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A JOURNAL OF WESTERN OKLAHOMA

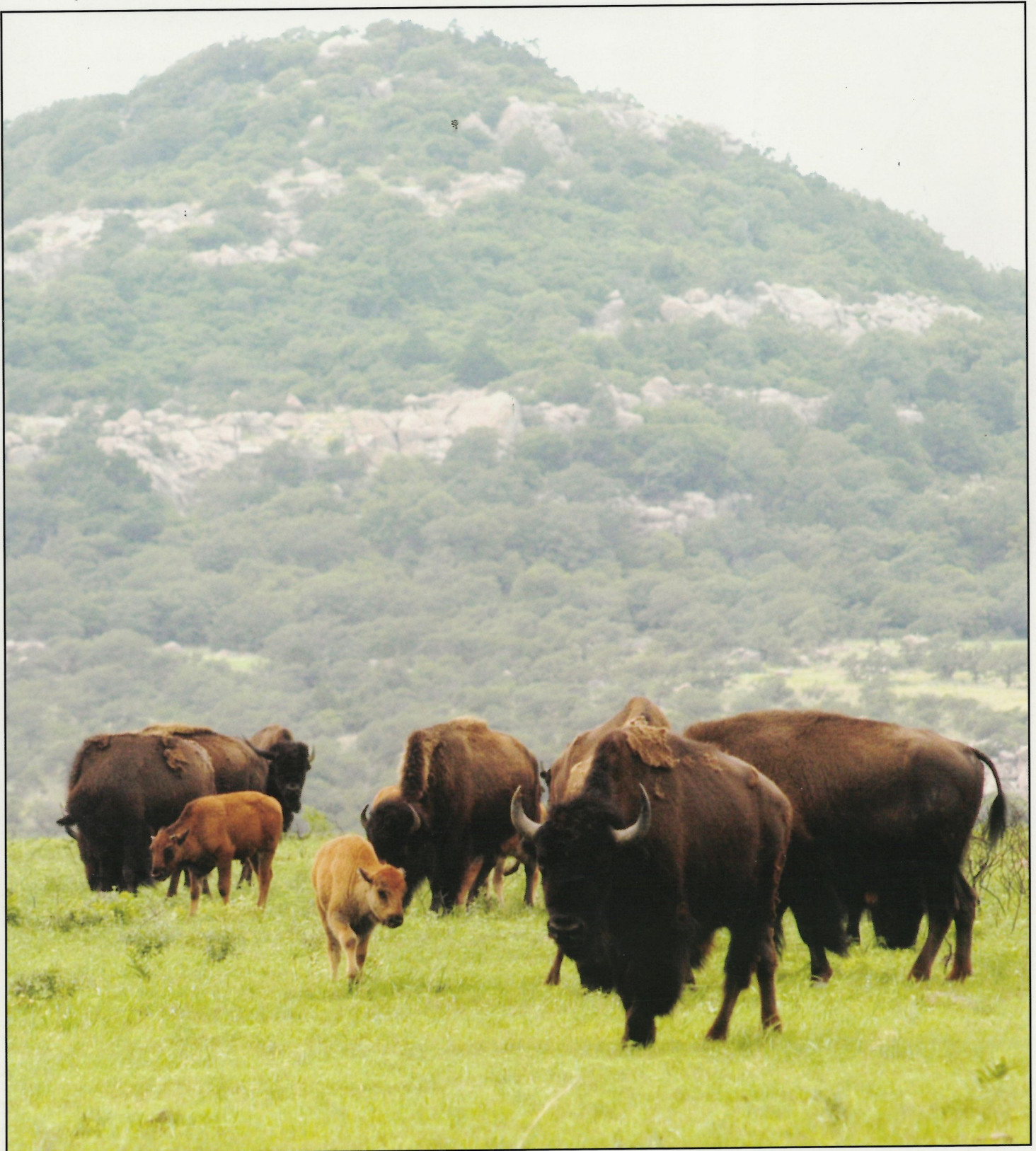
WESTVIEW

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W E S T V I E W

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Spring/Summer 2006

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Westview publishes fiction, poetry, prose poems, drama, nonfiction, book reviews, literary criticism, and artwork. *Westview* holds first rights for all works published. Send submissions and SASE to James Silver, Editor: *Westview*; 100 Campus Drive; Weatherford, OK 73096.

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Stylesheet

1. Submissions should be typed on 8.5" x 11" white paper; prose should be double spaced. Include a self-addressed stamped envelope.
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 works may be submitted.
3. Include a brief biographical sketch for our contributors' notes.
4. Submissions and correspondence may be sent to:
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Please visit our website at
<http://www.swosu.edu/resources/publications/westview>



Cover artwork by Neal Rue

Contents

Fred Alsberg	<i>Beginning the Modern-day Odyssey</i>	page 4
Fred Alsberg	<i>Daydreamer</i>	page 5
Fred Alsberg	<i>Emptying the Mirror</i>	page 6
Fred Alsberg	<i>Paperweight</i>	page 7
Fred Alsberg	<i>Roadside</i>	page 8
Jim Silver	<i>Interview with Fred Alsberg</i>	page 9
Helen Maxson	<i>Imagery and the Impulse to Transcend in Poetry of Fred Alsberg</i>	page 13
Barbara Eknoian	<i>Whirl</i>	page 16
Kenneth O'Keefe	<i>The Mind That Binds</i>	page 17
Linda Giacometti	<i>Moon Snow</i>	page 18
Ronna Wineberg	<i>Continuing Education</i>	page 19
Janet Flora	<i>The Place I Called Home</i>	page 26
Taylor Graham	<i>Wingspan</i>	page 32
Harvey Spurlock	<i>Off the Reservation</i>	page 33
Lyn Lifshin	<i>Wintergreen</i>	page 39
Judith Cody	<i>Ode to the Flowers of Today</i>	page 40
Celia Jeffries	<i>The Wrong End of the Knife</i>	page 41
Ashley Martin	<i>Today We Cut Down an Apple Tree</i>	page 48
Ashley Martin	<i>Party Guest Arriving Late</i>	page 49
Mary Diane Hausman	<i>They Never Were</i>	page 50
Christine Kravetz	<i>One More Lullaby</i>	page 59



Barbara Eknoian	<i>Monday's Child</i>	page 60
Dennis Ross	<i>The Smithfield Boys</i>	page 61
Juanita Torrence-Thompson	<i>A Marriage Made in Heaven</i>	page 62
Vivian Lawry	<i>Getting Along Fine</i>	page 64
Sandy Longhorn	<i>Self-portrait: September</i>	page 68
Sandy Longhorn	<i>Roofing the Barn</i>	page 69
Sandy Longhorn	<i>Green Mountain Falls</i>	page 70
Sandy Longhorn	<i>Black Dirt Girls</i>	page 71
Anna Harrington	<i>Boston Common</i>	page 72
Robert Cooperman	<i>William Eagle Feather Contemplates the Widow Burden</i>	page 76
Robert Cooperman	<i>The Widow Burden's Suspicions About John Sprockett</i>	page 77
Robert Cooperman	<i>Mary LaFrance Ponders Her Relationship to the Late Reverend Burden</i>	page 78
Robert Cooperman	<i>The Widow Burden, After Her Second Interview with John Sprockett</i>	page 79
Robert Cooperman	<i>John Sprockett, After His Second Interview with the Widow Burden</i>	page 80
Contributors		page 81



Photo by Joyce Stoffers



Beginning the Modern-day Odssey

by Fred Alsberg

Sitting down to write tonight
I discovered I could not
romanticize a radish.
I could not inflate an egg.

All snowflakes
started to look alike,
I could no longer hear
the breeze unsheathe its blade.

Wasting perfectly good
pieces of paper,
I learned only that
I couldn't play chess with headstones.

I could not sell a lottery ticket
to a crow, let alone
do a tap dance
on typewriter keys.

The sky, it would seem,
had closed up shop;
I'd need to be content
to rule out a few dead ends.



Daydreamer

by Fred Alsberg

When in Geography
Mr. Glarrow droned about places
on a map he'd lowered,
I would spy out the window
a leaf take flight
on a sudden current of the breeze;
lifting free, it would surge and sink,
then surge again,
until at last it sank past tangled trees
and matted underbrush
onto the path
I'd hacked with my machete.
Wearing khakis and safari hat,
with slung over my back a carbine
and the smallest of packs,
I'd brush aside hanging vines
to scan the high canopy
where yellow-green leaves
would blend with olive-gray,
forest-green with purplish-rose.
Through humid air, ripe with decay,
would come the reverberant cries
of unseen birds and monkeys,
then, behind me, sounds of their resettling.
With branches swishing against legs and chest,
I'd peer through the snarl of twining plants
for palaces and temples long ago
abandoned by their inhabitants,
yet just as among lush ferns and fronds
I'd discover crumbling gray-stone facades,
marble pools overgrown with reeds and algae,
their great, toppled, gargoyle-like gods,
I'd be hit dead-center,
with a well-aimed, blackboard eraser.



Emptying the Mirror

by Fred Alsberg

A fringe of white hair
framing his lemur eyes,
he sits at the edge of the bed,
and the book in his hands
reminds him of when, as a boy,
turned pages were waves.
It seems to him that his body,
wrinkled and dry, has now curled;
he feels himself shrink inward

through bellies of birds and fish,
through shells and smaller shells and smaller still,
until for a moment, he looks outward
from a single cell,
before dissolving in water
that mends without a scar,
a sea that breaks upon the nothingness
where Buddha came to sit and rest.



Paperweight

by Fred Alsberg

Eight floors down
in a snow-covered parking lot,
a car is sawing itself free.

It leaves a black space its own shape,
then fishtails into the street
where traffic creeps as though underwater.

The whole city is submerged,
and snowflakes filter down
like fishfood in an aquarium,

to where people walk free of their footprints.



Roadside

by Fred Alsberg

At a gas station
along the interstate
people in shades and tee shirts
gather round a cage
in the bed of a pickup.
Inside, a mountain lion
sits motionless.

His eyes, tan and wide,
stare off
toward a line of pale orange hills
far beyond the circled onlookers
and the small boy
wriggling fingers
through the bars.



Interview with Fred Alsberg

by Jim Silver

Jim Silver: Tell us about the history of *Westview*. When and how did it begin?

Fred Alsberg: *Westview* was founded in 1981 when a grant was obtained to create a center for regional studies. Originally, the magazine was a joint project of the History and Language Arts Departments, but after a few years the historians lost interest and the magazine became a regional literary journal under the editorship of Leroy Thomas. Following his death in 1992, I was appointed editor and took the magazine in its current direction. Oddly enough, it was only after I retired as editor in 2004 that I learned the name *Westview* had been borrowed from a nursing home.

Jim: Has the administration been supportive of the project over the years?

Fred: As *Westview* has been publishing for twenty-four years and much of the expense has been borne by the university (subscriptions have helped greatly in this regard too), I would say that they have been quite supportive. After all, the magazine is old enough to vote and have a glass of wine with dinner. Additionally, when I became editor, I inaugurated the *Westview* Writers' Festival. Here the university provided the funds as well for various guest writers to do readings of their work and teach creative writing workshops for our students. The readings have been open to the community free-of-charge, and the classes have been invaluable to our students. Part of our mission as a state university is to provide cultural opportunities for both our students and people of the region. I believe the administration takes this responsibility seriously, hence *Westview*, the Writers' Festival, and many other cultural activities that take place all over campus.

Jim: Do you have fond memories of particular Festivals or guest readers?

Fred: Virtually all have been enjoyable. I'm thankful to the many writers who have taken part.



Fred Alsberg

I guess my favorite reading was by my former teacher, Miller Williams. (First, because the selection of poems was so appealing; second, because he read them so well; third, because he drew over two-hundred people to his reading and received a standing ovation of remarkable warmth.) The party afterward was entertaining too.

Jim: You did a series of interviews with visiting writers. Which of these was your favorite?

Fred: Again, many writers have made wonderful contributions. One does stand out, though. Walter McDonald's observations about the craft of writing were so insightful that I find myself utilizing them in my classes every semester. I'd recommend they be re-printed in creative writing textbooks galaxy-wide, with appropriate mention



of *Westview*, of course. I would add that he taught a great workshop class while he was here as well.

Jim: A look at the evolution of *Westview* shows that the journal really came into its own in the volumes under your editorship, in terms of appearance and content. What factors did you consider most important in putting together an attractive and engaging journal?

Fred: Well, thank you for that assessment. I'll address those separately.

Regarding appearance, I sought to learn from others who had been engaged in the production of literary journals. I studied the formats of many long-established and elegant magazines. From these sources I borrowed here and there, then added some variations that reflect Western Oklahoma to create the present format. My objective was to present the work of our authors in a way that was easily readable and respectful to their creations. I don't like to crowd poems together, for example. I don't like illustrations that overpower and thereby adulterate the writing. Illustrations should serve as accompaniment in much the way a piano ideally sets off a singer. I confess I love fine paper. I love simplicity, clarity, and cleanliness of presentation.

The color covers of photographs by Mike McKinney and Stuart Harrison have greatly enriched our presentation as well.

As to content, editing a magazine is much like being a collage artist. One hopes to bring stories and poems conceived separately into an unforeseen harmony. When I became editor, I opened up the magazine to writers from outside our region. *Westview* has published many of the finest writers in the Southwest. We get wonderful pieces from around the country and occasionally an international contribution. Locally, we've had outstanding submissions from the community and even provided a venue for some gifted students. Cole Rachel and Cathy McCraw come quickly to mind. Please don't ask me to name my favorite contributors because there have been just too many

wonderful pieces published, and when I re-read an issue I admire different ones anew. I would be remiss, however, if I didn't mention Robert Cooperman's generosity in allowing us to serialize his book-length works.

Jim: Having retired as editor, what do you think you will miss most about the role?

Fred: I guess the fun of seeing the latest issue arrive. I also enjoyed getting mail from around the country, and the festivals were fun. Of course, I still plan to attend those in the future. Jim, I think I'm creating the impression that I did all the work on this magazine alone. Nothing could be further from the truth. Without the tireless efforts of many co-workers nothing would have been accomplished. I'd like to thank each of them and the university for having given me the opportunity to work on such an exciting endeavor. Know that I wish you personally and the magazine continued success.

Jim: What do you intend to do now with all the extra time at your disposal?

Fred: I have received a list with the demands of at least a hundred competing activities. In all seriousness, though, I hope to allot most of that extra time to my own writing. Being an editor is to be an impresario of other people's talents. I have no regrets in this matter. I've liked showcasing the works of fellow writers; however, I also want to see what I am able to accomplish in my own writing. Now will be my chance.

Jim: Do you think editing a literary journal has influenced your own writing in any way?

Fred: A good question and one I've asked myself over the years. Reading so many submissions has alerted me to certain realities of publishing. First, you are engaged in a competitive sport. You must produce work that is stronger than that produced by the vast majority of other writers. The percentage of acceptances is small when compared to rejections. To this aim you should be engaging from the first line, even the title if possible. It's a matter of producing a good first impression for an overworked editor. Ideally, you then build



without making missteps to a climactic ending that is memorable and makes the editor set your work aside.

Jim: Who were your mentors while you were in the MFA program in Arkansas?

Fred: I had quite a number of different teachers, but by your term mentor I suspect you mean which professors were particularly influential. The two who played this role for me were Miller Williams and Jim Whitehead. Not only did they influence how I view the craft of writing but also the way I would later teach. Allow me to make some observations. I found both of these gentlemen to be encouraging without praising anything which was not praiseworthy. They challenged preconceptions yet allowed me my own direction. Each possessed a fine mind and a kind heart, and they were always focused on the work at hand. I'd add that I was always taken seriously and treated with respect. What more can you ask of a professor? Or a friend for that matter? I'm glad that Miller is still producing poetry that I very much admire and which I believe will endure. As for Jim, who passed away not so long ago, I have to believe that he's somewhere dashing into some classroom to challenge some assertion made by a young writer during the previous class. That's how much he cared.

Jim: Why does twenty-first century America seem to have little interest in poetry?

Fred: Yes, the common lament by poets that the public is ignoring us. While it's true that poets face increased competition for the public's attention from TV and movies, something we can do nothing about, the greater problem is that the modern public views contemporary poetry as being rarified far beyond the reach of average folk. What we poets view as subtly rendered observations about our very own lives, they view as so much high-falutin lingo that never quite gets to the point. There's a disjunction. Even when poets wear the guise of a third-person perfect-servant, who is everywhere apparent but nowhere obtrusive, we come across to those not of us as self-absorbed. Whether inten-

tionally or not, we seem a bit inconsiderate to the very people we hope will read our work, and this has helped reduce the audience for poetry today to primarily other poets. If other poets, or ourselves for that matter, are the audience we wish to write for, obviously the question at hand is of no significance, but our work will continue to diminish in cultural importance. If we wish to be read by those who aren't themselves poets and influence a culture which at the moment has never needed poetry more, I would recommend, let's just say for variety's sake, more persona poems where the speaker is not well-educated, middle-class, and ever so decent and responsible. I would recommend poems which have identifiable meanings. And no, I'm not talking about homilies you can hang on your wall, but meanings that exist beneath the surface for the reader to discover, carefully extract, and hold to the light. Additionally, I'd recommend subject matter and diction accessible to present-day Americans, such as was utilized by poets as different as Frost and Bukowski. (I mention Frost, because with his "easy wind and downy flake" he was probably the most popular American poet of the twentieth century, and Bukowski, because last time I was in Barnes and Noble I noticed he had about fifteen books for sale, an enormous achievement for someone who, like the rest of us, has to compete with novels, TV, movies, computer games, etc.) Of course, poems of the type I am suggesting are being written today, wonderful poems, but they make up too small a percentage of what is being published to affect the public's overall impression of poetry.

I also find it ironic that we are a generation of poets who takes such pains to avoid being didactic, yet all too frequently we lecture by means of tone. And trust me: people know when they've been lectured to, even when they're not quite sure how it's been done or what's been said. Writers of poetry, I believe, should be interesting and meaningful while still being respectful to intelligent people who don't have specialized training in our



field. Fiction writers seem to know this. Movie screenplay writers seem to get it. Song lyricists are in the know. They are ever aware of audience, as was Shakespeare. To target a wider readership, poets need to consider the interests and feelings of this potential audience when we compose, edit, or judge. (Isn't it their time and attention that we are seeking?) I remember a story about the Spanish poet Lorca being particularly moved when he came across an illiterate guitar player on the street singing one of his poems to guitar accompaniment. My point is that once we are a little less exclusive in terms of tone and subject matter, and assuming we write poems that climb rather than cling, our work will be more attractive to those who don't write poems themselves.

Jim: Do you remember the first poem you got published? What were the circumstances?

Fred: Yes, I'd just finished grad school. I knew I'd forgotten something I needed to do. Ah yes, send out poems. Actually, I was overly timid I have to admit. I now know rejection helps me hone my work. It lets me know that my poem isn't good enough—not enough fire or defective in some way. By sheer luck I had two poems ("Baudelaire's Mistress" and "Paperweight") taken by *Blue Unicorn* the first time I put some poems in the mail. Since then, however, I have experienced the so-called boomerang effect (rejection) many times. It's been helpful as sometimes I've subsequently re-drafted and improved poems that were later published

elsewhere.

Jim: In your own role as teacher of the art of writing poetry, what lessons do you consider most important for students to learn?

Fred: To be honest, I still consider myself a student of the art of writing poetry. However, your question deals with what beginning writers need to learn first. I would say that one has to learn to write using the language of the senses, what Mary Oliver calls "the five rivers flowing inward." Also one has to learn to listen to the sounds and rhythms of the words and not just understand their meanings. If one can come up with good metaphors/similes like the little boy who said, "When I hit my funny bone, it feels like ginger ale," one is fortunate. Much must be made of the necessity of reading masters of the past without being content just to imitate. Ultimately, writers must become a synthesis of their sources and hopefully employ what has cohered in the service of invention.

Jim: What goals do you have for yourself as a poet at this stage of your career?

Fred: Your last question is an easy one. My goal is the same as it has been from the start, and I suspect won't change—namely, to write one book of really good poems. By this I mean that, considering the idiosyncratic nature of poetic taste, I produce a book that a reasonable number of reasonably intelligent readers will find highly gratifying.



Imagery and the Impulse to Transcend in Poetry of Fred Alsberg

by Helen Maxson

I am not a poet. I do not have a poet's ear for the musical workings of verse. As a student and teacher of literature, I have always known that the significance of Phinny's death in *A Separate Peace*, and the ways the novel dramatizes that theme, are more readily apparent to me than are the traces of hymns in poems of Emily Dickinson, or their implications for her work. I have studied with professors who are gifted poets, and I knew as they lectured that I could never detect on my own the subtleties of music and meaning that appeared so vividly to them in the poems they were discussing. With my own students, I have likened the writing of poetry to the writing of music. We have wondered together where Mozart got his material—from what area or quality of his mind—and then considered poetry as a similar medium.

Still, two aspects of poetry, both of them part of its music but also distinct from it, have always been eloquent for me: first, the reliance on imagery that poetry shares with fiction, and second, poetry's greater ability to aspire beyond the here and now, beyond the mundane realm critics have long seen as the special province of fiction. My taste for the transcendent (whether shown most clearly by a love of the choral music reflecting centuries of religious faith or by involvement in the political protests of the 1960s) has drawn me to the poems of Wallace Stevens, whose career was devoted to embracing and transcending the limitations of this world, and whose work has been as powerful for me as any novel. Perhaps my affinities for Stevens and novels are linked in part by his belief that poetry must embrace anything it seeks to transform before the transformation can take place, grafting a dialogue between that process and its everyday starting point. Perhaps its inherent involvement

with the data of the senses gives poetry no choice but to embrace the here and now, as do Stevens's elegant birds that "sink / Downward to darkness on extended wings" in "Sunday Morning," and his "listener, who listens in the snow," seeking winter's beauty in "The Snowman." Perhaps readers of novels can see poetry in no other way.

I have enjoyed the poems of Fred Alsberg in part because several explore the impulse to transform or depart from one's physical nature or environment, making them good tests for Stevens's perspective and making that perspective a good source of insight on the poems. There is an Eastern or Asian flavor to these poems; in several, one moves toward a higher state of being that involves some distant or unitary point of origin, some primal emptiness preceding the clutter of worldly forms, or both. In one poem, a man with "lemur eyes" imagines himself passing backwards in evolutionary history "through bellies of birds and fish, / through shells and smaller shells and smaller still," to "a single cell," and from there to "a sea that breaks upon nothingness / where Buddha came to sit and rest" ("Emptying the Mirror"). In another poem, a car frees itself from a tight, snow-covered parking space and "leaves a black space its own shape" behind; a few lines later, "people walk free of their footprints," and all things float suspended in a snow storm "as though underwater" ("Paperweight"). In "Roadside," a caged mountain lion sits "motionless" in the back of a pickup, surrounded by curious people on the side of the interstate; it stares into the distance, effectively escaping the humiliation of its confinement. In another poem, a father teaches his daughter to fold up the darkness that is frightening her, filling it gradually and completely with a light in which "nothing hurtful



can hide" ("Bedtime"). In another, a beachcomber collects treasures from the sand and then closes his eyes, letting the "peach-colored glow" he sees give way ultimately to a "glare" that "would otherwise / have made him look away" ("Beachcomber"). All these poems depart from the familiar world to a transcendent state which seems somehow higher, purer, and less-constricting.

Often the journey to transcendence in Alsberg's poems follows a guide or pathway. The child follows the caring instructions of her father in picking "any speck of light" to magnify, diminishing the darkness around it. The beachcomber follows the "mica shimmer / of a pathway" to a brightness that only the path's approach could enable him to face. The poems I have mentioned all depict some carefully detected starting point, the locus of some process that will lead to a higher plane. Similarly, in the poem "Daydreamer," a geography student follows the rise and fall of a leaf on currents of air outside the classroom window, coming to the jungles, wildlife, and ancient ruins his imagination adds to his teacher's lesson. Again, the flavor is Eastern, the images suggesting the path of Enlightenment a Buddhist might follow.

But the notions of a guide, a pathway, a guiding star or leaf, emphasize the physical world one leaves behind in finding enlightenment, and these poems celebrate that world as well as its transcendence. One poem, entitled "Beginning the

Modern-day Odyssey," laments a failed journey of the imagination. The poet had sat down to write, and wasted "perfectly good / pieces of paper" to discover that his muse, his guide on the pathway to imaginative success, would fail him: "The sky, it would seem, / had closed up shop; / I'd need to be content / to rule out a few dead ends." Ironically, it is vivid and imaginative imagery that describes what the blocked poet could not achieve. He "could no longer hear / the breeze unsheathe its blade." He could not "play chess with headstones."

He could not "do a tap dance / on typewriter keys." As he ironically lists the inspired images he could not create, the poet describes as well the world in which he writes. In his work, the world and its poetic transformation are closely allied.

The poem "Daydreamer" goes as far in the same direction as to locate its higher plane in a dense, lush jungle world, though that context is distanced from the student by its imaginary nature, ancientness, and geographical location. Still, it is the immediate world of school that is empty of worldly forms, the map drawn down by the geography teacher, as removed from the terrain it represents as the charts of Whitman's learned astronomer are removed from the stars. It is the plenitude of jungles and stars themselves, not abstractions from them, that can impress and educate.

More often, though, Alsberg depicts the higher plane as an uncluttered place, letting material



things suggest confinement in an untransformed world that keeps asserting itself as a poem reaches beyond it. The sheer weight, massiveness, and power of the caged mountain lion, conveyed more by its juxtaposition to the trivial t-shirts and sunglasses surrounding it than by direct description, are very much foregrounded by the poem, as are its tan, wide, staring eyes. In "Paperweight," the tight parking space makes the car's ultimate exit all the more freeing. Furthermore, it is the containment of fluid—not its transcendent release—that allows the people and objects in the paperweight to float free of their footprints; if the fluid itself were to float free like the "sea that breaks upon the nothingness / where Buddha came to sit and rest," its magic would be undone. The weighing down of paper and, in the poem about writer's block, the use of "perfectly good pieces of paper" to rule out obstructing dead ends: these material, restrictive aspects of the untranscended world are prominent in the work of escaping it.

It is not only imagery that embraces the world in these poems, but also narrative tones like humor. A small boy's "wriggling fingers" invade the mountain lion's cage. Comparatively trivial, careless, and annoying, they offer a distressing and very funny conclusion to the situation described, as does the sudden shattering of the geography student's daydream by the "well-aimed, blackboard eraser."

Similarly, the tender concern of the father for his frightened daughter evokes, along with fatherhood in general, the world we know as ours.

Still, their images provide these poems' firmest grip on the immediate world, in its various stages of change. Images like the fishtailing car and people walking free of their footprints in "Paperweight," and the "lemur eyes" in "Emptying the Mirror" engage the senses in much the same way as do the romanticized radish and the other images withheld from the frustrated poet by the closed sky in "Beginning the Modern-day Odyssey." Even as the frustrated poet wistfully enumerates the images he cannot create, the narrator of "Emptying the Mirror" enumerates each stage of his journey toward nothingness, his imagery giving substance to all material things along the way, including the mystical "water that mends without a scar." The absence in this image is a physical presence that helps locate the vision of the poem in some dialogue between the otherworldly and the here and now. Like the "lemur eye[d]" old man whose return to the birth of the race is triggered by a book he holds in his hands, and like the beachcomber who must gather driftwood before he can enter the realm of light, the author of these poems collects the images he wants to leave behind, enacting a goal of lyric poetry with a strategy of stories.



Whirl

by Barbara Eknoian

Grandma said she was kicked out
of dance halls when
she was a young girl
with another friend
for spinning.
Two girls entwine
as they spin like tops
around the waxed wood flooring.
Giggling they circle
around and around the hall
without a care whether
they look rowdy,
or might knock
into other dancers.
Too young to think
about consequences
they are dizzy with delight,
hair wispy and damp.
Feet fly over the floor,
skirts lifting
with the twirling.
Chased out of the dance hall
they laugh and float
into the night,
voices echoing
in the dark empty street.
They spin around
the lamplight,
whirling all the way home.



"The Dance" by Rassouli



The Mind That Binds

by Kenneth O'Keefe

Like birds from winter's freeze I think to leave
It all behind me by escaping on
A stroll through summer-green wood. Limbs weave
Shadowy, breeze-shaken webs upon
The paths that wind me in a labyrinth,
Where fears, regrets and grievances persist —
Despite my effort — solid as a plinth.
Nearby, in brackened brush, a snake has hissed.

I could have stayed at home and suffered this
Poison, that chokes peace as it carpets my
Soul like creeper that smothers grass. I kiss
Hope for some narrow span of bliss good-bye,
Knowing how toxic thinking clings to me
As stubbornly as honey to a bee.



Moon Snow

by Linda Giacometti

A shivering, clouded sky,
back-lit by the glow of the moon,
illuminates
cottony snowflakes
as they flitter down
to join the white blanket
covering the ground.
A rabbit, wrapped in his warm, winter coat,
bounces from drift to drift,
nose twitching
as he tastes winter.
Crystallized twinkles
replay the moonlight,
pausing only where footprints
mar perfection.



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall



Continuing Education

by Ronna Wineberg

He makes her feel young. That's why Sarah first became involved with him. She meets him every other Tuesday. In another two days. She's forty-eight, and she hadn't felt particularly old before or unhappy. Stuck, perhaps, as if she were immersed in mud. Ben makes her feel like a girl. A cliché, she often thinks as she lies naked beside him at a Days Inn. Sometimes when she lies next to her husband at home, her days seem numbered. On rare occasions, she feels surprisingly old, when her back aches or her teenage daughter peers at her, saying, "God, you have a *ton* of wrinkles, Mom. Can't you *do* something?"

The first time she saw Ben was five years ago. Sarah, a lawyer, was mailing a package for work. January. The post office was crowded and cold. He was in line ahead of her in a black parka and brown wool gloves, reading a book, *On Family Dynamics*. He impressed her immediately. His tall, lanky body, his thoughtful manner. There had been ice storms in Tennessee; power had gone out a few times. Sarah overheard the woman in front of him asking if he'd prepared for more storms. Ben looked up and said, yes, he'd bought a generator. He seemed friendly. Sarah asked, "Where did you buy it?"

He'd gotten it second-hand from his wife's brother, he said. "Anyone can buy one at Home Depot. Do you have someone who could help install it?" he asked Sarah.

"Not really." She thought of her husband, but he was a virologist, always busy. She didn't mention him.

A few weeks later, she bumped into Ben at a continuing education class. She recognized him, the man with the generator. He asked, "How did you survive the last storm?"

They traded life stories. She felt a natural affinity for him. He was a lawyer, too, specialized in disability law, moved from California years ago. Sarah told him she was from Boston, came to Tennessee

with her husband. She worked in estate planning, had recently branched into divorce. Sometimes she thought she was too soft-natured to be a lawyer. When she saw the dispute-resolution class, she decided to return to her roots. She'd started as a social worker. Perhaps she could work with families again, mediate conflicts. Lessen a tension, she told Ben, better a life. She thought, but did not say to him, that she might use the techniques with her own family or to try to resolve the disputes she felt within herself.

On Tuesday morning, Ruth Lambert, a new client, sits in Sarah's office. The space is a small square in the modest suite that Sarah shares with two other lawyers. A large window looks out on downtown. Slants of winter sunlight brush across her desk.

"I want a divorce," the woman says. "I can't go on anymore."

Sarah rests her hands in her lap and waits for Ruth Lambert to continue. Some clients are full of emotion; others are reserved. Sarah believes that clients feel more comfortable because she is a woman. Forthcoming. She's often privy to details of people's intimate lives, as if she were a psychiatrist.

Ruth Lambert is silent now.

"Tell me your circumstances," Sarah encourages. "Has anyone been unfaithful? Do you have children?"

"Children." She sighs. She is petite, with short dark wavy hair, and is dressed in a black suit. Her large brown eyes are painted with pencil and mascara. Beautiful dark lashes, sad eyes, Sarah thinks.

"We have two teenagers," she says. "I want to be frank. It's not an affair. He is not having an affair that I know of. But his temper is unbearable. If I have a different opinion, my husband goes ballistic.



'Go to hell. You're starting a god-damned argument.' He even said, 'I hope you get run over by a truck.' Is this the man I love?" She pulls her chair close to Sarah's desk, taps her fingers on the shiny wood. Her sweet, rose-scented perfume fills the air. Her nails are bright red, the polish chipped. She glances at her small amethyst ring, the four silver bangle bracelets on her wrist. "He supports us, but some days, I'd rather starve."

Sarah nods. "You won't starve, I hope." She glances at the calendar on her desk, a present from her daughter: "For Women Who Do Too Much." *Tuesday*. Her husband is out of town at a conference; in two hours she'll be with Ben. "Tell me about your husband's work." She studies Ruth Lambert. "Has he ever hurt you physically?"

"Physically, no. Emotionally, I'm full of bruises." The woman smiles sadly. "He's in music. The business end. But what I said isn't exactly true."

Sarah waits. *There are two sides to every story*. It can be difficult to pull the story from a client.

Ruth Lambert stares at her lap, then eyes Sarah. "He had an affair once. I found out...did something foolish. I became involved with someone." A red blush covers her face.

Sarah shakes her head in sympathy. *I became involved with someone, too*. "These things happen. If one partner is having an affair or thinking of it, the other partner often is." She'd read that in a family law journal. *My husband wasn't having an affair, and I became involved anyway*. She still hasn't mastered distancing herself from clients.

"In a million years, my husband wouldn't suspect. But something happened. My lover treated me better than my husband does." Ruth Lambert smiles, a soft dreamy smile. "Or maybe marriage

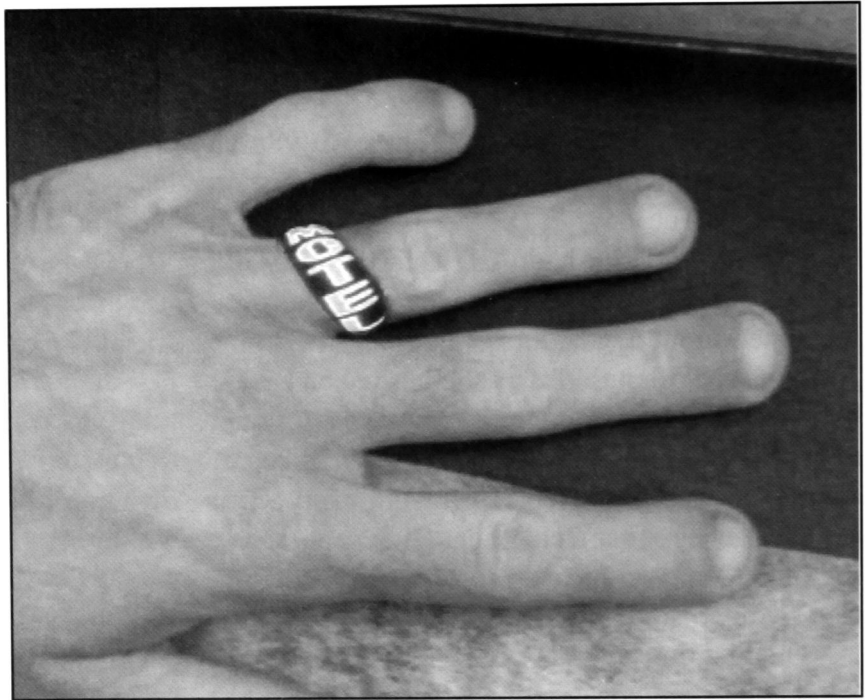


Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

ruins you." She bites her lower lip, as if considering her words. "Or the affair ruins you. But something is ruined, as if I've left the Garden of Eden. When we married, I was sure I'd entered a Garden of Eden. But it's not."

"That's often the case." Sarah jots a notation on a legal pad. Marriage doesn't ruin you, she thinks, you ruin yourself. There are no Gardens of Eden. She has friends who complain about their husbands but want to stay married. It depends on what you're willing to accept. In her own life, even as she said, "I do," she'd had small second thoughts. Sarah's husband has a temper, like Ruth Lambert's husband does. He works long hours. Nights, he plays games on the computer to relax. They don't have much to talk about anymore.

The woman is describing her ruined Garden of Eden. Tears brim in her eyes. Sarah feels for her, hands her a box of tissues. Clients often ramble like this, as if to purge themselves. They just want comfort. Sarah used to become impatient. But listening is rarely a waste of time. Once a client is unburdened, he or she can focus. As if one must

walk through the muck of contradictory feelings to reach the heart of the matter.

Ruth Lambert locks eyes with Sarah. "Do you think I'll suffer? Will it be difficult for the children?"

Sarah chooses her words carefully. "The sooner you get this behind you, the sooner you can get on with your life. Your children will adjust. I'll represent you, fight for you." Of course Ruth Lambert will suffer, in the short run. Then she'll go on. Sarah wishes she could make it different. Divorce is always wrenching.

The woman dabs her eyes with a tissue. "I suppose you don't need to hear all this. But it helps to tell you."

"I'm glad." Sarah pauses. "Do you want to marry your lover? Is that what you intend to do?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I think an affair or a friendship is better than marriage."

Sarah had thought this, too. "It complicates negotiations if he's in the picture. I wouldn't mention him."

"Sometimes," she whispers, "I don't know what I'm doing with my life. Yesterday, at a restaurant, I saw a couple I knew. They were with a woman and introduced me. My lover's wife. It was awful. There she was, sleeping the sleep of the innocent. I felt torn. Guilty. Why can't he leave her? I'm ready to leave my husband."

"These situations can become unbearably complicated," Sarah replies. "One piece of advice: I wouldn't divorce your husband to please your lover. I'd divorce him only to please yourself."

After Ruth Lambert leaves, Sarah tells the secretary that she's going to an afternoon meeting. Instead, she drives east, away from the city, to a Days Inn. It's sunny and mild, though it's February. Perhaps this year's winter storms are behind them. Sarah considers the litany of thoughts that crowd her mind whenever she meets Ben. Second thoughts. Why does she allow herself to be subject to these whims, as if she's a teenager? *Maybe I'm*

no more clearheaded than clients, than Ruth Lambert. But Ben has a grip on her feelings that won't let go. It's simply love now. He wouldn't believe it, doesn't need to know. Driving to meet him, she is shy and excited as a girl.

In the car, at the hotel parking lot, she waits for her cellular to ring so he can tell her the room he's in. She jots a note about Ruth Lambert's case on a legal pad, then stares at her reflection in the rearview mirror. She used to feel absolutely married before she met Ben. It's been unsettling, a continuing education, to see how one's affections can waver.

Sarah's eyes are green, with a speck of brown, the skin folding beneath them like creased cloth. You have a lovely honest face, her father used to say. That will help you in life. He was born in Poland, escaped during the second world war, a self-made man, in the furniture business. A survivor. Always stern. There had been plenty of furniture in the house when Sarah was growing up, but not enough love to go around.

She has always prided herself on honoring commitments. But now she lies to her husband and children, her secretary, the freckled-faced young man who had perfunctorily checked her into this hotel before. She'd slowly lost her compunction about this. Lies have become an element of her personality, as if she is hollow inside. There is no substance to her anymore, just a series of trapped doors. She is two selves now. Is this how Ruth Lambert feels? The self who sleeps with her husband. The self who betrays him. *I am a good person*, she thinks now. *I love my family, try to do the best for them, for my clients. I want to be a good person. I would never wish to hurt anyone.* She shuts her eyes. *I am, in fact, not a good person.*

The phone's ringing jars her to the present. She puts the cellular to her ear, hears Ben's voice.

When she knocks, the door opens immediately. Ben smiles.

She is always amazed to see him, that he has chosen her, just as she was surprised, when she



married, that someone as smart and worldly as her husband chose her then.

They kiss.

"Anything new?" She shuts the door.

"You're always new to me."

She sighs. "This is like having another life."

"Then you don't have to leave your real one, do you?"

Later, in bed, she feels tenderness toward him, like she felt when she and her husband first set up house, when the children were young. She thinks ridiculously of Ruth Lambert. *Why can't he leave his wife?*

"Maybe we'll live together someday," she says.

Ben kisses her neck. "I don't think right now." He has told her he will not leave his family yet. He's unhappy, but his wife is part of a package with his children that he's not ready to give up.

"In a while?" She links her hand in his, stares at the thin gold band on his finger, on hers.

He doesn't answer.

"I always thought we'd live together someday." Sarah's voice is heavy with disappointment. "Maybe someday hasn't arrived." She laughs, trying to make light of this.

"Maybe sometime it will."

She pulls the clean white sheet to her neck. She is so good with words in her work, but can't find them now. "We could live happily ever after."

"There's no such thing." His expression is serious. "But you never know."

"I suppose you don't." She moves her face toward his. A manufactured scenario, living happily ever after. She creates scenarios for work, as most lawyers do, shading the truth when needed. She wonders now if Ben shades the truth, too. But when his lips meet hers, she understands that though most things in life can be masked, it's difficult to camouflage love and desire.

That night, at home, a few hours after Sarah has gone to bed, she awakes with a feeling of

tightness in her back. From time to time, she's had backaches. She wonders if this current discomfort is punishment for her afternoon with Ben. She tries to rearrange her body, moves slowly as if her torso were a fragile object.

Instead of finding comfort, she feels a piercing pain in her lower back, as if something were pressing inside her. She debates whether to get up, find Advil or just bear this. Bear it, she tells herself. But she's up again in another hour.

In the morning, pain is shooting down her legs. She can barely move. She stays in bed as the children get ready for school, grateful her daughter has just gotten a driver's license. After the children leave, she considers what she has to accomplish at work, decides to do what she can from home. She calls the secretary and then phones her husband at his hotel.

"Pain down your leg?" he says after she's explained.

"The left side. Terrible cramping."

"Must be sciatica. I'm sorry, honey."

She can imagine him shaking his head in the way he does when he's sure of his opinion.

"Pressure on a nerve of yours," he says.

"Very painful."

"Not pleasant, back problems. Call the internist. He can prescribe pain medicine, a muscle relaxer. Or wait until I come home."

She imagines a shrug, the wave of a hand in dismissal.

"I'll wait it out," she says.

But the pain does not let up. She phones the doctor. His nurse calls in a prescription, schedules an appointment later in the week. Sarah's daughter picks up the pills from the pharmacy. They barely take the edge off.

When her husband phones that night, she asks, "How long will it take for the medicine to work? For this to heal?"

"Heal." A sigh. "That's the problem with Americans. They want a cure overnight. A virus has to run its course. A bad back won't clear up in



a day. Things need time to heal.”

“Oh.” Sarah isn’t sure why he’s brought up nationality. “Do you think I should have tests? An MRI?”

“Go to a doctor, honey. But what’s a test going to tell you? If the doctor gives you one, then he’ll send you to a surgeon. Better to take an anti-inflammatory. Physical therapy. I’ll be back in four days. Stay in bed. If you want, I’ll come home early.”

When they finish, Sarah places the telephone receiver back in its cradle. Her husband means well. What she wants from him is not information, but *comfort*. She’s in bed, on her back, knees bent. She phones Ben. He’s out of town, too, for work. She leaves a message on his cellular, then stares at the telephone, feeling terribly alone. As if all that exists is this room and the pain that has forced itself into her, like an intruder. Punishing her. There must be a language of pain, like the language of law or love. She’s learning it now.

At night, the pain is worse. Tonight she’s forgotten to close the bedroom blinds. She’s in a drug-induced fog of painkillers and relaxers, living in a shadow world, without color or sound. Like childbirth. She inhales the slept-in odor of the sheets, the faint scent of sex with her husband from days ago. *I could bear this if I were having a child*. On her back, she shuts her eyes, breathes slowly, as her Lamaze coach advised long ago. She imagines the heaving, pushing, gasping. A slithering head. Her daughter’s tiny, perfect body popping out, like a miniature cannonball. She can almost feel this.

Breathe, she tells herself, and she thinks of her husband, then Ben, as if imagination can conjure presence. Ben is in the room now, holding her hand. Desire seems to cut through the pain. The best sex is in your mind, she thinks. She remembers her first boyfriend from long ago. He was young, strong and confident. Like she feels with Ben. She half-expects to hear his voice, opens her eyes. A full white moon is shedding light, like a Chinese

lantern, through the window. There are no storms tonight, though snow is beginning to fall. Tiny flakes that glisten in the moonlight. The light seems to make her pain glow.

Things come back to haunt you. The small second thoughts she’d had when she married have resurfaced. We’re all haunted by something. She knows her husband. He gets up early. He hates to leave a task unfinished. That haunts him. She doesn’t know about Ben. He’s half-mystery to her.

In the morning, Ben phones, as he sometimes does when out of town. He hasn’t checked messages on the cellular yet.

Sarah tells him about her back. “Try not to worry. Demand that the doctor see you sooner, Sarah. He’ll help you.”

“Promise?” she asks foolishly, groggily. She can feel the medicines dulling the pain and her senses.

“I can’t promise that. I wish I could.”

“No one can, I suppose.”

“No.” His voice sounds hazy, far away. “The world is new every day. Things can change in a second. For the good. Hold onto that thought.”

“I will.” Her body feels heavy, like kneaded dough. Ben is comforting her. For comfort she would travel anywhere.

“Someday, maybe we’ll marry,” he says. “I want you always.” Or perhaps he doesn’t say that. Maybe she imagines this. Yes. Pure imagination. Sarah’s head feels woozy, as if she’s had too many drinks.

These are the changes life brings. Sarah has begun to see a physical therapist, as if she has enrolled in a Continuing Education class. Back pain is REAL—How to Cure It. Her back is a presence she must be aware of now. It’s healing slowly, a bulging disk. She’s learning to listen to her body. She was always impatient with her father. He used to talk about his ailments as if they were oppres-



sive boarders in the house, the gout, his asthma. Now she feels regretful; his illnesses were probably real.

For three weeks she works from home. Ruth Lambert telephones her. "You've helped me," the woman says. "I've thought about what you told me. I want this divorce for myself, not anyone else."

Sarah appreciates the new certainty in the woman's voice, and hopes to be well enough to represent her at the court date.

For eight weeks, she misses her meetings with Ben. They talk on the phone, but he seems beyond reach, as if she is living in a new country where she must be intentional about her movements, how she sits or walks. Her husband helps with meals and shopping. In the evening, she sits with him and the children by the fireplace in the living room. When he places his large hand on hers and asks, "Do you need me to get you anything, honey?" she shakes her head no and smiles, grateful. Here, in this room, with him and the children, the pungent scents of burning logs, the warmth of the bright flames, she feels comfort. Safety. The strength of her husband's hand. As if she is wrapped in a womb. She never wants to lose this, never wants to grow old and be alone.

Sarah expected to be young and strong for years. She may well be. But now she has second thoughts. She's thankful for her husband's help. He's honored his commitments, taken care of her. Given comfort. She won't leave him now, perhaps ever. She asks herself: *Do I want a relationship with Ben, where there aren't expectations? I'm not hurting anyone, am I?* She doesn't think she can give him up.

Tuesday. She is meeting Ben again. The thought of seeing him makes her feel happy, like her old self. She's grateful that her back supports her, that she's temporarily whole.

This morning when she left for work, she kissed her husband goodbye. "I'm glad you're feeling back to normal," he said. "I love you."

"I love you, too." At that moment, she did.

Driving to the hotel in the gray afternoon light, she asks herself: *How long can I continue with Ben? For the rest of my life?* She has no answer. Her thoughts wander to men she has loved. How many? Enough. If you live long enough, you'll have the chance to love different men. The image of a college boyfriend flashes through her mind, his curly blond hair and muscular arms, as if he were a



masculine angel. He couldn't become erect. Get it up, be done with it. He had cried, ashamed. She'd cried, too, for his discomfort. Whose fault? Skin and orifices, a poke, you're finished, done. Fleeting as breath, a little death, die, revive, go on. How can such a simple act hold so much power?

Today, Sarah is meeting Ben at a Holiday Inn, closer to the city. A spring storm hovers in the air. The clouds are full and heavy, as if rain will burst from them at any moment. She rounds a corner into the parking lot. She's cautious about driving too far because of her back. Marriage is artificial, she thinks. How can you understand what you want when you're twenty or twenty-five? Or anticipate who you'll meet as life unfolds?

She waits in the car for Ben's call and then starts toward the lobby. As she's walking, she notices a woman leaving the building. Petite, with dark hair. Bangle bracelets on the woman's wrist. She reminds Sarah of Ruth Lambert. Sad eyes, even though she's smiling. Her arm is linked in the arm of a short, dark-haired man. Her lover, Sarah thinks. She steps beneath the eaves of the roof, out of view, and watches as the couple walks past. The woman is living a secret life, Sarah imagines. Looking at them, she feels as if she's seeing her own life from the outside, as if she has been living next door to herself for years. She is both disgusted and drawn to what she imagines. Does she have sad

eyes, too? Then she thinks of the house she shares with her husband and children, of her painful back, the warmth of those days together by the fireplace. That glow of legitimacy. The comfort.

When the couple drives off, Sarah continues to the lobby. She looks to her left, then her right. *Afraid of being caught.* But so eager to see Ben, she wants to run now. *This is my gift to myself. Yes. I may do this for the rest of my life.* A new certainty. As she hurries ahead, she glimpses another figure at the other end of the parking lot. A man. Tall. Far from her, like a silhouette. He walks toward the hotel, staring ahead, as if he doesn't want to be noticed either.

Sarah slows her pace, watches. A car pulls into a space near him, a woman driving. He turns to her. A smile. A glance between the man and woman, then away. Anticipation. Desire. There's no mistake. She squints for a closer look. The man smooths his hand through his hair, hair that Sarah suddenly realizes she has touched. Her husband. She steps quickly beneath the eaves of the roof again, so as not to be seen. Stumbling. The ache in her heart is more piercing than she thought possible. She stands, pressed against the cold, brick wall, in a world without color or sound. Learning a new language of pain. Deep in the shadows.



The Place I Called Home

by Janet Flora

I'm not sure what I was looking for when I drove up to the brick, two-family, semi-detached house where I spent the first 20 years of my life in the Kensington section of Brooklyn. The mystery and the stakes grew when I found myself standing on the porch about to ring the bell of the home where I had not lived in more than 30 years. As I ran my finger over the raised lettering of the new tenants' names beneath the doorbell, I wondered if we ever know what we hope to find when looking back.

When I left my Manhattan apartment, got in the car on that sunny, early-summer day in June, I was looking for something much more tangible—a new kitchen faucet—from one of the large home-improvement stores just on the other side of the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel. Usually when I needed something functional or unglamorous for my apartment, I drove to Queens or Jersey, until my sister suggested that the Brooklyn megastore was well-stocked and more convenient.

"And it's close to the old neighborhood," she said on the phone that morning. "You could pass the house."

"Why would I want to do that?" I said, surprised at my own adversarial tone.

"For nostalgia, to see what's changed or what's stayed the same. It's just a thought. There's no need to get testy."

"Well, the store sounds great!" I said with exaggerated enthusiasm, hoping to make up for my harshness. "I think I'll go; thanks for the suggestion."

I arrived before the store opened, and decided to get some breakfast. Back in my car, I found myself heading for the billboard-sized sign looming like some giant flashcard that read *Prospect Expressway*—that strip of highway connecting the Gowanus Expressway to Ocean Parkway and my

old neighborhood—wondering about my reaction to my sister's suggestion. I got off at the familiar Tenth Avenue exit, where years earlier I made my way from home to the city, either as a child in the back seat with my parents and sister and later with friends who could drive, and still later when I had my own driver's license. The whole idea of time seemed to blur. Could this route really seem so familiar when I had not taken it in almost three decades?

Back then, trips to the city meant experiencing the original, or getting the best that was not available in Brooklyn. Like when my parents would take my sister and me to the Christmas Show at Radio City, where the Rockettes kicked up their legs to their ears, and I was sure I wanted to be a Rockette when I grew up. Or later, when I drove across the bridge on my own to Vidal Sassoon's, where I got my hair cut into a one-eyed jack, a fashionably lopsided haircut that left my hair bobbed on one side and in a pixie on the other. Or to buy makeup from Mary Quant so I could make thick lines around my eyes with black kohl. Or when I went to the Electric Circus to dance in the strobe of psychedelic lights, or to hear Richie Havens at the old Fillmore East in the center of the East Village.

Not long after my own exploratory excursions to Manhattan, I found my first apartment in the East Village and moved there with a roommate. Thirty years, one husband, and several apartments later, I own a co-op and still live in the East Village—which is closer in proximity to my childhood home than most places I travel to on a daily basis within New York City, like the Upper West Side.

So now as I turned right, off the exit ramp and onto Tenth Avenue, I wondered why in all these years, I never went back to Brooklyn. There was the obvious—no one left to visit. But maybe there was a reason that had to do with moving on and beyond the parameters of a borough and neigh-





borhood. Did the staying away have something to do with protecting my feelings of distance? Did I need a psychic separation from the place that never measured up to the real thing just across the river? Or was there something just too uncomfortable about looking back?

As I drove parallel to Greenwood Cemetery, I thought of making a visit to the place where my parents and grandparents are buried. But that was something I never did even in the years immediately following their deaths. Not because I didn't miss them or think about them, but like my parents before me, I had found other ways of honoring the memory of the deceased. Whether it was lighting a candle on the anniversary of their death or birth, reading old letters and greeting cards, or wearing a piece of jewelry that had been handed down through the generations.

There was that time when I passed the house over ten years ago, when my mother died in 1992. But I did not really see the house that day. We drove by in the funeral procession not because this was where we lived as a family, but because this was also the house where my mother grew up. As I sat wedged between my father and sister in the back of the black towncar that followed the hearse containing her remains and looked out the tinted window, my vision blurred with tears, I imagined my mother as she was in those faded black and white photos we would look at again and again as kids. The group shot taken in front of the house. Mom standing in-between Nana and Grandpa with her two younger brothers in front of her and her little sister in Nana's arms. Another of Mom, at 18, sitting on the steps to the house with her dog Duke at her feet, dressed in her jodhpurs and riding boots after returning from the stables at Prospect Park, where she rode a horse down Ocean Parkway when a bridle path extended down to Brighton Beach.

The bridle path has long been paved over.

I wondered how many times the concrete steps I now stood on had been paved and repaired. And I wondered about the girl in those photos who

became a teenager, who became a woman, who became my mom. And if, when we return to the place we called home, we hope to find some secrets, or the answers to some mystery that remain in the bricks and the mortar of the places that stand long after we are gone.

Looking around me as if I had dropped something, I realized the dimensions of the porch could not have been more than 8' x 10'—it was more of a stoop than a porch. Where did we all sit on this small landing of cement—my mother, father, sister, Nana, Grandpa, and I? How could it have seemed so big? Sure, I was much smaller then, but upon returning, I felt smaller still. The whole idea of memory made me feel lightheaded, almost dreamlike.

When I did move to the city, this house was still the place I called home, even after Nana and Grandpa died. And even after Mom and Dad retired and bought a place in Florida, they kept the house and would return to Brooklyn for the summers and holidays. So there was no final goodbye, and I couldn't even remember what year the house was sold. It was just like a slow fade in a movie. Occasionally on these visits, I would see a childhood friend who was back visiting too, or one who still lived with her parents. But it was never more than a quick hello; after all, I thought I had nothing in common with those who stayed behind. On one visit, when I was about 20, I did listen with a bit of interest when my father told me that my childhood playmate Dorothy Montella had moved to Florida. "That's nice," I said, but I thought: *Florida is just the suburbs in the sun, suitable for retirees and sun worshipers, and what was that compared to the majesty of Manhattan?*

Now I stood facing what seemed to be the original mahogany door at the entrance to the house. Its beauty surprised me, as if I were seeing it for the first time; the way the grain seemed to make vertical lines in a deeper shade of reddish-brown and how the glass pane sat recessed in the top half of the door, as if done by a master framer. Looking at



my reflection in the glass, I was surprised to see the middle-aged woman with auburn, chin-length hair who stared back at me. Was I expecting a younger version of myself? And which version would that be? The little blonde girl with braids, or that young woman with the one-eyed jack? Touching the brass doorknob, I wondered if each time we saw something, a place, or a person that had become routinely familiar, would we look at it differently if we knew it would be the last time we saw it? Would we memorize details or celebrate in some way? So that last time I saw the house—whenever that was—turned out not to be the last time, there was this moment and it seemed I needed to do something special with it. I was just not sure what that should be.

I returned to tracing the raised print of the names beneath the doorbell with my index finger, like a blind person reading Braille, and then glancing at my watch. I saw it was only 9:30 a.m., too early to ring anyone's bell, let alone someone I did not even know.

I made my way back down the steps of the stoop and stood on the sidewalk, looking left and then right, trying to decide which way to walk. I had already driven down most of the street until I had gotten to the house, so now I turned right to the houses that I had not seen from the car. Two doors down was one of the few detached houses on the street. Mr. and Mrs. D'Amico lived there; they had no children, but seemed to genuinely enjoy the kids that lived on the block. We all knew we would get the best treats from the D'Amicos at Halloween. In their yard, they had a vegetable garden and grew basil among tomatoes and zucchini. When my mother made sauce, she would sometimes send me to their house to get a bunch of basil. I could still imagine Mrs. D'Amico (whom I never remember seeing without an apron) clapping her hands high in the air, and then resting them clasped at her breast, as if in prayer. She would shout out to her husband, "Carmine, look who came to visit." Sometimes they would both come into the garden

and let me pick the basil leaves off the plant myself. And once, Mrs. D'Amico showed me the tiny seeds she planted that made the tomatoes, and when I became incredulous that these little brown seeds would turn into tomatoes, she'd throw her head back and laugh. Mrs. D'Amico, who then seemed to me to be so old, was probably 10 years younger than I was in that moment that I stared up at the house from the street.

Then I passed the Zuckerman house and remembered Arthur, one of the few Jewish boys on the block who wore a yarmulke. When my mother found out that Dorothy and I made fun of it, she told me that it was a sin and it would be like making fun of the little cap the altar boys wore on Sunday. I didn't make fun of his yarmulke again. Every time since, when I see someone with a yarmulke, I think of Arthur and what my mother said.

Now I stood before Dorothy Montella's house. The steps of the porch looked freshly-painted in a crimson shade of red. A small garden in front of the house was filled with rhododendrons and irises, and shutters in the same shade of red as the steps framed the windows. As I looked up the driveway I saw a man, probably in his early 50s, tugging on a nozzle hose, and walking toward the garden with the hose pointed at me.

"You're not going to spray me with that thing, are you?" I asked.

He laughed. "Only if you get too close to the rodos."

"You know," I said, "I grew up on this block and I haven't been back in thirty years. I was wondering how long you have lived here?"

"Eight years," he said.

"Oh, I guess you wouldn't know the Montellas; they were the owners back then. My best friend Dorothy lived here."

"I'm married to Dorothy," he said. He kept looking at me, and all of a sudden, I couldn't think of anything else to say, or I could, but didn't know where to start. Finally he said, "My name is Pat, by the way. Pat Latanza."



"Oh, of course. I'm sorry, I'm Janet Flora."

"Would you like me to tell Dorothy you're here? I think she is just getting out of the shower. Why don't you come into the backyard?"

I think I heard myself thanking him as I followed. As Pat disappeared into the house, I looked around, still expecting to see the three-foot above-ground pool that Dorothy and I would play in until our skin was shriveled like old women. I thought about the two of us: she with her olive skin and dark, brown hair cut in a little pixie, and me with my blonde braids. In the summer her skin would get a shade of deep bronze. We would stretch out our little arms straight out, as if we were getting ready to do karate, and line them up side by side, touching, so we could compare our skin tones. Inevitably my skin would only be a deep shade of pink. She'd call me whitey and she'd laugh saying, "You'll never catch up, you'll always be a whitey." Eventually I'd have to admit that it was true.

Now I remembered the space between her front teeth and how we would laugh at the way she could make whatever she was drinking spring from between her teeth like a miniature fountain.

The pool had been replaced by a dove-gray wooden deck, decorated with lounge chairs, and a glass table with six chairs and an umbrella. I sat down on the steps of the deck and looked at the neighboring yards, trying to remember who had lived there.

I heard her voice before I saw her, and it sounded so familiar, but not immediately recognizable, like hearing the first bars of a favorite old song not heard in a long while.

"Janet," she said, "is that really you?"

Turning around, I realized I was holding my breath, and in that moment, I could see only a shadow of her slim five-foot six-inch frame from behind the screen door as it slid open on its rollers. I thought of her mother coming out to serve us milk and cookies when we had taken a break from the pool.

Dorothy's hair was short, not in a pixie, but pushed back behind her ears and parted on the side, with an elegant sweep of silver-gray bangs that covered most of her forehead. She was wearing navy sweat pants and a white tee shirt. Her olive skin, even now, looked smooth and that familiar shade of bronzed tan.

At first, I thought this is like seeing a ghost—but then I thought, no—this feels more like a peek into some future from some past.

Neither of us said anything else, but we hugged and I noticed that I was still the shorter one, by about the same two inches. When we broke the embrace, I looked closely at my old friend and I saw the folds of skin on her eyelids and the creases at the outer corners from years of laughing. And I thought she looked great for 51; we both did. But then who could say what 51 looks like, particularly someone who is 51? When she smiled, there was that space between her front teeth.

"Can you still make whatever you drink come through your teeth like a fountain?" We laughed and hugged some more. And then sitting down in the chairs at the glass table, I said, "How do we catch up on thirty years?"

She nodded and then shook her head from



side to side. It was a perfect combination of yes and no.

Pat came back outside to say he was leaving. He shook my hand and told me he hoped we would meet again.

Dorothy and I gave each other the Cliffs Notes version of our lives. I told her I had been divorced for 20 years, never had children, didn't remarry, and still worked teaching and writing. We exchanged lots of facts about when our parents died, what our siblings were doing, and where some of the kids we grew up with had ended up. She told me that she returned from Florida eight years ago when her father died, to help look after her mother, who died only a few months later. Pat would be retiring in three years from the airlines, but they had no plans to go back to Florida. She worked at a local salon as an esthetician.

"I was never happy in Florida," she said. "I missed Brooklyn, I don't want to leave again. I don't want to leave this house. Like your mother, my grandmother raised my mother here too. I'm third generation in this house," she said, looking around with pride as she touched the banister of the deck proprietarily. Then looking at me she said, "Like you would have been if you stayed."

We stared at each other for a moment and I nodded, acknowledging her observation, but stunned that she said this as if I'd lost an opportunity or overlooked some treasure.

"You know," she continued, "sometimes that's the one reason that I'm sorry I never had kids. There's no one to really give the house to. Of course, there are Pat's kids. But they wouldn't—couldn't—feel the same way about it."

And in that moment I realized that I saw something differently about staying; I never knew it was a choice or an opportunity. I always thought home was just the place where you got stuck.

"Oh," she said, looking at her watch, "it's almost ten-thirty, I have to be at work by eleven. I wanted to give you a tour of the house," she said, standing up.

"I don't want to hold you up. Next time," I said. But I didn't really know if there would be a next time. Time often has a way of getting in the way of next times. So as we held on to each other, I decided to celebrate this moment—even if it didn't look much like a celebration—to memorize as many details as I could: the feel of the wooden deck beneath my feet, the way the sun hit the glass of the table, and the smooth, buttery texture of her skin.

When I got back to my old house, I started up the stairs again, then turned and walked back down and got in my car. Looking up at the house from the car, I realized I did not need to go in: because the memories were in me, not inside the house.

Now driving back toward the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel, I thought maybe the reason we go back to a place—or don't go back—is not to see how the place has changed, but rather to see how we have changed.

Something in me did change when I left my old home, but not what I'd always believed, and what I thought was separated by the body of water surrounding Manhattan did not really seem to matter all these years later.



Wingspan

by Taylor Graham

I used to be a pebble
but now I'm the frigate-
bird weaving wide wings
with sky.

I used to perfect my form
by round rolling in
the sanding and polishing
of tide

but now I search the wind
to trim my feathers
and teach the silver fish
to dive.

I used to be old as
earth-bones but now I hold
quick-dead in the hollow
of my eye.



Photo (detail) by Joel Kendall

Off the Reservation

by Harvey Spurlock

"The names of the deceased are being withheld pending notification of next of kin," intones the radio announcer.

Eileen heaves herself from the mattress, pads across the small room's bare floor, and reaches toward the six-pack in an otherwise-empty refrigerator. The cool glass against her fingertips ignites a flicker of anticipation. She knows in the back of her mind that this first morning beer in a month will lead to another around-the-clock drinking bout. One that within a week or so will render her unable to ingest a bite of food and will continue until the only way out is another trip to the Indian detoxification center.

From the antiquated radio, the funereal voice of Hank Williams moans a song of sorrow out of the past. Mechanically, she raises the beer to her well-formed lips. Her finger traces a scar on her lower lip and loses it in the flesh of her rounded chin. Her thoughts remain on the news of the wreck. Last night she heard an owl. Her mother heard an owl the night a bunch of drinking buddies couldn't wake her father.

For the most part, her only contact with her wino real father had been once a month when his government check bought her a new blouse or skirt. Her stepfather, a big man of sober ways and lofty ambitions for her, raised her. He hadn't had much control over her mother, but he ruled Eileen with an iron hand. He left after her mother ran off on a month-long fling with a North Dakota Sioux. That was about the time Eileen's life started falling apart.



She is sure Johnny was the driver. She pictures him in his uncle's Cadillac, flying over the northern Arizona highway, left hand locked on the steering wheel and the neck of a beer bottle, his other hand

caressing the blonde he brought into The Hunter's Club earlier. The uncle is stretched out in the back seat, half-consciously groping at the blouse of a blowsy brunette they scrounged up for him in a joint they'd slithered into after leaving The Hunter's Club. The blonde is running her hands over Johnny's tight jeans, inside the loose-fitting shirt which camouflages a body that even in its twenties is becoming flabby, that has lost touch with the midday sun and an honest day's work.

Full of confidence, Johnny steadies his knee against the steering wheel and tilts his head for a long swig. The blonde is lost in visions: lounging beside a pool in a bikini and high heels, she'll let her closest friend in on the tale of the wild Navajo. "I must have been insane to go out with that dude," she will exclaim, her eyes widening. "All that talk about guns and knives had my heart in my throat the whole time! Needless to say, I did what I could to please him.

"And we *did* have some fun. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Indians around here look pretty tame. But, I swear, no one will civilize that one in a million years.

"You wouldn't believe how he treats that Shoshone wife of his, though. Worse than a dog. No white woman would tolerate such humiliation for a minute. It's hard not to feel sorry for the plump little thing."

The blonde brushes Johnny's mane-like hair back from his neck. Maybe she'll give him a sucker bite. Something to remember her by when he comes to tomorrow afternoon, something to remind the Shoshone what a fool she is. She strains upward with her made-up mouth, shoving his knee away from the steering wheel.

The Cadillac spins on the berm, dips toward the ditch. A flash of fear searing his gut, Johnny whips the car back onto the pavement. He stabs for the brake, frees up his right hand by slamming the



blonde into the passenger door. But he has jerked the wheel too far. They are plunging into the ditch on the other side of the highway. The Cadillac snaps off three young pine trees before a giant weather-worn rock sledgehammers the elk-antlered hood into the front seat.

Johnny's handsome features haven't been crushed. But the eyes are as lifeless as the two holes in the turquoise medallion that dangles from around his neck. The medallion may not be a face. But to Eileen, it's the visage of an aged medicine man willing himself into his own grave aware that his last drop of magic has dried up.



Johnny, his uncle, and the blonde had materialized in the bluish smoke of The Hunter's Club about midnight. From a table Johnny sang out, "Bring us a beer, barkeep."

Eileen moved toward the tap, bristling, despising being called *barkeep*. If her life had taken a bit of a different twist, she might be a concert pianist; or at least playing in a high-society supper club. She took lessons for eight years. She can still hear her stepfather: "You miss one day of practice and I'm cutting it off. You'll never get another piano lesson."

It was no challenge. She loved playing the beat-up piano he had worked overtime to buy. And he would have overlooked a slip-up or two anyway. "You want to hear my daughter play?" he would chime when they had company. "Get out some of that religious stuff, Eileen," he would say, slapping his knee with a large leathery hand.

"She's going to be the next organist for the church. That is unless that old lady hangs on too long—until Eileen's off this reservation, making it in the big world."

He swore she would go to college. And she almost had; music could have been her major. Her stepfather was smart enough, but he hadn't finished high school. He always had jobs that involved more

hard work than pay.



She set their beers on the table and the uncle waved money at her. He routinely picked up the tab. Johnny reciprocated in various ways: doing the driving so he would be the one to do the DWI time, for instance.

Johnny hugged the blonde, his eyes gleaming. "Hey, I want to introduce you two. That's my better half, Eileen. And this here's Gloria, a very, very close friend. Man alive, we got to be close in a hurry, didn't we, honey?"

"You didn't mention no wife, Slick."

Eileen figured the blonde's rings were in her purse. She probably had a truck driver husband on an out-of-town haul.

"That's because ours is purely a marriage of convenience, baby."

"Convenient for you maybe!" shot back Eileen.

"She pays the bills. And I provide certain other services." Johnny rubbed the blonde's back.

The services he was referring to no longer were part of their relationship.

"All the same, I think I'll excuse myself."

The uncle's head was lowered, cowboy hat shading his eyes. Eileen sensed he was indifferent to the pressurized atmosphere. If the lid blew off, he easily enough could wheel out of the way. The inheritor of a large farm and herd of cattle, he every so often sold off a slice to support his lifestyle. Eileen wondered if he ever thought about the day the last piece got lopped off.

She wondered how the blonde would look with a slashed face. "Maybe you'd better leave, cutiepie!" she hissed. "Before I put glass in your face. Then no man will ever look at you again." She grabbed an empty bottle from the next table.

The blonde appeared paralyzed. Johnny leapt up, the death's skull on his chest dancing manically. He clawed into her blouse and drew back his hand.



"Hit me, buster, and I'll have the cops on you!"

The uncle shoved his hat back and lifted his eyelids.

They stood motionless, eyes fixed on each other. Tears welled in Eileen's. Her words came out punctuated with sobs. "Don't...forget, buddy, I put one guy...in San Quentin. And...I put a knife in my first husband's back...when...I caught him with another woman. I...I...can do the same to you...any day."

"Wow! I'm shaking in my boots."

She yanked herself loose and eyed the blonde. "You can have him...you hussy. I...never...want to lay eyes on the bastard...again."

She trudged toward the bar, sniffing, wiping away tears with the hands that hadn't touched piano keys in years.

The way Eileen told it a young man was serving time for hurling her out of a window. In truth she didn't know how she fell out of the window during a party in an apartment over a San Francisco skid-row bar. And the only person she had ever stabbed was Johnny's uncle, with a fingernail file. During a drinking spree, she awoke with him crawling on top of her—Johnny's idea of repaying his uncle's generosity.



Still in her housecoat and sitting in the broken-down armchair by the window, she thinks about another beer. Hopefully the owner of The Hunter's Club will take her back one more time after the binge is over, after she gets out of the detox center. But then maybe it's time to leave Arizona anyway. There's nothing at the Wyoming reservation; she left there for San Francisco after her first marriage broke up. Maybe she'll try San Francisco again. She could find a place in a better section of the city, away from the few others from the reservation who were there.

The trooper is probably on his way by now,

traveling the same highway that the Cadillac had last night. She supposes he'd rather be going to a ranch house, where portraits of ancestors hang in the hallway, than to a one-bar town out in the sticks to encounter an Indian woman. This is the part of his job he dreads the most under any circumstances.

He might have come from somewhere else like she had—maybe somewhere far away: New York or North Carolina. She can imagine him reflecting that there is still something that mystifies him about the Indians, as much as he has been around them the last few years.

Rounding a curve, he gazes down into a pine-tree-lined canyon. The northern Arizona landscape can be beautiful, even poetic. Not knowing anything about meter or metaphor, he'd written a few poems in high school. In fact, his dreams of college had seemed easily within reach—yet in the end, they remained unreachable. Fast-talked by a recruiter, he had joined the Army instead and found himself in the military police division. After his discharge, staying in law enforcement seemed to be a natural progression. He hasn't written a poem since high school.

He winces as he sees the small town up ahead. Now that he's almost there, he simply wants it to be over with. It's a shame about the Indian alcoholism: the endless array of public intoxication arrests on the reservations. Most of them had drunk themselves out from behind the steering wheel long before they ended up the way this woman's husband had. That could be a subject for poetry too. Writing from an Indian angle, he could entitle a poem "The White Man's Gift"—if he could still write a poem.

The rundown apartment building across from the bar is all too easy to find. Eyes from all around—especially the woman's, no doubt—are on him as he steps out of the air-conditioned, out-of-place cruiser into the brilliant sunlight. Without his sunglasses, he'd feel completely naked. In the dark doorway, expecting the stairway to be rot-



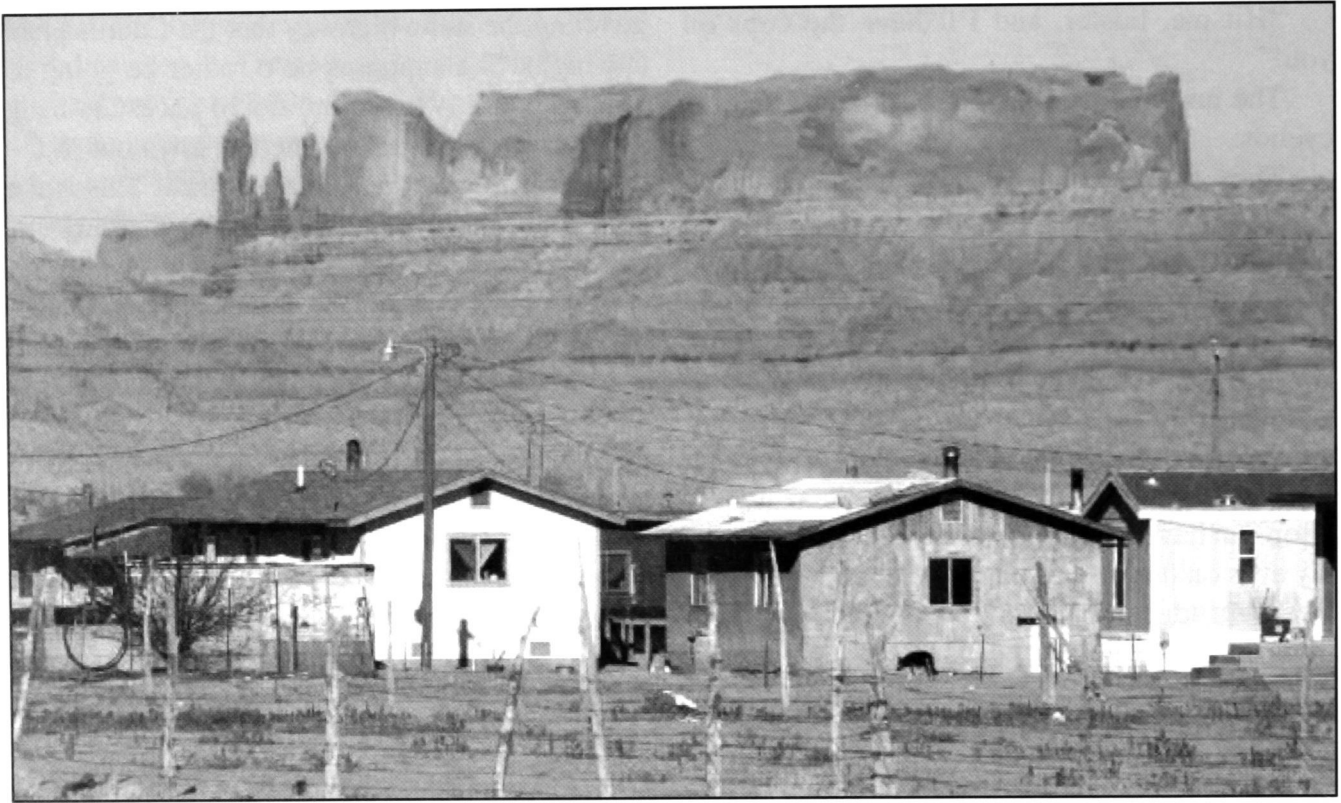


Photo courtesy Getty Images

ting and treacherous, he uncovers his eyes for the climb. At the top of the stairs, he slides the dark glasses back on.

When she opens the door there is an aura about her he hadn't anticipated—like maybe life had taken a wrong turn for her long before last night. She *is* still fairly young; as he had been once. At the moment, though, the indefinable ambiance only makes the news of her husband doubly tragic, doubly difficult to deliver.

Emerging from the dingy doorway, he again conceals his eyes, wishing he could have done the job in a less matter-of-fact manner. But he's never been good at conveying his true sentiments. The midday sun could blister a person's brain cells, but he'll soon be back in the air-conditioning. He'd caught a faint whiff of alcohol when she fearlessly thanked him. Somehow, despite hair growing white, he doesn't feel like Santa Claus. Maybe he'll write the poem someday.



Her feet are already aching when she gets up to get another beer. They still are misshapen from the fall. The doctors at first thought she might never walk again, but she proved them wrong despite not even a card from her mother the entire time she was in the hospital. She took a bus to Arizona instead of going back for the last operation.

Between her feet and the need to sneak a beer now and then, it would be a long night at work. She had a few nights left before the booze totally took control. It was Johnny who brought her beer after she was too weak to get it herself. And it was Johnny who always called the detox center for an ambulance after her arms drew up around her chest and she began seeing skulls and dead people.

Back in the armchair, a song she knew as a child runs through her head. She hums a few bars then experiments with fresh words to the music.

The knock on the door gives her a jolt. She

hadn't noticed anyone in the hallway. Drawing back the faded curtain, she peers down on the garbage-strewn sidewalk in front of The Hunter's Club across the street. The scene is more nauseating in daylight than the neon nighttime. An overstuffed cat slinks into the alley beside the bar. But no silver-gray state trooper's car mirrors the sun.

She slips the beer into the refrigerator on her way to the door.

It's Johnny's mother, the tattered quilt turned into a dress hanging from her withered shoulders. "Johnny home?"

"Does it look like it?"

"Can't rightly see. Where is he?"

"How should I know?"

"I take it he didn't come by last night?"

"Why should he? There's nothing for him here."

"I'll be talking to you later then, Eileen."

Eileen sighs. "You want a cup of coffee?"

A bony finger tremblingly settles on the mother's pointed chin. She looks up from under crinkled eyelids, a hint of a smile licking her wizened lips. "Don't mind if I do."

The mother eases to the edge of the unmade bed. Eileen snaps off the radio and starts down the hallway to run water into the pot. Thinking back to the day Johnny brought his mother a box of fried chicken, she speculates that the old woman really wouldn't be sorry to see him dead. The chicken was to make up for having kicked her out to sleep in the alley the night before so a lady friend and he could use her room. Not accustomed to much food, the mother toothlessly gnawed through half a drumstick and shoved the box aside.

Johnny malevolently eyed the box and drank more beer. "I go to all that trouble and you don't even goddamned eat it," he periodically mut-

tered.

Her reply was: "I'll eat some more for supper. Lordy, that'll last me three days. I sure do thank ya, Johnny."

In the end, he jumped up and jammed pieces of chicken, bones and all, into her mouth.

She almost choked to death.



Eileen plugs in the hotplate. Thinking of the beer, she wishes she had let the mother leave. "Did you hear..." She remembers Johnny hocked his mother's radio. "Did you hear that owl last night?"

"I did. That hootin' sure enough put a chill in my bones."

Eileen spoons instant coffee into cups. "There was a car wreck last night. Four people dead according to the radio."

"Some of them fool teenagers?"

"Radio hasn't said yet."

They lapse into silence. After Eileen serves the coffee, she sinks into the armchair and recalls the last time she riled Johnny up the way she had last night.

Just past noon the next day he came across the street from the bar, perspiration glistening on his face, the medallion flopping against his chest. She could have slipped out the back but he only would have caught up with her. There was something flat and dead about his eyes when the door burst open.

Afterward she couldn't get out of bed. Johnny had to carry her to the bathroom.



Eileen inches the curtain away from the window.



Gazing outside, she sings in a low doleful voice:

Last night I heard
An owl in a tree.
Twere these lonesome words
That he spoke to me:

The elk once played
The night away,
But he's been slain
This very day.

And those dancing eyes
No longer shine.
The barroom warrior's
Beneath the pines.

She hums a bit more.

When she turns from the window, the mother's coffee is on the nightstand. Her back more bowed than before, she wrings her gnarled hands in her lap. "Johnny's the only family I got left," she murmurs.

Eileen nods.

"Lord knows, he don't treat me the way a mother's got a right to expect. I guess I should have left him alone after he left the last town."

There are two children from Eileen's first marriage, both living with her former husband's parents. She sends them presents for birthdays and Christmas but hears nothing in return.

"Johnny was all right once, but then the drinkin'..." Her voice trails off.

"Well, I'm gonna leave ya, Eileen. Thanks for the coffee."

Eileen walks over and helps her to her feet. They embrace briefly, embarrassedly break away. The old woman shuffles from the room.



The trooper is younger and heavier than she imagined him. He doesn't wear sunglasses. Aside from his uniform and white man's facial features, he reminds her of her stepfather.

Her stepfather whipped her only once. It was the

evening her freshman year when Farrell Whiteplume, a senior, talked her into riding home with him instead of taking the bus. "I'm sorry, child," he said, "but I'm doing it for your own good. I want to see you get off this reservation and make something out of yourself!"

"I guess you're here about the car wreck," she says to the trooper. "I heard about it on the radio." The radio is on again, an announcer pushing a deal at a health spa.

"Uh...yes, ma'am. Are you all right?"

"I'll be okay." Three years after the whipping, she could have easily gotten a scholarship. Her grades had been nearly straight A's. But she married Farrell Whiteplume, thinking she could still go to college later.

"Can I give you a lift somewhere? It would be in the line of duty."

She shrugs and shakes her head, the corners of her mouth downturned. "No thank you." She should be sobbing; maybe even fainting.

"Do you need someone to stay with you? I could get a friend or relative."

She shakes her head again, almost apologetically, and lowers her gaze to the floor. Claspings her housecoat more tightly around her, she doesn't understand why, when crying has come so easy all her life, that she now can't summon a single tear.

The trooper's eyes skirt the room. Maybe he's looking for a bottle of sleeping pills, something near the ceiling to wrap a lamp cord around, a gun.

She sees a small lonely room somewhere in Idaho. Some said her stepfather had blood relatives in Idaho. She never heard him mention them, though. It was during her senior year that her mother had had the fling with the North Dakota Sioux. But he didn't actually walk out the door until two months later, after he got the news that Eileen was to be married.

The trooper takes a card from his shirt pocket. "Here's a number you can call regarding your husband, ma'am. They're pros. You won't have a bit of trouble." She accepts the card and the trooper turns toward his cruiser.

She feels so alone that her eyes do mist.



Wintergreen

by Lyn Lifshin

always there in my mother's pocket book
wedged between eye glasses, a broken
watch, coupons, lipsticks, keys she was
always sure she lost. In her last days, she
insisted the lifesavers be on the night stand
near the bed, there to keep her from coughing
or throwing up pills. Like Joy perfume and
Jolie Madam, a whiff of wintergreen is
a smell of my mother, the color in her last
years she always chose as she longed
for emeralds, for green to move into late
Vermont winter snow. When I see a field of
it, smell the minty scent, I want to scoop
it up and bring it to her. She already started
seeming lost and scared, was terrified if
she called and I didn't pick up the phone.
Peppermint or spearmint wouldn't do. It was
wintergreen in silver foil, clean and fresh as
a night the stars are silver fish, the moon a
silver apple. I wonder why I didn't make a tea
of it for her, if anything else growing smells
as fresh. When we drove in Murray's car
thru Silver Moon Diners and cranberry bogs
my mother always asked if I'd like one, gave me
the roll, smelling of her lilac scented lipstick
and for years, faintly of Mariboros and
Tareytons, the sweetness melting as the city
did behind us, comforted like air the first day of
snow when nothing is stained or walked on.
In the last pocket book she used, wintergreen
still scents the lining longer than the bitter smell
of Compazine and Librium, Demerol, Lanoxin,
pills for nausea, pain, anxiety, fear



Ode to the Flowers of Today

by Judith Cody

Having no feet you race across
The garden to me on a breeze
Wafting your fresh bloomed perfume
You tempt me to rest beside your
New and brilliant beauty.
Knowing that it will vanish
Too quickly
That my eyes
Will be the solitary
Observer of your
Magnificent performance
In the fleeting sunshine,
I am compelled to
Remain beside you.



Photo by Carlos Gauna



The Wrong End of the Knife

by Celia Jeffries

Lydia had waited a long time for this kind of emptiness in her life. Her family, what is left of it, wanted her to keep one of the nurses or housekeepers. "How can a woman live alone?" her son Greg said. But Lydia likes being by herself now. She wakes each morning, wraps her robe around her body, and shuffles off to the kitchen. Her hands find the kettle and the door of the refrigerator and the handle of the drawer, and she settles into the corner seat just as easily as she did each day of the last 65 years. She looks out the window, following the movements of the sugar maple, watching the leaves twisting and turning, following what must be shadows of birds in the trees.

Truth is, time is immense now. She melts into it, moving her bones when they press too hard against the back of the chair, sliding her feet across the floor from room to room, content that no one remains in the house to tell her what needs to be done.

A quiet house at last. No parents in the upstairs suite, no grandchildren impatient for Sunday dinner, no husband surrounded by nurses, secretaries, and financial advisors. Lydia knows the time now without bothering to look at a clock. The sun tracks its light and shadows across the walls of the house minute by minute. The paper arrives, announcing the day, the month, and the year. And on Thursdays, Tilly comes for the grocery order. Two months since George Hughes' body was shipped to the Harvard Medical School repository for cadavers, and Lydia is content. This is her house now. Her house and her things. The samovar in the study. The desk her father made out of her piano. The hat she rescued from the summer home. And her plants, her gardenias and lotus, in the conservatory. For the first time in 95 years, Lydia's life is her own.

"Are you ready, girl? It's going be a hard day today, the missus is whining, and the trolley is creaking, and the leaves on the trees, see them?"

They're turning their backsides up to the sky. It's going to storm before long, get your rain clothes out. Girl, don't you go out without them now. I'm taking this tray upstairs to your mother, and I'll get your eggs on the plate the second I walk back in here, don't you fret. It's going be a hard day, but we can start it right, can't we?"

Mamie fusses over the spoon bread and pear chutney, moving her arm deftly across the counter to lay out the breakfast tray, all the while talking to Lydia in a continuous, quiet stream.

"I don't know what's gotten into your sister, she's staring in that mirror again like she's met someone new. Go on out there and fetch her from the hall while I get this upstairs. And for heaven's sake, keep your eye on that stove."

Lydia looks up at the stove, then back at the open book on the table in front of her. "Margaret," she calls, "time to sit. Mamie's on her way upstairs."

"How does this look?" Margaret stands before the mirror, tying a ribbon through hair.

"Lovely," Lydia says, her eyes still on the book before her.

"I don't know, I'm not sure," Margaret says. "Maybe I should cut it all off; what do you think, Lydia?"

"Fine, it looks fine."

"What do you know? Your head is always in a book. Men don't want bookish girls."

Lydia lifts her eyes to the stove, sighs, and then crosses the room to turn off the gas. George's nurses cautioned her daily, then walked her through many simple tasks, helping her define movements to accommodate bones, muscles, and joints. She bristled then, telling them she knew how to take care of things in her own kitchen. Now that she is alone, she follows their instructions unequivocally.



The can opener is what usually undoes her. Lydia never uses the electric one sitting on the counter, ready to whirl around the lid at the press of a button. Instead, she reaches into the drawer and pulls out the spear she used all her life, working hard to fit her fingers around the handle and press down on the tooth. More often than not, the can slips out of her grip, and the opener jams down into the counter. A whole section of the counter is imprinted from such attempts. When the whistling stops, Lydia uses both hands to lift the kettle off the stove and fills the coffeemaker she bought in Paris thirty years ago. She leans close to see when the water turns from brown to chocolate, then carefully pours the liquid into a large china cup. She slides her feet forward, carrying it back to the table where she places it to the right of the newspaper.

Lydia takes a sip, then opens the paper out on the table. Nothing registers. For a while she managed to read books from the library, but even those are beyond her now. When she does read, it is with a magnifying glass she holds down on the page and moves across like a woman ironing in slow motion. In truth, reading ended for her long before the last eye operation. When she looks at the paper now, it's a black-and-white puzzle, with blocks of gray and lines running throughout. She keeps it at the table to check the date and to remind her of the year. That's what they want to know.

"Do you know what day it is, Mrs. Hughes?"

"And what year is it?"

"Who is the president?"

If she couldn't answer that, they'd try to move her to one of those places where they keep old folks now. This happened to friends.

"Oh Miss Lydia, you are so slow today," Mamie calls. "Move yourself along now, there's tea in the pot and jam here on the sideboard. And that bell, it's ringing upstairs. You in university and your sister married, I seem to run more 'stead a less. It's a wonder to me how that happened. Don't forget those books in the hall. I tell you, girl, you're

gonna lose your eyesight before you see what's really worth seeing. All that reading, day in and day out, up late with that electric light. People's eyes going bad early. My granny, she saw the world whole, till the day she died. Ninety-eight she was and her eyes wide open, watching the Lord reaching down to take her up. Big, wide eyes looking straight at Him. Gotta save your eyes for that final look, that's what I say."

Lydia slides the magnifying glass up to the top of the page and peers intently at the date: Monday, October 12, 1919. She blinks and squints her eyes, trying to focus. That can't be right. She leans far over the table and holds the glass firmly down on the newspaper. Monday, October 12, 1991. You can lose a whole lifetime with the switch of two numbers. She looks back up at the patches of yellow moving back and forth in the window, the yellow that feels so soft on her eyes. It is a fine, clear day, and she hears the call of a cardinal, although the flash of red is too quick for her eyes to catch. Must be cool outside. The sharp breeze sends the yellows tossing and twirling. Occasionally, one loosens from the branch and lifts into the air before passing out of the frame of the window. Lydia looks down at her hands lying quiet in her lap and allows her eyelids to close. They feel cool and damp on her eyeballs.



All this sunlight. It's hard to focus sometimes. Lydia has to squint hard. And after driving the rig all morning, she goes into the farmhouse and stands there blind as a fish for a minute or two, instinctively turning her head toward the voice of the woman she has come to train.

"You Miss Johnson? From the County Extension?" The voice is not welcoming.

"Yes." Lydia smiles, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the light, waiting to see a jawline and arms folded across a chest.

"Think I don't know how to feed my family?" The woman stands in the middle of the room hold-



ing a basket of tomatoes. On the table beside her sits a crate of potatoes.

Lydia unbuttons her gloves and bows her head slightly before the woman. "Pleased to meet you," she says, but does not offer her hand.

The county extension sends her out on the easiest route they can manage, but still it's tiring, riding in the light and then sitting in the dark, talking with the farmer's wife, trying to make the woman comfortable, trying not to appear to be too much of what she is: the woman from the city who thinks she knows more about how to process food than these women who planted, watered, harvested, and cooked for their families, often for more years than Lydia had lived. But times are tough. People managed, yes, but now there are such simple things to do to avoid all the illnesses out there. Canning food was something people thought they knew, but they didn't know it all. Lydia wants to help.

"Well, girl," Mamie says, "it's a cheerless day, seeing you home so soon. I know you wanted to stay in that job. Not that I ever understood. Riding around the countryside, teaching people to cook. Strange thing for a young lady like you. But who am I to say? Been staying in one place cooking all my life. It's not enough now, sad to say. I'm sure your father had no choice. Lord knows he's never known what to do with your mother. She's always been so delicate, life exhausts her. Can't expect that to change. We need a lady to run the house. I can still cook and clean, but we need a lady to make the decisions, and I see you're that lady now. No need to ride around the countryside, you just come on down here in the mornings and sit at the kitchen table like we used to, just turn things around a bit. You do the talking now, tell me what's to do for the day. I like that idea, I do. It's not such a bad day after all, is it, girl? I mean Miss Johnson."

Lydia opens her eyes. A number of strips appear on the counter, but from the table she can't distinguish one from the other. She lifts herself up from

the cushioned seat and, taking a breath, shuffles across the floor. When she reaches the sink, she opens her gnarled hand, finger by finger, then taps gingerly across the counter. Knives were always something she prided herself on. Even those nurses were impressed by how well she handled herself in the kitchen. Shouldn't have been such a surprise. In her day, a degree in home economics was not for the lazy or undecided. She studied architecture, medicine, and engineering. It bewildered her what had happened to food in her lifetime. Used to be the cornerstone of life, the most important decision of the day. When she took over her father's household, planning meals drew all her knowledge of health and resources. But today, some of those nurses actually brought in already-cooked meals; "fast food" they called it. Garbage really. Nothing that could heal the unwell or sustain the living.

Where is that bread knife? Lydia looks down at the streaks on the Formica and reaches out, but there's nothing there. She lifts her hand and stares at it, squinting at the stone that flashes on her left ring finger.

"I tell you, Miss Lydia, George Hughes is an odd one. Stood at the door a full five minutes before ringin' that bell. A stick in the glass of the door, so tall and skinny. And look at the tatters he wears. Maybe not tatters, but not what other fellows wear. Your mother, now, she's not up to meeting these suitors, but I'm looking, I've got my eyes open, and when I go upstairs, she always asks. 'What's this one look like, Mamie?' she says, and I think, what can I do? A mother wants to know. This is the most important time in your life. She wants to know, so I tell her, I tell her what I see. 'He's from the country,' I say. She knows what I mean. Maybe he's going to school here, maybe he's as smart as they say, but I can see shoes that have walked on ground, and I can smell wool that's been out in the wet too long. He doesn't sit comfortably in your mamma's room. What can I do? I see the look in your eyes, you're tired of this house and these people. I know the sap



is running through your veins, don't blush at that, Miss Lydia, I remember those days. He looks good, though. And his people are good, from what I hear. So what if he came for Margaret first? He'll get the better deal with you, that's for sure. We'll just slice up this bread, and I'll take tea to your momma, and we'll figure out a way to make this work."

"It's not so far away," George said. But it was. Halfway across the country. On the Atlantic Ocean. The best technical school in the country. George couldn't pass up this offer. But what about her mother? Her father? Her life here in St. Louis? It didn't seem to be a problem. Now that she was married, no one seemed to need her or to worry about her.

"You do what a wife does," her mother said matter-of-factly. "You go where your husband goes."

"Boston Tech?" her father said. "Never heard of it. But I'm sure George knows what he's doing."

They took the train on a Thursday and sat up two nights in a row rather than spend money for the sleeper. George was excited and talked to strangers, something she had never seen him do before. When the train pulled out of Providence, the sky cracked open, and the rain made her jump out of her seat. She wasn't used to a land where you couldn't see what was ahead, where a storm cloud could sneak up on you and burst in your face. By the time they arrived in Boston, the sky was black. Inside the station, Red Caps ran about with right arms raised, hailing cabs. George would actually have spent the money for cab fare, but the school had sent a young man with an open car. The porter loaded their bags, then gently helped her in, spreading a newspaper over the seat. She pulled her hat down tightly on her head, gathered her coat around her body, and looked at her husband in the front seat, hatless and happy, a child from the backwoods.

"What have I done with my life?" she thought, as they drove through the streets, and her nose wrinkled up at the tang of what George later ex-

plained was salt air.



Lydia raises her head at the sound of a door slamming shut. Tilly? With groceries? No, today is Monday. No one has a key anymore except Dr. Grossman across the street, and he wouldn't be coming by at this time of day, this time of the week. Her son Greg only has time to telephone, not to visit. Lydia's breath becomes shallow as she tries to remember what she just heard. Was it memory? Or was it here, now, in the house? Lydia reaches up to the hook beside the back door and removes the fishing hat hanging there. With people in the house, the sound of a door slamming was not something to dwell on. But now such a sound is a puzzle.

Lydia stands in front of the window and waits to hear if another sound follows. That's what George would have done. George, who could hunt a rabbit down a hole. George, the MIT professor. "Logic rules life," George always said. "Look for what's different, what is not in the natural order." It worked for him. Until Eddy arrived. A beautiful, healthy baby, everyone doted on him. The family drew together every summer in a circle, brought to each other's sides by the arrival of the next generation. Her mother roused from her bed for whole days at a time, just to be in the room with the baby. Her father watched in silence. All was well with the world, until those moments when Eddy would tense his arms and legs, stare about, and begin to shriek. Then the family retreated to their territories, and George looked to Lydia to figure out what was wrong. She was alone then, so alone as she made the rounds from doctor to psychiatrist to neurologist and finally to surgeon.

Lydia brings her fingers down once more, finding the handle of the bread knife and taking a strong grip. Her breath comes in gasps, and her mind races as she struggles to find herself within the room. I'm facing the window over the sink, the stove is to the left, icebox to the right, stairs beside the door in the right-hand corner, table behind me.



This is my kitchen. Mother is not upstairs waiting for Mamie's afternoon visit. George is not standing in the hallway, looking like the last man on earth. No one is coming to dinner to discuss world affairs. Lydia has to tighten the muscles up the back of her spine, ignore the pain in her bones, and hold her body upright in order to locate herself clearly. Yes, I am here, she thinks, here on Lawson Road, here in my kitchen. And I am alone. Alone with the leaves flashing in the sunlight. Alone in the woods.

That summer, when the family settled into their slings hanging in the trees by the St. Lawrence, she slipped down the path to the water with a rod over her shoulder, bait in a pack, fishing hat on her head. No one put up a fuss. Things were so much more relaxed at the summer house. Father painted in his studio, and Mother spent most mornings sitting on the porch. They no longer complained when she was gone all afternoon. That had ended the day she came back with a string of pike that Mamie dredged in flour and flipped in the fry pan on the fire. Now when she gathered her gear and headed down the path, Father leaned out the open studio window to call, "Fish fry tonight?"

Eddy fished with her up until his fifth year. When she opened the catch to the lower shed that day, she heard him crying in his bunk on the porch. Just a whimper really, but she knew the sound. Eddy sat up and smiled through his tears when she tiptoed across the planks. She put her finger to her lips at the sight of his face. George would stop them if he heard their preparations. The doctor had said routine was essential to keep Eddy calm, and taking him fishing during naptime would definitely be breaking the routine. Eddy looked up, saw her gesture, and hid his face under the sheet.

"Shh, my sweet," she said. "Let's be quiet."

"Fish?" he whispered.

"Yes, fish," she said.

They left the porch by the ladder and managed to set off in the boat without capturing anyone's attention.

Lydia caught five pike that afternoon. Eddy squealed with delight at each one and grabbed the line, gently pulling them in. His hair glistened in the sun, and his legs sprang straight out in front of him each time he saw the glint of the fish fly out of the water.

When they paddled back to the boathouse, Lydia had to tell Eddy not to sing.

"We need to be quiet now," she said. "It's still naptime."

"Daddy sleep?" he said, his voice still a voice.

"Yes, Daddy's sleeping." She smiled.

Lydia tied up the boat and handed Eddy the creel to carry. She choked back a laugh at the sight of him struggling up the pier. She didn't see George sitting on the woodpile at the end of the dock.

"What the hell are you doing?" George stood up, his face red, his lips twitching.

Lydia dropped the gear at the sound of his voice.

"Did you take this child fishing?"

She didn't see Eddy pick up the hatchet. She didn't see the arms holding tight to the shaft, the black arc of the swing coming up behind George. She only saw her child's face, white with rage, old with fear, the face of the Eddy they all dreaded. When she cried out, George jumped at the strength of the five-year-old's thrust. Lydia's husband was unhurt. Her son never saw the river again.

Schizophrenia they called it. A deformation in the temporal lobe. An excision would put things right. George agreed. It was logical. Electrical impulses were going haywire. Cut out the problem and their boy would be restored to them.

Lydia stood before the hospital bed, her hands limp at her sides. Eddy, her little Eddy, lay in the bed, his head wrapped in cotton batting like a freshly boiled egg, upright in its cup, ready to be cracked. But he had already been cracked open. They had already sliced through the skull, pulled apart the white congealed membrane, and reached into the soft yellow tissue to remove the offensive



parts. You can't put an egg back together, she thought. All the King's horses and all the King's men couldn't put Humpty together again.

"The operation was a success," the surgeon said. "He's unconscious now and may be unresponsive for awhile, but we're quite pleased. He will be a more docile person, you'll see." The surgeon smiled and let the door slam behind him.

Some moments pass before Lydia looks down and loosens her grip on the bread knife. There's blood on the counter, but she doesn't notice it as she feels the energy drain down her arms, down her torso, down her legs, and out her feet, until she finds herself leaning against the counter, wondering how to get across the floor to the table. Tea, she thinks, a cup of tea. She turns to her left and, running her hand in among the shadows of the leaves on the countertop, moves slowly toward the gas range, the centerpiece of the kitchen, the most familiar space in her life. George balked when she wanted to install it. Six burners, two ovens, and a shelf above for warming plates. Just last summer, the nurses called in a repairman for one of the burners, and the fellow almost genuflected at the sight of it.

"You don't see any of these anymore," he said. "And still working fine, all things considered." He talked with her for ten minutes, asking how long she'd had it, where she'd bought it. He listened with genuine interest to how she had ordered it from New York City, how difficult it was to transport, how easy it was to cook for a crowd (twenty-five

one night when George brought home the Intelligence Committee during the war). And not a scratch or ding in it. Still spotless, despite those sloppy nurses.

Lydia runs her hands along the front of the range and squeezes her fingers to turn the knob of the front right burner. She listens patiently for the hiss of the gas. Such a sound, such a whisper really.

"Well, Missy, I don't think it's going be long now. Funny how things work, isn't it? Here I am years younger than your momma, and she's still holding on, mind you, she's only been holding on to the bedposts all these years, but here she is, still among the living, and me, worked every day of my life, raised four children, climbed those stairs to your momma's room, praised the Lord, and I don't think it's going be long now before I join Him. I've kept two houses, two families all these years, my own and your momma's, and I don't mind telling you, sometimes I mix the two of them up. You and that sister Margaret, sometimes when people ask me how many kids I have, I tell them six, does that shock you? I forget you two didn't come from me. You two girls, I mix you two up with all my own. But I don't know, the Lord works in mysterious ways, if I didn't see my arm in front of my face once in a while, I'd forget who we all are. Course I never forget that outside the house, don't you worry about that, but here in the kitchen, with you at the table and your momma upstairs and your



son Greg in the next room, why, I don't even know which house I'm in anymore. Don't you fret about that Eddy now. You make those visits, don't listen to anyone else but your Mamie now; I've talked to the Lord about this, I've seen it before. You just make those visits. He'll know who you are, one day, I just know it, you'll walk down that corridor and into that room, and his eyes will look up, and he'll SEE you. Those are my words. I promise it. You just keep making those visits. And don't you listen to no one else, no matter what they tell you about that stuff. I may be Mamie from the quarter, I may be Mamie the cook and Mamie the housekeeper, I may be old and lowering one foot in the grave, but this I know. You just keep making those visits, girl, I promise your child will come back to you, your firstborn, he'll come awake to you."

Lydia gazes out the window. The wind must be picking up; the colors are twirling now — yellow and orange and red and even white. It's getting colder, too; the sun must be leaving the kitchen. Lydia stands up straight, a look of determination on her face, her bathrobe loose around her pigeon legs, and makes her way slowly, pushing one foot in front of the other, from the kitchen through the hall to the door of the conservatory. Toward the end, George spent every afternoon there, wrapped in a blanket on the lounge, taking his afternoon nap. Lydia paced the house for those two hours like a bird flitting about its nest. When they moved George to the nursing home, Lydia crossed the threshold gingerly. Now she spends every after-

noon there.

Lydia feels the weight of her life lighten when she lifts her foot and steps into this room that is almost, but not quite, out-of-doors. Her left leg wobbles but her smile is steadfast. She lifts the hat and places it on her head, pulling the visor down to shade her eyes from the sunlight. Lydia turns her head to the window and smiles, then moves her hand across the wall to the back of the chaise lounge. She shuffles her feet before her until she can feel the arm of the chaise, then lets herself go, landing on the chaise like a slinky toy, one vertebra at a time.

The floor protects her feet, the ceiling shelters her head, and walls keep the rain and wind from her body, but nothing will keep the light from her eyes. Even now, as the house darkens, Lydia senses the sun in the conservatory. She feels the familiar yellow flow through the windows, wash across the floor, and work its way up the walls.

"Hang on there, Eddy," she whispers. "The water is a bit choppy today, and the sun is blinding. Don't touch that knife, darling, you'll cut yourself. Careful now, there's blood on the bottom of the boat, from all the fish we caught. What good fishermen we are. Mamie will be so pleased.

"It won't be long now. We'll be home soon," Lydia says, as she leans back against the stem of the boat.



Today We Cut Down an Apple Tree

by Ashley Martin

Crooked, slow growing,
youngest of ten to promise fruit,
the eight-foot space it vacates
makes way for a playhouse.
The unrooted apple tree
now waits for no season,
flung down on ground nearby.
Its unbudded blossoms wait to break out
with their suspended question:
which would last longer?
Girls will grow also,
slowly, sometimes crooked.



Photo by Joel Kendall



Party Guest Arriving Late

by Ashley Martin

Her forearms are bare
brown and without
sex's soft shape.
A calloused elbow
secures the gift
in waistless space
above no hips,
hair blowing north behind her.

She skips the ditch
between sidewalk
and parking lot:
the girl is late,
the girl is young,
both conditions require speed.



They Never Were

by Mary Diane Hausman

A familiar figure ambled from the woods, to the trail, and back into the woods again.

"I'd shoot that bastard if I had half a chance," said Darcy, glaring after the man.

"Boxer don't mean no harm." John Clay's defense of Boxer astounded Darcy.

"I know you're my brother, John Clay, but sometimes you are just too stupid for your own good!"

"And you're just too sensitive, that's what you are," retorted John Clay.

"You just don't get it, do you, big brother? There ain't no call for what Boxer done."

"I'm gettin' chigger bites, is what I'm gettin'." John Clay scratched his jean-covered thigh and pulled his feet out of the creek water. He reached for his socks and boots.

"I never could win for losin' with you anyhow, Darcy. C'mon, let's go pop some bottles."

Boots on, John Clay stood up to his full five feet, five inches and reached down a hand to Darcy. His .22 pistol stuck out from the shoulder harness underneath his hunting vest.

"You're gonna knock me in the face with that goddamn thing!" Darcy scowled, but he grabbed his hand and stood up. She pulled her own boots on, cursing the late October heat.

"Damn Indian Summer'll be here till Christmas," she muttered.

"Hell, you ought to be glad. 'Sides, it's good hunting weather."

"Don't even talk to me about hunting," Darcy said to John Clay's backside as they climbed up the creek bank to the trail. Darcy loved to shoot, but had never taken to hunting. She just didn't get the idea of a sport where an armed man was up against a soft-eyed doe or graceful buck. Forget about food. None of the hunters she knew, including John Clay, needed to hunt

for food. She thought it was just an excuse for the thrill of killing. Now you take Boxer, *there* was something that deserved to die.

They turned north, toward the town dump, where they had been going since they were kids to shoot empty beer bottles. Years ago they had up-ended an old car fender to set their bottles on. It was still there, as was just about every other hunk of junk Darcy could remember. The dump wasn't used much anymore, since the new one had been dug out across Interstate 35. Just as well. Darcy and John Clay considered this place their special territory.

Darcy strode restlessly alongside John Clay. Her .44 magnum bounced slightly from the shoulder harness she had rigged around her waist. "Gets in the way of her tits," John Clay laughingly explained to friends. But left-handed Darcy simply felt more comfortable drawing from her waist than her chest. And she just didn't feel like buying a holster. John Clay often tried to talk her into it, but she'd shrug and remind him, "It ain't never caused me to miss a shot and it never will. So you can just shit fire and save the matches, and leave me the hell alone."

She was still stinging from John Clay's defense of Boxer as they rounded a curve in the trail and came upon the dump. John Clay ran down the slope, picking over and under trash in search of unbroken bottles, not an easy task. Darcy looked back south, thinking of Boxer. She wished she could just forget about him, at least for today. But seeing him brought up the familiar rush of anger.

"Shit! I can't even come out here for a day to relax without that idiot ruining it for me!"

"Shutup and find your bottles," John Clay called good-naturedly.

Darcy started down the slope, a torrent of



memories flooding her head. She and Boxer had gone to school together. They were a grade behind John Clay, but the three of them were inseparable. Not by Darcy's choice. She never did like Boxer. Where John Clay tolerated Boxer's antics and tagging along, Darcy was always yelling at him to get away from them.

Boxer's idea of fun was stringing cats on barbed wire fences and punching girls in the mouth. He knew not to mess with Darcy; she was bigger than John Clay and made no bones about what she would do to Boxer if he ever tried to punch her. John Clay always thought Boxer was, well, just Boxer. Darcy thought that when God gave out good sense, Boxer must've been jerking off his tallywhacker out behind the barn. He ended up quitting ninth grade and never went back to school.

But Darcy could care less about Boxer's education. And she had long given up on his redemption. What she cared about and what haunted her to this day happened almost a year earlier. She had been making her rounds of the southern pasture and dawn was just skirting the eastern horizon as she edged her Blazer around the curve of Farm to Market Road 1223. An old station wagon zig-zagging down the road ahead of her caught her attention.

She thought the driver must be drunk, but as she drew closer, she recognized the junk heap as Boxer's. He must've been hunting—she could make out the shape of a deer over the hood of the wagon. Its head and antlers sagged over the front grill.

"What the hell...?" she asked the air as she realized there was something erratically moving in the road in front of Boxer's car. She slowed down until she was at least twenty yards behind him. He didn't seem to notice her, so intent was he on the thing in the road. She watched as he braked every few seconds, stepped on the gas, lunged ahead, then braked again.

As Darcy drew closer, she saw something half-stumble and half-run, never quite making

it out of the way of the antlers sticking out over the hood of the wagon. As the sun broke over the eastern ranch land, Darcy made out the figure of a woman. The Blazer was now a pick-up's length behind Boxer. Still he didn't notice her.

Darcy caught his laughter, a raucous "Yeee-haw!" as he madly swerved the car left, then right, taunting the stumbling woman.

By now, the Texas sun, another hot October ball of fire, glared across the road. Cussing, Darcy gassed the Blazer, slamming her hand on the horn as she did. She screeched to a stop on Boxer's side, narrowly missing his left swerve.

"You crazy son-of-a-bitch! What the hell's going on?" She rammed the Blazer into park and jumped out.

Boxer's face fell as she ran around the truck, arm already outstretched to yank open his door. It never occurred to her that Boxer would take off. He lunged the wagon to the right and gassed it full force, almost running her down. Darcy was amazed that the old rattle-trap had that much get up and go.

She stared in astonishment after black exhaust smoke. It was a full minute before she remembered the woman Boxer had been playing his insane game with. The woman, who couldn't have been more than twenty, if that, sat huddled on the pavement, sobs shaking her body. She looked up for a second, shrinking back, not realizing her tormentor was gone. Only fear registered in the sunken, brown eyes.

Darcy squatted beside her, taking in the ripped skirt and blouse, the girl's left breast protruding from the torn, red-patterned cloth. Darcy's rage mounted when she saw the girl's scraped and bleeding legs; there were black pavement pebbles embedded in her shins from falling.

She lightly touched a bruised arm. "C'mon, girl, we got to get you out of the road, at least." The girl slumped against Darcy, unable to help



pull herself up.

"Mmm. Mmm!" Darcy shook her head slowly from side to side. "Well, it's over now. Let's get you into town."

Darcy wasn't about to press for details yet. That could wait. It occurred to her that Boxer might have raped the girl. She sure wouldn't put it past him.

She stood up and moved around behind the limp body, stooped and lifted the girl by her armpits. She dragged her backwards to the Blazer and struggled with the passenger door as she tried not to drop the girl. Finally, she had her on the seat. The girl slumped against the door as Darcy closed it.

Behind the wheel again, Darcy floored the Blazer, quickly closing the three mile gap to the sheriff's office.

"You got a name, girl?" Darcy asked gently. There was no answer from the limp body next to her.

"Well, you have had a time of it, haven't you?" Darcy noticed a silver locket around the girl's neck. The sunlight glinted on filigree. No piece of tin, that, Darcy thought. Her emotions bounced back and forth between rage at Boxer and wonder about this girl. Darcy knew just about everybody in the county and all their kin. This ragged-looking girl didn't resemble anybody she knew. Maybe she was a runaway from Austin. The girl still slumped against the door, her sunken eyes closed.

Sheriff Conroy was just pulling out of the gravel drive in front of his white, gabled office as Darcy pulled up.

"Morning, Darcy Jean," he said through a lip full of Skoal snuff.

"Good thing you didn't say *good*. We got us a problem here, Sheriff," Darcy replied.

Sheriff Conroy walked over to the Blazer and peered in.

"Oooh-weee! What the hell happened to her?"

"Well, I'll tell you what happened to her. But first I'd like you to go round up Boxer Tate. He's what happened to her, that's what!" Darcy spat out the words. "Meanwhile, I'll get her over to Inez's and get her fixed up."

"Now wait just a damn minute here, Darcy. So happens that Boxer was by here just a little while ago. He come to tell me he caught some girl trying to untie that buck he shot whilst he was takin' a piss off the side of the road. Says he hollered at her to quit and she started coming at him with a knife. So he jumped in his car and she got knocked down when he took off 'cause she tried to get in his door after him. Says he thought I ought to know, in case she messed with anybody else. I was just on my way over to 1223 to take a look-see."

Darcy stared at the lined, tanned face. The man she had known since she was a kid might as well have been a stranger in front of her.

"If that ain't the goddamndest thing I ever heard!" She shook her head. "I'd a never thought Boxer had enough sense in him to make up a tale like that. And you believed him?"

"Well now, I ain't got cause not to. Boxer may act like somebody knocked him upside the head with a two-by-four, but I ain't never knowed him to lie," Sheriff Conroy said without much conviction.

Darcy fumed. "Well, here's cause not to believe him, sittin' right here big as Dallas in my truck!" Then Darcy spewed out what she had seen not more than an hour ago. All the while, the girl never changed her position against the truck door, never spoke a word.

"Look, Sheriff, I think she might a been *raped*!" Darcy finished her story with her biggest concern.

"I don't know, Darcy Jean. You sure the sun was up? Maybe you just saw Boxer driving away and the girl running after him. And if'n she was raped, you don't know it was Boxer. I just don't think that boy would do something



like that.”

“Well, if this don’t beat all! Shit fire, Sheriff! I *know* what I saw.” Darcy was stunned. “To hell with you! I got to get this girl to Inez.” Darcy wasn’t usually disrespectful to her elders, but she didn’t give a damn right now.

She stormed away and got into her truck. Gravel and dust flew up as the Blazer squealed onto the road. The sudden movement caused the girl to fall over the gearshift. Darcy pushed her upright as gently as she could.

“Don’t you worry, Missy. We’ll get that son-of-a-bitch.”

Darcy found Inez Watson in her backyard, feeding her chickens. Inez was wearing the same apron around her waist that Darcy had watched her bake cookies in for her and John Clay after school. Inez’s house was near the school bus stop, and she always made cookies for the kids to take home. She favored Darcy and John Clay, especially after their mama died.

“Come on out here and help me, will you, Inez?” Darcy was already pulling the girl out of the Blazer as Inez came through the old iron gate to the drive.

“My goodness, Darcy Jean! What happened to her?”

“Let’s get her cleaned up first, then I’ll tell you all about it, Inez.”

Inside the clapboard house, Inez quickly put a pot of water on to boil. She never had gotten around to getting hot water pumped in, and she didn’t see much point to doing it now. She was going on eighty-five and had gotten on without it this long.

Darcy settled the girl’s still body on the couch, figuring she must have passed out from all the trauma. She went to the oak linen cabinet and pulled out several towels, then pulled Inez’s house robe off a hook on the bathroom door.

It was evening before the girl finally opened

her eyes. Nothing seemed to register at first. She looked curiously at the worn, cotton robe covering her body. She touched the bandages on her legs and groaned as she tried to sit up.

Darcy started up out of the rocker she’d been in for hours. Inez motioned for her to stay put.

“You want some tea, honey?” Inez’s voice soothed Darcy, if not the girl.

Still not a word.

“You think she’s a deaf-mute?” Darcy whispered.

“No, I do not. I think she’s scared out of her wits,” Inez said matter-of-factly.

Darcy leaned back in the rocker. She felt stiff and hollow. She wished she hadn’t refused the fried chicken and greens Inez offered earlier for supper.

“Darcy, why don’t you go on home? I’ll take care of her and later we can talk to Sheriff Conroy.”

“I don’t think it’s going to do much good to talk to Sheriff Conroy,” Darcy said. She had been racking her brain all day to figure out what she should do. The girl had no identification on her, just a twenty dollar bill in the pocket of the short, tight skirt.

“Now Darcy, don’t worry so. You never did have a lick of patience. This’ll work itself out, you’ll see.”

Darcy stood up and walked to the couch. The girl had fallen back to sleep. Her dishwasher blonde hair lay matted against her head. Darcy sighed, then turned to Inez.

“You’re right. I better get on home. John Clay’s probably fit to be tied, wondering where I am.”

As Darcy pulled the Blazer up the drive, John Clay flung open the back screen door and ran out to the truck. She knew she should have called, but she hadn’t felt like explaining the whole thing to him over the phone. John Clay was a rush in a whirlwind when he got excited





Photo courtesy Tirito.com

over something, and she had needed Inez's quiet strength to regain her own. Besides, Inez didn't have a phone, and she would've had to drive over to the sheriff's or to Sonny's Cafe in order to call him.

She got out of the truck and walked up the drive.

"Dammit, Darcy! Where the hell you been? It's way past supper time. I was gettin' worried!"

She walked silently up the concrete steps into the kitchen. She tossed the truck keys onto the speckled Formica counter, then leaned against it and braced herself for John Clay's onslaught of questions. But he just sighed and looked at her expectantly.

"Well, I've had a hell of a day. We can start with that." Then she continued on through the whole episode of the morning, from sighting Boxer's car, to leaving the girl with Inez.

John Clay stood with his mouth open as she finished in anger. Then he started asking for every detail. After an hour's worth of questions and answers, Darcy finally insisted she had to get some sleep. She knew John Clay would

have kept her up all night with the questions he kept repeating, "Are you sure, Darcy? Boxer's a little weird, but...?"

A couple of hours later, as she lay on her bed taking in the night breeze through the window screens, she thought she might as well have stayed up with John Clay. She couldn't sleep. She just kept seeing Boxer ramming those grotesquely angled antlers at the girl. She was furious at John Clay for questioning her story's validity. He had always trusted her; he had no

reason not to now. She had screamed at him, "What, all you people think I made up this cockamamie story?"

She now felt bad about unleashing her fury on John Clay. But what the hell did he think anyway? She didn't all of a sudden go blind this morning. She saw what she saw. And no telling what would've happened to that girl if she hadn't come along.

Darcy wanted to find Boxer herself. She swore she'd kill him if she ever laid hands on him. But no one even knew where Boxer lived. He just had a knack for showing up out of the blue.

He used to live with his parents a few miles out of town, in the old Peterson farmhouse. A couple of years back, the house caught fire and burned to the ground. Boxer's parents never got out. Boxer had not been home. Darcy had her suspicions about how that house burned. People used to ride by at night, before the fire, and tell how they could hear Boxer cussing his old daddy and mama up one end and down the other. At any rate, Boxer didn't have a steady

address since then. Some folks figured he lived in his station wagon. That and his hunting rifle were the only possessions he seemed to have.

Darcy decided to call the state highway patrol first thing in the morning. And she'd have to get that girl to a doctor to see if she had been raped. She fell into a fitful sleep just before dawn.

Darcy arrived at Inez's about eight o'clock that morning. She walked into the house feeling like she'd been hit by a Mack truck. Her long brown hair was haphazardly tied behind her head with a leather thong. She hadn't even bothered to pull her jeans down over her boots. Inez stood inside the door, expecting her.

"Morning, Inez. How is she?" Darcy looked toward the couch.

Inez wrung her hands in her apron. She looked straight at Darcy and broke the news. "Darcy, she done took off." Her voice rang with disbelief.

Darcy said nothing, just walked past Inez to the couch. The robe lay there along with the red blouse they had taken off the girl. That was all.

"Where did she go? How did she get up? Did she talk?" Darcy was beginning to sound like John Clay with her stream of questions.

"She was up before me. I heard her out here and came on out. She put her skirt back on and that robe. She gave me this." Darcy took the neatly folded paper from Inez's hand. It was Inez's own stationery. In a childish hand, the girl had written a request for a shirt and directions to the nearest bus station. After that she wrote: *Please give this to that lady in the truck. It was my mama's. I did not mean to cause nobody trouble so I will leave.* Darcy looked up as Inez handed her the silver locket the girl had worn around her neck.

For weeks afterward Darcy searched the surrounding towns and counties trying to locate the girl. No one claimed to have seen her.

The bus stop to which Inez had given the girl directions was over in San Marcos. Darcy could only guess the girl had hitchhiked there by way of the state highway.

Darcy told people what Boxer had done, but she finally got tired of their shrugs and the frequent comments, "Oh hell, Boxer's crazy but he ain't *that* crazy." "Girl was probably no account anyway, and what the hell was she doin' on the road that time of morning?"

Darcy was appalled at her friends' responses. The sheriff said it was better off, all things considered. He figured the girl would've ended up with the short end of the stick had he tried to arrest Boxer. Not that he even intended to, Darcy thought. Inez said it was best, too. That hurt. But what hurt Darcy most was John Clay's question, "Are you sure, Darcy?"

It took a while, but Darcy finally put the locket around her neck and never took it off. Although there was no picture inside, the memory of the girl with the sunken eyes was so etched in Darcy's mind that she imagined the girl's face whenever she opened the locket.

Now here she was, a year later, still venting hate on Boxer when she ought to just get on with her day and find her bottles. John Clay had already shot a full round while she was in her reverie.

"You gonna shoot or just stand there like a dimwit, Darcy?" he called.

She picked two unbroken bottles out from under a rusted piece of metal. She held up her hand for John Clay to hold his fire as she walked over to the fender and placed the bottles on top. She walked back and stood beside John Clay. Before he could open his mouth again, she drew her gun and shattered both bottles.

"I will never figure out how in the hell you do that!" At least he still admired her ability to shoot.

"You don't have to figure it out. Just watch it!" She grinned at him, her hazel eyes, twins



of his, catching the sunlight.

They found enough bottles to shoot two more rounds apiece, then John Clay said, "I got to get. Supposed to go over to Jake's and help him pour cement for his new drive. I can take you home first." They had driven to the dump in John Clay's pickup.

"That's okay. I could use the walk."

"Suit yourself! See you at home." John Clay smacked her on the back and took off up the slope and down the trail.

She sure could use the walk, she thought, as she climbed out of the dump on the south end. She needed to shake the memories she had dredged up. She decided to turn west and go home the back way, through the wooded area that ran along the creek.

Stubborn gray-green leaves still clung to the live oaks. She breathed in cedar and mesquite as she walked lazily along. This trail would bring her out to then southwestern part of the pasture and from there it was only another mile's walk to the house. Suddenly, as she stepped over a hunk of driftwood, she caught site of something moving in the brush off to her left. She stooped to peer under the cedar trees. Anger caught in her throat as she recognized the plaid shirt and filthy jeans.

Boxer stood against a live oak, grinning stupidly, as he swung a lizard back and forth by its tail, watching it squirm and twitch. Before Darcy could stop herself she had drawn the .44 from the harness and wrapped both hands around the handle.

"Well, well. Boxer. If this isn't somethin', findin' you here like this." Darcy spoke low, but Boxer heard.

He looked up, fear all over his face when he saw the gun. He dropped the lizard without another thought. Darcy figured he would try to run, so she stepped off the trail, less than ten feet from him.

"Darcy, you ain't gonna shoot me?" Boxer's

voice was high pitched with fear, his eyes on her gun.

"I just might be your judge and jury, since you never got one, you bastard!"

Darcy parted her feet, and honed the gun in on Boxer. She aimed just below his neck, where his pulse throbbed wildly in his throat. Her finger tenderly pressured the trigger. She braced herself for the kick, anticipating the shock wave of needles that would reverberate up her arms from the Magnum.

God, this is so easy, she thought. She wondered if it was this easy for John Clay and his buddies to shoot a deer or pick off a rabbit. She guessed it was. Her eyes filled with hate for Boxer and she wondered if there was hate in a hunter's eyes when an animal stood perfectly still staring back with eyes full of fear? She realized her mind was wandering. A voice from somewhere in her head told her to put the gun down and walk away, told her she had no business here like this.

It was only seconds, but it seemed like hours that she had been standing there, her gun aimed at Boxer. Suddenly, she blinked as Boxer's angular face grew outward, elongating, the mouth and nose coming closer together. She blinked again. I'm hallucinating, she thought. I'm taking too long, and I'm hallucinating.

"Just pull the trigger, goddammit," she scolded herself out loud. By now, tawny hair covered what was once Boxer's pimple-scarred face. The brown eyes grew larger, fringed with long lashes. The forehead sloped forward, and where seconds ago Boxer's right ear had been, there grew a long curved jaw. It, too, was covered with tawny hair. And higher up on each side of the quickly changing head, ears twitched. Large, deer ears covered with short, light-brown hair. The huge fear-filled deer eyes stared at her.

"What the...?" Darcy blinked again. The deer's head, sticking impossibly out of Boxer's



plaid shirt, was still there. As she watched, the huge brown eyes changed. No longer pleading with fear, they were filled with an impenetrable sadness.

Darcy still held the gun at the neck, her arms frozen. She was just about to try and lower her arms, thinking she had unquestionably lost her mind, when the head became Boxer's again.

Darcy found her voice. Hoarse, it sounded far away in her own ears. "Go, damn it." Boxer didn't move. Fear once again defined his face.

"I said Go! Get the hell out of here before I change my mind!"

He blinked once at the gun, still pointed at him, then stumbled away from the tree. He quickly turned and broke into a run through the woods. Darcy could hear brush cracking beneath his boots. Slowly, she lowered the gun. It seemed to weigh twice as much as it should. She carefully placed it in the harness. She shook her head as she walked back on the trail. Her eyes ached, and she suddenly had trouble breathing. She looked up to see a couple of buzzards circling overhead. She sucked in the clear, hot air and walked on up the trail.

The stove clock claimed it was nine-thirty as Darcy sat at the kitchen table, her fingers wrapped around a cup of cold coffee. She had walked up and down the creek for an hour or so before coming back to the house. By then, it was sunset. She had been sitting at the table since she came in, going over the afternoon in her head. It seemed like a bizarre dream. She was still trying to shake the numb feeling in her arms and wondering just what exactly in God's name had happened.

She wondered why she had not pulled the trigger. A voice inside her told her Boxer sure as hell wasn't worth going to prison for. Another voice said, *They'da never proved it was you*. And so went the troubled dialogue in her head, giving her no peace for the rest of the

evening.

She stared past the bugs swarming around the porch light outside, wondering where in hell John Clay was. Probably stopped off at Sonny's for a beer and tacos. John Clay complained that Darcy wasn't a bit like their mama when it came to cooking.

"Hell, you're lucky I ain't," Darcy teased him. "Unless you mean to tell me you liked greasy meat and greens!" Actually, they had settled into a more-or less-comfortable routine of fending for themselves for meals.

As if her thoughts had summoned him, John Clay burst through the screen door, white as a ghost. Darcy, startled, spilled coffee all over herself and the table.

"Damn you, John Clay! Can't you *walk* in like normal folk?!"

He ignored her scolding. "You ain't gonna believe this, Darcy!" He sputtered, "They done found Boxer, shot, out on 1223!"

"What?" Darcy stiffened.

John Clay grabbed the kitchen counter, breathing hard. He went on, "Sheriff Conroy found him in the woods off the road, deader'n a doornail."

"What happened? When?" Darcy could barely get the words out.

"Sheriff brought him in just after dusk. Said he couldn't a been dead too long. He says he thinks it was a hunter! Says Boxer was probably out wandering around the woods like he does and somebody just thought he was a deer. Hunter must've took off when he saw it wasn't." John Clay stopped, took a deep breath and blew it slowly out, shaking his head. "Imagine that, Darcy? God, I can't believe it! Poor old Boxer!"

He rambled excitedly on again, oblivious to Darcy as she clutched the locket around her neck. The girl's bloody shins and sunken eyes flashed across her mind, followed by Boxer's face in the shape of a deer's head. She squeezed



her own eyes tight, fighting back emotions of exhaustion, relief, and she didn't know what all.

The day of Boxer's funeral was just as blue and cloudless as the day he was shot. John Clay was among a handful of locals who showed up at the small, white Baptist church out on the edge of town. He stood uncomfortably behind the last pew and listened politely as Pastor Daryl Higgins gave a surprisingly brief and unemotional eulogy. Toward the end of the sermon, John Clay felt a brush against his arm. He turned, startled to see his sister.

"Didn't think you'd show, Darcy, what with how you felt 'bout him and all."

"Let's just say I had a change of heart." Darcy looked up, above Pastor Higgins' head, avoiding Boxer's plain casket. She stared for a moment at the painted stained glass of the blue-eyed, blonde-headed Jesus kneeling at the rock of Gethsemene. She pictured the baptismal pool, hidden from view behind the faded velvet drapes. She thought of the time she pushed Boxer under water in that pool one summer day after vacation Bible school.

She had pretended she was the preacher. Lord knew if anybody needed saving, it was Boxer. Actually, she only did it to scare the living daylights out of him so he'd stop stealing the smaller kids' pocket Bibles.

"Humph." She shook her head with a half smile.

"Now what are you thinkin'?" John Clay whispered.

"Too damn much, that's for sure." She noticed that Pastor Higgins' voice had stopped droning and the small crowd was heading toward the door. "Let's get out of here." Darcy started for the swinging double doors.

John Clay shoved his hat down on his head as he walked down the cement steps. He stopped on the walk and stared past the barbed wire fence strung alongside the highway.

"Hell, Darcy, even the woods ain't safe no more."

Darcy started toward her truck. "I got news for ya, John Clay." She turned and looked back at the church. "They never were."



One More Lullaby

by Christine Kravetz

It is already nine o'clock on a Tuesday night.
In a few minutes I will go upstairs to spend
at least an hour getting my granddaughter to sleep.
The bath, the book, the song,
it doesn't matter to her that I sing off-key.
She will say,
Hush Little Baby, sing that one.
She will look into my eyes.
I will close my eyes—to give her the idea.
With my eyes closed, I will still feel her
touching me with her eyes.
How can I describe this?
I don't think anyone has ever sung to her before.
She only knows what I have taught her.
So I will sing. Raspy, almost tuneless, yet
with every *Hush Little Baby* she will surrender—
and this frightens me more than anything—
she will surrender to me.



Monday's Child

by Barbara Eknoian

He arrived five days before my first
birthday.
I learned to share early. Mama said I was
Friday's child loving and giving.
As toddlers we slept in a double bed.
He drew an imaginary line and warned,
"Don't cross it."
At camp, I spent my allowance carefully
so on the bus ride home I'd have a treat.
The lady at the snack window said,
"Sony, your brother used up your money."
I was a spelling bee whiz,
sadly he was dyslexic.
Every lunch hour. Mama played
a record and we'd hear,
"A-Apple, B-Banana,"
but phonics escaped him.
Most teachers called me into his class
to take home notes to my mother.
He dropped out of school,
related to the Hippie movement,
experimented with drugs, tried LSD,
and stayed with marijuana.
He was Monday's child, fair of face.
When he walked into a crowded room
someone said, he's beautiful
with that beard, he looks like Jesus.
He surpassed me reading Philosophy,
hated to hear about the imbalance
of power and wealth in the world.
Football players and Johnny Carson
making millions made him go into a tirade.
He could have out-talked the radio hosts.
Now he lives at a shelter, and called me to
say
he contracted HIV from a lady
he'd been with. I'm horrified thinking
she probably tricked him, but he says, "No,
we were just two lonely people, out
drinking,
who needed a warm body to feel close."



The Smithfield Boys

by Dennis Ross

"Could you take the four boys
this weekend? Bob and I
are having problems,
they've nowhere to go," she said.
They all came, quiet, thin,
ages four to eleven with teddy bears,
toy trucks, and sleeping bags,
bedded down on the floor
of the farm-house. The farm-wife,
small and thin, had four boys of her own,
cattle and hogs to feed, full-time job
at the grain processing plant,
husband in the hospital.
Make do. All eight boys helped.
"When is Momma coming back?"
they asked a week and then a month
and another month later.
Hard to answer. Do what you can.

Four months later, Momma returned,
tan, saying it had all been too much,
she had needed to get away
for a small vacation.
The farm-wife hadn't had a day off
in nine years, said nothing,
had tears in her eyes as the boys
gathered their belongings and left.
She saw new sadness, wariness in their eyes.

They had grown accustomed to real love.
Poor little Smithfield boys.



A Marriage Made in Heaven

by Juanita Torrence-Thompson

He was a young minister
Just starting out
Looking for a bride
He drove from Maine
To Virginia to date her
They had a good time
But no spark, no flame
She couldn't lead him on

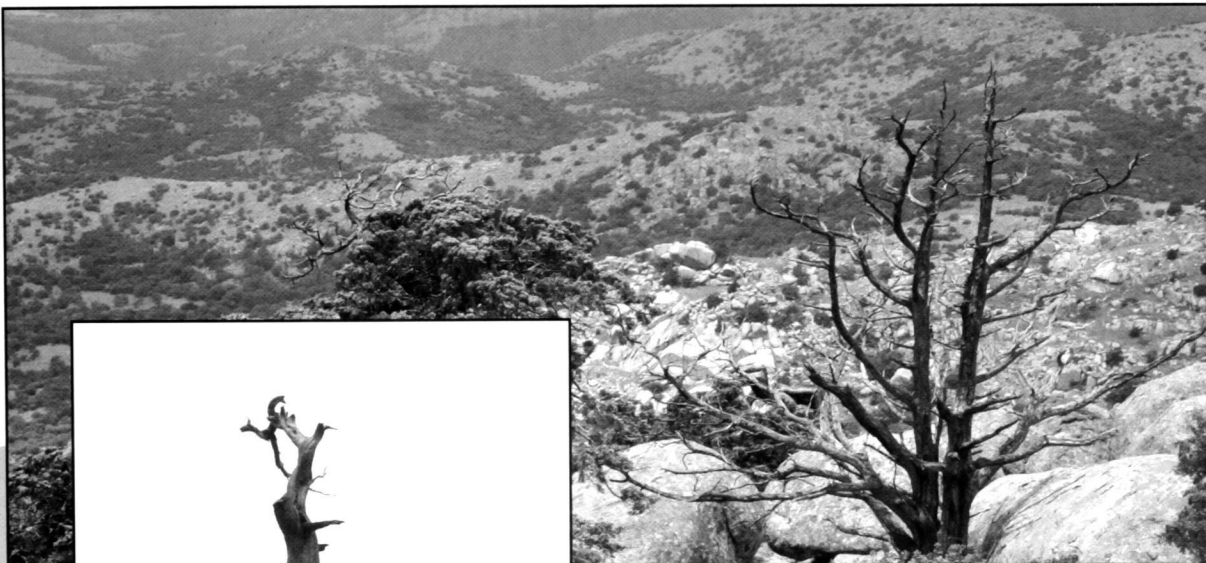
She wondered if they'd married
Would their children
Have his slim frame,
Sincere brown eyes
And wavy brown hair
Would they be dark brown like him
Light brown like her
Or somewhere in between

Her Aunt Sophie said he was senior minister
Of a South Carolina church
2,000 strong

She thought had they married
She'd have to bear sultry days
Be the perfect little minister's wife
Catering to pious parishioners
The object of gossip
If she didn't meet 2,000 expectations

If they'd married,
Her parents would've been happy
She would have the love of a kind, stable man
But she would've been smothered in onions
Life would've been humdrum
She might have a place in heaven
But it'd be hell on earth





Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge
Oklahoma

Photos by
Neal Rue



Getting Along Fine

by Vivian Lawry

You've come home for your regular monthly visit. Everything is the same as usual except that you've taken five vacation days, so this time it is for a week instead of a weekend, and you've brought your eighty-four-year-old mother-in-law with you for a visit. But everything else is as usual, the house a shambles and the children floating free. There are tumbleweeds of cat hair under the furniture, and you see that the cats have clawed the sheer curtains again and scratched the arms of the sofa—the new sofa. Your husband kisses you on the cheek and says, "Hello, my dear." Your daughters say nothing because they won't be home till later.

Your husband and mother-in-law sit on the screened back porch to talk, but you can't stand the disorder everywhere. You stretch the sheer curtains in all directions, working the pulled threads back into the weave. You use a crochet hook and a darning needle to draw the ends of broken threads on the sofa to the inside, trying to make the surface smooth again. Things look better. They always do. But each time, there's a little more damage that you cannot repair. You wonder why your husband doesn't use the spray you bought to repel cats. When you see the claw tracks on the leather recliner, you feel a spurt of fury because he lets them ruin expensive furniture.

The fury smolders as you restore order to the kitchen cupboards and wash the fingerprints off the woodwork. But you keep a lid on it, telling yourself he is doing the best it is in his nature to do.

The children's rooms seem to look worse every time you see them. But you do nothing to separate the piles of dirty clothes from the clean ones, to remove the small mountains of candy wrappers. Their bedrooms are their private spaces. You and your husband had decided that years ago.

The two of you discussed everything about how to rear the children, of course, and both of you

agreed that you knew what was best. You strove to be consistent and reasonable and fair. You knew better than to tell a child she *had* to do something that it was not in your power actually to make her do. At meals, you served each person some of everything, but you never said, "You are going to sit there till you eat every bit of that eggplant and kasha." Instead you said, "You know the contingencies: if you really don't want to finish, fine. But no dessert and nothing else to eat until breakfast." You were the one who set their weekly chores. When the children agitated for a pet, you had said, "I don't want to take care of a pet."

They said, "You won't have to take care of it. We'll take care of it."

You said, "I don't want to nag you to take care of it, either."

"You won't have to nag us," they said.

"Okay," you'd said. "Here's the deal. If any one of you will do all her chores for a whole month without being nagged or reminded, you can get a cat." That had ended the conversation for many months. But when the oldest and the youngest took out sheets of paper, numbered the days down the side and listed their chores across the top, posted copies on the refrigerator and on their bedroom mirror, you'd known there'd be a pet in the house soon. You were pleased. And secretly amused that they'd chosen February for their test month.

You provided the discipline and guidance. He always supported your decisions. It had worked well: the children had lots of friends, they charmed adults, they didn't do drugs or go to wild parties, and they had dinner with the family. As they got older, they became ever-more interesting, each so different from her sisters: the oldest disciplined, organized, responsible—a typical firstborn; the middle child gregarious and popular, courageous and stubborn; the youngest introverted and moody, creative, and exceptionally intelligent. When you



took the job two years ago, you were supremely confident in the strength of your marriage and the adjustment of your children. Your mate had always been completely egalitarian, sharing the housework and childcare, respectful of your career. At seventeen, thirteen, and eleven, the girls were going their separate ways anyway and didn't need you on a daily basis.

But two years into your commuter marriage, your daughters no longer take their turns cooking the family dinner one night a week because he says it's easier just to do it himself than to nag them to do it. As often as not, they don't all sit down to eat together. You think, "Keeping any discipline with children takes effort. But they *need* it." You stifle the urge to screech words like these because, after all, you are the one who took a job in another state, leaving him to cope alone, day in and day out. Besides, no one complains. But they never write and seldom phone, either. There came a birthday when you got no presents, no cards, and no calls. "But my whole family's always been casual that way," you'd said, as much to yourself as to your colleague.

When people ask how it's going, you joke, "The good news is they're getting along fine without me. The bad news is, they're getting along *fine*—without me!" But things have come undone. Even though you had been the source of structure, consistency, and discipline, you'd assumed that in your absence, he would take over at least some of that. You did not intend to leave a void, a hole in which your children could be lost.

It is worst—or at least, most obvious—with your middle daughter, the most strong-willed. Every phone call home scares you. She didn't come home for dinner when expected, or stayed overnight with her girlfriend without calling home, or rode home on her bicycle at midnight, five miles along a state road, with no lights on her bike. He tells you these things casually and seems to take no decisive action. Your ulcers get worse and you sleep poorly, but there seems to be nothing you can do about her from long distance. So you make sure they have school clothes and annual checkups

with doctors and dentists and silently blame him for endangering your beloved children, though nothing disastrous happens. You tell yourself they are survivors, like you, and pull the thought around you like a blanket.

When you come home, nothing special happens. There is no celebration, no killing of the fatted calf. It's as if you'd been gone hours rather than weeks. He goes to the office. The girls go to school, to track practice, to the movies. You retrieve your clothes and jewelry from their rooms, make space for your set of towels in the bathroom. You rub teak oil into the dining room table, trying desperately to put your house in order, knowing every fix is temporary, angry that nothing ever stays done.

It is the morning after you arrived home for this visit. Your husband is at work, the children at school. About 9:00 a passerby knocks at the front door. "There's a cat lying in the street. It's been hit by a car. Do you have a cat?"

You rush out and find Cleo on the far side of the street, her head near the curb—eyes glazed, bleeding from her mouth, probably with internal injuries as well. She's been hit from her blind side. She's limp and broken, but she's *breathing*. You grab a towel and wrap her up. Your mother-in-law holds her while you drive headlong to the veterinarian. The towel is damp and you curse yourself for not getting a dry one, a warmer one. The veterinarian says your mother-in-law can stay but that you must leave the examination room; your sobbing is making Cleo worse. You always thought you would be calm in a crisis. So now you slump into the molded plastic chair, look through the waiting people holding their cats or dogs, and wonder at your tears. The family didn't get Cleo till three months before you left. It isn't like she's even your cat. The veterinarian comes out. "She has a broken jaw and a broken hip. She's in shock. We can't tell more till she's stable." You go home to wait, dreading having to tell the family. Your mother-in-law seems completely unmoved.

You remind yourself that this cat is tough. She was hit once before, only a month after you left, and that time she lost her left eye and her right ear,



her jaw mended crooked, and it was months before the abscesses healed. But heal she did, and she was as normal as a cat could be afterwards. When the veterinarian calls to say that Cleo is dead, you weep uncontrollably. Your five-foot-tall mother-in-law is stoic and says you are overreacting. The children cry, too, and it's especially hard on your middle daughter.

You cry almost constantly. You can't help it. You wake in the night and your pillow is wet. You think obsessively about what else you might have done—a dry towel, putting her in a box or basket for support, talking to her in a soothing voice. Your

husband is confused and doesn't know what to say. You are angry that he cannot comfort you. The weeping goes on for days, till finally your tears dissolve the curtain of anger hiding the fearful truth: you were *there*, you did everything that could be done, and the cat died anyway. You can't take care of a goddamned *cat*, for Christ's sake, how can you hope to protect your children? How can you expect *him* to keep them safe? You weep for their vulnerability. You weep for your lost illusions. You weep for all the tears to come.



Sandy Longhorn



Photographs by George Byron Griffiths

Westview is pleased to run four works by Midwestern poet Sandy Longhorn, whose collection, *Blood Almanac*, is the winner of the 2005 Anhinga Prize for Poetry and will be released in book form later this year.

Longhorn's poems consistently enact the interesting play between the natural world that includes her speakers and the natural world as it might have been in their absence. This sort of juxtaposition of the possibilities involving nature and ego has been a recurring theme for much of Westview's history.

For this reason and a thousand others, Ms. Longhorn has been selected to be the Visiting Writer for the 2006 Westview Writers' Festival in March. She will work with SWOSU's poets—novices as well as veterans—and will read her poetry for the SWOSU and Weatherford communities on March 21st at the campus Conference Center, taking her place among past Visiting Writers such as Miller Williams, Carolyne Wright, Walter McDonald, John Graves Morris, and Debra Marquart.



Self-portrait: September

by Sandy Longhorn

The girl on the Shetland pony tosses
her head, shaking hay and bits of chaff
out of her matted hair while the pony strains
against the bridle, wanting to get the bit
in its teeth and lower its head
to what remains on the mown field.
The pony has been known to founder,
to gorge itself on summer's last lush
until its stomach bloats and its legs grow thick
as silos standing staunch against the sky.
The girl's hands on the reins hold back
that need, the fringe on her jacket
mingling with the pony's mane.



Roofing the Barn

by Sandy Longhorn

The roof, stripped down to plywood sheets,
shone like the mahogany coat of the gelding
knee-deep in pasture, both swaybacked with age.
Spreading the tarpaper in great swathes,
we tasted sawdust and oil, anchoring it
with the repeated firing of the staple gun.
Next day the shingles slid in the morning cool,
rasped against the roof, themselves, our gloves,
and resisted the short, blunt nails.
By noon they stuck, silent in piles.
Nothing sounded on the roof's steep slope
but the thud of hammers and shuffling boots
trying to keep a grip. My father worked the edges
and around the vents, whittling curves and slants
and making sure the notches matched.
I climbed the peak and straddled the ridge,
looking out across the acres of corn.
The order of the fields, the way the corners met,
was a kind of faith, as reassuring as the line of shingles,
as a green that stayed straight all the way to the horizon.



Photo by Joyce Stoffers



Green Mountain Falls

by Sandy Longhorn

—*Elevation 6410 Feet*

Day breaks
 knife-like and sudden
across the spine of this mountain.

Walking downtown in the still shadowed
streets, it's the light
 glowing, through the frosted glass
of a coffee shop's front window
that reminds me of the prairie dawn
 softened by fields of beans and wheat
 into birthlight,

the gradual opening at the end of night's long closure,
the gentle hand lifting the black veil.

This is the way I choose to enter the world.



Back home on the family farm
when summer edges
 toward fall,
 the sun comes up through fog
and the hayfield breathes out a jeweled breath.

My last day there I stood on a slight rise
and cast my finely-woven net over
those rough acres,
 pulling in the grasshopper's
emerald teeth, the shed scales of the luna moth's
trembled wing, the corn tassel's pollen,
and all the lace-knit webs
 cradling those still-beating hearts.



Black Dirt Girls

by Sandy Longhorn

Nights we sat on the porch steps and peered out
into the moss-colored twilight. The tall grasses,
bent by heads bursting with grain, were lit
by lightning bugs tilting like drunks.
We kept our voices low, masked by the hum
of mosquito swarms and the staccato slap
of palms on skin where bites festered to hills.
In the window behind us a fan sliced the air's
invisible body and chopped at the dense silence —
he in the den, she leaning over the kitchen sink.
Two miles across the cornfields, truck traffic rattled
over Highway 63, the now-and-then echo
of brakes bringing our eyes up as if we could see
that far into the darkness or the future.



Boston Common

by Anna Harrington

When her husband Spaulding died in a freak tie-rack accident, Miriam was not surprised. After all, she had been dodging Fate for years.

In fact, in quiet moments, when she hid from the world in her mauve-colored sitting room overlooking Louisburg Square and let herself reflect, she could admit that she had spent the past thirty years running to stay just one step ahead of Fate and now, now that she was tired of running, spent most of her time waiting for the cosmic blow that would pound her back down into the life she should have lived. Borrowed time—that was how she thought of it. She never deserved to have the wealthy husband with the mansion in Beacon Hill, a paved road into Boston society, cars, yachts, servants...My God! There was even a summer house in Maine. By rights, she shouldn't have had any of it. By rights, she should have been living in some drafty clapboard on the far south side, working the counter at the corner Walgreen's, married to a janitor or dock worker, and consistently dropping her R's. There was no shame in that in her old neighborhood, none of the mental effort she forced upon herself each time she spoke to remember that elusive consonant...paRRRRk the caRRRR in HaRRRRvaRRRRd YaRRRRd. Even something as small as that threatened every day to give her *away*, to mark her as an intruder into the world of Boston society, to bring the closed fist of Fate straight down upon her head. Each day, she held her breath and waited for Fate to block her path, point a jagged finger at her, and declare in a voice reminiscent of the biblical echo of God, "You—you are a Marjckowski!"

When she walked into her husband's dressing room and saw his body lying doubled over the motorized tie-rack, she didn't scream. She had felt his death coming the same way that some old men predict rain by pains in arthritic joints. She had predicted the fist of Fate, only she was horribly

sorry that the way the message had arrived was through Spaulding's death. Surely, Fate could have spared an innocent. Except, she conceded as she lifted his head to loosen the tie which had become entangled around the little motor's cogs on one end and around his neck on the other, that Spaulding had been her accomplice. He had known when he married her that she wasn't part of his world of old money, country clubs, and Ivy League schools which his family had attended for generations, but he had chosen to ignore it and the differences that marked her as an outsider. Or rather, chosen to join her in hiding them.

So she straightened out his body, sat on the floor beside him with his head in her lap, and waited for Fate to finish the job. When the maid found her, she wrongly assumed that Mrs. Harris was waiting for the coroner to arrive. It was Georges, the oldest of their three children, who stepped to the head of the family upon his father's death and made the funeral arrangements. Miriam had let the kids believe that she was too distraught to make the arrangements herself, while the truth was that she was afraid of making mistakes. She had never thrown a society funeral before. The last funeral she had arranged was her brother's, ten years before, and that had been easy. It was a traditional Methodist event, complete with a preacher whom her brother had never met, the first two verses of "Amazing Grace," and a pot-luck dinner in the church basement. She was gone from Boston for less than a week. No one from the family came with her. No one knew she even had a brother.

But with Spaulding's funeral, there was so much that could have gone wrong. What was the right kind of flower? He had always liked white orchids, but would those be right for a funeral? An Episcopalian church, of course, but what music? Even choosing a coffin was an ordeal. How much should a family of Spaulding Harris' status spend?



Too much would be ostentatious, too little would be beneath them. Thank goodness Georges was there. Whenever the funeral director needed a decision, her son would lovingly pat her arm at the sudden attack of distress that seized her and would answer for her. And so the funeral was planned by a surrogate.

It was a lovely funeral. At least, that's what all the attendees told her, and that's what was written in the *Boston Globe* and the *Herald-American*. To Miriam, it was all a blur. She had cried—of course, she had cried; he was her husband after all—and let her youngest son Stephen lead her through all the formalities in a kind of tear-shielded cocoon that kept everyone away. Her daughter Lillian attended the guests. If Miriam had made any mistakes, they were blamed on her grief and not given a second thought.

No one questioned her behavior until the obituary ran in the local paper. *The Beacon Hill News*, that rag, that weekly waste of paper whose only productive use was lining bird cages throughout Back Bay. No, she shouldn't be so hard on the young man who wrote the piece. After all, he gave a glowing summary of Spaulding's life, his business savvy, his dedication to friends and family. Could she blame the reporter if one of the examples he used to define Spaulding's character was that he had married beneath himself? That he had defied the conventions of Boston society and married a metal-worker's daughter? With each word she read, she felt Fate creep closer until it stood next to her, gleefully reading over her shoulder. It snatched her heart from her chest and, with a shriek of happiness, cast it out the window onto the Commons.

Life as Miriam had grown to know it was over. Immediately, she was voted off the board of the Boston Ladies' League, the Beacon Hill Garden Club, and the Ladies' Auxiliary of Massachusetts General Hospital. The country club regretfully cancelled her membership—the membership was in Spaulding's name, not hers, they tactfully explained, but if she wanted to re-apply through normal procedures, then they felt compelled to tell

her that the club was not accepting new members at this time. Old invitations to charity and political events were rescinded; new invitations never arrived. Her friends did not return her calls.

Even her own children, after each giving her one angry phone call, left her alone in order to adjust to the life-long lie she had thrust upon them.

She did not blame any of them and simply surrendered herself to a new life of isolation. She rarely left the Beacon Hill townhouse, spending her days in her sitting room at the window, staring down at the little patch of park that all the houses on the Square shared. It would only be a matter of time, she supposed, before all the neighbors petitioned to have her share of the park's ownership revoked. But until then, she determined to take her morning tea at the window and watch as the gardener attended to the plants.

She enjoyed watching him perform his greenery rituals. She knew on what days he watered the lilies, when he pruned the roses, when he washed down the stone statues. At her window, she watched his white-overalled figure arrive at nine and dirty himself among the old trees until the overalls were soiled brown and he wiped at his sweaty brow with his forearm. Too far away to see the dirty streak he left behind, she knew it was there on his face just as surely as she knew he drank from the garden hose with his left hand. When the August heat burned across the city, then he lifted the hose over his head and let the cool water soak him. Miriam was fascinated with him. He was never impressed with the grand mansions lining the square—or at least, he never let it show as he worked. He was never early and never late, and carried on with his job as if he were glad to be alone with the lilac bushes and wild Queen Anne's Lace. He was the kind of man she should have been with in that other life, the one in which she didn't marry Spaulding.

"Your tea, ma'am." The maid handed the cup and saucer to her.

For the first time since the funeral, she waved it away.

Her sitting room seemed strange to her, the



mauve walls suffocating, the contrasting yellows garish and fake. It was a sterile room—the objects inside were chosen by a decorator to match the rug, none of them containing any memories. It was the same with the hall and its antique table and chairs, it was the same with each of the bedrooms she passed...the study, the master bed and bath, the guest bath, the second floor front parlor. She saw each room as if looking through the pages of a women's magazine. The stairs emptied into a green marble foyer accentuated by the gold-trimmed front doors. Also antiques. Also chosen by some faceless, nameless decorator that Spaulding had hired to renovate the townhouse. To make it a home of quality. Well, it was quality, she admitted, if money equaled quality, but it was never a home. Not the kind she remembered from her childhood.

When she opened wide the double front doors, she saw him. He rubbed his dirty hands across the front of his overalls and reached toward the rose bush. She crossed the street, grabbed the iron fencing with both hands, and pressed her face between the bars.

He saw her watching, staring relentlessly at him. A puzzled tilt of his head. She knew no one from the townhouses had ever approached him before. He wiped his hands clean against his

thighs.

"Can I help you, ma'am?"

Floral scents surrounded him like a cloud. The smell of tilled dirt, the sharp freshness of cut grass, lilacs and daisies...she breathed him in.

"Ma'am?"

"What is your name?" she asked delicately, as if she were gently peeling dead petals from a rose.

"Bud, ma'am."

"Bud? Bud like a—"

"Beer. Yes, ma'am."

"Oh."

She liked his hands. They were rough, covered with dozens of tiny cuts where weed blades had sliced them, and dirt had outlined the nails.

"See you tomorrow."

He nodded, puzzled. "Yes, ma'am."

Miriam was true to her word. The next day, she stood at the iron fence and wished him good morning, watched as he tended the roses, weeded the lawn, and cleaned up after the trees. They talked, barely, but still she came every morning. After a few weeks, she stepped inside the park and sat on a stone bench. He didn't seem to mind. After a few months, he walked her back across the street at the end of the day and said goodbye to her at



the townhouse door. When they married one year later, the children refused to attend. She sold all the assets she had inherited from Spaulding—the townhouse, the Maine cottage, the Rolls-Royce, the stocks, all of it—and placed the money in trust for the grandchildren.

The new house was located in Swampscott. It was a two-bedroom clapboard with yellow paint that had grown dingy and faded over the years, and the front garden gate was broken. So was the top porch step. With time, she learned to ignore the dirty paint, to lift the gate before dropping the latch, to step over the top step. She didn't mind those so much. The little differences disturbed her: polyester pillows and cotton sheets, water straight from the tap, and no more freshly cut flowers. No more buying whatever she wanted whenever she wanted. There were no more new dresses, no more trips to expensive salons, and no more box seats at the symphony, ballet, or theatre. Now, nights out were spent drinking beer at O'Malley's Bar, she got her hair done at the corner Clip-N-Curl, and she bought her clothes at second-hand stores. But no matter, she told herself as she washed and folded Bud's underwear, this was the life she was born to lead. Or maybe, she let herself admit during the long New England winter when Bud wasn't working and money was more scarce than ever, it was a

poorer life than the one she was born for. She was born into the working class, not into poverty. But her second marriage was also penance for her first. She hoped to counter the years of overindulgence with years of stark poverty and, somehow, find a balance.

But even after several years had passed in Swampscott, the balance never came. She struggled to fit into the new world she had married into, terrified each time they stepped into O'Malley's that someone would figure out that she didn't belong, that someone would recognize her from her old pictures in the society pages of *The Globe*. Every night out was agony as she struggled to hold her cigarette properly, as she constantly reminded herself not to make a face when she drank her beer, as she concentrated on dropping her R's. Where would she go if someone learned the truth about her life? What could possibly be left for her? She had fallen so far already. And as she sat on the red vinyl barstool and watched her cigarette shrivel in the ashtray, she felt a cold breath chill the back of her neck. Fate had found her again.

When her second husband Bud died in a freak lawn jockey accident, Miriam was not surprised. After all, she had been dodging Fate for years.



William Eagle Feather Contemplates the Widow Burden

by Robert Cooperman

Weeks before her husband's husk
flew down that shaft,
Miz Burden traipsed up
to my mountain camp
with an empty berry pail,
saying the day was so lovely
she forgot to pick
any of the blue nuggets,
wind a tune she had to follow.

I couldn't read in her face—
harder to figure than tracks
in flinty ground—what she wanted.
If it was just a walk,
she'd put herself in danger:
a woman alone as easy pickings
for a grizzly as swiping honey,
or taking a runt fawn for a cougar.

If to shed her Christian skin,
even more parlous for me,
a half-breed: if I was caught
with a minister's wife,
I'd jerk like a locomotive
had took off both my legs.

Still, at her man's funeral
she did flicker a smile at me,
or I thought she did.
Ever since, she's all
I've been able to think of.

The wind's the only company
I ever needed. Now,
its lonesome moaning
drives me to town,
to offer her my condolences.



The Widow Burden's Suspicions About John Sprockett

by Robert Cooperman

When Mr. Sprockett haunted my cottage —
the night my husband never returned —
and left that pouch Christmased with nuggets,
he refused to say why the gold belonged to me.

Whenever I've thought of his visit,
a scorpion chill creeps into my heart,
For the one offense that badman finds
unforgivable: disrespect to the weaker sex.

Alive, my husband cast amorous eyes —
and more — at Mary LaFrance.
Not a large leap across a narrow chasm
to think Thomas would leave a barren wife:
an abomination to Gold Creek's preacher.

From there, no more than a stride
over a dry stream bed
for him to consider divorce a sin
he could no more countenance
than deny Jesus spoke directly to him.

And from believing
a legal sundering blasphemous,
Thomas had only one course left,
my heart rasping like a rabbit
in one of Mr. Eagle Feather's snares,
to contemplate his dread logic.



Mary LaFrance Ponders Her Relationship to the Late Reverend Burden

by Robert Cooperman

What tickled me about Preacher?
He thought himself pure as Jesus,
but it wasn't me Delilahed
a good man from a life of Gospel.
First time he spied me,
his eyes burned right through
my Kansas City silk dress.

Later, he called me his altar,
like we was wed; he whine
his wife didn't know
the ways to please a man I did;
and he couldn't educate her
without giving our game away.

I suspected what he was planning
for her, wanted to tell him
it'd be better if we left,
took new names, like we'd been baptized
and born again; but someone took care
he'd not succeed. My money's on
John Sprockett, a skillet-hard killer
with a soft spot for the ladies;

not knowing we're all whores
under the faces respectable wives
put on like party masks
they're afraid to set aside.



The Widow Burden, After Her Second Interview with John Sprockett

by Robert Cooperman

I thought I could bear the worst
as if I'd only spent an evening
practicing hymns.
But when Mr. Sprockett reluctantly
nodded that yes, my minister husband
had indeed wanted me dead,
the earth crumbled around me.

I fear I insulted Mr. Sprockett,
by not allowing him to bear me up
when I staggered from the treachery.
It wasn't his scar-scratched face
that made me turn away, but his knowing
that for Thomas I was an inconvenience.

I suppose I should feel flattered
Mr. Sprockett considers me a lady,
a saint worthy of poetry.
But all we women really wish for
is to be treated with respect.
If we're quoted verses to as well,
a Christmas window display.

Somehow, I reached the cottage
Thomas and I once shared,
resolved to quit it at once,
but fatigue shackled my arms and legs.
All I could think of:
if only William would hold me,
and say there was one haven
on this earth where I was welcome.



John Sprockett, After His Second Interview with the Widow Burden

by Robert Cooperman

She could've screamed
I'd killed her husband,
disbelieving the Preacher
wanted her dead.
Or she could've shrieked
at my grizzly-scarred face,
uglier than raiding Blackfeet
painted all the colors of war.

But she only thanked me,
grateful I'd saved her
from that small, nasty dog;
my heart pierced by an arrow
sweeter than a honeycomb
dripping more golden
than stream-glitter.

But plain as splashes
on a paint pony, she's sweet
on that breed tracker.
Jealousy rose up in me
like Yellowstone's garden
of hell-geysers and ghosts.

Simple as snapping
a twig, to kill him,
but she'd still never smile
at me like she does on him,
when no one's watching but me.

To be continued in future issues

These poems are part of a collection entitled *The Widow's Burden*.

Purchase information may be obtained from Western Reflections Publishing Co., P.O. Box 1647, Montrose, CO 81402-1647.



Contributors

Judith Cody, who also composes music, has won poetry awards from *Atlantic Monthly* and *Amelia* magazines. One of her poems, together with historical documents related to it, has been placed in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian Institution. Her poems have appeared in many journals, such as *Nimrod*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Fox Cry Review*, *Phoebe*, *Poet Lore*, *Soundings East*, *Stonecloud*, and *The Louisville Review*.

Robert Cooperman's third collection, *The Widow's Burden*, is available from Western Reflections Publishing Co., P.O. Box 1647, Montrose, CO 81402-1647. His work has appeared in *The Centennial Review*, *Cimarron Review*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*. His first book, *In the Household of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, was published by the University Press of Florida.

Barbara Eknoian was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 1996 and 1997 by *Chiron Review*, and she was the first recipient, in 2002, of the Jane Buel Bradley Chapbook Award for her collection, *Jerkumstances*. Born in New Jersey, she moved to California in 1978, where she has worked at the office of Family Service of Long Beach, a counseling center, since 1985.

Janet Flora, a graduate of the M.F.A. writing program at the New School University, won the first annual New School Chapbook award for best nonfiction essay. Her work has appeared in *New Orleans Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *The Portland Review*, *Willow Review*, and elsewhere.

Linda Giacometti, a junior at Southwestern Oklahoma State University, writes poetry and fiction. She describes her home as a "zoo" with her fifteen cats, five finches, two cockatiels, four mastiffs, and other pets. One of her poems appeared in the newsletter *Heartbeat* (Fredrick, Oklahoma).

Taylor Graham is a volunteer search-and-rescue dog handler in the Sierra Nevada, and she helps her husband (a retired wildlife biologist) with his field projects. Her poems have appeared in *The Chattahoochee Review*, *Grand Street*, *The Iowa Review*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Poetry International*, and elsewhere.

Anna Harrington lives in Jackson, Tennessee and teaches at Jackson State Community College. Her short stories have appeared in *Yemassee*, *Red Cedar Review*, and *Fugue*.

Mary Diane Hausman was born and raised in the Texas Hill Country, an experience that provides a voice for her work. Her work appears in her own poetry collection, *A Born-Again Wife's First Lesbian Kiss and Other Poems* (Relief Press) and in numerous anthologies and journals,

including *Not Child's Play*, *Inkwell*, *New Texas*, *Spillway*, *The Texas Review*, and others.

Celia Jeffries has lived abroad, run a group home for teenage girls, taught high school English, and earned an MA in British and American Literature from Brandeis University. Her work has been published in the anthology, *Women's Encounters with the Mental Health Establishment: Escaping the Yellow Wallpaper*, and in local newspapers. She is currently working on a novel.

Before turning to writing, **Christine Kravetz** was an attorney litigating on behalf of the disabled. She has taught poetry through the non-profit organization, California Poets in the Schools, and through a local school. Her short story, "Margie," was published in the anthology, *I Thought My Father Was God*, and new work is forthcoming in *Poet Lore* and *The South Carolina Review*.

Vivian Lawry is Appalachian by birth, a social psychologist by training, a college teacher and vice president of academic affairs by profession, and a writer by passion. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Chelsea*, *The Chrysalis Reader*, *Descant*, *The Distillery*, *Phoebe*, *RiverSedge*, and others.

Lyn Lifshin's recent prize-winning book (Paterson Poetry Award) *Before It's Light* was published by Black Sparrow Press. She has published more than one hundred books of poetry, including *Marilyn Monroe* and *Blue Tattoo*. A new collection, *Persephone*, will be published by Red Hen Press.

Sandy Longhorn is the Coordinator of Composition at Pulaski Technical College in North Little Rock, Arkansas. Her recent work has appeared in *Gulfstream*, *Cream City Review*, *Smartish Pace*, and *Connecticut Review*.

Ashley Martin graduated from the University of Tulsa and has remained in the city where, in addition to reading poetry, she is a stay-at-home mom to a menagerie of small children, dogs, chickens, and a cat.

Helen Maxson is a Professor of English in the Department of Language Arts at Southwestern Oklahoma State University, where she teaches courses in literature and composition. She is currently involved in an extensive study of American poet Wendell Berry.

Having retired from teaching, **Kenneth O'Keefe** has enjoyed the freedom of solitude and silence that has allowed him to focus his energies on writing. His work has appeared in *The Lyric*, *Rattle*, *California Quarterly*, *The Ledge*, *Reflections*, *The Penwood Review*, and numerous other journals.



Dennis Ross is a retired physics professor from Iowa State University. His work has been published in *Visions*, *Ruah*, *Westword Quarterly*, *Pegasus*, *Poetry Motel*, and *Offerings*.

Harvey Spurlock has had stories published in *The Sulphur River Literary Review* and *The Evansville Review*.

Juanita Torrence-Thompson's poetry and short stories have won awards, and her children's fiction received honorable mention in the national *Writer's Digest* contest. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Opened Eyes*, *Phantasmagoria*, *Chaminade Literary Review*, *Caprice*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Main Street Rag*, and other journals.

Ronna Wineberg received a John Atherton Scholarship in Fiction at the Bread Loaf Writers Conference, and her short story collection was a Finalist for the Willa Cather Fiction Prize. She is the Fiction Editor of *Bellevue Literary Review*, and her work has appeared in *American Way*, *Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Colorado Review*, *Descant*, *Midstream*, *People and Places*, and elsewhere.

Illustrations

- 3 Photograph by Joyce Stoffers. Metcalf Museum in Cheyenne, Oklahoma. The historical homestead is full of pioneer memorabilia and paintings by artist Augusta Metcalfe. The website for the museum is www.metcalfmuseum.org.
- 9 Photograph by Bigyan Koirala
- 16 "The Dance" by Freydoon Rassouli. His work is available at www.rassouli.com
- 18 Photograph (detail) by Joel Kendall
- 20 Photograph (detail) by Joel Kendall
- 27 Photograph courtesy New York City Visitors' Bureau
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