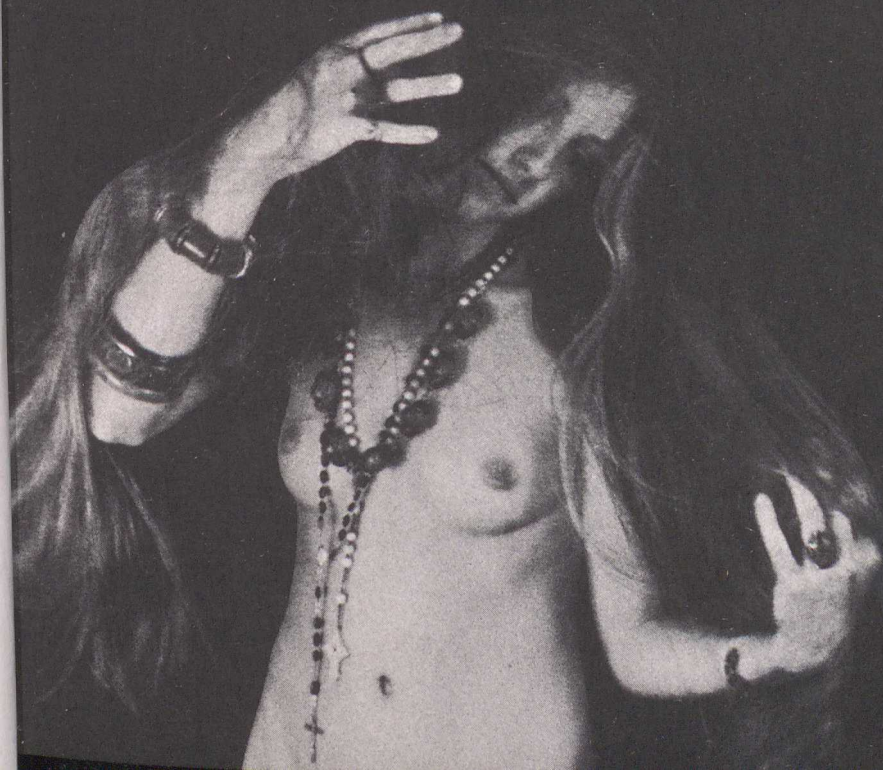


NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
ARCHIVES

# Towers xxxxi



# Towers xxxxi

## Northern Illinois University

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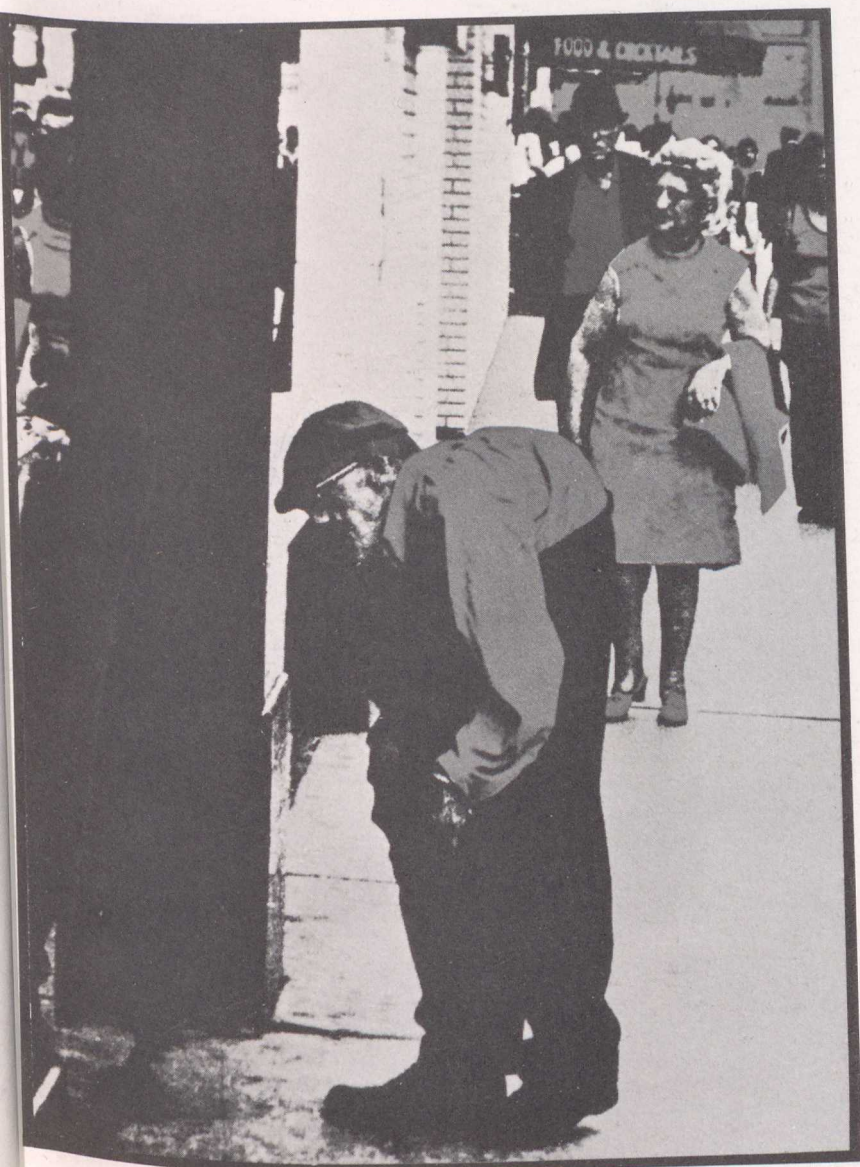
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Judge: Sue Doederlein



"In front of the Forum" serigraph

Tom Erickson

## THE SORCERER'S APPRENTICE

It might have been better  
if I had stuck to amateur  
status, contented myself  
by entertaining the neighbors  
with easy illusions and parlor tricks.

The thing is fast running out of control.

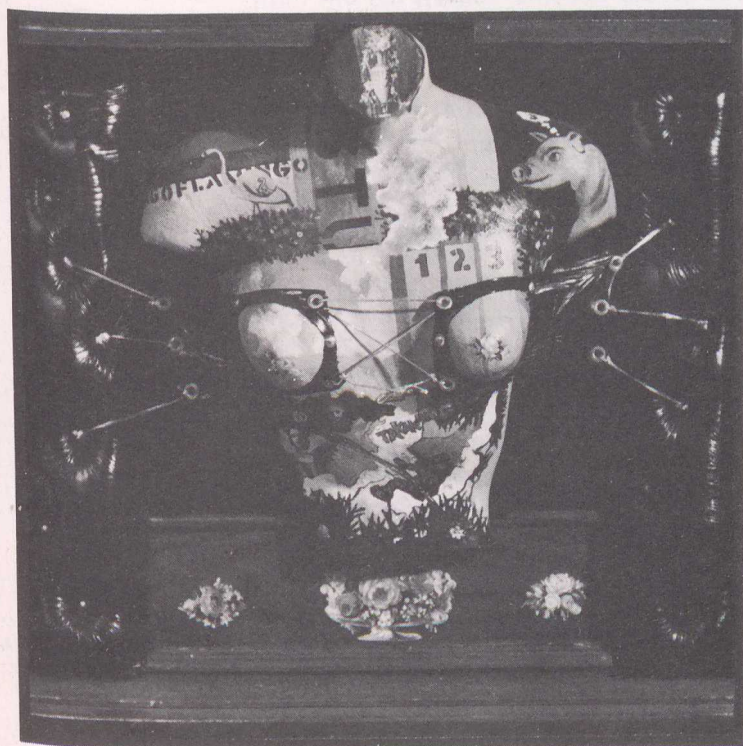
My house is littered with familiars  
and mandrake takes root in my hair.  
A plethora of fantastic characters  
surrounds me: they keep leaping  
from my hat, uncalled for.

Whatever happened to white rabbits?

I didn't want *this* as a career!  
O, why doesn't someone laugh  
and clap their hands and change  
these beings back to images again?  
The game's grown gruesome,

and some puppet may swallow my soul.

Jeff Abell



untitled sculpture

Jim Dowdall

## LETTING THE DARK OUT OF THE BAG

you would of course  
prefer to think this evening.  
that this is happening all the time.  
that things get dark  
because the sun goes down.

you would become fidgety,  
informing you the darkness  
now has purpose.  
that we have conspired.  
that we are unscrewing  
the lids off everything,  
opening drawers & closet doors,  
kicking up rugs,  
turning our pockets inside-out,  
letting the dark out.

we would ease your mind,  
explaining this is really  
being done with mirrors,  
except for your eyes,  
soon void of an image.

we will prove contagious  
what we are doing.  
you will be escorted  
to a white, windowless room,  
a single bulb hanging.  
you will be handed a sack and hammer.  
if when we have returned  
the sack is open,  
glass will be everywhere.  
you will have let the dark out.

Karl Elder

JAMES HARTWELL (1940-1965)

Jamie, with arms frail as tinder  
you strung a bow  
and kindled the one fire  
I've seen from elm bark.

How does any man say  
he pretended sleep  
while you kissed his hair  
and silently masturbated  
onto his sleeping bag?

Or that at 25 you were  
the baby of the family?

For the next of kin's sake  
the radio withholds your name  
just as I have these years.

It took a phone call  
from my old man  
reminding me  
you'd "took one chance too many."

At his voice I remembered your "Daddy"  
with biceps like cups of bronze,  
a Burlington foreman, the best.  
How you sometimes despised!  
Then near went nuts  
the night the Army flew you back  
from Panama, rummed-up,  
and visions of him fallen  
over his sledge,  
face blue as the rails.

How was it you knew  
those same rails  
would send a diesel,  
the penis of your bad dreams,  
to ejaculate  
you and your Ford from the track,  
scattered like so many seeds.

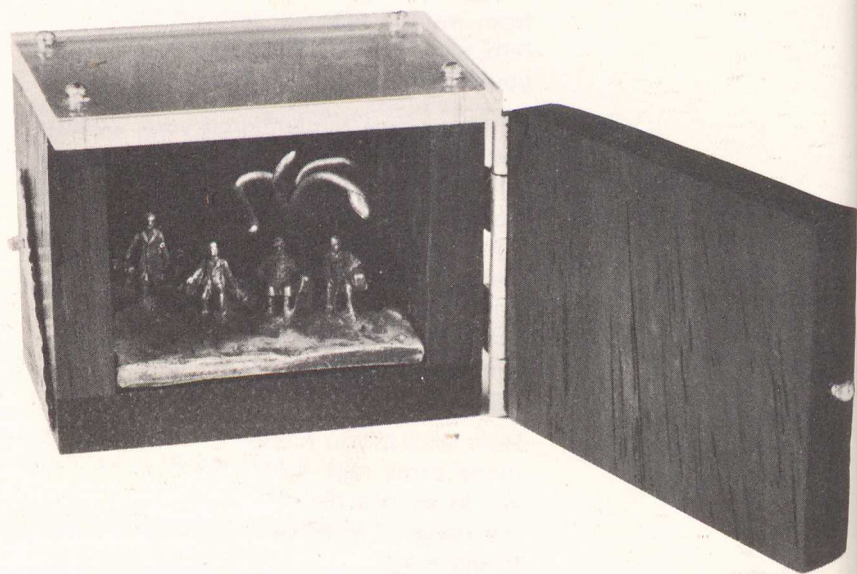
Jamie, I imagined when you  
looked up your heart  
near leaped from your chest.

Later, they told me it had.

For Christsakes, Jim,  
the gates were down.

Karl Elder





untitled box form

Dan Spahr

### THE CUT-GLASS

His eyes were clear as silks,  
Wavering like the green cut-glass  
Cupped in the dark of his hands.

I could smell his yellow teeth  
And the salt marks under his arms  
As he poured my children milk.

We left them in the kitchen  
When he took me to his showcase  
Where all the cuts in a crystal bowl

Spread light through the beveled pane  
And through the image of his lips  
Moving on the dustless glass.

He took out a long-necked vase  
Carved with a rustic scene  
Of youths running after a plowman.

Then he held it higher, in the light,  
So the lines he carved there years ago  
Converged with the lines of his face.

Janet K. Fair

## ASH EASTER

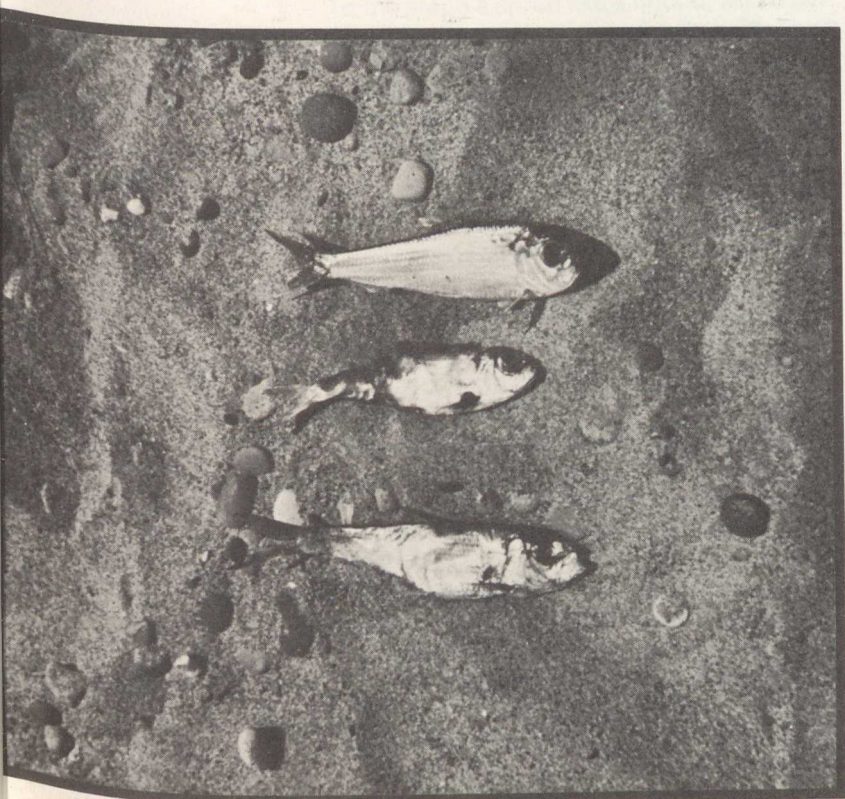
Easter morning walk  
With Merrienne & Niece Lisa  
In old cemetery across street  
From Grandparents' house  
I played baseball in an unused protion  
When I was young

Walking toward huge statues  
Of Christ on a steel cross  
A watcher on each side  
Noticing for the first time  
Some new graves of last few years  
Flat markers only no headstones

Merrienne points out one  
He was born a year after me  
He died at 22 in Viet Nam 1968  
An Easter lily in a tinseled pot  
An American Legion medallion on a shaft  
Stuck into his grave site  
Simple flat metal plaque

Ash from my morning cigarette  
Floats across the grave  
Merrienne & Lisa straighten flowers on others  
Lisa rides piggyback on my shoulders  
Kicks mud on my shirt as we return

John Hoffman



untitled photograph

Michael H. Price

## WEATHER FOR OPTIMISM

First, of course, there was this century  
Of gears and grinding, debauchery  
Of fear, that stripped away, even as  
It was laid, the careful sheen of the sky.

Now, scurf falls from a season of rain.  
Beyond a world rubbed raw, the watery sky  
Streams silently past clouds bunched  
Like continents before the Drift.

Day done. All the night, like mud, now  
Slaps beneath my shoes. Mars glints  
Above a swamp. Tonight, people will die again  
As they should, not in a country, but a bed.

Michael Antman

## AN ABSURDIST PLAY

The scene is the earth. A concrete apron  
Covers the stage, pole to pole. There is  
No theatre. The concrete stretches grey  
And bare as the eye can see, a bas-relief  
Of the sky. A stock figure is knee to chin  
In a ball in middle ground. Behind him  
Is nothing, and it does not concern him.  
Before him, myself. I am not concerned.

It has been this time for quite a time. My  
Stomach holds a shifting load of splintered  
Glass. My brain is filled with penny nails.  
I, the audience. I, the man, lope up  
To the stage's apron like a hound, and dash  
On my fours to the wings of the world.  
My dog's eye whirls up, blackly grows,  
And whirling with it, wholly dark,  
Hold in its dot the ends of the earth.

Michael Antman

## LYCURGUS CHURCH

Where the eye runs down  
The long valley from Lycurgus  
To the Upper Iowa  
Until it skips, making out  
Distances more remote,

To a moonlit dirt road  
Winding into the dark  
And wolves howling around  
Where somewhere back there in time  
They found, when morning came,  
Her shoes and her small feet.

The wolves, an uncle told,  
Had eaten all but those and left  
As poor reminder that she ever walked  
The Allamakee back roads  
And played in the sun or swam with the others  
In the stream,

Told, and in the telling his rich voice  
Trailed off into a dream . . .  
There was another, strong and mad,  
His lank hair hung over his face.  
His mother could not stop him  
Prowling in the night, and they say  
He ran with the wolves.

His name struck fear. And though  
The boys never saw him near--if they  
Saw him at all it was a simple dull lad  
Of some forty years playing with the calves--  
They used his name to fright the girls,  
Or when they were alone and it growing  
Towards dark, to scare themselves  
Into running home.

When the wolves howled at night, sometimes,  
My Uncle said, his wicker rocker sweeping,  
He out to check the hens before bed saw,  
Clear as day, men dancing in his fresh plowed  
Field under the bright moonlight.  
They were the ghosts of Indians who'd died there  
In a fight, and the howling of the wolves  
Had called them up--that and the fact  
He'd plowed that day had bothered them.  
A sack of arrowheads was proof,  
Crusty with black dirt.

Today the eye runs out  
Before it comes to such,  
And around Lycurgus Church  
Smiling clouds float  
Or it rains.  
Nearby a man plants corn.  
A woman wants to marry there.  
And neither hears the howling  
Anymore.  
Such nights as once there were that  
Held the long dead wolves that fed  
On dreaming boys are peaceful now.

Dick Steele



## NO WEATHER EYE

I have not like the fisherman  
Spent my life on passages  
Between some Dulwich and the sea.

Not like the cod-man sat cutting  
Toy boats by the hour.

Not named my bawley "Bessie"  
After a favorite sister.

Not carried shrimp to  
The Railway station hard-by.

Not stood with a glass to my eye  
At the broken door to the boat shed.

Not worked in a canvas jumper, leggings,  
And high boots, ankle-deep in the mud,  
To retrieve the craft mired  
By a sudden drift.

I could not turn out a new sail  
Or mend an old one for extra pay.

Not carried in an oilcloth six wicks  
Of blubber matches in a brass box.

Not felt deeply the loss of hen-coops  
From the deck during a storm.

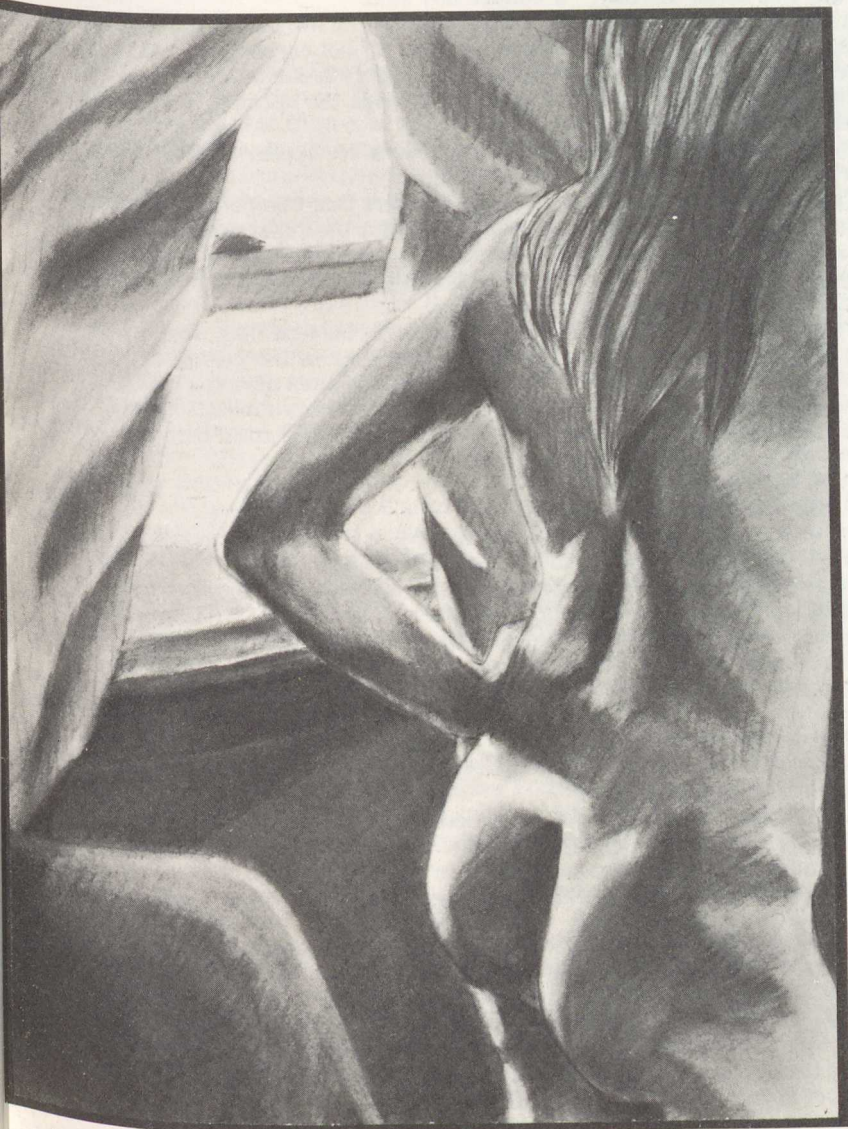
I never expect to go aloft.

An excursionist who goes down  
In summer weather,

A passenger who remains below  
With the ladies,

I have never been grateful for linoleum.

Dick Steele



untitled drawing

Carla Babrick

THE FLY IN THE CAN  
(A Tale of Love)

By Greg Janicke

The buzzer cut the sound of talking factoryworkers. Black, brown, white men, black, white women, college boys slowly rose from their places at the indoor picnic area, one by one, and regrouped in front of a large plastic board hanging on the wall.

"see where the board put me today. . ."

"ah, I'm bored already," a college boy said.

A fork lift truck wheeled around the corner by the workers--the back of the truck looked like an air conditioner--this one gave off hot carbon gas, not cool air--the truck honked its horn, a chunk of workers slowly broke away from the group to make room; back first the truck passed through the opening; it drove on to the lines of machines nearby.

Ron stood at the back of the group of workers. He appeared to be looking at the workers rather than through them and at the board.

The first shift of 035 Glenwood Plant Unifers Can Company was preparing to resume the work the third shift had left. From the supervisor's office near the plastic board a short, pot-bellied foreman stepped out, looking down at a sheet of paper in his hand--he approached the board and transcribed numbers from the paper to the plexiglass.

The packing floor of the five story complex was the first floor, and in a sense, the last floor, where finished cans poured from slots in the ceiling through metal channels, down to long enclosed conveyor belts located near the high ceiling; the cans moved in single file for several yards, then slid down metal channels again to more conveyors at the workers' level. The cans dropped down the metal channels in rhythm: clack, clack, clack, clack.

"...4739,4741,4803 on 309..."

"...got the Gallon Line again..."

"where's 4803? shit. Ron, you wanna take that line?" Ron smiled, raised his hand, touched his forefinger to his thumb, creating a floating "o". A skinny little man, his body smelling with whiskey, tapped his hand on Ron's shoulder.

"gonna sweat cho ass off today, man." From behind him, Ron caught the word 'Sophie'--he spun his head around and saw three bulks of female flesh waddling to their assigned lines--he looked down to the floor and slowly went to his line.

Ron joined 4739 and 4741 at the Gallon Line. Already several lines near him had been brought to action; the cans began to rattle as they trickled from the ceiling conveyors. Ron delicately pressed tiny rubber earplugs joined by a shoestring into his ears as he watched the arms and hands of the two co-workers slapping wet labels on large paper bags.

"some skids, Ron, huh?" a voice called out. Ron walked to a pile of 42"x42"x5" wooden platforms and began setting them, one by one, across the floor near the line. Can-filled paper bags would be set on the skids by Ron, 4739, and 4741 for the fork lift trucks to take out to the shipping docks. Ron caught a sliver in his skin from a skid he threw down.

Straight back: the skids; a two yard area for the bag sealers Ron and the two others; 12 blue iron bins; a one yard area for the two can packers; the conveyor line of gallon paint cans. 4739 popped a bag open, slid it in the bin, set the bin back on its 45 degree tilt. He snapped another bag. The two women packers filed into their area behind the bins. As Ron bent over to put a skid down, he craned his neck to see the women. Through the bins he could not see faces, but two stomachs; both pairs of arms owned big pulpy hands; one pair of hands set a purse on top of the bin shelf. Over the top of the bins Ron saw the floating head of a tall black man with a glass eye--the foreman of the Gallon Line. The eye slowly turned left and right like a searchlight; suddenly, the silver paint cans appeared, one by one, from the ceiling and fell to the ceiling conveyor.

"our black Moses done called manna outta heaven fo' us to feed offa," 4741 said in an exaggerated dialect.

4739 set 4 rolls of 2 inch tape on top of the bins. "how come you ain't asked me about th' White Sox, Ron? or th' Cubs? or th' weather? or..."

"he's too busy thinkin' on Sophie to worry about his ole White Sox..."

"Sooo-fee...or is it, 'sooo-freee'?"

"nah, sooo-eeee..."

Ron had come to Univers Can Company some 15 years ago as the next step in his life from high school. Money: Ron's face twisted into a smile at the sight of his Friday pay checks--at \$4.00 an hour he could make quite a bit--every pay day lunch Ron would dramatize to his comrades how he would save and save, penny by penny, play the stock market, invest in land, make money to settle down with a good woman. And even retire at 45 happy. The money would roll like cans in a line.

Work: the factory afforded more than money to fascinate young Ron. During working hours his lips would turn up in a grin, his big cobalt eyes widen as he watched can packers packing all different kinds of cans into boxes or bags. He would watch mechanics struggling with black oily gears and chain belts--Ron has asked if they ever worried about getting their fingers caught and have their bones cracked and ground into the machinery. They said no.

Depending on the line assigned, work could be hard or easy. Some cans moved very slowly, so the workers did, too. Some lines were always breaking down, so the workers had to sit and wait for the mechanics to fix the machinery. The Gallon Line moved the fastest and never broke down. Ron saw an old woman faint right before him on the Gallon Line once; she banged her head on one of the bins when she fell. The old bat should have known better than to keep working in this heat, Ron's partner told him. Ron just looked with his big eyes.

People: during work breaks Ron drifted from black, brown, white men to white, black women to college boys like a cork bobbing in water, asking people about their life outside of work. Most of them just laughed at Ron. Nosey and talking and never sitting still. He spent most of his time with the women--they talked back with him more than the men did.

"Ronny wants hisself a woman," 3601 said to 3614 at lunchtime once.

"how d'ya know that?" 3614 asked.

"'cuz I asked him once, 'why you always oglin' the girls? you movin' in on one?' and he said yeah, he could see it, that's what makin' money was all about."

"wow. yeah. there're a few buns around her I could see munchin' on."

Day after day work went on without incident. The plant stayed operating, the people still had work, every once in awhile everybody got a pay increase of a few pennies more an hour. Things were not bad.

And the workers enjoyed Ron. Every morning upon entering the factory world Ron extended his sleepy arms up and out.

"de Fly ees stretchin' his weengs," one would comment as he watched Ron. Indeed, his short, slim body, round head covered by patches of wiry black hair, and, in particular, his eyes, suggested to one of the workers that Ron resembled the insect. The others caught on and applied the name to him.

"goddam Fly gonna come buzzin' around at lunch smilin' and askin' and yakkin' about his big dreams..."

"why doesn't somebody tell him to shut up?"

"why? who else we got to keep us awake here?"

A woman worker admitted, "big eyes. I hate those big eyes of his. feel like he's lookin' right through my clothes at the glories underneath." Ron's eyes pressed out of his face as if a hand was choking at his neck.

"his mother was raped by a bug," some of the workers joked. Ron, they said, was the result--half man, half bug; his body wasn't sure which way to go.

But after years and years of repetition, Ron's smiling and asking and yakking about dreams slowed down; after years, his fellow workers quit calling him the Fly or anything else.

"I knew his babblin' would stop," a veteran employee told his comrades. "I knew he couldn't keep it up day after day. he finally wore hisself into a spot here."

"his eyes finnally fit his head now."

"still keeps buggin' with th' women most times." And they all worked day after day after day.

Sophie was a child. She had been transferred from the defunct Mayberg Plant of Univers Can; she had been at the Glenwood Plant only nine months.

Ron had first met Sophie at the Gallon Line. The cans had been falling and banging like a shooting gallery for 1½ hours when the line suddenly stopped. The two other sealers went to the washroom for a smoke during the lapse in activity while Ron seated himself on a 3 foot high stack of skids. Through the bins he watched a grey belly move away and out; then no longer saw the paunch. Ron rubbed some factory dirt from his eyes that a fork truck had coughed up; turned and saw a plain yellow waist gliding behind the bins to the former packer's spot. The ochre lap sat back on the conveyor line. From the thigh to an area just above the head, the strange new body was framed by dark metal; the body sat, motionless, next to a motionless can and looked, from Ron's distance, like a portrait painting. As the head turned to the fellow packer, the jaw dropped and bounced up and down. Ron heard nothing but watched her eyes--two chips of glass from a broken beet bottle. The head turned towards Ron and interrupted the jaw bouncing with a quick smile. Silver cans rattled far away and flooded from the ceiling. The other sealers were still in the washroom--Ron couldn't seal the bags to keep up with the packers--the line got backed up--cans popped from the conveyor line and banged on the floor--the voice of the one-eyed foreman shouted in Ron's ears--Ron's eyes widened at the foreman at the cans at the yellow woman--more cans broke from the ranks--the other two sealers laughed behind the foreman's back as they picked up fallen paint cans.

Nine months ago. Day after day passed like flowing files of cans. Ron finally spoke with Sophie. He bacame a packing floor acquaintance; he became a hello--how are you--sure is hot today--how 'bout them White Sox factory born friend. A fellow employee could have noticed the wrinkled scabs of skin parting for the white of Ron's bug eyes, the way they had looked years ago. The Fly now spent work breaks talking of money and land and stocks and settling down with a good woman and retiring at 55; he openly declared he was going places.

"I'm going places, too," Sophie would say, "Jamaica, Europe, Japan, shit, the world." Sophie smiled and talked and listened and ate while Ron smiled and looked and talked...

"get me some chipboard," a rough voice in the present now called to the Fly over the bins. He sealed a bag and went over and grabbed a handful of thin cardboards to be set between layers of cans in a bag. 4741 raised his hands in the air and gestured as if breaking a stick. It was morning break time.

The Fly retired to the indoor picnic area and sat with the fork truck drivers.

"no, Romeo, I ain't seen Sophie..."

"playin' softball after work?" a driver threw out to all at the table as he dug his wiggling thumb into a nostril.

"yeah, did you hear how that shittin' shippin' foreman screwed me over?"

"no, lookit Sexy Shirley..." a young woman walked from the personnel office past the picnic area. She walked on muscular legs visible to within inches of the thighs; while she walked her hair throbbled at both sides of her face like flapping wings; two notebooks held across her chest made a protective breastplate. Behind her, in contrast, walked an old woman with wild hair and a drooping back; varicose veins pressed at the bumpy white of her legs and resembled a road map. The woman turned to the Fly.

"no, I ain't seen her, but I'll tell her ya wanta talk with her.."

"god, would I like to get in Sexy Shirley," a driver with a pock-marked face said as he inhaled on a cigar.

"Ron, are you in?"

"softball, Ron. you playin' ball with us?"

After the workers had prolonged their 15 minute break for the usual 20 minutes, they were all back again with their machines. Work went on without incident; Ron and 4739 and 4741 worked quietly while the metal banged away until lunchtime.

In the cafeteria upstairs: clatter of silverware, plates, plastic trays; drag of chairs on the floor; buzz of talking workers; music pouring from speakers in the ceiling--the workers' eating place seemed to differ little from the workers' working place. The Fly looked around the room with his large eyes for a seat. He saw some comrades, smiling walked toward them, slowly sat himself in the only available seat--across from Sophie.

"Hi, love, bet you're sweating your bucket off. Got myself on 426--the little tiny oil cans that you pack 240 into a box--boy, I can park it in the washroom for 20 minutes at a stretch. Nothin' like earning money while ya sit around. Hey, would you be a darling and get me some water? Sittin' or workin', it's hot." Her small hand wiped her brow with a napkin, leaving a faint red scar across her forehead. The Fly went to the water fountain and returned with two cupfuls.

"Thanks, babe," The Fly smiled and sat back. He cleared his throat, sat forward, and cleared his throat again. He drank some water. His eyes caught a man walking to a table near him. The man had a large toy panda bear in his arms.

"brought his wife to work today," someone said. The man presented the bear to a nice-looking young girl with black hair arranged in bangs. Her yellow teeth appeared through a smile.

"for your new baby," the Fly heard. The man touched the girl and kissed her cheek. From across the girl, a lean man in a sleeveless T-shirt shot up, grabbed the gift-bearer.

"keep away from the girl--don't talk about no kid--she didn't want it--she was..." The thin man's fist crashed once, twice into the gift-bearer's face.

"Jesus Mary and Joseph," Sophie cried out. The Fly watched the thin man's arm muscles tighten and extend as they punched into the gut of the passive gift-bearer. He fell to the floor. The thin man threw the panda bear on him.

"goddam you, no touchin' her. leave her alone. baby ain't hers, I'll smack anyone down who gets cute. no touchin'..." The one-eyed black foreman grabbed the man and took him from the cafeteria.

The workers gradually resumed talking and eating and laughing after the gift-bearer had been helped away. Lunch ended with the Fly not saying a word, only occasionally glancing up and across the table, mostly staring down into a half-empty wax cup.

"Crazy-ass people," the Fly heard Sophie say.

The afternoon repeated the morning like each day repeating the other: work, break, work, break, work. The Fly, however, appeared different this afternoon--he fumbled with bags and boxes and tape like a novice sealer; looked like he was

working faster and harder as the day went on, rather than tiring out.

During the final work period of the day several new can lines opened up; more cans, more noise: clack, clack, clack, clack. But even as the noise grew, a sliver of it got quiet--the Gallon Line stopped. 4739 and 4741 slapped stickers on bags for a while, then left for the washroom. The Fly seated himself on a 2 foot stack of chipboard near the line. He watched brown-orange hips of one of the women packers suddenly snap up, twist, and rush away; he watched a flat, faded yellow waist counter the movements. His eyes widened as if the lids were reaching for the sky and the ground at the same time. Sophie sat and slightly waved at the Fly. From behind her a fork truck stopped, the driver hopped off, came up behind her, reached around and grabbed her breasts. She jabbed him with her elbow, she smiled, then laughed. The truck driver smiled, laughed, and returned to his route.

The Fly coughed, pulled both stops out of his ears, coughed, walked up to Sophie, leaned through a bin.

"What's on your mind, sugar?" she asked. The Fly pushed his head further through the gap of the bin. His face was only a yard from hers--his eyes, slightly closer.

"Speak up." His hands gripped tightly around the metal frame of the bin. His fingertips burned red and white.

"I'm sorry. What did you say? Huh? Go out? AFter work? Dinner, show, dancing? I can't dance. Quit kidding me, Ronny." The Fly released his right hand from the metal, slowly his arm muscles tightened and extended as he reached out and touched his fingertips to the back of Sophie's hand. Sophie drew back; she didn't smile she didn't laugh. The Fly snapped back through the bin as if he had stuck his hand in fire.

"Would you stop foolin' around? What? Money? You got enough money? We all got enough money. But it's never enough, y'know? Right now I'm savin' to get me a brand new...huh?"

One can slid down the channel. Clack. "After work I go home and eat, take a nap, read the paper, watch TV, and go to sleep. Nice and easy, ain't it? Then I'm ready for work. When I get my vacation I'll probably go to the Bahamas, or Mexico, or maybe, heh, the Virgin Islands...just to break things up..."

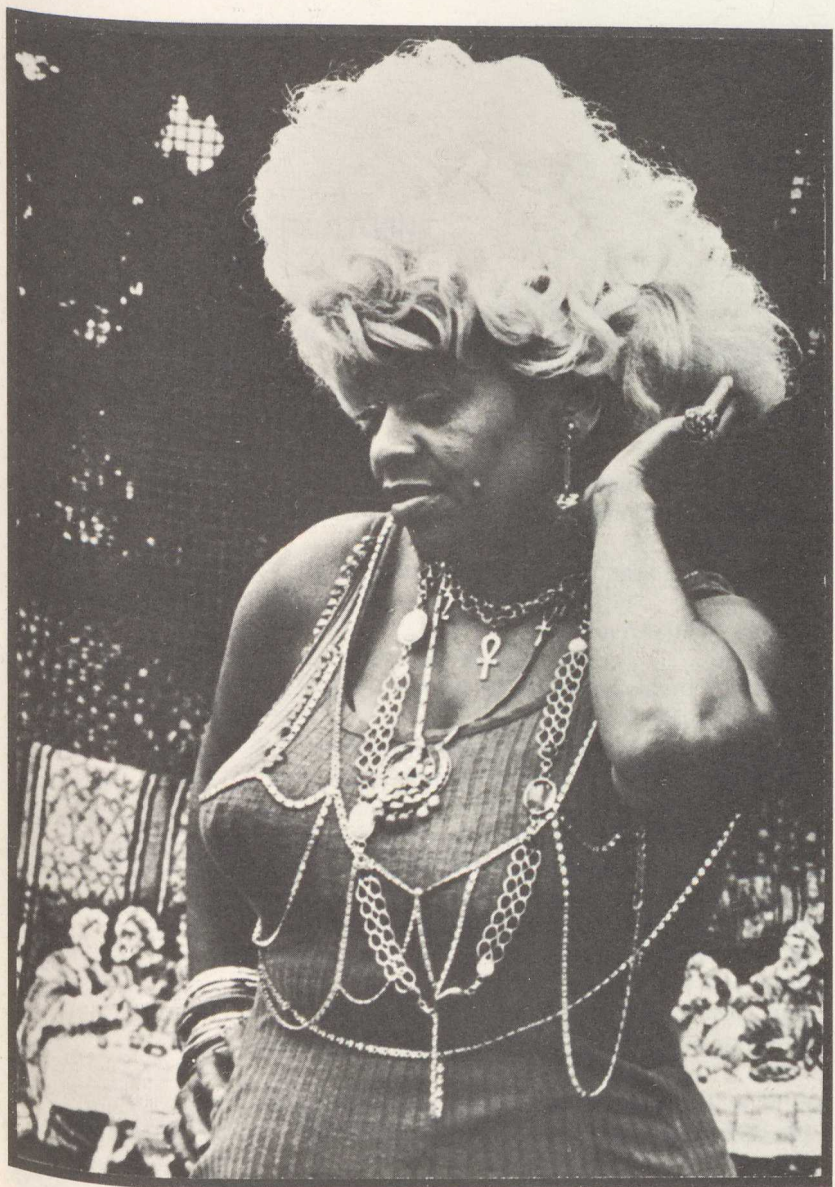
Clack. "Yeah. I'm really pretty. Halfa my teeth ain't mine, my hair's turned more colors than the rainbow, and I can't exactly hold a pencil under my mosquito bites, if ya know what I mean. Smile, Ronny."

Clack. "You're funny, Ron, just like they all say. Always jokin' around. But you shouldn't toy with a woman's affections this way with all your wild talk of chasin' around like kids, ha ha ha."

Clack. "And I like you, too. Is it 4:30 yet? I'm gettin' sore sittin' here..."

Ron loosened his grip on the bin frame. The Gallon Line started again, cans rolling and tumbling and banging and rattling down from the heights. Sophie was still talking.

"Maybe we can have an intimate lunch in the careteria tomorrow, eh, babe?" Her words were garbled and lost in the sound of banging cans. A fork truck passed by. Ron shut his eyes and pressed his index fingers hard against them. He rubbed and rubbed. For a moment when he reopened his eyes all he saw was black.



untitled photograph

Chuck Berman



## IN DEKALB

I've walked it one end  
to the other,  
and like a tunnel  
of sleep, the  
strict light's at  
either end:

In the East out of  
Chicago,  
factories break a pulse  
against dusk  
to hold the reddened sky,  
keep the light;

In the West out of  
nowhere,  
crude eloquence stands as  
some such form  
of survival from corn,  
corn everywhere,  
taut gesture of morning  
summer sun.

And at the heart there's  
no fear--not blood nor growth  
dares harm the dream,  
the dream of knowing.

Frank Delend Cluck

## NOCTURNE

Woman, what it is that clasps  
Us together holds us apart:

Some predatory wings clap  
Satin above us; constricted

Talons define our separate  
Bounds, while we dance stinging

Moments gaffed at brain-base  
By claws sharp as your sighs.

And speeding thick around,  
Thickly through us, memory

Absorbs spraying cries like  
Murmurs drained into soft downed

Pillow and flower-pressed  
Coverlet. We learn to hang

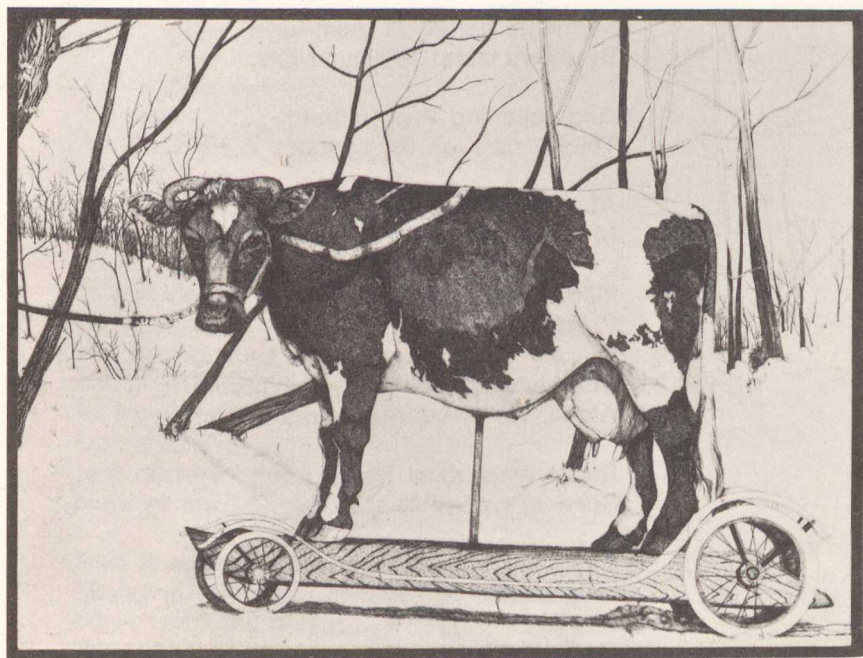
Still heaving breaths as they come;  
Alone, we relive what's remembered,

Relive what must be forgotten:  
Survival's possible that way.

But what frightens most is knowing  
That nested somewhere we'll join for good,

Devoured by one biting kiss.

Frank Delend Cluck



"Pull Toy No. 1" intaglio

Chris Williams

## ANXIETY

Up early, work hard.  
But it is even colder somehow.  
The storm has stopped and  
the light is bright.  
It tingles and dances on the snow.  
The snow rubs my thighs  
as I walk to the barn.  
The horse snorts steam into the cold air  
and stamps her feet as I tighten the saddle.  
She is as uneasy as I.  
We follow the frantic, struggling  
path of her mate in the snow.  
Somewhere are trapped frozen cows.  
Somewhere is my father.

David Meyer

## A PERFECT SNOW ANGEL

By Frank Delend Cluck

Only the sound of wheels skating across tight packed snow turned ice. He heard no other sounds, no traffic, no voices whispering, and the only smell was a funny mixture of gasoline and flowers. She took a little twig of flowers right before they left. It didn't bother him when she broke the quiet with sniffing. She stopped in a little while. He wasn't going to cry or be afraid anymore; "never ever!" he caught himself whispering. Dad coughed and cleared his throat. Mom mumbled something he couldn't understand.

Head on an arm rest, he touched the other door with his feet, stretching hard, arms straight at sides. He had the back seat to himself and it was a different world. On his back, he could look out the window across from him and see only dark blue sky, clouds scattered and moving real fast, beyond, but covering all, a bright winter sun. The sky framed in the window, and the only sound again, quiet roaring like a jet going over a backyard tent in the black middle of a summer night. But he wasn't scared like then. The sun was out and he felt bold.

Bold enough to be an astronaut. And he was. He was flying past jets and clouds to Mars and past Mars to heaven. It was a long journey to heaven. He was still, quiet, stiff. With his winter coat and suit underneath, he felt like he was in astronaut clothes. The car's movement and the speeding clouds made him feel he was flying.

"Mom? Mom, I want to be an astronaut for Halloween." She didn't answer right away. He sat and tapped her shoulder.

"Halloween's a long way off, Tommy." Turning and wiping her eyes. He saw they were red with dark rings around.

"Yeah, but you said time goes fast...so remember, Okay?"

She nodded and facing around began to sniffle again. This time he saw the handkerchief, and his father reaching a hand to her shoulder, the way Dad put it on him the other night. The first time he'd seen Mom cry ever.

Dinner, One of those settled times. He and Mom were drying the dishes when the phone rang. He held one end of the towel, she quickly drying her hands on the other; then patting him on the head, she took quick bouncy steps to the phone. She winked at him as she tossed her head to flip her hair back, bare her ear. He smiled back at her but with a devil's grin. She still had soap suds on her arm between elbow and wrist. It looked funny. He watched the tiny bubbles pop as he listened. And as they popped his mother's voice became more scratchy, bothered.

"Hello Mom!" It was Grandma.

"Oh, what's wrong?" Her eyebrows bunched together. The bubbles kept popping. "No...oh no," she groaned. "Listen, Mom, we'll call you back." She didn't say good-bye, hung up, and left quick to her room and Dad's, crying like a moan. "Mat...Matthew!"

He put down the towel, listening for something, and walked on tiptoe into the dark hall. Stopping at the bedroom door, he listened again, almost feeling like he did something wrong. He'd never heard her cry and stood frozen in the dark.

In a few moments there were footsteps. The door opened with Dad like a shadow, light all around. Then Tom saw his face, could make out the dim pattern in his shirt. Past Dad, Mom sat on the bed just looking down, the bubbles gone from her arm. When Dad started talking he sounded tired.

"Tom, you're a big fella now—I think you can understand." Tom was still. Dad squatted down. "Mom just got a call and I called back. Well...I want you to try and understand. Your Great Grandma Johnson was very very old and old people don't have good hearts, see?" Tom nodded. Dad continued, twisting his hands together, nodding with Tommy, "Good, good. Well, she was out shovelling snow, see, and

well she just died. Her heart couldn't work anymore." Tommy stood as before, not moving at all. Dad stared and made the boy look down.

At Sunday School once he saw a picture of Jesus supposed to be dead in a cave but it was an angel instead. The angel just sat there smiling, saying Jesus already went to heaven. And once he saw a funeral car with lots of other cars behind in a long string. In the quiet after Dad's last words, Tom heard Mom sob, saw her on the bed.

"Your Mother's very upset. She loved her grandma just like you love yours." Dad stood up as he talked. A strange feeling made Tom do it. Dad wasn't talking to a baby; Tom knew what dying was. Yet, something made him feel unsure. He began to cry and Dad pulled him tight into the flannel stomach of his shirt. The tears soaked into the cloth, feeling like soft pajamas against his face. Seconds later he was silenced.

"Will she go to heaven?" Muttering into the shirt.

"What, Tommy?" Not understanding.

"Will she go to heaven?" Tom pushed back, wiping his eyes for the answer.

"Oh, it's a long journey to heaven, Tommy. But I think she'll make it." Dad stood and put a hand on Tom's shoulder and stared right at his eyes for a minute. Then he walked back into the bedroom, shutting the door behind him. Everything was dark again except for a little slit of light from under the door.

"Sit back Tommy, okay?" Surprised, he felt his father's hand on his shoulder. He glided back against the car door still staring at Mom and tried to see the flag Dad put on the aerial. The window was cold and fogged from his breath.

He puffed breaths onto the glass and fogged the whole window. In the fog, he drew a space ship and spelled his name. He could see people through the mist standing on the sidewalks. They looked funny. They looked like jell-o people, wiggily and blurry.

Some old ladies with shopping carts were waiting for a bus and they looked sorry. They shook their heads like Mom did when he threw-up once. She said she felt sorry then and it made him feel better.

He looked out the back window at them for a second, but he didn't want to look long. His uncle was behind and he didn't want to wave at his cousin Beth. He didn't like her, but he looked too long and by accident he saw her. He didn't like any girls.

"Dad, could you go faster?" He felt Beth staring. She was probably making faces or saying lies about him.

"We'll be there soon, Son. Just wait." His father probably couldn't see Beth in the mirror or else he'd go faster.

Everyone had to keep moving. The weather was real cold, but when they followed the line through a red light and around a corner the bright sun hurt his eyes. It was neat to go through red lights. Tom felt part of something important. Everytime they went through one, he'd turn to see if Beth's father had stopped. But they kept coming too. Beth! What a jerk. Earlier that day he was in the funeral parlor basement with her alone.

Down to the basement. That's where everybody went when they were tired of sitting upstairs in the little church, but the basement was mostly for kids. The grown-ups could stand it longer upstairs with Uncle Max.

There were hot water and tea bags, sugar and instant coffee. It was cold down there and Tom was alone fixing tea when Beth came down. The other cousins and even kids he didn't know went with a guy who came down just before. He clicked his heels and wore suspenders. Said he found an empty coffin behind some drapes in another room. Tom didn't go. The guy was probably lying.

Beth frightened Tom when she walked down the stairs. He was glad someone had come but not Beth. She had some crinkly stuff under her dress and it made the bottom part stick out kinda funny.

"What's wrong with your dress?" He simply asked.

"What do you mean, what's wrong!" She stuck her face out and shook it as she spoke.

"It sticks out," he said, "and it's noisy too."

"Nothing! It's made that way." She was angry and called him dirty.

"I'm not dirty—you're stuck up!" He was getting warm.

"Look you baby, don't talk to me like that."

"I can. And I'm not a baby." He tossed it off with a flip of his head.

"Prove it!"

"I don't have to."

"See. You are!"

"Am not!"

"Then go up to the coffin by yourself. Go up without holding Mommy's hand!" She shook her face again.

His heart beat faster and a tingle made him cold and hot at the back of his neck. His eyes grew bigger and he pouted his lips till they were as round and small as a button.

"You're a creep!" He hissed. All his power gathered behind his staring eyes and pouted lips till his head shook with anger, fear growing beneath.

"Do it! Kneel and say the Lord's Prayer right in front of Gramma by yourself." She won. He could almost hear her giggle inside.

Tom turned red and pushed upstairs as the others were returning with scared laughter after their adventure.

"What if some hand came out?" one shrieked.

"What if the lights went out with us in there?" a wide-eyed cousin added. They all laughed, excited with fear.

Upstairs his walk was slower, right shoe creaking on the soft blue carpet. Behind he heard Beth rustling. He couldn't turn back.

"I told her, Ma, go in. It's too cold out. You're working too hard. I told her that but she wouldn't listen." Uncle Max was still telling his explanations for the one thousandth time. He used to live with Grandma Johnson. He didn't cry or anything. He just talked too loud about the same thing over and over. Mom and Dad said he was in shock or something but he just kept talking. Tom sure wished he'd shut up. It was making him nervous.

The little church buzzed with whispers, Uncle Max louder than the rest, sticking out like the lady in church who sang real bad. Tom stood in the doorway and Beth rustled up to his back, whispering almost like two words, "chick-ken". She poked his back.

Tom swallowed, looking straight to where grandma was, and began to slowly pace up the aisle.

Almost tiptoeing past aunts and uncles, he couldn't take his eyes off course. At first all he could see were her nose, chin and knuckles, then after more steps, her cheek, hair, dark blue dress against the white all around. It was easier walking up with Mom and Dad.

Past Mom and Dad and Uncle Max the mouth, who should please shut up before he made Tom scream. Past all the seats and flowers and beyond all the buzzing whispers. The whispers. Where did they go? He felt like he broke thru a barrier, all noises gone, all eyes on him. His neck and cheeks burned like when the teacher caught him cheating in Math. He stopped and felt like everybody was staring. She was right in front of him.

He stood for a minute like when he came up with Mom and Dad. His eyes wandered all over the opened hatch. It was all padded and soft looking. The outside was shiny and he could almost see himself, letting his eyes go every place but to her face. She wore a ring. He saw that and the buttons on her dress, the gray hair on a

lacey pillow. But it wasn't until forcing himself, that he glaned at her closed eyes, tight lips, and dropped onto the kneeler quickly.

"Look at the little angel paying his respects," he heard some scratchy voice claw towards him.

"Our father art in heaven," he mumbled rapidly. What if some hand...he remembered. "Earth as in heaven," even quicker. "The lights," he suddenly whispered looking round for windows. There were none. He hopped to his feet stumbling on the kneeler. Head down he strode up the aisle and out the door. As he passed her, he knew Beth could see his fear. He saw it in her ugly smile. He stared in rage at her face for a moment. She lipped two silent words but he heard them burn...

"Mommy's baby," she whispered. They were at the cemetery. Beth stood next to him in the line everybody formed in the snow. He kicked snow at her legs. His mother held his wrist and shook her head no. Some uncles and older cousins were carrying the coffin. Mike was too skinny. But he didn't slip. He did okay. They carried it by a fence and put it right over a deep hole. Then everybody bunched around. Tom was near the back caught between Uncle Jack's overcoat and some old lady's baggy fur sleeve. Ahead, a wall of backs. Behind, Mom and Dad. The minister's words were loud then soft, almost gone. The wind blew them, and the wind would sometimes make the ice tinkle in the willow branches. Tom watched birds overhead and when he took a deep breath he felt bigger. He heard boys shouting someplace past the crowd of people, on the other side of the fence. They were playing hockey or football. He was tired of standing around and wanted to run in all the snow. Some places he could see hadn't even been walked in. He wanted to do a perfect snow angel.

After the minister stopped, each person took a turn looking where the coffin was over the hole. Some people put flowers on the coffin top. Every lady was crying. Tom looked for Beth and saw she was crying too. He felt glad. Even his Mother cried again. He grew unsure, wondering at all the ladies so upset. The old feeling came back and he looked up at Dad. He stood with both hands in front holding his hat. When he looked down at Tom, he winked and gave a tired smile. Tom didn't cry.

Mom and Dad were almost the last to leave. The sky had grown darker and a gray sun pushed through grayer clouds. Tom's feet were growing numb and he shuffled to keep them warm. Suddenly he heard a thud and turning towards the fence he saw a football tumbling end on end. He started for it but Mom held his wrist.

"Let him get it." Dad said, taking Mom's hand.

Tom heard the crunching as he hurried to the ball. It was beginning to snow a powdery mist. He ran toward the fence, holding the ball overhead, his face feeling fresh with the snow on it, melting. He put everything into the throw; it sailed over the fence with ease and as he turned back, Dad waved a signal they were leaving. He felt proud and tall, so full of energy that he ran past Mom and Dad, beating them to the car. The snow was really coming and he kicked up big clouds around his feet.

Right near the car was a spot of untouched snow. He thought to do it, to lower gently down flattened in the white smooth snow, flapping his arms, then to rise slowly. His good clothes would be full of snow and Mom was coming but it would be perfect. Waiting for Dad to unlock the car, he found a patch of ice to skate back and forth on.



### TENNESSEE BREAKFAST AT 3

at 70,  
the Impala seems to snore along.

Red neon reflects off glazed eyes.  
    like fluttering moths,  
we slip off the highway  
and snort into a parking space.

A hulk of a waitress glares  
and pulls up her slip.  
We mumble our demands.

Piled atop a squeaky stool,  
    the Mack truck cradles his coffee.  
The bacon fries like seething dogs.

Sounding like a percussion ensemble,  
we left no crumb ungulpd.

The waitress draws  
and greets Abe Lincoln warmly.

Kicking the car awake,  
the belchers head for Georgia.

Jeff Silberman

## FROM THE COUNTRY TO THE CITY

### I. Old Fozger's Bend

I left the sloth sleeping,  
snug in his dusty fur,  
breath balmy.

I crawled down his back,  
barely scratching his grisly hair.  
He fidgeted,  
and sighed  
a gust of tolerance.

Rudely whistling at each other  
in his foilage,  
crickets celebrated the moon.

### II. Illinois 47

caught on to/  
A slick black snake,  
white tongue flickering,  
warned me-hissing-  
of the cemetery of the planned.  
I skittered on.

### III. The Eisenhower

Patiently,  
I climbed the giant fossils  
uprooted from their graves,  
skin rotted  
eaten away.  
Cement and glass tombstones loom,  
haloed with bacteria.  
Pyres puked its stench into the stagnant.  
Home again.

Jeff Silberman

## RELICS

"It's really amazing, you know,  
how Charlie keeps himself going."  
There were patches, wet and spreading  
on his brown shirt, as he struggled  
with the rusting mower. Sharp edge  
of splintered cabinet caught my  
shaking fingers, as I searched for  
relics hidden in the attic.

"That's just grandpa's show business stuff."  
No more. Afraid to touch yellow  
scores, where scrawled figures seemed to dance  
out of shadow. Years upon file.  
Stagebill from a playhouse burned in  
panic. I saw names, some lost to  
rot, testament to what he was.  
Bankrupt receipts, left unfulfilled.

Richard Schmidt

### DRY PENSION

I crawled at the edge of his life,  
Could not hear the music within  
The worn stick-figure. Silhouette  
Bent over accounts, an end in  
Themselves; carbon on rolled shirt-sleeves.  
I carried questions but dropped them  
In the chasm between us. He smiled  
With eyes of blue pearl long since dry.

Thirty years given for a gold clip.  
Something should have been said, amidst  
The shuffling. He worked to escape  
From mornings, cigarettes and a  
Slow Fall into the padded chair.  
Gnarled fingers once caressed the  
Sleek neck of the long forsaken  
Violin, marred by cellar floods.

Richard Schmidt



untitled photograph

Sam Karol

A STORY — in which we come to realize some things are temporarily permanent and others permanently temporary

By Gavin Maliska

The park surrounds the village on all sides, in circular fashion, short walking distance from the farthest houses. An American park—elms, oaks, birches, randomly placed; a shrub here, a bush there. In summer, the lawn is weeded in some places, dandelioned in others. But now it is winter, dingy and dank, dull and dark, drab and dreary. Two feet of gray-white snow buries the grass, scarred only where red cobblestones happen together, forming a path among the leafless trees.

Perhaps the year is 1973 when the citizen leaves his townhouse, bundled in sheepskin jacket, red woolen shirt, jeans, and boots, and walks to the park to meet the Amish woman. The air is cold, bitter and biting; the citizen's moustache is tipped with icy spittle as he enters the park through the archway—black, cast iron, old and permanent—and then down the ploughed walkway to the bench. To sit, to wait, to meet the Amish woman.

The young Amish woman runs in a very feminine manner, loping, her elbows tucked in at her sides. Down the ploughed walkway toward the bench where the citizen awaits.

She hurries to the bench where he has been waiting. They are not her moon rocks bulging from her already full breast pockets. The Law states no one but the government of the United States of America can possess the moon rocks. Each one is stamped: NOT MEANT FOR PUBLIC CONSUMPTION.

But she carries them in her breast pockets just the same.

The Amish woman hurries to the bench where the citizen awaits. Snow covers the bench and he sits in it, waiting, patient. He catches a figure, on the rim of his vision, making its way toward him and realizes from the clothing that she is Amish. He wonders if he would have come had he known. 'This was not part of the deal,' he thinks.

The expression on the Amish woman's face tells him it wouldn't have made any difference. She is smiling...knowingly.

The wind and the motion of her body cause the long skirt to press against her loping, loping thighs. Her body seems to the citizen rather out of place in the antique clothing, long dress, apron, bonnet, crude and coldly gray. He thinks, 'She would be much more at home in jeans and a sweater. A tight sweater. I should remove her dress and bonnet and introduce her to Levi-Strauss. It is what should be done.'

She is startled and frightened by this thought and cringes, jumps back, but gently. Always gently. He manages a weak smile and she is comforted in his weakness. She again busies herself with hurrying to the bench where he has been waiting. She empties the moon rocks from her breast pockets.

He thinks, 'Are these the moon rocks? So, these are the moon rocks!' No, he could not be excited, he expected much more. 'These can't be the rocks the Armstrong boy picked from the moon. They were so fresh, so ripe on the news. Now they are just rocks.' However, he allows for error in his thinking, deciding to wait for the truth from the Amish woman.

The bench is gray and crumbling as she spills the rocks from her breast pockets. The citizen is attached to it, not only by the ice which has formed between his trousers and the wood, but by a sense of tradition as he has been coming to this park, this very bench, for quite some time. When he sits on this bench he can be nineteen again.

The Amish woman speaks. "My husband comes home from the fields Fridays. He says, 'Look mama, good news.' He dumps these rocks on the table. Then we make love."

The citizen thinks, 'Are these rocks from the moon?' He says, "What can I do?" She says, "I know these rocks are from the moon. I don't know if I care." She thinks, 'Make love with me in the snow. It will be good in the snow.'

They make love in the snow.

When they have finished, the woman smiles and moves close to him. She says, 'I will go now. You will go to work. Take this moon rock. You will write me.' She leaves as she had come, hurrying. "See you later," he says. No reply. He puts the rock in his pocket and walks home to dress for work.

The citizen drives to work in his denim cowboy shirt and straw cowboy hat and 1962 green Chevrolet Belair coup. The lunch room clock reaches ten and he enters the freezer. He measures the length and width of various ice blocks, selecting the exactly correct one. Using the tongs, he places it on a pallet and wheels it into the display room. The customers: housewives, children, secretaries, jewelers, physical therapists, doctors, engineers, butchers, sailors, train conductors, certified public accountants, bank presidents, retired army officers, candy stripers, visiting dignitaries, maids of the well-to-do, all stand and cheer. It is appreciated that he can select the exactly correct block, fitting the moment. But, he is aware that ice melts and the water it produces will not be appreciated. He is also aware of the skill of his young apprentice which will someday surpass his own. However, he realizes that it would only have been someone else if it had not been him, and does not take it personally. He stands a polite distance from the ice block, demure in his contemplations, when the gray dress of one of the maids catches the corner of his eye and he is thrown back into the orgasmic splendor of the morning. A very inappropriate smile sets on his face. The customers are astonished at this behavior. Many leave. A report is made and he is called before the manager. He is sent home for the remainder of the day which to the citizen is just as well, though he does respect his work.

In the quiet hours after his dinner, the citizen can sit back in the overstuffed Moroccan armchair next to his lava lamp, smoke some of what is lying around, and reflect upon the day's accomplishments and failures. Tonight, he sits with the moon rock on the side cart. He wonders what he knows about any of this.

He knows: The woman is Amish. She has hurried to meet him in the park. They have now met. He now knows moon rocks. But he is still not impressed. He thinks, 'There it sits, just a moon rock, just moon, just rock.'

He does not know: Why it was so good in the snow. All of his greatest expectations had been fulfilled. And more.

He thinks, 'I have had Amish women before, but it was never like this. In fact, some of them were very lacking. And it couldn't have been the snow. I have done it before in the snow. There was that Mexican girl during the blizzard in Wyoming. We were completely covered with snow and it wasn't this good. Was it...was it...what was it?' Here he rises and strides around the room in frenzied pace. He talks aloud. "Not the park. No, not the park. There've been many times in the park. But none like this."

He trips over a fold in his Persian rug and falls against the coffee table, knocking the Sony Digital Clock-Radio to the floor. It turns on at impact and screams in loudest radio distortion, WHEN THE MOON HITS YOUR EYE LIKE A BIG PIZZA PIE THAT'S AMORE. He rolls over and clicks off the radio. The citizen does not consider himself to be a fool. He knows when something is being made obvious to him. One does not have to hit him in the eye for him to see. "So, the moon rocks," he says. Connections are made. He thinks, 'Astronauts, eagle scouts, flags

on the moon, the moon on TV, calls from the President, tickertape parades, and moon rocks. The fulfilment of the Great American Dream: wonderful, fantastic, sweet sex, every time. No more bumb lays. Every time. Simply amazing!

He picks up the rock with new respect. He thinks, gazing upon it, preciously, 'I will send a note to the Amish woman asking her to meet me in the park tomorrow. This stone must be tried again.'

He calls the special messenger service and asks for a boy to come by and pick up a note to be delivered to the Amish woman. Then he writes on his finest stationery:

Dear Amish woman,  
I will meet you in the park  
tomorrow. Please bring your moon rock.  
I will bring mine.

Love,

The boy arrives and the citizen tells him to deliver the note to the Amish woman he has met in the park. The boy tells him not to worry. "The note will get through," the boy says. They are very efficient. The citizen thanks him, tips him, and he is gone.

The citizen becomes so apprehensive of the meeting in the park that he cannot sleep. He sits in the chair all night, fondling the rock, thinking of how good it was and how good it will be. The morning brings the trip to the park, earlier than usual, hoping the Amish woman will be early too. He sits on exactly the same bench he has occupied for years. He tries not to be too anxious, but finds his eyes staring down the walkway, searching for any sign of the Amish woman. He begins to worry that she won't show up, that she doesn't want him, that he wasn't as pleasing to her as she was to him, that the messenger boy has failed, has betrayed his confidence. And the Amish woman does not arrive, nor does she come the next day, nor the next, nor...

A day, weeks later; the citizen arrives and no sooner is he seated than he catches a figure, on the rim of his vision, making its way toward him. She runs in a very feminine manner, loping, her elbows tucked in at her sides. As she nears him he realizes from her clothing that she is an Indian of the Arapaho tribe.

He wonders if he would have come had he known. And the woman is smiling...knowingly.

## BURN

A round-lake-shaped burn floats against my skin  
Lapping upon it in circles of pain  
Pretending to mirror the maroon of my dress  
(And I notice my pen is red and my stockings).  
Later: a marble balloon.  
If I pull the skin  
The color drains  
Into white canals.  
I'm red today--burnt my wrist  
Cried till bloodshot, cut my hair  
Athirsting in this red devil desert.  
Stretch marks on a woman's body.

Dona Lin Ruby



VIRGINS (A REQUIEM FOR THE LUNAR CANOES)

"No mind is more valuable than the images  
it contains." (W.B. Yeats)

"Strap yourself to a tree with roots,  
You Ain't Goin' Nowhere." (Bob Zimmerman-Dylan)

1.)  
loons call---  
dance  
in Ontario starshine.  
ARMSTRONG,  
ALDRIN,  
and  
COLLINS---  
fisherman.  
like me and pa.

striking deep their harpoon,  
tearing the ancient hymen of dream.  
once man's Eucharist.

Albatross.

that "White Whale,"  
now--  
Yankee Blubber.

"Whoremongers!"

2.) placings.

they're always greener.  
they're *always* meaner.

those *other* sides.

spendthrift dreamers  
polishing the "ice"  
once  
six feet "deep"---  
still snow-blind in mid-July---  
two months after the "thaw."

3.) judgements.

pebble toss, now.  
reaching ends---  
puddles quick.  
pools surrender slow.

poppies glowing---  
smiles blurred of  
tinted Greyhound gapers  
pointing.  
"Look!"  
"Real Canucks!"

me and pa cracked open our  
"Land of Lincoln" smiles.  
imagine that.  
them,  
thinkin'  
that.

4.) all,

only images.

changing with "every step."

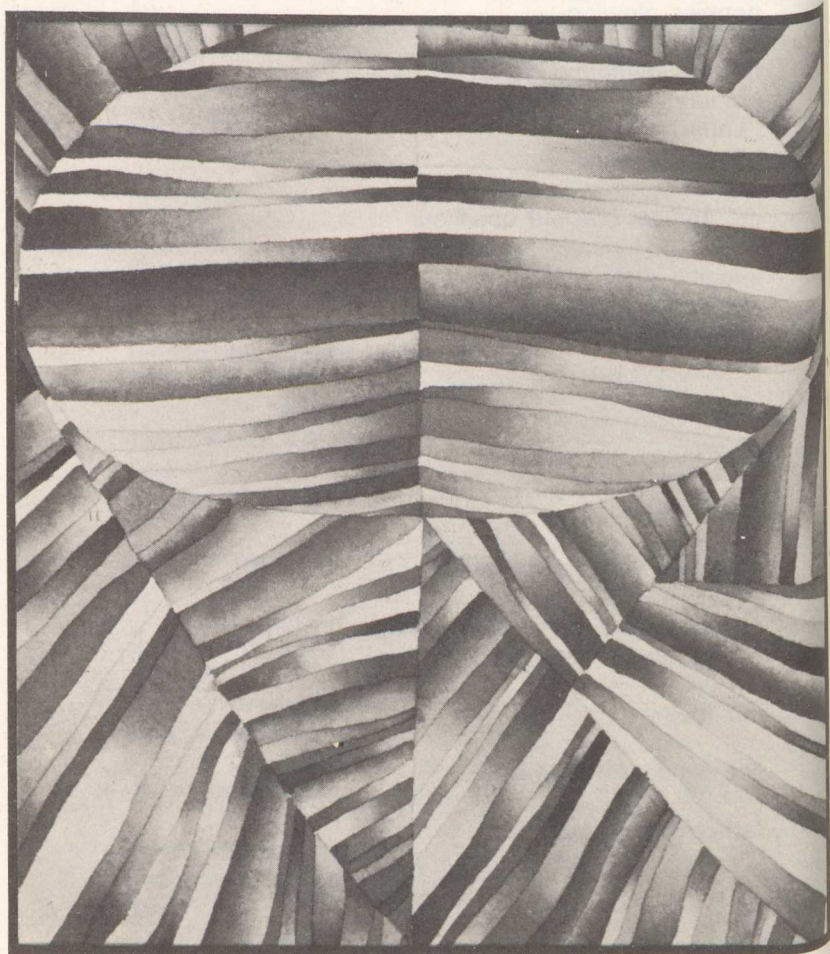
no welcoming breezes to unfurl a tin flag.  
no matter of distance---

our love---

like wind on the water---

fathoms unmoved.

Charles F. Fister



untitled watercolor

Virginia Kondziolka

## BOOMERANG

She walks head down, pushing  
her plastic-waterfalled umbrella,  
see-through, against the rain.  
Striking the sidewalk, the rain  
forms sharp V's, landing on booted legs.  
But some splashes high, cold and muddy.  
It trickles down until it's pressed  
between her legs, forming two parts  
of the ink blot, nestled in her inner thighs.  
She shivers and tightens her belt.

Before--he knelt in the mud, reaching  
his hand to her with a mint sprig,  
which she took while lowering herself  
next to him. After peeling the skin,  
she sucked the sweet pulp, and kissed  
the rain, warm on his eyes.

Now she looks up, blinking hard,  
while the rain boomerangs.

Mary Susmilch



"Mrs. Jones" painting

Steve Dudek

## ASPECTS OF THE WHEEL

By Jeff Abell

The poetry of Sylvia Plath can be, and has been, viewed as the ultimate manifestation of the school of subjective exploration that developed in the middle of the Twentieth Century, and is exemplified in the poetry of Robert Lowell and John Berryman. One merely has to think of Lowell's *Life Studies*, or Berryman's 77 *Dream Songs* to see the relation between these works and Plath's poetry, particularly the poems collected in *Ariel*. All these books show an extreme daring on the authors's parts to explore the depths of their psyches, and to view and interpret what they discover there. But Plath's work, while demonstrating this self-searching in an almost extreme way, has something more to it: an element of power that is lacking in Lowell's detached pessimism and Berryman's nightmare-syntax. It is this power, constantly hovering beneath the surface and threatening to explode, that gives Plath's work its unique impact.

It is unfortunate that most commentators have chosen to write more about Plath as a "tragic figure" than Plath as a poet. Indeed, if one reads the profusion of articles that have appeared in such magazines as *Cosmopolitan*, one concludes that Plath was either a thwarted feminist, or a prototypical "intellectual sickie," spending her time in depression, constantly contemplating suicide to put an end to her ennui. But this mopey intellectual mood is quite foreign to the character of the poetry in *Ariel*, or most of her poetry written after *The Colossus*. The tone here is not so much one of intellectually inspired depression, as one finds in Lowell, but of visionary or mystical insight, and the results of such insight. It will be the direction of this essay to explore two sides of this "visionary" element in Plath, as seen in "Lady Lazarus" and "The Birthday Present".

Mystical elements begin to make their appearance in Sylvia Plath's poetry late in the *Colossus* collection. "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond" speaks of "myths" "tugging" at us, and mentions a god and golgoths, (no capitals in these). "The Stones", the last poem in the collection, (and interestingly, originally the last of a seven poem series called "Poem for a Birthday" of which "Flute Notes..." was number five,) is the description of a scene that Plath simply calls "the after-hell" and she dryly comments, "I see the light." The conclusion of this poem is pertinent: "My mendings itch. There is nothing to do.—I shall be good as new." This would seem an obvious sarcasm on Plath's part, the entire poem being cryptically sardonic, and describing the "being stuck together with glue" that Plath experienced with American psychiatrists after her first suicide attempt.

This encounter with death is extremely important to Plath's work and unfortunately most critics approach this suicide attempt from a purely autobiographical viewpoint, as Plath herself did in her novel *The Bell Jar*. But the poetry does not deal with death autobiographically, but rather from a mystical viewpoint. During the time she was working on the *Ariel* poems, Plath periodically discussed the poems with A. Alvarez, and from his writings in *The Savage God* it is clear that Plath saw herself as something of a visionary or mystic. Her husband, Ted Hughes, commented to Alvarez on Plath's "incredible psychic powers." The increased interest in death in Plath's mature work coincides with an increase in mystical subjects and images. Tarot cards are mentioned in "Daddy" and "The Hanging Man;" there is a poem called "Ouija"; the sixth poem in the previously mentioned "Poem for a Birthday" was called "Witch Burning." All of these are elements in occult, or "black," mysticism. And this is the point: Plath's visionary abilities are of a black or negative nature.

Perhaps it is not too far afield to mention Aldous Huxley's essay-book, *Heaven and Hell*, in which Huxley discusses the nature of visionary experience. He divides

the visionary into two types: those whose experiences are positive and those whose are negative. Visionaries such as Blake or Saint Teresa, found a mystical "heaven" filled with "angels" and controlled by a benevolent "God," whereas the negativist perceives merely a hellish machine, populated with demons. Religion and philosophy contain both types of seers: for every ecstatic who perceives the "great order" of the universe, there is the opposite who sees merely "the wheel" of destruction.

Plath's visions are usually of a negative nature (though positive examples can be cited, for example "Balloons" or "You're"), but show an almost frightening amount of control. This is obviously Plath's intention, for she wishes to give the impression that she controls the situation, even when that situation consists of entrapment in the clutches of a death machine.

This vision of a wheel or a cycle of death and rebirth is perhaps the most easily graspable of the mystical elements in Plath's poetry. She herself tells us that it is this contact with destruction that has resulted in her vision, and while it was she that began the business in one sense, (by attempting suicide,) in another sense she had nothing to do with it. In the late poem, "Mystic," she says:

Once one has been seized by God, what is the remedy?  
Once one has been seized up  
Without a part left over,  
Not a toe, not a finger, and used,  
Used utterly, in the sun's conflagrations, the stains  
That lengthen from ancient cathedrals  
What is the remedy?

Once one has been chosen as the fuel for the ritual conflagration, one can do little about it. Plath seems to react to this vision in two opposing ways.

The first reaction is primarily one of rebellion, as most clearly portrayed in the poem "Lady Lazarus." The mood here is one of black humor. Plath seems to be satirising her condition as the "negative visionary," shouting "Boo!" at everyone from her psychiatrists to her readers. "Peel off the napkin..." she taunts, "Do I terrify?" The tone is a strange admixture of weariness, ("What a trash—To annihilate each decade.") and boisterousness, as can be seen easily in the whole image of carnival side-show hawking: "Gentlemen, Ladies,—These are my hands,—My knees." The whole process of life and death has deteriorated from something profound and cosmic into "an art, like everything else," a series of "theatrical—Comeback(s)."

In these rebellious moments, when Plath takes on something of the character of a super-woman, it is important to note that she still has not escaped her negative view of the world where she has "nothing to do." Indeed, it seems not so much the process of destruction that bothers her here as having to return to "the same place, the same face, the same brute—Amused shout." Plath scoffs at the efforts of her psychiatrists to reduce her vision to "mental disorder." "So, so, Herr Doktor," she says, adopting a mock-German, and hence, mock-Freudian, accent, "I am your opus...I turn and burn." The image of conflagration is changed to the Nazi "ovens" and the Doctor merely becomes a fiend interested in reducing Plath to a few comprehensible bits and pieces: "a cake of soap—A wedding ring,—A gold filling." Psychiatrists then are merely symbols of the greater destroyers, here addressed as "Herr God, Herr Lucifer," those polarities that keep the evil cycle turning. Plath sees herself as more than some "puregold baby;" she is more like the Phoenix, rising out of her own ashes to be born again.

The second reaction Plath displays toward her visions can be seen in the poem "The Birthday Present." The tone here is considerably more subdued and serious, though there is still a certain droll humor to it. Consider the following lines, where Plath asks to be given the mysterious "present" and says:

I will only take it and go aside quietly.  
You will not hear me opening it, no paper crackle,  
No falling ribbons, no scream at the end.  
I do not think you credit me with this discretion.

This humor lacks the sarcastic crackle found in "Lady Lazarus," and is more like the dry wit one finds in her early poems.

Not only has the tone become more subdued, but her view of herself is considerably less extreme here. While she still sees herself as "the one for the announcement," she cannot really see why, and has the personified "Vision" scoff: "My god, what a laugh!" Her encounters with the supernatural are no longer a self-controlled game, but an uncertainty, something "shimmering" behind "veils." Interestingly, while Plath asserts that she is "sure it is just what (she) wants," she can only suggest "I think it wants me." Rather than an inexorable force that has "seized" her "by the roots of my hair," as she says in "The Hanged Man," this is something which must be given to her. She cannot grasp it herself; she can merely accept it, and "not mind if it is small" and be "ready for enormity."

Two chief problems arise in comprehending this poem. The first Plath poses herself in the first line: "What is this, behind this veil?" And the second problem involves the anonymous "you" to whom the poem is addressed. The first question, being posed by Plath herself, gradually becomes unravelled by Plath herself, though she ends with a probability rather than an answer. Her conclusion fits with her method of approaching the question, namely, a sort of guessing game that a child might play with a package, trying to guess the unknowable contents. She describes the ting as "shimmering," and drolly suggest it might be "bones, or a pearl button." She suggests that she and the anonymous giver "sit down to it, one on either side, admiring the gleam,—The glaze, the mirrory variety of it." She sees it standing at her window "big as the sky," or hears it breathing from her sheets. Finally, she concludes:

If it were death  
I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless  
eyes.  
I would know you were serious.  
There would be a nobility then, there would be a  
birthday.

Plath has taken a calmer road back to the same old topic: death and the subsequent rebirth.

But this is a death with a difference, a death with a nobility as opposed to the grotesque cosmic merry-go-round she had been riding. This time "the knife" would "not carve, but enter—Pure and clean as the cry of a baby," and, miraculously, "the universe slide from my side." This must be one of the most remarkable twists of thought in all poetry: to Plath the only death that would bring any genuine renewal, or birth, is the very death that would not be followed by another "rebirth," another comeback. Plath, like the Eastern mystic, seeks escape from the wheel, from the cycle of reincarnation.



The realisation of Plath's meaning of the present helps clarify the giver's identity. She addresses herself to the controller, whomever or whatever he may be, but she does not approach him now as a "Rival" or an "Enemy" as she does in the other poems. Here the mood is one of supplication and request rather than defiance and demand. This should not lead to the assumption that Plath has entirely altered her views of the cosmos as a destructive process or herself as its unwilling victim.

Consider the passage where she taunts the "god" she addresses. "I know why you will not give it to me," she cries, in the tone of a snotty twelve year old. She accuses "god" of being afraid of releasing her out of fear of losing his image. She decries his "bossed, brazen" iconographic image, and then assures him it will be safe. In effect, she attempts to make a deal, in a very business-like manner: if "god" will release her from her role as sacrificial victim, he can keep his image, and she will keep quiet about the fakery.

The image of the machine is still present here. She addresses her antagonist as "O adding machine-" and pictures him dividing the world into tiny classified bits so he can have the pleasure of destroying each morsel. It is precisely this process of slow gradual destruction the Plath wants to escape. She has the visionary's ability to see partially through the "veil" that separates the world from "the ultimate," and the veils are 'killing (her) days.' She wishes to find out now, not have revelation come in sixty years when she will be "too numb to use it."

This, then, is the "birthday present" Plath so avidly desires: escape from the wheel of death and rebirth, escape from the evil eating-machine she sees herself as part of. Hers is not the view of the neurotic who cannot cope with ordinary life, but rather the view of one too sensitive to a part of the cosmos that most poets, even visionary ones, tend to shy away from. Perhaps this, more than any mental misfunction, is what Robert Lowell calls the "challenge" of the poems in *Ariel*.

