

Quiet Desperation · *Louis Simpson*

At the post office he sees Joe McInnes.  
Joe says, "We're having some people over.  
It'll be informal. Come as you are."

She is in the middle  
of preparing dinner. Tonight  
she is trying an experiment:  
*Hal Burgonyaua*—Fish-Potato Casserole.  
She has cooked and drained the potatoes  
and cut the fish in pieces.  
Now she has to "mash potatoes,  
add butter and hot milk," et cetera.

He relays Joe's invitation.  
"No," she says, "not on your life.  
Muriel McInnes is no friend of mine."

It appears that she told Muriel  
that the Goldins live above their means,  
and Muriel told Mary Goldin.

He listens carefully, to get things right.  
The feud between the Andersons and the Kellys  
began with Ruth Anderson calling Mike Kelly  
a reckless driver. Finally  
the Andersons had to sell their house and move.

Social life is no joke.  
It can be the only life there is.

\* \* \*

In the living room the battle of Iwo Jima  
is in progress, watched by his son.  
Men are dying on the beach,  
pinned down by a machine gun.

The marine carrying the satchel charge  
falls. Then Sergeant Stryker  
picks up the charge and starts running.

Now you are with the enemy machine gun  
firing out of the pillbox  
as Stryker comes running,  
bullets at his heels kicking up dust.  
He makes it to the base of the pillbox,  
lights the charge, raises up,  
and heaves it through the opening.  
The pillbox explodes . . .  
the NCO's wave, "Move out!"

And he rises to his feet.  
He's seen the movie. Stryker gets killed  
just as they're raising the flag.

\* \* \*

A feeling of pressure . . .  
There is something that needs to be done  
immediately.

But there is nothing,  
only himself. His life is passing,  
and afterwards there will be eternity,  
silence, and infinite space.

He thinks, "Firewood!"  
and goes to the basement,  
takes the Swede-saw off the wall,  
and goes outside, to the woodpile.

He carries an armful to the sawhorse  
and saws the logs into smaller pieces.  
In twenty minutes he has a pile of firewood  
cut just the right length.  
He carries the cut logs into the house  
and arranges them in a neat pile  
next to the fireplace.

Then looks around for something else to do,  
to relieve the feeling of pressure.

The dog!

He will take the dog for a walk.

\* \* \*

They make a futile procession . . .

he commanding her to "Heel!"

she dragging back or straining ahead.

The leaves are turning yellow.

Between the trunks of the trees

the cove is blue, with ripples.

The swans—this year there are seven—  
are sailing line astern.

But when you come closer

the rocks above the shore are littered

with daggers of broken glass

where the boys sat on summer nights

and broke beer bottles afterwards.

And the beach is littered, with cans,

containers, heaps of garbage,

newspaper wadded against the sea-wall.

Someone has even dumped a mattress . . .

a definite success!

Some daring guy, some Stryker

in the pick-up speeding away.

He cannot bear the sun

going over and going down . . .

the trees and houses vanishing

in quiet every day.