

[Vol. 48]

5062

KODAK SAFETY FILM 5062

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TOWERS

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TOWERS

Towers XLVIII

Towers XLVIII

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Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, Illinois
Spring 1977

In Response to Sartre: *Huis Clos*

If Hell is other people, then
is Heaven being alone?
The walls that say no exit, friend
are no one's but your own.

Paul Seevers

Outings

She was polishing one of her Hummel figurines while he read his magazine. "The shepherdess was always my favorite: the pleats in the pale blue skirt, deepened to azure at the creases . . . so dainty! So sweet! I guess I like her about the best . . . except for the fishing boy. Do you remember when you gave me the boy? Long time ago—the day by the river . . . we stopped . . . tea at the little shop with the white curtains. At the china shop next door . . . that wee shop . . . Thomas?"

He did not look up. He had stopped turning the pages of the magazine and was staring at it intently. He heard her, of course, but it almost didn't matter; she could go on just as well without him.

"The puddles that day! There were too many to step around . . . we had to *leap* over . . . you'd take my arm . . ."

He stared intently at the same page.

"Thomas, *do* you remember?"

"Hmph?" He looked at her, but vaguely, his eyes foggy.

"*Do* you remember?" Her glasses had slipped: There was a red tear-shaped mark on either side of her nose.

He cleared his throat nervously. "So sorry, dear."

"That day . . . what are you reading?" With a start, he brought his eyes back up from the magazine.

Now he was hesitant, almost pained. "An . . . ad."

He thought she was about to let it drop right there, but she asked, "What sort of ad?"

Again, that hesitant little intake of breath, an embarrassed little smile—"China."

"There's an *ad* for *china*?"

"Twenty-two days. Stops at Singapore, Hong Kong, the mainland . . . airfare, accommodations, two meals a day . . . twenty-three hundred dollars," he read.

There was nothing for her to say, really, except . . . and he begged her with his eyes: *ask it, ask me if . . .*

"How interesting, dear," She turned back to her shepherdess and, disappointed, he turned back to his ad.

"Dolly?"

She glanced up. He was conscious of the pulse beating in his crepey throat, the tic near his right eye; sitting perfectly motionless, he seemed to himself all nervous movement. She swallowed, "Yes?"

"Twenty-three hundred dollars. We have that much in the bank yet, don't we?" His voice was level, reasonable in tone, but the tic deepened.

She clutched her polishing cloth tightly. "We were saving—for vacations . . . a few holidays . . . my sister in San Diego. Outings."

"Twenty-three hundred. China."

"No, dear," she replied nervously. "I don't think so."

"Big wagons of golden wheat . . . plum trees in bloom . . . the Yangtze, the Yellow River, the red-and-yellow market places . . ." Now he was past pleading—he was enticing her, goading her.

She sighed explosively. "It's just too much! We can't afford it. It wouldn't be twenty-three hundred, it would be forty-six."

Startled, he looked again at the ad: "single occupancy"—of course, of course. How stupid of him . . . silly,

really. But he couldn't turn the page.

"A walk, dear?" She reached across the scrubbed table and took his hand. It was a gesture she seldom used, though she did pat him quite a lot.

Except in the most frigid weather, walks were their daily habit, helping to fill the somewhat hollow hours between breakfast and lunch. They walked only around the block—sometimes a little farther, if his heart didn't bother him—past the mailbox to the school playground, then, turning the corner, down Augusta to the little white house with black trim. Augusta was his favorite part of the walk. The brick houses dated back to the Twenties and had, he felt, a restful quality. Some had lilacs and mock orange bushes nearly two stories high, and after a spring rain the black driveways would be spattered with pink and white petals. In the fall, cathedral elms paved the street with gold and brown. At Hale they turned right and at Sinclair they were home.

Today he was quieter than usual. He remarked on the golden maple seeds whirling dizzily through the air, but aside from this he made no comment until they had passed the playground and were heading down Augusta. They walked very slowly, three steps to a square, because of Dolly's hip.

"Feeling poorly, Thomas?" she asked gently, clutching his arm.

"Some." He was counting the cracks in the pavement as they went along, counting them as he tried to slow his mind, stay his expectations. But the wooden junks, the smooth faces with those incredible eyes (Lapis Lazuli!" *Of course, of course . . .*) flew in and out like

yellow moths through a car window, and for all his efforts they kept on coming.

"Don't you worry about your old China trip," she scolded quietly. He wondered why she would allow herself to speak of it now—but then, of course, all danger of its becoming a reality was past. "We'll have a wonderful time at Cissy's in San Diego. She says they have all kinds of citrus trees in the backyard—figs, too—and every third Sunday there's a Senior Citizens Club picnic. If we're lucky—"

"No!" He said irritably. "No picnics. No figs. No . . . no dawdling! Goddamn it!" He stopped walking—forcing her to stop too—and stared angrily at her. "Frittering it away. The money, the time . . . pottering along, pushing our bodies like . . . like . . ."

"We're old, Thomas," she pointed out.

But we're not dead, he thought. We've been acting like we've had one foot in the grave for the last fifty years. What are we trying to do, get used to it before it hits us? Well *no*, goddamn it, *no*! There was a beating behind his eyes; it caused the browning lawns and foggy air to pulse impatiently. He could feel the erratic tic. He began walking again, too quickly, for her, and she had to trot painfully alongside him.

"But what can we *do*, Thōmas? We are old! We've had a good life: think of all the wonderful memories we have to look back on!"

He stopped abruptly again. "Memories? What memories!"

He could almost see her reach back through their years together; but all the outings—the puddled Sundays,

the lunches at tiny restaurants, the collecting of figurines—all blended into one ceramic image he knew she could neither present nor explain to him. So she stood there, clasping and unclasping her hands and watching a fat centipede crawl lazily across her shoe.

And you don't understand me, he thought bitterly, and it frightens you—this sudden talk of China, this impatience with the small and good moments of our lives. Watching her watch the centipede, he felt a compassion that bordered on anger. You don't know, he thought, still are not aware of it . . . the nights lately, the blue-and-white nights in the overheated, overcrowded little bedroom . . . and your thick breathing . . . and you're so wrapped up in your tea shops and opera recordings you don't realize.

He remembered the days before his retirement, the days in the hardware store he'd opened after college: its rubber smell and the smell of new wood. Steel and plastic. Faucets and washers. Tools. The hardware store took up twelve hours of every day, six days a week. He'd been immersed in it. When people asked him—Dolly, for instance—how he could put up with the long hours, his answer was always, "I enjoy being with people," but that wasn't completely true. It would seem silly to say you loved hardware, loved the good weight of a hammer in your hands, the odd, various sizes of nuts and washers. He had often stood in front of the nails and screws, taking in the shapes of them, opening boxes and letting them sift through his fingers, saying their names aloud: "wing nuts," "flat-head screws," and his favorite: "stove bolts." He worked

alone, ran the store by himself to cut expenses. He had a small but steady clientele.

At times he'd resented customers, the interruption of his reverie. But at times he'd welcome them, as a child welcomes his friends into a new tree house. Indeed, it was the children, staring spellbound at the monkey wrenches and alligator-nosed pliers that he loved best. Sometimes he would grab a plunger and press it to the floor, the rubber end of it firmly suctioned to the linoleum.

"There!" he'd exclaim triumphantly. "Pull that!" It kept them occupied while he sold their parents brackets and wood putty. Later, after their parents were ready to leave, he would casually pluck the plunger from the floor. Sometimes the children would laugh and sometimes they would simply gape at him.

Six days a week it would be like that. Sunday was his day with Dolly, the day for Dolly's outing. She would spend all week planning them, in between composing songs on the piano; songs she never intended to sell and did not, in fact, even transcribe. Except for tending her small garden she seldom left the house.

"Sunshine today, Thomas!" she'd carol on Sunday morning. "Let's go downtown to the Renoir exhibit."

He'd never really minded the outings—they whirled by too quickly to get impatient with them. He'd told himself it was good to be with Dolly, but his attention drifted in and out of her monologues. Actually, he'd sort of enjoyed the fresh air. By Monday morning he was eager to get back to the store again.

Life was like that for a long, long time. They would plan vacations and Dolly would go alone, because he couldn't tear himself away. The weeks she was gone were silent ones. He often slept on the beat-up old sofa in the back room, skipping dinner and forgetting breakfast entirely. And it went on like that until his heart stopped momentarily in the store one Tuesday evening. It had frightened him into retiring, selling out. The doctors and Dolly advised lots of rest . . .

. . . He was aware of the chill, of Dolly standing next to him staring at the ground, of a long while having passed. He wondered what on earth she was thinking.

Ceramic shepherdesses, fishing boys . . . The slow, hot nausea hit him again. The fog pulsed.

He remembered the night, several months before, when insomnia and the closeness of the cramped bedroom had compelled him to the window, where he tried to take air. The albescent moon lit upon the aerial on the house next door, made the garden roses appear black and sharp-edged. There was a spade lying on its side in the garden. For no reason, it filled him with a deep fear, so that he turned back to the dark room, but there was only the sound of Dolly's thick breathing, the white sheets yawning before him.

It was like *that*, his retirement. That and day after day of outings.

He took her arm again—roughly, now—and they turned onto Hale, three steps to a square, until they reached Sinclair. He imagined himself on a cool junk bumping down some river pungent with a damp spice smell. For a minute it seemed to him he couldn't

wait until next week, or even tomorrow. He needed it now.

The moment passed. He looked at Dolly and she looked back at him, wide-eyed, as they walked along. The damned tic was beating so hard he could barely see her: she winked in and out of focus.

"Dolly?" he called, frightened now. She patted his arm. The old sense of waste returned and he cried out, "But I want it!"

"Go, then." She said it as quietly, as simply as that. He blinked and peered at her over the collar of his raincoat. "I mean it. Go, if you're set on it. I won't mind sitting at home. The garden needs tending: the squashes are ripe, and I should get at those tomatoes before we get a deep frost. And the mums should be picked. Remember when you picked those mums for me from Mrs. Coventry's yard? She saw you, too . . . and you just smiled and said, "Well, hello, Mrs. Coventry . . .'"

He immersed himself in her words. Smooth golden faces laughed skyward . . . plum trees trembled and shook down their blossoms. And now, stricken, he allowed himself to be helped into a chair on the porch.

"Easy, now, Thomas. Rest, dear. No trips. Rest here with me. Easy . . ."

Through half-opened eyes, he watched the golden maple seeds spinning, eddying, as they fell into piles of golden wheat.

"In Singapore," he whispered exultingly, "they wear no shoes."

Julia Hoskin



Marilyn Masler

The Weight of this Night

if word could be
sent somehow
that i hadn't long to live
little hope that i'd last the week
and this news came to you
in a letter
a short note
in exact scientific terms
black ink on azure paper
that i was dying
you could open it
sitting on the door step
for a moment not feeling
the weight of this night
saying to yourself
he'd do anything
to change my mind

Stephen Dolgin

The Woman

with two kids and no husband
timeless woman already
on the other side of the dirty pond
feeling the skin
from the birth
of her no-longer-husband's children
roll over between
her white slacks and summer top
staring at her hands
clenching each other
in front of her emptiness
trying to squeeze
a forgotten prayer
from swollen knuckles

Stephen Dolgin

Memorial Day at Stillman Valley

A car hums on the highway,
louder and louder,
softer and softer,
then nothing, gone.
A railing of tan dust
balances over the road,
leans, rolls
into the black-eyed Susans,
into the beds where the insects sleep.

No birds sing here,
Too hot to fly
they perch on barbed wire,
gazing at no one.

A family stops
in a blue station wagon.
Muffled voices, Sunday clothes,
halfway between home and nowhere,
they saunter up to read
the inscription in the stone,
still lazy from Grandma's meal.

Abandoned in a field of weeds
wooden posts stand without arms,
white with age,
dry to the memorial's visitors.
From a distant farmyard
a dog's barking rings like
knuckles on rotten wood.

I lie in the shade of a gravestone,
wondering at the stillness,
still as the water in the bottom of a well.
You could hear a penny drop.
I heard wishes swallowed up in the silence.

An old tree rests its limbs in the grass.

Mark Kimmet

The Strawberry Decision

Iris Leather was not satisfied. She lay on her back motionless—studying the long white hospital door, trying hard to picture in her mind the face—unsure now that it was morning . . . like a lover who had loved in the dark.

In the night she had patted a tiny strange hand, wanting to shake it and shaking it she said, "Hello. I'm your Mother. Know me. Tomorrow." Then in the morning a rubber-heeled nurse came clanking a stainless steel cart—door to door starch—sailing officiously, pulling thermometers loose from hot dry tongues, shaking them down with peculiar aplomb. At once muffled infants were roused and matched with their owners . . . but time had taken the infant into manhood.

Now in the middle of this dreary January day, Iris fell back into time as she idled her way through Henry Field's Seed & Nursery catalog. Planning the upcoming growing season was an approved pastime; it resurrects, or so it is written.

a small space
about the size
of a living room
rug is enough to
make a strawberry
bed—she read

She has planned for months to start a bed of strawberries. Last May she had planned and measured and staked a suitable rectangle in the middle of the backyard. She had commenced to peel the heavy sod

with his old spade believing it would be only a matter of minutes and he would be heaving up the black dirt and raking it smooth and the birds would leave the hackberry blossoms and float down to the fresh dirt. He had done that once while she soaped and sponged and oiled and fluffed and swathed the infant; rolling him in his blanket with blue elephants. But in September she had had to telephone Gardens Plowed Abernathy and he came with his rototiller and chewed up the sod just before frost.

"Nature runs its course," mustered Iris in retrospect. It wasn't until she had become a woman that her father told her he loved once in a fit of passion in a bed of strawberries in maddening sunlight on the side of a hill. Iris had been born with a blushing red stain at the nape of her neck. They kissed her strawberry neck. "It was the best I ever had," he confided. It was good that he did for she could remember nothing but the prickly raspberry bushes that grew wild there after the strawberries died. Iris visioned her mother bending over that bed of black-green leaves, Johnson-waxed, filling an old cracked bowl with fantastic heart-shaped red berries, choosing now and again a perfect berry as her very own, plopping it into her mouth, and the pleasant shiver as the acid juice ran sweet down her throat.

(Iris was startled by the leap of her heart as she saw clearly for one brief second the face of a lover). She had loved once with similar abandon, in the damp grass, by the dark of the moon, taking the sperm and trapping it in her blood. She had not known of chemical blocks and uterine clamps. Oh, God, Iris was determined. She must decide on a berry today so that it would

arrive in time.

SURECROP

B4128K This famous June Bearer is said, by experts, to be the finest all-around strawberry. Berries are deep red all the way through and crammed full of delicious honeysweet goodness.

50 for \$6.25

Strange that one would think of a strawberry as famous. Men were no longer famous. Experts. Perhaps men should have functional names like berries. Iris could not lust for a name like "Surecrop." She liked the idea of something being "crammed full of delicious honeysweet goodness." But suddenly she remembered Ewell Gibbons saying those very words about Grape-Nuts and she remembered watching him pour a stream of Grape-Nuts into a bowl and she remembered this same pouring motion demonstrating Drain-Power—a drain opener, they said, (the narrator was invisible), that unclogs drains in one second without lye or acid simply by inserting the can itself into the drain, giving the can one quick push which would release a shot of something extra-ordinarily powerful, sending waves through the water, pushing the clog (rotting thick grease) out of the drain pipe into the waste tank at the end of the line. So last night, weathering an early evening desolation, she had gone to her drugstore searching the shelves for a vicious acid or lye, and finding between Liquid-Plummer (which he had said was no damned good) and Drano (which he had said was the best

damned drain clogger on the market) an attractive yellow can of Drain-Power.

Her kitchen sink was an habitual clogger. Modern man cannot live disconnected from its sewer ends, and a year ago on Christmas Eve he and Iris had gone into the basement; he wrenching the stubborn pipe connections loose, bleeding at the knuckles, rodding a rigid green water hose up the clog, she standing helpless as their residue came gushing down his arm, splattering over his chest and thighs.

She read the Power-Dome instructions. "Sit back," they said, "and enjoy your fast-running sinks, tubs, and showers."

At home, Iris re-read the instructions. It was exciting. While he slept she would send waves through the tarry odorous mess standing in the sink. She stuffed a towel into the sink drain on her left blocking that opening per instructions. Bearing down mightily, she inserted the bright yellow Power-Dome into the sink drain on her right. Iris could never have prepared herself for what was about to happen. The clog was no minor clog. The pressure waves that she had released with her ONE-SECOND-THRUST had met an unmovable barrier and hence came surging back. In one second, the crap was up her nose, on the ceiling, and oozing down the wall by the breakfast table. She muffled her dismay. Slimy buttons of dark sludge dotted her arms.

Later he woke for a cigarette. He listened drowsily to the problems she had encountered. Seeing the trail of sewage on the ceiling, he decided to give it a try. She

blocked, he inserted. It exploded over the both of them.

"Each can has approximately five depth charges," informed Iris (she had memorized the instructions), "we have three left."

"You can write that yellow-dome corporation and tell them I wish they had all five charges up their ass," he concluded.

Iris couldn't trust anything to be "crammed full of delicious honeysweet goodness." Not today.

CYCLONE

B4106 This great June Bearing variety has just about everything you want in a strawberry. Intensive tests prove this sugar-sweet fruit to be superior to many other varieties; very productive. Excellent for freezing. 50 for \$6.98

STOPLIGHT

B4130 It is quite different from Cyclone, described above, because Stoplight peaks its production a week later in what might be termed a "population explosion" of strawberries. And its taste is sweet, absolutely unsurpassed. 50 for \$6.98

"If," said Iris, talking to herself, "Cyclone is superior to many and if Surecrop is the finest all-around strawberry, then Surecrop must be superior to Cyclone." But she had already decided against Surecrop because it was "honeysweet." "If," she continued, "If taste is

more important than the other qualities, then I would certainly be free from blame if I ordered fifty Spotlights —or was it Stoplights?"

"Absolutely unsurpassed."

She could see it now, a bed white with billions of blooms exploding alive in the spring with the tulips, sugar spun into golden yolks, a warm lemon sponge from the oven, and Stoplights with cold cream pouring over into the red. Stoplights? Standing knee-deep in Stoplights. A bed of Stoplights. Here's a Stoplight for you dear. Orgiastic Stoplights. These were not orgiastic berries. These were market berries that come in market green boxes which Produce Manager Ed Wilting sprayed with a jett of Strawberry Aroma so that mothers would stop and look at the firm tough red flesh through clear as glass vinyl and take them home to their lovers and surprise them.

OGALLALA

B4115 Many people say this is the most delicious of all the everbearing strawberries. Particularly outstanding because it combines the tangy wild strawberry flavor with the productive qualities of a cultivated variety. And more so than other varieties, Ogallala has a pleasantly mild aroma.

50 for \$7.98

OZARK BEAUTY

B4120 Outproduced all other everbearing strawberries in recent Iowa State University tests. Extremely high quality fruit is very bright red, unusually large with firm flesh and firm skin. Self-pollinizing. 50 for \$8.45

A berry named Ogallala that was tangy and wild and smelled like a strawberry. It was almost everything she hoped for.

"I could say Ogallala with a mouthful of berries."

Iris didn't have any berries, but she sensed she was making significant progress. Again she read, "Many people say this is the most delicious . . ." Who are "they?" Who are "many people?" Ad populum arguments are fallacious and cheap, she reasoned. Self-pollinizing? How must that be evaluated?

Eagerly she broke away from her present state of deliberation to answer the phone.

"Hello."

"Hello, Mrs. Leather," said an interesting male voice. "I'm with Sunset Hill Estates. You fine folks own one of our four-lot family estates. We would like to drop out tomorrow night about eight o'clock and go over some plans with you and your husband."

"What kind of plans?"

"We would like to bring you up to date, show you some new features we have added," he said in a positive manner.

"I have no idea what we'll be doing tomorrow night

at eight o'clock, but if we're not doing anything I'll let you know."

She hung up the phone, poured a small cup of cold coffee, stretched out on the couch where he dozed after supper and covered herself over with a brilliant fuschia, gold, blue, green coverlet that her old mother had knitted while trying to stay awake for the ten o'clock news ("Why do those dying people in nursing homes want to live to see the next day?" she had asked her mother once. "Well," Mother answered thoughtfully, "they want to see what's going to happen next.")

Nature must run its course and everything would be alright (wouldn't it?) if Iris could adapt.

Iris folded her hands and fell asleep and dreamed of a visitor, a friend of her son—someone the son had met in the service of his country—who was doing a "gig" in Wichita (thrilling an audience with supra Echoes and extra-dimensional VIRB-B-B-Bs) and since Wichita was so close to Illinois, naturally he would drop by for a visit. Iris wasn't doing anything and of course she was glad to have him come. From the very moment of his arrival Iris was filled with suspicion. He came gliding without detectable effort around the narrow man-made curve to her subdivision ranch in an elegant-looking black automobile and stopped on the road in front of her house. She moved quickly to a window in a dark room and gasped when she saw that the visitor's elongated car was exactly as long as her house. He was there now in her house and she watched him undetected, noticing in particular that he never sat down.

He stood talking like a man with business at hand. No one sat down. He wore summer shorts. She was rather proud of her keen observation yet a little embarrassed. When she realized that his bare legs corresponded to the growth and development of an eight-year-old child, she prayed he would not see her—her unidentifiable visitor could not have been more than three and one-half feet tall.

Iris listened ghost-like as the visitor told her son, "If I wanted to stay in the Air Force and fly the most recent designs which have just about everything you could want in an airplane, I had to adapt. Aircraft today is designed extremely superior to the old favorites. The Air Force needs men who can fit the controls and breathe the ether." He pointed to his head.

Son nodded. Gave his friendliest smile. Did not stare at the ugly, yellow, bird-beak that grew where a nose should grow.

The Unidentifiable One swiveled his head back and pointed to the balls of cotton stuffed up his giant bird nostril and said, "My nose runs at this altitude."

Son nodded his head agreeably. They shared a laugh.

Sometimes, on the severest days in January it seemed, the sun glowed warm—expanding the south wall of Iris' house. At sunset the dark cold shrunk the house so rapidly it gave out with a loud snap. As Iris reached for the door in her dream, the house contracted. Naturally she could not doze through this unexpected explosion. She sat upright listening to the strange rumble echoing through the hollow space under the roof—or was it under the floor—she couldn't be sure.

Lois Logan



Neraldo de la Paz

The Day

(for Saichi)

I. Morning: The Awakening

Water moves
rhythmically
under moon-smooth ice.

Branches break;
the wind carries feathers to me,
and shouts.

Children become the snow,
laugh.
Someone boils fowl.

As regards myself,
Nothing is
the matter.
Water desires no ice,
moon no water,
wind no branch.

II. Evening: The Need

I pain! I joy! yes—desire!
And where are
the violets?
The angry young men?

The air, blue, whispers
no more:
 like it, I die
 again.

Look! The moon!
Spruce sleeps
in her forest.

III. Night: The Dream

Saichi, mind pacified,
drinks tea.
My legs do not grow warm
from this sun.

Look within your own heart . . .
Saichi tells me.

AUH! A small girl falls
on the gravel.
It could not be worse.

The sun
retreats
from the forest.

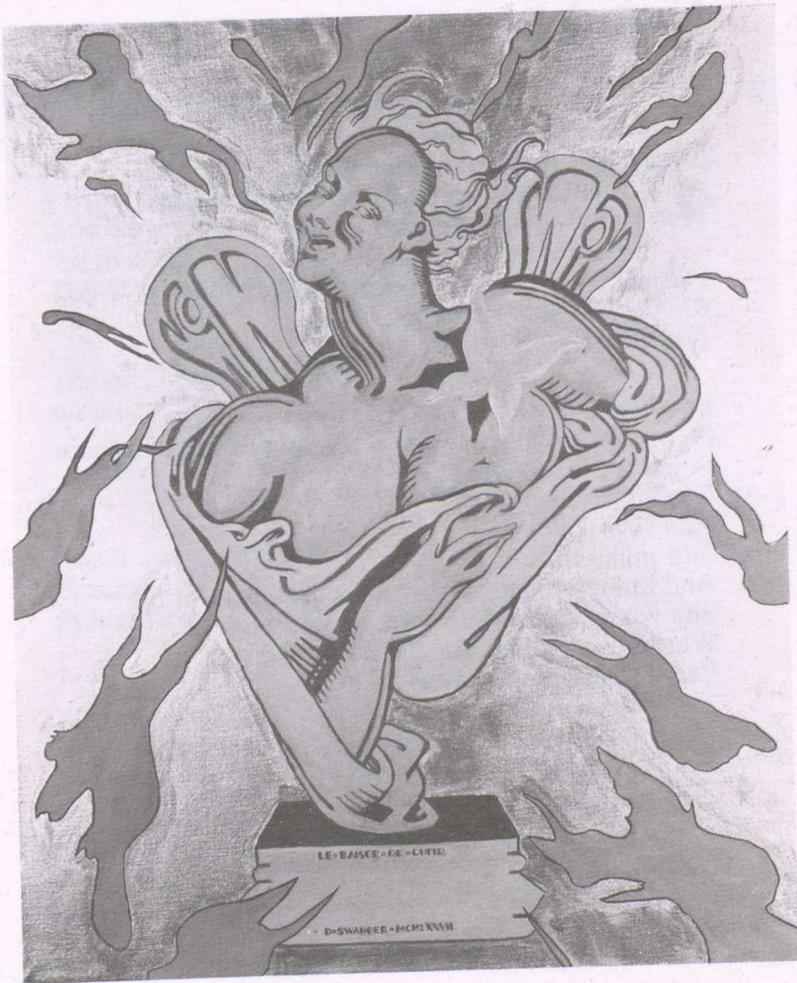
Cathy Murphy

Caught

Have you ever wolfed across the plains
 in a yellow sedan
Over some endless two-lane road
And caught between fields of high grey grass
Watched it spread through a tangled
 barbed wire fence
Passing immovable ice-born stones
Clump stiff against fading barns
And touch a thin white house.

Passing by a thin white house
Have you ever wondered if a woman squatted there
In some dim corner
Rinsing summer dust
And tiny spiders
Into milk-white Ajax
And knew when the pure burning smell hit her
She would pry old dirt out of a crevice
Where two walnut-stained cupboards
Came together cockeyed.

Lois Logan



Daniel Swanger

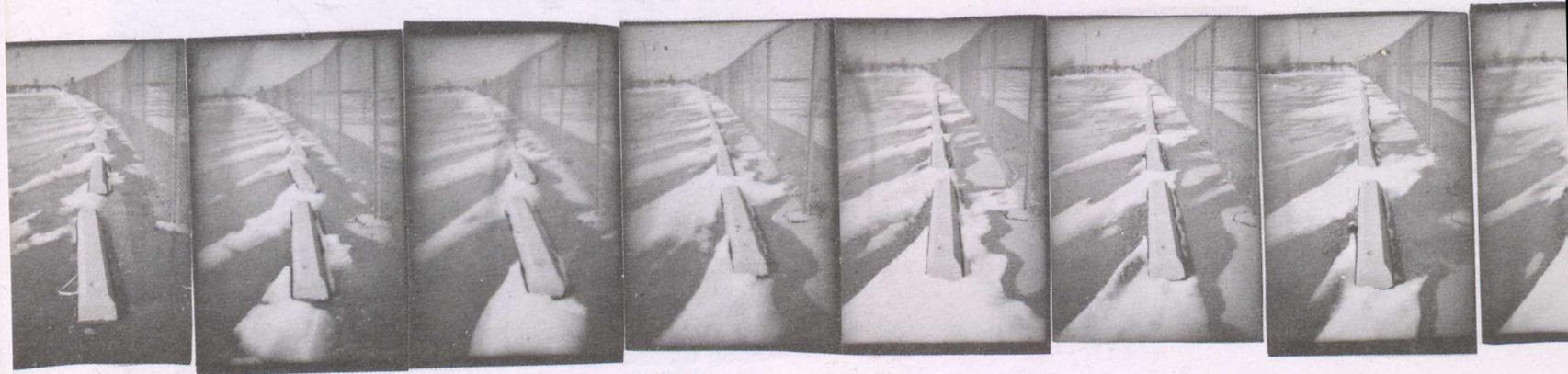
Cleopatra

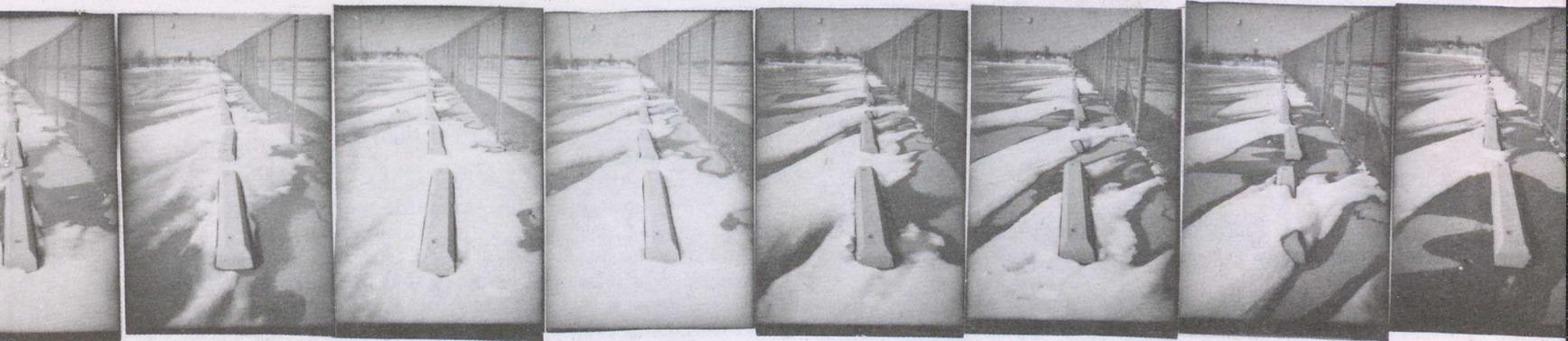
The winds are arid, and the moon
Clings to the face of Cleopatra.

She, stretching, moves a pinkened elbow
(Alabaster arm, a swan
Appendage), coupling, pillowing
Her ornamental head, and turns
To follow peacock-fashioned fans
With crystal glances. Silk, net, satin
Sprawl about; a velvet sandal
Soon releases from a foot
Of bluish ice; as leering plucks
Stream from a lyre, a voice adorning
Of a paramour leans down
And simpers: "You are Cleopatra,
Kin of Isis and of Nile.
Behemoth and dread chimera
Cower from their fear in dampened
Hidden caves." She languidly
Unfurls a ribbon round her throat
And signals this one soon be gone
To seaweed and to snails, his gorge
First from him drawn and rendered forth.

And so her barge drifts ever onward,
Love-enraptured in its dream.

Daniel Swanger





Jacqueline Rapp

Snowblind

"Father," I asked, "where did you get those tickets?"

"I won them," he replied.

"My, how lucky."

"No, *Fortunate*, my son, for that is how it was to be."

"I do not comprehend your meaning, Father."

"You shall."

"When?"

"Soon."

"I am anxious to know all; impatience swells in my bowels. Then could you at least tell me how you won the tickets?"

"Yes, I can. And possibly, I will follow with the information that you so impatiently desire."

"Hot Dog."

"Bite your tongue."

"Please pardon me."

"Granted. Now to the explanation:

"I won the tickets through a reliance upon the twists of this turbulent world."

"Elucidate, please."

"Thank you. Let me begin from the beginning:

"It was revealed to me that personnel at a local radio station were offering a certain specific number of tickets to a particular musical occurrence in the very near future. It was also revealed that a contestant for one of the groupings of tickets need only to write a simple letter requesting that he be considered in the dissemination of the desirable stubs. Unfortunately, I was unenlightened about what criteria were to be used in determining the most worthy applicants. Therefore, I was in a fog. I reasoned that, at the least, I could write and request, as I evidently have done,

as you can see, no doubt."

"No doubt."

"As I was saying, my son, I could write and request, as I evidently have done, as you can see, no doubt.

But I went further, much further than that—

"How far?"

"As far as the mind can see; to the point of speculating upon just what standards were to be used in the weighty decision making. Fortunately, I am endowed with the facility of logic. Through this vast warehouse of wisdom I deduced that the standards would be Neediness: a state that requires supply or relief, and Originality: the power to produce new thoughts or uncommon combinations of thought. How I arrived at such magnanimous conclusions is quite simple: The world believes that the Neediest should be the first to receive offerings. The world values Originality. The radio station subscribed to worldly beliefs and values. Therefore, the radio station—its inhabitants—believed in Need and valued Originality. Simple logic."

"As simple as—"

"As simple as earmuffs, mittens, and English mufflers. But misfortune of misfortunes, I had somewhat diametric characteristics than those two forementioned, a moment before. I had a swelling urge to pack it up. Nevertheless, I suppressed it. Because:"

"Why?"

"Because:

"In this sad age of Upheaval, standards and mainstays, those touchstones of civilization, as we know it, are in the turbulent process of Upheaval. What was at one time Red, is now Grey. Babies are merely stomach cancer.

Parades are in 5/11 time. Nations wage pitched battles with their reflections. Transportation, Communication, Categorization make the world a smaller place, yet the continents are drifting apart. What was once Error is now Preference. The walls had ears, now the ears have walls. The blink is no longer an interruption in the Light, but a flash in the constricting Darkness. Our neighbor is harvesting sow's ears and has-beens. With all of this blatant Upheaval, a Timeless Revelation became manifest: Could it be that what was once considered luxuriant plentitude is now abject poverty? Could it be that what was once considered a common conformity is now a creative eccentricity? By josh, it could, and thus my conditions, however diametric they appeared to me, could have conceivably qualified me for the tickets I longed to obtain. All because the world seemed to have overturned.

"As you can see, the world *had* overturned, my son," he concluded, slowly waving the tickets with his colossally extensive hand.

"Like the chef's soot encrusted pancake that tumbles end over end into his yawning waste receptacle," I quipped.

"No, like the chef's own blighted hand which he attempts to rid from his sight by flipping it end over end," he corrected.

"Ah, you are correct," I returned.

"Understandably so. I shall continue:

"As you can see, the world *had* overturned, my son, like the chef's own blighted hand which he attempts to rid from his sight by flipping it end over end. We know that now for certain, seeing that I have received

the tickets. But, as I've described, I was uncertain of the certainty before I had written the letter. To answer that gnawing question that was just beginning to erode my sensibilities, I needed to inform the radio-dilettanti of my circumstances. This demanded that I review my past life—a life supposedly deluged with perpetual monsoons of lucky stars and swollen channels of delight—and presented an edited account of proper information to whatever reader the reader chose to be—there at the radio station, needless to say."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Granted. This account would expose my life of what I believed to be Luxuriant Plentitude. The Common Conformities would rear their mundane heads in respect to my droll writing facilities made visible in the letter I intended to pen, and possibly through the stereotypically classical life of bountiful blessings and lavish harvests—as I believed it to be—that I would relate. All that remained was the task of writing the account of my former life.

"So I wrote, and received."

"Congratulations, Fater, it is a fine thing indeed, and thank you, Father, for elucidating to my satisfaction, but whales in my shoes—Former Life??? I have never heard of an account of your former life. I request permission to hear of this curious curiosity. Bubbling lipbraces—since when did you lead this former life?"

"I was working up to that, my son, for now I believe you are of the proper mind and body to hear of such a thing. It is of great relevance: it will give your life a clearer meaning, a greater purpose. Listen to the full extent of your ear; this is your day of enlightenment."

"Yes, Father, I shall," I vowed.

"Listen to the full extent of your ear; this is your day of enlightenment.

"Well, it is true, I have led a former life, that is, a life before yours, formerly, in the past. The events and situations I found I was in throughout its spacious course should clearly show our position in the world, explain our past, and reveal our futures. This is the account:

"It all began when I was a child, sometime ago, when I was in my childhood. My mother and father (I.E., your grandparents) were musicians, Mother playing the tuba and harmonica, Father playing the harp (and like a demon, if I may say so). Their band, The New World Rummaging Flea Orchestra, was quite popular in the 1940's and up until Mother's death in 1952. They produced a lot of songs that have come to be known as 'old standbys' on their label, *Capital Petroleum Products*. Their tunes still rage through my ear to this day. Ofttimes the tunes are accompanied by a vision of the titles; a manifestation of the words themselves right before my very eye: glimmering characters wreathed in metallic garlands while throngs of angelic figures grace the airs above. In fact, they're appearing at this very moment.

"Ahhh 'Yankee Doodle Bludgeon'
'Spelling the Length of Toes' 'I Wear My
Heart upon My Sleeve' 'Rhapsody Amidst
Migratory Apes of Fortune'

"Oh, the glorious list could roll on for eternity, as if the music was the essence of ethereal splendour itself. But that is an incidental, not essential to the account I now disgorge.

"As it was, I was blessed with a brother and sister, neither of which had a propensity towards performing music of any form, whether it be Amzolf Remedeus Bulk or the weaving hiss of a funeral procession, let alone our own compositions and concepts. I suppose that was due to their having the lack of necessary limbs. Despite this apparent drawback, Father seethed with glee. He viewed their absence of varied members as a good thing, for, he reasoned, had they been able to deal with a musical instrument, they would have had to grind through all of those grueling courses in order to learn how to manipulate one properly. This may have proved to be too difficult a thing to accomplish, thus causing them to fail to accomplish the mastering of an instrument. With manual training out of the question and way, Father's task was severely lightened. All that he had to do was instill into Brother and Sister an appreciation and reverence for the music of others — which would undoubtedly lead to an appreciation of music in general and a reverence of music in general. This would take many hours of musical instruction; hours upon hours of drilling, drilling, drilling, deep holes into those pliable minds, in which was to be placed musical explosives. At that particular time, its being 1957, they had only Father and I to care for them. All that remained of Mother were weather-beaten stacks of uneaten pancakes—there, in the greenhouse, here, in my lap, somewhere, in the cellar—soot on the walls, and two deep thumb imprints in Father's cheek. But I can say with a hiss and whimper that her distance proved to be no problem whatsoever. I was but three years old then, yet I was well aware of my capabilities and limitations, and

managed to lend Pop a hand whenever he needed mine. I filled the gap like the absorbent cotton that is wadded into the cadaver's sinking nasal cavity. With our tandem care, the children developed to Father's pleasing.

"Sister soon developed a wide ranging rash, though, and took on strange characteristics. In particular, she would constantly burst into tears, effusing rivers of the saline stew, while wrenching the hair from her golden brown scalp. These actions would occur whenever Father and I engaged in music-making. Father reasoned that such behavior had to be an expression of Sister's progressively overwhelming appreciation for the melodies we impressed upon her. She died a short while later, her body a moist marsh of moss and lichens.

"Many considered her expiration to be a malevolent calamity and attempted to console us over the matter. That was quite upsetting to Father, for it was a certainty to him that Sister was better off where she was since angels were known to be fond of harps.

"Brother was unaware of these events due to his habit of plugging his ear with putty to muffle out all sounds. Father and I took little liking to this habit of his, and quite understandably so. Often we would be melodizing the hearts out of our chests for hours on end, just for Brother, and notice him pale with indifference; gazing off into the winter sky that reared back in cold blue horror. In each case, we would, upon thorough inspection, find the grey substance hiding in the murky depths of his ear canal. This discovery would be followed by a display of active frustration on Father's part. It was the reasoning of Father that our music was divine in origin, and to exempt Brother from it

would surely send him off to the Pits of Hades; his resistance was preventing his salvation. In spite of intense efforts, his disposition remained constant: he would not listen to music. Or anything, for that matter.

"It was during one of our fruitless musical interrogations that Father hit upon an idea and said:

"'Qualitatively amassing general variations of specific tabulations, I espy remunerative malevolence circumjacent to such hypothetical improprieties as Mob Law and the Existentialism Plot. The inherent vacillations of such correlations arrogates any apportionment uniform in methodization. Thus, it is quite clear, yes, very clear indeed, no doubt, that ascetic pathways under the salacious arctation of the Sacerdotal Abderifes of this sour age are an absolute necessity to be upon.'

"By gouge, that was it. We would amplify and multiply the bass tones of our music. That particular range of sound was the most difficult to muffle of all, particularly when putty was employed as the muffler. It is a complex and scientific principle that tells us this, one which needs no mentioning. What matters is that we had lighted upon a way to override the putty, which had by then become somewhat permanent in fixation. We had only to apply our theory-in a practical way. We applied. We were correct. It was a matter of mere seconds before Brother showed his heartfelt appreciation for our overriding overtures by gripping his convulsing skull with grimacing hands. It was touching to hear his howling harmonize with our melodies. These indicators gave Father the doubtless assurance that he would then begin to develop into a fine child. Such progress

did occur, all the way up until his head burst open during a serenade, an hour later. Father was delighted to see this, for he knew that Brother was joining Sister in the eternal wonderland of dancing harps and angelic chorale.

"It was at that moment in time that I wondered to Father whether Mother (I.E., your grandmother) was basking in the eternal musicland as Brother and Sister were. Papa smiled, 'I am certain of that,' he said, 'for Mother's life was much like daughter's, that is, Sister, your sister.'" Whereupon, he told me a brief history of Mother's history, which went somewhat like the paraphrasing I am now to relate.

"He said:

"Your matriarch and I bound the nuptial tie three score years heretofore. Initially she abhorred melodious occasions, much like daughter, that is, your Sister. Being my spouse, though, I felt it was my duty to conscript her into receiving those lofty intonations I expressed, for I feared, much like in the case of son, that is, Brother, your brother, that I may lose her soul to Gehenna's molten seas. Many contemporary mentors claim that such conscriptions are tyrannical. This is not so. I behold a right to do so, better regarded as Marital Law. And I exercised my Right, but alas, to no discernable results. Mother resisted like Mephistopheles resists Truth. She grew reticent, laconic, withdrawn, taciturn. I saw it necessary, due to her pervicacious convictions—the vice that pinched her spindly tongue; the snow that isolated her mind; the serpent that nested in her heart—to force sweet harmonies upon her. I bound her

appendages, gagged her orifice, strapped the flailing works to the stone hearth that circumlocutes the fireplace, and proceeded with my rightful duty to expose and inject her with pulchritudal sonourousnesses. She had to respond favorably: her life was bobbing in the balance of judgment, much like the massive slab of pork that is itched over the edge of a towering plateau by jubilant primitive nomads, either to descend into the midst of a great horde of threatening rail dogs, or to be diverted into the hose of an infinite vacuum cleaner. Soon afterwards, I noted a change. Her countenance took on pits and ridges. Her fingers receded. Profound lesions grazed through her scalp. Her ribs multiplied profusely. She began to molt. This was quite perplexing. I was not aware, then, whether such responses were good or bad. I desired an understanding, and for that reason to a venture to the arboretum, where peace and wisdom hung like the leaden sand fogs of Mongolia. There I commenced a logical soliloquy and continued it for three weeks. Imagine, twenty-one revolutions of the globe I meandered in those verdant billows. Twenty-one revolutions of the globe. I SAY, TWENTY-ONE REVOLUTIONS OF THE GLOBE.'

"Twenty-one revolutions of the globe is quite a lengthy time,' I noted, said Father.

"Twenty-one revolutions is quite a lengthy time," I agreed.

"Father continued," continued Father.

"Within that monumental duration of moments I achieved my goal of complete understanding. It was

at that consummation of mental labors that I chose to rejoice in melody. I sang:

Weeeeeeeeeee oh!

Acres.

And acres of verdant billows,
Undulate like the beckoning fingers of temptation,
To enshroud me in folds of immortal darkness,
A somewhat nostalgic affair.

"Specifically, the melody was in celebration of my having marshalled the correct premises and arrived at a definitive conclusion. The syllogistic soliloquy went as follows:

Premise One: Angels play harps.

Premise Two: Angels are divine.

Therefore: Harp music is divine.

Premise Four: I play harp.

Therefore: I play divine music.

Premise Six: Any divine thing results in good and only good.

Therefore: My music results in good and only good.

And Premise Eight: Any action that results in good and only good should be constantly performed.

So therefore: My music should be constantly performed.

"And thus, when noting points seven and eight, I could only conclude that what was happening to Mother could only be good, and that it was my responsibility to constantly perform my music. Period. With that I barreled home and resumed melody making. I managed to record a few dozen selections within a month after that, with your mother doing the

background vocals—very well, if I may say so—and giving all indications that she was turning out good. Eventually her larynx chose to calcify from the constant utilization and thus, I found it my only option to fasten wind instruments to her mouth. I selected the tuba and harmonica because her lips were best suited for them: swollen, limp and moist. The recordings themselves did good things, no matter what the present day intellectuals may insist, for it was divine music. But sadly enough, those intellectuals would be happy to know that our recording and performing had to end. Mother caught fire at the end of the second month and ascended into heaven, thereby withdrawing from her earthly account. Therein ended her story. Thus ends her story." Father stopped momentarily as if he were reflecting over the goodness of it all and concluded, "Thus it has been clearly ascertained, by reason of my music being divine, that only goodness results from my music and, through the experiences I experienced with Mother, those wonderful benevolences, it became evident that our lives have been blessed ones. It is an infinite joy for me to see you follow in my guided footsteps."

He reared his head back and smiled with magnificent warmth, baring the shrunken teeth that were disposed about his mouth like black stalagmites and stalagmites. I pondered the yarn he had unraveled and soon grew into a clearer understanding of why our lives were so blessed, so good, and how I should regard these blessings in the future. Father saw my face twisting and, evidently perceiving the logical thoughts coiling in my cranium, heaved a heavy sigh—a sigh I supposed was

much like the hissing that occurred during Mother's consumption by fire. The beauty of the past and present workings overwhelmed me to such an extent that my thoughts soon lurched into emotions that moved me to break into a joyous lament. The lamentation lasted three months. Father died during that period, and decomposed rapidly, for upon the completion of my melody, and upon the opening of my eyes, all that remained where I had beheld Father only three months earlier was an oily mulsh of what resembled grey ashes. I was never to be dismayed by this on account of the fact that it was the result of divine music in some way, and thus it was good. My life from that point onward took on a deeper meaning, a definite purpose, a glorious hope. I was fortified, enriched, inspired by the revelations bestowed upon me through Father, and took to my heart the noble Truth he branded upon my forehead during my lamentations. It read:

'I am of divine guidance.'

"It was noble, indeed, my son, It was Truth. You may be able to make out some of the letters to this day. Why not look closely and see if any remain, my son," "whereupon Father arched his supple neck and swung the glorious head before my eyes. There, recessed deep in surging membranes, twitching muscles and undulating fat were the remnants of the ancient Truth. Few letters remained visible, and those that were visible, were badly weathered. They appeared to be:

I g ance.

But fleshly items are of no lasting importance. What really mattered was my appreciation of the events described—their relevance, their meaning. Father echoed

this thought when he said, "What is of lasting importance is not the temporal evidence you behold etched into my brow, but, rather, the history as a whole, and your appreciation of the events described—their relevance, their meaning."

I affirmed his echo, "I appreciate every word you have related."

"Then you have a grand future ahead of you," he retorted.

"Yes, that is true, Father. I thank you. The history has been of great value. I ask, though, is that the same account you related to the radio beaux-esprits?" I asked.

"Yes, indeed, that is the same account I related to the radio-dilettanti," he replied.

"No, radio beaux-esprits," I corrected.

"Ah, radio beaux-esprits," he conceded.

"Does that mean, seeing that you have won the tickets, that you are considered to be Poveritous and Eccentric?"

He nodded solemnly.

"Then that is an insult to the actual Truth."

He continued to nod, slowly and sadly.

"Then that is an insult to our divine guidance."

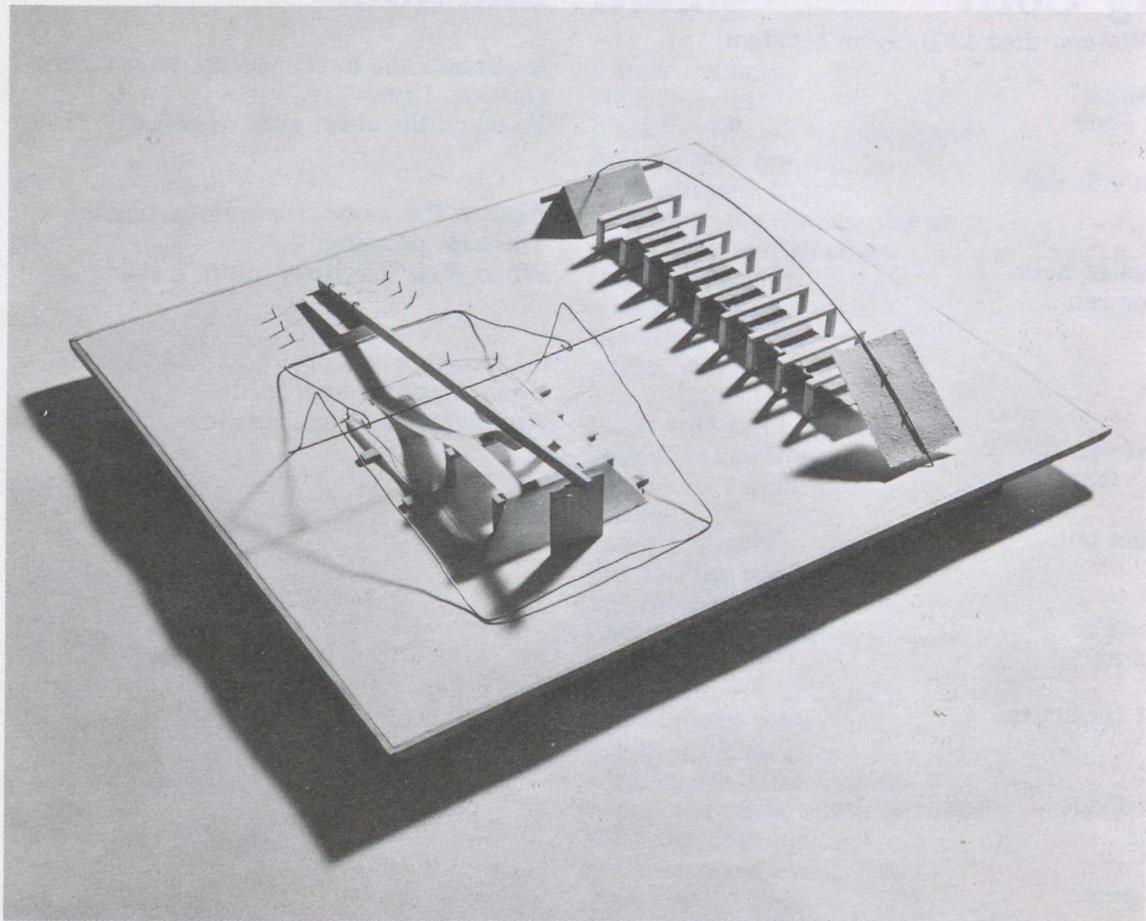
His head bobbed and bobbed, resigning to the sad realities like the bloated and pale remains of a salmon accepting the crests and hollows of lonely waves.

"It is clear: society has overturned," I concluded.

"It is a joyous day of revelation.

"Let me lament."

David Schmoller



Shelling Corn

(for Eugene Waters, died 1966, farm accident)

Colder than stone
Or husk, the wind
Splinters
Through corn-crib slats

And stirs cracked hulls
Of grain. Mice run
Rafter-high
To the top

Of the heaped ears,
Then tumble when
Conveyors
Pull the bottom out.

A thick dust rises.
The sheller clots
Our lungs
With cobdust for hours,

Until a chain snaps
And hammers
The crib
To ribbed silence.

Rodney Baker

Blackout

Ice breaks the lines: silence, then voices
Outside. I run
To catch the clean glide of geese

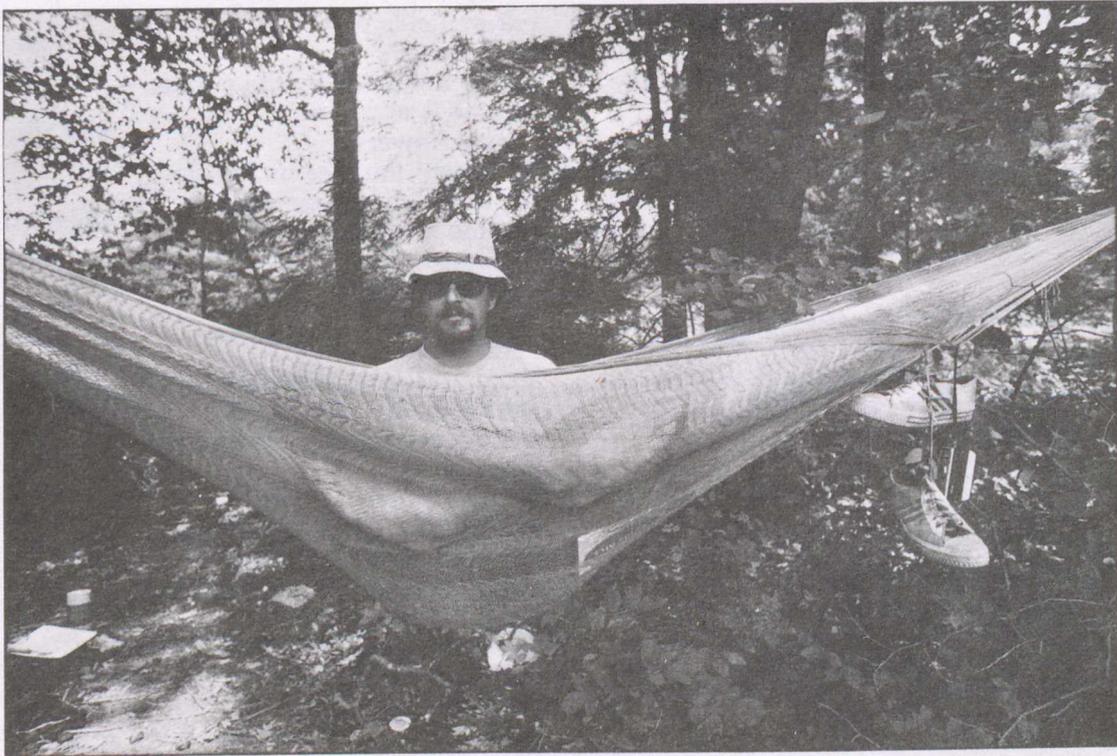
Against the moon, their wings black
Torches, pointing.
When their V swings south, a string

Of thoughts remains: cold wind sifting
Bone songs through teeth,
And lights in distant windows.

Rodney Baker

Dialog

i draw fields of
stick flowers
on the notebook by the phone.
a voice is at my ear.
i draw flowers
and count the tiles on the floor,
the cracks in the ceiling.
i watch a spider
wed the corner
the voice smiles,
edges forward.
i smile back
stand stiff as the flowers,
patient as the tile,
narrow as a ceiling crack.
my soul
empties slowly
through the pores of my feet.
the voice picks up speed.
i note the dust on the shelves,
clean them mentally.
the spider slows, finishes her web,
steps quietly aside.
the stick fields grow.
it's a month after harvest—
i draw the snow white on white
the voice stumbles, starts,
move to impatience.
it stutters to silence.
dust settles in the web.



Gary Nichols

The Poet

Chart a magic course; find yourself a silent ship
And sail the sea of your broken body and mind.
Go over and over the maps, days, and distance;
Glide on the wet canvas, green and sick
And watch the dust swirl and breathe back no more.

Blot out that possessed lyric with a cat o' nine tails
And graft old skin over the leprous decay.
Hush the lisp; trim the impediment away
For the echo might let the failing design escape
And you would lose, forever, the silent me.

Silent Voodoo Princess, made of steel and threadbare warp
You prefer the sun the other way around.
Grind up your ghost which haunts your kingdom like crown flint glass
Into little pins, poisoned with honey and milk,
To stick into your wooden dolls of putrid ink.

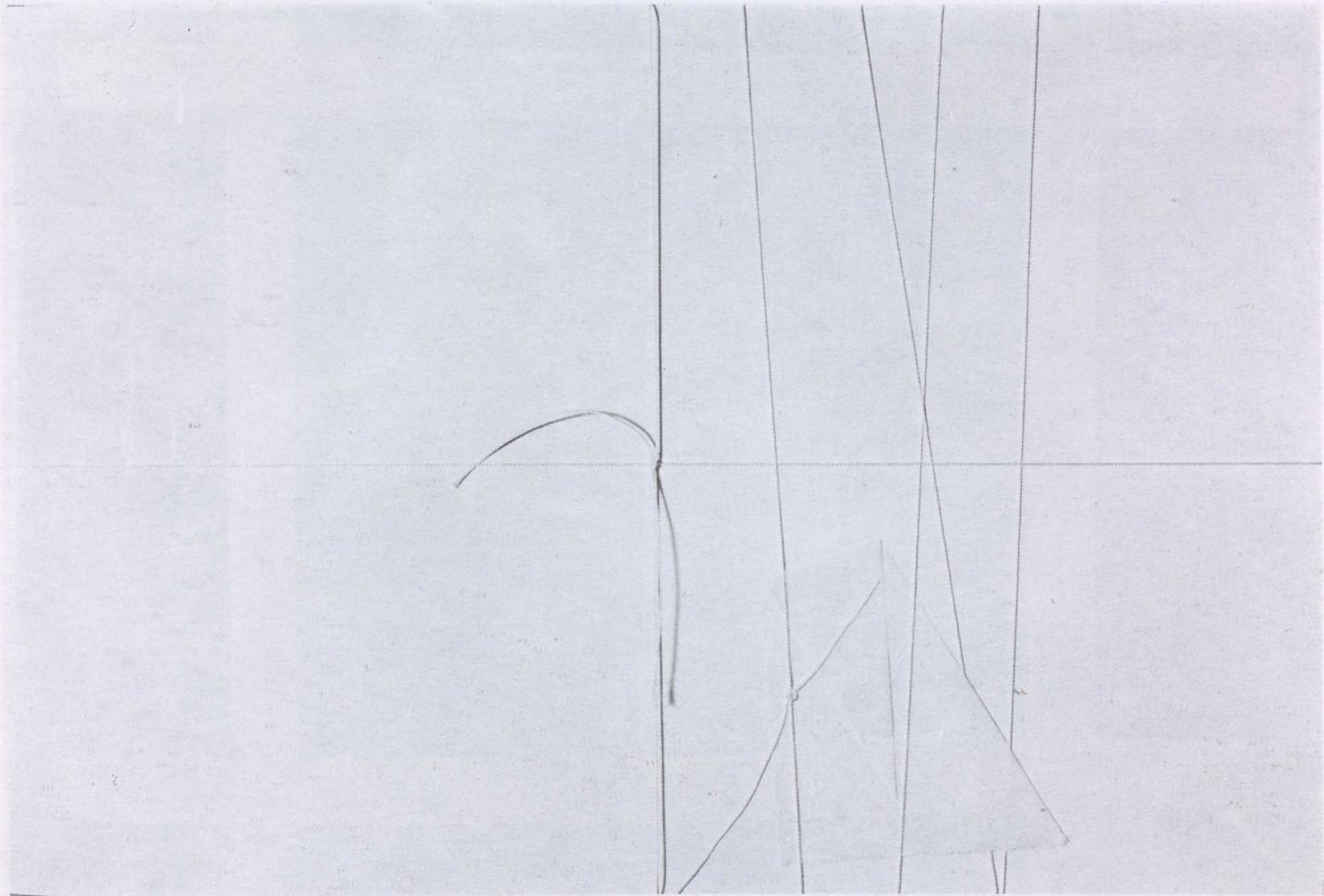
Carl Ludwigson

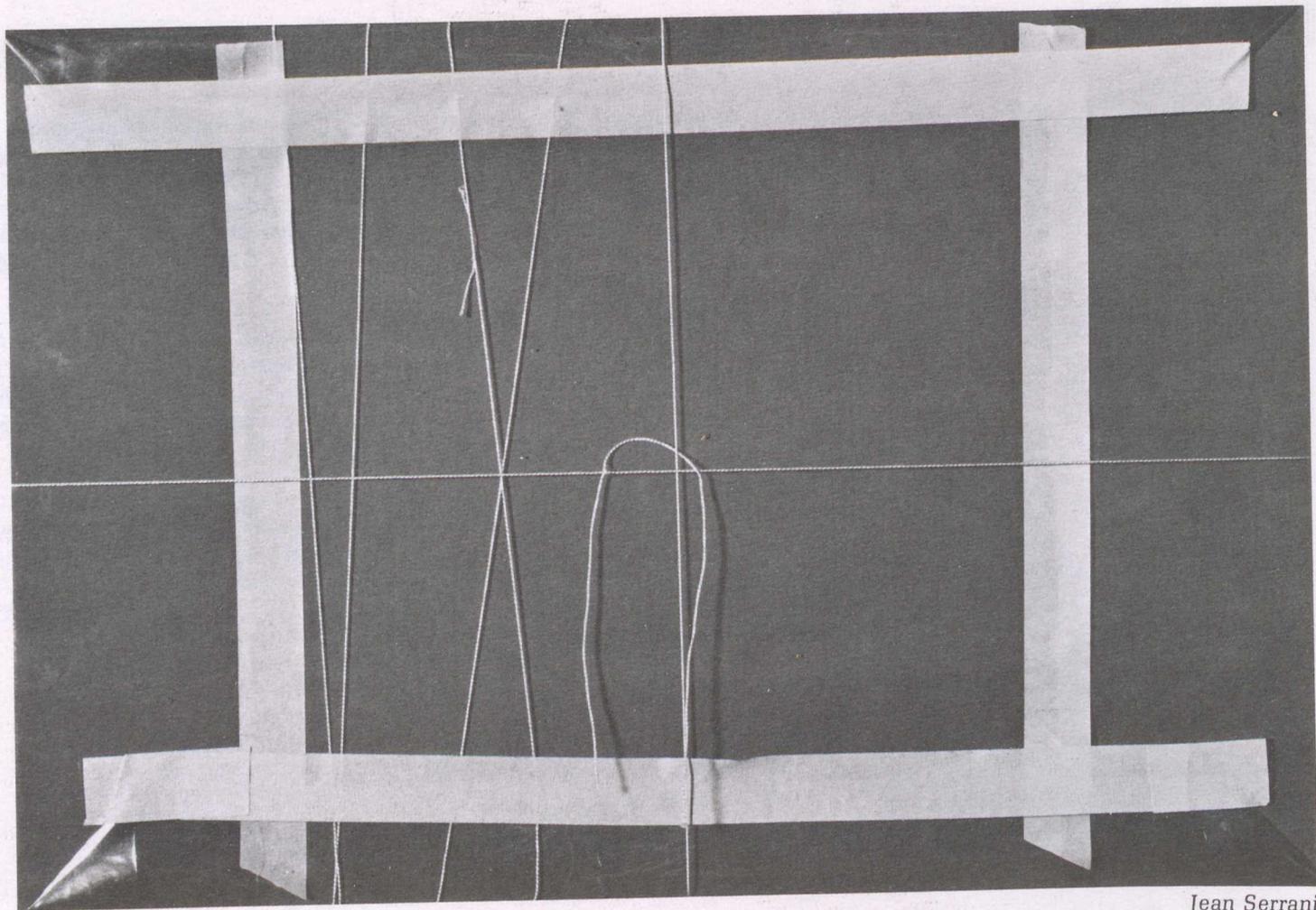
I remember my mother
Shouting at me, on hot California days
To hang out the laundry
In the dry backyard where the wasps feasted
Bacchanalia among the rotten peaches
A dance of the summer gods

And my mother, red hair tatty
The lines of alcohol a tapestry on her nose
Would scream, "Damn you, you are so slow"
Having forgotten what summer is for

So, I hung the laundry, slowly,
Weaving dreams of pioneers and horses
Until the October rains came
And we hung the clothes in the hall
On a string

Rosemary Jewell



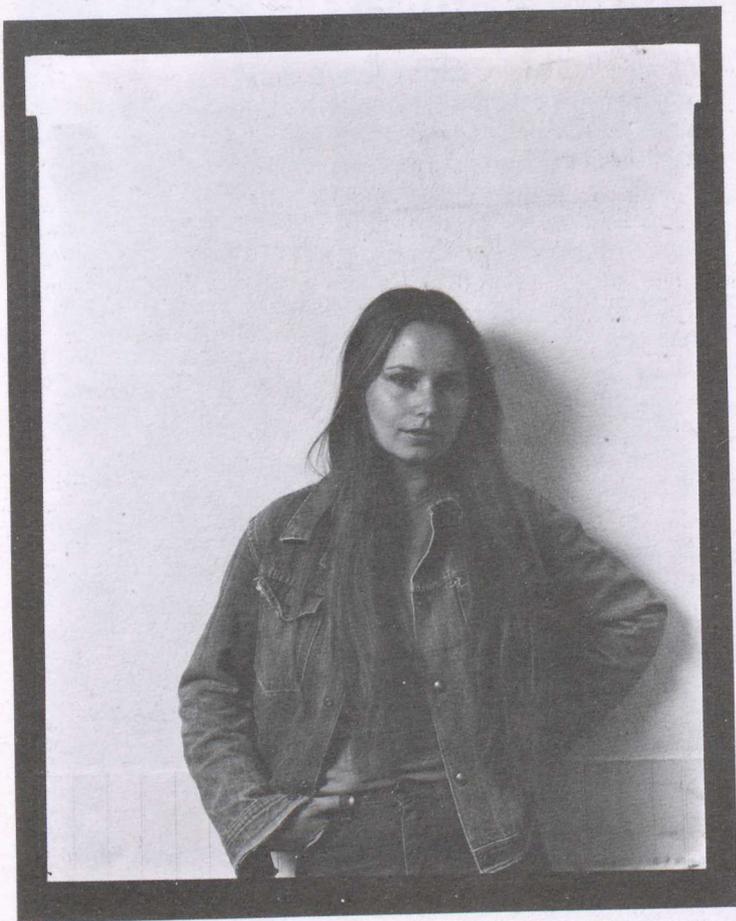


Jean Serrani

Improbabilities

I've seen too many impossible events
To believe in certainty.
The odds always oppose
Any strange occurrences.
Yet a house accidentally bought,
Or a door opened by chance
Change more lives than one.
Those who never move the pieces
Forfeit the joy of losing.
I took a card, any card,
And shuffled to you.
Though other choices
Might have entailed
Winning tickets,
That wasn't in the cards.
Don't try to hypnotize me
With those snake eyes:
I'm riding boxcars to you.
Luck isn't ladylike,
Though she loves a gentle man.
Gambler, don't play Russian roulette:
I've got your number, and I'm game.

Gloria Wardin



Herb Nelson

Not Looking at the Blackbird in Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"

In "Thirteen Ways"¹ Wallace Stevens proposes to "look at" a blackbird. Accordingly, the object "blackbird" is mentioned in each of the thirteen stanzas of the poem. However, as one progresses through the poem, a curious thing happens; one becomes aware that he is not really being informed about "blackbirdness," but rather is being led through a series of "lessons" in seeing. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" becomes a lesson in perception expressed in succinct aphorisms² and *mondo*-like forms.³

The distinction between "looking at" and "seeing" is primary to the spirit of perception which informs this poem. Stevens deals with both modes. One might think of this distinction as that between a passive observation of the world as if it were an object ("looking at") and an active participation in the phenomenon of perceiving which is always in relation to the self ("seeing"). Like smelling and sniffing, the first is an obligation; the second is an accomplishment. Moreover, being able to see is not the natural outgrowth of being obliged to look because something presents itself to your field of vision. In order to "see" one must perform what Rolly May, in the following analysis of Western existentialism and Eastern thought, calls "cutting below the cleavage":

Both seek a relation to reality which cuts below the cleavage between subject and object. Both would insist that the Western absorption in conquering and gaining power over nature has resulted not only in the estrangement of man from

nature but also indirectly in estrangement of man from himself. The basic reason for these similarities is that Eastern thought never suffered the radical split between subject and object . . .⁴

The Zen poet Bunan expresses this way of seeing as follows:

The moon's the same old moon,
The flowers exactly as they were,
Yet I've become the thingness
Of all the things I see!⁵

Noting Stevens' affinities with Husserl, Thomas J. Hines makes a remark that seems especially pertinent to "Thirteen Ways,":

. . . neither Stevens nor Husserl was interested in the 'thing' for its own sake. Both are involved, not with describing things for the sake of description or listing the concrete properties of objects, but with describing the mind in the act of perceiving the thing.⁶

Thus, in the first stanza, Stevens designates the dark eye of the blackbird among the white mountains as the focal point or "frame of reference" for seeing:

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

Having given the reader the proper clue, the poet switches immediately, in the second stanza, to an identification with the "thingness" of his subject: "I was of three minds, / Like a tree / In which there are three blackbirds."

In stanza three, the reader is again placed in the non-participant "looking" position of the first stanza, ("The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds. / It was a small part of a pantomime.") although with the understanding that perhaps he, too, is a small part of that pantomime. Then, in the fourth stanza, the poet again accomplishes the perceptual "flip" which takes us past the "cleavage" which separates human from human and human from nature:⁷

A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

Giving us the object blackbird upon which to focus, the poet has in these four stanzas taught us to look and to see.

Having presented at least two ways of viewing the world, Stevens turns in the fifth stanza to a matter which accompanies this kind of perception: a study of figure/ground relationships. This study is closely related to the concepts of "being" and "not-being" or "doing" and "not-doing." The speaker says:

I do not know which to prefer,

The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling (figure, being, doing)
Of just after. (ground, not-being, not-doing)

Again the poet is not concerned with the object blackbird *per se*, but rather with expressing a philosophy of perception. This philosophy is discussed in Alan Watts' *Psychotherapy East and West* in the following terms:

The Buddhist principle that 'form is void (*sunya*)' does not therefore mean that there are no forms. It means that forms are inseparable from their context—that the form of a figure is also the form of its background.⁸

Thus, when the speaker of the poem says that he does not know which to prefer, his tone is ironic. He is stating that the supposed problem is false. In Watt's words, "The attempt not to grasp rests upon the same false premise as the grasping: that thinking and doing, intending and choosing (hearing and not-hearing) are caused by an ego, that physical events flow from a social fiction."⁹

In stanza six, the speaker reiterates that which has been taught in stanza five, adding a few conditions. This time, seen through glass, which figures both here and in stanza eleven as an arbitrary and ultimately useless obstacle to "seeing," the shadow of the bird crosses the window of perception. There is a "mood"

traced in this shadow—one of a cause. But the "cause" is "indecipherable." Thus we are left only with a shadow, which is in a real sense as substantial as the "cause."

The study of figure/ground relationship may also be found in Stevens' famous "Anecdote of the Jar."¹⁰ In that poem, although the jar itself is "gray and bare," it is able to take "dominion everywhere." Seen in one way, it is foreign to all else. ("It did not give of bird of bush, / Like nothing else in Tennessee.") but seen from the "flip side," it immediately defines all else. The jar both defines and is defined by the wilderness: "It made the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill."

In stanza seven of "Thirteen Ways," the speaker becomes adamant about the importance of seeing. He berates the men who vainly imagine golden birds, unaware that the commonplace, seen properly, offers richness beyond exoticism: "Do you not see how the blackbird / Walks around the feet / Of the women about you?" This lesson seems to share an impulse with Gregory Bateson's comments about perception:

. . . the laws and processes of perception are a bridge which joins us inseparably to that which we perceive . . . to increase awareness in one's scientific universe is to face unpredictable increases in one's awareness of the self.¹¹

In other words, it is not easy either to "see" or to appreciate the commonplace; both require a risk of "unpredictable" dimension.

Stanza eight reveals an implicit contrast between the "thin men of Haddam" and the speaker who has taken the risk. The latter has become a part of the object of perception. The blackbird is a part of his being able to know "noble accents" and "inescapable rhythms."

Figure/ground relationships are again discussed in stanza nine. The speaker points out that the blackbird, the arbitrary focal point, in flying out of sight defines just one aspect of the many possible ways of seeing: "It marked the edge / Of one of many circles." Once again, this stanza is not about the blackbird. It is about "seeing" the blackbird as at once defined by and definer of, part and not-part, of the rest of their mutual environment, just as in stanza eight the blackbird is not what the speaker knows, but rather a part of what he knows.

Stanzas ten and eleven are also thematically linked. The speaker is again lecturing to the same sort of people who inhabit Haddam in stanza seven. He seems to be saying that if it were possible for the "bawds of euphony" to see properly, that is, to "see" the blackbirds in a real ("green")¹² light, they would realize how closely involved are their lives with the blackbird. This is why the man who is capable of seeing in stanza ten ("He rode over Connecticut / In a glass coach") has an almost appropriate response to what he "mistakes for blackbirds" (i.e. reality). The "fear that pierced him" is a tribute to his having "seen" for a split second.

Lucien Stryk, in discussing his interpretation of Shinkichi Takahaski's poem "Destruction"¹³ notes that Man's failure to relinquish "the most rigid form of all—

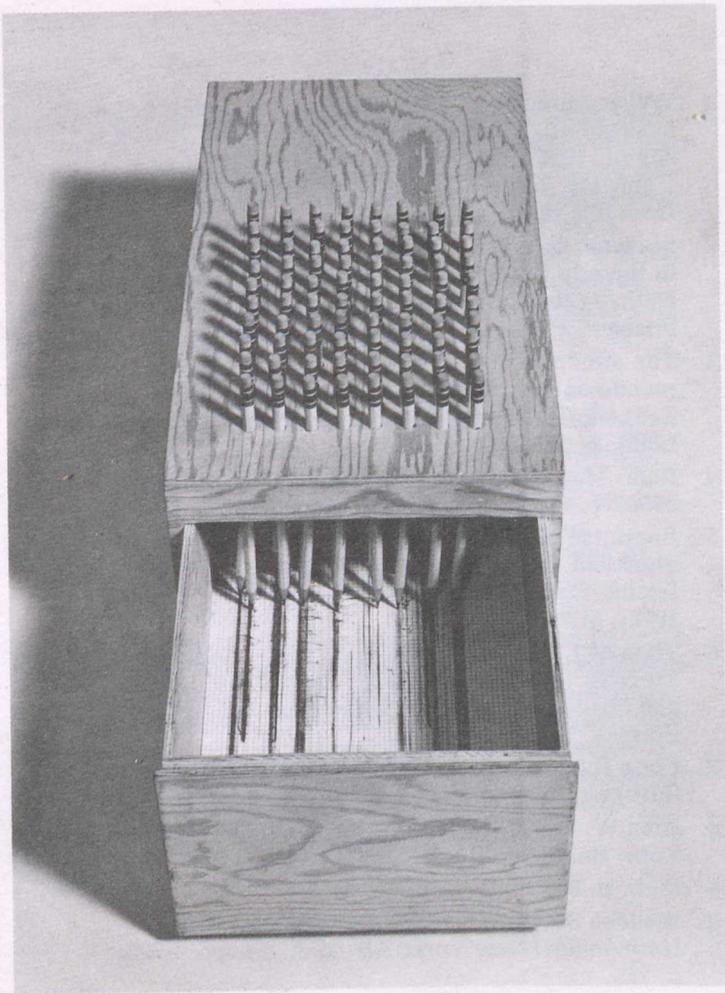
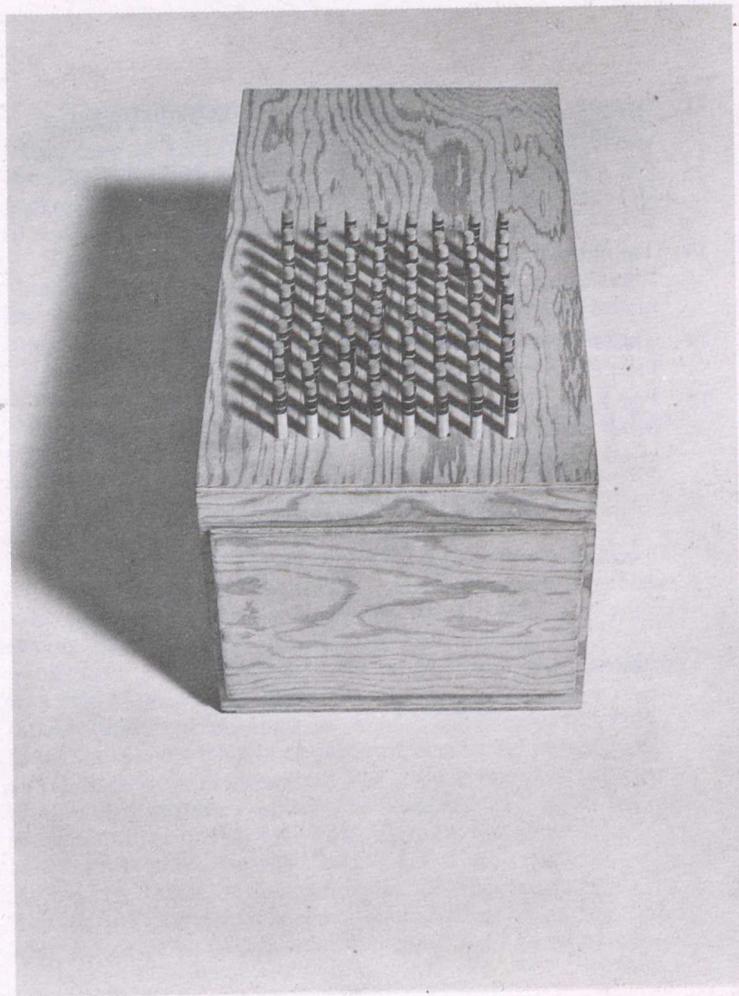
a conceptual universe"¹⁴ is part of the poet's concern. In Stevens' poem, the man is evidently sustained by his second perception—that the shadow is caused by his coach. He is thus able to explain it away "naturalistically" without having to take the risk of seeing. The point being made by the speaker here, as in Takahaski's poem, is that one must realize his oneness with the universe and accept the "blackbird" as at least as significant as himself, as being powerful enough to "crush you" if seen in the proper way.

The idea of oneness is restated in the *mondo*-like twelfth stanza: "The river is moving. / The blackbird must be flying." The first statement implies the second because one cannot be separated from the other.¹⁵ The brevity of the statement may also indicate a kind of summation of the lessons taught previously. The inference is that if one has been attentive, the fact of interdependence stated here should be obvious.

The quiet mood of the final stanza signals the speaker's acceptance of the world accomplished by "seeing." That the reader has learned the previous lessons is taken for granted. Now, even the "focus" or vehicle for learning is erased. The snow literally and figuratively obliterates the artificial boundaries which distinguish subject from object, seer from seen. It is not necessary to see the blackbird, obscured as it is "in the cedar limbs," to realize that all is one.

NOTES

- 1 Wallace Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," in *Harmonium* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), pp. 158-162. Hereafter cited as "Thirteen Ways." All references to the poem are from this text.
- 2 Stevens' aphoristic style is more fully discussed in Beverly Coyle's "An Anchorage of Thought: Defining the Role of Aphorism in Wallace Stevens' Poetry," *PMLA*, 91 (March 1976), 206-22.
- 3 The structure of Stevens' poem resembles the Zen *mondo* as described by D.T. Suzuki in *Studies in Zen*, ed. Christmas Humphreys, (New York: Delta, 1955), p. 165.
- 4 Rollo May, *Existence* (New York: Basic Books, 1958), p. 86.
- 5 Reprinted in Lucien Stryk's introduction to Shinkichi Takahaski's *Afterimages: Zen Poems*, Lucien Stryk, trans., (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), p. 25.
- 6 Thomas J. Hines, *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens: Phenomenological Parallels with Husserl and Heidegger* (London: Associated University Presses, 1976), p. 86.
- 7 For a fuller discussion of this idea, see also D.T. Suzuki in *Studies in Zen*, cited above, pp. 176-178.
- 8 Alan W. Watts, *Psychotherapy East and West* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1961) p. 82.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- 10 Wallace Stevens, "Anecdote of the Jar," in *Harmonium* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), p. 129.
- 11 Gregory Bateson, "Language and Psychotherapy," *Psychiatry*, 21 (February 1958), p. 96.
- 12 For a discussion of Stevens' symbolic color-system see Frank Kermode, *Wallace Stevens* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960), pp. 68 and 106.
- 13 Takahaski's poem "Destruction" in *Afterimages: Zen Poems*, cited above, p. 22, is reprinted in full at the end of these notes.
- 14 Taken from Lucien Stryk's introduction to *Afterimages* cited above, 1. 23.
- 15 For a discussion of Stevens' use of this idea in other poems see Frank Kermode, *Wallace Stevens*, cited above, especially pp. 27-28.



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