Quarterly Review of Literature

POETRY SERIES

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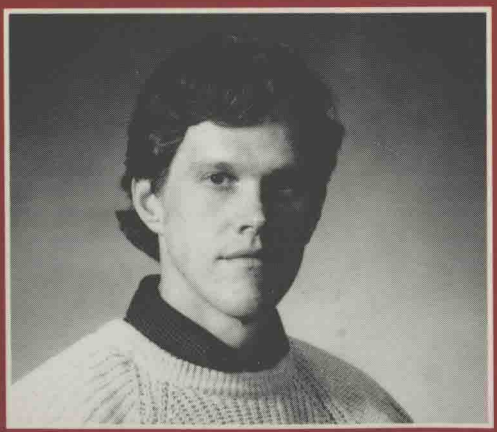

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Quarterly Review of

EDITED BY T. & R. WEISS

for RRN, my love

JEAN NORDHAUS

My Life in Hiding

JEAN NORDHAUS was born in Baltimore, Maryland. She received her BA from Barnard College in philosophy and a doctorate in German Literature from Yale University. She is the author of two prior volumes of poetry: a chapbook, *A Language of Hands*, published by SCOP in 1982; and *A Bracelet of Lies*, which was published by Washington Writers' Publishing House in 1987. From 1980 to 1983, she ran the poetry programs at the Folger Shakespeare Library and (in 1982-83) the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. She was Meralmikjan Fellow in Poetry at Breadloaf in 1987.

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MY LIFE IN HIDING

NOTES FROM THE CAVE

UNDER THE SIGN OF ISADORA,

my lonely mother taught me dancing.
It was afternoon, her cleaning done.
We climbed to the carpeted room
under the roof. Sunlight had entered
before us, warm prayer rugs unrolled
on the carpet. We took off our shoes
and closed the door.

Whatever she did, I repeated.
When she raised her arms
to touch the sky, I lifted mine.
If she bent low, sweeping the grass
with her arms, I did the same.
I would be water. In me
she would watch herself move between past

and future, my infant steps
continuing the figures hers began.
Now the waves commenced whose origins
pulsed before music, a rocking
like the motion of a wing, the gesture
swelling, flowing through her body
into mine, out through my fingertips
into the world.

KINDERTOTENLIEDER

Someone is dying.
Turn the volume high, so we can hear
above these shrieks, the green
meadow far beyond. Who is walking there?
A father, a child in an organdy dress.

He grabs her gently under the arms
and lifts her onto the altar, a stone slab
nested in flowers, touched by light winds.

Why were we so caught up, my father and I,
in those songs about the death of children?
Rocked on swells of sound,
we lay on the living room rug after dinner
letting Kathleen Ferrier's bosomy

contralto smother us in folds of velvet.
My mother is in the kitchen, holding her ears.
She does not want to know
about the dark thing between us—
the grief of Agamemnon

as he lowered the axe,
or how the blood embraced the blade.
She lowers the spoons into their caskets,
wraps the knives in their shrouds,
delivers the bright spears into darkness.

Why are we sad? I want to ask, What child
are we grieving for? My throat
is uncut and the rivers inside me
flow in both directions, leaving,
returning—Childhood,

I thought we were done
with one another, that you'd handed up
your last shards and nothing further
would come rising toward me
out of those drowned regions.

TWENTY-TWO WINDOWS

A woman the shape of a mushroom,
no bigger than a nine-year-old
and dressed in black
like one of those starlings
brought from abroad and set loose

on these shores, my grandmother
in our new house walked from room to room
on bandaged feet, turned and said
to my mother, voice rising to that grief-
soprano she saved for all deaths

and arrivals:
Twenty-two windows!
Imagine.

From the round, utterly
lightless womb, the warm hovel
in Mir, the long birth-tunnel
of steerage: Twenty-two breaches
for light, each day

a million crossings. Perhaps she remembered
her rooms in the city, the cavernous courtyard
far below with its trickle of watery light
and children who swam in that gloom
on legs pale as roots. Leaning

out of her life into ours like a plant
toward the sun, she said it again
with conviction—
as if she were taking an oath,
calling all her dead to witness.

MY BOLSHEVIK YEARS

In my youth
I mimed obeisance
to a haggard queen,
carried each day
the compost for her gardens.
At night I raged
and glittered
among the radicals.
I stormed the pantry,
circled the dining-
room, sailed manifestos
over the bannister
into the hallway.
I grew in myself
the seeds of force
my governors denied,
rehearsed for years
the excision of traitors,
rose at length
to power
in this government
of days to live
among the hours,
my house in flames.

NOTES FROM THE CAVE

I

Crouched at the top,
I can see only the bottoms of things
cut in half by a turn of the stair—
a rank of olive carpet treads,
half a doorway and the skirts
of chairs, my mother's shoes and ankles
as she passes devilled eggs, the crystal
chandelier dispensing trapezoids
of amethyst and amber light.

I hear my parents and their friends
conversing in a strange, new tongue, voices
rising to a fierce crescendo.
Bernie Goldbloom barks like a seal.
A low growl blossoms into gibbon-shrieks.
They are telling dirty jokes.

I am clean, maidenly
in my flannel gown, avid
to know. My perfect feet
encased in slippers. Soft down
covering my arms and legs.
Wolf Ears, they will call me
when they find me here. My father
has black hair all over his body.
I love him hopelessly, without reason
or measure. Sometimes when my mother passes close,
I catch the pungent scent of bear.