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Introduction

As *Chicago Review*'s fiftieth anniversary approached this year, I felt that this milestone could not be passed without remark, despite my reservations about the ways in which such remarks are usually made. Such celebrations are often little more than self-congratulatory exercises prompted by fairly arbitrary circumstances: there is nothing intrinsically interesting about the number fifty or the notion of an anniversary, at least when it comes to the writing of literary history. And yet for a little magazine like *Chicago Review* to survive when so many others have come and gone gives rise to reflection. The most prominent student-run literary quarterly in America (staffed chiefly by graduate students in the humanities along with other students and friends from the community), *Chicago Review* has been directed by an itinerant, youthful constituency. While I hesitate to generalize about this cohort across so many years, it seems fair to say that these editors have been particularly attuned to innovation in both form and content, eager to discover new voices, and interested in how literature can address contemporary culture. Perhaps because few editors have stayed around long enough to become entrenched, the magazine has rarely become partisan, rarely the product of a particular editor's vision. The frequent infusions of new energy and enthusiasm through changes in editorial staff have kept *Chicago Review* fresh when other journals have settled into a comfortable familiarity: this explains in part why it continues to attract readers and writers to its pages. So while this occasion for historical reflection is somewhat arbitrary, there is nevertheless plenty to reflect upon. We've decided to seize the moment.

In putting together this retrospective anthology, I sought to avoid what might be called the "trophy-case" approach to commemorative anthologies. It would have been easy to pick out the works of the most famous authors we've published and reprint them, confirming our prestige by reference to the prestige each author had accrued over the course of a career. Admittedly, had we followed this selection process, many of the works included here may well have been chosen. But I had a different model of retrospection in mind. I had long watched various members of the staff peer curiously into the dusty back issues lining the walls of our office. I myself had puzzled over some of these issues, just as I had rummaged through a jumble of files and cartons in storage. Working in the offices of *Chicago Review* is akin to picking through the contents of an attic, with all of the attendant pleasures and dangers. One might discover a letter from Raymond Carver on the floor of the closet, or one might be surprised to discover a hive of bees inhabiting a box of back issues nearby. Riffing through the pages of old issues, I

understood, was much the same: you never knew what might turn up. It was with this sense that retrospection could be fraught with surprises and secreted histories, and not be merely commemorative, that we began to assemble the contents of this issue.

Andrew Rathmann, Angela Sorby, and I met throughout the winter of 1996 to read through the archive of back issues and report to each other on what we had found. After about three months of reading, we came up with a list of intriguing works. We found late work by modernist poets, academic verse, cultural criticism from the Eisenhower era, the first rumblings of the Beats, meditations on Zen, deep image poetry, concrete poetry, coverage of the police riot at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, guerilla theater, early Language writing, metafictional experiments, minimalist fiction, lyric explorations of ethnic identity, and formalist verse. There would be a lot of explaining to do.

I wanted to understand what motivated the publication of such varied, innovative works. So I began an extended letter-writing campaign. I contacted as many of the authors and former editors as possible and asked them to comment on their contributions to *Chicago Review*. Then I took on the project of writing the editorial notes for this issue. I had a curatorial model in mind: each note would be like the placard accompanying a work of art in a retrospective exhibition. I did basic research on each piece, but I also used my correspondence as part of the archive for this project. This anthology provides a wealth of new material about the works reprinted in it.

There are significant omissions, of course. We declined to reprint translations despite our propensity for publishing international anthologies. Critical essays, though important, would take up too much room. Indeed, space limitations led us to stop our look backwards in the late-1980s (when I had joined the staff): we preferred to speculate about the more-distant past. We could not secure the rights to important works by Conrad Aiken and Leslie Silko. And, despite my best efforts, I could not find a place for a quotation from every letter I solicited, and most of the quotations are brief excerpts from much longer letters. All of these letters will be deposited in the *Chicago Review* archive at the University of Chicago's Regenstein Library, where they will be available to scholars.

I am grateful to my many correspondents over the past year, to the individual donors to this project, and to the Illinois Arts Council for its continued support. Finally, because this is the last issue I will edit, I want to thank the hundreds of writers, editors, and subscribers who have made the last five years so rewarding for me and who have made *Chicago Review* such a lively journal. May it continue to thrive.

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