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Facing Pages

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Facing Pages

III

SINCE THE FIRST of these columns spoke of the format or “landscape” of our magazine and the second took up methods of selection, a third should say something of our readers, a shadowy area of knowledge for me, but one I can approach by announcing the winners of our first, and we hope annual, Subscribers’ Awards. These are awards made by the votes of readers and meant as a way of including their voices in our conversation. The winners for last year’s work, Volume 19, 1989, are Allan Gurganus for his “Two Essays for Aloud,” Laura Kalpakian for her story, “The Battle of Manila”; and in the case of poetry, we have a tie between Dionisio D. Martínez for “Dancing at the Chelsea” (the title poem of his first volume) and Stephen Dunn for “The Guardian Angel,” from *Between Angels*, which has since been published. Winners receive \$100 each, our determination to solicit new work from them, and the knowledge that they have reached some of you.

Voters returned ten per cent of the ballots sent out, not a large number, but a start and a solid sampling. A few things are worth noting about the results. For one, no winner received more than a quarter of the votes cast in a given genre. Over half the poems we published last year received at least 1/4 of a vote—yes, one person did divide a vote so carefully—and of the twenty-six stories, essays, and review-essays available for consideration, twenty-two found special favor with at least one voting reader.

Eight of the fourteen stories we published last year were first person narratives—only slightly over half—but all four top vote-getters were among them, stories that had little else in common, not tone, or manner, or the sense of reality each had imagined. Is this the accident of a year, or is something else showing?

The most uncertain and flexible genre seems to be the essay. Six other pieces picked up enough votes each to give Gurganus a push. Two of these are review-essays, which we could designate a separate category. One is a travel memoir of China and Beijing during the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. One was a lecture to a general audience by a professor of philosophy. One, a spoof of literary criticism, has since been reprinted in *The*

Christian Science Monitor. Another, a whimsical account of the Russian origins of baseball, also got a vote as the year's best story. Had more votes come in for "PIZD'ÓSH" as a story than as an essay, we would not have quibbled.

Ballots will be out shortly to individual subscribers for this year's contest, for Volume 20, 1990, which concludes with this issue. We will announce the second round of winners in our first 1991 issue, already in production. So if you are a voter, you have about six weeks to return your ballot. The landscapes of our issues are inconceivable without readers in them. We hope you'll take the time to record your own readerly presence.

"This is fun, but taken seriously," one reader wrote on a ballot. Another took a moment to insist that Gurganus's "Garden Sermon" was "the finest thing" we had presented all year and deserved a "Best of the Best" award. No matter how idiosyncratic such views may be, approaching opinionated readers is one of our objectives. We know little, specifically, about who our readers are. To an extent it is our responsibility to invent them, or say summon them from the several stances of their, of your individual being. When asked to characterize for whom I think I'm editing this magazine, I usually say something about readers alone, not members first of a seminar, or social class, consumer group, or political party, but people on their own in a library or en route from one place to another.

We get glimpses of readers from notes and cover letters. I remember, and so may you, one writer who thought our rejection note "smarmy." Then there are the several who responded to our apology for not reading through the summer. This summer we returned a parody of "Howl" —

. . . No angel readers in the office this summer . . .

The poetry editor is sorry! The fiction editor is sorry! . . .

The whole sorry literary world is sorry! . . .

One person found it "the most sophomoric rejection" he'd received in twenty-five years, but seven others paused to write cheerful responses to it, one addressing us as "Dear Angel Reader," another smiling at our "wondrously woeful breast-beating form-letter." Last year, another writer responding to a variant apology —

This is just to say
that we don't read poems

submitted in the summer
and which you were probably
hoping we would love—

called it a “pleasantly whimsical detour from conventional formats” and went on to disabuse us of the hope we had attributed to him: that he would hope that we would love his poems. Then there’s the poet who, when thanking us for taking her poems, admitted, “I don’t dare tell most people around here that I write.” But these are writers and perhaps should not be confused with readers.

Such as the one who wrote to urge us “to publish the occasional piece that falls well outside the acceptable and the safely understood,” which of course I think we do, at least now and then. Or the one, just this week, who sent this:

Dear Folks—

Yesterday I read some great poetry and was quite absorbed [or disturbed, I can’t make out which] by an article by various commentators on Rushdie when I was called by my internist and left the waiting room, leaving behind a great publication, which would, I am sure, remain there, for it was too elegant to steal, but surely not until January next year, when I must return for a follow-up appointment, so could you please send me that fall issue, and while you’re at it, a whole year’s worth because I am absolutely enchanted by your publication.

Early last summer ten of us had put in sixty-some volunteer hours stuffing subscription invitations in envelopes to 11,400 graduates of our medical and law schools; this note was one tangible result, along with 268 new doctor/lawyer subscribers.

We’d have to be cynical not to cherish that letter, or a second from the first writer mentioned in the paragraph above, elaborating on his wish by saying

Some of us still think of the dark hours of this century. Nowhere in the issues I have read do I find any awareness of the blood sounds, the souls and colors hanging in the mind, the music of the deep tiredness, dreams without human sleep . . .

His judgment may be severe but it is true to our work overall, if not to every particular in our magazine's history. The writers who supply most of our work are not closest to those events and most would not write of them convincingly. Nevertheless, we hope we are here to read, to listen, and to recognize exceptions. Both letters, moreover, take up our hope, which many would dismiss as nostalgic, of meeting with readers alone, in their singularity, and of contributing to a series of ties that open from that. First and least important is their tie to our magazine. Beyond that are ties with the writers they find here and then with an inner self reading. Since we live almost entirely within a mass audience, these are connections to cherish. Essays, stories, and poems help us understand how rarely we are addressed as individuals.

The reader who seeks more awareness, by us, of our grim century turns out to be a writer, too. Perhaps most of our readers are. So I'll add one more message that came with new work this fall from a writer who had been turned away this summer.

This Is Just To Say Right Back:

Whan that Septembre with his showres dampen
The droghte of sumer hath ygiven crampe
And for a final tyme the gras ycliped ys,
Than longen folke to sende yow manuscripts.

Anyone who can come up with that last rhyme bears watching.

As for the manuscripts we long for, our reading of them points to another difficult horizon. One of our small pleasures in recent years has been to place all our writers' names on the cover as a kind of prose poem. We love to seek the different rhythms in the names, and an order that will accentuate them, and to savor their obvious variety of origin. We think those names extend the conversation we cultivate and lend texture to our landscape. Still we wish the variety were greater, and once we spoiled an indicator of that which we had when, by a blunder of proofreading, we demoted Mary Clark, a poet, to a former general of the U.S. Army.

Notice, though, that in every issue men outnumber the women. Even when I take note, which I usually do, and call our attention to these facts, it keeps on happening. On our staff women usually outnumber men, and still it happens. I am completely persuaded of an unconscious bias, even in

women readers, through their schooling, that favors just a little, and perhaps only gently, but persistently, male voices. A few nights ago I sat in the office and counted ratios in a dozen companionable magazines: *The Michigan Quarterly*, *Georgia*, *Kenyon*, *Paris*, *Gettysburg*, *Missouri*, and *Ontario Reviews*; *Poetry*, *Field*, *Antaeus*, *Tri-Quarterly*, and *Caliban*. I took whatever issues were at hand and only from the last two or three years. I counted the contents of sixty-five separate issues. *Field* had put out two issues in the last year in which women outnumbered men, even with their reviews being always by their editors, three out of four of whom are male. *Tri-Quarterly* also had one such issue and a couple of others in which the margin was close: 13:9 men to women and 9:7. *The Ontario Review* broke even once, and both it and *The Michigan Quarterly Review* have several issues with ratios nearing even: 10:7, 11:7, 9:7, 10:8, 9:6, 8:6. *The Georgia Review* has a new issue out that is all women, a special case clearly. But the rest of the time the ratios go like this: 11:3, 17:4, 26:6, 15:6, 22:10, 21:8, 25:3, 17:6, 22:7, 16:5, 13:4, 16:7, 24:10, 10:4, 17:3, 11:6, 17:8, 32:4, 31:7, 29:9, 15:7, 18:6, 15:3, 36:8, 63:25. A few names are not traceable to sex, but not enough to skew this story, and the issues I don't list vary only incidentally, with ratios of one in four, or five, or worse, common. Our own figures over the last nine issues are only marginally better than the norm: 15:8, 17:9, 15:11, 14:8, 14:7, 14:12, 15:5, 14:11, and 16:12. Our next will be a break even issue, 8:8, unless I spoil it by adding a review-essay, about 98% of which seem to be offered by men, or with further comment of my own.

Collectively, those figures are appalling. Each of those magazines has a male editor, often a male chief assistant. (At *The Kenyon Review*, that has just changed.) My temptation, at times, is to stop reading men for a while, because I can't believe the distribution of good writing in this country is so lopsided.

Representation is tricky. The far-flung "National Magazine," as I once referred to our cumulative voice, should be representative. Each individual magazine need not be. What is the point of editing if you can't make choices for yourself? Still one could wish we were less imbalanced. Only three of those sixty-five issues, seventy-four including our own, had more women than men contributing. And I haven't even raised yet other kinds of representation. Much of that depends on the submissions we receive. My informal count shows men submitting a few more manuscripts than

women, from week to week, but by no more than a 6:4 margin. It also depends on our receptivity as readers. For as readers we are formed by the history of our reading, which evolves but seldom shifts radically. That is one reason I listen to a student staff and have enlarged its representation in the last few years by developing a graduate class as structure for it. Their variety of background, conviction, and allegiance broadens me. As I get older—I'm fifty-one—I would resist becoming more narrow. I am reminded of Robert Francis's introduction to his *Collected Poems*, which he arranged from early to late so we could see him becoming more and more "frisky," he said, as he got older. I'd like to develop similarly as a reader.

A landscape is a plausible metaphor for all I've been detailing. "Usually a midwestern landscape," I said that first time, "with a sudden storm now and then but with few moments of violent transition." Our home in the midwest always tempts us, as when we put a heroic cow on the cover, or another time a gently feminized cornfield. Then there's the ad we imagined a year ago but never made real: a cow with a halo in a hammock in a pasture; a tree for shade; a few fleecy clouds overhead; blackeyed susans nearby, and a tall glass holding haystems beside her. She's reading a magazine and the caption, of course, says, "Is this heaven?" "No, it's *The Iowa Review*." Still, despite feeling at home here, we would accent more variety. Most landscapes figure a distant goal seen across the intermediate barriers of roads, fencelines, rivers, perhaps a nearer ridge. The interplay of these nearer and farther horizons gives texture to the work and draws the viewer into it. It also holds much of our editorial attention. If by a similar token you are drawn toward us and we toward your interior life as a reader, we wouldn't object to becoming neighbors. We could even offer a \$120 through-the-end-of-the-century subscription. —D.H.