

The Thaw

I

I first saw my wife nearly four years ago. At the time, I was working for a stationery supply company and was crossing the Ompanoosic River headed toward Sharps Crossing to make a delivery. It was a brilliant day in early spring, and she stood nude on the riverbank. For me, our courtship began the moment she dove into the roily, brown water below the bridge. Her white body was tossed by the turbulence as she was swept downstream stroking out strong with the current. Bobbing, twisting with the waves, she rode the flood a good distance downstream before tucking quickly and disappearing underwater. A moment later I saw her, all white and shivering, climb out on the opposite bank.

All along the riverbank the thaw had set in. Snowfields were receding on the south face of the gentle, rolling hills. New buds on the young beeches and maples gave the brown riverbank and surrounding landscape a light green hue, like a mist drifting above the swollen river as it meandered in the fertile bottomland.

The girl walked up the opposite bank only to plunge in once more. This time she swam directly across the current for her towel and clothes. When she had dried and dressed she climbed the steep bank to the bridge and came to me.

"You've been watching. Aren't you embarrassed?"

She was completely self-possessed, the afternoon was hers alone.

"I thought you might be trying to kill yourself."

"So you slam on your brakes to watch!" She gave me a harsh laugh and tossed her dark, wet hair. "Don't be ridiculous. I do that every spring." After a brief scrutiny, she determined this stationery salesman—samples fluttering in the back seat—was a worthy intruder. "Take me home," she said, "and I'll show you my farm."

As she was getting in the car, a jeep truck crossed the bridge. She waved to the driver. "Hello, Don."

I remember vividly still how Ketchum responded. He nodded, cool, and as if he were giving her some sort of mating signal—a flourish of bright feathers—he flicked on the yellow flashing light on the truck's roof. At the time, I felt the gesture was obscene. I still feel it was. Don Ketchum can make eating baked beans lurid; I've seen him do it.

"A friend of yours?"

"Sometimes," said Sarah Burns.

It is winter now. The night is marvelously clear but freezing, and I'm standing on the back porch in only a light brown sweater and slippers. We've had a series of twenty and thirty below zero days and nights at Sharps Crossing, and tonight the drains in the kitchen and bathroom succumbed to the intense cold. Snow has begun drifting around my heels; maybe Sarah will toss my parka out to me. I have socks on, and I'm not drunk. Simply, I'm standing out here to see that Don Ketchum's rig—the flashing light on the cab's roof is reflecting off the high snowbanks punctuating the darkness with bursts of yellow light—to see that Ketchum gets that rig of his out of here and down the valley to his shop.

When my father-in-law Ralph Burns . . . Ralph (“You might just as well start calling me Ralph”) . . . when Ralph saw the pipes in our house were frozen solid, he stood there—as only a native New Englander stands, alert but hunched at the shoulder, pensive, yet massively removed—gazing into the kitchen sink, and said, “What do you think, Daughter?” He speaks only to Sarah when he cogitates. “Shouldn't you call The Mechanic? By God you need more than boiling water and candles to clear this mess out.” Ralph calls Don Ketchum The Mechanic because he's a wizard at spontaneous repairs and patch-ups, a jury rig artist. And at one time or another he's done some repair work on every house in the valley. He knows the quirks of the water and electrical systems in our old house better than Ralph himself. I'll give Ketchum that. When I was making this place livable for us, he came over and fixed the water heater with tin and wire. Sarah's quick to point out we've had no trouble since. It pays to stay on Ketchum's good side, if you can.

Sarah did the telephoning. “A woman gets results faster in an emergency,” she said, cheek to the window gazing down the snowy road toward Ketchum's aluminum sided shed waiting for the phone at his end to stop ringing. “Hello, Don.” She used her most alluring tone.

Ketchum promised Sarah he'd be up directly and give the pipes a jolt with his rig.

Her breath frosted the pane. “We can't do without you, it seems. Thanks for the trouble, Don.”

Sarah reheated the supper coffee, and I poured myself a bourbon.

“No thanks,” said Ralph. “Coffee will do me just fine.” He eased himself into the rocker before the Franklin stove. “Convenient, him having his shop down by the river. A good worker that boy. Hey Paul? Clever. I hated to lose him.”

During a long cold spell, like the one we've been having, a house seems to get sucked of its heat. The siding, the insulation, the lathing, the plaster

absorb the cold. Now the living room won't go above fifty-five degrees. The rest of the house is much colder, even with the oil stove and both burners in the floor heater on high.

Winter is not my best season, and as we sat in the living room, I enjoyed the thought of Sarah's hair streaming behind her in the mid-afternoon sun that day. She got in my car and asked me home for tea. It was her mother, Rosemary, who invited me to stay for supper.

Sarah's mother, who does most of the talking, spoke to me from the kitchen while I sat in the living room balancing a saucer on my knee. "I was alarmed too when she was younger. But no one, I mean no one, not even her father, can keep her out of that river. Once each spring she goes down to the bridge by Don Ketchum's shop and does it. It's something she has to do."

Mrs. Burns came into the living room wiping her hands on her apron. "I suppose we thaw out differently, each one of us. Me? The winter's as long for me as it is for my husband, even though I spend most of my time indoors. Me now. I can tell the thaw has really set in here when Anne Ketchum, Don's wife, comes off the hill behind our place with the first greens and yells across the yard to me. 'Hey, Rosemary, how much salt pork should I use with these greens?' I yell back, 'You got a good bunch? Use two chunks. Two good size chunks.' Then she says, 'About a half a pound would you say?' 'Yes. Cut up real good. That sure is a nice bunch of greens, Anne.' 'Sure is.' Well, it happens the same way every year between us. We don't say much else to one another. With Sarah it's the Ompanoosic. With Ralph it's his parsnips." She had wiped her hands again and was fingering her watch, stretching the band to see it better. "Goodness! Just look at the time. You'd best stay for supper."

At supper Ralph said, "Well, it's here." His mouth was loosened by the fermented poached parsnips. "Even though it's been coming for months, I'm always surprised when it finally gets here. Fine parsnips, Mother." He ate for a while. Then he said something like, "This afternoon the apples that stuck with the trees all winter dropped. The branches don't snap, stinging your fingers like fire, anymore. At last, now that those trees out there have the green mist about them, they'll stop collecting at my cap and hair while I work." Poetry builds up in a man over the winter. "I tell you, sometimes I feel the trees out there, all brittle and bare, might one day lift me away into that black sky"

"Ralph. What are you talking about."

"I know, Mother. It's frightening. I still say you can't trust them damn apple trees until the thaw sets in."

“Ralph?”

“All right, Mother. I’ll relent. Ah! Mighty fine parsnips.”

iii

Here’s Sarah now. She’s just come to the door to interrupt my vigil.

“Paul. You’re crazy to stand out there half dressed. Come inside won’t you. Please?”

There’s no trace of my parka or even a blanket over her arm.

“It’s late, and you promised to milk for Papa in the morning.”

“Yes, I know. I know. I’ll be in.” Stoic. Frozen. God damn, it’s cold.

“Well, I won’t be part of it. If you want to freeze over a small matter like this, go right ahead.”

“Small matter. Small matter? Do you know how dangerous that was. That was no small matter.” Be calm now. Calm.

“Would you bring in some logs when you come.”

“Sarah, he could have killed you. Don’t you realize that?”

“Not so loud, you’ll wake up Papa. I’m going up to take my bath.”

“Sarah!” Quiet. Calm. “The God damn fool” That’s the second time tonight she’s slammed the door on me.

Ketchum’s truck is out of sight now, only the flashing yellow bursts from the cab’s light give away his position.

The lights are still on in his shop.

My heels ache. Could have killed her. He really could have.

Sometimes I think she cares more about keeping this farm running than she does me.

That first night when Ralph praised her for jumping bare assed into the Ompanoosic, Sarah Burns blushed.

“Mother tells me you’ve been in the river, Daughter. Fine. Fine. What a girl. See your head’s good and dry before you go up to bed. It’s not summer-time yet.” You could see he was proud she’d done it. He considers it, I think, a sensual act.

After supper they left us alone in the parlor. “You will have to excuse him, Paul,” she said. “The thaw always brings out the country vaudeville in Papa.” She was silent a moment, drifting. “You know when Papa dies they will cut open his chest and find that his heart is as brown and tough as an old berry root. His whole life he has pulsed in sympathy with this valley, the ice breaking up in the river, the pulse of the storm clouds moving across the sky, the harvest. He’s a man who knows his own death and isn’t afraid to look at it. Just think how many times Papa has lifted himself at five in the morning and moved across the snow-covered yard wearing those blue over-

alls, that blue and white striped cap and red shirt, to the milk barn. Why he's done that so many times he knows it by heart." She paused.

I was sitting on the couch. She sat on a chair across the parlor.

"He's going to be desperate for help one day if we're to keep this place going." She sighed and was silent a moment, thinking. Then she stood and walked to the couch. She sat on the edge facing me, elbows on her knees. Her voice was determined but still tentative, I remember. "I'd like to make my home in this valley," she said. "I'd like to work this place and survive on it just like Papa's done."

IV

I did all I could think of to clear the drains before calling Ralph over from next door. Electric heaters, hot water, candles. The kitchen drain pipe leads directly outside to an insulated box below the kitchen window. You need a crowbar and shovel to get to the pipe. I left that part for Ketchum.

We waited quietly in the living room. The bathtub upstairs was half full and scummed brown. In the kitchen sink coagulated grease, matches, and food particles floated among the cold cups and plates.

Ralph had gotten cold. His house is much warmer than ours; he's got a wood furnace he stokes three times a day. I offered him a whiskey, but he lifted himself out of his chair. "Well, I'll be over at the house. If Ketchum can't do it, it can't be done. You milk tomorrow, Paul?"

"If you want me to."

And he left us alone before the fire in our fifty-five-degree living room.

We sat quietly for a few minutes; then I went to Sarah and put my hand on her shoulder. "I was just thinking about when we first met." I began to caress her neck. "That day I first came here."

"Oh." Sarah was not responsive. "Your hands are cold."

I poured myself another bourbon and sat down before the fire in the rocker that Ralph had vacated.

She's still blaming the frozen pipes on me.

V

After our first encounter, I began driving north to Sharps Crossing as often as I could, and our courtship picked up remarkable pace.

One weekend, early Sunday morning, I was awakened by her whispers. She stood below my window on the grass in her bathrobe and nightgown. She was whispering through the screen. "Paul, I know of a quiet place we can go. Let's drive to the quarry for a swim. There won't be anyone there this early." Rosemary was not awake yet, and Ralph was working in the barn. I assumed that we left the farm unseen.

At the quarry she said, "Let's hurry." We took off our clothes together,

shirt, trousers, bathrobe, slippers, and nightgown. Together we swam in the deep, clear pool. In the warm, early morning sun we made love on the green moss that grows on the granite blocks.

Our courtship picked up pace to the point that after supper that same Sunday, Ralph and I took our walk over the farm. On that walk, Ralph told me a number of things and got his question asked. In turn, I asked him a question myself.

We left the house by the kitchen door and crossed the yard to the barn. Ralph checked the milk storage vat—temperature and level—and moved to the bin of pig feed. “They’ll eat as much as you give them.” He speaks in bursts when he’s working. “Once the ground loosens up. Late spring. Those pigs start right in.” His voice is almost harsh. “You ever seen pigs beating?” Ralph is not a crude man. “Well, the old boy sets his feet and climbs on. It will take him fifteen minutes sometimes. And, I swear, you can see how the ladies love it. She’ll put on a smile every time. I call it her Second Coming Smile because it’s so filled with sunlight and stars. While he’s up there on her, she looks away to places you and I won’t ever see. And damned if that smile don’t fade when he climbs off . . . or when he don’t service her proper.” He lifted two buckets of pig feed onto the tractor cart and drove slowly toward the pig yard which is a good distance from the main house. It’s closer to the caretaker’s house, which is where we’re living. All summer, when the breeze comes off the hillside, we smell the pigs. I don’t see how Sarah stands it.

I followed, walking along side the belching tractor. From atop the big steel seat of the green Oliver, Ralph said, “This farm has been in continuous operation since before the Revolution. Damn near two hundred years. I mean to keep it running. Haven’t missed a milking in nearly forty. We’re not rich. Self-sufficient. It’s always been that way. And it isn’t going to change.”

The pigs, their hind legs working furiously in the yard’s muck, scampered to the feed trough. “Ha. Here you are.” He slopped the feed into the trough. “It tickles me to watch them eat.”

We left the pig yard and walked to a point near the garden above the main house. Ralph checked the current in the electric fence surrounding the garden. “Hotchaal!”

Below us the farm buildings, the houses, sheds, an ordered clean complex, took resolve in the wide valley. “I was born in that house down by the bridge,” he said. “The one next to Ketchum’s shop. We sold that section off to him a few years back. My father built this house here after I was born. Haven’t come very far in sixty-three years. Ha! Just across the road.” We walked back to the old green Oliver. “I don’t plan on going too much further.”

Ralph climbed up onto the seat. Before he started off down the hill to the barn, he said, "Can't say I've figured Sarah yet. The first two youngsters made it clear they wanted off the place as soon as they could. She's more like me. Seems to want to stick around. Cares more about where she is than where she's going. Like wild grass." Then, he looked at me hard. "I venture," he was damn serious now, "I venture she won't be leaving this valley."

Ralph took off his blue and white striped cap, scratched his head, and sat there lordly on his old green Oliver waiting for me to ask what we both knew it was I was out there to ask.

"Well now," Ralph replied, scrutinizing me as if for the first time. If he hadn't had a slight twinkle in his eye, he could have persuaded me that he really was making a decision. As it stood, I knew that Ralph Burns had made up his mind long before then. I wasn't a brute, but I'd do. Strong enough, he figured. Otherwise, we wouldn't have been standing up in the pig yard talking the way we were.

"You promise me one thing."

"Sir?"

"You promise me that come spring she's right here to get her swim in the Ompanoosic. Hell boy, if she ain't, the poor girl'll be froze up all year round."

"Yes, sir. I promise."

The tractor belched once and rolled off toward the barn. I had to run to keep up with him. "Nope, haven't missed a milking in forty some years. I've never seen the sun come up any other place than somewhere between that cut and the top of Round Mountain there, depending on the time of year. Don't believe I'm any worse off for it. Neither's Sarah." Ralph climbed down from the tractor. "She'll run you ragged, Son. Strong willed, demanding, loves this place like her mother. Loyal and faithful as they make them. Always believe that."

He cut the motor on the Oliver.

We shook hands. "Welcome," he said. "Let's go find her mother. The way you two have been carrying on around here lately, she's begun to wonder if you'd ever get around to making it legal."

I flushed, and the kitchen door slammed behind us.

"Fine," he was saying, "Fine. We'd like it if you'd move right into the caretaker's house. I'll use Ketchum part-time until you catch on. Then we'll let him go. This place can't support three families. Ha! That's for sure. Barely supports one as it is. Sarah will stay over here with us until after the wedding. In the meantime, you two might want to fix up the place a bit. No one's lived there for a while. I know for sure the water heater's broken."

"Yes, sir."

"And, you might just as well start calling me Ralph."

“Yes, sir . . . Ralph.”

Ketchum stayed on for a year or so after we married; I was slow learning the work. Now we only use him for haying and in emergencies.

VI

A half an hour after Sarah called him, Ketchum was backing his jeep truck—the light atop the cab flashing yellow—right up to the back porch. He had installed on the truck’s bed some sort of power generator and rigged steel poles with floodlights attached to them on the rear.

Ketchum leapt out of the cab, as spry as a cat on the crusted snow, and in his taciturn, smug manner which always has annoyed me said, “Got troubles. Hey? We’ll fix you up.” He’s too self-assured to be sincere. He kicked over the generator, and the floodlights flickered slightly, then rose to full power, filling the yard with light, which was punctuated by the flasher revolving on his cab.

Sarah yelled to him out the door. “Hello, Don.”

“Hello,” he said looking over my shoulder at her.

I could tell by his smile and his quick down glance that she’d given him one of her lush, sensuous smiles. Don’t underestimate Sarah. Even though she’s a farm girl at heart, she has a stunning capacity to disarm a man.

Now, as far as I know, Ketchum had not set foot in our house since I called him here three years ago to fix the water heater. However, as he ran the cable from the generator and laid it beside the soil pipe which drains the bathroom toilet and tub, as he threw a second cable onto the roof and climbed nimbly up after it, I noted with a slight twinge of jealousy that he didn’t need to ask where anything was; his familiarity with the house was conspicuous.

To retain heat in the upstairs bedroom, I had tacked up a plastic storm window which came in a kit. Ketchum stood looking into our bedroom talking to Sarah. “We’ll have to go through this window,” he yelled through the plastic and glass. “Open the window, Sarah.” She raised the window and stood before Ketchum as he drove the cable clip through, puncturing the plastic sheet. “Sorry about that,” he said.

I stood helpless in the snowy yard below. Watching that cat burglar talk to my wife from my roof gave me the disturbing sense that I’d been somehow violated. I have the same sensation of vulnerability when I peer into my living room from a window in the yard.

The generator was roaring now. He instructed Sarah to run the cable into the bathroom and clip the cable’s end to the sink trap. He came down from the roof and attached the first cable to the black soil pipe below in the storage room off the kitchen.

Connections made, the generator began to strain. “We’ve a natural

ground," said Ketchum as the solder and wadding began to smoke. Once he unhooked the cable. "Getting anything?" he yelled through the floor to Sarah.

"Not yet," her voice was muffled through the ceiling above us.

"One more shot and you will," he said, clipping the cable back onto the pipe. The soil pipe was belching smoke now, and he looked like the very Devil as he stood there with hot solder popping around him. I backed away from the sputterings. When Ketchum saw me move, he said, "You better stand clear."

"Right," I said, covering my eyes. My impulse was to defy him, to move closer, possibly to grab the pipe, to show him that I was not as apprehensive as I appeared.

From upstairs, "Okay, Don. It's all clear."

He unhooked the cable. The generator revved. "I'll come over and repack this one day," he said to me.

"Obliged if you would."

Water was running freely down the soil pipe. The man's competence made me angry. It is humiliating to be helped by a man whom you find offensive.

"Now for the kitchen sink." Ketchum was flushed with victory.

I watched while he pried off the top of the insulating box and dug through layers of hay, sawdust, and earth to the drain pipe. While I examined, carelessly, Ketchum's rig, he went inside to attach the second cable to the kitchen sink's trap. His yellow flasher hurt my eyes.

When the generator began to strain once again, I went into the kitchen to watch what I begrudgingly knew would be another successful thawing.

There squatting together before the sink were the two of them. She had her back to me. He hunkered close in front of her. Her knees were apart and her slacks stretched tight. Ketchum's hands were on the sink trap, and his eyes were devouring her. "Come on, Sarah," he coaxed. "Try it. Don't worry. There's no chance for shock if your feet are dry."

I slammed the kitchen door as hard as I could.

"Sarah, come away from there." I found myself yelling. "You'll kill yourself."

But paying no attention, she calmly reached for the trap and tentatively covered The Mechanic's hands with her own. I think my fear—and my obvious disgust at seeing her squatting there with Ketchum—made her dare to defy me.

Breathless now, excited, she exclaimed, "Oh, Don. You can feel it. You can actually feel it throb like it's alive." She pressed her hands on his.

"That's what electricity feels like," I heard him say. He was pleased with himself, talking low.

“How does it work?” she asked, as she leaned toward him.

My heart beating furiously, I stormed across the kitchen for her.

“Electricity. I don’t know how it works,” he said.

I knew she was all right. The momentum of my rage propelled me. I couldn’t stop myself. “Sarah, get away from there.” I reached for her waist, trembling with anger. My hands slipped under her sweater. When I touched her bare skin, the current began pulsing through me as well. I was still holding her waist when the kitchen drain opened and sucked the sink empty.

“There,” she said exuberantly, “You’ve done it, Don.”

I yanked Sarah free from the trap then. When she stood, she somehow bumped Ketchum and sent him onto the kitchen floor. Startled, Sarah and I stood frozen for a moment while Ketchum, sprawled on the floor, looked up at us foolishly. Only then did I become aware that the throbbing pulse from the pipe had stopped flowing through us.

Sarah, who was baffled at first by my violence, now turned toward me angry. “Don’t you see he’s done it. The sink’s free.”

“It’s free,” said Ketchum from the floor.

“I heard it,” I said, deeply embarrassed.

When I went to help him up, Ketchum brushed my hand aside. He got up quickly and began winding up the cables.

“We can settle up later, if you’d rather.”

“Whatever you say.” He dismissed me with cool formality.

Sarah, ignoring me, went to the door. “Good night, Don. Thank you.”

He did not reply, but gave her one of his smug, cool nods. After he shut down the generator, he climbed in his truck and slammed the door. My good night went unacknowledged.

“We could have at least offered him a cup of coffee or some of your bourbon,” Sarah said as I stood on the porch watching him spin and lurch through the crusted snow in the yard.

Ketchum’s rig has disappeared down the road now, and the lights have just gone off in his shop.

Wood for the fire. And, Jesus, milking tomorrow morning at five.

At first, I found I was damn angry at them, and talking about it made me angry all over again. But why. What for. Is it her warmth. Her carelessness. Her trusting. His God damn competence.

I suppose it is.

“He doesn’t deserve any of my bourbon,” I said as Ketchum lurched out of the yard. “You could have been killed.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous. Don Ketchum always knows what he is doing.”

“The simple bastard could have killed you.”
“You’re ridiculous. I hope your feet freeze.”
I began to yell and swear at her.
“Quiet. Damn you,” she said. “You want Papa to hear us.” She slammed
the kitchen door and left me standing out here in my slippers.

I continue to hold my ground. It’s getting colder now.

FIELDS OF ACTION

Introduction / Thomas R. Whitaker

The most challenging modern poems aren’t merely narratives or mimings of an action imagined as taking place elsewhere. Nor are they “spatial forms” which might be adequately described by the critic who gazes and catalogues from the middle distance. Fields of verbal action, they require us to participate in their present movements. Some of their modes of action are explored in the pieces here brought together. A second such gathering will appear in our issue of Summer, 1975 (6/3).

First: three essays on fields that are simultaneously “epic” and “personal”—obsessed by Western history and devoted to constructing something like “the history of one’s self.” Guy Davenport here leads us into the forest of symbols that is *Ulysses*; Marjorie Perloff unfolds some origins of the post-symbolist landscapes in *The Cantos*; and Sherman Paul invites us to share that projective openness to the “context of / now” which generates *The Maximus Poems*.

In addition: two new instances of less obviously expansive but no less “cosmic” fields. The example of Rimbaud, as Marjorie Perloff argues, could urge Pound toward an actively presentational style. But for others, of course, Rimbaud has been most centrally the *voyant*. And without the *Illuminations* somewhere in the background, would we now have Denise Levertov’s “Growth of a Poet”—which seems to invite *la poésie objective* to rediscover an older understanding of the world as potential song of correspondence? Or W. S. Merwin’s “Birds at Noon”—which seems, after more than a decade of commitment to distances and absences, now to open a new field of lyric presence? The other side of departure, perhaps. “*Départ dans l’affection et le bruit neufs.*”

And also: a gesture toward another kind of post-Poundian and post-Rimbaldian field. (The explicit mentors here include both Cid Corman and César Vallejo.) For Eshleman’s *Coils* the poem must work through the