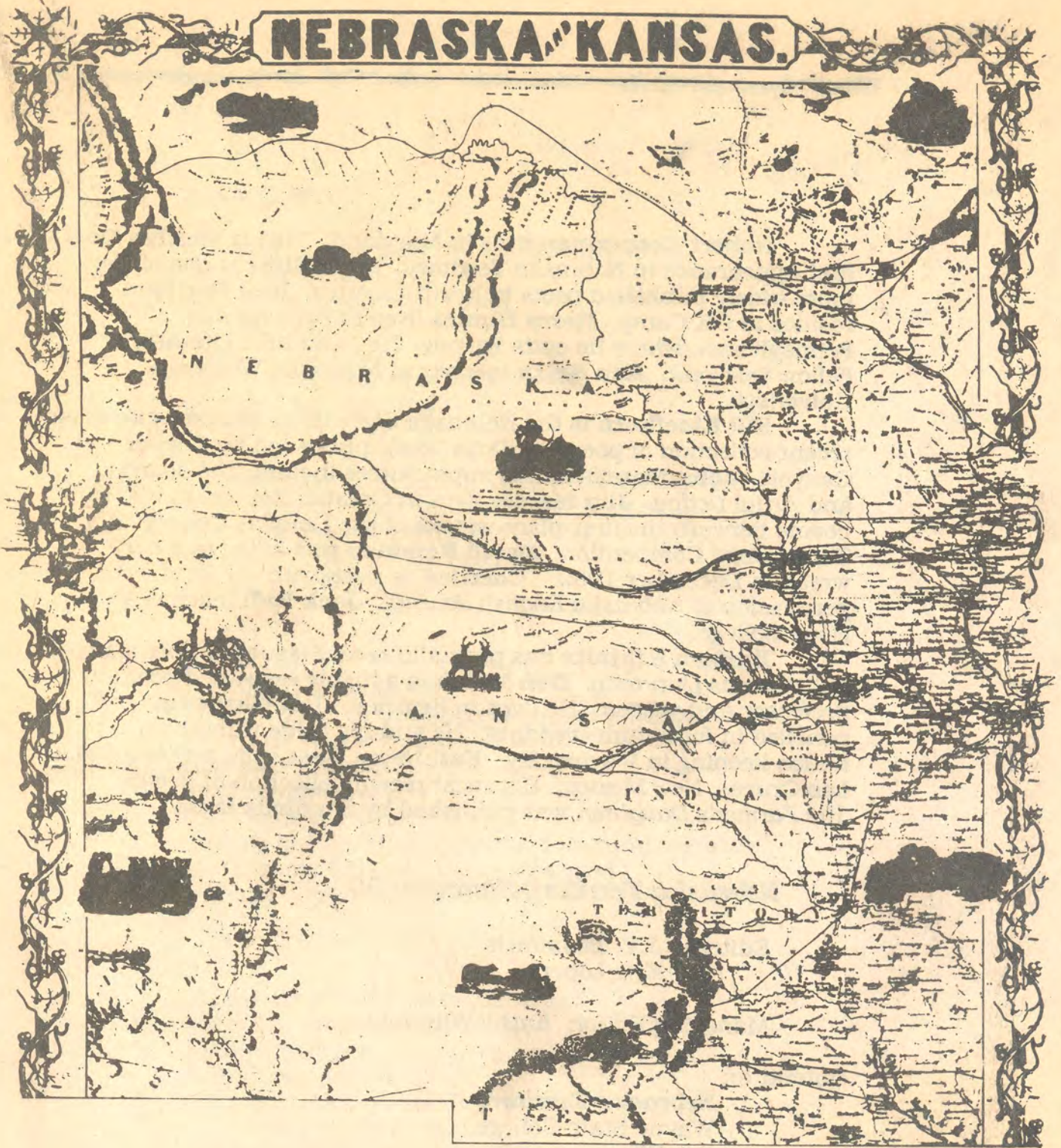



NEBRASKA AND KANSAS.



Nebraska Territory

Summer 1990



Robert Cooperman lives in Maryland. This is **Marilyn Dorf's** first appearance in Nebraska Territory. **Dave Etter** is one of the most widely published poets in North America. **Neil Harrison** resides at OK Camp. **Harry Humes** lives in Breinigsville, Pennsylvania, where he edits *Yarrow*. He is an NEA Literature Fellow this year. **Ken Keith** teaches at Nebraska Wesleyan University.

Bill Kloefkorn is the Nebraska State Poet. **David Lee's** most recent collection of poems is *Days Work*, published by Copper Canyon. **John Mann's** recent appearances include *The Journal* and *Artful Dodge*. **Jim Mercer** lives in Omaha. He writes his poems beneath the first-place winner of the Douglas County Cottonwood Competition. **David Remmen** was killed in a car wreck in December 1989. "Cherries" is used with the kind permission of *Nebraska English Journal*. **Jack Ridl** teaches at Hope College.

Barbara Schmitz has poems in recent issues of *Poetry Motel* and *Kansas Quarterly*. **Don Welch** is a highly respected poet, professor and person. He lives in Kearney. **Jeff Warner** is penciled in for a June wedding. He and his bride will set up house-keeping in Wayne City. **Kathleene West** lives and teaches in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Her most recent collection of poems, *The Farmer's Daughter*, was published by Sandhills Press.

Nebraska Territory Summer '90

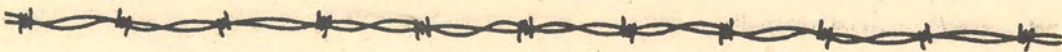
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William Kloefkorn

PLEASE SAVE


It's what I printed on the blackboard
before going to lunch,
printed as neatly as I could
as high as I could reach,
because what Miss Nelson
had written on that square of slate
deserved an immortality:
*What a little thing
To remember for years--
To Remember with tears!* They were the last lines
from a poem whose author I have long since
forgotten, lines from the first poem
I remember any of my teachers
talking much about.

*

I returned from lunch
to find Herschel Skaggs erasing the blackboard.
I surprise him with a head-on lunge
that pins his spine
hard against the tray
that holds the erasers.
Just as quickly then I release him, jumping back,
at the same time smacking him good
with my closed right fist.

*

I remember what it was the writer,
whose name I cannot remember,
could not forget:
*Four ducks on a pond,
A grass bank beyond.* But what
I likewise remember is this,
the sweep of Miss Nelson's arm
as she wrote in perfect cursive
those final lines,
and the sound of her voice





as she read each word, each line,
a sound with something more than
ducks and pond and grass inside it,
something from her own life
brought again to life by the words
of the poet whose name I have
long since forgotten,
though just now I remember the rest of the poem:
*A blue sky of spring,
White birds on the wing.*

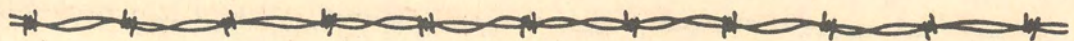
*

It does not bother me
that I must stay after school
because of Herschel's bloody nose.
It gives me the chance
to ask Miss Nelson
questions about the poem, questions
I no longer remember. And her voice
in response--call it for now
the early stirring of passions.

*

After Christmas vacation
I return nervous and elated
to my home room. Who to this day
knows exactly what happened?
In Miss Nelson's place
stands a thin tall woman
old enough, I think,
to be my grandmother. Each morning,
in an effort not to admit her,
I look out the window
until something enters the square--
a bluejay, maybe, or maybe on rare occasions
a piper cub--then I blink my eyes as if a shutter,
keeping the image clear and clean
on my bloodied brain
forever.





TURTLE ROCK

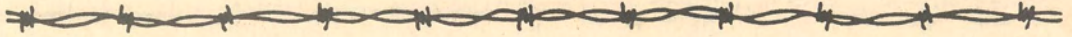
It's the rock I rode
on my grandfather's farm,
rock among rocks shaped like the turtle
that in my favorite illustrated story
challenged the cocky Br'er Rabbit and
by way of slow-motion ingenuity
won.

We bury grandfather in a rocky plot
due west of town.
The minister, obese with an oilslick of hair,
quotes more than I believe he understands.
The rigging that lowers grandfather
whines higher than the south wind. For luck
I toss a fistful of gumbo onto the coffin
where something more than ashes
to ashes, dust to dust,
had been.

With my brother I pry the rock
loose from the fingers
of a tenacious sod. We are
trespassing, Lord forgive us, the land
long since sold to a name
neither of us can remember. Inch by inch
the rock gives way, emerging,
until into a wagon we hoist it
to take it downhill to the pickup
to deliver it home.

Now the rock sits immobile
in a field of hotline salvia
between the east porch and the north edge
of a bunchgrass lawn. On my lap my grandson,
tired of his favorite story,
relaxes into the slow
dead weight of sleep, gravity
doing its unremitting best
to tuck us in.





SPIDERMAN

Water, Tub says, you run water
down the hole until
whatever it is that lives there
floats out and you nail it
with your Red Ryder BB gun.

I have the hose and the water,
thanks to grandmother
and her perfect garden,
but my BB gun
sits in the Sears catalog


lifeless as a wet dream.
What floats finally to the surface
is a spider large enough
to cause Tub Schmidt to swear.
He isn't so much afraid

as amazed,
Tub the huge and invincible,
Tub who reads to memorize
each issue of Spiderman,
and before you can say Jack Robinson

Tub has the spider
captive in a mason jar,
he is going to study it, he says,
until he becomes himself
the consummate means by which

to catch the fly,
Tub the truly unattractive
in a self-spun web the size of Texas
waiting for that first unvenomed face
to happen by.



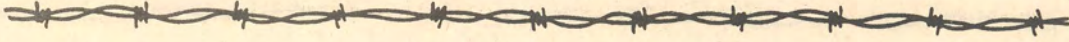


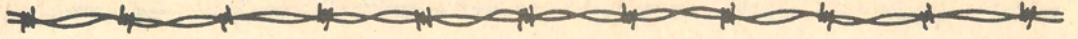
SUNDAY MATINEE

From where I'm sitting
I can ignore the bloody newsreel
by looking across and up
to see dust like distant nightcrawlers
alive in the beam from the projector,
until the feature begins, Diamond Horseshoe,
Betty Grable tapping her lovely legs off,
and call it by another name if you want,
but lust is the most honest word,
five minutes into the movie and already
I have this impossible hard-on,
my teacher in Sunday-school
only a few hours earlier
saying how the thought is equal to the deed:

I'm doomed. I ache so much
not even my popcorn can cover or reduce it,
Betty Grable's lipstick as hot I'd guess
as the flames I'm headed for, Jesus
I'd give anything just to touch her,
so you can imagine the wreck I am
when it's over and I step into sunlight
sharper than any strobe or flood,
God's incredible fireball
causing me to blink and to blink
until the main street, practically empty,
stops its shimmering and comes into focus,
the drugstore across the street
the only business open,
where I'll have a chocolate malt
and wait for the rest of the afternoon
to drop behind me,

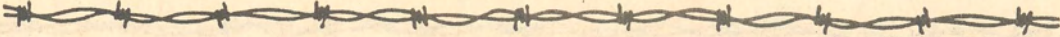
my girl then at the other end of the line
saying no, not tonight,
she is at odds with her mother
and this time she isn't going to back down
not even if it means an all-out-war,
and to be honest I don't really know what
in the name of Christ is going on,





my eyes closed to shut it out,
those distant nightcrawlers
squirming in a beam of light
until the newsreel ends
and Betty Grable fills the screen,
sparkling eyes, milk-white teeth,
legs that reach all the way to Paradise,
such perfect skin!

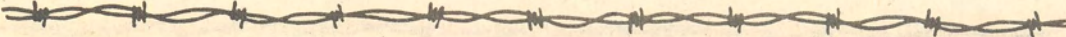




David A. Remmen

MARIONETTE

With invisible strings, her round
hips pull him from the bar
to the jukebox where her tight jeans
sway effortlessly to Young
Country. She slowly turns;
her million dollar smile
and twenty dollar body
shine like a new-mint
coin in the dingy saloon.
With child-like joy,
she draws him center stage
and silently pulls him close.
Expert hands command
him; together, they move
in perfect rhythm until
song's end. The bar
crowd claps, and she leaves
him, alone again,
at the bar. Through stony stare
and splintered heart, he eyes
her form in the antique mirror
as she walks to the man who will
share her bed next
and wishes he was a man.






CHERRIES

After we collapsed
under the cherry tree in the back yard,
a red fox trotted along the block wall
where we had just finished
playing King of the Mountain.
Somehow he knew we were too tired
to bother him, so he sat and watched the breeze,
sweet with the thick smell of rotten cherries,
breathe life into our spent lungs.
My sister gasped in innocent delight,
her cheeks, shiny round pieces
of fruit. Now, I imagine his eyes,
dark holes in his furred head,
were the openings to a world
where rotten cherries
and resting children
are the same fallen fruit.

THE WARDROBE

While I carried the wardrobe
hewn by your callused hand,
I could feel your heart
from The Other Side and it was good.
You didn't mind me tearing apart
your life as you had built it,
but instead you were happy.
Now, here in the dark,
I can feel your heart beating
buried deep beneath my shirts
in rhythm with mine. Grandfather,
you are now my Everywhere Spirit.





MOVING MOUNTAINS

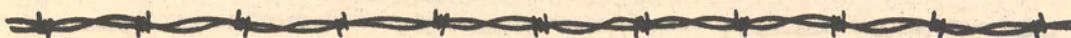
Moving mountains and moving dirt
with green John Deere and heavy disk
is all the same to Farmer Bart
who trims a ridge. It's no great task


to open wounds and kill the land
and watch the dirt like drifting sand
aloft on wind or when it rains
watch water carry bloody stains

to trickle down through cut ravine,
then flow on out to bloody stream.
His mountain moved, the dirt so fine,
the farmer, for the sake of time,

applies a fog a killer gas
which feeds the crops and burns the grass.
It leaks from tanks without a trace
until the farmer's twisted face

reveals the pain of mucoused lung
engulfed by fumes. A drop of blood
drips slowly from his mouth along
his narrow chin, a sign from God.





Harry Humes

I WAS THINKING ABOUT IT THIS MORNING


That old Cadillac up on blocks in the woods,
chrome fins shining, all the windows intact, clean.
I walked in there one day, mid-morning and hot,
pushed through wild grapes, opened the door and sat down.
Not a beer can or match, no crumpled napkin or towel.
Steering wheel cool.

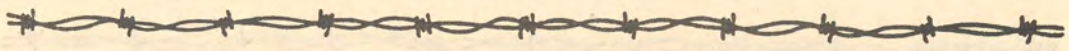
Not far away, a stone house in need of some work,
two runty ponies tethered in a field across the road.
The woman who owned the place was overweight.
She came out and said it was all right I sat there.
It was her husband's.
She looked after it while he was gone.
Half a dozen dogs barking, a cat rubbing her ankles.
This kitty here, she said, saved my little girl's life
when she was strangling.
This kitty sucked something from her nose.

You can sit there all you want, she said.
The small scar near her eye shone.
She held her right ear lobe between thumb and forefinger,
rolling it like a marble.

I was thinking about driving such a car
in the town I grew up in, down Second Street,
west a few blocks on Ogden, over the bridge
by the P.M. Church, to where Patty Jeffrey lived,
to walk out in her sleeveless T-shirt,
black hair shining, and then out of town
past the small airfield, along the black top
to the grove with its lights and dance pavillion,
walks by the water, bathing suits slipped off.

This August the Caddy vanished.
Some lines gouged where it had been hauled out.
And the front door of the house half open,
as if the woman, kitty on her shoulder,
were about to walk out, saying it was all right,
that I could stay as long as I wanted,
and the weeds growing and growing.





Jeffrey P. Warner

A PIECE OF COMMON GROUND

"Never could understand what would drive folks to make fools of themselves like that. A body should just mind their own business. They go hootin' and hollerin' and carrying on like that and then wonder why folks keep buttin' in. Foolishness." The old woman spat brown juice towards the brass spittoon, a brown line arcing and finally falling short onto the once snow white shag that covered the sitting room floor.

"Gramm, I could move it a little closer if you want," I volunteered.

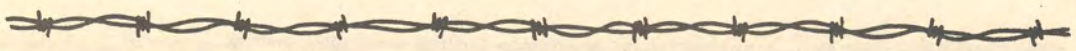
"You could poke it up your bony ass if you want. Leave it be right where it is -- I ain't too old to spit, you know. I missed on purpose, you knothead. Been missin' that spittoon on purpose ever since Leonard, God rest his pitiful soul, put that damn shag in **my** sittin' room.

I could see her working the plug over while she glared at me, gathering her venom for another attack. Her tongue bobbed in and out of her mouth like some gopher in a puppet show. She had her stroke about a month after we buried Grandpa Lenny, and took up chewing plug two weeks after that. I suppose she figured chewing would give her tongue a reason to move around so much. Anyway, Grandpa died putting that carpet in himself and Gramm hated the carpet for killing him. She let loose with another load of juice which fell short with the first.

"Ya see, Bill. Right on the money. Now don't you give me no sass. Your father sassed me like that just once. I cuffed him upside his cheek so hard he bawled for two hours. Don't think you're too old for the same, ya hear?"

"Yes, Ma'am." I lowered my eyes out of respect. That's one thing my pop taught me -- when Gramm gets serious, you'd just better lower your eyes. Or else.

"That's better. At least your father taught you something." She nodded her head one firm nod, her matriarchy still intact. Pop said Grandpa was always a pretty quiet guy and just let Gramm do her thing. Grandpa Len worked outside a lot, and when Gramm got cranky he'd take a load of hogs to market. I wish I'd have known Grandpa better. I bet he was a swell guy. I guess that's why I came to stay with Gramm for a



while, so I could get to know her before...

"Go fetch your grandmother some coffee, will ya, Bill? Just one spoon of sugar in it, now -- I don't want no syrup."

"Sure Gramm. Just one spoon. Comin' up." I picked up her cup and headed for the kitchen. I glanced back over my shoulder to see Gramm rocking slowly in her chair. I could tell she was getting ready for another shot at the spittoon. I stopped and watched for a second. As her chair rocked forward, Gramm leaned out to spit, using the momentum to get better distance. The brown arc leapt off her tongue, caught the lip of the spittoon, and slid down inside. She smiled and leaned back in her chair muttering "move it closer."

I turned back towards the kitchen to get the coffee. The percolator burped and filled the glass bead with some of the blackest coffee I had ever seen, then swallowed it back into the pot and burped again. I asked Pop once why Gramm was always so mean. He said it was from drinking so much bitter coffee. I smiled to myself and found the sugar bowl, careful to use just one spoon.

I walked cautiously back into the sitting room, trying not to slop coffee onto the shag or to scald myself in the process.

"Here ya go, Gramm." She took the cup and then looked up at me with a suspicious smirk.

"Thank you, Bill. Just one spoon in here?" she asked.


"Yes Ma'am." She took a sip and placed the cup on the endtable beside her.

"Your father used to get me coffee like that, but he'd damn near dump the whole bowl of sugar in it if you'd let him."

"He still does." We both laughed a little at finding this small bit of common ground.

"Tell me about Grandpa Lenny?" I suggested.

Her face tightened into a wrinkled scowl. Her tongue was trapped, trying to push its way to the surface. The chair stopped rocking on its backward swing and Gramm's fingers tightened around the arm rests. She glared at me intently with eyes like wet stone. I could see the words struggling with her tongue, trying to push their way into the sitting room with us. A trickle of brown juice escaped from her lips, rolled down a deep ravine on her chin, and gathered there hanging like a teardrop. She freed one hand and wiped her chin before spitting again onto the carpet. When the words



finally found her tongue, she was still reluctant to let them loose.

"I -- suppose -- a boy's got to know about his Grandpa."

"If --," I was getting nervous, "if you don't want to --"

"Doesn't your father talk about him?"

"Yeah, a little. He says Grandpa was always pretty quiet and always worked really hard. That's about all."

"Then what else do you want me to say? That pretty well sums it up. He worked and he was quiet. Work and be quiet. Work and eat and be quiet and sleep. That's Leonard."

"But what was he **like**?"


"That **is** what he was like. That's all. Did you feed the chickens yet?"

"No, but--"

"Go on out and feed the chickens, boy, and don't give me any of your sass. Go on, get out there."

Gramm turned away and started rocking again. I waited a second for her to look at me again. She just looked ahead, tongue working the plug furiously. I turned and went to feed the chickens.

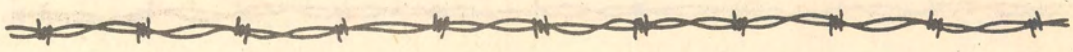





Dave Etter

CLIFF PECOTA: MUD, OIL, AND JELLO

"I've wrestled women in mud
and in oil, but tonight
at the Club Safari
it will be in jello,"
she said, and set down
my hotcakes, sausage, and eggs.
She was made for combat,
a husky, spirited girl
who liked to show off
her body to the boys.
I had recently worked
a job with her father,
putting in more toilets
at the country club.
"Where are you working now?"
she said, her elbows
on the counter, her eyes
watching me eat breakfast.
"The Ford agency,"
I said, "selling cars,
or trying to, anyway."
In the third grade we sat
next to each other
at Seventh Street School.
I still remember the day
we made some big cutout
Thanksgiving turkeys
out of thick brown paper
and the teacher, Miss Luby,
stuck them on the windows.
One afternoon I stopped by
her house after school.
Her stepmother gave us
store-bought cookies and milk
then shooed us out to play
on the backyard jungle gym.
In high school she was
terrific at softball
and set records in track

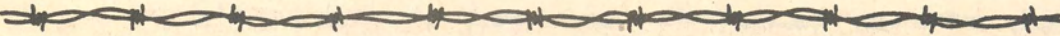





"Jello, huh? Jello?"
I said, mopping syrup
with the last scrap of hotcake.
"I think I'll drop by
at the Club Safari.
I've never seen you do it
in jello, not jello."
"Yeah, it was mud at first,
then oil for a few years,
but it's mostly jello now,"
she said, flexing a bicep.
"Well, I'll be damned, jello,"
I said. "What next, eh?"
She poured me more coffee.
"If it's jello they want,
I'll wrestle in jello,"
she said, and giggled.
I could tell she was getting
excited about her match.
She breathed heavily and her
breasts moved up and down.
"Mud was fun, but I think
I liked you best in oil,"
I said, and left with a wink,
a salute, and a smile.

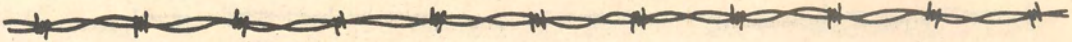
MONICA ROBERTS: PRIVATE DANCER

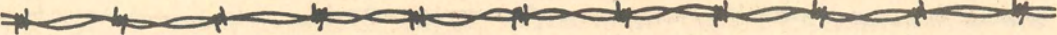
This old man said
through the loud rock
music and stale
cigarette smoke
that it was his
birthday and he
had spent two months
saving up for
just one private
dance with me and
I said I hoped
it would be worth
twenty dollars





to him and he
said he hoped so
too and I climbed
on his lap and
straddled him and
bounced up and down
and gave my thighs
a real workout
and wondered if
his thin legs could
take much more of
my muscled weight
and I stood up
on a chair and
wiggled and rubbed
my bare bottom
on his bald head
and told him this
might grow back some
hair and I could
feel his smile through
my butt cheeks and
I gently pushed
his face into
my bosom and
beat my titties
against his lips
back and forth and
I pulled his shirt
out of his pants
and raised it and
nibbled his right
nipple and then
I was all done
and he thanked me
and kissed me on
my sweaty neck
and later on
that evening I
let him have one
of my G-strings
because look here
I know these guys
and what they like
to hold on to.






Jack Ridl

AVOIDING THE FUSS


That's what it's come to, Custodian
thinks, and he's glad
for the quiet after the game, a stillness
that becomes a place
to walk in, all thought rising
and leaving like the way a bird
suddenly lifts away from anything
coming near, giving up even
what it's eating to flee.
But here, at least, he can stay,
feel the enormous emptiness
of the gym, almost hear
the cheers and disappointment
drift and disappear deep
into the night.
He begins picking up the debris:
pop cans, popcorn, paper cups, wrappers,
confetti, a wallet, three coats,
gloves, even a shoe, a hundred
programs, ninety cents in change.
Deep in his head, he can hear
the word janitor repeating itself.
Janitor. Janitor.
He smiles, drags the sack
of debris across court to the other side.





THE GYM


Ice hangs from the roof.
The windows are frosted.
Inside, the great furnace
huffs the heat up into
the bleachers. The cement
hallways shine. The glass
in the trophy case shines.
The trophies shine. In
the locker room, each scarred
locker stands solid against
the concrete walls, the benches
steady in front. A 4 x 6
box of foot powder sits
in the center of the room.
Against one wall is a blackboard,
chalk and an oily rag sitting
in its trough. Wire mesh
covers the lights; in the corner,
a water fountain. One door
opens outside, another to the hall.
In the gym, the floor glistens.
The blue paint in the key
glistens. The blue W in the center
circle glistens. And over it all
the scoreboard. And above the door,
the banner- "Home of the Comets."
Outside, the temperature
is four below.
Too cold to snow.






COACH: CHECKING THE SCORES

Mason won, and Tyler.
Carsonville got beat.
Newton, Falls City,
Benson Valley, Knox, and
Sextonburg all won.
Harristown lost. Denton
won. Phelps Academy lost.
Then there it sits--
Wilson--in the losers'
column. He's seen it there
too many times.
He begins to count.
His lips tighten,
as the losses grow
in his neck, rise up
the back of his head,
flood his brain.
He lies back,
lets the newspaper
settle on his stomach,
tries to hold a big win
in the center of his mind,
tries to find the feeling
when it all began.






Dear Coach,

Remember the time you left me in after I'd missed seven in a row, tossed a few out of bounds and let my man score twenty? Bad night. But you didn't pull me. You must have taken a lot of guff for that. I can still hear the boos myself. But then I thought they were all at me. Why'd you leave me in? I've thought about that lately, a lot. Did you really think I'd pull out of it? The other guys were furious, sitting there watching me screw up. And what happened after the game? What did you say? You must have had a second thought. Like I say, it hit me last week? I was for some reason thinking back, remembering certain games. At the time all I could think was "Don't take me out. I'll come around." After the game I wanted to run away. But I had a thousand excuses. I think I want to thank you. My family's fine, kids are growing up. We took a vacation this year. My mother's doing ok. Business is up and down. If you're ever in town, stop.

Best -





Ken Keith


MUSIC APPRECIATION, 1956

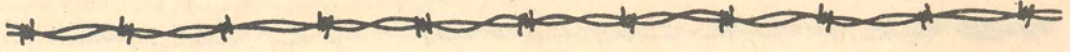
Picture a chariot
swinging me low enough
to dodge the paper airplane
Doyle shoots in my direction.

The sopranos carry us all home and beyond
to the majesty of purple mountains
until in unrestrained triumph
I bareknuckled and deadcenter upon his scalp
crown Bruce with brotherhood.

Moved to tears
Bruce truly sees
bombs bursting in air
as Doyle reloads and launches.

Miss Willa Mae snaps the picture
in a flash and freezes it forever
in the rearview mirror of her piano
teaching me a respect for music
that can be heard from sea to shining sea.





CHRISTMAS DISPLAY

Inching outbound on Leighton Street
I see a star rising in the east
a star bursting again and again
in an urgency electric against
a black December sky
and then lo the night is alive
with flashes incandescent
and admiring automobiles
dim their lights in awe and wonder.

Jesus Christ

is having a birthday
and electronic cartoon characters
ignite a tree in his honor
a tree standing in the flood of light
cast off by a silver carnival ferris
wheel spinning a version of this tale
that can be seen for miles
by pilgrims along the dusty road.


Jesus Christ

by all accounts a quiet man
and I wonder what he would
say to the floodlit soldiers
guarding the gate to his party
whether he would be frightened
by the traffic jam on Leighton Street
if he would sing along with the
synthetic music beaming
down from the housetop scaffolding.

Jesus Christ

who has surely been good this year
whose friends are throwing a party
to end all parties
the best one since last year
or until next






the best quarter at the box office
and the cash box
some kind of celebration
come kind of spectacle.

Jesus Christ.

TOUGH SLEDDING

It hurts
and Jimmy Boyle cries
every time it comes up,
how he starts down the hill
north of the school
on his Flexible Flyer,
aiming to shoot
through the gate
and into Locust Street,
around the bend to Keg Creek
without slowing down enough
to so much as
spit off the bridge
before he glides across Elm
and into right field
at the city park,
cries not so much because
the Flyer jumps the icy ruts
to splatter his nose
off the cold iron fence and
all the way across his face,
but because Mary Jo Burton,
God damn her, snickers
every time she sees it.






Robert Cooperman

**JOHN SPROCKETT REFLECTS ON CLIMBING
LONG'S PEAK WITH SOPHIE STARLING,
COLORADO TERRITORY, 1873**

She kept apologizing--
for being frightened dead weight.
I would have carried her to the moon for love.
But I couldn't tell an Englishwoman
how I felt, so I sang,
wind scoured our faces,
pebbles dribbled past.
I recited poems, used every word
from my rat-gnawed dictionary,
finally told her the sorry story
of my slap-leather life--
to make me hate her pity
for a murderer like me.

But I can't hate her,
though I can see nothing preferable
to dying with her
in snow falling like blossoms,
that strange heat of freezing
melting over us,
the side of my face not raked
by a bear turned to her,
my fingers fumbling to undo
the pins of her brown bun,
that weight of hair warming her neck
and my frost-bitten hands
lost in her shouldered cascades.
We'd be found in spring,
lovers in a poem.

At the quivering summit
my heart jumped, for she pecked
the good side of my face
in joy and gratitude
with lips cold as frozen lemons.
I burned, knowing she'd never repeat
that kiss at a less dizzy elevation.





**SOPHIA STARLING ATTENDS A DYING MAN,
COLORADO TERRITORY, 1874**


He filled the kitchen with his moaning;
his feet covered with heavy socks quivering
with each spasm that shook him
as a mastiff would a straw man.
His brother wandered the inn,
racked by chills, but able to walk,
if only until the older died.

Any appetite I had upon entering--
from a day of forcing my mare
through drifts past her withers
and streams freezing into my boots--
was swept away by his broken hurricanes.

The landlady kept soaking a rag,
but a dance was planned for the evening,
so I agreed to sit with him
while a fiddle scuttled down my spine
like insects no scratching can abate.

He died during the wildest reel
the fiddler's elbow could inspire.
One instant his body was drawn
into the air, the next tossed down,
those socks releasing the odor of his slow death.
His brother beat his head on the door frame,
crying, "Easier to die at home in Delaware."

I wanted to hold his hand in comfort,
but he collapsed on his brother's corpse.
I ran outdoors, gulped buckets of rasping air
until the landlady came to me,
saying the body had been removed,
my pallet beside the stove ready,
not another bed in the establishment.





Jim Mercer

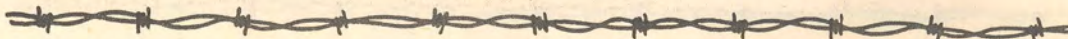
PACKING HOUSE BLUES

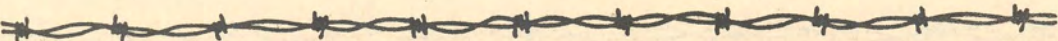
1. Cold Front

Ca chunk...jeezit's cold and what's that gismo and I wish this
guy'd speak louder I can't hear him over those blowers guy what
smells I better get another sweat shirt jeez is that guy ugly
or christ those are fuckin tongues everything is red gray
and white and did I bite an aluminum can I have to pick that
carcass up alone my back hurts already ha ha what'd he say about
that indian beer farts the whole place smells like beer farts
is that a woman jesus mary and joseph it's cold.

2. Swinging with the Chief

The Chief ran hooks for the luggin crew--
slipping nickled J's between ribs or
slit tendons on hind legs and pushin those
140 pound quarters down the rail
to where they're someone else's concern-all
in a motion like swimin. I got in line
as the foreman said and the Chief didn't even
look but some of the luggers laughed and
called me pussy but showed me how to
wrestle a front quarter up on my shoulder
without bustin my balls and after two hours
I was draggin ass big time, but I'd stopped
droppin 'em when we hit the last truck
where there was a quarter as large as a half--
the remains of some rancher's prized bull gone
dry, hangin, waitin, to end up at a Dairy Queen
eaten by some citizen ignorant of what he or
she was eatin--not ignorant to the flesh
and gristle and blood and bone but ignorant
of the brutish beauty and dust and grass and
years of bullin--and we couldn't believe
the tag weight and thought together it must've
been the live weight and not dressed weight and
the Chief pushed me ahead with his foot and Red
helped get the bull on my shoulder and I started
slidin on the blood-spit-tallow-metal truck floor






to the end of the truck where my ears rang and nose
itched and when I couldn't push him up to the hook,
the Chief eye-balled me and left-handed pulled
hook and rail and ceiling and office and secretaries
and salesmen and bosses and boners down
and slid the shiny steel between the bull's
ribs and pushed it all, all back up so effortlessly
that no one noticed but the Chief, the bull, and me.

3. Wounded

So, I'm shufflin to the can lighting
my Pall Mall when Larry calls me
into the infirmary where
this boner, Hank, is sitting
with a catcher's mitt of gauze
hard pressed to his giant gut
looking not like he's in pain,
but like he got caught
by the neighbor lady
stealing pop bottles from her garage.
Larry takes my cigarette,
tells me to have Ronda
call the hospital while
asking Hank if he knew how many
college boys it takes to change
a light bulb and Hank gargles a smile.
When I come back from the office, Hank
is smoking my cigarette
with his free hand, Larry
is fumbling with car keys and
navigating Hank toward the side door,
and he tells me to punch them out at
lunch if they aren't back. Hank grunts
when he nudges the door, leaving his mark
on the glass.
"Your old lady's gonna be disappointed
tonight," Larry winks at me.
"Won't be the first time," Hank gurgles and
they walk out
shoulder to shoulder, two
conspiring drunkards in the sunshine.

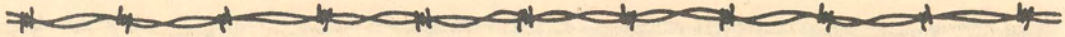




4. Sunday Afternoon

"So, what's the job like," but I am too
much with the sun's warmth which
is only now letting me feel my bones,
so I can't hear her. She repeats,
"What's it like, your job?" I can not
tell her that I still hear gnawing grinders or
dream about meat hooks pushed
through my ankles or men who play at
castration and throw kidneys
at each other while trundling hundreds of
pounds of stiff flesh about on their shoulders.
Do I say I watch women hunched over conveyor
belts boxing frozen patties with stiff hands
for ten hours a day and whose only
diversion is my cursing when the hot
lard I render spills and burns me through
my boots? Do I tell her how men stand shoulder
to shoulder, Atlases, knee deep in bones
and elbow deep in blood
with knives clasped in hands so gnarled they
must be soaked in hot water at night
so they can hold a fork to eat
the golden apples they've been hiding?
Do I say that when I close my eyes
to kiss her, I see spider webs
of red and white rib bones?
Touching her warm, soft shoulder
and looking across the orchard to
where the trees and sky collide,
I say, "It's okay."



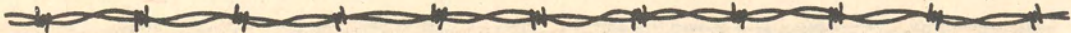


5. Ted

for Norm Ruegge

Ted straw-bossed the boning table,
hands working the same rhythm for
thirty-six cold years. "Ca Ca Cows
don't ch change," he'd chuckle. And quick.
Two front quarters for anyone's
one, and no scars on his Lucky
Strike yellowed fingers. His keen knife
singing, not machine-like, but more
sure, more beautiful, peeling back
dark red meat from glistening white
bone while Ted smiled and nodded
and hummed to the zing of his knife;
the clack of the meat hooks on steel rails,
the roar of arctic air from bellies
of compressors and the vicious
grunts of the big Hobarts grinding
time for lesser mortals.

Break at nine. Out in the day's light
for the first time, a line of red
aproned men drinking company
coffee from chipped cups, watching
clean shirted civilians pass while
Ted smoked sweet Luckies face towards the
sun rocking on heels, a dinosaur dreaming
of a silent boat, hands moving to a warmer rhythm.





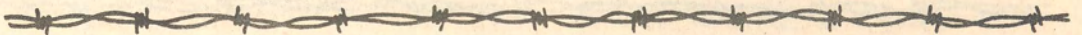
Neil Harrison


FIGHTING THE NIGHT

Lights from the fishing camp
come off the black water
where we troll weedbeds after dark
under a Minnesota volley of stars
stringing an occasional rock bass
red-eyed in the lantern light

Going out I'd swear
I could walk on the water
sliding under a boat
like a new-waxed floor, but
coming in I know
I'd slip through the surface
and go down

Gliding back and forth
trailing two-tailed twisters
half asleep and sinking
into silent dreams, knowing
we must go on like this
as long as fish are biting

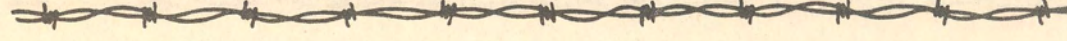





Marilyn Dorf

WHEN AN OWL DIES

When an owl dies
you see something thin
like a siren of smoke
curling slowly
and something hollow and wingless
reaching up
reaching
and the name of the owl
becomes your name
sliding through black fingers
of walnut and oak trees
and the voices of leaves are so loud
you cannot tell
whether the sky
or the river reclaims it.





Barbara Schmitz

FLOOD

What's happening to me? she sighs
trying on a polka-dotted dress
in K-Mart's tiny coffin of a dressing room

I look at her humped back
It's called aging I say
We all have to go there
You're showing us the way

She looks down
Her belly droops under her slip
You said it! she says
Just like that!


Does she think she can hold
back the raging water if
she nevers names it


never says the word flood?

She likes this dress. She just
wants to look a little more
She can't see the road signs
as she tries to guide me to Richman Gordman

My dad can't take her
Can't see to drive, only a hole
where the cancer doctor stole
half his blue-eyed treasure

People stare at him she says
Golden years! foam on her lip
Don't believe it!
You're lucky if you die young.





John Mann

ON THE BARE WHITE HOUSE OF A SUICIDE

Yolk from a cracked egg,
sun spills through dusk
toward bloody water dead-still.


On the house across the bay
each red ridge closes
like pulled Venetian blinds.


Was it noose knife bullet
a spue of blood
sudden as the sun

or pill to shut the breath
in empty rooms?
An artist, so they said.

These lines of light
like paint, our minds
your canvas stretching

to nothing-white
and silence--
the dark night breaks.





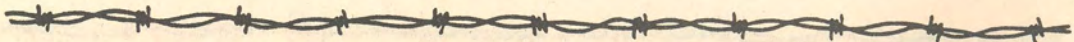
David Lee


PREACHER

In 1956 Baptists got a new preacher
Reverend Pastor Brother Strayhan
from the Southern Tennessee preacher school seminary
he had a Bible they give him
for graduating had about 40 ribbons
marking his page number
hanging out the back
ever color you could imagine
after he'd been there about a year
still tell them about how
they didn't appreciate him enough
because he was awarded them ribbons
for being outstanding in his field
one day Mizrez Bouchier
who was old enough to not care no more
sed after church she wished
he'd go back and stand
out in his field some more
she had enuf of him arredy

he'd preach swinging that thing
round like a Chinaman's kite
by the end the sermon
he'd took out the ribbons marking spots
all worked up to give the invitation
swung it so hard oncet
them ribbons chopped the top
off a incarnation in the pulpit flowerpot

he loved to preach on how
he got calt by the Lard to be his servant
when he's only 16 years old
met his lovely wife that same summer
my mama sez she figured he's right
all boys that age get calt
some of them even on the telephone
but she thought the Lord
got the wrong number that time
we all scrut up now and then






he had about 9 kids
sed it was the Lard's will
oldest one not even 12
his wife looked like a inner tube
without about 1/2 its air
you'd hear her in the grocery store
2 aisles over
her feet drug so
she's wore out not even 30
and known it was her
before you saw her
by the sound

even if he got his preacher pay
and a house and a car
and his electric and water
with all them kids he thought
it wasn't enough to get by on
ever 3d Sunday the sermon
was on the collection plate
and the bread on the water
he'd go round town
asking all the business for a preacher discount
wouldn't buy nothing in a store
if they didn't mark it down for him
when they didn't
he could make them sorry for it
he'd find some way to get it
into 1 of his sermons
whole churchhouse would go
somewhere's else after that
whether they believed it or not
his kids got in the pitchershow
1/2 price and free meals
at the school lunchroom
and the ball games without paying
because it was the Lard's will

so oncet he went to Lela's cafe
for supper with his whole family
stood there at the counter
before he'd set down
sed how much is your menstral discount






to eat there
customers listening 2 waiting to pay
sez I need at least 20 percent?
Lela sed whar? She wasn't even
a Babtist but a Presbyter
sez my family and I get discounts
because of I'm the Baptist Reverent
of up to 1/2 at most places
one of the people eating there
Clovis Robinson I think
sed yesmaam that's a fact

he's a Baptist deacon
had to back him up without no choice
wasn't nothing she could do
everybody watching to see
if they'd all walk out
Lela sed set down
I'll do my 20 percent 1 time
all them kids standing there
with their mouths hanging open
3 of them didn't even
have their britches zipped up
he order tunafish sandwiches
and a glass of water
for all them kids because it was cheapest
fried chicken for his wife
because that was most for the money
and told this waitress
to bring him a steak to eat
how do you want that cooked? she sed
Scriptural he sed
she sed what?
he sez well done
my good and faithful servant
leant back and grint
proud of hisself like he thought
she ought to brang him a dish of icecream
for free for thinking up that

Lela heard it
hollered through the winder
from the cash register to the cook





whole cafe listening
fix the preacher's kids hamburgers
make his wife shrimps and whitefish
put him a steak on
from off the bottom of the pile
I'll pay the different
cook sez how we want that steak?
she yelled scriptural
burn that sonofabitch to hell
he never did come back there
to eat again after that
and it never hurt Lela's business
not even 1 bit

Don Welch

SPARROW HAWK


Falco sparverius

It was in the sour gray light of the freeway's exhaust
that I saw it, the kestrel or sparrow hawk,
hanging in the air from habit,
the white feathers of its underwings
fiercely angelic, its yellow eye cocked to one side.

I was far from the plains and it had come.
I was sick with the metallic stench of cars
and it had dropped down, hunting
the grooves in the asphalt,
the rubber's dumb runs.

In their cars men and women were fleeing the city.
Deep in their lives faults had opened up,
and they were praying to a small hawk to take them,

to take them beyond the cement's ash pit
where money breeds with green flagellations
and with formal sexaul cries.





IN THE COUNTRY OF SEPTEMBER

In the country of September
doves gather on wires
like soft brown syllables,
with frost at the edge of their eyes.

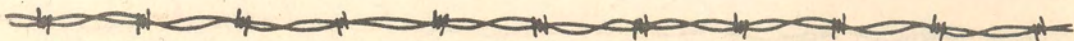
Farm wives,
already thinking of winter,
grow gray with loneliness,
and around the widower's house
what draws down the world
is the morning's old elm wood
and the blue metallic taste
of loss.

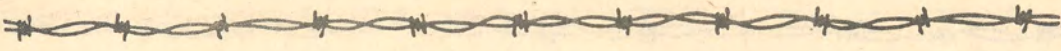
Still, there are women
who go after the mail under
enormous skies, wishing
for letters from their daughters.
They hear a thrush sing,
around them the air's
a seamless invisible skin,
the flag on the box is up.

And in the lofts of some barns
are the sweetest smells
anyone has ever known.
In the dark, horses sigh.
There is about them
the smell of cinnamon flesh;
over them expressions
of clover and timothy rain down.

And when buses, rumbling up
to the gaps in the cedars,
let the children on,
a giggling exhaust runs for miles and miles
through the land.

September:
gravel after rain;
or a bull ripening like a soft fist
on an ancient hill.





Kathleene West


INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

We can only compare what we have
to what we knew before.
We say the Camaguey plain is like Kansas
with palm trees, the tour bus an Oz on Wheels.
Your home is a Kansas I've driven through
picking up stories to enchant men like you.
But we are both in love
with Cuba, and cannot imagine our lives when we leave.

We say the smells at the sugar mill are familiar.
Like silage. Damp conveyor belts and heated pulleys.
Steaming Midwest grains.
We trail up the slick metal steps
to edge along the slippery catwalk
and stare down at the grinders and shredders,
the worn metal dim, cool
and perilously accessible.
Years ago, my brother nearly lost a finger
trying to free a knot of jammed hay in a baler.
You worked in a factory;
when three people passed out from the heat
the workers could go home.

But here is the warehouse with the rafter-high mound
of brown sugar.
It is Rock Candy Mountain, Sugar Loaf Heaven,
a Cane, Sucrose and Unrefined High!
We have been to Cuba; we have seen the sugar!
Under the watchful eye of an armed guard,
we dig our hands into the sticky crystals,
daring each other to fill our pockets--
three bucks' worth at the health foods back home,
maybe three days' worth on a food coupon here.

But we are dizzy with sweetness.
Our sweat makes syrup on our skin
and all that is lush and luscious in the air
clings to us in a dulcet aura of charm and unnatural grace. Oh, the
ancient speakers of Sanskrit,





grinding these precious grains into essence of *sukkar*,
attar of *succor*, extract of delight and healing.

The alchemists confecting
their pure and toothsome poison.

And those old imperial Adams at the factories
classifying their products:

male and female sugar they created them,

"very white and hard"

"sweeter, less hard and fine.

The sugar sings in our convivial veins
touching us with delirious gift of optimistic prophecy.

Let us be as sugar and salt to each other,

the place where need and pleasure meet.

Let there be more pleasure in our need!

Let all the Presidents of the World moisten the first fingers
with the executive tongues and dip them ceremoniously
into this summit of sugar.

Let them know the giddy well-being

the absolute love stored here

in this isolated mill surrounded by lime green plains,

surreal with cowboys herding cattle through the *plamettos*,

Radio Miami pumping heavy metal out of the bus radio

and twelve dazed *yanquis* inviting the armed guard

to visit them in Boston, Natchitoches,

Chicago. *Hasta luego*.

Hasta el proximo.

And in this moment, we believe what we say.





MEMENTO MORI


They were always dead,
two gray stones in Valley View
for us to visit every Decoration Day
and place the foil-wrapped Mason jar topped with peonies
between them.


Carl John Linnerson Wife, Olivia

If the peonies bloomed late
Grandpa and Grandma went without
and we traipsed the paths around them,
trading bits of cemetery lore
until our elders judged the time was right,
we'd lingered long enough.

You drive the hundred miles
to your husband's grave, a mass of peony and rose
on your passenger side, to fill the rigid vase
cast beside the granite.
I know the arrangement
at least as well as you.
You do what's right but try
to keep you widow's mite of independence.
It is the Friday before Memorial Day
and I promise Margaritas on your return.
It is the best rebellion we can muster.

"Now it's flowers for five!" Mother chirps.
Two more relatives I barely knew
and William Young, a circus roughneck
"Killed by Elephant Venice"
a hundred years ago this June,
his tiny legend kept alive
by a touch of Romance from our mother's side.
Our family leans toward longevity,
the last grandparent reaching 101
(although his daughter-in-law swears he lied).
You take pride in your husband's marker,
your nonconformist insistence on the precision
of month, day and year.
We dispute the importance of this
as Laura and Mary argued over sage or onion dressing




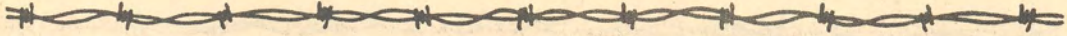


and nothing but turnips to eat.
I try for comic relief,
say I'd rather have a dozen plaques
announcing "_____ slept here,"
or display of memorabilia
like Wordsworth's socks and sandwich box in Windmere.

Our parents have purchased everything,
lot, plot and burial.
Dad shows me the place, "Right by the road. Kid--
so we can get out quick.
But right next to Long John Swanson, too.
Think we can get along that close?
We never could before."

I can imagine afterlife for some,
can picture Dad in his seventh heaven
with all the people in the world to talk to
but let invention fail me--
I haven't learned one blessed thing
except that death is worse in life
than literature. And be times I blamed
the books for letting me slip by so long,
refusing me the unwrit runes, the mute articulations,
whatever oxymorons I could never learn
to keep you from your grief.





**ON NOT GOING TO MY 25TH HIGH SCHOOL
CLASS REUNION**

OR

HOW I DIDN'T FILL OUT THE INFORMATION FORM

1. Name (Include Maiden Name Where Appropriate):

You want to make sure I belong, sure
you can locate me in the white padded yearbook,
the girl with healthy cheeks, a grin
like a stand-up comic's and hair ratted up
like Elvis Presley's with sideburns to match.
I kept the name long after I relinquished
all claims to maidenhood, and his name
I kept, too. I knew about Plains Indians
who strode off into the prairies, alone and fasting,
waiting for the vision to earn their names:
The One Who Turns Away. Cottonwood Sky. Brave Lightning.
No poetry in my vision, but this name,
this direction I follow.

2. Single or Married:


An easier choice than the ones my gynecologist gives,
where I classify myself as Single, Married, Divorced,
Separated or Widowed, not to mention the omitted categories
as Celibate, Seeing-Someone-But-Not-Sleeping-Together,
Seeing-Someone-And-Sleeping-Together, Living Together,
Living-Together-And-Looking-For-Somebody-Else, On the
Rebound, On the Make, On the Town, On the Lam. No
Doctor, I can't say I have a stable relationship; hand
over them pills.


3. Spouse's Name:

Not Applicable

4. Spouse's Occupation

Not Applicable





5. Number of Children:

N-Slash-A

6. Names and Ages of Children

N-Slash-A

Four blank answers out of Eight.

Score 50%.

There must be some way
to earn extra credit.

Rae-Ann has her horses, Alden
his research. Janice, her convent
and Sister Mary Concepcion.

I used to carry a photo of my '75 MG in my wallet,
said it made me understand about children,
how you invest in something demanding and dependent,
and for a while, stop thinking of death.

Once, my brother said, "There must be more to life,"
and Dad said, "I've got five good kids."


Now my brother has four good kids
and god, are the good. I attended their graduations,
their weddings and mail the volume of *Mother Goose*
to each first baby. I am a Great Aunt
10 times over. May that suffice.


7. Your Present Occupation:

Which of us has ever changed them?
Patsy, the popular one. Betty Jo, athletic and shrewd.
Carla Novacek who would marry Bobby Burachek,
Danny Lindholm, good-hearted, but slow,
Ramona Nord, good-hearted, but fast.
The nerd, the hunk, the hood, the do-gooder
and me, in a class of 29, the smart one
with a great sense of humor.

8. Comments on the Past 25 Years:

I always thought I'd be there in the High School Gym,
walking through the line to get the banquet meal
served by the Lions Club: chicken fried steak,





corn niblets, lime jello on a lettuce leaf and pale coffee
to drink during the address to the Alumni
by the Kearney State football coach;
and the honored classes standing on call:
my oldest sister and her husband, class of '49,
my mother, sole survivor of the class of '25
and the jokes from my father, and unrepentant 7th grade
drop-out. I imagined you all talking to me, even
and I imagined easily greeting one high school boy friend
without offending his wife.
Imagination fails me now,
but god willing, the nuclear bomb don't drop
and I don't gain weight,
maybe I'll dare to see you at our 50th.

