No. 21 Summer 2001

Fugue

Robert Wrigley

Melanie Rae Thon

Interview with Billy Collins

Summer 2001

Fugue

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Fugue

Summer 2001, Vol. 21

Fugue (ISSN 1054-6014) is a journal of new literature edited by graduate and undergraduate students of the University of Idaho's English and Creative Writing programs. *Fugue* is made possible by funding from the University of Idaho English Department and is published biannually in the Fall and Spring.

Subscriptions are $12 for 1 year (2 issues) or $23 for 2 years (4 issues) made payable to *Fugue*. Add $4 per year for international. For back issues, write to *Fugue* at the University of Idaho, English Dept., 200 Brink Hall, Moscow, ID, 83844-1102.

Submissions: Submissions accepted Sept.1 through May 1 (postmark dates). Please address to the appropriate editor and send with SASE to *Fugue*, English dept., University of Idaho, 200 Brink Hall Moscow, Id. 83844-1102. Prose up to 6,000 words pays $10 and one year subscription. Poetry, all forms, pays $10 and one year subscription. Please send no more than four poems or 6,000 words of prose simultaneously. Submissions in more than one genre should be mailed separately.

Cover art "Untitled," by Matthew Sullivian

Printed by University of Idaho Printing and Design.

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Letter from the Editor

Number twenty-one is my first real issue, the first issue where my staff selected all the pieces, chose the artwork for the cover, and saw the magazine through from the selection process to the printing stage. Becoming the editor of *Fugue* at the beginning of my second year of graduate school was an exciting, daunting, and challenging opportunity. I had a vision of what I wanted this magazine to become and I think this issue reflects that vision. My staff and I thought *Fugue* needed to go in a new direction, to be reborn in its image and to regain its vitality. It has gone from being an undergraduate magazine with some graduate influence to a collaborative undergraduate/graduate magazine governed by the graduate M.F.A. students.

Many things have changed from number twenty to this issue. The content of the material on the whole is much more experimental than in previous issues. We have often said that *Fugue* strives to be eclectic, but I think the tastes of the staff shine through in the way that most of our fiction pieces are experimental. One of them, Matt Blackburn's "From the Black," is a sudden fiction, which speaks to our interest in forms some literary magazines shy away from. Starting with our last issue, number twenty, we have begun to publish more pieces from writers in our M.F.A. program. With this move, we intend to exhibit student work next to that of widely published authors. The other impetus behind this decision is to use *Fugue* as a forum for fine work in the M.F.A. program. We still wish to have every issue made up primarily of work from outside the program; however, we hope to have one or two pieces in every issue from students in the program.

Number twenty-one is poetry-focused, featuring inter-

views with Robert Wrigley and Billy Collins as well as poems by Robert Wrigley. The other theme of our issue is the writing process. You will notice that both of the interviews address issues of revision and the writing process. Melanie Rae Thon's, "Dangerous Discoveries," a haunting and beautiful essay about the research and writing of her new novel *Sweet Hearts*, reflects our desire to examine the enigma of the creative process. Where does writing begin? How do we manifest our visions and how do they occur? When does form become the content? How do we know when a piece is finished? These are all questions that I believe this issue attempts to engage, if not answer.

We have also chosen a new logo for number twenty-one, designed by our very patient and helpful graphic designer, Sarah Wichlacz. We have an email address (fugue@uidaho.edu) and have a website in the works, which should be up with the fall issue. We hope issue number twenty-one will signal the new direction *Fugue* is heading.

I would like to thank Lance Olsen for his moral support of the M.F.A. students and the magazine, and for the generous use of his office. I would like to thank Darlene Jones for the patience and cooperation she has exhibited in scanning all the material for this issue. Also, I would like to extend a thank you to Joy Passanante, Dave Barber, and Robert Wrigley, who have demonstrated compassion and creative problem-solving techniques for funding the magazine. Of course I would like to thank all the contributors who sent their work this way, without whom this issue would not be what it is. I also am indebted to my staff who has really pulled together this semester in making the magazine happen through a collaborative effort. Thank you to Eric Wahl, who has kept thoroughly in-

volved in the magazine as fiction editor, despite an intense surgery; thank you to Scott McEachern, who has volunteered his time and energy to keep *Fugue* from eating me alive, and stepping in at the key moment when I needed help. Especially thank you to Ron McFarland for his humor in grim times, his copy-editing skills, and his allowing us act out our vision of the magazine.

Andrea Mason
Managing Editor

Melanie Rae Thon

Dangerous Discoveries

June 29, 1999, Mother's birthday, and I am on my way to prison. For five years, I have been trying to understand the passion of a violent, tender boy—now this is where he leads me.

Norman Maclean is one of my heroes. At the age of 74, he devoted himself to the story of *Young Men and Fire.* His words guide me: "Unless we are willing to escape into sentimentality or fantasy, often the best we can do with catastrophes, even our own, is to find out exactly what happened and restore some of the missing parts."

My desire to restore the missing parts of Flint Zimmer's short and troubled life has compelled me to climb alone in the Black Hills of South Dakota and the Absaroka Mountains of Montana. I have visited nine Indian Reservations: Rosebud, Pine Ridge, Colville, Coeur d'Alene, Cheyenne, Flathead, Blackfeet, Nez Perce, Crow. Like Flint and his Métis ancestors, I have wandered, hungry. I've been charged by a buffalo bull, chased by mountain goats, and visited in my cabin by an auburn bear too starved to hibernate. Every vision of the journey brings revelation and a lost piece of the story: a mahogany piano crackles in flame; a rusted Pontiac Torpedo soars; five gray union suits fat with wind blow like headless men on a clothesline.

One cold March day in Indianapolis, I learn to shoot a Taurus 85 revolver and a 9 mm pistol. If sixteen-year-old Flint and his ten-year-old sister Cecile are going to handle these weapons, I believe I need to know them. Gary, my teacher, is a paraplegic in a wheelchair, a man wounded in a robbery when he was seventeen and working nights at a gas station. I fire his .357 Magnum, battering the chest of the paper target. The noise scares me as much as the recoil. "What's to fear?" Gary says. "You just fired one of the

baddest guns on the market, and nobody's dead or even wounded."

He speaks without irony. There is mystery at the center of every life, what cannot be explained or rendered in human language.

When Norman Maclean died at the age of 87, he believed his manuscript was unfinished—not because it was inadequate, but because its mysteries sustained his compassion and curiosity. On August 5, 1949, fifteen of the United States Forest Service's elite airborne firefighters, the Smokejumpers, leaped from their small plane and parachuted to the edge of a remote blaze in Montana. They thought they were invincible. One hour later, twelve were dead or mortally burned.

White crosses on the hillside of Mann Gulch in the Gates of the Mountains north of Helena mark the places where each firefighter fell. The day Norman Maclean climbed the steep slope of Mann Gulch, he was almost 80 years old, and the heat at the bottom peaked at 130 degrees. Not a day of fire, just an ordinarily brutal day in August. Breathless and dehydrated, the old man felt his legs and lungs and heart failing him. He grabbed fistfuls of grass to pull himself to the top. He needed to follow each firefighter's path, to contemplate and imagine each one's separate suffering. He would not leave his young Smokejumpers until he was able to say: "If now the dead of this fire should awaken and I should be stopped beside a cross, I would no longer be nervous if asked the first and last question of life, How did it happen?"

I am not nearly so brave or noble. I want to be done with my novel, *Sweet Hearts.* I am ready to let Flint Zimmer and his family go: the deaf aunt who signs his story, the little sister who becomes his victim and accomplice. Like Flint's own mother, I am relieved whenever he is gone. With Flint locked up, we both feel safer.

I hope the visit to Montana State Prison in Deer Lodge is my last piece of research. I seek only physical details: walls and toilets and wires and rivers, cows and horses on the prison ranch, snow glittering high on distant mountains. Hawks, Kestrels, Pileated Woodpeckers, Dark-eyed Juncos, Warbling Vireos, and a hundred thieving Magpies will make Flint's arrival real.

In the High Security Unit, the chained man who is removed from his cage so that I can enter is not much older than the child in my story. He has stuffed his air vents with spitballs of toilet paper to keep from freezing. The guard removes each tiny wad. I measure the white cinderblock cell, 12 foot lengths by 7. I read the graffiti: *Be Not Afraid. Jesus Rules.* I stare at the window that is not a window but a four-inch wide translucent slat.

In the Minimum Security Unit Library, I see the tiny prisons within the prison, a birdcage and aquarium. Three yellow-headed cockatiels are free for the day, one happy pair, and one recently widowed male. I'm told he cried constantly in the days after his partner died, until someone had the brilliant idea of giving him a mirror. He thinks his reflection is his mate. Now he sings and pecks at the glass. It is a metaphor too perfect to use in a novel.

Along every walkway, flowers bloom: poppies and columbines, bleeding hearts and petunias. The man who has planted them once kidnaped a female athlete. He wanted a strong wife for his son. Now, he is a gardener.

Inmates here do 45% of the state's Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic. Together, they have painted huge canvases of Montana's four seasons—not from sight, but from memory, and from their teacher's inspired descriptions. If they have not earned their high school diplomas, they go to class three hours a day. A teenager who murdered his teacher has become a model student. Felons wear gaps and gowns. Some weep at graduation.

I think, Yes, there is hope for Flint here. There is the possibility that he will survive long enough to find solace for himself and begin to feel tenderness and sorrow for his victims. This is what we all need: long days of mercy in our own lives, hope, and freedom from pain, so that we have space in our hearts and minds to imagine another person's anguish.

But Flint's redemption and my own escape will not be this easy. Linda Moodry, my guide for the day, tells me that during the 1991 riot in Maximum Security, five Protective Custody inmates were murdered by other prisoners.

Norman Maclean is so close I hear him whisper: "If the storyteller thinks enough of storytelling to regard it as a calling, unlike a historian, he cannot turn from the sufferings of his characters. A storyteller, unlike a historian, must follow compassion wherever it leads him. He must be able to accompany his characters, even into smoke and fire, and bear witness to what they thought and felt even when they themselves no longer knew."

I have copied these words at least a dozen times in my own hand. They are my prayer. They give me courage when I feel my own strength leave me. I consider the young men who risked their lives to fight a fire, and I envision the old man who climbed, weak and parched, risking his own life to tell their story. And though fidelity to the people of our fictions may seem less sacred than devotion to the quick and the dead, I believe every storyteller bears the same burden of responsibility. We make a covenant with the people we invent to serve and love them as honestly as possible, to bear witness to their lives without sentimentality or prejudice.

September 22, 1991, just one year after the boy I had come to know as Flint Zimmer entered Montana State Prison, the inmates held in Maximum Security broke through the cyclone fencing with their bare hands, shattered the plate glass glazing of the officers' cage, set mattresses and trash and clothes on fire to melt a hole in the Lexan shield, and gained access to every cell in the unit.

Four hours later, the Prison's Disturbance Control Team entered a maze of fire and fumes they described as hell. They meant it literally. Sprinklers worked, but the smoke evacuation system didn't. Electrical wiring fell into standing water. Any misstep here might mean death by electrocution. One Protective Custody inmate, anticipating the riot, had mixed a bucket of blood-red paint to splatter himself. While fellow prisoners beat him with their fists and prodded him with a broken mop handle, he held his breath and lay motionless. He was one of the lucky ones. In five other cells, the blood on the walls and floors and ceilings was real.

Norman Maclean is not my only teacher. Kate Braverman says that a writer needs the stamina of a channel swimmer and the faith

of a fanatic. Mikal Gilmore must have thought he'd reached the limits of both during the years he explored *Shot in the Heart* and chose to expose himself to the ghosts and demons that had destroyed his parents and three older brothers. Long before I was fortunate enough to know Andre Dubus and learn from him as a person, his stories reminded me that everyone has his grief: the murderer knows despair; the rapist has been wounded. Goethe said, "There is no crime of which I cannot conceive myself guilty." In Frank Bidart's poem, "The War of Vaslav Nijinsky," the dancer confesses: "I know people's faults / *because in my soul, / I HAVE COMMITTED THEM."* I believe Andre Dubus was a man who understood this kind of intimate turmoil, the fear that his own impulses made him both vulnerable and dangerous, the conviction that a man who witnesses an act of violence and does nothing is as much to blame as the one who commits it. Yet even he recalled a time when empathy eluded him.

Decades before Andre Dubus lost the use of his legs, he pushed a friend in a wheelchair to the crest of a hill. The man was agile and strong despite his paralysis. Later, when Andre thought of people in chairs, he conjured men like his friend: "Stouthearted folk wheeling fast on sidewalks, climbing curbs, and of course sometimes falling backward."

He didn't fully understand what that meant until a day over 20 years later when he fell backward in his own wheelchair, and his head slammed the floor, and he lay hurt and helpless. In "Song of Pity," he says: "I lacked the compassion and courage to imagine someone else's suffering." He never dared to think of his friend "making his bed, sitting on a toilet, sitting in a shower, dressing himself, preparing breakfast."

Sometimes the smallest details of another person's daily struggle threaten to destroy us. We avert our gaze because sympathy forces us to recognize the fragility of our human bodies and our human spirits.

When I learned of the riot, Norman Maclean's prayer to follow my people into smoke and fire became an exhortation. On my

way to Deer Lodge, I thought I faced four weeks of revision. Returning to Kalispell, I realized I stood on the brink of six more months of immersion.

It was, I suppose, unnecessary work. Flint did not live in Maximum Security. He was not among the dead; he was not a killer. But I believed I could not know this boy, I could not love him fully, unless I too confronted the terror he must have felt when he learned what had happened. I needed to see the naked, barefoot prisoners beaten by guards as they ran a gauntlet of broken glass. I needed to learn how they lay facedown in No Man's Land for seven hours. Fierce with panic and perilously outnumbered, the guards could not determine who might be a victim and who a perpetrator. The sun blazed that day, and the night was cold, and still the prisoners lay, burned raw, but freezing.

In the novel, my description of the riot spans less than three pages, but should I meet Norman Maclean walking in the woods today, I will be able to answer him if he asks the most important question: *How did it happen?*

Andre Dubus once told me he prayed for me every day, and that when he did, an angel came and sat on my shoulder. The day he died, I was afraid of what might happen to me, how I would live without his faith and his protection. But Andre had more faith than even he fathomed. When he comes to me now, I am pushing his chair up a long hill on a cold, bright day in early winter. We will never reach the top. He speaks into the wind as we go—my friend, my fiery angel. If I try to go too fast, if he senses my impatience, he laughs. *Look at me,* he says. *I am your proof: there is no swift or easy way to gain the courage for compassion.*

Matt Blackburn

From the Black

In the black.
In the dark.
That's where this story starts, see.
In this black.
1965 – the biggest power outage of all time takes New York. Six long hours of candle-lit vigils from Boston to Delaware because there was no choice but to light fires. Light fires against the dark. It hit like something out of a mystery play, people who hadn't lived without juice running their toasters, figured it would only last an hour, maybe two, three at the most. That black couldn't go on forever.
Trapped in subways. Trapped in elevators. And some, like Max, trapped themselves because there was no other choice. People in the black. And the day was forgotten because once the sun plunged out and that dark set in, like the wilderness just walked into your fucking bedroom and rubbed itself on your sheets, shit got out of control. Caveman memories started percolating up through sheets of neurons, infesting parts of the brain usually occupied with getting a fucking cab on Bond and Broadway or worrying about Italian fuckers lining Washington Square Park. Dark gets in the way. Asserts itself. Buildings air-condition sealed now got to be opened to an outside.
To the black.
And bankers and deli workers direct traffic, live it up, assist firefighters and light matches. But to some, fire fucks with the mind. Creates stories out of shadow and glide and that's where this story starts.
In the dark. In that dark.
Ten thousand. Ten million votive candles ignited by the not-yet-dead, to forestall an unforeseen, uncivilized doom, to stave off an imagination that conjures crime and dark perversion.

Daddies fucking whores in that dark.
Little girls slinging blowjobs for quarters in that dark.
Prisons packed with dark-free, unrepentant men in that dark.
Hold-ups, second story jobs, crying, crying in that dark.
But not this dark.
1965. A strained power grid. Sea salt on a transformer. This is how the world ends, and we light candles to burn that gloom, that dark, that night.
And that is where the story starts.
In the black.
With Max.
Max ain't got no job and the streets ain't no place for a brother. Not with no lights. Not after a day that, thinking back, seems doomed to darkness. Inside is safe. This dark, the inside dark, is okay. No stories from this dark.
But that dark.
Not a candle big enough. Not on those streets. A light sticking out of that dark brings attention and in that dark, attention is not what this brother needs. No light bright enough for a son in Vietnam to find his dead ass home. No light quiet enough to evade a woman six blocks away armed with a court order and a new man named Rodney.
This Story. New York. 1965. Black.
And Max blocks up the windows with newspaper and fabric ripped from the already tattered couch. Keep out the seeking lights. This dark the only place for this brother. Not that dark lurking out the windows in the streets, pocked with candles and white fuckers helping each other. That dark is no place for a brother that done a nickel in Attica for B&E, that got a kid dying in Vietnam dark, that got a woman no longer willing to stand within 100 feet.
Not with the night a candlelit march to somewhere. Hippies and protestors and Vietnam on the transistor got to go because a brother can't live in that dark on those streets in this story. Not this brother. So the transistor goes in the hall and Max can hear it through the door until the batteries die and the dark creeps in underneath until a towel and duct tape keep it out.

He got a fireplace, some stoved-up relic of past tenants and nostalgia, but a fire is out of the question, no chance, not another thing to watch throwing stories and hypnotizing the walls with flicker. No fucking way. Too much possibility. Not for this brother.

Hoover and hippies and 1965 and candles and this brother in this story and that dark outside and this dark of Max's making, and this dark our dark goes on until Max starts seeing shapes in the shadows that ain't other cons rolling up with shivs and a son with his guts blown across his chest and a thousand other things from that fucked up 1965 dark and those candle-infected streets. This a dark a brother can back into.

A dark where a brother can keep his eyes out and see by the transistor now hall-dead and relax, lay back and relax until this brother and this dark are indistinguishable, and when the lights come back up and eradicate the dreaming, this apartment is empty.

Robert Wrigley

Fraternity

In consideration of his age, the sheriff would not cuff Nelson Burdette,
who'd arrived with the body of his twin brother, Nils, bound in wire in
the bed of the truck, a penny-sized bloody new mouth dead center of the
forehead, nothing much at all underneath the crown's sparse hair.

But then, the sheriff hardly knew one brother from the other, and only
then, when he'd asked. Leaning on the rusty fender, he'd peered at the
sad old eyes, the wedge of pale face gaped with shock, the bird-claw
hands tied in his lap, a black sulfuric flare over the back of a knuckle.

"Now which one are you?" asked the sheriff, looking down.
"Me?" said the live one, smiling. Then touching
the dead one's waxen lip, the sheriff said, "No. I mean,
which one's this?" The autumn light mid-day
made Main Street a boulevard in Heaven,
but for a tumbleweed and the neon reading "-rue Value."

"Why that there," the old man said, "is Nils. Finest brother
the world ever knowd and I'm the one that kilt him."
In the chill of the metal bed, the brother's blood
was almost black. The sheriff eyed a cloud's reflection there.
"He was always the sad one, wasn't he?" asked the sheriff,
"always down about this or that or nothing,"

The smile again. Why wouldn't it all be true?
And would it matter if it were not?
"You could never stop smiling yourself, could you?
And now you're all alone."
Suddenly the smell of an opened body, part metal,
part sweat. "I s'pose that's true," said Nelson Burdette.

Then, again, he smiled. And anyone who could have said
whose smile was whose was also dead.
So the sheriff said, "Come on, let's go," and took him
by the arm, who said his name was Nelson Burdette,
until the day he died and was buried by his brother's side,
one a killer, one a fratricide.

Robert Wrigley

The Local Myth of a Kiss

That neighbor boy who tried to kiss the frost
from Alice Murtaugh's tombstone married
his lips to the legend of this place. Did he
notice the dates of her life at all, I wonder.
Or how despite the cold the flowers on her
grave were hardly spoilt at all: three red roses,
their petal edges kissed half as hard as he was.

There is someone, it is said, who remembers
just what it was Alice Murtaugh whispered
in the shotgun's mouth, who had
tried the tongues of love and found them wanton.
Remembers, and dies
a little every day, it is said, though no one
knows the source of the weekly flowers.

It's like the weather or the wind,
the way the fog crawls up the canyon walls
and freezes, until the cemetery's ornate gates
loom ghostly, and the stones recede in clouds
that cling. Had he not panicked
and snapped his head back hard,
the boy might have been all right.

Now, however, an odd blossom etched
in the polished stone, a faint gray rose
over the weekly, inclement others
no one ever sees arrayed.
How is it forgotten,
such desperate parting, the kiss
that won't let go?

Robert Wrigley

Night Cat and Falling Stars

"Man alone can raise his face toward heaven."
—Ovid

So many stars her shape on the porch rail
is the absence of stars, and yet by their light
her whiskers gleam, the black cat, Lily.

This morning her gift by the kitchen door:
in the just-risen sun it shimmered, cauled
by an acidic sac, the headless vole, her latest kill.

We used to call them "falling stars." Shriven souls
burning back to life as babies. I was one
once, my grandmother said, and like every boy

brilliant and explosive, a bolis and a bullet,
deadly, bright with my bombast and blunder.
Thus Curley, Lily's light-colored son,

gone one night in his second year, aloft
in the talons of an owl. Some morning I will
find him, blond hide and rib-hull underneath a tree.

We are all of us here, my wife and my children
and me, drifting in and out of sleep on a mild
August night, as the meteors fall and fall.

And there is no joy like Lily's, a songbird in her jaws.
Putting up firewood I'll hear her coming, all
rumble and rasp, ignoring my scold,

that blood purr and predatory throb
and it is that rumble that wakes me now,
not the latest meteor's luminous trail.

By the light of stars and a night sky
not half as dark as her coat, I see, I swear,
she's looking not down but up to heaven like me.

Can she see a cosmos chaotic with tails?
Out of each dark clump one random fall—
yours, mine; out of the void we bolt in fear

You are vast now, sweet cat, black Lily. I am almost asleep.
Jupiter shimmers, a highlight on your flank.
Nightly, under the plummeting lights you stalk.

Later I'll waken again, and you'll be everywhere
and gone, on our pillows a few pawed petals
in blood, the wind your passage across our throats.

Robert Wrigley

Pietá

Did it once, lived that way, the way they are:
there's a slow, dizzy, no-gravity swirl
in their groins and in the way they giggle.
She's got one hand on the back of his neck
and the other on his thigh; her skirt's hung
on his watchband and sliding up: who cares?
Louis, one of the other regulars,
mutters they might as well get on with it,
and sure enough they do. Guy throws a ten
on the bar and goodbye. There's no one else but us
under the beer sign sun, the back-lit geldings
hauling Budweiser toward Christmas. The woman
who loved me once called it that, her "Christmas,"
and took my hand to show me what
she meant by waiting for it all. Now
there's just an hour before the game's on,
so the bartender tunes in a movie
we've all seen—more of the same, except now
he's killing her husband for her, for *them,*
he thinks, only he's gonna take the fall.
That's what you get for thinking with your cock,
Louis says, and the rest of us say amen,
as though, after all, he had said a prayer
and we were parishioners, Fast Eddie
the bartender our pope. Once I told her
she should make believe I'm Jesus, she should
act accordingly. She looked at me for
a long time, drawing little figure-eights
across my chest. "You want me to show you what
you'd die for," she said, " I will." Now Louis is
telling the latecomers about the couple that left,
and just like him he makes it raunchy and lewd,
even the way she held him when they first
arrived, before their two fast drinks of gin.

She'd swiveled toward him on her stool, and he
had turned outward toward the empty dance floor,
and laid his head on her arm, his dark hair
nearly on the bar, his eyes closed.
She held him and looked at him, unsmiling,
almost sad, as though in every act, in every flirt,
kiss, or touch, there lay the seed of ruin,
as though their future loss shone through his skin
and the end of the story they knew
but would not believe in, was only this, the way
she held him, silent, already mourning.
Through the steamy glass of draft my own
skin looks near godly, warmed with a gold sheen
almost worthy of Michelangelo,
or the color of the beer sign sunset
behind the bar, where night after night
no darkness ever comes. The night of the day
she left me, Eddie, all bartenderly
grace and well-intentioned, called out, "He's free!"
and a cheer went up from the regulars.
Tonight it's winter and already dark. Somewhere
they are wearing champagne, she is kissing
his perfect palms, the unrent skin of his ribs.
Dear Mother of God, may he know it all
is suffering—the passion and the nails,
the lifetime outside the other's skin—
even as she holds him and held him here,
his eyes, like mine, closed, and believing salvation.

Mary Ann Hudson

An Interview with Poet Robert Wrigley

Robert Wrigley's most recent collection is *Reign of Snakes* (Penguin, 1999), which won the 2000 Kingsley Tufts Award in Poetry. His earlier works include *The Sinking of Clay City* (Copper Canyon Press, 1979); *Moon In a Mason Jar* (University of Illinois, 1986); *What My Father Believed* (Illinois, 1991); *In the Bank of Beautiful Sins* (Viking Penguin, 1995). He is the recipient of two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as two fellowships from the Idaho Commission on the Arts. In 1987 and '88, he served as the state of Idaho's Writer-in-Residence. Among his awards are the J. Howard and Barbara M. J. Wood Prize, as well as the Frederick Bock Prize, from *Poetry* magazine, the Wagner Award from the Poetry Society of America, and two Pushcart Prizes. *In the Bank of Beautiful Sins* received the San Francisco Poetry Center Book Award for 1996; it was, in addition, one of five finalists for the Lenore Marshall Award from the Academy of American Poets. He is the 1997 recipient of the Theodore Roethke Award from *Poetry Northwest*. In 1996, he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. Wrigley is currently a Professor of English at the University of Idaho, where he teaches in the MFA program and lives with his wife, the writer Kim Barnes, and their two children, near Moscow, Idaho.

Hudson: Often, when I talk to poets new to poetry, their reasons for not writing or not writing a great deal revolve around this idea of being "inspired." In other words, no inspiration, no poem. However, it seems that most poets I have worked with in a mentoring capacity or have read about, in-

cluding you, write nearly every day. I have to assume that more experienced poets are not inspired anymore than others (I could be wrong); so, what skills and tools do you feel you have at your disposal, at this point in your career, that enable you to begin writing? What do you start with when the page is still blank? What compels you to write nearly every day?

Wrigley: The only times I've ever been able to write every day have come when I've received grants and taken time off from teaching. Which is all of twice. A half a year once and a whole year another time. Mostly I try to write two good days a week. The year I wrote every day (or nearly every day) was exciting and really a lot of fun, only I became aware, after a while, that if I didn't take time away from writing I found myself just going through the motions. In other words, I think all writers need silence too; all writers need time away from their own insides as well.

It's a kind of heresy to admit in the academic world, but I actually do believe in something one might call "inspiration," only it's not getting rapped on the noggin by the Muse or struck by metaphorical lightning. I believe that inspiration is a state you work yourself toward and into. How? By writing. Writing is a muscular thing. When you write you exercise the writing muscle, and that muscle, at its best, will deliver from you things you did not know you were capable of. When I'm in, for lack of a better term, some sort of a writing "zone," the blank sheet of paper thrills me. When I am struggling, I feel more like Sisyphus hauling the rock of the language up a mountain.

On those less-than-inspired occasions, I just go with the sound of things. A phrase, a particular word, the way a clause suggests a metrical construction. I let it go. I follow the sound of things and let the language show me what I have in mind. That no doubt sounds almost silly, except that I would argue that "having the tools" is what makes it possible. And the only way to GET those tools is to write and read and read and

write. Then write some more. If you keep on, inspiration is not something that will happen to you; it's a place you will arrive. It's a state you will have earned.

Hudson: Once a writer has earned a state of inspiration, what does this state, or what seems to me a kind of grace, look like? How does the poem emerge from the blank page when that blank page is welcome? Why is the academy reluctant to discuss process in this way?

Wrigley: I don't think the academy's especially prepared to discuss such a thing in a literary context. There are scholarly procedures that can trace the evolution of a particular work through its incarnations, but I'm not talking about that. I'm not talking so much about what happens from page to page, but about what happens when the space between the writer's impulse and the blank paper melts away. The fact is, "this state" doesn't *look* any different than any other writer at his or her desk writing away fruitlessly. Keats at his least would have looked very much like Keats at his best, sitting at the desk.

I just read a review of a book in which the reviewer spoke of poetry as an art that must be created from a "cloud of unknowingness," and that made perfect sense to me. You know, a kind of Zen, the-first-step-is-to-lose-the-way situation. I don't want to make this sound silly, and it may well be that "inspiration" is the term for it by a kind of default, but the situation I'm talking about is this: a writer steeps himself or herself in the craft of the art, keeps extending the range of his/her abilities, keeps trying to write what he/she can't write, what he/she would rather not write, what he/she finds too difficult or frustrating to write. In so doing, the writer prepares him/herself, develops the writing muscle, learns the whole array of tools, and thus, when the process is underway and that metaphorical door opens, the writer walks in and makes new and unforeseen things happen.

You've heard the old saw about there being no such thing as inspiration. What it is is "perspiration." Well, that's still pretty accurate, even if, like me, you believe in that "state of grace" that can be entered now and then. You will only enter that state with the tools, the receptivity, and the willingness to fail, and those things come from having learned your craft.

Hudson: I just recently had a very brief conversation with you during a workshop break where you said that your poem "Reign of Snakes" was a work that half your readers felt was exactly where you should be going as a poet, and the other half just didn't agree. You also mentioned it was a poem that surprised you, that started happening in a way you couldn't have predicted. Could you discuss "Reign of Snakes" in light of inspiration, the "cloud of unknowing," how poems come to be? I think many of us would be interested.

Wrigley: Actually, it wasn't the poem "Reign of Snakes," it was the other long sequence, which in the book is italicized and placed sequentially through the book. When I published that poem in *Poetry*, it was called "Earthly Meditations," and I do think of it as a single poem in five parts, its placement through the book notwithstanding.

What I was talking about was a kind of "place" that poem took me (or conversely, a place where I went where the poem was waiting) that had primarily to do with the sound of the language itself. Much of that poem felt to me, during its composition, like a ride down a steep hill in a barrel. It was exhilarating, and it made me dizzy. What I tried to do in that poem was to keep each of the five narratives—and there are five narratives that move in and out of focus in those five sections—moving forward in time, even as I let the language tell me what direction I might go. There are places in the poem where I think you can see that I'm wringing as much as I can out of a particular sound. I had in mind where the "story" of each

section might go when I began, but I had to unknow that. I had to trust the sound and the rhythm to show me the route to the story's end.

There are a few folks—friends of mine, fellow poets—who just don't like what I did there. There are others—more of them, actually—who love how that poem works. These people want me to do more of that and I'm not sure I can. I'm not even sure I want to. That was that particular poem and it may be no other. We'll see.

I should also say that "Earthly Meditations" is a highly larcenous poem. Eliot said that immature poets borrow while mature poets steal. Well, I'm mature. When I wrote that poem, I was immersed very, very deeply in the late meditations of Theodore Roethke, and I was also listening to tapes of Dylan Thomas, Sylvia Plath, and Galway Kinnell. You can hear them all in there. Hell, you can see them. Their voices make what I do, how I read and write and think about poetry, possible. And I might also say that, in the beginning, I wasn't sure I could trust the poem because it was so different. In fact, it's not that different. It's recognizably my voice, but it's differently tuned. I'm playing in a different scale.

You should always be writing the poem you're not quite able to write.

Hudson: Always? If "Earthly Meditations" was, maybe, unique in its experience of writing it, how else can we recognize, other than dizziness or doubt or grace, when we are writing the poems we *should be* writing? How do we, I guess, reckon with our own poems?

Wrigley: OK, mostly. How's that? It's also good to remember Bill Stafford's advice about what to do when you can't write: lower your standards.

You can't recognize such things as "the poems you should be writing." You just write. You need to get a sense of the line,

for example, that you're most comfortable in, rhythmically. Then, periodically, you ought to challenge that sense. This sort of bromide I've spouted—writing the poem you can't quite write—is mostly just a way to remember that the journey is more important than the destination.

I don't remember there being a particular day when it happened; it probably could not have worked that way. But I do recall that there was a time, when I was first making poems, when I was in love with the product—the finished poem. In those days, you might say, I preferred to have written. Then, at some point, I realized that I loved writing—the process, the engagement with language and experience and imagination—most of all.

In fact, it's not likely that there's anything you should "always" be doing, except making your craft better. How you do that is any way you can. For the Cormac McCarthys of the world, it means pushing the resources of the language and of the form and structure of the novel. For the William Maxwells, it means clearer and clearer, more perfectly crystalline sentences.

Hudson: So what about revision? How and when does that happen? How do you do it?

Wrigley: It happens from the moment I start until the moment I stop. I print out poems with a mechanical pencil in early drafts, and I'll often go through two or three pages getting the first four or five lines in place, lines which later on may wind up further revised, retooled, or lopped off.

My sense of the poem has come to be that it is a thing that emerges in the writing. It is rarely something premeditated, plotted, graphed, or outlined in advance. In this regard, the writing of the poem is not much different than any other sort of serious writing—fiction, literary nonfiction, drama, compelling critical or scholarly writing—in some ways. I mean, I re-

member reading in an interview with Saul Bellow, his thumbnail, and perhaps somewhat facetious, explanation of his novelistic process. "I just create a character and put him in motion." I have no reason to doubt that this is mostly true though.

Once I have a first solid draft of a poem, I let it sit. I'll read it a week later, or two weeks, and when I do, I try to come at it as though I were happening across it for the first time. Sometimes I see an idea emerging that's not sufficiently developed; sometimes I see that everything is there but insufficiently connected. If drafting—that rush of compositional energy and blind running through the woods—is about something called "inspiration," then revision is that point at which the poet has to impose his/her intellect on the poem. Good poems are smart. They devise ways of allowing the reader in. They don't answer all the questions; they pose questions. But the ones that matter most to me are the ones that allow me to come inside and see how the light shines through the windows.

And eventually, you walk away. As much as anything else, you walk away because the poem that interests you most is none of them you've written or have been writing, but the one you will write next.

Hudson: What were your influences while you were writing *Reign of Snakes*? What were you reading and paying attention to? What was impossible for you to stop thinking about? How have these influences changed recently, for even newer work?

Wrigley: I was reading a lot of Roethke—the late meditations, especially the "North American Sequence"—when I wrote the "Earthly Meditation" sequence. But then I'm nearly always reading Roethke. Can't leave him alone. My poetic grandfather, after all. I was listening to Dylan Thomas on tape too, which was fun and weird—all those poems that make such gorgeous nonsensical sense: "In the White Giant's Thigh" and "Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait."

But speaking of "influences" is problematic. Eventually one has the sense that one is making it up as one goes along. I mean, perhaps my most important influence was the King James Bible or the dulcet tones of the Reverend Kuhlman, pastor of my boyhood church—who believed I'd preach (and here I am). My namesake Uncle Bob's fabulous cool is part of my influence. My mother's fierce moral sense. My grandmother's "salty tongue."

My last two books (and the one in progress) have all proceeded from the title, through the poems, to construction, to completion. My first three books were assembled from a pile of poems. That works. I wanted to try something else. So I devised a title—even, God help me, a theme—and started rowing toward it. We'll see where that takes me.

Hudson: What I like most about your work, and others have said this first, is that though its landscapes run from the Missouri Ozarks to Idaho canyons, the same witness is still there. The integrity of the psyche holds fast. I think I could argue that all of your books have been written by theme, like you said your last two were, and that the poems populate the world the theme creates—the small chaoses of *Moon in a Mason Jar*, the revealed secrets of all of those people in *What My Father Believed*, how *Reign of Snakes* meditates and obsesses, and so on. What accounts, exactly, for this sensation of unity and fidelity? It seems to me more than a voice or imagination. It seems you are trusting something much bigger.

Wrigley: George Bush the First might have called what you're getting at "the vision thing." Vision is such a loaded and semi-magical word, but I don't hold it in awe much. One's poetic vision is essentially one's identity, passed through the lens of that craft the art requires. That is, I could not have written what I've written had I not been who I am: the first member of my family to graduate from college, the son of a long, long line

of working men and women; a Midwesterner by birth but a Westerner to the bone; someone who early on discerned the power in language. At the same time, I would not be who I am had I not written the things I have. Thus "vision" is who you are and what you do, through the lens of the art.

Were you to trace, very carefully, something approximating vision in all five of my books, you'd see how that vision has both evolved and nevertheless maintained a kind of constancy, a kind of fidelity, to use your word. What has changed has everything to do with craft. I did not arrive with my first book fully formed. Christ, I did not! I'm not embarrassed by my first book, mind you, but it strikes me now as a very green piece of work. The things that have become my obsessions—the frailty of life, the sweet miracles of the seasons, the dignity of the individual struggle to be something worthy of the moniker "human"—that's all there, but it's hobbled by what I'd call a kind of greenness of craft. *The Sinking Of Clay City*, my first book, is 90 percent workshop pieces. *Moon in a Mason Jar* broke out because I discovered a love for the poem's narrative arc at the same time I realized that music—that the sounds of individual syllables—could help propel that narrative. *What My Father Believed* is where I started toying with end-rhyme and syllabic lines. *In the Bank of Beautiful Sins* was a breakout completely, in a sense, though there are poems in *Moon* that might have fit in it. More than that, however, is the idea of theme, or, in your good word here, "obsession." Both *Sins* and *Reign of Snakes* are books written while I allowed myself to be obsessed with the idea of, in the former case, sin; in the latter, evil.

Finally, if there's something that holds it all together, it is craft. Learning craft shapes vision. In a very real way, your craft affects your vision more than your vision affects your craft. And there's this, something I know in my heart as surely as I know anything: you can never simply assume you've got all the tools; you can never decide you're somehow a "master," and that it's all possible. You're always—ALWAYS—a student

of the art. I read and write to learn to read and write. As long as I can write, I'll be studying what is possible. It's not much different than the best scholars. If your specialty is *Beowulf*, then it doesn't matter how many books have been written about it; yours is something new, something more. That sort of a scholar is him/herself a writer of the first order.

Hudson: I can't decide, sometimes, if *Reign of Snakes* might be a book of mourning, somehow. You said that when you wrote it you were obsessed with evil, and so does this mean it's a book praying for its absence? For it to make sense to us? Or is it about the place evil has in our lives? I'm thinking, especially, of "Bodies," "Peace," "Our Father," of course, "Reign of Snakes."

Wrigley: There's that justifiably famous Robert Hass poem ("Meditation at Lagunitas") that begins "All the new thinking is about loss. / In this it resembles all the old thinking." Exactly. I can't imagine how you could make any art that was not driven largely by loss. Only the most ecstatic poets avoid mourning and the best of them, Rumi, say, frequently mixes the two together in a wonderfully complex broth. Most poets are essentially elegiac, I think. It's just that the elegy is often concerned not with the loss of a loved or admired one but with the loss of something loved or admired within, or even loved or admired intellectually. But there's nothing new about that sort of thinking. It's old and new.

I wasn't so much obsessed with evil as with the idea of examining it. I finished *In the Bank of Beautiful Sins* more convinced than before that I didn't believe in the very concept of sin. That is, I didn't believe in the freight of it. I didn't believe in the way the concept of sin was wielded against people, for example. With *Reign of Snakes*, I became interested in the lowly snake as the apparent repository of evil, the earthly embodiment of evil, in fact. What I knew of snakes (and there were

plenty of them where we lived on the Clearwater River) made me understand them as beautiful creatures. Do I believe in evil? Sure, but not as a quality that resides in any inhuman creature. It's a human quality, and interestingly enough, it is very much at home in the imagination.

For instance, in "Peace" the evil is Timothy McVeigh's, and truly there's no making that sort of lunatic awfulness cease to exist. The poem intends to be, as Frost said the poem should be, "a momentary stay against confusion." In the poem the father tries to explain such a thing as McVeigh and his awful handiwork to his daughter, and finds that he can only say "People like us." "Our Father" is a pretty straightforward rant not so much against God, though it may seem that way, but against the way the idea of God gets as perverted as the idea of righteous fury, like McVeigh's. There are, I think the subtext of that poem suggests, some evil things that merely look like godliness. The Christian Right, for example. I won't lie. They were on my mind in that poem.

In "Reign of Snakes" it's all over, evil, in some form or another, at least once spoken of directly ("a sign, he told me, of evil buried near"). But by the end, the speaker—who's been speaking all along—collects the frozen rattlesnake and brings it in, in an attempt to bring it back to life, really. He's content there, smoking his cigar, and waiting. Of course it's ambiguous. All the poem is. All good art is.

I'm less certain what to say about "Bodies." There a reference to the bad news in the newspaper and such, but mostly it's elegiac. Losses abound, even in the simplest people and places.

Hudson: I'm interested in what you said about a work, upon completion, convincing the artist even more of the original idea that conceived the work. It also seems like something that would only really happen when work is approached, as *In the Bank* and *Reign* was, with an idea or theme in mind. You

write so many surprising poems like "The Pumpkin Tree," the "Earthly Meditations" series, "Nostalgia," "What My Father Believed," "Yard Work," that I can't help but think it's possible to convince yourself of something you had not ever considered while in the act of writing a poem. If your poems sometimes come from a cloud of unknowing, I'm wondering, do they sometimes seem to have known something you did not?

Wrigley: Sure. I don't who said it first, or who said some version of it first, but I've heard some hundred or so variations on the following: "The poem is a way of remembering something you did not know you ever knew, or did not know you'd forgotten." And if you think about it, that's not a whole lot different from "defamiliarizing the familiar" or "rendering the ordinary extraordinary." Writing is an act of discovery. I write my way TO something.

In the poems in *What My Father Believed*, which are more overtly autobiographical poems, that was problematic, because I was often writing about some experience that had a particular end to it. I knew the end when I started and I still had to write my way to it. In that case, the discovery lay not in what happened, in any narrative sense, but in the way I managed to get there. The journey. More specifically, the journey, in this case, has to do with things like the way the imagery connects, with the establishment of a poem's symbolic cast, with the very music of the language that connects the poem line by line and farther.

In a poem like "The Pumpkin Tree," I was surprised to get where I got to, but the end begins rising some few lines from the end, and it shows itself in trope of the "mummy of a saint." Given that I was working that angle of religious versus organic (I don't know what else to call it) faith, the notion of evil coupled to the fact of the wholeness of human existence (where there's love, there's hate; that sort of thing)—given that

I was continually and obsessedly thinking of these things, that image simply rose up and presented itself at the right time. I was startled by the end of that poem, even a little unnerved. And I like feeling that, I have to say.

Trust the poem more than the poet, I say. Sometimes what that means, I'm not exactly sure, but I still believe it absolutely.

Hudson: That reminds me of something I think I believe right now, that is, "you have to love the poem more than the beloved." I think your language attests to this idea–I am continually surprised by what enters your poems, even at the word level (playful at times, incredibly specific at others–like "ball-peen clang" in "Ice Fishing"). This sort love affair of yours with language seems particularly Wrigley-esque to me. How is it evolving? How will you surprise us next?

Wrigley: I don't know if my love for the music of language is evolving or just growing, intensifying. I mean, I like poems that make sense. That's also a certain kind of heresy, I suppose, for some folks. I don't mean that poems have to make a kind of sense that's easily digestible. "The Waste Land" makes vivid sense, more than a lot of Frost, I think. But Frost always makes it possible for the reader to look up from the page and know that the world is altered by the simple arrangement of words on the page. That's what I mean by sense.

Part of the reason I love jazz so much is that it strikes me as so much like poetry. In the same way that a great jazz player plays all around the melody, an array of notes that is and is not the melody, the poet is all around meaning, all around sense. The end result is that the tune is the traditional melody and a lot more, and the poem is just what it says, and a lot more.

Which makes me say, by way of confession, that I'm a cowardly musician. I played music when I was young. I was member in relatively good standing of Musicians Local 325; I paid

my dues. I made enough money playing the guitar and singing rock and roll that I bought a car and had money to spend all through my high school years. I must have been almost 18, when—after a couple of years of lessons from a good jazz player, learning progressions and all sort of wonderful scales and chords—I realized that music was going to be the hardest thing I could ever do. So I chickened out. I just stopped. I got practical. It didn't last, of course. I became a poet, for godssakes—right. That'll be a lot easier. My point in such a confession is that I don't think my passion for music ever left me; it just got turned toward the poems, toward the language.

I don't know if I'll surprise anybody or not. Mainly I need to keep surprising myself. That's the most wonderful part of writing, you know—when you say something you had no idea you'd ever say, and you realize it's somehow a very, very true thing. That's why you write. It's why I do.

Eric Roe

Wickedness

Her name is Fiona, and she's a Woman. Forget the "Wicked Witch" moniker. Forget the numerous, insipid TV interviews with Gretel and her allegations. Fiona is a *Woman* who knows what she wants and will not stand for any guff, from *anyone*. These days that calls for a certain amount of wickedness.

She rode into my life on the back of a black monsoon, and one look at that raven hair and those emerald lips told me it would not be wise to ask, "Where's your broom?" Why she noticed me, why she smiled and curled her finger at me, I don't know. But I've been smitten ever since.

What I knew of her before came from the Hansel/Gretel scandal coverage. Yes, *that* Gretel, with her ridiculous golden braids, freckles, and Swiss Alps dress. She was the real star of the show, squawking her accusations and her famous quote, rendered ad nauseam with horrific revelation for talk show hosts: "She was *fattening* him! She was going to *eat* him!" Gretel was the star by default. The media had nothing on the Wicked Witch—nothing but one composite sketch of a hoary, old, wart-plagued hag, courtesy of Gretel's descriptions.

Give them credit for trying, though. They had platoons of crews in the north woods, cameramen stumbling over roots and breaking their noses on equipment, reporters slapping entire civilizations of mosquitoes as they interviewed befuddled locals: "Sir, could you tell us a little about the legend of the North Woods Wicked Witch?"

"Ah, yep, well . . . baby eater."

"She eats babies, sir?"

"Yep. Yep. Eats babies. Lives in a candy house, yep."

"Lives in a house made of candy, is that correct, sir?"

"Ayup. Uh-huh. Baby eater. Yellow teeth. No-good wicked."

The locals weren't interested in helping locate the place. With an unending narrative from the reporters, cops combed the woods in a search for the famous candy house, which was decorated on the inside (Gretel claimed) with hideous amputated limbs from prior victims. The whole world was watching, or so the media seemed to think, hoping for the paydirt of catching the Wicked Witch inside, preferably nibbling on some hapless youth with her yellow fangs. But no such luck. No candy house, no Wicked Witch.

The hoopla died down. There was an inquiry into the behavior of the father and stepmother, who to this day claim that Gretel simply had her head in the clouds and got lost, that it had never been their intention to lose her. The case never went to court. As for Hansel, he appeared on one talk show with his sister, grunting "Yeah" and "Uh-huh" now and then, and that was it. The media could not produce a Wicked Witch, and the public turned its attention elsewhere.

(One elderly lady did create a belated media stir by getting arrested for, presumably, being the Wicked Witch. She was released when authorities learned she was actually the chairperson of the Fifth District's Garbanzo Ladies Bingo Club. The cops found her in the woods in a daze, but it became apparent that she'd wandered out there by accident after too much revelry upon winning the Garbanzo Ladies Beaner Bonus Bingo game the night before.)

Toward the end, as the sensation wore off and the story started ebbing back under the flow of the new Bluebeard scandal, I found myself at a newsstand, flipping through one of the pop culture monitors. There was a last-ditch-attempt-at-revitalizing-the-story interview with Hansel, a half-pager with a glossy photo of a buff, blank hero on the opposite page. Asked what he felt while in the clutches of the Wicked Witch, Hansel was credited with the reply, "She was wicked, you know? I mean, any woman who could do what she did, the way she did it—that's just wicked. I thought at first I'd be able to handle her, but I was wrong."

I caught a scent of rain from over my shoulder, and the hair stood up all across my back. A voice, a *woman's* voice, whispered, "He was in on it, you know. Hansel—couldn't get enough." I turned and saw her walking away, down the sidewalk, raven hair spilling out from under a black fedora, cascading over the shoulders of a black trenchcoat. Her spiked heels left puncture wounds in the cement, and all up and down the street wives slapped gawking husbands.

Me, I locked myself up in my rented one-room shack. I knew trouble when I saw it. My past had its own little scandal, and I still lived in fear that a certain flannel-clad woodsman would present himself on my doorstep one day with the be-all-end-all side of a hatchet coming my way. I curled up on the couch with a book and tried to banish the image of dark hair and vicious curvatures from my mind.

Lots of luck. At the stroke of midnight, a monsoon blasted open the windows and the doors and I found myself spitting dust and rubbing debris from my eyes. When I could see again, she was standing there. The trenchcoat and hat were gone, but the hair, wind-whipped, and the spiked heels and the rain scent gave her away. She smiled an emerald smile that was all white teeth and sparkling eyes and she pointed a polished, black nail at my book. "*The New Gothic Revival in Housing Structures*," she said. "How intriguing."

"Buildings are my life," I said miserably. One look at her and the wiring in my brain was switched around forever, with her pulling the circuits any which way she chose. I managed one coherent question, lying dazed in her presence. "Why me?"

"Because," she said, "you can relate. And I've been curious ever since the Riding Hood scandal broke a few years ago." She looked at me, still cowering on the couch and rubbing my eyes, and she laughed, pointing her sharp nose with derision. "Big, Bad Wolf indeed. Ha!"

"Please," I said. "Call me Rex." I managed a smile, the first I'd allowed myself in years for fear of being discovered.

"My, what big teeth you have," she said. "Call me Fiona." Then she entered the room without moving her feet, gliding on an invisible jetstream inches from the floor. "If I call you into the bedroom, will you come?"

I looked around, helpless. "This is the bedroom," I said. "And I'm already there."

I was. And I did. And I did again. None of the walls were left standing and sometime during the night I found myself on a bed made of a funnel cloud, with Fiona, with Fiona, with Fiona. She laughed and arched her back and I howled as we sailed over the rooftops and the fields. "It's the wind, honey," mothers were telling their children. "It's just the wind." And they locked the windows and pulled the blinds.

Her house—it really was a candy house, replete with sugar walls, but it was no cutesy thing with candy canes and gumdrops, as in the image Gretel had painted. This was sinful, with white chocolate shutters and doors of solid Lady Godiva chocolate and chocolate-covered macadamia nuts for doorknobs. "Fiona," I said, looking around in shock, "This is the most structurally unsound building I've ever seen! What are you going to do if it rains? What are you going to do if the sun hits it just right?"

"Rex," she said, and she smiled and ran a finger down my arm. "You live a life of fear, don't you?" She gave me a light push and I found myself tumbling back onto her bed. "Are you afraid of me?" she said.

"You're wicked," I told her.

"So I've heard." And she pounced.

Hansel was in on it, she told me one night it was late and Fiona was scratching behind my ears and I had to fight to keep my hind leg from kicking. She told me the story. Hansel was in on it with his folks to lose Gretel in the woods and collect the insurance money, which they'd have split three ways. Instead, he and Gretel stumbled across Fiona's house. Hansel figured it was his lucky break. He let Gretel get caught up in the wonder of the candy house and sneaked away, abandoning here there. Fiona appeared

in the doorway and cast a withering look at Hansel. "Your sister is eating my house," she said. "That's very rude."

Hansel stuttered and stumbled and nearly wet his pants.

"How would you like it if I brought you in here and ate you up?" Fiona asked him. And she smiled. Hansel grabbed Gretel by the braids and yanked her into the house and sat her down and told her not to touch anything, and he took another look at Fiona, who was already in the bedroom.

"Wasn't he a bit young?" I asked her.

Fiona tsked. "He was of legal age. It's just that babyface that gets the public sympathy vote. And you," she said, pointing, "you should talk, with your Little Red Riding Hood."

"Please," I said. "Her name was Lolita. And nothing happened. It was her *grandmother* I was after, who, I might add, was not the cross-stitching, gray-haired, sweet, old lady the media made her out to be. She wasn't even that *old*."

Fiona gave a skeptical and amused look, then continued with her tale. Hansel was a bore, she told me. All he wanted to do was roll in the hay and eat. First one, then the other, repeatedly. "God," Fiona said, rolling her eyes, "he couldn't make it last, for one. Didn't even try. And then he'd roll over. 'I'm so *hungry*,'" she mimicked, putting on the clueless face of an exhausted oaf. "So I'd get him some food. He'd eat whole chickens in one sitting. You know how much my grocery bill went up when he was here?"

"How long did he stay?" I asked.

"A week. Then I kicked him out. And his little sister, too." Fiona described how Hansel had cried and moaned and sputtered tears and tried to cling to her as she removed him from her home. "Very tiring, really," she said. "The last straw was when Gretel, trying to rip one of my shutters from an outside wall, drooled all over it with shameless glossal lust." Fiona plucked the girl away by the braids and spun her around and spun her around and let her go, and Gretel smashed into Hansel and the two of them hurtled and tumbled and shot of the woods like a huge

spitwad.

"That's why the whole scandal," Fiona summed up. "That Gretel, she's a vindictive snake is what she is."

I was obliged to tell my story next, and I told it. "The worst part was when the pigs came forward," I said. "They ruined my career." I'd been a building inspector before the Riding Hood thing, and there were these brothers, these three little pig brothers, whose houses I was called out to inspect. The first two were almost as structurally unsound as Fiona's candy house—one of straw, one of twigs, basically—and in the course of inspecting them, both houses came down around my ears without me even trying to wreak such havoc. The two pig owners freaked out and ran huffing and puffing to their brother, whose house I was also required to inspect. It was brick, a good, solid house, and I gave it a passing grade and moved on to other jobs.

Of course, when the Riding Hood story broke, these three guys came forward with allegations about how I'd tried to kill them, how I'd wantonly destroyed their houses and haunted them at the last pig's house, trying to destroy that one too. They ranted that I wasn't going to be satisfied until I had them by the hairs of their chinny-chin-chins. "The media bought it," I told Fiona, "and the public believed it, and I lost my license and haven't been able to inspect buildings since."

Embarrassingly enough, reliving the whole story had me on the verge of tears, and Fiona came over and said, "Oh, poor baby," and sat in my lap. I felt better when she was done with me. I felt better and better and better.

And though by the end of another two weeks I was exhausted and spent, it was the most blissful period of my existence. Of course, it had to end.

We were downtown for a show, and as we walked down the sidewalk together Fiona was teasing, talking about the pie she wanted to bake for me, a little-boy-blueberry pie. She made a snide comment about my long, sharp teeth, and I tried to tickle her, and Fiona, laughing and delighted, bumped into a blond,

pouty Gapling and the Gapling spilled ice cream down her pretty blouse.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," Fiona said, completely solicitous and reaching to touch the stain and make it go away with her magic. Before she could do that, the girl scowled and whirled around and snarled, "You stupid *bitch*!"

Fiona's eyes narrowed and her skin turned a light shade of forest green, as it does when she's about to let loose with some magic. "That's *witch*," she told the Gapling. And she pointed her finger.

Poof! The Gapling found herself on all fours with her tail wagging and her mouth panting, and she looked at herself and whined a confused puppy whine. Fiona stepped closer and pointed at herself and said, "*Witch*." Then she pointed at the Gapling-turned-dog. "Bitch," she said. "Understand?"

The Gapling ran whining and whimpering down the street while her friends stood amazed and shocked and in fear of their adolescent, pretty selves. Fiona turned on them next, but I grabbed her by the arm and got her away from there, muttering helplessly, "Hey, who says you don't have a sense of humor?"

"That's what I should have done to Gretel," she hissed, still angry, still tinted green. How these things must end. We got back into the woods, riding in on one hell of monsoon that must have taken out three neighborhoods on the way. And there we found her house, surrounded by federal agents, many of whom were in heat-resistant space suits. They aimed flame throwers at the sugar walls and fired, and the candy house began melting where it stood, and the agent in charge yelled through a bullhorn, "Come out or we'll torch the place! Hit it again, boys!"

"Sir," one of the others reported, "we have reports that there may be children held captive inside. Shouldn't we wait?"

"That's my deaf ear there, Agent Smith. Hit it again!"

We were spotted. Fiona shot one wicked glance at the agent in charge and he found himself waving his bullhorn in terror and screaming, "I'm melting! I'm melting!" But then it was over.

The agents shot the Wicked Witch full of tranquilizer darts with enough chemicals to down a Kodiak bear, and I took off through the woods, leaving my wicked woman to fend for herself as she slumped to the ground, her skin now the color of bright, green grass.

I left. I panicked. I saw my history flashing before my eyes, my ruined career, the endless media onslaught, I saw it all rising up like some dreaded beast to consume me once again, and I buckled and folded and ran under the pressure. It was me they had been following, I was sure of it, me they were still investigating in connection with the pigs and Riding Hood scandals, and I had led them right to my beloved witch. And I ran.

For three days I hid out in a series of rented rooms. I kept an eye on the TV. I cringed in shame each time they showed her face. They tried to make her look ugly and decrepit, and when that proved absolutely impossible in the face of her serious, mean beauty, they worked on a comprehensive smear campaign. Gretel-wannabes came forward with their own allegations. The Gapling dog was featured in a melodramatic Forgive or Forget spot on daytime TV, yipping and whining about her ruined looks while the host sympathetically petted her and murmured, "There, there, that's a good little doggy." And as for Fiona, she wouldn't say a word as she peered hatefully into the cameras and out at the repressed world she loathed. Sometimes it seemed she could tell I was watching, because she'd look right into the camera and a sparkle would come to her eye, the very hint of an emerald-lipped smile, her skin would turn just the lightest shade green. I couldn't watch anymore.

They were holding her in the federal lockup, pending a full investigation. Unable to bear my sins any longer, I dug under the razor wire and fences and crept to the foot of he wall, stood beneath the window from which wafted her unmistakable fresh rain scent. "Fiona!" I called in a whisper. "*Fiona*!" I called and panted and clawed at the wall beneath her window for a long time before I finally saw her visage appear from behind the bars. She

smiled that all-teeth, emerald smile, eyes glistening, the very same smile she'd worn that first night. She waved and smiled.

I was overcome with emotion. I threw caution to the wind and howled up to her, "Fiona! Fiona! Let down your raven hair!" Spotlights clicked on and aimed my way, brainwashed dogs started barking, men were shouting. Fiona looked down on me and shook her head, still smiling. "Let down your raven hair and I'll climb up and rescue you!" I shouted.

"Rex," she said softly, "poor Rex."

I was seized, frisked, cuffed, handled, boxed, and locked up. I spent a few days in despair, seeing her lovely green-hued face looking down from the barred window with sorrow and pity. And then I heard the news: The same night they caught me, she disappeared. They were blaming me. They said I'd rescued her, I'd enabled her to escape. The door was still locked, the window bars still intact. She'd vanished.

I served very little time. I got out on good behavior, which meant that I had been so good as to point out to the warden the lack of integrity in the structure of the lockup facility in general, and to show him the many ways one might, if one were clever enough, escape.

As for Fiona, the media chased her longer than the feds. There were more Wicked Witch sightings. There was a touched-up, glossy photo of her on the cover of a fashion magazine, touched up to do away with the cuffs and to make her black skirt that much more mini, and the caption read, "Wicked and Loving It." But this was all they had. She didn't belong to them. She was her own woman.

After the lockup inspection, I managed to get my license back. Sometimes I'll be out on a job, inspecting a building, and I'll catch a whiff of fresh rain. Or I'll see puncture marks in pavement steps. Or I'll spy out of the corner of my eye just the right shade of green and I'll turn my head quick and hope to see those wonderful lips, but it's always just someone's ring or the grass reflecting in a doorknob. But I know she's around, and she'll be

back. She's gauging me, biding her time. She may be wicked, and she may still scare the daylights out of me from time to time, but when she feels I'm ready, she'll be back.

I'm ready, Fiona. I'm ready.

The Incidents Just Described

The incidents just described are, of course, less meaningful in themselves than in both the context I have previously elucidated and their subsequent effect on groups and constituent individuals, the subjects examined here. Anton Staroz, for example, is only the most successful of those who have cobbled a haphazard political career from their (upon examination) vestigial claims of courage and prescience, the demolition of which, along with exaggerations and outright invention, does not prevent them from popping up every two, four, six years with another mendacious and trivial claim on public attention. And their TV ads are simply godawful.

Take, for example, the ad ("spot" in the parlance) that features the 10th Street Racetrack, winding through aspens over rolling hills. The 10th Street racetrack is five miles long.[1] Five miles! Either Staroz did not–could not–have done what he's claimed, or he was out there all day, in the broiling sun, just him and his pencil. The briefest acquaintance with Anton Staroz will convince the most skeptical that the former scenario is the more likely, Staroz's character lacking in both attention to detail and commitment to follow-through. (We also like to joke around the office here that Staroz, when confronted with a pencil, looks for the ON switch.)

Now there undoubtedly was a minor uptick in the local economy around the time of the incidents: nobody is disputing that. The causes, however, are murkier, tangled, more fraught. Professor Aron Bix has made the case in his (or is it her? I haven't heard if the operation was successful) unpublished dissertation that the revival of the local economy was a parallel and simultaneous de-

1 This sentence was contributed by Anna Bercel.

velopment rather than a direct result of the incidents Staroz so vigorously mischaracterizes—unless, as Doc Bix puts it a heavily sarcastic footnote (the dissertation is heavily footnoted; I actually think you can find the best parts there) one is suggesting that a community "might revive and thrive on the proceeds of hot-dog wagons and the sale of paper hats." Go, Doc!–I particularly like that "revive and thrive" with its scornful echo of Staroz's catchphrase "lick and listen." I repeat–go, Doc!

Just as bad, and a necessary complement and precondition to the ghastly demagoguery of Staroz *et al.* are the adherents of the school subsidized by Lincoln Dorme: those who blandly insist that the clock must be turned back or, more accurately, stopped at the precise moment events quickened. Exhibiting none of the courage or foresight of his namesake (that would be Lincoln; no Dorme shows up in the standard historical reference volumes on my bookshelves, and let me tell you, my bookshelves groan), Dorme even has the audacity to suggest that *no* lesson may be learned from–that no interpretation is even necessary of–what he continues to describe as "an aberration... [a] singular atom of incidence...pure warp." One is speechless when one sees the size of the stone Staroz's alleged opponent has handed him, if one may be allowed a lapse in one's professional rigor.

Lapses in professional rigor are exactly what our crew was not allowed. Instead, they were equipped (some would claim encumbered) with an elaborate array of tape recorders, Polaroid cameras, videocams, Geiger counters, post-notes (yellow and blue), clipboards, laminated IDs, portable Rolodexes, standardized questionnaires, free-form questionnaires, rubbing alcohol, ring-bound notebooks—both the kind you place in your lap and the smaller ones you carry in your shirt pocket–good solid shoes, trail mix, a roll of quarters for phone calls or jukeboxes or low-grade bribes, evidence bags, and bottled water. Most importantly, you can go into the field without any of these items except the loose-leaf notebook that contains the most up-to-date, sophisticated, scientifically rigorous, thoroughly thought-out methodology. OK.

The interviews conducted by our crews (and you'll be meeting them later on, a terrific bunch) suggest a certain weariness at the core of the experience. Lillian Macgane ("just a housewife, dear, with a home business in bead-stringing on the side") certainly spoke for many when she described how her initial enthusiasm and energy–"I was one of the first to volunteer, when I got there I looked down and I'd forgotten to take off my apron, I did so much of the groundwork, O my"–soon flagged in the face of both lack of coordination–"They couldn't find their ass with both hands, that bunch, PMF but it's true"–and creeping professionalization: "They looked down on you if you were just an ordinary person, that bunch, O my, them with their walkie-talkies all the time."

Apathy is also expressed by those more on the periphery. "By the time we all got there," Kells Martin remembers, "everybody's walking around [saying] 'it's over, it's over.' You know, 'go back to your homes. There's nothing to see here.' I'd never heard anyone say that except a cop. And these were the so-called experts. But I didn't go home. I think I may have spent the next couple days picking strawberries. I'm not sure. It seems to be about that time. I remember strawberries anyway. Big fields of 'em. Full plates of 'em. Bushel baskets."

Here is a chart that might give you an idea of what I mean:

1 to 125%	darkness	professed ignorance	irrational fear of children
1 to 3%	stable	actual ignorance	strawberries

Chilling, isn't it? If your spine requires a minute or two to thaw, I understand.

Some we talked to claimed to have had no interest in the subject at the time and to have no opinion today. "It's had no impact on me," a young homeowner told us. "Maybe because I moved

here later on. Maybe if I'd grown up here. But no." However, this interviewee (as well as inviting our crew member inside and generously providing her ice water) distinguished his view from the superficially similar position of Dorme and his cohort. "Dorme, every time I hear him on [the] radio or something, Dorme and this Stars [sic] guy, it's like they think it's a big deal, that it's this sort of big issue you need to come out for one side or the other. It isn't. It happened, it's no good pretending it didn't happen. I'm just saying quit acting like it's the end of the world."

This is probably a pretty good attitude, on some level; and it seems to be the tactic adopted by a good many at the time. "Myself, I paid it no attention," admitted or maybe boasted a man one of our crew members found living under a bridge. "It was, what you call it, peripheral. Just this sort of shimmering way off to the side and when you turn your head it shimmers off to the side of that field of vision and so forth. Like cataracts, I guess." He stirred his pot ponderingly. "That was before I had cataracts, mind you. I've sure got 'em now. It just seemed to me that that was what cataracts must be like. Back then. Now the essential correctness of my metaphor has been driven home to me. What a way to find out."

His companion spoke from the shadows: "That'll show you," to which the original respondent murmured, "That again," accompanied with a roll of his milky eyes for the benefit of our crew member (Dale, a hell of a guy, a man's man, the sort of guy who'd venture under a bridge for an interview, likes to drink, has a gig as a whitewater rafting guide, comes in on Mondays all cut up from the rocks).

Just take a look at these numbers:

7.5 %–police

38.8 %–dogs

56 %–utterly rational fear of children

12.56 %–lights out

I'd like to see Anton Staroz mess with this kind of evidence. Dale had these exact stats in hand the night he parked his truck in

his (Straroz's) driveway and blew his horn for over twenty minutes ("I picked the estimated time it took for the Battle of the Little Big Horn, AKA Custer's Last Stand, to run its course," Dale explained). Lights flicked on and off, figures peered from behind shutters and shades, a police cruiser crawled by but did not stop–other than that, no response, quite a change from the usual "leave me alone" or "who are you people, you band of obsessed maniacs constantly harrassing me" or the old standby "I think you've got the wrong house, I think you want the blue one two doors down." I had occasion to ask Dale how historians came to the conclusion that Custer's Last Stand lasted under a half-hour; after all, there were no white survivors, and I don't think the Sioux, the Crow, etc., had clocks or watches other than the ones used as inducements to surrender their land and liberty. Dale was hemming and hawing, then looked over my shoulder and exclaimed, "Oh, look, Jesus, it's Lillian Macgane–and she's naked!" Well, that's the kind of thing you need to see even if you don't want to see it, so of course like a sucker I turned around, and of course there was nobody there, Lillian Macgane or otherwise, and when I turned back Dale was gone, leaving only that whiff of sulpher that makes me wonder about Dale sometimes, although it could just be a personal hygiene thing. I wouldn't mind so much except that he's pulled this exact same trick on me at least three times, although not always with Lillian Macgane.

One day one of our crew came back to the base badly excited. He'd found a woman who was writing a verse history of the incidents in haiku form. A dispute immediately emerged: is a haiku a stand-alone form of the three lines, or can they be linked in a series or narrative? A dispute: name-calling. Sticks and stones, literally: there was a run on Mercurochrome. I forget who won; I know somebody left, a cloud of bad feeling all around.

Maybe I shouldn't tell that story. It sure punches holes through our vaunted methodology!

And it just occurs to me that nobody ever did a follow-up interview with the haiku-writing lady! We certainly dropped the ball

on that one! I definitely shouldn't tell this story!

Debra Mems summed up her view of the experience: "I'll never forget, 'cause that was the time, or around that time, that I switched over to menthol." Our crew member waited for elucidation of this seemingly fiercely Proustian moment,[2] misapprehending it as an opening ploy, anticipating the particular moving to the general the way it so often does in western narratives, until, as time passed and the afternoon waned and the Mems' dogs began to howl for their supper, realized that the change in the interviewee's choice of smokes was the entire extent of her memory of incidents (hell, *the* incidents) that one would assume and in fact have impressed themselves much more assertively on others, and so got up and left.

We went on to interview Thompsson Hugo at Speedboat Studios, an enterprise the enterprising Mr. Hugo runs out of his garage. Speedboat Studios, named after the vessel whose reappearance runs like a scarlet thread through the incidents just described, produces the cable access show *Incidents Update-Close-Ups & Cover-Ups*, which every Thursday at 11:30 PM pushes an aggressively Starozian, if there is such a word and that, alas, seems to be the case, interpretation of the incidents just described to its audience of unemployed insomniacs, using a crude barrage of shaky video footage of Mr. Hugo's superficially plausible monologues, squint-eyed examination of long-established facts, and a stream of guests from Mr. Hugo's neighborhood whose off-beat appearance and bizarre takes on the world throw their host, if only temporarily, into relief as a somewhat reasonable man. It's true that Mr. Hugo exhibits a seemingly unaffected Old-Worlde courtliness: he refers to the speedboat always as "she." But his

2 Proust! He's back!–cresting the bestseller lists, on the tips of all tongues at all the best coffee houses, even at the movies! One may now plausibly drop the name without being looked at as if one were simply some motheaten academic failure who frequents coffee houses with the intent to pick up scornful co-eds. Welcome back, *cher Marcel!*

manner is fundamentally flawed, disfigured by its Starozian (there's that word again, yikes) underpinnings. Which makes his low opinion of Staroz himself ("An execrable man. I loathe him.") a classic case of the narcissism of small differences. Thank heavens our team had prepared for this occurrence with the most up-to-date methodology!

And the most up-to-date prose style. Here is a sample from the field:

A kitten sniffs around the floor of Speedboat Studios at co-ax cables and shoeboxes of old reels of tape. Mr. Hugo picks the kitten and stroking her remarks, "An execrable man. I loathe him."

I mean, you can practically see it happening. Call me sentimental, but I find this passage almost poetic in its proseworthiness. It is the work of Anna Bercel, who contributed the sentence noted earlier. You remember it, let's all say it together:

The 10th Street racetrack is five miles long.[3]

Perhaps it is better that there is no countervailing broadcast espousing the position of the Dorme camp. Not only would it be a betrayal of their doctrine of torpid apathy; it is unlikely that any of them would be able to pillory Mr. Staroz with the cold forensic fury Mr. Hugo brings to the job.

It should be noted that Mr. Staroz has consistently and so far successfully dodged all of Mr. Hugo's invitations to debate. This explains the animated figure of "Anton Chicken" that serves as a cartoon bumper between the filmed and videotaped segments of the Update.

How many of our hard-bitten crew, while watching Terry Quick's videotaped reminiscences, nodded at the line "I'll never look at

3 Do-dah, do-dah. This is my own gloss on Ms. Bercel's very fine work which of course can stand alone. I'm sorry, I just couldn't help myself, is it professional jealousy that impels me when confronted with such a sweet and capable sentence to deface it? trivialize it? make everything into a goddamn joke, the way the ex has suggested? I don't know.

a child's sandbox the same way"? Our survey says close to 40%.

And, in the spirit of saving the best for last, did you know that Chris Picton, who witnessed the whole thing while remaining unwitnessed, went home unobserved, and never said anything about it even to the most casual stranger or trusted friend? Never expressed an opinion on it that diverged from the most banal vaporing that one could have gotten from any newspaper or the idlest pickle-barrel palaver, and still thinks nobody knows? And that he's right? We sent several people around and none of them suspected a thing. We still don't know: he didn't crack under pressure. Not even the most up-to-date methodology, skilled questioning, forthrightness of character and ultrasensitive meters of my sweet crew could detect the secret stirrings of these most deeply concealed thoughts.

You certainly won't find the results on the CD-ROM containing the results of the band-width readings from the battery of gauges and meters used by The Crew, available from this address [INSERT ADDRESS]. (Note to ed: I'll have to get this address to you later, some sort of foul-up @ our www, sorry.)

See you at Incidents Fest in the summer! Drop by!—we'll be under the red tent under the big blue flag, a tent sure to be full of people who have bonded together through this experience, bonded deeply, disturbingly, forever. We'll be under the big red tent under the big blue flag, ignoring you.

Karen Swenson

Walking with Dolma

My nose always runs at altitude—
"snuffle, snuffle."
Periodic puffs of fluff extrude
from the sleeping bag on Dolma's teenage
shoulders. She slips me a sideways grin
sly as a crab dance with the old platitude—
"Sniffle, sniffle."

We've got sound although we're lacking sense.
"Huff, huff,"
I grunt sweating in the redolence
of dust to the pass with Dolma's name.
She, beneath bag and day pack mocks,
impudent with teen eloquence—
"Puff, puff."

Gathered from pass to river I sing,
"Amazing Grace . . ."
all I can find among my Western trappings
in Tibet. My thin breath hovers over
my unspoken joy in split rock, clear river,
while beside me Dolma's perfect notes wing
"Amising Gace . . . ."

Karen Swenson

Rain Shadow

The mountain's green wall runs with rain.
It billows water-sails in wind
until each rock crack, each leaf vein
is murmuring refrains of water.

But over the pass the wind's whistle,
alone between white teeth of peaks,
is keening a parched canticle
in wheeling oracles of dust.

If wet engenders leaves, then drought
is fertilizer of both spirit
and root to prodigies that grout
the rock with psalms of petals.

Man Diet

I'm on a diet– now don't run off
or turn the page like I do when women
say that (especially thin ones).
I'm on a Man Diet and it's about time.

Let *them* eat cake– I'll
cram down men. I'm glutted,
they get stuck in my throat, you
can smell them on my breath.
I'm dizzily sick from sinking
eager teeth in, nibbling and sampling,
wiping crumbs from the pan,
sucking dipped fingers long after the taste's gone.

When I was small my mother warned:
"Greedy! When you're grown you can eat
all the batter you want: you'll get sick, you'll see!"
Spoon and bowl before me, I blend forever
flour, sugar, butter, eggs, vanilla, chocolate bits.
Civilized at first, I eat from the wooden spoon
then directly with my hands, digging
into the sweet lumped clay.
I barely get the succulent slime
to my mouth, greedily sucking my fingers
bowl to mouth to bowl to mouth . . .
and never feel sick, only sated for the moment.

My body belies chaos beneath taut armor–
sky-high cholesterol, sugars way out of whack
from all those candy hearts.
I practically vibrate: you can't guess
my sluggishess after an orgy of gorging
on fingers, flesh, salt sweat and sweet
everything else. My eyes, my mouth
are no menu; you can't read my craving
for the next feast.

Rachel Squires Bloom

The Correct Woman

Her eyes and smile are polite,
her hair in precisely the right cut
to set off her chin. Her lips
are thin, and surround even teeth
like a bow without an arrow.
Her fingers are freckled, tipped with
mauve ovals in winter, ginger in spring.

Below the table, her stockings match
the color of her calves exactly.
If you envision her ankles crossed,
a flesh x before the gate,
you would be correct.

Her words don't whorl into patterns
but are fitted into lists as finite and traceable
as folded items in a bureau drawer,
her thoughts linked into appropriate
hellos and how are yous.

Her polished furniture is allocated
the exact amount of space for its purpose.
She makes the bed at the same time each day,
the blue and white rectangle recreated
in a ritual to order. It stays made
even on birthdays, vacation days, days
when both children disappear
on the same afternoon.

Rachel Squires Bloom

The Plot

My father is almost manic,
anxious for anyone to come home
and hear his news: T*oday I bought my cemetery plot.*
It's on the way to the mall, so your mother will have to visit.

One aunt comforts herself with the weird fact
that from his grave my uncle can view
magnificent sunsets. She believes
that his essence will never be wormdust
entirely; he has permanent residence in that
fantastic land where all poor are worthy
and the rich squeeze through needles' eyes.
There, a sunset is slightly divine, as divine
as God's fingernail paring, or as one cat or tree.
My other aunt says, of babies born
dead prematurely, or strangled in their cords,
The parents have their own private angel.

My father waits for a reaction of horror
at the fact of his death, but
I've learned what he really wants and ask:
Did you lie on the ground to see what view you'll have forever?

Eyes alive, he confides:
I couldn't, the salesman was right there.
But I wanted to. I wanted to
but I didn't.

Gaylord Brewer

The Hemingway Look-alike Society Meets Bimini Bay Developers

They dizzied us with rum punch
and conch fritters, suckered us
with generosity
like a second-stringer's cheap right hook.
There were the scale models,

there the brochures lining
the patio tables of Paradise Point.
Here were unit prices
plus add-ons, ocean frontage,
full specs and

still plenty of choice availability.
Out there, along salt flats
and crab marshes, beyond
those last stands of beach cedar, all that
will be 18 prime holes.

We slipped ham chunks to a happy
bitch and foresaw the end of her days.
It will be segregated;
only natives who work, servants,
will be allowed inside.

We didn't say much. We squinted
nervously down the tunnels
of our double-length bill caps, adjusted
practiced pensive gazes
toward profound blue, hoped like hell

to sight one barracuda
or bone fish, something we'd read
and knew how to handle.
We scratched white-stubbled

cheeks, tapped messages on taut bellies.

The rum punch was weak,
and worse, finished. The buffet
had been cleared. This wasn't the tour
we'd signed for. Somebody should
level that punk,

that's what He would have done.
Before they shuttled us back past the dozers,
through a gate in a barbed fence
crossing the island's 400
skinny meters, before that we

scowled beautifully into a Bahaman
sun squatting like a hothouse whore
on her topaz horizon,
and within one minute her disappearance.
Amazing, glorious, falling there

from a lost world of men and hard truths,
falling for our crinkled brows.
Then they herded us
back to the buses, toward
the dingy bars and darkies of Alice Town.

Alletha Saunders

Interview with Billy Collins

Billy Collins is the author of several books of poetry, the most recent being *The Art of Drowning* and *Picnic, Lightning*. In April, a book of new and selected poems called *Sailing Alone Around the Room,* will be released. He is a professor of English at Lehman College of CUNY.

Recently Mr. Collins filled the position of Distinguished Visiting Writer at the University of Idaho where he conducted a poetry seminar with a select group of writers from the university and surrounding community. As a member of that group, I discovered more about poetry with a coven of writers outside a classroom than cooped up in a sterile atmosphere. We made penny ante bets on the Subway Series, Jeopardy, and one girl in a yellow dress on Wheel of Fortune. We discussed artistic influences and the people in the bar. I don't remember ever being quite as inspired about poetry as I was that week.

Mr. Collins agreed to an interview via e-mail for which I owe him my life. Although I conducted the interview, I have to give a great deal of thanks to the staff of *Fugue* who pooled together questions and ideas.

Saunders: What was your first experience with poetry?

Collins: Mother Goose, the mother of us all.

Saunders: What is it about poetry that draws or compels you to use it?

Collins: I don't "use" it. I write and read it. I write it because a) it is the highest game that can be played

b) it offers the opportunity of the continuation of the human voice beyond the grave. I want to be a literary ghost.

Saunders: You call poetry the highest game that can be played. Can you explain what you meant by that and why it is so?

Collins: I should qualify that. What I meant was that poetry is the highest game that can be played with language. That might even serve as a quicky definition of poetry—the deployment of language at its highest level of playfulness. In poetry, language is put to its most extreme uses. The limits of its possibilities are tested. Poetry is the place where the language is most aware of itself, of the strange and fresh ways it is being used. In the dictionary, words stand in a line looking all logical and sure of their places and chaperoned by a definition. And in most prose, language does its job by pointing to things. "Cat" points to the cat. "Baseball" brings the baseball to mind. But in poetry, language is returned to its once magical state. The words are surprised to be there. Some seem relieved, others embarrassed. The poet has brought them out of the orphanage for a day at the beach.

Saunders: What do you see as the function of humor in poetry?

Collins: I would distinguish between poems that set out to be funny—this would include light verse—and poems that discover something humorous as they go along. I enjoy reading some of the first category, but I write in the second. For me humor is a way of seeing the world and a check against the overly serious poems I used to write and still hate to read. When I think of its effect on the reader—and this is only an afterthought—I would say humor is a disarming device, a way of seducing the reader and giving him or her a reason to continue reading. When we respond to humor, we may laugh, but in

poetry we usually react silently; yet we can feel something opening inside, a receptivity begins. That reader is in a position to be led into the deeper corners of the poem where the laughter will be replaced by something else, which we may call "something else."

Saunders: What do you think the next new thing to come along in poetry will be or what would you like it to be?

Collins: The future holds no interest for me (he said flicking his ash on the carpet).

Saunders: Do you have particular writing habits that you think are good for beginning poets to cultivate?

Collins: First off, I should say that whenever I am asked to give advice about writing or to explain how I write, I feel like someone who has been asked to explain to a classroom of Martians how to kiss. It's something you discover on your own, and at some level, it's hard to do it wrong.

I have no work habits whatsoever. If I did, I would probably write less because I would resent having to stick to a schedule or be at my desk at a certain time.

"Whatever works" sounds like a bumper sticker, but that is what it comes down to. Catullus said "Never a day without a line" which is good advice, though weeks have gone by without a line (or a peep) out of me. For me writing in the early morning is best, that is, before my head has been contaminated with the public language of the radio, the breakfast table, the unwanted email. But young poets tend to write at night. Dangerous. You are apt to think you are the only person on earth, the only light in the house. If I feel tempted to write at night, I just turn all the lights off. At night you can be more productive drinking with your friends or sleeping.

Saunders: In workshop settings, a common statement is "Perhaps this poem is really two poems?" Do you ever find this to be the case in early drafts of your own work?

Collins: No. Again the part that may seem not to belong to the poem gets tossed out, not set aside to make another poem out of later. That is a kind of piece-work I would not be comfortable with. I don't want to picture myself at a desk looking through a pile of little scraps saying "oh here's a little thing I saved from that all night session from a couple of weeks ago." Start freshly. New day, blank yellow pad, sharpened #2 pencil. Off you go.

Saunders: Are there times when you find it accomplishes more to throw drafts away, why?

Collins: I throw drafts away all the time and I wish more people did. If a poem has no flow as I am writing it, I will often pitch it and start again later. The poem should have a bolt of energy running through it (the Chinese call it chi) and if I cannot feel it, the draft is burned—crumpled into a ball and rolled on the carpet with the others. If you have a kitten, they love playing with rolled up balls of paper, and that may be all a failed draft is good for. Why make a reader unhappy when you can make a kitten happy? They tell you in workshops to save everything. You could use it later. Rubbish. Pitch it. If you use it later it will seemed attached to the poem by duct tape. If you burn the rice, you throw it out and start again. I would say throw the pot out too. What the hell. A great satisfaction lies in throwing things out. Ask any monk. Did you ever see a monk holding a garage sale?

Saunders: In the process of writing and revising your poetry, do you find the exploration of an idea sometimes more satisfying (intellectually, poetically, etc.) than the final product?

Collins: No. Although much of the fun is in getting there, getting there itself is crucial. If the poem cannot find a way to end itself, or if the poet cannot supply an ending, then the whole enterprise is thrown into question. To the reader, a poem may seem to be about love or separation or celebration or whatever. But to the poet who is in the process of writing the poem, the poem is about only one thing: its completion. The "inspiration" for starting a poem may remain a kind of mystery. The impetus shaken out of the sleeve. But what inspires the poet to continue to write beyond this initial impulse is a deeply rooted desire for completion. To make a thing that can stand on its own after you leave the room.

Saunders: How do you know when you are finished revising a poem?

Collins: I know I am finished revising a poem when I feel that instead of straightening its tie so that it will look a little better, I begin wondering whether it maybe shouldn't be wearing a suit at all, and that perhaps it should change its mind about going to the party. Maybe rent a video.

Saunders: How has your revision process changed with success?

Collins: Success has nothing to do with it, at least I would like to believe. I put less and less time into revision because I think that I am learning more and more how the poem should go on the first writing, how to steer the poem correctly so that revision never means overhauling the poem radically, rather making small adjustments. If something that crucial were wrong with the poem, I would just pitch it. Again I am not a string saver. If a poem is aborted at some point, I throw it out and start again. Or throw it out and don't write for a week or two.

You never know what line may be your last. Of course the distinction between "writing" and "revision" is false. When I am writing I am always revising. And when I revise, am I not writing? William Matthews put it best when he said that revision is not cleaning up after the party, it IS the party.

Saunders: Do you have friends evaluate a poem before you submit it to a magazine?

Collins: Never. I still believe in the romantic conviction that poetry writing is a private and solitary activity. If I did ask my friends to evaluate it, I suspect I would not have any friends. I would be hurt by their suggestions; they would be irked by my panting. We would find new ways to avoid each other.

Saunders: Are there two or three books you would say are must haves for any aspiring poet?

Collins: I would recommend these to an aspiring whatever: Robert Burton, *An Anatomy of Melancholy*; Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*; Fernando Pessoa, *Always Astonished*

Saunders: You've said in this interview that you wanted "to be a literary ghost." Why?

Collins: Gee, I said that? Perhaps I meant that I saw poetry as a way of sustaining one's voice beyond the grave. If you manage to write a couple of poems that really last—I'm not saying I have achieved that—then they can never shut you up. You will still be talking after all the lights have been turned off and the chairs turned upside down on the tables. There you will be: a literary ghost, scaring the children with your poems.

If you would like more information on Billy Collins, please visit the website http://www.bigsnap.com/poet.html. You can listen to audio clips, read comments and gossip, and find out when he's coming to your area.

Editor's Note: As this interview goes to press, Billy Collins has been named the United States' next Poet Laurate.

Ryan G. Van Cleave

How to Survive Separation

At parties, tell the story how you've always wanted a dog. When your mom asked what you wanted for X-mas, you said dog. When it was your birthday, again, dog. What did you want on your hamburger? A dog. There may be laughter. Perhaps not. This is a quote, admit later. Say, from a book you surely haven't read.

Consume too much wine and not enough cheese. Never touch the crackers. Wear a pink Izod shirt. Carry a pack of unfiltered cigarettes. Ogle single women and sling your motel key rubber-banded to your jeans belt loop meaningfully. Jive to the music. Jive even if there's no music. Ogle the better-looking unsingle women. Tell one of them you're an ex-ballplayer in for a sports show. Wink at her a lot.

Offer a smoke to people you don't know and say lemme axe you a question—where you work? Affect a Transylvanian accent. Switch halfway through the night to a drunken Irish lilt. Sing.

To every story anyone else tells, respond: don't bullshit me. Then gesticulate like a deaf mute.

Sneer. Often. Yell I'm coming, I'm coming across the room to no one in particular. Tell the host that someone just crapped on the lawn. Sneak out the back around midnight. Make your earlier warning a prophecy-come-true.

*

At work, slip a few bills from the coffee money box. Blame someone who'd never do it in a zillion years. Plan ways to rob your company. Use your office computer to examine the International Website of Cheese. Call over co-workers and say wow, would ya just lookit that gouda.

Sway side-to-side to music no one but you hears. Do the local

paper's crossword puzzle. Try the Crypt-O-Gram but give up before it dizzies you. Nudge your nearest co-worker every five minutes and say: you know about the layoffs, right? Wink.

Tell the secretary you've got meetings all afternoon and leave by eleven fifteen. Don't go to those meetings. Go to McDonald's and eat too many Big Macs. Order an extra-large Diet Coke and explain to the cashier you're trying to watch your figure. Get a vanilla cone to go and leave it to melt atop a Cadillac hood.

Every couple you walk past, say under your breath, any port in a storm. Whistle innocently if they look.

*

Go to the corner bar and fake a seizure. Call the bartender a suckerman. Order a Molotov cocktail if he hasn't thrown you out yet. Tell him he's feeding sin to the folks. And the peanuts suck.

In the street out front pretend you're dead. If people try to help you up, refuse and hiss they're watching me, they're watching. Continue to lie there. The sun feels great on your face—wonder if you're developing a good base tan.

Get up before the cops arrive. Take a cab to the park. Make fake bread-tossing motions to the pigeons. Walk on the grass where the signs say not to. Look at the people hurrying back to work after their lunch breaks and laugh. Sit on a park bench and carve a teddy bear with your car keys. Try to write your intials in block letters. Wonder what your name looks like in Hebrew. Swahili. Remember the love poems you used to pilfer from your parents' old books in the basement, how you swapped out a few lines and mailed them to girls you liked.

Listen for the squirrels. Try to remember the last time you were on a merry-go-round, all those horses with emeralds and rubies. Shut your eyes and hold tight to the leather straps.

*

Check the motel front desk for messages. Toss out the ones from you sister saying your mom is worried. Drop your forewarded bills into the waste can. Try to be objective, see things from your sister's point of view. Mother's.

Slam the front door to your room hard enough to knock dust from the ceiling fixture. Lock the door. A steaming hot shower is the ticket. Scalding. Leaves you pink as a lobster ready to be cracked open and eaten. Read the shampoo bottle instructions as you towel off. Think too much about the word biodegradable.

Flip through the latest Stephen King book. Read the last few pages first. Fiddle with the mini-blinds. Consider making the bed since there's no maid in this type of place. Wonder if the sheets ever get changed. Can you smell sex on the pillow? Sweat?

Take a nap. Dream about the days when your brother called you a wimpshit. Dream about having a yacht you could sail to the exact middle of the Pacific, nothing but blue in every direction. Blue exactly the color of sapphires. Her birthstone. Wake up wanting to put a fist through a window. Don't.

Try to nap more, though you know it's useless. Turn up the AC. Open the Stephen King book. Rip out the pages one at a time. Watch them pile on the chocolate-colored carpet.

Get the AC really cranking.

*

Call her. When the machine picks up, hang up. Try again—surely she's just in the shower. Try once more just to be sure. Open a beer. Give it five minutes and one last call. You can never be too sure. She's a sound sleeper.

Imagine what the last person in this bed did. Try to guess if it was a hooker, a school teacher, a recently-gone-wrong Baptist minister. See if there's perfume on the bathroom towels, the faucet handles.

Go through your old high school yearbook again. Wonder why you didn't stick it out with that other girl. Surely the braces

are gone by now. What's the problem with a police chief's daughter anyway?

Count the ceiling stucco patches that look like your Aunt Gertie's nose. Try to calculate what your body's worth to medicine if you sold it piece by piece. Consider living without a second kidney. Imagine what the market price is for a spleen these days.

Tell yourself it's not your fault. Say it again and again. Open a third beer and sit Indian–style atop the bed in the dark. Burn a little incense. Some sage. Wonder if the police chief's daughter is somewhere in the dark this night, thinking about you. Wonder if anyone at all is. Have a fourth beer. A fifth, if you need it. Let the air seep from your lungs slow, deep, like you're hooked up to a hospital breathing machine.

Light up one of those unfiltered cigarettes.

Don't turn the tv on. Let the silence grow until you can slice it into thin wheels of darkness with your pocketknife. Eat it like a sausage, one lazy bite at a time.

Jim Meirose

Celestia is Snakebit

Typing poiuytrewq on the hard wooden chair in the secret area in the long long ago. The machine with holes to show the numbers. The calculator the size of a small TV set. No prose is adequate to try the Yugo. Treat the Truly brothers with the proper respect. Hurts to walk on hot coals. But do it. July is in the middle of the year. The girl ran her bike out the long dry path between the clumps of Indian grass to the pizzeria. You have written we have written I have written. Something there is logical re English. Compute the elves. Try the dictator, but there's nobody home. To toot the horn, blow through the ice-cold mouthpiece. I saw a boy leaning with his tongue on a fence in the cold in New York. In that house you were written. Celestia, I said.

Celestia.

She rose from the bench. The splinters snapped beneath her. The six inch wide bench in Ann Hathaway's cottage. The brawn and the brown of the elves. Celestia dripped coming from the swimming pool and looked down into the deep water from the edge. Beanies in the grass, the green snake. It slithered too. And its fang was holy. The quiet men worshiped them. The quiet men living next door raising snakes that she had to put up with. The quiet men's life-style. Hyphen not needed but put there anyway. Twelve twenty one pee-emm. Pee on yourself. The Christ. The marble pilasters in red sauce. She will like the food. The house is domed in the middle and the porch ceiling's down, the door is blocked in the back but you can go out the front, there's a perfect Christmas tree around front blocking the front door if you want to get sap-sodden just go use that door, what mode are you in tweety tweety bird tweeting shrilly in the cage remaining? What's in the house?

There, thought Celestia. She raised her skirt and went to the

snake. The quiet men in the house next door slumbered. The snake's face came up open with all fangs hung out and it went on Celestia's thumb and she fell down. Her hand dangled into the pool with the snake sliding round her form in the grass like it was trying to make her outline like detectives do with chalk when someone's dead in the street on the blacktop but what do they do in the rain oh My what do they do in the rain plunging down. The detectives stood in the rain with their notebooks open sodden and the lines on the gregg-ruled paper running in the water.

Celestia was snakebit, said Solomon. He pushed back his hat.

Sure enough, said the one-eyed guy. He waved his pencil.

If I had better eyes, I could tell you more, but I don't, so I can't.

Want to do so much, she had said. Want to get a great tome published. Want to look through the looking-glass.

Dopplers shifting all around her corpse, they bagged it and into the back of a slick station wagon it went. One-fourth done for the day. Step one: here comes the snake here it comes. Where did it come from? When you see a snake do you even care where it came from, blowing your turgid mopey sax into my ear? I thrill to the snail-like sound and fill up the bloopers and the beepers. A beeper goes off in an empty house is heard by the dog who shows no reaction. First, clean wound; then slice wound, then suck suck suck. But today they say don't suck. Research snakebite. For Celestia is snakebit. The turtle and the rat. Fought in the flat place. Waiting for mail or a phone call. Leave early today to get the cat with the stitch in her belly. Wait up the rafters and gray house to try the front of the house and the front of the hooligan and down the man with the great crease across his face put there by an angry man is a hungry man. One of the quiet men has a great crease across his face like he'd been hatcheted. He wore grey shorts only. They had cages of snakes and hats on. They put their pulleys in the dirt. The rope wound. The white cotton rope stained with blood found in a field. Forensics and the evidence mounted and the car cruised along with Celestia at

the wheel, but she pulled over before to you and me; jury in the court house, think hard and long before recommending a sentence. Put them away for life. The snake cruised the grass, mouth open. Small black eyes like small black droplets ready to run down the scaly side of its face. Celestia's body lay there. The high victorian house next door cast a shadow. The fish scale shingles. The remodeled home sank out of sight. Into the turned off TV. What is that fool making now, asked the wife. The daughter sat spreading a paper cross the table. The wray and ring hurt not you and me, just the trials of the men, and the snake couldn't be held responsible for the bite. Do you see. Being a wild thing, structure things. The steps to care for a snakebite. The steps to getting snakebit. A snakebite can change your life. Two sharp curved fangs. Venom. Made by God, in the long curving snake. Venom factory. The curse of the tunnels and the monkeys in the jar's head stuck dying looking for baubles. The sidewalk led around the pool to the diving board. The roses grew to the side writhing about the wire fence. The posts turned over pulled from the ground. Turnbuckles. The Celestia was alive until she got snake-bit; the snake waited cruelly, bad things in its heart; bad thoughts in its mouth. Celestia sat innocently by the pool, her large, brown eyes set firmly on the squared-off end of the diving board.

What are diving boards made of, asked the hatcheted quiet man.

Look it up.

Would there be steel inside a diving board?

There might be. Look it up.

Might a diving board be made of fiberglass? Might I not program the end of my answer?

Celestia came up, skirt waving. Her golden sandals made deep marks in the wet grass.

I've spilled the coffee all over the fucking place.

No justice, no peace.

How is it done? How is it done and how is it pursued?

Ahh, that's the news.

All right, enjoy.

Be good.

Fuck that man with the curled, snaggy, white hair and the dim eyes. Lack of eyesight means lack of sense. Wittgenstein. The Puritans. In their hats and with their clothing on, you will know them. They came ashore by that rock over there. Call it Plymouth. Dodge or Chrysler. Guts and brains are not splattered over Plymouth rock only because they only had blunderbusses then, not twelve gauge shot guns.

What are you doing here, said Celestia. I'll tell you my story, she said. Hear it: I was born in the dark year. After the blow. Part casket, part cradle. Make such a thing said Father, it was prepared for me as I was not sure how I would turn out. The carpenter waffled—I never heard of such a thing, said the carpenter, running his hand down his devilish goatee. He opened the book.

CELESTIA IS SNAKEBIT. The covers hung over. Cheap covers. But a well made book. Don't type so much, like thrashing a guitar. Need to get the cat today at the vet. They sliced open her belly and took out a mass, priest and altarboys and all. Red and bloody, it lay on a white towel. Or it might have lie in a pan. Drowned in the toilet. Someone started a novel that way they were about to be drowned in the toilet. That woman who seduced Faulkner. Drag, drag, drag into the room with the sink to be drowned. She turned back her sleeve, the right one, with dignity. A quick triple s; shit shave and shower. The bruce and hurly gurly in the slipskirt. Brown over the top of the meat ghostly-like, cook. The snake sliced into thin sections remains a snake. The person's less a person cut up into pieces in those bags over there. One two three four five six bags. He hurled the rods from his fistlike maw. The red church doors. The tradition. He stood on the top step waving the severed head.

Celestia is snakebit! he cried. Celestia is snakebit!

Number one. The strike. Snap shut the jaws and great muscu-

lar spasm. This night, the snake thinks strike! and it happens. A machine. The tongue wooden as not likes the sniffling boy best. The eighty dollars in the pocket shut up shut up. A thousand dollars. Would that I had a thousand dollars. Bart snot rats fool. Jestering fool. He waved the baton hung with ribbons before her.

Play he cried. Play! Play!

The cat obliged and ran around the box, its claws digging in the plush pile, keeping it upright, gaining traction. Latest term. Fund of monkeys. Lounge like the rich man, the poor man. Ricky; yell hilly beans and tripes. Pick up a tray of tripe in the market, look it over, under, around, and through, answer the phone if dialed, do the damned work and get the damned money. Celestia is snakebit. Under the moody sky. The house set in the field. The woods around it puffed out like an explosion. They ought of been brown. When they turned in the fall, it looked like the house was exploding in yellow flames. Hut track tricks and gretnas en route to deadly shouts, frying pan, mind, and sizzlers. Hey hey I'm poldy here. The funk man dug the right side and she lay by the pool thinking of the left. The table's round. What marks. A small table dread, dread, dreaddy traffic in sweet bottom. TV dinners by the pool how I wish I'd stayed in school. Line of rocks behind her. The pool, is kidney-shaped and filled with brown water. From ten thousand feet it looks like an organ. A swimming pool the shape of the human digestive tract. A green-roofed house with yellow shutters. What will Norm make us tonight? Tractor up the phony ponies. Slip the wire nooses. Noose up the collaborators one by one, unceremoniously. Just go down the line. Death by hanging. Step them up on the step chairs and raise them by the legs to get them in the short-roped noose, then let them down half-choking, then tilt them off the chair and they slowly spin choking, choking. Hit them in the ass with your hats to spin them faster. Spinning, spinning, choking, choking red mist in eyes, bursting head, death by hanging. Dementia Celestia mentally prone. You, my man, are mentally

prone! What an insult.

Mentally prone!

Mentally prone, cried the beet man.

Not blood, but beets.

Try the beets, he said. They're good.

Try the beets.

Celestia does not eat beets.

Would the hung-up men like some beets?

Celestia will not eat beets.

Beets and snakebite go together like bloody larkspurs of a feather, and you clear out your soul by communicating freely, and you snag the sparks by growing snoring sleeping in the bed with the light on by someone who's reading a closely printed tome; that's Celestia, snakebit.

Virgil Suarez

Nada

Been to towns filled with dust & cobwebs,
hours spilled over hours, bad loves
like bad weeds, everywhere the black
birds waiting, capuchin-like manes,
these bald birds of carrion, waiting ...

Summer days, heat of little resistance,
been in sand storms in El Paso, TX,
mouth full of nails, bitter words rattled
between the thin walls, an old man
coughs up phlegm & doesn't get up to spit.

Into the pools fall the palm tree fronds,
dead birds struck by pebbles in mid-soar,
at night the bats dive to lap up a drink
from the pond's surface, catch frogs
in mid-jump, the road loses itself

in the distance, that shimmering dot
where love & hate converge, once we stopped
for a family crossing the border, they spoke
to us in tongues, my wife and I gave them food,
water, bought their children stuffed toy bears,

candy, dropped them off in Yuma,
and my wife turned to me and said she was glad
we'd broken the law, me, too, I said,
nothing seems right but this handout
from this side to those hungry on the other.

We drive through still lost in the clouds.
We learn to drive in darkness and confusion.
We learn to read broken signs, a turn here, a sigh.
We learn to follow cracks up into the mountains.
We learn to love our lives on the run, this gift of speed.

Contributors' Notes

Matt Blackburn has tripped the light fantastic with the sultan of Qatar and is currently working on a cure for the common cold in his spare time. Some say that he lies. He's been published in *Fiction International*, awarded the Newbury Medal in mathmatics, and can fix up a delightful dish of spaghetti.

Rachel Squires Bloom has a master's degree from the University of Massachusetts, and is currently a teacher and writer. Her favorite interests are staying home with her dog, family and garden, and travelling. She recently went to the Balkans, but she enjoys exploring any city, particularly her own (Boston). Her poems have appeared in *The Boston Poet* and *Lucid Stone.*

Gaylord Brewer teaches creative writing at Middle Tennessee State University, where he is founding editor of the literary magazine, *Poems & Plays.* His first full-length book of poems, *Devilfish*, won the Red Hen Press Poetry Award for 1998.

David Hill lives and writes in San Fransisco.

Mary Ann Hudson holds BA and MA degrees from Iowa State University, and she is currently working on her MFA in poetry from UI. She will serve as *Fugue*'s first Poetry Editor starting in fall of 2001.

Jim Meirose lives in Somerville, N.J. His short work has appeared in many literary journals including *New Orleans Review* and *South Carolina Review.* One of his stories, published in *Oasis*, received honorable mention in the 1997

O.Henry Awards Anthology.

Melanie Rae Thon's most recent book is the novel *Sweet Hearts* (Houghton Mifflin 2001). She is also the author of *Meteors in August* and *Iona Moon*, and the story collections *First, Body* and *Girls in the Grass*. Originally from Montana, she has taught at Emerson College, Syracuse University, University of Massachusetts, and Ohio State University. She now teaches at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City.

Eric Roe lives and writes in Corvallis, Oregon. He has been published in *Fiction Forum* and *Lines in the Sand.*

Alletha Saunders received her bachelor's degree from Purdue University and has recently completed her MFA in poetry from the University of Idaho. She has read poems as a staff member of *Fugue* for the past couple of years.

Virgil Suarez was born in Havana Cuba in 1962. Since 1974 he has lived in the United States. He is the author of four novels, *The Cutter*, *Latin Jazz*, *Havana Thursdays*, and *Going Under*, and of the collection of stories, *Welcome to the Oasis*. His memoirs, *Spared Angola: Memoirs of a Cuban-American Childhood* and *Café Nostalgia: Writings from the Hyphen*, chronicle his life of exile both in Cuba and the United States. He is also the author of four collections of poetry. He divides his time between Miami and Talahassee, where he lives with his family, and is currently at work on his new novel *Sonny Manteca's Blues*, and a new collection of poems.

Karen Swenson most recent book of poems is her new & selected, *A Daughter's Latitude*, published in 1999 by Copper

Canyon Press. A native New Yorker, Swenson has been described as "an intrepid solo traveler" to such places as Thailand, Nepal, and Laos, not to mention Idaho.

Ryan Van Cleave's writing has appeared in recent issues of *Shenandoah*, *Notre Dame Review*, and *Mid-American Review*. He serves as the editor of *Sundog: The Southeast Review*; his most recent books are *Say Hello* and the anthology *American Diaspora: Poetry of Exile*.

Fugue

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