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cottonwood

Connie May Fowler
Oakley Hall
Luci Tapahonso
Oliver Rice
Denise Low
Alan Brown

Spring 1999

Cottonwood and Cottonwood Press
Lawrence, Kansas
Cottonwood 53
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ISSN 0147-149X

Cottonwood is a review of the literary and visual arts published twice yearly, in the spring and fall.

Two-issue subscriptions to *Cottonwood* are available for $15. Four-issue subscriptions are $28, and six-issue subscriptions are $40. If you wish to subscribe to *Cottonwood*, or to become a donor, patron, or benefactor, please write to: the Lawrence Arts Center, 200 W. 9th Street, Lawrence, KS, 66044; 785-843-2787 (phone); 785-843-6629 (fax).

Cottonwood welcomes submissions of fiction, poetry, nonfiction, reviews, photography, and other visual arts. Please limit poetry submissions to five, prose submissions to one story, review, or essay. Submissions will not be returned unless they are accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Simultaneous submissions are accepted, and submissions are read year-round. Please send submissions care of the appropriate editor to: *Cottonwood*; Box J, 400 Kansas Union; University of Kansas; Lawrence, KS, 66045.

Cottonwood receives support from the Department of English of the University of Kansas and the Lawrence Arts Center. Production is facilitated by the Word Processing Center of the University of Kansas. *Cottonwood* is printed in Lawrence by the Alliance Communications Group of Allen Press.

Cottonwood is indexed by the *American Humanities Index* and *Poem Finder.*

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Tom Lorenz

Editor's Note

For readers familiar with *Cottonwood*, issue 53 represents both a continuation and a departure. It is a continuation in the sense that all of us on the *Cottonwood* staff remain dedicated to upholding the rich literary tradition and the high standards established by all those who have worked on or contributed to *Cottonwood* over the past thirty years. It is a long and distinguished legacy we feel privileged to preserve.

But this issue also represents change and opportunity for *Cottonwood* and its readers. A new partnership with the Lawrence Arts Center and Allen Press will, we believe, expand *Cottonwood's* scope and provide it with the steady financial backing it has sometimes lacked in the past. A new look to the journal has been designed by Chris and Paul Hotvedt, our friends at Blue Heron Typesetters. And a new publication schedule will bring *Cottonwood* to the public in the spring and fall of each year.

One thing that hasn't changed is our commitment to provide our readers the finest in poetry, prose, and the visual arts. We are particularly proud of the contributors in this issue, which includes fiction from internationally acclaimed writers like Connie May Fowler, Oakley Hall, and Alan Brown, and poetry from award-winning poets such as Oliver Rice and Luci Tapahonso. You'll find stories and poems here that range from the gulf coast of Florida to the Nazi work camps of World War II, from the Atlantic coastline to a college campus in South Dakota to Tokyo and Hong Kong. At the same time we recognize that our roots remain in Kansas, and we are dedicated to maintaining a strong regional flavor in each issue of the journal, here represented in the writings of Denise Low and Kathleen Johnson, among others, and by the Konza Prairie photographs of Jim Nedresky.

There are many people to thank for putting together this issue of *Cottonwood*. I'd like to first thank the staff for all their hard work and dedication. I'd also like to express my gratitude to Rick Mitchell and Carolyn Doty, each of whom made invaluable contributions, and to Pam LeRow for all of her assistance. And a very special thanks goes to Phil Wedge, who compiled the splendid poetry contained in last issue's poetry retrospective and who has almost single-handedly kept *Cottonwood* going these past few years.

Most of all, I'd like to express our appreciation for all the old friends of *Cottonwood*, who over the years have stuck with us and maintained their generosity and support. And to our new friends, may this be the beginning of a long and engaging partnership.

Alan Brown — Love Like Rice

My sister Nobuko turned twenty-seven last month, and everyone is worried that she won't ever get married. But Mrs. Hamada, who arrives on a rainy Sunday afternoon wrapped in silver fur and jewelry, fills up our tiny house with her brisk determination. Mrs. Hamada, who parks her silver Audi with genuine leather seat covering right at our front door, has an excellent reputation as a go-between. She's successfully matched more than sixty couples right here in Nagano City, my mother assured Nobuko this morning at breakfast.

I am a man and I attend college in Tokyo, so marriage is not something I have to think about yet. But we must all do our best to help my sister. This weekend, I have come home at my mother's request so we can show the go-between what a fine family we are.

Mrs. Hamada must be at least as old as my grandmother, but she dresses up to attract customers: the fur and jewelry, a bright pink streak in her hair to match her pink glasses and pink dress. I think that she must have interesting stories to tell about her life, but my mother told us that her husband was killed in the war in China before they could have children. So maybe not.

My sister serves us tea and sweets. We are all sitting around the kotatsu, my father and I with our legs under the quilt because it is cold in the room, the women outside the quilt, stiff-backed, with their legs tucked primly beneath them. I know that Nobuko can only sit like this for about ten minutes before her legs fall asleep and her ankles start to ache, so I watch her.

Behind Mrs. Hamada, in the tokonoma, long stems of wild grass and one sad-looking yellow flower jut out of a bamboo vase at awkward angles, looking like they've just been trampled by a dog. My sister, at my mother's urging, has been studying flower arranging, koto playing, and the tea ceremony—as if these are the skills she will need to keep a husband and a house.

"Do you smoke cigarettes?" Mrs. Hamada asks.

Nobuko says, "No."

My mother and I sneak a look at each other. My father stares down at his cup of green tea.

"I can't be bothered with girls who smoke," says Mrs. Hamada, who possibly suspects that Nobuko is lying. "They don't make good wives. So if you smoke, even an occasional cigarette, you must resolve to quit."

My sister, who is also looking down at her tea, says, "I understand."

This will turn out to be the only thing she says the entire visit. My mother and Mrs. Hamada go on to discuss Nobuko as if she isn't here, as if she is an appliance, a washer or a television set my mother is trying to sell. My mother, it seems to me, is not a natural salesperson.

"Nobuko is a big help around the house," she says, holding the plate of plum blossom–shaped candies out to Mrs. Hamada, who smiles and declines. "She cleans beautifully. And she's a wonderful cook. And she's very kind to her brother."

Mrs. Hamada smiles at me. I nod my head enthusiastically as I kick my father under the table. He won't look up at me, so I try to push his feet away from the heat lamp and he pushes back—a game we've been playing since I was little.

"She works at Nagano Bank? She'll want to quit after she's married, of course."

"Well, yes. But then, lots of married women work these days," my mother says. "The world isn't like it was when we were young, is it?"

"That's true," Mrs. Hamada says. "But Nagano isn't Tokyo. Men here are more old-fashioned. They want a wife at home to take care of the house and the children. Anybody can work in an office. It's a fortunate woman who has the wonderful task of raising a family."

"Yes, that's so. That's so." My mother nods in agreement, looking around at her husband and children as if considering our worth for the first time.

Is everybody else thinking what I'm thinking: why didn't Mrs. Hamada ever remarry?

Then Mrs. Hamada turns her attention on me. "And what about you? Soon we'll be looking for a wife for you, won't we?"

"I live in Tokyo," I tell her, meaning: I don't need your help. I'm going to find my own wife.

"Tokyo? Ah well." She turns to my mother and lifts her painted eyebrows. "Then we should find him a girl whose family is from Tokyo, and with a house they own, not rent."

"But I'm still in college. And after I graduate, I plan to go to graduate school in America," I say, surprising even myself. It seems that everyone in my family has started to lie. This is what the go-between is doing to us.

"Is that so? My, you must be very smart. America? All the more reason to have a wife to take along. You'll be so busy studying, you'll need someone to take care of you. To cook and clean . . ."

"Wouldn't a maid be cheaper?" I say before I can stop myself.

My sister bursts out laughing, and quickly covers her mouth. My father grins. My mother, underneath all of the powder she put on just for this occasion, blushes and scowls. And Mrs. Hamada, she looks annoyed. I know I shouldn't have said that. We need her on our side.

This is what the go-between isn't supposed to know: about my sister and Mr. Sakamura.

A few years ago, a former colleague of my father's introduced my sister to a man who had just been transferred by his company to Nagano City. Sakamura was his name and he was from Hokkaido. The first time he came to our house to meet my sister, it was like our whole family was going out on a date together. My mother spent the day cleaning and cooking. She went to the beauty parlor to have her hair done, and then she put on one of her best kimonos.

"He's not coming to meet you," my sister said as she helped my mother wind and tie her obi. "I don't know why you're going to so much trouble."

"If he's a serious young man, he'll be judging all of us." She looked my sister up and down, shaking her head in despair. Nobuko, against my mother's wishes, had put on a red dress. I thought she looked pretty.

She turned to me. I was still in my school uniform. "Why don't you put on a tie? Hurry. He'll be here soon."

"Mother, he doesn't have to put on a tie. Please stop it. You're making me nervous. I should have told him I'd meet him at a coffee shop or somewhere."

"A coffee shop? What an idea. Where's your father?"

My father, who had retired from his job at Mitsui Pesticides two years earlier after having a stroke, could usually be found digging in his tiny garden out back or playing mah-jongg in the barber shop down the street.

"I'll find him," I said, leaving the room, happy to get away. Even I was getting nervous. What if I was responsible for my sister not getting married?

"Don't forget your tie," my mother shouted after me. "And brush your hair."

"I don't have any hair," I hollered as I stepped out of my slippers and into my sneakers in the genkan. I had a school regulation crew cut. There was nothing to brush.

The most important thing to know about Sakamura was his height. He was very, very tall. As tall as a small building. As tall as an American. When he lowered himself to sit on the tatami, his long legs folded under him like snapped chrysanthemum stems. Sitting, he was still taller than my mother was standing. I couldn't stop staring at him. His feet were big, too.

"Do you play basketball?" my father asked him when they met, but Sakamura only smiled. Since his stroke, my father is difficult to understand.

"I don't understand what your colleague was thinking," my mother said to my father after they left on their date. "They look ridiculous standing together. He makes Nobu-chan look much shorter than she really is."

"Where does he buy his clothes?" I wondered.

"All the trouble we went to. But don't worry, we'll find a man of normal height," she told Nobuko when she came home later that night.

But my sister continued to date Sakamura. She liked him. And so did I. He was handsome, and he had many good qualities, I thought. He worked in his company's export division, and he often brought me product catalogs and brochures in different foreign languages. And he was so funny. For example: one Sunday morning, he showed up unannounced for breakfast wearing his pajamas under his overcoat. We all heard the front door slide open and we went out into the hall, and there he was, standing in the genkan grinning and holding out a gift-wrapped box of my mother's favorite pastries from Sogo Department and a huge bag of Shikoku oranges.

My father liked him, too. When Sakamura brought my sister home from their dates, he would sit down with my father and watch television with him. My father isn't supposed to drink since his stroke, but sometimes he would open a bottle of beer, pouring most of it into Sakamura's glass, and saving a small amount for himself. He would talk to Sakamura, comment on the television shows they were watching, and Sakamura, understanding almost nothing, would smile and nod. He seemed to really enjoy my father's company.

My mother wouldn't change her mind, though. She was embarrassed by Sakamura's height. And she didn't appreciate his sense of humor. "Hokkaido people are like unpolished rice," she often said.

"Mother, he's very kind," my sister would remind her.

"People stare when you walk down the street together. And what if you had children that tall? What if you had a daughter? It would be terrible for her. Have you thought about that? You would have to go live in America or someplace where everyone is that size."

So Nobuko started to sneak out to see him. When she came home late at night, she and my mother would argue, and my father would slip out of the house. I would be sent to look for him. Once I found him at the video store, staring at the pictures of naked girls on the video cases. Another time, he was at the 7-Eleven, eating a hot dog. I never told.

Then one night, Nobuko didn't come home at all. At midnight, my mother sat down at the telephone and started calling Sakamura's apartment, and she called every ten minutes until morning. I know this because at about five o'clock, she came into my room and woke me. It was still dark outside. She knelt down on the floor next to my futon and shook me until I opened my eyes.

"I know she's there. They're purposely not answering because they know it's me calling. Can't you come with me? I'm going over there to bring her home."

"Maybe something happened to them. Have you checked with the police?" I didn't really believe that.

"I can't call the police. What if they go looking for her and they find her at his apartment? I'll never be able to show my face. Then how will your sister find a husband in Nagano? She's left us no choice but to go over there and bring her home."

"I have school." I could hear the rain and the wind outside. I didn't want to get out of my warm futon. And, to tell the truth, I didn't want to see my sister at Sakamura's apartment.

"Well then, I'll go alone."

"Where's Father?"

My mother stood up and left my room, her shoulders pulled back and tight with determination.

When she returned it was past seven, and my father and I were eating breakfast. She hadn't prepared the rice or miso soup before she'd left, so I'd made instant coffee and toast for us. When we heard the front door slide open and my mother shake off her wet coat in the genkan, my father quickly put his piece of toast, thickly spread with butter and jam, on my plate.

My mother came into the room, her earlier determination replaced by a startled look of defeat. Her wet hair was plastered down to her head and dripping.

"What happened?" I asked.

She started to cry.

I got her a towel, then made a pot of green tea.

That evening, my sister called me from the bank when she was finished with work, and I bicycled over to meet her. She told me what had happened: when my mother showed up at Sakamura's apartment, he had answered the door dressed in only his undershorts. When my sister heard my mother's voice, she came into the kitchen, wearing a pair of his pajamas.

I wished she wasn't telling me any of this.

When my mother saw my sister in Sakamura's pajamas, she ran into the room and slapped her. She didn't even stop to take off her shoes. Nobuko, shocked, cried out. That's when Sakamura took a broom and tried to sweep my mother out of the house.

"No! A broom?"

"Yes. Like she was a cockroach, or a stray cat that had wandered in. He kept sweeping her towards the door."

But my mother refused to be swept away, and Sakamura lost his temper.

"He picked up a big kitchen knife and he threatened her."

"He didn't really?"

"Yes. He waved the knife at her, and he yelled, 'Get out of my house or I'll chop you to pieces. Chop, chop chop.' Of course, he didn't mean it. He only wanted to scare her away."

"Still . . ."

"Yes. I know. He shouldn't have done that. I wanted to stop him, but to be honest, I was so surprised I couldn't move. Then Mother ran out the door. She forgot her umbrella. She was yelling, 'Kidnapper! Murderer!' She said she was coming back with the police. I didn't know what to do. His neighbors must have heard."

"She was crying when she got home."

"No?"

"Yes, she was."

"Now I'm really in trouble. What did she say?"

"She wouldn't tell us anything."

We were sitting at a window table in the Renoir Coffee Salon near the train station. My sister was still in her green bank uniform, and I had my school uniform on, so I was slumped in my seat watching the street in case one of my teachers should pass by.

"Well, of course I feel bad for her, but, really, she shouldn't have come." She lit a cigarette and held the pack out to me. "She should just stay out of it. I'm an adult now."

I refused the cigarette and was annoyed at her for offering it. Was she trying to get me into trouble, too, so that she wouldn't be alone?

"Are you going to marry him?" Even though I never would have admitted it to her, it bothered me too that she had spent the night with Sakamura. It wasn't something I wanted my friends to know.

"Maybe."

"Why just maybe?"

She puffed on her cigarette and looked at me very seriously for a long while as if she was trying to decide something about me. Finally she said, "I don't know if I love him enough."

"Enough? What do you mean?"

It was then that I learned from my sister, for the first time, that there are degrees of love. That, like other things that can be quantified, things like money and rice, love could be measured with words like "enough."

And so that night, I lay on my futon, unable to sleep, and I wondered: could someone be poor from a lack of love? Could you save love up for when you needed it? And most important, who decided what was "enough"?

My sister moved into Sakamura's apartment, and she and my mother stopped speaking to each other. We hardly ever saw her. Then, a few months later, Sakamura's mother died suddenly and he had to go back to Hokkaido to live. Sakamura was the eldest son, so it would be his responsibility to take care of his father until he died. My sister, who then moved back in with us, had offered to go with him, she admitted to me later, but Sakamura was afraid that his father, who was only in his fifties, couldn't be trusted alone with her.

"Supposedly he tries to do it with any woman who comes into the house. Sakamura says he's like a dog."

I blushed.

"Look at you, turning so red," she laughed. "You're not a child anymore."

Sakamura's name was never mentioned in our house again. It was if he'd never existed. And, eventually, my sister and my mother started speaking to each other. I went off eagerly to college in Tokyo, and, after a year or two, my parents set about trying to find an acceptable husband for Nobuko.

Mrs. Hamada introduced my sister to a number of men, but none of them seemed right, according to my mother, who would write me letters reporting on each one. They were either too old or too young. They came from the wrong kind of families. They didn't have good prospects for the future. I read her letters but didn't pay them much attention, for I'd just become involved in my first real love affair, one that I didn't dare tell my family or even any of my friends about—with an Australian man, a foreign exchange student at my university. Love, I was learning, was more of a mystery than I'd ever imagined. It could be both wonderful and painfully confusing at the same time.

One day my mother called and asked me to come home for the weekend again. We were all going with my sister to meet the family of a young man in Niigata Prefecture. Mrs. Hamada had introduced Nobuko to Kenji Kobayashi a month earlier. Mr. Kobayashi also worked for a bank in Nagano, right near my sister's bank. They were seeing a lot of each other. He and my sister liked each other well enough, and my parents approved. Now it was time for the families to meet.

"How tall is he?" I asked my mother.

"What difference does that make? A person's height isn't important."

"But does Big Sister love him enough? Does he love her enough?"

"What nonsense are you talking? Just get a haircut in Tokyo before you come. You won't have time here." And then she added: "Please. For Nobu-chan. This time it's important."

As the train enters the long tunnel through the mountains that divide Nagano and Niigata Prefectures, my sister leans over and whispers to me, "I'm still seeing him."

I glance across the aisle at my parents. My father's head is resting on the window, and he is snoring quietly. He looks so happy when he's sleeping that sometimes I wish he could sleep all the time. What does he dream about? About his garden? About the big-breasted girls on the video covers? About the days before his stroke, when he could smoke a pack of Mild Sevens a day, and drink sake, and eat anything he wanted? In the aisle seat next to his, my mother sits erect in a dark green kimono, her hair pulled back into a tight bun, her eyes closed,

her hands folded neatly on her lap. This is the way she naps in public: neatly.

I turn back to my sister. "Kobayashi?" I whisper.

"No. Sakamura."

"Sakamura!"

"Yes. His father remarried. A young woman, almost the same age as me. Isn't that crazy? So he bought Sakamura his own house. He's flown down to see me three times. Last night he called and asked me to come to Hokkaido and live with him." Nobuko glances over at my parents. "I'm going to tell them tonight when we get back."

"Tell them what? Are you going to marry him? Why are we going to meet Kobayashi's parents?"

The train comes out from the tunnel into the sunlight, and suddenly we are surrounded by bright, snow-capped mountains. The door to our car slides open, and a uniformed girl enters, bowing. "Tea. Coffee. Whiskey and water," she calls out, pushing her cart down the aisle.

My sister looks intently at her, as if she understands something final about the girl's life and future.

"I need to make sure. Kobayashi's nice enough, but after all, he's a clerk in a bank. Sakamura has his own house and his father will leave him loads of money someday. And he's crazy about me."

"But what about love? Which one do you love?"

"Love?" my mother says suddenly, opening her eyes. She wasn't asleep. "What about love?" She leans across the aisle and a white handkerchief escapes her kimono sleeve, flutters to the floor.

"Love? Oh yes. Love," Nobuko says absently, and she turns and stares out the window, as if love might be found somewhere in the shining landscape of frozen rice fields and mountains.

I pinch her arm, trying to get her to look at me. This is important.

"Love, love, love!" Two little girls in matching yellow school caps seated behind us snatch up the word and turn it into a children's song, clapping their hands as they sing, "Love, love, love."

My sister and I both laugh. But then I think, Yes! Everybody should be singing, "Love." I look around me and I can almost see it: up and down the aisle of No-Smoking Car Number Eight on the Super-Express bound for Niigata, passengers put down their comic books and newspapers, rest their chopsticks on their lunchboxes of rice and pickled plums, wake up from naps, cut off their conversations to shout, "Love."

The door opens at the far end of the car and another girl enters, pushing a cart filled with beer, cigarettes, and rice crackers. But what if she was selling something else? "Would anyone like some love?" she would call out, and all the passengers would reach for their purses and wallets.

My sister turns to me. "Sakamura," she says, then lowers her voice to a whisper, as if she's both surprised and embarrassed by this admission. "Yes. It's true. I love Sakamura. I'm very sure of it."

Suddenly, I can see my Australian boyfriend. I see him clearly: waiting for me in his dormitory room in Tokyo, asleep in his bed, wrapped up in white sheets like some wonderful gift. And I long to turn this train around and head in the opposite direction as fast as I can. For from him I have learned that with love, like rice, there's never "enough"; that you always want more.

My father continues to snore softly. My mother retrieves her white handkerchief from the floor and begins to weep just as the Super-Express bound for Niigata leaps out onto a trestle over a dizzyingly deep gorge.

My sister and I both press our faces to the window glass and this is what we see: a flashing silver river far below. Mountains behind us. Mountains ahead.

Tamara Carter

Dog Days

That night we walked blind, straight
into the middle of the field. The grass,
waist high, slipped against bare legs—
the sound a whisper I couldn't make out.
You'd slept the past two weeks downstairs
and I'd begun to move across the bed, filling
empty space. I told you all the explosions
in the world wouldn't fill that place with noise,
but you didn't listen. You circled the land
looking for a level spot, the bottle rockets
you'd brought shifting hand to hand.
I watched the dark streaks between stars.
The land dry as an open mouth.

You knelt down—the first rocket splintered
and sparked beneath your thumb. Its crooked
orbit sang towards my face. Smoke and ash
filled my eyes and mouth. You didn't know
that was the way I'd remember you—hard edges
of your smile cut in a lightning flash; your skin,
the color of limestone, coming toward me.
The cows beyond the neighbor's fence moaned
as you began to move on me, your hands
pushing me deep into the field. Your skin
rough as matches on my tongue.

Tamara Carter Traveling

Vertigo holds him at the top of the steps,
the blue sky arched sharply overhead,
thin clouds vaulted in an arc. Gravity
rearranges itself around his feet. He feels
a slight lift, quick intake of breath.
He closes his eyes, half-wishing to let go,

but in the house he hears her slam the cups
and plates. She scalds her hands in water;
the kitchen windows steam above the sink.
The house smells of vinegar and grease;
the dinner's steak he refused to eat,
hardens and grows cold on the stove.

Beyond the trees, cars rush the two-lane
road out of town, the blurred shapes taking
hairpin curves too fast, moving over mountains,
past ravines, into distant open space. Maybe the flat
prairies, Kansas, or the sunken lowlands of the coast.
He wants to tell her there are two thousand miles
of map out there he doesn't even know.

The dog lopes the garden plot, turns in his circuit
around the shed, scaring the neighbor's wild
chickens into the trees, feathers and leaves
scattering on the ground. The earth lies fallow.
He thinks this spring is the one where he won't
plow, let the whole damn thing go to seed.

James Brown Prologue: South Dakota

This happened during a class at the University of South Dakota. First I felt chilled. Then came the cold sweats and this tingling sensation up and down my arms like there were ants crawling on me. Except for that part, the symptoms resembled the flu. I think I ran a fever, too, and there was definitely nausea. But I kept right on talking, a real trooper. I didn't miss a beat.

My memory of that class isn't clear. It's been a few years now and I was in a bad state of mind. But about half were Ph.D. candidates in English and the others were majoring in creative writing. At best, if I try hard, I can recall two, maybe three faces out of twenty, but I distinctly remember them all staring because I couldn't stop sweating. I remember the embarrassment, too, and how I tried to make a joke out of it. Something about going from one extreme to another: outside you could freeze to death; in here, in these buildings, you melted like the Wicked Witch of the West. When I left Los Angeles, it was eighty degrees, clear and sunny. February in South Dakota was just plain bleak.

I was a visiting writer-in-residence there that month, on sabbatical from my regular job at the state university in San Bernardino. It was the first week of class, and if I seemed fatigued, or disoriented at moments, it was only because I'd flown in a couple of nights before. That would explain the bloodshot eyes and the dark circles. And as for that gaunt look, everybody knows skinny is fashionable in California. At least these were the things I wanted them to believe. The truth of the matter was much different.

I remember taking off my sweater. I remember the V-neck T-shirt I had on under it—an old one, thinning, not long for the rag pile. But at that point it was hard to care about dress. The sweating hadn't stopped and the nausea wasn't going away, either. It came and passed in waves and the intervals between visits seemed to be getting shorter and shorter. Somewhere earlier on I had gotten around to the student story we were supposed to be discussing.

I know I read it carefully on the plane. The chair of the English Department had mailed it to me before I left L.A., at my request, this story as well as several others, so that I could be ready for the first week. No down time. That's the way I liked it. They were paying me well and I believed that they deserved their money's worth. Then, an hour before class, I read it again. Ask me what it's about now, though, and the best I could manage is a sketchy description of its main character, a young thief. I don't mean this as a comment on the quality of the story.

The fact of the matter is, I read a lot of stories. It's what I do for a living, that and try to write them myself, and after a while I just forget, even the best ones. And my own, too, I especially forget my own sometimes. In this case, though, it was not a good story, because the writer didn't know much about thieves and was bent on sermonizing. I can remember feeling that as plainly as the tingling sensation on my skin, those ants, and trying not to scratch at them.

The writer, a Ph.D. candidate, wasn't thinking like a thief. He was looking at him from too far away, a good distance for judging but not intimacy, not understanding, and by this I don't mean sympathy. I like to let the students have their say first, so that my point of view doesn't unduly influence their own, and after they were finished I raised my own concerns. I used different words, though. Chose a gentler road, up and around the subject, even if it took a little longer to get there. I wanted to be helpful and I wanted to be liked and most of the time there are ways to get your point across without having to spill the writer's blood, or not much of it, anyway.

When I was done, a student raised her hand. She was a bright woman who later proved to be one of the more talented writers in class, and she was upset.

"Let me get this straight," she said. "According to you, we're supposed to like this low life? All he does is rip people off. I don't see why we have to sympathize with him."

Again, sympathy wasn't the right word, and I don't remember using it. It's understood, I think, that stealing is bad. That it's wrong. Thieves know that, too. They know it hurts people, even themselves. What I want to know is that they might otherwise live respectable lives, or that this thief does. Make him a family man, a loving husband. Give him a couple of kids and show him coaching Little League on the weekends. Or wrestling. That's big out here in the Midwest. This guy leads two lives and theft is a passion, a rush, a need that both sustains and destroys him.

These are the things I wanted to say. But I didn't. The hour was close to up and the nausea had grown stronger. Dizziness had set in. I let them go early and found an old bar on the edge of town, the kind I liked best, where it's always dark inside and the air smells sour from the night before. Nobody knows you here and doesn't care to and these were the people I used to be most comfortable with. There were no judgments. We shared a common bond, and I had earned my place beside them.

The nausea subsided with my second shot of Kessler and the sweating stopped shortly after that. Those ants kept crawling, though, because they wanted something else, something stronger that you can't get very easily in a small town like Vermillion, South Dakota. They say the first forty-eight hours are the worst, but they're talking mostly about the physical part and that passes. What's left is more insidious and it doesn't go away. Ever.

And that's the point I'm at.

I want to believe differently. That the worst is over. That I'm a changed man. I want to believe that every day I go without a drink or a drug that I'm that much further removed from the life I once lived. I want to believe just to believe. But believing isn't enough, and if I think I'm safe, even for a second, I close my eyes and I feel them again, those ants, always crawling just beneath the surface of my skin.

Kathleen Johnson   Dust Bowl Diary, 1935

Silt on the dishes.
Rags under the doors.
Horizon coppered by clouds of dirt.
The sun, a dim smear.
No stars for weeks. No shadows.

Our farm is sifting away—
only a bit of cornfield stubble
poking up through shifting dunes,
cedars chalked with fine dust,
half-buried fenceposts.

Cattle are dying,
their lungs caked with mud.
Others, blinded by blowing grit,
stumble in brown blizzards.

Once my hair shone
like corn silk under the sun.
Now it is dull, dry,
wrapped tight in a bun.

After awhile, everything
seems the color of vermin,
the color of moths—
dirty wash pinned to
the clothesline,
damp dishcloths
stretched along windowsills.

This spring, no lilacs;
no luster left
in Momma's eyes.

I've forgotten the true colors
of things. Even the sky
turns eerie shades I've never seen.

Tonight,
before sleep, I'll lie still
on the dusty sheets,
close my swollen eyelids,
and pray for vivid dreams.

Jay Ladin

Snails

Little more than water with horns,
only the barest wafer of bone
distinguishing them from worms,
I find them drying on my way to work,
their tracks glittering in the fog
like lines on an astrologer's chart,
unfinished moons and impossible conjunctions
scrawled on the sides of houses
whose walls are so thin
I can see the lives congealing inside them, the delicate jellies
shivering in the light of televisions.
I enlarge myself by imagining them,
I become a different order of creature,
a penetrating messianic odor,
the track of my abstract compassion glistens
as I maneuver
my own absurdly delicate structure
between the tires of passing cars,
sweating as the sun climbs over the spire
of one of those Gothic churches
whose every stone strains higher,
whorl upon whorl upon whorl,
like one of the millions of shells discarded
as with horns and a single foot
God crawls over the world.

David Beard

In the Winter

At six o'clock you light
the candles,
partly because darkness is
letting down her frail
black lace,
partly because you are alone
and the bright yellow flames,
flickering in the dishes,
dancing in the quiet rooms,
are like dinner guests,
with soft voices,
telling stories of the
howling wind,
with silky tongues,
telling stories of the
sputtering stars and frozen
little towns.

Oakley Hall — The Gates of Bone

We knew the war was all but over, and rumor had it that a white airplane would fly over the lines to notify us of the fact. We were on the Danube then, and there were Russian troops on the other side of the river. Sometimes Russians came over by boat, unkempt, enthusiastic guys in partial uniforms and their Munchkin-looking helmets. They kissed any Americans they could catch and stole the company radio. When Captain Shitface complained to a Russian colonel, the colonel assured him that the culprits would be found out and shot. After that, there was not much commerce between the Russians on the east bank and us on the west. We moved on up the river in our halftracks, watching for the white airplane, beautiful cool and warm days with the fruit trees in flower and puffs of cloud, as though this was a part of the world where nothing bad could ever happen.

However, advance elements ran into a firefight, and we moved with that glacial reluctance up into position. No one wanted to get killed in the last minutes of WWII, and good, safe wounds were discounted also. So we waited for a couple of tanks to come up and fire some rounds, and then the halftracks headed on north.

We could smell the camp half an hour before we reached it. At first no one identified it. Maybe it was some kind of garbage dump. Then we came over a low ridge, and there was the barbed wire, an impressive-looking building that must be some kind of cell block, and ranks of low wooden buildings. Inside a gate were about a million people in black-and-white striped pajamas, waving their arms, and over the gate was a banner with the message: WELCOM AMERICANS.

I remember feeling that I didn't want to go down there.

I guess Bungee, the driver, felt the same way, because he slowed going down the hill and a couple of other halftracks hustled on ahead of us to liberate the Frigga Work Camp.

Inside the gate we were surrounded by the prisoners in their striped outfits, clogs on their skinny feet. They all looked like clothes hanging on hangers, they were so skinny, with faces that looked carved out of some grainy wood though they were happy enough to see us, cheering and waving with big horrible rotten-teeth smiles. And the terrible stink. One of them climbed onto my halftrack and motioned to us to keep going, pushing on through the crowd of prisoners, "Come Amerikaner, see!" something like that, enough so I got the gist and told Bungee to keep going. One of the other halftracks fell in behind us, as though they had a guide also. We ran out of the

crowd and along the wire on muddy ground. Ahead there were some of the gray Kraut bulldozers, not moving.

So we came to the pit where they had tried to bury the bodies. The firefight must've been to hold us up until the bulldozers had covered over the bodies, but they hadn't got it done. Later they counted more than 1,800 bodies in that pit, and it was only one of three. They were stacked neatly in the Kraut way, naked men and women. I looked from face to face in the halftrack, and I knew that no one else, like I myself, could think what expression we ought to wear on our faces. Our guide was grinning, *grinning,* pointing.

Later Colonel Grady had the men and women from the village—who of course maintained they'd had no idea that such things were going on, they'd just thought it was a camp where prisoners of war were making some airplane parts for the Wehrmacht, and there was a rock quarry—had them herded down to the camp to dig up the corpses that had been covered over by the bulldozers, weeping and puking and whining. Our own bulldozers dug new pits, and the villagers carried the bodies to the new pits and laid them out. I guess it made us feel better. There was an awful kind of helplessness.

Tallboy said they were talking to some of the English-speaking prisoners when somebody in his halftrack dropped a cellophane container with the doughnuts in it into a mud hole, and those prisoners went into a wrestling screeching match trying to get the doughnuts, never mind that they had mud all over them.

Some of them died from our feeding them. They had to be weaned back onto food, little by little, and thin gruel to start with. Luckily Captain Shitface knew enough to lay that out right off.

There were some Poles who were as excited about kissing American soldiers as the Russians had been, but by now we knew enough to keep a hand on our wallets and an eye on the radio.

Tallboy and Rosie and I and some others parked over by the fence with a Brit prisoner of war who was not in bad shape, as he'd bailed out of a bomber in March.

I asked him what had happened to the guards.

"Some got away, but most of them we drowned them in the river," he said. "We had a kind of bucket brigade, you know, and we'd pass the poor buggers along down to the river. The Poles held them under till they were dead, and then let them float on downriver." He explained that the Poles were in the best shape of any of the prisoners, as a detachment of them had come in only two weeks ago.

"The commandant was a Colonel Bultman who escaped over the river, but we heard the Russkies caught him and hanged him. The real sadist was Colonel Haupt, who'd also escaped, too bad about that. There was a major they'd torn apart. Guards and kapos, we killed them." The Limey lieutenant discussed it calmly.

The camp was not an extermination camp for Jews, but a work

camp, slave labor, all nationalities but mostly Russian, French, Hungarians, some Italian politicals, some Gypsies. The cell block was for important political prisoners. There had been a Rothschild there, and a member of the Polish nobility—but they were all gone, taken out in a Junkers last week.

Outside the gate, the building a little way up the ridge was the officers' barracks. The officers had some girl prisoners for sex, the attractive girls among the prisoners were assigned to the officers, and some of the officers had kept their mistresses in rooms in the village, away from the stink of the camp.

The prisoners who had any mechanical abilities were assigned to the aircraft factory nearer the village, marched there at five o'clock in the morning and back at five o'clock at night. Less fortunate prisoners, especially the Russians, worked in the quarry breaking rock. Usually this killed a man within a month. There were 186 steps down into the quarry, and 186 back up. Prisoners did not make their twenty to thirty trips a day for more than thirty days.

Colonel Haupt liked to hang out on the rim of the quarry with his Luger and shoot anybody who halted to rest on their climb out of the quarry. Then others would be nailed to carry the bodies out, and they had better not pause to rest either. Haupt had a number of other nifty tricks for Luger practice as well. He was the worst, the Limey said.

After awhile the Limey took us through the cell block, which, as he had said, was empty now. The accommodations were not bad for a prison camp; the cells had writing tables, some of them easy chairs, cots with white coverlets, a crucifix on a wall. The emptiness of the place, echoing with our boots, was very spooky.

In the basement was a furnace with great arms of ducts raised as though to hold up the cell block above it. Stacked by the furnace was not cordwood but more bodies, naked chalky skin and bones, waiting to feed the furnace for heat. It was things like that that would make you think the German race ought to be exterminated from the universe, but in fact, at the time, I could hardly take it in. Monstrousness was coming at me so hard and fast and normal-seeming that you just hung onto yourself, as though you'd been thrown into some kind of raging sea where your life depended on nothing getting loose.

We just took on what seemed our priority, which was feeding those poor people in their black-and-white stripes and their clogs, keeping order mostly; you had to hold them back from gorging on what bread and meat and carrot and turnip stew the cooks were able to jack up in quantity so they wouldn't die in convulsions as we saw more than one of them do, feeding them in that terrible stink that only diminished when the bodies had been reburied in trenches, but there were still those among them too far gone, still dying, and they had to be taken care of too; so that it was both the worst time of the war, there at the very end of it, and the best, because the platoon,

company, battalion, regiment were not just killing Krauts but trying to save lives, and we did try, and we did do it, and we were better for it, though still that awful deep-running current of hatred for the absolute deadly cocksuckers who would do a thing like this ran through and underneath.

We were overwhelmed by them, but for some reason they weren't crazy to break out and start walking home, wherever home was; as though they had to savor their liberation on the site, and the food furnished to them by us and later the Swedish Red Cross.

I went over for a look-see at the officers' quarters with Tallboy and Lieutenant Smithers. There was a big downstairs kind of common room, with easy chairs, and sofas and lamps, an office, and a window looking out on the barbed wire and the hovels of the prisoners behind the wire. We were looking for women, if the truth be known, and there were women there, not bad-looking either, but infected with whatever it was that infected you so fuck-all I'm keeping alive and I don't give a shit what happens to you. I only knew I didn't want anything to do with that and them. Tallboy took a pretty Gypsy woman upstairs and came down with a case of crabs for a month.

The lieutenant, who was prowling around in the office, called me over. He was holding a parchment lampshade out at a slant from the lamp, and he pointed at it with his other hand, and I approached with that end-of-the-war reluctance against taking chances, hoping that this was not just one more thing I didn't want to have to know about, and it was that, all right, it was a tattoo on the lampshade, a heart with a double eagle head looking over the top, and in the heart some Cyrillic words, a tattoo that had belonged on somebody's body once.

Lieutenant Buck came off the phone with a finger pointed at me. We were in the commons of the Kraut officers' barracks.

"Daltrey, there's another report that bird Haupt's been seen in the village. Visiting some snatch there. Take a couple of guys and go take a look. Sometime it'll maybe not be a false alarm."

I put the arm on Robie and Bunker, and we took off in the company jeep, Robie driving and Bunker in the back. I sat with a boot braced up on the dash and a .45 holstered on my belt. There'd been three reports of Colonel Haupt seen in the village, from suck-up villagers. Haupt had been second in command of the camp.

Meantime the Swedish Red Cross had come in to take charge of the poor bastard inmates. They knew from other liberated camps how to bring these skeletons back from starvation. The war was definitely over, and rumors kept coming that we'd be moving north along the river.

Robie drove up the dirt road to the village past the dump of rusting Kraut earthmoving equipment, and, down the next valley, the big

hangar buildings of the closed-up aircraft factory, black humped roofs gleaming in the sun. From the ridge we could look back on the camp in its wire-enclosed spread, as though it was backed up by the glistening ochre and shadowed rock face of the quarry, with its top fringe of spring grasses and black woods.

Robie roared on down into town with its two-story tile-roofed houses like a toy village, where the good Germans claimed they hadn't known of the camp five miles away, that you could smell when the wind was right and even when it wasn't, and see the prisoners in the black-and-white stripes and clogs going in files to and from the aircraft parts factory. We knew the place where Haupt had been seen, and the jeep slammed to a halt before the building with a closed-up pharmacy on the ground floor. The door to the apartment upstairs was bolted, but Bunker shouldered it open with a crash and I sprinted up the stairs with the other two behind me. Ahead I heard a woman's screamed words.

I knocked open another door and followed the .45 in. A fat blonde-haired young woman in a petticoat stood barefoot by the window as though she was thinking of jumping out. A man in a civilian jacket, corduroy pants, a blue shirt, and striped tie stood facing me. He was smiling.

"Hi, fellows!" he said, as the others came in behind me.

"Colonel Haupt?" I said.

He made a shrugging motion of his upper body, still smiling.

"Any of you fellows from New Jersey?" he asked.

Nobody was. I felt silly holding the .45 so I holstered it. Robie and Bunker carried M-1s.

"I spent ten years in Lakewood," he said, no trace of a Kraut accent. "Ten good years," he said, smiling, nodding.

The woman sat down on a window seat, hands in her lap. She had a creamy pink and pale fat-girl complexion, and she stared anxiously at me.

The man had a dark, lined face with neatly brushed hair growing low on his forehead. He looked like Pancho Hagen.

"There was a nice little bar there where you could get a good lager," he went on. "Or a nice bottle of Gerolsteiner if you were inclined."

"Pat!" Bunker said, and I put my hand on the butt of the .45 when the Kraut unbuttoned his jacket. He took the jacket and shirt off and laid them on the bed.

He made a gesture, as though asking permission, and stepped to the big armoire against the wall. I drew the .45 as he opened the door of the armoire. He took from a hanger a Kraut uniform blouse and armed into it. It had a colonel's insignia on the collar and the black lapels of the SS.

The girl murmured something in German.

"My uncle is American," the colonel went on. "He is a butcher there. A fine modern shop, very nice. All modern things. I worked for him."

"I understood you were a butcher here," I said.

His smile did not falter. "I kept company with a very pretty girl there," he went on. "Her father was an automobile dealer. She was very nice. Sometimes we would go for picnics.

"Once I went with her to New York. We went to the Statue of Liberty, to a film also. We had supper there. We walked on Fifth Avenue among the very rich people. It was nice."

He made the permission gesture again, and took a uniform cap from the shelf of the armoire and donned it.

Now he wore a colonel's cap and blouse, with the brown corduroy trousers and the striped tie. He had straightened so he was standing at attention, his shiny shoes set at right angles to each other.

I told him he was under arrest.

He shook his head, still smiling. I could see a gold filling at the corner of his lips. He had a little hairline moustache like Errol Flynn, which you didn't notice right away because of the darkness of his face.

"Ah, no," he said. His voice had become deeper, that harsh Germanic bark. "I will only surrender to a person of proper rank," he said. "I will not surrender to a sergeant."

"Yes, you will," I said.

He shook his head. He made a military right face and started toward the door beyond the bed.

"Halt!" I said, cocking the .45.

"Pat!" Robie said.

Colonel Haupt marched toward the door. I skipped after him and swatted him on the back of the head with the barrel of the .45. The woman screamed as Haupt went down on his face, groaning, the cap rolling free.

I bent over him as he laboriously turned on his back. He glared up at me, his mouth working. He spat in my face. I jerked upright, swiping at my cheek. Then I jammed the muzzle of the .45 into his mouth. My finger contracted on the trigger, but just then Bunker swung his combat boot and kicked the colonel in the head, putting out the lights.

If I blew his brains out it might make my war mean something, but there was no point killing him if he didn't know I was killing him.

The woman had risen to her bare feet, her spread hands covering the bosom of her petticoat, her mouth working like a fish gasping for air or for not-air.

"Let's get him out of here," I said.

Colonel Haupt was tried in the War Crimes Trials, found guilty of crimes against humanity, and hanged. I was the one who captured him, my contribution against the Unified Field Theory.

Gary Duehr — Chain Poem

Do not ignore this poem. It has been around the world
Nine times. Do not keep it:
It must leave your hands within 96 hours.

Remember:
Constantine Diaz received this poem in 1953
And asked his secretary to make twenty copies.
He won the lottery.

Carlo Daddit, an office employee, received this poem
And forgot about it. Nine days later he died.
Delan Fairchild, not believing, threw the poem away.
He was plagued with various auto problems, but later finding
  the poem
Made twenty copies and got a new car.

See what happens in four days. This poem must tour the world.
Remember, do not keep it, do not
Send money. Gene Welch lost his wife six days after he received

The poem, he had failed to circulate it.

Rotation

Say a potato chip truck overturns, spilling
Bags of potato chips across the highway.
Some drivers stop to guiltily pick up a few, smiling at each other:
Potato chips for dinner.

How many of them will wake up
In the middle of the night and go into the livingroom
To stare for hours, wondering:
Has the darkened house changed its axis?

Or say the rear door of a Pinkerton armored truck flies open
And bags of money fall out on the expressway.
One poor guy walking by, who just so happens to be a failed armed robber
From Florida, can't believe his eyes. He grabs a couple
And sprints across a footbridge into a bar, trailed by two cops.
His story: *I thought it was my laundry.*

One moment of intense joy or sorrow singles you out
To ask you questions about your life
And you never regain your sense of equilibrium.
You keep one eye closed. You check locks, closets, under
The bed. You divorce and never remarry.

Connie May Fowler Excerpts from *Remembering Blue*

This is where it gets tricky. Where I leave the world observed with my own two eyes and enter the realm religious folk refer to as faith. Because you see, to remember Nick fully, without reservation or meekness, I have to write about what I cannot possibly know, conjuring a world by connecting bits and pieces I've gathered here and there, coloring both supposition and fact with my own doubts, fears, wishes.

Other people's memories, I swallow them whole. A passing comment or a heartfelt recitation of the facts—it doesn't matter—I gobble them with equal greed, savoring each moment until there is no difference between my memories and theirs. If there is a gulf to cross between point A and B, I press on, guided by the full force of my imagination and intellect.

How do I know my version of Nick's life is accurate and pure? The same way saints and shamans know that what they saw was a vision versus a flight of fancy. They simply know it to be true. They believe. The fire in their bellies tells them it's so.

Yes, I am becoming religious. Ecumenical. My newfound zealotry should surprise no one. A wife's intuition is rivaled only by that of a widow's. Holy men have nothing on us.

That being said, I must admit I do not choose this path willingly. Unwanted solitude and its accompanying pain have left me no choice. If I do not surround myself with memories—both stolen and otherwise—there is only absence.

It's a privilege, really, to explore Nick's life, to approach his days with wonder and awe, to slip inside his heart and become a faithful recorder. What divine irony that in the early days of my mourning, I have become my husband's attendant, his weaver of psalms.

Two days before Nick Blue walked into the Suwannee Swifty and delivered a kiss so astonishingly sweet that even now—in the midst of my bewildered mourning—it makes me smile, he had quit the sea. Quit it for good. He had given to his baby brother, Demetrius, his nets, his culling iron, his muddy white crabbing boots, his wooden oyster tongs, his yellow rain slicker, his ice chests, his flounder gig, his compass, which no oyster man would ever be without, his gloves, his hard hat with the halogen search light duct-taped to the front (his lucky flounder light, he called it), and even his lifetime supply of

Remembering Blue, Random House, 2000.

WD-40, which he used to keep the pulleys and gears of their small shrimp boat in some semblance of working order.

Having divested himself of the many tools and gadgets necessary in the life of a commercial fisherman, he decided there was no reason for him to even live on the island any longer. The island, named Lethe in honor of the mythological river of forgetfulness (when I asked Nick, "Forget what?" he said, "Anything you need to."), is an offshore bump in the sea just a few miles south of the North Florida mainland. Except in a dense fog, the island is easily discernible from the handful of fishing villages clustered along the winding, convoluted shore. Tourists and locals alike have been known to gaze out across Carrabelle Bay to the gentle rise of Lethe and whisper, "Oh my God. Paradise!"

When Nick announced to his mother, who also lives on the island, that he was "packing it in," he did so in the room of her house where all major announcements were made: the kitchen. He stood with the refrigerator door open, staring into it as if it were an icebox chock full of genies, then slammed it shut and said, "Mama, I'm packing it in. Think it's best if I got a job on the hill. I done told Demetrius." The sleeves of his T-shirt were stretched out of shape (as all his T-shirt sleeves were, owing to the size of his arm muscles) and looked oddly feminine. Ruffles did not suit him.

His mother paused from the business of cooking supper and tried unsuccessfully to harden her heart to what her son had just told her. Having placed on her butcher block a crock filled with Yukon Gold potatoes, she attempted to scoot past his words by concentrating on the task at hand: *Peel the potatoes. Don't forget to put the skins in the garden compost. Boil potatoes until tender. Puree with warm cream and butter. Season with salt and pepper and top with garlic chives which need to be snipped from the herb patch out back.*

In the same way people recite a mantra to help them slip into meditation, she ran through the progression of raw potato to mashed, but this time her old trick failed her and she got no further than *until tender* when the tears started to fall.

Nick planted his hands on his hips, pinned his gaze to a knot in one of the pine floor planks, and waited for his mother to compose herself. He did not wrap his arms around her because he knew a caring gesture would cause her to completely break down—something they both would regret. So he watched the floor until she cleared her throat. At that point he looked at her—most likely it was a gentle glance, for he loved his mother with a pathos-filled loyalty common between mothers and sons.

She pushed a wisp of hair off her forehead with the hand that held her potato peeler and said, "I don't want you to go. But I'll feel better if you're off that water."

As for Demetrius, who is two years Nick's junior and sports the

smile of someone who is perpetually wonderstruck, he saw his brother off at the community dock where their skiff was moored. Nick and his brothers built the tomato-red wooden boat in the summer of Nick's thirteenth year. I'm not sure who named the fourteen-foot flat-bottom runabout, but painted in yellow across its bow was the unlikely moniker, *Poseidon.*

Nick and Demetrius avoided the verbal fencing of a long goodbye. This was due in part to the fact that Demetrius didn't believe his brother could stay away for very long.

"My guess is I'll be seeing you sooner than later."

"No, Dem, you won't. I fed those wild cats this morning but you're going to have to do it from here on out."

"If you say so."

Nick started up the motor and began to idle away from the dock. Demetrius wildly waved and yelled, "Your stuff will be here when you get back."

"Take care of Mama," Nick hollered. Then he threw open the throttle and zipped across the bay.

The Ancients believed that if a person were to successfully leave the underworld and return to the land of the living, they had to drink from the River Lethe. In so doing, their memories would be wiped clean. They could then begin their lives anew, as if they were children—no history, no recollection of pain or mourning or bliss.

I believe that is what Nick was trying to do—cobble together a life that had utterly nothing to do with his past, with the core of who he truly was.

Once onshore, he unloaded his few belongings: a brown bag filled with various canned goods which his mother had hysterically removed from her own cupboard so "he wouldn't starve to death" and a duffel bag containing three pairs of jeans, five sleeve-misshapen T-shirts, seven pairs of undershorts, his razor, a horse conch shell, and a fading color photograph of his parents. He carefully set everything into the cab of his truck. I think he believed that if he was meticulous in the way he firmly wedged the sack between the dash and door, that perhaps an innate order would descend upon him and his new life, an order that had nothing to do with nature's cycles and the mythology of man.

He climbed into the Fordge—that's what he called his truck with its Ford cab and Dodge bed—and sat for a moment with the door open, staring out at Lethe and the bay, the only world he had ever known. I'm uncertain as to whether he shed a tear or two—he never told me—but I doubt it. He wasn't given to tears. I have seen him, though, so profoundly shaken that his hands whitened with sadness, preventing him from lifting a coffee cup to his trembling lips.

So I must ask, were his hands white with grief as he gazed at the place that was the taproot of his soul? Did his lips tremble as he

turned the key in the ignition? Did the faint wrinkles around his eyes—lines etched by three decades on the water—smooth into a merciless resignation as he shifted the truck into gear? Was the tightness in his chest nearly unbearable, so much so that for at least one clarion moment he considered getting back in that skiff and returning home? As his tires spun on the oyster shell path and as that wink of green and blue disappeared in his rearview mirror for what he thought was the final time, was my husband-to-be seized by a blind, slow panic?

Very simply, yes.

It was March 22, 1967, half past ten in the evening, and Nick's father, George Blue, being a nighttime shrimper, wouldn't be back on the hill—as the locals called land—for another nine hours or so. As is often the case with North Florida's early spring, winter had made a sudden reappearance, threatening the azaleas' extravagant blossoms and prompting George Blue, who was trawling the bay for brownies and hoppers, to pause from his on-deck work and slip into the engine room to put an extra blanket over Lillian, his wife of fifteen years and whose job on the *Lillian B*, he had reminded her, was to sleep. He had built for her a bunk complete with a down-filled mattress and a light to read by.

The bunk, of course, offered a comfortable place to do things other than sleep, an advantage that I'm sure did not escape George Blue as he labored to router the yellow pine edges smooth and shellac its swirled grain against all possibility of splinters. In fact, being a man of amorous body and soul, he even constructed drawers beneath the bunk which latched shut to guard against them being flung open during rough seas and into which he placed various vials of sweet-smelling oils, crystal bottles filled with balm, and other feminine bric-a-brac which he deemed essential to unlocking his wife's ardor. A cobalt bottle of Evening in Paris cologne nestled in a padded, ribboned box. Gardenia-scented moisturizer and dusting powder. A satin vellum-colored negligee with matching slippers. A lidded basket containing hard sour candies—he would have preferred chocolates but rejected them as being too impractical (this was a shrimp boat, after all). A leather-bound book of poems by Mrs. Elizabeth Barrett Browning. And best of all, a silver-plate hairdressing set comprising mirror, brush, and comb and onto which he had her initials engraved in a flourishing script: LAB, which stood for Lillian Athena Blue.

At thirty-two, Lillian was ten years her husband's junior with a practical streak larger than the Gulf itself. She was charmed by George's amorous bent. She often told him, "George, dear, you were born into the wrong time. You're such a romantic. Nobody's a romantic anymore."

But her amusement wasn't enough to push her over the edge—she was damned and determined not to give in to her husband's lofty

notions of physical love. It wasn't that she didn't enjoy sex—she liked it fine—she just didn't see the need to add any bells and whistles to it.

She was happy, though, with those drawers George built for her. "Perfect!" she said as he demonstrated how smoothly they slid in and out on their oak runners. "I've been needing a place to stash my socks."

However great the differences in how they viewed the negotiations of sexual love, perhaps George was on to something with his treasure chest of intended aphrodisiacs. Take as evidence the fact that the couple had been childless for the first thirteen years of their marriage and it wasn't until George built his little cubbyhole of a love nest that Lillian conceived. First came Zeke, followed in two years by the pint-sized fellow swimming in her belly on the night of March 22.

Lillian insists that all three of her children were conceived at sea, and I have no reason to doubt this. Of course she would know the exact date and time of her various conceptions. Blessed, that's what some folks would say she was, because underpinning her hard-nosed practicality was an abiding and even spooky intuition. The woman could discern her family and friends' fears and hopes with all the efficiency of a pediatrician capable of diagnosing measles at twenty yards out. And if, perchance, she was wrong, like the pediatrician, she prudently never admitted it.

On the face of things, it would seem neither her intuition nor her practicality were in working order when she insisted on going with George that night. After all, what would possess a woman who was eight months pregnant and counting to go out on a shrimp boat on an unpredictable spring evening?

To do her job. Sleep.

In its seventh month of in-utero existence, the baby suddenly became a tiny bundle of perpetual motion. At first Lillian joked that the child must be practicing for a career involving speed and stamina. "Maybe it's going to grow up to be a baker," she said to George one bleary-eyed morning over coffee.

"Baker?" George had no idea what baking and speed had in common but he rubbed her shoulders anyway. He gazed at the lovely hollow at the base of his wife's hairline and decided that if the baby's behavior meant anything, it most likely involved athleticism.

Wistful notions about what profession the child might pursue soon withered as the baby's activity continued unabated. He behaved as if he were his own one-man conga line. It was enough to make even the most patient woman irritable, snappish, downright bitchy.

But she did her best to remain civil (with varying degrees of success) while simultaneously attempting to trick, cajole, and convince the child that floating could be just as much fun as nonstop in-utero gymnastics. Since George shrimped at night, she had the bed all to herself and therefore did not feel self-conscious as she tried to calm the baby by lying in various positions. Flat on her back, her arms extended. Flat on her back, patting her belly. Flat on her back, her arms

akimbo. Flat on her back, singing "Fever!" (She loved Peggy Lee). On her side. On her side with her feet pulled close to her fanny. On her side, her legs scissored. Flat on her back again, spread-eagle. One foot on the floor. One knee bent, the other prone. Both knees bent, rocking.

Nothing worked.

Predawn, she would hobble out of bed, go into her kitchen—her hands on either side of her belly as if it were an enormous bowl of Jell-O—and fix herself a cup of hot tea with lemon and tupelo honey. She would wander the house, sipping her tea and bargaining with her baby. "If you settle down, just for a little while, I'll feed you warm milk with vanilla and sugar all the days of your life."

Gentle negotiations, however, proved fruitless. On day fifteen of the sleepless siege, she resorted to damnations and threats, the brunt of which she aimed at George. He would walk into the kitchen, minding his own business, thinking he might rustle up a cookie or two, and Lillian would take aim and fire: "If this child doesn't give me some peace soon, I'm going to lose my mind. How in the hell does God expect me to bring a healthy child into this world if I can't get one wink of sleep! I heard you in there, snoring away! And me in the shape I'm in!"

The normally robust Lillian stopped deadheading her roses, began serving her husband TV dinners, forgot to brush her hair, and spent hours in the tub each night, hoping it would relax her and—more importantly—put an end to the child's ceaseless fidgeting.

Nothing doing. After a month and a half with no rest, she determined that the only thing she hadn't tried was lulling the unborn baby to sleep on the Gulf's gentle swells. Being on the water almost always put her to sleep, she reasoned, so perhaps it would have the same tranquilizing effect on her baby.

Lillian's plan was not well received. Her sister, Diana, who was three years older with two children of her own, told her it was far too dangerous and that, besides, if she would just hold on for a few more weeks the baby would be born and at that point sleep wouldn't even cross her mind.

Her brother-in-law, Dicky Crum, adjusted his toothpick to the side of his mouth and said, "Shrimp boat ain't no place for a pregnant lady."

Her husband looked into his wife's bloodshot eyes and said nothing because he recognized the ruthless determination of a woman who was at her wit's end, and in his book that was a frightening place for a wife to be.

Once George caved, everyone else soon followed. Diana offered to babysit Zeke. She had a two-year-old herself, a little black-eyed, blond-curled girl named Charis whose greatest joy in life was to bite Cousin Zeke and then scream as if she had been wronged. As for Dicky Crum, he wisely kept his mouth shut.

George was a big man. Six foot and one-half inches. Biceps the

size of hams, thanks to twenty-three years spent hauling nets and wrestling crab traps. So hefting Lillian Blue, who weighed a pregnant one hundred and fifty pounds, onto the *Lillian B* was not a chore for George. In fact, it was a pleasure.

There he was, dressed in his rubber boots and a slightly moth-eaten woolen pea coat, doting on his wife, which was his greatest and rarest joy. In the chilly twilight, he cradled his big-bellied woman as if she were a swaddling child and barreled down the dock toward his shrimp boat. He didn't even have to buck up when he lifted her over the sides—he was that strong. He also didn't need to carry her—she was pregnant, not paralyzed—but he insisted, on the grounds that she wasn't in her right mind and therefore there was no way he was going to allow her to waddle down the uneven and warped boards of the dock under her own steam.

She was right, of course, about what her baby needed. Her head had no sooner hit the pillow when the tidal wave in her womb that had been kicked up by that restless little creature began to ease. She put her hand on her belly and said, "It's about time."

Gratefully, she shut her eyes and summoned images of her and her child sharing vanilla and sugar milk each afternoon in the comforting warmth of her cluttered kitchen with its charming collection of ceramic chickens when the moment she had been longing for finally arrived: like a woman floating through the depths of a cool, safe, bottomless well, she descended into a deep and dreamless sleep.

She had inserted her ear plugs to muffle the sound of the engine, but it was narcotic, wonderful, needed, impenetrable sleep that prevented her from becoming cognizant of the chaos that soon descended all around her. When the aluminum coffee pot clattered across the hot plate, slammed into the cookie tin, and hit the floor, she did not wake. When her jadeite mug sailed off the small Formica table and shattered beside the bed, she did not wake. When the dime-store picture of the Lord Jesus Christ rattled on the wall as if an unseen hand had seen fit to shake it, she did not wake. Even when a lightning bolt struck so dangerously near that the air in the engine room turned acrid, still she did not wake.

Lillian Blue may have been privy to the kind of hypnotic sleep that with any luck clamps down upon the hopelessly overwhelmed, thus rendering her completely unaware, but I'm convinced that the child in her stomach—that nub of a human who had only recently lost his embryonic gills—knew exactly what was breaking loose over Apalachee Bay. I believe that as Nick Blue floated deep within the amniotic pool of his mother's womb, he heard the wind howl across the face of the sea. He felt the *Lillian B* roll and tilt as the bay's deceptive tranquility erupted into a roller coaster of angry waves. He heard the thunder unfurl through both time and space and thought it was calling his name.

What an aching surprise that had to be—that sudden tugging urge to leave the domed shelter of his mother's belly. In the womb he had lived the life of a tiny god, his every need attended to by the vast machinery of his mother's body. He had not rested because his happiness would not allow it. In the dawning hours of his existence, he was frolicking. He may have been little more than a fetus, but he was already enamored with the sensation of dipping and spinning in a salty sea.

But as is the case with all mere mortals, a banishment from his state of grace was inevitable. Indeed, in the midst of his mother's contented snoring and as the *Lillian B* came perilously close to listing in the pounding waves, the child shuddered with the vague notion of paradise lost. He nudged his head against the widening eye of his mother's cervix. His bittersweet longing to stay put wavered as he became aware of a slight burning in his veins. Whatever was causing this slow singe, he wanted more of it. He needed to be able to open his little mouth and take in not water but this new thing that he craved. He worked his jaws, opening and closing, and his lungs began to expand, to push against the thin wall of his chest, in preparation for the nectar that was sure to come.

When the first birth pain struck, Lillian squeezed in her suddenly fisted hands the blanket that George had pulled up over her just thirty minutes before. She screamed for her husband, but the wind, which howled sirenlike, muffled her cries for help. Her firstborn, Zeke, had entered the world slowly, as if he didn't want anything to do with this earthly life. She was in labor for a full two days before the doctor, huffing and sweating, finally pulled the child out with forceps.

But this baby was different. There was no slow, inexorable march toward rapid contractions. They hit her with full-tilt fury, the pains relentlessly belting the wide circumference of her belly. She threw back her head, arched her neck, and pushed as hard as she could.

If she just had someone to help her, she thought. Just a little help.

George had no idea that there was a birth in progress on the *Lillian B.* And if he had known, there is little he could have done to help his wife, preoccupied as he was with preventing the boat from going down. The squall had blown in without warning, from the east—an uncommon but not unheard-of direction for a storm at that time of year. He had quickly pulled in and secured his nets and was attempting to set the anchor when the wind and water abruptly kicked the stern a good three feet into the air. George lost his footing and hurled like a pinball down the rain-slick deck. This giant of a man spun as if weightless, his legs snagging in a coil of rope and net, his head smashing into the rusting hardness of the iron winch. He shook off the blow and tried to sit up. Something warm streamed into his eye. He swiped at it and looked at his hand: blood. He pawed at his legs. His ankle, caught in the net's webbing, was grotesquely twisted.

The *Lillian B* slammed into the gullet of a wave, and a wall of water cascaded over the bow. Blinded by the rush of water and driving rain, George helplessly clawed at the darkness, groping at his foot, pulling at the labyrinth of hemp and nylon. He remembered the knife in his back pocket. He reached for it, flipped open the blade, but was knocked backward again as the *Lillian B* heaved under the force of the surging tide. He landed belly down, the knife slicing a half moon into his thigh, the air popping from his lungs. Pain shot from his ankle, up through his groin, and he doubled over, crumpled in the grip of the storm.

Certain that he had been abandoned by God, George's mind filled with a blank whiteness, his sole comfort the taste of his own blood as it flowed from his busted lip onto his tongue. The sound of the raging wind was deafening; he mistook it for his beating heart.

A clap of thunder boomed across the water, shaking the very ribs of the boat. It was at that moment, when he thought the *Lillian B* might come apart like so many matchsticks in the merciless sea, that he remembered something: he was not alone. Lillian. Oh my god, yes. Lillian. Lillian. Her name crossed his battered lips and then he let loose with a scream so primal it must have sent the stars hidden in the firmament spinning.

George Blue was a Herculean beast, not a man, when he sat up on all fours and dragged himself to the wheel house, the tangled mass of rope and net trailing behind him like a lumberous tail. Suddenly the world was a simple place, the darkness ablaze with his focus. He had to pull the *Lillian B* around. Had to face her into the wind and set that anchor. He would not allow his dear wife to die at sea. That was his fate, not hers.

Lillian's pain was the color of snow. The coldness of it blinded her. It burned through the layers of her skin even as it froze her contractions into a solid mass that began at her navel and radiated out.

Perhaps if she had been delivering this child in a hospital with doctors and nurses and her husband at her side so she could have screamed at the assemblage, she would have momentarily given up. No more strength, she might have said. I can't do it. I just can't. But there was no one to say that to, no one to fleetingly project her exhaustion onto while her body struggled toward the inevitable. No one to testify to her courage, pain, frustration. Not a single witness to her howling, dying animal agony. So after these words crashed across her tongue—"George Blue, damned if I'll ever let you touch me again."—she lifted herself up on her elbows, gritted her teeth, and pushed one last time.

The peculiar smell of her own insides filled the engine room as she felt her baby slide out. Grunting with the effort, she leaned forward and took the child in her arms. Pinch-faced and bloody, he bellowed as that first rush of oxygen flooded his hungry lungs. Lillian

opened one of the drawers beneath the bunk and reached in for the pair of scissors she kept there, all the while managing to keep a grip on this little creature who was slippery as a fish.

She then proceeded to perform a task that would make most any man faint dead away: she cut her baby's umbilical cord—snipped right through it with one sure motion. If she'd been a less practical woman or one who suffered from a frail constitution, there may have been a hesitation mark or two. But that was not the case. She was all about the business of life. Whatever it took. However ugly it got. She didn't allow herself to feel a single bittersweet pang as she severed the cord that had connected her to this child these past eight and a half months. No. She simply did what was necessary and then tied it off. Next, she put the child to her breast, laid back against her pillow, and endured the afterbirth—that purging of the placenta from her womb—with the quiet, practiced efficiency of a woman who understands that nature almost always takes it course.

Imagine George's utter shock when, after he had secured the *Lillian B* and the storm had begun to subside, he threw open the hatch to the engine room—blood still streaming down his face, his twisted ankle throbbing—to view a holy sight, indeed: his wife fast asleep, a baby boy suckling her breast. For a moment or two, he must have felt that it was all a dream. The storm and the gouge on his head and his wife's peaceful slumber as their son sucked away. Or perhaps he thought he was dead.

George did not put out his nets again that night. Rather, he busied himself with his true calling, with the one thing in life that gave him unmitigated happiness. He pampered his wife. He heated water, removed her clothes, and bathed her in the gardenia-scented bath oil that he had tucked into that drawer over two years before. He changed the sheets and fed her sweet warm tea with half-and-half. He soothed her skin—head to toe—with the gardenia body lotion. As she cuddled her baby, he combed the tangles from her black hair. And when she offered him his son—just as he did when Zeke was born—George Aristotle Blue cried.

In the wee hours of the morning, George tucked a pillow in the drawer, bundled his son in the silk negligee which his wife had never worn, and set the sleeping child sweetly on the pillow. The baby resembled a little prince, swaddled in silk, surrounded by scent bottles and the glint of silver. George eased into bed with his wife who lightly rested her hand on the rising and falling chest of her newborn.

No longer in constant motion, the baby slept. Other than the steady, slow dance of his chest, the only thing moving were his eyes. They darted back and forth behind the paper-thin wafers of his closed lids. But what does a four-hour-old child dream about? Were his visions spun of ashes or earth? Womb or water? Did he possess a self-image—something visual, palpable, tactile? Or did he see sounds?

Yes, this is what I want to know: in what language did my future husband dream?

In light of these ponderous questions I must admit I gain solace from recounting Nick's birth—from imagining how in the faint dawning light of March 23, 1967, as the Gulf lapped gently against the hull of the *Lillian B*, his mother looked for signs of herself in her child.

I close my eyes and see it all so clearly. A faint, prideful smile slips across her face as she marvels over his full head of hair—black ringlets just like her own father. I see him wrap his tiny hand around her finger, and I know that she welcomes his strong grip, believing as she does that it signals good moral character. With more curiosity than disappointment, she notes that he has his father's long, black lashes and high forehead. And even though it is a bit difficult to tell —him being less than a day old and all—she gains comfort from her certainty that he has her nose, a thin blade of a nose that suggests good breeding.

Please, do not doubt me about these facts which I have gleaned and conjured. Do they harm you? Do they harm anyone? I think not. So give me this, the faint flutter of joy I gain from remembering a certain sweet moment: she touches the dimple at the center of his drool-damp chin, awestruck at his perfection, and whispers, "I love you."

But I am getting ahead of myself. There is still uncharted territory to map. Barren hills to traverse. Hollow, wandering hours to account for. What did Nick see, feel, fear between the moment he climbed into the Fordge, blindly panicked, and the instant he walked into the Suwannee Swifty, compelled to unabashedly press his lips to mine?

Here are my answers. Guesses, at best. Perception and knowledge, they're not absolutes, you know. They waver in the light. Bold to dim. Stone to river. Yes, the whole ball of wax, it's ever-changing. You think you've got facts pinned down and then they wiggle away. But today, in my current state of mind, given my present circumstances, this is what happened to Nick. Exactly.

The faintly decaying aroma of fish nets lingered on his skin as the distance between himself and Lethe grew greater with every spin of his balding tires. The blind panic that had seized him upon his arrival on the mainland began to transform itself into something solid and cold and lethal, a rattlesnake winding itself around the double helix of his fear.

His instincts told him that if there were a cure it must have something to do with keeping the mind occupied. To that end, as he drove through Panacea, Medart, and on to Crawfordville, he tried to focus on the task at hand: finding a place to live. He would not think about Lethe or his mama or the feral cats that it would be up to his

brother to feed. He would blot from his consciousness any and all notions of a piney island where sea turtles shoveled out oval depressions in the sand to lay their eggs and where dolphins came in so close to shore you could see the pigment in their eyes and where night hawks darted through the twilight sky with such grace and precision that it was difficult not to be humbled by the very sight. He kept twisting the dial on the radio, the discordant jumble of music and commercials keeping him irritated, which was a damn sight better than feeling lost.

Nick did have a plan, however. It was sketchy, far from ambitious, and deeply rooted in negative capability, but in times of confusion and despair, people need to believe that they have a goal even if it's a flimsy one. His intent was to drive to Tallahassee, find a diner where a man could get a cup of coffee without feeling awkward, and search the newspaper's classified section. Apartments For Rent. That's where he would start. A small heading in infinitesimal print. The gateway to a new life. All he needed was a place to lay his head. Just a room. Maybe with a window. He would like that. Something to crack open and let a little air in.

He sped through Crawfordville, taking note of its many new businesses. Taco Bell. Subway Sandwich Shop. Discount Auto Parts. The IGA, though, was shut down. Couldn't compete with that new fancy Winn-Dixie where, it was rumored, you could buy pineapples —fresh and whole—just as if you were living in Waikiki. Who'd have ever guessed it. Crawfordville was becoming an ugly mess. Signs, signs, everywhere.

Gritting his teeth, he pressed on, north of Crawfordville and through the Apalachicola National Forest. He took a notion to sing, loudly, off-key. "Jimmy cracked corn and I don't care!" He laughed at his own self, amazed that the remnant of such a song was still floating in his brain, able to be called up at whim. He turned the radio knob and was surprised to find a tune he liked. He'd never heard this band before, didn't have a clue who they were. Maybe they'd say when it was over but probably not. Probably they'd go straight into a car commercial. But whoa! Look at that. Slow down. Take a closer look. A warped slab of plyboard. Hand-scrawled in green paint. Trailer 4 Rent.

"Well, there you go," he said and made a hard right onto a dirt road. He followed its curvy, pot-holed path for a good three-quarters of a mile until it spilled into a grassy clearing—a couple of acres' worth—shaped like a rectangle. In the middle of the clearing sat a single-wide canary-yellow trailer. Vintage 1960, that old tin can would have been unremarkable had it not been for the broad aqua stripe someone had painted with a good deal of precision around its midsection.

Nick, who was superstitious beyond what could be labeled reasonable, took the aqua stripe to be a sign. This was where he was sup-

posed to be. In a trailer in the middle of the Apalachicola National Forest, surrounded by timber pines that grew tall and straight, their green bristlelike leaves rubbing against the ever-changing Florida sky, their shallow root systems lacing through the shifting sand.

All of it—the pines growing in regimental rows, the sap oozing into trails of frozen tears on the tree bark, the jays darting through the cool bright air, the dollar weeds stitching perkily through clumps of crabgrass and nettles, the ring-necked doves cooing from the highest branches, the thistle about to burst into lavender bloom—created a mirage of permanence, as if this was a substantive land instead of what it really was: an ancient ocean bed littered with fossilized oyster shells and prone to that peculiarly Florida phenomenon known as the sinkhole, the opening up of the earth that swallows houses whole.

Sinkholes, of course, are a more common occurrence in Central Florida, where overdevelopment has led to the limestone-banked aquifer being sucked dry in places—thus the caving in of what people had thought was stable earth. But sinkholes are not unheard of in North Florida. In fact the land here—the very earth where the canary-yellow, aqua-striped trailer sat—was little more than a brittle birth caul veiling a maze of underground rivers and springs that flowed through limestone arteries in a cold, clear, sunless rush. Throughout Wakulla County, the underground rivers pooled to the surface, giant blue eyes blinking at the sun beneath gator-fringed lashes. But whether the rivers coursed through a cocoon of soft rock or the sandy brightness of exposed earth, they always, always meandered inexorably, doggedly south to the Gulf of Mexico.

The blue stripe. A sign. An omen. But of what? Nick stood in front of the trailer and took in his surroundings, ruminating. About thirty yards toward the eastern edge of the clearing rose a monument to other lives that had impacted this plot of ground. A solitary red brick chimney. Fuchsia and white camellia bushes bordered a spot where there had probably once been a porch. Wildly splayed Turk's caps and beauty berries created the outline of the former homestead, honoring the original footprint of the house as if the plants contained some kind of cellular memory, freely and wildly branching away from the now nonexistent structure, oddly resistant to encroaching upon its invisible walls.

He wondered if the person who planted the camellias ever dreamed or intended that years after the house had ceased to exist and long after the gardener—whoever he or she was—had left this place, that the bushes would still be here, tall and fat and blossoming with death-defying exuberance.

Maybe, Nick thought as he made his way over to where the house once stood, he could be happy here. Yes, he had simply reached another part of the sea, older and quieter and more seasoned than the Gulf that was but twenty miles away and fairly young, geologically speaking. That's how he should approach this place. It's what the blue

stripe meant. He had, without even trying, stumbled upon an ancient remnant of long-receded waters. In effect, he was standing on what was once the ocean floor. That was all there was to it. He hadn't upset the balance of anything by leaving Lethe. Not at all.

As if he owned the place, he took big strides, his legs—which would have been lanky had they not been sculpted by physical labor—casting tremendous shadows. He stepped between the camellias and imagined himself gaining the pine stairs. He wiped his feet on a mat. One made out of thick grass. No, cypress, he decided. He gestured as if opening a door. It creaked open and his nostrils filled with the pleasant scent of mullet frying. Suddenly hungry, he took off his ball cap and walked inside the imaginary house.

Nick wandered through all the rooms. They were high-ceilinged, beadboarded, and full of light. The house was a simple shotgun affair with a large, eat-in kitchen off to the right at the rear. Each room had at least two double-hung windows and the lady of the house—a young woman from a nearby village such as Hosford or Sopchoppy—kept those windows sparkling clean. At least for the first few years of her marriage. But then the babies started coming. By the time child number three arrived she gave up on dustless windows and settled herself on the front porch, where she snapped beans and watched her naked children play in the sprinkler. The groom, now, he was local born, a second- or third-generation mullet man, and he stretched his nets out in the back yard on a rough-hewn cedar fence he and his brother built. He didn't mind that as the years passed his wife's hips went wide and her once pretty face grew plump and toothless. He wasn't no Don Juan in old age, himself. And when his missus died at fifty-three from cancer in the breast, he felt he'd lost all reason to live. He suffered the kind of grief that splits the heart in two.

Nick stood in the geographical center of where the house used to be and divined all of this. It just came to him and he knew that it was true because Nick was like that. Once he decided on something, there was very little chance he would change his mind.

But what Nick could not divine was who owned the trailer. The plyboard for-rent sign didn't include a phone number. After he stepped back out into the yard beyond the green and growing walls of the old homestead, he walked the trailer's circumference, checking the door and jalousies for a clue, a wedged business card, something, but came up empty. He noted, however, with great interest that a window in what was most likely the bedroom was shaped like a porthole. He stood in the sandy yard, staring at the window, slowly shaking his head in amazement. Just knock me over, he thought. Another sign.

He got in the Fordge and drove to the feed store that was a half mile back up on the main road. There, he bought a bag of boiled peanuts and an RC Cola. After he handed the grizzled old man behind the counter a five-dollar bill, he said, "Excuse me, sir, but would you know who owns the yellow trailer that's for rent?"

"He ain't here."

"Know where I can find him?"

The old man stared suspiciously at Nick through his bifocals. "Outta town."

Nick looked at the RC and the bag of peanuts as if he was suddenly laden with too much luggage. "Oh."

"You from around here?"

"No, sir. Lethe." In this part of Florida, if you lived ten miles down the road, you were not local. Nick set his RC on the counter and opened up the soggy bag that contained the peanuts. "That's where all my people are from." Nick offered the old man a peanut which he, unhesitant, accepted. "And you?"

"Born and raised right here in Crawfordville." He popped the whole peanut in his mouth, shell and all, and sucked on the salty juice. Then he cocked his head, licked his lips, and narrowed his washed-out gray eyes. "Lethe, eh? You ain't George Blue's son are you?"

"Well, yes, sir. As a matter of fact, I am."

The old man grinned, peanut juice dribbled down his chin, and he chewed on the shell with his back grinders. "We used to go hunting together, your daddy and me! Goddamn, son, I miss him. I do."

"Thank you for that, sir."

"He was a good man. A flat-out crying shame, him dying the way he did. Wasn't a better shrimper than George Blue in the whole bunch. Don't make sense, it just don't. Don't ever tell my wife I said this, but sometimes the Lord God does things that bugs the bejesus out of me. And taking George Blue is one of 'em."

"Yes, sir," Nick said, and the uneasy fear that had stalked him these past few months and which ultimately pushed him to his decision to leave the island hit him with renewed, heart-pounding vigor.

The old man fiddled with the register, squinting through his glasses and trying three times before he found the secret combination that sent the cash drawer flying open. "Here you go." He reached into the nickel compartment and pulled out a key. "Jack Buford owns that trailer but he ain't gonna be back for awhile. Went down to Miami to visit his new grandbaby. That mess south of here you can keep. But when your daughter has her first baby, well hell, I'd even go to Miami for that. You might know his other girl. Louise Buford?"

"No, sir. Never had the pleasure."

"Well, whatever. Guess she's younger 'n you. Here's the key. Jack'll catch up with you about the rent when he gets back in town. In the meanwhile, you tell that mama of yours that Walter Strop said hello."

"Will do. Thank you, sir." Nick offered Mr. Strop his hand. They firmly shook. Mr. Strop had a helluva grip for a codger his age.

Upon returning to the trailer, Nick opened it up—all its jalousie windows and its sole door. If he could have, he would have peeled back the aluminum roof and let the sun bake away the stench of mildew. For a moment he worried about mosquitoes but then decided

it was too early in the day and too cool for them to be bad and, besides, he'd rather deal with bloodsuckers than the smell.

The trailer was simply furnished. An old coming-apart-at-the-seams brown Naugahyde couch. A homemade, surprisingly sturdy kitchen table. Two straight-back chairs. A galley kitchen. A mattress tossed like a piece of white bread on the bedroom floor. A bathroom with a shower the size of a phone booth. The medicine cabinet mirror was shattered. He peered at himself and his face looked broken in the mirror's jigsaw reflection.

He walked from the front of the trailer to the rear three times in a row. Other than the mildew and the cracked mirror, the place was fairly clean. On his last lap he contemplated how strange it was that the first person he met in his new life was a man who knew his daddy. Maybe you could never escape yourself, he mused. Maybe we each have our own destinies and the people who are lucky are the ones whose fates have nothing to do with the past—ancient or otherwise. Walter Strop had it all wrong. It wasn't God that took George Blue. No, sir. It was the sea, plain and simple. It owned the Blues. Every last one of 'em. Wasn't any reason in the world for his daddy to have fallen into the nets. Folks shook their heads and muttered, accidents happen. But not to George Blue they didn't. No way. And there also wasn't good cause for the engine to have overheated the way it did. The Blues prided themselves on keeping everything in tip-top shape. But that engine, it damned near exploded. The blaze was seen for miles, lit up the whole night sky. To this day, people talk about being on the hill and seeing a fire far out to sea and nearly crying at the sheer beauty of it. Holy smokes, that was fifteen years ago. Seems like only yesterday, him and his mama and his two brothers shuffling out to their front porch to watch the sky burn and his mama saying under her breath, "George Blue, that'd better not be you."

Nick shut his eyes and rubbed them as if he could, with a mere gesture, wipe away his family's history. Then he thrust his hands deep into his front pockets, stared pensively at the dark paneled walls and dimly lit, depressing rooms, and thought, I can't stand it—the only thing worse than being on the run is being hemmed in.

So he grabbed one of the straight-back cane chairs that had been tipped backwards against the wall and dragged it outside. He crossed the yard, carrying the chair in one hand, over his shoulder. It was made of Florida pine and weighed nothing. He slipped through the camellia-flanked passageway and into the center of what for all intents and purposes was a room with beauty-berry walls and a sky ceiling. He sat down in the chair and watched the sky. He observed how it grew nearly white as the sun reached its midday brightness and how as the afternoon progressed cirrus clouds began to move in from the north. A sign of a cold snap, he thought. If it got too cold Demetrius would stay in port. He would sit by the wood-burning stove and mend a net while his wife rocked their baby to sleep. And

his mama would pull out her wool socks—the ones it was hardly ever cold enough to wear—and she'd slip them on and wrap up in a blanket while she watched an old movie on TV, sipping sherry and bitching to herself about how much she hated the cold. The fish would run deep. But the fingerlings would get caught in the swift winter tide, the extreme tide that exposed miles of sea bed that were underwater the rest of the year. And the herons and gulls would put up with the cold because they knew about those low tides and the bounty they exposed: sardines, starfish, conch, whelk, anemone, crabs. But not ghost crabs. They wouldn't be back on the beach until April or, at the latest, May. But the sand would be scattered with shark-eye shells. He was positive of that. They were a wintertime shell. Yes, everything has its season. It's funny. But he sure did like that. How everything returns. It's the design of things. Hands on a clock. Tick, tick, ticking. Moving on and on. Each little bit of life, even sea worms and coquina, trying like the dickens to find their way home.

Denise Low

Excerpts from *A Daybook of Interiors*

April 12 Lawrence, Kansas

Wind gusts up to sixty miles an hour. Air seeps around the doors. Even though I am indoors all day, it wears me out. Wind pulls at the doors and sometimes tugs them open.

This is warm springtime wind. We open the windows and it rushes in, dispelling the stagnant winter air. But it blows papers off tables. It slams doors.

Tree branches bend under the pressure, beaten down. They bow to each other repeatedly. By the end of the day, many sticks and limbs litter the ground. The last dry leaves of autumn disappear, scoured away, but the fallen branches remain.

This year is almost as dry as ten years ago when spring winds brought a dust storm from the west. The sky darkened prematurely in the afternoon with the suspended dirt curtaining the sunlight. The wind blew fiercely then, too, and the grit blew into my face. The earth eroded away bit by bit, and I felt a sense of loss.

This wind takes away the dead leaves but stirs no dust. It takes away the winter, fills the house with new air, and renews the sky. This is hard work, and litter is left behind.

April 13 Lawrence, Kansas

Sun fills the house from every direction. Outdoors, it intensifies the white of plum blossoms and the yellow cups of daffodils. Indoors, the wooden floors brighten.

Light does not come only from the fireball in the east; it comes from the clouds, the trees, the birds flying by.

The window is a film of water between me and the world of light; it lets in particles of liquid sun. Glass is transparent: starlight crosses through melted quartz.

Air is filled with the diamonds of summer. They enter the house, and they enter my eyes. There is no dark corner left in the house.

April 14 Lawrence, Kansas

Grackles cover the garden and pick at dry grasses. They trail long strands of grass as they leave. These bird-bandits make nests the same as doves and robins.

Their purple heads shine even in the muted light of this cloudy

day; their eyes gleam yellow: they seem to be made of mineral colors, amethyst and sulfur.

They are among the most inhuman of the birds. They make harsh calls when they open their beaks, not coos or warbles. They walk in jerky steps, like wind-up toys.

They band together like thugs and bully the other birds with their size and numbers and abrasive alarms. They have the gall to eat out of the dog's food dish when he looks the other way.

This week we saw five males challenge a raven in the pine tree. They screeched and dive-bombed the black bird giant.

All five behaved like any angry parent, protective of a fragile grass basket hidden in the pine.

April 19 Lawrence, Kansas

A friend tells me it is morel season, and he picked twenty-five pounds of morels last weekend. It is bad manners to ask where another person hunts morels, so I take care with my response. In this populated area, many people want the fresh delicacies, almost as if they were truffles. Morels sell for twenty-five dollars a pound in the grocery store. But he describes not the location, but the general habitat—near jewel weed in well-drained but moist soil.

He is from an old Lawrence family, and he says his grandfather used to dry morels in the old days by tying them on a string. They cannot touch each other, so a knot is put in the string to separate them. Like herbs, they are hung in an airy, shaded place. Unlike herbs, they are strung horizontally. In the winter, then, the mushrooms can be placed in milk to rehydrate. Milk will bring them back to their original consistency.

But the fresh ones he takes home and stuffs with cream cheese and crab, and then broils for just a few minutes, until the morels turn into meaty fragrance.

He says the season is just beginning, the muggy weather needed to force mushrooms from the underworld. On the first hot day after a rain, he has sat quietly near mushroom rings and heard the plants rise out of the depths. There is an audible sound as the plants emerge.

Last night I did not have morels to cook, so I grilled a portabella mushroom, one perfect circle of mushroom flesh. Some substance in its juice quenched a hunger, and within, I felt I tasted the earth itself.

April 23 Lawrence, Kansas

The tulips bloom for the fourth straight day. They opened on Saturday—corals and oranges coming into focus, evolved from pale yellow buds. It has been like watching a photograph develop: slow at first, and as the image becomes discernible, suddenly it is full blown.

The tulips open in the morning and close at night. I had not no-

ticed this before; even though they last just a week or so, they still have hinges to open and close according to the sun.

They are butterflies that only live for a few days, but during those days they are remarkable. Each night they fold back upon themselves and hide their innermost parts. The next morning they loosen as the sun rises. During their short lives, the blossoms have a range of behaviors.

Blocky petals form a halo around black-eyed stamens. The coral-colored tulips have shadings and marbling of pinks and yellows. Even the hues of one petal make it appear to be in motion. I cannot see them all at once. My eyes are greedy, but I cannot fathom their radiance or hold them in my mind.

The stems of the plants have a covering of short plant hairs. I have never noticed these before, either. The huge bannerlike leaves are smooth, and the petals are as smooth as a baby's face. But the stems have protective fuzz up and down the lengths.

I want the tulips to bloom forever. I want them to remain open to the sun, without wavering or wilting. I want the soft wind to hold steady and the calendar to stop at this afternoon.

April 26 Lawrence, Kansas

The redbud trees bloom late this year. I expected them at the first of the month, but the cold weather slowed even these tough native trees.

But they bloom more profusely than ever before. Even the tiny growths along the bark bloom, so the trunks are covered with fuchsia blossoms, like pink moss.

Redbuds are not scarlet, but a deep, rosy purple. Leaves do not appear until later, so they appear to be giant bouquets of flowers. In wet, cold air the trees are almost black underneath the vibrant pink.

They form a backdrop to the neighborhood. Each yard has a few, since seedlings spread easily. The neighbor's old, established redbud rises behind the fence and radiates its color.

Two young trees in our yard do not yet bloom but stand silent. Next year, after the winter, they will turn colors along with their elders. Now they are scaffolding for petite, heart-shaped leaves in this season of pink petals.

May 6 Lawrence, Kansas

Lightning flashes against the window glass. Cold water pours out of the sky as thunder rumbles above the roof. The sky moves into the house.

I realize how much I missed rain and thunder all winter. The most fierce blizzard of January makes no sound beyond wind and the pelt of ice.

The thunder is a heartbeat of rainclouds. It is the echo of lightning strikes.

The thunder is a bear coming out of hibernation and scratching against tree trunks.

I remember when Athabaskan elders from Alaska came for the centennial powwow at Haskell [Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas]. A rainstorm blew through the grounds, and they had never heard thunder before. The sky seemed to split at the seams. They were truly frightened. A teenager with them spoke English and found out this was a normal sound with rains.

When I was a child my grandmother comforted me and told me thunder was the sound of angels moving furniture in heaven. We had a grand piano, and so I thought they were moving the celestial piano.

The thunder makes me feel close to my grandmother. It makes me think some voiced being resides in the sky who is not much different from me.

Of Centipedes and Candor

One is impressed by how few
there have been in all time
who are worthy of the list
at the back of the dictionary,

by how few of the few
have been so concerned about
the progress of the human spirit
that allegory hovers around them.

One is edified, then, to note
that it was George Eliot,
living in such disrepute,
with too much nose, an improper chin,

who proposed the installation of all
the monarchs of Europe in a zoo,
who pronounced Mr. Emerson
the first man she had ever seen.

One is pleased, too, that it was he,
misfit, failed preacher, errant teacher,
loiterer among useful men,
visiting the zoological garden in Paris,

who felt such communion with the grass,
the centipedes, and the foxes,
who professed with angelic candor
that man is a golden impossibility.

Dina Coe — Visit

"Beauty breathed about her and a lovely fragrance; light shone from her.
. . . She was Demeter. . . ."

—Edith Hamilton

We sit on a tufted islet,
my former neighbor and I.
The shore vines and trees
knot in the clear tangle I remember.
It's winter, and somehow
the water is not cold.

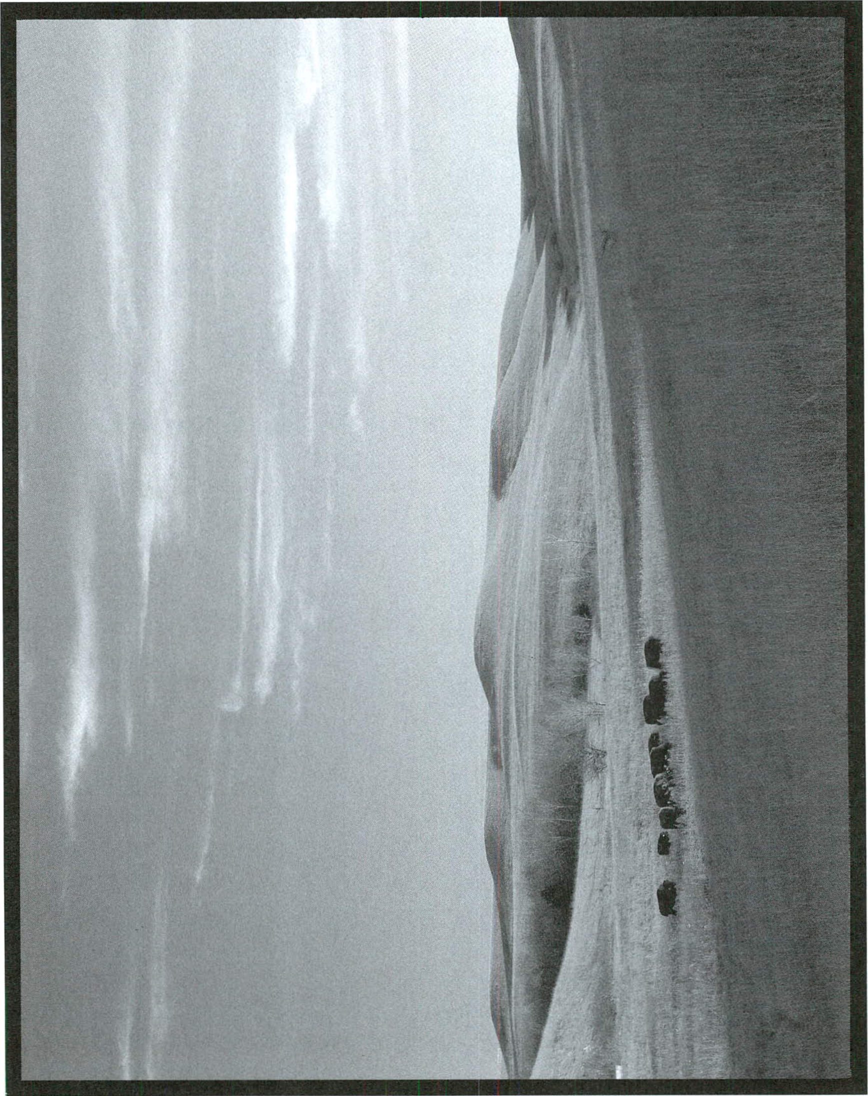
The brown lake floats by
grass faded to straw.
I'm sad to no longer live here,
relieved it wasn't a dream.
I try to say what I've missed,
can't put that shimmer in words.

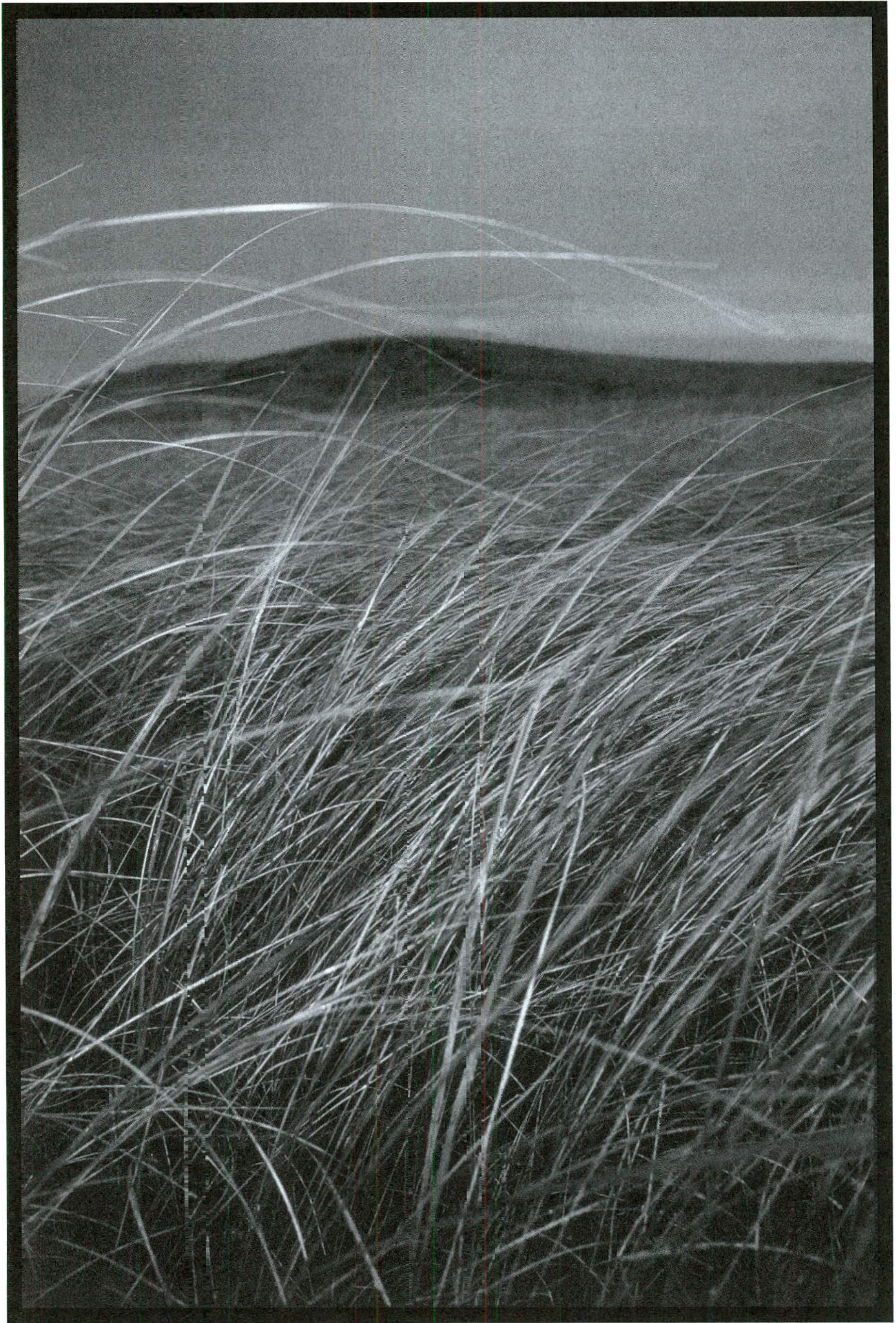
She gives me a dry stare.
What's to wonder at, she asks,
in muck-grown weeds?
As if my loss amounts to nothing.
Or, as if nothing's lost
since the lake and woods remain

whether or not I've moved away.
She's heartless, then again
she taught me to garden, scorning
my awe at the miracle it seemed.
She's so tall she stoops, a mole
caught in the wrinkles of her throat.

The bank yawns a mouth of mud.
Among webbed roots, I see the plant.
Grey-green foliage easy to miss,
the flower it opens is pink.
I gasp because this is winter.
Matter-of-factly, she says,

They come always at this time.
Does she know they come out
when I look, seeing another?
That I've come too, as she who lives here
year-round might have expected,
like her own daughter from hell?





Christopher Cokinos — Ethic

The ceaseless swells off Quoddy Head seemed lit
from far beneath: a glow in the Atlantic's cold
and thick and glassy heave
and fall to shelf, to rock,
the sudden coast. To look away,
to look again: prescient greens,
translucent sheen of surging light, deep
rising, rising of light and wave and time,
the ancient ocean changed, the Panthalassa
present, this massive and abiding reach
of cycled currents, Jurassic rain.
Black specks of dovekies rode the waves
above, perhaps, the bones of auks
and fossils ground to sand.
We sat on black ancestral rock, basalt
the salt beats down, in heat and cold, in wind
that's mostly cold. That day
the mass of clouds would
sometimes break the sky
with peristyles of light longing
instantly to earth, to whatever was beneath—
cliff-fog evergreens, sundew, grass
and columbine, to us. We ate the elements,
bread and cheese, the grains and churn
of a long and quiet time. All day my still
and watchful self was not, was caught
in gust-sharp, gust-sheared cry
of hungry black-backed gulls, cry
we say, all calling the pang
of recognition,
desire, counsel: *this*
is the planet teeming, this place
we've come to
and will leave tomorrow, deepened
for the long return, the reach
and touch of self to self, the wave
of *now* or *now* or *now*,
our place gone back to, always back,
and then, the careful stay.

Theodore Kitaif — Displaced Characters

Stale bread and fruit were all they would have to eat, and they wouldn't have had the bread were it not for Diandra. Although almost never seen without a stole of a rare and special breed of mink draped over her shoulders, she was known to all as a penny-pincher, and her cook often complained that she hovered around the kitchen as if she would dread the squandering of one lousy stalk of celery. Diandra had swiped the bread from the airport restaurant's buffet table just before she and the two men went out to meet the limousine they had hired to take them on the eighty-mile drive over the mountains to the resort city of Letira.

Their acquaintanceship was formed on the plane, where chance sat them three across, and it was solidified when they learned that they shared an ultimate destination. So didn't it make good sense, they agreed, to share the expense of getting them there from the airport?

Meete, a man of fifty, sleek of dress, sleek of manner, was on the lam. To break the power of the state over his bank he had simply ignored their burdensome regulations and treated his depositors' accounts as if they were his own. By this method he amassed a large fortune, and for years he pursued a secret investment plan: to stake these ill-gotten gains on the raising of a particular breed of pig that fattened quickly and could be sold at enormous profit. When a highly placed friend warned him that the law was about to close in, he snapped a fortune in large bills into the multipocketed vest under his shirt and, with a forged passport, took the plane to this country, where he could slip into oblivion.

Petersen, the third member of the party, was going to Letira to marry Margaret, a native of that city, whom he had met when she came to his midwest state to visit her sister. The latter worked on the estate where Petersen was employed as an assistant gardener and where, in an unused stall in the stable, he managed to breed Skye terriers as a way of supplementing his meager salary. He was thirty-five, slender but muscular (so that when a bar brawler tried to break a barrel stave over Petersen's left arm three years back, the arm suffered only contusions).

Anticipating an extra-large tip by hastening the journey, the driver took a shortcut off the main road. Two hours later the limousine broke down on the dirt street of a tiny deserted village on the side of a mountain. It was fifty miles back to the airport and thirty ahead to Letira. The driver (whose dream it was to invent a tire tread that would hold firmly to a perfectly smooth sheet of ice and that he

would style "The Grasper") went off on foot to find help. He would be back before nightfall, he promised.

The rain started soon after he left and continued through all of the night, coming down more and more forcefully until it stopped abruptly just after sunrise. Diandra had appropriated the large car for herself; the two men shared the least dilapidated of the wood shacks.

The next day Diandra and Meete sat around discussing who they would file complaints with when they got out of here, and how much money they would sue the limousine company for. They agreed that a hundred thousand dollars each would be a fair settlement. Petersen, roaming cautiously through the thick forest, found a tree whose fruit was edible and a small stream from which they could draw pure water using the tin bucket he had found in a pile of rubbish. He also came across a plant similar to one he was familiar with, from whose purple stalk he had, on a few occasions in the past, brewed an aromatic tea—but he would not bother with that here.

When, by evening, no help arrived, Diandra insisted that one of the men go for help early the next morning. Meete declined, citing a weak heart. Petersen was no coward—at his last job, as a construction worker, he would for the fun of it scale a nearby cliff on his lunch break—but he pointed out to Diandra that the terrain was unknown and the forest apparently impenetrable, especially to an outsider. One couldn't even follow the road that had brought them here, as it had been totally washed away by the previous night's storm. "We should wait," he said. "The driver, or someone, is bound to come for us. In the meantime, we should keep a smoky fire going all day, to attract any search plane."

To this suggestion Diandra, who considered herself the possessor of a devastating wit, sneered:

"Oh, I see! You'd rather play with a fire than get us out of this mire! You'd rather hide than hike!" And as he disappeared into the brush in search of firewood she screamed at his back: "You'd rather behave madly than manly! You'd rather bolt from your responsibility than be bold!"

That second night in their shack Meete suddenly said to Petersen: "I've been watching you stare at that broad."

"You're mistaken. The woman doesn't interest me."

"No? Then there must be something wrong with you. She could tread the boards of any Broadway stage, that piece—in fact, she could just stand there and men'd pay to gape at her."

"Some men would, no doubt."

"I'll grant that she's a sourpuss, but on the other hand I like a woman who pays attention to her looks. I bet she's afraid that eating an extra piece of bread will wreck her bathroom scale when she steps up on it. Anyway, since she doesn't interest you, I assume you're giving me a free hand with her."

"Unless she tells you to keep your hands to yourself, in which case I'd have to step in, wouldn't I?"

"Like a Boy Scout doing his good deed! But I know women, and I doubt it will come to that. If it does, though, I'd advise you to find yourself lost in the woods at the time."

"Couldn't. A matter of what's right, you know."

"What'd you say?"

"I said, a matter of right."

"I thought you said a matter of might—but we wouldn't want to trade punches over that one, would we?"

Words could frighten Meete. Once a cohort of his at the bank (a man who would later give evidence against him) meant to say, flatteringly, "The depth of your knowledge of the bank's computer system is never going to be fathomed by any bank auditor in a brown checked suit." But what he actually said was, "The death of your knowledge . . . ." This slip of the tongue had so panicked Meete that to avoid any evil effect he pulled the man off to a church that very afternoon and demanded that he recite a prayer of contrition.

In the middle of the night Meete left the shack and made his way over to the limousine. Its doors were locked from within. He tapped lightly on the window, a lover's tap; there was no response. He rapped loudly with his fist; still nothing. Angrily, he rocked the car violently from side to side, but the doors remained locked.

Back inside the shack, he said: "She'll need coaxing. I hadn't expected that."

Petersen pretended to be asleep.

"Try your little tricks again," said Diandra to Meete the next morning, "and I'll rip your eyes out. Clear?"

Not that Petersen interested her, either. To her, all men were interchangeable Don Does and Ron Roes; the only difference between them was the size of their bank accounts—and the man waiting for her in Letira could buy half this country for her.

She said no more that morning. She chewed on the last piece of bread and ate the fruit collected by Petersen, who, though he knew they were right to stay put, could not help but look back with dread at the baleful stare she threw him. Knowing nothing of her strong instinct for self-preservation, he feared that just to spite him she might go running off into the forest in search of a rescuer, in which case he would have to chase after her and carry her back, and perhaps even tie her up. It would be a nuisance.

He set about starting his fire again, and Diandra turned her attention to Meete. He was sitting on a rock, staring down into the palms of his soft hands. She placed herself two feet away. She said nothing, but her look told him that she did not believe for an instant in his weak heart, and that his cowardice was stealing from her her last chance for deliverance from certain death. Oddly, her accusatorial

gaze brought to his mind the time when, as a boy, he did steal something: he stole a fat bream from a fish market because there was no food in the house, and as he ran back home with the fish under his shirt he had the feeling that he was looked upon as a thief by everyone he passed.

That afternoon Petersen realized it might be a good idea to pry open the car's trunk (the driver, stupidly, had taken the keys with him). Neither of the other two would help, and the job took more than three hours. In addition to the usual tools and spare tire, he found only a case of beer inside. Petersen had given up alcohol two years before, and Diandra would drink nothing but chilled champagne. Meete could have it all to himself—but Petersen decided to keep control of it.

During the time Petersen had been working to open the trunk, Meete had stood by demanding that Petersen hike off into the forest—in any direction!—to look for help, and when Petersen insisted upon its uselessness Meete had insulted him roundly. With the beer, it now became easier to deal with the man. When Meete would talk to him as if he were a servant, commanding him to *do something* before they all died, Petersen would open bottle after bottle for Meete, and humor and stall him until the brew would quiet him down.

By evening Meete fell into a stupor. He dreamed he was being punished for trying to breed wild boars whose skins could be fashioned into the style of the most expensive mink. His arms were being held by two burly men in black who were dragging him toward a roaring fire. But he was innocent, he protested, he was a saint! And to a third man in black, waiting beside the blaze with a rope in his hands, he cried out, "How I dread being burned at the stake!"

On the fateful fourth day, while Diandra sulked in her limousine, Petersen and Meete walked around the ruined village in search of anything useful. It had rained heavily again the night before and most of the remaining shacks had been washed away. A thick mist clung to the surrounding trees like the tatters of dirty gray gowns worn by giants at an awful ritual. Meete paused beside a rude stile that had floated into the middle of a rocky path. Loudly cursing his fate, he kicked at its frame as if intending to break the stile into a thousand bits. He picked up a large piece of wood that he had loosened, and Petersen watched anxiously as Meete swung it around and around over his head. If it were to come to it, Petersen thought, he could stave off the blows from the broad hunk of wood, take it away from Meete, and lay him out with it. But he hoped violence could be avoided: it would only make things worse than they were.

"I'm clearing out of here," Meete suddenly announced. "You and the blond bimbo can do what you like—separately or together."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous, you haven't a chance of making it."

Without looking back at him, Meete turned and entered the for-

est, slashing at the vegetation with his piece of wood. He strode down a narrow path in the manner of a knight setting out to stalk the dread monster Ambsace through an ancient forest of a vanished continent.

Petersen followed him at a distance of twenty-five yards, marking the trees with the tire iron taken from the trunk. After about two miles he lost sight of Meete. Hurrying along, climbing over the trees blown down by the storms, pushing through the thick, dripping vegetation, he found himself at the very edge of a tall cliff. From here he had a view of the mountainous landscape, which was stunning in its beauty but without any sign of human life. He took hold of the trunk of a tree and leaned far out over the cliff's edge and looked down. There at the base of the cliff, sprawled over huge rocks, lay the body of Meete. To the police, later, he would state it as his opinion that Meete had lost his footing on an outcrop of wet shale. Now he descended the slick paths with care, and it took him more than an hour to reach the body. He checked first for a heartbeat, but found none—but he did find the vest stuffed with cash. This he removed and strapped on under his own shirt.

"Where's the brave Romeo?" asked Diandra through the car window when Petersen returned.

"Dead. Fell off a cliff."

"That figures! When we get out of here we can stage a broad comedy of errors, with his character as the lead jerk. So now what?"

"I see you've kept the fire going. We wait."

Diandra spent that night in the car, Petersen in the shack. They ate the fruit Petersen collected and kept their smoky fire alive. In the middle of the next afternoon they were found by a helicopter pilot taking three wealthy Swiss businessmen for a look at the country's photogenic mountains and ravines.

Having been alerted by phone, Diandra's lover was waiting for her at the helicopter base. She went off with him after a brief conversation with Petersen in the course of which she said, "I know you gave our friend a helping push, but don't worry, I'm not going to tell anyone."

A day later Petersen found his way to Letira, where Margaret worked in the laundry of one of its hotels. Mail service in that part of the country hardly existed, and thanks to the money he brought to the marriage, they purchased three small trucks and went into the business of delivering packages and letters among the distant towns and villages.

Margaret's father, a farmer, was proud of his daughter's success in the world. He, who could barely write his name, would often say to his friends:

"Think of it! She takes a letter from here and brings it there, and from there here. Do you realize what wonderful and unexpected things can result from all those letters moving around?"

Victor Contoski   Gutters

All day the rain
has been coming down
and coming down

on the home
where my father
lived his quiet time.

I see him now
        coming
in the gray day
in his raincoat
        setting the old ladder firmly
        against the side of the house.

Up he goes
the ghost

a dead man
cleaning dead leaves
from the gutters

in the rain

his hands gentle and strong
doing
        what needs to be done.

Victor Contoski   Memory

She weaves the night
with her long thin hands
under a white moon

cold as a frosty pump handle
cold as the iron chains
holding an empty swing board
in their arms

on an abandoned playground
in the blue night.

Victor Contoski — Biology

The bell rings.

That's the end of English.
Books slam shut.
Papers ruffle.
The teacher turns away
and erases the blackboard.

Dave on my left
and Fred on my right
go out to biology.
Coming? asks Pat.

I put my notes
in my briefcase
and follow
down the pitted stone steps
across the mall

where the building
—what was its name?—
used to stand.

But it has vanished
along with Pat and Dave and Fred

and I am standing alone
a man of sixty years
with a high-school biology textbook
long out of date

looking for my place
among the dead.

Lai Yung Kwok — Two Women in a City

0

She is living with her mother in a city.

1

The city is built on an island. Its traditional style of housing is a four-story apartment building with a balcony for each unit. The people dry their clothes on the balcony, and sitting under the hanging clothes, they take naps, listen to the radio, and watch the street scenes. On sunny days, the clothes on the balcony undulate under the clear blue sky. On cold winter nights, even though the doors and windows of the houses are all closed, and even though there are only a couple of passers-by on the streets, the clothes waving in the strong north winds can still expose the vivaciousness of the city.

2

The clothes drying on the balconies also give her a sense of security. When she was a primary student, she was usually by herself at home, as her mother had to work in a factory from morning until evening. Upon returning home from school, she ate the food that her mother had prepared for her before she went to work. The food was cold but tasty. Afterward, she washed the dishes, cleaned the floor, and did her homework.

Then she would stand on the balcony waiting for her mother's silhouette to appear at the street corner. The city was quiet in the afternoon, especially in winter. Far away came fragments of old songs, telephones ringing, babies crying. Only those clothes hanging on the nearby balconies could give her a feeling that some people were living around her. She would feel scared if all the balconies were empty.

After four or five hours, the street lamps lightened, one after one, each with a ring of ghastly greenish light. Then her mother appeared at the street corner, holding a basket of meats, vegetables, and fruits. She rushed to the door and opened it, and after a while, she could see her mother walking up the staircase. Her mother took out some seasonal fruits from the basket to give her. She ate the fruits immediately, as she was hungry. Sometimes the fruits were oranges, apples, bananas, or mangos, but sometimes lai-chis.

3

Her mother did not need to work on Sunday, and she would take her to the market to buy food for the meals. The market was crowded and noisy. She gripped her mother's hands and clothes as tightly as possi-

ble; she was frightened of losing her mother in the crowd. Under the sun, the tents of the food stalls and the clothes on the balconies and along the sidewalks cast dark shadows on the ground, on the walls, on the faces of the people. The streets, the markets, and the city were full of shadows.

Her mother usually bought her a doll or a comic book in the market. If she noticed something red in the food stalls, she would ask her mother to buy lai-chis for her. Summer was the season for the lai-chi. Sometimes her mother would buy them, but most of the time her mother told her that the lai-chis were so expensive that they could not afford to buy them.

4

She remembered the first time that she ate lai-chis; it was her father bringing them home after a long trip. Her father was a sailor, and he had returned home twice in a couple of years. The morning after, when she woke up and could not find her father at home, she cried. Her mother told her that her father had left home and was already on board. His ship had sailed away from the city for many, many hours.

It was also the last time that her father brought the lai-chis home because he never returned. Her mother told her that he was drowned in a sea disaster. In her memory, she had been with her father two or three times, and she could only remember that he was a tall and thin man.

5

The city cannot grow lai-chi. It is a native fruit of the city's nearby mainland, which exports tons of lai-chis to the city in summer. The lai-chi is red in color, and within the red peel are the white pulp and a dark brown seed. She liked eating lai-chis because they were sweet and fresh. When she was a kid, she could hold four or five lai-chis in one hand.

6

Her mother was not born in the city but in a village in the nearby mainland where they could plant lai-chi. At seventeen, she left her mother and young brother and went to the city to find a job. She sent almost all of her salary home to support their living in the village. She was by herself and knew nobody in the city. One of her neighbors, an old woman, felt pity for her and proposed to her marriage with her nephew, a sailor. In a city, it was more secure for a single young woman to have a husband who could take care of her.

Her mother married at the age of eighteen, and her father at thirty-six. One year later, she was born in the city.

7

She had seen her mother's wedding gown, a kind of red, like the color of lai-chi. The wedding gown was kept in the lowest layer of a brown

suitcase, and upon it were a torn marriage certificate and some photos of a girl. The girl had big eyes and two long braids. That girl was her mother.

That night, her mother received a call from her younger brother who told her that their mother had died in the village. Her grandmother had been sick for about half a year, and during that period, she always complained that some spirits were sitting at the corners of her house and waiting for a chance to take her life away.

Before the usual time they went to bed, her mother took the brown suitcase out from the wardrobe and let her see the things inside it. Her mother also made sure that she knew the exact location of the suitcase in the wardrobe.

She understood her mother's intention: her mother hoped to be buried with all the things in the brown suitcase after she died. In the bed, she thought that she would bury her mother with the wedding grown and the marriage certificate, but she would keep the photos with her.

She was at high school then and was mature enough to understand many things.

8

And she was mature enough to have an idea that her father had not died but run away with a woman. She could not find any photos of her father in the family's albums. Her mother had probably taken them away, or burned all those photos, including those taken at their wedding.

Did her father meet that woman in this city or in another city? Were they living with their children in this city or in another city? Even if she would meet him some day in the city, she would hardly recognize that he was her father. He was only a stranger to her.

9

A windy summer afternoon. She was sleeping in her bedroom. The windows were opened and the curtains were undulating. A big brown street cat climbed along the water pipes outside the apartment and then lay at the windowsill.

Rays of sunlight fell on the ground.

At the street corner, a hawker cried out loudly, "Sweet lai-chi! Cheap lai-chi!"

8

At eighteen, upon graduation from high school, she studied music and classical guitar at a music institute. From the way her guitar instructor touched her hands when teaching her the techniques, she sensed that he had deep affection for her. And her classmates told her that the guitar instructor liked her very much, as whenever he saw her, he would immediately stop smoking. But she was hesitant in de-

veloping a closer relationship with him. He had lived in another city for ten years and had just returned to this city for a few months. He knew nothing about the city in the past ten years. She felt that he was more strange than any other men in the city.

7

During the summer vacation, she continued having lessons with her guitar instructor at his home every Saturday evening. At the time she got off the tram and walked to his apartment, the sun was low in the sky and cast long and faint shadows on the streets. His apartment was very near to the harbor of the city, and through the windows, she could see the steamliners, ships, boats, and junks sailing by. Sometimes they were so close to the coast that she could see the passengers on the ships, and the passengers could probably see her as well. The ships sailing outside the windows made her feel that the apartment was also on the sea.

While she was having lessons in his apartment, she felt that his affection toward her grew stronger. After the lesson, he would ask her to stay to listen to music, or to watch music videos with him. He also made tea for her.

When she left his apartment, the streets were all in dark. Stars were in the sky.

6

She never saw any woman in his home. But the tidiness and the scent of the apartment revealed that a woman visited his home quite often and helped him do the cleaning. There were always clean clothes drying on the balcony: gray and black trousers, white shirts, blue pullovers. Since she had been in his apartment and knew more about him, he seemed not so strange to her as before.

One evening, while she was in her guitar instructor's apartment, it suddenly rained heavily. The strong wind blew the rain inside the apartment, and blew away the scores on the music stand. He rushed to close the windows; she helped him. The heavy rain and strong wind were kept outside the windows, and the apartment returned to calm and silence. But outside the windows, the city was in agitation. The residents rushed to their balconies to take down their clothes hanging along the clotheslines, and the passers-by and hawkers on the streets rushed to find shelters. Shadows clustered under the shelters. It soon flooded on the roads.

5

She was watching the city; he was watching her.

4

After it stopped raining, she left the guitar instructor's apartment and took a tram to return home. The flood on the roads had subsided. The

streets were soon crowded with passers-by and hawkers. The city returned to order.

When she stepped on the staircase under her apartment, a man was walking down. He was a tall and thin old man. She passed by him. She felt that she had met this man somewhere in this city before.

She opened the door and found that her mother was standing on the balcony. Her mother knew that she had returned home, but she did not turn her head around. It seemed her mother was absorbed in watching something on the street. She walked near the balcony. Under the street lamp's ghastly greenish light was the shadow of that tall and thin man. He walked quickly. He never knew that there were two women on the balcony watching him silently.

3

Her memory could go back to as early as when she was three years old. She was sick, and her mother took her to see a doctor. It was a cold and windy winter night. No one was on the streets except her and her mother. The streets were dark, and the windows and doors of the houses were all closed. It seemed that there were only two people in the world: her and her mother.

2

The man's shadow finally vanished at the street corner.

Only the undulating clothes were living under the city's dark sky.

1

She started going to concerts with her guitar instructor.

Just before the summer was gone, he took a trip to the nearby mainland. When he returned to the city, he came to visit her and brought her a basket of lai-chi from the mainland. Her mother was very glad to meet him and prepared a big dinner for him.

After he had gone, she and her mother sat on the balcony and ate the lai-chis. Her mother said that the fruits were very sweet, and this summer was an exceptionally good season for lai-chis. But the summer was going to pass. The red peels and dark brown seeds of lai-chis were soon piled up on the table. She noticed that the balcony was extraordinarily bright tonight. She looked up; ah, a full moon was high in the sky.

0

And she will live with her mother and a man in the city.

Luci Tapahonso

Excerpts from *Blue Horses Rush In*

It Was

I won't return to the startling beauty of the valley
where stars glimmer bright. And so many.
I stood in the quiet road amazed.
It seemed a fantasy. It was.

The stars and dark steep mountains circle us.
Beneath the huge pines, deer wind a careful path
to the waiting water. They know no guilt.

Inside the circle of water, the clear rippling twin of moon,
coyote's careless handiwork of stars, the deep black sky.
The water is still, quiet lapping at the edges.
Mosquitoes hum, waiting, waiting.
The water does not remember you and me
sharing stories, teasing, laughing at lunch.

Perhaps those afternoons' bright sounds linger
in the trees, the steep cliffs, the dry air.
But what good is memory if this place
does not recognize me? Or you?

Later, a low din dissipates into the floor of the valley.
Inside the glass-walled banquet rooms,
people are reading and talking poetry.
Wine glasses clink, sheaf of poems shuffles,
peals of laughter descend into the cool night.
I am there, reading words and smiling.
I am not there; I watch the wide back doors.
    I drive slowly past houses of fine aged wood
    and huge glazed windows.
    I know no songs to draw you out
    to the night's lingering beauty.

You are inside a huge, dark house,
a silent shelter of your own thoughts.
Everything you should have said echoes over and over.
You are drinking too much.

There is no symmetry here though the deer
are lying down now in the hushed mountainside.
There is no symmetry in the glorious disarray of distant stars.
There is no symmetry though stories are buried in the mountainside.
There is no symmetry though songs burn when glowing stars fall.

Tell me.
Tell me now.
What good are words that wither
in the clean, silver slants of moonlight?

In Praise of Texas

So many times I've rushed into airports frazzled,
my hair everywhere as I lugged bags along,
my face flushed from hurrying,
and my breathing loud and raspy.

But I will never be seen like that in Texas.

Because George Strait lives in Texas.
A friend saw him once at Gate 29 at Dallas–Fort Worth.
He is so nice, she said, and to prove it,
she handed me a picture.
George Strait had his arm around her. He was smiling.
I struggled so to share her happiness.

Though that was years ago, I believe that unending faith
precedes glittering possibilities.
I believe that the world is basically good,
and so I am certain that one day
I will just happen to run into George Strait in Texas.
Maybe he'll be buying the *Dallas Morning News* at a Circle K.
Maybe as I'm having a salad, he'll walk into the same cafe,
like an ordinary person, and order a medium Diet Coke.®

Each time I am in Texas,
my hair shines radiant,
I won't allow dark thoughts to mar my face even for an instant,
my hat has been steamed and re-shaped,
my clothes are smooth and coordinated,
and I am never rushed.

Once as we dined alongside the Riverwalk in San Antonio,
my husband smiled at me and said, "You sure are pretty."
"Thanks honey," I said, "but do you really mean it,
or are you just saying that?"
"I really mean it," he said.
I removed my sunglasses and searched his face
in the evening light,
but I couldn't tell if he really meant it.
In any case, I glanced around very discreetly to see
if anyone else (maybe a country western singer)
shared his sentiment. Just in case, I reminded
myself to sit up straight.

No way.
You'll never see me looking frazzled
or the least bit scuzzy in Texas.
Whether we drive through Dalhart, visit Fort Worth
for a few days, take in a Rangers game,
or whether I have a brief layover at Houston–Hobby,
I believe that one has to be prepared
for whatever Texas has to offer.

Sometimes as the plane glides over that vast, plain state,
above scattered herds of horses, I can see the luster
sparkling off their broad backs like intense hope and I am
reassured that dreams can blossom without any urging on our part.

A Song for the Direction of North
Tsaile, Arizona

The sky is a blanket of stars covering all of us.
The night is folding darkness girl.

Just after midnight, we walk in the cool mountain air.
The stars glisten so.
Their bright beauty makes us dizzy.
Laughing, we bump lightly against each other.
I hold my daughter's arm.
We walk slowly, still looking at the sky.
The night is folding darkness girl.

Those few stars in the north seem so close.
Maybe they are right above Buffalo Pass.
Underneath the stars, the Lukachukai Mountain
lies dark and quiet.
It breathes with the sacred wind.
Clearly, clearly the barking of dogs echoes from miles away.
Right there under the pine trees,
the shiny, smooth horses snort and breathe loudly.
The night is folding darkness girl.

The Milky Way stretches wide and careless across the dark night.
It is a bright sash belt with thin, soft edges.
The night is scattered thickly with glistening specks
and blinking orbs of light.
In some night spaces, there is no order.
"Coyote sure did a good job," Misty says.
We laugh, and I love my daughters so.
The night is folding darkness girl.

The house sits strong and round against the base of the mountain.
In the dark stillness, slants of moon and starlight
wait within the carved walls for white dawn girl.
Slants of light wait for white dawn boy.

Ahshénee 'wéé, t'áá kóó neiit'aash dooleełée.
My beloved baby, if only we could stay here.
There is no end to this clear, sweet air.
To the west, immense rocks lie red and stark in the empty desert.
Somewhere my daughters' smooth laughter.
deepens the old memory of stars.

Each night, I become Folding Darkness Girl.
Each night, I become Folding Darkness Boy.
Each morning, White Bead Girl arrives.
Each morning, White Bead Boy arrives.

Blue Horses Rush In
For Chamisa Bah Edmo, Shisóí 'ał́ą́ąjį' naaghígíí

Before the birth, she moved and pushed inside her mother.
Her heart pounded quickly and we recognized
the sound of horses running:
    the thundering of hooves on the desert floor.

Her mother clenches her fists and gasps.
She moans ageless pain and pushes: This is it!

Chamisa slips out, glistening wet, and takes her first breath.
    The wind outside swirls small leaves
    and branches in the dark.
Her father's eyes are wet with gratitude.
He prays and watches both mother and baby—stunned.

This baby arrived amid a herd of horses,
    horses of different colors.

White horses ride in on the breath of the wind.
White horses from the east
where plants of golden chamisa shimmer in the moonlight.

She arrived amid a herd of horses.

Blue horses enter from the south
bringing the scent of prairie grasses
from the small hills outside.

She arrived amid a herd of horses.

Yellow horses rush in, snorting from the desert in the south.
It is possible to see across the entire valley to Niist'áá from Tó.
Bah, from here your grandmothers went to war long ago.

She arrived amid a herd of horses.

Black horses came from the north.
They are the lush summers of Montana and still white winters of Idaho.

Chamisa, Chamisa Bah. It is all this that you are.
You will grow: laughing, crying,
and we will celebrate each change you live.

You will grow strong like the horses of your past.
You will grow strong like the horses of your birth.

Review

Blue Horses Rush In: poems and stories by Luci Tapahonso

University of Arizona Press, 1997.

Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday first brought attention to the oral literary heritage of American Indians when he won the Pulitzer Prize for *House Made of Dawn* in 1969. Within the narrative line of the novel he interwove songs, Native- American church sermons, stories, and prayers. Other Native writers who have become well known since Momaday's first publication are Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, James Welch, Ray Young Bear, and Luci Tapahonso, among many others. Tapahonso's *Blue Horses Rush In*, her fifth book, is an English-language representation of oral tradition in written form. Both form and content reflect the *Diné*, or Navajo, origins of her work, and the result is also a new literary form, composed of elements of both fiction and memoir.

Walter Benjamin, in his essay "The Task of the Translator," notes how the act of translation creates a third language, since the target language must be changed to accommodate new structures. Tapahonso is bilingual in English and *Diné*, so she is able to convey nuances of both languages. Tapahonso's English-language text includes *Diné* terms that become familiar, such as *Hózhó*, a word representing both beauty and spiritual harmony in "A Birthday Poem" (79-80): ". . . I tell Lori we *Diné* are made of prayers./ At times, the world may overwhelm us, yet because of the *Diyin*,/ each morning we pray to restore *Hózhó, Hózhó, Hózhó, Hózhó*" (80). Sometimes she uses the English syntax most similar to *Diné* phrases, such as beginning a sentence with an object. An example of this occurs in her much-anthologized poem "Hills Brothers Coffee": "The store is where I'm going to" (98). The maternal uncle who drinks coffee with his niece speaks no English, so the poem reflects his world not only in setting and kinship relationships, but also in his idioms. English stretches its boundaries to reflect the experiences of people in *Diné-tah*, Navajo Country.

More than the language reflects *Diné* life. Many of the prose pieces and poems are set among extended family and friends. Tapahonso explains the storytelling community in the preface: "We meet relatives or friends almost everywhere, and conversations consist of jokes, stories, and intricate wordplay" (xi). The informal style makes this collection accessible, as though the readers travel the Shiprock

area in New Mexico with the author. Her family and friends become companions through the stories about barely-running cars, ceremonial dances, *Diné* history, and family gatherings. Stories recount family teachings, as in "White Bead Girl," after a teenage child becomes a runaway. On the telephone the grandmother comforts the mother: "'. . . you will remember what happened, but the pain will not be the same. Because each time [children] hug you after that, each time they serve you food, each time they laugh out loud with you, a bit of the pain leaves until only the outline of it remains and that alone becomes the memory"' (68). The wisdom of how to survive the hardships of life are contained in the stories, as well as humor. Tapahonso's work is memorable because she uses language to ignite experiences in the reader's mind, so that the stories have images that are beyond either English or *Diné*. She explains her poetics in a preface that, like Momaday's essay "Man Made of Words," will become a useful critical essay:

> The understanding is that the function of stories is to entertain and that they usually involve some teaching as well as the exploration of possibilities, besides which they all require a vivid imagination and a nonjudgmental mind-set. Therefore, one may get caught up in the story, on some level becoming a part of it, and even more intensely so as it is retold at another time. (xiv)

The repetitions and carefully selected synecdoches in the writings evoke the experiences so fully that the reader is pulled into an imaginative trance led by the storyteller. Images sink into many levels of consciousness at once, evoking sensory response as well as intellectual understanding. Keith H. Basso comments on the visual, succinct storytelling style of the Western Apaches, neighbors of the *Diné*, where "speaking involves the use of language to 'depict' and 'convey' images to the members of an audience, such that they, on 'hearing' and 'holding' the speaker's words, can 'view' the images in their own minds." What the listener adds to the images is crucial to the completion of the storytelling process. The poem "It Was" contains this stanza of description:

> Inside the circle of water, the clear rippling twin of moon,
> coyote's careless handiwork of stars, the deep black sky.
> The water is still, quiet lapping at the edges.
> Mosquitoes hum, waiting, waiting.
> The water does not remember you and me
> sharing stories, teasing, laughing at lunch. (33)

The natural and human worlds overlap, and just enough information is given about each to suggest a mood and a story. The poems in this collection are often narrative, such as "In Praise of Texas," about a friend's sighting of George Strait; or structured like songs,

such as "A Song for the Direction of North," with repetition of the phrase, "The night is folding darkness girl" (5-6). Tapahonso's poems and stories in *Blue Horses Rush In* invite participation. The prose pieces are also narrative, as well as sharing with the poems the quality of vivid imagery.

The first-person narrative point of view makes the stories even more true to life. The writer makes it clear that this is a fictional device, since she could not have personally experienced everything she writes about:

> Although many of the stories or jokes that are told can be translated and relayed fairly well in written form, the clear sense of voices and characters is diminished in some ways, so that even though it's obvious when I tell a story orally that I'm not the protagonist or other person, the reader of a story may interpret it otherwise. (xiii)

The first-person storyteller, though not necessarily the author, still brings the reader into an intimate relationship, like a conversation. Gestures and inflection of voice are lost, but the performative setting is reconstructed in Tapahonso's work. The work lends itself readily to reading aloud, as the author shows during live performances of her works. She is one of the best American readers of poetry.

This is Tapahonso's second collection of prose and poetry published by the University of Arizona Press, after three books of poetry by small presses (including West End Press of Albuquerque). It shows Tapahonso developing a genre of prose that is at once explanatory and fictional. She uses both this genre, and the poems, to tell stories, and also to translate the entire *Dinétah* world within the four sacred mountains. In both English literary tradition and in *Diné* tradition, the purpose of literature is to entertain and to teach. In *Blue Horses Rush In* the teachings include not only moral advisement, but also explanation of another way of life. The southwest landscape comes to life with people, as a warm narrative voice recounts memories from the far and recent past. This book is a solid addition to Tapahonso's growing body of work.

—Denise Low

Contributors

David Beard has recently published in *Double-Entendre*. His work has also appeared in *The Sun*, *Oyez Review*, and *The Tucumcari Review*.

Jon Blumb is a full-time professional photographer based in Lawrence, Kansas. His portraits of William Burroughs have appeared in several books and his photographs of grassroots art in the Midwest were published in *Backyard Visionaries* in 1998 by the University of Kansas Press.

Alan Brown spent seven years in Tokyo, writing for magazines and newspapers and reporting for BBC Radio. His first novel, *Audrey Hepburn's Neck*, won the Kiryama Pacific Rim Book Prize for Literature. Brown, who has received an NEA Literature Grant for his novel-in-progress, lives in New York City.

James Brown is the author of the novel *Lucky Town*. He is a recipient of an NEA Fellowship and the Nelson Algren Award in Short Fiction. He is currently at work on an autobiography about addiction and suicide.

Tamara Carter has published her work in *Cargoes*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, *Fandango*, *Hollins Critic*, and *Zone 3*.

Dina Coe has poems in recent issues of *Southern Poetry Review*, *Connecticut Poetry Review*, *Poet Lore*, and *Barrow Street*. She lives in rural New Jersey.

Christopher Cokinos is a former Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest Visiting Artist Fellow. His nonfiction book, *Hope is the Thing with Feathers: A Personal Chronicle of Extinct American Birds*, will be published by Tarcher Books in 2000.

Victor Contoski is the author of five books of poetry and four books of translations of contemporary Polish poetry. His most recent book is *Midwestern Buildings*, published by Cottonwood Press. A new book of poems, *Homecoming*, is scheduled to be published by New Rivers.

Gary Duehr has had poems published or forthcoming in *Agni*, *American Literary Review*, *Hawaii Review*, *Iowa Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Texas Review*. His first collection, *Winter Light*, will be published by Four Way Books.

Connie May Fowler is the author of the novels *Sugar Cage*, *River of Hidden Dreams*, and *Before Women Had Wings*, which won the 1996 Southern Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. Her work has been translated into eleven languages and published in more than twenty countries. *Remembering Blue* will be published by Random House in January 2000.

Oakley Hall is the author of fifteen novels and six mystery novels. His latest book, *Ambrose Bierce and the Queen of Spades*, is an historical mystery novel set in San Francisco. The director of the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, Hall received the PEN Center USA West Award of Honor in 1998. *The Gates of Bone* is from a novel-in-progress.

Kathleen Johnson is the recipient of the Langston Hughes Poetry Award and the Kansas Voices Poetry Award. Her work has appeared in *The Midwest Quarterly*, *West Branch*, and *Kansas Women Writers*. She is currently at work on a collection entitled *Just West of Freedom*.

Theodore Kitaif lives in New York City. His work has appeared in *Chelsea*, *Colorado Quarterly*, *Ohio Review*, *Mississippi Review*, and *South Dakota Review*, among others.

Lai Yung Kwok published her first collection of short stories, *Some Journals on Living*, in 1997 with funding from the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. Three of her works were included in collections of Hong Kong short stories of the 1990s. This is her first published story written in English.

Jay Ladin has published poetry in many literary magazines and anthologies. His work has most recently appeared in *North American Review*, *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Willow Springs*, and *Turnstile*, and he has work forthcoming in *Seneca Review* and *Sonora Review*. He lives in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Denise Low is the author of five books, including *Starwater*, *Tulip Elegies*, and *Spring Geese and Other Poems*. A regular contributor to *Cottonwood*, her *New and Selected Poems* will be published by Penthe Press this year.

Jim Nedresky is a freelance photographer living in Lawrence, Kansas. His work has been featured by many regional artists and arts organizations. His current project is a visual diary of the Konza Prairie, a tallgrass preserve in the Kansas Flint Hills.

Oliver Rice is the recipient of the 1998 Theodore Roethke Prize, awarded by *Poetry Northwest*. His poems have appeared in numerous journals, most recently in *Gettysburg Review*, *Ohio Review*, and *Ontario Review*.

Luci Tapahonso has published six books of poetry and two children's books. Her most recent book, *Blue Horses Rush In*, won the Mountains and Plains Booksellers Association Award for Poetry. A former Robert Frost Poet-in-Residence, she is editing an anthology of Navajo writers to be published by the University of Arizona Press.

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