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AURORA

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DANCING GAILY ON SOFTENED PAW

Bloody hounds cry out in shame
Acquaintances, yet, they have no name
They're we crunch beneath our feet
Yet they shudder in cold and sweat in heat

Call them by code or whistle clear
They'll come in numbers from far and near
Dancing gaily on softened paw
Never a stumble never a fall

Darken another page with rhymes
Write of sickness and age old times
Speak cruel of those that sneer or cry
Reject and never ask yourself why

They're us we see that's why we frown
And even dogs sometime feel down
Offer a hand or kind word of praise
Squint to see past the frozen haze

Lowell Keith Combs

THE GIRL WITH THE STRAW HAT

The girl with the straw hat
Stumbles
Behind her mother on the hot street.
Clinging desperately
To her mother's swishing skirt
 For protection.
They duck into the five-and-dime store,
A haven--
 Against the scorching sun
 And the thickness of a Saturday
 afternoon crowd.

The girl hesitates slightly
Before the crystal cases
Of peppermint candy mountains.
Only to be dragged away
By her busy mother,
Before she could submit a broken plea.
They pass the endless chain
Of dolls.

 Small hands reach out
 To cradle one against her aching breast,
 But her mother scolds her,
 And slaps her hands away.

Once more,
They walk into the blinding sunlight
 Of the crowded street.
The mother holding tightly
To the girl with the straw hat
 The bare feet
 And the empty, searching hands.

Larry Bernard

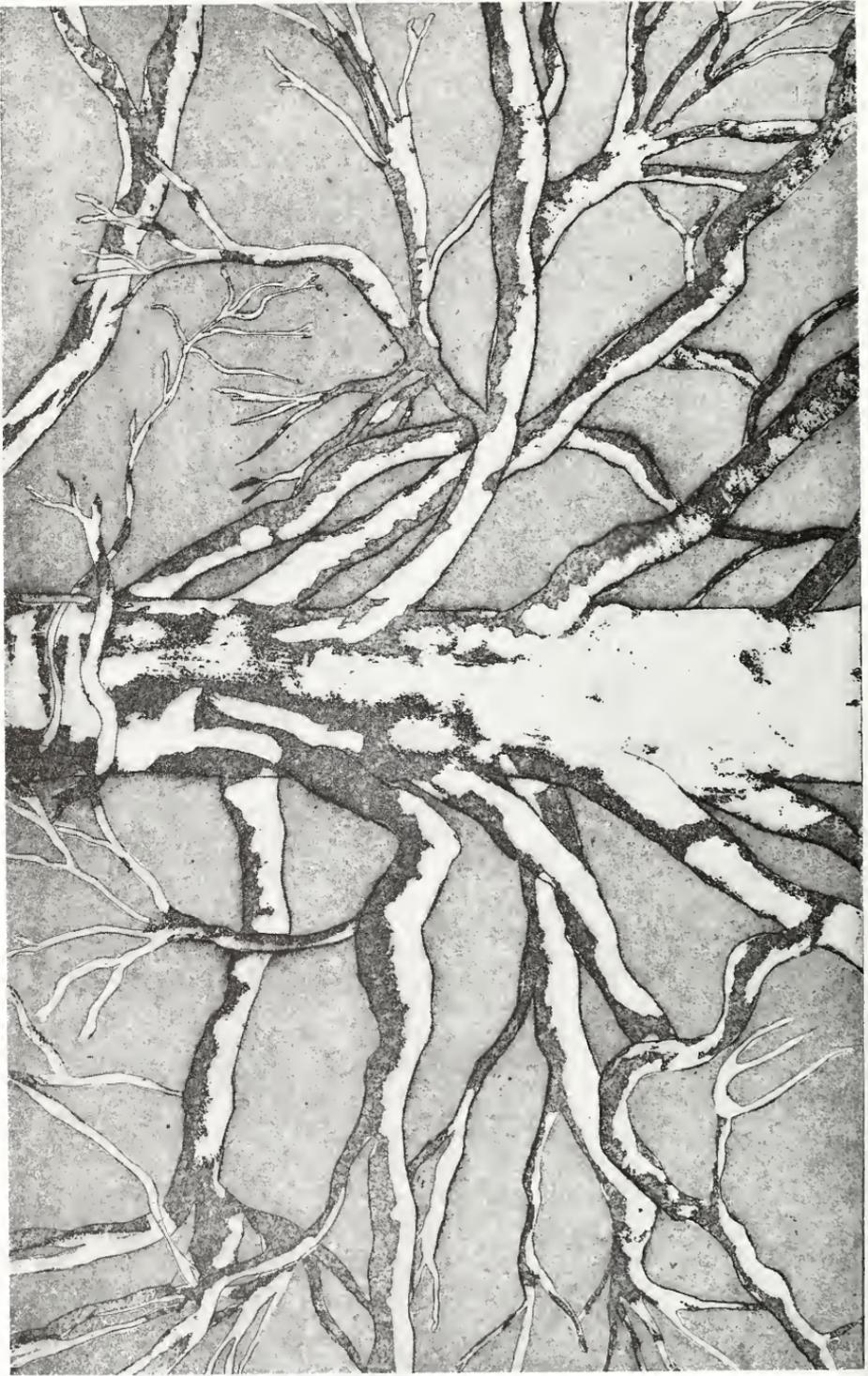
FINAL SUNSET

A sunset always weighs heavy
On my mind.

Somehow

It gives me the feeling
That my life is also sliding painfully
Down that amber sky--
And will soon be lying
In a smoldering heap
Behind the mountains.

Larry Bernard





Being in a state where age shows its inexperience
I often wonder what I am doing
I'm really confused
 sometimes
I'd like to cry.
It seems unfair to me
the pressure I must withstand
and still stand strong and straight
never deviating from the standards,
while I battle against life's hurricane forces
of injustice.
I'm really not complaining-
I'm just trying to understand why some people
get all the breaks in life,
and who other people
just get broken.

Sbeck

A childhood or so ago someone fenced in my forest.
I have not decided whether they fenced the
 forest in,
or fenced the world out,
but they did it.
I cried.
I felt the pain those cold metal stakes caused
 in the Earth's side
I felt the hurt the trees felt when I turned to
 leave
without caressing even one of their branches.
(I think I heard one small pine crying,
but I knew the wind would have to soothe its
 loneliness)
I never went back: it was time to grow up.
I can never go back.
But I'll never forget,
a childhood or so ago,
when someone fenced in my forest.

Sbeck

TWA CORBIES

Two crows sitting on a tree branch
One motheaten crow says to other stuffed crow.

Wanna come up to my place and screw?
Why wilbur, what a vulgar suggestion.

Well then.

Sewers looking pretty tonight.
Perfume is in the air.

Tourist slums are a selling sight.
The moon is bright and fair.

Prisoners banging on the bars tonight.
Don't see no bars nowhere.

In that case, my dear,
Wanna come up and see my etchings?
Why wilbur, I'd be delighted.

Rebecca Burden

MY SISTER

"Why!" my father said the other day,
"Your cousin looks very old."
My cousin looks very old.
With her teenage husband
Who floats around, his hair with him
On his 1950 Harley-Davidson
And his 1950 set of toys -
And his 1950 crud along.
Of course my cousin looks old.

And there is my sister
With her stretched tight gray skin
wrinkled somehow.
And her hair.
It's gone through the change
So many times.
And each time a little bit of
whatever it is that makes an 18-year-old look 18
kinda washes away.
There is my washed out sister.
who has a son as old as - - well too old.
She talks of children and doctors and gossip
and relatives and "woman things". ..
And writes to me - "Don't get married"
"Don't have children" - "Don't let any man
get hung up in your hair - and your body."
"Men are a syphilitic parasite. They get hold
of you
Eat your brain. They blind your eyes.
They rot away your fingers.
You become blind, mindless drudges.
Yes, drudges.
Where is the world?"
But always the men leave little
itching spots that -every time you scratch-
reveal those cloudy 18-year-old
dreams.
And it's a nasty itch.

And there are mothers
Who marry their teachers - or fathers
or idols.
or even sons.
They always have "my beautiful son."
and diligent houses.
And a stop at the drugstore includes
A Harlequin Romance
Because somewhere along with
Emancipation
the opiate H got slipped in.
And housewives who could be
Fiona or Laurie or Arabella
(names only cost 50¢ - and so does reality)
vacuum in The Outback
struggle with laundry in England & Sweden
& Switzerland & France - anywhere but in the
good old U. S. of A.

And you're always Chris Evert
or Betty Grable or Shirley Temple.
Dressed in tennis whites
Tropical Tan legs
and stardust freckles
Short bouncy living hair
To fit your short bouncy life
- and life is short -
the death rate among brides is outrageous.
Even the sex symbols are nice.
They're independent women
out of an Emilie Loring novel
with sex, of course, extra.

But even if you're in a Harlequin Dream
or scratching an itch
Or running to keep your body behind your age
Even if you have delusions of Chris - or Candice.
It doesn't mean I have to.

Rebecca Burden

Laundrymat

Have you ever noticed -like at Halloween-
People dig out their costumes to go to
Quick Helpy Selfy Laundrymat.
It doesn't matter that cutoffs--g-strings--
have no patches where
laws of decency specifically state.
And it doesn't matter that the night
before you spent two hours with Helen Rubenstein
Revlon, Maybelline, and Avon -
he can see you with your two-day-old nail polish
and clean soap smell - perfume left lying on
the dresser.
Or old young men tottering from maytag to maytag
(the brush they forgot to use on their hair
abracadabracally on their chins)
Ladies with nice cotton underwear, black button
hook spinster shoes
lavender halos lined placidly along the rusted
lawn chairs.
The laundress (with mop attachment #28351)
Of course belongs in this song
on her knees -sawed off broom handle invading
the privacy of the
washers- scuttling nickles pennies - all scumeaten
and college students - their apron umbilical
cords severed
meticulously measuring
the most popular Tide
gazing off in their escapist
pot daze
cause they just haven't learned to accept the
Sitting in the Laundrymat Watching the Apes Blues.

Rebecca Burden

Intimacy

A private joke that only we two share,
Our fingers entwined.
A mutual thought that is suddenly there,
A kiss in the mind.

A sentence I begin and then you end,
A song we sing.
Our dreams woven with the wind,
a soul thing.

You think a smile and look at me,
My lips curl, thus,
Why can't the whole world see
That we love us?

Devera Field Finley

The Beggar

Mon Professeur, please don't
scar
me with lies.
The baby as supple as hot pie,
sucking mercilessly at the mother's
awakening breast
may be dropped with
one simple
careless
cough.

Fear of Women

I told you
of how I am scared to death
of women;
not necessarily of you
but of womankind.
About how they can rob me
of all pride
by delivering jeweled "come-ons"
like a salmon
in shallow water.

Steve Patrick

Old Blood

Nymph-like gentlemen take hold
of my sleep:
especially
the older ones.
Calluses have disfigured my hands
making them no longer smooth.
And now my throat feels like
a swallowing of dry rice-crispies
sticking to the tube.
The blood is thick and
very hard to get out of the fingers.
But who needs old blood anyway?

Steve Patrick

To Akos: a Playwright

Ashamedly, I cast out my tears as a
taxi transports you to your
heavenly starship.

Hell, I don't know why
I'm crying, your eyes twitch with a green film
you piss all over yourself and
half the time I can't understand a
word you're saying with that
Hungarian accent of yours.

Screaming, I awake from moon-bathed nightmares
thinking of you on the other side
of the country
those no-faced bastards with
their cracked grins
laughing, tormenting you.
You may come to me and
tell of your potential
Broadway plays.

I choose my friends from
those who treat you with kindness.

Steve Patrick

EVAPORATION

The faucet of life drips tears and abandons
One more clogged drain.

In keeping with tradition a plumber is hard
to find

And only does the job half right when he finally
comes-

The water evaporates and so does the life-

Leaving vacant a place where liquid joy once
poured

Through silver fixtures.

There is no love left-

Only one lonely soul to ponder its origin-

And regret its depart.

Laura Moser

The Zoo

Society is but a whip, and we
are all restless animals
awaiting a chance
to escape.

One may follow the whip and
discover safety, or disobey
it and discover life
through the
scars of

experience.

Deborah Gay

Cigarette Butts

Sororities, fraternities, one-
way cliques,
Dead-end streets, popsickle sticks,
You with your passion, me
with my dreams
And nothing that lasts forever.

A new face, an old line,
Another diversion to pass
the time,
Realizing the game, but
still playing along,
And wondering how it will
end - and when.

Deborah Gay





James Bryant

Friend Torgsten:

Friend Heplin advised me recently I had best attend to my contract, lest I set myself up for the regal shaft. "Contract?" pensed I; "But whatever do you mean?" I sifted immediately to Bureaucratic HQ that I might plumb this matter as obliquely as circumstance might allow. I was directed to Desk 20, where was stationed a nicely processed girl with a staid administrative demeanor and mealy complexion. I was a mass of jitters and stood facing her dumbly for some moments before she sensed my presence. When she asked, "Yes, may I help you?" only one word rolled off my furry tongue, and it trippingly: "Contract."

"Sit right down," she said clerically; "No, in the chair." She warmed up to me just a bit once she perceived that she wielded the upper hand. "Okay," she said, gathering some forms together, "I'm gonna need your name, sobriquets and so forth; also your birthright, your blood count--"

"Wait a minute," I blurted; "Excuse me, but I don't know my blood count."

"You really are the neophyte," she chuckled, and drew a syringe from the lower left-hand drawer of her Burgoyne desk. Skirting the edge of the desk with a chic movement of the hip, she came toward me requesting that I roll up one

of my shirtsleeves. She rubbed my upper arm with an anaesthetic and plunged the needle in. She extracted 10 cc's, then rang for a nurse from the bio-med lab and handed the blood sample to her. "This may take a little longer than normal," she said, sitting back down. "You're supposed to come knowing things like your blood count."

"Must have slipped my mind," I fumbled fuzzily, still wondering what the nature of this contract might be. Another peculiar thing happened: when I told her my birthdate, she sort of stared at me momentarily, as if I were either unusually young or unusually old to be taking out such a contract as this. Friend, you know how punctilious I am, so you can imagine my reaction when she commented with a sigh: "I'll never understand why some people insist upon waiting until the very last minute." "Very last minute" was, of course, hyperbolic, merely an accustomed expression of speech, but I gathered from her talk that this taking out of the contract should have been done long before my twenty-first anniversary with life which, as you know, is next month.

We worked, she and I, through the rest of the questions until again I was stumped--only this time it was impossible for a simple lab test or any other type of test to provide an answer. "Spouse's name?" she said. "Uh, I am not married," I answered. "Well, then what is your fiancée's name?" she pursued. "I'm not engaged either," I said, and the poor girl's jaw dropped near to the floor (of course, I too am exaggerating for effect). It was then that I was forced to reveal my ignorance concerning the entire situation. "Well what do you propose I put on this dotted line?" she asked dismayed. "Couldn't you leave

it blank for the time being?" I offered. "It is not normal procedure for a single party with no apparent prospects to take out a conjugal contract," the girl flatly announced. Friend, did you know of this? Ah, but of course, you've been married since age eighteen! The girl was as stupefied to learn that I hadn't known I was filling out a marital contract as I was to learn that I was!

She tapped the eraser end of her pencil to her lips and heaved a pensive "Hm," while I sat there fidgeting monstrously. A conjugal contract? Why had I never heard of this? "Well, you've got to file," the girl said; "You've got no choice in that." I inquired what would happen if I should fail to file. "Simple," she explained with some amusement; "You'll be issued a new birth-date, something more recent, and you'll be sent back to middle school and be expected to work your way through it all again. Try to get a wife this time, won't you?"

"But I can't go back; I won't! My grades were always exemplary," I plained, immeasurably rattled at the prospect.

"Then you should experience no problems in that respect," she said coolly. "But if you should emerge sans mariée c'est fois, vous devez retourner encore--you'll have to go back yet again."

"But this is ridiculous--back through high school, back through college? No, I can't possibly do that."

"We call them middle and upper division guidance institutions, Mr. Lummochs."

"I don't give a good one what you call them, Miss Mills." (She had one of those plastic, mock woodgrain nameplates with her name routered out in neat, white letters sitting on her desk.) "I simply cannot do it, and I certainly won't do it. I will not walk back ten years into my life just to scrounge up a wife. Why, those kids'll be half my age, none of their parents would even let them go out with a man of my years.

"I told you, we fix that--your birthday will be moved up."

"Heck with that, Miss, we're just gonna have to think of another way out, 'cause I'm sure as my heels not going back."

Then, Torgsten, we sat stock still for several minutes. I was dreaming of Southern Arizonan landscapes--of Sajuaro cacti, shelf rocks, burrowing owls, and ring-tailed cats--when suddenly Reenie (Miss Marina Mills) struck the top of her desk with her left fist, and then at a furious rate continued filling out the half-completed forms with my name and birthright at the top. "Your religion, Mr. Lummochs?"

"Oh, put anything," I instructed. "No, put Ephemeralist."

"And now I'm gonna need your thumb print and finger prints," she said, slapping an ink pad down on her desk and flipping it open. She rolled my fingers one by one in the ink and then onto the paper--a neat little box was prescribed for each digit (but I'm sure you've been through all this, Friend Torgsten). She filled in a few more blanks, once asking my eye color, another time if I had any party affiliation, another time

if I had any unusual defects (I told her "No"-- I don't know, would you call them "unusual"?). Finally she asked for my signature. She had a look of piracy on her face, and her tongue curled delightedly over her upper lip as I signed. "Now all it needs is to be notarized," she said, getting up, gathering the forms into a stack, "so if you'll excuse me for just one moment." (Hyperbolizing, again.)

I reached out for her arm as she was turning away. "Hold it, hold it," I laughed; "Aren't you forgetting something--something along the lines of a betrothed?"

"Oh, are we?" she asked with feigned uncertainty. "Well, let's us sit down and see if everything is in order, Mr. Lummochs. Yes, we still have to get back the results from the lab test on that blood, don't we? And what was it you said--you didn't think we had the wife's name right? Um, la-da-da," she hummed, running her pencil down Page One, flipping it, then running her pencil down Page Two. She nodded her way through the entire form, breaking up at one point: "I like this," she chuckled; "Party Affiliation: Tends to avoid most social functions." She nodded on. "Ah, here it is. Name of Applicant's Spouse slash Intended Spouse: Mills, Marina; 19; pleasantly disposed; etc., etc. And you claim, Mr. Lummochs, that some mistake has been made?"

Torgsten, when I told mother and father that I was getting married, mother let out a few tears, and father said, "Have a drink, m'boy!" Mother asked, "You've been keeping a girl down at school and never even mentioned anything to us about her?" and father said, "Gee, that sure

is good news, son. You had your mother and me kinda worried; thought maybe we'd have to put you through another ten years of schooling just so's you could muster yourself a bride." Teddie asked, "Is she pretty? Oh, I know she must be, Alf, if you're gonna marry her." Mother gave me a kiss on the forehead and asked when they were all going to meet her. "Well don't keep us in suspense, son," father said; "Tell us her name."

I hope Teddie won't be disappointed in his older brother when he meets Reenie. Teddie always believed I'd marry a ravishing beauty, 'cause of all the nighttime talk we made as kids. I must admit, when I first saw Reenie, the thought of marrying her never came to mind, it was far afield. She's got an awful lot of beauty, though, really; she just hides it well to discourage all ilk of crass suitors. You may call ours a marriage of convenience, if you wish. Reenie and I do so ourselves, facetiously. You are invited, Torgsten. I've told Reenie lots of good stuff about you, and she's dying (hyperbole!) to meet you at the wedding.

I know, Friend Torgsten, that the circumstances of my wedding are far from typical. Forget all that talk we made at the institution about "the girl I will marry": quite frankly, Marina isn't that girl. But you know and I know that that girl doesn't exist; only in our heads, and we both recognize what untenable places those are. Bunkie, I beg you, be happy for me, my friend. Come to the wedding and see if we are in love (Reenie and me). The whole thing has sort of taken me from behind, I admit. Yet, somehow it feels right, and I must assume on that basis that it is right. Please come, and bring

Molly, too. I'd love more than anything in the world to see you two here. Well now, it has just occurred to me: I'll be needing a best man, and you're the best around, Torgie, so you'll have to come. Not only is your presence desired, but verily required. I will forward you the co-ordinates just as soon as same are set. Be seeing you soon, Torgsten.

Skying out,
Friend Lummochs,
(Alfred T.)





THE MESSENGER TRACE

I see.

I see the messenger come;
Follows the thundering stream,
Down the steep winding path,
Down to the rocks.

I hide,
Here behind leaves shiny green.
The jungle acts as my screen,
Beside the messenger trace
Covered in mud.

Why?

Tell me why should I be,
Here where few men would see;
Where time stands still.

Back.

Take me back to the sea;
There my love, family,
Huts of baked brick block.

I hear.

I hear what messengers say-
They made the people be slaves,
Huts of brick lie in waste,
Buried in sand.

I wait,

Here by the messenger trace.
Runners race down to the sea
From the army above.
Spear in my hand.

Spear in my hand,

Spear in my hand . . .

A. W. Schmidt

Bicycling, I Saw A Young Girl
On Tates Creek Pike

Her buttercup hair bounced
On a faded purple sweater
Stretched across breasts
Drooping like two swollen
Honey-pot spigots;
Buckets of oats swung
In hayfork calloused hands
As she walked from me toward
Her lover in the barn.

I pedaled on by her daddy's farm
Thinking of a spotted pony
Nuzzling her sugar lump.

Joe Wood

Old Couch on Dilahey Street

People-scented,
An unwrung sponge soaked
With soap-opera tears,
Stained by Saturday night
Date grapplings. Discarded, its
Users now in Berea, or Bardstown,
No farewells for an ass-hole buddy.
Faded green, sweat-mottled,
A curbside, cotton-covered wreck
Waiting for the trash truck.

Joe Wood

Echo Special

Today while I waited
For a train
Crossing the road,
An approaching red caboose said
That "All things pass,"
And I thought of you
Singing down the rails somewhere
Without me.

Joe Wood

Submitting Myself

An eclipsing poet who finally
Returned my poems
(slightly tattered)
Once said her file
of Atlantic Monthly "REJECTED"s
Meant more than
Any shelf of contributor copies
Or armsful of two dollar checks
Just pissed away on cheap wine.

As I grow older I
Understand, for the months
She held me (while considering)
Now mean more than
Armsful of cheap victories
I never remember.

Joe Wood

FEATHERBEDS NEVER WEAR OUT, IT SEEMS

Randy Bryant

Every piece of furniture had a name. The chair sitting in the corner, a possession of more than 20 years, she called "Spongey." She called her couch Old Springy because it sank deeply with her, then seemed to bounce her up like a jack-in-the-box when she moved to stand up, and her bed had recently been renamed Joseph.

Agnes was still trying to get used to the new name. Joseph did not seem right...yet. Originally she'd named it Mr. Cozy, but had changed it just two months ago, when Joseph died. Joseph was her husband. He was the only person, besides his wife, who knew the names of their household items, and the only one who knew that they even had a name. Agnes would never tell anyone else about it, and made Joseph promise not to. He didn't know why but he knew that it was important to her and she could not stand to be teased about it. So he never said anything to anyone.

There was a picture on the living room wall that hung directly above Old Springy. Joseph always referred to it when he wanted to be playful. It was their wedding picture. "You were a lot prettier when you were younger," he would tell her when she stood over him with a menacing scowl and a dough roller clutched tightly in one hand. She would stop, realizing what she must look like to him, then laugh at her own image of herself. When he really felt like attacking he would say something like, "You should take that wedding gown back out one of these days

and make yourself a brassiere out of it, if you think there's enough material there." He had come up with certain lines for certain situations and they worked pretty well for him. Later, Agnes would tell him that he could cheer up a dead man. Then they both felt good again.

For Agnes, the picture of their wedding held a much more serious meaning. She recalled those youthful days with both vigor and compassion. Her youth had been very happy, mostly because Joseph had always been around. She recalled the trips to the zoo where her young lover disobeyed all the DO NOT FEED THE ANIMALS signs and lifted her over the fences as if he would throw her in as food too. She remembered all the many months of anxiety wondering when...and if, he would finally bring her that tiny, little gift. "Joe and Aggie," she would say with a smile that could permeate all the years in between and reach out and touch a memory.

When he died, a part of her seemed to die with him. But she never cried. Her children thought that Agnes must have understood the ways of death and growing old, accepting willingly the inevitable and trusting life for its beauty. The children never noticed the new wrinkle that once again creased the old woman's brow, or the sunshine fading from her hazel eyes, or the chin which dropped a bit each day. They never knew that she had changed the name of her bed.

Agnes was growing old, and so were the relics from her past that adorned her small home. The tables boasted an unequalled collection of scratches and stood on wobbly legs, ready to collapse with self-pity if anyone disagreed.

Lampshades were torn with fingernail scratches, pencil gouges and knife scars, using up their last few moments of service with courage. Spongey was beginning to need a new name. His skin was getting thin and much of his padding had escaped, leaving only a semi-soft seat of cloth and wood. Old Springy wasn't quite as bouncy as he'd been before. His joints were getting progressively weaker and he would soon be losing a leg. "Just look at all of you," Agnes began telling them. "You're all nothing but a bunch of skin and bone. Every one of you." Only Joseph appeared as if he would last for a while. Featherbeds never wear out, it seems. But the old woman had no intention of giving up anything. "They can surely make it for as long as I can," she told herself. And she attended to them daily to make sure that they would.

"You're moving to town," her daughter, Anita commanded. "I'll find a place. Mark and Clark will help me pay for it. You'll be right in town where everything is handy."

"No, I guess not," Agnes would say. "This little place out here will last as long as I will. I'd rather just live out here, I guess." She'd said that now for years.

The children blamed her stubbornness. Their mother had always gotten her way, ever since they remembered. "If you boys don't chop that wood right now you'll do without any supper tonight." They didn't get their way then. And they wouldn't get their way now, either, if they wanted her to move to town. And they said they knew better than to try. "Fussin' at you is like fussin' at Uncle Sam," they said. "I guess

that if you want to insist upon living out here, you will but I'm hanged if I'll ever know why you do it."

"Just never you mind why I do it," she sassed. "Just you take it for granted that I'll live here until I die, and then I'll die here, too." Agnes could still assert herself. And her mind was made up.

"Mom," Anita said, "like it or not, you're getting to be an old woman. And if something should happen to you way out here, you'd never be able to get any help."

"Now that's my business," the old woman would say, thinking about Spongey and Old Springy and Joseph, but saying nothing about them to her children.

Agnes had three children. Anita, her daughter was the youngest. And the twins, Mark and Clark were two years older at thirty-nine. They came to see her often. Anita lived in town and was her most frequent guest. Mark came twice a week, and Clark came only on Wednesdays. The old woman felt like she was being pampered.

"Well, if you won't move to town, then we'll just have to come out here every day to make sure that you don't die or something." But this was nothing more than a game aimed at making the old woman feel guilty and Agnes saw through it quickly. She figured they'd realize it before too long.

She never told her children about Spongey or Old Springy or Mr. Snuggle, the fireplace. She was afraid they wouldn't be able to understand and would not be as thoughtful about it as Joseph had

been. And she felt like it was a very odd thing to do; and, especially at her age, she did not want to be thought of as odd. So Agnes could never tell her children why she refused to move. She couldn't divulge her secret because they would think she was wierd and have her committed to a mental hospital.

They'd tried to take her to a rest home once--and only once. Mark and Clark had made arrangements with Myrtle's Rest Home and had come to take their mother away. But Agnes stuck a knife to her neck and threatened suicide if they touched her. She just couldn't imagine herself stuck in front of an electric heater in an old folks' home with hard leather chairs and senile old people all around her, staring out the window, wishing she would hurry and die so she could be with Joseph again.

"We're worried about your health," Anita told her.

"Hang my health," she said, "and me, too, if I can't live with it."

Mark had been the one to suggest that she at least visit the doctor once in a while. "You're getting old, Mom," he told her, almost as if it were his fault and he were apologizing for it. "Look," he would say, "it's not as if you'll end up in the hospital. You'll just know that on certain days you should take it easy and just relax."

"I've never been to see the doctor in all my life," she said, "except when I had you children. And I never took one pill of medicine either. And I'll probably live longer than you

or 'Nita or Clark either one." And that was that.

A discussion with Mom usually left Mark and Anita with their hands in the air and an expression of "Where did we go wrong?" on their faces. Only once did Clark stop to visit his mother and almost get close to what was going on.

One Wednesday afternoon Clark almost admitted to himself that his mother was not senile and stubborn, that she did in fact have a sound mind, a strong will and a very good reason for doing whatever it was she did. One Wednesday afternoon Clark almost cried because of the guilt he almost felt, and he almost said "I love you, Mom." And for a moment, one Wednesday afternoon, Agnes almost gave away her secret. For a moment she almost told Clark all about Spongey and Old Springy and Joseph and all the other names of all the other things that she loved--but she didn't. But she'd wanted to. But she hadn't. And two days later she promised her dead husband that she never would. It was her secret--hers and Joseph's. That made it sacred, somehow.

Agnes talked to Joseph every day. And he answered--from her imagination. She talked to him and he said all the things he would have said to her had he been alive. He talked a lot about their younger years--before and shortly after they were married. When she talked to Spongey she was speaking to Joseph. When she gazed into the logs burning inside Mr. Snuggle, she was searching the eyes of her lover with a look that transcended time, reaching far back into the past, tying together all the things that had ever happened. And when she stretched out on Mr. Cozy, she was in his arms.

She changed the name of the bed back to Mr.

Cozy. Joseph just didn't sound right for a bed. Besides, without Joseph around, she couldn't make believe. And Joseph wasn't a bed. Joseph was a man. Mr. Cozy was a bed. Agnes fell down on Mr. Cozy and started to pout. Nothing sounded any good any more. Something just wasn't there.

Wednesday afternoon came and Clark stepped into the small living room. Old Springy had finally lost that leg and had crashed to the floor on one side. "I'm going to fix this before I leave," he said to himself.

Above the couch a white square emphasized the yellowing of the wall around it. He tried to remember what had been there, and finally he did. "Mom," he shouted. There was no answer. Clark bit his lip and walked slowly into the bedroom, fearing what he was sure had happened. Agnes lay cozily on the bed, a peaceful smile on her face. Slowly, with a faint smile, Clark tip-toed back into the living room to build a fire. Out of the stillness he had detected a weak, but distinct, nasal sound of snoring. Agnes sure was stubborn.

On her belly was the picture of a wedding. In the corner it had been signed, "Joe and Aggie."





Visions on a Starry Night

Stars in solitude spinning
are maelstroms of yellow light
dragging their cosmic flags
across resting rooftops

Hillsides rising in the night sea,
like whales, spout the earth they breath
over empty cobblestones
and shuttered shops

Cypress needles untiring in
their nightly vigil, writhe
above the stunted steeple
to embrace passing streaks of warmth

The night sky sweats
as the little town sleeps
forging embryos from heat
to relinquish the dawn's cooling dew

From the frenzied landscape
and lacerated spheres
the hopes, the dreams, the fears
struggle unseen and silent

Steven Cambron

"black cat"

the black cat limped in,
and licked a dirty paw
filled to the brim,
and covered in blood.

then with his yellow eyes,
he made the moon appear. . .
filled to the pale brim,
and smiling evil thoughts.

the stars went black
into a day of midnight,
and the world was filled
to a dirty cup brim. . .
of many dead people,
and one living black cat.

Bert. W. Ballinger

"winged bird"

In a hushed-up environment,
The two-winged metal bird flied
 high and into a silent star
That equals an endless
 and timeless light-year.

A face with dim cold eyes of stars
 sees and touches into the heart.
Man, where are you going so far?
 If only I could soar with you,
and visit into the outer starlit zone...
A zone that someone has touched.

Into a blank night without a sun,
A two-winged metal bird in white
 flies outward and into a star...
hoping for an episode of life.

Bert W. Ballinger

MAN TO MAN

Jacqueline R. Maki

Stephen's black eyes spat fire. "It's just that I don't want you reading my mail. Can't you understand that?"

"And for the last time, I have not BEEN reading your mail. Can't YOU understand THAT?" His mother's voice quavered, shrill.

"Well, then, how do you explain being here in my room when I come home? 'Dusting'! And Darlene's letter is right out here in plain sight? Opened up and half out of the envelope." Stephen swung his accusing finger from dresser to desk. "And I know it was inside the cover of my geometry book when I left for the station this morning." He glared at her. "Mom, how can you go and wreck a guy's privacy like that? How can ya?"

Stephen dropped onto the bed and ran his large hands through thick black hair. He swallowed hard, and his Adam's apple rode up and down his throat. "I mean, all this crap you've been feedin' me about honesty and respect must only apply to kids, huh? Mothers can do what they damn well please!"

"All right, Stephen don't get crude. You have no right to . . .," but Camille Andrews's automatic reaction came to a stop. Stephen's eyes were glued to the floor and his fists were white at the ends of stiff muscular arms. His knuckles dug hard into blue-jeaned knees.

Camille cautiously sat down beside her son on the brown-and-gold plaid spread. The soiled dustcloth twisted in her chapped hands.

"Now look, Stephen," she started quietly.

"I know you're upset, but will you please just listen to me? I did not read Darlene's letter. I only touched it. I picked it up to move it while I dusted your dresser." Camille turned to her son whose angry eyes were still riveted to the floor. "I did NOT read it. You know I would never do that, not unless you asked me to." She shifted the dustcloth to her left hand and put her right hand on his shoulder. "What you and Darlene say in your letters is your own business. Why are you so convinced I've invaded your privacy? Don't you trust your own mother?"

Stephen remained silent for a moment. Then he jerked away from her touch, stood up, and walked to the window, fists thrust deep into faded front pockets. "If you want the truth, no," he mumbled, half to himself.

"What, Stephen?" Camille was trying to be patient. "I couldn't understand you."

He spun around, almost violently. "That's right, Mom. You can never understand me, can you?! What I said was, 'NO'! I DON'T trust you."

Camille bit her lower lip.

"You're always asking where I'm going, where I've been, who I was with. You never once allow me the dignity of not having to tell you every single thing I do." Stephen lowered his voice, the tone mockingly calm. "You don't trust me," he climbed up the words; "and I don't trust you," he slid back down. "It's that simple."

Stephen was close to tears, but he tried to ignore it. His tanned face betrayed him with its flush. "And now that you've read everything there is to read about Darlene and me, will you leave me alone?" The words were Staccato. "PLEASE."

His final appeal roared against her eardrums. Camille slowly rose from the bed, straightening the gold shag rug with her toe.

"All right, Stephen, I'll leave you alone." She made herself answer quietly. "But I'm not finished. I won't let this drop until you believe me."

She walked towards the door but turned around to look once more at Stephen. His large, gas-station-grimy hands were shaking as he tucked the letter back into its envelope. "He's only sixteen," she thought. My own son, but sometimes I don't even know who he is. . . ."

Stephen looked up. "Is there something else you want to say?" Icicles hung from every word.

"No, Stephen, I'm afraid you wouldn't believe anything I'd tell you right now."

"And I'm afraid you're right, . . . Mother." He made the last word an epithet.

Camille stepped out into the hallway. She felt her ears burn as Stephen closed the door with a heavy kick behind her. A top corner of the Grand Funk poster came unstuck with the slam and drooped from its honored position on the maple door. Camille lost control of her lower lip and smeared the dustrag across her steamy cheeks. "Damn that letter," she fumed inside. "After all this, I almost wish I had read it."

Nine-year-old Christienne burst through the back door, blonde pigtails flying. "Saturdays are great, Mom. I love 'em! 'Specially when there's no homework buggin' ya." She snatched a banana from the fruit bowl and stripped it thoughtlessly. "Whaterwe havin' fer dinner, huh, Mom?"

Christienne had shortened her name to Chris, way back before her birthday two weeks ago. She figured a guy named Chris had a better chance of playing third base on the neighborhood team than a guy named Christienne. But her mother still

insisted on calling her Christienne. Thought it was more ladylike or something. That was okay -- for Mom to call her that -- as long as nobody else got the bright idea to do it, too.

"Christienne, it seems like you just finished your lunch. You can't be hungry already, can you?" Camille turned around from the sink, flicking a potato peeling from her thumbnail. Her face was blank.

"Yep. I can be hungry, and I am!" She wadded up the banana peel, gave it an artistic toss into the trash container, and wiped her sticky hands on her once-white cutoffs. "But I guess I can wait till you. . . I mean, till we . . . get dinner ready. Whaterwe havin', dijasay?"

"Oh, I thought we'd . . ."

"Whew! It's getting hot out there." Jeff Andrews threw the back door open and stepped in from the garage. "If that grass had been any taller, I'd have needed a machete to get through it." His husky frame fell into the nearest kitchen chair. "Do we have any beer, Hon? I'm spittin' feathers."

Camille answered disinterestedly. "Yes, I think there's one left from last weekend, way in the back of the refrigerator. Christienne, can you find it for him?"

"No. Uh, wait. . . ." Chris maneuvered a mysterious foil package, two jars of pickles, a sticky dish of grape preserves, and a plastic lemon out of the way. "Oh, yeah. Here it is, Dad."

She twisted off the easy-open cap, plunked the amber bottle on the Formica tabletop, and skillfully lobbed the bottlecap into the wastebasket.

"Thanks, Chris," said Jeff, flipping his

daughter's pigtail playfully. "Where you going now?"

Chris unwrapped the foil and pulled out a dry piece of week-old roast beef. "Oh, I think I'll go find Stephen," she said, bobbing her entire head up and down to chew the meat. "He promised he'd get me a patch kit for my bike tire while he was at the station today. He's home from work by now, isn't he, Mom?"

"Yes, he's home, all right." Camille's expression frosted with her words. She sighed and turned deliberately back to the sink.

"Well, jist call me when ya want me ta set the table er somethin', okay?" Chris and her roast beef raced three stairsteps at a time to the bedrooms.

Jeff pulled a long, cold mouthful from his Bud. He swallowed luxuriantly and then carefully placed the bottle back inside the wet ring it had drawn on the table surface.

"Camille, is something wrong?"

"No. What makes you think so?" Her back was still to the table, and her potato peeler was working much faster than before.

"Well, you sounded sort of . . . well . . . perturbed, when Chris asked about Stephen. Did something happen?"

"Oh, a little something, I guess. . . ." She emptied her hands and dried them on her apron. "When Stephen came home this afternoon, he and I . . .," she turned toward her husband, ". . . well, we had a little fight." She reached for her coffee mug and filled it from the green enameled pot on the back burner. "No, we didn't either. We had a BIG fight, and we screamed at at each other. . . ." Her voice shook, as it had with Stephen.

"Oh, Hon, . . ." Jeff pulled out a chair for his wife, and Camille sat down slowly.

"And I feel just terrible about it." She set her mug down noiselessly on the woven placemat and used her index finger to trace the daisy design on the mug's glazed surface.

"Now, Camille, it couldn't have been as bad as all that. What could you and Stephen possibly have to fight about? He's always been a good kid."

"Yes, he has, and he's still a good kid. But," Camille felt tears welling up, "he doesn't think I'm such a good mother."

"But why would he say a thing like that?!" Jeff's voice was puzzled and defensive.

"Because he thinks he can't trust me anymore. He thinks I've destroyed his privacy, . . . and . . ." By now she was crying. "And the worst part is, he doesn't believe anything I say -- his own mother."

Jeff covered her nervously tapping fingers with his own hand. "Oh, c'mon, Doll. Don't cry. It's not like Stephen to say things like that. I'm sure he doesn't mean it. What in the world brought all this on in the first place?"

Jeff took another swig of his beer which was warming too fast to suit him. He twirled the bottle with his right hand, his left still on Camille's.

"Oh, that letter is what started it."

"Letter? What letter's that?" Jeff stopped playing with the bottle, and he involuntarily squeezed Camille's hand.

"The one from Darlene."

"Oh." Jeff held onto the word for a second or two. Then he removed his hand from Camille's and shifted his weight, trying to drape his left elbow casually over the back of the chair. Clearing his throat, he spoke quietly, "What's wrong with a letter from Darlene?"

Camille looked at him. "That's just it. I

don't know what's wrong with it. But he accused me of reading it -- of 'invading his privacy.' "

The corners of Jeff's mouth turned up almost imperceptibly, and he leaned his face close to Camille's. "Well, now, did you read it?"

Her blue eyes snapped at him. "Of course, I didn't! How can you even ask such a question?!" She burned her tongue on the hot coffee and jerked the mug away from her face. Coffee dripped from her lip. "What's wrong with me? Everybody in this house thinks I'm a sneaky . . . peeping-Mom!"

"For Heaven's sake, Camille, I didn't mean that I thought . . . it's just a letter, . . ." Jeff reached for vocabulary. "I'm just trying to figure out what has you and Stephen so wound up at each other."

"It's not that hard to figure out, Jeff," she explained disgustedly. "Not hard at all. He thinks I read his letter from Darlene, and he hates me for it. I didn't read the letter, but he won't believe that." Camille twisted a sweaty, red curl in front of her earlobe. "And frankly, Jeff, he got so upset about the letter, I've spent the whole afternoon wondering what is in it."

"Simmer down, Hon. I'm sure it isn't anything to get excited about." Jeff moved his hand back to her wrist.

It isn't, huh? Then explain to me why our dear son, who never so much as looked cross-eyed at me before, suddenly accused me of 'feedin' him this honesty crap' and then of 'wreckin' his privacy.' " Camille tossed her head flippantly and then stared at her husband. "The boy's got troubles, Jeff-- maybe real troubles with Darlene-- and I'd just like to know what they are."

Jeff shook his head. "I'm sure you're making a mountain out of a molehill over this thing." His voice was calculated and smooth, over his accelerating pulse.

"Oh, I am? Well, how can you be so sure? You're no mind-reader!" Camille got up from the table and carried her empty coffee-mug back to the sink. Her face was drawn and pale.

Jeff's eyes followed her; he inhaled slowly, and his words began with the influx of air. "All right, Hon. Do you want me to talk to him? Find out what's on his mind?" He unconsciously gripped the damp bottle.

Camille picked at a snag on her terrycloth apron. "Well, it's a cinch he won't be talking to me for awhile . . . or showing me any of his personal mail."

"Okay, now, just relax." Jeff stood up, abandoning his now warm half-bottle of beer. "We'll have a man-to-man chat," he chuckled self-consciously. "Maybe that'll help."

"I wouldn't touch your crummy letter even if you MADE ME!!" Chris shrieked tearfully over her shoulder. "And I won't be coming back into your crummy room anymore, either -- EVER!!!"

"Good riddance, Christienne," Stephen crooned.

"And you can keep your crummy patch kit, too!" Her pitching arm flung the metal container hard, and it clanked into Grand Funk as the door swung shut.

"Hey, kids! What's going on here?" Jeff's voice boomed as he climbed the stairs.

"Stephen thinks he's soooooo smart, Daddy," Chris whined in the hallway. "He called me a 'lyin' little sneak'! I hate him!"

"Oh, you do not hate your brother, and you know it."

"I do so hate him," came the whimper.

Jeff held his daughter, both hands on her shoulders. "No, you don't. You don't mean what you said, and neither does Stephen."

He spanked her lightly on the smudged seat of her cutoffs. "Now go see if your mother needs any help in the kitchen, and I'll see what's up with Stephen." He exhaled heavily.

Dramatically, Chris sniffed once more and then galloped down the stairs.

Jeff knocked twice on his son's door.

"Stephen, may I come in?"

"Yeah, Dad. Door's not locked or anything."

Jeff walked into the room and looked at the dark-haired young man sitting at the desk.

"Stephen, what's going on around here?" Jeff asked quietly. "What's all this between you and your mother, and now Chris is having a fit, too?"

"Oh, Dad, it's like my room is a museum. Everybody thinks they can walk in here and just browse through anything they find." Stephen looked up quickly at his father. "Oh, I don't mean you, Dad. It's just . . . everybody else in this house." He finished the sentence hurriedly.

Jeff swallowed the knot in his throat and spoke with a dry tongue, "What do you mean? Has Chris been into your things?"

"Nah, not her." Stephen shrugged and smiled slightly. "She's just a nuttly little kid. I shouldn't have yelled at her just now, but I'm so mad I . . ." He dropped his eyes to the wooden pencil his fingers were tapping on the blotter pad. "I didn't mean to call her a little liar, Dad. She's not. Besides, she was probably outside all day. She didn't even know

there was a letter, let alone read it."

Walking to the window, Jeff looked out absentmindedly at his freshly cut lawn. "Well, now, do I understand that you've accused your mother of reading this letter?" And then he added quickly, "Whatever letter it is you're talking about."

"It's a letter from Darlene, Dad. This one." Stephen pulled the envelope out from underneath the blotter pad and held it up. Jeff's eyes never left the window. "And she did read it. When I walked in my room today, Mom was standing there by the dresser, and Darlene's letter was out -- half-opened up and everything. She probably threw it down in a hurry when she heard me comin' upstairs."

Jeff played with the keys in his workpants pocket. Still looking at the yard, he remarked, "Well, now, son, there wasn't anything in that letter you didn't want your mother to know about, was there? You know how mothers are . . . she's probably concerned about how serious you two may be getting, Darlene inviting you to her spring dance and all." He spoke quickly, and the words blurred. Turning to Stephen, he was surprised that his voice suddenly got louder. "Is it really so bad if your mother DID read the letter?"

"But, Dad! That's not the point!" Stephen's hands flew to his head. "She read my personal mail. And to make things worse, she lied and said she didn't!" The boy pushed back his desk chair and stood up. "If a guy can't trust his own mother, Dad," Stephen walked to the window and drew his father's eyes into his own, "who the hell can he trust?"

Jeff looked at his own reflection in his son's black eyes, stormy under heavy lashes. He put his arm around Stephen's neck and wrestled him closer. "Ah, Stephen . . . Stephen . . ."

His voice was nearly inaudible, but his pounding pulse filled both temples. "You can trust your mother, Stephen. You can trust . . ." Jeff's voice trailed off.

Stephen's reply was muffled against his father's T-shirt, "Yeah, sure, Dad. That's easy for you to say. It was my letter that she read."

Jeff released Stephen from the fatherly bearhug, and they looked at each other. Jeff's square jaw was set. "Nope, m'boy, that's where you're wrong. That was not easy for me to say."

Suddenly, then, Jeff backed away and headed for the door. "Uh, look, Stephen, . . ." he spoke mechanically, pausing in his steps. "I want to talk about this some more, but I . . . uh . . . forgot and left the hose running in the garden. Can you wait a minute while I go move it?"

"Okay, Dad. Sure." Stephen hesitated. "But I really don't see what's left to talk about. But . . . sure, Dad, whatever you want." His smile chilled Jeff's neck.

Pulling the bedroom door closed behind him, Jeff let his feet take him down the stairs. His memory was swimming through those scented pages of adolescent secrets, the private jokes, the promises. A curse rose in his throat, and he felt a coarse whisper rasping through his clenched teeth. "Nice going, Jeffrey. That boy in there can be real proud of his old man. Real proud. . ."

A few seconds later, Stephen opened the door and followed his father's path down the stairway. Camille was still working at the sink. She saw Stephen out of the corner of her eye and turned to look at him.

Stephen grinned at her slightly from one side of his mouth, but his eyebrows were low over the black coals of his eyes.

"Yes, Stephen?" Camille began shakily.
"Did you decide to apologize?"

"Not exactly, Mom" He was moving his head up and down in a slow, knowing rhythm. "I just wanted to tell you one more thing. I think it's awful nice of you -- awful nice -- I mean the way you not only read my letter but then you have the courtesy to share it with Dad -- especially that really cute part where Darlene invites me to her dance." Stephen leaned flirtaciously on the word "cute."

Immediately Camille opened her mouth to speak, but then she closed it again slowly, until her lips pressed tightly together. Her eyes pulled her unwilling head away from Stephen to the window over the sink. Dazedly, she watched Christienne pull a handful of young lettuce from the garden, rinse it in the gush from the hose, and then wipe it on her cutoffs. Camille allowed her eyes to slide cautiously along the garden edge, across the lawn, and finally, to Jeff. He sat hunched on the too-green grass, his elbows on his knees in front of him, head down, hands over his ears.

Camille watched her husband for a long moment, and then turned back to her son. Stephen was still there, staring at her. But the sneer was draining from the corner of his mouth, and the fire from his black eyes.





THE LESSON

You taught me
breaking the green striped
shell
to red center
warm sweet wet
wrists to elbows.
You taught me
cracking the charred mud shell
to white center
coarse sweet hot
tongues to stomachs.
In the dying garden
in Sunday's fall
you thought me child
you taught me
the fierce sweet center.
We became each other
eating the ripe fruits
but later I grew wild
refused to let your tongue
into my center's juice.

Jacqueline R. Maki

TO PARIS

City suck
in your anti-Yankee breath
and hide it in your greedy breast
behind red teats pulled sore
by mobs of death.

Still your Seine tongue
serpentine between
your naked streets
licking at the dung
beneath your feet.

Listen to me long
enough to learn his name
the only boy who's sleeping with
your fetid fecund heat
the one more man who will awake.

AU PARIS

You feed his eyes reflections
his own new dreams
dancing on the dayheat
surface of your Seine
for centuries.

You wrap his reaching bones
his hungry flesh
in hot yeast scents
le pain
the color of raw seed.

You dip your velvet finger
into tomorrow's wine
and write a promise on his tongue
his blood is young
you age it carefully.

Jacqueline R. Maki

THE HARVEST

Six apples
new and firm and green
sunned themselves among the dancing leaves
upon my tree.

One by one
he wrapped the six green apples
in his sweating palm
gently, slowly twisting
until he pulled them down.

He pressed each apple
to his stubbled cheek
bruised the cool, green skins
just tenderly
and one by one
rolled six apples toward his teeth.

MARIONETTE

I dance your subtle rhythms
bounce my hair beneath your nose
shrug my shoulder bones
and flap my elbows in your face
wag my hips across your stage
leap and droop
according to the cross
you hold over me.

But strings break
and rhythms, too.
You never see
the frantic beat
I dance in my dark room.

Jacqueline R. Maki

