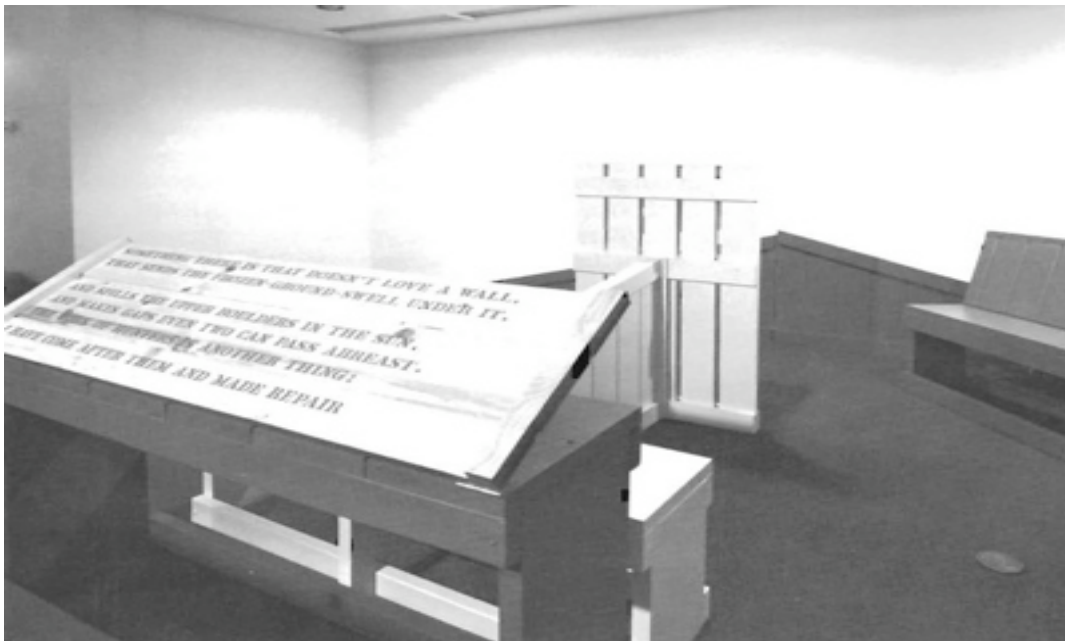


the death of the hired man

David Antin

Some time in the late winter of 1982 I got a call from the Baxter Art Gallery at Cal Tech, asking if I'd do a reading in connection with a Siah Armajani show they were opening in March. Under the direction of Michael Smith, this Pasadena placed university gallery had become a serious showplace for contemporary art in Southern California. Armajani was an avant-garde sculptor whose work I respected and the show was an installation that was billed as a "Poetry Lounge." I had no idea what a Poetry Lounge might be, but Michael had arranged for a series of readings in the Lounge by six very different poets on six consecutive Tuesdays during the exhibition—Clayton Eshleman, Jerome Rothenberg, Oscar Mandel, Jerome McGann, Richard Howard, and, if I accepted, me. The line-up seemed plausible enough and I agreed. But what took me by surprise was the unavoidable presence of a seventh poet, Robert Frost, whose poem "Mending Wall" was distributed in printed segments six lines long on each of the desktops confronting the audience members sitting in the pews and dividing them from any poet reading from the boxy pulpit podium in front of them. In this Poetry Lounge, Robert Frost divided us, the contemporary poets, from our potential audience. I wasn't sure what this meant for Armajani or me.



when i was invited to come here i realized that siah
 armajani had gotten here first because i received a
 phone call from somebody up here barbara and she
 said siah armajani has constructed a poetry lounge for
 us up here at caltech and wed like to know if you would
 come up and read "read" well i said i dont
 really read i talk but i guess i could come up
 and do a talk poem and barbara didnt blanch at
 that i guess i couldnt see but it didnt
 seem to set her back at all and she said all right
 and it was agreed then i received in the mail a
 little green booklet that was i suppose to prepare me
 for the poetry lounge because while i might have
 imagined what a poetry lounge was if it had been built
 in the caltech library this poetry lounge was in the
 baxter art gallery and i also knew because i
 happen to be an art critic as well as a poet that siah
 armajani was an artist and not a contractor and comes
 from a part of the art world we both share so i had
 no idea what sort of thing this poetry lounge in an art
 gallery was going to be and the booklet didnt prepare
 me for it either it prepared me for several other
 things that siah armajani had constructed at several other
 places on several other occasions than this one
 reading houses and reading gardens and meeting
 gardens and newsstands with reading benches and tables
 and fences in art galleries in places like omaha and
 cincinnati and purchase and roanoke and i could
 see from the booklet that siah had a considerable
 involvement with sitting and reading but since
 for me poetry has a lot more to do with standing and
 talking than sitting and reading i still couldnt
 quite imagine what this poetry lounge was likely to be
 so i let my mind play over the possibilities and i
 imagined partly because of siah armajanis wonderful
 name some poet like basil bunting reclining on a
 great oriental settee behind which a beautiful maiden
 was kneeling and pouring from a costly beaker some sweet
 and appalling wine which the reclining poet
 awaited from her hand and would take and between
 occasional sips sigh and lament his lost love for
 some handsome youth now long since dead in a music
 as sweet and appalling as the wine but then i thought
 that wasnt too likely and i reminded myself that clayton
 eshleman teaches poetry at caltech and siah would surely
 have taken account of this so that he would have
 painted little paleolithic figures upon his fences and
 benches in recognition of claytons well known passion
 for the old stone age but looking at the little

green booklet once more i recalled that siah and i had
 very nearly served together in a symposium held in
 washington on the present state of the crafts a
 symposium at which he somehow didnt appear and was
 replaced by an amazingly handsome vietnamese poet with
 a brilliant smile a monogrammed leather attache case
 and an elegant gold wristwatch and i thought
 then that siah might be doing something craft conscious
 for poetry and as the booklet revealed in
 spite of his sonorous name which i took to be
 either armenian or persian siah armajani had
 turned around in minneapolis and made american furniture
 and i thought wow in the baxter art gallery of
 the california institute of technology we will have
 handcrafted american furniture for american poetry
 and i remembered that there is a school or
 was a school of american poetry that was so
 american i used to think of it as armorican more
 armorican than american and i suspected that siah's
 relation to this armorican americanism with its neat
 downright simpleness its blunt straight
 forwardness its woodenness might provide
 us with more of those wooden things he had built for
 the art galleries of purchase and roanoke and omaha
 and cincinnati more of those boxy tables and
 trestle benches those tongue and groove slatted
 fences and here we are in the poetry lounge in this
 gallery arranged like a church or a meeting hall or a
 schoolroom with its three little rows of desks and
 benches on each side facing my cratelike lectern or
 pulpit with the crisscrossed shelving at the walls
 lodging a few books that signify poetry and all
 this was more or less expectable but one thing i
 didnt expect that went beyond all my expectations
 was robert frost that robert frost should be here
 and i should be here with him in the same place at the
 same time i knew of course that robert frost was
 going to be here someone had told me something of
 it but that the entire poem "mending wall" would be
 stencilled line for line across all the desk tops
 separating the people on the benches from me up here
 at my pulpit that went beyond all my expectations
 because it creates a conjunction of two poets i simply
 could not imagine in fact i considered this
 conjunction so impossible to imagine that when i was
 publishing my last book and composing a preface to
 stand as a kind of signpost to any entering reader to
 indicate what he or she might soon expect to be
 confronted with i quoted something i had said on a

previous occasion "if robert lowell is a poet i
 dont want to be a poet if robert frost was a poet
 i dont want to be a poet if socrates was a poet ill
 consider it" now i didnt say this because i despise
 the writings of robert lowell or robert frost but
 to try to explain in what sort of way i would like my
 works to be heard and seen and to prevent confusion
 because in some ways im afraid im a
 rather implausible poet not to myself of course
 to myself im a simple straight forward talking
 poet more plausible than most whod be easy to
 understand for most of those people who sat around in
 the courtyards and coffeeshops and taverns and listened
 to homer or socrates but my book was a long way
 from those courtyards and coffeeshops and a lot
 closer to a library or school where robert frost
 would surely be a much more plausible poet than i
 who would seem to be a still more implausible
 poet because i had come in his place and i wanted
 to assure everyone that i had not come in his place
 at all and now here we are confronting each
 other across the desk tops of the same place and
 anticipating something of this i wanted to think about
 what it was that made me feel so deeply and firmly
 that we were two poets who could not possibly occupy
 the same space because i had felt that way for a
 long time and felt it i think more deeply and firmly
 than i was sure i had a reason for feeling it so i
 thought to myself before coming here i will get
 myself some robert frost books and ill look into them
 so i got out the three volumes of robert frosts biography
 and i looked at them because i thought it would
 be difficult to read his words without having some sense
 of the world within which they might apply and i
 got out a book of robert frosts poetry one of those
 books that are refugees from our childhood that
 are collected by someone like louis untermeyer in
 which the poems are taken from most of the poets books
 no matter where or when they were written or under
 what circumstances and pressed up against each other
 between little folksy engravings and chatty paragraphs
 commending their various excellences or frosts as
 if these were in no way dependent on any human context
 of time or place or situation but since this is
 the standard situation for robert frost the place
 in which he is the perfect model of a plausible poet
 and a place possibly very much like a poetry
 lounge i thought i would read in that book but
 because i cant imagine poetry anybodys poetry in such

a place i cheated and read in the biography as well
 and i asked myself this question what is it
 about this poet or what is it ive felt about this poet
 who ive never considered hateful from another
 time from whom i feel so completely alien that i
 couldnt imagine sharing the term poet with him
 there are i said things about him i should like
 but i dont like them anyway for example i came
 on a letter of frosts that i liked and would probably
 agree with at least in part or at least a
 large part of that letter makes sense to me within my
 world it was a letter he had written to somebody
 named sidney cox whom i dont know and dont
 especially care to know as i dont care about the
 details of robert frosts personal life but i do
 care that in this letter frost said that "the living part
 of a poem is the intonation entangled somehow in the
 syntax idiom and meaning of a sentence its only
 there for those who have heard it in conversation
 its not for us in any greek or latin poem because
 our ears have not been filled with the tones of greek
 and roman talk it is the most volatile and at the
 same time important part of poetry it goes and the
 language becomes a dead language and the poetry
 becomes a dead poetry" now i dont entirely agree
 with that but it belongs to a discourse i would
 take seriously i mean i would agree that for us
 greek and latin poetry have a certain amount of deadness
 because we have no idea how they really sounded
 though i was once in a seminar with a woman who had
 a great theory of how they sounded and she sang a whole
 book of the iliad at us and it was one of the loveliest
 performances ive ever heard but i still dont know
 how they talked the only way i ever got any sense
 of how they talked was in reading plato where the
 sense of the sentences when you think youve got it
 gives you some sense of the way they sounded and
 it seems to me also that this image of a spoken language
 and its ways of making sense lying at the bottom of
 any poetry that makes sense was something i could agree
 with and surely take seriously but there is something
 about robert frost here that doesnt make sense to me
 because most of his poetry doesnt make sense that
 way or makes sense that way only once in a while
 and i guess you can see that from the lines that
 are stencilled in front of you on your desktop or your
 neighbors desktops from a poem that most people
 who would think about it would consider one of frosts
 best poems in precisely this way that the lines

sound of the sense that sentences make in peoples
 conversations but i think there is something
 disastrous about the language of most of this poem
 something mechanical and wooden about the way the
 lines are nearly all end stopped and tacked on one to
 the other like siding and most of them are
 stretched out to reach the end of a line or swollen
 to fit the poetical style

something there is that does not love a wall
 that sends the frozen ground swell under it
 and spills the upper boulders in the sun

or

the work of hunters is another thing
 i have come after them and made repair
 where they have left not one stone on a stone

there is what i would call a disastrous poetical language
 in robert frost and i dont understand it or why it had
 to be so disastrous because it wasnt a personal
 disaster perhaps it was a national disaster or a
 disaster of his time but somewhere in the poetical
 debris of such a poem there will be one line that will
 make sense in the way frosts letter talked of
 making sense and you wont want to dismiss it the
 sound of a voice saying over and over again as if its
 speaker had just discovered its meaning something
 like "good fences make good neighbors" which
 is not equalled but supposed to be by "something there
 is that doesn't love a wall" though not only have
 you never heard anyone speak it you cant even imagine
 anyone speaking it in precisely that way because
 you suspect quite rightly that something called meter
 has turned an english sentence back on itself to make
 it sound more poetical more important and quaint
 something there is for sure that goes around
 turning over english sentences like "i let my neighbor
 behind the hill know" into "i let my neighbor know beyond
 the hill" which is too bad because if there
 was something wild and whimsical in this poem that didnt
 respect walls you might suppose it wouldnt respect
 meter either so you dont take it too seriously
 and thats too bad because frost as the poet
 appears to identify himself in speaking for the
 force against walls "that wants them down"
 or represents himself at least as knowing more
 than his neighbor about walls and their limitations

so he keeps bugging him "why do they make good
 neighbors isnt it where there are cows but
 there are no cows here my apple trees will never
 get across and eat his pines before i built a wall
 i would ask to know what i was walling in or out"
 to which his neighbor doesnt respond just
 answers with that line that might have come out of a
 book of marianne moores or a collection of gnomonic
 verse or simply out of the long experience of
 the neighborhood "good fences make good neighbors"
 the logic of which is unassailable if you happen
 to look into the life of robert frost who was it
 seems a particularly acquisitive man and might have
 followed his apple seedlings up to his neighbors
 doorstep if the occasion presented itself but
 frost doesn't want to give his neighbor a logic only
 a tenacious hold on a conventional saying that the poet
 wants to toy with if not challenge and so in what
 i regard as the most disastrous language of the poem
 he proposes to give a kind of shape to this something
 that doesnt love a wall and wants it down "i could
 say 'elves' to him" now thats a blatant lie
 there is no way that robert frost could have said
 elves to him he could not and would not have said
 elves to him because if he had ever said elves to
 him he would never have been able to face his neighbor
 again across any wall at all and of course thats
 exactly what robert frost wanted to continue to do
 to face his neighbors across his wall and be taken
 for a new england farmer sort of but of course
 he was not a new england farmer he was hardly a
 farmer at all he farmed when he felt like it raised
 a few chickens that others had to take care of and
 come over and kill and apple trees that didnt take
 much tending which in any case he could always
 hire others to do but he wasnt much of a farmer
 or he would have known that being a farmer is as
 precisely dependent on walls as being a poet is not
 and we wouldnt have that curious characterization
 of his neighbor as an old stoneage savage when it
 wasnt the old stone age gathering and hunting people
 but the new stone age cultivators who made so much of
 surveying and boundaries and walls robert frost was
 not so much of a farmer as a poet dressed up as a farmer
 in a disguise he would have liked all of us readers to
 see through and it seems to me thats part of the
 awkwardness were confronted with when we try to read
 the poetry of robert frost the awkwardness of
 metaphor poetical metaphor which is something

that gets handed to you in such a way as to assure you
 that its not that thing thats being handed you but
 something else which you will have to take it for
 if youre going to take part or pleasure in the
 transaction at all now whenever robert frost has
 an interesting insight into anything hes looking
 at some kind of human action and if you take a poem
 like "the code" and its an interesting poem
 what youve got is an anecdote or a short story
 in this case told by an old farm hand about a
 farmer hed been working for a hard driving man who
 managed by driving himself to drive his workers before
 him in jobs like mowing and loading hay and the
 old hand had put up with this driving all day long and
 bided his time because nothing explicit had been done
 or said to violate the code of farmer farm hand relations
 till they got back to the barn to unload the hay
 and the farmer who was standing in the barn
 stall down below called to the hand who was standing
 on top of the wagon load that hed just been stacking
 "let her come" in just that tone of voice that
 could be interpreted as criticism and command and
 the farm hand tried to kill him by dumping the
 whole load down on his head now whats valuable in
 this poem is the sense of the way the mans resentment
 of this farmers style of rushing was there before his
 words but it was the words that gave the hand his
 justification for killing because they constituted
 the open act of violation and the farmer whom
 the farm hand didnt really succeed in killing appears
 to have recognized this too and it gives a nice
 image of how many small acts of nearly imperceptible
 violence can be precipitated into a single utterance
 struck off like the head of a match whats good
 about this story is its compactness and simplicity the
 sense of watching a mind slowly registering its
 experience but the trouble is the poem is nowhere
 as compact as the anecdote lying at its center which
 could have been tossed off in a couple of dozen lines and
 is padded out to more than a hundred with a lot of rural
 furniture and the thing about this furniture is that
 its less functional than metaphorical if you dont
 see what i mean consider armajani whose furniture
 most of you are sitting in its not serious furniture
 or its too serious joinery look at those
 bookshelves against the wall if bookshelves is what
 they are because the fact that you can place a
 few poetry books in them doesnt make them bookshelves
 and they are much more seriously minimal wooden

wall sculptures to which something excessive has been
 added along with the blue paint all those hinges
 for example now those hinges are borrowed from a
 great class of familiar objects with moving joints
 that allow you the convenience of a certain indecision
 to accommodate which you can open and close the
 joined things or at least move them back and forth as
 the impulse strikes you but there is no reason
 why you would want to move these hinges back and
 forth and if you wanted to you couldnt
 because the joined things prevent the joint from
 moving since each separate piece of wood here is
 hinged at one end to the top of a crosspiece from
 which it would hang down loosely and if you wanted
 you could pick it up and let it swing back down but
 armajani has intervened at just this point and hinged
 the two loose ends together to form a hanging "v" from
 which you couldnt budge them if you tried because
 the length of each wooden flap prevents the other one
 from moving and this is pretty funny because of
 the way it transforms all these moving joints to fixed
 ones and makes you wonder why hes used them
 until you realize that these hinges are not hinges
 at all but images of hinges or synecdoches that
 as individual hinges expend all their energy calling up
 the class of hinges of which they are merely representatives
 or consider this gable shaped wall structure that terminates
 absurdly in what resembles a little bench surely you
 could find no reason for sitting here and no one
 is ever likely to sit here armajani must know this
 so we are not really looking at a bench but an
 image of a bench that is there to represent like
 all those hinges structures of a type we encounter
 now mainly in museums where we can hardly divine
 what needs or whims were satisfied by these plainly
 ingenious designs so this is not a simple functional
 furniture but a metaphoric mannerist sculpture that
 reminds you of a kind of american craftsman furniture
 that this is not and it goes further it invites
 you to test its function and then springs its trap
 which tells you something by the way it looks and doesnt
 let you use it look at where youre sitting on those
 benches theyre quite a bit too low for most of you
 to read comfortably the six lines of "mending wall"
 stencilled on the desk in front of you if you wanted
 to read them you might have to stand up as at a lectern
 which these desks much more resemble besides
 what good are six lines of a forty-five line poem that
 youd have to stand to read the rest of from the seven

other lectern desks and youre not going to do that
 either because this room is set up as an auditorium
 and all your benches and desks are angled toward my
 cratelike lectern pulpit that turns me into some kind
 of preacher teacher and you have to crane your necks
 a little to look toward me over the fragments of robert
 frost this room is beginning to tell us something
 about the contemporary state of poetry or armajanis
 beliefs about it which may not be so far off the
 mark an image of a slightly foolish teacher preacher
 followed by an uncomfortable audience from which he is



divided by fragments of robert frost and this is
 pretty funny but the clincher is yet to come suppose
 you the audience for poetry take it upon
 yourselves to become poets and write your own poem
 you reach for the hinged lectern on which the robert
 frost is inscribed to lower it into the desk at which you
 can write and it comes down and crushes you against
 the desk behind you apparently these fragments of
 robert frost that prevented you from hearing
 poetry will also prevent you from writing it this
 is a very funny situation for a poetry lounge in
 which poetry becomes at best uncomfortable and at worst
 impossible there is a certain amount of mockery here
 in which metaphor poetical metaphor is turned back
 on itself as the enemy of poetry or at least of
 meaning now this feels like a kind of attack on
 poetry or a certain image or aspect of poetry
 and certainly of robert frosts poetry at

least that part of robert frosts poetry that has been
 selected for popular acclaim according to which
 he is americas poet the way andrew wyeth and norman
 rockwell are americas painters and there is that
 way in which he sometimes resembles one or the other of
 them though there is something fiercer and harder
 in some of his poetry but there is often and almost
 always something that blurs or hides this a kind
 of metaphorical screen that he drops over it that softens
 and discolors it and i wondered whether my problems
 with frost were the problems of metaphor the kind of
 metaphor that does not reveal but conceals and colors
 and i wondered what the role of metaphor was for
 frost and i think im first beginning to understand it
 now its the idea that metaphor is what a poet
 does its his job to turn speech into figures
 of speech and dimly i seem to remember hearing back
 in school somewhere that that was the center of poetry
 metaphor poetry was metaphorical speech i
 never understood it then why does it have to be
 metaphor so i forgot about it as if it was some
 kind of literary aberration to which schools are prone
 but i see it goes deeper than that this commitment
 to metaphor yet what is it if i try to review
 it in the light of a classical education i can
 ask what aristotle had to say of it in the poetics
 aristotle had some funny things to say about
 metaphor toward the end of the poetics the
 part that nobody tends to read very much because by
 then youre so interested in tragedy its hard to remember
 its as a species of poetry that hes discussing it
 and when he finally comes to the language of
 poetry hes going to take up the nature of words and
 the greeks have a peculiarly idiosyncratic idea of
 them according to which all words are some kind of
 names because for the greeks all representation
 appears to consist of naming at least according to
 aristotle and for aristotle because he is a greek
 and because the greeks have such a powerful idea
 of a rep things have reps everythings got a
 rep and the rep is carried by its name and there
 are names for actions as there are for things and for
 people and among these names aristotle says
 there are the right names and the wrong names the
 wrong names are metaphors now as he says this he
 also says other things about names that there are
 foreign names and common names and specially strange
 and deformed ones but metaphor is the wrong name
 you get something that is not the right name for

something and you call it by that name for example
 you call this woman "george" she wont answer to
 that name but it doesnt matter what does matter is
 that you refer to her as george in such a way that she
 or others hear her referred to as george well she
 isnt really a george and you probably dont have a
 strong enough idea of what a george is for me to discuss
 it with you but charlemagne her name isnt
 charlemagne but if i call her charlemagne youll
 have a strong image of the character i want to attribute
 to her you can immediately see what power will
 accrue to her youll see her holding a scepter
 riding at the head of her troops half roman
 half german and followed by a train of irish
 scholars and all emperor uniting civilization
 and force if you accept it you may not believe
 me because she doesnt look at all like shes going
 to play the role of charlemagne today now if
 thats the case and shes not going to play charlemagne
 what will this wrong name metaphor do it will
 depend i suppose on how much you care about how wrong
 it is because you could consider it like a hat
 you put on a hat you cover your face somewhat
 you put it in the shade if i put on a hat i
 would look different i dont like to wear hats but
 i remember once when i was hitching across the country
 in about 1952 i remember that because it was the
 year that eisenhower was to be elected president and
 i was travelling west on the northernmost route route
 10 and in 1952 they had not yet completely obliterated
 the country when it got dark the roads got dark and
 there were stars or there was a moon unless it got
 cloudy when there was nothing and the road was empty
 and you could wait a long time for a hitch if you
 travelled at night and i travelled back and forth
 across the country that year from idaho where i had
 been working and i was passing close to bismark
 north dakota i dont know what it is now but in
 those days it was a lone landmark on the road in the
 empty state of north dakota and i happened to be
 wearing a hat i was wearing a hat because it was a
 hot and sunny summer and i was trying to keep the sun
 out of my eyes the hat was a beaten up old fedora
 that i had worn to work to keep branches out of my
 eyes and i was travelling with a friend who was
 similarly wearing a hat over his dark wavy hair and
 a man pulled up in a pickup truck and offered us a
 hitch and we were driving along my friend walter
 making small talk with this friendly man whod picked us

up when he gave us the pitch first he started
 on all of the reasons why living in north dakota was
 living in gods country the best place in the world to
 live how attentive and sharp it made you to live
 close to the wild makes a man observant and sharp
 "i bet" he said "i can tell you all kinds of things
 about yourselves you wouldnt think id noticed" we
 bit go ahead "i can tell" he said "where youre
 from what kind of people you come from" okay we
 said "i can tell" he said looking at my thin pale
 handsome friend "youre from new york"
 admiration from us "how could you tell?"
 from your jewish accent he said and walter
 who was of german extraction smiled "how about
 me?" "youre a scandinavian" "how could you
 tell?" "easily discernible" he said "well?"
 "youre the blonde germanic type too bony to
 be german" apparently the hat sitting on my bald
 head had confused him slightly changed my genre
 made my absent eyebrows blonde if i had taken
 the hat off i might have been a zen monk or if i
 took on a monocle i could have been german again this
 time a junker once when my wife was going to our hip
 clinic when she was pregnant to see the
 doctor there it was back in the sixties at the height
 of the early protests against the vietnam war and
 the doctors were keeping check on her progress and i came
 along sometimes to keep her company one day we got
 there and the nurse receptionist stared at me for a moment
 and said "youve done something" i said "what?"
 "shaved off your beard" now i never had a
 beard but i knew what she meant i wore chinos or
 levis and black motorcycle boots and ellie wore no makeup
 and all of us were protesters against the war
 bearded beatniks this has become a somewhat
 historical term and many of you wont remember it but
 thats what you were then as later ellie might have
 become a hippie a condition for which i didnt qualify
 because in my levis and boots and very short hair i
 looked too military and this nurse who had glanced
 casually at me taking in only my boots and jeans one
 day looked at me and seeing no beard realized that i had
 shaved it off she dropped a hat on me or shed
 always had a hat on me and seeing me walk out from
 under it she dropped it on me again now what is
 this trick of getting and keeping things under your
 hat the way armajani goes about getting american
 carpentry under a hat and we recognize this hat
 trick because we recognize the hat armajanis as a

high amish hat and frosts as a big broad brimmed high
 crowned straw that doesnt fit any wearer so we
 know whats under that hat isnt simply wearing it but hiding
 under it now what does it mean to perform this hat
 trick to me it suggests that most of the people who
 perform it know very well or think they do what it is
 theyre covering up they seem to have a very clear
 idea of what the truth is or the fact is and its
 inadequacies and what they want to give you or put
 in front of you or themselves is something thats not
 exactly the truth it may be better than the truth
 or more interesting or simply more pleasing
 now the people who go in for this must have a
 strong sense that they know the truth because you
 have to feel you know it to want to cover it up with a
 metaphor how else would you know you had a metaphor
 and not simple truth how do you know this isnt
 a real poetry lounge because it doesn't work as a
 poetry lounge because as a poetry lounge its
 ridiculous and works only with absurd difficulties that
 we all imagine a poetry lounge would never present
 though we may never have seen one or imagined it
 before this lounge is something like its hinges
 which as hinges are some sort of lies so i
 suppose you need if not an image of truth at least
 an image of some kind of untruth that can serve as a
 kind of poorly fitting hat and i guess at bottom
 both frost and armajani have a clearer idea of truth
 than i do because im not at all sure when im using
 metaphors or giving the wrong name i suppose im
 pretty sure her name is not charlemagne its a low
 probability but who would believe my sons name is
 blaise cendrars when he was a little boy we lived in
 the town of solana beach and every morning i used to have
 a conversation about this with a neighbor of mine a
 mr canton a retired actuary who came from montreal
 every morning mr canton used to come strolling up
 the street on his way to the bluffs overlooking the ocean
 and he proceeded in his portly old mans way hands
 behind his back pausing to take in the street and pausing
 occasionally to converse with his neighbors his
 conversation with me was conducted in french and concerned
 blaise who he regularly observed was a wonderful child
 a handsome child well behaved what was his name?
 and when i answered blaise he would smile and say
 ah thats a wonderful name and observe that he was named
 after the saint who protects against ills of the throat
 at which i would smile and point out that he was
 actually named after blaise cendrars the great one armed

poet of france then mr canton would nod politely
 make some observation on the weather and continue
 his stroll this would happen every day that we
 chanced to meet mr canton on his morning stroll he
 would ask my sons name i would say blaise he would tell
 me of saint blaise who protects against ills of the
 throat and i would tell him of blaise cendrars the french
 poet who protects against depression and this was
 our regular morning conversation it gave mr canton
 pleasure and it gave me pleasure until mr canton one day
 went off to his montreal brothers home where he would
 be taken care of by relatives and end his life in peace
 probably still convinced that blaise cendrars was
 not my sons right name and in this blaise may have
 agreed with him because he has resolutely refused
 to let friends know his middle name for no other
 reason i suppose than his suspicion that they would hear
 "cendrars" a foreign name meaning nothing to them and
 turn it into "sandra" which is not a foreign name but
 not a boys name either he has also let us know
 that in front of his friends and their parents we must
 call him "blaze" instead of "blaise" though hes not
 quite so consistent in this but it seemed right to
 ellie and me and weve called him blaze in public whenever
 we remember for this is california where the english
 translation seems to articulate his name so at
 baseball games when the loudspeaker announces to the
 gathered spectators "now batting for glendale
 federal the shortstop blaze antin" the
 name flares up in the spirit of the poet he was named
 after in a form they can pronounce and recognize in
 san diego as his right name and you may ask why
 if its so important to give the right name did you name
 that golden california child after a scraggly raunchy
 french adventurer poet and the answer is he wasnt
 born a california child he was born in new york as
 dark as an arab a wizened little baby with what
 looked like a heavy growth of beard who refused to sleep
 for a full twenty-four hours after he was born and
 he looked like no one else except maybe w c fields
 and ellie said he looks like a trouble maker
 the little bastard wont go to sleep he wants
 to look around maybe get up and go he looks i
 said like the kind of kid wholl run off at sixteen to
 cover the russo japanese war lets name him blaise
 cendrars besides this was the name of the twentieth
 centurys most cheerful poet one of frances greatest
 but however that may be and i believe it he
 was surely the most cheerful and a good person to

take after and thats why we named him blaise
 cendrars hopefully and it didnt seem like a
 metaphor because an infant has no right name yet
 and has to grow into one we hoped it would be this
 one and now it doesnt seem to be the wrong name
 after all he gets to be more like the name each
 year to be sure a younger somewhat cooler
 california version a blaze with all the light and
 somewhat less heat who has not grown into the name
 fully yet but look how long and how far blaise
 cendrars had to travel before he grew into the name
 he gave himself in the hotel des étrangers after running
 away from his quiet swiss home he had to travel
 through manchuria with a rug merchant and to the united
 states where nobody knows what he did except
 hang around the new york public library and write a
 poem about easter and even if he didnt do anything
 else but hang around the library and bryant park he
 knew more about the united states than most people
 who toured the country because he knew its modernism
 he knew a great deal about the united states
 its strange commercial fever and he wrote
 about the discovery of gold though hed never been in
 california later he improved on this way of
 working he went to remote and exciting places
 and then wrote about them making them more like
 what they were than they ever could have been but
 blaise cendrars was not a metaphorical writer in the
 way that robert frost is a metaphorical writer
 blaise cendrars could once in a while be accused
 of lying honestly telling a story the way it
 should be told to make it luminously clear blaise
 cendrars was a writer of luminous and questionable truth
 in this sense he was far superior to robert frost
 who apparently had the problem of trying to make
 the truth poetical not in a wild but in a
 professional way as if he considered it a poets
 job and when you hear a poem of robert frosts you
 know hes not simply telling you how it is or how he
 might desperately want it to be hes simply raising
 it to put it on the shelf with literature at
 the same time hes not the sort of poet who fails to
 respond to the things in life that just come up
 that simply happen and you can see this in
 a poem like the death of the hired man if you can
 get through frosts incredible ineptitude his
 awkward blank verse his clumsiness at setting up
 a situation at finding names for people mary
 warren "mary sat musing" "waiting for

warren" mary and warren are the modern people
 and when warren comes to the door what does mary
 do she rushes on tiptoe down the darkened passage
 to tell him "silas is back" the refugee from
 english literature has returned to the farm of
 the educated urbanized couple mary and warren
 the style of naming is as broad as a comic strip
 and the names ring nothing "fred where is
 north?" "north is there my love the brook
 runs west" which is even worse because the
 death of the hired man still has the nucleus of a
 story in it something brief and disturbing that
 happened an old man whod worked for them comes
 looking for a place to stay and finding no one
 home falls asleep against the barn door where the woman
 finds him and gets him into the kitchen where he
 offers to clear the orchard and ditch the meadow
 and falls asleep and the husband returns to
 hear whats happened which is where the poem
 begins but then theres all this talk of the old
 man coming back sensitive talk from mary
 tough farmer talk from warren the old man
 walked out on them for better wages during haying
 time and warren wont have him back warren
 is clearly frosts idea of his farmer self what
 hes like or should be like which is not too
 pleasant frost gives mary the best of it for
 sensitivity a strategy that reads "honesty" in
 the realist tradition tell a story on yourself
 and everyone believes it tell a story on someone
 your readers will identify with you and theyll believe
 it and dislike you a little less and while frost
 is busy manipulating and playing with his readers
 expectations of sensitive women and harder men and
 pathological old and poor ones hes doing it in a
 wooden literary language he offers as spoken american
 that runs a register from fake folk "he
 thinks young wilson a likely lad though daft on
 education" to 1907 short story talk "harolds
 young college boys assurance piqued him" through
 palgrave poetical "part of a moon was falling
 down the west" or "as if she played unheard some
 tenderness that wrought on him beside her in the
 night" to arrive at the parlor gnostic about home
 "i should have called it something you somehow
 havent to deserve" that clinches it and just
 about the time that mary convinces warren to take
 him in they find the old mans dead now whats
 dead? its the language of this poem thats dead

the poem is covered with hats everywhere i
 look the poem is covered with hats but i cant help
 imagining theres something under one of those hats
 now why is that? everything in the poem seems to
 be a hat trick and i cant stand the language of
 it which most critics would probably say is all
 that there is in a poem anyway yet i still
 have a strong sense of something hidden in it
 something obscure and hard as the angular
 silhouette of a man in a doorway glimpsed from the
 window of a moving train in another of frosts poems
 where the brief image of the tall man sharply lit
 against the darkened doorway is the gist of it and the
 poem is obscured by frosts usual habit of poetical
 play how tall the man was how gaunt how poor or
 comfortable or alone all of which is irrelevant
 as even frost knows to the center of this poem the
 observation for a second of this figure in a doorway
 which if its obscure is still more significant
 than the whole hat covered operation that he finally
 presents and i wonder what is this disability
 that frost suffers from and i think it is a
 kind of american gentility he was an american
 poet at a time when being an american poet was almost
 equivalent to being a parlor poet that is you
 could write poems about anything from a rainbow to a
 steel mill strike as long as you did it in language
 suitable for listening to in parlors which was
 not the way they talked in parlors that would have
 been a lot more interesting but in a language
 designed for reading and listening to in parlors
 that would hardly be listened to anywhere else
 and as an american poet he was suffering from what
 everybody in american literature was suffering from in
 those days whenever anyone came calling then they
 wore hats hats were very important at the time
 when these poems were being written they were
 published around 1914 and most of them were written
 one way or another about seven years earlier and
 even though he continued to write into the 1920s and
 30s and even 40s frost is really a poet whose mind was
 formed before the first world war and we have to
 work hard to remember the world of poetry he grew up
 and matured in its hard because weve killed off a
 lot of the people frost grew up among and shared the
 world of poetry with back then names like richard
 hovey and bliss carman louise imogen guiney and
 lizette woodworth reese does anyone remember
 william vaughan moody or joaquin miller i

remember them because i grew up in the forties and i
 went to an old fashioned high school where they were
 very retrograde about literature which they
 taught out of old anthologies put together in the early
 part of the century in which all the poems were
 filled with transcendent feelings heroic feelings
 like millers columbus "past the pillars of hercules
 past the blue azores sail on sail on"
 or romantic ones like alfred noyes highwayman who
 came riding over a road that was a ribbon of moonlight
 over the purple moor ribald comic ones like arthur
 daleys giuseppe da barber who was always "biggah foh
 mash and hadda da granda da blacka moostache"
 or lyrical adolescent ones like nathalia cranes
 "im in love with the janitors boy and the janitors boy
 loves me" poems by people who went ecstatic at
 the sight of a cloud passing by or made delirious by
 the smell of crushed grass or the sight of the sun
 through a tenement window poems of whatever type
 that almost invariably reflected the extraordinary
 intensity or sensitivity of feeling that was almost
 the definition of a poet now frost was surely
 caught up in this peculiar definition of the poet and
 there are plenty of poems in his first volumes
 a boys will and north of boston that represent
 nothing more than an attempt to justify his claim to
 poetry by bearing continual false witness to his
 sensitivity to nature poems in praise of butterflies
 and flowers and the miracle of rain were the professional
 poets stock in trade and frost tried to carry the whole
 line of romances rhapsodies and emblems but at the
 same time he was a tough and stubborn man with a nasty
 streak and a cold curiosity about people and
 things that let him register a few cool hard images in
 which he recognized his own experience and because he
 was a stubborn man he seems to have wanted to get these
 into his poems but he was also a professional
 poet so he had to make sure that these were poems
 he was getting them into and his way of going about
 this was to put hats on them to make sure you knew
 they were important i lived for a while with an
 uncle who used to wear a hat to work every day and
 in the morning when i went to school and he went to work
 we used to ride the train together every day he
 was a businessman and manufacturer and every morning
 he wore this beautiful dark green homburg and heavy
 coat over his dark worsted suit from witty brothers to
 the factory where he promptly took off his hat and
 coat and jacket before he began to work now i never

saw him go out in the morning without his hat and coat
 in the summertime he wore a seersucker suit and a
 straw hat and though i worked for him for many
 years i never saw him wear the jacket or hat at work
 in those days the 1940s i never saw any serious
 person without a hat now these hats werent meant to
 keep you warm if you wore them in the winter your
 ears were freezing does anyone remember what
 those hats were like they had a crown and a brim
 and they sat fairly shallowly on your head a
 crisp wind would blow them right off if you didnt hold
 onto them with your hand but it was a respectable
 thing a hat it made you a serious person and
 thats all it did it wasnt a workmans woolen hat
 that you could pull down over your ears workmens
 hats were not for serious people they were a form
 of shelter like gloves or a ski mask everybody
 knows what ski masks are because burglars are always
 using them in the movies you see on television so
 you know about them even if you dont ski but you
 can get the wrong idea about them from the movies
 because in principle theyre like workmans hats
 a form of shelter not a disguise but you dont know
 about hats though i had a friend who used to wear
 a hat only when he went out drinking it was a
 bowler hat and represented his college days it
 reminded him of his princeton childhood so he wore
 this bowler hat with a raccoon coat whenever he set
 out for greenwich village to visit saloons like the san
 remo and the white horse because it signified a
 jovial bon vivant writer who would make the tour of the
 dives in the village in the 1950s writers were still
 making that tour in the 50s and im sure that hat
 meant about as much as any experience in the tour
 because the hat gave the right color to any
 experience my friend could have as long as he was wearing
 it and i think of that hat as long as i keep trying
 to think of the death of the hired man as a poem
 which i cant say that i like still if i think
 of the experience i imagine to be hidden in the poem
 behind the words that i dislike im reminded that
 my mother-in-law once owned a hotel in the mountains
 of upstate new york the hotel had been built many
 years before probably at the end of the first
 world war by two brothers one of whom was a
 kind of woodworker artist a folkish artist such
 as siah armajani might have imagined armajani is
 not a folk artist hes a gallery artist who imagines
 folk art or craft and various workmanlike properties

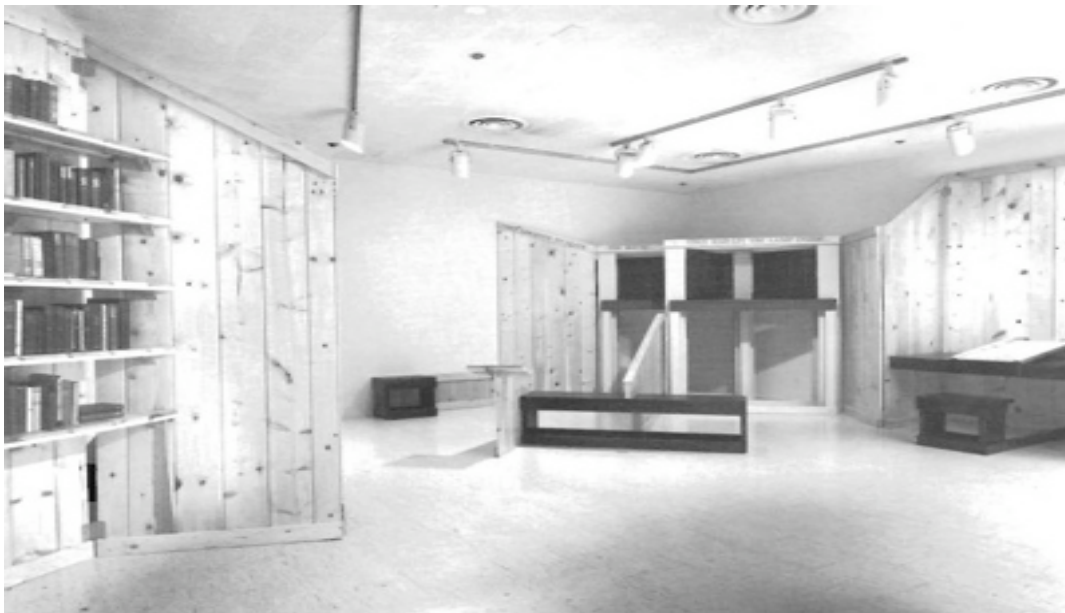
and this man was a kind of sophisticated folkish
 woodcarver painter caricaturist who made caricaturelike
 wooden sculptures and caricaturelike paintings of
 gnomelike people and demons and the other brother
 was more of builder a big bear of a man and the
 two brothers built this hotel like a great chateau in
 the mountains and the two of them didnt build it
 alone because the artist brother was more of an
 artist and decorator than a builder so he did the
 decorating the painting and the finish carpentry
 while the bearlike brother did the building with
 help most of this help were local people who in
 winter time would wander by looking for odd jobs here and
 there in the country and they were probably the
 sort of people frost knew from new hampshire and vermont
 you could hire them for mowing and haying on the
 local farms and for odd jobs building and repairing
 wherever you needed and when they didnt wander by
 there were places in the local towns callicoon
 and jeffersonville liberty and monticello where
 they would hang around and you could go and find them
 and there was one of them that this builder brother
 used to work with fairly regularly a heavy drinking
 ugly old foul mouthed guy named joe brizo he was a
 pretty good rough finish carpenter who could frame
 a building lay concrete and plaster and paint and
 handle the plumbing and some of the electrical work
 whenever he was sober and because he was a
 good workman and his foul talk that got fouler and
 fouler the longer he was sober amused philip which
 was the older brothers name in the winter philip
 would go down to a saloon in callicoon or liberty to
 hunt him up and hire him for board and pocket money to
 rebuild the main kitchen or repair the water system
 and the two of them philip and joe brizo would
 work together for a month or so until joe saved enough
 money to go off and drink for a while by
 spring philip would find him in a bar in callicoon center
 or monticello and drive back with him to reshingle the roof
 and repaint the main building or frame a new guest
 house and repaint the pool bottom and this would
 last from march to june when joe would drift off again
 and in july out of money he would drift back and
 hang around the open hotel as a general handyman for
 a month or so until he got restless and disappeared
 till fall when philip would have to go off to find
 him in a bar in hortonville or hancock so that they could
 close up the place together and this would happen
 year after year they would work together and joke

and quarrel together and in the evenings sometimes
 drink together and the two of them got older but
 not together because philip the owner brother as
 he got older got richer and drank less and less as he
 got older while joe brizo as he got older drank
 more and more and he got poorer and as he got older
 and more deteriorated from drinking he would get
 distracted sooner from working and wander off more
 quickly to liberty and monticello where the
 trotting track came and he found a new way to lose his
 money along with drinking and he got more
 difficult while working more quarrelsome and less
 reliable as a worker because he would drift off
 quicker and leave a job sometimes right in the middle to
 go off drinking so he was becoming too difficult
 for most employers but philip who had a sort of
 fellow feeling for joe because the two of them had
 worked so long together that a part of both their
 lives was in some way nailed into the structures they
 had built together so whenever joe brizo came
 around in whatever shape philip let him have a
 place to sleep and found some light work for him at
 the meager wages he always paid knowing he would
 disappear in a day or two it was about this time
 that my mother-in-law started managing the hotel for
 the two brothers who were getting old and losing
 interest in the day to day operation of the place
 jeanette was an imperious little woman who got
 exasperated with the eccentric ways of her help
 chambermaids who stole towels and linen
 dishwashers who showed up drunk for work
 salad chefs who quit on sunday before the afternoon
 meal and the temperamental chief chefs the
 french one who produced red white and blue sour cream
 for everyones blintzes on bastille day the
 passionate ukrainian with the giant wife who suspected
 that all the male guests were running after her and
 chased some inoffensive person around the lawn with
 a knife for exchanging a few amiable words with her
 and the quarrelsome handymen who drifted in and out
 and were never there when you needed them they all
 exasperated her and she put up with it as an experienced
 hotel manager who knew the quality of the help she was
 likely to get but as soon as they overstepped her
 line she would rise in fury to her full five foot height
 and pronounce a banishment from which they were never to
 return driving them off the property immediately and
 sending their wages after them to the employment agency
 from which they had come racing off in the car to

monticello to hire replacements or taking on the work
 herself and she never had any qualms about this
 act of firing happening as often as it did she
 would flare up abruptly and calm down almost as quickly
 as a matter of course though she was aware that
 many of the local people so dismissed held grudges
 against her but she chalked that up to her role
 as hotel manager and then owner she merely added
 them to the list of her normal commercial enemies
 butchers who had cheated her milkmen laundrymen
 and linen suppliers local farmers who wanted her
 property for their chickens competing hotel owners
 and developers several banks and their lawyers
 and regarded them with a kind of grim pride as
 witnesses to her success and importance in the area
 but with joe brizo it was different maybe
 because he was polish and she was polish or it was
 because of his foul mouthed style that she hated
 and the one time he had gotten splendidly drunk
 in the middle of a saturday afternoon and marched up
 to the porch of the main building where he sat down among
 the guests and regaled the general area with a series
 of incoherent filthy stories punctuated by intermittent
 outbursts of abuse at anyone and everyone present in a
 string of expletives in english polish and ukrainian
 and she had never forgiven him for this and the
 image of his violence had lingered in her mind
 where over the years it had been magnified to such
 a point that it was equalled in her mind only by her
 image of the german bund about whose activities
 in the local area just before the war shed heard awful
 stories and the two images had more or less fused
 in her mind so that in the lonely late fall days
 when she was shutting down the hotel and the woodwork
 creaked or the pipes knocked menacingly and the moody
 overcast weather began she would look out at the
 fiery foliage of the autumn trees and suspect arsonists
 coming with cans of gasoline or vandals with crowbars
 and rocks to smash the windows and tear up the porch
 and generally terrorize her and her family so she
 used to keep a .22 carbine in the bedroom and whenever
 she heard an unlikely sound and there were lots of
 them creaks and bumps and knocks she would send
 out her husband with the carbine to look for prowlers
 and when i came up with eleanor shed sent me out
 because i was bigger and more imposing and i used
 to feel foolish taking the rifle and looking for what
 i was sure were raccoons or squirrels or rats in
 the attic so i would ask her what do i need the

rifle for and she would tell me about the time the
bund came by to drive philip and his brother out of
the area and how philip who had been a greco roman
wrestler fought half the night with a truck full of
local toughs that he finally beat off with lots of broken
arms and legs and they had threatened to come back
and burn the place down at which philip had only
smiled grimly and challenged them to try but had
to take to his bed for a week afterwards that was
1939 i said and this is 1960 and the nazi movement
has not been doing so well lately and not here
where almost all of them have gotten old or moved
away “dont forget joe brizo” she said “ive
seen him skulking around the grounds sometimes at
night just waiting for a chance you take the
gun” and i had seen joe brizo once in a while the
summer that i was working as lifeguard for the hotel
a beaten up grizzled old man trying to keep
out of everybodys way and i would take the gun and
feel completely foolish standing there holding it
and i would walk up and down and look in all the
places the scratching noises came from with the .22
always getting in my way and i would come back and
tell jeanette it was probably some rats that got
in through the roof but i remember one grim march
that jeanette and peter were staying up there in one of
the smaller cottages that they could keep warm with
electric heaters and peter still had room to paint
the weather was raw as always in that part of new
york where the delaware freezes over in december
and doesnt thaw till early april when the ice begins
to crack in a week long cannonade that sends huge ice
floes down the river to port jervis and below and
jeanette and peter were huddled in their little cottage
when we came up to have dinner with them and cheer them
up wed brought some bottles of wine and we had
a great time eating and drinking looking at peters new
paintings and listening to joan baez peters favorite
record on the scratchy little phonograph theyd kept in
the country and we all went off to bed but
in the middle of the night jeanette, came by in a panic
shed heard something crashing around in the next
building and now it was suspiciously quiet and
she was afraid to look she had the .22 and i could
see i was elected so i forced myself awake and
went out to look the snow was already gone from
around the building and there were no tracks
but the screen door was loose and moving gently
back and forth in the wind someone could have gotten

in i pushed it open and went from room to room
 trying all the doors and they were as i suspected
 empty dank and depressing like any summer
 hotel in winter i searched the first floor room by
 room and the second and i was really angry and
 heading back down the corridor when i heard something
 in the linen closet and i stopped to look for what i
 figured was a rat and he was there a dirty
 little grizzled man curled up and sleeping on the
 floor and he stank a sour rancid smell of
 whiskey and dirty clothes and vomit and he was
 lying on the floor of the closet sound asleep and snoring
 and very small i closed the door and went back to
 tell jeanette theres no one there the door
 was banging in the wind the next morning he was
 gone
 now i could have killed him off in the story
 slowly or quickly it wouldnt have been too hard
 i could have given him a heart attack or pneumonia
 something terrible could have happened but i
 was thinking of him in terms of what had happened to
 the hired man and that level of escalation i
 dislike so intensely in robert frost and thats
 where joe brizo comes in



All images originally appeared in Siah Armajani: A Poetry Lounge (Cal Tech, 1982)