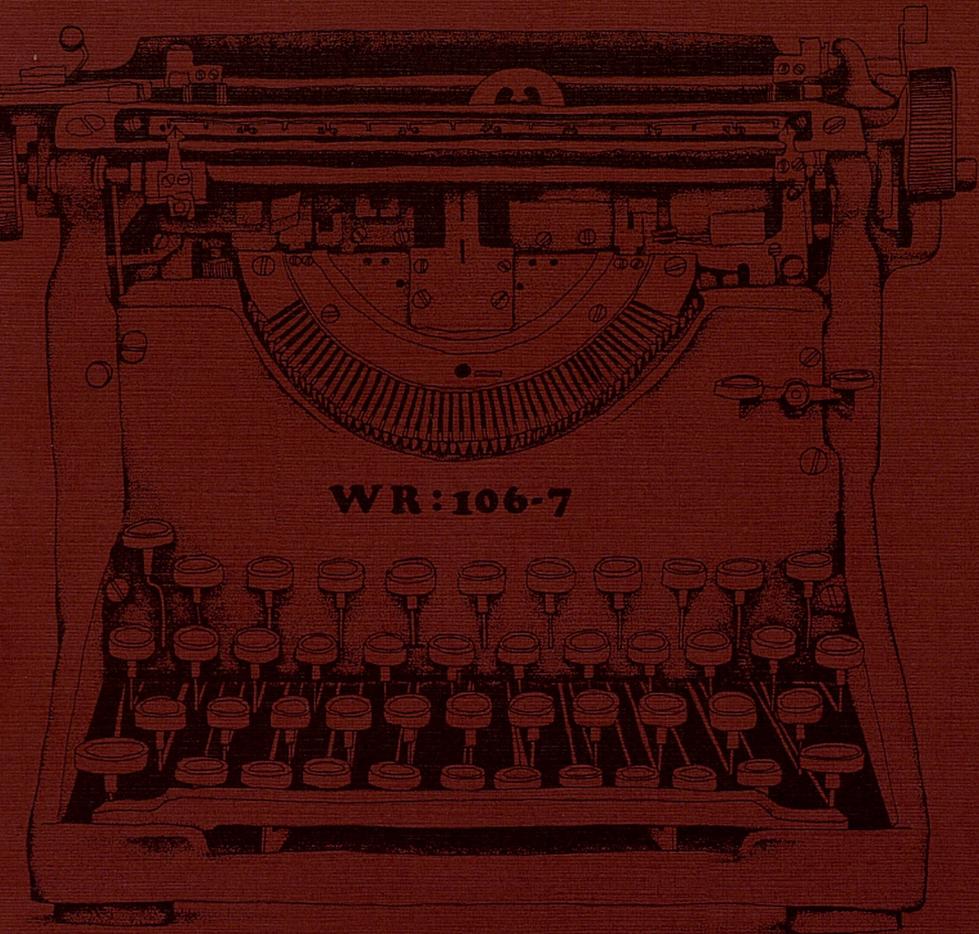


**children of a lesser
demagogue . .**



. . Gerald Locklin

CHILDREN OF A LESSER DEMAGOGUE

"well," i ask her, "how did you like it?"

she says, "i thought it was great."

when it becomes apparent she has no intention of soliciting my opinion, i decide to give it to her anyway:

"i liked it while it was still pro-deaf, but when it started to get women's libby my enthusiasm waned."

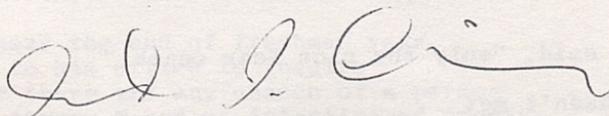
she is watering a plant.

"actually," i say, "i thought he put up with way too much bullshit from the bitch."

she is hoisting the plant, like a union jack, in its macrame rig.

"he should have dumped her and found himself a beautiful deaf girl who wasn't such an almighty ballbuster. there must be millions, even trillions, of beautiful deaf girls out there who would be delighted to be taken to a poker game by william hurt. i bet a few of them might even consider me a great catch!"

a familiar scene is occurring: she is shaking her head and locking herself in the bathroom. i smile and turn on the ballgame.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "J. J. O'Connell".

LEARNING TO SEE CROOKED

"mommie," she says, "i've never seen you and daddy kiss."

"Of course you have," the mother says;
"you've just forgotten."

"i wouldn't have forgotten that," she says,
"because i always wish you would."

"it doesn't matter," her father says. "we
both love you and we love each other in our
own way."

"you've seen us kiss," the mother says.

"not on the mouth. not the way people
kiss on your soap operas."

"your mother and i have been together
nearly twenty years," her father says.
"we did a lot of kissing in our time.
that's why we have you and your brother,
thank god."

"maybe you did, but you don't now,"
their daughter says.

the father says, "your mother and i sleep
in the same bed. we do our best to get along
and we have our love for you and your brother
in common. there are things we have come to
understand that you will someday also understand."

this almost satisfies her, but she adds,
"i think you wish that mommie still kissed you."

the mother says, "if you're finished eating,
you may leave the table."

MORE STATELY TOWNHOUSES

chekhov said, "only the rich fear death."

but he hadn't met
the american middle-class.

THE ANSWER MAN

the voice on the office phone says,
"may i ask you a literary question?"
i don't recognize the voice:
"sure, go ahead."

"there's this poem in a book by an author
named milne, and it concludes,
'hush, hush, whisper who dare --
christopher robin is saying his prayers.'"

"yeah?"
"you know the poem?"
"i know the poem."
"yes, well, i'm writing a book, you see,

and i'm in the midst of a passage about birds.
i wanted to allude to this christopher robin
but i didn't know whether
he was a human or a bird."

i take a breath: "he's a kid.
a human-kid, not a goat-kid.
he's saying his prayers.
he's not a robin.

also, winnie-the-pooh is a stuffed bear.
and tigger is a stuffed tiger.
and eeyore is a stuffed horse."
i somehow stop short of suggesting one further stuffing.

"well, thank you, you've been very helpful."
"any time."

thank god it was a question in my major.

THE AMBIVALENCE OF VALENCE

in a sense, dear reader, you have only
my chemistry teacher to blame.

when, near the end of freshman year,
i went to his office to inquire
whether there was any chance of a person
with a strong F and no intention of opening
his still inviolate textbook
being passed out of the class,

he said, "you don't intend to remain
in pre-med, do you?"

"god, no," i said, "i've already changed
my major to english."

"thank god," he said, "you can't do much harm there.
i'll give you a D, but if you double-cross me
i'll find a way to have you kicked out of school."

i had no desire to double-cross him,
but he was wrong about my not being able
to do much harm in english.

BEACH APPRECIATION 101

the berm is coming down.
the bulldozer is flattening it
inch by inch. soon it will not
even be a memory.

who after all walks around in july
remembering a sand-berm?
who wants to remember winter at all,
to recall the days when the water was
numbing and the sand nearly mud and
the clouds antithetical to comfort?

i know people who claim to love
the beach on dismal days, but i
never see them at the beach on dismal
days. also, i suspect they like those
days a lot less when the tide breaks
through the berm and soaks their million-
dollar living rooms for which no flood
insurance is available.

the people who claim to love the wintry beach
have a name for themselves: they call
themselves poets.

i only know of one insurance man who ever
called himself a poet, and he didn't call
himself a poet very loud or outside of
certain circles and i bet he was sharp
enough when wintering in key west not
to sell the local poets hurricane insurance.

A HELLER OF A MESS

i'm working the last day
of walk-in registration
and nearly all our classes are closed.
a bright-looking kid says,
"i need advanced composition."
i ask, "have you taken freshman composition?"
and he says, "no."
so I say, "you have to take freshman composition
before you can take advanced composition,"
and he says, "okay, then, give me a card
for freshman comp."
i have to tell him: "i can't. all the sections are
closed."

from the way he's looking at me
i can tell what's going through his mind,
so i say, "i know it sounds like catch-22,
but that's only natural. we do the best catch-22's
of all in the english department
because, you see, we're required to memorize the book
before we can be hired."

i don't have the heart to tell him
that none of this has mattered anyway
because all the advanced comp sections
are also closed.

KINESTHETIC SCULPTURE OF JOHN STUART MILL BANGING HIS HEAD AGAINST THE ROCK

john stuart mill, in his essay on liberty,
enunciated a principle that proved,
for over a hundred years,
as workable as it was simple:

make laws only against tangible,
direct, measurable harm.
don't make laws against people
harming themselves or giving bad
example or lowering the moral tone
of the society.

murder was out; the private life was in.

then, in the late 20th century,
someone in the insurance companies
had a brainstorm -- if you harmed yourself

you were probably raising the insurance rates
for everybody. therefore, you were actually
(or actuarially, at least)
doing tangible, economically measurable
harm to others.

thus, the mandatory seatbelt law.
thus, the smoker left
with no place to smoke.
thus, the sin taxes -- pay in advance
for your eventual cirrhosis.

if aids were confined to the homosexual population
the country would just let them all die off.
but since it may not be, don't be surprised
to see the nisei internment camps
extended to gays.

i'm sure the technology already exists
to detect whether you are brushing your teeth
regularly and correctly.
if not, why should i or my employer
pay your periodontist for you?
and if you get robbed or raped
by someone who's just read
a book of my poems,
why shouldn't you be able to sue me for damages?

what's frightening is that i find that all
but a few of my students,
even the brightest of them,
see nothing wrong with the above.
they are comfortable with a world as
projected and protected by the statisticians,
politicians, criminologists, a.m.a.,
and the radical leaders of these
and other pseudo-liberal reforms.

but maybe they're right.
god (read: b.f. skinner) knows
how much of an impediment
to our blandest of new worlds
might prove even so pitiful
a reactionary remonstrance

as this poem.

I'VE HAD MY UPS AND DOWNS WITH WOMEN

usually i knock them up
and they knock me down.

A PRESCRIPTION OF KRYPTONITE

a young woman calls the talk-show psychologist to complain that her husband of ten years still masturbates once a day, sometimes twice or three times. the doctor asks if he exhibits any sexual inclinations towards the wife. "oh yes," she says, "he wants to make love to me three, sometimes four, times a day. he always has."

"in addition to the masturbation?"
"in addition to the masturbation."

"what about his other appetites?"

"he's a compulsive overeater, an alcoholic, and he smokes a lot of dope."

at this point i'm sure the host is going to tell the wife to knit her husband a pair of superman pajamas,

but, as i should have expected, she instead declares the guy an addictive personality, a sick man beset with anxieties who owes it to his wife to seek professional assistance in getting to the root of his obsessive/compulsive abnormalities.

IT STILL DON'T WRITE ITSELF

some of my young friends think you can be a writer without fucking up your life. they don't want to write any poems that will hurt anyone's feelings or be an embarrassment to themselves or their families. they don't want to waste time writing that could be better spent with the kids or making a few extra bucks or making someone or other a little happier.

i like my kids and i scramble around for money too, and i generally try to keep the peace,

but if i get too far from writing
i'll still pick a fight with a wife
or mother or girlfriend or best friend,
or all on the same day,

just to have something to write about
and nothing else to do
but write about it.

THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN-LOG BRIGADE

at my kid's progressive pre-school
all the kids go potty
on a row of toilets
along one wall
without any stalls or doors.
frankly, i have always preferred
a bit of privacy,
but i realize that has a lot to do
with my upbringing
and that i was never in the armed forces.
so i'm glad my kids are growing up
much more comfortable with their bodily functions.

in fact, i would go one step further:

when i ask my wife whether the pre-school teachers
also do their duty upon a row of open stalls,
she says, "no, they have a couple of regular bathrooms
with doors and locks upstairs."
well, why are we adults not leading the way?
example is the best teacher, and i propose
that all of us, teachers and parents and guests alike,
at the pot-luck suppers and the halloween party
and the easter egg hunt should sit and shit
side-by-side as the festivities go on around us.

after all, i know progressive parents like ourselves
would want to avoid any taint of hypocrisy.

IN THE REIGN OF THE GOOD SHOGUN BONAPARTE

he seems like a bright kid,
so i assume he's kidding when he says,

"you know, london used to be all these
winding little streets

until napoleon built these big avenues
through all the old neighborhoods."
i say, "napoleon didn't get to london.
he missed the boat from ostend
when he ran into a delay at waterloo."
but now, from the look on his face,
i realize he is genuinely confused.
i try to be kind:

"it was paris.
the grand boulevards.
cut through the quartiers.
the baron haussman.
and it wasn't the same napoleon."

"let's see," he says, "london is in ..."
and he pauses.

"england. paris is in france.
they're only about an hour apart by plane,
but there's a channel in between.
their histories are intertwined,
but in recent centuries they've had separate governments
and spoken different languages."

he's grateful to have these matters clarified.
i go on to say a few words about dickens.

that evening i read in the papers
that on an international test
japanese students did even worse than americans
in geography.

THERE MAY BE SCOTTISH BLOOD ON MY FATHER'S SIDE

when i ask my former wife
how our son's contact lenses
are working out, she says,

"well, they really weren't a good idea
and then, the very day we were supposed
to have them double-checked by the eye-doctor,
he lost one of them."

"did you get your money back?"

"for one of them."

"were they insured?"

"not yet."

so i hang up as amicably as possible
and, on the way to the car,
i grind my teeth at the mother for having
urged me to give the son the money
for the contact lenses,
and the son for not knowing
the value of money.
don't they teach kids about cash-flow problems
in eighth grade?

then i find a street-sweeper ticket
on my windshield -- twelve dollars bail.
i must have been so drunk that i parked there,
right beneath the no-parking sign,
even though i vaguely remember
the thought making its way through the circuits,
like a camel turned loose in the kif closet,
that thursday was sweeper day.

so i forgive
(temporarily at least)
my former wife
and i permanently forgive my son.

and if someone will pay me twelve dollars
for this poem, you will be helping me
to square accounts with my conscience.
but if you can, brother, at least spare a dime for it,
maybe the i.r.s. will let me write off
the remaining \$11.90
as expenses incurred
in the pursuit of my profession.

IT TAKES, IT TAKES A BUSY MAN

he hadn't made a dent
in his list for weeks.
one of the items was "call z."
then one day z's wife called to say
that z had died.

he was ashamed to catch himself
indulging in a feeling of accomplishment
as he crossed "call z" off his list.

SHOES TO FILL, OR DON'T MAKE ME LAUGH

i saw today, in coda: the poets' and writers' newsletter,
a highly amusing item:

the state university of new york at binghamton
is advertising to fill the chair
formerly held by john gardner.

among the qualifications is that the candidate
possess "similar achievements" to gardner's.

maybe they haven't heard in binghamton
that hemingway, faulkner and edmund wilson
are all also dead.

PHILIPPE NOIRET

he's middle-aged.
overweight.
middle-class.
doesn't ask for much.

he does not resemble
clint eastwood or burt reynolds.
he likes to eat and drink.
he is a french sex symbol.

i'm counting the days
till my next sabbatical.

ONE OF THE ONES WHO HASN'T WOKEN UP

when i make my nightly call,
she says, "are you feeling better?"

"yes," i say, "i let myself lie around all day
and i am feeling better.
my throat is still sore,
but the aching in the legs is gone.
i'm wondering, though, if it was really the flu
or whether it wasn't maybe the acid fog."

she starts to laugh
and i demand, "what's wrong?"
and she says, "oh i just can't believe
what a paranoid you are."

i begin shouting then:

"don't you ever read the goddamn papers?
don't you even listen to the goddamn news?
that fog was the most acidic
in the history of california!
it was more corrosive than toilet cleanser!"

she says, "you know i don't have time
to listen to the news.
you know i'm working on my shakespeare paper."

we both calm down then,
smooth things over.

i don't really care if she ever
watches the news or peruses a front page,
but i am sick of being called a paranoid
on the plains of a biochemical armageddon.

A CASUALTY OF THE RECENT WARS

we're lying there holding each other
and agreeing how good sex always makes us feel,
when she says, "except, of course,
when it's really awful, like this one guy,
a couple of years ago, he really had a problem."

"what was his problem?"

"his problem was that nothing happened."

"jesus," i say, "sometimes nothing happens
when we start out, but you always know
how to make something happen."

"but this guy was only nineteen!"

"look," i have to tell her, "that's even worse.
when you're nineteen and nothing happens
you're apt to give up altogether.
by my age you've learned that,
give it a chance and sooner or later
the sun always rises."

"well," she says, "i was younger too,
and of course the first time we were together

i had just thrown up.
but i gave him a second chance.
and i didn't make fun of him or anything."

"that was wise," i say. "that's a good way
to lower the suicide rate."

"now you've made me feel guilty."

"it wasn't anybody's fault," i say;
"you were both young,

but if you do feel the need for a little expiation
my catholic upbringing will help me design a suitable
penance."

ADULT TRAUMATA

trying to explain to a general education class,
the primary process of literary pleasure,
i say, "wouldn't we all like, once in a while,
to regress to that age
when we were not even ourselves yet,
when we were one with the breast, with the mother,
and the mother was the world?
and wasn't it wonderfully easy to earn applause
at the potty-training stage,
when all we had to do was go to the bathroom
without missing the target
and our world would give us a standing ovation?"

they giggle; i giggle.

but they'll soon learn,
as they turn into teachers and interior designers,
that it's not that easy to impress
supervisors, deans, and other bosses,
especially where improval implies a pay increment,

and that to merit the appreciation
of a husband or wife of many years
they may have to literally kill themselves.

I WOULD HAVE TO SAY

that the alcoholics i have known
have been, as a group,
more creative than the joggers.

THE UNIVERSAL TROPHY IS ARTHRITIS

most of my life i competed in athletics,
from softball leagues
on through high school and college
into years of weightlifting, faculty basketball,
backyard boxing, and barroom armwrestling.
even when i cut it all back to jogging,
there were always voices inside or out
telling me i ought to be going
a little farther or a little faster.
now i try to keep afloat on the ocean
about twenty minutes
a couple of times a week.
the only challenge
is trying not to drown.
if any of my kids wants to compete at anything,
that's fine. and they can be sure
they won't be competing with me.
i just hope they learn sooner than i did
that the least important way of proving yourself
is athletic.

A DEAR GERALD NOTE

i awake today to a note from my wife:
"i'll be taking the kids to my mother's
after work today
to celebrate valentine's day."

it is february 17.
valentine's day was 3 days ago.
we've been celebrating valentine's day
for about ten days. i tried to keep up
with the celebration,
but i dropped out about february 13.

today, february 17, is not valentine's day,
but it is my birthday.

no matter.
my wife will remember within a week
and rush me something i like
from the liquor store.
and, in the meantime, not all the money
in the world could purchase a gift
as exquisite as this finely nurtured hurt.

HOW THE LITTLE PRINCE SOLVED THE NUMBERS' GAMES

the magician thought to amuse and befuddle
the young prince. "your majesty," he said,
"let's say i have 30 gold pieces
and you ask for five.
i take five from the 30
but i save two back
and give you three.
3 from 30 is 27 plus 2 is 29.
what happened to the extra coin?"

"what a jerk-off,"
the prince muttered into his handkerchief.

"here's another," continued the magician:
"look at the fingers on my right hand:
10, 9, 8, 7, 6.
now look at the fingers on my left hand:
1, 2, 3, 4, 5.
6 plus 5 equals 11.
i have 11 fingers!"

the diminutive prince drew
his little sword
from its tiny sheath
and severed the magician's left hand
at the wrist.
"now you have six,"
he yawned.

CHOP-CHOP

i've never felt that poetry readings
have much to do with poetry,

so i had no qualms about adding
a tapdancing poem and a rock-and-roll poem
to my readings.

but i know enough of human nature
so that i was not surprised
when a woman who had never published
or read publically a single poem
was the first to demand of me the inevitable,

"aren't real writers above that sort of thing?"

IT TAKES ALL KINDS

there's a flyer on the bulletin board
from a magazine that promises to publish
the first twenty-five poems it receives.

it's about time somebody rewarded
punctuality in the arts.

THE ANGELS OF RETRIBUTION ALWAYS RING AS MANY TIMES AS IT TAKES

haven't the jehovah's witnesses caught on
that the only souls they're going to find home
at ten in the morning
in this age of the working wife

are agnostic professors with afternoon-evening-schedules
desperately sleeping off the night before?

or is that the point of it?

THEY KEEP TELLING ME THAT FREUD IS OBSOLETE

i think most people skip through the early chapters
of literary biographies -- who cares what brand of pabulum
the kid was allergic to
when you can just as easily be reading about his mistresses
(to whom he may also have been allergic).

but i find i linger over
the first fifty pages and four years:

the scandalous great-grandfather,
the abrupt change of cities, the forceps,
the circumcision, the plain but bosomy mother,
the idealistic but defeated father,
the nanny who loved music,
the uncle who loved the nanny,
the early years of suffering, joy, suffering,
joy, suffering, joy, suffering ...

about the time the genius goes to school,
i skip ahead to senile dementia.

THE ANIMAL QUEENDOM

when my mother cat had kittens
i somehow thought she'd never leave their box.
i assumed that, except at feeding times,
she'd want to stand eternal maternal vigilance,
a monument to sociobiologic singleness of purpose.

instead, right from the start, she liked
her little forays back into the other room,
even an occasional stepping out into the yard.
and now, just one week later,
although she dutifully feeds and washes them,
she much prefers to sleep stretched out
on the couch.

i figure any day now she'll be wanting
to go after her real estate license.

TAMING THE WOULD-BE WILDE-MAN

i sit down with ray zepeda's class
for lunch after their final exam
and i order
hash-browns with peppers and onions and cheese,
a side of sausage,
a side of sour-dough toast,
and a coke.
when my repast arrives
the girl sitting on my right says,
"i used to eat like that
but it started to ruin my body."

"it's never hurt mine," i say.

she glances pointedly at the beergut
resting comfortably on my lap
and says, "it can take years off
your life though."

"i don't know about that," i say;
"after ninety good years, i can't complain."

but she comes right back at me with,
"well, you sure look ninety,
and i bet you feel even worse."

i decide to talk to the girl on my left.

IT GETS DONE

a friend of mine, george carroll,
has this phrase, "it gets done."
he means it in the sexual realm,
that before the bar closes
you will somehow end up with a woman.
it always does seem to be the case for him.
somehow it never happens to me.

but i like the extension of his idiom
into other areas, like writing.
if you're a writer, the writing gets done.
if you're not a writer, it doesn't.
the non-writer can cite innumerable valid reasons
why it isn't getting done,
such as wives, kids, jobs, distractions,
unconducive working conditions, broken typewriters,
and the heartbreak of unrelenting rejections.
the writer will,
in spite of all of the above,
write.
no, let me return to the periphrastic passive:
it gets done -- no one quite knows how.

THE THINKER

for years i received a rand calendar each december.
it was sent with the compliments of a name
that sounded familiar but that i couldn't
quite place. maybe the married name, i figured,
of one of my former students, and i always made
a mental note to send a thank-you letter.

one day i learned that it was quite an honor
to be on the mailing list for rand calendars.
i'd always liked mine, had always put it up
on my office wall where i pasted back the
individual months with masking tape. there
were inspiring quotations from great men
(and, in recent years, a great woman also)
and there was plenty of space for writing
in a day's appointments.

i began to fantasize that maybe
i was being sized up as a potential
thinker for the think tank. i could
see myself sitting around all day at
a comfortably messy desk deciding whether
or not it was cost-efficient to drop

atom bombs on the major mongolian cities
or whether we should just hope for a drought.

in fact, i finally took it upon myself to send
that long overdue thank-you note.

i even enclosed a copy of one of my books
of poems, ostensibly as a reciprocation
for the many calendars, but mostly
to demonstrate what a sterling mind i possess.

this december i did not receive a rand calendar.

THE AGE BEFORE ANTIBIOTICS

when i was growing up in the forties
there weren't any immunizations yet
for measles and whooping cough and mumps
and chicken pox, not even for polio.
i didn't get polio, but i got most of the rest.
what made me think of this
is that my kids are home with chicken pox right now,
but they've had shots for all the others,
and they'll probably be back in school in a week.

i was always better in a week too,
but my aunts always prevailed upon my mother
to make me stay home an extra week recuperating
while they took turns taking care of me.
that second week was a bore.
i was an active kid who loved,
if not the confinement of school,
then at least the social and competitive aspects of it.
i suspect the ennui of those second weeks in bed --
the awful daytime radio, the awful reader's digests --
turned me into an early masturbator
and confirmed me as a writer.
i was playing with myself to make the time pass
before there was very much to even get a hold of.

but reading a student's essay the other day
on how she contracted scarlet and rheumatic fever
because a doctor sent her home too soon
from a tonsillectomy,

i remembered that five of my aunts' brother and sisters
had died in a single epidemic week
decades before i was born,

and i realized why i,
the only child of them all,
was kept home that second week.

OLD MACDONALD HAD A MADONNA

"you are a misogynist," she says;
"are there any women, over the age of twelve,
you haven't written nastily about?"

"yes," i say, "i have never written
anything uncomplimentary about farm women."

that takes the wind out of her sails.

"farm women?" she asks.
"farm women," i say;
"i have cast no aspersions upon
the integrity of farm women."

she shakes her head in speechlessness.

AN OPEN RELATIONSHIP

we have finally learned mutual trust.
well, if not "trust" exactly,
then at least an absence of jealousy,
a great diminishing of possessiveness.
oh i'm sure if she were spotted
checking into the sleepy-bye motel,
i'd still react,
as would she, if she came up on me
parked somewhere and found someone's head
between my legs.
but these things would have to force themselves
upon us. we no longer interrogate, investigate,
keep track, or look for clues.
it's just too bad that,
in order to achieve this peace,
we had to lose most of what we had.

MAYBE SHE'S THE POET

my daughter, the freshman-in-college writes,

"Thank you for sending The Wormwood Review.
I really enjoyed it. It also came in quite handy
one morning in English class when we were asked
to complete the assignment of reading
our Favorite Poem to the class. I was one
of many who had slept through the previous class
and knew nothing of the assignment.
When called on, however, I was able to rummage
through my bookbag and find your poem,
'The Dolphin Market.'
I also saved another kid's ass
by letting him recite
your poem, 'Shit.'"

KUDOS

my wife had taken a sick day
partly because of a lingering virus
but also in order to attend
the quiet little health-food-cupcake celebration
of recent birthdays, our daughter's included,
at the pre-school.
when i realized i had
just enough time between classes,
i decided to drive over also.

our little girl was taking a nap on a mat
when we arrived, but as soon as she saw us,
she got the attention of a teacher
and, pointing excitedly, cried,

"she's my mommy,
and he's my da,

and they both love me very much!"

i ain't never gonna win
no nobel prize

but even if i did,
it would be anticlimactic.

MAKE IT EASY ON YOURSELF

i loved gandhi and felt it deserved its major awards, but i thought some of the technical oscars should have gone to films more challenging in those areas. das boot, for instance, must have presented enormous problems to the cinematographer. and when gandhi won best costuming, i said to my wife, "they should have sent a representative from percale sheets to accept it." of course, she pretended not to have heard me, so i said, a little louder, "someone from the wamsutta fabric company should have been around to pick up that costuming award."

"it wasn't funny the first time," she said.

i was sorry she'd acknowledged me so quickly. i could have milked that particular wisecrack through an infinity of variations.

ONE MAN'S POISON

i heard that a self-styled religious student had lodged a complaint about having been allegedly forced to read the allegedly "pornographic passages" of doris lessing's golden notebook in a twentieth century english lit class.

it was only those passages got me through the book.

THE WALDEN/WOODSTOCK APARTMENTS

thoreau was right about the majority of mankind leading lives of quiet desperation.

the problem with my neighbors is that they are not even quiet about it.

THE OBJECTIONABLE CORRELATIVE

amadeus, equus -- impressive plays about the irrational.
yet not irrational themselves.
to the contrary: logical, paraphraseable, fully
communicative.

hamlet, the turn of the screw, look back in anger,
travesties -- they leave us trying to iron out,
through versions and revisions,
that final intractable wrinkle.

poetry derives from childhood,
not from child psychologists.

NO RESTITUTION

yeats wrote, "there is some one myth for every man."

a man had such a myth,
explained it to a friend who did not understand,
and the friend stole it for a poem.

it didn't mean much to the friend,
a publication to add to a dossier.

but the man from whom the myth was taken
never got over it. there is an absence in his life.
he tries to avoid the friend now,
but it's hard, since they listened to each other
for so long, and still sympathize.

and the friend would probably give the myth back,
but he took a thing that could not be returned.

A TEACHER

another of my colleagues is dying of cancer.
i don't know him well -- we aren't even
in the same department, not even the
same building -- but i have been guided
by him nonetheless.

he's always been a first-rate teacher
and a first-rate scholar, and he's won
all the awards in the state

for that sort of thing.
but he somehow found the time to also
be a leader of the faculty and a defender
of the rights of underdogs off-campus
as well as on.

in the academic senate, i have always
glanced his way before raising my voice
yea or nay.

he looks fine, but in a year or two
he'll be dead.

i'm not a religious person. the only
immortality in which i firmly believe
is that we live on in those who have
learned from us. it's not a new
insight. it's the point, i suppose,
of to the lighthouse and of the whole
jewish religion.

i've learned from my colleague, many have,
and if anyone he stood up to
thinks that he or she will have
an easier time of it from now on,

may they think twice.

HE WAS ALSO MODEST, INTELLIGENT, GENEROUS AND,
WORST OF ALL, LIKEABLE

i picked up my mail at school today
for the first time since the winter holidays began
and it was a good day:

2 poems in one little magazine;
2 poems in another;
a couple of poems accepted by a third place;
and a review published in an academic journal.

i don't have many days like that.

the only problem is
i was in the same graduate school
at the same time as the novelist, brian garfield,
best known perhaps for death wish and hopscotch,
and on one not particularly noteworthy saturday
he had six books accepted for publication.
he already, at twenty-four,
had twenty-four volumes in print.

we corresponded for a year or two
and then i fell hopelessly behind,
not being able to read
as fast as he could write.

HENRIETTA JAMES

speaking to my daughter
of some people we both know,
i say, "i can't really make a judgment
since i only have access to
one side of the story,"

and she says, "the only thing worse
than knowing one side of a story
is knowing both."

SHE SMELLS A RAT

she is angry because i am forty-five minutes late
and because i have been at the same type
of social gathering as the one at which
she and i first met.
she is so suspicious that,
even after my reassurances,
she is unresponsive in bed
and finally admits,
"you don't smell the same."

after this ridiculous admission, of course,
she is terribly embarrassed,
confesses paranoia,
resumes our lovemaking passionately.

i did, as a matter of fact,
walk one attractive woman to her car.
we did discuss some possibilities.
but we didn't do anything
that would have altered my aroma.

so my (as dr. johnson would have it) stink
must have been
entirely in her
imagination.

MAYBE IT'S TIME FOR THE FAT FARM

"you know," my six-year-old daughter tells me, quite solemnly, "you're very lucky that my mommy married you."

"why's that?" i ask.

"because if she hadn't you probably wouldn't have been able to get anyone else to marry you."

"why not?"

"well," she says, "you must know that there are a lot of men who look a lot better than you do."

that's undeniable, so i try, "do you think people only care about what other people look like?"

"no," she muses, "not all of them, but some of them do."

then, however, she finds a silver lining: "at least you're nice and you're funny."

that's good enough for me and twice as much as i deserve,

but, you know, i always thought all kids thought that their parents were the most beautiful man and woman in the world.

UNDER ROBIN'S HOOD

when i lock my car up in the parking lot of the resort hotel that is hosting the jazz concert,

my daughter wonders who among these wealthy owners of cadillacs and ferraris would want to break into my lowly toyota wagon.

what i tell her is, "these people got rich by stealing from the poor --

why should i assume they won't have a relapse?"

EITHER DECIDEDLY A GENIUS OR DECIDEDLY NOT

on the statewide essay exam
there is a box in which to check
that english is or isn't your first language.

if english isn't your first language,
then there is another box
for writing in what is your first language.

one student wrote in
latin.

FIRST DATE

"what's that smell?" she asks.

"i don't smell anything," i say,
"but drinking tends to clog my nostrils."

"it smells like shit," she says.

"probably pollution," i say;
"we're probably driving past a toxic dump."

the date ends badly.

two days later i nose out
beneath some newspapers on the back seat
a plastic bag of dirty diapers.

SOL Y SOMBRA

i'm picking up my daughter
at my former wife's
and they're trying to decide
what clothes she should bring along
for the weekend's weather.
then the mother glances at my all-purpose shirt
and laughs: "what's the secret
of a year-round wardrobe?"

it's simple: strive to remain
in the sun in the winter, and,
in the summer, seek the shade.

PROBABLY NOT

according to the campus paper
police do not believe the white male,
age 23, 150 pounds, blond with a
mustache, who yesterday exposed himself to
a female student in one of the parking
lots, is the same man as the tall, dark
man in his 30's sought in connection
with a similar crime three weeks ago.

S. O. P.

the old drunk lady ahead of me
in the liquor store
wants to match pennies with the young counter clerk
for the change from the purchase,
double or nothing.
while he tries to explain
there's no way he can do that
a line queues up behind her,
mostly truckers and bikers and marines.
finally she says, "ah, give the goddamn change
to charity."
the young man nods towards two containers:
"do you want it to go
to save the animals
or to save our pier?"

"the pier? fuck the pier!
give it to the fucking animals."

"you're sure you don't want
to save our pier?"

"i hope the goddamn pier falls into
the motherfucking ocean."

the young man says, "it already did,"

and she says, "then i hope it stays there."

my sentiments exactly.
the merchants on main street
want a pier to bring in business,
and the property owners
want to fortify the tax base,
and my wife wants a pier
to parade our kids up and down,
but i can live without the fucker.

THE PIG'S PEN

"most of the animal kingdom," she says, observing the silkworm moths in the candy box, does nothing but eat and sleep and procreate."

and i think:

i consider myself firmly a part of the animal kingdom and have surely been described as such by ex-mates but the one difference is that i eat and sleep and procreate

and then i write about it.

TWO GENERATIONS OF ITALIAN FRIENDS

i overhear the name of mario soldati and i begin to explain that period of late adolescence and early literacy when my best friend, vince prestianni, led me through the reading of the italian novelists, from manzoni through verga to pavese, vittorini, moravia, morante, bassani, calvino ... soldati.

"those were the days when we read the corpus," gene dinielli says, and, as usual, he is as accurate, succinct and suggestive of hidden meanings as a sphinx in the quadrangle.

we did indeed in those days read not only everyone but everything by everyone.

very few students today seem to, but maybe there were very few of us who did that even then.

today, well, today i try to keep up, but i keep falling farther behind.

dinielli, however, still reads the corpus, and we both have children who may, and i'm sure that prestianni, surrounded by library books, and still a writer of notes more literate than a lot of what is accepted as literature --

i'm sure that vince still reads the corpus.

DO PEOPLE PAY TO VISIT GRACELAND?

everyone who makes the mistake
of allowing me to guide them on
a tour of southern california
gets taken to the grave of marilyn monroe.

it's not a grave exactly --
just a drawer in a wall in the westwood cemetery,
which is a green patch behind the avco cinemas
that you enter through a parking lot.

no one that i have taken
to marilyn monroe's grave
has ever expressed a desire to see it in advance,
nor has anyone, afterwards, ever thanked me.

that proves they needed it.

SIESTA TIME

the guatemalan takeover
was about as unromantic, dull, and bloodless
as a takeover can be.
a very bad government was replaced
by a government that is either
slightly better or a little bit worse.
the continuity of atrocities
is not apt to be interrupted.

but what interested me
was the anchor man's announcement that
"only a few died in the coup."

i wonder who that few were
and why they bothered to die.

did they believe fanatically
in their theocratic dictator

or were they, like stoppard's rosenkrantz and
guilderstern,
basically a-political sorts
who just happened to be guarding the wrong palace
at the wrong phase of the moon?

FANTASIA AND DEFENSE

the husband and wife, arm-in-arm in the darkening park, are set upon by a gang of youths. the savages pinion the man to watch and listen as they rape and torture his woman. two pedestrians observe the scene: one joins the assault, while the other summons the police. the police arrive in time to arrest the delinquents. one cop comforts the woman; one adds to her humiliation. everyone is made uncomfortable and contemptuous at the spectacle of the husband.

the newspapers indict the violence of today's youth and the bad sense of the victims. a jury takes two days to return verdicts of guilty on two hundred and fourteen counts, not guilty on one hundred seventeen. the judge assigns the maximum determinate sentences, regretting that the law does not allow him to send all of them to the chair. that evening he gets even drunker than usual, and calls in sick the next day.

i am the wife, the husband, the rapists, the good and bad samaritans, the police, the reporters, the public, and the judge.

so are you.

GIRLS' NIGHT OUT

i call her to inquire how the wedding shower went.

she says, "it turns out that s. has recently been born again, so my gift from frederick's of hollywood was not greatly appreciated."

"any booze?"

"not a drop."

"what did you do?"

"first we all stuffed ourselves on macaroni salad,
even though i, believe it or not,
was the least obese person in the place.
then we played 'newlywed games.'
like 'according to government statistics,
how often does the average husband hug his wife
after one, two, five, ten, twenty-five
years of marriage?'"

"what was the answer?"

"what would you have guessed?"

"i would have started low
and dropped off steeply."

"you would have won the grand prize:
an assortment of evangelical bumper stickers."

A BIT CLOSE TO HOME

a friend of mine,
judy seal, wrote a poem
about her salvadoran babysitter
telling of having watched death squads
burst into classrooms
and machine gun her professors.

she admitted the professors
were generally not sympathetic to the regime
and that the guerillas were sometimes guilty
of deliberately staging shootouts where civilians
were sure to be caught in the crossfire.
nonetheless i think the blowing-away of professors
in mid-lecture
is a serious violation
of academic freedom.

THE TEST

my youngest daughter and my youngest son
think, like siblings everywhere,
that they hate each other.
the older often announces, matter-of-factly,
that she wishes the younger were dead.

the younger does his best
to drive his sister nuts.

but when my son tripped in the clothing store
and cut his head open on a metal rack
and we had to rush him to emergency,

his sister said, "i was terrified!
i guess maybe i do love him."

PRIORITIZING

when my wife reminds me
that i have offered to take my daughter
to the library
at the same time that the lakers
happen to be on against the celtics,

i heroically proclaim:

"my children mean more to me
than any dumb basketball game."

of course, it isn't the playoffs yet.

SCHOOL OF HARD KNOCKS

in the midst of the football telecast
a courtesy acknowledgment of the minor sports
was read:

"ucla's powerful soccer team
hosts usf tomorrow at noon
in the santa ana bowl
parking lot."

jesus, i thought, and to think the football players
complain about playing on astroturf.

a minute later, a slightly altered announcement
took precedence:

"ucla's powerful soccer team
hosts usf at noon tomorrow
in the santa ana bowl ...
and parking will be free."

A TRIPLE HOMAGE

hemingway told the young arnold samuelson,

"archie can write poetry,
but poetry is easy.
if a poet hits it lucky,
he can write two lines
and live forever."

francois villon had a hell of a life,
but found a couple of spare seconds
to dash off ou sont les neiges d'antan,
and lives forever.

and even archie mc leish himself
hit it lucky with a few lines out of
a few hundred thousand,

and for "you, andrew marvell"
and "a poem should not mean but be,"

he lives forever.

EVEN JAMES BOND MUST HAVE HAD A MOTHER

after a few pitchers of beer,
he admits to us, "i saw an announcement
in the placement office a couple of years ago
that the c.i.a. was recruiting operatives for italy
and i was a little homesick
so i send in my application.
i was amazed when,
about a week later,
they called to say that i was hired.
forty grand a year.
naturally they said that it was
absolutely confidential.
well, a few days later
my mother called and pleaded,
'when are you coming home to see me?'
and i said, 'it won't be long. i just
got hired by the c.i.a.'

four days later a letter arrived
that they didn't need me anymore."

IT DOESN'T QUACK LIKE A DUCK

they're down on kurt vonnegut
for writing bestsellers,

and yet his novels don't look
like bestsellers to me. they're kind
of weird and disjointed and playful
and they aren't even patriotic
and they certainly aren't overly
optimistic.

i'm sure kurt vonnegut likes
to make a lot of money,
but can you blame a guy
if he writes books that are not like
anybody else's bestsellers
and they become bestsellers anyway?

FEAST OR FAMINE: MULTIPLE GUESS

tonight at nine
i had the choice of watching
the mysterious stranger of mark twain,
starting over by dan wakefield,
return to the planet of the apes,
or the go-between, adapted by harold pinter,
from a novel by e. p. hartley,
and directed by joseph losey,
starring julie christie and, of course,
the man who has appeared in every british film
since 1950,

alan bates.

the choice i made told me
a lot about myself.

A VOICE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS

i'm drinking beer with three young guys
and one of them is ready to kill himself
because his girlfriend
is out with another guy

and his buddy says,
"how can you be pissed off at her,
when you were just hitting on that blonde
in here yesterday afternoon?"

and i say, "he can be pissed off
because he's a man."

the place gets as quiet as if
e. f. hutton were pontificating,

but the silence is no testimony
to the esteem in which my opinions are held --

it's in astonishment that anyone would
publically promulgate a double-standard
(one favoring the male, that is)
in our enlightened era.

of course the statistics say
that more young wives now fuck around
than young husbands.

and i suspect this is one time
that the statistics do not lie.

THE LOST DECADE

a friend and colleague comes to
the door of my office to see
if i have time to read over
his younger daughter's senior thesis.
i've known her since she was a child
and i say, "that's not a bad idea,
having senior thesis in high school.
she must attend a good one."
"oh no," he says, "she's graduating from college."

i think it's time i embark on the research
for my senior citizen's thesis.

MY NEW SHOES

i had to go to three shoestores
before finding a single pair
in sasquatch size -- 12 E.

the pair i finally slipped like cinderfella
into cost me nearly fifty bucks which i can't
afford, and they're so light and comfy
that they'll no doubt wear thin soon.
but for now they are as exquisitely
comforting and sensitive
as the most expensive of prophylactics.

my new shoes are made
of deerskin
and i call them "bambi."

ATHLETICISM IN AMERICA

in the food line of the tailgate party
a mutual friend introduces me
to the coach of a woman's volleyball team.
her first words to me are,
"come to a game sometime!"

i tell her that i'd like to,
that i have a daughter playing volleyball
back east and that i watched a lot
of the olympic volleyball on t.v. and
that i jockeyed my kids to one of the
olympic volleyball sessions at the long
beach arena.

"come to a game sometime!" she says.

"i'll try to," i say, as if i have
nothing better to do than attend the games
of every professional, amateur and interscholastic
athletic team in southern california.
i fill up my plate with beans
and turning from the buffet
tell her i am pleased to have met her.

she says again, "come to a game sometime!"

afterwards i'm really kicking myself
that i didn't think to invite her
to bring herself and her entire team
to one of my poetry readings.

AREN'T WE FUN?

i read that coleridge described
william hazlitt as "brow-hanging, shoe-
contemplative, strange ... kindly-
natured ... but jealous, gloomy and
of an irritable pride,"

and i find myself jotting in the
margin: "typical literary personality."

INTERMISSION

after a suitable interval
of lying in each other's arms
i get up and pull my pants on, saying,

"there is no significance in this,
the donning of the clothes."

what i mean is that i'm not leaving yet --
i'm just planning to raid the refrigerator
and i don't like to eat while naked
because i don't like to watch my stomach grow.

but what she says is,
"that's the most poetic thing
i've ever heard you say."

ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCE

looking at the paintings of paul cezanne
makes me feel i should be looking more closely
at my kitchen and my environs.
probably there are a lot of poems there
that i've been missing.

cezanne paints "still life with milk can,
carafe, and coffee bowl."

i look into my kitchen and compose "still life
with lady kenmore refrigerator, stove, and
washing machine purchased by wife with
assistance of wife's mother and aunt as a
reproach to husband who saw nothing wrong
with the old appliances."

TIRELESS RESEARCHERS

a friend of mine who teaches part-time
at a local junior college
assigned his freshman english class
to choose an autobiography --
any autobiography --
and report on it.

half the class reported
that they couldn't find one.

THE PLEASURE OF THE TEXT

i like my job: i like to teach,
and i like the place i teach at.
i think i have to work
a little bit too hard,
but a lot of people in the world work harder.

i get paid, basically,
to read and to write,
and i always wanted
to do both anyway.

i like my kids,
and they seem to be doing fine.
when i sense they are happy,
i am overjoyed.

my wife and i profess not to like
each other very much,
but we've been abusing each other
in such earnestness for fourteen years.
we've learned not to need each other much,
not to care much what the other thinks.

i am not without sex.
sometimes i think i need more sex
than i am getting,
but maybe i'm flattering myself.

i'm not a famous writer,
but since i have not forgotten
what it is like to be absolutely unknown,
i'm glad there's been at least some progress.

i think i wish my aches and pains
did not prevent me from getting much exercise,
but maybe i'm lucky
to have the excuse.

i came home after my night class
to see my kids before bedtime.
they were watching a christmas cartoon.
i poured myself a cheap wine
that i happen to like a lot.
it hit my stomach

and made me feel even better.

now my wife is putting herself
and the kids to sleep.
i'll pour another drink,

write this poem,
see if there's a decent movie on the cable.
i've been getting enormous pleasure,
for instance, from the foreign movies
on the bravo channel:
the last metro, the harder they come,
medium cool, breaker morant, diva.
also, on a local station,
i saw for the umpteenth time the wild bunch,
with its ants and scorpions,
its honor among thieves,
its maniacally affirmative laughter
in the face of the void.

a woman said she got more out of life
than was ever in it.
i get more than i deserve.

near midnight i'll drive to the "honeybucket"
to drink till two with ray and millie
and murray and fred and bob and chris and gary
and steve and jill and boak and jeff and nicky
and anyone else who cares to join us.

i don't want to have a headache in the morning
but if i do i'll get rid of it with excedrin,
and if the excedrin gives me heartburn,
i'll get rid of the heartburn with maalox.

after all, i have an obligation to play santa claus
at the english department party tomorrow noon.

i suppose if i really got down to it
i could think of ways
to change my life for the better.

but, for now, it will do.

-- Gerald Locklin

Long Beach CA

