The Best of DIALOG

Edited by
Christopher Dow

Phosphene Press

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Houston, Texas

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Foreword

You'd think that folks who had already published one failed literary magazine would have learned to leave well enough alone. But *Phosphene* had not failed in a critical sense, only a financial one, and that because we were trying to survive solely off of the sale of copies. The *Phosphene* story is related in the foreword to *The Best of Phosphene*, however, and we're not here to talk about it, per se, but about what happened beginning a year or so after its demise.

It was about then that Steven Robinson, Lazaro Aleman, and I were again bitten by the publishing bug. Or maybe I should say that we relapsed. Publishing is, I think, rather like malaria—you get bitten once and suffer recurring bouts of varying intensity for the remainder of your life. In fact, Lazaro and I both went on to become professional editors and writers. Sometimes, I've learned, you actually manage to publish something worthwhile, but most of the time, it all just seems like a fever dream.

As the three of us began discussions, we generally agreed that our new endeavor had to be structured differently from *Phosphene*. First, the new magazine had to pay for itself. We had paid to produce *Phosphene*, but that magazine died because we were doomed to continue paying. We wanted the new magazine eventually to make its own way financially, though we understood that, initially, we'd have to pay to produce it. With that in mind, we took in a fourth partner, Richard Leach. Rick did not have a background in writing or art, but he was intrigued by the endeavor, and he assumed the role of general business manager.

The format of *Phosphene* had not allowed for any sort of income aside from direct sales or subscriptions. Making the new magazine pay for itself entailed a different approach in both form and format, and we decided to produce it as a newsprint tabloid. This had the principal advantage of cheaper production costs with a greater press run—we could print 10,000 copies of a tabloid for about the same amount as producing 1,000 copies of *Phosphene*. In addition, with that format, we could sell advertising space to finance the endeavor. To ensure readership, we would give the tabloid away for free at various outlets in Houston's Inner Loop.

The idea wasn't farfetched. This was during the early 1980s, and the first boom in free inner-city tabloids was under way—one free Houston tabloid, *Innerview*, already was out there and holding its own. We didn't feel that there would be any

problems between us and the publisher of *Innerview* since that tabloid carried news and viewpoints, and we were targeting a different, though overlapping, readership.

There remained only one more task before we began to publish—naming the new magazine. We knew right from the start that we would not be using *Phosphene*. That publication had played its hand, and we wanted a fresh name to go with our fresh approach. We mulled it over for a couple of weeks, when one afternoon, within an hour of each other, both Rick and I independently came up with the name *Dialog*. It seemed to symbolize what we were after—interaction within the literary community, with the community at large, and between writer and reader. The symbolism and the synchronicity were too much to ignore, and the new publication was christened.

Dialog began as an extension of *Phosphene*, and to provide content for the first couple of issues, we put back into harness the stable of writers and artists we had developed with the earlier magazine. Soon, however, we expanded beyond our original staples of poetry, fiction, essays, art, and photography to include articles, book reviews, and interviews with local literati and other people of interest to the reading public. Ten thousand copies brings a lot of visibility, and that, in turn, brought greater attention. Ad sales were only modest, but they provided enough supplemental income to allow us to run poetry and fiction contests with cash prizes. The fiction contest brought in some particularly good work.

Alas, ad sales never completely managed to pay for *Dialog*'s production. None of us were good at sales, and the ads we did get came rather haphazardly. Making *Dialog* pay for itself would have entailed a single-minded attention to ad sales that none of us possessed, and so, financially, *Dialog* floundered into its second year and never saw its third.

But it never floundered in an artistic sense, though we did manage to publish some material that didn't make it into this volume. In the year and a half that *Dialog* was alive, we pushed the boundaries that we'd set with *Phosphene* into wider spheres of readership and literary community. The 10,000 copies always disappeared fast, and we received a lot of nice mail along with submissions.

But *Dialog* did expire. Not only were ad sales mediocre, but the lives and personal focuses of the editors changed, too. After a year and a half, we rather suddenly called it quits. While I admit that, at the time, I was ready for a break, I was sorry to see *Dialog* go. Given adequate support by better ad sales, it could have survived and matured to give the Houston literary scene a more constant and long-lived voice. Since *Dialog*'s demise, several other Houston publications have offered a bit of the literary—such as *Blonde on Blonde*—but none have lasted long. I used to believe that it still could happen—that someday someone who is better organized and better funded will accomplish where we failed. But the advent of the Internet probably has proved the demise of the printed literary magazine.

But whether we lasted or not, we were there, and I'm as proud of *Dialog* as I am of *Phosphene*, and for the same reasons—we published some darn good stuff. So, here is *The Best of Dialog* to give you an idea of what was going on in those days when the Montrose Area was hip instead of upscale, and Shipley's Donuts ruled the night.

Poetry

James Bettison

After . . . Dinner . . . Thought . . .

In a minute
I would have
Eaten all the years.
To taste you
Only once.

R. T. Castleberry

Sketch for Mourning

I do not sit to rest
But dream and drink this sweet, Sunday wine
As August moves to September
And the summer women turn their faces to fall's cool edge.
In the high haze of morning heat
I stand in the doorway
And watch the brown curl and fall of leaves
    on cracked and pebbled walkways,
    on stairways of creaking wood or marble.
I lean to lift my drink from the stoop
And walk out to sit in the cool, dry smell of bamboo and brick.

I have people to mourn.
And I will do it with sweet, dark liquor,
Within the silence of this stained glass bar,
The quiet between the call and the response of a Motown oldies hit.
As I walk to stand unsteady at the railing
The white and grey of ice turns
To the swift symphony of old radio songs and the dances of skaters,
To the blast and shriek of teen-agers in play.
As I stand in the cool, half shadows of fall
Or walk, to stumble in confusion,
I can hear the oily strain and click of a builder's crane,
The cries of men as they work in concrete dust or mud.
I hear the laughter fade as the summer women tremble and move home.
I have people to mourn.

Robert Dante

Lessons in Charm

with some few precious possessions, I treasure too
our Scorpions, in each tail
a self-indulgence
like a black leather rose, rising
from a red bible,
red as lips which kiss arteries,
smooth as thumbs along lapels,
hammers of steel ringing
against evening's elemental colors, as we
pause to catch our breaths
between ticket stubs—

we try to remember what day it is,
which city we're in, Teasingly—
"The South ain't what it was," I sigh;
"It never was," you say.

The Persistence of Memory

Sunlight billows through
the sea in unanswered worlds
around us—

flowers blossom in my fingers,
down your shoulders and breasts,
unfurling whorls of light along
the singing nerves
inside my sky-brown arms

limbs of coiling smoke, we weave
unloomed imaginations—
we breathe . . .

Direct communication between species
is already a fact,
beyond our merely beating on those barriers
between us—the wolf and human
will howl new poems
into each other's bones—

we will engrave the trembling planets
with a common footprint
and gaze out at new Zodiacs
through a single eye . . .

We pull ourselves shimmering
up, toward the surface of sleep—
the tentacles inside my chest
fly on a phosphorescent current,
hungry for more

Claire Donohue-Korolenko

Pecan Day

I have the pecans in the blue cooking pot
Near the tree they owned, up to now
And in the sun, they shine

Away from the water spouts
Where the rain runs,
And dark brown jungle tears fall beside our window

Plunking, one by one, down through the Texas sun
The pecans hide, in the rain bursts
Away in the weed-grass snarled at my feet

In rhythm, they rattle on the roof
The rain rustles past on by to farther up north
A chameleon zigzags through puddle danger zones, all
As you sleep, in your room, summertime warm,
Hearing the pecans fall in your dreams.

Christopher Dow

Fall Flies

Black speck on the wall—
Closer—Fly. Fat fly.
Buzz from the left, at the window
To sunlight and green early fall.
Three fat early fall flies.
With no malice, I
Shake a finger in the air
One inch over the wall-bound one.
Don't fly, I say in my mind. Just
Let me shake my finger at you.
It does not fly. I shake.
I turn to those others,
Silhouetted against nature,
All fat and easy to squash.
One crouches, the next buzzes
A bit in the air, the third
Walks up the left window molding,
Buzzing, under a shimmering thread.
Another thread. Another. Spider.
My eyes range up past the crawling fly,
To the upper corner of the window.
Over the body of a fly, a spider
Hunches. The fly is fresh and fat.
The spider touches and sucks.
Fat fly. The others buzz
In sporadic bursts against the window.
The one on the wall lobs itself
Through the air to the glass,
Thumping a landing on that surface.
The world a movie at its feet, it waits
In early fall's dappled warmth,
A fat fly with other fat flies,
Waiting for the freedom of night,

When bright panes do not
Mesmerize with illusions of escape,
When cool drafts lend
A ride to winged creatures
Through a world of darkness
And no transparent barriers.

Lisa Howell Fenton

After Reading Ayn Rand

Rivet by rivet
I balance between
Blueprint and construction, idea
And Action, stillness and

Motion

I am the builder
The building
Rising, rising
From dust, sweat and singing
At noon

Girder by girder
Lace of my circuitry
Elevated speed Perfect flight

A button pushed
I transmit light
Compete with the stars
By day the sun answers
My blue glass

Girder by girder
Atoms forged Building
This grandeur climbs the sky
A massive spire
  Pain, adversity
Only passing through fire
Iron ore to steel
Shining steel
For my purpose
Beauty that cannot be violated

Panoramas of distance
Shivering height
Claimed as mine, mine
Each moment: An invention

I stand
With the purity of creation
Above your city

You cannot touch me now

Lisa Goodman

Sitting on a Couch with an Absent Jazzman
(Dedicated to Art Pepper)

When Pepper played beware of sorrow—
catch you tapping with surprise
He blew a life found locked in sound
he sang the time go by.

A mystery of mind in Art
caged behind a note
he wrote on white walls with his nails he
scratched on a script of sax-in-smoke hot-
licked the cell where he laid it all to life.

When Pepper played from way down under,
touching bottoms not perceived
under covers tight-shade-curtains
red-chinz flowered fifties-chic

women turned their hats in wonder
scotch-numbed throats like ice he slid,
fingered parts your mama said no
not to cry in public.

I sit on blue and nod agreements,
seeing what I used to hear
fifteen years found him the freedom
run me backwards this place spent,
scared the moods will send me screaming

of attempted explanations lie
about the man now cold; so
hot-stopped, jammed-packed, now survives

the late-night talkshow jazzed-up jives
of men who did not know his pride.
(I cannot claim I did.)

Sweat made sweet
the vibrant night
sound like baby-bottom smell
he played the truth with storm behind it
soothing me with lullabies in lies
the velvet-voiced man says
“no one can still the mystery of Art.”

Nina Haas

Impatience

Perhaps other old people are better . . .
But do not depend on me!
That breathless impatience,
So charming in youth,
—Salero, you called it,
A spoon-full of fire—
Has wilted into a course
Too impatient to care,
To water, to tend,
Even the flowers . . .
My poor fuchsias survive
On a sliver of conscience.

Kristin Higgins

The Sculptor Manque

How easy it would have been
for your tongue of highly polished silver
with the finest edges
to smooth and shape me
into your favorite pattern.

How easy
had I never learned to hone myself
with my own tools
had I not seen
that your favorite pattern left no room for mine
and that your tongue
was no tool of love.

Lyn Lifshin

My Sister's Diaries

spread out in the dark
room of the house
where sleet bent
pines are dripping,
diaries like shells
a blood sun catches
glass turned ruby and
cranberry in altered
light. Her today, a
net of holes. But
these leather books
with their spines
cracking like debris
from a wrecked ship
burning to surface
stud the colorless
crystalline haze
the way a field of
jonquils push
thru snow

Virginia Long

Remembered Fragrance

Delicate and sweet as Chinese
wind chimes to the ear, remembered
fragrance can conjure those images
long lost to time. . .

Jasmine adrift on night wind —
the way magnolia hangs, heavy
in the grey dawn, or from dark
closets, faint and haunting, a hint
of cedar, sandalwood or rose.

A woman brushes near, and drifts
of perfumed air stir sharp fragments
of youth's old longings —
that crushed gardenia on a prom dress,
love notes sprouting violets,
and oh! those walks in autumn's mist.

Wet leaves spreading a sponge underfoot,
earth-mold pungent in the cool damp —
illusive now her beauty, faded
by years, but the scent she wore
remembered forever.

Phillip Lopate

Straight Man

Dear Warren, I often think about that night
you took me to an all-male gathering
for someone in the City Ballet corps.
A small brownstone apartment; we got jammed
against the kitchen table with the wine,
and some corpulent, red-faced, oily queen
accosted you with his belligerent lust:
"*Well*! Where have *you* been hiding out?" he screamed,
and dove his hand down-shirt, squeezing your chest.
You winced, still looking tolerant and amused.
Yes you were quite the favorite that night,
as well you should have been, my handsome friend.
Discouraging no one, giving none consent,
the perfect coquette, while I stood by your side
for safety's sake, as though your newest date;
I must have been the only straight man there.

But then I went into the living room
and gave you time to operate alone.
Besides, I was afraid to stick around
and see you in too-vivid an embrace—
collecting memories which might disturb
the fragile balance of our new friendship.
The men inside were making out or cruising;
that didn't faze me, they were not my friends.
What hurt, however, was the eye-contact,
first greedy, then disgusted when they saw
I didn't know the code. They looked *through* me,
as if to say, "You don't belong with us."
I sensed hostility—or at least chagrin
at my blocking their visual line of fire—
and circled, finding nowhere safe to stand.

Then Dave, your critic friend, came up to me
in kindness, and we started talking films.
He told me he'd been reading Noel Burch;
Burch claimed most Westerners misread Japanese films,
they thought they understood the little cues
but their ethnocentrism deluded them,
all part of bourgeois–humanist hegemony. . . .
His words kept getting more abstract, the more
I saw the party heating up around us.
A moment's paranoia made me think
he was insinuating a connection:
Just as the Japanese codes eluded me,
so did I misperceive the patterns here.

I kept insisting it was possible
for a round-eye like me to "get" Ozu.
The argument went drily circular
but I clung to it, having nothing else,
til from the corner of my eye I caught
your leather jacket and red flannel shirt.
You whispered in my ear: "*Nu*? Had enough?"
"I'm ready to go," I said, and seized your sleeve.
You laughingly apologized on the stairs:
"What an obnoxious party. If I'd known
such boring assholes would be there, you can
believe I'd never have invited you!"

We walked up Broadway to the subway stop.
I wanted to complain to you how strained
the whole experience had been for me,
how real the gulf
between men of your preference and mine.
We were like ancient enemies who posed
threats to each other by our being,
mocking the turn where each had gone his way.
how could I trust you—or you me?—

beyond formal exchange of the latest tastes.
Why had you put me through this nightmarish masquerade?

Yet even as I framed the words, I sensed
the party hadn't been that strange.
I was exaggerating the sensual shock
to alienate myself from what had been
as unoutrageous as my shadow, as
the doctor's question put at seventeen:
"What are you most afraid of? Speak, first thought—!"
"That I'd become a homosexual."
So I didn't, though I might have, and you did.
Friends live the lives we don't have time for,
or temperament, or talent. Forgive me if
I still seem both repelled and envious:
a part of me may never understand.

John Lunstroth

UNTITLED

Against the line usually seen
as the horizon is a woman.
Enthralled by the sun, the hot
celestial body, she deserted
a dust covered plain and her people.

In robes she walked, when the moon was bright
as fire, towards the elaborate ocean. She passed,
suspended in desire, from anonymous rooms,
through the megaliths of modern man;
what history had etched beauty in her eyes,
what religion had formed childhood
so carefully in her body.

I was fishing that night, throwing time
after time my line through the waves,
when I saw her step from the sea wall
into the sand, I saw her procession
to the foamy saltwater, I saw the first
of ten sacraments in the wine-dark
sea, before she consummated devotion
in the burning swell of the dawn.

No longer with interest do I see Wisdom
define the horizon, no longer am I
enthralled with his strength as his fingers
pry chaste Night from her rooms.

Orson T. Maquelani

On a Lover's Bridge to Reality

Words more smooth than
the street-side blade:
like a hoodlum you still leave me
bleeding

way past needing
and again I hear your price.

The bridge is a terrible thing to cross

wishing not knowing
but wishing

Truth between your lies.
Still now
your words not even I

can toss.

Elizabeth McBride

The Atoll

When the tide was low
and the ocean water flowed
from the still lagoon and into the sea,

I wanted to walk out
on the crest of the coral ring
and circle the reef,

past the shallow pools
where spiny lobsters feed,
crawling at night from ocean side to lagoon.

One day I went so far
I saw the shark's fin slitting a line
through the dark water toward me.

I could barely hear my mother's voice
calling, barely see my father standing,
still, on the shore.

Kwajalein

When I was a child,
my father took me to live
on an island.
Day after day the light
fell through the window
and into my bedroom
and day after day I woke
and ran to the sea.
There with my feet deep in the sand
I looked across from the beach
to the coral reef.
It appears even more clear
to me now than then,
the sky spread around
the rim of the atoll,
and the sun bright in the sky
and again in the sea.
When I imagine that child,
my eyes are green as the shallow
lagoon and my skin as smooth
as the underside of a palm
leaf. I can almost touch her,
almost feel her hair,
long and straight down my back
as a memory.

Shells

That year, I fed the tiger-striped cat
my father loved, the one
that howled all night from the water tower
and slept all day beside the back steps
guarding the shells.

Buried there in the sand, they
yielded their meat to the ants.
Then my father, satisfied, dug them up
and soaked them in acid until
their surfaces were rippled glass.

When in my play at the edge of the water
I discovered shells still
full of flesh and smelling of the sea,
I took them to the steps—
my prayers, my offerings.

Robin McCorquodale

Andres Segovia, We Want to Show You Our Henry Moore

1

Andres Segovia,
we want to show you our Henry Moore.
Mr. Moore told us where to place it and then he said:
"On the thirty-first of October,
in the year, one thousand nine hundred and seventy nine,
on the night that Houston commemorates the return of all souls
with a Moonlight Bicycle Ramble,
my sculpture will be here placed."

I replied,
"Mr. Moore, on the thirty-first
the faithful will fall onto bronze
believers will clasp hands, shake hands and give the holy kiss,
steaming up the metal arches.
Cyclists will make twenty miles look like two or one,
but I shall look where you have adjusted the curve
and shall begin to worship."

2

Maestro Segovia,
Houston is my home and Valladolid is yours,
but would you play something British?
On this knoll, Allen Parkway, beside Buffalo Bayou's clay shores,
we have placed "Spindle Piece." Play:
Thomas Tallis
Benjamin Britten
Frederick Handel
Ralph Vaughan Williams
for Henry Moore.

The Promise

Clover created waves for cattle to stand in.

The clover for the girl to walk in
  ripples:
    on a lake, like a lake
      created more swells for that girl and grackles and crows
        to fly through and disappear in;
          for sandals to sink into,
            one bee now a dozen dive into blossoms,
              like seagulls diving into surf
                come out with fish.

The clover backed off in
surges of green,
a pond to prance into on high-heeled sandals
for these shoes to sink
for bees to accumulate and buzz,
sunshine, low-flying clouds, hard as rocks
the clover fell sideways heavy on its 4th leaf,
therefore, most remarkable of plants
undulating green for straw birds and pipers,
cattle to drown in, to melt under hoofs
with insects to shout in their
humdrumming ears; shining cows
the girl strokes
makes much over, touches and they
ring their bells;
for sandals to hurry past,
to sink into green when the man
held the barbed-wire fence far enough apart,
caught his shirt, cursed, smiled, walked into clover waves toward
her.

Billows in clover,
  floating on it
    swelling in green: to
      separate two lines of barbed wire
        incorporate bees in the picture
          and the girl's face (she smiles)
          in exposure to wind and sun
            not five yards away; while the
              clover backs off:
                sinks, rises,
                  into blushing
                    when the man as a man
takes
her hand
flowers are stars
really.
It is the
wind which
rocks the clover;

slips on the ring
over her finger, ripples
the green wind in clover
bees are a voice of golden families;
the sky, yes blue, another sea:
clouds swell, billow;
when the man lifted the barbed-wire
put one foot on the barbed wire, waded out to the girl in green;
rippling for boots to plunge into,
clover, his knee,
fell over the fourth leaf, the third
so on one knee; his third and fourth wish, a clover:
the day of exquisite luck, the green
he handed her a four-leaf one
the ring and his promise.

Joan McNearney

AN EXECUTIVE

showed me in
in this dream
i, shy
as an orphan

her charming face
through sewing room
viewing cabinets
bolts of silk
tactical prints
her life in threads
swatches impressive
floral

discerning glances
make me hurry
out the rear
but she invited
me only to see
her material things
& feel them
unattainable

all handsome houses
have well guarded gardens
lush chrysanthemums
smothering me
dog-faced.

D. Meeks

Bing Cherries, Purple Plums

Anatomy, Pathology, this building reeks of death.

Long past the sudden reaching for breath,
The astonished grunt or surprising sticky warmth
They lie, a hand, a foot, a gleaming eye
Dreaming within its clever fringe of lash.

The dark comes on so early now.
We skitter across the parking lots
Keeping our thighs together,
Holding ourselves with our own arms
In damp November chill.
We are so frail.

I need summery arms, sure and alive,
The scent of Sea and Ski,
Your mouth, what it must have,
Your voice, that wordless growl.
The twist of urgency, your face
Hard against my brow.

Summer will come, oh, say it will
With those heaped stands beside summer roads
Gleaming cherries, mounds of grapes, purple plums
All the tight-skinned fruit that bursts and runs
And we will have sun and sun and Queen Anne's lace
And violins and metal drums

And we will not remember
This dank, basement November scent
Down where the air is bad.

Formaldehyde, formaldehyde, when did these lungs know breath?
Pathology, Anatomy, these pickles stink of death.

Seachange

Moist and breathy, sticky-handed, patting
The wind swung around, last night.
The porchscreens are disconsolate.
The Gulf breathes thicker air and gives off mist.
The cutweeds sway and list and sibilantly break
Beneath this strange assault.

Ah, hell.
We were so strong
Pajamas inside our jeans
All winter long, cursing this broken house
Bulwarked against the north.

But who could fight off this pitiless unknowing?
This incessant, soft demand?

Damp and busy
Persistent as a two-year-old
The wind swung around in the false dawn, today.

The Gulf breathes heavily. The house
Leans, groaning, into the north.

Vassar Miller

Fear

Fear
no gentleman with
the stink of his sweat
and flatulent guts,
not pausing to dry
his boots on the mat
of a metaphor,
he tramples the nerves,
squats down in the mind,
picking the bones of
courage and honor.

A Rage for Order for Rose

From my back porch I'm watching God's housekeeping
And think you wouldn't want Him in your house:
No Lordy! Like them mens, no good at sweeping,
And look, just will you, all those leaves fly loose!
That great big broom God makes those old fall winds with
Like He ain't thought about nobody's yard.
Those clouds! Not fit to dry your hands with,
No wonder you could slap a tree trunk hard!
And, say, don't tell you how God wastes some comet,
And spends a million years on one amoeba
When you could, —Lord, have mercy ain't no limit—
You go and close your window—just how He be.
And now, be-hold! God gets Hisself a few
Dobabs all throwed around
and dear like you.

Sleep

walked off and left me
just like any no-good man.
He left my thoughts,
so many little bare-assed kids
gawking at one another
up in my attic,
this creaky old house full of night noises.

You ever see that bastard,
you tell him he won't find a love
good as mine.

What Really Happens

We are the cat who worries time away,
tossing it hither, *thunk,* and thither, *thwack,*
tail twitching, while between its paws its prey
flops back and forth and back
until the feline master of the house,
with time, poor thing routinely mauled to sweeten
monotony, forgets that time's the mouse
that kills in being eaten.

Harryette Mullen

A Brand of Love

I want her superstitious about me,
so she put me on like an amulet—
never take me off.

I want to pierce her like a hot needle
that hurts only for a second.
I want to be the gold
she hang in her earlobe,
swinging out to touch her cheekbone
when she laugh
or when she shake her head.

Want her wearing my smell like perfume.
My smell on her body
like a "No Trespassing" sign.

I want to touch her with fire
from the burning bush
so she'll always feel my fingers
hot on her skin.

Marie Ponsot

Metro Bus

1. We Take What We Can

Midnight, winter, corner of Elgin & Main,
men I'm afraid of; so far I've been wrong.
All four lurch and lean; a fifth snores in a stain
of his own liquids. I know I can't belong
at this bus-stop at this time of night.
All five ignore me as I look alert,
pace briskly from edge to edge of pooled streetlight.
Do they know/ I don't/ if the drunk fifth is hurt
& if he is, what to do. Here an hour,
no phone, not one walker, just rush-rush cars,
stubbornly we six exert no power,
risk no looks. Waiting is who we are.

Bus at last. My relief smiles its trust.
The bus driver looks at me with pained disgust.

2. We Envision What We Can

August. After noon. Heat. Heat endured like fate
slows us, stuns. Hair curls. Eyes sting. The heat lasts
till 4 AM; the let-up lasts till 8,
when walkers quit. Only cars move fast.

My bus-stop neighbor gasps and fans. She prefers
to clean house for señoras who don't mind
her grandbaby coming to work with her
in conditioned air, but they're hard to find.
Things will be better for the Rosa baby
born in Texas: Americana citizen,

no problema, job, car, high-school maybe.
Envisioned, Rosa smiles & smiles again.

I blink to find that old wild dream alive.
Rosa invites her grandma out to drive.

Museum

1. For a Christmas Visitor

The fountained garden of the Museum
of Art becomes you in your clarity.
I often breakfast here. I like to come,
down from the medieval gallery
& its little ivories that strike me dumb,
to this water-music. Today I see
that what was lacking was your company . . .
the vivid child in you whom you summon
to scout out & open the lost famous gate
of the world of wishes. In you run
& with a rush of words leave fantasy
for forecast: "This wish is good. I choose this one."
Selves drawn from self, you plan work you define;
you shine, good woman; garden & fountain shine.

2. A Century of Modern Sculpture

On the white wall: 4 bronze-black backs—Matisse
trying to muscle shoulder into arm;
up the steps: reason sports in a Calder piece;
a Dave Smith fusses; Benglis holds out gilt charm;
an eggsmash scrambles the post-modern soul.

I always make the same mistake. I come
toward sculpture to find, beyond my control,
some grail, some sign, hand-made, eloquently dumb,
set out for me to walk around & around
amazed as I listen & hear it hum.
It can happen. It happens, look, there by the door,

a stone girl proposes simple hands, her whole
body simple like the cup I came here for:
firm light lasts on her, the Flore of Maillol.

Pattiann Rogers

The Myth of the Fields

> . . . into his gates with
> thanksgiving and into his
> courts with praise . . .

The bluet blossoms lie thin and transparent
As petal-shaped slivers of a cold sky fastened
To the earth. The seedhead of a dawn, as icy wheat,
Brushes the sun-touched withers of the rising colt.
And the pony-scented sun rises, spilling flashing seeds
Of ice above the deeply buried petals of a black sky.

The court of god is the presence
Of this myth in the field, a court entered
By particles of thanksgiving discovered as light
Inside the quiver of the pony's haunch, inside the thin
Fire of ice cracking across the columned grasses.

And the kingdom of the field is the sheathed
And hooved, the rooted and earth-tight myth
Of god, the traceable electrons of that myth existing
As opening gate of potential light found and witnessed
Inside the intimate body of bluet, inside
The failing sound of the pony's call.

This point of praise for the sunsheathed stem
And broken-bladed frost is, in fact, half particle,
Half cresting effluence of illumination itself.

The sight seen through the open gates
Of the seeded bluets, the frozen blades
And icy myth of the sun, the shining shoulders

And frosted mane of god, all must enter into being,
Solely and at once, through the recognized form
Of their inseparable praises.

Remembering the Imagination: A Love Letter

Can you imagine remembering the rain, less than rain,
Yesterday morning, almost a stationary mist,
Imperturbable and weightless, a mist remembering
To exist in those places where nothing else
Was imagining itself to exist at that moment?

I remember myself imagining the spun moisture
Arching inside the inner-surface fuzz
Of every pre-dawn leaf and the glint of the condensation
On the outer surface of each of those dark green
Memorable leaves. I can imagine the fog
Completely filling the oak tree with more spaces
Than it could ever remember having possessed before.

And I remember the pine tree, maintained and encased
Inside the mist, holding one clear precipitate drop
Poised at the pinnacle of each of its sharp edges,
As if the tree had suddenly imagined in glass
Those precise points at which it had ceased forever
To remember its identity.

Can you imagine the clear golden horses existing
Inside and outside the fog, never remembering to imagine
Their perimeters, leaving themselves thus vulnerable
To that indefinite mist moving at will in and out
Of their rib bones and flanks, their fetlocks and withers?
The fog, moving in and out of the gold lenses
Of their disappearing eyes, could easily carry
In either direction whatever vision the horses
Might choose to imagine themselves remembering.

Imagine the fog, appearing, if the horses
Remember it simultaneously, as smoke blown from their nostrils,
Or appearing, if the horses imagine it simultaneously,
As billows of pale surf rolling over their disintegrating
Hooves. If the horses should emerge snorting
And rearing on the surface once more, imagine yourself shouting
To them before they sing again, "Remember, remember
To imagine the total gold boundaries of your possible existence."
Outside the imagination, no one had ever been able to remember
Anything of gold horses which have forgotten themselves.

At the distance from which you read this,
Try to imagine an invisible fog filling like light
More spaces between us than we might remember exist, ignoring
Those perimeters we have chosen to forget, an indefinite light
Moving freely from eye to eye, easily carrying the vision
Of everything I might wish to imagine that you remember
Of my existence at this moment.

A Sequence of Circumstances

Inside a real forest of blue ash, blue beech,
Speckled alder and ward willow, there is an imaginary
Lake bordered by greenbriar and honeysuckle,
By frogbit, lily and rushes of waterweed.

On that imaginary lake there is a real vision
Of two lovers drifting alone in the dusk
Beside the tangled banks of dark forest, lovers
Whispering together as they lie side by side
In the bow of the boat.

Within this real vision the woman makes imaginary
Trails across the surface of the moon
On the lake as if she actually explored the dust
Of that light by the tip of her finger moving
Over the water's white craters and their peaks.
By the imaginary trails her finger makes there,
The real moon on any real night is not known
And witnessed hereafter to be
Forever marked by fable.

And when her lover first bends to kiss her breast
In the dusk, moving his lips slowly across the dark
Of her nipple exactly as if he were a fable
Discovering the soft, hidden surface of some unmarked
Moon, there is a recognition of motion rising
In the mind, a motion reminiscent itself of dusk-scented
Lake water rocking slowly like a cherishing breath
Slowly discovering an imaginary sky, a real motion
Of recognition which could never have existed at all
Through any sequence of circumstances
Other than these.

Jacqueline Simon

The Biloxi Shrimper Confesses to His Monsignor

The Gulf doesn't hold so much:
where my grandfather used to get 50, 75 barrels a day,
I bring in 15 pounds.
Boats now are bigger, too, more efficient.
It doesn't take so many.
Yesterday there were so many boats
you could barely see the horizon.
We drag our nets east and west,
they go any way they please!
They cut across our fields, one cut across my bow.
When a sensible man comes in from squalls and lightning,
they stay out, all day, all night.
At the Blessing of the Fleet, where were they?
Already at work. But they're Catholics, too.
Christ says, Make peace among you.
But Christ would have said
you don't make peace
by running across your brother's field.
Now both sides go armed: tensions run high.
It's no way to live.

The Monsignor Replies to the Shrimper

They're out there on the water
because it's the only place they have.
Their trawlers carry families, wives, and babies.
They'll learn your laws and customs:
you think they want more violence?
Though I know they have their rifles, too.
Give them time, let them make their way.
The Gulf belongs to all the people—
now they're the people, too.
You want more shrimp in your double riggers;
you've got a thirty thousand dollar boat,
two thousand worth of nets.
Today you made four hundred
and the profit wasn't clear.
Nguyen Cao Ky gave them forty thousand, more,
to buy their boats.
He'll be looking for something in return.
That's at the problem's core, brother.
It isn't only the Vietnamese.
It's in the human heart.
The Gulf doesn't hold so much.

Sidney Wade

French Lilacs

The earth by now has given up its claw-toothed crocus,
its first born. Still, in shadows,

snow lingers like the smell of old leaves.
The soil has been expanded and torn,

then resettled by the force of the sun.
This morning is dark.

The wind blows and the air is heavy with rain.
The pomegranate heads of the lilacs toss,

glance off one another, bruises among the leaves.
I saved the rose you once gave me.

In its narrow box it aged to the color of dried blood.
Now I stand beneath these sudden flowers

and remember how we rose in those mornings,
light filling our eyes.

Two Leaves

It is barely spring, and I stand here
in the warming sun, hoping that God
will give me a vision, or children,

preferably both. I can see the balanced-
out leaves of last year's poplars and hear
their delicate rattle. The buds of the shade

trees swell, tighten, and shine when
snow still lies heavily on their branches.
I think of death, of course. The snow,

though deep yet, is dying in its own way—
giving itself up to swollen currents,
brilliance in the sun, somehow joyous

in this transformation. I am alone
by chance, not by nature, and dismayed
at this condition. My feet are cold. Sense

withdraws as the blood shuts down. Just
as I move to head back home I hear
the chirr of the cardinal. Its blood-

red body beats into the light when
it bursts from the trees—the branches
discard wet snow and the bird disappears

into the face of the sun which floods
this white ground with indifference,
and I am warmed to the bone by this circumstance.

Christopher Woods

Tennessee

Outside Pigeon Forge, the highway mists
In dying dusk.
My hands and eyes aching, I pull to the side
To rest, and if not,
Then to dream this all again, in sequence.

Walking through the underbrush,
Smoky Mountain air begs me to enter the past.
In my jacket I carry arrowheads,
Ones you left.
You left them, not for me, just left them.
A person leaves hints of what he was.
Arrowheads, cool and sharp, are all I have of you.

I must have been clouds, then, when you lived.
Dressed in flannels, you were geiger-counting the hills,
To take Tennessee if you could,
As it has always been in family memory.
Your journeys were holy travels, personal crusades.

Brother in time, we are tantamount to seasons
Of unbroken circles.
It all depends where and how time places itself.
Grandfather, I never even met you.
Time is dead but for the living,
So hot to annihilate time
And get to know ourselves outside the concept
Intrigues me.

As for you, old man, this vision will last,
Flickering in photographic haze.
Do you know, no matter how I hold my head,
Mine is still a neanderthal walk,
Clutching these arrowheads in Tennessee?

Fiction

Richard M. Bolling

Easter Tuesday

I don't tell stories for a living, but you have to *do something* while you're flat out of a job. I can think of one story right off the bat, immediately, that is, that happened at Shipley's. It's a small restaurant on West Gray and Dunlavy down in Montrose. Everyday at Shipley's, the poet would arrive, *punc*-tu-al at nine, clump up to the counter, and sit on one of the pedestals they call stools, and then talk to anyone who sat up there. Anyone was usually Lizzie. But this isn't a story about the poet. It's a story about a robbery at Shipley's, and at the end, the poet shoots the young kid who robs the register. That's later on, of course, but I wanted to tell you this now so you would *not* be surprised. I have a phobia about surprises now. Since I was let go. *They* said, Gable, we don't need you anymore That is, we don't need your services anymore You're a *fine* technician though Fine Good worker We'll refer you Don't bother cleaning out your desk Yes sir Fine worker. I heard that three times. From Mims then Stokes then Rowland, the big boss. Three fine workers. Yes sir.

Now Shipley's. At Shipley's Tuesday. I've told you that it's a little restaurant and that it has a bar, formica-topped, and pedestal stools. It also has a jukebox, cigarette machine, tables (formica-topped) not in rows, booths by the front window, waitresses, minorities sweating in the kitchen, sweating on their backs. You can see them through the opening where they put those steaming greasy orders. The poet comes in at nine. Now, the morning of the robbery, the waitress with the penciled eyebrows took his order. I don't know her name, I don't know *any* of their names, actually, but pencil eyebrows has a crooked, sneering way of turning her lips, always painted red, and she looks hard as a boiled egg in her white uniform. She's a tough eggshell with powder on her face and leering eyes. The poet, though, has his boulder-size boots tucked under the counter and, knowing the menu by heart, he never takes his eyes away from her as he orders. He even *thinks* while looking into her face. He told me he receives terrific enjoyment from that. That morning, his leather pouch was slung under his flat shoulders and I remember how heavy it looked as he clunked it down there. I had always thought it was his purse. Not his holster.

I'm sitting there alone. Not very usual because someone usually sits with me. The stricken, the drunken, the early risers, the bohemians, the punks, the degenerates, the underhanded, the lazy; in short, the clientele, like to hear me talk. And it was exactly that way in Alabama. They all like to hear me. I can understand that

well enough. Back in 'Bama, as we say, men still sit and *con*verse in front of rural stores and their country houses, just like on television. Believe me. And there's not a grain of truth to their stories. We call it fiction. And that's exactly what this is. Fiction. *I've* never heard of Shipley's being robbed. At any rate, on that day, I had been sitting there anywhere from one to two hours, reading all that good news in the *Chronicle,* the *Post, USA Today,* the *Herald,* and a stack of papers two feet high. Sitting with my arm on them like on a windowsill and sipping coffee out of one of those mugs you inspect to see if its clean. I sat and read the top paper around my elbow.

We were the only customers that day at nine. Everyone else left before eight o'clock because it was Tuesday, Easter Tuesday I call it now. Two of us on Easter Tuesday. I'm living on unemployment, and the poet's working at night as a watchman. After a while, this black man (I singled myself out in 'Bama using that term) named Lizzie shuffles in wearing his elastic suspenders, polyester plaid pants, and his Lone Star hat, greasy as hell. Lizzie's a very likable short man, but he whines like a kid when he talks—a Southern whine, an Aunt Jemima whine—and he calls pencil eyebrows by some nickname—it's different every day—then slides onto the stool and sets down a large grocery bag. The poet wipes the coffee from his mustache and shakes Lizzie's hand than wipes his pants. Pencil eyebrows gets irritated with Lizzie because of his voice, whining like out of a playschool. She plops the pale green note pad in front of him and stares full at him until he orders, moving her crooked lips. But Lizzie wants to sell the watermelon he has in the bag. She's getting hot. Do you want some breakfast or not? she says. I don't know Miss Ma'am he says Don't you want some of this good watermelon? he says. No she says. Now do you want to order? He adds Can't get 'em whole for two dollars like this. They're fine fine watermelon. Are you going to order or not? she says. Yes'm. But you know I shouldn't really be selling watermelon Because I'm black you see. You know black people and watermelon. What do you want? she says. Coffee? He says That's fine Miss Ma'am. *Now* do you want to order? she says. That's fine Miss Ma'am he says. Well? she says. I just wanted to tell you he says That I promise I won't bring up the watermelon again Even though it is the sweetest one I've *ever* seen. What do you want? she says. She writes it down on her green note pad—two donuts and coffee—shaking her head. When she leaves, Lizzie continues about the watermelon, then she knits her eyebrows together and points at him and says Don't talk to me about those again. Do you hear *me?* And Lizzie didn't talk to her about those again.

Two punkers had come in close behind Lizzie, and while Lizzie talked, they sat behind the cigarette machine beside the door. I can't see them on the other side of the machine, and I don't want to lean away from my two foot stack of papers. Actually, they *rolled* in, with black skates on their feet. The thin one is a young

male with a shaved head except for one-inch of hair just above the back of his neck. One-inch and blonde. The female is older, much older, thirty or thirty-five, unnatural black hair, zig-zag cut, a black sleeveless shirt, and white *angular* pants. Strange and beautiful though. I lean away from my papers, mug in hand, attempting to see her, and she's facing me as I lean out of balance from the booth. I lean back. She was looking at me and half-smiling, as if I had done something silly, in a masculine way. Like a silly male comment or gesture, interpreted as *so cute*. I get the same look when I introduce myself to women, I say I'm Clark Gable and they say *No, Not* Clark Gable and I say It is Clark Gable and they say Are you telling me the truth? and I say Yes and they say You don't *look* like Clark Gable. Very bright statement.

I cannot understand why I must *look* like Clark Gable. Now that *would* be a long shot. I caught hell at the office for it. Everyone said Well You don't *look* like him. Maybe if I had been born earlier they would want him to look like me. I hear Gable collected unemployment too. He deposited it in a savings and his chauffeur drove him home. I wonder, I just wonder what they would say at Shipley's if I sat here in my work pants and T-shirt, like everyday, and ate and then called my limo to take me home to River Oaks. And then what if I left a bad tip? Well, that would be just like the rich. They give us apartments to build or skyscrapers to construct or they order us to find oil, telling us we need all of that to keep the world running and in good order. While they sue the fuck out of each other for millions or they *settle* for twenty million and make their business pacts on patios. And after that they die or *kill* themselves. Then here we are. Stuck with their world that we helped them create. That's like a bad tip. The poet told me he wrote about that.

> The rich dream dreams like the Poet
> But His eyes are towards the sun.

Which is why I remember this day as Easter Tuesday because my eyes keep coming back to it.

Now the big waitress rose and approached the punkers' booth. I do not use the word *big* trivially for this woman. Over six-and-a-half feet tall with black hair and a face that would turn you to stone, a compressed face, a *smushed* face at best. She wore Nikes on her feet so she never looked like she walked heavily, instead she seemed cushioned on every step. When I think of her, I think of her as stepping *over* the tables, the longest strides, the elastic in her pants exposed and rolling with her walk, and her blouse hanging over her belly. There was nothing kind *about* her. But nothing mean either. An expressionless face of enormous power that took your order and *knew* you were aghast at her size. And the punkers were no different. They were quiet when she laid the menus on the table asking Coffee? to which

they nodded their heads. Then ordered. At that same moment. And as I sat there holding my mug up for my waitress, a squat kind woman with lavender-tinted hair protected by a hairnet, with my arm on my two-foot stack of papers I watched the big waitress move and roll at the hips and shrug when she wished to shrug and talk when she wished to talk, her voice like a hillbilly's. Taking orders and making no bones about it.

I remember that the punkers, of course, noticed the lack of music in the place. The female punker stood and rolled over to the jukebox in front of me. Then pencil eyebrows says that they can't wear skates in the restaurant. At that the punker does not look at pencil eyebrows, as if she did not hear, then proceeds calmly to untie her skates, dropping them beside the jukebox. She doesn't look at me. She doesn't look at anyone. I'm reading the *Herald* on the top of the stack and I hear the coins drop into the machine, then I see her pressing buttons, her mouth open, her head bobbing a little like she is listening to music. Then she picks up her skates and walks lightly to the booth, walking in front of the two boys that come into Shipley's. I suppose it depends on what you call boys, but these have no trace of hair on their white faces. One boy has dark hair, fleshed out and tall for his age, and I see from the back of his belt that his name is Henry. They sit at the center table. Both wearing jeans. Henry has his back to me. The other one is thin with a black T-shirt, no writing on it, straight and thin pale blonde hair to the neck all around. He is thin everywhere, every feature, his arms, his legs, even his chest.

I must have been absorbed in my two foot stack of papers or looking at the punk couple too much or thinking about how I didn't give a damn about anyone because when you're unemployed you think like that. I must have been in some state where I didn't really *see* those two. For what they really were. Robbery candidates. Henry and the thin boy. I remember looking at Lizzie eat his donuts, looking back at my paper. Mindless I suppose. The poet told me later that he didn't miss that they were up to something, that combined fearful and strutting walk, acting *too* ordinary. At the time he was scratching his mustache and staring over at them and I would see the poet's face, and Henry's belt, then my paper. Doesn't really matter if I realized what they were or not. I would have stayed there anyway. If they would have come in with swords dangling by their sides and daggers in their hands I would have stayed. The days were passing *that* slowly. They acted much older than their age, except once, when the big waitress handed them their menus. They surveyed her from top to bottom, bottom to top, like they were looking at a mountain, "We have to climb *that?"* and their jaws nearly fell our of their sockets. Spoke like kids when they ordered. Ordered the same meal, Breakfast Special.

Well, after the waitress returns to the bar, Lizzie turns to them, the tips of his boots touching the floor at the pedestal and he makes an inquiry. He whines Do you boys want some of the sweetest watermelon that you *ever* tasted? Henry shakes his

head. The thin one faces Lizzie saying No man no. Lizzie says Now you look like two strong boys like I used to be at your age about five years ago. Lizzie winks at the poet then continues And it's gonna get real hot today. Man it's hot already. So maybe it might be good while you're out playing or *gettin some,* if you know what I mean to have some watermelon just sitting so sweet in your mouth. Well a commercial direct from New York couldn't have done better than that. The thin one's packing a pistol around his ankle, but he's the one who can't resist. He asks to see it. So Lizzie unbags it carefully, cradling it in his long black hands like his first born, and he displays a medium-sized watermelon twice as big as his head. The thin one feels it with his fingers, Lizzie's holding it out to him, and the thin one says Is it hard? Lizzie turns to the poet and says Now tell me Have I ever sold one that *was*n't hard? That wasn't the best one you ever tasted? Hard as a rock on the outside and juicy sweet inside? The poet smiles at Lizzie to keep him going then Lizzie turns to them and says Feel it man Feel it Hard as hell Hard as anything you'll get with a woman. They laugh at that. I can see Henry's shoulders shaking with laughter. But they don't want any. Lizzie tries some more lines. Still don't want any. He grunts and thumps it back in the bag.

After that they just stayed quiet. The female punker had loaded up the jukebox until *next June* with quarters, and the boys ate quickly, obviously listening to the jukebox, leaning towards each other over the table. The female punker walked lightly up to the jukebox again, though it was far from finished, and she leaned over it, sticking her butt behind Henry. They watched her for some moments. I was looking at them. They watched her lean and strain all the angles on her white pants, then they watched her walk lightly back to her booth. But at that moment, right when her pants were straining the greatest and their eyes were round as saucers, I got mad. Flaming mad. Mad at everything. Mad as a dog. Absolutely furious that she exploited herself. That's how I viewed it. Exploitation. Leaning a little more than she had to. Now I believe in God, but I'm not a saint. Not now. Used to be, but not now. Not since I started to work for a living. What I'm saying is, I usually don't get mad at men following women's asses like they have a penis in their heads instead of a brain. I usually don't mind that. But I was furious that she exploited herself. And I was almost consumed when I thought of them looking at this older body with those new pubic bodies of theirs. And from there it was a journey into exploitation itself. I was thinking about the rich again. Breaking it down. Then thinking about myself. This was nothing new, you understand, I knew that I was exploiting myself the day I started to work in this town. But madder than hell. That's what I was. I could have cussed out anyone. Could have cussed out my old boss for *hiring* me. I should have *been* a saint. Should have been "Living off faith for seven years" as this one nun said who didn't make a dime. But like I said, this was nothing new. hardly. But I had reached the apogee of my anger, the apex, the hilt. I held myself

totally responsible. And everyone else too. Everyone I ever saw. From the punker with the one-inch hair down his neck, to pencil eyebrows, to the minorities smashing spatulas on the grill, to the writers who wrote the news that day in that two foot stack under my arm. Just furious. And when that kid finally robbed Shipley's, I was on fire. Let me tell you how it happened.

You know how time can pass from slow to fast because your mind wanders. That's what happened. The thin one walked to the register to pay the check. I was working on my fifth cup of coffee, still mad, still irritated at everybody and nobody, at everything and nothing, still mad like that, and I was leaning on my two-foot stack of papers completely absorbed, though, with the design of a particular napkin lying on my table. Some song played on the jukebox. Well I may not have known that he had the gun out and was robbing the register until I heard him quietly talk to the waitress. She must have thought he was joking. I *think* he was even trying to rob the register, with pencil eyebrow's help, with no one knowing. But when he talked to her everyone knew, and I *think,* I *believe* everyone knew at the same time. And that's what caused him to fire. My waitress, the kind one with the hairnet, had backed up right into the hot coffee maker, and when she jumped away from it he fired. He was really scared. You could tell that. Because when the gun went off, it went off twice, that's how *twitchy* his fingers were, he missed her by a good ten feet. But he hit the big waitress. At first I thought she just fell from dodging the bullets, but we found out later that she was hit. Badly.

Well, she fell behind the counter and, let me tell you, unless you've actually *heard* a *gun* go off inside, you won't really understand. But right when he fired everyone ducked. No one was down on the floor. But I bent over the table and Lizzie was under the counter and I could hear the punk girl scream once. *Every*one ducked. Even the kitchen help ducked. Except for the poet. I suppose that makes sense because he's the hero of the story, in a way. The poet remained sitting, crouched slightly though, but his head was high, and I remember his coffee cup still being in his hands, setting it down slowly afterwards. And after these shots, he never took his eye away from the kid. He watched his face the entire time, even when the kid told him to turn around Turn around! all he did was shake his head slowly and stare at him, studying him, not with those repelling eyes that manipulative people use but with those quiet observing eyes that only the poet has. Now the thin one waved the gun at pencil eyebrows behind the register. Her lips curled at him. That's when I realized I didn't see Henry. I never thought to look outside, where he was, in the car and warming it up. Instead, I just knew that Henry disappeared. But the thin one *was* scared. And I think the poet made it worse for him. Because while pencil eyebrows scowled and emptied the register and while the big waitress lay on the floor, silent as a bear and no one helping her, while all that happened, the poet just watched. And the robber even screamed again at him, threatened him with the gun.

But he realized that the gun was as effective as a spoon right then.

And I suppose he might have just taken the money and left for his death at the door, with nothing in between, if it had not been for two incidents. One which nearly cost me my life. The first incident was someone let a fart go. No one knows, still, which one of the punkers fired it. The poet contends it was the girl because he actually heard her barely say Excuse me. But Lizzie *knows* it was the boy with the one-inch hair because the fart was so loud. It *was* loud too. But that can happen under stress, when the body doesn't have control Well no one laughed about it but the kid. He chuckled, like someone let one out in the classroom, or had farted in a church. But right afterward, he was scared again and he didn't grin again until he turned around and stuffed some of the money in his pocket. Then he grinned like it was very funny, like it was very funny that he had us all by the balls, which he did. That's when the second incident occurred. I heaved my mug straight into the floor and smashed it as hard as I could, mad as hell again. Mad at his grin. Even the poet turned around at that. I stood up. I had a forcefield around me. For about two seconds I was invincible. Surprised he didn't fire at me, but I was up and screaming at him. I told him that he was a son of a bitch, a *young* juvenile son of a bitch for shooting a gun around like that. I told him What the fuck are we supposed to do? Watch you rob the shit out of this place? And I kept saying You mother fuckers You mother fuckers You come in here and do whatever the fuck you want to Well one day somebody will *slit your throat* for doing whatever the fuck you want to. I told him he was a criminal and a degenerate and a goddamn pussy watcher and a fucking atheist. Well he became even more scared than I was, standing there. He started looking around like there would be some sort of uprising. Henry sounded the horn outside. And he started backing out of the place. Like each one of us had guns. All I could see was his back as he backed up to the door. Everyone watched him, and after that speech it looked like everyone was ready to pounce on him, to lunge after him, like he was in an Asian jungle. He was paranoid. I would have been too because it *did* seem like everything was leaning on him. The car horn sounded outside again. Twice this time. He had some money that he held against his chest and, when he figured he was far enough to run for the car he turned around and literally ran into the door, smashing his face against it because it wouldn't swing easily. He had judged the distance wrong. Well, while he pushed the door open with his shoulder and his face, the poet stood up in one motion sliding the pistol from his sack like a holster and, raising then lowering it in an arc, he shot. With a roar louder than any gun I've ever heard, inside or out.

The story is that there were two dead and none wounded. Oh I know everyone will remember that day, Easter Tuesday, if they were there. If you can call *that* a wound. I didn't see the poet for three weeks after that. Pencil eyebrows said they took him to jail, but in the *Post,* it said that no charges were pressed. I don't suppose

it was self-defense, but I don't suppose it was malicious either. The strangest thing was that when I saw him after that three weeks, he came down and sat with me, and we talked until about mid-afternoon. That's breakfast and dinner. He said that he wouldn't have shot the kid if I hadn't stood up and incited him, so to speak. He even said that he quit his job after the robbery. About a week after. Told me about his last night on the job, but that's another story. Anyway, he said he was ready to starve after I made that speech. I suppose I can understand that. When you're unemployed you only give a damn about the essentials, and after a while, you stay sick all the time because you don't eat right. I don't know though. Sometimes I wish I would never open my mouth again.

Marsha Carter

Nothing But the Blood

"Nothing but the blood of Jesus," the old song enclosed her memory like a revival tent arching over the bobbin heads of hand-clapping worshipers.

"We believe," a tall, black-suited tent proselyte licked his syllables and spit them out like bad candy.

"We believe," the group chimed, desperate bells in the steamy air.

"God is he-yeh," he drawled, rolling his eyes.

"God *is* here," a woman screamed before the crowd could repeat it.

"God is *here*," the minister slapped his large hands against either side of the fainting woman's head and held her in an embrace of passion that tickled the groins of those watching.

She remembered being uncomfortably moved, sliding back between her aunt whose hips were jiggling in rhythm, and her uncle who moaned and keened blank-eyed. Between them, she was an unnoticed child. She too believed that night. She too was released from the moist heat of the tent, saved, into the clear summer night.

Her memory moved on to a morning of berry picking, to a day as simple as a green hill carving a soft breast out of a blue sky. She remembered feeling buoyant, scrambling through the stickers to grab the blackberry. Untangling her hair from the bushes, she stood up and dropped the berry into her burlap bag.

"God protects all people," her cousin Rauth had said, patting his own full sack. Its bottom was blue-stained and dripping.

"We don't never have to worry 'bout nuthin'," she replied. They stood on the side of a hill dotted with bramble bushes hiding blackberries, skinny legged and smug.

Her memory time-lapsed like a French photographer playing Renoir. Sensitive Impressionism fogged the edges of chronological events and drew her behind them, like the heroine trying not to stain the hem of her dress as she follows the camera dollie.

To believe is to be protected. To be protected is to live in grace. To live in grace is to be protected. Therefore, just believe. Rauth lasted thirty-seven days in Vietnam. His body, the face redone, was preceded by a telegram and two marines who seemed resigned to the ritual. She dreamed two dreams after the telegram came.

In the first dream she was standing on a densely green hill. The air was wet with the scent of bodies. Below her a river ran red. The red river flowed as crisp as the bright stream of blood that trickles from a superficial cut. In its waves, young men floundered. Rauth tumbled by and reached out an arm to her.

"Save me, save me," he called, "I believed."

She woke up, shaking the room into control. Falling asleep again, she dreamed Rauth stood before her. He had no face. Instead, clumps of flesh adhered loosely to his facial bones like a child's first clay sculpture, pieces stuck randomly to the wire underneath. She recognized him by his hands, which were perfectly intact.

"Would you want to live?" she asked him.

"Not with my face like this," he said.

"Nothing but the blood of Jesus," she giggled, and woke up horrified.

Her vital connection between the good life and the belief that belief would hand it to her was only slightly shaken after Rauth's mutilated body did not rise from the casket. Death after all, had violated his spirit. Her's was still intact.

*

That Renoir photographer, knowing art is irony, cameras through a bizarre garden where someone has perversely planted skinny, tight-budded roses whose thorns lift like leaves inviting a touch. She still follows behind, heroically innocent, leaping the darts, believing she cannot get stuck. Unhooking her dress hem from the thorns, she believes God has granted special protection to her ankles.

*

Her mourning for Diane was as dark and as flat as the negative she kept in an envelope in her purse. In it, she and Diane were fuzzy-featured, dark figures posing on their stomachs on a white rug, chins cupped in palms, grinning blacked-out all-American smiles.

"Pretty girls," a stranger had said, glancing at the photograph made from the negative.

Diane's funeral was in September.

"It's a Catholic church," Bede whispered. "Why are all your friends Catholic?"

"I'm into rituals," she hissed. "They comfort the living and placate the dead. There are," she paused, "no Catholic ghosts, if you've noticed."

"You're sick," Bede muttered.

"No," she sighed, "I'm not."

Crossing herself hesitantly, kneeling slightly and bouncing up, she entered the

church behind Diane's six sisters. They were a double trinity, this group of siblings. Two rows of three, all redheads, dressed in shades of black, dangling alternating gold and silver crosses between small and larger breasts. They wore impeccable white gloves. She imagined those suede-embraced fingers placating the dead, gently fingering rosaries, clutching each other in a row in the front pew facing the casket, lifting an arch of white protection against the rebuilt face of their sister lying in white ruffled sleep.

Diane looked as if she were seriously considering the shape of her hands folded across her chest. Her facial expression was a mortician's masterpiece after the car accident.

They filed past the open casket, they who knew her, stunned or weeping. Death was the invisible photographer clicking their brief faces for future reference, clicking as quickly as their heels rattled across the tiled floor.

Suddenly, a woman for who Diane had once worked flipped her upper body across the casket, almost laying perpendicularly across the corpse. She began gasping rhythmically, breathing formaldehyde in careless gulps.

"What's she doing?" whispered Diane's oldest sister, to the next one.

"She's praying?" trembled the youngest one, digging the gloved nails of one hand into the gloved palm of the other.

A priest ran over to the woman, losing the formality of his collar.

"You *cannot* do this," he whispered. "You must not *do* this!"

"What is she doing?" repeated the oldest sister, staring like the Magdalene at the woman's arched backsides curving over the casket.

"She's praying?" begged the youngest one, looking around for relief or reason. Diane's oldest sister suddenly made a convulsive movement which jerked the necks of flabbergasted mourners. She pressed her fingers into her eyes, and called to all their minds without exception, the Biblical phrase, "If thine right eye offends thee, pluck it out!"

The middle sisters half rose, arms linked and rigid, staring like earthquake victims at the woman's wreaking back.

"She is praying!?" shrieked the youngest one, and pressed her fists into either side of her head, tufts of hair sprouting like thorns between her knuckles. The priest gently tugged at the woman. She did not budge, but continued breathing between the breasts of the corpse.

Small movements rippled through the seated mourners, breaking their smooth surface of civilized sorrow. Women exchanged startled glances. Men looked behind them, chins jerked to shoulder blades. Children swallowed air. In the very front, the priest was a stark rod beside the woman's heaving back. He swung around wildly, saw the crowd's face, and froze.

Lazarus must have smiled at faces like these as he stripped the death linen,

stinking of oil, from his forearms. Peter, after the third cockcrow wore a face like these. Caught between panic and awe, the human face unmasks, is abandoned by spirit, and is terrible.

The scene was still life for several seconds. The tide was growing stronger, a tension which would snap, which would, which would. . . .

"What is she doing!!?" Diane's oldest sister shrieked. The room collapsed. Women slumped, men shook their heads, children howled, expelling balls of air from the chests.

Diane's oldest sister fell back into the front pew. The two staring sisters blinked like waking somnambulists. Snapped by that screaming question, the tension which tried to become a tide, which twisted muscles between shoulder blades, which pulled eyeballs, which clenched hands, and which kept them all suspended between panic and awe dropped back, licking their squirming toes.

The priest pulled the sobbing woman up, off the open casket. He stood then, hugging her to his chest, sighing with her sobs.

*

She fell on thorns. In front of her the camera dollie turns slowly, smashing skimpy roses under its wheels. The photographer too turns toward her, moving like a ballet dancer. He spins in a series of semicircles, raising his hands, palms flat and opened to her.

"This is it!" he mutters urgently. "This is it!"

Her fingertips are dripping blood. She lifts up on one elbow, holding up her fingers, staring at them as detached from her wounds as any accident victim. The photographer swings a leg over her prone and pristine martyrdom and frames her between his hands. She spits, "My fingertips are bleeding, you son-of-a-bitch!" He looks down at her and smiles. "I was wondering when you were going to say something."

She shifts out of shock into rage. "This is a tragic flaw!" She beats the ground with a splattered fist.

"It's part of the scene," the photographer shrugs.

"How," she sits up, "can my wounded hands be part of your damn scene?" He moves to her right, as casual as a snake. The camera focuses only on her. She sees herself reflected, chin narrowed, her face receding below protruding eyes.

"Because they are the result of your own decisions," his voice is compassionate. She stares. He continues. "Your decision completed the scene. I was only waiting. . . ."

"You son-of-a-bitch!"

". . . for it."

“You son-of-a-bitch!” she screeches, then swallows her scream like a knife. He strokes the edge of a rose thorn with the toe of his boot, then says, as quiet as a diamond,

“Art becomes art only when the artist releases control of it. Art is art only after it finishes itself.”

“Then what is the artist?” she demands, terrified at the door of revelation.

“Someone who watches and loves.” He leans forward, almost human in his need to be understood. “Believe, believe in only this.”

“And all. . . .” She waves a crimson hand weakly across an invisible horizon of memory. He silently moves behind the dollie.

Slowly she turns to the camera. In its iris she is alone in a strange garden. Her choices, spread outward from the torn hem of her gown, are roses. Staining a verdant and dangerous field, they are nothing less than the blood.

Christopher Dow

Meeting with Arthur

Playing tag around the school yard was a real obsession for me in third grade. My sister, Amy, was four years older than I and scorned such childish games. Since she went to the big school next door to the one I went to, and I thought she was wise in the ways of the world, I was a bit hurt by her offhand attitude toward my favorite pastime. Though I often tried to get back at her by making fun of her stuffed animal collection or her friends, I never really seemed to get much satisfaction. But despite her disparagement, I couldn't help but talk about the game to her as we rode home on our bicycles each afternoon.

The way home lay over a hill and down a valley, two or so miles. By injunction of our parents, we always rode together. I guess they must have felt we were safer that way. Or at least that *I* was safer. The arrangement was fine except when one of us had to stay after school. Then the other had to wait, too. As I was primarily the one kept late for minor infractions, Amy was usually justifiably grumpy on such occasions. On the day the business with the train started, we were running late for just such a reason, though not terribly so. Just the same, Amy was as angry as if I'd had to stay later. The reason was, that if we didn't beat the 3:15 freight, we'd have to spend several minutes waiting for the train to pass. Naturally, this would put us home even later than ever, and Amy would miss most of her favorite afternoon TV program.

"Come on, you dodo," she said to me. "Hurry, or we'll get caught by the train."

We were pushing our bikes up the long hill from the school. That was the hardest part of the trip. Once we reached the top, we could coast down the other side, cross the railroad tracks at the bottom, then ride down the road that paralleled the tracks until we reached our home street. The way wasn't difficult, and the only thing that could go wrong would be a train blocking us. We reached the top of the hill, and as we mounted our bikes, we looked to see if the train was coming. Though the road that led to the bottom was winding for most of its length, and the bottom was hidden from a viewer at the top, there was a portion of track that could be seen through a break in the trees and houses covering the slope of the hill. This section of track was down to the left of where we stood, and about three-quarters of a mile away. The train would pass across this section of track before it reached the crossing at the bottom of the hill, and if we could see it through this perspective window, then we

could be certain we'd have to wait for it to pass when we got to the bottom.

No train was visible, and Amy shouted to me to come on. Then she started down the hill, pedaling at first, then braking as her momentum built up. I followed as fast as I could, but I was still a novice bike rider, afraid of the steepness of the hill and the many turns. Amy was soon out of sight, though I tried to keep up with her. About half way down the hill was another perspective window, showing another section of track, a bit closer to the road crossing. As I looked through this, I saw the train passing by. I slowed down, not from a realization that I could never beat the train to the crossing, but to avoid Amy's wrath for as long as possible. When I finally did reach the bottom, I found Amy sitting on the curb, waiting for me, watching the train clack by. I sat next to her, ignoring the nasty look she shot in my direction.

"Could you play tag with a train, Amy?" I asked, forgetting her anger after a few moments. She gave me a withering look that only an older sibling can give.

"Don't be silly, you dodo."

I didn't think the question was silly, but prudently decided to keep my mouth shut. Shortly after, the train rumbled by, and the clanging bell and flashing light ceased. We hopped on our bikes and rode for home.

By the time we reached there, I'd forgotten all about the train, and raced in to turn on my favorite cartoon show, which came on after Amy's favorite. Amy usually joined me, though she professed to be too old for such inferior fare, but this time she stayed outside. I really didn't miss her until the commercial break started trying to convince me to convince my mother to buy a certain brand of crystallized sugar masquerading as corn flakes. I thought Amy might be in the kitchen getting a snack or something and wandered in to look for her. She wasn't there, but I could see her outside, sitting on the back step. When I pushed open the screen, she didn't even turn around to look at me.

"Flu-Flu and Crazy Dog are on, Amy."

"So what?"

"Don't you want to watch?"

"Not today, Michael."

"Watcha doin'?"

"Thinking."

"Well, I'm going back in and watch Flu-Flu and Crazy Dog," I told her, and I let the screen door slam shut in emphasis as I retreated to the TV room. I was puzzled by her behavior, but soon got lost in the cartoons and thought no more on it.

The following day after school, I was running around with some of my classmates, playing tag of course, and waiting for Amy to find me so we could ride home. She was later than usual when she came out the door and waved to me. I ran over, pulling to a panting stop in front of her.

"Where were you?" I asked.

"Inside," she answered enigmatically. "Come on, let's go home."

"We're gonna get caught by the train," I said to her, trying to make the statement as caustic as possible. To my surprise, Amy merely shrugged and walked off to the bicycle rack. Despite her nonchalance, I sensed an underlying stiffness, and, on the way out of the school yard, I asked what was wrong. Was she in trouble with her teacher?

No, she told me. There was no trouble. What was it, then? Why had she stayed after school? She was talking to a friend, she told me, then said to shut up and stop asking questions. I did so, pedaling quietly behind her until we had to dismount to walk up to the top of the hill. As we rounded the top, Amy stopped and mounted her bike. I got a running start on mine and with a few furious pedals was past her, starting down the hill toward the railroad tracks. I reached the first curve before I realized Amy wasn't behind me. Skidding to a halt, I looked back to see her straddling her bike at the top of the hill, her gaze directed down the hill to her left.

"Come on, Amy!" I shouted and waved for her. She ignored me, or maybe she didn't hear me. I yelled again, and this time, whether she heard me or not, she stepped on the pedal, and her bike began to move down the hill. I watched her descend, but instead of slowing as she reached me, she kept pedaling right on past, down the hill. Yelling for her to wait, I followed as fast as I dared. I passed the second place where the train tracks could be seen, saw the train already moving down them, and called out the fact to Amy. But she was disappearing around the next bend, and I didn't see her again until I reached the bottom. She was straddling her bike, watching the train go past. Her face was flushed, a strange light in her eyes. Ignoring my questions, she watched the last of the train pass, then we remounted and rode home.

Thus began a pattern that took me the better part of the week to figure out. Each day, Amy would hang around after school, doing what, I wasn't sure. Then she'd come to drag me from my tag game, and we'd ride home. At the top of the hill, she'd wait until she could see the train pass through the perspective window, then she'd ride furiously to the bottom where the road crossed the tracks. Being such a tag fanatic, though, I soon realized she was racing the train, but the reasons were obscure to me.

"Are you playing tag with the train?" I asked her on about the fourth day we waited at the top of the hill for the train to show itself.

"Sort of," she replied distantly, her attention on the perspective window.

"Why don't you just play with the rest of us at school?"

"Because this is different," she said, for once taking her attention off the visible portion of track and looking right at me. I was a bit taken aback by the intensity of her gaze, but I could tell she wasn't angry or anything like that, just excited in a way I'd never seen before.

"How?" I wanted to know, but didn't get an answer.

"Darn!" she exclaimed and began pumping her bike down the hill. I saw that the train was visible below, and I chased behind, realizing I couldn't catch up with her. In moments, she was out of sight around the next bend. I finally pulled up next to her at the bottom, with the train already half past.

"I'm sorry, Amy," I said, feeling guilty for having distracted her. Again she turned that new look on me, and again I saw she wasn't angry.

"It's okay," she said, and we started home.

Mother noticed we weren't coming home as quickly as we used to, and questioned us about it. Amy told her she was staying late to help a friend with a special project, and that I occupied myself playing tag until she was through. She didn't mention the train, so I thought I would.

"That's right," I cut in. "And every day we're just late enough to get caught by the train." Amy shot me a look that Mom didn't see but that spoke volumes to me. It told me I'd better keep my mouth shut about the train. But Amy needn't have worried, for Mom didn't notice anything unusual. She was aware that the train passed daily through the valley, and that if we were a little late we'd have to wait for it. She'd cautioned us enough times to keep back when we did, for the crossing had no barrier, only a warning light and bell.

But if Mom didn't suspect Amy was racing the train, she did begin to suspect something else—something I didn't understand at the time, though I was well aware of the basic differences between boys and girls. Amy had been racing the train to the bottom of the hill for about a month when I chanced to overhear Mom asking her some questions one night before bedtime.

She asked about the friend Amy was staying after school to help. I held my breath, for I was fairly sure Amy wasn't actually staying after school to help anyone, though I really didn't know what she did until we left. However, Amy came right out with the name Arthur. She and Arthur, she said, were working together on a science fair project. Mom seemed to think all her questions were answered then and there, and though she did ask what the project was, I could tell she wasn't as curious about it as about Arthur.

I was sure Amy had lied about meeting someone named Arthur, so I decided to see for myself what she did after school each day. The next afternoon, I sacrificed my tag time and went in search of her. I wasn't very familiar with the big school where the older kids attended class, and I got lost until a teacher saw me and, perhaps suspicious that a younger kid would be wandering around where he didn't belong, asked me what I was doing. I told her I was looking for my sister, and she showed me how to get to the wing where the seventh-grade classes were. I was soon in the right hall, and presently found Amy. I was surprised when I did. There was a boy with her.

They were at the back of the classroom, where a lot of projects were set up on tables and counters. Several other students were in the room, all engaged in their projects. I sidled into the room and over to Amy. When she saw me, her face turned red. To this day, I'm not sure if it was her boyfriend she was embarrassed by or me. Maybe it was a combination of the two, but whatever it was, she hurried me out of the room and in a sharp but hushed voice told me to go back to my friends until she came and got me. I did, only slightly perturbed at her attitude. I'd gotten a good look at the boy she was with and was more concerned with him than with Amy's scolding. I don't suppose there were any distinguishing features to him, though. He was just an older kid, taller than I, slightly long legged, with a somewhat thin face and brown hair. Later, I found out his name really was Arthur.

I did go back to where my friends were playing tag but didn't feel like joining in. I was wondering about Amy, Arthur, and the train. Before I knew about Arthur, I'd thought Amy was just staying after school as an excuse to be late enough to race the train. But if Amy had reasons for staying after school other than the train, why was she racing it? This was an imponderable question for me, and I resolved to discover the answer. When Amy finally came by to collect me, I almost blurted out an interrogation right then but stopped myself. She wouldn't have answered, or worse, she'd have given misleading answers. I'd have to discover the truth on my own.

That afternoon, however, I didn't have a chance to ask or observe anything. I don't know if Amy was angry with me for seeking her out, or if something else was bothering her, but whatever the reason, instead of waiting for the train at the top of the hill and racing to the bottom, she just rode down the hill, letting me keep up with her. The train had nearly passed, and we waited in silence for it to clear the crossing. When we reached home, she went straight to her room and stayed there until dinner. And after we'd eaten, she returned to her room and occupied herself there until it was time to go to bed.

The next morning, on the way to school, she seemed to be a little melancholy, but that evening she beckoned me from my tag game with her normal spirits. We rode to the hill and pushed our bikes up it. There we paused, both of us looking though the perspective window at the train tracks running through the valley below. While we waited for the appearance of the train, I saw Amy pull a shiny, pendulous object from her pocket.

"What's that?" I asked, leaning forward for a closer look.

"A stopwatch," she replied then told me what it was for.

"Where'd you get it?" I asked in a hushed voice. "Did you steal it?"

"I didn't steal it, you dodo!" she retorted huffily. "I borrowed it from Arthur."

"Yeah," I shot back, not to be undone. "Well, I bet *he* stole it."

"He did not! He got it from his father, who's the gym coach at the high school."

"What's a gym coach?"

"He teaches recess, sort of," she told me, and I knew than I had her over a barrel.

"Hah! There's no such thing as a recess teacher!" I replied nastily. Amy just looked at me like I was an idiot, though, and I was cowed. I wanted to hold the stopwatch, but Amy refused, saying I'd probably break it or lose it or something.

"What you got it for?" I wanted to know.

"You'll see."

A moment later we heard the distant rumble that heralded the approach of the train. Amy watched the tracks intently, and, as the train approached, her thumb pressed down on the stem of the stopwatch. Then she was off, racing down the hill, with me dropping behind. As I neared the crossing at the bottom of the hill a few minutes later, I saw Amy there, examining the stopwatch. I rode over to her and made a rude noise.

"Wassamatter? Break it?"

She ignored me and finished her examination.

"What time does it say?" I asked, edging over to her.

She held up the watch dramatically for me to see but snatched it back before I could actually do so, stuffing it into her pocket.

"Come on, Amy," I whined.

"It says it's time to go home," she replied, hopping on her bike and pedaling away. Yelling something derogatory after her, I followed at a safe distance.

For the next two weeks, I watched as Amy timed the train's run from the spot on the tracks visible through the perspective window to the crossing at the bottom of the hill. She also calculated her own time from the top to the crossing. The train usually took eighty-three seconds to cover the distance, and Amy's best time was ninety-eight seconds. She consented to let me check my own time down the hill, but I couldn't do it in less than two minutes. Shortly after that, the stopwatch disappeared. I suppose she gave it back to Arthur. Then, for over three weeks, she left me at the top of the hill to follow at my slower pace while she raced to the bottom in pursuit of her unuttered goal.

During this time, Mom asked me what was going on with Amy. Did I know Arthur? I answered as best as I could without revealing Amy's activities. I knew that racing with the train was dangerous and that Mom wouldn't approve, so I skirted the subject. I told her I knew what Arthur looked like, though I hadn't actually met him. I mentioned he was the son of the recess teacher at the big school, and she gave me a curious look but didn't ask more.

Mom's questions made me a little nervous about Amy's activities. Perhaps they forced me to think more about what she was doing, about the possible dangers involved, or maybe I was just concerned about having to hide the truth from our

parents for Amy's sake. Whatever the reasons, I confronted her with my fears one day while we waited at the top of the hill for the train. To my chagrin, she all but ignored me, putting off my objections with either a shrug of glib answers that I couldn't refute. I was getting quite frustrated when the train appeared and Amy took off, racing down the hill and out of sight around the first bend.

Angry and hurt, I resolved to play no further part in Amy's foolishness. She could race the train all day and night if she wanted, but I planned to ignore her. Thereafter, for several weeks, when we got to the top of the hill, Amy would wait for the first view of the train then race to the bottom, but I merely continued to ride on to the crossing, not waiting for Amy to begin. About half the time she sped by me on the slope, and the other half I watched her skid to a stop at the crossing just a few moments after the train rumbled across the road. And I couldn't help but notice she kept arriving at the crossing a bit sooner each day. By the end of that period, Amy was coming around the last bend in the road just as the train crossed.

Then one day, I watched Amy slide to a stop in front of the crossing only a second after the locomotive roared through. Despite myself, my interest renewed. Excitedly, I ran over to where she sat on her bike, watching the train pass. Her face was impassive as I plucked at her sleeve and went on about how close she'd come that time. She all but ignored me as the train rumbled on. Then she turned her eyes on me but looked right through me, not seeming to hear what I said. I was hurt by her disregard, but as we left the crossing and rode home, I thought of the weeks I'd meanly neglected her efforts. By the time we got home I apologized to Amy, and though she nodded and smiled, I could tell her attention was elsewhere.

The following day she failed to race the train. We arrived at the top of the hill about the usual time, but instead of waiting there for the train to appear, Amy just leisurely coasted down the hill to the crossing. Puzzled, I followed, calling out questions but getting no replies. When we reached the bottom the train was already well through the crossing. As we braked in front of the tracks, I asked her again why she wasn't racing. This time she looked at me and shrugged, saying she wasn't interested. I wanted to know how that could be after all the time and effort she'd expended, but she merely said she didn't know. She just wasn't interested.

The next few weeks were bleak ones for me. I'd had my own interest and excitement renewed by Amy's near victory, and the fact that she'd stopped racing was a blow to me, especially since I saw myself responsible. I believed that if I hadn't ignored her efforts for the weeks I did, she'd still be racing the train. At last, after all the self-recriminations, it struck me that maybe Amy was scared.

Oh, that was a popular epithet around grade school, but it was another thing to apply it to one's older sibling. I shied away from the realization for several days, even though I'd begun to understand there might be something to fear. I remembered the dead dog Amy and I had found in the weed-filled ditch between the

road and the train tracks the year before. We'd stopped to stare at the mangled and already bloating body for several minutes, wondering what had happened. It had been hit by a car or a train, but we couldn't decide which. The body remained in the ditch until it completely decomposed, an instructive but fascinatingly unsightly and odorous lesson in biology. Thoughts of the dog preyed on my mind for a week until they burst out one afternoon.

"Amy," I panted, pushing my bike faster to catch up with her. "Amy, are you afraid of the train. The dog. . . ."

She shot a curious look at me that shut me up but said nothing until we reached the top of the hill. There, for the first time in weeks, she stopped and stared toward the perspective window.

"I don't think so, Michael," she said, not looking at me but at the visible lines of the tracks down the hill. "I don't think I'm afraid. Do you?" She turned and asked the last of me, but I found it difficult to answer. I was confused by my own thoughts, not willing to trust my mouth to say the right thing. Apparently she sensed my confusion, for she turned away and again stared at the tracks.

"Come on," she said, urgency tingeing her voice. "Let's watch the train cross the road." She started down, but not so fast I couldn't keep up.

We got to the bottom in time to watch the train rush through, and as it went by, I couldn't help but feel awed by its size and power. Amy had an incomprehensible look on her face, in her eyes, as the cars thundered down the track.

Two days later, she started racing again. I was elated despite my fears, except for one thing. She wouldn't allow me to be at the bottom when she got there. I had to promise to remain at the top of the hill until the train first appeared and only start down the hill after she did. At first, I believed she was trying to punish me for my inconsideration and indifference the month before. Then it came to me that perhaps she wanted to be alone in her effort, that she didn't consider what she was doing to be a spectator sport. Only later, after it was all over, did I realize she was protecting me in case she failed.

I was irked by the restriction, but she was adamant, so there was little I could do but comply. Even so, I knew, despite the fact that I couldn't actually see, that over the next month she gradually came closer to the tracks each time she arrived at the crossing. She took on a single-minded intensity on leaving the school each day that didn't ease until she'd raced to the bottom of the hill.

Then, one night after Mom and Dad had put us to bed, when I'd nearly fallen asleep, I heard someone softly enter my room and come over to my bed. I rolled over to see Amy standing there in the half-light from the door. She was dressed in pajamas, with her hair slightly disheveled.

"Michael," she said quietly. "I have something for you."

"What is it?" I was puzzled, for Amy wasn't in the habit of giving me things

except for birthday and Christmas presents.

She reached out her hand and I took the object from her. I instantly knew what it was, and as I held it up to the light, I was even more puzzled and not a little frightened. I was an object I coveted and had tried to trade for on many occasions. She'd never relented, though, and that made her presentation all the more curious.

"What's it for?" I asked, not daring to say more.

"It's for you," she said with a slight catch in her breath. "You always liked it, and I want you to have it."

"Thanks, Amy," I said lamely, feeling lost.

"I love you, Mikey," she said, bending over to hug me. Then she turned quickly and went out of the room. I lay there for some time, holding the prism up to the light from the half-opened door, watching bands of color sparkle in the glass. Still grasping the prism in my fist, I fell asleep.

The next day, Amy came to get me after school. I wasn't playing tag, but was sitting on a bench, waiting for her, fingering the prism and holding it up to the sun. When Amy came up, I stuffed the prism into my pocket and followed her to the bike racks. We left the school yard and rode to the hill. We walked to the top, neither of us speaking. I sensed that today was different from yesterday. The race was going to be for real. The prism was angular in my pocket, reminding me with every step I took of every time I'd hurt my sister. I tried to speak to her, but she wasn't listening. At the top of the hill, I took out the prism, held it up to the sun, and sprayed a rainbow onto Amy's back, showering her with color. Then her back was gone, and she was pedaling furiously down the hill.

"Amy!" I cried out. "Amy!" I stuffed the prism into my pocket and took off after her. She rounded the first bend in the road and was lost to sight.

A great dread rose in me as I gave chase. Visions of the dead dog, torn and smelly in the ditch, rushed past with the scenery as I raced to the bottom of the hill, crying out Amy's name. Tears streaked my cheeks, and I was shaking so hard I could barely steer around the curves. At last, after what seemed like forever, I reached to bottom of the hill and skidded to a halt in front of the tracks. The train was rumbling through the crossing, but of Amy there was no sign. I looked around frantically, thinking she might be off to the side, but still I couldn't see her. I had two thoughts, then, conflicting but equally terrible. One was of Amy ascending from the Earth, dressed in white wings; the other was of her crouching behind a bush or a tree somewhere on the slope above me, snickering at the stupidity of her little brother. Anger and fear ran through me like hot lightning. Then, as I turned to look at the train, I saw her.

She was lying on the ground on the other side of the tracks, unmoving. Her bike lay several feet away, one wheel spinning around and around. I moved as close to the train as I dared and peered beneath the rushing cars, fear wiping away all anger.

She was lying on her back, but twisted slightly to one side. One of her arms was thrown across her face, and I could see blood on one of her knees.

"Amy!" I screamed beneath the train, but the clanging bell and rumbling rattle wiped out my tiny voice.

The train never seemed to take so long to pass, though it must actually have done so in a couple of minutes or less. By the time it had, I was frantic with panic. As the caboose went by, I raced across the rails to her. Yes, there was definitely blood on her. I plunged to the ground beside her, took her arm in my shaking hands, and lifted it from her face. To my intense relief, her eyes were open, and as I sat back on my haunches and began to bawl out in great huffs, she turned them on me and a small smile crossed her lips. Then she sat up and hugged me to her.

"It's all right, Mikey," she said again and again. "It's all right. It's over with. It's over."

At last she pushed me back and examined the scrape on her knee. Seeing it wasn't much, she turned back to me. I'd stopped bawling, though I was still snuffling and leaking from the eyes.

"Get your bike," she said. As I did, she picked up her own and waited for me to come back across the tracks.

Marie Dybala

A Rose for Anna

What had hurt the most was the loss of Anna. Joseph slumped into his hard, wooden chair. The shirt that once fit him well sagged at the shoulders and his right sleeve dropped limply at his side. Thin strands of white hair lay on his head. The house he built had changed little over the years other than the addition, finally, of the telephone, which rarely rang. The same dusty pictures covered the walls in frames he had carved with careful hands years before. The young faces of his children smiled eagerly from the old photographs. He stared blankly at the weeds that had overtaken his vegetable garden. He sighed and shook his head. Occasional houses had sprung up on the horizon like mushrooms after a spring rain. He longed to look back into the setting sun with no obstacles to obscure his view. He hoped to hear Anna bustle in the kitchen and to touch the long black braid she wound in a ball on the back of her head every morning. But she only returned to him in his dreams.

His head tilted toward the right so he could watch his son's cattle graze in the pasture across the gravel road. He had to strain to find the small dark dots in the green haze. Why could he see the brown dot cows more clearly than the things he held in his hand, he wondered. He could no longer read the Czech newspaper, *Vestnik,* that lay before him on the coffee table. When relatives sent letters he had trouble opening them. At night before he slept, he could no longer even read the Bible. He remembered the epic letters he wrote to his family in Europe. And that journal he had kept with each year's profits and losses etched in its yellowed pages. Where was it now? His life eclipsed while he sat in the darkness and waited. Aquamarine eyes hid behind heavy lids.

"Let's see what brother George has to say," Mary would announce with a pile of mail scattered on her aproned lap. But he was asleep before she finished the letter.

His life was like a dream now. He no longer felt contained in his body. At times, he stretched like a spider web in a dark corner. Then he drifted like a cloud of vapor across time and space. He would find himself in Kromeriz, Czechoslovakia, where he was born. He walked down the dirt path and saw his father in the back yard heave an ax over his shoulder to split logs. He smelled the honeysuckle that grew on the vine beside him and saw the delicate flowers that his mother cared for like her own children. The bluest of blue humming birds, a promiscuous lover, flitted from one flower to the next. The rise and fall of his mother's voice echoed in song through the open window where two loaves of bread rose and waited to be baked.

More often, he returned to his new life in America. He remembered how his knuckles pounded his uncle's door the night they met for the first time. He had taken a train from Galveston and arrived in Cameron earlier than expected. His English was awkward, and he walked through the dark streets with his heavy trunk pressing into his back until he found a man who spoke Czech. He followed his directions and walked the two miles to his uncle's farm. He bowed his head and trudged down the unfamiliar road. He tried to imagine what it would look like in the sunlight. His mind filled with apprehension. The unusually flat land made him feel like an intruder in a stranger's house. The cold wind slapped his face and burned his eyes.

Sounds brought him back to the blue wall. Mary bustled about the room. She swept the floor and gathered the newspapers. "We will have a visitor, your granddaughter, Marenka," she urged in Czech. He had not spoken to anyone but Mary in weeks. His son John had visited several times, but he always slept and missed him. So he forgot what Mary fussed about and faded away into his dream world.

He saw himself awaken in the house across the street that now had its windows boarded and its floor rotted. The image of his first farm in Texas, a large house with smoke unfurling out the chimney made him smile. He remembered the yard filled with people who drank beer and ate barbecue the day he was married. The large empty rooms felt extravagant when he lived there alone. In the mornings, his only companions were a chorus of birds on his rooftop. After he kindled the fire in the stove, he grabbed his jacket and hurried out to the barn. The sun, a cold and distant friend just above the horizon, illuminated the earth with a pale, red glow. He opened the long, wooden gate and let the cattle out to graze.

On Sundays, he could take the time to walk to the forest of baby pine trees he had planted and measure how tall they had grown. On this particular Sunday, after breakfast, he gazed into the mirror and combed the thick crop of brown hair with more than the usual attention. He lathered his face and carefully scraped the short stubble from his cheeks and chin. He looked pleased into his deep, blue eyes, but was distracted by the tangle of his eyebrows. He damped his fingers in the steaming water and smoothed the protruding hairs. He even trimmed his mustache. He dressed for church in his finest blue suit, tipped his hat to the right, straightened his tie, and walked onto the front porch where he waited. It was a cold winter morning, and a blanket of frost still glistened in the fields, but the fierce sunlight quickly dissolved its lacework. Soon, he could see her long, black hair that flowed from under her scarfed head and danced around her bundled body. At the perfect moment, he walked onto the road with his prayer book in his left hand. He slowed his pace until he heard her footsteps behind him. With a gentle turn, he met her blue eyes and smiled into them for the first time.

He extended his right hand. "Good morning, my name is Joseph, may I walk

you into town?" She looked down, and he continued. "I noticed you in church last Sunday. We must be neighbors." She remained silent. He nervously clasped his damp palms and tried to carry on a conversation, but she would not answer him. He was sure she despised him and tried to think of a graceful way to disguise his chagrin. Then, he mentioned he lived alone and his family was in Czechoslovakia. Her eyes lit up and she spoke in soft, Czech words.

"I, too, am from Czechoslovakia. My name is Anna." She glanced into his eyes to see that he understood, then continued. "My family just moved here a few weeks ago and my English is not good. I was too embarrassed to try to speak to you. I'm so glad you speak Czech." She laughed. Joseph's heart pounded when she held his arm and allowed him to escort her to and from church. The following Sunday, he met her again and offered her a red rose, moist with dew drops, from his garden.

The next week was unbearable for him. The days dragged and a storm raged that prevented him from working in the fields. He sat on the porch and grimaced each day. His eyes searched the road to the east as if he expected Anna's tall slender body to appear. In frustration, he went to his garage where he busied himself for hours. In the work area, he found his tools and an old sheet of metal that he began to carve and shape. He sat beside his tractor and looked around to make certain everything was in its proper place. The dirt floor was smooth and dustless despite the rain outside. Onion and garlic dangled on ropes above his head. He painted the petals he had wrought bright red and yellow. He planned when and how he would present them to Anna this next Sunday instead of the customary red rose. After church, he decided to take her on a tour of the farm. When he showed her his tractor and work room, he would give her the flowers and invite her to a dance the following Saturday. His blood surged with a new sensation while he gazed out the window at the falling rain. He sat content with his pipe and blew smoke rings into the clearing sky.

A hand gripped his shoulder and rocked him forward to the present. His eyes watered, and in the haze, he discerned two figures. One leaned over his shoulder and felt familiar as she shifted his pillows and helped to lift him in his chair. "I'm fine, don't worry with me, Mary," he muttered. Again he noticed the other figure who he thought resembled Anna. He saw her lips move and heard a mumble of words. He motioned for her to come closer and explained that he could not see well and that, without his right arm, he was not the strong man he used to be. In the light, he vaguely recognized his granddaughter, Marianne, whom Mary fondly called Marenka. She still looked like Anna, except that she dressed in such peculiar men's clothes; blue jeans and a long sleeved shirt.

"Hello, Grandfather, how do you feel today?"

He tried to smile at her, but his eyelids felt thick. She asked him many questions in English, and his eyes followed her movements around the room with great

concentration. When he answered her, she always responded with an anxious look, "Grandfather, I don't speak Czech, please tell me in English." One of the questions hit a nerve that vibrated through his body. It echoed in the corridors of his memory. "What was it like to come to America, Grandfather?"

He struggled to form sentences, but could only manage to say, "Kromeriz."

"What?"

"The *Koeln*," he uttered, then, "It was a cold wind." His eyes closed, and she sat beside him with his rough, wrinkled hand in hers.

He remembered when his hair was brown and wavy and his skin smooth and fair under a wide brimmed felt hat. He waved to his family at the train station and set out, alone, for Bremen, Germany, where he would board the ship, the *Koeln*. He rode all night on the train but had difficulty sleeping. He stared out the window at the blurred images that rushed past in shadows. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He pictured his mother in her bright, navy gingham dress—the one she wore on special occasions.

In the morning, he awoke early and watched the sun slowly rise over tall stalks of sugar cane. Soon they reached the port, and he clutched his suitcase and trudged across the town to the dock. He noticed many other young men already waiting there when he arrived. He even recognized one, John, whom he had met on the train the night before. Women in bonnets walked close behind their husbands, with children at their sides. Husbands checked in the baggage ceremoniously. Women said last farewells to the few relatives who stood with their hands over their foreheads shielding the sunlight. He smiled into the warm eyes of his fellow immigrants, and the ship churned. He felt lucky as he buttoned his jacket and a cool breeze whipped over the water. The town disappeared, and the ship drifted further out until all he could see was the church steeple. His attention shifted to the swells of the current that bobbed the ship up and down like a toy. His hands began to sweat, and he felt a chill. An older man to his right, whom he guessed to be thirty-five or forty, removed his hat and spoke as if he was addressing everyone in sight. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm going to Texas to drill for oil, and I've never felt better in my life. I'll buy a schooner of beer for everyone who makes it to Galveston with me. I wish I was your age again, young man."

"Thank you, sir. The name's Joseph Vira, and I'm pleased to meet you."

"Anton Bauer, and it's a pleasure to meet you. Where is your wife and family?"

"I'm only seventeen, and I'm traveling alone, but I will be going to Galveston, and although I don't usually drink, I'll take you up on that offer."

"Well, of course you will; we're going to a free country." Bauer smiled and patted Joseph on the back.

"I'll have to be going soon," he heard Marianne say. She pressed a glass of wa-

ter to his lips, but he insisted on holding it. She had stopped her questioning and sat with her hand on his arm. Her touch awakened his heart and he felt a strong yearning to communicate. He wished she spoke Czech like Mary or that his English was better. He remembered the first time he met Anna and chuckled aloud.

Finally he spoke. “I want to visit Anna, but I’m too old and tired. Would you go for me?”

She squeezed his hand in hers.

“There is a rose bush by the porch. Bring her a red rose. It was her favorite flower.” He added. His eyes closed. Marianne kissed him good-bye. She carefully clipped one long stemmed blossom and embraced Aunt Mary.

When he awoke, an auburn cloud hung in the western sky and twilight settled in the room like an evening visitor. Alone, he sat in the darkness and watched the moon rise in the east.

Frances Fletcher

The Perfect Gift

Marylou Medford felt as if the top of her head was coming off.

She had moved graciously through the long day of phone calls and congratulations. She had been warmly thankful for the lovely presents—and they *were* lovely—from Thomas and his wife, Alice, who was every bit as good as another daughter to her, and from her own Irene and Irene's Michael.

Michael had insisted on hooking up the electric carving knife that was one of their gifts and placing her hands just so on its handle.

"See, Mom," he explained carefully. "Nothing happens 'til you pull this trigger here. That's the only thing to remember. Not scared of it, are you?"

"Of course not," she had lied. All new electric gadgets were capable of scaring Marylou. She remembered with more than a trace of regret the days of kerosene lamps and wood stoves.

When the grandchildren had sung "Happy Birthday" as Irene had set the glowing cake before her, Marylou's eyes had shone with warm, affectionate tears. It had all been wonderful. She was grateful. And now she was tired to death. At seventy-nine, perhaps she had a right to be.

At last, they were all going home, crowding out of the hallways of her little house. Nobody had far to drive. Both families lived in the same large suburb as Marylou did.

Birdie next door, lingering on her lawn to wave at the departees, stepped across the driveway now and said it once more. "Don't know how lucky you are, Marylou, having the kids so close to you—and having kids that take such good care of you."

Marylou smiled into Birdie's warm, round face. "Ninety percent of the time I think so, too," she said. "It's just that, once in awhile, I begin to feel a little crowded."

Birdie was really a little shocked at that. "Oh, how can you *say* that! Why, Thomas has that big, successful dental practice to look after, but he never fails to call you every day, just to check!"

"I know . . . I know . . . and Irene, even with her mornings working at the library, nearly always comes by during the afternoon to see if I need any shopping or have any errands. Such really *good* children."

"So, how come you're complaining?"

"I'm not, really. Only, you know, Birdie, I think the children had more . . . more respect for me before Lyle died. All the time we were still a couple, they looked on me as a competent member of society. Why, they used to ask my advice."

"I know what you mean." Sometimes Birdie surprised her with a sudden, endearing plunge into insight. "But look at it from their point of view. They were depending on your husband to do the looking after until he went, five years ago. Since then, you've given up driving. . . ."

"Because they wanted me to," Marylou interposed.

"And they were right! This city's gotten too big for you; everybody goes faster than you want to drive. And there's four of them to run errands for you. Besides, you can walk to the bus lines if you want to go downtown."

"Which I don't! But you're right, Birdie, I'm a lucky woman. And I'm taking my lucky self into the house for a nice hot bath and bed, right now!"

It was a blessing to have Birdie, a retired practical nurse, next door, Marylou thought as she soaked in the tub. There were plenty of other friends, too. Retired teachers like herself, to call on the phone or meet for coffee at one or another's home. Marylou enjoyed them as she did her church friends, a little at a time. Seen every day, she had to admit, most of them would be dull, dull, dull.

"Our conversations are so limited," she had once complained to Alice. "Grandchildren, recipes, these scandalous modern times, the iniquities of the government. Or worst of all, our different aches and pains."

Surely there should still be something more.

The present! She had forgotten the present! Just like an old woman, Marylou scolded herself, hastily draining the tub, drying off, hurrying down the hallway with her quilted robe flapping. It had come in the afternoon, special delivery, luckily before the children—and their children—had arrived for the party.

Seeing that it was from her favorite nephew, whom the family dubiously referred to as the Wild One, Marylou had not held out against temptation, but had opened the mysterious, heavy box right away. Fortunately!

Adam was the only one in the family who shared her obstinate love of privacy. Perhaps for that reason, in him alone she had confided her crazy dream. He had been quite a young man then, visiting her between college semesters just because he wanted to.

She had made his favorite sandwich, grilled cheese with homegrown tomato slices and bacon on top. They had feasted and had a momentous conversation.

"I don't know exactly what I want," he had said. "But it has to be motors—machines—engineering, you know. Maybe airplanes. Not flying them, but designing them. That's what I want to spend the rest of my life doing. It's all I dream about."

"I have a dream, too." Now, what had made her say that, when she had never even told Lyle about the crazy thing?

Adam looked interested and waited.

"I'd like, just once, before I die, to . . . to . . . fly."

He was surprised. "But you've flown, Aunt. Don't you remember when you came up to spend Thanksgiving with Pop and Mom? And two or three other times, haven't you?"

"Oh, yes, dear, but I don't mean in a plane. I mean, you know, by myself." How *peculiar* it sounded! Anybody but Adam would have been phoning for the men in the white coats, she supposed. "Don't you know, they have a kind of apparatus you can strap on. I saw it demonstrated on the television two or three years ago, on the news. A man had it on his back and he just floated over a bunch of parked cars."

"Oh, I know what you mean. But, Aunt!" His chuckle grew into a laugh, and in a minute Marylou was laughing with him.

"It is funny, I suppose, for a proper English teacher like me, just when I'm getting on toward my old tabby days . . . but still. . . . Oh, I could never pay for such a thing, of course. And the noise it made! Horrible! But when I saw it, and the man really, really flying, I thought, 'Maybe they'll make a model even I could use, before I get too old to try it!' Come on, now, don't you think it would be wonderful?"

Adam had been serious then, and had agreed with her. Of course it would be beautiful, just flying around by oneself. Someday, he thought, it would happen.

That conversation had been a long time ago. She hadn't consciously thought of it again until today, when she had opened the present.

It was a flying machine.

Not that she would have known by looking at the compact, elegant bronze mechanism. The letter inside the box had explained.

"I've been working on this surprise for a long time, Aunt. Knowing you, I knew you hadn't given up that old dream. We've learned a lot since you and I talked about flying so long ago. This is a pilot model, strictly experimental, but I've personally tested it thoroughly. You wouldn't be getting it now if I wasn't sure it was safe!

"The three cylinders in the small boxes are the energy cells. That's our one remaining hang-up—finding a way to produce them in quantity. You put one of them into the compartment marked 'A' on the drawing, and snap the bottom closed. Controls are on the wide strap that goes around your waist. Study it carefully before you try anything! The instruction booklet tells you everything.

"Auntie, maybe this is a crazy present to send you. I'm not sure myself, but I'm sure Irene and Tom will think so! I feel this way about it: you've done what other people wanted you to all your life. Why shouldn't you please yourself just for once? I want to see my favorite relative have herself a ball!"

Dear Adam, she thought, stowing away the box—surprisingly light, it seemed, for such an apparatus—in her closet. Maybe I'll never use it, but I love you for thinking I might.

Next morning she was up early and waiting for the downtown bus as soon as the department stores opened. She went to a large, medium-priced store where nobody would know her.

"A jump suit?" the young clerk asked, swinging her long, untidy hair. "What size, ma'am?"

"I'll have to try something on," said Marylou. "Perhaps a ten, to start with."

"This is for *yourself,* ma'am?" Amazement made her pop her gum frantically. Little old ladies buying jump suits! Something new to tell on her coffee break.

Marylou summoned all her years of teaching high school English. She stood up very straight and gave the sleazy-looking girl one long, summarizing look from head to heel and back again.

"Naturally," she said icily.

She hadn't lost her touch. The girl pulled up out of her slouch. She seemed to have swallowed her gum. "*Yes,* ma'am!" She began digging into the clothes on the rack.

Trying it on again at home, Marylou was pleased with the fit and comfort of the suit. Of course, Adam hadn't thought of the absurd figure one would make, flying about in a summer dress!

It was four-thirty, a lovely summer afternoon. She had on the suit; she had studied the manual 'til she had it by heart; what was there to wait for? Trembling a little, she hoisted the apparatus onto her back, where it rested on its own leather shield. Leather straps came over her shoulders to meet a wide front bib. Like the belt, the bib was bronze clamped onto a leather backing. The bronze portions held a variety of clearly labeled buttons as well as the energy cell compartment.

She fastened all buckles, flexed her arms. It was secure and comfortable, and not very heavy at all. The only bulky part was the back, where twin exhaust pipes ran down the shoulder blades to curve slightly outward at her waist.

Cautiously, she stepped out into the backyard, tiptoeing in the tennis shoes she had bought to go with the jump suit. Wouldn't do to have Birdie next door spot her and run out for a chat over the fence.

Nobody. Marylou stood in the exact center of the yard. Her thumb on the "On" switch, she hesitated. Did she really want to do this? Who knew what might happen up there? Why should she take the risk? What was she proving?

"Nothing at all—except that I'm still alive!" she said fiercely to herself, and pushed the button.

There was a great jolt, as if a giant hand had tossed her upward. She gasped in a breath. She was zooming straight up into the sky. Air rushed past her face as it had when she, as little girl, used to lean out of the window of the car. There was hardly any noise. She looked down, incredibly far, to see her own back yard shrinking away.

"Don't go too high," she reminded herself from the booklet. Now, how. . . ? Ah, the "Forward" button. Next over. She pushed it. At once she was gently thrust forward, lying, it seemed, on the wind. It was the dream of her childhood.

Now she was playing with the controls. It was possible to turn, to glide, to swoop down and up and around. She grew drunk with excitement and a surging sense of power. She was young again. She was happy. She was free!

She was lost!

Where was she? There lay the great, sprawling city beneath her, but where was her own familiar suburb? She had remembered to secure her bifocals with a ribbon tied around her head, but she couldn't identify the buildings she used to know in the downtown section, even when she glided low. There were too many new ones towering above the old. Besides, she had never seen them from this angle before.

Like a providence, a police traffic control helicopter rattled into sight, above and to her right. Using her newfound skills of maneuvering, Marylou glided under it and eased herself up to the driver's window, wary of the rotor blades above.

The driver was squinting straight ahead. His partner was talking into a microphone. there wasn't a chance of being heard above the chopper's deafening noise. She would have to pantomime asking for directions. She rapped on the window with her wedding ring to get the driver's attention.

He was a big, dark fellow, she would have said, with an olive complexion; but as he turned full face to her, she saw that he turned a pasty white—almost green, in fact.

Steadying herself at the window with her left hand, Marylou courteously waved "Hi" with her right hand. Carefully she mouthed, "Where am I?"

The driver's eyes rolled up in his head. He sagged against his seat belt in a dead faint. His partner's mouth flopped as he stared across the unconscious pilot at Marylou.

"*Do* something, man!" she shouted impatiently, and then, carefully mouthing, "He's sick. Push his head down . . . HEAD . . . DOWN."

The partner seemed little better than a moron. He continued to sit frozen, staring at her. She tried once more: "WHERE . . . AM . . . I?"

Nothing. Then, like a lunatic, he jerked at the controls. She swerved away just in time to miss the huge blades as the man spun the helicopter down and away.

Marylou felt betrayed. A fine way for a policeman to act! And she still didn't know where she was. Then she thought about the sun. It was in the west, of course, and she lived in the southwest area. She must fly toward the sun until she found the great freeway system that ringed the city. Then she could glide above it to the point where it passed near her own neighborhood.

There it was! She turned left to follow it, astounded at the solid-looking miles of cars inching along the broad paved ribbon. Five o'clock traffic. She settled into

"slow forward" speed at a comfortable height to read the freeway signs.

Directly below, there was a noise like two big empty boxes striking together. BONK! As she recognized it for two cars colliding and looked down, more sounds arose: BONK-Bonk-Bonk-BONK-BONK! Horrified, Marylou saw a chain of collisions below her. A whole line of cars was piled up. Most of them were just pushed into each other a little, but a small economy car in the middle was pleated like an accordion at both ends. A man was wriggling out of the window.

There were more BONKS! What in the world was happening to all those drivers? Mass hysteria, perhaps. Marylou circled confusedly, wondering how she could help them. BONK-BONK-Bonk! Every lane was tied up now, with cars behind the collision areas at a standstill as far as she could see. The man had gotten out of the window, now. He looked up and waved at her. Waved?

He was shaking his fist at her!

Oh, horrors! She turned a sharp left and hit the "Fast Forward" button. Let her get away from those cars. It was she they'd been staring at when they'd banged into each other! How awful! She was the cause of all those collisions!

There, blessedly, was the water tower for her suburb. Now she could glide quietly home and take the thing off and never, never again. . . .

Cars. Irene's and Thomas's and . . . was that the fire department's little emergency car? It was. At her house. Oh, Lord, what now?

Hoping to get in unnoticed through the back, Marylou glided down into the backyard. No chance. There stood Alice, frozen, staring up at her with her mouth open. Oh, well. Marylou touched down with her feet and remembered to cut off the motor, but the sudden shift of power unbalanced her. She sat down inelegantly in the strawberry bed.

Alice took a single step toward her and fainted dead away. Mike, Irene, and Thomas rushed out the back door. They were all talking at once; yelling, really, babbling questions, picking up Alice, lifting Marylou to her feet. Impossible to communicate with them until they calmed down.

Impossible to communicate with anybody, suddenly. A big fist seemed to close in on her chest. Infinitely surprised, Marylou gasped for breath. The pain was incredible. She flopped a weak hand at Thomas, who looked into her fact then stared harder. His voice was suddenly eight years old. "Mom!"

So this was a heart attack, she thought. I never knew it would hurt so much. She barely noticed they were lifting her, carrying her not into, but around the house to the emergency car. Somebody had taken the flying machine away. They laid her on the cot in the back. A man in a white jacket squatted beside her. Lyle, she thought, it'll be good to see you again. Wait for me.

Two weeks later she was at home again. "A mild attack—just a warning, really," Fred Cameron had assured her with his best bed-side hand-pat.

"Call that mild? You ought to try it yourself," Marylou had snapped, but she was really just playing his game. She was too thankful to get home to make any fuss.

They lined up around her bed when she was settled at home: her beloved, shocked children. Marylou noted sadly how hard they were trying to keep calm, not to disturb her. Poor things, if they weren't so afraid for me, they'd let me have it!

Michael reassured her, "There wasn't anybody really hurt in those cars on the freeway, Mom. Nobody had been moving fast enough to get hurt. Of course, there was one monumental traffic jam!"

"It was on the television every newscast for the next three days!" Alice said.

As to the damaged cars, Michael told her, most if not all of the drivers were insured. "It's still each driver's responsibility to keep his eyes on the road," he added gravely, "no matter *what* goes flying around overhead."

"Who, whom did they—did they know it was me . . . I mean, I?" She seemed to be, at least temporarily, shocked right out of her pronoun case.

Irene said most of the newscasters had decided that some trick of sunlight had created a mass optical illusion above the freeway.

A psychiatrist had explained at some length how male drivers with dark, repressed sex urges would translate this optical freak into the vision of a woman.

A small but shrill element of the population was ready to go on the witness stand to swear they'd seen a flying saucer.

Thomas told her how they'd happened to gather at her house with an emergency vehicle standing by. "Birdie next door ran over. She knew you hadn't gone out. She was bringing you some figs. When she couldn't get in the front or back, and couldn't make you hear, she called Alice. Knew you didn't nap in the daytime."

Alice added, "I panicked, I guess. Thought you must be ill—maybe fainted in here by yourself. So I called the emergency car and dashed over."

They had all congregated, and, getting no response, they had gone inside with Mike's key and were just searching the place when she had returned.

"I must have slipped the catch on the back door when I stepped out," Marylou murmured.

Irene, who was going to stay with her for a few days, smoothed her pillow.

"Are you comfortable, Mother? Good. Now, we want you to make us a promise."

"I know, dear."

Thomas burst out, "Adam must have been out of his mid, sending you that thing! Damn fool. . . !"

"Now, Thomas, I won't listen to any more of that! Adam remembered that it was a silly old dream of mine, being able to fly like that. Just once, he wanted to make a dream come true for somebody he loved."

Michael said, “But, Mother, he should have remembered. . . .”

“He only forgot one thing, Mike; he forgot that I am old and decrepit.”

There was a startled silence. Quickly she added, “Of course, you all are perfectly right. It was a crazy thing for an old woman like me to do. And I want your minds to be completely at rest. I’m going to put that machine away—among my souvenirs. All those collisions! I never was so horrified in my life! I promise you, I won’t endanger people like that again, not for anything!”

Irene picked up the small hand that Marylou was resting on that side of the bed and held it against her cheek. “Thank you, Mother.”

A month later, when she had the house to herself once more, Marylou faithfully carried the machine to the closet in the spare bedroom. She had promised to put the machine away among her souvenirs, and she had promised never again to endanger lives as she had, flying above the freeway in daylight like that.

What about at night? Just, say, the one night . . . she had her old black opera cape somewhere, and a conical hat wouldn’t be hard to make from cardboard . . . tied on with black ribbons, perhaps . . . a thrill for the children!

Smiling, she fastened down the lid and slid the storage box back into place. Neat lettering on the top said, “Halloween.”

Lionel Garcia

The Wedding

The wife brought the old man into the kitchen holding him up by the arm and steadied him as she reached for a chair. Having placed the chair behind him, she pushed him down gently, and he quivered and shook as he descended slowly into the chair. She took his hat off and threw it on the chair next to him.

"Be careful with my hat," he said in Spanish. "It cost a pretty penny."

"I don't see why he needs a hat," the wife said to me, completely ignoring him. "He never goes anywhere. Never even goes outside the house. Why the hat? I'll never know."

He remained silent, looking out the window. He was old and useless and could hardly walk.

"Get me some coffee," he said, rapping on the table with a little authority. "And some crackers," he added.

She took her time heating the coffee, and it seemed to irritate him. Finally, after much waiting and nervous anticipation on his part, she brought the coffee and a cracker and placed them before him on the table. There was an air of defiance on her part, and I couldn't help but think that it was an odd type of behavior after such a long marriage. I would have thought that, by now, she would have forgiven him for any pain that he had caused her.

The cup rattled as he picked it up from the saucer. He shook the cup as he brought it to his lips. After sucking mostly air, he said, "This coffee is too hot," and he placed the cup back with difficulty.

"He always complains," the wife said. "The coffee is too hot! The coffee is too cold!" She was standing behind a small counter that separated the kitchen from the dining table.

He ignored her and looked at me with more intensity than I had seen during the day that I had been there. His one good eye (the right one had a cataract) seemed to penetrate through me, and after a while it seemed to water excessively. Little did I know at the time that he was trying to size me up to be sure I could appreciate an event that had left a terrible impression on him.

"I must tell you what happened to me in 1900 when I was ten years old."

The wife stood up straight and went over to the sink. "He's going to tell the wedding story again. I'll bet my life he's going to do it." She looked at me and raised her hand and pointed to her temple with her index finger and made a circle in

the air. “He’s a little crazy from old age,” she said aloud.

“The story concerns a wedding that I attended at a ranch near my childhood home. It was a typical ranch wedding. We, the children, were having a good time riding horses, throwing rocks at birds, and all the things children our age will do. But I’m ahead of the story.” He took a drink from the cup, spilling a good deal. “The coffee is much better now. At least I can drink it.”

He took a small piece of cracker and placed it as gently in his mouth as if he were taking communion. He followed with another sip of coffee, and then he chewed slowly, ruminating.

“In those days people were very mean,” he said. It amused me that he made that statement. After all, it didn’t seem to be logically connected to what we were talking about. “I don’t know why they were. We don’t see meanness like that very often anymore. Oh yes, one could say that our neighbor here on my right is not good, is lazy, but he is not mean.”

“Don’t talk about the neighbors. Don’t you know any better?”

“He’s always been a bad neighbor, very lazy and a scoundrel. But that’s not important. I know he’s lazy and a thief. Didn’t he steal my rake?” he asked me. I didn’t know.

“Your rake is in the garage underneath all the pile of garbage that you never cleaned in forty years of living in this house. Don’t accuse the neighbors of anything. You’re the one who is lazy and a scoundrel.”

“The neighbor to my left is just as bad. He beats his wife until the poor woman comes running to us for help. But what can I do at my age? I’m ninety-two years old. I’ll be ninety-three in eight months. If I were younger I would show him that to hit a woman is a sin against the natural order, besides it’s against the law.”

His wife was now sitting in a wooden chair across the counter. She was rolling her sleeves. “You certainly did a lot of hitting when you were younger, and I have the scars to prove it.”

He looked past the woman as if she were not there. “To hit a woman as he hits her is against all the laws of man. But what can you do? They say she goes out on him, and at night, I seem to see a car go slowly by. I may be wrong. But I do notice that the car slows down in front of the house, and it always passes by when the husband is not around. What do you make of that?”

“He hit me many time when he came home drunk,” she said to me. “But what could I do? I had children to think of. If it hadn’t been for them, I would have left him years and years ago. Now the children are grown, don’t like him, and don’t come to visit him. I’m here stuck with him not able to see my children. I’m not sure they appreciate what I did for them. It was hard, very hard. And then he would take after the children and almost kill them with blows. He would be so drunk that he wouldn’t remember, but I’ll tell you this, the children never forgot, and they never

forgave. Right now he could die, right where he sits, and they wouldn't care. This is the legacy that he has left behind. What is cruel for me is that, in his old age, he had no remorse. How can he? He doesn't know what day it is."

I had the feeling that I was being brought into the conversation, and I didn't want to become involved. The woman wanted desperately for me to agree with her. The old man was ignoring her.

He continued.

"One night she came in running and had blood all over her clothes. The other neighbor, of course, could care less. When I asked him about it, he said it wasn't any of his business, that he was having trouble with his wife also. To think that this is where we wound up living, among these savages. But they aren't as mean as the brothers I was going to tell you about. Do you want some more coffee?"

I replied that I had enough.

"If you need some more, just ask," he said. "Just as if you were in your own home."

"They were three brothers, mean as wolves, and they delighted in creating trouble wherever they went. Never was a person at peace when they were around. Let me tell you that they one time killed a young calf in front of his owner and asked him if he was going to fight about it. The poor man said no. Who would fight someone like that and especially when there were three?" He pointed three raised fingers at me.

"The week before the wedding they had had an altercation with the bride's father. Nothing serious by anyone's standards. The old man happened to be drinking beer at a tavern, and he said something about another man, an acquaintance of his, an innocent remark in any case, except that the brothers were there, and they took exception to the man's remark. They claimed the man being talked about was their uncle. Can you imagine that? They probably didn't even know the man. The man apologized and left, or tried to leave, I should say. They accosted him, tore off his shirt, and slapped him around. The man begged to be left alone, and they released him, warning him to be careful how he spoke from now on."

He cocked his eye at me again and held it open until a tear rolled down his face. He wiped the tear with a crooked brown finger as he continued to study me. He took another piece of the cracker and placed it on his tongue. He chewed for a while and then swallowed the cracker with some coffee.

"In any case, there was bad blood between the two parties. The man's sons, upon learning what had happened, were angry and had to be restrained from going after the three brothers.

"I remember as if it were yesterday that the wedding was on a hot August Sunday. We were in the middle of the dog days of summer, the so-called *canicula,* when even the wind will burn your face—the type of weather we had when we

blazed the road from San Diego to Freer. It was so hot then that the snakes would hide under the hollow roots of the older trees. All we had to do was go to the old tree and throw gasoline at the trunk and the snakes would roll out in a tangled mess, some so angry they would strike at each other and would fight to the death locked around each other. We would take a shovel or a grubbing hoe or an ax and kill them. But the more we killed, the more there seemed to be. It was like the tale that has no ending."

He took a handkerchief from his shirt pocket with a very shaky hand and wiped drool from the corner of his mouth.

"The wedding was beautiful. All morning long people had arrived—on horseback, and wagons, and even one old car. Who brought the car?"

The woman was caught by surprise. She seemed to wake up to the question. "There were no cars in 1900. You've got your stories mixed up. The first car we saw was in 1913, 1914, somewhere around there." She returned to her thoughts.

She struck me as having a very poor attitude, and then again she had been with him so very long that she didn't care for him or his conversation. The most I could say about her was that at least she didn't constantly interrupt the old man while he spoke, only occasionally.

"The wedding itself was at about eleven o'clock that morning. There were bridesmaids and best men, and all one sees at weddings. After the ceremony, we ate barbecue. The father of the bride—Antonio was his name, Antonio Briones—had killed a calf, and his friends had barbecued it in earthen pits all night long. Needless to say, they had been drinking all night long. This is not good, for men to drink all that much."

"Look who's talking now," she said. She looked at me and made a motion like a man drinking a beer and pointed at him. She laughed. "They used to call him 'hollow leg' because he drank so much. How quickly this man forgets. I cannot believe this."

He completely ignored her. "Let me tell you why it is wrong for a man to drink a lot. After a while, he abandons his family—his wife, his children, everything dear to his heart."

She got up and left. "I can't take any more of this," she said. She walked out of the kitchen and through a door to the side of the stove. It hadn't occurred to me that there was a room behind the kitchen, but apparently there was one, for this was where she went.

"You understand that we children were not allowed in the wedding ceremonies. We were observers, and we were fed last. Each with his plate, we went to the woods to eat. We could hear the laughter of the celebrants as they ate and drank. We were happy also, but not for long. From the woods we could see three men riding across the corn field towards the house, trampling the corn as they came. You understand

that to injure a man's crop is to insult him gravely. At that time we didn't know who they were. They were, in fact, the three brothers, the troublemakers, and we were to remember them for the rest of our lives.

"Remember that this happened some eight-two years ago, and I have difficulty remembering names. The father's name was Antonio Briones, and he had two sons, Adolfo and Octavio. Two of the men that had been drinking all night were the brothers Juan Garcia and Julian Garcia. The troublemakers, the mean brothers, were Juvencio, and. . . ." He couldn't remember.

"Eusebio and Carlos," came the voice from behind the kitchen.

"Eusebio and Carlos," the man repeated as if he had thought of the names himself. "And their last name?"

"Gonzales," she replied. "And quit bothering me. I'm in the middle of my rosary."

"Juvencio Gonzales rode to the long outside table where the wedding party was eating. His two brothers remained behind by the house. I could see him ride almost to the table, almost touching it, and the startled people looked up and saw him. Antonio Briones, the father, was up immediately upon seeing the man on horseback.

"'What do you fellows want? Why do you trample my crop?' The wind was blowing in my direction and I could hear their voices as if I were standing behind them. 'I thought that I had passed the word that I didn't want you at the wedding.'

"'That's the word we received," Juvencio replied. 'And it sticks in our craw that anyone would insult us, my brothers and me, in this way. After all we did you no real harm.'

"'I have already forgotten that,' Antonio said. 'And as for my sons, they have also. You were not invited, and I'm asking you in an amicable way to leave.'

"By that time the men in the wedding party were standing up. The bride was being led quickly away. The women were almost carrying her to the house. The groom, Pablo Garcia, stood (I could see very plainly for I was directly behind a mesquite tree and hiding my body from everyone) and he, Pablo, walked to where the conversation was going on. Upon seeing Pablo approach their brother, Juvencio, the other two rode their horses up. It was then three against two.

"Antonio's sons, Adolfo and Octavio, had been in the house, and when they saw what was going on, they reached for their rifles and came out running.

"'There will be no violence,' Antonio shouted to his sons. 'This is a day for celebration and joy. Let us not destroy it!'

"I can still hear the man say those words right now as if I were still hiding behind the tree. The other children that I was with had scattered, and I could see them hiding much the same as I.

"From here on, my mind becomes very vague, as if I had seen this in a dream.

The reality did not strike me until I was a young man.

"I had been looking around at my friends, when suddenly I heard a shot. By the time I looked up, (and it was almost instantaneously) all I could see was a puff of smoke rising from the barrel of a pistol held by one of the terrible brothers. My first instinct was to look at the group—who had fallen? No one! The I realized he had shot into the air. Juvencio, the oldest of the mean ones, dismounted. He had a smallish bay horse—smallish but fine looking. He pushed the father backwards, and I could see the old man trying to push back. Again he was pushed back, and I could see the men coming closer.

"'Let them fight!' shouted Eusebio, the younger of the *malos*. He knew it was not a fair fight. 'Leave them alone, and I mean it,' he said. He had a menacing look to him as he spoke to the man. 'Anyone interferes, and he has me to deal with!

"Mean Juvencio struck the father on the head and the poor man fell to his knees. Blood started flowing from the top of his head. He had been hit with some sort of instrument. Immediately I saw that it was a long barreled pistol, the same type that the Rangers used in the old days. God help you if you are ever hit on the head with a pistol such as that one. The barrel was thicker than my thumb."

He showed his thumb, a worn out wrinkled digit brown with age.

"The sons seeing their father bleeding, could not restrain themselves. Who would? Your father is bleeding profusely and on the ground, his enemy standing over him ready to shoot. They opened fire. The confusion was great as you can imagine. Juvencio fell dead but not before firing several shots into poor Antonio, the father of the bride. He also died immediately from what I could see. Now everything becomes a blur to me for the action was so fierce, so intense, that I could not follow it. There were too many things going on at one time. The women were crying and screaming in the house. They could see exactly what was going on, but they were powerless. But it seemed to me that Pablo Garcia, the groom, was the next to fall. There was no cause to kill him. But he fell by his father-in-law's side. The two surviving mean brothers, Eusebio and Carlos, were shooting at everyone, and Adolfo and Octavio were shooting at them. The women had broken through the door and were running toward the scene. The brothers Juan and Julio Garcia, unarmed, did not have a chance. Both fell as they tried to intervene.

"The thing is that Adolfo and Octavio, the old man's sons, apparently were enraged when they witnessed the father being attacked. Who wouldn't? Wouldn't you have done the same?

"After it was over, and it was over quickly, although at that time it seemed an eternity, there were eight men killed. Most children never experience the violent death of one single person in their lifetime, but here I was, on that day I had seen the death of eight men. Let me tell you who they were: Antonio Briones, the father of the bride, and one of his sons, Adolfo. Octavio survived the onslaught and had

a very prolonged recuperation. He was maimed for life. Pablo Garcia, dead. He was the groom. Killed defending his father-in-law's honor. That's three. The three brothers who would cause no more problems. That's six. And the brothers Juan and Julio Garcia who had been drinking all night.

"The aftermath was horrible, even more horrible than the shooting itself. The women were on the men as soon as the shooting stopped. They were screaming and crying and could not contain their grief. They were running from body to body screaming. The bride's dress which had been white and beautiful shortly before, was now spattered with blood. She tried to hold her husband's head on her lap, but she jumped up and ran toward her father, and thus she went, torn between the two men. The bride's mother, Antonio's wife, was in a rage, and she picked up a revolver that belonged to God knows who and began firing at Juvencio, her husband's killer, even though he was already dead.

"You can imagine what an episode like that does to a child my age. I have lived with that memory for most of my life."

He was silent for a while as he looked at me with that crooked eye. He took one last piece of cracker and a drink of coffee. Then he reached over and picked up his hat by the crown. He placed it straight on his head and I noticed how large his ears were.

"Are you through?" came the voice from inside the room.

"Yes," he answered.

She came out, grabbed him by the arm, and led him away. He tried to say something, but she told him to hush. "You've talked enough already."

"Wait a minute," he said, forcefully removing her hand from his arm. "I have more to say."

"No you don't," the woman replied. "You're going to bed."

"Leave me alone!" he shouted. "Can't you see that I need to say one more thing? God damn it, why must you bother me so?"

He braced himself with his hand on the counter and swayed gently back and forth. (He didn't need her after all.) "When I was a child," he said, and a tear came down his face, "my father would take us to a small lake near where I was born. And on the surface of the lake you could see the salt as it collected and floated to the shore. We would go there and pack salt, and in the winter, we would kill the ducks that had migrated from God knows where. We would take the dead birds and wash the lice off them in the salt water, skin them—skin, feathers and all and clean them to take home. My father loved the tails. He ate them raw. He would chew the tails off the ducks just like one chews the end of a loaf of bread. My brothers and I, we would laugh and feel like vomiting, but mostly we would laugh. No one knew why the lake was salty, but you could float almost anything in it. We bathed in it during the summer, but we were never allowed to go to the deep end. Someone had told

my father that it was very deep. Later on, in my older years, when I was operated on in my head for a tumor, I dreamed after the operation, while in a coma, that we were cutting large slabs of salt and loading them on mule-drawn wagons, and it seemed the dream went on forever, the salt went on forever. But," he said turning toward the woman and extending his arm to her, "those were the good days when I was like new."

I could hear her scolding him in the back room as she put him to bed. "Do you need to go to the toilet?" she asked. "No," came the meek, childish reply.

"Tomorrow maybe I can tell him about the snakes," he said.

"Shut up and go to sleep," she said. "You've already talked enough for two days."

Jim Hendrick

Bird the Good

It had been quite a while since I'd heard from Bird. He had written a long letter, what he called an epistle, from Italy. He was living among the magicians in Venezia. The epistle spoke of the void. How the empty spaces between people were actually teeming and alive with demons and saints. I had written back, as I always did, urging him to settle down with a good job or woman. "I have trouble standing in line," he replied, "waiting for orders. There is too much wonderful and exotic music in my head. Nothing is left for me to do but dance."

There's not the slightest doubt in my mind that my good friend, Mr. Bird, was insane. His insanity, however, was beautiful. It was appealing to me even though I did not understand it. He rarely worked or had money. If he got a job, it lasted for only a few weeks before he was fired for some outrageous activity. In Chicago, while employed in a meat packing house, he was let go for leading his fellow workers in singing as they worked. He argued that more was accomplished when everyone wasn't bored. "Bosses are not difficult to figure out," he told me later.

Money was a low priority with Bird. People, experience, freedom all rated far above money. He much preferred to trade in order to survive. In his last epistle from Venice, he mentioned trading a novel, in English, for a used but improved suit of clothes. "I am so happy each morning to put on this new look. Italian to a T. It was said of our generation that we loved to try new things." He eventually traded or gave away everything. I suppose I admired his disdain for possessions, but how long can one exist that way? I worried about him.

I must tell you that Bird had a wonderful quality that I personally miss very much. He had the rare ability to help you get below your skin. To experience the vital emotions and thoughts often trapped inside yourself. He could do this without judgment or prying. It made you feel that the world is a wider, more meaningful place. And, that your place in it—what you are, or "your music," as he calls it—is significant and real. It was a wonderful gift. I sometimes felt I was asleep til he returned and we talked. I also knew, however, that I could not endure him on a regular basis. His disorganization and intensity were too much for me.

A desire lurked in my heart that Bird would come back from Italy completely destitute. Having seen the folly in his life, Bird would give up the wayward style for a respectable office job. "I will tell him it is something new to try on," I thought. I hated so that I worried about him. I had my own life to live, after all, but he made it terribly complicated.

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I was, of course, astonished to see him on a wide and exclusive boulevard downtown. I worked near there in a tall office building. On my way to lunch there he was, strolling out of an opulent restaurant and sliding into an unnamable foreign sports car. He, the car, the street were equal in magnificence. Bird was in embarrassingly expensive sports clothes. He sat deep in the rich leather, looking all the part of a college boy on holiday. Even from across the street, I could see his eyes were shining. He seemed to be singing a tune, probably of his own making.

He was just pulling the car away from the curb when he spotted me. I was so dumbfounded that I could not even wave. I did manage to wind through the maze of traffic.

"What do you think? Does it fit?" This was his greeting after a year.

"Huh?"

He spun around like a child making itself drunk. "The car. The clothes."

"You, or I, have gone completely crazy."

He had just driven down from New York where all the fineries had been purchased. He quickly discovered I was on my lunch break and immediately insisted going back into the fine French Cafe from which he had just emerged.

"It's too ritzy. Let's just go have a sandwich down the block."

"No sweat," he assured me. "I'm loaded."

To the haughty maitre d', he handed several bills and requested his regular table. A crisp continental accent beckoned we follow. Bird grinned lazily and waved me ahead. We passed isles of superbly decked humanity to the rear by the garden.

"I eat here every day. They have the best seafood anywhere. The Choucroute Aux Poisson is heaven. Order anything you want."

Bird stared into the lush jungle of coconut palms and all manner of elephantine greenery for a second while I adjusted myself.

He turned. "Well, what do you think happened?"

"Giant dope deal?"

"Nope. Guess again." He beamed happily at me.

"Rich relatives?"

"Very good. But not exactly. An old friend of my grandmother was filthy rich in hoarded gold and left me six million bucks."

"What?" It took my breath away. "Why?"

"She liked me when I was a kid and didn't have anyone to leave it to. Funny, the way things happen, huh?"

It took me a few weeks to find out if his story was true. Sure enough, Bird was a millionaire. His fortune, I learned, was not six million but closer to three and a half, and not in gold but public utility stocks and electronics. Bird quickly liquidated

every possible asset and piled it into several banks. “I love to go into a bank and plunk down $300,000 in cash and watch all the VPs fall all over themselves to grab the account,” he told me with a twinkle in his eye. It also was true that he had bank accounts all over the place. In his spacious new house one day, I counted thirty bank books. It is amazing what one can do with money.

I’ll tell you true, Bird did unbelievable things with his money. By the time I saw him next, he had bought a palazzo on the Grand Canal in Venice and a one-thousand-acre estate in New Hampshire, all with servants and completely furnished. He only lived in a gargantuan old mansion in Key West. It was as far south as he could go in America. He made sure, however, that all of the servants in all of his residences were paid handsomely. He purchased a helicopter to travel to Miami to see me and shuttle us back to the Keys every once in a while. His style of life was utterly absurd.

In the time we spent together, it appalled me how much money he threw away. At first, I constantly badgered him about it. I was raised to believe that money is sacred. Money should only be used to make more money and the rest hoarded away for emergencies. I had no idea that money was a medium of exchange. Bird thought that money used to beget money bought only slavery. So he exchanged his wealth for things both tangible and intangible. He traded it to sad and ragged children for a smile. He bought fine meals at his favorite café for bums just to delight in their fateful experience. It seemed to me that this disposal of plenitude might set a disastrous trend among the patricians. As I might have surmised, no one imitated Bird the Good.

Bird was in his high-ceilinged library one day, mulling over his check books. The ancient paddle fans were turning dreamily overhead. “Do you see this?” he gleefully said to me. “I’ve only spent about one and a quarter million so far. It’s already been eight months.” He rolled his eyes and shook his head slowly. He was ebullient. Later I learned he was as deviant in accounting as in most normal functions and had actually spent nearly $1,800,00 at that point.

Shortly thereafter, he launched into the publishing business, printing books by previously unpublished authors only. He made sure no one on his staff read the books before they were off to the presses. “Everyone who wants to speak and has the courage to try should have the chance,” he told his staff. Bird published poems from old people in nursing homes in the finest leather bindings. The wild, imaginative drawings of small school children were his favorite subjects. At the release of each new project he would call a news conference—he was getting a great deal of publicity for his eccentricity, primarily ridicule—to announce the first 10,000 copies would be given away free at random shopping malls around the country. Some publishing houses criticized this move severely as a shrewd marketing strategy.

Bird would appear at these giveaways, riding in like some modern Santa Claus

in his helicopter, landing in the parking lot. Hopping out of the chopper, which always drew a crowd anyway, he would announce over a bull horn. He passed out the books to children, businessmen, women in tennis outfits, policemen, clerks, tax collectors, winos, hippies, Armenians, bankers, dish washers. Anyone who refused to take a book received $25, $50, $100 to take it. These carnivals gave him such delight. "Spreading the word," Bird called it.

I had a very difficult time seeing the purpose of any of Bird's behavior. It seemed to me he was merely being naive. He had the childish neglect of reality cognizant in a true saint. Most everyone thought him committable. For a short while, when his activities were capturing space in the various media, a loose knit cult developed in his name. That is where I get the title Bird the Good. These followers began turning up at his giveaways proclaiming that the essence of happiness was only found in giving away those possessions one loved most. Mothers tried to give away their children, followers passed out their clothing, some offered their bodies. It usually ended in a chaotic scene like sale days at Macy's, the followers chanting: Bird the Good is God. The police cruisers would roar in, lights flashing, sirens screaming as Bird fought his way to his chopper and escaped into the sky.

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The hardest aspect for me to understand was Bird's disrespect for money. I love money, and I work hard for it. I, thus, treasure it. Bird did not work for a dime of his inheritance and, thus, cared nothing for it. That's how I reasoned then. Later on, thinking about Bird and the lessons I learned from him, I could at least entertain the notion of how foolish it is to spend the best part of your energy in the search for any commodity. The war goes on in me, however, that to be comfortable and experience many of the exotic lamina of life, money is essential. Sitting on the proper side of affluence, Bird still maintained: Anything that only money can buy is not worth having. I argued with him one day that he would sing a different tune without his fortune. He laughed until I was uncomfortable. "I was just as happy before, maybe more. Listen, my friend, we all want to be successful, that's all. I am eminently successful whether I am rich or poor." I can, at least, dwell on this heresy now, although I do not entirely agree.

More of my time was being spent in Miami. My job was requiring more time and energy. I was involved with a new woman. For over a month, I lost touch with Bird altogether. When I did get around to calling, he was never at home in Key West. I finally wrote a letter after three months. Still no reply. Now that he had the means, I worried about him less; besides, it was all I could do to keep my head above water in my own affairs.

The phone rang at home one evening.

"It's about Mr. Bird," began Claude, the houseman in Key West. Claude was a gentle, elderly man Bird liked very much. "Today, I received this letter. Mr. Bird says he has disposed of all his property and spent his money." The insidious worm of worry crept into my stomach. Claude continued, "Mr. Bird left the Key West house to me. He enclosed the deed with the letter."

"Where was the letter postmarked?" I asked.

"Denver."

"Is there a return address?"

"No, sir."

I began investigating Claude's news and found that all of the bank accounts were closed, the publishing house sold, the palazzo and New Hampshire estate with new owners.

It was another month before I saw Bird. It was late autumn in Miami; a time when the snowbirds begin to arrive. It is the time of year when the weather is perfect. After work one evening, I drove to the beach and walked. Ahead of me in the mist of dusk, kicking sand as he sauntered along, was my friend Bird. For several minutes I trailed behind him. The collar of his shapeless coat was turned up. He was wearing baggy khaki trousers and the heavy plain black shoes of working men. Beside us in the distant horizon, day and night were merging in a burst of purple, blue, and orange. He turned to behold it. I moved up next to him. He shifted his gaze to me and smiled. We stood together, silently, in the vastness of the world watching day and night play like baby wildcats in the forest.

He was much thinner and visibly fatigued, except in his eyes. The eyes were scintillating as always.

"Where have you been?" I finally asked.

"Traveling a bit. My place is close by. Come on."

We walked to a large, run-down Spanish-style rooming house on the beach. One of those remnants of faded elegance lining the poorer section of Miami Beach. We traipsed up worn flagstone steps to the attic. The room was stark: a mattress on the floor, an arm chair that was ripped in the seat with wads of cotton stuffing bubbling out, an oil heater, a small wooden table with a hot plate sitting on top. I saw no refrigerator or sign of food.

Bird led me to the single chair. He treated me as regally as a visiting king. As I sat, he stood before me, the lean six feet of him, arms folded, grinning. He began, "So, what's your guess this time?"

"Crazy again."

That's what I said, but I didn't mean it. Bird's insanity was an appearance, an aspect. The world is full of partial truths. Bird was in touch with an essential, simple virtue; knowing human worth—his own and that of others.

"I gave the rest of the money away. It was always in my way. People wouldn't

touch me anymore."

"But did you have to squander it like that?" I was feeling jealous that I hadn't received any of his windfall.

He grinned at me the way he did when I'd said something ridiculous. "It was a test put to me. Now I need to return to my greater task in the service of poverty." He looked more serious for a moment, then, "Don't you love this place?"

I was confused. "Wouldn't your Key West house be more comfortable?"

He seemed offended. "Look!" he said, pointing to the open bay windows taking up half of one wall. "The ocean is moving out there. Can't you hear it? I can see it in the moonlight."

I stopped to listen and heard the gentle motion. The moon, about five-eighths full, was striking the water brilliantly.

He threw himself on the bed. "I can lay here on the bed and feel like I have my very own piece of creation."

I am by no means an aesthete, but I do enjoy beauty. For me the serenity and charm of the view was more than offset by the room in which we sat.

"How could anyone want more?" he sent on. "When I was rich, I owned a lot less. Now I can concentrate on one transcendence."

He went on talking with rising intensity for some time. Adventures he had experienced in the world. People he had hurt or neglected. Opportunities gained, and lost. His language was descriptive, enchanting. I thought, "Not even death is a challenge for him. He has examined everything."

"I've been rambling. I'm sorry."

"It's so beautiful the way you talk about life. But I'm wondering what you are going to do next."

He became very quiet and dropped his head. His voice came full of pain.

"I don't know. What can I do?"

I considered practical advice for a moment but decided to say nothing. He sat, quietly absorbed on a threshold like a defendant waiting for judgment, knowing the sentence will be harsh. The room was dark save a light spray of moonlight. After a while, I got up, and when he made not move to have me stay, I left him.

Out on the street, the old people and the vagrants roamed the tiny sidewalks. The tourists never come to this section, unless they are lost, and then only to see it from the protection of their cars. I heard singing on the porch of a house nearby. A guitar playing a Spanish tune. Dirty children ran along the street. I thought of Bird the Good. The young man with the publishing business, with property and servants. It suddenly swelled in me that maybe my friend was not the supremely independent person I thought. Maybe he needed someone.

Back up the steps, I knocked gingerly on the door. There was no response. If he was asleep, I would leave. The room was quite dark, but there was a faint glow

from the corner. In the corner stood a tall dressing screen that I had not seen before. The radiance came from behind it. I did not see Bird anywhere. I walked across the room.

Behind the screen was a burning candle sitting in the tangled branches of a massive piece of driftwood. The grayness of the wood shone silver in the yellow light of the candle. By this mysterious altar, on the bare floor, was Bird, bent forward like prayer. The marvelous and humble Bird the Good.

I trekked down the steps once again, this time heading for the ocean. At the edge of the tide, I removed my footgear. I moved in to let the warm water skim over my feet. The five-eighths moon was over my head. It was a cool, clear night. A good night for being alive.

The next time I made the trip up the flagstone steps, Bird was gone. Only a week had passed, but he'd moved out. There was nothing else to do but wait.

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From here all I have are two letters from Bird and the recollections of a few people who were with him. Within a month of our last visit, I received the first epistle. Here is a portion:

> "It is depressingly hard to comprehend practicality when I am always reaching for tenderness and freedom, hard to be stern and profound when I believe that life is intricate and glorious. I meet so many who put on their impersonal air, and not anyone who feels they are involved in a very personal journey. Everyone seeks to be important. No one seeks to be small and accept the vast wonder of living. Plenty attend to business as usual, but no one who is almost paralyzed by magnificent beauty in infinitesimal things. So, most of the people I cross pursue prestige and wisdom, while I now find fulfillment in sweat and germs of drunks, beggars, and prostitutes."

He explained in this letter how he was traveling the country working in missions for the poor, Salvation Army stations, seedy bars, wherever the sediment of humanity settled. He spoke with great humor and affection about his friends, usually colorful and kind bums and derelicts.

His second letter followed the first by two months. He now had a traveling companion, a black man he called only Conclusion. Bird and Conclusion together were assembling a new vision.

> "You said to me all those times to be careful. It is such a disgusting word. Is there anything more dreadful than being careful and missing the spontane-

ous love and excitement that exists? We learn to keep to ourselves, never allow the real passions to escape. Life can be a coffin, a living lifelessness.

"With my new friend Conclusion, I have explored the barest essentials of bodily existence. We grovel, beg, work, mop up the vomit of men we meet. We also sing, lie in the sun, care for sad-eyed souls. I am altogether full. I could not be more happy."

This was the last letter I received. It was written on a brown paper bag. It is the most involved statement Bird ever made. It has subjects, subheadings, arrows, drawings, as well as grease stains, telephone numbers, and random rips in the paper. The ending is concise.

"How we all fear suffering. The very thought of sacrifice and pain drives men to any means of relief. If we could only understand that only through suffering can we ever be blessed with true wisdom. The wisdom of a broken heart and empty stomach. The gain in your soul is worth the temporary discomfort."

I learned that Bird had many friends. I found this out mostly through Conclusion, who was sent by Bird to tell me. No one as generous with himself as Bird could help but draw people. Some came for selfish, neurotic reasons, but Bird accepted everyone without question. Charity was a quality he never had to learn.

I remember walking with him once and running into a wealthy creep we had gone to college with. He was irritating, constantly bragging even though his life consisted primarily of spending his father's money. In my book he was zero. I told Bird after the fellow left what I thought of him.

"What kind of attitude is that?" It never occurred to me that he could consider the idiot a true friend. "I suppose everyone that doesn't suit must go? It's easy to love the lovable but damn hard to love mean, boastful, shallow people."

"It's normal to love a villain, at least for awhile," I told him, "but it's unimaginable to me to let jerks like that have your friendship. It's a waste of time. He's a gnat."

He looked at me quite seriously. "You think too much of yourself. You think its okay to be buddies with an enemy. Anyone who feels strong could say that. It's always been a tribute to make a friend of a strong enemy. It takes more than vanity to love the weak, or the . . . gnats."

Conversations with Bird inevitably broke below the surface. I was not used to it. Sometimes I would be angry, other times frustrated, often ignoring. For all the life and insight Bird bestowed on me, I must say I missed so much. Like most of us, I survived by retreating within myself.

I shared this feeling with Conclusion as we sat in my apartment. It was almost spring. It was then, sitting in my comfortable, secure surroundings, that Conclusion told me Bird was dead. He had caught pneumonia in a coal mining town in Kentucky. They had been helping the Salvation Army with relief for striking miners. He worked for several days, coughing violently with a tremendous temperature. He waved off attempts to care for him, saying there were many others who needed the medical attention. Finally, he collapsed and died a week later in a tiny hospital in the mountains.

After telling me the story, Conclusion handed me an envelope Bird said must be personally delivered.

> "Sorrow is with us always, but so is laughter. It is easier to remember the sad hours than it is to give life to the happy ones. Such a shame that tears should flow naturally, but laughter, genuine rejoicing, require such effort. It is important then to cooperate with the buoyant side of ourselves. Not to stress too much a person's work, like a biographer. But to focus that energy gathered from another to spark glee in someone else. Remember, my friend, that our struggles will fade away, but the happiness we leave lives on forever."

As I read this last word from Bird, the light of a spring day was inching into the room. There was sadness and loss, but also there was a smile on my lips. I could not think of Bird and not smile. My mind was saying why? Why is he gone? It was incomprehensible. Then a thought crept in whispering so low I had to be still and listen: "Why are any of us here at all? Is it not so much why, as how." That, I believe, is what Bird would have said.

Enid Jimenez

Locked In / Looked Out

I've never been where they thought I was. No, even now I've made plans—other plans that don't include darkness. And I've never wondered what anyone else was up to, not even youth. Everything will destroy itself in a couple of decades or so . . . it doesn't matter who helps the destruction along. I prefer to wait for the outcome. And I would never say "I told you so." That wouldn't be truthful. I don't lie outloud. I've never been lonely, either, but I would like a game of chess now and again. Solitaire is a game that I always win. I beat myself, I imagine, and although winning is frightening, to some people, I'm not afraid of losing either.

You can tell a murderer right off. It's not a special gleam in the eye like everyone says . . . it's the hands. They act separately from the body. They say, "it's time," when the mind says, "it's time." You stand still, and your hands become the assassins. The assassins; the sins. And yet, I can see, in my mind . . . a jungle without boundaries and limitless green. Then I awaken.

If I were to say that I'm not afraid, that would be lying, and I've told you already that lying is the only thing I don't do . . . well. I'm not ashamed either to tell you that I'm just like you, let's talk. I've talked to lawyers, judges, desks, and benches. I'm locked in. As locked in as one gets without being on an island, surrounded by waves and scorching sun—Africa. There are some deserted islands left, it's a constant. I had seen canaries, and zoos, and all those things you think of when you think of "locked up"; it's not like that, either. For one thing, you begin to talk to yourself; on the second day you answer.

I've always been good at stories. In here, I've gotten very good. I can break your heart. Love stories. Hate stories. War stories. Then I get too pure. I distill war until it is just two men in the desert, biting each other, kicking, screaming, locked together in eternity. Eternity makes some people quite somber. Not me. I know that you can't erase the original war; we still wear our bones on the inside to prove that.

Do you see; it's because of this, that everything is so easily explained in terms of post office lines and bridges and teacups and immunizations? And that's why some of us are locked in. Something else . . . if anyone assumes that physical containment precludes travel, then they have never allowed their mind to use its legs.

An imagination can slice the ocean up into edible pieces or walk onto an old western movie set by swinging open bar doors and spilling light on expectant bad

guy faces. An imagination can dangle upside down in an animal snare and bite its leg off to escape. I've done these things and more. I know they think I'm here, but I have gone on to bigger, much better places.

I could tell you how I got here. I could tell you that I haven't the dark soul I thought was a prerequisite to murder. I've always gone at least far enough out of my way to buy Girl Scout cookies, and sometimes I would remove my hat in movie houses. I had no trouble murdering her, though, because she asked for it.

She took me to her house, after all, and pulled pieces of herself from high school annuals and memory boxes . . . dust filled the room as she hollowed herself out; preparing. We got good and goddamn drunk, too . . . cheap stuff . . . good and goddamn drunk. A murderer doesn't have a dark soul like I thought, just an understanding of endings.

It might have all began in childhood; what doesn't? I guess some of us here are born older than others. Most of what I did back then was in the name of science. My only friend as I was growing up was a scarecrow of a kid named Roger. His hair was the color of violin rosin, and freckles dotted his face in three separate constellations. We were accused of murder more than a few times. The judgment of the neighborhood weighed more heavily on our respective families, however, who were consistent in their punishment—Roger and I were separated on a weekly basis. One summer, we froze thirty-six frogs in my mother's deep freeze—right next to the vanilla almond ice cream and six frozen-eyed flounder. My mother lost ten pounds that summer because she couldn't bear to reach in behind the icy toads to get the ice cream. Eventually, when she could bring herself to endure the reach, she discovered she didn't want the ice cream anyway. Roger and I considered this an important discovery . . . much more important than the simulated "end of hibernation," when we thawed the poor things out on what must have been the hottest day of July. They moved slowly at first, dripping and steaming just a little. We ate watermelon and spit out the seeds as the frogs must have endured the greatest of all reptilian shocks—the immediate scalding of what had previously been nearly frozen blood. Thirty-six toads gave their lives for science that afternoon and two pink-stained, sticky children carried the burden of thirty-six tiny souls to bed with them that night. That was my first nightmare, by the way—it was much like a Japanese film I had just seen a few weeks before the toad massacre. I called out for my mother in my sleep just as the giant steaming toad ate my body, save the left leg which he left dangling from the carport rooftop like a Christmas tree decoration. I don't know what nightmares Roger had that night, but they must have been bad. He started attending mass even more often than before (it might have been a coincidence because his sister began wearing dresses that same summer), and he and I drifted apart. I bring all this up because, as I've mentioned, he was my only real friend and the last person who could hold a conversation with me without first

packing it full of recommendations.

I had once gone to church with him to see what he found so attractive about it all. The stained glass held my attention for awhile, with all of the pictures of slaughtered animals and woeful sinners and children who peered between purple-lined clouds to see God or a golden cup. One pane was of Jesus, who was talking to the masses with extended hands; the next pane over was Jesus on a cross with nails in his palms. Religion seemed very cause and effect if you looked at it only through the stained glass illustrations. Eating wafers and drinking wine sounded a lot better than it turned out to be. For one thing, we all had to use the same cup and you didn't even get enough wine to make you a little drunk. Roger must have enjoyed that kind of stuff, though, because he became very serious about it all. I'd like to think he got into it for the girls; after all, that's how I got where I am today. He might have fallen for some girl or another without realizing that Catholic girls cross their legs as well—especially those who "intend" to become nuns. He can't tell me he wasn't interested at one time, either; I knew him then. I really knew him.

I didn't have any enemies then; everyone was too frightened of me to hate me outloud. Kids tried to avoid me without catching them avoiding me. I wasn't a bully; I was a scientist. I had a conscience, though, and Roger was a firm believer in that. If I didn't like someone, they were fair game for my experiments. My grandmother proclaimed to everyone that I was just mature for my age, which made some of the things I did more palatable for the family pride in general. It wasn't only the "animal experiments" that made me out of the ordinary—it was my uncanny disconcern for what people thought about what guilt was, and although Roger tried to explain it to me, my reputation already was terribly tarnished.

I didn't surprise my family in the least when I ended up here. They all knew I would end up here. What they didn't know is that I haven't ended up—I've just begun a new experiment. I travel. That may be strange to hear from someone who lives in a 12x12 cubicle; from someone who has a constant shadow of black bar slashes on his face. I admit I worried a little, at first. The day they brought me in, for example, I paced. I remember quite plainly, that I ran to the bars to ask the guard for a transfer to a larger room. I told him that I would go crazy in such a small place, and that I wanted a room facing the courtyard instead of the injecting chamber walls. There was a possibility for a less gruesome place, I thought. He said something that I still believe to be profound, no matter the source. He said, "You're all crazy in here. Look what side of the bars you're on. If you were sane, you'd be out here." Then he walked away, as if it were a natural thing to walk away from a man who had just been condemned to trudge through the mire of his own memories or to invest a whole new personage into a whole new world he would have to invent inside a 12x12 block room that faced his inevitable doom. Roger told me once that heaven was described in the Bible as being just about this small; but he was given

to exaggeration if he felt it helped get the point across.

He came to see me a while back. He's a Father now. Father Roger. He asked me some questions, of course, to make sure that my mortal body had committed the actual act and not my immortal soul. Father Roger tended to believe my theory about the hands acting separately from the soul. In a way, I feel sorry for Father Roger; his best friend grew up to be a murderer. He promised to return tomorrow morning though. Everyone was surprised that I would allow the last rites to be given, since I'm not a Catholic. I did it for Roger. Why not? Personally, I think murderers don't give a damn about what people think they deserve. The just take anything that's offered.

Like her, for example. The cafe door opened. I looked up, automatically, not really caring to see anyone in particular. When she walked in, red dust from the road shook off her. She threw her head back; dust like glitter in the sunlight that had been allowed in the open door swirled into my coffee. She walked over to my booth and sat down. Just like that. No "may I" or "my name is" . . . just sat. For that moment, I thought of a jungle somewhere. A jungle absorbing the day, trailing mosquitoes and the scent of flowers behind it. I thought of this because she made me feel . . . as if she was a movement of the leaves; like a deer . . . and I was supposed to crouch for the attack.

Yes, it was strange. I tell you it was like life had stopped following her around weeks before. Just the sight of her made my blood being to race. She spoke—the empty sound of wind. Within the hour, I knew her life as well as my own. Anyone who can relate a life story so well, considers it over with already. Before too long, she began to expect sympathy, first, then we had some pound cake. It must have been a week old because I remember her remark about how it tasted like a sweater. That's the only thing I remember her saying, and we talked all afternoon.

She was a stranger after all; not an enemy, or a friend. I began to wonder if an experiment was presenting itself to me. Sure. I had to be careful . . . the previous experiment had lost me my job; the one prior to that, well, my family doesn't want to talk to me anymore. Perhaps that worked out for the best because they can work on each other so much more efficiently without me causing so much scandal. I use the word scandal loosely here; it was a shame but all of their plans to denounce me were worthless when the media interviewed them on my capital punishment case. Each and every one of them had his opportunity to tell everyone how much I deserve everything I get. Anyway, I knew that caution was at a premium when you experiment with adults, but I rationalized that what else was destiny but a string of experiments? My failures could have been considered catastrophes by someone less objective. I had nothing of value left, and I didn't even know what "value" meant. Who could have projected that a quiet diner, like any other you see on the side of the highway . . . and a cup of coffee would begin a new adventure? Just

coffee, I thought in my innocence as I stopped my journey, then I'll finish hitching to Dallas. I had hopes that a purpose would present itself to me in Dallas. I found something interesting on the side of highway 380 instead. The rest of the story is just details. They aren't as important as what I learned. I learned that I have the capacity to feel so sorry for someone that I will do anything for them. At least I did it that once. I thought that a strange discovery about myself, and I felt almost human about it. I know that murder isn't really a starting point in the quest for being a great humanitarian, but I was concerned enough about someone else to carry out a request—at the expense of my freedom. She asked me to go home with her; she had been desperate for someone—anyone. I was anyone enough for her.

It wasn't that she wasn't beautiful, either. People have been murdered for that before, you know. Imagine waking up one morning and finding an ugly old woman where your wife once lay. She was beautiful, though, especially afterwards.

That, I imagine, was the last "real" thing that happened to me. By "real," I mean that after that, my physical freedom was clipped and trimmed and finally honed into these four walls. I'm locked in, all right. But, as you can see, I've only really traveled since the day I came here. Father Roger tried to save me, he said. He asked me about my faith, wanting to know if it had diminished any since he knew me. The truth was that it hadn't, because I'd never had it back then, either. I told him that I liked parables, though. I even have one of my own.

It's a recurring dream that I call "blood sea island." I'm not an active participant in this dream, but I've attached meaning to it. The dream always begins the same: Thousands of bronzed people line the shores of what appears to be a small white-sanded island. This island is of the variety with beautiful flowers and where every kind of fruit is represented. An inactive volcano points ineffectually toward a clear, blue sky, and I know there are toucans in the leaves of the banana trees. The odd thing is the stance of all the islanders—they are all uniformly, as well as distortedly, peering out over the ocean toward the horizon in an eerie, unflinching manner. It's as if one single eye is formed from their union; an eye that creaks from left to right in a predetermined pattern they all know by heart. They don't see what they seek, and are very unhappy. Suddenly, after what I perceive is the passage of a great amount of time, they see a speck in the distance. The waves force the speck closer until it becomes a raft; closer still, it is a raft with the figure of a man on it. It's at this point that I realize that these islanders are afraid of the water. I know then, by a sudden burst of historical insight, that several of the islanders have tried to escape before by swimming. As one of them touched the water, froth and bubbles became scarlet as the body was pulled down by an unknown force, and bones were returned surprisingly clean. I became one of the silent crowd, then, warning this gentleman not to leave his raft lest he be consumed as well. The man does, though, much to our discomfort. As we crane our singular neck, his quick strokes bring him

in the one hundred yards or so to the island, leaving his raft bobbing forlornly in the unending expanse of blue ocean. He doesn't say anything to us, but at once we assume he is our savior. He points at us individually, explaining without words that we are to swim one by one to the raft and be taken away from this paradise. I become increasingly uncomfortable as I watch the islanders' faces. Each one registers unwillingness to remain on the island even one moment longer now that a means of escape is at hand. The danger is very evident to me—cooperation is the only way in which this task can be completed. On my invisible yet concrete-laden lips are the unheard words of a cliché: "women and children first." They jump into the water in a single body; the ocean immediately beginning to become animated by their arms and legs and faces—scratching, reaching, flailing, clutching, and finally bleeding, frothing, and drowning.

"Cause and effect," I told Roger, "is the only way to perceive religion." I'm sure he has forgiven that insight, however, as he's consented to perform the ceremony after all.

As I told you before, I've become very good at stories in here. "Blood sea island" is just a dream. Stories are my dreams made into memories. Those are the kind I collect. I've been too caught up in mind-traveling to worry about real destinations, schedules, time, and geography—all moot points. The war stories I mentioned earlier are the most emotional journeys for me. I must really prepare myself for anything when I depart for a war. The problem I've come up against is that, like I was saying, I distill war into its purest form. I pit two men against each other, causing me to assume the unhappy roles of the thousands of widows and children, as well as the millions of grieving friends left behind to set the world in order after it's all said and done. Sometimes I forget why I even started the war in the first place, but I cover well. I like the victory parades best of all. When the clowns with the confetti pepper the car of the winning side, and the loser is forced to walk behind with a broom These war stories are usually the closest I can come to observing morality—of course, *I* get to choose the winning side. Usually the side that shows initiative has nothing to worry about. In other words, the side that is fighting to experiment with possible outcomes—that's the winning side. I admit a possible bias there, but tell me, does God feel differently?

Now I feel compelled to negate any suspicions as to my considering myself a God; I'm merely a mild megalomaniac. Forgive me, but when you re-create your own universe within a very limited physical territory—well, I call it an accomplishment. Think of the Old West, or any unconquered wilderness for that matter. That's wide open territory. Think now about generations of people feeling good about "owning" that land, presiding over it, being "gods" of its destiny. And I have done so much more with so much less.

Death row doesn't have to be a dramatic place, especially for a scientist. A per-

son's last night of life doesn't have to be more memorable than any other—the next day will erase the memory so quickly that it might not have ever happened. I have been studying my hands, though. Tomorrow they won't be part of me anymore. My hands, the assassins, will go along their way toward dust.

I have imagined an execution—to prepare myself. Not an injection, of course—I chose instead to see a hanging. In the afternoon; a man fell from a ladder to the full extension of a rope and dangled like a ripe plum; I couldn't have been more graphic. When the sun began to set, I watched the outline of his form on the horizon—such a beautiful sunset; so many colors. To further calm myself, I gathered clouds that kneeled on the sun to push it to the other side of the world.

I might as well tell you that tomorrow I won't be there when I receive the injection; I'll be reliving "blood sea island." The man in the boat will swim toward the island. The sun will be unbearably hot, and the toucans will be screeching at each other in the woods behind us. This final time he'll have a face . . . a kind one. He'll explain to the islanders that they must come one by one onto the raft if they are to survive at all. They will jump into the water and the frenzy will begin. I will stand on the white, stark-white sand and watch, glancing now and again at the volcano and the sky. All of the islanders will die, and their bones will float away with the tide. Then there will only be the young man and myself. We will swim to the raft. We'll climb aboard and wait until the sun dips itself like a communion waver into the sea. Then we'll chart our course by the stars. I might even cast a line to catch an ugly drumhead, which will thump himself on the floor of the raft in a final frantic code of uselessness. Then, when the injection works, perhaps I'll be able to travel even further than before. My plans don't include darkness; I've told you before.

The sunlight is filtering into my small window to be strained into black slashes on the floor. I awakened to curt footsteps not ten minutes ago, yet, they only peered in to check on me. I have begun to prepare for my journey. My arms relax; my mind begins to walk around the room, then into the courtyard, then I am suddenly thrust into the glaring sunlight of the island. A man, meanwhile, has entered my cell with a tray of food. I have never explored the island before, so I decide to take a walk. The jungle is greener from the inside and the leaves slash my face with light, like my window back there . . . where another man in a green smock comes in apologetically to remove the tray. I run through the woods now . . . faster than I have ever run before . . . I am an animal. In the leaves I hear a rustle and turn to see a deer, or a woman, I'm not sure . . . the guard who had advised me about sanity came and cuffed my body to him . . . but I am in the jungle . . . running, breathing between the leaves of a tree. Behind me, a toucan—AAAHH! I sense everything so much more keenly. I guess because I'm suddenly vulnerable; perhaps I'm more powerful in that vulnerability. I am led into the injection room where a bright overhead light swings back and forth in a mad attempt to imitate the sun, but it is here with me . .

. and the deer running just ahead of me. The deer with legs shorter than mine; she had told me that she had seen things before . . . so painful that she could not stand . . . life anymore . . . "I see only limitations before me . . . so many hurdles to jump" . . . I jump; I devour . . . I have dragged so many carcasses home in one lifetime; it must be me. I remember it all too plainly for it to have been someone else; there is someone else . . . Father Roger, is that you? I'm sorry you came after all, I didn't come to greet you . . . because I'm looking in the distance on the shore now. The islanders and I are searching for that man on the raft . . . I see the needle enter my arm. . . . He is swimming for the shoreline . . . I'm still hopeful . . . the bodies pile onto one another as if freedom were that easy. Father Roger is saying something I can't make out . . . the hot lamp is still swinging . . . or is it the sun? Yes, the sun is swinging . . . I am swimming to the raft in long, easy strokes . . . the sun goes out for good.

Billie Sue Mosiman

Wild Strawberries

His constant hope was to find a way to heal them. Was there a way? The vicious attack on their son had left them all three wounded.

He walked into the room where shades were drawn against sunlight. She always longed for the sun, but now she'd turned her back on it.

A portable box fan trembled on the floor and blew stale air from one side of the room to the other. Magazines littered the floor beside the bed, dog-eared, some of the pages ripped loose.

He looked deeper into the artificial twilight. A book unread but open face down on a table beside a mug of cold coffee. The ashtray overflowed with ground butts. This was her world and no one else's. He sighed heavily and moved toward her where she lay sprawled across the bed, legs akimbo, eyes fluttering in half sleep.

The bed creaked agonies as he sat on the side of the mattress. He put one arm across her diminutive waist where the white slip was bunched. She struggled into wakefulness one hand groped across the sheet as if to tug on a vanishing dream.

"You shouldn't do this to yourself," he said softly. What he meant was she shouldn't do it to either of them. He ached to hold her, but knew caresses held no salvation. Touching brought recoil and anger. He understood this too and left her alone.

She rubbed her eyes with doubled fists and suddenly flung them out in outrage. Life was too raw and sleep so easy.

"I know I shouldn't do it," she admitted. "I'm scared to death. All I want is Jimmy home. Where is our Jimmy?"

He waited, the silence a stone great as the room. Shadows spun past the shades and warbled from the force of the fan. Everything moved—out there. In here, the tone pinned them to the bed.

"Can I just talk? Does it matter if I don't make any sense?" she asked, her eyes avoiding his.

"It doesn't matter."

Had the flecks in the depths of her brown cocoa eyes always been so dark and troubled? She was slipping away, and he let her go. He had no choice.

"First of all we move back South. You get a job with the Forest Service as a . . . ranger or park tender or something, you know, like that. We can live in the woods, and they'll give us a house. We can move and begin again, start all over. There

aren't any cars or trains or ambulances or city noise." She paused, listening to a siren. "No gangs, either. No people crowding us. It's quiet. Birds everywhere. Pine trees—God, I miss the pines, you don't know how I miss them. Anyway, there are trees drooping over the front of the house where we sit on hot nights, smelling tar oozing out. It's lovely and quiet. Are you listening?"

"Yes, of course. Go on."

"You do things like check the county roads or woods or the wild animals. You make sure there aren't any fires left burning or whatnot. But the best thing is, we're free. No phones or worry over bills or noise or air that breathes like plastic wrap. I can read, sew, or just sit, and it won't make any difference."

She was fast slipping. She sucked in her breath, and he imagined she could already smell the forest, the tar, the musky quiet. He waited patiently for her to continue. He'd heard it before, but sometimes he was in the role of a marina handyman, and they lived on the beach in Gulf Shores, Alabama, or he was a county deputy responsible for the welfare of an under-populated area in Georgia. Always there was hope of escape, a running away to deserts, mountain retreats, woods, especially woods. Civilization had caused her severe disorientation. The city had always baffled her. Fantasy was an urgent detour in times of stress. Jimmy's stabbing had completely annihilated her tolerance for city living.

Tears dropped onto her slip, spotting it gray. She brushed her lashes angrily, and her eyes cleared.

"That would be nice, wouldn't it?" she asked. He nodded his assurance that, yes, her dreams were indeed nice dreams. They always were.

"A man has his choice about how he lives, doesn't he?" she asked. "We aren't cattle, are we, waiting for slaughter?"

He winced at the word at the same moment she did. He shifted his weight and struggled to right one ankle that had fallen asleep. It tingled, but he kept his expression bland, a baked custard face.

Creature of effortless days, he thought, as she fingered the sheet, thinking. Her imagination overblown by books. A romanticist caught in an age of realism.

But I love her. This is my fate to love her.

"You could do it, honey," she said, picking up the broken thread of her fantasy. "Some people live uncomplicated lives. I can see it now. Remember those parks we used to camp in when we were first married? They needed forestry people, attendants, somebody to watch over those places."

"I know."

"All right. I'll tell you about the house. It's wooden so the outside smells come through the cracks to reach us. There has to be a fireplace with a wide mantle. Lots of split logs piled neatly on the porch. It has to have a porch! And a swing, of course. Then the kitchen is important too. It faces the sunrise, so in the mornings we

can eat by sunlight and supper is shadowy and cool. Not like here. Not like looking out the kitchen window on a chalky red building butted up against us and front windows that face the street. Did you know people, perfect strangers, crane their necks to look in on us? What do they want from me?"

He shook his head unhappily. Did people really spy on them like she said? He resisted an urge to glance at the shades.

"I'd have everything blue," she continued. "Blue curtains and white sashes and blue and white bedspreads. Hardwood floors. A big oval mirror hanging on the wall beside the mantle and vases and vases of wildflowers. They're the best, you know. Better than a hundred roses from the florist. Honeysuckle and dogwood branches in bloom. Goldenrod—but I used to sneeze around goldenrod. Violets and those wild orange irises that come out in June all along the roadsides. The house would be full of sweetness. At night, we'd count fireflies the way I did when I was a kid. If I could only hear a whippoorwill or a mockingbird. . . ."

Slipping. The South of her youth where sultry vines and bird calls forced her away from the whine of the traffic beyond the windows. The South. That country as strange and apart as if it was transplanted from the far edge of another galaxy. Something magic here, in the South. It suffused her blood with stories and tales, with memories, all of them hard-knuckled and sunburnt and smelling of dark loam and damp clay banks. She suffers an ancestral sickness. She left a trailing umbilical cord attached when she left the South, and it stretches across thousands of miles, its roots buried deep, deep in warm, baked soil. She is a prisoner, however unwilling, of her geography. He suspected this all along. She doesn't belong to him. She doesn't belong to Jimmy. The South had its claim first, and it's the strongest.

I don't understand.

He willed his thoughts to her, hoping for psychic intervention.

I don't understand, but sometimes when I'm still awake late at night, I wish I had your roots. I don't understand, but I wish I could dream your dreams and make them real. But the South, it's a spot on a map. It's only a place confined by a section of earth and climate. It's not even the same as it was twenty years ago when I took you away. Don't you know that? Time has ravaged the South, too. There have been cataclysmic changes while you weren't looking.

"There used to be a brook," she said, clasping hold of the dream by the coattail before it disappeared. "A little bit of water that ran behind my great aunt's house. I jumped across it when I was little, and it was big to me, almost too big to land on the other side without getting wet. The woods all around it. Steep sides, red clay. The water was clean, pure, cold and icy. Pale yellow sand shone from the bottom like fool's gold. I'd swing my arms in a great arc and jump. When I was hot and thirsty, I'd slide down to the water and lift the water in cupped hands. It was so good it makes my teeth ache to think of it.

"On the other side of the brook was a little kingdom. I'd find strawberries in the spring. They were the reddest things, like drops of blood spilled between saw-toothed leaves. I had to think real hard when I ate them. I had to think STRAWBERRIES, but when I got it right, they tasted as good as the big field strawberries. They tasted better! The weren't full of dust and grit and pithy centers. They were wild strawberries so they were made of dew and shade, the only stuff a little girl cares about.

"When I had my fill of them I put the sensitive plants to sleep. Of course, I didn't know what they were called then. They were just tiny, green willowy plants that magically went to sleep at my touch. I'd touch them all until the whole ground around me was sound asleep, dozing in the forest, and I was a fairy that had done this thing grown-ups couldn't do."

He was there. Tasting the wild berries, the cool, refreshing water, smelling the flowers, touching the sleeping plants. With great reluctance he drew himself up mentally. He had to. She was better, more stable, and they had to see Jimmy. One minute more. He could give her one minute. She pulled evenly and purposefully on her eyelashes.

"We have to go to the hospital."

"I know." Her fingers stopped their pacing across her eyes and she blinked at him, a wounded fawn guilty of nothing but a stumble towards survival. "I'll get ready."

He moved from her side to allow her room to stand. She pulled down the slip to cover milky thighs. She reached for a cigarette, hesitated, replaced it in the crumpled pack. He side-stepped as she brushed past him on the way to the bathroom. To feel busy, he picked up the discarded magazines, thumbing first this one, then that, glancing over the shining, newly minted models, their smiles aglow, tidy rooms of modern furniture, pictures of food that seemed to leap from the page. How sad. How cockeyed the world was. It wasn't like that here behind the drawn shades. He doubted the pictures were true of any world. They reflected fantasy too.

"All right," she said from the doorway. She attempted to smile and froze. She let the smile go and was herself again.

He took her arm lightly. She stumbled on the rug, and he caught her by the waist but let her go again when she looked afraid.

Crowds jostled them on the sidewalk. She pushed one man into the gutter. Purely reflex action. She knew how to live in the city.

The hospital was five blocks distant. He knew better than she. He had counted the blocks each day for seven days of Jimmy's confinement. He had spent his time in one place or the other, in the hospital or in her disheveled world. In between the two he counted the blocks, the cracks in the sidewalk, the passing cars, clouds, anything but the minutes wasted in limbo.

"It could have happened in the Mississippi Delta or the Alabama hill country," he said, forgetfully speaking his thoughts aloud. A mistake.

"Don't you say that." She was a hiss against his eardrums. "Don't you ever say that again when you know it's a lie."

Was it a lie? Was crime less cruel, accidents less real, disease less rampant, death less certain in the South? He wanted to believe.

She stopped and looked up at the hard marble structure blotting the afternoon sky. The floors rose out of squalor, noise, the stink of exhaust and decay. The hospital filled a space between the spires of a Catholic church on one side and a glass skyscraper on the other. He pressed her elbow and she lurched forward. He looked down at her shoes and saw they were the red, dainty ones, but they were scuffed and dirtied. One of her stockings had a run in it that followed a faint blue vein down the back of her leg, ending an inch short of the heel. He wanted desperately to hold her. But she was leaving him, and he'd lose sight of her if he didn't hurry.

Frosty air buffeted them as the doors slipped open. Too white, too scalding white and antiseptic. Employees in pastel colors moved in streams across the lobby. There was a bouquet. Clorets, Dentyne, alcohol, strong soap, pine oil. A bored receptionist, a volunteer in pink uniform and grey curls, looked up and slowly thumbed through her card file. She extracted two candy pink visitor's cards from the pile at her side and attached metal clips that hung like silver fingers from the corners. A brief, totally insincere smile. He ignored it and moved her to the bank of elevators. He knew you didn't have to talk here if you didn't want to. Social courtesies weren't enforced.

"How can you stand this?" she asked when they were safely entombed in the buzzing elevator.

"For Jimmy."

"I couldn't. Not even for you."

The doors slid apart and she looked into the glaring lighted hallway. He followed behind, gaze on the stocking run, sure the blue vein was even more prominent than it had been before.

"Are you Jimmy's parents?" a nurse called from behind a closed glass window in a cubicle. Sweat poured from her brow. She might be filling sacks with peaches on a roadside stand. "Would you wait here for a minute? The doctor wishes to speak to you."

They watched as the nurse dialed a number on the desk phone. When she finished they stared at her expectantly. She wiped her forehead and scattered a pile of pastel papers on the floor at her feet.

A voice took them from the back. "Well, hello! I'm glad you both could come. Will you follow me, please?"

Brisk, self-important footsteps. A consulting room, small, splashed with vinyl

chairs in orange, yellow, green.

They faced the doctor. “Two days ago it wasn’t good,” he intoned. “The chances for Jimmy were slim. But I have good news. We believe he’s going to pull through. The cut didn’t reach the lungs. He’s in stable condition, finally.”

Her rigid body toppled like a tower into her husband’s arms. He supported her with an arm around her shoulder. He heard her crying softly. The doctor patted her arm and left the room.

“I want to see him,” she said.

Against the crisp white sheets he lay sleeping. His face was unmarked, his dark lashes calm against his plump cheeks. She touched the mound of bandages around his middle. Her fingers darted up to his chest, his chin, his lips. She pulled away and moved to the door.

Outside the hospital, he whispered close to her head as she pressed her body against his. Horns bellowed, cars belched past, sodium lights winked on to signal nightfall.

He had made up his mind. Jimmy’s reprieve demanded promises.

“We’ll leave as soon as he’s able. We’ll take a train. I’ll send some applications to the park services and try to find a house, a house with a porch and a swing. We’ll leave here.”

“You’ll take me home?”

“Yes. All three of us will go home.”

At the street a cabbie slammed his brakes and squealed to a halt, narrowly missing the couple crossing the street against the light. He shook his fist and yelled obscenities until they were lost in a crowd on the sidewalk.

She remarked on the heat, the city’s terrible heat, as they beat forward against the onslaught of night people seeking an avenue of escape. He stayed quiet and listened because they were inside the circle again and his comments weren’t needed. He let her plot their future into Southern woodlands, her voice dipping below the city roar to reach him. He made an effort to enter the fantasy. He pushed away all doubts, all fears of what it was like where she wanted to go. If she didn’t remember hate or prejudice or boredom maybe it didn’t exist. He hoped she was right. She might have been right all along.

“We’ll look for wild strawberries in the spring and let Jimmy taste them before he’s too old,” she said.

He nodded on cue. Jimmy was not yet a man. The entire country was not yet grotesque and dangerous. His wife was not yet irreversibly lost in the corridors of her own alienation. There was hope and peace and happiness. Until he found where it hid, it was his duty to protect his family, without fail, the way a giant oak supports and protects the lichens growing in feeble masses about its exposed roots.

“Don’t you think so?” She asked and her voice was taking wings.

He didn't know what she was referring to, but he knew the answer. "Yes," he said quickly. "Yes, I agree."

"I know that I'm right," she said, taking his hand and rubbing his knuckles with her thumb the way she did when she was happy.

In the stale, airless apartment she raised the shades, emptied the ashtrays, sorted the magazines. He reclined on the bed watching. It was her world and he was content to let her guide him through it. She knew the landmarks so well.

Tracey Nichols

The Storm

"It's coming," Mother yelled excitedly. Her sudsy hand threw a yellow plate at the dish holder. It missed, fell and shattered on the kitchen floor with a noisy crash.

"Kids, kids, hurry! Put your shoes on, and your sweaters, too, now. Oh, Roy, it's so close, come see!" She yelped, wiping her hands on a checked towel. Stepping on crunching pieces of plate, she ran to the living room. Most country farms like this one had the living room off the back porch.

"It's a funnel cloud, sure is . . . couldn't be more than five miles off. What should we do, oh, us, open the windows?" She cleared her throat and rubbed the palms of her hands together. "Let's see, which ones, the southwest ones? I mean, doesn't the wind blow southwest to northeast, or is it the other way around?" she blurted and stammered as her sharp eyes darted from room to room. She did this during bouts of high-strung nervousness, which came often. Her tone had a more emphatic edge to it this time, though.

Father slowly eased himself out of the chair, and disinterestedly slid into his brown-leather house shoes. Striking up his pipe (which he's long since given up due to lip cancer) and padding across the floor in his boxer shorts, he was the picture of unastonished composure. My childhood gave me two visions of the contradictory truth, which is healthy for anyone, I'm sure.

The recollection must be twenty years old (when I was five and in the first grade), but some things one never forgets. That scowl on his brow as he placed the book face down (he was a knowledge-motivated man), and his muttering on that day somehow sticks firmly in my mind.

Knuckles white, gripping the sink, Mother's agitated voice rose an octave higher.

"My Lord, what are we gonna do? Quickly, kids, grab your stuff and come on. We're going to the storm cellar. . . ."

By this time, we were all bunched around the window, straining our necks to see. With a wild whoop, my eldest, buck-toothed brother exclaimed, "Look at that whirlpool a' dust. I betcha that cloud kin knock ya off yur feet!"

"It can knock the freckles right off your nose, now go! And help Kevin, too!" she hollered, patting him between the shoulder blades before he dashed off.

"Good God, Roy, it's goin' to blow us away! They say when it hits it sounds just like a train." Mother's voice trailed as she shook her head. Her eyes were wide

and teary.

Trying to find our sweaters and shoes was a major chore in the bedroom I shared with my two sisters. Clothes, toys, and indescribable junk scattered everywhere. It was a wonder we didn't disappear into Junkdom for ever, where all messy kids deserve to go. My favorite red sweater was located between a night stand and the bed, crumpled into a small bundle. Shaking it out (something Mom always told me to do in case of nesting mice) I put it on and looked out the window.

The yellow-gray sky was beginning to darken to a deep grayish-black color in patches along the horizon. When I opened the window, a few drops of drizzle sprayed into my face. The stillness seemed to silence the frogs' songs in the wind on the flat plains of this southern Oklahoma farm. Even though I knew very little about tornadoes, the quiescence of the evening did not seem to fit the description of one to me. Tumbleweeds began to roll unsmoothly, like tractor tires in mud, toward the enormous, gray barn.

I was sure the possums, skunks, and owls were burrowing into more secure habitats, sensing intuitively the feeling of dramatic air pressure change. The tall, green stalks of maize were bowing their heads to the ground in reverent Hindu meditation, and the tranquillity turned into a windy, swirling backflow of activity.

A flurry of air belched forth a stench of insect spray that hung in the breeze after the crop dusters had sprayed that morning. Was it for cotton? I don't remember, but that odor and wet earth trace repelled and thrilled me, and even today still leaves me with associations of tornadoes.

Dad was fond of bringing home treats, and I grabbed the bag of lemon drops from the top of my bed on the way out. Scooping up my shoes and socks, I ran to the hall by the front door to put them on.

Mother's voice kept getting louder and louder. I suppose she was hollering at one of my siblings, Clamorous sounds came from my brothers' bedroom at the same time the animals by the four waste sheds took up mooing, quacking, gobbling, and hooting. Inside, the trills, honking, and clucking created comparable pandemonium as well. Off pitch, the sound of thunder came clashing in and managed temporarily to silence the whole lot of us.

The omen of the gods seemed to straddle the red-brick farm house that stood in the open and deserted terrain. Even though the sound frightened me, I always felt excitement before a storm. It meant we could run down to the stock pond, the one with the windmill in the center, and play in the red mud afterwards. In an oozy, sloshy slime, we pretended it was quicksand or a sizable suction cup taking us in, ensnaring us, enmeshed to our elbows. Far-gone into muddy paradise, submerged in an inanimate thick cloak, playing in the stock pond after a rain was the next best thing to mother's womb.

The windstorm became more forceful. The trees commenced doing something

that looked to me like an exotic, tribal dance. I remember trying to duplicate the moves as I popped a lemon drop into my mouth.

Running outside to find Tiger, the newest, feline member of the family, I noticed the windmill was violently shaking, as if almost losing its balance. A sharp crash turned my attention to a glass, gallon milk container that we kept our fresh milk in. It had blown off the porch onto the sidewalk.

"Where are you, baby? Come on, kitty."

My blue print shirt, enveloping my skinny frame, blew up in gusts around my chin. The cows were standing together at the salt licks. The long, red hairs on their backs were fluttering in tufts and their tails were floating in smooth waves, all pointing northeast. Swirling dust blinded me temporarily. A screen door slammed, and whimpering, nervous voices came out. Mother was still inside, trying to gather her last chick beneath her wing.

"Now, Roy, don't be foolish. That tornado is on its way, and you'd be a fool not to take cover . . . please!" she chided, agitation making her jaw set just so.

"Oh, that thing isn't going to hit, Linnie. You're just being over-hysterical as usual. Why don't you just calm down? You're frightening all the kids, now." Full lips were pursed together, his look serious. During those rough times, only the youngest children could bring a smile to my father's face. We were poor even though Dad worked overtime. Bless his heart, he had a definite calamity of spirit with too many indefinite reasons. My mother worked also (this perhaps an understatement) as a nurse at a local hospital Although it was hard labor, to sure, it was also a relief for her to get away from the free-spirited country children that we had become. Later her job turned into a midnight shift.

Many times during those months, she was angry and frustrated. I once interrupted one of her tirades by saying, "You don't care about us at all!" Viciously said, it was meant to invoke guilt within her. I was scared when I saw the family breaking up. Later that night, I heard her crying in the living room, my father's even-toned voice trying to console her, and the words were low and indistinguishable. She never got over feeling guilty for leaving the oldest kids at home alone sometimes. That was the first time I heard the word divorce.

"You just don't want to pull yourself away from that damn TV!" her voice brawled, "You self-destructive, lazy bum!"

"Maybe I will take a little break, just to get me a fresh beer. You sure could use one. You're raving mad," he said choppily, with ice in his voice. His attitude during arguments became more unaffected and bovine with each passing criticism. He sighed heavily and marched from the room with a smug look on his face.

"What a great example you set for the children. You can go to hell!" she attacked in rage.

"Aah, go on, hysterical woman. You're disturbing the reception," he stated mat-

ter-of-factly in a monotone voice.

She turned and stomped out with one last, cutting remark on her lips. “I hope the tornado splinters that easy chair, fellah!”

Lord knows, one remark was an unfair statement, for the old TV we burned hot night and day back then was strictly for the benefit of the children—a cheap baby-sitter. My father rarely had time for such luxuries. It was plain to me that there was a greater tempest indoors than out.

Overreacting is what my father called her zealous animation, but, truthfully, she was more full of life than he was, had boundless energy, and got bored easily. The county was no place for a city woman. That had been his idea, and he felt ashamed to admit his mistake.

Now she was concerned for her family—the big one she had always wanted. My dad felt trapped and unsuccessful; there was no denying it in his eyes. Life provided him with an endless supply of mouths to feed. His traditional mind told him, “If only I was rich, my wife wouldn’t have to work. She’d be happy, and I could spend more time teaching Cory how to throw a ball and Jenny her ABCs.”

After my mother had gained weight, she would criticize my father for bringing home too many groceries, sweets in particular.

“If you bring all that junk home, I can’t help but eat it. Help me, will you? I’m addicted to sweets just like an alcoholic.”

“Linnie, I’m not going to deny the kids food they like just because you can’t control your appetite. Just go on a regular diet.”

“Roy, you overbuy. Some of that stuff will just spoil. Do you always have to play the great provider?”

“You mean, you over-eat. You don’t make use of some of that food I see you throw away. You waste instead of making leftovers from excess food.”

“I’m not Suzy Homemaker that can make T-bone steak out of ground round. You expect me to be perfect, and I try as hard as I can. A brown head of lettuce is inedible!”

“But not the chocolate cake!” he threw back. So, when he refused to stop, she ate to spite him, and because she loved chocolate cake. Soon, she enveloped herself in layers of soft cushion that would protect her from her hostility, guilt, and boredom. So, they were both to blame for saying ruinous things to one another, but neither one could help the other’s discontent.

What my mother had forgotten was that my father was an artist. Oh, not by profession, but he was a most excellent painter and sculptor. Eventually, he would forget this, too. New oils and canvas were spendthrift items not included in the budget. Chocolate cake and beer were, though. Food for their stomachs, but no food for their souls. So, little by little, he dried up like a twisted, empty foil tube of paint, and never said a word about it to anyone.

What my father had forgotten was that my mother enjoyed dancing. She was full of rhythm and loved to move her feet. She had learned to tap dance in the orphan's home she was brought up in. Eventually, she would forget this too. Nights out at the local "Corral J" were not in the budget, even though new jeans for the kids were. My father was not a dancer, nor did he even try to learn. Luxuries like this seemed frivolous next to the overwhelming worries of "getting by," so little by little her feet stopped tapping to the transistor radio on the kitchen window ledge.

They always forgave each other.

When she slammed the door, a deluge of pouring rain halted her steps. The children were all playing in the torrent, squealing with delight, quite forgetting all about the catastrophic tornado in the wake.

"Help me lift this, Lezley. It's heavy. We need to get in here fast."

"But what about Daddy? Isn't he coming?" Lezley asked with a look of horror coming over her face.

"Oh, I hope the wind blows that stubborn ol' goat away!" she bit, almost chewing with delight on the words.

"Mama!"

"Where Dada?" the baby boy, Kevin, asked with a slight tip of his tow-head.

"Inside, dear. He's hiding from the storm inside, but we are hiding in here. OK? He's watching TV."

"Uh, uh. Me go inside. Wanna watch TV," he whimpered, sensing the obvious uneasiness in her voice.

"Don't get bossy with me, young man, or I'll turn you across my knee. You kids never do as I say anymore. It's living out in this damn country that did it. You just run wild! Come on! Let's go. NOW!" I suppose she overused that tone and cried wolf one too many times, because it had grown somewhat ineffective.

As they opened the heavy, metal door that was almost parallel to the ground, Lezley remarked, "I'm not going in there, no siree. There's bugs and everything crawly in that place."

"Me, neither," I joined in, feeling a sweat rise to my brow. Nothing had ever seemed scarier. Every child was soon in unison. Usually, when one refused to do something, say for instance eating cabbage, invariably we all did. It was blood code and very offensive to break the pact, even if it meant severe punishment, which it usually did.

I spotted Tiger, the cat, about to pounce on a sand-colored grasshopper and swept her up in my arms.

"Ya can't crawl in the bottle any more, Tiger. It broke on the steps, look," I said, turning the cat's face to the porch.

Finally relenting, due to the intermittent rain soaking us to the bone, Cory went first. Cory and Lezley were twins, and they usually made all the important decisions

for the younger ones (I survived many bloody noses with those two).

By now, the funnel was up against our backbones. As I turned to look at it, my insides felt like viscid and heavy. There was a crack of jagged, purple lightning filling the sky with a light show then booming deep-voiced thunder. We all screamed in accord.

The storm cellar was a sunken dugout with red dirt, now mud, packed on a concrete roof above rotten, wooden-framed walls. What light was left in the dark sky cast only enough illumination for us to see five concrete steps leading to oblivion. A black hole.

Some cried louder than others when Mother ordered us down the stairs behind her, single file. Holding on to each other, we gritted our teeth and never lost contact—well-trained elephants in a circus.

I was on the end. Something in me knew this was just as bad as any ol' tornado, and I couldn't decide which was the worst of the two evils. I let go of my sister's shirttail. When they got to the bottom, I was still at the top of the stairs, rain pelting my forehead.

"Come on, come, Jenny. Help her, Cory," Mother's alarmed voice urged frantically.

I stumbled down the steps. Cory saw the kitten poking from under my sweater, damp and wild-eyed. He suddenly bolted out the door.

"Freckles! Maaamaaah, we forgot Freckles!"

He ran full-lunged, out into the storm, wailing the dog's name over and over again. Mama ran out after him. Several minutes passed. The rest of the children cried, fearing for Father's and Mother's lives, as well as Freckles's and Cory's, repeating over and over what sounded suspiciously like the "Lord's Prayer." Not being a churchly family, that was the only prayer we knew. Those few minutes seemed like a wicked eternity.

Severe retributions overflowed on Mama's lips as she returned. She had Cory by the collar, and closed the door. Cory, with his arms full of a muddied Freckles, looked like a form of lower animal life himself. His expression told us the storm was overhead. Spankings never made him that pale.

In the meantime, we caught a whiff of Freckles, the rankest dog this side of Kansas. A short-haired, brown and white spotted terrier, he managed to chase skunks down and inevitably lose. To this day, that is a pleasant, even comforting smell to me.

Just as our fears were easing, a rat's alarmed squeak broke the stillness of the musty, grave-like quarters and made me choke on the lemon drop. With a white, utility candle and two matches Dad kept on the front shelving, our courage bolstered, and we struck one of the match sticks and lit the candle. The little flicker became a steady light and no sooner than our eyes adjusted, did we see a huge,

black spider crawling on Dena's toe. (Yes, one shoe was missing—she couldn't find it amid the junk.) She shrieked and began to cry all over again.

"Stop," I whimpered. "You'll scare Tiger."

Old tin boxes, a window pane of glass, and grocery crates with their labels peeling and faded, surrounded us from all sides. We made the crates our seating in this smothering limbo.

On the right, wooden shelves appeared to be hammered into dirt walls, and held unordered rows of glass, mason jars filled with fruit preserves, green beans, and pickled somethings. The cobwebbed dungeon smelled damp and ancient. It also had a rat smell that I attributed to the grain and potatoes stored in burlap bags down there. Dad said they had a distinct smell, and he grumbled each time he threw away many half-eaten potatoes. There seemed to be an oily substance on the dirt floor, probably leaking out of a rusted piece of farm equipment that stood monsterlike, snaggle-toothed, and ironbound in the corner.

The rain sounded tinny on the door and seemed to beat out its urgent message for us to listen to. We all lost our voices, except for occasional streams of moaning, and in awe we waited for the sound of the train.

Dena's mouth was set in clenched and repressed fear, which was really quite hilarious in retrospect. Mother was, without a doubt, the most unnerved and emotional of us all. Probably because she had stayed up late and never seemed to sleep very long. Determined not to lose any of the flock, she counted heads. I thought that was one of the most ridiculous and silliest gestures she could have done. Maybe she was trying to keep her mind off the pulverization of the door overhead, that was by now starting to drip around the edges. Water was leaking from half a dozen places in this bottled-up purgatory. We remained for more than an hour in this condition, and I prayed silently for Dad's stubborn soul, sure he had been left for dead. We were in an interment camp, being tested for endurance by something savage and cruel. Condemned in this cave, nothing could have seemed more frightening, except for the punishing noises our of doors. Mama was our head jailer.

From the outside, I suppose we looked like a family of mice, secretly hiding ourselves in a tin can as Zeus not only pissed through a sieve but blew his potent breath upon us.

"Maybe this storm will pass, and we can all go in and have chicken and dumplings. Would you like that?" Mama whispered.

"Dena, sit on this overturned milk stool here," Mama said, trying to take her mind off spiders.

"Can't, Mama, tump over," Dena mumbled.

"Oh, I see, one of the legs is broken. Well, come over and sit on my lap, too," I noticed she always held more than one of us when she was afraid.

The tonality of the little faces brightened as the rain began to stop. My mother's

beautifully gentle face was dewy and glistening in the half-light. The slight wrinkles by the side of her eyes constricted as she drew picture in the dirt with a stick to amuse the younger ones. It was obvious that she was scared to predict the storm was over. There was dirt smeared on one fleshy applecheek and strands of auburn hair pasted to her thick neck. Her chest lifted and heaved softly. Then she turned to me and, with tears in her eyes, weakly smiled to comfort me. Oh, how I longed to rip out all of the fretful misery that clung to her life and take her into my arms and tell her, "Don't worry, Mama. Everything's goin' to be all right." It was on this day, so early in my lifetime, that I realized how truly sacrificial and gracious a woman she really was. I also discovered her never-ending concern and realized how purely she loved us all. Angry shouts lost their volume in my mind, and bad words she had spoken in frustration lost their meaning. In that instant, I felt free to grow toward something special, learn how to read, and run the maize fields.

The cat mewed loudly, and the dog ran from one corner of the cellar to another. Because it was such close quarters, that probably meant four or five steps. He began doing backflips. When Freckles got anxious, he would jump high in the air and twist his body in such a way that he would actually flip. Mother spanked him on the rump and scolded him.

"This smelly hold isn't big enough for you to perform now, you stinky dog!"

In order to cope with disaster, one needed a great deal of patience, coolness, and presence of mind. Mother possessed none of these qualities.

All became quiet. Wet and shivering, Mother finally opened the lid to our coffin and walked up the steps to a somewhat startling, quiet world.

One screen had been carried several yards from the picture window in front, and a few shingles from the roof were missing, too. Lawn furniture was strewn on the porch steps. The windmill had collapsed into the muddy stock pond. Tin sheds were missing their flimsy roofs. And, the treehouse, built by Cory, had not proved storm worthy, despite his boastful comments at every turn about its sturdiness.

Mother tore into the house in search of Father's body.

"No, no, Roy my darling, oooh. . . ."

As we ran into the house, the silence was unbearable. Slowly we peeked around the corner, holding our breaths. With a look of complete surprise on her face, she knelt beside the couch to touch my father's hair. There he was, with glasses atop his head, stretched out in languid stillness. His pipe was smoking on the coffee table beside the book and a can of beer. She kissed him on the lips. He was sleeping so soundly, he had missed the storm.

Essay

Phillip Lopate

In the Here and Now

The argument of both the hedonist and the guru is that if we were but to open ourselves to the richness of the moment, to concentrate on the feast before us, we would be filled with bliss. I have lived in the present from time to time, and I can tell you that it is much over-rated. Occasionally, as a holiday from stroking one's memories or brooding about future worries, I grant you, it can be a nice change of pace. But to "be here now" hour after hour would never work. I don't even approve of stories written in the present tense. As for poets who never use a past participle, they deserve the eternity they are striving for.

Besides, the present has a way of intruding whether you like it or not; why should I go out of my way to meet it? Let it splash on me from time to time, like a car going through a puddle, and I, on the sidewalk of my solitude, will salute it grimly like any other modern inconvenience.

If I attend a concert, obviously not to listen to the music but to find a brief breathing space in which to meditate on the past and future, I realize that there may be moments when the music invades my ears and I am forced to pay attention to it, note after note. I believe I take such intrusions gracefully. The present is not always an unwelcome guest, so long as it doesn't stay too long and cut into our time for remembering.

Even for survival, it's not necessary to focus one's full attention on the present. The instincts of a pedestrian crossing the street in a reverie will usually suffice. Alertness is all right as long as it is not treated as a promissory note on happiness. Anyone who recommends attention to the moment as a prescription for grateful wonder is only telling half the truth. To be happy one must pay attention, but to be unhappy one must also have paid attention.

Attention, at best, is a form of prayer. Conversely, as Simone Weil said, prayer is a way of focusing attention. All religions recognize this when they ask their worshipers to repeat the name of their God, a devotional practice which draws the practitioner into a trance-like awareness of the present, and the objects around oneself. With a part of the soul, one praises God, and with the other part, one expresses a hunger, a dissatisfaction, a desire for more spiritual contact. Praise must never stray too far from longing, that longing which takes us implicitly beyond the present.

I was about to say that the very act of attention implies longing, but this is not necessarily true. Attention is not always infused with desire; it can settle on us most

placidly once desire has been momentarily satisfied, like after the sex act. There are also periods following over-work when the exhausted slave-body is freed and the eyes dilate to register with awe the lights of the city; one is too tired to desire anything else.

Such moments are rare. They form the basis for a poetic appreciation of the beauty of the world. However, there seems no reliable way to invoke or prolong them. The rest of the time, when we are not being edgy or impatient, we are often simply *disappointed,* which amounts to a confession that the present is not good enough. People often try to hide their disappointment—just as Berryman's mother told him not to let people see that he was bored, because it suggested that he had no "inner resources." But there is something to be said for disappointment. This least respected form of suffering, downgraded as a kind of petulance, at least accurately measures the distance between hope and reality. And it has its own peculiar satisfactions: why else do we return years later to places where we had been happy, if not to savor the bittersweet pleasure of disappointment.

Moreover, disappointment is the other side of a strong, predictive feeling for beauty or appropriate civility or decency. Only those with a sense of order and harmony can be disappointed.

We are told that to be disappointed is immature, in that it presupposes having unrealistic expectations, whereas the wise man meets each moment head-on without preconceptions, with freshness and detachment, grateful for anything it offers. However, this pernicious teaching ignores everything we know of the world. If we continue to expect what turns out to be not forthcoming, it is not because we are unworldly in our expectations, but because our very worldliness has taught us to demand of an unjust world that it behave a little more fairly. The least we can do, for instance, is to register the expectation that people in a stronger position to be kind and not cruel to those in a weaker, knowing all the while that we will probably be disappointed.

The truth is, wisdom is embittering. The task of the wise person cannot be to pretend with false naiveté that every moment is new and unprecedented but to bear the burden of bitterness that experience forces on us with as much uncomplaining dignity as strength will allow. Beyond that, all we can ask of ourselves is that the bitterness not cancel out our capacity to still be surprised.

Interviews

Lionel Garcia

Interview conducted by Lazaro Aleman and Steven Robinson

Recently, Lionel Garcia's short piece "Leaving Home," an excerpt from a novel in progress, won first prize in the PEN-Southwest Discovery Prize fiction competition. The $1,100 award and critical recognition would have been a welcome boon to any writer. But for Texas-born Garcia, who has been writing in relative obscurity for the last thirty-five years, the award was especially gratifying—and long overdue.

Dialog wanted to know what effects, if any, winning the competition has had on the Seabrook veterinarian and what his future plans might be. We also were curious to know what kept him going all those years.

A mild-mannered and soft-spoken man, Garcia speaks modestly of his accomplishments. He expresses his ideas and feelings frankly and laughs easily at his own foibles. Indeed, Garcia's easy-going amiability is disarming. But underneath the mild exterior, one always senses a confident and strong-willed determination.

Dialog: When did you start writing?

Garcia: I started writing way back in the early '50s. Around 1950, '51, '52. Somewhere around there. I was writing in the high school paper and stuff like this.

Dialog: Were there any particular authors who influenced you at the time?

Garcia: No. There wasn't any author in particular. I just liked to write.

Dialog: When did you discover your present style, or are you even aware of a particular style?

Garcia: [laughing] I don't know if I found it yet. My problem is that, for a long time, I would write like whoever I was reading at the time. You know, if I was reading Faulkner, well, I'd write like Faulkner; if I was reading Mark Twain, I'd write like Mark Twain, or Hemingway. All those other authors. I think that I started writing like I write myself in, oh, maybe the late '60s. Middle '60s.

Dialog: Were you conscious of it when this change occurred?

Garcia: No, it just started to come a lot easier that way. There were times when I can write easier in a certain way than in another way. In strictly narrative form, the words just flow, as opposed to writing descriptive type things. Then I have more difficulty. But if I'm writing in the first person, like, what's happening to somebody, then I can just go and go and go. I can write ten, fifteen pages a day of that. But, the descriptive-type literature, that's a little more difficult for me.

Dialog: Are you a very disciplined writer, or do you write mostly when the inspiration hits you?

Garcia: Yes and no. I can, for example, sit down and write every day, and maybe produce from four to ten pages a day. Or, while I'm doing this, if I get the inspiration for something else, then I can just drop this and pick up the inspirational stuff. Other times, like writing a novel, you can't afford to do that. You've got to sit down every night and write something.

Dialog: Regardless of whether you feel inspired or not?

Garcia: Well, it's not too much of an inspirational thing. In the case where you're writing everyday, the inspiration comes from the writing itself. For example, I'll be writing and then something clicks. Then there will be an inspiration for that night to write something in the novel. But you really have to sit down every day.

Dialog: So you have a schedule you more or less follow?

Garcia: I write from about seven to ten each night. It's tedious work. You really have to think about it as something to accomplish a little bit every day. If you say, I can produce four pages a day or two pages a day, in a year, you've got a pretty good book. But if you think that you're going to write, and say, well, I'm going to write a one-thousand-page book or a six-hundred-page book, I don't think you can do it.

Dialog: What are your feelings about writers' workshops?

Garcia: Well, it reminds me of the story they tell about Sinclair Lewis when somebody asks me if I've taken creative writing in college and all that other stuff. Sinclair Lewis was at a college one time to give a talk, and the first thing he said was, "How many of you want to be writers?" And everybody raised their hands. And then he said, "Why aren't you home writing, then?" You now, why are you here, listening to me?

I think they can teach the mechanics of writing. This is what they teach in the writing courses. They'll say, well, we're going to teach you about plot. But the only way they can do that is by letting you read a short story that has a real heavy plot. Or they'll say, here's how somebody developed a character, and let you read something with a lot of characterization to it. But writing, I think, you just got to sit down and do it. I know I do. I just sit down, and I start writing. That's it.

Dialog: Do you think it's important for a writer to associate with other writers for support or criticism?

Garcia: No, I don't think it's necessary at all. I think if a writer is going to depend on the criticism and support of other writers, he won't be a writer. You have to believe that you're the best writer in the world in order to continue. If you don't think you're the best writer in the world, well then, what's the sense of writing? There's enough bad writers around. [laughs] And I'm not talking about the best in terms of fame and money and all that other stuff. I'm talking if you personally feel that you're writing better than a lot of people that are being published. I think that's enough to keep you going.

Dialog: How do you deal with dry periods?

Garcia: Well, I don't have dry periods. I'll tell you why. I need to be doing something all the time. If I'm writing a novel, and I don't know where I'm going with it anymore . . . suppose I don't know where the thing is taking me or what the characters are going to do next. Then what I'll do, I'll switch to another novel. So actually, I got three novels that I'm working on at the same time. And then, I got short stories. I'll write maybe about five, six, or seven short stories a year, in between times. I'll just jump from one thing to another. And that gives me a fresh outlook and inspiration. So, what I'm doing, actually, is, I'm fooling my brain. I'm saying, well, if you don't want to do this one, we'll do this other one. So, I'm always doing something.

Dialog: Have you ever just quit writing?

Garcia: I've done that. And I think it's been good for me. I think I've learned more during those periods where I have gotten disgusted enough to say, well, I'm not writing anymore. I think that when I go back to it, I'm a better writer.

Dialog: Do you keep a journal, particularly during those periods when you aren't writing creatively?

Garcia: No, I don't do that much research. The only research I do is when I'm writing to check out little facts. For example, last night I was up at 11 o'clock trying to find out when penicillin was discovered. Simply because it came up in the book. Well, it didn't come up in the book, but what happened is that this man had gotten sick. Well, I thought, how come the doctor didn't treat him? I'm working in a novel that's set in about 1940, '41. I got to make sure of little facts like that, so that the reader doesn't say, well, this guy should have been treated for this. See, I got a guy that is going to have trouble later on in the book, and he shouldn't be having trouble if there were certain medical advances. Like, for example, I caught myself the other day with a character using the telephone. Or somebody says, I got a phone call. And then you go back and say, wait a minute, although the phone may have been very common in 1940, there were a lot of people who didn't have a phone. Poor people didn't have phones. I know when I was a kid, we didn't have a telephone until the late '40s, early '50s. But that's the only research I do. Everything else comes strictly from the imagination.

Dialog: What is your primary goal when you write?

Garcia: It's hard to say. You know, I've been asked that question many times, which translated another way is, do you write for the money? Are you a formula writer? Or do you want to just write? A lot of writers will go and check the market and crank out a novel on whatever is popular. Or they'll go to a magazine and say, this is what this magazine wants. I've never catered to that, and I don't know if it's necessarily right. I'm not saying that the other way of doing it is better. But what I'm saying is that, first of all, I write primarily for myself, and hopefully, somebody else will appreciate it.

I think what you're trying to do when you write is you're trying to depict life as it really is, or as it was in certain cases, if you're writing about the past as you lived it. Now, if you want to write escape literature, that's okay. But I'm not going to do that. If I wanted to do that, I guess I could have written westerns and paperbacks and followed the literary trends. And maybe I would have been a commercial success. But I never have believed in that, and I never will. I just won't do it.

Dialog: How much of your writing is autobiographical?

Garcia: Depends on what I'm writing. If you want to express it in percentages, I would say 25 percent or less is autobiographical. For example, if you come up with

an inspiration for something that happened in your life, the episode that happened in your life may not be that interesting. But, it might be the seed that provides for a more interesting episode. What you do is, you use that maybe as the beginning of the story and then go from there. You've got to spice up your stories with imagination.

Dialog: With maturity, has your imagination become more or less fanciful?

Garcia: I think that with the years your imagination becomes more focused. You won't let it run wild. I used to write all kinds of strange stories that were purely symbolic. I was into symbolism for many years and, of course, I was heavy handed with it. I just let my imagination run wild. Now my imagination runs in check, at a safe speed limit [laughing], because most people don't like a lot of symbols. They just can't figure it out. The writer himself doesn't understand it sometimes. You ask the creator, what does it mean? And he says, well, I don't know, it was just an inspiration. I used to write like that. I don't anymore.

Dialog: In general, how does your early work compare with your present writing?

Garcia: Oh, I'm much better! I get better every day. I really do. I don't think that I can tell it on a day-to-day basis. But if I take something that I wrote last year and compare it to what I wrote this year, I'm much better this year than last year.

Dialog: In what sense?

Garcia: I think I'm a lot more of a thinking writer now than I was before in as far as trying to arrange a sequence of events. In a novel, a lot of what you're doing right now depends on what happened a hundred pages ago. And a lot of times it's hard to keep track of that. I think I'm a lot better now in developing an even flow. I've always felt that a novel should flow like a stream. It's an inevitable process where it's going. So, there are a lot of things that you can start doing on this page, and see, you're thinking maybe one hundred pages ahead. The reason we're saying this here is because this is going to happen. And this seems to give the novel a plausible course. This is very important to me. I've always believed that everything that happens in a book has got to be a plausible thing. Even an accident! There's got to be some reason for it. You just don't come out of the blue and create something in a novel. I don't think the reader will buy it. I think you have to start way back and work your way in a steady stream until finally there is an inevitable course that the whole thing happens. This is why, a lot of times, I'll say in writing that I don't know where the characters are taking me. I don't think you necessarily want to manipulate the characters and make them do what you want to do. A lot of times, you'll be

going and you'll say, well, this incident has created another incident up or down the line. But you didn't create it. It just came about. So the novel then becomes a steady stream. And when it ends, you feel, that's it. This is what happened.

Dialog: Is there a central theme or idea that runs throughout most of your work?

Garcia: No, the only thing, I like to write about people. Now, I may write about a particular type of people, if that's a central theme. I like to write about the type of people I was raised with, which were simple, poor people. And the tragedies that they have, simply by being poor. There are a lot of people who don't realize what tragedies occur to poor people through no fault of their own but just because they're poor. Anyway, I think that that's more what life is about than people constantly having a good time and all this other stuff. Because that's not what life is. Not to me, anyway.

Dialog: Is there a particular epoch of your life that you find the most fertile in terms of ideas or inspiration for your fiction?

Garcia: I think so. I think the '40s and the '50s in the U.S. changed a lot of things. You had, of course, the Second World War. I was too young for that, but I lived through it. I was born during the Depression. War and depression create a lot of literature. There's not too much good literature when there aren't any bad times. All the literature during the good times is kind of superfluous. But the Depression created a lot of stories and so did the war. Not necessarily what was going on in the war, but what was going on here, to the families of the people that were involved in the war. I think that these are the years that are the most fertile in my mind, if I'm writing something like that. A lot of times, I'll write a story that has no time. It could happen any time.

Dialog: Is it a disadvantage for you, as a Mexican American, writing in English for an Anglo audience?

Garcia: Oh yeah! Sure. I think that's been my difficulty for thirty-five years. Nowadays, all of it is marketability. Being a Mexican American, one of the things they tell me is, who wants to read about the Mexican American experience? Well, I don't write about the Mexican American experience all the time. I can write about the Anglo culture as well as I can about the Mexican American culture because I've lived in both cultures. I would not like to be known as a Mexican American writer. I would like to be know plainly as a writer. But still, there's the name and identification. See, there never has been in the U.S. a Mexican American writer of fame.

The only ones they ever tell us are good are the people from Latin America. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the one that won the Nobel Prize. And Juan Ramon Jimenez, from Puerto Rico, and all these other people. The Spaniards. But they tell us that the Mexican American is just not good enough, I guess. And yet, I don't see anybody writing any better than some of the Mexican American authors.

Dialog: What made you decide to go into medicine?

Garcia: Well, I had the mistaken idea that I was going to practice medicine and write at the same time. I had envisioned that I would have more time to write and I wanted to go into a profession that I love equally as well as writing. I was naive enough to think that I would be my own boss. But when you have your own business, everybody's your boss. [laughs] So, instead of having one boss, I have about two or three thousand bosses. But I have no regrets. What I have done is I have been able to provide for my family, which I probably could never have done by writing.

See, I took two years off to write once and I didn't get published. I was foolish enough to think I could do it in two years. And when I didn't publish anything in two years—I was working pretty much eight hours a day writing then—I got scared. I wasn't providing for anybody. I wasn't making a penny. My wife was working, but you know, we live in a very complex society nowadays. What do you do if you get sick? You can't afford a doctor. You can't afford to eat. You can't afford anything. So it scared me in the sense that if anything should happen to me, then I would have ruined everybody else's lives. And then I thought, what would happen if I never publish? Suppose you're a minor league writer, and you never hit the big time? You never do anything well. When you're dying, what do you say to yourself? I wish I hadn't done it? Or I wish I had done it differently?

Now, the other side of the coin is that if you become tremendously successful, everybody says, oh, it's great! What a great thing he did. But how many writers never make it? Who are just on the fringe. So it scared me. This is why, really, I went into medicine—to see if I could provide for my family and be able to write at the same time. And I've been able to do that.

Dialog: Would you like to write full time?

Garcia: Oh yeah! Sure. But even if I wrote full time, I don't think I could stand writing except maybe three or four hours a day. I don't know of anybody who could write all day long. I know that I would like to do it if it was profitable enough, and just in the mornings. I would love to be able to write in the mornings and then polish and type and get manuscripts ready in the afternoon. That would be ideal. Hopefully, someday I can do that.

Dialog: Tell us about the PEN award.

Garcia: Well, I'm sure you know they had the advertisement in the paper for anybody who wanted to submit work in progress that had not been published as a novel. I didn't know anything about the award or anything like that. As a matter of fact, I submitted it on the last day that it was possible to submit. And one night, they called me and told me that I had won the award, which was very gratifying to me because, after thirty-five years, somebody finally says, well, this guy's got some talent. This is where the critic is so important. Somebody's got to tell you that you're good. It's not enough that you know you're good. If somebody tells you that you're good, and if a million people tell you that you're good, well, then that makes it a lot better. It kind of reinforces what you already believed. But then, you've got to be the one who believes that you're good first of all. If you don't believe, like I said before, that you're the best writer around, then you shouldn't be writing.

Dialog: In your introduction at the PEN awards, you said that when you divided the prize money by the number of years that you had been writing, it amounted to about seven cents a day. Do you have any regrets about this?

Garcia: See, again, writing is a compulsion. I guess you have to be born with it. I don't feel good unless I'm writing. And by that, I mean, mentally good. I may be physically good, but mentally, I don't feel good unless I'm writing. So, it's a compulsion thing. I've got to do it, whether I get paid for it or not, because even if I don't get paid for it, I will still get the inspiration, and I will go ahead and write.

Dialog: What effects has winning this award had on you?

Garcia: Well, since this award, I've been working pretty fast on this novel because I don't know if anybody is going to put a deadline on it. See, what's happened is that I've gotten so much publicity from this novel that I have just kept on it. So now, I'm about four hundred pages into it, and I need about two hundred more pages to complete it. I've already been inspired enough. Somebody's put a carrot out in front of me now, so I'll finish this one.

Dialog: What are your goals after that?

Garcia: I would love to go ahead and publish the book and for it to be a best-seller and make a million dollars. [laughs] I guess everybody would like that, and if I said otherwise, I'd be lying. I would like to get the book published and for it to be accepted. Then I'll go back and pick up the other two. I've got about ten years of

writing stacked up right now that I need to finish up. So there won't be any dry periods. I guarantee you that. I think that the timing of success is so important, if you want to call this award a success. I believe this award has come at the right time for me. I don't think that I could have taken literary success in my early writing career. I think it would have destroyed me.

Dialog: In what respect?

Garcia: I think that it would have stymied my career. I think I would have had dry periods. Now, I'm hungry for this. I've worked thirty-five years for it, and I'm not going to mess around. But I think if this had happened to me in my twenties, I would have been complacent after a while and not really developed my talent.

You take a lot of these writers who publish the first novel in their twenties, and you never hear from them again. They don't have anything else to say. They've said it all in their first book, so they're gone. I hope that that won't happen to me. And if it doesn't, I attribute it to the fact that success came later to me. I think it made me a better writer. I was an apprentice for a long time.

Leon Hale

Interview conducted by Lazaro Aleman and Steven Robinson

Leon Hale needs no introduction to Texans. As a columnist for the *Houston Post* for nearly thirty years, Mr. Hale is well known throughout the state. It should be no surprise that to read the column is to know the man. He is as engaging in person as in print. We began the discussion by asking about where his ideas come from.

Dialog: Let's start off with your columns. You've been writing these for the *Post* for approximately twenty-seven years now. After writing a column for that length of time, do you find yourself at times not being able to come up with ideas?

Hale: Of course. that's the job, as much as anything. It's coming up with the ideas. In the first place, you repeat yourself a lot after you've been around as long as I have. But you also get a lot of help from the readers. Mail and telephone calls. That's what the job is, a constant search for ideas. What are you going to write about tomorrow? And you look for ideas in almost anything. Like this right here. Before we're through, I'll probably get an idea from you guys.

Dialog: Do you receive much mail?

Hale: Well, I have never gotten bushel baskets of mail except when I ask for it. I can ask for mail and get more than I want. I avoid asking for it 'cause I have to answer it.

Dialog: What about travel? Do you still travel as much as you did, say ten or fifteen years ago?

Hale: No, I think the first year that I was on this job and this column, I traveled about 75,000 miles over the state. But it's come down about a thousand miles a year since then. And in the last couple of years, I haven't traveled as much. I've traveled farther. I've been to the West Coast, and this past summer, I did a series on London. So I'm kind of spreading out. But I don't travel as regularly on the routine travel.

Dialog: Are you meeting as many people, do you think?

Hale: Yeah, I'm meeting as many, 'cause I'm staying here in Houston, where all the people in the world are. I think it's important to keep meeting new people and doing new things. I never have quit that. But I have gotten a little bit weary of going to Nacogdoches. I can still enjoy it, but I find I enjoy it more when I don't go as often. Nacogdoches is sort of the word I have for just traveling in Texas. Everything is Nacogdoches; it saves time.

Dialog: What are the advantages of a column, as opposed to being a general 'beat' reporter?

Hale: Oh, man, you're your own boss! You do what you want, write about what you want. I've never had any ambition whatever to be a newspaper reporter who goes out and reveals the sins of the public. I'm glad other people do, but that's assignment stuff mostly, and I've never been too much of a crusader. I've tried to understand the world more than I've tried to change it, and I know it needs changing. When I started out, I decided, well, the first thing I'll do is try to understand everything, and then I'll know how it oughta be changed. And I'm still trying to understand it.

Dialog: Some of your columns, no doubt, change people's attitudes for the better.

Hale: If I've done any crusading and changing, that's the way I want to do it. And I have got my little causes. I was doing things on the environment back when I didn't know what ecology meant. Way back there, and I continue to do that.

Dialog: Yet you seem so at peace with yourself in your columns. How do you deal with your anger?

Hale: I write the column in place of it. I think all column writers have some problem within themselves. That's why the position of columnist is so desirable an occupation. It's a way of expressing something they need to express. And, as you can see, I write a whole lot better than I talk.

I've had chance and chance again to give up the column and be a full time book writer. But I'm afraid to. I'm afraid I'd miss it so bad. I'd miss whatever its given me, the chance to sound off and get rid of my frustrations. You see, I can get up in the morning, and if I feel bad, I can write about how bad I feel. Or if the house is dirty, well, I can write about how dirty the house is. It's therapy. I guess that answers your question.

Dialog: So, though you might experience the same positive effects without the column, you're not willing to risk it?

Hale: I think so. I've always been scared to death to let go. It's been a part of me so long, though right now would be a pretty good time to check out. You know the paper's [*Houston Post*] been sold, and I've been there a long time. I've got two publishers who say, "We'll keep you busy." But I still haven't decided that I'm going to do it. I don't think I will. I *may* cut down a little more where I can do books.

Dialog: We want to discuss the sale of the *Post* further, but right now, can you tell us how you became a *Post* columnist?

Hale: I came out of school in '46 after the war, and I went to work at A&M College. I didn't want to work at A&M. I've been accused of being an Aggie, but I'm not. I went to Texas Tech. But I worked there because they gave me a job at $200 a month, and I stayed there about a year and a half. My job was to interview experts up there and write press releases then send them out to the newspapers.

The only thing I ever wanted to do in journalism was to write a column. I did one in high school, and I did one in college. I was looking for a place to write a column. So I started one up there and started sending it out. The *Post* editor grabbed hold of it and called me about it. Told me their farm editor was quitting, so I took the job. I did that for five years. I was running around covering county fairs. Wrote about cows and horses and cotton and all that stuff. I never did want to write about that stuff, but they let me write a column along with it.

Dialog: This was your first stint at the *Post*?

Hale: That was the first five year period. And then when I got unhappy there, well, I quit and went to work for an oil company for three years, where I was more unhappy. Then they [the *Post*] said "if you come back, we'll let you do what you want." That's how I got the column. I was running around the state, you know, writing about bums under bridges, nice old ladies doing quilts, things like that. And I've been doing it ever since.

It's changed a little, though. I do more commentary now, rather than just interview stuff. I cut that down because I got the feeling that, especially out in these small towns in rural Texas, which was my beat for so long, that I had covered it. I felt like when I went into a country store, I already knew what everybody was going to talk about and the stories they were going to tell. Now, that's not necessarily true, but I had that feeling. So I've quit that now. I talk to more city people and do more of my own opinions.

Dialog: It would be interesting to know what some of your strong opinions are, with respect to things we are all prone to have opinions about, such as politics, for example.

Hale: As I said a while ago, I feel strongly about environmental matters. What would qualify as crusading for me has been along that line. Just almost any environmental matter I feel strongly about. I lived five strange years in Pasadena. I was married to a woman out there. Talk about being in the belly of the beast! I'm not talking about the woman, either. I'm talking about the Ship Channel. Breathe enough of that stuff, and it'll give you a strong opinion.

As for politics, when I grew up, we had a picture of Jesus Christ on one wall and Franklin Roosevelt on the other. My parents were Roosevelt Democrats. They thought the devil was Herbert Hoover for causing the Depression, which of course he didn't. So I grew up that way, until the war, and then I became a damn wild-eyed conservative. I've sort of drifted back toward the middle since them. There have been times, I guess back about the '50s, when Eisenhower came in, when I was really just a flat conservative Republican. Now, I'm not sure what I am. I just take it by the issue.

Dialog: A lot of people who are familiar with your columns are probably not aware that you're also a fiction writer. So let's discuss this aspect of your writing for a moment, specifically your novel *Bonny's Place*. In this novel, as in your columns, you don't ever preach or moralize, per se, yet the book seems to have a religious theme: the examination of good and evil. Bonny, for example, by conventional or religious standards, is not a good man. He cheats, steals, commits adultery. Yet, by the morality you seem to project in this novel, he is the closest thing to a "saint." What is your definition of a good man and of evil?

Hale: I can't define what a good man is. But the reason the character Bonny interested me was that he was the combination of, if you want to say so, good and evil that's in most all of us, except to a greater degree. He's a worse man than I am. I mean, I don't steal and cheat on my income tax. At least, not very much like he does. But I'm not as good as he is, either. I wouldn't go and take a black kid into my house like Bonny did. I might, under some circumstances. But I never have. I've never really considered it.

I don't know. I don't know what a good man is. But I was fascinated by that intensity of good and bad as good and bad are perceived by the beer joint people. I used to hang around beer joints, and Bonny is a composite of about seven or eight people I knew. I became fascinated by their values. What they considered to be right and wrong. It's a pretty interesting study of humanity. I thought of it as a novel about judgment, because people like Bonney are judged as being evil by people who don't know him, just because he runs a beer joint.

Dialog: In the novel, one of Bonney's patrons, a local school superintendent, is

talking to the narrator and says that basically what he likes about the beer joint people is that they don't judge, unlike the solid citizens he spends most of his time with. Would you say this pretty much summarizes your point of view?

Hale: Well, I'm not sure about that, whether he's speaking for me. He's speaking for that character and for a whole lot of people in his position who I know, who are judged. He's in a very sensitive position in the community. But he could go out there to Bonney's and he wasn't judged. He walked in, and he was just another person. Yeah, that speaks for me, in a way. I think that's good.

Dialog: Would you say that is what you admire most about the "common man?"

Hale: That's what I admire most about the people who I was meeting around beer joints at the time I was sitting around among them, yes. That they just didn't want to judge me as good or bad. And as long as I went by the rules and didn't go in there starting trouble, they accepted me. That appeals to me.

Dialog: Would you say you romanticize that type of character?

Hale: Yeah, I guess I do. Is that all right? [laughs]

Dialog: *Bonney's Place,* in mood and characters, is reminiscent of Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*. Was Steinbeck an influence on your work?

Hale: You know, I had not read *Sweet Thursday* when I wrote *Bonney*. But I had read *Cannery Row,* of course.

Dialog: What other writers influenced you?

Hale: The standards. Mark Twain. It's kind of a strange combination, because when I was going through school and it occurred to me that someday somebody might pay me to write a sentence, the people I read were Mark Twain and Damon Runyan. Talk about a wide spectrum. Runyan wrote about the New York underworld. He was a columnist on the New York papers. *Guys and Dolls* was based on some of his stuff, and movies like *Little Miss Marker.* I just loved his rhythms and his lilt. Of course, Mark Twain, I loved his work and his genius. They're the people who most influenced me in the beginning.

Dialog: What about your writing style, which is basically clear, simple, and folksy

now? Yet, in the preface to your first book of collected columns, *Turn South at the Second Bridge,* you mention how, in your youth, you used to make "unqualified, assertive statements," and also use "four-bit words" that you wouldn't think of using now, like "sobriquet." What changed you?

Hale: That's right. That piece was one of the things I wrote back to my people at Texas Tech. Nobody out there ever told me to write simply. I thought the way you wrote was to write in the most complex, complicated style possible. I remember when I graduated, the greatest compliment in my view that I'd ever received was that somebody said to me, "Hey, I saw your piece in the paper, and I didn't know what you were talking about." I thought that was really neat, that I'd written something nobody understood. Then when I went to work at Texas A&M, I was there about a week when they said, "Look, guess who's reading your stuff? It's the farm people of this state, and they have a reading level of sixth grade." So they put me on a train and sent me to Auburn, Alabama, for two weeks, to a simplified writing school. I learned more about writing in two weeks there than I did in four years in journalism. They said, "Son, forget all this crap that you learned about writing. This is the way you've got to do it if you're going to be understood." That two weeks in Auburn is still a force in my writing.

Dialog: One last question about *Bonney's Place*. At the end, the narrator realizes he's basically "an outsider," in spite of the affinity he feels for these people. Does this apply to you, also?

Hale: It's true that he never really became one of them, and I didn't either. I'm not a beer joint person. I did a lot of research and work around them, and I can still enjoy going to them. But I never became one of them really. I never did become one of anybody I wrote about.

Dialog: Do you think it is the nature of a writer always to be an outsider?

Hale: Sure, I think so. I'm never in the middle of things. I'm over at the edge observing and listening. And even though you get mixed up sometimes in the lives of the people you write about, you're never a part of them. I've found that I can't be, don't even want to be. I thought at one time maybe I would, when I got divorced this last time. Anyway, I thought "I'll get out of Houston. I'll move out in the country, among these people I write about. I went to New Ulm, which is one of my favorite little villages, and they were going to help me get a house and live there. I did have sense enough to take a test. I stayed up there a couple of weeks, and about

the seventh day I knew I'd never stay there. I'd see the same people every day and hear the same old beer joint stories, and I knew I never would stay.

Dialog: Besides *Bonney's Place,* have you written any other novels?

Hale: One other that's been published. It's called *Addison*. It was written after *Bonney's,* and it didn't sell as many copies. but I think overall it's probably better written than *Bonney's*. I think it contains some of the best writing I ever did. It's been called a military novel, but it's not really. It's kind of a love and sex story about a guy in the army who takes under his wing three younger guys and teaches them what he knows.

Dialog: Do you have any desire to write another novel?

Hale: I'm working on now that I don't much talk about. It's the one I've lived for the last few years here in Houston. An old guy caught in middle age just struggling with this strange city and his own personal problems. That's as much as I can talk about it. I think about it all the time, and I think it'll probably be by far the best thing I've ever done, if I can ever get through it.

Dialog: Have you started to write it?

Hale: I've been working on it quite a while. This last few years, I've been in this transition period between keeping the column going and recovering from the turmoil of my personal life. In the interim, we've put out one book of columns from the *Post*. We've got another one coming out this week. That's what I've been doing in the book business.

Dialog: What's the new book called?

Hale: The title is *Easy Going,* and I think it's going to be a better collection than this one we did last year and that one. [pointing to a copy of *The Smile of Kattie Hatten*] It's far better than either of the others I've done.

Dialog: Are you good about the public relations aspect of the book business?

Hale: Sometimes I'm pretty good at it. But that's not, as you can imagine, my long suit. Probably one of my weaknesses as a writer of books is that I'd just a heap rather write the book, pitch it out there, and let it sink or swim on its own merit. But

you're just kidding yourself if you think that's the way you're going to make it now. You've got to write it, and then you've got to sell it.

Dialog: Are you trying to be more active in this regard?

Hale: No, I'm trying to be *less* active. I'm trying to get somebody else to do it. Anyway, it has to be done. When I get hyped up for it, I'm better at it than I'm being here. I mean, going on TV and all that stuff. I've done it, and sometimes I'm pretty good at it. But I'd just rather not.

Dialog: When did you discover that you were a celebrity?

Hale: I never have really felt like a celebrity. You hear people say nice things and all that, and some of my friends get really teed at me for not considering myself one. I know when you're in the paper every day, and people write letters and say nice things or bad things about you, you take on some sort of celebrity status. But I don't think of myself as one. And I'd just as soon sit over in the corner and let someone else be the celebrity. I don't deny that there are times when it's fun and it feels good. I'm sort of in the entertainment business, show business, and not too well suited for it. But that's okay. It's a living, and I can stand the negative part of it.

Dialog: Is there possibly anything you could do that would be more stimulating and more fun for you? Don't you have the perfect job?

Hale: Well, I've thought so, on both the writing, which I enjoy, though sometimes its hard, and the gathering of material. Both of them are probably the sort of things I would do if I didn't have to work for a living. I think I would pretty much go around and do what I do. At least up to now. I may be changing. I have a hankering to spread out a little and see some more of the world, do a little bit of traveling, learning, just daydreaming.

Dialog: Do you have any ideas about where you'd like to travel?

Hale: Well, I have proposed it to the paper, and I don't know about whether the new owners are going to go for it. But I've started out to, first off, see my own country. I haven't really done any wide traveling since World War II. The first leg of it was the trip a year ago, when we went to about twelve western states. Up in the Redwood Country.

Dialog: You must have enjoyed that.

Hale: Oh, man, it was really great. I wrote a whole month about it, and been writing about it on and off ever since. I want to do the same thing up the other coast. I've traveled pretty well in the South, the Deep South, but not the eastern seaboard. I want to go to Maine, Canada, and then across the top. Then I'll start maybe looking at the rest of the country, if I'm still alive.

Dialog: So we can assume then that as long as you're able you will continue to keep writing about your travels and the people you meet?

Hale: I would never quit. Now, it may not be safe to assume that I'll keep doing it for the paper. I may just quit doing the paper and write books. But I'll keep writing.

Dialog: On that matter, would you tell us your feelings about the *Post* being sold to a Canadian syndicate?

Hale: I don't really know these people yet. I had in my head a personal preference for the people who I was aware were looking at the paper. There were about six of them that I know of, and of my personal choice, the people who bought it were next to the worst. That might be an unfair thing to say because I don't really know them yet. But we had people like the *Washington Post* looking at us. That was my first choice. Who wouldn't want to work for those people. Of course, it's just been twenty-four hours since it's been announced, so everybody may be perfectly happy. I think one of the reasons that, at first blush, a lot of folks over at the *Post* are disappointed—and me too, really—is that the *Toronto Sun* itself is a flashy tabloid.

Dialog: Shades of Rupert Murdock?

Hale: Yeah. So we may be entertaining notions that they're going to make the same kind of paper out of the *Post*. I don't think they will because, in the first place, they're a newsstand paper. They don't even have home delivery. So I'm hoping the people don't turn things upside down.

Dialog: You're hoping they will adapt themselves to the readership the *Post* has already established?

Hale: I'm sure they've got that much sense. Anybody who can raise one hundred million dollars has to have some judgment.

Dialog: Why was the *Post* sold?

Hale: I don't really know. I just know what they announced. They said it was for tax purposes and changing interests on the part of the publishers. But the assumption has been that the tax advantage to them would be after the demise of Mrs. Hobby, who is seventy-eight years old, by the inheritance tax. You know, there are children involved. This is a very closely held corporation.

Dialog: H&C Corporation, right?

Hale: Yeah, Hobby and Catto. Anyway, I assume that's the story. I've never heard *them* say that.

Dialog: A few months back you did a column about having nightmares that you would lose your job if the *Post* was sold. Is that a real fear, or were you just having fun?

Hale: A little of both. All of us have had our little wonderment about what we would do if they came in and said "All right, folks, all of you over fifty years old just pick up your bed and walk." But I'm not seriously worried about it. If I walked out of there now, it would be a pretty good retirement.

Across the years, I've been proud of the *Post* some days. I can't say I was ever ashamed of it. I've never been ashamed to go around representing the *Post,* but I've been disappointed in it a few times because it didn't become as great a newspaper as I think it could have become. Sometimes, all of us get frustrated when we can't do as good as we know we can. What I hope is that these new people provide the resources to make the *Post* the paper it ought to be.

Dialog: In conclusion, how would you like to be remembered? As a columnist, a novelist, a good person?

Hale: I would like to be remembered as a guy who brought some pleasure into people's lives. Mainly through the column. I really didn't give a damn if I'd be remembered or not up until the time I was about fifty. And then I got to having pains in my chest, and things like that, and I decided that I did want to be remembered. That's when the books became more important to me because you're more remembered by books. Who sits around reading old newspapers? Nobody. Books endure. That's another reason I wanted to put out these volumes of columns in book form. I'd just as soon be remembered for the entertainment value of these books of columns as anything. I want my kids to say, "Yeah, the old man was a pretty good old boy."

Phillip Lopate

Interview conducted by Sarah Greene Marcoulier and Jeffery Ann Scoggins

Phillip Lopate was born in New York City. At the time of this interview, he was teaching in the graduate creative writing program at the University of Houston. He is the author of two volumes of poetry, a novel, a book on education, and a collection of essays.

Dialog: When did you start writing?

Lopate: I started writing in the fourth grade. We all had to do those poems for Thanksgiving, or pumpkin poems. Just as there was a class artist and a class athlete, I became the class poet without any particular interest in it. I was a great reader, and that interested me far more than writing. My father had wanted to be a writer. He was always reading, so I grew up in the presence of books. He liked things like Dostoyevsky, Faulkner, and Schopenhauer; very heavy dramatic things.

Dialog: What writers influenced your early work?

Lopate: I think Dostoyevsky was probably the biggest influence. It was reading him that made me want to be a writer and also made me think I could never be a writer. I thought, he's got universes inside his head, and I don't. If that's what it takes to be a writer—*The Brothers Karamazov*—I'm sorry, I'll never do it. Earlier, however, I had an experience or two where I wrote poems out of a terrific pressure from the unconscious. In one case, I woke up when I was about twelve years old from the middle of a dream and was very upset. The dream was that my father had died, and I just sat down and wrote a poem about it. A poem in free verse. And then I wrote a poem called "I Hate It All," filled with rage and horror at the circumstances in which I was living. The poem, after being a diatribe against life in the slums, ends up with this reverse movement in which I accept the fact that I am part of this thing that I hate. This turns out to be a very typical movement in my writing: asserting something and then catching myself up and contradicting it or finding the qualifications in it. Both of these poems were written not from a sense of myself as a poet and the fame it would bring me, but really from internal pressure. From the start, writing was communication. It wasn't simply a formal linguistic interest, but

it came from having to say certain things that I could not say otherwise.

In high school, I was the editor of the literary magazine, and I wrote stories. The stories were very much like my present writing. Very early, in prose, I had a way of looking at the world that was observant—based on observations of myself and the people around me. In college, I entered pre-law. My hero was Clarence Darrow, who felt his life was a disappointment because he had wanted to be a writer. I was going to be a lawyer who secretly wanted to be a writer. I had this disappointed life already planned out for me at age sixteen. But when I went to Colombia, I hung out with the pre-law students and had nothing to talk to them about. So I shifted into writing. I was reading Norman Mailer, the Russians, Flaubert, and Stendhal. They were all dovetailed together, the courses I was taking and the reading I was doing. Henry Fielding was a big influence on me for God knows what reason except I think I was looking for some objectivity and irony and distance to counteract this enormous Dostoyevskian subjectivity.

Dialog: In your essay "Bachelorhood and Its Literature," you express interest in the bachelor narratives of Hazlitt, Lamb, Pavese, Barthes, etc. Do you incorporate them into your more recent work?

Lopate: Well, I'm still doing essays. The great essay writers continue to be an influence on me. After I finished "Bachelorhood," I read Montaigne and got very excited about him because he has these all-inclusive essays that are like glaciers. They move, and they pick up everything around them. They are very associational. It's a terrific gamble and confidence that to write about yourself will somehow be interesting. Montaigne is incredibly honest about himself, and yet he has a very strong interest in the outer world. That is the kind of writer I see myself as being. Even though I certainly am autobiographically interested, I see the character that I'm building based on my "I" allowing me to explore the outer world.

Dialog: You have published a novel, a book of essays, one on education, and several volumes of poetry. What makes you turn to one form rather than another?

Lopate: I think poetry has been exploratory for me. It is a reconnaissance that allows me to find out what I'm interested in. Sometimes a poem will point the way to a subject matter that I then explore at greater length in fiction or an essay. If it's a made-up story, of which I've written some, there is no question that I have to do it as fiction. Often, what I want to write about is a kind of subject matter.

Dialog: In your essay "Remembering Lionel Trilling," you speak of your direction as a writer and choice of subject matter as "friendships, marriages, children, jobs."

Lopate: Right. At the moment I'm writing a long essay on film and also an essay on photography. Education allowed me a concrete subject matter. If there is anything that I can ground my writings on that is at all technical, that is outside simply my feelings, I am appreciative.

If I am writing an essay, I generally have a kind of concern about some issue. Often it starts with a memory. I remember something and this memory is embedded in a pattern, like: why do you do the same thing, Y, every time X happens? So at times, it comes from an impatience with myself that I make the same mistakes over and over again and I land in a cul-de-sac. This impatience turns into a kind of fascination. What is the pattern that is operating here? Why does this memory keep dogging me, why does it keep distressing me? And when I'm ready, I try to write out the memory. And I try to write out the analysis that goes with the memory, that's woven itself around the memory. So I'm very interested in recapturing memory, and I'm also very interested in the rationalization process that we build around our lives.

Dialog: You say, in the same essay, "I had always felt uneasy with the writing of Beckett, Genet, Burroughs, and the whole 'abyss' tendency." What is it that makes you uneasy?

Lopate: I'm interested in daily life and specifically in relationships—psychological relationships. I remember once Dostoyevsky saying, "Why do they call me a psychologist? I'm a realist!" When I read that, I thought, I wouldn't mind at all if people called me a psychologist. I really am interested in psychology and in behavior. Sometimes people attack that. Every time somebody wants to do something avant-garde, he strips his character of psychology. What drew me to novels in the first place was character, and character continues to interest me a great deal more than anything else. I will be more interested in a novel that has good characters than in a novel that has a very cleverly worked-out plot. I have, perhaps, a deficient sense of narrative structure in and for itself, because I am following out something else. I am following out the way people clash with each other and the way they give each other love. I like to look at relationships over a long period of time. The first novel I wrote (which was never published) is called *Best Friends*. It's about strong, difficult friendships. It was long on character and had absolutely no plot. I had the idea that if I simply wrote about all the people I knew, some pattern would emerge. Some pattern might have emerged in five thousand pages, but I stopped at page four hundred. I was looking for the implicit patterns in real life. Instead of making up a plot and superimposing it on characters, what I try to do is to think back about my life and find it coalescing into key incidents. Define the plot in one's life. The mistake I made with that first novel was I was writing about myself, at the same period I was living through. I didn't have the distance for these events to crystallize into stories.

I think you can work toward form in two ways: You can make up something—invent a plot—or you can keep working with your actual experiences until they develop a formal shape. I could say I don't have much imagination. I think that would be a modest way of saying I'm not terribly interested in making up whole worlds, because I'm so fascinated with the world that has been presented to me that I want to find the shapes hiding in it.

As far as the abyss is concerned, I feel that I don't have a talent in that direction. And it bores me. There are people who genuinely have a sense of horror. They are right to write out of it. I seem to have a lot of sadness, but it seems I just have too much energy or optimism to try to adapt myself to apocalypse. I really am comfortable in the world, and I would be taking a foolishly misanthropic position if I said I wasn't. The fact is that I see myself as effective in the world. I am always going out into the world and helping to build institutions. That work is key to my writing. It's not as if I want to sit in my room and write all the time. I want to get out there in society. I *like* people, up to a point. I like people especially in a work situation, where sometimes the best of them is being brought out.

Dialog: Would it be accurate to link you with the poets of the New York School—Koch, Ashbery, O'Hara?

Lopate: Only in a certain narrow sense. I went to Columbia at a point where the poets of the New York School were very important. All my friends were very influenced by them, and they were always reading the stuff to me. So I was in that milieu. In fact, I rebelled against that milieu because I thought people were becoming flunkies. I said, okay, I'm glad somebody is doing that, but I don't have to. I did like very much Frank O'Hara's poetry. He had a way of incorporating the occasional details of walking around the city and daily life that I enjoyed. He had a very strong persona. When I tried to write like Ashbery, it came out silly, so I gave that up. But even when I rebelled against them, the good thing was that I grew up with a defined literary scene. So, I was kind of a fellow traveler in the New York poetry scene.

Dialog: Would you comment on the criticism that contemporary literature lacks a definite, identifiable voice? Is this a justifiable criticism?

Lopate: I think people are very conformist, and there isn't enough *mind* in most American poetry. There's not enough thought. People are afraid to appear idiots, so they've learned to write a certain kind of safe poem. They all end in a kind of diminuendo. The thing that interests me most in literature is vitality. A lot of writers who attracted me when I was an adolescent seemed to have vitality, like Celine or Dostoyevsky. Recently, I've read a lot of Proust and Mann. You get a feeling of gen-

erosity from them—there's so much more where that came from. It's not so stingy.

I take much more sustenance from the past than contemporary literature. It was Pavase who said he couldn't read anything until the dust of fifty years had settled on it. I do think that, in the first place, the past has sorted out a lot, so that many terrible writers have dropped by the wayside. Secondly, when you read a novel about the past, there is the charm of antiquity, and you don't feel these people are just exploiting the zeitgeist and putting a lot of brand names in. What I'm trying to do in my own writing is build a bridge between the tradition and the present. I don't want to sell myself short as being a conservative or a traditionalist. I think I am making experiments, but they are not the experiments the avant-garde is interested in. A typical experiment that interests me is what Robert Musil called "essayism," which is to try to create a fusion between the essay and the story. So that the author will have back the commenting voice. So that the writer won't be terrified of saying how he sees the world. We've lived for so many decades in this period of the noncommenting narrator, where everyone said "show, don't tell." Writers, especially young writers, are terrified of commenting on the world except in a very hit-and-run manner.

Dialog: Do you think there exists a "poetry mafia" or dominant group that determines grants, publications, and teaching posts?

Lopate: No, I think it's more pluralistic than that. There are poetry mafias. I don't think it's so centralized. There are concentric circles that overlap. I don't care much about this. It's bad to worry too much about careers and patronage systems. I don't worry about American writing now. There is a lot of writing being done, some of it good writing. The fact that a lot of the not good writing is conventional in identifiable ways doesn't bother me very much.

Dialog: Would you tell us about the Teachers and Writers Collaborative and what effect teaching has had on your writing?

Lopate: I spent twelve years working as a writer in the schools for the Teachers and Writers Collaborative in New York. TWC was pretty much the first organization to send writers into the schools. It was a terrific experience for me, and it allowed me to be with children and have a kind of impact on the community. I entered TWC at a time when people were seriously perplexed about education and wanted to reform it. Now there is a lot of fiscal conservatism and educational anxiety in Washington, and I don't think there is a real consensus of support for that kind of reform.

When I came to Houston, I noticed there was no Writer in the Schools Program. I was a little appalled, but I knew what it would take to start one. You would have

to give a lot of energy to it. I continue to have a connection with TWC. I feel very loyal to the people who are slogging away in the trenches trying to make public schools better places. I gave twelve years to it, and I got tired. Now I'm teaching in a university, which, in some ways, is not as exciting as working with children, but it pays better and takes less out of me. Still, I continue to see my role as trying to build community. I helped start the reading series at the Museum of Fine Arts, and I program films for MFA. I stared a magazine at the University of Houston, *Domestic Crude,* and a little group of graduate students who go into the schools as writers. I get impatient with writers who are always bitching about something taking them away from their writing. People are taken away from their entire lives. Once you hang around classroom teachers and see how hard these people work, it is very, very hard to complain or take seriously your own complaints as a university professor.

Dialog: What are the effects of workshops and readings on your work?

Lopate: I teach a lot of fiction workshops. Often at the beginning of the term, I think it has a dampening effect on my writing. I get depressed at the poor quality of the student work, and I ask why am I doing this? As I go on, I begin to feel that I have to develop a model for myself as well as the students, and I start writing. That is, I don't want to make everyone write like me, but I do want to give them the benefit of what I've learned as a writer. So, I keep going between theory and practice, and before you know it, I'm writing, and then I'm more confident in my writing, and my students' writing is coming along, and we're all on a kind of optimist's jag.

When you teach workshops, you have to create a group out of disparate individuals. That takes time. Then you have to teach them what your own expectations are. In some cases, you have to teach them what literature is because they come in with an incredibly pop sense of what they can get away with. You have to teach them to recognize quality. I enjoy it.

I don't know that I need to teach, but I do need a workplace. I need to be in the world. I am not such an interior person. I don't have whole inner worlds inside me. I realize that when I am by myself, I am usually thinking about social relationships and incidents that have occurred between myself and others. There is a real other-oriented side to me, but I then have to go off and be by myself and work it all out—create a form for it. Unlike certain other poets, I don't feel I am too good or too fragile for this world. I feel like I absolutely need this world.

Dialog: Have you established a habit of writing?

Lopate: I usually write during the day between the hours of nine and five. I try to

go for as long as I can. It's important to try to increase the time you do write. You get a whole other kind of rhythm when you do that. You get past the inspiration period and go into another kind of work. I like to approach writing as if it were carpentry or shoemaking or something demystified. I have written for so many years, I don't need a schedule. I don't feel obliged to write every day. I trust that the writing will get done. It isn't a ritual.

Dialog: Do you keep a journal?

Lopate: That has been a very important experience in my life as a writer. I've kept journals ever since I was eighteen years old. They are the bedrock of my writing, in a way. I try out ideas, I record memories. *Being With Children* relies a lot on diaries. *Confessions of Summer,* to the degree that it was based on a real incident, I went back and found some diaries. Some of the little pieces in *Bachelorhood* came from journals. What interested me with those little pieces was in how short a space you could get the whole arch of the story. Like the old lady who asked me to walk her down the block. Some people felt that these things were too slight. Still, I wanted to show what the gesture looks like when it's like that [he snaps his fingers]. Like a painter doing a calligraphic motion. What it looks like when it's a little wash; what it looks like when it's a developed drawing; what it looks like when it's a painting. I wanted to betray the process of my work. And since I think that so much of my work comes out of the kind of thinking I do in journals, I wanted to show that step and then a more elaborated step. Recently, I've been rereading my diaries. Every ten years or so I read them all.

Dialog: Do you revise a great deal?

Lopate: Oh, yes. I revise a lot. Something like the Lionel Trilling essay I revised seven, eight, nine, ten times. *Confessions of Summer* I went through at least seven times and more.

Dialog: What about revising something that has been published?

Lopate: I'd like to revise some of the stuff. I wish I could. Sometimes I read poems and think the rhythm is off. Maybe I will revise them some day.

Dialog: How do you react to criticism?

Lopate: I haven't been so severely criticized. I've gotten a few savage reviews, but something like *Being with Children* got universal praise. *Confessions of Summer*

was more controversial. I react to reviews in the same way I react to criticism at a party. It interests me how people interpret the signals I'm giving off. I don't think it profoundly changes me, but it interests me. Sometimes it tells me more about the spirit of the age. *Bachelorhood* basically got very good reviews. Occasionally, there would be a review where someone would say that, for all this candor, he still doesn't spill the beans. Does this mean that I have to confess to incest or that I'm not troubled enough? I think there is a quality in my work that may never satisfy those who want a certain harrowing kind of confession. I feel *Bachelorhood* is really filled with me and my personality. If people think I was holding back, they don't know that this is who I am! I go toward the situation of pain or intrigue and I look at it and examine it and get what I can out of it. Then I move away. I don't wallow in things.

Dialog: What is the effect on your work of living between New York City and Houston?

Lopate: I still need New York for the street life and the pace of walking that has a great deal to do with the way I write. When I'm in New York, I'll write, I'll take a walk around lunch time, I'll come back, and I'll write. While I'm walking, I'll be in a dream, but I'll also see things. Here, I don't feel encouraged to walk—there are no sidewalks. Also, there is a lot of just plain information in New York that comes from living in the imperial city. Sometimes I think it's silly information. I'm not that jingoistic about New York. Now, whenever I got back, I think there is more information than heart. I'm fond of New York, and I'm fond of Houston. They give me different things. I'm promiscuous about cities. I have to have both places. Houston is having a subtle influence on me. It's opening me up spatially. At first, there didn't seem to be enough outside the window. Then I would turn back on myself and the void the Buddhists speak about was facing me—the abyss, if you will. A friendly abyss, but still an abyss. After three years, I find I can write here; that, to some degree, what is me is going to be the same no matter where I am. I think eventually I will write about Houston, but I need to know it to the bone. So now it is nurturing me in many ways.

Dialog: You are taking a six-month sabbatical. Will you be working on something specific that you would like to talk about?

Lopate: I want to do a long book about cities and people living in cities. It will probably be mostly about New York during the period of the bankruptcy scare. It seems to me that was something like a plague that never quite hit, but people were walking around stunned. I went to talk about the fate of cities and possibly write about Houston

also. I am at the point of trying to decide whether to do it as a series of essays or try to make this grand synthesis of the essay and novel, which is very ambitious.

I feel I have a long book in me. I'm not sure when I'm ready to undertake it. I have to recognize my limitations. I have to recognize the fact that here I am, an autobiographical writer who is writing about an average, nonmythic life. I don't climb mountains or fight bulls. I accept the project of such a life as a significant and reasonable thing to write about.

Cynthia Macdonald

Interview conducted by Lazaro Aleman and Steven Robinson

By her own admission, Cynthia Macdonald came late to poetry. Originally an opera singer, Macdonald had already established herself in that profession before a particularly difficult time in her life caused her to begin writing poetry seriously. Since then, however, the New York native has more than made up for her late start. To date, she has published three books of poetry, with a fourth soon to be published, and a possible novel in germination.

Presently, Macdonald teaches at the University of Houston and helps administer the Creative Writing Program. Indeed, it is Macdonald, in conjunction with Stanley Plumly, who is most credited for the successful implementation of that program.

A robust personality with energy to spare, Macdonald exudes vitality. She is bright, witty, and vivacious, and readily put the *Dialog* editors at ease with her casual charm.

Dialog: *Houston City Magazine,* in a recent article, states that Houston has now become a literary town, and that much of this new-found status is a direct result of the Writing Program at the University of Houston. Do you agree?

Macdonald: Houston *is* becoming a literary town. I don't want to say has become. After you're dead, I guess, you say you've become something. I don't know about cities. They're never dead, we hope. They might be, but we hope not. So, Houston is *becoming* a literary town. It's true that when I first came here in the early '70s, it was a literary wasteland. I mean, you've got to face the fact that, except for Vassar Miller, there were no writers here of any kind of national stature. The ones who had been here left, or, like Beverly Lowry, were still fledglings. I mean, the idea was, if you happened by some misfortune to grow up in Houston and be a writer, you'd better leave, because there were no other writers! Very few writers are hermits. There are a few, but usually that's caused by living too close to a whole art life, a whole literary life, a scene. Not out of too little. I can speak a lot out of my own experience because I began writing when I had a family and wasn't an opera singer, and I did write in isolation for a long time. And I know that the pressure grew and grew to find other people with whom to share work. I mean, it's not enough to share

work on the page. There's something about work in progress—work that isn't fully made yet. It needs other eyes.

Dialog: Would you say this is true of most writers?

Macdonald: Oh absolutely! Many established writers have other people with whom they share work. And beginning writers need mentors. There have to be generations in art. There have to be grandparents and parents and adolescents and kids. That happens naturally in a place where there's a rich artistic life, like New York. You have all of that generational structure naturally built in. But that wasn't true here. And I do feel that the writing program is responsible for the fact that there are at least two generations of writers here now and a third coming along. Of course, the city has progressed in many ways artistically over the ten, twelve years that I've known it. And I don't want to be megalomaniacal and say that it's the writing program alone. If there weren't a more hospitable art climate in the city as a whole, I don't think it could have happened the way it has. It was the right time for something like that. I mean, the fact that they've given a part of the hotel tax to the arts. No other city does that. That's unique. It shows a real wish to support.

Things also are much more easily possible here in the arts. If you get an idea, you have a sense here that you can probably carry it through. And that's not as true in older cities. First of all, it's harder to get a different idea, because a lot of things have been done. But I also think there is a sense of excitement here, and money, which makes a whole range of things possible.

Dialog: So, you would say that a writer today does not have to leave Houston in order to make it?

Macdonald: In fact, I would say that they'd be crazy to leave Houston, unless they have other reasons to leave. And also, the writing community is growing the way it should grow, which is not only by imports. I think one of the dangers of a city that's in this stage of its artistic growth is that it sees all the things from outside as precious and to be admired, and devalues what's in its own backyard. A few years ago, that was true here, but it isn't true now.

Dialog: Besides teaching and administrating, you also have a great interest in psychoanalysis. In fact, we understand you are presently being trained as a psychotherapist. Can you tell us why the interest?

Macdonald: My own psychotherapy helped me to make important changes in my life. But what actually made me want to explore psychoanalysis theoretically and

clinically were some observations I made while teaching. I became fascinated by the role repression and defense played in creating writing blocks. Repression meaning material that does not come out of the unconscious because it's too painful, too difficult to deal with. And defense being the maneuvers you go through to prevent that material from becoming conscious. What I would see is something in the poem that didn't belong or something left out. That's no great insight, although I don't think it's much discussed. I think most good teachers would say, "What is this doing here?" But what I noticed, thinking about it in psychoanalytic terms, was that, when that was asked, if it was material that the person couldn't deal with, the poem got abandoned or that whole section got put away. Or something else replaced it that didn't quite fit. It didn't read true. And if these threats happened too often, the person stopped writing.

Well, I became interested in knowing what you do then. What do you ask? How can you deal with this? And one of the things I came up with is that a lot of times writers will see this thing that doesn't belong, and it's just the same as if you came in here and there was a large, dead goat there [pointing to the floor and laughing]. You might say, "What is that?" And then you might say, "Would you like us to help you carry it out and put it in a plastic bag?" I think that rather than putting the dead goat in the plastic bag, in terms of the poem, the goat's the most vital part of the poem. And you run a considerable risk it you tidy up too much, if all the unacceptable debris gets put in plastic bags.

Dialog: Has this insight helped you in terms of your own writing?

Macdonald: I think, like trying to be your own psychotherapist, trying to do this to yourself is very difficult. First of all, you usually can't see it. That's the whole point.

Dialog: Like the eye trying to look at itself?

Macdonald: Right! The writing process is a lot of fishing things out and only later stepping back and saying, "How does this work? Is this right? Is this good? How should it be changed?" If you look at the catch with a critical eye too early, you're at risk of not being able anymore to do the fishing-out.

Dialog: Richard Howard, in his introduction to your first book of poems, *Amputations,* states that you got a late start as a poet. Can you elaborate?

Macdonald: A very late start. I'm a very elderly young poet. See, I won poetry prizes in school and stuff, but I really didn't have a need to write. Talent's fine, but

if you don't have a need to do it, writing is too hard. You have to really be impelled to keep going somehow.

I wanted to be a singer originally. And I was. An opera singer. I even won the San Francisco opera audition and sang with them. That was pretty good. But the satisfaction of singing is very different. One is a creative art; one is an interpretive art. An interpretive artist gets to do the best! Mozart, Schubert. But you're not creating, you're only re-creating. Anyway, one of the moves when I had very small children was to Vancouver, British Columbia, which I, in many ways, love, but I also was very isolated. It was the first time where I'd been without friends and family and so-forth, really far away, and I think that was a kind of pressure cooker for me emotionally. I suspect that that's what makes most people start writing. It usually happens earlier, you know, first love, and then sometimes, they stop right away. Anyway, I began to write, and I really wrote quite seriously while I was singing, but with time problems. I really worked very hard as a singer, and in between was writing poems. And so, after we left Japan, I realized I had to make a choice.

Dialog: What influence has your opera training had on your writing?

Macdonald: Discipline and form, I think. A sense of form, a sense of inhabiting other people. There are a lot of different characters in my poems. There are other poets, certainly, who do that. But it's more a fiction writer's thing usually, to write not out of the "I" as yourself. Well, I find the "I" of myself just very limited. In spite of the fact that I think I have had a fairly interesting life. I want to go beyond that, and maybe that's why some of the inhabiting of other lives.

Dialog: Going back to Howard, in his introduction he also states that you draw your poetry "from the grotesque." Is this an accurate description of your poetry?

Macdonald: Well, I think in fact he points out that grotesque comes from the grotto, and that the grotto is, if you want, the hidden part of everybody. And yes, of course, all writing comes from the grotto, whether it comes out as overtly odd or very conventional. So I would agree with *that* definition. I would say I am interested in strange things that happen, because they seem like a sharpened metaphor of what happens all the time.

Recently, I've been wondering why I'm so interested in performance. Not so much, I think, because I was a performer, but because performance is the moment where you have to *do* that thing or there's not another chance. I mean, imagine if you're a ballet dancer, and you fall. The audience can not see that ballet the same way. Perhaps, they, too, are thrown off balance. I love being a writer partly because you get a chance to do it over and over again until you think you've gotten it right.

Nobody is watching you while you do your versions. But as I said, I *am* interested in performance. Not just performing artists, but everyone's performance. What about the time when you say the wrong thing? Just like falling. It's never erased from the other person's mind, and you *know* it. I'm interested in those moments.

Dialog: Do you mean to say that you're interested in that moment when the performance fails?

Macdonald: I'm interested in the fact that you go through life trying to avoid that, and that provides a kind of tension. I have a poem about a tightrope walker, and I really do see both writing poems and living life as a tightrope walk. Unless the rope has just the right pull on it, it's going to be slack, and it'll wobble, and you'll fall off. And unless you know how to do it, you're always sort of hanging by one hand, holding your parasol in the other. [laughing] I think life is very exciting and dangerous, I suppose.

But when you say, "Are you interested in the moment where the performance fails?" I think, well, no, I'm equally interested in the moment where it succeeds, where the performance goes perfectly; where, instead of saying the wrong thing, it all works, and we can believe for a moment that life will go on happily ever after. Even though we know it won't.

Dialog: In your poem, "The Platform Builder," you say, "like owners who correct/ In every house they build the faults of the last one; the flaws are not/The same, but there are flaws." Do you feel this way about your poetry?

Macdonald: [laughing] Annnd how! That's a very early poem, but I think, yes, indeed, I do feel that way! I really do.

Dialog: You're never satisfied with your poems?

Macdonald: Sometimes I'm pretty satisfied, for a moment. But it changes. Some poems seem to be very wonderful, and then they don't seem so wonderful. And others you like at different periods. But, over time, certain of my poems do hold up for me. And I guess I think they're pretty fully realized. But then there are still things that might not be just right. It's not the individual poem so much where there are flaws, though there certainly are those. It's about what you see, a kind of vision of what you want to do, the marvel that you wish you could make, that you never quite manage.

Dialog: The ideal, in other words?

Macdonald: Yes, and I can't even say what it is, if you're asking, well, what is it? It's a whole range of different levels. I think sometimes of poetry as being panes of glass, or, did you ever see those multilevel tic-tac-toe games you can play, not only flat but you can play this way and this way? [demonstrating] Well, I see that and I would like to have all those layers of transparency so it's *so* clear that everyone understands it. And yet, so complicated that it can never be understood completely. Well, I mean, come on! [laughing] That's beyond my doing. Will *always* be beyond my doing, but I'm always trying to do it.

Dialog: A great many of your poems, especially in your latest book, *(W)holes,* deal with dwarfs, hunchbacks, and so on. Why this fascination with abnormality?

Macdonald: I guess you're asking the question, why do writers write what they write? Why do you choose the things you choose? I'll speculate, but it *is* speculation. I don't know the answer to that, and, as I said, I don't think most writers know the answer. Perhaps it's because I'm not interested in writing about the subjects that are easily encompassed. What we can see and notice everyday; maybe that's not what we need to write about. It's the things that we turn away from, the complications, the confusions, the ambivalences, that I most want to explore. I mean, one reason freaks have interested me is that I think we're fascinated with them. And at the same time, we also feel afraid, repelled, worried, concerned. All kinds of things. Our own fascination and our own fear of what's freakish in us.

There's a line in one of my poems that says "the freak wears on the outside what we conceal." And to me, that idea is very compelling, though the line itself is only interesting in that poem. And when you say, oh, look how beautiful! It's so green outside the window! I love that. I could write a poem about that. But somehow, it wouldn't be enough. Should I try and define for you again how beautiful it is when you already know, and you're happy to look at it, and I'm happy to look at it? Though I really do believe that there are poems of joyfulness and affirmation, and sometimes I write one. But usually it fails. [smiling ruefully] I'm very lucky. I not only love both my children, but I also like them a lot. I've tried over and over to write poems that would be an affirmation of that. I've never had a good one; they're terrible! Well, some people can. There are wonderful poems that people have managed to write without being soppy, sentimental, all the things that mine always are. That is a failure, apropos of building platforms and wonderful visions that don't get built.

Dialog: *Transplants,* your second book, overall seems a lighter book than both *Amputations* and *(W)holes*. Colors and glass seem to permeate the book.

Macdonald: I don't know if I would say it's lighter. I think things are kept less at arms length. Therefore, more color comes through. In my poem, "Mistress Mary Quite Contrary," a woman juggler has been buried in a tank of snow up to her neck: "Using only/Her forearms and hands, she circled silver bells/To the arched sky She felt them changing./Color flowed through her fingers like blood/Returning after freezing." In this poem, a return of feeling and color are directly allied.

Another way of putting it would be to say I believe the more you can experience the full range of your feelings without cutting off any part of them, the more you're apt to have a magnificent panoply of stuff to choose from when you want to transform those feelings into work.

Dialog: Moving away from your own work for a moment, what do you see happening in American poetry today?

Macdonald: It's an interesting time in poetry because we've reached a point where a great many people are accomplished poets. They are able to write very good poems, poems I like, poems I admire, but poems I forget. It's like seeing a beautiful white water lily and enjoying it's perfection. You won't remember it unless there's something more, a context that makes you remember.

Perhaps the lily floated in a glass bowl that was inherited from your grandmother whose skin was as pale and translucent as the lily's. Perhaps grandmother's bowl with the lily is in the middle of the table at which two lovers sit fighting or blissfully planning to go to visit Monet's garden at Giverney together. And perhaps as they plan, the Ku Klux Klan has arranged to burn the synagogue where the parents of one of the lovers were married. And perhaps it isn't a real lily at all but is one made of ivory. And a string quartet is playing Lili Marlene as the lovers fox-trot.

I guess it's all a reverse version of "For want of the nail, the shoe was lost, for want of the shoe the horse was lost. . . ." And I'm most interested by the longer, more encompassing poems than I am by the ones that are about the lily alone, or even the lily and the grandmother. We can enjoy the golden perfection we get at a time when so many can do something so well. But then it all becomes too gleaming, too rigid, and, like Midas, we have to go to the river and wash and, once again, suffer a time when we're not sure how to do what we want to do. That's where we poets are now—about to undo what we've learned to do too well and, after we've washed in the river, to set off into a dark wood.

Dialog: Coming back to your own writing, one final question. What influence, if any, has Houston, or Texas, has on your work?

Macdonald: I don't think I know the answer to that. I think in ten years I can

probably answer the question. I have had Houston as a part of the landscape in my poems for quite a while, because of that time I lived here in ’72, ’73. But they are referenced to Houston. I mean, the fact that there’s a poem set in the Meyerland barbershop; it could be another barbershop. That isn’t crucial. Then, there are poems like “Two Brothers in a Field of Absence,” which I know are set in Texas but where a reader probably wouldn’t know that. Of course, some poems, like “The Kilgore Rangerette Whose Life Was Ruined,” is obviously a poem about Texas, in which place is crucial.

I might add that one of my great prides is that I think I have been *banned* from Kilgore Junior College. I’ve never tried to go there, but somebody called up and tried to get a photograph of the rangerettes to put with the poem in a newspaper and they refused. They said, “What’s it for?” and when the paper said, “A poem,” they said, “Oh, we know about her! And we will not send you a photograph!” I thought that was a modest accolade, for a poet to be banned in Kilgore.

Michael McClure

Interview conducted by Patt McRae

I couldn't imagine what Michael McClure, member of the Beat Generation, and I could possibly have to talk about. Never having been a fan of the Beat Generation, I resented having to do an interview with someone I considered a middle-aged dilettante.

"Come in, honey," the mellow voice responded to my knock on the door of his room at the Helena Motel. He had just returned from giving a lecture on the Beat Generation at the University of Houston and seemed in an expansive mood. Sitting on the edge of the bed, puckish grin spreading over his features, he asked, "Well, honey, what do you think about the Beat Generation?"

Taking a deep breath and figuring I would wind up blowing this off since, for one thing, I had refused to tolerate the address of "honey" for about ten years and, for another thing, I really couldn't begin to imagine how to start the interview, I replied, "I think the Beat Generation is a bunch of decadent middle-aged degenerates sitting around playing with themselves, never having got past the psycho-social level of age six."

Reaching into his knapsack, McClure pulled out a pint of Jack Daniels and said, "Sit down, Patt. We're going to do just fine."

And, in fact, we did, and the resulting interview became a fascinating study of a gentleman who refuses to accept surface words as explanations and who possesses a relentless pursuit of communicative exploration within and without. Michael McClure, more than any other poet I know, understands and has the marvelous ability to articulate that difficult connection between print and sound patterns, insisting on that experience as part of our everyday lives.

Like the windows of Machu Picchu, McClure's "Beast Language" recreates a gorgeous and incredible view into the sound that is a constant vibration in our bodies and in our lives.

Dialog: When did you first write in Beast Language?

McClure: I think it was in 1959. I had a vision of thirteen bearded men seated at a long table facing an audience, and the man in the middle had lion paws, and they all were drinking black wine and eating black plums and eating loaves of french bread,

and they were holding a long beatific ritual, philosophical conversations with one another as a kind of dramatic rite. And what surprised me about it was that it went off as a kind of flash over my head that they were not speaking in English. I started writing a play out in the language that I heard. It sort of went off in my head all in one flash, and I started writing out the language. That surprised me. I thought, how do I write this out when they were saying things like, "graar, greer, retack, goor, nah." I just spelled it out as they were saying it; base of "goor" would be capital G, four capital Os, and R; "goohr" would have an H before the R, perhaps. GOOOOR, GOOOOHR.

I worked that play out, and we performed it in San Francisco as a kind of a happening in 1960. There were some really brilliant artists taking the roles, people like electronic composer Morton Subotnick, poet Philip Whalen, gallery owner Billy Armand, Richard Duerden, David Meltzer, and people who probably many people have read or heard works by.

Then I didn't write anything in that language again until 1962, when I was studying kundalini yoga, and I began to realize that there was a ball of silence within myself, and inside that ball of silence there was a whirl of poems, tantras of poems (tantras being rituals, short, brief rituals to change the nature of the universe) going on inside of that ball. I realized that I was going to write a book of ninety-nine poems in Beast Language, and I began writing them. But in the middle of this book—or not even in the middle, about one-third of the way through this book—it turned out that I had to go to Mexico to bring back cultures of psychedelic mushrooms, the sacred mushrooms, because I was involved in a legitimate scientific experiment for the Institute of Personality Assessment and Research at the University of California under the auspices of Frank Baron, a great early experimenter in the field of creativity to give mushrooms to creative individuals and do films of them while they were on mushrooms. But the Argyle Laboratories in Toronto, who created psylocybin sulfate, I think it was, had all they could manufacture bought by the United States Army. I couldn't put my hands on the drug, on the chemical form of the drug, so to continue our experiments, a biologist friend of mine and I had to go to the mountains of Oaxaca and bring back cultures of the mushrooms. I believe we were the first westerners in there after Wasson. As a matter of fact, when we went in there, it was the middle of the rainy season, and they didn't have the four-wheel-drive Jeep truck they were supposed to have for us at the rent-a-car place in Mexico City, and the only thing they could give us was a Nash Rambler station wagon. So we went into the mountains of Oaxaca, where in those days there were no roads except ruts with the rain coming down at God knows how many inches a day, in a Nash Rambler.

Dialog: But you had heard the Beast Language before any work with the mushrooms?

McClure: Yes, I just got carried away telling the story. I was just saying that I wrote this book of ninety-nine poems, but about one-third of the way though, I had to go to Mexico. Some of them are written in Mexico, some of them are written in bedrooms, some of them are written in airports. And in the middle of writing the ninety-ninth poem (the last poem, which was written, I think, in September of 1962. I had started in June) I had to get drunk on brandy to even write it. They had become so powerful and so magical, I couldn't face giving them up. Stan Brakhage, the great experimental filmmaker, phoned me right in the middle of it and I said, "wait a minute, Stan. I'm writing a poem." He was calling long distance from Colorado and I finished the poem and went back to the phone and read it to him; so he was the first person to hear these poems. At least, I read him the ninety-ninth one.

The language when you go from one to ninety-nine starts out in baby talk. They start out going "geer, gah, groooh, greer, graah," and the last ones are hierophantic, magical. Fully hierophantic, fully magical poems; but in between there is a period where they work with both English and Beast Language, and they slide back and forth in an interesting way. Also, they were not separated from what was going on in the real world entirely. One was written the day after Marilyn Monroe died. And I didn't say, "Well, now, I'm going to write a Beast Language poem about Marilyn Monroe." It became part of the religious experience of the poem.

Dialog: My next question was going to be: Can anyone understand it?

McClure: How can anybody not understand them?

Dialog: Okay, my problem was I've never heard it before. Hearing it, it became clear, whereas visually on the page I had a little bit of a problem with it.

McClure: I think the poems visually on the page are extremely beautiful. I met the great abstract expressionist painter Mark Rothko, shortly before he died a number of years ago, and I felt that he was the only person who was capable of appreciating them on the page, just as fields of letters; because if you don't read them aloud they resemble fields of letters and in that sense they are not entirely different from his great color fields of painting. Unfortunately, I lost his address and never got the book to him, but they exist on the page as patterns, and they exist in the air when you read them. The patterns, however, I think, are quite readable if you make the experiment of reading them.

When I first wrote them, before the book was published, we used to try to use them as a party game. I had manuscripts, and we would pass the manuscript around after dinner, and everybody would just read one or two. Everybody kind of had their own voice to do it, everybody sounded a little different.

Dialog: How do people react to it usually, when they first hear it?

McClure: Usually they like it when they hear it. Usually they are puzzled when they see it on the page. The book has been used by psychotherapists, and it's been used in jails and in experimental projects. I got a lot of mail, or used to when *Ghost Tantras* was newer. I used to get a lot of mail about various uses the book was being put to. It was interesting to me. I've never intended for them to be useful in any way except to change the nature of reality. And certainly the nature of reality has been changed since 1962, so the book must have been a success.

Dialog: Are you aware that one of the primary reasons sometimes we can . . . the only way we can communicate with some schizophrenics is because of the sounds they are making like that? Though usually not in as mellifluous tones and laid back as you are, because it's coming from their agony and, you know, whatever pain they are facing in their psyche.

McClure: Yes. I don't have much trouble talking to schizophrenics. I can talk to them in English pretty well. I don't find much difficulty speaking, I'm not that far from where they are. Also, you know, I grew up in Kansas, and I've heard people speaking in tongues. But I never heard anybody speak in tongues like this. This really comes out of my studies of kundalini yoga.

Dialog: This reminds me a little bit of Tolkien.

McClure: Ah yes. His work came out of, very much out of Old English and Middle English. And I did have models. Although these are religious poems, I did have models that were, oddly enough, Chaucer and Lorca. I could recite a couple of my models for you. For instance, a model was Chaucer's "Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales*.

> "Whan that Aprile with his showres soote
> The droughth of Marche pierceth to the roote"

All those things were in my mind.

Dialog: It's interesting that it came our of your studies of kundalini yoga. As you were quoting Chaucer, I was reminded of a reading I heard Neruda do of his "Machu Picchu" that sounded very much like an incantation. You almost could not understand it as Spanish, per se, but very much like the Beast Language. It was really interesting from that aspect.

McClure: Machu Picchu is an interesting place. It can really get one into an entirely different way of feeling. One of the things I noticed in Machu Picchu is that it's not the buildings that are interesting but where the windows look out to.

The people who built Machu Picchu were kind of like air fairies. They were living up on the edge of space, literally. This is a plateau; it's not as high as you would think. It's only nine- to ten-thousand feet, but it's literally on the edge of space. I mean, it's maybe a couple of thousand or one thousand foot drop to the Urubamba River, and there is nothing around it except peaks that are ever higher. Each window is based in such a place that it creates a gorgeous and incredible picture if you look out the window.

People got up there, and they spend all the time looking at the stonework in the walls. What I thought was fabulous was where the stones were not; where the windows were the most fabulous thing of all. I never heard anybody comment on that. There are little bridges up there with no reason for there being bridges. The only water to flow through them was utilitary water paths. They built little elaborate bridges over them so that these people were really always up in the air looking out into nothing.

There were several theories about what Machu Picchu was, but it's a truly enchanted place. I wrote a poem about Machu Picchu; it was a villanelle for Gary Snyder, and I wrote it there . . . and I can't remember a line of it. If I could remember one line, I could probably remember the whole thing.

Dialog: It is interesting how people react to things. I used to think people had to react favorably to everything in order for them to understand it, and I've come to learn that you can often accomplish as much through a negative reaction. At least, if they bother to be upset enough by it, you've set them to thinking.

McClure: Well, I grew up expecting negative reactions. My first reading was in 1955 when Ginsberg read *Howl* and, of course, we were all well received then—but we had our own audience. After that, we started reading in places . . . I mean, I think the worst reception I ever had was at Princeton about 1959. The audience was jeering at us.

Dialog: Did your behavior from that period lend itself to that kind of reaction?

McClure: Well, yes it did. I think we didn't expect approval. We didn't try for approval. I think some of us went out of our way to get negative acceptance, and probably, I went out of my way a certain bit to get negative acceptance since I was the youngest one of the bunch and probably the cockiest in a way.

I had the idea back then that there was no success but failure, and there is a cer-

tain amount of truth to that. If you succeed, you are pleasing at a social level. And if you are pleasing at a social level, I think you are locked in the universe of discourse. But my ideas have matured since then, and I think there is a way of pleasing on a biological level that is more important, but I wasn't aware of it at the time.

Charles Olson spoke of the universe of discourse, which is what people speak of today when they speak of semiotics. They are speaking of the universe of signs, that is the universe most of us exist in. And, in addition to that, it's the universe of ideas of western civilization, of modern petroleum civilization, of technology and everything else that is happening right now. It's what Marcuse called "one dimensional society." It's social society.

In addition to social society, we have a visceral mammal creature existence, and on that level, I think there really is a democracy of pleasurable meaningful interdependence. And I can *see* it and *feel* it. On the level of the other in that semiotic universe of discourse, I feel that it is very cold. We are cut off from one another, we're alienated, we're filled with bad faith, and we are not capable (congealed by one-dimensional society) of making a kind of radical conversional gesture and choices. We have no possibility of liberty.

When we stand on the meat of our own feet, of our own two feet—which we can't do very often—we can sometimes make an important choice or an important recognition of our own liberty. Poetry, ideally, is that. Sometimes.

Dialog: The *Soho News* referred to you as "a mammal patriot," and it was interesting because a few minutes ago, as you were reading, it reminded me of someone suckling. But when you think of suckling as a nurturing dependency kind of thing, it kind of brings you back full circle to what you were just talking about.

McClure: Yes. I was thinking more of "warm-blooded" as mammal. I hadn't really thought about that, the breast thing, but I guess that is what mammal means, coming from the word mammary. That is in a poem of mine called "Antechamber." The poem starts out like this and . . . it might give some idea of where I stand when I say "mammal patriot." This is a long poem . . . it begins going down the page somewhat like a Japanese poem with calligrams, and then the lines lengthen, and then they are spaced in a phonic way:

I
KNOW
NOTHING
ABOUT
BOATS.
What I do know
is organisms:
THE
CELLS
and
BEINGS...

And I tumble
in the flashy silence

THAT I LIGHT WITH SELVES

and look for music.

["Antechamber," p. 25]

So that's the poem in which I bring up the idea.

Dialog: You also write plays and songs. Probably the one people might most identify with is the one Janis Joplin made popular, "Mercedes Benz." But I also know that you are into some experimental music and electronic new wave music, and I was struck again by a connection I saw between what electronic music and your Beast Language and what you were saying about the "universe of discourse." Here are people using these computers with their microchips and everything to move to almost that mammal kind of biological feeling.

McClure: Yes, there is some of that happening. I have been listening to things that many people are listening to. I have been listening to Phillip Glass and Brian Eno. I have been listening to Kraftwerk, and I have been listening to David Byrne's music and things like "The Catherine Wheel," and yet, as I listen to that music, I am pleased by it.

I like Brian Eno. I like the imagination that Eno has. When I listen to Glass, I hear a very traditionally tonal nineteenth century music and it doesn't have emotional range, yet I keep listening to it over and over. It pleases me. It's easy to listen to. But the other night I played Morton Subotnick's *Sidewinder* which is—God

knows when it was written, it must have been about ’65, something like that—of the wholly electronic base. And when I say wholly electronic, I mean *wholly,* I didn’t mean that it was composed on the tape. And the emotional range of it is really significant.

I listened to Kraftwerk. It was in the computer world. I found that interesting, delightful. I play it a lot, but there is something infantile about it. So I miss the emotional range of things. Maybe we can’t afford the emotional range of things right now; maybe we’re in a lot of pain as a nation or as individuals, but I found myself looking back at things that Subotnick was doing in ’65. Really wild.

Not wild. Really emotionally powerful unknown electronic composers who will never be popular because they are really like Brahms or really like Beethoven. Chris Gainer is a good example. And I don’t think Chris pushes himself, and I don’t think we will ever hear Chris’s work in this century.

Dialog: Do you think, perhaps, back in the ’60s and part of the ’70s, rock music was undergoing such a change and was very emotional . . . that that just really kind of pulled everything out of everybody for awhile?

McClure: That’s very possible, although I don’t think rock ever pulled anything out of anybody. I think rock was an extension of what was going on. I don’t think rock did anything, but we may look back there (since we’re inclined to view things in terms of art, or music, or artifacts) and say, “Look, in the ’60s, all of our emotions—very deep emotions—were being pulled out of us.” Maybe it’s appropriate that we listen to Glass now, or we go look at Andy Warhol things which are portraits of Mickey Mouse and Dracula and not literal, but then I hear really superb composers like Chris. Chris’s music is so powerful, I can only listen to it once a month. I can listen to Phillip Glass’s work twice a day, no problem whatsoever. No challenge.

Dialog: You write plays. How hard is it for you to move back and forth between theater and poetry?

McClure: Well, they’re complementary aspects of my feeling area. Right now, I’m not writing plays but at least I announce that loudly, and as soon as I announce that . . . Right now, I’m sort of trying to write a play. I’m sort of developing an idea for a new one. My plays are not bourgeois realisms. Really, when a play of mine is done, it’s like seeing my own hallucinations. Acted on the stage, that’s probably the most ecstatic experience it’s possible to have outside of the writing of a poem. So it’s been an important part of my life the last fifteen or twenty years.

Dialog: I just had a thought. I saw a quote from Ben Franklin of all people: "I'm making myself up as I go." And I just had that thought about you. What would you tell a young writer today, when maybe there isn't the freedom to be really rebellious except maybe in punk rock. And maybe somebody doesn't want to do that; maybe they realize they cannot pass their college courses if they turned in papers with typography or language . . . letting themselves go off, like you did with Beast Language?

McClure: I guess I don't have any advice I'd give a young writer today except to make sure he or she *wanted* to write, which is the same advice I would have given twenty or thirty years ago.

I think there are a lot of people, there always have been, who are under the illusion that they want to write. As an illusion, that's okay. But to waste time following the illusion if it's not coming from a real deep center could be confusing. And those who are intensely centered don't need any advice from me.

Marie Ponsot

Interview conducted by Lazaro Aleman and Steven Robinson

At the time of this interview, Marie Ponsot was taking time off from her post as professor of English at Queens College, New York, to teach two poetry workshops at the University of Houston. She is the author of two volumes of poetry: *True Minds* (City Lights Books, 1957) and *Admit Impediment* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1981).

Dialog: What is the difference between reading your poems and hearing them outloud?

Ponsot: What is amazing is that some people find my work a surprise when they *hear* it, when they read it aloud. It really is written with a big sense of ear. I'm very interested in the type of contrast you get when you have a bass-line, or expectable rhythm, going on, but that isn't the only thing you work with. You try to have that as an expectation, and then you have the language going across it like a rhythm guitar. There are two rhythms going on.

Dialog: In trying to read your poems as straight prose, one gets lost. I had to come back and get into the rhythm and then I understood what was being said.

Ponsot: I try to do that because I like the sound of language a lot. When I write a first draft, it has something in it that I call a hum. It goes Mmmmm, Mmmmm, like those things of Swinburn's when you can't even remember what he's talking about. There's a big hum. It's great! But what was he talking about? So, when I rewrite, I try to cut across the hum, both with the idea and with the cadence of ordinary talk.

Dialog: How does an idea for a poem form in your mind? How long does it take?

Ponsot: Some of them come quickly. Some of them take for-bloody-ever. I don't very often have an *idea* for a poem. I usually have a few words in my head. Words that seem to be saying something but I don't know quite what it is. What I do is write to find out what's in it.

Dialog: At what time of day do you seem to be most productive?

Ponsot: I like late nights and early mornings. That's partly because I have a large family, and I was supporting them for a long time, so the routine would be to get the babies into bed, do twenty pages of work [that of doing translations], and then whatever energy I had left was mine.

Dialog: Do you do much revision?

Ponsot: Yes. [smiling] That's the pleasure. That's the hard work, the good part.

Dialog: Is there a point where you can revise too much?

Ponsot: Yeats has a remark about that. He presents prose and poetry as alternatives. I'm not sure that these are only names for the alternatives. But there are two attitudes toward what you've written. He says prose can be revised and revised and revised infinitely. With a poem, it "claps shut, like a box." Now, these are the two attitudes, I think. The feeling that you revise and revise and revise, that happens with some pieces. Other pieces just come together, and can't be changed. Boom!

Dialog: Do you have occasion to read a poem that you've written in the past and discover something in it that you didn't notice before?

Ponsot: Yes. I think that a lot of times when you're writing, especially if you're working with one of the conventions that asks you to put ten syllables in each line and no more, it makes you bring things out of your preconscious language center that sound pretty so you put them down. But you don't really know how true they are 'til later, because they're not conscious yet. The sonnets that I read at the Museum of Fine Arts, "Late," I wrote to try to get at this feeling I had about my mother and the really deep relationship we all have with both our parents. My mother was mysterious to me in very many ways. We were very different kinds of people, but we really were connected. It's a complex piece of writing. Very heavily revised. I kept revising to discover more and to take out what wasn't quite right. And then try to find out what I could put in that was a little more true.

After I finished, a couple of months after, I read them over and realized that all the incidents I was recalling—that are reflected in the poem—happened before the time I was six. And they are before the time that my brother was born. Now, my brother is one of my life heroes. He's my buddy. I trust him. We've always gotten along well. I didn't experience sibling rivalry as a conscious experience at all. Ever. I wrote that poem, and it proved that I lost something when he was born. In trying to talk about my mother's death, I found I had talked about that first loss, when I lost her as my universe.

Dialog: How long after you wrote the poem did you discover this?

Ponsot: Usually, when I think something is finished, I leave it for a while before I show it to anybody. I was with some really good friends in New York. We exchange poems. I was reading it aloud, and I was beginning to realize what it implied. At that point I changed something in the first sonnet. I have "loss on loss." I wanted to put the two losses in. That was the line I changed, because there was really a double loss. And one of them I hadn't even know about!

Dialog: Do you have poems of your own that are your favorites?

Ponsot: That changes. There's a little bit of a poem in *Admit Impediment* called "Unabashed," for example, that I'd never noticed. I put it in because it made some kind of little statement that I didn't know how to make any other way. We invent a lot of things trying to invent the idea of love. It's about angels. We imagine angels because they can do things perfectly that we can't do, like really love. And love loving and all that stuff.

Dialog: Most of your poetry seems to be very personal. Do you have to distance yourself from an experience before you can write about it?

Ponsot: Sometimes you can write about it right away. There's a poem called "Ghost Writer" that I wrote for a friend of mine who was an extremely talented woman. She was a senior editor writing speeches, reediting scientific material from all over the world, turning it into statements of real prose that would sell their ideas. She poured herself into that and was not doing what I wanted her to do, such as write great stuff for me to read. She had an option on a novel that she never finished. I finally forced myself to talk to her about it one day, and I could see it was too painful for her. She couldn't talk about what she was giving up in order to do what she was doing. So I kind of stopped right there, and after she left my house, I wrote "Ghost Writer." That was in November. On the twenty-third of January, she died. She was fifty. I wrote "Sois Sage O Ma Douleur" after she died. Before she was buried. The only poem that I ever thought of publishing that is not revised. I wrote that poem one night, then I couldn't touch it. It was too painful. I just couldn't touch it. And I still can't read it. When I read it, I want to cry. Because of the closeness I felt with her. We knew each other well for fifteen years, and she died still full of promise and possibility.

Dialog: One of the themes you seem to explore is laying claim. Do you feel that you've laid claim?

Ponsot: I try. Certainly. It's a daily thing, really. And I guess the reason it's hard to do is that there aren't good models for it. Because I don't think, as you can tell from that poem "From the Fountain at Vaucluse," that the world would be a better place if everybody laid fierce and tigerish territorial claims. What you do is try to assert the small space you occupy as yours and no more. And to do both of these, to make the right claim and not a claim larger than is proper, it's . . . it's . . . you make mistakes all the time.

Dialog: Do you think, then, that we have a responsibility that belongs to us?

Ponsot: We do, I think. What we try to discover in our lives is exactly what that responsibility is or involves. How we can declare it and act it. Yes, I think that's right. It is a question of responsibility.

Dialog: And I suppose if that is the case, then the great tragedy is that people don't seek to fulfill that responsibility?

Ponsot: Yes, they don't think of their lives in that way first. But the great wonder is that many, many ordinary people do take responsibility for their acts.

Dialog: What is it that diminishes people's desire to be responsible, or is anyone to blame?

Ponsot: Well, I don't know. But I noticed one thing when I was sending my children to school. School is a great invention, and I believe in universal education. And I'm a passionate teacher. But public schools are really determined by industry. By big business, for conformity. Not for individual, responsible choice.

Dialog: They've been compared to holding pens.

Ponsot: Right! They're holding pens. Obey. Obey. Meaningless or not. And that's the child's first and most permanent encounter with the big world. The schools get the five best hours of the day for the twelve most receptive years of a kid's life. And it shapes their vision of the world outside their own skins.

Dialog: I think you bring that up in your poem "Basic Skills."

Ponsot: That's my own kid I'm writing about. I saw that! I saw that, and I still want to kill that woman twenty years later. [laughs]

Dialog: Is your poetry, or poetry and the arts in general, geared to make people aware of this condition?

Ponsot: I think they can be. I think they should be, not through propaganda but through paying attention.

Dialog: Are you conscious of that when you write?

Ponsot: I write to tell the truth. I'm interested in telling the truth.

Dialog: Regardless of whether anyone out there hears it or not?

Ponsot: I trust language to do the communicating.

Dialog: It's up to you to say what you mean, and it's up to me to understand what you're saying?

Ponsot: Right! And I don't want to persuade you. I don't want to advertise you into something. I want to say what I think is true, and I want you to say what you think is true, and then, on that basis, we are closer than if I said, "Well, I want you to think this. . . ."

Dialog: You make that point in your poem "Of Certain Students," where you talk about setting up language snares that your students are quick enough to set off.

Ponsot: Yes, it's ideas we're trying to catch. Oh, boy! I tell you, what a racket. It's such fun. I discovered teaching late in my life, and I would do it for nothing if I didn't have to give grades. But they pay me a whole year's salary just for giving grades twice.

Dialog: Why the twenty-odd-year hiatus between your two books, *True Minds* in 1957 and *Admit Impediments* in 1981?

Ponsot: I think there's a big problem for me, and for many people in the arts, in the way they work right now. And that is just as true in Houston as it is in New York, as it is any place. The talent to make art and the talent to distribute it are not the same. These often coexist in one person, but not necessarily. They're very different. I have no gift for the work of self-publicity or self-distribution. I don't like the way some people have to orient themselves to do that. And I haven't yet found an original way to do it without losing my head. So I kept producing though I didn't distribute.

Dialog: A lot of people are submitting material to us, and we are trying to learn what to look for in a poem. Obscurity is a problem.

Ponsot: I'd trust the language to inform you, to form your judgment. Maybe the question of obscurity is the wrong question. Maybe what James Joyce said is really true: that it doesn't matter how obscure something may appear if uncovering what it is saying is sufficiently rewarding. You have to have the payoff. It has to be uncoverable. Discoverable. And if the payoff is good enough for the time spent, then it's a good piece. And if it's not, it's just self-indulgent.

Dialog: Since you do teach writing, what are some of the most common errors poets make?

Ponsot: We have to learn to trust language, and the naming of objects and event, really trust. There's one mistake everybody makes in adolescence—I'm trying to write a little poem about it right now—that is, we believe in the obscurity of the secret. Inexperienced writers dream that secrets are holy; that there is somewhere a secret that is sacred.

Dialog: In other words, the poet should strive for honesty, clarity, truth?

Ponsot: Yes. Sometimes what you're thinking about is very plain and clear and the words just come to you. And it's not a horribly complex thing. It just might be something you noticed that is not ordinarily noticed. And then other times when you write—as in those sonnets about the fountain—where I was wrestling with an idea. Those sonnets are very knotty, very lumpy. There are a lot of jagged places in them, and it would have been very easy to take these out, but I would have taken something out of the kind of struggle that it was for me to understand the subject.

Dialog: With age, does the writer have to guard against formula, or is that something the poet has to worry about?

Ponsot: I think that's a question of the kind of life you've led. Sometimes, the formula seem to affect the life more than the poems. Someone like Robert Frost knew very early in life that he was going to be a poet. And everything was subordinated to that. If you will allow me to say this without sounding as though I think it's easy: It is easier for men to have careers because they are trained to think of themselves as their career. That's also, of course, a hardship and a mistake. Even now, a woman is expected, more or less, "to be." A man is expected to be his career. The formula of success can be imprisoning. Everything in the life of someone like Robert Lowell

contributed to giving him his sense of his career as a poet. And, of course, it killed him. If you're someone who is just writing in order to write, if your prime objective is not distribution but production, you're not going to have that problem because the world keeps on coming new. You change, change all the time. Your language changes. Even your perceptions change. For me, teaching is a wonderful way to get that kind of energy exchange.

Dialog: Are you ever satisfied with a poem?

Ponsot: Well, every once in a while, you read something, and you say to yourself, "I was smarter than I thought when I wrote this," because it does tell you something that you didn't know you knew. But you never really . . . it's like teaching. You start out a semester, and you know what you *hope* will happen. Two weeks into it, I'm still feeling, yeah! And then you know you didn't do your best. You did what you could. And I don't really think of that as a failure.

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