

FIELD



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MARIANNE MOORE

A *FIELD* SYMPOSIUM

MARIANNE MOORE: A SYMPOSIUM

As we arrive at Marianne Moore's hundredth birthday, our acquaintance with her seems almost to be just getting underway. One is struck, reading these quite various essays, by the air of exploration, speculation and discovery they share. Exhilaration at the complexity and interest of Moore's art prevails, but it is the exhilaration that comes from recent acquaintance and fresh insight rather than long-time familiarity. Even the poems of her protégé, Elizabeth Bishop, tended to be discussed with greater confidence and sweep in our symposium of three years ago. There is something gingerly and tentative in the way Moore's readers still sidle up to the task of reading and characterizing her poems.

All this suggests that while Moore has been canonical for some time, acquaintance with the canon itself has tended to be superficial. We have taken it for granted that she is one of our major poets and skirted around the issue of just why that should be so. She herself complicated the question by her very extensive revising of her own poems, a practice on which these essays take different stances but which they rightly suggest must be a larger part of understanding and evaluating this poet than has previously been the case. Then too, her practice, both as to matters of form and of content, has been untypical, unique. You don't read Moore in the light of someone else's practice — Eliot's or Pound's or Stevens's. You roll up your sleeves and work from scratch. And you had better be prepared to take time, since this is not a poet who makes things easy or courts casual readers. If she is clearly accomplished and original both as an experimenter with form and with content, the interaction of those two elements in her work is especially problematic. Critics tend to talk about one or the other, whereas readers must discover their mutuality, their interpenetration, if they are ever to be comfortable and confident reading Moore.

May this symposium, then, inaugurate or contribute to a

much-needed new stage of our relationship with this important poet: better and closer reading of the poems, candid assessment of her strengths and weaknesses, and more thoughtful exploration of her enormous originality.

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THE STEEPLE-JACK

Dürer would have seen a reason for living
in a town like this, with eight stranded whales
to look at; with the sweet sea air coming into your house
on a fine day, from water etched
with waves as formal as the scales
on a fish.

One by one in two's and three's, the seagulls keep
flying back and forth over the town clock,
or sailing around the lighthouse without moving their wings —
rising steadily with a slight
quiver of the body — or flock
mewing where

a sea the purple of the peacock's neck is
paled to greenish azure as Dürer changed
the pine green of the Tyrol to peacock blue and guinea
gray. You can see a twenty-five-
pound lobster; a fish nets arranged
to dry. The

whirlwind fife-and-drum of the storm bends the salt
marsh grass, disturbs stars in the sky and the
star on the steeple; it is a privilege to see so
much confusion. Disguised by what
might seem the opposite, the sea-
side flowers and

trees are favored by the fog so that you have
the tropics at first hand: the trumpet-vine,
fox-glove, giant snap-dragon, a salpiglossis that has
spots and stripes; morning-glories, gourds,
or moon-vines trained on fishing-twine
at the back door;

cat-tails, flags, blueberries and spiderwort,
striped grass, lichens, sunflowers, asters, daisies —
yellow and crab-claw ragged sailors with green bracts — toad-
plant,
petunias, ferns; pink lilies, blue
ones, tigers; poppies; black sweet-peas.

The climate

is not right for the banyan, frangipani, or
jack-fruit trees; or for exotic serpent
life. Ring lizard and snake-skin for the foot, if you see fit;
but here they've cats, not cobras, to
keep down the rats. The diffident
little newt

with white pin-dots on black horizontal spaced-
out bands lives here; yet there is nothing that
ambition can buy or take away. The college student
named Ambrose sits on the hillside
with his not-native books and hat
and sees boats

at sea progress white and rigid as if in
a groove. Liking an elegance of which
the source is not bravado, he knows by heart the antique
sugar-bowl shaped summer-house of
interlacing slats, and the pitch
of the church

spire, not true, from which a man in scarlet lets
down a rope as a spider spins a thread;
he might be part of a novel, but on the sidewalk a
sign says C. J. Poole, Steeple-Jack,
in black and white; and one in red
and white says

Danger. The church portico has four fluted
columns, each a single piece of stone, made
modester by white-wash. This would be a fit haven for
waifs, children, animals, prisoners,
and presidents who have repaid
sin-driven

senators by not thinking about them. The
place has a school-house, a post-office in a
store, fish-houses, hen-houses, a three-masted
schooner on
the stocks. The hero, the student,
the steeple-jack, each in his way,
is at home.

It could not be dangerous to be living
in a town like this, of simple people,
who have a steeple-jack placing danger-signs by the church
while he is gilding the solid-
pointed star, which on a steeple
stands for hope.

THE STEEPLE-JACK

“The Steeple-Jack” has few of the signature elements we associate with Marianne Moore’s poetry. There are no words we need to look up (the animals and plants are to some degree familiar); there are no arcane facts from engineering manuals or quotations from the National Museum’s Curator of Reptiles. That we know Dürer made a trip to see a beached whale is perhaps less important than our recognition that Dürer’s paintings detail a “fascination with the strange in the real” (Bonnie Costello) that is very like the poet’s own. That she multiplied the stranded whales by eight makes that vision at once more and less apocalyptic: more because eight whales is a phenomenon that bespeaks a deep disturbance in the sea; less because their being there is noted so casually the scene is almost a cartoon.

And there are other cartoon-like images. The sea, as in a child’s drawing, is scalloped with waves “as formal as the scales on a fish.” The seagulls fly without moving their wings. Even the storm is only a harmless animated “whirlwind fife-and-drum.” And certainly the steeple-jack is something akin to those toy acrobats whose wooden stilts, when pressed, make the tiny figures flip up and over. This toy village cannot be dangerous. And yet something dreadful seems about to happen. Something is gathering itself just outside the margin of the sketch-pad, of the poem, and only the creator can keep it out. Fortunately, that creator is Marianne Moore.

This poem was originally envisioned as the novel portion of a three-tiered poem, “Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play,” and the elements of fiction are evident: the setting, picture-postcard pretty, deceptively serene; the (possible) protagonist, a college student named Ambrose; and the action, a steeple-jack gilding a church star. (This is minimal action, to be sure, but there is a storm brewing, and he could lose his footing.) But these remain only elements, contained in a suspension; these are not novel events and characters carried through time to a climax. In fact, climax is to be avoided at all costs. There is a fic-

tion being created here, but it's not the one we anticipate. This is the fiction of perfect, even perverse, calm.

A novel in which nothing happens . . . Yet in the poem there is a whirl of images which is itself activity. And "it is a privilege to see so / much confusion" — a privilege because from our vantage point (from above, like the gods), we see both the things and "what / might seem the opposite." What is "favored by the fog" — another term for imagination? — has become transformed. We are in New England falling headlong into the tropics, a glory of flora whose abundance is too much to take in all at once — "cat-tails, flags, blueberries and spiderwort, / striped grass, lichens, sunflowers, asters, daisies — ." This catalogue is very like the one Keats employs in the middle of the nightingale ode, the stanza which begins "I cannot see what flowers are at my feet." Keats lets *us* see them, however, a mix of trees and flowers which is an impossibility, for the grass, thicket, fruit-tree wild, white hawthorn, eglantine, violets and musk roses don't share the same growing season. Keats collapses time, allows everything to bloom at once, and the cadences of their names, as well as their various perfumes, sends the poet into a swoon. That's what happens to us in Marianne Moore's catalogue. As if "yellow and crab-claw ragged sailors with green bracts" is not enough, we get also "toad-plant, / petunias, ferns; pink lilies, blue / ones, tigers"; all the way to banyan and frangipani. This is the action inconceivable in a novel — riotous vegetation.

But, abruptly, this avalanche is checked. We return to the facts: "here they've cats, not cobras, to / keep down the rats." What was, for a breathless three stanzas, a teeming roil, ends in "boats // at sea . . . white and rigid as if in / a groove." Why the sudden halt, the stiffened sea, and then description of the village buildings? Is it perhaps because Ambrose is safer looking at the summer-house he knows by heart ("antique sugar-bowl shaped"), and C. J. Poole safer atop the spire (though it's tilted, "not true")? The buildings are mundane, after all — school house, post-office, fish-houses, hen-houses — not like the sea, about to break its rigid delineations; not like the flowers, a carpet of uncertain

magic. The church is a “fit haven for / waifs, children, animals, prisoners, / and presidents who have repaid / sin-driven // senators by not thinking about them,” fit, in short, for all of us. Civilization is salvation, at least for “simple people / who have a steeple-jack placing danger signs by the church.” In this perfect place, perfection is maintained by buildings and by rigorous distancings. It is ironic, yes, but beneath the irony is the author’s serious insistence that it must be so. The sea and its whales must be kept a child’s sketch. The trumpet-vines must not overrun the church. Nature red in tooth and claw has no place in the town square. And above all the church must keep its star gilded, that we may not be overwhelmed.

NINE NECTARINES AND OTHER PORCELAIN

Arranged by two's as peaches are,
at intervals that all may live —
 eight and a single one, on twigs that
 grew the year before — they look like
a derivative;
 although not uncommonly
the opposite is seen —
nine peaches on a nectarine.

 Fuzzless through slender crescent leaves
 of green or blue — or both,
 in the Chinese style — the four

 pairs' half-moon leaf-mosaic turns
out to the sun the sprinkled blush
 of puce-American-Beauty pink
 applied to beeswax gray by the
unenquiring brush
 of mercantile bookbinding.
Like the peach *Yu*, the red-
cheeked peach which cannot aid the dead,
 but eaten in time prevents death,
 the Italian peach-
 nut, Persian plum, Ispahan

 secluded wall-grown nectarine,
as wild spontaneous fruit was
 found in China first. But was it wild?
 Prudent de Candolle would not say.
We cannot find flaws
 in this emblematic group
of nine, with leaf window
unquilted by curculio —
 which someone once depicted on
 this much-mended plate; or
 in the also accurate

unantlered moose, or Iceland horse,
or ass, asleep against the old
thick, low-leaning nectarine that is the
colour of the shrub-tree's brownish
flower. From manifold
small boughs, productive as the
magic willow that grew
above the mother's grave and threw
on Cinderella what she wished,
a bat is winging. It
is a moonlight scene, bringing

the animal so near, its eyes
are separate from the face — mere
delicately drawn gray discs, out from
itself in space. Imperial
happiness lives here
on the peaches of long life
that make it permanent.
A fungus could have meant
long life; a crane, a stork, a dove.
China, with flowers and birds
and half-beasts, became the land

of the best china-making first.
Hunts and domestic scenes occur
in France on dinner-plates, signed on the
back with a two-finned fish; England
has an officer
in jack-boots seated in a
bosquet, the cow, the flock
of sheep, the pheasant, the peacock
sweeping near with lifted claw; the
skilled peonian rose
and the rosebud that began

with William Billingsley (once poor,
like a monkey on a dolphin, tossed
by Ocean, mighty monster) until
Josiah Spode adopted him.

Yet with the gold-glossed
serpent handles, are there green
cocks with 'brown beaks and cheeks
and dark blue combs' and mammal freaks
that, like the Chinese Certainties
and sets of Precious Things,
dare to be conspicuous?

Theirs is a race that 'understands
the spirit of the wilderness'
and the nectarine-loving kylin
of pony appearance — the long-
tailed or the tailless
small cinnamon-brown common
camel-haired unicorn
with antelope feet and no horn,
here enamelled on porcelain.
It was a Chinese who
imagined this masterpiece.

IMPERIAL HAPPINESS

*Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.*

Yeats, "Lapis Lazuli"

A reader of "Nine Nectarines" in Marianne Moore's 1967 *Complete Poems* might well be confused, on consulting the explanatory notes in the back of the volume, to be provided the origin of a phrase ("brown beaks and cheeks") that does not appear in the poem. In fact, the notes were written for the poem's appearance in the 1935 *Selected Poems*, where — under the title "Nine Nectarines and Other Porcelain" — the poem is nearly twice as long. The later version includes only the first three and a half stanzas and the final one. "Omissions are not accidents," Moore says pointedly, but in this case (as, I would argue, in many others) her omissions do not serve her well: the revised version is a sadly truncated and, to my mind, much less interesting poem. The original, on the other hand, marvelously exemplifies Moore's difficulties and satisfactions.

Surely the difficulties should not be minimized. The poem is in rhymed syllabics (three pairs of rhymes per stanza, and you have to hunt to find the third), and the intricacy of the form is mirrored in its movement. Restoring the missing forty lines helps clarify the poem's sense of shape; nonetheless, its apparently meandering movement, its skillful use of feint and diversion, the peculiarities of its voice, and its blending of the scrupulously precise and the bewilderingly obtuse — all combine to make the poem puzzling on first reading and then increasingly multilayered on further acquaintance. The fierce, focused attention and patient curiosity that are so clearly present in the poem must be mirrored in the reader if the whole is to mean more than the delicate, fascinating parts. The measure of the poem's modernity is that it cannot be identified as anything other than itself, a playfully unpredictable verbal performance; certainly, for instance, it is not the "description of a painted plate" that at least one critic has taken it for. For one thing, the plate doesn't appear until the end of the third stanza: to read the poem as literal de-

scription would be to read Moore as manipulative or simply inept. It's the *words* that matter here, not the plate: the poem is an enacted meditation for which the plate is merely the catalyst.

Like most of Moore's poems of the period, this one begins without a clear sense of dramatic context. The title seems to indicate a still-life, though the questions it raises ("other" porcelain? are these nectarines real or manufactured?) suspend comfortable assumptions, and in fact will reverberate throughout the poem. Moore begins in description, all right, but what exactly is being described, despite the tone of cool, scrupulous precision, is never named directly. The bough of nectarines we are peering at seems an emblem of natural perfection ("at intervals that all may live") and at the same time vaguely unreal ("they look like / a derivative") — and since we soon discover that they are in fact an artistic representation, the ironic play is entirely appropriate. The second half of the first sentence, with its epigrammatic turn (nectarines are to peaches as peaches are to nectarines), is Moore at her most slyly subversive. It's the sort of gesture that sounds merely fussy, overmeticulous (the *live / derivative, seen / nectarine* rhymes enhance the effect), but surely the vaguely Edward-Learish quality (what does it *mean* to claim that nine peaches are not uncommonly seen on a nectarine?) is meant to arouse our suspicion. And the next sentence nudges us further from the realm of horticulture into that of imagination, first as the leaves are described as "green or blue — or both, / in the Chinese style" (does this indicate the observer's uncertainty, her inability to name the color exactly, or have we moved from consideration of the particular to that of the whole genre of nectarine-painting and the options it allows?), and then in that terrific analogy of the fruits' "sprinkled blush" to the pink-and-gray mottle of endpapers.

"Unenquiring" is a striking word for the bookbinder's brush, of course, and it demonstrates how far we are from simple description. The focus of attention here is less the object itself than the act of attention to and representation of that object, as reflected both in the artist who painted the nectarines (still, at this point in the poem, a covert presence) and in the voice that in turn reveals that image to us. As opposed to the "unenquiring brush"

of the bookbinder, the artist's brush and the speaker's eye are both highly inquisitive, probing, imaginative. If the voice at first seems almost selflessly precise, it soon reveals itself as actually playful, eccentric, highly intuitive. The poem's aesthetic values have already begun to reveal themselves.

The following passage extends Moore's metaphysical concerns further. Braced by her reading of Alphonse de Candolle's 1886 *Origin of Cultivated Plants* ("According to the word of Chin-noug-king, the peach Yu prevents death. If it is not eaten in time, it at least preserves the body from decay until the end of the world"), she plays the helpful natural historian while evoking the nature/nurture conundrum that has underscored the poem since the title. This is another of her characteristic strategies: her quotations and elaborate footnotes often make her seem — and this is much like the Eliot of *The Waste Land* — a bit of an obsessive packrat, while in fact nothing is even slightly irrelevant, and every trinket contributes significantly to the design. The question of the relation between the object in nature and its representation in art, between wildness and cultivation, emerges overtly here, as the plate is finally named:

But was it wild?
Prudent de Candolle would not say.
We cannot find flaws
in this emblematic group
of nine, with leaf window
unquilted by curculio —
which someone once depicted on
this much-mended plate. . . .

We have moved farther toward the flawless world of artifice ("emblematic," "depicted") here, and given the proximity of "unquilted," we might take "curculio" for a kind of Italian dropstitch. But the poem continues to maintain its curious, complicated balance: curculio is in fact "any of various weevils, especially one that injures fruit," and even though it is absent from the painting, it is very much present in the poem. Even more striking, the plate itself has been damaged and "much-mended"; the fact that

the representation of perfection is itself subject to the vagaries of accident gets us very close to the poem's thematic center. Like "the peach *Yu*" whose magical properties depend on its being eaten "in time," the meaning of the poised perfection of the nectarines depends on their being seen in relation to the natural world.

The next passage widens the lens; what before seemed a detached bough now appears as a detail in a landscape that also includes . . . well, what exactly *is* that animal? . . . "the also accurate / unantlered moose, or Iceland horse, / or ass, asleep against the old / thick, low-leaning nectarine that is the / colour of the shrub-tree's brownish / flower." The moose/horse/ass uncertainty mirrors the earlier green/blue/both question, and points up the importance of the speaker's position as observer rather than creator: her knowledge may seem encyclopedic, but it is not magisterial. And yet the gently blurred, multiple possibilities indicate a further irony: if the observer can't be sure whether the animal is moose, horse, or ass, how can she claim that its depiction is "accurate"? The earlier meditation on the relation between reality and representation may have suggested an answer, but we must wait for the end of the poem for it to emerge fully.

The extension of the scene is so haunting that one wonders how Moore could have omitted it in her revision:

From manifold
small boughs, productive as the
magic willow that grew
above the mother's grave and threw
on Cinderella what she wished,
a bat is winging. It
is a moonlight scene, bringing
the animal so near, its eyes
are separate from the face — mere
delicately drawn gray discs, out from
itself in space. Imperial
happiness lives here
on the peaches of long life
that make it permanent.

The reference to Cinderella might at first seem intrusive, yet surely the magic power that fulfills wishes by transcending the grave is a reflection of the same force as the peaches of eternal life. The image itself, it seems, has undergone a transformation: while in the second stanza the nectarines turned “out to the sun,” now they are “peaches,” and the scene is moonlit. And in that moonlight, the animal that only a stanza earlier seemed sleepy and passive is now spectral, alert, its eyes open and floating out in space. (Grammatically this sentence might seem to refer to the bat, but I tend to think it makes more sense to read it in relation to the still-unidentified animal that is more central to the poem as a whole. In either case, it is the sense of mystery and depth that is important.) The static depicted image has become animated in time and space under the observer’s inquiring gaze; its meaning is “imperial / happiness,” but only in the moment when it is fully perceived. “A fungus could have meant / long life; a crane, a stork, a dove,” we are told: the representation is arbitrary, the symbolic possibilities multiple — and yet under the controlling authority of the artist’s imagination, the painting becomes not simply a representation but an image with its own inherent mythic truth.

In an apparent shift of focus, the next two stanzas return us to the “other porcelain” of the title, comparing Chinese ware to that of France and England. This might be taken by the unwary as a digression, but in fact Moore is pursuing her theme relentlessly. The survey of national characteristics becomes a meditation on aesthetics: while France and England present nature in domesticated, codified forms (“the cow, the flock / of sheep, the pheasant, the peacock”), the Chinese indulge in drama, peculiarity, mystery. As in the landscape we have been minutely observing, to “dare to be conspicuous,” to cross-breed nature with imagination, is risky, but it is also the source of enormous vitality. The contrast is simply presented without comment, and certainly the English scene is detailed with affectionate humor, but the cumulative weight of the poem leaves no doubt about which tradition Moore chooses to ally herself with. The poem has become a covert manifesto, justifying its own “conspicuous” eccentricities for the peculiar pleasures they may inspire.

And thus the last stanza, whose language seems resolutely objective, may be read as intensely personal. Having indirectly established her affinity with the Chinese, she can maintain her focus while apparently giving herself entirely up to contemplation. The Chinese are “a race that ‘understands / the spirit of the wilderness’ ” — and that spirit is precisely what cannot be captured by literal representation, and what brought the painting mysteriously to life. (Interestingly, “understands / the spirit of the wilderness” is unattributed in the notes: could Moore in fact have invented the quotation in order to further “objectify” her argument?) In mid-sentence the perceiver returns to the painting and effortlessly establishes her total authority: the animal that earlier was only vaguely defined is here precisely named, neither moose or horse but kylin, a Chinese unicorn. Having emerged out of a meditation on the representation of reality, the spectral animal is in fact the representation of the fabulous, “here enamelled on porcelain.” The link back to the title emphasizes the poem’s central paradox: in capturing “the spirit of the wilderness” as figured by the kylin, the porcelain plate is an emblem of permanence; at the same time, it is enormously fragile (“much-mended”) and entirely dependent on perceivers who can “understand” that spirit sympathetically. The final sentence — “It was a Chinese who / imagined this masterpiece” — might seem anticlimactically flat, unless we recognize the weight of “imagined” in this context. As in Yeats’s exactly contemporaneous “Lapis Lazuli,” which provides a striking parallel, the meaning of works of art depends on two acts of imagination, that of the artist and that of the audience. To read Moore’s poem, we must become conspicuously “Chinese.”

A GRAVE

Man looking into the sea,
taking the view from those who have as much right to it as
you have to it yourself,
it is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing,
but you cannot stand in the middle of this;
the sea has nothing to give but a well excavated grave.
The firs stand in a procession, each with an emerald turkey-
foot at the top,
reserved as their contours, saying nothing;
repression, however, is not the most obvious characteristic of
the sea;
the sea is a collector, quick to return a rapacious look.
There are others besides you who have worn that look —
whose expression is no longer a protest; the fish no longer
investigate them
for their bones have not lasted:
men lower nets, unconscious of the fact that they are
desecrating a grave,
and row quickly away — the blades of the oars
moving together like the feet of water-spiders as if there were
no such thing as death.
The wrinkles progress among themselves in a phalanx —
beautiful under networks of foam,
and fade breathlessly while the sea rustles in and out of the
seaweed;
the birds swim through the air at top speed, emitting cat-calls
as heretofore —
the tortoise-shell scourges about the feet of the cliffs, in motion
beneath them;
and the ocean, under the pulsation of lighthouses and noise of
bell-buoys,
advances as usual, looking as if it were not that ocean in which
dropped things are bound to sink —
in which if they turn and twist, it is neither with volition nor
consciousness.

MAN — SEA — SILENCE

I've gone everywhere with my speculation on the man of this poem's first line. At a first reading, and after several readings, I still want to know, what is he to the speaker? It seems natural to suppose that his mysterious position at the receiving end of the address in "A Grave," once cracked, would lead things calmly into the lap of some narrative conclusion. If the speaker would only interpret him for us — if she would look down at him maternally, or up at him religiously, or at him squarely as through a memory — then wouldn't the poem's vast metaphor crystallize?

Not really. One problem is that the speaker's tone, like her poem, is not that simple. In the breadth of its subject matter, "A Grave" is capable of living among contradictions without exactly tackling them, and without really resting among them either. The relationship between the man and the speaker might include all or none of the above possibilities. In fact, the poem pushes off from the man immediately, as if to leave me with my speculation, while it proceeds in its unusual and passionate one-sided discussion. However the man moved this speaker at first — a stranger, a tourist, a concept, a God — he is in a poem whose vision is broader than identity (even the sea cannot be named). The identities of man and sea are eschewed rather conspicuously, so that I begin to think I have asked both a wrong and an integral question, the kind a child might ask, such as "what is the sky" or "why do dogs bark" — one whose answer seemed implicit until the question was asked. Finally, I can only know that this man's silence is brazen and impressive, that he stands there increasing the poem's point of view, agitating its narrator, without so much as breathing a word.

There is another interesting silence in this poem, a stillness that separates lines from one another, and which often seems so definite as to be deliberate. It effectively inserts itself in the midst of ongoing thoughts, at the brink of and in the afterward, and sometimes in the middle of them (the enjambments begin to sound like stanzas). Full stops pick up that silence, meticulously punctuated. And yet, sentences seem as fiercely begun in this

poem as they are fiercely concluded, as if the breath and space detaining the speaker had as substantial a voice as her own:

The firs stand in a procession, each with an emerald turkey-foot at the top,
reserved as their contours, saying nothing;
repression, however, is not the most obvious characteristic
of the sea.

I am startled by how tangible the interim is in that shift between the firs and the quick, abstract characterization of the sea. It makes me think of the physical distance between one thought and the next. I feel as though I can hear the writer's mind, there after the semi-colon, clearing a palpable impasse and coming to the other side with as much ambivalence as lights clicking back on after an electrical outage. Like the man's silence, the silence between image, conception and recognition in this poem seems a death of a kind, and concrete in its own right.

If the poem is about death, it is a death that does not prefer human mortality, I think. The fish are not bothered by it or attracted to it, although they could easily be included in its progress. It is a death that moves the poet, and that in her eye, lives back to back with continuity. To her the firs on the water's face are seen as "in a procession," so that even if a funeral likeness is what she imagines, her eye is with the advancement of it all. I am intrigued by the obvious contradictions she perceives as mutual in the grave, our most tangible representation of human death it would seem, and the sea whose surface pictures motion almost exclusively. I am especially attracted to the metaphor this becomes for the way it shifts and progresses within the definitions or "contours" of metaphor, as if the sea were something splitting inside a cocoon.

But, overall, I am moved by the predicament of this poem's speaker, who by the fourth line of the poem is talking more or less to herself. The relationship between the speaker and the man appears clear in one sense at least; she is the speaker and he is the all too silent receiver. She can insist:

but you cannot stand in the middle of this;

She can know and admonish:

the sea is a collector, quick to return a rapacious look.

She can say “this is this and that is that. You have taken the view but I know better.” In fact, she can circumvent, detour, all but escape this man’s silence, which much like the sea to the fishermen in the latter half of the poem, offers not only no resistance, but nothing in return.

The queer thing about “A Grave,” for me, is the lack of provocation. The intensity of the speaker, her vision of the sea (the darkness in it), and the lack of alternative they present, the lack of echo therein, are not easily explained. The context of this poem finds the speaker at once superior and humbled, or awed, and it never changes. It would be like talking to one’s hands or a mirror, I imagine. And, at what point would all that silence begin to sound like an accomplice. Suddenly, the words printed on the page begin to look like cool shoals of fish brushing up, in their traffic, against utter neutrality. Sadly, there is no version of the sea to lend spark to this one, no version of the sea that comes to interrupt the speaker’s own.

Perhaps she would merely be risking righteousness if she weren’t so vigorous in her awareness, everywhere, of that as man’s original and flawed position. Then too, by observing the man’s situation from the ironic distance of her own, she has turned the table, so to speak, on herself. At the same time, she appears to be unable to resist her own urge to speak and the great freedom the man’s silence offers. As she exercises the ability to perceive, order, and analyze, she recognizes that these are the acts of volition and consciousness not existing in the depths and processes of the universe:

. . . looking as if it were not that ocean in which
dropped things are bound to sink —
in which if they turn and twist, it is neither with volition nor
consciousness.

Her poem suggests that hers is an explicit authority and that that authority is all but meaningless.

I am reminded as I read "A Grave" of the strange contexts poems and fictions are, and of the question of how much distance permits them. The answer, for me, which is not an answer, is sound enough — a poem begins to work its way out of real life tension into some other order that resembles the original only in ways I hadn't dreamed of. I used to believe the two things, the experience of the poem and the experience of real life, were not all that distant from one another. Lately, I've come to think that the distance is practically colossal. Imagination seems to prefer only so much of real gravity. I've never understood this. I don't know how far a thing can slant before it becomes deceptive. I don't often think of such questions while writing, but on the other hand, such questions are immediate and real. I think of the triangles of geometry which allow us to conceive of the spaces we inhabit, but which are not at all those spaces. I suppose I think of this because in Moore's poem, the poetic refinement that places the speaker at one point, the man at another, and the sea at yet another, works. It seems false in a way that makes the poem beautiful, and makes the poem sound unlike any other. She has stretched things a bit, I think, but I find myself fascinated by the results, and fascinated by how much she seems to be, within her own angle, by her own angle, deeply challenged.

I can't help but think of how small a stretch it probably is between imagination and manipulation, or between speech and oppression, "repression." There ought to be whole unknowable landscapes between death and desecration. But, like the sometimes small ground between discovery and repetition, often there is little. In place of an original struggle between man and survival, one finds organizations and hierarchies apparent in even the smallest systematic killings. Soon enough "men lower nets, unconscious of the fact that they are desecrating a grave, / and row quickly away — the blades of the oars / moving together like the feet of water-spiders as if there were no such thing as death."

Of course, there *is* such a thing as death. The speaker knows

this. She knows it like a blood relative. Her frankness, her urge to speak, her intelligence increase the poignancy of that fact, until what was obvious at first, is not in the least obvious. It isn't only that her voice is attached to the same human consciousness that drives the fisherman, but that a silence precedes it as well as them. There's the inclination always to say something into it, to say something to it, which is not the problem until one stands in the middle of it as in a boat, letting effort dim. The problem is that the little silences, the little deaths which might at one time have interfered, have been novel and slippery, can arrive all too easily.

Fortunately, in Marianne Moore's case, a real character speaks. Her effort is alive as her voice is alive, and full of contradiction: fearful, wise, despairing at times, resilient, urgent, nearly righteous, almost prophetic, it places its strange convictions between the ear and consciousness. She speaks and hears herself. She orders and sees order for what it is. It is both difficult and delightful, I think, that in the end, as she observes the man, and he observes the sea, the sea, whose foremost conditions are mystery, movement, and silence, is not and never was observing anybody.

SILENCE

My father used to say,
"Superior people never make long visits,
have to be shown Longfellow's grave
or the glass flowers at Harvard.
Self-reliant like the cat —
that takes its prey to privacy,
the mouse's limp tail hanging like a shoelace from its mouth —
they sometimes enjoy solitude,
and can be robbed of speech
by speech which has delighted them.
The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence;
not in silence, but restraint."
Nor was he insincere in saying, "Make my house your inn."
Inns are not residences.

ABSENT THINGS

For the last edition of her *Collected Poems*, Marianne Moore edits her famous "Poetry" from twenty-nine lines down to three. The severity of the reduction suggests several possibilities, ranging from issues of the literalist imagination (" 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them' ") to issues of rhythm vs. cadence (is it poetry or is it prose?). It could also be a case of modesty or irony. I prefer to think of the revision in terms of an understanding of and commitment to the uses of silence, reluctance — or what Elizabeth Bishop, in her moving essay "Efforts of Affection," calls Moore's "grace" and "reticence." We might even refer to it as the art of the absence of a certain kind of noise. *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* reprints the earlier version of "Poetry" with the note that ultimately "Miss Moore omitted all the poem following the first three lines." The footnote is incomplete. I want to make a little fuss about the oversight because, in light of her notions of poetry, I think it is significant what else Moore left out of her poem, in the very first line: "there are things that are more important beyond all this fiddle."

The fiddle can, of course, cover all sorts of fiddling. One of the values I'd like to assign it relates to those advertisements of originality so often cited in Moore's writing, those appearances of style — for which exclusive attention is itself reductive — such as the preoccupation with her syllabics, the emphasis on her playfulness and eccentricity, the fixation on the entertainment of her information, and the relegation to rhetoric of her powerful intuition concerning what Whitman called the tally ("Elizabeth, don't speak to me about that man!"), the tiering, the simultaneity of particulars. I don't put these concerns down; I mean only, for a moment, to put them in their place. It may be true that like Williams and Stevens — but without their considerable commentary — Moore is a revolutionary — or is she a reactionary? — of the individual lyric form, of how a poem can sound and what it can look like, line and image and shape. It may be true that her unique contribution is the admixture of media interaction — prose to verse — she manages to alloy with both intensity and ease, as if

her poems were antique findings as well as elaborately invented constructs, and as if she were both shopper and scientist. Yet it's possible that her greatest insight has to do with content rather than technique — with contents, with the meaning and nature of the found; with not only what poems consist of but where they come from, in the world and in her own distancing presence.

Moore, for one thing, is a genius of scale, of letting the air out of the large and of giving a touch of the grand to the small: glaciers that are octopi, snails that make modesty a virtue. She does this primarily by analogy, as in "An Octopus" and "The Grave" (perhaps her two best poems), by juxtaposition, as in "The Plumet Basilisk" and "Critics and Connoisseurs," and by focus on the funny fact, as in "Elephants" and "The Pangolin." Likely these methods come out in the wash more or less the same — to compare is to juxtapose is to focus on the evocative, ironic particular. The point is the quality of the extra-literary information and what the observer wills. Moore reverses D. H. Lawrence, for example, and instead of treating the animal as the passionate subject, sees it wholly as the inspiring object, and in doing so denies the figure in the narrative for the figure in the round. Lawrence is an expressionist with a story to tell, Moore a cubist with an object (*objet d'art*?) to see — her buffalo — "black in blazonry" — is structured for the eye and ear, the wit and thought, a kind of exemplary statuary. The norms of time and landscape are suspended in Moore, in just the ways that the outside, found information seems to float from zoo or library, neighborhood or newspaper into the text, like water ouzels and *anastasis* and ponies named Blue Bug. At her best Moore is a magical realist, a fabulist, a combiner of worlds, a maker of hybrids, a dramatist of detail.

At the level of voice, of tone, however, for all her multiple verbal dexterity and fluent imaginative layering, for all her observational and intellectual skills — the whole poetry noise — Moore is a rather quiet poet. She is certainly reluctant to speak "personally," even to the extent that she would escape personality. She is utterly shy as to asserting her place in a poem: the performance of the specialty act speaks for her. She is the poet

off-stage, in the wings, running the show. Witness rather than first cause. Indeed, Moore is unique — notably in her own generation — in the pressure and purity she brings to bear on this essential modern poetic problem: how to create the authenticity of the emotion without compelling the close proximity of the self. Moore is not a cold poet, yet how seldom even the first-person personal pronoun even pops up. “Silence,” as an instance, is an *ars poetica* in the pose of personal homily. The reference “My father,” as if Moore were passing on actual parental advice, is just another distancing device, part of a larger quotation she has borrowed from Miss A. M. Homans. Its use is really no different from the Edmund Burke quote that ends the poem, “Make my house your inn,” which is also “misassigned.” Quotations, like other data in Moore’s work, are objects too. This doesn’t mean that Moore is being ironic or appositional to the advice offered in the poem — the last “didactic” line is clearly hers — but it does mean that she wishes to disguise a strong and cool aesthetic statement within a familiar, and familial, setting. Even a warm setting, by New England standards. The poem is about restraint, not silence exactly — about the talents of reticence, about the power of the mouthpiece, all of which is magnified through the tension of denial, distance.

Self-restraint, privacy, solitude — these are themes of silence all right. The speech of silence, though, is the speech of theft, the speech that through delight robs silence; and that moment, both still and fluent, is the moment of reticence, power, restraint, of silence-into-speech and — in order to achieve self-deniability — speech back into silence. Moore’s objectifications, through the use of the found and/or the exotic, the borrowed or the quoted, are the perfect methodology of saying without speaking, of building without showing her hand. I find a certain poignancy in Moore’s method, and admiration. Even the thievery is brick by brick, perhaps because the sources are so common, close-at-hand. Moore is always the blackbird lining the nest with brightness and use. Enlarging by the little. Keats described the perfect poetic stance as disinterestedness, Stevens as disappearance into the text. They may be positing the same thing. For

Moore the world is the self and through it she is confirmed: it is her collateral. That is why for her a language of absences is no abstraction: it is her tongue. One never senses even a purchase on the drifts narrative of things. One sees Moore standing perfectly still in the middle of the commotion. The real irony is that usually her longer poems are her most restrained, reticent, such as "An Octopus," which builds on the principle of silences to be filled, of image or fact generating the need for the next, the way a glacier is finally snow. The longer the form the less the presence of the poet is called for.

BY DISPOSITION OF ANGELS

Messengers much like ourselves? Explain it.
Steadfastness the darkness makes explicit?
Something heard most clearly when not near it?

Above particularities,
these unparticularities praise cannot violate.

One has seen, in such steadiness never deflected,
how by darkness a star is perfected.

Star that does not ask me if I see it?
Fir that would not wish me to uproot it?
Speech that does not ask me if I hear it?

Mysteries expound mysteries.
Steadier than steady, star dazzling me, live and elate,
no need to say, how like some we have known; too like her,
too like him, and a-quiver forever.

AN INVITATION TO WONDER

Among her poems, Marianne Moore's "By Disposition of Angels" is a little like a dikdik, an ibex or a jerboa, that "small desert rat, / and not famous." Less inclusive than much of her work, less imagistic, the poem receives comparably little attention. Yet "By Disposition of Angels" is recognizably Moore's, marked by her multidirectional intelligence, her mix of humility and effrontery. The poem proceeds by merging, however tentatively, the earthly and the celestial, the human and the divine. The poem's six questions enact urgent, exuberant inquiry, for Moore pays homage to the hypothetical, inviting us to practice her strategies without violating the wondrous or ourselves. Here our wonder creates our questions.

Moore's title, "By Disposition of Angels," immediately alerts us. Are we to consider the temperament of angels, their inclinations and powers? Or are we to think of their placement or distribution? While the poem may take part in each of these possibilities, it primarily adopts a drama of position: What is the perspective we may take toward the absolute, "the genuine"? The angels, like the absolute poem, may exist in contradiction, fixed and in motion, exact and strict — and yet out of bounds, "a-quiver forever."

Moore opens with a question, "Messengers much like ourselves?", followed by a command that is part rebuke, part challenge: "Explain it." Moore thrived, I should think, on a good question. While her question tentatively identifies us with angels and the angels, as messengers, with language, her following two-word command places upon the poem the burden of proof. What follows are chains of paradoxes. The dark allows us to see the star. In absence those we love may appear clarified to us as never before. "Mysteries expound mysteries."

The poem is a performance of "too like," of repetitions in structure and language overlapping until the poem might seem as curiously watertight as the feathers of certain birds. Repetitions accumulate, accrete: *steadfastness, steadiness, steadier, steady, particularities, unparticularities, mysteries, mysteries, too like her, too like him.*

Defining by negation, Moore repeats *not* five times; she repeats *like* four times, defining by resemblance. At terminal position, the first three lines of these structurally duplicate stanzas, each like the cut wing of a sonnet, repeat *it*, that most ambiguous of pronouns. The poem then moves from the abstract to the concrete, from the generalized to the particular, from angels and star to the human. Moore takes us from the element of air to earth to speech itself, our particular "element." Each stanza's indented fourth line — "above particularities" in the first and "mysteries expound mysteries" in the second — suggest the angels must remain as distant as stars. The poem's self-compoundings perform like the winged and doubly embracive power we may associate with angels.

"By Disposition of Angels" first appeared in 1948, a year after the death of Moore's mother, a woman who was perhaps the most intimate presence in her daughter's life. Moore added a postscript to her *Selected Poems* that exemplifies her sense of indebtedness to her mother as a source, an originary mind:

Dedications imply giving, and we do not care to make a gift of what is insufficient; but in my immediate family there is one "who thinks in a particular way;" and I should like to add that where there is an effect of thought or pith in these pages, the thinking and often the actual phrases are hers.

Apparently written at a time when Moore was preoccupied with her mother's long illness and death, "By Disposition of Angels" may be the most private of a species of love poem, alluding to the mother as much as the mother tongue and mother wit. The woman "who thinks in a particular way" recalls us, paradoxically, to "these unparticularities praise cannot violate." Moore reminds us elsewhere that "efforts of affection — / attain integration too tough for infraction." The poem's weight of feeling is almost implosive in its privacy and tenacious double-mindedness:

Steadier than steady, star dazzling me, live and elate,
no need to say, how like some we have known; too like her,
too like him, and a-quiver forever.

The quills of the poem seem to rise. Angel, star, the spirit, the poem must for Moore be “a-quiver forever,” resonantly in movement.

Moore’s repetition of the prefix *ex* (out) in *explain*, *explicit*, and *expound* directs us to the letter *x*, not as a cancellation but as a marker, an intersection, the power of the double, the chromosome and the chiasmus, the unknown element, a sign for our crossed position — the *x* as the minimalist’s star. The poem performs as an intersection in which qualities of sensibility and aesthetics (“steadfastness,” an absolute integrity) meet. Dickinson’s “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant —” may be a prescription for Moore’s truths amid both these *x*’s and her curious syllabics that verge on a kind of skeptic’s numerology. For Moore, a truth does not require that we take one short dive but that we make our approach on the “slant.”

“Too like,” a certain power of excess, signals curious affinities, kinships. Reflections drift over reflections, for Moore’s angels emerge as doubly human, our higher powers. The poem, then, offers us both a measure of heightened possibility and a tonic against easy presumption.

THE FRIGATE PELICAN

Rapidly cruising or lying on the air there is a bird
that realizes Rasselas's friend's project
of wings uniting levity with strength. This
hell-diver, frigate-bird, hurricane-
bird; unless swift is the proper word
for him, the storm omen when
he flies close to the waves, should be seen
fishing, although oftener
he appears to prefer

to take, on the wing, from industrious cruder-winged species
the fish they have caught, and is seldom successful.
A marvel of grace, no matter how fast his
victim may fly or how often may
turn, *the dishonest pelican's ease*
in pursuit, bears him away
with the fish that the badgered bird drops.
A kind of superlative
swallow, that likes to live

on food caught while flying, he is not a pelican. The toe
with slight web, air-boned body, and very long wings
with the spread of a swan's — duplicating a
bow-string as he floats overhead — feel
the changing V-shaped scissor swallow-
tail direct the rigid keel.
And steering beak to windward always,
the fleetest foremost fairy
among birds, outflies the

aeroplane which cannot flap its wings nor alter any quill-
tip. For him, the feeling in a hand, in fins, is
in his unbent downbent crafty oar. With him
other pelicans aimlessly soar
as he does; separating, until

*not flapping they rise once more
closing in without looking and move
outward again to the top
of the circle and stop*

and blow back, allowing the wind to reverse their direction.

This is not the stalwart swan that can ferry the woodcutter's two children home; no. Make hay; keep the shop; I have one sheep; were a less limber animal's mottoes. This one finds sticks for the swan's-down dress of his child to rest upon and would not know Gretel from Hänsel. As impassioned Handel —

meant for a lawyer and a masculine German domestic career — clandestinely studied the harpsichord and never was known to have fallen in love, the unconfiding frigate-bird hides in the height and in the majestic display of his art. He glides a hundred feet or quivers about as charred paper behaves — full of feints; and an eagle

of vigilance, earns the term aquiline; keeping at a height so great the feathers look black and the beak does not show. It is not retreat but exclusion from which he look down and observes what went secretly, as it thought, out of sight among dense jungle plants. Sent ahead of the rest, there goes the true knight in his jointed coat that covers all but his bat

ears; a-trot, with stiff pig gait — our tame armadillo, loosed by his master and as pleased as a dog. Beside the

spattered blood — that orchid which the native fears —
the fer-de-lance lies sleeping; centaur-
like, this harmful couple's amity
is apropos. A jaguar
and crocodile are fighting. Sharp-shinned
hawks and peacock-freckled small
cats, like the literal

merry-go-round, come wandering within the circular view
of the high bird for whom from the air they are ants
keeping house all their lives in the crack of a
crag with no view from the top. And here,
unlikely animals learning to
dance, crouch on two steeds that rear
behind a leopard with a frantic
face, tamed by an Artemis
who wears a dress like his,

and hampering haymaker's hat. "Festina lente." Be gay
civilly. How so? 'If I do well I am blessed
whether any bless me or not, and if I do
ill I am cursed'. We watch the moon rise
on the Susquehanna. In his way
this most romantic bird, flies
to a more mundane place, the mangrove
swamp, to sleep. He wastes the moon.
But he, and others, soon

rise from the bough, and though flying are able to foil the tired
moment of danger, that lays on heart and lungs the
weight of the python that crushes to powder.

The tune's illiterate footsteps fail;
the steam hacks are not to be admired.
These, unturbulent, avail
themselves of turbulence to fly — pleased
with the faint wind's varyings,
on which to spread fixed wings.

*The reticent lugubrious ragged immense minuet
descending to leeward, ascending to windward
again without flapping, in what seems to be
a way of resting, are now nearer,
but as seemingly bodiless yet
as they were. Theirs are sombre
quills for so wide and lightboned a bird
as the frigate pelican
of the Caribbean.*

CLIPPED WINGS

When I was growing up and starting to take an interest in poetry I became aware of certain spinster-poets who dressed eccentrically and inspired a mixture of affection and contempt in the media and the public. England had Edith Sitwell and we had Marianne Moore. They were different, to be sure, but somehow one lumped them together. I found them supremely uninteresting.

I mention these early impressions of Moore only because I suspect that they are typical. They helped prevent me from becoming a serious and sympathetic reader of her poems for quite a long time. No doubt they reflect my own ignorance and poor judgment, as well as our cultural disposition to make poets, especially women poets, tame or safe or a bit ridiculous. But they may also tell us something about the shape and character of Moore's career.

Without having studied the matter closely, I have come to suspect that Moore collaborated somewhat in her own diminution from a fiercely experimental modernist to a quaint little old lady interested in baseball and rodents, a purveyor, at her worst, of dessicated whimsy. My suspicion stems from my gradual discovery that the texts in her *Collected Poems* (1951) and her *Complete Poems* (1956, 1958, 1967 — billed on its current Penguin cover as "The Definitive Edition . . .") are quite often drastically reduced and appallingly 'safe' versions of her best early works. For whatever reasons, Moore came to distrust her early, experimental tendencies, and she could not leave her own work alone. The tart headnote to the *Complete Poems* — "Omissions are not accidents" — emphasizes her right to second-guess herself artistically, but it does not resolve the issue of what a reduced version of this wonderful poet we have in her final version of her own canon. If we are to learn to read her well we must be willing to search out earlier versions of her poems and to exercise our own judgments in comparing revised versions to their predecessors.

This is not a matter of not letting Moore have the last word. It is a matter of choosing among her artistic impulses. If Picasso

had decided to paint later, safer versions of his cubist masterpieces we would not object, though we might not care much for them. But if the artist tried to destroy or paint over those masterpieces, or if they were carried off to museum basements through a conspiracy of neglect in the art establishment, then we would want to intervene. Marianne Moore needs to be rescued from her own late timidity about her work, and from the tendency of the critics, with the exception of John Slatin and, to a lesser extent, Bonnie Costello, to accept that timidity as canonical.

The poem I've chosen to discuss, "The Frigate Pelican," is a dramatic example of Moore's drastic overrevising of her work. I have asked the printer to set it with the excised passages in italics, to aid readers in following this discussion. The original version, first printed in T. S. Eliot's magazine, *The Criterion*, in July, 1935, and then in the *Selected Poems* of 1935 (still the one book by Moore to own if you could have only one), consists of twelve nine-line stanzas. The stanzas are cast in a syllabic pattern of 15-12-11-9-9-7-9-7-6. Lines 1 and 5 rhyme, as do 6 and 7, 8 and 9. This formal commitment, most of us would agree, is an extremely demanding one. Yet Moore cut her hundred and eight lines to forty-seven, reducing the poem by over sixty per cent. In the process, she produced two variant stanzas, one of eight lines and one of three, marring her own beautiful and careful patterning in the original. We presume this was not done lightly. And in some respects that "revised" version may be said to be a tighter and more orderly poem. But its ending makes no real sense as it stands, and some of the finest moments have been excised along the way. Whatever the problems of the first version, they are not eradicated by the "solution" of turning a vigorous and sizable original into a kind of crippled dwarf of itself. This has to be said emphatically, since reverence for Moore's editorial eye and revisionist practices seems to be the prevailing sentiment among her commentators.

It's probably wise to be candid about this poet's shortcomings from the outset. She has a comparatively bad ear. She is capable of triviality and irrelevance. She often risks incoherence and disorder, following private associations too far or letting her

taste for arcane detail and verbal gymnastics get the better of her. When we have acknowledged these problems we can get on to the business of appreciating her strengths. It is no accident that her modernist contemporaries — Williams, Stevens, Pound and Eliot — had enormous respect for her. She was a virtuoso of experimentation, willing to risk much. She broke up received ideas about how poems should behave, what they should include, and what kinds of challenges they could offer their readers. Her poems attack traditional notions of unity and decorum. They shift without warning from one topic to another. They are brilliant, unpredictable collages and assemblages, full of driving energy and imaginative somersaults. Her syntax is capacious and intricate, appropriate to poems so inclusive that they threaten to grow enormous in the interests of demonstrating the unifying and synthesizing powers of the imagination. Form is always a hard-won triumph in these circumstances, and the poet has her own special forms of control: the calming syllabics, the intricately patterned stanzas, the special uses of rhyme. She's as free-ranging as Whitman and as rigorous as Dickinson. She reminds us of seventeenth century figures like Vaughan and Traherne, with their ecstatic, charged poems in complex, replicating, anisometric stanzas. Surely she is our great modern practitioner of the ode, the elaborate formal poem of praise and celebration that comes down to us all the way from Pindar and has some of our language's greatest examples in the Romantic period.

Probably her best poem is the early "An Octopus," a headlong avalanche of language about a mountain — Mt. Rainier or a composite of such peaks and their glaciers. It manages to destroy the prim cautions of Imagism and redefine the American Sublime all in one burst of precariously controlled energy. Thank goodness she left it intact. It is the poem with which to begin any study of her work. It teaches you to accept her overloaded sentences and apparent detours. Having been swept away by it, you are ready to allow her her style and to stop worrying unduly about length and coherence. Then her best poems, while they will still ask a great deal from you, will reward you mightily for your attention.

“The Frigate Pelican” typifies her excitement about animals. There’s no doubt that the bird is partly chosen for its capacity to reflect her own values and temperament. The frigate pelican is of course misnamed. Its character comes not from any pelican-like ability to store fish in its beak but from its astonishing maneuverability in flight. It steals from other fishing birds, but playfully and expertly, by outflying them. If we think about Moore’s own reputation as a kind of literary pillager, filling her poems with other people’s phrases and thoughts, we can see why she might have been attracted to this thievish and misnamed aerial acrobat. I have watched them fly, in the Galapagos, and can testify to the absolute accuracy with which she describes them.

The original poem’s first four stanzas were devoted to careful description of the bird’s names, characteristics, and flight behavior. In cutting the four down to two, Moore performed a fairly arbitrary kind of surgery, losing helpful clarifications like “he is not a pelican” and the anticipation of the fifth and sixth stanzas in the comparison to the wingspread of the swan. She sacrificed some extremely exact language, both metaphoric and literal, in excising the third and fourth stanzas. And she lost some highly expressive poetry. I suggested earlier that Moore often has a tin ear, but I would praise this poem for the musical legerity with which it celebrates flight. The cut stanzas have a consistency of effect in their alliteration and consonance, as well as their light touch with vowels, that does a great deal to sustain the mood of excitement.

Moore’s cut version retains the next two stanzas, in which she teases the swan of romantic and symbolist poetry as a bird that by comparison reflects a stolid, bourgeois anthropomorphism, making animals into moral emblems by de-emphasizing their otherness. The rhyme that leads us from Hänsel to Handel allows Moore to introduce music into the poem, not through the bird’s song but by analogy to an artist who began in the safe and burgherly mode and ended by defying it, swan into frigate bird. There are some interesting tensions in the three-way comparison that involves Moore, Handel and the frigate pelican. All can be said to hide “in the height and in the majestic display” of their

art. Reproduction and love are another matter. The bird builds nests for its offspring, a caricature of the swan, while Handel, like Moore, "never was known to have fallen in love." In any case, the alignment of the composer's exuberant melodies, the bird's effortless mastery of the air and the poet's own soaring by means of her intricate, patterned stanzas is an exciting one. That Moore should later have clipped her own wings seems a shame.

The largest cut, of three stanzas, follows. It is true that this passage is difficult for a reader, but it is also surely the most far-ranging and inventive part of the original poem, one that opens it up not merely to the kind of analogy represented by Handel but to an entire animal kingdom, partly natural and partly fanciful, that reaches finally into the realm of myth. Moore's own notes about the giant armadillo and the blood-spotted orchid survive in the *Complete Poems* to baffle readers, a last trace of the excised original. May they tempt others, as they did me, to investigate and discover the poem in all its bewildering and fascinating entirety.

The three cut stanzas give us the frigate pelican's bird's-eye view, an exclusive vantage but not an escapist one, of a world that includes what a real frigate bird might see — Latin American flora and fauna — as well as a mythic merry-go-round of possibilities within the privileged purview of the artist. Did Moore feel she had gone too far by reaching all the way to an Artemis taming leopards? Perhaps. But the stretch is appropriate to her characterization of the frigate pelican's flight capacities and her own amazing instincts as an artist. Such connections are not for everybody, but they constitute Moore's real strength as a working poet and they did not deserve to be treated as superfluous. They validate her celebration of the bird. It is not simply that it flies so well but that it flies so high and far. Since there's an implicit defense of the artistic imagination here, it deserves to be as full as possible and not to be retracted, either as argument or as a stunning list of details.

We come next to the matter of the ending. The unit I'm considering now was originally three stanzas, subsequently cut to less than two. There are some undeniable difficulties — I'm still unsure what "steam hacks" are, though I think they may be the

organs that accompany merry-go-rounds, losing the tune as the carousel slows down — but I think the earlier version is much to be preferred, both as closure and as a psychological and aesthetic extension of what has gone before.

One way to get at this is to compare this ending with Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," the prototype, perhaps, for any ode-like poem centered on a bird. Keats, or his speaker, it will be recalled, after an ecstatic sense of union with the bird, suffers at the end a sense of separation as he falls back into his own humanity and the bird disappears into a transcendent realm where we mortals cannot follow. Something like this happens, I think, in the final stanzas of "The Frigate Pelican." Our humanity begins to separate us from this wonderful flyer. We struggle with the paradoxes of how to make haste swiftly or be gay civilly, while the bird lives out a Hindu motto without having to think about it. We watch (having returned to North America and a river Moore knew well) the rising of the moon, passive and bemused. The bird "wastes the moon" but manages to sleep briefly and to fly all night if necessary, without fatigue. Somehow human beings are much more subject to entropy. Our merry-go-rounds run down and stop. Even our Handel melodies must end. But the frigate pelican, by flying so effortlessly, using turbulence to remain unturbulent, seems to have solved the problems of gravity and exhaustion. It lives on the giant, endless minuet of the wind, as if it could go on forever and ever. It appears to be "bodiless." And yet — and now we now fall back once again into our own realm of paradox and puzzlement — how somber its quills are, given its lightboned and soaring propensities. Thinking about the satisfactions and frustrations that close the "Ode to a Nightingale" helps me understand how Moore is resolving her own ode.

Bonnie Costello, in her thoughtful study of Moore, is cautiously noncommittal about the two versions of this poem. She quotes and praises the earlier one, but she also has good words for the "final version" and its three-line coda, which closes the poem by characterizing "the tired / moment of danger" in terms of "the / weight of the python that crushes to powder." Having taught that version, quite innocently, I can testify that students

find it bewildering and abrupt. Having tried to defend it — I even suggested that “though” was a misprint for “through” — I can also testify to my relief at discovering that it was not the true ending at all, merely the result of some rather arbitrary cutting.

If we look back now at the original in its entirety, I think we can say it was by far the stronger of the two versions. Admittedly, it had some obscurities. By the time Moore gets to Artemis in the ninth stanza, she has come a long way and included a great deal. But this imaginative range is what makes her so exciting. She does not merely describe — Costello treats this poem in a chapter titled “Descriptive Poems” — but instead lets language enact transformations that are only possible in the kind of highly experimental poetic context she is capable of creating. Artemis is a good case in point. If you try to find, as I did, the painting which is the probable source for this passage, you will discover that painters do not show Artemis taming leopards while wearing a dress or a haymaker’s hat. Perhaps she is really Circe. More likely the ‘painting’ is an imaginary conflation of several paintings Moore liked, with a carousel thrown in for good measure.

I would admit too that “steam hacks” is extremely obscure, and that my reading of it is precariously conjectural. But surely the answer to these difficulties, if that is what they are, was not the revised version that Moore came up with. It’s like amputating limbs as a way of dealing with warts. Someday we may have a better idea of why Moore did what she did to her poems. Until then, we owe it to her and to the poems and to ourselves as attentive readers to look behind and beyond the confines of her “Definitive Edition” just as often as we like.

A STORY

Absence is homesick. Absence wants a home
but Absence left without a glance at Home.
Home tried to hold in Absence's despite
Home caved, shuddered, yet held
without Absence's consent. Home took a walk
in several parks, Home shivered
in outlying boroughs, slept on strange floors,
cried many riffs of music, many words.
Home went out to teach school, Home studied pain control
Home learned to dive and came up blind with blood
Home learned to live on each location
but whenever Absence called, Home had to answer
in the grammar of Absence.

Home would hitch-hike
through flying snow, Home would roast meat,
light candles, to withstand the cold. Home washed the dishes
faithfully. But Absence
always knew when to call.

What if Absence calls
and a voice answers
in the dialect of Home?

1986

THE NOVEL

All winter you went to bed early, drugging yourself

on War and Peace

Prince Andrei's cold eyes taking in the sky from the battlefield
were your eyes, you went walking wrapped in his wound
like a padded coat against the winds from the two rivers
You went in the streets as if you were ordinary
as if you hadn't been pulling with your raw mittened hand
on the slight strand that held your tattered mind
blown like an old stocking from a wire
on the wind between two rivers

All winter you asked nothing
of that book though it lay heavy on your knees
you asked only for a shed skin, many skins in which to walk
you were old woman, child, commander
you watched Natasha grow into a neutered thing
you felt your heart go still while your eyes swept the pages
you felt the pages thickening to the left and on the right-
hand growing few, you knew the end was coming
you knew beyond the ending lay
your old, unwritten life

1986

CHILDREN PLAYING CHECKERS AT THE EDGE
OF THE FOREST

Two green-webbed chairs
a three-legged stool between
Your tripod
Spears of grass
longer than your bare legs
cast shadows on your legs
drawn up
away from the red-and-black
cardboard squares
the board of rules
the board of play
But you're not playing, you're talking
It's midsummer
and greater rules are breaking
it's the last
innocent summer you will know
and I
will go on awhile pretending that's not true
When I have done pretending
I can see this:
the depth of the background
shadows
not of one moment only
erased and charcoaled in again
year after year
how the tree looms back behind you
the first tree of the forest
the last tree
from which the deer step out
from protection
The first tree
into dreadfulness
The last and the first tree

1986

WONDERS

In a wide hoop of lamplight, two children —
a girl and her younger brother — jump marbles
on a star-shaped playboard. Beside them,
in a chair near a window, their father
thinks of his mother, her recent death

and the grief he is trying to gather.
It is late October. The hooplight spreads
from the family, through the window,
to the edge of a small orchard, where
a sudden frost has stripped the fruit leaves
and only apples hang, heavy and still
on the branches like so many possums.

The man looks from the window, down
to a scrapbook of facts he is reading.
The spider is proven to have memory, he says,
and his son, once again, cocks his small face
to the side, speaks a guttural oh, as if
this is some riddle he is slowly approaching,
as if this long hour, troubled with phrases
and the queer turn in this father's voice
is offered as a riddle.

There is the sound of marbles
in their suck-hole journeys, and the skittery
jump of the girl's shoe
as she waits, embarrassed, for her father
to stop, to return to his known self, thick
and consistent as a family bread.
But still he continues,

plucking scraps from his old book, old
diary of wonders: the vanishing borders
of mourning paper, the ghostly shape
in the candled egg, beak and eye
etched clearly, a pin-scratch of claw.

A little sleet scrapes at the window.
The man blinks, sees his hand on the page
as a boy's hand, sees his children bent over
the playboard, with the careful pattern
of their lives dropping softly away, like
leaves in a sudden frost — how the marbles
have stalled, heavy and still on their fingers,
and after each phrase the guttural
oh, and the left shoe jumping.

THE NEON ARTIST IN DECEMBER

Snow everywhere, like the salt
electrons jump from, as gas snaps
and the tube hisses with light.
I am holding just now the hooked underbeak
of the great flamingo:
cool glass, a little dusting of phosphor.
Just off through the tree-line, the New Year
waits with its bells,

as in the ballroom of the Grand Hotel, stretched
thirty feet up to the promenade deck,
the back-kneed, s-necked mate
waits with its own ringing, its
soft, rattle-whistle of argon.
What a pair they will make: ice-pink tubeworks
north and south on the ballroom floor.
And below: foxscarves, carnations, the pull
and push of the long trombones.

Flamingoes! And now
the moon pressing back through the tree-line.

Close your eyes. Let us
say we are children together, ten, perhaps twelve.
I see neon: a steadfast landscape of
DEPOT, HEIDELBERG, VACANCY.
And you? Women in cardigans? A certain
leaf tree? Perhaps the gleam

of your dress shoe as you welcome the New Year.
The ballroom is thick with smoke and laughter.
Two birds, of course, north and south. Then
the catch in your breath as an uncle explains
the impact of vapor and salt, how
a light that has never been

curls up through the century — swank,
incredibly still.

Our times, he laughs, and in
from the thin roadways all the WELCOMES,
the PALMISTS and EXITS, all the boneworks
blown to their plush, just bearable tones

curl up to a wing and s-neck.
High above you, cupped
left, right on the ballroom floor, that
ice-pink, still parenthesis.
Then foxscarves. The flick of the black shoes.

QUICKLY AND FULLY

— *homage to Louis Pasteur*

Not foam at all. Certainly
not froth. Just a web of viscid gel
palate to muzzle. A squint. A gape. Now and then,
a rush of high-toned howls, sharp, then diminishing,
like a ball thrust down once and abandoned.

And where the candlelight offers its own web,
a woman reads of this illness —
one spark of germ, then the brain
like a scarlet skull cap — of the cure she will carry,
those specks of red medulla dictating sound,
flecked, injected, day after day,
two grams of rabid animal brain
flickering through her bloodworks.

Not fury at all. A nudge.
She had carried cold stones down the side-path,
for the licking, the swollen tongue. And out
from a break in the hedgerow, from a nest of
string and balsa, that tongue, nudging a hangnail.

She gathers her gloves,
little kerchief of biscuits and plums.
It is dawn on the roadway to Paris. Already

the chemists are working: all across the room,
suspended from threads in cotton-topped vials,
the daubs of drying medulla wait,
row after row, tiny nerve hooks for hearing, the curl
of the muzzle, used now for a madness
turned back on itself — ten-day, five-day, one-day,
to the strongest, far off in a corner,
so plump they might still cup the impulse for sound.

*Like glass-harps, she thinks, then takes the injection,
quickly and fully, as she takes the grief,
the little fear, then the joy of human wonder.*

Perhaps I will hear as you did —

for these days, the lost animal sounds.

But she does not, of course — just wind
and her shoes in the wheel ruts,
the sluice of bitten plums.

HISTORY OF MEDICINE

Finally I fondly remember even Benylin,
Robitussin, Actifed,
Tedral, Erythromycin,
penicillin, EES, I
remember the little open mouth and the
spoon's unwavering journey toward it, the
bowl of the spoon concave with its shuddering
pebble of blackish scarlet.
Time slowed down as the spoon went in, I can
still feel the thrum in the handle as their
lips closed, that little tug like
nursing and then I pulled the clean
glistening stainless out of their mouth,
Ampicillin, ipecac, St.
Joseph's, Tetracycline, my body
tuned to the four-hour intervals — we made
one being, the bottle and the child and I,
I remember it with longing. Even the ear-drops,
lice-shampoo, wart glaze,
even the time when my son was three and
would not take the Tedral that let him
breathe without that shriek in his chest, he was
standing in his crib when I spooned it to him and he
spat it out and I gently jammed another
dose through his teeth and he spat it out
until the white glossy bars were
splattered with dots of heavy syrup and he
understood I cared about the topic
even more than he.
As I cleaned him up with a damp cloth
I told him the germs were strong, we had to
seriously fight them — I can hear my voice now,
calm and cheerful. I can see myself, a
young woman with an orderly array of
brilliant bottles behind her, she is struggling to be
good, to be healed.

NECKING

I remember the greenish lights of the dashboard, aquarium green, like the paint-brush tips the watch-girls licked, licking the radium, and we were there above the Cyclotron, in the hills, the Rad Lab under us enclosed in its cyclone fence. I remember the soft curves of the dashes of the 50's, flank-shapes of domestic mammals, the front seat like your mother's body as if her lap were made to have sex in, those knobs like fierce nipples, those owls'-eye dials. And the beauty of the night, that crisp weightless blackness around us, the air that rose up the slope straight from the sea, from Seal Rock, so while we slid slowly along each other we were sister and brother to the seal in its liquid skin. And the lights of Berkeley below, brilliant and tiny — without my glasses a pit of smeared lights, a bottom drawer of light. And the rape and murder had happened here in these hills so the dirt that buried her body was always there with sex, porous and mineral, the flesh of the earth itself. And one of the gleams down there was the donut shop where he picked her up, as if all the most intimate pleasure, glaze and the hole, were to be touched by him. And the way the state had handled him, its easy touch of four thousand volts, that was in the car with us with everything else, the powerful brass bolts in boys' jeans, studs like engraved shields for their souls, the way they carried the longing of the species, you could not help but pity them as they set you on stunned fire. I remember my

breasts like little seal snouts so
thirsty for touch, and with hours of it I'd
pass out, still awake,
my body made of some other substance, my
eyes open in the green dark as
if we were on the moon. And in some
other car, all this time, on some
other spear or skirt of the mountain,
some boy I really loved. So I remember
flying through the night, sealed in a capsule
with the wrong person. But the place was right,
blue nuts of eucalyptus
studded the ground around us, tangy
Northern California night —
the mountains on my left hand and the
sea on my right, I felt someday I would find him,
proton electron we would hit and stick and
meanwhile there were the stars and the boy's pants
and my glasses, wings folded, stuck into a
pocket. I remember the loud snap when we
leaned on them and they broke, pair after
pair woke us up and brought us
down the hill, back to the families
sex had made. The porch-lamp blazed
over my head, I'd slip my key in the
lock and enter at the base of the blurred gem, it seemed
endless then, the apprenticeship to the mortal.

NATURAL HISTORY

When I think about eels, I think about Seattle,
the day I went back to my father's grave.
I knew we had buried ashes, a steel
box of clean fluffy ash just
faintly oily, and yet, as I approached,
it felt as if the length of him were
slung there, massive, slack, a
six-foot amber eel flung down
deep into the hill. The air was clammy,
greenish as the air in the Aquarium when we'd
enter from the Zoo. Whenever we saw a
wild thing, my father would offer to
feed me to it — tigers, crocodiles,
heavy bedsheet of the manta ray and
most of all the eel, it would ripple
up to us, armless, legless, grinning,
How would you like a tasty girl, my
father would ask the eel, a minister
performing a marriage, *How would you like to*
get in there with that, he'd lift me toward the
thick glass as if I were rising on the
power of my own scream. Later I would
tiptoe into the living room and
stand at the shallow end and watch him
sleep, passed out, undulant, lax,
indifferent. And at his grave
it was much like that,
the glossy stone, below it the ashes'
grey bouquet, and under that, like a
boy who has thrown himself down to cry, the
great easy stopped curve of my
father. Length to length I lay on him
and slept.

THE PANTHEIST TO HIS CHILD

When I first met my birthfather he seemed to say:

Keep this picture. Here I am —
just after the war that's how we all looked,
pensive, my violin played inside out.
My head bowed down, I leaned
like someone just emerged
from a score for strings.

My philosophy's part grass, part weed.
I cultivate it and I let it grow wild,
rangy as lilacs, disorderly as chestnuts
slamming down hard
so I cannot paddle them back.

The universe needs your sympathy
even though it boos my appearance sometimes.
Religion? I went *through* Zen;
I like the tea ceremony
but have no one to spill it with.

There is one God. Whoever it is is everywhere.
In the poisonous mushroom
whose curry flesh bruises turquoise,
a blue blush, just that sudden;
in the hit dog, black and white, uncombed,
who sticks out his blood like a long tongue
meandering down the grade,
a death-leash;

in sex
God looks at in eco-zones,
fireweed fluff lodging in a scorched slash pile
just before the snows, dodder
wrapping itself all over pickleweed in itchy marsh brine.

Do you think? Do you believe? Are some things proved to you?
That day we found one red poppy in a roadside of thousands
golden —.

Maybe it's standing up for bafflement.

Maybe it's an ancient bloodline found.

But do not believe that by being cleverly
all alone it stands for oneness.

It could be a rose fanatic, a defensive whistler,
unique in a world without tokenism.

All of these good guesses
make me a philosopher.

Ah, daughter, a kin of insight waits for you in me.

LOST

On my way home, cutting through alleys,
crossing the abandoned lots where the kids
fought their first wars, the ones they won,
I lose my way, although there is no way.
Slowly the night sky floods with stars.

The long arched bow of Orion, the belt
studded with jewels, the arrows that stay
forever as the shadowy bear and bison flee
toward the far corners of creation. I'm dizzy
in the middle of a street of silent houses

none of which is mine. If I stand here
long enough my breath will calm, the day
break on forests of TV antennas, on doors
that don't open, windows boarded over,
on no one at all, and I'll know where I am.

THIS DAY

Everyone knows that the trees will go one day
and nothing will take their place.
Everyone has wakened alone in
a room of fresh light and risen
to meet the morning as I did
before I came upon this name
and this sad nature by which others
know me. How long have we waited
quietly by the side of the road
for someone to slow and ask *why?*
The light is going, first from between
the long rows of dark firs
and then from our eyes, and when
it is gone we will be gone.
No one will be left to say,
"He took that stick and marked off
the place where the door would be,"
or "She held the child in both hands
and sang the same few tunes
over and over."

Before dinner we stood
in line to wash the grease from our faces
and scrub our hands with a hard brush,
and the pan of water thickened and grayed,
a white scum frothed on top,
and the last one flung it all in the yard.
Boiled potatoes, buttered and salted, onions,
thick slices of bread, cold milk,
the smell of coffee from the kitchen.
I felt my eyes slowly closing,
you smoked in silence.

What life
were we expecting? Ships sailed
from distant harbors without us,
the telephone rang and no one answered,
someone came home alone and stood

for hours in the dark hallway.
A woman bowed to a candle
and spoke as though it could hear,
as though it could answer.
My aunt went to the back window
and called her small son, gone now
for 17 years into the closed wards
of the state, called his name again
and again, and her tears fell into nothing.
What could I do? Answer for him
who'd forgotten his name? Take my father's shoes
and go into the streets?

Yes, the sun
has risen again, I can see the windows
change and hear a dog barking. The wind
buckles the slender top of the alder,
the conversation of night birds
hushes, and I can hear my heart
regular and strong. I will live to see
the day end, as I lived to see this hand
grow long and spotted. As I lived
to see the earth turn molten and white,
then to metal, then to whatever shape
we stamped into it as we laughed
the long night hours away or sang
how the eagle flies on Friday.
When Friday came, the early hours perfect
and cold, we cursed our only lives
and passed the bottle back and forth.

Some died.

I turned and he was gone, my friend
with the great laugh who walked
cautiously and ate with his head
down, like a bear, his coarse hair
almost touching the plate. The tall one
with arms no thicker than a girl's,
who cursed his own swollen face
as though he could have another.

The one whose voice lilted softly
when he raised a finger and spoke. Gone
in pain and fear. I sat beside him,
helpless, trying to describe the sea
as I had seen it, but it was lost,
distant and unseen, perhaps no longer
there under a low sky. I wanted to tell him
how the waves darkened and left only
the sound of their breaking,
and after a silence we learned to bear,
it all came back. He turned away
to the wall and slept, and I went out
into the city. It was I who'd held his wife
and felt the small bones of her back
rising and falling as she did not cry.
Later I would see my son from a distance
and not call out. I would waken that night
beside a sleeping woman and count
each breath.

Soon it was summer, afternoon,
the city hid indoors in the great heat,
the hot wind shrivelled our faces. I said,
"They're gone." The light turned from red
to green, and we went on. "If they're not here,"
you said, "Where are they?" We both
looked into the sky as though
it were our only home. We drove on.
Nothing moved, nothing stirred
in the oven of this valley. What
was there left to say? The sky
was on fire, the air streamed
in the open windows. We broke free
beyond the car lots, the painted windows,
the all-night bars, the places
where the children gathered, and we just
went on and on, as far as we could
into a day that would never end.

GANGES

In the dark there's no other side.
Only the river where every morning
the faithful prepare for death.
Small wicks flicker
in the leaves they carry
and scatter a little radiance
on their faces, their thin shawls.

Cripples are wheeled into place
on wooden platforms, and women
squat in a line on the stairs
with tin bowls. The eyes of their babies
are dull already and soft
as water in a cupped hand.
Softer than ashes.
Vague as my mother's
when they finally closed.

What is it keeps us
nurturing the first loss
with our regrets and unspeakable pity,
wanting to step over the edge
if we can come back
forgiven? What is it
in the sickrooms?

The ones who enter the river
lift the dark to their mouths.
When they loosen their saris
their arms shine. All
the wet skin of the grieved world
bobbing and rising.

How simple
the frail light is on the white shirt
of the boy I follow, led
from one boat to another
until the last one
where he unties the rope
and shoves off. And how calm
when the river takes it
and sets it down on its gray back
letting it ride there, a light
so still it scarcely seems to be
breathing. Like the light
as the fever came down
when I wrapped her all night
in wet towels, soaking and wringing
until the breath was there
in her mouth again.

It's the past I look into,
but the past keeps growing.
When I was a child at parties
they'd tie the blindfold
over my eyes and turn me around
until I was dizzy.
I never knew where to pin the tail.

I never knew where I was going.
The boy pulls hard
on the long oars, and our boat
nudges up to the ghat
where the dead are burning.
They are shoveling the ashes
from the last one into the water.

We row with smoke in our throats
through the smoke of morning.

It's already the next life.
The sun's on the rim of the old world
like the tip of an orange thumb.
We turn toward the shore.
The widows are wrapping their heads
in white, unwrapping
their floating shoulders.
Men stand in the river slapping
laundry on the black stones.

I hear the thwack.
And the chants of praise
getting louder. And the click
of rice striking tin
in the hands of beggars, the little
pale grains collecting.

HEARING THE NAMES OF THE VALLEYS

Finally the old man is telling
the forgotten names
and the names of the stones they came from
for a long time I asked him the names
and when he says them at last
I hear no meaning
and cannot remember the sounds

I have lived without knowing
the names for the water
from one rock
and the water from another
and behind the names that I do not have
the color of water flows all day and all night
the old man tells me the name for it
and as he says it I forget it

there are names for the water
between here and there
between places now gone
except in the porcelain faces
on the tombstones
and places still here

and I ask him again
the name for the color of water
wanting to be able to say it
as though I had known it all my life
without giving it a thought

MEMORY

Climbing through a dark shower
I came to the edge of the mountain

I was a child
and everything was there

the flight of eagles the passage of warriors
watching the valley far below

the wind on the cliff the cold rain blowing upward
from the rock face

everything around me had burned
and I was coming back

walking on charcoal among the low green bushes
wet to the skin and wide awake

THE DUCK

The first time that I
was allowed to take out
the white canoe

because the lake was so still
in the evening
I slipped out on the long sky

of midsummer across the light
coming through the overturned
dark trees

I saw the duck catching
the colors of fire
as she moved over the bright glass

and I glided after
until she dove
and I followed with the white canoe

and look what I find
long afterward
the world of the living

THE FEAST OF ST. TORTOISE

The day of her wedding, she crouches in the kitchen
and talks to the tortoise. He is older than she,
one of the family but celibate, reserved,

having taken holy orders in chapels of damp earth.
She admires his head, cobbled in ivory coins.

She touches his cowl, tender as chamois.
She praises his toadstool legs, his decisive beak,

and the raised ornament of his kindness
as he offers himself for a table

or a gameboard of fretted lacquer:
each hexagon fences a mound

into which a star has fallen so deeply
the whole field is on fire.

Let no guest go hungry.
She sets out a plate of lettuce chopped

into ruffles, the cool cheek
of an apple parceled and peeled.

This is for you, old friend.

He flippers forth. The bright worm of his tail
wags after him.

THE APOCRYPHA OF JACQUES DERRIDA

The ruptured underbelly of a black horse flew overhead.
Bonaparte, is what the matron said to me,
Always condescending; vulgar, slowly separating
The three syllables. And it was the last thing she said.
The engine block struck the tree. Our faces
Making brook ice of the windshield. The vaulting black horse
Now on its side in the dust. I was left
With the road, with the memory of cities burning.
Matron seemed to sleep. My nose bleeding.
I went over to inspect the huge sunflowers
That were beyond the stonewall. The sunflowers
Marched with me in Italy. They were cut down.
There was gasoline everywhere. The attendants
Will come for me. It's back to the island.
I'll study English out in the cool stucco of the shed.
I don't really believe I am the Corsican. But then
Neither did he.
The car was now burning with the tree. The black
Brook ice bursting. The horse got up and left me.
A back hoof snared by intestine . . .

I was once all game leg in a fast sleigh
Passing a half-frozen cook who asked a frozen orderly,
"Is he the snow?"
If only that cook had been my general.
It was that straggling long line that cost us.
If they had moved in a dark swarm, huddled together,
Cloud shadow over the Russian countryside, then
There would have been little trouble, a few men
Out on the fringes dropping to the snow for rest,
But still how
Like a forest they would have been
Moving over the land like that gang who came for Macbeth.
I know what you're thinking, that the land pell-mell

Is itself mostly obstacle
And this makes a road. But we were cloud shadow

Moving over snow.

BUFFALO CLOUDS OVER THE MAESTRO HOON

— for our godson

It was a useless thing to do with the morning.

Couples with umbrellas strolled over the lawns
Beside the abyss.
The Maestro tossed a fresh bed of straw for his friend,
He sipped coffee with chicory,
And, then, attempted to walk over Niagra Falls
On a string while pushing a wheelbarrow
That contained a lion captured in the Congo.
Hoon had copper cleats
Sewn into his silk slippers. He wore the orange gown.
It was the full weight of the lion
That propelled this old man and wheelbarrow
Over the falls . . .

Of all things this is what
I've chosen to tell you about the world. This,
And the fact that bearded Hoon and his big cat
Faltered, again and again, up in the wind
But were not toppled.

It was a useless thing to do with the morning.

And a glory. The only beauty
In the story is that the lion roared. His voice
Twice lost to the deafening falls; of course,
It was reported that the lion yawned.
The courage of the beast, feigned or not,
Is a lesson in understanding us,
Who are right when we are wrong,
Who see boredom in a toothless lion,
In his *cri de coeur* over a stupefying volume

Of falling water
That sounds like the ovation
Given to Hoon as he stepped
Off his tightrope into the open arms
Of men and women with umbrellas
Still strange to one another while on their honeymoons . . .

THE TWILIGHT OF THE GODS

A man had stuffed a huge dummy. Then he sat on its knee.

When he tired of this he alit and took out a small dummy and sat it on his knee.

When he tired of this he would take out a tiny dummy and sit it on the small dummy's knee.

When he tired of this he would again sit on the huge dummy's knee with the small dummy on his knee, and the smaller dummy seated on the little dummy's knee . . .

. . . And all to sit there as the twilight empties slowly through the dusk . . .

ANGELS

Angels have little use. They are best as objects of torment.
No government cares what you do with them.

. . . Like birds, and yet, so human.
They mate by briefly looking at one another.
Their eggs are like white jellybeans.

Sometimes they have been said to inspire men to do more
with their lives than they might have.
But, what is there for a man to do with his life?

. . . They burn beautifully with a blue flame.

When they cry out it is like the screech of a tiny hinge. The
cry of a bat. No one hears it . . .

ART HISTORY: THE HALO

1

The sun does do that, splay in a fan of beams down from the bright-edged cloud, even in these times. Long ago, the garland of Helios sprouted sharp rays. Eventually every god, pharaoh, emperor, just about everyone had one.

A saw-tooth paper king's crown cut out by a child is the halo of Mediterranean ambition.

The horns of Moses when he came down from the mountain were not horns at all, but mistranslated beams of light.

We long to see what we feel, that some of us shine.
We fall for back-lit blondes, and wet children at the beach.

2

Christians invented the ring halo. They floated it first over the lamb's head, then Christ's, then passed it among the saints.

Through Ghandhara the halo found the Buddha. Today in Tokyo a neon rainbow rests upon his shoulders.

Byzantine discs revolve, blurring like wagon wheels, like UFOs. Italian gilded wood — dimpled, stippled,

dotted, crossed — reveals round souls, no two alike, wearing lace rosettes, rings in rings, while holy words spray outward.

Behold the beheaded martyr, his unconcern, his body here, over there, halo and head still intact.

3

How eloquent, the oval overlap, the double
halo of embracing saints, their selves fused in joy, or

a crowd scene in Heaven, all dressed in Easter egg robes
their faces beaming in a bubble bath of gold.

But soon Renaissance saints don saucers, in perspective,
or filament rings like fireflies circling on slow film,

or they balance soap bubbles, iridescent, ephem-
eral, turning pale and holy, getting ready to pop,

until a hedging firescreen glows behind the Virgin's head, just
happening to be there, or a roundel in the cloth backdrop.

4

We smile now, to see an iron ring, with tiny lightbulbs, on
a stem, or an aluminum platter bathed in floodlights.

Yet the clouds will comb those rays, and we pray that some of us
can be more even than moons. We must give our own light.

Van Gogh said, in his portraits he wanted "that something of
the eternal which the halo used to give." And he worked

under night skies, candles stuck on his hat brim. His friend
described this; "Sunflowers were placed on the bier, all his

most recent paintings had been hung in the room where the
corpse lay, surrounding him, as it were, with a halo."

Reassured so often by the bus appearing,
today the reassurance is so timeless —
I feel instead a steadfast safety.
When I find a window seat, I may

drop my head and rest.
It is like sleep.
The dream is thought
that places the summer butterfly bush

symbolically
within what I should teach.
It is correct to write your stories,
the stories you long to write.

How does one say it?
These books are little
tastes
to whet your appetite.

PASTORAL

The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, Abridged Edition, would be beautiful on a narrow spine with my name below it. Except on the days when I lose my sense of humor and know blasphemy when I see it. *Pastoral* would be a beautiful title for this poem if I had a camper, if I had a car at all and could drive out to the scenery. This park is hardly pastoral. The delicacies abounding at the conservatory remain urbane. The mallards stand by the sculpture on the mini-island and the trunks are placarded *canoe birch, red oak*. Squirrels. Pigeons. Crows. Are independent business persons here, making their livings the way I do, a little here, a little there. That is a truth, but the truth is it never really works, it takes a whole nut, a whole seed, a whole park to feed any of us. The half-naked lounge here in summer, or two sit opposite at a picnic table, eating lunch like serious card players, or like business minds with twelve hard decisions before the hour is gone. Except on the days when I lose my sense of humor and know blasphemy when I see it, take my stance as the someone who, in any weather, is standing here alone, is gazing at something, gazing at a slope of trees and one tree within it, at haze and air.

ANONYMITY

The faces have waited. They are not angry.
The clothing has traveled too many times
through the washers, has a look of laundry, of use.
About the lives, which are lived elsewhere,
there is an anonymity.
No, it is far more terrible.
About the lives there is an irrelevance,
the lives, which are lived elsewhere,
are beside the point.

When a lady with crutches
steps out of the elevator
into us, two of us rise.
For a moment her trials are relevant.
The courtesy does not give us identity or joy.
Her life is lived elsewhere.

A clerk carries in a small machine. We rise
to draw papers with numbers. Our faces
have waited to listen
when the clerk asks that we take
in the order we arrived, waited
to answer questions.
Our minds are totally ready.

With my food stamps
I board the elevator with others.
Our small group waits. It seems a long time.
Our arms have become irrelevant.
Mine rises at last
and pushes the button.

That irrelevance transforms
into raisins in oatmeal.

The lady with crutches: suppose
she needed to screw a light bulb into her ceiling.
We could do nothing about it,
our lives irrelevant.

And any small celebration she made,
in the kitchen corn popping high,
those lucky little acrobats, someone
else to have hot popcorn too,
a serial on PBS . . .
irrelevant, so irrelevant there
that it is nonexistent.
I can imagine this elsewhere,
at my green table, but never there.

Plato believed our souls intrinsically drew
their conclusion. Something to fear. Something
that might exhaust us. Like the sum of our need.
Or our separate factoring into privacy.

VERMONT FARMHOUSE, 3 A.M.

All week she'd felt another's presence
in the house, somebody beseeching but proud,
something dissatisfied. Rounding the corners,
she caught its dark shape drifting in the glass
and under the cellar stairs felt it brood
among the pinnacles and jars, the pickles
and blossom honey. Pushing the pump handle
down, her hand shot back; the first sound
from that rusted mouth — an infant's ravaged cry.
She left the pitcher rolling and stood
at the foot of the stairs where
her own child's breath and breath kept coming.

Between midnight and five, the alarm set
for the blue feeding, cringed at its own sound,
its split entry into the cold brain.
She went down the stairs, the tiny mouth
pecking at her arm. Lit the candle left-handed
and sat. The flame jumped in its wax,
making the wall churn with shapes
any eye could organize into trees, sky,
or in the corner, a spider walking its web.

Feeding,
the other breast weeping in sympathy.
Twenty degrees outside. Gold in the hoodlum grin
of the grate. She felt the thing hovering,
half-expected the candle to go,
like a bad film. On the wall, the new shape
suddenly above her body, then settling.

She had come to hold them in her arms
and though she could no longer breathe
she made the sign of breath above them.

That was all, someone who'd held a child
to her heart in this room, returned.

When the baby slept,
she willed her visitor to stay,
mother-protector, then

willed her not to stay,
the light began to sway and her shadow
became mother-spectre,

willed her not to stay
as the other thing that lived in her,
such able-bodied failure
not even death could prevent it
from coming back, such able-bodied failure
the sun rose giddy on it,
the rooster sang crazily on it,

and she must wake again
finding so many people to feed,
so much work to do.

CLEANING THE OVEN

Cleaning out cow and chicken —
cleaning out all those long days
of low views, chewing grass, hauling
feathers around, ticks, the same logical
shadows, an expression of small
birds hopping in dung, among twigs
and serious, forthright lice, busy
as widows fixed to their knitting,
free to go anywhere, the silo, the bank
in town, the bank by the river,
flinging up on the intimate wind
bits of cheerful song, *Who goes there?*
And answering, *I do! I do!* On knees
attending to splash and drip and sweet-
smelling ooze, dark territories
from which the leaders have fled
plump as parrots, their ribbons,
their talk, their fabulous waltz
boiled down hard to a scorch, a mistake,
a thick crusty embrace that comes off
in black chips, greasy coin. *But
who are you? You?* Gathering in rags
cheese and honey, tiny nuggets
of rice, messages from the surprise
party offering warm hands at the door,
someone just passing by, just dropping
in for a minute, veiled, whispering, a kiss
surfacing, a blush that he and she
walked and waited for years to discover,
Yes, you, scraping off one, and one more,
and yet another burnt word, shoulders
back, back bent, eyes brimming
with happiness, fear, strangers,

old friends reaching out, trembling
under the speckled starlight to say,
Come in. Come out. Don't worry.
And call. Call when you are ready.

CONTRIBUTORS

LINDA BIERDS lives in Seattle. Her first book, **Flights of the Harvest-Mare**, appeared in 1985 from Ahsahta Press. Her new collection, **The Stillness, The Dancing**, will appear from Holt, Rinehart, & Winston in 1988.

NORMAN DUBIE's last book, **The Springhouse**, was published last year by Norton. He is presently enjoying an Ingram Merrill Fellowship.

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STANLEY PLUMLY writes that he is completing a new col-

lection of poems and a book of criticism, "both, with luck, within the decade."

ADRIENNE RICH teaches at Stanford University each fall. Her most recent book of poems is **Your Native Land, Your Life**.

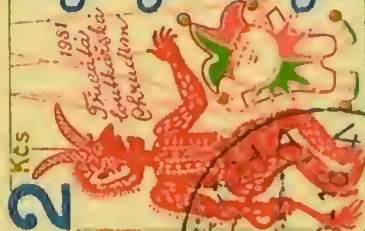
LEE UPTON received a Pushcart Prize for her poem "The Imagination of Flowers," first published in FIELD. Her book of poetry, **The Invention of Kindness**, was published by the University of Alabama Press.

NANCY WILLARD's two most recent titles are **The Voyage of the Ludgate Hill** and **The Mountains of Quilt**.

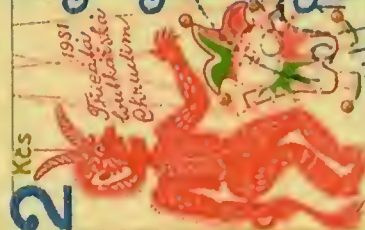
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ČESKOSLOVENSKO



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Dear Stuart,
I am (safely) back, inel-
the sera, the day ice sur-
in the Luftwaffe's refuge-
rator while I was sleeping
affected by the deep nyct-
effect of Ou Golden Pond.
Here - no charges, Naopak
did not appear yet and
Dominik lost his happy de-
played child appearance &
looks like the silly egghead
(see poem collition). Forgetting
the luxury of soul and missing
you all

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PSC

Okres:

PAR AVION
LETECKY

Yours
Miroslav