

## A BEGINNING

One's first experience editing a journal is frightening. How many typos did I miss? Is the typing clear enough? Is it centered properly? And what is more important, will the readers like the articles?

But, how can we miss, with such scholars as Harriet Sheridan, Edward P. J. Corbett, and Stephen Dunning? The Editorial Board decided that this first issue should focus on last spring's conference. Harriet Sheridan was the keynote speaker, Edward Corbett spoke to the college section, and Stephen Dunning, who has furnished us some of his poetry, was the luncheon speaker.

Our themes for the next two journals have also been selected by the Editorial Board: the winter journal will focus on Politics and the English Teacher, a theme which can include the pros and cons of issues such as standardized tests, a state-wide testing program, a state-mandated curriculum, grantsmanship, teacher evaluation and tenure. The spring journal will focus on teaching reading.

So send MEJ your thoughts -- in an article, a letter, a poem. We do not want to resort to using the esoteric articles of college and university professors from all over the country and the world -- yes, we have one from Teheran -- who are harassed to publish or perish. Although we welcome down-to-earth articles from anywhere, this is a Minnesota journal. So I would repeat the words of Elmer Suderman in his last issue last spring: "Force the new editor to edit, not to print whatever is sent...The new editor will enjoy that."

THE STATE OF THE LANGUAGE ARTS: WHERE ARE WE,  
WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Delivered at MCTE Annual Conference - April 22, 1977

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How are the language arts? What is their state? The answer is simply given: The state of the language arts is parlous. Why so? Let me take up the questions of whence, where now, and whither. To lend some credibility to my claim to speak about literacy past, present and future, I'll begin with a literary allusion to Robert Frost's poem "The Ovenbird." Ovenbirds do not usually congregate in large numbers such as attend MCTE conferences, if Frost's account of their habits is to be trusted. Yet, choice of accommodations notwithstanding, I think that we, in this location, are talking about an ovenbird's problem.

The question that he frames in all but words  
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

This phrase, "what to make of a diminished thing," is the ~~text~~ that I now advance to match the text adopted by a proliferating race of critics who have chosen the line that precedes, using it to describe the achievements of today's English students, whose thoughts and passions are said to be framed in all but words.

You have read the indictments in Newsweek, Change, The Chronicle, Harper's, the Yale Alumni News, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and other such whimsical publications. The uproar is

national. Herds of Jeremiahs roam from sea to shining sea crying out against the deterioration of the skills of reading and writing. In a report to the University of California regents, the chairman of the University's system-wide Academic Council revealed some "alarming" statistics about the basic English writing skills of University of California students.

Records of the College Entrance Examination Board show that in 1968, 63% of the entering students on the University of California's eight general campuses had scores below the minimum required by the University on the College Board's multiple-choice English composition test. By 1975 that percentage had climbed to 75%; of these, only a small percentage passed the 'second chance' essay exam given on UC campuses at the beginning of the student's first quarter. These students represented the academic cream -- the top eighth -- of California's high school graduates. 'With more than 50% of our students required to take subject A,' one UC administrator commented, "We can hardly continue to consider the course remedial."

In the 1975-76 Annual Report of the Committee on Subject A, the chairman informed the Santa Cruz campus of the University of California that the number of students enrolled in writing courses to meet the writing requirement spiraled from 11% in 1972-73 to 40% in 1975-76. Recent estimates indicate that the figure for 1976-77 will top 60% (The USCA Review, April, 1977).

The news from the East Coast is no better. An account in the Yale Alumni News complains that:

Anyone who reads student writing today knows that students can't write....The cases are rooted...deeply in a society that rears its children on sentimental and shoddy reading material, which bathes them in the linguistic sludge of television, and which debases the English language in the place where all learning begins: at home. (Yale Alumni News, p. 16)

And closer to home:

A survey of English department chairmen at both public and private colleges and universities in Minnesota produced general agreement that student writing skills have deteriorated badly. 'Writing skills have broken down,' says Julie Carson, director of freshman composition at the University of Minnesota. We have to start teaching writing at a different point than a lot of people suspected we would. We get down to teaching basic things. (Larry Millett, St. Paul Pioneer Press, July 22, 1975)

In an article entitled "I Can't Teach Comp No More," a teacher on the firing line vented her wrath on the back page of the Chronicle:

While the Modern Language Association put it more delicately when it wrote that 'students are coming from high school with a far less firm grasp on fundamentals than before -- middle-class as well as disadvantaged students,' I'm beginning to believe that no one under the age of 19 can write a simple declarative sentence. (Phyllis Zagaro, "I Can't Teach Comp No More," Chronicle, March 1, 1976).

There is no dearth of suggestions about the causes of our debasement. The arch-villains are said to be the influence of television and the decline of reading among today's school children. One critic continues further to explain that students cannot write carefully thought-out essays because they associate abstract subjects with vague reasoning. "We have to point out that the discussion of an abstract topic must be even more precise than the discussion of something concrete that they have experienced," she says (California Monthly, November, 1974).

The second subject for lamentation is the deterioration of the

reading skills of our students. The New York Times announces that

Publishers, responding to a changing market in college texts, are increasingly resorting to simplified language in their books to adjust to a new element in higher education -- the college student who cannot read at traditional college levels.... Since the publishers see no hope the educational system is going to raise the young people's reading ability, the publishers are going to lower the level of what the students read.

And the Wall Street Journal (December 4, 1974) complains:

It is truly painful to watch such students struggle with reading and flounder as they try to express their thoughts.... The fault lies not with TV but with ourselves. We, and most especially our educational system, have accepted an anti-language culture. The young do not learn their language simply because they are not taught.

One of our own, Ed White, complains in an interview with Daniel Dieterich, published in the January 1977 issue of College English, that his own freshman composition text books "which were once used in freshman composition courses, now seem to be used ...in advanced composition courses."

The "plight of the American language" itself, disfigured by neologisms that are splashed all over its body "like the daubings of a chimpanzee turned loose with finger paints," with its "parts of speech broken into smithereens," and with only "tinkers with tin ears... fashioned... out of old applesauce cans" to set the fractures and dislocations, is another subject for extravagant lamentation (Jean Stafford in the Saturday Review/ World, December 4, 1973, p. 14).

It may reduce our burden to know that the sins of the children

are visited upon the parent, and that laments about the decline of literacy are resounding in England as well. Great Britain's generally left-leaning New Statesman, for example, has commented editorially, "The evidence from universities, colleges, and employers that school leavers lack basic skills can no longer be ignored" (Malcolm Scully, "New Wave of Pessimism Sweeps Some Academics," Chronicle, November 8, 1976, p. 1).

And the London Times, analyzing the problems facing the Education Secretary, Shirley Williams, reports that "The concentration upon education as a path to self-awareness and expression has been taken to the point where basic standards -- the three Rs -- are slipping. Prime Minister Callaghan proposes to swing back the pendulum" (Sunday Times, October 17, 1976, p. 17).

When a Prime Minister gets into the act; when high school English departments are accused by School Boards of being "neo-primitive, of engaging in "social engineering, and offering courses that had no place in a high school" (reported of Darien High School in the CSSEDC Newsletter, NCTE, September 1976, p.4); when a nationally syndicated columnist for the Baltimore Sun (Ernest B. Ferguson) in his concluding comments about the Republican and Democratic Party Platforms, observes that "next election year, when the politicians seek strong issues to unite all kinds of voters, and which matter more than most convention effluvia, they might endorse a constitutional

amendment to require the schools to teach the children to read and write" (reprinted in Minneapolis Tribune, August 29, 1976); when the New York State Board of Regents enacts a requirement that students pass ninth-grade exams in reading and math before graduation from high school (March 26, 1976); then we cannot dodge the conclusion that the hue and cry about our national illiteracy and the demand that we get "Back to the Basics" is a political issue.

We may suspect that the call to retreat is most ardently sounded by those who found the Sixties hateful, who loathed long-haired students and underground newspapers, and who now, newly-dusted Warriner Handbooks under their arm, await the Second Coming of the lock-step curriculum.

We may even argue like Richard Ohman in the "Decline in literacy is a fiction, if not a hoax," a fiction created by the culturally and educationally elite, akin to the spasm that fathered the conflict over race and I.Q., underlain by "a continuing political argument about who shall be educated and what shall be the limits of equality in America" (Chronicle, October 25, 1976, p. 32).

But however we explain the crescendo of complaints about the state of literacy today, we cannot ignore the fact that the Where are we now? question about the language arts has got to be answered: We are in trouble, plenty of trouble. Never mind whose fault it is. When the taxpaying citizenry finishes skimming their newspapers, they know who to blame: teachers.

It is small comfort to look backwards and to discover that we are merely again repeating the past.

In a book that was reprinted by the NCTE a while ago, and that deserves to be revived yet one more time, How the French Boy Learns to Write, published in 1915, Rollo Brown contrasts the carefully organized, continuous French tradition of teaching writing with the "very feeble" tradition of good language teaching in America. He observes:

The teacher in the American high school must not only deal with ...boys who cannot spell, who not only know no grammar but hate the word itself, and who cannot give adequate expression to the few thoughts and vague feelings that save their minds from emptiness, but he must struggle, and he must help his pupils to struggle, against the overwhelming flood of inaccurate, sometimes absolutely vicious speech that tyrannizes the community. The student does not encounter anywhere an unyielding conviction in favor of careful, thoughtful speech and writing.

In 1936, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching funded a study by Burges Johnson of Union College and Helen Hartley of Syracuse University on written composition in American colleges. One reads the report of their research with an overwhelming sense of having heard it all before. The introductory section of the report begins as follows:

This inquiry into some aspects of college teaching of composition carried on for a period of three years at Syracuse University... was based upon this hypothesis: that a majority of students in American colleges are not taught to write well....Both in personal correspondence and in meeting other normal business and social demands they reveal a lack of that literary style or even of that ordinary writing skill which one should expect of the

college-trained man. A scientific inquiry or a series of experiments planned to proceed from such a hypothesis might begin at almost any point and go in almost any direction. If the college fails in this field of instruction, is it handicapped by the quality of the work done in the high schools or by the quality of its own teachers or by the method of teaching? (Written Composition in American Colleges)

As part of the preparation for their research, the two investigators obtained from leaders in journalism, industry, and graduate schools comments about the state of literacy. One such comment made by the Dean of the University of Chicago Graduate School might just as well have been made by his successor in 1977:

Concerning the ability or inability of the average college graduate to express himself well in writing, I do not think that the situation has changed very much in twenty years. A very large number of applications show a lack of facility in English that is surprising in the case of anyone who has spent four years in college. The cause of the deficiency is a deep-seated one. It goes back to the high school and is in my opinion the immediate result of the subordinate position now accorded the study of languages in large numbers of high schools. The English that a great many applicants for admission to our undergraduate college write is amazingly bad. Apparently the students who show this deficiency on entrance very often retain it all the way through college until it crops out again in their application to the graduate school.

It is tempting to retrieve and repeat the host of ancient complaints about illiteracy as the apologists amongst us are busily doing, and thereby exonerate ourselves from any particular blame for the present "crisis." It is fatuous to cast about for single causes, to point the finger at permissive high school English Departments; at the promiscuities of televisionese; at the increased number of women and minority students who take College

Boards and thereby lower them; at the insidious racism of the educational elite.

The January issue of College English devoted to "Literacy and Basics" began with an editorial lament that the call for contributions to that special issue produced very few responses. Expressing their mystification, the editors commented:

The reasons for this are not clear. Is the topic dead already? Is the profession generally lethargic about it? Resigned? Defensive?... We were further disappointed by the scope of the contributions. A large proportion merely reiterated the public concerns and in terms very similar to those employed by the media. Others devoted most of their energy to suggesting better ways to teach writing. We might infer from these facts that the profession accepts not only the public assessment of the literacy 'crisis' but also the blame for it. Our original call queried whether in fact there has been a significant decline in reading and writing ability among students. Yet not one contribution reviewed and analyzed in any detail the assumptions, methods, and statistics of the testing upon which so much of the public outcry seems to be based.

The editors go on in an attempt to put the current crisis into a sociological and political context, with the underlying premise one that Richard Ohman had articulated elsewhere. He is not alone, however, in his suspicions of the motives of some of the proponents of the "Back to the Basics" movement. Fear has been voiced as well by minority groups who see in the so-called renewed commitment to "academic standards" an attempt to justify cuts in special programs for "disadvantaged" students. As part of this commitment to "standards," proficiency testing has arrived on our professional

scene to ensure that no student graduates or moves to more advanced courses without requisite basic skills. The C.U.N.Y. system will shortly require all students to take proficiency exams in reading, writing, and mathematics, tests designed "to assure the university and the public and the students that those who move to advanced work have the basic skills necessary to do that work."

Comparable kinds of proficiency tests have also been instituted or will be instituted in the California State University System, at the University of Toronto, in Oregon, and at the University of Wisconsin at Madison (Malcolm Scully, "Colleges Toughen Requirements That Students Show Basic Skills," Chronicle, April 18, 1977). It seems clear that assessment is going to become a significant part of the usual procedure for both secondary schools and higher education. Students who fail those tests are going to look backwards crossly, at their earlier preparation.

The past was prologue to this present. And we know, those of us who teach freshman composition, that our students are in fact diminished from that past. Let me talk about "Where we are" from the perspective of what I see in my own English classes, and of the recent experience of my department with job applications. Of the hundreds and hundreds of applications that we have read during the past few years, only a handful show any specific preparation to be teachers of reading and writing. Very few more have taken a

sufficient range of graduate-level courses to be educated enough to teach introductory literature courses. What has been happening in the graduate schools, we must ask? The message we read, imperfectly, perhaps, from the transcripts, is that fewer and fewer have been prepared to teach less and less.' And so we add remedial reading and writing specialists to our ancillary staff, cordoned off from us respectable faculty folk.

But us respectable scholars are being dogged by the ghost of responsibilities past, by our neglected duty to teach reading and writing. It could be argued that those trained to be literary scholars in our graduate school years had best be left to the practice of what they are most comfortable doing. There are plenty of young aspirants to senior status in the universities who would willingly do the donkey work. I think I am not exaggerating when I say that most college English faculty prefer "to teach otherwise" than composition. But there is an enlarging number of senior faculty who are now ready to join the ranks of the scholar-teachers, of the Daniel Faders and Paul Olsons and Edward Corbetts. Attendance is rising at the Modern Language Association Annual Conference sessions on composition.

And what of our students? Of the five hundred or so who enter Carleton each Fall (God willing), no more than a dozen are exempted from our writing requirement. In the past, petitioners for exemption clamored at the door of the department chairman, offering

high verbal SAT's as proof of their skill. But we had learned from experience that high SAT's do not necessarily prophesy good writing.

Others were disappointed when their Advanced Placement composition exam did not get them out of the requirement. They were scarcely appeased with the explanation that the department regularly reads all such exams, whatever the score, and generally agrees with only a third of the College Board readers' rankings. Each fall this has resulted in a stormy protest from our Admissions Officer, himself the target of complaints from Advanced Placement teachers around the state.

But, lately, students who have been offered exemption have begun to turn it down. They come like lambs to the slaughter, carrying their handbooks. And there is an increase in the number of students who, having taken the required course, are not given the imprimatur at first try, and must therefore enroll again as sophomores, juniors, and occasionally even as seniors. And do so without whining.

When we dare to crash through the thicket of alarming statistics to the other side of candor, we must acknowledge to ourselves that all we can do in one ten-week course, with fifteen students, a dozen papers, four conferences for each, is to create the awareness of basic principles necessary for real learning to begin. And then they are gone from us, unleashed on hapless colleagues in other departments.

If we were as convinced as I wish we could be that all faculty in every discipline cared about good writing, and practiced it themselves, then we'd worry more about this unleashing on the one hand -- and less on the other. I suspect that my College is not alone in engendering examples of official prose like the following:

It seems appropriate to provide a forum for soliciting comments which can be attended by all major constituents and yet not in such numbers as to prove to be unwieldy. Therefore, meetings have been scheduled, and it is hoped that all concerned have an opportunity to have their input represented. These meetings are intended to be parallel sessions which would solicit comments and would also engage in any dialogue thought to be germane in restructuring procedures in the future.

When official pronouncements such as these are published, how can we complain about the simple blunders of the innocent!

Had we adequate staff, we would do what we have known for some time we should be doing, namely requiring students to take writing courses for a year or more, and, more horrible even than that, demanding that they write decent prose in psychology courses and philosophy courses and biology courses as well as in English courses.

When I cast back to my earliest experiences teaching college freshmen, I have to ask what to make of our diminished students today. For whatever reasons, their working vocabulary is no better than that of Gua, the talking chimpanzee. For the last ten years, I've asked my students to compile lists of unrecognized words met with in

their reading, unrecognized words like: abject, expedient, vindicate, spatial, venerate, chary, sultry, insular, solicitude, avers, misled, homogeneous, oblique. To see the freshman faces light up in 1977 at the prospect of regular vocabulary drill is to recognize one of the rewards we teachers have reaped by surviving the Sixties.

For whatever reasons, the only cultural allusions that are safe to make nowadays are to T.V. programs. Over the years, I have asked my freshmen to list five or six of the books they read and were familiar with before college. Silently, I have watched Silas Marner being replaced by Great Expectations being replaced by Catcher in the Rye, being replaced by nothing in common at all any more. Biblical allusions, classical allusions, historical references -- all miss their mark. Allusions to Caesar salad dressing may be recognized -- and to Marathon Man, but not much else. Even children's classics are slipping away. A survey of the thirty-five students in a Children's Literature course last winter turned up only five who had read Alice in Wonderland, three Wind in the Willows, and as few Charlotte's Web, though I have no doubt that the recent television cartoon will produce a surge in the latter's popularity.

For whatever reasons, we cannot use common grammatical terms for the parts of sentences anymore. In order to recommend changes in sentence structure we negotiate in baby-talk. "You have a dangling

modifier here -- it has to refer to a subject." "What's a modifier?" "What's a subject?" "Your pronoun doesn't agree with its antecedent." "What's a pronoun, an antecedent, agreement"? There was a time when I feared that the rising tide of high school students trained by Paul Roberts in transformational grammar would meet the ebb-tide of college faculty still saluting James Sledd -- and the result would be Babel. Groundless alarm. The tides have met, and the result is silence.

What I see then are this generation's unlettered students panting after learning, eager to develop infant skills, rendered breathless by their enthusiasm for handbook drills about the parts of speech, filling the corridors outside the remedial reading office, nagging student rhetoric assistants for extra conference time, signing up for advanced rhetoric instead of spring softball. "The hungry sheep look up and are not fed."

For the sake of the clerk of Oxenford, let's not muff it again. When we march resolutely back to the basics, let us know what we are marching to, and let us all march to the same drummer.

The tattoo that drummer is sounding is not a retreat but a summons to accept our destiny as teachers of reading and writing. Not in the narrow and mechanistic way that "Back to the Basics" would have us practice, but in the more enlightened way that we have been developing for the last dozen years or so -- acknowledging

that our prevailing ideal is not to make a great body of grammatical pedants or literary writers, but to enable students to think their thoughts into the best expression possible, to record their feelings with accuracy and honesty, and to feel the importance of putting everything into good form (this is a quotation from Rollo Brown's book, by the way).

How in the world did we ever get into the fix we are in, abused by parents, journalists, and each other?

The teaching profession has in its charge during their most impressionable years the entire citizenry of this country. How is it that we have amongst them so few advocates and friends! If we have known for decades that we must teach reading and writing coordinately, carefully, continuously, closely, how is it that the conditions of our employment interfere even more now with the proper practice of our profession? How many years has it been since the NCTE published its standard course load for high school English teachers: four sections with twenty-five students each? And how many School Boards have been willing to honor this standard? Why have we not been able to plead our case more successfully, all of us experts in the language arts?

Only a crisis allows us to effect change, it seems, and the pressures of crisis generally lead to the stupidest excesses of revisionism. Unless we stand guard, those old workbooks are going to come out of the closet; whole units of grammar teaching, once again

divorced from any relevance to writing or speaking, will be mandated. Required freshman composition courses will reappear in college catalogues, with droves of overworked and underprepared T.A.'s assigned to teach them.

And if we are going to administer proficiency tests, how are we going to prepare our students to take those tests? This is the question of: Where are the language arts going? Well, let us acknowledge that "Students are going to be tested," and then let us frankly recognize that now we are on our mettle to direct the revival of the English teacher's arts. If we don't, others will do it, and do it in a less than delicate way.

In an essay in Salmagundi, George Steiner observes that

If we are serious about our business, we shall have to teach reading. We shall have to teach it from the humblest level of rectitude, the parsing of a sentence, the grammatical diagnoses of a proposition, the scanning of a line of verse, through its many layers of performative means and referential assumptions, all the way to [the] ideal of complete collaboration between writer and reader....

We can be no less meticulous in the teaching of writing. Such teaching does not require any special mystical initiation by teacher and student. It must begin early, as it did for the literate French boy about whom Rollo Brown so lovingly wrote, who learned to write by writing, and reading, and writing, and revising and revising. (He was, of course, laboring in an age that expected its students to work.) Only elementary school teachers who have a

solid grounding in the theory and practice of the teaching of composition will be able to conduct the sort of careful, structured education in the art of language, in the art of composition both written and spoken, that every child must enter into at the earliest stage of innocent receptivity. Freedom and discipline was the theme of the Sixties. Unfortunately for today's condition of literacy, only the first part has been honored.

We are learning more about what we should do. The latest and most useful text on the subject of basic literacy is one just published, written by Mina Shaughnessy, entitled Errors and Expectations. In this book, which is the fruit of years of work with students in the open admissions program at C.U.N.Y., we find for the first time a serious attempt to organize and explain the kinds of errors that students with undeveloped powers of self-expression commonly commit.

There are enough texts now available for the profession to begin to exercise its own right to teach what it knows it must teach in the way in which it knows it must teach.

We have learned from our own experience that the first step in the teaching of composition is to establish common criteria of judgment, to come to some agreement about the kinds of errors to eradicate and the methods of doing this; and the second step is for us who teach composition to compose ourselves, and to subject our own

writing to the editorial opinion of our colleagues.

We've got to be willing to take the responsibility for teaching our students ourselves on the level at which we find them. We've got to agree to work with each other on all levels, elementary and secondary schools and colleges, to establish goals, methods, content, and sequence. Unless we are willing to practice what we preach -- first he wrought and afterward he taught -- politics will be the teacher.

A model for the kind of cooperation that should lie in the future for practitioners of the language arts is provided by the Bay Area Writing Project, a writing improvement program launched at the University of California at Berkeley four years ago. As it was originally designed, the program offered intensive summer writing clinics on the Berkeley campus for composition teachers from elementary schools, high schools, and colleges in the surrounding area. That project is now about to expand throughout California and to other centers in the country.

We, in Minnesota, would do well to think actively about establishing a cooperative program of our own. It is true that we have been doing this in a sporadic way for the last fifteen years or so, but the results have not been as impressive as they ought to be. Why should we not join together in summer programs and in

in-service programs in which there is a genuine sharing between public school teachers and post-secondary school faculty?

If the language arts are to be rescued from the moribund condition in which they are said to be, if we are to claim that the report of their death has been greatly exaggerated, then we must join together.

Jean Stafford concluded her elegy over the English language by remarking that if H.W. Fowler, whose Modern English Usage is the most dazzling record of a temper tantrum ever written, were alive today, he would die.

Very well, then, let us acknowledge that the times are indeed out of joint. And then let us agree that it will be exhilarating to be amongst those who can try to set them right. I think none of us can be under any illusion about the difficulty that lies in wait for the high school teacher who receives students from the elementary school who have not got in the habit of careful expression, who have no zest for the creative use of language, who have not developed the attention span to sit through anything moving at a slower pace than Starsky and Hutch. To receive such students in classes of thirty or more is bound to cause a loss of teacherly joy. For college faculty to receive students whose impoverished vocabulary makes them painfully inarticulate, and whose syntactical insecurities render their inarticulacies obscure, is for those faculties to

round upon their colleagues in the secondary schools and accuse them of abdicating their responsibility to teach English in favor of teaching collage-making. Recriminations are bad for the spirit.

I turn now for my concluding epigraph from the world of ornithology to the world of botany. "Out of this nettle, recrimination, let us pluck this flower, cooperation." The happiest outcome of this Conference will be pledges made by us all, from college to elementary school, to join together to go forward to the Basics of our own educated choice.

#### DREAMS OF DUCKS

Stephen Dunning  
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I  
This dream recurs, ducks caught  
by an instant freeze  
webbed feet firm in the ice  
bodies twisted side to side  
heads jerking. The marsh grasses  
rice, cattails; cracks and echoes  
of shotguns far away  
hunters invisible in blinds  
drunks before sunrise, voices  
staggering across the still silver  
of Lake Mille Lacs. The dream  
tries to divert me  
from ducks twisting  
side to side, father and me  
stiff in our boats, decoys  
bobbing and nodding, alive  
in the quiet surface of Mille Lacs  
splinters of daylight  
coming through the blind  
our feet firm in the ice