



Parting Gifts

Volume 5, Number 2

Winter 1992-93





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a rock in your throat
Hammocks in the sun
Spit slows to leech past
the unspeakable
Cherry Coke Sb-poke sucker cum

Babies tugged at this poisoned well
Tea pot song chickadee
Why weren't they poisoned then?
Saxophone

Somedays smaller and gone
Gazebo astrology
for a day or two

Sacher Torte, crinoline
a changed mole
persistent cough
Rain water candle flame Heaven
these futile thoughts

Elizabeth Kerlikowske

Rock Scissors Paper

My loyal body swallows
the lump in my throat
when I hear of your breast
Obediently it disappears
Delft were day lillies
Think lovely thoughts to
4
wish it I wash it away
Stained glass

Imagine this noma
sandblasted specks bobbing out
in a stream of peppermint tea
Black swans money

Never invoke its name, the C word
Caramel corn
Think this lump away
Lightning, willows, Wonderland
Try not to knead it
thirty times each day

It's bigger isn't it?
Spider webs in dew, first kiss
Where is it spreading?
Panic: shrinking-growing
Moon glow
Certainly it's smaller than yesterday's
Gone?

In the produce section
raisins, grapes
lymph nodes
and that's the end
Well known
Peaches breezes
Gone?
Lilacs cream
Gone?
The thing never discussed

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My grandmother needed a ladder
Each crowning of that tree
was a gardenia lovingly arranged
was a French braid
was a knit hat tied tight
by a mother
who lost her child
to the elements anyway

Laid to rest first
the bright tin star
came out last, the beautiful
compelling afterbirth
that decked the tree with sorrow

Grandpa went then to get more wood
My sister clung to Gran who wept
I memorized the carpet fibers
It felt wrong
to want
the bright caskets of presents

Elizabeth Kerlikowske

Holiday

My mother
grew in the center of the family circle
a Christmas tree
a memory poky and sharp
When I reached for it
I cried

Every Christmas held a funeral
of ornaments
I had my favorites
watching them be born
from tissue boxes Once a year:
red and red and red

Decorating would be done
I plunged in, my fingers
crippled from the sap
Gilt and cotton sticking to me

Celluloid balls
the hulls of joy
Clamp-on birds of paradise
their tails long gone
so hollow they had to be arranged
facing away from the trunk
looking out
Even sleeves didn't help
My arms came out
with a lasting rash

The angel hung below the star
which fit on a coiled spring
a hole in its heart for the light
This was the hardest part

Four Thieves Vinegar

"The sort conjurers still use
to break up homes in Kentucky"

They put your name in a bottle, pour
some of the stuff on top, cap it and

throw it into the rushing creek. If
you live within a five-mile radius,

you'll be driven crazy, guaranteed,
lose your teeth, wrinkle, baldness

will set in, digestion turn poor,
one of your eyes water, permanently,

though there'd be a moment of joy for
your hair, shot up, ready to catch fire.

Stuart Friebert

Finding Her

The phone rings. I answer it.
The voice on the other end
says she is the milk
inside a coconut, the furniture
I've always needed. I'm stunned
and tell her of my thirst,
my solitude, my desire
for an excellent armchair.
She says she likes my voice
and tells me we should meet
on the bank of a reedy pond.
I have a hunch this is the girl
I've been searching for—
the one with good teeth
and a flair for words.
And later that night, I find her
languishing on the bank
in the stance of a velvet recliner,
trilling out Thomas
with the smile of a dentist's daughter.
I say nothing. I wear
my silence like a falling rock.
She opens her legs.
I hit the ground.

Charles Rafferty

Feeding the Grass

I drove by a small church in Sherman,
Texas, the temperature near one hundred
degrees, the heat rising from even the
grass, like a wavering puff of smoke
before the fire, and the sign read,
"It usually takes a long time to find
a shorter way." On Sunday mornings,
while my wife and children attend church,
I write my self-centered lines. I could
walk to the front of any altar; recite
the required creed, as if selling
insurance, perhaps dropping a few dollars
in the offering, each week ending with a
lie. My son asks me, "Dad, why don't
you go to church?" "You'll find out when
you're older," I say, not sure that he
will, or that he should, but I know that
I love him. That's all I know.

The afterbirth of a crimson sundown
glistens across the surface of a pond,
and I sit with a black-plumed grackle,
perched on a low, stone wall, his glossy,
iridescent feathers wet and disordered,
one leg tucked and mangled beneath his
breast. A pure ghostly egret, calmly
minoring the shadows, glides over the
cattails, his long plumes announce the
breeding season. Wrens and sparrows
dart and dive against the sunset,
scooping insects from the air and water,
and the rain seeps through the green,
drooping branches of the willow, the
tears and rain
feeding the grass.

Steve Willcox

She Said Reading the Memoirs
There's Something About
These Women

They seem so frail so
weak don't know
where they stand
obsess about the
men leaving
them, scars I could
have puked she
said when I
read how one woman
cringed as a new
man went to touch
the breast just
reconstructed or
when that other
woman said her
man's grin at the
milk dripping
from her made
her sick I may
not know about
living in the ghetto
but when it comes
to the rest she grins
as if afraid to
bitch or moan
I know what's what

Lyn Lifshin

The Second Meeting
of the Judas Fan Club

"Fire and brimstone
a-sweat on your back, you crawl
from your neighbor's porch to a bed..."
His fingers flicking imaginary ash,
the priest searches for the parishoner's roots,
knowing each of them has dropped the leaves
from their branches to walk naked.
An image from his boyhood rises
into his thoughts: the backyard where he hooked
his cap on the end of a stick
and went running around the garden, balancing it.
There too in that garden
he grew out of his mother's tenderness, before the fence
of his Prussian grandmother's tomatoes,
the corn bent over from rain.
But how lonely the sound of his voice blows
through this yard.
"I want you to reflect your sins back
as if your flesh were aluminum,
know your neighbor as your friend,
if you have slept with his wife,
driven her furniture out of her house."
The schoolteacher sees her knees
stare up like foolish faces, the milk-ripened
breasts of the grocer's wife beseeching silk,
as the sinner's voice strains to take fire,
each sigh followed by a fiercer gaze.
"I want you to rock each abandoned baby,
sleep beside their nightmares,
turn the sulphur of your stares
to another direction."

Russell Thorburn

Railroad Tennis

One two
Three
Uncoupling in the train yard,
Bicarbonate of soda.

The centered game
Of the moving net,
A man dreaming
He is hunting.

Three becomes four.
Ends split means.
Lovers look at things
Thereby changing them.

The dream dreaming
Of a dragon.

The three, the four
The numberless
Embrace in the empty boxcar
While the twins

Hit the ball back and forth
Across the speeding train.

Tony D'Arpino

fGrand Canyon

Seven oceans pressed into dry layers,
swamps, savannahs,
ripple lines of dunes.
Somewhere there are footprints
of a dog-sized lizard.
Century by inch, the thick, green river
grinds through schist and granite.

Clouds fold into the vertical.
Ridges plow furrowed sky.
Ochre deepens to mauve;
pyramids of shadow.
This continent could go on
by itself, this trail heal
without a scar—

Here it's only a thin
surface of the human
over something obviously
too large—
not like Europe so fertilized
with graves, one cannot separate
trees from towns—

this canyon ledged
into the earth,
this country so close to bedrock
that tomorrow it could again
become unimaginable—
America, still undiscovered,
burning on the horizon.

Ioanna-Veronika Warwick

wouldn't go, so I held my breath and crawled back over the top again. lie was close, I knew that, to something, something very different.

He was trying not to breathe now. He stayed quiet, and waited for breathing not to come. But then one did come, and he was upset. lie wanted to stop it, to let it stop on its own, so he waited for not breathing to come, hut lie breathed. It kept coming and going, almost regular, like he was going to live.

He relaxed, and got excited, and tried to keep breathing, but it seemed as soon as he started to think he was okay he was fighting for breath again. 'We, something big changed. His mind, where he really was, where his thoughts were, dropped completely away, and he fell into something he didn't know. it was in his eyes, he couldn't accept it, and he fought, and thrashed, but he couldn't find it, not for anything, not for all the love I gave him! He shook his head from side to side, not knowing if he should fight being alive or tight being dead. Then he rocked from side to side, rocking in a rhythm, back and forth. Suddenly he stopped, reached his hand over to touch my shirt, as if to say, "You're five years old, the time for taking over." He grabbed at the front of my shirt and pulled me down, right up close. I started to chatter, I couldn't stop, I had to give him something, I said anything, I said, "I love you, Dad!" said, "Come on, Dad!" I said, "Don't go, Dad!" I said, "Don't go, you can't go!" He smiled, his breath smelled, and he kept smiling until I shut up, and cried just tears, whimpering.

"Oil Can," he whispered my nickname in barely a voice. Then the inside of his chest exploded, his back arched way up, and I fell over backwards on my elbows. It hurt bad but I couldn't feel it. His eyes were closed when I got up and looked. As tight as they'd go. He had to go someplace he didn't want to go. He was squeezing his fists and eyes tight. I was five years old, I understood, because I had to go many places I didn't want to go to. "God!" he said. I stood up and didn't know what to do. I ran around the room screaming for it to go away, just ran and ran in a circle for Mom to get home and stop it.

It ended. No matter how terrible it was, it was over in a matter of time, about fifteen minutes, and now he was peaceful. He looked up at me more tenderly than anyone ever could again. Then it was over, really over, and I put his hand down. It suddenly felt so heavy, I could barely lift it. It was cold. I wished I could have shut the door. I sat around the corner, a foot from his head, a little bit out of the wind, and waited.

Paper-Thin Pink Morning Glories

in my wife's
darkening garden
bats flit soundlessly
above the azaleas & forsythias.

in the shadows below
in the final moments of twilight
paper-thin pink
morning glories glow.

Michael Estabrook

To an Unknown Lover

You must be full of dawn
so I can think of you at dusk.
Coming like sleep,
leaving like the horizon.

You must be fragmentary,
fingertips, eyelashes.
Unraveling in the wind.
Crucified in the stars.

You must follow me unseen
like Eurydice, and at the first
insult of a glance
you must be gone.

Ioanna-Veronika Warwick

One for 1936

Haunt me back to where
the pavement gleams
with flinty specks
of broken moonlight,
where all our words collapse
on frozen corners
and it's always airless
evening; oh, ghost me home
to hear each trolley squeal
declare the heartless hour,
where I am sick
with hidden griefs again,
while life at least
keeps on hammering down
hot loin and thigh,
grinning wordless, yes—
gone mad, but still is
in there killing time.

Sydney Kessler

Ex

When I dream of him
I have to bear in mind
how I dreamt of cigarettes
for years after I quit
smoking.

Genevieve Marault

In the Door
Anthony Schlagel

I went to get a drink of water. The front door was open, and Dad was in it, half on the welcome mat, and half on the throw rug inside. He lay flat on his back taking a nap. But he wouldn't be taking a nap in the doorway, and in the middle of the night, so I ran over to see if he had the flu, because I had a bad flu at Christmas, but when I got there, I saw he wasn't breathing.

He tried to breathe when I came over, so I said normal things like he would have said if he'd been there, and not Mom, when I cut my finger slicing bread last week. I said, "Everything's going to be okay, Dad." But he couldn't breathe. He was waiting until one came. Then it did and he breathed it all the way in, then out, but only halfway, because he wanted another one, but nothing came. He panicked and thrashed around in his spot in the doorway. I looked outside for help. It was cold, in the winter, maybe the fresh air was doing him good.

Then one came finally, a breath, and he breathed it in, and he held it. He didn't want to take the chance that there wouldn't be another one. but he had to let go of it, so he did, and then there were regular breaths, and he breathed them. He calmed down a little bit more with each one. He shut his eyes and big drops of water squeezed out, because he hadn't blinked for a long time, and he rested, breathing deeply. I said, "Don't worry, Dad. Mom'll be home in a minute." I said, "Everything's going to be okay."

I was five years old, and I felt all the love in the world rush out to my father, but all that came out was advice. I would have hit the sides of my head with my fists as hard as I could until I shook it loose, if I'd been older, and more learned in the ways of language.

The reprieve was over. His eyes popped open wide, his face trembled. He tried to get a breath. Then one came. And he breathed a deep slow chest full, and I thought he might be learning how to do it better. He was so mean, but now he looked up so tenderly. I didn't know what it was, but whatever it was, it was passing on to me, I felt it. Because I was the only one home, and I was there, I wanted to say something that would mean something, because he looked up at me for it.

He was almost old, but not really old, and I was little, very little, and up until then I didn't love him, because he was mad all the time about something, like when I brought the wrong-size wrench, and he didn't listen to me when I said anything. "He's busy," Mom used to say. He was ~ ~ ~y, but with what, she didn't know, ever since I was born, and I wasn't supposed to blame him, but I did. Now he looked at me, like I was the only person in the world. And I was. I thought I should pull him in to get warm, but he wouldn't budge. I was wide and took up the whole doorway, with his belly high up and spongy, so I had to crawl over him to get to his feet. I tried to push him through, but I

Notes on Count Dracula
Barbara Lien

I was waiting for a phone call that never came. Suffering from a head cold, too, nothing better to do, I turned on my TV. Hammer Studio's COUNT DRACULA—why not?

Best dialog: "I am not young/yet I am restless." I wondered if Drac would do the "Children of the Night" speech. He did. I wondered if you'd think to call. You didn't. So much for consistency.

Chris Lee—not half bad; articulate, cold, serious. Jeez, wouldya look it that jive assed bat.

Lots of sudden close ups, supposed to make me nervous. On screen, a mother yelled, "My baby, where's my baby, I want my baby." My sentiments exactly.

She even prayed to God. "Won't help, lady," I thought.

"Dracula's wives done ate that baby." I tried not to think of you meeting a similar fate.

The TV station interrupted every five minutes with "bad credit, no problem" spots and phone sex ads; so, there went any chance for rapport with the characters.

Hammer vampires never learned foreplay. Drac just got down to it, with no tenderness in his bloody kisses.

Worst dialog: "Why can't this man be arrested?" / "Because Drac's one of the Undead, ya idiot, and the Undead don't show up for court dates," I thought. At that point, 11:58, I turned off the TV set. I wanted to spend the Witching Hour alone.

Smith and Halperin
December 1944

There was silence, call it the final stroke of night. Moon trails.

Snow masking mud.

A rag—a flower-print rag of dress snagged on low pine branches.

There, a cow fallen,
along with Smith and Halperin,
last week's lost patrol;

the cow swollen without eyes,
Halperin and Smith face down,
rifles scattered;

blood, black; the cow's
four unbroken legs stiffened,
sticking straight up...

Dullard Death, war whore.
oh, dirt-silent, wind-stupid, brainless
giant of a sky, consider the cow,
its sinless way of saying it,
that frozen, accusing gesture;
consider: not ever
once, that's

what it's saying:
look, dumb-ass—
NOT EVER
ONCE
LETTING GO,
FORGIVING...

Sydney Kessler

Supercat
Thaddeus Rutkowski

I don't want my cat mummified. I don't want my cat wrapped from ear to tail in sacred tape and sold to fanatics who shave their eyebrows as a form of mourning when their pet cats die. I don't want my cat to fall into the hands of entrepreneurs who make millions on the divine-animal mummy market.

So I teach my cat to fly. I take my cat to the top of a cliff and flight-check a hang glider. I strap my cat to the trapeze under the wing. My cat freaks, but I launch the aircraft anyway. I follow below as the glider approaches the ground. The glider moves faster than a speeding bullet. My cat looks like a bird, or a plane, or Supercat.

From now on, in the face of danger, Supercat will use his powers to bail his cat-self out.

Supercat won't be wrapped for sale as a votive offering to inhuman gods. Supercat won't dry out in a secret crypt, waiting to place a furry curse on the first white man to stumble in. If evil anthropologists arrive, Supercat won't be excavated and used as ballast, fertilizer, or a museum attraction. Most of all, Supercat won't be photographed wearing a fetish body suit for some magazine article on ancient housepet rituals.

Equal Opportunity
Thaddeus Rutkowski

Things might fall apart at the office.

I might exit the elevator and find the building gutted, the walls splintered, the floor cluttered, and the person I work for standing on a desk and making a speech about the nineties.

The person might take me aside and say, "I don't mean this as a criticism, but you don't seem to understand what the word system means."

I might sneak into a meeting to find out how many of my friends have been fired. The phone might ring and I might answer it. "Is my friend there?" the person on the other end might ask. "Who is your friend?" I might reply. "My friend is the owner of the company," the person might say. The owner might happen to be sitting right there. "Who wants to speak to me?" the owner might ask. The person on the other end, I might learn, might not be the person who wants to speak to the owner but might be only the person's secretary. The person's secretary might have the right number but the wrong area code. Suddenly I might feel that I am talking not into a telephone receiver but into a house cat's asshole. I might then give the hand set to the owner and say, "I have no idea where the person who wants to speak to you is. So you will just have to wait." The owner might seem amenable. I might hurry back to the person I work for and say, "I've always known

but could never say that system has an entirely different meaning for me."

"If, to begin with, you had been as polite as you are now," the person might say, "you might have been promoted to a less lousy level."

I might go out to the street, look into a store window and see a snowflake paper weight. Inside the glass ball a toy man might be shoveling fake snow. The flakes might swirl through the liquid air and settle at the toy man's feet.

From “The City of Wires”

The piano
sits
on stage
waiting
for
its
fingers
to arrive

Time
has no way
to outrun
a mind
that is dancing...

one
thin
vertical dancing
in
borrowed
light

A
collection
of
arbitrary
absorptions

Sentenced
to collapse
within
its
own
delicate
proportions...

Mark Soifer

Answer to “Honest Words” of David Chorlton
Eva Shaderowfsky

The reason that Ivan Klima had no problem with readers finally having access to all that was banned during the Communist oppression in Czechoslovakia is that he knows of what he speaks. Samizdat is not a superior or desirable form, whether in poetry, fiction or essay. The problems of producing in samizdat means that only those who felt that they must write, went to the trouble of doing so—albeit at the risk of incarceration. Now that the Velvet Revolution has changed the scene, all kinds of writings are available. This is not a pity, but a freedom. It seems that David Chorlton has romanticized the situation of the oppressed and seems to be looking for it everywhere. He finds it here in this country through the effects of advertising, TV, football, and so forth—in all that we would call popular culture. If this is his personal *raison d'être* and the impetus for his creativity, then fine. But he should recognize that there are only a few great writers in any culture, only a few good poets here and there and certainly some of them must be lost through the varying odds against them.

It is true that the voice of the few can count for more than that of the crowd. Hasn't this always been the case? Examples abound and need not be listed here. That the poet has a special place is also true, viz, we have poet laureates and state poets. But to be a poet is not necessarily to be privy to some eternal truth or to have any insight at all. S/he is, after all, a person who works with words. No more. A person who does this is not necessarily one who is more truthful than the next. Nor do I feel that poetry is essentially an international language. Too often, a background is required, in the culture, the language, the history of the poet in order to understand what is being said and why. Poetry then, is a text, which does not stand alone, either in relation to other poems which came before, or in its spectacular ability to convey truth. Adversity is always part of our lives, whether or not we are poets, whether we live here or elsewhere. The search for that which is to be fought against—capitalism or communism, oppression through banality of advertising, or the threat of jail—is not a difficult one. David Chorlton could find the impetus to write anywhere in this world. But isn't it also a freedom to be able to produce such a cacophany and a plethora of insignificant images and words? I much prefer to view all this as fertile ground rather than as oppression.

Trying to Find It
Mary E. Rechner

As I wake up I feel it, a small irritation. It has not been slept away, has not vanished. I feel myself inside my body, feel my feet touching the floor where they overshoot the mattress, feel my arms shaped in v's under my head and the pillow, feel my head heavy and my neck bare against the pillowcase, feel the fat at my hip grinding into the flattened-out mattress, feel my knees pressed together and remember the bruise each knee always leaves on the other.

I feel myself inside my body. I feel my sex inside my body and I feel and think my sex inside my body, inside my head. I look at the clock. It is nine o'clock. It is nine and the sun isn't shining and the small irritation I went to bed with begins crawling up my backbone.

I am the same person inside the same body that went to bed on this mattress, in this room, with my lover right beside me. He is the same also. The irritation lingers. It tightens my mouth. My lover wakes up.

He is awake and not yet speaking. He is awake, the covers off him. The sheets wind around my shoulders, ribs, hips, and thighs. His arm moves. His hand finds my shoulder under the sheets with his eyes still closed. My eyes are open and I look at his naked body, his hand touching me.

Our bodies lie together, mine under sheets and sweat. His is out, no fat at his hips or inside his thigh or hanging from his chest. He is a thin man, there are veins in his arms, and mounds, smooth oval mounds of muscle at his thighs.

He has an erection. It is resting up against his white belly. I look past his belly to his thighs, past the bone knees to the shin bones which turn out and up and branch into the tendons of his feet and into his toes.

There he is, all of him, his butt discrete and not bulging, his erection tight and deliberate. He can see it if he wants to, and he knows what it means. Irritation floods my body, an ache, a crick, a pain, and an itch. I feel my breasts sitting on the bones of my chest and the bulge of my belly. I feel moisture under my arms.

I feel the warmth, but not the kick that follows. I feel the warmth of myself, of my legs together and my armpits, the hair on my head. I feel myself and that only.

I do not tell him, feel like I've told him, feel like I'm so crabby, girl, you're not a girl with your lover on a Saturday morning. Irritation. I feel my body, some muscle, and hair, and fat, and bone. I am a heartless and lazy woman. Love is stuck somewhere inside me, swimming somewhere in the sweat sticking to my arms and legs, lost somewhere in my mouth or up my nose. I can't find it this morning, in this tangle, this snare of desire.

Seeing Bighorn

The search for Julian Roe
Wonderland Rocks

It came from giving up
my life on short notice
to try to find a lost man
who disappeared
in the rocks,

one Julian Roe.

Jeep-shuttled through the dark
and then at 5 a.m.
with pack and tracking stick
(no coffee)
by helicopter to nowhere:
the boulderland that seems
to have swallowed
Julian Roe.

Set down on sand in a rotorwash
circled by boulders,
all but blinded by the dawning
sun, did I see him
reflected off rocks?
An instant
in dawnlight,
as if turned to stone,
then gone.

Rangers who keep
to their schedules
for a whole career
have never
seen bighorn here.
And no one has seen
Julian Roe.

Taylor Graham

Airship

He took the boat.
The boat took him
to windows blue
with the going dust.

In the cabin thru
circles he saw
half-moon on waves
and at every break
his lips burned.

So tempting—pockets
of lost water, he lost
latitude, running out
barefoot on the hull,

as if to land, as if
for air where night
is overboard and birds
double up for the gale.

Emily Pestana

Entering

When you dream, no doubt, dream
the cold music of your window fan,
night air pours, pours picture-
less circles of opal and love.

Out of yourself—a character
lives nowhere, dreams words
toward Ohio, Spain or sky-blue,
where naturally you begin to read
what the blood rushed.

There is no going back
to sleepy paragraphs.
Quote after quote
of the green street lamp,
skeleton stories trail you home
to read the night to you aloud.

Emily Pestana

Stories I Started But Then I Had to Do Dinner
Lynne Conroy

“Shit!” he said as he stepped in it. Looking around for something to wipe his wingtips on, he spied an American flag strung onto a telephone pole with a yellow ribbon.

Gerry came upstairs dangling the Kotex he had pulled from his carburetor. As soon as I saw his face, I just knew he’d never understand my reasons.

Everyone on the block was talking about the Iraqi flag Howard had raised at dawn.

“He’s only done that once before. In 1969. When the government had another banner year,” Marie Doherty said to Ethyl DiGiovanni.

An hour after they had placed the sperm in Storeroom 389, the cop came in and said they had made a big mistake. It was no ordinary stuff they husbanded in the cryogenics plant.

Helen saw me hesitate.

“You must meet her,” she said, tugging at my arm. “She’s the one who donated Al Capone’s penis to the Smithsonian.”

For twenty years, the tumor in the chimney had grown slowly. On Sunday, the mortar cracked and six bricks fell out. That’s when Lisa’s husband decided to go for a jog.

The man with the heart-shaped scar above his mouth pulled the last of the Fabergé eggs from his jock strap.

We arranged the second meeting at the microwave repeater station, but the woman with the gold shark’s tooth necklace didn’t show.

*Risus eram positus inter convivium mensis,
et de me poterat quilibet esse loquax.
quinque tibi potui servare fideliter annos:
ungue meam morso saepe querere fidem.
nil moveor lacrimis: ista sum captus ab arte;
semper ab insidiis, Cynthia, flere soles.
flebo ego discedens, sed fletum iniuria vincit:
tu bene conveniens non sinis ire iugum.
limina iam nostris valeant lacrimantia verbis,
nec tamen irata iam tua fracta manu.
ah te celatis aetas gravis orgeat annis,
et veniat formae ruga sinistra tuae!
vellere tu cupias albos a stirpe capillos,
a! speculo rugas increpitante tibi,
exclusa inque vicem fastus patiare superbos,
et quae fecisti facta queraris anus!
has tibi fatales cecinit mea pagina diras:
eventum formae disce timere tuae!*

Farewell to Cynthia

I was ridiculed where banquet tables were set,
and anyone could gossip with my name.
Five years I had the heart to serve you loyally—
bite your nails often, and mourn my lost faith.
I am not moved by tears—by that art I was caught.
Your tears, Cynthia, are always a trap.
Leaving, I too shall weep, but wronged pride conquers grief:
you do not let the yoke fit easily.
Farewell to the threshold still weeping from our words,
the door my hand, though angry, did not break.
But may you be weighed down by all the years you hide
and your beauty be marred by ugly lines!
When your mirror reproaches you for them, may you
ache to pull your white hair out by the roots.
And may you in turn be shut out to bear contempt—
a hag, may you feel what I have endured!
My page has sung these terrible fortunes for you:
so learn to dread your beauty's full result!

Propertius, Elegies, III, 25

Translated by Michael L. Johnson

It was just like him to trivialize the incident with a sports metaphor.

"C'mon, Nan," he said to me, "Even in baseball you get three strikes before you're out."

"Why? Did I tell you I owned the Cubs?" I asked.

Dressed in the white jumpsuit, Harry seemed like someone else to Jill. For a moment, she thought her husband was the Elvis Strangler after all.

Swaying with the train, a man taught a woman to foxtrot in the aisle. She was his wife.

After I had eaten dinner, I realized Shelley had served the cherries jubilee on radioactive orange Fiestaware.

Doris remarked to Sylvia that the roast the Arawak had prepared native style had a peculiar flavor.

"I hope the cruise ship hasn't done anything in bad taste. The Arawak used to-- Well, you know, they ate people," Sylvia said, pushing away her plate.

In 1963 Karyn Kupcinet, daughter of a prominent Chicago columnist and late-night talk show host, was found dead in her Hollywood apartment.

On Television

I watched her father on television before
He had a dead girl for a daughter
Watched him while she lived in Hollywood
When her robe was occasionally draped
Innocently on the back of a chair
When she returned from appearing
On the Red Skelton Show or the U.S. Steel Hour.

I may have seen her on Hawaiian Eye
Before I knew she was her father's daughter
Before I watched the image of her father
Late at night knowing he continued
After her robe had been tossed for the last time
Across the back of a chair
As Karyn lay on her living room couch
For two, maybe three days, flecks of blood drying
Her TV turned low, running
Pictures that could have been her father
Interviewing Carol Channing before he knew
Or images of Karyn still moving
Across the set of the Donna Reed Show
Maybe Karyn's father was appearing live
And I was watching while someone left her
Without locking the door.

Patricia Edith

Polyp

He tries to cough it up
and can't
this stuck bit

not shell or fish bone
in the tight
passage of his throat

Before, each part
moved smoothly or rested
unnoticed unfelt

now, he tries to swallow it
this caught chip
his own flesh
it sticks in his throat

B. Yurman

When Someone
Is Dying

you barely
have time for
a bath every
4th day. The
first April day
it shoots up to
90 in hottest
light the sort
of afternoon
you'd have never
let anything
stay inside I'm
mixing shakes,
sorting pills
covering and
uncovering the
shaking. The
shades are
down the phones
turned off my
mother staggers
to the bathroom,
throws up with
the water running
to blur as water
falls did her
fighting with the
man who fell on
his face in
the snow
what is

Lyn Lifshin

Lit from Within
Paul R. Haenel

Even though a lot of time has passed and I haven't heard from you, I need to tell you about what happened recently after my friend Molly and I took in an exhibit at the National Building Museum. Molly had heard about two Dutchmen who were making sounds from thin steel cables attached to two grand pianos that were suspended from the ceiling, so we went up there and listened for half an hour, lying on our backs on the carpet. We closed our eyes for a few minutes and concentrated. The sensations were odd, something that went beyond that eeriness of that kind of sound in such a cavernous place. It was not like being underwater, but it was also not entirely like listening to sounds in the atmosphere. When the two artists quit playing the cables, Molly sat up, looked around, and said she wanted to go down to the Smithsonian Cafeteria to get something to eat. She had a pass and could get a discount.

While we ate I happened to mention that you had more than once suggested that I take a look at a certain painting that hung somewhere in the National Gallery. I hadn't read your letters in a long time and I didn't remember what building it was in, what artist, or the name of the painting, but I was pushing salad around on my plate, onions and pale, tasteless, hot-house tomatoes, and I said, "I think it's Dutch, or Flemish. I think it's a woman holding something."

"Vermeer," Molly said.

I said I didn't know. As I tell people, and as I told her, my memory for certain things gets worse with age, although there are other things I can't forget if I want to, things engraved in my memory as if acid-etched in steel.

I said to Molly that it was a painting you'd told me was your favorite.

"Oh," she said, "It's probably Vermeer."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

"Because," she said, "If anybody, particularly a female, would absolutely have to have a favorite painting, chances are it would be a Vermeer."

I looked at her. It seemed to be a silly thing to say, and I told her so.

"You'd be surprised," she said. "Have you looked at Vermeer lately?"

"Well, no" I said. "But you're jumping to conclusions," I told her that you were a Mary lady, that you had a Mary fixation. Maybe it was a Da Vinci, or a Michelangelo or somebody I didn't know who did Marys.

Molly raised one eyebrow at me.

We were not alone in the cafeteria. An older couple came in and sat down at the table next to ours with a healthy lunch—apples, some

kind of greens, kale or raw spinach, flaked cheese. The woman was frumpy and the man looked resigned to saying 'yes' to her all his life. We watched them for a few minutes.

Molly gestured a little with her fork and said, quietly, "That stuff wouldn't fill a bee."

"I think it's Vermeer," I said.

I was picking at pieces of mushroom that I made sure had soaked for a while in the Smithsonian's light Italian dressing.

"Do you know where most of this country's mushrooms are grown?" I asked Molly.

"Do I need to?" she said.

"In Butler County, Pennsylvania. Underground in limestone caves. Acres and acres. Kept in the dark and fed only shit."

"Is that true?"

"Well, it used to be," I said. "I don't know anymore. Item two. Do you know where most of the artichokes are grown?"

"How dated is this factoid?" she asked. She had artichoke hearts in her salad.

"Castroville, California," I said. "The artichoke capital of the world. Item three. The two places where most of the cranberries are grown?"

"I give up," she said, hopelessly out of her depth and bored with me.

"In bogs in Wisconsin and the southeast coast of Massachusetts. Ocean Spray, get it?"

"Ocean Spray?" She liked that.

"Of course," I said.

I watched the frumpy woman putting salt on her apple slices. I noticed that Molly was watching me, watching my eyes. I had never seen anybody put salt on an apple before and I made a remark to that effect. Neither had Molly. "That woman is nuts," I said.

"I think we should go find this painting," Molly said. "Enough is enough."

I have to say that I had mixed emotions about that prospect. It was as if I would be paying you a sort of visit, psychically, and I wasn't sure I was up to it. I had, some weeks before, told Molly about you, about your oddness, about my misbehaviour, my anxiety. She had demonstrated some curiosity about the matter, listening to me try to describe you.

"What finally happened?" she'd asked me.

I was sure she cared but I wasn't sure why or how much.

"I blew it." I told her then.

"Have you ever read Castaneda?" I asked now, as we bused our tables in a perfunctory son of manner.

"One of his books," she said. "The first one."

"That was the drug book," I said. "The other books were beyond

The Visit

it's taken me
76 years but
I've learned not
to listen to you
kids—I
find a book in Joy's
room, mine, I know
but she put her
name in it the
quotes would
hurt you if I
told you I'm
sharpening my
tongue to a
knife like the
one Sally stole
so now, over 30
years later, I
still can't
bear to even
see her. Have a
good time when
you go out and
leave me, I'll
be here, at
least my body will

Lyn Lifshin

eat my sandwich. She had put a little note in the bag. It was a quote from Kierkegaard that read: "Alas, the doors of fortune do not open inward, so that by storming them one can force them open; but they open outward, and therefore nothing can be done."

When I got back home I wrote a little note of my own that said, "Let's get married." It was the shortest note I had ever written, and I folded it up and put it, very carefully, about two-thirds of the way down in one of her tins of Fortnum & Mason.

It was a light tea.

the mushrooms, the peyote buttons. But eventually it got out of hand and preachy, and I quit. But anyway..."

And we got separated then, or separated ourselves, threading our way through the tables and people, trying to find a way out of the eating area. I went one way, left, and she went another way. As you know, I'm left-handed and nearly always take that way out of things, left, west, west—northwest, or south-southeast. Molly is right handed. The waterfall window was in front of us and when I found my way out of the maze of tables I had to stop and wait for her. She was far away, ambling casually past the waterfall, a woman my age and religiously indifferent, divorced from an Australian and still in love with Australia, where she had spent four or five recent years. I felt old, suddenly, watching her walk toward me, and suddenly I realized how much I missed God, or missed somebody who had the ancient belief in God. When we hooked up again I continued talking about Castaneda.

"...I didn't behave like a warrior with Heidi, as Castaneda might have put it. I behaved like a prudish and greedy Puritan."

"Did you learn your lesson?" Molly asked me.

"What does anybody learn from getting slapped in the face? Even if they deserve it..."

"Is that what she did?"

"Not without warning," I said. "Not without a number of warnings."

Molly laughed.

"Listen," I said, "let's just go. I don't want to know what painting she liked. I don't remember. We could be here all day looking. It's not that important."

But she knew I wanted to find the painting, a certain moment of light you had written and talked about, and knew that I was just trying to be polite.

"We'll find it," Molly said. "I'm sure I know the painting she was referring to."

An Edvard Munch exhibit was there. We went and saw The Scream.

"This is famous." I said, shouldering somebody away from it. I got up close and peered at the piece. I had first seen the image when I was a senior in high school, in a textbook on psychology class right before our teacher had taken us on a day visit to some nuthouse in Westmoreland County. The people in the bin didn't have the sort of pinched faces that Munch's subjects have, skulls nearly, or only, but I remembered them and that day, and the smell of the place. It was a nightmare that scared the hell out of me because none of those people knew they were crazy. They were merely innocent and bewildered and had no idea. I remembered, that day, how I had loved to pick up pine cones at a lake in northwestern Pennsylvania my family went to each year when I was a young boy, and how I had collected acorns, carefully

selecting them and lining them up in the grass out front of our cottage, a prisoner of their color, their shape, tinkering with them for hours. Madness could happen to anyone.

I turned from the famous woodcut, other people shouldering me away.

Molly was convinced she knew the Vermeer.

"No time to waste now," she said. "We're getting close." She led me to the Dutch gallery.

Those faces. I stopped in front of one painting, holding Molly's hand, and asked about their poses. The moment looked as if it had just happened, in Georgetown in a bricked-in backyard, two days before. She explained to me some technical thing about painting that I didn't understand. I wanted to know if the people in the painting had posed the whole time the artist worked. She thought I was being ridiculous. The painting looked like a living moment, something alive, a photograph. It looked as though if you got close enough to it you could smell the baked clay in the bricks, or the warmth of the sun drawing out of them some ancient smell.

"Let's go see your friend's painting now," Molly said. "It's right around the corner."

We had looked at about ten Flemish paintings by then, and I didn't want to look at the one you had talked about. I'd had enough.

"She's not my friend anymore," I said.

I felt sad all of a sudden.

"Do you think about her very much?" Molly asked me as we walked.

"I think about everything too much," I said.

The painting was illuminated from somewhere, somehow, like none of the others. When I came home, I reread your letter. I'd forgotten that you wrote that you had never seen it, the original. Now I wish only that you had, or could. It's much more lovely than I can possibly describe. I could have stood in front of it for hours, or days. Up close, you cannot see the secret of the light. It looks, simply, like paint, cracked and old.

You said you thought the woman in the painting was pregnant, and that that's why she had the look on her face she has. Molly didn't think so. She said a lot of women looked like that, were represented that way in those days. I didn't say anything to Molly at the time but now I think you were right. You said it was either pearls or gold that she was weighing. It was pearls. But even as important as that might have been to you or to Vermeer, it's not the most important thing about the painting. It's not the expression on her face, either. It's the light, the light everywhere in the painting; on the pearls, her face, her clothes, on the scale. The light from the window, or wherever it comes from, is what counts.

Molly, watching me, had a smug expression on her face.

"That's called 'skirting.' It gives the lure a little body. The bass have to think there's something there, I guess."

She said, "It doesn't look like any kind of animal I've ever seen."

"It doesn't have to. Bass are not too bright. They're merely instinctive. They don't discriminate. They wouldn't strike at a Pepsi can, of course, but they'll strike at one of these lures. It looks edible to them."

"I see," she said. She went to the refrigerator, opened it, and sighed. "I made you a sandwich."

"Thank you."

I finished the coffee, put the cup in the sink and ran some water in it. Then I took the tackle box out to the door. I got my two rods and set them next to the box, and put my jacket on. I put it on slowly and watched while she came out of the kitchen with the Kierkegaard and sat down on the sofa. She put her feet up on the coffee table.

"You don't mind?" I asked.

"No. Not at all."

"What are you going to do?"

She held up her book and smiled.

"You sure?"

"Yes," she said. She laughed. "I have my tea to sort, no? After you're gone, I'll line them all up on the table. Dark tea is for dark days and light teas for the bright and sunny days, when everything is perfect. That makes sense, don't you think?"

I nodded. "And today?"

She looked out the window. "Oh," she said. "I would say a light tea."

"Good." I opened the door and turned back to her and told her I would do my best at the pond.

"Leave some for the next time," she said.

I was ready for the bass that morning, and they were ready for me. Hungry and anxious, they struck the spinnerbaits often and with a great deal of energy. Everywhere I went along the pond's edge, everywhere I cast, there were bass. I caught two three-pounders with my good rig, released them and then started using the other rod/reel combination, a cheaper one that didn't

have a magnetic retarder. I had never mastered casting with it and decided to use it to get some practice and to give the bass a break. But they were hittin' everything. I went to top-water spinnerbaits and they kit those. I walked to a place where the pond was a little deeper and used a few shallow-diving crankbaits. I took two large bass in ten minutes on the crankbaits. Shortly before noon, almost satiated, I fixed up a few Texas-style weedless plastic worms and dragged them through some crap and caught a monster.

I quit shortly after noon, and sat on the bank to calm down and

to get out there and have my own last hurrah. I figured the joke was on them.

She had been shuffling around, following me like a shadow, with her thumb stuck down in Kierkegaard, marking a place. My tackle box was on the kitchen table, opened, and she went over to it and stared into it, the book dangling at her side.

“You should use this black spinner,” she said.

“Stick to tea,” I said.

“I’m just trying to help.”

“Firstly, it’s spinnerbait, not a spinner, and secondly, black is for muddy water or for when it’s dark.”

“When it’s dark? How can the fish see it then? That doesn’t make any sense at all.” She looked at me. “Do you want me to make you a little breakfast?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“I’m not asking too many questions, am I?” she asked. “There aren’t enough questions, that’s the problem here. That’s how I see it, anyway.”

I went to dress and when I came back to the kitchen she had taken all my spinnerbaits out of the tackle box and had lined them up on the table, sorted according to color and size. The Kierkegaard was sitting at the end of the second line, spine up. A cup of black coffee was sitting to one side of the stove and I took the cup and sat down at the kitchen table.

“So,” I said, “you’ve got them all lined up.”

“Absolutely.”

“Would you like to come fishing with me?”

“Certainly not. The concept is a little distasteful,” she said. “I’m just trying to help you see these things. when they’re in the box they’re all packed in so tightly. I thought you might want to consider your options.”

“What did you put in this coffee?” I asked her.

“Ah, you noticed.”

“Just a little whiskey,” she said. “Not too much, I hope.”

“No,” I said. “It’s just right.”

“It might be a little chilly out there.”

“Might be.”

“Yes?”

“If I understand this correctly, the lighter colored ones are for when the water is clear?”

“Yep. And in daytime.”

“How do you know all this?” she asked, picking up the spinnerbaits one by one and placing them very carefully back in the tackle box. “These things are so large. What are those blades for?”

“To reflect light and attract the fish.”

“And this rubber stuff?”

“This is the one,” she said, “isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I said. “This is it.”

“Your friend has good taste.”

“She’s not my friend.”

“She is if she told you to come see this.”

“Too late,” I said. “It’s too late.”

“Well, just write and tell her about it. Tell her that you saw it.

Thank her. It’s never too late to say ‘thank you,’ you know.”

“She’ll think I want something.” ~

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

I think of those people in the Westmoreland County hospital, now, more and more—their fluttering hands, their fears. I remember them, and I remember collecting and arranging my acorns. I was most fond of the ones that still had their caps, scaly things, severe, rough textured. But they protected the smooth seeds which were a soft, warm, chestnut brown. Once the cap fell off the acorn, it would lose its luster, its glow, within hours.

Now, writing this to you, I remember the smell of the pines at the lake, and how belief in God and order once was so comforting to me, a light that came from an unknowable place, like the light in Vermeer’s painting. That place, especially on rainy days, when I would stand on the screened-in porch and watch the raindrops plop down in random patterns out on the lake, was the infinite measure of sadness. And how wonderful it was. In those days my cap, scaly though it might have been, was still intact.

Molly would understand, and perhaps you will, too.

And Vermeer could have made the right canvas of that scene on a dark rainy day, I think, with the raindrops hitting the water, and the acorns lined up in the grass next to the porch, some capped, others capless, all of them sodden and lost in lush grass beneath a pine. Me from behind, from the porch, a small boy standing out on the dock, head cocked to the right, angled slightly downward, hands deep in my pockets—a varnished, shining record, cracked, full of detail, and lit from within.

Garden of Eden

I know it to be my best
—Marcus Stone on his painting “In Love”

In Stone’s painting you sent to me the other day,
the young man seated on a wooden bench stares
through space across a table at a woman sewing.
She’s intent on what she’s doing, neck bent, hands
snug beneath her breasts, and he’s intent on her.
An apple tree, growing through the table’s center,

is between them, heavy with apples, and a white
statue behind the tree, alabaster and winged, an
angel or an archer, and beyond that a glade in
sunlight. I know that both are dead now; the date
of the painting is 1888 and they were not children.
There are apples on the table, five red and a yellow

apple, and another red one on the ground.
The woman’s perfect hands are hard at work;
her right hand holds the piece of cloth, her left
is busy with the single thread she works.
The man, entranced, with the forefinger of his
left hand gone behind his cheek, seems

to lean with all his might into this moment,
yet he seems to be relaxed. His legs are broadly
crossed, and so are hers. I think of you and me,
and understand her knowledge, his desire,
the artist’s need to paint the one red apple on
the ground. He thought it best that we remember

what went wrong, regardless of the enfilade
of calm even this painted moment of happiness
might bring. No matter how enchanted
a moment might be, our desire that we will,
merely by living, live forever, is that one apple,
blood-red, alone, and fallen farthest from the tree.

Paul R. Haenel

Let’s Get Married

Paul R. Haenel

It was either very late at night or early in the morning, dark in any
event, and early Autumn, and I was strutting around my apartment
with some fishing gear, feeling cock-sure, licking my lips and thinking
of my hook-setting motion when the big bass would take my
spinnerbait. I was an optimist..

She was following me around, carrying a copy of Volume I of
Kierkegaard’s Either/Or, and making pronouncements about the
legitimacy and history of tea. This was at the height of her campaign
to get me to stop drinking coffee. She would make coffee for me, but
she hated it. It made her feel plebian, she said time and again.

“So stop making it for me,” I would say.

“Try this tea,” she would say.

“Yuck.”

She had one shelf in a cupboard, at my place, full of tea. There
were more than ten different teas—Constant Comment, Twinning’s
Irish Breakfast, tins of Fortnum & Mason’s Earl Gray and Rose
Pouchong, Darjeeling, and various herbal teas.

“What is an Irish Breakfast?” I would ask her.

“I’ve no idea. I suppose it’s what the Irish take in the morning.⁷
She said it in a very good brogue, although her last name was French.

“OK, fine. What is a Pouchong?”

She was holding a black iron frying pan and she raised it and
shook it at me. “It’s the sound this skillet makes when I bring it down
on your head.”

“I see,” I said, moving off a bit. “There’s no reason to resort to
violence.”

I went to the bedroom to sulk for a moment and she came in with
a cup of some kind of tea, a steaming cup of nearly clear tea, which I
peered at suspiciously.

“There’s nothing wrong with tea,” she said, sitting on the edge of
the bed. She was wearing a long flannel dressing gown and looking
very beautiful.

“I’ve come to apologize,” she said.

“For what?” I said, keeping the tea in view.

“Well...”

And then we made love.

The morning I was walking around the apartment with my fishing
gear I was not in the least bit interested in tea battles. I had other
things on my mind. A front had just passed through a few days before
and the weather was perfect.

The pond I was thinking of fishing would just have started turning
over, and the bass would be everywhere and very hungry before the
cold weather set in. It was their last hurrah of the season, and I wanted

