

Fall 1992

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Valparaiso University

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The Lighter



Fall 1992

The Lighter Volume XXXVIII *issue one*

Valparaiso University, Fall 1992

Editor: *Michael David Chasar*

Assistant Editor: *Kevin Charles Lindamood*

Art Editor: *Joseph Andrew Wangerin*

Faculty Advisor: *John Robert Ruff*

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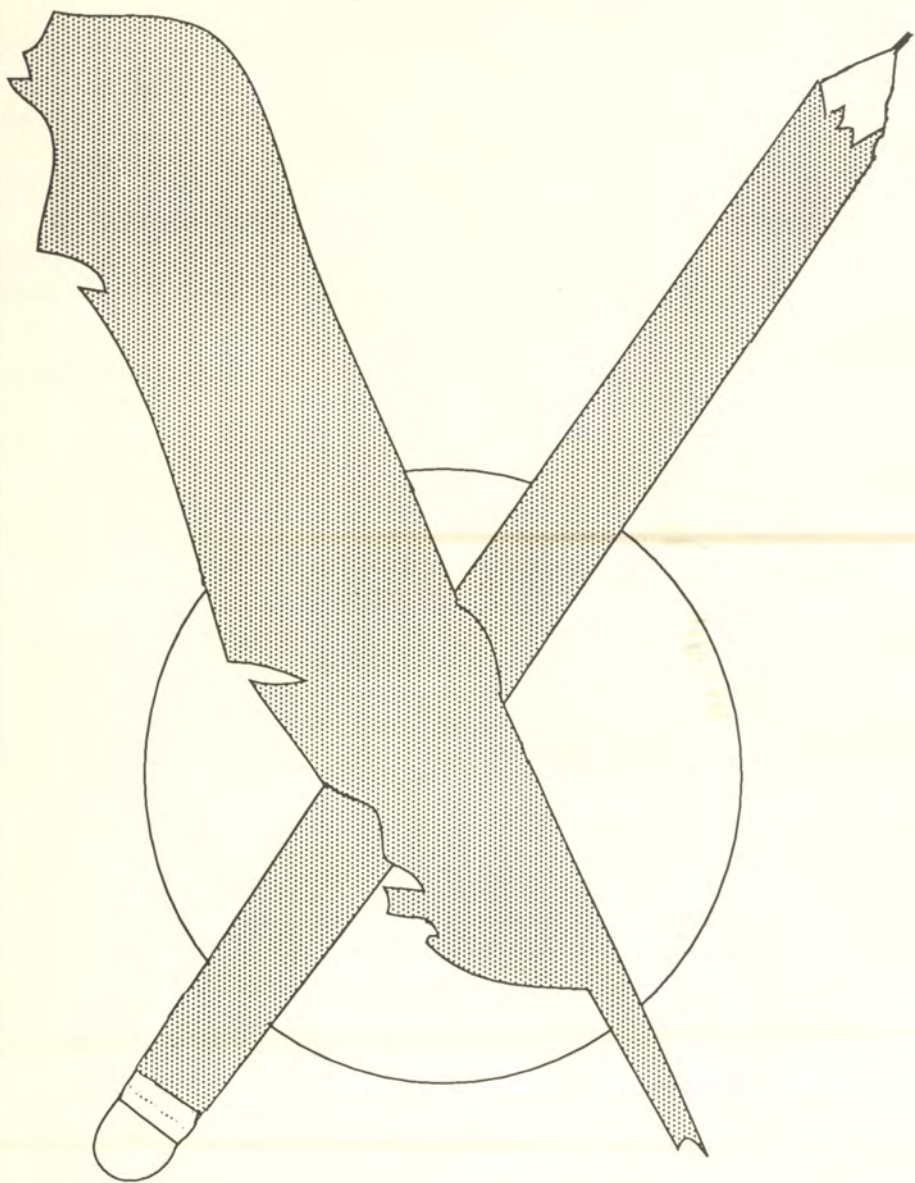
The Lighter is Valparaiso University's student literary and art magazine. All submissions remain anonymous throughout the selection process and are chosen by an unbiased group of interested university students.

The Lighter welcomes contributors and members to its staff regardless of race, creed, gender, political affiliation or shoe size. Any questions or comments should be directed to *The Lighter* office.

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The Lighter

I would love to be the poet laureate of Coney Island.

-Thornton Wilder

I always wanted to write a book that ended with the word mayonnaise.

-Richard Brautigan

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Preface

At a bookstore in Chicago last month, the poet and novelist, Michael Ondaatje, gave this advice to young writers: start a magazine and create an audience. I like Ondaatje's suggestion that editing is a creative activity, related to writing itself. *The Lighter* editors have created an audience, a task that requires a large measure of perception and care, not unlike the energies needed to tell a good story or to invent a fresh line. But when most readers open up these pages, it is the writers' work they will notice, and the editors' efforts will be invisible.

When I was co-editor of *The Lighter* a few years ago, our decision to publish "Yeah, I remember," a poem about sex, incited controversy. The incident pre-dated the NEA- Mapplethorpe conflict, but the situation was similar: conservative people were outraged that their funds should be spent on "pornography." We did not consider the poem pornographic in the least, and were somewhat surprised by the response. A male student crassly confronted my co-editor, Laura Blair, during a class, and angry alumni brought the poem to the attention of the university president. Consequently, we were forced to explain our criteria for choosing this poem over other submissions. We published it not only because the poet used music and image in a thoughtful way, but because finally, the poem spoke to the real experience of college students. As it turned out, many people who had certain worn-out ideas about literature and normally wouldn't look at *The Lighter*, not only read the magazine, but also discussed it. We found new readers through that poem, and despite the complaints of parents and the letters to *The Torch*, I believe we made the right decision. That issue was unusual, because our work as editors became visible.

No doubt these editors have made equally difficult decisions in producing this issue. They may find themselves facing the same kind of situation. But more likely, they will feel pressure to defend not what they *have* published, but what they have *not* published. Many of the people involved with putting the magazine together are writers themselves, and so are well aware that each poem and story has a history behind it. It is especially difficult to reject work that is sincere, but lacking the technical skill or voice that comes only with much practice. How do the editors make these judgments? They have not only read and thought about literature, but they've also kept their eyes and ears open. What they have seen, learned, and read at Valparaiso has helped them to create this

audience.

When I first began to think of publishing some poems I had written, I had this image of a shoebox filled with rejection slips, which I would one day, as if they were greenstamps, trade in for a published poem. Of course, it doesn't work that way. Nonetheless, rejections remind me of the enormous amount of patient labor involved in reading manuscripts, and if my work doesn't suit the audience of a particular magazine, better that the poem or story find its way to different readers. Moreover, it had been helpful for me to think of rejection slips as if they did have redeemable value. They are, if nothing else, emblems of persistence.

René Steinke

Steinke is a 1986 graduate of Valparaiso University. She is currently completing her Ph.D work at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and has published fiction and poetry in The Cresset, Cumberland Poetry Review and Tri-quarterly. She is currently the poetry editor of Valparaiso University's The Cresset, a post which she has held for the past two years.

The Coffee Plantation

“I had a farm in Africa. . .”

- Isak Dinesen

Waves of golden green hair
Ripple softly
In the inner rhythm
Of wind and water.

The aching arc of blue,
Like a hand outstretched
And cupped about the sun,
Watches over the drowsy
Beat of the breathing earth.

Warm and soft
As a lover's welcome skin
The leaves of coffee plants
Touch each other for reassurance.

A bird calls for music
From the hands, lips
Of mocha-stained natives
As they bend in the dance
With leaves
Of coffee plants.

She stands saluting
The empty bowl of sky,
The rolling, bending hills,
And the grace of her workers
As they caress the crop
Into bearing fruit.

The Madwoman

Her face withers.
Her cheeks descend
As wrinkles burrow
Into sweat-glazed skin.

The blue of her eyes
Chases birds
From trees
And empty leaves
Of hands flutter
To her face.

The fingers form
A cage that keeps
Back the animal
With eyes streaming in pain.

Confusion shakes her body,
Compels her feet to run,
Scattering the ground
With decaying footsteps.

The Tenant

During her later years, as she began to adhere to the advice of alphabetizing her phone list, long after the day she lost her hearing, Alice Crandall would fondly remember the way Johnathon A. Smith relentlessly paced the halls, brushing his teeth.

It was back during the days her breasts were lifted and she still felt her beauty. Not that she would have even entertained the idea of using the former nor the latter to allure the likes of Johnathon A. Smith. For to Alice, Johnathon A. Smith, a lock-jawed little man who rented her attic and walked with his buttocks pressed tight, was simply a Smith. But how difficult it was to dismiss the *Smith* from the *Johnathon A.* She recalled reading it in the paper: *Johnathon A. Smith desires to rent one room apartment.* Yet the crispness of the A. printed in the personals of the Sunday Times paled in comparison to the constant verbal reminders of the initial once she decided to clean the attic and rent the space for extra income.

“Nice to meet you, John Smith.”

“Johnathon A. Smith, Mrs. Crandall,” he retorted. “I’ll need plenty of time to be left alone, I trust you have a shelf on which I may arrange my books, and,” he cast an eye across the kitchen phone counter containing scattered numbers scribbled on scraps of paper, taped along the edges, “I strongly recommend you consolidate your, eh, numbers into some sort of alphabetical list. Easy to loose track of numbers in this day and age. Why, the family I come from would never stand for such an appalling - mess.”

Alice Crandall had always thought herself a tolerable woman, so she decided to let things be. Weeks later when she returned home from shopping to discover that her entire kitchen had been reorganized, her cooking knives removed from the sink-side drawer and arranged, small to large, on a set of hooks below the window, she simply accustomed herself to the new arrangement. When she was searching her room for her extra blanket, the one she always kept rolled into a ball in the corner in case she needed it, and discovered that all her linen had been washed, folded, and placed meticulously in the linen closet, she applauded the time and labor that went into the task. The more she listened to the small household tips and advise delivered at her with the high pitched arrogance of Johnathon

A. Smith - "I should think that a low fat diet would take higher precedence than buying food which simply costs less" - the more she learned to ignore them. He was, after all, a helpful man and we all have our little quirks now and then don't we and she did appreciate the extra work he did around the house and she would just have to learn to live with the slight annoyances and let things be.

It was during this time that Johnathon A. Smith began wandering the halls, brushing his teeth. She hadn't noticed it until the night Johnathon A. Smith wandered into her bedroom, without knocking. He just stood there without speaking, moving the bristles of a blue Dental-Association-recommended toothbrush in a violent circular motion over his top teeth, and then his bottom teeth, and then the underside of his teeth, still in a non-ceasing circular motion, and again his top front teeth. No speech. No sound save for the harsh friction of rounded bristles over his glaring grimace which seemed to say: *"This is indeed the proper way to brush one's teeth. See the way I carefully round each canine and polish each incisor with such a perfect circular motion. It is indeed a perfect circular motion, don't you think? Such a perfect circular motion, one, I have noticed, that you have never been able to perform correctly, Mrs. Crandall."*

Soon, the hideous smile would collapse around his so perfectly whitened teeth, the blue handle protruding between his tightly closed puckered lips. And he would turn. And he would wander. Alice Crandall remembered hearing him wander - from the kitchen, where she imagined him re-organizing the knives, from smallest to largest, on the hooks below the window, to the living room, where she could just picture him checking the coffee table and the end table and the antique desk for dust with the fingers of his left hand while all the while he wandered brushing his teeth with his right. Over and over, circular motion, circular, motion, canine, incisor, canine, incisor. From her bedroom, the footsteps of Johnathon A. Smith seemed to echo, to crawl into her ears, to bring back into her mind constantly the image of Johnathon A. Smith's pitiful mocking smile, Johnathon A. Smith's puckered lips, fat lips, with the blue toothbrush handle waving about as he bit coldly on the bristles, his lips still puckered. She heard the footsteps go from the living room, down the hall past the linen closet, up and down the steps, over and over, step after step after step after step.

Night after night after night after night he would wander. Stepping, echoing, pacing, occasionally popping his head in her bedroom door only to stare silently at her with that thin-lipped smiling grimace which seemed

over and over to mock: *One really ought to alphabetize that phone list, Mrs. Crandall. You don't eat properly, Mrs. Crandall. I do a much better job than you ever did in organizing your linen closet, Mrs. Crandall. Don't I do just a perfect job when brushing my teeth? Over and over. Circular motion, don't you know, Mrs. Crandall. Canine, incisor, canine, incisor, Mrs. Crandall. . .*"

But that was all years and years and years and years ago. Long after the day Mrs. Crandall finally decided to adhere to the advise of alphabetizing her phone list because her mind could no longer keep track of the scattered scraps of paper taped in various places along the phone table, long after she took to knitting and sewing and other everyday tasks which provided a sense of order to her endless silent days alone sitting on the brown-buttoned chair in the living room, she could remember Johnathon A. Smith only as a happy man who once lived with her a long time ago, who used to lull her softly to sleep with the soothing and doleful *thud* of each footstep as he paced around the house, brushing his teeth. Her mind had slowly been forgetting things, everyday things, and the past seemed to perpetually dissolve into single, simpler, memories.

She remembered receiving occasional phone calls asking for the whereabouts of a John Smith. She told them that a *Johnathon A. Smith* lived with her for a time, but she hadn't seen him in years. Would the caller please notify her if he was found. He seems to have left all of his belongings upstairs in the attic, just as they had been years ago. But no, she didn't know where he might have gone or with whom he might now be living. No living relatives. No past address. She'd be glad to answer any more questions. He was such a nice man.

But just as the pacing footsteps turned into a mental lullaby, the many, many phone calls faded into one. The linen closet had never been kept quite as tidy since the days of Johnathon A. Smith. And, looking up to the kitchen window, Alice Crandall remembered the day Johnathon A. Smith re-arranged her knives, smallest to largest on little tiny hooks. That was such a nice gesture. She hadn't used them in years and the silver polish was fading and the one in the middle seemed to have disappeared so long, long, long, long ago. But now it was time to sew and time to knit. It was time to grow older and time to sleep. It was time to make the memories simpler, simpler, oh so much simpler.

Gravity*Kunming P.R.C. 1992*

Wandering the Western Hills
we talk of hermits
and heroes mounded
in grounded graves, springing
from the earth like flowers.
We pick staffs from dead pines,
parry and thrust, Oriental warriors,
until the bark of dogs forces
us to higher ground. In flight
our conversations cover
the world
and other places
and how the leafy breaths
of trees conceal
creek beds seeming, sometimes,
to flow uphill.
When an evening mist descends
with all the footsteps of aesthetics
you pluck a flower from a mound
of earth, and we run
downward
taking to creek beds,
sometimes,
to hide our scent
from the teeth of dogs.

20

by Pablo Neruda

translated from the Spanish

I am able to write the saddest verses tonight.

To write, for example: "The night is starry and the heavenly bodies, blue,
shiver at a distance."

The night wind swirls in the sky and sings.

I am able to write the saddest verses tonight.
I loved her, and sometimes she also loved me.

On nights like this I held her in my arms.
I kissed her so many times under the infinite sky.

She loved me, sometimes I also loved her.
How to not have loved her huge steady eyes.

I am able to write the saddest verses tonight.
To think that I don't have her. To feel that I have lost her.

To hear the immense night, more immense without her.
And the verse falls upon the soul like dew upon the grass.

What does it matter that my love was not able to keep her.
The night is starry and she is not with me.

That is all. In the distance someone sings. In the distance.
My soul is not content with having lost her.

In order to bring her close to me my gaze looks for her.
My heart looks for her, and she is not with me.

Timeless nights that whiten unchanging trees.

Change, our faithful companion in the passage of time.

I am no longer truly in love with her, but how I loved her.
My voice searched the wind wanting to touch her silence.

Of another. She will belong to another. As she did before my kisses.
Her voice, her clear body. Her infinite eyes.

I am no longer truly in love with her, but perhaps I love her.
Love is so short, and forgetting is so long.

Because on nights like this I held her in my arms,
my soul is not content with having lost her.

Perhaps she will no longer create my suffering,
and perhaps these verses I write shall be her last.

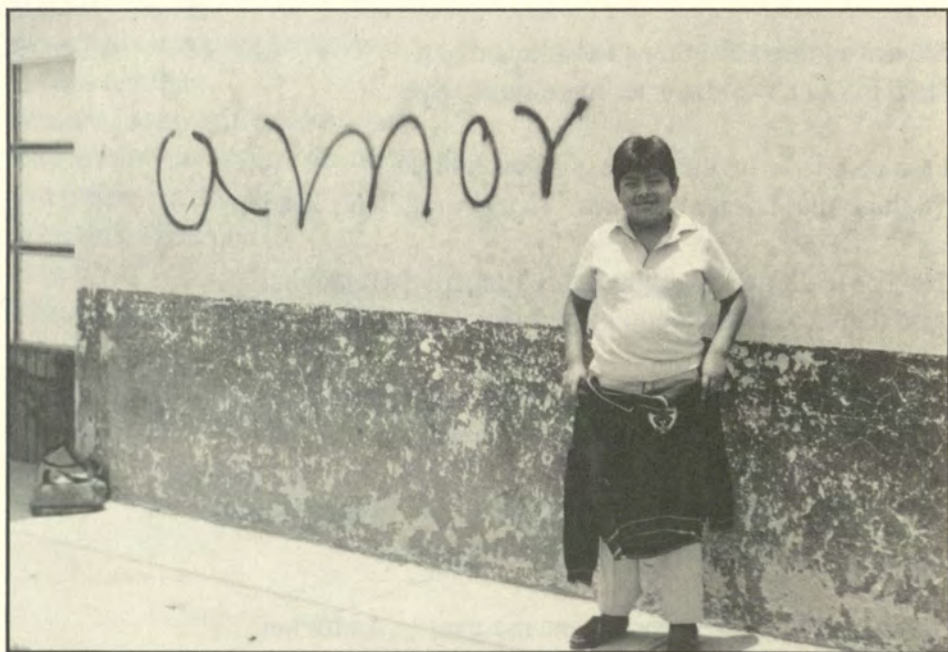


Photo by Lois Young

In Search of the Perfect Bowling Ball Bag and Other Stuff

When I was home this weekend my Grandma and pops came over because they were at the neighborhood Garage Sales in my addition and saw my car so they just **HAD** to stop by to see if the kids at my high school and student teaching in general have gotten to me yet and to tell me that Grandma got a new pair of Easy Spirit walking shoes but can't walk because the nice young black fellow at the fire station thinks her blood pressure changes too often but that she looks so young for a seventy-one year old and boy was he a nice young man but Grandpa said that everyone always says that about him too and also wondered if I knew of anyone at school who was selling a bowling bag—not the kind that just holds the ball but the kind that holds the ball and the shoes and has a place to keep his wallet and I said that none of my friends at school really bowl and Grandma said that she never bowls but she would like to be able to walk and I told her that I like to walk a lot at school and she said that's good because she can't because of her blood pressure and that she never should have bought the Easy Spirits because they were \$78 and she'll never wear them since she can't walk but Grandpa said he has had his shoes for six months and got his for only \$58 and he has had six pairs of them in his life and that he can wear them in the winter and he has not slipped on them yet but he can't wear them bowling but he doesn't mind because they were only \$58 and he doesn't have a bowling bag to put them in anyway and what do you expect nowadays and that when him and Grandma first got married you could get a pair of shoes for less than half that price and Grandma said speaking of marriage Uncle Jim and his new wife are still mad at her but its ok and Grandpa said who needs them anyway after all they've done for them and Grandma said they better get on to the garage sales because the bowling bags might go quick but Grandpa said that he wanted to stay and help Dad peel off the wallpaper in my room because he knows a guy who used to work with him who has a special technique for peeling it off and you just can't beat it and Grandma said that he doesn't know better than anyone else and Grandpa said that he sure did and that she should go sit on the couch and wait for him and my dad told him Thanks for offering but they better get to the garage sales and my mom and I just looked at each other and laughed and Grandma and Grandpa started to leave and Grandpa said for her to hang

on to his arm and she said What for did he think she was old or something and he said No he just cared and off they went walking down the street in search of the perfect bowling bag with Easy Spirits on her and \$58 “you just can’t beat ‘em” shoes on him and as I watched them I chuckled for a minute and it struck me what trips their trigger today may be different than what excited them in their yesterdays and I wondered who I’ll be searching with and what we’ll be searching for in somebody else’s memory-filled garage sale 50 years from now and I just smiled.

The Estate Sale

I.

A multitude of cars, vans and pickup trucks
Assemble in the harrowed field
Like lines of print on a page
Of a family Bible;
Others form the cord and tassel
Of a crocheted or tattered bookmark
Sticking out of the fingerprinted pages
As they park alongside the road.
People congregate at the milk shed
To receive a benediction
In the form of a bidding number
From a person who is either
A flat-chested woman with a husky voice
Or a flabby man with a high voice
(The clothes and the hair
Will not betray the secret).
Out in the granary,
The ladies from the Lutheran church
Sell pies and coffee.
Future bidders and the curious,
Prospectors panning for treasure and bargains,
Sift through
The boxed belongings and memories
On the lawn and hayracks.
A 5 year old boy tugs at his mother's T-shirt
And asks, "Where are all the toys?"
A woman with hair
Bleached to a champagne blonde
And teased and epoxied
Into a topiaried hedge,
And wearing baby blue eyeshadow,
Three sets of earrings,
And rhinestone bracelets from wrist to elbow

And rhinestone bracelets from wrist to elbow
To disguise her chubby forearms,
Roots through a box of table linens.
Oval portraits of stern-faced Germans
Lean against the front porch.
A woman pauses in front of them
And remarks to her friend,
“It’s a shame there is no family
That wants these.
How sad to think of someone’s picture
Just sitting on the front lawn,
Waiting to be auctioned off
To the highest bidder.”
An elderly man, indistinguishable
From his thin and twisted
Burlled oak cane,
Picks up a pair
Of old, rusted skates
And remembers a boy,
His cheeks slapped by the January wind
As he glided down a frozen creek
Of milky white ice—
The fastest boy in his class.

II.

“Up, up, up—gotta have an auction sale!”
The auctioneer cackles
Over the portable loud speaker.
He turns to a man
With a bidding card in his shirt pocket
And a forehead the same color
As the rest of his face,
“Will you give me \$20.00 to open, Sir?”
The crowd draws closer to one hayrack,
Then ebbs, and swells at another
As a cracked Red Wing crock,
Oak harvest table with nine leaves and legs
As sturdy as the men
Who once gathered around it at threshing time,
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A complete set of blue and white
Currier and Ives plates,
Spindle bed frames,
A lithograph that professes
"Unser Vater in dem Himmel,"
And an old croquet set
Still in its original wooden box
(And worth at least \$200
According to the auctioneer)
Are sold.
A spotter yells "Hit!"
For each raised hand
As if the bidders were making love to her.
The auctioneer holds up with his fingertips
A wedding dress
That still waltzes with the breeze.
A young woman with long hair the color of rosemary tea
Tied back with a ribbon
Watches the dress with the same look
That the 300 lb. man gives
The last piece of Lutheran pie in the granary.
A mother-to-be
Bids on an old, bi-level washstand
For a changing table in the nursery;
Her husband bids on an oil lamp.

III.

The woman with the rosemary tea hair
Returns to her car
With an armload of lace and cotton batiste.
The mother-to-be and her husband
Struggle to get the washstand,
A cream can, a night stand,
A flying geese quilt,
The oil lamp, mason jars, apple baskets,
A large print of Martin Luther
In an ivory-inlaid frame,
And a baby's dress and coat from 1910
Trimmed with laces and braids

Into the back of their Ford Escort.
The elderly man sits back
On the wooden front porch steps
Of the house his friend used to live in,
Rests his cane beside himself,
Folds his bidding card,
Tucks it into his coat pocket,
And waits for his daughter and son-in-law
To finish bidding
On an over-stuffed chair
Badly in need of reupholstering.
He smiles as he reaches down,
And with shaking hands,
Clamps the rusted skates
To the toes of his shoes.

Walter Wangerin Jr.

Born in Portland, Oregon in 1944, Walter Wangerin Jr. is the author of 2 novels (*The Book of the Dun Cow*, *The Book of Sorrows*), 5 illustrated childrens' stories, one book of poetry (*A Miniature Cathedral*), and 4 theological works. Wangerin is currently a writer-in-residence at Valparaiso University. His new book, *Mourning Into Dancing*, is available in bookstores near you.

The Lighter: When did you first learn about or discover writing, and how did that hit you?

Walter Wangerin, Jr.: Well I always did write. But I never really believed that I could make a living at it. I remember that I started writing stuff in elementary school and that, for me, it was a serious thing I was doing. It was partly because I was withdrawn and reclusive. It was partly because I read an awful lot. My brothers were all extravertish and able to do sports. And in their lives it was a natural step from watching basketball to playing it, and I think it was just as natural from reading to writing for me. At the same time, it was nevertheless clearly a *gradus* step for them. I'm sure they watched it, then they would choose similar to play it. It wasn't the same thing between the watching and the playing, and I think the same step quality existed between reading and writing for me.

I do remember that I wrote stories already in sixth and seventh grade in Canada. And then I wrote a novel in the eighth grade and it was self-conscious—I self-consciously sat down and chose the story and chose the characters. From then on, I think writing was part of any thing I would imagine for my future, but not as a profession. That much did not occur to me. I remember that I was conscious of short stories, particularly, throughout high school and college—real anguished kinds of romanticized short stories—and then poetry in the later parts of college and through graduate school. In graduate school I went into English. I did not go into creative writing. I still think that was the right decision—for me. It increased the breadth of my reading without narrowing the technique of my writing, which is what I think sometimes happens in creative writing schools. And I continued to write throughout then. I remember I put

together my first book of poetry in graduate school. I had a little extra money so I ran it off and I—this is probably not even interesting

L: This and the novel you wrote in eighth grade are both fascinating subjects for me. I always said I'd write a novel and make it a wonderfully huge four hundred page thing, and then I'd get to page five, put it down, and go play baseball with the neighbor kids.

WW: Well there's an issue to it. I honestly believe that the greater percentage of most of us can learn how to write. There's a small minority of us to whom God gives the gift and they do it from the beginning. And there's a small minority among us who you couldn't make write if you chopped up and fed, literally fed, the poets to these people to eat. But those are very small at bottom and at the top. The greater weight can learn how to write. The real issue, however, for this greater weight, is the drive to learn. Some people can conceive that drive. They can make it up on their own. They can *choose* to be a writer. Other people are born with it, even if not with the skills, and I think that I had *that*, and I would seek to stoke that drive in anybody. So for me, that was the passion. I was writing a poem a day anyway [in graduate school], and that was simply because I had established that as a goal. But I wanted to meet writers. I wanted to meet actors. So I conceived this notion that what I would do was make my own book of poems and make a list of all the people in this country whom I would like to meet and send a copy of these poems to every one of them and see what happened. It was a very bold move. I spent a summer between my first and second years at graduate school doing it, and I sent them off to everybody. And. . .How did I get on that? Oh, the writing came about finally because I never ceased to begin. I published some children's books in the early seventies when I was teaching, and I met an editor then who said, Walt, you should write fantasy novels, and she promised the potential of publishing one. So I did. It was a hurried question that I wrote a novel at all. I used to think of the novel as a mountain over which nobody really climbs unless you were special somehow, and I was not special. I mean, I was more special when I was in eighth grade than by the time I got to college. But because of her suggestion I did it, and it was rejected everywhere. It was a novel called *Wind Ward*. And I sent that one everywhere. I spent years sending it out. And everyone rejected it.

I had finally put it away and given up hope of writing, which is silly because every night poor Thanne would go to bed at nine and I'd

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retire to some hole in our basement, somewhere, we never had space and I'd be beating out these really horrible stories. And sometimes immoral stories. I know now that what I was doing then was testing the limits of all things. And so I was learning the technique and I was testing not just technical limits but also the moral limits. And I was, daily, night after night, writing these stories, testing-and that's again this drive, and now it wasn't poetry anymore, it was stories. I would get a notion and test, test the notion. I remember riding through Kentucky once, and you know how they have those long graceful roads, with the stony things going up beside them and all of a sudden a stone would drop way down and then you're looking down into trees? and I was drinking a Coke, and I have to admit, I threw the Coke bottle out the window, down into the trees and in my mind I followed that bottle and I said the "what if" thing that you always do for stories, What if there's a man, who's standing in front of a tree peeing, and the bottle that I just flung out of there hits him in the back of the head. That's going to hit him at sixty five miles an hour. It'll kill him. And then I couldn't get that out of my mind. And I kept seeing "Watch for falling rocks" go by me, "Watch for falling rocks," and I thought "Watch for falling Coke bottles" and what if somebody was responsible for doing that? What sin is committed here? And then that night I would sit down and rattle it out. From the man's point of view, I would fling that Coke bottle, he would get hit, and I would think "what does this say about anything?" That's what I mean by testing the limits.

L: I'd like to back up a little bit. You mentioned that you read a lot. Are there any particular authors that have either influenced you, or molded you in a sense or provided you with material?

WW: Those authors that really did begin an influence on me early and have maintained that influence ever since are authors such as Dostoevsky, who I read a great deal of in high school. My sophomore junior and senior years I would always return to the Russians. I would put Tolstoy in there but not at the same level as Dostoevsky, and I think the influence continues from Dostoevsky, not so much in formal terms as in this persistent tinkering with the human soul, which he continues to return to, and I do to, the very dramatic motions that people take, even secretly within their souls. Previous to that, I think the first novel, as a novel, that moved me most and lingered with me longest, was Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward Angel*. To me that was like somebody moved the casements, and the doors opened up and I know that it's an overwritten novel, but I

can quote it to you now. That whole romanticization of his life and family just opened up potential for me like mad.

Just to finish one or two things that I think are crucial to my own writing right now: the seventeenth century poets. What they did in terms of extended conceit and the ability to be as obscure with their ultimate meanings, even though on the surface a person would begin to etch together and piece together surface meanings, set me free to be as obscure as I would. The seventeenth century poets, and then ultimately people like T.S. Eliot freed the puzzling part of my mind. My heart was set free already by people like Thomas Wolfe, but the wit, the wit, and the joy in multiple meanings and so forth.

L: Do you think that a discipline is important for a writer? And why?

WW: Oh yes, no doubt. In graduate school, it forced me to revise my whole concept of what it means to be a writer. This is crucial, but at the time I didn't know it. I grieved the fact that poem after poem was poor. It made me begin to question my talent, my ability. But of course I was not going to stop writing, so what I had to do was to revise my whole concept of what it means to be a writer, and how long it takes to become one. And so it was at that point that I really believed that for the first time I said discipline is good, even without production. Then I said I was not writing poems, I was practicing at poetry. And suddenly it was OK.

L: You talk about this in the preface to your book of poetry, *A Miniature Cathedral*.

WW: Exactly. That's really my assessment. I don't think I'm a poet. I think I practice at it. And that goes to the days that trained me. And I still practice at it. But to the issue of discipline. Because there was a persistent practicing at it, because now there is a persistence in writing, even when I don't produce, what I am doing is learning the parameters of this language. For poetry what I think I finally learned besides sound and rhythm is ambiguity, that sometimes the life of a particular work are the six or seven meanings that it may contain, without one contradicting or destroying the other and without one being necessary to the other for some kind of reader response. That gave me a sense of the livingness of the work that I was dealing with that I would never have come to had I not forced myself into this discipline of writing with a dead regularity. And it's the same thing even now. I wouldn't produce except that I sit down

daily. And I would say that to anyone. There are writers for whom suddenly it flows, and when it flows it's like going to the bathroom. But I really believe them to be few. I think we have over-romanticized the whole concept of the arts, generally, especially in this country. And for most writers, it isn't like that. Most writers produce because they daily sit down and work at it.

L: You say that this discipline changed your concept of being a writer. What is it now and what was it then?

WW: Well, it was this romanticized notion and that I should always be writing something of value. Until then I used to think that everything one worked on had to have value, it had to have a fire in it, and as soon as I found that there was no fire I trashed it. What's the point, nothing's happening here, let's start on something else which meant that I made persistent false starts and learned very little. When I began to realize that what a writer is, or what a writer's commitment is, is to a whole lifestyle, just like a physician's commitment, and that there's a long period of apprenticeship, suddenly I could write bad stuff but look for what I was learning in it. And each piece did not have to live on its own. Suddenly there was a whole notion of the integrated life of the writer which meant that that year, my twenty second year of life, was probably as crucial as this year, my forty eighth year of life, whether that year produced anything memorable or not. That's what it did to me. In fact what it did was give me a whole objective and much more professional sense of the business of writing than I had had theretofore.

L: You've frequently mentioned the power of words in a community. Could you explain how this fits into your notion of the business of writing and what moral responsibility that puts on your shoulders?

WW: I would say if I exercised the power, without taking time to understand that power, then I were a dangerous person, and probably arrogant and self-centered and I may hurt more people than I know, precisely because language is powerful and I would be batting about in it. That is if I succeeded. The likelier thing is that if I didn't take time to understand power, then I probably wouldn't much succeed either. So the two go together this way. First of all my commitment to the community requires me to take a good deal of time to understand what this talent is and what this craft is. My talent, this universal craft of writing, and spend

time learning it. The first time that I read *The Little Prince*, “matters of consequence” is a phrase that’s said in there, and I think what it meant is that wherever you are is consequential. It made me aware of how powerful words are. So use them well. So then what are you obeying to use them well? Well you’re obeying the craft, you’re obeying your commitment to community in general anyway, to people around you to use them well, and probably you’re obeying some righteousness in your own heart which connects you to the universal, to God. And all of that requires an apprenticeship.

L: To switch topics, you’ve been a student and a teacher and a writer, husband, father and pastor. Do these roles, so to speak, ever conflict with one another. Is Walter Wangerin the writer different from Walter Wangerin the pastor, and so forth?

WW: I would say that in external matters like the time one commits to one or another, the choices one makes to attend to one of those roles more than another, yes, they conflict, and they did. When I get involved in a novel, I become a really grim person, and I’m unaware of it. I become so focused on the interior world that the exterior world suffers for it. I didn’t know that for a long time. It took Thanne apologizing for me. It took Thanne apologizing for me to wake me to the fact that I just looked so grim. People thought there was something wrong with me and of course Thanne realized I was involved in a novel. That’s a conflict. And sometimes it’s a really serious one. And I don’t think I can be excused always for my unkindness by my craft, you understand? That’s exterior. Interior, at the point where I am who I am, my identity, far from there being a conflict, I think that there is a mutual nourishment. Ministry, for me, put me very close to human experience, as I probably could never have been, except I were a pastor. I was invited, not just to observe but into the very souls of people, the sick, dying, suffering. That can’t help but enrich my perceptions of humanity for my writing and interiorly it can’t help but enrich my perceptions of my children, of who they are, of what they’re going through, and the whole business of language. To have read well, can’t help but to teach my ear how to listen well to those who talk, or teach my eye to read well the expressions on their faces. Interiorly, when I was both a pastor and a writer, I recognized that both were creative endeavors. Add to that. Marriage is a creative endeavor. And raising children is a creative endeavor. All these things ask me to make decisions in a twinkle and as much as possible to involve all the

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variables in those decisions. When you're writing a poem, something is alive to all that's going on, the sounds the rhythms, the next image, where this image was, so that you just *plump* the right word in. When I'm talking to a bunch of people in a parish, something needs to be alive to all the people that are there, so that when you feel the tensions coming and they're going to beat each other up, somehow you say the right word, *plump*, but it's a creative word. When you're raising children you don't know what tomorrow brings until tomorrow is here and here is this kid smearing something. . . what it is is exhausting. It's not a conflict. It's exhausting. You can't play all those roles at once without whipping yourself to death. And that's finally why I did have to make a distinction between writing and ministry. And parenting. And finding out that's crucial. You put on hold some of these other things because the children aren't going to be here forever, and sometimes you turn your total creative energy as a writer, to your spouse. That's a moral obligation we didn't talk about before. But you begin to see which are the more crucial things, and there are some writers who are willing to sacrifice their spouses for their art. I would not do that. If I would do that then I would be a false artist in some respects. Even though I've known excellent artists who have done that, something in me would be false in obedience. Something in me would be willing to be unkind. What kind of a writer can that be? For me, what kind of a writer would I be, if my own material, what would the honor of it be, if, in order to do it, I stole from Thanne. The more important way of talking is what kind of material would I have produced if I as a producer were willing to sacrifice or murder or cut or cut off somebody else in order to produce it. I know people who act as though their craft is their deity, their god, and they'll sacrifice everyone around to that art, to that artistic god. And they will produce powerful things at the same time, but that goes back to our conversation previously. I wonder how destructive some of that power may be and what kind of worship is going on if they sacrifice those unto whom they had made previous commitments like marriage unto this commitment, and those who were so sacrificed were not willing. Now there are some who are very willing. William Blake had a wife that was very willing to allow him to be and do whatever he wished with writing. That's wonderful. He was blessed with such a spouse. But not everyone has that spouse, since when you marry you make a commitment to that, and I wonder what that says about the commitment you made unto art.

L: On the back of *A Miniature Cathedral* there is a quote from *The Los*

Angeles Times, about *The Book of the Dun Cow*: “A powerful and enjoyable work of the imagination.” Is there a difference between being creative and being imaginative, between imagining and creating?

WW: That’s a very good question. I don’t think I understand that word “imagination” exactly the same way as the romantic poets did. If to be creative means to start on something from scratch and to say that which has never been said before, to be altogether new, and to be imaginative means to see things in your mind, even though no one else had ever seen them before, but imaging it in your mind and then imaging it in your art, opening up other people to this thing that they hadn’t seen before, then yes there’s a difference. Because I really do think that I don’t have the right to create what wasn’t before, and that when I do that, as I did when I was younger, I create monstrosities. I create monsters, because I don’t have the great wisdom of the creator. I have a limited wisdom, and in my grand areas I can create things that might hurt people. If you say something that had not been said before, you name something that had not been named before, and everyone says Yes! you’re arousing something in people that had not risen up before, was not alive before, but you called to it. You didn’t make it up. That’s the work of the imagination. Yes, the work of the imagination means that we image, and in our minds we put together things that maybe never had quite that way before, but it smells and sights and sounds, and then it’s the deeper, driving meanings of those things. Yes there’s a difference.

L: As far as younger writers go, what is the importance of a mentor,?

WW: I think it’s important. I think it’s enormously helpful. I don’t think it’s absolutely necessary. I put it very high up on the level of importance, but it isn’t essential for one to become a writer. I think that writers will find mentors, whether the mentors are living beings who can talk with them in the flesh and blood, which is very helpful, or whether they are people in print. I don’t think I ever had a living mentor. I had people that acted that way in passing sometimes and who would speak exactly the right word at exactly the right time. I would encourage it. I also encourage both student and mentor to realize the relationship may play itself out, in which case, shake hands, and then go on to other ones. That’s got to be said. Why? Because a mentoring relationship often begins to involve and suck into it more than just the craft. It can begin to suck all kinds of other feelings into it. You know, it’s like the needle. The

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blood goes back even as the needle shoots into the blood. There's an osmotic relationship there, that feelings go back and forth. Now when that happens, sometimes the really important reason why two people got together which, let's say, was mentoring and writing, both the craft and an insight, is fulfilled. But another bloody mass has involved itself at this time. Now when one wants to say thank you it's fulfilled, and the other's made commitments beyond it, that's when people hurt each other very badly.

L: And how about the importance of a writing community to provide a support and an outlet for a writer?

WW: Absolutely. Not essential again. Writers can write in solitude, but you're right. Now you're at the point where you don't need somebody who's been there. Now you need the community of some who are better, some who are worse, some who write, some who don't, that's not the issue. But all of whom rejoice in the business of writing. Here the relationship is tighter. Here it's the community that maintains the morality of the relationship. This is the sort of thing I personally have gone forth and sought, particularly after I resigned from the ministry. I looked for a handful of people with whom to share writing and that kind of discourse. I find that to be almost essential.

L: If you had one piece of advice for beginning writers, what would that be?

WW: Well, I won't say anything surprising, because advice at that level is commonly available. Read. Read out loud. Find those whom you appreciate reading, and read them over. Understand why you appreciate them. Mimic them. Mimic them as best as you possibly can, particularly those passages that moved you, trying to realize that's not how you're going to end up but that's how you began. That's one. Two: write every day. If you're a beginning writer and this is a commitment you are making, then write daily. Write on a variety of topics. It is important to be realistic. I just saw a guy last week who was on fire. I mean, if they turned all the lights out in that room, this fellow would light the whole room up with this burning, but he's filled with anxieties. He wants to write as well as James Joyce, and perhaps he has the capacity, but at this moment, that's unrealistic. Now I think he should keep that flame burning. But it's clear he's not writing anything right now. Why is that?

It's because every sentence he writes doesn't sound like James Joyce. So he stops, chagrined at his failure. He's a very young fellow. Be realistic, even though I do know there are moments where you do come on fire with your writing, so for a little while you'll live in the unrealism of the inferno or the paradiso, one or the other.

L: I think that, for many college students, it's difficult to balance academics, extracurriculars and a social life, let alone write outside of class every day.

WW: Let me say two things, and I hope there is no scorning either one. The first is more pragmatic and useful. And that is if you can't do it every day, then you can do it with regularity throughout the week, you can do it three times a week. Yes you can. It's not easy. But when I look at the commitment some folks make to the ARC, or to a sport they don't have to do, and nobody's fussing about that, so if you can't do it every day, you can do it three or four times a week. But then the second thing that I have to say, and I hope this is not to be scorned, that is the sifting process. It's what distinguishes people who have that drive from those who thought they did but don't. Be very careful how you quote that, because I don't want somebody who finds it impossible to say, "oh gee that means I'm not a writer after all." Because it is possible that if one does not have that drive, to work oneself up to the drive. It is possible, so if a person says, "I've tried three times and I haven't made it and Wangerin said this is the sifting process, I guess I'm sifted out," no, not necessarily. And yet, something is going on at this time here which is shaking you down. It may be that if you find yourself easily committed to the mall four times a week, or the movies, or to any number of other things, which are not under any kind of judgement, it might be that something of your real commitment is showing itself there as opposed to here.

Dear...

you and I used to run
the length of the moon
together. we curled up
in so many craters that
had we half the chance
we would have set a VW bus
down in the sea of crises
just to see what things we
could overcome. or was it
the driving that always
stretched the skin on
our faces? of course, we were
so busy looking
at the stars we hardly
noticed that
the sea had become
an ocean. and in each other
we had forgotten how
to swim. you should remind
me that I'm leaving out
Halley and that messy
trail of dust (was it me?)
she left behind. of course, that's neither
here nor where you are
and cold balls of travelling
space dust are significant
only in that we both could use
a good hoovering. except that somehow
these days I feel a lot like
Halley (to come around every seventy-six...)
and I wonder if you'll
give back the hoover and please
show me where the
outlet is (bless his soul); the dark
side of moonacy gets a little wearisome
and I could stand to lie
in the arms of your travelling
intergalactic space-bus.

The sun shone down
and made me warm
like that few seconds
spent in my mother's kitchen
before I went out
to play in the snow.

There was a slight breeze
enough to keep the sweat off
and just enough to help the gulls
hover over the sand
as if they were afraid to come back to earth.

The sand scrunched
under the weight of my body
and the curl of my toes.

I scanned the shoreline
for bits of broken glass
the remnants of too many Happy Independence Days
or mournings for the one that got away.
I would collect them
in my already worn pockets
and keep them in old wine glasses
where they would be free to dance
with the sun
to paint kaleidoscopes and rainbows
on my face
and to warm me
before I ventured out into the cold.

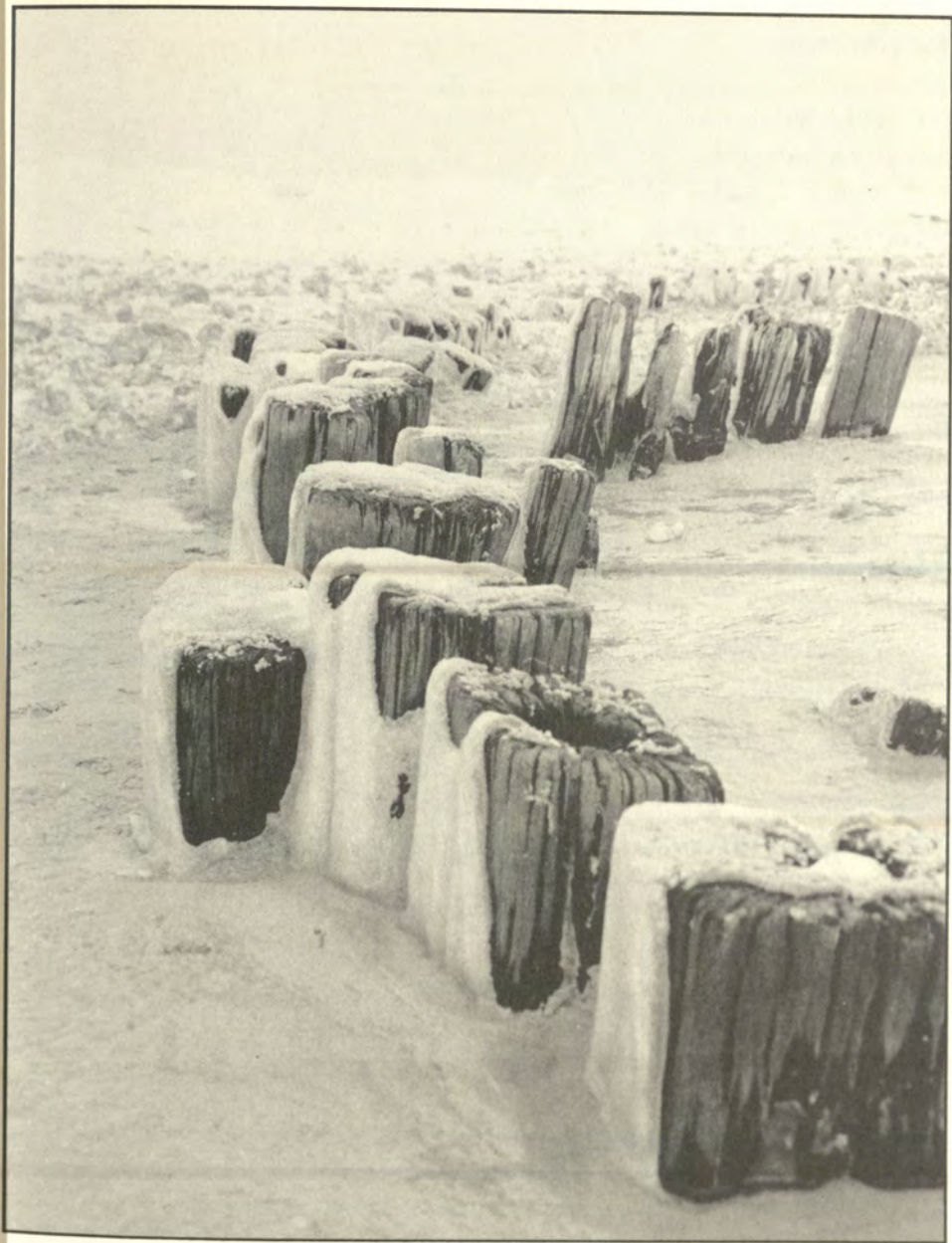


Photo by Stacy Burnham

for gretchen

if i were a little a boy
and you a little girl
with pony tails and a toothy grin
we would run and jump
pretend to fly
like tiger-colored fairies
that tickle my father's marigolds

and the flowers and grasses
and soft earth that squishes between our toes
and that great shining source about which
our mothers warned us
would fill us till we burst
radiating forth good spirit
lighting on every passerby
from the simple joy of it

we would know nothing else but
twistingandtwirlingandtumbling
androllingandlaughingandgiggling
and no-see-ums buzzing in our ears
and dragon flies swooping out of the sky
to sprinkle us with magic dust
and mother bluebirds scolding their young
with sweet songs

and the sheer summer warmth
would keep me glowing for many winters
and make me smile the way it does today.



Photo by Kerry Ghornley

Potter

Maybe it's the porch
that makes us think
of bratwurst and beer,
the hope of an open flame
that licks and sizzles
like the single citronella
yawning from the ledge
of flower pots and marigolds.
You somehow loved
those flowers, named each one
like daughters, spoke to them
of Hungary and history
and of finding God outside
the church. I'd frequent
the place in hopes of a meal
and find you reading
to the flowers. Shakespeare
on Tuesday nights, Milton,
Hemingway, the Greeks, whoever
was closest to your heart.
Some people called you crazy,
others eccentric. One went so far
as to bring you a Bible,
prayed for your conversion.
The rest of us knew
that you were in some way saved,
that your bratwurst grills
and open kegs fed many more
than Bibles. You didn't pay
attention to the talk,
opened blooms, instead, like holy books,
found salvation in the mass
of flower pots and marigolds
which rose like literature,
strung lines of rhyming poetry
through the pages of your open heart.

Poem

for Gabriel Garcia Marquez

When this tiny tiny inchworm
decides your text is nothing better
than a way to get from one point
to another, I question its respect
regarding the nature of art.

I always thought the nature of nature
was art, that some creator pulled
each living thing from clay, fashioned curves
with dirty hands, breathed in life.
You too, you target every word
with steamy, open-mouthed kisses,
conceive of words that issue forth,
pregnant in and of themselves.

I tickle my fingers down the strength
of your significant spine, soaking
in the concentrated sea of words
delivered when your pages part. Then,
like glancing at a couple kissing hard,
I spy the nervous little worm
pulling into its omega curl.
Its spring repeatedly coils,
coils, unleashes, and explodes.

A Word of Advice When Borrowing Books

And another thing, don't ever
bend the covers of my paperbacks.
That's what comes of being nice.
More often than poets, readers
are the ones assuming liberties,
as if "to borrow" means "to bend."
Well the next time someone borrows
one of my collection, I'll
be doing the bending. Like thoughts,
books pass on from hand to hand.
My mother used to think it
dangerous, kept me away
from libraries. Father,
on the other hand, lectured
me on resale opportunities,
how neither paperbacks, nor hard
ones for that matter, were advisable
investments for the future. Well I
told him, I did. It wasn't for
the future (I spelled it out),
but in the future. You know,
I don't think he heard a word
I said. Words, too,
are borrowed, and by being borrowed,
bent. I love our language, bend
it like my readers do books.
You can destroy a paperback;
our language is elastic. Stretch
it, pull it. Rubber band it.
Go ahead. Bend it.

Moon Gazing

"The moon looks odd tonight," she said
as I turned to see her gray eyes
peering up at the yellow
tinted mass. The moon hung
in the sky as if someone
had placed it there, like a child
meticulously places a bright yellow
sun on a drawing (the type of drawing
that deserves to be hung on a refrigerator).

"Why do people say there's a man on the moon?"
Her voice gently inquired. I loved her
innocence.

"I don't know," I replied
as the question still echoed in my head.
I wanted so badly to look up
and see a man smiling down
upon me. Instead, all I noticed
was the yellow
tarnished veil that clung
to the moon
like a child clings
to its mother's hand.

"It's made of cheese," her words gently
floated.

I smiled as I gazed at her sweet face
looking through the branches.

"That's a lot of cheese," I said
as I laid back
and dreamily watched the clouds
pass through the branches,
and the moon's rays danced
across my face.

Sink

Cold water gurgles noisily down
The ever-thirsty drainpipe. The brown skin
Of an onion flakes away under my thumb,
Revealing a slippery membrane; veins as visible
Through the translucent layer as pale
Blue trceries which pulse along
Your neck. I've been told that slicing
Onions under water will dull
The sting. As the thick-bladed knife cleaves
Through, acrid odor
Bites at my nose. Stifling a sneeze,
I brush a forefinger laden with onion
Juice against my eye;

And now the tears course
Down your cheeks as you shriek
At me in rage. Once
I had searched for myself in you, only
To discover that the deeper I sank
Into you, the less
There was of either of us;
You disagreed, and
In your anger, shook.

I now waver
Unsteadily, wringing clean my thumb
Under the stream of water,
One eye clenched shut.

Callous

After years of fretting,
I peeled you from my finger
Today: a dead body found
And removed with an absurdly fascinating sense
Of satisfaction. I never realized
How much I cherished you
Until the stel string laid open
A deep gash dividing the fresh pink flesh.
Feeling no pain inside (you
My protection, always there) I came
To believe nothing could hurt
Until the salty droplets spurted out:
Vivid red along my fingertip.
Now alone, I long again
To be embraced by another
Protecting layer of skin.

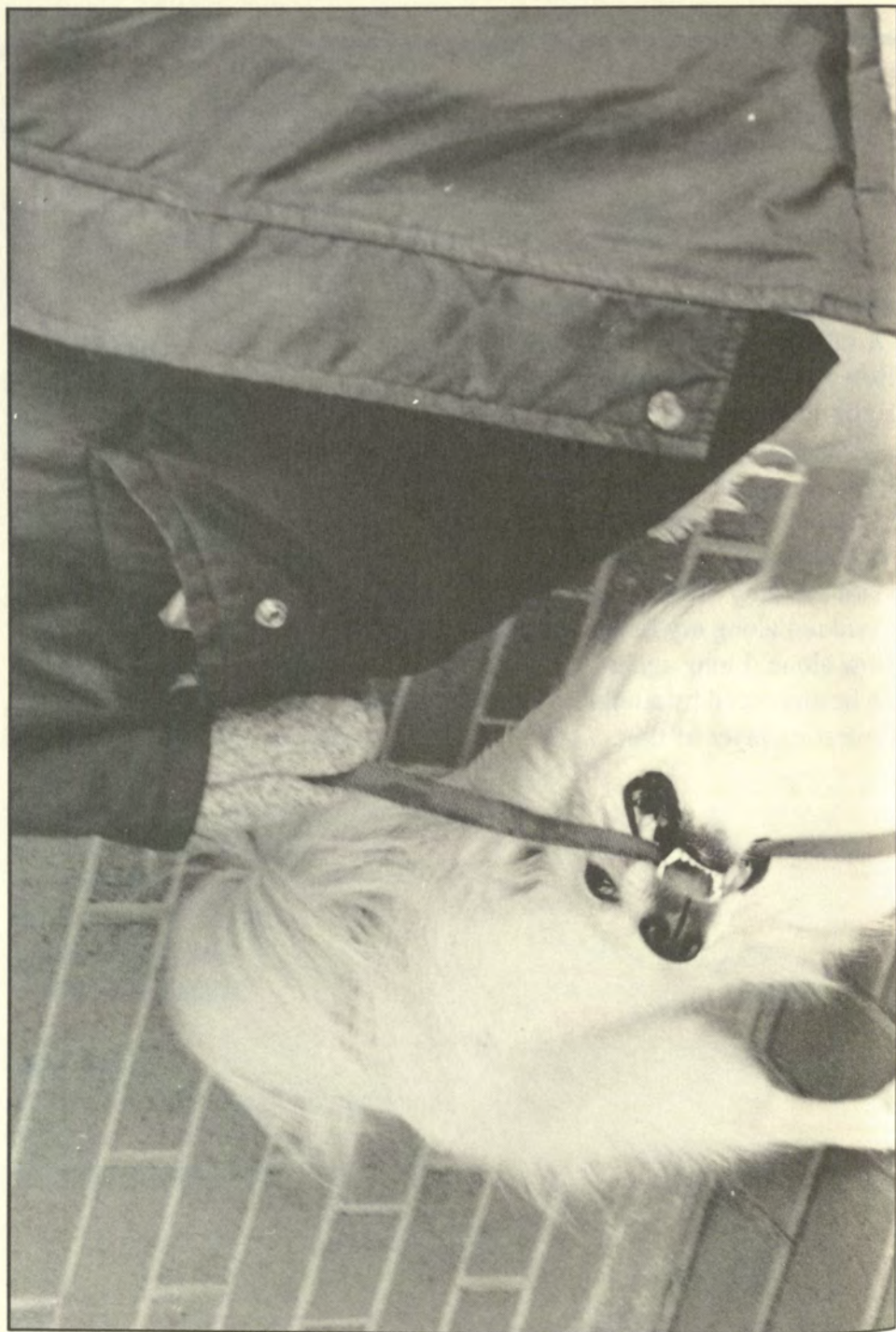


Photo by Kerry Ghormley

On the Mistrust of Poetry

A certain discomfort exists in our modern American culture, not unlike a child's discomfort with a rare vegetable: Both stare at the discolored rarity and exclaim, "But it is so unlike anything I have eaten before! Surely it will make me sick!" — and, due to their fear of exotic tastes and their weak stomachs, they reject the strange but savory treat. Stability of diet, physical or mental, is what most folk demand — and what poets detest. And our culture, no doubt, is a product of the dull sensibilities of "most folk," made fat and weak and complacent by their decadence, their "religion," and their "democracy." For poetry demands not intelligence but a strong stomach: Our bland American diet of Maalox, Sunday synoding, and November solicitude leaves us unfit to digest the exotic fruits of the creative spirit. And not only does poetry demand a strong stomach, but a refined one as well: The true reader must possess both the spiritual courage to swallow some disagreeable images and the refinement to taste the full sweetness, and poison, of the poet at play.

But there's something rather bothersome about refinement; it suggests that we're dissatisfied with what we've been given. This is something Darwin didn't take into account: Unlike other organisms, we do not merely respond to changes in our environment — we create environments of our own. Indeed, many "environmentalists" don't seem to comprehend that human beings are not like other animals. They blindly ask us to "get natural" and to merely "exist" when we cannot. The life of our species is grounded on the idea that we are something transcending "natural": If we were just that, if we did just "exist," we'd be nothing more than a herd of grazing cows. Animal existence is, for us, equivalent to death. Indeed, when we define "natural" we already impose human distinctions on the world — we have already rejected naturalism and embraced *creativity* — we have forced our will on our surroundings. Indeed, environmentalism is just as "unnatural" as polluter-ism (i.e., both are environments created for the sake of human convenience); their difference lies in their respective abilities to sustain the human species, and what it considers beautiful and worthwhile. We fight to save the environment because we realize that it is beautiful to, and sustaining for, *us* — not because we want "peace with all creatures." For all our similarities to dogs, apes, birds, and bees, we are still made different by

our profound restlessness; we despise the bland consistency of taking what is offered. Give a man bread and water and he'll leave his homeland in search of milk and honey.

Our restlessness makes us do some very strange things. Instead of spending all our time outdoors or keeping fit, we enjoy staying in and reading a good book. (The invention of light for this purpose demonstrates our preference for the mind's aesthetic enjoyment of art over the senses' physical enjoyment of the sun — if we so loved the sun, we would actually sleep when it was dark.) We smoke even though we know it's killing us; we kiss even though we know we'll get sick; we tell the truth even though it makes us and others sad. We don't even fuck to make babies anymore — we fuck to make love (something our modern puritan moralists still haven't figured out). It's a rare species indeed who places highest value not on biological survival, but on a somewhat absurd pursuit of "beauty" and "morality."

We can choose to do *nothing* — we can even choose to die. Each day we have a hundred chances to kill ourselves, and yet we choose again and again not to do it. (Can anyone say she's truly *lived* if she hasn't considered suicide?) Indeed, we might say that the greatness of our modern society lies in the fact that we have the power to destroy the entire earth and yet consistently choose not to do so. There is something very wonderful in this conscious choice not to destroy our race — "free will" in its highest manifestation? Human beings are the only species with the power to play God: not to merely live, but to choose to do so; not to merely die, but to die honorably. Even at birth, we are already dying; we spend our lives trying to die as gracefully as possible (thus, the invention of the after-life, the assurance of a *happy* death). To say it again: We struggle for not the most comfortable way to live, but for the most interesting way to die.

We can control our fates because we are conscious. Our human consciousness (i.e., awareness of our own thought and of the world around us) allows us to become aware of the eternal flow of life and our place both inside and outside of it. We are within: We are just one more clump of stuff, a lucky form of dead matter surviving with all the other matter, lucky or unlucky, in the world. But by some great miracle (or curse) of biology or breeding, we are also without: Consciousness has forced us to become aware of our place in the world, to place values on what we perceive, to give our lives "meaning." However, with our need to create meaning comes the realization that we are the sole creators of that meaning — the world has no beauty, morality, or truth without us. For, as Jean Granier suggests, we know no final absolute: "...an absolute

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must naturally escape all knowledge since knowledge is a relation, and since an absolute would cease to be an absolute if it sustained a relation to an other being outside itself" (Granier, 1966). We ask "why?" but receive no answer from anyone but ourselves: There is no final reason why we live or why we love.

This is our Garden of Eden, the forbidden fruit plucked from the tree of knowledge: the awareness that we are the only "souls" in an unconscious world. And this is also the ultimate end of our human lives: To create meaning in a meaningless world, to make order out of chaos, to make beauty out of "stuff." Our human consciousness has forced us into this position as God, who we once created to escape the awareness of our isolation from the world, but later refuted as the affirmation of our interpretive power over it.

Poetry is the primal instrument of human consciousness. It is the fundamental human means of recognizing and restructuring the world, from a valueless chaos to a meaningful set of experiences and values. On the most basic level, poetry transforms perception by mixing and matching particular sensations in new and palpable ways, such as Whitman's meditation on the essence of grass from *Song of Myself*:

"...I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I
receive them the same."

Whitman, as poet, uses the basic metaphor to deepen our understanding of, and appreciation for, the blade of grass — and for the similarity of all the different races which the blade of grass seems to represent. Indeed, as Sarah Kofman has suggested, the metaphor precedes the concept in the history of thought; one is just a universalization and solidification of the other. In a sense, then, the poet is the first scientist; he is the primordial examiner of nature, the first to find similarity or difference in it, and the first to actually create a schema through which to view the whole.

But the poet is also the first philosopher. He reflects on the world around him and realizes that his experience is only meaningful because of him, not because that meaning somehow exists outside of him (even separating "me" from "other" is a particularly human move). Thus, the poet's world becomes either dreary or beautiful depending on *his own* state of mind. Indeed, the main distinction of the poet lies not in his

intellect but in his courage to face the unknown and absurd, a courage reflected in Crane's poetry:

"I saw a man pursuing the horizon;
Round and round they sped.
I was disturbed at this;
I accosted the man.
"It is futile," I said,
"You can never—"

"You lie," he cried,
And ran on."

Crane, as poet, announces the human condition: a rather absurd pursuit of envisioned truths. Whether or not the narrator decides to join in the chase, he is at least aware of its ultimate futility. But just as the man in the poem refuses to listen to this voice of awareness, so too does our culture refuse to listen to the voice of the poet. For, becoming conscious of the human condition is something most people don't want to do; they'll accept any sort of justification for their mindless lives, so long as they believe that the justification is not made by them, but by some objectively "true" outside source, thus making it "real." Ironically, as we shall see, they actually end up relying on a poetic voice (usually one from the distant past) to create a meaning system under which they can live.

Because the uncreative masses are forced to rely on the poet, she is both loved and loathed. They must love her if their lives are to have any value; for, if I am too uncreative to participate in the creation of a meaning system, I must embrace one that a poet has created. And too often only one poetic voice is embraced to the exclusion, and oppression, of all others: This is the origin of dogmatism (and of all fundamentalist aspects of our own religion). Indeed, with the exclusive, loving acceptance of one poetic vision comes the necessity of squelching all others. After all, if I expect my values to remain constant, I must attack any attempt to replace or stand beside them: Admitting that my meaning system is only one of many destroys its claims to objective truth, or to my need for belief, returning me to an essentially absurd world. Such is the fate of many liberal Protestants: While they wish to believe that their values are true, they also wish to co-exist with others who do not share their meaning system. But they cannot both dogmatically believe and co-exist at the same time — if only Christians are saved, then everybody else is condemned (and how does one co-exist with a doomed soul?). Little

wonder that many Christians fear philosophical awareness — they fear the realization that their very lives are studies in contradiction.

As we mentioned above, defenders of a single meaning system, or better, a single poetic vision, often appeal to cultural tradition to justify their beliefs. For example, a believer in Lutheran values might argue that homosexuality has always been considered sinful, and thus, should now be considered such — when, in fact, these values were created by a theological poet named Martin Luther, among others. When will we realize that we can ground no dogmatic belief — that no human being, however ancient, scholarly, or God-like, can unequivocally authorize a meaning system?

But not only is the poet attacked by tradition-toting dogmatists; she is also assaulted by who we'll term "sensualists" and "ascetics." These are people who have found that every meaning system they've ever adopted has left their lives empty and meaningless. Or, they may have not had the gall of the dogmatist to defend his narrow poetic vision, and have concluded that any attempt to make sense of things is necessarily dogmatic and thus pointless. So they attack the poet's attempt: Instead of creating a meaningful way to live, they ignore human consciousness and attempt to achieve a wholly unreflective point of view.

The sensualist completely immerses herself in her most base animal sensations, drinking and smoking and screwing until she forgets herself and the world around her. Many sensualists live in our own academic community — once they become aware of how their capitalist/christian meaning system leaves them feeling empty, they become "wastoids," trying to drink or fuck themselves out of their problem, thus escaping their need to participate in the conscious human experience. And if they do appreciate any form of poetry, it's most likely that which will help justify their spiritual insobriety (e.g., much of "popular" and "college" music).

The ascetic, on the other hand, will try to completely divorce herself from her senses, so as to become unconscious and forget herself. She does this by diving into extreme meditative states, forgetting everything around her and attaining some sort of "nirvana." That is, because whenever we, as human beings, are conscious of *something* we are conscious of a *sensible* thing, the ascetic becomes unconscious merely by tuning out her senses. Thus, it's easy to see why the ascetic will mistrust poetry; poetry is a celebration of the senses, the embracing of the human power to consciously schematize perceptual experience. Because she rejects the sensible world, she rejects poetry. Indeed, the people who claim they're "transcending reality" or "reaching a higher plane of

consciousness" are really just forgetting reality and moving to a state of unconsciousness equivalent to death, which may be why these uncreative people, so tired of life, can only find comfort — or better, sleep of soul — in their meditative states.

Ironically, sensualists, ascetics, and dogmatists, for all their differences in lifestyle, are actually striving toward the same goal: To relieve themselves from the need to cope with human consciousness. They fear the pain involved in becoming aware of one's position in the world and of participating in the creation of a meaning system. And, as these people constitute a majority of human society, we can understand why poetry is so widely mistrusted; the latter is the primal instrument of human consciousness in a world where everybody's trying to get unconscious again.

That's why most folk, even while they rely on poets to justify their lives, still distrust poetry and creativity: In order to avoid this entire process, they latch on to one poetic vision and call it true. So, when a new poet arises and challenges the creations of the old, they get scared. Poetry is mistrusted precisely because it threatens the stable meaning systems in existence. Moreover, many poets are called "egoistic" merely because they overcome historically accepted values to posit new ones — new values which must naturally inhabit a single soul and hence be "egoistic" until they are communally accepted. Thus, while poets are essentially creative, they are also nihilistic; they must constantly abandon their old value and envision their experiences through new eyes (indeed, it is rather common among poets to always be somewhat dissatisfied with their past works, which stand as past visions to be once again overcome). But these new eyes must be the singular poet's eyes — the truly great poet will always stand essentially alone: a nomad, an exile from herself and her world.

By creatively rearranging his perceptual experiences, the poet actually rejects the "natural" world and creates a world of his own: Becoming conscious of his own sensibility, the poet then creatively re-schematizes it, thereby rejecting what he might instinctually perceive as a "natural" animal and instead forming an entirely new perspective. In essence, the poet's pleasure lies in his quite divine power to constantly see his world through new rose-colored glasses, to have his sensibility continually born again — a real Son of God, perhaps? In essence, the poet *creates a world that he wills to be*. And, in a sense, to do this he must destroy the world that *was*, or the world that *was willed to be* by himself and others.

For example, when a poet describes something as "bright as a

smile,” he rejects the common notion that the quality of brightness is something entirely distinct from the physical activity of a smile. By identifying these normally distinct categories with one another, he creates a new perspective and imbues both “bright” and “smile” with a new set of meanings. Thus, poetry ceases to be solely a nihilistic force and actually becomes the ultimate *affirmation* of life: As the highest imposition of human will on the sensible world, poetry affirms the human’s place in, and control over, that world. As the poet schematizes his experience, he actually *creates* that experience. Thus, poetry, as the embodiment of human consciousness, places humans above all other beings; through poetry, we not only creatively control our world, but celebrate it by imbuing each sensible experience with a wealth of values, symbols, and meanings.

However, as we mentioned earlier, by introducing new values, symbols, and meanings into the culture, the poet threatens popularly accepted notions and the activity that relies on their dogmatic maintainance. Whether the poet speaks through verse, prose, visual art, philosophy, music, or science, she continually creates new concepts that threaten the old. Her new perspectives are threatening not only as a direct affront to established meaning systems, but more importantly, as evidence that all are *human* concoctions, not results of some objective wisdom or power.

Modern poetry is especially threatening to the masses because it exposes the perspectival nature of the poet’s vision. Where most folk desire poetry that is simple, direct, and objective (i.e., what can be called “good” by everybody), the modern poet offers a creation that is intentionally complex and vague, precisely because he is offering a very subjective sort of perspective. Where verse poetry once used rhyme and meter to create a somewhat universal impression, the modern poet uses words that may mean three different things to three different people.

However, modern poetry, in its obscurity, also creates some important problems (e.g., we can’t create a communal meaning system if we can’t understand each other); and this is where we may have to embrace a creative process that’s a bit more inclusive of others’ perspectives. But, for all its problems, modern poetry does succeed in emphasizing that the creative process is a very *human* one; meaning systems aren’t pulled out of the air — they’re made out of people, from subjective “souls,” and the very subjective triumphs and torments those souls undergo. Communal values only arise from subjective ones: in a more ideal society, after many poets compare their subjective impressions and discover commonalities which form a bond both creative and shared;

in the less ideal society, after a single poet has announced his vision and a horde of ill souls chase it. Modern poetry fits neither scenario bloodlessly; but as it stands, are culture seems much more enamored of "realism," anyway.

And why do we so love what is "real" in verse and prose? Once again, because of our need for security and safety — comforts only found in a blanket that everyone can wear and not feel like a Linus. Indeed, our modern America accepts poetic visions that are not only understandable by everyone, but that also seems objective, created by an extrinsic, impartial observer. In realism, the narrator often seems an objective observer who relates and judges certain events as they "really" happen. Thus, reading a realistic novel makes us feel that there is such a thing as total objectivity, or "reality." For most folk, this essentially theological perspective — that is, "God" or "Author" as guarantor of "truth" — is essential for defending their meaning systems. So Reader's Digest becomes a bit easier to swallow than the Lighter, and is read by a few million more people.

But we should be careful to criticize so quickly. Accepting certain values and justifications for one's life is not stupid or strange; indeed, if we didn't assume certain hypotheses about our physical world, we wouldn't survive. I must assume that the ground lying under my feet actually does lie under my feet if I'm to get out of bed in the morning. Moreover, if I am to create the music I so enjoy, I'm going to have to accept a meaning system where music is valuable. And I will defend music as not only valuable for me, but for everybody else too. Indeed, our striving toward a "better" society can be interpreted as a striving toward a meaning system in which everyone will be a free and creative member. But, until we get "better," we must thoughtfully assume a great deal about the values of certain meanings and symbols — if we didn't, we wouldn't be able to survive.

However, in assuming certain things we should be careful to never leave them entirely free of doubt. Once we remove the skeptical nature with which we accept "truths," we make creativity impossible — the skeptical attitude is the necessary precursor to the artistic one (if everything was just accepted, nothing new would be created). The danger in acceptance comes not from the fact of acceptance itself but from the *attitude* with which one accepts. One must realize that one's meaning system may be valuable and should be defended, but still is not *true*. Again, one must indeed *assume* things to survive, but that doesn't mean one should *believe* them (in the sense of believing-to-be-really-true). As long as we never claim that something is true beyond a doubt, or even

believe in such, we shall never fall into the straitjacket of dogmatism, which squelches all poetry.

Indeed, unless we are to empty our communities of all immanent value — and the theological presumption of a God-separate-from-beings does that — then we must accept and embrace our poetry as what is most sacred in our community: It is the living and changing system of shared meaning, the ability of the language to destroy and then raise itself up. Indeed, we must recognize that sacredness of thought and expression doesn't always translate from generation to generation (or from person to person), and just because some poetic symbols, like those in logic or mathematics or religion, have been universally accepted for a long time, that doesn't make them true, but only seem that way. We must allow for new subjects — specifically, for the young and courageous poets — to break out of what may seem sacred to all of us, but what to them are rusty chains: We must allow them to corrupt the “sacred,” to put the Christ in a glass of urine. The unleashing of creative power necessarily disturbs and hurts us, but is also the only possibility we have for improving our imperfect or unaffectionate meaning systems: Jesus can't resurrect unless he dies first. Indeed, one could argue that publications like the *Lighter*, and not the Chapel of the Resurrection, are the most sacred institutions within the Valparaiso student community — they are the only forums for simultaneously corrupting and creating a common language and the sacred meaning systems with which we guide our very existence.

But of course, making poetry, like making love, detracts from the smooth operation of the community. And society's historical mistrust of poetry (any reader of *The Republic* knows it's not new) is especially emphasized in our modern American culture. Here in America, we especially desire a stable meaning system, mostly because we like to *produce*, not create. We want to run, to move, to do — not to think. I myself feel this sense of physical freedom when I look across the landscape from my home in Michigan. I see nothing but empty fields for miles, and sometimes I just want to run forever into the emptiness, breathing the ripe smoke of autumn while chasing the dull orange horizon. Our ancestors — excepting those who were already here or were forced to come — may have had similar feelings when they found a land that stretched as far as they could imagine. It was waiting to be conquered, to be “run into” — and so they set off to make it theirs. Doing this required very little reflective thought; if something went wrong, they could always move to someplace else and start again — and all that running made for very little time to sit back and think about the whole enterprise. After all, they had to survive; the decadence that usually precedes the rise of the

poet didn't exist. As Chekov so aptly put it, "A hungry dog believes in nothing but meat," and so did our ancestors believe in little but material survival and prosperity — and the stability of meaning systems which would provide that without skepticism. They had no time for poets or justifications, besides the few whose visions were adopted to repress possible guilt about trashing the native homelands and enslaving an entire race of people.

Our modern America is no different; any person who still thinks that our citizens are "free," or that we're living in a "democracy" needs to step outside of his Wonder Bread world. The fact that someone works for a wage — even a high one — doesn't make them free; the fact that someone has an education — even a good one — doesn't make them educated. We are still mindlessly digging our graves through our inane "work ethic"; our blindness is so acute that the only threat we see is from Japanese (perfecting our own abased self-torture, they're even better Americans than us — which in the end is no compliment), not ourselves. We live long lives, but our lives aren't *lived*, they're produced. Oh, we have achieved prosperity, but we have become decadent: Our material needs are satisfied, but our spiritual needs remain neglected. Indeed, we can claim superiority only in those aspects of life which require an imperialistic outlook (we fight a damn good war — just ask the thousands of dead Iraqis). We like our leaders when they let us melt into our television sets with a good conscience, not when they tell us get off our fucking asses. We are fat and we are weak and we are stupid.

But luckily, some of us aren't dead. Our decadence has allowed a good number of new poetic voices to surface, not only supported by academic institutions, but also supporting them by injecting a healthy dose of chocolatey-sweet poetic poison into the culture's ass. Indeed, while most folk in America are still opposed to consciousness, some know that if we expect to survive as both a species and a vibrant society, we must learn to respect and even to trust our poets — including the poets in ourselves. Doing so will most certainly hurt us, but may also help us. For, unless we create, we shall die.

The Blizzard

The tired young pines with their branches bowed low
Struggle to shake off the weight of the snow
Like oxen whose masters are fiendish and hard,
Bitterly seething, their cries fill the yard:

“Savage fate! Death slowly born:
Once sharpened green needles are dulled by the storm;
Colors bright, sap sweet as sin,
Are white-washed and tasteless all thanks to this din!

“But we? No no we no no we aren’t to blame!
Pestilence brought by this Lucifer rain
A curse that’s invoked by the merciless Sky—
Struggle to live and a comfort to die!

“Fie, cruel roof! Limpid so long:
Warm sun emanated like love from a song;
Now, cold mists eddy and gust,
And chaos erupts like the liquids of lust!”

Sardonic gaunt rodents all circle and sneer;
Derelict saplings, they shiver and leer
At potent gray vault. Saturnale begins—
Snowflakes respond to the voice in the winds:

“Hail, low pines! Why reprehend
My troubled old spirit? My sting and thy bend
Curses not! Pestilence, no;
Thy feeble young senses can’t fathom my soul.

“From time prehistoric I’d urged toward the void;
Life and its minions I’d made and destroyed;
A power, a mind, and a will had I honed—
Only to find that I dwelled all alone.

"Sol I forged, light with it wrought,
Attempting to make some divinity sought—
But, alas! Now I realize
Forever it's I who am doomed to be wise."

Horizon suffuses its dusty grey steam;
Snow falls and melts into pool gregarine;
A single rook pauses awhile and jeers
Pines as they suffer from Sky's frozen tears.



The Kill

Photo by Matthew Prendergast

Beginner's Blues

the good poems always
come at three
in the morning
when
the novice poet
(unlike the expert or the
insomniac)
is too
l a z y
to get out of
bed drink
a can of
MOUNTAIN DEW™
and capture
the slippery syllables on
paper

Character Sketch

we settled
down in madison in the suburbs really. jim worked
for a local advertising business — nothing big
but
he made
enough money to support
us. we tried
to start
a family but
the doctors
said
that
neither of us was able to have children. it
was such
a painful blow to the two of us! jim put
his hand through the glass on the back
door and
he had
to get
stitches he was so upset

Earthworms

rainy days at school were earthworm days
we would gather at the blacktop at recess
clad in our yellow uniforms
searching for prized specimens

we would ooh and aah over their lengths
dropping them into the shallow pools of water
to see if they would swim (they didn't usually) *

the older boys would throw them at kindergarten girls
sending them bawling to the recess monitor
the braver girls among us would keep the ones that lived
naming them ellen or bruce or jeremiah
but we would throw them back into the puddles
when the bell called us back to school
we weren't very responsible then

the yellow slicker and boots were replaced long ago
(i now have the careful responsibility
of tennis shoes and an umbrella)
yet walking down the sidewalk i pause for a moment
stoop down and remove my wet shoes and socks

i finish my journey barefooted
feeling the lonely drowned bodies of the earthworms
as they are squashed between my toes

Just a Couple of People

I don't know what first brought Jimmy and me together. He came into town halfway through second grade. One day he just turned up, and we paired off like kids do sometimes. The rest of my memories from that time all include Jimmy.

He came to stay with the Wilsons down the street. They were a nice couple, but older than my folks—their children had grown up and left home before I was even born. It seemed to me that the Wilsons were a little scared of Jimmy. Sometimes when he and I would run in after school Mrs. Wilson would look surprised to see us. But they weren't too strict, and Mrs. Wilson baked good cookies—fat ones with raisins—so we overlooked their strange ways.

For awhile I thought Jimmy's parents were dead. That wasn't too unusual then, the war being just over and all. Jimmy fit easily into my life, and, my seven-year-old curiosity fixed on other things, I didn't question anything about him. So in all the time we spent together, he was the first to mention his parents.

"I bet my Pa'd get me that," Jim said. We were standing in front of the toy store on the main street downtown, faces pressed flat against the display window. Inside was a striped bow-and-arrow set. "Real metal tips. I sure do want that." He sighed.

I hardly heard him. "You got a Pa?" I asked, taken by surprise.

"What?" he scowled. Reluctantly he turned away from the treasure to look at me.

"You got a Pa?" I repeated, staring back at him. He laughed at me.

"Everybody got a Pa, don't they? I guess I got one too." He twisted back to look again at the window.

I nudged him impatiently. "C'mon, Jim, you know what I mean. Where's he at? Where is your Pa?" I tried to see his face but he started walking away. I rushed to catch up with him.

He pushed his hands down into his pockets. "I don't know exactly where he is." Jimmy watched the sidewalk in front of him. "I mean, I haven't seen him since I was real little. But him and my Ma are trying to get a place for us. As soon as they got us a house and stuff to stay in, my parents are gonna send for me. They are."

He jutted his chin out the way he does when he's ready to fight

and gave me a look. His eyes had sort of squinted shut like he was going to cry, so I just shrugged my shoulders and looked away. Neither of us said anything. Pretty soon he slugged my arm and took off running, and we raced each other down the railroad tracks.

Later he showed me their picture. He pulled it out of a little zippered leather case he always carried, and smoothed it out in front of us. The photo was a black-and-white one, creased at the edges. I looked at it closely, at the plain unsmiling woman and the spectacular dark-haired man. Whistling low, I gave Jimmy a slap on the back.

"Look at that, Jim," I said, pointing to the picture. "He's huge! You're gonna be big like him all right."

Jimmy studied my face. "You really think so?"

I nodded hard. "You're already bigger'n me. Why, I bet you'll grow up to be—" I paused, then decided, "six feet tall!"

Picking up the picture, Jimmy examined it eagerly, squinting to make out the details. Watching him, I thought of my own father, a thin drooping man who ran the drugstore downtown. I had never seen reason to be particularly proud of him before, but I suddenly felt a surge of feeling toward my father. It would be sad, I thought, to not know your own dad.

As time went on, Jimmy started changing, and what began in him that day he showed me his parents' picture got stronger. His mouth took on a sort of downward curve, and the photograph began to wear thin from constant handling. He grew restless. More and more he went off by himself without telling me.

Seeing my best friend hurting made me hurt too. I tried to get him to do other things, to help him get his mind off his folks, but that seemed to only make him worse. After a while, it got so that the only time he seemed O.K. was when he was talking about them. So I talked about them too. A lot.

When we had parents' night at the gramme school and all the other kids parents were sitting with them in the miniature desks, I said to Jim, sitting next to me with the Wilsons, "I bet your folks woulda' been the first ones here."

He smiled waveringly. "You think so?" He thought about it. "Yeah, I guess you're right. They woulda' been here real early to see my teacher."

Jim sat a little straighter, held his head a little higher the rest of the night.

I tried this on him at other times, too. Like at the bake sale for the

church where I convinced him his ma's jelly would have been every bit as good as my ma's if she had entered it. And when the old Riley house burned and all the men in the town stayed up one whole night to try and control it, I told Jimmy that I reckoned that his dad could have put it out in a couple of hours, he looked so strong. There were lots of times when I talked my family down so that Jimmy's folks would shine brighter for him. The more I told Jimmy about his parents the less he kept apart by himself. He started going out more with me and the other kids and he lost his gloomy looks. We started having fun again.

Sometimes I felt guilty about telling Jimmy things I didn't know were true. But I figured that since I really didn't know his parents, then I wasn't exactly lying. I was just touching on some possibilities about them. And the changes in Jimmy were worth it all. It became almost a game for me: see-if-you-can-get-Jimmy-to-forget-that-his-parents-haven't-contacted-him-in-years-and-may-even-be-dead-for-all-he-knows.

Then, suddenly, the game was over. As abruptly as he had arrived those years before, Jimmy was gone—run away, my mother said. She asked me if I know anything about it.

"How could I?" I said blankly. The morning before, Jimmy and I had gone fishing. At lunchtime I went downtown and Jimmy went home. Everything had been just like always.

Not exactly like always. Jimmy wasn't home when Mrs. Wilson returned at four o'clock. At suppertime he still hadn't arrived. By nine o'clock the Wilsons were worried. Then they found the note.

"What note?" I wanted to know. My mother sighed.

"Honey, the Wilsons received a letter from Jimmy's parents yesterday." She rubbed the back of her hand across her face. "His father found a job in Chicago. There's some work for him in an apartment building, but he can only have the job if he and his wife have no children. Do you understand?"

I stared at her blankly. She stood up and pushed the hair back off her forehead. "They asked the Wilsons to keep Jimmy. With the letter was a passbook with the money in an account for raising him." She stood by the sink, her back to me.

My throat was tight and dry. "But...Jimmy—" My thoughts flew apart from a confused jumble. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to think.

My mother turned around to face me. "Jimmy found the letter. He cleaned out his room and took the passbook. On his bed was a note for the Wilsons, telling them he had gone. We don't know where he is."

She came to me and put her hand on my head. "Mrs. Wilson seems to think that nothing can be done about it. She's already given up. We really need your help. You knew him better than any of us. Are you sure you don't know anything about it?"

She bombarded me with questions, but I couldn't help. I couldn't even make sense of what was happening. Finally she gave up.

"O.K. Why don't you go lie down for a while. If you feel like it later, go down and see Mrs. Wilson, would you? She wanted to talk to you." Ma rang up someone on the telephone, and I wandered out.

I knew I wouldn't be able to rest, so I walked down to the Wilsons'. She was at the kitchen table with a tub of beans on her lap. There were more beans on the table, but they just lay there. She wasn't washing them or stringing them or anything. It was the first time I remembered seeing her sit still.

"Hi, Mrs. Wilson," I said, walking in. It felt strange being in the house without Jimmy.

Mrs. Wilson sounded far away. "Oh, hello Dear. Thanks for coming down." She looked at me but her eyes went right past me like they didn't see me at all. "Did your Ma tell you about Jimmy going?"

I started to say something but she brushed past me and went into a bedroom. She returned with an envelope.

"Your name's on it, so I guess it's something of yours." She handed it to me. "You should be more careful how you leave your things..." She trailed off, going through into the sitting room and leaving me alone in the kitchen.

I scraped one of the big wooden chairs back from the table and sat down. I held the envelope for a moment, looking at it. Jimmy's writing outlined my name in capital letters. I tore open the flap and looked inside.

It was the photograph. I pulled it out and smoothed the creases flat on the table in front of me. The couple stared steadily back at me. I tried to find something there, some clue that any one thing that I had told Jimmy about them might be true, but they were the same posed figures that they had always been. Looking at the photo, I thought about the picture postcard a friend had once sent me in the mail from a place I'd never been. It had a pretty scene on the front, really neat with bright colors, and for a while I had wanted to go and see the place it was from. Ma had told me no, it was too far to go and anyway, I'd most likely be disappointed if I saw it. Still, she had added when she saw how disappointed I was, the postcard had been a real nice thought. Looking at the photograph at the Wilsons' kitchen table, I guessed it was the same

with Jimmy's parents.

I stood to leave and stepped on a piece of paper. Jimmy's writing scrawled across it. My name on the top told me that it must have fallen out of the envelope when I pulled out the photo. I picked it up and read it.

Nick— I guess I should have known all along. I'm not the kind of person that good things happen to. I just feel like I got to do something now. Got to be somebody. You keep the photo. Doesn't seem right to take it with. Just a couple of people now. They were always more yours anyway. —

Jimmy

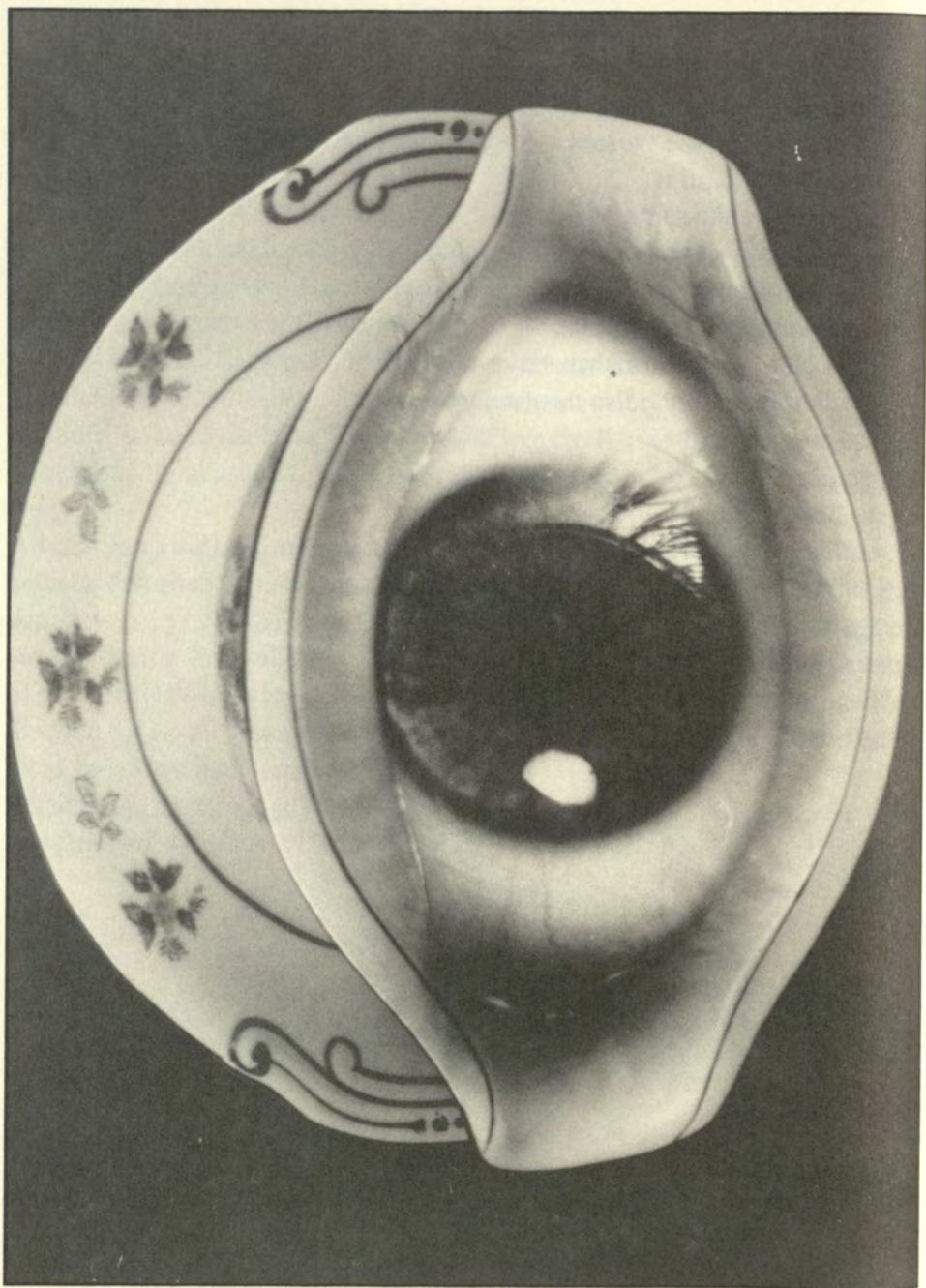
I remember being surprised when the first tear hit the top of the paper.

Roma, Spring 1992

You discovered it would take two days
to reach Corfu. I sucked the city
in through my nose. It was not
the light blue air of the Swiss and I gagged
on poverty and pre-pubescent thieves.
“Where’s the romance?” I shouted
at the window. Darkness and streaming rain only
reflected my frustration. You sat hunched
on the bed, solid dark stream of hair falling over
your face, a wall unkempt since Firenze.

All that long night Rome decayed. Before morning
ancient defenses were conquered by wandering
vandals. You held me and I let you
see me crying for relics of past lives and fear
of the dark. Wine warmed mutual hungers, cocooned
discoveries of the pension italiana. We shared
what bread we had. In the dark
outside, the water streamed into the Colosseum
and flooded the circle at St. Peter’s.

I was eight when my brother
broke his leg falling from
a bike. I cried for the twisted
limb when we heard it
would never be the same again.
Sitting with you now, I taste
the tang of those tears
I will allow myself later alone.
The skin on my arm burns where
you touch me and my pulse throbs
against my ears in the
silence between us
as you look at me. Helplessly
I remember the aborted
freedom of my brother's journey,
see again that solitary tangled
figure sprawling on the pavement
and hear the resounding finality
of the break.



Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder

Photo by Katherine Williams

Graveyard Tomatoes

Beware of the stars in the sky. Beware of the fish in the sea.
Beware of what lurks behind closet doors. Beware of what grins in the
basement at night.

Beware of what you can't see. Beware of what you might hear.
There are things that mothers and fathers beware. Beware of these things
as well...

In a town in a place not far from your house, lives a wrinkled and
weary old man. He's not very strong. He can't lift a stone, but he still
tries to do what he can.

One day he decided that he'd spend his time by planting a
vegetable garden. In the bright blazing sun, he tucked in his seeds and
waited for something to happen.

Days came and days went. Rain came and rain went. The old
man watched and the old man waited, until one tiny leaf sprouted up.

Now the garden was made in the back of the yard. It was right
along side of a tall wooden fence. If you ever climbed over and saw what
was there, you might hold your breath in suspense.

Row after row of grave after grave in an eerie and old cemetery.
Beneath the grass and the cold hard ground there are coffins and bones to
be found.

All of those bodies stuck under the ground. All of those bodies
beyond the fence. All of those people in such a small field. Surely, one
of them wants to get out.

So, under the ground, under the fence, and into a vegetable garden.
Up through the roots and into the leaves of a fresh planted green tomato.

The old man watched. The old man waited. The tomato
continued to grow. It got bigger and bigger, and better and better. It
brought smiles to his face in the morning.

At night he would dream of the day he'd wake up, when the
tomato was ready to eat. And in the tomato a soul from the graveyard was
doing the same when he'd sleep.

Well, soon that day came and the old man laughed as he plucked it
and took it inside. As his teeth sank in, something was switched, and now
that tomato is him.

So, beware of the stars. Beware of the moon, and beware of what
you might see. Beware of the monster that's under your bed, and make
sure you watch what you eat. . .

. . .the end

Moving Mirrors

Sweet is this
perpetual present
of most you

(Be you Blood of my Blood or
No, bold be I to say
I love most you
I most love you
You I love, most)

In you is me and
the me reflects
the you I see
the me, too, I most want
to be
(don't you know we are moving
mirrors in the same dance)

3 or 72
(sweet baby nephew or
dearest most Dad)
Smoothest skin of sisters
or lines my Mom
from most laughter
faith, too, in friends like
family

All I see
All see me
All reflect
Creating

(thank you)

Me.

Norma Field

Norma Field was born to a Japanese mother and an American father in Occupied Japan. She currently teaches Japanese literature at the University of Chicago. She is the author of *In the Realm of A Dying Emperor*, *The Splendor of Longing in the Tale of Genji* and the translator of *And Then*. She lectured at Valparaiso University on September 29, 1992, after which, *The Lighter* had a chance to chat with her.

KATRINA LOEWE: During your lecture you talked about the "Textbook Wars." I presume you're referring to the fact that in Japan school textbooks must say certain things. They're censored. Only certain textbooks can be used in the classroom. Is this happening with other books besides textbooks? Is there any censorship going on in Japan, particularly concerning critiques of the country and its leadership?

NORMA FIELD: More self-censorship than anything, which is a much more effective form of censorship than one that's imposed externally. That's true in newspapers, in the language that's used about the Imperial Family. I must say at the same time that a lot's been published in the last two years that we might not have thought could be said in print before that. So in a sense, the old Emperor's dying loosened things up. You know, most mainstream publishers play it safe, so you don't even have to see it as censorship, which is another important kind of censorship. It's a little bit different than what you're asking me about, but nevertheless related.

KL: Your mother is Japanese and your father is American, but you've chosen, I think, the American culture. . .

NF: I've chosen to live here, yes. . .

KL: And the books you've written, as far as I know, are all for American audiences. Do you see yourself changing perspectives in your books for that American readership, to speak to an American people? And have you ever considered writing books for a Japanese audience?

NF: That's a really good question. In fact, both the Genji book and this book have been translated into Japanese, and I've seen the draft of the translation of this book, and I'll be revising it extensively, and that has really made me think. The Japanese language is so nuanced for hierarchy. There are verb endings that change for gender and age relationships and social status relationships, and there are ways of adjusting the difference between you and your interrogator. And that's one of the things that, in seeing the translation, I realized that I had to involve myself in the Japanese translation, because I have a life in Japan, in Japanese, and I have a certain relationship with the people I write about. I realized I owe it to them to somehow try to be faithful to that relationship, which my translator could not read (she is a Japanese woman) from my English text. So that's one subtle kind of thing that I think I have to rework. My editor was concerned that, without those nuances, my book would seem like pure Japan-bashing, in Japanese, so that's something else I have to think out. Not that I want to soften anything per se, but it's almost where I situate myself. Do I situate myself outside Japan? I think I situate myself inside and outside Japan, and I don't have a fixed position in the book. But if I look as if I'm purely outside Japan, judging Japan, then it does become a very harsh critique. So that's something I want to modulate very carefully too. Does that begin to get at your question?

KL: Yes, that's the second part. But going back to the first part, are there any particular things you think about in writing to an American audience, things you perhaps "tone down" or "tone up"?

NF: Not that so much, partly because one of the things that's surprised me when I've written about Japan, not just in this book but in papers, is that sometimes my American readers will say, aren't you better off if you base your argument on what some Japanese themselves are saying. I don't feel myself to be separate so much from Japan and some of my views are so commonplace among certain parts of the Japanese population that I feel I haven't estranged myself enough in a way. So I wouldn't think of it as "toning down" or "toning up." I think there's a lot of basic information I have to provide because I think Americans know very very little about Japan. All of that seems foolish in Japanese. It's as if I were writing to fourth graders, which is normal when you're trying to give out one country's history for another country. But still, that is a general problem about Japan as well, how little is known about the United States and Europe, of the things that Americans would expect Europeans to

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know, and Europeans would expect Americans to know; there isn't that type of reciprocal familiarity with Japan.

KL: You came to study in the United States and at some point chose literature as your field of study. That, however, primarily means Western literature. Do you have any comments on that, because you come from a bi-cultural background, that a literature degree is confining yourself to one culture?

NF: Yes, I guess that's why I don't do strictly literature anymore. But there's something free — literature gives you a lot of maneuvering space. I think that, for me, still, the best way to learn about a place, a society I don't know, is through a novel. I still really believe that. In a paper, an academic essay, you have to proceed, first of all, logically, in an outline form, and you have to try to be as lucid as possible, whereas so much of reality seems to me precisely to be fuzzy, in its more important parts, and literature gets at that most precisely. So that's why I can't ever give up on literature as an orientation toward the whole. These days I use literature to inform the way I write, even if I'm not necessarily writing about literary subjects. So that's my relationship now with literature.

KL:What prompted you to write your most recent book?

NF: This book? Well, you know the first book I wrote was the tale of Genji, which was first written around the year 1000. It's one of the world's classics and I love it very dearly. But to be willing to be a scholar on something like that means acquiring a lot of paraphernalia. So during the time I spent in Japan, I felt obligated to always be learning more stuff, arcane materials to help me deal with a text like that, and I felt I could never live in my own time. So there was that kind of frustration. The other frustration came from feeling increasingly alienated from Japanese society today, and becoming uncomfortable with dealing with this beautiful aesthetic monument when I'm so alienated by this society. There was that great gap, and I felt that I really had to take time to work out a position for myself, how I could look at Japanese society today, or else I didn't feel any credibility anymore about myself as a scholar of Japan, and no more passion either. You need the passion to keep going. So I think there were a number of these concerns that I was carrying around in my head for twenty years, and it was really being there as the emperor was dying that allowed a number of concerns to crystallize and

made me feel that now was the time to sit down and try to write about and think through it all.

KL: I read the introduction to your book, and I found it really fascinating, your own experiences and as you said, how you get at a culture through novels. It was the day-to-day experiences that gave me that insight into Japan. I'm curious why you didn't talk about it at the lecture tonight, along with the three episodes from the book.

NF: I guess I was trying to be issue-oriented tonight, and that was it. That's too simple of an answer. There's a way in which I felt that it was really important to write about myself and where I stood in that book because, even for American readers, I didn't want to seem like a simple Japan-basher. So I wanted to make very clear my own investments in that society and my own attachments to it; nevertheless, as an academic you always worry about seeming narcissistic or self-indulgent, so there's that kind of a reservation that I probably have as an automatic reaction.

KL: Are you working on or planning to write any other books in the future?

NF: Yes. As soon as I get some time, there are two that I am thinking about. But one, I want to do some serious translating of women's writing, to see what Japanese feminism is, because, well, it's another form of Orientalism. There's so much interest in gender in American universities, and East Asia scholars talk about these issues, but the way the American academy works, translation has been so devalued, that people are only concerned with producing their own sophisticated analysis and critiques. I realized that then we become guilty of perpetuating a kind of Orientalism, and never giving these people a chance to be read in their own voices, in English. So I want to do some of that seemingly humble labor. I feel it as a kind of obligation. Then I also want to do another book of essays having something to do with Japanese modernity. For example, do you know a Frenchman named Jean Are Fabre? No, right? Practically no American does. Every Japanese eight year old knows him. He's an entymologist, and Japanese people are very big on collecting insects. This man's writings have been translated three times over, in a total of something like fifteen volumes. Why? Why is this French entymologist such a big deal even today in Japan? It has something to do with Japanese modernization, loss of familiar ties with nature,

Westernization, and trying to recover compensatory relationships with nature, that insect collecting becomes such a fetish in Japan. Of course, insects have a very traditional role in traditional Japanese interests, particularly poetry, so there's a kind of foundation that invites that translation. But still, I was fascinated to see a Toyota commercial on television this summer showing a family with butterfly nets in their Toyota's, and they hop out, and then the line is "You always want to be able to be Fabre." And I thought how an ad like that would absolutely not compute in America, so what's going on in Japan in 1992? So there's a wonderful combination where you're recovering a time of nature but you're doing it in a Western way, so you're accomodating both needs at once. So I am hoping that a number of these topics will serendipidously suggest themselves to me until I have enough for a book.

The Address

by Sohrab Sapehri

translated from the Farsi

“Where is the house of my friend” was in the air when the rider asked.
The sky paused.

A passerby gave the gravel the stick of light dangling from his lips,
Pointed to a birch and said:

“Before you reach the tree,

There is an orchard-path greener than God’s dream,

Where love is as blue as the feathers of sincerity.

Go to the end of that path which leads to the backdoor of adolescence,
Then turn toward the flower of solitude.

Two steps before the flower

You stop at the foot of the eternal fountain of earth-myths,

And you are engulfed by a crystal-clear fear.

In the fluid friendliness of space, you hear a rustle:

You see a child

Who has climbed the branches of a tall pine, to pluck a chick from the
nest of light,

And you ask the child:

‘Where is the house of my friend?’”

The Midtown: Seattle, 1963

I.

They sit at the bar, heads tilted upwards watching basketball
on the T.V. in the corner above the popcorn machine
While the bouncer fills the door frame,
leans on one shoulder
And the waitresses gossip by the jukebox,
bitch about tips

In the back, men in three-piece suits, college boys
and the regulars jam quarters into the panoramas
On a paint-chipped folding chair, one breaks rhythm
to dig for more change

Thumbtacked to brown paneled walls covered with dart holes
made by drunken men
Out of date calendar girls watch over the regulars
and five card stud on green felt tables
Cigar smoke rises from black plastic ashtrays
suspended from the ceiling a cloud forms
making the room smaller than it is

II.

Upstairs, she lies still and listening to laughter of men
too drunk to go home to their wives
The smell of sex is thick, mixed with Old Spice
and stale beer
And she is nauseated in the heat, the air heavy and wet
flies buzz the screen looking for holes

She stares at the rusty water-stained ceiling, waiting
for men and boys to come
With poker money stuffed in their front pockets
sneaking up the back stairs

Here they find a retreat from the self-made hell
they call family
And she—
the money to pay her rent

Newlyweds

Ninety-six degrees
Heat halts powers of reason
And I should kill you

Why did you fiddle
With the whatchamajigger
Fifty-eight before

Now beyond repair
No oxygen to my brain
The room is spinning

And I hate you for
Buying Coke instead of
Black cherry Kool-Aid

Also remind you
Mother's house has central air
And no basketball

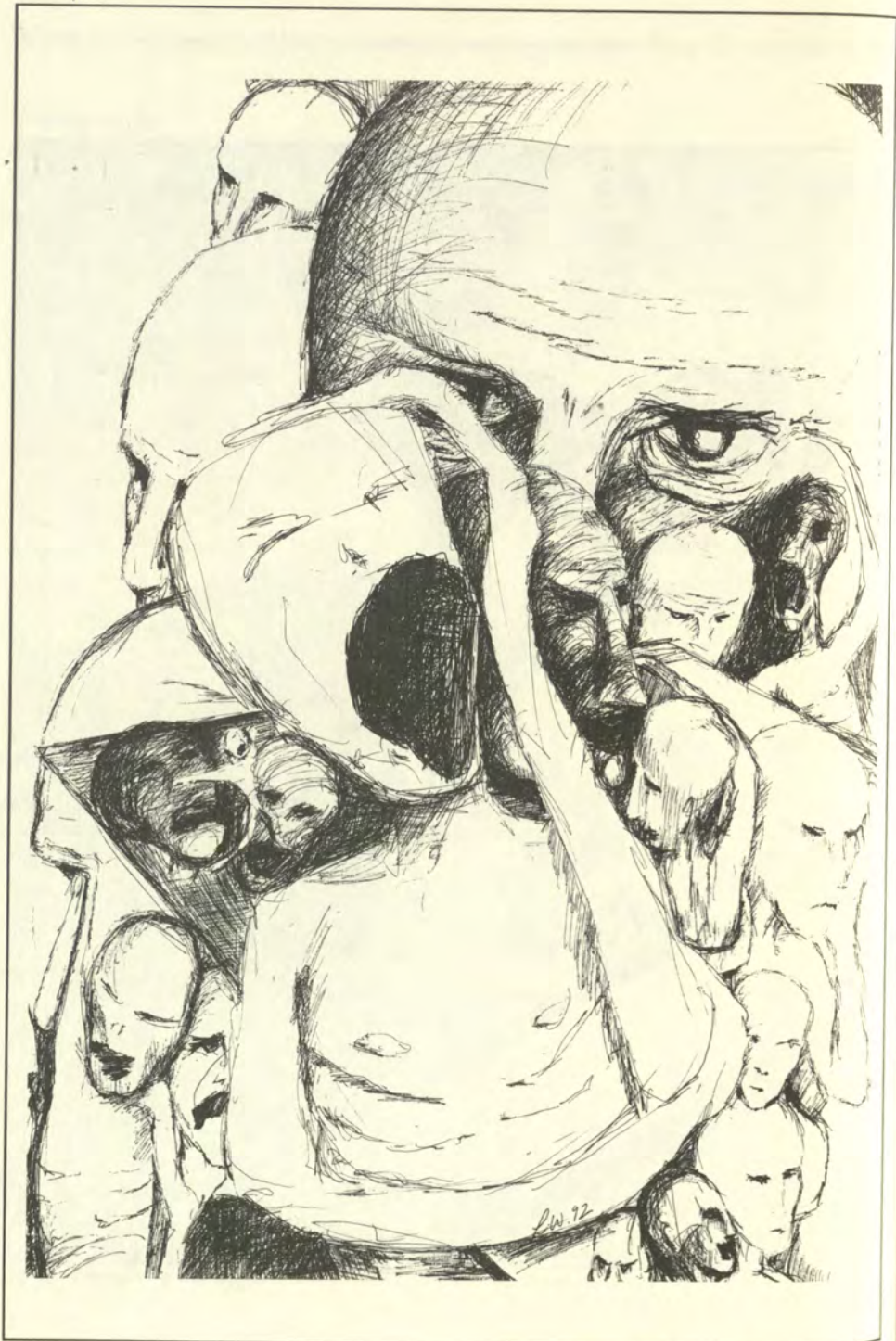
There is an outline
Of our bodies on the sheets
Sweat and hours-old sex

Honeymoon over
Can't afford parts and labor
My cat is panting

Ninety-six degrees
The ice cube trays are empty
And I should kill you



Photo by Kerry Ghormley



Drawing by Lisa Wolniakowski

Hymn

Just sitting in my room; that's all.

Just sitting on the filthy covers of my single bed; that's all.

"God will not help of course:

'For a whore is a deep ditch; and a strange woman is a narrow pit.'

(Dworkin quotes the Preacher).

Taking another tasteless drag of my stale black coffee, I watch those words roll off the page. . .

Then this carpenter's nail—this rusty old railroad spike of a thing—falls straight out of the briko-block and lands next to me.

What am I supposed to make of this?

(The woman, a friend of mine, probably had used it to hang her tapestry or Christmas lights.)

I pick it up. Finger it. Alive (or dying) its bold-brown skin rubs onto mine.

It is a stake-like nail wrapped with a serpentine wire. It is a fragile nerve strapped securely to its "necessary" tension.

Really it is a nail with a wire around it.

How long must this go on—how ripped-open-red—how angry does a "girl" have to get?

I am not a deep ditch.

I am not a narrow pit.

Male poets, male philosophers, male priests, writing wistful words about women: prescribing, proscribing, preaching and praising—they make me itch:

Do not compare me to a summer's day.

Do not praise me for my chastity.

Do not lament the gentle curve of my snowy neck.

There is no metaphor for me, damn you, and there won't be.

Quit comparing me to objects. Quit insisting that you know.

I am far more complex than your Sargasso Sea.

I understand that you only wish to create, to work, to be eternal, to urge your business about to the goal of absolute beauty: but I am *not*,

sir, the blushing bottom-rung of your grand ascent.

I am not being violent. Violence has never been enough. You have
 always out-violenced me. Exposed me, demeaned me, and
 butchered me if I fought back with your own weapons
 you called me a "whore," exposed me, demeaned me and laughed.

I am not being violent.

Violence has never been enough.

My dear poet, do you really want to praise women?

(Think before you answer.)

Then let me speak to preserve my own immortality.

I refuse to be the metaphor that glorifies your pen.

Let *me* define *myself* within and beyond the mores of our past.

To hell with your Procrustean tactics and to hell with your bed!

Damn you, (I hate with all my passion to be asking, but) give me my
 freedom right fucking now and *never* make me ask for it again.

Any other form of praise I will flatly deny.

I am not a deep ditch, I am not a narrow pit,
and I am tired of getting the permission of men.

I am here to speak and to speak loudly at that.

I am only myself, that is: I am "Angela."

I have come with things to say.

How My Sister Lost Her Teeth

I'll ain't never forget that day ma sister lost'er teeth. Pa was 'bout ready to ride off to another cattle auction 'en was roostin' up the kids to lend'm a hand. . .well, roostin' weren't the word. . .more like tuggin'us by the napes, 'en by golly we hollered the very bejesus outs our throats 'til Pa hollered hisself louder than all us kids together 'en threatened to get out grandpa's old cattle prod that I ain't never seen him use but I heard stories that I figure might be true. . .Anyhow, Gerthen (that's ma sister) was raisin' such a hoot that Pa damn near swatted the skin offa her rear 'en yelled 'til his face turned blue'bout how he breaks his back 'en such 'en that if she don't like it she can find her own eats. But worst of all, he stood up all rigid-like, made his voice real mean, then up and gave her the most godawful job whose burden all us siblings couldn't hardly bear.

Pa whirled 'round and started waivin' his crooked finger (the one he broke when he got mad doin' laundry in the crik 'en he slipped on a rock 'en fell on it funny I guess). . .then he pointed it right at that mossy manure wagon he always rigs up to the back of his truck 'fore he heads off for them godforsaken cattle auctions (see, he never could find it in'm to git a real cattle wagon). Anyhow, poor Gerthen, god bless her soul, dipped her head 'en walked straight for 'at manure wagon as if God had summoned her hisself. Pa up 'en let her tug 'til she had tears in her eyes 'en didn't even offer to pull his truck up close. Tilden 'en me started up to push her along but Pa wouldn't have it. He said she had to fend for herself 'en that if she wants to learn her lesson the hard way then he'll be damned if he ain't gonna let her do it.

Anyhow, Gerthen puffed 'en pouted but pulled all the while 'til the veins popped little squiggles on 'er forehead. 'En God bless her soul she did one right admirable job 'til she got barely a hog's tail from the trailer hitch. She was so wrapped up in her tuggin' that she let her bare little feet slip on a horse patty. 'En I'll be, she flipped so high in the air I coulda counted to 10 'fore her mouth wacked down on tht shiny chrome trailer hitch. She sat up 'en wanted to press the pain out but her hands was all smeared with horse patty 'en all she could do was set there with her mouth gapin' two empty spots where her two front teeth used to be. We all stood silent for a second kinda wonderin' if it were really happenin' of if we was all havin' the same nightmare. I run up 'en tried to wipe the

horse patty offa her with ma shirt tail but it weren't no good. Tilden up 'en started cryin' with'er so bad he couldn't look for her teeth no more (we never did find one of'em). The little ones jus' knda stared, I figured they was too young 'en was jus' glad it weren't them. Pa got horse patty on his nose when he hugged Gerthen 'en he started sniffin' 'en gruntin' hissself, 'en mumblin' real quiet 'bout how he was sorry 'en how Dr. Bradley can fix 'em up in no time 'en how God! did he ever wish our mother was here, god bless her soul. . .

BAKXAI: scene i

by Euripides

translated from the Greek

Dramatis Personae Euripides

TEIRESIAS: the prophet of Thebes. He is very old, and very well known throughout Hellas (Ancient Greece).

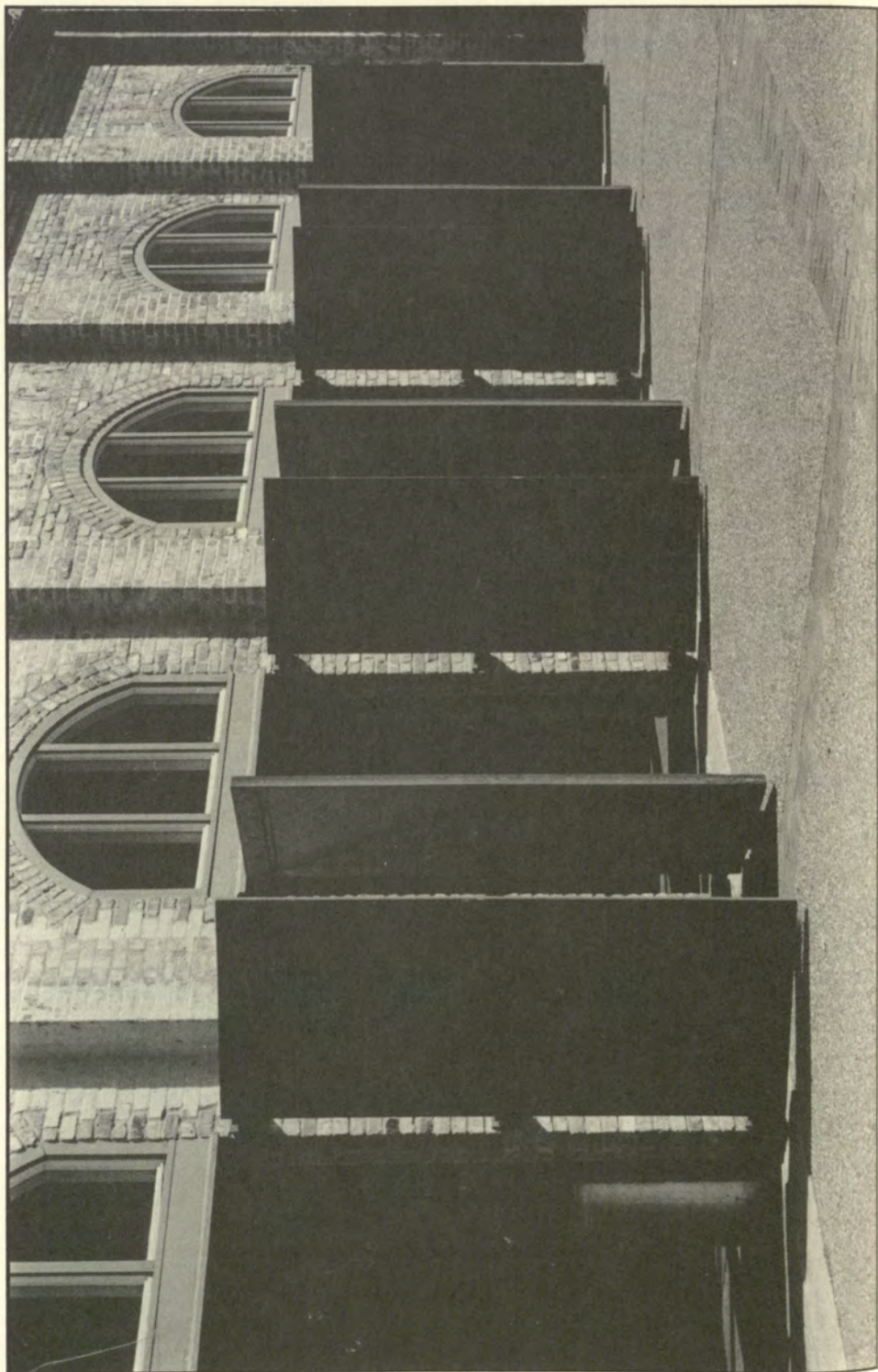
CADMUS: former king of Thebes, and Grandfather of the current king, Pentheus.

PENTHEUS: tyrant of Thebes, and cousin to Dionysus (Bacchus).

CHORUS LEADER: an Asian woman, disciple to Dionysus.

Setting

The action takes place in Thebes, specifically in front of a tomb. At the start of scene i, TEIRESIAS and CADMUS are dressed in the traditional costume of Dionysus, which includes a spotted deer skin and an ivy crown. They each carry a thrysus (a wooden rod) which is also a part of Dionysian worship.



Gates of Heaven

Photo by Eric Bardenhagen

TEIRESIAS

Who is at the door? Call Cadmus out of the house,
the son of Agenor, who came from Sidon
and raised the towers of this town called Thebes.
Go someone, seek him and tell him
Teiresias is present; I have come on account of these happenings,
since we are both old men, he the elder one,
to make the thrysus, to wear
the fawn skin, and crown ourselves with ivy.

enter Cadmus

CADMUS

Beloved friend! I heard and therefore recognized your voice
from my house; the wise voice of wisdom.
I have come ready in the dress of the god.
For it is right, because he is the only child from my daughter
and he, Dionysus, is a god to men.
It is up to us that his powerful being be magnified to greatness.
Where must I go to dance? Where must I walk
and in what city may I shake my head? Tell me,
one old man to another old man, Teiresias, for you are the expert.
I will never grow ill, neither by night nor by day
of beating my thrysus upon the earth; already my
age has been forgotten!

TEIRESIAS

This is also my feeling!
For I too feel young enough to perform the dance!

They attempt the dance, but soon stop, weary and out of breath

CADMUS

Couldn't we just take a carriage to the mountain?

TEIRESIAS

But if we did that, we would not hold the god in proper honor.

CADMUS

Shall one old man play nurse to the other?

TEIRESIAS

The god will effortlessly lead the two of us.

CADMUS

Are we the only men from this city to take part in the chorus dance of Bacchus?

TEIRESIAS

We alone have the knowledge, the rest are fools.

CADMUS

Then we are taking too long; let me have your hand.

they join hands

TEIRESIAS

There, take it in yours and make them one.

CADMUS

Having been born mortal, I do not look down upon the gods.

TEIRESIAS

We, as mortals, have no cleverness in their eyes.

The traditions, as ancient as time, which we have received from our fathers, will not be upset by words or argument though clever men try by means of subtlety and cunning.

People will say that I've dishonored my old age in dancing to Bacchus and wrapping my head in ivy; this is not so, for the god commands not only the young to dance, but also the old.

He wishes to be exalted by all and to have everyone made common, putting none in a class apart.

CADMUS

looking into the distance

Since you have the light, Teiresias, but do not see,

I will have to be the prophet this time!
Pentheus, the son of Echion, is walking quickly
down the road towards the palace. He is the one to whom I have given
the rule of this land.

How excited he seems; I wonder what new thing he will tell us.

enter PENTHEUS, not noticing their outrageous costumes

PENTHEUS

I was abroad and have now come home because of what I've learned;
I've heard that some new perversity was happening up in the city,
that the women have abandoned their homes
to mold their bodies into Bacchic revelry, and
go gossiping in the thickly shaded mountains; this is that novelty
spirit, Dionysus, who has come to this land.

In the middle of the band of revelers stands a bowl
full of wine, and then they slink off, one by one,
to satisfy the lust of men,
alleging that they are sacrificing priests of Bacchus.

I rank their devotion to Aphrodite, not Bacchus.

For these women I have taken shakles and bound their hands
and they are now safely in the common jail.

For the remainder I will send an expedition, and hunt them down out of
the mountains,

including Ino and Agave, who is my mother,
and also Autonae, who is the mother of Acteon.

I will put a swift end to these perverse Bacchants
by fitting their limbs with iron traps!

They say that a foreigner has come,
a wizard conjuror from the land of Lydia,
wearing his hair in fragrant yellow curls,
and having the wine-colored blush of Aphrodite in his cheeks,
who day and night keeps his company
with young girls, tempting them with his mysterious joy.

If he is in this land I will take him
and put an end to his tapping thrysus and the
shaking of his hair, by tearing his head from his body.

He claims that Dionysus is a god,
having been sewn up into the thigh of Zeus,
but it is known by all that Dionysus was burned to death

with his mother, because she lied about her marriage to Zeus.
Doesn't this haggard stranger deserve to be hung
for this tremendous arrogance, whoever he is?

taking notice of their dress

God! What is this? I see Teiresias
dressed in the spotted fawn-skin of Dionysus,
and my mother's father as well- it's ridiculous -
performing the Bacchanal dance with a wand; I cringe at the sight,
Grandfather, because I know in my heart this is not your doing.
Why don't you throw away that ivy? And also, Grandfather,
let the thrysus go from your hand.

turning to Teiresias

This is your doing Teiresias; by inventing a new god
you wish to create new occasions to watch birds
and collect more money for your interpretations.
If not for your old age I would banish you from the land,
or better yet, have you seated and chained with the rest of these
Bacchants,
for introducing these evil rituals. When women
are allowed to feast on gleaming wine,
I say there is nothing of value in such an orgy.

CHORUS LEADER

What impiety is this? Oh King, don't you have modesty
for the gods, or for Cadmus, who sowed the seed of this land?
Will the child of Echion disgrace his family?

TEIRESIAS

A wise man with an honest case to argue
does not have a difficult task;
you have spoken well, and with a quick tongue,
but the content of your speech lacks good sense.
A man who uses only his self-confidence in speech
proves to be a bad citizen because he has no sense.

This new god who you laugh at,
your words cannot capture the magnitude of
his power in Hellas. For there are two natures, young man,
that are of humankind; the goddess Demeter-
she is of the earth, though her name is what you wish.
It is this one who has brought up men from childhood on her food;

after her came Semele's son, who matched her bread with his wine,
offering the fluid of grapes to mortal men,
and it is he who puts an end to the distress and pain
in the lives of men. Whenever he strikes with the juice of the vine,
it gives them sleep to forget the evils of each day.
There is no better medicine for suffering than wine.
He is a god, and is poured out to the gods,
in order that men owe him all of their blessings.

And now you laugh at him, and laugh at the story
of the god being sewn into the thigh of Zeus? I will teach you what that
means.

When Zeus had stolen the baby Dionysus out of the fire
of the lightning, and had secured the new-born as a god in Olympus,
Hera wanted him to be cast out of heaven;
Zeus countered this in a god-like way.
He broke off a piece of the sky and gave it
to Hera in the form of Dionysus, so that she could cast him out.
But Zeus kept the true Dionysus and thus saved him from Hera.
At this time, the myth was created that he was sewn into the thigh
of Zeus.

By changing one word, they made the myth, because he
was once was a hostage to Hera, god to goddess.

This mania is the way of the god, and the one who celebrates
his mysteries has a multitude of raving prophecies;
when the god has absolute control of a man's soul,
he speaks through the man's insanity.
He also has taken some of the duties of Ares;
generals have run in fear while in battle
and vanished before weapons have been raised.

This mania is also of Dionysus.

Soon you will see him standing upon the rocks of Delphi,
towering over the twin peaks of Mount Parnassus,
and brandishing his Bacchic staff. He will be almighty in Hellas.
You should listen to me, Pentheus.

Do not be overconfident in knowing the force that rules men,
and also do not mistake a sick thought for a wise one.

Receive the god into your land,
pour an offering, and crown your head in Bacchic fashion.

It is not Dionysus that makes women chaste,
because chastity is found in the human character.

In the Bacchic rite the pure woman
will not lose her purity.

pointing to a gathering crowd

Look, even you are glad when many people
gather at your gates, and the name Pentheus is made great in the city.
It would not be a bad thing, I think, if he were worshiped here as well.
Therefore Cadmus and myself, the ones you laugh at,
will wrap our heads in ivy and dance.

Yes, we are an ugly pair, but both willing to dance,
and none of your words will mislead me into resisting the god.

Your mind is sick, and no medicine can help it,
because it seems that some drug has caused your sickness.

CHORUS LEADER

Old man, you have done no dishonor to Apollo,
and you have also given honor to Bromius, a great god.

CADMUS

Grandson, Teiresias has spoken good things to you.
Stay with us, and do not disregard our traditions.
Your words are all in the air, and your argument has no wisdom.
If this god is dead, just as you say,
tell yourself that he is alive; this is a good lie,
because it makes Semele the mother of a god,
and our entire family will be honored by this.

You have seen the pitiful fate of Acteon,
being torn apart and eaten by his own dogs, up in the mountains.
He only claimed to be a better hunter than Artemis.
Do not make the same mistake. Come, let me crown your
head with ivy; be with us giving honor to the god.

PENTHEUS

furiously slapping his hand

Never lay your hand on me! Go, play with your Bacchantes, then;
don't wipe your stupidity on me.

This fraudulent teacher of yours will take what I give him.

to the crowd

Someone with speed, go. Go to Teiresias' throne where he watches
birds. Overturn and destroy it with crowbars;
obliterate and tear down his entire existence.

Throw his sacramental tapestries to the winds, and release them into a thunderstorm. This will bite his heart the most.

The rest of you go up and track down this effeminate foreigner, who has brought this new plague to our women, and desecrated our beds. When you catch him, bring him here in chains. I'll have him stoned which is the death he deserves, and I'll see to it that there is an end to his Bacchic rites in Thebes.

TEIRESIAS

You fool, you don't know the idiocy of your own words. Your early disrespect has turned to raving lunacy.

Let us go, Cadmus, and ask the god to do nothing harsh to this man or this city.

Come with me and bring your ivy wrapped staff; hold my body up, and I will support you.

It would be ugly for two old men to fall, but come what may, we must be subject to the god Dionysus.

The name Pentheus will bring great sorrow to your house, Cadmus; what I say is not prophecy, but a fact. What a fool says, a fool does!

Cadmus and Teiresias limp off together



Photo by Lisa Wolniakowski

ALTHEA FRUTEX*

for Craig

I.

A honey-dipped moon shares its sweet,
subtle light as we, wrapped
in the warmth of midnight-flannel,
rock with anxiousness and wonder.

II.

A fan overhead exhales cool breath
on our damp skin and comfortable
silence, while the largeness of your
indigo-sleeper drips from my body.

III.

A small-winged devil dances
with skeletons and secrets,
hoping to watch us drown, dizzy
with the sting of confession.

IV.

A cherub comes and gently places
our warts and cancers on her back
and with them flies away, leaving
us strong, bathed and baptized.

* A flower meaning "consumed with love."

CATCHFLY

Bloated and ungirdled, I make out our agendas
in the attempt to avoid additional nooses and nets.
I'm not hoping to raise a prodigy, or even a president,
but a man — unlike the father, or grandfather, you'll ever know.

I'll not employ patricidal undertones
or reinforce the pitiful absence you will grow to accept,
but rather I'll show you the beauty and strength of a matriarchal
hearth — teach you to respect the breasts you'll soon suck,

remembering them as servants that once nourished
you. And when you graduate from the sandbox dreams,
should you find yourself concerned with The Hunt,
(in which lessons are easy to come by), I'll leave you

wanting to kill this generational recycling of abandonment.
We'll sort through the floating perversions and propaganda,
realizing your faultlessness in being my beloved bastard.

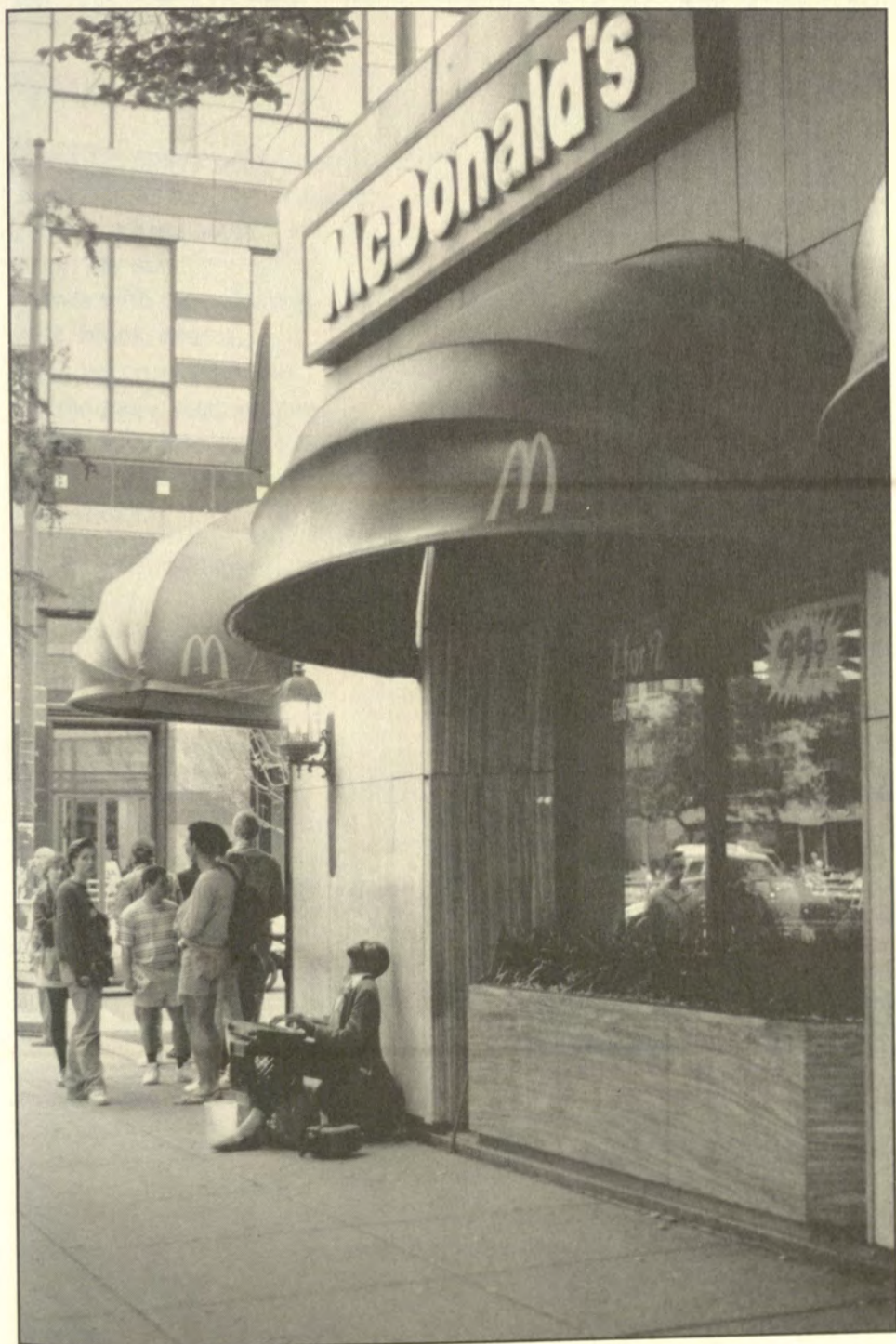


Photo by Naoko Mitsuya

Preacher

"I am not a pastor,"
you breathed to me, grasping
for words, for my mind.
"Magnolia. I think I'll call
you Magnolia." You named
me then entered me
into your store of knowledge.
How did naming
turn to knowing, when you still groped
asking what is where and who
in the Bible told me
that. Their words were page-fillers,
hardly alive,
cliches as common as you
use. Pray

tell me who are you then? A man
molding his own image? Woman-
saver, man-hater, brown-eyed, blues
singer simpering what you think
I want, need
to hear. Well, staple your pages
to your mind if you're storing
a book to share with me;
every witty spittle that flies
from your mouth denies
that you are a free thinker.
"I feel, therefore
I can be free,"¹ the black
lesbian single mother with white
lover sang, surpassing, negating
your moot arguments of who can be,
should be most bitter.

Taking grains and salting my mind,
I season myself, steeling
against your rhetoric, your leaving.
Tell me, why did you touch me, name me, then
wander, stringing me from your pupil
to your pulpit?

¹ Audre Lorde

Splatter

The siren splatters up towards me
smashing against my window,
glass blocking sound.
Bare, my skin
crawls with the pulsating
reds, blues, whites,
flesh becoming medium
for the panic pushing past.
And it somehow fascinates to think
that as it's flashing me,
I am flashing it.

Art

My ankles ached
until my feet swelled,
and then I only noticed
the throbbing
of my toes.

Pink never
did mean pleasure; pain
was pink, tied on each week,
as I stuffed my toes
into its mouths,
and lifted it across
the floor as if it had to be

my partner. I grew
until my feet became squares,
and I was told I should thank
genetics
for my dancer's toes.

Daintiness, escaping the bindings,
floated up
to my arms, angles
dulled and languid as the tissue
encasing the bones in my feet.

And it was never my shoes—
satin, paper, pink—
that embodied my art
until, sold at my yard sale,
they were bought to decorate,
to epitomize
on a wall what it is
to dance.

Contributors Notes

Christine Albright is an English major from Park Ridge, IL. A senior, she knows ninety words of Swedish and believes the dinosaurs perished from a diet lacking the proper balance of cigarettes and cholesterol.

Eric Bardenhagen is a senior English major from Racine, Wisconsin. Eric holds to the theory that the dinosaurs lacked a good Italian restaurant to give them the will to live.

Nancy Bernardo thinks the dinosaurs came across some bad fast food. Nancy is a senior English major from Downers Grove, IL who likes Patsy Kline. She has been published in *The Lighter* before.

Meridith Brand, a senior English major from Wheaton, IL, wonders if the dinosaurs really didn't die but left voluntarily because they knew something we don't. Meridith knows all the songs on Kenny Roger's "The Gambler" album. "Dith Baby" has published poetry in *The Lighter* before.

Stacy Burnham, being student manager of the union, is addicted to the place and its variety of exotic coffees. Stacy is a senior advertising major who asserts that, lacking a good healthy supply of Ben & Jerry's chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream, the dinosaurs had no choice but to opt for extinction.

Michael Chasar doesn't like Jane Austen. Michael is an English/Humanities double major in his senior year from Sagamore Hills, OH. He theorizes that dinosaurs are extinct because very small and furry rodents ate their eggs. Mike has also been published several times in *The Lighter*.

John Delagrance is a senior in the College of Arts and Sciences. He is from Naperville, IL. His work has appeared in previous issues of *The Lighter*. John is the lead singer of the campus-renowned band, Mrs. Frankley.

Denise "Bernie" Albrecht, a senior majoring in English from Fort

Wayne, IN, has the ability to put her hand around her head. Bernie holds with the theory that meteorites killed the dinosaurs.

Elizabeth Ellis is an IECA/Spanish double major from Chicago, IL. Elizabeth, a Southpaw in her senior year, contends that dinosaurs are extinct because so many people like eating dinosaur-shaped Spaghetti-O's.

Kerry Ghormley claims that aliens visited the earth and ate up the dinosaurs. She is a junior art and interior design major hailing from St. Louis Missouri. She enjoys spending time with her two dogs.

Todd A. Gibbs says in-breeding contributed to the dinosaurs' extinction. Todd is a senior Music major from Newington, CT and is a member of The Dry Bones.

Heather Gorman is a sophomore English major from Western Springs, IL. Heather sticks with the theory that meteorites killed the dinosaurs and is a firm believer in Koosh-ball therapy.

Craig Greenman, a senior Philosophy major from Brooklyn, MI, says people might think it's odd that he eats pizza. His essay *On the Mistrust of Poetry* received first prize for non-fiction in last spring's Wordfest contest.

Christopher Hanson likes to bake, listens to Irish Folk music, and never puts on pants before eleven on Saturday mornings. A senior majoring in Theology from South Haven, MI, Christopher thinks the dinosaur's extinction had something to do with Cheese-whiz.

Erika Harris is majoring in Philosophy. Erika is a junior from Gary, IN.

Kevin Lindamood wears his socks on the wrong feet. A senior Philosophy major from Richmond, MI, Kevin says dinosaurs are still around—they just wear different masks. Lindamood has been published in *The Lighter* in previous issues.

Katrina Loewe is a senior math and physics double major. She hails from Tallahassee, FL. Katrina says that her favorite mountain is Mt. Rainier and that smoking probably killed the dinosaurs.

Amy Louise McColly believes that the dinosaurs died out as part of God's plan. Amy, a third-year law student from Hobart, IN, thinks people might find her personal philosophy odd.

Naoko Mitsuya is a sophomore in the College of Arts and Sciences. She has come from her home in Japan to study at Valparaiso University.

Ali Mohajer is a junior in the College of Arts and Sciences. Ali is from Tehran, Iran. He has been known to appear on the V.U. theater scene.

Matthew Prendergast is a senior English major from Appleton, WI. Matt sees life entirely through the eyes of Dick Enberg. He is a big fan of marsupials, and his turn-offs include people who swear, Dean Martin impersonators, and prisons that aren't bordered by large bodies of water.

John Schaefer, a damn fine oboe player, is from Buffalo, NY. John is a Cross-Pollination/Anthropology double major and stands by the established meteorite theory. John has had several pieces published in *The Lighter* before this year.

S. Steinbrueck is a junior from St. Louis, MO. A Biology/Humanities double major, she likes yellow Kool-aid and paint and thinks the dinosaurs are extinct because they couldn't swim. Sara has also been published in *The Lighter* before.

Ardis L. Stewart is a third-year law student from Frankfort, IL.

Paul D. Streufert quotes Roman orators in his sleep. Paul is a Classics major from Milwaukee, WI in his senior year. He believes in-grown toenails led to the demise of the dinosaurs.

Angela D. Taraskiewicz is from Gallatin, TN. She is a junior in the College of Arts and Sciences and a classics major at that. Angie is a past contributor to *The Lighter*.

Joe Wangerin, a senior fine arts major from Valparaiso, IN, thinks that people are often startled by his wide variety of facial contortions. He believes that poor eyesight and bad dental work led to the demise of the dinosaurs.

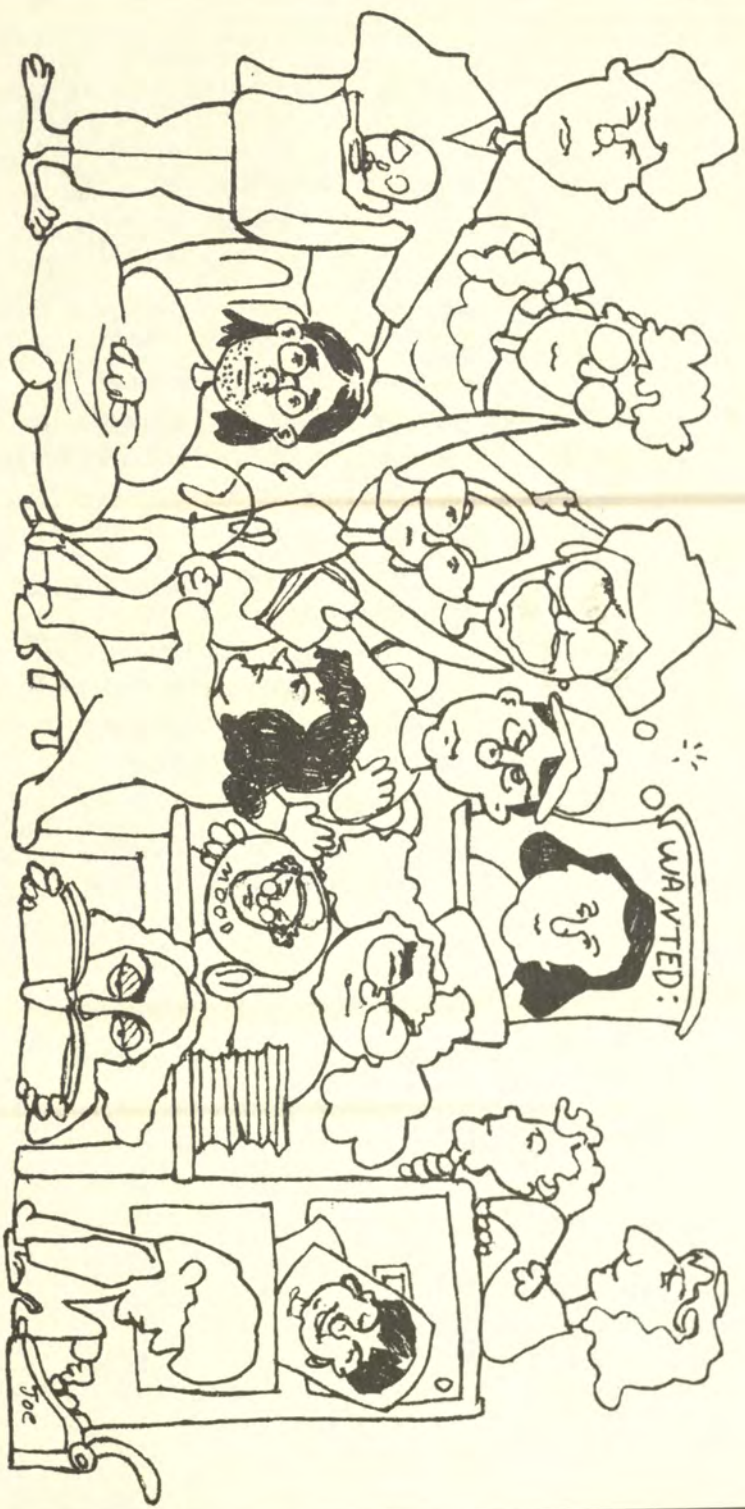
Kate Weizel believes dinosaurs' extinction was due to smoking. Kate is a sophomore English/Humanities double major from Bowie, MA who likes asthmatic cows.

Katherine Williams, known affectionately as "Griggs", is a freshman business major from Valparaiso. She says the meteorite theory is a bunch of hogswat and that cave men shot, killed and ate up the dinosaurs.

Lisa M. Wolniakowski is a senior art major from Brookfield, WI.

Lois Young is a senior majoring in International Economics and Cultural Affairs. She lives in Oak Park, Illinois and spent last spring in Pueblo, Mexico.

The Lighter Staff
(most of 'em, anyway)



The Epilogue

*Now I have done my work. It will endure,
I trust, beyond Jove's anger, fire and sword,
Beyond Time's hunger. The day will come, I know,
So let it come, that day which has no power
Save over my body, to end my span of life
Whatever it may be. Still, part of me,
The better part, immortal, will be borne
Above the stars; my name will be remembered
Wherever Roman power rules conquered lands,
I shall be read, and through all centuries,
If prophesies of bards are ever truthful,
I shall be living, always.*

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

The Lighter announces. . .

The 1993 Wordfest literary prizes. . .

Poetry. \$50

Short Fiction. \$50

Non-Fiction Prose. . \$50

Academy of American Poets Prize
\$100

All Valparaiso University students are invited to compete. Submit one copy of your work without your name; attach a cover sheet containing your name, address, phone number and title(s) of work(s).

Deadline for contest submission:
5:00 P.M., March 26, 1993
English Dept. Office (Huegli 224)

Prizes will be announced at a reading & reception on Thurs., Apr. 22, 1993, in the Lumina room (that would be in Huegli Hall).

Mayonnaise.

Inside...

• ALBRIGHT • BARDENHAGEN • BERNARDO • BRAND •
BURNHAM • CHASAR • DELAGRANGE • ALBRECHT • ELLIS
• GHORMLEY • GIBBS • GORMAN • GREENMAN • HANSON •
HARRIS • LINDAMOOD • LOEWE • MCCOLLY • MITSUYA •
MOHAJER • PRENDERGAST • SCHAEFER • STEINBRUECK •
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