CORNFIELD REVIEW

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#9

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CORNFIELD REVIEW

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IS THERE A MIDWESTERN LITERATURE?

While we were looking to buy our first home, our realtor continuously comforted us with the punch line to his one and only joke: three things determine the VALUE of a piece of property: "Location, location, and location." We laughed the few times he applied this reason to perfect houses well exceeding our budget, but gradually it occurred to us that the more laughable idea was the price range we had in mind. That place alone could determine everything! That location could subsume all other, presumably different reasons! Well, if that answer provided little comfort to me as a potential homeowner, it did summarize my feelings about this question "Is there a Midwestern literature?" Three things determine the value of Midwestern literature: location, location, and location. But I'd rather the word "value" exchange its financial meaning for its moral one, as in human values.

Before I elaborate how my realtor's reasoning applies as well to Midwestern literature as to my Midwestern house, I'll want to admit that the more I tried to bear down on the question, "Is there a Midwestern literature?" the more alternative temptations threatened my attention. For example, couldn't we describe (or dismiss) Midwestern literature with a list of the clichés commonly ascribed to the region? Clichés, to earn their weight in the fool's gold, must possess a fraction of (certainly not the whole) truth. Could Midwestern literature be a homespun web of small towns, general stores, flat lands, immigrant ancestors, middle-class families and conservative tendencies? (I'll grant you, an answer of "yes" would have made my work easier.) But I had to begin with "no." I had to begin by answering the question "Is there a Midwestern literature?" by saying "no." Even though I am a writer in the Midwest who directs a program and a bookstore designed to feature such regional writers and writing, I wanted the practical ignorance of the ancients who looked upon the undisciplined world with less proven superiority than plain suspicion. Rather than say "yes" and go about proving such a thing, rather than list specific and favored

books that should be on a Midwestern reading list, I wanted to start, as much as I could, with the blank sky over the Midwest, and by making out individual positions of light, accumulate a figure for such a heavenly body of literature. The ancients required the word *considered* for this act, *con sidereal*, meaning to bring the stars together, and this is the sort of scrutiny I wanted to use: to bring seemingly random points (for we are vast, and vastly misrepresented) into a figure whose character traits might influence, like a zodiac sign, everything born under it. I wanted to employ the astrologer's tricks of squinting to force the dimmer proliferations into the background, of looking off to one side to force more reluctant points into the eye's rods, and of repeatedly applying the common, recognizable, indigenous shapes of the known world--silo, ear of corn, skyscraper, or some such archetype--in order to assign a figure that might best assemble the daunting randomness above us.

I thought it essential to clear the air of obstructing, distracting, dimming views, to find a place outside the city's bright lights and not inside the impenetrable groves of academe. Therefore, I am not considering the following, possibly interesting questions. "Is there literature in the Midwest?" using the word "literature" the way the bookstore chains use it, a qualitative category, a synonym for "classics": those steadily-selling, perennial books which remain constant while the space around them changes every season--"literature" to be distinguished from "Fiction": quick-selling, soon-to-be-remaindered books which change every season while their allotted space remains constant.

I am also dismissing from our forming canon those books that simply contain geographical information about the region, whether used a mere background (as in anywhere with a few writerly details) or as foreground (as in a study of itself that our bookstore can relegate to the token holdings in Nonfiction: social sciences, nature, photography, or travel). I don't mean to quibble over their claim to the word "literature," but I wish to confine our attention to the realms of diction and poetry where, to paraphrase Diderot, the Midwest will not be the thing itself but the light in which the thing can be seen. Our book of Midwestern literature will offer information about ourselves and not about itself.

I am also declining the engaging or perhaps academic question, "Are there Midwestern writers, writers who were born under the sign of the Midwest?" Obviously, writers live in the Midwest;

some have written a body of work or a specific book that could be found within our purview, but we can hardly subsume everything written by that geographical congress as Midwestern literature. Neither would we want to exclude a book because it was written by a non Midwesterner, however we define that--by birth, or by experience, or by something ineluctable like sensibility. Rather than haggle over what defines a person's claim to a region, I'll insist that our designs should attend the specific work itself.

In fact, the most unexpected and apt idea that occurred to me, is that it is not the publisher, the writer, the book, or even the writer's story that earns a book its place in the Midwestern canon, but the readers that, collectively, determine it: Is there a Midwestern reader, readership that chooses appealing, engaging, relevant books that might constitute this body of Midwestern literature? In other words, can the question of a Midwestern literature be best addressed by what appeals to a reader rather by than by what occurs to us as writers, critics, or publishers? And could the tenuous but logical leap suggest this question: Could the interest in such Midwestern books extend to contemporary readers in general because they satisfy a national interest, desire, or even hunger for a kind of writing that has been thwarted, abandoned, or exhausted elsewhere?

But before enumerating those attractive qualities that a reader might be looking for in Midwestern literature, I had to be rid of that field of distraction I mentioned earlier: the troubling and simplistic temptation to consider Midwestern literature the embodiment of a set of salient features, that would either exclude arguable significant works by insisting on the presence of, say, agricultural preeminence, or include irrelevant works by insisting on the importance of, say, the family unit. Consider, for instance, the characteristics of density, population size, and degree of development (a huge spectrum that would have to incorporate farmland, a county seat, the rivertowns, the metropolis, the industrial complex). Can the Midwest find an emblematic value, a sign, by connecting St. Louis, Minneapolis, Cleveland, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Indianapolis--a few of the larger lights? Wouldn't the constituent values of that set be a more accurate compilation of large city traits, sharing more in common with other large cities throughout the nation than with the Midwest as a whole? Wouldn't that be "Urban Literature?" Would our emblem for the Midwest be any more accurate if our connections were drawn only through Leroi, Illinois, Prairie

City, Iowa, Circleville, Ohio, Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and Morocco, Indiana? In this group, wouldn't the common properties show greatest affinity to those of other small-sized towns, even those near the coasts? "Rural Literature." And what shall we do with those bright points (on the map or in the sky) that don't quite fit into our first or second constellation but whose fixity, like a planet, is undeniable? Is Ann Arbor more like a Midwestern town or any town where a major university has shaped the population? Would a book set there be in our canon? Is the character of Detroit governed more by its placement in the Midwest than by the last seventy-five years of the automobile industry? Isn't it more like other places where a given industry (rubber in Akron, cereals in Battle Creek) has conscripted the lives of its inhabitants? Would a book set in Detroit be in our canon?

Well, you can see my increasing discomfort. Each time I try to secure an identifiable trait for the region, even when I say that the trait can be the full, complementary range--the rural, the metropolitan, *and* the magnetic field that exists between and because of their polarities. To choose an image as *representative* must disclaim, as in a travel brochure, that there's just too much variety to show, just too little space here to do justice--ending with a phrase like "you'll just have to see it for yourself."

There is room on our shelves for other works where the Midwest is featured in a more dilute, a less dramatic, way, but for the books to be organized with the same Midwestern call numbers, I will hold out for a place that integrates the individual within the contexts of family, community, neighborhood, and even local politics, so that each concentric or contiguous unit shapes and is shaped by the others. A place of interdependency, a product of individual choices to be in a given place. Quite simply, in a Midwestern book, place would provide a solution to an individual's place in the world--even when it appears to provide a problem.

The endemic qualities of a particular setting would create a living system bent on self-preservation (however threatened), a system that would provide a means of understanding and assimilating the enormous, overwhelming world that impinges upon that place. And for the first time in history, I think that readers in America must acknowledge the rest of the transmitted world. The book we are speaking of would show the *effect* of whatever news it both creates and receives in its particular place. I suppose this stems

from my sense that literature is untimely journalism. Thus, the literature we are defining should demonstrate the impact of the world upon a singular Midwestern place, should live within a particular settlement of news.

This is not to extol the mere celebration of the idiosyncratic and locally colored, the peculiarities of locale and citizenry. No, our Midwestern book must transform those specific, unique details, in order to trick us into accepting its conventions, seduce us into lowering our resistance, convince us to empathize with the essential human qualities that cross any such regional boundary. We, as readers, can embrace such nourishing, comforting, and revelatory experiences only through the conduit of individual and local details that our senses can select from the white noise (the onslaught of information, the numbing inundation of news, the manufacturing of mass culture) that accompanies our lives. Our book works to sensitize the reader, reinforce his own sensitivities beyond the mere reading of a book, and it does this by providing an apprehensible, organized world in which honest perception, rewarded attention, and clear thinking are acknowledged. (The complexity of our lives outside a book rarely provides such elegant or enhanced opportunities for self-discovery.) The Midwestern setting should not only affect the lives of its characters but also the lives of its readers.

This is not the exclusive province of Midwestern literature, to be sure, but it seems that regionalism has found a particular receptivity of late, and this I would credit to a sense of place that exceeds the idea of "setting" we learned about in high school (a concept to be compared to and contrasted with character, plot and theme). Instead, setting is that identifiable source that nurtures, expresses, and influences those other essay questions: character, plot, and theme. Ah, then there are four determining values in our Midwestern book: location, location, location--and, location.

And perhaps in the Midwest, location is still an untapped resource of specificities, a place of unretold, unexhausted trappings that can yet catch a reader off-guard, can yet keep a reader reading, paying attention, paying heed. I suspect contemporary interest in the writing of other nations, the popularization of translated literature--South American, Eastern European, Australian, and so on--is not unlike this keen interest in the Midwest: readers seeking a more curious, unpredictable, devious, delighting literature that, despite--

no, *because of*--its foreignness and novelty offers the reader the ultimate reward of recognizing the essential, extraordinary conditions to which the human spirit is subjected.

Flannery O'Connor wrote: "It is a great blessing, perhaps the greatest blessing a writer can have, to find at home what others have to go elsewhere seeking." She, of course, referred to Milledgeville, Georgia, but her words apply to the writer in the Midwest who has undertaken the finding of the foreign--"what others have to go elsewhere seeking"--in his own home. William Maxwell compounds this idea in *The Folded Leaf*: "The great, the universal problem is how to be always on a journey and see what you would see if it were only possible for you to stay at home." In both instances, the primary quality that the reader feels most assuredly, is that the home place creates a lens through which things are focused, a vanishing point from which things are drawn, a language in which perception is wrought.

I'll suggest that the very popularity of Midwestern literature, the discovering of what has already been produced and what is just being produced, the novelty of regional-voices series, and even the resurgence of the personal essay is being generated by readers who desire the presentation of an apprehensible literature, whose values are recognizable, integratable, and even heartening, if that can simply mean to "give heart," as in to revivify feelings, however complicated, frustrated, or elated each might be. The Heartland reader would be a reader interested in the values yet possible in the storytelling of this region because he is tired of the bright lights of the big city and the cannibalizing of Manhattan. He is fed up with receiving less than zero from a book about the precocious, privileged, jaded youths (a novel, but frustrated attempt to find a naive, less arch voice). He is irritated with yet another new stylistic route to the Indies--this time from the point of view of the spices. He is resentful of the fiction of inexpressible velleities, glowering disinclinations, and moot recognitions that leave him asking, where are you calling from? what did I miss? as if it were his fault that the writer's world lacked gravity, seasons, or a heaven--location. Symposia and conferences throughout the country are being prompted by a need to discover a body of literature that provides something different than these august and aggrieved expressions of style. Could it be that the proliferation and interest in regional literature is a will toward reading books about ourselves (and if there are not such books, toward writing them) because

contemporary literature has not been telling our story, that is, when it has even deigned to tell a story?

Now that I'm in over my head, I might as well enjoy the plunge by proposing that Midwestern literature has less interest in experimentation and more in oral histories and dialogue, clear narrative and genuine conflict, and that this is attributable to the possibility that a vocation in writing for someone in the Midwest has been, until recently, less a recognizable, knowable choice. The creative writer was less available in the form of mentors, communities, creative writing classes, bookstores. There had been no cachet to being a Midwestern writer. Until the last two decades, writing as a voluntary enterprise (as opposed to technical writing or business writing) hasn't been held at any premium, except in elementary school, or in some private colleges. The professions of fiction and poetry (as decidedly different from the widespread amateur's interest) weren't as imaginable, so that one critical aspect underlying much of Midwestern literature--and its popularity--could be this very ingenuousness about being a writer, a refreshing innocence about the plausibility of the Midwest as the setting for literature. Perhaps this individual discovering that underlies Midwestern literature, the lack of a late style and its problematic thrashings, is what appeals to contemporary readers. Furthermore, our Midwestern reader, as well, could possess this ingenuousness.

Of course, such a young generation of writers could err on the side of wistfulness, zeal, ineptitude, but those errors would still effect the reader differently than self-consciousness and discontentment with traditional forms of narrative. And to defend this idea of ingenuousness, or humility, I'll call again to the witness stand Flannery O'Connor: "To know oneself is to know one's region. It is also to know the world, and it is also, paradoxically, a form of exile from the world. The writer's value is lost, both to himself and to his country, as soon as he ceases to see that country as a part of himself, and to know oneself is, above all, to know what one lacks. It is to measure oneself against Truth, and not the other way around. The first product of self-knowledge is humility, and this is not a virtue conspicuous in any national character."

Perhaps it is humility on the part of the writer which distinguishes Midwestern literature--a place where the writer understands that his value is the value of his region. And perhaps it is this humility which allows the reader an opportunity to sense himself--I mean,

to both employ his senses, and to detect himself.

And so I come now to an image from an essay by the profoundly Midwestern Michael Martone, an image of the Midwest as skin as he suggests in "The Flatness." Consider a Midwestern book, consider the location it contains, the skin of the reader. It acts as a membrane that provides both a personal (an "I") and a collective (an "us") identity. It is permeable to (accepting of) some things, impermeable to (resistant to) others. It insulates, protects, stores. It acquires, bringing the sensation of temperature and pressure, discomfort and pleasure and most significantly, kinesthesia: placement and orientation at any given time. And as a result of all these properties, it creates homeostasis: a means of remaining compatible with or comfortable within a changing environment.

Finally, I want to offer a rather hefty poem. For the last five years I've been composing the life of a character named Gordon Penn in verse. He is a soon-to-retire salesman who travels in notions, a widower, a family man with a dispersed family, and, he is not, despite his often solitary attempts to understand the predicaments that a somewhat privileged life presents him, a writer. Or even a reader for that matter. But I think, in terms of his life's work of traveling our region, he capitulates to some of the same principles of pleasure that he would were he the Midwestern reader I've been proposing. I developed the character as it dawned on me that I had a cache of materials--in notebooks, in the margins of my attention--that was plaguing me and pleasing me because they weren't assailable in the forms of poetry that I had been practicing. In other words, Gordon Penn was a third person that could indirectly assume something of my Midwestern background, my Jewish upbringing, my accumulating concerns with the way in which we interact with one another or with the world, so that I wouldn't have to don the mantle of the poet and try to apologize for my sentiments, camouflage my indignation, or delete any of those difficult, odd, passionate things that I had learned to edit out of my previous work. I wanted to write a poem that would embrace the readerly qualities that I've been at pains to describe. I didn't want to write a poem about the Midwest, I wanted to write a Midwestern poem. Thankfully, I wrote the poem first, and fretted about its Midwestern pretenses months later.

Well, with such a remarkably overdetermining, unhumble introduction, here is "Penn Concedes His Territories."

Penn Concedes His Territories

I.

A man named McCleary is Penn's replacement.
Spence McCleary. Unmarried. Early thirties.
By autumn, the territory will be his
alone, but now, he's Penn's new partner,
passenger, office mate, shadow, heir,
and challenger, whose major experience
in the notions line, was with a competing firm,
was all West Coast, Seattle to Sacramento.

With colored ball-tipped straight pins (a stock item
whose annual sales Penn has watched decline
in recent tallies), Penn and Spence are plotting
the Midwest region, claiming each destination
like an explorer or an astronaut
with color-coded pins instead of flags.
"Looks awfully random," Spence observes, retreating
a few feet from the map as if searching
among the clusterings of given points
for a constellation to name The Great Midwest.

Penn's region borders the Great Lakes, touches
the Great Plains, includes Great Falls, MO,
and the States' great river--but Penn has failed
to convince Spence that there is a claim to greatness
here, within or throughout, yet it does
seem great to Penn, who has worn this very route
into the material of the heartland--or, rather,
repaired across the heartland, as a darner mends
a patch in a threadbare, but favored garment.

"Looks like a lot of remnants," Spence concludes,
waving his hand over the map's dramatic
swatches, "the stuff nobody wanted in the middle
of nowhere." Penn's heard (albeit never seen)
the boasted grandeur of his colleague's West.
It bored him, quite frankly. Big-scale bores him.
It's too demanding. It's plain depriving. Ta dah.

And even if no one else is around, you feel
obliged to be a tourist with a tourist's feelings.

"I'm the first one to admit," Penn says, "it's not
as though we keep the country on pins and needles,
but still we've got essentials. It's not that thumbtacks
can't compare to microchips they *don't*.
And you don't compare places, either, " Penn says,
"unless you think geography is built
of opposites. The opposite of mountains
isn't flat, of ocean, the dry land.
Things fit together, Spence. You don't look
at a town and say it isn't a city yet,
or a countryside and think, undeveloped.
I don't think a farm is behind the times
just as a shopping mall isn't ahead."
Spence takes a highlighter and Xs Kansas
with an iridescent orange: "The place
where time stands still." This flusters Penn,
but eggs on his untenable defense.
"Look, Spence, each place is just one time
out of a lot of possible times. Topeka,
for instance, isn't backward or ahead,
it's near or far, depending on where you go."

With Kansas successfully tainted, Spence moves on:
Wisconsin is pink, Iowa, chartreuse.
The markers, another popular item, are scented:
key lime and passionfruit confuse the air.
"But even the name," Spence rejoins, "'Mid-,'
meaning muddle, neither here nor there.
And '-western,' what's that supposed to mean? *not*
eastern or southern or northern or Californian?
That's obvious." "I always thought it implied
'frontier,' " Penn answers, "As in 'Go west,
young man.' " "*Frontier*? Maybe centuries ago
but not since a seventh of the world saw
Neil Armstrong pussyfoot around the moon,
not since Cousteau explored Atlantis," Spence says,
pushing the last few pins in Illinois.
"You know, the lost continent." Penn knows.

Penn unwinds a nylon thread to link the pins

into the radiating travel routes
that are as much Penn's own as the rehearsed
synaptic paths of Penn's motor neurons.
"You're right, Spence. What's lost today is not
a continent like old Atlantis, but regions,
the little parts that don't combine into one
giant green meaning everything
between Canada and Mexico."
What's lost on Spence, at least on their first round
on the road, is the indigenous, the details
that recognition, not surprise, reveals.
Penn can remember when a regions boundaries
were real. Each had its own identity,
its own news, its separate history.
One place found out about its neighbors only
when there were disasters or visiting relatives.
"Telegraph, telephone, and tell-
a-traveling salesman, used to be the news.
But now," Penn concedes, in fairness to Spence,
"news is nothing new. It travels
from everywhere to everywhere like lightning
before the thunder--and all you've got to do
is count the seconds before the inevitable."

On their initial trips together, along
with notions, Penn found that he was selling the region
to Spence whose disaffection followed them
cross-country like an imminent storm.
"Tell me, Gordon, wasn't there a day
when you thought about the world you were missing?"
Spence asked, amid his running commentary
on how every locale through the region was flat
and dreary and so like the one before and--ready?--
his ultimate charge, "plain uninspiring,"
as though a salesman refueled on inspiration
like his car on Unleaded Supreme.
Penn took the occasion (assault) to explain
the difference between their outlooks with Velcro,
an item featured fully in their samples.
"Let's say that everything has tiny hooks."
Just for effect, Penn passed Spence a keycase
sealed with complementing strips of Velcro.
"Now, if something is going to catch the attention,

the other surface can't be slick or hooked itself,
it has to have that roughened, tangled pile.
You with me here?" Penn asked as Spence offered
a token glance in each hook-filled direction.
"Well, you have to quit looking for the grand
to knock you over. Think about fraying
a little. Relax. Wear down your smooth ideals
and, by degrees, you'll get attached to things."

It troubled Penn to defend the Midwest,
the place where he was born, reared, where
he traveled half his life, and where he'll retire.
On drives (alone) through Waukesha and Xenia,
another kind of map unfolds in his mind.
Clearly unnegotiable (as if
a soul besides Penn would give a damn),
this map is hand-tinted with a local color,
highlighted not with monuments, museums,
exits, or parks, but with one traveller's views :
places off and on the beaten path
where Penn has spent his time: the succession
of storefronts--new car showroom, Baptist church,
Chiropractic clinic--that he can trace,
squares where a circus or a farmer's market camped,
man-made lakes bordered with cottages
and trailer homes with gerry-rigged additions.
Here would be Penn's hours on and off the job,
as though one crossed the state of Work as simply
as a county line, and *here*, his rests, his meals,
his clients, considered family by Penn,
that Spence will marry into, for better or worse.

II.

Other than these last few rides with Spence,
Penn never shared his travels with anyone.
He kept them to himself, made few efforts
toward capturing or recreating what passed
before and then, neither all too slowly
nor all too quickly, behind him.
If Penn were selling vacations rather than notions,
he would have gleaned much more than souvenirs
from stops along his routes--souvenirs!

each one pretends to claim, *you're somewhere else,*
but woodburned, glittered, or handpainted,
they all insist, *remember, you're going home.*

Penn remembers a program in the Great Escapes
Travel Series that he and his wife attended
at the auditorium of the local college
where Penn and Marian were graduated
enough years earlier that the same lectures
governed a world that Palestine, Chosen,
Persia, and Latvia had occupied.
The slide show, "Hitting Below the Corn Belt"
(at least Penn dubbed it that afterwards)
included three carrousels of black-and-white
decrepitude, abandonment, distress,
and quote/unquote, the Midwest's rustic charm.
Penn found himself profoundly, personally,
misunderstood by each and every frame,
and while he'd never considered himself an expert
on anything but his few lines, Penn grew
self-conscious on his next few trips, sighting
would-be slides of what he would portray.

Twice after that, Penn had the inclination
to share his travels--he wouldn't have said "a lifetime
of travel" at the time, thought recently
and with reluctant pride, he's heard himself
pronounce the term. One anniversary,
Marian bought Penn a compact Polaroid
and Penn returned each trip with stacks of snapshots,
each as thick as a slide sandwiching
a foreign specimen within its fluids,
and with the unwieldly atlas, spent an evening
at the dinner table reassembling
his week-long journey with pictures of quirky motels,
gingerbreaded public buildings, pastures,
crosshatched fields, old-fashioned pharmacies
(old-fashioned *anything*, as though the past
were more authentic, more emblematic, to Penn),
and civic monuments commemorating
people that Penn would learn about from inscriptions
but then, passing the photo at home, would forget.
Penn kept the camera with him for a year,

regaling the family with full-color
installments of Marco Polo Penn's Midwest:
a collectable set like the volumes at Shopper's World.

But Penn observed, even before the children
(who were too old to feign enjoyment, too young
to admit to their father they felt none),
that one photo was so much like the next--
it *was* the next: a photo, and, incidentally
another place. And the fault? the camera's? Penn's?
or maybe a problem with tenses: no future,
at least immediate, would be returning
anyone but Penn to those very spots.
Though never formally expressed, Penn concluded
travel is even less communicable
than a *hobby* (a word that's used to justify
time to people with other sympathies).

Penn's second attempt began with "Writing for Life,"
a class at the community college that he took
as part of his pledge with Marian to be home Mondays,
to learn to share more of their time apart.
They both kept journals: a travelogue
for Penn, a book of memories for his wife.
Penn's trouble was making the Midwest, familiar
places he'd been so may times before,
sound as if he'd actually travelled there.
What Penn would choose seemed to have been written
before he arrived; his whole notebook read
like a diary of staying home with Marian,
while Marian struggled to find any distance
to impose on her life, so that she could look
anywhere but just around. Her journal
was set in Missouri, in those foreign years
before she met her husband, before Ohio,
before the house that Penn sold when she died.
They each kept a pair of journals, alternately
writing in one and then the other, and trading
the latest pages the day that Gordon would leave
so each could read about and write to the other.
The children were out of the house by then, his wife
had fallen ill, and for three years their journals
crisscrossed in a conversation of their own,

for Penn and Marian rarely talked of them.
Her illness finally ended the exchange;
by then, there was no time to spend apart.
Penn remained bedside, while medication
kept here traveling outside the here and now
of pain and self-pity and Gordon Penn.

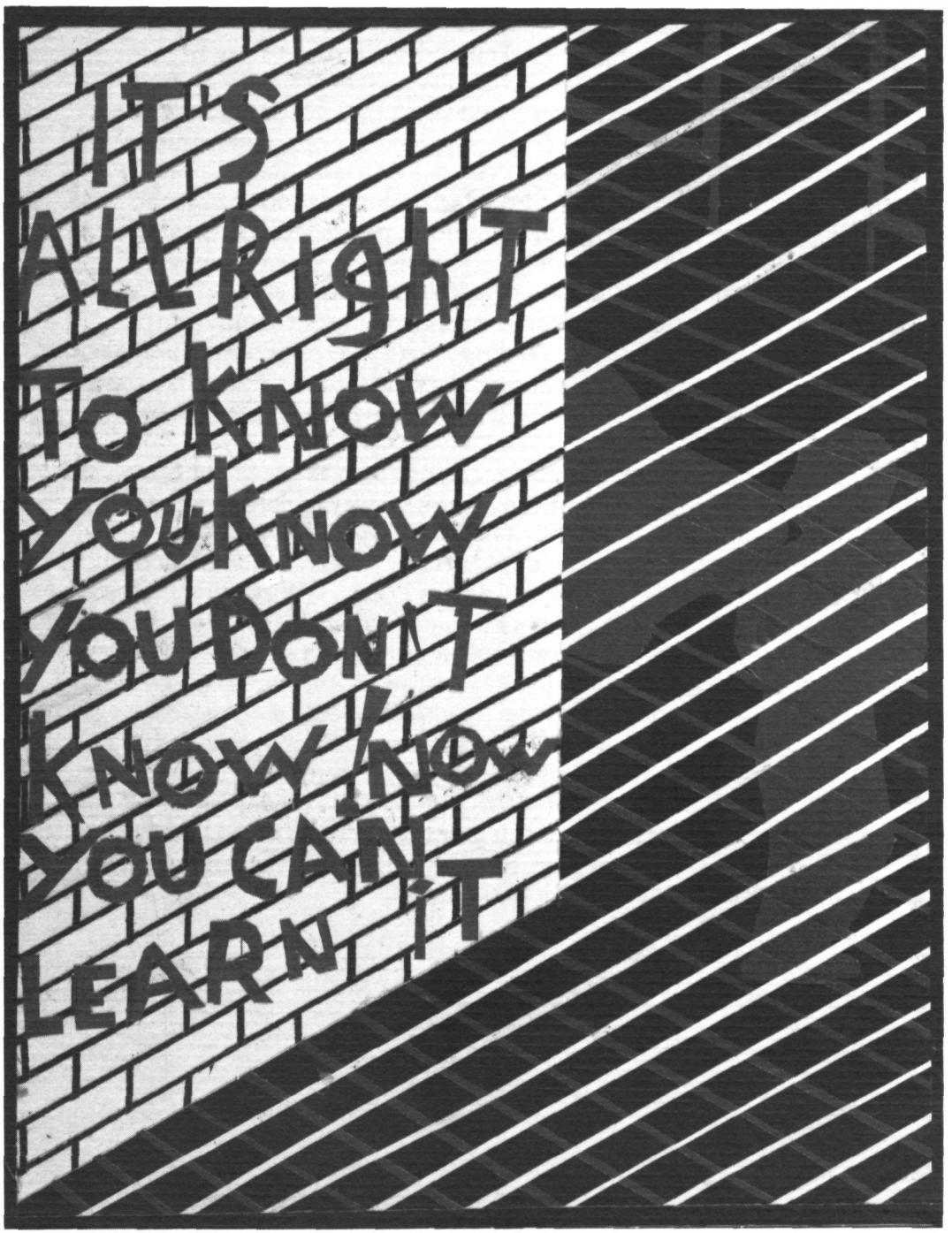
After her death, his territory changed,
emotionally, that is. Penn ceased to log
anything but mileage and expenses.
Returning to towns he'd never thought twice about
made him see, despite his late or fraught
attempts at sharing his routes with his wife,
that she was what distinguished one place from the next.
She was variation itself, the constant
north of the compass needle, that oriented
Penn to home regardless of the distance.
One place is different from another place
not because of the people living there--
for people live everywhere the same when you think
of people as reasons for living--but because
of someone at home or in the car beside you
on whom no news, however known, is lost.

III.

In retrospect, what Penn is picturing,
unfolding still in his head, is not a map
but something like an acupuncture chart,
where every yellow and red and blue pin
would chart the keenest points of pleasure and pain
discovered by asking and by accident
along the body of his territory.
And just as oddly as in that ancient science--
a needle inserted at one point, effects
its benefits at a second, distant point--
Penn can't explain his general well-being
by pointing here or there in his Midwest,
citing each attachment with a reason.
It's this that Spence McCleary won't inherit.

I won't hazard an explication of my own work but I have to pause on Penn's impromptu metaphor of Velcro--the Velcro Theory of Met Expectations. (I still shudder when I think that I've apotheosized Velcro in the process.) The Midwestern literature we are looking for is made of a compatibility, met expectations between reader and writer, experience and language, which requires the joining of loops and hooks: the roughened loops of recognition (cycles, patterns, repetitions, Penn would know that, technically, this half is called "the female") which are needed to engage the hooks of surprise (snags, interruptions, points, poignancies, or "the male" half). Whatever would be surprising about a book would engage the reader's ultimate recognition; whatever would be recognizable about the book, would engage the reader's initial surprise--so that, in the progress of reading , there is a continuous combination of linkages, a ladder to shared creation that is not unlike the recombining of DNA strands between the male and female genes.

Finally, I must leave you to assign your own shape to our Midwestern literature. I suppose I can accept, by way of conclusion, that I have found, by tracing with a flashlight, gazing skyward in my own backyard, and balancing Thornton Wilder, William Maxwell, Toni Morrison, Wright Morris, James Purdy, Willa Cather, Mr. and Mrs. Bridge, and several other armloads of books, the Sign of the Reader--an earthly figure after all, a grounded rather than a lofty sign. In fact, The Sign of the Reader can adopt, instead of the North Star, the North on Penn's compass needle that, regardless of the distance travelled or the foreign surroundings, provided an orientation, a constant from which to begin a return. In each book on our shelves of Midwestern literature, there is compass needle, and whether the characters consult it or not, it points to the home place, where the reader, wherever he is reading in this vast and vastly misrepresented world, can find himself.


IT'S
ALLRIGHT
TO KNOW
YOU KNOW
YOU DON'T
KNOW KNOW
YOU CAN'T
LEARN

RINGING THE BELLS AT LAKE GENEVA

In that hill country, the opulent spruces
and random narrow roads were ours,

absolute green. When we rose at seven
to ring the bells that roused the others

to breakfast, we pushed and pulled each other
into sweaters; we ran to the courtyard.

There, the woman with the blond braid watched us
arch our song into the still morning,

watched us waken mothers and fathers
who lay exhausted from their late nights.

We pulled the knotted rope
that hung thick as our young arms,

straining until the heavy copper bells swung
back and forth in the chill dawn air,

ringing relentless and clear,
until the ground drenched our feet,

until even our parents stood there,
holding hands.

THE SURGEON

What does he think--his glittering
Blade poised over delicate tissue?
Does he mourn the breasts, or yearn
Momentarily to bend and kiss each one,
Searing her subconscious with a last
Moment of adoration, sealing it with phantom
Pleasure? Does he murmur, "Forgive me?"
Perhaps he thinks of his daughter's
Flat nipples like bronze pebbled coins
And sees in those before him
Her future.
And the breasts, do they arch
Instinctively toward the knife as to a lover?
Does the sleeping torso twist
And pull away as in dream?
The outer layer
Is soft, inside tough. Ducts like sinews cling
To muscles. It requires great strength
To tear them away, globbets of fat pop beneath fingers.

When it is done, when the nurses sit her up, unconscious,
Wrap the flattened chest with clean white gauze
Over thick pads where breasts were,
When the orderlies wheel her out and take
Her tissue to freeze for study or to burn,
Does the surgeon go then and weep?
Do his fingers tremble later
Touching his wife? Do they glide lightly
Over mounds of her flesh? Fearful each morning,
When he looks at himself, does he see there
The dark root of a scream?

VISITING THE UNDERGROUND

We're told that Persephone
had no choice but to return to Hades
every six months or so--
but she must have been able to negotiate,
after all, some winters are short,
others long.
Perhaps, she visited
for reasons other than
hierarchical compliance.
There may have been children
that bards, being men, forgot to mention,
or other less acceptable rationalizations.

Think of Aeneas, of Odysseus.
They merely journeyed down to seek advice--
happened to see a few relatives,
an old love--
gathered information and beat it out of there
faster than you could say
commitment.

The problem with the underground
is that it's interesting--
somehow familiar and alluring.
Persephone, up in her mother's green world
must have wondered how things were below.
How her husband's work progressed,
if he ever got new shoes,
whether he pined for her
or had replaced her with some new maiden.
The long term effects of pomegranate seeds
and the waters of Lethe probably blocked out
the memory of being snatched from above--
it's the only sensible explanation.

Yet, remember--
part of the year she became a queen--
one doesn't give power up easily.
On hard afternoons in the real world
a visit to the nether regions might almost
seem a return to sanctuary.
He ran Hades, after all;
Hades was not Hell.

Like Persephone,
I visit the underground--
the children most frequently bring me,
but I sometimes, forgetfully,

stumble back on my own,
looking for news of you.
After all, I loved you once,
and no legend contends that
the lord of the underworld was two-headed.

My mother claims that I am doomed,
that I am weak-willed,
and weak-willed women must serve indifferent men--
the children, the gods, decree it.
Not true.
I visit the underground
because I remember the Elysian fields
as well as I do Tartarus.
No. There's stronger truth yet.
I return to you
because I love the darkness.

TOUCH UPON THE BRIGHTER SIDE OF DARKNESS

The earth preserving man for only sin and hate.
Virgin minds dissolve while torment waits
Breeding rapist art, fulfills your need
Pleasing man to only poison and tease.

Your spawning mate is crying for eternal sea.
Seeds of hope are only planting hateful ways
Bitter people only break a love to be
Securing on a reason or just to play.

Begging for a mercy, drown inside a rain.
Posing in a bubble, pity in a pain.

The innocence to life is gracefully dismayed.
Feel a likely future but your pulse erased
Choosing to deny an enemy who laughs
Doomed eternal friendship that began too fast.

Bathing in a shallow water for all to see.
Promises that die, you only turn your cheek
A capsule lies, and so you take the bait
Begging helplessness, you've met your fate.

NEVERENDING NOWHERE

Open your heart like the new day
beginning with the dawn.

Dawn?
It's just a question in time.
How can we fly,
with no wings there to glide.
Reach into the air,
and feel what you can see.
Touch downward and land,
at a place where you cannot stand.

Bitter sweet nights are out of grasp,
Living in total darkness.
Figures stir around and about,
things within a shadow are covered by light.

Your seller of dreams,
what should he be?
Your cellar of dreams,
how does it seem?

WINTER TERM

It is nearly eleven when he turns off the gravel road to nose the car into the leaning barn they use as a garage. Killing lights and engine, he hauls out his bag of books and crosses the frozen yard. The tin-roofed farm house, which belongs to her family, needs painting and rewiring, but the rent is so cheap, a gift really, that he can't bring himself to complain.

As he opens the door he thinks he catches the sound of singing. He dumps his bag on the deacon's bench and listens, but hears nothing. After a moment he calls out that he's home. In the kitchen, she says.

He finds her in the pantry on a stepladder. Her back is to him and he leans against the doorway looking at her . She's wearing jeans and one of his old shirts, red flannel, with the tail hanging out. Her coppery hair is caught up in a yellow kerchief. In the first year of their marriage, he would have gone to her to lock his arms around her knees and press his face against her warmth and fullness.

She twists about on the wobbly ladder. The expression on her face teeters between an eagerness for good news and a fear of bad, or maybe he only imagines it.

"Watch yourself," he tells her. "You'll fall."

"Well?"

"I got the check, don't worry. The way they stall, you'd think those extension clowns paid travel out of their own..."

"Nooo, silly." Her generous smile is just a bit too toothy to be pretty. She gestures at the wall with a paint roller. "Look."

"Gold?"

"Van Gogh yellow. Like it?"

"Bright."

"With no windows, you'll want bright walls, won't you?"

He nods. She likes redoing things. First it was their bedroom, then the smaller one as a nursery, although after her miscarriage and his tenure denial they agreed that a baby could wait until they were better settled. Now she's gotten it into her head that all he

needs to get back to his dissertation is a place of his own to work. `My nursery,' he jokingly calls her new project.

"Don't you like it?" she asks.

"Did I say that? I said it's bright."

"I thought maybe shelves in the corner."

"Let's not get into any big expense here."

"Just boards and brackets," she says. "Or you like bricks?"

"Since, you know, it's only temporary."

He reads a question in her look: How temporary is it when they're midway into their third year there?

He backs from the pantry door. Opening the refrigerator, he says,"Jesus, I'm beat."

"That won't help, you know."

"I'm wound up, all right?" He takes out a bottle of beer and twists off the cap.

"Why it's called a pick-me-up, I'll never understand. I read where it depresses you." Backing down from the ladder, she empties the paint tray, caps the can, wraps the turpentine -soaked rags around the roller and puts it into a plastic bag which she then seals with a green twistie. "When we get your books and typewriter in there, it will look a lot nicer, really."

Her good spirits in dealing with the rubble life dumped at your door amaze him, and he fails to see how anyone can be so cheerful with so little cause.

"The car's stalling out again," he says, then recalls that, driving home, he had thought not to mention it. When it came to car trouble, she was no help.

She follows him into the chilly kitchen. "You had to have it towed?"

"No,no. It's missing is all. Forget it"

"Didn't we just get it tuned or something?"

"Back in September. Sixty miles round trip to the main campus every day, fifty twice a week to the pen, you think that doesn't add up?"

As she washes her hands at the sink her head is framed by hanging plants. The little house is a jungle of spider plants, wandering jew, peace lily, chinese evergreen. She believes they clean the air.

"If it breaks down for good," he says, "then were are we?"

She dries her hands on a sunflowered towel.

"Stuck," he tells her. "That's where."

"I bet you're hungry."

He drops into a chair. "I could eat something."

She begins scrambling eggs at the stove. The only sound in the room is the clicking of the spatula on the pan. She used to sing bits of songs while she cooked, he remembers, and he would kid her about not knowing any one piece all the way through.

The day's mail has been opened and left on the table. Looking at the bills, he calculates how tight their money is this month. He finishes his beer. His body feels like lead. Maybe he spends too much time reading and brooding, and reading other men's broodings. But no, actually he spends too few hours studying and making notes on Conrad's stoic vision, and far too many in Columbus or Marion badgering illiterate freshman or convicted manslaughterers to put predicates in their sentences. That it isn't in her to complain, he thinks, makes him seem bad-natured simply because he has a common sense awareness of their troubles, and the world's.

"Coming home tonight, I couldn't help thinking." He twists the bottle in his hands, then taps its neck on the chrome edge of the table. "I don't know, it sounds crazy."

"What's that?"

"I could do something terrible," he says.

"What?"

"That's what I kept thinking , that I could do something terrible."

"Oh you could not."

"Yes. Anyone could."

"I don't believe that."

"You don't think you could?"

"Why even think something like that?"

"All right, not you. But me. You don't think so, really?"

"No."

"But I could," he says.

"What an old grouch," she says, but smiles to show that she's teasing." Here you are, here's your eggs."

"If I was locked up like that, I don't know what I'd do."

"Well, that's different. If you were in prison."

"You don't know what you could do, not until maybe it's too late. The prisoners, they're losers, sure, but not <u>bad</u> guys, not all of them."

She puts wheat bread and margarine on the table. "You want toast?"

He shakes his head, and starts in on the eggs. "Some of them act like high school kids. Last week when I said they had to finish <u>Heart of Darkness</u>? You should have heard them. `Aw, Teach, do we have to?' Then there's the others, the bad asses. They don't say a

word, just lean back with their arms crossed on their chests and look right through you. What they're doing in class, I've no idea. They look like wrestlers, pro linemen. All they do in there, except eat and do God knows what to each other, is lift weights. They wear workshirts, like denim but thinner, this washed out blue with the seams all split at the shoulders. You should see them, you wouldn't believe it . They're like monsters."

She lays a slice of buttered bread on his plate, then steps behind him. He expects her to rub his neck, but she doesn't touch him. "You're not really scared, are you?" she asks, and he realizes that she doesn't want to see his face when he answers.

He makes a sniffing sound just short of a .....sigh. He knows it's not the truth that she wants to hear, not if it's hard to live with. "I don't really think about it. It's a job." What she wants is for them both to be happy. It's a heavy load for him to carry, but he tries, though he can't hope to compete with her Mom and Dad, beet-farmers, square-dancers, churchgoers, married for forty-two of the happiest years of their life. And he can't help but think that she's less happy now than when she was a part-time secretary at the college, taking on extra typing jobs at night, like his dissertation when it still looked as if he might finish it in time to land a permanent appointment there.

"It's just, you're so worn out when you get home."

"Three straight hours . Plus the drive. And they're no help. I'm the one does all the talking."

"It must be scary," she says,"I can imagine."

"No, you can't."

She sits across from him at the table and he pictures wire mesh keeping them from touching all but their fingertips.

"You know what I mean."

"No," he says.

He goes to the refrigerator and opens the door to stand looking into its bright cold interior as though he's forgotten what he's after. The ceiling lights dim as the motor kicks in. He takes out the second beer he knows he can have without getting anything serious started between them and, feeling her eyes on him, sits down. He forks up another mouthful of eggs before opening the beer. "Tonight," he says, "I'm right at the place, you know, where Kurtz says, `The horror, the horror.'"

"I've never read it." She points to his eggs.

"And you don't want to." He takes a bite of bread, then shoves the eggs around the plate with the fork. "'The horror, the horror.' I'm just going to explain it to them, when Czuba starts in. He's

about the brightest guy in class, meaning he asks some questions that make sense. Now he's got his head in his hands and is rocking back and forth and I think he's having a seizure or maybe somebody slipped a knife into him."

"They can't have knives, can they?"

"Who knows what goes on in there? Nobody tells me anything. I'm just the man with the books, an outsider."

"But they search them."

"They're supposed to, sure. All I know is, Czuba could be dying, and the rest of them sit there looking at me like ' So what now, Teach?' He's rocking back and forth, groaning 'Oh Jesus, Oh fuck, Oh Jesus, Oh fuck.' So I go to his seat, squat down beside him, and ask what's the problem. How about him taking a deep breath here, trying to tell me what's wrong. What else am I going to do, send him to the principal? But he can't stop, or won't, and I can feel the others getting restless. I tell them please tear a page out of their notebooks and, this counts as a quiz now, write a paragraph on 'What does Marlowe learn from Kurtz?' Then I kind of pat Czuba's elbow and he gets up. He's a big guy, one of the weightlifters. I get him out into the hall. He just stands there sobbing. I can't see any blood on him, and I don't know if I should put my arm around him or what. Maybe it's against their code. So I just stand there."

"What was wrong with him?"

"I'm telling you, all right? He keeps going 'Oh fuck, Oh Jesus,' then looks right at me, his eyes are running with tears, and he says, 'That's just how I felt when I blew away my fucking wife."

"What?"

"That's exactly what he said."

"But why?"

"Like Kurtz. The horror."

"He said that to you? No!"

"Yes. I had no idea what he was in for. All the office sends me is the enrollment sheet. Now he wants to tell me the whole story. We're standing by the water fountain, he's got my arm and it's like the ancient mariner, there's no way I'm getting free. The others are hunched over their desks trying to write a paragraph, most of them can't put a sentence together yet, and all I can think of is, how in the hell did I end up here? So Czuba tells me that he and his wife split up because he brought his work home with him, he couldn't help it, even when he didn't talk about it, it was there, his attitude, his temper. They were always fighting over it. Then she started seeing this psychologist."

"Because of him probably."

"I guess so. Anyhow, he said that's what did it."

"But she was only trying to keep them together, wasn't she?"

"What? No. Seeing him meaning sleeping with him."

"Not her psychologist."

"A psychologist. They met someplace, at a bar or in church, who knows. He's a man, all right?"

"She wasn't trying to get help?"

"She was fucking him was what she was doing."

"Don't."

"I'm just telling you what Czuba said. 'She's fucking this guy,' he says. 'So, okay, we're split up, what right have I got complaining? Then this Sunday I run into her in the parking lot, at the shopping center.'"

"This was here?"

"Akron. He went to church that morning like always, he's Catholic, and that afternoon, he says, he's supposed to direct traffic at a shopping center, for extra money. I look at him, I don't get it, so that's when he tells me. He's a cop, was. A cop! You see what I mean? He spent nine years on the force and got two commendations. So he sees her getting out of their station wagon, and goes over. He says something, she says something, the next thing you know his service pistol is in his hand and she's down on the blacktop."

"She died?"

"He shot her, sure."

"No!"

"Then, he says, he sat down right beside her, in the parking lot, in his uniform, and waited for the other cops to come run him in."

"Oh my god, the poor woman."

"It drove him crazy, her running around."

"But still."

"Now he's doing twenty to life."

"He'll get out, won't he?"

"Maybe. He's done eight. But they crack up, they kill each other."

"Think of his wife."

"All right, I realize."

"At least he got a chance. What chance does she have anymore?"

"Any longer. You had to see him, the way he was crying."

"But... oh they didn't have children, did they ?"

"I don't know."

"Didn't you ask?"

"I just listened. He didn't say. I didn't ask him anything. "

"But if they had children, he'd tell you, don't you think, what happened to them and all?"

"I guess so, sure."

"Then I bet they didn't have any."

"All I know is what he told me."

"You think he was telling the truth?"

"Why wouldn't he?"

"Don't they lie?"

"Doesn't everybody? Jesus! Not about something like this."

"Maybe he likes getting attention, wants you to feel sorry for him."

"You don't believe it?"

"I believe he told you, but I just can't..."

"What? Because he's a cop he can't go crazy? Oh sure, like the psychologist, right? He's a doctor, he wouldn't fool around with the wife of a police officer. Sometimes, you know, I really can't believe you."

The overhead fluorescent tubes put purplish shadows under her eyes. "Your eggs are cold," she says.

He puts down the fork. " I'm finished."

"No, you're not. Look."

"I don't want any more."

She gets up, takes his plate to the sink, and runs water.
He says, "Now you're upset, right?"

"No, but I...no."

"If I can't talk to you about these things, then who?"

"It's all right, I said."

"Look, it's not you I'm mad at, I'm not mad, period. It's just the whole thing, I'm worked-up is all."

"I know it must be scary for you there."

"Did I say I was scared? When did I say that? Tell me." He twists about in his chair. Her back is to him and she's drying his dish with the yellow towel. He tells her, "I'm locked in too, you know."

"Do you have to be?"

"That's the way it is."

"But what would you do if there was trouble?"

"I told them, the first class, I said, I don't expect any disciplinary problems here, understand."

"Good."

"They laughed."

She turns to face him. "How do you mean?"

"How what? If you have to explain a joke, you know, then..." He lets out a short, barking laugh, surprising himself. "Once I came

home from school with this history assignment, and I asked my dad, 'were you alive during the great depression?' He's in his chair, like always, half-crocked, and he looks up and says, 'the economic one?' It was a joke, the only one I remember him telling. I didn't get it for years." He shakes his head. "Look, with the class, I was making a joke, that's all. And they laughed, all right? At me maybe, but I think with me. I might as well joke about it. They could break me in two, there's nothing I could do."

"You said there were guards."

"I'm on the second floor." He turns to empty his words onto the table. "The classroom's open up there, and so's the toilet, but the corridor itself is locked. The guard shack or whatever, the room with all the electronic gear, is down on the first floor. It's locked up tight. The guards stay in there, mostly. They stick together too. You don't see any of them going into a room alone." Like me, he thinks, but leaves it unsaid. It could be courage on his part, or only a failure of imagination.

"Well," she says, "at least you won't have to do it much longer."

"Teaching? About thirty more years is all."

"No, I meant at the prison."

"Four and a half weeks."

"That's what I mean."

"That's not long?"

"Is it?"

He shrugs. "Winter term always seems longer."

When he was single he had thought his sadness was due to loneliness and that his bearing it in silence was stoic and admirable. Now, living with her daily good spirits, yet remaining sad, he can't help but resent her for revealing to him his deficiency.

"Why don't you go to bed?" she says.

"No. You go on."

"I thought you were tired."

"Wound up, I said. Wound up is not tired."

"I didn't tell you to do it, you know. "

"Do what?"

"Teach there. It was your idea."

"My idea?"

"Well, it wasn't mine, I know that."

"Paying off bills was my idea, right. Being caged up with killer apes was not my idea, believe me."

"They told you, didn't they, what it would be like."

"Forget it."

"No, I sympathize."

"You do?"

"But remember, you said that's why the other teacher didn't do it, why you got the chance."

"Fine," he says. "Whatever." He scrapes the label from the empty bottle with a thumbnail. "All I was trying to say, when this whole business got started, was that you never know what you might do, maybe you could do something terrible."

"I know, but you're, it's late, and I think really it's the policeman you're talking about."

"No, I could do something terrible."

"If you were in prison, yes, but then you already would have."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"But I'm saying, don't you see?"

"Logic," he says, "takes you only so far."

After a moment she kisses the back of his head. "I'm going up."

"Goodnight."

He sits in the bright, chilly kitchen hearing her weight creak the floorboards over his head. He wants to call her back to say something to make them both feel better, but knows that even his apology would be tainted by resentment. What's done is done. And he can think of nothing to stop him from doing it, despite himself, day in and day out.

When she was helping out in the department, he'd hear the sudden bubbling up of her laugh, spring-like and musical, and would find some excuse to drop into the main office. She'd be done laughing when he got there, but would give him a smile. He married her, he thinks, because he wanted to be in the room where the laughter was.

After she's stopped moving above him, he turns off the lights and sits looking out the window at the snow-dusted fields under the full moon. In the center of his view there is a flaw in the pane that distorts his vision. He shifts his head, and recognizes the crystal prism she's recently hung there. Days, to her delight, it refracts the sun about the room like a school of rainbow minnows. He cups it briefly in his hand, a cold lump of cut glass. Stepping to the refrigerator, he opens the door, then closes it without taking anything out.

When he goes up he places his stockinged feet near the banister where the stairs don't squeak.

She sleeps with a pillow over her head. The hall light throws his shadow across her legs, so dark that it looks heavy, and it surprises him that she doesn't wake up to see what's in the room with her.

AFTER ANTIGONE

Tonight we ate hamburgers
and fudge sundaes, and now
before the early work,
asleep in my room
you pass these late hours.

Though mind and body sag,
the cold heart is hopeful,
and for a time I put
aside classical tragedies,
imagine your breathing,
restfully, in my dark bed.

THE HAVEN

Lightly as falling, I slipped bodiless
Through gaps in the branches, through stand after stand
Of cedars shouldering each other close
On the low blonde hills or sinkhole slopes, and wound up
Winded near a sunken, snowmelt stream--
Along its banks, the frozen grass lay folded
In waves, and still hid patches of snow. A drumming
Of wings passed overhead, and I shivered there,
Swept with the memory of you as you woke.

The creek itself was a dark stair of pools linked
By a small, clear-spun strand in the bird-tracked silt.
Though I felt no wind, a murmuring ran through the bark
Of the sycamore trunks all around--more shadow
Than substance--staring out through the milky air.
You were rising in a distant hour, in a warmth
Of sunlight. Then the dull bronze haze of daybreak
Loomed over the next ridge, and from the town
Beyond, the sounds of traffic rose to the ear.

MIDWINTER

The same wind drove the same rains from the sea,
Rivery cloudbursts drowned out each clear light
Of heaven, and lightning raved overhead all night,
Wound its fire through the meshes of strange trees.

Then pale gold morning reached the housefronts and
You were still here, just waking in first sun.
You showed me five birds lighting one by one
In our wet lilac--dropped from the heart of wind,

They looked like song-sparrows in the winter dawn.
Nuthatch? Vireo?--leaves of desire
Washed up from dream to daylight. "They're only birds,"

You said, and smiled, and closed the Audubon.
But snowfall blanks the vaulted desert air
Between us now, and these are only words.

A POEM CALLED LOST AT SEA

I always wanted to write a poem called lost at sea
Complete with fore and aft and masts
And rigging, sails I could inflate
Like cherubic cheeks of laundry, hoisting
Them off into oblivion.

Then after heaving in fog for days,
I and whatever reader remained would lift
Our heads as we rolled into imagery deep
And blue, dipping our faces overboard
Into its dark, swirling skirt.

All at once the sea would be personified
And come to resemble every lover
I ever knew. In the panic that followed,
Line breaks of any kind would be forbidden;
Everyone who threatened mutiny

Would be chained in the hold, and anyone caught
On deck without permission--my mother, for instance--
Could argue her view from the gangplank
While I lay on the tip of the bow, adjusting
The height of the horizon.

The irony of the poem would be that no one would ever
Cry out "Land ho!" because, of course,
We were lost at sea, tacking carelessly
Across the hips of the ocean, and it was night
And as in all good poems, in the depths lurked

Hidden meaning. One day, sun-rotted, the sails
Would mercifully unzip, and the naked lines of a poem
Called lost at sea could finally suggest
What happened: How your tongue stuck inside me like an oar,
How you and your boat kept turning, turning, turning.

WHISPER MY NAME

It always happens this way:
you leave and drive to the end
of the street, a million ways
you can turn, north, south,
west, then you're gone,
and I stand at an open window
tearing up these pages,
sailing them after you, to you,
and their sound, rising and falling,
is like a whisper, a cry, your name
lost in my body, some uncertainty
behind it, some question
that would make you turn around:
I just wanted to ask you again.

We'll haunt each other--
how else to say it?
We're that other kind of ghostly,
all flesh, filled with gravity,
we bump into walls and doors,
can't ever get out of our graves.
Our bodies hold us like tombs,
inside something still growing
quiet but wild: hair and fingernails.
If only the dead could learn
to keep warm, to dig themselves out,
if only the dead could need each other
the way we still do.

On Friday nights, leaving town,
there's a cemetery we drive past,

the cars' lights flicker bloodred
over the gravestones, like voices,
the dead talking to each other
in fits and whispers of light--
the same question, always new:
how did it happen?
how did you come to be here
next to me, your eyes wide open?
I just wanted to ask you again
about that quiet at the last minute,
the instant after something's gone

Tonight, there's a wreck ahead, a fire,
a helicopter taking up the injured man.
In our own heads, we hear him:
it's like flying, he says, I'm not ready,
mistaking copter blades for angels
as they chop at the stars.
We see the talk in the graveyard,
see the dead ache of his ascension,
and feel them to be better than we are:
how the dust of their bones billows
up when they touch, when they cry out,
how sweetly they whisper each other's names.

GREAT HORNED OWL

That summer when the keys jumped
and the letters were shaky, when the sky
bled like watercolor and the hands of the clock
moved slowly, when I lived at the edge of town,
in Ohio, and first played my staccato tune
for the colored stones in the clear pond,
for the whiteness of the moon;

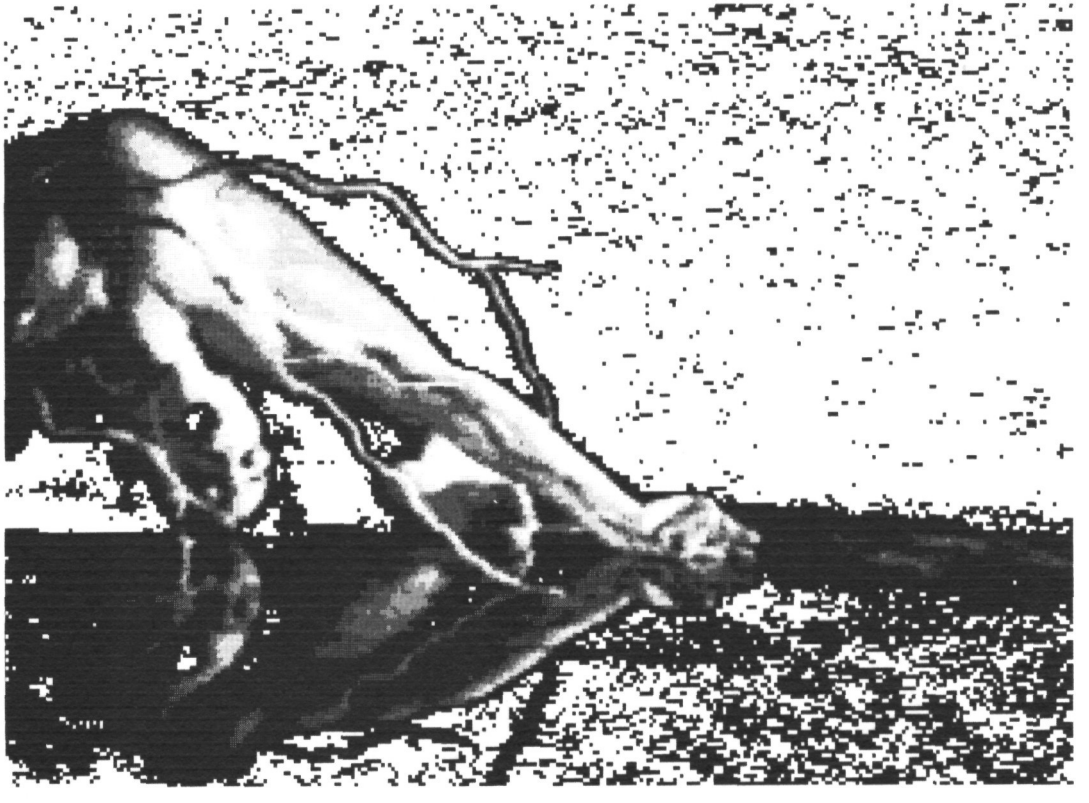
one morning , so long ago, I was startled awake
by a distinct, deliberate-seeming sound:
claw feet tapping above my head.
As if a visitor had been announced,
a code evoked, or a fine pointed line,
a persistent feeling, etched upon my brain.

And I flew down the dim borrowed stairs
to meet the unearthly light of dawn
in those large and steady yellow eyes.
We stared and took the other in at once:
the wildness. From where I stood
on the gravel walk, I watched the immense
wings on the peaked roof shudder, lift, and spread--

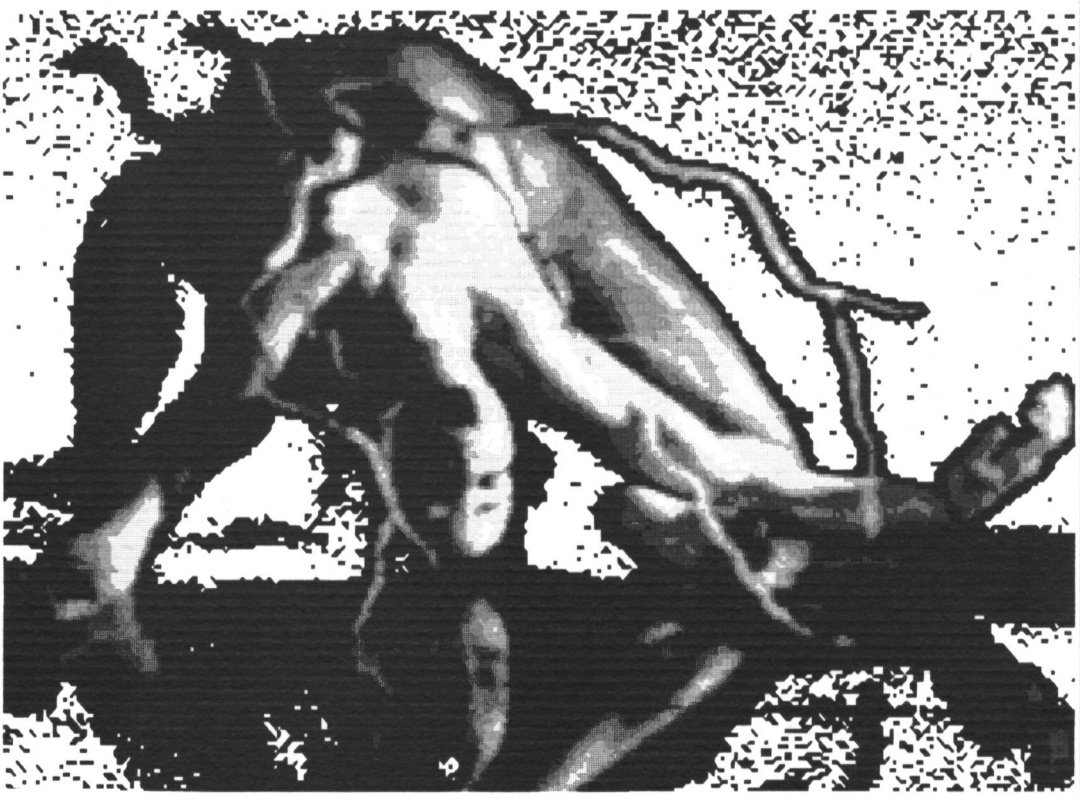
that eerily back-lit larger-than-life life
which had swooped in on me, soared in silence

crossing the field as a dark emblematic span
back when the fluttering, the fluttering began.

The following images are part of artist *Glenn Rothman's* computer enhanced photographs of dancer/choreographer Maureen Fleming.



In her recent work Fleming has been exploring areas where contemporary movement and dance intersect



with the meditative style of Japanese butoh. For these images Rothman has video taped Fleming's dance performances.

He then selects image frames, which he digitizes and enhances on the computer.

Gay Brewer is a native of Louisville, Kentucky. His poems have recently appeared in Puerto del Sol, Wormwood Review, and Kentucky Poetry Review. In 1989 Brownstone Books Published A Detective in Distress: Philip Marlowe's Domestic Dream, criticism on Raymond Chandler.
Jackie Bromstedt is an Assistant Professor of Theatre at the University of Texas at Austin, where she teaches directing and playwriting. She recently appeared in Austin as Mary Tyrone in Eugene O'Neil's Long Day's Journey Into Night, and this spring she directed Noel Coward's Blithe Spirit for the Zachary Scott Theatre Center of Austin. **Marcia Dickson** lives, writes, teaches composition, and does the work of scholarship in Marion, Ohio. She acts as an Assistant Professor English at OSU - Marion, where, she tells us "no one has as yet caught on to the ruse." **Angie Estes** is an Assistant Professor of English at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, where she teaches creative writing and American literature. She is a contributing editor for Cafe Solo, and her poems have appeared in Negative Capability and South Coast Poetry Journal and are forthcoming in The Chariton Review. **Robert Flanagan** has published a novel, Maggot, and a book of stories, Naked to Naked Goes. He has work included in Peter Prescott's Norton Book of American Short Stories, and in X.J. Kennedy's Introduction to Poetry. In October, Bottom Dog Press will publish his new stories, Loving Power. Flanagan lives in Delaware, Ohio where he is Director of Creative Writing at Ohio Wesleyan University. **Maureen Fleming** is an internationally acclaimed performer

and choreographer who is currently an Artist-In-Residence at La Mama in New York City. She has studied Butoh extensively in Japan. **James Lee** was born in the late nineteen forties in Jefferson County, Alabama and was raised by his mother's parents. Awarded several scholarships in football, he married in 1967 and is now the father of three children and several grandchildren. Mr. Lee is presently taking classes at OSU - Marion through the Marion Correctional Institution. **Karen Propp** hold a Ph.D. from the writing program at the University of Utah and currently teaches expository and creative writing at the University of Lowell. Her poems have appeared previously in Ploughshares, Antioch Review, and are forthcoming in South Florida Poetry Review and The Journal. **Michael J. Rosen** is the editor of Collecting Himself: James Thurber on writing and writers, humor and himself, and the forthcoming The Company of Dogs, an anthology of stories about companionship that will benefit animal welfare agencies throughout the country. **Glenn Rothman** is a nationally recognized artist who has recently attained the rank of Full Professor at OSU - Marion. **Robert Schroeder** was born in West Berlin in 1968 and is presently taking classes at OSU - Marion through the Marion Correctional Institution. He writes: "I was never really interested in writing until I stopped listening to just the music and zeroed in on the words. There's such deepness in the things that I hear through groups such as Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, Yes, Rush, and The Moody Blues, any old classical rock band. This deepness is what fuels me to write." **Ann Townsend** is currently finishing her Ph.D. at The Ohio State University. Her poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in New England Review/Bread Loaf Quarterly, College English, Indiana Review, and the New Virginia Review. **B.A. Vondenberg** became interested in art while attending classes through The Ohio State University's prison program. He writes that for him "Collages are a favorite. . . . (Art) sets the mind free, and show's (sic.) one's appreciation for the right side of the fence." **Liza Wieland** has just finished her first

novel entitled Names Of The Lost and is currently seeking a publisher for it. Her poems have been published in many literary magazines, including The Missouri Review, Ploughshares, and Black Warrior Review. **Mike White** is a doctoral candidate at the University of Utah. His poetry has recently appeared in Antioch Review, The Missouri Review, and New England Review/Bread Loaf Quarterly. He also has a chapbook collection entitled This Water.

Marion Campus

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POETRY :
Gay Brewer
Jackie Bromstedt
Marcia Dickson
Angie Estes
Karen Propp
Robert Schroeder
Ann Townsend
Mike White
Liza Wieland

FICTION:
Robert Flanagan

ESSAY:
Michael J. Rosen

ART:
Maureen Fleming
James Lee
Glenn Rothman
B.A. Vondenberg

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