



River King

Poetry Supplement

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Al Says,

Once again special thanks to the Illinois Arts Council for a 1999 grant to aid in funding *River King*. Cultures are only as good as their arts, and the arts are only as good as the artists. And although art may be seemingly as plentiful as tea in China, the tea in China has a price, and without the Arts Councils to provide aid, a good bit of the true art of the society would simply wither on the stem. As part of RKPS's thanks to the Arts Council, Al has included John Knoepfle's poem "a work of art is like a consensus." Of the poem John writes, "(it is a) poet and politician poem which I did in response to a request from the (Illinois) Arts Council, helping out as best I could in the struggle for funding. A number of other writers, (Gwendolyn) Brooks (Poet Laureate of Illinois) and others, did the same, and the council made a brochure out of the collection."

a work of art is like a consensus

it is a matter of generosity
this need to encourage talent
something that the artist can share
beyond limitations
enriching the public heritage

it is a kind of quilting
something gathered from many places
that will please and astonish generations
long after the quilters
circle another life

the legislator and the artist
they both must weigh and measure
seek balance in disrupted harmony
cast the lone vote

what can be offered then
why the best of all we have
the poet's stance in the word
the elected heart in the senate
the representative in the soul of the house

spinners and weavers
beyond our own talent and time

—John Knoepfle

Likewise, Al is happy to announce that Kansas City poet/artist Philip Miller, whose poetry has often appeared in *River King*, is *River King's* new art editor. Please send your line art to Philip (see address in pub box).

The Three Stooges Go to Heaven

All over the lawn, angels
Go numb with astonishment; harps dangling,
Croquet mallets forgotten.

Impossible. The
Wrong address, the other brother.
Still here they are,

The man with the soupbowl haircut,
The liver-lipped patsy always wincing,
The fat fool made to be slapped.

Moronic Magi of a different star;
Shameless body comics
With the gags that wearied Noah.

After so many pies,
So many fingers in the aching eyes,
The baseball bats, the rubber chickens;

The tough kid on the corner
Sneering, *Make it funny, see?*
I might let you off easy;

They have gotten in somehow.
Maybe to tell
Why laughter is so like snarling.

Jokes that made
The drooling idiot
Clutching popcorn in the dark

Feel for once a little dangerous,
Watching these eyesore bodies,
These twitching faces.

But here no one ever laughs
Unkindly. The seltzer bottles
Squirt right into your mouth.

It is all here,
Every single thing as promised:
The friendly faces, the gravel drives;

The albino heiress
Ignoring the Yale crew captain
To gaze at them, while the

Smiling Senator reminds the guests,
"Pies are to be eaten, not thrown."
Eternity without a punch-line.

They look around with wide eyes,
With eyes for once not *too* wide,
Their hands like sleeping birds.

"Gee," sighs Curly, "I never thought
We were that funny." And Moe whispers,
Like a blessing, "Shut up, stupid."

—John Kilgore



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Salt

Who is more serious
than the child of eight?
Watch her careful steps skirt
the fact of the mole the cat has left
in grass studded with flies
the color of jewels, of human eyes,
something she may notice
as she distances herself
but pokes the carcass with a stick
to find out the secret,
to see if it still moves.

Some days the child possesses her completely,
and she giggles behind the door
when her father is upset about the weather
or some forgotten thing so trivial
her own silliness seems serious again.
She grins into his face's red rage,
cocks her head at the sweat
beading on his brow,
curious about all secretions,
even her own tears which come now
as he brings down terrible words,
tears she tastes a moment in between
rashes of sadness, discovering as she weeps
in sweat and tears
the taste of seawater,
the same serious salt.

—Philip Miller

Seeing Wordsworth In London

And all around a whirl of debris
from Russell Square south to the Thames.
A theme of spirits roams the street
where lamp posts seared by flames,
to provide a second sight, give up
their thick black paint in small degrees.
The close and deadly air shrouds
those who would, if they could,
escape to the hills.

Yet nothing much has changed this day,
or will likely change, of how we think
or what we feel.

And William mingles with the crowd,
meeting face to face his Mass of human-kind.
A bundle of *The Philanthropist*
beneath his arm, he looks and ceases not
to look for mysteries one might uncover
in the light of stolen fire. Discerning
phantasms of heart from unmoved man
he seems not to understand
the artless hands that sculpt these forms.
He dreams a city, a living thing,
a soul devoid of habit or pattern.

We are beggars all at heart,
slouched against the wall, with blinded stories
to tell, the spirit of riot and public hangings,
of desire twisted without redemption.
The written papers round our necks
are scrawled with platitudes of shades
and shifters—all we know of ourselves
or of the universe—like seeing him,
in these advanced decades, among the heat
and blowing debris, consumed with desire
of composure and release, but still
devoid of ennobling harmony.

—John Carter

Small Cog

In your tan Mercedes
breaking away from childhood
with your inaudible voice,
no light in your doll's house,
collecting stamps, news accounts, cards
the paraphernalia of the damned
indifferent to the night
and the deafened music
your own history brings,
somewhere in Argentina's hills
you have an assumed name,
your iron crosses
carefully taken off your uniform.

Yet bank stocks still come in
from a few friends
in the unpeopled village
far from Berlin, Belsen or Bavaria,
you hold many secrets
by the wintering mirror
laughing in Saturday confession,
you miss the martial music
the paintings you stole
all honors you received
even the forced marches
parades, plans, pogroms
from the calloused dreams
in burning earth's redness,
never admitting
what an old fool you are
but still drilling yourself
in the discipline
of a brownshirt,
and no one is around,
answering yourself,
not in the present
but in a grown strange twilight.

—B. Z. Niditch

Very Dead

My nephew has just learned
to make a gun of his thumb
and index finger. He sits at
the kitchen table and shoots
at the refrigerator, his
bowl of cold cereal, his
mother. "Dead, very dead!"
he cries, and shoots again
what he has already
declared dead.

His mother pantomimes
terror, then death, then
death again.
She collapses on the
counter, falls against the
cabinets, slumps to the
floor by the dishwasher.

And so it goes until it's
time to get ready for
school. She hadn't realized
it had gotten so late (how
many times had she died?)
and in the midst of the
hurry, she yanks a bit too
hard on his jacket zipper,
ever so slightly nicking his
little chin. He shrieks and
writes and crumples to the
ground.

"Dead! very dead!" she cries
in forced gaiety, hoping
he'll see this as a mere
reversal of roles, as part
of the morning's game.
Except this time the blood
is real—a few small drops
on his chin. And this time
he won't look at her, the
woman who nicked him, the
woman who died for him
more than once.

—Michelle Matz

Noah

After the dove returned
with its beak full of promises;
after your old boat sagged and crumbled
on the slopes of Mount Ararat,
and your sorry, flea-infested
menagerie stumbled and slithered
back onto sodden earth; and after
your crazed wife wandered off alone
stepping gingerly around
the bloated carcasses, shaking her head
and muttering to herself—
after all the melodrama,
did you ever dream of wings
flush with black and iridescent feathers,
of the raven you threw to the wind,
the one that never came back?

—John Pollock

Ghost

We had heard rumors that the damnyankee
planned to use black troops against us. But
when they formed ranks between us and the sea,
stunned disbelief—"The fifty-fourth Mass!"
cut the late afternoon air. Then, from the gut
splen of our hate, "Come on!" we jeered and taunted.
But their ranks stood silent, grimly undaunted.

And then they came. Across sand and low dune
they came. Our fire cut them down like dry leaves.
But they came on without pause. No fife tune
or drum as they came through the upheavals
of shell and crack of small arms. And it grieves
me to tell some of us broke, white receding
from black, down into the fort, stunned, bleeding.

Red exploded inside my eyes. I fell.
But instantly up just as blue uniforms
crested the parapet. I charged with a yell.
I had no weapon but my fists, a crazed storm
of fury. Then I am dead. No hard form
to my blows. The touch of a ghost has no
friction: fleshy dues I no longer owe.

No debts of cause inhabit a spirit
entity. All brute animosity
has been laid down and the fleshless spirit
floats free of burden. I watched this ghastly
fight run its course with sadness and pity.
And those soldiers fought brave and died and
held for an hour that parapet of sand.

When it was over night breezes blew the ash
smell of battle inland. There were bright stars,
and across the bay Charleston was a sash
of light affronting the Yankee ships, bizarre
pastoral following so much blood and scar.

—Don Ammons

My Lucretia Survives

Some moments seem to move with fractured feet.
She bathes, scrubbing red the body
Somehow fossiled, crumbled as the dead walls of
Old Rome, where her lip-bitten cries once
Wailed to shamed, deaf ears.

She cannot wash his fingers from her,
Still the clawing; Five sweaty imprints in
Each arm; still, still, the night-breaking moaning,
In the silence unbroken by footsteps.

But even this can be survived.
Even this night that hot pours of water
Cannot cleanse. Even these fresh sores,
That now burn and spread, with time will close.
Even this black city whose sirens never cease.

—Brandon Brown

We Were Adults

Yet I can
remember a blemish near a lip,
a mole at the lower neck,
a mark on the ear from a piercing.
One night she drank too much.
I carried her two flights of stairs,
put her to rest on my bed,
tucked her in, wished her well,
and sat away watching a crescent
of moon, a white line on black water.
Her name does not come to me,
nor her touch. This morning
I remembered her. Water held
to ground like roots.
I stumbled twice and fell once,
ice breaking around me into crystal.
I thought first of snow,
then lines on lines, and then of her,
waking, coming to me,
joining me on the chair,
a streak of light from underclothing,
her shadow reflecting
reflections of the moon.

—Michael H. Brownstein

Brendan Behan Borstal Boy

*His voice would be head and shoulders
over everybody and his f-ing would be
twice as loud and that'd be the way he
emphasized a point whether it was politics
or football.*

—Noel Gill, barman

All the pubs were Local from Gill's
to McDaid's and every one in between,
patronizing them all in one night,
like all nights a ritual performance
of the stations of the cross, drinking
a pint of doric for a thirst befitting
a rogue and a poet, street raconteur
and brawler of legendary fame
and misfortune. Quickly in his cups,
all subjects were fair game for a blasphemy,
an argument that led to a row all the better,
each disagreement ended the same way
with a thump on the bar or along side
of the head, it made no difference,
the thing was settled once and for all
like the heads on all the pints
that stood waiting all along the bar.

—Alan Catlin



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The End Is Not Yet

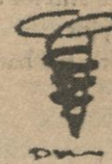
Turning aside the arm I offer at a senior's outing
to the zoo, seventy then,
my mother nods at a holiday of Brahmin girls
who sway inside their saris,
braids smelling of Kashmir and sandalwood.
I like the way they shake their hair,
my mother says. They shake theirs
and I shake mine;
as one hand frees a few hairpins, the other
fingercombs dappled grey
off the glow of her cheeks when I say
show the camera
your pretty face. In a younger world,
between brown-edged pages

of old countries with new names, her table atlas
pressed maple leaves like these
whose veins and arteries map the path
to the aviary. Spiny fingers point
to a caged labyrinth of desperate questions
the spiral hides from daughters
who link white pop-it beads, fill cigar boxes
with acorns, oak leaves,
who believe the truth of first dreams
under new quilts.
Silk, she says, spun from the lips
of the white worm
into the hardening air, her seamstress eye
measuring the cloth,

testing its selvage, cutting on the bias.

In the photo on my vanity,
a peacock's thousand eyes dance their lure
behind my mother's smile,
her foxtail stole framing cultured pearls
she names tears of heaven—
shed when the daystar angel fell from grace—
in a black velvet pouch
the one piece of jewelry still warm
from her bosom
I cannot wear even now, asking the shadows
every day, every night,
for permission.

—Martha Modena Vertreace



The Hand that Feeds

*—he intends only his own gain, and he is in this,
as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand...*
from *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith

That hand brushed the hair
of a Juarez girl's corpse,
her skin blackened
by the *maquiladora* sun,
hair parted by a gash
from her only lover, she lies still,
unburied, a direct deposit.

That hand sews tennis shoes on the equator.
Thin fingers hold the needle:
tight-lipped children,
small bellies, unblinking eyes,
placing the swoosh just right, over and over.

That hand knotted a Countess Mara tie
around my father's still neck, to cover the fingerprints
embalming couldn't hide.

Its fingernails grow
yellow as malaria
while we trim them, file them,
buff them, paint them,
with our hot breath we shine them

while the hair still grows from the skull
of that Juarez girl.

—Spencer E. Hurst

Of Humor Sorrow Secret is the Source

*Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leaves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?*
.....
It is Margaret you mourn for.

"Spring and Fall"
—Hopkins

Of humor sorrow secret is the source
sings Twain the poet, to what steers all
lives of pilots young drawn, in love always
with the flying of the fish from the river feeling

on epic scale. Love, when dare I say
your skin really really like alabaster
is, trueness is tried, temper trued, lips licked,
waist halo-spanned, love loved be. And you hair

like blond straw in light light alchemized
from particles of manger floating see! in airy air
through the slats warped away you watch me walk
walk walk the yard long green across

and ascend sunset toward. But I haven't
left yet: and when eyes close your my eyes
close, of the dark cool darkling we are afraid
until into the barn the staggered cattle have.

Them your father follows. But nothing he is:
he never the proddingstick he carries uses, though
twirl he has learned to. Then leaves. But I was
speaking about rapture. Before you fell asleep

I was going to say I'd you leave grateful
very whatever for cream you might me skim,
any something almost as love as good.
To wake you when I leave I shall be sure.

Rise will I, skinnydolphindip go in
your father's proudcold pond. And deep in dive,
freefish flush as sun splashes while you down
comb from your skirt the straw-into-gold

and for what deepdrowning is not gone hard grieve.

—Gale Acuff

Condo on the Coast

Yes, the ocean is good at roaring
the rocks alive with amber and slate and russet
glaring fog fills the windows.

But these rooms feel so bland
so simply white and square
furnishings petite and static.
I try to fill at least one room
with an empty beer can or two
making rings on
an invisible glass table.
Then a large ashtray
piled with gray smudges.
An unfinished plate of food
a leaning tower of books
clothes tossed about
on model-thin chairs
on prim divans
facing each other
boxes of miscellany
spilling onto the rug—
But the innocuous sand-toned rug
firmly grasps everything
diminishes it
and places it.

I remain a stranger here
a captive
in this exclusive district.

—Ray Greenblatt

To Be Read as Two or More Love Stories

Autarkic love wears cardboard shoes. Refuses
seconds then slips a roll in its pocket. Hoards
canned goods in the attic, scrip in the mattress.

During the Civil War, great-grandpa saw troops
coming for conscripts. His wife rolled him up
in a rug, prayed to St. Jude and served the men
buttermilk biscuits and honey.

Linsey-woolsey love torments the wearer
into rash actions such as proposing
a toast to her nose or carving her likeness in butter.

For the rest of the War, he hoed corn and thought
about luck. The rain and sun and rain again. Slept
to the cough of a corn husk mattress; heard it
rustle when they rolled towards each other.

—Linden Ontjes

And Wife

At first the cues were offstage,
prompts from the pit where sage
advice floats just below the ledge

of an entrance. I knew most
of my lines, improvised the rest,
kept my name, stepped on the glass.

But the ring turned me pale
despite my tan. Net worth: invisible.
Construction workers ceased to whistle

though the taunts - eh, mami - got loud,
in my face, a Shirley Jackson crowd
armed with stones milled from maiden pride.

And wife is how I am now known
in the bank signing papers for a car loan.
On the mortgage to my husband's home.

*Be reasonable. Look at it this way,
the Hispanic lawyers say.
Now you don't have to pay.*

The point is I do pay. Please.
I trail him like a veil in the breeze,
the last little bit of me to leave.

—Jen Karetnick



Position

The storm forces the lilacs
to beat their lovely heads
against the French windows
screaming for the guillotine
for these were the maids
to the cousin of the king
with more purple in veins
and thicker tastes in food.

Taking a cue from outside
Blanche ceased tear-trying
to convince the German lout
that dresses were like petals
that last a season then fall
to the next in line leaving
room for new but his head
was not quite in alignment.

—T. Kretz

Peter Simpson (1932-1992)

Peter Simpson was a man who carried sadness and hope in his heart. The human heart was his concern and his theme. He says in "Lines Against the Times":

Listen, let's try to
keep some hearts from
sinking any further.
Of all sad nights
our tense minds con-
jure, the worst are past

He has faith in the restorative power of dreams. He tells us in "Walking at Dawn":

I wouldn't mind
if God had saved some
luck for the poor. Anyhow.
.....
dreaming,
dreaming across the barren
prairies

And in "The Black King Sees the Infant Christ" this wise man speaks to the manger:

We share a secret,
Lord, a dreamy sleep

He was an urban man and an urban poet and he loved St. Louis. He says in "Another Trip":

This town
was quilted with snow after long cold.
.....

Something pure that might be quick
to melt runs through it all

He had in him, with Hopkins, an awareness of that dearest freshness deep down things. It is marked in his sequence of poems on Irish wildflowers, as in these lines from "Bloody Cranesbill":

They
have the sense of tender
flesh, breathing, awake
to air
.....

I've
always taken loneliness
as a cross with buds
below the bark

Or in these lines from "Roseroot . . . Sundew":

Consider the names together:
the lovely deep, the fresh
ephemeral—the antic
easy sense of life

This Fall

... I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.
—Frost, *After Apple-Picking*

More than apples drop and run
to waste in this season
coming on. You were right:
fall's nothing more than win-
ter's grudge arrived too soon.
All the chorusing
of colors blends and fades
away into a soiled table-
cloth, worn to grey. The cores
of apples gnawed, crumbs of
cakes consumed, some few dried
petals weigh the table down.
Others will have the normal
harvest through these days.
But the chill's already work-
ing on my bones; every single
gift I ever got or gave
is balanced on your table's
edge: poised to fall.

—Peter Simpson

It is this "antic/easy sense of life" that he is concerned to defend, a sense that can be so easily bruised. This concern put him in opposition instinctively to self-righteous power wherever he found it. This was a constant throughout his life. It was with him when he taught in East St. Louis in the middle 50s, as I well remember, and it is expressed in the columns he wrote as late as this past Thanksgiving. And, again, he is concerned to express this care for the beautiful vulnerability of the human whenever he writes of young girls emerging into womanhood. In "For the Girl I'll Love Forever":

they're apple-
bites that nourish
dreams

In "Valentine for All Occasions" he exclaims:

Oh, these
lean girls waving their
burning bones at the moon

In "Kansas City Municipal":

They are larks
looking for a mad time

And in "Lambert: St. Louis" he tells us that they are:

always bringing the same
love into the world

St. Louis by the Mississippi: Urban Eclogue

May—a chilly Sunday morning. Heavy diesels haul their freight across Eads Bridge, huff rainbow films into the wind. They merge with the smoke that coughs from Switzer's licorice stoves, dip to sleep, rub more smudge on the rolling Mississippi's flat, listless face. The old man's tired from a winter's wild carouse; blisters swirl the currents from the melted snow; the water sucks the chilly drizzle. Tiny veins streak out and pump dead blood, yellows dry Missouri into mud.

The muscles of the town don't flex much anymore upon the river's shiny, tensile strength. Commercial enter-prise spurs tugs with contracts, past shoals where all men needed once were the spoken words they gave. What I remember most: afternoon excursions, moonlight dancing on the Steamer Admiral, highballs, hotdogs, penny machines to tell a little fortune. I kissed her on the topdeck, as we ran below MacArthur Bridge. Later she cried when my old jalopy ran out of gas.

—Peter Simpson

He loved the flesh and dreams and songs, and he fought the self-assured religiosity of a materialistic culture. In "Children of These Wars" he says:

If there is only close air
in this land that can carry
neither wind nor song,
how will I pray in the breath
of my mouth

He would never accept an easy assurance of power. This is his meaning in "Saxifrage":

War's the hardy perennial
"real" men take for truth—

I am glad for the lies
that charge my bones,
my soul is filtering
the lies, my sleep taking
the sand and slime and
turning all of it to dreams
of my Yeats heart alive
again

Or righteousness that confuses itself with the Almighty. He is explicit in this regard in "Wild Columbine":

Be fair to all your memories
and turn your torture
from the rack of right
and wrong. God's eye looks
kindest on those who slip
directly into night or fly
through clouds, for judging
us is not his basic
bother (though He will
of course) but how He
will devise to do it
will make sense only
to those who gave
their best to love

Scavenging a Tree

Kate swaddled and asleep, I lurch our Dodge at the starry backdrop that will fall at Christmas dawn. The lot's locked tight; but I'm sly enough to lumber over rusted barbed wire strands atop the fence to take my pick among the ragged leavings. No shepherds watch—and better yet—no cops are cruising as I stuff my scruffy prize into the trunk. I know all about Augustine's pears, taken for sheer delight at getting off scot free. They aren't my holiday fruit; ripping my pants scuffling away is the price I pay. I've got some cash, this night in '59, but too many others don't—and never will. Standing solid with their loving desperation is the tattered gift I have to offer. The mutilated pine shelters our creche and holds among its limbs lights enough to make Kate clap her hands.

—Peter Simpson

He had the notion of the soul as a kind of filter, as quoted in "Saxifrage" and expressed here in "Keeping Open":

Light, you know, mingles
all the colors; and com-
ing in too strong can
twist the heart as well
as burn the eyes.
.....

all through the tortured
light you'll find out what
we're filtering is love

It was not that he could not bruise others. He knew that. He had a volatile nature. And so he could say of himself in this same poem:

seldom
safe, often sorry

But he was throughout all his work a political poet, one of the rare ones who had been an elected official. In "Anything Can Happen" which he wrote for St. Patrick's Day in 1982 he frames the coming decade and lays something aside for our needs:

Pray to Patty that the Herbert Hoover
Boys Club wont always stand for what
the country is these days.
.....

Let's send
up some hopes, some beatific visions
this season somehow might
turn out better than its auguries

And also, everywhere, there is that image of the heart in his work. He keeps "clean pictures/of your heart" for Robinson Jeffers. F. Scott Fitzgerald has a "spoiled/heart". He says in "Elegy for a Working Man" that "Saint Joseph's awl digs in my heart". He tells us in "Requiem at Peacock Alley: Charlie Parker":

One long mean riff—
the Bird's stuck heart
takes off to fly

And measures the change in the college' kids who have come to hear Parker:

Struck by brand new fire,
dark and mad, their eyeballs
turn inside to see what
magic mirrors make of
bloodshot hearts

Of his father's singing, he says in "My Father, the Nightingale":

The women's hearts were
melting—as they always had

And of his maternal grandmother, Mary White Simpson, he tells us:

Her heart became a secret thing

Speaking for myself now, as I enter into my own strange dreaming time, I have to confess the deepest loss. It is the strangest thing that those who practice this most public and available of the arts, the art of poetry, that they have to do so very often in the most isolated and solitary of circumstances. I could always telephone Pete or visit with him to ease that constriction. He was the confidant, the one I could talk shop with or level with, and those conversations were always moments of renewal for me. I can only say now, thinking of this, that to have had such a friend these thirty years and more was a great and rare privilege.

Oh, he had a big, bumptious, splenetic, generous, driving, democratic, fighting, Catholic heart. That's my Pete. And yours, too, I think.

But I do not want to dwell on our loss. Peter Simpson began his "Requiem at Peacock Alley" with the statement that it was "A sort of Saturday/for angels". He is the poet. He has the last word. I leave him, and you, with these angels on this Saturday.

—John Knoepfler

On the occasion of the memorial mass for Peter L. Simpson, the College Church, Saint Louis University, 18 January 1991

River King thanks Bookmark Press, Kansas City, MO, for its generous permission to reprint three poems by Peter Simpson.

A Neighbor's Death at Christmas

She departs under the brown blanket as,
rubber-tire smooth, two silent men wheel her
from the house, widowed ten years, now dead
to chill of late Iowa afternoon.

Along the street comes a pause in stringing
tree lights, dim reminders of a child's birth.
Some brightness quits the tangled skeins as
the ambulance receives a visitor.
Clutching lights, our children lean against
the windows, lean to watch the door close
upon the silent guest, lean to see the dark
ambulance begin its quiet journey
past our poised house where breathing slows until
we ache to divert their curious eyes.

After a while the empty street permits
our children to resume ornamenting
the evergreen, and soon into the dark night
small colors brave forth their uncertain light.

—Robert J. Ward

Eggs

for Nancy

Your old dog wakes you,
anxious in the night.
You stay awake, listening
to bullfrogs in the pond.
At dawn you find them
green and gape-eyed, gazing
at you, then they're gone.
One female lays her eggs
in greenish swill against the shore.
In the garden, your fig trees
swell with hard green fruit,
too much for anyone to eat.
Your hens cluck out more eggs
than you can manage. Two bluebirds
in the big old oak are nesting
right outside the bedroom where,
a year ago, your husband died.
When I leave, you urge on me
a dozen fresh brown eggs.
Come back, you tell me,
when the figs are ripe.
Come back just any time
at all.

—Taylor Graham



Chamber Music

We sang for our mother
and she would listen just as long
as we spilled the songs around
her—swimming in the river of our music—
for it was her voice leaking from our mouths.
I heard her once
her voice in mine
finding its place in the
spaces of my head
her tones escaping
over my tongue to teeth and lips.
It came from someone lost to her
not quite my face
but chordless humming just like mine
single tunes
green and pure
and filling up the room.

She would starve to see
the dimpled fingers smiling
at the cracks between the keys
and crawling songs
revolving ever on themselves
played and sung and never done.

I caught her reading music once.
She thought she was alone with
the notes—lidless skittering eyes
that stared without pity at her strange attempt
to find their vision in her fingertips.
And when she saw me
she blushed and slipped away.

—Susan Davis

Guerrilla Dining

our child, Lavinia (good Roman name
to go with her Greek nose),
is "taking us to dinner," as she puts it,
less fuzzy than we ever were.
she will wear her stirrup earrings
and her bloodstained jeans.
gazing a fine white wine
(Marcel's solicited recommendation),
she will explain the missing money
and the James Bond runarounds, shrug off
the sado-masochistic leather camouflage,
metal music, and the thickening oboe-dust.
what will any of us say, though,
about the weather, or about young Billy's
rise in air-conditioning, or about
that morose Mafioso in the razor suit,
waiting outside in his ocean-liner car?

she will criticize your ocelot gloves,
Dolores, and my pedigree toupee.
expect no mercy there, or anywhere;
we are not a standard anymore, of anything,
let's face it—her young nerves got our
frayed ones beat; her jabber, too,
and counterrevolutionary spite,
will surely overwhelm our qualifying lisps.
this is little Livie, once our pride
and joy, our gangly torment, tomboy worry,
Livie—our insatiable, wayward sponge,
has grown some ghastly outlooks of her own.
since the dear has plans to kiss us off,
let us at least show up manicured and dreamy,
fashionably late for fate, tipsy even,
on the loopholes lurking deep in liberty.

—jack shadoian

Woman on Ladder With Dead Child

After Picasso

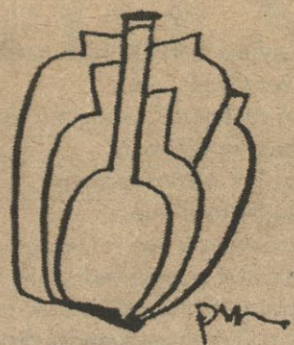
From the first rungs mounted
You have felt the contractions
Shiver past the straps
Across your spine, have lived
The damages of the event
And have learned that no breath
Is safely taken.

You have cried and given yourself
To little things, thinly dabbed
Mascara, messages
From your husband to wash
The cupboards, and splorches
Of paint, like the residue
Of weeping, sprinkled upon each
Wooden rung of your ascent.

As a petty diversion, you have
Tacked lists along the way,
Inventories of the diets you kept,
The formula you followed,
Histories of that day when you
Wasted everything
Scavenging for scabs of dust
Beneath a beige freezer.

You are the stories of every
Woman's climb, the splinters
And depressions on every ladder's
Rungs, that evidence of some
Predecessor who rushed herself
Up and out to the end,
Her stiletto heels dug in but sure
To slip after each quake
Of the small body, her dead
Child who, lashed to her
Back, shrinks them both
Into its own death.

—Raymond Barto



The Widower

I saw him at the grocery store.
He looked lost between the soft drinks and cereals.
He looked lost and soft.
I linked arms with my companion and we walked faster,
away from him,
to the checkout line,
me looking over my shoulder
to see if we'd been seen.

Later, I wondered why I'd done that.
I thought about her.
She probably knows what I've done.
She's become a spy for God,
this dead young wife.
In bed that night, I thought of him in the grocery store
as though he were still there.
As if he couldn't choose a cereal,
or had forgotten what it was he wanted.

I even saw myself driving to the store to save him.
I'd walk up to him
and brush his hair off his forehead
and take his cart
and finish the shopping for him.

Me in my nightgown and cardigan,
wheeling around the store, collecting ice cream,
soups, bread, and fruit.
Chatting with the widower.
And he, trailing behind me, looking small and soft.
The other shoppers stare at us.
They cringe at his pained face,
my stupid chatter,
and the ashes on our shoes.

—Kathryn Deaton

Some Consolation

Our great consolation is none:
we fall, whether from a precipice
or from the steps of a stoop;
just gravity and space determine
whether we walk on or die.

Whether a neighbor's hand, my own, a myth
nature, her laws, however sublime;
when I consider creation
under the light of analysis
I must truly say, "Not this."

God is nothing for me since
nothing in or outside corresponds
to what God is: on stoop or cliff
remain therefore steadfast: walk, fall,
do not seek grace within gravity.

A *via negativa* for post-moderns,
yours is a narrow path, Simone Weil:
to jump in the abyss, if need be,
knowing relentless gravity
is all that we can hope to find!

"He who lives by the sword shall
die by the sword." True, yet
"who puts it down dies on the cross."
Some consolation. Beyond perception,
gravity's grace—Some consolation, indeed.

—Thomas Dorsett

In Sex

When I am alone,
I grow into myself.
This is what I do not want you to see:
The hair on my forearms pricking up
My ears growing sharp.
My toes scratching
at the insides
of their shoes.
Today I do not
smooth down my fur.

Your muscles—
back
to shoulder
to arm
look like the flank of a horse—
cantering.
You bare your teeth at me.
You sweat.
I don't.
I am still and cold.
Hairless, clawless.

You, over me, make my fingers
grow stiff and mean.
You, with your teeth and your steel
eyes, make me want to bite.
You make something rise
in me. I hold it just behind my teeth
until—I can't anymore—
I turn my head to one side
and spit out the bear.

—Kathryn Deaton

Oak dance

On a slate cropped ridge of twisted oak
through rock and leaf we take our walk.
Let us be blown and soaked with rain;
to ravens our hearts in hand we carry—
souls trailing after like a mad king's train—
through the clouds we ascend the light.

In the silver mist our step is light
along cliff edges past old scrub oak.
Through hollow years, ascetic, we trained,
that this climb might be an eager walk.
Owning nothing, no load to carry;
ruling less, in our kingly reign.

Past and future are lost in rain;
the Now is bathed in flooding light.
The husks of Was are all we carry
as we wind our way through ancient oak;
unseen, unowned, we make our walk;
the moments unfold our whole thought's train.

Nuthatch behind us, and chickadees, train;
the squirrels above let acorns rain
on oblivious we, who dance our walk.
The burden carried is free and light;
past wind-blast pine and sunburned oak
to ravens, our hearts in hand do carry.

Our gristle, our bone, our sinew we carry;
our hope, our truth, in blood entrained—
blood to rise like the sap of oak,
that frothing up in spring's first rain,
will rise in lust to meet the light
on a stony ridge where lovers walk.

We dance, we run, we crawl our walk;
we have not even clothes to carry;
our skin is dappled in leaf strewn light.
The mad king has long outrun his train;
his grey hair streams with sweet spring rains
that draw up the foaming blood of oak.

What shall we carry, in this terrain?
Let us gently walk in the gentle rain
where ravens light in the heart of oak.

—Nick Vitrum

Clothes make the man

Now listen to me
dear,
sweetheart
you used to say to me
clothes make
the man dress like
a slob and guess what?
you are
now I say

Father,
your drooling again
how could you?

They have you dressed
in your best white
bib today 100% terrycloth
spread wide against your
barrel chest, your tux of
late such fancy duds
I remember best your grey
Dior with the thin lapels
and the black silk tie,
you wore Pierre Cardin cologne
I hated that stuff
I'd take it today over
urine and antiseptic
and this bib that won't
stay smooth keeps getting
all out of place
let's keep you neat
let's just pretend
that this is a 700 dollar
suit Father,
now listen dear,
sweetheart
your drooling again

—Rena Glin

Jake's Resume

It said 1986-1990, CCI.
Could have said armed robbery
And 4-25, but didn't.
But Jake got the job.
Stable, same place
Of residence for a while—
Stuff an employer looks for.
At break,
I ask him how he likes
His regained freedom.
"Just a longer leash,"—he says.
And he moves his head
Just so far and stops.
A strange habit,
But I didn't ask how
Long he had been doing that.

—Edward Supranowicz

waiting

i see stopped cars lights up ahead
behind weighted road blocks
red striped reflecting flashing
with monosyllabic tones
that ricochet down the alley
of my small minertown
past America's daughter
cocaine dreaming
learning how to fuck
and waking up at her mama's house
with breakfast ready
laundry washed
folded and stacked
in her chestofdrawers
would lick the sweat
from her inner thigh
but my mood has been pulled blue
to the porter hailing me
swinging his emergency lamp
holding onto the safety rail
with his free hand
and balancing on the bottom step
with his good leg
i had better listen when he says
All Aboard

—Don Moore

Octavio Paz

(in memoriam)
1914-1998

You walk no longer
in the green metropolis
yet your body of praise
shouts its own monologue
passed lands of the pampas
among the disappeared ones
those who study nature
near the llama's desert
where sister waits
for summer rains.

You do not run to the sea
your unfinished consolation,
nor by the iguana stone
where each life is a miracle
and the sun is taken
from Klein-blue Aztec hills
your vision continues
by its own lucky legacy
hearing ancient anarchic voices
with the proud fragrance
on the face of a child
who reads you by the hazel tree
now through labyrinths
the earth in an empty frame.

—B. Z. Niditch

Winter comes to Pond Hill

Hip up on Pond Hill today, the sun as bright,
the snow as white as in some storybook, as pure

as the heart of that girl in the tale who had seven
little men with warts and a long-sworded

effeminate prince for lovers, spun beneath my tires
like spun air, no more substance to it than a flight

of politician's rhetoric, nothing for the tires or for
the mind
to grip. Some wild and whiskered man up there—
no dwarf

I think, although he might have been a prince, he
was quite
crazy enough, no politician, too honest—got a grip

with his chain beneath my bumper and with
his little screaming yawling car he yanked

and backed and yanked again until I thought for
sure
his car or mine would come undone at its snowy

underpanted seams, and then mine rose up upon
its toes
and like a ballerina danced across the snowflakes

and up into the road between molecules of air
that pirouetted, shimmering, in that fairy tale light.

—Nick Vitrum

One Wakes

What is justice if a child
brought by chance to the autopsy table
isn't resurrected wholly?

To believe in what one's never seen,
suffering's final redress,
expressed in impeachable terms:

some say faith leads us
nowhere; yet a hopeful fool,
I stand by the Easter message:

while gravity stays unrelenting
even at the abyss,
one falls in; one shatters; one wakes.

—Thomas Dorsett

In Sickness and Encroachment

Three weeks before the wedding he moves in,
begins to open the custom cabinets,

starts to put his things where he wants
them, rearranges the kitchen drawers.

By the end of the second day, she has lost
the familiar feeling of her home, new paintings

grace the walls, there isn't enough room
for three rows of shoes in the walk-in,

the toilet tissue no longer rolls over the top,
there are socks in the laundry inside out,

and she watches him drink and backwash from
the milk carton and replace it almost empty.

Her closet shrinks, all those suitcoats
pushing their chests into her space, those

pant legs eager to brush their thighs against
a dress, and, hung on hangers pointing the wrong

way, his designer shirts whose arms once circled
her waist, moving slowly upward toward
her throat.

—Bill Cowee

Even When We Don't Die We Die All the Same

This long time
over a year ago we followed signs
off the highways of southern Illinois
late fall deserted of tourists
to the high flat rock home
of Indians and their art.

It's a climb up there now
even with railings, steps
and signs to explain.
We hiked among ferns and leaves
past the last sprig of columbine
to the worn rock slabs
where petroglyphs testify
to human wonder.

For protection they lived high above
water, firewood and food,
close instead to wind and storms.
They climbed to escape enemies
and in safety decorated the world.

This is how we live:
a young woman follows a man
down from where they were loving.
Perhaps there are nuts or sticks to gather,
perhaps there is sun through the November trees.
Deer lift their heads to listen
as the lovers dead so many years
that even their bones are lost in loam
laugh and whisper at their work.
He has carved the shape of God
but never the look of her face.

It probably came with a thrust
or like two red berries on a twig.
Something to someone became
the beginning of the end.
They stenciled the ground
like leaves until the first snow.

Like the snow we had last winter
falling in faint stone grooves,
like all that has happened since
unspoken, without warning,
too late to outlive memory.

—Joanne Lowery

In Memoriam: Ken Saro Wiwa

You want to stand
even in your sleep
on this winter morning
with bitter greetings
in many trousers
getting too small
watching each drop
of the winter's nakedness
in the gusting wind
from a hunger not quite dead.

Under a rope
of tar skies
night covers you
you sense orange blossoms
from the earth's forgotten warmth,
your shoes are heavier
made of human awnings
you wish for justice
thinking back
by your student lamp
with your scattered friends
wanting miracles
under a sovereign sky.

—B. Z. Niditch

Raking Leaves: The Twenty Lost Quartets Of Brahms

When the rains no longer nourish
And the summer burns itself
From the outside in,
The trees turn, losing their breath
In the swing of back and forth days.
Flacid, this passage to destruction
Like your afternoons with notebooks
Wringing the long lines of melody
Lost in the twenty string quartets
You burned before publishing just three.
I have memorized the notes
You meant finally for us to hear,
The sounds of a heart
Not easily revealed,
And have taken my own words
Without your slight regard
For light, unfinished things, my pages
Recording the loosing of leaves,
The fall of oak and maple pressed for time
In the bindings of bibles kept by my children.

—Raymond Barto



Wednesday's Child

for Pam

Wednesday you
Suckle the apple popsicle
laced with morphine,
finding it hard to keep even
that little bit down.
Your gaze falls out the sterile
window while your malignancy
doggedly eats you away.
A soothing oracle from Delphi records
sings about teenage love and death.
Coughing, I wear my mask
to keep up the appearance of a chance.
Three nurses come in,
each with scissors for bandages.
They'll put on wounds that will never heal,
and I wonder why fates like
these aren't saved for Jeebels
and antichrists, an end that no
corner-tied sheet could ever keep away.

—Jimmie McWhirt

Amateur Science Experiments

If you put a fresh
tumbleweed into a box
it comes out square
and can be easily stacked
in your garage.

If you drop raisins
into champagne
they'll each dance
a little
differently.

If you step outside
at 40 below
and toss
your mug of coffee
into the air
it falls
as crystals of ice.

If you multiply
cricket chirps
per minute by seven
you can calculate
the temperature.

They sing faster in August.

If you pretend not to look
then spin quickly around
you can sometimes catch
the furniture moving.

—Linden Ontjes

Second Hand Shop

Mother Helen,
daughter of Crimea,
dressed in blue-mourning robes,
eating lime-green jello, tell me, do
you ever bathe your body, do you
ever bake an Easter cake?
Palm Sunday, I think it is,
and my wife Sasha still
wearing her pink
sweater and I
love her truly when she's the washerwoman
of the house, ironing, pressing iron-on stars (gold)
on my poetry, and these are still God's unique
children,

Beat as they are, could you demurely show me
the way back to the 60's, show me the way home?
"Hold steady, now," I say, and my table
fills with more shuffled papers
and my coffee's cold and I
think I may try tea
for now there is
no struggle to speak of
and the writing is fairly stable
and rain bounces off of my soup
and I can't afford fresh meat
and a friend came over
and laid a hand on me
and said I oughta
publish a book
but it would take money for that
and so I slide things around looking for change
and no one is going to rescue me, I see, for
most of America is laughing at poetry
and they seldom prick up their ears
when I arrive on-stage in Chicago
and I just sigh and produce
more trash and trivia
and stash it on the dresser
and order the two electronic eyeballs
I bought at Goodwill to read it
and on Monday I go
to the Palm-Reader again
and she says to hang in there
and watch out for cops crisscrossing
the cool side of town, so I sipped a little
vodka and called a cab and got relaxed
in the head, and I wondered if she
was really named Helen and if
Mary was a virgin.

—Errol Miller

Never Chew the Peyotl Root

Or your world will become a stained glass window.
People in restaurants or walking their dogs
will turn deep blue or bright green,
their faces soft brown to match the buildings
or fiery red to match the streets
as lavender God looks down on it all.

The woman across the aisle on the train
will become Bathsheba, wearing fine silks,
pearls on her wrists, diamond rings on her fingers,
her eyes of a bird or a young doe.
If she clears her throat it will sound like a cello,
her eyes soft but her body on fire—
various shades of bright orange and yellow.
But if she senses that you are staring
her eyes will glower like dark green jungles
and you'll rack your brains for some means of escape.

If a man in a white robe leaves this train
with his chartreuse son and a pink lamb
you will know he is Abraham bound for the wilderness
to sacrifice Isaac, his first-born son
but you'll go on reading your paper, knowing
you'll soon hear flutes and harps spread the news
that a large angel with purple wings
has saved little Isaac just in time.

No, never chew the peyotl root
or people will comment on how you have changed,
the way you look deep into everyone's eyes
or the off-color words that slip from your lips—
even the way they think you think.
If you've only tasted peyotl once
and stop now, it may not be too late
to drink lots of liquids and realize
that the world is not a stained glass window,
that people don't really turn deep blue or green
and that angels don't have purple wings.

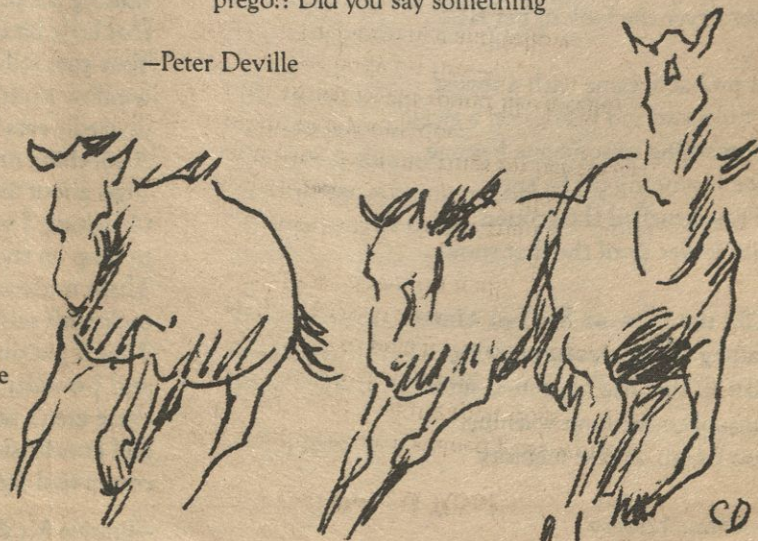
—John Dickson

Hate Poem

Browning did it, lasering his hate to a fine point.
'Hy, Zy, Hine . . . Gr-r-r - you swine!
And in a Spanish cloister too, much as I find
Myself in Casa Tambara, a fucking idiot for son
Serving 'prediche' for breakfast, tea and lunch.
The mother's simple as an owl, a harmless soul
Of negative intelligence, companion for the cat.
She's grating cheese now, tinkling the dishes,
All in insufferable servitude, and a silence
Of response that makes cows gossip. Then the thing
That makes the oil of my brain simmer, that imbecile
Politeness, of 'hello', 'goodbye', 'goodnight' Peter,
Looping like a tape. Those retrogressive burlblings
To the cat, squeaks and chucklings screw-loose,
Loony talk that a girlfriend (hypothetical)
Would send to the devil, him too when she could.
One of these days—sooner than later—
I'll tell him I'm a satanist, fucked the Pope,
Burnt the bible, shout it in his darkened room.
Miser though he is, he'll switch the light on
Soon enough stick that mealy muzzle at the door
And say 'Prego?' 'Bigot! Cretin! Bigot!' 's all he'll get.
A fresh light sprinkles gloomy rooms
And an angel runs down the stairs.

Note: prediche: sermons
prego?: Did you say something

—Peter Deville



Contributors

Gale Acuff has published in *Florida Review*, *Aethlon*, *Pikeville Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *Descant*, *Slipstream*, *South Dakota Review*, *Carolina Quarterly* and many other magazines. He is currently working on a Ph.D. in creative writing at Texas Tech University.

Don Ammons is a displaced American living and writing in Denmark. He has published poems and reviews on both sides of the Atlantic. His first collection of poems, *Somewhere Else*, was published in 1998.

Raymond Barto is a reconditioned poet once again active and submitting. He published widely some years ago, and this is his first appearance in *RKPS*.

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Michael Brownstein is the author of half a dozen chap books, including *Poems From the Body Bag*, *The Shooting Gallery* and the *Principal of Things*.

John Carter is currently on sabbatical in Luib, Scotland (on the Isle of Skye). He spends his days writing at the Piper's Moon Cafe.

Alan Catlin has published over thirty-five chap books. The poems printed here are from a long sequence of poems, *The Poet, Dying*.

Bill Cowee has published work in dozens of magazines. His latest book, *Bones Set Against the Drift*, was published by Black Rock Press in 1998.

Susan Davis is a graduate student from the University of California at Irvine.

Kathryn Deaton teaches creative writing at Warren-Wilson College.

Conci Denniston's visual art has been exhibited in many places, including the Kansas City Artists Coalition, a one woman show at Emporia State University at the Designer's Circle in Kansas City, MO where she presently has a large exhibit of her jazz paintings at the Sheridan on the Country Club Plaza.

Peter Deville is a lecturer at Genoa University, Italy. He has translated work by Umberto Eco and Giorgio Caproni for *Modern Poetry in Translation* (Kings College, London).

John Dickson was an NEA grant recipient for poetry in 1990. A former Chicago Board of Trade member, he is the author of three books of poetry, including *Victoria Hotel* and *The Music of Solid Objects*.

Thomas Dorsett has published poetry in over three hundred journals. His books include, *Dance Fire Dances*, *Beyond These Shores* (a translation of a recently discovered diary and poems written by a young Jewish girl in Nazi Germany) and a German translation, *der Schlangenstock*, of Jim Wayne Miller's *Copperhead Cane*.

Sharon Eiker is a painter, sculptor and poet. She serves on the board of the Writers Place in Kansas City. A recent book is *Heavy Morning Traffic*. Her work appears in the *Any Key Review*.

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Jon Kilgore teaches English at Eastern Illinois University, is a beginning poet who has published fiction in *The Nebraska Review*, *McCalls*, *Nebula* and *Farmer's Market*.

John Knoepfle is the author of eighteen books, has had his poetry included in several dozen special collections and various journals and magazines. He is an authority on the Peoria-Miami and on the history and lore of the great inland American rivers. His latest books of poetry are *A Box of Sandalwood*, *Selected Poems*, *Poems From the Sangamon*, *Begging an Amnesty* and *The Chinkapin Oak*.

Thomas Kretz is a Pittsburgher working as a historian and accountant in la bella Roma.

Joanne Lowery's poems have appeared in many magazines. Her third collection of poems, *Heroics*, was published by Avisson Press.

Michelle Matz has published in *The Berkeley Poetry Review*, *The New Poetry Review*, and *Okra*. She was a 1997 and 1998 winner in the Mary Merritt Henry Graduate Prize for poetry.

Jimmie McWhirt is an American native who lives and writes in Belleville, Illinois. He was an associate editor of Belleville Area College's literary magazine, *Head to Hand*.

Errol Miller's latest books include *Downward Glide*, *Forever Beyond Us*, and *This Side of Chicago*.

Don Moore lives and writes in St. Louis, Missouri. This is his first appearance in *River King*.

B.Z. Niditch is the artistic director of the Original Theatre and publishes widely in the US, Canada and Europe.

Linden Ontjes lives in a log house on the banks of the Tanana River in Fairbanks, Alaska. Her poetry has been published in numerous magazines and reviews. She has received grants from the Alaska State Council on the Arts and the Foundation for Art Resources.

John Pollock is a Professor of English at San Jose State University. He has published juvenile and adult fiction, critical essays, translations, and poetry in journals throughout the U.S.

Jack Shadoian teaches film and English at U-Mass/Amherst. He has published poetry in many magazines, most recently *S.A.M.*, *Lucid Stone* and *The New York Quarterly*.

Peter Simpson (1932-1992) is the author of *Stealing Home*.

Edward Supranowicz is a factory worker from Logan, Ohio. His poems have appeared in *New Thought Journal*, *Whole Notes* and other Midwestern and Western journals.

Martha Modena Vertreace has been an NEA fellow and is currently poet-in-residence at Kennedy-King College, Chicago. Her most recent books include *Light Caught Bending* and *Second Mourning*.

Nick Vittum runs a highly successful poetry reading series in central Vermont. This is his second appearance in *River King*.

Editors

Wayne Lanter is the founder and editor of *RKPS* and is the author of four books of poetry, *The Waiting Room*, *Threshing Time*, *Canonical Hours* and an epic narrative, *At Float on the Ohta-gawa*.

Donna Biffar, *RKPS* associate editor, is the author of *Water Witching in the Garden* (1995) and edits Belleville Area College's award winning journal, *Head to Hand*. She has published recently in *Poipourri* and the anthology *90 Poets of the '90's* and has work forthcoming in *Black Dirt* and *Any Key Review*.

Philip Miller, *RKPS* art editor, is the editor of the online literary journal, *Any Key Review*. He is the author *Cats in the House*, *Hard Freeze*, and *From the Temperate Zone*. His artwork has been published in a number of magazines including *Thorny Locust*, *Bone and Flesh*, and *Java Snob*. Some of his work is presently on exhibit in the Chambersburg, PA Council for the Arts.

Valeda Evans, editor emeritus of *RKPS*, began writing poetry twenty-two years ago at age seventy-two and has published in national journals and magazines.