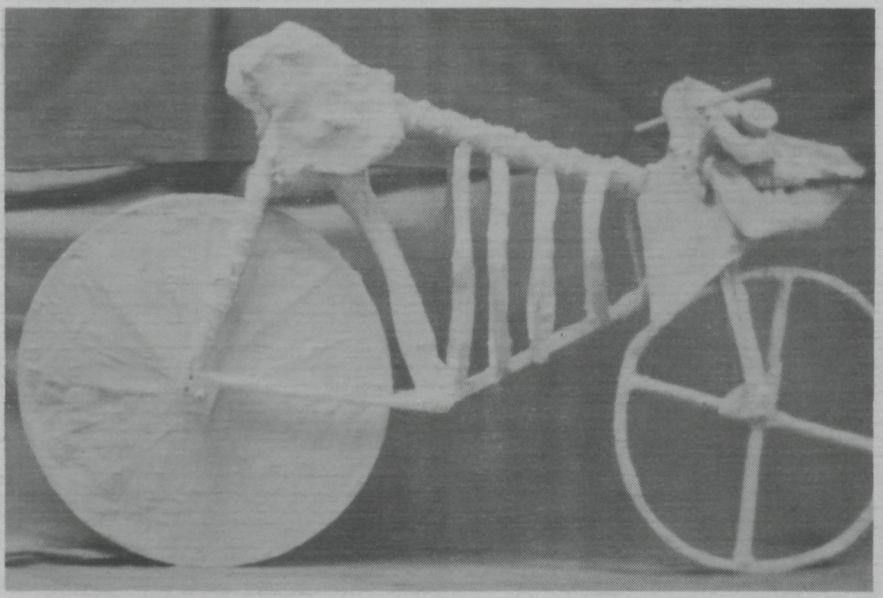
CORNFIELD

REVIEW



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CORNFIELD REVIEW

An Annual of the Creative Arts

Volume 11 1992

The Ohio State University at Marion
Marion, Ohio

Cornfield Review was designed to celebrate the Midwest experience and to house the particular voice in which the Midwest speaks. Many of the works within our collection represent this traditional idea, while others broaden its scope, creating a new and unique voice.

The brush of sea on a Pacific beach, the thrush of a harvester in a Nebraska field, even the Medieval sands of Persia find a way to express themselves in a spirit of the Midwest which we found to be unbounded by time or space.

It is our hope that as you read, you too will make the connections and interpret the language which is both foreign and familiar.

The Editors

JETTY

Places like this are rare,
   weathered spits of boulders dropped
past goosenecked pilings, past sandbars
   where ring-bills skim trapped schools of silversides
past bridges, barnacled marinas and into the Sound
   a great, roiling plain of breaking water - the continental shelf
drops suddenly away into the abyss of Hudson's Canyon -
   haunted by columns of darkness, shadows of tuna boats and
driftnets.

The drop is only half a mile from where I stand,
   at the end of the jetty, the last rock covered with *ulva*
and sea squirts and hunched fishermen hiding
   their crowsfoot faces in the warmth of their jackets.
There is no wind anywhere
   like the wind at the end
that churns the dark water into white fury
   that drives needles of brine into the skin that
pushes corridors of mist around far green beacons
   and opens the throats of foghorns.

Schools of snapper feed in the estuary
   created by the jetty's curled finger, holding away
the Atlantic. Engineers say it saves the beach from erosion;
   the snapper will tell you different.
A great blue has taken my bait today
   and runs and runs my reel spinning like a hot drill
pole bent double against the strain.
   Blues are just old snapper, past the point of mere snap -
into the realm of *bite*. Great strong fish they are,
   blue-eyed and big like the sharkmen from Montauk Point.

I let him run.
He follows the stream of the tide, screaming now
so that the clammer's mooring lines groan against the pull.
I imagine him, alone now, broken from the school to rid his
mouth of the hook, running out over the edge.
He stares into the darkness with unblinking eyes
down into seven thousand feet of yawning
down into skeletons of unrecovered rumrunners
and their hollow-eyed crews.

And I wait for him to rest so I can begin the long pull
back, back to the shallows, back through schools
skirted by hammerhead and leaping mako
back across weaving meadows of thelassea grass
over rippled plains of open sand where only target rays skate.
I will bring him from darkness into
haloed light, until he is beneath my shadow on the water
the nexus of all sunlight.

But for now he is still running, powerful caudal pumping
out over the edge, away from the stone finger reaching for
the hole in the ocean. When his fight ends mine begins.
I wait, crowsfooted and salted as Lot's wife,
tethered to him, forced by the wind of some other void
to look down into the measureless darkness and run.

COMBINE

Morning scratches at the icy window,
chisels pristine and crystal reminders
that the harvest hasn't ended unless
the workers have gathered in all the sheaves.
We, armed with thermoses of black coffee,
tapes of Beethoven, Bach and Andrew Crouch,
mount the great harvester-beast two by two.

We look more like pilots in a cockpit
than dirt farmers about to tame the land.
We perch in the cab like captains guiding
an enormous ship safely out to sea.
Great crows, sea gulls of the fields, lead the way.
The air is laced with smells of ripe sorghum,
the brittle sounds of corn stalks snapping in the wind.

We bring the fields to their knees, move through
the long rows like some giant sloth inching
its way, belly-deep, through the ornaments
of corn and barley, wheat and sunflower -
all the weighty symbols of bread and wine
waiting to be harvested for them that sing.
We do not go among them unnoticed.

We leave nothing in our wake but stubble.
Even the crows will not have it. The fields
look gaunt and hungry, lean as death itself.
What once bloomed with honey has paled white,
dusty as the dry ferns crumbling along the Platte.
But in the silos outside of town
are seeds enough to reach the very moon.

LEARNING BY HEART

> "Boredom is the dream bird which
> hatches the egg of experience."
> --Walter Benjamin, The Art of Storytelling

Bowed over the ironing board,
Mother seemed to doze
and we tiptoed past the kitchen
afraid to break the spell.
We thought that if we ran away
she would have to break out
of her dream to find us.

But what we imagined
is not what happened.
We squatted behind the bushes,
waiting, blowing on our fingers,
tired of oranges and bread,
but still she didn't come.

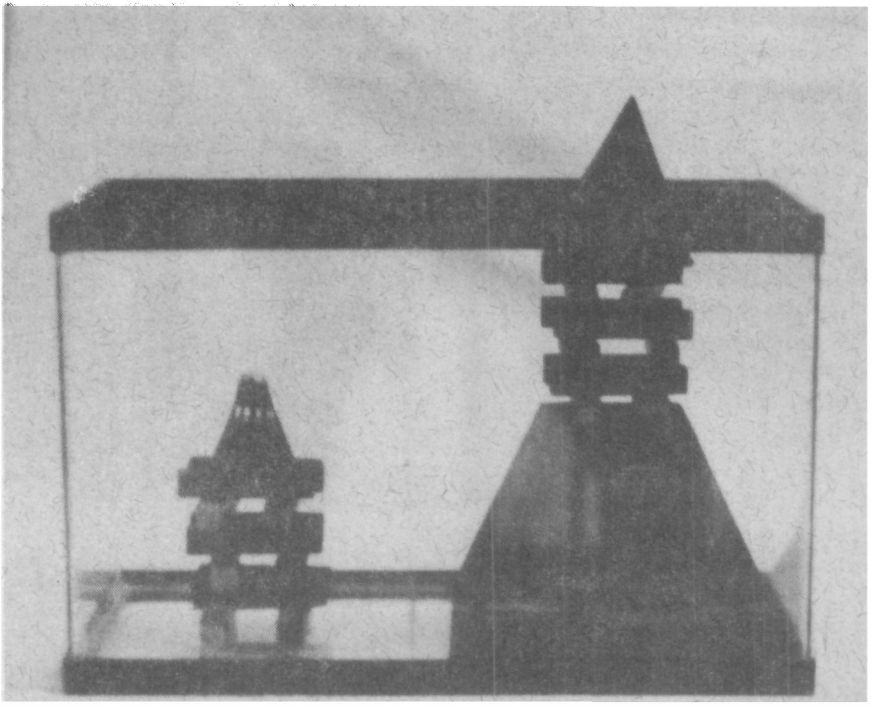
Dusk recreated the landscape,
a lamb cried for its mother,
but we heard no familiar call.
At last, cold and shy, we crept
home to the warm kitchen light.
Mother was fixing supper
as if she'd never missed us.

Gold coins of carrots
multiplied on the cutting board,
and the knife blade flashed
as it fell, and fell again.
Her head bowed, Mother
stood still in her trance.

We came into that light, hushed.

Ryan Burkhart

LOST APEX



MY DREAM OF AFRICA

Three slender men walk single file throwing shadows on the matted lush grass at dusk. They are coming to say goodbye.

This is my dream of Africa. This is my dream from a life I've forgotten in 1938. The window is raised. I lean on my arms and stare across the great fields. Today the air is very dry. It moans as it prickles my skin and shivers the windowpanes. Dry air gives me nosebleeds, but I can bear the small discomfort if it means that I can breathe the beauty of Kenya.

In the distance swirled with pink haze, I see uneven lines of acacia trees hugging the river. Clusters of white and yellow blossoms seem like a necklace for the strong running river. I know the herds of zebra and eland are coming to the red sandy shallows to drink while keeping eyes and ears alert for the lion and hyena slinking through the cover of bramble bushes and stunted fig trees.

This is my dream of Africa where an unlikely indigo-eyed eland nibbles cornmeal from my hand, and where the zebra follows me shyly as I go down to the coffee fields to check the progress of my crop.

This is my dream of Africa where the tamed hyena stretches by my kitchen door and waits for me to bring a treat after midnight. A boiled chicken leg. A slice of angelfood cake. My friend waits to run with me the mile to the stone well behind the long sheds where from daybreak to late in the afternoon the Masai workers sort and clean the coffee beans. They press against the narrow troughs with the sliding screens over a half inch of pure spring water that gleams like diamonds in blue shadows under the straw roofs of the open sheds.

This is my sad dream of Africa. Endless fields scorched by a spring and summer with only a few drops of rain. For more than four months it feels like tears must be squeezed from the gods

who watch over Kenya. They must be stone blind to the suffering of the children. Hugging their ankles all night outside the huts. Trembling with fever in the heat that never relents. I swear you can hear the ribs of the little ones clacking together and against thin skin -- keeping the beat with their chattering, rotting teeth. Eyes huge as black panic moons. Cheeks caved in. Hair falling out. Their nervous stick fingers drum bloated bellies. They are mesmerized by mothers boiling big pots with water drawn from the deepest cisterns. Stagnant but precious. Even cooked the water carries the risk of influenza. The mothers show blank faces as they toss in a few greens and chicken feet. It will never be enough to stifle the hunger of the little ones who passively accept their fate. The mothers and fathers share the same quiet dignity. They know they are visitors not owners in this life. The earth will give as much or as little as she pleases. The sky can be stingy or generous with moisture in any season. The natives can never control the ways of nature and would never be proud enough to try.

This is my bitter-sweet dream of Africa about the miracle that came a week too late. I can see the crates piled on the platform in Nairobi where the train passes through on Wednesdays on the long journey down to Capetown or Kaapstad as they say in Afrikaans. The crates are stamped RED CROSS. Rice and powered eggs. Boiled potatoes and sweet young peas. Sardines in tins. Tea and tapioca.

The supplies are loaded on big trucks with high open backs and steel roll bars covered by khaki canvas -- mostly used to transport British soldiers. A crowd gathers for the uncommon spectacle of food arriving from half a world away. A few at the edge of the circle are Somali. Awed by the smallest events. They have heard the strange word: America. That's where the angels live who sent the food. One or two of the luckiest Somali possess an even stranger word: Newyorkcity. When they dare to speak it, they feel the tickle and burn of the dark lesser gods under their tongues.

The crowd cheers as the convoy pulls out. Huge black wheels kick up storms of yellow dust and the sky is blood red in the early evening of the 87th day without rain. Everyone is hopeful tomorrow will bring a change. A torrent of grace from heaven and a small flood for the parched fields.

Another wide-eyed crowd runs to greet the trucks. The food comes too late to save 19 children but 48 will recover. Four mothers and a young warrior are gone. Multiply these numbers ten fold to cover the villages within a radius of fifty miles.

Tonight this village will rejoice and build a bonfire to the gods who are smiling as the crescent moon rises. White as ivory. The blood of suffering has burned off. There will be a feast and dancing until close to dawn. Even after the Masai drop sweating and exhausted, they will continue to chant in low melodious tones -- smooth currents in a secret ebony river that will never change course or be devoured by the cruel leopard named drought. Until first light through the trees, the skin drums will keep the tempo of 117 hearts ecstatic to be spared by another hard summer.

I've lived in my dreams of Kenya for seven years, and it feels like I arrived yesterday. It's too soon to say farewell.

Down in the spacious kitchen the pretty Masai woman kicks off her straw shoes as a quiet act of rebellion. She glares at the squatty icebox and tells him the farm wants me to stay. She knows the flowering myrtle under my bedroom window will miss me. Next spring she won't bare blossoms. She might lose her will and grow cankers. Even the yellow stray with the crooked tail will stare in the open kitchen door and whine sensing something's wrong. He will long for the courage to come in and help. The Masai woman feeds him from the battered tin basin. The cur trusts no other creature on earth. Every day the woman gives him what would only spoil in the heat after supper. Tomorrow and every day to follow the basin will be empty. The yellow dog will haunt the farm. Whimpering and moaning. Heartbroken and never guessing the Masai has gone back to her village.

The woman pads in smooth bare feet from pantry to propane stove and out the swinging door to the mahogany table and the single chair with a cracked leg. Everything else was moved on Saturday. Upstairs I have only a mattress on the floor and three big rooms echoing with restless spirits. It's time to go and I don't want to go. The woman carries coffee in a blue mug and a small white plate with toast and two boiled eggs. A simple last supper.

Coming down the steps, I catch my lovely Masai telling the coffee mug how much he will miss my hand. The woman asks for the mug and plate as a memory of me. Two of the last things I touched at the farm.

This is my dream of Africa. I'm sipping the coffee I've grown for the last time in a safe place that can never feel like home. Dreams are filled with mystery and contradiction. My green trunk waits on the cool stone floor by the front door. I'm making a great mistake in going, but can't change what was done and regretted long ago. I've put 600 moons and two forgotten lifetimes between myself and my dreams of strange, exotic Kenya. I was always afraid of hepatitis and small pox. Bad water and spoiled meat. Snakes in my bed. Leopards crazed by famine leaping through my window screens.

Three slender men are walking single file across my lawn. They are smiling at their bare feet and already enjoying the cool sensation of the smooth pebbles in the driveway they will cross before climbing the three cedar steps to my front door. They come to say goodbye and to wish me the gifts of fortune health and modesty from the great gods of Africa. They say they will keep a bonfire for me for seven days and nights to protect me from lions and other dangers in unknown places.

The men will walk this way again to meet the new man in my place, but they know it can never be the same. The grass will hiss and the pebbles clatter with different voices. Even the cedar steps will crack and creak to tell them I'm gone, and the one who's living on my farm has a dream of Africa I could never imagine. Who knows if I could, it might frighten me with changes.

THE HUNT

For one long summer the dog and cat,
free in the predictable wilderness
of Long Island in 1973,
met in a toe-to-toe grudge match
hunting the moles
that had been digging a hidden city
under our yard,
leaving hollow hills, dead grass,
my mother wishing she had
the heart to buy poison.
As featureless and newborn
as tadpoles, yet grown
and hardened by clay,
they belonged in a world of their own:
single blind muscles
outfitted only for digging ahead
in the darkness.
Once the competition started
I kept score, which
ran even for weeks,
the moles caught whenever they
dug too close to the air
and made the grass move
in a watery throb.
Usually if the cat caught them, they were killed.
The dog, however,
batted them gently over the dandelions
like the tennis balls she'd
chewed all tension from.
I preferred the dog's way, of course,
though by August the corpses
outnumbered the orphans 3 to 1.
I remember lifting the live moles
up from the grass,
their groping, babyish bodies,
unborn snouts, closed eyes,

the huge claws I scrupulously avoided,
rolling them into coffee cans
and taking the walk deep
into the neighboring woods.
They'd scratch the aluminum
the whole way, wondering
what new dirt
wouldn't move from before them.
I felt quite like a father,
a life-giver,
bringing the lost, the blind
into the new worlds,
where they may dig in any direction,
and calmly smell the sky.

GHOSTFISH

They move between Labrador and Long Island Sound.
Heavy waves will throw them up on the hard beaches

in large numbers. What you can't get over is
how white on white they are, giving you back

whatever mind you have left now, wandering
along barefoot, trying not to hyperventilate.

Just don't go pettifogging, is all I can think
to advise. The fish ripple around your feet with

the sound of a kiss. It doesn't matter that you're
grown up now, know they're in the last throes of life.

IV. THE TELLING

Blizzard months. The snow is not the tide.
It's conversation, spending little but its voice.
Like the wolf, wasting nothing. A stasis of time.
But we oiled leather, mended tools,
sewed and patched, and handed down tales.
All that we did was by our hands, these stars
hanging from the wrists. All the good it did.
The town of Krem is grass now
and one summer kitchen of stone, dark
and huddled under buckthorn and muckle plum.
I recall once the bones of a tree
insisting on itself above a shifting bank of snow.
And I remember my hands by winter light,
pale as the smudge of powder from moth wings,
holding their pain and a dream in a cloth
I tried to embroider with dawn. I left it undone.

HOW TO PLAY THE GUITAR

First, go west.
Not driving, not flying, and certainly not with any money.
Hitch, hop freights, or walk. You can't know the blues
until you've walked from Ogden to Boulder.
Go west until you've hit California.
If you're already in California, go to Oklahoma and back.

Then get a job. Not a career, a job.
Wash dishes. Cook. Hew wood, carve tombstones.
Drive railroad spikes into a mountainside, or
switch mainlines in Rock Island. Get axed.

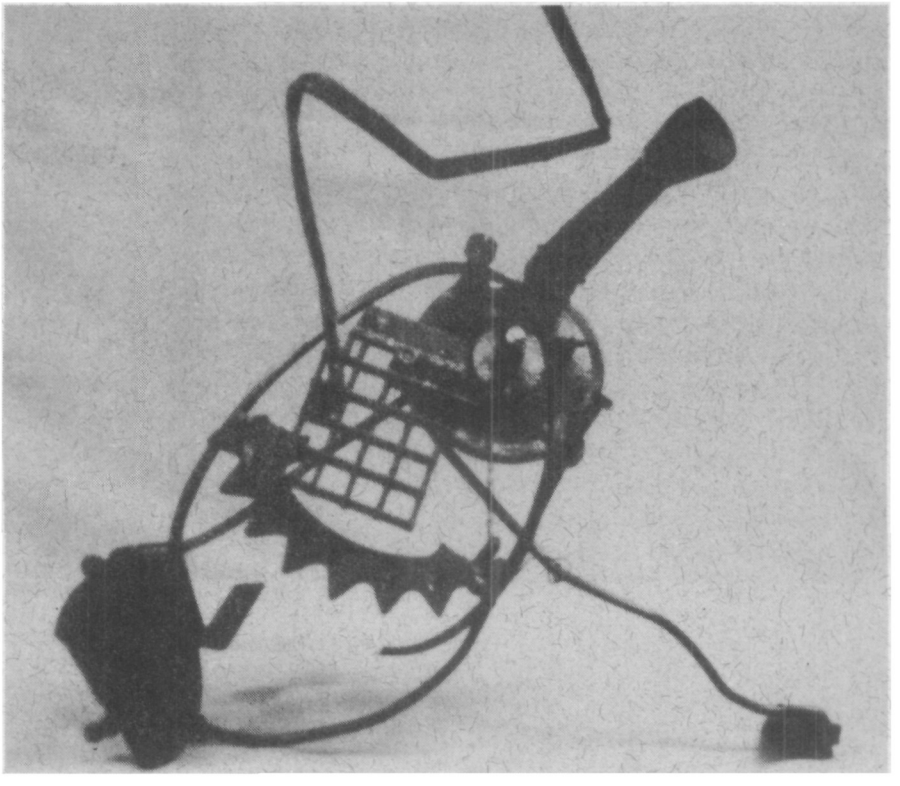
Then get arrested. If you're not doing something illegal,
you'll never get the hang of fingerpicking.
Spend at least three nights in jail, two of them drunk.
Learn the deputy's first name, and get banned
from the county for a period of at least seven years.

Then get stood up. Preferably by a beautiful woman
with brown hair.
Make certain she leaves you feeling like a broken liquor bottle,
like an alley cat in the rain. Call her "baby," beg her not
to go. When she's gone, make sure she's on the "cheating side
of town."
Buy a slide. Better yet, steal one.

If by now you don't know how to play the guitar,
you either have no hands or you've killed yourself.

James Lyon

GREEN THING



A WORLD OF HIGH STAIRS AND RAIN

After years of coloring it brunette, you've let your hair
go a glacier's grayish white, your father's thin hair
curling like loose winded snow on the lake ice.
Your body has been squashed by half of your life,
you walk it through the house, chair to kitchen sink,
with crooked arthritic slowness, everyone who sees it
visualizes easily the silent grinding of bones somewhere
inside you. It may be hard to say so,
but I'm not happy with the years you have left.
You, however, have always trusted the afterlife, Christian
and otherwise, and with Lazarus the thirteenth apostle,
he who preached little but who walked from his tomb
into sunlight crying like a new born from the womb,
you've never placed much faith in the world as it is,
a world of high stairs and rain. You've visited
psychics looking for no more than a word
from those dead you trust most, welcome, I guess,
or rest. They'd fish around for private facts--someone
close to you died after a long illness? cancer? no?
something about the heart?--and nod, eyes closed,
saying yes, your mother, sister, they're all waiting for you.
You can be with them again. You half believe it all.
As long as I've known, whatever age you are
is too young for anyone to die.
When someone does, you mention it in awe.
You ask, What of. When you find out, your head shakes no,
no, the tracks we follow can't just end in the desert.
Can't we catch another train, one whose schedule
takes us to the other sea? Can't we get off at this
station, and stand with our bags at our feet?
There are flower beds that need weeding from here
to Wyoming. There is quiet to be uncovered,
worms under shalestone. You're not moving westward.
If this were about direction, you'd know better

how to sit yourself down, how many drinks to have.
As it is, you know as little as anyone
about what's taken you this far, three children, a drunk
husband, TV in winter, cheap novels in summer.
You've always looked upward, still. The clouds don't
seem to move. Your eyes are still sky blue.

CIRCE AND COMPANY

"She gonna shake you down son,
with her bloody love."
He told me when I ask.
Lived down by the tracks, daddy
raised pigs. I knew that much.
But I'd see her,
walking in the gifted light
of the moon. And, dream of her nude
under the sun, her too thin
taunt lips pending. She named her pigs,
it's said, after the neighbors. . .
and her lovers. Had a big hog, four hundred
and fifty pounds at least, named Zero. Her father
was an oblisk. I became
a vertical phantom who wandered among
the polk weeds and mug wort,
my beige back sunburnt.

BARABBAS

IMAGE MAKERS: THE EDUCATION OF A NOMAD.
CAPPADOCIA, TURKEY. NOTE-BOOK.

It's the mechanical aspect that infuriates me
when I stir the tobacco leaves in the jar,
and I compare the gloss of the spirals in which he rolls
the films with the muddy waters of my dyes
and my wizened skin.
His lens and chemicals idle on the shelves.
Seldom he assents to my mother's toothless smile,
but when my father embraces him by the waist,
and both cradle their way to town to talk science
to peasants welded to their chairs,
jealous I stand on the dirty road
mocking reverence to the tractor's smoke and dust.

Engines and sheen, moreover they own the road.
For me: the burlap of the tent, the chests covered with rugs.
Meekness and passion of a forgotten mother,
stitch by stitch made silence and image.
We are left tangled with wheat and wool.
My sisters, my mother, sunk in sunsets
that I can not capture with boxes like him
because our sweat is the essence of the scene,
and we are sewn to the earth.
We have the whole world to work.
Some songs, some apple tea, some rest.

Dance is only whispers and stares,
at night, when the goats cuddle near and their absence
hurts more than our muscles and the darkness.
Stories and exhaustion whirl and illuminate our fear.
The voices reflect in the strips of celluloid
where he seals images with his crystals.
Tenderly, hungry for stories,
I wield my shuttle, I dispense legends on the warp.
I weave.

A CAPPELLA

You hurry back up the stairs or you'll make them late.
I'll hold your coat. Don't forget gloves. Cold burns deeper

than skin, and makes us cry in the night. Wrap this scarf
around your neck and cheeks. Don't run. You'll slip. The rug

slides on the wooden floor. A good many faded
rugs have been caught on that nail on the bottom of

the door, its wood warped, opened once to admit a
stranger who fogged the windows, changed all the bedrooms,

made our life go awry. Your gloves are hiding? I
know: you're too grown for such things you're no baby. But

daddy grows tired of waiting and blasts the horn.
Your best friend lost something in the snow, your favorite

in the whole-entire-world-around. Button up
tight. Wear my mittens. At least put your hands in your

pockets. It couldn't be found: the sky was getting
dark and I was calling, calling, *Dinner!* The house

is getting bigger, your toys disappearing, your
playmates becoming unreliable. Daddy

leans on the horn until you burst out the door, new
scarf dragging in the dirty snow. I lean against

the closed door, wince at the cold rushing under it,
kick the faded rug back in its place. The echoes

wander aimlessly until they find me in the
kitchen: they gaze mournfully from the corners as

I reheat last night's dinner. I chew slowly, stare
at the clock's hands, go to bed early. Nightmares woke

you again last night. I untangled you from the
blankets, dried your cheeks, tightened you in my arms so

you might hear the rhythm of my heart. Lost once in
snow. Found glittering with ice. But not by children.

[redacted]

MIDLANDS

Redacted at the request of the author. 7/27/12

[redacted]

ROKN-E SAYEN

If worldly wealth means that you sleep in luxury
Or if your pillow is the earth and poverty,
Don't gripe about the one for it will soon be past -
And don't congratulate yourself on what won't last;
Since pilgrim-souls have no abiding city here
What's there to boast of for two days? What's there to fear?

**

SADR-E ZANGANI

To talk to you about my heart's distress,
O God, can this be me?
And then to kiss your ruby lips, no less,
O God, can this be me?
For me to glimpse you, even from afar,
Was once impossible -
To sleep with you, to know such happiness,
O God, can this be me?

**

VAHSHI

If secretly I've glanced at you
Don't be annoyed with me: it's true
That kind of glance is not allowed -
But all the others do it too!

Epigrams translated from Medieval Persian.
Translator, Dick Davis.

THE COFFEE CUP SONG

"How dare you!" my momma says, her voice high and screeching like a lonely fiddle. "How dare you!" She throws one two three four five coffee cups at me. Percussion smash. Tinkle of white shards on the blue linoleum. We'll be drinking coffee out of styrofoam for a while, I think. That's all we have, coffee cup-wise, except for the sixth one, the last thing my daddy drank out of the morning he left, and it's sitting in the china cabinet in the front room.

She doesn't aim to hit me, although the fifth cup comes close. It explodes on the floor and a chip dings off my guitar's gloss. She's never thrown anything at me before. I watch the way you might watch a television program showing animals doing something you've never seen them do.

"How dare you!" my mother says again. She sinks down in her chair and puts her head in her hands. Her words are muffled as they make their way past the blue sleeves of her workshirt, the one with "Candy" embroidered in red loops on the front pocket. "How dare you put me in that song?"

I don't answer. She'll cry for a while, and then she'll sweep up the pieces, wipe her face with a cool rag, and go to work at the Krave-More Diner, where you can get the finest cup of coffee in this town or any other. I put my guitar in its case, go out the screen door, and head out down the road, raising puffs of red dust puffs around my heels.

It's morning. Maybe too early to have sprung it on her, when she was still shaking off her dreams. The sky arches over me high and sweet, and I can hear the sighing of mourning doves and the wind in the telephone wires. The air's cool now, but it'll heat up later, till you don't feel much like moving more than your hand on the guitar neck as you sit on the porch swing and try to puzzle out a song or maybe just that chorus that's been eluding you, chasing it up and down the frets. Back home, my momma's washing her face. She knows I'm not going far.

I can't say how I came by my love of honkytonk music. We

always listened to classical at my house, enough so I can call up some of the pieces in my mind, the big booming ones that go with the Kansas prairie. But a lot of that stuff's too tinkly and quick. When you're driving down the road, the notes fly out the window and bury themselves in the long grass. They don't stick around and keep you company, the way honkytonk music does.

I taught myself to play on my daddy's guitar, the only thing he left behind besides that coffee cup. At first my hands were too small and soft to do much more than strum, but they toughened up. I learned to pick fast and easy and the music sounded so lovely, I kept stopping to say to myself, is that me, is that me that's making those fine sounds?

My name is J.D. Daniels, Jennifer Delilah if you must know, but I go by J.D., the way my daddy did. I don't mean to make it sound like he's dead, because he isn't. My daddy sold insurance and provided for us for eight years. Then a wander itch came on him like a night fever and he packed up his things and left us without a word. Didn't take him overly far, though. He's living over in Greensborough with a woman named Amanda who's cleaned up his act. He doesn't drink or run around any more, and wears a tie to church every Sunday.

The only present he ever gave me was that guitar, an old steel string no name brand, and I don't know if the gift was intentional. I came off better than my momma. All she has is a cup.

My momma works at the Krave-More. She brings folks coffee and smiles at them to sweeten up their day. She's slow to smile, but when she does, it could melt ice from across the room.

I'll be fourteen next month. Changes coming, my grandma tells me. I know all that stuff. We learned it in health class and there's no call for her to nod so mysteriously. But I don't tell her that. She means well by us, and helps out when she can. The house we're living in belongs to her, and every birthday, she and I dress up in our best and go down to the First Farmer's Bank and deposit my birthday check in my savings acount for college. People ask me what I want to be when I grow up, and I tell them an archaeologist or a country singer or an astrophysicist, but the fact of the matter is that I don't know. But I pray every night to grow up a good woman like my momma and grandma, and not to be afflicted with a wander itch.

Three months ago I wrote a song. That's what caused all the trouble. The music teacher, Miss Mopp, told us about a contest

sponsored by a radio station in Abilene, Kansas. You wrote a song and sent it in, you singing along with whatever instrument suited your fancy. The radio station would pick the best tape and the winner would come in and record it at their studio. Then they'd make 45 rpm records of it to give away to five hundred lucky souls and play it three times daily on the air.

I thought that sounded pretty easy. I've been writing songs ever since I started playing guitar. At first I had a hard time getting them out of my head and into the strings. But I got better. I'd listen in the evenings to the songs on the radio, and I'd fool around until I figured out how so and so got that lonesome sound or how somebody else did that fancy bridge. I'd play a song over fifty, sixty times, until I got it right, but I had to play soft, because my momma hated what I was playing.

"That's trash music," she'd snort. "Learn to play something higher tone and I'll pay for guitar lessons. Better yet, we'll rent a piano, and you can play all day."

But by then, I knew enough to play the songs I loved, sad songs that crept out my window and spread across the sky like a million twinkling stars, sorrowful songs about cheating men and hearts worn out with weeping. I could make tears run down my grandma's cheeks when I played, and there's no higher tribute she could pay, but my momma stayed dryeyed.

Miss Mopp let me borrow the school tape recorder. I played three songs, then rewound and listened. My first song was about that coffee cup in our front room and it was so sad it made the soles of my feet itch.

But I wasn't sure. One time I wrote a song about being buried in white roses, because they're the most romantic things I know. I thought it was a sad song, but my grandma only laughed. Another time I wrote a song about a single candle in the window, and I thought that was a sad song, but my grandma paid it no mind. This song seemed sad, but I couldn't test it out on my mother, seeing as how she figured in it, which might influence her judgment. My grandma wasn't handy, and I wanted to turn the song in the next day.

I went ahead and wrote my name, age and school down on a recipe card with a little drawing of jam pots and squash up in the corner, because we didn't have any index cards. I gave it to Miss Mopp. And then I forgot about it, and that's the pure and simple truth, until yesterday when Miss Mopp told me I'd won.

I thought my momma would be pleased when I told her the news at breakfast. And she was, at first, until I fetched down my guitar and played that song for her. And that's when coffee cups started flying through the air.

I walk down the road to my grandma's house. She's up and in her kitchen.

"Sit down and play me this prize-winning song," she says when I get in the doorway. That's how I know my momma has already called her on the telephone. This is where I go when things get a little hard every now and then. My grandma pours me a glass of milk and puts two chocolate doughnuts on a plate. I sit down, prop my guitar on my knee, and play her that song. She starts crying before the first verse's halfway through, stands there and dabs at her eyes with her apron when I finish.

"That's the saddest song I ever heard," she says. "I can see where it'd fetch a prize or two. But do you understand why your momma's so upset, J.D. honey?"

I shake my head.

"It's just a song."

"But it's your momma's song. It's all her sadness spread out in the air for anyone to hear," she says, blowing her nose. "And maybe there's folks she doesn't want listening."

I know she's right. But I wanted to write a song about the saddest thing I knew, and that coffee cup has always qualified.

"It's my song too, " I say to my grandma. "I live there too."

My momma doesn't say anything about the song at dinner. I figure she'll ignore it, the way she does with things she doesn't like. She doesn't say anything at all to me.

Two days later, my grandma drives me into Abliene to the radio station. We figure we'll record the song in the morning, then have lunch, go visit the Greyhound Hall of Fame and the house of Dwight D. Eisenhower was born in. It's a scorching day by the time we get there, but the radio station, WKNS, your station for Kansas country sound, is air conditioned.

They take me in a room full of fancy dials and buttons. They make me play the song on my guitar, and then play it back through headphones and I sing along with what I played. I play and sing maybe ten, twelve times before the way it sounds satifies the man sitting up in the booth drinking coffee. He shakes my hand and congratulates me. His voice is thick and there's a little bit of water in the corners of his eyes. He says "That's the

saddest song I ever heard. Thanks for letting me listen."

A secretary gives me papers to sign, which my grandma reads through first, and then a lady DJ takes me in her office to tape an intro. It's like being inside a big machine, full of toggle switches and dials. She's got pictures of singers taped up on the walls: Patsy Cline, Kitty Wells, Loretta Lynn.

"Just speak naturally, sugar," she tells me. She flips a button on her microphone. "So tell me, J.D., how old are you?"

I tell her, and she asks questions like where I go to school and what's my favorite class and how I learned to play the guitar. Then she says "How did you write that song?"

I take a minute before I answer, "It's a song about a member of my immediate family, but if you please, I'd rather not say anything more."

She studies me, and flips the switch off, but she doesn't ask me any more about the circumstances of the song.

My grandma buys me lunch. We stroll around town and visit the Greyhound Hall of Fame. Eisenhower's house is closed, so all we do is walk around the outside and look in the windows, which is about as interesting as you'd expect. My grandma gives me a present she's made, a shirt with "J.D. Daniels: Prizewinning Songwriter" embroidered on the front pocket. I know I'll never wear it to school, but I like the way it looks, and I thank her. I wrap it up again, carefully, and keep it on my lap as we bounce our way home over dusty roads.

When I get back to our house, nothing's changed. My momma won't speak to me much. Meals are awfully quiet. She buys new coffee cups, the same as the old ones. They start playing my song on WKNS, and mail me five of the records. Some of the kids at school tell me they heard my song and say they liked it. But I don't turn the radio at home to WKNS because I'm afraid if my mother hears what I said on the radio, it'll make things worse.

Two days later, I come home from school, and there's my daddy sitting on the front porch. He stands as I come up toward the house. I squint against the sun like I can't make out who he is.

"Jennifer, is that you?" he says, and before I can nod or shake my head, he picks me up and hugs me tight. I hold myself stiff.

"It's me, baby, it's your daddy," he says and puts me down. I look at him real hard, this being the first chance I've had in a number of years, but I don't say anything. I don't know what to say.

"I heard your song on the radio," he says. "That's the saddest song I've ever heard. It touched my heart and showed me how I done wrong by your momma. I've come back to the both of you, and you can take that coffee cup out of the cupboard, wash it out, and fill it up again for me."

That's a quote from the song, but it sounds different coming from him.

"You'll have to wait out here till Momma comes home," I tell him and his face falls, but then he smiles even bigger.

"Tell you what I'm gonna do," he says, leaning forward and whispering like we were spies in a movie. "I'm gonna buy your momma some flowers. I'll be back in half an hour."

My momma comes home before the dust from his wheels has settled. She sits down at the kitchen table and I pour her a cup of the coffee I have waiting. I don't know how to say what's happened. I study on ways to do it. She leans back in her chair and puts her feet up, kicking her shoes clear across the room. She's still not talking to me much.

He knocks before I get the chance. I follow her to the front door, and there he is on his knees, with a big bunch of red roses. He says, "Candy honey, I've come back to you."

She stares down at him through the wire squares of the screen. I don't remember his shirt so white, his blue eyes shining, his hair slicked back and shiny. The roses are full open, petals sagging in the heat, sending up a sweet sad smell.

"Jennifer's song on the radio touched my heart and made me see how I done wrong by you and her." He smiles up at her. His hair on top is just about gone, and the skin gleams between the strands in the sunlight. He rocks a little, as though the wood under his knees was paining him.

"Does Amanda know you're here?" she asks.

"Amanda and I, we're past history," he says. He smoothes his hand through the air. "Water under the bridge."

She steps back and looks over at me. I shrug, trying to say this wasn't what I wrote the song for. I wrote it for the sake of writing a song, not so he'd hear it. She shrugs back. He kneels outside in silence, watching us.

My momma looks uncertain at first, but edges of her mouth quirk up a touch. She turns around, opens the door of the china cupboard, and takes the coffe cup, that goddamned coffee cup, out. I hold my breath.

"I believe you left this last time you were here," she says as politely as if she were on a commercial, and opens the door enough to hold out the cup. He takes it with a funny grin on his face and starts to speak. My momma closes the door on him and goes back into the kitchen. I follow her. She sits down at the table and adds more coffee to her cup to warm it up. A car door slams outside.

"J.D. honey, " she says to me. "Go get your guitar and play that song for me. I believe I'm feeling more reconciled to it."

THE TWINS BORROW A HORSE

We were horse crazy and used to walk
miles to find any horse to ride:
the little dappled gray mare the Snyder boys
had teased into something close to meanness
was a challenge; she'd start out walking
with her ears pinned back tight to her head,
her eye bright and I--when it was my turn--
would talk to her, try to win her over.
She was trim, after all, in spite
of the peppery coat, and had small hooves.

I'd start to think she was nice and wonder
why she didn't relax, stick up her ears.
Or my eyes would stray to the woods beside me,
to ground flaked by crenelated oak leaves,
to the white blooms of dogwood floating
in the cool shade. It was then she'd suddenly whirl,
jump stiff-legged and squeal--a high-pitched shriek
she galloped home on. There, by the barn door,
my twin was smiling for her turn.

It was her chance to try to undo
what our little mare's masters had done,
to make her forget those bullies and the way
they'd stick a big foot under her foreleg
to trip her onto her knees or slap her
into a gallop, then suddenly shout in her ear,
haul back hard on the reins and force her around.

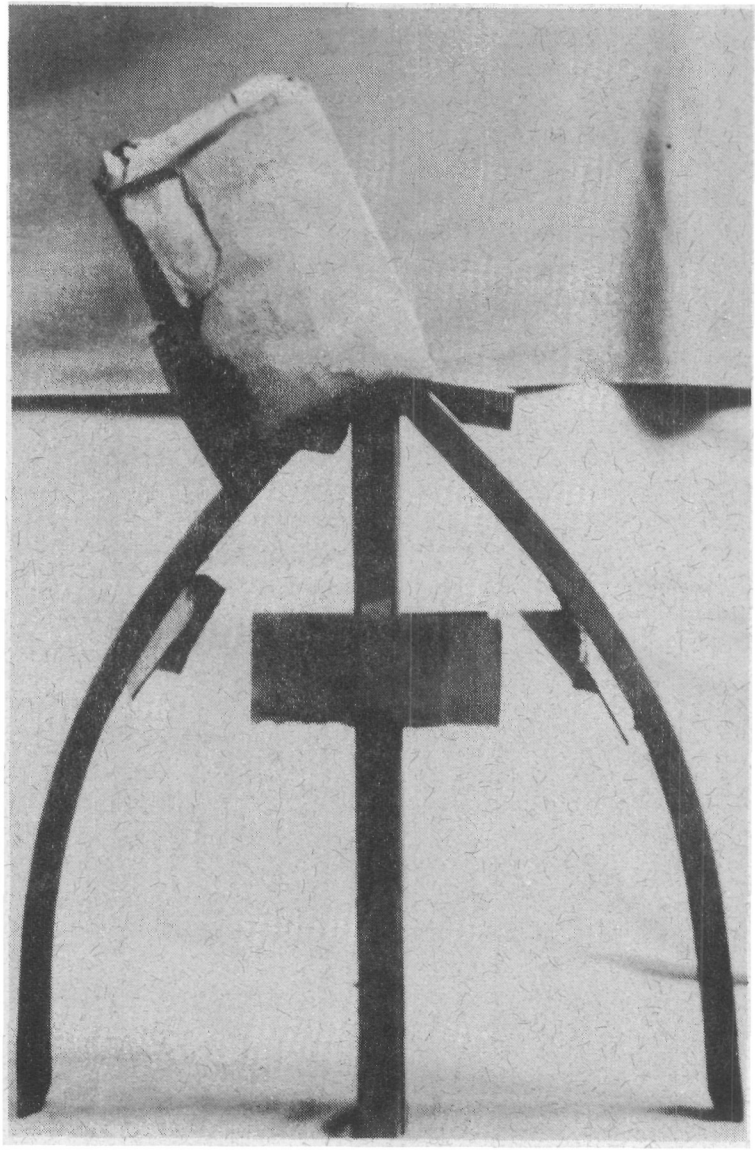
We each dreamed we could undo her nervous prance,
teach her to love us. One of us would triumph
and get her to come docile as a doe for oats
from our hands, eyes full of a liquid love,
full of a permanent and decided preference.

AGAIN AT THE DRILL

A strained orderly descent into dancing dust
and shadow, into a catacomb of glazed
cinder block. There we stand, side-by-side,
like riddles. Silent for the test that went
and came, went and came. Short bursts
bunched mean "test" but remember always
"the real thing" will go "on and on."
Lucky then to reach a basement, better here
than under little brittle desks and chairs. Glass,
they say, will be hot and kniving everywhere.
We wait for giggles wishing someone would.

Mary tempts with her blonde pigtail, ornately
plaited, ribbon candy shiny--no one makes
a move. James, of cartwheels, studies
his shoes. George has that nervous thing that
jumps his arm. Gerry, Peg (of fatty heart),
Mike and Sandy, that "dirty-fightin'-raggy
girl," stay close to Mrs. Halberstam (she has
a famous son), near enough to hear her breathing
bulge her throat, as the burst-burst-burst
snaps through the basement of our school, the
burst-burst-burst that never went and came.

GRAY MEMORY



FLOOD #2

Sloshing over chocolated cobbles, I wade
the flooded levee. The swirl sank away
moments ago, burying the edge of the city
under wet silt mounds. I'm alone with water,
solid to the old, black pier
and the cliff wall. Under a trapped pool,
a calligraphy of dots etches the bone
structure of my reflected face
in the mud, a small crayfish, looking
for food. It had legs, leaves footprints,
swims in lunges, sinks if it stops
moving. Only a little time remains
for it now, not knowing the river
has left it, that this silt
won't always be suffused with water,
gelled and glistening like flesh.

LADDER

Someone's stolen my ladder. Up high,
I was stealing the sun's ladder, fell
Westward, down from the sky, night
On my head, a meteoric plunge.

Sisyphus was a stone to himself,
Rolling up, back, all the time,
Without reason, or rhyme, just
Falling from the top to his feet.
Without meeting himself there!

Fate had it right, then, all
The sadder, said with a bitter mouth:
"Everything is climbing a ladder,
Which is taken away afterward."

Translated, from the Romanian,
by Gabriela Dragnea and Stuart Friebert.

HUGH ABERNETHY, JR. has stories forthcoming in *Reial* and *Confrontation* and new poems soon in *Minnesota Review* and *the new renaissance*. He was recently an editor for Zephyr press which published *The Complete Poems of Anna Alchmatora,* nominated by the *New York Times Book Review* as one of the ten best books of 1990.. **MICHAEL ATKINSON** has been awarded a recent fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts, and has poems recently appearing or forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner, The Seneca Review, The Massachusetts Review, The New York Quarterly, Willow Springs, Graham House Review, Hiram Poetry Review, The Seattle Review,* and other publications. **PETER BLAIR**'s chapbook, *Inside the Trackhoe,* won the 1991 Mid Ohio Chapbook Prize sponsored by *The And Review*. His work has appeared in *Poem, The Bassettown, The Pittsburgh Quarterly, Anthology of Magazine Verse, 1986-88 Edition,* and is forthcoming in *Crazyhorse* and *River City*.

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