fugue

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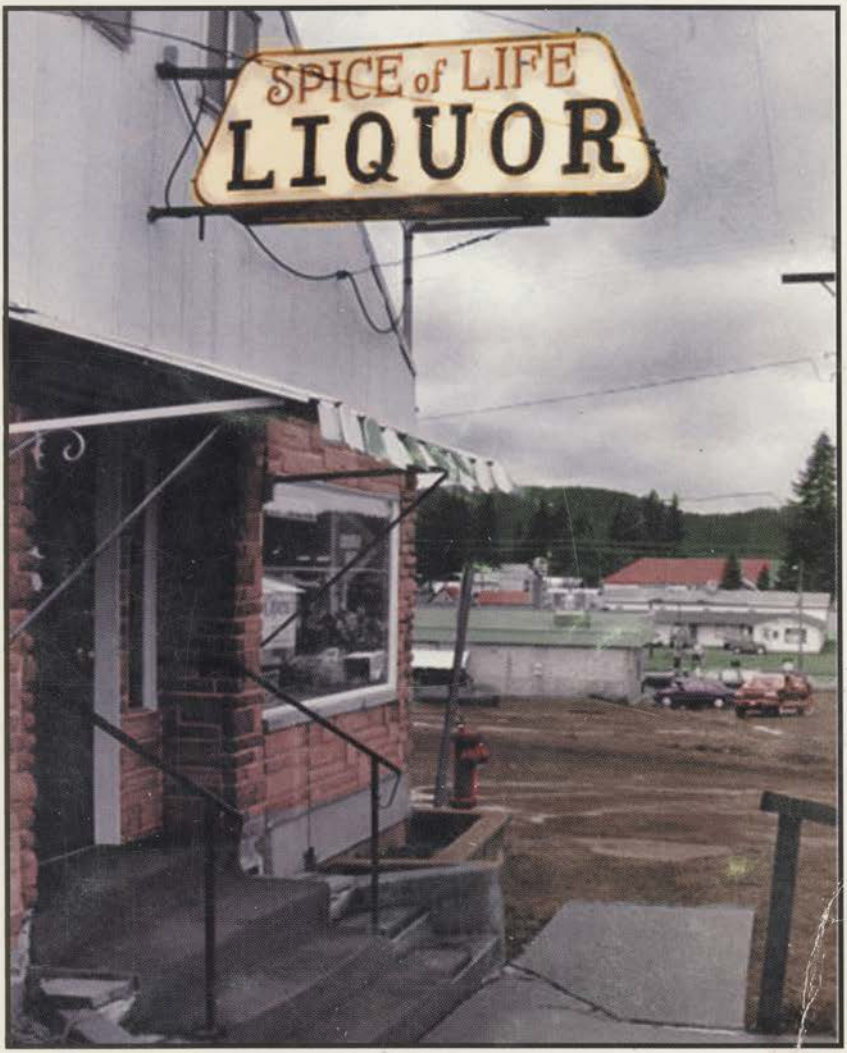

with Sharon Olds and Virgil Suarez

fugue

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Editor's Notes

We—the staff of *Fugue* and the University of Idaho Department of English—are proud to bring you *Fugue* 18. It has been a long time in the making and, now that it's finally finished, we can all sit back, read, and enjoy.

We are lucky enough to have two very special writers in this issue. One is Sharon Olds, a marvelous poet and teacher who now resides in New York. I have been a fan of Olds's work for many years, and it was certainly a thrill to have her come to the UI for a few days (see McFarland's essay on page 90). I hope you like her new poems in this issue as much as we did. And, if you aren't a fan of hers already, perhaps these poems will persuade you to pick up one of her books.

The other very special writer we have among these pages is Virgil Suarez. A professor at Florida State University, Suarez is the author of four published novels. But in this issue we have published some of his poetry, which we hope you will like also. James Mayo, the *ex officio* assistant editor, contacted Suarez to talk with him about his work and life. The results became *Electric Dialogue* which follows on page 13. It sheds a lot of light not just on Virgil's writing, but also on the exciting scene of Latino/a literature in the U.S. today.

But just because the two above are our featured writers for this issue doesn't mean they are the only ones worth reading. Look up a poem or a story. Flip through the little book you have here. It's bound to give you hours of pleasure.

Before I get out of the way, I'd like to recognize some of the people and organizations without which none of this could be possible. Thank you.

f The staff of and collaborators with *Fugue*, the readers, editors, and coworkers who make *Fugue*, and make this job a lot of fun.

ƒ Ron McFarland, the University of Idaho Department of English, and the College of Letters and Science for their kind direction, support, work, and funding to make *Fugue* a reality.
ƒ The Creative Writing/MFA students and faculty for supporting this magazine and all of us who work on it.

Very special thanks go out to Sharon Olds and Virgil Suarez for contributing fine work to this issue and for their cooperation. You guys are the best; stop by and say hello if you're ever in Idaho.

Also, I want to thank and congratulate James Mayo. He just finished his MA and is off to the sunny pastures of Florida. James, thanks; you, and your work, will be sorely missed here at UI and *Fugue*.

And, on a personal note, I want to thank Tabetha Bissegger for holding my head up, and kissing it, and being with me when no one else would. Thank you.

And here's to you, dear reader. Old St. Augustine picked and scratched at the Bible until a voice spoke to him and he read it, and he finally understood. And while I'm not working for a religious conversion, I want you to enjoy what you see here. So take and read.

Virgil Suarez

Song to Pre-Columbian Art

in the beginning was dust,
heavenly powder on the red
and brain of earthface,
from it came clay, once-moist
by nocturnal rains,
these downpours of weeping
spirits at play in the clouds;
from clay came the gourds,
receptacles with which women
carried riverwater home, adobe
hearths, a constant reminder
of the power of dirt, artesania
born out of *la tierra mas fina,*
silken ochre clay, then gold
and silver, cursed metals
that brought on the greed
of foreigners, ransacked
over the centuries, each time
more difficult to find, deities
better left undisturbed, now
dug up, desecrated, anger
ravages the land, curse
the harvest of a million
moons, now relics behind
museum display glass, all over
the world, they are consumed
by silence, out of place,
their glow of turquoise
and patina reminders that man
leaves nothing undisturbed
or unturned in his quest
for mirrors of his own demise.
In the end he finds more dust
and clay from which to rise again.

La Capilla de la Ramada – Morrope, Peru

The pilgrims bring handfuls of earth
from distant villages, long
treks through the bleeding-feet hardships
of their lives, arriving at the door
of this sanctuary, church built
from the *algarrobo* tree, durable
smooth wood, and *cana brava,*
wild cane sewn with a slurry
of mud hardened into carapace-hard
shell, whitewashed walls
and wood, the curved rafters
like the bleached bones
of a fossilized behemoth. A woman
comes to pay homage, in her hands
two bundles of fresh-cut flowers,
embroidered skirt and blouse,
simple offerings left on this altar
of endurance, of human persistence.
When no one is there, the adobe
bricks recoil, tickled by flowers,
the structure rears up on its spindles,
picks up all its bones and runs
out into the countryside—
such is survival in the New World.
Everyone hears the church howl
during the night, divine groans
in the beginnings of dust, clay, earth,
another thousand summers of bad moons.

Langston Hughes in Havana

Pass the *malecon* where the waves,
clash & sing against rocks:

a susurrus *danzon;* pass the *cafetales,*
the cane fields, the tobacco-laden

bohios where a man begins with nothing,
where a man begins with his hands.

I, too, am Cuban. *Cubichon jubilao.*
And the meeting with Nicolas Guillen

in Batabano-Songoro Cosongo, *replican*
los dioses congoses. Jibaro colorao,

cimarron *embembao.* You know
back in Harlem, the American Dream

drags itself through the streets
like some mangled animal frothing

at the mouth, *Mulato espavilao.*
In Havana, "Heaven is the place

where happiness is." We can all die
here on this island–the *cocodrilo,*

encantao, charmed by the sweet
song from your lips. The songs says

under the weight of so much toil,
"Wave of sorrow, do not drown me now."

The island, Langston, is still ahead,
and somehow we see its glimmering

sands, its never-ending shores, now
trampled by European tourist trash,

Barbarians on the prowl for well-oiled skin
of the *jineteras: blancas, negras, mulatas–*

it doesn't matter, conquest is color-blind.
Here is the *son,* the *cha-cha,*

the spilt milk of the coconut,
listen to the *guajiro's decima,*

sing, singing, you come & go, say:
wave of sorrow, take us there.

Wave of sorrow, don't drown us now.

Notes & Translations:
malecon: a sea wall in Havana Bay, famous landmark
danzon: a type of folk dance
cafetales: coffee plantations
bohios: thatched huts
Cubichon Jubilao: a Cuban retiree
replican los dioses congoses: the Congo gods reply
embembao: thick lipped, gifted orator
mulato espavilao: hipped cat
cocodrilo encantao: the enchanted crocodile, what the island of Cuba is called sometimes
jineteras: young Cuban prostitutes, feminine usage of jockey
blancas, negras, mulatas: whites, blacks, mulatas
son, cha-cha: types of popular Cuban dances
guajiro's decima: a popular type of folk music

Tree on a 3rd Story Balcony, Old Habana

Every day at noon when the noise
of the streets subsides, the lovers
come to this room, somewhere

in Old Havana, in this country
of lost causes, and they lie next
to each other on an *amaca,*

a hammock he has strung up
by the window, low so that in it
their bodies resemble the shape

of a canoe, and their sunburned arms
as they dangle over the edge, oars.
They lie there and read what the cracks

on the walls say, these love poems
in peeling flecks of paint, truths
in the patches of damp ceiling tiles.

After lovemaking, they dream
their escapes where so much water
fills their being. A fly balances

itself on the lip of the water bowl,
braving slick porcelain smoothness,
the burning candle flickers in a moment

of breeze as it cries on itself, slowly,
slow like the lovers' passing through
in this life. They love in this room,

silent, oblivious. All the while sparrows
have perched on the branches of the fruit

tree that grows on the balcony

outside the lovers' window.
A fruit tree, its knobby roots each day
deeper, twisted into the concrete and wire mesh,

grows up here on the third story balcony,
where sparrows now perch and preen.
Theirs is as much a history of this place

where the single fruit the tree has given
will suddenly be plucked by his arm
as it reaches out through the window

from the swing of the hammock. "This,"
he says, "is the fruit to quench our thirst.
The fruit to appease this hunger."

He brings this fruit to his lover, puts
it close to her mouth, watches as she takes
the first bite. Sweet is the juice of oblivion.

She now shares it with him–if they have
to pretend in this empty room,
then they will imagine this is part

of some story about to be told,
at the end of the end of the world
when the last two humans embrace,

seek consolation that like them, nature
has given, and given, a mother to all.
When the fruit is gone and the lovers

kiss, the fly plops into the water,
gives up its life for the sake of the magical.

A Song on the End of the Cuban Revolution

After Czeslaw Milosz

On the day Castro dies or flees
the zun zun hovers
by the hibiscus flower,
the Russian boats on the harbor,
those that remain, sink to become reefs;
delighted, the manatee and cayman return,
the *tomeguines* and rainbow bunting nest in peace,
and the lizard will cease to change colors.

On the day of the end of the Cuban Revolution,
men, women and children gather in the fields,
in the city streets, under the fallen propaganda,
torn banners and posters, the *guajiros* play
their *decimas* on their guitars. The *son* returns
to the island, the *maniceros* resume their chants.
The laughter of the maracas and the calling
of the tumba drums rises above all clatter
and human waking.

And those here and there who expect thunder
and the storm of vendettas are disappointed.
And those who expected bloodshed
are disappointed.
I do not believe it is occurring now.
As long as the cane and tobacco are in the fields,
as long as the Cuban parrots are nesting,
as long as children suckle
everyone wants to believe it is happening now.

Only an ash-haired babalao, prophet soothsayer,
never too busy to read his cowry shells

repeats and translates what all those sounds
he is hearing mean:

There will be no better change in the world.
There will be no better change in the world.

James Mayo

Electric Dialogue: An Email Conversation with Virgil Suarez

Late last summer as we began the process of evaluating manuscripts for this issue of *Fugue*, I came across a packet of poems sent to us by Virgil Suarez. I was immediately drawn to the strong voice in the poems, and those poems, along with a few more, made their way into this issue. Soon, I found myself reading his novels *The Cutter* and *Havana Thursdays*, then contacting him by email with some questions about his work. The following is a transcript of two weeks worth of emails, questions and answers, and two people discussing writing from a distance and having a good time doing so.

James Mayo: In "In Praise of Mentors" (*Spared Angola*), you mention being exposed to several different writers during your early years, many of them the canonized heavyweights such as O'Connor, Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne, while you also found that José Antonio Villarreal and Rudolfo Anaya really spoke to you in terms of what it means to be "hyphenated American." You mention it was Villarreal's *Pocho* and Anaya's *Bless Me, Última* that heavily influenced your decision to become a writer. What was it about these two books that you found so appealing and how did you apply this to your own work?

Virgil Suarez: What I found in both *Bless Me, Última* and *Pocho* was voice. I was a young undisciplined writer when these two books found me, and I guess what blew me away about them both was how the writers chose to tell their stories. They both have a very strong sense of voice, you know like when you open Melville's *Moby Dick*, and you read: "Call me Ishmael." And I learned from these books how to hook the readers, how to stop

them long enough from their busy lives and say, "Hear this. This is my story." I also thought that I had made a connection with the character. In both cases, the characters spoke to me, like a friend. Both are written in a very friendly way, but with extraordinary care for language, and language rhythm, especially *Última*. I think I initially stole from both. From *Última* the sense of pace, and how Anaya gets into both character and setting fast, and then from *Pocho*, I took away how language can lure you and not let you go. (April 28, 1999)

JM: *Spared Angola* is an interesting memoir, especially the mixing of genres. I understand why the first story, the story of your grandmother's arriving in Miami, is first because it's the source of the title and says a lot about your experience. Could you elaborate on the construction of the rest of the book? I think of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, with its one piece of prose and numerous poems, but what we have in *Spared Angola* is pretty much an even mix of poetry and prose. What was your goal with this mixing of genres?

VS: This is a good question, and I am glad I have an answer for it. My grandmother came to visit after a twenty-year absence from my life. And the first thing she said when she got comfortable in my parents' apartment in Hialeah, Florida, was that I had been, of all her grandchildren (and she had about twenty by then, and many great grandchildren) the one spared having to go fight some revolution in Angola, and that burned a path in my mind right away. I wanted to tell her that yes, I felt spared of that, but then there were some pretty bad experiences I was exposed to here in the United States. Not so much of our four years in Spain, but Los Angeles was a cruel world. I could have gotten lost right away. I really mean disappear completely, drop out, become a junkie, get into porno movies. I mean, who knows what the hell could have happened to me? All I knew was that school scared me witless. I wrote about it in the sequence of poems titled "No Nocturne for the Ravaged" and that's how I felt those years went for me.

I also knew right away in writing the book that I wanted the freedom of including a mixture of genres. I had read both of Judith Ortíz Cofer's books *Silent Dancing* and *The Latin Deli*, and they taught me how to be comfortable in switching from the personal essay anecdote to poetry. I also wanted the poetry to stand out. I had started out writing poetry under the mentorship of Eliot Fried at Cal State Long Beach, and then one semester I switched to fiction to write *The Cutter*, and I never went back to poetry. For almost a dozen years, I thought about poetry, certainly read a great deal, and wrote a bit of it, but it was the novel that called to me. But poetry for me has always been my religion. All poetry. I don't exclude anything. I have a great collection of poetry, all eclectic. I will read and reread a variety of poets. It keeps me feeling democratic about poetry. When I read a Latino poet as good as Alberto Ríos, I will also read Chinese-American poets like Cathy Song and Li Young Lee, and Native American poets the likes of Adrien Louis, Sherman Alexie, and Lucie Tapahonso. I mean I visit them daily by merely reaching over to my bookshelf and reading them, a poem a day. It's a great feeling to live in a country where you have access to a variety of voices. Right now I'm in love with the work of Bruce Weigl, Jim Daniels, Barbara Hamby, and a couple of young Cuban-American poets so different in breadth and scope that I feel like I learn from their poetry. I'm talking about Adrian Castro and his *Cantos to Blood and Honey* and Richard Blanco's *The City of a Hundred Fires.* Reading poetry, I think, has saved my life. I read poems like prayers. I remember I was reading Bruce Weigl's *Song of Napalm* when I saw my mother come out to the lobby, scared out of her mind because she was in the ICU ward with my father, after he'd had colon surgery, and he had his first heart attack, and she came out to tell me she held him but couldn't do anything, and I looked up from Bruce's book, then looked back to the poem on the page (I wish I could remember which poem it was I was reading at that moment) and I held the book so tight in my hand that I broke its spine. I still have it, and I've been meaning to get a

new copy of it. I've been waiting for the day I meet Mr. Weigl and maybe he will sign a copy for me. (April 28, 1999)

JM: That's a very powerful story, and speaking of family, we see and hear every day of problems within the family—that the breakdown of the family is the cause of society's problems (a favorite of politicians) and so forth. The family is seemingly extinct in our popular media; few television shows focus on the family in a positive way and I can't think of a major motion picture released by anyone recently other than Disney that stresses the importance of family. Yet, in your work, and I'm thinking primarily of *Havana Thursdays* and *Spared Angola*, the family is alive and well. How do you account for that? Do you feel this is a product of your heritage?

VS: Most definitely. It is a product of my heritage, most specifically of my Cuban parents. My mother always makes a big deal about family. Right now she is visiting us here in Tallahassee, and she's working the girls over with her "history" of the family, and I'm looking at them under the living room spotlight, my mother and both my daughters on her lap, I'm looking at them from the kitchen where I'm cooking, and my eyes well with tears because she's telling them about my dad, who died almost two years ago. I'm a sentimental fool. My personal view on family is that without it we might as well be a bunch of outcasts, like out of those Mad Max movies, you know. Without family there's nothing. It's what has always attracted me to the South, the sense of strong family, and though I'm a fallen Catholic, I see the importance of it for the sake of identity preservation. I've always been attracted to large families, the larger the better. It's what I wrote about in *Havana Thursdays*, my wife's huge family, and I loved every minute I spent with them. When the book came out some thought it was too close to their own lives, and in a way it is, but it's made-up in the end, a good fiction, I hope, about how a group of people live(d). I did the same with *Latin Jazz*, my first novel published, second written, and in *The*

Cutter too. I come from a very small family, here in the States. It's always been my father, mother, and me. No brothers or sisters. When we moved to Los Angeles, I didn't want to leave the company of first cousins in Miami. Living in Los Angeles taught me that my parents were basically all I had. My mother has a huge family in Cuba, and I remember them very well, my aunts and uncles, and cousins, but I grew up here. Maybe one day soon when I go back I will reconnect with their lives, share stories. I hope a book will come from it.
For me the ultimate is talking about poetry with my daughters, though Gabriela is still too young, but Alexandria, who is seven, is already writing poetry. She writes it, reads it to me, watches me write my own. We make a clear connection, bond, that I hope will last until the day I die. The first of all human experience is learned through the family, in the family, and I hope ours will be positive. I hope so. My wife and I are lucky in that we have these fine girls who are watching their parents make a living through the written word. I hope that's a good example we are setting for them. (April 30, 1999)

JM: We see this too in *The Cutter*, even as the protagonist feels some resentment toward his parents for leaving him in Cuba.

VS: Yes, most definitely it is in *The Cutter*. Julian feels cheated out of having spent quality time with his family. He resents his father, and the government, for having kept him from quality family time. In that book you see how people become distrustful because I think that is what communism ultimately does, replaces the family with government, and in Cuba, with one party, one person. That kind of indoctrination is evil because it aims to shake up the foundations of how people live, especially children. The idea being that if you get to the kids first, teach them to be distrustful of their parents, then the rest of their "learning" is easy. No better example in literature than Orwell's *1984*. It's happening in the United States with the two political parties

available. The Democrats talk one way, and the Republicans talk another, and I'm intrigued by how families get divided over politics here. I grew up Democrat with a Republican father, and I don't say that as a way to blame him, but it made for some heated discussions. Ultimately, it brought us closer together because we never forgot we were friends and family first. (April 30, 1999)

JM: Let's discuss *The Cutter*. This was the first of your novels that I read, and I was taken by the narrative voice, the descriptions of the country and life in Communist Cuba, and found the novel quite suspenseful (trying to guess what Blancarosa is really all about). I was also impressed to learn from reading *Spared Angola* that this was a novel you began as an undergraduate. Could you say something about what this process of writing the first novel was like for you?

VS: *The Cutter* came out of an exchange I had with Eliot Fried who had seduced me into taking his poetry workshop, and so I did for one semester, having recently changed my major at CSULB (and I think he had a hand in that too), and I had such a positive experience. I felt like I had learned so much, that I wanted more, so when he went to recruit some of us for his fiction workshop where he said we'd be working on a novel because that's what he was interested in doing, and was doing, I signed up. He set it up the way it makes sense, and which is the way that I teach novel writing. I ask the students to commit a whole year with a summer in between to get an entire first draft down, which is what I did with Eliot's guidance. On the first day he came in and said: "Ok, here's what you need to follow: 1. Write from your own background; 2. Write about one character, and one major problem that character is trying to resolve; 3. Write it in third person point of view; 4. Write it in one sitting; and 5. Write about three months to a year time span in this character's life." I liked the formula, tried it the first semester, and the book came out of me fairly effortlessly, even though my

language skills were not there yet. I was taking another short fiction workshop with John Herman, who kept telling me that I didn't know how to put a sentence together, and he kept challenging me, and finally one day I had the sentence, the image of the chickens pecking at the braided wire fence and the raindrops falling to the earth, or something like that, and John said I had it, finally. *The Cutter* took an entire year to write, the first draft I mean, in longhand on a lined notebook, which I still have, and the ink hasn't faded. It's been almost twenty years now, but the novel took me 8-10 years to finish. I was so frustrated with it by the time I became a graduate student at the University of Arizona that I was ready to give up, but I didn't. I remember one night I stayed up all night because I had gotten a Commodore Computer word processor, and I typed the whole thing all over again, the fifteenth time, I think, and I kept revising as I typed, and I still remember back to that night, and I think I was possessed, or mad, but it worked. After that the book took its final form, which was a string of these short chapters, and Robert Houston and Vance Bourjaily helped me too. They helped me see how I needed a character like Blancarosa to create dramatic tension and narrative drive. The rest was pretty much there. *The Cutter* was easy to write because I focused on my own father's experiences in Cuba, and I gave those same experiences to Julian Campos, who wanted so desperately to leave the island that he was blinded by it. I almost see that same kind of desperation in the *Balseros*, the people who brave the Florida Straits to come to the US, and what a courageous move that is, knowing that chances are they won't make it. The odds are against them. Anyway, *The Cutter* was my novel about learning to write a novel. Shortly after I finished the book, I started on *Latin Jazz*, which also came quickly, but I wanted to do a completely different book. I wanted to do a book with which I would exercise all of my technical muscles. *The Cutter*, though, was my first love and an excellent experiment. I reread it recently in galleys because Arte Público Press reprinted it this year, and I have to say that there are many parts that still grab me. And, in terms

of poetry, I still think about many of those passages as they fuel my new memories that then make it to the poems. (May 3, 1999)

JM: I know that as I was reading the novel I kept wondering how much time you had spent in Communist Cuba, if the stories of Julian's work on the farm was autobiographical somehow. And now that I know you left Cuba as a young child, I'm wondering about your sources for what life was like in Cuba. Have others besides your father shared information with you? Is this something that is talked about often? Did people close to you have an experience similar to that of Julian?

VS: Again, this is a good question. I used my father's life and experiences in Cuba, and how I looked up to him as a child, and I transformed those same experiences into Julian Campos's life. But I think there was also a lot about what I remembered as a child, my mother's stories, my grandmother's story. My grandmother got sick the year we were to leave, which was 1969, and shortly before we left, she died, so my father lost his mother and country at the same time. He was lucky to leave with his only son and his young wife. And what a travesty that was. We flew to Spain and made a refueling pit-stop in the Azores, then flew to Madrid, and there we knew no one. My father had to start from scratch, and four years later he would do it all over again in Los Angeles. There are two nuns in our family, Sister Mary and Sister Julie, who were living in a convent in Seville, and through the church and the Spanish government, they managed to help us get over to Madrid. It's amazing how these things go, how people travel in the darkness of not knowing what's going to happen next. It's like writing a novel: each time you sit down, you just don't know, but writing a novel is easy work compared to what real people go through in real life. As much as I write about my father, and my relationship with him, I don't think I

have the guts, if I can call it that, to do what he did for us, and not lose his mind doing it. I'm a wimp with my own little complaints about my life here in the United States. I often meditate about that to put things in perspective. My father is a hero to me, and not just because he recently died, but because he was a better man, a stronger man, than I will ever be. He chose action in life as his weapon; I chose words, these scratch marks on paper (or rather the clicks of a keyboard and the apparition of words on a blank computer screen). It's ghost-work. With my own children, I am trying to get them to see a connection between words and who writes them because I want them to respect what I do as a human being, and that involves spending many hours typing, or to what the untrained eye would see as typing. I type for a living, that's true, but I also make books, and poems, and stories, and essays out of all that typing. I think they are beginning to make the connection. My father really never understood, being an hourly-wage worker (he worked with his hands and received payment for that work), and I'm salaried, and we'd get into these funny exchanges where he would ask me why I didn't call up my boss and ask him for more hours, and I would say, "Pop, unfortunately, I don't have a boss. I mean my boss is an institution which is made up of colleagues, students, administration, and no, I can't ask them for more hours, I'm doing enough." And he'd shake his head to let me know that after so many years he still didn't get what it was that I did for a living. I think my parents initially worried that they didn't understand what I was doing teaching at the university because most of what they saw, they had seen before: their son sitting at a computer typing. I'm bringing my mother to campus with me now when classes resume this summer so that she can sit in one of my classes, so that she can visit my office and other offices in the department. And though she doesn't speak English well enough to understand everything, she will see me at work with half of what I do at the university, which is teach young people how to write. Parental approval is important to me,

and I think by their not understanding, they created a challenge for me. Write, get known, get other people to say, hey, I read your son's book, his story, and it's pretty interesting. I hope it is. (May 3, 1999)

JM: Your first collection of poetry, *You Come Singing* (Tia Chucha, 1998), was recently published. Could you say something about your process of putting together a collection of poems such as this? You have three sections, each with its own title. Since this was your first full collection of poems, how did you go about choosing the poems and arranging the book?

VS: The work that went into *You Come Singing* was hard to put together into the book and make it fit. The original title for the book was *Rants & Chants* which made it easier to squeeze poems into book form, but it worked out because I worked for a couple of months looking at and eyeing the poems, keeping out what didn't fit into the three sections. The section titles came later with the idea that if they were good enough, I could use them as the titles of forthcoming collections, like "Palm Crows," which is now a whole book by itself. I normally sit down to write from an idea for a poem, not for a book, so I will work during the year at generating work, and later when I sit there during the summer, I mean, that's the payoff for me as a writer of poems, I can sit there with a big stack of poems and reread and revise, then I begin to see thematic connections in the poems. That's how it worked and has worked for my books of poetry. I also have an excellent friend and fellow poet in town, Ryan G. Van Cleave, who will help me "walk" through all my poems. I believe it is a device Billy Collins uses in putting all his poems on the floor and then "eyeing" them as he walks back and forth. So I do the first few passes, then Ryan will help me do the last couple. There are so many poems in one year, that I get dizzy. Not all of them are up to my standards, so there's an initial throwing out of quite a bit of work. It hurts to do so, but it only goes to the

recycle folder, scraps to be used later. Once the book has *duende*, as Federico García Lorca would put it, I put it in manuscript form and begin to revise. Sometimes new poems win places in between other poems where I didn't see gaps. It's really quite a bit of fun to put a manuscript together. I enjoy the heck out of it. (May 10, 1999)

JM: I also notice, just skimming through the book, a wide variety of poetic styles at work here.

VS: Oh, I always try to experiment with line breaks and stanzas. I like poems that look so clean on the page (couplets, I love them) and look, as my colleague David Kirby would put it, "elegant." Dressed to go out to a dinner party. I also like the narrative fluidity of indenting lines. I like that a lot. My experiences I think best fit these kinds of formal looking poems. But if you notice in the last part of the book, the line begins to disintegrate, and I like that as well. Words become scattered on the page. I like the fact that this book has a variety of possibilities for dress, if you consider poems as being naked before you finish them on the page. Something like that. That's why I like the work of Mary Oliver, Louise Glück, and Billy Collins—because of the way the poems look. (May 10, 1999)

JM: What about the title?

VS: *You Come Singing* comes from one of the poems in the book, which an editor at Tía Chucha Press suggested, and I liked it because mostly I think the book is upbeat, a reaffirmation of how I've taken control of my life, I think, and how I've been lucky and charmed to live this kind of "outsider" life, which leads me always back to personal experience, and poetry. And I think it fits my voice, reading voice as well. I loved it when I first heard it. (May 10, 1999)

JM: You've edited or co-edited three anthologies of Latino and Cuban-American writing. Where do you currently see Latino writing, in terms of general popularity and the "canon"? I know that ethnic/minority literatures have enjoyed considerable exposure over the last 20 years or so, especially with Gabriel García Márquez and Toni Morrison winning Nobel Prizes and N. Scott Momaday and Oscar Hijuelos winning the Pulitzer. What names should we be on the lookout for over the next few years?

VS: Latino Literature, as I continue to be interested in it not only for scholarly purposes, but because I love to follow it and see what happens, is entering the mainstream with some very strong voices, voices that have been there all along, people like Alberto Ríos, Rudolfo Anaya, Rolando Hinojosa, Judith Ortíz Cofer, Demetria Martínez, Leroy V. Quintana, Sandra Cisneros. It's alive and doing very well. I am keeping a close eye on a couple of young writers and poets, mainly Junot Díaz, Adrian Castro, and Richard Blanco, the last two poets. Very exciting new voices. I think more people will write about their experience in the United States, and it is a literature that should fascinate many people because of its close ties to the American Dream, though the subjects these writers choose to write about are as varied and delicious as tropical fruit. (May 12, 1999)

JM: My primary area of interest is Native American literature, which can be somewhat political at times (especially the poetry), commenting on genocide, colonization, and land/treaty issues. Is there a certain political focus to Cuban-American and Latino writing? I guess I'm thinking about exiled Cuban writers living in the U.S. commenting on the political and social issues in Cuba or even United States policy concerning the Castro regime.

VS: Well, Cuban American writers, I think, are moving away from writing about the homeland. I mean, many still do. I know I still do, very much so, but I think people are writing also

about their lives here in the United States, what happens to a family in exile, for example, here. Few writers of my generation are still concerned with issues of assimilation, a free Cuba, the political aspects of the United States' relationship with Cuba. A lot of fiction I read, and the poetry, concerns itself mainly with character and voice. Most of it is well crafted material that sets out to tell a story, which has, of course, universal implications. My poetry now is concerned with some of that. My new book is titled *Caliban Ponders Chaos*, which deals mainly with not only Cuban history, but with the history of Latin America as well. I think it is a good opportunity to put it in perspective, in a creative way, as the clock winds down on this old millennium and century. Very interesting. I'm excited about this new collection, but I don't know when I will finish it. (May 12, 1999)

JM: This is one you don't have to answer of course, but what is your stance on United States policy with Cuba—the embargo, etc.?

VS: I'm not afraid to answer such a question. I lived the issue between my parents when my father was still alive. My father was a hard-liner, he didn't want to go back to Cuba, not while Castro is in power, and my mother, who has a huge family left in Cuba, has gone back. I have many uncles, aunts, cousins, still living in Cuba. I've been invited to go back, but I haven't done so yet, not because of any political reason, but because I feel I am not ready. It is connected to my work. Right now a lot of my work is memory driven, and I hate to go back and realize that I have been writing about lies, about inaccurate places, people, which I might have done, but I don't want this good work to stop. Also, I've been living in an emotional roller coaster which has taken its toll on me, the death of my father-in-law, the death of my father, the death of my grandmother, grandfather, friends . . . I keep thinking that if I go back to Cuba and see everybody, I will be living among ghosts, some of them good, some of

them not so good, but I am concerned about my mental balance. I'm serious about this. It isn't a casual matter with me. We'll see though what happens. I know for certain that the Cuban people both there and on these shores of exile will be reunited. No doubt about it. It'll be something to sing and celebrate. (May 12, 1999)

JM: You've been quite busy over the last few years—novels, a book of poems, the memoir, anthologies, and I've come across several of your poems in small press journals lately. What's next for you? Should we expect another novel or another book of poems?

VS: I am working—not so steadily—on the last novel I will ever write, which so far has taken me seven years, a novel called *Sonny Manteca's Blues*, and I see no end in sight any time soon. I am also working on a book of poems I mentioned earlier, and I just finished another collection titled *Palm Crows: A Cancionero*, and I continue to write essays, stories, more poems. The way I look at it is that I'm staying busy with the English language because I have a need to keep talking, understanding, living through my writing. My life is pretty quiet and charmed otherwise: beautiful family, great home, the best job in the world at Florida State University. I'm a pretty good teacher, I think, and I love the exchange with my students. This is more than I dreamt of, and it is all paying off. Next is more of the same. I would not trade places with anyone. Salud.
(May 12, 1999)

Bibliography:
Novels: *Latin Jazz* (1989); *The Cutter* (1991); *Havana Thursdays* (1995); *Going Under* (1997).
Stories: *Welcome to the Oasis* (1992)
Poems: *You Come Singing* (1998); *Garabato Poems* (1999)
Memoir: *Spared Angola: Memories of a Cuban-American Childhood* (1997)
As editor: *Iguana Dreams: New Latino Fiction* (1993); *Paper Dance: 55 Latino Poets* (1995); *Little Havana Blues: A Cuban-American Literature Anthology* (1996).

Paul S. Piper

Lima, Montana

There is always wind in the dry weeds
the hawk-shadow of desire once his
but no longer is anything his

Once he held the variegated sky in his hands
and once he held a bird he healed with his hands
and the new wheat stretched shimmering downhill
falling into distance
his father sitting next to him smoking

And once oasis the squat square house
defiantly innocent under the largesse of sky
now simply a pile of logs that belongs to a place
or is abandoned to a place and consumed
no more no less
the sky bent through four crippled windows

His father having left the now dessicated fields
and his mother having gone
to the swarms of black birds
where he once sat a boy, a man now sits
amidst the sifting dust, the whine of cicadas
waiting only for clouds and their little nights

First Snow

in memory of James Wright

The first snow falls early this year, before
anyone is ready, flakes almost breaking
their form to form water, yet
hesitant, like us, hearing the dark voices
of their origin far above earth. Yet
in a matter of minutes lightening the melancholy
of this small city, the ache
of lumbering, peripheral mountains.

It is suddenly quiet.
Quiet enough to hear the earth breathe, the
billions of seeds lengthen into their temporary
oblivion. Across
the street a girl on her way home from school
has stopped walking and is looking up into
the slow fury of the snow. Even from here I
can see her eyes are closed, that she
is falling backwards into the sky
into the origin of snow, of herself, as the
huge flakes break wet on her warm skin.

J. P. Steed

The Way to God

They come out of the barn, the two brothers, Jon skipping ahead, making games of the frost-whitened pasture. Rains have been kneaded into the clay and the manure, but now the uneven ground is frozen uneven, porous as a hardened cake and glistening with frost, and Jon foots the clods and the ridges as though stones across an icy creek. His Christmas pistol rides in the holster he's fashioned out of cardboard and duct tape and strapped to his army belt. The sleeves of his army jacket are wide-cuffed, exposing white wrists, and he wears a loose-knit, navy stocking cap, and army-green gloves. In skipping, his arms, like birds' wings, jerk and clip.

Matt, the elder brother, follows behind, stumbling. Two flannel shirts over longjohns, knee-high rubber boots. Red baseball cap. He carries Jon's old gun, the Daisy rifle, in both hands, like a broom or a shovel. Slipping into pockmarks, lurching, Matt's arms also jerk and clip, causing the BBs in the barrel to slosh like water in a tin. He watches the ground at his feet, tries to hit only the high spots like his younger brother, but the frost is slick, their father's boots a handicap. He steps in a hole, falls to one knee, and in pain and frustration he throws the rifle and swears. He says the words quietly, into the neck of his shirt.

"Wait up," he cries. Jon has reached even ground, out, away from the barn, at the base of the whitened hill, and is heading for the fence that separates the pasture from the orchard. The air is sharp, stinging Matt's teeth when he breathes. He stands, picks up the rifle, says, "Wait up," again.

Less than an hour ago their mother stood on the porch in her yellow bathrobe. The boys stood at the edge of the porch, side by side, and together they watched their father as he shouldered a green duffel bag into the back of the Ford pickup and dusted his pantleg. He seemed to search the ground for a moment, picking over the gravel for something fallen until at last he

faced the porch with his hands on his hips.

Well, their father said, the word riding out on his cold breath. Matt felt the cold on his neck, on the backs of his hands. The morning mists hung thickly around them, forming a small room around the porch and the pickup truck, with the silence of ceilings and walls, and the boys' mother said nothing—only stood in her bathrobe behind them, holding open the screen door.

Their father made a line with his lips, took hold of the truck's door handle, and said *Well*, again. *See you sooner or later I guess.* The words fell flat in the cold. But Matt heard in them an echo, a crack and a wave, out over the valley. Like a gunshot. Sooner or later, sooner or later. Sooner or later.

Their father lifted a foot into the cab.

Bye, D-d-dad, said Jon.

Then the pop and spit of the gravel as the truck drove away.

Matt catches up with Jon, who says, "We'll have to c-c-c-cross here."

Jon means a blank spot in the fence, a break in the blackberry bushes where a gate used to be, and he names it with authority, pointing, not looking to his brother.

"I know," Matt says.

Jon steps up, the fencewire stretches and honks under his weight. His hand makes a print in the frost on the black fencepost—an old tarred railroad tie turned vertical for its strength at the gate—and instead of hopping down from the top wire, Jon steps up onto the square top of the post, stands heel to heel with his arms out.

"Geronimo," he cries.

"Get down."

"Hang on a sec."

Jon squints into the orchard, then squats awkwardly on the fencepost, unholstering the pistol. He cocks it and sights with both hands.

"What're you doing?" says Matt.

Jon shushes him. The hillside is silent, muted by the mist.

The pistol makes its hollow *whump*, and Jon leaps from the post, crying *Got him* and running fullspeed.

Matt tosses the rifle over the fence and it vibrates like a broken bat. The creak of the wire, the slip of a boot and his hind knee is caught up for a moment. Then he is over. He picks up the rifle and says, "What'd you get?"

Jon is crouching under a tree in the orchard, waiting for Matt to catch up to him. A small gray bird rests high, light as Styrofoam, on the silver grass between Jon's knees. Its legs curled into its chest, a black bloody hole where the beak used to be

"You shot its mouth off," Matt says.

"Yep," says Jon. "I told you there were still b-b-birds out here. I was aiming f-f-f-for its head."

He lets a bulb of spit fall between his legs, near the bird, before rising to move on.

"Hold up," says Matt. He leans the rifle against the trunk of the tree and starts buttoning one of his flannel shirts. His cold fingers are awkward, slow, and Jon watches for a moment before stepping up to a flat stone set into the earth. He undoes his buckle and pees on the stone, steam rising. Standing over it, he presses, shoots square into the center—as though, unlike Moses, he would put the water *in*.

Jon turned eight on a Sunday, so was baptized on his birthday. His main argument against their father that year was that if he was old enough to be accountable for his sins, he was old enough to hunt. Friday nights as their father checked the lantern for gas, oiled a rifle with a rag, Jon would plead with him, but the answer was always *Not yet*, and Jon would throw himself against the wall, or slam the door to his bedroom.

Sundays, when their mother took them to church, she would say prayers for their father that he would be safe—though he kept not the Sabbath day holy—that all would be well. On the Sunday Jon was baptized, their father made it back from his hunting trip just in time for the invocation at the baptism, which was held up for over half an hour in the hopes of his arrival.

Earlier that morning the women in the ward had patted Jon's head or squeezed his shoulder, asking him if he was excited about the baptism and telling their mother he was a marvelous boy. Their mother told them she had two marvelous boys, and she fretted her sons with her kisses, made them stand straight and tall.

At the baptism Jon wore the white jumper and stepped down into the font where the Bishop was waiting. The Bishop wore a larger jumper, his great belly pressing against the white zipper, and Jon stood before him in the water, increased in his smallness. The women from the ward watched the upsidedown images of Jon and the Bishop in the slanted mirror over the font, as the Bishop raised his arm to the square. But Jon let his feet leave the bottom when the Bishop immersed him. They had to do the baptism over again, and again, until at last the white legs of the jumper stayed under the surface.

When it was finished they had pie and ice cream in the cultural hall, and then rode home in the truck, Jon on their mother's lap and Matt in the middle. Their father said *Well that's done*, and then he told them about the giant stag he'd seen charging out of the brush in a canyon late that morning. It had nearly trampled him, he said—he was unable to get a shot off.

Both of the boys remember that night—the baptism, the ride home, their father' s story. Both remember the way the headlights moved over the asphalt under their father's voice. Jon, his hair still wet, felt their mother tighten her grip around his waist when their father let out a *Crash* to tell of the stag's emergence. Jon remembers the rough sound of their father' s voice, the energy and the image of that deer. *A four point at least*, their father had said—its powerful legs shocking the ground, the snorts from its muzzle.

Matt remembers the energy too, and the way his own thigh ran along their father's, pressing against it as they rounded corners, driving in the dark.

Jon does up his pants and says, "Come on. Let's g-g-go down over there."

He points diagonally through the orchard. There is a bounce in his step, the sound of his pantlegs scuffing through the grass.

"I don't see any more birds," Matt says, scanning the orchard. The trees are uniform, each gray and ragged with rot. The boys have never known fruit here—the orchard was dead when they came.

"We'll f-find 'em," Jon says.

The two brothers come to the orchard's corner, where Jon turns sharply downhill. They leave the fence and the blackberries behind, the space on their right now filled with the ditch and the evergreens. The ditch runs from the top of the hill to the road—the road running along the base of their hill like the lip of an easel.

They walk for a moment in silence, Matt beginning to feel the cold in his toes.

"C'mon," says Jon. He heads for a particular tree at the edge of the orchard as though he's recognized it, and Matt follows after him.

Jon grabs the lowest branch and swings one leg onto it, rights himself, and leans back against the trunk. "C'mon," he says again, indicating the branch next to his.

Matt passes the rifle up and takes hold of the dead branch and is surprised at its sturdiness, its solidity. The gray bark is gnarled, breaks off into small slices of hardened toast, and he hooks his heel and struggles to pull himself upright.

When he is settled, straddling the branch, Jon hands him the rifle. They are facing the evergreens. Matt winces a little and shifts his crotch over the branch.

"We just sit here and watch?" he says.

Jon kicks his heels against the trunk of the tree. He takes off his gloves and his hands are red. "There should b-be some in there," he says, pointing into the woods.

"No there aren't," says Matt. "This is stupid. It's freezing."

"I got one, didn't I?" Jon says. "They don't go anywhere in the w-winter. It's not like they're d-d-d-d-ducks."

They hear a car on the road at the base of the hill, and it sounds amplified through the mist, as though through a megaphone. As though it is driving right over them.

Last deer season Jon turned nine and would try to sneak the bag he'd packed into the back of the pickup on Friday afternoons. He would wear his hunter's orange hat to school and tell his teachers he would bring them venison jerky the following Monday. Saturday afternoons he would pout, and if it wasn't raining too hard, he would leave for the orchard with the Daisy rifle, to kill off the birds.

The night of their father's last trip of the season, the rain turned to hail. Jon had already sneaked his bag into the pickup and was putting on their father's orange vest when their father held up one hand and said *All right. Enough.*

Matt came in from the living room to see what was happening.

Their father said *Upstairs. Both of you.*

Jon took the stairs by two. They each leapt onto their beds and sat facing the door.

Their father strode in with a frown, one hand stroking his beard. Light hail sounded off the hood of the truck and off the fiberglass roof of the porch.

The boys' beds were built up off the ground on four-by-four posts in an L, with their heads together, and when their father knelt in the crux, the beds met him chest-high.

Look son, he said, *I'm sorry.* He was speaking to Jon.

Jon started to protest but their father raised his hand.

I'd love to take you, kiddo, but you're just not old enough yet. You've gotta understand, hunting's a serious thing, and you have to be old enough to handle it.

What about M-m-matt? Jon said. *Is M-m-m-m—*

Is M-m-m-m—

Their father looked at Matt and pressed his lips together. Matt rolled onto his back to look at the ceiling.

Matt's old enough, their father said. *But hunting's not his thing, and that's his choice.*

Dad, Jon said.

Sorry, kiddo. Keep on practicing with the birds.

I hate the birds, said Jon. *I can't hit 'em with that stupid gun—it shoots all off to the right.*

Their father let out a small laugh through his nose. He reached out his hands to his sons.

I'll tell you what, he said. *You keep practicing on the birds, and maybe for Christmas we'll see about another gun.*

Jon stopped rubbing his eyes. Their father's right hand rested where Jon's shins crossed, as though gripping two strips of kindling; his left hand rested square on Matt's chest, as though taking an oath.

I still hate hunting b-birds, Jon said.

Their father tilted his head. *Hey now*, he said. *You're gonna have to show a lot more respect than that if you're gonna hunt with me.*

I have respect, Dad.

You're not just out there killing things, you know. It's like a chain. One thing leads to another—birds are just the beginning. But they still mean something.

Like what?

Well, their father said, *all animals are sacred.*

You mean like church?

Sort of.

But how come you don't go to church?

Their father looked at the crack where the two beds met and he worked his lips for a moment. Matt felt the weight of their father's hand on his chest, and he looked at their father's beard, at the bulge in his throat.

Their father turned to Jon again. *When you hunt birds you gotta show respect*, he said. *It's like—*

He paused, looking at the crack in the beds again as though it was something new. This rift. This fissure.

He said *It's like meeting up with angels on the way to God.*

A look of reverence swelled Jon's face, like water in a sponge, and outside the hail had tapered, had relaxed into rain.

Can I g-go when I'm ten? Jon said.

Their father smiled. He stuck out his chin and laughed. His

hands clamped down on his sons and he shook them and said *Great. You guys are great.* Then he stood up and left.

The women in the ward would ask their mother about their father, saying *How are you holding up?* and their mother would smile weakly and say *We are not given to suffer beyond that which we are able.*

Sometimes the men in the ward would ask how Old Raci was doing, and whether he was ever going to show his face around the chapel again, and they would try to make it a joke, to elicit a smile. Sometimes their mother would give them that smile and say *You're all just jealous*, and the men would lower their chins and move their shoulders like laughter.

One Sunday as the boys walked into the foyer, they overheard a woman tell another woman that the MacAthren family wouldn't be together in heaven—that the seal would be broken. The second woman, Sister Watts, said *I know, I know. Isn't it a shame?* And the first woman, Sister Geary, said *It is. It's amazing how you never see it coming. It just goes to show you've got to keep your testimony.* And Sister Watts said *I know.*

The boys' mother startled the two women, who didn't know she was listening. *Talk about not seeing it coming*, she said—as though from a tower. *If that man isn't careful*, she said, *his family won't be together in a week. You can forget about heaven.*

The cold is making it harder to talk. "How long are we gonna sit here?" Matt says. He breathes into his fists, the rifle laid out on the branch, the plastic stock wedged under his crotch.

Jon puts two fingers to his lips and mocks a cigarette, blowing his cold breath in Matt's direction. He takes the pistol from its holster and turns it over in his lap, runs his red fingers over its blackness. The pistol is heavier than the rifle. More dense and more powerful.

"I bet this would k-kill a r-r-rabbit," Jon says. "If you h-h-hit it right."

"There aren't any rabbits," Matt says.

Jon looks up from the pistol and says, "Let's shoot something." His eyes scan the ground near their perch in the tree, and work outward. They move toward the ditch, twenty yards away, and over it, his gaze like a rising sun, moving into the evergreens.

"That," Jon says, his arm flinging out as though yanked to point at a barrel-shaped tank ten yards into the fir trees and braced up by two-by-fours. Matt follows Jon's arm and sees the tank through the low branches, its sides orange with rust.

"What is it," Matt says, "a water tank or something?"

"Prob'ly a gas tank," says Jon. "For t-t-tractors I bet."

Jon raises the pistol and cocks it. He aims with both hands. The pistol makes its *whump* and there is a flat snapping sound.

"Did it bounce off?" Matt says.

"I think it's r-r-rusted through," says Jon. He smiles. "Go for it," he says.

Matt lifts the rifle and begins cocking it—two, three, four times. The BBs slosh in the barrel. Jon cocks and fires while waiting and a piece of the tank tears like soft bread and hangs by a small hinge.

"Cool," says Jon. "T-t-try to knock it off."

Matt raises the rifle to his shoulder and aims. He feels the branch underneath him cutting off his circulation, splitting him up the middle. The rifle's *poing* is hollow, followed by a high-pitched vibration Matt can hear in the trigger. The boys watch the BB cut through the air in its sweeping curve, to a rustle in the ferns behind the gas tank and wide to the right.

"This thing sucks."

"I know," says Jon, smiling. He holds up the pistol to look at it, then cocks it and fires. It takes two shots before the slice of gas tank breaks off and drops to the ground, and suddenly Jon is swinging his leg over his branch, leaping from the tree to the grass to get a look at his kill.

"What are you doing?" Matt says. But Jon is running.

Matt throws the rifle down and swings his leg. The ground sends a shock through his ankles, and his crotch aches from the branch. The blood leaks back into his legs with a cool wetness. He leans to pick up the rifle but it has broken in half, stock from barrel, and he hesitates before picking up the barrel half and

turning after his brother.

Jon sprints across the grass between the orchard and the evergreens, then stops as though against a glass wall. He starts again, at a gentle pace, as though not to disturb, still gripping the pistol in his right hand.

Matt runs and feels a warmth on his arms, the sun cracking through the mists. He catches up with Jon and they stand at the ditch's edge. The ditch itself, cut into the Oregon clay, is the same dark orange as the gas tank—as though the exposed earth, like the abandoned metal, has turned to rust.

The deer at the bottom of the ditch has been dead for some time. A forken-horn, Jon whispers. Its feet and head curl together as though in constraint of pain, and smeared clay and bits of grass are frozen to its hide. Black blood has clotted around the hole in its shoulder. The eyes are open, crinkling in on themselves but still holding some hint of mild surprise. The two boys stare from the edge and Jon's face shines, white with revelation and nausea.

Matt looks at the broken rifle in his hands and then back to his brother.

"You okay?" he says.

Jon slips a heel over the edge of the ditch and drops, to sit on the gray grass, his feet hanging over the orange clay. Matt crouches, joining him, the cold flat ground easy after the orchard branch. Jon stares at the deer, his right hand still grasping the pistol's butt, his left hand, like a baby's, wrapped tightly around the pistol barrel as though it were a parent's finger.

Matt blows into his fists and looks at the deer. The sun, burning off the mists, coats the world in a glaze.

"Was it a hunter or something?" Matt says. "Somebody just left it there?"

The frost seeps into Matt's pants, chilling the backs of his thighs.

"I broke your gun," he says.

Jon says, "Do you think Dad's coming back s-s-s-sooner, or later?"

Matt looks away, follows the ditch downhill until it disappears into more blackberry bushes. He tries to think about it.

To come up with possibilities, reassurances for his younger brother.

"I don't know," he says. "Sooner, maybe."

"Then why'd he take all his guns? It's not huntin' season."

Matt shrugs his shoulders and fingers the jagged scar where the Daisy rifle has split in two. He wishes he'd picked up the stock so he could match it with the barrel, to watch the seam disappear. But it is back in the orchard. Jon has laid the pistol in his lap, and runs his hands over the grass.

Matt says, "What do you wanna do?"

The air is still thin but the sun has broken the tip off the cold. The two brothers sit over the dead deer. Then they hear a hollow scratching and they look at the gas tank. A meadowlark skips twice over the rust and bares its yellow breast.

Before Matt can say anything Jon snatches up the pistol, is cocking and firing. Up on one knee, at the brink of the ditch and aiming with both hands. Matt grips the rifle barrel and watches the meadowlark as it sputters among the evergreens. It thrashes through the branches, breaks free, then climbs from low to high out over the gray orchard trees—the two brothers twisting after it. Its cry sinking away as Jon traces its flight with the pistol.

Come Sunday, Jon will consider throwing the pistol into the fire pit. Matt will try to talk him out of it, to remind him about the meadowlark, but Jon will say, "It's winter, all the b-b-birds are gone," and their mother will look out the window at the empty driveway and say, "Jon, you keep that gun, there's no reason to quit." But he won't listen.

The sun is melting the frost on the deer in the ditch. Another car roars over the road at the base of their hill, and it could be a pickup truck. The hollow *whump* of the pistol seems to reverberate through the broken mists, out over the valley, and Matt watches the bird jerk and clip across the sky, and he prays for an escape, feels the frozen earth under him, the cold on his ears—feels the knot in his bowels unraveling. He turns to his brother. Jon holds his bottom lip in his teeth, aiming almost with his eyes closed. Cocking and firing, cocking and firing.

Cocking and firing.

Georgia Tiffany

What Did We Think We Saw?

Endless owls guard the river,
their eyes like small fruits,
their restlessness exaggerated by wind.
Endless wind carves us
no time for silence.

Where will we go all night?
The instinct is not survival.
The words we have removed from our speech,
the touch we have removed,
the scheme,
are not survival.
The last shadows before dark are not our shadows.

Odd to think of this now—
the tree I planted in the backyard,
the careful weeding and waiting,
and then that first year
ripe chokecherries stained my hands.
Mother! I exclaimed, too excited to say more.
The chokecherries are not survival,
nor the stain.

Lichen hangs about the necks
of birches otherwise bare, their white branches
barely visible in night mist up from the river.
Will we swim to the other shore,
settle for looking back—
cold, wet, unable to speak?
Perhaps the owls have been blind since birth
and cannot remember
what it was like before the shadows

pushed out ahead of them.

What did we think we saw
after deer came in winter
to lick away the faces, the wide shoulders
and curves of the calves?
Or was it the breasts they favored,
able to distinguish the living from the dead.

I'm telling a story about us,
about the last time we honored anything
we could not see.

Three Poems for Gaetano

i. A Letter

The girl in grey gauze slips past you,
wind you thought you recognized,
dust, laughter from the bar
not laughter exactly,
more a high-pitched rattle, nerve-edged.
An old man fingers his groin,
the boy squatting in the doorway
locks a chicken in his arms.

Tombstone, you write, is no different
from any other small poor town
except for George Henry
and his souvenirs.

ii. Carving

When you close one eye,
you think you can see.
When you close them both, you know.

iii. The Souvenir

If he went public, they would mock him.
If he keeps quiet, both are magical.
G. Corrado

The negative, the dark room, the motion
made a space for him.

He found what leaves the earth
too filled with dance

to mourn, and then too filled with mourning
to be still.

He found a laughing crow,
a desert stone.
He touched the cactus flower,
placed the photo on a secret shelf.
And then the woman lying next to him
blossomed at the center of the world.

Flood

A woman in the bar whispered
the sun would tomorrow
come up underwater.

The ice dam above town had broken,
water suddenly raging, the lake swollen,
the rivers mad, and people
sandbagging.

A school northeast of the lake
was washed all the way to the marina;
desk drawers, textbooks, erasers bobbed
into the flooded hotel.
On a piling overwatching the bay,
a drowned horse snagged.

We ate pretzels, sang and resang old campsongs.
Sloe gin and high water.
We emptied the afternoon of ex-husbands
who did not understand us.
Then we took photos of the horse.

Ralph Robert Moore

When the Big One Thaws

"Who's this? Who's this?"

The rental agent bent forward, old eyes blue and magnified behind his glasses, fingertips of his right hand reaching down, reaching forward, tapping the top of Peter's bald head.

Peter toddled back a step, popping his lips, waving his pudgy arms in excitement. Phillip watched beside his wife from a few feet away, by the corkboard covered with thumb-tacked index cards. Men love touching babies, love putting their fingertips on them, letting the fingertips trail, knowing the baby came out between the mother's legs. Like touching the mother herself between her legs. Like trailing the fingertips up there, in there, across the pink hairs on the bald head, while everyone stands around smiling.

"Who are you? Who are you?"

"Peter." Phillip walked over, leaving Jill. "That's his name." He smiled at the rental agent, picked Peter up in his arms, away from the fingertips with their large nails, holding the sour milk weight against his chest, right hand going up behind the snaky sideways leans of the neck to support the weight of the head.

The rental agent swiveled around in his dark suit, grinning open-mouthed at Jill.

The apartment was the converted loft of a grey-boarded carriage house. They inspected the carriage house first, the rental agent swinging one side of the entrance out, stepping backwards in his galoshes, the tall, wooden door wobbling its height. Inside, a floor of frozen mud made blacker by shallow snow drifts, blown in against long-ago imprints of tire treads and boot prints. Three absurdly large metal hoops leaned against the side of the first stall, coos and flappings from somewhere high up in the brand-new rafters, unseen.

"Did you even want to go inside, Mr. Lowe?"

"The structure's sound?"

"It's built to code. The apartment."

Swinging the tall door shut again, the rental agent slapped

his gloved hands against each other, squinting at Phillip and Jill, then jerked his forehead back at the long, rutted driveway they had bounced down. "Lots of privacy. You can be as loud as you want, here."

Access to the apartment was up a zig-zagging interior stair added at the time of the renovation. Their boots sounded hollower with each turn.

The agent stopped below the top step, inserting one of a ring of keys into the shiny brass lock, twisting right, pushing the door open with his fingertips, grinning at the Lowes. "Go first. Go ahead."

They stepped up into a small kitchen. Faint smell of vinyl glue and caulking. Above the aluminum sink, a sensible, square window showed the coniferous tops of pine trees, boughs weighed down under the white, sandpapery glistenings of snow.

Jill turned around and around, long red hair swinging behind her blue-eyed appraisal. "I like it." She glanced up into Phillip's eyes. "It's small, but that's a great view."

"Let's see the rest of it."

After walking Indian-style through all the bright, empty rooms the three of them stood in the largest, the living room.

A wide picture window overlooked the frozen lawn below, black, winding driveway to the right, disappearing into sky-profiled pines; shorter, leafless deciduous trees to the left, and beyond their black trunks, a frosted pond.

The agent came up, a head shorter, alongside Phillip. "When the summer comes, you can get all kinds of fiddleheads down there, down by the shore of that pond. Steam 'em, and they taste like asparagus."

Jill joined them. "So that is a pond? I thought it might just be a clearing covered with snow." She was standing on the other side of the agent, looking down through the wide glass, down into the near distance, at the shrubs surrounding the

flat white emptiness.

"So why's the place so cheap? Isn't that what always gets asked at this point in the story?"

The agent covered his chin with his right hand, giving Phillip a sly look. "Yeah, it sure is." His blue eyes lifted until the black pupils clicked on Phillips'. "There're stories about that pond down there. Are they true?" He gave an elaborate shrug, twisting his head around to look at Jill on the other side of him. From below, from the way the three of them were standing, someone might think she was with him rather than with Phillip. "The story itself is stupid. The story is that down there, down in that pond, at the bottom, frozen in the mud at the bottom, is a big frog."

Phillip laughed. "A frog? That's the best you can do?"

The agent stepped backwards out from between the two of them, walking away from the window, his back to them, spreading his hands out. "That's the story."

Jill looked at the agent's back, then at Phillip, then back at the agent. "How big a frog?" She looked back at Philip again, letting out a giggle. "I mean..."

"Supposedly, pretty big. How big?" His shoulders lifted in his overcoat again. "What happened was, last year we rented this place, and the couple living here, they claimed the frog tried to get in." He raised his eyebrows. "See, the thing is, that pond starts to thaw come Spring, and you start hearing all these little frogs come back to life. Frogs can freeze over the Winter, and when Spring comes back, they thaw out and go right on living. Did you know that? Well, with this other couple, they were middle-aged, they'd hear the little frogs start to come back to life each night while they lay in bed with their windows open, that trill or call or whatever it is frogs give out, more and more little frogs thawing all the time, until it got quite noisy at night, but it was a pleasant noisiness, a country noisiness, and then one night they heard this loud— this very loud— croak start up. The big one had thawed. Took him so long to thaw because he was so big. Well, every night after that they'd hear fewer and fewer of the little frogs chirping, because supposedly the big frog was sliding on his belly along the bottom of the pond, down in the

green mud, down in the wavy shadows, big and cold, eating them all, getting quicker all the time to snap in the last few. Until it reached the night when they didn't hear any little frogs at all, because they supposedly all got eaten by then. So the wife says to her husband, 'I wonder what he's gonna eat now?' Let me show you something."

He led them back down around the zig-zags of the stairs, to the front door. Right index finger out, he pointed at the door frame, by the knob. "See that big split there?" Looking closer, Phillip and Jill both noticed the nice wood had the long scar of a vertical split in it, filled in with a paler paste.

"This couple, they claimed that frog hurled itself against the door from outside, trying to get in, and split this door frame. I've repaired it since."

Phillip studied the long vertical split in the wood stretching from the floor to his neck. "A frog did that?"

"They claim. After that, they left. They were afraid that okay, maybe the frog didn't get them that time, but if it keeps eating it's going to get bigger and bigger, right? And maybe next time, or next year, it'll be big enough to break down the door and get in. Climb up the stairs. Year before that, the couple living here claimed around Spring they started seeing this large dog on their front lawn every night, looking up at their windows. Only it didn't move like a dog across the lawn."

"Let me guess. It hopped."

"They just said it moved strange. Strange enough to where they left. You asked me, I'm telling you why the rent's so cheap. Locals won't live here. And we don't get a lot of outsiders."

Jill reached out, touched the split. "Actually, we're not outsiders." She swung her eyes at Phillip. "My husband and I decided to move back here. Back to our home town."

Phillip first met Jill by the trash area of his apartment building in Portland, Maine. He was carrying his black garbage bag of single-serving frozen food containers around the brick corner of the building, stepping around the mud puddles, and there, in the

wet sunlight by the battered aluminum cans, some so weather-worn they were blackening, stood this red-haired girl lighting a cigarette.

He set his big bag on top of a smaller, bright-yellow one in an unlidded container, trying to think of something witty to say, something that related to garbage, but nothing came to mind and he couldn't keep tamping down on top of his bag while he waited for inspiration, when he heard her voice behind him say, "How's it goin'?"

They talked over an hour back there, he bumming cigarettes from her halfway through. When he wasn't smoking he kept his hands jammed in his pockets, knowing he probably shouldn't but the hands felt heavy and big and awkward whenever he slid them out, to where he was concentrating more on what to do with them each moment than he was on their conversation, and her.

Her. Most people aren't gorgeous, and certainly not him, but she was perfect. Eyes, cheekbones, mouth, hair: one of those people who look like the Fall never happened. She laughed at his jokes, which he only dared tell after she had already giggled at everything else he said, really cracked up until the tears were running like sweet syrup out of her blue eyes, and her red lips stayed partly open even between laughs, trembling for the next punchline. She herself had no problems with her hands at all: they waved in the air, sometimes with her direction, sometimes on their own; occasionally she slapped the outsides of the long, baggy white shorts she was wearing with the underpads of her hands, and the solid, toned sound of her long fingers slapping against the outside of her clothed thighs made him imagine her in bed with only her tee shirt on, bare legs and red pubic hair looking twice as large as the rest of her.

She invited him to a party her friends were giving and although he hated those things, where you're sitting on a sofa for hours drinking drinks you eventually have to make yourself while some other person you never saw before dominates the conversation, he surprised himself and accepted.

Her friends were actually pretty nice, even the males. The dozen of them gathered in her friend Audrey's orange living

room, the ocean of starry black night portholed at the windows, hip-slinking cats and bamboo and rattan stuff inside, plus lots of silvery Leger prints on the wall, all of them listening to tejano music at a low volume while they talked, most of them keeping the conversation general enough so he could participate. He even took the floor a few times himself, telling stories where he was the fool, Jill leaning her shoulder against his a few times, squeezing his knee at the end of one story that got a particularly good laugh from the others in their sweaters and eyeglasses.

Afterwards, he and Jill stayed to help Audrey carry the dirty plates and drink glasses into the kitchen. Jill gave his free arm a spontaneous hug. "So, did you have a good time, soldier?" "I really did." He put the encrusted plates down. "I kept expecting some loud asshole to show up, but they never did." Audrey turned around from the sink, not wanting to miss the opportunity for a punchline. "Oh, we made a point of not inviting Raymond."

Phillip laughed. "Raymond? Who's that?" He had politely addressed the question to Audrey, but her glance towards Jill demurred the answer to her.

Jill came out of their new kitchen with pins between her lips. "Dug it feel funny bean bag in Maine?"

Phillip looked up from the chair he had been sitting in, watching Peter toddle around inside the wooden bars of his playpen. "Somewhat."

She walked across the evening dimness of their now-furnitured living room, to the picture window. Outside, in the cold below, within the darkening bare branches around its shore, the frosted top of the pond glowed with moonlight. The flare of a match summoned her yellow face in the window's black glass. "You seem depressed." She turned around, blowing the smoke sideways away from her.

He threw his right calf over the arm of his chair, still studying Peter. "When we left here, two years ago, I just felt this...mantle of weight lift off my shoulders. Like now we're

finally free, finally on our own, away from everyone else. Now we can start over again." He smiled the type of smile that indicates a lot of things, but not humor. "And here we are, once again, back in Maine."

She sat on the arm of the chair that didn't have his leg flung over it. "Well, we couldn't find jobs in Colorado, though."

He looked up sideways at her from where he sat. "That 'we' is so much like you." Actually, she found plenty of jobs, to where at the end she was working two jobs a day to pay their rent and get them groceries, two good-paying jobs, as a loan officer and a cashier, while he was shaken out of job after job. "I'll call the paper factory Monday."

She slid off the arm of the chair slowly, inwards, keeping her hand under his, her wonderful weight settling on his lap. A kiss on his forehead, arm around his neck. "Phil, listen, we'll save up again, try somewhere else. Nothing says we have to stay here forever. Next time, who knows? Maybe go all the way to California. We can even start planning now."

Phillip got hard despite his depression, despite the fact he was still staring straight ahead, under the forehead kisses, at little Peter.

"Raymond's my former boyfriend." It was after Audrey's party. They were sitting on the top wooden step of the back stoop of the apartment building they both lived in on separate floors, smoking cigarettes. Since the small building was on a hill, Phillip could see down into the city of Portland itself, the suspended yellow rectangles, the heavy, red-bricked shapes under the starlight.

"Former? Really?"

"Yeah." Jill rubbed her palm on the top of his thigh. "Worried?"

He snorted. "Well, I—we're not, I mean—"

She put a friendly arm across his shoulder, forearm against his nape, and it was the nicest gesture he had ever felt. The camaraderie of it, the light weight of the semi-embrace, the

unselfconscious reaching out. "Don't worry. We went out for two years. I liked him. I'm being honest. He was wild, he was crazy, he did a lot of things I didn't dare do."

Phillip cleared his throat, which was getting congested for some reason, studying her porchlight-lit face, which rotated through profile and three-quarters profile as she talked, trying to gauge by the moments when the face relaxed in the pauses between the slight eyebrow liftings of her continuing words how she actually felt about her former boyfriend now. "I can't see you not daring to do anything."

"Yeah, maybe now. But back then, I guess I was shy." She swung her pale, angled face to look at him, look at him levelly, taking one of so many dares needed to be taken early in a relationship. "Like you. Huh?"

"I guess, well, in some ways, to a degree..." He rose to his own dare. "Yeah."

Jill slid her hand in his, like a schoolgirl. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes, I trust you."

"Will you always trust me?"

"Always."

That brief exchange was better than any kiss he had ever gotten, until he got a kiss from her twenty minutes afterwards.

He met Raymond once, later on, very briefly. By then, Jill and he were living together, planning to move to Colorado. Bony face, wide mouth. The type of man men don't like. The accidental meeting seemed to go pretty well until Raymond put a light touch of his hand on Phillip's shoulder. He had eyes few people do: the gaze that holds yours as long as it wants. "You can't keep her," he announced. He took a step back in his long coat, arms swinging at his sides, eyes flicking up and down Phillip. "She'll want wildness back some day. Some day she'll remember the way we used to kiss, the nights we got drunk on the floor, the games in the middle of the bed. You can't keep her."

Jill's oven-mitted hand lowered the oven door. Inside, in the boxed heat, Phil's favorite dinner looked about ready, bubbles

popping on the brown surface.

As the boot steps continued trudging up the zig zag of stairs she pulled off the apron with its corny cooking-related puns. She was wearing a blouse and skirt, the first time she didn't have jeans and a sweater on in two weeks, with a light touch of green mascara at her eyes and a fingertip of perfume behind each pink, translucent ear. Tony Bennett was playing on the stereo.

She timed her opening of the door so he would see her from the last landing. He swung around the corner of wall, head down, looked up from the shadows at her standing in the lit entrance to their home, her long body clothed to show each curve and hollow to its best advantage, and grinned.

Jill had no intention of asking him how it went. She'd wait for him to bring it up, in his own way. Their hug at the top of the stairs turned into a kiss, two kisses, a grateful whisper in her ear: "You do so much for me."

Sliding his coat off, looking around to see where to put it, passing it to her reaching hands, he ran fingers through his snow-wet hair. "I got it."

Her face lit up. "You did? I'm so proud of you!"

After they let go of each other he filled a glass at the sink with water. "Braxton said I was one of the best workers they ever had."

"That was nice of him."

"I start next Monday."

She lifted her red eyebrows. "Great, so we have the rest of the week alone together." She mimicked reciting a poem: "A continuation of our vacation." She hadn't started to look for work here yet, since they both figured it would be easy for her to get a job, since she knew so many people.

Over the beef stew, served out of a wide white bowl, porcelain sides trembling with banana candlelight, she finished a forkful, swallowed, noticed the salt shaker and said, "Oh, I saw Raymond in town today."

"You did?"

"Yeah. Just briefly. Very briefly. Just, 'Hi, I thought you moved,' that kind of thing."

"Oh. Hmm. What's he doing now?"

"He's still with the paper. Same old same old."

"Hmm. Did you talk long?"

"No. It was very brief."

"Where'd you see him?" He put a hot, soggy cube of beef between his lips.

"At the, the supermarket."

"While you were buying this food?"

"Yeah."

"I really appreciate you making this dinner for me."

"Oh, I really wanted to."

"So..." He didn't have any utensils in his hands at the moment. His hands waved around a little in the candlelight. "What did each of you say?"

"I was in the vegetable section and I saw him, and I didn't have any reason to talk to him, but then he got behind me in the line at the checkout, and he asked when I moved back here, and where I was staying, and I told him we had moved outside town. I didn't give him the neighborhood or anything. And he said something like good to see you again, and I got my groceries, and that was it."

"You said though that he also mentioned he was still working at the paper."

"Yeah. He said something like, 'I'm still at the paper.'"

Jill loaded the last of the plates sideways into the dishwasher, shut the door, clickingly twirled the knob, and stuffed a bath towel into the space under the door where they had noticed a leak.

Philip came out with his shirt off, nipples erect in the slight chill of the apartment. "Peter's asleep."

"Great, that's great." She cocked her ear, wagging an index finger at the slightly raised screen, at the blackness of the cold night beyond the mesh. "Listen. Hear?" Bracing his hands on either side of the aluminum sink, under the night's faint sounds of melting snow he heard a single rhythmic trill.

Her left hand rubbed up and down his bent back. "When I

was a little girl I always saw robins as the harbingers of Spring." She watched the back of her hand slide up and down over his knobby spine, gold ring revolving on her finger as it rubbed over the cloth. "I guess now instead it's frogs."

Phillip went down the stairs of their basement apartment in Boulder, into their low-ceilinged living room, and immediately knew something was wrong.

Jill stood in the middle of the carpet in her cut-offs, swaying her hips side to side nervously.

He tossed his keys atop the little TV they bought when he found his first job. "Hi."

"Hi, baby." She went into the front of his body, warm and breathy, kissing him on the lips, licking the fronts of his teeth, then kissing his ear, something she never did.

"Everything OK?"

"Yeah, it sure is." A secret little smile on her lips, blue eyes holding his.

He shrugged, nervous. "What...what in particular makes everything OK?"

Stepping back on her bare feet in their little basement living room, red-haired, leggy and fey, she lifted her loose, white and orange southwestern-designed top, showing him her shapely, belly-buttoned stomach, sloppy grin on her lips.

He grinned. "What?"

She pointed to her eye.

"I?"

She held her right hand in mid-air, thumb horizontal, index finger horizontal an inch above the thumb.

"Little word? Am?"

She pointed to her stomach. "Nauseous?"

She pointed to her stomach.

He surprised himself, rushing forward, eyebrows at an incredible slant, tears already in his eyes, grabbing his arms around her slender wonderfulness, holding her giggles and wiggles against him, against him, careful not to press his stomach too

hard at hers.

Peter stood in his wooden-barred playpen, holding onto a square bar with one hand. Googling nonsense, spittle on his lips, he suddenly let go the bar, standing on his own fat, wobbling feet.

Phillip, seated, drinking, smoking, stared at him.

In his mind, for the uncountable time, the words came out of her red lips again, her white teeth appearing and disappearing with the pronunciations. In Colorado. Shopping for blue paint. "I told you I saw Raymond just before we left Maine, didn't I? I could have sworn I did."

Why would you see him?

We bumped into each other.

Bump. Bump. Bump-bump-bump.

I could have sworn I did.

I was surprised. Audrey calling, saying, when she gets back, let her know I called. Oh. Tell her I saw asshole, and he says Colorado's the pits. Sour grapes, huh?

I could have sworn I did.

Standing in line to pay for the paint. Jill oblivious. He, counting days. We moved to Colorado two months ago.

Holding her around the waist that first night, tears in his eyes. When? When is it coming?

Well, the doctor says I'm two months pregnant. So, this is May....

Peter gurgled at Phillip.

That way he waved his right hand in the air, gleefully, like it was on fire. Did Phillip do that as a child? Scrunching one eyebrow when he was confused. Phillip never did that. Where did that expression come from? Or did he as a kid, and grew out of it, grew out of even the memory of it?

Once again, he remembered back to that one time he met Raymond, trying to recall every gesture Raymond made, every facial expression, but all he could really remember, all that stayed in his mind, was Raymond's obnoxious habit of openly touching his crotch while he talked, standing there tall in his long hair and

wide mouth, openly reaching his right hand down to tap his balls in his pants while he talked to Phillip. What a pig. What an absolute pig.

Are you going to wake up some day, and not be mine?

Are you a reminder of another, growing bigger all the time between us? He lit another cigarette, listening to the little frogs outside, studying Peter.

"Why were you late tonight?"

Jill slid out of her lightweight coat, tapping across the kitchen floor to the sink. "I had a...the car's right front tire was low, so I drove real slow over to this gas station, and there was this line of cars waiting to get air in their tires." She drank some water from the glass she had been holding in front of her while she explained, blue eyes blinking as the water went down, as her throat bobbed.

Later, in the shadows of their bedroom, closed books on the carpet on either side of their bed, chorus of frogs at the dark windows, she rolled over under the ghostly sheets, squid-black spaghetti strap loosening off the moon glow of shoulder, and slid her long bare leg between his thighs, hands on his chest, gently balancing little kisses on his lips, right hand slipping down, pulling his cock up until it was long and rigid.

Phillip rolled her over onto her back, lifting a leg to lay it down between hers, but she touched his rising hip. "Wait. Let's try it like this."

Her hands escorting him onto his own back, she rose up on her knees in the darkness above him, spreading her legs in her kneel, settling one calf down on either side of his hips. "Let's try it like this." She maneuvered his cock until it was pointing straight up, then lowered herself on it, around it, warm and wet. "Let's try it like this."

The bellow from the windows made them both jump.

Phillip raised his head from his pillow, hips still pumping up. "What the fuck..."

Jill's long-haired head, bobbing in the shadows above the bed, swung left.

The bellow again, deep-throated, immense.

Off in the hallway distance, through walls and paintings on walls, came the opening sobs of Peter's sudden awakening.

Jill was working late tonight.

Phillip had eaten alone.

He picked up the telephone. Pushed the square pads, one by one.

Fewer frogs trilled outside. Either they were gone, or were trying to be quiet, very quiet, in the mud.

"Hello?"

"Hello, is this Mrs. Barbar?"

"Yes it is. Who's this?"

"Mrs. Barbar, my name is John Steam and I represent a new baby food company called Hot Tots and we're conducting—"

"Well, I wouldn't—"

"I realize you no longer have any young ones still at home, Mrs. Barbar, but we're paying people large amounts of money and free gifts if they'll just answer a couple of questions about when they did have children, or one child, in your case. This will only—"

"But I...how would you know I had a child?"

"That's a separate department, Mrs. Barbar, but I believe they check county records, just to make sure we don't waste any of our time. This research call will only take a minute or two, and then I'm authorized to release a check to you for one hundred dollars plus gift certificates good for over four hundred dollars in name brand merchandise, such as coupons good for free gasoline at any service station. Now you had one child, according to the Research Department's notes?"

"Yes, that's true. A son."

"What we're interested in, Mrs. Barbar, is finding out if your son had any particular gestures or facial expressions as a toddler that would more or less make him stand out from other children. Gestures or facial expressions that were uniquely his, so to speak."

"Well, I...why on earth would you want to—"

"We're merchandising our new product, I believe I mentioned the name to you, Hot Tots? And we will have a very realistic painting of a baby's face on the cover of our product, and our Research Department has determined that quite a few grandparents buy food for their grandchildren, so we want to put an expression on that baby's face which will more or less match the expression on the face of the grandparents' own child when it was growing up. It's what's known in the baby food industry as a 'grabber.' Now did your own son, when he was a toddler, did he have any particular facial expressions, or any particular gestures or mannerisms, Mrs. Barbar?"

"Well, I don't...he used to giggle a lot."

"That's good. 'Giggle a lot.' Thank you. Any particular facial expressions though?"

"Not that I...he was a normal baby. He cooed a lot."

"That's great. That's great, Mrs. Barbar. Did he...did he, for instance..." Phillip spread his right hand over his face, closing his wet eyes, alone in the silence within, the black and crimson cathedral, the arched, potato-yellow ceilings. Did he really want to go down those dark stairs? "Did he, for instance, ever wave his arms around, asif they were on fire?"

"As if they were what?"

"On fire. As if they were burning. As if he were being consumed by flames. As if the flesh were sizzling and popping on his bones."

"I guess I don't remember."

"That's fine, Mrs. Barbar."

"Am I helping you?"

"I don't know."

Jill tapped the long side of the wooden spoon atop the rim of the dutch oven, beef stew bits falling back into the bubbles. "Phil, do you think we should call the police?"

"And tell them what? There's a big frog in our pond?"

"Well, a really big frog."

"They'd laugh at us."

"I'm worried about Peter."

Seated at the round table in the kitchen, he spread his arms apart. "It's ridiculous. It's just...stupid. No matter what happens, we'll deal with it. We are not going to be destroyed by something as stupid as that. Something that stupid has no power over us. We're too strong for that."

She made another downwards series of more timid-sounding taps. "I agree it's stupid, but it just seems like it's getting out of hand. I mean, what happens if it does show up on our doorway? What happens if it does start coming up the stairs?"

"It won't. It can't. It will never get into our lives. I won't let it. I swear to you."

Later, over vanilla ice cream eaten in bed in the blue darkness of television, Jill mentioned Audrey had asked her to spend the night at her place tomorrow.

"Why?"

"They're putting her dog to sleep in the morning. It'll be her first night alone, without him." She smiled quietly at him, big blue eyes sad.

Do you? Will you always?

"Okay."

"Really, Phil? Is it okay?"

"Yeah. It's fine."

From across the sheet she held his right hand in hers, palms moving over it as if molding it. "You know, you know maybe this weekend, or next weekend, we could have Audrey baby-sit Peter, and maybe the two of us could go away together somewhere. Maybe up to Canada, Nova Scotia or something."

Philip watched the molding. "That'd be nice."

The big one bellowed again from somewhere in the darkness below, bringing the outside in, to their hand-holding.

Phillip reached down into the wood-barred playpen, lifting Peter out, lowering him until his Pooh slippers touched the floor, then suddenly still holding onto him, bent awkwardly over, as the fat little legs folded downwards until the diapered ass was on the carpet.

Peter's googling interrogatories from way down there, little fingers bending over his own ear, made the apartment feel even more silent in her absence.

"You can crawl around. I have to make a phone call."

The eight o'clock roar of hunger sounded from outside, from the cold darkness.

Phillip punched the music of Audrey's number, looking around at the windows.

"Hello?"

"Audrey? This is Phil, Jill's husband."

"Oh! Hi."

"Is— by the way, I was very sorry to hear your dog had, needed to pass on."

"My...Yeah. Yeah, it's been rough."

"Is Jill there? May I speak with her?"

"Is...it's the craziest thing. She— we were making some brownies? And this weird thing happened with the mixer, it just like sprayed half-mixed brownie stuff all over her, so she's in the shower right now."

"Oh. Hmm. Well, I mean, could I hold on?"

"Well, I don't think that'd be a good idea."

"It wouldn't be—"

"—No, because she's going to be in there a long time. It got in her hair, and in her eyelashes and everything. It'll take a long time to get it out of her."

"Oh. Well. Would you ask her to call me, please."

"Oh, sure. Of course."

Phillip finished washing Peter in the kitchen sink, sitting his pudgy little ass beside the aluminum controls as he pressed a towel against his fat body, gently blotting the moisture, Peter's right arm waving in the air as if it were on fire.

"Why do you do that, huh? Does it feel good to do that?"

Peter stared wet-lipped at Phillip's mouth, then tracked up to his eyes like a drunk.

"I guess it must just feel good to do that."

And in the quiet of the kitchen, in the quiet of that moment,

Phillip finally saw something in Peter's face. Using his outstretched right index finger, he carefully swung his son's double chin left, then right.

Phillip wasn't a gorgeous-looking man, certainly not, but in that quiet moment he looked close enough to handsome. He reached down into the sink's warm water, pulled the plug. Looked sideways at the watchful Peter, smiled. "You have my nose."

Another bellow sounded from outside. Louder than the other ones had been.

Was it getting bigger? Or closer?

Peter scrunched up his bare shoulders at the sound, baby-idiot eyes rolling around the kitchen.

"It's okay. It's just a big, stupid frog."

Picking Peter up in his arms, holding him against his chest, dampness from Peter's body getting into the front of his shirt, he carried him into the living room, hand behind the small, sideways-switching head, supporting it.

Using an elbow, he pushed the drape in the wide picture window to one side, looking way down at the lawn.

No more snow, no moonlight out tonight, only starlight.

Was there something large on the lawn?

He leaned his face closer to the glass, until the tip of his nose bent, looking down.

That large splotch down there of darkness, was that just a treetop shadow? Was it moving? Or was that just the treetop waving in the high night breeze?

"Hi, it's Phillip again, Jill's husband."

"Hi."

"Umm...is Jill there?"

"No. She went to the store."

"She did? I was hoping she would call me back after she got out of the shower."

"She had to race to the store to get a pizza before they closed. And after that, on the way back, she's stopping at an all-night laundry to get her clothes cleaned. My clothes washer's broken.

All the screws fell out of the lid."

They only had one car. Jill used it to drive to Audrey's.

"What clothes are she wearing now?"

"Mine. Yeah."

"Won't the pizza get cold?"

"We'll just reheat it."

"Well, would you have her call me please? When she gets back?"

"Oh, sure."

Phillip sat on the living room carpet with Peter, whom he hadn't bothered to put in pajamas yet, gently tossing straws underhand at him. As Peter's short fingers grasped each one up from the carpet, he'd beat the paper-wrapped white lengths against the fabric as though the floor were a big drum.

"Your mom's at an all-night laundry. She'll be home this morning."

The phone rang.

A loud crash sounded at the bottom of the zig-zagged stairs.

He snatched up the phone. "Hello? Jill?"

The ear-filling sound of ether and melting snow.

"Jill? Hello?"

Another thunderous crash from down below.

Phillip let the black phone receiver lower from his ears.

A third hurtle against the door down there, snaps and strains of wood rising up the zig-zagged flights.

Putting the receiver down, he walked over to the front door in the kitchen, surprised in his strides at how his calves trembled.

He stood in front of the white paneled door as if it were a taller person, looking at the brass chain slid into place, square links in a sag from door to frame.

A fourth assault from below, and a sound a lot like the door down there bursting open, bouncing off the opposite wall.

But it couldn't be.

And then no more crashes, no more wood splintering, no more bellows.

Silence.

He reached his right hand up, forward. Slid the brass end of the chain along inside its track to where the groove widened. Lifted the end of the chain out, let it drop out of his fingers, fall to a heavy swing against the white-paneled door.

Lifting up on the knob, twisting it, he swung the door open.

The flight went down fourteen steps, where it zigged out of sight to the right, behind the corner of a plain wall.

He stood at the top, white appliances behind him, the light from the kitchen falling down across the fourteen steps, bringing them out of the lowering dimness like grey rising out of black.

Turn on the hallway light?

He looked at the simple wall switch, but didn't.

Listened.

First a coolness rose up to him, the coolness of the outside, of the night, a coolness touched with the damp of the outside, of the night, of a breach.

Then the smell came up, so faint at first he had to widen his nostrils to confirm it, but soon rank enough to fill the stairwell. A raw smell, like fish, like mud.

From way down below, from around the lowering zig-zags of the stairs, he heard something shift.

Shift again.

And something about the shifting sounds, the spaces between them, or maybe their increase, told him the sounds weren't random. Deep down in his mind he knew behind the sound wasn't wind, or settling, but intelligence.

Something started clumsily, widely making its wet way up the stairs.

Another man, maybe louder and more boastful, might have turned and run. He didn't. An earlier Phillip may have turned and run. He didn't.

He stayed framed in the doorway. "You want me to face you? I'll face you."

He stood there listening to the slow, laborious ascent up the stairs, around the lower zig-zags.

At last, after so long, he heard something big and cold round that last lower corner, fourteen steps below him in the darkness.

A wide shadow, grey and green, fell across the lower five steps leading up to Phillip.

And then, hugely, hungrily, the shadow hopped. Upwards.

Pulled itself forward. Upwards.

Seven steps below Phillip.

Six.

Then a roar came out, a roar so full of fury the panes in the window above the kitchen sink behind Phillip rattled.

A roar full of frustration.

Phillip reached to the wall, flicked the light switch up.

Down below him, six steps down, a wet, fat, massive grey-green bulk filled the stairs from wall to wall, its breathing sides riding up the walls, its eyes, far apart from each other, each above the wide body in its own round tumor, blinking slowly.

The mass tried to ascend further, but its own soft bulk held it wedged where it was.

On either wall, five feet up, webbed green feet flexed.

Phillip looked down at it. He shook his head. "So there you are. After so long. Know what? Fuck you."

The eyes swiveled coldly towards his voice. The wide mouth opened, big as a car trunk, and a tongue the color of internal organs snaked out, flying up the remaining stairs.

The forked tip of the tongue quested left, right, as if it had its own eyes, inches from Phillip's waist, like a dog at the end of its leash.

"Fuck you."

The big mouth retracted the tongue, swallowing it up, slow blinks from the rotating eyes.

"Fuck. You."

The tongue shot out and up again, crimson and black, straining, questing, turning purple, ready to curl around, but still three inches too short.

Philip laughed. "You can't reach me. You can try all you want, until your tongue falls out, but you'll never touch me.

"And furthermore," Phillip said, and he was crying by now, but a good cry, a cry that indicates a lot of things, but not sorrow, "I'm not going to call Audrey's house anymore tonight. I'm

going to wait for my wife to come home in the morning, we're going to play with my son, and then we're going to kill you."

He turned around, wet-faced, nodding at Peter. Nodding at his son.

Peter toddled forward, reaching his small, pudgy hand down as he ran, and like a little pig touched his tiny balls.

Stopped in front of Phillip.

Touched his balls again.

Phillip backed up in horror.

The tongue whipped around his waist, just above his belt.

Before he could react, before his almost-handsome face could shift from the expression of joyful release, the tongue whisked him backwards in the air, whisked him down those dark stairs.

Allan Peterson

Thaw

The last freeze came and went,
the spider survived.
New leaves paid back light
their insurmountable debt,
planes came and went from Italy like swans.
I see her photo and know she has skin
the sun would damage if she stayed
and saw last night the red dishes
she kept in the dog's eyes.
Now with her last husband gone
she could say those longings
drag out those lovers from their watch pockets
take down their trousers.
Much has changed.
A dove in Indonesia has put out three albums,
pelicans touch down planets as they glide,
pale marble has enlivened her skin.
Of her visit to Florence she said
I don't think I've ever seen so many nude men.

Geri Radacsi

Counter Talk

A cool, dependable raillery
wafts in on schedule like sunrise
at the Elvis Cafe where the special is blackened
potatoes, no blemish the grillman can't sizzle out.

Roxy, waitress/owner/spent bombshell,
tucks a cigarette in the scarlet turn of a smile,
serves bagels and blasphemy to the everyday
postman and laborer, who lean

on a counter glazed like a slick of red bravura.
Before the bad lines of credit get delivered,
before the day's heavy machinery rackets,
they swallow Roxy's high-energy sass.

The King—postered in slim whites, fake gems and metal dots—
swivels
all the walls, forever loving tender and all shook up,
He melts Roxy, momentarily:
"The fifties—best time of my life."

Chromium yellow tiles beat beneath her feet.
A gray lump of rag in hand,
Roxy scrubs as if she could slip
through the counter's looking glass...

and unlock wounds of loneliness disguised
under wide skirts embroidered
with bouncy poodles. She wore a tiara of histrionics
on the stage set she called home.

Polite schoolgirls—walking all the allowable ways

in town past run-down brickwork, whistles and smokestacks,
vapor trails from piecemeal garages—
smelled oil not rainbows.

So what if—after first blood left its permanent imprint,
she made missteps in wanting
to be warm and held and human,
her lovers all stumbling south, their names lost in the barrens.

So what. She still heard the music to be heard—
not from the slow, bovine power of lowing,
but overblown notes of rock and roll
she clutched in fistfuls.

Trey Harrison

Hymns

It was decades before any of us discovered that Patricia had broken her back that summer when she and George Pat snuck in and, with Kak watching, got two of Wallace's mules to ride, the mules Wallace was always so mean to, the mules he used to beat with broomhandles when he'd plow, so that when that old mule felt Patricia pull back against the reins, and it took the measure of her insignificant weight upon its back, it just said enough, said no, and Kak, watching from the stump-and-wire fence called out let up let up because that mule just lowered its head and cut out across Wallace's pasture, running just like a dog all the way down to where the beehives were; but Patricia would not let up, and kept pulling harder against the reins. —It wasn't until recently, when she went up to Memphis to see the V.A. doctor about her osteoarthritis; when he looked at the x-ray of her back and said, "you've got a real bad place here."— That was the same summer that the wind-ghost chose Kak, leaving George Pat behind, perhaps suspecting that he would get picked up by the Dixie Division three years later, picked for the Pacific instead. Patricia hadn't even fallen off; George Pat got ahold of the reins before that could happen, but the ride alone must have been enough to do it because she went right then right straight to her mother's house, and didn't come out again for at least a month...

Pearl stood above the porcelain of the sink, working the knife both ways along the corn: first, with the blade, removing the tops of the kernels, sliding them off into a bucket, then taking the blunt edge down, creaming what remained against the cob, filling masonjarsful so that there would be corn to fry that coming winter on into spring. George Pat had been bringing in crates full of ripe ears all morning (John was at the factory); they were stacked, silks dangling through the

slats, by the door. When he'd finished, George Pat took Kak and some poles down to Wallace's pond; Pearl watched them disappear beyond the fence near the white, chest-of-drawer beehives and on over the treeless, meadow hill, her view obscured by the bushlimbs of a cedar, one that had been too small for anyone to notice when John and his brothers built the house, but which now grew flat against the side, expanding its limbs in a half circle, half covering the kitchen window.

Patricia lay in the next room. In the mornings since her mule ride, John and George Pat had pulled her heavy bed across the slatted floor into the living room so that Pearl could keep an eye on her through the wide doorway into the kitchen. Ma Henry, Pearl's mother, was stooped, sitting atop a turned-over corn crate and working with her blade to empty out another one. Empty, her hands would shake (so that they sometimes frightened Patricia when her grandmother would approach her, unable to move from her mattress, the old woman's fingers like insistent but still skittish snakes "Let's take a look at that back of yours," maybe while she was tending to the makeshift, pie-dish bedpan, or wiping the girl's beaded-over forehead with a mercifully moist rag), but with knife and cob they were steady, slicing then creaming, rhythm-tearing the husks and picking stray silk from between the tight rows of yellow and white kernels without moving from her upturned crate, faster even than Pearl could, wearing that same bonnet (the bonnet that Patricia would remember made her grandmother *older* than anyone else she knew), the one she wore when she'd been driven by her husband (whom she called Mister, he being thirty years old and a widower already, and she just thirteen at the time) in a wagon, an uncovered wagon, out to the spot where he built the house that Pearl was soon born into, and Wallace a year later (the house Patricia knew only as being full of wasps and snakes, and cedars that grew up between the boards) —the same bonnet she wore the day she killed that nigger man who came into that same house looking for something that

was his to begin with, killed him with a shotgun pistol while Mister Henry was gone a week to Pontotoc. Her hands were all rhythm with cob and blade; Pearl could not keep up.

Patricia watched her grandmother through the wide doorway (From where she lay she could not see Pearl at the sink), thinking thoughts brought on by the pain, almost but not quite wishing the old woman dead and out of her mother's house (thoughts Patricia would remember with an admittedly illogical guilt when Ma Henry finally did pass). They were thoughts of frustration, of confinement, like wanting to walk up to the old woman (and look her in the eye: Ma Henry was in fact the same height as Patricia now) and asking why'd you have to shoot that nigger man, even though she knew that her mother would slap her into the middle of next week before she'd spoken the last word of it. Pearl had been there, had seen the whole thing and Wallace too, while their father was away in Pontotoc. Mainly though, Patricia thought of Kak, Kak who was only a year older, the daughter of Pearl's sister Kathleen who'd left Houlka, taking her husband and only infant with her to Memphis, getting him a job with a distant cousin and setting her up in the Memphis schools, all while going to college at night, so all that Kak knew of the country she'd heard from Kathleen or her father, or seen only at Christmas and Thanksgiving. Kak, who'd been sent down that summer to live with Pearl and get along with Patricia and George Pat. Kak, who should've ridden Wallace's mules with them, and might have gotten on that old one who'd had enough instead of Patricia, who might have had HER back broken, who should've ridden the mules but couldn't ride, or wasn't supposed to: Patricia wasn't sure which, though she'd seen Pearl ("You'll need to know this soon enough, Patricia.") show Kak the old white sheet behind the other linens in the closet —Not at all, Kak said, how they do this in Memphis— show her how to tear it, how much to tear. So Kak did not ride; she was just standing by the fence, calling let up let up...

The wind raked the cedar across the glass. Beyond the chickenyard and on past the beehives to Wallace's pasture

she could see individual breezes playing, leaving their frantic imprints in the gone-to-seed grass that would soon be cut and baled, pressing themselves into the field like the dive and run of ghosts above a wide, flat pond. There were many of them, small and sudden and never quite agreeing on which direction they should blow. Pearl slacked off a moment from her cutting and scraping, mesmerized, wishing that Patricia could come to the window and see. Where the wind would part the limbs enough for her to see off to the right, she became aware of a palpable darkness.

"George Pat had better get Kak back here."

Ma Henry had now gained a whole crate on Pearl, and was struggling to take the next one from the stack. She had the osteo-arthritis, though none of us knew it then. We just knew that she was getting older, shorter, getting stooped-over.

"Get yourself out of that bed and come help me with this crate." Ma Henry pointed with one of those shaky fingers at Patricia. (Patricia did not know why Ma Henry had shot that man, and if she'd heard that he was in that house Mister Henry built looking for something that was his to begin with, then she OVERheard it, overheard things when she should have been asleep—the walls were so thin—overheard things she couldn't or shouldn't—she wasn't sure which—understand, things that Pearl would only talk about with Wallace, making their mother's voice: "You'd better not set foot in this house," and then the nigger man: "I'm coming, I'm coming on in." She heard how—of course—the constable came only once, to take away the body, and how he asked no questions, how he hadn't needed to.) Patricia didn't say a word to Ma Henry, didn't bat an eye. She just started letting hot tears roll down to her pillow, and wriggled her toes frantically against her sheets (it was the only movement she could stand to make, as we came to find out).

Pearl dropped corn and blade into the sink, walking over to her mother. "You leave her be. She's hurt." She grabbed the loaded crate at both ends, drawing it up to her chest and blowing from her face a black strand of hair that had escaped

from her bun (Pearl always kept her hair black, but the first time Patricia visited her in the nursing home in Tupelo she'd given it up, her white roots showing for inches. After that and for every couple of months until the end Patricia would come down and dye it for her.) She moved the crate into position for her mother to go to work, adding, "Storm's coming, you'd better go call George Pat."

—The V.A. doctor, hearing about all this, told Patricia, decades later, that if she'd lifted that crate she'd most likely have been paralyzed.—

Ma Henry replied that the boy was smart enough to come in from the rain himself, and so the cutting and creaming continued, Pearl looking up more and more carefully to the pasture wind-ghosts as they grew more insistent; she strained to see over the meadow hill, hoping to spot the poles first, then George's head, then Kak's, trailing behind. The thunder came now, was coming faster; she paid little attention to the blade in her hands, working it by feel, by rote against the cob.

Two things happened simultaneously: Pearl saw the lightning through her half-hid window, saw it fork midway between the cauldron-cloud and Wallace's field, saw that it was green, green as the cornhusks. And a window in the living room was shattered by something coming across the field, across the chicken yard and on through the glass, into the room where Patricia lay, coming in with shards and whistles and the seed-tops of hay, and the wind now whipped her hair from the pillow into her eyes. She began to moan; her toes pinched and released the sheet.

Pearl looked outside one last time. There was no rain. The wind ghosts swooped more rapidly than ever, and no poles came hurrying over Wallace's hill. Her window was now shaking against its frame, wanting to come out. She ran to the door, where Ma Henry stood, hunchbacked, saying, "Storm cellar...storm cellar," but not moving, the carriage of her expressions making it clear that any decisions, any actions would have to come from Pearl, who responded with a

hushed, "Patricia," a half-look through the wide doorway to where the girl's toes twitched beneath the sheets. She tried the door, but could not force it open. The wind had fastened it against her. Kak and George Pat are at the pond. John is at the factory. She cannot open the door. Patricia is in the bed. She cannot open the door.

—"No stairs," the V.A. doctor told Patricia, decades later. Not even to get to Sunday school. "You can put off those good deeds."

"For a few weeks," he said. "Forever again," he meant.—

Jeff Knorr

Taking Notes On Storytelling

The tractor down the road is stopped, cold.
It has been here empty for two days now.
My son and I break from my work
and go out in the cold in his wagon.
He bellows, tractor, as we come close.
Wide-eyed and pleased as a colt
in an open, spring pasture,
he drives his eyes over the machine.
He steals grace from the engine,
from fat tires caked with mud and hay.
We bounce down the road,
so he looks over his shoulder, smiles,
and begins the unintelligible story of tractors
while tracing the veins of a single maple leaf
flaming red in his hands.

Fishing Deep Sky

One day we will both
stand knee-deep in the river.
But that is long ahead of today,
and it's hot, so I ease out of
the pushing current pulling itself
to the mouth and lean on an oak,
settle into grass and shade.

Wild horses graze the far bank,
flanks strong as alder. I wonder
how we've all wound up here,
how time made your world and mine
slam together, how I am your father.

So, I sit and watch stones
turn on the bottom, leaves and bark drift.
Somewhere they'll settle, fall into quiet,
become where they are
in this drawing of rivers moving from mountain
to ocean to sky to ground
coming together making circles.

But I wonder not at just how
I became your father, how I hold you,
teach you to speak, to play in water
while wetting down tomatoes.
I wonder when we knew each other,
when our lives crossed and we first
ran up alongside each other flying wing to wing
the way spirits press into the blue heat of days,
into nights, hoping with uncertainty to be together.
The way two of these horses must race over prairies

past empty houses and water troughs searching.
I feel this point to point gravity of heart
bouncing off dark night sky
as if when I stand outside I see you
blaze out of constellations.

But in the long and short of it
I sit here in oak shade and know
years ahead which stretch like miles
under the hooves of these grazing horses
we'll both be knee deep in this river.
Maybe you tying my flies
because I can't see so well,
your hand pushed into my back
and the river running past us,
your feet anchored to the earth.

Richard Alan Bunch

First Fish

Circular to the last, you can retrieve the first.
Imagine lips parted as though to resort to chemistry

As you troll a virgin river without end.
The lines at first seem endless. Then other tests

At twenty, fifty, and eighty, each of them new catches
On each line. Matters soon taste all-too-human, assume

A visible diction—*bass*, *pike*, *sunfish*—shades of an ancient name.
Imperceptibly it becomes harder to snag that first one.

You can retrieve simplicity, the way your first hook,
Hallowed by the everyday, is struck with new luster.

Imagine trolling the river of those departed. How tunnels
At both ends light, hook of that eye first opening.

David Starkey

The Last Butterfly of the Year

The dog and I sniff the autumn air
as we trot along the forest preserve trail.
I'm remembering old girlfriends
and childhood fishing trips; I suspect
he's merely smelling for a place to pee.
The fields of goldenrod are brown,
the sycamore leaves yellow and falling,
the sumac blood-red. I quicken my pace,
suddenly anxious, knowing the blue sky
will be hidden in a week or two by months
of clouds.

On the way home, traffic's tied up
by an accident. A pumpkin truck
has overturned, spilling pumpkins across
the intersection. It looks like ground
zero after a gang of Halloween
vandals has stormed through: the pulpy fruit squashed,
orange-yellow rinds and clumps of seeds
strewn everywhere. On the sidewalk, a teenage boy
in flannel shirt and jeans sits rocking,
head in hands. Clearly, this is the worst thing
that has ever happened to him.

Back
in the woods, a chipmunk scrambles into its hole.
The last butterfly of the year lifts
into the cold wind and may, or may not,
alight on this earth again.

Barbara F. Lefcowitz

Root Meanings

The winter of 19— was so brutal that in a last frantic effort to keep warm, words began to retreat to their root meanings. Not just the words themselves—that would have been a relatively minor problem given the richness of our language—but the objects they represent.

I first became aware of the situation shortly after telling the milkman to cancel my delivery. Why bother if the milk froze solid in that brief interval between the milkman' s truck and my porch, sometimes cracking the ice-coated glass of its bottle? My poor cat Melissa would have to make do with powdered cream. Within minutes a lattice appeared in the space previously claimed by the milk bottle. Yes, a lattice, sometimes known as a trellis. The kind intended to support climbing roses. White, its carved wood occasionally visible despite snow; the gaps between its criss-crossed slats perfectly even despite their rapidly growing beards of icicles. It brought to mind my grandmother's lattice, so brimming with big bloody roses that its image flashed clearly before me despite my recent troubles with amnesia.

My neighbors, Drs. Ulfred and Margaret Schlauss, had temporarily moved in with me and Melissa because my flat was slightly warmer, given its southern exposure. Both Ulfred and Margaret are linguistic archeologists, and both caught on at once: the culprit, they agreed, was the word cancel, an innocuous sounding word if ever there was one. Did I not realize that the word cancel derived from the Latin *cancelli*: crossed lines, grating, lattice-work?

"Ach, Howard, is it true you didn't know that?" Margaret asked. It was true; my work as a botanical statistician demanded expertise with numbers, not words. Nor with actual flowers, let alone lattices. Because I was ashamed of my disorder, I refrained from telling them about my amnesia though it would have provided a good enough excuse.

Anxious to hear more, I offered hot tea, which Ulfred gratefully accepted, given the frigid weather, but Margaret declined because ordinary tea, contrary to its reputation, only made her catarrh worse. She preferred Peruvian tea, the sort brewed from coca leaves. Lucky woman, for the moment I poured Ulfred's tea into one of my prized blue porcelain cups it spilled in every direction, scalding my neighbor's flannel trousers. The cup itself simply disappeared, replaced by a small pig.

I must admit the pig looked more stunned to find himself atop my kitchen table than I did when he arrived as if *ex nihilo*, knocking over a bowl of bread pudding in the process. Smiling bravely despite his pain, Ulfred said immediately that the problem had to be the word porcelain. Did I not realize that it derived from the Italian *porcellana*, a purple fish whose shell is curved like a pig's back, the fish's name a derivative of the Latin *porcus* or pig?

Ignoring my second confession of ignorance, Ulfred announced that we were on the brink of the most serious linguistic crisis since Babel. No, Margaret said, pounding her mittened fists on the table, "Since the first person on earth uttered a sound and then repeated it, thus establishing the first word." They exchanged scowls. I myself said that if the situation were not soon brought under control, all communication would cease. Both Ulfred and Margaret laughed at the obviousness of my remark and the piglet squealed, which in turn elicited a viciously long hiss from Melissa. It was at that moment that the entire roof simply disappeared.

Literally my flat had been transformed into a pig sty. "Roof," Margaret explained, shivering despite three shawls and numerous thick sweaters: the word roof had returned to its most primitive Anglo-Saxon root, *hrof*, cabin or shed. And by extension the Welsh *craw*, pig sty.

"Don't jump to conclusions," her husband admonished, shaking a finger at her. "What about the Icelandic *hrof*? It just meant shed. They didn't have any pigs in Iceland when the word was invented."

"Who says so?"

"I say so. And you've also forgotten the Irish *crou.*"

"*Crou* you."

I hated to hear my neighbors bicker, so as I struggled with sheets, blankets, newsprint, and stray pieces of wood, anything at all to substitute for the missing roof. I asked if finding the precise root of a word might help eventually to rescue it, pull it up so to speak. Both Ulfred and Margaret thought the possibility worth pondering and Ulfred even suggested maybe it would be possible to shift a word to one of its less threatening roots. Alas, his efforts to bring such about did not in the least help restore what once had been my sturdy roof, whose tiles I had laid in place by hand over a period of three years. If anything, we were blasted by the coldest wind so far; even Melissa and the piglet huddled together. Piglets, I should say. Plus a large sow. Yes, my flat had indeed become a pig sty.

To keep warm and keep our distance from the pigs, we moved as close to the walls as we could. At least they were strong enough to withstand even the most tempestuous snow storms. Margaret said I need not worry about the walls: none of the word's roots would endanger us, not the Anglo Saxon *weall,* rampart or stake, or the Latin *uallus,* literally a protection.

"Ah, my dear, but you forget the link with the Old Irish *fal,* a hedge," Ulfred said.

"So? Even a hedge can protect."

"But not when it's so cold the air's a block of ice." I had just managed to stretch a thick blanket where once there were my deep red roof tiles but feared it was not thick enough to prevent the remains of the cracked ceiling from crashing down on us. So I tried to cover the ceiling as well with my last blanket, stretch it tautly in place with large brass nails, and for reinforcement pulling the blanket's border over the top of the walls. All went well until I felt the tickle of a leaf. A sharply pointed leaf. Then more and more such leaves, spreading so rapidly I barely had time to watch my walls disappear, along with my pictures, my oval mirror, my statistical charts, everything once attached to them, including all of the wallpaper's stripes.

Hedges. Neatly trimmed hedges like those of a formal En-

glish garden. Hedges all around us. With so many gaps between their branches and leaves the wind rushed in with such alacrity the crates of pig food slid across the floor and the skin of the pigs themselves froze, hairs protruding in stiff little tufts.

At least we still had my wood-burning stove to keep us warm. And Ulfred reassured me that if the stove should also retreat to its roots, the consequences would, for once, be to our benefit. Why? Because the root of the word stove, *extufa*, referred not merely to something we expect to find in a room, but to a room itself: a particular room set aside for taking a steam bath and by the 16th century to any room heated by a furnace. As if in obedience to Ulfred's words, the stove disappeared a few minutes later; to my delight, I realized that once more I had a room, complete with ceiling, floor, and—most important—walls. No more hedges. And a considerably diminished chill, enough so Margaret felt warm enough to remove one of her shawls. So great was our relief that we barely noticed when the bread pudding gave way first to lumps that resembled those ugly wens that occasionally disfigure a face, then disappeared completely from the bowl, replaced by a short man with an enormous paunch.

"Ah yes," Ulfred sighed, "the pudding has chosen to retreat to the Westphalian *puddek* and Gaelic *putac*. Both refer to swollen bellies or what we call paunch. Especially if the swelling is caused by an excessive intake of alcohol."

"Chosen?" I asked. Did the words actually possess enough power to discriminate between various roots and select the one most appealing? My question led to a heated discussion of the ancient conflict between fate and free will, Ulfred defending the power of the will, Margaret and I more inclined to credit fate. We were on the threshold of a new interpretation of the Oedipus myth, one that melded Freud with Calvinism and quantum mechanics—the latter my contribution—when the short paunchy man broke in by announcing that his name was Durril. And he'd appreciate it if we could get him some beer, preferably a lager. Explaining that we had no beer, I offered him tea but withdrew

the offer when I recalled the fate of my blue porcelain cup. Anxious to resume the discussion of fate and free will, I pointed Durril towards the pigs. Yes, my new room still contained a pig sty though now it occupied only a small area. But large enough to store a hefty supply of pig food. Unfortunately, Durril assumed I meant he could slaughter the pigs and eat them rather than partake of their slop. You can imagine the squeals and cries of pain, the tussle that culminated in the retreat of all my spoons to chips of wood and my Turkish rug to flocks of hair. He managed to slaughter only one pig, rapidly consuming its flesh to the bone.

Acute solemnity making her long face appear even longer, Margaret expressed her fear that the rules of the game were changing in a drastic way: no longer were words retreating to their roots in order to keep warm but to escape from the least unpleasantness. "Like most people these days. No tolerance for the slightest pain. So what do they do? Reach for the nearest drug. Anything to preserve the illusion of total happiness."

"Yes," Ulfred said. "In our day we wouldn't even think of such—such—evasions." Then he turned to me and said in a voice grave as a sermon that he, too, was now afraid. The situation could at any moment get so out of control words might disappear capriciously, to the point where all possibilities of communication were annihilated.

Durril began to laugh. Why worry about communication? All that mattered was food and drink and pretty soon the pigs would make more pigs...Ulfred was so disgusted he told Durril that the origin of his name was the gypsy word for a gooseberry. But Durril only laughed harder. "Just because you got some fancy degrees don't mean you know a thing. So happens my old lady weren't no gypsy. She came from one of the richest families in Scotland and my old man was English. They named me for my uncle, who was the king's doorkeeper. So there."

"Then they didn't know how to spell," Margaret said. "Because everyone knows the king's doorkeeper is spelled D-u-r-e-l-l— or with an 'e' at the end if he's French."

"You calling me a liar, lady?"

Before Margaret could answer we all began to scratch ourselves. Something was making us itch, the burning sort of itch you get from poison sumac. At the same time we began to feel much warmer.

"Of course. I knew all along things would change for the better," Ulfred said.

"You did? Just minutes ago you were talking like it was the end of the world."

"Believe me. Now I speak the truth."

"Bullshit."

Scratching his arms furiously, Ulfred turned to me and said how wicked it was that after forty years of marriage his wife still didn't trust or respect him. To avoid another marital brabble, I asked him why he thought things were changing for the better.

"Because the word freeze is gone. Straight back to its Teutonic root, *freusan*, which is related according to the laws of Gleichenheim's Great Vowel and Consonant Shift to the Latin *prurire*, to itch, originally to burn. If you don't believe me look up the Sanskrit *plosha*—"

"Go look it up yourself," Margaret said. "If you can find any of our books...I guess your feeble mind has forgotten how all of them turned into beech trees when this nonsense first began."

Durril laughed again. "So you don't got no more books! That's really rich. Now you're no smarter than me and it don't matter how my old lady spelled my name."

It was true. The retreat of coldness, that is. Not completely but enough to convince us the worst was over. Already I could see through the window that the clouds had retreated to their roots and become rocks and hills, and I could hear that the once frigid winds had become horns, joining to create a plaintive melody. Even Melissa must have realized what was happening, the strands of her fur no longer frosty tufts but warm and silky.

I wondered if any of the lost objects would return, like that blue porcelain cup. Logically, then, the pigs would be gone; likewise Durril and the flocks of hair that had replaced my rug. Such an intriguing possibility was beyond the capacity of my limited brain power, so of course I would consult Ulfred and

Margaret. To my astonishment, both had vanished. Margaret? Ulfred?

Had they perhaps returned to their own flat now that the cold had abated? I started to dial their phone number when I noticed a large but gentle white wolf gnawing on the phone cord. The wolf was trying to say something but all I could make out was the word "name." It wasn't until I noticed a fat round gooseberry smack in the middle of my table that I realized what had happened: names themselves were reverting to their roots, not just words. Sure enough, Durril was gone, Durril the gypsy gooseberry. I popped the berry into my mouth but it was so sour I tossed it to the pigs, one of which swallowed it whole.

Just why names were disappearing I couldn't figure...Thank god, my parents had the good sense to name me Howard. Though I knew almost nothing about derivations, I remembered my mother telling me that Howard meant watchman, he who guards and observes. And slowly I began to remember a book she kept by her bedside, *The Book of Names.* Given their eleven kids, always she and my father had to scrounge around for names...

Yes, it all came back. Like a root in reverse, rising from its earthy origin to the fresh air above. Indeed, so many memories began to return I was convinced my amnesia was cured—as mysteriously as it had begun. And I realized I had much to be thankful for. At least Ulfred had become a friendly, peaceful wolf; what if his name had been Ulger, a sporting wolf, or Ulrich, the supremely powerful wolf, or, god forbid, Adolph? True, I didn't know what to do with the pearl that had once been Margaret. Perhaps I'd have it set in a ring to surprise her when she emerged from her root?

But I couldn't bear to see my poor Melissa buzzing around the room as if in pursuit of pollen. If only I'd named her Yolanda or Corrinna. The moment she uprooted herself from Melissa, the Greek word for bee, I'd change her name.

Until that time I'd busy myself unnaming everything I could, giving objects names so new they could not possibly put down roots. Whatever sounded good to me... The prospect was exhila-

rating, much like a baby must feel when he or she begins to coo. Or the god of names. Sheladon. Nuala. Maigdhilla. Klaundra... If nobody understood me—well, that would be their problem. My only fear is that I'd create a name that had roots in some archaic language only an Ulfred or Margaret would know; surely the wolf and pearl would be no help.

Of course, nothing worthwhile is without risk. Perhaps even nothing not worthwhile. Right? So let me start with you, dear reader, no matter what your gender or ethnicity. I hereby christen you Phlumeriannash. Don't worry, it's all stem and leaves, no roots. If you don't believe me, just look it up in the nearest etymological dictionary.

Wait—I've got a better idea. I hereby name you Root. A word without roots, scarcely changed from its Old Norse version, *rot.* At least I'm almost positive that's what I learned long ago in my first botany class. Naturally, I won't know definitely until Ulfred and Margaret return. That might be a long way off. But return they will, I am sure. Even if that means Durril, too, will return. Until then I'll write down all my resurrected memories and dream about seeing my blue porcelain cup once more. And—it goes without saying—my poor Melissa. As I said before, I have much to be thankful for.

Jane Varley

Mayonnaise

Polonaise 1. an elaborate overdress with a short-sleeved fitted waist and a draped cutaway overskirt. 2. a) a stately Polish processional dance popular in 19th-century Europe; b) music for this dance in moderate 3/4 time.

We crowded in
to the long narrow tavern,
practically Minnesotan ourselves
as we threw elbows to earn
space for our parkas.
An old man dusted the snare,
the accordion pumped near the dance floor,
and when we danced we didn't care
how we looked near the man
in the polka dot shirt
dancing, yes, the polka,
whirling a breeze into his wife's skirt
as he had been doing forever.
We acted like we owned the place,
stalking the long bar rail
for conversation. We talked about taste
with a gay man and his lover
and pondered vermouth with
the bartender. The bouncer slammed
the back door shut, sift-
ing more people and cold air through.
The waitress was old
and commanded respect.
She wore a feathery broach on her shoulder.

Outside on the band's break
we lit a smoke and breathed it in

admiring the red script blinking
over the door of the tavern:
"Nye's Polonaise."
You're a poet, make it rhyme,
said Jim, who had one martini
too many and believed that I'm
able to make up words on the spot.
Polonaise? a rhyming phrase?
We argue the possibilities
as the long red word blazed
in neon above us.
It's not easy nowadays,
I told him,
unless you paraphrase:
In the kitchen they wipe spread
on pieces of white bread
as we dance the night away.

Jeanne Emmons

Artemis Rising

The shadows have the look
of something drained out of the trees
and slowly soaking into the pavement.
The poplars lighten with the loss of it
and rise up luminous and pure, leaving
their flat shades to drag behind.
In the west the face of the sun fattens
and flushes, a bright pomegranate ripening.
The full moon in the east glances up
and rouses herself, sheer and pale
as the cooling skin of scalded milk,
a film like a hymen. Faintly she stares,
and they face off, the hot pondering sun,
and the cold, thin membrane of moon.
Between them, jet trails cross the sky
back and forth, straight and arced,
like a strung bow. And the moon begins
to brighten to a hard, opaque white,
a polished platinum. The shadows
are so deeply absorbed, they disappear
into the great shade of the earth itself,
while the moon comes up and comes up
above the blended bars of lavender and rose.
She comes up while the sun's last rays
streak horizontal and redden the ribs
of the jet trails and the tops of the trees,
and the leaves droop with light like beeswax melting.
Then the moon gathers up all light into herself
until all else is black in the valley of evening,
so that I hold to her alone. And she grows
hard and tight as a full breast, and I, infantile,
hold on and hold on, until my mind empties

and opens, and onto its unruffled plain
she steals, unstops herself, and sends these
rippling figments flying, these streams
of dreamlight, flooding the dim meadows.

Ron McFarland

*A Visit from Sharon Olds**

March madness in 1998 brought to the Palouse country of Idaho and Washington an unexpected spate of pleasant weather, a generous dose of basketball, and Sharon Olds. Those fortunate enough to be included in her poetry writing workshop were blown away like so many kites snapping their strings. Many in the workshop, along with some of us on the sidelines, were enraptured by Olds's two-hour craft lecture, which was open to the public, and by her reading the next night.

"No one knows what poetry is," Olds said when the subject came up at the start of her craft lecture (or "dialogue," which is probably the more appropriate term). Perhaps, she suggested, the origins of poetry are in prayers for survival, for food, or uttered out of fear. But when in any language, in any circumstance, people are expressing most intensely what they care about, their speech turns rhythmic and poetry happens. I think that will hold up as a reliable paraphrase. "Today there are many poetries," Olds said during her conversation with an audience of fifty or so students and teachers, and she repeated that observation when she startled some members of the audience of several hundred at her reading by stopping in mid-program to ask for questions. These she fielded deftly and gracefully, and then she resumed her reading.

How does poetry differ from prose? Simply that the poet writes by line: the poet willfully breaks into line on the page. Olds wrote at first scarcely lifting her pen, "writing sentences that broke," not making lines that looked like those in most of the poems she had read, or as in the standard four-stress quatrains of the hymnals she had known as a girl, but lines that looked "odd."

Twenty-five years ago she took a poetry appreciation class from Muriel Rukeyser, and that may have turned her from a person who wrote poems occasionally into a poet. We all write

poems occasionally, of course, but we don't always put them on paper. Many of our best poems get written on the wind and are never spoken aloud. Perhaps our very best poems never even acquire words. (Somewhere in this paragraph, I have faded from Sharon Olds's literal phrasing, but I think the spirit of her statement is intact.)

Twenty or so years ago, Olds observed, there did not seem to be that many poems around about being a wife and mother, and she realized her subject matter was different, and she needed to revise. Now, she said, she tries not to put anything down on paper she is sure will be wrong. As simple and self-evident as that statement might appear, I suspect it lies at the heart of all serious poems—the pondering before placing the word. She walks away, and if the poem pulls her back, then the ending may not be right; she may have said something that was not true. If she likes it well enough, she types it (on an old manual machine, not on a word processor or even on a Selectric). How does she revise? She takes out what the poem doesn't mean and leaves in all the rest. Mostly, she said both at the craft talk and at the reading, she deletes "adjectives and self-pity."

Olds accumulates poems for several years before admitting them into a book, so her recent title, *The Wellspring*, which was published in 1996, includes primarily poems written around 1986. Someone asked about the poem "having a life of its own," and Olds spoke of the need to let the psyche drift, to avoid an overt act of the will. She prefers that the poem be let free to find its own way: "I don't want my poem to have to carry my packages home for me."

The distance between the character or personality of the poet and the first-person (I) of the poem was defined and argued rigorously by the New Critics between the 1930s and the 1960s, and Olds is grateful for that, preferring to call the "I" of her poems "the speaker" because, of course, the two are not identical, and it gives her a feeling of greater freedom to have that distance between herself and the fabricated character who appears as "I" in her poems. About fifteen years ago Olds took what she refers to as a "vow of silence" when it comes to talking about her

family and herself as they appear in her poems. She does not consider herself a Confessional poet (reviewers have been quick to apply that label to her) because she believes the word implies sin and acts of confession and contrition, and it seems to imply the Roman Catholic confession booth. Olds regards herself as "a good Puritan."

When someone called her "courageous" for writing what has been described as "poems of the body," Olds was delighted, because she sees herself as a "fearful, cowardly, phobic person." But there is a fearlessness to her poems, I think, and sometimes even a ferocity.

She took many names and identities out of her poems in later printings, Olds said, but she needed the actual name in order to write the poems in the first place. There were times when she wished she had written under a pseudonym. She has rewritten several poems from her first book, *Satan Says* (1980), but her publishers prefer that she does not read the new versions publicly.

"I do not regret my long apprenticeship to fixed forms," Olds said during the craft lecture. But when she realized she was writing too much in quatrains, she intentionally distorted line and stanza. Nearly all of the poems in her most recent books look the same on the page: flush left margin without stanza breaks (not capitalized, except where required in conventional prose); frequently "forced" enjambment (in the mode of the breath-line poets like Denise Levertov); frequent use of comma splices. She likes the effect of a list of nouns (and other high-impact words) down the left-hand margin. When she uses an end-stopped line, Olds says, "it really means something."

If one reads about the State of Poetry in the U.S. today (although one should probably avoid doing so for various reasons), one will find such laments as "Who Killed Poetry?" and "After the Death of Poetry" and "The American Poetry Wax Museum." But when was poetry *ever* "alive and well" in America? One thinks of the 19th century as poetry' s hey-day in Europe, when a poet like Byron could sell 10,000 copies of the long narrative poem, *The Corsair*, on the first day of publication

(in 1814, when the population of Great Britain was about 16 million) or when Tennyson could crow over selling 60,000 copies of *In Memoriam* (with Queen Victoria's blessing) in a year (1850), but in the United States the major poet was Longfellow, and his *Evangeline*, the first substantial long poem by an American poet on an American subject, sold just 2,000 copies the first year (1847) and took ten years to sell 36,000—and Longfellow was delighted. (The population of the U.S. in 1850 was about 23 million.) Meanwhile, some three years later, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold more than 300,000 copies in its first year and helped start a war to boot. We Americans aren't much, really, when it comes to poetry. We are an oddly prosaic people, perhaps too practical and down-to-earth for our own good.

Sharon Olds insists there is "much wonderful poetry being written now," and she celebrates that by reading a few poems by other writers at her readings. She particularly enjoys opening with a poem or two by another poet, starting her Moscow reading with Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" and Lucille Clifton's "Wishes for Sons." She inserted a few poems from an anthology by at-risk children in New York City, where she presently chairs the MFA program at NYU. She began reading from her own work with her signature poem, "The Missing Boy" (from *The Dead and the Living*, 1984), and she read such favorites as the broadly comical "Topography" and "The Transformed Boy" before concluding with half a dozen new poems not yet published in book form, including the first draft of "The Paper World," which she wrote for her workshop at the University of Idaho and which is published for the first time in this issue of *Fugue*.

Like her students, she wrote three poems during the three days she conducted the intense sessions. They work-shopped three poems not by circulating copies, which is the usual method, but by reading them aloud and making impromptu comments that stressed what was effective. Olds suggested that they did not have time to focus on what needed to be improved or where a poem might be going astray.

Most poets know there are definite limits as to what they can accomplish with fifteen aspiring writers in just two or three days. Perhaps the best that a visiting writer can do under such circumstances is to leave behind feelings of confidence and goodwill. Confidence not in one's own poems so much as in one's impulse to write them: This is a worthwhile thing to be doing with at least part of my life. Goodwill toward others who are also trying to write poems and toward poetry itself, whatever it is. I believe Sharon Olds achieved these goals.

I have also read my own work publicly from time to time, and I know the writer' s goals standing in front of an audience at a reading differ from the goals of a workshop. The reading runs for about an hour, and the audience must be entertained, and you don't usually rely on costumes, props, and special effects to help you along. It's just you, and your voice, and the words out there. Perhaps half of the audience knows who you are, whether you're the local bard or the visiting star, and they have great expectations. Perhaps most of the other half must be won over. One false step, one sub-par poem, and they may turn you off for the evening, which means "for good." They will not be purchasing a copy of your book for you to sign after the reading. If anyone turned off Sharon Olds, I missed it.

*This essay is a modified version of "What Was in It for Me?—The Poetry of Sharon Olds," which originally appeared in *Standing by Words*, the newsletter published by Book People in Moscow, ID (April 1998).

Sharon Olds

The Burned Diary

She lay down in the center of her world, in its rippled
shell, her diary one leaf of the nutmeat,
her family around her in pinion folds, she
slept, and the evicted tenants poured fuel
on the walls of the apartment under her,
head of the match like the char ball of
earth in its aureole of fire hair, she
breathed in the smoke as if it were air,
she never knew the couple of her parents
parted, bride of her father in his long
white, baker apron, sunk down
inside a door, groom of her mother
charred on the kitchen floor, or the super
on the roof, above her window, shouting
down, like God, or the cop getting halfway
to her, through hell. And when the dawn came up
on the black water of the house, they found it
by the side of her bed, its pages scorched,
a layer of them arched, the corners curled up
like the tips of wings, a messenger
from the other world, the solitary heart.
Did the reporter have to buy it from someone or just
pick it up and print it, so in one
day she lost her breath, her flesh
to the bone, and her secrets, each classmate read
I saw him today
he is so cute
to me on the front page, the asbestos
glove holding the small tome open
next to her school photo: ledge of her
bangs with their ring of light, one eye
looking up at each of us

who buys a paper and lifts her, one
looking over our shoulder at the sky,
seeing its coiled strata, its swirls
like oil, its shales and coals, its veins
of carbon, as if she sees it, the heavens
filled with earth.

When It Comes

Even when you're not afraid you might be pregnant,
it's lovely when it comes, and it's a sexual loveliness,
right along their radiant throat,
and lips, the first hem of it,
and at times, the last steps across the bathroom,
you make a dazzling trail, the petals
the flower-girl scatters under the feet of the bride.
And then the colors of it,
sometimes an almost golden red,
or a black scarlet, the drop that leaps
and opens slowly in the water, gel
sac of a galaxy,
the dark, lobed pool, calm
as a lake on the back of the moon, it is all
woundless, even the little spot
in jet and crimson spangled tights who
flings her fine tightrope out
to the left and to the right in that luminous arena,
green upper air of the toilet bowl,
she cannot die. There will be an egg in there,
somewhere, minute, winged with massive
uneven primaries of blood, cell that up
close is a huge, soft, pocked planet,
but it was not anyone yet. Sometimes,
when I watch the delicate show,
like watching snow, or falling stars,
I think of men, what could it seem to them
that we see the blood pour slowly from our sex,
as if the earth sighed, slightly,
and we felt it, and saw it,
as if life moaned a little, in joy, and we were it.

Π

Later, when I'm almost asleep, on him,
blossoms on the ground after a storm,
gelled, washed of color, my eyes
freed from sight—slightly rolling,
still—I understand that we have come
to the center of our life. We might seem to be past it,
our children grown, we are the ones who used to
be dead, by now. So this is heaven—
it fills my sight, the dark, walnut
headboard—like an M, without
its central ravine, a healed M,
Π, Π, Π, Π,
silent consonant of love
the bodies themselves hum, sometimes
it can be heard under the purrs and moans,
mm, mm, mm, mm, notation of paradise
where blood left on the towel all night
separates out its zodiacal glitter
the way the extra milk, that time—
when she was falling asleep after just one side,
and he caught it in a cup—formed, in the night,
its collar and then its disc of cream
next to the bed, its full moon at dawn.

The Paper World

Sometimes I stroke a notebook's page,
trolling for its grain, riding the palouse of its
musical scoring. The 26 veins and one
artery are like the hand of that old white lady
who spoke to me with a courtesy like kindness,
maybe it was manners but I thought it was mercy
for a sentient being. Caressing the lines give the
fingertips the weal of the 8 1/2 x
10 fencing—and its emptiness
is like your thirst to kiss a mouth
that thirsts to kiss you. Roaring Spring,
Mead, Shop Rite's Wright/Rite—like another
set of towns on earth, a paper
world. The page feels sensual
and holy, to me, like a child's worn-thin
pyjamas. But how would I know? When
would I have touched my pyjamas? Not when they were on,
my body was off-limits, it did not belong
to me. Did it belong to God, or was it just
where God had sent it, exile in the apparent
present. In a way, then, was it sacred, if something
dirty could be sacred. Petting the notebook,
I wonder how many beetles from the bark got in the
pulp-masher, the boiler, how many
fragments of wings in these 300 pages,
or tiny tissues of mill-workers' flesh,
or sometimes a whole hand. By its whorl-marks,
by the golden anniversaries of the
singing trees, I pray: if it were
possible, may I have done
my last harm on earth.

Contributors' Notes

The author of two poetry collections, *Santa Rosa Plums* and *South by Southwest*, **Richard Alan Bunch**'s work has appeared in *Poetry Nottingham*, *Hawai'i Review*, and *Black Mountain Review*.

Jeanne Emmons's collection of poetry, *Rootbound* (New Rivers Press 1998), was winner of the Minnesota Voices Project competition. She teaches English at Briar Cliff College and is poetry editor of the *Briar Cliff Review*.

Trey Harrison writes business proposals in the marketing department of an Atlanta, Georgia, computer systems development company. He earned his M.A. in creative writing from Mississippi State University last year.

Jeff Knorr teaches writing and literature at Clackamas Community College where he also co-edits the *Clackamas Literary Review*. His first collection of poems, *Standing Up To The Day*, is due out next fall from Pecan Grove Press (St. Mary's University, San Antonio).

A winner of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation, among others, **Barbara F. Lefcowitz** lives in Bethesda, Maryland, where she is always on the lookout for more root meanings.

James Mayo recently finished his M.A. at the University of Idaho with a thesis on James Welch. He has since headed off for Pensacola, Florida, where we all wish him the best.

Ron McFarland should greet the new millenium with three books: *Understanding James Welch* (U of South Carolina P); a collection of new and selected poems, *Stranger in Town* (Confluence Press); and a book of Idaho essays and stories *Catching First Light* (Idaho State UP). He also directs the creative writing program and teaches at the University of Idaho.

When not writing or working, **Ralph Robert Moore** enjoys being up to his knees in manure with his wife in Cedar Hill, Texas. You may see more of his writing at the web site SENTENCE (www.ralphrobertmoore.com).

Sharon Olds is currently the New York State Poet Laureate

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Allan Peterson has work forthcoming in *The Gettysburg Review*, *Curious Rooms*, and *Natural Bridge*. He is a recipient of a National Endowment Fellowship in Poetry and has been nominated for three Pushcart Prizes.

Paul S. Piper currently works as a librarian for the College of Arts and Sciences at Western Washington University in Bellingham. He holds an MFA from the University of Montana, and his work has appeared in *American Writing*, among others.

Geri Radacsi is a staff member at Central Connecticut State University and has had *The Atlanta Review*, *Connecticut Review*, and *The Southern Humanities Review* publish her work, among other periodicals. One of her poems was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

A creative writing instructor at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois, **David Starkey**'s most recent poetry collection, *Open Mike Night at the Cabaret Voltaire*, was published by Kings Estate in 1996. He has placed work with *Massachusetts Review* and *New Orleans Review*, among others.

J.P. Steed is one of the first graduates of the Univeristy of Idaho M.F.A. program;"The Way to God" is a story from his thesis. He is moving on to the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, where he will pursue a Ph.D. in something of value.

Virgil Suarez is the author of four novels, a collection of short stories, and has edited several anthologies of Latino and Cuban-American literature. He teaches creative writing and Latino/a Literature at Florida State University. *You Come Singing*, a collection of poems, is due out this fall from Tia Chucha Press/Northwestern University.

Georgia Tiffany's poems have appeared in *Willow Springs*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Poet*. Her work is also included in *Deep Down Things*, an anthology of Northwest poets. Georgia teaches writing, literature, and humanities in Spokane, Washington.

Jane Varley is an alumna of the Univeristy of Idaho who

earned her Ph.D. in creative writing from the Unversity of North Dakota just last year. Her work has appeared in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Midwest Quarterly*, and *Prairie Schooner*, among others.

Sarah Wichlacz, the cover artist for this issue of *Fugue*, is a BFA student at the University of Idaho. You can see more of her artwork and see some of her writings, as well, at www.uidaho.edu/~wich9428.

Richard Alan Bunch
Jeanne Emmons
Trey Harrison
Jeff Knorr
Barbara F. Lefcowitz
James Mayo
Ron McFarland
Ralph Robert Moore
Sharon Olds
Allan Peterson
Paul S. Piper
Geri Radacsi
David Starkey
J.P. Steed
Virgil Suarez
Georgia Tiffany
Jane Varley