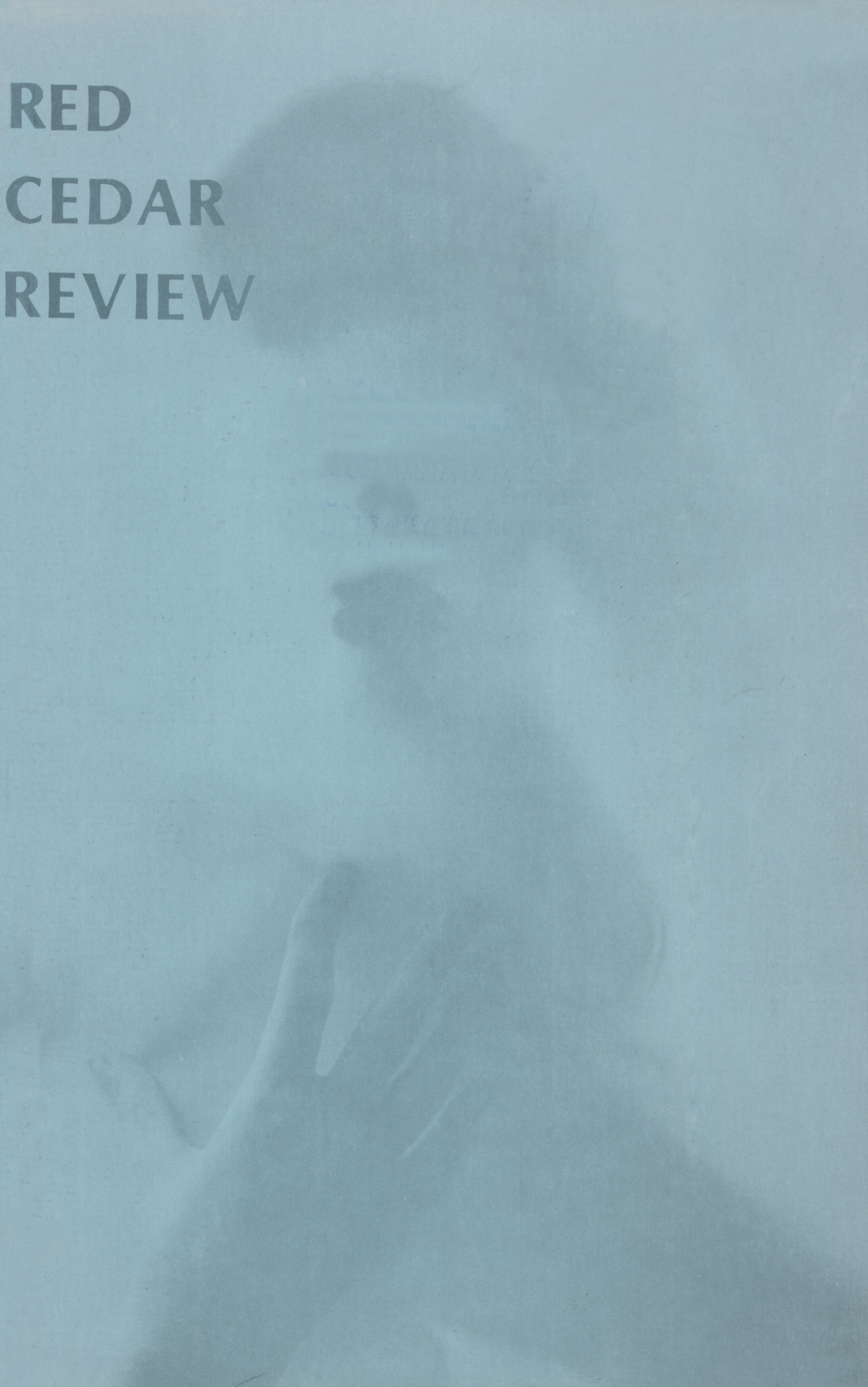


RED CEDAR REVIEW



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Volume XII Issue 2

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Steven Flegg

BY ACCIDENT

a child named a - a name
is a child's name

the first of the
first of the first

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BY ACCIDENT

a child thinks a persimmon
is a rubber ball

she throws it down
black seeds scatter on the rug

thinking the seeds are insects
she tramples them

they dry deep in the rug
a fever buries the child

her parents lock the room
the roof springs a leak

dust settles the rain falls
the seeds unfold

the floor opens to shoots
like candle flames in the pink nap

beams succumb to rot
and roots crawl in

young trees are thriving
when the floor collapses

on to the dining room downstairs
the restoration buffet

the parents in black at candlelit dinner
still grieving

Randall Roorda

UNTITLED

What are you doing, trying to paw
your way uphill over raw logging cuts,
scrabbling up streambeds, breaking through alder,
as though it mattered which way you went?
Those are hands not paws growing out of your arms

Red-faced & huffing, strapped to your shadow like a coolie
strapped to your ripstop weatherproof pack
strapped to romantic notions of nature —
which by the way occurred in fields
and meadows, i.e., on civilized land —
you enormous kid, running loose on a tether
Your body connects to a car in a lot, below

The hawks don't want you out here, they're too ignorant
to beg for your garbage. The bears & the clever
mammals avoid you. The trees are just trees,
they all look alike. The stones have no numbers
no shapes you remember (but they seem to multiply)
Did you come all this way to gibber with stones?

You don't belong here (did you ever, & where)

What are you proving, importing yourself
and your gear to the wilds? Your daily calories
exceed the environment. What you can gather
is sour, or breaks, & besides you are queasy
about killing

 You stop on a ridge & the safe water gurgles
out of your plastic container into your mouth
In your left breast pocket the keys to the car
are jingling

 You can always go back
You always go back

Judith McCombs

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL

As I write about nature, not knowing,
in the attic the insistent starling

scrabbles uphill & uphill & drops,
trying to get out to the cheeps

of its young on the eaves boards, but the hole
is all wall, scrabbles up to the hole

in the wall, but the hole is all screen,
scrabbles uphill & flops & again,

& I think it is squirrels on the roof,
or my neighbor, making improvements,

or my son in his crib, half-waking,
as the starling flops uphill & breaks

something inside, so it stops
where I find it, limp on the steps

to the attic, black feathers, no struggle,
but it seems to take in a little

of the water I hurriedly spill
by its beak, but it lies there, too still,

as I take it, gently, outside
with water, & crumbs in a diaper,

it lies there, black hoods on its eyes,
and will not wake up or climb back

to the shelter/the trap where it died.

Judith McCombs

THE ZAHIR

by Casey Bush

Monkey flower or monkey puzzle, a large chinese pine tree, Charles thought absently. He raised his drink to the light observing the soft yellows spinning around the glass. The Sun had set with the shades down, it was a family outing that he was spending alone. Let Ethel and the kids go to the zoo, I'd rather sit home and drink. Caged animals. Got sick last time I went to the zoo. Bald eagle with the clipped wings, bear pacing nervously back and forth. It had been an easy evening, he had eaten chicken, drank whiskey without television, peaceful. He read an article that told of the attempt to recreate the heavy water experiments of the Germans during World War Two; scientists trying to find how close the Nazis had been to winning the war by recreating their laboratories left over from blueprints. This interested him only slightly.

Charles stepped out on to the balcony which contained a pleasant view of the Portland area, Mount Hood and St. Helens beneath the Moon, a scene framed like a Japanese garden. It was there that he realized how drunk he was; stumbling over the leg of a chair, his fall stopped only by the grating, Charles swore, as was his custom, "Fuckin', son of a bitch!" Picking himself off the floor he examined the damage. One of the cufflinks had been torn from his shirt. Apparently the link had fallen into the bushes below making recovery impossible. Charles picked himself up and dusted his person. Dirt. Reminded him of how he had come into possession of the cufflinks. A present from the long lost Georges B. He had broken contact with Georges years earlier and was surprised to receive a package in the mail bearing no return address. Georges. What a loser. What a chump. He had sent the package by personal courier from Nepal but when Charles went to have the links assessed it turned out they were worthless. Who could tell? They had an exotic look about them. One side seemed to be the image from the back of the one dollar bill while the other side was that of a perched eagle. There was no date on the cufflinks otherwise he would have mistook them for once having the function of a coin. Charles remembered the courier, turbaned, barefoot with great swollen toes. As his memory was thus stirred he went to a closet and searched the bottom of it successfully producing the envelope that had accompanied the cufflinks. Enclosed was a bulky unopened warranty. Charles reread the letter carefully.

Dear C.

Hopefully my trusted manservant, Ex, has contacted you and delivered the cufflinks. How life has changed. My fortune has a way of coming and going. I was on the down and out when I left

Portland but have recovered slowly over the years. The mountain life seems to be good for my health, in a similar fashion the instability of provincial politics has been to my financial benefit. I miss the States rarely and will never return.

This note and cufflinks are but a token of appreciation with which I hope to heal the bonds that have been broken between us. Please permit me this excess, sentimentality, I'm sure you agree, is the most harmless of my weaknesses. Enclosed also is a warranty which I wish you would not open until one of the cufflinks is lost. It is a strange contract that may seem unreasonable but will explain many things. I trust you will not break this seal unless it is necessary.

Georges B.

This correspondence did not strike Charles as being strange by nature, he accepted it as a continuing quirk in the personality of Georges. When people go off the deep end, Charles figures, it is to respect their wishes. His last encounters with Georges had all been strained. Arguing until neither could understand the subject, involved in demonics and hate pouring out over sunglasses. Who knows how people separate. There is little that can hold them together. As far as Charles was concerned the cufflinks were too little, too late to account for the damage incurred. They could never meet face to face again.

Charles poured himself another drink. The energies that the alcohol gave to his system were growing as he opened the warranty. It was a sizable statement that was hand written so that Charles squinted his eyes to read the fine print; the words of a man he had not seen in years, whose existence he had never contemplated. The second document complimented the first only in its obscurity and frankness. Charles did not understand the implications after the initial reading but as the night wore on the point of Georges' words became inebriously clear.

Dear C.

Again and again, the connection, brain waves rattle in the tin can. An object falling into unknowing hands, chronic skeleton in the closet, it is the Zahir, it is coming back to me. It is making its way to my expectant hand. If you are reading this letter then you have lost one of the cufflinks.

Responsibility? You have none. That is why you were chosen to receive this gift. Chronic, seeking the source of this cycle in which time can be created. An obsession haunted by the infinities of chance, labyrinths of reason that come back upon themselves. It was no present that you accepted but an unknow-

ing trust, no doubt even you were surprised at the mode in which the Zahir left your possession. Its methods are blinding if followed too closely. It is a two faced coin. One side is always the same, slant eye with the pyramid, a symbol I have learned represents an elite group of Tibetan Masons. My initials have been placed in the pyramid. It is the other side that is truly two faced. No doubt in America it is an eagle spread beneath United States of America, E Pluribus Unum. No doubt.

Again and again, the connections, passing between hands, destroying the definition, an object that returns, that haunts without reason, that fills the mind slowly poison flower, carnage of memory replaced by the object present past future/ chant this dialectic, count the moments between the thoughts, time divisible, obsession complete, a coin, a talisman. Relentlessness. This is the state of life. Dry continents in my mouth, the road is pock full of disease, police civilization stands on a fiddle bow, the doctor is too thin himself for me to trust; relax, let me dispel tension. You have nothing to worry about.

Only in the most dream like memory can I place where I first met the Zahir. It was under the dim lights of a restaurant in Portland by the name of Armands. No class with vinyl seated chairs, stripes on the wall, I should have stepped out the back before my order was taken. I sat myself in the 'wait for your host' section, in the process stealing the waitress' tip, forgotten, fallen into my hand, the Zahir took the appearance of a quarter. I turned it over and found myself looking into its pale eye. I took it for a slug. So I tried to pass it for legal tender. The ploy would have worked but for the sharp waitress who noticed that I had over paid her by twenty five cents and the Zahir was returned. I could not argue as to its worth but felt mysteriously relieved as I left it as an excuse for my tip.

First impressions are not always the correct ones. A holy order. From who? There I was circulating in the singles bar, like a crowded elevator, inhale the door, everybody pushing a policy. "Just blew into town." Me too, I nod. I saunter over to the cigarette machine, feed it three coins return a pack and dime change. It wasn't until later I found myself volunteered to go a round that I consulted my change finding the eye of quandary staring back into my own. Owing only to my state of intoxication can I account for the rational bent of my behavior. Shock should have been upon me like halucination. A smaller denomination back by the same symbol. I did not hesitate to spend it immediately. The bartender gave it no second look. I mention this night in particular because it was as the Zahir lay in my pocket

that you and I had the horrible argument about the nature of sleep, whey the human animal needs it. I, petty as usual, argued: "Sleep is a hallway leading to a corridor, the cabala swinging back and forth on a chain, a dog consumed by the fires of the imagination!" Sleep, something I have not had enough of. I dared not talk to you months later at the grocery store. My groceries being packed, with horror I looked into my hand to find the Zahir. I found myself casting a sneer in your direction, before I could help it I was knee deep in black thoughts. Out in the parking lot I gave the bag boy a tip. It had left me none too soon. It was at the same time my relationship with you disintegrated that my whole life took on a new course.

The increasing paranoia, suspecting at every turn a new agent of the Zahir. I had no name for it at first. I dared not think about it or discuss it lest its power over me grow. But it returned to my hand again and again. In a phone booth once I found it waiting for me to make a call. There was no human factor involved in this but my own. The expression of its will over mine, dry bones exposed to the ravages of darkness. In the grocery store I tried to avoid you but in the phone booth I could remember no other number than yours. "No, I don't want to talk about sleep. Like superman I am lifeless in front of the liver of my friend." Apologies aside, I actually wanted to discuss the circular nature of time, the unassuring way we live, then death sets us free to observe millenium pass by on the merry-go-round and to realize what an insignificant part in its turning we have played. Remember what words passed between your lists? "It is as if you have strapped yourself to a Doomsday Machine, locomotive across the face of the clouds. Don't be resistant to change." Unneeded advice. But also unheeded. Don't ever get lonesome although you remain alone. The holy order of anarchy has motives, don't get it wrong, direct all helmeted action towards the podium, pandemonium. Your voice faded, the dial tone returned. It was not our friendship alone that was decaying but my entire life wrapped around the circumference of the Zahir.

Time started to move faster as if my life had been shortened. I became paniced by the spin of the Earth beneath my feet. The growing evil within me. For a while I tried to hang on to the Zahir, keep it out of circulation. I had hoped that this would turn back the hands of the clock. The opposite proved true. I was on my last leg. Every venture was towards failure. My mind followed paths unnatural. I could recognize the symptoms but could not alter the course of the river I was on. In my madness I marked the coin with my initials. For some reason this was an easy process,

placing the letters in the center of the pyramid, one third of the way up, the point of no decay, the space created by triangular logic so that the pharaoh's body does not shift with the sands. I marked the returning coin suspecting that more than one such unit existed. It found me, made the connections to fall into my hand. There was nothing I could do about its motion. It was then, in desperation, that I decided to destroy it. It is only matter. It can be vaporized. This I found untrue as I threw it beneath the wheels of a train only to have risked derailment, it seems my initials were the only marks the coin would tolerate rising untouched from the tracks. I then tested it with fire, enough energy to send a small projectile to the Moon did not shut the eye. I began to think more closely into its nature. What sort of existence was I encountering. Was it reasonable? Was there a logic that was escaping me? The manner in which it passed into my hands I noted, was always the same, it was money, exchange. Perhaps if I treated it with some less deference as to its purpose it could learn another mode of behavior. I would treat it as chewing gum and throw it away downtown, lost between the grating of the sewer. This was an interesting proposition. Unfortunately the hypothesis proved incorrect. What made me sure I was on the right track was the time involved. It took almost a month for the coin to recirculate. It was returned to me by the paper boy. "You're all paid up for the next half year." Sure kid, I looked absently at my change. The Zahir gazed back. In a way I had missed it. But as my life was just beginning to straighten out again, I found my chaotic tailspin continue. A weekend trip to the ocean and I cast it to the water, following its progress beneath the waves. How it again found me I have no idea. It could not hide in a vault. It had been misused and bounced back with an unquenchable thirst. I felt as if I was just beginning to understand the Zahir, its complex nature exposing itself through many experiments. I left the Portland area hoping to lighten the load borne by my close friends. Most had parted ways with me. Don't think your experience singular. I traveled across the country dogged at every turn by the Zahir. Money changes hands quickly. Few look closely at what they spend. I slowly realized that the coin was to track me to the ends of the Earth. As it entered my hand I lost control of my will, feeling an alien presence ease into the driver's seat. If I took my time to discover by trail and error its nature, it had more ground to haunt me upon. Soon losing it was not enough. I had to place it in a carefully considered receptacle; go to the zoo to slide it on to the tongue of the tiger, down to the shipyards to slip it into the hull of an unsinkable ship, bribe city officials to include it in a

time capsule that will not be opened until the next century. Nothing worked. The Zahir took on the image of Houdini swimming under the Detroit River, frozen and unbound on shore, back in my hand, change for any exchange. I tried to limit my purchases to only the most needed items. I used my charge account whenever I could, I made sure I maintained a limited cash flow. It was to no avail. The Zahir returned without mercy.

It was as I was paying for a one way ticket to Africa that I threw the Zahir back in the face of the young clerk at TWA. He could not understand my indignation. Much of my behavior is similarly unexplainable. Surely the Zahir could not follow me. Money is not passed that easily between systems. But it was a half a year later, after I had established a new identity in Tripoli that I realized my measures were not drastic enough. The afternoon Sun would be unbearable but for the breezes drifted off the Mediterranean. I had ordered a drink and almost passed out as the bartender handed me the Zahir with my change. I was caught between the heavy breath of the bar owner as he slapped my face, trying to get me off the floor, and the constant gaze of the coin. I could not move. No longer was it an American coin but now Libyan, later Egyptian, Persian. I circled this part of the world for some time, slipping into what was then French Equatorial Africa, seeking out a culture that had no means of exchange. I could not find one. The changeable side of the Zahir became cleverer than I, a snake twisting from one hand to the next, nobody receiving the same value. The Zahir wormed its way towards me in the jungle with a tropical speed, as though the constant heat was affecting its metabolism. I then noted that I was like a cold blooded animal and unable to control the rate of its activity. This supposition was to lead me to the roof of the world, the Himalayan Range in Chinese Tibet. I felt that if I could lead it to such a cold corner of the world I could force it into hibernation or at least slow the rate of exchange so that I would be able to live my life in some sort of order. I spent years slipping in and out of Kashmir, into Nepal, trying to slow it down. I climbed mountains and lived alone but just as years earlier it had shone up in the pockets of my freshly laundered pants, I would stumble across it in the snow. At every turn I was defeated. I could not shake it.

It was in a restaurant that I frequented near the Indian border that I accused the waiter of trying to pass me a worthless character. "This is no coin that I have ever seen." I made an angry display. "Give me another." I complained harshly upon finding the Zahir in my hand. "Oh, you are quite mistaken sir, this is legal

tender." I objected emphatically. "I have never seen a coin like this in Tibet. Give me something I can buy goat's milk with." The man was patient beyond my worth and took me aside to explain the issue. "This is a coin known more widely in an area of Tsinghai Province. I have seen it only rarely. You should treasure it." I managed quickly to get out of the good man the location of the area in which it was used. By his directions I wandered the heights of that area across Tibet, north, leaving the Trans-Himalayans going into the Kunlun Range and finally descending into the landform known as the Tsaidam Swamp; an area in the midst of the mountains the size of Ohio where the north arm of the Brahmaeputra River is known as the Tsangpo and for five hundred miles in a lowland marsh. There were not cities in this vast area as the ground could not support the concentrated activity demanded. The civilization existing within was a system of secret societies all dedicated to the obscurity of the native cultural forms. Needless to say I had difficulty locating the mint from which the Zahir emanated. It was there that I finally learned to call it by such a name. "Oh, yes, the Zahir." One of the workman smiled at me knowingly. Evidently they had seen cases like mine before. He put down the casting equipment he was handling and led me to his foreman. I tried to observe the process practiced within but the friendliness of the people employed in the mint so contrasted the reception I had put up with elsewhere that my attention wandered. The foreman took me into a back room and treated me to an exotic tea that contained a drug I have never elsewhere experienced. I had complete trust in the man serving the liquid. "Thank you, yes, another one please." I held out my cup. As I watched, dazed, the man cast the Zahir into the form in which you possessed it and at the same time made a duplicate so that I left the mint with no answers, only a set of cufflinks and explicit instructions. "Give these to a friend who is distant and unknowing of your plight. Do not let him know what is to be his purpose." I had wandered around the Tsaidam Swamp long enough as I found to my horror that the Zahir had invaded my dreams. The night before I wrote this letter I dreamed of the coin for the first time, its presence sneaking its way into my subconscious. Was I in India and the Zahir a Rupee, or was I in Greece passing Drachmas? The dream was confusing. I got rid of the coin none too soon.

So you have the complete story, except of course for the part you are to play. The transference of the coin, hand to hand, around the world, I cannot avoid it but perhaps you have brought me some relief; I can never be sure.

I will never live in complete peace. Thankyou for your service. I am forever indebted.

*Yours truly,
Georges B.*

The implications buzzed around in the back of Charles' medulla oblongata for some time afterwards. The cufflink had literally jumped off his sleeve, leaving the shirt untorn but the coin gone. It was not long before he was outside on his hands and knees searching for the link. The dim street light only cast confusing shadows but after covering the area twice he finally came up with the Zahir. Why was he so frantic? He was not sure what he believed. Had the tone of the letter captured him? He had owned the cufflinks for almost a year and nothing in terms of catastrophe had entered his life. Perhaps it was not a contagious disease. Perhaps Georges was the only being to be so affected. He would not have to worry about the coin ruling his life.

With these statements made clear Charles went back into his apartment. For the first time he noticed the initials planted in the eye of the pyramid. C.B. Why he had dirtied his knees was not questioned but hinged on if he really believed the strained words of Georges. Charles calmly replaced the cufflink and proceeded to clean up the house before the spouse returned. Tibet. He thought absently of the endless mountain ranges, emptiness, as he scraped garbage down the disposal, its sound filling his ears. The cold water running to keep the unit from over heating, the sound of lettuce and celery from his salad making its way down the throat of the machine, coffee grounds and chicken bones, all quietly digested, a cacaphony of leftovers. It was as he started to turn the water off that he noticed the roar of steel, the works in a drawer gone haywire, the noise thus produced confusing him, afraid it would spit back some limited projectile, it was in vain that he shut off the machine and ground it to a stop, realizing the Zahir had again sneaked off his wrist, into the drain, making its escape down the disposal unit. Soon to be found, unburied in a sewage dump, traded for a worthless item, mistaken as a coin, time and time again, worming its way across America, transported over the Atlantic and through the Burasian land mass finally reaching the reluctantly expectant hand of Georges B.

Charles sank to the kitchen stool. He did not want to be awake. He could not face the fluorescent light. Another whiskey passed through his hand. The Zahir was out of his reach but relief, yes sleep was not. It was as he fell off into a semi-conscious reverie that he remembered his half of the argument concerning the nature of sleep. "Sleep has two heads, one is dream and the other rest. Both are equal functions but dream should be avoided, it is too upsetting to the system. Rest is the polar opposite, it

must be seeked out, a land where the imagination is outlawed." Sleep, rest from the waking hours, no footsteps down the hall, vision exposed to total darkness, chronic, seeking the end of a cycle; the dreams Charles would experience would not haunt him. The other cufflink would be thrown away. Soon the letters/
would be forgotten.

WINTER 1946

after Andrew Wyeth

in an army coat
& boots
an aviator cap
civilian pants
an AWOL soldier
runs in the brown
stubble of a field
along the fence row.
there is only snow
by the rotting posts.
a pick-up's tire tracks
can be seen
from when a farmer
checked for
trespassers.
the soldier does not know
that the war
is over. winter
is only beginning
& he has no
surplus of clothes
or food
but is content
to be running &
casting a shadow
on the bare field.

marc j. sheehan

CONTINGENCIES

A woman rises early to see five small birds in the yard.

The woman is intelligent

and admires the severity of the scene:

 The tall figure standing in the break of drapes,

 hand drawn to breast

 eyes near closed.

 The personal clouds.

 The birds prodding each other for position.

This woman, motionless,

insists on the perfect nature of wood, its interests sacred.

A man wakes in the next room,

finds her leaning hard and naked against the glass.

A small rain makes them notice the sounds of each other
and turn.

He claims the attraction of water and air

to be the cause of their longing.

The people move together,

speak of farm girls who meet in the dreams of their mothers

 of girls who discuss the beauty in the mouth of the male

 and how to interpret it.

They open the window to the rain of day,

to the wood standing firm in its midst,

make no decisions

nothing reconciled

letting the day drape itself in neat long pieces

over this portion

of their lives.

John Harn

THE MAN WHOSE BLOOD TILTED THE EARTH

They made him dance
in a circle of peas
he didn't want to
but it was all they had
and he knew it
so he danced

When he was so tired
that he could no longer stand
on his red feet
he asked
will you help me

Not if you stop dancing
before midnight
they said nor if you
step on a pea

But my mother is sewing
the red coat for Elizabeth
he said and I must
be there to see her
try it on

Elizabeth is dead
they answered
dance on jig

But my mother is cooking
the gray goose from the fair
I must be there to help
carve it

The gray goose is waiting
to eat the peas stupid
dance

The boats came in
from the sea
the lights went out
in the stores
still he could not stop
they threw water
on him then ashes
then whiskey then wheat

He looked like a wide white
asphodel bobbing
in a circle of peas

You are our
cloud-late-in-the-year
they screamed
you will save us
from the winter storms
and the blight in the spring

I'm just a little dancer
he tried to say
who got left by
a one eyed medicine man
I can't tilt the earth for you

Tilt the earth for us
they panted as they
threw broken glass in his circle

At midnight they lifted his body
from the glass and the wheat
and as their last moon
fell into their last sea
one of them said
he had so much blood
in him surely it
will tilt the earth

M. R. Doty

MOTHER

The child stands in the window of an upstairs apartment
waiting for her return
the light behind him
rings his face and hands

At last she comes back
down the long street
for wherever it is she's been
carry me mother he calls
through the glass
down to the docks
set me down beside the boats
and let me breathe in the dark
thrashing air

But she is too tired to carry him anywhere
she is still young but when she combs
her hair she shakes out stars dead from exhaustion
she gives the boy a coat
to keep him warm
gloves to keep the frost away
a suitcase to pack the prayerbooks in

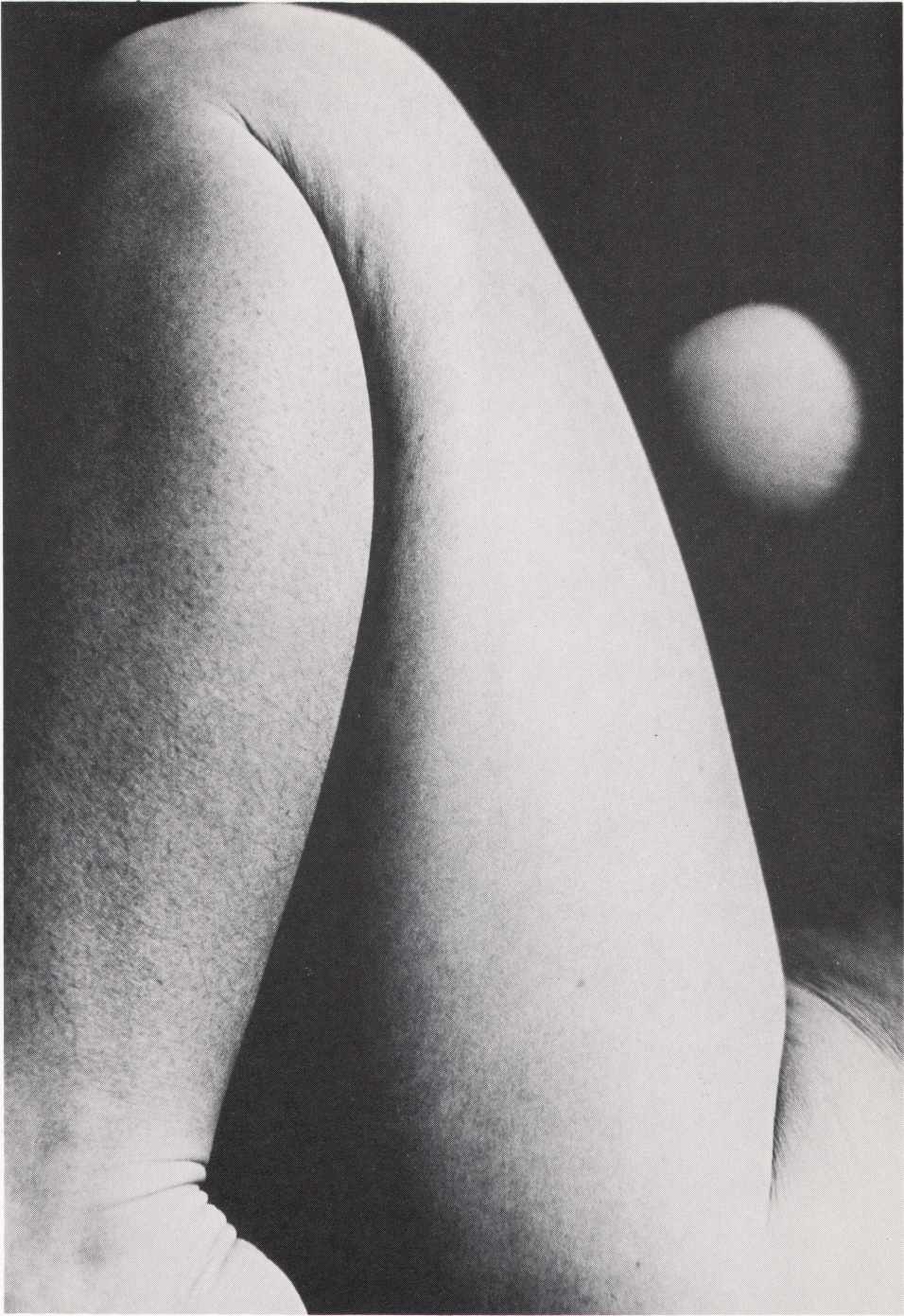
You she says are my son
and because of this you will never be able to stop
you will go on searching the lake bottoms
for whatever might save you
come now
bring your right hand the prodigal
your left hand the star

She leads him past the streetlamps
ringed with frost
through the empty square
still except for the sleep
cries of a drunk and the murmurs
of drowsing pigeons
toward the river
where the bridge vanishes halfway
across the water

She leaves him sitting on a curb
and carrying a suitcase a saint carried once
and gloves full of frost
and a coat somehow threaded with hail
she crosses the impossibly delicate bridge

He takes his time
about getting up he
learns to take care of himself

M. R. Doty



Wayne Rottman

FATHER

1

Let's see who can touch bottom first
you said and we dived
to the center of the pond
I came up
I waited for years
knowing you were still swimming
down that dark shaft of water
and someday you would touch bottom
and turn around

After years you come up
dripping on the other side of the pond
and walk away across the field
I shout and wave
but you do not turn around

2

You are standing in the field
beside everything you have buried
you stand in the same place for days

When I come back to look again
you are gone
nobody saw you
you could be anywhere

3

Someone is holding the hand of my shadow
it could be you

4

Women are digging in the earth
with hoes
sometimes they find potatoes
sometimes the burrows of animals
they come across men who are asleep
the men awake
and they dig too
I am digging
we would like to think
we will find you

M. R. Doty

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE GEOGRAPHY OF IOWA

1

The evening like a train
crosses the fields and the river
it is never on time so
no one expects it
when it comes it comes

bringing us a few strangers
who stare at the clock
on the courthouse
stopped forever at eleven
and ask where are we

This we say is where the trees
wait for you and wave their dark hands
in the wind

2

Studying geography is
like drinking a glass of cold water
but there is something in this well
which makes men and women sleep

If you are awake when you finish reading this poem
you have finished the lesson
if you are sleeping
there is still time

3

We gather on the porch at night
with our sons and daughters
watching the thin dark blue line of the horizon
together we think of the luminous country
under the earth where the grains of light sleep

Messengers run down our street
shouting out some news
that we never quite hear
we'll read it we say later when the crumpled
newspapers blow across the field

The stars appear
like the tiny lights
that crown the iron antlers of the elk
on the Elks' Hall in Webster City

4

Alone at night open your book
to the chapter entitled
maps they are nocturnal like moonflowers
the states yellow and pale blue in the dark
will rush out into your hands like water

I have shut maps in drawers
listened to them cry softly all night
beneath a pillow
locked them in closets
until I realized their strange longevity
their peculiar gentleness

They know
that each map is only part
of a great diagrammatical community
that even our shadows carry maps with them
that a map can be changed but it cannot die

5

If you remember the clock frozen on the courthouse tower
the use of geography as a cure for insomnia
the stars on the elk's crown in Webster City
the durability of maps
you have completed your introduction
to the geography of Iowa

Its history will be discussed tomorrow
there
beside that line of trees
linked only by their transparency

M. R. Doty

THINGS OF THIS WORLD

My neighbors have a grip on life, drive it
Like their shabby pickup, foot on the floor.
Through my window, laced with new red buds,
I catch a flag of dust, an engine's roar —
They're gone for nails, or paint, or jamjar lids.

The boys hunt squirrels and ride like thunder.
They love blades, climbing over, and hiding under.
At school they pick, dream of fire, and yawn.
The scent of washed hair makes them shy.
Something rolls there, like the sea, and is gone.

Their sister wants to drive a bus and bake,
And another thing — she cannot yet say —
But like hot jam, and lamb's wool, and the ache
Of fingers for dough, in the heat of the day.

Will Baker

UNFINISHED POEM

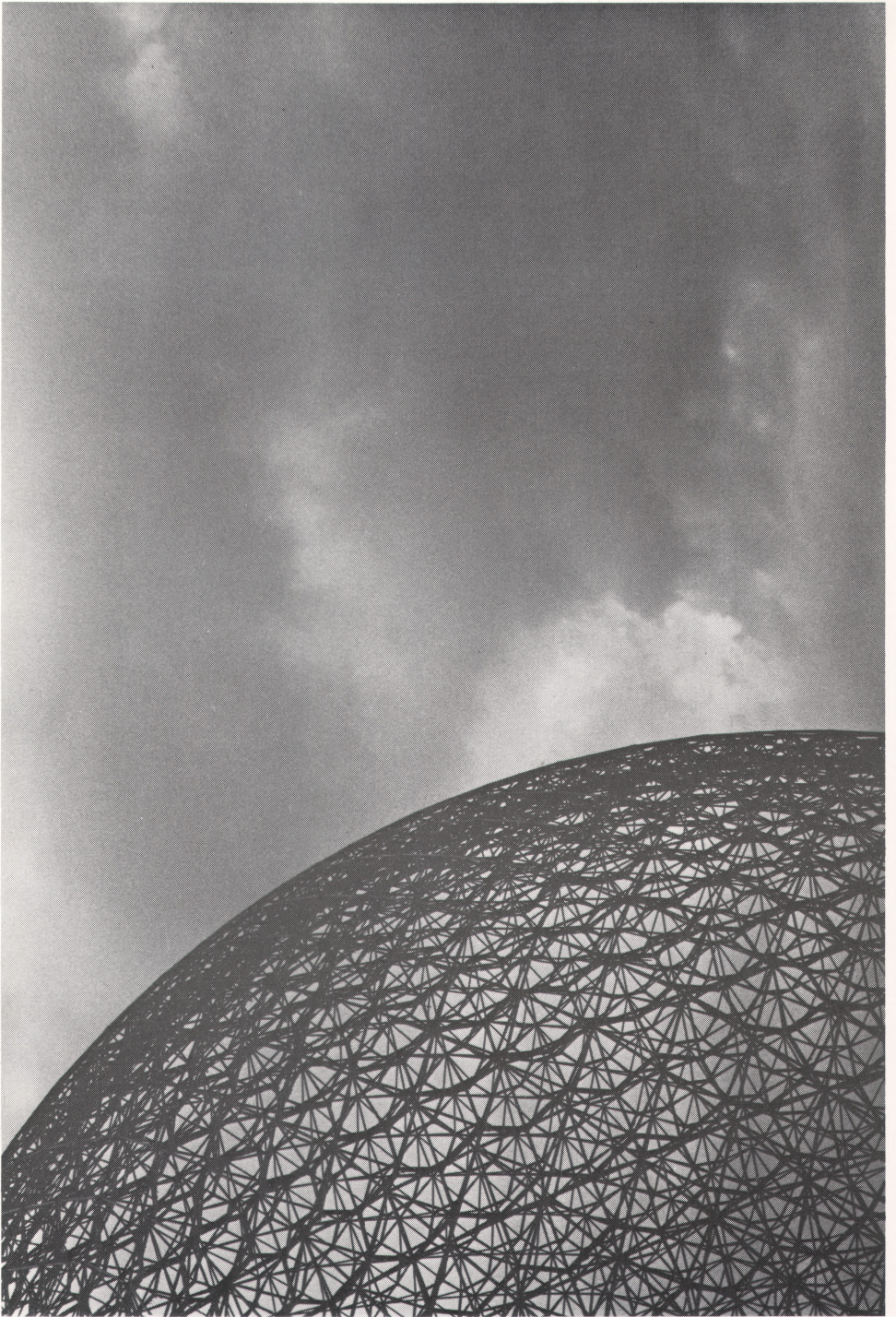
After the fourth beer,
you quit untangling Christmas lights,
their pastels bent to rainbows.
The fireplace gains weight,
covering an entire wall,
merging with the blue of candles.
Your son's snow
melts back to the door.
He tells you
there are two Santas,
one with a longer beard
You say you have a nose bleed,
avoiding further discussion.
The minutes crawl around,
looking for a contact lens.
At midnight you check the mail.
There is an apologetic rejection
and ten acceptances, each one saying
"hard, clean, significant."
You fall asleep in the mailbox,
fingering your beard.
The rest of your life is gravy.
Your typewriter is in the Football
Hall of Fame.
The National Endowment provides
a lifetime fellowship in exchange
for annual readings at the Library of Congress.
Politely, you decline.

Lucky Jacobs

UNTITLED

Night clicks on.
A cat spits out
its caresses
and an old man
yowls in harmony.
Motors churn over
sizzling cement.
I stretch out
my hand
milking the curtain
shut
trading glaring
lights
for greying
shadow.

Marilyn J. Atlas



Wayne Rottman

INVERTED REQUIUM

by Renaldo Migaldi

just call me angel of the morning. the plastic statue angel yup that's me.

one hour of sleep is not so bad you say it is better tha nothing you say well i guess it was enough for me to get my suit and tie on and drive here alone after the rest of them had already left. here i come into the parlor the creaking of metal chairs they are turning to see me okay so i am late what's it to you oh here it goes. oh i'm so sorry george your aunt and i are so sorry george how's your mother taking it george. one hour of sleep is enough so that i can get it together i guess to answer something but this suit and tie feels more like yessir i want a job sir i admire your firm sir.

there are chairs and an aisle in this room an aisle with a box at the end of it and here i go falling forward my leg joints clicking along to the front of the room and yes i remember i was here last night for five hours before i left to get some sleep so i went home locked myself up in my room sanctus sanctus sanctus six hours staring at the ceiling one hour maybe sleep and here i am again. everything at the front of the room is the same. same Black Walnut outside, Beige (Beige?) silk inside same flowers same ma same dad same same same same oh same. now i must kneel in front of joey and say my prayer it will be a short one that is for sure:

hum hum hum hum hum hum.

mmble mmble mmble mm hum

hum um mm da mmble hum

mm hm mmble humm hum. Amen

and here's mama still look at her eyes two red wet pools of something infected her face is all wet and runny and here is dad oh boy the dear suffering servant oh yes certainly the holy almighty patriarch shaky with sweat from the business the business the business the store the back office the apt houses he rents. the slow and painful climb to the immigrant american dream of shutting out all pain with high brick walls and a wrought iron gate estate yes the immigrant american dream. dad's hands are sweaty-shiny and his eyes are a solid shit brown staring staring at me. (you are the only one i got left george the only one i got left you must you must you must)

now ma is standing next to me and she's clawing my suitcoat pocket and not saying anything just sniffing up and clawing at me like i was her goddam teddy bear or maybe she wants me to raise joey from the dead ha ha ha. oh what is she thinking her eyes are rolling around the room from flowers to the floor to dad to my grandparents to the flowers to the chairs to the flowers and everywhere else except at me and finally she looks at joey.

aw, ma.

clawing tighter at my suitcoat she sobs. (hey look ma he can't hear you ma he can't clean up his room anymore. in the first place he can't get out of the box and in the second place he's DEAD, ma.)

oh now she lets go of me and staggers up to the kneeler
she stops
drops to her knees
reaches over to touch joey's hair
her sobs fade away

* * *

walking up up the long narrow stairwell in the afternoon twilight coming in through the little windows i always trip over joey's shoes on the stairs. his room is down at the end of the dark hallway and as i open the door i know i will find him poured out on top of his bed reading about the stars planets asteroids and the bright galaxies far away.

hey squirt, i say.

what? (him looking up from behind his book. his shadowy young face shows none of the stresses and strains of interstellar travel.)

here are your shoes. keep em in here before i break my neck on the stairs. what are you reading about anyway?

supernovas.

stars that blow up, right?

uh-huh. they shrink and shrink until they explode and fade away.

oh. that sounds interesting.

(ma is calling him again from downstairs more work to do. she says he's too lazy all he ever does is read all the time he should do some work around here.) JOEY!! COME DOWNSTAIRS AND SET THE TABLE!!

(Joey does not move.)

JOEY!!

coming! (he does not move.)

* * *

here comes old great-uncle giovanni from toronto god he looks so white and withered and his eyes are cloudy gray.

hello, george, he says. (his hand on my arm.)

hello uncle how are you.

(his sad quiet eyes.) i'm sorry george. you know how i feel.

sure, uncle.

we just get here this morning. we leave last night after your cousin marie call and tell us the news. (patting my arm.)

i'm glad you could come, uncle.

well i think you know how i feel. (yes it's all there in his sad smoky eyes. his lips quiver with age.)

i'm just glad you're here uncle.

i reach around him and give him a hug. his lusty years, white in the air around him, white in the dry smell of his clothes. he pats my arm one last time and shuffles softly up to the casket. i can see a cloud of white dust spilling out from beneath his black suit coat.

* * *

cars parked all down the curb in the driveway and on the front lawn. what in the world. i head up the walk and before i reach the front door my mother's sister aunt gina opens the door for me and inside voices are whispering:

george is here.

aunt gina is looking at me funny her eyes are red and wet. something happened something happened what happened.

she says flat and low: come in, george.

inside there are my grandparents aunts on both sides cousins cousins a couple of my dad's employees some neighbors a couple of joey's friends sitting on the floor everybody else crowded together in the living room sofas and chairs white cigarette smoke sifting up near the ceiling floating over people's heads. everyone is looking at me one grandmother starts crying that's my ma's mother she don't speak english. nobody saying anything here comes ole grampa georgio smoking a salem puts his arm around me. i'm afraid.

what happened gampa X where's my folks?

let's go up to your room george.

(upstairs we sit on my bed.)

where's joey grampa? where's my folks?

(takes a drag off his cigarette looking at the floor.) your mamma and papa they went to the hospital. they had an accident.

they had an accident?

joey, he had an accident.

what kind of accident grampa?

(another long draw. white smoke everywhere.) well he was playing out over across the street. your neighbors across the street.

the wilsons, across the street?

yeah, across the street.

what happened, gampa?

he looks away he turns his face toward the window he does not want me to see his face but i can hear his italian farmer's voice breaking.

they had some junk behind the garage, george. they weren't home and he was playing back there.

what happened, grampa! (i bite my lip.)

they had an old refrigerator back there behind the garage. (his voice squeaking on the word "garage.")

* * *

JOEY!! (now i can hear ma coming up the stairs and her feet are heavy and loud pounding and joey sits up and i look into his eyes and they are bright and picking into the air and i know what he hears he hears the wooden spoon in ma's hand.)

joey, you better go down there before it's too late, i say.

(but he knows it is already too late so he sits there on his bed which is all he has for the next few seconds until ma comes in through the doorway)

i called you fifteen times! what is the matter with you!

(if i try to stick my neck into his mess it will only make things worse for everybody. joey looks at ma, afraid no words. ma lunges at him with the wooden spoon and whacks him hard five times on the ass and once on the neck with joey's bloody screams slicing through my guts and i have my hands buried deep down in my pockets so's i can just maintain. oh you bloody bitch that's my brother he's just a little kid. i stand like an ass while they go screaming downstairs, ma dragging him down by the hair on his neck.)

* * *

ma is quieter now she embarrassed me earlier today when she started crying real hard over the casket and leaned over joey and laid her head on his suitcoated chest and started crying loud and i looked at dad and i knew he was gonna lose it too if somebody didn't do something so i went up there and pulled her up and uncle vito got on the other side of her and we sat her down and she cried on uncle vito's shoulder he's her brother and he sat there with her for awhile but then we went home and aunt gina cooked dinner for us and ma and dad washed up and now we're back and it's about seven thirty and the priest is here and i don't know his name. but she's quieter now.

hail mary full of grace the
lord is with thee blessed
art thou among women and
blessed is the fruit of
thy womb jesus
 holy mary mother of god
 pray for us sinners now
 and at the hour of our death amen
glory be to the father and
to the son and to the holy
spirit
 as it was in the beginning
 is now and ever shall be
 world without end amen

eternal rest grant unto
him oh lord
and let perpetual light
shine upon him.
(well she's quieter now.)

* * *

i get home and look in the TV room the lights are off and the TV is on and dad is in front of the TV and so is ma ma is in her chair watching the TV and dad is asleep on the sofa the light from the TV flickering bright then dark then bright then dark on his inert face. ma looks up at me as i start to walk away and i head for the kitchen and hear her following me.

what time is it, i ask.

are you looking for something to eat?

don't worry i'll find something myself. (the stove clock says it is ten thirty.) where's joey?

upstairs. (pushing past me to reach into the refrigerator.) here, i'll warm up some of this eggplant.

i don't want any eggplant.

well, what do you want?

look, ma, let just look in here, all right? i don't know if i want anything, yet.

oh, you're so touchy!

she drifts back to the TV room and i crouch in the cold white light of the refrigerator inspecting cold cuts leftover pasta imported cheese and finally i choose a carrot. a low rumble from the TV room tells me it is dad dad dad must be she woke him up. well okay i got my shit together maybe he's just going upstairs to bed.

hello george.

hi, dad.

he goes over to the sink gets a glass of water. he looks pretty mellow so i guess there will be no shit tonight he looks out the window into the darkness.

george, i want to talk to you.

(oh shit here we go.) about what?

come in the front room and sit down.

what do you want to talk about?

(turning around to look at me.) just come on and sit down!

look i've got a lot of work to do. i've got a paper due day after tomorrow.

that's a good excuse isn't it.

dad! come on, will ya?

when are you gonna get a haircut, anyway?

i don't know.

when are you gonna shave that goddam beard off?

i'm not shaving off my beard! i like it.

you look like hell.

good night. (i head upstairs i see the light is on in joey's room so i knock on the door.)

come in.

(i see him as usual with his head behind a book i gave him for his birthday called All About The Stars.) hey squirt.

what?

reading about them supernovas again?

yeah! wow, how did you know?

oh, i don't know. it sounded like it might be interesting and i was thinking about it today.

(joey smiles and sits up on the bed.) do you want to see it?

sure. (i sit down on the bed with him and he hands me the book open to page 120 as i read it he is there behind my shoulder.)

You remember that the bigger a star is, the faster it uses up its hydrogen? Well, a nova is one of those spendthrift giants that has got to the end of its hydrogen. It used up its resources and had to shrink. It shrank and shrank, and the more it shrank, the faster it had to rotate. Finally it got going so fast that it started to break up. It shot off its whole outer atmosphere and sent it racing out into space like a brilliant bubble.

That is what makes a star appear 10,000 times brighter than before. At the time of the explosion, its much hotter insides become exposed. After a while—generally a few months—the star settles back to normal. Then a few years later it is quite apt to go off the same way again.

Well, that's an ordinary nova. A supernova is something even more violent. A supernova has experienced the most violent thing that can ever happen anywhere in the whole universe. If you exploded a million million million million hydrogen bombs all at one time, it would make one supernova explosion. For a supernova doesn't fritter away its energy by shooting off bits of its surface now and again. It saves everything for one grand bang. When it happens, the explosion is over in about a minute. But in that minute perhaps nine-tenths of the star shoots off into space.

* * *

oy, joey. you look so pale. i'm sorry. i'm sorry they did this to you but i guess you don't care anymore.

they got a little rosary i knew they would it fits right around your fingers yes yes.

maybe sometime we can talk about this . . .

oh pardon me.

i asked mrs. wilson across the street how they found you back there and she was still white when she told me she said that when she got home from shopping in the afternoon the dog was barking and barking and she followed the dog around back of the house and he was barking at the old refrigerator and she opened the door and out you fell and her face was still white when she told me. they say accidents happen but i think maybe you were playing spaceship in there come on squirt come on outa there and tell me.

UNTITLED

An actor (every hair in place) is led away from his own house in handcuffs. He is put into the back seat of his own car. He is driven down his own driveway and around a corner that is not his. Here, in front of the drugstore's tinted glass, is where he is released, brought out from the car and allowed to speak. Now, between the small red fire hydrant and the curb, he is allowed to walk, up and down, up and down, until the people emerge through all the doors, picking their teeth, the curious and the overweight.

Sometimes a poem like this is interrupted because a small, black and white spider is crawling slowly across the wood table and towards the typewriter.

An actor (every hair in place) is led away from his own house in handcuffs. He is put into the back seat of his own car. He is driven down his own driveway and around a corner that is not his.

Dave Kelly

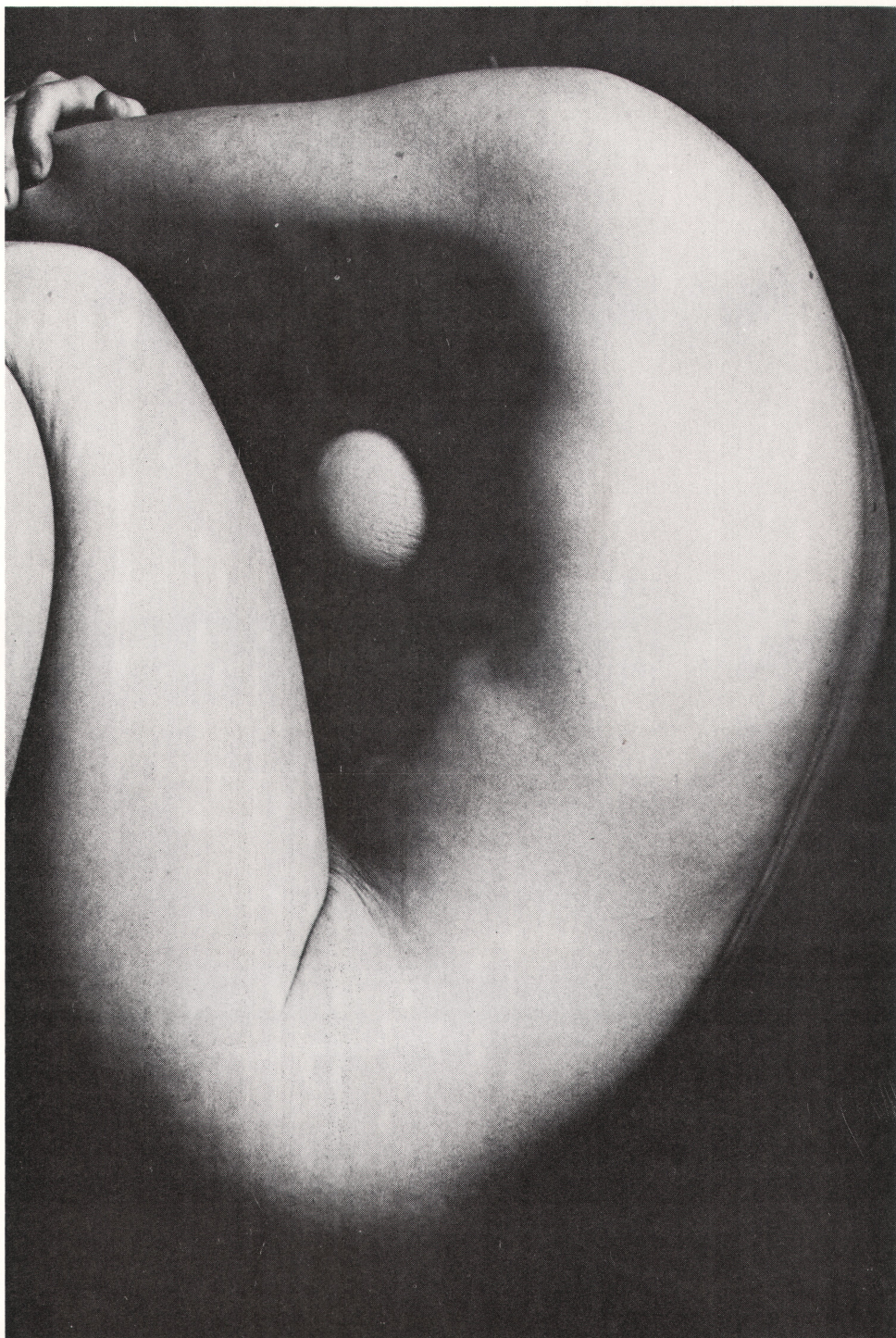
LAMENT OF THE FIRED MAN

Tomorrow, when you go out by that front porch
where the sparrows are kept, when you crawl forward
to labor, run your right hand over something wood
at least twice before turning anything
that is made of iron, that groans before it starts,
that smells of oil. Tomorrow in the fear that is dawn,
always fail to say goodbye to anyone
if you haven't kicked both of your heels against
a house's walls first; never refuse a second cup
before working if you haven't heard mass
in the trees yet, among those leaves that apologize
before and after coughing, those feathers that whistle.

My own father used to talk to himself over coffee
at least three hours before he would touch a mop
and I have seen the fathers of other boys
scratch themselves and spit longer than it takes
to paint a house red. Now if we have learned anything
from those men who bore us in their wombs
it must be to hate the hands that pull a checkbook
from the breast pocket of a suit, the hands
that remove the firing pins before sending us out hunting,
that make fists around the small bodies of birds.

Because, listen, today I spent the morning
putting tape along the broken wing of a colorless moth
and for that I was fired, my job was removed
from my side, my dollar bill amputated at the waist!
And now I'll have to feed the moth to my children
because, in paradise, there is very little else to do.

Dave Kelly



Wayne Rottman

BEAUTY

On the kitchen table
the accumulating bills
avalanche over each other.
They chill the room
with repossession threats.
Promises to sue, sue, sue.

I ignore them as I shuffle
to make tea,
third time for this wilted bag.
As it steeps
I open the cupboard
and find ants
have reclaimed the honey.

Though weak, the tea
warms me
while I brood on the bill mountain.
How I haven't written anything
for the past three months.
Haven't seen
a trace of a lover
for twice as long.
How the money is running out
like a stream into a hole in the earth,
and no dope at all.

And I remember
what my good friend Jane says,
that "Life Is Rough When You're Beautiful."
I realize that I must be gorgeous.
A regular sugar lovin' baby.

I go upstairs to brush my teeth
and notice that the mirror
tells me I'm beautiful.
I've always believed in mirrors,
so I put on my last clean shirt
and step out,
my beauty just sizzling.

I walk,
know that people are looking at me,
pointing at my loveliness.
I stand a little straighter,
walk more briskly,
throw off dashing glances,
a sparkly tooth smile.

I ramble along, notice
that two people are following me.
Soon there are 5, and 12,
and before I know it a small mob
is behind me,
raving on my beauty.

While I know I'm beautiful
I'm not fond of crowds,
so I walk faster
quicken my step,
but the ever-growing crowd
quickens faster.
Soon I am running,
tearing through the streets.
The crowd calling,
"Beautiful . . . Beautiful . . . Beautiful"

In a minute they are on me,
clamoring,
pulling at my last clean shirt.
I'm hoisted up
on their shoulders
while they cheer,
"Beauty . . . Beauty . . . Beauty"
and the whole town has come out.

The mayor tearfully presents me with
a jeweled crown and scepter.
Soon everyone is dancing, singing,
as poets come to write odes
while a mustached Italian
fills helium balloons
with my picture on them.

Other people are selling hot dogs
and sweet Greek pastries and white wine.
People laugh, dance, drink
with each other,
occasionally someone
fainting in the crowd
exhausted by my beauty.

I decide now, in the midst
of this party,
I can escape.
But a child spots me
at the edge of the crowd,
and cries, "There goes the beautiful person."

Everybody is after me again,
after my hot loveliness.
And after losing my crown and sceptre,
having half my last clean shirt torn off,
jumping three fences
and going down I don't know how many alleys
I make it home,
collapsing on the patched gray chair
in the living room.

Now I realize that Jane was right,
that my life is going to be rough now,
a real pain in the ass.
What with all my ravaging fans,
the personal appearances,
the commercials for everything
from shoelaces to motorcycles.
After all, being beautiful does have responsibilities.

I begin to sob,
begin to weep horribly,
wailing over my lost ugliness.

The faint sounds of marching
interrupt my cries.
I get up, dry my tears,
and cautiously peer out my curtained window.
But see nothing—
the streets deserted.

And there is the muffled sound
of a brass band with the marching.
I turn around
and there on the living room floor
are the ants from the cupboard.
Bodies still sweet with honey,
each one playing a tiny instrument,
marching in formation
that spells one word:
BEAUTIFUL.

Ron Mieczkowski

SHELLING OYSTERS

The mallet
ecstatically
strikes the chisel,
and the hole
is the knife's
geography lesson,
quick, final,
like dealings in
a dark alley;
once inside, you
inhale mirrors
and die slowly,
the pearl is
your skull,
a shelf-destined
souvenir that is
glad to be rid
of your flesh.

James Magorian

from **CROWFOOT, TEXAS**

by Andrew Schreiber

(The boy is running. Down the lane a dusty breath rises beneath his heels.

He keeps to the center of the path, between the rutted depressions where passing caterpillars have shaped the dried mud into studded tracks that look like strips of tenderized beef. The dust floats upward and dissipates, a brown exhalation the color of the parched prairie grass that rises to either side of the road.

He slows, catching his breath, and squints behind, into the sunset. Black skyscraper skeletons jut up from the fields, red and orange bursts of light streaming through their hollow insides. There are huddled shapes too: pumps squat as kneeling animals dot the plain, their black, spindly arms bobbing in inexorable synchrony above the dust-choked weeds.

The boy has turned and is running again, towards the dark farmhouse that broods at the end of the lane. The tractor ruts are shallower now. The lane divides; swaths of fresh tracks veer off from it across the trampled fields. The boy heads straight, along the original path, to where it narrows through a collapsed gateway. He pauses here, at the edge of the yard, his eyes glancing down the stretch of bobwire. The fence is badly rusted and clotted with brush. An old gate, unhinged and brittle as aged bark, lies on its face just inside the yard. The boy steps across it, the grey wood cracking beneath his sneakers, and approaches the darkened farmhouse.

The dusty windows glimmer dully with reflections of pink and orange. The porch overhang has begun to collapse on one side, drawing a dark lid of shadow down across the ragged screen door. The house itself seems oddly imbalanced by the drooping porch roof; it looks like the face of a man who has died with only one eye closed. The boy steps softly up the stoop and crosses to the doorway.

He squints in through the tattered screen, through the crusted glass of the padlocked storm door. Inside, carefully stacked crates huddle in the darkness, their creosote panels visible where the shadow of his palm has blocked the sunset's pink reflection on the glass. The boxes are stamped **HANDLE WITH CARE**. Below that bold legend is a line of smaller print, a cluster of dark letters interrupted by hyphens, which the boy does not bother to read.

He walks to the window, the one not obscured by the dangling porch eave. "Doggie," he whispers. His finger traces the word on the dusty surface of the glass. He draws his hand back. Reds and oranges shimmer in the letters where the dirt has been wiped away. The boy looks at it, pleased.

He sits on the stoop now, the lip of the collapsed porch eave hanging vaguely above him. His breath comes in short, truncated gasps as he sits

and faces the fiery implosion of color receding across the western sky. The paling sun is swollen and red, larger than life, and the boy scowls at its half-swallowed disc. His eyes peer outward, as if through a darkened glass, across the russet-tipped fields, where the metallic forms of the pumps and oil derricks now wink with faint stirrings of pink and orange.)

1.

There's nothing else like it in the world. First there comes a rumbling, like the gathering roll of a thunderclap, except it seems to come from deep inside you; you feel it in the beginning as kind of a flutter in your stomach, but before you know it the feeling has spread to your hips and legs, coming on stronger and stronger, and worked its way down until the ground itself is trembling. The derrick will pop and squeal, as if every beam and joint is about to burst, and if you're standing close enough, where you can hear the drill-shaft whine and the whistle of steam rise from the chugging boiler, you just might have to put your hand up against your thigh to damp the rattling of coins in your pocket. There is something else besides the trembling itself, something that coils up inside you like a wound watch-spring until you can't stand it any longer, and you leap into the air just as the thunder gathers to a roar in your ears and the earth underneath you kind of heaves, black jism spurting up the derrick and into the sky. The men gathered around jump and whoop, turning black in the shower that spreads like a tornado above their heads, and the stuff just comes and comes and comes like you can't believe. There's no telling how long it will keep up like that if left to itself; the great Spindletop strike roared for nine days before they finally capped the well, and according to my Grandad there was such partying in the streets of Beaumont that no one even thought of closing the shaft until the liquor gave out.

My Dad was just a baby when Grandad brought him and his mother up to Oklahoma (it was still Indian Territory then) after Spindletop dried up in 1902, and had begun working in the oil fields when he was still a boy. Grandad had been a wildcat prospector and driller; in his day he had made and lost a half-dozen small fortunes in oil, and had moved his family up to Tulsa to have still another go at it. But Oklahoma was a company state from the beginning, owned by the Mellons and the Rockefellers, and Grandad, a prideful man, retired rather than go to work for the monopolies.

But he wasn't too proud to keep his boy from doing the same. In fact, he sent him to work—an act that cost Grandad his marriage and cheated his son—my father—out of half his childhood. Dad was thirteen when he went to work for Galway, the company that ran the local fields, and had been an oilman for a dozen years by the time I was born. It was hard for me to imagine him as a child or as anything but the oily hulk, the huge grey fleshy machine, that came wandering in from the drill-site every

night. Most of the time he came home plain dirty and tired, smelling of the grease and oil the boiler steam had baked into his skin. He didn't talk much, and in fact I think I came to know the smell of him before I even knew his voice. He would always stop at the front stoop and take off his shiny, soot-caked boots and bib overalls before he came into the house; he'd gotten into the habit of undressing outside to make my mother happy, but that was before she ran off with some damn clean-shaven threshing-machine salesman, and according to Grandad he kept it up in case she ever came back. She had gone before I was old enough to know her really, and since I took my Dad's looks and smell for granted, it never was clear to me why she chose that drummer over him.

His hair was always black and shiny as a greased cable, and there was a dull, measly greyness to his skin, especially his cheeks and forehead, where the oil and steamy sweat dried in the hollow pores and in the stubble of his beard. Even undressed he smelled like the dark, gritty sludge and limestone sand that the biling pumps sucked out of the drill-shaft, and his sleeveless undershirt was always covered with damp grey patches that looked and smelled like he had been sweating oil. Once he had his boots and overalls off he would step into the front room and lie down on the floor, and I'd run over and kiss him. His lips were like moist ridges of black oily film, and I'd get up, wiping the taste off on my shirtsleeve. Then he'd look up at me and smile, and his barrel chest would rise and fall in a fummy burble of breath.

I know it was just plain stupid, but I couldn't help it. It just scared me when it happened, and no matter how many times I heard it I just couldn't get used to it. It would start with that rumble, low and distant like an echo from deep down in your belly, and get louder and louder until the sound was everywhere. When it finally blew, the roar would rattle the walls of the tin-plate houses, and afterwards if it was close enough, you could hear the soft, far-off spatter of the spewing oil as it rained down into the corn. Babies would be bawling, and more often than not I would be too, even though I was five years old and should have known better. Grandad would get up from where he had his feet propped in front of the stove and tell me it was all right, it wasn't nothing but another well coming in. Then he'd take me out to the stoop, and we'd watch the black geyser rising above the grey huddle of crackerbox houses. The streets would be full of women and children, all of them with their fingers pointing out beyond the town to the gushing shaft of oil. A cheer would begin at the far end of the street, and the women and children would be hurrying towards it as the sound got closer and closer. The crowd would swell the street and come cheering and hollering down through the town. If it had been dry out, which it usually was in those years, they would bring the dust with them, a thin grey fog of dust that smelled like oil and seemed to get through every crack and pinhole in the tin-plate walls of our house. When they got a few buildings down from ours we could see a kind of black hollow at the

center of them, and the hollow would be full of men drenched in oil. They'd be shouting and dancing and covered from head to foot with the stuff so that even with clothes on they looked like a bunch of naked, practicing Negroes. One of them would be my Dad, and seeing us he would break loose from the crowd and run up to the porch, his teeth and eyeballs white against the sheen of oil, and shout: "Look at her, ain't she a beauty! Lord, what a sight! Would you look at her blow!" Then he would disappear back into the howling rush of people. Grandad would smile weakly as they passed on by, his bucket jaw setting like cement. "More oil," he'd mutter. "More oil for the goddamn Rockefellers."

We had moved to Corning when Galway first opened the field there, and the folks in that town hadn't figured out yet that they weren't going to get a penny out of the oil that was being pumped off their land. Grandad knew, and I reckon my Dad did too, but Dad didn't seem to care whether the oil belonged to the Rockefellers or the Mellons or whoever. Maybe he was just boom-crazy like Grandad said, or maybe he'd seen the companies wrestle it out from under Grandad's nose so many times he'd gotten used to the idea that it was theirs. But there was one thing for sure—there was nothing prettier to my Dad than the sight of a tall black gusher heaving its payload skyward. As time went on he got to be the best (Grandad said the luckiest) drill chief in Corning; it seemed like every hole he sunk came up a header, and each time one came in he would stagger home black from head to foot and his mouth shaped white like some minstrel-man's smile, laughing as the jubilant crowd pressed past our door.

One night just at sunset Dad drove me down to where they were building the bridge across the river for the new highway. The water lapped and foamed against the concrete abutments, filmy rainbows of color swirling on top of it, and all along the banks the beached fish lay like so much driftwood left by the tide, their silvery scales glinting orange in the setting sun. Dad drew a deep breath, his grey hands rubbing against his puffed-out chest. "Smell that?" he said. I nodded, and his grin cracked underneath his shiny stubble of beard. It was something that smelled like oil, only cleaner, more airy. At first I thought it was the dead fish, but Dad was pointing away from the river, towards where the new highway cleared the trees and split through the yellow stand of corn. A white shape rose up from the field, like a giant tin of chewing tobacco, and next to it was a tall stove-pipe chimney. At the top of the stack burned a clear blue-white flame. It flickered star-like against the evening sky.

"Gus," he said. "That's how your daddy finds the oil." He made a hocking noise deep in his throat, imitating the roar of a gusher, and he laughed, his hands slowly spreading apart. I stared up at him in horror, and he stopped grinning. He bent down beside me, his grey, filmy hand running through my hair. "It ain't nothing to be scared of," he said, softly. "It's what makes the oil come—why, that's why it's there, Web. Those booms—they ain't nothing but the gas trying to let the oil out."

He lifted me into the truck and we drove back to town. Our old Ford rattled along the unfinished road. Behind us the oil derricks jutted up from the dark land into the reddish-purple of the fading sunset; boilers were still pumping here and there across the field, and as the steam from them spread up into the night it looked like a shadow of some gigantic, ghostly wings opening across the sky. A little further on we came up behind some old Negro walking with a fish-pole slung over his shoulder and his pouch hanging loose and empty at his side. He was heading away from the river, back towards town, and Dad shook his head as we passed him. "Sharecropper no doubt," he said. "Ain't nobody else dumb enough to try and fish that river now." I knelt up on the seat and looked behind us as the bowed shape of the Negro shrank away into the dark. The unfinished highway stretched back into the distance, a dark ribbon of shadow against the purpling horizon. Across the river the blue-white flame of the burning gas shone through the trees like winding starlight. The whole land looked and smelled like black oily smoke. The smell was strong, and it was everywhere; it felt like something big coming on, and for a minute I wasn't afraid. I felt like I was part of it, whatever it was, and it was stronger and bigger than any man, more than even the river and the land itself, so there wasn't any point in being scared any longer. There was nothing to do but go on being part of it and see what happened.

After that, I could see it feeding itself and getting bigger all the time. There were more cars and more machines every week, and pretty soon they were jamming the narrow streets that led into town. It seemed like the oil drew the machines—just like a carcass draws buzzards, Grandad said. Except after awhile a few buzzards can pick a carcass clean, and this thing just got bigger and bigger. The more machines came to feed on it, the more it grew. They tore down the corn to make room for more wells, and it finally got so there wasn't any field any more, just derricks spreading out from town all the way to the river, and a few withered stalks that had been choked where they stood by the mucky run-off from the sludge pools. There were derricks in town now too, sticking up between houses and in front yards. The drill-bits whined and sludge-buckets clanked and rattled right up beside the tin-plate houses so it seemed like babies cried all the time now. They dug trenches along the streets to carry off the water and runny grey muck that came out of the well-shafts, but it wouldn't seep down like any normal liquid, so it overflowed into the streets and mixed with the dirt and occasional rain to make a black, swampy mire. The machines and cars bogged down in it, and sometimes it seemed like everything was coming to a stop and the town was sinking down in its own slime; but still the thing kept on going, as if it could even feed on its own waste, and it grew and grew and grew.

They were drilling all day and all night now. Men trudged up and down the streets at all hours, grey and bent in the yellow haze of the arc lamps. Pumps creaked and hissed through the darkness like chattering

locusts, and every once in a while your sleep would be broken by the shuddering boom of one of the drills hitting a gas pocket. There was no more celebrating in the streets; the people had finally figured out that the oil wasn't going to do anything for their town except keep their men tired and dirty. The company needed every man it could get, twenty-four hours a day, to drill for the stuff and pump it out; they kept hitting more and more of it, all along the river, and at sunset a black mist would gather over the cooling water, a long, skinny cloud that seemed to stretch downstream for miles and miles.

They capped the wells as soon as they blew now, so as not to waste a drop of the precious oil; but that was just as well, since the ground probably could not have taken much more without the whole town floating away on some giant slough of oil. It seemed that the more they pumped, the more precious it got. The whole thing had suddenly gotten awful big and deadly serious. Dad was out in the fields almost all the time; we wouldn't see him for days on end sometimes, and when he finally did come home he was more silent than usual, and Grandad would speak to him in an angry whisper about how Oklahoma was no longer any place for a red-blooded oilman with a speck of pride in himself.

It was about this time Boomer Clement came to Corning. I heard about him from Dad at first. He came in from the fields one afternoon, more talkative than he had been in weeks, and told Grandad and me how this Texan had blown into town, and was flashing big money around all the stores and allowing as how he'd just snared the drilling rights to a sure-fire piece of land down in Rusk County. He was looking for a crew, Dad said, and had the biggest wad of green anyone in Corning had seen since the Depression got started and all.

Boomer showed up at our shack a couple nights later, and what impressed me most when I finally saw him was not his money or his shiny black leather boots or even his big brown ten-gallon hat, which had a leather sweatband with a turquoise-studded border and was bigger than any headpiece I'd ever seen. What I remember most about my first sight of Boomer was that he smoked. It wasn't that oilmen didn't use tobacco, or that they couldn't afford it, though that may have been true in some cases; but around an oil town, folks get to be pretty circumspect about matches and lit fags and such, and I had never seen a man as casual and downright careless with a light as Boomer Clement.

He was tall and skinny and nervous and had these restless hands that would wave and point and jab all the while he was talking. There was a lit cigar in one of them, a big black stogie that smelled like burning peat, and with every flick of Boomer's hand I could see the glowing ash getting closer and closer to Dad, who had just finished a triple shift and was sitting there with twenty-six hours' worth of black shale dust and oil tar standing on his skin. I don't believe Boomer had that cigar in his mouth all night long except to light it, and that was the worst part, because when it

went out on him he'd reach in his pocket and pull out these long pine-stem matches that he had to strike on the tabletop to get them lit. The flame would jump up, green sulphur sparks dancing across the table, and when he was done with the match he'd throw it still lit to the floor and grind it out with his boot heel. Then he'd be talking again, shaking that stogie across the table at Dad until I thought for sure Boomer was going to light him on fire with it.

They—or Boomer rather—talked for the better part of an hour. The upshot of it was that Boomer wanted Dad to quit Galway and come down to Texas and be his drill chief. Dad just sat and listened mostly, the line of his eyebrows lowered like a black crag over the narrowed whites of his eyes. Grandad hung back by the doorway. He kept inching back the tarpaper blind and squinting out the window as if maybe he was expecting somebody else, which I couldn't understand since Boomer was the first visitor I could ever remember us having. But Grandad kept on looking, peeking up and down the long line of machines that were jammed along the muddy street outside, and all of a sudden he glanced away, snapping the blind shut. "They're coming," he said. "Two houses down."

Dad stood up, his tar-crustied fingers clutching the edge of the table. "You better go," he said to Boomer.

"Who's coming?" I asked.

Boomer snorted, rolling his cigar between his fingers. It had gone out again. "If it's them boys from the company force," he said, "I wouldn't worry none. They been follering me around for three days now. Ain't nothing come of it yet--"

"You dumb cowpuncher," Grandad hissed, "don't you know nothing? You mean you let them tail you here?"

Boomer got up from his chair. He was laughing, innocent-like, as his hands wiggled stupidly in the air. "I didn't sneak around like some old coyote, if that's what you mean. After all, it's a free country, ain't it?"

"Come on," Dad said, pushing him towards the back door. "I can't risk no trouble. I got my boy here, you know--"

"All right, all right," Boomer said, finally. He stuck the cold stogie in his mouth and held his hand out for Dad to shake. "Think about that offer now, will you?"

"For Christ sakes go," Dad snapped, unbolting the door and shoving him through it. I could hear the squishing sound of boots hurrying up the muddy walkway to the front porch. Boomer trotted down the back steps, letting the door bang shut behind him, and just then two men I'd never seen before came busting in through the front, knocking Grandad sideways and pointing across the room to where Dad was standing. "Out there!" I heard one of them shout, and they both took off, dark pipestems flashing in their grip. Dad stood in the doorway, trying to slow them down, but they just shoved him aside and were out the back before any of us had a chance to even blink.

"Goddamn fool cowboy," Grandad muttered.

It didn't take them long to catch up to Boomer. He must have noticed his cigar had gone out, because he had stopped about ten paces from the back stoop. He had the stogie in one hand and the other in his pocket where he kept the matches, and when he saw the men coming at him he just kind of glanced up, surprised, not even trying to make a run for it. "He's got a gun!" one of them screamed, and he swung and drove the black, flashing pipe-stem hard against Boomer's dangling wrist. Boomer howled and doubled forward, the dark barrel of the cigar flying off into the darkness. He drew his other hand out of his pocket and clutched his smashed wrist against his side. The other man ran up behind Boomer and pulled his hat down over his eyes. Boomer was wobbling now, swaying from side to side, his polished cowboy boots crunching over the match-sticks that had spilled from his pocket. "My arm," he moaned. "You broke my arm."

I couldn't see any of their faces. They were standing in a dim pool of light that fell from the arc-lamp in front of the house, but the yard was still too dark for me to make out colors or features, especially the oil-blackened faces of the two company men. They were circling Boomer as he staggered blindly from side to side. One of them picked up Boomer's cigar and pointed it at his partner. "Bang," he said, and they both laughed.

Dad stood at the screen door watching. His face was a black, shiny scowl. I kept wishing he would do something. I wished it so bad I felt sick to my stomach, but he just stood and watched while Grandad hung back from the doorway and shook his head. "Damn fool cowboy," Grandad said. I could hear him grinding his back teeth.

Boomer was down on his knees now. The men had cuffed his hands behind his back. His hat was still down over his eyes, and he had his head tilted way back like he was trying to see their faces. I could see the knot of his Adam's apple bobbing as he choked and swallowed his breath. "You broke it," he was saying. "You broke my goddamn arm." There seemed to be more disbelief than actual pain in his voice.

"Come on," one of the men said, pulling Boomer up by his hurt arm. Boomer groaned and swore as they dragged him up the steps and back into the house. Dad and Grandad glowered at the men, whose oil-stained faces were creased with childish yellow grins. One of them grabbed Boomer's collar and jerked him upright, pulling his hat up out of his eyes. There was a red streak across Boomer's forehead where the band had been pressing against it. He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bulging out above his clenched collar. His eyes narrowed against the light.

"You just bound to make trouble for folks ain't you?" said the man who had hold of Boomer. Boomer gulped as his collar drew even tighter. "What kind of offer did you make old Bill here?"

"He didn't make no offer," Dad spoke up. He was so cool and righteous I almost believed him myself. "We was just talking."

"Talking?" the man shot back. He cocked his head and squinted one eye like a dog smelling shit sideways. "Talking about what?"

"You got it wrong," Boomer said. "They was just throwing me out. They wouldn't hear none of it."

"Real smart," the other company man said. He was dancing on tip-toe, trying to draw himself up to Boomer's height. "Covering each other's asses like that. I swear, you Reds is all the same—"

"Reds?" Boomer howled, indignantly. "You boys got me wrong—dead wrong—I'll have you know I'm a firm believer in the free enterprise system—"

"We'll see about that," the first man growled. He reached into Boomer's pocket and pulled out an old, crinkled cowhide wallet. He flipped it open, and the bills in the money clip fanned out like a spray of fresh ferns. "How about it?" he said, dangling the open clip in front of Boomer. "You gonna fight for it? Or don't it mean nothing to you after all?" There was a hint of laughter in his yellow, cur-like eyes.

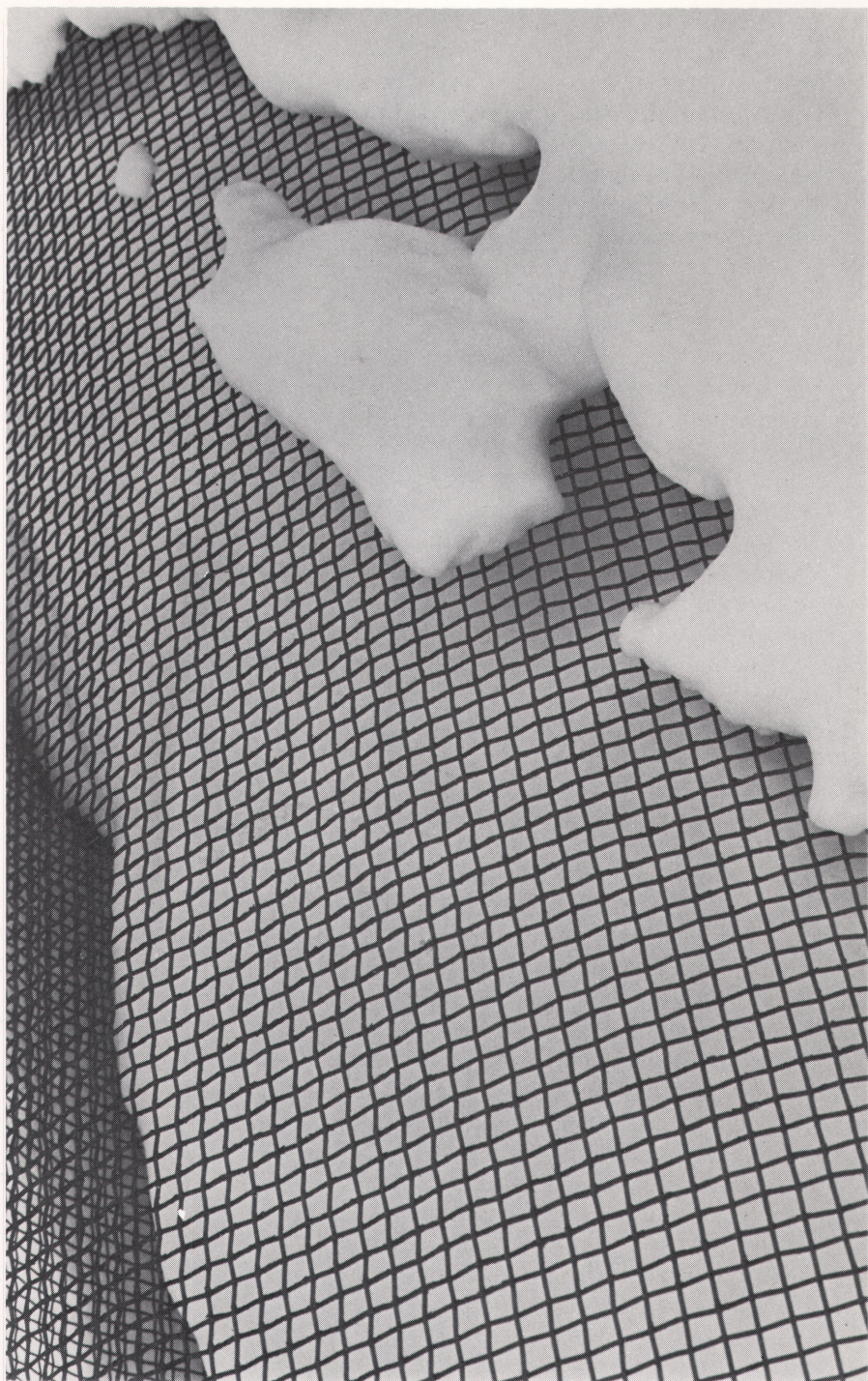
"Go on, take it," Boomer sighed. "You'll never see no more in one place again."

Dad must have seen it coming, because he was off his heels and moving towards them before Dog-Eye's stick was all the way up, but he was still too late to stop it. All I saw was the sudden red flash of anger in the company man's eyes and the rush of the descending pipe-stem as it caught the link-chain of the cuffs and yanked it down, sending Boomer howling and sprawling to the floor. The other man whipped out his pipe, waving Dad off, and the two of them grabbed Boomer by the armpits and started pulling. He twisted and hollered in their grip as they dragged him across the splintery shantyboard and out the front door. Once they had him outside they lifted him to his feet and gave him a headlong shove off the porch. He fell, jerking and twisting against the cuffs, and landed face first in the slick, oily mud of the front yard. Other men peeked out of the cabs of the passing machines, their craning faces grey in the arc lamps and smiles showing yellow, moonlike crescents of teeth as they watched Boomer jerk and flop like a beached fish in the swampy mud.

"Oh, by the way Bill," the dog-eyed man said, turning and pressing his tarry nose against the front door screen, "you're fired. You got till morning to clear out."

"I knew it," Grandad spat, when they had gone. "I knew that dumb cowpuncher wasn't nothing but trouble."

"Aw shutup will you?" Dad said, kicking open the screen door. "You was the one wanted to leave Oklahoma. Now come on and help me get Boomer up out of that mess."



Wayne Rottman

DREAMS OF THE NEIGHBOR LADY

when her children sleep she enters the t.v.
she wants gary cooper's hand to hold
she wants to ride joel mccrea's horse
legs touching leather together
she wants cary grant to say her name three times
she wants to free-fall from an airplane with charles bronson
locked in some final embrace

she wakes in the morning next to her husband
his hands have soiled her flowered sheets
she watches quiz shows trades her life for a weekend in vegas

in autumn i watch as she waits for his dark hello
in winter even he can feel her loneliness stroke him
fingertip wind across his face
in spring no gentle rebirth just a wilder flowering of passion
she turns away unable to watch us hang
laundry together

in summer she visits
her casual manner betrayed by her reasons
a recipe i've never had a question i would not know
the answer to
we deal with the weather the kids the neighbors

her hands grip the coffee cup
the pulse in her wrist interrupts our conversation
i cannot but she manages to lift her eyes from the blue vein
to search out my husband's bending body

she struggles to refocus her gaze speaks
righteous bone-pale about a divorced friend
"fool" she shudders and i offer a sweater
although we both know how hot it is

Deborah Kenan

THE MOAT

We see the water from every window;
when we step outside,
it surrounds us.
If you send letters
we conceal the wounds
of your unanswered words
in white envelopes.
If we try to write
shadows of numerous birds
fall across the page.

By remaining awake at night,
we have named five kinds of silence.
Afternoons are spent staring down the cold
translucence of wet stones.
Sometimes we hear swords
clashing in the distance.
We would take sides but the birds
who bring us news of the battles
are untrustworthy.

Each morning we watch the dragons
on the opposite shore
lumber into the shallow water.
They are clumsy and poorly disciplined.
When they have learned to swim,
we will move on.

Gloria Whelan

THREE LANDSCAPES

1.

The red-orange of a not-quite-ripe tomato,
the walnut-brown of dark farm buildings
and the black mis-shape of an old tree in the foreground:
a barn, coming into color, reddens like an opening
wound; Ohio, early morning, perhaps
a jogger and his dog —
one bird on the wire, two break from the field —
the first fast breath of a good run.

2.

The yellow niece-coloring of a moonscape:
sand, a few tired hills, heat waving the loose
highway like poor tv reception; dry throat,
back sweat-glued to vinyl, plenty of gas.
Nevada, just after noon maybe,
or maybe a snake skin flat as an egg
fried near the centerline.

3.

White; a familiar storm,
the saltfog mist rolling in off the Atlantic,
foghorn dull as old love; a luffing sail —
becalmed sleep:
a FOG horn, a FOG horn, a FOG horn

Phillip Sterling

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RED CEDAR REVIEW is a biannual magazine of the literary arts published at Michigan State University. Manuscripts may be submitted to 325 Morrill Hall, Department of English, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan 48824. Please include return postage.

SUBSCRIPTIONS — one year (two copies): \$3.50.

Single copies: \$2.00.

OUR THANKS to the MSU College of Arts and Letters, English Department, Student Media Appropriations Board, George Kooistra and University Publications, Albert Drake, and other friends.

COLOPHON — The text is set in 11 pt. optima, heads in 18 pt. optima.

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Michigan State University Printing

Volume XII

Issue 2