

*CANOE*

*JOE SOAP'S*

*CANOE*

*JOE SOAP'S*

*CANOE*

*JOE SOAP'S*

*CANOE*



JOE SOAP'S



CANOE



Editor: Martin Stannard  
Editorial Address: 30 Quilter Road, Felixstowe,  
Suffolk IP11 7JJ.

Associate Editor: Mark Hillringhouse

Contributing Editors: Paul Violi, Lydia Tomkiw,  
Ian McMillan

©1991 joe soap's canoe  
Copyright on individual items rests with the author.

ISSN 0951-4864

EASTERN  
*Arts*

In the Spring of 1990, whilst staying with Lydia Tomkiw and her husband Don Hedeker in Chicago, I investigated a bookshelf in their house and came across a copy of *Ecstatic Occasions, Expedient Forms*, edited by David Lehman. The subtitle, "65 Leading Contemporary Poets Select and Comment on Their Poems", explains the book well enough, I think.

It's a fascinating book, and I would love to have a copy of it on my own shelf. Instead, I xeroxed a hunk of it, and hijacked its idea for this special issue of joe soap's canoe.

I wrote to fourteen poets who, over the years, have been associated with the canoe, and invited them to select a poem of their own, published or unpublished, old or new, and to write a commentary on it. With the exception of limits on length (minima and maxima) I impressed no rigid format on their responses. Wait and see what we get, I thought. Wait and see if we get *anything*.

What we got is what you get, and I'd like to thank all the poets for participating.

Of course, there are poets who could be in here, too, but whom I forbore from inviting to participate since their association with the magazine was more in its early years than of late. For better or for worse, I decided to be "current", as much as possible. I'm not sure even now if this was a good or bad editorial decision but it's one, like all the rest, with which I must live.

Also in this issue, the series of interviews with New York poets continues, and features Mark Hillringhouse's 1985 interview with James Schuyler.

Sadly, our delight at being able to publish this interview is much tempered by the news that James Schuyler died as the result of a stroke on April 12th.

It may be the smallest of gestures, but I would like to dedicate this issue of joe soap's canoe to his memory.

Martin Stannard





Photo: David Kelly

Paul Violi lives in Putnam Valley, New York, and his work has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies. An associate and/or contributing editor (we're never quite sure which, but he's on board....) of the canoe since way back, Paul's most recent books are *Splurge* (Sun) and *Likewise* (Hanging Loose Press). He has been awarded two fellowships in poetry by the National Endowment for the Arts and has also received grants from the New York Foundation for the Arts and the Ingram Merrill Foundation. He has taught many classes and workshops, and has been active in the poetry programmes of the Museum of Modern Art.



## SCATTERED REMAINS

Welcome to the Chophouse. There will be a slight wait before dinner is served. If you care for a drink, Mr. Marlowe, the bar is to your left:

...Keep pushing, tis wiser  
than sitting aside,  
And dreaming and sighing,  
and waiting the tide.  
In life's earnest battle  
they only prevail  
Who daily march onward  
and never say—

ARETINO.  
Party of four.  
Aretino,  
your table is ready.

With an eye ever open,  
a tongue that's not dumb  
And a heart that will never  
to sorrow succumb,  
You'll battle and conquer  
though thousands—

SEREMONDA,  
Raimon de Castel-Rouseillon.  
Table for two.

...Methinks on right pinions  
from heaven they sail.  
To cheer and encourage  
who never say fail.

Ahead then, keep pushing,  
and elbow your way—

ATREUS.  
Your private room  
is now available.  
Atreus Party.

...All obstacle vanish  
all enemies quail  
In the might of their wisdom  
who never say fail!  
In life's early morning—

Mr. SIMONIDES.  
A table for Mr. Simonides.

Let this be your motto,  
your footsteps to guide.  
In storm and in sunshine—

SIMONIDES!  
Last call for Simonides!

assail,  
We'll onward and conquer  
and never say fail!

## FOOTING THE BILL

Poetry and potluck. Forced by hunger and circumstance to enter a South Orange, New Jersey, restaurant, "The Stuffed Shirt," and obliged to wait for a table, I stood in full view of voracious diners, my enjoyment of the piped-in music repeatedly interrupted by a jolting voice that commanded those next in line to be seated. For reasons that remain profoundly mysterious, I began to compose my own guest list: mythological and literary figures whose fate was tied to a notable dining experience. The situation had slipped into the allegorical burlesque, not to avoid reality but take it along for a ride. A framework, a way to arrange a dialogue looked easy enough to duplicate on the page, suggested by an intriguing book that was very much in my thoughts at the time, Julian Jaynes' *The Origins of Consciousness*. For the muzak I substituted a triumphant song that would bounce down the page like an imbecile on a pogo stick; for the announcements from the higher speaker, stentorian boldface caps. Finally seated, I placed my order ("Just coffee for me, please.") and began to sketch out the poem on a napkin (cloth).

When I began to trim the list of those being called to dine, I realized some of the names, not to mention the details of their demise, would need explaining if the poem were to make any sense. I couldn't think of a way to identify them without disrupting the poem, which was a disrupted poem to begin with. Footnotes, plenty of footnotes seemed like a good way to cheat the form.

As I finished the poem, images of footnotes kept coming to mind. My scattered knowledge of the unfortunate guests I was including was gained almost entirely from footnotes. I thought of great poetry anthologies, contents arranged chronologically, where notation undulated beneath literary epochs to culminate in the tsunami of Twentieth Century Verse cresting over the innocent reader's shoulder. Helpful, concise, delighting scholar and sciolist, often more interesting than the poems they served to elucidate, footnotes deserved an anthology themselves. Memorable examples of wonderful or shoddy editorial detective work; superfluous, erroneous, dis-allusioning footnotes; footnotes that needed footnoting; poems that wouldn't have a leg to stand on without them (prosthetic footnotes); or those that elevated

poems to dubious heights of significance (stilts); extensive notes that gave poems an endearing Eliotic weight; contemporary poems that needed more explication than Chaucer; less and less verse on page after page, short stacks of lines set above massive blocks of fine print until they looked like a colonnade of squat shafts resting on gigantic stylobates: "Remains" was simple, basic fare, but also an opportunity to express my love for and indebtedness to The Literary Footnote.

1. Christopher Marlowe, 1564-1593, English dramatist and poet. Died in a bar brawl brought on by his possible involvement in espionage or simply rowdiness. The details concerning how he was stabbed in the eye with a dagger and how his brain came out with the withdrawn blade are best omitted.

2. Pietro Aretino, 1492-1556, Italian poet and satirist. Part of an artistic circle that included Titian, Sansovino, and Giulio Romano, and that met frequently for dinner. An irrepressible joker, he died on one such evening when he choked on his food while laughing at one of his own jokes. According to witnesses, he regained consciousness while his body was being prepared for burial, cracked a joke at the mortician's expense, and once again expired. (In Titian's portrait of him, Aretino looks exactly like Orson Welles.)

3. Seremonda, 12th Century, wife of En Raimon de Castel-Roussillon. Though completely discredited by historians, legend has it that her husband, upon hearing of her love for the poet Cabestanh, killed him and served her his heart, well-seasoned with pepper. On learning what the main course consisted of, she flung herself off a balcony to her death.

4. House of Atreus. Family dining in a traditional setting.

5. Simonides, Greek, 5th Century B.C. For the complete story of how this poet, the first on record to insist on being paid for his efforts, escaped as sole survivor when a banquet hall roof collapsed, see Frances Yates' *The Art of Memory*.

Simonides' *deus ex machina* departure provided a way out of this poem as well. Two others considered, but rejected for not striking the hopeful note I wanted, were Ernest Dowson, erroneously believed to have not survived a fall off a bar stool (in an early version of the poem he was all set to occupy a

securely endowed university chair), and poor Sherwood Anderson who was to have passed up that fifth bon voyage party martini whose olive-laden toothpick perforated his diverticulum.



Tony Towle lives in New York City. *North* was published by Columbia University Press in conjunction with his winning the Frank O'Hara Award for 1970. He has also received a CAPS Fellowship, an NEA Fellowship, and an Ingram Merrill Foundation Award. His other books include *Works on Paper*, *Autobiography and Other Poems*, *Gemini* (with Charles North), and *New & Selected Poems 1963-1983*. A book of poetry and prose, *Some Musical Episodes*, is scheduled for late 1991 from Hanging Loose Press. He has written reviews for *Art in America*, and is presently the copyeditor of *Arts* magazine.

TONY TOWLE



## NEARING CHRISTMAS

A frog croaks continually in the pond below,  
and jumps out onto the ground.  
I climb through a window and cross the floor  
past a forest of utensils.  
A herd of bison roams the great plains;  
they bite my hands so I feed them;  
a girl paints a yellow sun streaked with orange,  
the last of some lines before the Christmas rush,  
before the wingless exasperations of Bloomingdale's  
which already entwine my heels  
in intellectual pursuit.  
I knew it would happen eventually,  
Frank's poems would come out,  
and I would feel the impulse to close up shop,  
so I have sat down to write,  
evading the personality, like Rimbaud,  
jumping into one, like Marianne Moore,  
or sitting simply like a sack of raisins in space  
as you threaten to become my personal Rachmaninoff.  
I have never been able to drink in the morning,  
as opposed to Frank to whom the day was of a piece,  
the sun poised firmly in the middle of the sky,  
though many a fortress has been lost in the meantime  
and a snowy range of mountains rises behind them,  
with some of the people forgotten,  
cancelled out by pretty events.  
I didn't meet Frank O'Hara in 1959, as in the book's notes,  
we met in 1962, August, by chance in the Cedar Bar. In 1959  
I hadn't even begun to write, and by 1962  
the problem was neatly reversed,  
having wept with love and irritation  
beneath the honorable sky  
which leads everywhere at once.  
December 15th, noon, 1971,  
one quick drink and I'm off to Bloomingdale's,

crawling with ants on a popsicle of moving clouds,  
against the color of the junior sky, by extension  
to Irma's coat, the far promontory, and the uniform of the  
person who turns the handle  
in Rachel's Musical Mystery House, the end of Part I  
the road and the morning.

I'm still here, 12:22, perhaps three minutes fast,  
forgetting what I was going to say.  
Two more drinks Towle and you'll say anything.  
I haven't been called Towle since high school.  
I had something else to say and I don't remember what it was.  
Two Spanish painters are painting my front door a tasteless orange,  
one more anonymous tribute to "Why I Am Not A Painter".  
Dr. Zhivago is a great novel, I don't care what anyone says.  
I could have written Safe Conduct myself; in 1964  
it occurred to me I might write one for Frank some day,  
if he ever died before I did, which wasn't likely.

Well he did and I haven't. Irma needs skirts  
so I'm going to Bloomingdale's to look for some,  
empty ones that is. I remember when it could be said  
that someone had a dirty mind;  
no more hopeless and antiquated than having, say,  
the mind of Henry James.  
"The woman's place is in the novel." - Henry James,  
who would be sipping something more exotic;  
but I have really got to go,  
out through the door  
to the facts of life.  
My life at any rate is more oblique than Frank's.  
What have I ever said to the sun for example?  
What did I ever say to Frank for that matter,  
brooding on the promontory of my early poetic development,  
silent and self-preoccupied, garrulous and self-preoccupied,  
not that anything's changed too much,  
an aging Frank O'Hara Award winner,



jumping from icefloe to icefloe  
a step ahead of a horde of younger practitioners,  
to whom I nevertheless occasionally turn and shout some advice;  
which is not to have a mistaken notion of your biography,  
no event in your life is of the slightest importance,  
but there is nothing you cannot use;  
the unceasing events of your boring life  
occur only for the success of a particular poem,  
awaiting your efforts on a horizon.

For instance, it is supposed that I am drunk at a party,  
I walk unsteadily into the foyer  
where Joe, Jane and John are putting on their coats.  
I stand there for a moment, breaking the alliteration, then  
find my way back, staggering with the implications,  
to the hors d'oeuvre of the infinite room  
which I have chosen from the swirling elements,

from the actual events, stories and people.  
I don't see clearly the swirling elements,  
I am made up of those elements;  
it would be better to live over a dyke bar than under one;  
like poetry they perhaps at worst only confuse two specialties,  
itself with life in poetry's case.

Finally I have gone to Bloomingdale's,  
and I am back.  
You call that lyric you big bag of shit?  
I am not talking to myself,  
or in that manner to a great poet of the past,  
that must be Frank, talking to me;  
I am at last fully awake in this mortal life,  
for the few years in the middle,  
and I keep myself opaque and I don't regret it,  
on the promontory.

Frank you've got to help me  
and there is an answer but not at this moment.

Disclaimer: I tend to avoid explicating my poems. If the information is crucial, it should somehow be incorporated into the poem itself, or in notes that accompany it wherever it goes, 'la *The Waste Land*. That said, having been handed an invitation to give one of my poems an elucidative treatment, I am taking the opportunity of providing some footnotes to a work that might perhaps benefit from a little clarification.

It was indeed "nearing Christmas" in New York in 1971 and I was unsuccessfully fooling around on the typewriter, trying to come up with something poetic, resulting in the first few lines of the poem. Part of the reason I couldn't seem to get anywhere was that I had recently obtained a copy of Frank O'Hara's *Collected Poems* (lines 13-15). It was a volume of almost 600 pages, an astonishing fact for those who, like myself, were not aware, during his lifetime, of the extent of his achievement (O'Hara died in a tragic accident in 1966 at the age of 40). I had known Frank for the last four years of his life, had taken his workshop (the only one he ever gave) at the New School in 1963, had met my second wife through him, had obtained through his recommendation a job with Tatyana Grosman (a position I held for 15 years) at her Universal Limited Art Editions studio, where Barnett Newman, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist, Robert Motherwell, Jim Dine, and other well-known artists made lithographs and etchings - Frank had generously given me entrée to the art and poetry world in which he himself was involved. Not only was it saddening to see that I had not fully appreciated the scope of his work when he was alive, but, not being terribly prolific myself, his *Collected Poems* made my own efforts to that point seem truly insignificant by comparison. This of course was the very reason I was trying to force myself to write something, to keep going until I did.

In addition (see why I don't explicate my work? It's endless!) I was putting off going Christmas shopping, the most depressing aspect of a season that in general could send me off on alcoholic binges. In addition to *that*, and along those lines, I had made myself a Bloody Mary before noon (line 20), not a good idea then or now, hoping to prod myself into inspiration - all the while knowing that I'd better get my butt uptown and do some shopping since I had a day off during the week, and not leave it (as usual) to the *very* last minute. Well, you get the picture, or

at least the outline. Here are some further notes/observations:

*Line 19:* The "you" of course is Frank O'Hara, who had mentioned Rachmaninoff and his birthday so often in his early poems that by the time I knew him he would make ironic references to it. (The particular composer for whom Frank and I shared a common enthusiasm, however, was Prokofiev.) I had already written an "Ode to Frank O'Hara" and he also figured, although nameless, in another poem, both written after his death.

*Line 27:* I was taking the "public" opportunity provided by the way the poem seemed to be going to correct the *Collected Poems*' "A Short Chronology" entry under 1959, which stated that Frank had met "... Leroi Jones, Bill Berkson, Frank Lima, Tony Towle, and many other young poets." As far as I know, the only "young" poets he met in 1959 were Leroi and Bill. He met Frank Lima and me in 1962, and other young poets around that time and later. In 1959 I was far away from the New York poetry scene, in Washington D.C., in the middle of my first marriage. I returned to New York the following year, shortly after I began, out of nowhere as it were, writing poetry. The circumstances of ending a marriage, not having any money, or an interesting job, or my own apartment, together with failed romances, personal depression and so forth, are indicated through the extreme abbreviation and understatement of lines 29-31. Between the time when I was supposed to have met Frank and actually did, I had gone, as they say, through a lot of personal crap.

*Line 34:* The mundane notation of time and place was a well-known feature of a number of Frank's *Lunch Poems* (1964) that had been taken up by Ted Berrigan and then by others in what had started out as homage but had soon reached the point of (unintentional) parody — so that I am using the device at this comparatively late date very self-consciously indeed.

*Line 35:* I'm still procrastinating, indulging myself by writing poetry when I should be out buying presents for others.

*Line 36:* No doubt a fancifully oblique reference to New York's fabled Christmas traffic, automotive and pedestrian.

*Lines 36-40:* Irma, my second wife; Rachel, my then-four-and-

a-half-year-old daughter and one of her toys; four increasingly obscure references to the color blue. I intend to stop ("end of Part 1"), go shopping, and continue the poem later.

*Line 42 et seq.:* I didn't go anywhere, obviously; I'm really reaching now, looking for inspiration from just about anywhere, and apparently finding it. Two workmen speaking Spanish to each other *were* painting the front door of my apartment, and all the others in the building as well, a rather garish orange. It brought to mind in an ironic way Frank's fondness for Spanish painting, and then his wonderful poem, "Why I Am Not A Painter", and then our mutual liking for Pasternak, and then, specifically, *Safe Conduct*, Pasternak's autobiography/homage to Mayakovsky, which my poem, in the same relationship of younger poet to older, was beginning, on a miniaturized scale, to resemble.

*Lines 53 et seq.:* Now I'm just rattling on, being witty. At some point I am no longer sitting at home behind the typewriter in Solfo (though the name for the neighborhood had not yet been popularized) but was taking notes by hand, heading uptown to Bloomingdale's in a taxi (an unwarranted luxury, but I was pretty tipsy by this time so the hell with it), realizing I'd better get some shopping done.

*Line 65:* A reference to O'Hara's "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island", which refers to Mayakovsky's famous poem on the same subject in a different location.

*Line 82:* A reference to O'Hara's well-known (perhaps *overly* known) device of bringing his friends into his poems without arning or exposition. Eventually I came to know many of these people myself. Here, again self-consciously appropriating one of Frank's better-known usages, they are Jane Freilicher and her husband, Joe Hazan, and John Ashbery. The occasion, however, is fictional, though certainly possible. Apropos, I was surprised when I first met Jane Freilicher; I had thought "Jane" was a rhetorical figure. I still think it is not of overriding importance to have to know the biographies of the people mentioned in Frank's work.

*Line 90:* A reference to Frank's *Poem*, beginning with the line "I live above a dyke bar and I'm happy".

I think the rest of the poem is self-explanatory, poetically speaking. Although in a way this poem is an Ode to Frank O'Hara, it is, in and by the end, overwhelmingly about myself, and perhaps in another sense (as indicated in lines 73-76) about the uses of autobiography in one's work. As it happened, "Nearing Christmas" occurred during the composition of a much longer poem actually called "Autobiography", in which this latter subject is treated in a wide variety of ways.

New York, January, 1991



Lydia Tomkiw lives in Chicago with husband Don Hedeker, and together they make Algebra Suicide, a music/words collaboration whose most recent recording is *Alpha Cue*. Lydia's poetry has been published throughout the United States, and she has been a canoe regular since the heady days of 1981. Her most recent collection is *The Dreadful Swimmers* (Wide Skirt, 1989).

LYDIA TOMKIW



## LITTLE DEAD BODY POEM

How right you are, dear Paul, that  
We hear of famous people's deaths while on vacation.  
Perhaps it's so that their funerals are not too crowded,  
With their loyal fans being out of town and all.  
Those celebrities are pretty clever.  
I've heard that somebody is born every eight seconds,  
So I presume that someone dies every eight seconds,  
Just to keep things even;  
It makes me feel shortchanged when I read the obituary page--  
Someone's holding back information.  
It also prompts me to flip through the telephone directory on  
Sleepless nights, saying over and over again,  
"Yup, you're all going, every last one of you..."  
Wow, heaven must be a big place.  
I don't know too many dead people, but folks tell me I'm young.  
When my grandfather died, he was laid-out in the Bub Funeral  
Home,

And I was secretly glad Mr. Bub did not  
Change his name to something more romantic  
When he went into business;  
I just wish it was less memorable.  
My high school locker partner, Ned, worked part-time  
For a mortician. Imagine:  
Dressing dead people,  
Straightening their ties, fluffing up their hair,  
So you can afford to take a  
Girl to the movies on Saturday night.  
That's love. That's adolescent desperation.  
I would have been honored to go to the movies  
With Ned and have him buy me popcorn.  
Instead, I went out with a boy who died.  
The hardest part for me was knowing that  
His body did not just disappear on the bed the minute he left.  
I think that's what keeps me off suicide:  
The idea that something is left for someone else to clean up.  
How rude and inconsiderate--

It's a pain to take out the weekly trash, let alone figure out  
What to do with over a hundred pounds of flesh that's about to  
go bad.  
It would be even worse in India where there's a religious sect  
which  
Believes you shouldn't desecrate any of the elements with  
the dead--

They can't be buried or burned,  
They can't be cast out to sea,  
So they're taken to the top of the  
Tower of Silence, where  
They become the vulture's problem.  
How's that for passing the buck?  
No, when I go, I want to go clean,  
Convenient, leaving no mess,  
As if I vaporized while taking a shower,  
As if I moved to Antarctica  
Leaving no forwarding address.

It started with a line from one of Paul Hoover's works that caught my attention, and then the rest surprised me because it started writing itself: while I set out to write a poem about dead celebrities, the poem itself started calling up instances of deaths of personal friends and relatives, and then it began addressing the larger issue of suicide. It also surprised me that the poem was nearly finished in one sitting, which is atypical of my composing style; although I don't disagree with the first-thought-is-best-thought notion of poetry, I personally rarely experience it in my own writing. After several attempts at approaching the first draft of "that little dead body piece" for editing, and finding that I couldn't take anything out, and didn't want to put much more in, I came to the conclusion that the only thing it needed to make me happy was a decent title. Even that seemed to write itself.

"Little Dead Body Poem" is one of my own favorites because it does contain true personal stories (although, in retrospect, my high school locker partner's name was Wes, not Ned, as my patchy memory improvised), and because it addresses a pretty morbid but universal subject. Because of the potential heaviness of the subject matter, I felt comfortable retaining the poem's conversational tone and whatever humor was inherent in the personal stories. Imposing any formal constraints on the piece may have given it a more "serious" temper, and I wanted to avoid any melodramatic gravity. Although I often employ traditional (and at times archaic) poetic forms in my work, I do feel that they are man-made systems, and to apply the overwhelmingly phenomenal idea of death to such a system would have been somewhat inane.

As it is one of my more narrative pieces and because of its comic edge, it lends itself nicely to be performed in live situations (no pun intended). It is sometimes difficult to create a piece that can work in both two dimensional (print) and four dimensional (time/performance) formats, as they are vastly different in terms of audience perception: print is a more permanent documentation of poetry, allowing a more intimate, one-on-one involvement with the reader who can return to the piece repeatedly; the performance of a poem is more fleeting and difficult for the audience because of the time element and because the ears process language differently than the eyes.

I found that "Little Dead Body Poem" worked in both formats, as it was dense enough to offer something on the page, but not so dense that it couldn't be "gotten" on a first hearing.

Algebra Suicide, the band I work with, recorded "Little Dead Body Poem" as spoken word integrated with music. The response to the text of this record was quite notable, which pleased me as it proved that the poem was evoking reaction from a traditionally non-poetry empathetic audience.



MARTIN STANNARD

Martin Stannard has been editing Joe Soap's canoe since he founded the damn thing in 1978. He has had a number of collections of his own poetry published, including *The Flat of the Land* (Wide Skirt, 1987), *The Gracing of Days: New & Selected Poems* (Slow Dancer, 1989) and *Denying England* (Wide Skirt, 1990).



## THE REAL NEW CRITICISM

So we moved to the Isle of Wight  
With a case of un-read books,  
A box of matches and a pack of  
Firelighters. We knew everything  
There was to know about aggression  
And were very aggressive. I had  
A brand new Sekonda watch and you  
Wore a fragrance called "Distance".  
I kept mine and you said "Art"  
Was about precisely that and sea  
Breaking upon an undiscovered shore.  
I opened the case of books and  
The odour of a disappearing world  
Punched me 'Biff!' on the nose.  
I felt sick, I had more important  
Things to say and struck a match.  
The books burned like bloody fuck.

"Those books burned like bloody fuck,"  
You said, as we lay in the after-  
Glow of brief sexual intercourse.  
"Art is redundant these days, and TV  
Is real communication." I got out  
Of bed and put on my new Doc Martens  
And you got out of bed and put on  
An MC Hammer LP. "We didn't need  
The firelighters," I said. "We might,"  
You said. "Yes, you're right."  
"I'm always right." "Not always."  
"Fucking am." "Fucking aren't."  
"Bollocks." "Fuck off." "Fuck you."

According to *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, the new criticism "is not susceptible of a formal definition, for 'new' in this context is not much more than a vague pointer." It goes on to say that when John Crowe Ransom published "The New Criticism" in 1941 "he apparently meant no more than to designate the criticism then current." It has a lot more to say, of course, some of which I understand and slightly more that I don't. As entertaining and enlightening, in fact, is the entry to do with New Zealand poetry on the facing page, which mentions that early 20th century New Zealand poets "shared the mediocrity of contemporary English poets who were often their models" — but I'm straying wildly off any point here. The "current" is what I had in mind when I wrote the poem, though actually I didn't have very much in my mind at all, to be honest.

I don't write regularly, or to a schedule, or anything like that. I do it when I feel like it or, if I haven't written much in a while and I'm becoming grumpy, I force myself. On this occasion, I noted down (in my "writer's notebook"! ) a fleeting thought that occurred to me, the idea of setting up a new school of literary criticism that involved, not reading books, but having at them with firelighters and a box of matches. Not too original perhaps, but historical resonances (and even contemporary ones) are obvious, though I thought I could detect a flicker of humour in there somewhere too.

Anyway, I took this note one day and, slipping in a mention of the Isle of Wight for no reason at all except geographic interest, wrote the poem. I almost knew that it was going to be "about" lack of tolerance, but I had no idea how this was going to work out. I did what I usually do: write, and see what happens. A kind of logical narrative drift opened up, as narrative drifts tend to do, and this helped.

I took, and still take, a delight in the way that the first line of stanza two is a spoken version of the last line of stanza one. I like that sort of thing. It came about because I couldn't think of any other first line to a second stanza that as yet did not exist. Cheating is okay. And having stumbled into dialogue, this second stanza was then destined to be virtually all dialogue.

"Art is redundant these days, and TV is real communication" is a quote from memory, and it may not be word perfect but the

meaning is accurate enough. I don't remember who said it, but I heard it on TV. The rest of the dialogue is made up, though I think I've heard much of it somewhere before. More than once, in fact. Not far from here.

Usually I work on poems and revise them extensively. I don't keep tabs on how many versions or variations a poem goes through; usually they kick around on my desk for weeks, sometimes months, often being left untouched for days or weeks, during which time I'm not even thinking about them. Then one evening I'll turn to the poem, read it through, make some instinctive alterations maybe, and put it aside again. When the alterations dry up, when I don't feel a warning blip inside as I read it through, that's when I figure it's done. Sort of like sticking a fork in it, I suppose: the cook knows, and it's hardly scientific.

But this one was an exception. I did ponder long and hard about that 'Biff!' in stanza one: was Biff! the right word? Wasn't Zap! or Pow! or even Bop! better? But I decided to stick with Biff! Apart from that, it was a pretty trouble free little poem.

The thing about not revising a poem, and trusting it while it's new, is to do with a certain kind of courage, I think, rather than anything else. Not that I'm a courageous person - far from it - but I do get fed up with worrying about this stuff sometimes. I know Frank O'Hara said "Go on your nerve" but blimey, it's hard sometimes, and our teachers told us not to. I still feel nice and plucky when I do it, though. Perhaps I should do it more. I shall have to think about it.

The more I think about things, the more I understand that I don't know much, and the more I understand that what I thought I knew and could trust in is either changing, or is plainly, dumbly wrong. You know what I mean: the only certain thing is uncertainty, with one or two honourable exceptions. Life and poetry, joined at the head and the heart, are about all that. Mine are, anyway. As Frank O'Hara (yes, him again), aiming his comments at the art audience, said, "Art is not *your* life, it is someone else's." And this poetry is mine.

But I don't think about this kind of thing when I'm writing nor, usually, when I'm not writing. It's a given, and thinking about

this as you write is not likely to make for good writing. (I almost found myself going on to say that thinking at all when you are writing can be pretty treacherous, but I can't say that: at least, not without going into the way in which one thinks as one is writing, which is not the same as the way one thinks when one is, for example, filling in an application for Arts Council funding, or choosing what to have for dinner.)

That's it really. It's not a very deep poem. I wrote it in December 1990 and decided it would be my last poem of the year. It has a certain air of finality which seemed to be saying "Give it a rest for a bit." Okay, I thought. I'll give it a rest. So I played records for two weeks, tried to ignore Christmas, and waited for 1991 to arrive. My New Year's resolutions were to "extend my vocabulary" and "be more tolerant." But the year and the world are falling apart already and it's still only January.





PETER SANSOM

Peter Sansom was born near Nottingham in 1958 and has lived in Huddersfield since 1976, where he now runs The Poetry Business - workshops, bookshop, publishing and so on - and edits The North magazine. He has had pamphlets published by Wide Skirt Press and Slow Dancer, and two 'proper books', one from Littlewood and another - *Everything You've Heard Is True* - from Carcanet. He is currently writer-in-residence at Doncaster Central Library, and has been since 1989.



## AL & CLARE HAVE BOUGHT A MIDDLE TERRACE INSTEAD OF BEING MARRIED

They are working in the cellar.  
Above us, a man is turning the roof.  
Sometimes there is a room full of pot-plants  
where the dead speak to us from near at hand;  
they are like voices from the under-drawing.

And our memory of them is a ship  
in distress. Our memory of them is  
foundering in heavy seas; and we are woken  
as if someone had knocked on the window  
with words about the rain, but the washing  
is finished in the utility room.  
It is curtains. It's a digression, a domestic  
parenthesis in a sentence in a section  
dealing with some entirely different subject:  
let us say Climbing. Climbing that endless ladder -

you must not look down, but then you do.  
Dusk is falling, you're afraid of heights,  
and night rung by rung decants last moments  
into our brimming glasses, into a blue  
earthenware jug, into our hands.

"Al & Clare Have Bought A Middle Terrace Instead Of Being Married" was written in 1986 or 7, and appeared in my Carcanet book, *Everything You've Heard Is True* (March 1990). It would have been better to use a new poem here but I don't seem to be writing. Sometimes I seem to be writing but it turns out I'm not. But enough of my problems. About "Al & Clare":

A photographer friend and I had been doing a lot of publicity shots in Sheffield for a pamphlet I was on with then. While we were over there, we stopped off at Al & Clare's, a couple of her friends I'd not met before. I was feeling like a poet, since I'd had my photo taken all afternoon, and was probably in a state of heightened awareness.

The title is exactly what Al & Clare had done. They couldn't decide if they wanted to get married, but they wanted a commitment, so they bought a middle terrace. It makes sense. A reviewer thought the opening of the poem *didn't* make sense, but it does: apparently when tiles are turned over - so the unworn part is showing to potential buyers - it's called 'turning the roof'. Similarly that idea of the dead being "like voices from the under-drawing": I walked in a room cleared to decorate and there was this disembodied talk. I didn't realise at first it was coming up from the under-drawing beneath the floorboards. It's a gift, finding a jargon word or phrase that has, like an under-drawing, 'resonances'.

Struck me that what you might do with your life - though I'm not sure Al & Clare were doing it - is renovate a middle terrace and sell it to buy an end terrace, then renovate that and sell it for a semi-detached. All the way up to a stately home. That's what the "Climbing" is at the end of the second stanza; not 'social climbing' exactly, but going up in the world. This attaches, not altogether firmly but who cares, to the idea in "night rung by rung decants last moments...." That line used to be 'decants the last moments' till Michael Schmidt pointed out my habit of putting in articles where I didn't need them.

I wondered a while about the joke "It is curtains" in stanza two. Jokes in poems are often a defence mechanism: in my case, partly so as not to be thought po-faced, and partly to evade exploring areas I'd sooner keep closed-off from myself. Most even quite good poets are troubled by this evasiveness, I think.

You can almost hear Ted Hughes, 'Oh my, I'm evasive these days!' The rather modish ending of "Al & Clare" is probably also an evasion. Though actually I *love* the ending. It's my favourite bit in any of my work, except for when I was starting another poem ("Cops") and, touched by the Muse, came up with: "Having shared a bath, not to save water, / I think we know each other a little better."

I want to write more like "Al & Clare". The 'I don't give a fuck' length of title, the 'you'll just have to trust me' shifts of sense and tone, the self-conscious cadencing and patterns of sound. The fact that, in the end, the poem pleases itself. Which of course all poems should do. But writing the Al & Clare way is often simply showing off. All tool and no timber. It's ok if you're Ashbery because in a sense then your tools *are* your timber. But he's so idiosyncratic I doubt anyone could write like him without having half his name. Why this one works for me is that at some level I was talking about something important to me. The business of 'climbing'. It still is important to me. Sooner or later I will have to buy a house or else get married. It is probably a superstitious or romantic notion that doing either of those things would stop me writing. But since I'm *not* writing these days anyway, all reasonable offers considered.



Tom Raworth was born in 1938 and lives in Cambridge. He has published numerous books, including *Tottering State* (Paladin, 1988), *Il Grande Giorno Verde* (Supernova, Venice, 1989), and *Sentenced He Gives A Shape* (Zasterle, Tenerife, 1990). Forthcoming in 1991 are *Sans Titre* (Le Refuge, Marseille) and *Eternal Sections* (Sun & Moon, Los Angeles). Exhibitions of his paintings and drawings have been held in London, Paris, Milan and Marseille, and it was from Marseille (where during January and February 1991 he was the first foreign resident writer at Centre International de Poesie) that he sent his contribution here.



Dear Martin,

I thought I'd pretty clearly stated my method in *El Barco del Abismo* over twenty years ago, and I don't think it's changed much. Perhaps it's more juggling than attaching now. So what I'll do is give you the context of the last poem I wrote a couple of days ago.

Just before midnight I was walking home after dinner with Jean-Luc Sarré and his wife Christine, the worse for anisette and Buzet. I remember being, while pissing, fascinated by a bright yellow sign advertising a garage: so much so I had to approach it and rub the wall with my fingers to make sure the painted shadow wasn't real. I went on down hill into the city, and some minutes later stopped at a stall for a sandwich (tournedos et frites: 13f). No-one about. The owner, Tunisian, listening to loud radio in Arabic. As he rolled the sandwich in paper, twisting the ends and adding a pink paper napkin, he switched the channel and we heard the news flash of the start of war. We shrugged at one another with eyes and mouth. And as I went round by the port, the water dark grey and calm

sitting there watching  
air decay  
between the levels  
of white tiles

started running through my head. At the bottom of the 39 steep long steps leading up the *Montée des Accoules* I wrote them down in pencil on the back of a scrap of blue graph paper on the other side of which was

Julien t'attend à 20h au New York  
Livraison cuisinière demain matin avant 11h.

About eleven the next morning, after opening the shutters and watching the Arab girl opposite lean over the bright red shoes on the windowsill to shout down into the street, I walked over to the Centre. Clear blue sky, sunlight hitting the roofs, a cold wind through the narrow stone passageways. The exhibition on at the moment is of Jean Cocteau's time in the South. Quite boring, lots of xeroxes of cards to his mother with Xs marking his room, endless photographs of Jean Cocteau with Luis

Dominguin, Jean Cocteau with Eddie Constantine, Jean Cocteau with Gina Lollobrigida. I made a quick sketch of a chicken with yellow feet, labelled it *Coq Jaune-Toe* and gave it to Emmanuel who gave me in return a letter from Franco. The news that Patrizia Vicinelli had died a couple of days previously. I remembered the last time I'd seen her husband Gianni Castagnoli, exhausted at a bar-table in Milan. And started listing images of Patrizia in my mind: dancing at 3am in the Lucky Bar only five years ago... a warm afternoon by the lake at Geneva with John Higgins... rushing all the way across town for a quick coffee with Val and Giovanni D'Agostino at the cafe near his studio... forcing herself to speak, and even to scribble a rough alphabet, after the stroke. An image of falling flickered through, and on the back of Franco's envelope I scribbled

tangles of wire  
toppling her to the ground

Back in my room; L-shaped, a table, a bed, a lamp, two chairs, I tried to work at some drawings for the walls. But couldn't concentrate. I walked down the various flights of steps to the port, turned right past the fifties (architect: Pouillon) blocks replacing the part of the Old Town completely destroyed by the Germans in 1943, thinking of a plan of Marseille printed in 1950 that Emmanuel had shown me, with just a white blank on the map for the whole area. I continued along, under the new concrete highway, beside the docks, to the main gate. Loitered until the two Customs Officers were occupied searching the bags of three black sailors leaving. Slid through the other side and past the rows of containers, rusting, some cracked open, one pallet stacked with cork bark, up a stone tunnel almost filled with an iron pipe and small stalactites and out onto the digue. There I spent the afternoon, alone, walking the length of it, watching the *Ti Pasa* come in from Algiers, the *Emerald Light* (rusty, heavy at the stern, listing to port) leave for Dublin, a couple of fishing boats rolling in the swell. Clouds flickered over, the sea and horizon changed colour continuously. When I got back to my room on the envelope was

by the side of the numbers  
polished petrol tank  
unlike what he saw

leaned down and picked up  
hoardings juttet out

Evening. Water running down the central groove of the stone steps as the cleaners, blue trousers obviously standard issue and size, as the white inverted 'v' on the leg, sometimes cut off, sometimes with six inches of colour below it, showed, swept away the day's dog-shit. The plastic bags of rubbish, handled tied into rabbit-ears, already on each corner. I wrote some letters, closed the shutters, switched on the lamp and listened to the news

ejected from the real  
far away breathing  
to hold on to  
gloved fingers meshing

appeared.

Before going to sleep I played with the lines, taking fourteen as the length I've been happy with for a while. In the morning I read it again with the windows open, chill wind through the room, coffee spitting on the hotplate:

sitting there watching  
air decay  
between the levels  
of white tiles  
he saw  
tangles of wire  
a polished petrol tank  
hoardings juttet out  
by the side of numbers  
to hold on to  
far away breathing  
ejected from the real  
gloved fingers meshing  
toppling her to the ground

(in memoriam Patrizia Vicinelli)

Marseille, January 17th 1991

regards,  
Tom



Photo: Mary Gail

DAVID RATTRAY

David Rattray was born in 1936 in Southampton, New York, and currently lives in New York City. He has published several books, the most recent of which is *Opening the Eyelid* (Diwan, Brooklyn, 1990). He also publishes translations, and forthcoming in 1991 is *Black Mirror, Selected Poems of Roger Gilbert-Leconte* (Preface by Antonin Artaud, translated and with an introduction by David Rattray) from Station Hill Press.



## OUT OF THE DARK

is what  
"from the bright field  
seen dreaming"  
actually meant  
in the meadow at sunup  
where you saw a  
halo on somebody else's  
head. The long red  
train went past at a tear.  
Pursue  
lucidity that  
shapely thing, you might  
disappear  
smelling of  
straw and apples.

In the year 627, an adviser to the pagan king of Northumbria summed up this life:

*A swallow flies into a banquet hall out of the night, pauses a moment in the fire's warmth, then flies out into the dark again.*

The simile also describes something often known as the stream of consciousness, although to my mind the latter is more like skipping stones across the surface of a body of water. Or island-hopping, as in Tennyson's *From island unto island to the gateways of the day*. "From light to light and dark to dark" is a turn of phrase used by Cervantes, meaning "continuously." *De claro en claro y de oscuro en oscuro*.

The swallow and the banquet hall came up, as it happened, on the eve of Edwin of Northumbria's conversion. His Frankish queen Aethelburh was already a Christian. As a reward for her help in winning Edwin over, the Pope sent Aethelburh a comb of gilded ivory and a mirror.

At the moment of birth the infant emerges into light, the first it has ever seen. But has it not already *dreamt* of light? Where were we before our nine-month sojourn in the womb? There is probably no one alive who has not at some time imagined a preexistent, prenatal paradise or "bright field seen dreaming," one enclosed in yet another sheath of darkness in its turn, no doubt. The Gnostics said that outside this checkered state there is a light world from which we descend and to which we are returning. One of the commonest near-death experiences is that of a doorway or sphere of light toward which the subject is irresistibly drawn, a phenomenon also describable as a tequila sunset of the dying brain. Not surprisingly, the Bible states that light and darkness are equivalent (Psalm 139.12: "The darkness and the light are both alike") although God divided them in the beginning.

To equate "the dark" with its opposite "the bright field seen dreaming" is here of course a rhetorical device (that of Paradox) aiming to arrest a reader or listener's attention, as the poem breaks out of the nothingness preceding its existence in the mental universe that comes into being when a poet and an audience meet, whether by the turning of pages or the bending of ears.

"There's a halo on everybody's head," the poet Patrice Repousseau assures me. "The trouble is, we rarely see it. When we do see it, we *can't* disappear, for we have been given access to that which never ceases."

I am not at all sure that I would want imperishability at the price of perpetual visibility. The prospect of being merged with the mineral components of my surrounding habitat is as precious to me as an old-time believer's faith in resurrection and immortality. In a recent period of fearing for my life, I took comfort in a handful of pebbles from the ocean, with the thought that in the long run some happily biodegradable essence of myself would become like them, my kin, as it were. It's an intriguing idea, though, access to that which never ceases. Is it a door one passes through? Perhaps we are there already and don't know it. It does seem unlikely that anything with a beginning is not going to also have an end.

The halo on another's head in a meadow at sunset is at once in the eye of the beholder and outside it, an objective phenomenon. A physical explanation is ventured by Goethe in the chapter on after-images in the treatise on color. Everybody has been in such a meadow at some time or other; it is an experience that often happens quite early in life, only to be repeated over and over at unpredictable intervals, as though on cue. At times a main turning-point may be pictured as a meadow without wind.

Halos first came into the world in Persia. From there Greek artists in the train of Alexander introduced them to India, Buddhist missionaries carried them to Tibet, China, and beyond. Greeks also brought them home to the Mediterranean. Hellenistic kings, Roman emperors, and Christian saints acquired them. The halo eventually became a flame enveloping a Sufi sage's entire head. The latter convention, still observable in Persian miniatures, may have been introduced by Mani himself. However, the capacity to perceive one's neighbor's aura is a mere iconographic convention but a feature of perception innate to many species, including the human, where it is typically atrophied by acculturation, if not age.

I've always known I had a halo on my head but it was only when I saw one on somebody else's head (and this actually happened more than once) that it dawned on me that I was coming to.

Steichen and Arnold Genthe sometimes put vaseline on the camera lens to create that dewy aura but this was a sleazy 20th-century equivalent of the old-time iconographic halo, a bit of make-believe believed in by nobody but the concierge, coyly (even subliminally) suggesting a reality that our age has never dared confront except as a vague, slightly comic glow of factitious sentiment.

In my poems *you = one*. Usually. The language of a poem is so different from that of everyday discourse, even the liveliest, most spontaneous speech. Things that sound fine when you *say* them may not sound so fine in a poem. A lot of what makes poetic language work may be a memorableness and economy in the words that can be as striking by virtue of what they don't say as by reason of their so-called message, substance, matter, content. It matters less that I express something than that I put you in a space where you know you are in the presence of the inexpressible. The job of poetry is to empower its audience to actively communicate with the realities that can't be expressed.

When I was about four, my seven-year-old brother made a painting of a train on a dozen sheets of paper pasted together to form a continuous sheet maybe 15 feet long. He painted it bright red from end to end, save for the locomotive which was black. It had windows and doors and wheels and a caboose. The long red train went up on my brother's wall. From his bed he gazed up at it morning and evening, running halfway round the room just beneath the ceiling. It was my first experience of art on a wall. It was also my first experience of the green passion of envy. The red train became the bandwagon of life passing me by. I teased my brother to give it to me. He promised that he would. One day I went into his room, and the long red train had vanished. It had gotten dirty so they had thrown it out.

In 1985 I went to an art auction. There was a glass-fronted box with a picture of a train crossing a desert under a black sky, in bright red grease pencil on cream-colored paper. "Long Red Train," by Steven Lack. I bought the drawing; it's on my wall on Avenue A.

The point of view in this particular poem is looking back at what happened early in life, when consciousness took a step back and recognized itself, only to see a long red train go tearing by. Then

the point of view jumps to the present and future, in which the pursuit of lucidity, in other words, the beautiful, is bound to take the pursuer out of this world if not into another. Small stays, says Wang Wei in *Hiding the Universe*. The gases released by straw and apples are not antagonistic but complementary, green and red smells, wholesome and pleasant as can be, except when an excess of either or both becomes suddenly foul, nauseating, even lethal.

To make art is to reenact the nuptial flight of the bee, which is a leap into the invisible, and too bad for the bee. Darkness and light, separated by a rapidly advancing streak of redness. This was all there was in the way of "content," just a glimpse, a flash, not much in fact. To construct from such a glimpse a grand message with deep meaning is not my pigeon; yet style, any style, I can't get away from it, is that red flourish, the will.

In the 18th and early 19th century there was a fad for writing short poems on windowpanes with a diamond stylus. That is how I would like to write out "Out of the Dark" in a transcription embodying the transparency of a perfect idea.

In 1989 the book artist Gérard Charrière and I decided to collaborate on a small pamphlet. I chose "Out of the Dark." The result was a leporello or accordeon book consisting of a white band laid across a black background with a red streak hand-painted through the middle. The text is printed in English and French above and beneath the red streak. The translation came into being because Gérard, a native speaker of French, found the English-language text difficult to grasp, so I wrote it out for him in French the same evening we hit on the design:

EN SORTANT DES TENEBRES

étants ce que précisément  
"du pré lumineux  
entrevu dans le rêve"  
voulait dire  
dans ce champ à l'aube  
où tu vis une auréole  
sur la tête de quelqu'un d'autre  
le long train rouge  
passait à une vitesse déchirante.  
Poursuis la lucidité, cette belle chose.  
Tu risques de disparaître  
en sentant la paille et les pommes.



Photo Linda Hennessy

Simon Pettey is an English poet who has been based in Manhattan for the last ten years. He is the author of *Lyrical Poetry* (Archipeligo Books), *Conversations with Rudy Burkhardt* (Vehicle Editions) - an extensive interview with one of New York's most celebrated photographer/film-makers - and, most recently, *Twenty One Love* (Microbrigade).









## FOR A COWPER PAPERWEIGHT

Not that his writing isn't moving when  
it doesn't seem it should be,  
owing in part, at least, to the cloud of difficulty  
surrounding his difficult life,  
the pleasure of the low key  
and mastery of cadence – but that it is  
difficult to say why some of it  
should be as good as it is, the life  
of the writing apart from the life.  
The quiet assertions made,  
assertion becomes an extended lyric  
which, foregoing rapture (as it foregoes  
rhapsody) presents feeling in such  
a way that it ascends human heights,  
both detailing and depending on  
the level motion of the feeling tone,  
like a long headline broken up into  
individual letters and presented  
at random, one letter at a time  
throughout long and occasionally tedious  
narrative and description, the promise of sunshine  
throughout a long brightly overcast afternoon.  
(As though – almost – one had to compete  
with the weather and lose in order  
to feel anything, or as though mere utterance  
blended one with what was being uttered,  
in this case ground and sky, the nature  
and numerous pleasures of being between.)  
Nor do the exceptions in what prevails,  
“I was a stricken deer, that left the herd  
Long since; with many an arrow deep infixt  
My panting side was charg'd,” alter  
the weather of the context, while lending a sense  
of extra, unrepressed life to the whole;  
to a whole consisting of dullness  
as well as all the other neighboring kingdoms.

A sense that pleasure is often  
pleasure of recognition which doesn't depend  
on prior experience – though one has had that too.  
“Oh Winter, ruler of th'inverted year,  
Thy scatter'd hair with sleet like ashes fill'd,  
Thy breath congeal'd upon thy lips, thy cheeks  
Fring'd with a beard made white with other snows  
Than those of age, thy forehead wrapt in clouds,  
A leafless branch thy sceptre, and thy throne  
A sliding car, indebted to no wheels,  
But urg'd by storms along its slipp'ry way,  
I love thee, all unlovely as thou seem'st,  
And dreaded as thou art!”

Dear Martin,

As I hunted around for a poem to comment on, it became clearer and clearer to me that self-commentary pretty much contradicts the way I go about writing. Most of the time, at least when I *think* I'm writing well, I don't know quite what I'm after; I hope to surprise myself. That's what happened in most of my favorite poems. Sometimes I have a tone or kind of language, or even a vague shape or length, before I start, but these often get shifted around before the poem is done. Sometimes I have a wonderful title or idea — which of course isn't wonderful unless the poem is! A couple of examples: "Two Architectural Poems", "April", "Tinker to Evers to Randomness" (which title I *knew* I had to use) and a couple of others from *The Year of the Olive Oil* were inspired partly by an idea of making lyrical poems out of material and language that had no business being lyrical. I think of these as Technical Lyrics. "Prometheus at Penway" got its title from some art reviewing I was doing at the time, got going as a parody of a critical paper, and then somehow to my surprise became a lot more serious. I think I do, although it may not always be apparent, go on my nerve (O'Hara) and the speed of my perceptions (Olson), make quasi-musical decisions (Eliot), and think of music and meanings as one (David Schubert). I also like Stevens' remark that poems should resist the intelligence almost successfully. I like it most when I surprise myself.

So where does that leave the commentary you asked for, beyond the "3 brief sentences" you pointedly discouraged!

Let me try to say more than 3 sentences about a poem which, though not perhaps in my Top Ten, I still like. About 20 years ago I visited Keats' house at Hampstead Heath and brought back Keats paperweights (Keats paperweights!) for my friends Tony Towle and Paul Violi. About 10 years after that, it occurred to me to "make" a paperweight, of words rather than a portrait under convex glass, for the neglected poet William Cowper, whose "Task" I had been reading. I was inspired by the idea of making criticism — or more accurately, quasi-critical or critical-sounding talk — into a poem: not including critical remarks in a poem, but making the criticism equal the poem. I know I was a lot more interested in that *idea* than in writing about Cowper, though I was very inspired by "The Task"; whatever emerged

about him simply emerged. In fact, I originally tried to shape the poem into a circle, how's that for formalism, the one and only time I've tried anything like that.

I also wanted a longish Cowper quotation in the poem — a further mildly outrageous aspect: it was not only a poem and not a critical piece, it was *my* poem and the quote would take up nearly one quarter of it. (One of my secret pleasures was quoting him at his most rapt, after calling him non-rapturous and non-rhapsodic.) And I wanted the quote to come in without any warning at the very end, as though the rest was introduction, the explanation on the wall next to the monument (or paperweight), and the quote was the stuff of/for the paperweight itself. Or the other way around. This is all threatening to make the writing procedure sound far more serious than it is!

By the way, in accepting the poem a few years ago, the then editor of *The Paris Review* suggested the quote could be cut some! (I don't know, are poetry editors supposed to do that?) To me, the somewhat inappropriate length, not that it's so long, constituted a further breaking of the rules, one of the other things that made the poem a poem rather than an academic piece, which in some non-humorous way it was also parodying. As I write about it, this rule-breaking doesn't sound very daring. But I find that I produce things I like when I start out, at least, to do something uncalled for, even preposterous, if only to me.

Best,

Charles  
9/90



Ian McMillan was born in 1956 and has been a freelance writer and performer since 1981. He has published several collections of poetry, including *Selected Poems* (Carcanet), *Unselected Poems* (Wide Skirt), and *More Poems Please, Waiter, and Quickly* (Sow's Ear Press). The most recent is *A Chin?* from Wide Skirt. As well as poetry, Ian writes childrens' stories, radio features and comedy, book reviews, and album reviews for Q magazine.

IAN  
MCMILLAN



TITLE (Northumberland June 11th/12th 1987)

Just notes really.  
Nothing like real writing.  
The boys ran into the trees.  
Profit is unpaid wages.  
The girls cried.  
Redraft the sand.  
What is dad doing with  
his shadow on the beach?  
There is a new sign,  
a footpath sign.  
Brightened, bud.  
Redraft me. I am  
Elizabeth holds up a cassette, spools  
it out. "I'm bandaging  
the moon."  
Crowds of old people.  
Polling station.  
Lasbury village.  
A Conservative landrover  
with a flag flying  
roaring through the streets  
of Alnwick.  
you are weeping Robin Day.  
weeping Peter Snow  
And yes you are  
Three a.m. The foghorn.  
The day, redrafting itself.  
The flag.  
How do you paint te  
rror?

I've chosen this poem for all sorts of reasons, both personal and poetic, although in my case I don't think you can separate the two. It's specifically about me, slumped in a chair in a holiday cottage in Northumberland, watching the 1987 election results on a huge black and white telly.

The poem also represents a change of direction. I'd been writing certain kinds of poems, on and off, since 1984 and the pit strike. Poems like "Pushing, May 1984" and "Tall In The Saddle"... poems that are as near as I'll ever get to realism. At the time they felt like the proper response to make, and for the first time ever I felt like the poet had a place in the community. In May 1987 my *Selected Poems* came out from Carcanet, ending with the mainly political poems from my 1986 Smith/Doorstop booklet *Tall In the Saddle*. I liked the poems, but somehow I felt that I had to begin to make a new response. I was striving too hard to be understood, and I didn't write poems primarily to be understood. I did live gigs and reviews and workshops and radio work in the cause of understanding... let the poems stand up for themselves.

Although I knew I wanted to do something new, I wasn't really sure what it was. I glanced at my early poems in the *Selected*, and I knew that I didn't want to return to the lush, dense pastures of the poems in *The Changing Problem*. Somehow the new poems had to reflect all those years of Thatcherism and waste and horror... they had to be as political, as rooted in the community, without being crowd-pleasing for the sake of it.

I always make notes, all the time, but in the summer of 1987 I became Lord Notetaker. I filled book after book. We went on holiday to Northumberland and I took notes. One of my daughters pulled the tape out of a Postman Pat cassette, and when I asked her what she was doing she said "I'm bandaging the moon." I wrote it down. I made shadow pictures on the hot sand; the girls asked what I was doing. I wrote their question down. I heard someone on the radio say "Profit is unpaid wages." I wrote it down. Later, I thought, I'll shape these notes into a long poem about the Summer of 1987. I was in some kind of hyper-receptive state. Everything assumed significance.

For reasons of lightheadedness and naivety I was convinced that Labour were going to win the election. I sat stupefied in front of

the telly and watched the Tories slaughter them. I stayed up until 4 a.m. hoping for a late surge from the West Country. The next day, in pouring rain, we visited a tractor museum. I didn't take a single note. I remembered something that someone had once said to me in a workshop: "Your poems are just notes. Not real writing."

So, in a state of cussedness, I decided to make a poem that was just notes ... I looked through my notebooks. I selected, but wildly. I wanted to avoid significance, symbolism. I wanted the poem to be disjointed, angry, incoherent. Some of the notes in the books were upside down. I wrote them in upside down, taking great pleasure in turning the paper over in the typewriter. I suppose I couldn't do it now I've got a word processor. I worked on it. I tried to remove a sense of narrative. I tried to make it like one of those Kurt Schwitters things made out of bus tickets.

I showed it to people. Nobody liked it. Perversely, that pleased me. At the same time, another idea was forming in my head, an idea that eventually became the sequence "The er Barnsley Seascapes", then other ideas came, then others. Somehow this strange poem had released lots of ideas. I sent it to Geoff Hattersley at "The Wide Skirt" and he said he liked it, and he published it, and then it ended up in my pamphlet *More Poems Please, Waiter, and Quickly*. I'm still pleased with it. It seems to break all the rules I set myself, all the things I thought I ought to do to make poems, all the things I tell people in workshops that they ought to do. It makes me realise that, as far as I'm concerned, poets should set themselves limits and then break the limits.

Since 1987 I've not written that many poems. I've written a few, and I'm fairly pleased with them. It seems to me though, writing this in July 1990, that I'm somewhere near another stalemate and consequently another breakthrough. God knows what it will be and whether I'll spot it when it comes.

I've taken lots of notes today. Lots.



Mark Hillringhouse was the Poetry Director for the William Carlos Williams Center for the Arts in Rutherford, New Jersey, and has worked as an editor for both the New York Arts Journal and the American Book Review in New York City. His poems, interviews and articles have appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *Sequoia*, *The Little Magazine*, *American Poetry*, *The New Jersey Monthly*, *The New York Times*, *Columbia*, *The Manhattan Poetry Review*, and others, most recently and most notably, of course, *Joe Soap's Canoe*. He was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 1987, and has won Fellowships in Poetry from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts in 1985 and 1989. He teaches Creative Writing at Passaic County College, and has been an invaluable associate editor of the *Canoe* for the last couple of years (probably the best paid job he's ever had).



## ONE DAY STANDS OUT

How easy it is  
to be fooled by the life  
in the photograph:  
wind frozen hair, sun  
in your eyes, teeth  
as white as smiles  
cloud more permanent  
than either sadness or misgiving.  
You learn nothing from fallen angels  
you only know the continual  
good life of tan trousers,  
the clear liquid image  
of water under a blue sky.  
You are never alone.  
Your arm is around the shoulder  
of a friend you left years ago,  
raising the dead fish  
dripping with blood, heads  
almost touching.  
You are never out of music,  
neither starving or thirsty.  
As you stand on a wave,  
the brim of your hat is slanted  
the way the rest of the afternoon  
tilts under the horizon  
on the longest day of the year.

This poem came about as a result of staring at an old fishing picture I had on my desk. I began thinking about who I was and where I was as I was meditating on that photo. I was also thinking about who I was and where I was when the photograph was taken and what had happened to the guy standing next to me. We had been close friends. Now we are enemies. But in the photograph we are locked in eternal friendship.

Why I remember it so well, and why I want to keep remembering this moment is part of the poem. It was a happy moment occurring in the middle of a bad time for me after a then recent divorce from my first wife. On this particular day, I snuck off from my job at the local library in Holland, Michigan and went fishing. It was June 21st, the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, there would be daylight until almost 10 o'clock in the evening.

I had everything I needed on board. My best friend was with me. I had plenty of food, beer, music, plenty of sunlight and blue sky ahead of me for hours and hours. I could jump off the boat and swim. The water was warm. The waves were gentle. There was a slight breeze. Fishing generally puts me in a good mood, but on this particular day, I hadn't been out fishing in years and was glad to be doing something that I loved to do. It got me into the landscape as part of the outdoors and got me into my head where I could think, meditate, ponder, center my thoughts and feel connected to the horizon curving out from under me. That's the zen part of fishing. I was exactly where I wanted to be, doing exactly what I wanted to be doing. How many of us can say that at any given moment. I usually can't.

That's when the photo was taken, at the high point of my day. I had just caught the largest lake trout of my career, a twenty-pounder, that took a half hour to reel in. I raised the fish, put my arm around my friend's shoulder, smiled and click! The moment was captured.

Twelve years later I can barely remember what my ex-wife looks like and the sound of her voice has faded, her features have blurred. Memory is selective, protective at times, and plays tricks on the imagination.

There is a sadness, too, surrounding this moment. Besides the



broken marriage, I had a falling out with my friend some weeks later. We have never seen nor have talked to each other since.

I pretty much accurately describe what's in the picture. The boat is cresting a wave. I'm in tan work pants wearing a white t-shirt and a green baseball cap. The setting sun can be seen reflected in my mirror sunglasses. I'm holding the fish and there's blood dripping down its side. So the poem took its cues from what I could see. What I couldn't see, but felt at the time, gave me the other parts of the poem. My ex-wife becomes the fallen angel.

I was also intrigued by the idea of the corresponding senses of time at work in this poem; although this gets philosophical, it was this sense of wonder about time that drew me in. My friend in the photo is always my friend, yet he is no longer my friend. The photo exists in the present but represents the past. My former friend is still alive somewhere (I think) and the fish were eaten. Who knows where that ended up. The lake is still there, but that day is gone and now only exists in my imagination. I still have the sunglasses, but my hat is lost, the pants wore out, the t-shirt was thrown away.

All I have left is the photograph and the poem.



Robert Hershon has written nine books of poems, the most recent being *How To Ride On The Woodlawn Express* (Sun). He has won a number of awards, including two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife, the poet Donna Brook, and is editor of Hanging Loose Press, publishers of poetry and fiction. He is also executive director of the Print Center, a non-profit arts printing organisation.



## ON THE CEILINGS OF THESE OLD THEATERS, THE CLOUDS MOVED AND THE STARS STAYED STILL

I was slicing tragic carrots on the Jackson Pollock dinette table. She floated by hanging from her Walkwoman La-La Machine, a sweet moronic crooning just under the breath. And what's on TV, I said. She knew, she always knew. More reruns, she said, highlights and great themes from the Berryman-Plath title bout and a penetrating drama based on the final days of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Say, why does everyone, I queried, get such a boot out of watching F. Scott drink himself to death? Oh it's a comfort, she said, so corroborative, it restores a sense of proportion and regularity. Then she had to change tapes.

But wasn't I saying that to Gary Cooper at the party just the other night, me talking and talking and Cooper just standing there embodying virtues not saying anything but not going anywhere either. So I talked and told him my pet theories and my shy desires I told him the sex secrets of my Aunt Dot and the dream about the chickens and I sang the songs of my childhood and a few songs from his childhood and Gary Cooper saying nothing and I'm doing a little time step now to the tune of Hey being serious that's pretty funny, Hey being funny that's pretty serious and Gary Cooper chews a silent potato chip very slowly and the hot news begins to flow: Gary Cooper is (no I can't) Gary Cooper is a (say it, I can't) You can, you can, sings her angel voice - Walkwoman high on the starry ceiling of the Loew's Paradise - you can: Gary Cooper is an asshole, yes Gary Cooper is a right-wing jackass horse-fucking monosyllabic millionaire cactus-up-the-ass asshole and I grab him by the lapels of his leather tuxedo Fuck off Gary Cooper stay out of our onion dip you bastard Stay off our dance floor and don't stir our swizzle sticks and don't crush our beer cans and don't shake our hands sincerely and don't stop for your big hat Fuck off fuck off fuck off Gary Cooper

This poem is part of a book manuscript called *Good Wine With God Knows Who* (to be published God knows when by God knows who) where it sits among seven or eight other poems that are not exactly about the movies but use some of the paraphernalia of movies — images, titles, dialogue, but especially actors — toward more personal ends. The trick is to take advantage of the free ride without falling off at the curves and drowning in a sea of nostalgia.

I was in San Francisco last summer and the television in my tiny North Beach hotel room had a movie channel called American Movie Classics and I didn't watch a single certified classic but I watched hours of B movies from the Thirties starring Lyle Talbot or Leon Ames or Sally Eilers. I like the way they talk — fast, they've only got 75 minutes — and that the pictures look as though they were shot in my parents' first apartment.

A few months earlier, I read some of these movie poems in Boston, where nearly everyone is nineteen years old, and two worried-looking students came up afterwards to tell me they didn't know who Laird Cregar and all those people were. I told them it was okay, that sometimes it was even the point, and that, in any case, there wasn't going to be a quiz and they looked like well, who needs it then. I also read the poems at a New York high school for apprentice geniuses and was surprised to learn that virtually none of them had ever heard of Gary Cooper. I rather like it that, finally, Gary Cooper and, say, Joe Kirkwood come to the same end, although that probably doesn't help this poem much.

Cooper is, of course, the embodiment of the cowboy virtues. It is a good thing to be inexpressive and inarticulate. It is good to be a loner. It is good to be a misogynist. It is good to live a mindless existence up to your hips in mud and cowshit. It is okay to shoot people if you are sincere. This all still sounds pretty good to much of the American public and has a great deal to do with why we are governed by men who look like cowboys, think like fenceposts and have the moral courage of cattle.

But I'm just working one little corner of the ranch. The fear of art, the hatred of artists. Ideally, an artist will destroy himself at an early age, thus corroborating that art is an evil and dangerous business and people are prudent to keep it out of

their lives. Failing that, art may be ignored, made profitable, persecuted, ridiculed – but mostly ignored. The worst of it, the most pompous and boring and self-important stuff, is adapted for classroom use. But this is all in the poem, I hope.

I like the way the poem sounds – a lot of door-slamming T's – and I like the way it moves right along, ending in a rush. I like to read it very fast and I'm told I get quite red in the face. It crossed my mind that maybe I was being unfair to the actual, historical Gary Cooper, but then I remembered reading some of his lunatic friendly testimony before the Senate Internal Security Committee in the Fifties. If I can ever find the quote, the next time you see *'High Noon'*, you'll be pulling for the guys who get off the train.



Geoff Hattersley was born in Swinton, near Rotherham, in 1956. He started writing in 1983 and has published three books: *Shadows On The Beach* (Red Sharks Press), *Port of Entry* (Littlewood) and *Split Shift* (Smith/Doorstop). He now lives in Huddersfield with wife Jeanette and cat Cat, making "a sort of living" running writers' workshops for the local council and doing readings. He is founding editor and publisher of *The Wide Skirt* magazine and press.



## ALMOST UNBELIEVABLY

Sad, to be sitting here still  
smoking too many cigarettes,  
watching this cold pancake of a film  
for the third time in one life,

to consider my mother,  
patiently sitting through Western  
after Western with my father  
because she *liked the scenery*.

History repeats itself, after  
a fashion, and these also  
are facts: the diaries we've kept  
would make appropriate palimpsests,

our stamp collection  
ranks among the dull.  
When the toast caught fire  
last night and the grill,

it was the most exciting event  
here for at least three years.

I didn't find it easy to single out one piece that gives a good insight into my poetry and the 'process', perhaps because I always have a number of poems 'on the go' at once, rather than writing one thing and then moving on to another. I also feel my work is intended as a large picture, in which all the individual pieces are single brush strokes, interacting with and adding to each other. I finally settled for "Almost Unbelievably" simply because it's a personal favourite and because I know a handful of other people who've told me they like it.

I try to write relaxed-sounding work that takes its impulse from the everyday, and you can't get more everyday than a couple watching the telly with their feet up. It's a situation readers can immediately understand, rooted in a world they're familiar with. I don't think the poem need be restricted by the situation. It can make a broader comment too. I'd hope that "Almost Unbelievably" is commenting on modern western tedium/inactivity and on women's role in society, among other things. But I hate poems that carry a big stick and bludgeon you with it, though I guess I've been guilty of writing a few such things. If I can, I prefer to make the comments ironically, holding back as much as possible, letting the statements carry their own impact rather than trying to explain everything to the reader. I guess I'm saying that I try to be engaging and entertaining, though it's equally important to try not to be *merely* engaging and entertaining. The surface lightness doesn't stop it being a serious poem. I think it can sometimes prove more telling to deliver a serious message under the camouflage of a light touch. I also think poetry, like life, benefits from a sense of humour, and I try not to make the mistake of confounding seriousness with solemnity. The humour should have an edge to it though, as I've tried to give the last four lines of this poem. I'm hoping to leave the reader feeling both amused and disturbed. I've found it's not too hard to do one or the other, but achieving both at once is a tougher challenge. I wouldn't claim I was successful in this poem, but it's what I was aiming at.

As with a lot of my poems, it happened that I used 'I'. As someone else once said though, 'I is another', or can be if you want. Although I *have* written a number of purely personal pieces,

I try not to go through life with a bucket over my head and many

of my first-person narrators are only really meant to be me, Geoff Hattersley, in as much as a method actor playing a part becomes that part. This may seem an obvious thing to point out, but some people who've reviewed my work in the past seem to assume any poem that uses 'I' is autobiographical. Novelists and short-story writers don't have this problem, so why should poets? The truth is, I like to take on roles within my poems, and in "Almost Unbelievably" I'm playing the bored husband. This is not my own marriage, except perhaps occasionally. I was thinking more of so many marriages I've observed, specifically Northern working-class ones, where the only social contact between the couples seems to be confined to sitting side by side in virtual silence watching television programmes, usually of the husband's choice. I decided also to make the narrator pretty articulate because many Northern working-class people are and yet they're rarely portrayed that way.

I realise I've said nothing about how I actually wrote the poem, how I came to choose this subject. Alas, I very rarely set out to write a poem 'about' anything. My usual way into a poem is to free-write for a while and see what my subconscious throws up. There's always something I can try to expand on. It can be a quite substantial chunk of writing or it can be as little as a single line or phrase. Either way, the second stage takes a lot of time and thought, so I'm not describing automatism. Relying too much on the subconscious has its disadvantages, including the possibility of unintelligibility. Relying too much on the conscious causes problems too, in that the poem can end up sounding little more than a word-game, a sort of poetic equivalent of a crossword puzzle. I think most successful poems start in the subconscious, but the end product should be the result of the subconscious working *with* the conscious in an odd balance. It's hard to strike the right balance, but if you can, you must be coming pretty close to how people actually speak, think and feel, which is perhaps what a poem should try to capture. The subconscious provides the guts of the poem, and the conscious then comes into the picture by developing the lines of thought and maybe deciding to move the poem along slightly different lines, in giving the raw material shape and form, in tightening up the language and discarding unnecessary baggage. Working from the subconscious in this way is maybe why a lot of my poems aren't strictly autobiographical, even if they appear to

be. Obviously, my own life and experiences must surface to some extent, but it's just as likely that what arises is a situation I've observed, or a story I've heard, or a book, or a film or record, or a dream or fantasy, or a conversation overheard on a bus or in a pub - anything can and does find its way in.

I've said nothing about rhythm, rhyme, lack of rhyme, line-breaks, stanza-breaks, punctuation, metre, that sort of thing. These are all important tools available to a poet. I choose the ones I think I need for the job and decide how to use them. They're pretty flexible tools, thankfully. The most important tool is language. I generally try to keep the language in my poems simple and use the correct words rather than complex ones, though if the correct word turns out to be 'palimpsests' then I'll use it. I've also said nothing about form, though this isn't because I consider it unimportant to poetry. As someone else once said, writing poetry without it is like playing tennis with the net down. I tend to write in short statements, linking them up as I go along, and the forms which most accommodate this approach are couplets or short-lined quatrains, which I use a lot.



Connie Deanovich lives in DeKalb, which is in Illinois. Until recently she lived in Chicago, where she was founding editor of the excellent *BCity* magazine. She has won several awards for her poetry, and her work was included in *Under 35: The New Generation of American Poets* (Anchor/Doubleday 1989). A collection entitled *Ballerina Criminology* is recently published by The Pink Dog Press, and one reviewer has already noted that Connie throughout "surprises and delights with her own special brand of surreal zing."

CONNIE DEANOVICH



## PURE VALENTINE

In the orchestra it matters. Beards  
become concerns as if it were a circus with dollars to be made  
where everyone wakes up at sunrise,  
gets cold with barn water, so their singing voices drop down  
for a song sung importantly  
to a low flower.

This is never done in a hamlet where  
mothers come home on stretchers after a nightshift on the  
switchboard.

Awake, all voices sound big,  
the diapason clear as in the best city's best auditorium  
where all audiences are royal  
or feel so feeling muted velvet on their cold necks.

Next to a closet kneels a boy  
wanting to be inside, light a candle to undress Barbie dolls by,  
and to read how Xygon, the Ibu prince, got his power, and  
can he have some? His  
brains creak now, take him to a cold tower,  
acquit him from piano lessons,  
nimble fingers better used on snaps  
and strings, plastic pumps and tiny teacups.

Later, he is protected by geese on the soft edge of a windy lake.  
It matters here that there be wind to cool his hot hair,  
to teach him to use it for trumpet time, to slurp up air  
like good dope smoke savored, then release something better,  
bluer.

The truth is only practiced, not perfected to flaw  
until you wear off-white and love a man named Devotion,  
build a cool kitchen with free cats circumventing  
like a seam on a purple yellow sari you watched spinning  
as it stood on a bus.

In Rome how lost you'd be in antiquity with new people  
reading newspapers upside down  
and no genetics to weave a blonde for you to wink at.

It would have to be a boat  
to justify your coming back here.

I try to establish an order when I write, and I often do it by writing patterns into my poetry. In "Pure Valentine," for instance, I work with several patterns, the principle one being made from the word *cold*, which implies the purity of a mountain spring: cold with barn water, cold necks, cold tower, wind to cool his hot hair, a cool kitchen. Even the word *boat* at the end implies cold, because the boat I had in mind was an ocean vessel traveling across the cold Atlantic waters.

The pattern is the substructure for the construction of the poem, and the construction is the meaning of the poem. I say this because it is not important for me to write in order to express myself. If that ever happens, it's almost always an accident. Instead, I try to write something different into the world, to create some place or someone new into existence. Mainly because I get visually bored a lot.

In "Pure Valentine," imagery acts as movement. The reader can come with me to hear and see an orchestra in an auditorium, to a circus, a closet, a tower, a lake, a windy bus. These places are a part of pattern building. For example, the bus the sari spins on in stanza five comes back in the short sixth stanza by implication. Implication, like imagery, moves the poem's world forward.

In stanza six, someone in Rome is watching strangers reading newspapers upside down. I see this scene as happening on a bus, naturally enough. The upside-down part is shorthand for saying the person watching cannot read Italian. I like this upside-down business because it implies frustration, loneliness, adventure, and fresh experience, all traits of a love affair dampened by separation. The person watching the readers is no one, but he's also the addressee of the titular valentine. Like a fantasy, he comes and he goes. He's a part of the pattern of people in the poem: the circus people, the mothers, the boy, Xygon, a sketched-in boy grown into a trumpet player later in life, hippy lovers who keep cats, an East Indian woman, and the personified valentine visiting Rome.

I think valentines are dull — the cards and the people. The idea of a person as a valentine makes me gag. I could not, therefore, focus on one. He is a part of a pattern made of people. This deals with the word *valentine*, but not the word *pure*. Although it's rare for me to recall what reading correlates with what writing,

I remember that this poem was written when I was reading Berrigan and Ashbery at the same time.

The idea for a valentine poem comes from Berrigan's "Valentine," which begins "I have been here too many times before/ you & now it's time to go/ crazy again will that make you like me?" "Valentine" compacts into twelve lines a lot of sad self-expression, and it has the air of an antique poem because of the choppieness of the language and the syntactical inversion in lines such as the wonderful endline "again unkempt in my passion at that May I?"

My poem, "Pure Valentine" is called "Pure" because I thought a real valentine would never speak words of love and longing, that the valentine (card or person) would only imply these things. Taking out the raw expression of love and longing I felt I was purifying the idea of a valentine. The emotions should be made to fit, not dominate, the lover's life. Further, the world of the poem is large, made intentionally so to fit the implication of a large love. Love doesn't work for me in isolation. Also, love is not sufficient by itself. It has to be part of a whole life, and life has to be a part of the whole world, mentally. It's like this in the poem as well.

The world Berrigan's poem implies through language is antique. I borrowed that idea in spots. My imagery, like an antique world, is not readily understood. My unified bow to a bygone era comes in stanza two, however, with the rich audience feeling velvet on their cold necks, as the women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did because of the off-the-shoulder gowns they wore. This image is one that is traditionally romantic — a costumed aristocrat's night at the theater, probably opera or orchestra with chorus. Music is also a traditional element of romance, and the pattern of music can be found in the singing circus, the diapason of the singers in the auditorium, piano lessons which turn to trumpet playing as the boy grows, and in the opening line's orchestra: "In the orchestra it matters."

The opening line is an imitation of the first line of Ashbery's "Pyrography" (in *Houseboat Days*): "Out here on Cottage Grove it matters." I like to use Ashbery from time to time as a model because his poems are invariably fresh worlds. I don't believe he



cares if all of the poem's meaning, if there, is readily discernible to the reader. I think his concern, like mine, is in the poem's construction, its patterns.

To tie the cold pattern up, at the end of the poem the implied valentine will take a boat across the cold Atlantic back to his lover because a boat is a more romantic transport than a jet. The imagery and patterns in "Pure Valentine" of coldness, people, and music contains the poem's meaning that love must simply be there, integrated with everything else, not really spoken of outright because valentines are very square and useless.

In this poem, as in much of my work, I write in an effort to integrate myself with people and places of the past, not necessarily readers of the future. The boat, like the circus and the Ibu prince Xygon, is a nod to the past. Valentines are a part of the past too, but I had to manipulate mine to fit into a purer, artificial, more present world.

August 9, 1990



Photo: Mike Conway

Simon Armitage was born in 1963 in Huddersfield, and grew up in West Yorkshire. He works as a probation officer in Oldham, and lives in Marsden, near Huddersfield. He won an Eric Gregory Award for his poetry in 1988. He published three collections, *Human Geography* (Smith/Doorstop), *The Distance Between Stars* (Wide Skirt) and *The Walking Horses* (Slow Dancer) before Bloodaxe published his first full-length book, *Zoom!* in 1989.



## THE GUILTY

They look us dead in the eye  
and deny it. They turn out their pockets -  
nothing but biscuits and the shreds of a tissue.  
They will undress their children this very minute.

Suggest their names, they are astonished.  
Push them, they remember dates and places. Push them  
further, they come up with blood groups, postcodes,  
distinguishing features. Their curtains twitch

when we call round in the car, or we hear them  
leaving like rabbits through the back door.

They take on habits, the guilty; throw us  
from the scent. Analogue watches worn to the inside,  
the buttering of bread before the slicing.  
They let out their belts, one notch,

before eating; salt their supper before they taste it  
and flush it twice if they flush the toilet.  
Shake their hands, their hands are like putty.  
Their children agree with them, absolutely.

So when shall we birch these people?  
And how do we know these things?

I could call the speaker in this poem Mr X, for I believe him to be male and not at all inclined to give his proper name in a public setting. In any case, anonymity suits his purpose, and such a title would bring a smile to his face in more private moments. I imagine he works for some authority, some agency in which investigation of a certain type is part of his everyday business. Through his experience he has arrived at a number of indisputable conclusions.

The guilty. These are his customers, his clients, and he would begin with something of a paradox: they look him dead in the eye and deny things. It is a technique developed over thousands of years, probably going right back to the Bible, and investigators made of sterner stuff than himself have fallen for it. To Mr X, now in his umpteenth year of service, anyone who tries it might just as well put their head in the noose and tighten it. As for the phrase "Look me straight in the face and tell me this isn't true..." - balls.

And who would put a biscuit in his or her pocket? It is a sign of breeding, learned behaviour, a pointer to a childhood of deceit where even the least valuable object had to be stolen and concealed. "If it isn't nailed down..." The biscuit was probably wrapped in the tissue.

For "we will undress our children this very minute" read "It's a fair cop, Mr X." He sees it this way: to do so would be to play them at their own game, therefore he will decline the offer, thank you all the same. There would be no burns, no bruises, no bites; the guilty would be vindicated and he would be stood there like a jackass surrounded by naked but unblemished children. No, the evidence lies elsewhere. The bruises have faded.

More significantly (and if Mr X were a greedy man he would have patented this point) the guilty are generally a wretched and miserable bunch who will crumble under the slightest pressure. Push them, they will split on their neighbours. Push them further, they will squeal like piglets on their brothers and sisters. Honour amongst thieves? Fiddlesticks.

In the course of his duties, Mr X makes home visits, door to door enquiries, and before he rings the bell he hears a restlessness,

a scurrying. It is the moving of boxes, the swapping of bedrooms, the synchronising of stories. If Mr X were a dreamer (which he most certainly isn't) he would wish he had a pound coin for every time this has been the case. Eventually he enters a house where the dust has not settled, a house ordinary in almost every way but for the smell of guilt, which to Mr X is as lingering as Blue Stilton. Things like this cannot be taught. Mr X has to hand it to himself; there is no substitute for experience.

Then come the details: the watch, the bread, the belt, those bits and pieces whose total significance is greater than the sum of its parts. As for the toilet, three explanations: 1) One flush was neither loud nor long enough to cover the sound of another activity. 2) Something would not flush away the first time. 3) Listen, Mr X, we are clean and innocent people who flush our toilet, and here, for the second time, is the sound of the toilet flushing. Ironically, Mr X thinks to himself, guilt is as indelible as a tattoo, and will not be so easily washed away or disposed of.

Finally, the handshake. Naturally, Mr X would sooner dive head first down an elevator shaft than engage with the guilty in this act of mutual respect, but after all, this is work. They have the flesh of dead people, and the moment he plants his own firm grip in their plasticine palms it is as good as a handcuff. As for the children, no matter how small or how sweet they will corroborate the most implausible story. Comical, really. As thick as thieves, Mr X believes the saying goes.

Obviously Mr X is a great believer in corporal punishment, and probably capital punishment and national service if it comes to that. How does he know so much about the guilty? Well, call it gut reaction, call it intuition or put it down to experience. He just does.

Of course, we could argue with him. Tell him he sees what he sets out to find. Ask him to retire. Mention that it takes one to know one, or even lecture him about living in glass houses and throwing the first stone. We could check his pockets, quiz his children, push him, push him further, watch his table manners and his other habits (I heard he pisses in the bathwater) and read him his rights as we shake him by the hand. And would he dare look us dead in the eye? Would he deny it?



Photo: Mark Haringhouse

James Schuyler was born in Chicago in 1923. He was formerly on the staff of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and was an associate editor of *Art News*.

His books include *Freely Espousing* (1969), *The Crystal Lithium* (1972), *The Morning of the Poem* (for which he won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1981) and *A Few Days* (1985). His *Selected Poems* was published in 1988 by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York. He also published three novels, *Alfred and Guinevere* (1958), *A Nest of Ninnies* (with John Ashbery, in 1976) and *What's for Dinner?* (1978).

In 1983 James Schuyler was elected a Fellow of the Academy of American Poets. He died in New York City on 12th April, 1991.



JAMES SCHUYLER: An Interview by Mark Hillringhouse

*This interview was first published in "The American Poetry Review", March 1985.*

Mark Hillringhouse: You equal Chekhov and Elizabeth Bishop in the way you handle detail, in the way you incorporate so many details from your personal life into your poetry.

James Schuyler: I've always liked looking at things and I'm very attracted to writers who share that infatuation with things, such as Elizabeth Bishop and D.H. Lawrence (in his poetry) or Walt Whitman and Boris Pasternak.

MH: Would you compare yourself to Frank O'Hara?

JS: I don't think I write like he did. Well, I think Frank's poems are often more like diary entries than mine are.

MH: You seem amazed by the small wonders, so many improbable miracles that the world contains, like that racoon you write about in your longest poem, "The Morning of the Poem." How do you feel about the waking day, how do you handle it?

JS: That's a hell of a big question [laughs]. I spend a great deal of the day reading, that's how I handle it. At night I watch TV. What I write about a great deal of the time is something immediate that I see, or something I think about that I've seen.

MH: Nature?

JS: I miss nature living in the city. I lived in South Hampton, Long Island for twelve years and I liked that very much. I get bored looking at that building across the street.

MH: Where did you grow up?

JS: I was born in Chicago where my father was a newspaper man. We lived in a little town called Downer's Grove just outside the city. When I was very small we moved to Washington D.C. and we lived there for a while and in Chevy Chase, Maryland. When I was twelve we moved to Buffalo, New York. Two years later we settled in a little town just outside of it called East Aurora, where my brother and his family still live. My parents were divorced when I was quite young. I was very withdrawn. My homelife was very chaotic. I really didn't fit in and wasn't very happy growing up in East Aurora. No, it was more that I didn't fit in with the crowd in high school who were very athletic-

oriented. There wasn't anyone like me who liked to read books and who was interested in art. I had a couple of buddies, but my best friend lived in Buffalo and we didn't see each other very often. He's in my poem "The Morning of the Poem" - a guy named Bernie.

MH: What's your religious background?

JS: Well, I was baptized a Presbyterian. My mother and stepfather became Christian Scientists which disgusted me very much.

MH: The name Schuyler goes back to Colonial history.

JS: Yes it does. A big New York State family. I am related to General Phillip Schuyler and to the travel writer and translator Eugene Schuyler. He was the first person to translate Turgenev into English. General Schuyler served in the Continental Army. I believe he fucked up the battle of Saratoga. Instead of being court-martialed he was allowed to resign because of his high family background. He was Alexander Hamilton's father-in-law. The family came here from Holland very early in the seventeenth century. There are two branches, one up near Albany and the other in New Jersey. There's even a Schuylerville in Upstate New York. Mine is the New York family.

MH: What was your mother's family name?

JS: Connor. She was born on a farm in Minnesota. She's half-English, half-Irish, that's why I have this Irish mug [laughing].

MH: Where did you go to college?

JS: I got a scholarship and went to a college called Bethany in West Virginia which is associated with the Disciples of Christ with which I had nothing to do. It was a Protestant denomination. After two years I left to go into the Navy during the war. I served on a destroyer in the North Atlantic doing convoy duty. I guess I was nineteen when I went in.

MH: You got out when the war ended?

JS: No, but I'd rather not talk about it [laughing].

MH: Any teachers or professors you can remember?

JS: Yes. I was very influenced by my English professor, Dr. Florence Hoaglund, who was a grand woman.

MH: English was your major?

JS: Yes, but in high school my major was History. What I did mostly in college was to play bridge which I learned to play when I joined a fraternity. And that was how I liked to spend my time. In high school there was one English teacher who also directed the school paper for which I wrote. He introduced me to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, though he said that I was too young to read it. I went ahead and read it anyway.

MH: What were you planning on becoming?

JS: I very much wanted to be an architect. My stepfather, who was in construction and who wanted to be an architect himself, convinced me that I couldn't draw, ergo I couldn't become an architect. While I was in high school I switched my ambition to writing.

MH: What did your mother do? Did she have any ambitions?

JS: My mother used to write poetry, though it wasn't very good. It was religious poetry.

MH: Did she show it to you?

JS: Yes. But my stepfather used to punish me by not letting me have a library card though I went ahead and had a library card anyway. I used to have to smuggle books into the house under my coat.

MH: That's a very strange punishment.

JS: He was a sort of hunting and fishing man and that's what he wanted me to be. Which is what my brother became when he grew up. When he was mad at me he'd say, "That's what comes of grandmother taking you to museums." Which is what she used to do [chuckling] when we lived in Washington.

MH: Maybe you got your love of nature from your stepfather.

JS: I think I got more from my grandmother Connor who was a real nature lover. She used to take me out and tell me all the names of wild flowers.

MH: You constantly mention different flowers in your poems.

JS: Well, I like them and I miss them. At home I was a gardening slave. I had to weed my ass off.

MH: You mentioned *Ulysses*, I was wondering if you read any other books that turned you on as a youngster?

JS: What decided me to become a writer was one day in my tent

in the yard in the back of the house I was reading Logan Percele Smith's *Unforgotten Years*, his autobiography. He described how Whitman used to come to his family's house in Camden and what a wonderful person he was, and the idea came to Smith that he might become a writer when he grew up - and I looked up and the whole yard started to shimmer, and I thought, "I'm going to be a writer," which I never really thought of before.

MH: How old were you?

JS: I was somewhere in my teens in high school.

MH: Were you reading any poets back then?

JS: Yes. I used to read whatever anthologies were available in a small town like East Aurora - Louis Untermeyer, Sheldon Robbins, etc. We had a very good Mark Van Doren, World Poetry in Translation.

MH: Who were the poets you were aware of then?

JS: Oh, Edna St. Vincent Millay [laughing], Sara Teasdale, Frost, etc.

MH: Did you enjoy Frost?

JS: I think I liked Frost more than I do now, although he is perfectly all right.

MH: Who were the first major poets you came into contact with when you were young?

JS: When I was quite young and living in New York City in the forties I met W.H. Auden of whom I became a very close friend. I typed up a lot of his poems for manuscripts. I used to think if this is what poetry is like I'll never be able to write it.

MH: Did you show him your own poems, or were you not writing poetry at that time?

JS: I didn't start writing poetry until I was twenty-five or twenty-six. My ambition before that had been to write short stories for *The New Yorker*. I have had poems in *The New Yorker* but no short stories. It used to be good when John Cheever and John O'Hara were writing stories for them.

MH: So you started writing poems later than usual?

JS: Well, I came to New York after the Navy and worked for the Voice Of America. Then in 1947 I went to Italy for two years and

then I came back and lived in New York again, then I went to Italy a second time in the mid-fifties.

MH: For the Voice Of America?

JS: No, no, by my own hook. I inherited a farm in Arkansas from my paternal grandmother which I sold and I went to live in Italy on that. I just wanted to goof off. And be somewhere beautiful. I had a lovely apartment in Florence.

MH: How did you meet Auden?

JS: Well, his muse was a young man named Chester Kallmann, who's dead now, and I met Chester and had become a very close friend of his. Meanwhile, Auden had been teaching in Michigan and came back to New York, and that's when I met him. I typed the manuscript for his book *Nones* and I also typed his translation of Jean Cocteau's "Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde."

MH: What did you do in Italy?

JS: I really hadn't started writing yet. I used to try but nothing came of it. I just travelled. I was then a great opera buff. I lived in the house that Auden had rented on the Isle of Ischia.

MH: How did you come into contact with Frank O'Hara?

JS: Through the art dealer John Meyers. He had worked in Otto Ulbrick's, the best bookstore in Buffalo. I used to hang out there when I went to Buffalo as a teenager in high school. I got a nodding acquaintance with him. When I came to New York he was working for Peggy Guggenheim. Back then the first thing I had ever published were three very short stories in a magazine called "Accent" which Howard Moss published, and he called me up to congratulate me. Meyers said, "You're a poet!" And I said, "There's a poem in that magazine that I like very much titled "Three Penny Opera" by Frank O'Hara." And John Meyers said, "Why, Frank is in the room with me." So a little while later I met him at a party after a Larry Rivers opening. And John Ashbery was there too.

MH: What year was this?

JS: 1951. Later on, Frank and I shared an apartment on 49th Street, where still later John, who had gone to France, came back and stayed there with me for a year.

MH: And Kenneth Koch and Barbara Guest?

JS: I had met Barbara then, too, but I hadn't really become a close friend of hers until quite a bit later. Kenneth Koch was rather a pain in the ass [laughs]. He later became a friend of mine. He was in California when I first got to know John and Frank, and when he came back and found out that I had joined the group he rather resented it. He tended to put me down, which I didn't care for. I was very fond of his wife, Janice, who's dead now. She was a very close friend of mine. I'm also very fond of their daughter, Katherine, who got married recently. Frank and John treated me like one of the boys, one of the group, even though I hadn't been at Harvard with them. Alex Katz once said something to me at a party that implied I went to Harvard, and I said, "Alex, I didn't go to Harvard, I went to a hick school in West Virginia." And Alex said, "Nah, you're Harvard...." [both laughing]

MH: Was Alex Katz at Harvard?

JS: Scarcely [chuckling], he's Cooper Union. Fairfield Porter went to Harvard.

MH: What were you doing at this time?

JS: I was working in a bookshop run by a man named Bob Vanderbuilt, "The Holiday Horoscope," which specialized in imported English books. It was located on 54th Street. Bob, who was very well off, later married and moved to Switzerland to play golf [laughing].

MH: And after the bookstore?

JS: Then I was writing a good deal, poetry mostly. Frank and John encouraged me very much with my poetry writing. They seemed to like my poems, which made me feel great, because they were obviously very talented themselves. They turned me on to Pasternak, whose poetry influenced me very much.

MH: Which poems? Do you remember any that inspired you?

JS: One, beginning "Waving a boughful of fragrance." The only poems of his that were available in English were in the back of a little anthology of Pasternak's writing which included *Safe Conduct* that New Directions published. Have you ever read *Safe Conduct*? It's marvellous. It's the story of his early years.

MH: When did you get on board the staff of the Museum of Modern Art?

JS: After I stopped working at the bookstore. For several years a friend financed me so I could write a novel, which was *Alfred & Guinevere*, my first novel. Then in 1957 I went to work for the MOMA. I had begun reviewing before then for "Art News" in 1955 which I did for quite a while. I did it so much that I can hardly bear to go into an art gallery now.

MH: Who were the first painters you met when you arrived in New York?

JS: I had a friend named Charles Heilman, who was a decorative painter, whose work I liked very much. He was more of a designer than a real painter. Then I got to know Jane Freilicher, whose talent I admire very much. Then Fairfield Porter, who is my favorite painter. I lived with the Porters for twelve years in South Hampton, Long Island.

MH: What years were those?

JS: 1961 to 1973. Fairfield is indeed my favorite painter. [pointing to the wall above his bed] There's a portrait of me by him when I was younger.

MH: Have you ever tried to paint?

JS: No.

MH: Did Fairfield Porter like your poetry?

JS: I think John Ashbery was the one he liked best, but he did like mine. He once said that I was much more visual than he was [laughing].

MH: Did you ever write poems about his painting?

JS: No, but I tried to write poems that were like his painting. I used to read to him a lot while he was painting; things like *Anna Karenina*. Then, every summer, we would go to an island that Fairfield's father had bought in Maine, which was very very beautiful - Great Spruce Head Island - it really turned me on.

MH: Of the painters, who do you see any more?

JS: Jane Freilicher, Alex Katz, George Schneeman [pointing to wall above bed], who painted that nude of Bill Berkson, and Joe Brainard and my friend Darragh Park. [pointing to a small painting between windows] That's a Darragh Park, the little one of a street in front of a brownstone in the snow.

MH: Who are some of the other painters you admire?

JS: I'm very fond of the painters of the "Venetian School" - Botticelli, Veronese, Tiepolo, Guardi. I'm very fond of Longhi. There are some beautiful ones in the Met. I like all the Impressionists, and I like De La Croix very much. I greatly admired him as a man. Have you ever read his *Diaries* - oh they're great. I like painting in general. Fairfield thought Velasquez was the greatest painter.

MH: Alex Katz [trouble hearing]?

JS: No, no, Velasquez [laughing]. Fairfield liked Alex's paintings but I don't think he went that far.

MH: You said you wanted to be an architect.

JS: I was very turned on by an issue of the "Architectural Forum" that was devoted to the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. I'm not very much into the immediate work of architecture today. I don't care for Phillip Johnson. I like Mies van der Rohe very much, and all of the "Chicago School" - Sullivan's iron grille work.

MH: What do you like about New York City?

JS: Not much [laughing]. I'm fed up with it. I used to love it. When I first lived here I used to walk and walk and walk. My favorite part of the city was the part downtown that's now torn down where all the old cast iron buildings used to be below City Hall. I have a very nice book called *Brick & Brownstone* about the row houses in New York.

MH: You mention that book in "The Morning of the Poem."

JS: Right.

MH: What was it like being in New York City in the fifties?

JS: Well it was very upbeat. There was a very strong concerted action among the painters, the "Abstract Expressionists." The old Artists Club used to exist and we used to go to the Cedar Bar where all the artists hung out, when we didn't go to the San Remo, which was gay [laughing]. And for me the big thrill was getting to be friends with Frank and John - particularly with John. He and I were inseparable at that time.

MH: What was O'Hara like?

JS: Oh, he was exceedingly charming, he was very witty; he talked a blue streak.

MH: And Ashbery, what was he like back then?

JS: Ah, witty [laughing], like Frank. And I don't know, he was very - off-the-wall [laughs]. Frank got mixed up with the artists much more deeply than I did. That was really his bag.

MH: Did you ever get the feeling that you were all in competition with the so-called academic poetry of the time, or even amongst yourselves?

JS: I don't think it occurred to any of us. We were just doing our own thing. We really weren't in competition with the "academics." And among ourselves, well, no, we all enjoyed each other's work. Once, I was walking through the slush in Washington Square with Frank going to a bar, and we were talking about our own poetry, when suddenly, Frank said, in his very bitter tone, "Let's face it, John's the poet!" which rather pissed me off, because I thought I was a poet, too [laughs]. That burst of modesty was not very characteristic of Frank [laughs].

MH: Who do you read now, who do you keep up with?

JS: Well, a lot of little magazines come floating in and I read them. I like Eileen Myles very much, I like Helena Hughes [sitting in the room during the interview], I like Ron Padgett's poetry very much, and Michael Brownstein, Anne Waldman. I also like Gary Snyder. I have a pen-pal whom I've never met, whose poetry I like - Jeffrey Young. He published my little book of poems - *Early in '71*.

MH: Howard Moss?

JS: I like his poetry. Howard was the first person to publish my poetry, my poem "Salute." He published it in a little pocket-sized book that came out for a while in the fifties.

MH: What were your five favorite books last year?

JS: Two books by Barbara Pym, Paul Violi's *Splurge*, Eileen Myles's *Sappho's Boat*, and *A Nest of Ninnies* [laughing] by me and John Ashbery.

MH: Do you write with music in mind?

JS: I write with music playing. I don't think necessarily in mind. I usually have the radio turned on to WNCN, the classical music station. I take what they give me [laughs]. When I was first in New York I used to go to jazz clubs. I remember hearing Pearl Bailey when she first made an appearance at the old Blue Angel

in the forties. I heard Billie Holiday at the Apollo in Harlem. I was very fond of Teddy Wilson.

MH: Any "popular" music?

JS: I like some, like the Beatles, but my interest is really in serious music - classical. My favorite composers are Mozart, Verdi, Chopin, Scriabin and Prokofiev.

MH: How long did it take you to write "The Morning of the Poem"?

JS: I wrote it during the summer of seventy-six when I was visiting my mother in East Aurora. I guess it took me a little less than two months. When I left East Aurora I tended to go on with it when I got back to New York City, but the vibes weren't right, so I just wrote a brief ending. When I started writing it I intended it to be about one hundred pages.

MH: How did you control it?

JS: Control it? I don't control my poetry! Ernest Hemingway said you should always keep going if it's going bad, and only stop if it's going good.

MH: Was it written in the morning?

JS: Yes, sometimes very early. I spent most of the morning at the typewriter. I pretty much write on the typewriter. Only if I'm going to the country for a few days will I take a notebook along and write in that.

MH: What started the poem?

JS: I think I woke up one day with a title in my mind, and as I say in the beginning of the poem, I just dreamt of Beaudelaire's skull for some reason.

MH: You seem to have a morning consciousness in a lot of your work.

JS: That's when I usually write. I never liked writing at night the way some people do, Ted Berrigan, for instance. Well, Ted lives at night.

MH: *Freely Espousing* came out in 1969?

JS: Yes, but it was ready two years before that. [laughs] I think that when I thought up the title I thought of it as Whitmanesque. *The Crystal Lithium*, or rather the poem by that title, was directly influenced by Whitman's "Song of Myself."



MH: You begin *Freely Espousing* with the line, "A commingling sky," which seems to be a very Wallace Stevensesque word - "commingling."

JS: Oh, I wouldn't be surprised since I read Stevens very intensely at one time. He influenced me tremendously. I had read him in anthologies when I was in high school, and when I was in the Navy aboard ship I kept his book *Harmonium* with me. A friend and I once went to Hartford, Connecticut, just so we could walk past his house [chuckling to himself].

MH: You have more of a stated subject matter than, let's say, John Ashbery does.

JS: My poems as they develop are very different from my early poems which were inclined to be Dada or surreal. John Ashbery once told me that he made me realize that a poem didn't have to make sense. But then I went on to write poems that do make sense [laughs].

MH: Edmund White says, "You're the closest of any American to rendering, in English, the Chinese response to nature."

JS: I was heavily influenced by Arthur Waley's translations from the Chinese, and also the translations I read of Tu Fu in particular.

MH: You seem fond of writing elegies for seasons in *Freely Espousing*. Your poem "February" is a good example.

JS: Yes, it's a poem about February. I don't really think of it as being elegaic. Sometimes they are. I think my poem "December" is. That's one of my favorites among my own poems.

MH: A few of your poems have that Olson-Creeley look in the way they're broken up and stretched out across the page.

JS: That came through John Wieners who suggested that I look at Olson and try using that field that he used. But to tell you the truth I was never very much interested in Olson's poetry.

MH: Creeley?

JS: Not really. I think they're both very good poets, but they don't turn me on the way other poets do.

MH: They tend to move chronologically from left to right forward in time by going down and across the page.

JS: Right. Yes, there's a poem in *Freely Espousing* called

"Flashes" that's written in that style.

MH: Also "Rachmaninoff's Third" and "March Here."

JS: At the time I wrote those I was carrying on a very intense correspondence with John Wieners. I like his *Hotel Wently Poems* very much and I like John.

MH: What is the relationship of your titles to your poems?

JS: I think they are fairly intrinsic. I like giving a poem a name rather than a number. I very rarely call a poem "Poem." I never have any trouble finding titles. I usually do have the title at the same time I'm writing the poem. Once in a while I think it up later. John Ashbery has told me that he thinks of his titles first. Although, the other day I thought of a title that I can't seem to make a poem for, which is "White Night Black Easter" - maybe that's the poem [both laughing].

MH: Howard Moss says, "There is no one quite like Schuyler because his writing is very straight and yet it so transcends itself all the time. No one else quite has that peculiar talent of sounding like a diary and yet not losing the effect of lyric poetry."

JS: Good old Howard.

MH: Do you ever write parodies?

JS: No.

MH: I found a type of parody. It was in your book *The Crystal Lithium*, "The Cenotaph." It's subtitled "Three Idylls for Kenneth Koch." It reads very much like Koch.

JS: I don't think so. I mean I don't agree.

MH: It's reminiscent of the style he employed in his *The Art of Love*.

JS: [interrupting] That was written before *The Art of Love*. When I wrote a poem called "Money Musks" which I dedicated to Kenneth's now dead wife, Janice, I showed it to Fairfield Porter, and he said, "I see you've been reading Kenneth Koch." This infuriated me. I didn't think it was remotely like Kenneth Koch.

MH: Marjorie Perloff has said about Frank O'Hara, "His poetry is a series of painterly arrangements." You, too, seem to write this way; you can conjure up a painting in words. Your poem "After Joe Was at the Island" from *The Crystal Lithium* is a good example.

JS: Well, that was a poem about a painter. Joe being Joe Brainard, of course. It was written after he had gone. It wasn't about a painting.

MH: I notice that you arrange your poems seasonally according to time as in *The Crystal Lithium* and *Freely Espousing*.

JS: I tend to arrange them, not in *Freely Espousing*, but in my other books, in the order in which they were written as best I can just because there is a sequence of time. I also usually divide them up into the various places where they were written.

MH: You've got a poem in *The Crystal Lithium*, "The Dog Wants His Dinner" for Clark Coolidge, almost a parody.

JS: Well, perhaps. I didn't just dedicate it to him, I wrote it with him in mind. I like Clark's poetry very much, although writing in that style is not for me. I like playing with words or making hieroglyphics out of words. I think Clark is very talented.

MH: Do you ever get the feeling while writing that you've written the same poem over and over?

JS: If I do I stop. Luckily it doesn't happen very often.

MH: I would say that many of your poems have Baudelaire's synesthetic quality.

JS: That's very flattering. I really don't read French very well so he can't be a direct influence, but of course, I've read Baudelaire in translation. I liked him very much when I was young. For some reason there was a copy of *The Flowers of Evil* or "Selected Baudelaire" in the house when I was growing up. I can't imagine why, nobody else ever read him.

MH: Well, that image of Baudelaire's skull keeps popping up in "The Morning of the Poem." Also, in that poem, you shift from that long couplet style of yours into skinny stanzas that run along the margin about four or five times.

JS: It's really just one long line.

MH: One long line?

JS: When I wrote it I set the typewriter as wide as I could and that determined the length of the line.

MH: That's curious. You didn't enjamb by dropping down to a shorter line which gives it that couplet appearance?

JS: No, that had to be done for printing - it was changed for typesetting. I think I would have preferred it the other way, but it worked out, so I really didn't care.

MH: Who is the painter in "The Morning of the Poem" who lives on 22nd Street?

JS: Darragh Park, to whom the book is dedicated.

MH: When did you feel that you made a breakthrough in writing?

JS: When I wrote the poem "Salute." I was in the hospital in White Plains, New York corresponding with Howard Moss. As I said, it was the first poem I had published.

MH: When did that come out?

JS: 1952 I guess. The book *Salute* came out in 1961, but all the poems that were in *Salute* are in *Freely Espousing*.

MH: You write with bigger emotions than Ashbery does.

JS: I think John draws on his dream-life quite a bit, or he used to. He doesn't write much about his personal feelings. It's very difficult to write creatively and not have your emotions somewhere or other.

MH: Edmund White says, "You're the most musical poet we have."

JS: I'm very conscious of sound, that is, when I read other poets. I like the sound value in Elizabeth Bishop very much. She is one of my all-time favorite poets.

MH: You frequently resonate off a single sound in your poems.

JS: Well, I do it consciously, but I don't know how I got into it.

MH: Do you do it silently or do you voice your poems?

JS: I speak sometimes. I test them with my voice.

MH: Edmund White also says, "There's a certain lack of punctuation in your poetry which promotes a delicious ambiguity which is slow to resolve itself."

JS: At times I try to do without what seems superfluous punctuation. At other times I'm more conventional.

MH: Edmund White goes on to say that you are "an aesthete of the particular, gourmet of the real, and it is this outlook, along

with some of his jokey, gee wizzy mannerisms, that he shares with other members of the New York School, notably, Frank O'Hara..."

JS: [laughing] What "Gee Wizzy Mannerisms!"

Helena Hughes [breaking in] You know Jimmy, when you read the papers in the morning! [laughing]

JS: I think we're all part of nature willy-nilly!

MH: He goes on to say that the best short poems are in the present tense.

JS: I don't think about what tense I'm using. It's whatever is appropriate to whatever I'm going to say in a particular poem. And I don't have any scheme. At one time I was rather religious, though I'm not now.

MH: What did you make of O'Hara's essay called "Personism"?

JS: It didn't interest me. It's not one of the things of Frank's that I liked.

MH: Why do you think he wrote it?

JS: He wrote it because he could never shut up [laughs].

MH: You wrote a statement for Donald Allen's anthology for your own poetry where you mentioned the poets and painters in New York as a group more or less in the same boat, but it was the painters who were steering the boat!

JS: I guess I believed that at the time. It doesn't seem so true to me now.

MH: As you were writing *The Crystal Lithium* did you feel that it was another breakthrough - the long poem?

JS: Yes, it seemed to break through into what I wanted. It was also a breakthrough because it was turning out to be one of my best poems. I was very aware of that.

MH: Did you feel a need to write a long poem?

JS: I don't know about feeling a need. As I said, it was triggered from having read "Song of Myself" by Whitman. The length of that suggested a length to me. I couldn't end it. Then I met somebody and fell in love and I ended it.

MH: Again, Edmund White says that "Only through the long poem can Schuyler recreate the experience of time living

through us."

JS: That may be true, but I don't think about things like that. I think I just want to keep the story going.

MH: You write well with other people in collaboration.

JS: I enjoy it.

MH: *A Nest of Ninnies*, with John Ashbery?

JS: John and I had a ball writing *A Nest of Ninnies*.

MH: How did it come about?

JS: John and I were being driven back to New York by somebody we didn't like, so in the back seat of the car we started writing it, primarily, I think, to bug the driver.

MH: It must have been a long ride?

JS: Well, we didn't write the whole novel that day. It took sixteen years!

MH: How did you write it?

JS: On and off. We started out by writing it line by line, but then we allowed ourselves more freedom to write whole paragraphs as we went along.

MH: You never quarreled over a line, or edited each other?

JS: No. I've never really quarreled with John about anything.

MH: And now you're writing another collaborative novel with Helena Hughes?

JS: And another novel with Tom Carey called *Small Crimes*.

MH: How does it work out?

JS: Well, Helena gets to do the typing... [laughing]

Helena Hughes: I sit here and Jimmy sits there.

MH: Who gives each other the lines, or do you just do your own work?

JS: We say out loud the lines we thought of.

MH: Do you outline a plot together?

Helena Hughes: No.

JS: I wanted to call it "In County Wexford" but Helena won't let me because her parents live in County Wexford, Ireland.

MH: Getting back, how did you know when or where to stop *A Nest of Ninnies*?

JS: At the penultimate chapter I was willing to stop but John said, no we needed more. So we went on and wrote the last chapter that takes place at the ristorante.

MH: Do you feel the same about writing prose as compared to writing poetry?

JS: In a way, although writing prose is a more relaxed affair.

MH: More relaxed?

JS: Yes, it's less intense.

MH: Do you feel freer when writing prose?

JS: I feel free when I write, but poetry and prose are like two different states of mind.

MH: So you do separate them?

JS: Yes.

MH: When and where was *What's For Dinner* written and how did it start?

JS: I wrote the first page one day in Maine in the sixties and I put it in a drawer and didn't think about it for years. Then I got it out, I think it was the summer of 1972, and worked on it quite hard, but I couldn't seem to finish it. When I moved back to New York City in 1973 I did finish it. Then it was turned down by every publisher in New York until it was finally published by Black Sparrow in California.

MH: How did you get such an easy conversational tone into the dialogue? It seems almost overheard.

JS: That's just the way I write dialogue.

MH: But it sounds authentic.

JS: The characters are not based on real people. It's entirely invented, except for the hospital where the leading character goes to take a cure for alcoholism. That was based on a hospital where I had been, though not for alcoholism.

MH: So you do have a familiarity with convalescent wards and group therapy sessions?

JS: Yes. They weren't wards. They were all in private rooms.

MH: Taken as a whole, the book appears to be a discourse on the suburban mentality.

JS: I spent a lot of my youth in the suburbs so I know about that. I rather like the lifestyle.

MH: In your novels, as well as in your poetry, I get the impression that most of your work deals entirely in the concrete of daily life.

JS: Yes, well, I don't think I have a philosophical cast of mind. I'm more of an observer.

MH: Do you read philosophy at all?

JS: No, never.

MH: Not even in a vicarious way from other people's reading of it?

JS: Perhaps, slightly, I don't think very much. The only philosophy I've read is Catholic, at the time when I was thinking of becoming a Catholic.

MH: Thomas Aquinas?

JS: Yes, but more Pascal. Pascal I liked very much, so I guess I have read some philosophy.

MH: It's more evident when reading *The Home Book*. There's a few sections in "The Infant Jesus of Prague" and in other sections where it becomes theological.

JS: Yes, well, "The Infant Jesus of Prague" is really rather a cryptic description of a nervous breakdown.

MH: That's very interesting, because the way it's written seems like a prose poem.

JS: It is. At the time I was very much under the influence of Rimbaud. I think I was trying to imitate "A Season In Hell." Whereas the poem "The Home Book" was an attempt to write in the style of Boris Pasternak's early stories. They're both very early efforts.

MH: The separate sections in those poems remain autonomous, yet in a certain way connect by making metaphorical leaps.

JS: Yes, that's correct.

MH: Were you writing it while undergoing a nervous breakdown?

JS: Oh no, only in retrospect.

MH: When was "The Home Book" written?

JS: "The Home Book" and "The Infant Jesus of Prague" were both written in 1952.

MH: How did it come into print, because the date of publication is 1977.

JS: It was printed in "C" magazine in the sixties, and in "Art & Literature." The book of those separate pieces was put together by Trevor Winkfield, an English friend of mine, who used to put out a very good magazine in England.

MH: *The Home Book* ends off where *The Morning of the Poem* begins. The last line is about Darwin and in the beginning of "Empathy and New Year" from *The Morning of the Poem*, you mention Darwin.

JS: Yes, I was keeping a little diary at the time I wrote those poems. I love Darwin, he had a very open and loving, generous character. I felt this about him from having read his autobiography.

MH: There's a poem, on page 34 in *The Home Book*, which I believe to be truly representative of a brand of "New York School" writing - it's called "Things To Do."

JS: It wasn't invented by the "New York School"; it was invented by me! Ted Berrigan has stylized a version of it in his "Things To Do In Providence."

MH: When did you meet Ted Berrigan?

JS: While I was living out in the Hamptons during the sixties, Ted called up and said Edwin Denby had shown him some poems of mine and that he would like to publish them in "C" magazine. Later on Kenward Elmslie had a little get-together at his place where I met Ted Berrigan and Tony Towle and Joe Brainard, the painter. Joe, in particular, became a very close friend of mine. Ron Padgett was maybe at that meeting, too. I remember going to Ron's house for dinner one night, and Ted and his first wife, Sandy, were there. After that I saw quite a bit of Ron Padgett. At one time, Fairfield Porter used to give him his house when he and his wife were away. Ron would house-sit.

MH: You've written a funny sketch of Ron Padgett in *The Home Book*, called "At Home With Ron Padgett."

JS: Yes, that was a reply to a sketch he did of me. It's really entirely a collage.

MH: What did you think of those, then, younger poets? Did you think of them as a second generation to you and Ashbery and O'Hara?

JS: I think they're fine. Yes, I think of them as a continuance. You've seen Ron Padgett's and David Shapiro's *New York Poets Anthology* by Random House?

MH: Yes, I have a copy. They should reprint it.

JS: Maybe Full Court Press would. I think it was a publishing disaster. It didn't sell at all. The only mistake in it was that they left out Barbara Guest. At that time, Ron Padgett didn't like her work, though I'm told he later apologized to her for it. Kenneth Koch went to see him and practically went down on his knees and said, "You can't do it without Barbara!"

MH: Do you like Barbara Guest's poetry?

JS: Yes I do, very much. I loved her novel *Seeking Air*.

MH: Do you write sonnets?

JS: Not any more. A friend of mine, Arthur Gold, a man I once lived with, encouraged me to try writing in the formal styles, so I did for a little while - this irritated John Ashbery very much, who once said, "Have you written anything lately that would interest me?"

MH: But Ashbery's written formal verse?

JS: I don't know. I know that he was very mad at Frank O'Hara for writing the sonnet "A City Winter" and using the conventional form of the sonnet.

MH: Were you taken with Denby's sonnets?

JS: I think they're great but I wasn't influenced by them.

MH: Or John Wheelwright?

JS: I like his poetry.

MH: What do you like about it?

JS: [quoting lines of a Wheelwright sonnet]

*What was that sound I heard fall in the snow?  
It was a frozen bird, why must you know?*

I think that's a great way to write.

MH: He's very difficult.

JS: In some poems, not in all. He was a good friend of Fairfield Porter. He has a poem dedicated to him.

MH: I believe that Wheelwright, Fairfield Porter and James Laughlin were all at Harvard together.

JS: And Lincoln Kirstein. Lincoln had big eyes for Fairfield which scared the shit out of Fairfield [laughs] - this great huge towering brute positively luring over him.

MH: Did you ever meet Dylan Thomas in New York in the early fifties?

JS: I once went with Howard Moss to hear him read. I told Frank O'Hara I was going and Frank said, "I can't stand all that Welsh spit!" I thought he was too theatrical as a reader. At one time I liked his poetry more than I do now.

MH: When did you meet Edwin Denby?

JS: I first met him in Italy when he and I were both living there, then I got to know him in New York City in 1952. We had sort of a relationship and that ended very badly. I used to go to the ballet with him and to the concerts. He was a very elegant man, very aristocratic, Harvard background; his father was an admiral. There used to be a senator, Edwin Denby, and there was this Edwin Denby cigar which was quite his style. He's about twenty-one years older than I am. He appeared older.

MH: Was he at all influenced by you and O'Hara?

JS: No, he'd already published a book of poems. Frank admired him very much.

MH: Do you think writing formally is easier?

JS: Oh, it's sort of fun titillating round with a form. There's a translation of a Dante sestina in *Freely Espousing* which I enjoyed doing very much.

MH: Do you internalize the poetic forms?

JS: No, I don't write that way at all. I write as I go along, even in the strict forms of a sestina or a villanelle. Those technical aspects of poetry are something I simply never think about.

*CANOE*

*JOE SOAP'S*

*CANOE*

*JOE SOAP'S*

*CANOE*

*JOE SOAP'S*

*CANOE*

£3.95

US\$8.00