

Watchum fly, Hobert said, giving them
a running punt at the low middle

It wasn't such a big pile of turds
after all. It was a good size rock
with some shit for extra measure

I guess Hobert wasn't my last friend
to learn the whole truth is not
always what it's advertised

-- Judson Crews

Gallup, NM

my uncle jack

1.

my uncle jack has gone to florida
again. he can forget the snow to shovel
for a while. he'll fish and thaw his bones.
i don't know if he brought his girlfriend.

his girl is fifty;
jack is seventy.
he lives on hawley street, in rochester,
new york, with his surviving sisters.

i've never been to florida.
i lived in rochester
for twenty years.
i haven't lost the chill.

mosquitoes in the summer time.
the opening baseball game rained out.
people used to get the goiter
before they iodized the salt.

jack was married once,
but no one talks about it.
we are catholics,
and we are country folk, close-mouthed.

except a poet can't be.
jack worked for kodak forty years.
when he turned sixty-five
they gave him a baby brownie, a pension,

and a pat on the back.
he still sends me ten bucks at christmas,

which means he either doesn't know the way
i live, or has decided it's my business.

and yet he never married his own girl,
nor lived with her, in over twenty years,
and the obvious reason is that he felt it was
someone's business besides his own.

i was afraid of him, he was so quiet.
i wasn't raised on a farm,
so i didn't understand that kind of quiet.
robert frost would have liked my uncle.

sometimes, though, over the boiled potatoes,
he'd scourge the republican party.
and once i heard him say, "i'd sooner have ten burglars
in my living room than one policeman."

still, he took his girl to church each sunday
and was the perennial pall-bearer.
the local ward-healer, a republican,
was his best friend.

i started out to say
how little i know of my uncle,
and all of a sudden it seems
i know a lot more than i realized.

i'd always figured for instance
he didn't sleep with her,
that it was like the best of de maupassant
or the worst of graham greene ...

only tonight, three thousand miles away,
it's clear: of course she's been
his mistress -- he knew god didn't care
but that the family would. he was discreet.

all those evenings after dinner,
all alone in his room,
listening to the overheated radio.
sometimes i suspected he said his prayers,

but i never burst in on him,
his rosary in hand,
nor did he try to catch me
playing with myself.

2.

i love my uncle jack
and i'm as like him as not.
i too am quiet
because i don't know what to say.

i always wanted to write a letter
and say, "jack, we never said anything,
but i always felt ...
i mean i always wanted you to know that ..."

i'm afraid i may have written that letter.
i drink so much and sleep so late
i have trouble distinguishing daydreams from nightmares.
if i sent it, i hope it didn't muddy the waters.

MAYBE I COULD GO BACK AND HELP HIM SHOVEL SNOW!
SHOOT THE BALONEY ABOUT POLITICS!
DOUBLE-DATE!
oh for jesus' sake.

3.

the house on hawley street was built by
granfather kindelen with his own hands.
he sired fourteen kids in it,
of which i am the only next-of-kin.

the house is three stories
with a porch and a cellar.
robinson jeffers would have liked that house
ezra pound would have liked that house.

the neighborhood is black now.
one night a man tried to rob my uncle jack.
jack didn't fell him with one swoop,
but he didn't call the cops either.

he just threatened to make a fuss
and refused to hand over his wallet.
the man went away.
one small triumph for the shanty irish.

4.

my eldest aunt bought me
a spiral pad when i was ten
to write the family history.
elizabeth, here's the first page.

hey, hank

you know that barmaid
in the 49er tavern
where we stopped to have a beer

before your reading?
and later you wrote me