

IRON

IRON WAS A SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY-BASED LITERARY MAGAZINE THAT RAN SOME 14 ISSUES BEGINNING IN 1966 THROUGH 1972, AND THEN FOLLOWED WITH A SECOND SERIES OF SIX ISSUES THAT ENDED IN 1978. THE REMARKS THAT FOLLOW PERTAIN PRIMARILY TO THE FIRST SERIES OF THE MAGAZINE. IRON—BOTH SERIES—WAS PRODUCED BY STUDENTS OF ROBIN BLASER AND/OR THE NEW AMERICAN POETRY, THE LITERARY MOVEMENT BY THE PUBLICATION OF DONALD M. ALLEN'S 1960 ANTHOLOGY OF THE SAME NAME.

ALLEN'S ANTHOLOGY FEATURED A SERIES OF AMERICAN POETS WORKING IN THE ROUGHLY-DEFINED INTELLECTUAL AND FORMAL LINE FORGED BY EZRA POUND AND WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, WHICH ARGUED FOR A POETIC LINE AND DICTION DICTATED BY THE INDIVIDUAL'S ABILITY TO THINK, COMPOSE AND SPEAK IT WITHOUT DISGUIISING OR UNDERMINING THE PARTICULARITIES OF HIS OR HER PRIVATE AND PUBLIC IDENTITY, WHICH WERE TREATED AS ONE AND THE SAME. THE LEADING POETS OF THE NEW AMERICAN POETRY MOVEMENT WERE CHARLES OLSON, ROBERT DUNCAN, ROBERT CREELEY, DENISE LEVERTOV, ALLEN GINSBERG, GARY SNYDER, EDWARD DORN, AND FRANK O'HARA.

BECAUSE IRON CAME OUT OF THE WEST COAST, AND MOST OF THE YOUNG WRITERS INVOLVED WERE STUDENTS OF ROBIN BLASER, THE MAGAZINE TENDED TO MOVE, WHENEVER IT COULD ELUDE THE INFLUENCE OF CHARLES OLSON, TO ROBERT DUNCAN'S MORE ORPHIC MUSIC, WHICH INCLUDED THE THEN-RECENTLY DECEASED BUT MORE INTELLECTUALLY ROWDY JACK SPICER, AND BLASER HIMSELF, WHO HAD ACCEPTED A FACULTY POST AT SFU IN 1966 AND WAS AT THAT POINT IN HIS CAREER EXPANDING HIS CONCERNS BEYOND THE LIMITS OF HIS MENTORS AND PEERS, AT LEAST IN INTELLECTUAL QUALITY AND RANGE. OLSON'S APPROACH TO COMPOSITION, IN THE EARLY YEARS OF HIS CAREER, HAD BEEN TO POLITICIZE THE PROCESSES INVOLVED. DUNCAN'S APPROACH WAS TO INJECT A POWERFUL HOMEROERIC CHARGE INTO THE MECHANICS OF COMPOSITION WITHOUT ARGUING AGAINST OLSON'S POLITICIZATIONS. THE TWO STREAMS PROVIDED US WITH AN ATTRACTIVE BALANCE, PARTICULARLY WITH BLASER'S GENTLE GUIDANCE.

THE INITIAL PARTICIPANTS IN IRON (NOT ALL OF WHOM PUBLISHED WORK IN IT) WERE, IN REVERSE ALPHABETICAL ORDER, RENEE VAN HALM, SHARON THESEN,

JIM TAYLOR, HENK AND TANYA SUIJS, COLIN STUART, KEN LINDEMERE (WHO LATER NAMED HIS NORTH VANCOUVER MUSIC STORE "IRON MUSIC"), NEAP HOOVER, ALBAN GOULDEN, AND BRIAN FAWCETT. OTHERS WHO BECAME INVOLVED OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL YEARS INCLUDED VICTORIA WALKER, KARL SIEGLER, STAN PERSKY, TOM MCGAULEY, GLADYS HINDMARCH, BRETT ENEMARK, MICHAEL BOUGHN, AND CLIFF ANDSTEIN. BRETT ENEMARK EVENTUALLY EDITED MOST OF THE SECOND SERIES. WE GOT GENEROUS INFUSIONS OF ENERGY AND NO LITTLE AMOUNT OF PRODUCTION MONEY FROM RALPH MAUD, WHO HAD BEEN HIRED BY SFU TO A FULL PROFESSORSHIP AS A DYLAN THOMAS SCHOLAR, BUT ARRIVED IN VANCOUVER A CHARLES OLSON ACOLYTE WHO WAS RELUCTANT TO DISCUSS THOMAS UNLESS UNDER DURESS.

THERE WERE OTHER PROFESSORIAL INFLUENCES ON US BEYOND THOSE OF BLASER AND MAUD, OF COURSE. THE HORDE OF TIGHT-ASSED ACADEMIC CLERKS WHO HAVE NOW TAUGHT SEVERAL GENERATIONS OF STUDENTS TO HATE LITERATURE AS QUAINLY OBTUSE AND OBSCURE ARRANGEMENTS OF LANGUAGE WRITTEN BY UNRULY INDIVIDUALS AS MUCH IN NEED OF SUPERVISION AS THEIR WORK NEED EXPERT SIMPLIFICATION AND REORGANIZATION COMPRISED MUCH OF THE SIMON FRASER FACULTY, DESPITE ITS UNINTENTIONALLY NEWMANIAN BEGINNINGS. MANY OF THE CLERKS WERE AMERICANS WHO COULDN'T BELIEVE THEIR GOOD FORTUNE AT FINDING THEMSELVES ON A TRACK TO ACHIEVE EARLY TENURE WHILE THEY WEREN'T MUCH OLDER THAN THEIR STUDENTS.

THE PROFESSORS WEREN'T ALL BAD PEOPLE, EITHER. THERE WAS LEONARD MINSKY, WHO TAUGHT SOME OF US MIDDLE ENGLISH WITH A BROOKLYN ACCENT (AND OTHERS OF US HOW HAZARDOUS TO AN ACADEMIC CAREER POSING AS A REVOLUTIONARY COULD BE IF ONE DIDN'T HAVE TENURE). PERHAPS THE MOST SANGUINE INFLUENCE WAS THAT OF THE LATE ROB DUNHAM, WHO TAUGHT US TO RESPECT THE ROMANTIC POETS, EVEN WILLIAM WORDSWORTH. GEORGE BOWERING, A FINE POET IN HIS OWN RIGHT, JOINED THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT AT SFU AROUND 1970, BUT WE REGARDED GEORGE AS A CONTEMPORARY, AND THUS WERE QUITE WILLING TO PLAY BASEBALL WITH HIM BUT NOT TAKE HIS COURSES OR TREAT HIM VERY SERIOUSLY AS A TEACHER OF POETICS.

IRON APPEARED IRREGULARLY AND IN CHANGING FORMATS. THE IRREGULARITY WAS LARGELY A PRODUCT OF THE LAZINESS OF ITS EDITORIAL BOARD, AND TO A LESSOR EXTENT, OF THE GENERAL SHIFT IN GENDER PRIVILEGES THAT WAS OCCURRING AT THE TIME. IN 1966 EDUCATED WOMEN CONTRIBUTED TO THE GENERAL HUBBUB ONLY WHILE THEY WERE TYPING MANUSCRIPTS AND STENCILS FOR THE GUYS, BUT WERE ABOUT TO NOTICE THAT BEING AS TALENTED AND INTELLIGENT AS THE MEN AROUND THEM ENTITLED THEM TO AN EQUAL DEGREE OF ARROGANCE AND LACK OF INDUSTRY. THE FORMAT CHANGES IN IRON WERE DICTATED BY THESE FACTORS, AND ALSO BY PRINT TECHNOLOGY IMPROVEMENTS: MIMEOGRAPHY TO OFFSET TO HIGH SPEED XEROGRAPHY. THE LAST ISSUE OF THE FIRST SERIES WAS PRINTED ON A XEROX 9200, THE FIRST OF THE NOW-UBIQUITOUS HIGH-SPEED PHOTOCOPY MACHINES.

THERE WAS ANOTHER DYNAMIC CONTRIBUTING TO IRON'S INERTIA AND PRODUCTION CHAOS. BY THE EARLY 1970s, MOST OF THE WRITERS INVOLVED IN IRON HAD EITHER LEFT THE UNIVERSITY OR WERE IN GRADUATE SCHOOL, WHICH IS TO SAY, THEY NOW BELIEVED THAT THE PHYSICAL WORK OF PUTTING OUT LITERARY MAGAZINES OUGHT TO BE DONE BY UNDERGRADUATES OR OTHER UNDERLINGS EVEN THOUGH IT HAD BECOME VERY DIFFICULT TO FIND ANYONE IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING WILLING TO PLAY SECOND FIDDLE TO A BUNCH OF SCRUFFY POETS WITH NO MONEY.

BECAUSE IRON EVOLVED ALONG WITH THE YOUNG WRITERS WHO WERE PRODUCING IT—VERY RAPIDLY AND WITH NO GUARANTEE OF IMPROVEMENT—THERE WAS NO "TYPICAL" ISSUE OF IRON. BUT THE 12TH ISSUE OF THE MAGAZINE, APPEARING IN 1971 UNDER THE TITLE "SERIOUS IRON", ACCURATELY ENCAPSULATES MOST OF THE CHARACTERISTICS AND PREOCCUPATIONS THE MAGAZINE HAD, INCLUDING ITS NOT-ALWAYS-CHARMING INATTENTION TO FINE DETAIL. "SERIOUS IRON" ISN'T SEQUENCED WITH EARLIER OR LATER ISSUES, NOR IS IT DATED EXCEPT FOR AN OCTOBER 1971 NOTATION ON THE EDITORIAL PAGE, WHICH IDENTIFIES THE EDITOR AS "LINDA PARKER". MS. PARKER WAS A YOUNG MASSACHUSETTS VISUAL ARTIST WHO WAS CLOSE TO CHARLES OLSON DURING HIS LAST YEARS. SHE'D WRITTEN A LETTER TO BRETT ENEMARK CRITICIZING THE CHUMMINESS SHE'D DETECTED IN AN EARLIER ISSUE OF IRON, SUGGESTING THAT THE FRIVOLOUS PRACTICE OF DEDICATING POEMS TO ONE ANOTHER WAS MAKING IRON BOTH HARD FOR OUTSIDERS TO PENETRATE, AND MORE THAN A LITTLE UNGRACIOUS.

THE FORM "SERIOUS IRON" TOOK WAS A COUNTERATTACK ON MS. PARKER'S VIEW OF POETRY—AND OF US. ON THE COVER IS A PHOTOGRAPH OF TOM MCGAULEY, SHARON THESEN, ALBAN GOULDEN, BRETT ENEMARK, AND ME GAZING SOLEMNLY AT THE CAMERA, DRESSED IN WHAT WE IMAGINED WAS A PARODY OF POLITE WRITERLY GARB. BOOKS WERE PILED ON THE TABLE, AND THE ONLY THINGS THAT GIVE US AWAY AS NOT, RESPECTIVELY, ROBERT LOWELL, MARIANNE MOORE, RICHARD WILBUR, KARL SHAPIRO AND W.S. MERWIN, ARE THE FINE DETAILS: A CHEAP PLASTIC LAMP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE TABLE, A CLAMP-LAMP ON A CORD RUNNING DIAGONALLY TO A WINDOW THAT SHINES DIRECTLY AT THE CAMERA, AND THE MAP OF NORTH CENTRAL BRITISH COLUMBIA—STOLEN FROM THE SFU LIBRARY'S COPY OF DANIEL WILLIAM HARMON'S DIARIES—TACKED TO THE WALL.

THE BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES AT THE END OF THE 50-PAGE ISSUE WERE A RUN-ON GAG TESTIFYING TO THE EXTREME PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL SERIOUSNESS OF EVERYONE APPEARING IN THE ISSUE, AND THE EDITORIAL PAGE THAT FOLLOWED, PURPORTEDLY WRITTEN BY PARKER HERSELF, HAS HER SAYING THAT "SERIOUSLY, I THINK VANCOUVER OUGHT TO SMARTEN UP, INJECT SOME GRAVITY INTO THE FORM OF ITS MAGAZINES, AND PERHAPS TAKE A BATH NOW AND AGAIN. THE PARIS REVIEW IS A GOOD MAGAZINE TO EMULATE, IT'S ALWAYS OBJECTIVE AND JUDICIOUS AND WE ALL KNOW THAT LEADS IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION. DON'T WE?" THE "EDITOR" GOES ON IN A SIMILARLY HEAVY-HANDED WAY TO DENY THAT SHELLEY, BYRON AND KEATS SPENT TIME TOGETHER IN ITALY, AND HACKS SOME POOR POET NAMED FREDERICK BOCK FOR PUBLISHING TWO POEMS IN ISSUE VII-3 OF THE QUARTERLY REVIEW OF LITERATURE THAT "HAD UTTERLY NO EFFECT ON ANYONE", BLAMING THE

"FIERCELY OBJECTIVE EDITORS" OF QRL FOR ARRANGING THE ISSUE TO ENSURE THE NON-EFFECT.

OVERKILL? SURE. DID THE CHUMMINESS OF OUR SMALL COMMUNITY EXCLUDE OTHERS? YES, CERTAINLY—PATRICK LANE CARPS ABOUT IT TO THIS DAY. BUT THE EXCLUSIVITY HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH US THINKING WE WERE SUPERIOR BEINGS. WE'D CREATED IRON OUT OF MODEST MOTIVES AND WITH EQUALLY MODEST EXPECTATIONS. WE DIDN'T BOTHER TO MAKE THESE VISIBLE TO OTHERS BECAUSE WE THOUGHT THEY WERE SELF-EVIDENT.

SHORTLY AFTER I REACHED UNIVERSITY, I ASKED COMPOSER, EZRA POUND SCHOLAR AND MUSICAL EDUCATOR R. MURRAY SCHAFER, THEN PIONEERING THE UNIVERSITY'S COMMUNICATIONS DEPARTMENT, WHAT HE THOUGHT WERE THE BEST WAYS TO LEARN MY CRAFT AND GET MY WRITING INTO PRINT. I ADMIRER SCHAFER BECAUSE HE'D BEEN MAKING A CAREER OUT OF WITTY INSOLENCE IN THE FACE OF AUTHORITY, AND HIS ANSWER WAS CHARACTERISTICALLY UNCONVENTIONAL—AND USEFUL.

"WHEN YOU'RE STARTING OFF," HE TOLD ME, "YOU LEARN BEST FROM YOUR PEERS, PEOPLE YOU CAN ARGUE THINGS OUT WITH IN PERSON, PEOPLE YOUR OWN AGE. SO GO OFF AND MAKE YOUR OWN MAGAZINE. USE IT TO PUBLISH YOUR OWN WORK WHILE YOU'RE LEARNING YOUR CRAFT. DON'T SEND OUT YOUR POEMS SO STRANGERS CAN JUDGE HOW CLOSELY THEY RESEMBLE THE ONES THEY'RE WRITING. AND NEVER MIND TRYING TO IMPRESS THE BIG SHOTS. THEY'RE OLD, THEY'RE TIRED, AND THEY'LL ALWAYS LIKE YOU BEST WHILE YOU'RE ON THEIR FARM TEAM. WHEN YOUR WORK IS GOOD ENOUGH, THE PEOPLE WHO WILL GET IT BEFORE A BIGGER AUDIENCE WILL COME LOOKING FOR YOU."

"THE BEST THING ABOUT BEING A STUDENT," HE'D CONCLUDED, "IS THAT YOU GET TO BE A STUDENT. DON'T LET ANYONE CHEAT YOU OUT OF THAT ADVANTAGE."

A FEW WEEKS LATER, WE STARTED IRON CONSCIOUSLY ON THE BASIS OF THAT ADVICE. IT WAS SO NAMED BECAUSE IRON ISN'T GOLD OR LEAD, AND IT ISN'T REFINED ENOUGH TO BE CALLED STEEL. IT WAS AMONG THE BASIC RAW MATERIALS OF HUMAN IMPROVEMENT, WHICH IS WHAT WE BELIEVED ABOUT POETRY. I'D LIKE TO PRETEND THAT THE CHOICE OF "IRON" FOR OUR MAGAZINE'S NAME REFLECTED OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE IMPORTANCE OF IRONY IN ART, BUT THAT WOULD BE A LIE. WHAT I CAN SAY IS THAT IN AN ERA WHERE MANY LITERARY MAGAZINES UNDERTOOK TO REPRESENT VASTLY MORE THAN WAS REASONABLE (WEST COAST REVIEW, CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE, WHILE TOO MANY OF THE OTHERS STOLE THEIR NAMES AND THEIR ENERGY FROM CULTURES THAT WOULD FIND THEIR APPROPRIATIONS PUERILE AND EXPLOITATIVE, IRON DIDN'T CLAIM TO BE ANYTHING AT ALL EXCEPT BASIC STUDENT INQUIRY, AND INSOLENCE.

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IN 1971, I THOUGHT "SERIOUS IRON" WAS VERY WITTY, AND I CARRIED THAT RECOLLECTION ACROSS THE INTERVENING YEARS AS IRON'S BEST MOMENT WITHOUT

REALLY ASKING MYSELF WHY. IT WASN'T UNTIL I LOOKED THROUGH AT A PHOTOCOPY OF THE ISSUE A FEW WEEKS AGO THAT I REALIZED I DIDN'T RECALL A SINGLE PIECE OF WRITING IT CONTAINED. AND AS I READ THROUGH THE DIFFERENT PIECES, IT BECAME CLEAR TO ME THAT I WAS READING MOST OF THEM FOR THE FIRST TIME. WHAT STRIKES ME AS A CLOSE-TO-DISINTERESTED READER IN THE YEAR 2000, IS THE DISJUNCTION BETWEEN THE WRITING IN THE MAGAZINE AND THE MAGAZINE ITSELF. THE INDIVIDUAL PIECES OF WRITING IN "SERIOUS IRON" ARE PARACLETE TO THE POINT OF SYCOPHANCY, SERIOUS TO THE POINT OF WEEPY EARNESTNESS AND FILLED WITH THE COSMOLOGICAL SENTIMENTALITY THAT CHARACTERIZED, IN PARTICULAR, CHARLES OLSON'S LATE WORK. BY CONTRAST, THE MAGAZINE IS IRONIC, PLAYFUL AND STUDIOUSLY DISRESPECTFUL OF AUTHORITY.

THERE WAS A REASON FOR THIS DISJUNCTION. MOST OF THE YOUNG WRITERS INVOLVED IN STARTING IRON WERE FROM SMALL TOWNS IN WESTERN CANADA—SHARON THESEN, BRETT ENEMARK, AND I WERE FROM PRINCE GEORGE, B.C.; NEAP HOOVER WAS FROM VERNON, B.C.; GLADYS HINDMARCH FROM LADYSMITH ON VANCOUVER ISLAND; AND ALBAN GOULDEN WAS FROM MEDICINE HAT, ALBERTA. WE WERE AWED, IN OUR DIFFERENT WAYS, BY CONTACT WITH WHAT SEEMED TO US "REAL" WRITERS, AND HONESTLY ATTRACTED TO THE RAGGED-EDGED VERNACULAR OF THE NEW AMERICAN POETRY. THE POETRY IT EXPOSED US TO WAS BETTER TUNED TO OUR HORMONE-DRIVEN PREOCCUPATIONS THAN THE STERILE AESTHETIC RECORDS OF EMOTIONAL ATTRITION, LIP-BITTEN INCAPACITY, AND MENDACIOUS SILENCES THAT FILLED ACADEMIC LYRIC POETRY IN THOSE YEARS. WE WANTED TO WRITE POETRY, SURE, BUT WE WEREN'T PREPARED TO BE TEA-SIPPING LOSERS IN A WORLD OF MINIATURES.

IN ADDITION, I THINK THAT SOME OF THE MOSTLY HETEROSEXUAL WRITERS IN IRON WERE DRAWN TO OLSON—I WAS PERHAPS FOREMOST AMONG THEM—BECAUSE OLSON WAS SO FRANTICALLY HETEROSEXUAL, AND THUS, AT ROOT, FULL OF THE HETERODOX CONFUSIONS THAT SPICER/BLASER/DUNCAN SIMPLY DIDN'T EXPERIENCE. NO ONE HAD BOTHERED TO TELL US, YOU SEE, THAT POETRY HAS HISTORICALLY BEEN THE ONE BRANCH OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE AND ENTERPRISE WITHIN WHICH ONE WAS ABLE TO OPENLY SEARCH FOR ONESELF, FOR ONE'S LIKENESS, AND FOR ONENESS ITSELF. IT IS IN THE NATURE OF THE ORPHIC TO BE UNIQUELY OPEN TO THE HOMOGENEOUS, AND TO HOMOSEXUALITY, THE LATTER OF WHICH HAD JUST BARELY BEGUN TO BE FREED FROM ITS PROTECTIVE ENCODINGS IN 1970.

IT IS ALSO POSSIBLE THAT WE WERE IMMUNIZED TO SOME DEGREE—AGAINST THE HOMO/ORPHIC BIAS, AGAINST OUR TEACHERS' INTELLECTUAL SHORTCOMINGS AND AGAINST THE EARLY NEW AGE EXCESSES OF THE NEW AMERICAN POETRY—BY GROWING UP IN SMALL TOWNS, WHICH EQUIPPED US WITH AN INNATE SCEPTICISM ABOUT HOW RELIABLE PEOPLE WITH POWER COULD BE. WE WEREN'T QUITE AT THE POINT REACHED BY A LATER GENERATION OF WRITERS, WHO DON'T TRUST ANYONE WHO HASN'T LOST A LIMB IN AN INDUSTRIAL ACCIDENT, BUT WE UNDERSTOOD THE CONCERN.

OUR SCEPTICISM GOT US AT LEAST TO THE POINT WHERE WE WERE ABLE TO CRITIQUE THE MOSTLY PHONY AND SELF-AGGRANDIZING ENTERPRISE OF MAGAZINE WRITING AND PUBLISHING POETRY. I THINK THAT SAME INNATE SCEPTICISM ENABLED SOME OF US, DESPITE OUR AWE, TO GLIMPSE THE SELF-ABSORPTION AND EGOMANIA OF OLSON AND DUNCAN. THOUGH WE WERE UNDER THEIR INFLUENCE, WE TRIED TO DEFLATE SOME SMALL CORNER OF IT TO DIMENSIONS MANAGEABLE ENOUGH TO IMAGINE OURSELVES TAKING AN ACTIVE PART IN IT. IF OUR MENTOR BLASER FOUND OUR INSOLENCE TROUBLING, HE NEVER LET IT SHOW, EXCEPT TO MAKE IT VERY CLEAR TO US THAT JACK SPICER WOULD HAVE APPROVED.

THE DIFFERENT PIECES OF WRITING IN SERIOUS IRON ARE DISTRACTINGLY FULL OF TYPOGRAPHICAL ERRORS (EVEN SUBSTITUTING "PEOM" FOR "POEM" AT ONE POINT) AND IT IS INFUSED WITH SILLY ASTROLOGICAL AND TAROT CARD REFERENCES AND A NOW-EMBARRASSING FAN CLUB MENTALITY ABOUT CHARLES OLSON. THE OPENING PIECE, FOR INSTANCE, IS A SERIES OF NOTES RALPH MAUD WROTE AFTER VISITING OLSON IN GLOUCESTER A YEAR OR SO BEFORE HE DIED OF LIVER CANCER IN 1970. THIRTY YEARS LATER I CAN JUST BARELY PENETRATE MAUD'S ENCODINGS, AND THAT ONLY BECAUSE I WAS INVOLVED IN TRANSCRIBING THE LECTURE OLSON GAVE WHEN HE VISITED VANCOUVER IN 1965 THAT WAS EVENTUALLY PUBLISHED UNDER MAUD'S EDITORSHIP AS CAUSAL MYTHOLOGY. ON THEIR MERITS, MAUD'S NOTES DIDN'T DESERVE THE LEAD SPOT IN THE MAGAZINE, BUT WHOOPS, I RECALL THAT MAUD HAD PRETTY MUCH FINANCED THAT PARTICULAR ISSUE BY GETTING IT PRINTED FOR US IN THE UNIVERSITY'S PRINT ROOM.

MORE OR LESS ACCIDENTALLY, MAUD'S SHORT-HAND MEMOIR ALSO DOCUMENTS THE ARROGANCE OF A CERTAIN KIND OF AMERICAN CULTURAL IMPERIALISM MADE NOTORIOUS BY ROBIN MATHEWS AROUND THE SAME TIME. MOST OF THE AMERICANS WE KNEW, LIKE BLASER AND STAN PERSKY, QUICKLY ACCLIMATIZED TO CANADA AND HAVE SINCE BEHAVED MUCH MORE INTELLIGENTLY AND CIVILLY THAN THE VAST MAJORITY OF THOSE OF US WHO WERE NATIVE BORN. BUT IN 1970, THE DISCOURSE AROUND CHARLES OLSON WAS ASTONISHING FOR ITS CULTURAL ARROGANCE, AND IT IS THAT IMPRESSION, NOT MAUD'S REVERENCE FOR OLSON, THAT ARTICULATES MOST CLEARLY.

"SERIOUS IRON" PROCEEDS WITH EXERPTS FROM GLADYS (NOW MARIA) HINDMARCH'S ACCOUNT OF HER FIRST AND ONLY PREGNANCY, AND THAT IS FOLLOWED BY TOM MCGAULEY'S TRANSCRIPTION OF A JULY 1971 LECTURE BY BRITISH POET AND EDITOR JEREMY PRYNNE ON OLSON'S MAXIMUS IV, V, & VI, WHICH HE HAD SHEPHERDED THROUGH BRITISH PUBLISHER CAPE GOLIARD (JONATHAN CAPE) IN 1968. THE ISSUE DWINDLED FROM THERE WITH SOME VERY GOOD POEMS BY VICTORIA WALKER, AN EXTREMELY PERSONAL AND AMBIGUOUS ONE BY ME, SOME OTHER OBSCURE SELF-DECLARATIONS AND THEN PETERED OUT WITH AN OLD ROBERT CREELEY ESSAY WE PRINTED UNDER THE HAVANA COPYRIGHT CONVENTIONS. NONE REQUIRE COMMENT HERE EXCEPT THE TRANSCRIPT OF PRYNNE'S LECTURE.

IN GIVING PRYNNE'S TRANSCRIBED LECTURE SO PROMINENT A PLACE IN THE ISSUE WE WERE ALLOWING AN EDITOR TO REVIEW HIS OWN BOOK, BUT NO ONE SEEMED TO THINK THAT WAS ODD. IN OUR MINDS, OLSON WAS ALWAYS AS MUCH

AN EMBATTLED AND UNDERAPPRECIATED "CAUSE" AS A LITERARY FIGURE. WE WEREN'T THE ONLY ONES WHO SAW HIM THAT WAY, EITHER. PRYNNE'S DEFENSE OF OLSON'S NEW BOOK, WHICH NEARLY EVERYONE WAS FINDING TO BE A MIXTURE OF INCOMPREHENSIBLE MYTHOGRAPHIC RAVINGS INTERSPERSED BY THE SAME KIND OF FRAGMENTARY LYRICISMS THAT MARK POUND'S LAST CANTOS, WAS THAT IT WAS "NOBLE, SIMPLE" AND NOT CONFESSIONAL OR LYRIC.

"WE PARTICIPATE" PRYNNE SAYS, IN AN ELLIPTICAL RHETORIC WORTHY OF OLSON HIMSELF, "IN THE CONDITION OF BEING. AND THE CONDITION OF BEING IS THANKFULLY BEYOND THE CONDITION OF MEANING. OH YES, THE WHOLE LANGUAGE HAS THAT VIBRANCY, THAT STEADY VIBRANCY OF THE SINGULAR CURVATURE WHICH IS EQUIVALENT TO WHAT WAS ANCIENTLY CALLED NOBILITY."

PARSE THAT IF YOU CAN. I COULDN'T AT THE TIME, AND TODAY IT'S EVEN MORE OPAQUE. BUT IN 1971, I UNDERSTOOD ITS EXPRESSIVE CONTENT, AND I GUESS I STILL DO. PRYNNE GAVE HIS LECTURE, REMEMBER, NOT QUITE A YEAR AFTER OLSON'S PREMATURE DEATH, WHICH BY ITSELF PREVENTED ANYONE IN HIS EXTENDED COMMUNITY FROM MAKING A FAIR-MINDED EVALUATION OF HIS LATER WORK, PRYNNE INCLUDED, WHO WAS AS DETECTABLY IN AWE OF THE GREAT MAN AS ANYONE IN THE AUDIENCE FOR THAT LECTURE. TODAY, IT SEEMS TO ME THAT OLSON'S LATER WORK IS MUCH DIMINISHED IN SKILL AND COHERENCE FROM HIS EARLY POETRY AND IS HARD TO DEFEND IN OTHER THAN EXPRESSIVE TERMS. IN THOSE EARLY POEMS, OLSON HAD BEEN A CIVIC-MINDED WRITER GROUNDED IN A DETAIL-DRIVEN APPRECIATION FOR LOCAL HISTORICAL, BIOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS. HE'D USED THOSE CONTENTS, AND THE ENHANCEMENT OF CONTEXT THEY PROVIDED, TO WORK HIS WAY BEYOND THE POUND/ WILLIAMS-INSPIRED DISLIKE FOR THE LIMITATIONS OF EXISTING POETIC FORMS OF EXPRESSION AND PERHAPS FOR ARTIFICE ITSELF, TO ONES THAT SEEMED MORE ACCURATELY LIBERATED AND LIBERATING. IT WAS A LAUDABLE IF QUIXOTIC UNDERTAKING, AND IT WAS ONE THAT HAD RUN AGROUND BY THE SAME COMMON CURRENTS THAT HAD PROVIDED ITS ESSENTIAL ENERGY: THE CULTURAL ASCENDANCE OF FIGURE OVER GROUND, AND THE VARIOUS SELF-DETERMINATION MOVEMENTS THAT HAVE SINCE MADE PARTISANS OF NEARLY EVERYONE ON THE PLANET WHILE ALIENATING EVERY COMMONALITY EXCEPT THE RIGHT OF CORPORATIONS TO EXCESSIVE PROFITS.

SOMETIME IN THE EARLY 1960S, I THINK CHARLES OLSON BECAME OBSESSED WITH IMPOSING A CAPRICIOUSLY SELF-INVOLVED AND POSSIBLY CLINICALLY MANIC-DEPRESSIVE "COSMOLOGY" ON ANYONE WHO CAME UNDER HIS INFLUENCE. HIS POETRY MOVED FROM AN ASSIGNABLE DECLARATIVENESS (MEANT TO COUNTER THE CONFESSIONAL LYRICISM HE LOATHED) TO A CELEBRATORY MODE THAT WAS ALTERNATELY SOARING IN ITS LYRICISM AND HECTORINGLY PEDANTIC ABOUT WHATEVER OBSCURE PIECE OF SCHOLARSHIP HE HAPPENED TO BE SHAKING BETWEEN HIS TEETH. MOST DAMNING, THE POEMS HE PRODUCED UNDER THESE CONDITIONS OF COMPOSITION ARE PRETTY WELL IMPENETRABLE UNLESS ONE BELIEVES, A PRIORI, IN THEIR COHERENCE.

NOW, THE YOUNG WRITERS IN IRON WERE ALSO SUSPICIOUS OF PURELY CONFESSIONAL LYRIC POETRY. TO US IT WAS BORING AND SELF-INVOLVED. OUR

INSTINCTS, BORNE OF THE INCIPIENT NUCLEAR ARMAGEDDON THAT HAD THREATENED TO RAIN DOWN ON US THROUGHOUT OUR CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE, TOLD US THAT OUR CONCERNS OUGHT TO BE EFFICIENT, SWIFT AS THOUGHT ITSELF, AND GLOBAL. FROM THERE WE WERE EASILY CONVINCED BY OLSON'S EARLY WORKS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCALISM AND SPECIFICITY BECAUSE IT MEANT THAT OUR PERCEPTIONS OF REALITY, EVEN IN OUR NON-GLOUCESTER OR SAN FRANCISCO PART OF THE WORLD, WERE POTENTIALLY AS AUTHENTIC AS THOSE OF ANYONE ELSE.

THE CLAIM OLSON—AND LATER HIS FOLLOWERS—MADE, THAT A BALANCING OF PARTICULARISM AND COSMOLOGY CONSTITUTED THE COMPOSITIONAL CONDITIONS FOR EPIC WAS, IN ADDITION, AS SEDUCTIVE AS IT WAS OPAQUE. IF YOU'VE GROWN UP WITH THE END OF THE WORLD CONSTANTLY AT HAND, IT WAS NATURAL TO WANT TO BE INVOLVED IN SOMETHING GRANDER THAN A LOT OF SUCKY-FACED SELF-THERAPY. BUT THE SCATTERING OF OLSON'S INTELLIGENCE THAT OCCURS WITH AND AFTER MAXIMUS IV, V, & VI LEFT ME SCRAMBLING FOR PERSPECTIVE, EVEN AT THE TIME. I KEPT THINKING THAT COSMOLOGY AND EPIC OUGHT TO BE MORE THAN A MATTER OF FLAMBOYANT FILTERING OF ONE'S SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES WITH THE MOON THROUGH THE TAROT PACK OR THE GREEK EARTH GODDESSES. BUT IT DIDN'T SEEM TO TROUBLE ANYONE ELSE, SO WHAT DID I KNOW?

WITH HINDSIGHT, ITS EASY TO RECOGNIZE THAT OLSON'S LATE ENTERPRISE—I REMAIN CONVINCED OF THE VALUE OF HIS EARLY WORK—WAS IN REALITY EPIC ONLY IN THE SENSE THAT OLSON WAS HIMSELF A PHYSICALLY EPIC CHARACTER: A VERY LARGE, STRANGE MAN WITH AN OVERWHELMING VITALITY AND A HURRICANE EGO. "I AM CHARLES OLSON: A COSMOS" WAS THE DECLARATIVE THEME THAT EMERGED EVERYWHERE FROM THIS SECOND, EXPANSIVE VERSION OF THE MAXIMUS POEMS. AS SMALL TOWN KIDS IN A NON-IMPERIAL COUNTRY, WE QUICKLY TRACED THIS BACK TO WALT WHITMAN'S PAX AMERICANA EGOMANIA, WHICH WE'D FOUND FUNNY ENOUGH THAT WE OFTEN PARODIED THE FAMOUS PHRASE USING THICK GERMAN ACCENTS: "ICH BIN VALT VITMAN, EIN COSMOS..."

NO DOUBT WE SHOULD HAVE BEEN MAKING FUN OF OLSON'S BOMBASTIC EXCESSES, AND IN OUR CONFUSED WAY, THAT'S PART OF WHAT THE FRAMING OF "SERIOUS IRON" WAS TRYING TO DO. BUT WE WERE ALSO "UNDER THE INFLUENCE"—OF OLSON'S MYSTIQUE, AND OF THE PEOPLE WHO HAD BEEN FLATTENED TO INTELLECTUAL TWO-DIMENSIONALITY BY PERSONAL CONTACT WITH THIS LARGE, GREAT MAN AND HIS LARGE, GREAT EPIC.

I HAD INKLINGS THAT THERE WAS SOMETHING AMISS IN OLSON'S BIG, SMILING PAX AMERICANA. HIS WAY OF CONFIDING IN US AS IF WE WERE ALL AMERICANS HACKLES ON THE BACK OF MY NECK. AS A CANADIAN AND AS A NORTHERNER, I DID NOT NATURALLY SHARE HIS NEW ENGLANDER'S JOHN WINTHROP SENSE OF BEING AMONG THE ELECT. WHERE I'D COME FROM, TO BE CHOSEN WAS TO BE SINGLED OUT. MY INSTINCTS WERE MORE ATTUNED TO KEEPING STILL AND HOPING THE BULLIES DIDN'T BEAT THE SHIT OUT OF ME FOR BEING LIPPY AND DIFFERENT. BUT MY RAISED HACKLES WERE, AS IT WERE, MERE SHIVERS OF IRRITATION, LESS COMPELLING THAN THE GENERAL HORMONAL RAGE OF BEING A MALE IN MY 20s, WHICH WAS MAKING ME MISTAKE THE LONELINESS OF ADULT LIFE

FOR COSMOLOGY, AND VICE VERSA. AND I SUPPOSE OLSON, IN HIS MADNESS, FED THAT RAGE IN WAYS FEW OTHER POETS OF THE ERA COULD HAVE.

THIRTY YEARS LATER, SOME OF OLSON'S WORK—THE EARLY ESSAYS AND THE CIVIC AND LOCALLY-GROUNDED POEMS OF MAXIMUS I-XXII—ARE COMPLICATED AND CONVOLUTED ENOUGH WITH REAL CONCERNS TO BE WORTHWHILE. BUT WHILE FRAGMENTS OF THE LATER WORK ACHIEVED A POWERFUL LYRICISM, TOO MUCH OF IT WAS FRAGMENT, INCOHERENT BOMBAST, AND BULLSHIT. THE ABSURD INTELLECTUAL ORTHODOXY OLSON INSPIRED SO OBSCURED THIS THAT IT WAS ALMOST A FULL DECADE BEFORE I WAS ABLE TO ADMIT TO MYSELF THAT I HAD UNDERSTOOD ALMOST NOTHING OF MAXIMUS IV, V, & VI AND NOTHING AT ALL OF THE POSTHUMOUSLY PUBLISHED THE MAXIMUS POEMS VOLUME THREE. I'D MERELY AGREED TO PRETEND I DID FOR SOCIAL REASONS. AND SO, I'VE SINCE FOUND, DID A LOT OF PEOPLE I STILL LIKE AND RESPECT. OLSON TAUGHT US TO WRITE AND THINK WITH A RESPECT FOR PARTICULARITY AND WITHOUT FEAR OF ABSTRACTION. THAT WAS GOOD. WHAT WAS DEBILITATING WAS THAT HE OFFERED US NO USEFUL CLUES ABOUT STRUCTURE AND WEIGHTING BETWEEN THE TWO. AND THE ZEITGEIST OF THE ERA, WHICH WAS MUCH MORE INTERESTED IN LIBERATING US FROM THE PAST THAN IN GIVING US A BALANCED EDUCATION, OFFERED NO TOOLS, EITHER.

YET HAVING SAID THAT, I WANT TO RECORD MY CONVICTION THAT IT WAS BETTER TO THINK COSMOLOGICALLY THAN NATIONALLY—AND MUCH BETTER TO BE FOOLISHLY PARTISAN TO A NOBLE ATTEMPT TO MAKE THE WORLD LARGER AND UNIFIED THROUGH THE POWERS OF LANGUAGE THAN TO BE AFFLICTED IN THE WAY WE ARE TODAY, FORCED TO ARTICULATE OUR UNDERSTANDINGS THROUGH OUR INDIVIDUAL COMPLEXES OF ETHNICITY AND PREFERENCE, AND THROUGH THE PHOBIAS THAT ETHNICITIES DON'T SEEM ABLE TO EXIST WITHOUT. THERE WAS LESS HATE, THEN, PARTICULARLY AMONGST LIBERAL-MINDED PEOPLE, WHICH IS WHAT SCHOLARS AND POETS AND STUDENTS ARE SUPPOSED TO BE. TODAY'S LIBERALS ARE NOW COMPELLED TO HATE ONE ANOTHER ALMOST AS VIRULENTLY AS PEOPLE HATED IN THE 1930S. TODAY LIBERALS HATE RAPISTS, RACISTS, MONETARISTS, MALE SUPREMACISTS, ABLEISTS, ENVIRONMENTALISTS, ALL THE WHILE WONDERING IF IT IS THEMSELVES THEY TRULY LOATHE, OR WHAT IT IS IN THEMSELVES THAT HAS BECOME SO HATEFUL. TODAY'S INTELLECTUAL AND ARTISTIC CLIMATES MAKE ME, FOR ONE, LONG FOR SOME EPIC, OR AT LEAST FOR SOME OF THE COSMOLOGY THAT IN OLSON MADE THE WORLD FEEL LARGE AND WELCOMING.

IT IS POSSIBLE—JUST BARELY—TO REGARD THE CONTENTS OF SERIOUS IRON AS OUR ATTEMPT AT MOURNING OLSON'S PASSING; OUR WAY OF RUEING THE DEPRESSING TRUTH THAT THE GREAT BIG FATHER HAD GONE OFF INTO THE AETHER AND LEFT US TO PONDER HIS IMPONDERABLES WITH NO ONE TO GUIDE US BUT SOME OLDER POETS ROUGHLY OUR OWN SIZE, AND OUR THOROUGHLY MORTAL PROFESSORS. PERSONALLY, I WAS SLIGHTLY RELIEVED THAT I'D NEVER HAD TO FACE OLSON'S OVER-THE-TOP GLARE, OR HAVE TO PERFORM AN ON-THE-SPOT DECIPHERMENT OF HIS ZEN-LIKE OBSCURATIONS. I WAS HAPPY TO HAVE BLASER AND OTHER MEN AND WOMEN OF MORE MORTAL DIMENSIONS TO DECODE. IN BLASER, I STILL THINK WE GOT THE BEST TEACHER WHO CAME OUT OF THE NEW AMERICAN POETRY, ONE WHOSE LATER

WORK HAS PROVED AT LEAST THE EQUAL IN QUALITY TO THAT OF THE MAJOR FIGURES. BLASER NOT ONLY SURVIVED, HE GREW.

I DON'T KNOW, ANY MORE, EXACTLY WHAT OLSON AND DUNCAN AND BLASER AND EVEN RALPH MAUD AND LEONARD MINSKY THOUGHT THEY WERE TEACHING US TO DO AND BE IN THE LATE 1960S, BUT I'M INCREASINGLY AWARE THAT WHAT WE WERE LEARNING FROM THEM, WILLY NILLY, WAS TOLERANCE. MAYBE TOLERANCE WAS SOMETHING THAT WAS JUST IN THE AIR WE BREATHED IN THOSE DAYS. HOWEVER IT WAS DELIVERED, MY GLOBAL GENERATION OF WRITERS LEARNED IT WELL ENOUGH THAT WE HAVE SINCE PRACTICED TOLERANCE AT A LEVEL OF SKILL AND DEPTH NOT APPROACHED BEFORE OR SINCE IN HUMAN HISTORY. UNFORTUNATELY, TOLERANCE IS, AS INTELLECTUAL AND LIFE PROJECTS GO, BOTH LIMITED AND FLAWED, AND IT MUCH TOO EASILY ENDS UP AS MORAL COWARDICE, INDIFFERENCE, AND SILENCE.

PERHAPS MORE IMPORTANT OLSON, BLASER, AND THE NEW AMERICAN POETRY ALSO GOT SOME OF US TO QUESTION HUMANISM. I THINK QUESTIONING HUMANISM WAS ALWAYS A PRIMARY ELEMENT OF BLASER'S PEDAGOGY, AND IT IS ONE FOR WHICH I AM DEEPLY GRATEFUL. I CAN STILL RECALL THE HEART-STOPPING MORAL CONUNDRUM THAT WAS CREATED FOR ME WHEN BLASER SUGGESTED THAT INDIVIDUAL SURVIVAL MIGHT NOT BE THE HIGHEST GOOD. IF NOTHING ELSE, IT ALERTED ME, MORE OR LESS PERMANENTLY, THAT HUMANISM DESERVES MUCH CLOSER SCRUTINY THAN IT HAS GOTTEN. IT RECEIVED LITTLE MORE THAN LIP-SERVICE FOR THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS OF THIS CENTURY, AND THE BRAINGLESS TURNING ON IT HAS BEEN THE CLANDESTINE FUEL FOR A BIZARRE OUTBREAK OF SPECIES-WIDE SELF-LOATHING IN THE TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LEADING UP TO THE MILLENNIUM.

FINALLY, THE BEST THING I CAN SAY ABOUT IRON WAS THAT IT DIDN'T OUTLIVE ITS USEFULNESS. IT HELPED A GROUP OF YOUNG WRITERS TO EDUCATE THEMSELVES, AND THEN IT PERMITTED THEM TO MOVE ON. THERE ARE NO GREAT UNDISCOVERED AESTHETIC ARTIFACTS TO BE FOUND IN THE PAGES OF THE VARIOUS ISSUES OF THE MAGAZINE. WE WERE, IN THE END, STUDENTS LEARNING A CRAFT THAT, BECAUSE IT REQUIRES ONE TO LEARN THE CULTURE ITSELF, TAKES SEVERAL DECADES TO MASTER.

IN THAT RESPECT, THE BEST QUALITIES IRON HAD WERE THOSE THAT WERE REFLECTED BY "SERIOUS IRON": ITS INSOLENCE, ITS SCEPTICISM, THE BLOSSOMING SENSE OF IRONY THAT DID NOT DESCEND INTO CYNICISM, AND ITS WILLINGNESS TO MAKE FUN IN A WORLD THAT GAVE CREDIBILITY ONLY TO MAKING LOVE AND MAKING WAR.

BRIAN FAWCETT

AS PART OF TRYING TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO BEST ILLUSTRATE THE FUNDAMENTALS BY WHICH IRON OPERATED, I SENT OUT AN EARLY DRAFT OF MY ESSAY TO AS MANY OF THE CORE GROUP AROUND THE MAGAZINE AS I COULD LOCATE, AND ASKED THEM HOW THEIR VIEW OF WRITING AND WRITERS HAS CHANGED SINCE THEY WERE INVOLVED IN IRON, AND WHAT THEY NOW THOUGHT OF THE MAGAZINE. I GOT THE FOLLOWING RESPONSES:

BRETT ENEMARK, NORTH VANCOUVER, B.C.

I DON'T WRITE MUCH ANYMORE. I DECIDED 10 YEARS AGO I DIDN'T LIKE CONTEMP. POETRY & THAT, IN ANY CASE, I NEVER UNDERSTOOD A WORD BLASER EVER SAID (THOUGH CERTAINLY HE HAD SOMETHING TO SAY, I COULD NEVER THINK LIKE THAT). RECENTLY, I'VE BEEN WORKING ON A COLLAGE OFF & ON THAT CONSISTS LARGELY OF STICKS AND MUD MIXED WITH PICTURES OF MY DAD POSING WITH VARIOUS BULLDOZERS, AUTOMOBILES AND BOTTLES OF BEER. CALL IT THERAPEUTIC. IT INCLUDES POEMS I WROTE ABOUT HIM 15 YEARS AGO. SO I HAVEN'T LEARNED MUCH ABOUT THE WRITING BIZ, THOUGH I HAVE FIGURED OUT HOW TO WRITE PAPERS & ENJOY THE PROCESS, MOSTLY BECAUSE IT FORCES ME TO GET OUT OF MYSELF.

NOR DO I SEE MANY POETS ANYMORE, THOUGH I HAVE BEEN GETTING TO KNOW JAMIE REID. MY RESEARCH IS FOCUSED ON THE 50'S AND 60'S AT THE MOMENT AND I'M TRYING TO FIGURE OUT SOME THINGS ABOUT THE BEATS, WHOSE WORK NEVER INTERESTED ME AT ALL ACTUALLY, UNTIL NOW. I THINK YOU GOT INTO THAT MOMENT. I DON'T THINK AT ALL ANY MORE ABOUT OLSON. I MAY SOMETIME AGAIN, BUT HE SEEMS TOO AMERICAN TO ME NOW. BESIDES I'VE BECOME INCREASINGLY SOCIOLOGICAL IN MY CRITICISM. I HATE TO SAY IT, ESPECIALLY TO YOU, BUT I LEARNED MORE FROM THINGS YOU SAID THAN FROM THOSE GUYS. OF COURSE, TO JUDGE FROM MY SUCCESS, THAT MAY NOT BE A COMPLEMENT. I MEAN I AM MORE INTERESTED IN RED LANE RIGHT NOW THAN ANYONE ELSE, IF ONLY TO RECOGNIZE THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS THAT MADE ME WHAT I WAS AND AM.

NEAP HOOVER, VICTORIA, B.C.

I READ YOUR PIECE AND FIND MYSELF AGREEING WITH YOUR COMMENTS ON OLSON - I'M GLAD I AM NOT THE ONLY ONE WHO DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THE FUCK HE WAS TALKING ABOUT PAST THE EARLY STUFF. IRON - IT WAS FUN, IT WAS EXCITING.

I HAVE ABSOLUTELY NOTHING PROFOUND TO SAY. I THINK MY RELATIONSHIP TO "POETRY" WAS PROBABLY, QUITE, I'M GOING TO SAY, "DISHONEST". IT WAS THE LYRIC THAT I WAS LOOKING FOR. LYRICAL POETRY WAS, AS CLOSE AS I COULD GET TO, A DREADED AND IN SOME CIRCLES, MAYBE YOURS, DISDAINED CONCEPT, A "SPIRITUAL" RELATIONSHIP TO THE WORLD. A NON-MECHANICAL, KNOW IT ALL, "COMMON-SENSE", BULLSHIT, GOLF COURSE, APPREHENSION OF THE

COSMOS. SPICER WAS THE GUY I LIKED. I LIKED HIM BECAUSE HE WAS FOR ME TALKING ABOUT A RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND WORLD (I DON'T MEAN ECONOMICS OR SOCIOLOGY) THAT KNOCKED ME OUT. IT WAS IN-SIGHT-FULL. I GUESS YOU USE THE WORD "ORPHIC". IT IS THE SAME FEELING I GET HEARING A MYTH THAT SKEWS MY SENSE OF THE WORLD. I'VE DECIDED I'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR THAT, WHATEVER THAT IS, FOREVER. I'M STILL DOING IT.

I COMMEND YOUR COMMITMENT TO YOUR PROFESSION.

JIM TAYLOR, CALGARY, ALBERTA

I HAVE BEEN LIVING IN CALGARY SINCE 1989, SO IT HAS BEEN A WHILE. I AM STILL WORKING FOR PARKS CANADA AS AN HISTORIAN. MOST OF MY WORK IS NOW CENTRED ON THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN PARKS ALTHOUGH I HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN PROJECTS IN BC (ON THE QUEEN CHARLOTTE ISLANDS AND PORT ALBERNI) AND MANITOBA (CHURCHILL AND RIDING MOUNTAIN). I LIKE THE COMBINATION OF BOOK WORK AND GETTING OUT AND ABOUT. I HAVE BEEN ON ZODIACS ON THE QUEEN CHARLOTTE ISLANDS, HELICOPTERS IN GLACIER NATIONAL PARK, HORSEBACK IN BANFF AND SNOWMOBILE IN CHURCHILL.

SO FOR A GUY WHO NEVER KNEW WHAT HE WANTED TO DO WHEN HE GREW UP I COUNT MYSELF LUCKY. I AM STILL WITH MY SECOND WIFE, JANET, AND WE HAVE THREE CHILDREN: TWO GIRLS 17 AND 13 AND A SON WHO IS 11. I SAW LOUISE LAST YEAR. SHE IS LIVING IN EDMONTON AND IS MARRIED TO THE EDITOR OF THE CANADIAN ENCYCLOPEDIA.

I WAS INTERESTED IN READING YOUR COMMENTS ON IRON. IT BROUGHT BACK SCENES THAT I HAD LONG AGO FORGOTTEN. COINCIDENTALLY I WAS BACK AT SFU THIS PAST FALL FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MANY YEARS. IT SEEMED A COMPLETELY SOULLESS PLACE AND I COULDN'T

FIGURE OUT WHY I CONSIDERED MY UNDERGRADUATE DAYS THERE TO HAVE BEEN SO RICH. YOUR MEMOIR HELPED BRING LIFE BACK TO THAT IMPERSONAL CONCRETE.

FOR ME TO GIVE YOU A DETAILED INTERVIEW ON IRON I WOULD HAVE TO DIG OUT THE OLD ISSUES WHICH FOR MANY YEARS SAT IN THE BOTTOM DRAWER OF A FILING CABINET AT HOME. BUT I AM NOT SURE IF THEY ARE EVEN AROUND ANYMORE AND I WANT TO GET THIS OFF WITHOUT TOO MUCH DELAY SO I WILL SPEAK GENERALLY. MY RECOLLECTION IS THAT YOU AND HENK SUIJS BEGAN IRON IN 1966. LATER ALBAN SHOWED UP AND HELPED EDIT THE THING AND HENK DISAPPEARED SOON AFTER. I WAS NOT INVOLVED IN THE FIRST ISSUE WHICH WAS PRINTED VERY SIMPLY. I REMEMBER THE COVER WAS DRAWN BY THAT FLAKY ARTIST CALLED DAVE. WE LATER FOUND OUT THAT HE RIPPED IT OFF FROM A BOOK ON DADA ART. ALTHOUGH DAVE WAS NOT ASKED TO CONTRIBUTE ANYTHING ELSE AS A RESULT, I REMEMBER THAT YOU AND HENK WERE PRETTY PLEASED ABOUT THE ASSOCIATIONS THAT DAVE HAD CAUGHT. I REMEMBER BEING INVOLVED IN THE PRODUCTION OF THE MIDDLE GROUP OF ISSUES IN THE FIRST SERIES. I GUESS THAT YOU COULD CALL ME THE PUBLISHER.

LOOKING BACK, WE SEEMED FAIRLY WELL HEELED. WE RENTED AN IBM SELECTRIC TYPEWRITER AND THE TEXT WAS TYPED ON METAL MASTERS WHICH WERE THEN PRINTED OFF IN THE PRINT SHOP OF H.A. SIMONS LTD, CONSULTING ENGINEERS WHERE MY DAD WORKED. I HONESTLY CAN'T REMEMBER WHO DID THE TYPING EXCEPT THAT I KNOW IT WASN'T ME. COULD IT HAVE BEEN SHARON? I CAN ONLY REMEMBER TWO COVERS. THE ONE WITH THE BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO OF THE LAKE WAS MEANT TO BE A ROMANTIC IMAGE IN IRONIC CONTRAST TO THE UNSENTIMENTAL STUFF INSIDE. THE NICE PENMANSHIP CAME FROM KEN LINDEMERE WHO HELPED ME ON THAT ISSUE. THE MOST AMBITIOUS PRODUCTION WAS THE ONE WITH RENEE'S COVER. SHE SILK SCREENED THAT AT THE VANCOUVER SCHOOL OF ART WHERE SHE WAS A STUDENT. THE QUALITY OF THE PAPER AND THE ART WORK MAKES THAT A PRETTY IMPRESSIVE COVER BY ANY STANDARD. I THINK THAT WE PUT SO MUCH EFFORT INTO THAT ISSUE BECAUSE WE HAD GREAT PLANS FOR IT. I BELIEVE THAT YOU WERE PLEASED WITH THE CONTENT. I KNOW THAT GLADYS USED IT AS A TEXT FOR A COURSE SHE WAS GIVING AT VANCOUVER CITY COLLEGE. SHE LATER GENTLY CHIDED ME FOR NOT INCLUDING A TABLE OF CONTENTS. THE STRIPPED DOWN LOOK WAS PART OF THE IMAGE BUT SHE WAS RIGHT AND WE COULD HAVE PRESENTED THE AUTHORS A BIT BETTER THAN WE DID.

IRON HAD NO FORMAL ASSOCIATIONS WITH THE UNIVERSITY AND WE WERE CAREFUL TO KEEP IT THAT WAY ALTHOUGH IT WOULD HAVE MADE COMMUNICATION EASIER IN THE LONG RUN. SINCE ALL OF US WERE MOVING AROUND A LOT THERE WAS NO FIXED ADDRESS FOR THE MAGAZINE. WE ENDED UP USING THE MOUNTAIN HIGHWAY ADDRESS BECAUSE IT BELONGED TO RENEE'S PARENTS. I WONDER IF MRS. VAN HALM WAS SURPRISED BY SOME OF THE MAIL SHE MUST HAVE RECEIVED. WE SOLD THE MAGAZINE AT A TABLE WE MANNED IN THE ENTRANCE BETWEEN THE OLD STUDENT CAFETERIA AND THE OLD FACULTY RESTAURANT. I REMEMBER TAKING COPIES DOWN TO DUTHIE'S WHERE BINKY KINDLY LET ME PUT THEM ON A RACK. COPIES WERE ALSO SENT TO THE NATIONAL LIBRARY FOR COPY-RIGHT PURPOSES.

YOU ARE RIGHT IN ASSERTING THAT THERE WAS A SELF CONSCIOUS SENSE OF GROUP IDENTITY THAT WAS CENTRED ON THE BLACK MOUNTAIN POETS AND ROBIN BLASER. LOOKING BACK, I THINK THAT ROBIN RAN A KIND OF INFORMAL POETRY CLUB. ALTHOUGH NOT EVEN AN ASPIRING POET, I GUESS I GOT INCLUDED IN HIS GET-TOGETHERS THROUGH MY ASSOCIATION WITH YOU. I ALSO TOOK AT LEAST TWO COURSES WITH HIM. ONE WAS A CUSTOM-DESIGNED POETRY COURSE THAT LOOKED AT A LOT OF BLACK MOUNTAIN POETRY, ESPECIALLY CHARLES OLSON, AND A 17TH-CENTURY POETRY COURSE. I NEVER HAD A LOT OF ONE ON ONE CONTACT WITH ROBIN; I WAS NEVER IN THE INNER CIRCLE LIKE YOU. BUT HE NONETHELESS HAD AN ENORMOUS INFLUENCE ON MY DEVELOPMENT AS A SCHOLAR.

TWO THINGS ABOUT HIM I STILL REMEMBER. ONE WAS HIS OWN SERIOUSNESS ABOUT SCHOLARSHIP AND THE SERIOUSNESS WITH WHICH HE TREATED STUDENTS. THE OTHER WAS HIS PREACHING ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF TEXT, OF OPENING UP WORDS TO REVEAL LARGER WORLDS BEYOND. ALTHOUGH I COULDN'T GET TO FIRST BASE WITH HIS POETRY, I FOUND HIS LECTURES TO BE IMMENSELY ACCESSIBLE BECAUSE HE DIDN'T BULLSHIT AND HE WAS SO

PERSONALLY COMMITTED TO LEARNING. I CREDIT SOME OF MY ANALYTICAL SKILLS AS AN HISTORIAN TO HIS TEACHING. MY STUDY OF THE KINGSTON PENITENTIARY AS AN ICON OF UPPER CANADIAN SOCIETY IS INDIRECTLY INFLUENCED BY HIS TEACHING.

STILL, THERE WAS SOMETHING VERY OTHERWORLDLY ABOUT ROBIN, AND WHAT YOU CORRECTLY IDENTIFY AS HIS ANTI-HUMANIST APPROACH HAD SOME DISTURBING POLITICAL CONNOTATIONS. I BELIEVE THAT HE WAS FAIRLY SYMPATHETIC TO POUND'S FASCIST LEANINGS FOR EXAMPLE. I WONDER IF THESE POLITICAL CONTRADICTIONS HELPED DISTURB YOUR MASTERS' WORK.

THERE WERE CROSS-INFLUENCES OF COURSE. GLADYS HAD BEEN AT UBC AT THE SCHOOL OF CREATIVE WRITING. A PLACE THAT WE WOULD NORMALLY SCORN ALTHOUGH WE MADE AN EXCEPTION FOR GLADYS, AS YOU DID LATER FOR GEORGE. IT WAS THROUGH GLADYS THAT I CAME IN CONTACT WITH STAN PERSKY, ROBIN'S ONE TIME LOVER, AND FOR A MORE REGULAR CONTACT WITH THE BERKLEY SCENE OF WHICH I THINK ROBIN WAS PROBABLY NOT TYPICAL. BUT THE CIRCLE OF PEOPLE AROUND IRON FORMED A DISTINCT COMMUNITY AND IT GAVE ME A SENSE OF BELONGING ALMOST TO A MEDIEVAL COLLEGE. I ADMIT TO BEING FAIRLY LAZY ABOUT READING THE CANON. THE FIRST VOLUME OF MAXIMUS POEMS WAS IMPORTANT, OTHER STUFF OF OLSON'S I COULDN'T UNDERSTAND AND I BECAME MORE DRAWN TO WRITERS LIKE GARY SNYDER WHOM YOU AND ROBIN DIDN'T TAKE TOO SERIOUSLY. IT WAS INTERESTING READING YOUR COMMENTS ON OLSON WHICH MAKE SENSE OF SOME OF THE THINGS THAT WERE GOING ON AT THAT TIME. I REMEMBER BEING QUESTIONED BY STUDENTS THAT WERE NOT PART OF OUR GROUP BUT WHO NEVERTHELESS WERE PRETTY SHARP. ONE GUY, IN PARTICULAR, I REMEMBER TALKING TO ME ON THE BUS ABOUT AN OLSON POEM HE HAD JUST READ. HE POINTED OUT THAT IT WAS COPIED FROM A DEFINITION OF A WORD IN WEBSTER'S DICTIONARY. HE THOUGHT PERHAPS THIS WAS A HOAX BUT I WAS PRETTY STEADFAST IN MY ALLEGIANCE.

I GUESS OLSON'S WRITINGS BECAME A BIT LIKE THE QUOTATIONS OF CHAIRMAN MAO. OLSON'S INSISTENCE ON THE PARTICULARITY OF PLACE AND HIS LINKING OF HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY WITH LITERATURE DID INFLUENCE MY DECISION TO TAKE AN MA IN CANADIAN STUDIES. ROBIN MATHEWS FOUND THAT TO BE AN IRONIC CONTRADICTION BUT IT LED TO A CONTINUING INTEREST IN CULTURAL LANDSCAPES.

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I FOUND A COPY OF IRON III IN MY BASEMENT. IT WAS EDITED BY NEAP AND I NOTICE THAT THE COVER PHOTOGRAPHS "WERE TAKEN BY CLIFF ANDSTEIN IN GLOUCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS. 'OUR LADY' CAN BE FOUND IN THE MAXIMUS POEMS, AND THE MADONNA WAS FOUND IN CHARLES OLSON'S BACK YARD." WE MUST HAVE BEEN QUITE PLEASED TO HAVE BEEN SO CLOSE TO A PIECE OF THE TRUE CROSS. SHARON MUST HAVE TYPED THIS ONE, RENEE DREW THE TITLE PAGE AND I DREW THE MAP. I REMEMBER COLIN WONDERING AT THE TIME WHETHER A REALLY GOOD POEM WOULD REQUIRE A MAP.

STAN PERSKY, BERLIN, GERMANY

DURING THE PERIOD OF IRON, I WAS SUCCESSIVELY ENAMOURED OF ("ENAMOURED" IS A WORD MEANT TO ENCOMPASS THE CONFUSIONS OF "IN LOVE WITH AND/OR DEEPLY INFATUATED BY"): NEAP HOOVER, RICK BYRNE, BRIAN DEBECK, BRIAN LOOMES AND MARTIN BELL—ALL PEOPLE, ROBIN MATHEWS WOULD BE HAPPY/UNHAPPY TO KNOW, WHO ARE/WERE NATIVE-BORN CANADIANS. I WAS READING THE JOURNALS OF ALL THE 18TH/19TH CENTURY TRAVELERS (E.G., ALEXANDER MACKENZIE) WHO CAME TO WHAT WOULD BECOME THE CANADIAN WEST COAST, AND SIMULTANEOUSLY BECAME ENAMOURED OF THE ABOVE-NAMED CANADIANS, AS PART OF A PARTIALLY UNWITTING PROJECT TO "CANADIANIZE" MY MIND AND BODY.

I DON'T HAVE OLSON TEXTS IN FRONT OF ME, SO I HAVE TO GO BY MEMORY. WHAT COMES TO MIND, ABOVE ALL ELSE, IS A LONG, EARLY POEM BY HIM TITLED "AS THE DEAD PREY UPON US." IT'S A POEM INVOKING HIS DEAD MOTHER, IN WHICH SHE'S IN A DREAM HELLSCAPE OF A LIVING ROOM WITH USED TIRES HANGING FROM THE CEILING, THEIR TREADS WORN BARE AND TATTERED, AND THE CHARACTERS AND CREATURES THAT PASS THROUGH THAT LIVING ROOM RANGE FROM AN ABORIGINAL PRINCESS TO BLUE DEER. (WHETHER ANY OF THESE IMAGES ARE IN FACT IN THE POEM IS A MATTER OF UNCERTAIN MEMORY.) WHAT I REMEMBER "LEARNING" FROM THE POEM IS THAT WE ARE IN A WORLD IN WHICH "OUR" DEAD ARE CONTINUOUS WITH EVERYTHING ELSE (ESPECIALLY "OUR" LIVING), AND THAT THERE IS A METHOD OF FICTIVELY RETRIEVING THEIR PRESENCE THROUGH AN OBEDIENCE OR OPENNESS TO THE ORDER OF "PERCEPTIONS" AS THEY COME THROUGH THE RHYTHM OF THE BREATHING OF ONE'S OWN BODY ("PROPRIOCEPTION"). AGAINST THE INABILITY TO REMEMBER, I LONG FOR THAT POEM TO APPEAR BEFORE MY EYES. WHAT A MISTAKE NOT TO HAVE LEARNED MORE "BY HEART" NOW THAT I NEED IT.

FORTUNATELY, ROBIN BLASER IS AT HAND—WE HAD DINNER THIS EVENING AT THE AROMA CAFE IN BERLIN—OBTAINING THE PROBLEMS OF RECALL. HIS GREAT GIFT TO US—THEN AND NOW—WAS AN ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE HIS SENSE OF WONDER AND APPRECIATION OF THE MEANINGFULNESS OF AN EXPANSIVE WORLD (SO THAT ONE CAME TO SEE THAT THERE WAS AN IMPERATIVE SENSE, AN URGENCY, IN CONFRONTING, SAY, WILLIAM BLAKE, JOHN CAGE OR MARY BUTTS) THAT WAS NONETHELESS LOCATED IN THE HORROR OF OUR TIME (WHAT BLASER CURRENTLY CALLS THE "IRREPARABLE"). DURING THE IRON DAYS, I WAS IN HIS OLSON SEMINAR IN WHICH HE SET THE STRAIGHTFORWARD TASK OF HAVING EACH OF US SELECT SOME REFERENCE SOMEWHERE IN OLSON'S MAXIMUS POEMS AND LEARNING EVERYTHING WE COULD ABOUT IT (I ENDED UP WITH A BATCH OF EGYPTIAN GODS).

AS IT HAPPENED, I MET OLSON A FEW TIMES, CALLED HIM UNCLE CHARLEY (WHICH ONLY MILDLY ANNOYED HIM), TALKED TO HIM ON THE PHONE AND CORRESPONDED A LITTLE WITH HIM IN CONNECTION WITH A MAGAZINE PROJECT BLASER WAS DOING IN VANCOUVER ("PACIFIC NATION"). AT AN AT-HOME DINNER IN SAN FRANCISCO ONCE, SOMEONE MADE SOME CARELESS, SLIGHTING REMARK TO BLASER, AND I WATCHED, WITH SOME AWE, AS OLSON WHEELED ON THAT

WHO YOU'RE TALKING TO? DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA? HE'S ONE OF THE MAKERS OF THIS STUFF, I.E., A POET. MAYBE IT WAS JUST A KIND OF HIGH BULLYING ON OLSON'S PART, BUT I WAS YOUNG AND IMPRESSIONABLE. OLSON'S DECREE THAT "ART IS LIFE'S ONLY TWIN," I TOOK AS A MANTRA (CONCURRENT WITH FRANK O'HARA'S "YOU JUST GO ON YOUR NERVE"). THAT OLSON DID OR DIDN'T GO TO PIECES AT SOME POINT—DON'T WE, WON'T WE ALL?—SEEMS OF LITTLE CONSEQUENCE AT THE MOMENT.

TONIGHT AT DINNER, WITH OUR FRIENDS THOMAS AND ILONKA, AND ROBIN'S MATE, DAVID, WE CARRIED ON THE "ARGUMENT" THAT WE'VE BEEN CONDUCTING, ON AND OFF, FOR SOME 35 YEARS. HE'S JUST "LETTING GO" OF HIS CURRENT TEXT (A LIBRETTO FOR AN OPERA, "THE LAST SUPPER"; MUSIC BY THE BRITISH COMPOSER HARRISON BIRTWISTLE) NOW THAT IT'S HAD ITS FIRST READINGS (THERE WAS A "WORLD PREMIERE" IN THE BERLIN STAATSOPER HOUSE LAST WEEK—ALL VERY SPIFFY), AND IS BEGINNING TO THINK OF OTHER THINGS. I SAID THE TITLE OF A PHILIP K. DICK NOVEL, "DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHEEP?" AND HE MISHEARD IT AS "DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF ELECTRIC SHAPE?" AND THEN WROTE THAT DOWN IN HIS NOTEBOOK, ALONG WITH THE NAME OF THE WINE WE WERE DRINKING, AND VARIOUS OTHER THINGS, WHICH MAY OR MAY NOT LEAD TO "WHAT'S NEXT." HE HAD DENOUNCED ALL DUALISMS WHEN WE TALKED A COUPLE OF DAYS AGO, SO I NATURALLY ANNOUNCED AT DINNER THAT I WAS INDEED A DUALIST—A POST-CARTESIAN, POST-DARWINIAN ONE, AND THAT IT WAS PERFECTLY CLEAR TO ME THAT WE HUMANS WERE A BADLY EVOLVED COMBINATION OF A MIND DESIGNED FOR IMMORTALITY AND A BODY BUILT FOR MORTALITY... AND SO IT WENT. WHEN I LATER SAID, I NOTICED THAT YOU SAID ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO REFUTE MY DEFENSE OF DUALISM, HE REPLIED, I'M SITTING OVER IT WITH A GUT FULL OF LOOSE BOWELS.

1 A.M. (I.E.,
PAST MY BEDTIME)
APRIL 25, 2000

SHARON THESEN, VANCOUVER, B.C.

DAYS OF IRON

I KNOW THAT THE ROBOT
IS STRUGGLING TO FORM ITSELF
TO CHEW INTO DEATH
THE LEAVES OF THE ROSE.

EDWARD SANDERS

AS PASSIONATE AS WERE OUR OWN FROTHINGS-AT-THE-MOUTH IN THE 60'S, THEY DIDN'T HAVE QUITE THE URGENCY OF THOSE TO THE SOUTH OF US, AMERICANS, WHO HAD COME TO CANADA FOR SOME PEACE IF NOT A SAVED BUTT,

MAYBE SOME KOOTENAY ACREAGE TO BUILD A COMMUNE ON, OR A TEACHING JOB AT THE NEWLY-CONSTRUCTED SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY IN BURNABY, B.C. THE RULING SOCIAL CREDIT GOVERNMENT, FEW IF ANY OF WHOSE MEMBERS HAD A POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION, HAD GIVEN THE ADMINISTRATION A BLANK CHEQUE WITH WHICH TO PURCHASE WHATEVER FACULTY THEY WANTED, SO THE VARIOUS DEPARTMENT HEADS WENT AHEAD AND HIRED MARXISTS AND POETS GALORE. A LOT OF THEM WERE AMERICAN. AMONG THEM, IN THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT, WERE MY MOST IMPORTANT TEACHERS: ROBIN BLASER (POETRY AND COSMOLOGY); ROB DUNHAM (THE ROMANTIC POETS—MY MA THESIS WAS ON COLERIDGE'S SHAKESPEARE CRITICISM); RALPH MAUD (CHARLES OLSON, JUNGIAN THEORY, AND THE POLITICS OF THE LOCAL); LEONARD MINSKY (CHAUCER, EROTICS, AND POLITICS).

IN THE FALL OF 1966, BRIAN FAWCETT AND I INTERRUPTED OUR CLASSES FOR A FEW DAYS TO ELOPE TO IDAHO AND GET MARRIED. I WAS TWENTY YEARS OLD. WE MOVED INTO A FREE-STANDING "UNIT" IN A DERELICT AUTO COURT AT THE BASE OF BURNABY MOUNTAIN, WHERE A NUMBER OF OTHER ARTY STUDENTS ALSO LIVED. IT WAS MY FIRST YEAR AND BRIAN'S SECOND, AND BRIAN BY THEN HAD BECOME FRIENDS WITH ROBIN BLASER THROUGH TAKING HIS POETRY CLASSES. ROBIN, SIMPLY THE MOST APPEALING HUMAN BEING I HAD EVER MET, HAD AN UNUSUAL SENSE OF BEAUTY, A WONDERFUL RESPONSIVENESS TO VITALITY, TO WHAT IS ALIVE IN PEOPLE AND THINGS. LIKE BRIAN AND I, ROBIN HAD GROWN UP IN THE STICKS (HE, RURAL IDAHO; US, THE B.C. NORTHERN INTERIOR); HE LOVED TO SMOKE, DRINK, TALK, SWEAR, AND EAT. HE KNEW THE BEST PLACES TO BUY LIGHT FRENCH COFFEE BEANS WITH CHICORY, NEW ORLEANS STYLE; PROVOLONE CHEESE; COBALT-BLUE FLOWER VASES IN A VANCOUVER NOT YET TEEMING WITH THESE THINGS. DESPITE THE TEMPTATIONS THAT OFTEN GO WITH THAT DEGREE OF ATTRACTIVENESS, ERUDITION, AND CHARISMA, HE REJECTED COMPLETELY ANY SORT OF STATUS AS POSSESSOR OF THE HIGHER WISDOM (AN ISSUE BETWEEN HIM AND ROBERT DUNCAN, WHO DID NOT REJECT IT).

RALPH MAUD'S CLASSES DOVETAILED NICELY WITH ROBIN'S, IN THE SAME WAY THAT THE POETICS OF THE SAN FRANCISCO RENAISSANCE DOVETAILED WITH THE ICONOCLASMS OF THE BLACK MOUNTAIN SCHOOL. BOTH WERE SIGNIFICANTLY REPRESENTED IN DON ALLEN'S NEW AMERICAN POETRY ANTHOLOGY, OUR GUIDE THROUGH MUCH OF THE LATE SIXTIES AND EARLY SEVENTIES. WHATEVER THE "NEW AMERICAN POETRY" WAS, IT EMBODIED A POETIC SENSIBILITY I COULD RELATE TO, OR AT LEAST, WAS TAUGHT TO RELATE TO. I WAS REALLY QUITE NAIVE ABOUT THE ANTAGONISMS AND THE SEXUALITY RAGING IN THE POEMS OF THE SPICER, DUNCAN, AND BLASER SIDE OF THINGS, AND OFTEN COMPLETELY OUT OF MY DEPTH WITH OLSON. YET SOMETHING WAS GOING ON IN THAT POETRY THAT HAD NOT SO FAR BEEN AVAILABLE TO ME AS A YOUNG POET PRIOR TO GOING TO SFU, WHEN I WAS LIVING IN VANCOUVER AND WORKING AS A SECRETARY AT CKWX. MY TYPING SKILLS, HONED AT STENOGRAPHIC BOOT CAMPS LIKE STANDARD OIL, WOULD BE UTILIZED LATER ON IN IRON MAGAZINE, CERTAINLY MORE THAN ANY OF MY OTHER SKILLS, SUCH AS THEY WERE. BY THE TIME IRON WAS BEING PUBLISHED, I'D STOPPED WRITING POEMS, INTIMIDATED, PROBABLY, BY THE SUDDEN ONSLAUGHT OF POWERFUL MALE WRITERS, POETS, TEACHERS, AND CRITICS IN MY LIFE:

AN "ONSLAUGHT" WHOSE INTELLECTUAL AND POETIC DEMANDS AT THE SAME I WELCOMED AND VALUED. AS A YOUNG WOMAN WRITING IN PRINCE GEORGE AND VANCOUVER IN THE EARLY SIXTIES, I DIDN'T HAVE ANY ROLE MODELS, LET ALONE FOREMOTHERS. THE WHOLE TISH THING, WITHIN WHICH DAPHNE MARLATT AND GLADYS HINDMARCH WERE PRODUCING WRITING, WENT BY ME: I WAS A LITTLE TOO YOUNG, PLUS I HAD HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH UBC UNTIL BRIAN AND I STARTED GOING TO READINGS AND PARTIES AT WARREN TALLMAN'S HOUSE.

I DON'T RECALL STUDYING THE WORK OF ANY FEMALE WRITER OTHER THAN THAT OF DENISE LEVERTOV, WHO, AS AN ANTI-WAR POET AND A SORT OF MYSTIC AND A MEMBER OF THE BLACK MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY WAS ALWAYS MENTIONED IN THE SAME BREATH WITH ROBERT DUNCAN; AND H.D., WHOSE WORK ROBIN INTRODUCED US TO. I DON'T BELIEVE I TOOK A COURSE FROM A FEMALE TEACHER IN ALL MY UNDERGRADUATE YEARS AT SFU. BUZZ WAS CIRCULATING ABOUT A BEAUTIFUL BRILLIANT WOMAN POET FROM TORONTO, MARGARET ATWOOD, BUT HER APPEARING AND READING AT SFU WAS MORE EXOTIC TO US THAN HAD THE GHOST OF JACK SPICER STAGGERED ONTO THE STAGE. WHEN CHALLENGED ON OUR LACK OF INTEREST IN "CANADIAN" POETRY, WE WOULD CITE HORRIBLE STANZAS FROM BACK EAST OR FEEBLE-MINDED RAVINGS FROM THE LOCAL LITTLE MAGAZINES. OUR POETRY WAS DEALING WITH REAL THINGS: HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY, COSMOLOGY, POLITICS, ECOLOGY, WAR, MYTH. WE SCOFFED AT POETRY ABOUT CANDIES AND THE CRIES OF LOONS. WE WERE IN THE MIDDLE OF HISTORY.

SOMETIME IN '66 OR '67, WE STARTED IRON MAGAZINE. MY CONTRIBUTION WAS TO TYPE THE ISSUES ON BEGGED, BORROWED, OR STOLEN STENCILS ON WHATEVER HALF-DECENT ELECTRIC TYPEWRITERS WE COULD BORROW; RUN IT OFF ON WHATEVER GESTETNER WE COULD COMMANDEER AT PEOPLE'S WORKPLACES OR ENGLISH DEPARTMENT OFFICES; COLLATE IT, STAPLE IT, STUFF IT IN ENVELOPES, ADDRESS THE ENVELOPES, LICK THE STAMPS, MAIL IT OUT. OR DIVIDE THE STACKS OF MAGS INTO LITTLE BUNDLES THAT BRIAN AND NEAP AND ALBAN AND JIM WOULD TAKE TO PLACES LIKE DEAR OLD DUTHIE BOOKS DOWNTOWN, TO BE SOLD OR GIVEN AWAY.

ALL OF THIS WAS TAKING PLACE IN THE VARIOUS HOUSES WE LIVED IN, MOST NOTABLY THE ONE ON LOCO ROAD IN PORT MOODY, WHERE OUR SON JESSE WAS BORN IN 1970; AND IN OUR MARRIAGE AND OUR SOCIAL LIFE. I WAS INVOLVED WITH IRON, TAKING CARE OF THE HOUSE, LOOKING AFTER THE BABY, GOING TO CLASSES, DOING PART-TIME SECRETARIAL JOBS TO HELP PAY THE BILLS. I WAS ALSO PART OF A VITAL AND BRILLIANT INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY OF POETS AND POETRY STUDENTS. THE WAR IN VIET NAM WAS OF ENORMOUS CONCERN; IT SEEMED HALF THE PEOPLE WE KNEW WERE DRAFT DODGERS OR LIVING POLITICALLY DANGEROUS LIVES OF SOME SORT. WE WERE STUDYING MARCUSE, ADORNO, BROWN, LAING. WE STUDIED LOCAL ABORIGINAL MYTH AND POURED LIBATIONS UNTO APHRODITE AT MIDNIGHT IN ENGLISH BAY. AT THE SAME TIME, BRIAN AND I HAD LIVED IN PRINCE GEORGE ENOUGH TO HAVE DEVELOPED AN ALLERGY TO PRETENTIOUS BULLSHIT AND AN ATTRACTION TO THE KINDS OF STORIES LOGGERS TOLD IN BARS ON FRIDAY NIGHT. ALL OF THIS FOUND ITS WAY IN BITS AND PIECES INTO IRON.

BY 1968 AND '69 MY TYPING JOBS HAD EXPANDED TO INCLUDE MASSIVE, EXHAUSTING TRANSCRIPTIONS OF DRUNKEN LECTURES BY OLSON. I WAS BEGINNING TO GET PISSED OFF. IMAGINE THE IMPACT, THEN, WHEN I FIRST READ KATE MILLETT'S SEXUAL POLITICS, WHICH EXAMINED FEROCIOUSLY THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN LITERARY LIFE AND CAME TO DISMAL CONCLUSIONS. THOUGH I NEVER DID BECOME A PRESCRIPTIVE FEMINIST, THE REALIZATION OF THE COMPLEXITY AND INJUSTICES ENDEMIC TO MY POSITION AS A WOMAN IN EACH OF MY MANY CONTEXTS WAS DISTURBING. BY THAT POINT, MY MARRIAGE HAD STARTED TO UNRAVEL AS WELL.

IN 1972, BRIAN AND I SEPARATED. IRON WAS UNDER BRETT ENEMARK'S MANAGEMENT AT THE TIME, EVENTUALLY TO TRANSFORM ITSELF INTO NMFG (NO MONEY FROM THE GOVERNMENT). ITS URGENT, ANARCHIC, IRREVERENT TONE HAD SOFTENED. BY THEN ALSO, THE ROBOT, IN ED SANDERS' WORDS, HAD MORE OR LESS CHEWED INTO DEATH THE LEAVES OF THE ROSE. IRON HAD REALLY JUST BEEN THE NEWSLETTER OF OUR EDUCATION IN THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT OF SFU IN THE 60'S. WHAT I THINK ABOUT NOW IS THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE MAGAZINE MUST HAVE BEEN SEEN BY OTHERS AS THE HOUSE ORGAN OF A CLIQUE OF OLSONITES AND HERO-WORSHIPPERS. BUT AT THE TIME, IT SEEMED TO US THAT WE BELONGED TO SOMETHING THAT WAS IMPORTANT, THAT MATTERED, WHETHER WE UNDERSTOOD EVERY WORD OF OLSON'S LATE MAXIMUS POEMS OR NOT.

IT WOULD TAKE ME ANOTHER TWENTY YEARS TO WEAR OFF A FEW LAYERS OF THE INDELIBLE INK THAT SO COLOURED MY POETIC EDUCATION. I WONDER WHAT SORT OF POET I'D BE TODAY WITHOUT THAT TRIBAL MARKING, THAT IRON TATTOO

DOTS OF LIGHT ON THE LAKE EQUAL BOATS
EXCITED BECAUSE
WE'RE GOING TO SEE THE PERFECT STORM
THIS AFTERNOON, GLOUCESTER, THOUGHTS
OF OLSON
SOME KIND OF BIG MAN
WITH ROUGH WAYS YET DAINTY
ON A ROCKING WHARF, MADE MY LIFE
THE WAY IT WAS
CIRCA 1967, 68.

ALBAN GOULDEN

IRON EASE

LAST NIGHT I WATCHED A PBS RETROSPECTIVE OF THE BEAT POETS CALLED "THE SOURCE." IN ORDER TO MAKE THIS ALLEGORICAL TITLE CRYSTAL CLEAR, WILLIAM BURROUGHS WAS LEANED OVER A MIKE TO INFORM US "WE ARE THE

SOURCE." THE "WE" I TOOK TO BE CAPITALIZED AND OTHER THAN ME. AND I SENSED SOMETHING FAMILIAR. I HAD FELT A SIMILAR DICHOTOMY IN THE LATE 60'S AND EARLY 70'S ABOUT BOTH SFU AND IRON: THAT I WAS A BIT PLAYER—ALBEIT AN INTERESTED AND WILLING ONE—IN ANOTHER VERSION OF THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK.

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY WAS SUPPOSEDLY A NEW SCHOOL BREAKING THE MOULD OF EUROPEAN ACADEMIC COMPARTMENTALISM AND CLASS STRUCTURES. YET RON BAKER, THE HEAD OF THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT WHEN I STARTED THERE, MADE INSTANT IVY ON THE WALLS HIS FIRST PRIORITY AND HEADED "HOME" TO ENGLAND TO RECRUIT AS MANY BRIT GRAD STUDENTS AS POSSIBLE IN ORDER TO TONE UP THE PLACE. THIS DIDN'T WORK. AFTER THE FIRST YEAR, ALMOST ALL OF THEM WENT BACK "HOME" AGAIN, TRANSCRIPT "B'S" TRAILING IN THEIR COLLECTIVE WAKE. ON THE OTHER HAND, IN ACQUIRING TEACHERS THE UNIVERSITY HAD DECIDED TO GO SOUTH AND, LIKE THE CFL, RAID YOUNG-WANNA-BES OR OLD CHEAP CAN'T-ANYMORE-BES FROM THE RANKS OF THE "REAL" PROS. OCCASSIONALLY THEY GOT LUCKY. PEOPLE LIKE LEONARD MINSKY OR JERY ZASLOVE. OR ROBIN BLASER. (HE WAS ONE OF THE BEST, IN PARTICULAR BECAUSE HE COULD STEP AWAY FROM HIS CONSIDERABLE POWER AS A DEMAGOGUE—ALMOST WROTE "DEMIGOD"—EVEN WHEN HE DIDN'T AGREE WITH WHERE HIS PROTEGES WERE HEADING. AN IMPERIALIST WHO COULD TOLERATE DEFECTION. RARE MAN INDEED.)

BUT MY COLONIALIST AMBIVALENCE IS EVEN MORE APPARENT TO ME WHEN I CONSIDER IRON. IT WAS A STUDENT MAGAZINE BORN OF THE DEEP-SEATED EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF ITS FOUNDERS TO ASSERT THEIR INTELLECTUAL VALIDITY/MASCULINITY (THE TWO LIKELY SYNONYMOUS) IN A PLACE THAT TOLD THEM THEY HAD ESCAPED FROM THE BRUTAL ANTI-INTELLECTUAL BEER-SWILLING SOCIETIES OF PRINCE GEORGE, VERNON, AND MEDICINE HAT. ONLY TO FIND THEMSELVES SUDDENLY IN THE BALLPARK OF SOME PRETTY HEAVY IMPERIAL HITTERS. (I USE JACK SPICER'S ANALOGY ON PURPOSE; IT IS NO SECRET TO ME WHY BASEBALL BECAME THE FAVE SPORT OF THESE JUNIOR POET-WARRIORS.) THE BIG UMPIRE IN THE SKY WAS, OF COURSE, CHARLES OLSON. SPICER HAD LAID DOWN THE SACRIFICE. AND BOY THERE WERE A LOT OF ACOLYTES UP TO THE PLATE: EVERYBODY FROM CREELEY TO JACK CLARK TO THE BEATS TO KESEY TO ... BETWEEN BLACK MOUNTAIN AND ON THE ROAD-KILL, IT WAS JUST AS HARD TO ESCAPE AS TO BE DRAFTED. HENCE, THE MAGAZINE YO-YO'D IN EDITORIAL TONE FROM TOUGH GUY TO SERVING WENCH: WE COULDN'T DECIDE IF WE WERE STILL IN THE BEER PARLOUR OR HAD MADE THE ROSTER.

BUT AMERICANS ARE ALWAYS GOING TO BE SUPERFICIALLY LARGER THAN LIFE; IT IS THEIR GREAT WEAKNESS. AND ATTRACTION. CANADIANS HAVE TO BE CONTENT WITH THE SERIOUS IRON(Y) OF ACQUIRING THE CULTURAL CONFIDENCE AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE TO STAND AS TALL AS THEY ARE. THAT IS, TO BE MEASURED IN NO ONE'S TERMS BUT BOTH THEIR COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL OWN. HOWEVER, IN THAT PLACE AND TIME IT WAS SOMETHING I STILL HAD TO LEARN.

YES, THERE WERE PROBLEMS WITH IRON AND THAT ERA.

1) THE PRESENCE OF WOMEN AS TYPEWRITER INK-STAINED COPY WRETCHES OR, RARELY, AS "WRITERS" THAT REALLY TRANSLATED INTO THE ROLE OF HANDMAIDEN OR GODDESS-MUSE (THIS LATTER, OF COURSE, DEPENDING ON THE SEXUAL PREDILECTION OF THE MALE WHO WAS BEING SERVED).

2) THE CANONIZATION OF PERPETUAL ADOLESCENCE. I REMEMBER A POETRY CONFERENCE IN PRINCE GEORGE WHERE ONE OF THE GREAT MENTORS HIMSELF, ROBERT CREELEY, WAS SO DRUNK THAT, AS HE TRIED TO GET UP OUT OF HIS CHAIR IN ORDER TO MUMBLE TO THE AUDIENCE (IN FUTURE READINGS CREELEY ALWAYS REMAINED SEATED), HE FELL OVER INTO THE ARMS OF GEORGE BOWERING. WHO LAUGHED. (WHAT ELSE COULD A BOWERING DO?) BUT I DON'T WANT TO PICK ON CREELEY (HE'S A FAVOURITE OF MINE BECAUSE I THINK THAT AT HIS BEST HE MANAGES TO MAKE THE POETRY OF LOSS INTO A USEFUL SURVIVAL TOOL). HELL, LOTS OF US WERE DRUNKS—ME INCLUDED. OR IF NOT DRUNKS, OFTEN GRADE 6 BULLSHIT PRANKSTERS SEEKING ATTENTION. HO-HUM

3) AN UNHEALTHY INDULGENCE IN PRECIOUSNESS. WHEN THINGS WEREN'T WORKING WELL, WE HAD THE VIRUS OF SENTIMENTALITY-DISGUISED-AS-PREISTHOOD RUNNING RAMPANT THROUGH THE BODY ... AS IT WAS BREATHED.

4) A TENDENCY TO EQUATE LANGUAGE WITH ACTION. THIS IS A DANGEROUS ONE AND IT HAS TAKEN ME MANY YEARS TO UNTANGLE THE FANTASIES THAT WHEN WRITTEN DOWN SIMPLY STIMULATE CERTAIN PARTS OF THE BRAIN, ENDING THERE—AS OPPOSED TO WORDS WHICH ACTUALLY LEAD TO REAL EMOTIONAL THEN PHYSICAL ACCOMPLISHMENT. WORDS THAT ARE EARNED. WE WROTE AND TALKED ABOUT ALL THE RIGHT THINGS. BUT WE SELDOM DID THEM. OUR TRAIL OF BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS IS JUST ONE INSTANCE OF THAT. THE INFLUENCE OF OLSON, SPICER, AND ROBERT DUNCAN HAS SOMETHING TO ANSWER FOR HERE. IN CONTRAST TO THE BEATS, WHO WHEN PUSH CAME TO SHOVE WERE AT LEAST WILLING TO GO DOWN IN SOCIAL FLAMES, THIS "GREEK" BRANCH OF IMPERIUM WAS MORE OFTEN THAN NOT A LOT OF TALK AND A LOT OF DRINKING. AND A LOT OF WORDS ON PAPER.

BUT LET'S END, JUSTLY, WITH THE GOOD.

1) ROBIN BLASER, OUR REAL LITERARY MENTOR, WAS THE KIND OF TEACHER ONE IS MAYBE LUCKY ENOUGH TO ENCOUNTER IN A LIFETIME. BECAUSE HIS LANGUAGE OF THE FABULOUS IS SO MUCH A PART OF HIM, THE WORDS AND CONSIDERABLE KNOWLEDGE HE HAD FOR US WAS MORE CREDIBLE THAN WHATEVER A THOUSAND STANLEY COOPERMAN'S—COMPLETE WITH TOADIES AND FAT FINGER RINGS—COULD EVER HOPE TO SELL. NOBILITY HAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH HOW ONE LIVES. ROBIN LIVED AND LIVES THE LITERATURE HE LOVES. HE TAUGHT ME THE WAY TO BE WITH WHAT YOU MAKE: WHAT REAL USES WRITING HAS IN THE WORLD. I WILL NEVER FORGET IT.

2) ONE OF IRON'S GREATEST STRENGTHS WAS IN THE REVEALING OF WRITERS WHO WERE NOT DIRECTLY A PART OF IRON OR, INDEED, THE WHOLE ACADEMIC CIRCUS. KEN BELFORD IS MY IMMEDIATE EXAMPLE. I DON'T KNOW THAT

MUCH ABOUT BELFORD'S PERSONAL LIFE—THEN OR NOW—EXCEPT THAT AT THE TIME HE LIVED IN THE BUSH SOMEWHERE FAR TO THE WEST OF PRINCE GEORGE. I DO KNOW THAT I WAS FORTUNATE ENOUGH TO ENCOUNTER HIS WORK BECAUSE OF MY IRON CONNECTIONS. HIS POETRY WAS THE ACTION OF SOMEONE WHOSE SENSE OF PLACE WAS CLEAR. ALTHOUGH HE MIGHT HAVE BEEN DROWNING IN DARKNESS (TOO BAD HE COULDN'T SEE THE NORTHERN LIGHT), HE DOCUMENTED HIS EXPERIENCE WITH PRECISION AND CARE. I THINK OF HIM AS AN IRON MAN.

3) SERENDIPITOUS DISCOVERIES. SHARON THESEN WORKED HARD AT PHYSICALLY HELPING PUT IRON TOGETHER. THEN, SURPRISE, ONE DAY I OPENED ITS PAGES AND ENCOUNTERED ONE OF HER POEMS. A LIGHT HAD TURNED ON. THIS WAS THE WORK OF A POET.

4) FINALLY, BECAUSE OF THIS INSIGNIFICANT LITTLE MAG, I MET—AND DID GET TO KNOW AND LEARN FROM—SOME WONDERFUL, INTERESTING PEOPLE. THIS WAS THE MOST SOCIAL TIME IN MY LIFE. I LEARNED THAT LITERATURE DOESN'T HAVE TO BE JACKED OFF TO IN A CORNER. I LEARNED, AMONG OTHER THINGS, THAT IT IS ABOUT COMMUNITAS, THE COMMUNITY OF THE SOUL. (BUT YOU BETTER HAVE DEVELOPED ONE BEFORE YOU START FLINGING THAT WORD AROUND.)

I LEARNED FROM ROBIN AND NEAP AND BRETT AND GLADYS AND TOM AND KEN AND JIM AND COLIN AND STAN ... ET AL. AND, MOST OF ALL, FROM SHARON THESEN AND BRIAN FAWCETT.

I LEARNED WHAT DIDN'T WORK. BUT I HAVE, OF NECESSITY, LEARNED WHAT DOES.

AND, EVEN NOW, IRON KEEPS ME WRITING.