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an excerpt from

Shelf Life: Battling Overwhelmedness

WHAT if you happened to pick up an issue of a literary journal from forty-five years ago and found it to be full of interesting stuff? Not just amusingly-old-and-musty but *interesting*. Would that be wonderful? Or terrifying?

It was in the trunk of my car. I think I must have taken it from a shelf in my English department's library, on a day when I wanted something unexpected to read at a coffee shop. Then, as often happens, I probably read something else instead, and the odd old journal later that day got dropped on the back seat of my car, and still later got dumped in the trunk along with other items when I cleared the back seat for my daughter and her friends. Then another day, maybe months further on, I happened to notice it—the *Hudson Review* from summer 1963—and there was just enough curiosity, vitality, and wakefulness in my head to push me beyond a typical two-minute, bemused dismissal.

Life gives us too much to take in. Literature does too. But if we always pull back and settle for overviews, synopses, generalizations—or if we look only at what's "new" and "hot"—we're doing death's job. We do it some every day, but occasionally . . . occasionally we have the energy to notice something—something we wouldn't have expected to lift out of the Rio Grande of neglected formations. . . .

In the summer of 1963 I was fourteen. Six or seven more years would pass before I had any awareness of literary journals. In my twenties (the 1970s) I became obsessively aware of them, wanting to publish in them—including the *Hudson Review*. The editors of that journal never accepted anything I wrote,

and my last submission to them was in January 1984. (Yes, I still have those old records.)

A literate and literary teenage boy in Rome in the first century AD must have become aware, at first in cloudy ways and then (as he learned to pay attention) with more and more excitement and alarm, of the all-but-infinite wealth of achievement—and commentary on that achievement—in the culture around him. How not to be overwhelmed, not to give up? For some personalities, the answer can be systematic study. For personalities like mine and those of most poets, the answer has to be, “Look carefully, caringly, at something. Think. Then do this again with something else.”

Out of the trunk of my car, one day in 2007: the *Hudson Review* of summer 1963!

What’s in it? Eight substantial reviews (or review chronicles as the *Hudson* calls them) dealing with film, theater, music, dance, and literature. An essay by Leonard B. Meyer on radical empiricism in aesthetics. A story by Joanne Greenberg. And poems by A. R. Ammons, W. S. Merwin, Louis Simpson, W. D. Snodgrass, and two less famous poets. A person could easily spend a dozen hours reading and thinking about all this writing, and to do so would be an enrichment, a serious deepening, of the life of the mind. A person could do this in 1963; another could do it in 2008.

Reading the Summer 1963 issue of the *Hudson Review* more than four decades later, I get the illusion of encountering a thorough—no, not thorough, but surprisingly capacious—cross section of literary “high” culture in the early 1960s, when I was not yet in high school and Robert Frost had died only a few months before and the Beatles had not yet hit the States.

The review chronicles, the essay, the story, the poetry—if I write about these things, and you read what I write, together we fight one battle against overwhelmedness.