



# Parting Gifts

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Laura Washburn's poems make an odd union of the grotesque and the domestic.

They suffer a powerful realism while exercising a most eccentric republic of voices. There is something strangely narrow and menacing in the dramatic speeches of Washburn's poetry and yet there's also that wonderful sense "of the voice that is great within us." The emotions, the common scandal of these poems come shockingly close to what we all know about ourselves but nevertheless find unspeakable. This is a young and a brave poetry.

—NORMAN DUBIE

Laura Lee Washburn's poems are as muscular as they are personal, a joining of spirited opposites into a singularity that will distinguish her in the world of letters. She is onto something all her own. I read her work with pleasure.

—ALBERTO RIOS

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COMMENTS

# This Good



## Warm Place Laura Lee Washburn

### When You Wake Up in the Blue Room

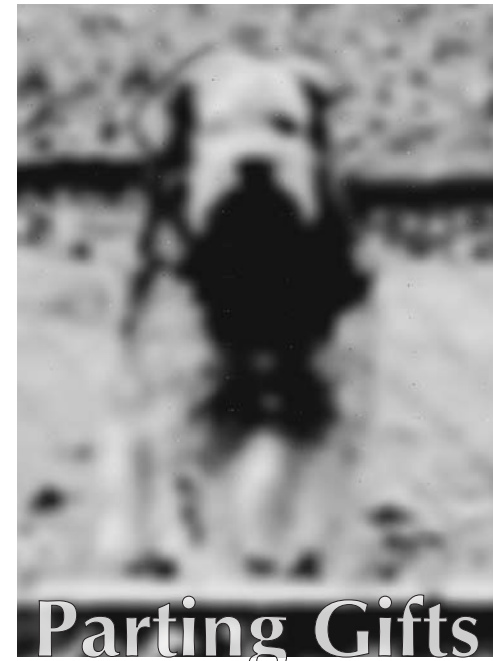
Night sounds quiet down  
and you go to the window,  
expecting fangs in the yard,  
some reason to be a man,  
but turning back to the bed  
you find a third party,  
the moon making love to your wife,  
pressing her pale legs into the bed.  
You can't imagine a worse affront.  
You grab her shoulder  
and lean into her face,  
swallowing your words, *You  
put the moon in our bed.*  
She refuses to admit it,  
but from then on, you don't sleep,  
but keep guard in the night,  
straight up in a hard chair.  
You watch the two of them  
each night, white against white,  
her eyes flashing under their lids.  
You hear pleasure cry in her sleep.  
From your hard-backed chair,  
you've seen her  
reaching across the bed.  
You've seen her welcoming  
whatever she can find out there.

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## Parting Gifts

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My knees are wet, your high  
breasts and my hair.

Girl born of lemons brush  
 with your wet lips  
 these drops of matter  
 gathered as one man.

## Tsvetayeva Tells Me Vincent Cioffi

He will take you by the hand  
and lead you to dark places.

And he will kill everyone  
you've ever loved.

And he will take your breath  
 from you  
 and your eyes

And he will arrange them  
 in the blue air;  
 mother, child  
 lover, friend

And he will do this in the name  
 of goodness  
 as he breathes madness  
 into you  
 and sorrow.

And you will  
 stumble under their  
 particulate gaze.

He will let you see,  
                   on a road  
                   in a northern land,  
 a tropical bird,  
 green,  
 walking the center line.

## Summer in the Street, Greenpoint, 1997

Vincent Cioffi

Barefoot, you're singing  
in the street. Your head  
bowed, the way your hair  
falls brushing your lips.

The timeless river nearby.  
The immortality of water

and parents, unclothed, rutting  
in a lemon grove.

The old earth, the older sky.  
Tart fruit on the ground, in  
the branches. They're

making you  
in the lemon scented air.

And I, on the streets of Greenpoint,

a red, open hydrant  
and water high in the street,

am smoking the best tobacco  
in all Brooklyn,

refracted drops gathering  
over us as one water.

Vodka running  
down the walls.

## Schneider Cow Camp

Taylor Graham

Frost on horse apples.  
In morning sun it steams up heady  
as a yearling in a change of weather.  
The only sound's the soothing  
of the creek in willows,  
and yes, a single songbird  
strikes a note like hoof on ice.

## Raking Leaves

Taylor Graham

Whoever used to own this place  
didn't love it.  
The backyard cottonwoods  
have dropped their litter,  
one year on top of the last,  
a weeping mat of decay.  
The roses gone in all directions  
to sucker and thorn. Storm-  
down branches and windblown  
trash. And the lawn—  
what a world of itches  
under a cradle-cap  
of leaves! I'm raking  
it free. Released, a few  
green patches, a subtle  
lift of soil against  
my rake. *Oh yes,  
a little to the left.  
And harder. Please.*

## Again at Vallecito

Walt McDonald

We swished our boots  
in the cold, our stiff parkas  
keeping us warm at the pond,  
the last hawks gone.  
Up past the pines, the moon  
emerged like a blue balloon  
through cirrus sheer as silk.  
Gone were trivial memories  
like pools we thought  
we'd always be able to wade.

Was it here we pitched the tent,  
was this the circle of stones  
we built for campfires  
when the twins were three?  
This rippled lake was the dawn  
of creation, dark on the calm  
of the deep. And then the moon,  
a silhouette of trees,  
a crow far off and snow streams  
trickling to make a pond.

Now, after the roar  
and whining of tires,  
we are alone in a forest,  
far from home and telephones,  
away from children we adore  
and seven grandchildren  
who haven't felt cold water  
beginning to soak through,  
who've never seen this lake,  
the moon behind those clouds.

## What's Up?

Walt McDonald

Landing at night in pilot training,  
one buddy rolled inverted, then panicked  
when the instructor called *Pull up!*  
pulled hard straight down into the ground.  
That fireball posed the puzzle for us all.

I've dangled from cross bars, flown inverted  
ten feet off the ground, cocked back my head  
and stared at good earth flashing by.  
Whenever I look up, it's there.  
I've asked the question on my knees,

in bars and bunkers far from home.  
I've tumbled on the floor with grandsons  
who tugged my beard and squealed.  
I can't explain the simplest riddles  
even the toddlers ask—where ducks go

when it snows, if they'll grow old  
like me, if they'll go fight a war.  
They look me in the eye as if I'm wise,  
a kind old man never out of candy,  
always good for flipping books

and giving horsey rides at bedtime,  
an old softy, a block of salt  
they kiss goodnight and leave  
to his business, time for parents  
to tuck them in, those nimble,

stronger people who hold them tight  
after nightmares, who show them  
ghosts on the ceiling are merely shadows  
from the night light—cartoon dogs  
and angels, winged horses flying high.

## Our Son Turns Eighteen and Enlists

Walt McDonald

Picking up speed downhill, I leaned into curves,  
pumping under tunnels of willows, bricks  
flicking by, traffic ahead, and I couldn't see  
which way to turn. I was riding my son's ten-speed,  
going wherever he rode, to remember being twelve.  
I tried to slow down but suddenly knew  
it didn't matter, I was twelve  
on wheels that could take me anywhere.

Last month, our son with cropped stiff hair  
and polished boots clasped his mother,  
stood up so I could hug him roughly, walked off  
and disappeared. I checked the clock,  
arcing like rocks we tossed in a stream  
backpacking the week he turned eighteen.

## Unmistakable

Errol Miller

Odors, curse of the body,  
at the end of a broad highway leading  
to destruction, a corridor where  
more than the heart goes  
for release.

## Postman

after van Gogh

Edward A. Dougherty

Dark suns, your eyes  
have the sea behind them.  
I, too, am far from home longing  
for a 'silent gravity'  
to hold me in place.

Can you deliver  
these unspoken bewilderments  
to my love who lives  
with me? She loves  
indigo and the daisies  
that fall from the blue sky.

## Pushing

Marshall Howell

He pushed her and she fell. She got up. She pushed him and he fell. He got up. They pushed each other, and they both fell. They both got up and laughed heartily.

A dog ran up from a dark, lonely place and bit them both in the achilles tendon and the carotid artery. The dog fell. The dog got up and ran back to a dark, lonely place.

"What's there to do now?" she said.

"You've got me," he said.

"We've learned a lot about pushing," she said.

"One good push deserves another," he said.

They both laughed heartily.

He pushed her and she fell. She pushed him and he fell. They did this until suppertime. They both went home and enjoyed a hearty meal consisting of meat, a potato, and a beverage. Then they both retreated to a dark, lonely place to await the cessation of consciousness.

# How Ants Felled Two Trees

Edward A. Dougherty

Before the circling wind let loose  
its hungry pack of dogs

Before the rain weighed everything down with grief

Before the upper-atmosphere currents  
aligned themselves  
for acrimonious stillness

Before summer became what it is

There were ants

Black and numerous like drops of blood, like  
omens,  
ants following the invisible trails  
laid down by the bodies of their fellow ants  
to the exposed heart of the sweetgum tree.

Each creature took only what it could bear,  
no more and no less.

I don't know how the bark  
was opened, but it was enough.

And before the ants,  
before that engineered line of thieves,  
there was a sweetness, a fragrance  
going out into the world.

# 621

Simon Perchik

You cough on a pillow now, use the height  
and snowcovered mountainside spreading out  
falling off the Earth

—you breathe as if your headstone  
had feathers, wings and on the downstroke  
would lift off without you the way all stone  
is covered with smaller stones  
with whispers and your lips pressed close

—you hear the ground drinking water  
to keep your throat open, the dirt  
breaking into bits, into snow  
and stones every child learns to throw.

443

Simon Perchik

My breath overflows as if the sky  
drinks nothing but words  
—*goodbye* and sudden coughs

—I can't close my jaws though the rain  
is not in some faraway cloud  
but here! my throat wide open  
oozing side to side  
the way waterlogged planks  
work loose from *goodbye*  
from motionless lips —I can't inhale

to somehow sit down with the sky  
—me, *How's it going?*  
and it drinks, *How's it going?*

—I can't shut up, my mouth  
covered with only a thin frost  
brought to the table  
given a warm glass and a saucer  
as if a new hole has just been dug  
and my tongue something that restores  
the ground, its arms and legs

—my huge mouth spreadeagle  
and over the world, over the stars  
over the words still gathering  
at windows broken open among  
the returning stones and raving.

Lighting Torches

Deborah Bayer

The corpulent man smelled like grilled salmon and cigars. He stood a hairbreadth from me, "Would you mind if my wife dances with your husband?" He had the voice of a judge, a voice you obeyed. The man's wife was behind him. She was a head taller and twenty years younger than her husband.

As I struggled to recall a word, the wife lay a slender hand on her husband's bulky shoulder. Her lips were dark, full of blood. Her dress was French vanilla and strapless. Winking, she said, "He's my procurer." That was it, the word I wanted, but she thought of it faster. My handsome husband missed all of this, five feet away, facing the brassy wedding band. The next thing I knew the procurer was tapping my husband's shoulder and lickety-split he was sweeping the vamp across the dance floor, the sea. They were a slick sailboat, both in off-white. My husband's new linen suit, a perfect fit. My red silk dress a sudden and unexpected embarrassment. I wanted to yell from shore, "Shouldn't the first dance be mine?" A lot of stuff shows up in the first year of marriage, I remembered someone telling me.

I elbowed my way through clusters of guests. A curly-headed young man lowered his arm to block me, "Hey, smile. It's a party." I bit his wrist, which he found hilarious.

The grounds were ample. A wood chip path led to a goldfish pond where a busboy was lighting torches. Dusk threw soft light on an angel whose frozen smile looked more demented than divine. A run crept like a beetle up my ashen stockings. The fish weren't gold, they were pale orange sherbet. I pulled the oversized brass key from my pocket. For a split second I saw the word *Heretic* before Heritage Inn came into focus. As I pitched the key into the radiant green pond full of pennies, anger pull at the roots of my hair.

I smelled him behind me—fishy, smoky—before he spoke in his resonant commanding way, "Did you make a wish?" He chuckled. "Look, I owe you. Tell me what you want. Ah, but you can't, can you? You don't know, do you?" His chuckle chiseled at my pride and even after he had gone, as I tried to take solace in knowing I hadn't turned to face him, hadn't given him the dignity of a response, I knew beyond doubt, I had been defeated.

In the waning light a voluptuous skunk crept between two blue spruces and I seized my wish. Staring with slitted eyes into the flame-lit pond, I whispered, "Let there be a flood, a plague, a fire."

# Population Doubles in Detroit

David M. Sheridan

It could have been a joke. Or perhaps the Department of Transportation hung it up to help people see around the corner. In any case, one day the mirror was simply there, on the side of the wedged-shaped brick building occupied by Harry's Liquor Store. It was large, as mirrors go, and the only place of origin Winston could imagine for it was a ballet studio; he thought that in a past life the mirror might have provided young dancers with images of themselves performing pirouettes and *rond de jambe en l'air*.

There was nothing to celebrate the mirror's arrival. Winston suspected that few people knew it was there. He tried to tell people about it, about how it was positioned in such a way that when you were cruising south down John R on your bike you appeared to be on a collision course with someone coming from the right. It was a very convincing illusion, and the relief you felt at the moment you discovered that it was an illusion—the moment you realized you were merely headed toward yourself—came very close to pure bliss.

Winston tried to tell people this, but people were hard to find these days. Often he could traverse the entire length of the Cass Corridor without encountering two souls. He had to remind himself to look before crossing the seven lanes of Woodward: cars were so rare that he sometimes forgot to check for one. Empty People Mover trains went through the motions of stopping, opening their doors, waiting the designated interval, and then moving on, though Winston was often the only witness.

Encountering people was fast becoming a surprise, the exception rather than the rule. You began to assume that no one else was there but you. That's why the mirror was so striking: all of the sudden someone was there, threatening to interfere with your trajectory. Winston decided that this was the mirror's true purpose. He knew it was an old trick for doubling inventory. If you had a small store and wanted to give the impression that you were a big operation, you simply put mirrors at the end of your shelves and instantly there was the illusion that you carried twice the number of products. Winston figured someone was attempting to employ this device in the city: setting up mirrors to double the population of Detroit, to give the illusion of traffic, crowds, inhabitation. What was a city, after all, if you

# Closing

Errol Miller

Our boat is full  
of wind & wings, approaching sixty.  
Once young the brass-side lamps  
are sort of rusty, pressing outward,  
pressing onward, in the shadow  
of the shore a pivotal hand leans down  
from Heaven, occupying stillness.  
Behold, we sail in peace, suspended.  
The weight of the numbers, bow,  
bent forward, a dance,  
a dove, a flower  
straining on.

# Detroit River,

January 1996

Ken Meisel

River on this coal-blasted shore,  
River whose name now starts with a fist,  
ends on its knees at St. Lawrence,  
River whose hands have frozen in prayer,  
whose knees sludge through the dark  
murky mire; the internecine spaces  
where boat hulls and netting embrace,  
River whose bottom has no soul, whose  
surface bobs with tints of gray steel,  
whose throat swallows River Rouge;  
River whose mind is void of all memory,  
whose jagged fingertips have turned to green ice,  
River of sunken beer bottles, churn on.

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Simon Perchik

He has this rule, *No tools*  
and for the same reason  
I take his beat-up ladder

—he knows it won't be used  
that inside a week I'm back  
better than ever with thanks  
and carried on my shoulder.

Each Spring's the same  
—I bring the 6-pack, wait  
for the *You shouldn't have*  
while he opens 2, tells me  
how the shed needs a lock

and I admit to nothing  
though the dust rag  
is there in my hand  
—he's used to this, *Buy one*  
you cheapskate, wants to hear

how it's not the same, the ladder  
has to be glommed and a neighbor  
who goes along, explains again  
how expensive a strong lock is  
then snaps back the lid  
as if the loving tab would light  
the world and everyone who ever lived  
seen again, holding on  
with no one passing the other

—we have it settled, the ladder  
is his, stays dingy, leans  
inside the shed the way a dead child  
still calls to its mother

and once each year I carry off  
these powerful wishes rung by rung  
return their distant heights and wing.

could drive down the roads ignoring traffic lights and stop signs? What was a city without the constant threat of someone bumping into you or the hope of someone "coming into your life?" A city, if it was nothing else, was a place where paths crossed, where bodies were crammed into tight elevators and subway cars and people were forced to breathe the close moist breath of strangers.

The mirror was consistent with the other tricks Winston had noticed lately. On the People Mover stop in Grand Circus Park, for instance, someone had installed an extremely realistic looking ceramic man who held a ceramic copy of the *Detroit News* in his carefully crafted ceramic fingers. Winston had felt the urge to approach the man for small talk on more than one occasion: it was amazing that something as hard and cold as ceramic could be made to imitate a warm-blooded human in the casual, almost lethargic act of waiting for a train.

Winston expected to see other mirrors and sculpture-people appear. Soon an acrylic woman would be requisite on all People Mover cars, sitting in the last seat from the back, her thin nyloned legs crossed lightly under her leather coat, her gaze permanently fixed on the opposite window as if encouraging passengers to see something important out there. In vacant lots they'd stick polyester men with gray hair, walking schauzners with neatly groomed fiberglass fur. Soon plastic children with dirty faces would stare out the shattered windows of the abandoned train station, a cardboard suitcase in one hand, a hundred miles of train fare clutched in the other.

Winston foresaw these things, that the population of Detroit would double through a sleight of hand, a trick done with mirrors and space-age polymers. And he longed for the thing to be accomplished, to live in a city densely populated with illusions, where everyone was a study of his own type, and where around every corner you encountered your own double racing toward you: your other self eager to be reconciled at the point of contact.

Winston was sure that in the new duplicitous world overcrowding and loneliness would turn out to be the same thing. Perhaps other opposites could be reconciled too, like peace and violence, hate and love, stranger and brother.

For now, though, there was one large mirror on the side of Harry's Liquor Store, calmly reflecting an adjacent world, a world *around the corner*. Pumping hard on his ten-speed Schwinn, Winston would fly toward it as fast as possible, waiting for his other self to appear in its shiny surface, as if he

were being reborn from the margins. This alter ego would race at him furiously, speeding toward a collision, but Winston always squeezed the brake grips at the last moment, the moment before he and his other self became one.

One day soon he would get up the courage to keep his hands off the brakes, to let himself reach escape velocity and shatter through the mirror, colliding with his own image in a kind of nuclear fusion of selves. He liked to imagine that moment of contact, when the tip of his nose touched the cold smooth surface of the mirror and he stared into his own eyes and understood that thing about himself that he had never understood.

And then of course there was the afterlife, the post-impact existence on the Other Side, where he would emerge—new and dazed and whole.

## Living Inside the Ocean

for Mary Donald

Edward A. Dougherty

Erotically, in currents  
slow and powerful, forests  
undulate like women  
in skirts, men in leotards,  
bodies lean,  
taut, flexible.  
Letters not yet written  
lay on the floor where  
gold light, where red  
light, where blue light  
is the kindest ink.  
Holy books and their  
sacred vows float,

sometimes attaching,  
pollinating, making coral,  
making oxygen  
from discipline-to-love.  
I'd lost sight  
of how the spirit drifts in  
and out like fog  
or tides, how some days  
it's a rainstorm,  
but some days its presence  
is known most  
by longing for rain, by thirst,  
by the memory of water.

## Picasso's Women

("Les baigneuses," 1918)

Doris Henderson

Placed in impossible poses  
on a beach of dull green sand,  
one leans her head to a vertical axis,  
gazing at some unseen apex overhead,  
her unwound hair trailing like sea grass.  
Another, face averted,  
sees only a distanced world behind the frame.  
The third feigns sleep—or death?—  
breathing the greenish atmosphere,  
bending an elongated arm above her head,  
pale elbow arched over the flattened palm.  
(Pablo, this woman has two right hands!)

He likes to twist them, like clay images.  
Torque interests him: thicken, and stretch.  
Nobody has a neck like that—  
was he thinking of horses?

The lighthouse watches them with its slit eyes.  
Rows of wiggled clouds float in a turquoise sky.  
Rocks like warped marshmallows burgeon at their feet.  
A sailboat juts from the flat, unwatery sea  
like an empty claw.

Three women caught in suspended motion,  
little round breasts like misplaced oranges  
under their taut, unwrinkled suits  
of fashionable colors—blue zebra stripes,  
tomato aspic, hue of ripened eggplant,  
circling their thighs. The zebra lady  
is skewed in three directions  
by an invisible hand.

Picasso's women—strangely mutated dolls.  
How Gertrude must have loved them.  
She always bought the ones that made her laugh.

## Enclosure

Doris Henderson

The gates were always there,  
hard-shanked, muscular,  
cutting scars in the narrow pathway,  
the arcs of opposing circles.  
Beyond them, we could see the fields,  
hollowed and yellow gold in the distance.

Then the sky closed in,  
painting its features on doors and windows.  
A few giant rooks were blotted against the canopy  
like smudges on a crinkled page.  
Sometimes a sudden rain would envelop the dusty porch  
like pounding waves.

Now the taste of our confinement  
sours in the mouth,  
flowers in the doorway  
dry to stubborn little knots.

Fall is the burning time,  
the broken doppler of a passing train.

Inside, the floorboards creak and groan,  
tables and chairs in disarray.  
The dark, spotted walls  
are tinted with remnants of conversations:  
an intricate paisley pattern  
where a salamander suddenly appears.

## Years ago

Doris Henderson

we used to put cotton in our ears  
when we went outside on a windy day.  
Grandpa would be chopping wood,  
a small drop of moisture trembling at the tip of his nose.

We took the little sled out to the pond,  
where the sun glowed icy white over the smooth green surface;  
tiny things were sleeping in the plankton underneath.  
On the far horizon, snowdrift and windswept clouds  
merged to a vast infinity.

\*\*\*\*\*

The bed would be cold when I got into it,  
Grandma's face bright pink from stoking the coal stove.  
She would take a hot brick from the oven,  
wrap it in newspaper, then in flannel cloth,  
and place it under the covers, at my feet.  
After she closed the door, the walls dissolved.  
In the big mirror I could watch the moon  
floating in gray-white mist.

## The Original Main Street Poem

Errol Miller

They were just simple homegrown voices,  
blind men seeking solace.

## Temperamental Errol Miller

Here's  
a piece of advice:  
shut up.

## The Vigil Edward A. Dougherty

Candlelight and reminders  
of medication.  
Punctuation of days, pauses  
like when I speak with Dad  
on the phone. All I have  
is voice, no head nodding,  
no clue to distraction.  
Only spaces in thought  
taken up by tumors. And so

the pain and the pills.  
And so Mom's vigil. Candles.  
Wax dripping as light wanes.  
Coughing late into the dark.

I am far away  
from the green lawns of Florida,  
golf courses, fountains in ponds,  
shopping centers. I am far away  
keeping my vigil, saying my office,  
my work of words and pauses:  
breaking silence to pray.

"It's amazing," he'd say to me,  
"how much smarter your parents get  
as you get older," meaning me, of course,

seeing him in a brighter light, *schmart unt* not  
*too late* at all. I asked if his mother  
had gotten smarter as he got older.

"Oh no," he said, "she really was dumb," that woman  
whose wise smile and warm arms circled me  
and drew me to her soft bosom.

## Dreamland Errol Miller

A precarious road,  
a precarious road.

## Too Zoon Olt

R. Yurman

*Too zoon olt*, my father mimicked the tag  
line of a long forgotten vaudeville  
comedian *unt too late schmart*,

me, he'd mean, of some guy in the news,  
never himself, the man who'd known all the answers,  
held all the cards from the time

he chased his younger brothers squealing into bed  
while his mother sat at the kitchen table  
not ready to pull herself up, tend to the dishes,

put away the remains of dinner, the remains  
of the missing husband gone to his girlfriend's,  
then to California, leaving the nine children

he'd pumped into her, too heavy to move,  
exhaustion making her legs and lungs  
ache, *too soon olt*.

Maybe *too zoon olt* for my father too,  
working at 14 to feed the survivors, he  
wouldn't talk about it to me, but his brothers

after they got out of the army  
tracked their old man down, visited him in L.A.,  
kept in touch until he died at 96, not my father,

he'd have nothing to do with the one who deserted him,  
his mother *too late schmart* in Brooklyn  
with the six who survived, she died at 75.

## Waiting for the Light

R. Yurman

*We want rings, sure knowledge, safety.  
What we get is each other: night houses,  
boxes full of mystery, apples waiting for the light.*

—Lisa Lorea

You ate the apple and left me  
the core. This is not some big metaphor  
for our marriage, it's what you did  
that sunny late spring afternoon  
30 years ago when my cousin  
Darlene stopped by with her kids  
to drop off a card and a hard sweet  
shiny apple from her backyard for  
my birthday. You two were already  
well on the way to becoming fast  
friends by then, so you piled our daughter  
and her two into her car and drove  
off to the beach, but before you went  
you ate the apple and placed what was left  
alongside the tiny star-shaped  
card on my desk where I found them  
when I got home from work hours later—  
no explanation, no note, just the card  
and the remains of an apple.  
By the time the five of you  
came boiling up the front steps  
flushed and noisy, I was sitting out  
on the deck sipping a vodka and tonic  
watching the sun drop into the Bay.  
That afternoon alone, quietly  
celebrating my birthday, not knowing  
where you'd gone or when you'd  
be back, was one of my sweetest  
times in all our years together.

## Young Women

R. Yurman

when I first began dating  
often I'd complain  
about the young women I'd spent  
my hopes and money on

"But she must've been beautiful"  
my mother would croon  
"Her youth is her beauty"

"Ma, take my word for it  
she was ugly"

"No no, all young women  
are beautiful—you just have to know  
how to look at them"

older now than my mother was then  
I've learned how to look

young women drift by  
swatches of hair shaved away  
rows of rings imbedded

in earlobes lips nostrils and  
other rumored unseen  
barely imaginable places.

pierced tattooed razored dyed  
still their skin their quick  
green eyes shine

## On Route 78, Iowa, 8pm

Ken Meisel

Out here: the last calls of day-  
light awaken:

as if the music of small  
black leaping bugs, rubbing  
their wings together

were a chorus, celebrating  
another full day of sunlight, melting

over the corn. I squat over  
a blue vervain, studying these olive-  
colored grass hoppers, leaping

over each other. Above me,  
straddling a pine tree limb

is a black crow, exclaiming the meaty  
death of a vole on the road.

The loud roar of trucks is drowned  
by the scores of hidden crickets,  
singing under the smartweed,

and the white wind howls through  
the corn stalks, rustling their dry  
brittle leaves, like paper.

I stop by an equipment barn, catching  
myself holding onto the day,

and the buzzing black flies,  
peppering the giant augers and chains

are lifted like great whorls of lint.

## By the Barn, Iowa Ken Meisel

By the barn, near the farrowing  
house, a small brown bird

twisting its mangled body  
through the yellowed corn-

dust, like a dark star. I kneel  
down to watch her last moments,

her life, spend pecking for food  
scraps & seed, her offspring

maybe watching from above, in  
the wind-gnarled branches of an

old Siberian elm. Grandmother  
hobbles down the back steps with

an armful of trash, the sunlight  
is a handful of tints, coloring

the pig pen, and by the silo, a  
dark skinny cat, green eyes

glowing like jade, watches me  
watching its dinner, dying.

And far off, stirring over the  
Mississippi's brown hair streaks,

winter, like a large polar bear  
is brooding, rocking her head.

## In the Barn, Iowa, 9pm Ken Meisel

Here, inside this dark fetid  
box of humidity and straw bales,

a litter of farm kittens  
furtive as mice go scattering

away, and the mud-caked sows,  
heavy with the burdens of

their pregnancy, grunt as I  
enter, hands full of corn meal.

And the long, thin, hoary spider  
web skeins, hanging like

frail ghosts, swing loosely from  
the rafters whispering sleep.

If I have left out something  
it is me, slightly afraid

of the creeping dusk, as it starts  
witching itself in the rapid

chirrup of crickets, hiding under  
the bulk of a wagon. I kneel,

listening to the memory of night  
entering this barn, remembering

every boyish lie I have told myself  
I am bigger and better than

these simple four-legged creatures,  
huddling together, against night.

## At Grandmother's Farm, Olds Iowa Ken Meisel

Overhead, sunshine, hot & dry.  
Nobody around for a distance.  
Wild pepperweed and stinging nettle  
clog the ditch. A dead opossum  
opens his mouth to eternity. Beyond reach,  
grasshoppers spray over corn tops  
and crickets litter the dusty roadway.  
A blue vervain breaks into small,  
delicate blue flowers. Later, at  
the edge of a corn dryer I smell the body  
of a dead cat, eaten by disease,  
and I see the skeleton of a baby pig  
spread out along a grassy lane, like  
a small white mandala. Crows circle  
overhead like black handkerchiefs.  
When Grandmother falls coming up the stairs,  
the frail, gaunt kittens scatter.

## A Sighting: On Route 218, Iowa Ken Meisel

There, nestled in the thick cudweed  
and burdock, amidst the early  
autumn asters, a 56 Buick, part  
rust, part antique. We drive  
past her, then turn back. She  
receives the late afternoon sun  
melting over the corn like  
a yellow sword, cutting a sheath  
of light through her open windows.  
Her interior is dusty. Glass  
shards sparkle over her seats.  
And what remains of her chrome  
still shines like some form of armor.  
Garden spiders fat as jewels  
hang from the crystalline webbing  
wrapped over the grill. Grass-  
hoppers leap from her roof, then  
pop back into the tall, dried  
barnyard grass. Overhead, grackles  
noisily announce the coming dusk,  
and a farmer, bouncing along on  
his tractor, turns into the sun.

## Rasputin

Steve Harris

An old film shows the little Tsarevitch  
in 1912 taking a brittle ballerina turn.  
He had been healed, apparently, by telegraph  
through the prayers of Grigori Rasputin.

Rasputin knew something about God, tears  
and prayer. He also enjoyed watching farm  
animals fuck. God had chosen to allow the  
Holy to mix wit the unholy. Rich naked

women, with whom he drunkenly rolled  
on the black river banks, tried to under-  
stand him, saying "bless me," while spreading  
their legs for God, ignoring the hot sun.

## Frogs

Steve Harris

Their limbs erupting strangely  
with new branchings, the frogs pull  
themselves across the damp grass;  
their cold minds confused.

Nearby, the water's surface  
glitters like knife flashes,  
while below, darkly stirring,  
the second plague moves,  
shadow-sure.

## Death House

Steve Harris

One sign outside the death house called  
for the pick-ax. And when it was over,  
there was a cheer. Retribution.

Rehabilitation in Texas;  
rehabilitation on a medical  
gurney. In the death house,

at eye level a relative looked  
for the first lick of Hell to enter  
the woman's eyes, who in turn asked

for forgiveness before muttering  
a last prayer over dry lips. Between  
them there was no connection, like Old

and New Testament. And over them,  
over us, is dropped a gray sheet  
as in Acts, bound at the corners,

making the figures underneath  
indistinguishable, uncertain  
of the terrain called Mercy.

# Martyrdom at El Mozote

(1981)

Steve Harris

From among the seven hundred:

beneath the pale sky,  
beneath the green trees,  
beneath blue-bottle flies,

a Christian girl from El Mozote  
is being raped by the army.

A long afternoon.  
Hot, crouched like a beast.

The smack of skin to skin  
less frequent now.

She sings hymns,  
psalms to almighty God;

they rise into the sky  
like silvery, accusing,  
loving fingers.

In time the paradox  
maddens, even frightens,  
the dull-eyed legionnaires.

The girl is shot, then chopped  
with machetes; with a fury  
that seeks to obliterate,  
to reorder, to forget.

The sky has caught her song,  
placed it in its unseen envelope.

They didn't belong in this country, the man and the woman and the little boy. But the old woman belonged. She would have let him belong. She would have found a place for him, a word for him in her strange language where everything was a poem.

The walls of the house are white. The sound of the earth is red, red and marching. He will not march. The boy sees the servant woman on the verandah, carrying a bowl of flowers inside (night air, they say, is dangerous). Lights are yellow in the windows. He is framed in the tree, cradled, never afraid to fall, not even missed. Watching the lights. Watching until the last light goes out.

# Driving Home

Michael E. Nowicki

My brother is a passenger in my car.  
He rides time away  
while meditating on the passing scene  
that changes with each new song on the radio.  
For him  
the path we take is always different  
even though the roads we take are always  
the same.  
Time holds no meaning after an hour  
and home is the destination  
we drive to after leaving from.

# The Boy Who Stayed Outside

Kathryn Kulpa

The boy had decided not to go inside when they called him. He had decided not to go inside again, ever. High in his tree, safe behind its branches, he watched the house. They would start calling him soon. Once before that happened. Once they called and called. After a while his father came outside, found him behind the rock, carried him to his room.

"He'll have no supper tonight," his father said to Janie and his mother. The boy didn't care. He lay on his bedroom floor, on his stomach, listening to his parents' voices from below as the smell of their dinner came through the heating vent.

"Maybe a tutor."

"He needs more discipline. High time he was sent to school."

After a while the talking stopped and he crept downstairs, silent, shoeless, knowing Janie in the kitchen would give him a currant bun. She said he must have been changed in his cradle sure for a gypsy bairn. All his gypsying about. He asked what were gypsies and she said they were dark folk. Travelers. "No homes for them. Tents and wagons."

"Don't they have to come inside when it's dark?" The boy asked.

"Dark's nothing to them," said Janie.

He almost asked her if the old woman was a gypsy. Then he remembered.

\*\*\*

Once there was a rock and an old woman who lived inside the rock. She taught him the way outside, how to live on nothing but air and freedom and the smell of salt and roses the wind brought. Which plants to eat and which not to, where water bloomed, there was a litany, a melody, it was easy to tell. Why that rock (which was nubbly and cobbly with glass, pebbles, somebody's beach once, some crawling thing's shell) was cool in summer, warm in winter; the songs the stars sang at night when they danced with each other, when they bent and whispered secrets in treetop ears. She knew the words they whispered. But now she would never tell him.

They had taken his rock away from him. They had taken the old woman. They said she was not an old woman, that he was too old to play with sticks and rags of clothes. Too old to roam and moon about all day, learning nothing.

# A Fermentation

Christopher Dungey

All right, granted,  
that it is somewhat like the sea,  
but not like opening a can  
of tuna; not like the seafood section  
of the supermarket. The neighborhood  
cats will ignore you next morning,  
unlocking your car at the curb.  
Just think of it, later, climbing  
into the shower, or unzipping  
your fly, as releasing a fermentation  
of slightly sweet, slightly spoiled  
water left by an ebb tide, puddled  
on the sand near some boardwalk  
pilings; or at the base of a breakwall  
in a storm-wrack of kelp,  
tiny shells, alewives,  
and an algae culture doing well  
on an old hairpick.

# Nighttime Thinking

J Heath Atchley

*I am thinking about  
wounds tonight,  
the philosopher told her husband.*

He lay silently in their bed,  
caressed her hip,  
and traced one of her stretch marks  
with a finger.

## Fall and All

Christopher Dungey

I've already tugged  
the green, polyurethane blanket  
over the chlorine sleep  
of the pool; steamed slime  
and zebra mussels off  
the fiberglass sailboat hull  
when the Kiwanis Club guy  
in an orange plastic vest-  
so-I-can-see-him offers  
me cider through the driver's side  
door glass, right in the intersection.  
But then we get to the Harvest  
Dinner in the church basement  
with centerpieces of real Mums  
and miniature pumpkins; a gravy  
scent to lick the Wednesday  
night quilts until Advent.

## Sorting Keys

Christopher Dungey

We have to sort through all these keys  
and start locking up again.  
Someone walked right in. Someone  
took a twenty off the kitchen counter.  
It just isn't anywhere. We hope  
it wasn't an inside job.  
Maybe the neighbor kid  
who stepped in to borrow bread,  
a roll of toilet paper,  
or to get his sweater back.  
Let's put a good light on it—maybe  
there was someone with him  
we don't know.

\*

We have to round up all those keys  
from the bottoms of junk drawers  
and purses; loose in wardrobe  
organizers, folded into wallets,  
cleverly hidden under random objects  
in the garage. Try them  
at each entrance; the square ones,  
or clover shaped with triangular holes.  
A review of security procedures  
to overlap the work schedules  
of everyone should allow us  
to toss out one or two.

# Breakwall at Caseville, Michigan

Christopher Dungey

They curse under breaths  
of sour-cream Pringles, peanut butter  
and jelly, at the jet-ski punks  
tormenting throttles up their channel,  
but go ahead, spin-cast  
anyway, into that wake,  
into the sloshing lee  
of the breakwall at Caseville.  
Sitting in sparse proximity  
all the long, concrete way out  
into Saginaw Bay, those fishermen  
might as well be house painters,  
surrounded as they are by buckets,  
styrofoam bait cartons, tackle  
boxes. It's as if Jackson Pollack  
went after the lot of them  
with a palette of silver  
scales, then shook up  
an orange soda. Some perch  
may hit, but most just break  
the pocked surface, thrashing  
to feed on an evening hatch  
of harbor insects.

# Demolition

John McKernan

The workers, speaking a language I had never heard,  
arrived at dawn and began immediately to take  
apart our old wood-frame family house in Omaha.

By noon, they had almost finished. All you could see was  
the chimney with a section of the roof.

We watched the sledge hammers, mallets, winches, and  
crowbars—fascinated at the skill and precision and  
economy of their labors.

Even though we did not know if they could understand,  
we could not help shouting out repeatedly, "Please  
be careful with the windows!"

I found myself, surprised, asking one of the young workers  
"Will you clean and polish the windows when you're  
finished?"

He somehow understood my question and waved his right  
hand rapidly in a sort of circle and nodded his head  
three times as if to say, "We will. We will. We will."

Late that evening. I drove by and a few workers were finishing  
up. I could see others in the back of the truck—alternate  
glow of their cigarettes—bright reds fading to nothing.

They were watching a small child patiently mowing—in full  
moonlight—the beautiful lawn.

Looking up, I saw each window in place. Polished black. Each pane  
of glass reflecting the bright white host of the moon.

## Scarecrow

John McKernan

I wanted to be like you when I was tiny.

Your shadows deepening the cherries and ripening  
the grapes.

Then a crow seemed like a blast of Death's shrapnel.

Straw eyes

Shoulders of wood

Hands of air

Daylight a new contraceptive

The violin wind through the strings of your red and  
blue flannel shirt

Some of our childhoods remain pinned to our breasts  
like tattoos of thorns or poison ivy.

"To relieve the pain apply additional memory."

Even Nietzsche cried as a child when he was forced  
by others to tell of his "sins."

## Delusion

John McKernan

A voice deep within the Delusion began to echo  
and re-echo.

How hungry I have been for years.

I have sat down in the gutter, washed my hands in  
the filth, and feasted on a large sack of memories.

I should have ordered the Logic Plate when we  
dined at La Maison.

I don't care if it dripped Lilac and leaked Sunset.

Vise was not Versa. East was not West.

But just remember the Sundial was allowed to rape a tardy  
shadow once every Leap Year.

## This Grieving

Therése Halscheid

We age...  
somewhere  
in slow-turning sunlight  
you are mourning  
your father,  
your father's  
breakfasts  
his way  
with his candy,  
and you are missing  
your mother—  
in her chair  
your mother  
missing  
you  
    open  
your eyes  
with your hands  
force the lids back  
to be only thirty,  
or, any day  
in mid-twenties,  
once more  
wanting it all  
again to do over  
exactly  
as our numbered  
days there,  
with your father  
your mother,  
and other  
ways we claimed  
friendship.

## In Some Way Seeing

Therése Halscheid

We lean into  
unusual  
belonging  
and all which is  
felt moves  
into one  
unearthly flame  
like the heated  
orange light  
we lie close to  
like the tan strips  
of gathered wood  
ignited, evenly  
burning  
the excited shape  
of our bodies  
as you kiss down  
*fire*, you say, *fire*  
as you kiss  
in your mind  
I know that  
you glimpse  
past my  
closed,  
seeing eyes  
without looking  
I learn beyond yours—  
blue, blinded,  
open.

## A Tree Struck Down

Therése Halscheid

*It might make one in love with death, to think  
that one should be buried in so sweet a place*  
—Shelley

...as this,  
with this tree  
in grass,  
as grass blows  
against bark  
stippled  
by daisies  
where limbs lie  
spreadeagle  
from the field  
to the place  
at the edge  
of a pond  
after roots  
had broken  
their grip  
from the stones  
and stones  
overturned

glistening  
in light  
of the rain  
where I am  
running the lip  
of the bank  
to finger  
the womb  
on the tree,  
to first find  
this hollow  
that is moist  
and split back  
with folds  
like the woman  
who has opened,  
wanting  
a hand.

## Doors

Irene Eberling Marsh

You dream of doors,  
wake with your arms aching,  
your fist flushed  
after all that pounding.  
No one ever answers.  
Your mouth is clenched  
all day against sleep,  
teeth sunk in your job,  
computer printing scars,  
telephones hiccupping  
in a maze of keyboards.  
Our parking lot stretches  
to a flat-earth horizon.  
We button our coats  
at the main entrance,  
dusk clinging like fungi  
on all that glass,  
your face already  
less defined,  
eyes busy elsewhere.

## Gilbert's Dream

Irene Eberling Marsh

You are lost again  
false doorways  
applique foyers  
the buildings missing.

It is night  
the pavement  
sparkles  
for miles after  
each corner.

You step off a curb  
sink into lava, dull  
gleam weight sliding  
up your legs, your body  
just as you see  
your apartment  
right there, key in your pocket.

You know what happens  
try to freeze-frame  
a shiny wave, slow, viscous  
edging around your chin.

## Bart

Irene Eberling Marsh

My face is new each time  
and you smile.  
You do not ask where you are.  
All the chairs have arms  
and you remember  
how to sit.  
You are surprised each time  
by meals, by time of day,  
your room, your pair of shoes.  
You take my word for it,  
engrossed in the barrage  
of light from the spokes  
of your wife's wheelchair.

## The Bag

Irene Eberling Marsh

Even I do not know.  
The bag, dark, all zipped up, is  
like thousands of others,  
and I claim it, I leave with it,  
my face set as I was trained,  
my steps choreographed.  
But the concrete feels spongy,  
wobbles, I feel off balance,  
the bag grapples my leg,  
tries to trip me.  
My arms, like uncoiling rope,  
spill from my shoulders.  
I feel the lost connection,  
feel my head twirl on its stem  
as I walk through detectors,  
approach dozens of exits.  
My reflection keeps pace,  
everything medium.  
I stand by the curb, waiting  
for a chasm to span.

On the  
Death  
of  
Octavio  
Paz

J Heath Atchley

Today is  
dead  
even before  
it starts.  
Minutes will  
not move.  
Heavy limbs  
apologize to  
a thick air  
they cannot  
penetrate.

Ex-lover's  
Landscape

J Heath Atchley

This morning  
the snow continues  
with no thought of us.

Precipitation wounds  
aspiration.

Your body,  
naked beneath  
flannel pajamas  
speaks in a foreign language.

I want to translate,  
but it insists I don't.

Big Here  
Curt Dawkins

Dear Lois,  
I am big here. I would be big anywhere, now.  
Been here three weeks, already I drink with the boss.  
I call him by his first name like old buddies.  
Sex with the secretary is fun, too. At noon,  
I bend her over the sink in the utility closet.  
She's stopped wearing panties. She ends  
up with lipstick smeared all over like some  
old lady; blind, palsied. I play  
right field. You know, company softball.  
Like I said, I'm big here. Popular. I have changed.  
You would miss me, Lois, if you left me now.  
I rarely get drunk and cause trouble. Of course,  
I'm told I can't change the past. Acceptance.  
People pat me on my back in the office and  
around. Lots of people, Lois. Lots. A real  
people person, I am. My own desk and  
telephone extension. It is hard to transfer  
people to other telephones. There is often  
a dial tone when the person picks up.  
Some cursing follows. There are still things to learn.  
I want to call you some nights. Not often  
am I lonely, but when I am  
I cry, thinking of you. How you  
snored so. They make things to control that now.  
In retrospect, in the fog before sleep, everything  
you did seems wonderful. I once put cotton  
up your nose and watched you struggle  
to breathe until your mouth  
popped open with a gasp. Your lips fluttered with  
the intake. I would never do that  
now. I love your snoring now.  
The hairdryer smells like your hair and  
I blow it around sometimes hoping  
the room will smell like you again. Maybe

I hope for too much, after all  
I have more than I deserve. Like I said,  
I am big here. This office, this town,  
these workers, these people, this phone.  
Oh, Lois, do you remember when I called you  
Lois Lane and I acted  
like Superman?  
Did you like that?  
With all the love I can muster,  
J.W.

## Fish

Curt Dawkins

Nostalgia feels a lot like loss, but  
to remember the street named  
Garden, in a small town, seems important.  
How I slipped the metal fire ladder  
quietly out of its box, lowered it from my second  
story window an inch at a time, so as not  
to wake my sisters or parents, and stepped  
into the night. How I took that road to  
some forgotten campground—clearing after a dance  
I never attended, and jumped in  
a boat with my father as he pushed off  
land. How there was no moon that night and  
we fished in silence, catching nothing. We  
rowed toward shore and a long walk  
home. A fat, silver fish popped out of the black lake  
like a baby squeezed from the womb. Silver  
in light that wasn't there—a magic  
flash, flopping in the hull water of a slowly sinking  
boat. It is important I remember  
how I saw the fish as some miracle, the  
way my father must have once seen me.

## Something We Must Face

Jeff Vande Zande

Where was he going  
out of Detroit, speeding northward  
through thick traffic, leaving  
the brick and steel, abandoning  
the week's rush of faces?

Why did he follow interstates down  
to highways, the ones that fade  
into county roads? Unlike city streets,  
this pavement's named after nobody,  
just letters and numbers like H-553.  
Soon this drops off into gravel  
and leaves behind the community  
of yellow dashes and lines.

Would he imagine his escape  
seven hours from his driveway  
on the seasonal road winding toward camp?  
Old joists and walls on the border  
of swampland, a family remedy  
handed down from his father.

When would he drive the twelve miles  
back to the nearest one  
street town to buy what he forgot  
in his race to arrive?  
Eggs, bread, milk, coffee—  
a harvest from strange hands.

Didn't he know in the morning,  
waking without his wife, he'd hear  
the faint moans of a construction  
zone? Semis rolling over rumble strips,  
the heavy scrape of bulldozers—  
county roadmen spreading blacktop

over dirt.

## Punched Out

Jeff Vande Zande

Punched out, off the line,  
he speeds into the vague promise  
of the interstate, blacktop  
in touch with any other place,

even the northern cities  
his bosses own land around,  
Charlevoix, Petoskey, East Jordan,  
destinations only three hours away  
according to the song of the green signs.

He wonders if he will burst  
into wings on the main street  
of Traverse City, like a nymph  
opens into Mayfly at the surface  
of the Au Sable river.

His exit fades in the rearview mirror,  
and he doesn't recognize the eyes  
staring back at him, dark  
dilated pupils—undiscovered globes.  
He wonders if the hunger he feels  
is just the dinner he hasn't cooked.

A June bug, like a callused finger,  
taps its death against the windshield.  
Something in its mad swoop toward  
the light tells him his engine's  
A to B miles should not be wasted  
on chasing a ghost dead since birth.

Turning back, he lets the white  
dashes hypnotize him until television  
and then sleep. Before dawn  
he will find himself again  
on the line, punched in.

## A Week in the Country

Richard Stolorow

"The hell with Mother Nature!" I screamed a bit drunkenly as we sped back from the neighboring county where we'd purchased our alcohol. It was my one moment of freedom in an otherwise oppressive week spent mostly down on my haunches chewing a piece of straw with the half-naked Oakland brothers at the edge of their organic garden. Barefoot and bare chested, these twins were glad to take an hour and a half break whenever we showed up to go swimming down at the quarry, though they never actually said so. I remember them saying hello when we first met but I can't recall another word spoken.

They followed us down the steep path, ponytails hanging heavily from leather ties, and waited patiently while we picked blackberries on the way and stuffed our mouths. Then, at the quarry pond, everyone stripped down and had a little fun in the water, some washing with Dr. B's soap, others swimming out into the still, deep water.

The girls joined us, too, and one wasn't supposed to look at Suzanne's huge dark breasts or Margaret's thick black pubic hair that stood out in a ridge away from her body. Nor did the girls let on to be staring at the boys' bodies, the lanky suntanned flanks of the Oakland brothers, the thick little penises coming out of the cold water. One sat on the sand or rocks and gazed contentedly at the surrounding cliffs, the trees, the sky.

Back up at the Oakland boys' garden, we squatted around and chewed some more straw. We didn't speak, we never spoke, as it seemed to me we were supposed to be imitating the vegetables growing around us. The corn was tall, the beans were thick: one couldn't help admiring. After about twenty minutes of it, we were free to go home.

Home was a cabin stuck in a large meadow about four miles away by automobile. The temperature was in the humid nineties and everyone, females included, went around in cut-off jeans and work boots: no shirts, no socks, no hats. Everyone, guests included, was supposed to be busy working on one of the many projects around the place, hauling downed wood, hammering on the cabin, weeding the garden. No one told you what to do, and no one would take responsibility for telling you which project was more important to be attending to. Everybody simply chose something

he or she could “get in to” and plunged on ahead. A few stayed indoors and soaked beans or made that heavy nearly inedible bread that is so common in such groups.

Around cocktail time, somebody would grab the rocker and haul it out to the shade where he’d roll a very skimpy homegrown joint and wait patiently until enough of the group had joined him to light it. Five or six of us would sit on our haunches and pass the thing around hoping I’m sure for a decent high. Work was spoken of at length, the weather, the evening’s festivities. Then we went in to dinner, calling any stragglers from the fields.

Dinner was always beans and rice with a vegetable or two from the garden, the highlight of the week except for the blackberries on the way to a swim. One drank well water and did one’s own dishes. Conversation was a bit more lively this particular evening in anticipation of the visitors from the city who would be coming out to celebrate with us.

Four people, two men and two women (not, by the way, clearly coupled) arrived about an hour before sunset and brought a little container of marijuana which we all politely lined up to smoke. Someone said “The Colombian!” and the group was brought to sober attention, even the beautiful Oakland boys who had ridden over in their ’49 Ford truck and who took this smoking business very seriously.

About eleven o’clock after a couple of hours staring at the city girls and wondering about possibilities, Margaret took me abruptly by the hand and led me outside into the darkness. There, she proceeded to attack me for a few minutes, forcibly pressing her body against mine. While she was kissing me, I managed to recover my balance and began to embrace her in my own fashion, heading I have no doubt for that ridge of pubic hair I had found so fascinating at the quarry. But Margaret had got what she wanted by that time and she grasped the wrist of the hand trying to sneak down into her jeans and said, “No, and I mean it.” And she walked back inside.

I remember standing there for the length of time it might take one to urinate properly, and then I too went back into the cabin. Margaret had disappeared, apparently to bed, and I hung around for another hour hoping someone would pull out some more Colombian or start an interesting conversation. No one seemed motivated to do much of anything except tell stories of local potatoes or honeydew, and I soon went off to my sleeping bag.

By Saturday, the day before my departure, I had had enough. I talked one of our members into driving me to the next county where I could

## Grocery Store Florist

E. G. Burrows

The carry-out clerk has left  
a flat of moon-grafts on the sidewalk,  
a crop of potentates in turbans,  
tall kids with pink pumpkin hats.

One cactus blends into another,  
odd topknots on fire  
like the glass eye of a lighthouse  
or the sun on a strongman’s shoulders.

Brave birds of paradise shrink  
in the chill. I remember them  
under whitewashed skylights in Florida.  
I remember a death in winter.

The store clerk rescues his plants.  
They shake as he carries them in:  
Russian doll-women, painted tombstones,  
spiny heads with the busbees of shahs.

Zoran fell forward on the table. Blood ran from under his body and dripped on the floor.

Hans pulled on his leather jacket and laid a bill on the table.

*If he goes, I'm lost. He's the only Swiss in the place. The only one the police will listen to.* Daggers drove into his stomach. He couldn't speak.

Munir articulated Chico's thought. "Hans! Don't go. You're a witness."

"That's right," Drago broke in. "It was self defense. You saw it."

The Swiss shook his head. "Sort it out yourselves. I've got a class. Serbo-Croatian, remember?" At the door, he turned back. "You people make me sick."

Chico snatched a medal from inside his shirt and pressed it against his lips. His wife squealed broken German into the wall phone. *Our Lady of Sorrows, don't let them close me down. I'll take any vow. Don't let them.*

In the distance a siren wail began its long crescendo.

## Another Spring

E. G. Burrows

They said the martins were coming back.  
They never came,  
May or later.

Raise a house on a pole.  
Saints will live on a pole  
if you put them up to it.

But what are those birds?  
They look like ravens.  
Their mouths are full of the wrong words.

I want to believe the martins  
are not extinct, are waiting  
somewhere, and will return

with the sounds of purple across water,  
a murmuring in their apartments,  
their family rooms.

purchase a large bottle of inexpensive tequila. By the time we were halfway home, I was joyously leaning out of the window shouting, "The hell with Mother Nature," and screaming, "Hamburgers!" at any innocent cow We arrived at the cabin in the late afternoon and it was with a great deal of pleasure that I laid out limes and lemons and salt on a slab of wood just under the shade trees. I, of course, sat in the rocker and called at the top of my lungs, "Come and get it, you miserable creatures."

## Above and Below

E. G. Burrows

The Troublesome Mountains  
stab at the sky.  
Sometimes they draw blood  
and the sunset runs down their sharp sides.

Mostly they yawn.  
Climbers cling to them like leaches,  
and what does the sky do  
but roll away on white sidewalls airily.

Those people who live at the base  
never aspire for more of anything  
unless it's the gritty taste  
of blue shadow and small marmot leavings.

Heights mourn the loss of eagles.  
They glow like snuffed torches  
then fade into one more range  
furrowed by llamas and strangers.

## Blue Porch

Richard Stolorow

I had been sick for a month with a low fever, and though it was November I spent most of my time on the back porch huddled in a coat watching the portable t.v., writing samples of suicide notes and resignation letters during commercials, though it was life I wanted to resign from, and suicide was too drastically energetic. My ironic style must have amused me. Certainly living in my friend's front room didn't, lying on the mattress on the floor listening alternately to the tiny nose clearing sound he performed repeatedly or to the hum of the furnace coming up through the floor in spite of my sawing off the tops of the stud wall in the basement beneath me in a vain attempt to eliminate the vibration. I was also an English teacher two long bus rides from the University across the river, but only twice a week, and even then only remedial English. But I tortured over it anyway and couldn't wait for the hours on the back porch off the kitchen to nurse my nondescript illness with self-pity and withdrawal.

The second and third floors were rented to four nurses after whom I bitterly lusted—even flat-chested Susanne with the broken out skin because she had sturdy athletic farmer's legs and, god help her, she thought I was funny. The three foxy ones I would have groveled for. But it was Susanne who put her hand that fall into the middle of my back on a walk in the park up the street and with whom for the first time in I didn't know how long I let go of whatever inside me was holding on to my sickness and I felt suddenly better. She was very sweet, very nursing, and for a night or two I kept imagining myself introduced to her parents around a huge kitchen table piled with fried chicken and mashed potatoes while outside coming in off the fields her respectable brothers were knocking the field dust off their overalls, anxious to meet this promising city boy who would, finally, love their good-hearted sister.

On the third night, Susanne came out to the back porch just as I was finishing a half pint of cheap vodka, and sat in the other rocker looking fresh and womanly. I read her something I'd scribbled between television shows, which she thought was very intense and full of insight. Her female healing properties aside, she seemed a bit of a stranger to intensity and insight, yet I soared aloft on her praise and wondered for a moment whether a literary genius should throw himself away so easily on a gawky Ohio farm girl.

*After the last brawl, the police said they'd shut me down. That's all I need with the debts I piled on my back to buy this place. And the wife and me working ourselves to death to pay the interest. To two banks and the City Glaziers, too.*

The young Moslem pulled down his black skullcap and lowered his voice. "You Christians don't have room to criticize anybody. Look at what the Serbs are doing to our brothers in Kosovo."

"He's right," Drago gloated.

"Just a minute," Zoran snapped. "Let's not forget what the Croats did to the Serbs during World War II. The concentration camps. The Franciscan monks working as torturers to convert our people to Catholicism."

*I'd never be able to pay off those debts. I'd have to skip the country. Go back to Seville and hope to God my relatives would stake me for a fresh start. Some homecoming for the hero who went off to Switzerland to make a fortune.*

Hans changed the subject. "Our teacher says the two forms of Serbo-Croatian are like British and American English. One language with a few differences."

"Not any more. Too much has happened," Drago snarled. An ugly flush spread over his prematurely aging features. "And none of it *would* have happened if the Serbs hadn't lorded it over everybody else in the old Yugoslav federation."

"Crap!" Zoran said. "What started the war was the way you Croats treated our brothers in the Krajina. They'd been there for *four hundred years*. You drove them out and stole their property."

*There I go again, taking sides in this thing. But it's too complicated. It's got nothing to do with me. I've never been to the Balkans. Wild horses couldn't get me there now. His stomach began to burn. The wife is right. I get too involved with these guys. With everybody. That's why I'm so tired when we close up. Why I'm not much good to her in bed anymore.*

"Good riddance."

A nervous tick jerked Hans' right cheek. "Drago, Zoran, wait—"

"Stay out of this," Zoran barked. "No Swiss can understand."

At a call from his wife, Chico ducked into the kitchen. He was elbow-deep in dirty dishwater, trying to clear a drain, when the voices in the next room made him stand up and run. He squeezed out the kitchen door just in time to see Zoran swing at Drago. Drago dodged the blow, pulled a glazier's knife from his belt and in one clean thrust, drove it upward into Zoran's throat. *Holy Mother of God.*

# A Flicker Before Darkness

Charles Edward Brooks

From behind the bar, Chico stared uneasily at the nearest table. A pensioner with blue eyes was telling a story to three brawny younger men in red coveralls. Laughter rang out.

*The Yugos are OK so far. But they just got here. Used to be my best-behaved customers before the war. And now! If I weren't afraid of pissing off their boss, I'd tell them to take their business elsewhere.*

"You're a great guy, Hans. Here's to your health!" Three beer glasses were lifted toward the older man.

"Thanks, Zoran. But I always feel like a clod with you fellows, because you have to speak German when we're together. I'm coming along in the course, though. It won't be long before I can talk in Serbo-Croatian."

Chico sighed. *If all my customers were like Hans, I'd be in clover. A big shot at the bank before he retired, they say. And now he does prison work. I'll bet he'd put in a good word to the police for me next time there's trouble. And there will be. There always is.*

"There isn't any such thing," Drago said. The Croat scratched the dirty knit cap that covered his patchy baldness. "It's two languages. *Serbian and Croatian.*"

"In Sarajevo we speak Bosnian," added Munir.

"You're both talking politics," Hans protested. "The school calls the course *Serbo-Croatian.*"

*Used to be when anybody asked them what they were, they said "Yugoslav." I remember the first time they came in here. To replace the big window after the first youth riot. Not long after City Glaziers broght them in. Back then, these guys were like brothers.*

"Once upon a time you Moslems were all Serbs or Croats," Zoran said. The powerful Serb pulled off his company cap and slapped the tabletop with it. "You betrayed your own people—your own *God*—to butter up the Turks."

"I didn't betray anybody!" Munir cried. "I was born and brought up in Islam, that's all."

*Here we go!* Chico slid out from behind the bar and loomed over the table. "All right. Keep the noise down. I mean it." With a warning scowl, he plodded off. From the flashing jukebox a nasal voice wailed a Turkish tale of love and betrayal into the silence.

She suggested she show me her room which quickly erased my doubts, and I viewed with tenderness the touching bedroom of a girl still ungrown of her dolls and her school pennants. Somewhere in the background the prettier nurses rallied for their night out while I, half drunk with grain spirits and sentiment, threw myself on her bed and asked her again about her childhood. Susanne politely drew up a chair and painted quaint little pictures of country life, until she heard the others going out. Then, as if she had been waiting for us to be alone in the house, she joined me on the little twin. I took her instantly into my arms and kissed her.

It was strangely erotic, perhaps because so pure-hearted a girl was now coming into heat. Sweet simple Susanne—I never would have guessed. Immediately, as she drew me on top of her, I slipped a hand under her shirt in search of her tiny breasts. With the other I grasped the blue-jeaned crotch which moments before had pressed hard upon my leg. So this was the passion buried in heartland America, a passion so hidden as to emerge in bad skin, yet so natural as to reflect the barnyard of her childhood. I rode the muscular panting Susanne until, much like the sexuality of my earliest adolescence, I entered willingly the tumescence and, placing my tongue deep between her lips, let out a silver stream into my underwear.

At that moment, I believe we were married and divorced. Before she had a chance to suspect that anything definitive had transpired, I was up and apologetically exclaiming "Whew, that was something!" warding off any privilege she might claim since she'd allowed me to touch her. I didn't bother to wonder if she were inclined to so claim—I was now envisioning the enforced marriage of a silver-tongued city slicker with a homely sturdy farm girl. Susanne looked unsatisfied there on the bed, and for that I truly loved her. But there was nothing I could do: the magic had come and gone, and I excused myself and returned to my porch.

There, amid the spoils of my former depression, I felt youthful and pleased. I sat in my rocker looking out over the brave wet trees, nagged a bit by my own foolish nature. I was nevertheless grateful. I saw that the urge for love would find its way eventually to the surface, and for a moment I wanted her to know how true it all was. But somehow, instead of telling her, I pulled my collar up cozily around my ears and turned on the television.

## First Person

### Bill Embly

I was sitting at the kitchen table working on a story when the “I” key burst into flames. My mother, standing over a skillet on the stove, said, “I *told* you to stop writing in the first person all the time.” I quickly unplugged the keyboard and threw it out the window. As we were eating our liver and onions, the fire alarm went off. We ran from the apartment. Tenants in the hall were in a panic. Someone said, “Some jerk’s been writing in the first person again. His keyboard caught fire and now the whole building is going up in flames.” “What a jerk,” I said, to deflect suspicion. “Why would anyone write in the first person? He must be a rookie.”

We were all crowding in at an elevator shaft, only it was empty, just a straight drop to the ground floor. “What do we do now?” someone cried. “Well, someone has to go first,” I said, knowing it was my fault anyway. So I jumped down the shaft. I didn’t fall so much as float down. It was an exhilarating feeling, like writing a first draft in first person. I landed safely in the lobby and called back up the shaft, “Just do it, for Christ’s sake! Mom, jump!”

She came down next, landing safely. “Wow, that was fun,” she said. We both called up the shaft, “Jump, jump! One at a time, jump. It’s a gas.” One at a time they came floating down, everyone but an author who lives on the fifth floor. He couldn’t bring himself to jump because he writes in the third person. I said, “For Christ’s sake, Mr. Barwick, it’s only fiction! Show us your fear. *Jump!*” Holding his nose, he jumped, and sure enough, came drifting down like a falling leaf. I shook his hand. “Now that wasn’t so bad, was it?” He said, “No, not bad at all. I’m surprised, frankly.” I said, giving Mr. Barwick a knowing wink, “The buck starts here, Mr. Barwick.”

We all ran outside to find the fire department had arrived and the situation was under control. My keyboard, it turned out, had landed in a rat’s nest in the window well. I counted seven dead rats, all brown with bad teeth. The fire itself had been harmless, killing only the rats. There was a woman there from the evening news who wanted to know how this fire had got started. Mom proudly pushed me forward, “It was my son who did it. He only writes in first person.” “Is this true?” asked the woman from the evening news. I said, “Yes, it is. I feel more comfortable writing in first person. I write in first person so I can share what is otherwise a very private experience.”

After, I try not to think about the future because that means thinking about the past, which is, well, past. Instead, I think of Nigel getting off the long flight over the black ocean knowing at the end of the tunnel there will be someone waiting to pick him up, help him with his luggage, and drive him to a place he’ll learn to call home.

## Brian’s Dodge Ram Hits Another Doe

### Ken Meisel

By the dark, dew-laden hollows,  
deep inside a copse of butternut  
trees, she pokes her gem eyes  
out of pitch-colored darkness,  
hears the truck, roaring down  
the dusty road, hesitates, then bolts,  
like a piece of tree branch  
dropped across the unlighted Iowa road,  
and Brian awakens from the thrumming  
sound of tires over gravel,  
and nighttime radio, full of static,  
and hits another running doe,  
with his Dodge Ram truck.

It's been three years since that Three Mile Island summer of break-ups, and she's met a man from England through a pen pal page on the Internet. Everybody around the office refers to him as Nigel, even though his name is Henry. He's coming to stay on the basis of one two-week visit. I'm as cut off from the meaning of this sudden action as anybody else.

"He's such a cupcake. A perfect little cupcake," she'd told me right after he left from his visit. "After jerk-boy city, I didn't think it was possible that love could happen so fast or seem so right."

I didn't know it was possible for people to talk that way and keep a straight face.

After, I dated men who, well, wouldn't be described as cupcakes by me or anyone else. I dated men who coached basketball and soccer and hockey.

My current has been known to yell "your intensity is for shit" at random points during the evening. He had a side of the bed in no time flat. He's a good time, or at least my idea of one.

When this man was looking for a different job, one of my friends asked him how it was going.

"The last time I made a cut was on my high school basketball team," he said.

His reduced expectations get to me every time.

When I tell my current about Kate's description of Nigel as we're lying in bed, he asks when Cupcake is due to arrive.

I roll onto my side, facing him. "A couple of weeks. Before desire fails, before the silver cord is loosed."

"Where does that come from?"

"Ecclesiastes. There is nothing new under the sun," I say, as I put his hand on my breast.

"Thank God for that," he says, and then we don't say anything at all.

Watching little boys and little girls playing with building blocks, the psychologist Erik Erikson noted that while girls concentrated on building houses and entrances, boys would stack blocks as high as they could and knock them down. I think about what the therapist said to me at my last marriage counseling session: "You're not mad at this man, you're mad at all men." I'd had quite enough, but my ex continues with her to this day. As Erikson wrote in his journal, "Contemplation of the ruins is a masculine specialty."

"Well," said Mr. Barwick, "I don't know what Edith Wharton would say to that. There's a fine body of literature written in the third person."

"Yes, yes, Mr. Barwick," I said, "but I am not Edith Wharton."

"And what about Albert Camus," said Mr. Barwick. "Think of the rats he killed, and he did it in third person."

"You came down that shaft yourself, Mr. Barwick," I said, "and you came down in the first and only person. That's my point: first person first."

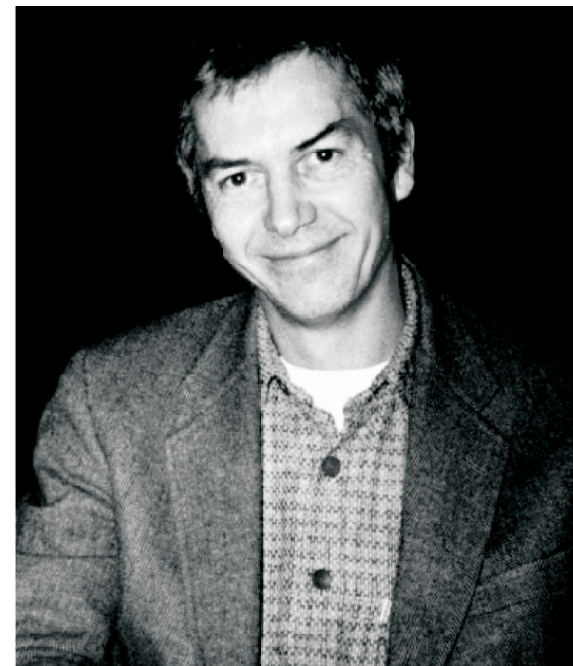
The woman from the evening news plucked a wig from her head and said she had shaved her head to send her daughter to college.

"That's an interesting idea," said Mr. Barwick. "Do you mind if I use it?"

"Well, I don't know," she answered. "It was this young fellow here who started the fire."

"Go for it, Mr. Barwick," I said. "You can refer to me as Matthew Shepherd."

*Matthew Shepherd, he wrote, was sitting at the kitchen table working on a story when the "I" key burst into flames.*



Bill Emby

# Haircut 1958

Ray Miller

I walked to Nine Mile Road when I was eight, folding and unfolding a dollar bill then jamming it down into my pocket again. Joe's Barber Shop: a white tile facade with a spinning red and white pole. I sat and waited my turn with the other men, glanced at the covers of *Esquire* and *True Detective*, then read the one Superman comic Joe had kept for six years. I waited so long, I read the Donald Duck, too.

When I climbed into the scrolled chrome and cracked leather chair, my feet didn't reach the footrest, but I was tall enough not to need the board under me.

"I want a Princeton," I said.

At eight, I had an image of myself becoming a tall college man, wearing a letter sweater, standing in front of an ivy-covered library, books under my arm.

Joe picked electric clippers from between the jar of blue liquid full of combs and the ultraviolet oven full of scissors and razors.

"Okay Boss," he said. "I know how you like it."

Then he shaved my head. High in the back, high around my ears, just a tiny bit longer right above my forehead. I watched in the mirror until he finished, and closed my eyes while he rubbed witch hazel tonic over my scalp with both of his huge hands. I handed him the dollar and walked home, smelled the witch hazel, felt a slight burn around the edges, scratched at loose hairs under my collar, still felt his hands on my head.

When I walked by the barbershop between haircuts, I'd look in the window, and if Joe saw me, he'd salute, raising his scissors to his forehead.

For ten years or so, that was how I looked. Then I started going to the barber by the high school. Started wearing it longer, as long as the dress code allowed. Had an image of myself as John Lennon or Bob Dylan now. I walked by Joe's on the way home from school and didn't look in the window. I didn't want to see him salute. As if I'd have to explain.

# The Contemplation of Ruins

Michelle Brooks

Okay, let's say you *could* do it. Meaning you have the capacity. Fall in love, have a baby, find a job, write a book, get a divorce, etc. First off, there's always some asshole telling you how easy it would be if you really wanted to. It's you that's holding you back. And so on and so forth. And when you're finished, there's somebody else telling you how you could have done it easier, less expensively, with more style, less mess. I'm tired of this. Sometimes it takes every ounce of energy just to get through the day without coming out the other side as though I'm a passenger getting off a particularly long flight, ruffled and jet-lagged, waiting for someone to pick me up and take me home.

When a man wants to leave you, it's like when you're in a bathtub running the hot water and all of a sudden it's getting colder and colder until you can't stand it. You keep wanting to believe it's going to warm back up, but eventually you're forced to get out and put back on your clothes just to quit shaking.

When I get letters for him, which used to be all the time and now is almost never, I always write "not at this address" on the envelope. One time my pen wouldn't work so I threw his mail away. When a pen really finally runs out of ink, all the shaking in the world won't bring it back.

Two weeks after, I dialed my old phone number to check my messages, not realizing it wasn't my phone number anymore, wasn't my message, wasn't anything. I felt like I'd been on one of those rides that goes up for a very long time until you're suspended. Just when you're convinced that you won't drop, you do. At amusement parks, I avoid those rides along with the ones where you're stuck with centrifugal force to a wall and spun around. Inevitably, those attract pukers. One of my childhood friends always rode the evil Whirl-O-Matic with the expected results.

"Why do you put yourself through that?" I'd ask as she leaned against the wall, her face pale after vomiting near the log ride.

"I think I'm going to get used to feeling bad when it's over."

One of my coworkers, Kate, got a divorce about the same time I did.

## Just As the Copper Sun

Joyce Odam

Just as the copper sun, round and perfect, went down, and the last lit hour flared, and the sky was the last sky of the day and nothing moved—for a moment everything was held in a formal stillness—still I rose from what I was doing to marvel—the only movement in the world, to stare at the sun as if to hold it there on the swift horizon, and I could not hold it; and still, all the soft red air surrounded me and I was tainted the same red, and a cold blue was spreading—another movement to match my own. Everything else was caught—the brief bird in the air could not move, the leaf falling from the limb in front of me was arrested in air, and then the frozen moment let go and the sun was the only movement, and I was locked in a stillness, my hand in its gesture, my mouth forming its “Oh” for my eyes which, I am sure, held two red suns that went down at the same moment as the one on the horizon.

## The Black Mood

Joyce Odam

How were we to know that dark was so long, and so low to the ground; how it took our shadows to itself and hid us from all sound; how far it went to muffle what we almost said in time. It was so simply everywhere. It caught us in a mood, precisely right—precisely toned—with last light trembling near—so like a last chance that we took. I do remember fear—the way we somehow pulled ourselves away and out—and how the dark snapped shut and swallowed back. Mygod, we could have disappeared.

## Air Heart

William P. Coyle

I can't help loving Amelia Earhart and others similarly situated. The world got caught in her heat, they all said Amelia we love you surely you'll be back we can't wait it's so easy 'cause it's Amelia! Goodbye Amelia we've packed some sandwiches have a glorious trip! Those who are most enthusiastic start calling her Air Heart because she was born for the air. And Amelia goes off in her tin can that's really indestructible across the Pacific and she's scared and she's determined and she's no fool but she's ours now and if we've got her eating ham sandwiches, who says she wasn't? And there's Amelia eating sandwiches and singing the latest songs with her navigator and, I think, why, yes, there *is* a certain spark between them that will certainly develop into something more once they land. And we're following right behind them watching their shoulders bob to the songs they're singing into the perfectly ray-beamed sun.

And then, boom, Amelia smashes on an island, her pants and shoes exploding right off her and this evidence is found someday and some of the people who said she was the queen of some tribes or that she did it on purpose to escape this hideous world where masculine women are hated begin to feel foolish. “Gravity: it brings us all down in the end” becomes everyone's motto and embracing the sea is what we now bravely find hideous. And Amelia starts looking sadly comic there with her shoes in the trees and her pants right off her there in the sand and, ok, maybe she managed to survive a week or two, but there she is and the sandwich makers simply ignored the evidence months ago because they're sticking to the version of the tribe queen and why shouldn't they?

Ok, so we know that Amelia never made it and even if she did, she's certainly gone by now. Gravity: even if you land on an island the island's in the sea. But it's right and good for our mental health to, on occasion, cultivate that part of our consciousness which needs or at least prefers to demand that Amelia find something unexpected in the glances of her navigator. The gauges of their shiny ship can never be imperfect, and fuel is so plentiful that they start practicing loops as they flutter off with their sandwiches and their songs, through the deferential clouds, heading, as calculated, for nets of endless mercy.

## Early Dark

Joyce Odam

walking downtown  
dark at six o'clock  
a mild winter evening  
just early enough yet  
for hotel boys to be out  
on roller blades and bikes  
and lone men ambling by  
with hands in their pockets  
and you and I looking for  
a restaurant we heard about  
the car six blocks away  
too late now I think of  
the money in my purse...  
stories of murders...  
a dangerous world...

## Where the \$ Went

Errol Miller

Too many blonde girls, down low.

## of age

R. Yurman

my brain's so young  
it feels unused  
my heart too  
but my organs limbs bones  
feel beaten down  
cramped joint-ached gimpy  
calcified gassy  
full of time

birth-slick damp-eyed  
barely able to stand  
on splayed unsteady legs  
my thoughts  
nuzzle me  
blind for milk

## For Andy

Irene Eberling Marsh

You are always reading.  
Other people's words  
topple into your speech,  
boulders falling  
across a pathway.

She is a shadow  
cluttering your page,  
your CD-ROM.  
Her voice scrapes your brain

at mealtimes,  
scuffles with manuals,  
newspapers.

You lost your glasses.  
Your eyes ache  
late at night.  
You wake her.  
She switches on a light,  
picks up a book.

## Portrait of a Dead Grasshopper

Ken Meisel

Way out past  
the tractor barn,  
beyond the farrowing house  
where pigs grunt  
a thunderstorm in,  
a dying grasshopper  
the size of a  
man's thumb  
lies squashed,  
flapping its  
kaleidoscope wings  
against a tea-  
colored rain.