Shoplifting Poetry

We're in the bookstore stealing poems,
fifting the best lines—
You cop one from Williams,
I stick my hand into Pound.
No one's looking... 
I throw you a line from The Cantos—
It disappears in your ear like spaghetti.
We stuff ourselves with Crane,
Cummings, Lowell, Voronesky—
Neruda, Rilke, Yeats!
The goods dissolve in our brain.

Now we move from the shelves with caution.
The cashier's watching. Can she tell?
Fat! We've overeaten.
You giggle. End-rhymes leak at your lips like bubbles.
I clap a hand on your mouth.
You are holding my hear
as we fall out the door.

Poem for a Volunteer in a Nursing Home

Sometimes,
young woman,
you unnerve us
with your manners,
blunt words and dress.
So forgive us our laughter,
for we still hope for a glimpse
of your braless breasts
at the top of your paisley blouse
and do not wish to lose your smile,
or your fingers on our hands.
Our laughter is applause
for your moments spent
with old men.

Martin Stelinger
Portland

Douglas Scribner
Augusta
It was exactly six-thirty in the morning when April Devoe got out of her car, grabbed onto her basket, and walked stiffly down the long furrow of potatoes to her section of field. The sun was not yet over the hill. Cold rays of light wove silver through the trees. A web of frost still glittered on the ground and clumps of soil bearded and brittle with frost smashed to powder under her feet. The tractor was already halfway down the first long row, the digger dragged behind it rattling, wheezing, clanking — churning out the nerve-jangling metallic tone that would creep up on her and fade again like a radio jingle a dozen or more times in the course of the day. Where the digger had already gone lay two filament rows of potatoes on the dirt's surface. Here and there were huge coiled masses of plant tops that had caught up in the digger and then been yanked out. Poisoned, withered tops clung hard to life and fiber, never dying enough to dry up and blow away or lie flat and be crushed. More tops than potatoes, everyone grumbled this year. Every year.

Jean was already bent over and picking up. When April came near she stood straight, said hello, and dumped a full basket into her barrel. The potatoes bounced in with a rush of hollow thumps. Before she had reached the end of Jean's section, April heard jealously the familiar, muffled sound of half-fullness as the contents of a second basket tumbled in. At the next section, the one before her own, Freddy and Bea were just getting started. No hello's came from them.

Their section seemed too short to April. Already she was feeling the fury of this day's greed and suspicion. Her own section looked too long, the far marker just barely visible. Freddy had probably moved her stake again, always giving her more section when he and Bea were feeling lazy or else shortening it up, sneaking that stake around behind her back, when they were greedy for more barrels and the picking was good.

April pulled on the gloves that were still damp and crusty with mud from the day before, yawned, and let her eyes stretch for the last time this morning out to the distant end of field, so far and blended into high grass and scrub trees she could not tell if there were pickers there yet or not. And then she decided she'd over to the start of her section and tipped it on its side, then bent from the waist. It was done. She stiffled a groan. Bullets of pain shot from her waist up and down the length of her body. Breakfast crouched in a cold heavy wait in her stomach. For an instant she was no longer blood and breath and bone and flesh but only pain, pure pain. Then, since there was never any question of giving in to this agony, she forced herself into the rhythm of the day's work: first, her body arched as gracefully as a cat over the tipped barrel, she flung potatoes into it with two hands at once. Swiveling the barrel around as far as she could and flinging with wrist-flicks that astonished even the oldest and hardest of pickers, she got that barrel half-filled from four rows across before she even tipped it upright. Then, faster than the devil, they all said, with those wrists of hers on magic hinges, she threw potatoes into her basket like some crazy juggler, basket braced between her ankles, spuds flying into it from earth like rockets launched into space. Her basket full in seconds, she straightened up, ran to the barrel, and dumped in the potatoes. The second barrel, filled even faster, finished off the barrel. She ticketed it with her number from a pile of tickets in her pocket and dragged over the next barrel. And then the next. One right after another so that even on the worst days with the smallest potatoes or rain muck or machinery breakdowns, she was barrels ahead of everyone else, ahead even of Charlie who at the age of sixty-eight could not bend his back because the emphysema made him choke but could pick on his knees better than almost everyone else could nick on their feet. April knew if she let her knees touch ground even once she'd be finished. They would draw frost like two wicks, then ache sharply, stiffen, and grow numb. With all the time she would need to unkink them, she'd lose twenty barrels a day for sure.

She moved down her first set of rows like fire through dry brush. The sight of her line of barrels set off within her a small warth of consolation that helped her maintain the frenzied momentum into the next row. She took a grudging pride in her work. Doing it well, doing it best, was what made it bearable. "Quite a worker"; that April, quite a worker," people had always said, and always said twice as if unable to underscore the fact in any other way, even when she was a kid. Quite a worker and quite a looker, is what some were more likely to say now. Her features were large and hush and well-proportioned. Her long thick hair, red as fall maples, was pinned into a knot and tucked under a bandana when she worked. Her skin shone gold with freckles. She was tall, lean and solid with muscle. Carrying three children had not wrecked her shape.

The morning began to warm. The frost vanished, earth dried pale. The trucks hummed and ground behind her. One of them crept along the finished rows, picking up the filled barrels. From the back of the truck, Ernie the year-round hired man took the huge metal ring that was attached to the winch and threw it with a clunk over the rim of a barrel. "Aa-yup!" George's baritone floated out smooth as ice as the barrel was hoisted up off the ground with a screech of metal. When it reached the level of the flatted, Ernie disconnected the rim and removed the picker's ticket, while George unwielded the barrel into place with massive arms. Slowly the truck made its way down the row. Then, full, it turned back to the potato house to dump its load, passing the second truck as it went down the field with empty barrels. Two men on this truck threw off the empties, spacing them evenly along the length of the field so that the echoing thud-plunk of each barrel hitting ground became a new line of the field's rhythm and melody. Thud-plunk, thud-plunk, thud-plunk, thud-plunk, thud-plunk, they were timed, like pulse-beats, with the truck's one uncanny skill; to fall regularly, precisely, one here, one there, thud-plunk, thud-plunk, until there were no more left, no matter what the difference was between the pickers' speeds and needs. April's neighbor on the far side, Edna, exquisitely slow of body and mind, could barely manage a strip of field twenty feet long, yet each time the truck went by she got a few barrels...
until the whole depth and breadth of her section, by the middle of day, would be covered with empty barrels lying on their sides, while April or Jean and just about anyone else would be a dozen rows ahead and crying for barrels; would be pacing back and forth with nothing to do, waiting, losing money; would be screaming at the fellows on the truck, “Give us more, you jerks! Can’t you see?” And the fellows, as if deaf and blind or somehow convinced they were serving the interest of a higher, purer cause, would give them each two or three barrels, just like Edna, for an eight-barrel section.

“Edna, could I have one of your barrels here?” April asked after lunch, smiling and trying to be friendly.

“Uh-oh,” Edna answered, her face stony and grim. “Nope. Not from me. I need it.”

“Edna, you won’t possibly be needing all those barrels before the truck comes back again.”

“I will, too.”

“Edna.” April said more sternly, with no smile left, “I’ve got to have more barrels. You’ve got more than any of the rest of us.”

Edna wrinkled her nose and held onto April with a long, hostile stare. Finally she said, “Take one from back there,” and pointed far behind her to the very first row. “But just one.”

“Oh for Christ sake.” April yelled, stomping away. “I’m taking two.”

Each day there was at least one battle. She was growing to hate Edna. She could no longer feel sorry for the woman as she once had. With her children April was very strict and forbade them to mock or belittle the kids in school who were retarded and slow. She was ashamed of her venomous feelings toward Edna. But as she dragged up the hard-won barrels from so far away, losing more precious minutes, she grimaced deservingly at the back of the dumpy, lethargic figure picking gingerly at each potato, one by one. Edna’s very looks made April angry.

Anger it was that kept her going. Except for the moments now and then when the rhythm of her work maintained itself automatically, when there were no long waits or jumbles of trips to interface and her hands simply followed one another without a thought, it was rage, not skill or even doggedness that propelled her. Anger at Edna. Anger at the voice of Edna’s sister Annabel, a shrill whine that snagged on phlegm and soot as it drifted from the section beyond Edna,星球, and Annabel’s wrenching with a husband’s grunts. She was angry at this irreparable order of pickers down the field, created on the very first morning by the sequence in which they arrived; they were stuck with each other all season so that no longer feel sorry for the woman as she once had. With

“Edna,” she said sternly to her, “I have a proposition to make.”

“What’s it?”

“Son Freddy chuckled. “What do you think?”

“Big deal, a little dirt,” said Bea. “It won’t kill you.”

She got angry at Bea and Freddy. All the time she was angry at everybody and that was what kept her going so crazy-fast. Not just that she was young and strong and desperate for money; what made her not only good but the very best on the field was the rage, the constant fury.

Lucy Hornig

Lucy Hornig

The plot comes clear. The tenor suffers all his life for old songs, and their bodies so alike have different voices.

There is no landscape, no libretto that will tell us we are not alone in the universe, even in sleep.

The details outside ourselves, this factory huddling under Katahdin and spewing out people like smoke, unfamiliar, remote; the trail cuts across the mountain like an artery and assumes our names.

Kathleen Lignell

Twice in Millinocket

All day we have been steeped in heavy clouds like a room full of vapor where someone has just boiled water for tea. We are here for disparate reasons. On the way home I look behind and for the first time see Katahdin rising over my shoulder. Whether becomes of us, your body will remind me of that mountain—abrupt, huge in its implications. Months later I pass the Great Northern paper mill alone: white, opaque, thick massive smoke and the viscous flow of workers emerging with empty faces off their shift. I had been waiting years for you to enter my life, to labor in each other’s arms and the factory windows high and frosted keeping us apart. I put my hand between your thighs, quiet, deliberate, remembering patches of snow. Now that trail rises in my mind where we walk through elevations that imply new birds, new music sung with a voice I recover from a dream.

The landscape is pure invention plucked and fingered like the strings of an ancient instrument. We’re walking in a world without memory. There are no slashed trees for guides. Descended, we make up a story for the opera on the radio, the soprano a woman who walks in her sleep. The plot comes clear. The tenor suffers all his life for old songs, and their bodies so alike have different voices.

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Stockton Springs

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Kathleen Lignell

Stockton Springs
On my lover having left me
one month before my
thirtieth birthday

All through the summer the seduction sustained me. I plotted, he
suspected, or perhaps it was the other way round. I remember the
night on the sofa, hot and sweaty from riding the horses. I was. We
talked as always, and then like punctuation to our conversation his
hand rubbed my foot. I knew it was done.

We managed long nights of love. He drove home in the cool mists of
midnight and dawn. We worried what our neighbors would say, and
our children. "You are amazing, dear friend, dear lover," he said. I
felt proud, laughed and gasped for more.

But now that the wind has come to howl and the stoves are fired to
chase the descended cold, he's gone. Not forever, you understand. An
old friend, a neighbor, we'll be thrown together, often innocent as
chase the descended cold, he's gone.

Now my mouth is not filled with
roses, by our families or other friends. There will be picnics,
workdays, dinners, business, but no
long-tongued kisses at the door
of morning.

Now my mouth is not filled with sweetness, but is dry and bitter as
a mouthful of crumbled leaves. I should have known when he
dug my new garden before he
said goodbye. All that Indian summer day he worked, bare-backed while I ,
from the safety of the hammock, imagined trysts. He was
sitting in the hammock, imagined trysts. He was silent.

No amount of grace would silence me when he did not come. I had
to ask, to know. I brushed my hair and wore my red hat to make
myself look happy and brave; I trudged up to his studio. "Where've
you been? What's happened? Is it that bad?"

He answered gently, fondly, perhaps wisely. "It's pretty bad. I can't
come anymore." Smiling, but not looking at me all the same. The lit-
tle fold of skin beneath his eye twitched madly. I shrugged and walk-
ed as coolly as I could out his door, down his steps.

The bathroom mirror and I are having a dialogue. I'm witty, cut-
ting by turns tender, pleading, fierce. Then I notice all my words ac-
cented with three lines across my forehead. I end the conversation
abruptly. Yet each time I pass the flat silvery surface of my familiar,
I'm caught for an instant by my own eyes unable to resist the reflec-
tion. I see myself walking, in flight, patting back a loose hair,
straightening my shoulders, and sometimes looking frightened as a
child.

I listen to the prattle of my son. No sympathy there for my sadness.
We take long walks in the wind and golden light. He pulls and tugs and
dances. He teases

Sometimes I feel as ignorant as my son of the truth of future time.
How long a time can "alone" be? A month from now? A year? A hun-
dred years of solitude or joy?

I find myself alone, not so young, living in the country,
unemployed. I recognize the possibilities of fresh, romantic love are
but few. So, I find myself comparing. I hold up my everyday talk to
what I might say to him at midnight. I measure feeling simply happy
against feeling a strong hand feel the notches of my spine. Peace

J. Brown
Portland
The Drums of Heaven

Mrs. Reed stood at her kitchen window and looked out over the back fields to where the stone wall held back the dark forest. The gently sloping terrain glanced in the morning sunlight. She smiled as she surveyed her good land.

"God is good to me," she said to herself.

She studied the fields as though she were memorizing them; itemizing each section as to contents. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she again glimpsed the black shape. But when she directed her eyes to where it was, it was gone. The smile suddenly flickered from her face, but reappeared when she saw nothing concrete.

It was a glorious morning. Her daughter, Ruth, had given birth a few days before. The thought of this miracle of life brought her smile back in full force.

"Morning, Mama," said Ruth. "How are you?"

"Morning, Ruthie," answered Mrs. Reed. "I'm fine. What a glorious morning. How are you and your grandchild doing?"

"We're just fine, Mama." Mrs. Reed thought Ruthie had a cold or something. She didn't sound quite right.

"Mama, I'll get straight to the point," said Ruth. "Will I have decided not to have the baby baptized at least not yet. Now before you start in, Mama, you got to remember that this baby is a baptism of the world.

"Mama? Can you hear me OK? Mama, are you there?"


Mrs. Reed hung up the phone slowly. She sat in a large wooden chair in the living room, the darkness was still in her hand. She stared blindly at the carpet. "No baptism! Good God!"

"We will just see about this, young lady," threatened Mrs. Reed. She waved the rag in their defi antly. As Mrs. Reed went to the kitchen sink on her way to the back door, she savagely flung the lamp rag into the standing water.

On the back steps, the sun blanketed Mrs. Reed with warmth. She squinted up into the sun and smiled. The day was golden and Mrs. Reed felt less tense. She walked over to the oak rain barrel that stood by the clothesline, lifted the cover and stuck her head inside and breathed the coolness, smelled the sweetness.

"Bible," said Mrs. Reed, "You got a Bible in there?"

"Yes ma'am, It's the best selling book I got."

Mrs. Reed still hesitated. A Bible would be just the thing to give to Ruthie and Will. Yes, it would back her up about this baptism.

"What about it lady, you got a place where I can stay til this storm blows?" The man was anxious. He fidgeted with the valise handle.

She glanced up at the black skies. Small drops started to pummel the ground. She squinted into the wind.

"OK, come on in. I might want to buy a Bible from you, she said."

The man smiled.

"Let me get some water for coffee." She went into the kitchen and returned with a coffee pot. "I like to use rain water for coffee," she hurried out past the man to the barrel. "God's good water," she said.

Again Mrs. Reed hung over the barrel's brim and smelled the water's sweet aroma. Now the rumble of thunder seemed to come from another world. She didn't hear the drummer approach.

He moved quickly across the yard and came at Mrs. Reed from behind. With one quick, deliberate movement, he lifted Mrs. Reed from the ground and held first into the barrel. He watched her legs thrash for a little while, then grabbed his empty valise and entered the house.

Deep in God's good water, the last thing Mrs. Reed saw was the black slime on the bottom of the barrel.

R.N.S. Leonard

Invention; and it could be by the Aegean

Since I am older than I was the canaries sang much longer, the fingering of light upon the joy of our two bodies near the sea was wild enough (more than before) for me and her, the wreness of the waves and she in summer undulation (more than before?) was exercise to keep the curious and learning gods in satisfaction, it was Greek, another millioneth time for us, unique, ecstatic, the mythical landlord and his wife, in care of this hotel, hearing all that noise (like 5 thousand canaries) must have known their special guests were with body language writing the encyclopedia again.

John Tagliabue

Lewiston

Small gusts raced across the fields and tagged at Mrs. Reed's dress. Wisps of her hair blew about as she remained leaning against the barrel. Soon the forest beyond the stone wall was one with the black skies. A shiver ran through Mrs. Reed. She replaced the tin cup on its hook and settled the cover against the wooden barrel. Might even fill the drum by the looks of this storm, thought Mrs. Reed. Another rumble of thunder echoed over the earth.

Mrs. Reed wrapped her arms around her waist and was just at the back door when the voice stopped her in her tracks. She spun around to see the small man. He was dressed in black and held a large value, also black. She stood staring at the man for what seemed to be eternity. The tiny voice kept trying to tell her about the black shape beyond the wall, but Mrs. Reed refused to acknowledge it. A sudden, explosive crash of thunder startled her back to reality. All the sky was black now.

"Excuse me lady, but have you got a place where I can get out of this storm?"

The man removed his black hat and placed it over his heart.

"Yes, lady, you bled from onion skins.

"Why did you get here? Where'd you come from?"

"Sorry if I startled you. I'm a traveling salesman. Name is Alvah Worth"

Mrs. Reed glanced down at the little man. She did not like strangers. She held a lock of gray hair out of her eyes with one hand and thought.

"Where'd you come from?" she repeated.

"I been traveling these parts for near a week. I sell books."

"What kind of books," said Mrs. Reed as another drumroll of thunder reverberated.

The man replaced his hat and dropped his valise. He looked up at the woman and a slight smile came to his face. The wind swirled around him.

"Why, in this here bag, I got all kinds of books. Dictionaries, novels, almanacs, Bibles. . . . "

"Bible?" shot Mrs. Reed. "You got a Bible in there?"

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R.N.S. Leonard

This is no time

for sleep.

Tonight, through years, your mother comes.

She moves beneath the awe-hewn beams of this white room

in you had hoped she would.

Light and silence fuse in her.

She moves beyond all pain, all needs.

Offer her the tweaks you have

and folded on the shelf for her to see.

Her fingers run the burdock green and trace

the yellow zones

you bled from onion skins

for this first shearing of the lambs.

Of ways to remember tonight is

touch her upon your chosen things,

their bones.

Susan Hard Shetterly

Gouldsboro
A Righteous Man

Fred Cooper considered himself a righteous man whose moral standards were severe, open to no compromise. Young men new to his real estate agency were immediately advised by old Mrs. Lloyd, Cooper's secretary:

"Don't ever forget what Mr. Cooper tells you. To him a bargain is a bargain, right is right. Understand? He knows right from wrong, believe me. He's a good man, and a righteous man!"

The simple fact of Fred Cooper's life was that, so long as he saw himself as courageous or given to displays of righteousness, he did set rigid limits for himself and felt it his duty to correct and guide those around him whose behavior or appearance suggested moral depravity. He knew inwardly that he was not brave or demonstrative. He usually avoided raising the banner of truth or wading into combat against the brush and the ugly.

Tall, thin and pale, when regarding himself in a mirror he saw a figure much too gawky and angular — a modern-day Ichabod Crane. He often envisioned the earth overrun with ravenous beasts to be slumbered at all costs. The one regret of his quiet existence lay in his certainty that he lacked a fitness for the struggle of life. The world was a cruel place for the righteous.

But there came a time when he realized that a righteous man must sometimes act. His wife of ten years, a booshy, domineering woman of many words, was as alien to the joys of genuine love as her husband. She viewed him as an instrument for measuring status and threw on his fine moral esteem in the community. He, in turn, was always pleased for her to trumpet his righteousness to everyone.

"I'm so proud of you, Fred!" his wife exclaimed. "You saw the correct thing to do and by God you went right out and did it!" She bent across the kitchen table and patted his hands. "You did a good thing," she said, "and you should be proud. Wait until our friends hear how you saved that boy! They'll think you're so brave!"

Later, encircled by a cluster of admiring neighbors, Fred held up his glass of milk and addressed the throng:

"The neighbors cheered and Fred moved away with a tinge of satisfaction, self-worth, happy just to be known as a righteous fellow.

One warm Saturday he gathered his fishing gear and went off by himself to an isolated pond near Elsworth. He had promised his wife teasingly, for both knew he was an inept fishermen, that he would return with a catch to take her breath away.

He enjoyed the silent splendor of the day, but he started for home with an empty bucket. Undoubtedly... after all, the fresh air and chance for calm reflection were what had mattered, he drove into McDonald's for a snack. Taking his drink, he started to brake, and he saw they were fiercely upset.

"I'm used poor driving judgment, but for her to make such an absurd thing. Cooper declared. "My wife would be astounded if she knew what he was thinking, and he visualized her pride in him if he went ahead and... He had a chance to prove his moral courage once and for all by punishing the bag in front of him in a way that would really make people take notice. A plan had crept into his mind.

Along a remote stretch of road between two small villages the red car squealed abruptly onto the sandy shoulder. Approaching, he saw the driver jump out and wave her right hand at him in a defiant challenge. He could speed on by, ending the matter, or he could stop and carry out his plan. Vaguely, he knew his decision would set the course of his future. He pulled up behind her, allowing his bumper to knock against hers as a subtle insult.

Before opening the door; he sat and sized her up a moment. As he had supposed — ousted breasts scarcely concealed, flesh pinched into folds around polka-dot shorts, unkempt and abundant hair of a light, artificial coloring, lavish gobs of scarlet makeup... He got out with a sick and sized beside his car.

"You goddamned丑女!" she began. "If you can't drive, why the hell don't you stay off the road? Darned near killed us back there! Jesus Christ, Charlie! What a piece of work. What a piece of work."

But the woman, this ignorant wench who lacked the sense to brake, and he saw they were fiercely upset.

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Reb Nachman (for Chaim)

Roberta Chester
Bangor

You Don’t Know Me

Great Grandmother

Old humpback pew never did fit my old slated bottom.
Mama had a cushion. Same old slate swimming up that sunbeam.
Comes through that yellow pane, same one Johnny broke when he was ten.
Once I dodged it feeling shy but now my sins have faded
Like this carpet. Why do all churches have red carpets?

Grandmother

Look at all the white-haired widows
Just like me and ma.
Twenty years since John escaped me into clouds of gold
But while he lived I was a queen
And after, I was well provided for.

Mother

Four of us together for once
Dressed powdered perfumed smiling at our only man
Passing the communion wine.
He only speaks to us in public but he pays the bills.
This time-bomb I’ve planted beside me will never wait, never listen, never smile,
Weird houseresses paint her face punch a time clock
And she knows I did it all. For her.
Her happiness will be my own.

Daughter

Peaceful, safe, just this bright hour my heart is calm.
Sunbeam still strikes this time of year — I caught it once.
Their little rituals, their children’s tales —
Dare I tell them He is risen — run down the aisle — He lives in me.
I saw Him in the jail, He sat beside me in Bellevue.
Poor ma, I’m glad we have this day.
Tomorrow I must tell you how this time
The pills spilled over the bed there weren’t enough
I only slept three days,
I never told you how that first time
They told me LSD would show me God.
Then Peggy left, Jack overdosed
And Bob exploded over Vietnam.
The man I found him in the South End he was black
I wanted him to kill me but they took me to the shore
Tied up my pills and called on God to cure me. He was awful.
I needed Him so much. I called on God but Satan answered,
Black gulls called my name.
I will tell you how last night the demons came again
I took a sleeping pill and wept alone. You’ll take me
Crying to the ward where swaying zombies line the halls.
Oh, ma, please come to me along the urine sticky corridors
Bend down to touch one weary head, smile at the child-crone
Tugging at your hem and hold my hand
While I sleep sweating near the nurses’ station.

Virginia Liscomb
Gray

2 July, 1981: Road Back

This lowering day sweats down at noon. The
timonometer across the windshield lulls me. An anniversary of some sort
coming up again. 4 July, 19—

19, Dempsey, hands rock-hard with plaster
of Paris, and padding kneaded to the knuckles
by crusty Jack Kearns, betrays Jess Willard,
who timber-tumbles to the heated ring
of Toledo. Pale nose breeze across
a baked Chicago infield, slide through
parching grasses of their yard, win to lose
to the Reds, to blacken October’s gold.

Home now, empty under sacks of food, I
labor through the mist. The night may clear, but
I will not see Venus curling into
the space held open by the crescent moon.
To Cuba
(Fidel Castro)

I remember
when you came down from your southern mountains
into the heart of America
and we welcomed you to our shores
and cheered you in our streets.
What you had achieved made
up your own beginnings,
the people rising, joining,
touched again by the old dream
of becoming themselves.

It is sad we turned against you, amigos,
frightened by the strident voices
that drove us apart,
Close and distant neighbor,
I think I understand your bitterness,
the arrogance, the disdain,
yet still believe
the common geography of our hearts
will allow a final bridging
of our narrow straits.

Gordon B. Clark
Bristol

The Pope and
The Slum of Vidigal
(found in the Sunday Globe, July 26, 1981)

When Pope John Paul II
visited the slum of Vidigal in Brazil,
moved by the poverty of the people,
he took off his golden ring
and donated it to the local church.

The clerics in nearby
Rio de Janeiro
have held it in safe-keeping
while the Brazilian Catholic hierarchy
discussed what to do
with the Pope's golden gift
to Vidigal.

Last Week
Eugenio Cardinal Salles
announced
the ring
will be placed on display
at the National Museum of Sacred Art
in Rio.

A replica
will be kept
in a chapel at Vidigal
as a memento
of the Pope's visit.

It is my understanding
that the Cardinal
does not see the replica
as a call to revolution.

Ruth Webber Evans
Portland
Depression Glass

Try, "depression poetry is like depression glass." I am bruised feeling frozen in a purple glass plate, greened purple glazed in acid, metalled shine. "If I were you I wouldn't bother with me..." and more in the same vein. Remember the thirties? Thursday night at the movies? Nevermind what was playing... thirty cents and free glass dishes... Remember?

Bruise purple bordered in bright-eyed comedy (if not travesty) of grapes — tight bursts of sour grapes — hard as bullets zinging (still the white-hats win). In dream sequence, I see flickering rainbow discs, runaway, rolling down canted uncarpeted aisles — spitting strobe-like flashes of hearty Kitsch, brittle greened purple. Now — let's run those bruised words by again?

Margaret Wicke
Oakland

Barker

Tying the awnings
of my lids
I roll back my bed,
lock the trailer,
fight the knotgrass
on the fairgrounds,
shake the spiders from the blinds,
set the milk bottles,
the marked and weighted ones
on the bottom
just like where the losers come from,
and in good voice
I click the microphone
hear a stronger me say
that no empty hands go away,
you can do it,
try a free shot,
don't fire, just lob,
a baby can do it from his crib
and he should know milk bottles,
even wooden ones, right?
and everybody wins
at this counter, fat, thin,
boy, girl, whatever
you want to be,
if you can throw
try it once then go,
just like marriage, honey,
ain't that right, sugar,
knock 'em all over
and you can be my lover
if nothing else.
before I die I beer up,
and no bed leaves empty.
Nothing to it.
Just watch me.

William Dubie
Peabody, Mass.

Laundromat

Almost ten years ago a friend wrote me a poem about a laundromat we both frequented. The clattering cycles of worn machines, the garish lights on the yellow washers soured the richness of that Ohio summer. The useless scoldings of mothers from the trailer park, children like unbalanced loads screeching for colas. I don't remember any of the fetchings scrawled on the dusty cards pinned over the "Articles for Sale." But having forgot those messages, I know it was possible even then to be saved locally, in that long summer while the cicadas chorused in the darkness, while the corn ripened head high. As if a war and its madness were not enough, as if life did have to go on; the knowledge that it could not seemed the single truth.

I don't remember her poem, either, only being asked once, "What are you doing here?" I took the emphasis for a compliment. Little did either of us know.

A decade later I'm still in them. I wonder what she would ask me now, here in the Highlander Laundromat in Waterville, Maine. Saturday night. Summer. Surrounded by archetypally obese women in shorts, whose hearts seem to freight the air as cross and soggy as their endless baskets of clothes. Oh Lord. Kids tipping the barrels for bottles, checking the washers for loose change. The doors still push open easily in a way that still robs my balance. I still waste time here. I still watch the clothes tumble round and round in the dryer, I could say I better understand.

I think she might just ask me if I were in love.

David Adams
North Jay
A Contemporary Epic

"What's that, dear? .. No, do tell me. .. Yes, someday, perhaps, you'll have to tell me .."

My eyes are shaded from the sun, / my weight sprawled idly upon / crossed fabric slats and hollow metal tubes / in half-bent couch left us by a dead relative, / having the capacity in rain / to lie flat-folded and compact / - a real space-saver that / they said. The plump-clouds, I am told, pose little threat; / warped by aging flesh that I / am now resigned to own to. / These ruffled hands are / idle / and / no longer answer insult with a fist / nor wave to answer compliments / like those of Albert Rugh / fence neighbor Albert / wave to answer Constance, / Mandy's secret and / my own.

Quite recently I noticed, or experienced / a certain impetus, like weakness; / quite recently / let us say, I experienced / a will towards an impossible consistency. / consistency in working, let us say. / Not facts, their Truth / (which I am told mean nothing). / No, not that, / but only that they work, / that all combine and interlock / according to the effort / let us say, how high which / they live - / unique or just intelligible. / Some demon or disease (fear work) has entered me, / nourished on old plans and memories, / depositing this will toward a dull pliant / unity / imagined as a vague reflection of my years / or as a vagueness to allusion to those years.

But I am given to distraction, / I am lost in dead abstraction. / And I have told you nothing.

Several days ago .. I believe several days, / for the incident seems clear to me; / not near, you understand - nearly all / I find myself still able to recall / seems near / but clarity to me / suggests a temporal proximity / and therefore I believe for I insist / that it has not been several weeks / but only several days. / And, let us say, / less than a week. / And let us say / I was engaged in action, / let us say, / following the wheeled insistence of my mower- / cigarette / Tomorrow then.

"God. .."

"I am a concept feigning substance. / Consider the process seems / unity, without undue embellishment. / For I knew what he would say. / Yes, beautiful and something to forget. / The unique aptic notes she / live - / unique or just intelligible. / Some demon or disease (fear work) has entered me, / nourished on old plans and memories, / depositing this will toward a dull pliant / unity / imagined as a vague reflection of my years / or as a vagueness to allusion to those years.

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The Beast

Last night when you pulled on your jeans
each leg ramming into its tunnel like a gun rod,
keys and change gnashing in your pockets
I knew it was for the last time.
You slammed the door so hard
the painting on the wall above our bed
slumped sideways, and I saw our lives
like jaws parting full of bitterness
yet with the expectation
of coming back together again and again.

Tonight, unable to sleep, I go outside
listen to crickets whisper
anthems to the dumb, dark hours
and in the mirror of the sky I see
a woman wishing
over and over
for some animal’s heart so small
such evenings wouldn’t hurt.
She turns from the mirror
returns to her bed
feels ice-cold contours moving toward her
crawling down over her flat belly
into the space between her legs
this new lover named loneliness who,
waiting for the first empty moment to spring,
lowers himself down on top of her.

Maggie Stewart
Augusta

One Hand Clapping

The sound is
two hands clapping,
minus one hand
appreciation expressed by a man
with only one hand
half of what the applauded wishes for
interpreted by the other hand
as a non-violent act
noise silence makes when one hand
moves quickly through it
not felt on the clapper’s eardrum
not heard by another
clapping with two hands
not an issue for a deaf listener
not an issue for a deaf clapper
a sign of hope for another
also clapping with one hand

Terry Plunkett
Northport

Parkscape

The fountains smell of urine.
Red cannas follow tulips
Under chestnut-drift like popcorn,
Food for gut-fat pigeons,
Pink feet splayed on pavement—
Starfish at the ocean.
On an elevated platform
Some blowzy, suddy lady
Leans on a slippery scrub-board
In a fountain like a washtub.
The organ-grinder’s monkey,
An agile pimp in scarlet,
A go-between for Music,
Extracts thin dimes and nickels
From somnambulistic children,
Pale faces under sailors
As vapid as balloons.
If I cut the string that ties them
To their grannies or their nannies,
They will float above the parkscape
With the pigeons that I scatter
When I run at them and scuffle
My patent leather shoes.

Robert McGuire
Newcastle
Bradbury was tired of being poor. Even old Henry up the road wasn't poor — not the way Bradbury was poor, subsisting as he did on cucumbers and the dim sum he got from time to time of these days he would swear some protein from the forest. Bradbury wasn't exactly envious of the old man — but dammit, for Henry, always grinning and putting around, the whole business of survival seemed so, well, accidental. And dammit again, Bradbury had more going for him than the old man had ever had. In fact, the more Bradbury thought about it, the more it struck him that poverty was inexorable. "No point a smart feller like you scratchin around like an old banty-ben," Henry himself had said that very morning. Face it, the old man was right.

Bradbury knew his options. Employment, of course, was out of the question. Bradbury had decided that years ago — which was why he was poor in the first place. Gang activities, banditry included, were also out of the question. Ethical considerations aside, very much aside, Bradbury was no group person. What he needed was a one-man operation, a low-risk, high-yield, solo enterprise. Counterfeiting, for example, was not out of the question. Bradbury lived in the country, in a log cabin built over an old cellar hole. The cellar hole was roomy and deep, perfect for clandestine operations. There was even a natural safe of sorts, a large cavity behind a squared-off, pink granite rock. He could keep his operation small, specialize in one denomination, twenty dollar bills, say, crisp new twenties by the armload. Of course, old Henry would wonder, think he was doing dope — or worse, inheriting money. By Henry's ethic, at least you had to work at pushing dope.

In the end, Bradbury rejected the counterfeiting scheme as too risky — and not just because of the Henry factor. Computerized supermarkets alone left him reeling. vending machines. By its hand canes, the twenty-cent crime lab was more than he could handle. Besides, triggered by the thought of Henry, another idea came to him, something more within the range of conventional business ethics, not to mention his own skills and inclinations. He spent the rest of the evening recalling stories the old man had told him, tales of the old days, of wildlife that once roamed the forests, of cougars in particular. "Of a time or two when townspeople locked their doors and windows. Bradbury perched into the wee hours, mulling and scribbling. By morning, he was ready for action. He fixed off a letter to a friend in New Mexico and burrowed in the stacks of his town library. By the end of the day, he was something of an expert on the subject of turn-of-the-century, local wildlife — on the subject of cougars in particular. He returned home with a legal pad full of notes and a book called Safari. It included a chapter on chemical big-game repellents.

That all took place on a Monday. On Tuesday afternoon, Bradbury returned Safari to the library and mailed a carefully typed letter to Chemco Inc. in Cincinnati, Ohio. The rest of the week he spent organizing his wildlife notes, waiting, refining his strategy — except for afternoons, which he spent weeding his cucumbers and checking his rabbit snares. The rabbit snares were invariably empty. Witch grass had invaded the cucumbers. Bradbury was very tired of being poor, exhausted by it, in fact.

The following Monday, there was a package for Bradbury at the Post Office. "Bay's Taxidermy / Albuquerque, New Mexico," read the label. Bradbury bought four toilet plungers at the hardware store and headed for home. "For cougar paws," read the note on the package. "As requested, numbered counter-clockwise from right front to right rear. What are you up to now, Brad?" Bradbury squatted at the note in the dim candlelight of the old cellar hole, then folded it neatly into his pocket and held the paws, one by one, up to the light from the candle. Perfect. Ray was the best. Bradbury spent the rest of the day setting the paws large, furry jewels in the cups of the toilet plungers. Then, counter-clockwise from right front to right rear, one through four, he replaced the handles of the plungers: he would have to be able to tell in the dark.

Bradbury was whittling his last notch when three long blasts of a horn flushed him from his cellar hole. Blinking in the sunlight, he signed the release and helped the UPS driver unload the truck — carton after carton, forty-eight in all, from Chemco Inc. in Cincinnati, Ohio. It was well after sunset before Bradbury found himself, secure in his cellar hole again, perched on his inventory, scanning his Chemco contract. "Exclusive regional dealership. . . ." He liked that. "Product: Bwana." Bradbury suspected that Bwana was nothing more than repackaged witch grass. But the labels listed "Bwana" and sold Bwana by the boxload. By late summer, Bradbury's cellar wall safe was overflowing. He would spend the rest of the week taking orders. His business was growing by leaps and bounds. Bradbury was even getting a little tired from getting rich — but he loved every minute of it.

And so it went, week after week through the summer. Bradbury's cucumbers gave way to the witch grass; his rabbit snares went unchecked. But business was booming by late summer. Bradbury's cellar wall safe was overflowing. He would have to do something about the safe, invest the money somewhere, buy into Chemco, maybe. Oddly, it was on the very evening that Bradbury first had trouble fitting the pink granite rock back in place that old Henry came by for a visit.

"Howdy, Brad." "Been a long time, Henry." "Business goin pretty good?" "Coul’dn’t be better, Henry." "You was pretty quick on your feet with that Bwana stuff there. Good thing, a man knows how to grab a opportunity.

They sat on Bradbury's doorstep. "Yep," old Henry continued, "it's a real good thing. Funny thing, too. Old Witt Bowden — use th' words, just like you — made himself a pile of money off' the cougar, too. Raised a cub. Use 'cha plus folks a quarter come in here. Kept the money b'hind a rock in the cellar — pink rock, sacred. And I believe it was. Old Henry chuckled, but Bradbury was aware that he was eyeing him admiringly. He refused to be taken in "What came of it all?" he asked, but the old man ignored him. "Lonely," Henry continued. "Witt use 'meistret that cat somethin awful. Kept him half-starved — so's had be ferc for the customers, y'know. Well sir, one day Witt Bowden went just a little bit too far. That old cat busted clean out his cage and laid into Witt like the divil himself. Weren't nothin left but bones and a hole in the wall. Folks say that Witt musta lifted the latch himself. Lotta talk, Witt, talk' bout the cat comin back, too. His spirit, y'know, hauntin the place. That's how they come when that old couple break the law. Folks just tryin' t'protect themselves, y'know. . . ."
In Defense of Marshall “Dodge-ism”

(For F. G.)

As Marshall Dodge's performing artistry becomes art for me, the “reality” of Maine life assumes a metaphorical cast and hue. In his “Bert” and “I” stories, Dodge, like Robert Frost, creates from traditionally flinty, wintry Downeast Yankee realism a social metaphor of light humor which is very human and descriptively incisive. Through humor, Dodge’s characters project both a kind of unconscious manifestation of individual isolation and an acceptance of community by Mainers.

Most of characters of “Bert” and “I” I perceive as window dressing, attempting to enliven this basic metaphor of individuals accepting their communities by referring beyond them, to nature.

Many critics see Dodge’s monologues as “stereotyping” Maine people. But Dodge and his partner, Reverend Bob Bryan, are working, like Mark Twain or Finley Peter Dunne in “Mr. Dooley,” squarely within a valid vein of American humor.

Philosophically speaking, the Dodge-Frost metaphorical creation is generally Aristotelian, an empirical breakdown and categorization of life and nature’s parts, of their substance and accidents. This has led in Dodge’s case to the creation of a “person,” often called “Bert,” whose actions, responses and solutions imitate Maine reality.

As if they actually were the Maine persons and communities they represent, Dodge and “Bert’s” underlying metaphor is that resolutions and explanations are produced naturally, so to speak, from within the communities and episodes and stories.

This kind of naturalism is inimical to many modern modes of thought and to some social conditions now facing Maine. It is often viewed as “quaint” or “romantic,” a throwback to the “social physiognomy” of Isaac Newton in a twentieth century age of high technology and abstraction. And as social science analyzes and “opens up” Maine communities, intangible community methods of dealing with good and evil and love and hate seem to disappear. The gulf between ideals and feelings becomes apparently unbridgeable. The result is often yearnings for a romanticized past or an unrealizable future because resolutions to social problems are masked by social science.

Some people legitimately resent a “natural” solution to social problems. But this is no reason for Marshall Dodge to abandon naturalism in folk art. If one creates art strictly for purposes of “proving” a point, policy or study, one generally ends up with whatever one started with or were originally looking for. The same is true of the audience or perceiver of art, which essentially defines a pre-conceived concept ahead of time. True, good art engenders belief, brings one to the threshold of empathy, awe and universality. However, art is more of a capturing and sharing of meaning within a form than a general transmitting and communicating of knowledge as reality. Dodge’s art form is humor.

My reply was that masking is an essential, legitimate tool for theatre and performing artists like Dodge. And my friend pointed to a particularly obtrusive description of Maine by Helen Yglesias, a racy, journalistic marriage of a morose rendering of hallucinated statistics and a sacrosanct theory about some steel scruple. There are “parts” of Maine life that art turns into a h eavenly tone. Dodge, and Maine fiction do mask social problems into a morose rendering of hallucinated statistics and a sacrosanct theory about some steel scruple. There are “parts” of Maine life that art turns into a heavenly tone.

A brilliance bleeding west in the lake's white bowl.

A brilliance bleeding west in the lake's white bowl.

And had you not been there to hear the story?

Yes, he had not been there to hear the story. It was a story of the white bowl, bleeding west in the lake's white bowl.

We sat on the granite crest of a glacial knoll

A brilliance bleeding west in the lake's white bowl.

And had you not been there to hear the story?

Yes, he had not been there to hear the story. It was a story of the white bowl, bleeding west in the lake's white bowl.

Of change and winter silence ranged against us

And had they not been there to hear the story?

Yes, they had not been there to hear the story. It was a story of the white bowl, bleeding west in the lake's white bowl.

Tenderness might then have spanned and fenced us

Now, as far as “Bert” goes, he can come home.

Richard Sewell
Waterville

Patrick Flynn
Rockwood/State, MA
To Eat an Icon

The right of first refusal belongs to me. I exercise it often because it is important to be firm and difficult and be as a knife is or a fork is to a child in Bangladesh, or some place like that, and be a belly that looks full.

People like me insist on the refusal because we are distant souls, though perhaps browned like lettuce edge left wet and standing next to butter and a grapefruit.

Refusing women and fortunes and god on a stick is nothing. Really. It is easier to dance, waltzes especially, and it is far from final and the words of a blind man to a radio; it bears not so much weight as it may seem.

Terence Day
Waterville

The Fooling of Ralphie Post

Jesus loved the fishermen because they told the best dirty jokes around. Ralphie Post is one of those fishermen — he lobsters down to Metlinc. Right now he is substituting for Chet Mason but he'll be pulling up his traps soon and breaking his collarbone doing boogie skiing up to Sugarloaf or knocking back a cold one at the Elks club.

But to get to the point of this story we must go back to the summer of 1971 just before I had my orchidectomy. It was the day of my sister's wedding and since she was marrying a parson there was no alcohol at the reception so after the water punch was all served we went up to my brother's house in Camden and got down to some serious drinking.

Ralphie Post was there and he started telling jokes and I did too and for some reason on that night I sparkled as much as he did and we kept the crowd in stitches till four in the morning when I finally took my Thorazine and crawled into bed. It was a once-in-a-lifetime night which I have never been able to duplicate but remember with great fondness but I am sure that Ralphie has had many of them.

The next spring I had stopped taking my Thorazine and was producing work at a rate I had never done before so I decided to try to fool Ralphie Post. I made up this very official sounding letter from one C. C. Cleaveland, director of the Bailey Island Lobster Plug Museum. In the letter I asked Ralphie if he would carve some plugs (they were already using hands on Metlinc) and soak them a few days aboard the boat to make them authenic looking.

Ralphie was living at the time over George Hall's Garage and every morning the noise of the truck and the smell of the diesel oil wakened him in a fury. So the morning he got my letter he wasn't in what you call a pleasant mood. When he first got the letter he believed it and talked with his wife about why some fool would want him to carve plugs when he could still buy them by the thousand down to Bailey Island. But he considered doing it and was trying to think of a good way to soak the plugs when he decided the letter was a fake and showed it to all his friends. They all got a big laugh out of it and he was happy to have another joke in his endless story line.

Soon after that I went crazy from not taking Thorazine and spent a few weeks up to Togus, a grim place in those days — there might have been some fishermen there but no jokes. I've only seen Ralphie a couple of times since then and I never have any new jokes but all he wants to talk about is the time I fooled him with that "letter about lobster plugs." So I feel pretty good about my own sense of humor even if it only comes on only twice a decade. It just makes me wish I could stop taking my Thorazine again and write some more of those letters.

Kendall Merriam
Richmond

X-ray Room

Spring. They appear in their hospital gowns as snow women. I with my perfect eye stare, tell them to breathe.

Their bodies against the steel table, I preserve them for winter, their soles silvered with ice, their gait slow like a great Pole bear.

"Now hold. Do not breathe." Snowmen are by nature white. But snow women, the pale of fallen tea roses, the perfect distribution of light.

"One more time, breathe." They exhale, snow-deep, the breath of ghosts as they walk through fields, leaving a print as rhetoric, I with my perfect eye stare. I cannot breathe.

Mary Ann Meade
Lewiston

Recipe

Flay flanks. Batter evicerated bodies. (Discard dead eyes.)
Scrape skins. Slice white flesh beneath. (Gouge out live eyes.)
Plunge into unctionous hell. (Beware of bones!)

Edward Hopper
knew it was the way he cast the light across the canvas that told more than all the pulled shades, empty streets, and city rooms.

Maureen Walsh
Bangor
Cord of Birch

It was high summer, that time when winter seems implausible, a moralist's admonitory dream.
That I, shortsleeved, took through the neighborhood
A question, revealing it only when it was understood
All round that the amenities as to the heat and flies
Had been upheld, when something like response might thrive.
A hundred-sixty years of working in the woods,
Their lives were sure to contain the fact or two
I wanted about some birch I'd cut that spring
And the extent of its aptitude for making heat.
To a man they grunted, that to let me know they knew
That I was bothering about a very poor thing.
I relaxed in the shade of their attitude,
Ignorant that each was to recall, surmise, delete,
And say that which the others had said was untrue.
Gravely I agreed with their unblinking contrarieties.
My hand shook hands and the doubt inside of me
Hurrahed. Back home there was the cord, a pile
I'd left beside the back path. I pouted a while,
Hefted a piece — it was wood. Nothing descended.
At night in bed I defined and mused and pretended;
Nothing came of it all but dismal sleep.

Aroostook 13:
Farmer in February

Nothing recognizable that will grow—trees mere,
the hammered sun frigid beyond the gesture of this pale field.
Far-sides are lighted; width untracked in wave-lengths
means where the snow-mounds are purple-flanked.
The maple dryly measures the crystals meaningless,
chilled season, rigid run-off; in emptiness the maple
measures the thought of a wasting plant.
A swept external farm dwindles westward
where a day bites off its unwillingness.
My neighbor west—should I walk over there,
despite wind and stove-heat?

Brian Fitzgerald
Presque Isle

Baron Wormser
Mercer
And Still the Moon Waxes

It is the night before Full Moon
And all over the land
Beds are filled with picked off
Fingernails and toenails.

All day yesterday
Sockets of extracted teeth
Balloonied with old blood
As cheeks became chipmunked with edema.

Throughout the Greater Portland Area
People have been eating more than usual
All week. There was a riot
Among diners queued up at the Baker's Table
And two people were taken away
In the Medius wagon. Three others fell
Down the steps but stayed for dinner.

Out in Scarborough, encroaching tides
Lapped up Black Point Road
Down by the marsh, then swallowed
An orange Volkswagen in broad moonlight.

And Still the Moon Waxes
Of the height of the Full Moon tide
Lapped up Black Point Road
Down the steps but stayed for dinner.

In the Medius wagon. Three others fell
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