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Stylesheet

1. Submissions should be typed on 8.5″ x 11″ white paper; prose should be double spaced. Include a SASE.

2. Submitted artwork should be suitable for black and white reproduction. Work should be no larger than 8.5″ x 14″. However, photographs or slides of larger work may be submitted. Submitted artwork with a SASE will be returned.

3. We accept and enjoy formal verse, free verse, and prose poems.

4. Include a brief biographical sketch for our contributors’ notes.

5. We welcome submissions on a 3.5″ disk formatted for IBM or Macintosh. Please include a hard copy of your submission.

6. Submissions and correspondence may be sent to:
   
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FRED ALSBERG: When did you first begin to write poetry? What was the occasion?

CAROL HAMILTON: I had never had interest in poetry, but was writing and publishing short stories and articles when my children were small and we lived in Hiram, Ohio, a small college town near Kent State. A time of personal tragedy came in my life, for which I was totally unprepared. That and all the turmoil on our campus and the tragedy at nearby Kent changed everything in my life. A friend on the faculty there, who has for many years since been a poetry editor, showed me some poetry she had written at the Iowa University workshop with Paul Engle when she was suffering from psychological problems and had a couple of attempted suicides and hospitalizations behind her. She told me that, though she did not consider what she had written there as very good poetry, the writing had been helpful in getting her through that hard time. She suggested writing poetry as a resource for surviving tragic events.

So I began writing poetry, drawing on the only poetry I had ever really liked, that of John Donne, and the lyrics of the songwriters of that era, Judy Collins, Joan Baez. Bob Dylan, and especially, Simon and Garfunkel (of special interest to me was their “The Dangling Conversation”). I found in these writers what I liked in general, the use of metaphor to make sense of things. So that is how I began to write my own poetry. I began publishing immediately, but I had no idea if what I was writing were really poetry or not. But it was the coffeehouse poetry reading era, and there were lots of opportunities to share. My mother came from Oklahoma one summer to stay with my three children so that I could get away from problems at home for a little while, and I went to the Indiana University Writers’ Conference. Twenty-five were accepted in each workshop on the basis of work submitted, and I went in short story and won first prize for the week in that category. But I sat at the shadowy edges of the poets’ workshop with Lionel Wiggams, listened, and also attended and shared at their critiquing/sharing sessions to ask if I were really writing poetry. They were most enthusiastic and encouraging, so I continued. I learned there that the various schools of poets do not always blend comfortably, and I wrote a little verse called “Wiggams’ Ark” which went:

Two by two the poets came
of every style and creed,
and true to form, the species did refuse to interbreed.

Jesse Hill Ford was at that time a regular short story writer for THE ATLANTIC. He was my teacher, and he gave me the award in short story. He told me that I should write three hours a day. When I went home, I began writing from 4-7 a.m., before my children arose. But my little boys discovered that I was up and decided that was a good time to awaken for play, so I changed my writing time to 9 until midnight. I found the style and content of my writing varied greatly at those different parts of the day. I soon returned to teaching to support my family, and I have always, ever since, done my writing early in the morning before anything else. I found that after teaching all day and caring for my own children, there was no creative energy left over for the evening or night. I just now thought that it might be fun to start writing poetry at night once more.

FRED ALSBERG: How do your poems take shape? Origins and forms?

CAROL HAMILTON: How poems take shape is a mystery to me. I believe that when a writer sits down to write at a
regular time and place, the mind learns it is expected to snap to attention, and somehow, it always does. But that is a product of long practice. I usually write at least one poem a day. People used to asked me if the writer does not need to wait for inspiration. I find inspiration comes at odd times, usually when I am driving or reading or some other time when there is no opportunity to sit down and write. But I do jot down ideas on scraps of paper. I do not keep these in any kind of order, but keep them in a box or bag or jumbled within a stack of papers.

If I need an idea for a poem, I'll grab a few, which usually bring my ideas back to me completely out of the original context, but that only adds new dimensions to the original idea. Sometimes, I may sit in the yard or look out the window or read a few poems by some other poet or read in a book I have on the history of food, or the BOOK OF SAINTS, or look through a book of paintings. Always something starts stirring, and often several different ideas converge with a complex of memories coming to the fore as well. I start writing and keep writing until suddenly some surprise comes to me. I am always astounded that it all came together somehow. I always feel as if I just discovered something I did not know I knew. Then I type the work on the computer, play around with the shape, the line breaks, the sounds, look up some of the words, which also sometimes adds some new ideas, as words, definitions are so complex and full of history. Then I print off a copy on used paper, record it and listen to it, change it until it sounds right. The next day I listen again, change some more, and usually, I am finished with it and ready for another. Some I completely finish in a very short time, others I may play with for a few days. I am not a poet who keeps agonizing over endless changes to one poem. Sometimes I'll take up an old one and find I want to re-write it, but that is usually when I need to re-type it for some reason. I do have one critique group and I share a few poems with them each month and find lots of work to do after those sessions. But this is the first group I've ever stayed with, and I have only been in it about a year. I find it very helpful, as this is a group with good chemistry. But basically, I work alone.

But normally, I don't keep changing things unless an editor asks me to, which happens. When that happens, I usually go along with the request, unless I just don't like the change, in which case, I just send it to someone else. Sometimes I change a poem back to the original version for re-prints or anthologizing, etc. But usually, I find editors make very good suggestions, and most of what I have ever learned about poetry I learned from some very kind editors, especially Judith Neeld, who used to be editor of STONE COUNTRY in Massachusetts. I have never met her, but I should build a shrine to her. She taught me a lot with great generosity of time and talent. Many of the poems she critiqued for me over and over were finally published by some other magazine. She always explained why. And sometimes she published my work, too. I feel very sure that I learned more from her than anyone.

I love to write in form and often just decide I want to write a villanelle or a sonnet today. Villanelle is my favorite form, but I really like terza rima, too. I used to be very strict about the rules, as if I were doing my figure 8's for the Olympic's competitions. Now, after doing lots and lots of that, I find I enjoy playing with the forms. That is what most good poets do. But I think the poet needs to earn the right. I used to tell my students of 0 level grammar classes at Rose State, "It is like checkers. You can only go one direction until you become a king. Then you can go anywhere." Most of us want to go anywhere before we have earned the right.

FRED ALSBERG:
How has living in Oklahoma affected your work?

CAROL HAMILTON:

Living in Oklahoma has been a great influence on my work, but it was not originally. I spent a number of years living in Connecticut, Scotland, New York, West Virginia, Ohio and Indiana. When I returned to Oklahoma in 1971, I had only been writing poetry during the last couple of years in Ohio and one year of living in Indianapolis. I grew up here, but on returning, all the remembered but unnoticed history and landscape was a freshly experienced delight and shock. Much of my writing for many years was full of images from our landscape, and the whole feel of the plains, the expanse, the swept-clean surface, the blown-away history, the Plains Tribes’ belief that a man is a tall as the distance he can see.... this has all been very much a part of my writing since I returned to Oklahoma. I hated Oklahoma history in junior high school, but since I had to pass a test in the subject to teach here when I returned, I read Arell Gibson’s book on Oklahoma history (he had been a professor of mine at Phillips University many years before he made his name at the University of Oklahoma) and found how rich and fascinating our history is. I have especially written a lot about western Oklahoma, as I grew up in Enid, and my relatives raised cattle and wheat around Capron, where I loved to go as a child. I have written children’s books about the desert, and that began before I had ever been to the desert, so a long love affair with landscapes of scarcity began for me on my return to Oklahoma.

FRED ALSBERG:

Which writers have influenced you? Which writers would you suggest we read?

CAROL HAMILTON:

This I have already partly answered, but early on, my biggest problem was to find poets whose work I liked. And I advise every beginning poet to read lots and lots of poets to try to find whom they really like. And also to continue reading those they really don’t like. In other words, the first job of anyone who is serious about writing poetry is to read lots of poets, and read them seriously to begin to discover what you like and what you do not.

I suppose I liked T. S. Eliot before I ever read him. I have several letters from editors in my early days of writing, before I had read Eliot, comparing my work to his, either in praise or blame. And when I read him, I liked him a lot. I think the reason I wrote the way I did was that the times in which I began writing and thinking about life was a time vastly influenced by Eliot. We were at Yale for several years and the talk (and that is what we did there .....talk!) was imbued with the every thought of Eliot, though I did not realize that that is where some of my thinking came from. I saw “Murder in the Cathedral” performed in a cathedral there and heard a lot of talk about “The Hollow Men,” but that was all I officially knew of Eliot. But once I read him, I loved his work. Long after I was accused of copying him.

It took me many years to find two poems I really loved, and I still love them: “The Dark and the Fair” by Stanley Kunitz, and “After Apple Picking” by Robert Frost. Over the years, I’ve found many poets I adore. But some of them I did not come to like easily. Some of my favorites are: Elizabeth Bishop, Wislawa Szymborska, Kunitz, Mary Oliver, Yeats, some of Auden, Robert Hass, Czeslaw Milosz, Yehudi Amichi, Billy Collins, Naomi Shihab Nye, Li Young Lee, Ted Kooser, Pablo Neruda, Gabriela Mistral, Unamuno and Borges, and probably my very favorite, Seamus Heaney. I really admire Richard Wilbur and W. S. Merwin, but I don’t read them for fun. There are so many wonderful poets writing now. There is really no end to the list. I suggest beginning poets read everybody and find out whom they like best. One of my favorite books, which I turn to whenever I feel like writing a short but astounding piece (!), is the wonderful anthology by Czeslaw Milosz, A BOOK OF LUMINOUS THINGS.
FRED ALSBERG:  
Do you have any advice for aspiring writers concerning word choice? Concerning the sounds of words and their arrangement?  
CAROL HAMILTON:  
The very best advice I have ever heard on improving word choice and sound in poetry came from Ezra Pound (whom I also like) via W. S. Merwin. I attended a workshop with Merwin in Tulsa a few years ago, and he told us of going, at the age of 18, to a hospital in New Jersey to meet Ezra Pound and ask him how to become a great poet. Pound told him no one could help anyone else become a poet. The only advice he had to help the poet was to memorize a lot of poetry and translate a lot of poetry. Merwin did a lot of both, and he came to believe that poetry is all in the ear. The poet must educate and feed the ear.  
I have been memorizing poetry for about two years now and find that it has done more for me both in my understanding of the ideas in the poems and of life in general, and of how sound and word choice work in the poems I have learned. I do not think there is anything, other than reading and loving a lot of poetry, that can more to help the poet improve his/her work. When great sound lives in your head, you begin to absorb it into your own work. I have written and published some poetry in Spanish and have published some translations, and translating, too, is extremely helpful in understanding the importance of all the connotations of word choice. I have not done much of that lately, as I’m no longer teaching Spanish or Spanish literature and have not been reading much in Spanish, so I have not felt inspired to do so. But anyone can work with translation. Even if you do not know another language, you can find several translations of a poem and compare them, selecting lines and words from each to make the best version you can. My students at the University of Central Oklahoma, in our Spanish Literature in Translation from the 20th Century class, quickly began to know a good translation from a bad translation, even when they did not know Spanish. They had studied the life and the intent of the poet, and they realized when something did not ring true. Anything that does not ring true is bad for poetry. But there is never a perfect translation. Borges has pointed out that every translation has something to teach us. No poem is ever perfect either. Perhaps that is why we keep trying so hard.

FRED ALSBERG:  
How do you decide where to break your lines?  
CAROL HAMILTON:  
Line breaks are so very important, and when I was teaching poetry, I usually gave my students a list of about 20 things different poets have said about how lines breaks should be done and of the rules some follow. I’m a full-time, right-brained person. I have no rule. But I always think about each line...over and over...for that is a very important part of poetry. Silence and space are as important as sound and print for poetry. I cannot give a definitive answer, as it is very dependent on the poem, the sound, the look I want on the page, possible confusions for the reader, etc. This would be a good topic for a very long book.

FRED ALSBERG:  
You taught for many years. How did teaching affect you as a writer?  
CAROL HAMILTON:  
What I have to say in response to that question is a cliché. I learned more about poetry in the seven or so years that I taught poetry at the University of Central Oklahoma than I had learned in the many years I had been writing before that. But that is always true of teaching anything, and I think I’ve taught everything. I taught in the elementary schools most of my life, and I began learning a lot when teaching poetry writing to children. Children make wonderful poets with only a little guidance. I was teaching in a ghetto school in Indianapolis, second grade, before the integration of stu-
ents, but just as faculties had been integrated, to 34 extremely deprived, in every way, students. I was trying to teach them about metaphor, though I didn’t call it that. I popped corn and had them tell me everything that sound was like to them. They could not write much down, so I put their ideas on the board and we made a group poem. They gave me the best line I’ve ever received from students, and I’ve done this exercise often: “It sounds like an army of ants marching over the roof.” I learned everyone owns poetry. Everyone can speak poetry. On teaching Oklahoma history to second graders. I discovered the speeches of some of the chiefs of the Plains Tribes at the Council at Medicine Lodge and other historic gatherings. They had no written language, but they spoke poetry. I do not teach anymore, but I still spend a lot of time working in schools, and I always learn wonderful things from students. But mainly you learn as a teacher because of all the preparation you have to do to be ready to teach. Nobody gets better at anything without work.

FRED ALSBERG:
In what way do your spiritual beliefs find their way into your poems?

CAROL HAMILTON:
For me, poetry is too inextricably intertwined with spirituality to talk of them as separate states. For me both have to do with ultimate truth, which is something of which I am sure I have no particular wisdom. So I just try to be as honest as I can be in both realms. My poetry is probably more about what I do not know than about what I do know. It is about exploring what I kind of, sort of, maybe, ask-me-next-Friday, think. Neither poetry nor spirituality nor science is worth anything if it lies.

FRED ALSBERG:
What are you happiest about in your poetry? Least contented?

CAROL HAMILTON:
I’m happiest when I am writing poetry and I am always delighted when I finish a piece. And sometimes I am joyous when I see it in print. That is not because it is in print. I rarely remember what I have written. Once done, forgotten. There are a few poems I remember writing, and I love them, but usually, I completely forget. And when a poem comes out in a magazine, and I read it and have no recollection of having ever written it, but it makes me laugh or cry, then I’m really delighted. I am least contented when I read something I have written that I think is silly or something even I can’t understand, or it is sappy. I often see those things in print. But I decided long ago that if I wrote something that I liked at one time and someone else liked it enough to print it, it has served its purpose, even if it is a sappy purpose. I’ve never thought I had to be perfect. Good thing, too!
All the Players

by Carol Hamilton

Braiding corn rows on the beach,
the island women fetch attention,
live by their flying fingers.
Some sway with ripe fruit
on their heads while the men
hawk straw hats.
It all seems lazy, lush.
At night the coins are counted,
tomorrow is calculated.

West of Chihuahua,
the Tahumara women climbed
into the truck with us,
their baskets dangling,
their cave home left behind,
to rise with us to the best vantage
for a view of the hazy purple canyon, gash
in earth still open to the west.
They set up shop for us
who took them there.

In Morelia the mothers urge
the children to comb the tables
in the plaza once more
to sell their tiny packets of Chicklets. Some
hang back, teary.
but in the end, they come.
We wave them away.

This morning my world is gray,
and rainbow colors dance
in the fringed ecstasy of the windsock.
I think of the bright places,
know that at this very hour a child
south of me slices a cucumber,
salts it, hopes to sell the taste of summer
to someone willing to carry off
all of life's hardball pitches in a cup.
We hand over a few coins
to keep the game going.

I have a big jar of pennies.
It sits high on a shelf in the closet.
I have never counted them.
Jet Lag

by Carol Hamilton

You are right. I'm a bit short
to be the creator of whole universes.
But remember Napolean.
And I promise I'm not idly boasting.
Just this morning
dawn did not happen,
and now look! It is already day!
And all because I was busy
attending to some past streets,
labyrinths, and I did not have my compass,
my bread crumbs, my rope of salvation.
In the end I rubbed myself invisible
there, posited myself
near the lighted numbers
which froze at midnight
to the touch of some storm
which, I would swear under oath,
ever happened.

Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall
Halloween Party

The woods must have had, 
for when I returned today,
it had taken off its garish 
costumes and everything was 
changed. After long drought, 
hard cold, then ram at last, and 
during my few days' absence, 
some fright drained the corn. 
the canes, the weeds of color. 

Behind a neighborhood fence 
the maize in the garden patch 
stood stiff and aslant. 
The weeds had pallid heads 
glistening in easterly slant light 
through moist haze. The air, 
damp and redolent of wood 
and wet straw-like things, 
was soft, and the greens still 
daring day, the red splash of sumac, 
the orange-red sandstone 
muttered with blowsy lips. 

Death danced through here, 
they all tell me, and she will be back. 
But tell the hostess to gather 
the spent party favors. 
Even with these used-up scraps, 
she might make a scarecrow, 

one with a smiling face.
We learned their leaves' simple,
unfretted veins, much unchange
in the sap from pre-historic times.
We took huge mobs of children
each year to the campus, de-bussed
from our clichéd, yellow transport,
mingled, trailed, clumped around that man.
He loved his landscape,
what he created there: the privet hedges,
beds of pansies, fall mums of rust and gold,
the trees, one a descendent from a seed
carried west from Mt. Vernon,
the plash of fountains,
the mist of sprays to keep it all
going in this harsh-weathered place.

We would go back to research
this survivor tree: maidenhair, gin silver,
apricot, fleshy fruit, edible nuts,
fan-shaped leaves. Just words.
From China. To Japan. To here.
Ancient geisha still fluttering fans
in golden lights of evening.
Artifacts

by Carol Hamilton

I took no notes on my travel in that far land
Or how your hand fit mine like a velvet glove.
No words were jotted in journal to whisper your love
Nor of universe seen in rainbow or grains of sand.
The memories slip through my fingers like a strand
Of wool off the bobbin while all my push and shove
Of shuttle forms patterns of past that I see from above.
I sift through the mud at the edge of my history’s pond.
But heaven sends down silver streaks of stinging hail,
The knotty pellets concentrated hard
To strike me still from lifelong journey’s tale.
These are moments nothing will discard.
They are the nuggets that never, ever fail
To slice my fingers sifting for love’s shard.
The Uncle

by Estelle Shanley

I remember him sticking his fingers in the holy water font at the front door, blessing himself hurriedly, almost making a mockery of the sign of the cross but afraid to venture out without a sprinkle of the blessed liquid over his face.

Always in a great rush, he'd march off down the street, his thick work boots scuffing against each other, and the long-handled stiff broom carried proudly on his shoulder. He held it like a rifle and he a soldier ready for battle. Although his job with the town council only required that he keep the gutters in the town clean, Uncle Aidan did his job with a prideful sense of his own value, and knew his place well enough in the order of things.

Sometimes he complained about cigarette butts in the gutters. The discarded dried orange peels he did not mind, nor the papers that fluttered and danced in the breeze. Cigarette butts were a different story. If God meant men and women to smoke, he'd have made them into chimneys, Uncle Aidan proclaimed at least twice each week.

A handsome man with dark hair, he affected a neat trimmed mustache with waxed handlebars trained to curve up at the ends. He also had a lovely singing voice and with a shake of his fist to the sky he regularly admonished God for not providing an opportunity to prove himself as an opera singer.

All that was long ago and talk of it filled the mind with memories and images of a man who once exhibited strength and pride. All he did now was lie upstairs in the bed moaning. He moaned night and day, a sound that drove us mad in the beginning, but like everything else in life, we got used to it so that only when he changed its tone, and on occasion began bellowing, did we take any notice. The bellowing especially concerned us because Uncle Aidan might disturb our neighbors, old Mister and Missus Maculey on one side, the Campbell family on the other.

The Maculey's had a sweet shop, a tiny place cut into their hallway with a miniature counter and a few chocolate bars and cigarette boxes displayed in the front window. That's all they sold, sweets and cigarettes. When the front door opened a bell rang and Mister or Missus Maculey waltzed out, sometimes irritated because a customer might have disturbed their dinner. They hated kids but liked our money. They gave no credit and hung a handmade sign on the wall that said No Tick Allowed. The couple had one child, a grown daughter, married to a lazy man never off the dole. His wife, Maeve, was long-suffering, my aunt said, and if she met her on the street, the two women stood and talked for a half-hour or longer. The Maculeys always asked about Uncle Aidan. If his bellowing was particularly loud, they made sure my aunt knew he disturbed them. She'd apologize and afterward stand at the foot of the stairs screaming up to Uncle Aidan, criticizing him for distressing the neighbors.

Uncle Aidan had lost whatever ambition he once had. The loss of it and the lack of it became a regular topic of discussion with the women who came nightly to chat with Aunt Mary and pass away the long evenings. They said more than that, but in tones hushed and secretive as they warmed their white stockingless shins at the fire. Although I had good hearing and tried always to be within earshot of good talk, it was difficult to make sense of their complicated chatter, and harder still to know what they really thought about the bellowing man upstairs.

Mary Kerley married Aidan Cavanaugh over twenty years before and something of a mystery clung to the marriage. Perhaps he was previously married and his wife died. Once I overheard a conversation between my aunt and a neighbor about Uncle Aidan's first wife and I was never sure whether she died in childbirth or in a boat accident.
on a lake. When he had a forlorn sad look, I wondered if he was thinking about her but never had the courage to ask. Posing such a question would only give away my forbidden practice of listening to the talk of grown-up people.

If Aunt Mary loved Uncle Aidan when they married, she did not love him now. Every day she yelled up the stairs how much she despised him. At night during the fireside visits with the women, she uttered the ferocious feelings she harbored.

After taking to his bed, Uncle Aidan developed terrible habits. The pink wallpaper, strewn with blossoming trees and colored birds was a bit dingy, and a leak from the previous spring left a stain on the wall closest to the bed. It intrigued Uncle Aidan and kept him occupied for two days as he picked off the paper. The torn wallpaper looked worse than the faint splash of seeped rain. When the curtains blew and billowed in the breeze, he cursed, and tied them in thick knots to weigh them down. He screamed curses when we tried to sweep his floor and thumped his fist on the brass headboard. He forbade all attempts to collect the dust puffs that gathered under the beds and moved about into other parts of the house.

If he cared not a farthing about keeping the room tidy, he was worse about himself. He never washed and weeks passed before he’d even accept the change of a nightshirt. But, just because he did not throw the fresh folded garment back in our faces, was no guarantee that he’d remove the foul one on his back. If he took a notion in his head that it would please anyone in the house, especially Aunt Mary, Uncle Aidan became defiant and another fortnight could pass before he donned the laundered nightshirt.

The mirror over the dressing table turned gray, the dust so thick it was possible to scrawl a message over its surface. A vase of flowers in front of the statue of the Blessed Mother had long ago withered, but Uncle Aidan refused to allow them to be touched, despite the odor of fermenting stalks rising from the rancid interiors of the crystal container. The stench was everywhere, but dead flowers and an unbathed body could not match the stench of the chamber pot he pushed under the bed.

He jawed plenty about its fullness and our unwillingness to empty the pungent contents. He regularly threatened to slosh it out the front bedroom window and disgrace Aunt Mary before the neighbors, maybe even splashing a few. The thought tormented her but she took his threats in stride and with a shrug declared there was no bigger disgrace than being stuck with a lazy lump of a man who refused work, and did nothing but lie in bed and piss the contents of his bladder into a pot. Generally he wore her patience thin, forcing her into a cranky and contrary mood, and she vented her temper on any moving object. She regularly kicked the dog, banged saucepans, slammed doors and threatened everyone within eyesight. “Empty the rotten chamber pot, you lazy whoremaster,” she yelled from the bottom of the stairs, and when Uncle Aidan responded by moaning loudly, Aunt Mary invoked the names of Saint Colmcille and Blessed Oliver Plunkett, pleading for patience, begging for divine understanding. “May you hold your water till the two kidneys God gave you rot,” was her commonly uttered curse. But, as she often remarked during the evening fireside chat, there was no satisfaction to be derived from the confrontations.
“There’s no way to shame the likes of him, for the only God he worships is the God of Laziness,” she exclaimed, her sighs enticing words of encouragement from her companions, who agreed solemnly that she was nothing less than a saint for carrying such a hard and heavy cross. “Ah! The truth is, Mary, you’re a marvel of a woman, a real jewel who bears her trouble without a complaint,” commented Granny Byrne, smiling at the absurdity of her declaration.

Constantly, Uncle Aidan begged Mary for a cigarette and when she refused, substituting instead a string of insults and obscenities longer than the Litany of the Saints, he retaliated by moaning louder. The woman, undaunted and unmoved, ridiculed his laziness, mocked the fakery of his illness and thanked him for assuring her eternity in Heaven.

“It’s a hell on earth you put me through, you rotten lazy good-for-nothing whore’s bastard,” she’d scream and Uncle Aidan’s response was a series of pathetic moans that disgusted and frustrated her even further.

“He has my head demented,” she told the women, who never failed her with words of encouragement and understanding. At the same time, they agreed that for love nor money they would not put up with it themselves.

The women provided solace for Aunt Mary, who welcomed them warmly and never begrudged them a pot or two of strong tea, hot scones or freshly baked bread with currants and candied peel that sparkled like rubies when sliced with the sharp bread knife.

The women provided comfort, but were also an audience for Uncle Aidan, who groaned and moaned louder for their benefit in the hopes of invoking sympathy.

My uncle, once good-looking, talked gently and sang pleasant songs from operas, especially the songs from Gilbert and Sullivan. Aunt Mary seemed jealous of any attention shown him and admonished that we pay him no heed. She scoffed critically about his made-up arias. Although I never let on for fear of deepening her annoyance, he had a talent I greatly admired. I often pictured him guiding a gondola up and down the canals of Venice, singing his songs to beautiful women and men who booked ages in advance to hear Aidan Cavanaugh from Dundalk, County Louth, Ireland.

He hated the harsh guttural sound of the Irish tunes and thought them crude and belittling of love. “If we keep the softness in life, and the sweetness in love, the rest will follow, and all will be grand,” he often declared, slapping his knee for effect, then throwing his head back to sing the opening bars of “Flow Gently, Sweet Afton.”

When Uncle Aidan gave up his job on the Town Council Corporation, he did not let on to a soul he had no notion of going back to sweeping streets. His hair turned gray, almost overnight it seemed, and the mustache that was always combed, moistened with hair cream and trained upwards at the ends, became carelessly tangled and stained by tobacco and strong tea.

His teeth, once as white as the mother-of-pearl rosary he presented me the morning of my First Communion, turned yellow and I believed this was somehow caused by the constant moaning and the stench from the chamber bucket. I vowed to empty it more regularly.

I did not mind the moaning, but I hated the smell that clung to everything in the front bedroom. We took to closing the door, a custom that annoyed Uncle Aidan greatly and forced him to moan louder, especially just before lunch and dinner time when he became impatient for his food tray.

“It’s in the bloody zoo up in the Phoenix Park he should be,” Aunt Mary complained. “He bellows louder than the lions and tigers, and nothing shuts him up until his belly is full.”

One day I climbed the stairs with his lunch, steeling myself against the pungent odor that caused the knotted curtains to hang limp and lifeless on the windows. Uncle Aidan moaned softly and his eyes stared sorrowfully at the tray. As I
stood by the bed waiting for him to smooth the blanket and draw up his knees to balance the tray. He surveyed the tray skeptically.

“You’re my good sweet girl. now skip down them bloody stairs quick as a sparrow and bring me a plate of bread and butter and a wee dish of straw jam,” he said, remembering the play word we once used for the sweet ruby jam. “Is it bread and jam he wants?” screeched Aunt Mary below in the kitchen. She hated what the man upstairs had become and wanted nothing more than for him to go back to work sweeping the streets.

“Give the lamer one thick slice. Scrape the butter on, then scrape it off, and to hell with the jam. Let him get out of the bed and go to work. He’s got the mouth for jam,” she muttered disgustedly.

Despite her tone and her obvious unwillingness to cooperate, as soon as she was distracted I buttered thick slices of brown soda bread and covered them lavishly with red jam. I felt sorry for Uncle Aidan lying on gray soiled sheets, breathing in that awful odor all day and night. I knew the sweet treat would cheer him.

I heard him move as I reached the landing. When I entered the room he was standing without a stitch of clothes, his hands holding a bulge of round flesh that hung from the bottom of his stomach.

I expected blood to gush forth from this terrible affliction, and although he was smiling at me and winking, I realized in an instant that he was, indeed, dying, and standing up in a momentary rush of strength for the very last time.

As the dying man reached out to me, his eyes glazed, his stale breath coming in short loud gasps, I slipped from his grasp and rushed down the stairs, taking them easily three at a time. I roared the horror of the scene upstairs and pleaded that we send immediately for Father Campbell.

Seeing the urgency, Aunt Mary made a quick sign of the cross and invoked the name of Jesus. Battling a shortness of breath, she mounted the stairs.

“Be the holy Jaysus! You rotten bastard, showing that filthy thing to the girl. You blackguard. You filthy scum. It’d be too good for you to rot in hell, but that’s where you’re going, and God almighty, it won’t be soon enough,” she screamed.

She descended the stairs, bringing with her the tray with the untouched bowl of barley soup and the bread generously piled with strawberry jam. “Let the rotten cur starve to death,” she said, slamming the tray on the kitchen table.

I knew instinctively from her reaction that whatever was ailing him, he was in no danger of dying. While I was given strict orders not to go into his room again, I felt sorry for him, not so much because of the bulging flesh growing from the bottom of his stomach but because I could hear his muffled sobs the entire afternoon.

That night, when the usual group of neighborhood women came for tea, they were very solicitous toward me. When I brought in the tea tray, Granny Byrne patted my hand, clucking a comforting tut-tut with her tongue. She patted my hand saying there, there, you had a bad time of it today, love, just put it out of your head. I nodded, but did not understand. Mrs. Broughton called Uncle Aidan a dirty filthy blackguard showing his accoutrements to a child. Jaysus! exclaimed Molly Curley, that’s a queer and a grand name for his pee-pee. It was only then that I knew the bulging flesh arising from Uncle Aidan’s stomach was where he peed.

Uncle Aidan, knowing full well the women were downstairs, groaned loudly and mournfully, like a banshee keening at a graveside. He was so persistent, his moans and whines intruded upon the chatter below, forcing the women to pass comment.

“And how’s himself, Mrs. Cavanaugh?” Imelda inquired.

“The chest on him sounds awful bad tonight, that wheezin’ could be heard in the next county. Are you not going to send for Doctor Magee?” she asked. Mary never let an opportunity escape to ridicule the man up in the bed. He’d been her husband
for twenty-two years and in the last twelve months
had not worked a single day.

"By the Holy Christ and his Blessed Mother
above, if I lay hands on him it'll be to scald the
flesh off him right up there in the bed," she threat­
ened. "God of almighty, he's as fit as a fiddle, and
him lying up there day and night with no intention
of working," she lamented. The women clucked
their tongues in sympathy, each of them individu­
ally scourged by some form of Irish manhood. They
warmed their hands to the fire and agreed that it
was a terrible thing entirely that had befallen Mr.
Cavanaugh.

"Well now," droned old Mrs. Byrne. "There's
one thing that can be said and I'll take the liberty
of sayin' it now. The Irish men. Ah! They're a great
bunch altogether with a grand gift for looking for
work in bed. Jesus be good to them. It's laziness
they will never offend. Am I right, or am I wrong?"
There was nothing to be said, so the women nod­
ded in agreement and praised Aunt Mary for her
fortitude in a time of such grave trial.

Mary had not been a real wife to Aidan
Cavanaugh for at least a dozen years. When she
afforded herself the luxury of some deep thinking,
especially in that quiet period when she examined
her conscience before weekly confession at St.
Malachy's, she realized that the man started moan­
ing when she first refused him the use of her body.
It was as if he had given up hope entirely, and she
saw the flame flicker and die in his eyes. "It's a
receptacle for the soul, it won't be a vessel for your
scum," she sneered one night, enraged as he groped
over her with his hands, his fingernails embedded
with black dirt from the streets. When he lay close
to her she could smell the lingering odors of cow
dung and dried orange skins that rotted in the gut­
ter. There were other smells, but she hated most
the touch of his coarse hands moving roughly and
awkwardly over her body. His job was low and
embarrassing to her. He pushed a broom and a
wheelbarrow and swept the streets. He even swept
the dung deposited on the road by the horses pull­
ing the baker and the fisherman's wagons.

Mary Cavanaugh was not a vain woman. She
came from the country, had a modest rearing and
relocated to the town to meet a man she could
marry. She knew well enough she was no raving
beauty, but she had a refined side and an easy man­
er, and when she took the hairpins out of her black
bun at night she often reflected that if she worked
at it, a man far better than the filthy lazy lump in
the next room might put her in a class of desirable.

Her hair cascaded down her back, framing the
face that had long ago lost its softness and was
permanently locked in a look of intense disgust.
The twists from the bun left creases in the black
mane and fell like waves across her back.

Her skin was white, for it had never been ex­
posed to sun, and if her fleshy abdomen hung down
in folds and ripples to the tops of her heavy thighs,
she knew tricks with corsets and steel stays so that
the flesh could be harnessed, compressed and cam­
ouflaged.

At night in the bed alone, when her shivering
from the cold sheets subsided, she often ran her
hand over her stomach that flattened when she lay
on her back. To her own touch, it felt soft and
smooth as the velvet on the sofa in the front room
of Father Sweeney's parish house. She occasion­
ally dared to think she was sensual. Once on holi­
day in the Isle of Man, she filled in a newspaper
survey that determined a person's desirability. She
scored high and it pleased her.

Sometimes her hand wandered to the tuft of
hair that curled around her private area, and she
wondered if it was wrong the way she had exam­
ined those red secret areas through a looking glass
when she was younger. She could tell from the ris­
ing crescendo of groans and moans in the front
room that the auld fella had his fill of sleep in the
daytime and would be carrying on right through
the night. Mary heard him move and knew he was
reaching for the chamber bucket.

She tried to close her ears to sloshing, but
knew by the sound that the enameled container was
full, and that someone would struggle to carry it down for emptying in the morning.

The truth was Uncle Aidan had once intended to return to work to finish off the time necessary to collect his pension from the County Council. Jamsie Gilmore, the queer fellow next door, discouraged him and urged that he not be a foolish man, advising that he take sick pay, then go back to complete the time requirements for a pension. Uncle Aidan heeded the advice, not because he trusted Jamsie Gilmore, who hadn’t worked a day in ten years and became daft after the chaps on the railroad locked him in a boiler room overnight. But the advice suited Uncle Aidan, and matched his ebbing ambition. Jamsie’s coaxing was not only welcomed, it was followed to the letter.

In the beginning, Uncle Aidan never spent the entire day in bed. He’d wash and shave, sharpening the straight razor on a long black belt that he called his strop. He’d dress and come downstairs and Aunt Mary, surging with hope for his return to sweeping, would offer a half-pack of his favorite Kerry Blue cigarettes. Out into the back garden he’d go, signaling up to the window next door where Jamsie Gilmore, in his queerness, sat day after day. The two men walked to the back of their adjoining gardens, out the gate and stood at the back of the wall talking and smoking for hours.

Uncle Aidan reacted with amazement when Elizabeth and her three children settled in, sharing beds and sofas. When he confronted Aunt Mary, she shrugged and said there was nothing she could do but offer her widowed sister and her children a roof over their heads. He screamed. He called the widow a bitch. He called her children giggling skitters. He threatened to flog them with his shaving strop. He moaned. He bellowed and he swore to himself that now he would never get out of bed. Despite himself, and to his surprise, he came to enjoy their presence and especially the attention they gave him. Dr. Magee came once a week, more to annoy and insult him than to administer medical care. “Aidan, my good man, there isn’t a damn thing wrong with you. The groaning and moaning is a habit. Don’t you see that it’s for effect, there’s not a bloody thing wrong with your chest. Get up out of there like the decent man you are and go back to your job. The gutters in the town are eagerly awaiting the strokes of your brush.”

But Uncle Aidan only groaned and moaned louder and longer. The day he heard Lizzie was going to America to make her fame and fortune, leaving the three orphans behind in his house, his determination became more entrenched. He would never leave the bed. He would never work again. His habits grew worse. He took to spitting in the chamber bucket, the spittle coming deep from his throat, gurgling up in massive heaves in his chest, emerging finally in a rolling sound that was both sickening and disgusting. The white masses of phlegm floated on top of the bucket that long ago replaced the chamber pot and Mary told the women that the house must be filled with consumption and perhaps, even typhoid.

“God preserve all here,” exclaimed Mrs. Byrne, clutching her scrawny chest with one hand, while she blessed herself hurriedly with the other. “Ah! With the help of God, the old man will soon be back on the job.” she sighed. Hopelessness rang strong in her voice and she shook her head and stared mournfully into the fire.

One day early in June when the Irish spring naturally blends into a summer’s day. Uncle Aidan got up and, using his ivory-handled shaving brush, smothered his face with foaming soap worked into a lather from the contents of the brown cracked mug. He shaved. He tidied his mustache and descended the stairs wearing his good trousers held up with brown elastic braces. As he didn’t bother fastening his collar there was no need for a necktie, but he put on his waistcoat and took a short walk to the bottom of the garden, bending to pick an occasional weed from the flowerbeds.

Cheered by the sight, Aunt Mary scurried about in a great humor and created an enormous flurry of giddy excitement.
“Thanks be to the good Jesus and Mary above, and thanks to the Holy Family, one and all. My prayers have been answered,” she exclaimed, and put on the kettle for tea. I was dispatched down to the garden to tell Uncle Aidan he could come in for tea and a warm piece of apple tart. Delighted with the invitation, he sat contentedly at the table while Mary hurried about and patted his head several times. It was more a sign of encouragement than affection, but Uncle Aidan smiled while Aunt Mary remarked it was a fine warm day. She put on her hat and coat and rushed to Saint Malachy’s to light a candle in thanksgiving. To prolong the celebration and feeling of good will, she brought home sweet buns from Emer’s Bakery.

Before that happy day was over, Aunt Mary put pen to paper and wrote letters to her daughters in London. She urged them to plan a holiday at home with their English husbands.

“Young Daddy has made a miraculous recovery and is up and dressed and out in the garden. It’ll only be a matter of time now before he’s back at the corporation,” she wrote, and sent me off immediately to post the letters. So great was her happiness she gave me sixpence to buy sweets at Lucy Larkin’s and an ice cream at The Roma.

With Uncle Aidan gone from the room, Mary washed the walls. She threw open the windows, cleaned them until they sparkled in the afternoon sun, and replaced the limp curtains with a fresh crisp pair. In a rush of boundless energy, she dusted off the picture of the Sacred Heart, adjusted the crucifix over the bed, waxed and shined the flowered linoleum floor until it gleamed. The mattress was turned on its side and aired at the open window. She made the bed with clean-smelling linens. Pillows were fluffed, the covers turned down, and Mary even tucked a double package of Kerry Blues under Uncle Aidan’s pillow for a nice surprise.

When she descended the stairs to make the evening tea she was in such good humor she hummed to herself. At teatime she even took out the cherished Christmas fruitcake and after a few thin slices were cut, it was carefully returned to the dark confines of the tin with its interior coating of muslin cloth moist with pungent vapors from the whiskey bottle.

Uncle Aidan frowned and coughed and appeared uneasy when Aunt Mary told him about her chance encounter with Paddy Flynn, his foreman on the town council. She pretended she just bumped into him outside the post office, never letting on that she actually went to his office at the Town Hall. Uncle Aidan shuffled around the kitchen a few times, walked out into the garden for a smoke and then ascended the stairs. He loved the attention she had given him, but it was not enough to keep him on his feet. He stayed in bed and went for weeks, urinating, spitting, and moaning without leaving the room. In no time at all the stench was back and the curtains had
the same limp yellowed look as before.

The daughters did come home, one at a time, talking with an affected accent they picked up in England. They brought their silk dresses and tailored suits and sweet-talking husbands who smelled of women’s perfume. They played cards for money during the afternoon and at night sent out to Cassidy’s Café for a whole block of ice cream and paper bags full of steaming chips deliciously oozing vinegar vapors.

Uncle Aidan left his bed for the first round of visitors, but only long enough to have a picture taken with the Brownie camera outside the garden shed. He was stubborn and would not hold the dog. Nor would he pose with a chicken from Mrs. Maculey’s hen house or with Mrs. Gilmore’s cat. Everyone said it was a waste developing a snapshot of him just standing there at the shed, so a crowd of us stood beside him to be sure to get the full value from the camera box. When the other two daughters arrived for their Irish holiday, Uncle Aidan told them he was slowly dying. He said it was consumption that made him moan all night and all day, and he complained bitterly and said Doctor Magee could be classified as a useless doctor. “God made a right mistake putting him here. It’s in Africa he belongs, prancin’ half-naked with them witch doctors,” he declared, his tone pitiful, as he pleaded for attention.

After the holidays, a determined Aunt Mary went to the mahogany wardrobe, dressed herself in her only gray wool tailored suit and white silk blouse, and went to see Patsy Flynn, the corporation foreman. When she arrived home she announced to Uncle Aidan she had learned all the necessary details of his impending retirement. It was a cinch, she said, mere child’s play. All he had to do was show his good intentions by returning to the streets for six weeks. “Aren’t they just after tellin’ me that you don’t really have to clean, just make like you’re moving the bloody brush. Report daily for six weeks and we’ll be granted the pension for the rest of your days,” she implored.

Uncle Aidan moaned loudly and let on that he had no strength to move even his bowels. “Isn’t it dying I am, woman, and you forcing me out of the bed and back to the streets. It’s dying I am. I’m telling you. Sweet Sacred Heart of Jesus, take me as soon as you can, deliver me from this cursed woman and this hard harsh world. For Jaysus’ sake, will you give a dyin’ man a smoke, a last cigarette before I meet my maker.”

Uncle Aidan cried unconvincingly; no tears flowed down his cheeks. Aunt Mary said nothing. She turned away, her face grim. She lifted herself from the side of the bed and walked down the stairs with a totally dejected air.

“Get on your bicycle and go to Doctor Magee’s house and ask him to come at once,” she demanded when she reached the bottom of the stairs.

Nurse Reagan opened the door and ushered me into the front waiting room filled with gorgeous furniture and a big bouquet of sweet-smelling roses on the table. Dr. Magee was friendly since the death of my father and offered me a sweet from his pocket before he put my bike in the boot of his car. I rode with him in style, loving the smell of the leather seats and the gray carpet on the floor.

We were back within the hour and he left his motorcar engine running, and walked with an air of resignation into the house. Over a cup of tea and a piece of Christmas cake Mary told the story about the corporation, the pension, and the requirement that her man just show up for work for six weeks. She begged that he convince Aidan. He climbed the stairs slowly, each heavy foot echoing throughout the house. He knocked twice before Uncle Aidan gave him permission to enter.

“Get up and get dressed. Wash the grime from your face, take a strong laxative and you’ll be right as rain. You’re hardly dying, my good man. You’re lying there destroying yourself with the laziness that has robbed the life from many the Irishman.” Dr. Magee said, his tone gruff and impatient.

Nothing budged Uncle Aidan; not even Father Callahan, who came and knelt by the bed,
his nostrils constricting against the stench while he offered a prayer for the moaning man. Aunt Mary complained to the women visitors. “Sacred Heart of Jesus, the cheek of him up there thinking he can be kept and him bringing in not even a farthing from the dole.”

On the following Monday, the postman brought a special letter from the corporation stating that unless Aidan reported to work the following Monday, the deadline for the pension would pass. It was all there very clearly explained in the letter. Unless Aidan Cavanaugh worked, all possibilities of a pension would be withdrawn.

Aunt Mary climbed the stairs, her breath coming in heavy spurts. She read the letter and once again pleaded. “It’s not like it’s hard work. They only want you to make an appearance,” she implored. His only answer was a sorrowful stare and an escalation of moans.

Aunt Mary decided he was mad. She said so. She said the madness had destroyed him. Once again she sent for Dr. Magee. He agreed to threaten Uncle Aidan. He further agreed to frighten him into activity by ordering him removed to Ardee, the mental hospital a few miles outside the town, a dismal place where people went in and left only in a coffin. “It’s Ardee for you, my good man. Now avoid it altogether and get up and go down the town and just pretend you’re moving the brush. Pass the time with the fellas, it’s only for six weeks,” he pleaded.

Uncle Aidan pretended he was delirious. His eyes were blank and he acted as if the words were not registering. “Just let me die in peace in the arms of my maker,” was his faint response.

Doctor Magee gave a dejected shrug. He sat for a minute downstairs shaking his head, gazing into the fire. “There’s nothing on him, nothing at all, but a kind of crippling laziness that happens to men of his age. I told him he’d be off to Ardee, although he’s hardly a candidate for the place. Aw! Begod, he’s as sane as myself.”

Tormented with rage, Aunt Mary kicked the dog, cursed Jesus for forsaking her in this hour of her need. She walked the length of the garden but could neither curb nor control her temper.

She flung stones at Mrs. Maculey’s chickens, when they escaped through the hedges and were feeding on fresh manure packed around our rhubarb patch. “Keep your bloody fowl in your own yard or I’ll twist their necks,” she threatened, and picked earwigs off the rose bushes, flinging them on the cement path where she vigorously crushed them with her shoe. She alternately blamed God and Mary, his Mother, and then called upon them to intercede.

“It’s not a bloody miracle I’m asking, just to get himself out of the bed and on the streets for a few weeks,” she screamed. She drank strong tea, sitting silently, gazing into the fire. Her face was as gray as her mood.

Finally, after long deep thought, she requested that someone immediately go into Maculey’s shop for a package of Kerry Blues.

She boiled the kettle and when steam was emerging from the spout Aunt Mary took the cigarettes from the package, carefully unwrapping them from the white paper, breathing deeply as if the task was one of great effort engulfing her in a life-threatening tiredness. She placed the smokes in a large white bowl and poured scalding water over them. Their brown spidery contents were immediately flung asunder, separating from the white tissue-thin wrappers, and the bowl became a steaming pungent gruel of tobacco mush.

Breathing rapidly, Aunt Mary, her face flushed, her eyes narrowed into slits, cradled the bowl with both hands and climbed the stairs with an impressive burst of determination. Without a free hand, she kicked open the door of the bedroom and unleashed a scathing criticism of the moaning man.

“You rotten filthy lazy scum. Here’s the Kerry Blues, and it’s to scald you with them I should be doing,” she screamed. “You’re a whore-master, an anti-Christ, a cur, the king of lazy lumps, and it’s me that’s the right old fool puttin’ up with your...
carry-on.”

Suddenly she screamed, and there immediately occurred a quick scuffle. One sickening thud followed another, and Aunt Mary moaned loudly. I ran up the stairs, reached the landing and saw Uncle Aidan in his nightshirt, his eyes ablaze. Aunt Mary down on the bed, her bun askew and the jet-black hair dripping with rivulets of blood that flowed freely from her skull. He emptied the contents of the chamber bucket over her, and slammed its bottom into her face, rendering it a mass of pulp and gushing blood.

The presence of another startled him and he ceased the beating, giving her enough time to struggle to her feet and start down the stairs.

He cursed and taunted her and threw the bucket, followed by two crystal dressing table containers, after her. His aim was flawless and each object flung through the air hit its target and the back of Aunt Mary’s head.

She reached the bottom and wept with pain and anguish, while I wept with fright and dread. “I have to lie down,” she gasped and groped her way to the sofa. “Go up there now like a good wee lassie and bring me down my shoes, then go for the priest, then to the Guard’s Barrack and tell them to hurry.”

Uncle Aidan was behind the door buttoning his old black trousers. “Get out, you skitter, get out before I slit your throat or take off your knickers and cut you up some more.” he hissed, flashing his shaving knife. I grabbed the shoes and ran.

The house was suddenly filled with neighbors, who administered as best they could to the blood-covered woman. Aunt Mary wept with big heaving breaths. The Gardai explained in grave tones that they had no recourse but to arrest the man upstairs for as the investigator commented earnestly, his intention obviously was to murder the poor woman and maybe the entire lot of us.

Dr. Magee was the only medical man in the town at the time and understood his patients and their families. He brought children into the world, saw them grow, and saw them die. He asked me about the row, and changed the subject to ask about my progress in school.

The likes of Aidan Cavanaugh frustrated him, for whatever problem he had could not be detected by x-ray or stethoscope. He knew there was urgency but had little hope of accomplishing any change.

Dr. Magee debated gravely whether Aunt Mary’s sight would ever come back. He sounded doubtful, looked dismal and stern when he heard the account of the mayhem. He grimly went to the foot of the stairs and called to Uncle Aidan.

“No, my good man, you don’t have to go to work ever again. Just get your belongings. You are leaving here, but don’t bother, you won’t be needing much in Ardee where you’re going and where you’ll die.”

Clearly, he was shocked at what he saw. Aunt Mary on the sofa was covered with a blanket. Granny Byrne and Imelda tried to wash the blood from her face, but her hair was matted and beginning to smell. Severe swelling and the beginning of a bruise was emerging over her eyes and as Dr. Magee stooped down to examine her, he was stunned at the severity of the frontal blows and the lacerations to the back of her head.
He again walked to the foot of the stairs and yelled to Uncle Aidan to hurry up and come down. "You've done enough damage to this household," he said softly, as if to himself.

A crowd of neighbors and their children congregated outside our front door, either out of curiosity or to provide help if needed. Dr. Magee sounded Aunt Mary's heart and lungs and suddenly remembered he left his motorcar running. He asked me in a very casual way to go out and turn it off and I felt full of importance as the crowd parted for me and I turned the key and the motor sputtered to silence.

Uncle Aidan walked out with the clothes on his back and nothing else. He spoke to no one, and not once did he look at the woman lying on the sofa. He never looked at her, or at us, but silently moved through the crowd of neighbors who gathered on the footpath, got into the car beside Dr. Magee. They left for the asylum.

We never saw him again, although we lived in dread that he'd escape and finish off Aunt Mary, and perhaps all of us who he thought had robbed him of his home and, perhaps, even his life.

When he groaned and moaned in Ardee, we heard that the men on the ward threatened to slit his throat. Mad as they were, they complained about his using a chamber pot, so Uncle Aidan stopped spitting and pissing in a bucket at his bedside. got up every day like the rest of the men, and walked in the yard. In the summer, they said he had his own little patch of garden where he grew flowers that were used on the altar in the hospital chapel.

His daughters, when they came from England on holiday, visited him. They brought him a pound note, a hunk of Christmas cake with marzipan icing, chocolate bars, and a package of Kerry Blues, which were hard to get because of the rationing imposed by the war in Europe. They always came back strained by the visit but glad to tell Aunt Mary she had nothing to worry about. their Daddy was secure and would never escape.

Her vision continued to be blurred and she saw only on bright days, and then only shadows. It was necessary to fix her hair carefully around her face to cover the scars that were deep and ugly on her forehead and along the right cheek.

Sometimes in the early evenings, the two of us would sit by the fire, toasting bread on a long fork held close to the red embers. Aunt Mary caressed my hair, winding it around her fingers. "You're a great girl," she sighed one night. "But don't ever tell anyone the kind of beating he gave me that day because maybe, after all, it was me who provoked it. Just don't tell anyone, and be off with you now and butter the toast and the scones for the tea while I set the table. Surely to God. I can still do that much."

The house was quiet, its inhabitants peaceful. The grimy sheets were no more, and the sweat-soaked bloodstained wool blankets had been dispatched to the town dump. The room was aired for weeks and the night air allowed to flow freely through the windows.

The light rain even spattered on the inside sill, and we ignored its gentle beading on the floor because it served as a purifier.

The groans and moans were gone forever; and slowly even the foul smell ebbed away. The windowpanes shone once again and lace curtains, crisp with starch, framed the small windows. A smiling photo of the Pope replaced the grim picture of the Sacred Heart and twice a week a bouquet of roses from the garden filled the vase on the dressing table.

Aunt Mary announced one night that she had half a notion to rent the room. "A lodger," she happily declared, "and preferably, of the male gender." Perhaps, she mused, one of those young bright chaps who lived in Cavan or Roscommon and worked on the Dundalk Railway.

At night, she'd lie in the next room listening to his even breathing, and marvel at the absence of moaning.
Leaving the Middle Years

by Walt McDonald

A friend asked, “What’s your best way to spend a day?” Half wisecrack, I tossed back, *Whatever my wife and I are doing*. That’s easy to say, but true.

At our age, every day is grace and every breath’s a blessing. Life is grass, stunningly brief, but abundant in so many ways.

We were kids when Roosevelt died in 1945—and we had thought what an old, old man he was. Years ago, watching TV, we realized we were *exactly* Roosevelt’s age, when he died. That night, we held hands a little longer in the dark, with the TV off.
Sitting down on the front porch step, he laid
the shotgun across his lap like the evening newspaper.
His mindless fingers picked at the stock, at shellac.
He smiled the way he always did—at nothing.

Perhaps it was the sun hidden behind the cedar shelter
like a pheasant cock that made him grin,
its hour pink-purple. Or, the noise of cicadas
just turning on, their gears grinding like an old truck’s
or the static of radio warming up to a tune.
Could he know the grin was a mistake,
that his wife, standing there, facing him,
had worn her own perplexed look for fifteen years?

Her face was paralysis. Her tongue a key locked
in its own box. When speech moved.
like an unpropped cord of firewood.
it wasn’t what was said, but the amount of it.

Several days, the mailman stuffed the roadside box
with letters and papers. When it could take no more,
he drove into the yard, irked at delay.
There they were: sudden news, headlines.
What Words Can Do

by Kim Bridgford

The world will take an answer we will not,
Without the reasons, without the rationale:
Such miracles that rise from the garden-pot
In flags of silk. How often have the ill
Taken their wheelchairs into the sudden air
And felt as holy as a cloud? Be blessed
By such small mutterings that are there
Within the earth, like a loamy palimpsest.
Be blessed by life. Our words can only trace
What birds do every day: their lives complete
In chittering. With them are no shame-faced
Pilgrims, no scholars making their retreat
In dusty rooms—just flight. No questioning
Will bring to us what birds know how to sing.
I cling to it like lint to a sweater, 
or a cockle-burr to a sock. 
It’s a journey I did not choose. 
By the time I decided against it, 
I was already well on my way. 

Time is slippery stuff. Before 
you can name it, it’s gone. 
yet, who can deny these swollen 
feet, these wrinkles etched 
like trails to the hole in the green? 

Old bones speak for themselves. 
Something in me evaporates 
each time I pass through a season. 
Why are alarm clocks scary? 
Who can believe the meaning of dawn? 

Does time make a man or reveal him? 
I’m tired of the long look back. 
If time is an unhatched egg, 
what is eternity? Why is the stuff 
so damn annoying. The moon knows 

but will not tell. Pity the moon 
and all those things with answers. 
Better to wade out into the stuff 
butt naked. Sometimes seeing through 
a thing, is to see nothing at all.
The Image

by J.A. Daniel

Always the image, he tells himself. All meaning resides there. Forget historical context, authorial intent. Irrelevant, elusive at best. He stared at the page again, trying to see in his head the Americans, now two centuries back but as fresh as the breeze from his mountain trek. They rode in a sleigh, not that he ever had, ever would, but it was vivid in his mind's eye. Juan felt the edge of the leather bite into the huge hindquarters of the horse, rip through the rough hair. Yes, cut would be the right word. The man would have a strong arm, the animal would feel his power, the passion he felt for the young woman sitting behind him. If they were to escape, but of course they would not, which is how life went, they needed to hurry. They had to run before their thoughts caught up with them, before the bleak years lying ahead began to follow them like bright ghosts, finally rushing ahead, paralyzing them in the bright beams of promises, duty, old vows, money. The horse speeded up coming into the bend now: la vuelta, el recodo, la curva, how to find just the right word, the precise picture, the image. His head throbbed.

He drove up the steep road outside of town, his own town on the dried-up river. A half-hour drive into the freedom of the mountains, away from his tiny rooms crammed with books, windowless. He himself had blocked out the light with bookshelves so as to be alone, untroubled by the noise of the town, young people, his own students frolicking into the dawn, drug addicts crouching in the alleys of the high-rises across the Via Verde on which there was no longer even a memory of green, not a bush or a tree living. However far down the roots plunged, there was no water left. All piped somewhere else.

He was taking the hairpin bends, los recodos, driving fast, his small red car hurtling against time. At the top was air he could breathe deeply, opening up his lungs to the sweet scent of pines. Strag-
ago. Before she had brought him out of her body, now almost half a century ago, she had stopped her own ears. Five older children had poured from her body without attracting her interest, and five more appeared in the years of his youth. How hard to remember any of it now.

He had closed his eyes and gone out into the dark. It was Tuesday, March 8th, 1966 when he walked up the road and stopped where it curved to the right, his small pack digging into his shoulder, his face pointed to the future. He knew what had happened to Lot’s wife and he never looked back. An old man in a truck picked him up and dropped him off at the train station. He opened his eyes after that.

Back to the Americans, the short novel he had agreed to translate. It was money he needed now. If he were to marry Luisa he would need more than a professor’s salary. She, with her antiques, her beautiful apartment by the sea, her housekeeper, the close-knit upper-middle-class family with houses in the country. How could he really be part of all that? Even with all of her assurances, he felt uneasy. They quarreled in the kitchen, but not in the bedroom—a good sign. Or maybe not. Maybe in the long run the kitchen is the more important place. Look at all the old people in the cafes, planning their next meal before their morning coffee is done. The ones who still talk that is, the ones who stay alive.

His mother’s face came into his mind. So much sex, so many children, but what did it mean? She eats only rice now, refuses most of her meals. Her dark face has turned white in the TV lounge, as though she has been invaded by the fluorescent glow of the screen. And she doesn’t remember me at all. I sit next to her like a stranger. I am a stranger. How could she know at fifteen that strangers would grow in her body, fall out bloody and screaming into the world? How could she know we would drink from her breasts and grow bigger than she ever was, grow huge and ungainly and alien from her blood? His heart went out to his young mother, her black hair tied up on her head as she worked beside his father in the fields, her belly curved and round and heavy in the sun. Do I only imagine, or can I remember myself curved round her breast as she moved, tied in a bundle that felt like part of her body until in the dark cool night she set me down? I remember feeling alone then.

Except for Luisa I’ve always felt alone, ever since. I try to cook simple food for her, grilled fish, vegetables, salads, all the things I never ate as a child. I learned more than cleaning potatoes before I left the Paris restaurant. *Paella,* they can keep that. Too much sticky rice with creatures nobody can identify, fish thrown over the sides of the boat into nets, thrown by housewives into rice. We don’t have to eat like that. Not with just the two of us and our two salaries.

She laughs at me. I know that. But it’s a warm laugh. She laughs when I scold the housekeeper for using too much garlic. “We’re not peasants,” I tell her. The housekeeper laughs too but her laugh is not so pleasant, and it is better when she is not there. Luisa laughs about my insistence on the primacy of the image, even my questions seem to amuse her. “It’s all about time and history,” she tells me, but I know how to escape all of that.

“No so,” I tell her seriously, “the meaning is always in the image, the heart is there.” *La curva,* the bend in the road from which you can see neither forward nor back, only the curve of her breasts and the heat of the afternoon before you are set down in the cold by a woman who has stopped her ears from hearing your cries, a woman who cannot remember you even when you sit down next to her in the darkened room and stroke the curve of her once warm arm. You leave, you escape, you follow the bends in the road, but the image overtakes you everywhere.

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A Thing of Gray All Morning

by Fredrick Zydek

The sky has been a thing of gray all morning. I want someone to paint the air bright blue, to send notes from the distant sun that sing their way into stuff that celebrates light.

I want the season of glad green leaves back. The barren trees and I have grown tired of the things winter brings in its cold hands. The birds, who make their home in the painted sky, know how to deal with ornery seasons. They leave them behind like a rotten dream and go to places where meadows still bloom with the clamorous colors of wet spring.

I should have been a bird flapping his wings in a southerly direction. What does it mean when crows and geese know better than we to abandon the mean spirited and flock to places the sky celebrates with sweet-fruited trees that drip forever green, places where a gray sky means a warm rain is coming to welcome back the world.
For years after I arrived in the United States from Spain, and to Madrid from Havana, Cuba,

I would not know words like this one, English words that sound like a type of dance,

and I mention it here because I think each time of my grandfather’s farm, the barn in San Pablo,

the granary, some type of mill where water ran, but you had to pump it first, where old tractor parts hung from the rafters like the carcasses of dead animals. Crows and sparrows nested in the holes of stirrups, saddle mounts, crooks and crannies, and the smell of molasses, o sweet it was, thick, rich, and we fed it to the pigs mixed in with palmiche, seeds from the palms that grew around the house. The chickens nested here, brooded until the chicks hatched. I found milk bottles from ancient time, or so I thought. and the toads hopped in too when the rains came, thundered on the tin roof like spooked horses. Frogs croaked from their hiding places. Engine parts shone in the ray of light that snuck in through cracks, these broken boards on the walls. I came here to have adventures. I knew, to get away from other cousins who were bigger and meaner than I was, then when I heard my grandmother calling, I sat atop the broken-down tractor and pretended it
was a tank. It could have easily been a tank
from the Bay of Pigs Invasion, sure, and the parachute
billowed over the entrance was a man-of-war, a membrane
from an angel’s wing, a white cone of moondreams?

Some things, a world gone ablaze with their uselessness,
so many still unnamed, so many not forgotten, not yet.
Her skin the color of her stained buckskin dress & cracked more than her boots. Her sharp blue eyes squinted upward at my notepad from a mesquite rocker on front porch at a trading post. Her hair a mixture of her Scotch-Irish blonde Tennessee mountain roots & pine bark, the 90-year-old woman volunteered, “I’m a descendant of rawhiders who came to Silver City in 1880’s & widow of the last blacksmith in town.” I didn’t believe her until calloused hands dipped the tip of a Bowie knife blade into snuff jar, placed a bit on her tongue, formed a billiard ball in her cheek, chewed, then spat tobacco juice at a knothole 10-feet away, hitting it dead center. She said, “My mother was born in a Shuttler wagon on banks of Rio Grande. Took first bath in the Gila on her honeymoon, owned 1 dress, no shoes. Cooked beef & beans on a tripod, ate off rawhide dishes. Drank coffee darker than soot, fought prospectors & Apaches. Never slept under a roof. Traded pelts, leather buckets & tools for Indian blankets & mescal whiskey. Kin knew every cattle brand in Territory but never bought a steer or was found guilty of rustling in a Texas court. By age 10, a rawhider could rope a javelina, trap a lion & ‘cause nails were scarce, mend a broken wagon wheel with whangs of dried hide & build a corral strong as the wall of China with leather throngs.” She paused, swirled history, eyed plank floor, drilled a gnat buzzing my new Rockports. My pencil froze. I said, “Thank ya ma’am. How much you askin’ for that rifle scabbard & old horseshoe?”
The Proofreader in Spring

by Charles Raftery

He knows the misery of the misplaced modifier, the reckless proliferation of the comma. Outside, the world is igniting itself with the loosening mud of meadows, the unruliness of creeks overspreading their reedy banks. The idea of spring approaches with a hint of something seismic, until it reaches the twenty-third floor to ripple his morning coffee. He hears the explosion of trillium and sorrel far beneath the riffled pages of dictionaries, the buzzing of electric light. Cubicled away from any window, he knows the shadows of his office never move, that anything needing to be corrected is not worth being enraptured by. He believes that everywhere he is not—whether forest or field or suburb full of flower pots—is going off like fireworks. Only more slowly, and with a beauty that lasts as long as it should in a world that was made for loving.

Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall
Summer

by Jim Douglas

It has not rained for ninety-three days
and the leaves of the trees along the gravel
and dirt section roads
are coated with a khaki dust as fine and fragile
as powdered sugar. The hot dry air crackles like cellophane
in winter and though it is August
the belly dancing
leaves of the cottonwoods
along the barren creek beds have given up on water and turned
a desiccated yellow. The thick green leaves
of the blackjack and pin oaks have faded to a leathery brown
and even the Johnson grass, immutable bane of all farmers and gardeners, has died of thirst
and the prickly pear paddles have shriveled thin, their needles more brittle and sharper than ever.
Someone drops a cigarette
out a car window
or parks their red hot catalytic converter over dead buffalo grass or maybe even strikes a match
just to watch the thick gray fog of smoke rise and flow,
flames dancing among the dead stems, a slow breeze keeping the beat,
while every volunteer fire department
in Comanche County answers
the call and fights the flames, sweating rivers inside their thick flame retardant clothes, gasping for clean air in spite of special masks. We drive home in the dark,
bright beams
highlighting shadows of blackened grass and weed, the air acrid with the smell of charred flora.
Here and there orange glows and yellow flames are the aftermath of war and it looks like the end, but I know that even without rain
that within the week the blackened ground will sprout thin little sprigs of green.
October Comes to Ohio

by Richard Luftig

The maples in town
have given up the ghost
early this year. At the edge

of houses, shag bark hickories
bombard cars and pets
with projectiles harder

than summer hail
while greedy squirrels,
mouths already puffed

and full, dash happy to watch
gravity and asphalt act
as nutcrackers. Out in the fields,

doomed pig corn,
husks pasty-white and frayed,
stoop under the weight

of a quick darkening sky
that yields an apple slice
of moon even before milking time.

Back in town, the old
in their clapboard houses,
look at the sky and worry

about hipbones, heating oil,
the portents of ice. They watch
with distrust as if morning

and evening make no difference
anymore, as if October
and loneliness are conspiring

to force what’s left
of the living and the dead
off in the same direction.
If Eden Were a Public Garden

by Suzanne Rindell

There exists a
Natural reverence
In the hushed sound of two people entering a public garden;
Instinctive, unspoken, understood,
Their subconscious slowing steps and pious eyes
Betraying new repletion.

I have seen it; I have watched
Couples become topiary statues
Transfixed by lily-ponds
Spouting Spenser, Shakespeare, and Blake with
Smooth rippled tongues.

I have heard the holy haunting echoes
Of the glasshouse, I have watched the near-sighted
Botanist performing first-rites
Over a bed of cuttings.

I have studied the faces of the lackadaisical
Their limp bodies strewn on park benches, eyes rolled upward
While wafting herb gardens weave spicy
Images, breathing life into salivary words like olfactory,
Onomatopoeia, opiate, oolong, orange blossom.

Gone now, their vagary loiters still.
I sit among empty benches and listen to the rattle of
The wind-bleached bones of winter, so sacrificial.
I wait for spring to creep into the gnarled fingers of cherry trees
And with primitive sign language, whisper the genesis
Of this gospel into the eyes and ears
Of innocent pedestrians.

Photo by Emily Montgomery
Driving By Night

by Mark Henkes

Driving during the night, a drive-by-night, can be a silent cow, furrowed dirt in the dark, squawking blackbird experience. You don’t see roadrunners scurrying in the dark, and what you don’t see one imagines as you travel through the countryside at 60 miles per hour. You look to the left of the state highway and compare this to what is seen when one looks to the right and you think each side of the highway must be the same—a barn, a barn animal, a silo, a grain elevator, grains spilled on the ground, a wheelbarrow, a shovel, so silent, nocturnally humble, plants punching quietly through the soil under the maternal light of a conscientious moon that oversees the growth of the silently thriving countryside while you curiously drive the road that divides the flatland.

A smell, stronger than the salty popcorn you recently ate, more pungent, deep, from the plants growing in that rich soil, allows your mind to reach many miles into the night and guess how many flora and fauna contribute to the mysterious odor that has interrupted your nose. It is not the stench of oil and its wells. The oilfields are well behind you. No, this smell is of earth, of grain, of dung, grass chewed by cattle, hay and oats, dry soil overturned by machines and revitalized, pushing beetles and ants from their comfortable burrows, uprooting weeds and forcing them to dry and shrivel, fresh weeds and fresh soil over here and fresh grass and hay and oats for the cows and horses, something fresh and moist and warm that cools in the cool night air, heated clouds that rise in every stall and every barn and in every field and every clump of overturned weeds where warm and cool air mix gently.

Where there was once blackness now peek two orange lights many lengths behind you, creeping up slowly, now four lights, eight, yellow lights, red-orange, bouncing, bumping, beaming toward you as they speed their way closer and they are catching you, they will catch you. Yet there is no concern because the truck drivers have been gentle all night. They have not been reckless, they have not driven you off the road, they don’t honk, blind you with their brights, drive in the left half of your lane as they pass. They have been quite the gentlemen tonight or maybe some of them wear a dirty dress and torn pantyhose.

A lonely sign with an arrow points—“cemetery.”

Who could be buried here? Someone born before 1900. A Civil War soldier. Slave. Slave owner. Plantation owner. A mayor of some town no longer on the map. A man who slapped his wife. A baby that died only three weeks old. A man who suffered from lumbago. A man who died before the car was invented. A child who was burned by a wildfire. A deaf and dumb man. A wife who could not cook pancakes. A man who robbed a bank, whose left leg was longer than the right, who did not own a suit and tie. Flesh long ago rotted, bones brittle. Have to go in and find the bones. Bring in the coroner. Match dental records. DNA tests will tell everything. Could be a famous gunslinger. Did the man drink? The bones will show. Rotgut whiskey. Farmwork stretches and strains backs. Hoeing into hard, dry soil, backs bent, shoes filled with dirt, they wipe their sweaty brows with grimy hands. Like your great-grandfather, the old farmer, deep crevasses in his face, sad eyes, fractured skull, weathered hair and back bent with years of backbending sunbleached labor. He never knew you because you were a child, ignorant and the child of his grandchildren, too young to teach, clean and spoiled and running through his wheatfield like a playful little dog, playing hide and seek behind his broken wooden plow.

It’s a skull, it IS a skull, not in the cemetery, it’s the lights, the trucklights, coming faster, shaped like a skull, coming faster, wants to pass, the skull

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staring at your small car, making you submit to its 18 wheels, the roar, the heavy bounce, probably has a full load of lumber with shafts of loose rebar crammed into the upper corners, the fuselage rumbling into the left lane, the skull creeping and lurching, jumping and munching at the trunk of your vehicle in ominous red-orange and yellow skullights. Like a snake devouring a helpless mouse, the skull reaches your backdoor, the frontdoor, the rearview mirror, your headlights. The skull-lights haunt the blackness, surge ahead into a black vastness as small insects fly by lights and disappear, perhaps crashing to the ground, perhaps escaping the cyclonic wave of air.

Winds, not the blowing and sucking of the truck that has already passed you but rather, winds from the depth of the midnight countryside, buffet your vehicle. Dirty air, a duststorm, flies across the shoulder and into the highway. No roadrunner could cross this flying dirt and you see no birds in the roadway. Here comes the tumbleweed, thick and fast, ripped and fragmented, bouncing and rolling as it approaches the asphalt, traveling in waves like a deep vast sea or a herd of marching insects, reflecting brilliantly to your headlights. This is no small wind because small winds do not unlock so many weeds from their moorings. Weedballs dare you to crush them. Large balls aim for the hood of your car which smashes them, exploding almost happily in defiance of your machine. The weed remnants hang on your car, they attach to your wheels and along the chassis, groaning with the tires and scratching the asphalt, refusing to surrender. You hear the broken weeds clinging to the bottom of your car, making noises that vex you because they screech—your aching car has been attacked and needs repair. The skulllight truck is far ahead of you now, it has survived the rumbling tumbleweed, but you are not sure, and the weeds continue to roll and cross the road, roll and cross, the small ones are crushed like waves of seawater and explode the larger like torpedoes aimed at your hood. No raindrops drip from your windshield and the wind subsides, the weeds attack no longer. Hundreds of tumbleweeds line the shoulder of the road like soldiers waiting anxiously for an attack signal from their commanding officer. You ride the berm, crushing a layer of suspended lifeless thistles, stopping your car alongside a wounded armadillo.

The armadillo squirms and twitches, it has been smashed on one side. The truck with the skulllights might have injured the mammal. But you don’t have time for the injured, so you examine the car where dozens of weeds cling to the vulnerable underbelly. You pull them out, one by one, weeds scratching the asphalt as you grab and rip them. Thistles stick to the hood, the windshield, the wheels, the tires, the chassis, and tear them apart and crush them with your shoes. The wind is nowhere, the tumbleweeds are silent and inert. They anticipate along the berm for a gust to push them, for the colonel to give them instructions.

The armadillo grunts and choked, it’s slowly dying, so you jump in the car to escape, to drive many healthy miles away from this. But the car will not start. You turn the key again and the engine rumbles and rolls. Again, it does not move. You hear the animal whining from inside the car. There is only one method of escape—walking to the animal, its grunting and whining and bleeding, you kick it toward the brush. It spirals in the air and carves a path into the grass. You hear no sound and hope it is dead. You put the key in the ignition again and detect a vomit-inducing smell.

Putrescence and rot—what if it’s an oil worker sneaking behind you with a rope ready to strangle? What about a hungry, tired hitchhiker who wants to steal your cash? A woman who escaped a state prison and dripped birthblood on the front of her prison garb? A convicted murderer who has two claycaked shoes and a broken jaw? Sure, it could be a murderer carrying an ax, one with dried urine on his pantlegs. Or possibly a prostitute who hasn’t bathed or showered in six months. What about a pedophile—your grandfather, an oil worker, forced you to drive his oil-smears stickshift truck when
you were ten years old.

You failed. He screamed and accused you of ruining his transmission. He didn’t know you had never driven a truck. He didn’t know your father never taught you. Your grandfather used to be a lumberjack and he said he trimmed his toenails with an ax. He was stronger than your father, defeating everyone at armwrestling on a tree stump or at the kitchen table. You try the ignition once more.

It works! It works! The car is running, and you want to run as fast as you can from whatever is causing this stench. You open the driver’s side window, but the smell is even stronger on the outside. The window, shut it. You’ve wasted time, too much thinking, get the car going. God, what a stink! You press the accelerator and begin to crush dormant weedballs. 5 miles per hour.


You can certainly imagine the farmer whose legs were crushed when his horse buckled and fell 150 years ago; and the woman who died a dreadful death on these low plains of some incurable disease; or the boy whose rotten teeth reeked so badly he couldn’t smell his food when he ate dinner; your family probably froze during a snowstorm and their fingers and knuckles were numb forever. You can imagine the life they wanted and the life they never received—they want your gym shoes, your refrigerator, apartment, car, clothes, job, highway map, clean transmission fluid, the solid oak coffin with the crushed velvet lining which you put on layaway last year.

Please! 20 miles per hour. Hurry, press the pedal, God’s pedal, please, 30, 35. The year is 1855 and the ancestors remember their pain, their pine coffins are rotted and nothing stops them from searching for you. Don’t want to look back. Ghosts, the ancients trudge behind you, don’t look back. 1855, 1860, so very patient. They want to flash dusty spider webs in your face and hand you clocks that broke and stopped before Abraham Lincoln was assassinated and mice that were eaten by cats who were owned by farmers who lived on potatoes and radishes. Their poisoned blood and broken skulls want to possess your mind and repossess your vehicle with age and dank places and horrid smells and fatal diseases of the heart and blood.

Then you gain confidence—the stars shine above and ahead of you, you push the pedal—45 miles per hour. 50. You seek the present and an optimistic future, the sounds of buzzing insects—yes, they are alive and buzzing a song, and you believe you heard a blackbird squawking in the darkness. Yes, your life may be salvaged, just keep going, don’t jerk your head, life is ahead and above the horizon and what is below the ground should not be investigated or even criticized. The dead gave you life but they cannot take away the future. They never knew you and therefore only want the sweetness and beauty they knew during their lifetimes. They can anticipate nothing, therefore they do not want your life.

You smile when you recognize the Big Dipper in the black sky and then Little Dipper. Yes, there’s a barn to your left and behind it probably—yes, it must be—cows, you hear, it must be cows chewing on grass, they’re chewing and the chewing has saved you, and isn’t that dung steaming in the night air? Steam means life and you are alive like the crickets and the grasshoppers and the beetles digging in the dung and the cows chewing, chewing. You are far away from the past now, the dirty, ignorant past, and everything will be fine now, everything will be fine.

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Smoke embers pulse,
Bathing fists of ash with milky flame.
Vibrant fire dances wild
Twisting, flowing, fleeing from the wind.
Basking in beauty’s painful glow,
See and feel the orange silk of heat.
Baroque, a designer calls it, late eighteenth,  
a “waterfall desk.” Lovely in its way, he says,  
as he traces the walnut burls, palms the inlays,  
fingers the carvings, the spools,  
but out of place in your foyer.  
I’ve accepted another piece of mother’s,  
though my husband’s had enough  
of her good taste, shakes his head  
as if antiques she spent vacation days collecting  
(silver cradled in flannel and chronicled  
like honorable ancestors:  
two Regency salt spoons, one Charter Oak gravy ladle,  
eight King Richard lemon forks)  
are bogus claims to grandeur.  
“Something to pass on,” she’d whisper  
to my father at the register.  
“Something Baroque!” Anything Baroque  
might magically connect El Reno, Oklahoma,  
to Newport, R.I., and the life of Mrs. Riley—  
for me. But something hidden in those terraces  
of shallow drawers was what I wanted:  
A letter of passion from anyone to anyone.  
A sepia photo of a splendid woman of dubious  
character, the aunt I was never told about,  
whose smile was my own.  
I move it into the guest room with other old pieces,  
all of them out of the way. I tell my husband  
it has to do with dreams, possibilities,  
but I don’t say whose. I tell him what counts  
are all those complications, surfaces  
aswirl with broken curves,  
the turmoil in the grain,  
the eyes in the veneer.
The Point of a Glass Pen

by Elisabeth Ward

In my day Christmas shopping consisted of going on an expedition into the City. In my children’s day it meant going to the Mall. Perhaps the thought of the previously turned century, millennium, or even just another year pushing her past her own quarter century mark, or maybe, quite possibly, just a change of scene, caused my daughter to take advantage of low overseas plane fares from the East Coast and do her Christmas shopping in Venice. But lucky us, who stayed at home, for we received Venetian glass.

Our Christmas trees have been family affairs, covered with memories of other Christmases, ornaments with names of grandparents and pets, even greetings from friends. What others called debris we called creative. The glitter-sprinkled walnut shells and faded construction paper, knotted and stitched stars and painted blobs of clay described our children’s growth, their perceptions of a shared holiday cheer.

First from the box my daughter brought, on Christmas Eve, was a shimmering faceted ball, blown unlike any other. To see the tree, to see the room revolving, against the pale teal was to see the world of Christmas through the eyes of a child, view new wonders at every turn. Christmas morning brought sunlight glinting from that ball, spinning around the room as our children had once danced, aglow with the warmth of the season. And then other presents. My husband opened his pen first, causing us both to think of an icicle ornament, preparing to hang it upside down from the tree near the gently revolving orb we’d opened first.

“There’s more!” our daughter cried, not wanting to give anything more than gifts away, and handed him the wrapped vial that held three ounces of brown, vanilla-scented ink. We each received glass inkwells, mine mounted on delicate legs, the stopper gilded from within.

“You mean this thing’s a pen?” we spoke at once, unusual for us for we two prove that opposites attract.

The handles fit like skin along our fingers, concave in certain spots so we could hold, not grip, the glass. The tips, with welts like cats’ tongues, were deeply rutted first to gather, then allow the old-fashioned ink to flow.

When next I looked at our tree my mind swirled round the room with the gathered light. No longer watching, in my head, my children growing up, I gazed through centuries instead. Here was a different time, an era where electric lights, now so easily found and glaringly displayed, were not only uninvented but unneeded. A single candle could glow times ten, and then reflect some more, against a tree filled with such balls as the one now turning on our tree. I saw women in shawls of Italian merino smoothing skirts of rippling velvet, settling at kneehole desks to write tales of their Christmas wishes, pooling precious ink onto parchment sent into the expanding universe of language.

I’d recapture that time myself, I decided, at dusk when the winter sun cast wan shadows against the hills before peering through our tallest door to wink the day’s last blessing. But gathering my thoughts I found they tied me to the present. The current day, that very year, the silkiness of the pen and the smell of that vanilla brown ink, no matter how old the tradition, were new to me, as was the very act of writing with such a delicate tip. Slow down, said the pen, settling smoothly within my fingers, slow down.

In search of a thought through the ages I found a thought on aging instead. My daughter’s gifts, like her childhood hung on our Christmas tree, had again taught me more than I knew. For with that glass pen came not only tensile pleasure but advice and good reason as well.

Slow down, it said, and don’t press too hard.
My Mother’s Incense Burner

by Jane McClellan

A temple lion or foo-dog, sized to fit on a bookshelf—cost (hand-inked on the bottom above a printed “hand-painted in Japan”) $1.00. It must’ve arrived, circa 1930, in this small Kentucky coal mining town at Christmas when trinkets and toys reached out to shoppers at the company store.

Growing up, I never attempted to touch this temple guardian. A sacredness passed like wafts of perfume from my mother to the foo-dog’s mystery. I was too awed to ask questions.

What did it mean to my mother, who packed this fragile, enameled glass and carried it to every house she moved to? More lion than dog, it bared its golden teeth and ruby tongue to guard the books she treasured—Modern Library editions, including The Papers of Bertrand Russell and The Philosophy of Spinoza, heady reading for an Appalachian hillbilly.

When she set a square of burning incense on the base, pungently sweet smoke seeped between the foo-dog’s teeth. Now that she’s gone, I continue her ritual. Yet I no more know the message it breathes to me than I know why she treasured it—something about faith in life itself, about growing older and not knowing where I’ve been. About connections unbroken through the years, about what matters in the end.

Photo by Jane McClellan
Marks on the Surface

by Joan Digby

Sometimes players fail to sweep the court
and we arrive to find a palimpsest
of scrapes and dusty footprints
that tell the story of games lost and won.

This furious calligraphy is nothing like
the narrow line of deer tracks
leading from the forest to the water’s edge.

In tennis tracks we read a war of conquest
fought in skirmishes along the baseline and the net.

Strategic battle plans litter the court now:
sole marks—deep grooves of angry tread—
that double back in circles for the kill.

Along the alleys are the telltale spots
where shots hit cruelly to the outer edge
drew opponents off their balanced stance
and foiled their hopes of victory.

Seen in late summer’s dappled light,
the court’s a universe of comet tails and stars,
where balls, like spent suns exploded,
leave shadows of their departed ghosts.

Putting this ruined world to rest,
we take the brooms and sweep concentric circles
softly parallel like some Japanese sand garden
but empty of all landscape rocks,
a tabula rasa without imagery or thought
perfect for meditation on the game to come.
Burned In

by Barry Ballard

Out here I’m just another photographer lugging around camera equipment. They don’t know that when I rinse the pigment of the world through all these glass filters, I’m almost dreaming of crawling inside. They don’t know that I’ve lived and died a million times before I’ve ever opened the sun to all those secrets I wind and rewind.

This is the only place where I can put myself down on paper, where my past sins are no thicker than the film’s emulsion, and where the rain inside me is a scrapbook of washed images that have been “burned in” with bold clouds of hope furled in the sky.

Photo by Joel Kendall
Dark Mischief

The crow, that bird of shadowy legend, carries his own carbon beneath him. Not quite as ebon as the bird himself, but shape-shifting as it goes, his shadow clowns the path of his flight, then scrambles crazily up the wall of the house, arriving breathless at roof-top miraculously in time to slide under and shrink to nothing as he tucks his wings and surveys the unfolding day.
Exile

by Errol Miller

The arts will live again
but not you, child, nor your purple cheeks
puffing out illiterate sonnets of Eastern cities
boarded up, of erotic death, of maidens
standing by the gate of Hell.

Gothic Southern authors have spoken of
a puny voice incessantly chattering through the night,
the newsprint of morning booming out a story
of people rubbing their wounded eyes
with salt and creamy salve.

Dawn, and it all seems so clear
and so distorted, tea leaves in a white porcelain cup,
green vapors seeping from the kitchen
as midwives prepare a stew
of alcoholic eggs.

In that delight, that reverse magic,
you ask for Mama and water and advice and clarity
and writing paper and home and a good wind
to blow away those troubles stacked
in neat rows of trivia.

Leaving your number for a return call
and waiting as streamlined trains lurch across
your writing arm, your pride, on the other shore
one red light blinking solitary and lonely
in a sad café on cypress stilts.

Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall
B.B Dunne

Here at La Fonda, on the wall:
a painting of him dressed Chinese,
looking almost inscrutable.

Surely eccentric to a fault
even for the Santa Fe art
colony in its prime, he talked

a lot about chile that might
burn the enamel off your teeth
or—much the same—some beautiful

creature seen passing on the street.
Once had the front door of his house
carved in the shape of a life-size

Venus de Milo and then let
no woman come inside unless
her figure was a perfect fit.

Photo courtesy of Santa Fe Guesthouse
On Sunday evening we rode to mass on motorbikes. Miss Thuy took me on hers, the American expatriate and his Vietnamese wife rode together and Miss Ngoc rode alone on her motorbike because her husband was living in the promised land. The church served up masses from the darkness of the early morning through the brightness and heat of the day and into the darkness of late evening.

We arrived at the church early so we could find a place in the pews. The previous mass was letting out and we waited in the crowded street on our motorbikes as the people emptied out of the churchyard, the street filling with motorbikes, cyclos and bicycles. The Catholic Vietnamese emptied out, and dispersed again among the Vietnamese who were not Catholic but sold their wares in the alleys alongside the barricaded churchyard, or who lived in the shanty-town around the church. The Vietnamese who were not Catholic, eyed the Catholics and stared at the foreigners who occasionally came to the church, which on this evening consisted only of myself and the American expatriate who was a good Catholic.

The congestion in front of the churchyard was made worse because a paraplegic had allowed himself to be laid in the exact middle of the churchyard gate. He was deposited comfortably on a reed mat in the middle of the main gateway of the churchyard. His family must have laid him there while the previous mass was in assembly. This was a very clever way for him and his family to beg. I had never seen a beggar pull this trick before. No one made a move to remedy the problem of congestion he caused. So as the previous mass ended and the Vietnamese Catholics on their motorbikes and bicycles, and some on foot, emptied out of the churchyard they eased their way around him, paying no attention to this clever paraplegic. neither looking at him with pity for his condition nor scornfully out of the fuss he was creating.

I dismounted from Thuy’s motorbike and when the churchyard emptied of the earlier mass I walked in among the next mass, easing alongside the place where the paraplegic was laying. I tried to discern how much money he was bringing in. On the dirty reed mat upon which he was distorted there were some Vietnamese bills. I saw a 1,000 ống note and three 500 ống bills. That would be 2,500 Viet Nam ống, and inside the churchyard I did the math in my head and figured it was the equivalent of sixteen cents. That seemed wrong and I did the calculation again in my head and this time came up with thirteen cents. I couldn’t accept the discrepancy, so I thought about it again from all angles, but then Thuy came up to me and took my arm and we went into the church.

My acquaintances had parked the motorbikes in the rope corral inside the walls of the churchyard, and in the church together we found seats in the middle and a little to the front. The pews of course were hard and flat and beautifully fashioned of some good Oriental lumber. Upon sitting I looked at the dark wood of the pews and thought of the golden color of fresh cedar paneling, and then of the gray color of cedar wood exposed to the elements. As I began to relax I tried very hard to recall the smell of white cedar. It was difficult to do with Thuy and her clean, perfumed smell next to me.

This very successful church appeared new, bright and clean. It was open on three sides as one might expect in this latitude, and the breeze that moved through from the displaced afternoon heat of the crowded district put me at ease. The ceiling was tall and pointed above us. New icons and idols at the head of the church were lit up with new pink, blue and purple neon lights and electric signs that
spoke in the Vietnamese language of the virtues of the Catholic Church and its servants.

I sat still in my seat on the center aisle and tried to sit straight and calmly. Thuy sat next to me, but we didn’t talk because we didn’t yet share the language that was due such a formal and reverential moment. Then sat Ngoc, and then the Vietnamese wife and the American expatriate down the pew. I sat on the aisle seat so I could settle with my long legs stretched in the aisle. Our girls sat very gracefully as Vietnamese women do. Thuy and the wife were made up in gaudy colors of lipstick, base and blush, with the affected clothes and high heels. Thuy smelled very good of both soap and perfume as she sat erect next to me. The girls studied cosmetics in the evening. Ngoc also studied English in preparation for her eventual move to the promised land to be united with her husband. I was uncertain what these girls did during their weekdays, for they studied only at night.

Many of the Catholic Vietnamese of the district came and the church filled and the mass of devotees spilled out of the open sides of the church and into the churchyard, so that latecomers sat with their families on their motorbikes, and so even the alleys beyond the churchyard walls were packed with people and motorbikes.

The Catholic service began with speeches by men and songs by the choir and many amens from everyone. I could relax when we weren’t standing or kneeling on the hard boards. I relaxed and watched the birds fly inside the church, flying in from the open sides of the church, flying up inside and around the high ceiling, flying in and out of the small windows high up and under the ceiling, perching on the expensive Japanese speakers attached high on the walls and to the ceiling and spreading the word. While my attention was focused on the birds the service continued for the Vietnamese. Songs were sung in Vietnamese. The men in green and white gowns led the service, preaching in Vietnamese. The congregation replied with the Vietnamese “A-mén.” At times during the service I watched the birds fly, and at times I closed my eyes and thought of the birds and smiled.

The birds acted much like the American tree sparrow but were larger. They appeared to be only just smaller than the bluejay. They behaved like American tree sparrows or chickadees, but were the size of grackles and thrushes. I was disappointed because I could not place the species of birds among the birds I knew. They actually acted more like a cliff swallow or barn swallow, but did not have the same appearance. They were not brilliantly colored, but dull and brown like the American tree sparrow. They flew inside the church and I was unsure if they flew in circles through joy or with anxiety concerning the congregation. Probably the church was their home and they lived in the ceiling, in the high small windows, maybe even on the great Christ-on-the-cross on the white wall at the head of the church. The birds lived at peace with the than lán lizards, which were possibly the English gecko, and which clung on sticky, sucking fingers to the high walls and ceilings where they ate mosquitoes that rested and died there. The than lán must be regarded as our friends because they ate mosquitoes, but it was difficult to call them a friend, as it is difficult to call a rat a friend. The muskrat is a large rat but it was my friend in my youth on the Mississippi flyway of the American Midwest, for it was harmless and peaceful and so quiet in the water. Thoughts of muskrats brought me around to the swamps I had haunted, and I tried then to recall the smell of the muskrat swamp, its compost and carbon gas and stagnant water. But all I could evoke was the smell of alder flowers and alder bark. This was unfortunate for I thought then of the beaver. The muskrat was my friend, and compared to the muskrat the beaver was just a crow in a flock of mourning doves.

Of course the body and blood of Christ occupied the bulk of the service. During the preparation of the taking of the meal there was much banter between the green-and-white-robed priest and the congregation. The flight of the birds became
more active and I had to discipline myself to watch them by moving only my eyes and keeping my head respectfully level and facing ahead, and not to watch them by turning my head back and forth and up and down and all around.

Many men of the church came down on the floor with the wafers in goblets in order to deliver them to the Vietnamese who gathered in lines in the various aisles. My acquaintances ate the communion nearly every week. I moved my legs to let them pass, first Thuy, then Ngoc, the wife and the expatriate. They went back behind to get in the line forming.

The American expatriate was a good Catholic from a well-bred New York Irish family. Thuy was a new Catholic who, I was coming to believe, had converted in part to make marriage with an American easier. The Vietnamese wife of the American had converted just prior to their marriage, from the Pure-Land Buddhist sect common in Vietnam. Ngoc was from an old Vietnamese Catholic family that had fled the communists in the north in 1954. Her family came from Bui Chu, a Catholic fishing village down river from Hanoi in the delta of the Red River. In 1954 the French colonialists surrendered at Dien Bien Phu in the north and the communists won a great victory, and many Vietnamese Catholics came to the south for refuge, and of course their refuge was eventually sacked.

I attempted to sit respectfully, but was unable to keep from watching the Vietnamese women who were in line in the aisle alongside of me. I watched as they took the wafers. I noted their customs as they took the wafers in their palms from the clergymen who dispensed of the believers quickly. The believers then put the wafers in their mouths and crossed themselves and held their arms crossed in front of themselves and returned solemnly to their seats in the pews. They knelt and crossed themselves yet again and prayed with their clenched
fists to their forehead.

Looking at the women and men I tried to discern a difference between them, the Catholics, and the mass of Vietnamese who weren’t Catholics. With these Catholics I saw a respectfulness, solemnity, and lack of vitality that I did not see in the street with the everyday, non-Catholic Vietnamese. Many of the Vietnamese girls and young women were well-dressed, in high-heels and tight t-shirts and mock American jeans always worn very tight. The men were dressed very respectfully in trousers and short-sleeved button-downs, always white, some with old, wide ties. While the body of Christ dipped in His blood was being disbursed to the believers I came to watch a Vietnamese boy moving among the congregation at the front of the church. I noticed him as he moved from an aisle on the far left, where he had received communion, to the head of the front and center line. He went to the side of the dapper and short clergyman. This clergyman was serving up a long line of people, and I was curious to know how the faithful would take the boy’s discourteous cutting in line. The boy pulled on the clergyman’s right sleeve, the hand at the end of which distributed the wafers. The clergyman gave the boy a wafer and went on with the communion of others.

The boy took the wafer irreverently and did not put it in his mouth, and quickly came up the center aisle among the line, towards the new line alongside me, which was being fed by another, shorter still but less dapper, churchman some few paces from me.

Ah, this boy. Now I was on to him, as he stood alongside this very short clergyman and pulled on the white sleeve dispensing Christ’s body. The boy now was more obviously of the very lowest class. His shirt was soiled, and he was barefoot in soiled shorts. He was dark-skinned as the very lowest classes of the Vietnamese were. Dark-of-skin from uncompromising sunshine and dirt and pollution, from lack of shelter and water. So he too was a beggar.

His methodology I took to be very clever. He stood alongside the clergyman and pulled the white sleeve again. The clergyman would not be diverted from his task and very intently continued handing out the body of Christ. I looked away then to count how many clergymen were conducting the communion. There were six goblets with six men dispensing the wafers. Good. The boy could conceivably receive six wafers. And if he re-entered the lines and took communion twice from the same clergyman? The clergymen appeared to be absolutely unconcerned with who actually they were dispensing to, neither looking into the eyes nor at the face of the faithful. Each clergyman seriously from the goblet selected then gave, selected then gave the wafers.

The boy again pulled the white sleeve and the clergyman pulled his selective and generous arm away and took half a step to the side away from the boy and continued selecting and giving away to others. With this clergyman the boy was out of luck. Having tugged thrice at the white sleeve, the boy left the church, and anyway the communion was falling apart, the lines dying. The men with goblets and whatever few wafers were in them returned from whence they came.

Someone touched my back and I turned and it was Thuy with the others. They had gone to a far line in a side aisle to receive. I got up and stood in the aisle to let them pass, first the American expatriate and his wife, then Ngoc. And finally Thuy, whom I followed into our pew very closely to catch the scent of perfume and soap which always shad­owed her in the heavy air of Vietnam. She knelt and did the crossing and praying and I looked at her from behind. The service continued and I returned to my friends the birds and the than lán lizards. Soon I went far away to a grove of white cedars and finally found the smell of damp cedar fronds decomposing on the earth.
He thought me a simpleton,
quoting Shakespeare at me
like the Bard justified
the murder of a woman.
Then he accused his wife
and Emil the Frenchie:
as if she'd ever soil
her marriage vows.

I took the pouch he proffered
like mine were the dirtiest hands
his Bible-dainty fingers
had ever touched;
and since it was full dark
by the abandoned shaft
he wanted his wife to lie in,
I twisted his neck
quick as a chicken for a pot
when I was a Reb raider,
then flung him into the pit.

No one'll find him for a while.
The hard part's figuring out
how to sneak that pouch of dust
to his wife without her knowing
where it came from, or why.
One thing I’ve learned:
go against John Sprockett
and don’t expect to live a minute.
When I spied him heaving
Preacher Burden into that mine,
like Moses smashing the Golden Calf
we’re all coverting in these mountains,
I knew not to cry out.

Sprockett’s a killer,
but unless he’s mean-drunk
as the bear that raked his face,
he don’t murder for no reason;
nor did I have any abiding respect
for that thundering Sunday hypocrite.
What Preacher Burden did
with Mary LaFrance wasn’t Bible study.
Most likely they had a disagreement
about her, and it don’t pay
to dispute John Sprockett over anything.

Preacher’s wife always had a smile
for me, and a juicy slab of pie.
Her civilized conversations
a welcome change from unbuttoning
my britches for whores
without even a how-dee-do.

I’d console her, but my claim’s
more demanding than any wife.
Besides, if Sprockett figures out
who told her, my life’ll be worth
less than a speck of pyrite.
Dying, the Reverend Burden Recalls Leading a Rescue Party

by Robert Cooperman

Oh, how I’ve fallen off!
Now, I lie broken for my sins;
once a good man. Ask Jack Manion,
who never failed to thank me
for saving his life, his soul.

Snow fell so satanically that year,
I feared to ring the Sabbath bell,
lest we’d be buried in drifts.
Between blizzards, a lone ride
gasped a tale of gold pilgrims
trapped on Perdition Pass.

I ordered a rescue party.
“They’re dead, and we’ll be too,”
Sheriff Dennehy gulped down whiskey:
my gaze determined as a hawk,
its wings catching the glory
of God’s dawn.

Finally, we spotted five men.
As I helped Jack Manion down
the mountain—his toes frost-black
as rotted potatoes—he confessed
he’d shot a doomed soul
who’d drawn cannibal’s short twig.
“He’ll haunt me in Hell,” he trembled.

“God forgives all,” I assured.

He’ll not forgive me, plotting
to have my inconvenient wife erased.
Mary LaFrance, Annoyed That Preacher Burden
Has Forgotten Their Assignation

by Robert Cooperman

Just like a man—
after he’s huffed and puffed—
not to keep our appointment,
me with his mushroom in my belly.

First time he saw me,
he took my hands and whispered,
"The Lord has reserved a place
for thee among His elect."
That night, he snuck me
out of Miss Jezebel’s,
whipped up his buggy
like Utes was chasing us,
 hatchets in their blood-
bathed fists.

He toted me like a bride
into an abandoned shack,
did what even married men of God
do with irresistible whores,
then swore he wanted to marry me.

"You’re already hitched," I reminded,
him grinding teeth like a wolf
gnawing its trapped paw
to free the rest of itself.

It’s not like him to be late,
especially when he blessed my belly
and shouted, "Yes Jesus,
I will perform Thy dread will
upon my barren sinner of a wife!"

What he meant, I was afraid to ask.
Two Boys Make a Dreadful Discovery

by Robert Cooperman

Me and Timmy doubled-dared each other into that played-out shaft, hoping nuggets was lying around like hardened horse turds. That’s when I stumbled over something soft and scary.

I screeched like my older sister clawed me so fast I couldn’t even think of fighting that booger off.

When Timmy shined the lantern, there was Preacher Burden, dead as a donkey a bear intends to make leftovers out of.

We lit out of there like all the banshees in Ireland was chasing us: me yelling for Timmy to stand guard at the mine entrance, whilst I fetched the Sheriff.

Saloon trash climbed all over each other—like wolves on winterkill—so each could brag he discovered the body.

To be continued in future issues

These poems are part of a collection entitled The Widow’s Burden.
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Kim Bridgford directs the writing program at Fairfield University, where she is an associate professor of English and poetry editor of Dogwood. Her poetry has appeared, or is forthcoming, in North American Review, The Christian Science Monitor, and The Georgia Review. Her fiction has appeared, or is forthcoming, in Redbook, The Massachusetts Review, and Witness. She received a 1999-2000 NEA Fellowship.


J.A. Daniel has published work in Carleton Miscellaney, North Stone Review, Writers Who Cook, and Dakota Territory, and won for both poetry and fiction in the Lake Superior Writers Series. He was the recipient of a Norcroft Writer’s Residency. Most recently he taught a writing seminar at the Ezra Pound Archive in Brunnenburg, Italy, and was an invited reader at the University of Murcia and the University of Alicante in Spain. He is the author of two ongoing courses for the University of Minnesota, Journaling Into Fiction and The Short Story.

Joan Digby is a professor of English and director of honors at Long Island University. Her first book of poetry, A Sound of Feathers, was published by Red Ozier Press. She has edited and contributed to a number of poetry anthologies for William Morrow (Permutations, Food for Thought, Inspired by Drink). She is currently on sabbaticast working on a new collection of poems.


James Jay Egan grew up in Minnesota and Wisconsin, and received his education at the University of Minnesota and the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis. He now lives in Vietnam, where he teaches composition and English as a foreign language. His work has been published in the e-journal Scrivener’s Pen (www.scrivenerspen.com); the web version of The Circle Magazine (www.circlemagazine.com) and the Gowanus Books webpage (www.gowanusbooks.com).

Carol Hamilton’s most recent publications have been in New Orleans Review, Spoon River Poetry Review, Shades of December, Leapings, Mid-America Poetry Review, Potpourri, Cumberland Poetry Review, Cape Rock, International Poetry Review and River King. Upcoming work will be in Green’s Magazine, Southwest American Review, Maelstrom and others. She has four new books coming out soon: Breaking Bread, Breaking Silence; Gold: Greatest Hits; I, People of the Llano; and a children’s novel, I’m Not from Neptune.

Lois Beebe Hayna is active with a group called Poetry West and is co-editor of its magazine, the Eleventh Muse. She has published recently in Wisconsin Academy Review, Wisconsin Review and Comstock Review. She co-authored a collection of poems, A Book of Charms, and is the sole author of three other collections—Northern Gothic, Never Trust a Crow, and View from Behind the Mirror.

Mark Henkes earned his master’s degree in political science from Oklahoma State University, and has taught political science at a Texas community college. He was a staff member of the Pennsylvania Speaker of the House, and was a legislative reporter in Springfield, Ill. He has had about a dozen short stories published, one of them in four nations. His story in Westview was inspired by a night drive on Interstate 40 between Tucumcari, N.M. and Albuquerque, formerly Route 66.
Michael L. Johnson is a professor of English at the University of Kansas. He's published six books of poetry, including Violence and Grace: Poems about the American West (Cottonwood Press, 1993) and From Hell to Jackson Hole: A Poetic History of the American West (Bridge House Books, 2001). His New Westers: The West in Contemporary American Culture (University Press of Kansas, 1996), a work of nonfiction prose, won a Spur Award.

Richard Luftig is a professor of educational psychology and special education at Miami University in Ohio. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in several publications, including Plainsongs, Palo Alto Review, Midwest Poetry Review, Liberty Review, National Forum, Aura Literary Arts Review, Plaza (Japan), Windsor Review and Tower (Canada), Scar and Redoubt (Australia), Muuna Takeena (Finland), and Third Half and Discover (England). His chapbook was nominated for the Pushcart Poetry Prize.


Errol Miller has published in American Poetry Review, Painted Bride Quarterly, Rhino, Nebraska Review, Kansas Quarterly, Laurel Review, Berkeley Poetry Review, Arkansas Review, Southwestern American Literature, Conn River Review, and elsewhere. His newest collection is Magnolia Hall from Pavement Saw Press, which is also carried by Small Press Distribution. He also has two recent collections, Forever Beyond Us and Downward Glide, and several chapbooks. He was the co-winner of Spillway Magazine’s 1998 Call and Response Poetry Contest, and was the feature artist in the 2000 Poet’s Market. Several of his poems have been nominated for Pushcart Prizes.

Charles Rafferty’s collection, The Man on the Tower, was published by the University of Arkansas Press in 1995 after winning the Arkansas Poetry Award. His newest collection, Where the Glories of April Lead, was published by Mitki/Mitki Press in 2001. He has published several chapbooks and placed poems in such journals as Massachusetts Review, DoubleTake, TriQuarterly, The Southern Review, Quarterly West, Washington Square, Louisiana Literature, The Laurel Review, Poetry East, and Connecticut Review. He has received the Robinson Jeffers Tor House Prize for Poetry and a grant from the Connecticut Commission on the Arts.


Mark Sanders has new poems coming out in Borderlands and Northeast, as well as a story forthcoming in an anthology of Plains writers. He has several collections in circulation: Here in the Big Empty (poems), A Dissimilation of Birds (stories), and A Stone’s Throw; a Glass House (non-fiction essays).

Farhan Shakeel, born and raised in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, graduated from Southwestern Oklahoma State University with degrees in finance and mass communication. He was inspired by his Middle Eastern roots to author The Torch. Shakeel enjoys photography and freelance writing. His column has appeared on-line for the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University. Shakeel enjoys listening to rock ‘n’ roll music and is a die-hard Atlanta Brave and New York Yankees fan. He has a passion for investigative journalism and hopes to pursue a career in it.

Estelle Shanley is an Irish-born award-winning journalist and recipient of the first Managing Editor’s Award at the Lowell, Mass., Sun. She also received an Outstanding Journalist award from the Massachusetts Dental Society for her work on mental health. Her assignments have included coverage of Pope Paul VI’s historic trip to the United States in 1970 and the Royal Wedding of Prince Charles to Lady Diana.
Virgil Suárez was born in Havana, Cuba in 1962. At the age of twelve he arrived in the United States. He received an MFA from Louisiana State University in 1987. He is the author of two new poetry collections, *Palm Crows* (University of Arizona Press) and *Banyan* (LSU Press). This year *Guide to the Blue Tongue*, his sixth collection of poetry, will be published by the University of Illinois Press. He is the co-editor of the anthologies *American Diaspora: Poetry of Displacement* and *Like Thunder: Poetry of Violence in America*, both published by the University of Iowa Press. His work continues to be featured in international and national literary magazines and journals. He divides his time between Key Biscayne and Tallahassee, where he lives with his wife and daughters.

Elisabeth Ward is a former journalist for *The Chicago Sun-Times* and *Sports Illustrated*. She lives in upstate New York and devotes her writing time to western-type novels and poetry. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in several literary journals, including *Literally Horses*, *Poetry Motel*, and *Roanoke Review*.


Fredrick Zydek taught creative writing at UNO and later at the College of Saint Mary, before deciding to write full time. His work has appeared in the *The Antioch Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *The Hollins Critic*, *New England Review*, *Nimrod*, *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Yankee*, and others. Mr. Zydek has over 800 publishing credits, including personal essays, fiction, academic articles, plays, poems, and an occasional review. A collection of poetry, *Ending the Fast*, contained the quartet “Songs from the Quinault Valley,” which was awarded the Sarah Foley O’Loughlen Award. His fourth collection of poetry, *The Conception Abbey Poems*, has just gone into a second expanded edition. Mr. Zydek is currently the editor of Lone Willow Press and the director of a reading series at the Unity Center for Oneness.

**Illustrations**

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35 Photograph (detail) by Joel Kendall
36 Photograph courtesy of Silver City Volunteer Fire Department. The department was formed in 1997 after a grass fire destroyed thousands of acres near Oilton. The caption to the picture reads, “1997 photo of courageous Silver City firefighters, wrapping it up and preparing to head back to the Fire Chief’s barn after successfully suppressing the ‘1997 Rocky Canyon Ranch Fire’ (not to be confused with the 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2003 Rocky Canyon Ranch Fires).”
38 Photograph by Emily Montgomery
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50 Photograph courtesy of Santa Fe Visitors’ Bureau. The photo is from the B.B. Dunne room at the Santa Fe Guesthouse.
53 Photograph courtesy of David Paul Morris, a freelance photographer living in the Far East.
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