

## CONTRADICTIONS

Brent remained standing as he made the phone call,  
but Shelley sat cringing on the sofa.  
What perplexed me as much as anything else  
was the eider down bulging in her arms.  
Out-of-place things render me helpless  
with their contradictions,  
and I tend to feel like a non-  
returnable bottle.

"Dammit, the line's still busy," Brent exploded,  
and Shelley looked even smaller,  
half buried by the quilt.  
A spot of sunlight from the stained-glass window  
just caught the side of her head  
like a raffish scarf.  
Another contradiction there, I thought,  
as I took some hesitant steps to the open door.

Then Brent banged down the receiver, raised it again,  
and punched his fingers on the buttons.  
From the doorway, standing empty and useless,  
I could see their garden alive with benevolent color.  
"Father will know what to do about this," Brent said,  
"if he ever gets off the phone."  
To judge from the look arriving on Shelley's face,  
she agreed with Brent.

## QUARRELLING

Margaret and I quarrelled  
because she would not let me sink  
her makeshift boat in the marsh pool,

Sally Beth and I quarrelled  
because I went to a fire sale  
the night of her concert,

Winnie and I quarrelled  
because I made fun of her twenty-three-dollar gloves  
in front of the Butlers,

and Babs and I quarrelled  
because I left her alone at home with the kids  
on her brother's birthday.

It was only a cheap boat,  
but it would have made lovely bubbles,

and they would have had one hell of a time pulling it out.

— Knute Skinner

Bellingham WA

#### THE SPIRIT OF THE LETTER

Clarity is the virtue they exhibit.  
For one thing, they're not written but printed.  
This is not a case of chance or habit.  
It is entirely purposeful and concerted:  
That there be no mistake of what they mean.  
Like Shaker chairs, it's unadorned and plain.

The stationery is always the same:  
White (not off white). Standard letter size.  
The ink is blue. Exactness is the aim.  
The principle: If something's true, it never varies.  
Another way: Get it right, it stays right.  
The fold of the letter is always tri-partite.

My mother has a sense of humor, so  
These letters aren't without it. I'd color-code  
It light brown. Its shape is an eyebrow.  
Lifted. When written out, it's an aside  
(Parenthetical and often concerning  
Money) (that somebody's got and is burning).

Family gossip is my mother's great love  
To which she applies her three subsidiary  
Loves in the spirit of the problem-solve:  
Math, bookkeeping, chemistry.  
Siblings are equations. One's character  
Must balance. People explode in laughter or anger.

Family is dying. Numbers are pure — but people?  
The figure 1 is perfect, but one's figure  
Hardly is. These letters end a chronicle.  
Adjustment must be made for turnover.  
But while others undergo degeneration  
My mother's eye is still sharp — and open.

#### UNFASHIONABLE ADMISSION

"Nothing! They couldn't answer a single question.  
They just sat there — Duh! Wuh! ..." He grits his teeth,  
Squeezes his face in tension, or derision.  
"How long have you been in Japan?" I ask.