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Editors' Note

This issue concludes with an appreciation of Robert Creeley, 1926–2005. We have bracketed Kate Cumiskey's moving tribute to Creeley the teacher and friend with a poem he wrote shortly before his death and one he first published in the Fall 1955 issue of this journal.

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COVER

Jacques Hnizdovsky, "Prairie Chicken," 1974 (front) and "Sage Grouse," 1975 (back), woodcuts

© 2006 Stephanie Hnizdovsky

Mary Greene, design

→

An arrow at the bottom of a page means no stanza break.

NICKY BEER

Still Life with Half-Turned Woman and Questions

after Merwin & Hammershoi

- Q. So, what are you working on these days?
A metaphor machine.
- Q. What did you paint first?
A table that glints with the self-assurance of a rack.
- Q. And next?
A bowl with the pale, rotund mien of a bureaucrat—it's the ideal receptacle for a severed head.
Then bottles, side by side, like the hard parallels of a double-barreled shotgun.
- Q. What's that hanging on the wall, to the left of the table?
A mirror.
A window.
A sliding panel cut in the door of a solitary confinement cell.
A gray eye gone rectangular with its own blindness.
- Q. No really—what's that on the wall?
Another picture.
- Q. Why is she turned away?
Because she chose to wear the hex on her forehead.
Because she failed to gleam.
Because she interrupted.
- Q. Why can't you sleep?
Why can't *you* sleep?
- Q. Why can't I sleep?
Because of all these little unfacings.

NICKY BEER
Blue Thought/Blue Shade

Broad-billed parrot (extinct 17th century)

I flaunt a dense, veinal color, poised
on a bank drained to dull, iron-red dregs.

At my back, a purgatorial mountain
wraps its hips in orange mist.

A shadow cowers underneath my tail.

A mate, I think, would render me less
superb—though solitary, I am, at least,

singular. See how the scrub
nearly faints with admiration.

Every night, the same vision:
overcome by the weight of my head,

I struggle to keep the black barb of this beak
from piercing my own breast.

Every night, I watch
that implacable scythe sink

into a mass of indigo feathers and shear
painlessly through the ribs' curvature
to retrieve my heart,

shrieking back every word I'd taught it.

NICKY BEER
Still Life with Ham, 1656

after Willem Claesz. Heda

Runner and bunched white cloth
ruck backwards, revealing
the table's warm length,
the florid shade of a bare,
sun-browned shoulder.

this is how I love you best

A spit curl
of lemon rind yawns
and droops over the edge.

sun bound in a lean shaft of early window

Amid rude crowds
of oyster shells
a blue-flecked Chinese bowl has forgotten
itself, almost tipping over
in the aftermath of mounting
the broad
serving dish.

bedsheets that imitate your body

Near-drained, the *roemer*
and the trim *façon de Venise* hold
their drams of untasted air,
something silver and not yet breath.

collapsing into their own folds

A bared flank
of cut banquet meat resplendent
in its starched cuff of fat.

this is how adoration moves over flesh

This is how morning touches beloved indolence.

preparing for an annunciation of light

CHAD DAVIDSON

Flies

Grapes left to flies for want
of us who sprawl in bed late
are still grapes left to flies. Indifferent,
we must be some riot of guilt, intemperate

loungers, scuffs in the unfinished
threshold of last night. Putrescence
on the lowermost grape is merely wished-
for grace clothed in ambivalence.

And that you could be holding a glass or held
by one is the same as saying the gelding
lying bloated in the sun, the birch felled
for nothing more than boredom, is seldom

noticed by the mirrors of our house.
The computer hums your name. The flies,
some other lust or nonsense of wing. Housed
in their frenzy, beating themselves senseless

against an hour, they know nothing of you,
nor that their day's so short the bruise
of a grape only keeps in motion two
wings two minutes longer. If they lose

their love of dying we might also begin
our day as fugitives, like when you swam
off coast with me. The blue-black ocean
held you, and I was dispossessed. Not because I am

a lover of the threat that closeness poses.
I am. Because, out of the flies
clouding the plump bulbs of kelp, rose
a gull's riddled body. Something dies

every minute we fail to praise it and I care
nothing, or very little. What more
can you take from me? I swear
the ocean once was a broken mirror.

D. M. FERGUSON

Hyacinth

As effective as any male
pointed stick, rotting
tree trunk, malignant
mushroom, the gentle
spear leaves swooning
in the ax-swinging scent
of the hyacinth's turreted
eruption, blue-bruise
semaphores unfurled
to the winter-scoured
wind, ranked trumpets
upraised, broadcasting
feminine, frilled hostility,
cluster blooms of curled
contempt—not love itself,
sweet and dead, but
its aftershock, the little
yellow tongues ululating.

NOAH MICHELSON

In the Mood

No longer in the mood for moon landings, woozy
pop-a-wheelies, my dime store toy ticker—a wee
sparkling Godzilla—to be woken up, gently
lifted from his dented tinderbox, wound up

and raced across the dining room table only
to wind up, again, first runner up in love's low-
budget beauty pageant: tinfoil tiara, Niagara
of mascara, duct tape parade—never again! Now

I've a new weasel to pop, a different Jack
in my box, so to speak, from week to week;
mano a mano, ketchup and mayo—I've committed
myself exclusively to euphemisms, to being

used, used up, passed from waist to waist
like a hula hoop—pink orbit, flushed
wedding ring—resolved to complete
my rounds around the playground despite

the dizziness, the drizzle, the occasional
encounter with an especially shriveled specimen
like a purpled hunk of smashed prunes
drooping out of a pair of sweatpants.

So hurry! Act now! Supplies are going fast!
And who can predict how long I'll hold up?
The prize-sucking vacuum cleaner finally
loses suction, coughs dust, crawls behind

the couch to die; the hardest-working kissing
booth on the East Coast summer carnival
circuit—sticky walls, slashed prices—eventually
breaks down, goes bust; but while it lasts—

whatever it is that's towing me through
these long, Atlantic nights, that's as devoted
to remembering as I am to forget—don't stop,
keep going, faster, faster, like this, never stop.

NOAH MICHELSON

Kingdom Come

When it's finished, and I have regained
the present, the bedroom recomposing
itself around the pulpy grapefruit-colored
air of first light, of not quite May,

each atom briefly discernible as himself, a son
separate from his scheming family, each dizzy
planet plucked from his refractory solar system
and singularly loved before retrograde;

when myself has been returned to himself,
and I have emerged from that closed-eyed
kingdom of spit and jerk, the emergency
over, called off, the ambulance delivered

to the station sedated, empty, disappointed,
the dumbfounded stadium of my body being
rebuilt, panting bulldozer, conveyor belt
of sodium and tablespoon of bleach;

then I ask what other men blinking awake
alone in this apartment building? How
many fluid ounces filling this spilt city?
What other illegible autographs drying

invisible across our exhausted chests?
Exactly what kind of mercy is this?

KATHARINE STORLIE RAUK

Dark Corners

Last night in the garden,
I glimpsed Grandpa
in a dark coat
ankle deep
in grass.
He turned away
into the scent of basil,
along the edges
of night.

I cannot forget
the white shock
of his hair.
His face madness,
a flower
unhinged.

He swallowed
the prairie, its ragged
emptiness
of wind.
If only
he could have eaten
the dirt,
its seeds and roots,
instead of
hiding books in the attic,
sharpening
the ax.

SAM REED

From *The Book of Zeros*

0

Zero came to the first heart and saw that she was missing
So she went inside it
The heart felt this and said what are you
But there was nothing that she was
Nothing that she wasn't

So she said I am what comes next
And she made the future and went to wait for the heart there
All she left was a glinting
At the edges of objects and air
Something taut and intending the heart could feel in it
A wind that gathered and would not blow

0

Before they knew division the numbers entered each other freely
Eleven went into two as many times as they wanted
Each accepting the other like a thin sheaf of water on stone
Does light

But Sumerians craved the numbers and so calculated bodies for them
The skeletons were trapped in a reed
Who was made to speak to a tablet of mud
The bones tumbled out
One by one
Sunlight with its great knuckles was called on to set them
And their muscles were the tongues of Sumer

As if ceasing some dream or commencing it the numbers
Discovered they were not light or liquid but flesh
Six saw ten and called to him come
I remember you
But the tongues and the mud said divide
So she passed through him once before his body became locked
And ten to be enfolded in six
Had to break himself

The numbers were sundered and chafed in their numerals
Except zero
Who was then floating to the east in the snows

→

The reed that knew how to name her
Was the only one no one could find

Zero saw how the numbers in their solitude
Were like seas with holes in the bottom
So she made herself into a river
To divide the world and carry the answer to the seas
And when they felt her they recalled how it was
To never end

0

No one goes out to buy zero fish
Though once no one went to the market and was surprised
To find there weren't zero fish

So she went to a bakery to get what she needed
Which had neither fish nor ox nor moth
Nor scent of hard passage eroding off a hide
No sand and no leaves and upon them no rain
No stars and no dark thing striding among them
Nor across us

She asked for no bread and the baker refused
What do you want it for anyway
A sort of ark she said
I need what my hands or my head
Can't hold
When she'd gone the baker looked down into his table
The flour looked up from the wood
All that night he prepared hollow loaves
Arranged on their racks they made a sound like seasons

0

The verbs wanted to know how to conjugate
Themselves when nobody was doing them
So they went to ask zero
Who directed them to the rain

They found her in the dark
Feeling with her hands for something she had lost

→

When they asked her she didn't look up
When did anyone ever rain me
So they listened

And they heard how rain is made of abandoned verbs
And while some among the pilgrims like *burn*
And *effloresce* were suddenly
Required elsewhere
The others conjugated themselves into water
And took up the work of rain
Which is searching for those who remember how to speak it

And a way of reminding the cedars where to grow
Who think if the rain has a birthplace
They will reach it

0

On the tundra winter is convoking
The ghosts of departed quantities
Swans bears light what is certain
Their husks grow brittle and shatter into snow

And the zeros emerge like a herd of throats
Craters unslackable knots like suns
Shining backwards
Whose every orbit names them

If they are a blindness no bedrock has plumbed it
If they are a gesture it was always over
If they are a speech it is
Undecipherable

If they are a thing
She is waiting inside it
Already gone

We are her footprints

Italicized passages in the third and fifth sections, respectively, are from Alfred North Whitehead and Bishop George Berkeley.

DANIKA MYERS

Riparian Strip, Willamette River and Belden Creek

1. What Falls

The double bascule of the Burnside Bridge angling back towards itself.

The slow lowering of the drawn spans pauses crossings. Upriver,
lattice on the Steel Bridge starts to climb; beyond: the Fremont,
high and still.

A man's gaze into the Willamette.

The wind lies, says this stranger smells like your neck. The scent gusts
away, blows back, and I realize your smell rises from my own arms.

The spans on the Hawthorne are open steel grating; I won't walk
across.

Everything below that bridge flees, too cowardly to stand and catch
what falls.

I won't watch water and wind running away.

2. Belden Creek: Scrub Brush, Hawthorn Saplings

No great swath empty of timber, no swing, no drop.
No sway and crack of long wood roughly split.

Just the tear of brambles, clear, clear, thorns
torn out, and brown ground bare barely a week

before new shoots scuff it green. The saplings
we clipped at the ground, and we dug out small root fists

to burn. The black tree rushed out new
branchings as soon as we pruned,

without waiting for spring. Thorny arms threw
their fruit to the same old circle as before.

3. Woodshop: Salvage, Fir Boles

A lathe turns bowls out from banded burls,
mines a golden vein from layers of wooden age.

My grandfather's cold hands clenched his chisel,
shavings curled away and the thick block dwindled.

What doesn't smooth to cylindrical when it spins
fast? When I stand still I am uneven, spiral-

ridged and burred. I remember the familiar shriek
of boards torn towards metamorphosis on the table saw;

lovely, fir-breathed destruction of raw planks.
He pegged invisible joints between pieces grown far

apart under separate, rough barks, planed them smooth,
sanded a tongue-and-groove marriage of strange woods.

The world files us towards each other, splinter-against-splinter:
hard embrace, rasp-on-rasp, sap-palm, grip, and, yes, fierce cry.

4. What Falls

The creek froze silent, but the forest shrieked great cracks as each
trunk broke.

What ice encased last December piles the slopes: thawed, torn arms
working into the ground or down to the river.

A few still cling by bark ribbons, rough strands curling like bands of
untwisted twine.

I saw slim twigs flesh themselves in glass, a thousand fingers,
crippling multiplicity forcing shoulders from socketless trunks.

Insistent weight unwrapping itself from its skin when it rolled
monstrous new hands towards the ground.

And shade. There is enough left of the forest the sun can still use
leaves to throw shadows down.

5. What Fades

You fade when
I am froth and flame,
desireless rage.

You froth and flame
in a tidal rage.
I fade when I am yours.

Provocation, laughter.
At night: Jasmine,
pale moths.

The cold trap
of a pale sigh
holds me in white breath.

Fragility. You
are too strong to see
what breaks.

Wings beating
satin powder
against the lamps.

6. Belden Creek: Treated Timbers, Firewood

A forest of six-by-six timbers planted
in a concrete slab, then wrapped with metal

sheeting, grew into a pole barn in the meadow.
In heavy rain, I crept to my nest in the loft

and listened. Close to my ears, the roof popped
under hard drops like a breaking trunk.

That sound broke from silence after chainsaws
stopped on the hill; when the trees fell

across the meadow I loved the fall, not the tree.
Great pine pendulums, cones thrown up to gravity,

the long slap of trunk to meadow, shuddering ground,
thrill a shiver wringing the valley of my breastbone.

My mother's arms tightening around my shoulders,
pulling my knobbed spine hard against her thigh.

7. What Falls

Plenty of ready and tender rounds, swollen gourds, enough my aunts,
too, will reap dinners of what's grown here.

What my grandmother has sown here.

One green squash, too large, too woody—only cows will eat it now. A
green nod, a slow, heavy duck to the ground, and the half-broken
vine still feeds it.

Too many, too round, gourds bump from my arms, roll away; I apron
my shirt and re-collect.

There should be more to pick, I want more, baskets to give away. I
want baskets of pumpkins. I want the weight of bushels of
Gravensteins against my arms.

I am not what you want, but I am strong.

8. An Empty Lumberyard: Maple, Oak

The road cul-de-sacs out into train
tracks, warehouses, and the bank's final plane

down to the river. Only an open wall, no door
closing a pole-building that stored

unhewn logs. I can see that echoes hold the void
inside. Tarps flap over empty windows.

This is the street that divides old industry
from blocks of homes. Across from the vacant

yard and gaping barn, several lean men in dusty white
undershirts work wood under the yellow shop lights

of an open garage. Their hands are certain of the glow
hidden between folded grains of oak;

they move sure of their own bodies, of the incline
required to bow past open bins

of raw lumber cantilevered out from the walls.
The carpenters labor in duets of pull

and glide, unison lifts, a corps whose steps break
with single focus around materials for making.

Their universe of purpose claims
my gaze. A rag dipped in oil will draw

gloss with firm circling, a vibrant
maple opal, fire drawn from a soft heart.

9. Belden Creek: Fir Stumps

I know how roots tunnel underground,
gnarls drawn by desire, by survival. When low stumps—

low enough to sit on—were torn from the ground,
their secrets lay exposed, piled stump-down and tangle-

up in the meadow, big roots wider than my
thighs. Stumps that appeared so small

now dwarfed my father. Clumps of black soil
broke free from the smallest fibers, the fine

living lace that had held the hill. Ornate, fist-sized
cupboards closed dark behind knotted roots—

dark, curled and silent, a lonesome space
left in crevasses dirt rained out of as it dried and lost

its grip. In September, we burned them.
The hard, huge stumps sucked heat inside.

For weeks, at night, their fire-bloomed cores
glowed through charcoal skin.

When rain came, the stump-shapes melted away:
black sludge, sticky ashes smudging the meadow.

10. What Falls

Your hand, twitched from where it palmed a warm cloak over my
breast, wakes me from a dream where you delta me down on the
berm and say, *of course, our love is an alluvial plain—*

Rain. Not gloom, but down from a gray-pillowed sky. A soft, steady
flutter in the pine boughs; fern arms unfurling on a rainy bower.

I want to be as tall as you. I like to stand surrounded by pines.

I feel it most when I see trees lean out from the banks, desperate,
twisted grip sunk clear through the undercut: small trunks gaunt
out over the rush; cold roots bared.

The creek works soil as sand works wood, smoothing the grains away.
Lumber is not unsturdy, though it lies rootless in flat lines and
grays in the rain.

11. What's Caught

You are caught
in indecision; I am
a translucent anchor.

Wrong words
squirm in an ugly
memory. Choice, breath,

froth locked
in a broken chest.
Breath is a tide.

The moon-leashed
tide ebbs and flows
in a mute trap.

A bright cord
tied from tide
to fading satellite.

The moon is caught
in thrall of light,
will wax again.

12. Frame Construction: Raw Lumber

Two lots over, a man is building a house:
I can hear the fire of the nail gun.

Joists climb around him, strong and straight.
We can check his progress from an upstairs window,

but from the back porch steps, it is only the sound:
staccato shot, air compressor kicking on,

then settling to a steady hum. It is the
old sound of my father and grandfather

nailing siding to the house. I feel better,
back up warmer against your knees, wipe my eyes.

Behind us, your garden has been taken by November frost,
summer's wild vines shriveled fast in the snap.

13. What Falls

We stood from the same bed this morning. You are farther from reach
than the branches on a Douglas fir.

A past composed of gray wind and gravity of ice. I will fill my arms from
the garden again, as long as the harvest can last.

I am not so brittle, my hands are accustomed to use, they will not
split, unholding, to the floor.

The vast, dead forests of the Pacific, washed down in a flush winter
river too wide to freeze.

Bared of bark, brine dried, they mill angrily from shore to shore, and
nothing catches them.

They tumble out, then fall into new knots of salted stumps until the
next tide pulls.

JESSICA GOODFELLOW

Why the River Flows Away from Its Source

All poems should be about water. Or bones.
And bones. Muscles like slingshots cradling knees.
Each step, wading through skin, sloshing.
A flood you cannot be lifted above.
Turning toward a longing for home.
A gold roof for the emperor. A blue roof for god.

Have you grown crooked as a plum tree,
or crooked as a black pine?
You will not know until you get there.
Your father, showing you bamboo,
its straightness, said, "Each segment
has a beginning, an ending." He was wrong.

Your mother said,
when your first piece off the wheel
listed like a weft-riven spider's web,
"Never mind. Things nearest perfection
are most easily broken." You've
never made anything worth breaking.

See, there is no water in this poem.
There never was.

JESSICA GOODFELLOW

What You See If You Use Water as a Mirror

In Shinto, the eight elements
of beauty include impermanence
and perishability. Choose one
as your watermark. No,
that is the wrong one.

Begin by learning the 10,000 ways
to spell water. Puddle, swamp,
ice field: waters that don't
move. Estuary, geyser,
glacier: waters that do.

At lunch today, someone said
you were beautiful. The reader
is beautiful, he said. You weren't
there, but somewhere thinking
lagoon, waterfall, tide pool.

Knowing understatement is an element
of beauty, you thought drizzle,
fog, dew. All there is
to know about beauty can be learned
from water, so when you ask

the other five elements, you are told
mystery, incompleteness. Pause.
To learn the final three is to dishonor
the previous two. You must choose.
But here's a clue: cove, tributary, sleet.

T. ALAN BROUGHTON

Moment of Silence

This is the house where children died,
where gas leaked slowly up the stairs to fill
rooms where they slept, a hall where the dog
curled on its own bed and never woke.
These are the parents who came home late,
smelled nothing wrong, but staggered to the lawn
holding the remnants of their lives—lanky arms
and legs that dangled like puppets after the play.

This is the moon that shone all night, full
of reflected light. See how years later it rises
again above the trees and roof, again makes
shadows from whatever stands between itself
and earth. The rooms were stripped bare,
other occupants strew their chairs and toys,
drop clothes on scarred floors. We don't recall
their names, those of us old enough still
to wonder at the way even sorrow lapses,
fades when our homes are elsewhere.

But sometimes driving by, in a pale shudder
our breathing holds as if we can prevent
the coming of what we cannot hear or smell.

MARIANNE BORUCH

St. Francis in Winter

Snowbound, St. Francis in the iris bed, snow
making a little cap for his stony head.
He's maybe a foot and a half tall, smaller
from the kitchen window, his thoughts
an inch wide, an inch deep. His furrowed brow—
the half-master of concrete who poured him, then
shook him from his mold nevertheless
narrowed by hand each line of worry there.
Snow peaks on his shoulders, palest
drift from last night, a veil of it
over the streetlight when I looked out late
in the no-moon dark. It came down.
It kept coming. I didn't think
solace, seeing that. I didn't think
St. Francis-over-the-frozen-iris-who-guards-
the-way-oh-vast-and-strange-non-
human-sounding because it was
near-sleep washing
the house away and we were about
to turn and walk upstairs.
Morning now, the dream of not
being here over. St. Francis
more alone than he's ever been. Kingdom
of patience, kingdom of his badly
chipped outstretched hand. So cold
out there, not even a bird, not even its
splintered call, the yard
white, its enormity absolute
and small, everything St. Francis knows
but keeps forgetting.

ELIZABETH TIBBETTS

Swimming

“Do you skinny-dip?” he asks, this man
caught behind plate glass while the green,
late-summer world beckons and glitters
outside. We’ve been talking about swimming—
the draw of quarry, ocean, lake, and stream.
I don’t answer, but describe my morning
immersions with my dog in the silken pond.

I don’t say how I go daily for water’s caress,
to find my own pulse and breath, listen
for God, learn my length and breadth. I don’t
mention that I carry my basket of troubles
down to be washed. Sometimes this job
(this life) breaks my heart with its losses
and riches. Why not say “yes,” crack the old

professional code (it’s only love that sustains us)
and give, along with his morphine, a glimpse
again of a body swimming unencumbered.
Instead, I place my hands on his frail back
and press my fingers along the muscles and bones
of his shoulders and spine where he still knows
every stroke, everything that’s touched him.

ELIZABETH TIBBETTS

Still Here

Softened by a glass or two of Cabernet
(cheaply bought now that Americans disdain
the French) I left the table of my neighbors,
our bursts of laughter and dour conversation
about our president and his dangerous antics

in our only world, and went to the kitchen
for more bread. There, through the window,
a sweep of damp air and wild spring calls
of peepers rushed in like the Holy Ghost and
made me pause. Their piercing chorus of voices

mixed into such a deep soup of sound
that one frog was indistinguishable from
another. And for one long moment
I was held there in the world's big hands,
and everything that mattered was evening

with its early, scattered stars, the fragile
smell of daffodils and boggy water,
and the mating calls of a population
of those finely tuned, permeable animals
(indicators of the Earth's well-being)

so much older than we are, that have survived
ice ages and the shifting of continental plates,
but are now disappearing—though still here
thriving at the wet edge of my neighbor's lawn
in this hollow where we are all clinging

to the slippery edge of wildness, where
I was allowed a rush of such sweetness
and grief, those fraternal twins who are born
in us again and again, though perhaps
not forever, singing whether or not we listen.

PAULA BOHINCE
Acrostic: Outhouse

Once this homestead held many children,
uncles and great-uncles, delicate and stooping aunts
tattling lace all day, needles replacing
husbands who disappeared into Bayonet Woods, never returning,
obsession becoming gems of fine knots
until their men thread wholly into white roses,
sadly filigreed, as the wild roses
edging the outhouse are eaten by beetles.

MILES WAGGENER

Door

We know ourselves as two
doors fathers seeing the first from far away,
mothers coming en masse to the second.
Both hear the key's indelible
scrawl revise itself in the second-
thought of oil, of tumblers, the lock willing
its bolt through selvedge
and back again, generations
crossing the foyer in nightdress,
backlit motes adrift on stale air
out of the current's reach. The sun
is going down, the sun is on
the other side of the world. Fathers
crowd the narrows homeward,
changing their lives, telling
themselves for the last time, footsteps
scattering birds from the trees, they are
jarred by the lock's trapdoor striker,
ungiving at the legion of useless keys.
At odd hours mothers wake to all the
words they know will pass through us,
our candle-lit byways,
light-piqued fissure of escutcheon
blown out. Fathers, then mothers are before the frame,
broken then mended to hold us, where at one
they whisper please, at the second
they kick it through.

secretly praising the aim, who

 hopes to polish the skull as a keepsake for such a trifle
that towns worry over—

 bauble that our talk moves through even
 now it could be in some keeper's hand, so
among the sayers

 of crotch or crux, who will climb the tree?
Who waits for it to fall?

SUSAN TICHY

Impicature

Beer truck climbs the canyon road, past beaver ponds and aspen
Some rules can be broken: the rules of the color wheel cannot be broken

He said the backbeat nails you to the pain
(Style sheet says *latest violence* or *recurring unrest*.)

“China uses half the cement in the world, and one quarter of its tin”
Come round the bend to a bighorn sheep standing confused on pavement

“In *Encounter* everything depends on Perseverance”
So was that a sheep or a beaver with its mouth full of twigs?

■

Sometimes no more than a line scrawled
“Depth represented is not depth”

A little dead snake, bluer than pavement
Ice-grass blossoms, or iced grass: pay attention

Even immigrants can arrive by helicopter (or so he said)
Comes with the price of admission

(Always described as *latest violence*)

With two dead turtles beside the creek there’s a lot to choose from

■

Wild turkey chicks in the leaf litter: leaf-colored, size of my fist
“Language is founded on noise,” he said, “as an island on the sea”

(May be explained as static or *recurring unrest*)

Some executed with their hands tied, some just shot in the street
And it’s your job to know the difference

A semi carrying eight new cars swept golden leaves from a maple tree
Growing close to the road

A rock partly polished, partly cut

■

In *encounter*, everything, so turn the radio up, admit defeat
First it says *Hovenweep*, and then *killer elite*

Sixteen dead deer in twenty miles
Woodpeckers living in the telephone pole

At the corner of the truck-wash parking lot

Anything familiar can be made strange
White-faced ibis probing for snails in an irrigation ditch

Artillery beside them in a pickup truck

■

When you come round the curve there's a rat frozen in your headlights
Road carved out of a rock face, and watch out for falling, etcetera

Now lots of couples on motorcycles, the women all taller than the men
And with bigger asses

One last pocket of resistance (and yes, possibly, *bottled up*)

"Shovel and fire make a hole in the road"
"Bombing might trigger violence"

Those blacked-out, souped-up choppers were real enough

■

So what is this? Rooks more playful than crows but they all eat meat
Pump gas in the rain so you won't have to wash the windshield

I was looking up *linchpin* when I thumbed past *limpkin*
And looking up at a fighter jet when I drove right past my turn

They say the eye was photographed
Then blown up large as a head

And that man watching birds in a war zone? Don't mind him
In a city of *white domes* he'll say *dove*

JOHN PURSLEY III

Wet Plate

The Mathew B. Brady Civil War Collection, Library of Congress

Smoke. White light—to dust, now brooding
The filamentary—skin, dead
 Skin, dead draws—blues & gray—turncoat

Sprawled, maybe dead
Limbs of trees, limbs of dead, branch out—buckle
 To knees in crosscut recline—maybe smoke

To dust—now settling, sun dropped down
Like ash, or following—
 Men having fallen—some cloud

Of trees, give blur of trees—
Maybe turncoat, maybe fathers
 To smoke—boys of boys—rifle the musket

Lean—powder burn & residual slag
Heap hunched in the plural-end of ever—muddied
 Boots, the ever-muddied—sprawl of white

Like trees now settled like smoke—
Grays to blue—the eye's porcelain
 Fragments—maybe gives picture, gives light

To trees like clouds to smoke,
Like gray—is itching of an arm, one barefoot
 Stump muskets through.

DANEEN WARDROP

Sacagawea to Vasili Kandinsky

Sometimes I find a crack running vertically along a rock,
then up, through branch-sky-branch, and it's the side
of a door, and I open it, and walk to the tacked-
down back of canvas, leave the others there with compasses and packs,
up to their knees in mud they think of as new. They can't tell
which side I'm on. Can you? Where,
when you paint riders or rowers, do you put the *thereby*?
The baby on my back wants sweetness at its core at all
times. When we are only a range away from the ocean,
they're going to go on without me, leave me never to see
the waves as long as the world, and the spume-headed monster—
but then relent. On the way I point out the mountain pass notching
the west sun.
In your mirror-back composition, a black oar rows along a ribbon.
How memory is different from history?—in that way our mouths could
suckle us.

DANEEN WARDROP

Tallulah Bankhead to Alice (Wonderland) Liddell

Afternoon forms around her face, in the dents between eyelashes—
of course I'm talking about myself, my dear. But you can agree
if you wish. Oh, it's simply not your style, I know: for you
luminous means dull, water means echo, sunlight ashes,
and such nonsense. You got tired of being the Wonderland Alice, *Does it
sound
ungrateful?* Yes of course, if gratitude lies our side of the reflections,
but we understand the beloved is the one demanding
a story: for your apron, for your lap, the story blinks torn-gold
clouds around the one who asks. Desire bothers with nothing
but acceleration. Let me pour you tea, if you will not allow bourbon
at this hour—Will you drop me a sugar cube?—Lean back in your chair—
Stir—. No, you must relax, for God's sake—you can do it.
Be a love, be a cartwheel without underwear, be
a fiddle-dee-dee, be your own dear.

DANEEN WARDROP

Yang Keui-fei to Werner Heisenberg

If I could be Precious Consort to the finest emperor of the Tang dynasty,
then why not you to me—you who have no empire to lose: only: if two
people
throw a ball to each other, does a witness alter
the flight of the ball? I know that a white cockatoo, heaved
into the center of a game of Go—as I did
when the emperor was losing against his rival—can scatter the pieces.
It pleased him to win by my throw. The jade phoenix
trinkets hanging from my waist, the sweep of black hair, curve of hand
strumming a lute strung with threads
of the strained-water silkworm—these shift if you love me
back? Ah, sometimes I find myself preferring
it be only love-of, for the love-back is not the same distance.
The night sets on the ground its wide ledge.
The stars not arranged on anything.

DANEEN WARDROP

Blackbeard (Edward Teach) to Lucrezia Borgia

Is it the different colors of the ribbons in my pigtailed
that bother you? The cannon fuses under my hat brim? That!
Those're to light and they'll smoke and I'll be thought
Lucifer. I'll toss them for you. I'm no devil,
darlin'. You probably think I couldn't give you the weddings
you're used to: Trailing the floor, gold brocade sleeves;
open the dungeon doors for the celebration and let the prisoners go free;
a wedding gift of a gold-bead rosary, containing
for each bead, a vial of different rare perfume. I also
know what it was, though: you standing
in front of the Thou of your father, his scepter leaned slowly
forward so that you pull on willow-thin fingers.
And I'll still have you. We'll never dock,
seams in a flag-ripping wind.

DANEEN WARDROP
St. Joan to Demosthenes

Tautological: the God-I in me
loves God. You are so like him,
his squared chest. The way in
is somewhat slow.
I would gargle with the tips off swords if I thought
God could hear my blood-voice,
but that may not be love.
They say you would lie to win your case.
A lie lands without a bounce at the Ghost's feet.
Do you have the little rocks?
They said you spoke lightning
that can rattle the pebbles in their sockets.
Here: in this rose we copulate
but do not touch.

ROBERT CREELEY
Dover Beach (Again)

The waves keep at it,
Arnold's Aegean Sophocles heard,
the swell and ebb,
the cresting and the falling under,

each one particular and the same—
Each day a reminder, each sun in its world, each face,
each word something one hears
or someone once heard.

for Kate: 2/10/05

DOVER BEACH (AGAIN)
The waves keep at it,
Arnold's Aegean Sophocles heard,
The swell and ebb,
The cresting and the falling under,
each one particular and the same —
Each day a reminder, each sun in
its world. each face,
each word something one hears
or someone once heard.

for Kate: 2/10/05

KATE CUMISKEY

Good Company: A Tribute to Robert Creeley

Vancouver, British Columbia, March 31, 2005

I sit down to write about my friend and I am blank—the words, the images which have been rushing through my head for hours rush away. But he would appreciate a blank. He would appreciate a space. Here. There.

Here is
where there
is.

I'm thinking of the first time I met him, at the Atlantic Center for the Arts in November of 1994. After I complained to my sister about my, *whine*, isolation as a writer, she told me to shut up and apply to get into that great colony ten miles from home. I did, blindly, and was accepted for a three-week residency with a poet I'd never heard of.

When I phoned my sister she said, "Perfect. He's the perfect first poet for you to work with," creating an assumption that I'd be working with a minor, perhaps midcareer writer, someone who would prod me to the next logical step. I looked him up in the encyclopedia. Under "poetry," the only reference I found was his name on a timeline, captioned, "greatest living American poet." What had I gotten myself into?

The Sunday evening before the session there was a dinner at the intimidatingly endowed facility on Turnbull Bay of the Indian River in New Smyrna Beach, Florida, my hometown. As I approached the dining hall, a single-story cypress structure, light splashing from picture windows onto the raised wooden walkway and the mangrove swamp beyond, I looked in and saw a room full of artists, writers, and composers. I stopped, hand on the door, and said to my husband Mikel, "I can't do this. I've never read a poem of my own out loud to anyone, including myself. I cannot walk in there, sit down and converse with this man."

"It's just dinner," he said. "Let's go."

Perhaps fifty people were milling about. Close to the back of the room at a long table sat ten, nine of them listening to a black-haired man wearing a dark blue windbreaker. "I think that's your poet," said Mikel. "In the windbreaker."

I walked over, and Robert Creeley said to me, “You must be Kate. We’ve been waiting for you. Now we can begin.”

Creeley opened worlds for me I didn’t know existed. I found his intellect a bit daunting, but his generosity, kindness, and humility of spirit made him accessible. He was a patient and careful listener, a sharp and masterful tutor. He had that rare effect of the virtuoso teacher—he elevated his students with seemingly little effort. Bob focused on two things: students’ work, and those elements of his life and history he felt we could benefit from. His stories were rife with humor and despair, the stuff of living life full throttle.

One story in particular changed me: Bob had been teaching at an exclusive boarding school; when he walked into the teachers’ lounge one noon, everyone was griping about how much they hated the place. He realized he was unhappy, too, so he quit, drove to Central America with his wife and four small children, and worked for very little pay as a tutor on a plantation. This struck me as incredibly brave; it inspired me to quit my job as a special education teacher and write full time.

I cannot pretend to a full understanding of Bob’s work. Being a minimalist, however, I appreciate its telegraphic language, its use of space. For me Bob the poet is both everyman and uniquely himself. But what I love the most about his poetry is that it is so honest, as he was.

Bob’s brilliance permeated his teaching, so much so that later it would become difficult for me to function in the classic grad school workshop. He gave what help he thought a poem needed, and then asked what the writer thought. He did invite discussion from the group, but each critique was a direct and personal interaction between Creeley, the student, and the poem. General class opinion was secondary. He demanded a flexible dynamic consisting of whatever was happening *now*. During our conference toward the end of the residency, Bob asked what I worried about most in my poetry. I was afraid of being labeled a domestic poet. “Well, you *are* a domestic poet. But it’s nothing to be afraid of. Hey. Dig it.” He spread his arms in an ironic and self-deprecating gesture I would come to love, as if to say, *Look here. You’re in good company.*

After working together at ACA, Bob and I kept up a sparse but friendly correspondence, the occasional e-mail, a card here and there. But I refused to take advantage of our acquaintance. I never put him down as a reference or used the letter he wrote for me. It is only now, after he is gone, I wonder why, and discover it was not Bob Creeley the resource I was protecting, but Bob Creeley the friend. During that first residency it was the man I came to love. Yes, the poetry is wonderful, and prolific. And the mind was a genius's, no doubt about it; periodically during our conversations waves of awe would wash over me: *I'm sitting here talking with Bob Fucking Creeley, oh my God.* I told him about it—he just laughed, embarrassed. But the fact of his honesty was unavoidable: brutal with regard to himself, unrelenting; kind regarding others, but also unrelenting. He had a gift for spotting falsehood that was downright uncanny.

Shortly after coming to the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, I mentioned to two classmates, Snezana Zabic and Hoang Anh Tran, that I knew Robert Creeley and might be able to persuade him to visit, perhaps as a keynote speaker at our annual Writers Week. They were so excited that I approached the faculty, and our chair, Philip Furia, asked me to go ahead and write to Bob. His response was typically generous: "I'm now at Brown from SUNY Buffalo, but have a sabbatical for spring of 2005. You can have that time, all of it, if you like."

By the time arrangements were made, Bob was only available for three weeks. With his wife Penelope he came to Wilmington in the second week of February. I was in the office when they arrived; Bob looked just the same as he had ten years before, a little grayer, a bit thinner, but with the same wide smile, the same ironic tilt to his head. And, I believe, the same windbreaker.

This time Bob and Penelope depended on me to be *their* guide to the people; they knew the area a bit, as they'd shared two happy summers there. During their stay, I discovered a quality of his I hadn't been aware of. Sitting together before class one afternoon, listening to him talk with another student about Maine, I said, "I thought you were from Massachusetts!"

"I was born in Massachusetts, but my people were all from Maine," Bob said.

"I dated a boy from Maine, in high school, but I broke up with him after six months, because he didn't kiss me."

"You broke up with him because he didn't kiss you! He was shy! Do you remember his name?" Bob asked, agitated.

"But, Bob, six months!"

"You should look him up and explain. You didn't give him enough time. He was from Maine! He was shy." He bent his head to look at some poems on the table in front of him, and for a moment I could see the shy Maine boy Robert Creeley once had been, and in many ways still was. I realized that all his good-natured sharing, his insistence on openness with fellow writers, came of hard effort, a gift he *gave* to us.

During the first class session Bob spoke animatedly about the possibilities for writers online: blogging, hearing our favorite poets actually speak much beloved poems at the click of a key, zines and online journals. My peers didn't know quite what to make of him. Some students were irritated he wasn't focusing on their poems. It took a couple of sessions for them to adjust to a seventy-eight-year-old man with his finger firmly on the pulse of where poetry is *now, here*. He was all about creating. As age seems to do with everyone, it distilled in him those qualities and characteristics he'd always had. A small-minded person becomes mean and bitter with age, a kind one, generous and graceful. A brilliant and forward-thinking individual, Bob had naturally become more so. It was a pleasure to watch my fellow students come to understand that.

Bob was well aware of his effect on that last group of students. After the first class we talked about it with Penelope. "What they don't understand," Bob said, "is that I can't waste *time*. I don't have that much of it left. I don't have time to spend on poems that don't need it, whether they are finished or not ready to be poems yet. I can't talk about stuff that's been talked out; I need to spend time on what is new, or on giving what I can from my own experience."

None of us knew this would be Bob's last group of students, that

he had so *very* little time left. The three weeks were intensive—three three-hour sessions per week; for Bob and Penelope they became a time of increasing alarm at his rapidly deteriorating health. He stubbornly insisted on teaching every class, on meeting every scheduled appointment and conference, even as it became heartbreakingly apparent how ill he was. I came to understand his old-fashioned work ethic, his deep, formal sense of obligation as well as his abiding, sustaining joy in teaching. I've been a teacher and an educational administrator for more than a decade; from that perspective I can say that Bob was one of those rare teachers who embodied the symbiotic relationship between craft and presentation. His openness and humility, his years of experience and confidence in his own love of the subject, allowed him to modify each class session on the spot to maximize its impact on his students. After Bob took a terrifying emergency trip to the hospital during his second weekend in residence, I tried to persuade Penelope to convince him to go home. "You don't understand, Kate," she said. "The teaching is literally keeping him alive; I could not ask him to leave it. He wouldn't do it, anyway."

It was hard for me to lose my friend. But I'm thankful, blessed, to have loved and learned from him. He laughed a lot, told lovely stories, and listened well: *I hear, I hear*. In one class session, after Bob had me read a brief, three-stanza poem I'd written, he said, "Hey, Kate, just take out the 'of Mexico' after 'Gulf—let it be any gulf—and switch stanzas two and three. Dig it."

I sat slumped in my chair, a little down. Some of the other students were concerned he hadn't spent much time on the poem. Then *he* looked concerned, reached for my hand on the table. Bob thought he'd hurt me. "Oh, Kate—" he began. "It's nothing, Bob. I just, well, I just wish *I* had seen that." He smiled, tilted his head to the side and spread his arms in that telling gesture, *Well, I am Bob Creeley*, and said, "Well, Kate!"

I said, "Thank you Bob."

He said, "You're welcome, Kate!" And we laughed.

He'd done what needed to be done and was ready to move on.

ROBERT CREELEY

Not Again

Sometimes I am embarrassed
by the recurrence of that pronoun
which calls into question, rather into
prominence, my own face.

Of course I
am embarrassed, what else?
Like with the waiter with the tray on which
repose (only) his own hands.

Always—
SundayMondayTuesdayWednesdayThursdayFridaySaturday—
no matter where I look,
I am there.

It was a breeze and a seashell
brought in Venus—
but I can be here
without going anywhere.

So goodbye
until we meet again,
and when you come, walk right in.
It's I.