I normally prefer imagistic over abstract poetry, except when the abstractions are illustrated by images: a beam, a column, a tomato. The poems in this issue achieve an airy quality in their representation of the real by the symbol, which is perhaps a good definition of the surreal, where the symbol is slightly skewed into dreamy exaggeration. These are not so much actual tomatoes, dogs, Magic Markers®, or beams as they are kinfolk of Donne's compass in "A Valediction, Forbidding Mourning," which stands in for some transcendent paradigm by which we measure our lives. (Such extended metaphors are referred to as metaphysical conceits.) These poems seem to refer to another, superior, reality—the world from which we are emigrants, or exiles, "the world of light," as Henry Vaughan, another metaphysical poet, called it.

Gloria D. Nixon-John's intense poem approaches the visionary. She is past director of the Oakland Writing Project and is Red Cedar Writing Project teacher consultant. She lives on a small ranch in Oxford, Michigan, and is currently writing a biography of poet Bronwen Wallace. What I like about Mary Winters' poems are the lengths to which she goes to set up the transcendent experience, only to abruptly cut it off at the knees at the end. Like many good poems, they show a mind and heart in the process of thinking and feeling, doubling back, then taking off again when it was thought they were ready to rest at conclusions. Mary worked as a lawyer before attending graduate school to become a reading specialist. Her poetry has appeared in The Anthology of Magazine Verse and Yearbook of American Poetry, Literary Review, Poetry East, and Seattle Review, among others. Her prize-winning chapbook is Grace Itself Invisible.

Jeff O'Brien translates unseen anxieties and fear of death into what is visual, tactile, and more familiar to us, easing some of the sting. His is a homely, almost cozy poem about events of cosmic significance. Jeff writes in the Laurel Mountains of Pennsylvania. He has more than twenty-five years experience as a journalist, editor, and publisher. His weekly column appears in newspapers across Pennsylvania and has earned more than forty state and national awards. His commentary has been heard on National Public Radio's All Things Considered. Seasons in Upper Turkeyfoot: A Countryman's Journal will be published this spring by Lucid Press.

Ryan G. Van Cleave is a freelance photographer, and his poetry has appeared in Slant, Willow Review, Oxford Magazine, and New York Quarterly. His most recent poetry chapbook is Elephant Tracks Across Topeka (Lake Effect Press, 1996). He is poetry editor for Sundog: The Southeast Review. I like the way his poem "Requiem" superimposes low culture over high to arrive at the real art of childhood innocence and experience.

Consider the Beam

First you consider the span across
as joist or lintel
below there is shadow
and lower the loom,
then the weave of softer beams
movable beams.
And if you blink quickly
at the setting sun
the stars peek out and call
vision! vision! beams of light
that start but on a dot.
Then what choice do you have?
Nothing rigid really,
no shrunk or symmetry
just that which is either above
or below the horizon
clouds that collect like misery,
rain that falls and scatters like hope.

Gloria D. Nixon-John
What I Don't Like About a Tomato

is it's sold its birthright by growing in
a plastic chamber, allowing itself to be
puffed up with air.

Lies of a tomato: rosy red promising exterior
(what lured the brave dog who heard they were
poison, chomped anyway seduced by their nose-
widening smell now like their taste
entirely gone).

Oh the ones we get from all over the world
as if that helped. From places religious and
not, each tomato more pretty.

Each of them a liar: its color from a can.

Cut into one all expectation and hope.
You get green slime
crossing the divide to black rot.

What can you do but cut out its heart?
Well beyond coring like that horrible
breast operation that removes all the tissue,
puts in a (poisonous) implant because
your genes scared you silly.

Discard the tomato scrubbing your hands,
praying as usual it's not an omen of
death and decay. Something that like cancer
starts deep inside, a tiny seed of your doom.
The doctor ushering you out: "Fit as a fiddle!"
Twiddle twaddle. You've got maybe a year.

Mary Winters

Years and Years Crosslegged Atop a Pillar Was

nothing.
Adults do not know how to talk in the presence of
a child.
They do not omit the terrifying—why?
holy men in India who stare at the sun until blind.
The day they start, aware what will happen.

Never gaze at the sun directly, my teacher warned.

Never.
Through smoked glass, I pretended to watch an
eclipse.
The blind holy man who must grope for his bread.
The better to see God within?
Better not, I thought.

Mary Winters

Their Eyes That Won't Close

They whack and it tortures me so.
The fruit from the ginkgo tree
in the park by the highway:
the grinning woman with a broom
knocking the filthy berries to the ground.
What will she make—some horrible jelly?
She leers, rubbing her belly.
Whacking and whacking 'til the poor tree is
bare of its fruit and its leaves.
More than dead for the winter
since she's left it no seeds.

It torments me so but not as much as
the man across the street
hanging and hanging and hanging out his window.
Black leather coat. Clenching a cigarette.
Whacking the wall with a shovel.
Chipping and chafing away,
big chunks in the street.

What's the worry, the ill?
Whacking and whacking.
I cannot imagine why and it
tortures me so.

Mary Winters
Coronary

The dog he
lifts his big warm head
off of my feet, one less comfort
in the rain that gutters in the can
and shakes the panicles
and fells the saturated bee.
Hummingbirds arrive
between the cells, I hear
the next one far away, I feel
the heel of thunder in my chest,
the wet road pale as cloud,
ten skies shining on my nails.
May I meet a sanguine god
who lacks a sense of irony
his breath a fog
upon the pane, a comfort
in the dripping dark, the rain
beads on his muzzle.

Jeff O'Brien

Requiem

The euphonium player scratches openly
during the lento movement. He is thinking
of the calfskin Indian war drums his father
used to carve from the lightning-split tree
behind the sandbox fort at their old house.
The oboes squeal to life next to him and he obeys,
retaliating with a low, carnival-barker G,
the type of oomph that'd shake feathers off a crow,
even one purpled on the side of a beechwood-
wall
d fort by a cap-chewed Magic Marker® years and
years back.

Ryan G. Van Cleave

Memberships Available in the NCTE Committee on Public Doublespeak

A limited number of memberships in the newly reconstituted Committee on Public Doublespeak will be available to interested members of the Council. Major functions of the committee will be to create a series of concrete classroom exercises (lesson plans, discussion outlines) calculated to focus student attention on particular uses of language that the committee is prepared to call irresponsible; and alert the profession generally to the forces that in the committee's judgment are misusing the language: government and its military personnel, industry and its advertisers, educators, you and me.

If you would like to be considered for membership in this group, send a one-page letter by October 10, 1999, explaining your specific interest in the committee, relevant background, and your present professional work to: Administrative Assistant to the Secondary Associate Executive Director, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.