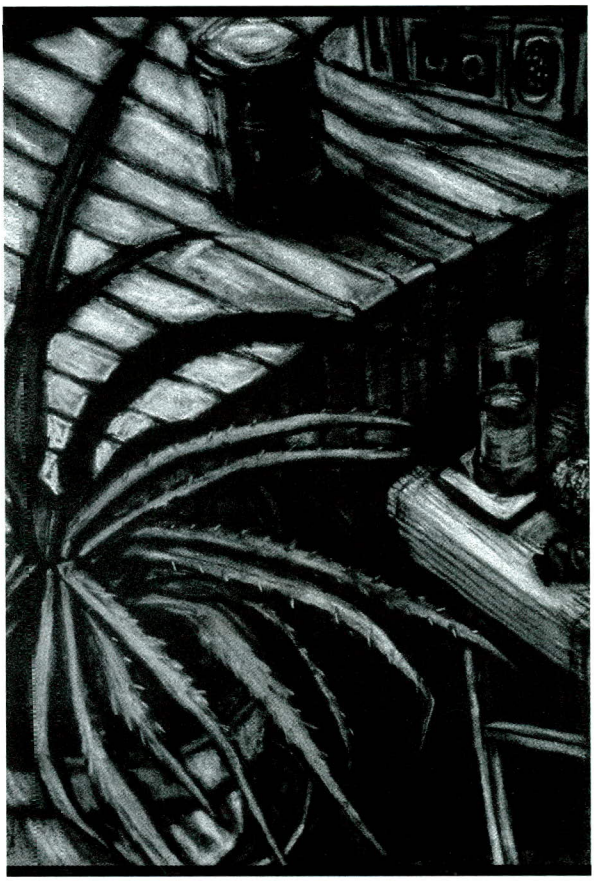
57

cottonwood

Kevin Boyle
Walter Griffin
Laura E. Miller
Paula Newcomer
Legacy of the
Harlem Renaissance



Spring 2001

Cottonwood and Cottonwood Press
Lawrence, Kansas
Cottonwood 57

Lawrence Arts Center
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 indexed by the *American Humanities Index*, *Poem Finder*, and the *Index of American Periodical Verse.*

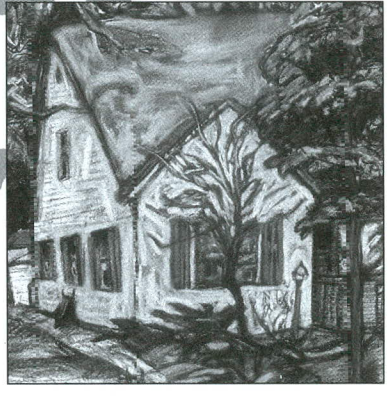
On the cover: A detail of *Studio Corner* by featured artist Margo Kren, Professor of Art at Kansas State University.

cottonwood 57

cottonw

Spring 2001

vood 57



Cottonwood and Cottonwood Press
Lawrence, Kansas

Contents

Laura E. Miller

The X-Y Bond

After their son Jay's death, Franca and Carl Yarin were more like chaste and cranky roommates on TV than like husband and wife. Only there was nothing comic about them; if either were to speak honestly, without censure, the damage would be irreparable. Carl ran four, then six, then eight miles a day. Franca mentally packed and repacked a suitcase. Just as she was summoning her courage to speak of separation, she heard about a bereaved parents group that met in a church in downtown Boston. Although it had been years since Franca had entered any church, although she no longer believed in God, they joined.

Each week, they sat with other parents in a meeting room in the church basement. She remembered the room as gray, though it was, in fact, painted a buttery yellow. Like her and Carl, most of the others commuted in from the western suburbs. Franca wondered: why were almost all the children boys? The X-Y chromosomal bond is weaker, explained Carl, who was a dentist. Boys are more prone to leukemia and aberrations of the cells.

Everyone in the group seemed to be more or less their age, but, then, it was hard to tell. Any parent who lost a child skidded from hopeful young adulthood into defeated middle age. One of the men had gone gray in a year's time.

At one meeting, she passed around Jay's high school yearbook. In his senior photo, his hair covered much of his face. At a school where most students quoted Thoreau or Emerson under their photos, Jay had chosen lyrics from a punk band called Stüssy.

"All you need to form a group these days is an umlaut in your name," Carl muttered after the yearbook came out. Mercifully, he did not lecture Jay on self-presentation or any number of the topics he could have pursued and that would have gotten him nowhere.

Jay's group were the head-bangers: boys and girls who wore studded chokers and brutal-looking boots with grommets. But they were not bad kids, she explained to the other parents. In truth, she hadn't known any of them well. It was hard to tell one

boy apart from the others, with their ripped and pinned T-shirts and black leather.

Driving home from the meetings, Franca and Carl argued about what she told the group, as they had once argued about Jay. Are we allowed no privacy at all, he asked. She was, though, determined to tell the truth about him. The others in the group nodded when she spoke, slogging through the swamp of their own thoughts. Is it possible, Franca wondered, for us to be of any real help to one another?

Jay was nineteen when he died, though still only officially a freshman at his college in Vermont, an alternative school that awarded credit for almost anything. The week before his death, there had been a freak warm spell, a false spring. It was Jay's winter break, but he and Carl had had another blow-up. Like all their fights, this one had been triggered by something inconsequential; it was more about power than anything else. Jay had slammed out of the house to wait out the rest of the month at a friend's off-campus apartment. The day he left, the temperature plunged back down into the single digits. Two nights later, on a crystalline, star-crazed night, Jay laced up his old battered hockey skates and took off over a frozen pond. The weakened ice splintered and gave. A postmortem blood alcohol test showed him to be legally drunk.

"I told myself I'd never be like my father," Carl said afterwards, in the middle of one of their interminable silent evenings. "But I was like him. I was worse."

Franca knew he was seeking some sort of absolution, which she could not give. If someone cut her open, that person would find jagged branches and cracked ice.

Several months after she and Carl began going to the bereaved parents' meetings, Franca noticed Stanwood Lee and Cynthia Willis. She saw Stan first, with his long, angular body and the neckties he liked to wear, which were made from segmented wood or shaped like a fish. In his seat, he shifted restlessly, crossing and uncrossing his legs, and shredded his Styrofoam coffee cup while others spoke. Cynthia sat erect in a bright, wide-sleeved dress, one hand resting on the other like a watchful cat. Like Franca and Carl, they had no other children. They were the only black couple in the group.

At the meetings, Franca learned of Stan's boyhood on various Army bases and his struggles to keep working as a sculptor. She learned of Cynthia's job as a counselor at a women's college. She learned of the bee sting and their son's hidden lethal allergy. During the coffee breaks, the Lee-Willises stood off by themselves. Franca made a point of saying hello. Stan smiled back. Cynthia, in large sunglasses, looked as proud and unapproachable as a movie star.

"Do you think they are uncomfortable in the group?" she asked Carl on the drive back home.

"I don't think anyone is particularly comfortable."

"I like him. I find her a little haughty."

Sometimes after closing down her small specialty foods business, Franca drove in any direction to avoid going back to the house. After Jay started college, she had the living room redone in fashionable chrome and leather. It now reminded her of a dermatologist's waiting room. Sometimes she drove farther west, where there were rolling hills and homes large enough for family members to avoid one another for days. Sometimes she drove into the city and passed slowly through various neighborhoods. Each was like a different country. Every now and then, she'd see a mural on a brick wall. She always stopped to study the painted rainbows and unicorns and the cheesecake fantasy blonde who reclined on a cushion of clouds. Paco, she read. 1979 to 1996. She stared at the bouquets people had left, at the flickering votive candles. In her car in these neighborhoods, she would cry for all the boys she hadn't known. She'd also cry for Jay.

One day, the phone rang, and it was Cynthia. She wanted advice about making a cassoulet.

"I volunteered to bring it to a potluck at my church. I liked the sound of the name, but I got in totally over my head. When I cook, I usually put a bunch of stuff in the Crock-Pot and plug it in and hope for the best."

They ended up talking for more than an hour. They spoke of food and movies. They spoke daringly of their rage at parents whose children were still alive. They spoke of the neighbors who could not look them in the eye, how people they used to know never mentioned their children's names.

"People I have known for years have stopped coming to my store," Franca said. "They cannot bear to see me because it's awkward."

"I just want to scream when my students come in because they're homesick or angry at a boyfriend or something. How dare they come in for reasons like that? I shouldn't be counseling anyone. I'm not in shape to be helping anyone."

"Jay drank. He smoked dope. I don't know if he did anything more. I don't think so, but I don't know." Franca twisted the telephone cord nervously with her fingers. "Carl and I couldn't agree on what to do with him."

"We're coming up to the mark," Cynthia said, "when Ezra will have been alive three years and dead three years. I think about it all the time. I don't know what we're going to do when we reach it."

They spoke several times a week. Like characters in a Beckett play, they conversed on parallel tracks. Hanging up from their conversations, Franca was spent and lightheaded, but also cleansed. Too keyed up for bed, she looked at magazines in the living room. She wrapped herself in an afghan she'd crocheted when she was pregnant with Jay and turned pages, too dizzy to focus. Possibly, the last time she had spoken so freely and believed herself to be so exquisitely known was with her girl friends in Italy when she was young.

The Yarins started going out with the Lee-Willises for coffee after group or to Stan's favorite pub for live jazz. Most often, Stan initiated. Delighted, and surprised that it was she and Carl whom they wanted to see, week after week, Franca accepted. They went to evening hours at the Museum of Fine Arts. Stan led them through warehouses in the South End, where friends of his had studios. The four of them together spoke seldom of Jay or Ezra. Instead, they made a study of distraction. They moved from bar to restaurant to a late-night jazz set at another bar. Stan had the route mapped out. In bars, he and Carl went to play pool in the back while Franca and Cynthia pumped quarters into the jukebox. A little drunk, they sang along with Aretha Franklin and Barbra Streisand. Franca was able to taste food again. At the movies, her mind no longer wandered down its desolate corridors, leaving her numb and lost when the lights

came on. The four of them always met somewhere else, a neutral place that was not either of their homes.

One night, they went bowling out in the suburbs. Stan, tipsy on the snack bar's beer, began miming ridiculous rubbery gaits from a Monty Python routine. He used the long polished floor of their lane as his stage. The only other people in the bowling alley were slacked-mouthed high school kids, who'd stopped to stare at him under the greenish light.

"What're you all looking at!" he shouted.

Out in the parking lot, Stan said, "I haven't seen kids this ignorant since I was a kid on those bases in East Bumblefuck."

"Yeah. Well, you're not there anymore, but you're still making trouble everywhere you go," Cynthia snapped.

"Stan's one loose cannon," Carl said to Franca on the ride home.

"Those kids shouldn't have been staring. He was right to say something."

Carl reached over and stroked her thigh. He, too, needed the furlough from their chaste weeks. Without the Lee-Willises, they had only the occasional dinner parties and the brunches that made up their social life otherwise. The platitudes. The silences around Jay's death.

They went out alone with Stan one night when Cynthia was away, busy at her church—a strict Evangelical church, where women wore long skirts and dark colors to the Sunday night worship. It was a rigorous service, with singing and weeping and testimonials. Franca had a hard time imagining what Cynthia got from it all, but her eyes shone with tears when she spoke of the healing that the service gave her. "Please come sometime," she'd invited Franca. "Everyone is welcome."

Just before last call, Stan began punching the table with his fist.

"It was my fault. It was my fucking fault."

"Don't do this to yourself. It won't do any good." Carl tried to rest his hand on Stan's shoulder.

"The fuck you know. You don't know jack."

"We do know jack," Carl said quietly, lifting his hands away.

"You think Stan is drinking too much?" Franca asked Carl later, after they had driven Stan home and gone to bed.

"I don't know if it's our place to intervene."

"Whose place is it, Carl? Whose?"

He did not reply, and she did not see the point at picking at it like a sore. When Jay was thirteen, fourteen, and his grades plummeted, she began to suspect he was getting high. At first she said nothing, because she knew that Carl would handle it all wrong. She fretted silently and hoped for the best. Then everything erupted. Once he punched a hole in his closet door. Carl thought they should send him away to a school where he'd learn some discipline, and at times the tension in the house was so heavy she also wished Jay would go and then she'd weep with guilt. She no longer knew what was best.

If Stan were white, would they be less reticent? And if he didn't drink, what would hold him together? In bed she and Carl held each other and shivered and did not say a word.

This is what Franca knew of Ezra's death: It happened in the summer, two years earlier. The three of them were on vacation in Pennsylvania. One day, Cynthia was laid low by a headache, and Stan offered to get the boy out of her hair, to take him to an old ruined barn where he liked to draw. He'd packed up Ezra's crayons and some paper for him as well. Franca could imagine the rest, the terrible unstoppable sequence: an absorbed father, a restless child, a stick he found to poke things, a row of black-eyed Susans, the bee. They were miles from anywhere.

In the group, parents whose children had cancer spoke of the hope they placed in new treatments, in changing over from Children's Hospital to Dana-Farber. They spoke of the passage of years, in which one possibility shut after another like doors in a hallway. Franca knew it was useless to measure sorrow for sorrow and determine who had it worse. Often, before dropping off to sleep, she could see Stan sprinting with Ezra toward the car he'd parked several miles up a dirt road. He and Cynthia had to drive back seven hours, just the two of them, with the empty car seat. Driving with Carl through the bleak winter fields in Vermont, her eyes burned from lack of sleep and chain-smoked cigarettes. Still ahead were meetings with the police and with people at his college and with the medical examiner, where

she had collapsed onto her knees when they finally lifted away the sheet. For all the parents in the group, the divergent roads led to this moment. Even when people from the outside asked, they never really wanted to know.

One day in her shop, Franca looked up and found Stan waiting at the counter. The Lee-Willises had left the parents' group, and the holidays had come and gone. It was January, the month Franca dreaded most of all. Outside, the wind was bitter. Stan blew on his gloveless hands to warm them. When he unzipped his jacket, she noticed his silk tie, painted with tropical birds.

"Stan! That's a great tie."

"I'm on my best behavior. I had a meeting at a gallery around here."

"That's fantastic! When's the show going to be?"

"They're getting back to me. They're looking for just that niche. Emerging African American artists, Black History Month, that sort of thing."

He offered half a smile.

"Would you like a coffee?"

"Actually, I'm starving. Got any dishes you need a second opinion on?"

Franca filled up a plate with the clever blends of pasta, vegetables, and pecans that had gotten her written up as a hit of the week in the local newspaper. She brought the food over to Stan, who perched on a stool at the side counter.

"If we both weren't already married, I'd marry you just based on this plate. The bread alone is amazing. You make that too?"

"There's more of everything." Franca went back behind the counter and sliced more rounds off the baguette.

Stan, who sat hunched toward the counter, made her remember Jay on his last college break. They'd been talking calmly at the table, enjoying each other's company. His calm was a gift, and she remembered him at eight or nine, when he was still a cheerful, talkative boy who played the piano and did not despise school. She reached across the table and touched the thin hoop Jay wore toward the top of his ear, where she knew the pain was greater, and asked him if the piercing had hurt.

"Nah."

His gaze was glassy and unfocused. He was high as a kite, but she chose to push that truth away.

"Would you do something for me?" Stan asked now.

"Yes, what?" Her heart skittered with alarm. Whatever it was, she knew she would not refuse.

"Look at my slides and tell me if my work is something you'd have the remotest interest in seeing."

"Sure, but I'm not much of a judge of art." She was surprised to hear her normal voice. She tried to swallow. Her mouth had gone bone dry.

"I'm not asking you to write a review or anything. Just look at this and tell me what you think."

Stan handed her his portfolio. Franca's hands shook as she unzipped the folder and pulled out the plastic sheets containing his slides. She held the sheets up toward the light. The work surprised her. What exactly had she expected? Jazzy batiks, Ibo masks, anthropology? Stan's pieces were austere: three logs joined at the top with an enormous iron ring. Some of the sculptures were quite small; others appeared large enough to fill a room. She slipped each slide from its pocket and examined it. In the center of each tripod hung a bowl, carved from wood or shaped from unglazed terra cotta.

He looked at her. "You're thinking, don't quit your day job, right?"

"The small and large figures. Those are parents and children?"

Stan's dark eyes brimmed. If she touched his hand, she knew that the river of tears that sat dormant inside her would rise and spill over. Their gazes locked. It was Wednesday, Carl's half-day at the office, though he usually drove his sports car somewhere on his afternoons off. He didn't like to come home when the house was empty. Franca believed she would follow Stan anywhere, to any destination that he named.

Stan raised his index fingers to his eyes. "If I decide to pack it in, would you give me a job here? I'll wash dishes, peel potatoes. I'm not fussy."

"You'd find the business so dumb. Feeding those who are already overfed. People get so worked up over chicken salad."

"I'll take a refill on coffee. Also, do you have a brownie or something you'd like to test out on me?"

While Stan flipped through his newspaper, Franca waited on customers. She blanched and slivered almonds, sliced grapes for the orzo salad. Like dentistry, hers was precision work, but she was distracted by Stan's presence out front. She was aware of his turning pages, of his drumming fingers on the countertop. When the news came on the public radio station at four, he folded up his paper and came over to her.

"Back to the salt mines," he said.

"Come for dinner. You and Cynthia." She spoke calmly, belying her knocking heart. His eyes reflected the bottomless ache that linked them, that she recognized in all the parents in the group. Her hand brushed his.

"Sweetheart, we'd love to, but in your town I'd be pulled over in a heartbeat for driving while black."

Several nights later, Cynthia called. When she heard the sound of her voice, Franca gripped the edge of the desk. She believed herself found out.

"Stan mentioned he was in your shop the other day. It's about time you guys came over. Let's say Saturday. For dinner."

Franca exhaled with relief. "We'd love to!"

Cynthia laughed. "Whoa! Hold on! I'm not exactly Betty Crocker."

For the dinner, Franca made a Linzer torte and filled it with her homemade raspberry jam. She pulverized the almonds and citrus rind in her food processor. She made a special trip to the organic market and paid a criminal price for a pint of hothouse berries for a garnish.

When she asked Cynthia about bringing wine, Cynthia said sure. One bottle.

On Saturday, while Carl was out buying the wine, Franca tried on a variety of outfits. Whenever she and Carl went out, she generally wore black like the widows from her childhood. Finally, she pulled on a two-piece dress of wine-colored cashmere, a gift from Carl for a long-ago birthday. She squeezed her feet into high-heeled boots; they had swollen from her months spent working in sneakers. When she put her hair up, more of the gray showed, so she unsnapped the clip and decided to wear it loose.

Carl came into the bedroom and helped her close her necklace.

"They didn't have that French Pinot Noir you told me about, so the clerk recommended something from California."

"What is it?"

"Something Vineyards. The bottle's downstairs."

"It is Pinot Noir, though?"

"I bought what you said. It's ten degrees out there, you know."

He pulled out a sweater and a fresh pair of corduroys and began changing. Since Jay's death, he'd become gaunt and hollowed out. The curly hair of his youth had thinned to cirrus wisps. As a father, he'd been stern and unimaginative, badgering, hectoring, intruding. Every action he took pushed Jay further from him. She understood how it was to be a teenager with a mind on everything except school. Or that's what she had believed. Before the terrible period, she and Jay were in league together, concocting stories to avert Carl's irritation. Carl was meticulous where they'd been undisciplined, but none of it mattered anymore.

"I thought Pinot Noir because it is less intense."

"You're the expert." Carl was terse, but then he added more gently, "I haven't seen you in that dress for a long time. It looks nice."

As they were putting on their coats, he said, "We should take the Honda. It does better in and out of tight spaces than the Audi. Stan and Cindy don't have parking."

Franca knew that was a lie. Carl bought his Audi after Jay's death. Reading all the performance surveys in *Motor Trend* filled months, months. There was nothing the Audi couldn't do, short of walking on water. He simply didn't want to leave the good car in the Lee-Willises' neighborhood, where fixer-upper Victorians stood beside firetraps and community patrols fought an uphill battle against auto theft and break-ins.

On the way to the Lee-Willises, the car heater rattled without releasing much warmth. Franca kept turning around to check on the Linzer torte. On Huntington Avenue, chopped up by potholes and trolley tracks that crisscrossed through the pavement, she reached over into the back seat and held the cake in her lap for the rest of the ride.

Greetings and salutations!" Stan's voice boomed out from the warped double doors that opened into their building's

vestibule. He held a goblet of wine in his hand. Carl and Franca stepped inside and stamped the crusted snow off their shoes.

Cynthia came into the hallway and took the cake from Franca. She was wearing a flowing dress with a fiery abstract pattern. "Oh, my! I'm afraid my stew pales in comparison. *This* is a work of art!"

"Cynthia doesn't cook anything with more than five ingredients. It's a matter of principle." Stan led them into the living room.

Carl held up the bottle. "I hope Pinot Noir's okay with you folks."

"What's not to like?" Stan said.

Cynthia glanced over in Stan's direction, then covered her glass with her hand. "Thank you, Carl, but I'll stay with water for now."

Suddenly shy with one another, the four of them sipped their drinks and nibbled on mixed nuts from a bowl. They listened to a jazz pianist on CD. Beneath the tight geometric rhythms, the music was yearning and blue and more intricate than human speech. A tiny yellow parakeet flew free, swooping from perch to perch. Instinctively, Franca covered her wine glass with her hand as the bird passed overhead. On the coffee table, she noticed a pile of metal shavings that clung to a magnetic base. She fidgeted with the cool diamonds, trying to mold them into some sort of recognizable shape. Across the room, Stan smiled at her and tapped his finger on the arm of his chair. Hanging behind the sofa was a framed painting made up of exuberant horizontal strokes of orange, red, blue, and then a muddy blend of the three colors.

"Ezra painted this?" Franca asked Cynthia.

"Yeah. At two-and-a-half. Pretty good, huh?"

"Jay loved to paint, too. As a young child. He didn't stick with it, though."

She heard Stan say to Carl, "I've heard this guy. In D.C. You haven't lived till you've heard this guy in the flesh. He's the best improv pianist around, bar none."

The four of them balanced plates of stew on their laps. The bird perched on the branch of a ficus tree and twittered. Franca picked up and studied a framed photo of Ezra, beaming in a wading pool with a red ball in his arms.

"That's the easiest time, when they are little," she said to Cynthia. "When they're happy, you know it is a hundred percent."

They ate quietly, praising Cynthia and praising her again for the simple stew. Stan refilled the wine glasses.

"What do you say?" Stan finally put his plate down and turned to Cynthia. "I think we know Carl and Franca well enough for the game."

"Oh, honey, no." Cynthia groaned.

"What is it?" Franca asked.

"I'll explain. It works best when we've had more to drink."

Carl said, "This is sounding ominous."

"Relax. The game is each of us takes turns coming up with a word. Say my word is 'sun.' We go around the circle and each of us has to sing the line of a song with the word 'sun' in it. You get a point for every song you think of that no one else has thought of first. Other languages count, Franca, in case you're wondering. And yes, you can make songs up if you can do it spur of the moment."

"But I can't sing."

"Doesn't matter." Stan poured more red wine into Franca's goblet.

"Stan. Maybe they don't want to." Cynthia rubbed her leg with the palm of her hand.

"It sounds like fun. I'll try," Franca announced.

"You in?" Stan turned to Carl.

"Okay. But I'm warning you: you might end up expelling me from the game once I open my mouth."

"Okay, then. We'll start with an equal opportunity word. 'Maria.'"

They went around the circle. "How do you solve a problem like Maria?" "I just met a girl called Maria." "They call the wind Mariah." Cynthia sang "Ave Maria" in a clear soprano. Franca won that round, relying on the Catholic hymns from her childhood. They made their rounds with "sun" and "time." The game reminded Franca of reckless parties from the 1970s, fueled by jug wine and the coy self-revelations that were largely games of sexual hide-and-go-seek. Still, she played then, as she did now. Not to play was to show a failure of courage, a lack of trust. Her singing voice was breathy, Carl's was nasal and off-key. Stan sang in a brash, confident baritone, but he had the tendency to go flat. Because he could make up lyrics on the spot

and switch confidently from ersatz Broadway show tunes to Motown to blues, he won each new round. The bird twittered and darted from a chair back to the windowsill.

"Okay. Dessert time," Cynthia said. "Tweetie Bird's getting a little psychotic."

Stan brought out another bottle of wine. Cynthia exclaimed over the Linzer torte and the fresh whipped cream on top and the miracle of raspberries in January. Franca flaked a few crumbs from the cake's pastry and held them out on her finger to the parakeet, who sat perched on the back of the sofa. The bird flitted away and landed on the end table.

Stan was telling a long, intricate story about a friend of his who had won a commission for a bank lobby.

Franca was laughing. Stan's story was funny. It turned out his friend's sculpture has been expressly designed to mock corporate greed. Even if the bank managers got a clue, the piece was cast in bronze and sat on a marble base. It wasn't going anywhere. It might have been the wine, but Franca felt as if she were floating near the ceiling, observing herself from above. There she was, laughing and resting her hand on her stomach. There she was, smiling guiltily as she sliced herself another piece of cake. There she was, tucking her stockinged feet underneath her to warm them under her cashmere skirt. Was this happiness? It had been so long since she'd felt anything she could recognize as such, she was no longer sure she knew that emotion. But she was watching herself laugh and savor the bright, sweet-tart contrast of her cake. She was feeling content and complete in the moment, which was far more than she'd been able to hope for.

"Listen." She raised up her glass. "I'd like to say something. Stan and Cynthia, you have brought laughter back into our lives and I hope we have also... . It's a paradox that our losses have brought us together but... . Excuse me, I do not express myself too well." Franca looked down into her wine glass.

"No, no. You're doing fine." Cynthia squeezed Franca's hand.

"Here's to surviving the holidays," Carl rushed in.

"Amen to that," Cynthia replied.

"Honey, don't we have something to tell Franca and Carl?" Stan nudged Cynthia.

"Franca was saying something."

"No, no. I think everyone understands what I was trying to say."

"Don't be shy."

Cynthia looked down into her coffee cup. "Not now, Stan."

"No?" Stan nudged her again.

"This is not the time, Stan." Her words were like small nails she was driving into wood.

"What?"

Franca felt her heart knocking against her ribs. Was it possible the Lee-Willises were planning to move away, to leave the haunting memories behind, leave them? Ever since Jay's death, she had a horror of phones ringing when she did not expect a call; she dreaded someone's announcement of big news.

Cynthia glared at Stan. "I was going to tell you all, but not under duress." A smile played at the corners of her lips. Although she struggled to suppress it, she finally broke out into a wide grin. "Okay, then. Okay. I'm pregnant!"

There were embraces and exclamations. Carl poured more wine and they toasted Stan and Cynthia. They toasted the baby. Cynthia talked at length about her ambivalence over bringing a child into their life, burdening it with their sorrow. Stan wanted another boy, but she was not sure if she could be a good mother to a boy, she would always be looking in him for signs of Ezra. As Franca listened, Cynthia's voice seemed to fade, as if she were walking down a hallway and did not realize that Franca was no longer beside her. Soon after Jay's death, Franca had her last period. At the time, ideas were drifting into her mind and then, before she could grab hold of them, they washed out beyond her reach. Her change of life barely registered as it, too, floated away toward a horizon that she was too exhausted to contemplate.

"I'm thirty-eight," Franca heard Cynthia say. She looked down at her own hands, chapped from the months of cold and marked with the wrinkles of her fifty-two years. She rubbed them together in an attempt to warm them.

In the drafty hallway, Carl and Franca put on their coats.

"Franca." Cynthia rested the palms of her hands on Franca's cheeks. Her eyes were full. When Cynthia hugged her, one of her earrings brushed Franca's cheek: a cool kiss.

We could go somewhere warm," Carl said as they were driving home. "One of the islands. Take a break from this damn winter."

They'd talked about a vacation the year before. There were hundreds of islands, each offering its own version of azure sea and white sand, waiters with fancy drinks on their trays. She and Carl had sat in the travel agent's office, where she opened one glossy brochure after another. In each, couples embraced under lurid sunsets. Maybe you want to take these home and think on it, the agent suggested kindly as she pushed the brochures towards them. She was a smart woman; she could sniff out desperate fantasies of escape. Back at the house, the brochures silted up. They never did decide.

Ice crunched under the wheels as Carl steered the car up their driveway, past the box elder that Jay used to climb, always higher than she wanted him to, past the grove of willows that separated their property from their neighbors'. Carl pushed the button of the remote control, and their garage door floated open. Lights burned in their front windows to fool potential burglars.

Carl asked, "Should I get a Sunday paper?"

She shrugged.

"Go or not go?"

"Do what you like."

Franca stepped out of the car. Instead of walking into the house from the garage, she eased herself out onto the frozen driveway. The ice splintered beneath her feet. Whenever she heard the sound, she closed her eyes against the image of Jay sweeping over the surface of the pond. She could see him, the summer between his junior and senior years in high school, rising on the escalator at the international terminal at Logan Airport. All week before his departure, he and Carl had fought about his wild hair, a hunk of which he'd dyed magenta. Carl kept needling Jay: is this the way you want your relatives to see you? Like kids don't color their hair in Italy, Jay had snarled back, but he let Carl hug him goodbye at the check-in desk. Franca cried while the escalator lifted him away from them, toward the glassed-in area which separated those with tickets from everyone else. Back then, she cried easily and extravagantly over the smallest things.

Carl called out her name, but she stood out in the dark shivering, her feet numb, her face numb.

"Franca. Come inside."

Carl walked over to her and opened his arms. The stubble from his chin and the wool from his coat scratched her cheek.

She felt his large, gentle hands against her back, and she remembered how he used to guide her up a steep flight of stairs during the last month of her pregnancy, when she didn't think it was possible to keep walking. She leaned against him now, giving him her full weight.

"Come inside. Please," he murmured.

"Look how cloudy it is," she answered. "It's going to snow."

Walter Griffin

The Baby

You are there.
I have finally put
a face to your ghost
in the cracked photograph.
I am the smile on your

face, the half-grin you
used to sway my mother.
Now, in the tall grass behind
the stone carved with your
name, I feel your breath

in mine, in the curious
letters of your unit and
rank in the quartermaster
corp. I take the cold stone
in my mouth, ring the

bell of this night hour.
If the ground could open
and set you free, I would
take your bones inside mine,

walk with you from this
cursed place of maggots and
worms, go to a ballpark, pitch
a fast ball in the dark, knock
one over the fence, drive

the moon into the trees,
list all the things we
never did on a paper
plane, daddy, and fly
it all the way home.

Kevin Boyle

Conversion

If I explain that on our windowsill by the TV
sat two bones of two saints inside a glass case,
like a ring box, and the bones were thorn-shaped,
and rosaries were in every room with drawers, and
that before my sister became a postulant, novice
and then nun we had received postcards from Africa
where a cousin was a missionary among the Tanganyikans,
the lake a dark and swollen font on my father's map,
and my Irish aunt had written aerograms after her audience
with the Pope, his hand in blessing imitated by me
in front of my sisters' mirror— body long— and Irish
cousins saved for months to afford their holiday
in Fatima where they placed photographs of those
too ill to cross the sea at the site where Mary appeared in
blue and white to Bernadette, and our visitor around
the holiday table was Father Jack, who supervised
the orphaned boys at Charles Borromeo and blew his perfect
smoke-rings at my mother's face after his plate
had been stacked a third time with the slices and dressing
he admired so, then perhaps you will understand
why that first— those first— slow dances with girls
other than my sisters who would not dance close
surprised me so— their hair not bunned or wrapped back
but fragrant and moving, their cheeks that matched
my unshaven cheeks and would caress them, their bones
that were not in shards but whole and rhythmic and
swaying against my skin and clothes— and how I understood
then that the body that could be so aroused by
an intimation of touch and by touch, would become
my small god even while the strokes and heart attacks
and Vietnam and "childhood diseases" would send me back
again and again to Foley's Funeral Home, still
I believed in the sacredness of flesh drawn to flesh,
of that communion, of rising to meet a girl or woman

as she pushed against you, of finding the pleasures
of skin that I would confess for a year or two, but
then just gave in to. I became a laborer in the vineyard
of the body, just as my mother began to lose herself
to age, and I thought then I had received abundant
recompense for what I'd lost and would never find again.

Deborah Cooper

Behind Each Window

they land back
in their beds,
the gauze of dreams
falling away.

Here and there,
a strand, still tangled
in a woman's hair,
or wound around the fingers
of a small boy's hand.

The mind,
in those first upright moments,
returning to the jungle
or the stranger's face,
then losing hold,

fastening itself back,
putting the water on for tea.
These mugs
that will not be
turned into birds, thrilling
the hand,

the table that keeps
its shape,
the house across the lane,
set in the same gray
puzzle of stones
as every other day.

Soon, the first door will open.
The first person will come

around the corner,
the way he always does.

Behind this mild sky,
the wild dark waits
for the faces to close again,
waits for the travelers
to slip free.

Tamara Titus

Color Theory

Georgia moved quickly down the last row of the theater, collecting half-empty popcorn tubs and soda cups. She lobbed them expertly into the large trash can waiting for her at the end of the aisle and circled onto the next row. Before she could reach the end, Sam called out from the front of the dimly lit theater.

"Seventy-one."

Georgia glanced up at the sound of his voice; he held a small maroon umbrella, still damp from the evening rain. The folded material flapped about loosely. Its narrow band remained unsnapped, ostensibly to facilitate drying. She smiled at Sam. Umbrellas were the chief inhabitants of the lost-and-found closet behind the concession stand, but they were by no means the only occupants. In the winter months, gloves and scarves turned up a good deal too. And those were just the things they saved. The Royale's worn seats, with their gentle backward slope, coaxed all sorts of items from the pockets of patrons. Loose change, lighters, dry-cleaning receipts. With each nightly cleanup they found different pieces of personal minutia, the detritus of lives just passing through. Most of the objects left behind were never reclaimed.

Seventy-one, she thought, as she knelt to collect an empty Milk Duds box. Two years had passed since they began counting. During that time, Georgia discovered that she and Sam worked well together; early on, they developed a natural routine that anticipated each other's needs. When they both reached the same row in the middle of the theater, Sam held the umbrella out to her like a relay runner passing a baton. She grasped the plastic handle in resignation, knowing that the race had already been run: they would never reach one hundred. As Sam let go of the other end, she wondered if he was thinking the same thing.

Together they hauled the large gray trash bags out the back door and heaved them into the dumpster behind the building. Sam held the door for her as they went back in, then locked it. They trudged up the long aisles toward the lobby in silence.

Georgia stood the damp umbrella up to dry at the edge of the candy display, and they walked slowly toward the front door. Outside, Sam paused instinctively, but she shook her head.

"Goodnight," she said, knowing she had only to ask and Sam would gladly walk with her to her apartment building two blocks over. She felt guilty refusing his courtesy, but she knew he understood. Georgia wore her self-sufficiency like a knight wore armor: the weight was a necessary burden. Occasionally though, on nights when the more aggressive panhandlers loitered in the dark parking lot, she gave in to Sam's chivalry and allowed him to escort her home.

"Goodnight, Georgia," he replied, turning west toward his own apartment.

As she walked past Bishop's Drugs on the corner, she noticed that the windows were spray-painted with the fake snow they sold as a Christmas decoration. White holiday lights blinked off and on all along the storefront. The tiny beacons barely dented the darkness surrounding them, but the lights reminded customers of the twenty-four-hour pharmacy inside. The cold air quickened her pace, and by the time she reached the door of her building, her breath was labored.

Georgia slowly climbed the stairs to the second-floor landing and let herself into her tiny apartment at the end of the hall. She crossed the living room and entered the kitchen, placing the kettle on the stove and igniting the burner. In the bathroom, she pulled on a ragged black headband to restrain her hair while she washed her face. Her left hand groped blindly for the white towel hanging beside the sink; small rivulets of water ran off the end of her chin. Georgia dried her face thoroughly and stared into the mirror. Her dull-brown hair fell just above her shoulders. A thick scar cut a jagged path across her forehead and sliced between her eyebrows, marring her reflection. But the scar hadn't always been her most prominent feature.

Three years earlier, when Amy Bellington walked into Sculpture II class that fall semester, Georgia had turned to look at the gangly girl. Amy's wild black hair tried to escape from the band she'd secured around it; strands shot up in odd places all over her head. But when she began to sculpt, the energy that disrupted her hair surged into the clay and brought it brilliantly to life. She quickly became the envy of every student in the class, including Georgia.

By November, Amy had convinced Georgia that it was time to add life to her hair. Amy applied the dark, foamy dye generously and wrapped Georgia's soaked head in an old towel. When Georgia emerged from the cocoon, her hair blazed with a rich auburn color that darkened her pale-green eyes. She'd admired her reflection then, happy with the transformation. That night she slid into the passenger seat of Amy's old Pontiac just as rain began to fall. Amy turned west down River Road toward town, singing along with The Eurythmics on the radio. Then the picture in Georgia's head simply stopped, as if the delicate film of memory had snapped midreel and continued to flutter helplessly while the projector lit only a blank screen.

The next image was of color. Turquoise exploded into black, then a bright yellow suffused everything, finally giving way to a deep indigo. Briefly, she feared she'd gone blind, but then she realized that her eyelids weren't open. She forced them to part, and slowly the colors receded, revealing a room that wavered and spun as she tried to bring it into focus. "Concussion," she heard a woman say to her as she lifted her hand to her forehead. Her leg was broken, and her face required thirty-six stitches. They had shaved part of her head to complete the repairs. Early the next morning, Georgia's mother finally told her that Amy never made it to the hospital.

The kettle began to whistle and Georgia sighed. She turned off the bathroom light and crossed the cool black-and-white linoleum floor in the kitchen to silence the steady noise. Steam billowed out beneath the lid, and the silver surface reflected a distorted image of her, squeezing her into a narrow and distant figure. She poured hot water into a mug containing an Earl Gray tea bag and returned the kettle to the stove, cutting off the gas burner.

Georgia added milk and sugar to her tea before bringing it into the bedroom. She set it carefully on a small end table and sank onto the futon. She'd bought the hard, low bed as a precautionary measure several months after the accident, when she began falling onto the floor during the night. Lying so close to the ground made her cold, but she wasn't ready to forego the futon. Even now, sleep could be hazardous.

When Georgia woke it was nearly eleven. Streaks of light peeked in through the closed blinds; tiny bands illuminated her bare white walls. She rolled over to face the windows and stared at the small sculpture in the corner. The figure of a woman was

rising from a sitting position, captured beautifully in the act of standing. Her rough-hewn edges lent a universal quality to her, somehow making her more, rather than less, realistic. She was the only thing Georgia had ever stolen.

After the accident, Dr. Halpern had called Georgia to let her know he'd saved her work from the previous semester. Wouldn't she like to come and collect it? So she made one final trip to the Crane Visual Arts Building on campus, right around dusk on a Wednesday in March. Her former professor led her into the storeroom off the back of the studio. Inside, a large metal rack of shelves contained several boxes. The second shelf held one labeled Georgia Collins. He pulled the box out for her and set it on the table by the door. "I'll let you check to make sure everything is there," he said gently.

He walked out into the hall toward his office, and Georgia stared at the rack of shelves. On the very bottom was a box marked Amy Bellington. She pulled it out and quickly lifted the lid. Four pieces rested inside. She knew them almost as well as her own. The base of the largest figure remained unfinished, adding to its raw look. Spots where Amy had dug her fingers deeply into the clay to give birth to the woman still bore the marks of her fingertips. Georgia pressed her index finger into one of the indentions left by Amy's hand. Her tiny finger disappeared into the hole left by a much larger talent.

When she drew her finger back, the pain she had eluded for months finally found her, surging through her chest and setting every nerve ending on fire. She bent double and gasped for breath. "Seat belt," she whispered, knowing the warning would have served no purpose. Amy had lived by instinct, not restraint. Georgia lifted the sculpture gingerly from the box and secured it between two of her own. She slipped quietly out the door without saying goodbye to Dr. Halpern.

A scrap of sunlight illuminated the top of the sculpture now. She stared at the figure as the beam moved slowly across it. Then she tossed back the covers and sat upright with her feet on the floor. Clad in her old terrycloth robe, she shuffled to the front door and opened it just a crack, just enough room to snatch the morning newspaper from the dingy hallway carpet outside.

She started brewing a pot of coffee and returned to her bedroom while gurgling sounds drifted out of the kitchen. The newspaper slipped easily from its plastic sheath and spilled onto

her eiderdown comforter. Most of the paper she could live without; it was the daily crossword puzzle that kept her paying for the subscription. Georgia opened up the Living section and set the rest of the paper aside. The puzzle always ran on page three, opposite the movie listings. She glanced over at the movie section, zeroing in on The Royale's advertisement. As long as the ad continued to run, she knew she still had a job.

She picked up her pencil from the end table and went to pour herself a cup of coffee. She always worked the crossword with a pencil—uncertainty restrained her. But it had been a long time since she'd had to erase an answer, and lately she'd begun to toy with the idea of using a pen. She dug her old Clinique eyeliner sharpener out of the kitchen drawer and used it to hone the pencil to a fine point. The pale-green sharpener was the only item from her makeup bag that she still had use for after the accident. Applying makeup felt a little like slapping a fresh coat of paint on a house with rotting floor joists; the exterior hardly mattered if the structure wasn't sound. She tossed the sharpener back into the drawer. The digital clock on the coffee maker read 11:22, and she knew she needed to get moving. The Friday matinee shows started at one-thirty.

Shortly before one o'clock, Georgia rounded the corner by the drugstore and saw Sam standing in the nearly empty parking lot, a long silver pole extending from his hands to the marquee above the theater. He was changing the movie listings, replacing the large red plastic letters one at a time. *Waking Ned Devine* opened today on screen one. Sam's white cable-knit sweater rose up as he reached to place the "V," revealing a black leather belt threaded through the loops of his jeans. Thick-soled black shoes covered his feet. She'd never once seen Sam in any footwear other than his signature Doc Martens. She smiled. Time might turn Sam's black hair to gray and his rolling gait to a shuffle, but she knew she would always recognize him. She could find him behind closed eyes.

"Hey, Sam," she called out.

He looked over his shoulder at her. "Hi, Georgia. You just missed William."

She stopped walking and stared up at the marquee. William Baxter had owned The Royale for years. When he bought it, it had already begun its downward spiral from a first-run venue to a dollar theater. In an effort to stay afloat, he'd gradually raised

the ticket price from one dollar to one-fifty, and then to two dollars. Last year, William had made a big production out of changing The Royale's format to that of an art-house cinema. They began showing foreign and independent films, and William raved about attracting a whole new level of clientele. He boasted about providing a service to the community, but Georgia recognized the foxhole conversion. It was money—not art—that occupied William's mind.

Initially he'd taken quite an interest in running the theater, but time had cured him of that. In fact, for the last several months, as the number of nightly patrons continued to decline, William had left the theater management entirely to Sam.

"I'll be finished in about ten minutes," Sam said over his shoulder. She resumed walking and let herself into the theater. While she unlocked the safe, she wondered how he was going to tell her what she already knew.

When Sam came inside, he pulled up a stool next to her in the box-office window and waited until she had finished counting out the cash drawer. "We have until the end of the month," he said directly.

"That's it?" Georgia asked.

"That's it."

"Well," she sighed, "so much for the distinction of high art." Sam placed one hand briefly on her shoulder before heading to set up the projectors.

That night Georgia drifted around downstairs while Sam remained hidden in the projection booth. Around ten o'clock Sam reappeared. "Do you feel up to going to Figaro's after work?" he asked. The cafe was just around the corner, opposite her apartment building. She had run into Sam there on several occasions, and periodically they went over together after work.

"Sure," Georgia said.

It was after midnight when they finished closing, but Figaro's remained crowded. The heat inside condensed against the long plate-glass windows, creating tiny beads of water that rushed toward the terra-cotta floor. The distinctive aroma of coffee floated on the current of warm air blowing from the two vents at the back of the room. Sam wove his way quickly through the crowd, directing her to a small two-top near the corner. She draped her wool coat over the chair. "This is the best seat in the house," she said.

"Why?" Sam asked.

Georgia nodded toward the wall beside them. "The view." A large abstract oil painting hung on the exposed brick. Some two dozen paintings decorated the cafe walls. All of the art was for sale.

"Why do you like this one?" Sam asked.

Georgia glanced up at the tall canvas. "Because it's seamless," she answered. *Amy would have found it too bland.*

Sam looked up at the painting. Beneath it, a small plaque gave the artist's name and the title of the work: *Chromatology* by Ethan Jackson. "Is it worth $1,200 to you?" he asked.

Georgia smiled. "It would be, if I had that kind of money to spend on art."

Sam nodded appreciatively. "I know what you mean."

When a skinny waitress appeared to take their orders, Georgia placed hers without looking at the menu. Sam settled on dessert. The girl returned quickly with their coffees, and Georgia decided to go first. "What are you going to do?" she asked tentatively.

"Find a new place to watch movies." He took a sip of his black coffee. "I've had to do it before."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"When I graduated and came down here from New York."

She nearly dropped the cream pitcher onto the floor. "You have a degree?"

Sam nodded. "I went to NYU to study film."

"You have a film degree from NYU?" Her eyebrows shot up.

"Mmm, hmmm." Sam's gaze followed the dark line connecting her eyes to its point of disappearance just behind her right temple. While he watched her, he tilted his head slightly to one side, as if listening to some melody only he could hear beneath the din of nearby conversations. "Your painting's been hanging here a long time. If it doesn't sell soon, it'll disappear. You know the owner only gives each work three months display time."

Georgia looked back at the canvas, tracing the deep blues that bled without interruption into greens and back again to grays. The waitress arrived with their food, and she returned her attention to the table and to Sam.

"What are you going to do?" he prodded.

She chewed heavily on a pie-shaped piece of pita bread smothered in hummus. "Maybe I'll buy it," she answered slowly, evading his question.

Sam cut a bite from the apple pie on his plate and speared it

with his fork, the tines deadcentered in the pastry. "You should." His eyes met Georgia's for a long moment, and oddly, she felt embarrassed. The sensation stuck with her until they parted company on the sidewalk.

The next morning she propped several pillows between her and the bedroom wall and settled onto the futon to work the crossword. She loved filling in the white squares; the process of moving from one clue to the next always reassured her. One right answer yielded the key to another, guiding her down the path to completion. But today the clues seemed unreasonably difficult. She glanced over at the sculpture. In one of their last classes together, Georgia had asked Amy about the piece. "How did you know where to start?"

"I had to alter my perspective," Amy answered.

"What do you mean?" Georgia asked.

"That's how I discovered her. I imagined myself on the inside of the clay, looking out."

Georgia glanced down at the smudged newsprint, turning the clues over and over again in her head. Soon, several of the white squares had turned gray as a result of repeated erasures. She resumed her efforts with vigor, bearing down hard to make her answers stand out. When the point of her pencil broke under the force of too much pressure, she finally set the puzzle aside unfinished.

The sky grew overcast as she showered and dressed for work. One look out the bedroom window told her she would need her umbrella before the night was over. She remembered to grab it from the hall closet just before leaving the apartment. Outside, the wind tore at her clothing as she walked, head down, toward the theater. Sam was already there when she arrived.

Most of the evening, Georgia found herself staring idly out the box office window into the darkness. When she finally locked the doors behind the last patron, she started cleaning the glass. She had just finished when an older man in a long overcoat came running up to the doors. His breath streamed out before him visibly, clouding up in the cold December air. "Miss?" he panted.

Georgia put down the bottle of Windex and stood up. "Yes?"

"I believe I've left my umbrella inside. May I come back in and look?"

She smiled. "Of course." She unlocked the left door and stepped back to let him enter.

"I was in the large downstairs theater. I'm sorry to trouble you while you're closing up, but I hate to leave it behind."

"No problem. You'd be surprised how many umbrellas we collect after the last show. I'm sure I would have found it shortly." She followed the man up the carpeted ramp toward the concession stand and gestured toward the open theater door. "We've turned the lights on for cleanup. Let me know if you need any help looking."

He smiled in return and walked slowly down the aisle to a middle row, and Georgia turned back to her closing tasks. He emerged moments later carrying a long black umbrella with a wooden handle. "Thank you," he said, nodding to her as he headed for the exit. "It's silly, but I've managed to hold on to this umbrella for years. I try to be very conscious of keeping up with it."

"You're one of the few. Not many people come back for umbrellas." She unlocked the door again and held it open for the man to leave.

He looked curiously at her face from behind the thick lenses in his old-fashioned glasses, and his gaze softened. "That's too bad." The wind gusted, pulling at the door. "Good night," he said and stepped out into the cold.

She watched his back recede until his black coat blended with the darkness. Her fingers traced the slightly raised line on her forehead. Then she closed her eyes and examined the seam from the inside. *Wait*, she thought suddenly. *You viewed it from the wrong perspective.* The scar did more than divide her face; it also held her together. But when she opened her eyes he was gone. She stepped back inside and locked the door, reaching instinctively for the Windex and the roll of paper towels at her feet. Before she could spray the glass she realized that the man had left no fingerprints behind; he'd pressed carefully against the door handle in an effort not to undo her work.

When she and Sam left half an hour later, Georgia hesitated just outside the door, peering down the sidewalk where the old man had disappeared into the night. She noticed that the wind had died down. Sam watched her as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Walk you to your door?" he ventured.

She thought about it before shaking her head. "No, but thank you. I have to run into Bishop's tonight before I go home."

"Okay." Sam smiled at her. "Goodnight, Georgia."

"Goodnight." She tucked her umbrella under her left arm and shoved her hands deep into her coat pockets as she walked up the sidewalk toward the corner. Only two cars sat in front of the drugstore, and she realized as she walked in that she was the lone customer. She could see the pharmacist moving slowly about in the back of the store. The female clerk behind the front counter nodded to her as she passed by and headed for the last aisle. Halfway down, on the bottom shelf, she grabbed a bottle of Suave shampoo for normal hair. She never bought expensive shampoos; they all contained the same ingredients, and too often people forgot that hair was dead anyway. Only conditioner actually made a difference. Conditioner and color.

She glanced furtively across the aisle at the boxes of hair dye lined up in neat rows. The large mirrored disk mounted on the wall at the end of the aisle reflected her indecision to the clerk, who pretended not to monitor her movements. She drew close enough to the boxes to read the labels. Toasted Almond, Hazelnut, Nutmeg. The different colors all reminded her of Figaro's flavored coffees. She lingered, wondering if her hair was technically Light Brown or Medium Brown. One box showcased a young woman with beautiful auburn highlights. The color was called Desert Sunrise. Georgia envisioned the first rays rising above an endless flat plain, brilliant color warming from indigo to coral as light flooded the vast space. She picked up the box and headed for the counter.

The older lady smiled as she rang up her purchases. "This is the way to go, if you ask me. If you don't like it, you don't have to live with it." The text on the box stated that the temporary rinse lasted for twenty-eight shampoos. Georgia found it hard to believe that you could just wash it all away. She paid the woman and pushed open the door. While she paused beneath the overhang to pull on her worn gloves, rain began to fall in fat, splattering drops, slowly at first and then building quickly into a watery crescendo. She unsnapped the tie on her umbrella and pressed the silver release button. The green canopy opened with a soft whooshing sound, and she swung the umbrella over her head and stepped out into the rain.

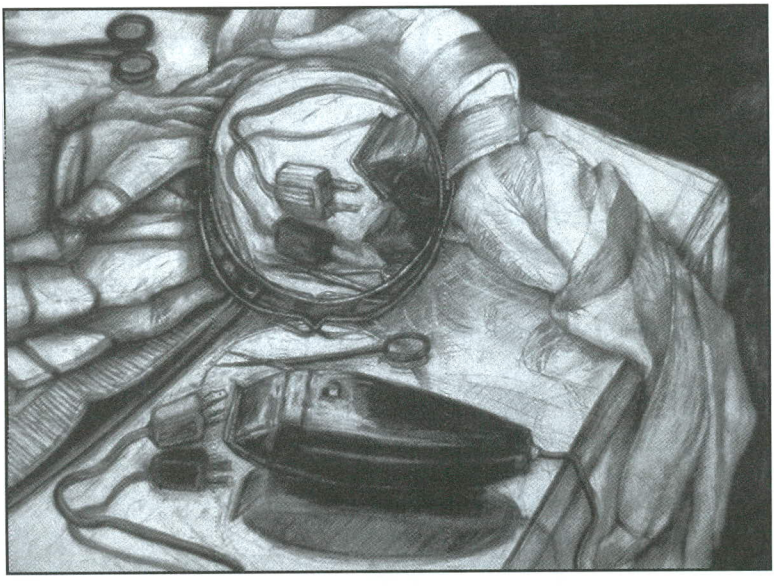
A Round about George

This issue of *Cottonwood* features artist Margo Kren, Professor of Art at Kansas State University.

Before living in this white frame house with my husband, George, in a particular town in Kansas, I had never stayed in one place more than eight years. Living in one place for twenty-five years has taught me to see change as an integral part of life. Like the diarist and compulsive letter writer that I am, I have wanted to go a step further and put my experience into a visual and verbal form. Feeling that I needed more than to commit this experience to memory and that my memory might fail me, I began to draw as if I was photographing for the first time. I created a visual record of the things that created a kind of visual *Symphonia Domestica.*

—Margo Kren

Prairie burn: The air, heavy and humid, predicts thunderstorms. A sinister looking funnel moves in from the right, and threatening black smoke from the burning of the Konza spread itself over the land.

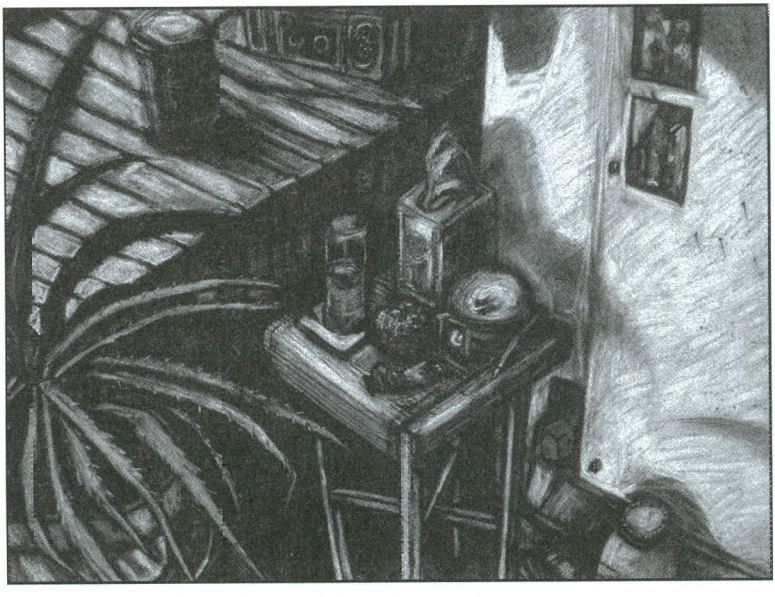


Haircut: A mirror reflects not a face but the instruments for grooming: Shaver, cord, scissors, combs, and towels await a family member's monthly haircut.

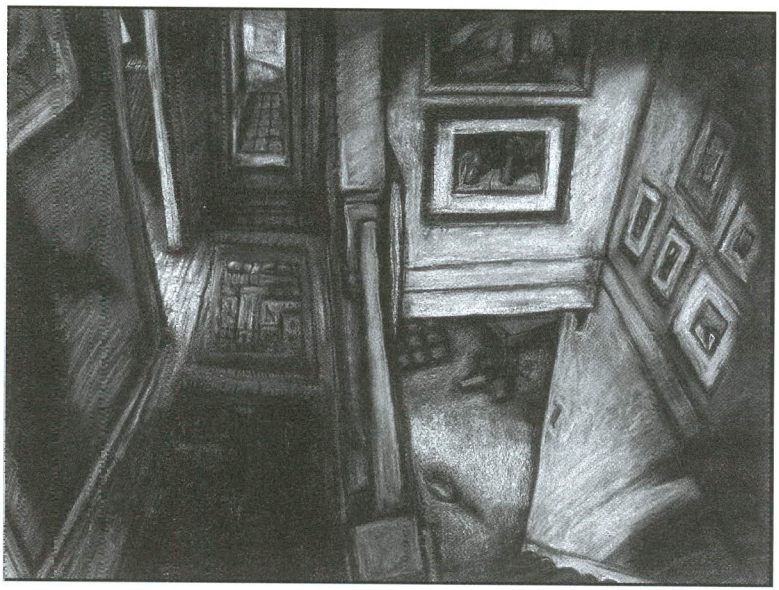
Gloves: Upon entering the house, my husband and I, not particularly given to neatness, throw our gloves on the floor They lie there like sunbathers on a wooden floor, age-old lovers, intimate in touch but with their distance.

Backyard Scene: A large garage provides a backdrop for a private area for birds, who compete with squirrels for a turn at the feeder. A catbird chair sits to the right awaiting occupancy. A ladder leans against the wall going nowhere.

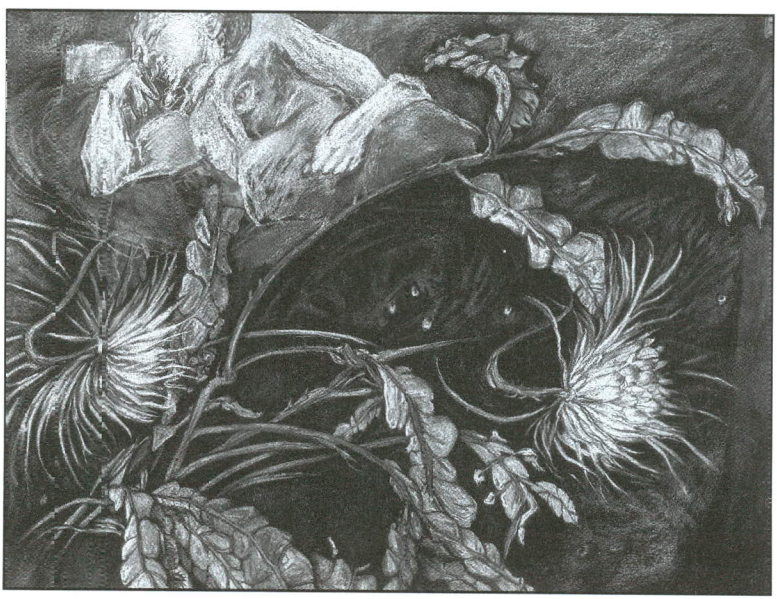
Books, helmet and tripod: A tripod, a camera case, a motorcycle helmet, books on Freud, and a pencil are all mute evidence of a person's unique identity.



Studio corner: Early morning light spills across the rows of stacked paintings onto the small table with a glass of water, gourd, box of Kleenex, and a bowl of pins, and on down to the floor to a bottle and tubes of paint. Pinned to the wall are postcards and clippings of reproduced art works.



Hallway to the stairs: Standing at the top of the stairs in a privileged position, I can view down the hall to my studio on the left with, partially visible, my paintings stacked against the wall, or I can see at the bottom of the stairs shoes on the floor. Shadows float sideways along the walls.



Night Blooming Cereus: Once a year, midsummer, a plant blooms at midnight. Like a thousand gardenias, the fragrance fills the air. The warm pungent smell announces its arrival, and like Tiffany glass, it opens its translucent petals outward and back.

Pillow and nightstand: The clock registers time, the heartbeat of life. The phone, a connecting device to the outside world, resides on the angular nightstand. But there is a temporary respite from the real world in the soft curved pillow and warm blankets, which suggest the comfort and sensuality of close quarters.

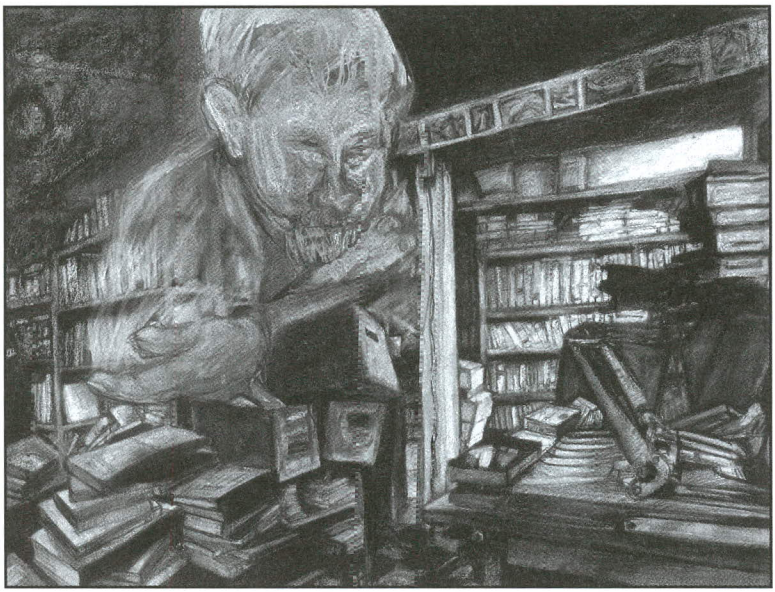
Sunflowers: Sunflowers confront each other along the fence in the backyard. Bees and other insects encircle them in the close heat of the summer day.

Bertrand Street: In the older section of town, trees frame a gray Kansas house. Totally bare limbs provide a glimpse of birds perched. Some of the trees already hint at the rebirth of spring. A massive tree stump, like an amputated leg or arm, breaks through the ground alongside the walk.

The luncheon: A morning's brunch of coffee and dessert left on the coffee table and the lone sandal resting on the floor attest to the social gathering that just took place. Napkins identify the luncheon party members. One has folded her napkin back into the original position, another casually pushed the napkin away from her, and another has wadded hers up like a ball. Like artifacts, they speak of another time and place.

Books on the stairs: The TV set is on and an announcer speaks the news. Books left on the stairs lie waiting to be taken down to the basement library. Sunlight spills down the stairs and into the kitchen.

Dresser top: A woman's dresser is like an icon—comb with hairs still caught in the teeth a watch still ticking, perfume bottles half empty, a bracelet and an earring. My two arms in the top right reach into the top of the drawer for clothing.



Head: A plaster study of a head s ts on the table with outgoing letters proposed against it. Scissors, rule-, sma l baskets of pencils, a roll of masking tape, and a sheet of slides are all items that identify an artist.

Window view: In the winter, houseplants are clustered around the window, awaiting the turn of the season when they can be outside. They have a unique view of the street scene below.

Mark Wekander Bestiary of Loneliness

I

Once on Danish television I saw a documentary on a Finn
who had been in a gold rush when he was young.
After that initial frenzy, he was alone
except for another man who skied by maybe once
or twice a winter. On these occasions he waved
through the icy window and the man disappeared
for three months, a year. He said, and I remember
through two translations and fifteen years
(Finnish to Danish to English and have told it in Spanish)
that he never wanted to find enough gold
to change his life, just enough for a little fever.
Winters he spent keeping warm, melting water.
Sluices, gravel and gold were frozen.
He fed two intruding mice one winter,
invented mazes, watched them by kerosene light
in the darkest days when the sun's rising and setting
were the same. He was sad, he said, one morning
to find them drowned in a water basin.

II

I have lived here in the Sierras de Luquillo for three years.
At night I watch plane lights turn at Bayamón,
fly to San Juan. The city is always there,
silent, mere light. Days it disappears into exhaust.
At night rats crawl porch rafters, their fat bodies
balance to glut on bananas hung from wire. Lizards stick
vertical to walls, their tongues whip insects out of air.
Small frogs, *coquis,* live where it is wet and dark.
I found one in an espresso pot, but too late.
It was dead and I had drunk the coffee.

III

A conch frog, as big as a dinner plate, comes to the door
tonight.
It is its own world. Its skin exudes poison that sends dogs
into hallucinations— vomiting, occasionally death. Maco says
his collie was addicted, lay panting and convulsing when it
could.
This one is assured inertia possesses invisibility.
The *sequia de cuaresma*, the lent drought,
cracks the red clay, yellows the grass, browns
tree crowns, sucks hose water to the underworld.
The smell of water lures it. Outside
the sky's vastness sucks out my breath.
It moves when I'm not looking
into the toilet, nose level with the water.
It feels it is slower than sight.
With the blunt end of a broom I harry it,
poke the right haunch for left, left for right,
like drivers' education skid advice.
The dark night, the dry cracked earth
are outside. After each hop it is immobile,
as if it expects me to weary, to realize its absence.
When my back is turned, it jumps beyond the light.

Fredrick Zydek

A Chill to the Bones

It's been raining since early autumn.
The slate tiles on the roof
glisten like polished ebony, have
endured, too long, the dark pursuits
of rain that chills the bones.

There are bloated earthworms
in every puddle and pond,
pink testaments to what drowns
when the rain keeps talking until
it has no more secrets.

I stare into the fire, wait for shadows
to warm my bones, to sluff off
the pose of another long wet winter.
There were no leaves to shuffle
through this year. The rain turned

them to pus - slick dangers for anyone
dumb enough to be out walking.
Odd how a single drop of rain makes
the same noise as the backdoor
when it clicks shut for the night.

Norbert Krapf

Mississinewa Field Song

Big puffballs
of purple thistle
bursting open
atop tall stems

twined with green
vines, arrow-shaped leaves
& tilting cups of
morning glory white
moist with dew

below tufts
of pine needles
brushing together
in the breeze.

Plateaus of Uncertainty: Symposia on Legacies and the Future of the Race—Part 2 Legacy of the Harlem Renaissance

John Edgar Tidwell
Valdinia Winn
Robert Hemenway
Carmaletta M. Williams, moderator

Editor's Note: The first installment of these symposia appeared in *Cottonwood 56*. In introducing it, Carmaletta M. Williams detailed the origins of this series in a scholar residency she organized for Johnson County Community College in February 1999, featuring John Edgar Tidwell of the University of Kansas English Department. In response to a programmatic need to present African American culture to her students, colleagues, and community, she devised a four-part program featuring Kansas Black writing, the Harlem Renaissance, the future of the race, and a performance program entitled "Harlem Renaissance: Cultural Life." In this installment, Drs. Valdinia Winn, Robert Hemenway, and John Edgar Tidwell participate in a roundtable discussion that Professor Williams entitled "Legacy of the Harlem Renaissance."

John Edgar Tidwell: In the last twenty-five or so years, we have witnessed a veritable explosion of scholarly interest expressed in the "Harlem" Renaissance. Biographies of well-known writers, recoveries of lesser-known ones, reissues of primary texts, and innumerable literary and social histories are among the proliferated activity that has taken place roughly since 1971, when historian Nathan Huggins, in his *Harlem Renaissance*, published

the first comprehensive study of this literary and cultural phenomena. To distill so rich, so varied, and so momentous a subject into a brief overview, therefore, seems curiously akin to David subduing Goliath. In the face of an overwhelming body of carefully protracted scholarship, a "slingshot" of a discussion can only, at best, strike a glancing blow by identifying and suggesting the continuing complexity of certain persisting, salient issues. In this regard, there remains a certain scholarly contentiousness about three interrelated and overlapping issues: (1) the name of the period, (2) the cohesiveness of the participants, and (3) the dates establishing the parameters of the period, its beginning and ending. Any determination about legacy, therefore, must, of necessity, first clarify the terms under which the movement has been described.

About naming the period, easily the term "New Negro" is among the most popular designations. The reason is that it resonates with an iconoclastic signification, because its raison d'etre was to reconstruct the image of the race. However, what this meant to 1920s cultural promoters and their late nineteenth century forebears differs considerably. For Booker T. Washington, Anna Julia Cooper, W.E.B. DuBois, and many other racial promoters writing at the fin-de-siecle, "New Negro" signified an ideological concern for uplifting the race. It meant confronting directly the proliferation of Black misrepresentation that, coming out of the post-Reconstruction social and Darwinian-inspired ethnographic or racial theory, reduced the complexity of Black life to a bevy of stereotypes, half-truths, and racial distortions. Theirs was an attempt to (re)claim the humanity of African Americans by rebutting misrepresentation with images signifying dignity and truth.

In a brilliant rhetorical tack, a group of racial promoters in the 1920s, among whom Alain Locke was arguably the most influential, coopted and reinvested the term with new signification. Locke, the first Black Rhodes Scholar and a Ph.D. in philosophy from Harvard, made his 1925 edited collection *The New Negro* replace the more polemical focus of the earlier use of New Negro with a more artistic function. By assuming the humanity of African Americans, Locke felt the artist's purpose should no longer be driven by propaganda; instead, self-expression and self-exploration should be the motivation of art. Part of Locke's genius lay in his understanding of the role Black art

might play in redefining American culture in broader, more inclusive ways. Reading the new spirit animating post-World War I American life, Locke observed the nation's renunciation of Victorian social mores and constraints that led white Americans to find comfort in a supposed joie de vivre in Black life. Such interest initiated the "vogue of the Negro," which, arguably, made the 1920s New Negro possible. In an effort to ride the wave of interest in racial matters, Locke adroitly navigated between the new racial stereotype of the exotic-primitive and the racial essentialism that might define "authentic Blackness."

One permutation of "Negro Renaissance" has been attributed to a New York *Herald Tribune* report on the now famous 21 March 1924 Civic Club dinner, held ostensibly to celebrate the appearance of Jessie Fauset's novel *There is Confusion*. The Urban League, under the auspices of its house organ *Opportunity: A Journal of the Negro Race*, transformed the dinner into a quasi-pep rally, introducing young Black talent, white literary patrons, and publishers. As a result of the connections made that night, the *Herald Tribune* found this significance: "that America was on the edge, if not already in the midst, of what might not improperly be called a Negro renaissance" (qtd. in Lewis 116). One consequence of the term "Negro Renaissance," then, is that it brings together two notions: the sense of a collective aesthetic effort with the idea of the florescence that occurred among African American artists.

Writing as one immersed in the euphoric emergence of these younger writers, Arna Bontemps rhapsodized about this phenomenon in poetic terms. For him the idea of flowering, blooming, or stirring signified "The Awakening," which he dated beginning around 1921 or 1922. In his retrospective memoir entitled *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, Bontemps defined the spirit that came to represent for him the age of the Renaissance in terms of individual writers. A poet, fiction writer, and essayist, Bontemps warmly recalls the signals of a movement portended in Langston Hughes' "The Weary Blues," Countee Cullen's "Brown Boy to Brown Girl," and Toomer's *Cane* as establishing new directions in Black art.

While "The Awakening" is important because its personal focus recounts a view from the artistic inside, Bontemps' designation never acquired the popularity of "Harlem Renaissance." Historian John Hope Franklin, writing in his seminal study *From*

Slavery to Freedom, had little reason to expect that his summarizing comment about 1920s Harlem as the site for the first gathering of Negro art and culture would set forth the most commonly used term labeling this period. Despite Franklin's acknowledgment that cultural activity was taking place simultaneously in places such as Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Boston, Minneapolis, and Kansas City, literary historians came to concentrate all of their efforts on upper Manhattan as the location for the Renaissance. Indeed, the defining focus of such important studies as Nathan Huggins' *Harlem Renaissance*, David Levering Lewis' *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, and Ann Douglas' *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* begin by establishing the significance of New York to the Renaissance. In spite of its popularity and its conciseness, "Harlem Renaissance" still represents a problematic expression because it continues to suggest an exclusive location, instead of the multiple sites that even Franklin observed. It is a view that Gerald Early fosters in his monographic introduction to *My Song's High Song: The Collected Works of Countee Cullen*. In his compelling introduction, Early argues that Cullen was the archetypal Harlem Renaissance writer because he was the only one living in Harlem during the whole period of the Renaissance, because he made judgments about Black art by writing a column for *Opportunity Magazine*, and because he also edited *Caroling Dusk*, a collection of Black poems.

And yet, the Renaissance was more than an impressive list of single writers who journeyed to New York's mecca. There were the political matters expressed explicitly in the rhetoric of Garvey's Black nationalism, Hubert Harrison's socialism, and the integrationism of the National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). There was the reconstitution and reemergence of popular art as found in such Broadway musicals such as *Shuffle Along* (1921), *Strut Miss Lizzie* (1922), and *Runnin' Wild* (1924). Blues and jazz wound their way from Beale Street to Broadway. The term that many critics and historians feel best captures this collage of aesthetic, cultural, and extra-literary foci, "New Negro Movement," has emerged as the most comprehensive descriptor of this era.

"New Negro Movement," as a literary and cultural signifier, is important because it sets forth the idea of an inclusiveness other designations simply don't contain, and it still retains a

sense of individuality. Consider, for example, the ideological assumptions of "movement" as opposed to "school." In theory, both terms imply a relationship between individual members of an aesthetic group; however, a "school of writers" defines the nature of this relationship as individuals who often have been influenced by a single person. As a consequence of this "master-apprentice" relationship, the practice of the followers is shaped and molded into an art that follows the fundamental principles of the master and is evaluated in terms of how well it reproduces the master's ideas. By contrast, "movement" suggests individual practices, self-exploration, and self-revelation. Although within the same period the producers of culture and literature might share ideas, their works are not imitations of one another. So, the term New Negro Movement can contain writers as disparate as the formally trained, highly stylized, decorous poet Countee Cullen and the vernacular-inspired Langston Hughes. The flexibility and inclusiveness of New Negro Movement therefore highly recommends it as a term designating this era.

What remains, then, is the problem of beginnings and endings, which, in literary studies, is the question of periodization. This issue is always very complicated, even though it seems driven by relatively simple questions: When does the New Negro Movement begin? When does it actually end? How is significance attached to the respective dates? At bottom, the sheer number of temporal pairings used to delineate the movement suggests arbitrariness and caprice. But instead of right or wrong dates—that is, critical consensus—we have to acknowledge that selecting particular dates is an act of criticism. In other words, critics and historians construct the period by choosing particular dates to serve the purpose of their arguments. While we might hope to find unanimity, we have to settle for seeking to understand the function of the inclusive dates. In this way, we can appreciate more fully the argument being made by each critic.

For example, Gerald Early, the well-known cultural critic, has seen fit to describe the years of the New Negro Movement from 1908 to 1939. For him, these dates signify the beginning and end of the New Negro's spirit of rebelliousness. Boxing, for him, serves as the emblematic spirit of the age. Thus 1908 is the year Jack Johnson emerged as the heavyweight champion of the world. His personal life, as defined by his stubborn violation of the usual

"racial rules," made him into a heroic figure in Black popular culture. Dating and marrying interracially were as outrageous as his standing above and leering at the white opponents who, lying on the canvas of the boxing ring, were being counted out. The fact that his actions were considered heroic and outside the "laws" governing appropriate interracial relations elevated him to status of folkloric hero among African Americans.

This outlaw spirit, this feeling that Black people were relegated to secondary citizenship status and denied the freedoms mandated by constitutional decree, was displaced by 1939 with the newfound hope that full racial integration was just on the horizon. This feeling was put in place symbolically by the ascendancy of Joe Louis to the heavyweight championship of the world. In contrast to Johnson's flouting of the usual "racial rules," Louis was comparatively a gentleman. Moreover, he became an "American hope" because his fights with German Max Schmeling at the advent of World War II meant that Louis had become almost deracialized and coopted by the American ethnocentric necessity to win support for the impending war.

But Early is not without a need to describe more specifically the literary output of the younger Black writers. Sandwiched between these two boxing dates is a literary moment he calls the "Harlem Renaissance." Rhetorically, this positioning enables Early to argue the significance of Countee Cullen as the archetypal Renaissance writer, for the reasons I cited a moment ago.

Other historians, though, have found it more feasible to locate dates of the movement not in individual writers but in their shared or collective social experiences. For instance, social historian Ann Douglas, who sees whites and African Americans inextricably intertwined culturally, found that the hopeful dream of racial integration, signaled by the conclusion of WWI, turned to disillusionment in the nightmarish 1935 Harlem Riot. In a more precise rendering of this same period, David Levering Lewis, in his *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* (1994), envisions a tripartite division: 1917-1923, in which white Bohemians expressed interest in Black life; 1924 to mid-1926, dominated by the civil rights establishment of the NAACP and the Urban League; and 1926-1935, during which African American artists themselves were hegemonic.

Still some literary historians prefer to locate the era more closely in terms of its literary production, thus permitting an in-

trinsic history of the movement to be written as a collection of texts. For them, Claude McKay's poetry collection *Harlem Shadows* (1922) is the front end of a frame that ends with either Wallace Thurman's roman a clef *The Infants of the Spring* (1932) or Richard Wright's trenchant renunciation of the movement in his essay "The Blue-Print for Negro Writing" (1937).

As we seek essential meaning in this myriad of complicated issues about naming, periodization, and group dynamics of the "Harlem" Renaissance, it's important to be reminded that each concept, while important alone, is best understood in relation to the others. It is nearly impossible to select one out for intense scrutiny without, somehow, engaging the others. What this means for us today is that the narrative of the "Harlem" Renaissance belies the simplicity we often impose on such diverse literary and cultural phenomena. Part of what's gained from this understanding, then, is that the era is rich, diverse, and multifaceted. The legacy is equally so. Of course, not all historians share this idea. Harold Cruse, in his important study *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, has declared the Renaissance an utter failure because it was unable to leave in place a viable protest tradition in art. Admittedly, his criticism that the movement foundered because of an inordinate intervention by white patrons is not entirely without merit.

But art is a living thing. It is ever evolving; stasis is not the nature of art. What Cruse and others seek in their need for a polemical art ignores the individual expression that emerged in the artistic practice and product of those creators from the Renaissance. In their own way, they laid a stone in a foundation that continues to rise. The lines of continuity are not always clearly marked. Not every current artist looks back, as Alice Walker did in rediscovering Zora Neale Hurston, to find spiritual and aesthetic guidance for his or her work. But we should not feel constrained. Part of what we should do, as we approach the twenty-first century, is to reexamine the past for the lessons it may contain. For to do so ensures a stronger future.

Valdinia Winn: What is the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance? Is that term appropriate for the movement? If not, then how should one label the outburst of literary and artistic activity of the 1920s? Was it merely an African American intellectual movement? Does the decade of the 1920s accurately establish

the time frame? These are the driving questions that continue to fascinate scholars. Whatever the answers, no one can deny that what African American artists, philosophers, literary and social activists said and wrote during the 1920s left a lasting impact on the African American community, the nation, and the world.

First, what is in the name Harlem Renaissance? I must say Dr. Tidwell presented a well-developed argument for the use of the term "New Negro Movement." Succinctly stated, that label is inclusive of the tone and the personalities of the movement, and it also addresses the issue of the movement's cohesiveness. These writers were critical observers, not just dreamers. They were designing a blueprint for the African American community and for the world. When they spoke and wrote of America and Africa, they linked their literature, art, and philosophy to the survival of African and African Americans worldwide. While some artistic works appealed to the taste of European American patrons, others spoke strictly to the African American spirit. Those with formal training and financial and social power dominated the group, but there were other writers who, not being bourgeoisie, concentrated their works on the lives of ordinary black folks. There were even those nonliterary folks like Marcus Garvey who played a significant role in the intellectual health and well being of the African American community. Thus the term "New Negro Movement" speaks to the diversity within the community of artists.

Utilizing the term "New Negro Movement" also allows one to discuss those writers who left America for France after World War I. During the 1920s, Paris became a place for some of the best and the brightest African American writers, performers, and musicians including Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Jessie Fauset, Gwendolyn Bennett, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Aaron Douglas, and Augusta Savage. Their images of Paris were different but their disparate observations provide a nice composite of the experiences of African American expatriates in France. They went to Paris to study with the masters. They were reacting and responding to the racism in America. What did they find? They found a similar racism in Paris, but they also found an African American community of artists. Thus there is substantial reason to support the name "New Negro Movement."

Yet, there is a "spirited" aspect to the label the "Harlem Renaissance" that is lacking in the former term. Harlem was the

Black Mecca. Here, in the 1920s, was the first concentration of many elements of African American life. The music, the art, the literature, the dance, the theater were all in Harlem. Langston Hughes and others found a new haven and new freedom . . . a sense of belonging. In Harlem, they could discard the stereotype of the past and create a new beat. There was still racial discrimination, but they had hope for the future. But, as Dr. Tidwell noted, the tentacles of Harlem reached out to African American communities in Chicago, Memphis, Kansas City, New Orleans, and Paris. As these artists made European Americans aware of the African American community they made African Americans proud of their heritage.

Then, how does one resolve this conflict of terms? It's impossible. I would suggest that we don't get bogged down in the name but rather take the two labels and combine them. I suggest that we put them on two sides of a coin. Flip that coin and as it twirls take that energy and spirit as the true legacy of the movement.

What about the periodization? Many historians agree that the 1920s marked the beginnings of the transition to modernism in American life. Of course, some changes in society had begun in the nineteenth century, while others began during World War I. Nevertheless, a modern society was clearly evident by the end of the decade. Corporate expansion, technological advances, urbanization, increased migration and immigration, new liberal values, and a new popular culture contributed to substantial changes in American society. And as a result of recent studies, many historians now reject popular stereotypes and view the 1920s as a period of both continuity with the past and change toward the future. With this in mind, I suggest the Harlem Renaissance began in the post-World War I years, flourished during the 1920s, and declined during the Depression of the 1930s. By the Depression era, African American writers enlarged their scope, looked beyond the African American world, and rejected purely racial materials. The duality of being an African American and an American was again a pressing issue for many young black artists of the 1930s and World War II era. While perhaps minor, the wealthy patrons were also gone during the Depression years.

Nevertheless, many authors like Langston Hughes and others continued to write in the 1950s and 1960s. They continued to be activists and artists. What is the legacy of their works? The legacy is clear. It is the spirit of survival and liberation. The

African American intellectuals of today and the new millennium have a clearer image of the past and a clear path to the future. Whether or not they are "race men and women," no one can deny that today's intellectuals are the products of the historical works and forces of the New Negro Movement/Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s.

Robert Hemenway: What I'm going to do is to talk a little bit about Zora Neale Hurston in the Harlem Renaissance and then pick up on a couple of cues that Dr. Winn and Dr. Tidwell threw out. I think I can best describe the role and the presence and the position of Zora Neale Hurston in the Harlem Renaissance by giving you an anecdote. There's a story that Zora Neale Hurston was in South Carolina in the 1930s and she walked across the street against a red light. She got to the other side of the street and there was a white policeman standing there. He looked down at her and said, "Girl, what are you doing walking against that light?" She didn't much appreciate being called girl and she didn't much appreciate the threatening presence of this large white policeman. She looked up at him and said, "Why officer, I saw the white folks go on green and I assumed the red for us."

The interesting thing about this story is that it is actually a folktale. It is a folktale that Zora Neale Hurston collected when she was collecting folklore in the South. But as with all of Zora Neale Hurston's folklore repertoire, it was something that she had ready to apply to the situations that she found herself in. I think that's the role that Zora Neale Hurston played in the Harlem Renaissance. She came to Harlem just like everybody else came to Harlem. Arna Bontemps came to Harlem from California. Wallace Thurman came to Harlem from Utah. Langston Hughes came from Lawrence, Kansas, and Mexico and Columbia University after dropping out of school after his first year there. People were coming to Harlem from all over the country. All came to Harlem, the Black Mecca, the capital of Black America. Aaron Douglas came from Topeka because Harlem was where the action was. That's where he, as a young painter, wanted to be.

Zora Neale Hurston came in 1925 from Howard University. She came because she was a writer. She had written a play and submitted stories and plays to the NAACP literary contests. She came because that's where other young African American artists

were coming to. Zora, to that group, represented the Black rural South. She represented a rural Black experience. As she put it, "The only white folks in Eatonville were those that passed through." She came representing a certain experience that African American people had in this country, an experience that had certain elements of racism in it. But it was also an experience of African American people telling stories to each other, telling tales to each other, creating what Zora said was African American folklore, and as she put it once, "What black folks had before they knew there was such a thing as art." What she meant was that during slavery, when it used to be against the law to teach a black person to read, there was still art going on in the quarters. The art was African American people expressing themselves to each other and telling tales and perpetuating tales just like that story about Zora and the stoplight.

I think that's an important thing to remember about Zora Neale Hurston. As poet Sterling Brown once told me, "When we'd have parties and Zora was there, she was the party, because people would come and sort of group around her and she would tell tales." After that Civic Club dinner in 1924, there was a party afterwards and Zora came and stood at the back of the room. She had a big long boa around her throat. She threw it over her shoulder and said, "I am here. Zora Neale Hurston. Colorstruck." What she was referring to was her play, which had won a prize. She was that kind of a flamboyant personality.

As Zora came into the Harlem Renaissance, she came to the attention of people we might call "patrons of the arts." She came to the attention of Black people like Walter White and James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. DuBois, the establishment, the NAACP and the Urban League. They invited her to their houses for dinner. She was as interesting to them as she was to the young artists. She also came to the attention of various white people who were on the fringes of the Harlem Renaissance. Carl Van Vechten, the drama and art critic for the *New York Times*, was very much on the scene in Harlem. Carl VanVechten came to meet Zora and came to be good friends with her. Alain Locke, the chairman of the philosophy department at Howard, the first African American Rhodes scholar, got interested in her, and he introduced her to a white woman named Mrs. R. Osgood Mason, who was a rich, old-money, white woman from New York City. Mrs. Mason actually funded Zora Neale Hurston to go

south in 1927 and spend the time from 1927 to 1931 collecting folklore in the South. So you had Zora Neale Hurston in a Chevrolet coupe paid for by Mrs. Mason, a pistol in her handbag, travelling the back roads of the South.

The year 1929 probably signaled an end to the Harlem Renaissance, at least as we traditionally think of it. Yes, we went on to various arts and writing in the 1930s. Yes, we went on to Richard Wright and to *Native Son* in 1940. But as Langston Hughes said, in 1929 with the stock market crash, we all tumbled downhill toward the WPA. He was making an important point, I think, and that is that people had to start worrying whether or not there was going to be enough food on the table. When you're worrying about that, it becomes harder and harder to engage in a kind of artistic revolution or an aesthetic revolution, which is the way that many people thought of themselves during the Harlem Renaissance.

Audience: Given all you've said, no real mention was made of Marcus Garvey as a New Negro. What role should we assign him in this particular time period?

Tidwell: I'm distressed too that Marcus Garvey has been reduced to near nothingness in the scholarship on the Renaissance—that is, until recently. His contemporary, Alain Locke, wrote what I consider the most thoughtful summarizing essay of the period—"The New Negro." In it, Locke reduces the centrality of Marcus Garvey to the status of a subordinate clause, saying Garveyism is "a transient, if not spectacular, phenomenon." What a putdown!! It suggests that, despite Garvey's orchestration of a movement that numbered somewhere between one and four million people, he was little more than a demagogue or a leadership anomaly. His "Back to Africa" movement was infused with enthusiasm, energy, and excitement that people who were associated with the NAACP and the Urban League, such as W.E.B. DuBois, Alain Locke, Charles S. Johnson, and James Weldon Johnson—the so-called Negro leaders—could not match. Simply put, his charismatic leadership cannot be summarily dismissed. Among his contemporaries, though, Garvey posed a number of problems, which I think are best considered in terms of class or caste. DuBois, Locke, and Charles Johnson

would certainly represent those DuBois had called "the Talented Tenth." Their doctoral degrees from prestigious universities had prepared them socially, politically, and intellectually for racial integration. By reducing Garvey essentially to a demagogue, they were dismissive of him and his emigrationist ideas. Yet Marcus Garvey was able to articulate the ideas and concerns of the masses in ways that Locke and others simply could not. To ignore Marcus Garvey, as many people have done until recently, then is to create, for me, a major error in the ways in which the Renaissance is thought about. If we use the term "New Negro *Movement*," then we certainly make the case that Garvey is the perfect exemplar of "movement."

Winn: While we have only given passing comments to Marcus Garvey in this symposium, I believe that he holds an influential position and plays a pivotal role in the New Negro/Harlem Renaissance Movement and its legacy. As I stated earlier, those with formal training, financial and social standing occupied the leadership positions in the African American community. Marcus Garvey was not formally trained; he was not bourgeoisie, and he did not promote integration. His Universal Negro Improvement Association was nationalist in outlook and international in scope and appeal. He was truly Afrocentric in the modern sense of the word. Thus, if one only addresses the poets, artists, playwrights, etc. who are traditionally identified with the movement, then Marcus Garvey is at best placed on the periphery. Yet, a true scholar would not only research the obvious, but also research "outside of the box" and investigate all cultural aspects of the African American community.

We have all stated that as a reaction and a response to the socio-economic and the racial conditions of the new urban, industrial, and segregated society, many African American artists redirected their energies and frustrations into the arts. As a direct challenge to European political and cultural hegemony, others established self-help organizations, independent newspapers, and waged economic boycotts in the name of racial pride. The most successful protest movement of working-class African Americans in the 1920s was Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. Headquartered in Harlem, but with branch offices throughout the United States, West Indies, and Africa, the UNIA championed Pan-Africanism, self-help, Black capitalism,

and community building, all within the context of segregation. The literary arm of the UNIA was the *Negro World*, published in Harlem from 1918 to 1933. It alone stands as a cultural instrument of the Harlem Renaissance. Its editors included T. Thomas Fortune, William Ferris, Eric Walrond, and Claude McKay. Garvey also published the *Daily Negro Times* in Harlem from 1922 to 1924. While all of the Garvey publications ended in the 1930s, they addressed local as well as international issues all within the context of colonial rule and exploitation; at the same time they were instruments of education for the masses.

To date historians still debate the impact and widespread influence of Marcus Garvey and his activities within the African American community and larger society. Part of the debate results from the absence of a complete set of raw materials for solid biographical and historical analyses. Part of the misunderstanding comes from the fact that many historians do not relate Garvey's actions and philosophies to the past. They neglect the activities of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, who urged African Americans to emigrate to Africa in response to the violence of Jim Crow. Many historians further neglect the works of T. Thomas Fortune, who founded the Afro-American League and who agitated for political and economic empowerment and self-defense. Historians need to study Marcus Garvey in the context of the Black community-building process, as opposed to the traditional view that all African Americans sought racial integration. Too often historians and other critics of the Garvey movement fail to discuss the internal complexities of African American and African communities. Until scholars begin distinguishing between issues of class, gender, color, and nationality within social groups, scholarship will be incomplete.

Finally, I believe Alain Locke's comment made in "The New Negro" that Garvey was "a transient, if not spectacular, phenomenon," speaks to Garvey's influence. Locke, DuBois and the others saw the parades; they knew ladies who were members of the Ladies Brigade and the Black Cross Nurses; and they knew members of the Garvey Militia. They most definitely read (Claude McKay edited at one time) the *Negro World* and they were aware of the thousands who paid tribute to Garvey in 1926 in Harlem while he was imprisoned in Atlanta. What he

said in his newspapers, they shared in spirit and incorporated similar sentiments in their art and literature. They may not have been card-carrying members of the UNIA, but there was more of a relationship than scholars want to note. If J. Edgar Hoover listed Garvey as one of the most dangerous African Americans during the 1920s, it is understandable why Alain Locke and others would dismiss Garvey and distance themselves from the UNIA and its philosophy.

Audience: Since this was the era of Jim Crow segregation, it seems logical that some kind of cooperation might have existed among the various groups attempting to achieve civil rights. Wasn't there at least some collective attempt to confront the proliferation of social problems, like lynchings for example? Whether they were in Harlem or Kansas City or Chicago—what did Black leadership do?

Hemenway: Your question is right on point. The NAACP was working this entire time to get the United States Congress to declare lynching a crime. We live in a country in which lynching has never been declared a federal crime. It's the reason why in the Civil Rights Movement, when Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman and other people were being killed, that if you were going to try the people who everyone knew killed them you had to charge them with violation of civil rights and not with murder. People understood that, and this relates to the Garvey question too. What Garvey represented when he said, "Let's think about going back to Africa. This place stinks," had a lot of power particularly for people who didn't have the advantage of going to universities or who struggled to put food on the table every day. They basically said maybe this guy Garvey's got something to say here. The reason I think that Alain Locke would put down Garvey the way that he did is that Garvey posed a threat to the leadership of the Black community. Locke and DuBois and people like that wanted to lead the Black community into a relationship in this country that was better, less racist, and would do away with segregation.

Tidwell: I think your question profoundly raises a number of issues that I wish we had more time to deal with. There's a split between Alain Locke and the other racial leaders. Locke em-

braced the idea that literature and culture should be vehicles for promoting racial harmony and perhaps help create an idealized interracial social arrangement. To do that means the focus is not necessarily placed on all existing horrific social conditions because the foundation of a consistent, sustained idea of culture has to be built on positive things. What Locke tries to do is highlight the wonderful features of the race and the great possibilities for improved interracial relations afforded through the arts.

Carmaletta M. Williams: Yes, but there were other sources of leadership conflict. There were the attacks on and by the American Communist Party and the labor unions. Particularly the CIO attempted to organize the writers and artists working on the WPA projects. Maybe that's one way of seeing the end of the "Harlem" Renaissance—when the WPA comes into existence in the mid-1930s. If that's true, what value did the WPA have for Black writers?

Hemenway: The first African American writers didn't get employed on the Writers' Project until about 1936. Arna Bontemps and Richard Wright were among the first because they managed to get approval from the federal government. So people like Margaret Walker were unemployed for literally nine months waiting for their qualifying status, which enabled them to get their assignment. Still, a number of Black writers did get employed on the project. From the activity in New York, the locus shifts to Chicago, because the concentration of writers who have migrated were more there than in New York. They did exist all over. There were even Writers' Projects in the South, which we don't hear much about. Sterling Brown and Arna Bontemps both had supervisory positions with the Writers' Project. It was a pretty short and intense period for a number of writers, and those who were in the right place at the right time did get an appointment.

Tidwell: I can speak about Sterling Brown. Sterling Brown had the position of Editor on Negro Affairs and operated out of the national office of the Federal Writers' Project. His job was to peruse all the various state and local guidebooks for erroneous or stereotypical representations of African Americans. For Brown, the role of editor got even more complicated because Black writ-

ers saw him situated in a position to influence hiring decisions. As a consequence, a great many people approached Brown about needing a job on the project. Of course, he was unable to help people because hiring fell outside the purview of his job responsibilities.

Insofar as the FWP provided writers an opportunity to earn their living by writing, it became a kind of substitute for the patronage system that affected so much of the writing centered in Harlem. There appears to be a correlation between the 1929 stock market crash and the closing of the "cashier's till" that had funded many Black writers in the 1920s. Government subsidy took the place of financial support provided by individuals and some groups. With that, the dynamics of patron and beneficiary changed dramatically. But other changes occurred as well. Most writers shifted away from the folk-based vision of art to embrace what the Depression now demanded: a more socially engaged or proletarian art. However you define the period of the New Negro, it's clear that the FWP rescued many African American writers. And as we continue to ask questions of periodization, names of the era, and literary relations, we can do so with the assurance that this was indeed a very heady time in African American literary and cultural history.

Christopher Brisson

Lack Luster

Your perfume in a room after you have exited
rather nude is quite enough to keep you there.

The disarray of sheets, the way the mattress represents you
in soft depression, the where and how you slept, once

you're at the sink brushing your teeth and I stumble in
having fallen asleep at my desk yet again is an image ripe

for heavy-handed, post-modern discussion of "the Lack"
and its paradigmatic heft. But I say, fuck it, let's forego

undue temptation and stick instead with eggs, all the big,
brown eggs we used for Millicent's sixty-first birthday cake

made in laughter yesterday and the purple-gray egg house
standing in our wake that seemed a crate of mourning.

It's not unlike old shoes recording the bridge of my toes,
the arch of my sole. Oh where do the unwanted vowels go,

once discarded by contractions, swept off the page
like so many wee round bastards? Of course, we've grown

accustomed to the obvious tricks of pistachios leaving
shells, peaches pits, tongues spit, snakes their skin.

We revel in the mystery of the navel, its seductive loop.
As each museum's guillotine guarantees heads at a glance,

land in draught forces the mind to water. How delightful:
air no longer invisible: watch it come to life, fill all the flat

tires, balloons, embolisms. Must I draw the line at saying
each unworn glove hungers for ladies' fingers, nor elaborate

too fully the wilting of old hosiery, bereft of flesh, huddled
in the bureaubacks, sobbing? Today as I walked our ragged

beach, and you drifted away, out of sight, remnants
from some magnificent sinking ship, I couldn't help

recall how foot-prints, hoof-prints, dog-prints,
on sodden paths, beaches, doorsteps, conjure

images, movement, suspense, assorted crimes,
strolls, escapes and dalliances, a range of exertions

concluded only hours, if not moments, ago— the proof
and question marks of those before me: here, now,

yet gone. Look no further than the shock of amputees
lining our crowded streets—we always see their missing

limbs well before we see them. This is how we work.
This is how we think. I can make no more apologies.

The sight of a chair never leads one to anything
but thoughts of human beings, a pair of buttocks,

a reprieve for the feet. Last year, that most difficult of
afternoons, the glossy showroom full of empty coffins:

big and small, newborn to adult: all filled with nothing
but bodies: enemies, strangers, loved ones. It just happens.

And thus we let the linguists and detectives, the excavators,
keep their parts for things, synecdoche in banana peels, moon

beam, ham bone, rodent turds, split feather, as we search
for finer fear and pleasure in those objects coming forth

unseen. Your spoon, any spoon, declares soup, medicine,
tapioca, listen to it: hear it scream, scream for something,

something for its space. It knows the want; it's not that different
from hordes of urns dusty in the V & A, drum-hollow through

three long millennia. Beautiful, barren vessels for whom loving
restoration means diddly—the amphora dreams only of wheat

from the Peloponnesus when the night guard turns off the light,
the smell of history, nourishment, the plowing of fields—

not unlike that uterus you lament, dark, empty, eager
for at least one viable child. Come back to bed,

that's not an infant you hear, just the shrill
taunt of absence: loud, clearer than tears.

Quinn Dalton

How to Clean Your Apartment

Clutter. *See also* Choking, 4.33
boyfriends, 4.52
mothers, 4.76

Let's think for a moment about why you're here. There is, first of all, the matter of the missing man, who convinced you to stay in this city of movieplexes and theme restaurants rather than run the "rat race" in more exciting locales. His arguments led you to expect certain outcomes. He came with a set of plans and operational instructions, which now of course are also missing.

And there is the matter of the pop-up mother, leaping across phone lines, from behind doorways, ever hopeful for your marriage and motherhood—words you hear echoed whenever she says, "I just want you to be happy." She means well, but with all this clutter you can't find your walls anymore, not even a window, and what you need more than anything is light.

There are women you know who would decide to climb Mount Kilimanjaro at a time like this. Or join the Peace Corps, or start a foundation for a new cause. You happen to believe that haircuts are life-altering events. So you've decided to clean your apartment.

You have observed your life from every angle; you have wandered its rooms, cleared fire trails where you could. You have considered the years neatly appointed like the trimmed lawns on this charming college street, and the picture doesn't please you. *Bottom line it*, as your boss says: the future is uncertain. It's time to take control, time to reclaim cubic feet of storage space in your closet, time to give the dog back his favorite corner, at least temporarily. How happy do you think he is, wedging himself between a pile of magazines and that dying plant? That will be your first step, you think with a tentative smile. Get rid of the plant—but save the clay pot, maybe you could fill it with marbles, use it as an umbrella holder, a door stop.

Alcohol
as cleanser, 1.20

Yesterday afternoon you stopped by the liquor store and brought home, in addition to a fifth of Jack Daniels, several boxes. You bought whiskey because it's the stuff the lonely detective in your mind drinks, feet propped on a wooden desk, overcoat striped with slats of smoky light. It's the beverage of the tragic, the misunderstood. Night after night, you strain for sleep; your detective gave up on it long ago. He waits, he taps his desk, he's the one asking all those troublesome questions that rattle unanswered in your head. Clutter. What does your detective say? Get to the bottom of it. See what you find.

Use the liquor boxes to carry old clothes to Good Will, or to your friends, whoever's less picky. Warning: offering your cast-offs to friends can be dangerous. You will find out what they really think of your personal style, or, worse, you might discover how much better they look in your duds. There is no need for these revelations right now.

Start with the closet. The first items will be easy—you will pluck from its hanger the purple and chartreuse shirt with a stain on the breast pocket; you wore a funky broach to cover it for a while, but then it lost its funk, and you lent it to a co-worker and forgot about it when you decided to switch jobs, move south, *re*invent yourself. The shirt doesn't fit your image anymore. It says cute; these days you're hip. Drop it in the Glenfiddich box. You're off to a very good start.

Wardrobe
role of Fate in women's, 3.43

There are good luck clothes and bad luck clothes, and you know that both must be handled with cautious respect. Good luck clothes can lose their charm if you wear them too often. Bad luck clothes can become good luck clothes, given time, but you have to be willing to risk it and give them a second chance. Take, for example, the red dress you bought for that trip you took with the environmental activist, vegetarian, wine-collecting Silicon Valley programmer you met at a client's software launch party. You saw yourself wearing that dress while cruising Route 66 in his olive green MG, a matching scarf tied around your

neck and whipping with your hair in the wind. The day you wore it the sun burned you both so thoroughly that you had to drive with the top up from then on; by day three there was a constant ringing in your ears from the engine, which roared like a lawn mower in your head. You were too hot to move—or cry—when the car finally overheated somewhere in the desert, at which point you discovered that Java and C++ certification is no guarantee of one's classic convertible maintenance skills. Neither of you took it well; there was no further communication after the plane ride home, not even an e-mail.

You redeemed the dress in an interview (with the help of a rather boxy jacket, which now, too, must go), winning the job for which you later moved south. Still, you haven't worn it since, so drop it in the box.

Ah, here is the black velvet one the English yachtsman you dated in college bought for the Torquay Ball. You loved his accent and the fact that he could shinny up sixty-foot masts in horizontal rains while whistling and that he had sailed the North Atlantic alone. The night you wore that dress, the two of you danced for hours, until he compared you to the Gulf Stream (hot and fast) and dipped you with unexpected clumsiness, pouring a very good champagne down your back. The dress is too, well, *fuzzy* for you now, and the last you heard, the sailor traded his boat for a bank. Walk the plank, you say, as it drops into the box.

Make that two boxes: In addition to the shirt, skirt, and dresses, you have ditched six pairs of shorts, a pair of pink leather pants you bought during a flu of bad taste, a jacket made of fabric curiously resembling couch upholstery, several T-shirts whose slogans don't fit your point of view anymore, nine lonely socks, several tattered belts, and many slips and nightgowns you never used. Actually, pat yourself on the back—no fewer than three teddies, two wizened garter belts, and seven slippery camisoles, the shrapnel of various past romances, have fallen gracefully into those boxes, as well. Be proud; you are moving on.

Screening calls
brief arguments for, 7.61

The phone's ringing; you know who it is. He always calls at this time of day. All week you've let your voice mail field his

messages, but this time, take a deep breath and answer. Remember what this day means to you; understand that nothing short of a complete break with all past encumbrances will leave you free to enjoy the future.

So.

Break the seal on that bottle of Jack Daniels and pour yourself a finger or two as you walk to the phone. Easy does it: liquor will make you sentimental, and right now, in the long stretch of a Saturday afternoon, with blond streaks of light sliding over your cast-off belongings like a message from beyond, and with this man calling you yet again, this man who is beginning to make you feel like a bass in a stocked pond—the only bass, as a matter of fact—that gets caught over and over again, held up to the camera by the professional fisherman and then tossed high over his shoulder, sparkles of light or water flashing in your flat eyes, you can't tell which is which, and you don't care. "That one looked a little worse for wear," the fisherman mutters, but no matter, he'll catch you again, you'll swim toward his newest array of cheap but shiny lures, wriggling with their shimmer, the memory of past fish misjudgments triggered only when the hook rips in.

Answer on the fourth ring. Say hello in your deepest whiskey voice. Lean against the wall and listen as he tells you how sorry he is about last weekend; he wants to make it up to you, how about the two of you go to dinner, just to talk, he says.

Take a long sip. Let him do the asking for a change while you review some facts. Don't be too hard on yourself. Remember that you did break up with him, at least, when he gave you the Space Speech—specifically, his needing more of it and your not giving him enough. He was going to be traveling more with work, he said; this was an uncertain time in his life. You nodded, tried to recall a time in your life that *hadn't* been uncertain as you closed the door behind him.

But then you broke down and called him last weekend and he came over, and you knew you could have, should have asked questions before taking him to bed, but you also know yourself well, and you are most likely to trust someone when there's the least reason to do so.

After your less than prudent behavior, you secretly labeled him the man who is smarter than you. Your closest female friend says he's a fool—you yourself have told him he's a fool, but it doesn't

make any difference. He must hold within him some secret, some divine strength, to be able to walk away from you so easily. He must be smarter than you to be able to stand being alone, while you circle the boat, drowning in the weight of your own memory.

But what better way to clear one's head than to get rid of all the things that hook one to the past? you think as he apologizes for last weekend. Let's go to dinner, he urges. Can I come pick you up? he asks. You want to say yes, you want him to come over, every part of you wants to raid that Glenfiddich box and cinch yourself into one of those garter belts you swore you'd never wear again, maybe slip that red dress over the top, maybe not.

Close your eyes. Think about the beautiful, clever, independent woman you thought he saw when he met you. Be strong. Tell him you're in the middle of spring cleaning. Tell him you're streamlining your life.

Are you moving? he asks. Ignore the hint of regret you'd like to think you hear in his voice.

I hope so, you say.

Chrissie Hynde, condoms, junk mail
usefulness of, 6.38

Put on some music to get the sound of his voice out of your head. You're in the mood for the Pretenders, but Chrissie Hynde's voice makes your dog howl. Still, at this point, you need some of Chrissie's black-leather inspiration. Choose her second album, and skip to the song called "Pack It Up." Ignore your dog, who is already cutting loose on the back-up vocals, snout puckered at the ceiling. Look around your apartment for leftover evidence of the man who is smarter than you. All you find is a chewed-up toothbrush and a half-used pack of condoms—not the brand you usually buy. If you're having second thoughts about parting with these meager traces of his existence, remind yourself that the package was open when he first brought it over.

The toothbrush you'll toss, no problem. The condoms you'll keep; allow yourself to entertain the thought of using them with another man, the perfect man, the sweetest revenge. Except, you realize with a drop in your stomach that feels like a punch, the perfect man you're visualizing looks dead-on like the man who is smarter than you.

Concentrate on Chrissie. She knows how it is.

Dance while you gather the loose papers you find on your desk. Play air guitar as you shred the credit card offers, bank statements, career suggestions scribbled on airport cocktail napkins from your mother, expired coupons, guilty notes to yourself about long-term goals, crime reports and apartment security ideas from your mother, mysterious phone numbers, invitations, and book suggestions from your mother, such as *Leading from the Heart* and *Ten Ways to Catapult Your Career.* Be encouraged that your discard pile is bigger, if only slightly, than your file pile.

Move on to the magazines, which you have shoved in corners, on top of shelves, behind furniture, under your bed. Don't get frustrated. Divide them according to title and year. Later you can go back and label the boxes, start your own magazine library: BeefEater's and Cuervo Gold for the 1990s, Absolut for 2000.

Therapy
cheaper alternatives to, 9.07

Give yourself a break before you take on the knickknacks. Add some ice to the Jack and have a seat on the stoop with your dog. It's evening, a dangerous time, as if the sun's not setting but losing its footing, slipping like your resolve. Ask yourself how you become such a hoarder of things. You weren't deprived as a child. Your parents had money and they spent a lot of it on you, their only child, their straight-A student, their ballerina girl. They put you through lessons, braces, summer camps, private high school and college, new clothes every season, and even after your father had moved out, your slim-suited, banker mother came to every event in your young life. She came even when you didn't want her present. Like your first gynecological exam. Like the time in college you got booked for possession of marijuana and certain party-style mushrooms. After that episode, she had said it was a good thing you wanted to be a writer; it was the only profession left open to you.

That was just like her, you think, ever practical, impossible to ruffle. Your mother had more garage sales over the years than everyone else on the block put together. She didn't believe in book ownership, with all the good libraries around. Her father was a briefly famous architect, and she thought throw pillows

ruined the lines of a couch. She knew about spring cleaning. She always said you couldn't carry extra baggage and be happy. After your father left to pursue an archaeology degree in Greece and then a vow of silence, she sold everything he wasn't smart enough to take with him, including gifts you had given him over the years—a pair of onyx cuff links, a mahogany wine rack, a brass change collector.

You are overwhelmed with dizziness, or a sudden realization, you're not sure which: it is your mother's fault that you cling to everything you own, everyone you meet. She *made* you this way, with her executioner's skill in putting the past behind her. She doesn't respect you; how could she? You hoarded letters and old tests, worn-out sneakers, and outgrown clothes, while she discarded bank branches and whôle departments of customer service specialists. Time to move on, she likes to say, whether she's talking about the next stop on a business trip or her failed marriage, but moving on is precisely what you would like to avoid, because the future is unknowable, and therefore who could be sure whether you might need to use that [insert noun here] again. Best to hang on a little longer, just to be sure.

Temptation
resistance to, 2.89

When it's dark and you're tipsy and feeling sorry for yourself, and you're counting your women friends who are married now and send Christmas cards with their babies on them and the men friends who are married and no longer keeping in touch with you anymore, and you know better than to measure your life against someone else's yet cannot stop yourself, do not approach any packed boxes, because you might decide to keep all the old things that are crowding out the new, and because like it or not, it is time to move on. Pack it up.

Gifts
from women (Macy's), 5.054
from men (Hallmark), 5.055

Late night, time for the knickknacks. Yes, this means the miniature porcelain puppy collection and the cluster of cookie

tins. They will be challenging, so you were wise to save them for last. There's a certain rhythm in getting rid of your possessions; you have to work up to the keepsakes. Reward yourself if all goes well—even if it doesn't, then, just for trying. Perhaps this experience will help you understand your mother a little better, although you might need less legal substances for that kind of insight.

The miniature English spaniel the yachtsman gave you after the first time you had sex goes first into the London Gin box. Why is it you're getting rid of all the things men have given you? You scan your apartment, looking for things that women have given you. You realize, upon inspection, that your women friends give gifts you *use,* in your favorite colors, like scented stationery and bubble bath, and that this fact alone is a fine argument for lesbianism, which several of your relatives suspect you of, anyway. After all, you're a liberal, single, thirty-one-year-old woman. What more do they need to know?

Now for the series of small pastoral watercolors, all gifts from the Silicon Valley programmer. Sigh loudly, but don't relent. Turn next to the pile of decorative boxes, each containing bent paper clips, cracked shells, dry perfume samples—dump these things which are the next step up from dust in the universe and stack the boxes neatly into old London Gin. It's almost full, and your dog, peeking around a yet unsorted pile of magazines, looks disoriented and needful of some fresh air. Time for a walk.

Dogs. *See also* Companions, 8.11
brief arguments for, 9.21

When you get back, there's a message on your voice mail from the man who is smarter than you. He sounds so casual, so detached. How is your spring cleaning going? his recorded voice chirps. He doesn't sound the least bit miserable to be alone.

Or maybe, you think, maybe he isn't alone anymore. Press your hand against your forehead until you can choke down the desire to drive to his condo and catch him with some new, unsuspecting woman. Tell yourself you're on her side, whoever she is. Tell yourself you'd only bad-mouth him to help her. Don't return his call.

Your dog is sitting patiently at your feet, waiting for you to unclip his leash. Pet him for being so quietly supportive, so *there*

for you. Let him lick your face. Feed him and watch him eat. It's so easy to please him. He will never edge toward the door at the end of the weekend, unsure of when he'll be back in town. He will never pretend to be happy without you.

Now. Look at all those full boxes lining your bedroom wall. You are doing so well. In fact, at this rate you might have to pace yourself, just to have enough packing to get you through the night. Take your time; allow yourself to savor this slow emancipation from your pack-rat past. Screen your calls. Your progress might invite a false sense of strength, but you may not be ready to face the man who is smarter than you.

Men. ***See also*** **Companions, 8.11**
as fine wine, 10.145
as bad luck clothes, 10.39

You are disappointed that he hasn't tried calling you again. Here it is, midnight; if you had called him three hours ago, you'd have already left several more messages, each one more desperate than the last. Don't linger on this thought; it is too depressing. Instead, focus on all the room you will have for new ideas, new experiences.

You are sitting on your living room floor, spent, amber Jack Daniels swirling in the bottle as you dangle it in lamplight, when there's the knock at your door. Don't even bother to check who it is; you know. There he is, leaning against the door frame, hair wet and sticking up from the shower, hands in the pockets of his impeccably faded jeans. You can't even breathe; you seem to feel his voice more than hear it when he asks you to come with him for some Mexican; he's in the mood for tacos, maybe a few Margaritas. Slip on your sandals, splash some cold water on your face to no effect, and the next thing you know, you're in that restaurant he took you to on your first date.

He's talking about nothing in particular and you're fuming. What was this weekend about anyway? Why did you bother? You should just go home and bury yourself in your boxed belongings. You haven't learned a thing. You snag a waiter by his vinyl chaps and order a Margarita *grande. Andale,* you tell him.

Two Margaritas later, you are not sure if you should excuse yourself and vomit in the restroom, or wait until you get home.

Really, you're pathetic, but you feel pretty good. Or, more accurately, you feel nothing, and that's a welcome change.

As gracefully as you can, rise to your feet. You know there is nothing you can do about the past. Tell him you're ready to go. In the car, you are not so inebriated that you miss his sideways glances and the way he manages to brush your knee when he shifts gears. Resist it—you know he isn't good for you, and yet the thought of him free in the world, or worse, free and happy with some other woman, makes a pocket of acid bubble up in your throat. Close your eyes, tilt your head, let your hair fall away from your neck. You can afford these languid movements that he will mistake as invitations, you can arch your back in a stretch just as your dog can roll over and expose his soft belly to you—there is no danger, nothing to fear. This man, who may or may not be smarter than you, can't have you, in spite of what he may think, because tonight you will open your front door just wide enough for yourself. Enjoy this new feeling of power—it will not last when you are alone. Still, tonight, imagine your future, how good to yourself you might be the next time around. Imagine knowing what's right, and sticking by it.

If only you could pack this man in a box along with everything else—what kind of box would you choose? A wine box, definitely, that had held something pricey and complicated. Imagine leading him gently to it—instead of to your bed—and folding him inside. This box, safely sealed, you could shove to the back of your closet, along with the bad luck clothes you can't get rid of but are hoping to redeem. Maybe someday he will emerge, aged and wiser. And maybe you will even have room for him.

Paula Newcomer Bringing in the Hay

We've been watching the skies all week.
Now they are scattered across
the field, hay bales packed
machine-tight and tied with hemp.
In the west, black clouds push forward
against our polished blue sky.

Children bouncing beside me,
here is the thump and lurch of the
truck shifting
through its gears.
And when I cut off the motor,
birds calling wildly in the treetops above,
word sent out: insects and mice
and seed grains below.

In our hands, golden treasure, we hoist
them onto truck bed; seeds cling
to our hair, our shirts; husband
clinging to the back of the truck.
One more load ought to do it.

The light funnels down and pours
over the field,
rippling grasses gone,
sky above echoing
clean sweep below.

We circle slowly our
gardens and house,
outbuildings and barn.
Grasses stunted in tire tracks
where we've taken this journey before.

Twenty-five years now,
ancient, wise pattern

of our family: This is how it feels
pulling light into
your farm.

II

This is not all there is.
I meant to speak of it as a dusty,
anxious labor,
how borders blur
between your body and
the rest of the world.

I meant to name it—a meditation,
perhaps,
an opening up to
land and sky.
How you are on the earth and of
the earth, taking the field from
its natural state.

I meant to speak of
the soul separating from the body.

III

Inside the house,
inside the old chest, a photograph
inked in white: *Haying Crew, 1948.*
Perched in front of the combine,
study in B &W, all my uncles—
Junior, Sheldon, Jay and little Gary,
my mother's brothers; stringy, dark-haired Schwartzkopfs, fed
from Grandma's
picnic basket, and later
Aunt Dorothy's picnic basket
driven to the field,
can't stop now,

black clouds howling in the west.
They are smoking cigarettes
cupped carefully in their
palms against the hay.

I am linked to these dark-haired men,
this husky, blonde woman;
my *seedbed*, I suppose,
and what brings me here backing gracelessly
across the lawn to the
peeling white barn,
first spatters of rain on the windshield.

IV

A visitor, city-slicker, seeing them
stacked inside the barn says,
How did you get them in that nice
block design?

V

Every June, our refrain,
watching the skies all week:
Farmers like us is tough;
Rain can't wash our dreams away.

VI

I am bound to my family
as these long grasses are bound.

In the field—seeds still
sowing themselves a future.

Action List

People used to come to Garber from all over to get in on the oil boom. Now no one came to Garber. Everyone who could left with the oil. Those who stayed endured the limbo of living in a ghost town. Most were elderly people who grew up on the farms in the area, families whose adults drove fifteen minutes to Enid every day to work in the large Rainbo Bread bakery, and assorted others of the out-of-work and the young and potentially criminal. The town was small and relatively safe. But it was easy to see the beginnings of danger.

We turned down Main Street and drove past the three blocks of abandoned and decaying buildings—hotel, newspaper office, drug store, general store, and community center. The only businesses left were a tractor dealership, a gas station where locals could get some emergency groceries when they didn't have time to drive to Enid, and a post office. All these were located on the edge of town.

Uncle Ray and Franky had talked about selling their house, but as I far as I knew nothing had ever come of it. They had been all right here the last ten years, and I couldn't really imagine anyone taking on Carlos' uncle. The guy was six foot four with big shoulders, big arms, stocky legs, and an always clean-shaven, hard-looking face. Lately Uncle Ray had had some health problems; on the last few visits it seemed like he had lost weight, and I noticed his balance was a little less steady and his hair was thinner. But Carlos didn't say much about it so I figured there weren't any serious problems.

Though he couldn't farm anymore, Ray still wore jeans and boots all the time. The rare exception was in the first few summers after they moved to Garber when, in the early morning hours, he could be seen in a most unexpected mode—walking his Springer spaniel through the quiet streets of Garber, wearing only a pair of gray tennis shoes and black running shorts. When

that dog died last summer, Carlos and I attended the funeral in the back yard. I would never forget seeing the tears in Uncle Ray's eyes. Carlos said it was the first time he had ever seen his uncle cry.

As we pulled into the gravel driveway, Uncle Ray came out of the house to greet us. "How you doing boy?" he said, giving Carlos a bear hug.

"Good," Carlos said.

Uncle Ray inspected his face for a moment. "You look good. You feeling all right about everything?"

Carlos nodded.

"I hear it's the sidekick's birthday." Uncle Ray turned to me and smiled. The deep shadows under his eyes made him look tired. He was his usual friendly self, but he seemed nervous. He was definitely talking fast.

"Steve, from your twenty-plus years on this earth, do you think you've got enough experience to deal with anything the world throws at you?" he asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I can manage all right," I said.

He nodded and stretched out his hand. "Good to hear it." He shook my hand. His grasp did not have the firm, warm feeling I was used to. It was softer and its iciness sent a shiver up my arm.

Ray's dark eyes moved to Dave, who had been shifting from leg to leg every few seconds since we got out of the car. Ray leaned forward and took Dave's hand. "These boys call me Uncle Ray. You can call me that or Mr. Juarez or Ray."

Dave gave him a forced smile. "Hi...Ray. I'm Dave."

Ray turned around, and we followed him into the small, ranch-style house. Carlos led us to the bathroom, where the three of us crowded around the little sink and attempted to wash our hands at the same time. This led to shoulder nudging and pushing and water getting all over the counter and floor. Carlos cursed and wiped it up as best he could with a Kleenex. He tried to act pissed, but Dave shrugged his shoulders and said, "Whoa," and all of us laughed. It really was something to see us in the mirror. I'll always remember that—the three of us standing there, Dave's spiked blond hair shaking with his laughter, the smile breaking through Carlos' serious face, and me, the tallest one, standing there holding the hand towel.

"Let's eat," Uncle Ray's voice boomed from somewhere inside the house.

Carlos," Franky said in a high, enthusiastic voice. It sounded even more animated than usual.

Carlos looked at his aunt for a long second before replying. "Hey, Franky."

"Do I get a hug?" she asked.

Carlos nodded and received an even bigger hug than the one his uncle had given him. She held on for a long time, like she hadn't seem him for a while. She left her right arm around him and turned from the stove toward us.

The kitchen was U-shaped. In one half were the stove—now covered by steaming pots—and oven, and the other half contained the dishwasher and the refrigerator. The sink, now full of plates and bowls, sat at the bend of the U. Both below and above the appliances, old-looking cupboards stuck to the walls. Usually cookie jars, a knife holder, a spice rack, and a few plants sat on the counter, but today these were all missing on the clean, white surface. My favorite part was the kitchen floor, a rubber-like tile that gave the appearance of an old-fashioned, maroon brick sidewalk.

"If isn't the birthday boy," Franky said, turning to me but keeping her arm tight around Carlos. "When's the big day?"

"Wednesday," I said. "But Carlos insisted that we celebrate last night."

She finally let go of Carlos and stepped toward me with her arms out. "Good for him," she said. "You're what, twenty-three now? You're getting to be a man." Over the last few visits she had made it a practice of giving me greeting and farewell hugs. My bones weren't quite crunched by her squeeze.

Franky smiled and turned back toward the stove. Over the last ten years I had come to love this woman, though it took some time for me to get over her appearance. She always wore a flower-patterned housedress that went from her neck to her ankles. The thing was sleeveless and her hairy, freckled arms flared out through the openings. She had red, color-treated hair that was perpetually permed, and she wore too much lipstick. I understood these traits as outlets Franky used to express her love for life. Franky ate too much, primped her hair whenever she thought no one was looking, and worked so hard her hands

were always covered with calluses. She wore dirty white Keds at all times and when she faced me I could see countless, permanent smile lines running across her face.

I grinned and floated toward the smells—a heavenly mixture of onions and peppers and roast and baked apples—which were focused on the wood table in the middle of the large linoleum floor between the kitchen and the living room. Two strips had been inserted to make room for us. Ray took the head seat, and Carlos sat next to him, squeezed in between the table and the window; Dave and I sat across from Carlos. Franky sat down last, bringing with her the pitcher of iced tea. Franky gave grace.

No one spoke. Silverware clanged, ice rattled, napkins unfolded, chairs straightened, plates filled, silverware scraped, mouths chewed and swallowed. Ray raised his napkin to his mouth. Somebody said, "Umm." I reveled in the food. Afterwards, I sipped watered-down iced tea, sucked on ice cubes, and waited.

I looked at Carlos. He waited too, even though I knew it wouldn't be long.

"You got your mind made up to do something today?" Uncle Ray asked Carlos.

His voice broke through my postmeal glow, and I leaned forward. Though the look on Carlos' face made it obvious, it still amazed me that Ray seemed to already know that Carlos was here for action.

Carlos nodded, then he sat up straight and looked at his uncle. Then his eyes shifted to the table. "We're going to get rid of the clouds," he said.

It was weird for Carlos to not look at his uncle when they were talking, but Carlos was not able to keep steady eye contact today. I couldn't understand.

"I'm sick of them," Carlos said. He said at first they were okay, but that it had been three weeks since he had seen the sun.

Though I hadn't really thought about it before, it did seem like a long time since I'd seen the sun. During this morning's drive the clouds seemed lower than usual, almost pressing against the red dirt of the countryside.

Carlos said every morning going to work at the building site he was greeted by the gray sky and the thick air. He said it was time to do something.

Uncle Ray looked at his nephew. He brought his hand up to his chin. Franky shook her head but not in a surprised way. It looked like she expected this. Dave, misreading the silence, spoke first.

"Whatever happens with the clouds won't be able to top that meal," he said.

Uncle Ray kept staring at Carlos. He wasn't interested in Dave's opinion.

"You got yourself an AL?" he asked.

Carlos nodded, reached into his right pocket, and pulled out a folded piece of paper. As he unfolded it I saw there were actually three papers. These would be the extra copies. "Here," he said, handing one to Uncle Ray, who took his glasses out of his shirt pocket and began reading. "Steve," Carlos said, handing me another copy of the list. He turned to Dave. "Why don't we help Franky clear the table and get the dishwasher started." It wasn't a question. Dave nodded and stood up. The three of them went to work.

The plan was typical Carlos.

Steve's ACTION LIST

1. *Leave Ponca City. 10:35*
2. *Give Steve hangover remedy. 10:40*
3. *Cokes for Steve, Dave. 10:55*
4. *Arrive Uncle Ray's. 11:55*
5. *Eat lunch. 12:00*
6. *Clue Uncle Ray, Steve in. 12:40*
7. *Do dishes with Dave. 12:41*
8. *Conference. 13:00*
9. *Uncle Ray, Carlos plan. Steve, Dave check on flamethrower. 13:15*
10. *Leave for airport. 13:55*
11. *Arrive airport. 14:05*
12. *Carlos, Steve get cloud fertilizer from Storage Shed #3. Uncle Ray start plane. 14:08*
13. *Take off. 14:18*
14. *Torch clouds. 14:38*
15. *If unsuccessful, seed clouds excessively. 14:55*
16. *Return to house and Franky, 16:00*

I looked up to see Uncle Ray staring toward the sink, where Franky was busy washing dishes. When he noticed I was finished, he shook his head.

"This is..." Ray said. "This is something." He held the AL in his hand and motioned with it at me. "You weren't in on this?"

"Not before now," I said. "I would probably still be sleeping if it wasn't for Carlos."

We stood up. Ray headed toward the countertop area adjacent to the refrigerator as I moved through the doorframe to the living room. To my surprise the chairs were already set up in a semicircle facing the couch. With nothing else to do, I took my normal conference place on the orange and brown, flower-patterned couch. Dave and I would sit here, Uncle Ray would sit in the beige corduroy recliner directly across from us, Carlos would be on his uncle's right in the brown armchair, and Franky would sit to the side in her rocking chair.

Franky played a consultant's role in these meetings. If the males talked too much and wasted time, Franky reminded us to get moving. If we didn't, she would make a suggestion. These always seemed better than anything we had come up with and were not debatable.

"What do you think?" Carlos asked. "Will the flamethrower work?"

"It can definitely take out water and ice," Ray said.

"But..." Carlos said.

"There are probably too many clouds for us to do much damage with the flamethrower," Uncle Ray continued.

"Exactly. So step fifteen may be necessary," Carlos said.

Franky's chair creaked as she rocked back and forth. Usually she sat perfectly still during a conference, but today she stared past us out the window at the gray neighborhood. She didn't seem to be listening. Every now and then I caught her eyes racing from Carlos to Uncle Ray to Carlos and then back to the window. Maybe she was just thinking about the clouds.

"Something's going to happen," Carlos said. "Anything. Rain, storm—just something to jolt those clouds. We're going to change that gray. You know, put some life back into the sky."

"Do you boys know what a flamethrower looks like?" Uncle Ray asked Dave and me.

I had seen one before in a Rambo movie and nodded.

"It's out in the tool shed. The wand ain't too heavy, but it is fragile. You should leave it in the box, which is heavy. Both of you'll have to take an end. You guys get it and stick it in the back of Old Faithful. Carlos and I'll get some work coveralls and some gloves and the fuel packs."

After these instructions we stood up and headed in our separate directions. Dave and I went out the back door, through the screened-in patio, to the back yard. The yard was faded and thin, but the traces of mower tracks could be seen. Uncle Ray usually mowed until the first freeze. Because the humidity of summer had held on so long, the plants in Franky's immense garden were withered and dying, but death hadn't come yet, would only come slowly under this sky.

My eyes moved up from the suffering plants. The clouds created a low ceiling, the power of their grayness making it difficult to imagine anything beyond them.

"I wonder why no one ever wrote about the clouds," I said.

Dave followed me along the edge of the garden. It was fifteen feet on this side and extended nearly fifteen more to the fence. "I've read stuff about clouds before. In high school English class we read..."

"No. I don't mean that poetry or whatever it was. I mean like a horror story."

Dave nodded. "Hmm, there's always that stuff in horror movies about the moon and the drifting clouds."

"But there's never been anything about attacking clouds. I think maybe this could be a good horror story, you know, clouds banding together and holding us hostage."

"Sort of like *The Birds?*" Dave said. "Except, *The Clouds.*"

"Exactly," I said.

"Hey, do you really know what a flamethrower looks like?" Dave asked. I brought my eyes earthward to find us in front of the shed.

"Maybe," I said. Dave looked at me, his face displaying no confidence "This shed is crazy."

Dave nodded.

The shed was a maroon, narrow, wooden building with two swinging front doors. We walked up the sloping concrete and entered another dimension. The smells of grease, dust, sweat, and paint twisted through the dark interior. Normally Ray's workbench was covered with sawdust, nuts, bolts, WD-40,

model glue, hammers, screwdrivers, and overflowing boxes of nails. Everything was in place today. All the tools were put away in organizers or on shelves. The only tool sitting out was a red level. It lay on the counter. For all Ray's care, the design proved to be about a half-bubble off.

"It's probably upstairs." I reached up and pulled down on the string hanging from the ceiling. The piece pulled down, allowing a ladder to slide to the paint-stained concrete. The many spots of paint, mostly matching the deep maroon color of the outside walls, were a constant reminder of the work Ray had done in this shed. I went up the ladder first. The upstairs was in perfect order too. Before, it had always appeared to be a cramped storage place, filled with cobwebs and equipment that Ray needed only for special occasions.

"You see it?" Dave said from the bottom floor. I looked around the room, hunching to avoid hitting my head on the crossbeams supporting the ceiling

"I think so," I said. A sturdy-looking wooden box lay in the middle of the floor. I bent over to inspect it.

"This family's kinda weird," Dave said.

"How do you mean?" I asked, pulling the chain over the end of the box so I could lift the top.

"Just how serious they take this 'Action List.' I thought it was just a joke, you know, something to laugh about when we got out here. I thought maybe Carlos brought me so you'd have somebody to talk to while he was doing family shit."

"I'll admit this family's a little odd. But they're cool," I said. The foam covering under the lid felt incredibly soft compared to the wood that was just beginning to splinter.

"How well do you know Carlos?"

"Not as well as you," he said. "We just drink together after work sometimes. Actually, I think you've been around every time we've hung out. You guys are like partners in crime."

I picked up the foam to reveal what looked like something straight out of an action movie.

"Carlos and these people are real close. Carlos doesn't have much family. His dad took off on some scheme when Carlos was little. His mom's a real bitch. Ever since we were in junior high he'd spend summers out here. Once he could drive we'd come up all the time on weekends."

"Okay, I can see all that," Dave said.

"It's deeper than that though," I explained, fitting the foam back into place. "After his dad left, because his mom was always going out, Carlos had to stay at home alone. One night two guys broke into the house, probably somebody who knew his dad had cut out. Anyway, instead of hiding, Carlos tackled the first one he saw. I mean he was like eleven years old or something. The other guy picked Carlos up and threw him through the glass back door. The guys took off when they saw Carlos' blood beginning to pool in the back yard.

"But, even then, Carlos was tough. Before he passed out he crawled to the phone and called Uncle Ray. Ray called an ambulance and flew his plane over to Ponca City. He beat Carlos to the hospital. After the blood transfusion, the first thing Carlos saw when he woke up was his uncle."

"That's a pretty crazy story," Dave said.

"I know how it sounds," I said. "But Uncle Ray saved his life."

"That seems like an even better reason for him not to humor Carlos about this AL."

"You don't understand. The first AL Carlos ever saw was the one Uncle Ray and he used to build this shed," I said.

"Building a shed is a lot different than taking on the clouds," Dave said. I could hear the frustration growing in his voice as I slid the cover back onto the box and reaffixed the chain.

"Carlos' plans are always wild. They usually don't work. Uncle Ray's plans, at least the few I've heard about, are usually practical stuff, like building this shed or painting the house," I explained. "Anyway, I found this thing. This box looks pretty heavy, I think I'll need your help."

"All right," he said. I heard the ladder creak with his weight.

Just put that in the back," Uncle Ray said. Dave and I walked with quick, small steps as we struggled toward the worn-down pickup truck. When we sat the box down some rust fell from the bumper. Uncle Ray had driven the faded blue 1962 Chevy truck for over thirty years. It didn't look like it had much left to give.

Carlos lugged bags and two large gasoline containers. It was obvious he needed help so I steadied one of the containers as he pushed it into the bed of the truck. Usually Carlos would have been helping Uncle Ray do this.

"How's Old Faithful?" I asked, carefully patting the truck.

"Not so good," Uncle Ray said. "It looks like it's about done." He leaned up against the truck.

"Steve, you and Carlos take the Blazer and get the cloud fertilizer," Ray said. "Dave and I'll go straight to the hangar and get the plane ready."

Dave gave me a scared look, but there was nothing I could do.

The grayness outside appeared to be changing. We had the windows down and I thought I could feel a slight breeze stirring. It felt like maybe a cold breeze out of the north. If there was one, we were driving straight into it.

"Feels like the air might be shifting," I said.

"Maybe," Carlos said.

I looked at him. His eyes moved constantly from the road to the sky to me.

"Do you remember the first AL?" His voice came out of nowhere. It sounded as if it began somewhere deep inside and barely had enough strength to break through the surface. It was Carlos' most relaxed voice—it sounded completely unnatural.

I nodded. "Sophomore year."

He nodded and turned toward me. "The 25-4 Plan."

I smiled. "The 25-4 Plan."

"That one almost worked," he said.

"It may have been the closest one."

The 25-4 Plan was true high school genius. Carlos, me, and two of our friends each put twenty-five dollars into a pot. This pot then went to my sister who used it to buy us ten cases of Natural Light. Carlos' mother was gone that weekend so we put the cases in his basement window well. It was winter so the beer would always be cold and Carlos' mom never came downstairs so we figured it would be safe. We were only halfway into the second case when Carlos' mom decided to venture downstairs and found the stash. She nearly let us keep it but instead threw a party for her friends.

"Why did your mom go downstairs?" I asked.

"I still don't know," Carlos said. "She said she was looking for me, but I don't think so. She never went down there for anything. Maybe she was out in the yard and looked in the window well or something."

"How long ago was that?"

"Five years ago," Carlos said. I could tell he'd been thinking about it, the way the answer flew from his mouth.

"It seems like forever ago," I said. Carlos slowed down as the airport approached. He always turned too fast and the car almost lost control as he pulled into the dirt road leading behind the hangar.

"We've been friends for a long time," Carlos said.

I nodded. "So what about getting this cloud stuff ?"

Carlos' voice slipped back into the serious mode. "There's some storage sheds around the end of the hangar."

"Won't they be locked up?"

Carlos nodded. "In case I can't pick it I brought along Uncle Ray's shotgun," Carlos said.

"Uncle Ray gave you his shotgun for the lock?"

He looked at me and raised his eyebrows. "Sure. Anyway, I can pick the locks at this airport."

I nodded. I believed him. I had seen Carlos pick locker locks, house locks, luggage locks, everything. And he was right, this wasn't much of an airport. The dirt road gave way to pavement on the other side of the hangar, but grass and weeds thrived in the gaps and breaks that filled the concrete. The hangar was dark and small, capable of holding eight planes at most—all the space needed for the few farmers in the area who had planes. Ray didn't really need his anymore, and Franky wouldn't let him go up in it by himself, but he refused to sell it.

"There," Carlos said. "Storage shed number three."

He pointed at the construction-yellow, metal building off the end of the hangar. The car screeched and stopped just in front of the double doors. They were locked by a common door lock and a master lock. Carlos had the common lock open before I was out of the car. The master lock took longer. After two minutes, during which I opened the back of the Blazer and put down the back seat, Carlos had it open. He handed me his thin, slightly hooked picking wire.

"Keep this for me," he said.

I nodded and put the wire in my pocket.

We could each carry one of the large, charcoal-sized bags and it took us about four minutes to completely fill the Blazer.

With every bag the frame lulled closer to the ground. I closed the back hatch as Carlos relocked the shed. We sped in reverse to the hangar. Using only his side mirror he backed us through half of the hangar and stopped in front of Ray's plane. We hopped out and joined Ray and Dave.

"You remember how everything works?" Uncle Ray asked me, nodding toward the plane.

"I think so," I said. On our last flight, a joy ride east over Stillwater a few weeks back, he had made me do everything: the prep, the takeoff, the flying, the landing. I had gotten pretty good at flying over the last few months, but I knew I couldn't take off without help and wasn't real confident in my landing ability, although it was fun to think of myself as a pilot.

"Why don't you prep the plane today?" Uncle Ray said. "It'll give me a chance to go over landing with you again."

Is this plane safe?" Dave asked. We were sitting on the floor in the back half of the plane. There wasn't much space left with all the cloud bags and the two gasoline containers. We leaned against the wall of the plane. Carlos and Uncle Ray were in the front.

"I know how it looks with the stained paint and those worn propellers," I said. "It's not a nice plane, but it runs all right. I've made it through at least six flights."

He nodded. As the plane rolled to the runway I could tell he was trying hard not to let his fear show. When the plane began racing forward he put his head down.

"Does flying get to you?" I asked.

"Sometimes. I think this bothers me because there's no windows."

I had to admit that it was weird speeding along without control, unable to really confirm what was going on with sight. The plane began to ascend, which brought a change in air pressure. The different feel of the air always made taking off seem like entering an altered universe.

"Like right now," I said. "You can't say exactly why, but you can feel we're in the air."

"I don't like it." He yawned. "My ears always pop forever."

"Mine, too," I said, forcing a yawn.

Carlos made his way from the front of the plane back to us.

It wasn't a far trip but he had to twist his way around the stacks of bags.

"We should be in the clouds in about ten minutes," he said over the engine noise. "Let's get the flamethrower ready."

Dave felt too sick to stand up so Carlos and I dealt with the flamethrower. Carlos strapped one of the gas tanks to his back while I unpacked the machine. I handed the wand to Carlos, who took it by the handle. With his instructions I attached the hose and the air pressure machine to the tank. He attached the hose to the wand and flipped a switch. A second later the blue pilot light appeared at the end of the wand.

"How are you going to avoid spraying the plane?" Dave asked. His voice sounded thick and low. I was sure he was about to vomit. "Even if we lower you out somehow, won't you just get slammed back into the plane? It's not like we can hover in one place."

Carlos rubbed his chin. "Man, I think you're right," he said. He flipped the switch and the pilot light went out. "We'll just use the 'Sky Shaker' bags." He bent down over one and shook his head at the large blue name on its front.

Fifteen minutes later we were above the clouds. Brilliant sun rays filled the plane through the front window, and everyone got excited. Dave even stood up for a second and his voice lost its queasy sound. We floated above the cloud layer, which extended in all directions below us. From up here they weren't gray. Each one was white and puffy.

"They don't seem so bad up here," I said.

"It's amazing," Carlos said.

"I love seeing the sun up here," Uncle Ray said. "It's so damn bright. You can see it everywhere."

Carlos put his hand on his uncle's shoulder.

"Let's go to work," Ray said. He bent down and fixed a club-looking device to the steering wheel to keep us level.

Carlos and I tied restraining ropes around our waists. Ray shoved the sliding door in the back of the plane open and we began pouring the mixture onto the clouds. The mixture was of a very small grain and felt like liquid. Ray warned me not to get too much on my hands.

For the next fifteen minutes Carlos and I lifted and poured. We did every bag together to make sure one of us wouldn't

struggle and fall. When we were done, Ray slammed the door shut. The effort made him as sweaty as Carlos and me.

"Let's wait for a while and see if anything happens," Ray said.

"If it does work, won't we want to be on the ground?" Dave asked. I had forgotten about him in our struggles.

"It'll be all right," Carlos said.

"Besides," I added. "I'm not ready to leave this light." The three of us went back up front. Ray sat down in the pilot's chair. Carlos let me sit down in the other chair so Ray could give me another lesson.

"I think you're ready to get your license," he said.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe."

"You remember how to land?" he asked.

"Sort of," I said.

He went through it again, stressing when and how much to ease up on the throttle and the ideal speed for touchdown and the importance of ignoring the jolt of landing. He told me the goal was not to land and then slow down. The goal was to control speed to the point that I could set the plane on the ground. It had to be the third or fourth time he'd told me since we got to the hangar.

"You did good a couple weeks ago," he said.

"Man, it's so incredible up here," Carlos said.

The glow was everywhere. Light came from the sun, somewhere above the plane, and spread over us. My cheeks grew warm with the light, and it was impossible not to smile.

Dave ended our numbed silence. After thirty minutes of waiting he began asking every few minutes if we could go back. When the three of us decided to wait another thirty minutes, he shot us a look that was somewhere between anger and nausea.

A few minutes later something started happening. The clouds began moving in a disorganized pattern. One cloud went left, another went right, another consumed its neighbor, another floated away from the group.

"Something's happening," I said.

Carlos nodded and looked out the window. His face retained a serious look.

"Be excited, man," I said. "An AL is actually working." Just then some cloud-to-cloud lightning flashed to the left of the plane.

"The plan's not finished," Carlos said. The sound of thunder shook the plane.

"Was that thunder?" Dave yelled from the back.

"What?" I said. "Oh, you mean the return part."

He shook his head. "There's another plan."

"That sure sounded like thunder." Dave's voice echoed through the cockpit and inside my head.

"What other plan?" I asked.

Carlos looked at Uncle Ray and then back at me. "This," Carlos said, pulling a piece of paper from his left pocket. "The MAL."

"Shouldn't we go back if there's thunder?" Dave yelled.

I unfolded the piece of paper as Carlos watched. I looked down at the plan as thunder boomed from somewhere below the plane.

Master ACTION LIST

1. *Ray, Franky sell house. October 20*
2. *Ray, Carlos, Steve create storm. November 30*
3. *Ray, Carlos step into storm.*
4. *Steve land plane, help Franky.*

The sound of thunder broke my stare.

I looked at Carlos and then at Uncle Ray and then at Carlos.

"Franky's going to move in with her sister over in Pond Creek," Ray said. "She'll need your help."

I nodded, but kept my eyes on Carlos.

Ray stood up and headed for the back of the plane. "I'm going to get ready."

"You sure you can land this thing?" Carlos asked.

I hadn't made that connection yet. "I guess I'll have to. The storm'll be a new twist." I looked at him. I had to ask him why, but knew it wasn't what he wanted.

"How long?" I asked.

"Uncle Ray's been trying to come up with it ever since he found out...since he got sick. We had talked about it, and once he sold the house, I decided if we could make this thing happen I'd go with him." His dark eyes were clear as he spoke.

"What does Franky say?"

"Not much. She cried when we first told her." As he talked Carlos kept his eyes locked on mine. "She understands."

I looked at my feet, wishing I could understand.

"Carlos." Ray's voice broke through the thunder.

I followed Carlos to the back of the plane.

Ray opened the door and the noise of wind and thunder filled the cabin. Outside I could see the clouds converging. They looked mean.

"What are you doing?" Dave asked.

Uncle Ray hugged me.

After we hugged he shook my hand. "It's been good to see you become a man," he said.

Carlos went over and slapped Dave's hand. He looked at Dave and then over his shoulder at me. "Thanks for coming with us today," Carlos said.

"What do you mean?" Dave asked. He looked at Carlos and at me and then he realized. "You're going out there?" He pointed with his eyes toward the door.

Carlos nodded.

Dave pulled himself to his feet.

Carlos shook his head and moved toward me. "I'm out," he said. "It's been..." His voice trailed off, but he didn't look away.

I hugged him. I was ashamed to ask him why, but I couldn't stop myself.

He gave me a slight smile. "You've never had to ask before," he said. His deep brown eyes reflected the light coming in through the cockpit.

He stepped toward the door, joining Uncle Ray at the edge. A flash of lightning lit up the opening in the wall. A hazy yellow had replaced the glow.

"You ready?" Ray asked.

Carlos nodded.

They hunched down and jumped out the small opening.

I leaned forward to watch them as long as I could. Soon they were only specks. Then the specks were swallowed by the clouds and a great bolt of lightning flashed to the west of the plane. They would really see something.

I moved toward the door and pulled it shut. As I turned around I remembered that I wasn't alone. Dave leaned against the side of the plane, standing amongst the scattered, empty Sky Shaker bags. I made my way to the cockpit. The Blazer keys lay in the pilot seat. I put them in my pocket and sat down.

Dave stumbled into the cockpit and crashed into the seat

next to me. He put both his hands on his head and stared out the cockpit window. I undid the device Ray had fashioned as his autopilot and took the controls. Instructions taped to the steering wheel indicated the target coordinates and I turned the plane back toward the airport. The trip down was rocky. We bumped like a pinball from one air pocket to another—Dave always sure the plane was about to fall apart, me already knowing it wouldn't. Finally we came out of the clouds. I had misjudged our altitude and we hit the landing strip too fast. The plane skidded and slipped down the slick pavement. It finally stopped about fifty yards from the hangar area. I didn't feel like parking the plane so I just shut it down.

As soon as Dave's feet hit the ground, he threw up. I stepped around his hunched-over figure and looked to the sky. The clouds sped eastward and poured out their insides all over us. I sat down on the cracking pavement.

Drops plopped and patted all around. I took off my windbreaker and let the cold rain soak into my clothes and run down my arms. I brought the fresh smell of the rain deep into my lungs. The coolness of the air made my mouth dry.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the Action List Carlos had given me at dinner. I didn't know what time it was, but we were on Step 16. I stood up. To the west the sky was lighter, and it didn't take a weatherman to predict the clouds were about to pass on. I walked over to Dave and pulled him to his feet.

We had things to do.

Review

Outcasts
Brian Daldorph
Mid-America Press

Uncurling
Jeanie Wilson
Mid-America Press

Mid-America Press of northeast Missouri is committed to publishing poetry in the Kansas City region. In the new millennium, it offers work by Brian Daldorph, a professor at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, and Jeanie Wilson, an education administrator and seasoned poet of greater Kansas City. Both books feature fascinating subject matter, clean editing, and attractive design. They focus on character studies, often media stars, from Marilyn Monroe to Sylvia Plath, as well as private narratives. The Midwest appears as a topic upon occasion, but both writers have worldly concerns.

This is Daldorph's second full-length book, along with four chapbooks. He is comfortable with his style, and his political agenda is sharpened. This book's six sections read like separate chapbooks, but all have continuity of language.

The title *Outcasts* appropriately describes the downtrodden condition of the narrators of many of the poems. Most tell of tragic lives, as though they were portraits tinted with sepia ink. Some poems are dramatic monologues. The crystal clarity of the language is most striking, even in dialogue. "The Human Pincushion" describes the story of a circus freak:

> That's what they called me
> when I did vaudeville,
> hoping to live off
> my one true gift.
> Harry Houdini and I
> were the toast of the town. . . .

Daldorph is able to distill the freak's rise to fame into a lyrical form, with every word leading up to the dramatic end, when his inner emotional state matches his lack of nerve endings: ". . . I felt nothing/ nothing at all." Daldorph shifts between emotional intensity and descriptive detail in this terse story.

Whimsy is one of the poet's many gifts. What happens to young Liesel Von Trapp after *The Sound of Music* ends? What will happen if Sylvia Plath never smothers herself in an oven? Daldorph construes a futuristic "Liesel Von Trapp," which shows the ingenue at age forty-nine. Liesel's sixteen-year-old daughter has no Rolf, but rather a heavy-metal drummer named Ivan. "Sylvia Plath at Sixty-Four" shows the poet living in a "thatched cottage/ with nameplate, 'The Bell Jar.'" In this poem, Daldorph references original Plath poems, but tulips are no longer shocking and bloody babies are grown. The poet mutes Plath's passion. He imagines Plath quit writing after *Ariel*, and "Old abandoned beehives in her back garden/ remind her/ of when she stung stung stung." The detached older poet becomes a shadow, and ultimately the poem shifts into comment about youth in contrast to age. It becomes more than a biography; it enters the sphere of true lyric.

Some of my favorites in this collection are the Grandma Pool and Stella Jones poems. Daldorph listens to stories and finds wonder, humor, and monstrosity in them. He refines life studies and turns them into narratives that also stir the heart.

Jeanie Wilson's book *Uncurling* shares a similar interest in life stories. She opens with a sequence of poems about Marilyn Monroe, tied together by terse style and high dramatic moments. The poem "Acts Three and Four" compresses stages of the movie star's life into two stanzas:

> At twenty-six,
> in black wig, dark glasses,
> Marilyn turns her back
> on lovers, moguls, Joe;
> flies east as Zelda Zonk.
>
> At thirty-four,
> crying pent-up tears,
> she lays to rest
> an orphan,
> hipslinger,
> a tail switcher;
> searches the mirror
> for someone new.

Wilson summarizes in thirty-five words the love affairs, the marriage to Joe DiMaggio, and the life of an orphan turned sex-pot. Then the ending couplet humanizes the icon. It suggests the woman had insight and self-awareness, despite the public role. The entire sequence of a dozen poems explores the interplay between media emblems and individuality. Especially effective are the pieces that explore the afterlife of Marilyn Monroe: "Skin" is about the photographs taken in the morgue, with the gruesome implications of public necrophilia. "Gravity" is about the autopsy. The fascination with the suicide star continues in the poem "Memorabilia," which ends "Marilyn Monroe's/ brassiere:/sealed bids/accepted." Finally, Wilson imagines the star in "Alive in Argentina" at last at peace and reading a script made from *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The rest of the book also shows a similar wry wit. The poet achieves this through unexpected points of view, like unexpected photographic foci. A microlense shows the world from unexpected vantage points, as in "One Eye Flush":

> She falls,
> lies face down,
> one eye flush
> to her carpet,
> its steel-blue nap woven tightly,
> its nylon shafts
> rooted in shadow.
>
> Blue threads pull her
> beyond her periphery,
> through an archway
> to the eye of the needle.

Here the shift to ground level charges the poem with drama. Up close, shadows becomes nightmarish. Is the woman dead? Did she drop her needle and find herself caught in the maze of threads? Is this a David Lynch movie like *Blue Velvet*? The poem has an ominous tone, and the snapshotlike vantage point forces the reader to mentally contort. Carpets will not be the same after reading this poem.

In this set of poems, individual pieces interact with each other, and while some might be slight if read by themselves, they

all fit together stylistically, with the same terse lines and the same off-kilter humor.

The Mid-America Press perpetuates a reputation for clean editing and putting substantive work into these publications. The fascination here with movie stars and famous writers perhaps is a quaint Midwestern trait, since the actual viewing of celebrities is rare. Instead, the writers can add fantasy to the images gleaned from media. Stereotypes of weathered barns fall away as these two poets show themselves to be documentarians of a strange and wonderful world.

Denise Low

Contributors

Kevin Boyle has published recent work in the *Colorado Review*, the *North American Review*, and the *Greensboro Review*, which awarded him the best poem in 1999. He teaches at Elon College in North Carolina.

Christopher Brisson is a graduate of Tufts University and Sarah Lawrence College. A writer and actor, he lives in Los Angeles, California.

Deborah Cooper has published her work in a number of journals, including the *North Coast Review* and *Kalliope*. She uses poetry extensively in her work as a hospice chaplain. Her chapbook, *Redirection of the Heart*, will be published this year by New Song Press.

Quinn Dalton is a graduate of the MFA program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her stories have appeared in *The Best of Writers at Work* and the *Emrys Journal*.

Walter Griffin has had recent work in the *New Yorker*, *Poetry*, the *Paris Review*, the *Southern Review*, and the *Kenyon Review*. His most recent collection is *Nights of Noise and Light*, published in 1999.

Robert E. Hemenway is the chancellor of the University of Kansas. His book on Zora Neale Hurston is titled *Zora Neale Hurston: a Literary Biography*.

Norbert Krapf teaches at Long Island University and directs the C.W. Post Poetry Center. He is a recipient of the Lucille Medwick Memorial Prize from the Poetry Society of America. His 18 books include the poetry collections *Somewhere in Southern Indiana*, *Blue-Eyed Grass: Poems of Germany*, and *The Country I Come From*.

Margo Kren has had her work exhibited nationally and internationally. The recipient of a Governor's Arts Award and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, she teaches at Kansas State University.

Loyal Miles is in the MFA program at the University of Indiana.

Laura E. Miller has had recent work in the *Blue Mesa Review*. Her short story "Lowell's Class" was anthologized in *Scribner's Best of the Fiction Workshops 1999*.

Paula Newcomer is a native Kansan who currently lives on a farm in New Jersey. Her poetry has recently appeared in *Barrow Street*. She has published fiction in the *North American Review* and *Playgirl* and essays and articles in the *New York Times*.

John Edgar Tidwell has published widely on aspects of African American literature, focusing on the work of poets Sterling A. Brown and Frank Marshall Davis. His edition of Davis' *Livin' the Blues: Memoirs of a Black Journalist and Poet* appeared in 1992.

Tamara B. Titus has published work in *Distillery: Artistic Spirits of the South*, as well as the *Charlotte Observor*, the *Athens Observor*, and *Athens Magazine*. She has a story forthcoming in the *Emrys Journal*.

Mark E. Wekander taught for twelve years in Puerto Rico. He has published poems and translations there and in Mexico, as well as in the *Atlanta Review*, the *Southwestern Review*, and others.

Carmaletta Williams is an associate professor of English at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas. She is the winner of numerous awards, including one from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

Valdinia Winn is a professor of history at Kansas City Kansas Community College. She has written extensively on African American and diasporic communities. She was recently elected to the Kansas legislature.

Fredrick Zydek is the author of four collections of poetry: *Lights Along the Missouri*, *Storm Warning*, *Ending the Fast*, and *The Conception Abbey Poems*. His work has appeared in many quarterlies and journals, including *Cottonwood 55*. He is the editor of Lone Willow Press.

Cottonwood
ISSN 0147-149X
$8.50