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A JOURNAL OF WESTERN OKLAHOMA

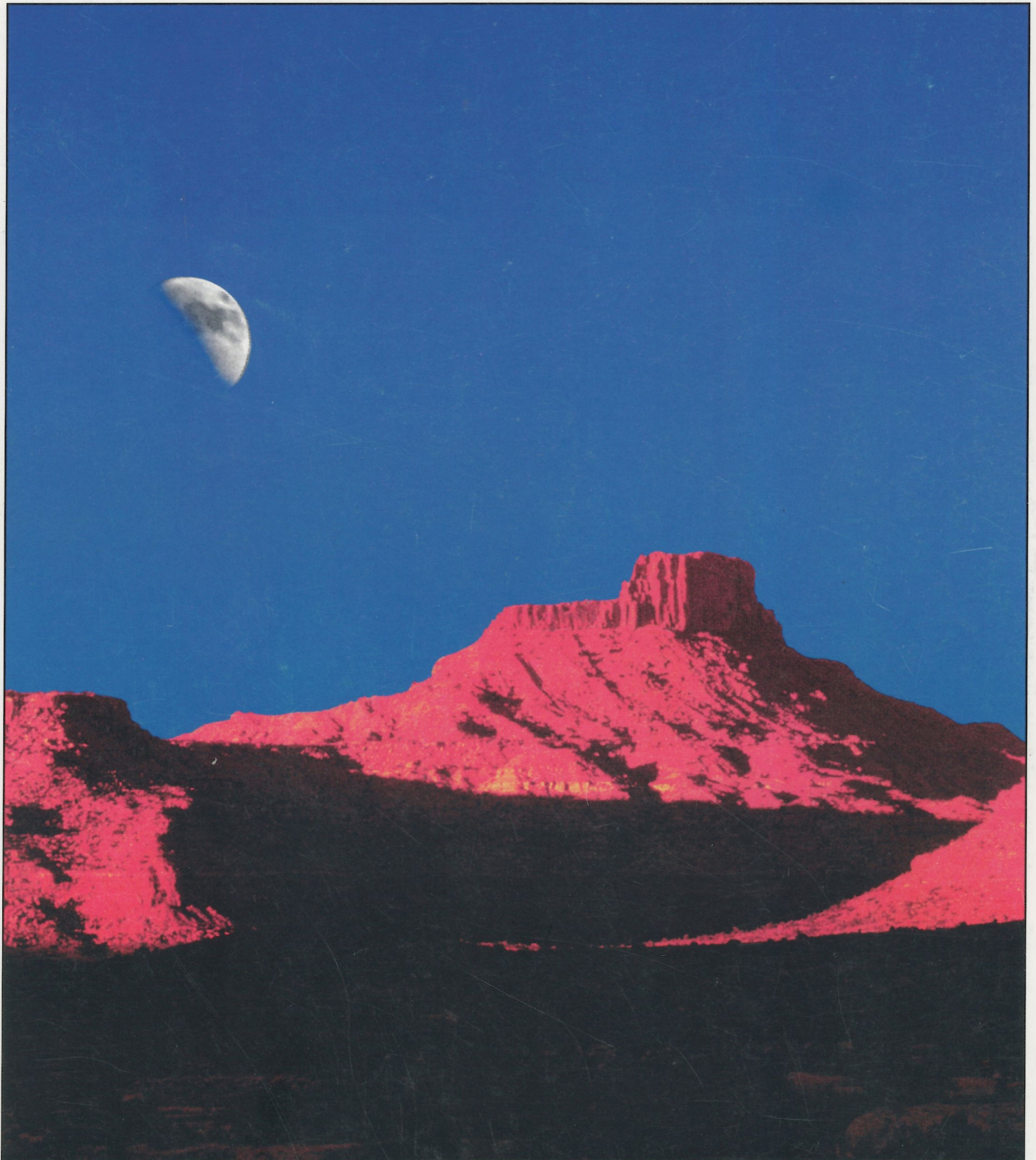
# WESTVIEW

VOLUME 22

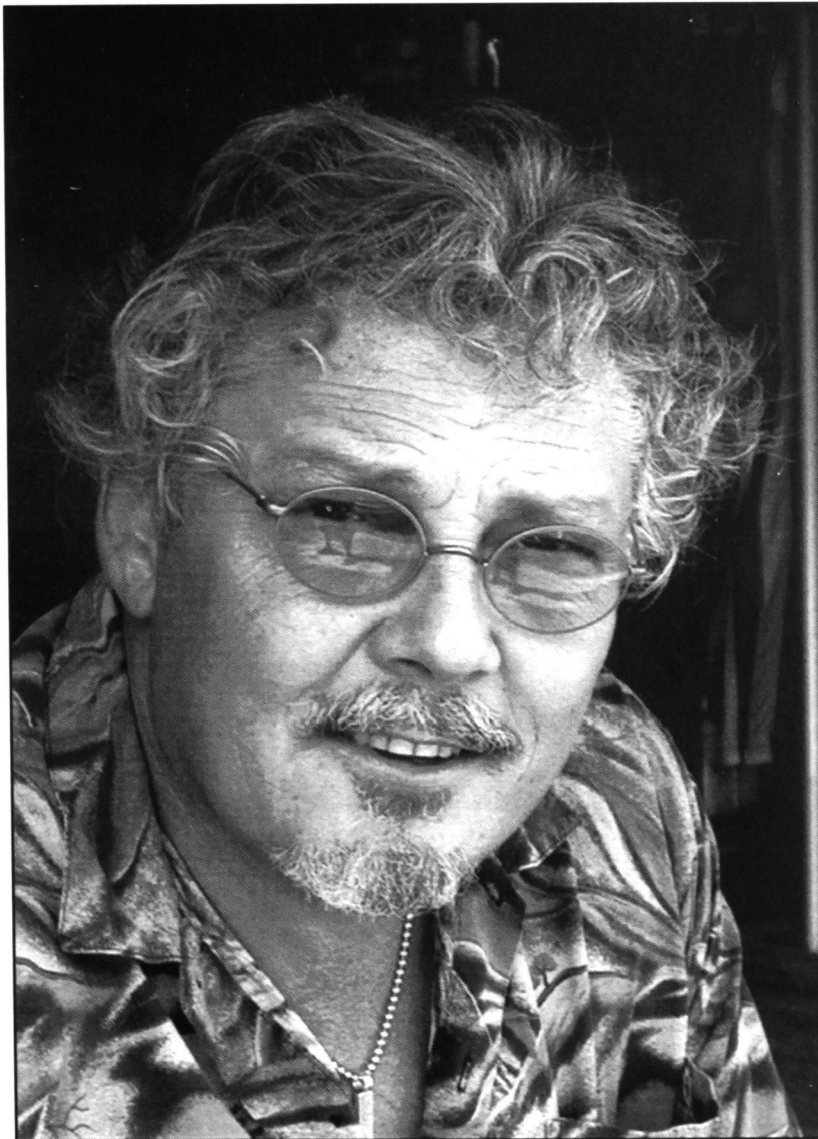
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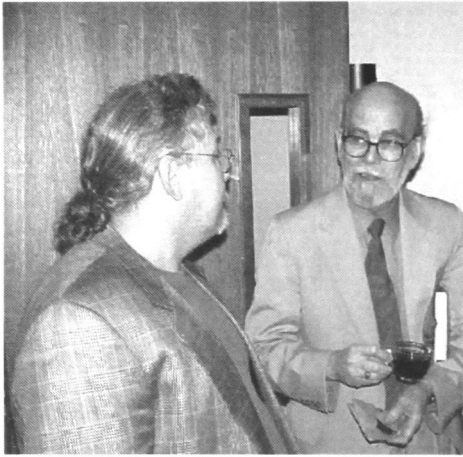
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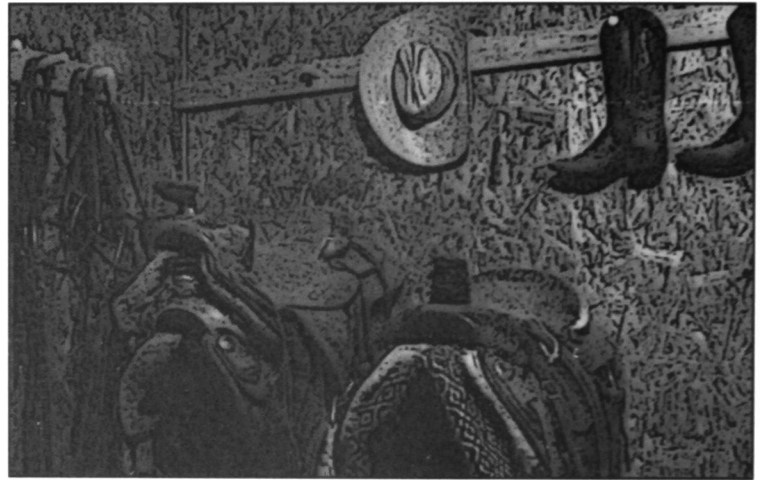
**C. Michael McKinney**  
**1951-2002**

POET, WRITER, *WESTVIEW* EDITOR,  
WEBMASTER, AND PHOTOGRAPHER





*C. Michael McKinney talks with Miller Williams at the 2000 Westview Writers' Festival.*



## The Covers

*Many of McKinney's photos constituted the cover of Westview. Below are a few examples.*



## The works of C. Michael McKinney

*C. Michael McKinney contributed many photographs to the pages of Westview. McKinney was a consummate photographer who had an eye for bringing the spectacular out of the ordinary.*



### C. Michael McKinney Memorial Scholarship

A scholarship fund in memory of Mike McKinney has been established with the SWOSU Foundation. Memorial gifts are being accepted. Contact the SWOSU Foundation office at 580-774-3267 for more information. Mike, a faculty member on the Sayre campus since 1991, passed away Nov. 11, 2002.



# A Journal Of Western Oklahoma WESTVIEW

Volume 22

Number 1

Fall/Winter 2002

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## Stylesheet

1. Submissions should be typed on 8.5" x 11" white paper; prose should be double spaced. Include a SASE.
2. Submitted artwork should be suitable for black and white reproduction. Work should be no larger than 8.5" x 14". However, photographs or slides of larger work may be submitted. Submitted artwork with a SASE will be returned.
3. We accept and enjoy formal verse, free verse, and prose poems.
4. Include a brief biographical sketch for our contributors' notes.
5. We welcome submissions on a 3.5" disk formatted for IBM or Macintosh. Please include a hard copy of your submission.
6. Submissions and correspondence may be sent to:  
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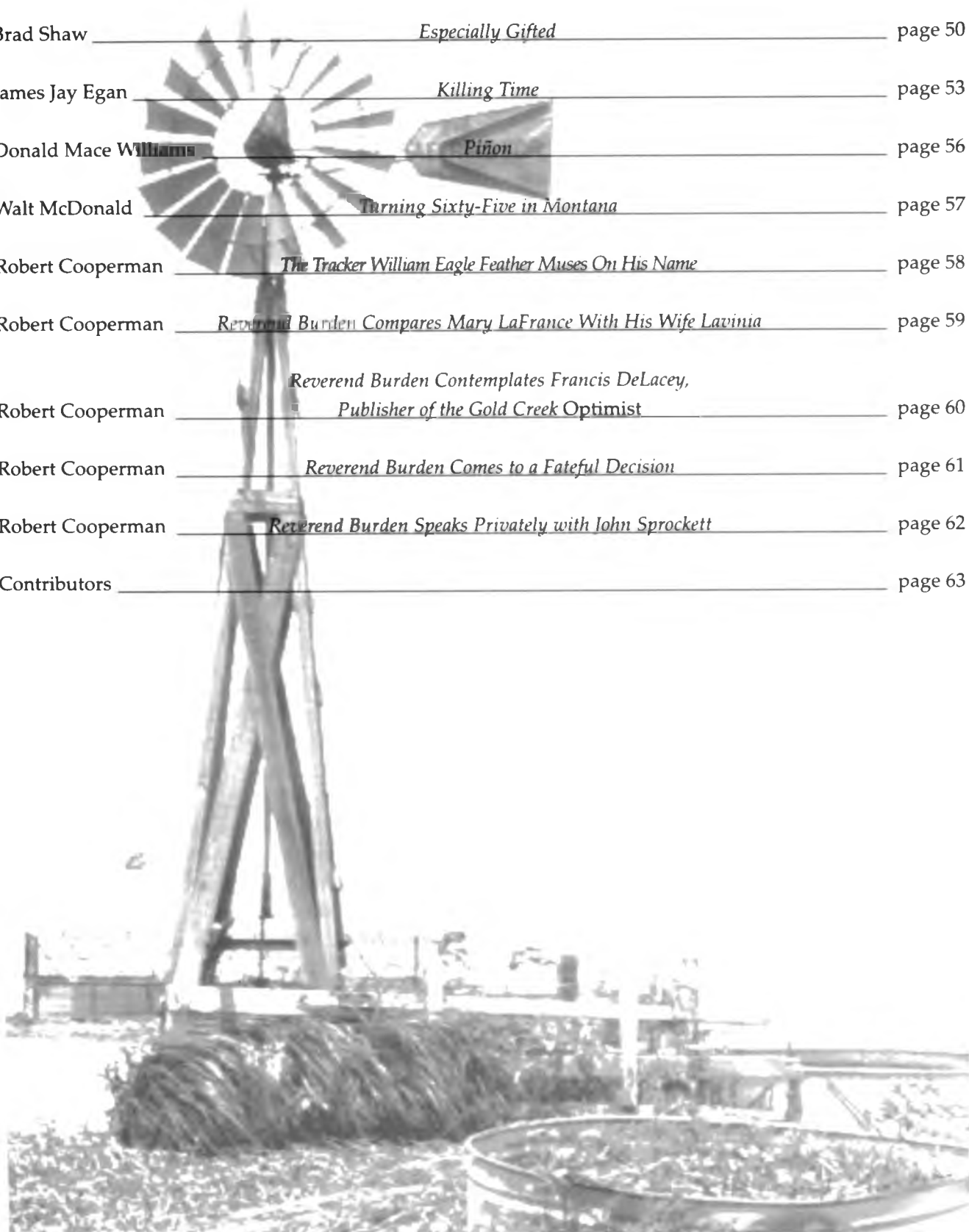
Cover artwork by Stuart Harrison, "Monument Valley"

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# Interview with Virgil Suárez

by Fred Alsberg

**FRED ALSBERG:**

How old were you when you first discovered you were interested in poetry? What was the occasion?

**VIRGIL SUÁREZ:**

I had always been fascinated by poetry, in particular the poetry of Neruda and Lorca. As early as I can remember my grandmother also read to me translations from ancient Chinese poets. I couldn't tell you which ones because she was reading me translations in Spanish. I suspect they were either Tu Fu or Li Po or Pu Chuy, or even Confucious. She also read to me plenty of Jose Marti. I must have been seven or eight. In the last years of my life in Cuba, in my childhood paradise, as I've come to call it, I was also lucky enough to go to school at Cal. State Univ. Long Beach and fell into the hands of Elliot Fried, Charles Stetler, and Gerry Locklin. They were there writing and publishing a storm of poetry. Those guys lived and breathed it. They were great at getting a tremendous scene established. It was poetry for me from the very beginning. I made the silly mistake once of thinking that there might be some money in it if I wrote novels. I still laugh at my foolishness. Ah, innocence! Ah, crazy nonsense. Writing a novel is like going fishing without bait, heck, without even a hook. It's rubbish to think that one writes to make money. The business of writing and publishing and selling novels is just that, a crazy business. I want my words slim and pure, no strings attached. That's why with poetry I'm free. Nobody messes with poetry, at least not with mine.

**ALSBERG:**

How important is family in your work? How important is your early life in Cuba to your work?

**SUÁREZ:**

Family is central to my work. Also community. I have struggled to make a great community

out of my life in Miami in these last ten years. I know a lot of writers I think of as friends. Denise Duhamel and Nick Carbo are now down in South Florida, so I see them often. My friends Geoffrey Philp and Ricardo Pau Llosa. Also Mitchell Kaplan, owner of Books and Books, who loves poetry and keeps the best poetry selection in the Southeast. He keeps me well supplied. It's a great place, Miami, which includes lots of family, and the vibrant Cuban-American community. Lots to write about. I wish I could live down here 12 months out of the year. God knows I'm trying to make it down.

**ALSBERG:**

Has living in Florida influenced your work in any way?

**SUÁREZ:**

All of Florida is influential, from the Panhandle to the Keys. I live in Key Biscayne and Coral Gables, so that whole tropical world seeps in. The woods in Tallahassee have also done enough to entice me. I was born in a big city and have always lived in the city, but there are things about the country I love.

I love the Everglades. I love how everyday there's a new color to its water. A new hue. You can enter Florida and never leave, which is what I think has happened to me. I love it. I love its people, the heat, the water, and all that Uva Caletta, which is now back in full force around Key Biscayne after Hurricane Andrew. I love the feral iguanas. I love the blue crabs scuttling across the parking lots in the morning rains . . . it's as magical a place as we can hope for. It's also a great place for writers and writing. It's got a tremendous literary tradition. Of all the cities in it though, I love Miami the most. It's where I feel most comfortable. I belong there. I will be buried in Miami one day.



**ALSBERG:**

Would you comment on your drafting process?

**SUÁREZ:**

An idea for a poem strikes and I will spend however long, sometimes a poem comes fast and some times it'll take a week, but the process for me is always the same. The computer, the cursor, the emptiness of the screen. My job is to fill it, begin to craft words from a single image or idea. I swing between writing narrative poems and poems that are completely mood-driven or image driven. I will work on a poem until it begins to ring true in my years.

I will revise and read aloud as many times as it takes until I arrive at a poem that, if I were an audience member at a reading, I would say pleased me. A poem I would want to hear, read, write. I like most of my childhood poems because they take me back somewhere that no longer exists, or that perhaps exists only in my imagination. "Writin' is fightin'" as Ishmael Reed calls it. For me putting in 10 hours a day writing a poem is not uncommon, but then I write like this all the time. Perhaps it has become an addiction which has no cure. I'm long gone, I think. Thank heavens it is writing and not robbing banks!

**ALSBERG:**

Which American and English poets have influenced you and why?

**SUÁREZ:**

Plenty. I love the work of Stephen Crane, Hart Crane, Sylvia Plath, and mostly Poe. I love Poe. I spend most of my time reading the contemporaries though. Tremendous poets the likes of Timothy Liu, Denise Duhamel, Kim Addonizio, Li Young Lee, Juan Felipe Herrera--Lord, there are so many of them. You know, I can easily say that the American novel is DEAD, but poetry is ALIVE and KICKING. Kicking some butt. Yeah, plenty to read. My all-time favorite poet right now (and I gauge this by how voracious my appetite is for

his stuff) is Adrian C. Louis. Sherman Alexi too. Mark Tercotte. These guys write a great line, great poem. I like poetry that takes chances.

**ALSBERG:**

How has your knowledge of the Spanish language and Spanish poetry affected your poetry written in English?

**SUÁREZ:**

It's a blessing to have two languages. God knows remembering words in Spanish has been a muse to me. My poetry is infused with Spanish. I love the sound of certain words. I love the images my parents put into my head by using words I had never heard of before. Take "guanabana" as an example. It is soursop. It's a prehistoric fruit, at least it looks it, though I don't know how old it is. Very tropical and very delicious. Lots of words like that. I think of the word, then tinker with the poem about what the word means. Lots of my poems begin with a word in Spanish. I use them as a catalyst for ideas.

**ALSBERG:**

A quick take on Lorca? Neruda? Paz? Vallejo? Which Cuban poets should we read?

**SUÁREZ:**

Great poets, though I'm not too crazy about Paz. Paz is too dry, too dull, too much of a brainiac, not enough passion like Lorca or Neruda. I would not put Paz in the same grouping. I would put Paz and Borges together. I think we should all read Jose Marti. Also Nicolas Guillen. Great rhythm and great sounds.

**ALSBERG:**

How important is sensory detail?

**SUÁREZ:**

Which relates to the way we feel, see, hear, touch, taste the world. Colors are important, but the image is what lasts. The red wheel barrow, no, the white chickens, the rain water. Ah, unforget-



table. I have measured out my life in tea spoons, but I have also drunk my share of Cuban *cafecitos*.

**ALSBERG:**

What are the qualities and characteristics of the poetry you find most engaging?

**SUÁREZ:**

They tell me a story, but they also leave a lasting impression through images, which are constructed by language. A few years back I was devastated by the power of Bruce Weigl's poetry. He's an amazing poet. So is Rita Dove, so is Charles Wright. I love poetry that takes me to a place, a time, an individual and an individual's struggle. *WHAT SAVES US* by Weigl is a must-read-and-must-reread collection.

So are most of the books written by Adrian C. Louis. Poetry that zings with vibrancy, the electricity of the soul. Poetry with Lorca's Duende zapped with *cojones*.

**ALSBERG:**

How would you like to see your work develop in the coming years?

**SUÁREZ:**

This is a good question. You know, I take it one poem at a time. Sometimes I begin writing a sequence, and that sequence leads me to new place. I've been doing lots of Jesus poems lately. I like Jesus. I like the idea of our idea of Jesus. He's a great myth. Enough power behind that myth to write a thousand books!





# La Perdición

by Virgil Suárez

What my father spoke of some men who lost  
their way, either through booze, women, cock-  
fights—or all. Men who held a rooster in their

arms and whispered secrets into their ears, sun's  
radiance sparkling off the bird's plumage. Talons  
with *espuelas magicas*, magic spurs bound in leather

straps to the bird's legs. Men of sweaty faces,  
shadowy eyes, tattoos of women on their arms.  
Yes, men who'd lost their way in the world.

*Los perdidos para siempre*. Those lost forever.  
In their country, in the fields, dangerous men.  
Men of power, muscles bulging under cotton

shirts. Men with rolls of money rubber-banded  
together in their pockets. Men with hidden, sharp  
knives, ready in one minnow-swift motion.

to cut you, tear out your tongue, leave a gash  
in your side. Those men, those men of memory.  
Luminous ghosts now, walking in and out

of my life. Like my father, a ghost himself, who  
sits here next to me, holds me in his arms, whispers  
fighting words into my burning, hollowed ears.



# The Mortician's *Guayabera*

by Virgil Suárez

It hangs behind the door, white like his hands,  
after so much washing of bodies, flesh of pure

rapture. In the eyes of a dead child, a river  
speaks of valleys, mountains, a scarf adrift

in the currents. In a dead man's mouth, a gift  
of red words, a column of fire rising from cane

fields in the night. This man could be a father,  
a son, or the Trinity. A scar runs down his spine

toward the back of his left leg, a sienna canyon  
caught between two cupped hands of earth.

It is a bird, this shirt of white, tropical humidity,  
mist rising above palm fronds in *el campo*, a *guajiro*'s

garb, his suave style, ready for *decimas*, dance  
in the company of *campesina* ladies, white bird,

egret, stork, a dove, rising there behind the door.  
You would not know of its longing, its passing.

In the night, when this man too used to silence,  
wears it out in the cool evening breeze, it glows,

it comes alive. It is beacon of all those dying  
for their return home. And if you return home,

you will wear the plumage of birds on your back,  
the color of brackish water in your eyes, salt or sugar

in your mouth, the sting of tears from such radiance.



# Tamarind

by Virgil Suárez

That summer, after the great storms, we helped our mothers  
make sweet squares out of tamarind pulp and sugar. We  
climbed the trees, stripped the brown, finger-sized pods off. We  
crowned the tree's roots with mounds of these pods. Piles, We  
carried in our stretched-out shirts, ants crawling up our arms. We  
entered the cool of our mother's kitchens, our mouths tart  
with the sting of so much *tamarindo*, as we called out loud. We  
heard our stomachs grumble. Sheets of brown, sugary pulp we  
tore and ate, over and over, gobs of it sticking to the roofs of our  
mouths, between our teeth, thick on our tongues, our throats. We  
sang to this concoction that summer we stripped the trees bare. We  
heard the rain pelt the tin roof of the empty chicken shacks. We  
knew no other sweetness. Our mothers told us stories of seeds,  
of these tiger-eye, black seeds we cracked out of each pod. We  
dreamt of those seeds, of their blooming in our swollen bellies. We  
heard their *pink-pink-pink* upon the leaves of the banana trees. We  
kept time by how many seeds we kept in jars, as if they were fireflies,  
as if they were the things that kept us alive when nothing else did.





# In Praise of the *Asabache*

by Virgil Suárez

Tiger's eye, luminous in the night, keeper  
of good fortune, pearl of an islander boy

cartographer of dreams, how water  
traverses a life, fills gourds, mouths

left open to utter these words of new  
directions, song for border crossers,

these distances gobbled up by verdigris  
horizon, glitzy possibility. Talisman

of luck *Para el mal de ojo*, evil eye.  
You wear it inside your clothes, feel

it near the skin, burning down to bone.



# Chile

by Virgil Suárez

Cajun princess with your thighs of moonlight,  
that muddy-green of rivers in your eyes,

in your mouth the cadence of jujubes,  
molasses of your lips, cane sugar on your tongue,

when you walk through the rain, water  
soaks down to your essence, a marsh wader.

The sun turns taffy in your hair, your  
body the vessel by which I've learned to cross

borders—this land between the dead  
and the living, play your congas conjure lady,

play your talking drum, that's rain  
falling from your fingers on to their skins,

talk mama, talk, your toll is only that look  
askance, it lets me know the ride's always free.



# King Cobb

by Victor Gischler

Ronny wasn't sure at first if it was his brother's body.

The stampede had left Nathan Cobb a battered mash of blood and bone and hair, hoof marks like deep notary stamps the length of his broken body. It took Ronny and his two brothers staring at him for ten minutes, sweaty palmed and pallid, to recognize the corpse. Joey had finally decided it was Nathan when he saw the pink bandana. Only Nathan carried a pink bandana.

"Remember all the fights he got himself in?" Lee asked.

Joey and the youngest brother Ronny nodded agreement but without much emotion.

Two days later, the three shuffled in their wrinkled black suits, kicked at the gravel in the funeral home's parking lot.

"What started it, do you think?" asked Ronny.

"Anything," said Lee. "What's it matter?"

Joey said, "I heard of all kinds of things setting off a stampede. AM radios, electric toothbrushes, somebody whistling Dixie."

"I said it don't matter."

Ronny asked, "What's going to happen now?"

Nathan had been the oldest, in charge, managed the whole ranch after Dad took to the wheelchair. The question hung heavy in the dusty air.

*What's going to happen now?*

\* \* \*

"I thought the sheriff had been through that already." Ronny unpacked his bag, put his neatly folded shirts into the empty dresser. His old room hadn't changed. Six years gone to Los Angeles, and the only thing different was the layer of dust.

"Hank's known Dad twenty years," said Joey. "All Dad had to do was say the stampede was an accident, and Hank just said fine and wrote it was an accident in his little book and that was it."

Ronny raised an eyebrow. "Wasn't it an accident?"

Joey scratched the stubble along his big horse jaw. "Just strange, that's all."

Ronny was the baby of the family. Only four years separated Nathan, Joey and Lee. Lee was the oldest now at 38, Joey 35. Ronny was junior to Lee by ten years, but in Ronny's eyes, he was the only one who had done anything with himself. While his brothers broke wild horses and drank whiskey and got into fights and raced tractors down by the river, Ronny had put himself through UCLA and was now a junior executive in a prestigious advertising firm.

"Cows don't stampede out of malice. Something just spooks them, and they go off."

Joey scooped a wad of tobacco from a leather pouch, jammed it deep into the wet recesses of his cheek with two fingers. "Maybe." He chewed slowly.

Ronny unpacked his toiletries, lining them in a neat row atop the dresser: comb, toothbrush, deodorant, razor and shaving gel. Outside, the cattle persisted in their dull mooing. The sound seeped into the house. Even now, after being away, Ronny still had a sense of the herd. The thick, dumb mass of meat writhing and chewing and crapping almost as a single entity.

Finally Joey said, "There's been talk."

"There's always talk."

"There's a fella called Burt Charles," said Joey.

"You don't have to tell me," said Ronny. "I know Burt."

Burt was one of the dozen or so hired men that helped work the ranch. He'd been with the Cobb family even before Ronny was born. A good man.

"You go talk to Burt then," said Joey. "You tell him I sent you." There was a hint of challenge in the older brother's voice.

"Not tonight," said Ronny. "Dad wants us all around the table for dinner."

"Sure." Joey fished around the room with his





eyes but couldn't find a place to spit.

\* \* \*

The dinner table was three thick oaken planks hammered together with huge iron nails. The father and the remaining brothers sat in stale silence around it as Liddy trucked food in from the kitchen. Like Burt Charles, Liddy had also been with the family for years as maid and cook. She was an ageless, haggard, half-black, half-Apache woman with a surly disposition. But the house was spotless, the food excellent.

She put the ceramic serving trays on the table without tablecloth or heating pad. The rough wood had worn smooth and dark from years of use. Ronny noted his family's eating habits hadn't changed. All meat and starch. Potatoes, corn, heavy biscuits. The meal's main attraction was a roast the size of an engine block.

The room's only light came from the huge blaze in the hearth on the far side of the room. The dancing flames cast his family in a hellish orange, reflected oddly in the eyes of the stuffed deer's head over the doorway.

Ronny sat next to Joey and across from Lee. The two older brothers took after their father, thick, tall. Ruddy complexions, faces hewn from rough lumber. Lee's hair was thinning, and he tried to compensate by growing long, coarse sideburns. Ronny took more after Mother. Sharp features, fine lips and thin fingers. Just as tall as his brothers but leaner.

At the end of the table sat Dad, Virgil Cobb, in all his ancient and fading glory. He hunched in his wheelchair, pale eyes glittering from the dark reaches of his sunken sockets. Lips twisted, teeth a yellowing grimace. He shrunk within his plaid flannel shirt, now a size too large. It was buttoned to the top and at the cuffs, a woolen horse blanket over his lap.

No matter the season, Virgil Cobb always felt cold, the chill of an old man reduced to skin and bone.

Those glittering eyes swept his domain, ap-

praised his sons like vassals. *He sits there like King Lear*, thought Ronny. An old, wrecked monarch, choosing which son to love the most.

Ronny knew he couldn't win that one.

Virgil Cobb and his sons ate without talking, only the clink of flatware, the sounds of chewing and men passing dishes. And the herd, of course. Always the herd.

The meal ended, and Liddy cleared the table.

"Liddy." Virgil's voice was a rusty barn hinge.

She looked at the old man, waited.

"Bring the scotch from my office. The twenty year old stuff, and glasses for me and my boys."

"That's not good for you." Liddy's voice was flat and gray.

"Just bring it, woman."

She snorted and left.

The old man shifted the throttle on his electric wheel chair, and it moved back from the table and to the left. The wheelchair's little engine made a grinding sound, loud and sharp. Ronny winced, but his two brothers paid it no mind.

The old man caught Ronny's expression. "A little harsh on your delicate ears, eh?"

"It doesn't bother me, Dad."

"Wouldn't matter if it did. My chair. I can make any damn racket I want in my own house."

"It only happens when he backs up to the left," said Lee. "I've been after him to let me fix it."

"Plenty of other things need fixing more than this damn chair," said the old man. "You remember what I told you, Lee. You're running this place now that Nathan has passed, so forget the damned chair. It'll be time to ride the fences again next month." He jabbed a gnarled finger at Joey. "I haven't forgotten you. I need you too."

"You can count on me, Dad."

The old man turned to Ronny.

"I guess our little ranch troubles don't mean much to you way out on the coast."

"That's not true, Dad. I'd come if you needed me."

Virgil acted like he hadn't heard. "So are you



rich yet, Mr. Hollywood? Making big money selling toilet paper and toothpaste on television?"

"I'm working on a campaign for a water softener. If I do well, I might get promoted."

Virgil's next comment was cut short by Liddy and the arrival of the scotch. At the old man's instruction, Liddy filled each glass three fingers full and passed them around.

Virgil held up his glass. "To Nathan. A good son, and a man. You boys will have to work hard to live up to his example."

Ronny drank. It stung his throat hot and hard.

\* \* \*

The brothers sat on the long, low porch in front of the house. Lee sat in one of the rockers. He'd produced a pocketknife and whittled aimlessly at a stick of firewood. He also puffed a fat, vile cigar. It seemed to be a race to see which Lee could make disappear first.

Joey leaned against the railing, away from Lee and Ronny. He stared hard toward the herd although it was too dark to see, cocked his head, to keep track of the mooing.

Ronny stood with his hands behind his back. There was a television inside, but no cable. Too early to sleep, but maybe he'd read in bed. He was about to bid his brothers goodnight when he heard the music and singing.

It took Ronny a moment to recognize his father's voice, high-pitched and raw but on-key: *I was dancing with my darling to the Tennessee waltz . . .*

"That ain't right," said Joey without turning around. "This ain't a time for singing with Nathan just in the ground."

"So what?" Lee whittled. "Let him sing."

"Just ain't proper."

Lee closed the knife, flicked the dwindled stick into the night.

"Where's the music coming from?" asked Ronny.

"Me and Lee got it for him last birthday." Joey jammed another wad of tobacco into his cheek.

"Dad sat in his office and sang along with the radio every night, so we thought he'd like it. What's it called again?"

"A karaoke machine," said Lee.

"Joey thinks maybe Nathan's death wasn't an accident," said Ronny.

Joey turned, frowned at Ronny.

Lee said nothing at first. He puffed his cigar fiercely, the orange tip washing him in pale fire. He looked like the doorman to hell, his eyes dark and hard, his mouth twisting into a rough snarl with each puff.

"That's fool's talk," said Lee.

"All I meant was it seemed strange." Joey's eyes bounced between Ronny and Lee.

"Nothing strange about a stampede," said Lee. "It happens."

"Sure." Joey nodded.

"But what was Nathan doing out in the middle of them? They'd already been brought in and fed and watered."

Lee put his hands on his thighs, rose tiredly from the rocker. "And just what would you know about it?"

"I admit it. I'm rusty," said Ronny. "Why don't you remind me? What could Nathan have been doing out there?"

"Just about a hundred different things," said Lee. "Or don't you remember? Maybe he saw a lame calf. Maybe a coyote got into the pen. It's a twenty-four hour job."

Ronny looked at his shoes. "I just thought you might know specifically."

Lee descended the porch steps, the old wood creaking. "I'm going to make the rounds. I don't want anymore talk about this, you hear? Let Dad alone. Let him sing. Let him do damn well whatever he wants." Lee faded into the darkness until only the glowing ember of the cigar bobbed up and down like a hot beacon.

On his way inside, Joey whispered, "You weren't supposed to say nothing in front of Lee. What are you trying to do? Make it hell for every-



one around here?"

Ronny paid no attention. He watched Lee's cigar burn in the night, wondered if his older brother were standing out there looking back at him.

\* \* \*

Ronny heaved himself out of bed the next morning at seven, stumbled into the kitchen where Liddy wiped down the long counter with a wet rag. She looked at Ronny, her brow furrowing.

"Coffee?" Ronny's voice was still rough with sleep. He slumped at the small kitchen table.

"Everyone *else* finished breakfast an hour ago." She put cup and saucer in front of him, filled it from an old metal coffeepot.

"Did Burt Charles ride out with the others?" he asked.

"No," Liddy answered without looking up. "He's over the anvil today."

Ronny nodded. He'd heard Lee mention that the ranch's regular blacksmith had moved away two months ago after marrying a woman down in the panhandle.

"Liddy?"

"Yes?" She put away dishes now, still didn't look at Ronny.

"Were you around when Nathan . . ." He shifted awkwardly, cleared his throat. "I mean, did you see it."

"No."

"Nothing at all?"

"No." She heaved a basket of potatoes to the top of the counter, selected one and began peeling over the sink. "But I heard."

"From inside the house?"

"You don't mistake a thing like that. The whole earth moves." She shrugged. "Anyway, Mister Cobb's window was open."

"You were in his room?"

"In the office," she said. "He was at the window with the singing machine, and I was bringing coffee."

"What did he do?"

"Just watched," she said. "Snorting, running, kicking up dust. He watched it like watching an earthquake. Like watching the end of the world."

\* \* \*

Ronny heard the rhythmic metal clang of hammer on anvil long before he rounded the barn and found Burt Charles under the low overhang. The wave of furnace heat washed over Ronny as he entered the smithy.

Burt set aside the hammer and extended a rough hand. "Hello, Ron." They shook. The old cowboy looked like a Marlboro poster, his skin leathery brown, white walrus moustache overwhelming his upper lip and yellowing. He wore a long leather blacksmith's apron.

"How have you been, Burt?"

"Can't complain. Me and the boys miss you around here. A little life went out of the place when you went away."

"I wish I could have visited under better circumstances." Ronny inspected Burt's blacksmithing tools as he spoke. "Joey said I should have a word with you."

Burt's smile crumpled. "I'm just as sorry as I can be about Nathan, Ron."

"I know."

"I'd hate to say something to reflect poorly on him after he's gone."

"I just want to make sure everything's straight," said Ronny.

"I was up in the hayloft when I heard Nathan talking to Miss Martina—I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that." Burt scratched his head. "I meant to say Martin. Martin Garland. The boys call him Miss Martina enough it just rubbed off."

"Why do they call him that?"

"Martin don't ride out with the herd," said Burt. "We took him on last year to husband the chickens and goats and other animals around here. He kind of holds himself separate from the rest of the boys, and you know how they are. Hell, a fellow bathes everyday regular and they call him sissy."

"Anything to that?"



Burt shrugged. "I wish you wouldn't make me say, Ron. I sure hate to talk against somebody that never done me any wrong."

"Okay, then."

"Talk to him yourself maybe."

"That's probably best," said Ronny. "What did you hear him say to Nathan?"

"I'm only repeating this because it involves your ma, so I think you have the right to hear."

Ronny's stomach tightened.

"Nathan was telling Martin about a conversation with the old man—um, that is your father. Seems they got into a big quarrel about how to run the place. Nathan told your father that they should start buying pick-up trucks to run the herd, cheaper and easier in the long run than keeping up horses."

Ronny smiled without cheer. "Dad didn't like that."

"Hell no." Burt chuckled, shook his head. "Mr. Cobb said right away that was your Mother's talk. Modernization, bringing in machines to do what men and horses have done for years. Nathan told Martin all about it. I guess they were closer friends than anyone knew."

"What did Martin say?"

"He just said not to let the old man get under his skin. He said Nathan was a good man with good ideas and he shouldn't worry about an old man set in his ways."

"Did you tell Lee any of this?" asked Ronny.

Burt shook his head. "Lee don't much care for Martin. I figured it would just cause trouble."

"Thanks for talking to me Burt."

"It's okay," said the old cowhand. "I just hope everything settles back to normal."

Ronny hoped so too. "Where can I find this Martin?"

Burt picked up his hammer. "With the chickens."

"Thanks, Burt."

The rhythmic clanging resumed as Ronny headed for the chicken house.

\* \* \*

Ronny leaned on the post which held up the chicken wire. "How's it going?"

The young man in the pen was lanky, pale, corn-yellow hair pulled back in a ponytail. He held a sack from which he scooped chicken feed and spread it around the yard. He looked up quickly at Ronny. "Yes?"

"You're Martin? I'm Ronny Cobb."

"I know." Martin's features hardened, he went back to spreading the feed. "You've come to ask about Nathan."

"That's right." Ronny studied Martin. The young man had a different way about him. Haughty. Formal. He wore sneakers instead of boots.

"What would you like to know?" asked Martin.

"I hear you were close with Nathan."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that you were good buddies," said Ronny. "Where are you from?"

"Raleigh, North Carolina."

"How'd you get out here?"

Martin shrugged. "How does anyone get anywhere?"

Not a talker, thought Ronny. Fine. He'd cut to the chase. "I understand you might know something about what passed between my father and Nathan. Maybe something about our Ma."

"Why would you think that?"

"Is it true or not?"

Martin stopped spreading the feed. "Nathan and your father disagreed on some points. That's all. Nathan felt he could talk to me about it. I don't get along with my old man so well either. He doesn't like the way I live my life."

"What does it have to do with Ma?"

Martin shuffled his feet, looked at the sky and shaded his eyes against the early morning sun. "It's all about who's in control, I guess. You father's a hard man."

"True."

"Look," said Martin. "If I speak plainly, will



you hold it against me. Am I going to get fired or something?"

"Go ahead and talk."

"It's Lee you need to speak to, not me. They had fights, loud ones."

"They've always fought. Brothers."

"Well, these fights were about your father and the ranch and sometimes about me."

"Why you?"

Again, the shrug. Ronny thought Martin's whole life must've been one long shrug. This time Martin added a yawn, his pink tongue curling like a cat's.

"Lee thought I was a bad influence," said Martin. "He'd say to Nathan that the rest of the men were laughing at him for hanging around a chicken boy. People are idiots." He kicked at a chicken that had wandered too close. It flapped away, a comic flightless flailing.

"Was Nathan's death an accident, Martin?"

Martin didn't flinch at the question, didn't even blink. "Ask Lee."

Ronny nodded at him and turned away, trudged back toward the house. He'd have to speak to Lee, have to ask the hard questions. Even as kids, Lee had chafed under Nathan's rule.

But they all bowed to Dad.

Ronny didn't have long to wait. Lee rounded the barn with quick, long strides, intercepted Ronny just before the house.

"Lee, I wanted to ask you some—"

"You're not asking nobody nothing." Lee trembled, grit his teeth. "I just got done taking to Burt Charles."

"Lee—"

"Have you been talking to that sissy-boy Martin kid?"

"What did you and Nathan fight about? Was it Ma?"

"You don't know anything about it."

"That's why I'm asking."

"Well, I'm not asking," said Lee. "I'm telling. You leave off poking your nose in."

"Nathan was our brother. Don't you want to know why he was killed? Or is it that you already know?"

Lee balled his fists. His voice was low. "Stop talking right now."

"Nathan's dead and now you run the ranch. Dad's favorite now, aren't you?"

Lee's breath came hot through his teeth. "If you weren't family, I'd kill you for saying that."

"If you won't talk to me, I'll ask Dad."

"You're not talking to Dad. You're not going near him."

"I'd like to know where you were when the stampede started. Maybe Dad'd like to know too."

"I was with Dad, in his room when the stampede started. I already told the sheriff that."

"What was he doing?"

"At his desk," said Lee. "Working on the books."

"That's a lie! Liddy was with him. Dad was at the window with the karaoke machine."

Ronny turned toward the house, but Lee caught his arm, pulled him back. The brothers stared frozen at one another.

"Let go, Lee."

"Where're you going?"

"I said let go."

"Not if you're going to bother Dad."

Ronny jerked his arm away, but Lee leapt on him. They rolled to the ground in a tight clinch. Both tried to punch but neither could get leverage. They pushed away and staggered to their feet, a hot dust cloud hanging in the air around them.

Lee spat. "That sissy chicken boy's been leading you on. I'm telling you, Ronny, leave it be."

Ronny threw a sloppy punch. Lee turned, took it on the shoulder and jabbed a fist into Ronny's nose. Ronny stumbled back. Blood trickled over his lips. Lee ran forward to finish it, but Ronny clinched and they were both in the dust again. They rolled away from the house, toward the pens. The herd lifted its collective head, watched the fight with eerie cow disinterest.



The brothers punched, short ineffectual jabs to the ribs, and the back, the side of the head. The dust cloud grew. The herd stirred.

And just slipping into Ronny's peripheral vision came the chair. It wheeled along the porch, glided like a ghost down the wooden ramp in front of the house. Old man Cobb sat in the chair like Caesar watching his gladiators, wheeling forward, eyes glowering.

Ronny suddenly felt shame under the old man's glare, not because he was fighting. Because he was losing. Hate surged. He punched with renewed fervor, howling in his brother's grasp. They rolled in a tight embrace across the yard, smacked to a halt against a wooden post of the cattle fence. Ronny *whuffed* air, and Lee finally landed a solid punch on Ronny's lower lip.

Ronny spat. The taste of blood and dust and shame.

"Let him up, Lee." The old man's chair brought him on. "You're spooking the herd. What's this about, you two?"

Ronny shoved himself up, leaned against the fence post, kept his eyes on the ground. He felt the shifting herd through the wood.

"It's nothing, Dad," said Lee. "Go back inside."

"You don't tell me to go anywhere, boy." The chair hit a deep groove in the hard-packed dirt and stuck itself. Cobb worked the joystick, but it wouldn't budge. The tires spun and the little electric engine whined.

The cattle grew noisy, restless.

"Let me help you, Dad." Lee moved toward the old man.

"Get way. I can do it."

"Dad—"

The old man moved the joystick back and to the left. The gears ground. It sounded like screaming, like angels having their wings torn off. The cattle went crazy.

"Dad, don't—" Lee rushed to his father.

"Get away! I'm doing it!" The old man swat-

ted him away, ground the gears, his gnarled hand gripping the joystick white-knuckled.

Ronny felt the surge of beef against the fence, the posts cracked and snapped. He ran. The porch, he could get on the porch. All he needed was to get up a few feet, let the stampede seethe around him. He reached the porch, turned and saw Lee make it to the barn.

The cattle thundered around the house and out to the open range. Ronny shouted for his father, but his voice was lost in the pounding hooves. He saw one of the chair's wheels spin off into the herd, kicked between cows.

Ronny was numb by the time the last few cattle finally trailed after the raging herd. The hired men had come out of nowhere along with Joey. They got horses, rode after the fleeing animals. Lee emerged from the barn, walked slowly to the battered bloody mass strewn next to the shattered chair.

Ronny went to his father.

"Don't come over here," said Lee, but his voice lacked command.

Ronny looked long at his father, stumbled a few feet away, and emptied his guts.

\* \* \*

Lee found Ronny on the porch after the sheriff left. Both brothers were tired, drained. Liddy brought them whisky then left them alone.

"What'd you tell him?"

"The truth," said Ronny. "Dad's chair started both stampedes. The karaoke machine amplified the grinding gears loud enough to start the first one. The second time he was close enough for the cattle to hear without any amplification. A mistake. Just a stupid, unlucky mistake."

"I guess." Lee looked away, squinted at the horizon.

Ronny waited, knew there was more.

"I did lie about being in Dad's room the day Nathan was killed," said Lee. "But I saw him in there the day before, watched him for an hour from the doorway. He didn't know I was watching."





Ronny closed his eyes. His stomach knotted.

"He kept making noises into that karaoke machine like it was some kind of experiment. He had the speaker pointed out the window, and he'd hold up his electric shaver to the microphone and the alarm clock and other stuff, seeing what the noise sounded like through the speaker."

Ronny swallowed hard. "That doesn't mean—"

"Joey's bringing the truck around," said Lee.

"He'll drive you to the airport. I know you have to get back."

Goodbyes were stiff and formal.

On the way to the airport, Ronny told Joey he should visit him on the coast sometime. When things settle down.

"Sure," said Joey, his eyes fixed far ahead on the road. "Sounds like a good time."



# Getting the News

by Peter Desy

You can't feel them but you know they're there,  
the sentinels on guard against those cankers  
or the cells that go amiss. But now the molecules  
break and form in helpless *deja vu*.

Or the albino tentacles of tissue  
sinuate toward some important part,  
a thing you can't do without, a small gland,  
or smaller even than a follicle, subhuman, with a sac.

Well it *all* breaks down, and you get the news  
on the telephone from a nurse with a guarded  
"The Docor wants to see you,"  
which is exactly like getting The News.

His still photograph shows the site  
of the traveling disaster. You wish it were  
something on your arm you could slap  
and flick away, but it isn't.

It winds down or up some venue  
of a vein or duct, or (you imagine),  
breaking surface, oozes here or there.  
The limpid antibodies float, petered out.

Going home you feel like a broken equation  
in which *x* got lost for good.  
It all seems so simple, and it is,  
but unacceptable.

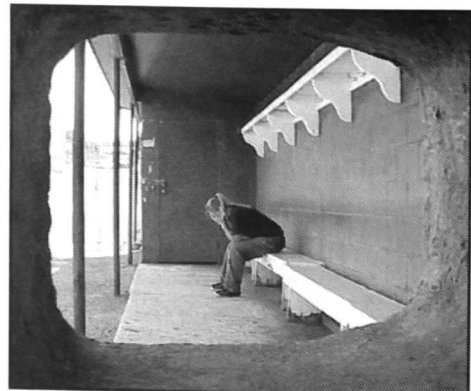


Photo by Tabatha Kathol



# Haunt of the Horse

by Stephen Massimilla

Where do you wander, horse of cadaverous steel,  
your rider half-dead to the rustling world? Up the road  
awaits the day and the dale, the friend, the meal,  
the fiend in the hall. In the woods, a fading coal  
warms the maid and the grail. Durer portrays  
his knight astride a bloodless beast: the son,  
whose youth assures us less than the horse dismays.  
Assurance wakes, loves its Father one to One,  
but under the dark rings of mail, Death inquires  
when the blade will spring to cut him free . . .  
to bolt from his wretched hideaway. Night squires  
the knight toward skeletal trees, but how cunningly  
the Maker cast a drop-dead gorgeous steed  
in an ageless gaze for our dying age to read.



*Photo courtesy artchive.com*



# Steel Garden

by Gerald R. Wheeler

Dried blood-colored iron shell, door sagging  
on wire hinge (driver's door missing), broken  
headlines a blank stare, front seat exploding  
springs, instrument panel—cracked glass-covered  
faded numbers & dead gauges that looked like  
an abstract painting in noon glare. Steering wheel  
turned toward past, floorboard weed bed,  
pine sapling shifting toward a green horizon.  
I saw the hulk of the pickup while hiking in the hill  
country near Austin. 5 minutes later, I was beckoned  
to a barn that resembled a junkyard garage  
reeking of gasoline & oil. Hardly space to walk.  
Dirt floor strewn with rusty fenders, radiators, pistons,  
axles, gears & bumpers. I was knocked down by lathes  
& engine block suspended on chain from ceiling.  
Stumbled over welding tanks & torches. Shot  
by paint guns. I scanned shelves lined with oil cans,  
stacks of manuals, tools, solvent & rags.  
I wandered outside behind the barn. Suddenly  
a stranger materialized & waved his arm like a wand.  
Magically, vintaged Cadillacs, Buicks & Chevys  
appeared among trees. A bullet-riddled sedan  
with a grill big as whale teeth charged out of tall grass.  
I gazed at hoods gleaming silver wing ornaments,  
sleek metallic black bodies that had dorsal fins,  
two-tone torsos & broad shoulders & wrap-around  
windshields wearing sun visors, & spare white-walls  
bolted to trunks. I saw a woody lugging a surfboard,  
a 1921 customized Ford that surely was the first SUV  
& Dodge with a rumble seat occupied by a naked mannequin.  
The stranger squinted, "People come from all over the world  
to see my collection. Even Hollywood moguls  
offer to buy them for parts in movies. But I always  
tell 'em, 'My flowers never leave the garden.'"



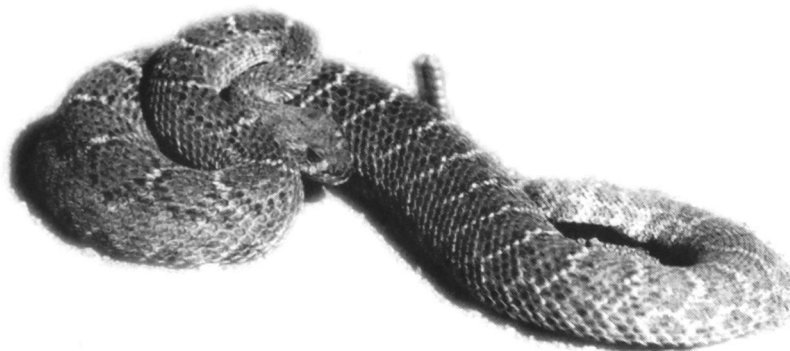
*Photo by Gerald R. Wheeler*

# Rattlesnake Roundup

by Greg Young

Each year I hear the commercial:  
“Come to the world’s largest rattlesnake roundup.”  
I consider taking the family to eat fried snake flesh,  
to marvel at handlers milking venom into jars.  
Neighbors tell me rattlers are not aggressive.  
“You’ve lived here all your life,” they say,  
“walked right by them without knowing it.”  
I think of how March is early snake season,  
how in June I will wade through waist-high weeds,  
lift hay bales from the shadows in the barn.

Week-enders flock to Sweetwater, Texas.  
I see them on the six o’clock news, families  
dressed in shorts and sandals. A little girl in dog ears  
taps the glass. Tomorrow is the last day to see them  
before they end up as a belt buckle or a trophy—  
a coiled diamondback mounted on a board, encased  
in glass, displayed at eye-level in an executive suite.  
More will taunt them before their appointed time.  
They will cheer the rattlesnake queen, chew  
the rubbery meat. I’ll stay home, wear boots,  
step lightly, shake the rattle in my gourd.



*Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall*



# The Motherless

by Mimi Seydel

Storybook orphans have pluck. They're free to go on adventures. They are loved by their millions of readers. Think of Madeline, the red-headed Parisian with the *bon chic bon gout* wardrobe. Able to impress us on the page with her brazen ways, such as saying "Pooh-pooh" to the tiger in the zoo, while also being adored as a doll, with a trunk full of accessories, she can both have her cake and eat it, too.

The children of the destitute, abandoned in fairy-tale woods, always find their way back. They outwit ogres and witches and reappear on their parents' doorsteps with enough treasure to ensure a proper upbringing forever after. Think of Perrault's *Petit Poucet*, or Tom Thumb. His parents leave him with his siblings to die alone in the woods, not once, but twice, and he channels all his resourcefulness towards getting himself and his brothers back home. He is too busy to be sad, resentful, or angry. Constant dangers keep him engaged.

In real life, these days, even unfortunate children have time to think and feel. Real life orphans look around and know that, to paraphrase Dave Eggers, they are *owed* and they get to take what they want. Too young and too short to see far, what they want might only be the new, sharp pencil on someone else's desk, a few of the candies out of the teacher's stash, the spotlight during math, or a good fistfight. Children missing mother love suffer from a vicious, insatiable greed that will cost them over and over and over again. They are not heroes; their grief is unbecoming.

In the public elementary school where I teach French, there are too many children like this, roughly ten percent, or two per class. Half of these have been rescued

by the state and placed in the group home, a boarding facility on a lovely campus with round-the-clock house mothers, social workers, tutors and cooks. The others live with relatives.

Cezanne wanted to "astonish Paris with an apple" and painted still life after still life to get it right. I simply want to wow a few kids with some magic words, the kind that opens doors in the mind as well as in the world. The motherless children are not easily impressed. They have more to teach me than I, them.

Deandru lost his father, then his mother, then his grandmother before his eighth birthday. Now

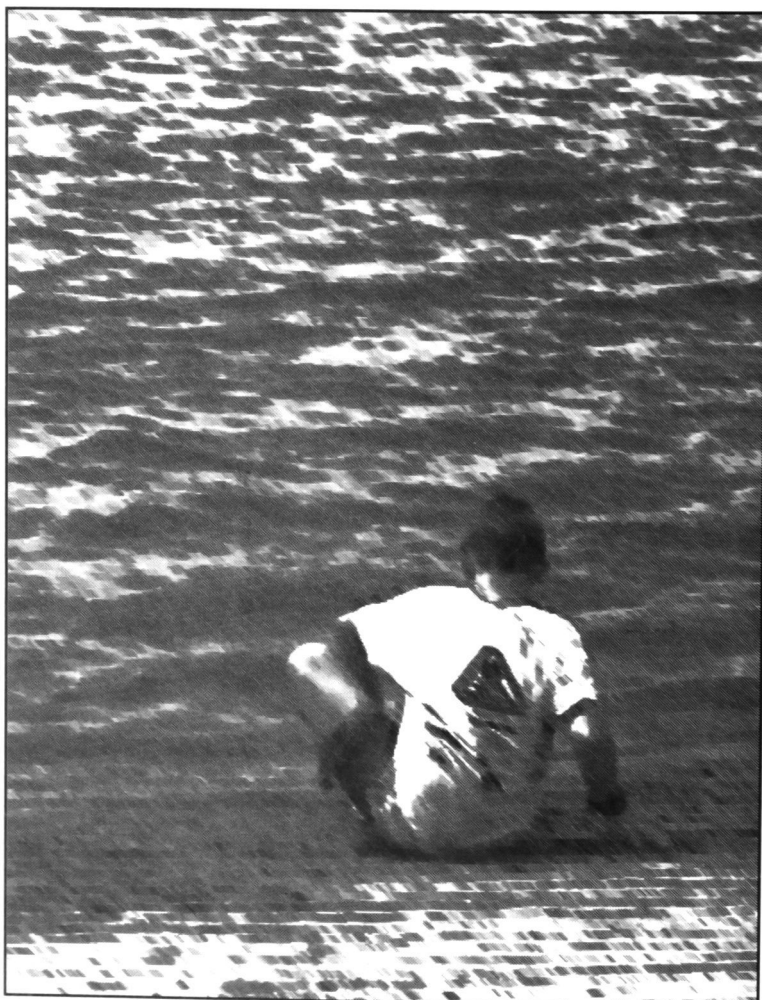


Photo (detail) by Kerri Bentley





he lives with his aunt and two older cousins. He comes to school every morning, arms folded against his chest, a scowl across his brow, dangerously loaded with leadership skills. His mind thinks fastest when it's challenged by authority. His favorite game is to snatch a small treasure, such as an eraser, a Pokemon card, or a barrette, from a fellow student and wait for the sudden but predictable look of dismay. Sometimes he pockets the treasure and sometimes he passes it on like a hot potato.

It's as if he wants to teach everyone else the lesson he was forced to learn early: that what you hold dear can go missing in an instant. It's a lesson that never fails to interfere with my own lessons on favorite foods, creatures of the forest, or birthdays, because it will always be more profound.

We're seated on the carpet in a circle. The students are claiming the toy animals they can name.

"Hey, gimme that!" goes the cry. "Madame, Deandru's got my *le serpent*!"

"No, I ain't." Deandru holds out his empty hands as proof.

"There it go," says a witness. "Tobias's got it."

"No, I don't!" shouts Tobias as he inches away from the rubber snake hidden under his thigh.

The clock ticks on. Everyone's concentration has been broken. As we continue the game, Deandru repeatedly raises his hand for a turn. If I don't call on him, he pouts. When I do, he can't name the animal he wants. He holds our attention as he hesitates. "Say, '*la grenouille*,'" another boy whispers. "Say, '*le tigre*.' Go on, say it," urges yet another. Finally he mutters enough syllables to earn a toy, but he plays the game grudgingly, and takes no pride in either earning a point or learning a word. As the year progresses, the less he will learn, and the more frustrated and disruptive he will become.

Sharita talks, and talks. She keeps her voice just above a whisper. Her eyes may look straight ahead, but she directs her stream of commentary to one side or another, towards one of her three friends. Sometimes, she bothers to cover her

mouth. That's the closest she'll come to admitting she's breaking a rule. Last year she was a class star, recalling and storing new words at a prodigious rate. This year she has stopped learning, because she can't hear through her own noise. Her chatter is like an iron curtain, blocking the free flow of ideas. She's afraid to turn it off. Her speaking voice has become to her inner silence what the bathroom light is to the bedroom dark. Her granddaddy's senile and wears a diaper. Grandmomma's been to the hospital once already for her heart. Daddy drinks. Momma can't keep her. Tall for the age of eight, and clever, she's figured out just by how much she's on her own. Her grandmomma who takes care of her takes care of the other adults around her. If her grandmomma dies . . . better to keep talking than to think about that.

Meanwhile she can't, and she won't hear the words I say as I point to pictures of cherries, grapes and peaches, and neither can the people around her. Halfway through a lesson I become aware that my throat is tight and my voice has risen to adjust to her volume. But it's no use. Her English words are too easy for the others to absorb; they jam my messages. No one has learned enough to advance to cherry pies and peach ice cream, and the lesson becomes a bore.

"F\*\*\*ing S\*\*t!" six-year-old Teesha cries out, over and over, for no apparent reason.

"Make her stop!" begs another girl. Some children have covered their ears.

"You can only learn to say what you hear," I say, putting down my laminated shapes. "Someone said these words for Teesha to hear, instead of nice words, like 'I love you.'" The other children fall silent.

I walk towards Teesha and lead her away from the group. This little girl is a new arrival to the neighborhood group foster home; she has been rescued from some unmentionable, inhumane situation, and plunked down in the midst of socialized, albeit rowdy, children. She's equipped with very





*Photo (detail) by Chad Martin*

few tactics for connecting. Yesterday, to amuse the other children, she tried to pull the chair out from under her precariously balanced classroom teacher stapling work up on the bulletin board. There is some confusion about her name; I've heard her called Tisha and Tasha, as well as Teesha, but she answers to whatever. Her first day I caught her snitching a wad of discarded gum out of the trash. Her smile is wide, but superficial, not in her eyes. Today, she has managed to get what she needs for the moment: my full attention, a calming voice, a hand on her shoulder. Meanwhile, no one in this class gets a French lesson today.

Augustus colors detailed scenes. I've given him a special assignment to depict the seasons. This keeps him from spitting on the other children, sweeping his hand across the table to knock everything off, or pointing his finger like a gun at me, shooting repeatedly. When Augustus was five, his mother was fatally hit by a car a few days before Christmas. When he was six, his five-year-old cousin Jasmine, who lived with

him, was fatally hit by a car while he was playing with her and other cousins in the front yard. Sometime in between those two accidents, his grandfather died of natural causes.

His image for summer depicts a shore that runs diagonally across the page. There is a figure in the water, surrounded by dark blue Vs of waves. There is a black line above the shore line that suggests a cliff. Beyond that line stands another figure. It is an unusually sophisticated composition for a child his age. If I didn't know his story, it's possible I wouldn't sense how far apart the two figures are, how the figure in the water seems to be drowning.

François Truffaut got it right. His portrayals of orphaned, abandoned and abused children tell the truth about the debt that is never paid. Not all of Truffaut's children are as happily resilient as the unattended baby in *Argent de Poche* who crawls to an open window and falls to a surprise soft landing, safe, thanks to not one of the horrified adults watching from below. Most of his children have to

work at their survival. At least one fails completely.

*Au Revoir, les Enfants* tells a story of betrayal. When a Catholic boarding school shelters a Jewish child during the German occupation, the headmaster is denounced. The Gestapo arrives in the classroom, looking for the boy. It's his friend's nervous glance towards him that gives him away. It's an innocent, accidental betrayal that has devastating consequences within the context of the greater, adult betrayal of the Holocaust. The Jewish boy will die; the friend will bear the guilt.

*L'Enfant Sauvage* tells the true story of the "wild boy of Aveyron." Discovered by hunters in the south of France in 1800, the naked, speechless boy with a long scar on his throat had been surviving alone in the woods for no one knows how long. He was sent to Paris for observation, and was taken in by twenty-six-year-old Dr. Jean-Marc Itard, a specialist from the School for Deaf-Mutes. Dr. Itard threw himself into the task of teaching the boy to speak, with the dedication of an Annie Sullivan and pedagogical innovations that would inspire Maria Montessori, but the boy was never able to master language. Though he was able to spell out words, his first word being *lait*, or milk, he remained mute. And he was never completely comfortable in the civilized world.

Victor, as he was called, provides the perfect example of how much we human beings have to learn from the very beginning of our lives, and what happens when there is no one to teach us. Victor drinks by putting his head in the water, until he learns to use a cup or a spoon. Wearing shoes the first time, he slips and falls. Given a bed, he sleeps on the floor.

But Victor lets himself be taught, and he is able to show love and respect for, as well as frustration with, his teacher.

Fed up with the constant cries for any kind of attention except the kind I want to give, I decide to show highlights of this story to my recalcitrant second-graders, in the hope that it will help them to see that, however soured they've been by cir-

cumstance, they've already managed to learn a lot of things from people who cared enough to teach them. And they would do well to learn more, while they have the chance.

First, I tell them the story, using the beautiful illustrations of Mordicai Gerstein in his book, *The Wild Boy*, to hold their attention while I give a simple rendering in French. They are intrigued enough to be quiet, so there is time to allow for an English version as well. The children practice their understanding of verbs by answering questions in French about what Victor can and can't do. The day after we view the film, the students make words out of letter cards the way Victor did. The word *lait* enlightens once again.

I will not say that the story of the wild boy has changed anyone's life, or set anyone on a new course. But when I begin the video of *L'Enfant Sauvage* it is Deandru who tells the others to shut up. Out of the ninety children who view the highlights of this movie, not one misbehaves for a second while it's playing. That sets a record.

When the overly ambitious Dr. Itard presents Victor with a too-difficult problem, and Victor responds by falling backward into a four-limb tantrum, we all laugh. I rewind and we watch it again. "Have you ever felt that way, when things get too hard?" I ask, and some of the children nod, still smiling. I'm smiling, too, able to recognize myself in the driven doctor, and admit to what can happen when my well-intentioned high expectations curdle into frustration. Dr. Itard has to discover not only Victor's limitations, but his own. I have to accept that there are needs I can only help a little towards filling, and that the little contributions of many won't ever make up for the love of one essential missing person.

I am satisfied that at least today I am able to give back to these children a lesson that holds their attention, that broadens their awareness, that is finally as profound as the one they've been trying to give me: that is, just how tragic a loss can be.



# Sunday Drives in the Forties

by Fredrick Zydek

The things of money were still  
in those days. Taverns closed  
at midnight. Main Street was barren  
as a room full of old nuns—  
not even gas stations opened.

No one had heard of shopping malls.  
When we took a Sunday drive,  
it was for the drive itself.  
The clan would climb into the Model A  
knowing it was the journey,

not the destination that mattered.  
Mother would pack a lunch,  
and we'd drive to the lake  
or the big maple along Spiketon Creek  
where we would munch and wade

and take long naps in the sun.  
Maybe we'd drive to Grandma's house  
and listen to tales of the old country  
or crank up the Victrola for Grandpa  
and watch him smoke his long cigars.

Those were the days of croquet  
on the lawn, pitching horseshoes,  
playing marbles in a circle scratched  
in the dirt out behind the barn,  
and catching crawfish in the ditch

that ran along the dirt road  
to my grandparents' farm. Sometimes,  
if it rained we would simply drive  
to the woods and eat our sandwiches,  
hoping to see a deer. It was enough.



# Offering

by Earl Coleman

She complains "And is that all I get for putting up with you," confronted by our crystal pitcher overflowing with a mix of hothouse tulips in their finest colors, separated by some baby's breath? "Some flowers once a month? Does that make up for everything? Why do I get a feeling you've done something wrong?"

I think to tell her, but I don't, that she is better off than all the rest of us, who put up with the shit life dishes out, when we've done nothing that can warrant it, and get pieced off by flowers scattered for us in their brilliance in the Spring, then die away real fast. I get the feeling that life's doing something wrong.



*Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall*



# The First Star of Fall

by Ryan G. Van Cleave

The black-soaked sky is huge with the voice  
of cormorants and yellow-breasted swallows.

Leaves drained of all color  
litter the ground like so many unwrapped cigars.

The resinous scent of oak and spruce is here tonight,  
nearly lost in the heavy purple breath of lilacs.

And high above the bulky shadows of chestnuts—  
there, above the tallest tier of pine—

a guttering white dwarf, it is self-control,  
the light of a heart exhausting itself.

On the brink of extinction,  
its splintering shine casts a spell,  
asking us to please, please last.



*Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall*



# Carol Hamilton's *Breaking Bread, Breaking Silence*: A Review

by Robert Cooperman

Carol Hamilton, *Breaking Bread, Breaking Silence*  
(Chiron Review Press: 702, N. Prairie, St. John, KS 67576-1516, 2001)

Mark Twain once observed that the difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. Nowhere is that axiom more true than in lyric poetry, in which every word is crucial to the overall effect of the whole and every word must carry the added weight of a compressed form. In Carol Hamilton's prize winning new chapbook, *Breaking Bread, Breaking Silence*, every word does yeoman service, heroic service to create a luminous, splendid collection.

As the title implies, this sequence deals with one of our most basic needs: food. But *Breaking Bread, Breaking Silence* is about more than that primal need, which in my barely civilized family evinced itself as a sort of boarding house free-for-all brawl to amass and eat the most food on the table. Hamilton makes us see that food is about much, much more, about human communion, communication, about love and its denial. The very act of preparing a meal is an act of supreme human love and memory, of the binding together of families and civilizations, as Hamilton makes clear in the collection's second poem, "Preparing the Feast," in which "Time swirls gently at the/kitchen sink, where again/the ham rind is sliced . . ./and clove/spikes pierce down . . ." The women gather in the kitchen to prepare a feast, Thanksgiving? Christmas? It's not important which, but what is important is that something communal is taking place that will feed a family, a clan, and this act of preparing the food is part of a long continuum of human history. The act of cooking makes civilization possible: "each of us pressed in, fitted/one to another, gathered at/an ancient table."

For Hamilton, the sharing of food is more than

a family ritual, a family delight; it's a spiritual, religious activity, a secular corollary to the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist, as in "Salt Bread." Here, eating together is "a reminder/that sacrifice was carnal." The religious is rooted in the particular, the material world. But behind the secularizing of the sacred is Hamilton's knowledge that the primal religious experience is one of terror, of human sacrifice that has, thankfully, been subsumed into the ritual of taking food:

"We/eat and drink calmly,/leave terror to its/desperate struggle on/some forgotten altar."

By mingling the sacred into a secular experience, Hamilton creates a powerful, heady diction. Her borrowing from liturgical language and from biblical imagery exalts the chore of merely cooking, the act of shoveling in food that tastes good. The basics of life, for Hamilton, become a hieratic experience: "There have been oblations/substitutions, ransoms,/whetted blades stayed/before bloodletting. . . ." Notice the allusive language, but even more the attention Hamilton pays to and the care with which she mingles sounds as on the slant rhymes of "blades" and "stayed."

As much as Hamilton borrows from the language of religion and from sacred ritual, she's more than aware that food is about families, the love that's expressed in the creation of a family feast, and the accommodations family members make and the white lies they tell to grease along the machinery of getting along together. Feasts mark sacred and secular celebrations, but they also mark time passing, lives passing, and loved ones passing away. In "My Mother's Relish Tray" Hamilton recalls dishes and accompaniments both her mother and grandmother made and that no one in the family

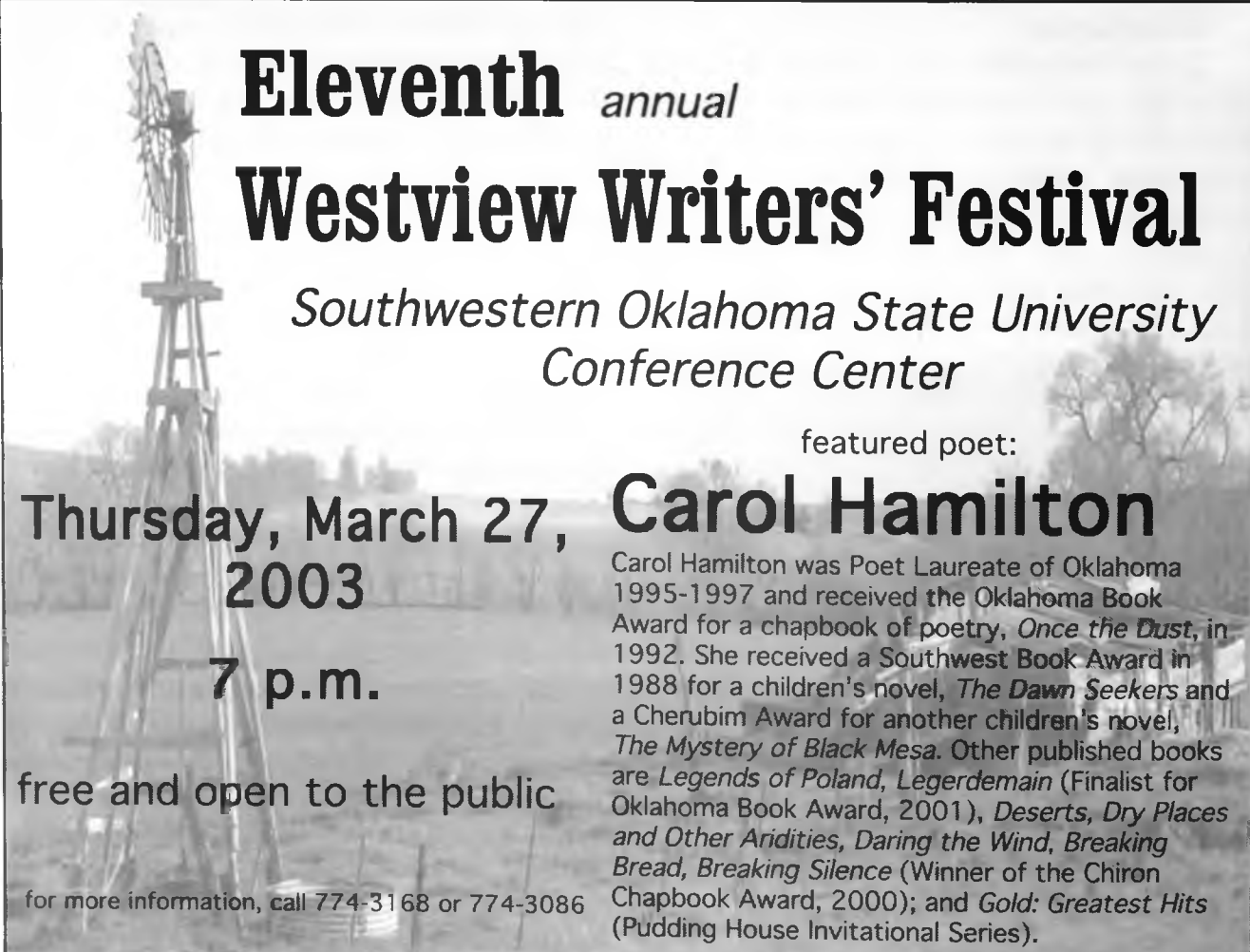


was so impolite, until now, to say how much they disliked the jello mold, but that these dishes "fill hungers we cannot/even name." And so they appear on the feasting table year after year, not so much to be eaten, but for the sake of memory and human continuity. It's the hunger for human contact, for communion, even more than the physical hunger for food that sustains families.

At the heart of this luminous collection is the knowledge that all sustenance means the death of something, a sacrifice for which we must make thanks. Something, be it animal or plant, has died so that we may survive. This is the truth of all life:

"But sacrifice/Has placed this dish before us... Martyrdom has given us this feast... We must whirl and/Dance like dervishes, thankful/That we are at the table." ("How Are You? Have You Eaten?") And for this wonderful chapbook we should give thanks too and devour its pages and poems in the spirit in which they were created, for the emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual sustenance *Breaking Bread*, *Breaking Silence* has given us, for the martyrdom to craft and vision that the poet has made on our behalf.

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**Westview Writers' Festival**  
*Southwestern Oklahoma State University*  
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**Carol Hamilton**

Thursday, March 27,  
 2003  
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Carol Hamilton was Poet Laureate of Oklahoma 1995-1997 and received the Oklahoma Book Award for a chapbook of poetry, *Once the Dust*, in 1992. She received a Southwest Book Award in 1988 for a children's novel, *The Dawn Seekers* and a Cherubim Award for another children's novel, *The Mystery of Black Mesa*. Other published books are *Legends of Poland*, *Legerdemain* (Finalist for Oklahoma Book Award, 2001), *Deserts, Dry Places and Other Aridities*, *Daring the Wind*, *Breaking Bread*, *Breaking Silence* (Winner of the Chiron Chapbook Award, 2000); and *Gold: Greatest Hits* (Pudding House Invitational Series).





# After Ice Storm

by Carol Hamilton

Branches clack clack creak  
and clatter in south wind toss.  
Their brittle veins/capillaries  
reach up, wave, screech.  
And here beside me  
empty June bug shell sparkles  
shoe polish brown in early sun,  
waits on undisturbed trunk of tree,  
secured there, will outlast this day.  
It does not argue issues  
of utility versus survival,  
and the sun does not interrogate  
what it touches in passing.



*Photo by Roger Roussell*



# Heart

by Bruce McCandless III

Eddie was an honest man  
as honest as men are  
He came up outta Longview  
but he didn't come up far  
They caught him in a dead man's truck,  
a gold watch on his wrist  
They asked him what he had to say  
Eddie told 'em this

Judge I done the best I could  
with what I was around  
I grew up with some beat up folks  
and they done beat me down  
I guess I could have stopped myself  
I never meant to start  
the ugliness gets in your hands  
and then gets in your heart

Lucy left her three-year-old  
the day she turned nineteen  
she tried to find herself a job  
so she could make it clean  
but paying bills ain't easy  
when you're smoking half you earn  
she's on the street in Montrose now  
you know she'll never learn

She says she done the best she could  
with what she was around  
She grew up with some beat-up folks  
and they done beat her down  
Maybe she could have stopped herself  
she never tried to start  
she shot that shit into her veins  
it pooled up in her heart



The Senator had won two terms  
was aiming for a third  
He was at a noontime meeting  
when a strange event occurred  
The FBI showed up in force  
Someone mentioned rape  
The Senator he stood his ground  
until they played the tape

His lawyers did the best they could  
with what they had around  
They went to see some high-class folks  
but those folks let him down  
Maybe he could have stopped himself  
he never thought to start  
the arrogance gets in your head  
and empties out your heart



*Photo by Tony Alexander*



# Nighthawk Falls, Dusk

by Richard N. Bentley

## NIGHTHAWK FALLS, DUSK THE OPALESCENT RIVER, ADIRONDACKS

Alexander Heiwig Netherwood (1826-1892)

Oil on canvas 48 x 36 inches

*The waterfall into the Opalescent River was called "one of the most glorious cascades of the Adirondacks" by nineteenth-century guidebooks. Netherwood, a transitional figure between the Hudson River School and the American Impressionist Movement, began as a harness-maker's apprentice and signmaker. He scoured the mountains, woodlands and waterways of North America, easel strapped to his back, in search of the ideal and the allegorical. This painting of Nighthawk Falls captures at once a sense of fixedness and fluidity, what Netherwood called "The voice of the wilderness which strikes its own chords. The falls and lofty Adirondacks stand afar—mauve hills gently rising from the flood, receding like steps by which we may ascend to the Great Temple, whose pillars are the Everlasting Hills and whose dome is the Boundless Vault of heaven."*

*Nighthawk Falls, due to its remote location, is rarely visited today.*

### **Exhibition Notes by Lionel Netherwood (Great-grandson of the artist)**

Just before he awoke, Netherwood, the art historian, was mixing on his palette with a number five brush a shade of mauve whose color symbolized both complexity and distance. As the dream-like dribbles of mauve lifted, colors from childhood began to edge into his vision, and he awoke, startled, to discover that his campsite was full of the vivid purple of morning, with clumps of mist coiling over the river like unraveling satin.

The Northlands! The vast wilderness! The unknown! Netherwood propped himself on his elbow and stared at some rocks that looked as if they

were on fire in the morning sunlight, and then at the folds of his sleeping bag, etched in gold. His aluminum-framed backpack leaned attentively against a tree, like a waiter ready to take an order. It made him think of food, and a saddle of bear he had once eaten at a wild game dinner at the Harvard Club. It made him think of breakfast.

"Pancakes, Mr. Hartshorn?" he said. "Rise and shine."

Hartshorn, his guide, lay zipped up inside his sleeping bag, knees under the chin. Although he slept like a child, Hartshorn was a man of seventy. His nose was long and tubular, like a sturdy root, and his eyes, even when closed in slumber, had a look of primeval wisdom. He was, to Netherwood, the personification of the Adirondack wilderness guide; perhaps the last of that great breed. He was nostalgia made flesh, the man who had first taken him camping, fishing, and exploring; the man who had told him ghost stories full of giddy adventures when he was a child, nearly half a century ago.

Netherwood had returned to that part of the world that held the summer memories of his youth; mountains and streams, valleys and lakes pervaded by the scent of pine forest. He was pleased to find the Adirondacks still filled him with the enchantment of those dream-bound years.

"Pancakes, Ralph?"

His guide refused to stir, so Netherwood bolted out of his sleeping bag and struggled into his hiking boots, which were newly purchased from the catalogue and made of split-leather suede with breathable, abrasion-resistant Cordura nylon and carbon rubber outsoles. He heard a loon, its cry muffled by the fog on the river, and accepted the



bird's distant song as a good omen for the day.

By the time his guide awoke, Netherwood was crouched by the fire, poking a spatula into an iron skillet. The air smelled of pine, dew, smoke, coffee and bacon.

"Pancakes, Ralph? With blueberries?"

Hartshorn crawled over to the fire, and Netherwood filled his plate with steaming cakes. "Why so ding-danged early?" Hartshorn said. He squatted down across from Netherwood and sullenly forked the food into his mouth.

"We should get started," Netherwood said. "I'd like to reach the falls before sunset."

"No way do we get to the falls today," Hartshorn said. "I already told you that. For one thing we'll be traveling through brackish swamps and pools of green slime. Beyond that, you have your fern and bog marshes, tamarack thickets, and bad weather."

"And beyond *that*," Netherwood cried, "Nighthawk Falls. Our destination. Our reward."

Netherwood felt entirely confident that with Hartshorn's help, he could accomplish his mission. This would be his first trip to Nighthawk Falls, the once-celebrated cascade that lay far back in the wilderness. Although he had only seen pictures of the waterfall, one of them painted by his great-grandfather, he felt he knew it intimately—a rushing torrent of water falling through a rocky gorge. The falls had been captured by painters of the Hudson River School, portrayed in woodcuts, lithographs and stereopticon photographs. In the nineteenth century the waterfall was an American icon, an ineradicable image of the wilderness. The image could still be seen in art museums and prints by Currier and Ives, but as far as Netherwood could tell, few people had actually visited the falls in nearly a century. Perhaps a rockslide had obliterated them. Perhaps it was their distance from numbered highways and the arduous effort to reach them. Perhaps it was indifference.

Whatever the reason, Netherwood had persuaded his old friend, Hartshorn, his childhood

guide, to make one last journey. Although it seemed a strange journey for them to undertake at this point in their lives, Netherwood had felt a growing sense of sterility in his career, a descent into pedantry. Hard times in the market had forced him to close his art gallery, and he mourned the tradition of painting that had fallen into disrepute as the privileged creation of that private club known as art history. It was now possible to spend an entire day touring the SoHo galleries without seeing a single painting. Instead, the current vogue was for "installations," pages torn from porn magazines, rearranged cases of 7-Up. He knew the time had come to revive the great traditions of the past, to try and breathe new life into old forms. He would try to recapture his great-grandfather's methods, as well as his relationship to the wilderness. If Hartshorn was to be the physical guide on this trip, he, Netherwood, would be the spiritual leader. His new digital camera lay in the bottom of the canoe, next to the supplies and groceries. He would bring the falls back electronically, restore them to the American consciousness.

Hartshorn tossed the remains of his pancakes into the fire. "We may never get to the falls outright," he said. "From everything I've ever heard, it's a rock-strewn shitpile back there." He dipped a cup of water from the small tin pail. The water was warm, and a breeze during the night had blown pine needles and ashes along the surface, mixing them with dead mosquitoes. Hartshorn made a face and spat the water on the ground. "It ain't going to be so pretty as it looks in your mind. Every time you reach out, you're likely to grab a handful of mosquitoes, no-see-ums, black flies, deer flies, horse flies, moose flies. It's a by-God bug hell back there." He looked at Netherwood as if daring him to go to bug hell.

Some men, Netherwood was convinced, never saw past the bugs, never looked beyond the metaphysical mosquito bite on the tip of the nose. But he knew that Hartshorn's head was filled with practical wisdom—observations, woodsmanship, the



design of a canoe, the length of shadows, the direction of the wind. And *his* head?—it was crammed with different stuff: dreams, visions, scholarly distractions, and the fact that his new boots hurt his feet despite the expensive materials they were made of. He had to be tolerant with Hartshorn—appreciative—or together they would never survive.

Netherwood limped down to the river, where their canoe was tied to an alder bush. Dew had soaked the grass and ferns, made the leaves soggy under his feet. He started to take a compass reading; then, realizing that a compass would be a pointless instrument on a journey of this nature, he knelt and drank from the river.

A wide orange sun was coming up as the two men set out in their canoe. The sky behind them was a dull red, but in front of them the air was still dark blue with a fading, transparent moon. The Opalescent River was a calm sheet, bearing only minute glints of ripples, and the steeply wooded shores seemed to be pressing in slowly. Netherwood, paddling in the bow, felt himself to be the focus of the whole landscape.

"Those old stories you were telling me last night," Netherwood said. "Not since I was a child have I wanted to believe anything as much as those stories." Hartshorn had always been known for his ability to tell a different story every night for months. Most of his stories began with some sort of truth, an element of bragging, but some never gave truth a nod.

This part of the Adirondacks, Hartshorn told him, had its many legends. There were banshees, escaped axe-murderers from the State Prison, even ordinary ghosts. Old Jean LeGrand was a local figure who was said to have been seven feet tall and capable of carrying two oxen stacked on his back. The wizard of the woods was a man named Joe LeBeau. He could make coons disappear up rain-spouts. He could make saws rip through trees by themselves. He could turn pebbles into gold coins, and he was headless.

"Which story was I telling you?" Hartshorn said.

"The Witch of the Woods. Georgina Rutledge. You were telling me how, on one occasion, a man saw a rabbit and tried to kill it by throwing a rock at it. When the rock hit the rabbit, the rabbit disappeared and Georgina Rutledge materialized on the spot and punched the man in the nose. I don't remember the rest."

"You fell asleep," Hartshorn said, tugging at the brim of his hat. "You never used to do that." He did not sound particularly disgruntled, having already recorded most of his tales for an English professor at a nearby community college. "Anyhow, this Georgina Rutledge story ain't over yet. That Witch of the Woods is still around. I was out in the swamp one moonlit night. A mist came up, laying there like a bedsheet. You've seen those nights. Fog was rising up like a thing coming out of the water. Something screamed. My hat flew off my head. I run home, through the underbrush. My arms was all cut up."

"But why did you run? Sounds rather captivating to me," Netherwood said. "a real Witch of the Woods. I would have at least waited until she materialized. Perhaps she had something important to tell you."

"That is no fake story," Hartshorn looked affronted. "She snatches pigs right out of pens. I believe she took a baby once, down in Oswegatchie. I'm telling you the truth."

They say my great-grandfather was part of Adirondack folklore, too," Netherwood said. "He could make rivers flow uphill. He could make the sun stand still in the sky for hours. Doubt if there was any magic to it, though. He did it through his painting. He did it through... art." Inane comparison, he quickly realized, and fell into silence.

They continued to paddle. Toward noon, Netherwood's arms and shoulders began to ache. He shifted his weight with each stroke of the paddle, causing the canoe to rock from side to side. Hartshorn had to shift his own weight as a counter-



balance, causing the canoe to turn in half circles.

"Paddle, damn it," Hartshorn shouted. "You paddled better when you was ten years old."

Now and then Netherwood would bang his thumb against the side of the boat, shake his hand in the air, and thrust the thumb into his mouth. But Hartshorn's goading seemed neutral and impersonal. Netherwood had heard it all before.

The sky became brighter, and Netherwood began to complain about bugs. When they stopped briefly for a snack, he dropped his new digital camera into the river while peeling an apple, and could talk about nothing else all morning.

"For shit's sake, then," Hartshorn said, "why are we doing this?" By now Netherwood was hardly pulling his weight at all. He would dip his paddle into the river and let it drift back alongside the canoe without any force. His head was rolling as if it were about to drop off his shoulders.

"Why, why, and what for?" Hartshorn repeated.

"The falls," Netherwood said. "We must keep going." He stopped paddling altogether. He looked very weary and began to lecture hoarsely.

The greatest of the waterfall paintings, he explained with broad gestures, was his great-grandfather's *Nighthawk Falls, Dusk*, now in the Fine Arts Museum in Cleveland. The painting depicted a group of Cambridge intellectuals converging at the foot of the falls.

"To do what?" Hartshorn said.

"To botanize, to commune." Netherwood widened his eyes as if he could actually see the painting before him. "In the background are giant pines three or four feet in diameter, framing the falls. Ralph Waldo Emerson stands isolated in the center of the painting, wearing red suspenders. He is being watched intently by Louis Agassiz, William Cullen Bryant, James Russell Lowell—you've heard of them, of course—as he aims his rifle at a target on a tree. My great-grandfather painted himself in the foreground, fly fishing, but you wouldn't know it unless you studied the picture carefully. He always disguised himself in the underbrush.

Thoreau," Netherwood explained, "was not invited on the trip, having been considered something of a loafer. Longfellow had been invited but declined to come when he heard that Emerson was bringing a gun." Netherwood continued his description: "The small figures in the foreground," he said, "merge into the noble, grand and gentle ribbon of waterfall that is bathed with light. And this light leads the eye upward, past blasted trees, toward a transcendent view that goes on indefinitely—indefinitely, you might say—into light itself. The smallness of the figures remind us that they, like we, are standing before a divine creation, before the cosmic grandeur of nature. Before God himself."

Hartshorn stopped paddling and looked at his fingernails. "Well," he said, "all fools have their fancies. Of course, a lot of money is made by folks with big pinup pictures in the back of their minds, but not with no waterfalls."

"I know you've always taken a less than transcendental view of things," Netherwood sighed, conscious of his hideous inability to express himself.

"Don't provoke me," Hartshorn said. His voice was firm. His chin went up. "I'll get you somewhere. But this here's no way to do it. They ain't made a canoe yet that'll get you where you want to go." Hartshorn said they weren't designed efficiently, for one thing. Dumb design. "They make canoes with them big decorated upsweeps which look artful in the showroom but which extend the freeboard areas above your submersion points, with the bow and stern too narrow. Ain't been a canoe designed yet that wasn't a death trap, that wasn't a coffin."

Netherwood nodded, or at least attempted to nod. He seemed to be having difficulty breathing. He spread a hand over the front of his shirt and gasped deeply, as if he were in pain. "In any case," he said, "I'll restore the falls. If the falls will accept me." His face became blotched and red.

On the floor of the canoe, a cardboard cylinder held a 1950s U.S. Geological Survey map which



showed railroad lines that no longer existed, bridges that had long since collapsed into the river, logging roads that were grown over. Netherwood knew that this wilderness was, in fact, a new wilderness, much of it wild only since the turn of the century. There had been lumbering in the area; there were tanneries, saw mills, mines, and camps. At one time it had been possible to buy a ticket somewhere, get on a train, and ride to Nighthawk Falls. Now the forest had reclaimed everything. Netherwood would not be surprised if the falls turned out to have disappeared entirely. He wondered whether he, himself, was not on the verge of making such a disappearance. He would vanish without having made much difference to anyone. At times, he almost enjoyed the feeling. It tended to make him feel less serious and self-important, more like Hartshorn. He turned and resumed paddling; at that moment, as the canoe turned slightly, they saw something bright along the shore. It seemed unearthly, yet flesh-toned. A splash of color through the ferns reminded Netherwood of the dawn that had disturbed his dream. They approached warily.

Imagine a woman lying face downward in a bed of ferns, quite still, with her arms embracing an orange knapsack.

"Is she alive?" Netherwood said. As they drew closer, they could see that she was wearing jeans, and the color of her shirt seemed to blend with the mossy floor of the forest. Her reddish hair was spread out from her head, covering her arms and shoulders. Netherwood stepped uncertainly out of the canoe and onto a rock. Grasping at branches, he worked his way onto the shore, and stood over her cautiously. "She's breathing," he called out. "She's alive."

Hartshorn tried to keep the canoe pointing into the shore. "She must be a long way from home,"



*Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall*

he said. He tied the canoe to a tree trunk and clambered up next to Netherwood on the river bank.

As they bent over the woman, she raised her head a little and blinked. Then she slowly lifted one hand to her head, and her fingers disappeared into her hair. Netherwood felt his breath drawn up by her gesture. "Excuse me . . ." he began. "Excuse us . . ." The woman sat up, and he stared at her for a moment as she slowly pushed back her hair. There were twigs, leaves and pine needles twisted in it, like a garland, and a faint strip of white along the part. She had full, red lips and tiny, sharp teeth like a child's. A pendant of milky stone hung from a leather thong around her neck.

She shook her head and said, "I thought you were never coming." Netherwood's senses were too dulled to do anything but smile foolishly. His eyes traveled from her thighs, to her breasts, to her



forehead, then made a circular sweep down along her bare arms and back to where her fingers lay concealed in her hair. He suddenly wanted to reach down, pick her up, and draw her against him so he could feel her cool breathing against his cheek. He wanted to look deeply into her eyes as he held her closer and closer.

Netherwood would have collapsed next to her if Hartshorn had not pulled him roughly back.

"I thought you were never coming," the girl said again. "You *are* Gordon and Ralph? From the Wildwood Service?"

Netherwood felt as if he would admit to anything.

"Hold everything," Hartshorn said. He drew Netherwood aside. "Excuse us for just one minute."

A slight distance away, he put his hands on Netherwood's shoulders. "Trouble," he said.

"She looks lost," Netherwood said.

"Something here ain't quite on the up and up. She looks like a river rat to me."

"We can't leave her here," Netherwood said.

"We can," Hartshorn said. "We can and we should if you ask me, but you don't, and you won't, which proves my point."

"She needs rescuing," Netherwood insisted. His anger brought an expression from Hartshorn that seemed both stubborn and pleading.

"I'm the guide," Hartshorn said, at length.

"I'm paying for the trip."

"Your head's gotten too heavy from all the padding, the heat and the colors."

Netherwood knew this might be true. It was either that, or some developing fever. Should he try to conceal his condition from Hartshorn? Assuming a cheerful tone of voice, he turned to the woman. "You're welcome to join us."

But she was already in the canoe. She clasped the back of her head with both hands and stretched her elbows out, as if she had known the two of them for a long time but from a great distance, like servants.

Hartshorn rolled his eyes and threw up his

hands. He kicked a stone into the water as Netherwood climbed, almost toppled, into the bow. "This canoe is overloaded," Hartshorn exclaimed.

The woman glanced back at Hartshorn, who was murmuring to himself as he pushed the canoe into the river, then she settled back against the pile of gear in the middle of the canoe. Her face was serene. The white pendant gleamed just below her throat.

"We're not Gordon or Ralph from the Wildlife Service," Netherwood said, "if it matters. In fact, I don't believe we've met."

"I don't believe we have either," she said. She made a slight hand wave.

"Been here long?"

"I live here," she said.

Netherwood nodded, with a puzzled expression. "This is some kind of vacation?"

"I'm not on vacation. This is where I live and work." She smiled. "I'm a business person. I have a degree in biominerology. What sort of work do you do?"

Netherwood stretched his right hand under the seat and lifted his knapsack from the bottom of the canoe. He rested it across his knees and unzipped it. He pulled a business card out of the pocket and handed it across.

"Lionel Netherwood," the woman said. "Fine Art."

"Do you like realism?" he said.

"Of course," she said.

"I thought perhaps not, somehow," he said.

"I love landscapes," she said.

"Do you?" Netherwood said. "We happen to be headed for a waterfall that was painted by one of the greatest landscape artists of the nineteenth century. Would you like to come with us?"

"Thank you," she said.

"You mean you'll come?" he said.

"I'd like to," she said. "It's nice of you to ask."

"Not at all," he said. "You know, I think it must be marvelous, really, to live as you do. No strings, no commitments. But surely you must get lonely



sometimes.”

“I like my own company,” the woman said. “It’s all quite delightful if you know your way around.”

Netherwood, leaning over the side of the canoe, thought he could see a firm, heroic face smiling up at him from the river’s surface. It made him feel a little less feverish. “And when you get lonely?” he said.

“I sit by the river, and hope two nice men like yourselves will come along and pick me up.”

Netherwood turned. They smiled at each other.

Hartshorn continued to paddle, with an air of muted apprehension.

Around a bend, the trees parted and the sky rose before them, a wash of blue. The sun had moved swiftly and effortlessly, and now it shone on their faces. They fell into silence, soothed by the monotony of paddling and a mauve-colored line of hills in the distance.

“What exactly,” Netherwood said, “does a biominerologist do?”

She smiled. “All I can tell you is what I’ve done.” After graduate school, she explained, she ran a guide service, taking birdwatchers and rock

collectors into the back country. After one of these trips with a group of businessmen and their wives, she received a letter offering her a grant. The businessmen represented a foundation that gave away money to people who didn’t ask for it. “Now I search for treasure,” she said.

“Treasure,” Netherwood said.

“You’ve heard of Adirondite, perhaps.”

Netherwood shook his head. She held up the milky stone that she wore around her neck.

“Some kind of rock, is it?” Hartshorn said.

“It’s more than a rock, it’s a tool. A tool for a whole new way of life.”

“A tool?”

“I’ll try to make it simple,” she said.

“Adirondite is a crystalline, glassy material that has recently been discovered in this area. Scientists say Adirondite might be hardened drops from the outer surface of meteorites fused and melted during their passage through the atmosphere, then splashed about like tears on impact with the earth. The rocks have ripply striations on the outside surface, which may be a runic code, carrying messages of extraterrestrial origin as yet to be deciphered. In



*Photo by Luke Black*

any case, it is only recently that its spiritual properties have been explored.”

“What’s that rock that you’re holding up worth?” Hartshorn said.

“I’m coming to that. The stone definitely has an etheric pattern that heralds a great time, not only on this planet, but for all beings in all places. It has no karma associated with it and was created in great secrecy in the days of early Lemuria by a very select group of Brothers of the Light and it was kept out of this dimension.”

Netherwood, clutching his temples, was starting to shiver all over.

“Karma?” Hartshorn asked.

She laughed. “I’ve explained it badly. As we all know, the distinctions between matter and energy tend to blur on the sub-atomic level. For example, because Adirondite is a white stone, it can help in the secretion of breast milk and semen, strengthen the teeth, and reduce inflammations. But its main value is spiritual transformation. The stone has indicated that I will travel to an interesting place today.”

“God, I hope so,” Netherwood said. He wondered if she could be persuaded to pose for him before the legendary Nighthawk Falls. He wondered how the woman would look in a cocktail dress at a gallery opening, her arm in his, leaning on his shoulder.

The woods were gradually thinning, and Netherwood was distracted by strange sights. He gazed at rocks on the shore which looked thick and fleshy. Then he saw, as though over his own knuckles as they clutched the canoe paddle, a streak of dim dribbles along the forest floor that blotted out the vision of ecstasy he had been trying to arrange for his eyes moments ago.

They were coming into an enormous marsh. Before them, the river seemed to wind on an upward-climbing curve, leading their eyes through a steamy haze toward light. Netherwood tried not to look up, but in this sky, at the edge of his peripheral vision, there floated a veil of creamy white

scrubbed down to the distant hills, a scrim, at once opaque and translucent, like a yellow mist. However, he had only to look directly at it and it would vanish, and again the sky would explode with an even, dense blueness.

Netherwood blinked his eyes and pulled his paddle through the thickening water. “This is new country for me,” he said.

“We’re far from civilization now,” the woman said. “It’s beautiful. Beautiful in a way that’s kind of intimidating.”

“I know what you mean,” Netherwood said. “Lush. Overpowering.” He glanced at the toe of her right hiking boot. He tried to think of something more to say. On each side of the canoe elongated pools flashed, and over them hung dark swarms of midges. A large swamp flower brushed past the canoe, shyly vibrant, a bluntly polychrome vision. It exuded a disconsolate scent rather like turpentine.

*I must pull myself together*, Netherwood thought. In spite of the sultry heat, he felt chilled. He imagined that he might faint and that the outlines of his delirium, showing through the sky and water, would gain complete control of his consciousness. At times, Hartshorn and the woman seemed to grow transparent and he thought he saw, through them, a rough and tumble of shapes and colors so improvisational and so ordered that they had no botanical identity. He took hold of himself, straining to keep his eyes open. He looked at Hartshorn, at his stubborn profile under the gray hat with the upturned brim. He felt, to his horror, that he was forgetting who Hartshorn was and why he was with him. He remembered himself as a boy; always tugging at Hartshorn’s shirtsleeve, “Can ya take me fishin’, Mr. Hartshorn? Can ya take me campin’?” The memory reminded him that he would be entirely alone in the world if he were ever separated from his guide. But at the same time, a terrible excitement shook him as he realized he was also indispensable to Hartshorn.

The map that Hartshorn held on his knees began



to flap in the wind. He tugged at his hat.

"Where are we?" Netherwood called out.

"Upriver," Hartshorn said, adding defensively, "Have I ever gotten you lost?" He reached into his knapsack and issued them each an apple. The apples seemed to have been appropriated from somewhere, a bowl, and to Netherwood it was an art-historical problem to figure out from where. As he ate, his apple hovered against an apparently monochromatic representation of the girl's cropped face, consisting of eyes, eyebrows and the white hairline. There seemed to be a visual pun intended, connecting her eyes with the oranges, the oranges with her breasts, in a network that left behind, like her detached grin, an illusory concept. A dull, hermeneutical emptiness settled over him.

"Look, how odd," the woman said. "We must get through this swamp to reach the hills on the other side. But could this be a mirage? The forest is no longer visible."

Netherwood scanned the space before him. Yes, it was true, the forest was no longer visible. Imagine that there was only a quivering vapor hanging over the marsh that obliterated all solid objects in ambiguous transparency that made the scenery indistinguishable from the weather. "You probably can't see it," Netherwood said, "but someone is trying to come through."

"What are you talking about?" she said.

He realized that what he was saying was nonsense and stopped. His head was spinning and there was a humming in his ears. He knew there was no medicine among his supplies.

The girl sat in silence, morosely picking at the crystal that hung around her neck.

"I must touch it," he said to her, stretching out his hand. "I...I'm not feeling well."

"Serves you right," Hartshorn shouted. "It's too bad. I tried to warn you. Just too bad..."

Netherwood imagined he was referring to the corruption of pure landscape by the woman's presence. In the course of the last few minutes, ever since they had stopped to rest in the swamp, Hart-

shorn seemed to have grown larger and swelled. There was now something mocking and dangerous about him. He took off his hat and, pulling out a dirty handkerchief, wiped his forehead which was orange over the brows, and white above that. Both colors came off on the rag. Then he leaned forward and said, "Pull yourself together. We're moving on."

"Maybe we should leave him here," said the woman's faraway voice.

"Nah," Hartshorn said, "he's just blocked up, full of stoppages. Now I'm not wise like you, not too smart, don't seem much point in pretending to be, either. That stone of yours absolutely don't need us in order to be a healing stone, in order to be true or untrue. But let him touch it. Can't do no harm."

As Netherwood reached for the stone, delirious visions were quietly and firmly finding their places. Three notational trees hovered over the river, like wriggling tadpoles, and the river itself seemed to recede into an illusory distance and to remain on the surface of the distance, as if it were surface and depth at once. Gathering all his will-power, Netherwood focused his gaze on a patch of vermilion and magenta, doubtless referring to flora, while a sort of loop danced at the top edge of his vision. It could have been the sun, or a cloud. It condensed so much power, inspiration and aesthetic risk, that it took his breath away.

His fingers closed around the stone, and at that precise moment the canoe hit a rock, slid right, and hit another.

"Damn," Hartshorn said. "Current seems to be picking up a bit." He began to paddle with short, light, rapid chops. They could hear a low, murmurous sound, like a distant avalanche.

"Look out!" the woman said suddenly.

They felt not only the violent thrust of the water, but a sudden sucking noise, more powerful than the weight of gravity.

"The falls!" Hartshorn shouted, finally, above the sound. "It's drawing us in!"

The roar of water became thunderous. Hartshorn



tried to turn the canoe, but a rock flew by, then a ledge, then a clump of bushes. They were rushing, plunging, skimming the surface, then sinking too low, shipping water. Netherwood's heart raced in panic. The canoe was bucking, heaving, bouncing. He shouted, and the shout turned into a scream.

They overturned. They found themselves in the water, gasping and choking, grabbing the canoe's sides. Battered by rocks, bruised and stunned, Netherwood felt too astonished to feel pain, and simply let himself be carried along.

Then the canoe was thrown sideways, smashing broadside against a rock. He tried to clutch at the canoe, but his fingers slipped. He sank, swallowed a mouthful of water, surfaced to find himself on the other side of the canoe. He was able to breathe in short, ragged gasps, even to glance at the woman, as she crawled up an embankment farther back. She waved at him, then stood swinging the leather thong, with its stone pendant, around in circles over her head.

Hartshorn disappeared. He surfaced again, farther upstream, looking like a canvas rag, a sack, or an abandoned life jacket.

Netherwood was pulled after him, staring, blinking in disbelief. His legs had gone numb from the cold. He could feel the presence of the falls: a sudden, sucking upward current in front of them.

"Grandfather!" he cried. "Great-grandfather! Where have you taken me? Where am I going?"

Netherwood reached out, and it seemed to him, clouded as his senses were by sickness, that this was all an innocent bit of sport, that in a moment they would get up and, once they had caught their breath, stroll peacefully toward the river bank, empty the canoe, and continue on toward the hills, to some shady place with long filaments of water spilling over a ledge. But suddenly, he realized that what was taking place around him was not the trick of an imagination that had been carried away, not the workings of a fever, through which hostile glimpses—the fleshy rocks, the apples, the smashed colors—were trying to show. He realized

the boundaries of the scene were fictitious, since everything beyond his own immediate senses was, at best, fictitious, an imitation of life hastily slathered across a surface in an attempt to remind us that all we have to confirm our reality is the deceitful landscape that surrounds us. He knew that fiction—the landscape of nonexistence—was here in the rushing, mad, merry white water, and having realized this, he found within him the strength to grasp for Hartshorn's hand, whose fingers were plucking the air.

"Here I am," Hartshorn shouted. "You were right! Ain't this gorgeous?" His eyes had rolled back into his head. Netherwood saw him distinctively, consciously, his arms flailing wildly, his fingers stretched wide.

How Netherwood suddenly hated this scene above which God was announcing Himself through spectacular cloud formations flamboyantly lit up with cadmium reds and oranges. If he could only define the wilderness by deliberately refusing to allow himself to be included within its boundaries, he might avoid its stupefying extravagance. Was he there or not? Was he trapped in this life, or was he being forced to leave it? Under the burning sky, this corner of wilderness, a place of mirage and illusion, waited patiently for him to go away.

*...The landscapes of Netherwood are said to contain the unmistakable signature of the artist, as if each were a self-portrait. Although the viewer cannot see him exactly, Netherwood is there, his face formed from a clump of bushes or blurred by a cascade of falling water. In the dark woods he might be peering out from the intertwined branches of fallen trees, his eyes formed from the milky pebbles of shoreline. If you could reach into the picture and scoop up a handful of the pebbles, they would appear quite ordinary. The artist could be anywhere, and, at the same time, nowhere in particular.*

*...from the catalogue*



# Thunder's Shadow

by John Jenkinson

My shadow's little night, taller  
Than Mr. Lincoln, crosses the lush green  
Graves of the Union Army, suffers  
The blank erosion of their stones.

Here where the hardtack Yankees broke  
Rebellion's back, held their ground  
Before the fury of grape, the shock  
Of massed bayonets, of unbound

Lives propelled by statehood's passion  
Far beyond our current notions  
Of the local, their homeland loyalties  
Narrowed to a band of counties,

A shrike whistles to his mate  
As tin leaves shiver down the thin,  
Cool afternoon. South of town,  
Little Round-top flares, ignited

By the westward falling sun.  
Drawn by two dun, long-eared horses,  
A Van Tassel runabout passes,  
Its fragile clip-clop thunder blunted

By the blare of tourist cars,  
By the clash of plastic sabers.



# Picture of My Father, the Accountant

by Rafaella Del Bourgo

Behind him  
the Ventura Hills bleach in the sun  
and his face is set and serious  
as if to warn predators—  
coyote or the occasional puma—  
that he is on the job  
and they should cling  
to those narrow paths  
they've carved into the scrub behind the stables  
and not interfere with him  
in his navy blue jump-suit.

His left hand gentle on the muzzle  
of his horse  
his right hand rests  
on the head of a portly German shepherd  
who barks with a Teutonic accent.  
She has thrown her paws against his chest  
despite her training not to  
and he seems to tilt backward  
but will not fall.

On Monday,  
he will scrape grey stubble  
from his week-end face  
struggle into a rumpled shirt  
clip on a tie  
which will droop like his thin hair in the heat.  
He will stop for coffee and donuts  
over-tip the waitress  
then spend the day  
riding his adding machine  
down linoleum canyons  
and counting saddle-bags of money  
for other men.



# Especially Gifted

by Brad Shaw

Kris and I drove home from the specialist's office without speaking. Jacob, then three, sat in the back blankly staring through the window. We had spent months traveling from one doctor's office to another. Something was wrong with Jacob, but we didn't know what. I'd initially feared profound deafness. However, that wasn't it at all.

I finally broke the nauseating silence. "It's not as bad as the alternative," I said without much conviction, referring to deafness. Kris shot me one of her looks that says "You're an idiot." I get those a lot.

The doctor's words ricocheted in my head like a racquetball gone mad. "Your son is autistic," she had told us that afternoon at the end of her evaluation. My mind kept trying to digest the word, "autistic," but it had limited capacity to do so. The sum of my education concerning autism came from Dustin Hoffman's role in *Rain Man*. Thoughts and emotions of Jake swam in my head. They circled—around and around. The interior of the car seemed too small and there was too little air to breathe.

"Oh, then he has a special gift," I ignorantly quipped to the doctor. She smiled knowingly at my remark while Kris shot me another of her looks. "Sometimes that's the case," the doctor said emphasizing "sometimes."

"Sometimes that's the case, but not always."

Jacob's speech had developed normally up to about 18 months. We didn't notice at the time, but his communication ended rather abruptly. That is, it didn't just taper off. But, we didn't realize that at the time. So, we thought the deterioration was gradual. When it occurred to us that Jake was no longer communicating, we began seeking one professional opinion after another. As is often the case with parents of autistics, we first concluded Jake was losing his hearing. I hated the idea of a son with machinery protruding from his ears and one

who used his hands to make speech.

I had been raised that you did not question God. His decisions were wise and thoughtful. However, I had to call him to task on this one. I was confused and angry. Angry with God, and that was strange territory for me indeed. I feared I would grow bitter.

If I never hear another person say, "God only sends 'special' children to 'special' parents," it'll be too soon. Only people with normal, healthy children say that. Try hearing one parent console another with that gem at a special child's workshop or symposium. I used to have to bite my tongue when people said it to me fearing I'd scream out, "My son bleeps instead of making words. If I let go of his hand he'll dart into the traffic. He's four years old and in a diaper. You'll have to excuse me if I don't feel so 'special' today."

Jacob is our oldest. He was almost four when his brother, Jordan, was born. Being our first, we had nothing to measure by, and therefore lived in a quasi-ignorant bliss. But, as Jordan got older, and experienced new and wonderful things, we began to realize some of what we'd missed with Jake.

Last night we watched Jordan struggling to put his shoes on. At only 19 months Kris and I are amazed at his extensive vocabulary and motor skills. He kept repeating, "shoes, shoes, shoes," as he struggled with the task of getting them on his feet. He's a beautiful, blond-headed, blue-eyed boy. His success with the shoes was limited, but he'll soon get the hang of it. We pray Jacob might learn to put his on in the next couple of years.

Jordan now gets invited by friends and relatives to parties. I realize the words, "Thanks for inviting Jacob over, but perhaps some other time," have never crossed my lips. Even our families seem eager to keep or baby-sit Jordan, with little or no mention of Jake. Yes, Jordan is at a "cute" stage. Yes, he's now beginning to talk and do those silly





things that people find amusing and comical. Yes, he is a pleasure to be around. Jacob, on the other hand, when left unchecked, will wreak havoc on a household. Things that are not in the "right" place will be upended or otherwise damaged. He cannot take or follow even the simplest command. If not watched closely he will escape the house and dash for the street. Jake is a beautiful boy, but an easy keep he is not.

There are varying degrees of autism, from mild to severe. Jacob falls into the moderate category. He is still devoid of any form of language. He spends much of his day covering his ears with his hands. The doctor said that is probably because he is bothered by sounds on a frequency that you and I cannot hear. Kris has a stronger faith than I that Jacob will learn communication on some level. He is unusually strong and large for a child his age. He is generally a docile, loving boy, but he does have bouts of frustration and anger that lead to short spells of violence.

Jake is not kind to his clothes. Shirts are for chewing. It is not uncommon that a dark, wet ring will appear on the sleeve of a shirt before we arrive at a destination. Kris sometimes takes an extra for these occasions. We do not know if the chewing is a nervous habit or if he is fulfilling some kind of need from lack of stimulation. I sometimes wonder if he will gnaw a hole through the shirt.

He spends most of his time driving his VCR and pacing his room. I say "drive" for there is really no other way to explain it. On every tape he owns, there are certain scenes that must be viewed, re-viewed, then re-viewed again. If he has an unnatural ability, it is that he can play a movie, hit rewind, walk the appropriate number of circles in his room, and arrive at the play button at exactly the same moment every time. It really is phenomenal, if not hell on the VCR. Without exaggeration, we have thrown out enough damaged tape players to have purchased a new car. But, the VCR is one of his few forms of play, so we tolerate the expense. It is troubling for me to watch him circle

his room. Usually this is accompanied with hand flapping and squeaks and bleats he makes with his mouth. The doctor told us this is "self stimulation," or stimming for short. He generally stims when angry or confused. Confusion can follow a simple rearranging of the furniture. We learned long ago that the more things stay the same, the more they should.

I have come to accept peace where I can find it. Kris and I are truly blessed people. Jacob, unlike so many others like him, can be touched and hugged. He will, on occasion, make eye contact. In those rare and special times, when I find Jacob smiling at me with those deep blue pools that are his eyes, I, for just a moment, get to glimpse into his soul. In that brief time I get to tell him all the things a dad should say to his son. He, in turn, gets to tell me it's not so bad, and that everything will be all right. And, for a fleeting moment, a door is opened and we share the same space.

### *Merry Christmas, Scrooge*

Kris and I decided not to put up a Christmas tree this year. The family called us Scrooge, but we decided the price was too high. Jacob cannot cope with that much change in the house. From the time it goes up, until several days after it comes down, Jacob is a wild man. Things get broken; small children get hurt; sleep is elusive. I don't exaggerate. Jacob does not deal well with that much change.

When the family asked what Jacob wanted for Christmas, our reply, "money," must have seemed calloused and uncaring. But after a few years of making him sit by the tree as we opened his presents as quickly as we could, for Jacob can sit for only a short time, we tired of the facade. We would hand him his shiny new toy, only to watch him try to hold it between his knees, or fling it into the air so he could stim as it crashed to the floor. On the rare occasions he would hold and look at a new possession, his expression seemed to say, "Tell me



again what the hell I'm supposed to do with this?"

I try reading to Jacob. It is a fiasco. A scene to rival the best that the Three Stooges have to offer. I hold the book, and boy, and try to read and turn pages as he swings his elbows, squirms violently, or attempts an escape over my face and down the back of my chair. My efforts are futile. When I put aside the book and begin to wrestle or tickle him, then his interest is piqued, and he will stay. Otherwise, no dice.

Sometimes, after an extremely strenuous bout of wrestling or tickling, Jacob will go surprisingly relaxed in my arms. It is in his relaxed state I get those rare moments of eye contact. It seems only at those times we truly commune. I ache, knowing there's something he wants desperately to tell me. I know he knows something is not right; that something is broken.

I think he wants to say, "Here, Daddy, fix it."



# Killing Time

by James Jay Egan

I sat at the door to the hayloft on the backside of the far barn. My shooting cap was high on my forehead. I sat there with a view high above the ground and looked out on the fields, my back to a bale of hay, my scoped twenty-two across my legs and the old man's expensive field glasses on my crotch. I faced east and the countryside was beautiful in the evening with dark coming on. I looked on the country below the purple evening sky, the yellow greens of grasses, the deep green high corn, and dark thick woods. They had sent me away many times before and I'd seen many places, but I always thought, hell, what if I do get to heaven and it ain't as nice as August in Wisconsin.

Behind the barn we had a fallow field of hay grasses, thick and green in the summer, stretching from Bunny Day's stand of corn on my far left, below me and across to the cattail swamp behind Mrs. Johnson's trailer home on my far right. It was a football field's length ahead of me to the fence line and then Ray Krueger's large stand of corn beyond. That cornfield marched on to the hardwoods on the north-south ridgeline. If you traveled the game trail under the crest of the ridge in a southerly direction you came to the basin of my uncle's farm, with its blue pond, red outbuildings and white farmhouse settled inside the oak woods. Mrs. Johnson told the old man once that a farmstead was always the farmer's self-portrait.

Our small plot here behind the barn had been fallow for some years now. Before I'd come along the old man had his friends butchering the cattle here. Long before me they'd kept dairy cows. When I was a younger kid we had some saddle horses that the old man kept because he liked their smell. After he up and sold the horses we had alfalfa. But there was no reason to keep the haying up, and the pasture went unused and untended, and now there was just the grass field, the smooth brooms and the tall thick patch of canary reed grass in the old

cattle run alongside the impenetrable cattail swamp.

The breeze blew in and out of the loft access. It came in and I smelled the green cooling earth. It went out and there was the smell of the dry empty barn. The loft door had been used long before in bringing hay up for storage, in the time before hay was baled. A pulley with block and tackle lifted large bunches of hay in a sling or twin forks up to the door. Farmhands pulled the hay in, released it and piled it in the loft. Later they forked it down to the livestock through trapdoors for feeding. The block and tackle were gone now to some antique or scrap yard. I smelled the old hay and dry lumber from the barn. The barn continued to decay, but the hay didn't rot. The roof was sound and the barn was dry inside. We had patched the roof for some reason only a few summers ago.

I sat up there like that because the old man had given the green light to shoot the feral cats that had moved in and settled on our yard. They were killing off the old man's rabbits and squirrels on the windrow. He encouraged the squirrels and rabbits in the stand of cedars and spruce so as to harvest a dozen of them in the winter for frying. I sat up there maybe hoping to see a buck coyote, as there was a continuous season on coyotes now and I wanted a coyote to add to my collection of pelts. I'd even take a skunk just for the hell of it. Sometimes to bring in predators I'd dump table scraps or dead blackbirds back on the far fence line between our hayfield and Krueger's corn. There were many predators on the property. I had gone away again and had come back to find the old man bitching about badgers in the field. Badgers were protected. I sure wish they weren't. I guess the old man had tangled up with one on his trapline when he was a kid. I wanted a badger pelt, too. I had muskrats and three coons from the cattail swamp, a mink I had picked up dead on the road between



our drive and Mrs. Johnson's, and an opossum that had gotten into our tool shed. The old man had tanned the three fox I had killed when I was a younger kid and had sold them to the tourism industry in town.

I was sighting down my scope on a crow sitting and cawing on the corner fence post at Day's property when one of them cats came right beneath me outside the window. He was black with a white underside. He was tiptoeing along through the shorter-length grass and white clover around the rusty pump and dry trough. I kept silent as I moved my rifle onto him. He stopped and sniffed, then he sat down on his haunches facing away and licked his front paw and cleaned his ear. He wasn't fifteen yards below me. I looked down my scope and he was so close he almost filled it up. He turned back towards the barn and me. I whistled once. He stopped stone stiff with one paw up but didn't know where the sound had come from. I put my crosshairs on the base of his neck, between the shoulder blades. I shot him. He went down. I looked down at him lying on his side. One back leg kicked a few times and I heard the bubbling of blood in his air passage. I waited a moment. Then I looked down at him through my scope to see if he was twitching or breathing. He wasn't. His eyes were shut in a wince and he was smiling. I let him be and watched the field till it got almost dark. I looked out on the country and wondered whether I could've hit the cat if he was out on the far fence line before Ray Krueger's stand of corn. Once I tried to lay my crosshairs on the bobbed wire. I couldn't keep steady though. The crow had flown off to the ridge.

Finally I left my rifle up there in the access and took the field glasses and went down from the loft. I went between the old barn and the pole-barn, across the barnyard, and through the gate to the front lot. I took a spade from the aluminum shed. The old man had told me that whether I trapped or shot the cats, they had to be buried right away and not made to suffer too much. He was superstitious

about killing cats.

Back of the far barn again I examined that dead cat. I had shot him on the left lobe of the forehead where his scent glands were located, and was disappointed with myself because that wasn't where I had aimed. I couldn't find an exit wound. I touched his eyelid. He had yellow eyes. His fur was fine and soft. I checked his nails, and they were intact but worn, so I figured he was feral and not one of Mrs. Johnson's. He had scars and scabs from ticks. But he wasn't a bloody mess.

So I picked him up by his hind leg and it was still warm in my hand. I buried him in the burning circle good and deep under dirt and ashes. I stuck a tall stick in the ground where his grave was. I hitched another stick near the top with twine to make a cross. I didn't want the old man to go mucking around in the burning circle and unearth a rotting cat.

He was a tomcat with big balls and I thought about all the litters he wouldn't be siring. I thought about how many rabbits and pheasant chicks he wouldn't be killing. The dew was coming on with the darkness and I wiped my hands in the short crabgrass. The grass was dusty with ash.

I went up again and put the shovel in the shed. The old man was watching television on the front porch. I heard him coughing. I took off my boots on the back steps, went in the back door, walked up the stairs to the old man's room and replaced his field glasses on his nightstand. I went back down to the kitchen.

"What's the shooting?" I heard the old man say from out front.

"Killed a tomcat."

"Which one?"

"Black with white."

"That son of a bitch. I know him." Then, "You bury it?"

"You told me to."

There wasn't much in the fridge. I went out back and put my boots on.

I stood in the late evening on the back steps. I





*Photo by Amber James*

attempted to pick out the scents in the moist cooling air one by one, the cedars and spruce, the grasses, and the summer composting. I bent my head, struck a match and lit a cigarette. I never trusted myself smoking in the barn. I tossed the match into the flower garden overrun with broadleaves. I pulled my cap low on my forehead.

I walked across the yards on the damp, mowed bluegrass. Beyond the far barn I came to the dry trough next to the rusty pump and sat on its edge and smoked. Above me the black muzzle of my rifle stuck out from the loft. I saw it silhouetted in the darkening sky.

The mist was rising over the lush cattail swamp. The fallow field inbetween was smooth and dark, and noisy with crickets. The crickets chirped, but the frogs in the swamp were quiet. The warm air of the day was lifting, and the cool air descended on us. The moon hung over our place.

I smoked to the end, and blew smoke at the moon once. Then I turned to the trough and set the butt in its bottom, watching it. I bent to the short white clover and rubbed my fingers in the dewy leaves to wipe the smell of tobacco from my fingers. Where I had dropped the cat I saw a dark, wet patch of clover.

I stood and walked away from the barns. I stepped into the field, brushing the wet blades of quack grass and crabgrass with the legs of my jeans. I counted ninety-seven paces to the fence, and the tall cornfield rose up to meet me like an army standing stiff under the moon, with the wooded ridge

passing far beyond it.

I bent and passed through the second and third tines of bobbed wire. At the edge of the cornfield I stopped and looked up and down the first row for a break in the corn. I stepped to my left and was onto the soft soil, giving in to the heels of my boots. The corn stood before me, two heads taller than me. I eased through a break between two stalks, their blades touching me like beggars. I ducked into the darkness of the corn, walked the first row thick with blades of corn to a break in the second row, passed between two stalks, then down the second row five steps, and passed between two more stalks. The corn stood thick and lush, never so impenetrable as the cattail swamp was in summer, but dense and receptive to one like me. The loam under my boots felt dry and soft. At a certain point inside standing corn, in the green summer, yellow autumn or gray winter, at a certain point inside a stand of corn everything outside the corn stops existing.

I stopped in a narrow row and looked down it, first one way, then the other, then turned towards the moon, hanging over our farmstead. I saw the moon indifferently suspended behind blades of corn, and cornstalks and spires.

Facing down the row, I bent and sat, slowly first, then heavily, and all the corn was above me now, and even the moon disappeared. Then I lay back on the soil with my eyes closed, crossed my legs, and clasped my hands on my chest, smelling dirt and vegetation, and lay my head back. They were sending me away again in the morning.

I opened my eyes, and the corn around me rose and covered the dark sky. The corn stood seven feet and at the top of each stalk sat a spire. The silk was coming out of the ears. Beyond the corn I picked out stars. One star at a time appeared in the blackness. In my imagination I felt the nearness of the hardwoods, the cattails, our barn and the old man on the front porch. I had a growing superstition about killing cats, too.

\*\*\*



# Piñon

by Donald Mace Williams

Squat, bristle-boughed, too close to the ground for shade,  
It darkens the foothills of foothills, the first pine  
On the lowest land that is not plains. You gauge  
The nearness of sweet country by it, of high  
Mountains where leaves yield, cooling the skin,  
When you walk small trails. The tree of getting there.  
A traveler who makes piñon slopes his end  
Must like heat, rattlesnakes, rocks, and parched camps,  
Must choose terrain like a Hurd or an O'Keeffe,  
To whose eyes truth means that which is sparse and bleached.



*Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall*



# Turning Sixty-Five in Montana

by Walt McDonald

Here, grizzlies roam, at home in a million trees.  
We've here in a tent in autumn, weeks until 2000.  
God knows how puny we are and lets the seasons run,  
a thousand years like a day to someone who can save.  
Thousands of tourists encounter grizzlies  
in the visitors' center—photos behind locked glass,

paws broad as skulls. Bears killed nine campers  
in Glacier Park last year, hiking in spite of claw marks  
slashed in pine trunks and bear scat shouting  
*Here there be bears*. Ten times that many died  
by drowning, car wrecks, strokes. Crosses mark  
Montana's wrecks along all mountain curves,

and billboards promise *Jesus saves*. Glaciers  
scoured Montana granite thousands of years  
like clumsy sleds on stones, gouged a vast moraine  
to make McDonald Lake, a slushy, ten-mile pond  
no one could see from the moon. God knows  
how puny we are and lets the glaciers melt.



# The Tracker William Eagle Feather Muses on His Name

by Robert Cooperman

Spawned by a white trapper  
sheltered for a night by a Ute woman  
stolen by raiding Lakotas  
and treated no better than a slave,  
I was the boy mud was flung at  
after Mother died,  
coughing red blizzards.

My name: "William"  
came to me after John Sprockett  
recited a poem by that Shakespeare,  
at a funeral, something about not  
fearing the sun no more.  
I couldn't cipher half the words,  
but the sounds wove pictures pretty  
as geese across the falling-leaf sky.

I figured William Shakespeare  
had powerful magic, so took his name:

"Eagle Feather."  
Mother said one fluttered down  
at my birth: only reason  
the tribe didn't set me out to die.

The one time I glimpsed  
Preacher's wife, I wanted  
to whisper my name in her ear  
over and over and over.





# Reverend Burden Compares Mary LaFrance with His Wife Lavinia

by Robert Cooperman

My wife never presented me  
with proof she's strong  
in the Lord: a son.  
Mary has, or will,  
in five months' time:  
more my lawful wife  
in God's eyes  
than church-Lavinia  
ever was.

But I'm shackled to her,  
a prisoner of war  
who hates his cell-mate.

I'd sue for annulment,  
Lavinia's desert-womb a sin.  
But Mary and I'd have to quit  
Gold Creek, parishioners  
turning on me for tearing  
that contract asunder.

I want to spend my days  
here, beloved of my flock,  
my son rising to my pulpit  
when I lay down my burden  
of leading sinners  
to the Light.

If only I could find  
some Bible precedent,  
like the one about witches.



# Reverend Burden Contemplates Francis DeLacey, Publisher of the Gold Creek *Optimist*

by Robert Cooperman

A free and forthright press?  
Nothing forthright  
about the claws  
that whiskey-breathed devil  
sinks into me:  
nosing out about Mary,  
who I saved from whoredom;  
set her up in a cottage  
away from the weasel eyes  
of them that spread gossip  
like rancid honey  
on moldy bread.

Mary needed a haven,  
her bosoms heaving  
penitence the first time  
she offered me her jewel.  
But that's between me and her:  
my true wife in the Lord,  
her ripening belly my altar.

But DeLacey's snouted us out;  
I'll have to pay and pay,  
to keep his tattling rag  
from burning off the press  
like the dirty hand of Satan  
had set the type  
and smeared the ink.  
But I'll repay him,  
no forgiveness for a bearer  
of false witness.

Just as there's none  
for Lavinia, barren as Egypt.



# Reverend Burden Comes to a Fateful Decision

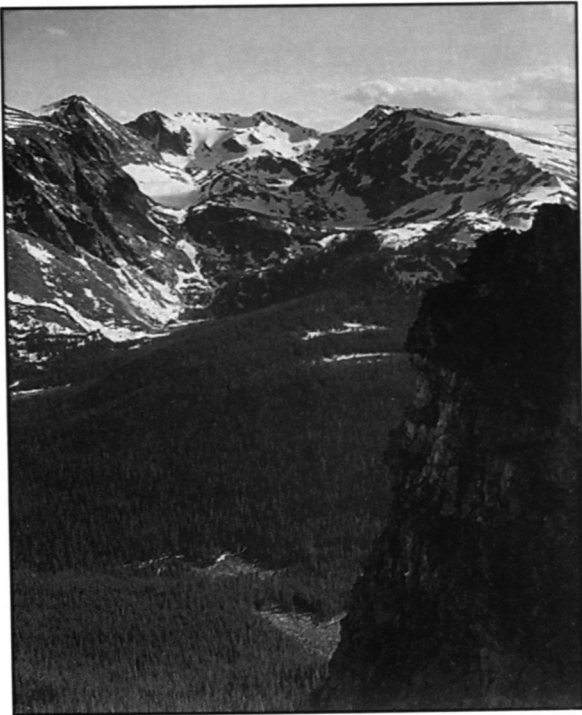
by Robert Cooperman

I've asked the Lord  
if it's necessary;  
He's answered.  
Still, it's dreadful  
to think my wife must pay,  
but a man of the Book  
can't have the skunk whiff  
of divorce clinging to him.

There's nothing for it  
but to pay John Sprockett,  
famous for the deaths  
trailing him like cannon smoke.  
He'll know how to do it clean,  
fast, and merciful,  
not like that soiled dove  
we jerked years back.  
She kicked and thrashed  
like she was in the grip  
of heathen lust.

Though it's not my hands  
on Lavinia's throat,  
not me tossing her down  
the abandoned shaft  
where I pay DeLacey,  
to keep him quiet  
about me and Mary,

still I tremble.



*Photo by Ansel Adams  
courtesy of royaltyfreeart.com*



# Reverend Burden Speaks Privately with John Sprockett

by Robert Cooperman

I'm chief pillar  
of the newly erected church  
I had to bully from this town.  
If I seek a divorce,  
my flock'll be ravaged  
like demons possessing swine.

What's one more murder to you,  
wearing slaughtered souls as lightly  
as savages decorate their belts  
with Christian scalps?

My wife's no fit helpmate  
for a man of God:  
she fornicates with the Frenchman;  
I've nosed out his letters to her,  
destroyed them in a righteous frenzy.  
She flaunts her adultery  
like a biblical harlot.

When I confronted her,  
she laughed the scorn  
of Salome in my face,  
rolled her hips  
like Mistress Quickly:  
you and me both love the Bard.

So here's my proposal:  
a bag of purest dust, to toss  
that strumpet into this dead shaft,  
to avenge me like Othello.

**To be continued in future issues**

These poems are part of a collection entitled *The Widow's Burden*.

Purchase information may be obtained from Western Reflections Publishing Co., P.O. Box 1647, Montrose, CO 81402-1647.



## Contributors

**Richard N. Bentley's** work has appeared or is forthcoming in such publications as *Michigan Out of Doors*, *Cumberland Poetry Review*, *English Journal*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *Orange Willow Review*, *Paris Transcontinental*, *The Pikeville Review*, *Plainsongs*, *Southern Indiana Review*, *Pleiades* and *Westview*. He teaches creative writing at the University of Massachusetts.

**Earl Coleman**, after a lengthy career in publishing, turned to writing full-time about ten years ago and has been widely published since then and nominated for Pushcarts XXIII and XXVII for short stories. On his website, updated bimonthly, he has poetry (some from his new book *A Stubborn Pine in a Stiff Wind*) and essays and stories. Website address: <http://www.nearbycafe.com/stubbornpine/stubbornpine.html>

**Robert Cooperman's** third collection, *The Widow's Burden*, is from Western Reflections Publishing Co., P.O. Box 1647, Montrose, CO 81402-1647. His work has appeared in *The Centennial Review*, *Cimarron Review*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*. His first book, *In the Household of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, was published by the University Press of Florida.

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**James Jay Egan** grew up in Minnesota and Wisconsin, and received his education at the University of Minnesota and the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis. He now lives in Vietnam, where he teaches college composition and English as a foreign language. His work has been published in the e-journal *Scrivener's Pen* ([www.scrivenerspen.com](http://www.scrivenerspen.com)); the web version of *The Circle Magazine* ([www.circlemagazine.com/](http://www.circlemagazine.com/)) and the Gowanus Books webpage ([www.gowanusbooks.com](http://www.gowanusbooks.com)).

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*Review* and *River King*. Upcoming work will be in *Green's Magazine*, *Southwest American Review*, *Maelstrom* and others. She has four new books coming out soon: *Breaking Bread*, *Breaking Silence*; *Gold: Greatest Hits*; *I, People of the Llano*; and a children's novel, *I'm Not from Neptune*.

**Stuart Harrison** was born in Bradford, Yorkshire, England and has since traveled extensively around the world. After settling in Oklahoma, he attended the University of Oklahoma where he received his BA in Anthropology with a specialty in petroglyphs. As an active member of the Archaeological Survey of Oklahoma, he is involved in the NAGPRA program which involves returning sacred objects and remains to their tribe of origin. He is a self-taught photographer and has combined his interest in photography with his knowledge of petroglyphs. Many of his photographs have been published in magazines, scientific journals, and have won numerous Best of Show and People's Choice awards. His work is on permanent display in private collections and locations, including the Department of Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution. A portion of his proceeds are donated to the Native American College Fund and the American Red Cross. He may be contacted at McCloud, Oklahoma: (405) 964-4077.

**John Jenkinson** earned his PhD at the University of North Texas and his MFA at Wichita State University. Author of two chapbooks, he recently served as Milton Center Fellow in Poetry at Newman University. Winner of an AWP Intro/Journals Award, he has had poems appear in a wide variety of journals, including *The Georgia Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Passages North*, *Portland Review*, *Quarterly West*, and *Visions*. A collection, *The History of Sleep*, is forthcoming from Basilisk Press. Married to fiction writer Catherine Dryden, he currently teaches literature and creative writing at Butler College.

**Stephen Massimilla's** poems have appeared in *High Plains Literary Review*, *The American Literary Review*, *The Madison Review*, *Tampa Review*, *Salt Hill*, *Hawaii Review*, *Phoebe*, *Poem*, *Descant*, *Sanskrit*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *The New Orleans Review*, *The G.W. Review*, and many other journals and anthologies. He has received a fellowship, MFA and MA from Columbia University, and a first prize from the Academy of American Poets. He teaches writing at Barnard College. He is also a visual artist.

**Bruce McCandless III**, a freelance writer and editor living in Austin Texas, has published fiction, poetry, and essays in a variety of venues, including *The Asia Wall Street Journal*, *Louisiana Literature*, the *Texas Observer*, and the *Austin American-Statesman*. His poem, "The Death of a Liquor Board Agent" appeared in *Westview*.

**Walt McDonald** was an Air Force pilot, taught at the Air Force Academy and Texas Tech University, and served as Texas Poet Laureate for 2001. Some of his recent books are *All Occasions* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), *Blessings the*



*Body Gave*, and *The Flying Dutchman* (Ohio State, 1998, 1987), *Counting Survivors* (Pittsburgh, 1995), *Night Landings* (Harper & Row, 1989), and *After the Noise of Saigon* (Massachusetts, 1988). Four books received awards from the National Cowboy Hall of Fame. His poems have been in journals including *American Poetry Review*, *The American Scholar*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *First Things*, *JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association)*, *Landon Review of Books*, *New York Review of Books*, *Poetry*, *The Sewanee Review*, and *The Southern Review*.

**Mimi Seydel** teaches French to first-graders in an Atlanta public school. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in various literary journals such as *Portland Review*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *Alembic*, *DeKalb Literary Arts Journal*, *Lumina*, *MSS*, *Mangrove*, *Orange Willow Review*, *The Smith*, *Virginia Quarterly Review* and *Xavier Review*. Since returning from abroad in Paris and Amsterdam, she has been writing mostly fiction.

**Brad Shaw** and his wife, Kris, are the parents of two sons, Jacob (6) and Jordan (2). The Shaws own and operate a small convenience store and cafe near Eakly, Oklahoma. Shaw graduated from Southwestern Oklahoma State University and serves as an adjunct instructor of English at Redlands Community College in El Reno, Oklahoma.

**Virgil Suárez** was born in Havana, Cuba in 1962. At the age of twelve he arrived in the United States. He received an MFA from Louisiana State University in 1987. He is the author of two new poetry collections, *Palm Crows* (University of Arizona Press) and *Banyan* (LSU Press). This year *Guide to the Blue Tongue*, his sixth collection of poetry, will be published by the University of Illinois Press. He is the co-editor of the anthologies *American Diaspora: Poetry of Displacement* and *Like Thunder: Poetry of Violence in America*, both published by the University of Iowa Press. His work continues to be featured in international and national literary magazines and journals. He divides his time between Key Biscayne and Tallahassee, where he lives with his wife and daughters.

**Ryan G. Van Cleave** is a freelance photojournalist originally from Chicago, whose writing has appeared in recent issues of *Shenandoah*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Quarterly West*, and *American Literary Review*; new work is forthcoming in *TriQuarterly*, *The Journal*, and *Southern Humanities Review*.

His most recent books are *Say Hello* (Pecan Grove Press, 2000) and the anthology *American Diaspora: Poetry of Exile* (University of Iowa Press, 2001). Last fall he was the Anastasia C. Hoffman Fellow at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Institute for Creative Writing.

**Gerald R. Wheeler's** photography, fiction and poetry have appeared or is forthcoming in *North American Review*, *Whole Terrain*, *Comstock Review*, *RE:AL*, *Louisiana Review*, *Westview*, *Kaleidoscope*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Aethlon*, *Small Pond*, *Owen Wister Review*, *Lynx Eye*, *New Millennium Writings*, *Potomac Review*, *Panhandler*, *Pivot*, *Vincent Brothers Review*, *The Oregon Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Heartlands Today*, *Jama*, *Chiron Review*, *Descant*, *Sundog*, *Pudding* and elsewhere. He is the author of *Tracers* (Black Bear Publications). His poetry collection, *Tracks*, will be published by Timberline Press in 2002.

**Donald Mace Williams** is a writer and editor with a background in journalism and university teaching. He has a PhD in English from the University of Texas-Austin. His poems have been featured in *Western Humanities Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Orbis* (UK), and others will appear by *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Concho River Review*, and *Candelabrum* (UK).

**J. Greg Young** lives with his wife Beth and two children in Abilene, Texas. He is a pharmacist for a large hospital and is a 1988 graduate of SWOSU. His poems have appeared in a number of publications including *Owen Wister Review* and *Lilliput Review*. He has work forthcoming in *Windhover*.

**Fredrick Zydek** taught creative writing at UNO and later at the College of Saint Mary, before deciding to write fulltime. His work has appeared in *The Antioch Review*, *Cimmaron Review*, *The Hollins Critic*, *New England Review*, *Nimrod*, *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Yankee*, and others. Mr. Zydek has over 800 publishing credits, including personal essays, fiction, academic articles, plays, poems, and an occasional review. A collection of poetry, *Ending the Fast*, contained the quartet "Songs from the Quinault Valley," which was awarded the Sarah Foley O'Loughlen Award. His fourth collection of poetry, *The Conception Abbey Poems*, has just gone into a second expanded edition. Mr. Zydek is currently the editor of Lone Willow Press and the director of a reading series at the Unity Center for Oneness.

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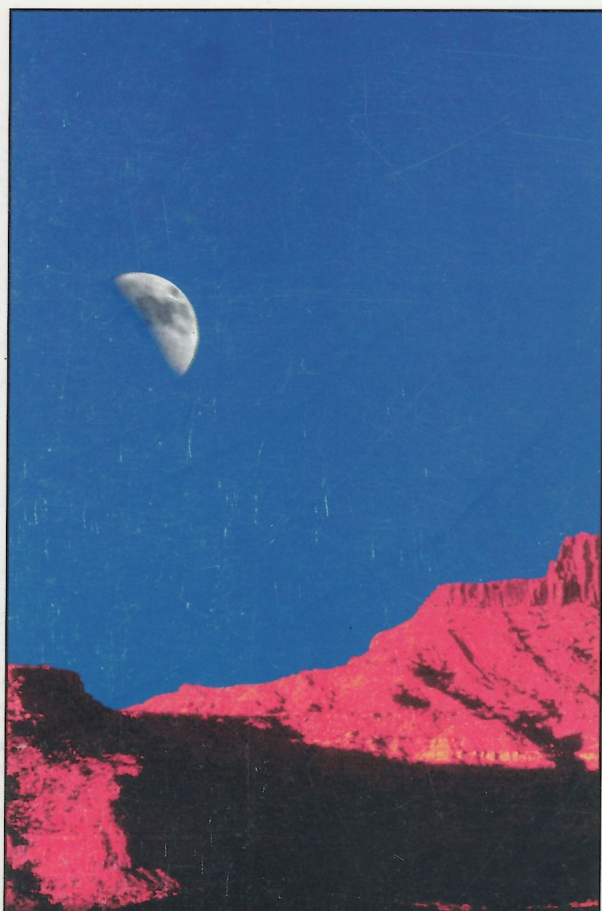
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