

*Research*. Clark Coolidge. Tuumba. 1982. Unpagged. \$3.00. *The Sacrifice Consenting*. William Dickey. The Pterodactyl Press. 1981. 51 pages. *Memory*. Laura Jensen. Dragon Gate. 1982. 69 pages. \$5.00. *Triangles in the Afternoon*. Ron Padgett. SUN. 1979. 46 pages. \$4.00. *Narratives from America*. Richard Ronan. Dragon Gate. 1982. 139 pages. \$6.00. *Hannah's Travels*. Richard Speakes. Ahsakta. 1982. 45 pages. *Ninth Life*. Deborah Tall. Ithaca House. 1982. 50 pages. \$5.00. *Tamsen Donner: A Woman's Journey*. Ruth Whitman. Alice James Books. 1977. 75 pages. \$4.95. *The Valley of Minor Animals*. John Woods. Dragon Gate. 1982. 88 pages. \$6.00.

### BELOW GROUND

Cloudless day. Summer. I carry my young son to the park which lies peacefully at the end of our busy street. A pleasure to scan, it rises on a slow curve running down to the lake where so many ducks live their explainable lives. We move under cool oaks, maples, the water coming closer, its clear blue intelligence. Lovely park. Pretty thing. In the transient pitch of summer.

Yet that's not why I come here. It's this—this peculiar risen land near the shelter, a powerful puzzling shape under the tall grass. We who know nothing call it simply, an Indian mound. Then it hits me as it always hits me—right here in this everyday park: a prehistoric thought. I let the word sink in. *Prehistoric*. For it is not the Winnebagoes who left this ghost behind, but their human predecessors: the unnamed, the secret, the ancient.

Put that next to the gleaming drive-ways, their jewel-like automobiles in the sun—how strange and still it all suddenly becomes, half relic already, or perhaps I exaggerate. Still, what poems do, it seems to me, is rightly analogous to this walk in the park. Some are pretty—nice enough, a pleasure; others throw up Indian mounds. I could say we need both but I would only partly mean it. Indian mounds then. And whatever the claim, readers of poetry spend a great deal of time looking for them, especially now against the widespread complaint that our poems

are too thin, too alike, too letter-perfect but thought-scarce. More and more such a search includes the small presses.

Trace the stereotype by heart: courageous but quirky editors, beautiful handmade books, new or neglected writers, some worth printing, some just forgettable friends of the editor. An uneven reputation lives, but once in hand, it is the books themselves that give witness. Surprising fact #1: small press editors have as much luck in finding extraordinary work as any commercial or university press. This is, in no small way, amazing given their willingness to take on the unknown, the unreviewed. Surprising fact #2: not all small press books are hand done with care in the cool and shabby garage. Some seem thrown together by a threshing machine and a staple; more are as slick as the big presses',—shiny au courant graphics, machine assembly, blurbs and photo in rear. Surprising fact #3: for whatever reason—economic, aesthetic—established writers are seeking out the small presses and more are sought out by them. (Here I do not mean those poets, particularly the more experimental, who have willfully spent most of their lives with the small press, often more out of friendship than ambition.) This growing shift to mainstream work might sadden those who hold the small press as an underground force, but such writers often get reviews, get into bookstores, increasing demand—therefore possibilities—for small presses.

One press eager for it all—risk and solid ground—is the new (1980) *Dragon Gate* from Port Townsend, Washington. Handsomely bound, Laura Jensen's *Memory*, Richard Ronan's *Narratives from America* and John Woods' *The Valley of Minor Animals* represent three distinct directions. After several chapbooks and limited editions, Ronan's carries the weight of a major collection—and a brave one; Jensen's is a strong second following *Bad Boats*, put out by the prodigious Ecco Press; Woods' is his seventh, breaking a habit of years spent mainly with the now discontinued University of Indiana poetry series, years spent under a cloud of critical neglect. With press runs of 3,000, *Dragon Gate* begins to compete with commercial runs and—glad discovery—throws up a lot of Indian mounds.

I find poems in *Memory* that quite simply stun me: not a few—even one or two of that quality would win me—but several. Jensen's eye is so firmly established that one nearly grows self-conscious before it. A quietude not unlike Louise Glück's emerges, perhaps warmer, not so

inconsolable. Consider the beginning of “I Lie Down” which launches the kind of meditation underscoring the entire collection.

I lie down. Petals slowly cover me.  
The tree is repeating what it knows,  
slowly, thoughtfully, and when I sigh

I lay down my thoughts like a purse  
beside me, like a coat around me,  
like gloves crossed over my heart

like a pile of luggage a yard  
away, like golden jewelry in the  
bank deposit in another city. . . .

The repetition in this poem reinforces the exhaustion which, once given into, brings rescue, recognition. I especially admire the associative shifts in definite odd increments farther and farther off until simply—“like a rescued fish set back in its/element, I lie down”—free of distraction, open to new beginnings, fresh meanings.

It is for Jensen, then, not the long considered but the unexpected that is valuable. The title poem shows us the falconer in wait for his falcon who returns, like memory, by his own will, unable to explain his timing. Indeed memories, their stubborn heartfelt grace, crowd this book. Childhood is vivid—from the cool, dark summer bedtime which recalls “the drawer/close in the old soft cabinet/the rolling wood on wood/to conclusion” (“Hot Gravel”)—to the dime store turtles, “a moist delight” and the kite which “was a speck, the opposite of fishing” (“Kite”). The fears of childhood linger here (“Creature from the Black Lagoon”), calmly evoked, not ironically distanced. In this, she does not patronize the past but travels through its darkness again.

Jensen’s reverence for strangeness throws much of her work into shadow. “Starlings” is a poem whose perversity is a found beauty: two starlings “bathing in soot.” She speculates on their private lives where they “dream their boring dreams/which they consider luminary.” Their awkwardness, their “presumptuous wishes”—in spite of this, the birds carry a true sense. A neighbor keeps a bath where

... they might bathe forever  
and be yet speckled, gritty, holy only  
by name. They bear their stars  
crudely, yet believe me, they are Earth's  
creatures; suet and seed are cool and good.

In that simple phrase—"yet believe me"—we have Laura Jensen: gentle, insistent, clear about these memories be they in light or shade.

For John Woods, memories and the poems eventually fueled by them often link the personal with larger forces. His work exists, unlike Jensen's which is highly interior and reserved, in real time to show us one man dealing with events that, like it or not, maneuver us all. World War II, for example, appears often enough in previous collections and *The Valley of Minor Animals* is no exception. What is exception, however, is how the war enters here: not as youthful experience to be ruminated and deciphered, but as a character itself.

What a relief finally to find WWII an old rumbled thing—true veteran—stopping "to glare in the window/of the VFW in Bad Axe. Bingo Night," muttering "*San Franciscojima . . . Oaklandawa*" ("*Dear John Was All She Wrote*"). Of course he has a mission: "to free John Woods from the last/shoulderpack of youth." Such a goal may or may not be easy; we'll never know for it is too crowded in the Woods' garage. There is *herself*, "that bitter, courageous old woman/the Great Depression/ . . . sickened and excited by the steak smoke/bursting from the ventilator." Not to be outmuttered, she can whisper too. "*Ain't got enough clothes to pad a crutch . . ./ugly as Old Maid Sin.*" What happens? This is a story poem after all. A kind of weird love breaks out—is this Woods' definition of history?—and subsequent events (Kent State, Attica, etc.) are hatched.

I have little problem with Woods' talent for serious whimsy. I wish there were more. The poem that launches the book, "Aunt Forest, 1936" works similar magic through the use of a question-answer wiseguy format. (An echo here of Henry and Mr. Bones, but no, this is straight Woods.) It is a long poem which continually undercuts its own narrative.

My neighbor "aunt" had three miracles:  
a horse and buggy, a player piano,  
and a Texas cat . . .

*I suppose the horse played the piano?*  
The horse was Dolly,  
dreaming in a stall of well water and oats . . .

*Sure. Let me suggest her dreams  
were sodium groins, gear funnels,  
and turnip biplanes.*

The poem wanders on, in and out of seriousness. I can't imagine who the deadpan cynic is but he manages to burst any hot air nostalgia and in the process says something about the self-obsession raging in contemporary work.

The book carries other surprises: intriguing persona poems; Woods is an artful ventriloquist. There is a nasty drill sergeant, an impeccable detective, even Captain Ahab has his moment bobbing through foam into the 20th century. But Woods' vision is not all so charred, comic, or fiercely inventive. "The Wish" illustrates another current in the book, one rising and falling on simple kindness and inevitable solitude, as the poet imagines a woman summoning "the world's/drifts and hardware" to write a poem. It is this depth we ache to enter when we read or write. And Woods—unrecognized, removed—concludes with great beauty.

I want very much to be in this poem,  
to come up the wet, outside stairs  
with red wine and cheese.  
I want to leave my wet boots  
by the old gas stove . . .  
But, no, the pen is moving.  
Certain oaks and large white birds  
stir in the mangroves.

Richard Ronan may know something about such mangroves for an intensity born of keen listening lives in his *Narratives from America*. I said earlier that this is a brave book—brave because people seldom bother with the form he most often chooses. Not the standard Fanny May Assortment Pack of poems, nor the tightly related series, these, as the title promises, are narratives, stories, story poems. It is no accident then that one of the book's epigrams is Frost's who stands ancestor here in

his capacity to weave tales, invent characters with a voice that gathers one in, does not wear out. Perhaps these poems have too much prose in them; some might work as readily as fiction. Never mind. The lines cast their own beauty, slowing the pace, giving grace.

Consider parts—not all, it's far too long—of “The Pickerel,” a poem spoken by a boy fishing with his father. It's night. “My father was just a warm shape/at the other end of/the boat, the coal of his/cigarette rising and falling. . . .” A bony, “prehistoric” pickerel is pulled up, and the boy, reaching to throw it back, is caught by its hard clicking jaw.

I cried out once and then  
clamped shut like a jar.  
My father had the big  
flashlight on. I was  
bleeding in his light.  
Look, look, he said. Look,  
(so quietly you could hear  
everything, even your own heart)  
if you do anything,  
it might bolt and tear you.  
I nodded. The air was turning  
white around me . . .  
I didn't say anything.  
I sat on the wood seat,  
as rigid as a pole,  
the claws inching numbly up  
my arms toward my face, prickling  
like sleet. . . .

No words are spoken again between father and son. The fish drowns, Ronan says, “without its water.” The boy finally free of the monster sits silent, dazed, “just waiting, the lilies quivering their white/lips, waiting as the breeze came again from the big lake.”

What astonishes me here is the purity, that is, the absence of philosophical babble that many writers couldn't help pinning on such a primal experience. Ronan gives us the thing itself. He knows the boy's voice, what he could think and remember thinking, and keeps tight to that source. Other voices in the book demand more: older, more painstakingly thoughtful, believable in their need to generalize. But in most

of them one feels, as in “The Pickerel,” the experience happening with sure force, right now, for Ronan has a clear gift of *seeing* what he writes.

Other of these lengthy pieces deserve mention. The opening “Fools,” “Vista Point,” “Seated Nude” all work powerfully on the intricacies of families and lovers. In form or content the only departure is “Easter Crossing” which shifts from contemporary personae to an earlier voice: a priest sailing with a group of immigrants to America. “We’ve had the second burial by water—” he writes as one of his many diary entries, “his sack weighted with sand/. . . I saw thin ice on the folds of the canvas;/imagined it gaining on the boy within—/between the red lashes,/the slight hairs upon his upper lip./His lips would be blue. . . .” (“3:30”). Such entries record the daily sadness and beauty and through them, one feels witness not only to an historical but to a human event.

Inexplicable to me, a clear movement has risen in the last few years from the political to the strictly historical poem, both springing from real event, but the latter far cooler in its meditative drama. Dragon Gate is not the only press intrigued by work that warps time to capture it. Ahsahta, founded thirteen years ago at Boise State University, is another.

That Ahsahta has gladly put into print Richard Speakes’ first book, *Hannah’s Travels*, itself in diary format and spoken by a woman going overland a century ago, is not surprising given its pledge “to publishing poets of the American West.” With a serious regional commitment, editors Dale Boyer, Orvis Burmaster and Tom Trusky feel strongly the eastern publishing bias and seek to offset it, both in their contemporary and modern series. One feels a new-land excitement in the venture, the kind of edge that gives small presses power. Forget Goliath for a moment. It’s David with that steady rock, clear aim.

With such an aim Speakes looks back and comes up with Hannah, whose husband, John Emblen, feels—as the poems get moving—more and more cramped in his father’s farm. Speakes is careful to lay down much unrest as fuel for the going; roughly half of the poems pass before the journey is underway. In this it differs from others of its manner—Margaret Atwood’s *The Journal of Susanna Moodie* and George Keithly’s *The Donner Party*: almost a genre now—but the psychology is apt. Why would anyone trade home for danger, death, the mere promise of things better. We need to know; only on this fact is the massive experience relived. So does Hannah observe “the cow’s dull eye/is evidence, the meager crop a witness/so simple it argues sing-song, rhymes *no/* with *go*, & when the field turns wily/it mutters *foe* into the wind . . . (“Evidence”).

Things thicken. A child is conceived, brought forth. Hannah emerges as a woman living a rich, though passive inner life, accepting the journey—John’s vision—as one accepts rain. It is an unfortunate decision to cast Hannah with the complete reserve stereotypic of 19th century women. One hesitates before it. What of the arguments about going? The depression? The fear? Moments before leaving we read her thoughts. “I touch as memory touches/each thing that will remain/one finger/trailing off the table’s edge. . . .” Regret. Fondness. Feeling enough. But no anger, little pain.

What nightmares exist here are tied not to the rigors of the journey but to Sara, the daughter, of whom Speakes writes with an elegance characteristic of the entire work. A few days after birth, it is Hannah knowing quietly, completely that “there is nowhere to go/but into the splash of her iris/the color of a tunnel that turns to light/where it opens again far away” (“Sara”). The child’s death, then, at seven months, not twenty days into the trip—and caused (I find this most horrible) in part by Hannah herself as her milk, through fever, dries up—quite rightly haunts the poems that remain. Perhaps a woman’s guilt in this is not inevitable. Speakes does not move directly on this point; I wish he had. His Hannah, in character one might argue, represses the loss by turning more inward, the language growing denser, more deliberately obscure, as she lightens the wagons of her cherished things, as she turns the wheels by hand through mud, each step “a crumb, falling, unremarkable portion of all.”

Unusual in books of this nature—unusual indeed in this century’s literature whose main vehicle toward depth is disaster—Speakes ends with hope. But then, the Emblens have yet to reach their goal; they are only in Wyoming, loading stores for the hardest part to come. Another child is on their minds. “On the other side John sees rock-sure/the new start awaits us, our arrival/another child, pet of the new start./John churns in me to make it so . . .” (“June 21, 1852”).

Closing with such optimism would be impossible for Ruth Whitman for, unlike Speakes’ work, what she invents must curl tightly around the sad facts of real event: the ill-fated Donner expedition. *Tamsen Donner: A Woman’s Journey* put out by Alice James Books of Cambridge, Massachusetts, is probably the most thoroughly researched of any historical piece. Funded by the National Endowment, Whitman followed the Donner route, imagining it *as it was* for those caught in one of the greatest migrations in human memory—no small matter before land-

scape mad-hatted and worn out by concrete and Hardees and U-Save stores.

As bespeaks a journal in its day-to-day stirrings—part prose, part poetry (the real Tamsen Donner was a published poet herself)—Whitman realizes three movements: the thoughtful, exuberant beginning, “Prairie,” the sobering “Desert,” and the final “Mountain,” a deathgrip as the party literally holes up for winter and its rage.

What pleases in “Prairie” are the common sights: the first excited singing and picnicking as well as the headaches from the wagon jolts. All becomes part of the going, pressed finer by a landscape that amazes and frightens until, four months out, on July 4th, they turn to toast their Illinois neighbors who in turn have promised to hold their glasses west. “So do we make a link/between what we were/and what we have become:/we are inventing/the body of a land. . . .”

I admire this invention, however romantic. It forces an historical presence with haunting sepia onto the inner eye. I like the notion too that we can know what we are doing—or someone can. Whitman’s Tamsen keeps this keen edge throughout, her vision growing by turns bleaker, more wary as things toughen, until finally in “Desert,” “. . . we are traveling blind.” Thirst, weight, light: the horrors of the crossing are nowhere more moving than in the letter from a previous adventurer found scattered into bits amid the salt flats. “Spread on my lap where I/have gathered blossoms, held/my babies, I hold this/future:/random shreds of paper/have a scheme the listening hand the patient hand must find . . ./hard drive two/days and nights/no water.”

In such difficulty, the mind fights to contain a redeeming pattern until all seems invention. Whitman’s plainness of word and line can at times risk the obvious. Then this: “The mountains rise/unscalable/the road is/a fiction/I am not inside this story/I am sitting/beside my husband/a frame/to the picture. . . .”

The last section, “Mountain,” is of course the climax to the disaster and as such, the most difficult to bear. Amid darkness and death Tamsen maintains a sad, fierce calm even in her famous choice to remain with her injured husband, sending the children out with the rescue team. Notes included from the actual salvage expedition state that although George Donner’s body was found, Mrs. Donner was not. The thought settles like silt and aptly holds, for Tamsen Donner surely lives here, in Whitman’s work.

The other notable poem on this catastrophe—*The Donner Party* by

George Keithly—alters the experience considerably by seeing it through George's eyes. My bet is that anyone would prefer Tamsen's version for its heart and simplicity. As such, it seems fitting for this journey to have been taken up by Alice James Books—a press devoted, though not exclusively, to work by women. Beyond its sexual preference, Alice James is notable as one of the few presses to be successfully run collectively. For ten years now, poets have not only decided on new manuscripts, they have typeset, pasted-up, designed, distributed and thrown all profits back into the press. One feels triumph here and an echo somewhere as time shifts to a morning in 1917, Virginia and Leonard Woolf around a table at the Hogarth Press, working—though not exclusively either (there was T.S. Eliot)—for women in literature.

Beyond the pleasures of tradition, there lies the pain of working so quietly and so small. Although the financial squeeze is, if anything, democratic, affecting big and small alike, the problems of the small presses seem to loom larger because so much is often at stake—their very existence—when, say, the state grants dry up or the source of wholesale paper goes under. Short of disaster, worries still mount. As Chris Henkel of Ithaca House wrote to me, “mostly our problems relate to money in one way or another—not enough to do as many books as we'd like, not enough to buy new type. . . not enough to advertise as much as we should.” What it finally amounts to is sales—getting poetry to readers, and to launch that, getting books reviewed.

Reviews continue to be a thorny issue with small press people because for many publications, size is not only a relevant but a deciding factor. “I've been told several times ‘that we cannot review a book with an edition of a mere 300 to 500 copies,’ ” Floyd Pearce of the Pterodactyl Press complained in our exchange of letters. He argues against this position with the fact that commercial runs of 2-3 thousand frequently sell far below 500. Still, rules gel, tradition resists. When one considers the extraordinary work put out over the years by small presses, it is almost unbelievable that, for example, a place like Ithaca House should, out of its 101 titles, be reviewed only twice in *The New York Times*. And this record is one—I'd bet—that most small houses would happily give up at least one eye tooth to have.

It is Ithaca House—a press that does all its work by hand, three men in that boat now since 1970—that has recently released Deborah Tall's *Ninth Life*, a book that feels good in the hands, not flashy, not foreign. Warm oatmeal, the morning cold. I can't go farther to say the poems

are like that; most have more defeat in them, a dark reserve which—this is her second collection—will probably grow richer, fuller, less bolted to its fear. The third stanza of “The Exit,” a poem of return after much travel, reveals a quiet urgency.

And I suppose my body has stored its itinerary  
as tenaciously as fat does toxins,  
all those indestructibles too many parts  
per million to ignore until  
changes for the worse begin to feel natural.  
By now life’s simply gravity, drawing me  
where I have no mind to be.

This voice of helplessness is misleading. Other poems scare with a steadiness that reminds one of Weldon Kees. “The Suicide,” “Our Garden,” “Three Anecdotes,” all go numb within, too tight-lipped to be so casual.

The finest work in *Ninth Life*, however, is weft not with regret or irony. Tall writes superb love poems and of those that end the book, it is “Takeoff” that is one of the best of this difficult genre.

This is the earth falling  
and these the stars. We take off  
between two columns  
of blue lights, austere and touching  
as the word *father*.

I’ve looked down like this many times, but,  
unlike before, I’m unallured by change of location  
or the chance of landscape’s dazzle.  
I’m a woman in love with her husband  
and might as well stay home.

The poet, burdened by a sudden inaccessibility as the plane climbs, narrows her plea to keep things known, lives intact, for “whatever we’ve named ourselves adheres./What breaks up mid-air forgets the shape it took, all that passion for exactitude.”

What makes this poem so memorable is the distance buried there—in spite of its obvious feeling, its isolation. When Tall turns her reserve in this way, the result, I think, is flawless.

Isolation in poetry is a curious thing, perhaps the prime part of the best work going. It might be odd to say, after that statement, that Ron Padgett remains one of the most private poets we have—odd before his vast gregariousness, his daring to be carried by any old wind. So much rushes, collides, flies up in his poems that many seem animated, things dreamt on a moving train through landscape brilliant and unpredictable. But it's that voice—overly everything: funny, simplistic, nostalgic, as if he hadn't a soul to talk to for 20 years—that keeps the whole rig centered.

Open *Triangles in the Afternoon*, a collection put out by SUN press of New York City. Find "Ode to Poland" (which of course has nothing to do with Poland) and read the beginning stanzas that no one in his right mind could give us but Padgett.

It is embarrassingly true  
that you don't begin to die  
until you begin to live,  
embarrassing because it is a truism  
uttered by big fat idiots.  
I am a thin person, myself,

seeing the golden sunlight  
of sunset radiant against red bricks . . .  
lifting me out of my shoes and into some real  
or imaginary sense of the Eternal. . . .

The poem meanders on, risking humor against an obvious weight of meaning. This push-me pull-me balance is struck throughout the volume. Call it irony—but it seems more, goodwill in the bundle, a smart-aleck joy.

Padgett's gaiety does little harm in his attempts at political satire. In "Ode to Bohemians," after much complaint against the "horrible" governments of the world, we have this zany—and earnest, I think—call to freedom.

For me, I say "Fuck it."  
I have a glass of red wine  
and a beret upon my head,  
I am tipsy in Montmartre,

my smock smeared with paint  
and the lipstick of script girls,  
and I salute zees life I lead,  
O happy vagabond! O stalwart bohemian,  
defying the ordinary rules of society  
to express your inner self,  
to tell those callous motherfuckers  
what it's like. . . .

It may seem to some ridiculous to treat Padgett seriously, but I'd argue this a long time. His work says things the way a primitive painter, a so-called "naïf" might say things. Calculating to disarm, Padgett cuts through common experience finding there the absurdity and the richness present. His skill at association is unmatched in contemporary verse. The long piece in this collection, "Cufflinks," is witness to that fact as it flashes first on man's brotherhood with the frankfurter, through proclamations on beauty and the unconscious, to target, among others, Picasso "an artistic genius who walks around in his underwear/with dark eyes that say everything and nothing." In this speeding monster of a poem, certain jewels are set.

. . . as the years passed, you find yourself  
stopping for a midnight snack. . . .  
How is it that you can recognize  
the chicken leg at midnight?  
Because after years of reading classics  
of the Humanities and Philosophy, each  
volume at exactly 72 degrees under a light rain,  
you find they form a chicken leg  
that left some distant planet the day you were born.

Ron Padgett is one of those poets who has spent much time in the small presses, published again and again by such houses as Big Sky, Kulchur, Angel Hair. Unfortunately, this makes his work difficult to hunt down, distribution and press runs being what they are. Somewhere, I keep hoping, there's a wonderfully shabby bookstore (preferably materializing just a block from my house) with stacks of old Padgett teetering in the gloom. In the neighboring stack, I might find another ghost—Clark Coolidge, a poet, like Padgett, printed for some time now

mainly by small presses. Tuumba, an interesting outfit in California, is his most recent, giving us the fine chapbook, *Research*.

I approach this volume the way I would a time bomb buried who knows where underneath a not quite familiar field. The walking is unsteady but one can be seduced into momentary ease by the recognizable—a sprig of chicory, say, the footprint of a squirrel. To be exact, translate these to the impact of a line or a series of lines that make literal and emotional sense amid a scurry of fragments coming onto the eye and ear with a force overwhelmingly equal, rapid and often incomprehensible. The key thing here is *line* which for Coolidge is a departure from earlier experiments in single-syllable, single-word structures. Although he still eschews the traditional baggage of poetry—meter, metaphor, rhyme, a narrative shape—these lines begin to have a weight of such things, pressure enough to set something resonating in the reader.

Picture of the woman's handbag falling from her  
distracted grasp  
Picture of my back in a leather coat as I feel an idea  
Picture of snow  
Picture of soap  
Picture of lack of control, a flatiron  
Picture of the workers all smiling in a line. . . .

And there is a mystery there is a mystery there in this  
An antidote to life  
Thought and cold cigarettes  
Poetry

Only parts of *Research* carry this sort of coherence, flashcard and staccato as it is. For those I am glad, for an oasis is an oasis and if Coolidge allows himself now and then a romantic last chance declaration, it makes his bold trafficking in this century's insidious white noise that much more numbing.

Yet in a serious way, I defeat my own reading of *Research* by talking about meaning. Sitting down before the book is an experience like little else in contemporary reading as it is largely physical. The mind speeds, then slams to a halt; just as something begins to settle, a new territory opens with the next line only to die before its time as well. Each is a diving board into another pool of thought. It takes muscle, nerve, even to keep reading.

Everything has to be reinvented, including the morning  
You could have, say, coffee, or two shots  
A washingmachine with white and black slots on top  
of a refrigerator  
Impelled toward danger, love lost its savor  
Dynamite in the corny entryway

One struggles to connect and the bare joy in that is worth it. Like eavesdropping in some glad cafe, one makes out something by leaping, filling in the blank. Beyond that lies the simple wonder in words themselves, their density and strangeness, coming into the head and slipping out. But this, of course, has always been Coolidge's fascination.

Still an obsession to explain himself emerges in *Research*. Many of the lines concern the nature of poetry itself; Coolidge's pure, cold variety that is. "There is nothing in poetry that will remind me about/the world . . ." he writes. "Poetry is a lesson in love with no belief. . . ." Or . . . "the instinct of the vernacular to use chance well." There's more. The apology continues with a fierce, moving sufficiency in these lines which underscore Coolidge as one of the few true experimental poets we have.

They have told themselves that there is no further  
entrance  
If I do not live at the entrance  
If I keep my own council  
I drop into the mesa into the midst of this soup  
I dial animal  
Drop the mineral and diminish

As hypnotic as Coolidge is in his objective, nearly mathematical vision, one can go an equal distance in the other direction to find William Dickey, who matches Coolidge only in degree: translucence for things opaque. Through Dickey's work we see life itself, the feel of everyday etceteras mounting until his poems seem talk itself, heard weights and confusions, not exactly the guy next door—he is too elegant and solitary for that—but close.

Solid work precedes *The Sacrifice Consenting*, beginning with publication by Yale as Auden's final choice, on through major alterations which include *More Under Saturn* (Wesleyan) and *The Rainbow Grocery* (Massa-

chusetts, the Juniper Prize). Dickey is one of those poets who have let personal life in these last two decades of massive social change twist, turn and pull their poems forward. Who hasn't? one might say. But Dickey's openness distinguishes itself in the confessional mode by a fine ironic edge, striking a balance that makes the poems not only approachable but memorable.

In that balance one finds affection and fatigue, and nowhere is the combination more effective than in his love poems, a genre which largely populates previous collections. In this volume, however, Dickey moves beyond their passionate center to points more distant and, for all that, more moving. "Making Love With Your Socks On," he begins in a poem of that title, "is surely worst. All ought to come off." The instruction continues as the poet lays out his argument for this "uneasy posture" with humor and caution: the glasses that might "hook themselves inextricably together . . ."; the plea for "a dim light" against scars, fat, impotency. And just as we think the poem mere whimsy, the tone shifts up, the once quirky diction assuming a lyric elegance which is Dickey at his best.

It is not, then, splendor. These are only the bodies  
we carry everywhere with us, making them walk  
up and down stairs, and keep appointments . . .  
It is the same body, is it not, kissing  
in the disarray of the bed?  
The argument is plausible, but no, it is not.

Only in dark and nakedness do  
some things in us become of themselves capable,  
as the bodies, let alone for a moment, turn  
toward assuaging one another, touch  
lip to lip, read,  
inexorably, but with tenderness, the pattern  
written in the other's hand.

There are things disarming—free—about Dickey's work that I admire. He is careful not to overspeak, to pad, to bully with a veneer of feeling. Like his own anthropologist in "A Beautiful Pair of Shoes," he is watchful lest he become "a fake primitive, burying himself in the earth/to be dug up and exhibited." This quality makes the book a relief

to pick up, a voice to trust. One wants to read on through fine poems as “Making My Will,” “Letter from the West,” “Lab Techniques”—all of which share, under their newsy exterior, a lyric power. That this presence is a surprise at times seems to surprise Dickey himself. In one of his few vaguely surrealist poems, in which he gives birth to his own life, a child whose “hard feet/ . . . hold fiercely onto the solid ground,” we have this hint of vulnerability, of dream, as the poet casually adds that “nothing about him ever/will suppose wings.”

*The Sacrifice Consenting* is a book put out with unusual care, hand-done completely from end paper to end paper by Floyd Pearce of the Pterodactyl Press. As such, it serves as an example of what small presses can do—physically—that the monolithic houses of New York and Boston do not, and that is, of course, make beautiful books. There is, in this, the joy of printing itself. As Pearce put it, “If one is of a ponderous metaphysical turn of mind, this act can serve as a metaphor for almost anything . . . [on] alternating days, it’s as gratifying as working in a garden.” I can’t imagine an executive at Doubleday so set adrift.

For those houses that do their own fine handwork, and even those that instead farm out the manuscripts in the last phase to local printers, there is the integrity in doing (almost) all the work themselves, and beyond that, covering the tricky connections to the world: advertising, distribution, sales. It is an integrity born of thinking *wholly*, in non-specialized rhythms that seems rooted back—or perhaps forward—a few centuries, happily out of step with the somnambulistic demands of modern business. The reward is a book in the hand, words there because someone besides the author simply wanted them heard, regardless of profit, deaf to the bark of the brokers.

So we keep these parks that cherish Indian mounds. I put the boy in the stroller and wheel quietly home.