ALEMBIC
Contributions

Mark Casey
Michael Woody
Edward McCrorie
Maureen Nichols
Thomas L. Fallon, O.P.
Drew Maciag
Jane Lunin Perel
Craig Watt
Clyde Lyman
Ana Margarita Cabrera
Kathleen Mele
Patricia Slonina
William B. Godin
Thomas Delaney
April Selley

Common Trust
Even at Night
Killing the Sequence: A Revaluation of Lowell's The Dolphin
Tha Lamb
for The Woman
Prelude to a Suicide Note
the Teacher of Apples
The Neverending Death of Pissmeyer Shawanshaw
Four Legged
Observation: infinity
swan hunter
Saturday on the Pettaquamscutt
Little Compton
finding things
Chesspiece

Photograph
Ana M. Cabrera

Cover
Christopher Donohue
Common Trust

How does the mute say
i wish i were a Lear
just for the joy of raging at the storm
of feeling the rain shred my fists
just to lick the jeweled edge of pain
i want to know.

i came out of my boot riding
the salt leather tongue
deformed unfinished spent before my time
pedantic electrodes ashen in my brain
lobed with abstract chains of doubt
you salved my lidless eyes with the enduring tears of Lao-Tzu
The Way.

Rusted, standing in your warmth
like a bud, like
a pair of handcuffs it took a long
time to unfold and open
my hands pirouetting about your face
looking for sharp edges on the gates of openness
i game you the bullets
but it’s hard to give the gun. Mark Casey

Even at Night

At times when flavor is gone from the gum
Some might press the wad
Under tables at cheap restaurants,
Or drop it on gleaming summer sidewalks
To be pressed to the hot sole
Of a passer-by’s careless shoe.

And when one wears holes in a pair of faithful pants
From the countless falls they have absorbed
To spare our fragile skin,
Aren’t they new dust rags
Or sold for rummage?

Often poets write poems
And store them;
Pick them up later,
Say, “It’s lost,”
And begin again.

But I won’t let you go,
Even at night. Michael Woody
KILLING THE SEQUENCE:
A REVALUATION OF LOWELL'S THE DOLPHIN

Milton killed the opic, they say — implying that no one can ever fill that form to overflowing again as he did in Paradise Lost. In his recent Pulitzer-Price-winning book, The Dolphin, Robert Lowell may have killed the sequence. He has certainly been stabbing and kicking it for several years — especially since the publication of his first Notebook, 1967-1968. Now the beast looks dead.

The sequence is a fairly recent literary form. Yeats’s “lyric clusters” are the first good instances in the twentieth century. Anticipating Yeats in the nineteenth century is Meredith, whose “Modern Love” is a fine sonnet sequence, or Tennyson, in the lyrics of In Memoriam, or Fitzgerald, in that scandalously hedonistic work, The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.

Modern poets have found the sequence a most congenial form, for it implies both an independence for each poem and a rough interdependence, and perhaps a chronological development, for the whole. It does not extract the total involvement of lyric poetry from the reader: some intensity can be saved for the next poem, or the next. On the other hand, the sequence crowds more life and meaning together than the old narrative forms had. Epic, romance, and poetic drama had moved at a slower pace. The sequence therefore enjoys a middle position, as regards pacing and concentration, between the old lyric forms and the old narratives.

Exactly when and why the sequence originated in English poetry is not clear. It might have grown out of the ode — that complex of emotions turning around a nucleus of subject matter and moving through a series of stanzas. As everybody knows (and as Tennyson painfully knew), Keats killed the ode. The next logical, or better, organic step was a cluster of odes — each with its own individuality and all with active membership in the group.

Lowell has been at this sort of thing for a long time. In the 1940s he wrote the majestic, dour, and Melvillean “Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket.” In Life Studies (1959) there are disconnected sequences: poems about parents with a chronological pattern but interrupted by other poems. But the publication of Notebook 1967-1968 shows the poet in dead earnest about the sequence. In this book and in several following, including The Dolphin, one poem after another consists of fourteen lines in rough blank verse — modified sonnets. Lowell seems imprisoned in this form. It is an astonishing phenomenon; and the appearance of the form coincides roughly with Lowell’s attraction to journalism — one recalls his quite serious praise for Norman Mailer as the best journalist in America — a remark which Mailer quotes, with some rancor, in Armies of the Night.

The Dolphin, if it does not culminate these efforts, certainly marks a crux in the history of the sequence form. The book contains 106 poems, 101 in fourteen lines, 2 in five lines, and 3 in fifteen. It tells the story roughly of the poet’s affair with Caroline, a young woman living in England, her pregnancy and the birth of their son, Sheridan; while Elizabeth and Harriet, Lowell’s wife and teenaged daughter, wait and worry back in the U.S. The book also argues the theory of its own practice: that truth in poetry comes not from a lyrical, dramatic, or narrative selectivity, but from the pain and trivia of life, the rando and occasionally flashing facts of everyday.

The book has some pointed successes. New York, which Lowell has always been clever at aphorizing, is “conical foolscap in the sky,” or (in a brilliant theft from Keats) “an irritable reaching after fact and reason!” The skyscrapers suggest something: “As if one had tried to make polar bears / live in Africa — some actually survived.” Lowell also alchemizes a lot of old and base cliches. “One man,” he says, “two women, the common novel
plot;" but the plot is "hexed;" "Melodrama with her stiletto heel" dances about; and "only the show already chosen shows" — a line whose assonance nicely underscores the re-run idea. There is also the sudden intrusion here and there of death, forceful in its suddenness, as when the speaker in "Artist's Model" tells us: "Christians scream worse than atheists on the death-ward."

The most compelling metaphor is the fish. Since Lord Weary's Castle Lowell has been a superb poet of sea-stuff. In The Dolphin a woman-fish symbolizing life and youth tries to such the polyp诗人 up from the depths of his own isolation. "Failure keeps snapping up transcendence!" Of course the threat of being eaten hovers: her "belly lustily lagging three inches lowered." But the poet has to break out of his "hangman's knot of sinking lines," and the dolphin helps. Striking Biblical allusions swim around in the poem called "Flounder." And in "Another Summer" an italicized, imaginative voice scoffs at cynics: "Do not say - I have never known how to talk to dolphins, - When I try they just swim away."

Such moments, however, are rare in this book. In some most dismal parts, and very much as a whole, the book fails: it tries to inflate essentially airless details, to multiply these exorbitantly, to admit the real emptiness of the incidents, and finally to argue, sometimes with a baffling arrogance, that this alone is poetic truth. Whatever that comes down to, and very likely the everyday-ness of Jesus' parables and Wordsworth's encounters have something to do with the answer, Lowell's are Minute Particulars with a vengeance: gritties which are just too nitty.

The philosophical assumption of the book is that we cannot know the truth of our lives. "Conscience" in fact convinces the poet that he is not writing much: for "life never assures which part of ourself is life." All of which is epistemologically defensible. But not very alarming poetically — at least not when the poet chatters (in "July-August") about being in the hospital, reading the news, thinking of the Fourth of July, Bastille Day, and someone's birthday. Or when he discovers after the first blush of romance that his nose is "just a nose" (a rose is a rose?); that his girl is a bright, banally, "as a blond starlet;" and that "it's time to turn your pictures to the wall." In one ontological pronouncement the poet writes: "Nothing living wholly disappoints God" (though one might exclaim, What a way to say it!). Not gods, however, we had better cringe all we can when the poet loves his home for its "tedium and deja-vu" and submits a list of Christmas presents including a redwood bear, lemon-egg shampoo, and home-movie projector.

A seamy side of all this has to do with Elizabeth. Some poems in The Dolphin appear entirely in quotation marks. They are generally spoken by Elizabeth, and they are the most prosaic pieces of all. "In the Mail" is an assortment of random notes, scared feelings, and hapless cliches. "Letter" is information about "the London scene" and about how "gay, etc." Harriet is. In "Foxfur" Elizabeth wants to laugh and "gossip" with Lowell; Harriet is no longer a child, for she thinks that "God is just another great man" — which crowning maturity is followed by the inept juxtaposition: "Will you go with us to The Messiah?"

The point of quoting these passages of course is not to prove that Elizabeth is hopelessly dull. Just the opposite: her remarks were not intended for publication — certainly not now — and certainly not in the affixed guise of poetry. The "author" has done a bitter disservice to this woman; and a disservice as well to any minimal conception of poetry; and he has crowned the insult with a fatuous verisimilitude by failing to change names, even calling her, with a forced affectionateness, "Lizzy."
In fact he goes on to argue the opposite: that gossip is essentially poetic truth. One crux is the poem called "No Telling." It begins: "How much less pretentiously, more maliciously / we talk of a close friend to other friends / than shine stars for his fest-schrift!" Speak for yourself! one might snap back; but of course bombast has always luxuriated at anniversaries and teas; very likely the more official the speech, the more officious. But most adults can recall numerous conversations not given to petty slander, talks in which close friends actually get the plaudits they deserve. Still the poet goes on: "Which is truer — / the uncomfortable full dress of words for print, / or wordless conscious not even no one sees?" A good question, acutely imagined. But why, the question emerges, why build such a wall between print and deep feeling at all? The deepest feelings have in fact appeared often in print. Hasn't it been one function of poetry, for example, to express such depth and breadth from Greek epic to the present? (Lowell is aware of this objection and will take it up in other poems.) He continues: "The best things I can tell you face to face / coarsen my love for you in solitary." This is either sincere and candid or plain bathos: If one genuinely feels the love in private, why sentimentalize the inability to make it public? Or would Lowell take us back to the old "fading coal" business of Shelley? The rest of the poem may be the best, and the worst, answer, containing novel expressions like "long lonesome road" and the silly self-dramatization: "I am still a young man not done running around."

It may seem rash and certainly unfashionable to so take a poet at his word. Poems after all are not preachments; and if on occasion they do preach, imagine the irrelevance of preaching back! But Lowell insists that we take him straight. The book is full of such assertions: "Trifles are luminous, / gossip makes New York and London one." "Should revelation be sealed, / he asks rhetorically, "like private letters, / till all the beneficiaries are dead?"

Confessionalism is Elizabeth Bishop's term for Lowell's strikingly original work in the 1950s; now in the 1970s it is still Confessionalism — running somewhat amuck. If only the poet had failed, repeatedly, to practice this awful preaching! But every airport gets a line, every taxi and brick wall, several nightmares, and a lot of daydreams. Some are intriguing: touched to the quick by a living imagination. Most are gossip.

As such, the book has predominantly trite diction and a kind of chatterbox syntax. If some lines arrest powerfully, many others are throwaway. A central sequence towards the end is "Marriage;" here wine "loosens tongues," "there's morning in my heart," and Caroline is called, absurdly, "nothing less than the best woman in the world." More often one finds several lines running which, if not silly or hackneyed, so nothing at all. In "Green Sore," for example, Caroline and the poet "pack, leave Milgate, in a rush as usual / for the London train, leaving the lights burning — / to fool the burglar?" It goes on like this. As for the book's syntax, Lowell varies a good deal from his contemporaries. Whereas Ammons or Wright will use a period, or a colon, or no punctuation at all, Lowell sprinkles dashes, dozens of commas, semicolons, question marks, quotes, and (probably his trademark the last few years) ellipses. The result is curious. The subject matter shows much discontinuity from one line to the next; coupled with
this syntax, the sentences running on at some length with different kinds of punctuation keeping alive their continuity, all this comes down to the conversational: nervous, often flighty and clever but unfocused chatter. Gossip.

A final correlative of Lowell’s theory and practice needs attention. Attitudes towards literature of the past in The Dolphin appear to be witty and original. At first glance “Mastodons” is an incisive account of Jews dying and prehistoric beasts liquidated; on closer examination the poem is a strong and understated critique of both nature and art in the past. “The price of freedom is displacing facts” — that is, too much of the past is melodrama rushing wildly to its conclusion without covering all the ordinary bases; and formerly “good narrative is cutting down description,” leaving out the nitty-gritty, in order ro reach “the inevitable closing line.” A less imaginative and more transparent first cousin to this poem is “Plotted.” Continuing the effective melodrama analogy begun earlier, Lowell executes his “written plot” in life; then he sees Hamlet “stuck with the Revenge Play / his father wrote him,” declaiming “words his prompted fed him.” Which is of course literally true: Hamlet is a stage work; but what a strangely matter-of-fact way to describe Shakespeare’s drama! As if Hamlet were only play-acting and as if its author had not anticipated such a surmise and crowded the tragedy with all sorts of this-world events, from the player’s boasts to the wisecracks of gravediggers. The faint praise here is puzzling. One might have expected that Lowell, far from depreciating Hamlet as melodrama (whereas his own poems, presumably, tell all), would have found in Shakespeare’s Prince a kindred spirit. Macbeth also takes a few lumps. Its tragic hero can declare, "twere well it were done quickly" — such a “bromide” is fine for him; for us, the poet says, there is only a tottering off that “strewn stage, / knowing tomorrow’s migraine” and remembering the artificial heightening of last night’s “flow of elocution.” Similarly, in “Leaving America for England” (where Lowell uses another, unidentified mouthpiece), W. B. Yeats “was not a gent, / he didn’t tell the truth: and for an hour, / I’ve watched and prayed — who prays exactly an hour?” Lowell submits, finally, “Everything is real until it’s published.” True? We should maybe count bumps on the poet’s head and forget about his work? Obviously this theory with its attendant literary criticisms becomes more absurd the more one scrutinizes it.

Will the sequence, then, survive finally? One hesitates to say it is alive and well: Lowell might come back and stomp it again. Evidently Lowell was trying to fuse literary genres such as the sequence and the journalistic essay but the result instead is confusion: neither the ordinary intensity of the sequence (which can be quite extraordinary, as poets such as Hughes and Heaney have demonstrated); nor the ordinary factuality of journalism. Can the sequence possibly contain such “history,” grubbiness and smart as is found in a Mailer takeoff? Lowell may need to say yes. He may need to disburden himself now more than ever, and more quickly, of the hard facts of his life.

Poetry has done more, and will do more again. Length is not the problem: Crow has proven that. The problem is one of style, and substance too: gossip is not poetry, whether it comes from emperors or Little Orphan Annie. The Dolphin bears witness to one clear limitation of the sequence form. As another poet has said, You cannot know what is enough until you’ve done too much.

The sequence, and of course poetry itself, will outlive all this. As a good poet wrote some thirty years ago: “The Lord survives the rainbow of his will.”

Edward McCrorie
The Lamb

learn to love
your sorrow
whispers the
Lamb.
I am here.
I fill your emptiness.
I am the cool rain
dripping, gushing
from the rooftop
to the mouths
of my children.

Sometimes
they move out
from under the roofs edge.
In my wild rush
to reach their mouths
and draw them back,
I blind them.

I splash hard
in their eyes
til all they can see
is water.
Water.
Til they mix
the bitter taste of their tears
with my water,
and in the heat of my love
their tears are
forgotten,
and they stretch
to reach.
They touch
my rooftop.

Maureen Nichols
for The Woman

(Genesis 3:15)

Delicate radiance,
fragile silence,
breathless stillness,
nostalgic grace
suggesting simplicity
once enfolding men
when the world was new and fresh;

before grossness,
before fracture,
before dislocation,
before dissolution,
before desolation,
before black burdens bowed men's souls,
before . . .
when the world was whole and good;

on the "now" she hovers,
almost indivisible, like itself,
almost eternal, like pure Beauty;
exhaling pliant memories of
painless peace
when men minded the Rest of God.

For the future
portending pity and forgiveness,
promising pardon and renewal,
breath of God, embodied swiftness
rising, falling, up or down or out,
est or west or north or south,
straight or curved,
parallel or intersecting,
right, obtuse, oblique:
all lines of life, like hers,
are time-space measures
from Infinity to Infinity,
willy-nilly, measuring meaning,
drawn to . . . and for . . . and by . . . Divinity.

Thomas L. Fallon, O.P.
Prelude to a Suicide Note

Wednesday dawns
In its lacking
A sickly attempt, almost
Anemic
Pink and pale.

Hung over
And hallowed out,
The girl is hating the ugliness
Before the bed is cold.
The walls are damp
The windows empty.
She tugs at the coffee
To get what she can.

The sky she sees
Is a malnourished cow
Sick over the railing
Of the slaughter house ramp.
The ground
Is stale water
Unflushed over night.
The air is gone
(Or at least too thin to breathe).

The colors are muted.
No, stained.
Stained the color of smoke.

The sun creeps higher
With the absurdity of a dying baby.
Heat begins to vent from
The unflushed water
In puss scented waves it lifts
Upward, into the cow's belly.

Being dizzy on such a day
Is all the more reason to scrape
The crud off the razor blades
Or pound a clump of pills
Hard on the table
To get what you can.
the Teacher of Apples

1
Seiji Osawa of the black shining hair
Conductor of Symphonies walks into my dream.
He is wearing a white robe and smiling like a sunflower.
On his head rests a red skull cap. “I’m Mr. Osawa,” he offers.
“I’m a teacher of apples.” “Oh”, I say, facetiously. “You mean your students are apples?” “No — I teach all there is to know about apples!!!!!!! “And we break into laughter.

Later, in the blaze of sunset, sitting at the kitchen table, I hear myself say, “Families of apples are crying out for their geneologies.” That is what music is.

2
A man slaps a man. Apples bob in the wind. A man shoots a man. Oh Winesap, it is autumn.

3
The skin tells it all; the tough earth at its determined best, covering over the sweet juice, the dark humming seeds. Someday where there is no starvation no steel treachery, we will sit under these trees and be taught all the legends of apples; the pilgrim roots, the anointed boughs. The diaspora of apples and the shocking histories of intermarriage. It will take forever to interpret the testimonials of worms. By then we will turn into apples, the cider that keeps drinking itself. Oh Seiji, I’m ready.

Jane Lunin Perel
The Neverending Death of Pissmeyer Shaw An Shaw

Back, back and farther back still when the ant
Was a noble and Kingly creature of industry,
Of a greater and wealthier station than today,
There was a king of kings, the most noble
Of all the grand council.

Once an iridescent ebony warrior whose strength was
Rarely surpassed. Now ruled in wisdom with Kingly bearing.
He courted the gentry and would work in the fields
Carring great hulks of carrion to the cities. His judgment
Of law was mixed, mercy when duly deserved and the quick axe
When needed, his legend spread far and wide.

The streets now lined, mile after mile with crowds of
Solemn mourners. It was the king’s final journey.
The years had not taken the determination and the pride
From his brow. His ebony armor now white and silver
Shrouded by the long purple robe. He moved only to nod at
A friend, or smile weakly to his aids, or twinkle his eye
To the small ant children. They carried him now to his grave.
For it is a long journey and he will die along the way.

On and on the bier with feather weight of the Prince of Princes.
To the Forests of Amber they went, to Sylvan Star the long
Selected tomb for the greatest ruler of them all
Pissmeyer The Nimble. Borne by his six brothers who
Threatened violence to win the honor of the final task
To lay his soul to rest.
And finally to his upright throne. To be entombed, in
A cradle of warm amber. There to sit looking out over all
The mountains and vales, stately seated forevermore.

Craig Watt
"Tell us a story," Little Akhlos said.
"Yeah," his sister Akacia chimed in, "a story."
The two little ones jumped up and down at the look of consent their mother, Telia, gave, indicating that she would soon comply.
"A long time ago . . . her language was not ours, nor were the names as ours, but if you listened closely you would recognize that it was, at one time, ours. It was a language that had journeyed far among the stars, and in its travels, became mellow and wise, so that when it returned, it had the quality of a fine instrument.

". . . in the time of our forefathers' forefathers, there were three kinds of animals on the Earth. Two were four legged and called 'Dog' and 'Cat' by the ones who were two legged and who called themselves 'Man.'"

"Both Dog and Cat had long been associated with Man. Dog had lain at Man's feet since before Man learned to tool metal. Cat had kept vermin from overrunning Man's houses, barns, and settlements. However, Dog and Cat quarrelled constantly.

"One day Man said, 'Dog and Cat quarrel incessantly, each wishing to claim the place next to Man as his own. Since they cannot settle peacefully amongst themselves, Man must choose between them. For to cherish one is to hate and despise the other, to say 'yes' to one is to say 'no' to the other, to adopt the first is to leave the other to his own devices and fate.

"'Dog is friendly. Cat is aloof. Dog has the quality of refined and dedicated obedience and service. Cat is independant and self-willed. The affection of Dog is complete and won with a kind word and a good heart. The love of Cat is won by much work and must be won many fold over.

"'Dog has represented the qualities men seek and admire — service, humility, and self-sacrifice. Cat has always represented those that man despises — egotistical and proud — selfishness. We must choose wisely . . .'

Just then, Taran, Telia's husband, pushed his head into the children's room and said, "Telia, tomorrow, don't forget the food for the dog. I just gave him the rest of what we have."

"Speak softly," Telia whispered. "The children are almost sleeping, already Akacia has ceased purring."

Clyde Lyman
Observation: infinity.

Night,
envelope of black air
over trees, houses, men in slickers
yellow on the docks.
Lights cut;
tankers glide, like Nessie,
their steady chop-chop fading slowly.
The chill bites through my coat;
mist settles on fishermen’s beards.

Tugboat,
row of precise dots
amber through the murky nightwater.
Motor roars.
Blades knife the bay
again,
again,
the tiny boat races past me.
Waves respond-
in giant cresting swells
they beat the coastline;
gods without mercy.
It is the lowly tug
which guides big ships into port;
the toughest seas cannot uproot its anchor.
It is good, this freedom
to flee in the night

to a proper place in time.
I wrap my coat around me
and go home, to my cup of coffee.

Ana Margarita Cabrera
swan hunter

i am in the cove wearing
a dress of iridescent seaweed
i have no hair  i hide easily
among the rocks watching you

you’ve come hunting for swans  you believe
you’ve kept your journey a secret
that no one has seen the reflection of the elephant
grass in your eyes
but i’ve seen

you stand at the mouth of this salty inlet
the swans white
and glistening excite you
you want to wash yourself with their grace
you want to choke them out of their wicked
torrent at your approach
you aim your gun to kill
and i must stop you

coming out from the stoney shadows
to sunlight i appear
your own secret  bald
brown and slimy yet brilliant
and wet like swan feathers
all this you’ve kept inside

swan hunter you are full of the blood
beat purer than love
your secret is the throbbing
tides  back
and forth  circular
motion
the workings of our inards
you cannot stop me as i take
away your weapon

Kathleen Mele
Saturday on the Pettaquamscutt

for RLP

Such a day means the wind
in our faces as we head
down the channel marked
with plastic bottles
tied to twisted sticks.

The youngest fishermen are believing
they can catch more then old shoes
while I believe this hour
will never close.

Who would tell
that sea bird arching forward
running
on the water flapping
those long wings slowly
now fast, faster —
at last
to be borne
in the air
a steady flight.

Farther down,
the swans have no desire,
move silently near the greeness of narrow
finger islands
and do not notice our passing.

We are guided by paint splashes on rocks,
and bushes on the bank
that do not shift
with each new spring
like the sand beneath us.

You know this route and destination
with such knowledge
I guessed only the sun could have
as it memorizes
our day-long shadows.

The ride home seems briefer
than the one that brought us
out to the ocean;
I know that at your house
every corner is filled
with wild daisies,
making it easier somehow
to love the land.

Then too, I bring home treasures —
mussel shells,
sea-smoothed stones,
sand in the cuffs
on my pants.

Patricia Slonina

Little Compton
(May 74)

It is so peaceful here
I can’t stand it
I want to do nothing
Taking sunlight into my body
Thawing the cold silences of winter
I want to tell you
how this air
makes me breathe
and I’m feeling a little light-headed
I’ve been silent for so long
A few more days in the sun
Will not matter.

William B. Godin
finding things

(some questions posed by
the archaeologist)

I- whose flames were extinguished here?

warm man, brown faced in the firelight
with aged joints swollen like rosary beads
connected by sunken bone-chain
(conforming movement into painful mystery)
upraises his arms to heaven and speaks
the immutable language of the silent, mangled word —

is resurrected by other gods from four
thousand years in the future.

II- what do you make of this bone?

the once solid pod containing the
seed of the fruit of the Ages has mostly
decayed into skull-dust in which we plant
our family tree.

III- why did they make arrows?

the festival of ground stone; penetration
to the heart of some frail beast.

at night: faint hopes to skewer the moon.

Thomas Delaney
Chesspiece

Everything was grey about the woman who stood in the doorway: her plain calf-length dress scented with “Evening in Paris” and dust, her brushed kid gloves, her opaque stockings and laced shoes with thick half-inch heels that reminded him of those his late grandmother wore. But it was especially the pillbox hat with the thick shoulder-length veil that gave her an air of austerity, as if she were in mourning.

“Good evening. Come in,” he said. She nodded briefly and strode through the room in measured steps, then sat in front of the card table where the ebony and ivory armies already faced each other across the chessboard.

“Smells like snow,” he remarked casually. “Maybe we’ll have a white Christmas after all.” Again she inclined her head politely as she turned to view the board intently.

“One white pawn’s gone,” he said. “I’ve had that set almost twenty-five years. Never lost a piece. But I couldn’t find that pawn tonight.”

The woman replied by moving one of her pawns, apparently intending to spot the missing one. There was no movement in her body except the sweeping motion of her right arm as it brought her grey hand to hover over the chesspieces. Her fingers were like pincers, he thought, gently catching the statuettes between them and gliding them into their new places. So this was the woman whom the guys jokingly referred to as the “Masked Marvel.”

“It’s all a gimmick,” some said. “She’s just tryna get free publicity.”

“She doesn’t need a gimmick,” the man argued. “She’s an excellent chess player.”

“Maybe she’s gonna write a book. You know, like that guy that got painted black? Only she’ll call hers Crazy Like Me.” And except for himself, they all laughed, the remark made funny by the late hour and the beer and the boredom of watching the stale cigarette smoke settle into a sooty residue on the dimly lit barroom tables.

“Maybe she’s a guy. Must be a guy. You ever seen a woman chess champion?”

But as he watched her place his pieces in an ebony row along the edge of the table, he perceived that her intense communion with the statuettes before her was not a publicity game. As she executed subsequent moves, his gaze drifted from the board to the faded red roses on the wallpaper above her. The edges of a calendar which he had tacked over a grease spot on the wallpaper were curling to enclose the picture of The Last Supper reproduced on it, and the stain was showing once again.

“I should have cleaned this mess before she came,” he thought, surveying the books piled on the floor which formed a terminal for translucent cobweb bridges joining the floor and ceiling. Other books lay askew with old beer cans on a bookcase composed of two weather-pitted boards separated by cinderblocks. A layer of undisturbed dust over the makeshift shelves transformed them into a mural of muted color against a side wall. The uniformly thick volumes of an encyclopedia, whose gilded edges had turned dull brown, leaned over from the top of a typewriter on a cluttered desk. Then he seemed to remember a soft yet firm voice calling him out of his reverie with the word, “Check.”

“Would you like a cup of coffee?” he asked abruptly, his voice sounding brazenly loud against the thick silence. The veil glided slowly from left to right.
“You won’t mind if I have a cup, then?” Again, the woman’s head pivoted from side to side.

His chair squealed against the linoleum as he stood up. “Sorry,” he whispered. He walked slowly to the kitchen, but turned quickly when he thought he felt the woman’s eyes upon him. But the veil was turned only toward the chesspieces.

After watching the blue gas flame caress the charred bottom of the teakettle for a few minutes, he tiptoed back to the kitchen door. The woman’s arms hung loosely by her sides. Her back was pressed straight against the torn caned chair back, and her shoes rested neatly under the table as if she had not stepped into them and they were apart from her. What had she been like as a child, he wondered. Did she have platinum banana curls and dancing, innocent eyes? Did teachers smile at the delicate cards she made for them from construction paper and tinfoil letters? Did she sing “Silent Night” with a babylke lisp in class plays? He imagined himself back in a miniature second grade world, listening to the song of a perfect little girl who did not even have light scars on her knees like other children because she had never fallen from a swing or bicycle.

He rinsed the mug he had used for breakfast and poured some water over a teaspoon of instant coffee. When he reentered the living room, the woman raised her head, as if in a silent query.

“Sure you don’t want any?” he asked, nodding toward the cup in his hand. “It’s that decaffeinated brand that doesn’t keep you awake.” The woman only turned again toward the ivory statuettes which now shone opulently in the dim light from the naked bulb in the ceiling fixture. He slipped into his chair and moved out of check. Again, the woman steadily lifted another piece into place to threaten his king. With each move it became harder to defend himself against the triad of pieces that he was sure would ultimately win the game for her, and the intent study of the grey veil upon him as he concentrated on the pieces that fluctuated in brightness in the dull light.

“Do you mind if I get a little fresh air?” he asked, abruptly grabbing a jacket from a rocking chair. He closed the door behind him. The moon shone like a luminated host on four inches of new snow that completely covered the surrounding grounds except for the three or four inches on his front step under the overhand of the roof. He put his foot into the snow, then shook the fluffy powder from his shoe into the slushy imprint he had made.

“It’s something out there,” he said, coming inside. “It’s clear now. The stars look like scattered ice chips against the black sky. It’s ironic when you think that they’re gigantic balls of fire.” The grey veil nodded, but sympathetically.

He dropped wearily into his seat, and carelessly moved his besieged king. He then seemed to recall “Checkmate” drifting thinly across the board to him, into him. The woman unfolded from her chair and stood beside him for a few seconds before he sprang up, jarring the table and sending the statuettes to the floor in a clattering echo.

“This means I’m not the best anymore,” he said simply. The woman stepped to the side of the table, nodding and preparing to leave.

“But before you go, I must see your face.”

He took the veil gently, feeling its softness separating his thumb and index finger. The woman did not resist, but let him lift the veil. The man prepared to look into her eyes, but he saw only a solid, rounded surface of white, the face of the missing pawn.

April Selley
WE REGRET THAT THERE ARE SEVERAL ERRORS APPEARING IN THIS ISSUE.
WE WISH TO APOLOGIZE TO THOSE AUTHORS WHOSE WORK IS AFFECTED.
THE EDITORS