

Henri Coulette (1927-1988)

SO BEGAN THE HAPPIEST YEARS OF MY LIFE

The mass was still in Latin; the Dodgers still in Brooklyn. It was late August, 1952. A man named Paul Engle had offered me a fellowship, and I had said yes, and caught a big plane to Cedar Rapids, and a little plane to Iowa City, where I spent a long afternoon listening to a lone fly on a windowsill in the Jefferson Hotel. It was the shank end of evening now, and I was hungry. Two of the three restaurants were closed for vacation, and the third closed at nine, two minutes before I tried the door. I bought a pack of Chesterfields in Racine's, where an old bald man chalked the day's scores on a blackboard. I drifted down to the river, where a tired moon floated, and bombed that moon with my cigarette. The night confirmed the afternoon: I was a long way from California. I was homesick, heartsick, and too broke to go home. So began the happiest years of my life.

It was customary for most of the poets who passed through the Workshop in the Fifties to talk about it afterwards as though they had done time on Devil's Island. I can only imagine that all their days in Iowa City were like my first day. I know that my mood changed with the coming to town of the other students. How fine they all seemed, the young men and women in their cashmere and shetland, in their arms the tall chimneys of new books. They brought September with them. Shops and theatres and even restaurants opened their doors. The university, like a camel laden for some great journey, lurched to its feet and got started.

The Collected Poems of Henri Coulette was edited by Donald Justice and Robert Mezey and published by the University of Arkansas Press in 1990. This volume brought together Coulette's first two books, *The War of the Secret Agents and Other Poems* (1966) and *The Family Goldschmitt* (1971) along with a completed manuscript for a third, *And Come to Closure*, as well as some uncollected poems. Several of his later poems had appeared first in this magazine.

But these images are no more than anyone might remember of a dozen different college towns in the Midwest of the Fifties. What made my happiness were the people and books I came to know. I can't name them all, without sounding like the dazed recipient of an Oscar. Still, I do name these few: Catullus and Horace, Dr. Johnson and Proust, Dante, Donne, and Baudelaire. They are still on my shelves, but those shelves could become rubble in a California earthquake, and it wouldn't matter. These writers walk around in my memory in the company of the men who introduced them to me: Gerald Else, John McGalliard, Charles Woods, and John Berryman.

Paul Engle brought me to Iowa City on the strength of a handful of poems he—and I think he alone—saw any strength or touch of talent in. The other young poets in the Workshop became my teachers—not that I let them know that. In some cases, it was a matter of avoiding the mistakes of others. But mostly it was trying to write up to the level of my fellows. How high that level could be can be seen in the pages of two remarkable first books, *The Summer Anniversaries* by Don Justice and *Heart's Needle* by Dee Snodgrass. We were lucky, those of us in the Workshop of those days, for our world was an Aristotelian world—there was a there out there—and it included the idea of a tradition, master to journeyman to apprentice.

The university, then, did what universities are supposed to do. It made the idea of itself manifest: *there were these men and women, and they read these books, and they talked about them, and they wrote these poems, and they read them to each other.*

If I could climb into a time machine and chance upon my earlier self sitting, say, with a nickel glass of beer at Kenney's, if I could, I'd buttonhole that young man and say, "Enjoy it, dammit. Never again will you be surrounded by so many marvelous people. You and your friends will soon be scattered to the four corners. You will go home and grow up and be lonely." When I think about it, I'm not sure there wasn't an old gray-haired bore who said something like that. I should have bought him a beer. "Irene! Draw one for the Ancient Mariner."