

# Source and Drama

## *An Editor's Note*

Once again, we reach into the deep lake of our history of letters—that is, the history of bright new writing this magazine has presented—and retrieve a gleaming fish that has been resting a long time out of sight. We find that it is time, on the 100th anniversary of the birth of the novelist, poet, memoirist, seaman, correspondent, raconteur, Harry Roskolenko, to re-introduce to our readers one of his most memorable essays, first published in *New Letters* in the spring of 1978, two years before his death on July 17, 1980.

Although the essay confronts the writer's impending death, it is no "death essay," in the same way the poet Basho refused to write a traditional death poem. "Every moment of life is the last," Basho said to his disciple Rotsu, "every poem a death poem. Why then at this time should I write one? In these my last hours, I have no poem." Here in his last months, Roskolenko offered us life, and laughter. This essay does not merely record a part of that life; it is, itself, alive, and so is its title, "Laughter," wiggling and splashing back into view. Read this essay every week for a year.

I say that as introduction to the art and writing that run generally through the core of this issue. In certain entrapments, we find freedom; in devastations, we find joy—in story, poem, essay, and art. Look at the photographs of the town of Greensburg, Kan., following the tornado of May 4, 2007. Look at them. Theirs is a human story, even though no human appears.

Art, whether literary or visual, tells it slant, sometimes, with the artifacts, the crazy combinations that mark a human presence.

“When Joseph Conrad described a typhoon,” notes Antoine de Saint-Exupéry in an essay, “he said very little about towering waves or darkness, or the whistling of the wind in the shrouds.” Conrad’s portraits of devastation look instead much like these tornado photographs by Larry Schwarm. “Family treasures painfully collected in a lifetime of poverty,” Exupéry continues, “pitiful mementoes so alike that nobody but their owners could have told them apart. . . . It was this human drama that Conrad described when he painted a typhoon.”

We have the consolation in these photos, unlike with some other tales and poems here, that the devastation was not inflicted upon people by other people. Nature—meteorological or biological—tough as it can be, spares us the sinister motives of ideology or self-interest. No matter its subject or source, however, art seeks the human drama. Someone’s blue car, someone’s daughter’s illness, someone’s youthful dream. Great writing includes in its pool of attributes humor and heroism, those glimmering qualities, I believe, our readers hope to get a look at.

—Robert Stewart