

At the Fair III

15. Tim McGinnis grew up in north central Illinois, flatter land than Iowa, to become a writer in New York from where he sent us a three-page story, "The Trail," about a distracted Kafka on a hike at Boy Scout Camp, and as it had in fact been a while since we'd run anything on Kafka's scouting days, as his two and a half line cover letter reminded us, we placed it first in an issue over twenty years ago to learn, a couple of years later, that McGinnis, not yet forty, had died of a brain tumor; the news came when his family approached us to sponsor an award in his name, for he had been especially pleased by our acceptance of his work, over the transom as the saying goes, what we have been here for most when we are at our best; and so the prize has continued, with interruptions, and some shading of emphasis, since holding out for comic sketches, which had been our intent, threatened to make it a very occasional prize as almost all such writing wilts under a second glance.

16. Jim Barnes, whom we named recently as co-winner of last year's McGinnis Award, wrote of "the thrill of the big littles," a category in which he included us; "there is nothing," he said, "quite like publishing in a big little magazine" and knowing your work has been chosen from a few thousand competing possibilities, knowing, that is, that you have held the disinterested attention of peers and may pirouette briefly on the stage they have set; the sense of community in that and its loose knit association of sympathies keep writers writing and their work flowing to us so that I have spent much of the last three decades feeling guilty toward those for whom I failed to muster quite enough sympathy, much less found room to wedge into our pages.

17. A mature white pine stands outside my study window, so close that branches reach our eaves, and I've hung a small feeder filled with sunflower seed about fifteen feet away and right in view as the small birds come and I relish the titmice, the rarest of the regulars, who fly in one at a time, take a seed and bring it to a smaller branch,

little more than a twig, but nearer my window and framed by it as if to present themselves, “Here I am, Titmouse, hammering away at your seed,” though maybe he doesn’t say “Titmouse” but like the Fox, who are the Meskwaki, favors his own name, perhaps the ‘wheet’ or ‘peet’ or ‘keet’ that I hear them pipe, stating their name, or calling mine, or their mate, or perhaps for more seed—“seet, seet, seet,”—the repetitions vary from one to five, which I count as I count on their return to our feeder.

18. Impressive the inundation as my desk becomes a loaded shelf, a magazine in that sense, and my book bag another, where manuscripts lurk in manila envelopes, and how of a late afternoon the custodian and I are often alone in these halls since he comes to work around five to find me a bit benumbed at my desk, for I must reject almost everything on it, with a note whenever I find the words since so many submissions have sat for so long it would be impolite to return them as if I had not noticed; the Zen of that as Tom and I pass the time of day and the universe hums around us, radiating down our hall, through my window, and I make small progress although on occasional afternoons, with a sudden run, I tick seven or ten off my list of remorse.

19. My guilt can be tempered by bewilderment at the writer’s lack of it for sending such ordinary fare, obvious of feeling, bare in rendering, with no surprise, evidence mostly of the author’s apparent belief that every page he has written deserves a place in some unsuspecting magazine, and that I should oblige.

20. Hard to measure the influence of the farm and of seasons, hoping the crop would come in and there would be a harvest, with the constant renovation of fields by plowing, disking, and cultivating—that last a practice now ancient in an era of herbicides—and loving how one could slice pigweed off between rows of corn, turn the weeds under, turn over fresh earth, loving our old, early summer idiom of “laying the crops by” once they had a head start on the weeds, and so accept the year’s cycle which we could have labeled Volume One, Volume Two, on and on as their records went up on a shelf, not to mention teaching Chaucer, who knew how new corn

came out of old fields and how the oxen stood awake when he saw that he had, again, a large field to plow.

21. Or, as he wrote, “to ere,” which, by the way, is a homonym for a place in which to “wander by the way,” as he said of another of his taletellers.

22. Faithful proofreading is our version of cultivation, an old-fashioned sign of our care for your work, for the pride we take in the wonder of it, but now and then sweet mistakes have their moment, such as the line that I wished least to correct: “loose bottoms on her blouse were seldom preludes to seduction”—couldn’t we just not notice, we could not but did notice, and made the correction, only to wonder, later, whether our typesetter had introduced the goof, hoping to get it past us, his joke on us; or later still—it took years—whether the writer had intended it so, had hoped to have it both ways, those loose bottoms dangling delectably before the reader, like a word crossed out but left in the text, and if ever asked, he could blame us; and I wonder if I’m yet to the bottom of it.

23. Once when Ashbery visited I tucked an *SASE* into the book from which he had read and it stayed on his desk for almost two years, until one day it bobbed up to prompt him as I had hoped: “Let those who have never denatured another’s remark / swim in wit now....”—“More Hocketing,” you can look it up.

24. Serendipity, my Goddess, breaks through occasionally to remind me of Montaigne (paraphrasing Plato), “All things are produced by nature, by chance, or by art, the greatest and most beautiful by one of the first two,” or that, as Guy Davenport put it, “Imagination is the art of finding things.”

25. When he was Director of the Writers’ Workshop, Jack Leggett called *The New Yorker* “a family magazine” and we gather ours too, surprisingly far flung, with distant cousins returning every now and then to our inn and fireside, as glad to pass an evening with us as we are to welcome them home.

26. The rejection slip I inherited was written by Marvin Bell, and its key phrasing announced that “we could not use” the work in question and expressed our “regret that the volume of submissions precludes a more personal reply,” words that made me cringe since “we could not use” obscured our agency of choice and suggested an inability resulting from something like Higher Law; so after a time I wrote my own note that admitted we read manuscripts in the company of others until we found a few favorites, and that the rejected had made an important although “hidden contribution” to our magazine, which only summoned the retort that “hidden contributions” were the least of a writer’s ambitions, thank you very much; then later during a summer of semi-despair, I wrote a cheeky note that acknowledged finding a few plums both sweet and cold in our mailbox which, alas, were not yours, which summoned worse, though a few reported having laughed; all of which did not stop me from printing Marvin’s note on a T-shirt, attracted by the thought of ‘precluding the personal’ enhancing the shape of a bosom most shapely, a shirt I wore once in the Yucatan, and as I passed a couple of sunbathers on my way to the beach, one said to his friend, “I’ve got poems there right now,” for which I did not pause, though a few years later, I decided Marvin was right: a Higher Law is in force for if I would be true to my idea of our magazine, I could make use of most work submitted to it about as readily as I could make water run uphill.

27. Over the summer I’ve noticed that Titmouse comes more and more rarely, and I thought they had moved on, or had fallen prey to neighbor cats, but then once in a while, after an interval of weeks, I would see a pair again though their appearances thinned through August to virtually never, and my progressive rationing of the seed, meant to discourage sparrow squadrons and squirrels, can’t be the whole answer since Nuthatch, Chickadee, and House Finch still show; so I have decided that Titmouse needs me less, being more resourceful than others, though I still keep watch, loving his quick movement, dark eyes, jaunty cap, and bright style so that they have become my Emblem of Choice, the rarest at the feeder though still in the neighborhood, as I discovered again when I heard “Peet, peet, peet, peet” just a while ago and noticed a family of four browsing the high limbs of a hackberry.

28. Recent reviews in *TLS* and elsewhere of books about Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn awaken a memory of a Q&A with Joseph Brodsky after a reading in 1978, the auditorium packed, many of us standing in the aisles, and Brodsky's being baited a little about his countryman who was beginning to appear more a crank than a prophet, possibly an embarrassing fundamentalist, and so the question, "What's your opinion of Solzhenitsyn and the legend that has been built around him," and Brodsky's long pause, wondering, I imagined, just how far he wanted to get into that before his delicate reply, in his angular, high-pitched voice, with its squeak of chalk on blackboard, "Well, let's put it this way, I'm awfully proud that I'm writing in the same language as he does."

29. The late Jim Simmerman was the only submitter from whom I welcomed multi-page cover letters, full of play and a few pointers about reading his poems, a rhyme to look for, "the only one for 'orange'" in one case, though that proved a stretch; once he sent a several-page poem in quatrains, "The Gravedigger," in the midst of which comes a scene of sister-brother fellatio; can I include this, I asked myself and then thought, why not, anyone who makes it this far will be in sympathy, and then, few will even see it, let it be a test—a woman in Davenport had once written "you are denounced," objecting to sex in "Home," a Jayne Anne Phillips story that remains vital in *Black Tickets*—so we put in Jim's poem, to dead silence, until a letter came from Boston, handwritten, ballpoint pen on yellow legal paper, commending us on our daring treatment of a delicate and neglected subject and hoping the writer could count on more of that nature, to which I said nothing; what could I say, how could I promise, so it went in a file of curiosities and we went on only to receive a second letter a couple of weeks later, this time from Buffalo, handwritten again though not clearly by the same person yet making the same request and suggesting that our touching on the forbidden was balm to her wounded life, and I added that to the file, wondering about the new minority we had unearthed, the odd chance that we were looked to by it, and wondering if the letters might be a joke, but afraid also of hurting a writer's feelings by presuming as much; and so things stood until the following summer when I visited my (now) ex-sister-in-law, who kept goats outside Philadelphia and made cheese for nearby restaurants, and as I stood

in her milking shed watching her work, she asked, "Have you got any strange mail recently"; and the jig was up.

30. Except she was the one subscriber who I could be sure had read the poem.

31. One spring a college girl coming home from Northwestern wrote to ask whether we might have summer work, which we did not, although if she wished to hang out we could find her a desk, which appealed it seems because she worked faithfully all summer and the image that remains is of her back turned to me and her attention fixed on manuscripts, although, once or twice, she babysat for my children, children now grown and parents themselves; then summer ended and our helper returned to college, and that was that until four or five years later I noticed a manuscript submitted by Leslie Pietrzyk, a story with nary a hint in its brief cover letter of any prior acquaintance; "Now that is class," I thought as I read and returned her story without any acknowledgement either, while wondering whether this had happened before, and how often, and why I had not noticed; but another story came in only a few months, and this time, responding especially to its closing scene, in a southwestern country bar, something of tequila and lime and its eye-watering jolt, and of her teller's thinking as she found a man's hand on her blue-jeaned thigh, "So this is how to grow up," which gave us the title for Leslie's story—two novels and many more stories have come to life since.

32. Late last summer, after the floods, after exile from our offices yet getting our August issue out on time from temporary quarters in an upper hallway of another building, I thought, "let's do a River Issue" and so stumbled again upon a chief joy of this work, our ability to initiate an idea on our own, not needing anyone's approval; the idea is foundation, the rest construction, mentioning it to others, paying attention where it resonates, prodding likely sources, inviting writers for their special knowledge or experience, some of whom would not have thought of themselves as contributors, finding the chance here and there to extend the thought as metaphor, letting art that was not intended as a depiction of river be seen as such, even a long sound poem be offered as an "articulation of river," joining

in the enthusiasm awakened among contributors, letting that lead to the photographic archives of the State Historical Society in one instance, to panel sessions of a conference in another, then seeing our staff rise to the challenges of integrating unusual art, wrestling unwieldy material into shape, more of it than in a normal issue, and to work steadily under the pressure of time as another summer careens toward August until the issue is in our hands, and we are immersed in the next challenge.

33. It took me years to imagine the reason for these circles and layers of devotion, not just to our magazine but to others like it, by unknown writers who keep writing, by well known writers who send too, by the faithful band, over twenty of them by now, who said “Yes” right away when I asked whether they would serve as a final judge for our annual Iowa Review Awards, and especially the staff, some paid a pittance with RA stipends, others wholly volunteer who come to meetings, read new work, argue for selections, proofread and proofread again, and of course me too, sticking with it; where does the love come from for I must call it that, and I think I know: it is the obverse of and complementary to the stance required of a writer; it is the play of community in balance with an intensely selfish need to work alone; it is the belief, deep down, so subterranean as to be almost subliminal (and more than a touch subversive) that what matters is the writing, not the writer.

34. It can be a relief to surrender to that.

—DH

Note: “At the Fair (I)” appeared in The Chariton Review, Fall 2008. “At the Fair II” appeared in our Spring 2009 issue.