

Lă Bas



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LA-BAS:
POETRY & POETICS

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Poetry/Fiction:

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Commentary:

"On the Formal Function of Plot,"
by Jane De Lynn

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WE LOVED THE INEXACT

We loved the inexact
Replicas in the museum: our life
Had no human scale, but tore
Apart little by little
As by a mysterious flowering
Light is torn from the river.

Thinking that way, we moved
Along, slightly paranoid, through
Husks the afternoon became.
The new construction site
Was seen to be a point
Grappling the emergent line.

Several other things called
Attention to themselves
In the act of crawling quietly
Out of view toward an out there
Not located on any map,
Not my map at any rate.

An upward motion swept everything
Up, way up, into a stratosphere
Of positive sexual charges
And then a downward motion swept
Everything down again and before
Became a different version.

We were pleased that the place
Thus prepared us to accept
The blank stares these moments
Offered, tossing us aside
Into a packing crate or closet
To list the misremembered items.

Still uneasy, though: these things
Irradiating pleasure as we lost
Them, the concept of the mud nymph
Sufficient to explain
This mud but unable to tell us
What to do about it.

[Cont.]

WE LOVED THE INEXACT cont.]

We loved the jostling
Forward, the sensation
As of flight seen as gesture,
Eclipsing much pain
As the pain of separation
Is eclipsed by a dream of union.

Otherwise, a slow progress
Toward several trees there
In a distance, growing larger
And older and clearer and
Finer as we approach the option
Of turning, finally, away.

-Donald Britton

SIGNS

A landscape blunders toward the room.
Rain pours. Snow falls. The city
Wears a white uniform as night
"Comes on," seductive, like valium.

I have this feeling, which sleds off
Into the street. It concerns you,
Somehow. My unintended meaning is
"You image in it the sadness and pity
You experience as a permanent state
Though realized through different objects."
This is known as "projection,"
As when, tilting the visor of the lamp
Toward the victim with the wine glass.
This is known as "the third degree,"
An eagle's shadow thrown upon the wall
By a clever manipulation of the hands.

[Cont.]

SIGNS cont.]

The feeling returns, "somewhat dazed,
But, thank the good Lord, unharmed."
Soon it will be "as good as new"
And resume "a normal, productive life,"
Albeit a limited and unhappy one.
The possibility of other feelings,
Equal in intensity, is suggested
Though not predicted. This is explained
By "anal retentiveness," the unhealthy urge
To shield one's anus from others.
The room will then become emptied of light,
Blackened by the pretense of hands as wings.

The snow drifts apologetically down
And "re-enacts the old, despairing scene."
Its moral is that we want the same "things,"
We just have different names for them.
This is known as "desire," in which "fear"
Is present, like a guest with a gun,
If you interpret "guest" as a reference
To you and the threat you represent.
But the guest grows old and "passes away"
The way a minor chord yields to the air,
His teeth dropping like ice on pink taffeta
As the absence of light is the eagle's shape.

-Donald Britton

LA PLUS BELLE PLAGE

Clever clouds unfurling new stratagems,
going at it like bantams:
coiled, calm, coiled again, recoiled.
Ingenious assortment of clouds
and arrangements of the assortment.
With each new assortment
a new arrangement and a new feeling.

Rum and Coke Sip #1:
inroads of tidal questionnaires,
sun filliping toothpick sand.
Musical clouds complicating space glints,
triple assemble upsurge through heat,
Uncertain Destiny Clouds
droning across harrumph of horizon.

Reconnaissance clouds, sunstreak virtuosos.
Cloud names: last name first, first name,
middle initial, maiden name,
real name, unspoken name, unspeakable name,
unknown name, unknowable name,
spouse's name, spouse's occupation,
spouse's income, own, rent, buy, mortgage.

Operatic gusts plangent over seafroth,
beachscape darkening to teak.
Negresco stomach crease inventory
after powdery brass Negresco sunset emotion,
Negresco clouds, Upper Lip Moisture Fear.
Wave palaver. Wave bye-bye. Star waves.
Awaiting advent of The New Gorgeousness.

Awaiting departure of The Old Hideousness:
sol, soleil, solitude, solipsism.
Despair of escaped canary snafu: achoo.
Despair of teeth and toenail obsession concession.
Implausible clouds, tottering like milk troughs
on edge of first invention of summer.
Despair of sperm wax depletion allowance.

[Cont.]

LA PLUS BELLE PLAGE cont.]

Favorite cloud: institutional dispenser soap pink.
Lummox resurfacing. Lummox plunging.
Point of origin, destination, arrival time,
length of stay, citizenship, nature of business,
male, female, birthdate, hotel beauty,
cloud enigma, grande pensée, most fun thing to do
in one of Earth's really great Principalities.

-Donald Britton

NON PIANGERE, DONALD!

Si in un lontano giorno
io t'ho sorriso...

--from Turandot

1

Weird wind at the window.
Inside-of-pocket sky, close, empty,
cool, cigarette-wrapperish
and shadowless.

No preliminary smells of ho-hum rain.
Wind still acting up.
Looking out: a fat Ann Miller,
a dog on the next roof,

woman following man following man
following man, hair all messed up.
Darkening sky. Papers scuttling.
Baby Tarzan yell from schoolyard

full of Babies and Tarzans.

[Cont.]

NON PIANGERE, DONALD! cont.]

2

The tedium of wanting you.
An Emotionally Intense Moment.
I make one two three four
slash marks like a prisoner

counting the times I've stood
before the mirror wondering
what you'd think seeing me
crying like this because of you.

Little forests of five trees,
one of which is falling THUMP
across the others. I'm not
there and you're not there

but I hear it.

3

The meaning of Being is the question
to be formulated. The steak
and the salad and the baked potato
were delicious.

Breeze up. Airplanes gurgling
out into the silent Atlantic, tracing
me-to-you parabolas: semicolon
quarter moon and evening star

and streetlamp making two shadows
behind me and in front of me.
Me following me following me.
In the middle of the street I remember
that time I cracked my head open.

-Donald Britton

THE CERTAIN BODY

Slipping into something. Coarse hands. An inexhaustible need. Knees touching under the table. A walk to the drug-store. The silence filling up with a childhood in a small town. Say something: well, it's great being here. I like pinball, though I don't play very well. Someone says, "Par-don me, sir." Someone says, "The fiddle is beginning to attract me, which is nice."

Stopping off at the restaurant for cigarettes. The hand moves toward that other hand. Something definite on the level of conjecture. Cough cough.

"This is me two years ago. This is my friend." It's all cluttered up. The small park looks like a cemetery, but it isn't. What are you doing tonight? Not much, some reading, by myself, and some other work. These things move along to make room for those other things. Empty the ashtray.

Head on lap, hands on back: to be carried into the next room. Foot behind head. Talk about weird. The dazzling interior of a mouth. It says, "Don't let this happen to you." I want to go out for a cheeseburger. There's only one cup, so we can share the coffee. They both think of themselves as un-loveable.

The train pulling into the station. More women. The morning aluminum. That softness so anterior to that hardness. Cloths, sheets, napkins were hanging vertically. You flicked off the light to see through the peephole. He was in the bathroom. Were you cooking in the dark?

Contours of a voice. Hollywood is looking for another Italian working class hero. It's a big decision. Anything else? yes, I was just going to say something that refers back to something I said a few minutes ago. That there should be such a thing as an irrational explanation. I had this fantasy about your being older than me. Exposed brick condominium. A new car. Other variables.

[Cont.]

THE CERTAIN BODY cont.]

Words that desire you. Stare through the building. It wants me. I'll send travel brochures. "I bet you're a loner." Heh, heh, heh. A turd in the shape of a squirrel holding a heart. It's frightening, but I think it should happen. It detonates.

Rain could not be prevented. It shot into the air, a vault. Hanging discretely over the edge of the radiator, the silence perfectly neat in rows. The Catalog of Values. Jack Kerouac and Ted Greenwald. The class of visionary objects. Traces of having passed by here, stirring the white air. The power is off. What if feels like must be what it looks like.

Put your hand there. So old as to be almost invisible. Seventeen billion pieces of mail between us. The countenance is distorted.

The directory spewed to a point of flame. The air dripping with doves, searing the light shut.

-Donald Britton

"A" is for "ox"

The first oxygen conversion occurred as an incline, a sharp bend as in "wrench". The elements surrounding this act were strong, physically violent ones--wreck, wrestle, wretch, wiggle--with the exception of "wren". The next major activity was "wrinkle", again related to "wrench" with the addition of "wind". Wrist action proceeds from there--wrist-lock, wrist pin, wrist shot, wrist wrestle, wristy--preparing us (motor-wise) to write: write our own ticket, write-down and write-in.

Add "(t)s" to "low land" and prevent escape or intrusion. Add "d" to get along without help, "tra" to cut an opening in bone, "nian" to form a legendary band of warriors, "ik" to call a pale fawn fox, "l" to cultivate aromatic seeds, and "gek" to plant them in Greece.

Performing military service for the king and bearing a child have a common medieval root. The progression to this point is first academic, then technical. Textbooks give way to textiles which lead to T-formations and T-groups. We pause to add "th" and proceed through Mediterranean anemia, deep seas, Greek muses, pesticides, young shoots and the instinctual desire for death. It is there that we find "thane", to be followed by all manner of "thanks", including the "thank-you-ma'am"--a ridge built across a road so rain water will roll off.

To the north of "bovine": conceit, one eighth of a carucate; to the south: pharmacologist, bend or bow downward; to the east: U.S. biographer, dense serpentine; to the west: print face between brevier and long primer.

[Cont.]

"A" is for "ox" cont.]

"Egg" and "oxygen" both contain "edge", with egg's edge located at "share" and oxygen's at "shear". The distance doubles from one to the other along the line: shar et vb farne atim domin citi porta acio torti him sho SHAG prob low ME L dou sha tio HE min ers cou ock metim semb dj.

often with 30 or 40 feathers
sequence upon sevens
whose plates there appear
cassava meal
form of a flat band

"Bō" is a sound bordering on "bourgeois" and fronting for "bow wow" and "box" before the "ō" in "boy". The movement between can be described either as sluggish or patient, depending on one's bent. From sidepiece to horsehairs, bells to vulgar, fin to front, head to hollow, weather edge to alley, capsule to saw, nephron to spar, the action continues alternating left to right and back to left again accompanied by the chant "1 stick 2 head 3 hair 4 frog 5 screw".

-Tina Darragh

"K" is for "palm of the hand"

Part II - the lines

line of the head

"Fog" and "pus" were first linked to the relationship of "down" to "off", as in "laying the book on the table". Then, with a little push, "plug" and "stuff" were found to be classical yet vulgar kin moving warily toward hoary herbs having large, silky aments.

line of the heart

stay _____ until I call
teetotum or with dice
thought as in "pavement"
overstreet grief

line of life

the indulines
19th century Russian
beatnik + hilum trifle
averaging a pale
"will you nill you"
zero when raised
wears a nine
colorimetric
stone and became
Australasian creeping
wind = goal

line of fate

mo chro
mo cy
mo di
mo fla
mo glo
mo ly
mo poi
mo pro
mo sid
mo sta

[Cont.]

"K" is for "palm of the hand" cont.]

line of fortune

"game. He would pretend to be the announcer of a game. He'd throw his ball against the porch and it would go BANG and he'd yell, 'A run around first and a run around third and STRIKE THREE!' All summer long he'd do that, and finally he started coming through the lilac bushes."

line of health

Two arcs developed from the original "wire" spun of fine gold--the iris and the rainbow. Fading-in, the eye's arc gauges how much color is needed to send a message while, fading-out, the sky's arc becomes the colors operating the finish line stretch at the last moment.

line of marriage

The color "yellow" comes from "light bay", but whether that image refers to "light over the bay" or "light from the bay" is not certain. The definition is surrounded by trees--tulipwood, buckthorn, birch, pine, jessamine, osage orange and smoke--and suggests that we turn to the area of "far and wide" and "faraway" for further clarification.

-Tina Darragh

SONG

I can live
okay
without you

Entire life
tripped a switch, today,
I can live

Alive
a line of trees sway
without you

A bee-hive
the world works away
I can live

Like a sieve,
heart separates night and day
without you

Admit to lonely vibes
then fade away.
I can live
without you.

-Brad Gooch

SONG

I can't live
no more
without you

I can't leave
the floor
I can't live

Refusing to give
hot flower
without you

Following the river
in a shower
I can't live

Wait, then deliver
one word more
without you

There is still a sliver
(sore)
I can't live
without you.

-Brad Gooch

TRYING TO SAY IT

It is as if an eagle
takes the heart
when the lover sleeps
and drops it
before morning
in the chest
heaving
sweat-dreams
of the other lover
tossing aside
when morning comes
he is perplexed
the cold & loose
stone
left
will not do
it is a cage
with some ratty bird
no one wants to see
the sleek lizards
perch
wait for the heart
the rain is raining
adrenaline morning
gotta find
gotta find some new
a terrifying call calls
in the blue
in the art-deco blue
in the blue where thoughts
are true
but this song will not do
return to life
to the empty
to your call
everyone wants to hear
every true word
changes color
and these asides
I look at you I look away
the tensile cymbals start to play

[Cont.]

TRYING TO SAY IT cont.]

is a new shorthand
which I do not like to use
and nor you to receive
but someday
when my heart is like a useful stone
that at last nobody wants
I have something to tell you
it is drumming already
it is the story of my life
it takes place in Africa
hot Africa
and you you are the heat
and you you understand the beat
precious long island wood
washed-up
on a long long long long day
I refused to admit nothing had been happening
until I felt you.

-Brad Gooch

FATS NAVARRO ODE

Inner city summer heat rising off concrete slow all
I got (the idea) body & senses & mind relaxed, which
Would distort in your language, impossible to sleep
Beside the flooded heart-shaped pool, sweet sex
Lingering a dilemma heat of graffiti & Federico Garcia
Lorca's radio a bullet a knife a gun or a blow &
P. Inman folding the red flag of a seductive past, the
Mississippi flows a chronology slowed to 80 & old
Dixie gentlemen remote as chromosomes a tender
Caressing sensation & loaded with mystery & the blues
You never lose Serge Prokofieff x's out a few small pains
Slopes off fatigue, doped up, fatigue & miniscule

Serenity of sleep, antennae desire. I want more. I want
More, to decipher her plasma or open the thick brown
Envelope of aphrodisiac buds; reread the "cystallization"
& leave enough room for love. For love & expectation &
Hope, our only real end blowing towards the end of
September! from the island of Hong Kong! "Give me a
Sixpack of crushed beauty to saturate our exquisite
Bitterness." You indicate a primeval fertile crescent,
Your favorite. I want, I want. Tina Darragh want to
Waltz & do the minuet, 200 years ago, you bet, &
Animates a cone of flattened accolades as Linda Stepulevage
Fools on a pale blue afternoon sleeping on a white

Divan in the many colored scene, Macdonald, Pa., consensus
Of orgasms, face now smooth, the "you" that is everybody
Same procedure in an impersonal villa, empty & hubris
Swimming in her face & less assured of the sidewalk, yep,
Nope. Hazard analyses punches a hole in her ego or karma.
Apparatus of erotica & pyromania along the diagonals of
A metaprogram to relax & erase words from certain economic
"laws" in the capitalist era, night after night after night
Having no desire to register the cool soothing verbal
Rhythms of someone you admire, someone forlorn, someone
Unknown, someone taut, someone Oriental, someone sweet &
Gentle, someone overwhelmingly flat with a lean body &

[Cont.]

FATS NAVARRO ODE cont.]

Those exotic intimidating deep Chinese references.
Hunks off Amarada Hess derange the beat in the IQ
Meter, mebbe with intelligence the weight of a pronghorn
Antelope Lynne Dreyer solos against the block universe
Of whom? Carl Gustav Jung? No. Why that look? The look
You gave me. I dunno, there's a fixed amount of sadness
& that's "cool." You know, solid. Get it? Or Karen
Silkwood freaking in a political history seminar,
Convulsive moments, for example, alone in bed, the
Black telephone receiver like a negative imprint, feeling
Low down. Walk slowly across a rug that cost as much as
A Cadillac. Lick a silky vulva. Love of meat, love of

Money, an individual doll. Since those beautiful objects
Have been seen in the Yugoslavian skies, the recollection
Of my past life & its transcendent frames of desire seem
Different, funny, more alive. The city which saved your
Life like an overexposed photo of a blue VW bus, empty.
I am fucking off & she is lost, sleeping, but trapped,
Collapsed into sleep without even trying to write a
Modern version of the Ramayana, too bad. Lonesome, I don't
Know what I am. Fake it (fake it) because you can't
Always get it back, erase these these words, increasing
Seepage hits or a stun-pistol, too late & her luck held
Out. & here the future Odysseuses of space, burned back

Into the darkness of the room, amazingly lifelike &
Brilliant as the cancer, a typical symptom of your paranoia.
& here is some 95 per cent pure shit, here under a socket
Holding a broken bulb & your footsteps embarrass you as
You leave the Dupont Plaza Hotel to get your rocks off on
A white upholstered Hepplewhite sofa, Ah! the softly
Rippling shadows of the lonely life, here, in Badapest!
The door held ajar by a 2-by-4, our bodies calm as rocks
On a coastline at low tide, rhumba drums thundering &
Another cup of coffee, a perfect blend of mass, axial rotation
Or distance & everybody's asleep, as the earth & the
Other earth direct our attention to an as-if experience

-Doug Lang

CEZANNE

•
Cezanne painted apples
we drool over with red tongues

and no one will ever eat them

Cezanne is a great painter

•
at the museum a man has been hired
to guard Cezanne's apples

Cezanne will be appreciated
for many years to come

•
when Cezanne was 4 years old
his mother gave him an apple

he ate it

when he saw the core
he felt he had lost something beautiful

•
Cezanne does not paint apple cores
he is not a confessional painter

he is an impressionist

-Arlene Ladden

LEAVING

She'd only wanted the treble cast. Why
she thought, does the melody ring?
She'd only asked for it rightly,
or for nothing. The ground curved
like an animal about to stir.
She pricked her finger on a conifer.

Somewhere a wild voice escapes the throat
like the cry of wolves
and civilization becomes not even a memory
the concept overwhelmed by wanting it.
The tree stands like a girl stands. Savage sounds
fall delicate upon unsavage ears, and that
is only the smallest beginning,
hinting of decibels now and to come.
Night drops down, stars appear.
They tinkle underfoot with branches.

And silence
Silence, like pain, emerging imperceptibly,
carving its place like the moon in a cloudless sky
unmoved and unmoving, the last tones of melody
exhaust themselves.
They lead her to a clearing spliced by arteries
of twigs and trees
and she is positively luminous.
She commands a landscape, the reclining
panorama is entirely her own.
But she is overcome by spaciousness, and by a fear
of freezing.
She is sorry she came.
The grass between her toes is wet and green.
Light shimmers with a strange irregularity.

-Arlene Ladden

SINGLE FILE

You are not obliged to answer; the requirements are lifted.
However, I have knelt, recently, to see
for the first time your hands
as if I had looked up, mid-summer, to see
the bird whose song I had missed.
Intensifications are hard to come by. We know this.
Now we are back among opportunities: drug stores, Mahler,
spice racks and these swivel chairs
remaindered for almost nothing. Houses collapse
while we sleep in beds provided, the real information
changed into tunes in Malibu, portraits in New York.
A cracked heart is mended with another cracked heart,
medallion with Pegasus on one side, Venus the reverse,
the winged horse who kicked a mountain with his hoof
and she, didn't she walk out of the waters
as Virginia Woolf walked in?
When we reached the street, you turned right and I turned left.

-Ann Lauterbach

BETWEEN

I called three flying geese herons, confused
between long legs and long necks.
I know the difference between women and birds.
But neither of us knows why
butterflies fly at the sea and die there,
intact and closed.

The subject eludes, not the words.
They are rinsed into irradant puddles
where the sky leaks light onto pavements
and the trees are flat. And as we follow the slippage
we see how scale counts and that deep in the shine
of the perceived landscape as a chain of events
like a hand-cuff of stars, or pebbles.
My mother always looked away, out of the picture.
And I am known for decorous deceptions
from which neither bruise nor wailing comes,
just refusal to observe the perishing.
I know there is loss in the heavens even if,
fixed on enchantment, I stare only at colors
abridged from history and from the history of awe.

-Ann Lauterbach

THE DAY AFTER

An island is not a window onto a broad climate
but a caption describing what is beyond
and illegible. The tides are high,
the light rivets and we are aware
of an intrinsic mode less probable than music.
The sound is the pitch of a shell, a brilliance
that parades before us as if we were marooned
in some incessant necessary garden
or an ancient resort furnished with intimacies.
By now the moon does not count as the moon
slips out of sight into the abstract, the luminous.

There are no vertical landscapes, just
a low, monotonous museum lit from within by
other, giant lights. The windows are shuttered.
By the time we arrive it is too late
and we know why some houses seem blind and others
merely logical. We cannot intrude on these limits;
even the dunes are the occasion of dull enterprise.
The fires, for instance. How many are deliberately set?
Last winter's show was sobering: she walked across
in a purple coat and the birds were held down, pecking.

-Ann Lauterbach

"up & up mount fuji
little snail"

for Marshall Reese

[In its original form, this poem consists of a set of index cards, to be re-shuffled and re-read as often as the reader likes. At each shuffle, the top card, followed by the phrase "for Marshall Reese," becomes the poem's title -eds.]

in other words

a romance

fuck-off

everyone's predicament

employers don't have that kind of
time either, etc.

an historical novel

you might like a donut, etc.

intimidation

fear

bitchy mood all the time

[Cont.]

"up & up mount fuji, little snail" for Marshall Reese cont.]

bitchy mood all the time

sure we do

fuck-off

the interruption

of a new machine

just like I have been doing

it's not surreal I'm broke

or puke from nervousness, etc.

everything was lopsided

about this work situation

when the moon is full

you will have plenty of dough

I'm, like

[Cont.]

"up & up mount fuji, little snail" for Marshall Reese cont.]

disturbed honking

not everyone's predicament

in time to pay the rent, etc.

-Chris Mason

THE DOSSIER: WHAT YOU WERE

What you were in the habit of referring to
as your intelligence
has left us now
to foment some more distate for instability,
another literature about a climate, endless
paperwork
to be strewn some cloudless day
so like the next across the island sector
in a policy of the vague excuse
to linger en route and on the veranda
with other twining indications
that intelligence was never very operational.

It took to its work like a duck to water, enthusiastically.
But operative status came to be granted
to fewer and fewer among the missing,
the presently weary, the rested up.

Intelligence was to be a factor,
like fish in water,
in the far-flung, sunlit demography
which is stable,
and the the population, which is not.

Now intelligence has left us.
This is not enough
to erase the suspicion that the newness of each new situation
and the rawness of the data it provides
is not what intelligence ferrets out.
This is not the climate for ferreting,
though the work continues, like flags in the air,
whose greatest good
would be to stand for the greatest number,
most of whom are not yet born.

To their own misrepresentation
those legions upon legions are the unwilling midwife,

the colorful, ageless character
who has watched so many regimes arrive
and, like strict departures, go
the way of theory
whose profound instability
has given unscheduled birth to so many islands,
islands lacking dossiers,
orphans

[Cont.]

THE DOSSIER: WHAT YOU WERE cont.]

stranded in the dawn, clamoring to be fed, clothed
and allotted a regime
like a dog in the manger,
whose pedigree will ensure recognition, options
and intelligence enough
to keep tabs on the men of straw,
if not every straw in the demographic wind.

But this is not enough.
Sabotaged by fair weather
and the fledgling regime's dependence on fair weather friends,
intelligence finds itself in days to come
riffing back to page one
of a dossier that in theory will never get off the ground
and back to the drawing board where it belongs.

In the meantime, it is operational, marginally,
embarrassingly, like hunger to the fed. So that,
in effect,
intelligence
has left us
like birds
in the hand having opened on departure
one last file on such effects of same
as may in future justify
a theory of having lingered,
if not a policy of having stayed,
or neglect of a policy of no precipitous retreat,

so that
what will be eternally new, the waves, the foam,
will rest
on what remains the same, the foam, the waves,
and what you were
when you were sought out by others of your intelligence
left you unfound,
though not unfounded--never that (chorus of agreement)!
That would be suspicious.
Nor were you lost,
having left your admirers flattened out
against windows from within and, outdoors,
up on rooftops:

[Cont.]

THE DOSSIER: WHAT YOU WERE cont.]/no break

useless intelligence,
unstable, sunlit men,
ruminative men, though impatient,
men like puns.

It wasn't really serious, that unscheduled flight; it's just
that you took it seriously.

A vanishing vanishing point
looks from evaded checkpoints like a coup.
Intelligence cannot get the picture: your regime
of beautiful inattention
reperpetuates itself in luxury
--its theme, its generosity, its distances
and what it offers itself
--"Why, yes--it's me!"--
is what it offers its critique:
"It is me."--and never you mind

that the globe that is shrinking is not the only globe
you are standing on:
The evolution of the greatest good
must now proceed
within the context of a theory of the greatest number.
This welcomes you, this future
in the image of the populace,
the volatile factor,
like truth in the telling,
the greatest good
and of interest
to intelligence, too.

As if you cared,
standing still or flattened out

against the waves which shrink
along with the globe against which
they'd like to flatten themselves
in the image of a mood,

the urge
to say it with exotica, little marks on paper,
uncrumpled, yellow and flattened out.

[Cont.]

THE DOSSIER: WHAT YOU WERE cont.]

But who would evolve toward deciphering them?--or
the greatest number of them
--for evolution's message is partial,
partial to those who can flesh it out.

It's the rawness of data
to everyone else, impatience breeding a future apart,
for not everyone is in a mood to evolve
...though the greatest number come out smelling like a rose.

There's the evolution, too, that leaves you what you were,
as in the last will and testament of the reincarnated one,
mending fishnets or drafting a proposal,
stepping out of your role or back into something comfortable,
smelling like flesh and having left us
or not.

The picture remains
to be drawn as it might be seen
by a decipherable presence, your own,
what you were or might have become, i. e.,
what the picture lacks
and intelligence cannot provide

--but never you mind:
the globe you are standing on is not the only one that shrinks
from the greatest number, sustaining its revolutions
in the diurnal way,
dizzy by noon,
restored by sunset
to forepaws
to pirouette always
out of the path
of your happiness

which is year one
for what we are about to achieve.

And if our attention to the greatest good is overzealous,
it's to find if in our number there is any one

[Cont.]

THE DOSSIER: WHAT YOU WERE cont.]

whose nights in this regime
have found a way to be overlooked
by the critique your absence
has scattered in the heavens
or if

your departure remains
the requirement of a daylight policy--one step
at a time,

an expanding time, yes, but only on the scale of shrunken sunset
viewed in flight and
operative that way too,
when what you were

is the only literature standing still, like a brief
for what might be, and what you are
is the regime of considering it
for itself,
alone,

apart
from the sunlight that flattens out the page.

-Carter Ratcliff

THEATER OF THE TERRIFIC

The beach is empty
like mia cabeza misma.

Stay the way you are,
don't ever change.
You're marvelous

and when thoughts of you would fill my head,
that's when I was really living.

Like a feathered friend,
my soul would arch across the morning sky, all that white.

*

The marvelous was terrific,
the way it would make you stay the way you are

for me
in the soul's equivalent of sensory deprivation

in back of the eyes and during their marvels,
a pink cloud getting orange.

*

It was terrific
to get up in the morning
and walk out in the soft, tough-minded illumination.

The air was filled with little pictures
fluttering toward the mind,
and the mind is not balanced in the world by touch,
and the soul is not balanced by the warmth of pink sand
on the body turning orange
on the empty beach

[Cont.]

THEATER OF THE TERRIFIC cont.]

beneath the ragged palms
aslant their elegant shadows, amid
the sea wrack,
the seediness,

just being there...

*

Satin curtains
opened on the sky, the days
and days apart from you.

They were thoughts, like applause
rushing at me from water's edge, like the dove

or the seagull

or the dappled,
the tropical, fawn, with her delicacy,
her delicacy with words.

*

In the house, at the edges,
there was lots of milky, afternoon light.

*

The soul is the pilot
in the brain,
like light in the heart of an afternoon
cloud
which shows how it feels
around the edges.

*

[Cont.

THEATER OF THE TERRIFIC cont.]

I was drowsy
and inspired
to look to the body for an equivalent of what I see.
A delicate equivalent.

I chose your body, darling,
from thousands and thousands,

launching my soul on the terrific sky
like a chromium boat,
all that white.

*

You're my inspiration

to look to the body for an equivalent of what I feel
and because
what I see
is heartbreaking beauty,

the ocean's serenade
and sunrise like musical appreciation,

and death
that waits in the sky
for the feathered creatures who fly there

to push it further and further away
from the impossible but necessarily terrific dream

of loving you
to stay the way you are,

like applause that fills the mind with pictures
along those lines,
the lines of your departure.

I am radiant in those pictures,
my power like the sun's.

*

[Cont.]

THEATER OF THE TERRIFIC cont.]

It's spacious. And empty, too,
because it is the light
and it brings the light

to the shutters and bamboo shades.
Your departure...

Your house is my house.

Your history has its seedy side,
now that I hold you in my arms,

but otherwise
you could never stay the way you are.

*

Your history would never spread in my direction
like waves of applause
and the way you are

would have no equivalent in the light

you see
I bring you
or it wouldn't be so

that you illuminate the place you are going

well in advance

of your temporarily being there,
sexy as ever

near the frond on the sand
and the precision of its shadow.

*

[Cont.]

THEATER OF THE TERRIFIC cont.]

That precision
--that's never an equivalent of what you see.

*

Nor is imprecision
equivalent to what you feel

with twilight turning back on the day
with its escort of palms

that stops by the roadside
just ahead of the growing darkness,

with its equivalent in our bodies,
the motes, special cases
of afternoon light, light as breath,
a feather,

and guiding it
into a picture, into your mind.

*

It's terrific to be discussing all this
with you

as your inattention
guides you into history,

and before you know it night is here.
You're getting to know yourself,

so you turn out your light
inside your hazy netting.

The white moths can have the darkness
to do with it
what they want,

and to do the dream
--to do the dream before it does them.

*

[Cont.]

THEATER OF THE TERRIFIC cont.]

And the morning after--
that's the emptiness you feel. The spaciousness
when it dapples the sand, when it thaws all that pink,

the screen, the sill, the porch, the seedy cot,

and you lie back down
because, that way, you can always
stay that way
till the mind gets back

its feathered friends
and the power once more
to admit,

you're so terrific
and I never got to know you...

*

I got much further.
I arrived

at history's equivalent of sensory deprivation,
at the power of the mind

to adore its future
to stay the way you are.

-Carter Ratcliff

VERSES REPLY

The "in" box is blank paper, the "out" is paper
with words typed on it, executions
of inner processes on an electrical machine
Oh, keep it up Peter! you're going to make us
all so much happier, we lovers of flow
Let it all just go, let the marking of paper
register mental events ever subtler in hopes
of a masterpiece, sure, but more important
in the interests of incessantly going
You are going, dear soul, and even hastening
with things that are bad for you, though retarding
with attachments, love retards, yet do
go on with typing on and taking
pieces of paper out of the typewriter and
saving them, save everything! It pleases
the horizontal forces, the horizon holds you
in focus so long as you're moving toward it
You're our Minnesota clipper! A boat
makes a constant career of perturbing the ocean
momentarily, we'd admire you for doing no less
in the medium that's ours and which you would bless

Oct. 1977

-Peter Schjeldahl

DRAFT-DODGER

Conceived on the night of the German
invasion of Russia, I awoke to warfare
mainly in the form of police sticks
hitting young heads, and I was well
out of it, ensconced in the limitless
bubble of my prairie birth and
backfiring youth, muttering
to myself of my abysmalness and glory
so much more serious-seeming than the bruises
of the kidding contemporaries I did cheer on

I lived in the midst of many things and I
read the newspapers, and I wrote

In 1966, pumped full of vicious drugs
and sleepless and filthy, on Whitehall Street
after an ordeal of many faces I realized
I was free, and wasted as a soldier

I wouldn't have been any extraordinary soldier

but I could have been an ordinary soldier, ordinary
misfit in any plausible war, ordinary fuck-up

I could have tried to avoid getting killed and
gotten killed anyway, perhaps, I could have killed
had that presented itself, I could
have suffered in myself a cracked world
and later shared a silence with others so suffering

Maybe writing about that would have presented itself

As it was, for years grenades and guns went off
in my head in the moments before sleep, exterminating
a shadowy enemy that could have been my country's

had it not been my very self, with which
prolonged negotiations ever portend an armistice

-Peter Schjeldahl

POEM WITH ADA

sitting in the park
waiting for the baby to cry

tense, not bored
not watchful

unalert but open
to the hubbub

smoking

how is a baby like a pair of suspenders?

clue: one is visible, one is not

tempted, as always,
by the philosophical reflex
reaction to the seeming bind

a bird, a squirrel,
greenery

playing children of several
ages: set of previews

Ada, don't cry
don't squirm

do whatever else it is you do

what is it?

meditate?

okay to drool
mopping your mouth makes me feel . . . well,

feel well

well-being can be a kind of agony,
am I right?

[Cont.]

POEM WITH ADA cont.]

mention the clear air, warm
sun, cool shadows:
no excuse from the day
to not feel utterly at home on Earth

and yet one is not,
nor ever will be?

I'm just a visitor here myself
and a vehicle
for you, kid, to move you
away intact

that's okay

don't bother to thank me

it baffles me as much as it would you
if you weren't such a little dumbbell

thanks, anyway, for seeming content
and for not resembling me
though everybody says you do

you with your ability to turn adults
into morons

"Yankee Doodle went to town
Riding on a po-ny"

you like that, huh?

what the fuck

(that squirrel looks more intelligent
than I feel)

be good and daddy will sing some more
when we get home

pretty great daddy, huh?

wind kicking up

dust, do not get into this baby's eyes

April 1976
-Peter Schjeldahl

FACE

When I draw a face I usually put a grin on it. My own face won't grin. Years of smirking have unbalanced the smile muscles: the left corner of my mouth always leads the way. I prefer the right side of my face. It is ostensibly diffident but actually reserved. Let the left side carry on about my contempts and embarrassments; its twin has life under advisement.

Skulls grin unmistakably. The mad joy of having evolved into homo sapiens is part of our structure, a tendency to joy beneath our susceptible flesh -- susceptible to constant pain, endless distortion by the wrenching self. There is no fairness in the mechanics of personal existence; there is nothing, in fact, but ruthless mechanics. The concerns of the mechanism dominate everything.

In childhood family pictures, our parents are usually smiling. But there are no pictures, no X-rays, of the mixtures of oil and sand they have fed into our gears. There are only our adult faces, telling the world how we're working, whether or not to bother with us, whether or not to watch out.

Do you pick at your face? Do you stroke it? Do you hide it behind a hand while conversing? Do you wrinkle it in a peculiar way while thinking? How many adolescent efforts at improving your image have left you with silly facial mannerisms? When you look in a mirror do you really look, or do you only check to see if everything's okay?

A few dozen muscles operate the face, moving within the flesh. Over the years they carve out little valleys, orchestrate little tensions and slacknesses. They work together on a repertoire of expressions that grows subtler as it narrows. At last we have essentially only one expression. Our feelings then simply animate this or that aspect of the pattern, changing it as passing clouds change a landscape, flooding it by turns with light and shade.

[Cont.]

FACE cont.]

A disfigured face is terrifying not because it is ugly but because it communicates something impersonal. Its accidental expression shocks us like a dream image come to life, a fairytale image that overwhelms the small, frail machinery of the waking mind. (The vast dreaming mind, by contrast, can stand almost anything.) We recoil from the disfigured face in horror of an encounter with our own unknown selves.

The face of a sleeper is a simple mask: blankly contented or blankly quizzical or blankly dissatisfied. I like best the face of one who, sleeping, resembles a beached fish, washed up on the shore of a peaceable island.

-Peter Schjeldahl

APPEALING TO THE EYE

As I traversed whatever lay East, a range of
Mountains, not the mountains of the East
Or Northeast, though, which fold like velour
Which brings to me the grand image of breasts
Which can and should be easily encompassed in
The vade mecum (whatever that is) of emotion
Which art so prissily provides for me, yeah
I had managed to travel cross-town afoot
Although a spasm of falling afflicted me

As I grow older, more averse to murk, I discover
Sometimes to shock, sometimes to only chagrin
What the words have turned out to mean:
With the pleasure of harmonious tears
I consulted my pocket reference book and
Found "vade mecum" means "pocket reference book"
Exactly what I unknowingly had intended--

But
What interest can these velocities hold for you
Who are so arranged and aggrandized as to be
Larger than mountains and aglow, too, with ague?
No doubt why you fell in the street: the fever mounts
To bastinado you with small bronze peaks

Well, if it pleases you, I should like to take
Not merely my opportunity to tell you all
But also a few pears and bialys from your larder
To succour me on my eclectic voyage, commencing when
My recovery from my recent passage through
The wild and waiting mountains of your north is through,

And now I will begin the day's unveilings, such as
How the fire begins, how the flame comes to fall

-Simon Schuchat

ODE TO THE CONFEDERATE DEAD

An Eclogue in honor of the memory of Robert Lowell

I want these girls to stick around.

Is that clear?

Their skin's light flush, the voltage of the air
Soupy with the sleep of darts.

Did I want to fuck?

I wondered, among my ancient nuts, if I
Would fuck among those subtle branches--even
Within the forest (quite possibly an idiot)
In the ideal triumph of falsely idolized "roses."
Well, I guess...

What if these girls changed poses?
Who cares if, to your eyes, they look simply fabulous?
And buddy, what if they're just movies in your head:
Eyes blue cold spring resourceful weeping trop chic?
Are those other grunts only another lazy trick,
Just a breeze stirring up the inside of your pants?
Hell no! And now one falls onto the other in utter quiet
Hot palms whispering around the cool dude's neck
And not a drop has fallen from anywhere except me horn,
Bubbling through the permanent forest. Just the breeze
To clear the tubes for action, to soundly blow
In two directions from dry pipes in wet shower
Onto a perfect smooth edge, a one story skyline.
That breath, I made up in a clearly smooth oven
Out of air: it takes me back on through the sky.

The border of Sicily has a calm mossy swamp
Which I possess like the sun with that kind of arrogance
Tactful, with flowers that look like white sparks LISTEN:

"I cut the hollow tubes made squishy soft

"By pure genius. Now, on the white black red

"Of foreign forests winding a vine around the head

"Of a round fountain, a sleeping white person strums

"On her skin--without much effort her nipples get stiff

"(O hot corn muffins, O raisins!) the girl's

"Chest slowly going up and down..."

Limp, the itch of the yawning hour

I wasn't looking at the clock or dailing NERVOUS

Now, the mindlessness of I who would want "the,"

But later I'll feel real energetic

Erect, alone, glowing from head to toe

And by then one of you lilies will get the message.

[Cont.]

ODE TO THE CONFEDERATE DEAD cont.]

With sweet nothing noise lips that kiss
And turn away, assured of their sneakiness
On my breast, probably innocent, there's a hickey
From some mysterious imperial set of teeth.
But shit, the confident one in this myth
Is the bucking animal under the joyous blue
Who, turning with trouble along his cheek
Dreams in solid longing, that he can amuse
Immediate beauty with the tale of our confusions
Telling them in our very credulous chant--
A loud one, loud like love ringing her changes,
Puffing the ordinary song among the two
Naked cheeks and naked thighs (to stare upon!)
Followed by the snore of vain monotony.

And so, why not, O control panel of my jet, O cunning
Throat of birds, make sweet noise beside this lake
Just once: proudly mumbling, I'll talk for hours
Of dresses, idolize these paintings, and these paintings
Will, out of the shadows, undress the beauty.
Just like sucking off the clarity and juice of a grape;
To exile regret and caution, keep them at a distance
With arpeggios of giggles: I just lift the luscious bunch,
Suck it dry, blow on it, hold it to the light
Drunkenly look at it with awestruck gaze til dusk.

Girls, let's review our memories now:

"My piercing and rushing eye timelessly struck!
"We necked to drown the burning swell we felt!
"We made loud noises of passion among the trees!
"But now the perfect bath-towel of your hair is gone
"Into the bright thrill of breakfast juice
"And I run away from that, fall in bed with a stranger
"(We both despairing of being strangers to ourselves)
"Yes, into another set of arms! What's the danger
"Of grabbing them, anyway, and running off with them
"Into the bushes? The nervous shades hate that,
"All their odors die in the lifelike sunbeams,
"But we have played in every place and every light."
You're beautiful when you get angry, anyone tell you that?
I love it when you ought to hate me, jaybird naked

[Cont.]

ODE TO THE CONFEDERATE DEAD (cont.)/no break

Running my tongue across your cabin's ridgepole
Like a flash of lightning! Why's private nudity
So exciting?--the active legs, the passive mouth
All naivete goes by the boards, wet with
Tears or sweat or other, more delicious juices.
"The stupidest thing I did was run off proud
"Of having you in my confidence, that wound-up
"Net of love the powers that be love to confuse:
"I was just about to lick my sores
"In the bowl of your lap (mouth to single
"Finger, now the light-touched whiteness
"Sets her mutated intelligence on fire: she's
"Small and bright and calm and sure and...)
"When you suddenly flailed your arms about
"And ran away, like from death, sans culottes, so
"Heartless, not even looking back at me!"

Oh well, someone different will get to play
With my horns, tie them to her hair:
Ya know, my heart, already ready to bust
Like a fruit much beloved by buzzing flies
With my happily imprisoned blood
Still pumps for the infinite buzz of sex.
After this forest has long since burned off,
Still in the ashes there's a ton of fun.
You are but an inactive volcano, O love
And you continue to move with honor and grace
When your face turns glum or you feel tired.
Then, I'm the boss.

Ah shit.

But now,
A soul without speech and a lumpy body
Slowly gives in to proud afternoon silence.
I might as well just pass out, despite
The possible rudeness, in the dust. What a
Pleasure, to lick the effective star of scotch.

Goodbye. I see you as the jokes you are.

after Mallarme's L'Apres-midi
d'un Faune

VII--X 1977
-Simon Schuchat

from CITIZENS BAND

Staircase fanfare comes across the night. These questions cross the margins run off the rain so blue real aura and real blue. Sitting still no claiming knowledge your outline no straight line our hustle several ways it could make sense. The birds are falling from the fence and that sound is to us is to us different angles, backgrounds so various so strong mauve identity. The I in I'll give you without perspective so thick was the carpet we tried & the narrow space carries out the words that are in the direction saying to you, I want something.

And then with the trees silly image of me unaccompanied only more there than not. The drawn circle of comical dread, somewhere South, where ants forever crawl towards. Not stumbling, relying on news that prances slowly eventually trashing every fossil cancel the battles & the winners so the losers & the competition the start and end my friend through thick and thin.

Slow response understanding that you in the chair goes away with the light wrestling with a part of truth no longer built on mature women. Testing is the worst thing I can think of. Melancholy is a beautiful word. The boss doesn't starve for fun, crossing to the plane, toes tight inside shoes, peel oranges & peel lemons.

Kick out frills, so nice, refrains from the spring catalog, so fine, my mind has stopped short & I turn smear the room with panic. And out, kick out frills, then empty. The swivel chair screw is missing foliage pours into & I remember grease. My timing is adjusted to casing you a file system askew.

By Susan, Tad, Terry, Pete. By Cary, isolation. Soon connected with the weakest link. Glue begins to fade during the silence, the last night words of giveaway with every step of the soft ground in your voice. Air traces empty palace, your last sitting place embossed. If you didn't I would. Get the stars confused by sun, faint talk through the floor fainter what we felt or feel. Fitting into a million hallways, translucent maze, an empty past, counter top eyes of tense changes object rearrangement.

[Cont.]

from CITIZENS BAND cont.]

Now I'm in the second tier and held fast. Now I'm talking to you in alternative celebration. Now I'm the only hologram.

In final, the bottle of wine now wine bottle. Returning again to lend pencils, again plastic or pink pearl erasers, 12 inch wood rulers with one metal soft edge, 10 squares to an inch graph paper the lazer beam tricks and on seventeenth you say there's plenty of good ideas but time and I say she must have known when he held onto her sleeve so tight. She must have run away. A phrase that stays in your mind of poetry of music of art all laughing at the anthropomorphic sensibilities.

Like a saxophone in the basement and then upstairs in the amp. I could tell you fantastic beginnings and little more. I could tell you the origin of the quilts. Your shadow behind after an hour of words the missing tone.

Imagine he is looking and she wants a holiday, breaks about the eighth. Deli behind her collar turned, legs out front, keeping them together, toward the lake through Syracuse his eyes his notebook flying. To give someone a hard time let yourself go to give in to let yourself go. Tote bags on the plane arrangements made for stop offs. The new softness takes her further away imitates her first sound extremities settle white like cocaine. Outside rain, while both body halves ripple with the deep bath.

Jawbone on wrist as music as blood (inner corners) heated cheeks (outer corners) you're within range when I don't look. Your distance moving in time fast eater you may want to go without. In the evening music for someone for me negating that the music is for me. Unconstructed unaware your cigarettes are on the table. Telephone con. Bliss tracks losing track unsure that it was ever like this photo. Mud slide on the coast, cut-out fronts for your poetry. Her voice more than her words, her feelings, fear counts twice now. With this example, two examples. A long time ago, life was one cell.

[Cont.]

from CITIZENS BAND cont.]

He was an organizer and he organized the tenants. When he moved into the building. She rolled cigarettes in a t-shirt lining the walls without an eye for this. Louder voice deep as she spoke around the room she thought. I wanted to tell him a final way I wasn't always joking & smile that I wasn't always serious. Instead it was to stay unattached you could become attached.

Did you say co-miserate? I only wanted cigarettes. You're taking off my glasses again. Velox. 200 vision of you. And to kiss you for the littlest things.

Behind the bushes, special energy food. Leverage touched us off and I was looking out the window the last time. I threw off the robes. Where around again close your eyes for a favorite song. Rooster. The shopping mall photograph color up.

After all the crusts my toes curl and my hair stands straight. Eyes at my someday. To hold onto. Run around. At night, it's the sentence, your body darker than the dark, clockwork words then you don't say them you don't say them. Rectangles. Squares. The walls a long time constant answer to the walls is constant. We have vertically symmetrical bodies but after a shower we must dry them from top to bottom not side & side. Because gravity. Water slides down.

I've been standing. I've been coming down the stairs, I've been through the doors of the drug store when bells began to ring. At first it was location. Before that no choice but Vienna arrive by boat. It must be different under the ocean. Calm or worse or better. How was it romantic?

Now we think possibilities the hardest choice & how you might. Invite me along. We are casual. The rest of me hanging from a thing called neck and straight shoulders. Trees in reverse, snow that won't go down. The three-way light bulb is stuck in the third way.

[Cont.]

from CITIZENS BAND cont.]

He knows what it means when he turns his back. When I felt this way I was the freak. My big feet were more distinct than others. Itemizing. This year all left handers may turn into right handers. It is 1978. When I feel this way statements are restated. Apparent sense. You're in your emotions, they're no help now. Send it to me after you've circled. Take two big drinks and think. Now wake up. You may want to use a new deodorant or cut your hair. You're tilted and again tucked in. There's a coral highlight on the table. Real coral is far away. You think now far away.

She's a good talker but she doesn't use apostrophes. Single words resonate and possession is eliminated. My mind goes too fast and can't keep up. Imagination preceeds imagination.

You're in the circle. The fountain is turned off. There are patches of ice and you have to walk around them.

1/78

-Diane Ward

INTENSIVE CARE

One is experienced, one intelligent, one to talk easy, one for definitions. One way could be to urge me. When you want it, in charts, take it back. You make tracks that last longer. Triple leads to triple lists.

The long time when I met you. Yellow plastic wavers underneath, the chair. Players bound by players, surround the audience with games. I'm a crowd and you're a crowd, posing: studies of people before you locking out those behind. Fonts for stencils, tiny letters make big books squeezing eye drop-pers breath of the atomizer. Embargo in the 50's nice day for. What do you understand?

Faking as appeal. To think to think believe it makes differences. As a shadow, window shade down now silhouette, voiceless as a pencil line squared with a needle through who's eye thread as settings for a dance as clear pine laminated, imitation, slowest dancer here unheard. Big hammer misses the nail head bending down to straighten the nail your hand has the power not to think. Junction at the railroad tracks, stacks of houses ready to go up.

So clear, fine Canadian lake, so clear I want to block it out. Why the tree is in the water, why they're closing the bridges, why the smoke, the billboards turned out as toys. I walked through in May documenting carefully. I threw away the facts sat down with them. Not when the leaves had already dried after falling after changing colors after green. We want to stop and stare. Over the rough spots, puddles. Over cracks. Calculated steps in which walking is denim blown by the wind, skeleton of a foot, the shoes you choose to wear, the stoppage of the concrete, dry leaves crackle from the pressure.

12/77

-Diane Ward

PROTECTION

I

He makes his way to the front. An arbitrary ending, thinking ahead. Go to the coroner and buy me a knife, a wristwatch, water, a machine. Steve is quoting. Divided consensus carries little weight. Exhaustion of labor, brought home in a laundry cart by a passerby, sitting under a fruit tree in the light. The swamp will have scorned this magician. You are a large number, and occasionally the operator, on principle, gels. Drawing not on futility of inner resources but with the design. Imagine we are sitting in a darkened theater and walking into the war. He is glad to have destroyed his writings, subconsciously revived. The obstruction is in the home (the back room). He writes for television, a face appears on the screen. A squat man with small ears tuning a violin. It has implications--nails driven into speech. The taxi driver falls through a region of thorny branches, avoids the ground. Wandering eyes arrive to help, the boss begins to work. He advocated a literary grammar, as it was originally conceived. Out of habit the voices become unsnarled, too soon. The elephant is lodged in the door. Snow on the street outside, but I can't see without my glasses on. Parallels at 8:00 PM. One day in May it looks like the hallway, a foot deep. I'll show you how thoroughly the rhymes are prepared (sound of many large dogs). Friends drinking unfamiliar water on Oak Street, in unfamiliar bars. You are confusing two different stories, two different alphabets, of two different kinds. How far may an argument extend. In such cases he consciously does not concern himself. The factory dances, as though sitting apart.

II

Death spilled hot water (on the iron) he thinks (useless). The winter (final days) comes to its end (settled) alone. We see outside (somatic) a curtain (nerves) side by side. We operate in dense fog (a landscape) with control (signal towers) against detail. Observe that the fewest (survivors) can play the game (and win). Worn-out (run of the mill) language, nothing new (the turning point in his life). To die of (will cure many) a thought (enters the room) because nothing (cannot sleep) will follow. A man in black (bending over a rock). Tension denotes speed, reaches

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PROTECTION cont.]

(between a woman and the sea) its highest point (before ending). He was practical (an anarchist) (a cop). Your thinking (self-destructive) describes stages of the weather (an effect) (bright forgotten days). Rocks (on the field, lit by the precursors) hold on, as water (remembered, inactive) in the pipes. He looks (open score of face) like long-lost twin (narrative voice). He said talk (decades earlier) (but sleeping) has no claws (sleeping). Back to the future (his precarious spot) organized for fools. Disclosed climax, to be reached (years late). Disoriented (it contains) (remote) (endless series) (renovations). It betrays its trust (recognize the dog). Gulls circling (the national anthem) of a true exile (a habit). What do you (parallels) mean, by experience (quoting at length). He stops (slavery) to untie (uneven) (the pinnacle from which) his shoes... Each day sustains (necessary) a high ceiling (and us). It is mine (sounds like me). Literalness (naturally) the principle of (surplus positioning) conscious (as) sandstone (machines). In two seconds (telephone) (incidents) the other side of the street. Half-way the (accidental) mock paraphernalia (we stopped) I repeat. For a moment (against his will) all that remains active (with silence) silence confronts. The liquid (talking to me) bears a resemblance (surroundings disappear). To be followed (giants plunging through the years) by something (enigmatic tree) less complex.

III

In the front room a television is playing. Thousands of images light the screen, each person makes up his own. Perfect devils silently moving against the sun. Birds, monkeys, and other small animals dive for cover. It's foggy out the window, the street is being torn up. Trees in shadow lead the imagination to depth. Arkansas, the flat Germanic voice repeats on the radio. This could produce continuity where vision is disturbed. The wilderness turns up again, and you turn away. He worked rapidly and soon a beautiful city was built on seven successive levels. Time seen as an image is time lost to sight. It is not unlike the pleasure one feels thinking of an old friend, recently dead. He had always wanted to be a landscape painter. A description of an English countryside might shortly appear in print. One is left with a trowel and a lot of empty flowerpots. It is necessary to go further here and repeat discussions already held in another place.

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PROTECTION cont.]

There is a building he pictures in his head. Damage has been done-- a curious moral problem. There is no healthy state of mind, he is firmly convinced. Nothing is more common than for the meaning of an expression to change, for the river to change course. Even as the eyes are moving across the page. Everything in the world is presented to him then. To make a revolution every day is in the nature of the sun. How might it be different, you forget. The author of a technical manual is chastened for his dull prose. Never talk to a man unless you can describe him, then kill him fast. The goods are inspected in the warehouse. Some things we will never penetrate. There was desire piling up in shapes so quickly it got in the way.

IV

A critique given name and address visualizes a distant home. The map is filled out and thrown away. Voices of the front office rise to strike heads against the grain. A face is not recognized as a thing made as such. Today he has forty years forgotten to be alive. A machinist's understanding seems purposeless at best. Between the noisy terminal outputs the dead spaces spread out. The empire has its origin in speech leaving the brain. A matter for the planned advertising of the world. What breaks piercing the pattern of profit and loss can be made. The narrative terminates in another story. There will be civil war. Seeming clairvoyance where there is flaw in place of design. "Mud," he replied, relieved, "the economy of anything." Unreadable instructions in a textbook reverse direction and float. We stand fighting the fascination of words that may be true. A style glares out of describing what can actually be seen with the eye. The night as diagrammed is still and clear. Illusions obliterate the frame to be feared nonetheless. In one logic of paraphrase a bridge to move time can be named. The afternoon compresses a shadowless day. Thinking of the moving cloud they thought all the years would wait. We do not see the morning sun the walls in the room recombine. We find an agreement between patterns of surface and depth. Each view is founded on the study of numerous lines. In the end a complex mind emerges as statements in a book. The details of his personal life are left behind. "Now you see an indifference, living heroically, now you don't." The weather has such an effect on his voice, which it has made obsolete.

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PROTECTION cont.]

V

We believe in ourselves and consciously shove aside the past. Suddenly he is disinterested, without any excuse. Friends arrive, you are pleased to see them. A new development occurs. It is now time that there be voiced misunderstandings and doubts. Some seconds ago the dam broke, flooding the town. If we live in a lightning flash, it is in the heart of absolutely nothing. As he walked through the open door, what follows. I put the pebbles on the desk and accept the risk again. What range of sound is counted as unsorted information. It's getting too close to home, time to change voices. Here he ascribes meaning to a meaningless shape. Laundry soap in a cardboard box, a simple design on the side. Stones of the lake with two names. Language makes a home, not the other way around. He finishes his statement and looks up at the crowd. Among so many millions of faces, no two are alike. Things of the moment are things of the mind. These luminous details show tension below calm. The storm reflects itself, black as day. You want the thing that isn't named. A writer sees too much and writes what he has already seen. He thinks before he speaks. Different ways of talking about the same thing. They begin to take an interest in each other, what follows. The field is exemplary, the materials are scarce. He solves the mystery by becoming it. The unknown which corresponds to the outside. Not having worked much, they cautiously experiment. The outcome is thoughtful, and preserved.

-Barrett Watten

THE FORMAL FUNCTIONS OF PLOT

In her essay "On Style" (1962), Susan Sontag suggested that "the great task which remains to critical theory is to examine in detail the formal function of subject matter" (emphasis hers). (The obverse of this would also be an interesting study: the examination of the content function of style.) The lack of apprehension of these two functions is what has caused an almost unbridgeable chasm between the mental worlds of those who write "fiction" and those who write "poetry." This lack of communication, interest, and comprehension may not bother either most poets (who tend to congregate in large, mutually congratulative groups) or most novelists (who tend to retreat, for long periods of time, in their own self-created worlds), but it does bother me: it resembles, a little too closely, bands of ostriches doing headstands in the sand. Who's to watch, and ultimately, who's to care?

The formal function of subject matter in fiction (plot, characters, themes) serves a function similar (I believe) to that which rhyme, rhythm, alliteration etc. served for pre-literate cultures: not "mere" stylistic devices (which is how we might consider the use of such things today), but mnemonic devices: ways to remember. Of course, most longer pre-literate works also had "subject matter," and perhaps (since "style" functioned, in a sense, like a coding device) these cultures in which it is truly possible to posit an absolute dichotomy between "content" and "style." (In those days, of course, there was neither "poetry" nor "prose"--just oral literature. "Plot" was the inspiration, "style" the encoder.)

Today, we have books, and it is no longer necessary for anyone to "memorize" a work. (Actually, the bard in pre-literate societies did not attempt to repeat a work word-for-word, but rather to convey the essential "story": NOTE (1) incipient dualism--that which is to be represented (the essence) as distinguished from the [by definition more than one] way(s) this can be represented. From this the notion that a work of art can be "paraphrased." NOTE (2) poetic devices as means, not ends; the subordination of "poetry" to "story.") The advent of written language took away the raison d'etre of oral literature and, as usual, attempts to resurrect pre-literate forms were, relatively speaking, failures (compare the Aeneid with The Iliad). Only after the advent of writing was it perceivable that there were two modes of writing ("poetry" and "prose") rather than one; "poetry" was more interested in the development of what had been the mnemonic devices, and "prose" was more interested in "story" (the original essence).

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Even though it is no longer necessary to memorize works, it is still necessary to remember them. All writing is linear (even concrete poetry, to be read at all, must be read word-by-word), but many short poems (and most poems are short) can be visually seen at once, like a painting. (Even poems several pages long could be spread out, their length perceived at a glance.) Sontag and others have made the case that style "depends on, and can be analyzed in terms of, some principle of repetition or redundancy." No matter how initailly confusing the work, the principle of redundancy can be grasped (assuming it is there at all) in a somewhat shortish poem, simply by the possibility of confronting the whole at once, and by rereading. (It is possible to read and enjoy a poem without grasping its principle of "repetition or redundancy,"--out of some sensual awareness or "head trip" on language--but this is essentially "stupid" reading, no different from the way millions of Americans read Gothics or historical romances or "thrillers": jerking off on word rather than plot tricks.) The whole cannot be confronted in fiction, due to considerations of length and time. What can be accomplished in poetry by rereading, must be accomplished within the work of fiction itself. The longer the work, the more this must be done. (Oddly, the most memorable--in the ordinary sense of the word--works of ficiton, the best novels, tend to be those that are long rather than short. I can remember a great many novels in relatively decent detail, but hardly any short stories). Effective fiction seems to depend, somehow, on length. Subject matter is the means by which long works resolve the problem of memory.

"Plot" (and I like best the Random House dictionary definition not of "the plan, scheme, or main story of a play, novel, poem or short story," but def. "1. a secret plan or scheme to accomplish some purpose, esp. a hostile, unlawful, or evil purpose...") is the presumably visible structure of incidents in a work, which psychologically sets the reader to expect the work is going "somewhere"--and that, therefore, it is worth finishing. This is the most important problem in a work of fiction, and it is surely the reason why so many works of fiction fall neatly into genres (detective, sci-fi, western, gothic); a reader of these genres (and there are specialized readers, the way there are specialized writers) has been this way before, and liked it, and so will give a writer he/she has never before encountered a great deal of leeway before putting aside the book. (Some readers are so compulsive about plot endings they are unable to put a book down before they finish it, even if

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they hate it.) This kind of expectation leads to a kind of criticism very common in genre writing: the "ending" is a "disappointment," generally because it is either "far-fetched," "unbelievable," or, au contraire, too predictable. It is a stupid but understandable complaint: if one has gambled four hours on the (justifiable) expectation of ten minutes worth of real pleasure, the end had better be satisfying.

This notion of plot is, obviously, primitive, and the genre novels which tend to receive this kind of criticism are also, I believe, primitive. (Better genre novels depend for their punch not on ending, but the world-view they embody, and are not so prone to this kind of criticism. Or, if they receive this sort of criticism, it is less relevant, and less damning.) All plot really has to do is keep the reader reading the book. Bad genre novels, by making the reader concentrate on ending, are really over-determinate in structure. (The bad guy will or will not be caught--and he/she is nearly always caught--so how will he/she be caught? Endless repetitions of this formula wore out the formula until it became enlarged--generally by moral ambiguities, a confusion between "good" and "bad" guys--which is why spy novels tend to be more interesting than detective novels.) Better novels only give their readers enough plot to keep them reading the book. (Decisions of this order can involve a kind of war of nerves.)

Approaching a work, one is all curiosity. One has read works before, one has been satisfied, one wants to repeat the satisfaction. In the works one has read before, it has taken a number of pages before the dimensions of the work began to take shape; one is prepared for a certain number of pages of relative confusion. In other words, in the beginning is total potential. Each sentence read diminishes that potential. For instance, the man in a railway carriage might be on the Orient Express, but it turns out he is on a trunk line outside of London. This gives place (a known), but takes away other places. The year is 1913: soon war will be declared, that civilization will be destroyed; the character doesn't know it (perhaps even the author, if the book was written in 1913 doesn't know it), but we know it (thus the pathos of historical novels). We know the year is 1913, but we also know the eras in which this novel does not take place: possibilities become limited. The young man is a clerk, he is in love with the sister of the baronet, his boss: the dimensions of the story reveal themselves. Psychologically, the reader is in a totally different place than he/she was at the beginning of the work. From an utterly passive state of "awe" (towards a mini-universe of 400 black pages in which anything can happen), he/

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she has changed to a state of "curiosity" about the characters in this novel. The generalized desire (to be interested in something) has found its object. Novels which do not transfer this interest (from the unspecified general to the specific) lose this interest, and the reader may still have curiosity to read some book, but not this book.

This interest is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon. Retaining it is perhaps more difficult than attaining it. At the beginning, the reader does not comprehend: there is place, there are characters, but what are they doing? and why? The reader's state at this point is "incomprehension," confusion. This is initially pleasant; it is the starting point of "suspense" (in its more general meaning, "a state or condition of mental uncertainty or excitement")--on the whole, an enjoyable feeling, but one that can easily pall. The intelligent reader reads not for tricks, or for mystification, but for knowledge (in the most general sense). The initial interest is in characters. After awhile, they must do something, or experience something, or think something. This is plot.

Subsumed within content are "structure" (arrangement of incidents, not necessarily chronological), point-of-view, explicit and implicit narrators (this latter is generally referred to as "tone"--though I think it more revealing to say that "tone" is the voice of the third-person narrator) and, of course, incidents (plot). Some writers of narrative seem uncomfortable with these categories, apparently so old-fashioned. They may not consciously try to fashion any of these elements. But these elements will appear (sometimes the worse due to neglect) independent of the will of the author.

In the beginning of a novel, all is freedom, potential. The process of the novel transfers the potential into the actual. Possibilities decrease. This does not happen evenly. By far the greatest decrease occurs in the opening chapters: place, time, characters, plot soon emerge. Then it is time for the reader either to "settle down with the story," or put aside the book. This is the period (perhaps a fifth of the way through the book) when generalized curiosity (to read a novel) must be transmuted into specialized curiosity (to read this novel). In terms of the contract between author and reader, beginning is crucial.

If beginning is crucial, ending is where the "contract" must (or should) "pay off." One characteristic of a good novel is the "inevitability" of its ending. Of course, no ending is "inevitable," except in retrospect. Even works considered classics have had orig-

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inal endings that were utterly opposite to the ending of the work as it was when published, and we now read it (for instance, Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground). Using Sontag again, what seems inevitable in a work of art is its style. At first sight, it seems churlish and philistine to complain about an ending, but what the reader is (unconsciously) expressing is a failure in the author, not to give a "good" ending, but to be true to him/herself. The way an author is present in work is, of course, by his/her style. A bad ending is a failure of style.

A bad ending is not simply a failure, say, of 10% or less of a novel. In retrospect, it condemns (or at least casts a shadow over) the entire work. This is most obvious in a genre novel such as mystery or suspense, where nearly all expectation resides in the end (at least for mediocre works in the genre). By choosing to write in such a genre, the author is consciously dealing with certain reader expectations concerning that genre, particularly expectations concerning end. (Of course, he/she may choose to deliberately subvert those expectations, and in so doing, also deliver an ending that is "satisfying.") What is crucial is not to fulfill the expectation itself, but to deal with it intelligently and persuasively. This is true for all conventions of the novel.

Endings are just as important for non-genre novels, though the issue tends not to be expressed in that fashion (since the objection sounds so philistine). New authors, especially, are said to have "lost control," or to have let the plot "get out of hand." What the critic is implying, is that the author didn't know where he/she was going. It is a serious charge (though not, perhaps, to Roland Barthes). What it means, ultimately, is that at a certain point in the book, the author knew no more than the reader, and perhaps less (if he is under the illusion the ending is satisfying when it isn't)--not just "knew more" in general, but about his/her craft in relation to the reader, who is generally just a voyeur. It is not a deadly charge if the rest of the book was enjoyable, charming, enlightening, etc., but it will damage the author's credibility.

A bad ending is most damaging to two very different kinds of novels: (1) genre novels (already discussed) and (2) programmatic novels. All novels have "programs" or "plans," as all novels have style, but some novels seem "programmatic" the way some novels seem "stylized". What we really mean by the word is "over-programed." An element of spontaneity is missing. This is often, misleadingly, referred to as the "freedom of the characters to act and think for

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themselves." Of course, characters do no such things. What is really meant, is that the author created characters that appeared to have such & such potentials, which were then undly (for no apparent purpose) constricted as if, in division, one were suddenly denied the use of fractions.

Programmatic novels are of various sorts (social critique, aesthetic critique), but they seem to share one common aim that overshadows all others: that of instruction. The author appears at a greater than usual distance from the reader, who is forced into a posture of mental subservience; he/she knows less, and the author clearly knows more. (If the author does not, in fact, know more, this is courting disaster.) Most, or perhaps all novels have an art of instruction about them, but in programmatic novels this dominates. (The difference can be seen between Parts I & II of War and Peace). The two main sorts seem to be (1) novels aimed at illuminating some social or economic or political evil (Dreiser, Sinclair) and (2) novels aimed at illustrating some aesthetic theory.

These two kinds of novels, so different in nearly all respects share appropriately diverging fates. Most readers, thinking themselves morally "good" (if faint-hearted), will acknowledge the existence of social, economic, and political evils in their society; perhaps the more they acknowledge them, the less they are willing or able to do something about them. Reading a novel of this sort pleasantly engages those parts of their personality that are concerned with morality, while (often) at the same time, even more pleasantly assuring these same parts of their inability to change such circumstances. These books, then, are often popular, particularly if they "deal with" problems of immediate concern (such as political novels written post-Watergate). Few readers, however, no matter how good-hearted, share the same kind of passion for (or even awareness of) problems of aesthetic theory. (This is also true of a surprising number of authors.) Novels of this type, advocating (by their illustration) a new aesthetic theory, have a different kind of readership: small but intense, often "followers," often other writers or those "in the business." In as much as the polemic connects, by contra-assertion, with prevailing aesthetic theories, the average reader (whose knowledge of the prevailing aesthetic theory is hardly extensive) understandably feels lost in such internecine battling. The raison d'etre of the of the novel isn't apparent to him. It makes no sense. It is boring.

Whereas the first sort of programmatic novel tends to have immediate success (often best-sellerdom) that tends to fade even as

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the first hint of remainderdom approaches, the second sort is more likely to have accruing success. It is not that they are really less simplistic than the first kind, though the writers of this sort of novel are literarily more sophisticated (compare Richard Kostelanetz with William Safire): it just takes an audience longer to catch on to the kind of problem dealt with here (assuming the audience ever catches on). The change is aesthetic fashion takes far longer than a change in (writing about) the political/social/economic sphere. In other words, the literary besieging avant-garde can enjoy a relatively permanent stage of oursiderness, of programmatic contra-assertion against prevailing (what are thought to be prevailing) standards. This luxury is not available to the programmatic writer of works in the social sphere, who is constantly faced with the problem of displaying ever more and worse trespasses against the social covenant. It is like pornography: the evils must get ever more titillating or they will cease to shock. And without this shock, there is boredom. (Perhaps this is why "muckraking"--both of the journalistic and fictionalized sort--seems to appear in waves, as does pornography, as does science fiction, as must any form that aspires to the "ultimate"; it is no more possible to sustain apocalypse in literature than it is to sustain orgasm in sex.)

And yet, the besieging avant-garde (whose only hope is remaining "outside") is also prey to enervation--only from within. The state of being outside can lead to a permanent attitude of belligerency that, sufficiently hardened, has nowhere to go. Imagination withers, especially as the state of being "outside" is itself somewhat artificial. Outside what? Outside bestsellerdom (at least in America), but inside (at times) critical approval, grant receptions, teaching positions, most of all inside its own mutually reinforcing circle. Within such boundaries, it begins to seem unnecessary, even somehow a sign of shame, to connect up with the dreams of those vast external masses. What do they know of us, after all? And so, why should we bother to know about them? With this attitude, what is one after all besieging? One is left with merely a club to which one does not wish to belong.

-Jane DeLynn

