

At the Fair II

1. From the beginning, the challenge that interested me most was the choices we made, for what's the point of a magazine if it does not publish good stuff and how do you find that except by reading a lot, unsolicited offerings for the most part, writing by writers with little or no publishing record though the writer may make claims in a cover letter and usually does, to which we pay as little attention as possible—not that we mind the letter, for it is a courtesy to acknowledge this odd human relationship of writer to reader and back—but we generally find whatever claims made beside the point once we pick up the work itself, which we set down later, far more often than not, uncertain for want of a controlling theory of value to which we have committed ourselves beforehand and that we try to avoid in hopes of being fair-minded readers which, if it means anything at all, may mean readers at a fair and minded, that is supplied of something like a mind, by that fact.

2. There are many reasons for a literary review, but only one really counts, especially from a public university; everything else is peripheral to our saying “Yes” to writers we do not know, writers who don't emerge from our own circle, who may have sent their work from anywhere and who have found favor so far only where they were assented to by friends, which is a fine way to start, so natural seeming that it is hard to imagine another, but to submit that same work to strangers and hear them say, “Hey, you are coming through to us”—that is why we are here.

3. Amidst the forty-five shelves in our office, and the long running top of one set of them, some holding incoming manuscripts, some recent issues of the thirty or so magazines with whom we exchange, one range storing the whole history of *The Iowa Review*, a couple more for reference works, *The Chicago Manual of Style* (in an outdated edition), dictionaries, encyclopedias, atlases and other compendia of information and lore, a bible or two, and a range given to review copies, catalogues, and folio publications like *The Threepenny* and

American Poetry Reviews, all this interspersed by a four-drawer file cabinet and the desks of three graduate assistants, each with its computer, and with another computer, our main one, on a table along the south wall, where an old typing table blocked a door that therefore didn't open, a table that held an IBM Selectric that I used to wheel out for envelopes before I found it easier to just sit down and address those by hand, and a coat rack behind which, propped in one corner, a fishing pole stood that belonged to my very first graduate assistant, whom I barely met but was reminded of just last week by a contributor who mentioned his name in a letter: his pole stayed in that corner for over twenty years until one Sunday I tossed it in the dumpster—

—Amidst all this in one twelve-by-twenty-foot room with a conference table in its center, one window in its southeast corner looking out over a parking lot and railroad tracks beyond which stands the library, and six or eight chairs we're always shoving aside or stumbling over, and several house plants with broad, green leaves on long, drooping stems that Lynne has added and waters, you can find—"David's Shelf"—one shelf for letters and manuscripts that I won't leave to others no matter how veteran but take it upon myself to answer, work that has come, usually, from former contributors to whom I feel some relation, though most I have never met, or that may come from a naïf, a school kid, or farm wife, or prisoner, or a university colleague who doesn't read contemporary writing but thinks he may have written some of it, or perhaps a writer from a distant culture, someone unschooled in *SASES* and who has no idea about our magazine and what it attempts and for some reason I hope to answer rather than dump—

—all these items wait on that shelf for my attention, which I always intend, every day I intend to answer more as I prove the bottleneck of our provident order, a neck I narrow further by taking time for comments like these, forming another shelf, you could say, for some purpose that, like most everything else, is far from clear.

4. Of course "To Autumn" is a marvelous poem, generations of teachers have told us so and thousands of hours of class time have gone to inventing reasons why; but what of "To February" by Susan

Wilberforce whose name I've contrived though she no doubt exists and may even be a poet, and if I've anticipated a poem of hers, she should send it to us but with a SASE since I have often wondered what we would have done with a small packet from Emily D. had she sent half a dozen poems in the conventional manner before her name was known beyond Amherst.

5. A few days after her homecoming from six restorative weeks in North Dakota and after several days of an infection strong enough to require one long evening at the ER, with something given intravenously and antibiotics, we went out to our favorite bistro for pot roast, though it wasn't called pot roast but "wine-braised beef," and a bottle of Argentine red, and as we lingered, talking more and more closely, Rebecca teared up at the thought of spring and its cruel "mixing" of "memory and desire," as we had seen ourselves that afternoon noting first signs of bloodroot and bluebells, which had waited for her and so arrived a month late this year as my collected calendars reveal, and I thought of how often, more often every year, I've noticed that every poet's theme seems to be just that, how they keep on saying it, all of them, and how I've wanted to invert the cliché and imagine, as Robert Francis put it, becoming "sprightlier" instead; but the old theme is not to resist and forces itself upon us like the desire we spoke of all the way home, that of the bluebells that spread and insist, even between the patio stones, pushing up their tough, bunched leaves, still bloody from below and rising again, as purple as they are green, into the season when they ring for us.

6. I find myself reading and setting some work aside for maybe I'll find more in it a second time, then setting it aside again, still unwilling to reject it, when what I should learn is that hesitation means "No," although there have been a few times, not many but notable, when a second or fourth reading brought out something persuasive that I'd not noticed before, which helps me remember that an instant decision suggests I knew ahead of time what I was looking for when I would prefer to believe that I wait to be surprised.

7. Unlike most of my colleagues, I have never been in want of a topic, have never had to lay out an area of research, but have, for

over three decades, always known what counted for work, a discipline I'd never expected, my Zen of Reception, going to the office far more days than not, checking the mail, sorting and filing some of it, answering a few inquiries that could be answered quickly, reading manuscripts, writing notes, sending an acceptance letter every once in a while, looking ahead in our Running Table of Contents and juggling as needed to make the pages come out, returning manuscripts, a few with comments, or, as the rhythm of production calls for it, share in the proofreading and lay out the order of an issue, dividing the writing by genres and then each genre into several smaller groups, rotating and placing those groups to point up pleasing juxtapositions, then trimming the self-advertisements of our Contributors' Notes before finding an order on the back cover for the names of our writers with attention to sound, rhythm, and available rhymes—the found poem of names by which we end issues—and reading the whole all over again as the last reader before sending it to press, calling or e-mailing writers when I stumble over a problem we had allowed ourselves not to find crucial until that last moment, then checking the bluelines, the color match for the cover, and later thumbing the uncut pages before one day receiving a box with twenty-four copies of a new issue by which time we are into producing our next with two or three more lined up and waiting in our files, perhaps with a hole or two in each for which I return to my special shelf, often finding notes from Lynne on the envelopes since she will have read some already.

8. A squirrel just chewed off a small branch and carried it high up the pine beside my window, and now he's back for another, which he, or maybe she, grabs by the butt end, where she chewed it off, then, using her forepaws, shifts it in her mouth, centering the branch for better balance or to keep it free from snagging on another limb or twig as she scrambles up the trunk to her nest-under-construction and now comes for a third branch in the time it's taken me to type this much, no a fourth since he dropped the first one I saw him chew off; amazing the things I know nothing about that are right in front of me, and have always been, squirrels, perhaps two of them running relays up a pine trunk with twiggy branches in their mouths, deft little makers that they are.

9. It was my old (but younger than I now) professor, Fredson Bowers, who advised, “Don’t be afraid to get a firm grasp on the obvious.”

10. Or there is the way of being tribal and asserting over and over the primacy of your tribe while maneuvering to amass more audience for it, and even though I’m sure that appears our way to some, it has never been the way I’ve favored.

11. The indigo buntings affirm their commitment to our yard and I go to Ace Hardware for seed to affirm my end of the bargain, and Oriole too has returned though I have yet to see him high in the cottonwood just leafing out but I recognize his song, not the series of round piping tones that I first learned but single notes as if testing and studying to sing, until a Cooper’s hawk crosses the yard to the maple beside the patio, where he perches, watching me on our deck, while eyeing the birdbath, then me again and stepping closer and more into the open before he floats down to the bath’s rim and walks all around it, looking for the best spot to drink, and looking over his shoulder constantly—who could his predator be, in daytime when the owl sleeps?—until he dips his head, sips twice, and flies to the fence on the north side of our yard, then across the ravine and away while Oriole, way up high in that cottonwood, keeps quiet.

12. “By the time you are grown and aging you need to have a tale; your life should have been a life that permits a tale; why should anyone care about you later if you have no tale to tell?” asked the Haida sage on public TV many years ago, whose question returns to me now as I come to the end of my time with this magazine, having been with it nearly half my life and over three quarters of my university career.

13. It has permitted this, that as I was penning these notes we moved out of the office I have described and into a suite of three rooms with twice the total floor space we had enjoyed, and when I turned my old key in to the English office, having finally ditched too that old Selectric typing table, Erin said, “My, you must have had this for a long time,” and I could smile and think, Well, yes, all

this, more or less since you were a toddler, and that, somehow, has underscored my teaching all these years, of Chaucer, Montaigne, the essay tradition, and lyric poetry.

14. Every issue is an essay and I dream of someday getting one entirely right.

—DH

Note: "At the Fair (I)" appeared in The Chariton Review, Fall 2008. One paragraph has been repeated here, for which we thank its editor, Jim Barnes.