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Five Poems

Robert Rehder

HI THERE

Here we are, on my old stamping grounds,
The whole family,

Me, Caroline and Katherine,
Enjoying the excitement

Of shopping after dark at K-mart
And hearing people talk about internet.

We breakfast at the Hy-Vee
Where you have to give your first name

To get your breakfast –
Democracy is so intimate.

As I was buying an air ticket in the mall,
My travel agent, Annette,

We've never dated
And had only met on the telephone,

She's looking into my eyes,
Murmuring: "Bear with me, Robert,

I'll be right with you,"
Although she was only talking into her headset

On the other side of her desk,
Trying to get me a consolidator for Zürich.

Think of it:
Two hundred and sixty million people

On a first-name basis,
What are they trying to hide?

The action is somewhere else,
Which is why everyone walks around plugged into
earphones.

They all wear Reeboks
So they can start running

As soon as they get the message.
Maybe this explains fast food.

Who can afford to think?
They don't invite each other to dinner

Because they're too busy,
Instead of friends you have email.

After three weeks, Caroline said:
"It's a siege mentality."

We need high crime rates,
They confirm that we're threatened.

We work all the time,
Because nothing has any meaning.

GO WEST

The end of the world has started
In the Tri-Cities

Of eastern Washington,
Kennewick, Richland and Pasco,

Where the aesthetic is not a category.
You cannot buy a newspaper

At the Columbia Center mall in Kennewick.
We're not here to learn.

The black girl in the bookstore
Stacked high with best-sellers says:

"You might try a grocery store"
On the assumption, I suppose,

That perishables belong together,
But there's not one of them either,

And no restaurant
Where you can sit down to eat.

The mall exists to sell us what we don't need.
Whatever happened to beauty?

Crowds of sedentary people in sports clothes
Wander about

Admiring the brand new desolation
That gives a new meaning

To the cost of living.
Being here is like appearing on television.

This is a city composed of suburbs.
They have moved to the country to destroy it,

Put their children into day care
And spend more time in their cars.

This is a phantasy world
Superimposed with an absolute disregard

For the landscape.
Nothing belongs,

An in-your-face ugliness
That insists

On the unconditional surrender
Of the natural world.

We're always doing this.
The bulldozers are out there now

Scratching the itch.
Do we hate our mothers so much?

THE FRONTIER

Lemme tell you about Cultural Studies,
The new American craziness.

At Wisconsin there's this professor
Who studies border art

Which is when a Mexican sneaks into the US
Does a graffito – social context is crucial –

Paints a picture, whatever.
Any of our guys sneak into Mexico,

It doesn't count –
Wouldn't be multicultural.

If a Mexican paints a picture in Mexico,
It's no go. Where's the art?

If he paints in Tucson or El Paso,
But on the way has his passport stamped,

Forget it.
The work has no intellectual interest.

If your back isn't wet, it's not border art.
There's this incredible quality you get

If the artist has been baptized in the Rio Grande,
Hidden under burlap sacks

Or in a truckload of melons.
Can you spell *silly*?

Lucia was in the locker room changing
When a class of freshman women came in

Talking about what they were taking.
This is Illinois.

English, history, sociology, communications –
At the end of the semester, in every subject,

They were going to analyze a Madonna video.
Wow! What a preparation for life!

If you can analyze a Madonna video,
You may be smart enough

To watch television all by yourself.
And since the teenies haven't listened

To what's-her-name for years,
It's really neat for Cultural Studies to have this classic
icon,

You know, like Plato or Thomas Jefferson,
So that the kids have a sense of the tradition.

Over in Germany, they're cool, too.
Her friends in American literature, Pia says,

Are doing a project on the Simpsons.
(Didn't they write *Moby Dick*?)

And I met this guy in Iowa
Whose academic field of interest is shopping malls.

Yes, of course, he's in English.
They don't do stuff like that in business schools.

English is where it's at.
But Thursday

Was breakthrough day.
Recognizing that in an era

Of techno-globalism,
Following the post-mall interregnum,

There would be a need for a more focused,
Upscale,

Erudition-deficient, consumer-oriented topic,
Open to free-association Lacanian discourse

And Benjaminian object theory,
Combining straight-up Stuart Wilson narrative

With Homi Babba babble,
I thought it was time to turn the other *chic*,

So at lunch,
I invented boutique studies,

Because of which I am going to be intensely famous
For the next eight months.

I've got this grant to do research in Palm Springs
And Beverly Hills,

The grant proposal is being published in *Social Text*
And *People* magazine has asked for an interview.

That's the wonderful thing
About Cultural Studies,

You stop thinking
And have all these great ideas.

SUMMER'S END

The hibiscus blooms,
Crumples the old flowers

And throws them away,
As if it were writing a novel

And they are the crushed, discarded
Rough draft,

Rejected purple passages,
The bits and pieces of exploded fireworks

That fall in our garden on August first.
Now only a few flowers are left

And the story isn't finished.
Nietzsche calls Brahms,

"The musician of the unsatisfied,"
Which is why I like him.

The forest is our depth
And has that unfinished quality

Of the finished.
The leaves turn and fall,

A different abundance.
Brahms toasted Custer —

Flaws are us –
I support the Sioux

Who lived for the emptiness
Of the endless grasslands.

CHACO

The great houses of Chetro Ketl
And Pueblo Bonito

Are empty.
The roofs are gone.

The upper stories have fallen in.
As usual, we don't know what happened.

Events keep eluding us –
Ruins,

Our incompleteness.
The remaining walls

With their expert, intricate stone work
Are a triumph of desire,

Definite, clear-cut
And free standing.

The tawny canyon is the memory
Of an older river,

A clock set on geologic time,
Another ruin.

The only thing we find here
Is the present.