The Winter Lightning

for Paul

by Howard Nemerov

Over the snow at night,
And while the snow still fell,
A sky torn to the bone
Shattered the ghostly world with light;
As though this were the moon’s hell,
A world hard as a stone,
Cold, and blue-white.

As if the storming sea
Should sunder to its floor,
And all things hidden there
Gleam in the moment silently,
So does the meadow at the door
To split and sudden air
Show stone and tree.

From the drowned world of dark
The sleeping innocence
Surrenders all its seeming;
Under the high, charged carbon arc
Light of the world, a guilty sense
Stiffens the secret dreaming
Animal park.

So in the camera’s glare
The fortunate and famed,
For all their crooked smiles,
Reveal through their regarded stare
How all that’s publicly acclaimed
One brutal flash reviles
For cold despair.

So is the murderer caught
When his lost victim rises
Glaring through dream and light
With icy eyes. That which was thought
In secret, and after wore disguises,
Silts up the drowning sight
Mind inwrought.

So may the poem disport
The mirror from the light
Where none can see a seam;
The poet, from his wintry heart
And in the lightning second’s sight,
Illuminate this dream
With a cold art.

The next speaker, Helen Frankenthaler, offered another kind of tribute to Feeley. A Bennington graduate and now a trustee, Frankenthaler studied with Feeley and recounted her experiences in the art department in a speech which is reprinted here in its entirety.

Helen Frankenthaler’s Tribute

Paul would have been proud, respectful but embarrassed by this new building. Many here who remember him might conjure up a vivid pose: his head cocked to one side, one hip thrust out, his knuckles running under his chin. He’d laugh nervously — eyes wide, darting, curious — the very essence of the vitality and charisma he made echo through the art department and the College.

Our studio was one room off the dining room on the second floor of Commons, where we painted easel to easel on our own projects. Or as a group, confronted by a shivering model or dusty still life. Seminars in that studio were conducted in front of a bulletin board covered with color reproductions from art magazines. Under Paul’s aegis we would dissect Cezanne’s “Card Players,” Matisse’s “Blue Window,” a late Mondrian, Titian’s “Venus and Adonis,” examples of analytic cubism, old masters, the works —! A melange that would ignite seminars of exchange, argument, enlightenment. Paul brought an aura to that room. We had brain-tickling, drawn-out conversations, questions, battles, over how artists had arrived at a certain solution. The meaning of space, light, content. And within his orbit we also confronted each other as artists and critics — a wonderfully fragile, suffering business! Often we’d leave puzzled but in pursuit of more answers, more questions; going further to confront others, ourselves and the canvas. He guided that spirit of discovery and detective work to see what art is about.

Paul was a serious, involved, ambitious painter. A true artist, an inspired teacher, he challenged us, encouraging students to be independently productive. He was a marvelous teacher because as a painter himself he seemed to creatively wrench from his students the questions that he himself wanted answers to; yet steering us, opening new possibilities. He milked his students in order to investigate what he wanted to know more about; that is the true benefit of learning firsthand from one who is fully committed to practicing his own art. He assumed that strangeness and shock of the unknown were necessary aspects of growth. Nothing seemed too outrageous, no clumsy idea too awkward to play
It was exciting, fun, and hard work. We learned from a painter charged with that healthy spirit of energy an drive. He defined the art department at Bennington from the forties, giving it a unique stamp on campus and throughout the country. Along with his great sense of elegance, style, humor, there was a raw, rough, risk-taking, dare-devil quality — all reflected in his teaching; he combined a young vet fresh from the Marines with the radiance and mystery of art.

During the fifties and sixties he was instrumental along with others in bringing contemporary art and artists to the College; so that one could get the magic and reality from the source. Bennington became a kind of link of the avant-garde, and people from all over were eager to participate. There are inherent limitations within any campus situation but, relatively, an education should open up the experiences of life: susceptible to all kinds of attitudes, strains, potentials, anxieties, changes. That is part of its vitality and hopefully contributes new ideas and growth.

Paul’s reactions to this event today would have been laughing embarrassment — to hide his great sense of pride in the place. Overwhelmed by the sight of the building, its great facilities, enormous spaces. And the anticipation of what they will hold; excitement similar to starting a fresh canvas. "Knock it off" he’d say — to make you feel: let’s use the space and get to work.

After reading Art Faculty member Philip Wofford’s statement of thanks to members of the Samuel Lemberg and Nathaniel Usdan families for giving a permanent exhibit hall to Bennington, Brockway introduced Jack Moore of the Dance Faculty who read a tribute to Martha Hill, for whom the dance workshop was named. Hill was a guiding spirit for modern dance not only at Bennington but throughout the country. She left a teaching position at NYU in 1932 to join the first faculty of the college and as chairman of the dance division she established America’s first Bachelor of Arts Degree Program in modern dance. By co-founding with Martha Graham the Bennington College summer school of the dance in 1934, she provided a summer base for such companies as those of Martha Graham, Hanya Holm and Doris Humphrey and thereby spread the message of modern dance through the students who came from throughout the country each year. She left Bennington in 1951 to establish the dance division at Juilliard, but returned to the college in 1969 to receive an honorary Doctor of Letters degree.

In attendance for the dedication, she smiled on the platform as Moore read a statement from Bill Bale, a former Bennington faculty member who now heads the dance department at SUNY, Purchase, which said in part, “Living and teaching at Bennington during the glorious and productive years of the 40’s and 50’s was a privileged, creative and joyous experience.”

Moore also read a tribute from Martha Graham who was unable to attend the ceremony. She said of Martha Hill, “They are bestowing upon you an honor you so richly deserve. You have been a key person in all that we have been able to do in dance and I feel that Bennington and your dream are largely responsible for the recognition and success that modern American dance has had today.”

In an attempt to recognize by name the many people who have played major roles in Bennington’s history Martha Hill found herself suggesting "We’ll have to have an annual dedication in order to mention everyone who has made Bennington great.

The final speaker of the afternoon was Elizabeth Bloomer Ford, who attended the Summer School of the Dance in 1936 and 37 where she studied with Martha Hill, Martha Graham, Hanya Holm and others. At the time she was a dance instructor at the Calla Travis School of Dance in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Her remarks are reprinted here in full.
Helen Frankenthaler discusses the dedication art exhibit “Artists At Bennington” with Betty Ford.

held later in the afternoon, with Kriter Mousseux donated by Edith Bonoff Birnbaum, '47.

A box lunch was served in the Galleria to the dedication crowd, and the occasion gave Mrs. Ford the chance to speak with students who gathered around her for an informal lunch. She was presented with a silk screened t-shirt with a portrait of Bill Dixon, which she examined while balancing her box lunch on her lap. From the balcony above, the First

Lady’s circle of interested students and semi-inconspicuous Secret Service agents appeared but one island among many in the crowded hall, and it seemed she was perhaps briefly able to shed the trappings of celebrity.

Mrs. Ford left the festivities shortly after lunch, and though the college may not experience too many more media bombshells in the process of educating people, we seem to have completed this sortie with the press in fine form. TV camera crews, reporters and photographers drifted off soon after the First Lady departed leaving in their wake a sense that what is done at Bennington is worthy of the watchful eye of the media.

During the afternoon, student works in the form of “Nook and Cranny” commissions were presented throughout the Arts Center. Dor Ben-Amotz and Randy Witlicki produced electronic music compositions, while musicians Amelia Rogers, Michael Starobin and Sue Temple performed works of their own compositions in the Newman Court. In the Visual Arts Building, music composed and performed by Andy Teirstein, Cathy Marker, Beth Kanter, Larry Jacobs and Paul Tempie was presented. Members of Henry Brant’s composition tutorial played on the terrace east of the Music Workshop.