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Dialogue

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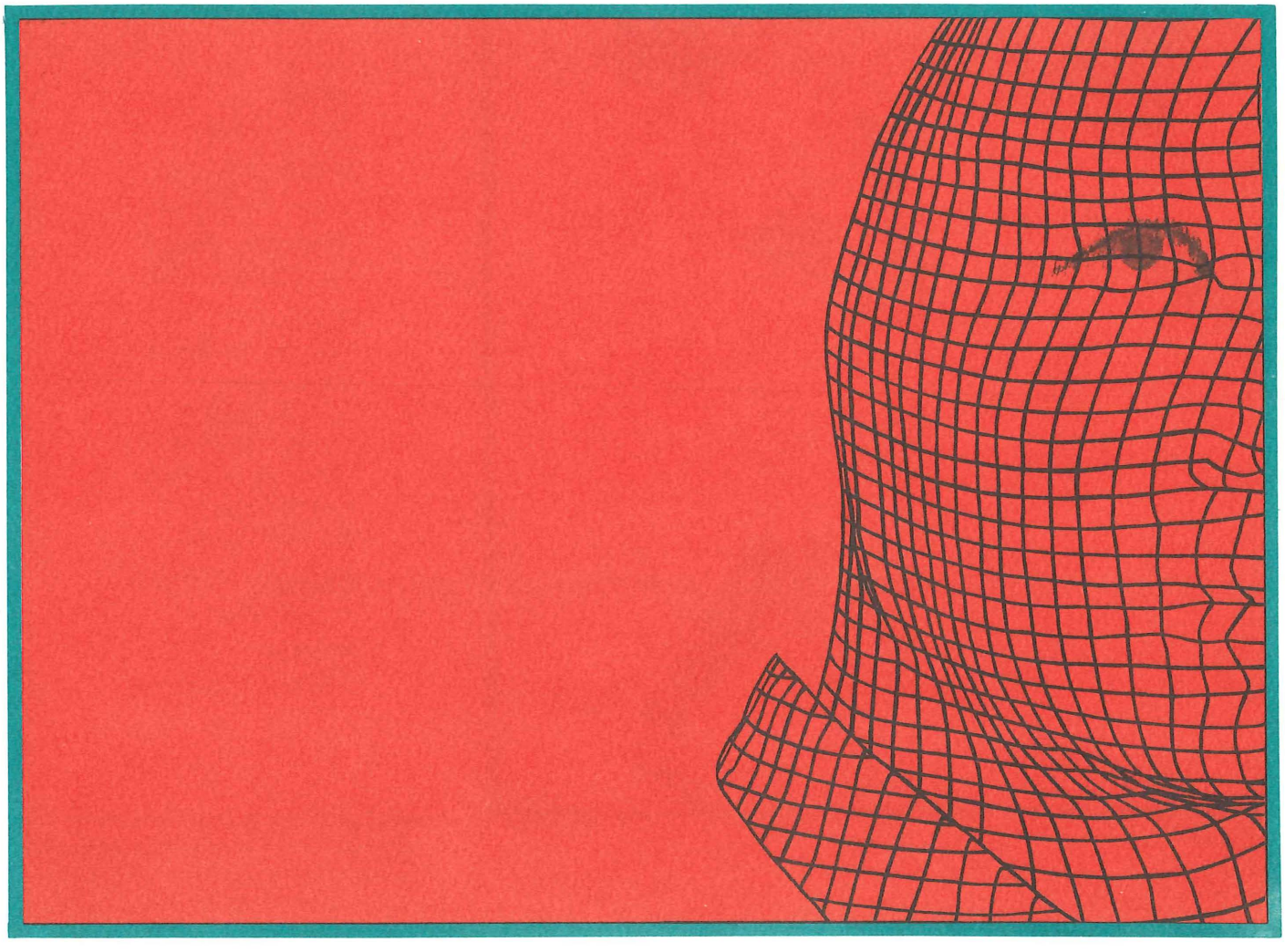
Dialogue

Vol. 17 No. 3 1984



Business Opportunities

Pictures of Italy

Talk about Language

Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow

Dialogue

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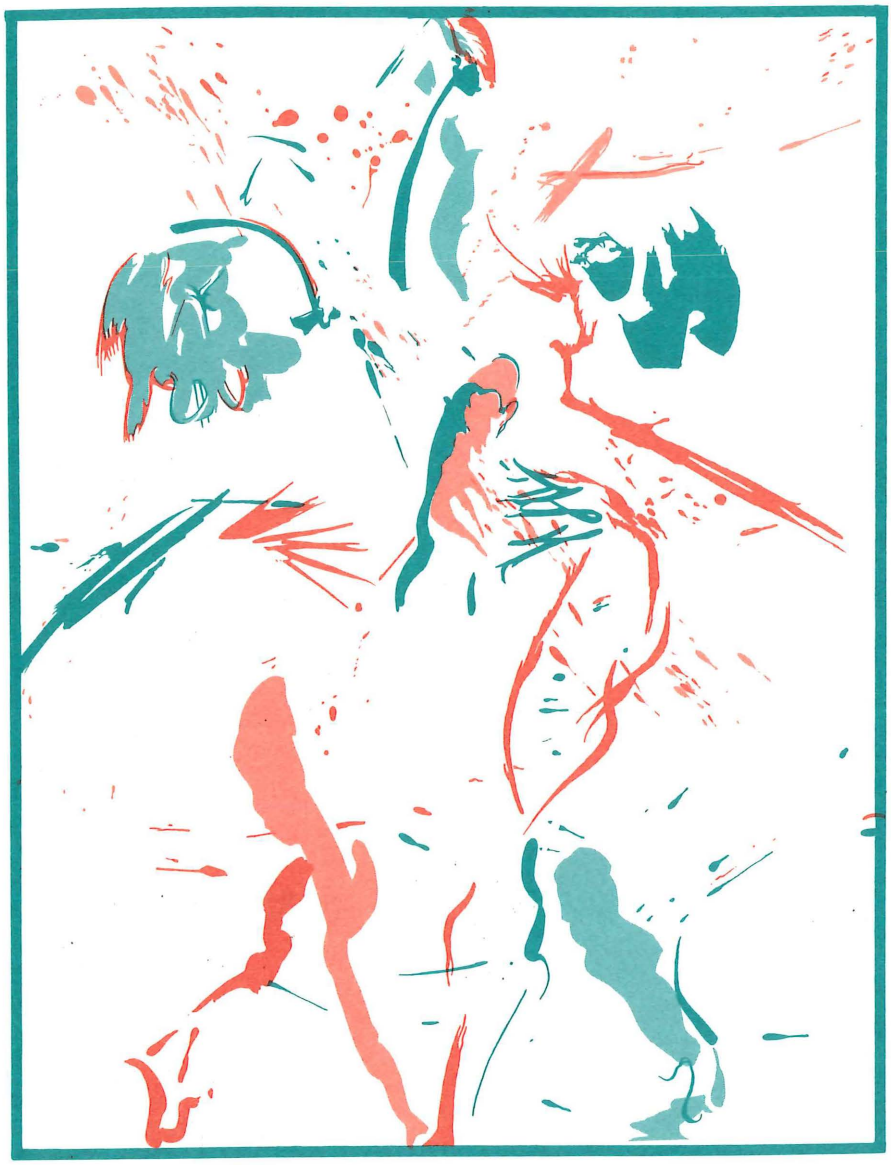

Untitled
Lisa Ramsey

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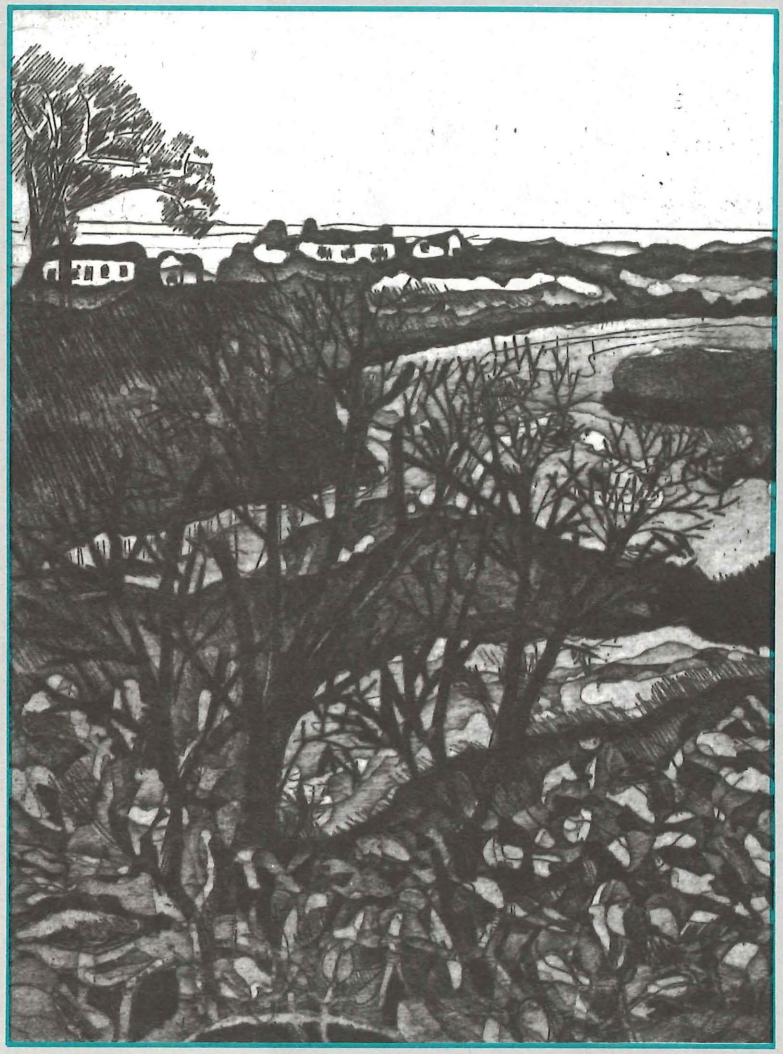
Cover—David P. Schaap

Editorial

If we look closely at our Christmas trees, we see they are decaying. The white snow we imagine and see on Christmas cards is visibly filthy and invisibly polluted. The presents we give are tinted with guilt. We walk in shame because of our inadequate love. We look only to discover that we still hate certain people. And the proclaimed "good will among men" is unrealized. Our Christmas is accompanied by drearily sweet Christmas muzak which thinly disguises our daily terror and nightly despair. Anxiety is heard in the ticking of clocks and the ringing of Salvation Army bells. Winter winds challenge our calm and threaten to reveal universal dislocation. Our rest is haunted by fatigue and tension. Our memories condemn us, and our future opens only to desperation and fear.

Behind our Christmas surfaces is swirling darkness threatening. But there is a still point, one who came. He reveals a world of calm and glorious light. May he be found in your Christmas days.

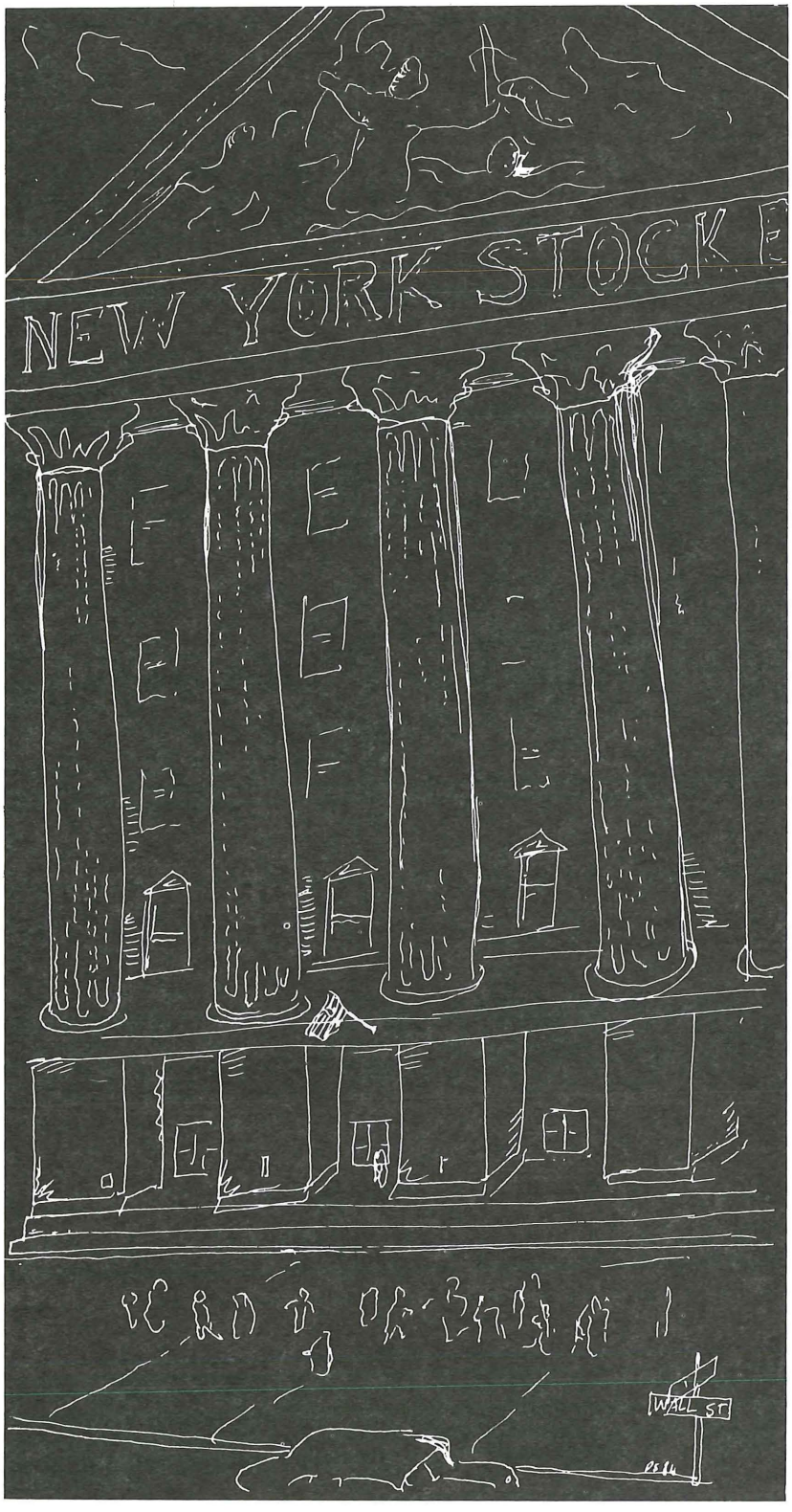


Ring of Kerry

Pam Havinga

What should I major in?
A Partial Answer

Ronald A. Wells



Last summer some research work took me to New York. While doing my work I stayed with an old college friend in the city, who had risen to a position of distinction in the Stock Exchange. He wanted to show me "the street" (as Wall Street is known to insiders), and to introduce his old college pal to his colleagues. So, when my main work was completed, I spent a day in the dynamic bustle of "the street." My friend had set up various tours and conferences with some of the key people in the division of the Stock Exchange over which he presides.

I was thrilled by the sheer dynamism of Wall Street, but, frankly, not interested enough in its operations to follow the minute descriptions with which I was presented. Being more interested in people than institutions, I began engaging various people about themselves, e.g., where they were from, what they had done before coming to Wall Street, what they had studied in college. As to the last question a pattern of diversity began to emerge: this one studied political philosophy, that one history, the next one psychology, the other economics. I asked, after a while, if they knew of anyone who had studied business administration. They quickly asked me if I meant as an undergraduate or as a graduate student. As an undergraduate, I said. None, was the reply.

I hope my colleagues in the Business Department with whom I share the basement of the library will not feel hurt or criticized by what is to follow. Nor should students majoring in business feel attacked. I merely wish point out that my experience on Wall Street was not an isolated example. The message, however, is simple: majoring in business as an undergraduate *does not* necessarily lead to a better job in the business world than majoring in a liberal arts discipline.

Let me say immediately that I am not trying to talk anyone out of majoring in business. I am speaking to the many students who, in reply to the question about choice of major field, say, "I want to get a job when I graduate, and business is where the jobs are. Besides, what can you do with a major in English,

rom Wall Street

sociology, philosophy, psychology, history, or French?" The answer from Wall Street might be surprising.

It may be true that the *initial* placement in a job would be slightly easier for a business major (especially one with a concentration in accountancy). But it would seem that the best jobs, i.e., the most interesting and the highest paying, are still reserved for liberal arts majors. Why is that, apparently, so?

Why liberal arts majors are preferred is because they, at least potentially, bring the skills that the corporate world wants and needs. Those skills are multiple and transferable, and they all turn on the ability to think analytically and to communicate effectively in both writing and speaking. There is no royal road to becoming an analytical communicator, which means that a student should major in the area he/she likes, does well in, and helps him/her realize the fullest potential.

My own father rose to a position of modest prominence in the largest bank in the six New England states. Of the hundreds of people working under him, the promising ones with good analytical and communicative skills would be selected to do a graduate course in business, at the bank's expense, or do a further course if they already had a business or law graduate degree. In next to no cases had people "moving ahead" studied business as undergraduates.

Somehow, somewhere the apparently not-necessarily-valid proposition has been given to students that to get jobs in the business world one needs to study business in college. My own experience, and those of others, seems to indicate that those who want to study other things to which they are drawn should also do so, because, paradoxically, it may land them a better job in the business world.

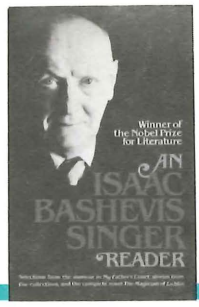
When a graduate applies for a job with a corporation, the implied question always put to that graduate is, "Are you any good?" What "any good" means varies with the situation, but since business is about solving problems for the company in pursuit of its goals, the premium is on the person who has begun to realize his/her fullest potential in terms of abilities to analyze problems, to communicate effectively about them, and to be confident enough about oneself to act appropriately.

One final illustration. A friend in Grand Rapids (a history major, incidentally) owned a manufacturing corporation with divisions in several cities. He asked a new employee, a recent graduate, to fly to Dayton, Ohio, to find out what the problems of production were at a particular plant and to have a report on the president's desk in a few days. The report, the president later said, was analytically confused and badly written. The president himself had to go to Dayton to assess the problems (after he had fired the ineffective employee). In relating the story the president told me to tell students interested in business careers to learn to think and to communicate. I asked him if that meant majoring in logic and English. No, he replied, I don't care what they majored in as long as they "are good."

So, to the truly undecided student who wants a business career, one says: major in whatever discipline you are drawn to and become the most complete person you can be. For such people good jobs always exist. On the other hand, majoring in something you don't really like in order to "get a job" invites the question, "a job doing what?" That question turns the students back to themselves and to their most essential convictions. At a Christian college like Calvin, one hopes that students will look beyond the mere desire for "a job" and look to (the neglected concept of) "the calling" which God has for them.

It is a strange but true convergence of realities that, to the question "what should I major in?" the answers of Wall Street and of the Christian community should be so similar.

Illustration by Dave Shaw



Reviews

Singer, Isaac Bashevis. *An Isaac Bashevis Singer Reader.* New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1982. Paperback, $12.50.

Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978, Polish-born Isaac Bashevis Singer is a master novelist and storyteller. He draws from his background to craft stories that bring to life people involved in life's common struggles. Singer's in-depth knowledge and experience of Orthodox Jewish culture—his father was a rabbi—allow him to delve into the intricacies of the Jewish mind in particular and of the human mind in general.

The *Reader* is a collection of fifteen short stories, four selections from a book of memoirs, and one novel. As Singer writes in the author's note, "the purpose is to give the reader a taste of and a desire for the writer's other works," of which there are many. The works in this collection aptly represent his themes and style of writing.

Singer writes in Yiddish. After his works are translated into English, he collaborates with editors to ensure that the translations retain their original flavor and meaning. His style is at the same time straightforward, concise, and colorful. He does not glob up his prose with wordiness and convoluted sentence structures. Yet he is a master of meticulous description: without going into every detail, he vivifies characters and places by using concrete, fresh images and down-to-earth, even earthy, language. Dr. Fischelson, the hero of "The Spinoza of Market Street," is

> quite bald except for a few wisps of hair remaining at the nape of the neck. His nose was as crooked as a beak and his eyes were large, dark, and fluttering like those of some huge bird. . . . He belched frequently and emitted a foul-smelling gas each time. . . . He found it beneficial to take grated radish after meals and lie on his bed, belly down, with his head hanging over the side.

Singer's unpretentious style, however, does not limit him to trivial topics. Using the banal and the earthy to probe philosophic, moral, and religious questions, he explores the intense struggles of his characters in a world of temptation and earthly passions. Yasha Mazur, the hero of *The Magician of Lublin* (the novel in this collection), is a man who enjoys all the pleasures and passions of life. Meanwhile, "he believes in God. . . . He has worked out his own religion," even though his God is a distant one, uninvolved in Yasha's moral and psychological battles. Yasha is a soul searching for good, yet yielding to evil. Without moralizing, Singer points out the dangers of giving in to passions.

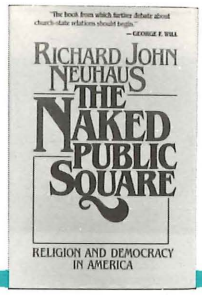
The dangers of evil are evident in the short stories as well. Satan and his imps play a large role in the world of Singer's characters and events. The narrator of "The Unseen," for example, calls himself "I, the evil Spirit" or "I, the Seducer" and has his wicked hand in all that takes place from the first to the last sentence of the story. Without resorting to the morbid, Singer also uses other gothic features to expose the grotesque elements of human nature. In the story "Blood," Risha cannot separate her thirst for watching the slaughter of animals from her passionate desire for the butcher himself. However, Singer's realism deals not merely with the grotesque and violent; he also points out human foibles and failures in a sometimes poignant, sometimes humorous way. In "Short Friday," he describes Shmul-Leibele as "half tailor, half furrier, and a complete pauper." He is a bungler, but he is an "honorable man" as well. Singer breaks down human pretentiousness in the way he probes his characters and allows them to scrutinize themselves.

The selections from the memoir *In My Father's Court* are short but afford much insight into Singer's experiences growing up in the household of a rabbi. Many of his stories originated from people and incidents of his youth. One of the most poignant is "The Wedding," in which a young man comes to the house of Rabbi Singer, asking him for permission to marry a prostitute. "My mother was dumbfounded," he writes. His father decided to allow the marriage, for "it was a deed of piety to rescue a Jewish girl from a sinful life." But his mother could not reconcile herself to the idea:

> Only when the last guest had left the room did my mother return. It was cold outside, but she opened every window to let in fresh air. She threw out whatever remained of the cakes and drinks. For several days thereafter she walked about in a daze.

Through his storytelling, Singer deftly expands his experiences to make vivid the people, their speech, their dress, their habits—a whole way of life. He interweaves the humorous with the serious, the earthy with the dignified to convey the essence of Jewish culture and to penetrate beyond it into universal experience.

Lisa Stegink



Richard John Neuhaus. *The Naked Public Square*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984. Hardcover, $14.45.

Modern thinkers have been prone to present their views in what they consider to be a situation of crisis. Richard John Neuhaus is no exception. The crisis Neuhaus presents in *The Naked Public Square* for our consideration is the degeneration of our public moral fiber, its threat to the future of democracy, and its promise of totalitarianism in America. The loss of our public morality has occurred and is occurring because of a fundamental misunderstanding of the relationship between religion and democracy in this nation. Neuhaus asserts that the voice of religious America must be heard in the public square to ensure a future for the American democratic experiment. Although Neuhaus's viewpoint is flawed at several points, he presents several rich and valuable insights into the problematic enterprise of relating religion and politics.

In Neuhaus's view, the root of the crisis facing America's democratic experiment is a new and radical separation of church and state. A notion that we are a "secular society" has become dominant among our intellectual elite (most notably among our Supreme Court justices) and has resulted in the systematic eradication of religion from American public life—the "denuding of the public square."

Neuhaus argues that this interpretation of the separation of church and state is only two or three decades old. He contends that our founding fathers at the inception of our country assumed the presence of a Judeo-Christian society and counted on its influence to provide the moral framework for the operation of our government. Ironically, many churches have exercised their influence on the public square to help exorcise religious influence from the public square. Neuhaus argues that the expulsion of name-brand religion and its replacement with secular humanism will corrupt our nation's moral framework and render responsible, democratic governing impossible. Without some transcendent authority to which it must be responsible, our democratic process is cheapened: moral claims are reduced to mere "interests" which must be compromised in the least abrasive manner. Further, in the absence of the Judeo-Christian influence, the moral views of a marginal few in our society (i.e., secular humanists) are imposed on the rest of society, an imposition which Neuhaus argues is democratically illegitimate. Finally, this Judeo-Christian "moral vacuum" is a dangerous, inherently transitory state, begging to be filled with a totalitarian party-state which dictates morality, and thus all aspects of our public and private lives—political, educational, familial, and religious.

As Christians, Neuhaus argues, we have a great vested interest in democracy. Democracy, by which he means the American experiment, is the system of government most compatible with Christianity and religious freedom. The primary argument here is that because democracy is open-ended and dynamic, trying to govern pragmatically by compromise, it makes no final or ultimate claims and is most compatible with a Christian eschatological view which looks to God for the final judgment. Viewing world politics in a typically East-versus-West, Communism-versus-Democracy fashion, Neuhaus can point out with confidence the fragility of our democratic American experiment and the "colder and darker world" which the extinction of democracy would usher in.

Though Neuhaus's profound distrust of secular humanism and its notion of "a secular society" is reminiscent of the Moral Majority, he opens the book with a timely and insightful critique of Jerry Falwell and the religious new right in which he distances himself from the Moral Majority. The basis for criticism, however, is unconventional: the Moral Majority is right in making overtly religious public claims; they are wrong in grounding those claims in private revelation, not public opinion. Moral claims made in a democracy must be open to public appraisal, debate, and compromise. But because they are making Judeo-Christian religious claims in the public square, Neuhaus hails the Moral Majority as a possible savior of democracy—despite its professions and actions to the contrary.

As Reformed Christians living in North America, we should deeply affirm elements in Neuhaus's argument: the Christian church ought to take an active role in attempting to transform culture, making moral claims within which the democratic process should operate and working within the democratic process for a more just society; the Christian church ought to be thankful for and work to protect the freedom of religion which we have as a right in this democracy.

But by the same token, we should question some elements in Neuhaus's argument. First, what is this Judeo-Christian heritage? Even if we grant, in an ecumenical spirit, that all professing Christians and Jews in America could settle on a universal Judeo-Christian moral agenda and that all or even most Americans could agree on a common Judeo-Christian heritage, should this heritage's influence be formally religious? Need its influ-

ence be direct? How would the public philosophy grounded in the Judeo-Christian heritage differ from civil religion, if at all?

Second, would moral claims made on the basis of this Judeo-Christian public philosophy be publicly grounded in the way the Moral Majority is not grounding its public moral claims? Here Neuhaus relies, in part, on a moral majority:

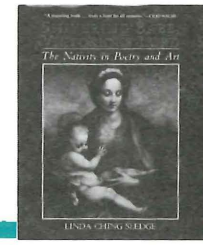
> Despite this much-discussed pluralism, however, over ninety percent of the American people say they believe in God and think the Judeo-Christian tradition is somehow morally normative for personal and public life.

Neuhaus does deal with this apparent inconsistency in his treatment of these two "majorities." He argues that "pluralism is a jealous god": if pluralism is established as dogma, there would be no room for the Judeo-Christian moral framework that authorizes and ensures the rights of the marginal in society. Ironically, in establishing pluralism, pluralism is lost. Despite such assurances that a "sacred canopy" would not be coercive, the other ten percent may still be subject to the tyranny of the majority by the imposition of a Judeo-Christian heritage.

Third, what Judeo-Christian influences on this new public philosophy are valid? Clearly, Neuhaus would discourage radical Judeo-Christian influence in the restoration of our country's moral framework; he spends much of the book defending the American status quo. In chapter four, "Critical Patriotism and the Civil Community," he offers a "carefully nuanced proposition: On balance and considering the alternatives, the influence of the United States is a force for good in the world." Crudely put, the point of such a defense is to say, with qualifications, "love it or leave it." The defense is valid in that it makes a fine practical point—those willing to work within the system are bound to have a greater say in the restoration of the public philosophy. For this and other valid reasons, Neuhaus does not think highly of main-line churches that toe the line for the leftist causes. However, the "happy convergence" of the main-line churches today with leftist causes should not be despised without taking a long, hard look at Neuhaus's "happy convergence" of the great American experiment with Christianity. If radical Christian voices in the public square are shouted down, dismissed as mere self-flagellation or naive idealism, then the American way, capitalism, and nationalism may have triumphed, but a valuable Christian influence on the public square will have been lost.

The Naked Public Square is a thought-provoking attempt to relate religion and democracy. It struggles honestly with difficult issues and provides insights which are and will be valuable in any discussion of church-state relations. Despite its flaws, this book makes a valuable contribution to the development of a Christian role in democracy.

A. Houston Smit



Linda Ching Sledge. *Shivering Babe, Victorious Lord: The Nativity in Poetry and Art.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981. Hardcover, $24.95.

O the magnitude of meekness!
Worth from worth immortal sprung;
O the strength of infant weakness,
If eternal is so young!

The event we celebrate at Christmas is of such mystery that our minds collapse in the explanation of it. Words, whether they form systematic theologies or poetic worlds, cringe in the knowledge of their insufficiency, encouraging their users likewise to bend the knee in simple adoration of the incarnated Christ, the baby Jesus. It is no surprise, then, that the faith of an age is reflected in its poetry concerning that birth. And, if you are willing to discard the vestiges of extreme Thomism that remain in our conception of the relationship of Christian faith and the world, then it follows, too, that the faith of an age is affected, by definition, by the circumstances of that age.

It is this string of causality that Linda Ching Sledge treads in her book on English nativity poetry. In chapters dealing with successive centuries, she outlines the political climate of the time, the shape of the Christian faith, and the Christmas poetry that arose from that faith. That is, at least, her intent. The book is, therefore, terribly titled: the subject of the book is *English* nativity *poetry*. The place of the paintings here is very questionable. Not only are they not referred to in the text, but they do not serve at all the thesis of the inter-relationship of history, faith, and art. In a certain sense, they contradict it. For almost invariably the paintings are continental and of a century other than their corresponding poetry. The captions beneath merely draw a con-

nection between the tone of the painting and the poetry of a particular poet. They say, in effect, "This is what Milton's 'Ode' would look like as a painting." I hope there is more method in this madness than Eerdmans' desire to come out with a glossy Christmas poetry and art anthology.

So long as I am criticizing the outward form of the book, I should add that the poetry should not, in my mind, interrupt the text, since that text, as a "scaled-down version of an earlier unpublished scholarly treatise," needs to progress as a unit, at least chapter by chapter. And the book would be much less deceptively light if the text were printed on more typical paper, the glossy pages being reserved for the paintings.

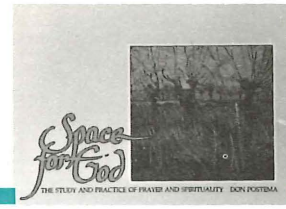
This book is, then, a botched incarnation, unsuccessful in its attempt to merge the traditionally separate forms of scholarly works and collections of poetry or art. But the two parents, rather than form a stillborn child, are in themselves valuable and do not necessarily get in each other's way. I will proceed by commenting on the text; the paintings and the poetry are, by themselves, beautiful and enjoyable.

The main thrust of Linda Sledge's writing is, as I stated earlier, the relationship of history, faith, and nativity poetry. The work is much too short (only eighty-one pages of text) to cover any of the periods in detail, though it is good to see them treated together. The nature of the work, however, is such that it can only affirm what the reader already knows; it could not, for instance, convince me of the historical trends of the eighteenth century, though I was able through past study to concur with the overall view given of the Miltonic period.

The treatment of the eighteenth and nineteenth century nativity poetry was disappointing: the dismissal of the period as lost in rationalism and incapable of dealing with the mystery of God in man smacks of the reductionism that sees our own age as a return to balance and good sense. It seems to me that a more sympathetic view is demanded if we claim to believe "with the church of all times and places."

The book is not, however, one of Christian nativity poetry, but English nativity poetry. Thus, we are asked to consider, for instance, Yeats's response of faithlessness in his Christmas poems, and the final paintings are no longer Madonnas but merely women and children, reminiscences of the form without the articles of faith that accompanied them. Sledge's hope is, however, for a re-Christianizing of the culture that fell victim to scepticism via rationalism. Her concern is not for the enduring church, but for the return of the Artist to the Church. Thus, in her final lines, she writes: "The aesthetes and thinkers of our age look upon the Nativity as a compelling, quintessentially modern theme." I appreciate the implicit goal of furthering the reconciliation between art and faith. In this light the negative judgment on the Christian poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is understandable, for that is a judgment that will win the respect of modern culture. It is, nevertheless, inexcusable: we must be wary of how far we bend over backwards before our spine snaps.

Tom van Milligen



Don Postema. *Space for God.* Grand Rapids: Bible Way, 1983. Paperback, $7.90.

"Lord, teach us to pray!" The cry of the disciples has been echoed by saints throughout the centuries, a never-ending plea for training in spirituality. In *Space for God,* Don Postema provides nine such lessons "for busy people who also want to be deep people." The lessons, however, do not so much teach spirituality as they do develop a spiritual nature within the reader.

The book's ability to enhance the reader's prayer life and spirituality is due largely to the format Postema uses to present the material. Each lesson begins with a short reflection containing Postema's thoughts and personal experiences relating to the chapter's topic. Along with his own Christian Reformed perspective, Postema liberally quotes from other renowned theologians and philosophers such as Ford Lewis Battles, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen, and Lewis Smedes, as well as the Bible and the Heidelberg Catechism. These quotes support and further develop the lesson's theme while they give the book a distinctively Calvinistic emphasis. Postema very successfully unifies the many quotes (more than half of each reflection is footnoted material) with his own perceptions, keeping each chapter surprisingly well-focused.

After presenting concrete material in the reflection, Postema continues to develop the lesson with a section entitled "Windows to Insight." The windows consist of works of art: reproductions of Van Gogh and Rembrandt paintings, poetry, Bible passages, Psalter Hymnal selections, and lengthier excerpts from a wide variety of writings of theologians and

philosophers. While the relationship between some of these pieces and the reflection's theme is very obvious, the ties between most of the windows and the chapter's focus are quite oblique and require contemplation to discern. Of course, this is exactly what Postema intends. The reader is naturally drawn to develop his or her own personal convictions about the chapter content by considering how others have personalized the material. This interdependence between the reflection, the windows, and the reader is certainly Postema's most effective tool in his teaching of spirituality.

Since *Space for God* is part of the Bible Way church school materials published by the Christian Reformed Church, it should not be surprising that each chapter concludes with a set of exercises. But even these the reader will find unique and meaningful. Once again highly personalized, the exercises put into practice the aspect of prayer which has been especially emphasized in the chapter. As Postema himself states, "The exercises may seem strange at first, but you are encouraged to do them anyway. They will help you experience many different forms of prayer so that, by the end of this book, you will be able to choose those that seem most appropriate for you."

And that is the book's ultimate goal—to lead each reader to develop a personal prayer life. Although the format of the book plays a fundamental role in the achievement of this goal, the content gives the how and why of prayer. Beginning with chapter one, "Making Space," Postema encourages the reader to take a break from the busyness of life and spend time with God daily. He acknowledges the discipline necessary to do this, but in the following chapters he gives so many specific examples of how to do it and the results one who prays can expect that it is apparent that a regular prayer life quickly becomes a joyous discipline, not a trial.

By his dedication of three of the nine chapters of the book to gratitude, Postema makes clear what the emphasis of prayer ought to be. Gratitude requires recognition of a gift received, but it also demands a response to the gift. Postema explains gratitude as a spiral, "a spiral in which the giver gets thanked and so becomes the receiver, and the joy of giving and receiving rises higher and higher. The gesture of thanks moves both the giver and the receiver to another level. It expresses a unity; it solidifies a relationship." Such a relationship should develop between God and the Christian. God gives us all we have and are; as our gesture of response we make space for him, thus drawing us continually closer together. This is one reason why gratitude is so fundamental to the Christian's prayer life.

Postema covers other aspects of prayer as well. In the seventh lesson, he discusses "Wrestling with God." Rather than denouncing questioning and being angry at God, Postema affirms these struggles and emotions as an integral part of our human nature. God wants our all, not just our pious and sentimental times, and so we should feel free to wrestle with God. In fact, the biblical people who struggled with God—Job, Jacob, Jeremiah, the psalmists—are the ones who were closest to God. Our willingness to share our questions and frustrations with God and his willingness to struggle with us deepens the relationship of trust between ourselves and God rather than being witness to a lack of faithfulness.

Finally, spirituality must have an impact on how we live. Postema asserts in the eighth lesson that God requires us to be just and compassionate before we offer our sacrifices of prayer. Postema concludes this chapter, one which challenges us to live spiritually and not just engage in a spiritual life, by saying, "Prayer and justice/compassion presuppose each other. We need to do both without ceasing!"

As Postema points out in his first chapter, to learn to pray, you must first want to pray. If you want to pray and do not know how to, or if you wish to develop further your prayer life, *Space for God* is an excellent guide.

Pam Vermeer

Marina Observed

Only let tomorrow be the world's last night.
Let the monarch crack the chrysalis.
The fish the egg.
  Fly over the lake.

The bottom of her mind
Lies cluttered with glass and rocks and fish bones.
The text swims above her eyes.
  Words blurring into connotations into lies.

Dragonfly twitches on your line.
You float on a patch of deepening purple and saffron.
  The wine and the bread and the tears in her eyes.

Eyes wet and sore receive the text and the signs.
Oars creak and waves spatter and
  With insects and crustaceans and rowboats parade.

Legs ache skin chills eyes burn.

The flames cool and flow over the water
To the weeds by the shore where
Fish spawn and butterflies die
And float on the surface until
The wings melt into color.
Thorax and legs drop to the bottom
  Where she records them.

The boat scrapes on the gravel.
You step to shore
And face out over the waves
With your hands in your pockets.
  (Won't you come back tomorrow?
  I wish to sleep tonight.)

—Rob Schreur

Roundtable

What follows is a partial transcript of a discussion on the nature and characteristics of language with Catherine Gallouët-Schutter, William Vande Kopple, Raymond Van Leeuwen, and Clarence Walhout.

Dialogue

Knowing the reservations you all have about your abilities to discuss these matters, let us begin by considering the difficulties of talking about language.

Van Leeuwen

It's a little bit like asking a fish to talk about water.

Gallouët-Schutter

The question we must ask is, what language are we talking about? Are we talking about any system of sign? Or are we limiting ourselves to verbal communication? The difficulty is that we are using language to talk about language. We are using the very tool of our discussion as the object of our discussion.

Van Leeuwen

And yet, that is characteristic of being human. We think about being human, but we ourselves are human. We are self-reflexive. Self-reflexivity is one of the basic things which distinguishes us as human.

Vande Kopple

One of the major difficulties is that language is what Kenneth Burke calls a terministic screen. That is, although we do have remarkable meta-linguistic ability, and can use terms to draw certain portions of external reality to our attention, at the same time, our attention is drawn away from others. That is the sort of thing that always plagues us when we talk about language.

Dialogue

What is the proper metaphor for talking about language? Should we conceive of it as a medium, as a tool, or as the nature and expression of being?

Walhout

Of those three, I would choose the metaphor of a tool. The other two, I think, represent extremes. Language as medium suggests that meanings are ultimately subjective and originate within a person. That language is a medium for articulation and expression suggests that language essentially has meaning because of what we give to it. The other metaphor, language as the nature of being, suggests that language represents the boundary of our ability to think. This metaphor comes out of a Kantian view that we cannot know things in themselves but that we know things only as they are in language. Either of these two extremes is not acceptable to a Christian. The metaphor of language as a tool has been much disparaged in the twentieth century, especially in literary theory. This is in part an effect of the effort to define language as having utilitarian value on one hand and an aesthetic value on the other. But it seems to me that in a Christian context, if you are talking about the ultimate purpose of human life as meaningful and responsible action in God's creation, then language is one of those things which was given to us to use.

Van Leeuwen

We can have an instrumentalist view of language, but language can also act as an artifact, as a poem or a novel. We enter into those things, and they do have an instrumental aspect, but they are also artifact.

Walhout

There is much in twentieth century aesthetics which suggests that the art object is something which is made for its own sake: a poem is not to mean but to be. I don't think that is an acceptable way of thinking about language. That is not to say that art has to be seen in a purely utilitarian way. It is the means

whereby we understand something or imagine something.

Gallouët-Schutter

The question is, what do you mean by mean?

Walhout

I don't think a work of art means by itself, as just an object. An object, including a work of art, means because human agents are doing something with it or to it. You cannot talk about the meaning of a work of art as something self-contained within the object. Art has meaning because it is used for certain ends.

Vande Kopple

To me, the essence of language is not really its capacity for being used as a tool. That would be comparable to saying that the essence of some particular metal is to be used as a hammer. I agree with Kenneth Burke that the essence of language is symbolic action. We can think of it as action of a certain sort, symbolic action.

Walhout

But what do you mean by "Language is action"? People can act, but language itself is not an agent.

Vande Kopple

When people use language, they are acting symbolically. The best approach to understand language is probably to consider it as you would consider other sorts of action. That is, we must consider the questions: who are the agents? how situated is the action? what sort of situation is it occurring in? what sort of values motivate those agents? and what sort of effects does the action have? At the same time, we must not forget that language is symbolic, and, therefore, it is substituting for something else.

Van Leeuwen

But sometimes language is itself, not a substitution. I agree with your instrumentalist tendencies. But for all the truth of what you are saying, sometimes there are poems which simply exist. They have their own being. I do not want to deny their inter-connectedness and their referentiality of various sorts. But, when you say language is a tool, you are losing some of the being-ness of its products. Once they are produced, they have a certain ontic status themselves.

Walhout

Maybe the metaphor of tool is limited. A hammer is what it is because it functions in a certain way. The hammer, once it is made, is an object of the human worker and has an ontic status. But its meaning as a thing created cannot be understood unless it is seen in relation to its purpose and origin.

The difficulty is that we are using language to talk about language. We are using the very tool of our discussion as the object of our discussion.

Van Leeuwen

But tools are made, and language is largely given. It is true that we also make language. But we cannot underestimate the fact that language is embedded in culture and is given to us. And culture is also embedded in language. We cannot study a culture unless we learn its language. In trying to teach my students to understand the Bible, the comparison I use is that reading the Old Testament in English is a little like looking at a Rembrandt on a black-and-white television.

Dialogue

Perhaps we can move from here to consider the relationship between a language and its culture. How closely are they tied? And how much is each culture and language isolated from other cultures and languages?

Gallouët-Schutter

As a language teacher, I experience daily in my students a resistance to the learning of a new language, not a linguistic resistance, but a purely cultural resistance. The students are resisting the language because of the language's cultural connotations. They feel the pull and tug of these cultural aspects of the language and resist it. They feel an invasion of their American or English language privacy.

> We cannot underestimate the fact that language is embedded in culture and is given to us. And culture is also embedded in language.

Vande Kopple

The culture does indeed affect the language. But we really cannot ignore that language does affect culture, too. That language affects culture probably garners too much attention in recent discussion. There are many linguists who spend much of their time showing how various linguistic systems dissect reality in various ways. They speak about the ways in which language can allow people to see certain things and cut them off from seeing other things. I agree that language and culture are closely related, but I would judge that we have probably given too much attention to language affecting culture and not enough to culture affecting language.

Walhout

There are some interesting Biblical texts which may suggest that language is embedded in culture and that it is something which human beings created for their own purposes. Genesis 2:19, where Adam names the animals, is often understood this way: Adam looked at the animals and saw into their natures and gave them a name, so that the names pointed to the animals. In this view, language points us directly to reality. The text also says, God made the animals to pass in front of Adam, to see what he would name them. In other words, it seems that God was giving to Adam the freedom to look at and interpret what he saw and to give it an appropriate name. So human beings experience and interpret the world and develop a language which enables them to understand it and deal with it.

Van Leeuwen

But this language is given to us. We are born into a culture which already has its language. And this is also the case with all other cultures. So we cannot understand Old Testament culture, for instance, without understanding its language. It bears the culture in a way that a translation cannot. If we see one of Wattean's paintings on a black- and-white television, we miss important aspects of the message. On the television, we will not see, for example, the details of Wattean's characteristic statuary which often reveals the deepest meaning of his pictures. That is the sort of problem you have in reading in our own language an ancient text or a text from another culture. We realize its gross message, but we miss some very significant things.

Gallouët-Schutter

The difficulty of understanding a culture though translation is experienced by someone who goes to see a movie in a foreign language which that person does not understand. Maybe this person hears the movie in the original words and reads the subtitles, then sees the movie again, this time with dubbing. These experiences are quite different. The reading of the subtitles soon becomes unconscious, their meaning is absorbed, and the meaning of the language which is not understood penetrates the person through its tones. This experience is far richer than seeing the movie dubbed in English.

Walhout

This raises the question of relativism. If we push that too far, we say that culture and language are so connected that we don't have access to them. And, therefore, we cannot

really understand the language and its culture.

Gallouët-Schutter

That is my experience living as a bilingual person. I always feel that I am slightly outside or slightly next to but never within this culture, because my natural language is not English. There is always a slight differentiation which does not allow complete access. So I think what you say is right, in a sense we can never truly understand someone else's culture and language.

Walhout

I wish to avoid such an extreme relativism. The Eskimos have a large number of words for snow. Some people would say that, therefore, their experience of snow must be different from ours and that we cannot share their experience, because we do not have the language which enables them to have their experience. This seems to me to be an extreme form of relativism. We are not so bound by language that it is impossible to understand and interact across cultures. Language is not just a system which imposes a boundary to our understanding. Language also has an exploratory value. It is a way in which we can invent and explore. Because language is functional, we can use it to develop and change and move toward greater understanding. ■

Human beings interpret the world and develop a language which enables them to understand it and deal with it.

Untitled
Dwight VanTol

Words & Works—

It is often asked of me how I compose poetry and short stories, and often, I think, the interested party is more likely offering a compliment—implying that they enjoy my work—rather than expressing a true curiosity, for invariably the finer details of the ensuing discussion bore them and one of us changes the topic. You may accomplish the same if you wish by turning the page; however, I will try to avoid tedious detail and concentrate on generalities, hopefully making my explanation a little more palatable.

But before I go on, I must take a few words to define what I think poetry is. I believe I can agree with Shelley and Wordsworth that "poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be the expression of the imagination." Hence, great thinkers, from prose artists like Plato and Bacon to versifiers like Milton and Keats, are poets, and a poem is then a product of their imaginative genius. For our purposes, I will mean "poem" to refer to verse and short prose, where I am most experienced; but bear in mind that this is a restrictive classification I use for the sake of this essay.

It is popular for poets (if I may ennoble myself with the title) both to avoid describing the writing process, because it is supposedly mystical, irrational, or beyond elucidation, and to embrace the opportunity to do so in an effort to put to an end the myth that composition is the product of some inexplicable, peculiar genius. In a sense, I think all activities of man are based in nothing more than electrical impulses firing through the brain; a blink, a gentle, upturned lip, a scorn—all these are expressions rooted in some bio-chemical activity of the mind. But of course, we do not understand the mind in all its complexity, so we quite rightly invent phrases and constructs to fill the gap in our language when describing its operation. This can be taken to extremes, however, when discussing the imagination, and a poet like Poe, for all his efforts in describing the rational composition of poetry in "The Philosophy of Composition," is thought to be an indecipherable, deranged genius or interpreted like a Freudian case study. Readers *want* to find in poets what they cannot understand to confirm their beliefs—beliefs with which they approach the work—that there is something beyond their grasp, something inspired and supernal that only the poetic mind can comprehend.

This ridiculousness can be dispelled if we look at how poetry is made. I cannot speak as a natural poet—if such an animal exists—but I can speak as one who *cultivates* his art like a sculptor chips at marble.

The final draft of a poem is always less than the idea that began it. Only once have I retained the original theme in its entirety throughout a piece, and I accomplished nothing but a hack poem—an experiment that taught me to let my pen wander more often than stay it. Yet this aspect of composition is useful only in the first few drafts. Once an idea takes shape, major movements and natural images become apparent, and, in verse, appropriate meter reveals itself, the task—and it is indeed that—is to filter what I have and organize what remains into an appealing whole. Most poets will admit that they have discarded more verses and sentences than they have saved in their better pieces; but most find it difficult to confess that they hated doing it and probably reused those precious lines somewhere else. I've done it myself, although with little success. What results, however, in tedious selection, is a new idea, one more mature, deliberate, developed,and representative of the chosen theme; in short, the work becomes a truer picture of the poet's mind.

How is this process begun and perceived by the writer? That is difficult to say. For want of a better word, "inspiration" provides the ideas for the best (which unfortunately are the fewest) of my pieces. This inspiration is not the hand of God; it is not some euphoric communication with beauty; it is a conditioned response to external stimuli. Let me explain further.

A good poet is a thinker and writer even when there is no audience to read his work. Many keep notebooks filled to capacity with dream sequences, particularly fascinating excerpts from a work that struck their fancy, reactions of other poets and friends, and simple, basic themes. You will find anything imaginable in a poet's notebook, most of it making little sense to anyone but the writer. He also keeps a journal, a place of solace, sometimes the only device for relieving anxiety, wherein he can freely ramble in run-on sentences and unorganized clauses without the fear of criticism of his careless work. If not only a cathartic practice, it teaches the thinker to remember and judiciously choose what is important and what is not. If this becomes habitual, sometimes only a two or three-word phrase, recorded so long ago that it has been all but forgotten, will be recalled without warning at precisely the moment it is needed.

Last year I took a course in Milton—a poet touched by the Muses if ever there was one—and recorded in my notebook a selection from *Comus* that appealed to me. In an un-

-Chas. S. Cairns

related stroke of Fortune, I also came upon the passage in Luke concerning a possessed man who lived among the tombs in the land of the Gadarenes. Months later, after the information had blended with the cauldron of ideas already in my mind, I went back to the notebook and was immediately presented with a four-line stanza relating the two. It was:

On the other side of the Sea
They dwell among the tombs
In the land of the Gadarenes,
Shadows thick and damp, in gloom.

I know not whence it came, or why at that time, or even for what reason I was drawn to my notebook. It simply "appeared" before my mind's eye—doubtless because some stimulus or combination of stimuli had coaxed it into revealing itself.

I have found that the more one practices his art, the more alternatives he can perceive. One familiar with mathematical *theory* will approach a new problem not with formulas but with an intuition as to how it will solve itself. A sculptor and painter are so familiar with their skills that they do not have to consciously decide which chisel or color to use—they simply use it. Similarly with the poet: He does not count ten syllables on his fingers to compose a line in iambic pentameter, decide where he wants to place the subject, verb, or prepositions in a sentence, or even logically contemplate, initially, the words he will use; at the moment of conception these things simply flow from his pen.

Yet this takes practice. You cannot compose iambic verse without thinking about it until you have done it enough to know how it sounds and moves, or write a paragraph with just the proper touch unless you have tried (not necessarily succeeding) many times before. Then will possibilities present themselves. More important are the words chosen by the poet to express himself and the themes chosen to work with. The poetic mind operates with a sense of what is right and fitting if the poet knows how to harness it. My themes are generally macabre, bizarre, melancholy, or violent, forceful and titanic. That is the mindset I choose and the domain I allow myself. It is interesting to witness the images that can be called to consciousness when the poet immerses himself in an idea, and more interesting to let the imagination take the reins and in a frenzy of series of stimulations and recalls virtually construct an idea of its own volition.

If it were possible to catalogue every last fragment of information in the brain, every stimulus continuously affecting our senses, and know the intricacies of the thinking process, the anatomy of a poem could be completely and irrefutably diagrammed. But not even the composer, of course, knows this. If he did, he could polish his work to its highest lustre. But since this is impossible, he must refashion the raw materials of his imagination, according to his taste, into a finished product. This skill again forces images into the brain for consideration, until, after an adequate amount of time (which only the poet can determine), the work is more conformed to the writer's conception of what he wishes to convey.

For example, upon deciding that the stanza previously mentioned was too specific in that it drew attention to an actual location—the land of the Gadarenes—I changed it to read:

On the other side of the Sea
They dwell among the tombs,
In this kingdom by the Sea,
Shadows thick and damp, in gloom.

Not surprisingly, the change was made a few hours after reading Poe's "Annabel Lee," and I had inadvertently borrowed verbatim a line from that poem. Although I chose "kingdom" as an homage to Poe, and because my peculiar interpretation of what "kingdom" was coincided with my purposes in "The Disembodied Spirit," good-natured criticism led me to change the line again to read: "In this *hollow* on the Sea." This selection was dictated entirely by Reason, which said "hollow on" was more poetic than "hollow by," and that the word *hollow* itself suggested the sense of emptiness I was trying to impart and might even bring to the reader's mind a feeling not dissimilar to that which one gets when reading Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." And, happily, Poe is hardly forgotten, for my meter remains unchanged, and any reader familiar with "Annabel Lee" cannot avoid making the connection.

If I am satisfied with what I have, I am then done for the present, and return to the work only after it has had time to mix and meld with anything it might meet in my conscience. Then I begin again—less the poet, more the mason. ■

the solitary walker

Chas. S. Cairns

"Last night was last night," she said with little reservation. "I didn't plan it; it just happened."

He was silent. He had put his arm around her as they walked, and now felt obligated to keep it there, even though the enjoyment had suddenly gone—as surely stolen as it was given.

"Things just aren't that simple," she faltered, seeming not to have the right words. And in any case he wasn't listening too closely.

"There's someone else. And besides, I'll be leaving in the fall. I want to spend the time I have with my friends. I'm sorry if I led you on."

Mary had a little lamb . . .

The streets were still wet from the evening's heavy rain. It was hot, humid, everything hanging on the air as though transfixed by nails—the reflections of headlights off asphalt, the moist smell of plants, the putrid stench of worms, the conversation. All was for a time suspended, static—

"What do you want me to say?"

"You don't have to say anything," she spat. "You scare me"—softly, quietly—she then said.

"Scare you?" He was incredulous; almost angry. He fiddled in his pockets, turning keys over coins. "How?"

"Oh—I don't know. I can't explain."

"Scare you."

She hung her head low, staring at the undulating pavement as they walked along. He removed his arm, but now had no place for it, so took a fresh cigarette from the pack he'd opened a night earlier and rolled it between his fingers.

He accepted her excuses nobly, or so he thought. He smiled curtly, and said goodnight.

He could have loved her, he thought, lighting the cigarette, for a moment staring at the flame; the light obscured the night temporarily, and then everything returned to its usual dingy gray.

He didn't know what about her had attracted him. It was not her countenance;

she was handsome enough, but in a fashion that suggested manliness, for her mouth was full, her jawline straight, and what could have been her most beautiful attribute—her hair—cropped short and thinned behind her neck. Perhaps it was her arms—full, solid, though delicate; or the subtle, smooth, chocolate color of her skin. "Old fool. And a young fool," he mumbled. Chocolate or carab?

Home was at least an hour's walk. He didn't particularly like the idea; it would give his mind too much time to think about his foolishness, and now he'd probably smoke another half pack of cigarettes. He took a draught of an anodine from a green phial he was in the habit of carrying, and licked a layer of the savory stuff from his lips.

Passing the cemetery, he came slowly to a stop. The cigarette dangled from his lips, his shoulders sagged, and his hands he clenched and relaxed rhythmically in his pockets. He used to ride his bicycle through the hilly place when he was a boy. He had even come upon a burial once, and watched a casket lowered into its concrete sarcophagus while mourners in black solemnly observed. "He's in Purgatory," said Steve. "What's that?" He straightened his ballcap. "It's where ya' go when ya' die." "I thought you go to heaven?" "An' if nobody prays for ya' your sides catch on fire, an' ya' burn like that 'til somebody does pray for ya'." He dumbly watched the people move away from the fringed tent—

He loved contemplating the history buried in the older sections. The tombstones were all chipped, cracked, eroded by time; often you could not even read the inscriptions, but that didn't concern him. He cocked an unwary ear to a warm breeze whispering between the trees and graves.

Walking through the open gate—ill at ease, for it was usually padlocked these days— he chose a lonely path he hadn't remembered seeing before. Poplars, elms, and maples hung low over the trail; they still dripped with rain like a forest of drenched sponges, appearing more black than green.

Far along the path, among untrimmed bushes and weed-choked grasses, was a single marker. It was no different from the others but for a barely visible fissure that extended from its peak down into the mossy tufts at the base. There wasn't another stone for a number of yards, only a limestone bench set deep in the ground before that one plot, damp, scarred, stained black with dirt, and covered in moss.

Whose fleece was white as snow . . .

He sat down upon it, lit another cigarette, and stared at the words engraved in the memorial:

MARY ANN
AGE 18
IN THE PLAGUE YEAR

If there had been anything else it was now lost in dust.

"You too," he said, and stamped out the cigarette.

The nights soon came as a blessing, dropping over the countryside like a death

shroud, tacked each corner to the four winds. The setting sun was a relief to his redded eyes as much as to his senses, the moon seeming to calm the anxiety he felt churning in his bowels. Yet, in time, if he was about the house he paced; if he tried to sleep—for even but a minute's rest—a thousand pale inmates of Bedlam picked at his brain with their mad spears.

He began to take regular midnight strolls while smoking a sweet cavendish in his pipe. At dawn he would always return and lie in bed for hours, contemplating dusk, until fatigue would finally overtake him and force upon him the hell of the insane and grotesque.

A hundred times he'd promised himself never to pursue another, and a hundred times the promise he'd broken.

He sat and gazed as quietly as did the graves around him. One would not even know he was there but for the light at the tip of his cigarette and soft conversation that passersby claimed to have often heard.

And everywhere that Mary went . . .

"You look very beautiful tonight," he said simply, slowly, exhaling a soft fog of breath into the cool air with each word. "I like being close to you." He paused.

"You don't have to answer. I know how you feel." He smiled, loosening his tongue, lightly curling his lips, adjusting his position a bit. "I'm happy here—with you. Can you see my smile?"

He emptied the green phial and returned it to the pocket of his weighty, black wool overcoat while scratching a week's worth of whiskers on his upper lip with an index finger, pushing his small, rubbery nose back and forth, snuffing, swallowing.

"They think I'm mad, you know," he said tremulously, hurriedly, motioning with his head to a man and woman walking by outside the iron fence. "I can't blame them, really. A few months ago I'd have thought the same."

He put out his cigarette in the soil at the roots of a potted anemone, mottled and wilted.

"You know, I've got a place between Porlock and Linton. A farmhouse. Very nice, but lonely." He was now sullen, talking with a weighty, tobacco-laden voice. "I know you'd like it if you saw it." He bowed his head.

"Mary Ann . . . you've been good to me when I needed you most. Please, share with me the only thing I have left in the world to offer."

He rose from the bench, straightened his coat and replaced his hat, and walked resolvedly for home.

And carried along on the bitter autumn wind—on the air inhaled into Winter's cavernous lungs—weaving its way between tombs and trees, one might think he could have heard the breathless sobbing of a young girl.■

Illustrations by Steve Crozier

the disembodied spirit

On the other side of the Sea
They dwell among the tombs—
In this hollow on the Sea—
Shadows thick and damp, in gloom.

In mountain homes they hide and cry
In aging bodies pale;
Their midnight trek they make to die
In some lonely grave-strewn vale.

Sitting in protracted death,
Some by new-made graves,
The years of waiting their thoughts obsess
While eyeing the end they crave.

But ne'er enough holes are dug for the dead,
And few fresh homes laid for the shades.
The chosen search and find their bread,
The others cut with stones and blades,
And wail from dawn 'til dusk in the hills,
Grov'ling in the mire of a lightless cave.

Oft they'll rest on some grassy knoll
And converse about their pain;
They'll whimper in rhymes they know so well
And repeat a weary plaint:

Why are we so cursed—
We who death so loved—
Cursed to live alone together
Forever loved by none?

And always there's one,
Apart from the rest,
In loneliness cursed but in solitude blessed,
Peering into a vault,
Pond'ring the cave,
Longing for the peacefulness of the Grave.

—Chas. S. Cairns

Song

What creeping madness
what forgotten caress
makes my mind
churn and wind
around the cricket's
shattered chirps
My body sleeps
in tossing regrets
My ear beats
with pounding blood
upon my pillow
And the cricket
beneath the window
divides the night
into tolerable units of fright
The grey wall's deceit
shapes solstice heat
expects to survive
with soul and moon and sun
into the victory of the one
the unity of pure light
where we will all burn on

—Rob Schreur

Untitled
Dwight VanTol

Kyrie I

When my mother's sister's husband died
my mother wept, but in the basement where,
I guess, her tears would be less audible.

Her sobs were fairly loud. My father looked annoyed,
but whether at her actions or
his inability to comfort is

beyond me. (Maybe those are hen and egg?)
We didn't talk about it then. What words
could make us understand? The earth

had registered complaint and borne it up
to heaven in thistles and hard labour. That
would do until the Eschaton. Until

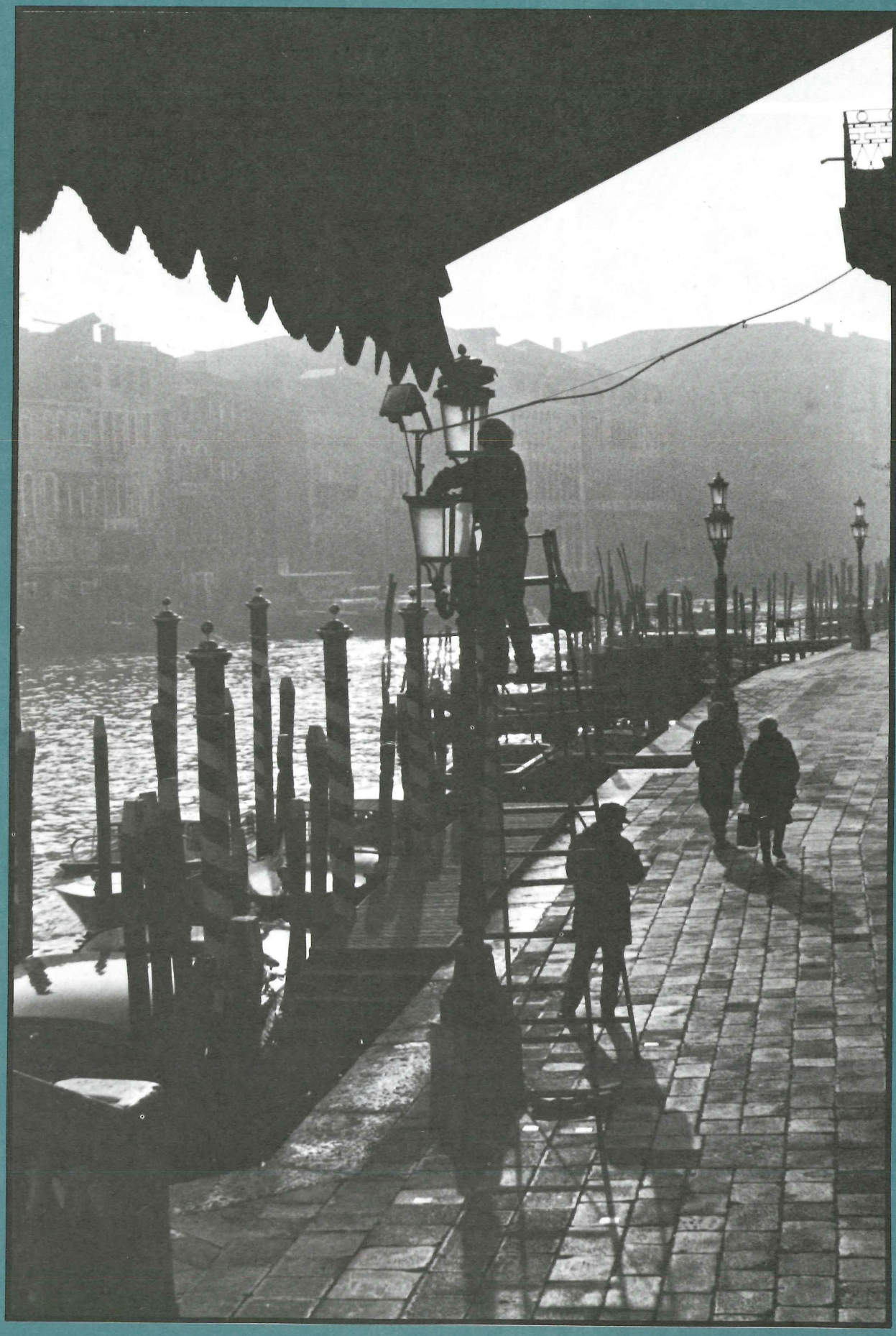
he comes again, remind him of his promise,
Mother, flatter him with supplication
speechless eloquence. Perform your Eu-

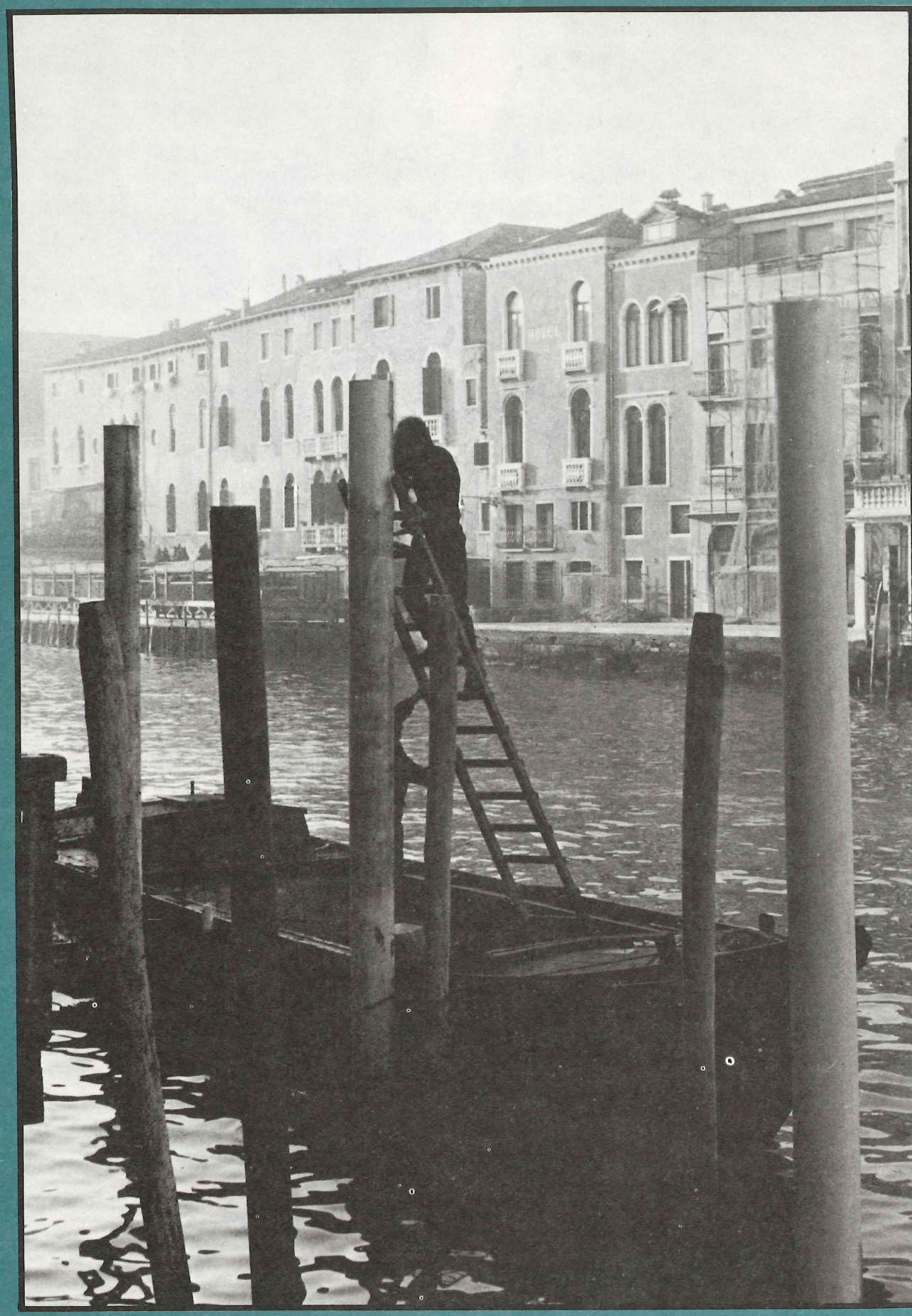
charist, a song beneath the ground. And he'll
invite you up to eat with us, your eyes
bright and your cheeks blooming.

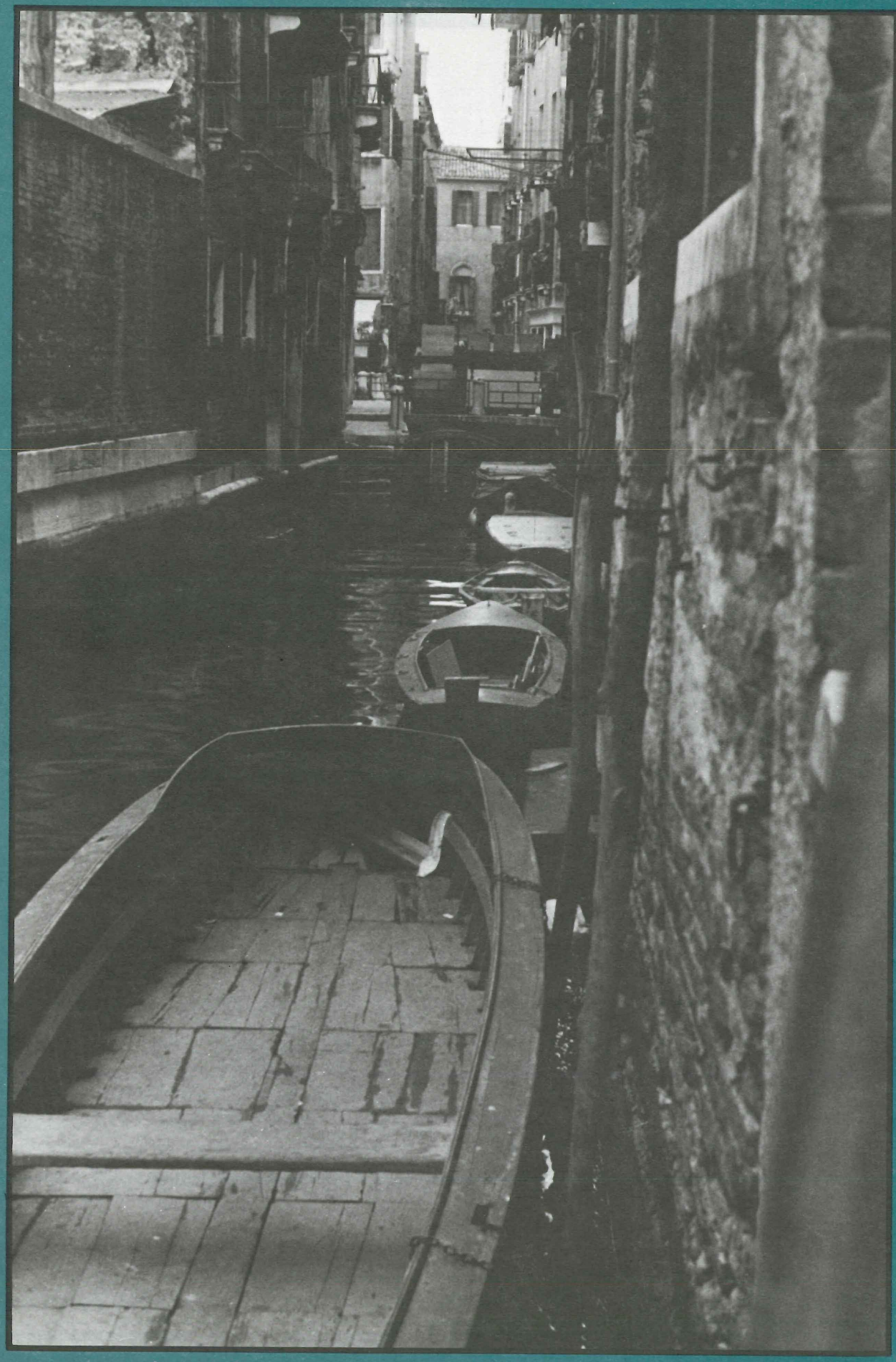
– Tom van Milligen

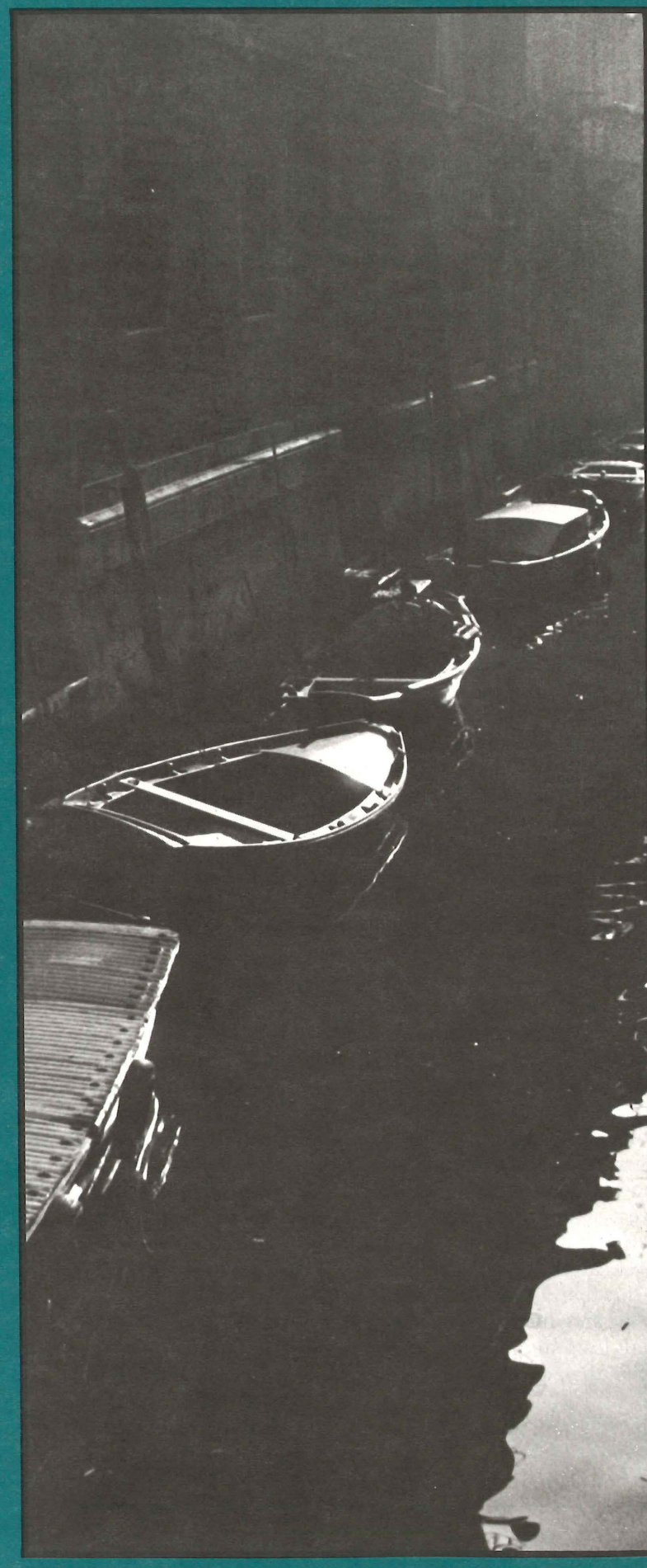
Portfolio - Nadine Haven

Italy









Meditation

There's a star in the East on Christmas morn,
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.
It will lead to the place where the Savior's born,
Rise up, shepherd, and follow.

from a Negro spiritual

It was a bad day on the journey, a cold and dark Friday both outdoors and within the doors of my own skin. Like a leaf in autumn, I shook horribly in the blustering wind, missing class and a Latin quiz, missing friends who were far away and longing for their nearness, missing friends who were near because I had run far away in the fear of falling like that autumn leaf. And farthest away of all was Christmas. Not only did the celebrations and trimmings seem foreign, but also the story of Christmas and all the promises packed in its telling. No births to rejoice over, only deaths to mourn. On that day a year past, my cousin had died of leukemia, and the rain grew colder in the remembering that we saw the rain without him. Another death took place now, a suicide, and the death ate away like a disease the insides of those who loved her and wondered why. The rained-on streets of people's faces, the holocaust caught in eyes too tired for tears, the starving child throwing up food because she had forgotten how to eat—the world in countless ways is dying from a hunger no Christmas feast can fill or satisfy.

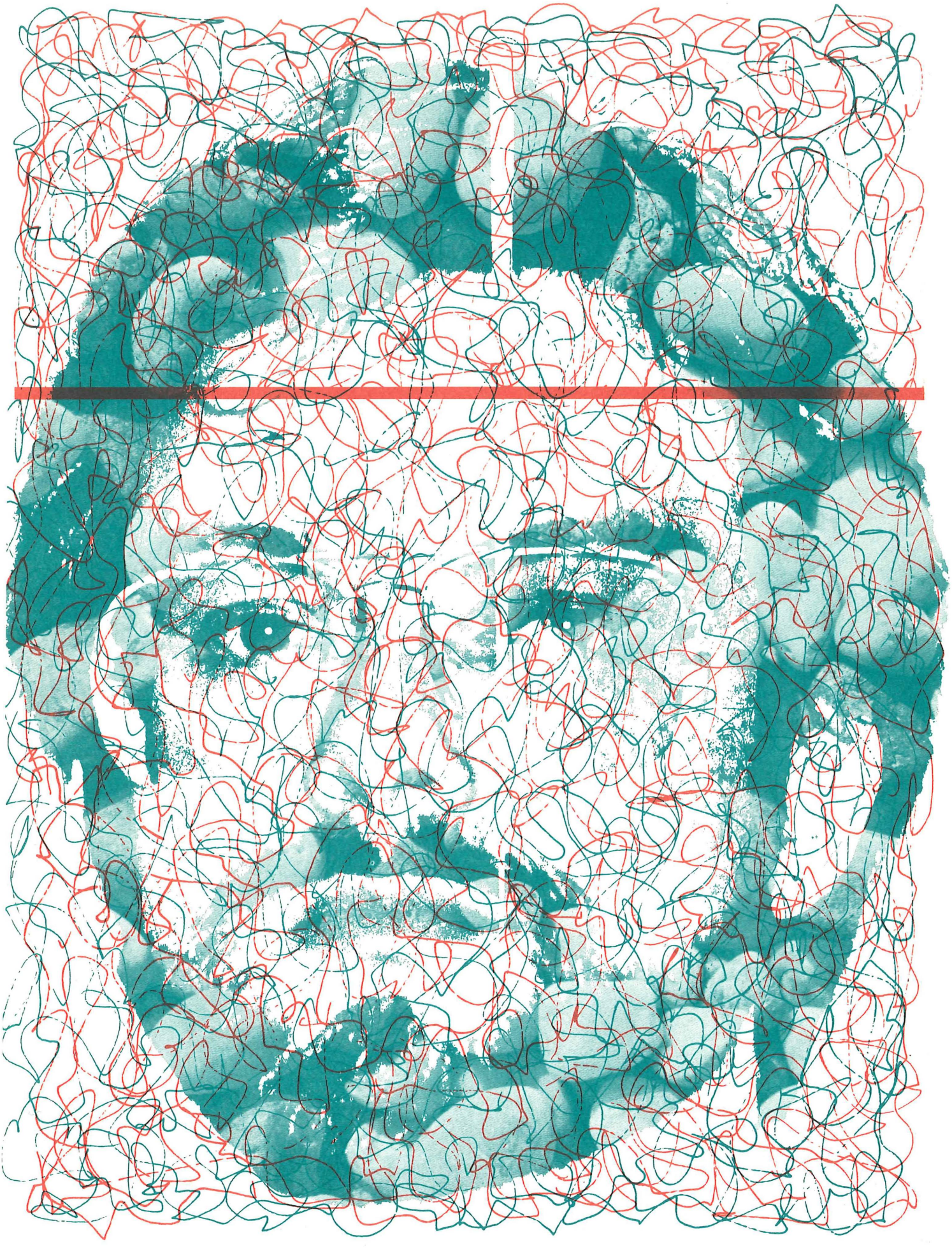
But then I was startled once again as the shepherds had been startled on that long-ago field. From deeper down than darkness and quieter than the night, a star shone light into the blackened sky. A friend who was sick with a hundred-degree temperature reflected light in her tired eyes as she gave me hope in the grasp of her hand. A professor received my babbled words of growing-up like a gift, letting me see crooked if crooked was all I could see. A seminarian, though weary and having much to do, sat with me the afternoon as I shook in the fear, giving his shoulder to lay the pain on. I was hardly the best of company, but he invited me home anyway, and he and his wife fed me and clothed me with a safe place to smoke and sleep and remember, remember the voices calling out, "I'm here, Nat. I'm real." All and all, a Christmas feast.

Suddenly Christmas wasn't really so far away, for maybe that's what Christmas is all about—a love feast packed into one dark day. Perhaps the stuff of this love is that He was born into the darkness we all of us fear so He could meet us there. He was born into a stinking stable with no place to lay His head except a spit-on manger. He came down into the midst of darkness and suffering to be with us in the darkness and to suffer for us, granting us a star to journey by as the wise men journeyed by that ancient and mysterious star.

Though ancient and mysterious like the star, the story isn't just a once-upon-a-time tale, but a story that happens still. Perhaps the star that broke through the cold and dark Friday was something of the star that the shepherds saw: Emmanuel, God with us. And the story happens within us as well, for He is born in anyone who gives Him room. He makes His home in the stench of our souls, our fear the stinking stable, and our sorrow a place to lay His head. Once He is born in us, a miracle is wrought. We are made reflectors of His light, even though we ourselves are in countless ways sick and tired like my friend was sick and tired from the flu. As with stars, the light is not our own but comes from the Son, Joseph's child, who comes to be with us so we can see a star in darkness and be a star in darkness for those who have no light.

When remembered, Friday was a bad day, cold and dark both without and within. Yet this day was also Christmas, and maybe that is hope and blessing enough, maybe that is light enough to shine with on our darkened journeys home to Him. ■

Natalie A. Dykstra



Self-Portrait

Merry Christmas

Natalie A. Dykstra
Ken Effmeyer
Ed Ericson
David P. Schaap
Rob Schreur
Dave Shaw
A. Houston Smit
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