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The Vehicle, Fall 1988

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Matt Mansfield

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Archives

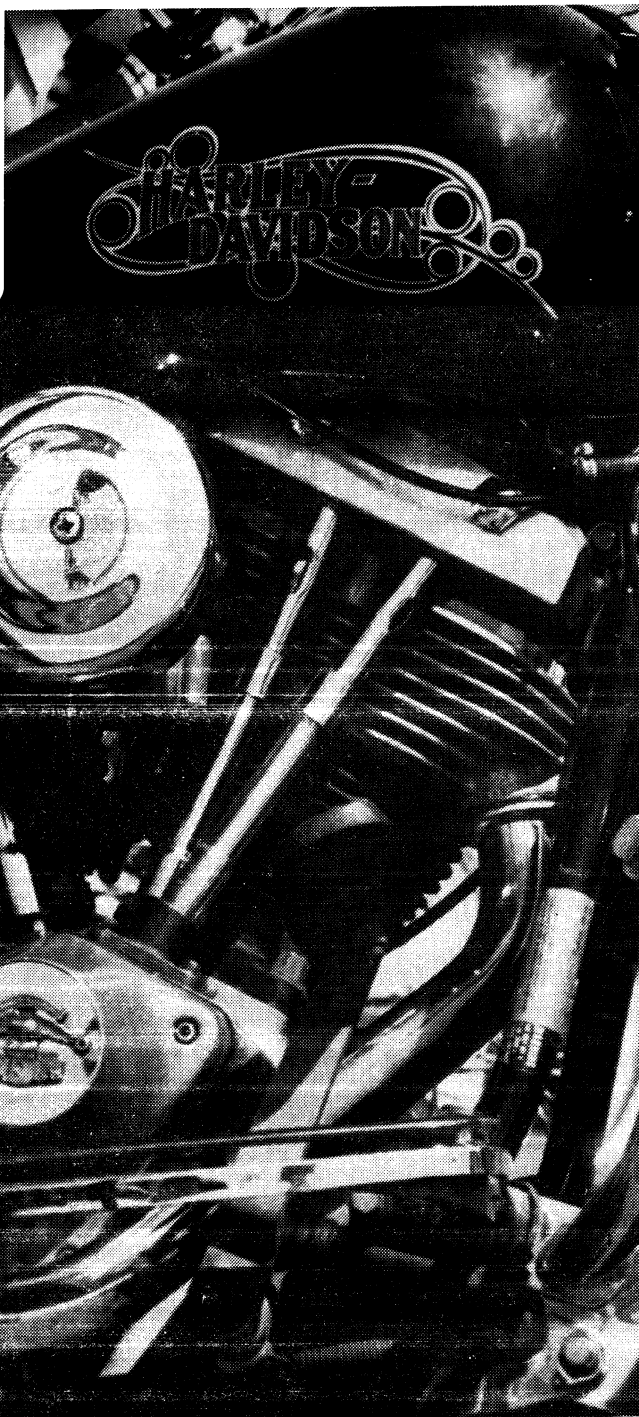
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Fall



vehicle fall 1988

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VEHICLE FALL 1988

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Cover Letter

No one you know knows me.
I have not published widely.
In another state one poet told me
not to burn out, impossible
since I have no reputation
to speak of except my record
with women: the worst in the county.
When I say hello women pretend
they are foreign, in busted
French say they are married.
Today I ran over a squirrel,
felt him thump off the Chrysler's
underbelly twice and from the mirror
saw him roll out deader
than a bad joke. I kept going
and turned the radio up.
I tried to remember my last
good deed and imagined myself
Man of the Year. Then a little kid
threw a rock at my car.
Forget it, I said out loud,
wheeling home without groceries,
my trunk full of charcoal and hickory,
nothing to roast but sacks
jammed with poems no one could love.

Bob Zordani

Letter to Harrington Street

Jonathan, I'm drunk. The sky sank years ago.
Now thick pools are rising, spreading like tar
across Illinois. Combines are fast in the fields,

floundering. Farmers lie dying on tractor hoods,
dreaming for help. Children breathe hard
in the night, swallowing air like meat. Tonight

we sing Jesus to the shrieks of sick birds.
Not even love would keep us in tune. Here
angels shrink toward Heaven and go, their wings

flapping stiff against wind. We know we are bad.
Our dead float like logs in the pools. We watch
them rot in open air. We watch them bloom.

Bob Zordani

The Only Truth

It is eight years ago
and your hands are busy
with the simplest lock

in the parking lot. I have
a groan for yes, for more.
There is nothing here,

nothing but you and
a thousand cars parked
quiet as tombstones.

In the yellow light we will
crush your father's plush seats,
then wipe off, re-dress, climb

up front, and blast the lilac
air freshener as we drive
somewhere, anywhere, until

what we have done
becomes a sin so small
it does not, cannot matter.

Bob Zordani

They'd Gone to a Movie

and that was ok but when
we got home, I couldn't
well you know she expected
me to perform. That word
like an elbow in a rib
that's been healing. I
felt as if I'd woken up
at night and found a
Chevrolet on my pillow
rusting so loudly and
fast there'd be no
chance of sleep

Matt Mansfield

The Locket

I was thinking and leaning towards giving in, when I saw you. You looked the same as always, standing there, except I was hanging from your neck on a thin gold chain. I looked at my real face pressed into a heart-shaped charm and my brown eyes blinked at myself serenely. I walked towards you slowly with me dangling so ornamentally from your neck and opened myself. The locket was empty.

Monica Groth

The Sleep of Babes

Have you ever known a terrible thing?
I have and I know I have
although I forgot it for a long while
but still I know it and now
I even write it
so yes, it really happened and
yes, it's terrible.

But was it terrible?

I didn't think so until
I overheard my mother's night reaction to
something that seemed strange
but not terrible.
But really it was terrible
because my mother said so and
shouldn't she know?

I'm sleeping and it feels like
my bear is crowding me
pushing me to the very edge of my bed even
but I'm sleeping and
thinking is thick.
And I'm sleeping but I keep waking up
but not really but
it's so crowded and
I am suffocating
like when my dad
who is bigger than me
tickles me and I wiggle
underneath his wrestling pin.

My mom is here now
and she'll wake me up.

Finally I have room in my bed
and I can lie in the middle again and
pick my bear off the floor and
go back to untroubled sleep since
my dad is back in my mom's bed
and out of mine
except he's almost crying
which is worse than screaming
and he feels awful
although nothing bad happened
and my mom is wearing a three piece suit

and drilling the man on the witness stand
tightening the screws.

He is not a monster
and he knows it
but still
why was he at the scene of the crime
and doesn't the criminal always return there?

And my mother wonders this
and so does he
and so should I?

But I am young
and I am sleepy
and my mother and father are good.

Monica Groth

Techni-Color Characters In a Black and White Town

A white man and a black woman
were walking and they
spoke

too, they were talking

Strange they were dressed
for a hot summer
afternoon
Full of bright light and
color

A small town to be walking
and out of place they
seemed

a small white man and
A Large Black Woman
walking and talking

Monica Groth

The Horse

At the state park
I catch a glimpse
Of an old tree,
Half-remembered,
In the shape of a horse's head.

It grew out of the side of a hill,
Gnarled and worn even then,
Bending toward earth,
Toward the red-and-gold forest floor,
Still life in straining bark.

I walk down into the trees,
Hoping to get nearer,
But the horse bolts—
Behind the curve of a hillock,
Beneath the branches of an oak.

Only when I stop, silent,
Do I catch the faint stamp of hooves,
See the mist of breath
Moist steam on this cool afternoon.

On a summer's afternoon I saw it first—
When I was a boy
And the woods still held magic.
The hooves ringing through the woods,
The bent tree swaying.

Rodger L. Patience



Gatsby's Light

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed cloths, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments.

Conrad
Heart of Darkness

I know Gatsby's light
across the bay,
cat eyes yellow
under moonlight wink
pacing corner
to corner

She
in the gloom, the black
of cracker-box houses
dimly lit,
warming her Bohemian blood
from curb to curb
car to car

I swim in the heat
she shares,
the wild blood
to capture, to keep
my own

She,
to the mist that crawls
from curb grates,
whispers a naked rhythm;
jungle of I-bars, of fences,
wires, glass rumbling,
come dance upon the bones

I wash on to the shore
across the bay
wide-eyed staring
at the noon sun.

Jim Reed

Millions of Me

In grey, oozing goo
I float
swim
fly
between
this place
and its universal analogues
where millions of me
rush in
stab with their differences
wash me
down curb drains
of blackened backstreets
to breathe pot smoke
at cats
then hang them
for constantly talking
I cry
shave my legs
not wanting to be
a man anymore
shadow self
shades of my decisions
all connected
knotted to the guts
imploding
seal each part
oozing, grey
in freshlock freezer bags
until I
follow back footsteps
see myself
dissolve
into the grille
of a checker-top
taxi

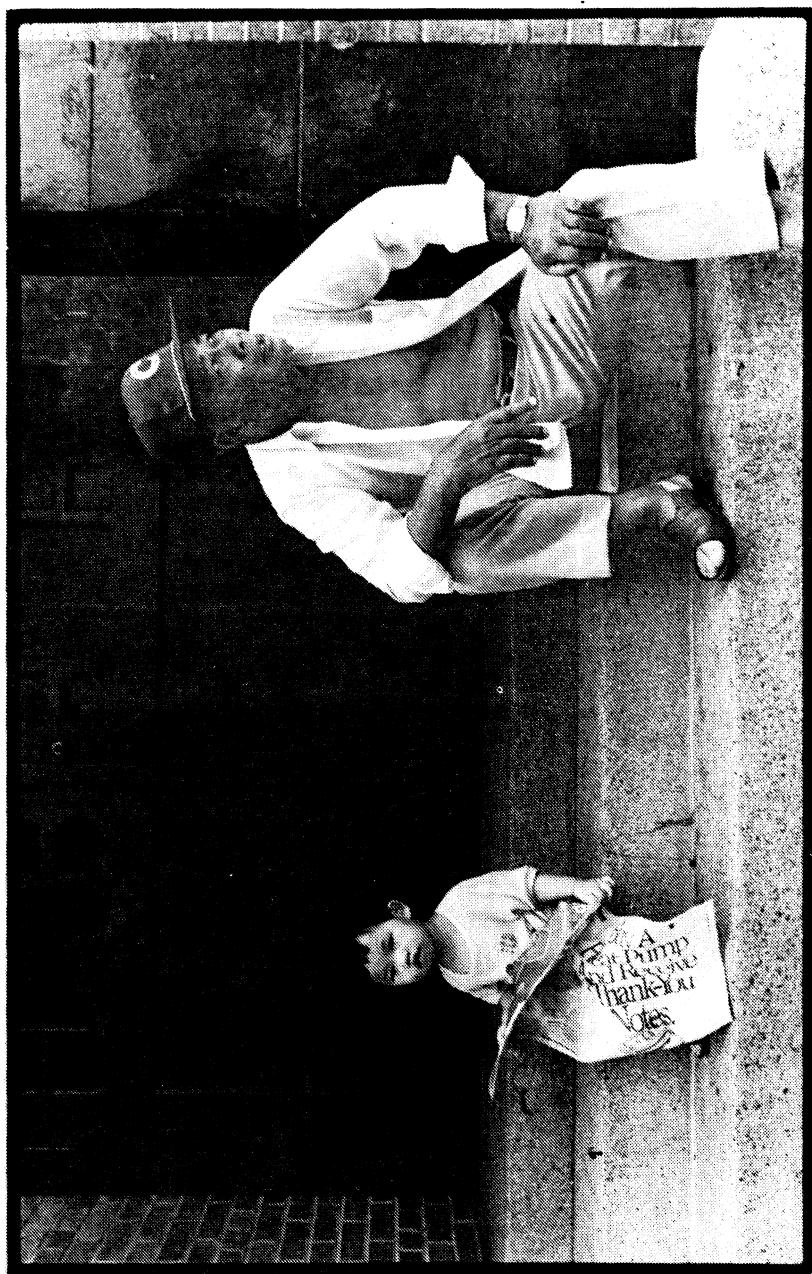
Jim Reed

View From The Streets

Chicago Sidewalk Series
Summer 1988

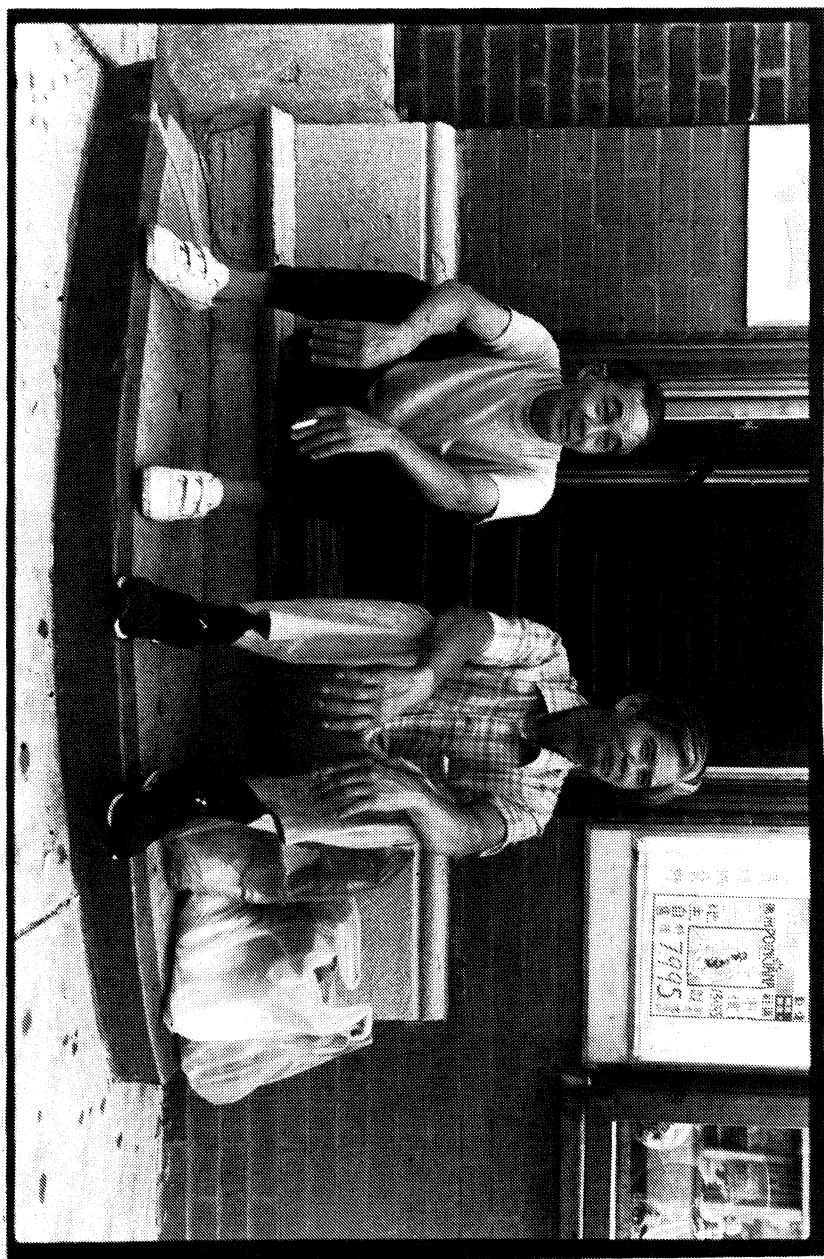
A Collection of Photographs
by
Steven M. Beamer



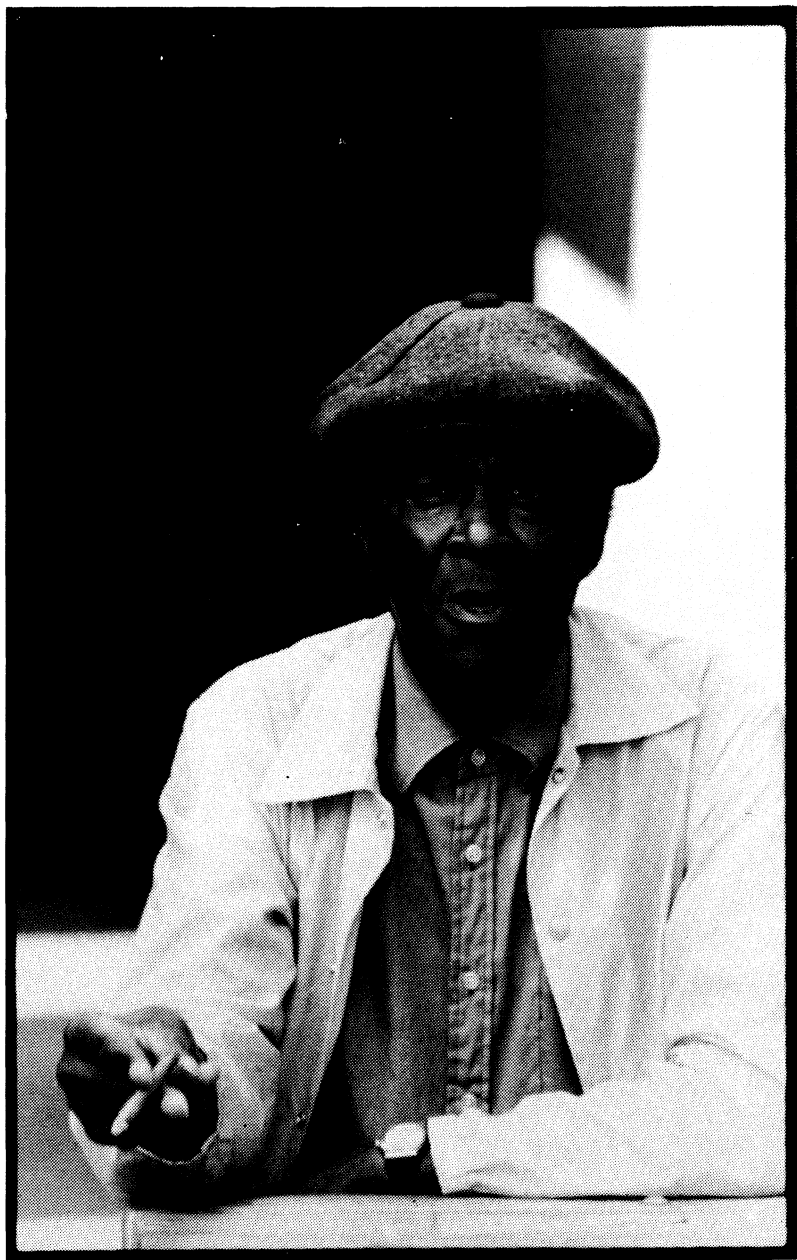


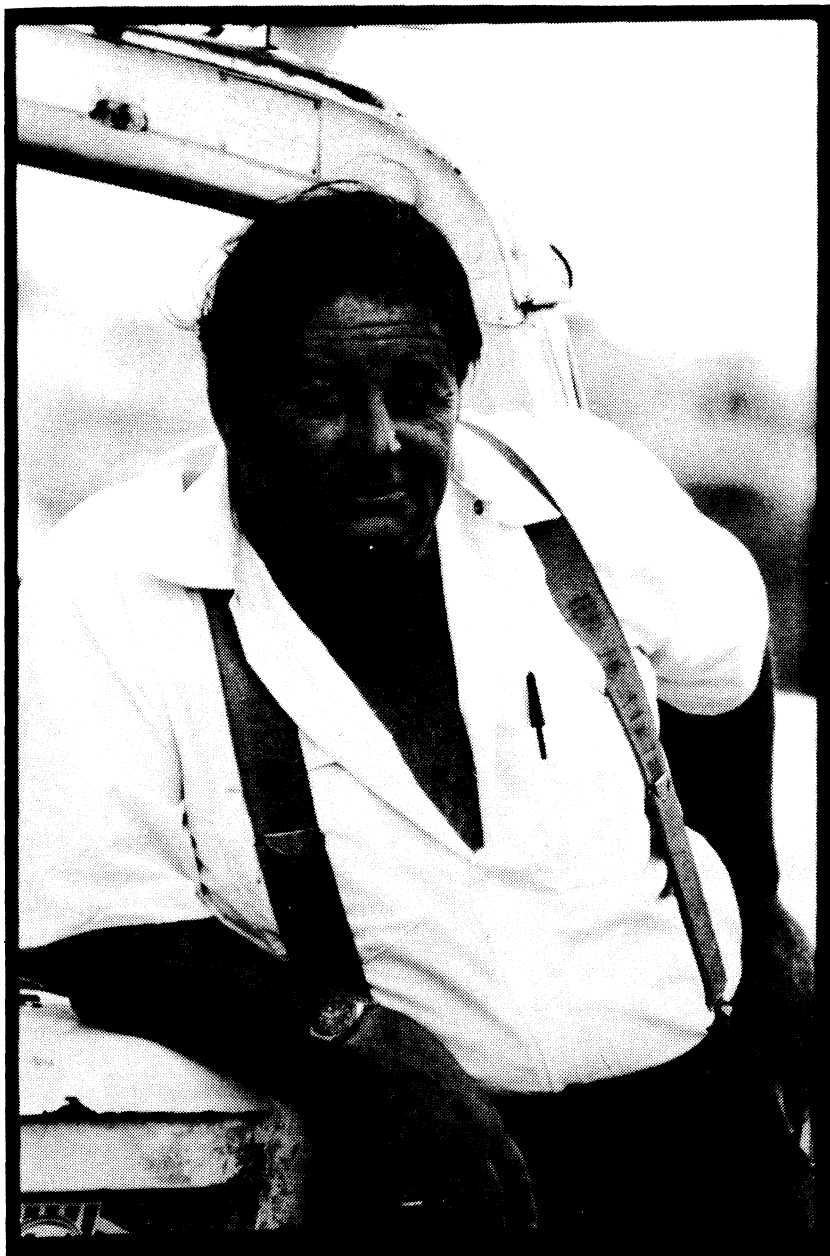


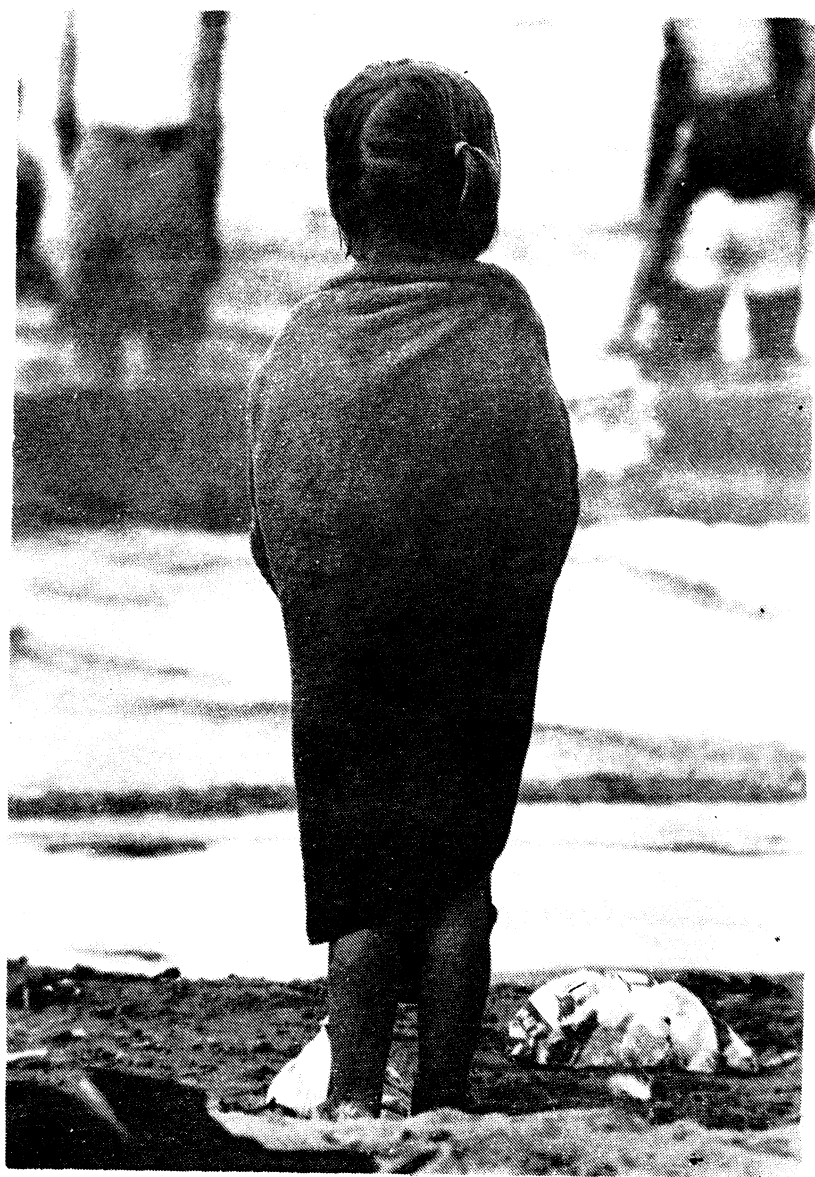












When Headlights on the Highway are just Headlights on the Highway

No similes
No metaphors
Here
Between two beers
Sweating profusely on the bar

This is the place
Where there are no remakes
Of old Buddy Holly songs
No questioning the tackiness
Of the grumbling beer light

And the passing train
Jiggles the sticky seat under me
Unpoetically
Blows its steel nose at this shack
Long, hard, and smelly

Hovering
Somebody's Marlboro is no firefly
No glowing meteor from beyond
No child's unfailing night light
Just a cylinder of nicotine

And tar

Michael Salem

Concrete Affairs

Love in the city
is like a warm jeans commercial

beautiful women slide out at dark
always in slow motion, always
hiding long legs under a universe
of black stitches

men huddle in bitter packs
rats smoking camels, flicking
butts to the beat of an easy rhythm
smiles sharp and smooth as glass

Black Russian, Seven and Seven, Comfortable Screw
bond skin with their glasses sweat
chilled for a moment before thawing
into a hard soft-filter kiss

Michael Salem

The Middle of the Street

nothing

but the road
and the quiet mist
and between the two
the overturned pizza box

skittling like a millipede
over black asphalt
spastic white movement
of its grease-stained carapace

passes the line of yellow dashes
perforation cut in the lanes
like the stitches between saltines
the slightest pressure snaps

I could jump on these lines
and the road would rumble
and cave in with a sigh
beneath the pizza box and I

opening into nothing

Michael Salem

Scent of a Storm

I heard a spider
by the lakeside—whispering
in steam
to the muffled sunset

shards of voices
bouncing off Chinette plates
“... pull out before the I.R.S. . . .”
“... and before I knew it . . .”
“... personal protection, now a .38 . . .”

Ranger is by the waterline
fur: color of a coffee stain
happily rooting at something limp
away from the smell of people food

I had only seen them—the mother and son
once before
their lunch in bags
eating softly at a picnic table
gazing
at a motorboat roaring close to shore

pretty
no wedding ring
but she was past me
with her boy in the sunset

a cold front
bedspread over the horizon
rose in the west
a brilliant pink
like that in a red-light district
held out the longest
fading

I breathed the crisp breeze
hearing the boy ask,
“Is every night like this?”

I almost opened my mouth
almost told him myself
but her look closed me—
sent me to the corner

“Yes,”
her voice, brown clay
cowhide-warm
“every night is like this.”

Michael Salem

The Fishermen

Ray was propped against the third post from the left on the front of his porch. That was because he had the best view of the road there as well as a reprieve from the rising sun's glare. Like every warm Saturday for the past twenty years, he was waiting for Ernie to come tooling up the road in his '65 Chevy Impala. As usual, Zora had packed a ham and cheese sandwich and an overripe apple (the only way Ray could chew it). His thermos was filled with tea, but his flask had a little whiskey in it. Zora didn't know about the flask.

Roaring up the drive, Ernie eased the huge white beast between the decorator bird bath and the blue globe on a pedestal. With a spryness belying his seventy-six years (and seventy extra pounds), he squeezed out of the car and started towards the porch.

“When are you going to move that god damned bird bath? Nothin' bathes in there except that snot-nose next door. For Christ's sake, Ray, you got so much god damned stuff in this yard, it's pitiful.”

“Mornin' Ernie. Ready to do some fishin'?”

After packing the trunk the two were on their way to pick up Ivan. He was as much a part of their Saturday trips as the styrofoam minnow bucket that Ernie had toted since Ray could remember.

Route 16 was a long, flat stretch. Occasionally, the monotony was broken by a dilapidated corn silo or a rusted trailer. The last mile to Ivan's, though, had to be the worst. Not only was the highway cracked like a bad patch of dry skin, but Ernie's conversation started to get as abrasive as pumice stone. Normally, Ray shut him out.

"I swear, everytime I come down this road it gets worse. Bumpy as hell. Probably tearing up my car right as we speak. Course, the god damned road crew is too stupid to spit on their shoes. Can't re-pave the god damned thing, gotta patch it with black shit. It's like driving on scar tissue. That's what it is, you know. Like Bill's leg. My son-in-law. Ever see his leg? Did it in Viet Nam. Ever see it?"

Here, Ray managed to nod and perform the correct series of agreement syllables that would pacify Ernie. Unfortunately, they wouldn't shut him up. Now they were only a few minutes from Ivan's, but his presence wouldn't change the flow of conversation any, either.

"I do believe that Ivan has more god damned shit in his lawn than you do. Except that he doesn't have any of that sissy stuff like your wife likes. Still, lawnmowers ain't too nice to have laying around." Here, Ernie stuck his head out the window to yell at Ivan. "Got enough shit in your lawn, Ivan?"

Carefully placed in the nylon-weave lawnchair, Ivan barely acknowledged Ernie's typically asinine comment. Resting across his lap, clutched in root-like fingers, was his favorite bamboo rod. Ray and Ernie didn't know why it was his favorite. Less stuff to fiddle with they guessed. He didn't have a tackle box like the other two. A few hooks and a sinker formed a bulge in his breast pocket—maybe a worm or two. His wife was too dead to build him a sack lunch, so he didn't even have that to carry. Within five minutes, they were on 1460 north headed straight for Jackknife Pond. Home of the big fish and even bigger mosquitoes.

Ernie pulled into their usual spot. Close to the bank, but free of trees. Even the weeds had quit trying to grow there. The constant battle against the car doors had proved too much. Ernie, then Ray, then Ivan all gathered their gear and headed down the path to their favorite stretch of timber.

"Well, I think I'm going to head down a bit. You know those fish won't bite if we're all clumped together like a bunch of girls on the playground." Ernie probably could have gotten away without that speech. Ray and Ivan had it memorized anyway. Like every other Saturday, Ray followed Ernie and left Ivan to his nylon lawnchair and bamboo rod.

"Coming Ivan?"

"Aw, you know he's not . . . he's already plunked down in his lawnchair. I tell you though, the fish won't bite if you sit in a metal chair. It grounds your bodily vibrations—you know, heartbeat and such. Then the fish can tell for sure you're up there trying to catch them. What are you fishing with today? Worms? Ha. I try to tell you, minnows the way to go . . ."

"I don't know, Ernie, I usually catch two fish to your . . ."

"It's not the quantity, Ray, it's the quality. Remember that twelve pound crappie I got last summer? Damn near snapped my god damned test line. Fought like a flounder."

Ivan could hear their conversation drift off in the distance. Ernie, as usual, was shooting off at the mouth and Ray was following his blueprint to the T. Yes Ernie, No Ernie. Anything else was cut off by Ernie's opinions. It didn't bother Ivan that they left him alone. It meant that he

didn't have to fish. He hated fishing. He only brought the one rod along so it would look like he was . . . he wasn't about to bring anything else that he wouldn't use. The outside was calm, though, and other than an occasional burst from Ernie, silent. Ivan loved silence. He knew that Ernie talked just to assure himself that he wasn't dead. It was obvious by the way he couldn't allow more than five minutes to pass before he felt he had to speak. Ray didn't talk to prove anything. He just answered. That's all he ever did. Speak when you're spoken to. Old men should be seen and not heard. Ernie is God. These were the three scriptures that Ray adhered to. Ivan, though, just liked to sit and be quiet. He thought, just today, he wouldn't even dip the rod in the water. He'd not even move.

"Ernie, would you please quit winding your line around mine?" Ray was the best whiner that Ernie had ever heard. He didn't know what Ray would do without him.

"Look, Ray, I'm not doing it by accident. Purposely, I'm wrapping the lines to confuse the fish. They won't be able to trace our heartbeats through the rod if the lines are twisted. It'll jumble the noises. I swear, you don't know a god damned thing about fishing."

Sometimes Ray really got on Ernie's nerves. The way he licked up to that old bat Zora really made him sick. He knew that he had a flask in his fishing jacket pocket . . . he also knew that Zora *didn't* know. For god's sakes. Seventy-four and he couldn't even go uptown without checking in with her.

"Ernie."

Ray broke into his stream of consciousness like a sandflea at the beach. Irritating, insignificant.

"Ernie, I can't get my worm on this hook. My fingers are too stiff . . . things are too wiggly." He looked at Ernie with such a pitiful, pleading look that Ernie wanted to push his lawnchair into the drink.

"I told you to use minnows anyway . . . here, gimme that thing. I swear, Ray, sometimes you can't do anything. I don't know what you think you're going to catch with these things anyway."

"You know that I always catch more . . ."

"If I told you once, I told you a thousand times . . ."

"You have . . ."

"Fine, be an ingrate. I take you fishing and you call me a boring blow-hard."

"I did not."

"You just as well should have."

For a few minutes, there was a golden silence. Finally, Ray's conscience got the best of him. He knew better than to pick fights with Ernie. He had to be the thinnest skinned bastard he'd ever met, much less been friends with. Zora hated Ernie and never let a chance pass when she could express this. "You let that old fart push you around too much." She'd always tell him this . . . as if she never pushed.

"I'm sorry Ernie. You're right. Can I borrow a minnow?"

"Sure thing, Ray. Hey, why don't you go down and check on Ivan? See if he caught anything with that stupid stick of his."

"Okie-dokie." He levered himself from the chair and started back down the path. About halfway there he was overcome by one of his frequent lazy spells and decided that it wasn't worth it. He hollered instead.

"Ivan . . . how you doing?" Before Ivan could have had a chance to answer, though, he was headed back for his lawnchair.

"He's fine, Ernie. Say, I was thinking. Maybe we could drive up to Spoon River next Saturday. I heard the fishing was great over there."

Ernie sighed with mock patience. Every weekend Ray suggested this venture and every weekend, Ernie had to shoot down his plans.

"Ray, do you know how to get there?"

"No."

"Do you know how far it is?"

"No."

"Do you think for one moment that Zora would let you go?"

Silence.

"Maybe you just better think things through before you go flying off at the mouth, okay Ray?"

Ernie had problems of his own. The last thing he needed was a couple of codgers to coddle. That's what he was, though—a baby-sitter.

"Did you see if Ivan got anything?"

"Yeah, he said he got a couple but threw them out . . . too small."

"Yeah, well last week they must have been too ugly. He never brings any back. What's his problem anyway? Aw, never mind, I don't care."

Three nibbles later, Ray's stomach told him that it was time to eat his sack lunch. He pulled the bag out and unwrapped his sandwich.

"What d'ya got there, Ray?"

"The usual. What did you bring?"

"Check this out." Ernie pulled a Coleman cooler out from under his lawnchair and lifted the lid. Inside was a plate of fried chicken, a few sandwiches overflowing with meat and cheese and a quart-sized Tupperware container of potato salad. A bag of chips and a thermos were also laid in there, along with some plastic-wrapped brownies. Ernie fished in style.

Sadly, Ray stared at his meager sandwich and squishy apple. Ernie noticed his buddy's lunch and made a generous offer. "Here, have some chicken and chips."

The gesture so touched Ray that he decided to pull out his flask and jolly their spirits. This was precisely what Ernie had expected,—anticipated. For a couple more hours the two fished and drank and ate. And Ernie talked.

"Well then I was up in Wisconsin . . . just layin' on this dock, see and twiddlin' a leaf over the edge and this giant muskie comes and practically snatches off my hand. I ran back to the cabin to tell the boys, just as Dot was putting supper on the table. They all jumped up and grabbed their poles. Dot sure was pissed."

The warm sun and Ernie's droning voice began to lull Ray into a semi-conscious stupor.

"We'll have to stop by Edna's for a free side of beans. It's that hoagie

special. I think that gravy comes with it too." There wasn't anything that Ernie liked better than a puddle of gravy poured over his meals.

"Ernie, do you think we could move down by Ivan and see if we have any better luck down there?"

"What makes you think we'd have any better luck down there? But, if you think it would help, I guess we can try."

Ray hated the fact that no thought was right, no idea good unless it came from Ernie's fat head.

They carted their gear back down the path to where Ivan was propped in his chair. His rod was still laying across his lap.

"It's no wonder you never catch anything, Ivan. You don't even have your pole in the water!"

Ivan just stared out at the pond and ignored Ernie (much to his dislike).

Ray settled into his chair with a groan and flung his line into the water. "Geez. I can just taste that hoagie and beans at Edna's . . . Hey Ern, think I could have another piece of chicken?"

"Jesus Ray, doesn't that witch of a wife ever make you anything to eat? Or is she afraid you'll lose your girlish figure like she did?"

"Hey, Zora's not fat. She just doesn't want me to look like . . ." He'd almost said "you" but remembering Ernie's thin skin (more like a cell membrane) he caught himself. ". . . Like a blimp."

"How about you Ivan? What'd you bring for lunch?"

"Ernie, look! I got a bite . . . my pole . . ."

"Jesus Christ, Ray, don't put your pacemaker in a bind. It's probably only a guppie that escaped from somebody's septic tank."

The rod was bent nearly in half and the test line was taut enough to slice through a tomato, but Ernie refused to help Ray land it. "You've got to do some things on your own."

Ernie was rather disgruntled, though, when Ray plopped a five pound crappie on the bank. "Look at this . . . hooo-ee! . . . this has to be the biggest crappie any of us has ever caught out here."

"I doubt that, Ray. Don't you remember that one I caught a couple of years ago? It weighed close to ten."

"No, I don't remember. Ivan, look at this, isn't she a beaut?" Ivan didn't even acknowledge the fish. "See, Ivan's impressed."

"Hah. Ivan couldn't be impressed if a naked lady were to sit on his lap and shake her hooters."

"That's not very nice, Ernie. You know Ivan's the quiet type. That's why he gets along so well with you." Ray was shocked at his own audacity. "Isn't that so, Ivan?" He patted him on the shoulder and Ivan rocked slightly sideways.

"Come on . . . let's quit the hen pecking and do some serious fishing. You know we won't have too many more of these days left. We're getting old, Ray, as if you didn't already know it."

Ray and Ernie and Ivan sat in relative silence for nearly ten minutes before Ray shattered it. "Who do you think will go first?"

"Probably you. You'll starve to death the way Zora feeds you . . . or should I say doesn't feed you."

"I think you'll go first. You'll blow up from one of your little snacks."

'Oh my! I must have had a chicken too many.' POW!"

Ernie glared at Ray from the corner of his eye, and attempted to set his jaw amid his many chins. "Hey, Ivan, do you think that Ray will go first or I will?" Ivan didn't have an answer for that. "He probably doesn't want to upset you, Ray, he knows how your old lady starves you. You'll probably just trip over one of her sunflower windspinners and break your back . . . or end up head first in the birdbath . . . or get sucked into that tractor-tire swampgrass . . . what are those anyway . . . lilies?"

"They're tiger-lilies." This was about all that Ray could come back with. He hated the lawn decorations too. But he loved Zora and he despised Ernie when he started making fun of her. Ray hoped that Ernie was the first to go. He planned on sticking a pink flamingo on his gravemound.

The setting sun was turning the pond into a pool of lava. Ernie's stomach growled. It was time to go home. "Don't forget, Ray, we have to stop by Edna's on the way back . . . side of beans."

The two rose from the chairs, picked up their poles, then tried to rouse Ivan from his stupor. It was impossible.

Ray looked at Ernie—he tried to read the expression on his face. Ivan was dead. As dead as they would be someday. Was it fear in Ernie's eyes? It looked more like hunger.

"Hey, Ern, can we still stop at Edna's?"

Angie Gerald

Organs —for D.V.H.

Say we are losing our organs
one at a time, like good china.

Tonsils, an appendix, one tepid lung
removed to strengthen the other.

We keep an eye on our livers,
a fist tight around our hearts, shelling

that slug of muscle like a walnut.
Protect. Skin and bones, that's

what I'm saying. Do not take incisions
as healing. Let scars trace themselves

in and through our bodies. We map
ourselves with operations, with days

blue as rivers, red with roads
leading to small towns where we

find ourselves empty as brown bags,
filling, losing the wind.

Patrick Peters

Carpentry

There is no barn,
but a folded frame
that may have held horses.
And no fences,
though bittersweet
squares off the house.
A sturdy porch swing,
but as for the porch itself,
some boards have fallen through.
There the porch gapes.

Imagine how we
will come together
with the common grip of tools.
How the light will show clear
through windows
we squeaked clean.
We will see dust particles
falling, the light
is that good.
Imagine us at dusk

arguing what feeds
along the edges of fields.
Drinking, sloughing off the day,
the day going, gone then,
we settle ourselves
in familiar chairs
carried in that afternoon,
and one of us,
any of us,
will try the piano.

Patrick Peters

Fishing —for Bob and Jeanne
“Drownin’? Hell, that’s just part of fishin’”

When I wake you
you do not recognize
my hands,
sliced and rough,
my nails sharp new hooks.
I have come home
hairy with moss,
slick with river muck.
Cupping your breasts
they overflow, run
thin through my fingers
like water.
My eyes float pale
in their murk
remembering the black
lengths of catfish,
the muddy sadness
of touching bottom.

Patrick Peters

Autumn Poem For a Friend In a Printing Plant —for Dirk

For months my hands rainbowed
as I filled ink pots on presses.
Dropping the scoop, I dug
elbow deep in blood red goo,
cautionary yellow, sucking green.
I could not rub the green away
from my arms, the shining black
like tar beneath my nails.

You, at least, have kept your fingers.
Few keep full hands. We watched
one man's arm explode as it was pressed,
pulled rolling with the paper
to be printed. While he waited
in shock for the disassembling
of the press, what words fell
across his hand and wrist?

Sooted smoke chugs from your plant.
Imagining it knots my lungs. Forget
work habits. Forget choking, leaving
the place dizzy, waking with toxic
headaches from twelve hour shifts.
Unlearn. Spin your bike into
the country. Spin the day away.
Look into the sky and see no smoke,
only the grey of full-fisted storms
turning over the October sky.

Patrick Peters

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