Cottonwood 48
Denise Low Issue

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Cottonwood magazine welcomes submissions of fiction, poetry, graphics, photography, translation, reviews of small press literature, and literature by midwestern authors. We also welcome articles on the arts from both local and national writers and artists. Poetry submissions should be limited to the five best, fiction to one story. We cannot return submissions which do not include a stamped self-addressed envelope.

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Lawrence, KS

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Cover and Photographs by Nicolette Bromberg
cover photo: Castle Rock, Kansas (1991)

Editor's Note

The staff was especially pleased to reach this calendar year with a full set of issues out on time in 1992. That accomplishment was largely the persistent work of Karen Hellekson, our production manager. This year, however, funding crises have delayed production, and we are in the more usual position for a small magazine, behind in our plans. To the authors in this issue, our heartfelt sympathy and apologies; we know how maddening it can be to find editorial acceptance and then wait and wait for the vast reading public out there to get the copies.

Ah, but we all know that small magazines do not *have* vast reading publics! Those who like what magazines like *Cottonwood* do need to spread the word to their reading friends, and there will never be a better time to pitch in for one's favorite magazines than now. As is announced elsewhere in this issue, we are constrained to raise our prices for subscription and single copy purchases for the first time since 1985. We have tried to keep the increase modest and implore those who read us or are published by us to encourage their friends to join our subscription list.

Meanwhile, here at El Rancho Jayhawk, we have tried to produce an outstanding issue for encouraging such subscriptions. Denise Low is one of our favorite poets and will be appearing not only here but in an anthology of Lawrence poets, *The Phoenix Papers*, this fall. (Twenty-three Lawrence poets, including several present and past members of the *Cottonwood* staff are included.) Nicolette Bromberg's photographs complement Denise's poetry most pleasantly.

Simon Perchik has contributed another of his short poems. I am pleased to see Paul Haenel and Nancy Winters here. I have enjoyed getting to know them in a computer workshop. And the fiction, a department of our magazine often praised, seems to me of especially high quality this time around. (I should note that as a member of the faculty, my editorial responsibilities do not include selection of the material; that is done by the respective staffs. Thus, my response is like that of any other reader, except that I am a bit more careful since I am proofreading as well as enjoying the works.)

We do also have a press publication on the way: Michael L. Johnson's *Violence and Grace*, a collection of poems about Western subjects. I have read several drafts of this work and hope it will receive the wide readership Johnson's poetry deserves.

Finally, a personal note. I retired from my faculty position in May but will continue as *Cottonwood* editor for a while. Thus, those of you who drop in to see me when you pass through Lawrence may find that I am not in my office some of the time. Call me at home. It is always a pleasure to see old *Cottonwood* friends (and, of course, new ones!).

George Wedge

Poetry

Scott Owens

For One Who Knows How to Own Land

As night stretches gray
fingers from pine woods,
yellow tops fall
beneath the long knife.
The old man's denim cap
appears and disappears
behind rows of corn.
Coming closer he strokes
the necks of calves chewing
the tops in his hand,
quiets the barking dogs
with a single command
and leads the cows to stable.
His calm voice calls
white chickens to roost,
settling on trees and
housetops like shadows,
and then, when all
is still his black boots,
caked with the red day,
bring in the night.

From crooked roads
I see the lights
of porches come on.
I see the houses
holding the sky
and earth apart.
I see the darkness
waiting at the doors,
as if the fields and fences
don't know enough
to stop coming in.
And I realize
those who know how
to own land never rest,
they can always be seen
sitting on ruined porches,
framed in darkness,
deep in the night.

Simon Perchik

*

My skull still rickety, the lighting
hurts—another team in smocks
come to photograph the ache
whose songs and kisses and my cheeks

—in those days when I rubbed my chin
both hands would sweat—I never caught on.
I thought it was my sinuses
even when the vague pain

took hold my mandible—looking back
I should have known, the warm saliva
lush shallows, rains locked in battle
with microscopic flames: a second brain

not yet unfolded into halves
and the warm lather—no one here is sure
about the beard though twice a day
every day I shaved, nourished

some imminent dampness—they come now
to measure its birthweight
date its first cry, its little by little
instinctive branching off though my jaw

has never forgotten the receding mountains
the stones returning to stone
to one raindrop, over and over
grinding out its name for the Earth.

Milt McLeod

Sailing From Anse Marcel Before a Rain

St. Martin, French West Indies

Wispy cirrus breaks the noon sun's sheen,
and we can see it all more clearly: Petite Caye's
rocky fingers, laced with caves, reaching out
and down, deeper than sight, too deep
for Aqualungs and bathyspheres and submarines,
deeper than Cousteau's dreams—or ours.

By two, we motor lazily off Grand Case,
peering over the side,
watching the waving sea grass at twenty feet
and broad coral fans that sway
like the hips of Creole women: these private dances,
intimate rhythms of tides we never feel.

And even sitting *naturiste* under the cocoa palms
at Baie Orientale, we furrow our brows
over all that we don't know: whether
the Company back home will survive, whether
we'll live long enough to do it all just once, whether
we were wise to believe anything we were told.

And what do we really know—I mean, completely?
All our lives we couch our ignorance
in vague opinions: some our own;
most, mere hand-me-downs. And the bright tetras
dart in and out a million coral caverns,
performing their rituals, undiscerning of shadows:
whether a swimmer with windowed eyes,
a great ship plying its course across a watery sky,
or higher still,
a new cloud heavy with rain.

Herbert Woodward Martin

Sleeping Lovers

(for Phillip John Shaw)

There they were positioned in the waiting room of the local
bus station, asleep in each other's arms, when suddenly,
without warning, they were instant gasoline and flames.
Fire itched into their flesh like the tight curls on
his dark neck, and the long straight ones which dangled
like gold from her fair head. It was the abidingly cool
smell of the gasoline and the joyful fire's tickle that
caused these two to dance wildly like Holiness Witnesses
fingered by the Holy Ghost, like puppets in a conflagration
until they fell, smothering each other on the ground in
a heap of flesh, hair, blood and bare bones, becoming
collectors' items, someone's common vision, a naked
brutality, the general hostility of a father's father's
father's teachings. These lovers did not exit this life
singing into a peacefully cinematic dawn. They had one
utterable and civilized love. It was tested with flames
by these certain youths who made, in that terminal, a dark
monument to Siegfried and Brunhilde while listening to the
song of secrecy propagated by a father's father's father's
father's laughter.

Stacia Bensyl

Making Jello for the Dead

Crowded four in a room—
four generations of women—
my son makes the fifth generation
an inconsistent link in our
matrilineage.

My breasts ooze milk, I
drink 7-Up from a flexible hospital straw,
the tube down great-grandma's
throat pumps out her
stomach contents—
"Nothing by mouth" on a note taped to the door.

We speak in whispers, the
whoosh of the stomach pump
louder than our voices.
We cannot turn off the machines, she
speaks to us now and then,
asks about the baby, if the road
is icy between St. Joe and Maryville,
if we have gas money.
You can't unplug a woman who can talk, but can't eat.

Mother calls while I am baking
Toll House cookies.

Sometimes dead is as good as you get.

My son yells from the high chair.
I cradle the phone on my shoulder,
cream the butter and brown sugar,
ask if Grandma knows her mother's dead.

The funeral director asks
about her mother's maiden name,
where her parents were born,
her date of marriage—

closer to Grandmother's
birthday than it should be.

I think of all those people, the bad weather,
what they will eat.
I make a list, go past Safeway on the way home,
pack my bags in the car as snowflakes settle on my celery.

We are the keepers of
life and death,
dissolving powder in liquid,
making jello for the dead.

Paul R. Haenel

Blessing For The Daughter Of A Friend, Born Out Of Place

In Texas
throughout the pecan season
Larry the Buddhist
who later woke me nightly with his prayer
collected windfall nuts at curbside
on his way home to his fat wife
and his memories of Scranton Pa

Three months later
in New England
in the dark before dawn
Larry traded his field jacket for a road-guard vest
and dozens of pecans spilled from an open pocket
and spun on the ice
at our feet

One great cloud of condensation
the laughter of a platoon
hung in the air
for a long moment
and then the applause of sixty black-gloved hands
pushed it up into darkness

In that instant
I saw him wince
and bend to pick pecans out of a Kyoto garden
his rake leaning on a rock
while his wife on the other side of the monastery wall
dreamt of him
night after night
bent over her naked back

Nancy Winters

Imperial Ballet School, Class of 1898

Segregated to the last, the graduates are posed
In separate groups of girls and boys.
The boys are military, with lyres instead of
    rifles on their collars.
The girls are upper servants or the modest daughters
    of the bourgeoisie.
Tonight, these sixteen will shine in the blue and silver theatre,
Though the tsar doesn't come to graduation any more.
Among them, there is one whose name will be remembered—
    Michel Fokine.
There is one, a girl, with five years to live
    whose cause of death is not recorded in the archives.
Two, young men, will die in '17 and '18, one
    of angina and a degenerating heart, the other
    of who knows what.
Three, besides Fokine, who fixed his eye on a wide horizon,
Achieve a local fame.
Two will be builders of the State
    secretary of the dancers' soviet,
    teacher in the Sverdlovsk Culture House.
One will end his days in Cleveland,
    having been an actor in St. Petersburg, an impresario
    among the refugees in Istanbul, a maker of movies
    in jazz age Paris, and, returned to his last, a teacher
    of the beautiful daughters of immigrants.
Tomorrow, the graduates sign contracts. Members of the corps
    get 600 rubles a year and belong to
    the tsar's personal household.

Gilbert Allen

The Case of the Invisible Chapel

Like the stadium, his body was found
in the underbrush. The football
was painted to look
like a small cigar. It
was still warm. At first

there were no clues.
"I was looking for my new Camaro,"
said the head of the Fellowship
of Christian Linebackers, "when I found
the body. I drove away
as fast as I could but
when I came back with the trainer
he was still dead."

And our enigma
thickens. Three days later
an envelope was discovered, stapled
to what had been his budget
director. It contained a cashier's check
for two million dollars and the sketch
of a new building beneath
the fifty-yard line.

There was an emergency meeting
at which they agreed in principle
to insist it be called
The Catacombs. In keeping
with denominational ties and league
regulations, electrical appliances
would be prohibited.

The goalposts were refashioned on Friday
to accommodate four assistant professors
at once. "It's amazing
what we can do
when we all pull together,"
said the former athletic director
in his inaugural address, chewing
on a nail in the end zone.

Gregg Morgan

Food for Worms

A city street
begins to burn as traffic
roars and headlights lick the walls.
Graffiti's sprayed about some neon
signs, each letter cut up, disconnected,
where the stencil held the space,
where the neon holds itself.
A man and woman
kiss, she's pressed against a wall.
Traffic flows down the freeway,
and junkyards swarm with wreckage,
bright maggots, rotting in the sun.
Sunset. Time
to catch his train. She pulls
a card from her purse. His name
and the company logo, like stitches,
a braille knot she rubs with her thumb.
The woman's apartment
is littered with pens. She's bred
her own worms for the garden.
Sometimes at night she touches
them, holds them up to the light.

Rate Increase
Effective January 1, 1994

Rising costs have forced *Cottonwood* to increase its rates for the first time since 1985. However, we think it's unfair to do so with absolutely no warning—so you have until January 1, 1994, to renew or subscribe at the ridiculously low current rates. And if you bought this off the newsstand, this is the last $5.00 issue you'll be able to get your hands on, so buy a subscription now and save $3.00.

Here are the new rates, effective January 1, 1994:

new single-copy rate	$ 6.50
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The current rates are:

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Fiction

Ginger Wineinger

The Reading

Morgan had just pulled his second Bud from his stash in the English chairman's refrigerator and settled back against the sink to take stock of this miserable affair when Linda Martinson came in looking lost and pretty. Women didn't want to be pretty now, he reminded himself. They strived for stunning, striking, drop-dead. Like most, Linda had to work at it, but she did all right. Morgan stopped short of finding a metaphor in her shirt, solid white but for one black sleeve and shoulder. It brought out her pale unmarred complexion, that was all.

She caught him staring. Morgan raised his eyebrows and widened his eyes, the mad professor look, and she smiled with relief.

"Hi—Carl," she said. "I almost called you Dr. Morgan."

"A bad old habit," Morgan said. "Were you at the reading? I didn't see you."

"I came in late. I wasn't even going to come to this, but—" She blushed and watched one of his rhetoric students put in a six-pack to chill. She probably thought the Department would at least fork over for a cheap jug or two. Was she making a point when she opened the door and went straight for his beer?

"Have a beer. Have one of mine," he said. She smiled and cracked it open, not getting it. Her gray eyes looked larger than he remembered. He couldn't think what to say beyond the obvious. "What did you think of the reading?"

"I liked it," she said. A note of caution hedged her opinion in case it should clash with his. "I liked some of the images he used. Especially the one with the professors as a school of fish."

"A flock of sheep might be more appropriate." Her smile deflected him from the rest of his observations. He took a drink, then admitted, "Goldberg's an ingratiating fellow."

"I could tell," she said, raising her eyebrow. He had no idea what she meant. She might want to impress him. Or she might've misdefined the word. *Ingratiating.* Always sounded like an insult to him, which was why he

liked it. *Grating* buried in it, lurking behind its true meaning. "But he's a poet," she said. He waited. Confused, she went on, "In your class I always got the feeling fiction was *it*. You know, where the important work got done."

He grimaced at her bluntness. He'd first taught her four years ago in his introductory workshop when she was a sophomore. Only nineteen. That discovery had startled him almost as much as when he'd noticed her wedding rings. He'd nearly lost his thread in class, wondering why the young insisted on undermining their lives just as the talent took hold. That wonderful illusion of eternity.

"Are you writing these days?" Morgan asked. Since he'd stopped cold eight months ago he asked everyone else first.

"Not too much. It was a rough—" She looked at someone behind him and her jaw relaxed unconsciously. She blinked. "A rough summer."

The kitchen was getting crowded, as it always did at these things. No one wanted to get too far from the booze. Around the table three young women had made themselves at home, the one on the left Ralph Saunders's girlfriend, he thought. Her hair was a blonde permed halo under the low hanging light, one side of it caught up with a rhinestone comb. She smoked pertly, blowing sideways, and passed a battered ashtray back and forth to her companions. Ralph (MFA, Poetry) walked up behind her, buried his face in her hair, and burrowed through to her neck. She laughed and reached up to touch his dark curls.

"Oh," Linda said. "Who's that?"

"She and Ralph've lived together for a couple of years or so. I don't know her personally. I've never spoken to her. She's a—piece of ass." He said it with care, like a French phrase. He timed the next word with equal care: "Why?"

"Well, I mean, I wouldn't even be here if he hadn't asked me." The hurt in her eyes changed rapidly to amazement, and ridicule. "Uh—Monday night at Kirby's. Ralph and I had this incredible conversation. I mean, three hours, and we're falling off the bar stools. Nothing happened. You know, we just said see you and went home, but it was—"

"Friendly?"

She smiled.

"And he invited me to go to this reading tonight. Not to go with him, but you know, we're both writers so I'll see you there. He told me to call him for the address—oh, God—at the office. I didn't think there might, you know, be a reason."

"You were expecting a little—attention," Morgan said. Love is ninety percent attention. A quote. From where? He swallowed the word on his tongue: Husband?

"You could say that. At the moment I'd settle for 'Hi, how are you,'" she said.

"Ralph's a strange guy," he said. "A very nice guy. But. There was this conference last spring. In Pittsburgh. And there was this woman." He followed Nabokov's instructions for pronouncing Lolita: "*Li*-la. She was coming on to Ralph. They went to all the sessions together, all the parties. So everybody was saying Ha*ha*." Two Groucho eyebrow moves. "But they really didn't do anything. Not that I'm—trusting. Our rooms adjoined. I could hear him pacing around every night." He didn't tell her he'd wanted to call Ralph, to see if he could help, but hadn't. What words could he possibly—? Linda looked at him sideways like Lauren Bacall in *To Have and Have Not*. Morgan remembered what he was saying and went on. "Ralph was just being a concerned, supportive—*friend*. All in his well-meaning way. He didn't *mean*—" He paused and felt in his pocket for smokes. "Anything."

"Of course not." She smiled. "I want to say what everyone says: Why is this happening to *me*?" She gave the same too-bright smile, then let it fade a bit. "Another half of me wants a story out of it."

It hit him like an electric jolt. He forgot about wanting to comfort her.

"Don't we all," Morgan said. "A friend of mine says all writers are the querulous children who didn't get invited to the party."

"Oh, I got *invited* to the party, all right," Linda said. Ralph giggled and mussed his love's hair. She ducked to get away from him, then let herself be caught. Linda took a long drink and looked at the schoolgirlish rounded toes of her loafers. When it finally came, her smile was momentary and wicked. "It's not like I'd be out for revenge," she said.

"Uh huh." Morgan kept his voice low and gravelly, but he wanted to sing.

"I swear. All I want is to make some sense of it."

Sense indeed, he thought. He saw the marvel in her face: her and not me. Why *her* over me?

"What if there isn't any sense in it?" he said. He found his lighter and struck it twice, then steadied the flame.

"I don't know, Carl. What do you do if it's one of those idiotic things?"

Morgan lit the cigarette and watched the fire burn a weird chemical blue. He shrugged and clicked it out.

"You make something up," he said.

Morgan's wife had most definitely been out for revenge when she'd begun to write. Not that her stories involved situations or characters remotely like their life. She wrote nailbiters for the manicured set, purple-prosed bodice rippers where the lovers overcame their initial revulsion for each other in various exotic locales before sweating them-

selves into a shade-flapping bedroom scene. No, Christine had set out in revenge of his glacial two stories a year, his meticulous relentlessly honed prose, his religion of understatement. Can't they for once say what they mean? she'd remarked after reading the latest. Aren't you afraid no one will get it?

Let them read it again, he'd said.

Read it again, Sam, she'd drawled in a good imitation of him, then snorted genteelly. Love, not even your wife would read it again.

Soon after, she'd bought a computer—he was no help there—and began processing words at night and on weekends. In six months she had a book, in eight a contract, and in twelve another book. As she piled up paper on what used to be her drafting table, Morgan's output dried up to nothing. His pen wouldn't move with all her keys clicking in the background. After the second contract and an advance on her third, she quit her job at Cessna.

Of course her stuff sold. He'd known it would. It was what people wanted, what they liked to read on a trip or waiting in the doctor's office, at the lake house the second week in July. Christine wrote books for people to fill in their lives' spaces, not for readers. Morgan wanted them. He knew there were still readers for whom stories and novels were an essential like food and air, who didn't want escape or inspiration or a moral to their story but simply for someone to make some sense. A minimal number, perhaps, but they were what he strained after, most of the time without hope. Hearing Linda talk about it, even casually, he felt a faint stir of cheer. She knew.

Once a little money came in from her romances, even though it wasn't appreciably more than she'd made at mechanical drawing, Christine wanted to celebrate. A trip to Paris, she suggested, then insisted. He had plenty of vacation, even a sabbatical if he put his mind to it. At first he resisted from inertia and the thought of the innumerable arrangements—Christine would handle most of them—but then he refused on principle. Any writer should recognize the futility of a trip to Paris after the twenties. You couldn't just visit for two weeks. You had to live there cheaply and young and in love, and they could do none of those things. Even a month, two months—it would turn out shoddy and overdone, the quintessential ugly Americans.

"You can't take a computer to a café," he'd said.

"You can, actually," Christine had said. "But I know what you really mean. You can't stand to be writers in Paris, particularly when I'm the other half of the plural. You won't go with me because I won't *get* the destination."

No. Misinterpret—*misread*, he edited silently. Her grossest error.

*

"*Mon Dieu!* Where have *you* been?"

Kensington reared up out of the refrigerator flailing the champagne bottle like a defective maraca. Morgan wished he'd taken his chance to deliver a swift kick in the ass to his francophiliac colleague.

"I've been temping. At a bank. For the summer," Linda said, each phrase more hesitant. Kensington reined in his hilarity for an instant. His black caterpillar of a mustache quivered and his lips trembled as he stared bug-eyed from her to Morgan and back again, then gave in to his enormous bray.

"I call that nowhere," he said, once calm.

"It might be permanent if nothing turns up. I need the money, I'm getting divorced," she said.

Morgan had suspected as much, but it stung that Kensington found out in the first ten seconds. In a minute or two he'd have her an agent.

"That's rough," Kensington said. "You've got to depend on your friends, you know. Don't try to go it alone."

An obvious volunteer, Morgan thought.

"It's very amicable," Linda said. "I really don't feel bad at all. We've fought a lot less recently. If he'd been this agreeable the last year we were married, we'd still be together."

"Is this recent?" Morgan said.

"Two—no, about three weeks now."

"Recent," he said. She considered him coolly.

"We'd separated last winter for a few days, so it wasn't exactly a surprise. Although this time was his idea." She sighed. "It's over, though, that's the biggest relief. No more walking on eggs. I've done a lot of that this summer."

Her calm rendered him mute. She tossed the empty can into the trash and turned toward the refrigerator. Kensington immediately made a fuss over opening the champagne and pouring her some into—horrors—a paper cup. The sound of Linda's laugh mingled with Kensington's, both hearty, hers genuine and full of life.

Poet du jour Goldberg began working the room, shaking hands and grasping elbows, collecting praise and slaps on the back. He lit on Morgan and immediately picked up their discussion from last March about a month's residency this semester. Morgan didn't bother to tell him he wasn't chairman anymore. While he ran on, Morgan listened to Linda and Kensington, who was rehashing his own divorce three years ago. His wife moved from Poetry to Women's Studies.

"You think it'll be easy," Kensington said. "Everyone's an adult here, sure, no problem. But then you get to thinking, that's a perfectly good refrigerator. Why should she get it?"

"I guess that's the good part about not having anything," Linda said.

"I'm getting this uneasy feeling you're not coming through for the fall," Goldberg said.

Kensington leaned close and for a moment Morgan thought he might kiss her. No, a private word into her ear. Linda shook her head and laughed when he finished.

"No, it's true," Kensington said. "You have everything. You're smart, you're pretty—"

"Was this all new work tonight?" Morgan asked quickly to set Goldberg off again. He felt himself lurching dangerously into the stove knobs.

Ralph Saunders stood in the kitchen doorway and leaned his head back against the jamb, smoking and looking at Linda. He smiled when she spoke, his face pleasantly blank, but made no attempt to draw himself in. Morgan tried to discern the source of Linda's excitement: attractive in a nouveau hippie way, Ralph's shoulder-length hair was his best feature, wild and curly like the rock stars on the music video channel Morgan secretly watched. His laugh bespoke a large volume of grass. He wrote some good poems, though from reliable sources he virtually lived at Kirby's, one of the dives across from the campus. *Why him? Why him over me?* Morgan caught himself thinking.

"But when are *you* going to read for us again?" Goldberg asked in an uncharacteristic display of concern. Not concern, of course. The carrion could smell it.

"That would be after I've communed with my muse," Morgan said. He clenched his teeth into a grin and then buried his head obviously long in the refrigerator's cold wire bars.

The last time he'd read in public was with Linda. His name drew a good crowd, not only the usual writerly suspects, but the literature and criticism gang as well. Their big chance, Morgan didn't read often. He didn't mind. Their ammunition stung like birdshot compared to Christine's.

Christine had hosted the reading that night in October a year ago. Her last, though he'd had no idea then. He'd felt proud when he glanced at her across their living room. Her hair was smooth, in a honey-gold chignon, and her taupe slacks fit over her trim hips perfectly with no trace of binding undergarments. His heart swelled at her lack of pantyline.

Main attractions read last, so Linda went first. Morgan missed her first two pages, busy examining her husband. Nothing extraordinary, the usual Scandinavian-descent Kansan. But the two together fascinated him.

Neither of them possibly past twenty-one, they huddled close together on the overstuffed sofa like sparrows in a windstorm. They refused all offers of drink, and he felt old and corrupt as he chainsmoked Pall Malls and nursed his neat bourbon on the rocks.

Linda wore mauve and pink that night, innocent colors that heightened the incongruity of what she read. Readings usually gave him trouble, concentrating, but he still remembered the title. Put Out the Cat. He remembered everything about that night.

In the story, a couple lived in a decrepit one-room apartment, the bedroom an alcove at the front of the house, hidden halfheartedly from the street by ragged curtains. Needlessly hidden, since nothing happened there. They argued. The husband went on a camping trip with his friends and the wife stayed home. Earlier in the summer the wife had borrowed money from her parents to buy a secondhand air conditioner. Their cat discovered it could get outdoors through the accordion panels made to fill up the window, now yellow and brittle with age. But the landlord made them take it out once the electric bill came. Not accepting that its escape route had disappeared, the cat tore the window screen with its claws.

The wife caught the cat when it slunk back through the ripped screen to collect its dinner. She trapped it in the husband's toolbox and drove twenty miles into the country.

"When she stopped at the dip in the road, she knew this was the place," Linda had read without looking up. "She couldn't remember the way and wouldn't find it again. For a second when the box was open and the cat crouched low, meowing in a low throaty moan, she felt sorry for it. But it wouldn't come to her call and she hurried away. She threw the box into the back seat of the Volkswagen and got in to drive back the way she'd come. Into the sun this time, though, she hadn't reckoned on that: its blaze reflected off the dust-coated windshield and blinded her. Looking backward was the only comfortable view. The rearview mirror forced her to see the small black spot in the middle of the dirt road. At that moment the cat ran into the grass as if it knew she were watching. She drove on, but not quickly enough. The late August heat and the shadows made by the dry trees, the dirty leaves hanging over her path, nearly choked her.

"When she hit the highway again, the sun had lowered enough for the visor to do some good. She stopped worrying about the cat. It loved the outdoors, it often caught grasshoppers and ate them. Maybe a woman in one of the nearby houses would put out a plate of leftovers, or, seeing it had been well cared for, take it into her home. Or some farmer might shoot it and end its misery. She felt strangely lightheaded, like after a long illness. She knew what she'd done was extreme. Her husband would've taken the cat and cared for it if she'd asked. Suddenly she pictured them dividing

other possessions, then every meager thing they owned. But she'd had her say in this. The wind tearing through the car was clean."

Morgan had savored his apprentice's clear sober prose until he'd glanced at his wife. He recognized the danger at once, mirrored in the look on Christine's face. The cruel feelings Linda put into words might well be a dream of their future, and nothing he was about to read was any good. He'd have to ditch the worthless sheaf in his hand and make up something, that was all, a tale to change her mind, paper over her memory, to erase his old sins of omission. His best story ever this time, the one to recast her image of him: The one to say what he meant.

When he'd finished reading his planned program from the good copies Christine had typed, he watched her admirable derrière hurry from the room onto the front porch of their house, bought by Introductions to Modern Literature. She'd hesitated briefly, then her pale silk blouse faded as she walked past the hedge into the yard. When she came back a few minutes later for his reception, a mist sparkled over the bold planes of her cheeks and brows. Her eyes glimmered up at him, full and watery, and he wanted to touch her hair and tell her he loved her in front of all his friends and enemies. But the words that actually emerged still reverberated in his head, all too clever.

"Like April in Paris," he'd said.

Three weeks later she left him.

"At least drink one of *his* beers," Morgan said the next time Linda opened the refrigerator. She laughed and took one of Ralph's Michelobs.

"Good point," she said.

He had her to himself again. Goldberg had latched onto Kensington for a meeting of the mutual bullshitters' association.

"So you spent the summer separating," Morgan said. "How do you spend your time now?"

"I'm reading a lot. I think I'm going to try to give up writing. Have you ever tried?" He smiled.

"No." He had a sudden vision of her propped up in his bed with pillows, reading her way through his library. Her there, and him at the desk, scratching urgently through a notebook. Once in a while she would laugh and read a bit to him, like the paragraphs in the back of the Book Review, but something amazingly apropos. The ache of wanting it surprised him.

"There should be a place for people who are trying to quit," Linda said. "Like the Betty Ford clinic. Only what would they call it? The J. D. Salinger home for recovering writers?" He laughed.

"What are you reading?"

"Oh, anything. I read something old that my inferior education skipped, then I go contemporary for a while. I figure if I read enough new stuff I'll get jealous and write something of my own."

"You should have plenty of material now," he said slyly. Her face brightened.

"Yes, but my problem is I can't settle on one way to tell it. It's the worst kind of writer's block, I think. The story won't hold still long enough to get it down. I can always think of another way to go about it."

He had always seen only one way to go about it. Now he needed a new plot, a new form.

"Is he rambling yet?" Ralph Saunders said. He stood behind Linda, a glum D. H. Lawrence cartoon tight across his chest. "Is he telling stories about Iowa yet?"

"We're having a *serious* conversation about writer's block," Linda said, mock-slurring.

"You fiction writers. You think less than ten pages a day is blocked," Ralph said. He tapped Linda's shoulder gently with his knuckles and Morgan regretted his own decorum, not even holding her elbow.

"Whereas you poets think ten words a year are sufficient," Linda returned.

"If they're the right words," Ralph said.

They went on while Morgan finished his beer. The difference in Linda's face when Ralph spoke made him dizzy. Even at their most contentious, he ended it with his goofy laugh so she'd know it was OK, he still loved her. Or knew that she still loved him. Love was here somewhere, even if no one admitted its illicit presence. How much was Ralph willing to stir up his life for her? At this tender time she might find him gentle and sweet—later, weak and too soft. As Morgan watched them flirt, he hoped for her faithlessness, for just this once a different ending to his scene. Watching her slip away, he wanted her most.

The first Saturday after Christine left, she'd surprised him with a visit. For a moment he thought she'd come back.

"Come in!" he said too loudly, looking for a place to put his carrot juice. His healthy phase. "I mean, it's your house! Too."

She almost smiled. In her new lavender sweatsuit she looked like a tropical drink, silly and sweet, packing a wallop.

"I was thinking about that hall closet. There's a few things in it I need," she said.

Morgan took a step back and waved her past. He wasn't sure if he should supervise—his lawyer would advise him to keep tabs on exactly what she carried out in these guerrilla raids—or if he should go on about his

business. But he had no business. It mystified him how she'd always maintained such an urgent air, of being pressed for time.

He slumped in the doorway while Christine extracted her raincoat, the good tennis racket, the small extra vacuum cleaner, and his plaid cashmere scarf. While wrestling out her Wellingtons, he heard her muffled cry of pleasure.

"Look at this! I can't believe they're here!" She sat on the floor in a loose tailor's position like a child ready to grapple with difficult grownup shoes. Her delight centered on two dusty rollerskates, buried in the back of the closet for twenty years, maybe more. Her fingers left clean trails across the white leather, then she shook them upside down like she did any shoes not worn lately. (Once a mouse ran away from her broom into her empty left boot. She didn't forget quickly.) She laced up the skates and stood, her purple legs shaking.

"Be careful," Morgan said and literally bit his tongue. After a few slow strokes on the hall runner, she stepped onto the dining room's bare wood. One, two, slowly, almost down, she grabbed the back of a chair and handed herself from place to place. Soon she made a lap around the table free from support, and minutes later she could skate as well as ever. She made a daring leap off the single step down into the kitchen and twirled noisily on the bumpy linoleum. She skated through every room except their bedroom (carpeted wall to wall), whooping and laughing, exhorting him to watch and tell her she wasn't so bad after all these years.

But Morgan stood rooted to his spot in the entry doorway. Her grace rendered him clumsy and slow, dumb even to praise her or scoff. It seemed she spun around him in circles that grew larger and faster as she moved away, ever away from him, faster and farther. And all he could do was admonish: easy there, watch your step. Take care.

By the time he'd endured three carbon-copy dialogues without ever leaving the kitchen, Linda was enmeshed in repartee with Kensington, Goldberg, and Ralph Saunders. He tried to pay attention and involve himself, but he really wanted to go home and go to bed. *Although technically precise and impeccably crafted, this story at its heart—has none. Emotions run low, and the characters' most identifiable want is to experience a bit of passion.* Bad reviews, like ex-wives, he thought, never really—He couldn't think of a properly pithy epigram. Never really left. But he wasn't after wit, not this time.

The bones of Linda's elbow between his fingers reminded him of her youth. She looked at him, startled, a bit pleased, her eyes squinted against the smoky room and the numbness of beer.

"Can I—see you out?" he stammered.

"You're leaving?" she said.

"I've had enough," he said, more lightly. *Are you with me? Will you help me—find it? Love?* "What about you? Can I walk you to your car?"

He felt them all watching, wondering what he was about, if he'd gone mad with aging lust. Before he could take it back—*no. that's not what I meant, come with me, let's talk somewhere alone, what's possible, what we want*—she smiled and glanced at Ralph.

"I think I'll hang out for a while. They want me to read them some of my poems."

Poetry. In spite of his bias, his specialized advice to stay put and craft stories like a jeweled Swiss watch, she'd spilled over, uncontained, branched out into another form. She'd written poems and hadn't told him until now, made brave by drink. Others could know her better, strangers who didn't see with a filtered eye, a screen that blocked out his narrow mind's spectrum. As he let go of her he knew she would learn, she would do fine without his help, and if anyone could settle for nothing but others' books it was him. She could write her heart out. He'd wanted her in his life, and it wasn't to happen. A private reading, and she wouldn't invite him to stay.

"The real literary life is reading. You know."

He felt barely memorable. She nodded, sobered, but she wasn't who he needed to tell.

Outside he smoked and leaned against a battered yellow Volkswagen he thought belonged to Linda. He looked up at the second story, windows lit, animated shadows passing in front of the shades. He rustled his feet in the maple leaves' jagged brown points until he'd cleared a space of pavement. Their musty scent reached his nose and he thought of Linda's dusty country road with its canopy—menacing, not protecting.

He dropped his cigarette and fumbled to crush it quickly. He wanted to hurry, the poem already coming, words gathering and flowing for the first poem in his life, his new form at last, but he made himself go slow. Don't hammer out lines just yet.

Christine, skating again. But this time as she careened past, out of his reach, she'd snatch a book from his shelves. One of her romances, her property reclaimed, or a classic, his complete Joyce or Shakespeare stolen in spite. It might be his own slim book of stories. Maybe for the rest of his days he would look at that place among all the full rows, shake his head and wonder. Then he knew: when he remembered the things she had read, the lines he'd scorned but she'd loved—when he went to find them again, to try at last to understand, that would be the one she had taken.

Caila Rossi

Do Something

Aunt Rose isn't wicked, but there is something wicked inside her that has taken over, given her a preternatural strength in her old age and made her a foe of rational thinking. That's how Dana sees it. She and Jed have been living for almost a year with Rose in a large Brooklyn brownstone—the "family" house—owned by Dana's father and his sisters. Neighbors say they used to hear Rose curse and bang things about in the morning even before Dana and Jed arrived, yet Dana can't help taking this behavior personally. Last fall, while digging up the garden, she and Jed joked about disposing of a body. Then Dana dreamed she really did kill her aunt and since then she's regretted these murderous impulses; she can't joke about them anymore.

Rose sometimes laughs and says, "Pardon me for living, I just fell off a hearse," as though aware of the ill will she stirs up, and when she makes Dana and sometimes even Jed laugh it's hard to imagine living without her.

Dana envisions Rose at that moment in the rear of her antiques shop downtown, seated at the round table spread with cheeses, fish, bread and butter. She knows Jed is thinking about dinner, too, or else lying in front of the television watching reruns of *Leave it to Beaver.* Each of the combatants in the house has a refuge, some relief from the fray. For Dana, it's this desk near a window in her office.

She watches the sunset streak the sky above New Jersey with a haze of pink and violet. The other secretaries hurried toward the door an hour ago, reminding her that it's Friday. But even were it possible to forego the long subway ride and be beamed home in an instant, she would rather stay here to see the western sky fade and darken into gray and blue. Last month at around this time, someone jumped from the office above hers, hurled himself through a plate glass window and landed on a parked car. Dana can't let go of that gray blur she saw, or imagined she saw, dropping past her window—her piece of a final, irrevocable act.

Standing in the elevator bank on her way out, she listens to carloads of conversation drop past, crowded, like moving cocktail parties. None stops.

"Hi Dane." A cocky new guy from Corporate Finance lets the door to the office slam behind him. "Goin' away this weekend?"

"No."

"Doesn't look like you're going anywhere." He pushes the down button, as she's forgotten to do, and looks at her with a private smile. "Been waiting long?"

Dana tries to think of a withering comment, the sort Rose would make. "No," she says.

When an elevator stops, he sweeps her in and stands not too close in the crowd, smiling. "What's the most popular form of transportation?"

"The car," she says.

"Nope."

"Is this a riddle?" This obnoxious guy in the office detained me, if Jed asks.

"No," he says. "Guess again."

"Bicycle?"

He shakes his head, aware he's got the attention of everyone in the elevator.

"Feet," someone says.

"Nope. Give up?" he asks Dana.

But they've reached the ground floor and she doesn't reply.

He tells her anyway: "The elevator."

"Probably."

"It's true," he shouts after her. "I heard it on television."

Men don't look at her on the street anymore—there's always someone better-looking right behind her. If she were to meet Jed again, for the first time, would he take much notice? If she hadn't thrown herself at him with a lot more confidence than she feels now, he probably would never have looked at her in the first place. It was his voice that attracted her. She had heard it before seeing him, a few moments before, taking off her coat in the foyer of a friend's apartment. There had been a circle of people in the living room and that voice, laughing, speaking briefly, drawing her to him. The voice is handsome, warm, good-humored. It's a deep voice with a slight drawl she rarely hears anymore. She'd thought: Arizona, Colorado. It turned out he was from California. A laid-back voice.

She had entered the living room staring at a tall, redheaded man thinking, with some disappointment, that it was probably him when Jed spoke again and she turned quickly to see him: dark, thin, speaking with a broad grin about a man and his imaginary bodyguard. She fell in love with him at once.

Shortly after they met, a numerologist predicted that together they would create magic. Dana keeps this in mind. So far they've done what felt

right: got married, moved to Rome, moved back after three years to live with her aunt. Rose was almost eighty. Married and divorced early, she had never had children. On a visit home, Dana had been disturbed to find her severely depressed after a cataract operation.

"The operation was a success, but the patient died," Rose repeated, over and over again. Her wit, once so delightful, seemed to have ossified.

Dana was sure she could revive her aunt, at least as well as the shock treatments Rose demanded. She and Jed were running out of money in Rome. They could move back, live with Rose. They would get a car, drive around for merchandise for Rose's shop, maybe make a few trips abroad together. She would take care of Rose in her old age.

But Rose doesn't want help and she's not old: life has simply played a cruel trick on her. She doesn't remember saying Dana and Jed could move in. A week after they did, she accused them of having come to kill her.

In Grand Central, Dana remembers to call Jed from a phone on the concourse. "I need more pencils," he says. His voice is droll, inappropriate for this information.

"I'm not in the office. Can't you buy some tomorrow?"

"I guess so. I thought we were saving money. Pick up some chocolate," he says.

"Are you stoned?"

He laughs. "What makes you say that?"

At the cookie stand, two young women lean against the counter, their hips bulging against the slim line of their winter coats. Dana waits behind them thinking what a pathetic sight they all make: three fugitives from Overeaters Anonymous.

Last summer she took a diet pill called Control. They lost their effectiveness after three days, but she continued taking them anyway. Control. It was a joke, sort of. She and Jed had been back three months and he had just lost his job with an advertising agency. She never did get the story straight. He said it was politics; it was a sign he should be doing something else. Now he could finish the novel he had started in Rome, sell it, and they'd move into their own place.

The women ahead of Dana buy only four cookies, two apiece. "We're dieting," one tells the counterman. Dana orders a pound of chocolate chunk. The counterman is in a good mood after flirting with his last customers.

"I've missed these," she says, not wanting to spoil it for him.

"Ya been outta the country?"

"Yeah," she says without thinking, then, "California." She doesn't feel like sounding exotic.

The counterman nods. Outta the city, outta the country, as far as he's concerned.

Dana is glad she never told Rose their plan to move out: it would have given her false hope. Not that she seems capable of any hope at all these days. Dana tries not to let her aunt's pessimism influence her, a difficult task. All through Dana's early life and even into her twenties, Rose was her idol. Dana was compared favorably to Rose, which was gratifying after a lifetime of trying to adopt her aunt's point of view. This was always a bit off center, and in articulating it Rose often surprised herself much as her audience. That was part of her charm.

Part of her madness, Dana thinks now. She sees herself in Rose's eyes: no longer the beloved niece, but the enemy. Dana tries to redefine herself along the lines of love, but Rose will have none of it.

Downstairs, the huge, green circle of the Number Four charges toward her. Dana grips a pillar. Sometimes, near an open window, she suddenly gets the urge to jump. The impulse doesn't feel like despair, but comes from an unexplored part of her. Years ago her uncle, Rose's brother, was visiting friends on the thirty-first floor of an East Side apartment building when he jumped from their bathroom window. Dana remembers him as a gentle, quiet soul: depressive, probably. Yet surely he didn't plan such an unfriendly visit. There must be degrees of impulse, like earthquakes. A strong one carries you away.

Jed insists she doesn't need a therapist. "Just breathe deeply, from here," he says, touching her midriff. Then he takes some violently deep breaths she's afraid will burst his lungs. Someone once said people jumping from tall places are dead before they reach the ground, that their lungs burst on the descent.

She sits near a connecting door that keeps sliding open, letting in the cold air and noise of the train crashing through the tunnel. A large young woman is stretched across four seats, asleep with her head cradled in her arms, her thin brown hair a matted mess. People stand, not wanting to disturb her. Street people are less unpleasant when they're sleeping. Once, a homeless woman pushing her way out the door paused long enough to smack a woman sitting next to Dana. Dana was stunned, but the woman next to her smiled for the benefit of those who stared, wondering what she'd done to deserve it.

The train picks up speed below the East River. Beneath her feet, the pulse of the wheels is a current like that of swiftly moving water. Serious black faces sway above her. In the mornings, Dana is squeezed among them, rising to the balls of her feet, then settling, rising and settling to the rhythmic bumping of the car.

One night last week Rose arrived home in a defiant mood. Usually exhausted after a day in the shop, this evening she was excited: she'd had a man on the subway arrested. "The bastard." She cursed him roundly. Though only five foot two and slight, her mouth is still a formidable weapon. And in fact, when Dana looked at the paper Rose waved at her, she saw it was her aunt who had been given the summons, for verbal harassment. Rose shrugged and went to bed like a lamb.

Early the next morning she was downstairs again kicking the metal garbage pail around the kitchen, cursing Dana and Jed. After what had seemed an almost normal, human encounter between them the night before, Dana was especially aggrieved. Pretending to lose control, she went around the house slamming doors, banging the furniture and cursing. "There!" she'd shouted at her aunt. "You see what you sound like?"

And Rose had looked at her as if to say, "At last! Now we're speaking the same language."

Jed said he needs six months more to finish his book, which is what he said three months ago. Then he'll get a job, they can move out. "If you want."

"If I want?"

"Well, where will we move to?" He likes having all this space. In Rome they lived in a rooftop flat that was about the same size as their bedroom here. Now he even has his own room to write in.

"What difference does it make where we go? You're not writing. You just get high all day. We could be anywhere."

He'd looked annoyed. Glassy-eyed.

Dana remembers a time when it was fun to be in the house, chasing her cousins up and down stairs, hiding under the high beds, playing in every room but the middle one, where her grandfather lay napping, later dying. When she slept in the house as a child, she was excited to hear the sound of traffic outside the window, heels on pavement, the intensity of the city so different from the quiet suburbs.

Now the high beds are gone, the lace curtains, her grandparents, the air of smothering welcome. The walls are streaked with soot from when the furnace backed up, the windows rattle in the cold wind, the front terrace is crumbling, the furniture worn and broken. And Rose remains, triumphant. She's survived and the others are gone, in anger, death, discord. She seems glad for the strife between her and Dana, between her and Jed, Jed and Dana: she's in her element.

Dana sometimes wakes up feeling hopeful, having dreamed of an extra room in the house on a third floor, her grandmother's refuge, an aerie, warmly furnished, to which she's inherited the key.

Jed assures her that nothing is permanent, but the changes he makes are not the ones she has in mind. Last night in bed he surprised her by revealing his fantasies, an innovation that made her wary. It's perverse, she thought. Pressed to reciprocate, she made up a story complementary to his, afraid her real thoughts would bring everything to a halt.

"I want to make love to you on the street," he'd said.

"Like cats?"

"In that alley by the grocery store."

Holding him, feeling his weight, so familiar, so solidly, always there, she imagined him dead. Killed while crossing the street. Shot in Prospect Park. Gone. And suddenly his touch was as fervent as that of a new lover. She pressed him closer and when he asked for her fantasy, she said, "In a taxi. No. On the beach, behind a dune."

Then he said he wanted to make love to her and another woman.

"Who?"

"I don't know. One of your friends."

"Who? Which one?"

"Michele."

Michele had come to visit right before Christmas. Jed prepared dinner while Michele supplied the wine and lively conversation about Miami, where she had been living with a disk jockey for the past year. She'd looked tanned and happy, and thin. Michele and Jed looked handsome and young, like gods, beneath the light above the table.

Dana sees them that way, still—radiant. Even her aunt is radiant. They're all bigger than life, caught in their own luminous bubbles, impermeable. She's the only dull one, fat and flabby.

That evening she'd made coffee, toasted bread and washed dishes. She likes dealing with inanimate things: the typewriter, the telephone, the copier. Sometimes she feels the urge to squeeze the life out of things just to keep them from changing, even in predictable ways.

When Michele admired the kitchen, Jed jumped up to show her some old containers Rose had saved. "Look at this," he said, holding up a box of salt. "It must be forty years old."

Michele had run her hands over the painted Welsh dresser behind her. On its shelves were old photographs, small paintings and vases. "You feel like you're in the country here." She'd looked around appreciatively.

"There's just one problem," said Jed, laughing.

Michele smiled but looked conciliatory. "How old is she now?"

"Seventy-eight," said Dana.

"Amazing. And she's still going strong."

Dana had waited two weeks before telling her aunt that Michele would be spending the night. Finally, she'd asked Rose the day before if it was all right and Rose had replied, "I have enough house guests."

"Do you remember," Michele asked, "when we stood in your aunt's store window like statues with that tapestry draped around us?"

"Yeah." Dana smiled.

"Does she still feed everyone in the Village?"

Dana didn't know. She hadn't been to her aunt's shop in months, not after Rose's friends, seated around the table, had greeted her so uncertainly the last time she was there. Her aunt had obviously been badmouthing her. Yet there was Rose, flitting blithely around the table, wearing her amused, optimistic shop face. She was the person Dana had always known—except for the duplicity.

"Dana used to talk about her aunt nonstop," said Jed. "I could never figure out why."

"She's a great character," said Michele.

"She's a bag lady," he protested. "If she didn't have this house, she'd be out cursing people on the street."

"Oh come on," said Michele. She turned to Dana. "Do you remember her talking about traveling? About 'discovering places that weren't America'? She has such a way with words."

Dana looks up. Has anyone noticed her dopey expression? The train is stuck somewhere between Fourteenth Street and the Brooklyn Bridge. Though packed, it's quiet as a waiting room. Fellow passengers hang above her, suffering in silence. If only Jed had known her aunt when she was still quotable.

The night Michele stayed, the three of them talked, joked, drank and ate till long after midnight. Knowing how noise travelled in the house, Dana had shut the kitchen door. Sometime after two A.M., it flew open. Wearing an old, turquoise terrycloth robe and white anklets, Rose straddled the doorway, her long white hair wild about her head, her cheeks sunk into dentureless jaws. She glared at them, flooding the room with a dark gray aura.

Jed and Michele froze. Their expressions didn't change, but apprehension ate around the edges. Finding her voice, Michele only made matters worse.

"You're looking well," she said.

"'You're looking well,'" said Rose, her face pinched into pleasantness. "'Have a nice day.'" She was mimicking Michele.

Michele looked terrorstruck, as though she were watching Rose's head spin. She had no idea her visit might be an issue here.

Dana tried to explain. "Rose hates platitudes. Don't you, Aunt?"

But Rose would not be patronized. Muttering, "Shits. Stupid bastards," she headed up the stairs.

No one spoke until her bedroom door slammed shut. Then Jed said, "Thar she blew!" and laughed briefly.

"That voice," said Michele. "She's completely changed."

The next day Michele said she hadn't been able to sleep. She was afraid Aunt Rose would creep into her room and kill her in the middle of the night. "Or, just as bad, that I'd hear that voice again."

"You could have slept with us," said Jed.

He hasn't shaved in a couple days. The effect is a casual handsomeness. When he looks in the mirror he probably thinks he'd have no trouble attracting other women.

"What's for dinner?" Dana lifts the lids of pans on the stove. "Green beans. Breaded pork chops."

"Veal," he corrects her.

"What's the occasion?"

"It was on special at the supermarket." He's standing close, too close. Slightly wavering, not so much physically as psychically, he's testing her mood. How obvious these subtle signals are, adaptable to anyone. She doesn't feel like kissing him.

One of the four kitchen chairs is piled high with magazines from the *Sunday Times*. Jed had been researching mail order advertisements for some mysterious purpose he didn't reveal until the week before, when he said no one was selling smoke detectors. "I could buy them on Canal Street for twelve dollars and sell them for twenty-four ninety-eight. What do you think?"

At least he was thinking of ways to make money, but the pile of magazines, whose pages were splattered with food, annoyed Dana, and her aunt had complained about them, too. "I think you need a license to sell through the mail."

He took her word for it. A few days ago, she saw smoke detectors advertised by a national chain store for less than eight dollars. When she told him he smiled. "I guess I'm not a very good businessman," he said, letting himself off the hook.

Sitting down to dinner, she says, "When are you going to throw those magazines out?"

Jed doesn't answer. He stands erect by the stove, holding in his paunch. His arms have become thicker, not with muscle, and he's developed a double chin.

"You should start watching your weight," she says.

He smiles to himself. "I'll start running when the weather gets warmer." He'll lose weight quickly.

Dana picks at her food. When she gets up to dump what she hasn't eaten into the trash, he says, "Don't. I'll eat it tomorrow." Then he adds, "Tomorrow's Saturday," and reaches for her, but she pulls away.

After dinner he retreats to his favorite position in front of the television in the living room while Dana does the dishes. When the mail order idea fell through, he spoke of writing a script for a sitcom. He said he could make a lot of money, but so far he seems to be stuck in research.

Finished with the cleaning up, she finds him in the living room sprawled on the sofa. "Please don't forget to take out the garbage."

"Sure." He gets up immediately.

She hears him upstairs looking for his shoes. His tread is heavy. In brief, frightening flashes, he becomes a stranger to her. He's lost ambition, confidence, and relinquished them with such dispassion that for a long time she didn't perceive any change.

Dana is sitting in the kitchen when the wrought iron and glass front door closes, then the inner door. She hears the wall button for the light in the foyer pushed in and the sound of her aunt looking through the mail, the slap as she tosses it back on the marble-topped table, her quick march to the dining room. The button is pushed in, the chandelier lights up the room. With strong steps, Rose heads for the closet, hangs up her coat. The light remains on as she comes into the kitchen and puts a quart of milk into the refrigerator.

Dana holds her breath. Has her aunt seen her? Tentatively, she says, "Hello."

"You're so quiet." Her aunt's hair is twisted into a knot at the back of her head. Her voice is almost warm, and though she still has her back to her, Dana doesn't want to imagine hostility where there is none.

"Did you have a nice day?" It slipped out. She didn't mean it, braces herself.

But Rose turns and mildly, without looking at her, shrugs.

Jed walks in wearing shoes. He greets Rose politely.

"I'm very tired," she replies, starting up the back stairs. "Good night."

"Good night," they answer in unison, hoping it will be.

Then Jed asks, "Where's the garbage?"

And Dana says, "Where do you think?"

He tugs it out of the battered garbage pail.

Alone again, Dana examines one of the cookies she brought home, then bites into it. It's too sweet, too greasy; nevertheless, she finishes half the box.

Jed has gone up to the bedroom. Dana walks around turning off lights, turns on the television, a black and white set whose reception is poor. She turns it off. The only advantage to watching it is being able to sink into the sagging sofa. At night Dana plumps the down cushions and carries up books and items of clothing that might suggest the house is lived in by anyone but Rose.

In the darkness of the bedroom, she makes out a bulge beneath the comforter. She gets to her knees on Jed's side of the bed. His eyes are closed but he's awake, smiling. On impulse, she whispers, "Michele said she would do it."

"Do what?" He opens his eyes.

"Make love to you and me."

"Michele doesn't do things like that." He still smiles, but doubtfully.

"Yes she does. I spoke to her today. She said she will."

As he grabs her and pulls her on top of him she repeats, "She will." He rolls on top of her, kissing her face and neck.

"Your beard scratches."

He kisses her lips, trying not to rub against her cheeks. She pleads to get up. Finally she pulls free, saying she wants to change her clothes.

"Don't," he says. "I like you in a dress." He puts his hand up her skirt and kisses her deeply.

Dana wonders whose lips he thinks he's kissing, hers or Michele's. Something inside, near her heart, shifts like a heavy piece of furniture.

"What's wrong?" he asks, pulling back.

"Nothing." She draws him down, kissing him. There's some hesitancy in his lovemaking. She looks at his serious face above her. It seems a face from her past. He's trying too hard to please her. He looks stupid. His passion is ineffectual, like a bad actor's. She gazes at him disinterestedly, wondering about his former power over her.

This is the death of love, she thinks. It's very cold, but painless. Instead, the absence of such substantial emotion intrigues her. She feels clearsighted and distant, as though she just woke from a coma and knows the name of everyone around her but feels no attachment to them. Maybe it would be possible to live the rest of her life like this, on a superior plane, free of emotion, rational, unyearning.

She made a terrible mistake to let Jed think he was someone special. He's just a man like any other. She feels sorry for him. She understands that she will have to leave him. She'll leave them both. He and Rose will probably get on fine together. She'll keep in touch, if they want.

Something drops in her aunt's room and when Dana flinches, finally moving beneath him, Jed whispers, "Do you like it when I make love to you?"

"Yes," she says, but her voice belies the lie. It's an expedient "yes," a "yes" for the office.

Jed says nothing. For a long minute he doesn't move. Then he rolls off her. She senses a timidity in his stillness: she's frightened him.

"Something fell in my aunt's room."

"Michele didn't really say that, did she?"

The room next door is silent now. Dana imagines her aunt trying to get their attention. Her arms flail, she sweeps a brush from her bureau. No help comes.

She turns to Jed. His eyes are shut deliberately. Light from the street lamp opposite their house spreads into the room. What would he do? He'd get a job, someplace to live. He'd get himself together, meet someone else. He'd be grateful to her, in the end. She would have done what was best for him, saved him from wasting his life.

Now he stares into a dark corner of the room then reaches, blindly, for something on the bedside table. Finding it, he aims it at the foot of the bed and presses a button. The glare from the television lights up the glassy layers of his eyes. He gazes at it without blinking. He looks at it as a dog might, loyal, patient, waiting for something he'll understand to happen. Jed the Dog. He's miserable as a dog. She sees that now as his face assumes more human dimensions.

She fights those feelings of attachment returning to possess her, but they are strong, monolithic. No longer a dog, not even just a man, he is her Jed, in a bruised stupor. "Michele didn't say that," she says and, after a minute, "Did you hear me?"

She wants to shake him. "Why don't you answer me?"

He's absorbed in the television, in a car commercial far more interesting than she.

She kicks out her foot to push in the on button, but she misjudges and the television slides across the wood chest at the end of the bed and crashes to the floor.

The room is dark again and silent. Jed doesn't move.

"Good," she says. "I hope I broke it."

"You're sick," he hisses. "Just like your aunt."

"Sick of you, maybe. Do-nothing. Good-for-nothing."

"Shut up!" Rose snarls from her bed. "Bastards! Shits!"

Dana is looking at Jed. He is still as wood, tense. "There she blows," she says, not quite getting it right.

Jed doesn't respond. He really thinks he's living with two sick women. She sees his jaw tighten. He almost looks ready to do something.

Maryanne Del Gigante

Grandma, Pharaoh and Me

"Wanna do something?"

"Not today."

"What ya doin' out here?"

"Running away to Egypt," I said. "What's it matter to you, anyway?"

"I'm goin' to run away too some day. Where do you reckon is a good place?"

Luddy couldn't go to Egypt like me because of the coins. There were only enough for me, and he knew it, so he was trying to think of somewhere as good as Egypt to run away to, only there isn't.

"My Dad says your Ma's going to lose the place," he said.

"You don't know a damn thing, Luddy Van Dorn," I said and it was true. That Mr. Van Dorn can't even speak English, so how Luddy reckons his Dad knows other people's business is beyond me.

"Got a jar for yabbies," Luddy said, same as every Saturday.

"It's my creek and I say who goes fishing for yabbies," I snapped.

Luddy got a shock. He blinked hard, sort of like Mama does, only she does it all the time. She blinks as though she's resting her eyes and looking at what's going on in her mind in case she missed something. With Luddy it was just surprised.

"Wasn't your yabbies last Saturday."

He was scooping up water in his jar and tipping it out slowly, just in case. As if yabbies crawled into jars by accident. Like I said, Luddy is a pretty dumb boy.

But he was right. Last Saturday they were Grandma's yabbies—now I didn't know who they belonged to.

"Buzz off, Luddy!" I said. If he didn't go right then he'd see me cry.

But he kept on fooling around with his jar, probably figuring it was better to stay friends on account of the yabbies even if I was in a bad mood because of Grandma.

"*Mickey Mouse Club*'s today," he said, kind of sly, as if I had forgotten who had the only TV for miles around. But right then I didn't care about his

stupid TV, or the Club, or anything. When he didn't go away, I figured that he might as well make himself useful. "What do you think it feels like to be dead?" I asked.

I thought I'd just mention it seeing no one at home wanted to talk about it and Mama was acting as though I was about two years old or something, saying I was too young to go to the funeral and all. Not that I thought some dumb boy would know anything worth poking a stick at, but you never know unless you ask.

"Saw a cow once that was dead," he said "—drowned."

I could tell he was asking for it.

"You should'a seen it, it was really awful—all puffed up and rolling round and round in the water with all its legs sticking straight out. Looked like a brown old barrel floating along in the river," he said, making his hands go round one another so I could see exactly what he meant.

I tried to whallop him, but he was already running for the fence.

"Get off of my property!" I was yelling, "I hope some dumb kid says rotten stuff like that to you when your grandma dies so you know how it feels!" I threw some stones to make sure he knew I was good and mad at him, and that it would be about two years before he could come back for yabbies in my creek.

When I was tired of the creek I went back to the house.

"I thought you was going to Egypt," Mrs. Dawson said. "Looks like you walked there." I was a bit dirty, but not dirty enough for a spanking. "Your mother was looking for you."

"Where'll Grandma be from now on?" I asked.

Mrs. Dawson went on kneading the dough, squeezing and rolling, folding it quickly to stop the edges drying out. Mrs. Dawson wasn't a Catholic. Maybe she didn't know where you go when you die because everybody except Catholics goes straight to Hell and she doesn't like to think about it.

"You know perfectly well where."

I was right, she didn't know. She balled up the pastry, slapped it flat on the table and began again using her knuckles.

"Why can't I go to the church—I went at Christmas—it's not like it's Adult Conversation."

She wasn't in the mood. I stood around watching. After a while Mama came into the kitchen to see the clock. It was almost time to get ready for the funeral. Aunt Grace had been ready since the crack of dawn; I knew because I'd seen her hanging around the garden all dressed up in her black things. From a distance she looked like a hole burnt out of the air.

At first Mama didn't see I was there, or she really thought I had run away to Egypt and wasn't expecting me to pop up in the kitchen, or she was too tired from arguing with Aunt Grace over whether or not to sell the farm. That or she just wasn't thinking about me and where I was right then.

"Mrs. Dawson . . ." she started to say.

Then she saw me:

"Oh there you are Carolyn, I've been looking everywhere for you! You really *must* stop running off like that—as if I didn't have enough on my mind without you adding to the worry."

I was hoping she wasn't really mad at me because of Egypt and running away, and that maybe she wouldn't notice the mud. I pinched the back of my hand to remind myself to keep quiet while she finished going over the refreshments with Mrs. Dawson.

Time was running out.

"Will you see to everything Mrs. Dawson? I have to depend on you today." Mama sighed. "It's all so sudden, I don't know how one is expected to cope." She looked like crumpled leaves blown against a fence, standing up only because there was something behind her. I hoped Aunt Grace wouldn't come in and start the whole thing all over again—I'd have probably whalloped her like I'd wanted to whallop Luddy. I gave Mama a dishtowel to wipe her eyes on. It was a pity she saw the mud when I went to the sink.

"What have you done to yourself child, *look* at your knees!"

I was sorry I hadn't listened to Mrs. Dawson in the first place and washed the mud off before it was too late. Now there was nothing for it but to jump right in. It was my last chance.

"Please, Mama, can I come too—*please.*"

She looked at me as if someone else had turned up in my shoes; another daughter who didn't know that she wasn't supposed to keep on asking to go to the funeral with the grownups when her mother said she was too young and it would be too much of a strain.

"We'll see," she said, kind of doubtful.

She is always saying "we'll see" as if something will happen out of the blue and everything will change and nothing will be the same as before. It must be hard to be Mama and not be sure of a single thing.

I tried to think of what to say to show her that I was big enough and that I didn't mean it about Egypt.

"Please, Mama."

She was working out how tall I was.

"Carolyn, we've been over it before, I think you're too young for funerals, dear . . ."

"*Please,* Mama."

I tried to make my face look right, thinking of all the reasons why she ought to let me go: I grew three inches since I was seven, I would scrub my knees, I would wear the dress Grandma gave me last birthday, I would behave myself, I knew my catechism, I loved Grandma, I did, I did. Please. Now was the worst moment, like a rabbit sitting in the road with the headlights getting closer and closer and the rabbit wondering whether to run or sit. The car was either on my side of the road or the other. Please the other side, please.

"Mama . . ."

She closed her eyes for a minute, thinking or resting. She was tired and had almost given up.

"Then for heaven's sake get ready, though Lord knows you won't understand a thing."

The car drove slowly along the dirt road to the church. I kept my eyes fixed on outside the window and sat close to the door. I was thin enough not to take up much room, you hardly knew I was there. Aunt Grace was driving. Mama sat in the back. I looked at her once and there was a tear she didn't notice creeping along her chin. Nobody spoke, not even to tell me to remember to behave myself as if I didn't know the difference between a church and a haystack. I sat on my hands to keep them still and kept my eyes fixed on the telephone poles, the stubs of wheat, the shadows full of sheep, birds on dead trees far away, fence posts flashing by—one, two . . . ninety . . . two hundred . . .

St. Jude's Catholic Church was on a side road but I thought they should have put it near the Post Office in the center of town, next to the War Memorial and the Botanical Gardens, so people would know where it was instead of having to look it up. It was no place for a church in the middle of some old weatherboard houses and a vacant lot full of broken bottles and rusty wire. There was a group standing around outside waiting for us to come before they could go in—Mrs. Darcy and Mrs. O'Malley in hats and their best dresses, Mr. and Mrs. Gillard, the whole parish, chatting away and having the time of their lives. It was like the Royal Agricultural Show. They stopped when they saw it was us. Mama got out of the car and came round to go up the church steps. I opened my door just enough to squeeze out and hurried alongside her so they would see I was part of the family. You could tell Mama was trying to remember how I got there. She couldn't send me back, so I said nothing but held my handkerchief tight in my pocket. I almost wanted to pull it out to show her I'd remembered.

My shoes felt tight. It was hot.

Aunt Grace rushed into the church as if there was a prize for the first one to get a seat. She didn't even wait for us. I came down the aisle with Mama, keeping my eyes down and acting respectful. Inside, the music was so soft you hardly noticed it, dark, quiet music like the inside of the church or under the peppercorn trees in the morning. It wasn't all the music, only the long full bits that go underneath—the real music would go on top, like ripples on the surface with the creek flowing under.

We sat up front. I didn't want to be staring at the casket, but it was beautiful polished wood shining and the flowers shining and candles all around. The music began. Father O'Leary came in. We stood up for him and the altar boys, and for Grandma and Mama and me.

"Let us pray . . ."

I didn't forget a single thing during Mass. I watched Mama and Grace and stood up when they did, sat down when they did, and thought of God and Grandma and the dead lambs that got left in the paddock until there was nothing left but a few bits of wool and bone the crows didn't want. I hoped it wouldn't feel like that for Grandma.

"Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world . . ."

". . . Grant her eternal rest . . ."

I thought of the Nile River and the pyramids and the soft little leather bag of coins Grandpa brought back to Grandma from Egypt after the War. She'd given them to me and I was saving them so I could afford to go there when I grew up. I thought of what she'd told me about Pharaoh, how he took everything he needed for after he was dead, and had it all buried right there with him.

Grandma had nothing with her, only her best dress and the mother-of-pearl brooch.

In the speech, Father O'Leary didn't ask for donations for the Missions like he did at Christmas. I thought it wouldn't be fair for God to want Grandma and donations all at once. Father O'Leary talked about God loving Grandma and wanting her with Him and how we mustn't mind giving her back but Mama had been crying. She'd been crying hard for two days because nobody was expecting it when Grandma was Taken, and because of the farm and the bills and Mama said it wasn't fair that Grandma had just gone and left us for ever. To me it felt like Grandma had run away and no one knew where or why. But Father O'Leary was saying we had Grandma for lends, not for keeps. Now she belonged with God again.

It was all right when you said it like that. It felt like discovering magic writing in the Catechism. Suddenly I knew: Grandma was gone, but it was

like when you take some water from the creek and pour it back again later, the way it blends perfectly and doesn't look different from the rest. You can't tell which is the exact water that was in your jar, but you know it is *there.* It belongs like it used to, only now it's part of something bigger and more important.

And just like that everything was clean and sharp, like the sky when the drought breaks after weeks and weeks, and you had been thinking it would never rain again.

All the time, Mama was reading the parts we had to say in the book, and Aunt Grace was pretending she didn't have to. When it was time to stand for the last hymn Mama was too tired to get up. She sat there a minute thinking of something else and missed all the first part of "The Lord is My Shepherd." Myra Davis came from behind and whispered to Mama and then Mrs. Davis and Grace began to pull at Mama, holding her up and dragging her between them down the aisle and out the door. Mama could hardly walk and I thought she would rather be in the shade than outside on the porch, but Mrs. Davis and Grace had decided for her. I sat there a while in the cool and the dark with just the candles alight and the end of the song. The men in the suits were getting ready to take Grandma away so I followed everyone outside.

There was a crowd around Mama, it was a wonder she could breathe with all the people hanging over her, like a bunch of old crows picking round the last waterhole. Grace was near the big car, talking to a man from the Heavenly Rest Funeral Home.

"It's been too much of a shock for you, Maise," Mrs. Gillard was saying to Mama. "She was too young to go sudden like that."

"The ways of the Lord are a mystery to us all," Mrs. O'Malley said.

"Ours is not to wonder why . . ." someone else said.

"It's the way of all flesh," Mrs. Gillard said because she must've read it somewhere.

"Leaving you with all the worry," said another woman, who was forcing Mama to stay sitting on the bench. "It's a crying shame with the price of wool what it is."

"Don't look like rain neither . . ." a man said just to make it worse.

It was a wall of people between Mama and me. I squashed through. Mama was surprised to see me.

"There you are, Carolyn," she said, tired, as if she had been searching. She looked around the faces in the circle and then at where she figured I was. Sometimes she just didn't see you for looking.

"Are you all right, Carolyn? Oh dear, who will get you home?"

"But I want to be with you!" I said.

I had my handkerchief to give her. The clean one.

"Nonsense, child, your mother is in no condition to worry about you." Aunt Grace was there with her sharp fingers. "Come along now and don't make it any more difficult than it already is."

Some busybody was offering to get rid of me for her.

"No thank you, Amy, Mrs. Davis of the Ladies' Auxiliary will go back with her and Mr. Willard from Heavenly Rest has kindly offered to drive them. It's all arranged."

I pulled away to give Mama the handkerchief, but Aunt Grace had a grip.

"Carolyn," she said sounding kind and holding tighter, "you're upset—I told her mother it would be too much strain on an eight-year-old." She was using me like a ramrod to push her way through the crowd. "*Far* too young I said, and I'll say it again. One minute she wants to run away to Egypt, and the next she's making a nuisance of herself."

The ladies stared at me. Their eyes looked at me as if I had been the devil himself in a cotton frock. Their faces said, "Here is the girl who left her mother to run away to Egypt." Mrs. Gillard looked at me amazed; they were all amazed. I felt my shame begin to burn on the ground around my feet and rush up and over me like I was a tree on fire that would burn forever.

"That was before the church!" I screamed. "I didn't *go*—I came *back!*" My voice came out very loud because it wasn't fair. The people were stunned and stared at me. Grace looked at me hard, the tip of her tongue between her teeth. I looked back just as hard. She wouldn't dare smack me in front of the church, but you never know.

"It's expecting too much of children. They don't understand," someone was saying.

"I s'pose you shouldn't wonder there'll be tantrums."

Some lady was making it worse, treating me as though I had done something wrong or as if I was a baby. "Go along home like a good girl and forget all about it," she said.

I hadn't run away and left Mama. I hadn't done anything.

I was hoping Mama would stick up for me, but she didn't because of the people pressing in all around.

"Carolyn, *I won't say it again,*" Aunt Grace said and I think I started to cry. I didn't want to be bundled off like an umbrella nobody wants. There was no hope of making anyone understand. Grace and Mrs. Davis rushed me off towards a thick man in a tight suit. He had the engine of the car already running as if I was going to make a break for it or something.

"Here she is, Mr. Willard," Aunt Grace said, holding me out at arm's length like I was something you could catch diseases from—like rabies or the plague. "I'm sorry to put you out like this, but it's been too much for the child. I warned her mother, but I'm afraid the child in*sists* on having her own way. In my opinion she is indulged far too much for her own good . . . In any case, she won't be any further trouble, Mrs. Davis will settle her down. Best get her home now."

She sounded like the vet when he says one of the ewes has to be put down because it's almost dead anyway. It was the same thing. She stretched her lips over her teeth at Mrs. Davis, said "Thank you so much Myra dear," and went back up the church steps to tackle the crowd.

Mrs. Davis fussed and Mr. Willard opened the doors for us and took his cigarette out of his mouth. He held it in his thumb and first finger with the burning end turned in. There was a bit of tobacco on his tongue he had to spit out before he could talk.

"Well, come along now, little lassie," he said, "let's get you home to your . . ." he couldn't say "mother" like he began to, so he had to say "to your place" instead.

Frances G. Sternberg

Visiting the Ill

I'm not usually attracted to men with gray hair. But this is different. Prematurely gray and with quite a lot of gold still in it. He's not really that much older than I am.

"Don't I know you?" he asks.

I'm not usually attracted to men with opening lines. But this is also different. In fact, he *does* know me.

"We met at the Gordons'," I say. "We broke the Yom Kippur fast together. You talked about weekends on your farm, the horses. Your wife came on to my husband. And I was sitting next to your wife."

His smile deepens the lines around his blue eyes and reveals very white, very even teeth. He's taller than I remember and thinner, raw-boned but not ungraceful, with a weathered tan. A Jewish cowboy from Kansas via the Bronx, waiting for a table at the East Side Deli—the east side of Kansas City, not New York City.

I smile, too, wondering if I'm taller and thinner than he remembers. In the fall, we curl into ourselves and puff out, taking on a layer of subcutaneous fat, like hedgehogs preparing to hibernate. In spring, we straighten up and fly right, lean and mean, like eagles.

It's spring.

He looks me up and down. "You weren't dressed like this at the Gordons'," he says.

"Of course not."

Then, we'd just come from the synagogue, and I had on what my sons call my Morticia Addams dress—a black shroud with long sleeves and a long sweeping skirt that covers everything. Today I wear an old leather jacket, a leotard, and tight faded jeans tucked into short black boots.

"I like this better," he says.

"In a previous life I was either a ballerina or a biker—I'm not sure which."

"What are you in this life?"

"Still ambivalent."

He laughs. "What are you doing here?" he asks.

Both times we meet over kosher food. Bagels and lox in fall. Pastrami on rye in spring.

"I've just had my lunch," I tell him.

"But you didn't finish it. I was watching you."

I shrug.

"Are you in a hurry?"

I shake my head.

"Then sit with me," he says, taking my arm and guiding me back to the table I've just abandoned. "Have some coffee or a soda." I decline both, but he orders a Diet Pepsi for me anyway.

As he cuts his sandwich into extra wedges, neatly and precisely, he focuses entirely on what he is doing with his hands. Strong hands with prominent knuckles and joints and old calluses on the fingers. Hands that regularly channel great tension and energy and a vast inarticulate life force. The hands of a cellist or a pianist, a sculptor or, like this man, a surgeon.

"What kind of surgeon are you?" I ask.

"Cardiac," he says, tapping his chest, "heart."

He offers me a wedge of his sandwich. I shake my head. He cuts a pickle into extra spears, also neatly and precisely and with the same focus. This time, he doesn't offer, he just hands me a spear.

"You come here a lot?" he asks.

"Rarely," I say. "Only when I have to be at the hospital."

"Is something wrong?"

"Not really. I'm on the *Chesed* Committee. You know, good deeds. My synagogue. It's a *mitzvah—bikkur cholim*—visiting the ill."

"Dressed like that?"

"Why not?"

"They must be comatose."

"They are," I agree. "It's my first year doing this. They always send the beginners to neurosurgery."

He finds this very funny. So do I, now that I think about it.

"If they're comatose, how do they know you were there?"

"I leave a little pre-printed visiting card." This starts us laughing again. I show him one. It has my name on it, the name of the synagogue, and an elliptical line from the 103rd Psalm: *Bless the Lord . . . he heals all your diseases . . .*

As he studies it, he stops laughing. "What's left out?" he asks.

"I'm not sure. Something about how God redeems our lives from destruction."

"You believe that?"

"Does it matter?"

"So what happened?" he asks, after a while.

"What happened to what?"

"My wife, your husband."

"I don't know. I didn't ask. What do you think?"

"I think they made it. I think they're still making it—on and off. Your husband's a shrink, right?"

I nod. He certainly is.

"That's what I thought. A mind fuck. My wife goes for that. You go for that, too?"

"I guess. We've been married for twenty years."

"You're kidding. You must be older than you look."

Wicked people don't age. A Yiddish proverb. My mother thinks it's a joke, but it's really a curse. Think about it: never aging, never maturing, doomed to grow up but not out, searching for our reflection in everything, trapped in eternal narcissism. Maybe we're all wicked.

"Much older," I say.

"Ever try any other kind?" he asks.

I'm confused. "Any other kind of what?"

"Of fuck."

"Such as?"

He smiles a wonderful smile right into my eyes. "Not a *mind* fuck."

"Not for twenty years."

He runs a finger inside the neckline of my leotard, letting it rest for a moment at the base of my throat. He can feel my pulse racing. "What do you wear under this?" he asks.

"Nothing."

A soft intake of breath and another wonderful smile.

The husbands of two women I know come in and catch us like this. One of them, a younger colleague of his, winks at him. Affirming the male bond. Way to go, bro'.

"We have to stop meeting like this," I whisper.

We burst out laughing again.

Much later, laying together in the half-gloom. "Are you sure you never—?" he begins.

"Never."

"Then why—?"

"Curiosity."

"Revenge?"

"Not entirely."

"How was it?"

"Nice. Direct. You don't say much, but you're thorough. I like that."

His eye is caught by a faint glow coming from my arm. He grabs my wrist, circling it with his thumb and forefinger. "What're these things?" he asks, touching two flexible plastic bangles that light up in the dark. I forgot I was wearing them.

"Presents from my sons. They won them at the synagogue Purim carnival."

I remove one and hold it up between us. It makes a halo the color of new grass. He takes it from me and puts it on his own wrist. It just fits, but he'll have trouble getting it off.

"Who's with your sons now?"

"Why?"

"It's so close to dinner."

"My husband. They're skiing. It's spring break."

For a split second, he looks surprised, shocked. I wonder what, if anything, he's heard about me.

"Spring break. Right. I forgot."

"You remember my sons?"

"Two sons, eight and ten. They were with you at the Gordons'. I remember other things about you, too. You smile too much."

"So do you."

"And when you don't smile, you look . . . lost."

For some reason, this makes me very angry and I sit up. "Lost?" I ask, my voice rising. "Lost how?"

"Easy, easy," he says, pulling me back down, "I mean like . . . lost in thought."

"Well, I have a lot on my mind."

"Your husband ignores you."

"The honeymoon's over."

"And that's why he screws around?"

"Maybe."

I move closer to him and kiss his chest. Little kisses, like sparks. The hair is soft, silver over the gold of his tan, damp from our exertions, salty and sharp to the taste.

"Why does your wife screw around?"

"She had a bad winter—a couple of bad winters."

"And you? Why do you screw around?"

"Because it's there," he says.

Then, as if to change the subject, he rests an ear lightly over my heart and listens intently.

"I hear a murmur," he says. "Mitral valve?" A point of information, just taking a medical history.

"Yes. Prolapse."

"Inherited?"

"Yes." Along with a pre-disposition to anxiety neurosis, agoraphobia, and sudden death. But I don't say this.

Thoughtfully, with great concentration, he teases my breasts with his tongue until my nipples are tumescent. Then he moves lower and kisses the scar that rests like a faint starfish on my navel.

"Laparoscopy?" Another point of information.

"Two. One for infertility. One to tie my tubes." Same site, opposite terrors.

Lower still, his lips graze the short, curved seam just above my pubis.

"C-sections?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"Also two. Matters of life and death." One of each.

"Battle scars," he says. "You're not as perfect as you look." He's relieved, maybe even pleased, definitely not disappointed.

"I also have stretch marks."

He nuzzles my stomach. "I've seen worse. After two pregnancies—"

"Three. The third one didn't . . . wasn't . . ." I can't go on.

"How far along?"

"Seven months . . . a little girl."

He moves lower, swinging himself all the way around and over me. We stop talking.

We sleep. His back curving against my breasts and his hand nestling protectively between my thighs. My arms circling his waist and my cheek fitting into the warm hollow between his shoulders. Such peace. I could sleep like this forever.

But the rasping of his pager awakens us. He swears and reaches across me to jab at the buttons on the phone. "What is it?" he asks. He swears again. "What are her vital signs?" More swearing. "Who's with her now? That schmuck? He's incompetent. Don't let him do anything. Just get her stable. I *said* get her stable. I'm on my way." He reaches across me again and hangs up the phone. A short distance, but long enough to restore his good humor. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde—and me. The three of us kiss. "An emergency," he says, getting out of bed.

"So I gathered."

"You should be used to them."

I shake my head. "There's no such thing as a psychiatric emergency."

This amuses him. "Says who?"

"My husband."

"What about suicides?"

"No. Suicide hot lines are better at talking them out of it. The police are better with jumpers. SWAT teams are better with hostage takers. Everything else requires medical attention first—"

"You mean a *real* doctor—"

"He's real enough, but he only sees them after they're admitted."

"Some racket. Even dermatologists have emergencies."

"Just one," I say. He laughs. "My husband told me that, too."

Although he's dressed and ready to go, he sits down on the edge of the bed and takes my hand. He isn't laughing any more.

"Who saw you after you were admitted?" he asks.

I shake my head and try to pull away, but he won't let go.

"You forged a prescription. One bottle of reds and one bottle of yellows. Spring break of last year. Your husband and sons were skiing then, too. Your housekeeper was away. She came back earlier than she was supposed to and found you."

So he's heard everything. I keep forgetting what a small town this is.

"Your wife isn't the only one who's had a couple of bad winters," I say. "But I screwed up. I should never have taken the pills at home; I should have checked into a hotel. Or I should have slit my wrists or jumped from a window or off a bridge or hung myself or stabbed myself or shot myself or turned on the oven or the car engine or swallowed poison or—I don't know—" I run out of breath and have to pause, "—something unambivalent."

"Why didn't you throw yourself in front of a train? That's unambivalent." I stare at him. "My son. Two years ago. At school. Also spring break. My only child." I begin to cry. He puts his arms around me and holds me until I calm down. "Choose life," he whispers, kissing my hair. "He didn't understand. You have to *choose* life. Every single day. Over and over and over. I could have told him, but he never asked me. He never asked me a goddamn thing. It's driving my wife crazy."

"That's why she's seeing a shrink," I say.

"And you're getting medical attention."

"And what are you getting?"

"Laid." But suddenly he holds me tighter. "How will you get home?" he asks, after a while. My car is still at the East Side Deli.

"I think I'll spend the night here. It's already paid for." He looks frightened, so I smile at him. "I'm fine. Don't worry. Go. Do what you have to do."

Choose life. Does he know it's from Deuteronomy? *I have set before you the blessing and the curse. Therefore, choose life, that you may live, you and your seed.* Isn't it just like God to give us a choice that's not a choice?

"I'll come back after—I'll bring you some dinner. You have to eat. You're too thin."

"If you want to."

"I want to."

I smile again. "Okay."

After he leaves, I suddenly remember the lines missing from the psalm. *Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and forget not all his benefits: he forgives all your iniquities; he heals all your diseases; he redeems your life from destruction; he crowns you with loving kindness and tender mercies; he satisfies your mouth with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*

I also remember that he's still wearing the plastic bangle from the synagogue Purim carnival.

I fall asleep hugging his pillow.

William Sharp

Ducking Henry

I don't know how he could tell. I wasn't wearing plaid pants or tennis shoes or chewing bubble gum when he walked up to me that evening I was standing at the bus stop and said, "You're an American, aren't you?"

I have stood in the student cafeteria line and, when my turn came, heard the German woman behind the buffet say, in condescending English, "And *you*?" It's not flattering to be told that you stick out. You want to lose yourself in the illusion that you are so well blended into the culture that even the natives don't know you're not native.

"Yes," I answered. He was a short man, Oriental, chubby and pushing forty. He wore a dark suit under an open trench coat. A silver crucifix hung loosely over his tie. His shoes were black and polished. He laughed, a high-pitched giggle from the top of his throat. "I *love* Americans," he said. I smiled and nodded, though I avoided his tractor-beam gaze. "You are a friendly people," he continued. "Americans are very open. I have many American friends. Many, many American friends. Where are you going now? I would like to invite you to dinner, O.K.?" He spoke quickly, and his words were poorly pronounced. I shuffled a little.

"Actually, I'm on my way to a lecture," I said. I spoke slowly and loudly, as if to an old person. "But thank you for the invitation, I—"

He interrupted me with another staccato giggle, a girlish sound and a wide-open smile. "I understand, I understand," he said as he began hitting himself with flat hands on his chest and sides. "Do you have a pen and paper?"

"No, I don't," I said, a damning admission for someone on his way to a lecture. Where was the bus?

"Ah, wait!" He stopped slapping himself and put his hand into his coat pocket, coming out with a folded piece of paper and a mechanical pencil. "You must, you must have dinner with me. I am an excellent cook. You are a student, yes? I will prepare food from my country for you. When can you come?"

"I'm busy this week. But I appreciate the—"

I faltered when the man fell to his knees in front of me, pulling up his trousers slightly to do so. He used the sidewalk to write something on the paper.

"I have many American friends," he said, writing. "The Germans," he lowered his voice—I don't know whether he thought someone might overhear him or if he did it for the sinister effect—"the Germans are machines. They are computers. You cannot speak to them. No, really." He looked up at me for a response. "Really," he said. "Believe me, I have been here many years. You will see. They are computers. Everything *der-die-das, der-die-das.* One cannot speak to them. All my friends are Americans."

He stood up and handed me the paper. Down the long, level avenue I spotted my bus. The piece of paper he had given me was written out like an oversized business card. It read:

HENRY GYI
Political Refugee from Burma
Auf dem Hügel 29
Telephone 620201

"Next Sunday?" he said. "Do you please have time next Sunday? I will be very grateful if you will allow me to prepare food from my country for you. Here." He was handing me another scrap of paper and the pencil. "Write your address for me. Six o'clock next Sunday? I will come to your house and bring you to my apartment. Please."

My bus was a block away. There was no more time to put him off, no way out other than make either a rude exit or do what he asked. I took the paper and pencil from his chubby hands and squatted on the sidewalk as he had, hurriedly writing my name and address. When I handed it to him he took hold of it like it was a treasure map.

"William Pilkington," he said as I turned to the slowing bus. He was reading my name out loud, discovering it, not addressing me. Then as I got on the bus he called, "Next Sunday, Mr. Pilkington, I will come to you. Six o'clock." And he giggled. "Thank you very much. I have so many American friends. I will—" His voice was cut off by the closing bus door. I put my flat palm up, unmoving, a goodbye wave. Grinning widely he waved back, like the Germans do, waving his hand up high until the bus was out of sight. I chided myself for having given him my true name and address.

Meeting Henry Gyi was an *Überfall,* a surprise attack. By the following Sunday I could not make myself believe that anything would come of it,

although at six o'clock I did take the time to dress up a bit. I was not surprised when he did not show.

By eight o'clock I had already put him out of my mind, had changed back into jeans and a t-shirt and was lying on the bed reading when somebody pressed the buzzer to my room. I was new to Bonn and had few acquaintances—it had to be him.

My first impulse was to lie still with my door locked in case someone let him in the front door and he came up to my room. He was, after all, two hours late. I would let him think he had missed me.

But the buzzer kept buzzing, on and on, and I had to lie there listening to it. My thoughts drifted to the speeches of my Fulbright orientation week about cultural exchange, shaking hands across the oceans, building bridges over troubled waters. I thought about this man's offer of a home-cooked meal.

The buzzer stopped and I did not move, waiting to find out whether he had given up or if someone had let him into the building.

About a minute passed, and the buzzer started going again.

The buzzer finally stopped, and I was done with Henry Gyi. I resumed my reading.

Then came the knocking at my door.

As I lay there, listening to the raps come in incessant sets of threes, I envisioned him there in the hall, chunky Mr. Henry Gyi. Like many of the doors in the hallway, mine was adorned with stickers. One read, "What If They Gave Free Beer and No One Knew Where?" There was another sticker, "*Ausländerfeindlichkeit? Nein Danke!*" (Be Hostile To Foreigners? No Thanks!). Being foreign myself, it was supposed to be a joke, although no one seemed get it.

Slowly, inevitably, I got up and opened the door.

"Mr. Pilkington," said Henry Gyi. Laughing, he walked right in. "I thought you had forgotten me."

I smiled at him. "I'm sorry, Mr. Gyi. I didn't hear it—I was in the shower. Please sit down."

We did not go to his apartment that evening—he seemed to have forgotten his offer of authentic Burmese cooking. Instead we headed to a little Italian restaurant around the corner. During our walk down the well-lighted street he warned me about the dangers of Bonn.

"You must be careful, Mr. Pilkington," he told me. "You have only one life. It is too easy to kill a person. I know. Really. I am a doctor, did you know? Just a cut here. Or here." He began pointing out, on me, all the different vulnerable places. His anxiety amused me because I considered

Bonn to be pretty safe. I mean, some kids tore out a hedge in front of the dormitory and you would have thought it was the crime of the century the way the neighbors carried on.

Then Mr. Gyi showed me his gun.

"You've got to watch out for yourself," he told me. "They will kill you, Mr. Pilkington. No, really. I am a political refugee. If anyone approaches me, Mr. Pilkington, run for your life!"

I nodded, dumbly, and that's pretty much the way I was the rest of the evening—nodding, agreeing, taking in whatever he had to say.

So we sat at a back table in Da Vito's and I learned about Henry Gyi. He had his whole life there in his briefcase. He thrust sheet after sheet at me, his face saying, "This is my story. Here. It's all in here." While we waited for dinner he kept handing me photocopied documents and letters, some recent, some at least ten years old.

I read silently, looking only at the pages in front of me because I felt his eyes all over my face, waiting to catch any twinge, any blink of reaction to *his* life. For relief I drank from a mug of beer which he zealously kept full, ordering new drafts by snapping his fingers for the waiter. I had never been in a restaurant with someone who snaps at waiters.

It was a hodgepodge of documents, in no discernible order—personal letters of recommendation in English for Henry Gyi, medical technician at a clinic in Bonn; a statement from the United Nations High Commission on Political Refugees affirming his status as a political refugee; a document in German explaining his right to carry a German passport; correspondence to and from various bureaucrats concerning a request for formal recognition of Gyi's medical degree from Rangoon University; several letters questioning, explaining, forgiving the fact that Gyi had entered Germany using a forged Thai passport. Most of the photocopies were worn from handling, some passages underlined, others with exclamation points in the margins. Henry Gyi's name, wherever it appeared, had been accented with orange highlighter.

But the papers didn't tell me why I was having to read them. At one point I tried to ask that and he responded with his laugh, saying, "Please, read. You must be very interested in me. Here." He handed me more. "Do you know any other political refugees?" he asked. I said I didn't. "You must be very curious about me," he said. "It's all in here. Read this one. *Bitte.*"

I continued reading. My lasagna came but Gyi kept handing me new pages whenever I set one aside, so I ate with one hand. I found I was more comfortable if I held the paper in the air, keeping it between us like a shield. Gradually I was able to piece his life together from what he had given me: Henry Gyi, formerly known as Ohn Shwe, a medical student, had taken part in a failed revolutionary movement and had fled to Thailand. In Thailand

he worked in a pharmacy, illegally, without any papers or passport, but, reading between the lines now, somehow he managed to earn enough to buy a fake passport which he used to obtain a tourist visa to Germany. He had lived in Germany for over a year, without residency or work permits until he revealed himself to the authorities and requested political asylum. And he got it. That was nine years ago.

After the waiter took away our plates Gyi leaned across the table and showed me another, smaller sheet of paper—an original. He kept it in his own hands, holding it out for me to see. The paper was yellowing and had started to tear at the folds. Stapled to it was a black-and-white passport photograph of a younger, leaner Henry Gyi. The language on the paper, about two sentences, I took to be Burmese. It was stamped with a circular seal, as official-looking as something you could pick up for fifty cents at Woolworth's.

"This is from my president," he said softly. "The president of our revolution. It states that I was the head medical person for our government. You see? He signed it here." He turned the page toward himself and ran his finger along the words, reading them aloud. I understood his reverence for the piece of paper: It had provided him his asylum. He folded it and filed it in his briefcase.

"Now you know little bit about me," he said. "Please, Mr. Pilkington. Tell me about yourself." He sat back and clasped his hands on the table.

I wanted to laugh. Was he kidding?

"I'm just a student," I said. "You know—*Germanistik.* Philology."

"Yes, yes," he said, grinning widely, "I understand." He was already looking for the waiter to pay our bill.

Gyi escorted me back to my dormitory. On the way he showed me a small can of mace and a switchblade knife, but I was numb by then. At the front door he shook my hand. He thanked me for reading his documents. "You see, Mr. Pilkington," he said, "I think friends should know something about one another." His face was earnest. I agreed with him. Then he told me that he would come by at the same time on Thursday.

I am not an extemporaneous person. I was tired and the suggestion took me off guard and, afraid of committing an awkward lie, I said all right.

He would come by from time to time, sometimes expected, sometimes not, and sometimes not turning up when he *was* expected. I was forever finding little notes in my mailbox or under my door, such as,

DEAR FRIEND MR WILLIAM PILKINGTON

I will be very thankful to you if you could please kindly phone to me 0228=Bonn 620201 and please allow me to come to see you tomorrow morning 8 p.m. Friday, November 10.

Yours Sincerely,

BURMESE HENRY GYI

I avoided him when I could—occasionally hiding in a utility room down the hall on the chance that he might hear me breathing behind my door or otherwise sense that I was in, but that wasn't always possible. And there were times when I was so lonely that I suppose I wanted to be caught, even by Henry.

I began to feel more confident around him when I came to realize how little attention he paid to anything I said. I was merely a connection for him, and only one of quite a few, I gathered. I wrote meaningless letters for him addressed to "Whom it may Concern" declaring that my good friend Henry Gyi was an honorable fellow. Or I revised letters that Henry had written, long strings of polite phrases like, "I am so sorry to take your precious time for my humble self." They requested huge favors. Henry would thank me profusely for my work on these letters, bringing me little gifts, a ballpoint pen with my initial dangling from a chain on the end, a religious calendar with mottos for each day of the year. But he usually found my versions of his letters too direct and proceeded to mail off his own originals—like sealed bottles cast into the ocean.

I did not call him "Henry" to his face. We addressed one another as "Mister Gyi" and "Mister Pilkington," which I rather liked, as if I was in pre-war Berlin rubbing elbows with the communists, actresses, and affluent homosexuals. On the one occasion he called me "Bill" he was a little drunk and it kept coming out "Beer." By the next time I saw him it was back to "Mister Pilkington" and "Mister Gyi."

He was endearing at times, like a child can be, his wants were so evident. Or want, I should say. Want. He wanted to go to America: Once, in my room, he stopped in mid-sentence and picked up the Webster's dictionary from my desk. "Facts about the presidents!" he cried. "Does this contain information about Mr. Reagan?"

Henry was not only a man without a country, he was a man without a language. Sometimes in conversations I could see his eyes moving, trying to remember a word, but not coming up with one. He spoke a mixture of English and German, groping desperately for words, trying anything at all to keep his sentences going. He loved to talk, but he didn't have much to work with. He had lived in Germany for ten years, but his German was

awful. ("I cannot go back to kindergarten, Mr. Pilkington, and learn this *der-die-das, der-die-das.* I am a doctor.") English was his best language, and it was mediocre. I don't believe he had a language left to call his own, to *think* in.

Henry was convinced that his destiny lay in America. His plan, which he kept as no real secret, was to obtain a tourist visa to America. Once there he would find a way to stay. ("Do you know of a good Catholic non-profit lawyer, Mr. Pilkington? Because if they are working for the Catholic Church you know they are honest and will not charge you.") I suspected he planned to go underground, as he had at first in Germany. The problem with his plan was he was sure that, as an unmarried man, he would be required to leave his savings in Germany as collateral for his person, as hostage, to ensure his return. Henry had in fact never even *applied* to the U.S. consulate for a visitor's visa out of fear that a "Visa Denied" stamp on his German passport might foil later schemes and attempts. In short, Henry was looking for that one way in which he would be absolutely assured of receiving a visa before he actually applied for one.

He lived in a fraternity house, a *Burschenschaft*, not as a member but as a paying tenant. German fraternity boys are even more preoccupied with spanking one another's bare bottoms than are their American counterparts, and sometimes when I visited Henry I heard the sound of swords ringing in the fencing room next to his. It was still considered a matter of honor to bear a scar.

The first time Henry had me over to his room was to show me his latest purchase—a stereo set. While shopping in the *Kaufhof* he had been overcome by the music playing on a display model. Henry had listened to the song over and over, until a saleswoman intimated that he either buy something or move along. So he had bought the whole thing, the stereo set and the single forty-five record, and had placed the machine precariously on top of a stack of American *Money* magazines in his room.

"This song says so much, don't you think?" Henry said. He set the stereo on automatic playback and it was all we heard, the only record he owned. It troubled him that he could not tell whether the singer's voice was that of a man or a woman. Neither of us could tell by the name on the record jacket. He very much wanted to believe that it was a woman, but he had his doubts, and it troubled him greatly.

His little room was filled with magazines and newspapers. He bought them for the advertisements—the business opportunities, pen pal invitations, diplomacy schools, anything that would help him find a route to America. I noticed only two books: hardbound editions of the Hite Reports on human sexuality.

Henry did have a dark side, the pistol and switchblade side. There was wild talk of smuggling gems and opium from Burma, of running guns. ("Do you know where I can buy some guns illegally, Mr. Pilkington?") He spoke of opening a restaurant. ("My cooking is much better than this," he said every time we ate out, but he never cooked for me.) He was plotting, always plotting, ways to get money, ways to get to America.

He made me talk on the telephone to his British priest in Bad Godesburg. It was not clear exactly what we were supposed to talk about, but I gathered that Henry expected us to sort out a way to catapult him to the States. The priest was as uncomfortable with our conversation as I was. "You," he told me, "as an American citizen might be in a position to help Henry." *I am innocent of the blood of this person; see* ye *to it.*

But I couldn't see to it, and I was halfway sure I didn't *want* to. I was as innocent of Henry's blood as the priest. I just didn't have anyone to pass him along to.

So it went, for several months, the phone calls, the notes, the meetings. As I made German friends I ducked Henry more and more. To avoid seeing him one-on-one I invited a German girl for coffee when Henry was scheduled to visit. Henry was pleasant to her, but when he left to use the restroom he called me after him. He handed me a note:

PLEASE! MR. PILKINGTON, NEXT TIME WE MEET ALONE!

I nodded. He didn't trust the Germans.

He traveled some, within Germany, usually to cities like Heidelberg and Stuttgart where there were hordes of Americans. I knew nothing about his other American contacts. It was as if he was afraid we might meet one another and leave him out, so he was careful what he told me about his other acquaintances. Just once, however, he couldn't resist showing me a copy of a letter someone had written for him. Henry had already been to work on it with his orange highlighter:

President Ronald Reagan
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

In the past I have supported you with contributions that I thought I could afford. I have never asked any favors of you, but now I would like to ask one.

> Mr. President, my wife and I were on a pleasure trip in Europe when she began to swell in the abdominal area. She was hospitalized and tested. The doctors said she has Ovarian Cancer and the prognosis is not good. Enough about my problem.
>
> While we were at the Ulrich Tillman Klinik in Bonn, Germany, we met a medical student Mr. Henry Gyi, who is a native of Burma. Henry would very much like to visit the United States, but is unable to obtain a Visa to come to the United States.
>
> Henry realizes that the United States has an immigration problem but he would very much like to visit his friend. He asked if I would write to you and ask your assistance and so I am.
>
> Mr. President, if you could arrange a Visa for Henry it would be very much appreciated.
>
> I think we need a world wide exchange of medical methods and tested ideas to find a cure for this horrible disease of Cancer. Thank you for reading this letter, Mr. President and may God bless you.

At last Henry had found somebody who could write a letter to his liking, whereas I, young and inexperienced, had failed him.

"This is a very strong letter, don't you think?" he said, leaning back on his bed, his brown belly visible through the gaps in his tight white dress shirt. "Mr. Pilkington—how long do you think it will take Mr. Reagan to respond?"

"Well," I said, "of course you know he won't answer it himself."

"Yes, yes, but how long do you think it will take?"

"Who knows. A couple of months maybe."

"So long? Hmmm." He paused and began smacking his lips, emitting little popping sounds. "Mr. Pilkington—who will answer this letter, do you think?"

"I don't know. I'm sure the President has a staff to do that sort of thing."

"I see," he said, poring over the photocopy again. "I think this is a very strong letter, don't you? A very strong letter?"

When I was due to leave Germany Henry came to my room as excited as I had ever seen him.

"They have answered the letter, Mr. Pilkington!" he exclaimed. "Everything is O.K. Do you have beers? No, no, I will get them. Here, read, read. I will get the beers." He began rummaging my little refrigerator.

I sat at my desk with the envelope he had pushed at me. I hadn't known exactly which letter he meant—I had taken part in so many—but a photocopy of the letter to President Reagan was the top sheet in the envelope.

Henry sat on my bed pouring a beer so fast that it foamed over the sides of the glass and all over his hand. Not wanting to wipe it on his suitcoat, he shook his hand in the air, laughing. I tried to ignore him.

The first letter, on Department of State letterhead, was addressed to Henry's contact at the *Klinik*. It read:

> Your letter to President Reagan has been referred to the Written Inquiries Division of the Department's Visa Office for reply. The Visa Office is responsible for determining the appropriate action in cases such as the one you describe, and you will be hearing from them in the near future.

An address he could write to for further information followed.

I looked up and Henry was gleaming at me, like that first night at Da Vito's. I took the beer he had opened for me and looked at the next letter. It was from the Public Inquiries Division of the Visa Office, addressed to "Dear Writer." A box was checked: "The attached leaflet(s) is self-explanatory."

"I cannot believe it," said Henry. "I am going to America."

The next page was not a letter. It was simply a handout: "General Information for Applicants for Visitor Visas." I scanned the headings on the page, "Qualifying for a Visitor Visa," "Obtaining the Visa," "Restrictions Applicable to Recipients," and I realized what had happened. Somebody at the Visa Office had tried to look up Henry's file and had found out there wasn't one. Henry had never applied for a visa. The Visa Office couldn't handle a visa problem until there *was* a visa problem, so it had sent him information about how to apply.

I blurted: "Mr. Gyi, this merely means they can't do anything for you until you apply for a visa."

"No, no," said Henry. "They will take care of that. They are going to notify me. Everything is very positive."

I opened my mouth and rubbed the back of my neck.

"Everything is very positive, Mr. Pilkington," he assured me and picked up the papers off my desk.

"Mr. Gyi," I said. "The upshot is that you need to apply for a visa. They can't do anything for you until you do."

Henry grinned his wide grin, so little did he think of my diagnosis. "You see," he said, beginning to read from the second page, "It says, 'You will be hearing from them in the near future.' They are looking at my case, Mr. Pilkington."

"Mr. Gyi, they sent everything in one envelope. That line refers to the next page. You've already heard from them."

Henry laughed and handed the sheets back to me. "No, no, Mr. Pilkington. This is only general information. Not a response. You see? Right there. 'You will be hearing from them in the near future.'"

I looked at the papers again, at the last sheet, "General Information for Applicants for Visitor Visas." I shook my head. Nothing else would be sent to him, I was sure. I noticed at the bottom of the page a list of the documentation required for the application: "Evidence substantiating purpose of trip, intent to depart the United States after a temporary visit, arrangements made to cover the costs of stay in the United States and return abroad . . ."

Henry left me that day convinced that positive news was forthcoming. I had not dampened his spirit in the least: his wheeling and dealing had gotten him out of Burma, into Thailand, out of Thailand, into Germany, and now it would get him out of Germany and into America. What did I know?

I didn't see Henry my last few weeks in Bonn, although he telephoned once or twice. He was in a state of rapture, short-lived, I was sure, but as long as he held that hope that positive news from the Visa Office was inevitable he didn't need me any more. He asked me for my address in the States and without hesitating I made one up. I reasoned that he might not even write me, and if he did and got his letter back with a "Return to Sender" stamp on it, well, that was as good a way as any to make the break. The day before my departure he happened to telephone, not realizing that I would be gone the following day.

"I had forgotten the date, Mr. Pilkington," he said. "What time does your train leave?"

"Seven A.M.," I told him.

He told me he would come to see me off at the railway station, but he didn't show. I knew he wouldn't.

About a year later, driving home from a so-so weekend with my parents in Dodge City, I was pulling into Abilene to grab a bite before it got dark. I found the fast food drag and began reading the signs on both sides of the street, looking for something good. I was starved, my mind was sharp, and my eyes were catching everything. Even so, I don't know how I saw it, underneath the JESUS LAUNDROMAT sign, a hand-painted poster taped to the window:

Henry Gyi's Homemade Egg Rolls
AUTHENTIC
75¢ apiece
3 for $2

I pulled the car over, my mind racing. To come across him here, halfway across the world, in a strange town, to come across him here—was it possible? Still, his name was unique—I had never heard of another "Gyi." In fact, I think he made it up. Could it really be him? How could Henry have ended up in Abilene? How did he get out of Germany? I switched off the engine.

I tried to calm down. I tried to reason it out. Maybe this really was Henry. Maybe it wasn't such a coincidence. In those homesick months abroad when I was a little drunk and bored silly with Henry, I must have rambled on some about my native state, making it seem more tolerant, more beautiful, a little more hilly, and quite a bit less hot and muggy than it actually is. Maybe I'd been more of an influence on Henry than I realized. Maybe he had followed me to Kansas, but didn't know where to find me.

Perhaps Henry had left his savings in the *Dresdnerbank* after all. Perhaps he had found his good Catholic lawyer. Perhaps he had emigrated, or he had stayed illegally on a visitor visa. And now he was here in Abilene.

Still a little shaky at the possibility, I got out and walked into the little restaurant. Paper and plastic lanterns provided just enough light for me to tell that everything inside was red—the walls, the tablecloths, the carpet. Two or three couples sat in booths along one wall. Country and Western music played softly in the background. The room was hot with steam and smelled of grease from the cooking. In the back was a wide, rectangular window to the kitchen, lit up and animated like a movie screen in a dark theater.

My eyes searched for Henry and then I saw him, in the kitchen, dressed in a cook's white costume. He was plumper than before and sweating. His

back to me, he was stirring something on the grill and humming loudly. He looked happy.

So this is what it takes to get a taste of some of Henry's authentic Burmese cooking, I thought.

Not waiting to be seated as a sign suggested, I walked through the tables toward him. A petite Asian hostess came out to intercept me, but I smiled at her and pointed to the kitchen and nodded mutely, as if I knew what I was doing. She smiled and let me pass.

I stepped up to the kitchen window, like a customer, and awaited the reaction, the astonishment, to hear Henry call my name, not caring what Abilene dinnergoers heard it because this was a miracle, truly a miracle, to find one another here in the Heartland.

Henry turned around, but it wasn't Henry. Hell, he wasn't even Asian. He wasn't even *a man.* She was a stout woman of about Henry's built, definitely home grown. She had freckles. She spoke to me cheerfully: "What can I do for you, Hon'?"

"Egg rolls," I said meekly.

"You should order with the waitress, Hon'," she said, "but I'll get 'em started. How many?"

"Three," I said. I hesitated. But I had to ask, "Could you tell me why they're called 'Henry Gyi's' egg rolls?"

"Henry Gyi's?" she said. "You mean *Gyal's. Gyal's* Egg Rolls. No Henry." She gestured toward a package on the shelf next to her. Sure enough, in bold black letters I read "Gyal's Egg Rolls."

"Made here in Abilene," she continued. "We're semi-known for them."

I thanked her, went back to a table and placed my order with the waitress—to go. On my way out I looked again at the hand-painted sign on the window. It read "Gyal's."

Back on the road home I turned the radio up, rocking and rolling, snacking on egg rolls, amused at my own silliness, delighted by the close call I'd had. Did not have. At length, as the wheat fields faded from gold to black, I turned the tunes back down and, for a few short hours, nursed friendly thoughts of Henry, still out there somewhere, knocking.

Denise Low

An Interview with Denise Low
Conducted by Karen Hellekson

I first met Denise Low in school—we were students in a seminar together—and I rather belatedly realized Denise Low, *Cottonwood* ex-editor and local poet, was the same as Denise, the person who sat next to me as we mused knowledgeably about modernism and postmodernism. The Denise in class was a critical writer and thinker, teacher, and expert on Native American literature. The other Denise is a poet, whose voice stretches over boundaries of difference and time. It was a pleasure to read her newest book of poetry, *Tulip Elegies.*

Though I speak of Denise as two people, or perhaps as divided, the difference was merely my perception of her. She does not live two separate lives but a single, unmysterious one. This interview allowed me to finally destroy the bridge between the Denise I had heard of through the *Cottonwood* grapevine and the Denise that I met and let me see a single, complex soul that I am still coming to know.

I interviewed her on her living-room couch, tape recorder set awkwardly between us ("talk into these little holes on top of the machine"), an elderly dog snoozing by the door.

Karen Hellekson: Let's start with your *Cottonwood* connection. You were on staff for five years—in what capacity? How did you feel about Cottonwood at that time?

Denise Low: *Cottonwood* is how I got started writing in many ways. I had reached a point in my life where my kids were out of diapers. We had moved back to Lawrence in 1977, and I was ready to get serious about writing after many nights with teething babies. I took a class with Victor Contoski [at the University of Kansas], who was just absolutely the perfect person for me at the time. Also, I went to a *Cottonwood* meeting. A friend, Bob [Greene], suggested it: "Try reading for *Cottonwood*; see what you learn as a poet." So I went to the first staff meeting. Michael Smetzer announced, "I'm getting ready to quit. Is there anyone who would like to be editor?" No one spoke

up. Though I was a raw beginner, I stayed after the meeting and said, "Well, I might like to do this." I worked under him and later edited and co-edited, and learned just a great deal from reading the mailings that came in and from writing grants. I tried to get the publication on schedule, tried to up the submissions.

I really learned to see writing in the larger sense of not only the writer-reader relationship, but also everything that goes in between. I think that gives you an appreciation of the whole process. It is so much labor to create a magazine, as you know. It's not a place for just writing out of vanity. I early got a sense of responsibility to the readers, to have something to share with them.

KH: And you started writing as a result of this experience?

DL: I had been writing off and on. I had written nothing through my BA because I could never get into a creative writing class; they were always closed. I did have some good encouragement from a few teachers, including Beth Schultz. I did nothing, of course, during my MA, and then I had two kids. I really had wanted to start writing, but I just started when I took Victor's class. He is so gracious never to bring up my early poems! He talks about how important it is to destroy your early work. He's absolutely right.

The other education was working simultaneously, really, with *Cottonwood.* Somehow I decided we should do more books. I edited *Thirty Kansas Poets* and wrote a grant for the Kansas Arts Commission—totally as a beginner, in my twenties, and just going by instinct. I got the grant, a small grant, and everyone said, "Why are you printing 500 copies of [that book]? No one in Kansas reads poetry." Nonetheless, we went through one printing in six months and then reprinted and went through a second printing. Five years later, we did *Confluence,* an updated Kansas poetry anthology, which I edited again, and it sold out. There really is a need for regional literature. People really do like to read about themselves. The national media just do not represent this milieu accurately or kindly. I think that there is a real discrimination against the Midwest. Wes Jackson writes in *Altars of Hewn Stone* that one reason is the Midwest is what so many people left after the farm economy failed.

KH: It's East and West Coast; they skip us in between.

DL: Everywhere from jokes on *Cheers* to the *New Yorker.* I don't think there's an understanding of some of the values that form the Midwestern ethic. And not much patience or really any need to learn them, since there are only a few people in Kansas. There are a lot of well-educated Kansans, but they are not involved in high culture, if only because they are far away from each other and have had other priorities in the short history of European-Americans culture in this state. Actually, Kansans do read, more

than the national average, according to the book distributors I've talked to, and I think the coasts just don't respond to that market.

KH: Speaking as someone who used to work in a bookstore, our regional section always did extremely well. But look at the popular items: anything about Jesse James sold extremely well. Cookbooks.

DL: But the interesting thing is, New York City is a region. New York City is a wonderful place, but it is a region. Many publishers happen to be in that region, and they want to read about their own region. I have a friend, a professional writer, with an agent and publications, who wrote a novel set in Omaha. Literally, her agent read the first draft and said, "My dear, you must make this more upscale and move it to New York." That's where the agent's population center is, where her sense of the market is. But in the meantime, where does that leave the Midwest? This exact thing has happened to several other people I know.

KH: Southern writers get a lot of attention also. I think it's time for the Midwest to come to the fore. But it will take writers to start writing about it and then hit it big.

DL: And find publishers and distributors for it. I wonder if this attitude—that settings in literature are interchangeable—has a connection to capitalist exploitation of the land. In my own writing, I feel an obligation to the hills and rivers that support my life, to elaborate on their place in human culture.

KH: Setting is an important part of anything you write. Suddenly switching it to the East Coast—

DL: Well, that changes it completely. So you have a Midwesterner, with that sensibility, writing a novel set in New York. It's still going to have Midwestern sensibilities spliced onto a different place. Anyway, it's confusing because it's really hard to pin down what the Midwestern voice is. And a lot of Midwesterners migrate to New York and the West Coast.

KH: Do you see yourself as part of the Midwestern voice?

DL: Sure! This is where I grew up and this is the place I know. I have trouble sometimes with people from other parts of the country communicating, because they take a Midwestern reticence for blandness. William Stafford belies misconceptions about Midwesterners, a perfect example. And as a woman, I go through all of that passive stereotyping due to gender, and further, as a Midwesterner, I was taught not to be too flamboyant or be the center of attention and not to stand out and not to hog the conversation. I think some people misinterpret that as not having anything to say. I've just had a number of interesting encounters through the years where people have thought I was really stupid [laughter]. I finally figured out what was going on and learned to shift into another kind of dialect in talking to these people.

KH: A lot of it might be politeness too. I'm from Minneapolis, Minnesota, where guilt is ingrained in you. Even now, I'll feel incredible guilt about things. There's no way around it; I just have to deal with it, but it can be an amazing stumbling block. If other people don't feel that, you can't use your traditional strategies to manipulate them in ways that you're used to. Strategies that work in Minneapolis won't work in, say, New York. It's weird.

DL: If the other person isn't a part of that paradigm, then you're totally out of the circle. It's an interesting thing, and also within the Midwest, you're not taken as seriously as a writer. My parents have been very good about being as supportive as well as they could, but of course, my parents say, "Can't you write anything but poetry?"

KH: A bodice-ripper or something that will sell!

DL: Exactly. It's not a writer's community in some of the smaller towns of Kansas. There are reader communities. I go out for the Kansas Council for Humanities programs and speak in some of these small-town libraries. But the audience wants to read what's new in New York. I think there's a real sense of inferiority that's not accurate, but that people out in the tiny towns of Kansas have. Because they are isolated, they feel they are not up to or equal to the Coasts. In fact, one of the best audiences I have had was a Leavenworth, Kansas, women's book group. It was traditional women who were meeting in the afternoon. These women had read everything on the *New York Times* bestseller list as well as good literary fiction. They had the most insightful questions and educated comments about my writing of any audience I've seen.

KH: Do you like doing readings? Do you go and read often?

DL: I cannot read often because of restrictions at Haskell Indian Junior College, where I teach. There are conflict-of-interest regulations. I am not free to pick up and go on reading tours. I do try to get away evenings and read locally. I try to get out of state once a semester. I have been fortunate with these. San Francisco State Poetry Center has a video library on contemporary poets and I read there in '88, so I'm in their archives, and I've read in Los Angeles, Dallas, Minneapolis, and Utah. These things come up and I do get away, but I can't really pursue readings because of my job.

Teaching at Haskell is not like teaching at a normal college because we are under the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which is under the federal government. We must obey the same rules that the mail carriers follow. We are obligated to be on campus 40 hours a week. Any vacation time or leave time, we have to get cleared on an hour-by-hour basis. It's just a very different environment.

KH: It sounds more like obstacles. Professors don't have to organize their time like that; it's just assumed they'll work on their own time. This seems more high-schoolish—that's a bad comparison.

DL: Unfortunately, no, it's not. We have better administrators who understand that we need to be free to go on our own to the KU library and so on, but we have to have a document to cover us if we go to KU, even. Every move we make during our 40-hour week has to be covered. If nothing else, it teaches patience.

KH: You must like teaching—and teaching there.

DL: I really do like teaching. I'm both an introvert and an extrovert, and I really do value getting out and bouncing ideas around with people. I enjoy the energy with my students. I like the students at Haskell very much; they're always challenging me and teach me in a multitude of ways. I have two frustrations: I do need my own time to work, and there I am interrupted all the time. Thoughtful writing just can't go on in my office. And secondly, the work load is heavy.

KH: How many classes do you have to teach in a semester?

DL: Four.

KH: Are you expected to do research as well?

DL: No. But that is where my love is. I will do the research because I love doing it. I do have critical articles published, and reviews and so on. I can do some of that on government time, if it is relevant to my work, but it's just hard to find time. And then there's committee work and advising, choosing textbooks, developing curriculum. We're in a really active period right now because Haskell is changing its curriculum in order to accommodate four-year college programs.

KH: Let's turn to your poetry. I'm struck by your use of memory, of reliving events, of wanting to stretch out experience. How does your poetry capture memory, distill it?

DL: Those are very good observations because one of my goals is to live my life as fully as possible. Writing for me really does stretch out time. It defines it, it preserves it, it gives it more dimensions. I'm fascinated by time and memory and what you remember and what you choose not to remember, which is the focus of "Selective Amnesia," published in *Stiletto.* I had some experiences as a child that I blocked out and then those memories did come back as an adult. I also have a very good memory: I remember things from when I was a little baby in a cradle. I have a lot of distinct memories from when I was a tiny child.

KH: You also keep journals, judging by some of the entries in your essay in *Tulip Elegies.* Does that help stretch out memory also?

DL: Yes. It's fascinating to see how different I am from the journal writer of five years ago, say. I ran across one of the first poems I wrote that

hadn't been destroyed. I was such a different person, yet I was the same person, and these shifts are all the identity of Denise Low.

KH: I never keep a journal, but I did when I was in England, because I thought I might want to remember my half-year there. Even now, when I read it—and I don't often do that—I suddenly remember things I had completely forgotten about. It serves as a jog for my memory. I relive experiences in a really intimate, almost physical way. Does that happen to you too?

DL: Oh, yes. In fact, this is crazy, but I just had a tooth refilled this week. As the dentist removed it, through the layers—that one filling has been redone like three different times—I went through the layers of remembering all the way back to my very first dentist. It was very physical. It brought back this crusty old Kansas dentist who had the slowest drill in the West.

KH: Let's bring the topic back around to Native Americans. Of course, you teach at Haskell Indian Junior College. The Native American influence on your work is unmistakable. Can you speak a bit on the impact of Indians on your life experience, poetry?

DL: That's a really complicated question! I hope there's an influence, and I've been wondering what it is. I grew up in southern Kansas, in Emporia, and there were a number of people of Indian ancestry around me, some of whom were very influential. One of my writing projects is to get in touch with an old high school friend and write about a man who mentored both of us at a certain point in our lives who was part Cherokee. These people around Emporia then didn't have the real reservation experience; they didn't have the continuity of their traditions, but they had something. Towards the end of my years in Emporia, a man who had been my father's best friend came to acknowledge his Indian ancestry and his ties with it. The man, Jack Haggard, started powwows in Emporia then, in the 1970s. Certainly I am of European background, but there were a lot of Indian people whom I knew as a child. In Emporia, there just were a lot of Indians: neighbors and teachers. It wasn't a big thing; it was just like you're part Irish or you're a part Cherokee or part Chippewa. Of course, I was ignorant of the destructive influence of Indian boarding schools; I was ignorant of what was really going on. Nevertheless, I wonder about indirect interaction between the cultures and maybe that has influenced me. I started reading Mari Sandoz when I was eight or nine. I've always seen Native American history as a crucial part of the history of this region.

KH: When I go to Indian art shows—Haskell Indian Junior College has one every year, and of course they have them in Minnesota at powwows and related events—it seems that the artwork is concerned with the Indians' past, not with what is going on now. Instead of a focus on what's here and now, there's an idealized past. Do you think that's a problem?

DL: I think that's an accurate perception. When I teach creative writing at Haskell, I try very hard to get my students to look at the whole picture and not to buy into clichés. Also, part of the problem is there are non-Indians who want to buy clichés from the past. They perpetuate that market. In another form, *Dances With Wolves* is a similar example.

KH: And *Thunderheart*, which I watched last night.

DL: Which is better, because it's the first time [in the movies] where you really see a reservation. At least *Thunderheart* brought us up to 1970.

KH: How does your own work fit into that? Your poetry mostly focuses, again, on the past, not the present.

DL: Each poem has a dialectic of past and present. I really do believe that memory is power, and conscious awareness of the past informs the present. I do want to create poetry that has an impact on the present moment, and I think to get depth, which is really important to me, that you do have to go through layers of past experience.

KH: The Native American influence seems tied in to your sense of place. You mention the Ogallala Aquifer, as well as the Midwest in general and Kansas in particular. Place seems to pin down, solidify, experience—even the earth itself. What is your connection to place?

DL: I'm very conscious, and have been since I was very small, that there is a history with this land—of people, of rocks, of animals. In *Spring Geese*, I spend a lot of time with fossils—get down to the bedrock. I just think it's important for a culture to be informed of where it has come from in order to make intelligent decisions and expressions of its present and future. I think a poet's job is to digest and synthesize as much as possible in order to give voice to community experience, including history. I think this is part of an ecological consciousness, the most crucial politics now.

KH: I'm curious about the use of religion in your poetry. Sometimes you adopt a Jewish persona ("Pray for the People"), sometimes a Christian one, sometimes neither, as in "Easter Morning," where a couple celebrates Easter not by going to church but by making love. Where does religion fit in?

DL: That's an interesting question, and it ties in to my attraction to Native American literature that I read. Native American literature allows for spirituality, whereas in contemporary European-American literature, if you write from a Christian point of view, it's discarded as naïve or sentimental. In popular fiction especially, you read nothing that's religious in a conscious way. I can only think of a few books: *The Handmaid's Tale*, by Margaret Atwood, a Canadian, which is an interesting take on fundamentalism.

KH: Philippe Sollers' *Women*.

DL: Yes, in places—coming to terms with Catholicism. And I think it is to Sollers' credit that he is thinking about it. In a lecture at Berkeley, I heard Paula Gunn Allen, a Laguna Pueblo writer, point out the implicit influence of Puritanism on Americans, even on people who never set foot in a church. Values and worldview are passed on. But it is interesting—the selective amnesia that the academic writing culture has: Thou Shalt Not Write About Christianity—or conventional religion, although Zen is okay; it's more hip. I really do want my work to have spiritual content—whatever that mystery is exactly. I don't strive for an orthodox Christian set of symbols. But take alchemy. I've studied the symbology of astrology since I was sixteen. There really are some wonderful metaphors for the whole life process that come out of the European alchemical and astrological traditions, and out of Christian mysticism. I really would like to be able to evoke some of those levels in a way that is powerful to people. I like the work of Michael Hefferman, who uses Catholic angels and saints. It's a richer set of cultural artifacts than the Congregational Church's Protestantism in my background.

KH: Pre-made symbols, in many ways. I know feminist concerns are of special interest to you. How and where does feminism intersect with your work, your beliefs? Do you see your writing as a feminist expression?

DL: Again, I have a lot of unresolved feelings. I am a woman; I have had a woman's experience. Some of those experiences as a writer have been those of limitation. I've thought about this a lot. I feel I have been dismissed sometimes, and that some of my subjects have been dismissed. I did some early writing on quilting, and gardening is a family tradition. But for many years, as you know, women's culture has been devalued, whereas the guys can get together and write their baseball card poems and bar poems, and that's taken as serious. But a woman writes about her garden—! I had a man say to me, "You're calling this set of poems *Tulip Elegies*?! Isn't that kind of flip?" For me, [tulips are] incredibly sensual, rich, evocative objects.

I try to be respectful of male culture. Still, I am aware in numerous instances of being belittled for being a woman, and I conclude that a technique of that belittlement has been sexual harassment, since I was molested by a neighbor boy as a small child, which is on a continuum with other experiences. A pervert followed me home from school when I was ten, and my parents called the police. Sometimes it was very surreptitious. I'm trying to say these were not isolated events. I had teachers talking to me graphically about sex when I was just a kid, and those conversations were veiled threats. I grew up in this nice town in a normal, middle-class neighborhood, and my parents tried to protect me. Of course, at maturity, you get the whistles on the street and leers, professors who want to go to bed

with you, and the dirty jokes. It all resonates with the earliest experiences of sexual threat. It's a constant pressure that ultimately, I think, is a dominance thing and serves to make it very difficult for women to assert their voices. Speaking is a kind of basic power, like writing, and when men, especially men who are teachers, shift their attention from a woman's words to her body, they sabotage her sense of comfortable power in the world.

I think my experience as a Midwestern woman is not atypical. The women I have talked to have been through much of the same harassment. I think it's important for me to talk about it.

KH: How are—or were—you able to assert your voice in such an environment?

DL: Several things. I have a very wonderful older brother, and he was very good to me when I was a little kid—[he is] six years older. He always made me feel like a dignified human being. When he came back from Harvard in the summers, he would give me writing assignments and encourage me to be a writer. I have been fortunate through all of this to have had men as mentors—and of course all my publishers have been men.

I really like men, and I think having had a really good relationship with my brother, I feel very comfortable with men who are treating me in a respectful manner. I've had very good mentoring at different points from Jim Bogan, Vic Contoski, Steven Meats down at Pittsburg State, who helped me at a certain stage of my writing that led to *Starwater*, and I'm very grateful to him and to the many men who are colleagues and friends and editors and publishers—Michael Annis, Dan Jaffee, George Wedge, and most recently, James Gilkeson.

KH: And have you formed connections with women as well?

DL: Yes, I like women too. But look at the women editors and publishers in the Midwest—who are they? I'm on the board of Woodley Press at Washburn University, which specifically has guidelines to publish writing from Kansas, or writing with some connection to Kansas. Of the twenty-some books published by Woodley over the years, only two are by women. There just aren't many Midwestern women who make it through to be writers and publishers. Name me a woman publisher besides Gloria Vando in the entire area. And she's from New York—a Puerto Rican from New York.

KH: I think her presence might still encourage women.

DL: Oh, yes. She's worked very hard for women's writing, through Helicon Nine.

KH: I think it will also help that women's concerns are being taken much more seriously. On the academic front, feminist criticism is becoming more important.

DL: You see that through the academic side; my focus more is on creative writers in the Midwest.

KH: For example, you mentioned quilting. That seems to have become lately the big metaphor for women's concerns—for coming together and creating something. The AIDS quilt in some ways comes out of that whole idea. Some of the icons that used to be laughed at are now being taken much more seriously by everyone.

DL: Which is good; and I also think that men are opening up to the feminine side of themselves too, and they are happier, healthier people. I think in particular of my first husband, who was with me in the delivery room for both my children and very committed to his children. And of course Tony [Allard] is a great support for my writing in practical ways as well as doing drawings for my books. But still, the Midwest region and the publishing scene, such as it is, is very patriarchal.

KH: Do you see feminism as affecting your work in any way? How does it affect what you write?

DL: It encourages me. I see myself writing as a person rather than sitting down as a woman, or as a white woman, or as a Midwestern white woman.

KH: So you write from human experience.

DL: Right. I really am not thinking of the ideology of anything. I want most of all to be known as a writer and not as a poetess.

KH: With the condescending little *-ess* on the end! Let's turn to *Tulip Elegies*, your latest book of poetry, just out from Penthe Press. The essay comprising its second half seems intensely personal—more so, perhaps, than the poems themselves. I know *Tulip Elegies* was written as a response to your father's stroke. But you also mention the death of Cecil Dawes, Junior, a Haskell student who disappeared and was later found dead in the Kaw River. How does that death fit into the poems? I think your father's stroke is fairly self-evident, but how does this other concern, which happened at the same time, become involved with this work?

DL: It was a series of events that happened to me in my mid-30s, where I experienced death and divorce. I really did not have a language or imagination that included those things. I had a much more static sense of things: you grow up, you get married, you sort things out in a certain way, and you stay that way. There is a happily-ever-after that all of our movies end with: the couple gets together after a long courtship, and that's the end. The basic verb of English, "to be," implies a static state. This was shattered by the tragic shooting death of my son's best friend when my son was thirteen. It began a series of disintegrations for me. I had known Cecil Dawes, Junior, at Haskell, had worked with his father, and when he died,

that just brought up again the horrible tragedy of losing children. You lose not just the person but that person's entire future, all those years that would have stretched before him. Cecil's death stirred up that loss of a thirteen-year-old boy. He had been very close to my family, a very close playmate and companion, and in the house a lot. Losing Cecil—again, it's losing a part of myself. Wanting to come to terms with all of that is what led to the poems.

KH: At the very end of *Tulip Elegies*, there are a couple lines in which you mention that the Dawes family adopted a child after Cecil's death. I was wondering if that tied into the whole concept of renewal that seems to be implicit in *Tulip Elegies*.

DL: Definitely. I was very conscious of it. The Dawes' adoption of a baby is an act of hope. We have to accept with the gift of life that also loss is a gift. The fact that we do come to an end gives life its characteristics.

KH: Could you speak also on your father's stroke? There's a beautiful essay about it in *Tulip Elegies*.

DL: At that difficult time, I gave myself permission to start writing about it. The publisher, Jim Gilkeson, said to me, "This is such a striking set of poems. Is there anything more? Can you explain the process of how it got written?" I'm very grateful to Jim Gilkeson for prompting me to write about that. It really helped me a great deal to take all of this and pull it together.

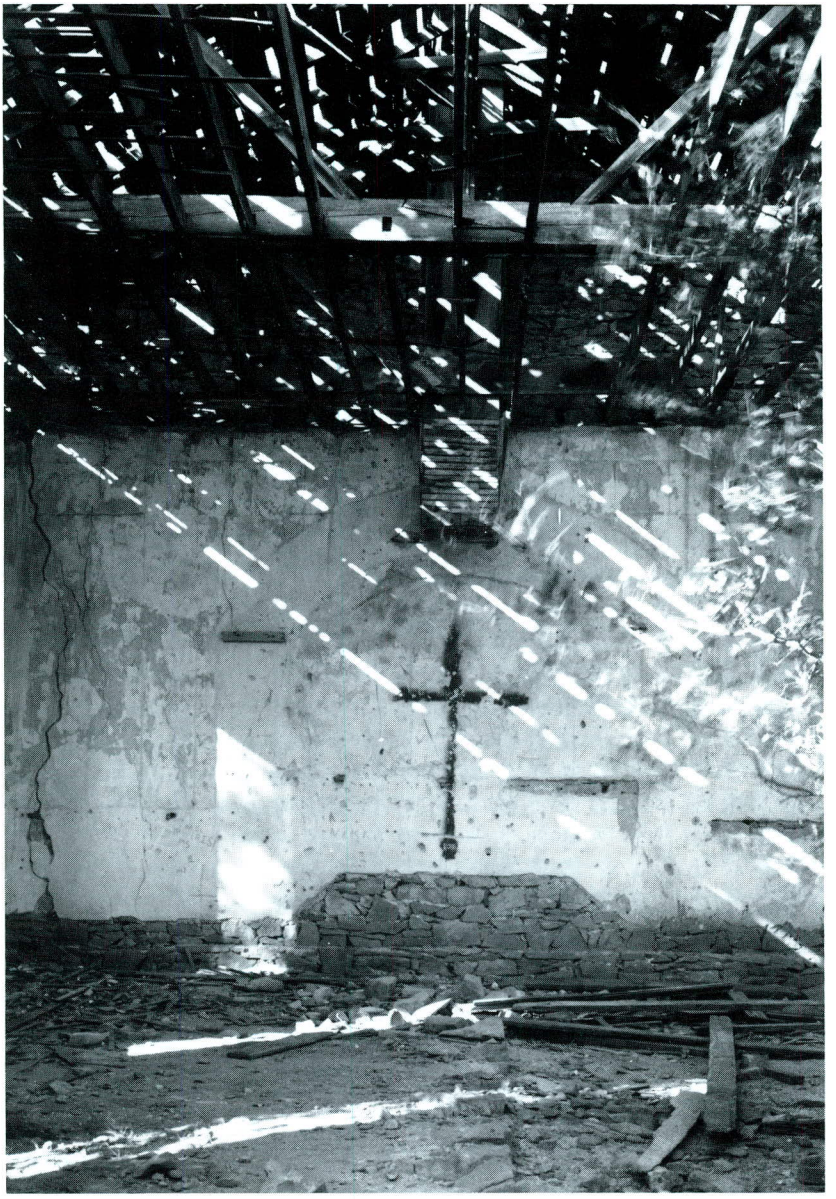
My father had a stroke in August of 1989. I had just returned from California, when I got a call from my mother. Even though it did not appear that it would be that serious at that time, I knew my life had just changed. It really is a shock to see a powerful, articulate, strong-willed person undergo this kind of change. He was a very talkative man, and he still cannot speak. Losing speech is a horrible change for people. It cuts you off from so much. He also cannot read.

KH: It would be amazingly frustrating: to be able to think completely coherently without being able to express oneself.

DL: It's just sort of a Kafka-esque metamorphosis that was so quick. It was a very sudden thing. One day he's playing golf; that night he's in a hospital and can only blink.

KH: What's happened to him since you've written *Tulip Elegies*? Has he recovered?

DL: No. He did go through therapy and was able to go home and sit up in a wheelchair. His left side is still strong; he still cannot speak, so he uses gestures. It is interesting to see how you get used to things, what ways you find to be happy. He's been miraculously resilient, considering his losses. Not that he hasn't had tough times in these three years, anger and frustration. He's really doing well. I admire him greatly.



Burning Cross, Stull Church
Stull, Kansas (1990)

Departure from Brattle Street

Fanny Longfellow spent her last morning
busy over her desk, sleeves
from a summer-white dress
brushing the scrapbook while Charles
practiced sonatas. She sorted
programs, postcards, locks of hair.
Henry was in his study writing,
the girls were in the garden,
and this last hour she found
strands of the baby's brown hair
so soft she could hardly feel them.
Like her voile dress, the touch
was barely thickened air.
She felt lightness as a dimension
she could enter, like the paintings
of the parents in the parlor
floating in rays from an unseen sun.
She slipped gossamer curls into paper
of an envelope and held sealing wax
to thin flame an instant too long.
Transparent heat reached out,
ignited wicks of cuffs, sleeves,
and moved through veils of flesh
until it reached a core of light
always there, waiting to be set free.

Lightning

One night we drove through a stormfront into a landscape of sleety rain and fireball lightning on every side of the road. The clouds were so low the car seemed to move through sky rather than ground. We expected the fragile metal around us to explode.

For fifty miles we experienced unreal scenery of water and fire: rain fell in slabs; lightning went off like land mines all around the car. For hours wind moved against earth in a frenzied dialogue.

We witnessed this and lived.

*

Usually a storm follows a regular sentence order. First the thunderhead looms higher until it dominates the sky. It blocks out the sun. Then the hush of quiet air seems to hang forever as wind direction shifts. Then quickening of cold wind, faint thunder, and spatters of rain build to a torrent quickly as the front passes through, with lightning and thunder firing at once. Finally it slacks off, and a steady driving rain settles in for the night.

This last rain is the best sleeping song outside the womb.

*

Lightning is a complete language. The fundamental grammar is simple—bolts touch ground or do not; strikes split clouds singly or in branching veins of sparks.

Horizontal lightning flickers from cloud to cloud, aloft, brightening cloud banks from within. From a distance, they are silent. Lightning aimed at earth in jagged perpendicular brings violent noise, and all movement stops.

Some rainstorms move quickly, with simple dynamics of distance and arrival, pianissimo and fortissimo. Some ramble for days around one spot, circling west, east, northeast, west.

Surprise is crucial. Intervals between thunder jolts are irregular, syncopated against regular pulse of bloodflow.

The quiet moment afterwards deepens into a pause like the hushed moment after a storyteller ends a thought.

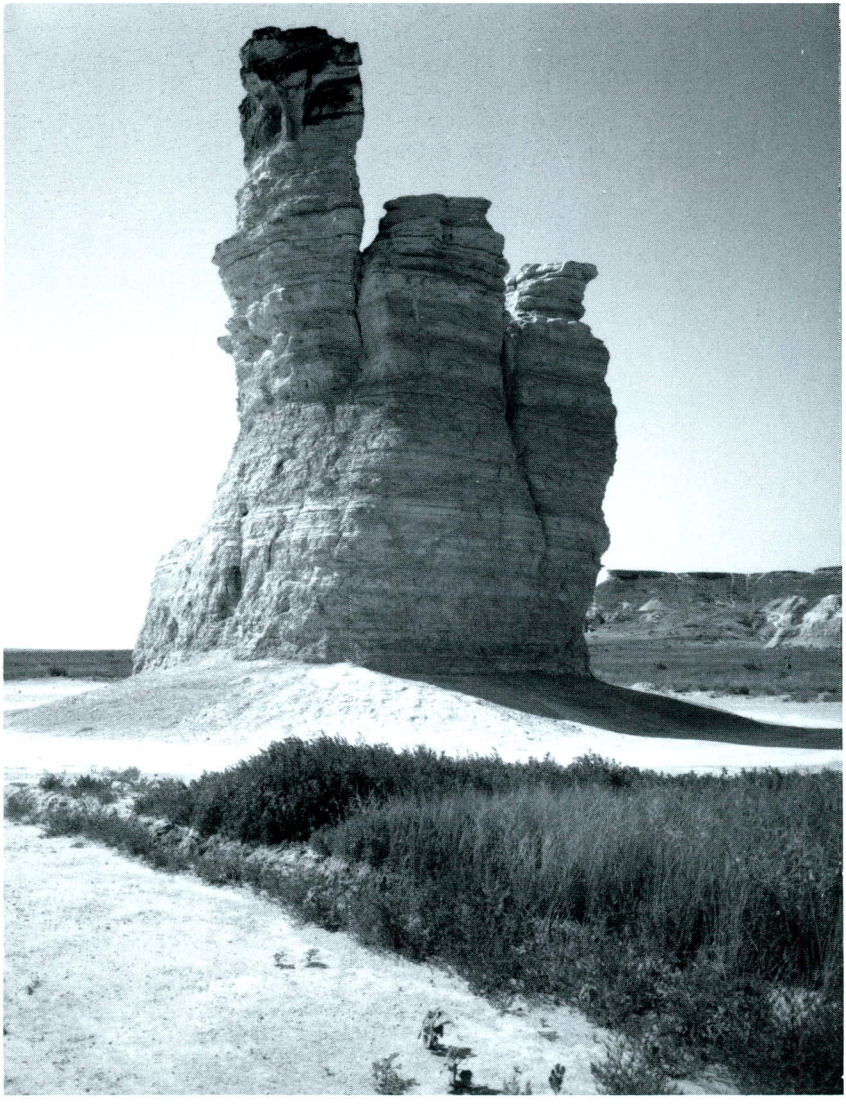
Neosho River, Indian Territory
1848-1876

Kanza people travel from Ohio
to a glistening river
dark brown like mink.
Cottonwoods shade the banks.
Water runs all year
and each fall buffalo
come like a rushing flood.

Horses dip their heads
into muddy water, drink
and graze on bluestem.
Government-built houses,
tight limestone boxes,
fill with fleas and dead air.
Livestock winter in them.

Teachers live in the mission
and follow a clock.
They cannot speak right
and say "Konce" and "Kanza."
Wind carries church bells
on invisible currents
downriver and across hills
filled with silent flint.

This lasts forever,
as smoke rises forever
to constellations hidden
beyond heaven. Children grow
old and know only this
world of grass and horses
and river touched by wind.



Castle Rock, Kansas (1991)

Mushroom Rock (1991)

Scenes from Emporia:

1. Bas-Relief

A few thousand people breathe together
night-quieted air, an invisible rhythm.
Time recharges under old stars
as still winds settle deep
between frame houses and elms.
Earth-black miles surround town
and stretch into bottomless fields.
Sky bears down so hard
the town is held exactly in place.

At the downtown intersection
the only movement will be
the train whistle, faint at first
like a distant coyote whine
coming from the farthest darkest edge
then moving closer, wind rushing in,
whistle filling yards and sidewalks,
closer, marking acreage of night
all the way to the center of now.

2. Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe: Arrivals

The train is a thread
drawn through the town
east to west,
and the town itself
a needle's steel
around motion.
Whistles, grinding brakes,
each brick of the walk
shaken in dirt
and I know
lines of track
will arrive soon
rolled up in boxcars.

The old black engine,
iron rhinoceros,
bellows
and my father climbs down
heavy-footed on dry land,
smelling of coal.
He carries a canvas bag
and inside are pieces
of other lands.

One time I hid in the engine
behind the twirling beacon.
I could see the light tunnel
bore into blackness
and tracks aimed west
like a ladder.

Railroad Right of Way (1990)

3. Night Walks

Ancestral elms and locust trees
guard the night. Twilight rises
from sidewalk cracks and puddles.

On the pavement, time slips backward
to children's long afternoons
of wagons and trucks and marbles.

One yard tells a story of iron gate,
hedgerow, bricks, goldfish pools.
Overgrown honeysuckles scratch glass.

Next door a porch of windchimes,
glider, geraniums and cactus—all
assembled for an outdoor parlor.

Against the side window
organdy curtains trace
a frame around yellow lamplight.

In the lighted pane, gray sleeves
move and stop. Hands appear.
Then nothing again but lamplight.

A back yard dog barks,
pauses, barks, pauses, pauses, barks.
I walk past the empty lot.

St. Joseph, Missouri, Stockyards (1990)

4. Hometown Scene

North to Sixth Street I see last week's
tornado damage, a telephone pole snapped
in three parts, new Fords wadded, but
it's old news. Traffic moves, and sky.
Afternoon sun fires a clump of yellow iris
at the corner of Sixth and State.
In the distance a man walks toward me.

Driving down Twelfth Street I see
the brick street, dust blowing,
a shirtless man still walking.
Clouds follow him east. Downtown
in a room for Stanley's Jewelry
one corner window catches the glare
like heat trapped in a topaz ring.

Mushroom Rock (1991)

5. Peter Pan Park

At Monkey Island
mallards swim the moat.
Spider monkeys
fidget human hands
across steel bars.
Even their tails
know how to walk.

Nights we lie still
on sheets sweated through
and listen to fan blades.
At daybreak sparrows
peck at the screens.

Lukewarm water
from the garden hose cools
my sister and me. We make
mud rivers. Sugar comes
crusted over cookies.

After supper we watch
sparrows at Monkey Island
fly between us
and peacocks and ducks
to the monkey house
and away past
elms covering the sky.

Cassoday, Kansas (1987)

Flathead Catfish

Catfish as big as men wallow
beneath the dam, rearranging rocks
to fit six-foot bulge of torso,
head and tail. These monsters
have whiskers covered with taste buds
and nerve lines down their length
to sense movement across the river.
They live through seasons unchanged
as the mud, indistinguishable
from rock outcroppings, clay-brown
and just as still. Open mouthed,
they wait for bass and crayfish.

When a man drowned, his wife
walked the banks for weeks
alongside the pool of flatheads.
At last she called psychics
to seance with water and spirits.
They probed other worlds
but heard no voice rising
from currents or sinking into
bottomless sand. They sensed
only a presence at nightfall,
a stirring when catfish awaken,
when night animals come to life.

KH: Mike Johnson, whose review of *Tulip Elegies* will appear in the same issue as this interview, really enjoyed Tony Allard's illustrations and wanted to know—and I want to know too—if they were drawn specifically for this work. Did the two of you work together closely on this?

DL: Yes, we did. I see the book as several layers of text weaving in and out. The essay is one; the journal entries are another layer; the poems themselves; and then Tony's drawings. He sat down and tried one style; I didn't like it. He set it aside and weeks later he came upon the perfect thing, mandalas. He did one in that style and I said, "That's it exactly." He drew twelve of them in about two or three days.

KH: The shape of the drawings was a concern when you published the book. Can you talk about that?

DL: Because they are mandalas, it would be great to have a round book. Well, that wasn't possible, given the limitations of the physical dimension. We then wanted a square book, just to square the circle, but that was going to cost a great deal. Then we just sort of made it a squarish rectangular shape.

KH: As square as a rectangle can be.

DL: Right! And still get a decent price at the printer's.

KH: I know Tony's illustrated some of your other works also.

DL: He's a good sport. What's also interesting is there really is a lot of interaction between his work and mine, and even though he and I are very different people and working in very different media, since he is a performance artist, you will see that both of us have a fascination with time and transformation. We're very much concerned with some of the same things.

KH: I wanted to talk about the criticism you write, as well as the poetry you write, because I know that you write critical articles. We've had a class together. The essay section of *Tulip Elegies* contains scholarly writing. You finish off the whole thing with a Works Cited page.

DL: Well, it's a "Sources" page. I didn't want to be too scholarly.

KH: How does your critical work tie into your writing? Is it completely separate or not?

DL: I like doing both. I've always liked critical writing and the study of literature itself as well as creative writing. Well, it's just an extension of reading deeply. I guess both give me pleasure, which is the main thing. I like the opportunity in critical writing to engage at depth with something. I do like the research; really, both involve a lot of research, which may not be apparent when you read poetry. One reason I included the sources at the end of *Tulip Elegies*—and it really is kind of an informal, idiosyncratic "Works Cited" page—is if people are interested, to send them to those books. But also I wanted to acknowledge all the voices that work with mine.

KH: So it's a help to the reader as well as a nod to the people who helped you.

DL: Exactly. And kind of a mapping of the whole process. I think of writing and journal-making and all of that also as a kind of map-making.

KH: What kind of things do you tend to write about for criticism?

DL: To avoid conflict of interest at Haskell, I started doing a lot of Native American criticism. I really have loved Native American literature for a long time. I taught a course at KU, a 203, on Native American Literature, in 1982 or '83, before I taught at Haskell, and learned a great deal from Bud Hirsch and Wolfgang Kraus, a German graduate student. I really appreciate the values of many of the Indian writers. Many of them do tend to engage in community and also the spiritual. I think they often have a more direct tie between human spiritual expression and nature, which is also relevant to a Midwestern writer growing up in this semi-rural area.

KH: I also promised I'd ask you about alchemy.

DL: One of the things you learn as a non-Indian working with Indian people is not to appropriate their cultural symbols. I feel very strongly as a non-Indian person that I want to be respectful. I want to be as good a teacher as I can of Indian literature and as good a critic as I can. But my own writing has to be an expression of a non-Indian person. I think alchemy is a wonderful set of European ideas and symbols that express many things similar to Indian spirituality, but in a distinctive non- Indian way. That's one reason I chose alchemy. I'm not about to start writing reportage of private ceremonies Indians perform.

KH: The last question: What next? What are you working on next? I assume you're already working.

DL: Of course, of course, it's always in process. In '91 I was very grateful to win the Kansas Arts Commission Literary Arts Fellowship in poetry, which they give once every three years to one poet. This tells you about the level of funding for the arts for this state. To acknowledge my appreciation, I started a set of poems and prose pieces about the Midwest and this area, about Kansas. I'm trying to write very honestly and accurately about an individual experience that I hope belies the stereotypes that the coastal media present as Kansas.

KH: So you're going to spread the true message!

DL: Well—yes. But there are some people that say you should keep it a dark secret, that living this marginalized existence has its own advantages, which it does. You don't get into the academic games; you don't get too comfortable. There are some real advantages. So maybe it should be kept a secret. Let people stay away.

KH: Thank you, Denise. It's been a pleasure talking to you.

Reviews

Women in Cars by Martha McFerren. Kansas City, MO: Helicon Nine Editions, 1992. 65 pages. $9.95 paper.

Italian Smoking Piece (With Simultaneous Translation) by Christy Sheffield Sanford. Kansas City, MO: Helicon Nine Editions, 1992. 20 pages. $10.00 paper.

We are told that the writer writes alone. We know well the images of the solitary writer, tucked away in a quiet room or holed up in a cabin, gazing into the air and scribbling, scribbling and gazing some more. In a talk about collaborative writing and intellectual property, Andrea Lunsford suggested that the emphasis on the writer as a unified, isolated self comes out of a masculinist tradition. By contrast, collaborating de-emphasizes the individual ego and encourages cooperation and the seeking of common ground. Its direction is feminist.

In an effort to practice Lunsford's ideas and to do what we can to challenge the masculinist paradigm, we have attempted to collaborate on this review of two books, each by a woman. The recent opening of a house for writers in Kansas City perhaps also challenges the writer's isolation. Known as the Writers Place, this small castle in the Valentine district provides a space for writers to be around one another, for writer's groups to meet and for writers to read their work. For some it will be a place to escape writerly loneliness; for others it will be a place to collaborate, to write in concert with others. We take this space to thank Gloria Vando Hickok and her husband Bill Hickok for founding the Writers Place.

We have Gloria Vando Hickok to thank also for these two books under review, both published by Helicon Nine Editions, which she edits. This not-for-profit press sponsors two annual contests whose awards include publication. Martha McFerren's *Women in Cars* won the 1992 Marianne Moore Poetry Prize and Christy Sheffield Sanford's *Italian Smoking Piece* was a finalist in the Virgil Thompson Creative Non-Fiction Competition.

That both these books are written by women should not be taken lightly—gender informs their writing, both in the subjects they choose and the ways in which they treat them. We think particularly of McFerren's poem about a weird gynecologist and of Sanford's images of smoking and sex from one woman's point of view. Both writers concern themselves with sexuality, their own and others. Sanford (or the "I" of the text) interlaces her own sexual episodes with those of Ugo and Valentina, and McFerren devotes a number of her poems, particularly those set in her college years, to her own growing sexuality and the foibles of her friends.

"Sunglasses, 1970; The Rest, 1987," in *Women In Cars*, illustrates how McFerren effectively mixes humor with sex—humor with everything, for that matter. The speaker goes "to bed with a boy/just to get his sunglasses off him," the sort of motive we have learned to expect from males. This reversal of expectation makes us reconsider the connection between sex and power. She succeeds in snatching his sunglasses off to find eyes that, apparently, were worth the effort. Lest we think that sex with such frivolity could still go without censure in the time of AIDS, she concludes the poem by evaluating the past in light of the present:

> You shouldn't be listening
> for any resonance in this:
> It's not about Lonely in America,
> it's about fooling around.
> For a while it was possible
> to bed somebody just to get his
> sunglasses off. It was fun
> and you got to see people's eyes.
> Nobody had to worry about
> getting pregnant or sick or
> anything. You could go ahead.
>
> All that's going to change now.

Like many of her poems, the humor of "Sunglasses" does not come without acknowledging the absurdity of the gesture or raising the specter of a darker reality.

Similarly, McFerren can balance her vision of a dark reality with humor. In "Southern Gothic," for example, the violent and disturbing South we associate with William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, she satirizes as "that lush disease/known as Gothic." For McFerren, the South is the place where women gossip over tea about atrocities rather than perform them, where racism and child abuse occur in full daylight, and where home is "a mess, but a warmer, cheaper one." Her sense of humor allows her to embrace the South, which, for all its flaws, remains home. In *Women in Cars*, flaws are to be highlighted and explored, laughed at and acknowledged. Suggesting a healthy attitude about unveiling the body and the self, the title poem relives the experience of undressing while speeding down a darkened, deserted highway. As McFerren describes the scene, the last item the girl in the car removed was her fake ponytail, and her date, Frank Fallis, screamed

> "GAAAAAA," and skidded off
> the road. And then he said,
> really sarcastic, "You got
> anything *else* unnatural?"

We cruise (and laugh, and wince) with McFerren through the rest of the book as she removes that which is unnatural and exposes the warts and frailties that are quite natural to our human condition.

As for human frailty, who but the purest among us hasn't looked at a HoHo, perfectly aware that 99% of its ingredients can kill, and eaten it anyway? In "Puremouth," "the puremouth woman"—whom we understand is the speaker's own shrieking inner voice—walks into her bedroom and enumerates the silent killers in the speaker's appliances, dental work, hair color, food, magazines, art work, and on. What better medicine to take for such mortal dangers, McFerren might ask, than a dose of laughter? Rather than do as suggested and remove all cardboard from her life, she acknowledges its toxic reality, and with a chuckle, says, "I knew this. I did it anyway." "Puremouth" attests to the inevitability of making choices between indulging in the sensual and pragmatically avoiding what might be bad for us. While McFerren's text laughs its way out of the dilemma, *Italian Smoking Piece* smolders from the friction of such choices.

Christy Sheffield Sanford's *Italian Smoking Piece* occupies a blurry space between prose and poetry, the ambiguity of "piece" helping to shrug off categories while remaining open to associations with essay, story, poem, music, sculpture, etc. Sanford connects twenty "meditations" by weaving in and out of the text two subtle narratives and several themes—the sensuality of smoking, the smokiness of sexuality, U.S. versus Italian attitudes about smoking, and, implicitly, the playfulness of language. The surface of the text rolls like waves rather than flowing on a level plane, as Sanford's "simultaneous translation" rises immediately above the line of primary text. For instance, she may begin placidly enough in English, then in bold, superscripted italics, translate an English word or phrase into Italian; she might then pun in Italian before going back to English on the flat line. Before we know it, Italian briefly becomes the primary text and the English translation runs above. Sanford even puns between languages creating zany leaps from "pansy" to "*pensee*" or from "apple" to "*mela*" to "mêlée."

Smokers gather to laugh, chat, as though before knowledge,

la mela *the mêlée* *drop,* *dripping*
before the apple . . . . goccio L'acqua

There's water coming in through the ceiling.
gocciola dal soffitto. The ooze

memory before the Surgeon General. *godiamo*
of ricordo. "We enjoy God, our food,

talk, smoking, each other."

In some ways it is a textual performance, and visually the words drift across the page like smoke. At times the two languages fuse into one, recalling an earlier time—before the apple, before the Surgeon General, before Babel, when all languages were one.

In a society that has recently found new and compelling evidence of the dangers of secondhand smoke, Sanford's *Italian Smoking Piece* reminds us that we can look at smoking from an angle other than the Surgeon General's. Merely disputing the evidence that smoking kills, even the tobacco industry assumes the same values as the non-smokers—health and longevity over gratification and sensual pleasure. Sanford is more realistic and finds the real grounds upon which choices are made. A person smokes in spite of the hazards; a person smokes because it answers a need; it is, according to Sanford, "the public exposure of extreme oral needs."

Smoking is sensual and sexy, and like sex, it can be beautiful, glamorous, fashionable, or it can be sordid and abject. On the one hand, it forms part of

> The choreography of courtship: her hand and arm move in arabesques, arches; her fingers graze her pursing lips; she grasps the cigarette, sucks in. Her thumb indents her cheek. . . .
> A man holds a cigarette between the thumb and middle finger and behind his back as if to hide or protect. Now, he traps it between taut second and third fingers. He moves it upward from the fork of his fingers to knuckle level. When dragging, he feels his lips with his fingers, giving himself a secret kiss.

While Sanford emphasizes the romantic images of smoking, she does not shy away from sordid ones. She describes a woman who has just performed fellatio in a bathroom stall. "As she washes her face, a long, long viscous stream flows from her mouth." Moments later streams of smoke flow from her mouth as she and her partner "smoke over their semifreddo." And Sanford offers still other images that are more ambiguous. Noticing a sidewalk littered with "*mozziconi* (butts)," she comments, "Filter tips are sexy and nerdy at the same time like stocking tops and bra straps that show." *Italian Smoking Piece* cautions us that people must take responsibility for investing objects and actions with their significance.

It occurs to us that some readers might find the opacity of Sanford's piece offputting, for it does not exhibit the coherence we expect from prose. Others may see the lack of forthright clarity as an inevitable result of addressing complexity. Both *Italian Smoking Piece* and *Women in Cars* exhibit strong writing. While we find McFerren's work a bright flame, a candle illuminating the self and its flaws, we might describe Sanford's as smoke with fire beneath.

Becky Eason and Dan Martin

Tulip Elegies: An Alchemy of Writing by Denise Low. Lawrence, KS: Penthe Press (PO Box 994, Lawrence, KS, 66044-0094), 1993. No pagination. $10.00 paper.

> That desire to change soil
> into petals, that certainty
> seared into the oldest bulbs,
> is familiar, is a charge
> even in my red pulse.
>
> —Denise Low

Traditionally, the elegiac poem expresses grief over another's death, closely following the poet's path through sorrow toward consolation, toward a transcendent moment of understanding when the poet realizes that the dead lives on: in memory, in the flowers and vegetation of spring, in heaven, in the immortality of fame, in the verse of the poem itself. This consolation usually implies that the mourned has moved from a lower plane of existence to higher one. Denise Low's *Tulip Elegies: An Alchemy of*

Writing both draws on and rejects these traditions, combining verse with prose, theories of alchemy with the practice of writing, all as a way of working through grief over her father's stroke, "the metamorphosis of a robust man into an invalid." What is transformed through the process of writing this set of poems and accompanying essay is the poet's vision and understanding of her father's "metamorphosis."

Structurally, the book consists of two parts: a series of twelve poems ("The Tulip Elegies"), and an essay which traces out connections between alchemy, writing, gardening, the illness of her father, and meditates on how these various elements came together to form the poems in the first part. In the theory of alchemy, "The members of a pair work together in a balance, not in opposition. Nothing is born or killed, only expressed in new ways." In Low's book, the poems and the prose both work to create such a balance, with neither taking precedence over the other, and with each section supporting the other. *Tulip Elegies* is filled with a series of seeming oppositions: poetry/prose, male/female, life/death, her father before the stroke/her father after the stroke, and many more. Through the image, or the icon, of the tulip, Low draws together and synthesizes these oppositions. As sexuality and companionship create a balance between male/female, the very act of planting a tulip becomes a metaphorical balancing of the elements, a burial that is a necessary precursor to life, carefully bringing together the (seeming) opposition: Life/Death.

"Tulip Elegy I" opens in November, paralleling the beginning of the accompanying essay, which also starts in November ("the season of death" she states in the essay, as well as the month of her father's birthday, and the date on which the family begins to realize "his damaged mind would not recover"). The essay begins with the poet feeling "helpless to correct this catastrophe to my father." In the first "Tulip Elegy," helplessness gives way to a sense of purpose:

> November, season to aim
> the spade and bear down hard.
> Grass gives, rips open:
> sod and black flesh.
> From crumbled stone will rise
> the new year. I bury
> crisp buds into the breach
> and press them further down.

Low imagines a simultaneous planting and burial, both of which metaphorically represent the act of writing, with the poet's pen analogous to the spade that must be aimed and brought down hard, burying and transform-

ing her grief, creating something new from the emptiness of her loss, changing the "season of death" to the "season to aim." As Low writes, "shining petals will carry / a core of darkness up from the subsoil." The loss does not go away, but is transformed, and the tulip carries within itself both the "core of darkness" that is loss and the "shining petals" of the new creation.

The consolation of this new creation, however, is not the resurrection of the Christian elegy ("Resurrection is a falsehood"). Low rejects the hierarchical implications of Christian rebirth. In "Tulip Elegy VIII," she writes, "Mud is where miracles occur / where blossoms, kings, and wolves / come apart in final union." Most importantly, "New buds this spring are not / the same flowers resurrected." The consolation here is not one of apotheosis, of a movement from a lower plane to a higher one. If there is a resurrection here, it is in the activity of mourning, the transformation of loss into language. Behind the act of planting, the act of writing is "The desire to change soil / into petals" through the alchemy of language, and by so doing to change loss into the act of creation as well as consolation: "The moments I was immersed in writing the Tulip Elegies was the first peace I experienced after my father's crippling stroke. The writings and rewritings engaged me for weeks at a time in a healing trance." In the last section of the essay, Low notes that her father "endures, different from the man he was before." The consolation comes from the poet's acceptance and understanding of change, of her father's "metamorphosis," not through imagining that metamorphosis as an apotheosis.

Both Low's prose and her verse are well crafted, containing astonishing moments of beauty; the language of her essay is often poetic, and her poems are meditative—like small essays; there is emotion in the prose, and intellect in the poetry. There *are* moments in the essay when the language flattens out and Low emphasizes the information carried by her sentences at the expense of the beauty of the language—although those moments are few. Tony Allard's drawings deserve special mention as well, the combination of black ink on the white page working its own alchemical combination of opposites. At the end of Section III of her essay, Low provides a list of the correspondences between tulips and alchemical imagery. Allard's drawing on the next page combines a tulip, a yin-yang symbol, a map of the earth and the heavens, day and night. The drawing perfectly illustrates the alchemical concepts on the previous page, and vice versa. I find the relationship between the drawings and the writings to be symbiotic, with one supporting the other, and I wish that Low had traced out this interplay, had more explicitly woven the drawings into the fabric of her book.

Mike K. Johnson

No More Nature by Terry Wright. Lawrence, KS: Kairos Editions, 1993. 25 pages.

The poems in Terry Wright's new collection, *No More Nature*, seek, as the end of "Saturnalia" puts it, "a token / communication," even though they fear that such a thing may be so unlikely or difficult in the world we have created for ourselves as to be virtually unachievable. There is the distinct fear behind these poems that no one is listening, and yet this fear paradoxically drives the poems frenetically along in the search for meaning and for connection. Even the linebreak at the end of "Saturnalia" resonates with the urgency of this search. "It seeks a token," the penultimate line declares. And a token is, of course, both something that represents a fact or event or emotion, a symbol as it were, and a stamped metal object used as currency. And in the culture Terry Wright contends with in these poems, a culture which seems at times able to understand *value* only in monetary terms (which is—as an aspect of "the machine" we find grappling with "nature" in the poems—artificial), it is a word which suggests value even to those who might have trouble hearing what comes next. Because the next line, dropped down so it gathers in as much white space as possible, is simply one word, "communication," which equates communication with value, as well as suggesting that in this culture, in which we can actually imagine a time when there is "no more nature," communication in any true sense is becoming merely a "token" gesture; and, in addition, if we recall that another of the shades of meaning of token is something given as a sign of affection or kept as a memorial, then we have the further implication of what this poem is, and all good poems are. Good poems are offered with affection as a kind of repository for the world that is always in the process of being lost.

"But the past is a file / of dead words on paper," as "Spin Doctor" points out, and these poems contend with the reality that poems need to be composed in ways that keep the words alive, or bring them back to life, so that the poem is not the past but the past (and the future) experienced, or re-experienced, in the present of the reading of the poem. The energy found in these poems attests to the measure of success Terry Wright manages. That energy emanates both from the words he uses, which refreshingly includes words that have actually been born of this century, and from the unique, perhaps even radical vision which allows computer lingo and other technical language to come to the service of human touch, human communication, as in these lines from "Conquest of Space":

On the dark side
of the lens my neurons fire
like *Voyager*'s tiny nuclear generator.

But Terry Wright is not a one-dimensional poet whose vision is tied inextricably to twentieth-century technical jargon; listen to him speaking of "Roses as Fossils"—"Between the cut and the vase / is the unsustaining air." Every word in this sentence has been around a long time, but the vision is unique and calls us to an attention that is new.

The poems in *No More Nature* are, finally, acts of witness to the insanity of the end of this century. They are testimonials to that which must survive within us even as it is destroyed in the world beyond us *by* us. These are poems which understand that, as "Garbage In" put it, "All our talk / of objects is surface and nature is repetitive."

George Looney

Contributors' Notes

Gilbert Allen (Box 30881, Department of English, Furman University, Greenville, SC 29613) has published two collections of verse: *In Everything* (Lotus, 1982) and *Second Chance* (Orchises, 1991). He received the 1990 Rainmaker Award from *Zone 3*, and has poems forthcoming in *Cumberland Poetry Review, New Mexico Humanities Review,* and *Southern Review.*

Stacia Bensyl (609 W First St., Maryville, MO 64468) teaches English at Missouri Western State College. Her most recent work is forthcoming in *Kansas Quarterly* and *Journal of Irish Literature.*

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Maryanne Del Gigante (3225 Garfield St. NW, Washington, DC 20008) grew up in Melbourne and Wagga Wagga ("place of many crows"), Australia and has pursued a career in art and design. Currently she is a graduate student in Washington studying the Italian Renaissance.

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