

fugue

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Featuring poet Sonia Sanchez

Fugue

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Upcoming in the Spring 2001 issue will feature poets Robert Wrigley and Billy Collins.

Submissions are read from Sept. 1 through May 1 (postmarked dates). Please address to the appropriate editor and send with SASE to *Fugue* at the University of Idaho, English Dept., 200 Brink Hall, Moscow, ID, 83844-1102. *Fugue* pays \$10-20 for prose up to 6,000 words, and \$5-10 per poem. Please send no more than 4 poems or 6,000 words of prose per submission. Submissions in more than one genre should be mailed separately. Queries (but please, no submissions at this time) by email to: fugue@uidaho.edu.

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To the Reader

Issue #20 marks the tenth anniversary of *Fugue*, which started in the fall of 1990 as a modest, 48-page, saddle-stapled literary magazine published at the University of Idaho.

J. C. Hendee, a graduate student in English and later an MFA candidate, served as executive editor for the first several issues, ambitiously striving for three runs per year. It was our policy from the outset to pay a small honorarium to each contributor, and while the sum has increased slightly, we have always wished we could afford to pay more.

Throughout the years we have been supported financially by the Department of English, and we are most grateful. Graduate and undergraduate students who work on the staff screening manuscripts, copyreading text, and promoting and distributing the magazine receive one credit hour per semester and may accumulate up to three credit hours, which may be applied to their degrees. As faculty editor during most of the years of its operation, I have donated my time and often inadequate efforts throughout the year; that is, serving as faculty advisor and copy editor of the magazine does not modify my course load. For the most part my work with the magazine has been a pleasure and a labor of love. I am among those who believe that a good creative writing program, whether at the undergraduate or graduate MFA level, should have a literary magazine connected with it and that students can learn a great deal from serving on the staff, not only about editing and publication, but also about writing.

Students on the staff of *Fugue* learn quickly what not to do as writers: not to send ten poems when the magazine limits the sub-

missions to four; not to mix genres by stuffing four poems, a story, and an essay in one envelope; not to try to get away with a self-addressed envelope but no postage; not to send four stories to the magazine in rapid succession in hopes of breaking down the editor's will by sheer volume and persistence; not to cram four poems on one page, or one poem each on half-pages. Students staffers also acquire some standards of judgment, although as with all such endeavors, they know they will never be one hundred per cent accurate. They learn something about how to read, and in the editorial meetings they have the opportunity to stand behind their decisions, or to alter them in the face of more persuasive arguments.

The first few issues of *Fugue* were dominated, predictably, by contributions from local writers, and although the scope of the magazine has broadened significantly over the years, we still encourage submissions from writers in this region. We always hope to have two or three "local" poems, essays, or stories in every issue, but we *always* evaluate submissions against the ever evasive "standards" we have acquired by some sort of readers' osmosis over the years. We have never viewed the magazine as a showcase for the often very fine work being turned out by undergraduate and graduate students in our own creative writing program, although we are publishing increasingly more work by MFA students. We recognize, however, that the magazine will inevitably reflect something of the lessons and values the program instills, so we are indebted to those who have taught creative writing courses here over the years, to Tina Foriyes, who essentially created the program when she came to the University of Idaho in 1968; to Lance Olsen, who took over as faculty advisor of *Fugue* for several issues; to Mary Clearman Blew, who came to the university in 1996; and to Joy Passanante, Robert Wrigley, and Kim Barnes, Joy for several years and Bob and Kim only recently.

We owe particular thanks to the executive or managing editors who have invested much extra time and energy to the magazine over the years, not only to John Hendee, the founding father, but also to Eric Isaacson, who as editor, with the guidance of Lance

Olsen, took *Fugue* that extra step to the perfect-bound, full-color cover stage, and to Ryan Witt, who took over in 1998 and helped us improve our format from issues #16 through #20. Ryan received his MFA degree last spring and is now teaching full time as an instructor at Idaho State University in Pocatello. We wish him the best. It is no easy task simultaneously to take a full load of graduate courses, teach half time as a teaching assistant, and put out four or five issues of a literary magazine.

On the other hand, that is exactly what we are asking of our incoming managing editor of *Fugue*, Andrea Mason, a second-year MFA student whose undergraduate degree is from Colgate University in Hamilton, New York. Andrea hopes to improve the format of the magazine, to upgrade the paper stock, for example, and perhaps to include some artwork or a gallery, finances permitting. Presently, we are considering the prospect of moving from a biannual to an annual publication, probably a good bit lengthier. We are also kicking around the possibility of a name change, so if anyone who reads this has observations or advice, it would be welcome. We think our tenth anniversary is a good time to reflect on where we have been and where we would like to go, and it would help if a few loyal readers would let us know what they think.

Of course our plans include widening our circulation and building on our small list of subscribers. We think we should be much more aggressive in marketing and distribution, but that is always the case with small magazines like this one. For the foreseeable future, at any rate, we plan to hold subscription costs to \$5 per issue (\$10 per year) postage paid.

We are proud of what we have accomplished over the past ten years, and we are especially grateful to our contributors, including the noted resident and visiting writers, who have allowed us to feature their work in our pages: Mary Clearman Blew, Joy Passanante, and Brenda Hillman (#13); John Haag, Roberta Hill, and Raymond Federman (#14/15); Stephen Dunn and Ed McClanahan (#16); Vivian Shipley and Lesa Luders (#17); Sharon Olds and Virgil Suarez (#18); Philip Dacey (#19). In a few cases

we have interviewed these writers, and we intend to keep that up whenever possible.

As to #20, you will observe that our featured writer is Sonia Sanchez, who was a Distinguished Visiting Writer of poetry at the University of Idaho in April 2000. We have accompanied her poems with a substantial essay written by Corinne Flowers, a second-year MFA student in our program. Her writing is both personal memoir and appreciation of Sanchez's poems, an unusual but we think effective combination. In the text of her paper Cori quotes several of Sanchez's poems, so any reader unfamiliar with her work will leave with a good orientation to it. For issue #21 we plan to feature poems by Robert Wrigley and an interview with him.

In the present issue, which reflects the combined efforts of Ryan Witt and of our new managing editor, Andrea Mason, along with staffs from last spring through this fall, you will find a substantial story by Mildred Morris (New Jersey), a short-short by Dan May (Wisconsin), an essay by Peter Chilson (Washington), and poems by writers from across the continent. As in the past, the magazine reflects an eclectic vision in both prose and poetry. We remain open to both mainstream literary and experimental work in all the genres, but our old biases against so-called "genre fiction" remain intact.

Ron McFarland
Faculty Advisor

Bequeath

“I want, want only to leave
something behind,”

the childless octogenarian mentions to me
between sips of pink lemonade on Tuesday
afternoons when I visit nursing homes in 1983
as a civic-minded eighth grader. What this something

is she never says. Well, it won't be Mona's laughter, no
matter how rousing, how mellifluous; her chuckles warm
and plentiful disappear over Scrabble as quickly as
they color themselves into the gray-green drear

of the oval community room, the anemic Wandering Jew
in the too-small pot on the window sill, the flaccid cheeks
of one's drooling colleagues. Laughter is lovely, I'm sure
you'll agree, but no permanent installation, so to speak.

Mona wears fake daisies in a loop around her wrinkled
neck. I think of a goat one could love with all one's heart,
each ventricle. I spell *thorax* on a triple-word patch,
score big in red. Mona totals the points. She laughs, once

again, but beats me by the end. Week in, week out, it is
like this. Trounced. First day of our acquaintance she gave
fair warning: a childhood immersed in Latin leads her towards
sure supremacy whomever the opponent. *Egret* she will set

down, build to *regret*, *regrets*; how like her to turn a *coax*
into *coaxial*, twice feed off x, the woman will strew innumerable
prefixes, compound words, over the board, the pale wooden
tiles reflecting a lifetime of learnedness, a headful of books,

maps, indices, untold powers. Wit. At noon I must shake her
victorious hand goodbye. She doesn't know it, but June will
come as it always does with sunshine and change and I shall
graduate, my visits done with, and nice Gail Evangelho, outreach

coordinator at school, shall divulge that at the Roland Thatcher
Nursing Home, Ms. Mona Giebelhaus's known as a real pain in the ass,
a certifiable loon, troublemaker, tough old bird, bitch (choose your
favorite nomenclature), unpopular with every shift of nurses: Mona,

the verbose paranoid, she spews volcanic, orchestrates day-long fits
built around elaborate intrigue, espionage, demands she be let out
to uphold her duty to the Commonwealth. In September I begin
high school, become immersed in algebra, tennis, AFS, yearbook

deadlines, the organization of several class dances. Latin. Only fifteen
years later will I be driving towards Plimoth Plantation two days
before

Thanksgiving, we're going right down Route 6, shrieking seagulls
aloft,

Welcome to Wareham, Gateway to the Cape, and there's old Roland

Thatcher hiding under a new name, new awnings, but still dressed in
hideous green asphalt shingle, and dear, articulate Mona, she must be
dead by now and I swear I will be vigilant, hold fast to vanity, intellect,
motion, all manner of fortitude. I will have none of it—the blindness,

baldness, hysteria. Say no to wither, drift, erasure. I cast those sooty
vultures into someone else's picture, their pond. I am selfish, no
doubt about it. "The Monster Mash" comes on the radio even though
Halloween was three weeks ago, how strange, and I consider virile

heroes in Hammer horror flicks, their *Eek*-ing darlings, the thrust
of useless crucifixes. What is it to be a successful vampire? To live
forever . . . yet dependent, driven to suck on a rat's neck when denied
human juice—acts of desperation, unsavory necessity. At Cranberry

World I obtain a variety of recipes which make use of Massachusetts'
premier crop, learn the history of pemmican, cold winters, floating
red harvests, handle the antique tools specific to this colonial staple.
One week later I make sixty scones loaded with the plant, the Indian

fruit, tart and red and firm. From my kitchen window I can see well
the Rural Cemetery, founded 1663, my mama tells everyone who'll
listen

I was crazy to buy a house with such a view, dead bodies just a few
hundred yards from the back porch, what about your drinking

water, you do have a well, she reminds me twice a month. How is
your health? Been to the doctors lately? And the smell of baking—
so primitive, redemptive. That night I feed the dogs as many scraps as
they can endure. *We eat, we shit, we live*, some better and longer

than others. That night of roll, pinch, rise, cooking for fifty unknown
reasons, mouths. Mona told me Giebelhaus meant "House of Gables,"
and it seemed appropriate for this woman of pointed observations,
rich recesses of language. For some ten years now no one has beat me;

I regularly pile up seventy, eighty points in a single turn, lavish, well-
placed words. Biology has been good to me. Science has so many
x's, y's, z's. I want, I want only to leave something behind. Did you
know twenty-one days into disuse the average muscle abandons all

gains, or indelible ink can be made from the blood of a cranberry?

Confronting Terra Firma: Landscape as Adversary

Landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up
as much from the strata of memory as from layers of rock.

Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*

I'm trying to follow good advice and concentrate on the ground ahead. But with each step, slightly crouched, I dig my left hand into a slope that falls at a near 70-degree angle over a half mile of loose rock and soil before hitting spruce forest. I begin to hyperventilate. My friend J, an experienced wilderness guide walking out front, tells me not to use my arm like an outrigger, but to trust my body and walk. My thighs ache just behind the knees, and my back muscles, from shoulders to waist, feel tight and prickly, a defense against the fall I fear. "Come on buddy boy," he says, "like you're in your own back yard."

I calm my breathing, but against advice look down as my foot loosens a rock that tumbles hard and disappears over a rocky lip. My eyes follow ravines that fan out through forest into the June iciness of the middle fork of the Cimmaron River here in Colorado's San Juan Mountains. The river gushes a white vein through meadow and forest thousands of feet down. Here, above tree line, the world is gray and brown and dull red. The ravines look fresh, no plants, just gashes in crushed basalt and granite, as if water carved them this morning. As if part of a sun-baked mud cliff that rises high above had collapsed hours before.

My difficulty with J's advice is coping with being high up on steep terrain in vast open space with nothing to break or cushion my fall. One moment I feel as though I've jumped into empty space

and the next like I'm on a giant wave. An overactive imagination and some knowledge of geology don't help. I sense a sudden tilting, as if terra firma has been set on end by a smashing through from below like a fist through paper.

The story is old. The earth seethes and spits, fighting itself, bleeding and shaking into these mountains. I see sections of a granite wall, a purplish slab shooting out of the mud cliff above, while the occasional crack and scrape of falling rock feeds my notion that dust from this molten jujitsu is settling only now. On these slopes trees won't grow for long. Wind, snow, and water punch channels like new wrinkles. We pass a splintered tree trunk sticking out of talus and I'm conscious of myself as bowling pin.

This is about landscapes and the mind. My friend J loves high places and has spent a decade wandering the Rockies and Alaska's Wrangell Mountains. "Don't think landscape," he tells me. "Think itty-bitty piece of ground." As I agonize over every move, he squats suddenly like a Cossack dancer. He says, "Wow!" and points to an alpine flower, queen's crown. "What a pretty flower." I'm awed and annoyed by his ease on terrain that constantly rearranges itself. Rock falls, mudflows, avalanches of snow.

After 200 yards we enter a peninsula of spruce forest and scramble up to the base of the mud cliff that rises 500 or so feet. We find a resting space against the cliff, which looks like a mountain with its guts ripped out. The pastel surface crumbles to the touch. J waves his arm in a downward arc. "In our lifetime, this whole cliff—whoosh."

Here I expect a challenge, to hear sharp popping of falling rock that will make us jump and run. I focus instead on the idea of fear. On this ledge at 10,000 feet, notebook in hand, I attempt a definition. "High up, I've no control. I'm so aware of gravity in a place so indifferent it would as soon swallow me, as drop me, pummel me, as let me go."

Making notes calms me, an old habit. To focus thoughts in tense moments, as if to say, Look here, it's on paper now, I have to get through this!

That's the issue: fear induced by landscape.

To our right, across a narrow canyon, the bottom edge of a spruce forest gives way to a grooved, nearly vertical slope of more baked mud. I get out binoculars to scan an avalanche chute. Snow, dirt-smearred and pitted by falling rock, fills the channel. Here, it's easy to imagine demons, like the legends of our own Bigfoot or the Yeti of the Himalayas, freakish metaphors for the mountains that hide them.

Landscape as predator.

Landscape interests me, especially how we cope with different terrain, or fail to. I imagine eclectics of landscape, of points of view, and the definition of the word. We wire landscape to countless sensory inspirations rooted in a crazy natural circuit board: soil, air, water, plants, creatures, and shelter. Our reactions to land are inspired as much by what we see, hear, smell and touch, as by how imagination interprets what our senses detect.

Now, on this ledge, I look over my notes and see the words, "no control." In the margin I scribble a name, "Saint-Exupery"—the French aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupery, who wrote about landscapes from the perspective of the pilot. Countless times I've read his novel, *Night Flight*, and lingered over this passage about a pilot in peril: "Heavy clouds were putting out the stars. He leaned toward the earth, trying to see the village lights, shining like glow-worms in the grass, but in those fields of darkness no lights sparkled."

When terrain induces fear or extreme discomfort the mind moves to contrasts, thoughts of anywhere but here, or of other difficult situations, other frightening terrain endured. In my case, in the Sahara Desert of West Africa where I've spent three years, I longed for alpine green and the multi-colored geology of the Rockies. Such thoughts comforted me. Yet now, in the mountains, I think of the Saharan dunescape, where wind softens every edge and when the wind blows hard the very desert terrain itself appears to dissolve under foot in a blur of white dust. Contrast is where coping begins.

But I found much to fear from the desert as well. Fifteen years

ago I camped with friends in the Saharan sand dunes of northern Niger in West Africa, where mountains of white sand are always shedding under the wind. This world of sand, endless miles of it in all directions, set me nervously adrift as if in an open boat, like Francis Parkman on the Great Plains in 1846, writing of “the smooth prairie gracefully rising in oceanlike swells on every side.” I recall, as well, fixed checkpoints and drunken soldiers of the African roadscape—the lonely narrow roads that pass through the vast expanses of sand and laterite rock in countries like Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, countries where the Sahara has taken virtually every mile of land. And, on those same desert roads, I remember burnt out oil tankers and wrecked cars specked with bullet holes. Remnants of banditry marking the land.

Such memories feed my rationalization, the idea that few places have frightened me like this high alpine terrain where J and I sit. His head drops to his chest while I stare into space. I’m trying to convince myself that I’m not pure coward. But really I’m passing the buck, holding landscape responsible by comparing this terrain to places I’ve survived. But now from my position below the cliff those past situations seem more acutely psychological, just demons in my head, compared to what I feel at this moment with J.

I’m on the back of a beast gritty and real under my hands and feet. So I’m trying not to be noticed.

Landscape as scapegoat.

J agrees with my fear—the notion that landscape kills. “Up here fear is respect,” he says. Escaping death in these mountains, as in the desert, is a constant process of negotiation, communication, a gathering of information to prevent misunderstanding. The curmudgeon naturalist and writer Edward Abbey wrote of the desert in the American Southwest, but I find truth in his words for both the Sahara and the mountains J and I wander in. “The desert is a land of surprises,” Abbey wrote, “some of them terrible surprises. Terrible as derived from terror.”

J often talks about “reading landscape,” about balancing one’s chances with clues the land offers, some of which strike me as

embarrassingly obvious because I haven't recognized them myself. We've been spending, for instance, much time on steep boulder fields, crossing some quickly, while "Zen-stepping" others. That's J's term for carefully watching where and how you step. "You can read a slope's stability," he said one afternoon, "by looking at how much lichen covers the exposed surfaces of rocks." This means the fungus has had time to grow in one place, undisturbed by violent rock falls. Respecting this place, surviving in it, requires sensitive concentration.

But now, resting against the cliff across from the avalanche chute, I'm reading the land in my own way. J sleeps, ball cap tipped over his eyes, and I imagine my escape if somehow stuck in the forest atop the chute. I plot routes down and ways to negotiate tough places. I think of what fear might do, how it may paralyze me so I would sit atop that chute unable to help myself. Or perhaps the fear would propel me to find a way out. But I'm untried in that sort of mountaineering and I don't want to know what it's like. Tracing the chute's path with my binoculars, I think of sliding it in my nylon pants, feet first. It's steep, but appears manageable. Then I spot a straight twenty-foot drop from an icy ledge before the chute ends in a creek.

Escape, for me, is a logical thought here and the fantasy provides comfort. Odd comfort, an obsessed inner monologue that I regard as evidence of terrain pushing me to craziness. If the escape I imagine scares me more than the path we will take out (J wants to explore a different way down), then perhaps reality will be somehow easier. Anyway, the need to leave comes soon enough by means we both dread and expect—the hard popping of falling rock that makes us jump and run, scrambling away from the cliff, our packs not yet fully strapped on. Stopping a moment, we look up, recognizing a false alarm as only dust and small stones fall on our former resting place. Still, reason enough to move on. We weave our way through thick forest, over and under trunks of dead spruce. J leaps downward, bushwhacking. I follow with solid, careful steps, Zen-stepping my way down. This is the kind of walking I do up here, and the kind he does only on really tricky ground.

“Use your feet,” J shouts back. “Trust your feet.”

Oddly, the contrast in competence and courage between us, while a bit frustrating to my vanity, bothers me little and interests me a lot.

“I’m lucky,” J says later that evening, “to have this body and be in these mountains.” We are sitting in the pocket of a pile of big boulders, scooping from plastic bowls a meal of dried potatoes and beans over rice. This is our field kitchen in a boulder field along a creek that feeds the Cimmaron River. We’re easy prey for a flash flood in a place that offers a wide view of clear sky, the canyon walls and the way to the river below. Our tent stands safely two hundred yards away in the forest.

Lucky, I suppose, is one word for J. He is 28 years old, about 5’5” tall, naturally muscular and quick, a man with thick, short black hair who has made a life of measuring himself against the land. The ground we’ve been covering over eight days—steep snow and boulder fields, narrow but stable avalanche chutes and forest trails—seems no match for him. On a morning days earlier, below a 12,000-foot mountain called Courthouse Peak, I watched exhausted and frightened as J dropped his pack and climbed a steep chute, walled in by gray rock, several hundred yards up the mountainside. He carefully kicked steps in the snow for me, before nimbly descending to retrieve his pack, and me. He may as well have been traversing a golf course.

J followed on this, his second ascent. “Yer fine,” I heard, “doin’ fine.” Quickly, my vanity dissolved and with it any prideful thoughts of “I don’t need help, thank you.” I accepted help gratefully. Humility, maybe, is a consequence of fear. “Careful,” he said. “Take your time.” I fought off an urge to rush up this thing to a safer place. I stopped, shut my eyes a few seconds, breathed deeply and found a rhythm with my kicks in the snow, concentrating on each step. “You got it,” he said. “No problem!” This made me laugh.

These mountains serve a purpose in J’s life, a challenge to confront and overcome, which doubly serves as medicine for the mind. Yet for me the landscape at times seems only to rattle cruelly at

my limitations, my sense of terror. J is the sort who knows where his limbs are and what they're doing at all times. I, on the other hand, nine years older and thoroughly gray, live far from the ground and from personal physical awareness. I'm tall, 6'2", thin and gangly, unsure of my body even on a flat basketball court, where my flailing limbs often land me in trouble with those who have received my unintended elbow to the forehead or finger in the mouth.

"These mountains are my refuge," J says, "where I come when my problems overwhelm me. Things get tough and I want to shovel into a mountain, put myself right up against it."

Landscape as therapy.

Yet I find, even as we rest this evening, eating and comfortable, that my nerves never quite relax high up. At rest and in conversation, I sit against a boulder with my head up, scanning cliffs and high glaciers and meadows, not just for scenery, but watching, arms folded, as if keeping an eye out for an attack. I watch for whatever may come crashing down from way up there.

Comfort in any place, J reminds me, depends partly on time spent. "You have to work yourself into your surroundings to a situation where you can relax." He paused, sitting on a nylon pad in sandals, dirty gym shorts, fleece jacket and ball cap, legs extended, back against a rock. A happy man. "Getting to know these mountains, it's a relationship, like getting to know somebody. The more exposure you have, the more you study the place, the more relaxed you feel."

Which is to say that if you pay attention you know when to cut loose. One afternoon, at the head of a wide snowfield, J assures me the snow is stable, that it won't slide. I frown doubtfully. J grins.

He says, "Just surf it!"

In the mountains the most fearsome challenges of terrain often stare right at me. Certainly much remains hidden here, especially to my unskilled eye, but at the same time so much cannot be missed. Cliff faces, for instance, and the obvious destruction where sliding snow and earth have taken out whole groves of trees. Up here

thick fog can disguise elevation, though not the sharp angle of slope beneath your feet.

J tells me that negotiating a mountain “is sort of like dancing when some cowpoke bad guy says, ‘dance’ while wielding his Colt 45. When a mountain says ‘dance,’ you better dance, partner.”

Right on. You can protect yourself from a desert dust storm. The Tuaregs, nomads of the Sahara, for example, squat in the desert and make a tent of their robes, propping the material up with a knife to make breathing space. But you can't reason with an avalanche. You try not to meet one, or you run like hell. Landscape, desert or mountain, defines the rules and harbors clues that signal danger. You respect that, you learn the history, how to read the signs, or you don't and suffer consequences. I am drawn again to the fact that on high alpine terrain you learn to be wary of boulder fields naked of vegetation. Fear, in other words, sometimes saves you.

Yet it's precisely the unreasonable, unexplainable event that fascinates me here in the San Juans, where the landscape's volatile capacity for violence throws itself at me unendingly. With two days left, J and I hike in sandals up the middle fork of the Cimmaron River, crossing it back and forth and keeping close to its banks. Finally, below an impassable waterfall, we scramble up a grassy bank onto the Forest Service trail that runs along the river and up into Wetterhorn Basin.

The trail disappoints me after days of bushwhacking off trail. I've longed for something familiar and now find predictability a letdown. But only for a few minutes.

Soon we are walking over and around recently fallen spruce trees. There are few at first, until suddenly we are hiking a vast forest dead zone. The trail becomes irrelevant as we pick our way under, over and around huge trunks of ponderosa pine beside jagged snags. The wood is still fresh, the needles just turning rusty. The cause, a windstorm that shot south through the basin months before. Uncompahgre National Forest officials say the wind, trapped in this narrow valley, hit the spruce like a giant hand, flattening

hundreds of acres and covering the forest floor with what may as well have been, under that force, a stand of bamboo.

My habit on this trip has been to seek escape and now is no different. How could anybody survive such a thing? Where could you hide? I stand beside a fresh snag as wide around as a tractor tire, touching the splinters and looking at the tree on the ground, 100 feet not high but long now, a tree summarily stripped of rank. This, I confess to J, is almost too much for my imagination.

I stutter. "What this must have looked like . . . sounded like . . . it's . . . I can't even describe this." The wind is gone but I'm nervous, thinking of staccato snaps and deep thuds near and far, like artillery fire, the ground vibrating as trees fall, and a prolonged roar of wind like a vast explosion, and myself, running, dodging, stumbling. I think of a force not directly of the mountains but channeled by their presence. An avalanche of air. A sneak attack.

J is lost in his own thoughts among the trees.

Finally we climb up around the devastation. Eventually we follow a ravine to the river and find evidence of recent avalanche activity. Stray tree branches and smaller trunks lie scattered across the snow as if tossed there only that day. We camp our last two evenings beside the river and spend a day hiking up Wetterhorn basin.

Not far above camp we poke our heads out of timberline. We see elk and flowers in alpine meadows. Glacier lily and lupine. Then, J, 25 yards in front, runs back up the trail towards me, shouting that he nearly ran into a wolverine just over a rise. We look back and see this furry shape running off. After a while, to confirm our sighting, we follow its escape path up a creek, but find no tracks to match our guidebook descriptions. (The last wolverine seen in Colorado was spotted near here in 1979.)

We sit near the river. J, binoculars to his eyes, speculates on climbing a jagged peak above us called Cock's Comb, named for the rock teeth that rise to its summit like the comb on the neck and head of a rooster. After a while he says the rock looks too unstable. But he's considering Courthouse Peak, the mildly technical walk-up whose slopes we'd been on days earlier. We didn't

climb it because, well, it scared the hell out of me.

“I can do it in a day, easily,” J says. “I’ll drive in around four in the morning Saturday. To the top before noon and down. Easy.”

J’s ease in this place still startles me. I look at him for a few moments, splicing together memories of these days in the mountains with thoughts of dust storms and Tuareg rebels. Trying to make sense of my fear. I soon give up.

I give J my best straight face. “Sure, no problem

James Gramann

First Snow

You drift in shredded remnants of a cloud,
brush away the cloak of shattered eggshell.
Stinging pillowfulls of feathers, death knell
of a swan, melt against your tongue. A shroud

of ashen petals, wasted from the once-proud
summer, swirls about you in a carousel
of afterlife, a shimmering farewell
to youthful flowers of red and gold. Unbowed

by winter's storm, you meet the simple severance
of its touch, and turning quietly inside
yourself, accept the blizzard's promise, knowing

all the flakes to come will fall in reverence
for your season. Bound for earth, they guide
you home. You rise and follow where it's snowing.

Pet People

You pet people befuddle us, leave us perplexed,
which is why it confounds the keen mind of each cat
when we try to predict what on earth you'll do next.

Could it be the instruction of humans neglects
the page where it says keep your wits when you act?
You pet people befuddle us, leave us perplexed

and suspicious your pedigree's based on insects,
such as fleas. And oh! What a toll you exact
when we try to predict what on earth you'll do next—

the Siamese see blue, and the Manx turn so vexed
that they cast off their tails. What precipitates that?
You pet people befuddle us, leave us perplexed!

Intelligence-wise, every feline suspects,
you rival the low of the kangaroo rat.
When we try to predict what on earth you'll do next,

it, more often than not, has to be double-checked,
which, of course, never helps, underscoring the fact
you pet people befuddle us, leave us perplexed
when we try to predict what on earth you'll do next!

Last Wishes: Sisyphus Retold

Theresa, swaying through in her aged Volvo, is thinking about the preybird that she cut down, mid-flight, with the speeding grill of the car. She's thinking about it and it is 10 minutes gone, its event complete, but she's thinking: speeding into that sunlight bend, and seeing the bird—some falcon thing, twitchy with wind—as it swooped from a sprucetop into a drop that ended in an explosion of feathers against the car: some bad pillowfight. Feathers wiffle in her windshield wipers, and she looks beyond them, bloodless, to drive.

Tomorrow afternoon, Theresa decides, she'll doubledunk the basketballs. She'll finish teaching her eighth period typing class, pull on her grey sweatsuit and while the girls are stretching and giggling and waiting for practice to begin, she'll slip two balls free from the net bag. She'll charge up the full glossy court dribbling both—*thunk-thunk, thunk-thunk*—and the girls will turn: *Flygirl's doin' it!* And Coach Theresa In-Yer-Face Willenbring will leap furious from the top of the key into her famous double-damned-right-dunk. *Swishswish*. The girls will hoot and laugh—*You go, coach!*—and if there are any men around—other teachers, her weenie of an assistant—they'll turn away embarrassed. She'll blow her whistle nonchalant and the girls'll spit out their gum and the two with braces will slob in their mouthguards, and practice will begin with the taste of Theresa's treat. Seven feet tall, and she might look clumsy as hell, but Theresa, no use fakin' around, she'll be in quite a mood by tomorrow afternoon.

In yer *face*.

The bird's feathers twitch.

The morning is gone already as Theresa finds in her afternoon of mountain driving that the Ole Volvo needs a rest: engine light

keeps ticking on, and she flicking it with her gnawed-on fingertips and hoping against hope that the car will be fine. Better be fine. No space in this weekend away for crackerjack car trouble.

Last night, atlas fanned across the bed in her motel room—ugly TV, dirty tub—she chose these pinewood backroads on purpose, tracing along the map roads obscure and thin, roads hardly visible. She picked roads free mostly of towns, and on them no others, no cops ‘specially. She hadn’t considered the car, this punkdick sorryass car.

Theresa’s achy legs crane up against the wheel, and if she weren’t worried about getting back (and *unnoticed*) she might get out and walk and maybe stretch among the boulders tumbled between the trees, and kick around the melting snow. The engine light glares. She thinks about praying, but isn’t it always jest too late.

The Volvo, with its Golddigger Basketball bumpersticker and rusty swisscheese spottings, coughs like an elder as it sways along the curves at the bottom of the pass. With the rising elevation the car is hacking out the back, and she’s punching the gas and soon it ignores her foot. Finally, halfway up the thirteen thousand miserable feet of the mountain’s shadow, Theresa sputters to the side of the road, and is still in the engineless quiet.

She is still.

Theresa doesn’t want to be on this snowy roadside with not a soul and fading light. She towers over her ticking engine and feels its heat and hopeless machination. She smells its cooked rubber scents, and dusty gas, and warm wiring, and she wishes for the locker room: tennis shoes and deodorant, shampoo steam giving that hoopgirl glow. She does not want to be on this exchange, even, with its criminal swaps in casino parking lots, its hoodlum handshakes, its chances of trippin’ too far out of her gangly reach.

The trip came down to a moment in yesterday, one that gives her a slacken stomach and a headache of rock even to remember, but—*flygirl’s doin’ it*—a moment which would pay for itself forever. The moment: tossing her 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Team duffel bag into the back of an El Camino, and getting in return a

duffel bag not her own. The new bag with its new bulges, new future, was faux vinyl and green, and Theresa asked the rogue if maybe she could get *her* bag back, not the stuff inside, but her bag, y'know, *official* memorabilia, hoopster insignia, sentimental val—?

“Buy a set-a Samsonite,” he said, and was gone.

Easy until now.

Beyond the shoulder there are openings in the trees, places where tufts of broken scrub are stitched into the snow like swallows recently dead. She worries about her footprints there, tracking off under boughs and weaving deep to where she'd buried her new bag—those FoxTV stories about dumbass thugs teach a mighty lesson—but she'd backtracked enough and left enough mayhem in the snow to keep even a good pig confused. She hopes.

She stares into the engine. Into the fucking engine. She wishes it were a thug, one she could step up to and palm its face and shove away, but in that she's hopeless. And hopeless looking downslope: not a town for 60 miles, shit-on-toast. She pulls her ponytail through the back of her A's cap and feels night creeping—*C'mon baby*—toward her back. She slams the damned hood and is greeted by a swirl of dropping feathers. She gathers an armload of folded clothes from her backseat—a tee shirt, a pair of socks, her Adidas jacket—and heads walking up the mountain, choiceless.

In the blank night above timberline, where the rocked tundra has gone suffocate under season, Theresa's freaked. Four hours of straight walking up, not a solitary car, not a porchlight in her trompings, and now at the icy apex of the mount she's taken to wearing her spare socks on her hands, and tee-shirt wrapped around her ears and face like some Belfast bomber, and the wind cutting through even this. She freaks about frostbite and abandon, and slips a finger between the folds of her face to the gummy gap where her dogtooth used to be. It's a place of comfort like a thumb wrinkled by girlhood sucking, and once she's home with her new bag it will become a shiny white crown, and hers a new \$1,900

smile. Gleaming in your face.

She'd spat out the tooth last spring, right in front of her rowhouse apartment, when the guy fisted with rings clocked her good and swiped her bike; broad daylight, the chump. And she'd been so fuckyouall before about staying in the neighborhood despite its gunshot nights and the hollers of a few—*Yo CrackerGirl*, or *Coughitup Whitebread* or other punkass Honkeytrip—and she wouldn't move to the burbs, *nah-nah-nah*. She'd coach her hoopgirls with one bad tooth and live a daytime stroll from school. That was Before; down there in the bury of snow, her new bag sketched the line: After.

Aftahh.

Her finger squishes in the socket. She'll shop uptown for a condo, and think about which color of Saturn to buy, and envision what the girls will say when she shows up with new tooth in Niketown's latest slicksuit. *Damned, coach!* Like she'd ripped the shit off Shaq's fat back.

She plunges her hand into a wall of roadside snow, pulls out a fistful and sucks it to water on her tongue. She's freezing in the stark, walking freaked.

She's still walking.

And still.

The house cranky hours later is hardly a house, but a cage. A cage because slats of light can be seen by Theresa from her place on the sinking road, glowing stripes tucked between pinetree-silhouettes, cut out of a starry above. Theresa's feet hurt with each step, and the cagehouse is shoddy enough for her to consider walking on and on evenso, as she has since the afternoon died.

Up corroded steps to a porch hexed only by a windchime, and Theresa peels the socks from her hands and tee from her face and raps on the door. She raps again, bigger fist. The door is thick, she kicks its base. She turns the knob and inside the woman is waiting.

“—” Theresa almost says.

The woman is waiting in a giant chair that seems to digest her in its puff. In her bagged bathrobe she is a meekish crone who holds up a finger—*sh!*—as Theresa tries to speak. The woman swings her sclerotic legs above the floor and harrumphs out of the chair. She cranks herself straight and stands three feet small, maybe four. Theresa is stuck staring down on the miniature wretch and thinks she might run if only her legs weren't gravy. The thought crosses her mind that she's fallen into some monstrous world where Grandma Clampitt meets Yoda or someshit that the hoopgirls will *no way* like crazy when she tells them after the grand doubledunk, tomorrow in yer—

"Listen," Theresa says, and knows it's rude to laugh, "I've been walking—"

"Yeah well."

"My car—"

"Against the wall," the woman says.

"Against?"

"Only for a frisking."

The woman's voice is guts on a victrola. Theresa finds it laughable but does not laugh. Because the haggard woman standing below her—*way* below her—picks up a shiny thick pistol from the floor behind the chair, two hands on the handle and it's still too damned big so it shakes, and her face is a squint of wrinkles without eyes. But the pistol watches through its.

"Wall."

Theresa thinks holding her laughter that she could just as easily bop this seahag's head than stand against the wall, but as she looks down upon the woman, with her strands of white hair seeping from balded yellow skull, and looks at the gun poking into her growling belly, she thinks she could also just as easily *die*, too: the woman's got that look. She puts her arms against the wall, spreadeagle, so her fingertips touch the ceiling. The wall feels wooden cold like bones. She does not laugh.

"You're not gonna find dick," Theresa says.

Theresa feels the woman's wrangled claw groping around her thighs, the front of her stomach. She realizes as they reach the

underside of her breasts—*whoa, darlin'*—that the woman's arms do not go higher, and realizes with a quick peek back that the woman has dropped the pistol into the gaping pocket of her robe, one finger tracing its gleam. Wouldn't fly like that in my neighborhood, Theresa thinks, hag'd be yawnin' blood and brains.

"You want me to kneel?" She this time can't not laugh.

The woman is quiet for a moment, and Theresa waits for the gun's cock, gets ready to bop her ass frightful.

"Yes, kneel," the woman says. "Pray."

She rips off Theresa's hat, and tosses it to the floor where it holds yanked-free strands of hair. The move is quick and harsh, *quick*, so Theresa thinks maybe she's underestimating this beast. She closes her eyes.

"I can keep walking," she says.

"Have a seat," the woman says, "I'll make tea." She disappears through a door that swings with creaks, and Theresa cracks her knuckles. From the door's other side: "Plenty of time for walking."

"So."

"You have a phone," Theresa says.

"I don't," the woman says.

The two women stare from chairs perfectly spaced, and tilted with springs and slants, perfectly uncomfortable. The shorter's legs dangle above the ground and her bathrobe is open without shame on breasts dropped by time and white like dampened flour. The tall one looks beyond the short and around the barren hovel. Bare knotty walls, no pictures, no books, and the only visible décor she can see is a yellowed pillow sunk in the little woman's lap.

"Is there some phone booth or something," Theresa says, "because my car's—"

"No luck," the woman says.

Theresa is breathing through her nose and stabbing her fingers into her knees, looking around. She is breathing out her nose in tiss.

"We'll get your car in the morning," the woman says.

“You know someone?” Theresa says.

The woman stares at the floor so Theresa sees her eartops like clams gone rotty. She thinks she might break, all this walking and crime now this—she stares across the chasm in her break. The woman scrunches at the pillow in her lap.

A checkerboard border of black on the pillow, and in its center a cross-stitched proverb which Theresa cannot read through the woman’s cuddle of arms.

“Can I see?”

The woman tosses the pillow across the space and Theresa palms it midair like, of course, a bas—

“I used to sew more,” the woman says. She holds up her twisty hands apologetic.

Theresa hmms. She reads the stitched design and reads it twice:
didn’t make this world
only learned to hate it
didn’t make this world
only learned to hate it

“Weh-hell,” Theresa says.

“I’m proud of it,” the woman says.

“I don’t get it.”

“Not yet you don’t.”

Theresa looks around for more in the staring silence, with wind touching her like ghostfingers from gaps in the slatted walls. Crazy bitch, knit that shit.

“You ever play hoop?” Theresa says.

Theresa nods painful. She sips her tea, some pansy rosehip dribble. She wonders if there’s poison, crazy bitch, sips slower. Her knees point up high though her bigole feet crush the wooden floor, and she wonders where she’ll sleep tonight. And the car.

The woman scratches at her toothless gums, nibbles some squishy bit from her finger.

So.

A sound above Theresa’s head startles her slightly scared, and she cranes around to see just below the timbered ceiling a shelf spanning the length of the wall. On it perch dustbunnies and an

urn. And an orange cat peeks over as if to possibly pounce.

Raiwwwr.

“That your cat?” Theresa says.

The woman covers her mouth with a hand and twitters. Theresa bites her teeth. She repeats into silence:

“That your—”

“My husband,” the woman says.

Theresa sees the urn and understands crazy. The cat inches up to the edge, and inches back. Looks around. Inches near the urn.

“Thing might knock it down,” Theresa says. “That cat might tip him over.”

The woman nods. “Okay,” she says, and nods.

Theresa figures the urn won’t hit her when it falls. She won’t move, then. She looks at the urn, a fancyass vase all laced with purple trim, practically alone up there, and looks at the cat. The cat looks hungry. And stuck.

“Can he get down?” she says.

The woman kicks her feet. Holds her tea warmhanded.

“Your cat,” Theresa adds, “can your *cat* get down?”

“Not really,” the woman says. She does have eyes, Theresa sees, and they are shrinking again as the woman smiles like she’s gonna just start rolling in it. But the smile creeps Theresa into a tiny shudder, like all that laughin’ *with* and laughin’ *at* crap she lays on her hoopgirls. She wonders which with the woman.

“Not really,” Theresa says, more to herself, “not fuckin’ really,” and puts her teacup down on the floor. She stands from the chair and pivots quick—*Eat that!*—and pulls the cat down without hardly stretching. The cat is rodential in her giant hands.

“How long’s he been up there?” she says.

“I’m not as tall as you,” the woman says. “I can’t climb like you.”

Theresa feels like she’s being fooled at—damned!—*with*. She sits down with the cat and tweaks his belly and the cat doesn’t purr or anything from some state of stretching shock. She sets him on the floor, and he looks around a bit, then paces between the two women, back and forth, back and forth. Like he were walking on a shelf.

"I feed him," the woman says, and Theresa looks up from the march. "I throw him food up there. *Good* food. Bacon."

"Then what's he drink?" Theresa says. "You throw him a bowl of damned water?"

"Ice cubes," the woman says. "*Damned* ice cubes."

Theresa looks upon her enormous feet, tucked into puffy hightops, sore from that walk of uphill constancy. The woman hardly notices Theresa at all, just kicks her feet as if in some cracking waiting room of some cracking healer who won't ever arrive. Theresa feels in her chill that she is no guest at all, but some part of this crone's sad wait. She's sure she doesn't want such, nor to help her into bed wherever-the-hell, nor to bathe her in the grey bin of water stagnant by the kitchen door. She thinks of the tub in her not-yet-condo, flash with mirrors.

"I was going to tell you about my car," Theresa says. "It's broken down, other side of—"

"We can't go until the morning. I have to feed *that*."

She points to the cat, which stops pacing to tilt his scraggled head. In a split he cranks around and bolts. Up Theresa's knees with a thrashing of claws—*gawdamned!*—and over her shoulder, shelfbound. The cat is again stuck in wait for ice and bacon. The woman looks satisfied scratching her pimples thigh.

"Thing is stupid," Theresa says, "that's what. Thing is stuck."

She watches the cat and will not get him down again. He can shatter the woman's urn of ash, and Theresa can watch her scoop up the bonedust and cry, hell with it, make mud out of whatever fool married *her*. The woman is also watching the cat up there.

"You know," she says, "he *never* knocks him down. It's something of a miracle."

The urn wobbles a bit along the cat, but rights itself well, like special effex.

"Never knocked him down?" Theresa says, watching. "How long's he been up there?"

"Died *years* ago."

"Cremation, though," Theresa says, pursing her mouth like she'd licked mildew.

"His wish," the woman says.

"I couldn't torch no one," Theresa says, "even a man."

"It's funny, though," the woman says, "he wanted to be spread in the snow up above timberline. You know, he wanted to join the snowmelt or some nonsense, *drip* into the river valley where he used to go fishing. Last wishes."

Theresa thinks for a moment she might half-like this crone, with her loneliness and her rituals past. But then the woman laughs to herself, and with her head tilting toward the roof as if to curse this former man, she stops laughing and looks as if she'd just had some sickened vision, smiling gums like plucked pink roots. Theresa sees white bristles in the crone's gaped nose, across her upper lip, needling from her chin.

"So that dumbshit cat can crash the jar to bits," Theresa says. "The urn's empty—"

"No," the woman says.

"He's in the snow," Theresa says, "it's what you jest said."

"He's *not*," she says, "that's it. He's still in there." And she is laughing, again.

"Last wishes," Theresa says, "my ass."

Crazy-betrayal-bitch.

Theresa is slumped in her chair in the dark and listening to the woman's perpetual wheeze. She cannot sleep sitting up like this with a blanket too short and wrongly wrapped, but the woman wheezes in it, sleep, from her chair right there—pillow in her lap, gaped pink mouth, bathrobe split around her body, sleeping. And the cat asleep above.

Theresa is in the dark and thinking about her money. All that money, and unsleeping in a damned chair. She waits and waits for the hum of some stranger's car on the road outside. She is ready to spring away and get elsewhere help, but none comes, and none she's sure will. She might have stacked her bricks of cash on the hood of her broken car, some greedy monument to some wrathful god, and not a body would know its existence out in the silence.

She tries to sleep. She tries. She feels a nightmare coming.

She tries to sleep.

The house in the morning is sliced with sun through its slats, and Theresa without sleep stares into a bowl of grey mush slopped up by the woman.

"If you aren't going to eat it," the woman says from the kitchen, "pass it here. I've only got one bowl."

"Feedin' me this shit," Theresa says, stabbing at the mush, "givin' that stupid cat bacon."

The woman appears in a flurry of tattered robe and snatches the bowl away.

"If we must be together like this," the woman says, "you might try to be *pleasant*."

From her moment of surprise, Theresa goes a hell-you-say mumble, then says: "Listen—"

"I've heard it," the old woman says, and scoops down a spoonful in a halfstance hobble. "Go take the tarp off the car. I'll be only a minute." A grey dollop drops to her chin; she laps it with her foody tongue. "*Gowahn!*"

Theresa is looking out the black Lincoln's tinted window at the slant of mountainside, pinetops brushing each other under breeze, other trees tumbled in wrecks of deadfall. The woman is silent and the radio is AM cowboy—*sheehitt*. Theresa is fingering her toothgap and shaking her head. She looks over at the tiny woman driving and shakes her head.

Hoopgirls'll never believe.

"You *sure* you don't want me to drive?" Theresa says, fingering her seatbelt.

The woman ignores her, weaving the giant car along the road's bad shoulders. She is propped atop a cinderblock and squinting through the steering wheel. Theresa looks down to the woman's feet and shakes her head again. Stacks of single-serving boxes of cereal are duct-taped to the pedals. Each time the woman guns it, or slows to cut a badly-measured turn, a rising *Crrunch* crackles through the

car. Theresa looks down to the places where the boxes have split, where small falls of Fruit Loops and Trix pour out to the floorboards in a spectrum of tidbits and crumbs, broken Cheerios.

Feedin' me mush.

Timberline approaches. The woman sighs through her nose. Guns it, crazy bitch.

Crrunch.

The woman is backing right up to the Volvo's front bumper, and Theresa is combing the roadside with her eyes, seeking other snowprints, seeking the safety of her forested bag. The two cars clunk together.

"There," the woman says, and climbs out from the height of her Lincoln. Theresa closes her eyes for a spell then follows.

At the back of the long Lincoln the trunk is open and the woman is gone. And then she is there, climbing out of the trunk in her bathrobe so her breasts wattle down and are bluish with cold, and she is holding a frayed rope as she bumbles out like the car is giant and she not small. The rope is a knotted rosary of fixed breaks.

"We'll tow you to a phone," the woman says, and begins braiding the shabby rope through the Volvo's bumper and laughing *with* herself.

"Lemme try to start her first," Theresa says, but the woman keeps tying.

The woman seems selectively deaf and Theresa bags it and climbs into the Volvo, taps the dash, turns the key to a click of silence. She tries again, luckless. Gets out.

"Give me a hand," the woman says, "you know the drill."

The woman finishes her poor tangles and Theresa reaches around her to tighten them, finds some version of sabotage in the woman's loose knots.

"Tryin' to kill me," Theresa says, more to herself as the woman walks back around the Lincoln and begins her slow climb in.

"Harder than you'd think," the woman says, and Theresa adds another knot to each bumper just in case, the old bat. Before climbing into the Volvo to begin her ride up, Theresa makes sure the

woman isn't watching, and tosses her extra tee to the side of the road, so her future place, her future bag, won't be lost.

The tow up the mountain is a jux of deadly threats, the rope between cars twanging with bursts of dust. Under the woman's tug, sweeping curves imagine themselves beyond the road and gravel sprays and limbs scrape. Theresa considers the woman's husband as she steers within the mayhem, and thinks how easily his wish was denied.

Come timberline, Theresa decides on something and honks the horn. The Lincoln drags her faster, and Theresa jabs the horn for nothing except to scatter perching birds. She is cursing.

Latched to this woman she is alone with her plan, so alone she puts it through: presses down the clutch, gears into first, and as the road stretches straight she plunges free the clutch and in an eruption of smoking tires she's jerked hard into the wheel, bashing her lips, but the Volvo sparks alive, and stays. She tastes slight blood but *whoops* anyway. She honks and is ignored by the dragging black car. She flashes her lights; the cars speed into downward turns.

Theresa's hands slip sweaty on the Volvo's wheel. She thinks of her brand new bag and thinks of the calm she needs through each mad turn despite the panic cooking beneath her skull. She is reaching the mountain's base soon and with it the woman's shack. But the woman, she knows, will keep going, pushing on, ignoring Theresa as she honks. She gives herself a final hell-with-it, and slams both feet on the brakes. This afternoon she'll doubledunk.

Brakes: The Lincoln lunges backward and its rear hops from the road. In a sweep of fuming tires, the black car sways itself right as the rope snaps up and slaps back like an angry whip. In a skidded moment that for Theresa lasts forever, the Volvo lunges to a stop, its engine still running; the Lincoln speeds away, dragging its empty rope behind. Theresa watches the woman disappear in her black stretch of car, and putting the Volvo in reverse, licks the red from her lips. Watches a feather drop.

In yer face.

Theresa sees her place up ahead, her tee shirt balled upon the roadway. She sings to herself as the Volvo purrs to a stop, feeling despite her sleepless haze that she will be ready for practice if she can get home in the next bunch of hours. She is happy. She sings:

Short people ain't got no reason to
No reason to live a'tall

Side of the road, parking brake on, Theresa examines her bleedings in the rearview. The cut along the top of her gumline is not bad, but as she presses it with her finger she feels a slight looseness in the reddening tooth below. She pokes at it, cringing, and pokes again. As she does the tooth clicks off as if a piece of bonewhite Lego.

Lord above.

Theresa examines it and doesn't believe. Its roots string outward tentacular, and she feels in her gut a welling that would become tears were she not so furious at the bonish thing in her palm. She tries to fit it back, *cramming*, but the socket will not hold, and in the rearview she sees her gummy gap trickling red has widened.

It strikes Theresa, as she slams shut the damned Volvo's front door, that her sleepless night is creeping her world, and maybe the taste in her mouth is part of a dream gone bad. She walks with heavy feet through the roadside snow, kicking it pissed, and the silence she hears when she enters the woods was not there a moment ago; the silence contains an engine suddenly stalled. She looks from her spot among the boulders and the Volvo is there, and still. She does not get her new bag. She melts a globe of snow against her teeth, numbs her bleedy gums.

Theresa knows even before she reaches the front of her car, with its broken rope and feathers flicked by invisible wind, that it will not start. She knows she will have to begin walking soon, and knows that this afternoon she won't get back to doubledunk for the hoopgirls. Tomorrow, special treat.

Damned coach, they'll never believe. Ever believe.

She's walking, again.

She's still walking, again.

Ray Major

Zen in France

A coon's age ago,
Not far from Monet's garden,
I stood on a slate patio
With a whiskey in my hand
And let a French girl nibble at my ear,
Till she asked my religion.
I told her
I sat in meditation
And read Zen poetry to cats.
She was a skeptic,
She scolded me with her finger,
Tapped my glass and said,
Monsieur, il n'est pas le Zen.
And I said *Tu as raison, cheri*
And I poured the whiskey
Down her dress.
C'est le Zen.

Featured Writer

Sonia Sanchez

Sonia Sanchez was Distinguished Visiting Writer in poetry at the University of Idaho the week of April 10, 2000. A leader in the Black Arts Movement during the 1970s, Sanchez was born in Birmingham, Alabama, and educated at Hunter College (New York). She did graduate work in poetry writing under Louise Bogan at New York University. Her first book, Homecoming, was published in 1969; her fifteenth collection, Shake Loose My Skin: New and Selected Poems, appeared in 1999. "Sister's Voice" is reprinted from Does Your House Have Lions? (1997) with the permission of the author, for which Fugue is most grateful.

Sonia Sanchez

Sister's Voice

this was a migration unlike
the 1900s of black men and women
coming north for jobs. freedom. life.
this was a migration to begin
to bend a father's heart again
to birth seduction from the past
to repay desertion at last.

imagine him short and black
thin mustache draping thin lips
imagine him country and exact
thin body, underfed hips
watching at this corral of battleships
and bastards. watching for forget
and remember. dancing his pirouette.

and he came my brother at seventeen
recruited by birthright and smell
grabbing the city by the root with clean
metallic teeth. commandant and infidel
pirating his family in their cell
and we waited for the anger to retreat
and we watched him embrace the city and the street.

first he auctioned off his legs. eyes.
heart. in rooms of specific pain.
he specialized in generalize
learned newyorkese and all profane.
enslaved his body to cocaine
denied his father's signature
damned his sister's overture.

and a new geography greeted him.
the atlantic drifted from offshore
to lick his wounds to give him slim
transfusion as he turned changed wore
a new waistcoat of solicitor
antidote to his southern skin
ammunition for a young paladin.

and the bars. the glitter. the light
discharging pain from his bygone anguish
of young black boy scared of the night.
sequestered on this new bank, he surveyed the fish
sweet cargoes crowded with scales feverish
with quick sales full sails of flesh
searing the coastline of his acquiesce.

and the days rummaging his eyes
and the nights flickering through a slit
of narrow bars. hips. thighs.
and his thoughts labeling him misfit
as he prowled, pranced in the starlit
city, coloring his days and nights
with gluttony and praise and unreconciled rites.

Eye of the Beholder

Mid-April, and I am unearthing carrots. The densely packed clay they struggled through all year deformed the narrow bodies, twisting and contorting them like ancient trees. But they are survivors. In spite of last spring's surprise freeze, the drench and drought of summer, and months of frost and ice, they emerge now firm and sweet. When the last is pulled from the ground I begin to break the stubborn soil, turning it under with compost, softening with peat. The bed will hold more tender crops this year, ones that do not have the strength to grow unaided.

Spring, with its re-emergence, wakening, rising, is life. And truly there is no subject more worthy of wordcraft. Whether unraveling from slumber, exploding from seed-spheres, or coloring the drab landscape in order to open our tired eyes, spring is the time of creation. Columns of tulips, grape hyacinth like sweet blisters, petticoated pansies, and the star-marked forsythia. Where once nothing existed, something now becomes.

Caught up in this season of surprise, "real life" holds little appeal. A pile of books I was supposed to have read last semester remains on the corner of my desk. They were to be primers for a writing workshop already over—a week that slipped away quickly as a storm-sprung earthworm and just as slippery to grasp.

I first met the poet two years ago through a video recording. Listening to her speak, I knew I could never see or hear poetry as I had before. When she read, her voice and body were transformed—possessed by a demon muse she whispered, shrieked, moaned, howled, clucked, clicked, laughed, crooned, stuttered, and sang—she *was* the poem, and it was her. The words grew out from passion and hope while remaining deeply rooted in her life. Her work was composed of a sincerity and raw emotion that seldom

translates through secondhand experience, yet she was able to move me profoundly and immediately inspired a poem in which I thank her and other black women poets who have deeply affected my life and my craft. An excerpt from "Ode to Black Woman Poet":

Lucille

your wishes for sons have been visited upon the
daughter
whose hips swing just as free

Maya

once i held a shining moment where i knew what it
was to be
a phenomenal woman
and turned to wish you a *good morning*

Sonia

your hopes for the world are my hopes for the world
and i find peace lies within your voice
and i gladly surrender my privilege to you

Nikki

who would hate the most—
your militant dreams were similar in magnitude if not
content
to my own militant dreams
and i went ego tripping with you over egypt
and we were natural women doing what women do
when they are natural

Toni

who writes not stories but gifts
and a little girl spoke to me once and her voice was
your voice
crying out from brain, ohio or birmingham and it
was my voice

Alice

our brown mother is the same brown mother
and i was there with you in africa in 1965 although i
was not yet born

and through you i have learned how to possess the
secret of joy

...

because you have taught me
i will call you my sister
and hold your beautiful face in my hands

knowing that once
however briefly
i have touched greatness

The second time I met Sonia Sanchez she was standing outside a classroom at my university. Initially my eye was drawn to the liquid tints of the sheer scarf covering her hair—she was in so many ways a woman of color. I was then struck by how short this powerful, engaging woman was. As Dudley Randall says in the introduction to Sonia's book *We A BaddDDD People*, "This tiny woman with the infant's face attacks the demons of this world with the fury of a sparrow defending her fledglings in the nest." Not even five feet tall, she possesses a rare strength and grace, and, as I would soon discover, the voice of an angel. Not a sweet, comforting guardian, but a terrible messenger of God, a creature whose song shatters bone, and whose gaze burns the eyes from their sockets.

As a writer and an individual she defies convention. During workshop Sonia closes her eyes when speaking of writing, sometimes for several minutes, as if trying to recall the words to a long-forgotten prayer. But it is when she opens her eyes that the real power is revealed. For while she exudes perpetual strength and confidence, it is the eyes which communicate her spirit to the world. This spirit is as visible today as it was thirty years ago where in a book portrait the poet holds her chin high and proud, gold-hoop earrings framed by a six-inch Afro, eyes angry and saying *resist, respect, remember*.

Energy such as this cannot be readily contained, and it has to a

certain degree altered and infected me. Only a day into the week-long workshop and I am exhausted, both emotionally and creatively. I lift rounded scoops of dirt, shaking weeds free, chopping clumps with the shovel blade. I am taking more time this year, more care to make sure the soil is prepared correctly. It must be able to hold water, but not solidify and fracture when dry. If it is too loose or too solid growth will be hindered and cultivation difficult. I want to write about this day, this moment, but I cannot describe it. I cannot express adequately the peace one feels with grit under the nails, a garden full of fat, healthy worms, and the way the turned earth wraps cool tendrils of dampness around bare toes. The best I can do is grow things now and hope the words come later.

Sonia asks us to write a memory poem. One of my earliest and most vivid memories is from the summer I was four years old. I fell on an open sardine can and the jagged lid sliced through my hand. The incision was stitched without being numbed, and left a large scar on my right hand. I consider making this poem the first of a series of works about scars. That is until Sonia says, "This story is not what your poem is really about. Write what it's really about." Well, *I* certainly thought I had written what my poem was really about, but Sonia says it lacks the fear, the terror of childhood. So I try again, hoping to recall something thoroughly traumatic—completely poem worthy. Unfortunately for the reservoir of horrific experiences, I had a happy childhood. I was not upset by anything too severely or for an extended period of time. Nothing, that is, but the one thing I don't want to talk about. The thing that is not about physical scars. The thing I can never make words for.

All my life I have carried a constant reminder, a stigmata of sorts, which tells the world I am different, I am other, I am not beautiful. Because mother told me it was not noticeable, because other children seldom pointed it out, I did not see it for a long time. But as I grew older, more aware of my own body, it became a fixation. A fixation that has recently been insinuating itself ruthlessly. Over the years I have learned to love my sturdy legs, my ample rear, the curve of fat below my navel. I've dealt with my

freckles and scars and crooked teeth. But still I believe—I *know*—if I could only change my eyes, if I could *fix* them, I might be beautiful.

The second night of workshop Sonia passes around pictures of herself, taken when she was a teenager. These are to be the starting point for her own memory poem. In one picture she is posing in a bathing suit. She begins to tell us a story.

When she and her sister were very small they were playing together on the porch, surrounded by aunties and such. One commented on the sister's beauty: "She is such a pretty little thing." Upon hearing this, sister raised her head and neck "swan-like," Sonia says, to bask in the praise being bestowed upon her. "What about Sonia?" another asks. A pause. Then, "She looks like her father . . . but she's smart." So this girl, who would one day become an activist for black power and womanism, set out to prove herself worthy of shallow praise. She accomplished this by winning a bathing beauty contest in which her sister also participated. "I won because my figure was more proportional," she says. "I was not prettier than my sister—she had this gorgeous, gorgeous face," she says, touching her own cheekbones. I was bewildered. How could anyone think this woman was not beautiful? Not only did she carry herself with pride and extraordinary inner grace, but her face, her features, were positively lovely. She transcends beauty all the way to radiance.

I don't talk to people about my eye. Lazy, sleepy, ptosis. No one seems to understand. Sometimes I don't understand. It appears no one else in the world has this affliction, at least I have never seen it in another face. Since birth, all my life, I have been the only one. I wonder what might have been scripted on my genes. What my mother did wrong to hinder my development. What sin I was marked for before I took my first breath. One day it seems the most important thing in the world, the next a petty conceit. This day is one of the important days. My right eye and all its implications have been vexing me into a shallow depression. Not severe, just persistent. I have too many other things to think about, yet this thing, this small little bit of a thing is dominating my thoughts.

The only cure is a hot bath. I pick up a book of essays by Alice Walker. With the arrival of Sonia, I have been thinking about the women in my poem, about their legacy, experiences, and voices. Today I need to hear a voice not my own. Descending into the steam, I open the book to the table of contents and see there is an essay entitled "Beauty: When the Other Dancer Is the Self." I know I could certainly use someone else's perspective on the subject. Alice begins to tell the story of a childhood accident that injured her right eye and left it blind:

But it is really how I look that bothers me most. Where the BB pellet struck there is a glob of whitish scar tissue, a hideous cataract, on my eye. . . . For six years I do not stare at anyone, because I do not raise my head (Walker 387).

This is peculiar. Remarkably familiar. How is it that on this particular day I find myself reading the story of an eye? A disfigured right eye? I too did not raise my head for many years. I still cannot look directly into someone's eyes unless I feel I know them well. And many times I have been told things such as "It could be worse, you could have a _____, or not have a _____." It was meaningless. Couldn't they see? Couldn't they understand that everyone saw it? That it was the first thing people noticed about me? I would never be seen like other girls.

That night, as I do almost every night, I abuse my eye. I rant and rave at it, in front of the mirror. I plead with it to clear up before morning. I tell it I hate and despise it. I do not pray for sight. I pray for beauty (Walker 389).

I once discussed the problem with an optometrist, who had two things to say on the subject: "Children on the playground can be very cruel," and "At least you're not blind." The last statement still rings in my ears. *At least you're not blind.* Yet, even if I were, would I not pray for beauty just as Alice did?

How is it that this story, this essay, is my own life? How is it that two people can experience such parallels? Like Alice, I too prayed for beauty.

It was the summer after my junior year of college and I needed to get away. I packed my car with a cooler, tent, sleeping bag, and

clothes. I had no plan, no agenda, I just pointed west and started driving. Although I did not realize it then, my entire journey was directed by providence.

By the end of the first day I was halfway through British Columbia, driving in the dark with no idea where to stop for the night. By chance I came across a campground in the middle of high mountain wilderness. It was full of RVs and trailers, not my idea of getting away, but it would do for the night. The camp hosts were exceptionally friendly, welcoming American dollars at a good exchange rate and going so far as to help me set up my tent by headlights.

The morning was my first indicator this would not be an ordinary road trip. I woke at dawn, quite alone, remembering and suddenly grateful for the fact that RV campers get up late. I discovered the lake—deep, still, surrounded by fleshy evergreens, blanketed with, and this is true, a thick fog braided with the haunted trilling of loons. I took a deep breath to make sure I wasn't dreaming. The tingle of cold air told me I was not. I wanted to dive into the water, to join the birds in their misty shroud. But when a single submerged toe came back bloodless and blue, I thought better of it.

These strange and wonderful occurrences repeated themselves for the next two weeks.

In Vancouver I could not get a room at the youth hostel where I planned to stay. After a long day on the road ending in this strange place with nowhere to go, I felt overwhelmed. The desk clerk was kind enough to give me a list of alternative housing. I called the University of British Columbia, which had rooms available. There I rented a private dorm room for ten dollars a night, complete with a communal bathroom and kitchen, as well as a splendid view of the ocean and setting sun. Since I shared the floor with only a few others, I could soak in the bathtub for hours. Resuming this small ritual brought me back to myself, allowed me to become calm and focused.

The next day I visited the Vancouver Aquarium where I walked through clouds of Amazon butterflies and spent the afternoon study-

ing fish. Wandering through the park, blissfully unaware, I suddenly realized I was toe-to-face with a 2,000 pound whale. The large male orca rested in a small holding pen off the side of the pool. Apparently it was not a widely known fact that one could stand here, reach out an arm, and almost touch a killer whale, because in spite of the hundreds of people at the aquarium, we were alone. He drifted to the edge of the concrete, lifted his entire head from the water, and looked right into my eyes. We remained that way, staring at each other for a very long time, until we were discovered by tourists. I went on my way and he dropped back below the surface and retreated to a corner.

I read my tarot cards that night: they predicted abundance and new beginnings.

In the morning I ferried over to Vancouver Island, where I found free camping a few yards from the ocean. It was unbelievably cold at night, and the sound of large rocks rolling and retreating in the surf kept me from sleeping soundly. I was saved from freezing by a wool blanket I felt strangely compelled to steal from the university, hoping it would not bring bad karma. The next morning while I was gathering shells at the beach, ravens raided the campsite and stole my smoked salmon. I decided it was a fair trade.

Walking through Victoria, I distributed my pocket money to street musicians. A girl on the seawall was playing a song from the album I had listened to since leaving home days before—"Lovers in a Dangerous Time" by Bruce Cockburn. Another strange coincidence.

That night tarot cards told me of a future love.

Now driving through northwestern Washington, I had been alone for almost a week, seeing what I wanted to see, going where I wanted to go. The trip was otherworldly. On this night I planned to camp in the Olympic Rainforest. Unfortunately, and typically, I could not find any open sites, so I slept by the side of the road. In the morning I found what looked like an old logging trail. I hiked until I reached the shore of a small river. I stayed there for the night. In the morning I bathed in the icy stream, marveled at the endless green, and studied the many species of fern and colossal

slugs. I was awestruck by everything, and very much at peace. I stayed another night, and I as I wrapped myself in the purloined blanket I listened to the smooth roar of water and wind sifting through leaves. *Everything in my life is right, except for my face.* I prayed for a miracle.

To whom or what I was praying I could not say. My faith has evolved over the years, starting with a traditionally Christian belief in my childhood and ending up in an encompassing Taoist realm. Although I consider myself a Taoist, I am a disciple without proper guidance in the form of a church or spiritual leader. The beauty of Tao, however, is that it works with anything, anytime, anywhere. Its fundamental principle is balance and harmony—opposing forces working as a whole.

Regardless of affiliation, I have always ultimately believed in a greater energy, a substantially non-conventional god that permeates all beings and beliefs. Any time I have needed guidance, assistance, or even substance, I have received it. So that night I prayed. I prayed for the impossible—I prayed for beauty And I truly believed it would happen.

In the morning I woke up warm, rested, and centered. I found a small mirror and, propped up on one elbow, prepared myself for a miracle.

Nothing. The same face. The same eyes. I honestly believed it could happen. Everything seemed so right to make it happen.

But even the absent miracle did not darken the light I had gathered. Although it would not be the first or last time I would struggle to change myself, this time in my life was a tangible turning point, and I was offered a brief glimpse of a clear future.

I recall these things as I lay submerged, soaking the pain from my skin and bones. I remember years of unanswered prayers, hoped-for remedies, attempts at hiding or correcting my flaw. I would exercise the eyelid to strengthen the attaching muscle, stretch the good one down to lengthen and compensate, grow the front of my hair so I could use it to cover the offensive part. I wanted surgery. I wanted to fix the problem and be through with it. Each time I consulted with plastic surgeons I was more than ready to rid

myself of this problem, but each time circumstance intervened and delayed the process again.

Alice did have surgery. When she was fourteen, her brother and his wife took Alice to a doctor who removed the scar tissue, leaving behind a small, bluish crater. Suddenly she finds she can look at people again, look into their faces and allow them to look into hers. Everything changes. She gets better grades, a boyfriend, and positive recognition from her peers.

Then, many years later, she is giving an interview for a magazine. The journalist asks what kind of “look” she wants for the accompanying picture:

Suddenly all I can think of is whether I will get enough sleep the night before the photography session: if I don’t, my eye will be tired and wander, as blind eyes will.

At night in bed with my lover I think up reasons why I should not appear on the cover of a magazine. “My meanest critics will say I’ve sold out,” I say. “My family will now realize I write scandalous books.”

“But what’s the real reason you don’t want to do this?” he asks.

“Because in all probability,” I say in a rush, “my eye won’t be straight” (Walker 390).

I hate being photographed. Nowhere does this disfigurement show more explicitly and disturbingly than in pictures. When I know photos are imminent, I experiment with the way I turn and tilt my head, how much I can smile without squinching my eye shut, exactly how I should sit or stand so that the camera captures the least amount of asymmetry. As for the men . . . how can you believe a man who says you are beautiful when he is in love with you?

It seems no amount of time and distance can heal these hidden scars. Like a solid mass of tissue under the skin, they can be felt long after they are supposed to have been healed.

But then Alice remembers:

I am twenty-seven, and my baby daughter is almost three. Since her birth I have worried about her discovery that her mother's eyes are different from other people's. Will she be embarrassed? I think. What will she say? Every day she watches a television program called "Big Blue Marble." It begins with a picture of the earth as it appears from the moon. It is bluish, a little battered-looking, but full of light, with whitish clouds swirling around it. Every time I see it I weep with love, as if it is a picture of Grandma's house. One day when I am putting Rebecca down for her nap, she suddenly focuses on my eye. Something inside me cringes, gets ready to protect myself. All children are cruel about physical differences, I know from experience, and that they don't always mean to be is another matter. I assume Rebecca will be the same.

But no-o-o-o. She studies my face intently as we stand, her inside and me outside her crib. She even holds my face maternally between her dimpled little hands. Then, looking every bit as serious and lawyerlike as her father, she says, as if it may just possibly have slipped my attention: "Mommy, there's a world in your eye...Mommy, where did you get that world in your eye?" (Walker 392-93)

The impact is such that I can almost feel it. A tiny crack in my third rib. A distinct thump against my breast bone. A moment without breath. Then I cry. That this might be beautiful, might be valuable, has never occurred to me, has never been an option to consider before this moment. I begin to cry and I cannot stop. I cry from a place deeper than the heart, deeper than scars. I cry until the tears make the water tepid and salty. I cry until I too become liquid, slipping below the surface, melting into water.

Then I remember:

I am twenty-seven, lying in bed with my lover. We are naked

and looking at each other in silence. I ask him, "What was the first thing you noticed about me?"

He answers, "Your eyes."

I can feel my face drop, my illusion vanish.

"They were so striking."

"They're *crooked*."

"I know," he says, "that's why they're so beautiful. This one," he says, pointing at the left, "is the waxing moon. And this is the waning."

I am struck dumb. How can I respond to this beautiful gesture? No sounds, no actions could answer this strange, brilliant moment. I simply return to silence.

Looking back, I would not say this changed my life, or even changed my mind. But what it did do was provide me a touchstone, a place to rest when I had struggled too long. And it was the first time in my life I considered not having corrective surgery.

The moon is growing more full, moving into Libra, which means I should plant seeds soon. I have already started the late crops in carefully marked seed flats and placed them in a warm corner of the house to gestate. But the beds lie fallow. I have cultivated and fertilized them, now I wait for the right time to sow. I line up the packets, decide which will go first. The carrots and radishes, of course. They have proven time and again they can withstand any kind of cold snap. Also the spinach, chard, lettuce, onions, and peas. They like cool weather and unless we get a severe frost they will do just fine. I set aside the vegetable seeds I plan to use in a second and third planting, ensuring a continual supply through autumn. The flower seeds, the ones better sown than started, will remain inside their glossy paper jackets until the sky promises sun. They have not the strength or determination to tolerate chill.

I can see that the lawn needs to be mowed, the hedges pruned, the dandelions' progress checked. But I do not have the energy to undertake these tasks. The two hours I spend in workshop are completely draining. Sonia is so intense, so magnetic, that simply being in her presence shifts something inside me. Whereas the others in this class seem to have tapped a spring of inspiration and

endless poetry, I am digging in earth of salt and sand, moving away from my own words, toward I don't know what.

Sonia's words are most effectively conveyed through her own voice, and in fact some of her work is only fully understood when read aloud. But her art is revealed on the page as well, where the words become colors, shapes, and textures. They defy margins and style, utilizing all capitals or lower case, repetition, and alternative spelling.

Sonia was an activist in the 60s and 70s—she still is today, in fact, but her early works reflect anger. Anger directed at racism and sexism. Anger at drugs and violence. Anger at white America.

I have often felt that being white is an apologetic act. In spite of generations, there is a guilt to being colorless, the culmination of history and heritage. Sonia writes of this in a poem, the title of which is an acronym popular in the 1960s (Taking Care of Business):

TCB

wite/motha/fucka

wite/motha/fucka

wite/motha/fucka

whitey.

wite/motha/fucker

wite/motha/fucker

wite/motha/fucker

ofay.

wite/mutha/fucka

wite/mutha/fucka

wite/muthalfucka

devil.

wite/mutha/fucker

wite/mutha/fucker

wite/mutha/fucker

pig.

wite/mother/fucker

wite/mother/fucker
wite/mother/fucker
cracker.
wite/muther/fucka
wite/muther/fucka
wite/muther/fucka
honky.
now, that it's all sed.
let's get to work.

Her point is that it's time to forget the name-calling and get something done about the problems. This is why when I read Sonia's poems I felt as though the anger was being directed at me, although I was blameless as anyone could be, maybe more so because my own grandparents were brought to this country in indentured servitude. Growing up in western Montana I was probably exposed to many forms of prejudice, but I do not believe they affected me. I recall being quite young, playing on the grass in front of our cabin. "Look at me, Mom! I'm the Queen of Sheba!" as I traipsed around with flower scepters and a blanket gown. "The Queen of Sheba was black," Mom said. I thought about this for a moment, said "Oh," and continued ruling my imaginary kingdom. On autumn afternoons I was an Indian princess, then a medicine woman collecting twigs and berries. For Halloween I donned the kimono Grandpa brought Mom from Korea, learned how to say *hello*, *thank you*, and *goodbye* in Japanese, and ate everything with chopsticks. In the winter I was an Eskimo girl. With my faithful "sled dog" by my side I spent the day packing and carving snow into blocks, stacking them and sealing crevices, finally crawling inside the sanctuary of my tiny igloo.

In the middle of the week we take a break from class to attend Sonia's reading. I am reminded of the first time I saw her—the unconventional presentation, the way she can completely enrapture an audience, the sincerity and strength of her poetry. Here is the poet of the words, the painful words from generations ago. Yet something is different. She is more thoughtful and reflective—

perhaps more mature. Of course more mature. She has two grown children now, and is old enough to be a grandmother, a great-grandmother even, and yet she can still speak explicitly about politics, race, loss, the blues, and sex with more heppness than any Generation X-er today. And today she talks not of hate, but of love; not of race, but of unity; not of past transgressions, but hope for now. Did she change or did we? I'd like to think it was a little of both.

She begins to read "Just Don't Never Give Up on Love," the first piece I heard her read those years ago, the poem that in a small but significant way touched my life. It begins with Sonia at the park, trying to write. An old woman who shares her bench starts to talk of love:

"Girl you gots some spunk about you after all. C'mon over here next to me. I wants to see yo' eyes up close. You looks so uneven sittin' over there."

Did she say uneven? Did this old Buddha splintering death say uneven? Couldn't she see that I had one eye shorter than the other; that my breath was painted on porcelain; that one breast crocheted keloids under this white blouse?

My shorter eye? I don't remember hearing that line before. I pause for a moment. Could she be talking about ptosis? No, I think. I had not noticed. It simply couldn't be.

She continues reading, enchanting, her lilt and song voice ceaseless, blurring the distinctions between poem and commentary, between poem and poem. The sounds become one long, lyrical hymn.

I was not going to plant a garden this year. Growth requires much work, sweat, and frustration. It is difficult to remember what joy might have come in the previous year. From the time I started grade school until I graduated high school Mom made me help out in the garden. I hated it. I hated pulling weeds, mucking through mud, stupid root vegetables that snapped their tops when I tried to pull them out of the ground. I hated the smell of pig shit that was an annual requirement for boisterous crops. I hated building fences,

digging holes, hauling rocks, and getting blisters from the rake and rototiller. Then the harvesting, canning, pickling, freezing, and drying. Hours upon hours upon days when it would be simpler and more economical to go to the grocery store and buy a 39-cent can of tomatoes. It all seemed a little unnecessary.

Then I got my own piece of earth. Not entirely my own—it's rented. But for six months out of the year I am allowed to tend it, and because it is mine, it is somehow different. Now when the seasons change I must plant. I must write.

It is Friday, our last day of workshop. Sonia and I meet before class for a conference. I have given her a copy of "Ode to Black Woman Poet" and she thanks me with gracious words and an embrace. "That is what poetry is about," she says. "It goes beyond race and gender and class." We discuss poetry's universal power, how poets see beyond borders and language and race and gender, how they are able to comprehend the whole world. "It is because they see with the poet's eye," she says. She looks into my face, into my eyes, and says "See with the poet's eye, my sister." And suddenly I see. Her right eyelid hangs lower than her left. *The poet's eye. The world. My right, Alice's right, Sonia's right. Our eyes. Legacy. Sister. Sister. Sister.*

I call my mother and ask if she thinks the warm weather will stay.

"I don't know," she says, "but there's a lot of things that you can put outside now. A lot of things that can tolerate a frost. And when they come through it makes them stronger."

The beds have lain fallow long enough. On my knees I press my hands together, then spread them far apart, smoothing the surface of the soil. Seed after seed falls to the earth. I cover them gently, water, and wait.

Each night of workshop the group would stand and hold hands. Each person was invited to say what was on his or her mind. And each night the circle ended with Sonia sharing a similar statement:

*It is not easy to write
Being a poet is the most difficult thing there is*

*Walking on two legs is hard
Being a human being is hard
Being alive is the hardest thing there is*

And she is right.

Alice, too, finishes her story:

That night I dream I am dancing to Stevie Wonder's song "Always" (the name of the song is really "As," but I hear it as "Always"). As I dance, whirling and joyous, happier than I've ever been in my life, another bright-faced dancer joins me. We dance and kiss each other and hold each other through the night. The other dancer has obviously come through all right, as I have done. She is beautiful, whole and free. And she is also me. (Walker 393)

I do not know what the future holds for me, if I will ever make peace with my own self, but I do know that for the first time in my life, I have been shown, not once, but three times, that my mark might be a gift. Perhaps I have been given a covenant by those whose footsteps I follow in, by those who have taught me. And I see for the first time that the other dancer might be myself

This year I planted flowers where the vegetables grew. There are enough leafy greens, legumes, brassicas, and root crops to nourish me through the year. I have even established a small bed of carrots among the blue iris, which will open soon. But this is the year of blooming. Marigolds and sunflowers will adorn every bed. Already the strawflowers, poppies, and daisies are eager to take their places. Even the random violets and wild geraniums are tolerated. If it has color it is welcome. Welcome spicate chrysanthemum, milled columbine, daffodils like tiny cups and saucers, primrose powderpuffs, the sticky fragrant nicotiana, alyssum, cosmos, bridal-white spirea, welcome budding lilacs, bleeding heart, welcome fragile lilies, tulips, foxglove, gladiolus spears, gentle morning glory, new and wild roses. Welcome. Welcome to this season, the season

I surround myself with life, abundant flowering life. This year, as far as the eye can see—beauty.

Deborah Gillespie

Extraordinary Neighbors

Evenings the father swings his baby girl,
not yet two, under the oak.
Still in white shirt and work pants,
he pushes her, smiling and smiling.

Peaceful as the front porch
where their three chairs sit,
a red wagon and a bike,
the mother plants pansies along the walk,
their boy shoots hoops till dinner
—a picnic with the squirrels
in a corner of the driveway
where they play forever after.
The boy gives the ball a whirl.
Evenings the father swings his baby girl.

We can hardly believe our luck
after the last ones—evicted,
the yard strewn with cans,
debris of nightly pool parties.
Or the family before—single mother
of three, ex-husband, provoked,
abusive and charged,
the landlord, absentee.
But now a baby laughs and jokes,
not yet two under the oak.

Today the father sits on the porch
alone, home early from work.
Silent as a seed, he sits without
newspaper, book, or magazine,
without food, or drink, or smoke,
he sits as if he never had the chance
to take in spring, a fragrant bath
of lilacs and lilies, the yard is a park.
He gathers green with every glance,
still in white shirt and work pants.

I admire him and his moment,
a precious, endangered species,
and feeling guilty for its ruin
(the lawn is a jungle)
I yell, *Sorry!* and start the mower,
my attempt at reconciling.
He rises, goes inside,
then returns to the tree,
his baby girl beguiling,
and he pushes her, smiling and smiling.

Geography

The renovators woke Sylvia with their saws, sledgehammers, and terrible laughter. Dishes rattled. A picture fell. She lumbered over to the window. Gripping the sill—Sylvia could get vertigo just peering down from her third floor bedroom window—she saw two workmen lug an old fashioned sink-washtub over mounds of tarnished snow. They tumbled it into a dumpster, jeering as it hit bottom with a ringing thump. Sylvia looked across the courtyard for the wagging head of Thelma Bergman deploring the decline of 770 Avenue P from behind parted kitchen curtains. But Thelma had fled long ago. And now, more fully awake, Sylvia remembered her “friends” and fellow holdouts, Hal and Naomi, had defected yesterday, masking their betrayal with misty kisses. She was the only tenant left.

Well, she wasn't going anyplace. After fifty-five years, she had arranged the furniture just right. She took a moment to curse the day she had let Hal and Naomi into her immaculate apartment, then went from room to room assessing damage. Rings on the coffee table. Long, black hairs in the bathroom, one especially revolting strand wound around a bar of soap. Paint streaks on her daughter Judy's floor. She pulled the stained, musty spread off her bed and opened the windows wide.

What she would do was what she had always done. Resume her schedule: Monday floors, Tuesday furniture, Wednesday windows and mirrors, Thursday kitchen, Friday bathrooms. Her future gleamed in the spray from a white plastic bottle. She loved polishing surfaces, and there was something stirring, even spiritual, in the names Joy, Dawn, Pledge, Jubilee, and Fantastik.

Sylvia marched into her kitchen, filled her kettle, broke two eggs in a bowl, beat them vigorously with a fork. When ready, she

carried her green pea omelet and instant coffee into her dining room and sat down. Her dining room—actually an oversized hall—was the heart of her fortress, the room from which the five others radiated. Here, at this very table, her family once ate chicken, boiled, roasted, or fricasseed, her children did their homework, and Sylvia attempted to restore peace over savage games of Geography and Twenty Questions. And here, surrounded by photos, paintings and warm memory, she sometimes imagined that in this vast world filled with dirt and deception, her life amounted to something. On her left, over the sideboard, hung her wedding photo. Sylvia wore a white satin, princess-style gown with covered buttons, and Irving, behind her, a rented tuxedo. On either side were two smaller pictures: baby Larry with pail and shovel before a painted beach backdrop, and a fat, happy, Judy on a sad-looking pony. On her right were three oils done by a much older Judy in her artistic phase. Larry's two little girls—no longer little, of course—beamed from the back wall.

On her second coffee, Sylvia heard a thump. The chandelier swayed, the faded-to beige globe on the sideboard revolved, and fine plaster drifted down from a ceiling crack.

“Made you sit up and take notice, didn't it, Mom” a girlish voice seemed to come from the chair beside her. In crises, the dead often appeared to Sylvia, and at this moment she could almost feel Judy's warm breath stir her hair and smell the turpentine on Judy's smock.

Sylvia brushed off plaster. “I still haven't gotten over that stunt you pulled thirty years ago,” she silently replied.

Judy tucked a pinch of straight brown hair behind her ear. “Always throwing that little incident up to me. I was only a kid. All I wanted was your attention.”

“Suicide is a little incident by you?”

“I was trying to make a point.”

“So, tell me, what was your point?”

Judy's eyes narrowed in her pale, truculent face. “You haven't changed a bit. Everything has to be spelled out, handed to you in writing. Don't you ever read between the lines?”

To Sylvia, Judy looked thin to the point of transparency. "I see what I see. I see you're not eating. Want some omelet?"

"No, thanks."

"How about a little rice pudding? Or sour cream? Non-fat sour cream with an apple or pot cheese?"

"Oh, God, here we go again." Judy flung her arm across her brow, a familiar gesture. "Sorry I'm so dense."

"OK, if you really must know, what I always wanted was...."

Sylvia pursed her lips. Had her last word been "Alaska?" Why Alaska? And why travel to the ends of the earth when you've got all the slush and snow you want right here in Brooklyn? But she had no chance to pursue this. Judy's image had already merged into the carved chair back, her voice effaced by more banging.

Sylvia glanced at the three paintings Judy had forgotten to destroy, as if they might yield a clue. But the palette knife self-portrait, the dark cityscape, and the black outlined fruit stared back in sniffy silence as if to say, if you don't know, we're not telling.

The racket continued all morning. The vacuum cleaner did not drown it out. After lunch Sylvia wrote her grocery list:

pt non-fat sr crm	2 lb gr smith
1 lb. Tom	2 gr pep
doz. Egg	4 bagel

A big afternoon ahead. As she was getting ready, her son Larry, the lawyer called from Phoenix.

"Sure, you're legally entitled to stay," he yelled, "but what are you trying to prove?"

"Tell me, where else can you get five and a half rooms for three-fifty a month?"

"But you don't need five and a half rooms. Think, Morn, does it make sense to risk your life for. . . ."

"And two full baths," she reminded him. After he angrily hung up, she stood there, twisting the telephone cord. He wanted her to move to Arizona. But how could she explain the "family" in her apartment without sounding like the crazy old lady he worried she was becoming. Maybe her ghosts weren't real—of course they

weren't—but they were there, they depended on her, and they filled up the emptiness. It wasn't just Judy. She might turn a corner and see the waving tail of Patches, the calico eat disappearing down the hall, or she'd be watching TV and hear the rustle of pages as Irving sat in his chair, reading the *Daily News*. Or, and this would sound really weird to Larry—how could a living person be a ghost?—eight-year-old Larry might start wheezing at night and she would have to think about getting the humidifier going again.

But now she'd better get started. Sylvia shopped in three or four markets to take advantage of specials, and this was triple coupon day at Safeway. Skirting cables, piles of broken tiles, tipped out floorboards with rusty, protruding nails, and the out-of-service elevator, she trekked down the hall, the dimly-lit stairs, and across the graffiti-trimmed lobby. Through the front door glass, she saw two men climb out of a car, the tall one with a large, official-looking envelope in his hand. She turned right around and huffed up the stairs again. Gasping for breath—her blood pressure must have been off the charts—Sylvia fished through her pocket-book for keys.

She could never forget the evictions of the thirties. Never. Furniture, dishes, a lifetime piled on the sidewalk. Thank God all the other tenants were gone. The thought of strangers gawking at her prized possessions was enough to send her plunging down to that very sidewalk.

As soon as Sylvia was inside, and had locked the two inside locks, the doorbell rang twice. "I'm not in," she yelled.

"We have a great offer for you," a man's voice shouted back.

"If you have a take-out menu, shove it under the door."

"Uncle Manny always said you were an intelligent woman." The voice yelled. "'Can't pull the wool over Mrs. Gold's eyes,' he used to say."

Could they be the hated nephews? After her cheapskate landlord, Manny Fishman, died, his nephews and heirs couldn't sell the bankrupt building or even give it away, according to Thelma Bergman. So they decided to go condo, alternately badgering and bribing the rent-controlled and stabilized tenants to leave. She had

never met the nephews and needed faces to nail her hatred to. She cracked the door as far as the chain permitted.

They introduced themselves as Fred and Bert Fishman. Fred, tall and balding, with a fringe of reddish hair and rimless glasses, said their uncle had the highest respect for her.

“He kept that a secret from me.”

“Well, Uncle Manny wasn’t one to throw around compliments,” Bert, the shorter, darker, more ebullient one, said. He mentioned his uncle’s love for his building, his desire to make it a showcase.

Sylvia looked behind her at the water-stained walls and crazed ceiling. “I always said to your Uncle Manny, ‘Any time you want to fix up this place is OK by me.’”

“Right,” Bert said. “Anyhow, now we have an irresistible offer. Let’s sit down and discuss.”

Sylvia felt that familiar tug behind her knees from varicose veins. She would have liked to sit down, but she had learned that once you let the outside world in your door, anything can happen. She shifted from foot to foot.

* * * *

If everyone minded his or her own business, Sylvia believed, there would be no discontent and no war. Her contribution to world peace had been never talking to any of the other tenants, except, reluctantly, Thelma Bergman, to keep informed. But that was in the pre-renovation notice days. Six months ago, when they had been down to four holdouts—Sylvia in 3C, Thelma in 3D, Naomi Koretz in 6H and Hal Levin in 1E—they had held weekly meetings, usually in her apartment, the largest.

She told herself it was for a worthy cause. Sylvia always had a nice spread after—cheese, crackers, various dips, pastries, fruit—nobody ever went away hungry. Hal brought wine. The renovation was still in the planning stage. Their big topic of conversation was the “blue man,” tall, darting eyes, steam shovel hands, always a blue shirt, roaming everywhere with clipboard and calculator. Thelma, once stuck in the elevator with him, said she nearly died of fright.

One evening, Sylvia was eating supper, the same tuna fish salad

every night—why fuss for one—when the bell rang. Through the peephole, she saw the long, thin neck and large, hungry eyes of Naomi. To Sylvia, she looked like a baby bird shoved from its nest. She asked her in, offered her water. Naomi managed a swallow.

“I started walking up,” she said, “when I heard footsteps behind me. If I stopped, they stopped. If I started, they started, like in the movies. Even if I made it upstairs, even if I locked the door, what then? They say the blue man has a key to every apartment.”

“Don’t you have an inside lock? I have two.”

“I never thought I needed one.”

Sylvia looked at Naomi. She must be in her early forties but wore long, gauzy, see-through skirts and no bra. “A high school math teacher, yet,” Thelma had once whispered. But where Thelma saw craft and desperation, Sylvia saw a sad, willful, wistful innocence that reminded her of Judy. Judy with her long, dark, straight hair, her broomstick arms, and her ruined canvases. “Why not stay here until you get your lock?” Sylvia said.

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to impose.”

“No problem. You can stay in Judy’s room,” she said, shocked by her easy words. When Judy was fourteen, they bought her the rock maple bedroom set. Top of the line, better than Larry’s. She and Judy picked out the flowered bedspread and curtains. Not that it had changed Judy into the vivacious, pony-tailed teenager she was meant to be. “It isn’t *things* I want. Don’t you see, Mom? Don’t you see?”

Now sometimes she did, sometimes not. Sylvia sighed.

After the blue man had left for the day, Naomi carried down three suitcases of clothes that looked like Salvation Army surplus, but had impressive labels with Italian-sounding names. Sylvia watched her hang the clothes in Judy’s closet and arrange her natural cosmetics on Judy’s dresser.

“So many jars and bottles for the Anne Frank look,” Sylvia whispered to Thelma at their next meeting.

“Did you ask her how long she plans on staying?” Sylvia compressed her lips, pretending to look concerned. Actually, the ar-

rangement was perfect for her. In a few days she was washing Naomi's clothes—"No problem, a few extra when I do mine"—preparing eggplant lasagna—"So many vegetarians these days."—and listening to her school problems—"Kids today expect everything on a platter."

Naomi was still there when Thelma Bergman announced she was moving. The stress, she said, was bad for her heart. After Thelma had left the meeting, Hal and Naomi jumped on her. "It was her idea we should stick together," Hal said, helping himself to chopped liver. He was a white-haired, barrel-chested man with a hearty appetite, especially under duress.

"She said she'd rather die than live with her daughter-in-law," Naomi said.

"Claimed the blue man was after her," Sylvia said, rolling her eyes. "She should be so lucky." Ordinarily, Sylvia refrained from bad mouthing anyone, but Thelma had just made the world a less solid place. The "betrayal," as the three now called it, tightened their circle. They toasted their friendship. Then Naomi, smiling wanly, pleaded fatigue and retired to "her" bedroom.

Sylvia stared at the thin slice of space vacated by Naomi. "Skin and bones," she said.

"That's the way women are nowadays," Hal said, attempting to scoop up the last of the chopped liver with a tortilla chip. Sylvia, mortified at the implied criticism of her hospitality, vowed to double the quantity next time. "Did you know Fay, my wife?" Hal asked. She shook her head. "Too bad. Fay was a sensible woman like you. Taught fourth grade. Died two years ago," he said, a catch in his voice. "Her regret—no children."

Sylvia didn't mention her regret. After thirty years, she still got that lump-in-the-throat feeling whenever she said, "Judy died." Yet what else could she say? "Passed on," sounded like the chicken pox, "departed," like a plane, and "expired," like a credit card.

"Life is full of regrets," Hal said. "I paint. I should have started when I was younger. Fay had talent, too. She remembered every student she ever had. She could have written a book. Maybe deep down, we're all geniuses."

That had been Sylvia's secret conviction—had she not been forced to work in her father's store, she could have been high school valedictorian—but how had Hal known? "What I can do is make up recipes in my head," she said, swirling her second glass of wine. "I know how much baking powder will make things rise, and how many eggs will hold things together, and what you can substitute if you run out. If you know the right proportions, you can make anything," Sylvia said, blushing. She had never said anything so puffed up before, but now that she had, the idea reverberated with self-evident truth like the Declaration of Independence, or was it the Constitution?

"They say Beethoven composed the Ninth Symphony after he was deaf," Hal said, refilling her glass.

"Symphonies are not in my repertoire, but anything else. . ."

He laughed. "A bargain, Sylvia; you make dinner tomorrow, and I'll paint your portrait."

Sylvia no longer believed what she saw in her mirror. What miracle could she hope for from a painting? But cooking for more than one stirred some cauldron deep within her: roast lamb, potato soufflé, green beans almondine, spinach mushroom salad, chocolate torte. Who could resist those savory syllables?

So mornings she'd consult the cookbook in her head, make her list, and shop. Afternoons she'd sit for her portrait in the maple armchair with the flowered cushion that went with the bedroom set that couldn't make Judy happy. Hal set up his easel, sketched an outline, and began painting. He wouldn't let her look, but she sensed each brushstroke on her skin.

He told her how he'd been a printer, a salesman, a sailor in the war. She didn't ask which war, and he didn't expect her to. He was the same Depression generation as Irving. Like him, he had gone to Brooklyn Tech and, like him, had taken any job he could get. The ground seemed solid underfoot, so Sylvia talked about her own life. She told him she had gone to James Madison High, and she had loved school. In eleventh grade she owned one white blouse, washed and ironed every night, worn one day with a scarf, one day with a tie, one day plain, when she ran for class president,

her campaign slogan was *Take the lead with Sylvia Fried*. “I won, but my face hurt for week after from smiling.”

Sylvia had not talked so much in years. Her punishment came two weeks later, when she examined the portrait with glasses on. On canvas she appeared cut from a block of stone. Even the folds of her dress looked carved. “So heavy, so settled looking?”

“An interpretation. I saw something eternal in you.”

“The rock of ages.”

“OK, OK, I exaggerated a little,” Hal said, brushing back a strand of gray from her forehead. “You want me to fix it up?”

“No, no, never mind,” Sylvia said. Finished was finished. She remembered how Judy would do a painting, nice design, pretty colors—she was into abstract toward the end—but then she’d keep on painting, painting. No, there was no way to change Hal’s picture without mining it. “That’s art, I guess.”

A few days later, Hal began a portrait of Naomi. What a relief for Sylvia that her modeling days were over. Now she could try the culinary masterpieces that for years had been simmering in her head. Every evening at five she got out her pans, her bowls, her chopping board, and her knives and she diced, sliced and stirred; something dark and meaty for Hal, colorful and vegetarian for Naomi. She loved to watch Naomi stuff herself. She especially loved Hal’s “Haven’t eaten like this in years.” No one since Irving had praised her cooking. Soon Sylvia started taking risks: puree of chestnut soup, squash with wild rice and hazelnuts, beef teriyaki, and a carrot-raisin pie that seemed to fill Naomi out overnight.

One day Naomi left the apartment early, dressed in a baby blue dress with a string of pearls, no less. Wherever she was going, Sylvia hoped Naomi would get back early, because she was planning a special soufflé: one side spinach for Naomi, the other seafood for Hal, the overlapping middle for herself, if nobody else wanted it. At three, just as she was putting a batch of rum-walnut macaroons in the oven—Sylvia was beginning to think she had a way with egg whites—in walked Naomi and Hal. He wore a navy-blue suit, the first suit Sylvia had ever seen him wear, with a carnation in his button hole, yet.

"Doesn't he look handsome?" Naomi asked.

"Oh, yes," Sylvia said, wiping her hands on her apron. "What's the occasion?"

"We got our pictures taken."

"Pictures?"

Naomi smiled blissfully at Hal, then confessed they had just gotten married at Borough Hall. Sylvia just stood there. Married? To each other? Hal didn't even like Naomi, and he was thirty years older. What kind of a crazy world was it where the ground opens up beneath you?

Naomi looked lovingly at Hal. "We wanted to surprise you."

"Well you sure did," Sylvia said. She had never liked surprises.

"Catch," Naomi suddenly said, laughing and tossing Sylvia a small bouquet of white roses. The roses struck Sylvia in the stomach and fell to her feet. Was Naomi mocking her? Sylvia looked at the roses, scattered on the floor, and at Naomi, who seemed ready to burst with more surprises. Then it struck Sylvia that Naomi was pregnant, and what Sylvia thought about the roses, or about anything else, was the farthest thing from Naomi's mind. To his credit, Hal looked sheepish. Proud but sheepish. They waited for her to say something. "Very nice," she choked out.

"By the way, we've accepted the settlement," Hal mumbled. "We think you should, too, Sylvia. I mean, it doesn't make sense for you or for any of us, for that matter, to put ourselves in danger for some abstract principle of solidarity, does it?"

When Sylvia didn't reply, Hal said in a heartier tone. "Come on, Sylvia, smile, smile, like you did for good old Madison High. We've made reservations for you at our wedding dinner tonight."

Sylvia shook her head.

"Please come," urged Naomi, eyes wide and guileless.

"We want you to share our happiness."

Sylvia said she wasn't feeling well. "But enjoy." She waited until they left to throw the flowers in the garbage. Then she peered into the hall mirror to see if she looked like Mrs. Matchmaker, and there, behind her, to the right, stood Irving, a folded newspaper under his arm, a mocking gleam in his eye.

"So what did you imagine Sylvia?"

"Nothing, Irving," she said. "I imagined nothing at all."

"I hate to see a woman of your age make a fool of herself. Tell me, in your own words, what were you thinking of?"

"Thinking?" Sylvia said. Odd how Irving never seemed to grow old. Hair as dark as the day he died. Eyes piercing. "I was thinking of making a spinach-seafood soufflé."

"One spoonful of your soufflé, maybe, and next thing you and Mr. Heartthrob are riding off into the sunset together?"

"You're really enjoying this, aren't you?" she said.

"You didn't see the hanky panky under the table? The fun and games on the bed?"

She fixed her gaze on his mirrored face. She felt that if she turned ever so slightly, the image would wobble. "Maybe if I had nothing better to do with my time, like you."

"Too busy batting your lashes and making fancy-schmancy dishes to look under your nose?"

"Why are you going on like this, Irving? Could you by any chance be jealous?"

"Ha. You should live so long. For him, artichokes. For me, roast chicken with kasha varnishkas when it wasn't kasha varnishkas with roast chicken."

"That's all you ever wanted, remember?"

"It was good, Sylvia. I'm not complaining. But all that chicken. It was the chicken fat that finally did me in. . . ."

* * * *

"And we, in turn will do everything to ensure your safety, but we can't guarantee it," Fred was saying. Had he been talking all along? He looked at her earnestly. "Remember, we are not legally liable for anything that happens."

Sylvia's face softened. That's exactly what her son Larry had said. Strange how Fred with his solemnity and glasses called to mind Larry. Larry had been such a good boy, never giving her a moment's worry. But then her smile froze as she thought of Naomi and Judy and how resemblances deceive.

"All your neighbors are gone. You are all alone." Fred said.

“Think about it, Mrs. Gold.” “So who needs neighbors,” Sylvia said. “I never did.”

* * * *

Now the benches have vanished and the old birds flown South, but thirty years ago the women were lined up on both sides of the courtyard. “Sylvia, Sylvia, sit down. Take a load off your feet,” they would say. To Sylvia, they seemed like crows, trying to coax from her mouth a morsel. As she hustled past them, grocery bag in hand, their cawing escalated. Sylvia would smile, wave, and say she was expecting a phone call.

The big question for them, having no other visible occupation besides gossiping on benches, was, “What’s Irving doing?” It was intolerable that Irving Gold, wearing a suit, driving a Buick with white wall tires, should leave at ten in the morning and return at 3:30 in the afternoon. They prodded and probed, but learned nothing from Sylvia. If Irving wanted to sit in his broker’s office every day, playing the stock market on margin, losing the money he had made the past twenty years from his shoe store, what business was it of theirs? “And how’s Larry doing? Still in law school?”

“Fine, everybody fine.”

“And what about Judy? Still the artiste?” they forged on. They meant twenty-four and not married.

“Also fine,” she said. But, Judy, of course, was not. In high school she had been a misfit. An overweight misfit, without the cushion of good humor that fatness sometimes provides. She didn’t fit in with the other misfits. She didn’t drink, smoke, or carry on with boys, which would be the normal, acceptable route, and provide her, at least with the companionship of bad company.

One morning, in her senior year, she refused to get up. “I feel awful,” she said, coughing.

Sylvia believed in school. She made it a point that her children, if at all ambulatory, went to school every day, nose dripping, eyes fever-bright, trail marked by balled up Kleenexes. She felt Judy’s forehead. Obviously only a cold. “Take a hot shower,” she said. “It will clear your nasal passages.”

Judy sat up, a wild look in her eye. “What if I told you I just

don't want to go to school today? What if I told you I just wanted a day off?"

Sylvia shook her head. "You'll miss something important," she said.

"So I'll read the book."

Sylvia narrowed her eyes. She had been an indulgent mother up to now. She had allowed Judy to go on that stupid grapefruit diet, she had let Judy keep the kitten she found wandering in the hall even though Larry was allergic, she had even stuck up for Judy when she refused to work in the store, but on this one issue she had to take a stand. "No," she said.

"I knew you wouldn't. You, with your middle-class mentality," Judy flung off the quilt and fled into the bathroom. Underneath the patter of the shower, Sylvia heard loud sobbing. Sylvia stood there, twisting her hair, wondering what some other-class mother would have done.

She sighed. Well, at least Judy was getting ready for school.

It was only after Judy graduated from college that she discovered painting. Once she did, she forgot everything else, even forgot to blame Sylvia for her suffering. She lost weight, became interested in men, or maybe it was the other way around. She looked lovely in her new slenderness. But, as usual, she overdid. She painted through the phone ringing, the kettle boiling out, Kennedy's funeral. She painted until two, three o'clock, despite Sylvia pleading with her to eat a bite, Irving yelling at her to go to bed. She was like a truck, all speed and no brakes, barreling through the night. To hide her progressive thinness, she took to wearing loose clothing that dangled from her bony shoulders as from a wire hanger. It took longer and longer to set up her paints. She'd sit for hours, staring at her already overworked canvas. Sometimes she'd just cry, but she refused to see a doctor.

One night Judy painted over all her canvases, painted them black, except the three already on Sylvia's wall. Next morning, when her mother came in to waken her, Judy didn't even look dead. Her arm was flung across her eyes and her lips were curled as if she were merely pouting. But her calico cat must have known. She hid un-

der Judy's bed and would not come out until they took Judy's body away. Later that afternoon, perhaps disturbed by the parade of people, Patches ran out the door and never returned.

Judy had ingested only ten aspirins, not enough to kill her, the autopsy report said, but the bottle on Judy's night table reproached Sylvia with its emptiness. She told Irving how the previous night Judy had asked her what death was like, and she had said, "Like nothing."

"And what is nothing?" Judy had asked.

Sylvia didn't like philosophical questions. "Nothing is nothing," she had said firmly. "You haven't had any supper. Would you like an apple or a grilled cheese sandwich?"

"How was I to know what she meant?" Sylvia said. "Would *you* have known?"

"No," said Irving, his face quilted with grief, "but you were her mother." If she weren't needed by Irving, Sylvia might have broken down, too.

When Irving died six months later, the women on the benches chirped their so sorries again, but after a few weeks they had to know. They sent Thelma Bergman as their emissary. How are things? Need any help? What now, Sylvia? Sylvia knew of only one way to get over things: keep busy. She became a bank teller, working for twenty-three years after that.

* * * *

"Mrs. Gold, Mrs. Gold, please don't shut the door. This is for your own good. I would say the same thing to my own mother."

"So talk. I'm listening."

Fred took out his handkerchief and mopped his bald head, although it was not hot in the hall. "You seem to think it's you against the world, Mrs. Gold, but it's not true. People care... Maybe I shouldn't say this, but Larry called me from Arizona just last week. He pleaded with me. 'Talk to my mother,' he said. 'I've tried, but with her it's an emotional issue.'"

Sylvia recalled how it felt at the beach when the very sand you stand on washes away underfoot. "My own son!" she cried.

"Please stay calm, Mrs. Gold. Larry has your best interest at

heart.”

But Sylvia was not listening to Fred. She was thinking of something else, something blue flickering in back of her mind like a pilot light. Was it a game, a game her children had played?

* * * *

When Sylvia and Irving had moved into the house on Avenue P fifty-five years ago, it had been brand new. There were shrubs in the courtyard, mirrors in the lobby, and their apartment walls were painted a fashionable burgundy. Judy was born four months later and Larry two years after that.

With the war, Irving’s shoe store prospered. A toy store opened on King’s Highway, across the street from his shoe store, and all Judy and Larry had to do was ask. There were tricycles, doll carriages, roller skates, Lincoln Logs, electric trains, and a doll house. After the war, a girl’s clothing store opened next door to Irving’s, and soon Judy’s closet bulged with dresses and jumpers. Her drawers were filled with matching socks and hair ribbons. Sure Judy wore half sizes, “chubbies.” Sure Larry had allergies. But those were the maladies of privilege. In 1945 Sylvia and Irving added wall-to-wall carpeting, a credenza for the living room, and a crystal chandelier for the dining room. Their apartment projected the splendor of a movie lobby, such as the Brooklyn Paramount, but on a smaller scale. In 1947, they installed the first TV in their building. To Sylvia, there was no better time or place to be.

On Sylvia’s thirtieth birthday, Judy baked her a cake. It was lopsided, but who noticed? Before Sylvia blew out the candles, ten-year-old Judy asked, “What do you wish for, Mom?”

“I wish for health and happiness for all of us.”

Judy rolled her eyes. “Oh, Mom, Something for yourself.”

Sylvia shook her head. “I can’t think.”

“Do you want to go someplace?”

“How about Arizona?” Larry said.

“What about Alaska?” Judy said. “That sounds like fun.”

Sylvia shook her head again.

Judy spun the globe. “Africa? Antarctica? Australia? Asia? Argentina? Albania?” They went through the list as if they were

playing Geography and were stuck on the A's.

"So, have you decided, Mom?" Judy asked, her hand resting on the globe.

"Just packing for the mountains is excitement enough for me." A family joke. When they went on vacation to the Nevele Country Club in the Catskill Mountains, Sylvia took her ironing board, her mink stole, and the contents of her medicine chest.

Judy didn't like jokes, especially her mother's. "You never want to go any place different. It's always the Nevele, the Nevele," she said, curling her lower lip, a signal she was about to burst into tears and run from the room.

Sylvia tried to think. When she was a child, she had nothing. Her father used to beat her when she asked for as much as a dime, when he had a bad day, or for no reason at all. Her mother languished in a shade-drawn bedroom, a damp cloth over her forehead, not willing or not able to protect her. No one had ever taken her picture. She never had a birthday party or a dress that was not handed down from some rich cousin, yet she had married a good-looking man, uneducated, but smart, and they had bright, well-behaved children and a beautiful apartment with dusty rose wall-to-wall carpeting. Every summer for one week they lived it up at the Nevele. The Nevele was as she imagined heaven, but with nightly entertainment and all you could eat. She possessed everything she had ever dreamed of, and now Judy wanted her to ask for more. What could she possibly wish for? So to please Judy, she had chosen Alaska. On her cake, there had been thirty candles, and she had blown out every one.

* * * *

Standing here, talking to Fred and Bert, her feet were killing her. What harm in inviting these nice boys—no earrings, no pony-tails—to sit down and talk? "OK, come in, but I'm not promising."

"We understand. We won't take more than five minutes of your time." While Bert laid out various forms and waivers on the table, Fred handed her a contract to look over. "Take your time, Mrs. Gold. Read the fine print."

Sylvia sniffed. Was she a doddering old lady who didn't know

how to read a legal document? Putting on glasses, she read down to *moving expenses and ten thousand dollars*. “That’s it?”

“Ten thousand free and clear,” Bert said. “Think what you could do with that kind of money. You could retire to Florida.”

“Who needs Florida? Heat, roaches, all those old people.”

“You could take a trip to Europe. See the sights.”

“Planes are out, too. Nothing to hold you up.”

“Lots of nice places you could go by train,” Bert said.

Sylvia hated to disappoint them, but she couldn’t think of one nice place she’d like to go. Besides, she needed to move around or her veins would start acting up again. “Let me make coffee while I think.” She strode into her kitchen, filled her kettle with water, and set it on the stove. While arranging the burnt-at-the-edges rum walnut macaroons on a platter—she had almost forgotten to take them out of the oven yesterday—Sylvia heard a familiar voice behind her. “Gee, are those for me?” She turned, and there was Larry in striped T-shirt, cowboy hat and boots. He grabbed two cookies, poured himself a glass of milk, and sat down at the kitchen table.

“So now you’re working for *them*,” Sylvia said. “You lawyers are all alike.”

“Lawyer? What are you talking about?” Larry said, his voice muffled by the macaroon. “I’m gonna be a cowboy when I grow up.”

Sylvia frowned. “Sorry. I was thinking of another Larry, a Larry who turned into a stranger. I forgot you’re only eight.”

“That’s another thing, Mom. When will I be nine like other kids? It’s no fun being eight and cooped up in this apartment.”

“*You* never complained before. You seemed so happy. I always said to Daddy, ‘At least one child is adjusted.’”

“Oh, sure, compared to *her*. But I’m a boy. I need room to run around.”

“So where do you want to run around in? Alaska?”

“Alaska? I picked Arizona, and you know it. The only reason you said Alaska was Judy likes it,” he said, his eyes narrowing, his chin jutting. “It’s always been Judy, Judy, ever since I can re-

member. All she had to do is cry and slam a few doors, and you cave in. I want to go out West where the coyotes howl and the wind blows free.”

“If you had only told me...” But Larry had already started to fade into the yellow, flowered wallpaper. Sylvia put the coffee and remaining cookies on a tray. It was so hard to keep peace in the family.

Upstairs the banging had resumed. Powdered plaster filled the air, and Sylvia had to cover the tray with a napkin before she brought it into the dining room and set it down on the table.

Bert took his coffee light and Fred black. “So have you decided, Mrs. Gold?” Fred said, his voice raised above the din.

Sylvia paused, her attention perhaps caught by the sway and click of the chandelier, or the globe spontaneously revolving, or the grayish mist that swirled and swirled around the ghostly outlines of Naomi and Hal. Naomi in her baby-blue dress, and Hal with that silly boutonniere.

“Sylvia, Sylvia, why so bitter?” Hal said, extending his hand. “Come, let’s make up. We were like family once, remember?”

Had they come to gloat? Sylvia crossed her arms. “No family of mine,” she said.

Naomi, shyly smiling, held something wrapped in white out to her. What was it? Another bouquet? A bouquet in white tissue? No. It was a baby. A baby in a blanket. “You brought us together.” Naomi said. “We’re naming her Sylvia after you.”

Sylvia pulled back. She was not religious, but it seemed disrespectful, if not downright insulting to name a baby after a living person. “Oh, no you don’t. I’m not dead yet,” Sylvia cried.

“Of course not,” Bert said. “You have many, many years ahead of you.”

Sylvia blinked. In the wedge of space formerly occupied by her ghosts, Bert and Fred now sat, calmly drinking coffee. Had she been talking aloud? She must watch herself.

“Many *happy* years ahead, if I may say so,” Fred added. “Why spend them rattling around in an empty apartment?”

Sylvia sighed. If he only knew how crowded it actually was.

Counting the baby, there were now as many ghosts as rooms in her apartment. And what purpose did they serve? What had any of them ever done for her except whine, complain and make her life even more miserable than it already was? Not even one dish had any of them washed. Or picked up as much as a sock. What did they think this place was, the Nevele? Serve her ghosts right if she just packed up and left them behind to torment each other. "So you think I should run out like the rest?" Sylvia said.

Fred put down his cup. "Look at it this way, Mrs. Gold. You've paid your dues. Worked hard, raised a family. Let others cater to you for a change. Why not take a cruise?"

Sylvia smiled inwardly. That had been her secret dream, stashed away like her mink stole and almost forgotten until Fred reminded her. Unlike a plane trip, a cruise had almost no element of danger. It would be like a week in the Catskills but at a much more reasonable elevation. "OK, OK," she finally said. "But this is under protest."

"I understand," Fred said. He made an X where Sylvia was to sign. Still she hesitated. Where would she go? Sylvia placed a finger on the slowly revolving globe, sculpting a wavering circle in the light coating of plaster. There were so many places she didn't want to go, it left her breathless. But the point of the game was not to find the perfect place. The point was to keep moving and never repeat yourself. The possibilities were endless. Alaska, Austria, Algeria, Ankara, Alabama, Arizona, and she still hadn't exhausted the A's.

Marriage Rondo

sometimes the strings are so out of tune it is
hateful and could drive you
crazy and sometimes

I try to tune it up and I wind it so tight
the string breaks and sometimes
the weather is

so contrary that I can't tune it anyway and days
go by when I can't play
a simple scale

because when I wind the string to exactly
the right place the peg
unrolls all

the way back and it just keeps doing that as if
I am destined to never play
another note

and sometimes I want to give it away and play
something else like a drum
or a kazoo

and sometimes I think about what it would be like
to play nothing at all and never
worry again about

tone and tempo and articulation and often I walk by
the living room and just to see it
there waiting makes me

smile and someday I get every note right and my
god it sings and vibrates through
my body

and my heart and I breathe in rhythm and the birds
outside sing like the dawn
of creation

My Father Wrote Short Stories

Twelve years old, my father
found his father, a timber cruiser
wandered in from miles deep
beyond the tree line, fallen
down in the basement, shotgun
shook from his twisted limbs,
twisted the way the Yellow Dog's
last few miles wind desperately
as if trying to dodge the end
where it dwindles into fingers
and fades out through the swale.
Those last downstream miles
just below the 550 bridge
where, at twelve, wading waist deep
next to my father, I witnessed
the nature of darkness and water,
how overcast skies hide our long
shadows, give the trout no sign
of our approach, and how the river
turns through wide bends, pools
beneath fallen logs in dark,
constant eddies, a swallowing gloom
my father swore his father dove
headlong into when the fish
weren't biting. I feared the way
the river rushed me from behind,

bullied me toward the murky pools,
while my father, rooted in the river
bottom, waved his dancing line
above the surface, sweeping
arms casting an incantation, landing
the fly suddenly, as if it were stunned,
as though the wings were real
and blood pumped through the steel,
barbed thorax. His spell coaxed
a rainbow trout up from the depths,
bursting under the hook, dragging it
down as though trying to pull my father
out of the river bed into the darkness,
swimming deep but losing the fight,
cranked to the edge of the hole
where I waited with the small net.
The silvery body, cradled but thrashing
in the mesh, shined as if its scales reflected
the blaze from my father's tired eyes.
Flying on the high, I rushed downstream
to where the river blackens
through the bottom of a swampy ravine,
but my father called me back, shook
his head, warned me that few trout
are ever worth the darkest waters.

This Trembling

In the fingers of a girl
Drinking coffee, the legs
Of a man who refuses his cane,
The hands of a woman
Getting ready to pray.

Read this. Look at this,
Says the girl in black
To her boyfriend,
Pointing at the words—
I know what he means—
The loveliness staining her hands
From the mildewy book,
Faster she points, *here*
And *here*,
And the type seems to rise
For a moment
Out of the dead man's lips.

This trembling along the body;
Water on a leaf.

And if he can't walk,
That's the end—he knows it—
So usually he doesn't try,
Lying in his chair
In the shadows.
Later, he takes
Tablecloth, centerpiece,
Silverware
Down with him, down, down
To the floor, to the deep
With the wavy fishes,
Where he waits, appalled
By his helplessness, wet

With his rage, tangled
With the coins, seaweed,
Unaccounted-for treasure
In the shipwreck of his life.

Here, say the crickets,
The hummingbird, the snow
On blue air, the poise
After a storm,
The apple swaying.

Velvety quiet, woodenly still.
The priest has come and gone,
The floor an echo of in between.
And if, like this woman,
You have no one—
History laid in its skin and bone
And sinews in the earth—
What do you do?
Her hands are clasped,
Moving, wanting
This pain to be stilled
By the carved miracle
Of departure and return.
For that's the promise:
Return with departure,
Thorned face, flung arms.
The sweep of a bell, she thinks,
That music.

The gathering of the body
In its fullness of love,
The threads of the human
Pulled into
That trembling place.

Otherwise?
For she saw the shadow
Lying down with her beloved,
The darkness in the room—
Presence into absence,
Flesh into stone.

And in that seeing
She was still, waiting
For the broken passage,
As she always has:
Scorched cloth, wrung tears,
And the friendships,
After all those years,
Left by the side of the road.
Afterwards,
She couldn't help it;
She lay with him again
In the way that they liked.
Yet now there is nothing
But her own memory:
Incomplete, one-sided,
And therefore insatiable.
O Jesus,
This trembling that takes her,
Clotted like a handkerchief
Crammed in her throat.
O Lord, O Lord.

The shivery green spike of a seed.

A child moving
In the body of a woman;
The terrible miraculous
Trembling in the world.

Kim Bridgford

The World

And if the world will not remember you,
You must remember it: the way the leaves
Fall, in glimmers of a rendezvous

With death; the way birds echo in the eaves
Like trilling messages. Time runs like water
In your hands, and you place fingers in the caves

Of loss: dolls sit in attics wearing better
Days like antiquated banners, lace
And velvet dimmed by dust. The scent of cedar

Catches in your throat. When you let loose
Upon the waves, like a tiny boat, where do
You go? Is it just travel or a place

That you arrive? One day you wept—you know
You did—and yet the flickering tears cannot
Be touched, the trick of dying stars, made new

By all those years. When you kissed him, your fate
Slipped side by side with his, and now he's dead.
How did his hands feel? What was his favorite

Poem? The details flow away; instead
The waves of sadness; instead your children's faces—
The one in Utah, and the one you buried

When he was seventeen. It's common that traces
Of a grief will leave an imprint. Still, there are days
His moon-face never rises. Time erases

Even that. There are books you've used to ease
Your way through life, and music, with some laughter
Like a counterpoint. Your favorite foods—just these—

Along with deep red wine, and movie after,
Remind you of the shape and lure of life.
And if in tugging at what lies hereafter

Your visions alternate between your grief
And angels strolling like the afterflash
Of days you tried to hold, know it's enough

To live the days of momentary ash,
What's left of them the burning that transcends.
Water or fire—It's your life's business

To learn this: what's most meaningful depends
On holding on to everything that ends.

Kim Bridgford

Counting

Apples

Some are yellow-touched,
Some sour with bruises:
That's the message you've learned
Out of paradise.
There is nothing but this,
You think, *nothing.*
Even when you leave,
Your feet will slip on
The apple smell rising,
All the way to the end
Of the world.

Pins

Start over.
The pins make you
With their wandering slimness,
Their pricking enterprises.
They dance; they slide.
They are unnerving in their identical hiss.
They don't know what they want.
Take us away, then don't, oh, don't,
But you know what to do,
The insides of your palms
Wearing a fine red pinpoint.
You will suffer this out
Again.

Butterflies

Sitting there in the midst of them,
You think of silk slapped together;

You think of ideas
So tenuous you could never believe
In flight. *So there,*
They seem to say to you.
And there.
Here counting is a matter of faith.
First, the pause like heartbeats stopped
And started again,
Then the rising: so little
Everywhere.
Where to turn, where to go
In all that trembling?

Bonding with Bill and Betty D.

I'm in the garden, which is sandwiched between our house and Bill and Betty D's driveway, putting in the early crops, peas, taters, lettuce, radishes, and onions. Julie and I are going totally organic this year. It'll be more work, but worth it.

1:30, tick tock clockwork, here comes Old Bill creeping home from Joop's Tap in his slime green tank of an Oldsmobile. Leaves every day at 11:00, comes back fully loaded at 1:30. Funny no one's ever called the cops.

Hello! Look out! There goes the post Archie put up to keep people from cutting the corner short. Whoa! Now he's up on Bud's lawn. Is he going to—? Yes. No. Just misses Bud's triple birch. Overcorrecting, he bounces across the blacktop into Wacky Willoby the undersheriff's yard. Bottoming out, the Olds slithers into the low spot, fishtailing, churning chunks of mud—fwap, fwap—onto the new vinyl siding over which Wacky is, for some inexplicable reason, immoderately proud, almost as proud as he is of his formerly perfect lawn. Hee hee. Wait till Wacky gets home.

The Olds jounces back onto the blacktop. Using all of the street, he's veering this way. Steady as she goes there, Bill. Quite the five-mile-an-hour spectacle. Even less linear than usual. Uh-oh, my Dart's out front, just took the collision insurance off. Swerving, he's gonna miss it unless he makes an abrupt—Look out! Damn! There goes my mailbox, torqued off its screws, but I can probably pound it back in shape.

Now he's flirting with Pinky's row of white pines. Their dark metronomic trunks seem to revive him, for his head snaps upright. He's past the pines now, swinging wide for the final approach. Houston, stand by.

I'm leaning on my hoe, ready to boogie over the riverbank if he

tromps on the gas by mistake.

He's looping, looping, still looping. Now he's off on his front lawn. The Olds stops momentarily; now it's moving again. What's he doing? No, stay in the car, Bill. He's trying to get out. His left leg is dragging on the grass; he's got himself twisted kitty-whampus, trying to reach back inside for the steering wheel. Snap. There goes the little maple his son Dave planted a couple summers ago to replace the spruce that blew down in the big wind. The car's going round the birdbath in tight circles—as tight as a twenty-foot Olds' 98 can make.

I don't know if I should help him or not. He and Mrs. D. are funny people. It's like they're afraid to let strangers, like me and Julie who've only lived next to them for like our whole adult married lives—four sometimes blissful years—get too close, like they're afraid we'll rip them off or make nuisances of ourselves or something. And he can be an ornery cuss. On nights when the windows are open, we hear him over there, bawling like a wounded bear. He looks like a larger version of J. Edgar Hoover—empty feed sacks below corn-kernel eyes, anal-retentive lips, bulldog jowls.

Here comes the Olds for another pass. Each time he goes around, he's a little more animated. He's spotted me now. He's saying something I can't make out.

"Help," he's mouthing, "Help."

I guess I better then, help him, that is. Here goes nothing. I run over, match my pace to the Olds's, reach past his jiggling gut and jam the shifter into Neutral, then Park. The transmission clunks the ark to a bucking stop. Gas sloshes back and forth in the tank. Bill looks up at me, his mouth working like a fish, but no words come out. Julie says she's never lived anywhere where people are so non-verbal. She's a big city girl from downstate. It was my idea—she calls it, Your *bright* idea—to move up here. I reach past Bill—he smells like the bar—and switch off the key.

He hooks his thumb around the windshield post, fingers like bratwurst splayed on the glass, clamps his other hand over the top of the door, and grunts and tugs, which gets the gas sloshing again,

but his butt never clears the plastic seat cover. He looks up again with beady eyes turned liquid and sad. "I'm all used up," he complains. Deflated, he stares through the crack, between the door and the windshield at something beyond my ken.

I'm starting to feel sorry for the old coot. Reminds me of the title of a movie Julie and I saw on video recently, "They Shoot Horses, Don't They?" I'm thinking they ought to shoot people too, when they get beyond a certain point. Course, I'll probably feel different about it if or when I get old.

Old Bill's squirming around, trying to lift his derriere off the seat, but the strength's not there.

"Want me to help?" I ask.

He cranks out a rant, ending with, "Damn diabetes and gout and heart attacks. Ain't good for nothing but fox food anymore."

With that he risks another look at me.

I should tell him, *Maybe if you wouldn't drink like a fish*, but what good would it do? Now it's his turn to give advice. "Live while you're young, Sonny Boy. Don't let anyone feed you that crap about the golden years."

I don't tell him that I never listen to anyone old anyhow, especially someone who looks like J. Edgar Hoover. Instead, I tell him, "That's just what I'm trying to do, live it up."

He looks at me as if to say, *You young punk, you just wait, you're day's coming.*

But not as soon as yours. Ha ha, hee hee, ho ho. I'm no longer feeling simpatico. I want to get back to my garden.

"Here, grab ahold of my arms," I tell him.

Jeez, the old dude's a load. I wonder how his wife Betty handles him. She's a bitty thing. Sometimes she calls their son Dave, the one who planted the maple, to come up from the city downriver to help. I've told both her and Dave, that since Julie and me are right next door, anytime they need help with the old gasbag, just let us know. Only they never do.

With Bill grunting and me pulling, we manage to extricate him from the Olds. He wobbles, then plunks his hammy forearms on the dull vinyl roof.

“Want me to pull it in for you?” I nod toward the Olds, then tip my head toward the garage.

“I can do it myself.”

Sure you can, Pops. I’m not going to argue with him.

Just like that, he changes his mind, says I can park his car for him. Whoopee ding. Thank you, Sahib. Oh no, now he’s taking out his wallet. You get what you pay for, nothing for free, don’t want to be beholden—the old Northern European, Calvinistic ethos. Julie hates the rigidity of the people around here. I tell her, *Hey, where else can we live that’s this cheap?* When that doesn’t work, I add, *And safe.* She appreciates the safety factor.

Bill thumbs through the wad of bills in his broke-down wallet. “Here, how much do I owe you?”

Suddenly greedy, I’ve got a mind to call his bluff, jam my fist in there and take all his ill-gotten booty, maybe pay off our credit card debt. I heard he was a real skinflint with his employees when he ran the trucking business out on the main drag. Instead, I answer with a look of wounded pride and say the expected thing, which in this case also happens to be the right thing, “No, no, that’s okay, we’re neighbors, after all. We’re neighbors.”

Yeah, you said that already. I don’t know why I’m getting peeved at myself, except maybe because of our relative poverty. I just don’t have a shark’s instinct when it comes to long green. As Bill shoves his wallet back into his wrinkled khaki pants, a tiny tear forms in the corner of my eye.

Returning to a tried and true theme, he says, “Good for nothing, good for the glue factory.”

Free-associating now, I riff on his lead. Horse meat, horse hide, horse gizzard, horse feathers, tastefully glued to form a sculpture titled, “Look What’s Become of Bill D.” I’ve got two sculptures due by the end of the semester in the art class I’m auditing down at the U.

Uh oh, here comes Mrs. D. flying out of the house, her mouth screwed on sideways, arms all akimbo. She’s as skinny as he is fat. She gapes at the Olds, its front wheels cramped off, the door flung open, sitting high and dry on the lawn next to the bird bath

like a pterodactyl that's swooped in for a drink.

"My goodness, what happened?"

She's looking at me, but I'll let Bill provide the color commentary. Instead, he schlumps toward the house. She catches up with him and tries to take his arm, but he jerks free.

"I'll throw the keys on the stoop," I yell after them.

She turns and regards me as she waits for him to fit through the doorway. Her way of answering me is to scratch her cheek.

The Olds idles roughly. Needs to be taken out on the river road and opened up. I inch it into the shadowy maw of the garage until the tires bump the creosoted stop block. The post in the middle and studs along the side are splintered and furry from past run-ins.

No sooner am I back in my garden than the inside door opens. Mrs. D. sticks her face against the storm door, peers left and right before she opens it, like she's expecting trouble, like this isn't Podunkville. Never even looks toward me on the other side of her driveway, my hoe clanging in the dirt. Her hand reaches out snatches the keys, and both doors close.

Trust Fall

I always fall in love with the girl in the book. When I was five, I fell in love with Sal, in *Blueberries for Sal*. She filled her pail with berries and then ate them all, saving none for later. That's the sort of self-indulgence I can identify with. When I was twelve, my biblioamour was Eowin, the warrior princess in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Eowin dressed up like a boy in order to escape the confines of her gender, so that she could go out and fight the good fight. Later it was voices on the radio, like when I was ten and fell hard for Melanie. That was around 1968, and when she belted out a chorus to "Candles in the Rain," I understood why people sometimes said, "I'd lay my life on the line"—for *her*, to protest the War, to ensure that we can each love whom and when we want. At about that same time I came to the realization that love can't be restricted, at least not the way that, say, grammar can be prescribed. If the culture I was born into seemed to insist that boys fall in love with girls, I was certain, at nine or ten, that this must be some sort of misunderstanding.

At some point during the turbulence of adolescence, my skin grew hungry. I inched out of my books far enough to start falling in love—and all the rest—with flesh and blood humans. I don't think I was really aware that I had a body before I was seventeen. The sounds we make when we are entrained and consumed by passion come from some inner core of us, from some place where we don't wear masks, wear nothing but skin and nerves. Especially the sighs, those electric currents that come from deep within the body. When our neural pathways are sluiced with the chemical brine induced by kissing and caressing, time is stripped of its tyrannical clothing. Like a medieval carnival, lovemaking restores the body's empire, exalting the lowly and inarticulate, making

the uncontrollable fool king for an hour or a day.

My body is an uncontrollable fool. The fool, like the trickster, in many religions is a sacred being, the one who can mediate between our quotidian lives and the divine. It's the fool in us that induces "alternate" states of consciousness, which in fact aren't alternatives but necessities. The fool is an open mind, the imaginal desire that convinces us of our changes of heart—and the fool is the one who incites to take the risks that make our hearts change. As an idea with a history, the fool has many names. My favorite example from this history is that of Socrates, whose *daimon* guided him to his own death as the proving, the refining, truth of his "foolish" love of life. If we've learned to distrust our "foolish" intuition, this ability to be instructed by some wordless inner mentor, it is because of our phobia of the body and our fear of life's uncontrollable topsy-turviness. Standing mute, with an idiot grin on his face, the fool is perched on the edge of a cliff. If he thinks a thought at all, he will back away from the cliff with a gasp. But if the fool is truly foolish, he'll leap, silent and trusting, into the void of the unknown.

My body may be wordless, but it speaks loudly. The powerful surges, the subtle traces that course through our stomachs, knees, palms, and loins are the signs we must interpret to know our bodies' intentions. Like little proletarians, these signs do the work of bearing the information from the inner stuff of us to our conscious selves trying to get by in the world. Like proletarians, these messages from the body are often socially unacceptable, impractical, revolutionary, life changing, messy. The body does not live by the time of the clock but by the spiraling seasons of the sun and the gravitational phases of the moon. The body is our creative well, and its laws often run askew to the axis of jurisprudence.

If some of us are capable of negotiating a treaty, or enforcing a silence, between the laws of nature and the codes of culture, I am not. I learned to avoid conflict early in life, that the best offense is a good defense. My defense was to be silent in the world and lead a noisy interior life. That's where I break the laws of nature and transpose the codes of culture. All sorts of biographical data could

be offered to demonstrate the *why* of my survival strategy, but for now I'm more interested in the *what*, the *stuff* that this inner force has wrought. Because what happened is that I started writing. I started writing to the girls in the books I read, to the boys and girls I fell in love with, to myself, to the world. I stared listening to the voices.

Writing is a safe way to give voice to my foolish body, especially if I don't let anybody read what I write. But the latter is impossible, because, after all, I have severe discipline problems. From the very beginning, I was breaking out of my vow of silence. I had to *tell* somebody what was spilling through my head, so I wrote letters. To my sixth-grade girlfriend down the street, to my grandmother far away, it didn't matter. And I still write letters.

A child of the TV and the telephone, I could never write a letter with quotidian news in it. I've always thought that the news of the world was being told *sotto voce*, taking place just out of view, and that this world news was really the intimate history of our imaginations and our desires. The television drolly rolls on like an unchanging river of garbage, the perps and victims of our human *mésalliance*, the background noise above which I wanted—foolishly, perhaps—to find some *meaning*.

We think that writing may be a desire for communication, but I think this idea needs a little refinement. We engage in any form of communication—indeed, we cannot help but engage in forms of communication—because we desire *contact*. Some of us love nature because it makes us feel *connected*. I love to read because I often become passionately connected with the people and ideas I find on the page. This is why I am fascinated by, and am a devotee of, the epistle.

Letter writing is, I think, unique among the forms of written discourse in that it continues a conversation between two (or more) people by other means. In a letter to a lover, a trusted friend, a parent or sibling, we often find a voice more intimate than we can manage in person. Less worried about what our faces, our hands, our mouths might be saying, we are freer to wander through the free-associational thickets of our imaginations, to follow the

meanderings of our desires and concerns. The intuitional urgings of our bodies, if heeded, can invoke a trust and compassion that render the most difficult truths and choices palatable.

This quality of voice is one I find strongest in the letters of Marsilio Ficino and John Keats. Keats is well known, of course, while Ficino, for his soulful wisdom and uncompromising counsel, is worth dusting off. He lived in the Florence of the Medicis, and was the court philosopher of the elder Medici, Lorenzo. Under Lorenzo's patronage, Ficino founded the Platonic Academy, seeding the Renaissance flowering of Neoplatonism. Ficino was deeply introverted, and remained celibate all his life. Like most introverts, like many people, he suffered from depression, but instead of a curse he considered the black ache a gift. So too did Romantic poet John Keats. He wrote his brother George, after their younger brother Tom had died in John's arms, that the world should not be called "a Vale of tears" but "a Vale of Soul-making."

Neither Keats nor Ficino denied the terrible pain of depression, of grief, and praised the blessing flow of tears. To fall, to let the tears fall, to let the body find its emotional depths, is the way down into the wisdom Hades of the soul. From Heraclitus we know that "the dry soul is best," and that there is no place drier of passion and clearer of judgment than the chthonic realm of Hades. Both philosopher and poet knew and loved the story of Socrates' last days, with its epiphany of eternity and compassion. Ficino was particularly adept at bringing this encompassing passion to the *passim* citations of daily life. The most powerful men and women of his day sought him out for political and psychological advice, either by interview in person, or more often by post. Ficino allowed several editions of his letters to be published while he was still alive, and these became models for a style of letter writing that persisted through the nineteenth century.

When I started writing I didn't know any of this history; no one had told me that the romance of letters was an anachronism. In my efforts to lighten the burden of the mystery of being alive, and in hopes of finding some comfort there, I dived headlong into the romantic spirit, and have never since found a reason to emerge.

The world my correspondents and I create in our letters can completely absorb me, until the personae of our exchange become the truth of my life, turning actual living into a badly drawn sketch.

Fidelity goes flying out the window when I get involved in a hot correspondence. My imaginal self overwhelms my quotidian perception. I cannot speak to the person in bed with me because my soul is engaged in conversation with someone who, in a sense, doesn't exist *except* in my imagination. That this semi-existent lover licks a stamp and mails me a missive only serves to corroborate my feeling that "real life" is of questionable provenance, because the person writing me the letters is making a statement, in the very act of writing, that reconciles my desire for meaning with my life's unfathomable imagination. If we live our lives *with* other people—and how can we not, in some more or less direct fashion?—then my "withness" is often coupled to an other through the medium of the envelope.

Intense correspondences are marks of indigo periods in my life. The periods—months, years—when I hover, liminally, between subclinical depression and the deep black. The first one started when I was eighteen. I had met Michael the year before at school. He was a transfer student, and had been enrolled in my first period homeroom. When I walked into class, he was sitting in my seat. Within a few minutes, before the late bell rang, before the teacher had arrived, we were out of there, fast friends bonded instantly by our mutual discontent with the strictures of adolescence. We inaugurated our friendship that afternoon by eating a small pile of peyote buttons.

Within a year we had gotten into so much trouble together—and lost our virginites to a pair of girl friends—that parents and probation officers pushed Michael into the Air Force. The girl friends had been a distraction, his accommodation of me: we all knew Michael was gay, and that he and I were in love. He came out while in the Air Force, in letters to me, and in a big way to the gay community in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Michael wrote me letters about sex, about drinking, about getting into trouble with the military brass. I wrote letters about what it meant for us

to be in love; I had nothing to say about living, much less how to get by in the service. He struggled to respond, but became less and less coherent.

When the Air Force kicked him out after a year, Michael came back to me. We moved in together, and nearly drank ourselves to death. Reality came caving in on the world I had imagined in my letters to Michael. My former best friend turned on me one night and left me sprawled on my kitchen floor. Another night, a bullet came thicking through our living room window, burying itself in the wall above our TV. I fled, back to the high desert, and started shooting rattlesnakes into my veins. Down, down I went into altered states of consciousness, down into the wishful dust of death.

Years lay down like strata in the face of a cliff, leaving their lines on our faces. Gravity pulls, insistent as sin, and our muscles and breasts flow in the same direction as our tears. Strangely, though, but perhaps not surprisingly, laughter appears to be an anti-gravity device. Spontaneous outbursts of laughter recombust the broken-down machine-prison soul-body, and we can feel the *levitation* of our spirits, the *rejuvenation* of our self-image, the tangles of quodidia turning to webs of meaning. Laughter induces an amorous blush of fate; it sparks a memory of the future.

Memory is like glue, sticking things together so they always come around again. Life is a bowl of karma jambalaya. If I don't learn something right the first time, it comes back at me some time later like a recurrent boomerang. Things like French, or learning to live and love. Like music, love requires constant practice—and access to an instrument. Just as I am a slut for books, and have ravaged many a maiden therein, I like to play many instruments. I like to experiment with love—or, anyway, *it* likes to experiment with me.

In the summer of 1989, I was in a frenzied state of *disponibilité*, that French word that means “availability,” but in the hands of the surrealists has the sense of *available to magic, to chance*. That summer I traveled north to redwood country, to a summer arts program where I'd be writing poetry all day every day for three weeks. My duffel was stuffed with condoms; I was full of piss and

vinegar, and horny as a hound dog's full-moon howl. And I didn't need a breakthrough or a jumpstart to write poems: I didn't know her name yet, hadn't yet imagined how we might fit together, but a muse already possessed me.

This possession-by-muse thing, it's not something they teach you about in poetry school. That's because poetry school is really life, the school of hard knocks, department of angst, contemplation, and seduction. Since my teen days hanging out on Hippie Hill, I knew I was supposed to "go with the flow." A muse is just an altered state of consciousness. But, because following the flow had me nearly killing myself on repeated occasions, I no longer necessarily trusted my intuition. It may be cyclic, but the muse's flow never stops pushing and tugging, so it's not a matter of whether I trust or not. My lack of trust is only a form of resistance, and resistance is futile.

And I can be pretty persuasive myself. Though I had no luck the first week. Which is to say I wrote a lot, talked a lot, made some friends, but didn't get laid. On Monday morning of the second week things changed. New arrivals, who couldn't make it the first week. I noticed her immediately: the cascade of long blonde hair, of course, but, too, the small smile that was both a veil and an invitation. And within a few minutes, I was treated to the frank curiosity of her blue-eyed gaze. I guessed she was a few years older than I. She never spoke, just observed the speaker with those piercing eyes. When we went outside for cigarette breaks, she chatted with a couple of women I had learned were students at San Diego State.

We got out of class in the late summer afternoon. I walked down from the campus on the hill into the town of Arcata, seeking alcohol. I walked into the liquor store closest to campus, and out strode the quiet blonde.

"Hey!" she said, and grinned at me knowingly.

"Hi!" I managed to reply. From three feet away, this woman seemed unbearably beautiful. I stared at the crow's feet around her eyes, revising her age upwards, and felt even more attracted. As usual, I was tongue-tied.

“Want to come have a glass of wine?” she offered.

“Yes, I do, thanks,” I said, and sighed with relief. Had it been up to me to make the first move, I would have stammered something unintelligible and moved past her into the store, kicking myself for not grabbing the chance, for being afraid of women, *this* woman.

Sue and I spent the next two weeks together, exploring each other. We may think that Mr. Spock’s Vulcan mind meld is a *Star Trek* science fiction, but in fact we mere humans are quite capable of conveying to each other the contents of our hearts and minds, even if only partially and slowly. But of all that has passed between me and Sue, one idea has proved the most durable and important, one theme has kept me on my trek.

Having just completed an undergraduate education, I was hardened by the cynicism that comes from immersion in the academic environment in which our body of knowledge is severed limb from limb. To our first chance meeting, I brought my *disponibilité*, my unquenchable thirst for alcohol, a backpack full of books and scribblings, and a rage against the control-freak machinations that I perceived as being responsible for leaving me intellectually torn and fragmented.

Sue brought much the same, except for the latter. She stared my rage in the face and posed it an implacably put question.

“Where’s the body? When you read those scholars, those philosophers you’re so angry at, do you ever ask yourself if a body could survive in the theoretical world they’re creating?”

Scales fell from my eyes. A million threads of thought immediately began to move and weave themselves into a fabric. Intuitive associations found legs to stand on, my imagination was given fingers to gather with, and when in the past it seemed that some idea had been swaying its hips, alluringly, I suddenly understood that *of course ideas have hips!* And if ideas wanted to lie down together, copulate polysemously, and make little baby theories, then by God, by *nature*, of course they could! I *could* feel the OH molecules roaring through me, slam-dancing with my brain cells, butt-bumping my liver, making me drunker than a whore on a holi-

day. What came next, I couldn't say.

Except that Sue and I wrote letters. Lots of letters, long ones, full of our poetry, and news, and ruminations on *that question*. Sue's ruminations were published a couple of years ago in her collection of poems, *The Flesh Envelope*. In the title poem of the book, she reminds us that the ancient Greeks knew all about the body *and* the soul. Epicurus wrote, "The soul is a body of fine particles distributed throughout the frame." Sue then offers:

Folded into this fleshy envelope,
this frame that eats too much, drinks too much,
loves immoderately, angers easily & seldom forgives,
this husk that drives stupidly & works erratically—

is a Garden & in that Garden a soul
that walks at a leisured pace
discussing moral existence with like-minded friends.

.....

How can I bring my soul into the world
without bringing the Garden?
The Garden is the apple, the world is the worm.
Or the soul is wax, the body pure flame.

I wrote endless letters: now that I knew the identity of the central player in the mystery of the human condition, I was full of theories. I'm still working on those theories; Sue gave me the gift of an intellectual toy that lasts a lifetime. And slowly, feeling, emotion, and the aimless wandering of a pleasant walk with a friend began to creep into my writing, into my being. What could I do but fall in love, and let Sue fill my poems the way she flowed through my body?

The rhythms of a lunar empire are in our blood,
and we sprout like mushrooms
in the burnt-out heart of a redwood.
You're smarter than all the psychedelics of
my youth, and just like children,
we speak of a revolution in everyday life.
Everything leaks, I find you already here,

blue eyes undressed and beckoning
through this cloud of unknowing, welcoming me
with a gaze to anneal the passions of martyrs,
and a caress.

I want you in the dirt and the moss,
to make a mark upon the air with our breath
and the rhythms of our writhings.

We speak of the constantly breaking and rechain-
ing strands of love and knowledge, sigh,
lean into worldtree.

Through thick crusts, magma warms our spores.
Days later, in a dream full of the cool
and the shade, I noticed your absence,
and I turned, as if waking, I turned to touch you again,
and I'll keep turning.

“The imagination is very powerful in creating another
nature, as it were, out of the material that actual nature
gives it.” –Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*

There's this '60s kid's song by the guy who taught me how to
play guitar which says, “Happiness runs in a circular motion.”
What is it with the circular motion thing? We speak of vicious
circles, while karma is a wheel in motion. Our emotions recircu-
late, and move in periodic, cyclic waves and currents. Why do we
so pervasively employ the circulation metaphor to describe our
emotional states? Do we feel as if there is a flow, or current of
“stuff,” that circulates within ourselves, between beings?

Motion was the first big question among ancient Greek phi-
losophers, and never has been resolved. In 2,500 years of physics,
we haven't been able to adequately explain why things move in-
stead of staying put. Our theories may well convince us of their
truth, but that's what they remain: Greek *theoria*, “observations.”
The Presocratic philosophers addressed the problem directly, and
posited the existence of a primal stuff, an *arché*, that interactively
expanded and contracted as it heated and cooled, thus initiating
motion in the universe. The cause of this “condensation and re-

fraction,” as the Greeks called this process, was never identified or explained. By the time of the Middle Ages, and Thomas Aquinas, the problem had been, as intractable problems often are, deferred and sublimated. To put it another way, it seems the question of motion, like some childhood trauma, had been buried and ostensibly forgotten, diffused and left to permeate, in shreds and fragments, ideas of “essence.” The idea of divine essence—a word based on the Latin verb “to be,” *esse*—took over the motion problem—for everything from atoms to emotions—and became the will of God.

But as our vernacular metaphors indicate, the problem of motion has never gone away. We still talk about this primeval movement as if it were some sort of mating dance, an erotic push-me pull-you that does seem to possess some sort of will power, a tug-of-war, or tug-of-sex, that keeps us open for whatever, whoever, comes next.

“The feeling of the sublime is... a feeling of pain arising from the want of accordance between the... imagination and... reason. There is at the same time a pleasure thus excited...”

While there is occasional gain without pain, old Immanuel Kant knew the score about getting the good stuff. “This shit’s sublime. It’ll put your dick in the dirt,” I once heard a junkie say. I think it’s possible to die from the sublime, from the pain of discord, from the lack of accordance between imagination and reason, between heart and head.

“Go not to Lethe,” John Keats wrote in his “Ode on Melancholy.” Don’t drink the waters of forgetting; don’t forget the *reality*, the *reason*, of imagination. The reason being the soul, that inexpressible that so very strongly desires expression. That’s the reason that particular line begins the Ode. Doctor-philosopher Keats was giving us his best medicine for melancholy. Like Keats pairing “the downy *owl*” in his rhyme scheme with “the wakeful anguish of the *soul*,” we take inward flight when gripped by depression. By the summer of 1997, I was so flown I was like a black hole.

Or a snake pit, out of which I leaped straight up. Owls don’t

like snakes, they eat them. So I ate what was killing me and moved on down the road. Don't stop imagining, Dr. Keats advised. Heed your soul, said Socrates. In my leap, only a few things and people stayed attached. Such shedding of skin is indeed painful, and arguably sublime.

One of the people who stayed attached was Nikki. That's because she wasn't around, and never had been. In fact, we've never met, and perhaps never will. Indeed, Nikki is not "her" real name. Do we have an imaginary friendship? Or a friendship of the imagination? Is it possible to fall in love with someone with whom I've only ever exchanged letters? So it would seem, and, both writers, we leapt—or belly flopped—into a story so full of twists and turns it must be written by fools. Still, even though we communicate frequently, I sometimes wonder if Nikki exists. She has frequently claimed that she doesn't:

"I'm a chimera. I am ink scratchings on paper."

Girl in a book. An interactive book, a story we write together, sometimes to amplify our inner wildness in the damp of the imagination, others to refine our foolish desires in the dryness of Hades. A worldly wise woman, a wicked writer, warped, worn, and often weary—she was perfect. My soul flew like an owl across the continent to this woman who does not exist as anything but a presence in the aether, that archaic meeting place of fool-hardy lovers. For in my imagination nature had provided the very ingredients I needed to survive. I needed to create a world in which imagination *was* my reason, as the only thing that was going to lift that black fog was repeated bathings in creative juices. So in I leapt, only to find Nikki already there. Our plot thickened. Here, I thought while falling hopelessly, is a woman with a powerful imagination.

"That's the trick to pain," Nikki wrote in the first story she sent me. "It helps you break things down into essentials."

In a sense I jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire, while Nikki nearly jumped off the page and into my arms. We created emotional turbulence in the aether and got up early every morning with our boards to run down and check the surf. We both knew, Nikki and I, that we were just telling each other stories. Making

stuff up. To me, that's what it means to be a poet: to invent reality. It's a dangerous, "foolish," practice, for what if I convince someone that the reality I've created is reliable, can be trusted like gravity to keep that person's feet on the ground? A home, I confess, can never be a house of words. "Trail of broken hearts," k.d. laing sings. John Keats was an optimist, incredibly: Sometimes I have to cry. Maybe that's a way of making soul, too.

I sent Nikki a picture of me. I looked good. She sent me a photo of her. She's stunning. She's wearing sun glasses. To see her eyes would be too much, would burn through whatever was keeping me from seeing her skin. In one of Nikki's stories, I kept rereading the line, "Stop wearing underwear. Buy lipstick. Have intercourse with the notorious Will Craile."

Craile rhymed with Braille, so clearly Nikki wanted a lover she could *feel* but not *see*. And Will was the name I had given my dead brother in my novel. Clearly, I thought, this web of associations is meant to bring us together. We never budged, neither of us, from opposite ends of a complex web of mail delivery. Instead, we both went a little crazy, like the characters in Nikki's story, Vin and Elsie, who are trying to gather the courage, the strength, to get an HIV test.

One day I had a vision, or anyway a brain-state change. I fell in love with Ikkyu, a Japanese poet of the fourteenth century. He was wild, his life was harsh, but he always managed to keep his youngest face, his green side turned toward the world. As a poet he's ironic, bittersweet, and hones close to the skin of existence. In a footnote somewhere, I read about his old-age affair with the blind minstrel, Lady Mori. This is evidence, I thought, of the fate of the recouring soul, bodied and rebodied on the road to bodhi dharmahood. In a fugue, in its theme and variations, I was Ikkyu and Nikki was Mori.

And that was it, I was officially obsessed. The world was on notice: things, I, could get dangerous at any moment. I was going to go knock on Nikki's door, see if the babe in the sun glasses was really her. Forget about friends, family, and contracts based on mutual love and understanding: this wasn't me invading, this was fate performing surgery. I was really depressed. I retreated to me-

dieval Japan, with Ikkyu the renegade Zen poet, to search for the blind Lady minstrel. I was thinking too hard, and had forgotten how to jump off cliffs.

The only antidote was stronger stories, fierce stories, to write letters foolish enough to bend reality enough and give us room to breathe, to conspire, to “install” ourselves, as the French say when they cozy into a comforting chair. To make our imaginations work *with* instead of against the grain of our lives. To fall in love *within* the possibilities, not *with* the possibility. Stories that would surround us with the “radiant white light” of the fool’s leap into the void, the radiance Elsie wishes for Vin, the music Ikkyu hears in Lady Mori. We need letters, written by hand, placed in special boxes or under pillows, letters written in dialogue with the lovers of our imaginations to protect us from a plague of cancerous narratives.

My Beloved Lady Mori,

How sweet it is to greet you again with the name that, so many centuries ago, was like the scent of cherry blossoms and the taste of plum wine to me. The songs you used to sing, even after so long, still pulse in my heart: songs of love so joyously profound they seemed sad. Indeed, your voice, my love, made the very stones weep. When you sang the birds would fall silent and listen, taking lessons from their mistress. Then, as now, your beauty was so great that when you passed by flowers would bloom out of season.

Our world loved your songs; our world loved my poetry; our world celebrated our love.

Do you recall? Do not feel shame if you do not. After all, it has been over 500 years since last I kissed you, cupped your breasts, embraced you as a lover. So long it has been since we cradled each other in the dawn, laughing at silly puns and riddles. We were already so old when we met! Our lives had been spent wandering, celebrating nature, love, the simple taste of a slippery udon noodle. You, a wandering musician with your vision of the eternal sky; me, a wandering monk with eyes, you would say though you could

not see, like a placid lake.

Blind! Yes, my soul, your eyes beheld not the light. Yours was an inner vision, so luminous, so beautiful, that it erased my previous madness and bitterness, and sustained me to the end of that life we shared. Blind—how like the photograph of a woman I've never met, wearing sunglasses... Then, as now, you gave wings to my curiosity: "Unasked, the flowers bloom in spring..."

I remember now something I wrote in mid-life, long before we met. It seems prescient to me now, as I sit meditating upon the puzzle presented by the Wheel of Life and Death:

"After ten years in the red-light district,
How solitary a spell in the mountains.
I can see clouds a thousand miles away,
Hear ancient music in the pines."

It's true you know: all those years I spent wandering, in disgust of the Zen-temple hierarchy, finding my home among weavers and whores. How you used to tease me! How you used to bless me with your singsong rhymes of finding truth in a lover's arms. Then as now, my love...

We have been so sad, dear woman, from missing each other. Do you recall the story of the exile of the Emperor Godaigo? When he had been a captive for some time the Empress sent him his lute, with these lines written on a scrap of paper:

"Turn your thoughts to me,
And behold these, my tears,
Too thick to brush away;
They fell on the strings of the lute
When I saw how thick the dust lay."

The Emperor, recognizing his beloved's true feelings, wrote back:

"When I plucked the notes
After many months of silence,

I yearned for you.
And the notes became cords
On which to thread my tears.”

That life we shared—like this one—was a drop in a pool. The mountain embraces the pool. The earth carries the mountain. Love is yugen—a mysterious power; love is many loves, some eternal. Eternal like our souls. Exile, separation, the sense of loss: these are transient visitors upon the kusa makura — the grass pillow upon which you lay your head on a long journey.

The sadness and confusion we may feel are fate’s hands shaping our souls. What we feel is memory’s kiss craving another; an echo of unremembered caresses calling up the well. I am filled with the certitude of joy-will-come. You are my fate: inevitable, but magnanimous. And I am your truth: hidden, but revealing.

When we were very old—after we had settled down together; after, at the people’s request, I had started a temple of my own—I wrote these lines which I now offer you as a loving reminder:

“If one purifies the ground of one’s own mind and beholds one’s own nature, there remains no Pure Land for which to hope, no hell to fear, no passions to overcome, no duality of good and evil. One is free from the cycle of rebirths. One will be born in every life as one’s soul wishes.”

Forever—and again forever—I am your Ikkyu

Never stop imagining, I repeat to myself, to my unknowable friends, for there *is* world and time enough. In the world that nature provides, I stand on the edge of a tall rock. I spread my arms out as if to embrace something—or someone—I can see only in my mind’s eye. I close my eyes. I am a fine dispersion of particles, dry as the sere wind at the edge of a cliff. Leaning back, I let myself fall. I fall into the arms of a stranger. My stranger, my friend.

Contributors' Notes

Gaylord Brewer teaches at Middle Tennessee State University, where he edits *Poems & Plays*. A Hemingway buff of the first water, Brewer is also the winner of the 1998 Red Hen Press Poetry Award for *Devilfish* and author of critical studies on David Mamet and Charles Bukowski.

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Peter Chilson, author of *Riding the Demon*, the AWP award-winning book of creative nonfiction for 1999, teaches creative writing at Washington State University, where he is faculty advisor of the literary magazine, *Landscapes*.

Brian Clark, a second-year MA/MFA student in literature and nonfiction, came to the University of Idaho from San Francisco, where he ran Permeable Press for 10 years. Clark's first novel, *Splitting*, was published in 1999 by Wordcraft of Oregon.

In addition to being an aficionado of Sonia Sanchez's poems, **Corinne Flowers** is a second-year MFA student in poetry at the University of Idaho. "Lately," she observes, "my work has arisen from theft. I steal words from books and articles, then write verses and poems from them."

Deborah Gillespie lives and writes out of Platteville, Wisconsin.

Gail K. Golden comes from the Big Apple where she works as a psychotherapist. A poet by avocation, her poems have appeared in *Vision*, *Hyperion*, *The Mickle Street Review*, and other magazines.

James H. Gramann is a professor in the field of natural resources at Texas A&M University in College Station, where he was recently elected to a 3-year term as president of Brazos Writers.

Ray Major lives and writes his poems in Hershey, Pennsylvania, the chocolate city.

"Bonding with Bill and Betty D." Will be the fifth of **Dan May's** short stories to see publication. He lives and writes in Cadott, Wisconsin.


Mildred Morris lives and writes in Leonia, New Jersey.

Sonia Sanchez, the featured poet in this issue, was born in Birmingham, Alabama, went to school in New York City, and currently teaches at Temple University in Philadelphia. In 1968 she married Black activist Etheridge Knight, with whom she had three children (they later divorced). Author of more than a dozen books of poetry, Sanchez is a winner of the American Book Award. Her most recent book is *Shake Loose My Skin: New and Selected Poems* (1999).

A third-year MFA student in fiction at the University of Idaho, **Matt Sullivan** has recently returned from a year on exchange at Wodz University in Poland.

Jeff Vande Zande lives in Michigan.

Hita von Mende's oil paintings celebrate the myths, scenery and romance of the Pacific Northwest. She works and lives on Vason Island, WA, where the Silverwood Gallery exhibits her work. She has received numerous awards for her paintings and is featured in many private and corporate collections. To see some of her other work please check out her Web site: vonmende.com.



Gaylord Brewer

Kim Bridgford

Chris Brisson

Peter Chilson

Brian Clark

Cori Flowers

Deborah Gillespie

Gail Kadison Golden

James Gramann

Ray Major

Dan May

Mildred Morris

Matt Sullivan

Jeff Vande Zande