



Parting Gifts

Volume 5, Number 1
Summer 1992



Parting Gifts

Volume 5, Number 1

Summer 1992

Copyright © 1992
March Street Press
3006 Stonecutter Terrace
Greensboro, NC 27405

All rights return to authors upon publication

ISSN 1043-3325

Indexed by The Index of American Periodical Verse
(Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press)

Edited and published by Robert Bixby

type geniuses is that, unlike the academics, they're unstudied in the craft. They often write for love of words or, more often, for the image of themselves they achieve by writing. Writing is something they woo and not something they work at. And the best of what they produce so often is word play and not a product of life. Writers of pretty words, so taken with their words and with themselves for writing them, so often miss what's real. Life is as painful as it is lyrical, probably more so. In fact, I often think much of life's beauty is its pain. Writers who simply play with pretty words, brilliant as they may be in the exercise, throw away the best part of the world, the part known by those who have felt its pain and know its ironies and have the guts to dredge it all up again in their work, the part of the world that hard working hacks with callouses can pour into their writing so well that even blondes can see the compassion in their comedy. So I toast the hacks of the world. And I'll hang a different label on us if you feel uncomfortable with that one. But it's the hacks who show the ivory tower crowd something about the world they live in. And it's the ivories who climb out of the tower who achieve greatness in that other camp. As a footnote, you might be interested to know it was my friend and fellow computer journalist, Edward Mendelson, who persuaded me to use my real name and not a pen name in PG. Ed, when he's not hacking computer reviews, is an Auden scholar at Columbia. He's one of those rare writers who can tread comfortably in any camp and he uses his real name with pride on everything he writes. I'll resist the temptation to sign this. Aw hell, why not?

Carol Ellison

Transom Note
Carol Ellison

Interesting threads you started today. I hate the word, thread, but what else do you use to describe electronic conversations? Forgive me if I ramble, I woke up feeling ill and I'm writing now between thoughts of interfaces, input devices, the love story I'm working on and what to fix with tonight's beef roast. I should take two Tylenol, unplug the phone and simply focus.

Your response to Alan should flatter him and, if others in our workshop are sensitive to what you both said, they should learn from your observations. I wasn't planning to attend tomorrow but now I think I might, just to see what sort of reaction you get from the blonde, blue-eyed people in the group, whether the comments stir a discussion of images and reality (as they should) or whether they raise the defenses of the blondes (as they probably will). Did I tell you I was a blonde? Don't hate me.

I could only smile at your remark about my intolerance of bull data. Thank you. It's something I value in friends, as well, almost as much as humor and compassion.

As to hacks and UPS drivers, I'd love to eavesdrop on the conversation if you raise your theory in the workshop. Perhaps I could come along and you could introduce me as your cousin, the hack from the Midwest. I am a hack. I call myself that all the time—and with pride, the way programmers call themselves hackers. I've always been so driven to grab the byline and the dollars that go with it that I have trouble shedding that mentality to do anything more noble. But in grabbing the byline, I've collected a wealth of experience I'd never have known otherwise. You also write for a living and you've managed to create Parting Gifts and Splendid Exile. And except for the fact that Exile dropped me, along with Mort, from that ladder and left us lying there when we both wanted some sort of resolution (isn't the current buzzword "closure"?), I thought the story was great. Beyond hits comedy was a sense of life and humanity that's missing from just about everything the UPS drivers produce and from much that comes out of academia. When it's publish-or-perish, a lot that gets published ought to perish. And the thing about the UPS

hContents

Composition/Allison Joseph/i
1)ear Rob,/Eiizabeth Kerlikowske/3
Soldiers/Elizabeth Kerlikowske/5
Ball/Joan Payne Kincaid/8
/Ruth Lepson/9
He's a Clock/Belinda Subraman/10
A Celibate Life/Belinda Subraman/1 1
In Mid-1890/Michael L. Johnson/i 1
The Old Woman/Pat Schneider/12
Cycle/William N. Nesbitt/13
Crievances/Joyce Odam/ 14
Short Order Waiter/Albert Huffstickler/ 15
When Stella Cut Too Much Off My Hair/Alysia K. Harpoottian/16
Vows/Paul Beckrnan/ 17
Hotel Hanover/Emily Fragos/ 18
Early Frost/David Chorlton/19
Honest Words/David Chorlton/20
An Alien Left to Find His Way/David Chorlton/2 1
Snowtlight/David Chorlton/22
Cover Your Mouth When You Cough/Lyn Lifshin/23
Nothing Better Comes After This/Alysia I-Iarpootian/24
Keats Arrives/Robert Cooperman/25
It Comes Back/Lyn Lifshin/26
Edna/Albert Huffstickler/27
An Inheritance/T. Cohn O'Callaghan/28
The President Blows It Away/Joan Payne Kincaid/29
Out of the Mist/Joan Payne Kincaid/30
Manz and Womanz/Elizabeth Kerlikowske/3 1
Shooting the Breeze/Ray Catina/33
Day Off/Peter Spiro/34
The Salmon Factory Sestina/Greg Rappleyle/35
/Richard Kostelanetz/37
Towards the James River/Errol Miller/38
Tour of Duty/Ray Catina/39
Silver/Carol Ellison/40
Transom Note/Carol Ellison/42

David's recent line of girlfriends. There had never been a Trixie. Debbie looked like a Trixie. "It's Debbie, Mom."

David gently corrected every gaff. But Trixie didn't miss a one, acknowledging each with a tight smile and patient eyes while Dennis perfunctored diplomatic follies, calling the woman by name and charming her as if she were his own, in an effort he told Barbara later to salvage the situation. Barbara watched him over dinner and wondered how her husband performed for women when she was not around. Trixie, she thought.

David refused the ice cream when Annie announced dessert. He and Debbie had to go. They planned to meet friends at the movies and did not want to be late. It was the first time all evening he'd mentioned the movies, couldn't recall the name of the one they planned to see. Barbara knew she'd offended. And Dennis had too. Could parents do nothing right?

It was a holiday Barbara preferred to leave in the past.

But Dennis had left the silver here to remind her. Barbara drew her bathrobe around her and listened to the silence of the house as she walked to the bureau and removed the chest. She put away the pieces one by one, refusing to lift the nests that Dennis had left. Their time in the open had done them no good. Raising the silver to the light, already she saw the hint of tarnish.

Silver
Carol Ellison

The Rogers 1847 winked (or did it wince?) when Barbara pressed the wall switch. Mornings should not be so dark and the silver should not be lying there on the dining room table, free to tarnish in the air and startle a still sleepy housewife with its diminished brilliance. It lay where Dennis had left it the night before, spoons and forks washed and nested in stacks, side-by-side to a regiment of knives, on a still-dirty tablecloth he hadn't bothered to remove and toss into the washer.

Dennis' stabs at thoughtfulness were just that, nothing more, and ever-less.. or so they seemed to be becoming. We had left her one more assemblage of half-done efforts, not unlike dinner when he mashed the potatoes but left them in the pot for her to dish up and carry to the table and when, after carving the turkey, he left the frame at the front of the counter where the dog cound—and did—get it.

"You're tired, Dear. Just go lie down while I clean up,"

he'd said after the kids found reasons to leave the table, leave the house and populate Christmas with their friends. Dinner began well but ended badly.

Dennis commended Barbara on the stuffing but took credit for the turkey. Annie fixed cranberries, spiked with Chambord. Alcoholic anything, it seemed, fascinated the 15-year-old. She'd searched Barbara's magazines for holiday recipes spiced with exotic liquors until she found this one. And David had come with dessert and his girlfriend - a gallon of chocolate chip ice cream, his personal favorite, and what's-her-name, picking up both on the way from his off-campus apartment.

At least Barbara hoped he'd picked her up, that the woman had not slept over. The thought of her first-born in the arms of a woman distressed her. He was 19. Still her boy.

Barbara could never remember the names of David's women. Girlfriends, she called them. And he always corrected with the word, "woman... This woman I'm bringing with me on Christmas..." This one who was...who? Debbie. Yes, this one was Debbie. Barbara called her Trixie three times during dinner. Why, she wasn't sure. There hadn't been a Trixie in

C o m p o s i t i o n

Their questions unasked in the silence between my stories, my weak little when-I-was-in-college sermons, I find myself before twenty four faces, all of them white, some of them male—the very people I have been taught not to trust, the very people who have been taught not to trust me, my kind: the blue-black, the brown, the copper-beige. My text is called Writing for College, an authoritative gray tome my students don't find authoritative. The girls in the class listen politely, take notes; some are pretty, some are not, some even speak, and I try to listen, to not cut them off in midsentence, pressing back my ideas for theirs, making room. The boys are clean-shaven, clean-cut, and I can't help but think that they giggle when I turn my inadequate back, my legs taking me round the teacher's desk, my steps tiny clicks on tile. Each class session, I try to match faces to names: Marie, Jane, Ellen, Michelle—a halo of hair around each feminine face, long or straight or permed. Peter, Robert, Mike—cooly remote in team jackets and jeans, hair close-cropped, sneakers blushing white.

As I pace the room, their eyes follow—
shifting blue and green, sometimes brown.
I could walk a scar through the floor
of this classroom, march to the end
of the hail and back, and their eyes
would still be trailing me, questioning
my usefulness, these books,
the good gray language I try to give them.

Allison Joseph

Tour of Duty

Seventeen months in a Naval Hospital
does things to you.

There you were among the maimed,
the basket cases, paraplegics and
worse.

Sometimes, a ceremony would be held
and medals would be pinned on
the remains.

Mostly, what you would hear at night
was the agony of rehabilitation exercises
Learning how to walk down parallel
bars into a compound where the enemy
overran the secure base you were doing
short time in, trying to survive
and
everything erupted
and your spine went cold

Four months later on a ward stateside
you could hear a soldier screaming:
“Save me, save me, I’m down, I’m hit.”
and you wonder where you are, what country
you’re in and if you can save anyone,
even yourself.

Ray Catina

Towards the James River

Union guns,
they are the last
of the Seven Days' Battles
down Malvern Hill to a task force
holding on, no compassion in the batteries
of the mangled Southern troops, plenty
of mistakes but in the end
neither will prevail, too many memories
on a fading floral wall, the repeated failures
of the dead, they shall not
inhabit Mechanicsville again
in the routine campfires of tomorrow
haunting river steamers glide the river
magnificent brigades disappear at first light
right or wrong good men guarded
all the flesh they had, moving as one
onward through deep water and cornfields
to a Delta Jungle nearly hidden by time.

Errol Miller

Dear Rob,
Elizabeth Kerlikowske

I wanted to wait at least a week to see if I still thought you were full of shit, and I do. The diarrhetic crap (excuse my redundancy) that flows without end from the pens of some of our "contemporaries" is empty. It has neither shape nor form, form does not explicate or enhance the content, the content is a mystery to the writer as well as the reader. The content for the writer seems to be an affirmation: "Look, here is something on the page I have written. Now I am a writer." There is no shaping, no movement or symbols within the piece, no greater truth revealed. Now call me a classicist asshole (I'm sure you will) but I want there to be more to it than words. Poems are words, but words to a purpose. Words selected with care, integrity, purpose. As one of the third graders I was presenting to summed it up, "Oh I get it. It's like we're trying to find out the truth, and the poem is the judge." Yes, we're trying to see how close we can get to saying the unsayable, to echo that which is only feeling, intuition, vague sense. To try and make that an understandable, tangible whole on a piece of paper or uttered in public for the ear: that is what poetry is about.

Everything that comes from a pen/pencil/keyboard/orifice of a literati is not poetry. I disagree that what I write is sixties. I couldn't write in the sixties. I was learning in a series of apprenticeships. The nearest comparison I can make to the art of making poetry is the art of making dance. Many dancers modeled themselves on the free-form artistry of Isadora Duncan without realizing the years of classical training she had to invest in order to make her dance appear to be so free. Writers whose mentors are free-form, spontaneous, overflowing founts of undisciplined word-spewing have missed a major piece of their education, a piece their mentors may have discarded but it was discarded knowingly. The contemporaries

have never had it to discard. That is why their work is so vacuous and self-indulgent.

In your letter you say “stylish young poets breeze by us.” I ask you, “Where are they going?” To incestuous publishing houses? To the nepotism mills? To the bicoastal paradises of bisexuality? When was the last time a nonhomosexual, noncoastal, nonacademic human being won some kind of major award? When these poets breeze by me, I no longer care because the goal, the reward (the home base, if it’s hide and seek) has become obscured for me. There is no goal. There are only games. I would rather write and explore, write and wonder, write and satisfy my audience here in the hokey-pokey beer barrel of the Midwest than enter the cut-throat manic publishing world of “fashion.”

When Ike and I had an interview at the Wesleyan Press about our book of letters several years ago, the editor’s first question was, “Are you lesbians?” When we said no, she replied that that was too bad. If we had been lesbians, she could easily market the book. Since we were just two gals exploring a nonsexual relationship, that was not of interest. So in these times where sexual/political content become paramount, I withdraw. I will publish a few poems occasionally with people who think poems are poems. Who have not made the mistake that the poems are the people. My goal is to have a life. If the goal of the poetry biz is to become well known and have drunk university professors kiss one’s ass at receptions, I decline.

You know my knee... I have to use crutches now. I bought the Itzak Perman “Violin Guy” brand. The kind that don’t fit in my annpits. I don’t need to use them all the time, but I need them for those occasions when I’m not sure which way the joints will bend. When I was dancing at 20, it never occurred to me that I’d be crippled by 40. Certainly makes me wonder what 60 will bring. I always said I’d like to be like William S. Burroughs, entering a room and slashing at people with a cane. My wish is realized. Consider what you have wished in the past; it may come back to visit you.

Destitution. Unresolved conflict. Strike. Hello. Pervade. Dead on Sunday. Litigation. Chess. Naming names. Plot. Becoming a millionaire. Strip-tease. Keeping the beat. Education. War is over. Upward mobility. Anticipation. Entering an asylum. Inebriation. A love affair. Matriculation. Holding one’s breath. Tomorrow. Dropping one’s pants. Change. Behaviorism. Going home. Audition. Epicurian indulgences. Inspiration. Observations. Drug addiction. Scratching. Die with me. Seconds, minutes, hours. Deterioration. Curiosity. Rent. Antagonize. Here and there. Gurgling. Stroking one’s imagination. Acceleration. Nutrition. Getting Laid. Rewriting. Chastize. Disaster. We hated them. Progress. Home again. Je t’adore. Gibberish. Promiscuity. Justice. Immobilization. Oozing. Self-referring metaphor. Destiny. Malnutrition. Impure story. Airborne. Integration. Out of step. Straying. Passing time. Amputation. Fast break. Creep. Fight back. Reincarnation. Alcohol-influenced behavior. Jock-sniffing. False statements. Orgasms. Revolution and love. Blues. Asphalt ecstasy. Milk and milk. Freeze. Remove your veil. Enslaving. Periodically nodding out. During. Acceleration. Nutrition. Getting Laid. Rewriting. Chastize. Disaster. We hated them. Progress. Hod-sucking. Making out. Rendezvous. Hand me down. Mischief. Suggestions. Space cadet. Innocence. Compliments. Explosions. Junior. Retirement. Crashing. Seduction. Rage. Disenchanted. Misinformation. Beguiled. Confessing sins. Medicine. Trouble. Absolving responsibilities. Silence. Wonderworks.

Richard Kostelanetz

And I stood in the cutting line, sorting and cleaning fish with the Mexican women
as Ramon piled the guillotine's basket full of the king's silent, bronze-eyed songs.
And October fell into November, and each morning as we came to the salmon
factory
coffee steamed open our hands, our forearms cramped, and snow dusted the tin
roof.

The day the ice machine froze, the day I went up the rickety ladder to the tin roof
and scraped the paddles in the silver barrel, trying to loosen the reluctant ice
we began to run out of fish. That afternoon we cleaned the salmon factory
sorted frozen salmon eggs, glazed and then refroze forty boxes of male chinooks.
By end of that week, the runs stopped, and on the last day I sang these songs;
"Vaya Con Dios" and "Rhythm of the Rain" with the sad-eyed Mexican women.

The foreman drove to Mobile with a box of silver knives and three Mexican women.
I flew to New Orleans, toasted the moonlight that rippled across the tin roof
of the bayou fish house, spent a thousand silver quarters on Cajun songs
at a bar in Chalmette, drowning my black salmon dreams in smoky amber heat,
over ice.

And every hungover day I called the office, to ask whether they had sold our
chinooks
boxed and cooling in the warehouse, across the frozen road from the salmon
factory.

In my floating dream, the Mexican women smile at me. In their dripping box of ice
I hear the salmon, singing Lorca's Deep Songs. I drift alone, above those silver
chinooks.

The moon is full; spreading a luminous fire across the tin roof of the salmon
factory.

Greg Rappleye

Soldiers

The spring I lost my virginity
we were losing
or at least not trying to win
in Viet Nam
I only fucked vets
It was this patriotic act
the least I could do
And the older the better
I knew a vet who'd come home
before I knew there was a place
he could've been
I owed them that, my body, didn't I?
They'd put their asses on the line for me
for our country
We owed them
We owed them, didn't we?
I swept their scars for information
Looked into a thousand blood-shot eyes
and wondered what I'd missed
by being a girl
Fucking was the closest I would come

They were the Midwest's Jims and Tims
and Toms, except
the ones who returned with only initials
so much had happened a couple of letters
all that was left
Their foreheads gleamed
a different sun rising
a light more orange
They were haunted
and I wanted to read their minds
I wanted a transmission of insight
in that moment union created
They wanted to rip pound twist

tear dictate taste rend heal repeat
my body
It was perfect
We all just wanted to feel
something

I wasn't the only one
Other girls like me felt guilty
for having low lottery numbers the next day
at school after that first televised drawing
The #1 draft, our quarterback, huddled with the guys crying
Automatically excluded from slaughter
by sex, I became a soldier of the sheets
underneath or over
in my hand
between my legs
in my mouth
in his mother's house
I did this for my country
I wanted the forbidden truth
that permeated the air vets breathed
the semen they ejaculated or withheld
because it was too much like dying

Ghosts I wanted to flesh out
and color with my desire for life
My empty mind I wanted filled
with their silence and their stories
I wanted the guy next to me
to light the joint and have the VC
pick his head off
No matter how many joints I lit
it never happened
I just kept getting high
kept on looking in their wallets
while they slept finding thickly
made-up Asian women, their addresses
Vows of undying love in a child's hand

The Salmon Factory Sestina

God, it used to rain. And I was crazy when I worked in the salmon factory.
Stacking fish totes, piecing together a cutting line, singing with the Mexican
women.

Some days we packed chubs, or whitefish, just waiting for the silver chinooks
to run up those rain-swollen rivers. And that staccato of rain, rattling across
the tin roof.

Finally the salmon did come, silver as a quarter moon and dead-eyed in the
ice
we'd loaded the night before into those wooden boxes. I learned the Spanish
songs

the dark-eyed women sang as we cut fish, and began to teach them my songs
as the days went by. The cutting line found a rhythm, and the salmon factory
hummed to life. The salmon grew dark, the lift trucks rumbled, dumping
fish and ice

across the tables. I pulled eggs, sorted fish, passed them to the Mexican
women

who scraped guts and bloodlines under the bare lights that hung from the
tin roof

like a constellation of dull stars, indifferent as we caressed those river-dark
chinooks.

September closed under an unseen moon. They trapped more spawning
chinooks

as the days grew colder, and we sang our tired passions out to the radio's
songs.

The cold stars sank, the salmon swam all of their miles, and rain pelted the
tin roof.

And I remember smoking a cigarette at the rollaway door of the salmon
factory

watching snow cover the mud, molding the delicate boot prints of the
Mexican women

into winter fossils. The snow fell, and fell, and we loaded the rusting fish
trucks with ice

and the company drivers, with their whiskey breath, rolled away with boxes of ice
and in the morning, rumbled back to our heartache songs, bringing more
chinooks.

Day Off

After six straight days
of twelve hour shifts
we stand around the corner
blowing smoke rings
sipping beers from a bag
swapping stories
telling long lies
afraid to go home
to the women and children
we'd kill for
afraid that on our one day off
with nothing to do with our hands
we'd realize we don't
like to play with the children
or talk to the wife
we're so fiercely frightened
of losing
we'd kill for.

Peter Spiro

I never knew what my cousin Steve saw in Viet Nam
or did

He drowned in booze when he came home
but he got used to it
Ultimately, he needed the real thing
We went to the Big Lake
Steve stood at the St. Joe lighthouse
screaming into the breakers
letting them smash into him
again, again
grinding his bones into the rocks
He felt nothing
He started to swim to Chicago
Instead he reached the other side
as I reached the end of my patriotic promiscuity
numb, fucked over
and still wondering
what happened over there

Elizabeth Kerlikowske

Ball

He says come alone
ballroom dancing
dipping me down
like icecream
twirling on tongue
and thighs
tossing me under
the music
the seasons
our lives

Joan Payne Kincaid

In Womanz poem
the lamp is in her spine
the polished spoon
her childrenz cries

Elizabeth Kerlikowske

Shooting
the Breeze

One minute you're
just shooting the
breeze, the next
minute you're wiping
his brains off your
face, rolling on the
flat of your belly
ready to spread fire
or else you're dead

Ray Catina

In Womanz poem
there's too much fucking
period

Womanz writes out of her underpants
the swirling Checkmate of slit and blood
powerful, unstated

Womanz wants to bleed into her old age
because she is alive then and
a well and a fountain

In Manz poem
a fountain is for coming

In Womanz poem
a fountain is to drink

Swallow sister
exhorts Manz poem

I'm drowning
explains the author
ess

In Manz poem
there is Eden, El Dorado, Xanadu

In Womanz poem
there is a house
She should clean it

Manz is content to come
into a hankie

Womanz wants to shudder
with the universe
Manz Poem was writ by the nurtured fire
the lovelight in her eyes

It's about the same amount of pain
still there are variations on the theme
I've grown but my heart and brain
have fixtures that remain the same
I make my life with the things I can name

Ruth Lepson

For Lisa

why not take pictures of ordinary days, for instance,
those two cats walking single file down the street
or Ruth Lennon with her little purse walking to the store?
I have pictures of my parties, of upstate New York,
London, Claudia's vegetable garden, the men I loved but
no pictures of you and me, mid-September, lawn chairs,
cloudy day.

Ruth Lepson

He's a Clock

he knows how long
he's been
against the wall

he's a would-be device
for women
if they would use him
if they would call
his numbers
all over his face
he says it's time

for now he's happy
just passing the hours
loving his minutes
with a second hand

Belinda Subraman

A Dry Spell

Trying to tune in the past,
mind like a radio dial
jerks through smears of static:
nothing comes through.

Michael L. Johnson

Manz and Womanz

In Manz poem
a hot dog peeks out from between
the fluffy lips of a snow-white bun

In Womanz poem
ketchup straddles the frank

In Manz poem
Womanz is a hood ornament
who bends back on a tight spring
at the touch of his hand

In Womanz poem
Womanz is the vehicle

In Manz poem
Womanz is a warm breast to fall asleep with
his lips sucking her life
until it's empty and long
long
long

In Womanz poem
Womanz prays for mastectomtes

In Manz poem
Manz is important
and Womanz is scent left in bathtubs
a stain on the sheet

In Manz poem
Manz thinks too fucking much

Manz thinks highly of Mariz poems

dark haired children dead? our spaceships stare a brief
flicker that laughs and speeds past sharks of attentiveness;
take your cold out in the rain where he couldn't continue
his role of bird-tree-ocean-everything empty names fly

Joan Payne Kincaid

Out of the Mist

Pregnancies I was part of
after microscopic battles
was a famous moment women dream
as in mist
of full moon that doesn't make it
hope and mystery
you mark off
out of your hands
movement down inside
doesn't belong to you
moving so you can
feel a bulging expansion
a small hiccup
that grabs your life.

Joan Payne Kincaid

A Celibate Life

is a bologna sandwich
without mustard
unwrapped 4 days
in the fig
asking to be eaten
but doing nothing
but growing hard and cold

Belinda Subraman

In Mid-1890 a Reporter for the Medicine
Lodge *Cresset* Updates Readers on the Condition
of Charley Schuneman, Whom a Small Texas
Pony Recently Left Sticking Up Against a
Gatepost like a Fifty-Cent Porous Plaster on an
Extremely Old Maid

Charley finally fell
to the ground and
gathered breath enough
to get home, where
he remained until
Tuesday. He is now
able to be out,
but walks sorter
slouch-ways, like
a hog going to war.

Michael L. Johnson

The Old Woman

“What is going to happen?”
my mother cries from her high bed
in Cozy Corner.
She doesn't want to know.

“If you loved me at all,”
she says, “If you cared at all...”
My brother tells me to remember
how she put us in an orphanage,
tells me to remember how she sent him
many times away. “Let the old bitch die,”
he cries, and I can see the pain in him,
his eyes so full of it I think
of whiskey, how he almost drowned
in whiskey, trying to forget.

I think of wine in cheap dark places
on both sides of that house where we lived,
I smell the stink of beer.
His fear, and mine, is not a fear of dying.
Try as we may to forget or remember,
our fear is this: the crooked thing
that poor old woman hurt us with.

She called it love.

Pat Schneider

The President Blows It Away

It is green and softly breasted unlike Arabian nights
where she had to entertain with stories as soap
opera of ongoing days; this Island lies underneath
cliffs and trees and licking oceans of wondrous instants
eternal as childhood's progressive disentanglement
the love abstraction politicians twist to corpse
the skepticism of sculpted birds' words
their tiny glitter eyes in my mind he speaks of turbans
of dedication torn limb from limb; humpback whales
and sea turtles gone from that Gulf of varied life
plover gull sparrow swan not getting straight to the point
too fast under the sun moon hearts of cities like America
in spring circles of eat below trust in god but remember
to tether the camel where Sheherazade sings; his eyes dart
daggers of dead men's bones smothering the man who refuses
to withdraw; she says the morning is the best time for it
signs to mobilize our wounds—sun-nailed to a tree
where something magical can be rubbed but you cannot be
tentative tying yellow ribbons round an old white house
being chained to some corporate desk in protest of what
is and what is not; how she loves those who come to eat
at the soup kitchen; and the special effect while he's
driving or going to war...forget the bra-play idea...
men love to make war not love...bad timing can spoil such
things and mockingbird begins spring fairytales
preparing us for Cleopatra reincarnated as a new kitten
who will rescue us with her innocence like a dream-life
genie coming to fulfill expectations; sad, the young prince
immolates in Massachusetts closed off from the cardinal
's hard riveting red...birds perched in the clenched
fist of ice-black trees and pouches that do not nurture
wordless as a writer staring at glass and marble candles
locked in corrals of bleeding peace in sunset of tropical
winter what is it that whispers of sand and camels and

with her big legs on her front
porch and greeted me when I
dragged in from work with,
“Be glad you can do something.
Look at me. I should have
stayed in Ohio.” But she
didn’t. She wouldn’t because
when your sister writes she’s
sick, you come and you stay as
long as you have to. That’s
the way Edna saw it and that’s
the way it was because there
are rules people should live
by and she knew them
and still does.

Albert Huffstickler

An Inheritance

A day at gneeveguila bog
Swelt brown Wintree afternoon.

Cutting one sod behind the other
each sod a generation of youth.

With a suckling lift, in gentle stoop
he turns subsistent dreams

sunk to the sentience and grace
of a dirtened Oak pitchform.

T. Colm O’Callaghan

Cycle

Passions aroused
coupling achieved.
Spermatozoa erupted
and he was conceived.

He demanded attention
at two in the morn.
He kicked a few times
and then he was born.

Viscera functioned,
diapers were cleaned.
He suckled a while
and then he was weaned.

He wanted a pony,
a wish overruled.
He studied a bit
and then he was schooled.

He’d learned a few things,
no more than required.
He looked for a job,
and then he was hired.

He married a girl;
a good time was had.
He waited a while,
and then he was dad.

His son took a wife;
his grandson was sired.
He gained a few pounds
and then he retired.

He felt a slight twinge
and took to his bed.
He rattled a bit
and then he was dead.

William N. Nesbit

Grievances

We pull through difficulty
like a long net being drawn through water,

heavy with effort, letting everything through
but what we should let go.

Joyce Odam

Edna

People should not pass in silence.
Edna's story's never been told
so I'll tell it for her. From Ohio,
worked for Champion Spark Plugs
for fifteen years, made her quota
every day, quit to come here
to nurse her sick sister, lost
her pension, stayed on, worked
in a nursing home till her legs
gave out and then stayed on
on Social Security. Diabetic,
opinionated, conservative, deeply
religious. There are rules
people should live by and she
knew them. "Woman told me
once, 'Well, you're an old maid.
You don't understand anything.'
I told her, 'I may be an old
maid but I understand plenty.'"
Sat on her porch in the
apartment next to mine, complained
of boredom, wouldn't stay on her
diet, legs big as tree trunks
but that didn't stop her from
eating what she wanted to. "All
she ever ate was cookies and
coffee," Rose, on the other side,
told me. Well, they finally put
her in a nursing home. Now
she's gone and there's an
emptiness where Edna sat

a toppled tree forcing us to go around.
I fell asleep to the carriage's joltings.

When I woke, Rome flickered like a witch
fire.

I cried out for Fanny from my dream
of a holy concupiscence, to make me
demand—
for a dislocated moment—
that we find that fat, murderous bird of
God
and have him marry us immediately.

Robert Cooperman

It Comes Back

like an ankle
that pings
after what
held you
won't do it
it throbs, a
heart toyed
with, strained
under weight
it hadn't
noticed chugging
or going up
and down like
the lover who
did then
didn't a ping
and nothing
connects
as it did

Lyn Lifshin

Short Order Waiter

Can you believe
8 hours a day
7 days a week for
2 years? And every
day having to
lose it to survive.
If I live to be
a hundred and five,
I'll never forget
that place, that
counter long as
all history, the
smell of my own
sweat, the solemn
oath every day
not to lose it
this time, not to-
day and then
the plunge to the
nether regions, to
that moment when
I knew I couldn't
get it all done
and I lost it
and it was all
a blank until
I emerged finally
into the sun, the
day lost, nerves
stretched tight in
a silent scream,

furious with my-
self for losing
it again and then
wondering how I
would have survived if
I hadn't then
wondering how I
came to pick
a job where you
had to lose
to win.

Albert Huffstickler

When Stella Cut Too
Much Off My Hair

I kept insisting, "I'm bald."
You said, "It's only a trim."
And I cried and wouldn't.
I even said, "I hate you."
And slammed the door.
You came in and apologized and told me,
"It's only an inch.
Your hair is still at your waist.
This had to be done
Because it's healthy."
You saved the clippings
To make a pillow
Some day.

Alysia K. Harpootian

Keats Arrives in the
Campagna with Severn,
7 November 1820

I barely have strength to lify my head
in this rickety vettura
bouncing us from Naples to Rome over roads
breathtaking and wretched as any in the Highlailds.
Severn fills the coach with wild flowers,
hoping to revive me with their aromas.

I left all hope at the San Carlo Theatre:
its sentries armed like brigands.
Despite the lovely countryside
it's a land of masters and slaves
kept cringing with muskets and swords;
fear of an uprising even in the opera houses.
The hot, stabbing lamps made me dizzy;
I feared another hemorrhage, so we left.

But a sight greeted us in the Campagna
I take for emblem of this tight-laced land:
a cardinal—crimson from collar to slippers—
stood shooting pheasants in the meadow,
to livened servants returning the corpses
like fawning retrievers to that bird of prey.
In England, a man would sooner knock you down
than play the hunting dog to a priest.

England! Lost to me forever.
I sank into the depths of the vettura,
the horses—until they smelled their Roman barn—
unable to outstrip Severn's wandering the fl~td~
for flowers and to quick-sketch volcanos,
a fallen-down cottage now a pigpen,

from the edge
of the bed tells
me as I know
if she could
find a way to
call, after
ward, she would
to tell me how
she loves

Lyn Lu shin

Nothing Better
Comes After This

Which is why it's called that.
You've entered the stories of.
Know the characters. Especially the lead.
The quirks.
Storing potatoes and plastic containers
in the broiler.
Not knowing it was.
Storage space is tight in that kitchen.
Puts his frozen yogurt
In the microwave.
Likes it melted.
The nomination was.
It doesn't all work for the.
You won't win best supporting.

Alysia Harpootian

Vows

"If I tell you something—it's just between us. Right?"

"Yeah, sure."

"I have this habit. Every time I make a new friend I tell that friend that I would like to confide something personal about myself, and I always stress the importance of confidentiality both before and after I tell them. After the friend swears her oath or omerta, and they all do, I make up a story, something off-beat, that's very personal and I watch her expression."

"Really? And then what?"

"This goes no further?"

"Honest. It ends right here."

"Then I go home and I write down in my index file the made-up story and the name of the person I told it to. The file is alphabetical by name, of course. That way if the story ever gets back to me, I know who it came from and I also know who I can and cannot trust."

"Wow. That is amazing."

"Please do not tell anyone else that I do this."

"Don't worry I won't tell a soul."

"Thanks."

Paul Beckman

Hotel Hanover

mother lies staring in the
hotel hanover
walls painted pink and rusted sinks
the stench of stale air and
dirty basins
sister sits beside her stroking her
forehead and whispering shh, it's
alright, whispering shh, mother's
turned to stone
in the hotel hanover.

Emily Fragos

Cover Your Mouth
When You Cough

my mother says
after a demerol
lets her sit up,
not just curl
into pain like
a scabies mite
into soft flesh
stubborn, settling
in. Honey, not
for me, I don't
care, but for
others. My mother
under 90 lbs,
sometimes not
able to sit up
still has to have
her say, tells me
when she chooses
of binoculars,
a blue vase I
should take from
the apartment
urges me to
go home, not
wait till she
dies, as she
used to tell me
I didn't visit
often enough
tells me how
to wear my hair
wipe her fingers
move the radio

Snowf light

A country of white feathers
and ice lies silent
as the clouds. Telegraph wires

are strung along its roads,
disappearing into the breath
of fields no tracks

disturb. Only a few
slow cars are crossing
the valleys lined with clusters

of trees stripped bare. We are
three weeks into war,
listening for daily

battle plans. In the time it takes
to dress, a dozen missions
are completed in our name, with no

counting the dead
and no saving the earth, which has
no voice to surrender with.

David Chorlton

Early Frost

Frost appears before a soul
expects it. A sudden layer
covers grass and gravel, roofs
and the woodpile

stacked for a winter still
to come. The sun

has risen behind
a sheet of thin paper, and its pale
warmth does not reach
the hazy windows
where early risers

look in vain for colour
on the ground where the baker
carried loaves before dawn,
steaming in her arms,

as she dropped
her shoeprints behind her like crumbs.

David Chorlton

j

Honest Words
David Chorlton

Since the “Velvet Revolution” in Czechoslovakia, home to many writers I admire, I have reached the uneasy conclusion that freedom and culture are incompatible. At least the evidence points to these two principles existing at odds with each other as book buying in Prague (and elsewhere in the former East Bloc) turns more toward what Ivan Klima called “trash and pornography.” The impressive thing about the interview with Klima in which he uttered this denunciation was that the Czech writer had no problem whatsoever with readers finally having access to writing that had been oppressed by the communists.

Finding a place for poetry in what is generally regarded as a free society (all things are relative) isn’t simple. If we rate importance by the size of the audience, prime-time TV, football, and the National Enquirer are all more important than poems. But I cannot help insisting that the minority or dissenting voice will always count for more than that of the crowd. And I remain convinced of the collective value of those who consider poetry to be part of their freedom.

Language is twisted in new and devious ways by industry and its Madison Avenue magicians selling their delusions. In the face of this, honesty may be the only weapon we have. Writing as resistance is as important to this as to any other country. I feel compelled to use poetry as a foundation in activism for peace, justice, and the environment. Culture is strongest under assault. We may not risk jail for speaking the wrong word in the U.S., but politics and marketing have placed tremendous pressure on the arts. It is precisely this pressure that proves the integrity of working poets, whatever their style and taste—or nation, for that matter. Poetry is a world language, translatable always into honesty.

An Alien Left
to Find His Way
b

His life was fifty years in Mexico
and one day
in Arizona, where the sun
struck him down in July.
He walked until the desert

weighed nothing, having crossed
the desperate meridian
to work for whatever
an hour is worth

where a week of one man’s time
costs more than another’s year,
but close to the border

everyone is burned
with equal fire. Directions are illegal here.
The man’s shadow

spread wide on the ground beneath him
suddenly folded
shut,

trapping him inside
as if a large black moth
had alighted on a stone
to wait for the stars.

David Chorlton