

## Editor's Note

This issue concerns itself in many ways with spiritual and religious life. That theme wasn't planned, and you will not find much orthodoxy, certainty, or ideology about it; you will find, however, people in search of understanding, who achieve, at times, moments of epiphany—a word not in vogue these days—and a clarity of vision. You will not find much theologizing in the abstract sense. You will find a Kentucky family watching strange lights in the sky and deciding that this is the second coming of Jesus. You will find rhapsodies over birds—northern juncos—and flowers—lady's slippers. You will find, also, the intersection of faith and “mass graves undug in desert air,” and one man's memory of the “madness of Saigon.”

We remember what Don Quixote says of love—*that it makes all things equal*—and in that spirit, our cover and inside pages reproduce sections of *The Don Quixote Frescoes*, by the great Spanish artist Luis Quintanilla, painted in 1940 and 1941 at what was then the University of Kansas City (now the University of Missouri-Kansas City). The Quixote figure in these murals is the likeness of one of my predecessors, Alexander Cappon, editor of this magazine from 1938 to 1970. Quixote and Alex Cappon fit well into our impromptu theme, as we celebrate this magazine's heritage in its 70th year. Lord Byron has written of Quixote, “His virtue makes him mad.” What is virtue? In this issue, Marilyn Kallet's poems of hope command us “to look again” and face the

truth of events. So I cite Quixote's own words from Part One of Cervantes' novel: "A willful wrong voluntarily and knowingly I never committed to anyone."

Quixote's madness is the madness we aspire to. The mainstream press this season points mostly to the presidential election and to our desire for certainty and solutions. Literature sets us to action, only; it does not promise solutions and does not break its promises. It seeks what Jonis Agee here describes as the mystery and magic that affirm all life: "A hand reaching out for the world, then pulling back." If you ask for a poem's five-year plan, the poem will ask you for your five-year plan. Sorry. Literature is the only art form that cannot be experienced on any level passively. It requires your involvement.

In what way do our actions in life matter? That is the question of this issue of *New Letters*. The spiritual journey through these poems, stories, and essays is your journey. "Never mind apportioning blame," says Linda Pastan. Here, we have Thomas E. Kennedy coming upon a destitute mother and child during New York City's recent blackout, and asking, What is my role in the lives of these strangers? We have a poem about "Massacre of the Innocents," where the poet sees naked trees in Breughel's famous painting of war and wonders, "Will they ever be able to come into leaf / to flower / again?" We have the very personification of idealism, and we might well ask how to sustain our own visions. Here, we have everything that should drive our politics. We have the great questions.

– Robert Stewart