Shoplifting Poetry

We're in the bookstore stealing poems, lifting the best lines—
You cop one from Williams,
I stick my hand into Pound.
No one's looking . . .
I throw you a line from The Cantos—
It disappears in your ear like spaghetti.
We stuff ourselves with Crane,
Cummings, Lowell, Voznesensky—
 Neruda, Rilke, Yeats!
The goods dissolve in our brain.
Now we move from the shelves with caution.
The cashier's watching. Can she tell?
Fat! We've overeaten.
You giggle. End-rhymes leak at your lips like bubbles.
I clap a hand on your mouth.
You are holding my ears
as we fall out the door.

Poem for a Volunteer in a Nursing Home

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

The first pages of a novel

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

Jean was already bent over and picking up. When April came near she stood straight, said hello, and dumped a full basket into her barrel. The potatoes bounced in with a rush of hollow thumps. Before she had reached the end of Jean's section, April heard jealously the familiar, muffled sound of half-fullness as the contents of a second basket tumbled in. At the next section, the one before her own, Freddy and Bea were just getting started; no hellos came from them. Their section seemed too short to April. Already she was feeling the fury of this day's greed and suspicion. Her own section looked too long, the far marker just barely visible. Freddy had probably moved her stake again, always giving her more section when he and Bea were feeling lazy or else shortening it, sneakily. April grumbled this year. Every year.

April pulled on the gloves that were still damp and crusty with mud from the day before, yawned, and let her eyes stretch for the last time this morning out to the distant end of field, so far and blended into high grass and scrub trees she couldn't tell if there were pickers there yet or not. And then she decided she'd do that difference was between the pickers' speeds and needs. April's neighbor on the far side, Edna, exquisitely slow of body and mind, could barely manage a strip of field twenty feet long, yet each time the truck went by she got a few barrels.
until the whole depth and breadth of her section, by the middle of day, would be
covered with empty barrels lying on their sides, while April or Jean and just
about anyone else would be a dozen rows ahead and crying for barrels would be
pacing back and forth with nothing to do, waiting, losing money; would be
screaming at the fellows on the truck, "Give us more, you jerks! Can't you see?"
And the fellows, as if deaf and blind or somehow convinced they were serving
the interest of a higher, purer cause, would give them each two or three barrels,
just like Edna, for an eight-barrel section.
"Edna, could I have one of your barrels here?" April asked after lunch, smiling
and trying to be friendly.
"Uh-uh." Edna answered, her face stony and grim. "Nope. Not from me. I need
it.
"Edna, you won't possibly be needing all those barrels before the truck comes
back again."
"I will, too."
"Edna," April said more sternly, with no smile left, "I've got to have more
barrels. You've got more than any of the rest of us."
Edna wrinkled up her nose and held onto April with a long, hostile stare.
Finally she said, "Take one from back there," and pointed far behind her to the
very first row. "But just one."
"Oh for Christ sake," April yelled, stomping away. "I'm taking two."
Each day there was at least one battle. She was growing to hate Edna. She could
no longer feel sorry for the woman as she once had. With her children April was
very protective and forbade them to mock or belittle the kids in school who were
retarded and slow. She was ashamed of her venomous feelings toward Edna. But
as she dragged up the hard-won barrels from so far away, losing more precious
minutes, she grimaced derisively at the back of the dumpy, lethargic figure pick-
ing gingerly at each potato, one by one. Edna's very looks made April angry.
Anger it was that kept her going. Except for the moments now and then when
the rhythm of her work maintained itself automatically, when there were no
long waits or jumbles of tops to interfere and her motions simply followed one
another without a thought, it was rage, not skill or even doggedness that pro-
duced the tut-tut, stomping away. "I'm taking two."
She grew enraged when by late on a morning like this one had been, the sun
so diseased and rotten that her

Twice in Millinocket

All day we have been steeped in heavy clouds like a room full of vapor
where someone has just boiled water for sea.
We are here for disparate reasons.
On the way home I look behind
and for the first time see Katahdin
rising over my shoulder.
Whatever becomes of us, your body
will remind me of that mountain—abrupt,
huge in its implications. Months later
I pass the Great Northern paper mill alone:
white, opaque, thick massive smoke
and the viscous flow of workers
emerging with empty faces off their shift.
I had been waiting years
for you to enter my life, to labor
in each other's arms and the factory windows
high and frosted keeping us apart.
I put my hand between your thighs, quiet, deliberate, remembering patches of snow.
Now that trail rises in my mind
where we walk through elevations
that imply new birds, new music
sung with a voice I recover from a dream.
The landscape is pure invention
plucked and fingered like the strings
of an ancient instrument. We're walking
in a world without memory.
There are no slashed trees for guides.
Descending, we make up a story for the opera
on the radio, the soprano a woman
who walks in her sleep.
The plot comes clear. The tenor suffers
all his life for old songs,
and their bodies so alike
have different voices.
There is no landscape, no libretto
that will tell us we are not alone
in the universe, even in sleep.
The details outside ourselves, this factory
huddling under Katahdin
and spewing our people like smoke,
unfamiliar, remote; the trail
cuts across the mountain like an artery
and assumes our names.

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

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

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

But now that the wind has come to howl and the stoves are fired to chase the descended cold, he's gone. Not forever, you understand. An old friend, a neighbor, we'll be thrown together, often innocent as roses, by our families or other friends. There will be picnics, workdays, dinners, business, but no long-tongued kisses at the door of morning.

Now my mouth is not filled with sweetness, but is dry and bitter as a mouthful of crumbled leaves. I should have known when he gave me my birthday gift too soon. Like trying to fit one more week of summer before the fall, he dug my new garden before he said goodbye. All that Indian summer day he worked, bare-backed while I, from the safety of the hammock, imagined trysts. He was dilet. No amount of grace would silence me when he did not come. I had to ask, to know. I brushed my hair and wore my red hat to make myself look happy and brave; I trudged up to his studio. "Where've you been? What's happened? Is it that bad?"

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

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

I listen to the prattle of my son. No sympathy there for my sadness. We take long walks in the wind and golden light. He pulls and tugs and dances. He teases the dog. I snap. He cries. It is the only time I feel ashamed.

I sit knitting, intent as a cat. I listen to mournful records I have not played since I was twenty-one. Songs of young women, betrayed, abandoned, disappointed all afraid for their beauty, for their lives. After so many laments I try to block out the words, and see only the soft brown wool taking shape beneath the steel pins in my hands. If anyone saw me now I'd look just as they would have us women be. Doing handiwork by the fire.

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

I find myself alone, not so young, living in the country, unemployed. I recognize the possibilities of fresh, romantic love are but few. So, I find myself comparing. I hold up my everyday talk to what I might say to him at midnight. I measure feeling simply happy against feeling a strong hand feel the notches of my spine. Peace next to fever, affections against obsession. I am overwhelmed. A tight fire burns when I try to settle myself to be content with the memories of this love.

J. Brown
Portland
The Drums of Heaven

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

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

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

It was a glorious morning. Her daughter, Ruth, had given birth a few days before. The thought of this miracle of life brought her smile back in full force and she began to hum as she wiped down the kitchen table. The sun poured into the window and set her cafe curtains aglow with golden light. But like small, black butterflies, her eyes kept darting to the stone wall and the dark forest beyond. Somewhere in her brain, a tiny warning voice told her that there was something odd going on. But she refused to allow this thought much room. She had just finished cleaning the table when the phone rang.

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

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

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

"Mama, I'll get straight to the point," said Ruth. "Will and I have decided not to have the baby baptized: at least not yet. Now before you start in, Mama, you got to remember that this baby is Will's too. Now we both know how you feel about this, but you got to let us do as we feel is right."

"Mama stood quietly. Her mind returned to the dark shape over the stone wall, but only for an instant.

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


Mrs. Reed hung up the phone slowly. She sat in a large maroon chair in the living room; the dishrag was still in her hand. She stared blindly at the carpet. "No Bible?"

She stood and lifted the cover against the barrel. The morning was quiet. Water from the tin cup dripped onto the ground making a small pool of dark mud. She again looked out across the fields and saw something strange. "Here! Right here was something..."

She dipped in a tin cup and drank the cool water. Sweet and clean! Just like God's baptism of the world. Rain. Soothing and pure, God's rain cleansed the world, into the sun and smiled. The day was golden and Mrs. Reed felt less tense. She studied the fields as though she were memorizing them; itemizing each section as to contents. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she again glimpsed the black shape. But when she confronted her eyes to where it was, it was gone. The smile suddenly flickered from her face, but reappeared when she saw nothing concrete.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Glanced up at the black skies. Small drops started to plummet the ground. She squinted into the wind.

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

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

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

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

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

This is no time for sleep.

Tonight, through years, your mother comes. She moves beyond the one-hewn dress. Her fingers run the burdock green and trace the yellow lines, the hair from onion skins for this first shearing of the lamb.

Of ways to remember her, tonight it is the hands, their touch upon your chosen things, their bones.

Susan Hand Strattony Grodstono

Invention, and it could be by the Aegean

Since I am older than I was the canaries sing much longer, the fingering of light upon the joy of our two bodies by the window near the sea was wild enough (more than before?) for me and her, the wetness of the waves and she in summer undulation (more than before?) was exercise to keep the curious and learning gods in satisfaction, it was Greek, another millennium time for us, unique, ecstatic, the mythic landlord and his wife, in care of this note, hearing all that noise (like 5 thousand canarins) must have known their special guess were with body language writing the encyclopedia again,
A Righteous Man

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

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

But make no mistake—Cooper saw himself as courageous or given to displays of righteousness, he did set rigid limits for himself and felt it his duty to correct and guide those around him whose behavior or appearance suggested moral depravity. He knew inwardly that he was not brave or demonstrative. He usually avoided raising the banner of truth or wading into combat against the brash and the ugly.

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

But there came a time when he realized that a righteous man must sometimes act. His comfort and security, Fred contacted the proper social agency and the Preston boy was rescued.

"I’m so proud of you, Fred!" his wife exclaimed. "You saw the correct thing to do by yourself and you went right out and did it!" she added.

He drove into McDonald’s for a snack. Taking his drink and a frown came over his face. "Just one thing bothers me," he went on. "The guy was standing on the road and by God you went right out and did it!"

"I’m so proud of you, Fred!" his wife exclaimed. "You saw the correct thing to do and by God you went right out and did it!" she added.

...the coarse gesture, though he knew it to be a disgustingly common one, rattled him, as though he were a visitor from another planet."

He smiled when he thought of the possibilities. His wife would be astounded if she knew what he was thinking, and he visualized her pride in him if he went ahead and... He had a chance to prove his moral courage once and for all by punishing the hag in front of him in a way that would really make people take notice. A plan had crept into his mind.

"SLOW down!" she cried. "Why should I have to slow down for an asshole like you?"

He frowned, seeming forlorn that she was so childishly intractable. He sauntered around to the other side of her car and looked into the front seat. He was relieved to see nothing that could be used as a weapon. Moving past the front of the car toward her, he said, "Now I made a mistake in my driving. I admit it. I have no right to give you reason to be afraid."

"Listen, creep," she said, stepping right up to his face, untying hair straying down over her eyes, "I’ve got your license number, and I’m going to call the cops."

"Go ahead," he countered, "and I’ll tell them how you nearly ran me off the road. It would be your word against mine, and I’m a respected businessman."

"Get a load of this!" she said to her friend. "Ashley’s gonna use his position against us! Don’t he know everybody’s equal in this country? She turned to him sharply. "Fucking you, Charlie," she said simply. She perched herself on the fender of his car and took a long drag from her cigarette, regarding him as though he were a visitor from another planet.
Reb Nachman (for Chaim)

Reb Nachman of Breslov
who had no successor
knew the purity of his soul
was beyond measure
and was sometimes even blinded
by his own light.
When he died
the stars attended him.

He asked to be buried in Uman
among the martyrs
of a thousand pogroms
so he could tell them stories
when they turned to him.

Slowly, in the course of years,
from splinters and pegs
they hid beneath their clothes,
his followers smuggled his chair
from Russia and set it like a throne
in Jerusalem where it is cordoned off
so he could
tell them stories.

All the other graves in Uman
are gone now
except the concrete slab
that bears his name
set between the squash and succotash
in a garden of great renown
where a peasant’s laundry flies
like angels’ wings
and the wind is a long whistle.

The faithful come from far and wide
to pass in single file
beneath the windows
where the children
who are fed on soup and stew
stare out at them
with luminous eyes.

Roberta Chester
Bangor

You Don’t Know Me

Great Grandmother
Old humpback pew never did fit my old shat bottom.
Mama had a cushion. Some old dust swimming up that sunbeam.

Comes through that yellow pane, same one Johnny broke when he was ten.
Once I dodged it feeling shy but now my sins have faded
Like this carpet. Why do all churches have red carpets?

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

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

Daughter
Peaceful, safe, just this bright hour my heart is calm.
Sunbeam still strikes this time of year — I caught it once.
Their little rituals, their children’s tales —
Dare I tell them He is risen — run down the aisle — He lives in me.
I saw Him in the jail. He sat beside me in Belleu.
Poor ma, I’m glad we have this day.
Tomorrow I must tell you how this time
The pills spilled over the bed there weren’t enough
I only slept three days.
I never told you how that first time
They told me LSD would show me God.
Then Peggy left, Jack overdosed
And Bob exploded over Vietnam.

And I never told you how that first time
They told me LSD would show me God.
Then Peggy left, Jack overdosed
And Bob exploded over Vietnam.

I will tell you how last night the demons came again
Black gulls called my name.
I will tell you how last night the demons came again
I took a sleeping pill and wept alone.
You’ll take me
crying to the ward where swaying zombies line the halls.

Oh, ma, please come to me along the urine sticky corridors
Crying to the ward where swaying zombies line the halls.

And after, I was wellprovided for.
Poor ma, I’m glad we have this day.

And Bob exploded over Vietnam.
Dare I tell them He is risen — run down the aisle — He lives in me.
I saw Him in the jail. He sat beside me in Belleu.

While I sleep sweating near the nurses’ station.

Grandfather

2 July, 1981: Road Back

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

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

Home row, empty under sacks of food, I labor through the mir. The night may clear, but I will not see Venus curling into
the space held open by the crescent moon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ruth Webber Evans
Portland

To Cuba
(Fidel Castro)

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

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

Gordon B. Clark
Bristol

Photo by Elliott Healy
Depression Glass

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

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

Margaret Wicke
Oakland

Barker

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

William Dubin
Peabody, Mass.

Laundromat

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

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

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

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

David Adams
North Jay
A Contemporary Epic

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

My eyes are shaded from the sun, my weight sprawled idly upon a crossed fabric slats and hollow metal tubes in half-bone couch left us by a dead relation, having the capacity in rain to lie flat, folded and compact— a real space-savor that they say. The plump-clouds, I am told, pose little threat; they hide mere vacant portions of the sky, and are, so I am told, but wit and wind-lofted gatherings of air. Here, they call the state "conditionally fair." Presently, their shadows drift down over me, warped by aging flesh that I am now resigned to own to. These ruffled hands are idle and no longer answer insult with a fist / nor wave to answer compliments / like those of Albert Rug (my neighbor Albert), / wave to answer Constance, / Mandy's secret and / my own.

Quite recently I noticed, or experienced / a certain impetus, like weakness; quite recently / let us say, I experienced / a will towards an impossible consistency, / consistent in rain / to lie flat, folded and compact / a real space-savor that they say. The plump-clouds, I am told, pose little threat; they hide mere vacant portions of the sky, and are, so I am told, but wit and wind-lofted gatherings of air. Here, they call the state "conditionally fair." Presently, their shadows drift down over me, warped by aging flesh that I am now resigned to own to. These ruffled hands are idle and no longer answer insult with a fist / nor wave to answer compliments / like those of Albert Rug (my neighbor Albert), / wave to answer Constance, / Mandy's secret and / my own.

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

Several days ago... I believe several days, / for the incident seems clear to me / not near, you understand — nearly all! / I find myself still able to recall / seems near / but clarity to me / suggests a temporal proximity / and I believe for I insist / that it has not been several weeks / but only several days. / And let us say, / less than a week. / And let us say I was engaged in action, / let us say, / following the wheeled insistence of my mother — / the grass shooting freely from sterile ground / to face bladed meticulously sharpened — why, / that cost me several days of leisure. / And let us say my neighbor, Albert Rug, / let us say he strode directly to me.

Yet there. There. / Impossible. Impossible. / "One moment, Albert. . ." / Rubbing of the eyes, construed inhibited sighs, / several hard and wistful drops upon a cigarette / as the fumes and mower's noise diminish / and a minute and wave of light / for me. / That will do. / That seems adequate. / Or, more precisely, it will work. / I know. I know.

"What's that? Yes, dear. No, I believe that was yesterday. . . Day before? / Tomorrow then, Yes, that's fine. / An excellent idea. . . Yes, dear. . . No, I have no idea."

Poor Constance is afraid to die, / as frightened as I am bemused. / Tender is the care / for skin / stretched taut on cheekbones, soft sense / to my touch, and quick the pace, darting into / unseen rooms, quick / like day's fragility. / "Tell me... Yes, yes, that's fine. Yes, I'll change direction.

So much had changed now, / ever since she overheard my child, my Mandy, / impression of an old forgotten love, / ever since she heard the girlish whisper / quite audible / through the mere three walls and two open doorways / that stood between them, / neither caring that those baffles proved / completely ineffectual. / ever since she heard her secret, Mandy's, mine, her own.

"What's that?... Yes, I did see her... No, she didn't say... No, nothing. You know how girls are."

Yet she does? / Does she know? / or care to know? / or merely carelessly im- pose... / "Yes, no, I can't remember. / Like the way she has been seeking this event since Mandy's birth. / Just as she had read, seen, heard, and experienced it. Just so. / Yes, just so. / Each day, since that day twenty years ago / and nine months prior / she would consider this creation / of hers (and partially mine) / first with her hand, / eyes closed, / straining to feel within her tiny heartbeats, / and then with her ears / slowly examining the object up and down, slowly / from head to toe, / as if by mere will or fantasy / to stretch it one more inch, a foot or so, / or maybe twenty years. / But I am cynical. And that is hardly fair.

"What's that?... Yes, I have. I did take them... I think so. Or maybe it was years ago."

I have no need for vitamins, but likewise no objections. They are, after all, merely small, / white and manufactured, and so I am told / exceed the body's needs a hundredfold. / No more exhausting, I suppose, / to eliminate an excess, than to overcome a small deficiency. / So I accept them, admit that / aligned to her I am important, now / a symbol of her years / and noticed days. / No, Constance will not let me die. / Constance has said nothing / in her notes about my death. . . / But she forgets the pills that didn't work! / belatedly invented aids to passion! / No, Constance gave those meagre months ago, / succumbing. / Yes, the morning after, / the night nausens, the five sudden pounds— / a price too high for mere illusion— / unamused gazes — / in our case, mere delusion.

And listen, can you understand? / Can you read the epitaph? / Can you see the future years and lastiards, / the darkness and this chair folded in the sunlight? / Well, I was thinking several years ago / how someday this child's tactful variant / of this form, sprawled before me, / would fall into maturity and on that same day, / when full devotion and obedience flourishes, / it might conceive the strange nature / of its parent's (singular, feminine) wishes. / I was thinking that and wondering why / Mandy / as my Constance claims is far too young / for vitamins.

I still recall, as Mandy drew me secretly from Constance, / I still recall that grin I greedily mistook for guilt. / I still recall as she began to whisper / near Constance, / hidden by those rooms and walls / and open doors, I still recall the tautened joys / that grew as if the smirk I saw before me / might burst into a grin, into a shriek of / victor, in harmony with profane / Truths such as myself imagined, / so long ago, / so long past, and so long / before I met my Constance. / And you're the first to know," she said.

And that is what I am building to. / That is what I've hinted all along. / And that so shades this utterance, / so magnifies my feet, resting idly, / shadows / into blurs, I have no wish for identities, / ever for days.

We have decided I was sitting, for conversation, / idly employed in contemplation. / And yes! Yes! Now I remember how I sat, / not for convenience but in fact. / And yes, that is precisely how it was / that is exactly what I meant to say / some time ago when I began.

Albert and his epitaph of neighbor walk / in sunlight warn upon rooftops. / And Albert's steps are hesitant, as / if bold secrets hobbles him. / "Walter," twirls he / and perhaps this amazes me? / "Walter, you're... Perhaps the earth's list / jarred his balance, staggered him as if her were / a THING magnified, stained with sweat, / the palms of the curious. / Walter, you're..." / So much had changed now, / ever since she overheard my child, my Mandy, / impression of an old forgotten love, / ever since she heard the girlish whisper / quite audible / through the mere three walls and two open doorways / that stood between them, / neither caring that those baffles proved / completely ineffectual. / ever since she heard her secret, Mandy's, mine, her own.
The Beast

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

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

Maggie Stewart
Augusta

One Hand Clapping

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

Terry Plunkett
Northport

Parkscape

The fountains smell of urine.
Red canna follow tulips
Under chestnut-drift like popcorn,
Food for gut-fat pigeons,
Pink feet splayed on pavement—
Starfish at the ocean.

On an elevated platform
Some blowzy, stubby lady
Leans on a slippery scrub-board
In a fountain like a washtub.
The organ-grinder's monkey,
An agile pimp in scarlet,
A go-between for Music,
Extracts thin dimes and nickels
From somnambulistic children,
Pale faces under sailors
As vapid as balloons.
If I cut the string
that ties them
To their grannies or their nannies,
They will float above the parkscape
With the pigeons that I scatter
When I run at them and scuffle
My patent leather shoes.

Robert McGuire
Newcastle

Photo by Elliott Healy

Photo by Elliott Healy
Bradbury was tired of being poor. Even old Henry up the road wasn't poor—no, he was just poor, subsisting on acorns, and living hand to mouth. One day he climbed up the hill, and made a discovery. He was in business. A picture appeared in the local Weekly: old Henry stood beside the mudhole, pointed at the pawprint. A uniformed game warden stood beside him, and there was a poster in the background. The picture was accompanied by a short article: old Henry hadn't seen a cougar in these parts for fifty years. It said the game warden agreed, speculated a bit, emphasized the harmlessness, relative nature of the big cats. Bradbury was off and running. Ten miles to the north, the Big City Daily picked up the story. The cat, so to speak, was out of the bag. It was time to thicken the plot.

Nobody, however, knew if the big cats would come. With the coming of evening, Bradbury was back at his mudhole. An eager child was there, with one of Henry's innumerable grandchucks. His bicycle parked nearby, Bradbury pointed to the pawprint, traced its outline with his finger, told him he was going to help him get the cat. The child raced away on his bicycle, much to Bradbury's wonder if the old cat would take the bait.

For three days, Bradbury wondered and waited. By Friday afternoon, he knew he was in business. A picture appeared in the local Weekly: old Henry stood beside the mudhole, pointing at the pawprint. A uniformed game warden stood beside him, and the grandchuck hovered in the background. The picture was accompanied by a short article: old Henry hadn't seen a cougar in these parts for fifty years. It said the game warden agreed, speculated a bit, emphasized the harmless, relative nature of the big cats.

Bradbury was off and running. Ten miles to the north, the Big City Daily picked up the story. The cat, so to speak, was out of the bag. It was time to thicken the plot.

There was no way the night of the big cats and the nine lives of Eveready. Bradbury had to roam the countryside. Pfinger 1, Pfinger 2, Pfinger 3 and 4—used them all, not randomly or indiscriminately, but always with attention to angle, pressure, and appropriate setting.

Night after night, Bradbury pried his trade. In time, he grew accustomed to the newspaper accounts. "More tracks found . . . outskirts of town . . . circling . . . growing bolder . . ." By the end of the second week, Bradbury detected the first hints of hysteria in the accounts. He laid a final set of tracks at the Big City limits and temporarily retired his plungers. Shortly thereafter, he appeared at the editorial offices of the Big City Daily with a manila envelope under his arm.

Bradbury's article was a scholarly work, deeply rooted in his studies of turn-of-the-century wildlife, of cougars in particular, in the newspaper's circulation area. It detailed the history and habitation of the big cats; it emphasized their harmless, relative nature: it scoffed at accounts of attacks on humans and family pets. The clinical, detailed descriptions of these accounts, rejected as they were, fit nicely with the scholarly tone of the article. The editors were impressed. Bradbury retired his plungers again and launched the second phase of his operation.

"Bwana," Bradbury told the boy at the hardware store. "From Chemco Inc., specialists in big-game repellents."

"Bwana," he told the man at the drugstore. "Twelve dollars a can." He rented a van, carted his stock to the Big City, and sold Bwana by the boxload. By mid-afternoon, he was sold out. He placed a collect call to Chemco Inc. and spent the rest of the week taking orders. His business was growing by leaps and bounds. Bradbury was even getting a little tired from getting rich—but he loved every minute of it.

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

"Howdy, Brad."

"Been a long time, Henry."

"Business goin pretty good?"

"Couldn't be better, Henry."

"You was pretty quick on your feet with that Bwana stuff there. Good thing, a man knows how t'grab a opportunity. They sat on Bradbury's doorstep. "Yep," old Henry continued, "it's a real good thing. Funny thing, too. Old Witt Bowden — we'll hear from him, just like you — made himself a pile of money off the cougar, too. Raised a cub. Use 'rcharge folks a quarter to come see it. Kep the money b'hind a rock in the cellar — pink rock, granite. I 'lloved a wall."

Old Henry chuckled, but Bradbury was aware that he was eying him shrewdly. He refused to be taken in. "In what came of it all?" he asked, but the old man ignored him.

"LORDY," Henry continued. "Witt use 'rcharge that cat somethin awful. With the money b'hind a rock . . .

"Well, sir," one day Witt Bowden went just a little bit too far. That old cat busted clean out of its cage and laid into Witt like the devil himself. "Weren't nothin left but bones and a little bit of hide."

"Folks say the cat must've lashed the henchman himself. Lotta talk. Folks talk about the cat comin back, too. His spirit, you know, haunt the place. They say how come they burned the old place down. Folks just tryin' t'protect themselves, y'know. . . ."
In Defense of Marshall “Dodge-ism”

(For F. G.)

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

Most characters of “Bert” and “I” perceive as window dressing, attempts to enliven this basic metaphor of individuals accepting their communities by referring beyond them, to nature. Many critics see Dodge’s monologues as “stereotype” Maine people. But Dodge and his partner, Reverend Bob Bryan, are working, like Mark Twain or Finley Peter Dunne in “Mr. Dooley,” squarely within a valid vein of American humor.

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

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

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

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

I recall discussing a recent review by Sanford Phippen reprinted in MAINE LIFE, which commented on “Dodge’s stereotypes” and the general lack of contemporarily meaningful social truth in Maine fiction. Leaving aside publishing and marketing considerations, a writer-friend observed to me, “If Phippen’s right, Dodge and Maine fiction do mask social reality!”

My reply was that masking is an essential, legitimate tool for theatre and performing artists like Dodge. And my friend pointed to a particularly obtuse erroneous description of Maine by Helen Yglesias, a racy, journalistic mangling of a morose rendering of hallucinated statistics and a sacrosanct theory about human mind.” A brilliance bleeding Eastward, black was bruising into night, And had their will. A man has his bad luck. We sat on the granite crest of a glacial knoll.

Dodge and Maine fiction do mask social reality!”

Here, I responded, “Do you want to be so depressed by this description you see Maine life and its way of life as ‘social melodrama,’ or would you prefer to lighten things up just a little with Dodge’s humor?”

The drawback to Dodge, as most Maine social critics sadly observe, is their inability to accept his image of “Bert” as reality, as Maine. But one can accept this image in some respect in order to criticize. Thus, Dodge’s art form undergoes personal transformations in the eyes of perceivers, from made-up stories to actual fact, from allegories to logical analogies, from metaphor to concept, and perhaps, ending up as an adjunct of some sort to striving for that elusive and purportedly exclusively individual commodity, personal identity.

If as idealists we see Dodge’s characterizations solely as literally truthful, flickering representations on the cavernous walls of our Maine hearts, as personal images of reality, we easily miss the metaphorical meaning and humorous pleasure of his artistry. Worse, we could plunge into the escape-to-nature mindset of some summer visitors, or into the concept-minded maze of feelings of some well-intentioned critics of Maine social reality.

If we personally identify too heavily with “Bert” or some of the “parts” put into his creation, we tend to counter with another unexperienced or partially experienced reality. Because we are not Marshall Dodge, the artist creating characters and monologues, in a sense we can become characters ourselves in search of an author, almost unconsciously performing seriously what Dodge offers through “Bert’s” jest.

“Bert” does not perceive abstractions. Data from the social sciences mean next to nothing to his hornet’s nest of family, friends, enemies and assorted kin living in small communities, isolated or fragmented enough to lack rigid social and economic stratification. “Bert” knows Maine as the place where one can “buy a piece of his mind” in a bookstore, lawyer, banker, clergyman, factory worker, artisan, storeowner, or housewife. Young people migrating to Maine, cleverly experimenting with their lives according to the age’s prevailing scientific methodology of proving falsehood (while everybody else knows what everybody else is doing), do not bother “Bert.” Presumably, “They don’t know nothin’!” Which is often the case.

A rather basic description of Maine public-policy social reality was penned by Allen G. Pease, a tempered idealist with a long and distinguished career in state government and with deep personal roots in Maine.

“Maine,” he observes, “is a nation of garlic observances, such as Toynbee’s ‘New England is a finished piece,’ or with a gloomy preoccupation with poverty or backwardness in Maine. Seems to me Maine is relatively free from divisive social problems of race, class, or political corruption and organized crime. Melbourne people stand high in their average level of education, our minimum wage for state government employees is high by national comparison. Maine’s so-called reticent people have established some of the state’s environmental, health control laws in the nation … and our relatively low per capita income is in large measure a function of population statistics. Maine has a rather large percentage of retired workers and youthful dependents for our labor force to support, but this will change.”

Contrary to the above description, the “natural predators” of “Bert” are people who can’t relate their own perceptions to a community that does not fit into their preconceived vision of reality. People who can’t “fit” without thinking up something to fit into, whose tools are conceptual or highly romantic, perhaps compatible with high technology, but not wholly meaningful to their experience of nature. It is a view of nature having been conditioned by mankind, nature still retains great mystery.

For example, any number of people could obtain computerized geographical and meteorological data that there’s enough space and air to breathe in Maine, and run the concept back to its roots in the pre-Penobscot Maine community where one aye bogged another with a gnawed moose leg bone and the skull of the second age got dug up thousands of years later to prove this very fact. Naturally, “Bert” would agree with this logical progression. It is impeccable proof of the “territorial imperative” by which native lobster fishermen operate.

So why climb on old “Bert’s” back? He has control over his own technology. He understands his tools, which produce the results he wants. He knows if he’s nasty, petty, selfish, and venial right back to him — probably a close relative, too.

In communities where the existence of good and evil is more or less accepted as natural because control is almost unconscious achieved through traditional values and social structures and limited economic options, lives are lived in close quarters and character armament or expressions of affection become relatively common knowledge. Dodge draws on this public social legacy for characterization, the key ingredient in his yarns. In “Bert” and I” the author is not writing and performing comedy with plots, story lines or a “statement.” Dodge does not compose drama or tragedy, but humor.

With “Bert” and I” the state at least has an icon which is identifiable and pleasing to outsiders, offering them a remote possibility that things could turn out good “naturally”. And Dodge’s humor is funny, even tolerable to less self-conscious Mainers.

The late author of the Great Society, President Johnson, remarked about his small Texas community, of which he was Emperor, “They know when you’re sick. They care when you die.” By some quirk of national character, Americans are predisposed to achieve such concordance. We have a system — depending upon, as “Bert” might say, “how much you have to leave them”. In Maine, for better or worse, we still live and die in a community.

Now as far as “Bert” is concerned this article probably won’t generate book-ings enough to get out of Maine for the winter. But his humor has, and if he does get warm, he can come home.

Richard Sewell
Watersville

On the Granite Crest

We sat on the granite crest of a glacial knoll Over a hemlock-tattered scope of white. Eastward, black was bruising into night, While, in the woodslope, footless, sure and old, A brilliance bleeding Eastward, black was bruising into night, And had their will. A man has his bad luck. Weatherfast, but my hand had frozen stuck We sat on the granite crest of a glacial knoll...
To Eat an Icon

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

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

Refusing women and fortunes and god on a stick is nothing. Really. It is easier to dance, waltzes especially, and it is far from sinful.

and the words of a blind man to a radio: It bears not so much weight as it may seem.

Terrence Day
Waterville

X-ray Room

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

Their bodies against the sivel noble,
I reserve them for winter,
their sotes silvered with ice,
their gait slow like a great Pole bear.

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

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

Mary Ann Meade
Lewiston

Recipe

Flay flanks. Batter eviscerated bodies.
(Discard dead eyes.)
Scrape skins. Slice white flesh beneath.
(Gouge out live eyes.)

Scrape into unctuous hell.
Serve with spiced sanguinity.
(Beware of bones!)

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

Maureen Walsh
Bangor

The Fooling of Ralphie Post

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kendall Sterriam
Richmond
Cord of Birch

It was high summer, that time when winter seems implausible, a moralist's admonitory dream, That I, short-sleeved, took through the neighborhood A question, revealing it only when it was understood All round that the amenities as to the heat and flies Had been upheld, when something like response might thrive. A hundred-sixty years of working in the woods, Their lives were sure to contain the fact or two I wanted about some birch I'd cut that spring And the extent of its aptitude for making heat. To a man they granted, that to let me know they knew That I was bothering about a very poor thing. I relaxed in the shade of their attitude, Ignorant that each was to recall, surmise, delete, And say that which the others had said was untrue. Gravely I agreed with their unblinking contrarieties. My hand shook hands and the doubt inside of me Hurrahed. Back home there was the cord, a pile I ipouted a while, Hefted a piece — it was wood. Nothing descended. At night in bed I defined and mused and pretended; Nothing came of it all but dismal sleep. By New Year's the snow was over two feet deep; Load by load my dilemma was taken away And often I stopped to stare on my way Back from the shed at the smoke the fire had freed And let myself be gratified by the wisdom of need.

Aroostook 13:
Farmer in February

Nothing recognizable that will grow—trees more, the hammered sun frigid beyond the gesture of this pale field. For-sides are lighted; width untracked in wave-lengths Mount where the snow-mounds are purple/funneled.

The maple drily measures the crystals meaningless, chilled season, rigid run-offs; in emptiness the maple measures the thought of a wasting plant.

A swept external farm dwindles westward where a day bites off its unwillingness. My neighbor west—should I walk over there, despite wind and stove-heat?

Brian Fitzgerald
Presque Isle

Photo by Charles Lamson
Circa 1873
And Still the Moon Waxes

It is the night before Full Moon
And all over the land
Beds are filled with picked off
Fingernails and toenails.
All day yesterday
Sockets of extracted teeth
Balooned with old blood
As cheeks became chipmunked with edema.
Throughout the Greater Portland Area
People have been eating more than usual
All week. There was a riot
Among diners queued up at the Baker’s Table
And two people were taken away
In the Medici wagon. Three others fell
Down the steps but stayed for dinner.
Out in Scarborough, encroaching tides
Lapped up Black Point Road
Down by the marsh, then swallowed
An orange Volkswagen in broad moonlight.
In every living cranium
The Circles of Willis have overfilled
This week, causing a cerebral rash
Of murders and general mayhem. Rapists
Were mauled by their victims for a change.
Hospital labor rooms overflowed
With amniotic fluid drawn out
To see the moon, that being
Primary; the floating to eternity
Of ancient spirits at the edge of death for weeks,
In every living cranium
And I wonder, are you still
Climbing fast, eyes fixed
On the scalp of some mountain?
My last ditch thought was to pick out a tree
My eyesight blurred, my whole face running sweat,
And whirl me full around to face my death.
Ipeered
And filled up with its silent victory shout.
And since, when I have seen a deer in flight,
The salmon at the falls, I understand
That lunar invitation was
To give it
Down by the marsh, then
Of murders and general mayhem. Rapists
Among diners queued up at the Baker’s Table
Down the steps but stayed for dinner.
It seemed to me was in my hair, whose hands
From a now faceless older boy whose breath
Across a little field and on into
The woods along a pathway to the sea .
Until at last I felt my legs going dead.
My eyesight blurred, my whole face running sweat,
My last ditch thought was to pick out a tree
And sverre behind it to a stop, then hope
I could move round it left or right to keep
Its trunk somehow between his grasp and me.
And so I did, and, standing there, realized
Through wrenching gapes — I was the only one.
I peered out, and, astonished, saw him stop
Some distance well back up the path, then turn
And start with steps back the way we’d run.
I felt saved by a life force beyond my own,
And filled up with its silent victory shout.
And since, when I have seen a deer in flight,
The salmon at the falls, I understand
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Styles

Joel, I hike the steep short trail up
Maine’s Bald Mountain with my
Yellow-haired daughter racing ahead,
And I remember you, all those years
ago, scrambling the rugged Sierra
Switchbacks up, out of Pate Valley,
You climbed so fast! Looking neither
right, nor left, nor down at your GI boots.
At the top, at White Wolf, where
you waited for me to catch you,
your laughter: a spring-swelled
High-country creek; your raw boy’s
Pride: you had peaked in record time.
(And I remember thinking: those
Marine Corps years of hers! And
how I blamed THEM and your father.)
For whatever reason, it was never
My way of hiking, and I see why, now,
We had to break camp at that trailhead.
You were primed for a bed in the valley,
And an outsized meal.
I, for a meadow’s nest,
In fingering reach of stars.
And now, these many years later,
I still hike slow and stop a lot.
I still fool around with stars.
And I wonder, are you still
That high-stepping manchild,
Climbing fast, eyes fixed
On the scalp of some mountain?
Are you still setting records, Joel?
P.C. Peterson
Dryden

It All Began
With Ginni Wren

It all began in the 3rd grade
When I did the Feather Dance
I was not just another
Heavy footed head stopping boy
Wishing for scalps
Or for Ginni Wren
But her eyes from the 2nd row
Would feed my white Indian spirit
Into the drum which circled with me
Round the pageant feather
Quaking in a mote of clay
I danced harvest spells
My back bent like a bow
Teeth bared above the quill
& Ghost Dance War Dance
& wishes prancing
Like dowsing bees
Into ears as into cells
Sweet as honey
& golden visions I danced
& my bare feet made the feather tremble
& they heard me
& saw how she watched
&Willed not for Ginni Wren
To lure me as the rest.

Giulli Averv Tresscot

Beyond My Own

No more than eight, I ran with full blown fear
From a now faceless older boy whose breath
It seemed to me was in my hair, whose hands
I all but felt about to collar me
And whirl me full around to face my death.
Down a long hill into the drive and then
Around the corner of the house I sped,
Across a little field and on into
The woods along a pathway to the sea .
Until at last I felt my legs going dead.
My eyesight blurred, my whole face running sweat,
My last ditch thought was to pick out a tree
And sverre behind it to a stop, then hope
I could move round it left or right to keep
Its trunk somehow between his grasp and me.
And so I did, and, standing there, realized
Through wrenching gapes — I was the only one.
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Some distance well back up the path, then turn
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Editors: Gordon Clark,
Terry Plunkett
Typesetting: The Comp Shop
Layout assistance: Phil Paratore