

Fall 1987

Fall 1987

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The Lighter



The Lighter

Volume 33 Issue 1 Fall 1987

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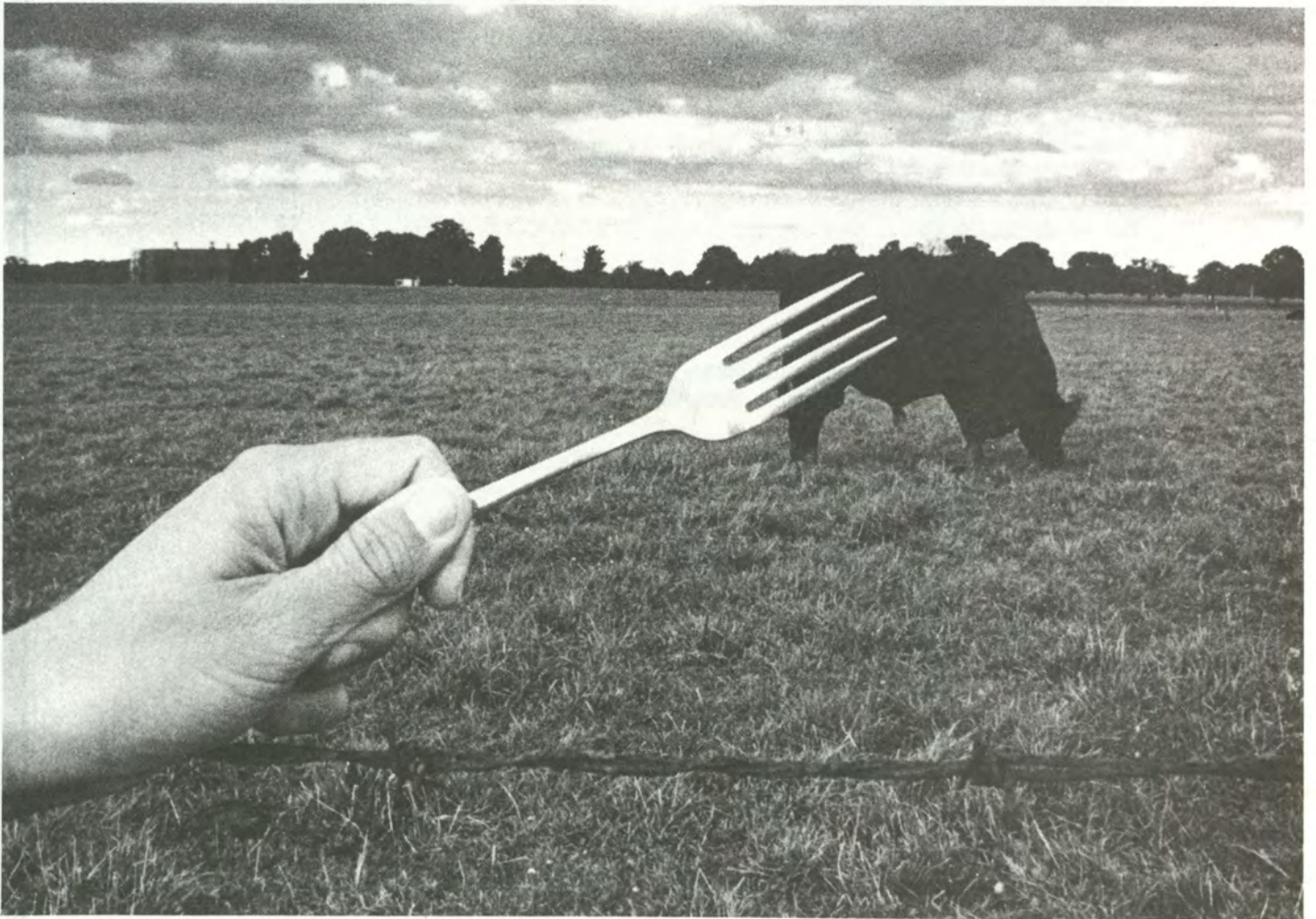
cover photo — Andrew Beck

Death by Pun — Rick Van Grouw

Prelude

I wish to write of light and joy.
My pen is poised to meet the task.
The muse sits at my shoulder smiling,
but my sorrow comes
and blows the little bastard off!
Deal with it.

Andrew Zeber



drowning in the cornfields

and you, an ensign in the bus rider's navy
always treading the
spiderweb of loose change you hoarded
from the last city's job
and strung out
from one asphalt strip of plastic and broken glass
to another
until it snaps with the weight
of you staring out greyhound windows
and you splash down in another town.

you find yourself, again, at work behind a counter
bleary-eyed and unsure of the stock
but quick with the change
(there's been years to practice)
money and gas stations
are the constants of the universe

when did your dislocation begin?

were you born this way—
with an umbilical cord of sand
and the tendency to mistake
one nurse or another
for your mother

or did the back of your brain contract—
the names of relatives
and childhood sweethearts
squeezed out of the grey ridges
your long trail of broken pledges
the result of some mental disorder

I see you as a child
walking through your house
your edges shimmering and bright
as if you were superimposed there
on the whim of some director.
hard of hearing when you wanted to be
you had a blind spot for familiar streets
a teflon retina

some critical point must have been reached:
your yearbooks turned
to dust and insect legs
when you tried to crack them open
you took on the air
of a man caught auctioning off his family album
by a relative whose name he can't remember

and now the highway maps you sell
are as vague to you as sea charts
the faces of friends pass in waves
their names only ersatz latitudes

this part of Illinois should be
familiar territory by now
but you move across it like a sailor
who's lost all hope of finding port
and only wants to drown in the cornfields

Pat Burnette

Mary Cassatt: Painting a Portrait of her Mother

These afternoons turn like clouds in sun:
the long pale dullness, impatient strokes of light.
Her breathless talk: how Paris is waiting
for me with its frothy gardens and fountains,
patisseries and cafes scalloped into the streets.
Her foot taps like the metronome.
She worries about my hands in these gloves of paint,
and that I spend too much time in here.
The cold bothers her, and often the fire
is just an orange lace smothering coals.
Her cough has become a kind of scolding.

Earlier, she insisted I move the vase to the shelf,
and she spaced candlesticks, like buttons,
along the table. She tells me to finish
and paint Alexander's children again. But they're
so misbehaved. I am accustomed to her stubbornness,
this firmness I can't see past. She apologized
for the argument and agreed to pose,
but the canvas is still wild with bare places and blues.

It has been difficult to look at the line
in a face I know so well. She reads part of a letter
from Philadelphia: "something in the air is turning
the brick an awful green all around the house."
The lilies she throws in the wastebasket
make the sound of paper. Sometimes I dream
this canvas erases and becomes part of a wall
or sidewalk. But each day, it is there
again, and the brush moves more awkwardly.

...here, I want something rounder, almost a pear.
But not that either. There's not enough space
for all her movements. I see two figures:
one of her seated, reading of the horse races, and
one rising, *Le Figaro* falling from the hand.
The chairback grows wings over her shoulders.
There is nothing now I recognize.

After a few hours, she leaves, and I'm alone
with this face that isn't hers. The sheers
on the window flutter. Are these the feminine nerves
critics see in my work? A draft
over the spattered rags at my feet.
Tomorrow, I'll remind her how quickly
the light passes, how slow I am to find it here.

René Steinke

Last Communion

[for Czeslaw Milosz]

The bread tastes of flesh.
The old woman mixes
powdered bone in with the flour,
kneads it throughout,
and bakes it in the oven.

Chewing it still warm and doughy,
the grit wears the teeth,
bleeds the gums.

A small lump lodges —
spitting out white bread,
blood, and an old gold filling.

Paul Fackler



Surender Mathur

Morning

In the morning, he stretched out his arms and felt only the pillow beside him. Glancing at the floor, he saw her clothes curled up like sleeping children on the carpet where he had carelessly tossed them. He found her sitting in the dining room, staring at the brightly-lit Christmas tree.

— What are you doing? — He stood behind her.

— I'm remembering. — Her eyes were fixed on the lights.

— I'm remembering the feeling of the morning after Christmas. When I was a child, ever since I was very small, I would run and plug in the lights and watch them blink and reflect in the glass ornaments. I sat knees against my chest, feet tucked under my nightgown. — She rocked gently back and forth.

— The pine needles would be hard and dry, their scent beginning to fade. The room was empty, quiet, the tip of my nose was cold and I'd try to feel the excitement of the day before. — She hugged herself, remembering.

— But it was gone as soon as the gifts were opened, slipping up the chimney with the smoke from the wrapping paper my father burned in the fireplace. — Her arms dropped to her sides.

— The solitude of that morning always seemed much more real than the frantic unity of the day before. It frightened me. — She had stopped rocking now.

— I used to hate those lights because they reminded me. —

— Unplug the lights. Come back to bed. — He slid his hand down her back and around to her rounded stomach.

— Don't touch me. — She stared at the lights. — I'm cold.

Later, as he was shaving, she walked quietly into the bedroom and sat unrepentant on the edge of the bed. He could see her reflection in the bathroom mirror, sitting stonily in the room behind him while he drew the razor across his cheek. She was looking past him at her own image, made small in her eyes by the distance between the walls.

— Damn. — His hand instinctively reached to the edge of his jaw as a few drops of blood pattered lightly onto the unscarred whiteness of the porcelain basin. — I've cut myself.

Her eyes met his in the mirror. — Stop watching my reflection. —

— I'm done. — He turned his back to the mirror. — Hurry. I don't want to be late. —

She entered the bathroom as he stepped out, shutting the door firmly behind him so he wouldn't

see. The reflection of the door filled the mirror when she moved to the side of the room. She stepped back into the center and watched her face contort for a brief instant as she pulled hard on the string. She touched her fingers to the bloody thing dangling before her in the mirror. The reddish tint left on them reminded her of possibilities narrowly avoided.

He took her hand as they walked to the restaurant, but she stayed a pace behind him, dragging her feet like a reluctant child.

— I can't see them. Your father says he can read me like a book. —

— It's meant to be a joke since he knows you read so many.—

— But your mother — She stopped and dropped his hand. — She's constantly talking about them, and I won't be able to sit there and listen. —

He grabbed her hand in anger. — Why can't you say children? We're already late. —

The hostess sat them at a booth next to a window across from a couple with a baby.

— Yes, we'll all have coffee. — His father took charge.

— Look. — His mother clapped her hands together. — Isn't that baby darling! —

She looked at him in defiance. — Yes — She made faces at it until the small thing grinned and laughed.

His mother smiled at him. — She's so good with children. —

She turned her grimaces away from the baby and looked past him out the window. He read the mocking tone in her glance.

The waitress brought their coffee. — No thank you. Nothing more for me. —

— Aren't you feeling well, dear? — A look of hopeful sympathy appeared in his mother's eyes.

The baby across the aisle laughed again, and the other three turned to smile at it. She continued to stare out the window. The hard, angular edges of the sill framed a man walking by. His breath hung in the frosty air beneath the brim of his hat, and his feet passed lightly over the dead brown grass reaching up through the cracks in the sidewalk.

— How is your paper, dear?— His father's voice brought her back into the heat of the restaurant.

—Fine.— She glanced at the baby in its fuzzy red sleeper and wondered if it was also smothering. — I'm much too hot.— Her eyes implored him to follow. —I'm going out for a moment.—

—Yes, dear.— His mother was again all sympathy



Eric Levin

and smiles. —You do look rather pale.—

In the bathroom, she retched repeatedly. The sour taste of coffee and bile combined to burn her throat, and the four walls of the stall confined her. She let the water run until it was cold and then rinsed her mouth and hands. Her sallow reflection stared past her back into the stall, and she had a sudden desire to get out into the cold air. As she pushed the glass door open, she heard the baby crying behind her.

He saw her walk by the window and followed after making explanation and apologies.

—Yes, everything's fine. No, we've just been working hard lately. Of course, I'd tell you if we were. Yes, we'll get together soon.—

She walked several feet ahead of him, and he made no move to call her back.

Reaching the park, she watched a few small brown leaves scamper underneath the swing set and past the slide. His feet rustled the leaves behind her, crushing them as he approached. She could feel his anger without turning around, but he put his arms around her.

— I love you. —

—That doesn't undo what I've done.— She stood motionless, still facing away.

—We made the decision together.—

—But I was the one who did it.— She could not turn around.

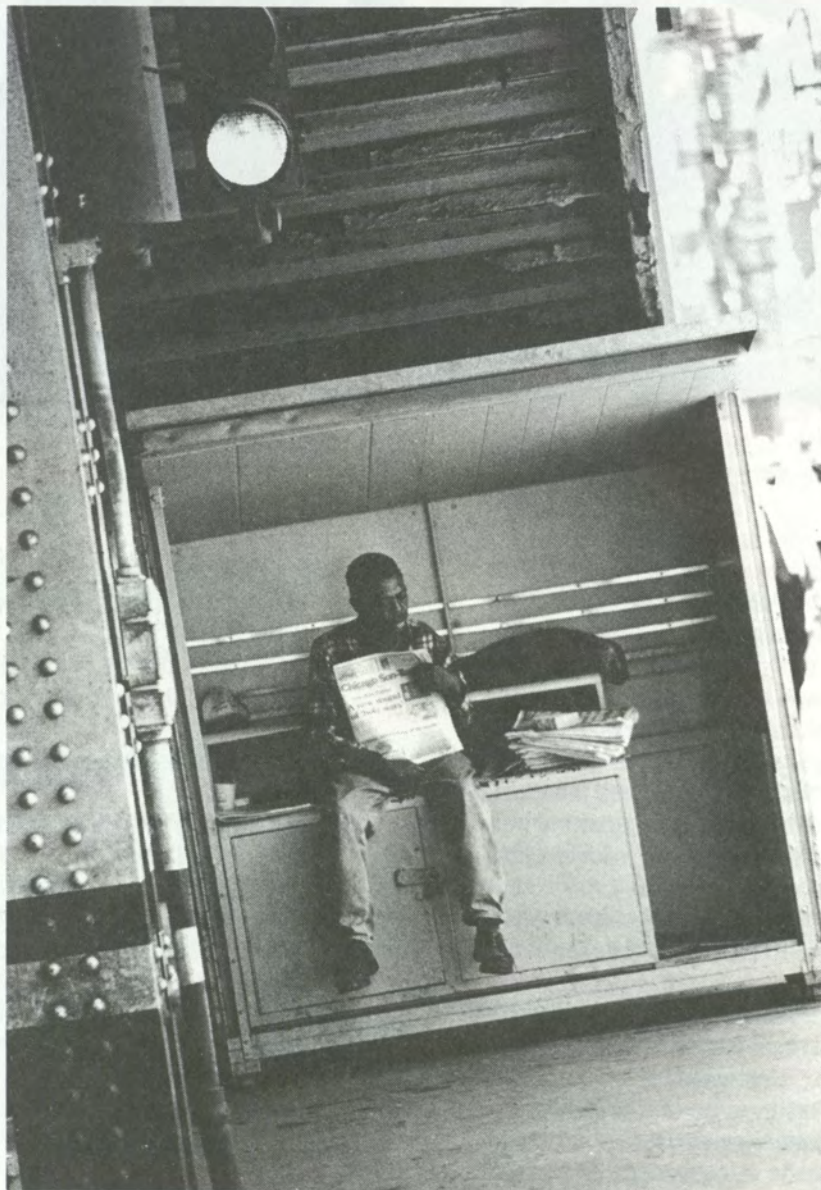
He let his arms drop to his sides and walked away.

That evening she sat alone in the dim light of their living room and pretended to concentrate on a novel. Through the wall, she heard a music box playing a lullaby in the apartment next door. The music and a gentle shushing stilled the baby's occasional cries. She remained curled in the chair for a long time, listening to the wind outside and the lullaby continually repeating itself within the other room. When the baby began to cry again, she unplugged the Christmas lights and walked slowly to the bedroom.

Tanya Stedge

SMOKED A MARLBORO
OUTSIDE
BIRDS ATE THE DEEP
GRASS, MY HEAD
SUCKED ON THE TREES
A PLASTIC MINUTE
THE DEW IS A FRESH
COFFEE HEARTBEAT
THE MORNING WIND
BLOWING

Andy Shaw



Andy Beck

Aubade for Bill

My love — I would not have
of yours
Your love
Your soft and easy love
That turns to little in the light of dawn
but a sour, bitter taste
in my mouth —
Making me run to brush my teeth
before you wake
Oh yes, you are;
You are forevermore "a nice guy."

My gentleman —
so practiced in the art of
awkwardness
You would not use a girl for this
By morning light
Your seduction is degrading
in light of what I'd hoped for you
But I have my reasons
And for my reasons I do give you
what you want

My Casanova —
I am better than that
Another notch of conquest in your belt
Let us understand that I at last
have not been taken in
by your "persona"
But have ignored — or, should I say,
have circumvented — it
Into a little game that is,
for practical intent, my own
And we have managed
To wrestle from each other
what we need.

Marcia Boggs

Early Christmas Airgun

On a quiet morning ripped
apart by a playful pellet
wedging its way upwards
through nothing
a dove plummeted through
the same nothing
stricken from her perch
in the pine grove
helpless against the scratching
taunting support of Christmas
greens as she fell unable
to pull the burning hole
from her insides
or fend off the ground
as it rushed to catch her
with jolting possessiveness.
And the boy went away whistling
about an old grey goose
as a pair of red stick legs
kicked thrice in the grass
and were still behind him.

Rick Van Grouw

Heaven is two-thirds water

And he taught in many parables. (Mark 4:2)

He'll come. He'll wander into the press conference which He called Himself, followed by a White House committee assigned to wipe up the blood that still drips from his wrists, and He'll say wittily, "Sorry I'm late. Oral Roberts asked me to donate a hundred dollars." The press will chuckle and then He'll field the first question. They'll all shout "Mr. Christ! Mr. Christ!" and shake their pens at Him. He'll call on some young reporter with wet armpits who will ask the standard human question: "When do we get to jump on your back for you to carry us off to our heavenly home?"

Jesus will stand there slowly shaking his head behind clusters of microphones. He will open His mouth and will speak to them, saying, "Two successful businesswomen decided to purchase new coats with the extra money they'd earned from wise investments, for they lived in Chicago and it would be getting cold soon. They were fashion-minded women; coats from Goodwill would not do. But they were also bargain shoppers so they went off in search of a sale.

"The first store in which they shopped had costs for 50% off. But they said to each other, 'Let us continue to shop, for surely we can find a better sale.'

"And they did. They found a store offering 75% off, but that was not enough. Neither was 80% nor 90%.

"In Chicago, the weather grew colder.

"Next, the women found a shop with expensive coats that they liked very much. One of the women picked out a shiny silver coat with big black things that grew out of the shoulders. She tried it on and

it went well with her hairstyle. The other woman tried on a smart wool burgundy coat that made her look both warm and professional.

"A sales clerk watched them trying on the coats, approached them and asked, 'May I help you?' as sales clerks often do.

" 'Oh, no. We're just dreaming,' one of the women answered.

"But the sales clerk continued, as sales clerks often do. 'These coats are not on sale, but, because you are in need, I will give them to you for 100% off.'

"The woman who was still wearing the silver coat ran out of the store before the sales clerk could change her mind, but the other woman stood and pondered for a while and said, finally, 'Thank you for your generosity, but I am sure I can find a better sale.' Then she turned and clacked her high heels out into the cold Chicago wind.

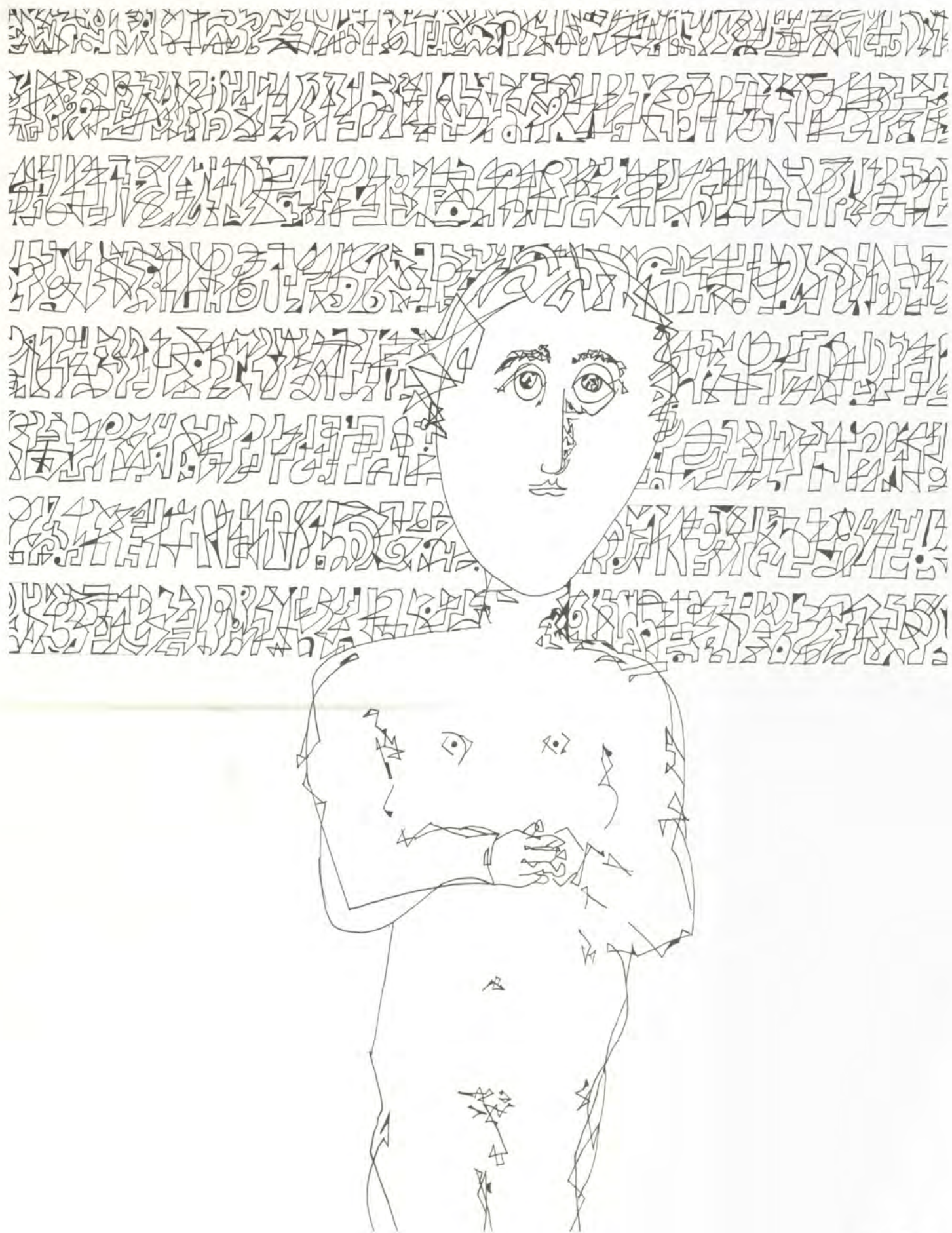
"Several days later she was found dead, her face frozen to a shop window."

After the parable, the entire blue press room will stare back blankly while the essence of His words creeps slowly into meaning. As understanding clenches the press, the press will clench their pens.

And then for the first time in press conference history, every reporter, including Sam Donaldson, will be struck dumb. There will be this distressing silence on every T.V. in every home in the world and every mouth will drop open for disappointment to reach in and thrash hope into unconsciousness. And Jesus will smile warmly and say, "You see, it doesn't get any better than this."

Strange of Jesus to quote a beer commercial.

Brian Jung



TOM CLARK 19

this is the house where tom clark died,
some 19 years etched by
since larry laid lucky, lazy and loved,
back with the beetles
betwixt the weeds
CHILD TAKES ROOT WHERE CONCEIVED
tommy born and tommy heed
spell, speak, write, read,
knew not his luck
nor dad's name,
but learned the land which whipped him
while first friend,
dirt life the road
circles open windows,
sends dust inside
this, the house where tom clark died

Andy Beck

1959 - Nebraska Boy Plays Hooky

Musty, dust-covered attic crates stuffed with *Life*
and motes floating over. A boy, six foot one
in the fifth grade, rag-tag shirt untucked,
lanky and green in the sleepy mid-afternoon,
cuts school to look at pictures of the 1927 models
of cars, stars and city skyscrapers — things
he's never seen. Hungrily scanning articles
full of Hoover, Depression and Wall Street bankers
hanging by swinging fan lights, he stays
for hours and reads stories of murderers defended
by Darrow, dead dukes and duchesses from faraway
places like Illyria or Moravia, homeless wanderers
from Oklahoma farms and a pair of ancient twin spinsters
still living in Patawonnick, Massachussets.
When, with the fall of day, all light fades
from windows papered over with newsprint, he knows
he will escape, this place is grown too small.
He comes down, stained from elbows to fingertips
with the black ink of the past.

(based on a story told by Ed Uehling)

Michael Caldwell

we are sitting in the library, and I'm thinking — I have so
a really great article on feminism and citizenship and nodding
— You do realize you're sitting by a man?
— No need to scream it. But my body is.
He's not just any man. We're friends. Maybe more —
I'm trying to concentrate under the table. His foot's right next to mine. Pretty appropriate
Doesn't sound like much of a turn-on but it's doing
I haven't turned a page
this woman deserves m
able to concentrate
the most mundane to the
conditions
loftier.
my body keeps

Sit in this chair and think about it. I'm trying to concentrate on the wider political and social reality but my body keeps
distracting me.
Maybe it's the context. I always feel really wicked in the library. I think it's the way I feel about books. I have this
kind of reverence for them that borders on the religious, and a place with this many books is positively orgasmic.
Libraries and good bookstores always leave me weak at the knees. Some weird combination of the sexual and the in-
tellectual. If books weren't lacking in some key areas, I'd never look twice at men.

Maybe once.
And then I have these library fantasies like running naked through the stacks and rolling in the pamphlets. Or starting
out on the top floor, making love standing against the shelves, moving on to the stairway, spending some time under
one of those tables in the reference room, and maybe ending up in a cubicle downstairs. Kind of silly and not that
original but my body's saying — Don't tease me. And my mind's saying — You're really perverse. Get some control.
He moves his foot and I still can't concentrate because now I'm disappointed. I know he doesn't know how aroused
I am and that makes me even more aroused. Here I am just radiating sensuality, feeling essentially erotic, imagining
what we could be doing with our feet not to mention our hands, and he doesn't even know. There's something satisfy-
ing about being so self-contained. I mean, I'm a microcosm.

- Poor word choice, my mind says.
- Wrong too, my body replies. His foot started it.
- Don't be so literal, my mind returns.

I start reading for the tenth time. And I still haven't turned a page. His foot's touching mine again and I do have both
feet on the floor but the rest of my body has moved into some higher or lower realm. My body and my mind disagree
on this point.

This woman quotes the heroine of some Margaret Atwood novel: "Context is all." And I'm thinking — Maybe it is
the context. And why am I trying to justify what this casual contact is doing to my microcosm and what is the meaning
of this thought in the larger political and social reality that conditions me? I'll think about it tomorrow.
Meanwhile he's taken his foot to the bathroom, so I take mine downstairs to check out a book, and I'm thinking
about the essay I can't read and the author's idea of feminist democrats as "prime movers" in recent history, and I'm
wondering if I can make time for more history this evening, and my body's saying — I think so. Or at least my foot is.

Tanya Stedje

BAT

My little god
So much smaller
in my room
than in the moon,
Your home
(so far away —
but you have wings
and can ascend
back to your stature)
But in my room
You lay your hands upon my breast
breathing life into my mouth
And, in the fashion of a god,
breathing death

Marcia Boggs



Eric Levin

Letter from the Hang

August 25, 1987

The second pack of cigarettes disappears
in smoke that wreaths my hands; motes
of ashen tobacco and paper drifting in curls
and eddies through the light. It could be

a window in mid-afternoon, sunlight
through glass over the green heads of plants,
dust rising from an old sofa that shifts under
my weight; it is sunlight we often try

to copy in dark theatres, lamps hung
overhead in the pipe grid replacing sky. I
would show you that the window is easy; a stencil
(a gobo, I would tell you from atop the ladder)

slides in and window light cascades
over rows of seats. We create by presenting
the opposite, the effect, you see. I swing
it so it oblongs onto the floor and you can stand

at the edge of the stage, staring out the supposed
window, mullion shadows dividing your face. You could
heave a melodramatic sigh and watch crashing waves,
yearning for that ship to come from beyond

the back row, beyond the still lobby and busy
night streets. But the cigarette smoke finally disperses
and the air no longer carries the color
of light. I won't smoke anymore because

I wanted you to see the light falling, and instead
of being here, you too are the tendrils spreading
and slowly thinning out near the ceiling,
the briefest of silhouettes in my false

window. A closing door echoes in the lobby.
My partner is back — he forgot the gell plot
and returned to his apartment for it. He
enters the theatre waving a sheet of paper, sees

the empty cigarette packs and full
ashtray and tells me that I don't smoke. I tell
him that the fog machine is locked in the office
and I don't have the key.

Eric Appleton

The Lighter Interview with Dave Smith

(Part One)

Last spring, Dave Smith, one of America's leading contemporary poets, gave a reading on campus. *Lighter* staff members Bill Rohde, Tanya Stedje, and Polly Atwood interviewed Smith over lunch, and the first part of that interview follows.

Dave Smith is currently a professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University and previously taught creative writing at the University of Florida and the University of Utah. He has published seven volumes of poetry, a volume of collected poems, a collection of short stories, and a novel. In addition, he co-edited *The Morrow Anthology of Younger Poets*. Smith has also compiled an impressive list of awards, among them a Guggenheim Fellowship, two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, and an award from the American Institute of Arts and Letters. He has twice been a finalist for the Pulitzer prize in poetry.

Lighter: A lot of your poetry seems very personal and it seems like you write a lot from memory. And yet when I read your poetry, I don't feel like, "Well, this is his personal memory, I can't understand it at all; I'm not included." How do you go about writing poetry where you take personal memory and create something that other people can relate to?

Dave Smith: Well, I think the first thing you do is you recognize that what might seem like memory to you is induced to seem that way by the way the writer composes material—that it may *not* be memory. It is a mistake to think, for example, that something which is presented to you as being an autobiographical event is, in fact, autobiographical. It's a literary technique in which you present material as having been personally experienced. But one of the reasons you do that is to cause the receiver, or reader in this case, to accept its authenticity. That is, if I say to you, "This thing happened, and I know, because I was there and it happened to me," you tend to listen to it in a different way than if I say to you, "Joe told me that. Jane said that Frank experienced this thing." You tend to think that it's more hypothetical than real. If I can then take that same experience and render it almost cinematographically, dramatically, let's say, so that you feel it's happening in front of you, it increases even more

whatever possible effects that experience has in it. Now having said that, I will go on to say that in many of my poems, what seems to be memory, starts in memory of actual experience. But at some point, that I don't always choose, becomes imagined. That is to say, I can put it in very simple terms — I don't hesitate to lie, if by lying, I can make the experience more resonant with common experience as opposed to individual experience. The problem of any writer, particularly now in the 20th century, is how to engender a sense of authority, a sense of verifiable authenticity. For example, when Milton says at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*, I'm going to "justify the ways of God to man," if everybody out there believes in what Milton says and is familiar with that scheme of worldly design — that God made the world and this is the way it is and you just have to look around you and you can see it, and I'm not going to tell you how it got to be this way — then he doesn't have to worry, as a poet, really, about authority. It's already provided. It's in the religious framework of the faith. But if I say I'm going to justify the ways of the world to you according to me, then you're likely to say, "So what? Why isn't your scheme and his scheme and her scheme every bit as valid as my scheme?" And in fact it is. So I have to find a way of writing in which whatever I describe is also accurate to some extent for your experience. Otherwise your experience says, "Well, that's the way it is for you, but not for me." So let's say I write about a typical theme for a writer, let's say the fall from innocence in some sense. If I write about a loss of innocence by a high school kid who gets drunk before a basketball game accidentally — how could it be accidental? Let's not say it's accidental — that somebody offers him a drink and he gets drunk, and then he misses the last shot at the buzzer which would win the game. What we're faced with here when he realizes what he's done is a self-corruption or a selfishness, which leads to a loss of innocence when he understands what his responsibility was. You could say, "Well, I never did anything like that, so that doesn't make any difference to me." I have to write that in such a way that whatever you experience, it will seem roughly parallel. So that you can draw the same lesson — you can feel that it has an application to your life. This is why students of the sixties were fond of saying, "I can relate to that," which in a sense doesn't mean anything, but in a sense it means everything. So that's why memory is important. I once said to

my wife that the worst thing that can happen to a writer would be to lose his memory, because if you lost it, what would you write about? How would you have any sense of perception? That is, how would you be able to relate anything in a sense of $A + B = C$? I just don't know how you could do it, how you could write about anything if you had no history, no past, which is what memory denotes. Anyway, that's a long-winded answer for your question.

L: Who do you hope to reach with your writing and who do you perceive your audience to be.

DS: Well, that's the kind of question that's almost always asked by readers, and not by writers.

L: Do you write for yourself?

DS: Well, this is the difficulty in answering the question. Yes, of course; first you write for yourself, because if you're not pleased then it doesn't matter, whatever you do, I think. Well, that's too strong. A person of reasonable intelligence can be taught certain kinds of manipulations of words which can then be sold. I could teach how to write a saleable essay for *Mechanics Illustrated* but if you have more than just a reasonable intelligence and if you have taste and if you have desire to do something better than just modestly, it won't be long until you'll be unsatisfied with writing for *Mechanics Illustrated*. You'll want to move up to the next level, and at that point you're not writing for the audience. You're doing it for yourself. But, if you lose track of the fact that there has to be a recipient on the other end of some kind, then it becomes so idiosyncratic as to not be a completed act. So you have to be aware of an audience. One great writer said that his audience was a fit audience, though few. A lot of my friends say that they write for their friends, for a handful of people who they just think of as judges.

L: That's what's unique about poets. When you're published in a magazine, you know it's going to be a very small readership. Is that ever distressing?

DS: Well, it's distressing in the sense that we'd all like to be famous and rich. And you know that's not a possibility so you kind of accept it; I mean, you don't have to accept it but . . . Yes. If you write a novel or even a short story, you know there's a possibility that it's going to become a screenplay. If you write a poem, it isn't going to be a screenplay. Hollywood's not interested in poems, so there's that distinction you're aware of. But in the end, it doesn't matter.

L: You talked about being satisfied with your work. The question I always have is: do you know when a poem is done, or is a poem never really done?

DS: I have two things to say: the French poet Valery said, "You never finish a poem, you abandon it." And I think that's true, because you are never satisfied. And there's a perfectly logical explanation for that. The better you get, the more demanding you are. If you were a violinist and you wanted to be a great violinist, then that's always out there. But when you become a great violinist, you stop and say, "Well, now I'm great and I don't have to want to be better," and no, you don't. You constantly want to be better because you are aware of the possibility. What happens of course, the sad part is that you come to realize you will never be better. For example, one sees this frequently in dancers. Because a dancer's body is gone so early — by the mid-twenties it's over, and the mind is just beginning to understand what's going on but the body says, "No, that's it." The other side of that question, are you ever satisfied, with respect to reading books is that when you do something like I did — put together a group of selected poems after a number of individual books, I went back to my early poems with the feeling that look, after all I'm twenty years away from those first ones, I know more, so I can redo them and they'll be better. I can undo the mistakes. What you don't know until you try that is that you can't go back and be the person you were twenty years ago.

L: So you feel like you're a different person now?

DS: You find out very quickly that you're not just rewriting, you're destroying. There's some kind of a personality, that person, in that work, that you just simply kill. And then you find yourself after awhile trying to get back on to where it was. There are in my selected poems, some poems which are radically revised from their original book publication. I thought, and still think, that in some of them the revisions were improvements. A couple of the reviewers said they were absolute destructions. Maybe I'm too close to it and don't know. It's certainly true that in writers like Auden, John Crowe Ransom and others, when they came back to their poems 20 and 30 years later and tried to revise them, they ruined them. You could see that the intelligence, the knowledge of structurally what to do was better, but the engagement of the passion — of whatever the person was at that time that the subject was different — it can't be recaptured. That doesn't mean it's lesser — it's different.

L: Do you think the pace at which you change changes. . . I mean, when you were in college, did you, as I find myself doing, look at a poem I wrote a year ago and think: that's an entirely different person that wrote that. Now that you're older, do you find a poem has to be five years old to seem distant. Or, do you still find yourself changing as much from year to year.

DS: Well, I think that change you're speaking of is more accelerated when you're in a learning phase. The younger you are, the more likely you are to change quickly. Students, generally, I think this would be characteristic, write a poem and today they are happy with it, tomorrow it's awful. Next year — today they'll write a poem and next week it will be awful. The distance between the initial excitement with a good piece and the disappointment that comes with recognizing its weaknesses, that distance grows longer as you grow older. It also means that you're getting closer to satisfying your standards which are often internal and specific and subjective. If you are any good at all as a writer, which is also to say a self critic, you never will get to the point where you say, "This is wonderful. And tomorrow it's wonderful, next week and next month and next year —" you just never do that. But the space between the times when you feel "Well, I could have done something better" and the time when you think "This rivals Shakespeare" is what changes. It changes as you grow more flexible in your abilities, more capable in your moves. But you always have that hunger to do better. That's one of the marks of an artist of any kind, is that you are not satisfied. Another way I tell my students this is to say "You are doomed to failure, there's no way you can succeed." Now we have to define the terms of failure and success. In terms of public success and often even private success, you may very well succeed. You may publish a book or books, and you may win prizes. All of that is quite possible. But, in terms of your own standard of what succeeds and what fails, every time you do something it will for a while to you be a success and a while after be a failure, because you will know now that you want to do something better. It's just inevitable in whatever art you practice, unless you are the kind of person who is so self-satisfied that you don't look to be better in which case you will never do good, really, much less get better.

L: In what you were saying about changing the poem afterwards, I don't know if you have ever tried it or if it is really a valid alternative to changing — but to rewrite the same idea or same structure, to start over — a new poem, is that something you can do?

DS: Oh yeah, they do that all the time. In fact, that gets you into some strange and very funny situations. For example, let's say you write a book in which there are several poems about, just to pick a subject, buying a used car. And the first poem is okay, and the second poem is maybe a little better, and the third poem is not so good. And then you publish the book, but after you publish the book you write a *great* poem about that subject. Now, does that go in the next book? Okay, so you put it in the next book and then you write a few more, and they are always slightly different, but essentially, they are the same thing. Now you come to do your selected poems. How many of those do you put in your selected poems? Do you choose one, or do you choose two or three? It puts you into difficult situations. The reason this occurs is that for none of us is our experience infinite. That is, it would appear that there are certain images and subjects which are ours, almost by right of birth. And when you own them you keep using them over and over. It's as if you can't get it right and you know it, but it's not really that either. If you think about, for example, Frost, you can think of certain kinds of trees, and snow and brooks, and those are his things. Frost doesn't write about used cars, he doesn't write about airplanes. He writes about, in some respect, the same things over and over. It partly happens because that's his, and it partly happens because that's what's around him. But it also happens because all of us are in some respects limited. The greater the talent, the larger the world of experience. A very clear reason why, among others, Shakespeare is the greatest. He could write about more things convincingly than anybody else ever has. So in my case there will be certain things I'll write about over and over. Memory is a good example — things that are lodged in my memory. After awhile, you become aware of this and you try to disguise it. I don't mean deliberately deceitful, but you try to vary your metaphoric subject in the hope of achieving a new perspective on the old material. And then you get to the point, and this is the point I've been at for the past couple of years, where you just sort of stop writing so much. You just wait for things to change a little bit and they will. At least you have to believe they will and generally it is the case with writers that they go through periods of feverish activity and then lulls and then more activity. And there is a place in there where I won't say you exactly gather new experience, but you sort of find ways to look at the old experience differently. It's one of the traditional reasons for travelling.

L: So do you think it works? So many young writers, especially, try to expand their experiences or horizons or whatever by travelling — the whole Kerouac thing. Does it work?

DS: Yes, sure, absolutely. There are always obvious other examples. We know Emily Dickinson did travel a lot. Her experience is a pretty brave and wide one. Although one of my students in class the other night — I've been teaching a seminar in Whitman and Dickinson — last class was a sort of debate about how people feel about it too — almost got to be a "great taste, less filling" — back and forth. One of the students said he just couldn't finally accept Emily Dickinson because her experience was so limited whereas Whitman was crossing Brooklyn Ferry and going out to the West and doing this, that and the other. He felt Emily Dickinson's perspective was too limited, too domestic, too local. I don't agree with him. I think that's not true. But I understand it. But I do think one of the ways we provide a stock of

material for ourselves is to experience the world. One of the ways we experience it is by physically going through it. Another is reading, another might be watching movies. That is, one can experience the world imaginatively as well as physically; it doesn't have to be travelling, but it helps. I think that's one of the ways one can do it.

L: A good imagination and intelligence can transcend being stuck in the same place?

DS: Yes, and it seems in some way likely if not provable that both would be the best though to have a receptive imagination and the ability to experience the world would be better. Henry James has a very appropriate line here — to writers — he says, "try to be one of those on whom nothing is lost." That's absolutely true and the converse of that is that the better you are the more you are one of those on whom nothing is lost.



Dave Armstrong

the day the pork queen came to the library

the old people say it takes decades
to really forget
a really hot summer
but surely the elderly
are prone
to hyperbole

for myself, that summer
is already turning hazier
than the shimmering sun
made it in the first place
it's condensing and dripping away
like humid air does
on a cold can of root beer, let's see

the grass was brown and itchy
under your feet
that's for certain

and my car had a lot of problems
the radiator
came this close (the mechanic said)
to blowing up in my face

on the whole, though
nothing really jumped out at you
a few grandmothers died
(thousands if you ask about it at the nursing home)
the brook looked anemic
people sweat a lot

I was working in the library, again
it was cooler there than most places
and quiet
I was alone much of the time
as it was too hot for serious reading
and there were plenty of other places
to find the other kind

the day she came is the one I really remember
for me it was a summer with one hour of relief
sandwiched between
two long, dull stretches of employment

her shirt was white and a little damp
she was pretty brown
and I could see a bead of sweat run
from the tip of her jaw
down her throat
and gone, out of sight

there was a guy with a camera along as well
who I didn't notice at first

the whole thing it turned out
was publicity from city hall
the mayor could feel, I suppose,
some kind of constituent discontent
because of the heat
and so he said
"look, here's a place to hide from the heat,
and it has the pork queen's full support"

I was in the picture with her (the guy took several
but they only printed one)
and it's still the only part of the summer
I really remember
as clearly
as the old people swear they remember '36
and the year the brook disappeared completely
but believe me, I'm not taken in

Pat Burnette

RED-EYED MIDGET CHICKEN WOMEN

Was it really a million
men lost and not an inch
of ground won? Facing
forward on the train,
a boy tried to ignore
the profuse crimson
of wild poppies
simmering in a field
through his window.
Feeling guilty besides
about the pleasant bubbling
of his insides, like watching
the pretty girl in history class
write him a note across
the room about holding
hands after school.

And so blushing, excited, tense,
he remembered her suddenly,
minute and gnarled,
laughing at the chicks
who scuttled squeaking
in the lane, frantic
lunatics that they were,
so that he had laughed
too. And he had bought
her pound of gooseberries
for a fair price, wondering
all the while if he shouldn't
pay slightly more.

Rick Van Grouw

Worship

Every service the young priest gives
brings home guilt to her.
She thinks his blue-eyed sermons tell her more
about herself than she could ever know
on her own. No father, no friend
could speak as directly to secret longings
half-heard in whispered stillnesses.
It is his eyes she sees upon herself,
when she leaves the house to wander
in the woods for hours, having told her parents
she's spending the night with a friend. Alone,
she shrugs off clothes and performs
the self-appointed penance of laying
a branch across her bare legs and back
till little blue ridges welter there
and swell to the size of bruised fruit.

Murmuring a fervent prayer for forgiveness
(the kind the young priest leads on Sundays),
she dresses. Resting on a rough bed of tufted weeds,
the moon, shining through the scar-like, twisted
limbs of a nearby crab-apple tree, resembles nothing
so much as a spider sending forth tiny, iron-hard threads.

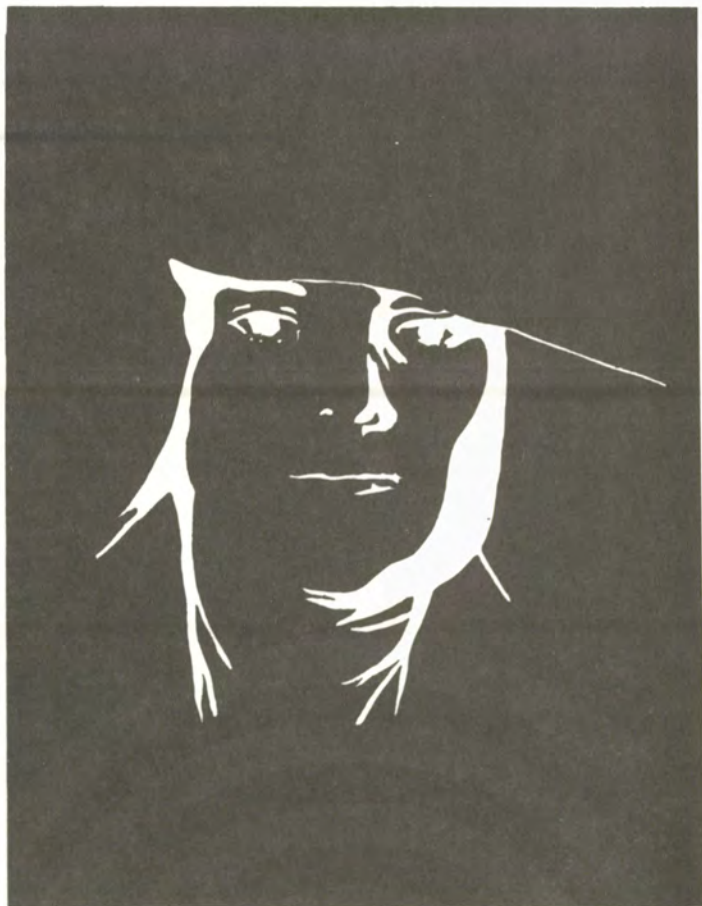
Michael Caldwell

Waitress in a Black and White Movie

I shake my head "no" at the man
in the photograph he shows me
The detective nods, sighs
his last smoke, leaves. And
the street flickers in the doorway.
I give Joe another bourbon — everyday
he's nervous, shreds his napkin
then pieces it together again
as if to apologize for the mess. Funny
what some of them leave you —
an army of nickels lined up
like checkers, a small tower of dimes,
maybe a discreet bill under the sugar:
teasers of stories like what they let on
to the piano player with anonymous requests.
Orders sing in my head, these refrains I can't forget.
Sometimes even in my sleep, I'm still waiting
tables — drinks jewel-lit on the tray
I can never balance. It floats away.
The bartender wipes circles over the bar,
over the rings and rings left from glasses.
I shelve clean snifters like calendar days
against the mirror, notice half-moons
of mascara, the worried hollows
from the lunch rush and bill walkers. I wade
through the day and the dark liquor air
to the corner table, where there's a man
who's no regular. The bartender leans over,
listening. I feel the myself sink into the dark,
drunken eyes of the customers. He wants
to know if I know the man
in the photograph. For a minute my face is lit
in the glow of his lighter.

I figure the bills, wipe the tables, finish
by five. Outside, windshields, people, chrome,
cement — the sun runs over everything.
I haven't seen him. I haven't seen him.

René Steinke



gone again

indecision fences keep my hands and lips in line
while flashes strobe reality into patterns
of a humid lakeside moment, snaking, chases after all
that I could say, you and me, we're just as always will be.
fresh shaved, naked, lying listening to country music twisting
back through each and all the goodbye scenes.

so you kissed him on a midnight stairway I'd seen before
from two of three sides: spotlight-caught past the trees,
kicked back on the beach while I shuddered off pig
paranoia to the late night movie, tucked safe in hardwood floors.
dope clouds rapping through an occasionally made touch,
leaving in streetlight patches on snakeskin thighs
walking towards a future dark and tarot man.

walking catching that smooth explosion of leg gliding
up across the hump of your ass.
quiet in another greasy chicago morning — face
the train and thoughts again, just to look
and not explain.

back twisting naked through not so country music,
packed to leave this room, one year long already,
getting on when it's best to get, nervous,
tired, and stoned on thoughts of you.

Fritz Eifrig



Andy Shaw

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Special thanks to Jane Layman, English Department secretary, for transposing the Dave Smith interview.
Extra-special thanks to Dave Soderna, the man with the Exacto, and the *Torch* for the use of their equipment.
Printed by Home Mountain Publishing

The *Lighter* staff assumes all responsibility for the contents of the magazine. Views expressed within the pieces contained in this magazine do not represent official views or opinions of Valparaiso University, but instead are expressions of individuals within the university community.

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DEATH BY PUN

A sculptor
in this stone cold
world is the only starving
artist who can afford
to frieze to death

Rick Van Grouw

