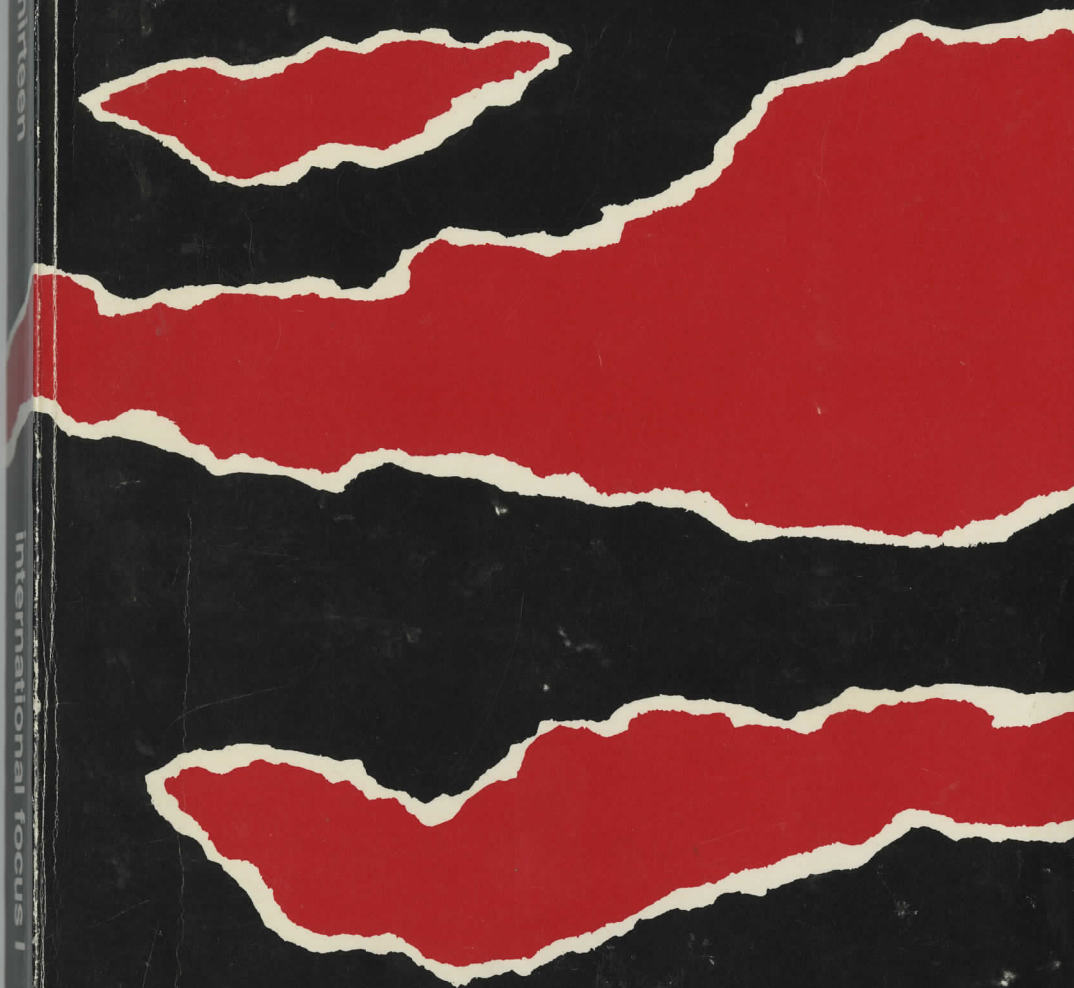


# conditions: thirteen



international focus I

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1986





# **conditions: thirteen**

## **international focus I**



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## **international focus I**

**a feminist magazine of writing by women  
with an emphasis on writing by lesbians**

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**conditions** was founded in 1976 by Elly Bulkin, Jan Clausen, Irena Klepfisz, and Rima Shore.

# Introduction

With this issue of **conditions** magazine, we have begun to implement the mandate set forth by the previous editorial collective, that of publishing an issue whose concerns were international in scope. We are proud to publish this issue of compelling writings and reviews. In **conditions: thirteen, international focus I**, we have included writings by and about women from Ghana, Guatemala, Ireland, the Phillipines, India, Puerto Rico, Germany, Canada, Chile, Malaysia, Cuba, and Panama, as well as the United States.

We have been so excited by the response to this theme, that we have decided to continue this focus in our next issue, **conditions: fourteen, international focus II**.

This season has seen global attention centered on the political, social, and economic conditions of women. We have come to the end of the United Nations Decade for Women, launched ten years ago in Mexico City. For every step made toward equality, we still face the virulent inequities, sexual subjugation, and pervasive oppression common to women in every community of the world. A clitorrectomy in Nairobi is an involuntary sterilization in Puerto Rico, is a rape in Brooklyn, denial of a woman's right to her body, invasions practiced daily by those who would seek to control, distort, or annihilate us.

In light of right wing censorship attempts, the Supreme Court's June 30th decision to uphold state mandated anti-sodomy laws, rampant militarism/imperialism of the current administration, AIDS hysteria, increasing violence against women, and the escalation of oppression in South Africa, **conditions** continues to be a place where women can give voice to the rage, celebrations, and visions within us. Your continued support, communication, and financial contributions will enable us to continue to serve you.

The **conditions** Editorial Collective

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# Collective Update

In September of 1985, four women of diverse backgrounds and interests joined the **conditions** editorial collective. They were Dorothy Randall Gray, Randye Lordon, Annette Peláez, and Sabrina. Along with two previous members, Cheryl Clarke and Debbi Schaubman, the new collective went about the process of learning one another's styles, differences and values.

Debbi and Cheryl had faced the immediate task of recruiting new members after last June's resignation of Dorothy Allison, a member of the collective for the past five years. Their efforts brought to the collective this new group of women skilled in various aspects of graphics, finance, photography and editing.

When Shelly Messing resigned the position she had filled for nearly eight years, Adrienne Waddy, a former collective member, became our new office manager. Then, in February 1986, Debbi Schaubman decided to take a leave of absence from the collective. She had been involved in the production of issues 10 and 11/12.

On April 29th of this year, the collective sponsored a benefit poetry reading at the New York Jazz Center. Invited to participate were writers previously published in **conditions**, new writers, performance artists, and musicians. This delightful afternoon featured Joan Nestle, Fay Chiang, Sapphire, Donna Masini, Toi Derricotte, Luzma Umpierre, Linda Smukler, Abena Busia, Susan Sherman, Dorothy Allison, the Narratives Performing Company with Gwendolen Hardwick and Breena Clarke, Irare Sabasu, Alicia Ostriker, and Joan Larkin. While songstress Adrienne Waddy and her accompanist Clarice Thomson brought the house down, Dorothy Randall Gray emceed, and Akiba and Leota prepared exquisite food for all.

With the benefit under our belts, the collective went back to the task of reading and sorting through manuscripts for this issue. After each selection is read by at least two, and sometimes three members, a decision is made regarding its inclusion in the current issue.

We still maintain the ideals of the founding editors. Their goal was to produce a feminist magazine of writing which publishes and speaks to women for whom a commitment to women is an integral part of their lives. **conditions** continues to be a magazine which places emphasis and importance on writings by lesbians, and continues to reach out to new writers, women of color, working class and older women, women in prison and mental institutions. All of us, however, differ in the ways we define "feminist" and "lesbian", women's issues, and the role of a feminist literary magazine.

Now that this issue has been completed, the collective faces the awesome task of revamping our marketing and distribution strategy, and mounting an exhaustive campaign for manuscript submissions from women's communities throughout the world for **conditions: fourteen, international focus II**. You can help by putting us in touch with women writers in the national and international arena. Until the next issue, we remain...

the **conditions** editorial collective



# Collective Bios

**Cheryl Clarke** Taurean, refused to take the risk of allowing another collective member to write her bio as the following have done. She is a relentless lesbian, relentlessly black, and relentless.

**Dorothy Randall Gray** brings to the collective finely tuned graphic skills and the zaniest sense of humor this side of the Brooklyn Bridge. She has an infectious spirit that manages to uplift the collective as effectively as an 18 hour bra. In addition to being a performer, designer, and a published writer, she is also a native Polarian who has applied for citizenship on this planet.

Chicago born **Randye Lordon**, trained at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, is a published mystery writer and music aficionado. She brings with her a sense of wit which makes the very serious business of editing a delight for all.

**Annette Peláez** was the last member to join the new collective, and was a much needed missing link. Annette's background in photography and art has brought us a new vision, a clear, fresh way of "seeing" the magazine. With a flair for the bizarre, this adorable lesbian blushes after she starts fires within the collective, then sits back smugly as firewoman Randye attempts to douse the flames.

**Sabrina**, "a nappy headed West Indian" on her first Saturn return, is highly skilled in finance and management. Her contribution to the collective is a sense of organized elegance that barely hides her passion for logic and the written word. Her ability to see both sides of a question during our discussions leads us to weave our most convincing arguments in hopes that our verbiage would cause her to finally fall off her fence.



# Fiction



Turtle-Bear 1986

Charcoal drawing (photographed by Annette Pelaez)

# A VIETNAMESE DOLL

Vigdis Stokkelien

Translated by Barbara Wilson

*We are reprinting "A Vietnamese Doll," originally published in Conditions: 11/12, The Double Issue. Unfortunately two of the pages were reversed in the process of production. We are happy to be able to present it to our readers in its corrected form.*

Every morning until she heard Esther squeaking like a rat in the bedroom, Gøril hoped that it was just a bad dream. The child hadn't arrived yet—in a while she'd go to town, choose some pretty dresses, small shoes, cuddly teddy bears, soft dolls, building bricks, eat lunch with Leif and plan everything for the new child: a musical kindergarten, trips to the zoo...

Esther lay on her back in the yellow crib. She stared at the ceiling; her eyes were expressionless.

The cheerful curtains with Donald Duck figures stirred in a light sea breeze. Gøril could hear the waves smack the shore. It smelled of warm earth and cherry trees.

Everything she'd bought during the long waiting period stood untouched on the long, low shelf: a white and a Black doll, a red-painted dollhouse with tiny furniture, a candy-striped ball, alphabet blocks, a flute, a drum, a bucket and a spade.

Each thing was chosen with care. She'd even tried to find a Vietnamese doll, but there weren't any. So she'd bought a black doll with curly hair, thinking it was more "homey" than a white one. But Esther's skin wasn't dark; it was very light. The dresses in the closet were also unused; the four-year-old could only wear baby clothes.

Lifting the child out of bed, Gøril took in her strange smell, an acridness that reminded her of bark, and for a moment she felt complete aversion. Esther's hair was thin on the crown; little drops of sweat sprang out on her forehead. The narrow brown eyes stared past her, but the child stopped squeaking.

Already out at the airport, when she and Leif stood together with eight other adoptive parents, she knew that something was wrong. The local paper took pictures: Leif lifting the child up, Gøril giving her the black doll, the child still as an oriental ivory figure.

In the evening the family came to see "the new child." Esther sat where she'd placed her, on the blue sofa, and stared straight ahead; the pile of gifts and beautiful wrappings was left untouched.

"Take her right to the hospital before you get attached to her," said her mother-in-law. "It's sad, but I've had years of experience with children and this child can't normal."

"Get attached to," Gøril felt only confusion when she picked up the child; but fear came over her almost too strongly—disgust, fear, compassion.

One of her friends had put it brutally: "You should have a right to a refund on a kid like that. When you're nice enough to take one, they shouldn't send an idiot."

But she was certain that the child wasn't an idiot. Inside she had the strange feeling that Esther was somehow sleeping; if she could only reach her, she could wake her up.

"Maybe we should look for a child psychiatrist," Leif had said last night. He tried to talk to Esther, pointed at himself, said, "Papa," pointed to the doll and said, "Baby."

When he straightened up, she saw that his face was damp with perspiration, that he tried to hide his aversion.

She poured water in the bassinet, set the child in it. Unclad, Esther was a pitiful thing, with a swollen stomach and small baby limbs. She had bad balance, too, her head wobbled, her body moved in little jerks. It was like a weird dance.

Gøril was afraid to soap the small limbs, felt a disgust that crept through her whole body; her fingers twitched away when they came in contact with the tensed skin.

One morning when Esther lay there unmoving in a blue towel and she was drying her, a feeling of hopelessness rose in Gøril.

She called the nurse who'd brought the children to the country, expecting to get good advice, sympathy—or maybe she'd really been wishing that the nurse would come and fetch the child, that the days with Esther would lose themselves in memory like a bad dream.

The nurse had said angrily, "I thought you were mature people. Did you believe you'd get a doll baby when you got a child from a country that's been in a war so long?" She'd called forth terrors Gøril could hardly grasp, talked about napalm and death.

It was too awful to listen.

"She doesn't even understand the language," the nurse had said. "Don't go dragging her around to specialists, give her time, have enough love..."

Gøril put the little boat she'd bought a few days ago down in the bathwater, pushed it back and forth while she cried, "Tututututut."

For a moment it was as if Esther followed the boat with her eyes—didn't she see the signs of a glimmer of joy in the slanted Asian eyes? No, she stared straight ahead, without expression.

Gøril dressed her, carried her to the kitchen, brought out vitamins and cornflakes, boiled an egg.

Esther ate a couple of mouthfuls.

"Shall we go to the beach and swim, Esther? Swim?"

Did happiness glint in the dark eyes? Did Esther understand? How should she understand? The child hadn't uttered a sound in the three weeks that

she'd been with them, not even in her own language.

To go to the beach took all Gøril's willpower. They were stared at on the road, chattered in the gardens: "That's the Vietnamese child they took in when they couldn't have one themselves—she's the one who can't have children—and then they got an idiot. Imagine."

Esther could walk, if she wanted; she took a few steps then sank down on her bottom. Her head wobbled back and forth, her body stiffened when Gøril pulled on her leg.

She'd brought a stroller for the four-year-old, and now Esther was sitting in it, stiff as a stick, staring straight ahead.

On the way to the beach Gøril prattled along automatically—"See the tree—the car's driving fast—see the kitty—the dog—the flower."

Everyone they met stared at them, stared curiously at the foreign child. Gøril was ready to cry.

She'd dreamed in the months before the adoption came through how it would be, how they would run to the beach, play in the garden.

Had thought of how the child would rejoice with happiness to come to a home like this—live in a big house with a garden, have good food, real toys, her own room.

They'd called her Esther after Leif's grandmother. Now it went coldly through Gøril—she couldn't even keep her name—everything had to be alarmingly foreign.

Down at the beach she lifted Esther high in the air. A gull came towards them on wide wings; the child's fragile body shook.

"Bird—bird," said Gøril and pointed, but Esther didn't follow it with her eyes.

She set the child on a blanket, brought out the colorful buckets and shovels, built a castle, decorated it with shells and seaweed, made ramparts around it.

Far away down the beach some children laughed; they were playing with a polka-dot beach ball.

Suddenly Gøril wept.

"Mama's going swimming."

A sort of longing arose in her to swim far far out, to swim and swim until the water soothed this feeling of helplessness.

The water washed coolingly up toward her thighs. Esther sat there on the blanket and Gøril imagined that Esther was following her with her eyes, wanting to wave.

Gøril lay in the sea, floating. The sun was hot just over the sea and the shore. In the west dark clouds floated in over the skerries.

On the beach Esther sat like a statue, only her hair lifting in the slight breeze.

Water sprinkled the child as Gøril went ashore, knelt on the sand, filled the

colorful buckets, turned them over, saying, "Sandcakes, sandcakes."

It was like talking to a stone.

Then a little finger came as if by accident near the sandcakes; Gøril took the thin hand in hers, led it over the bucket, the sandcakes.

A trembling went through the hand.

Esther slept and Gøril rigged up a kind of sunscreen, lay down and peered up at the drifting clouds. As a child she'd made up fairytales about such clouds, had seen how they took wonderful forms: elves, trolls, fairies from the stories. Now and then a complete pirate ship floated across the sky with filled sails and Captain Kidd at the helm.

Now the clouds floated together, casting somber shadows on the beach.

She herself must have slept as well, for when she looked up the sky was dark. Esther squeaked.

"Home, shall we go home?"

Gøril felt a numb tiredness, barely managed to push the stroller over the beach.

It would be that way at home, too. She would pace back and forth, looking at Esther while her dejection grew. Dust settled on bookshelves, the dishes piled up in the sink; she threw together pre-cooked foods for dinner, no longer had morning coffee with her friends.

Lightning flashed across the sky.

Esther stirred and suddenly Gøril's nerves crept to the fingertips of her shaking hands.

Esther got up, holding fast to the stroller frame, and stood there looking at her.

It was eerie, like a dead person walking. Gøril let go of her grip, took a step backwards.

Esther just looked at her, and Gøril thought there was hate in her eyes.

Then the thunder sounded over the beach; the lightning zigzagged towards the waves.

Esther threw herself forward and Gøril caught her in the air, falling to the sand with the child. Esther had gone crazy, was trying to bury herself.

The lightning was so near that Gøril saw it strike; the sand scorched.

And suddenly she clasped the child, covered her completely with her own body, whispered consoling words in her ear, heard herself sob.

Ashamed, Gøril brushed them off, hoped no one had seen it all.

Esther was still sobbing.

And suddenly she understood that Esther believed it was a bombing attack, that she must have dug like that in the earth before, trying to hide herself.

Gøril felt a burning tenderness, held the child close to her, kissed her hair, her cheeks, her nose, whispered meaningless words, "My Esther, no bombs here — they're gulls, not planes — it's thunder and lightning."

For a moment Esther was tense, a shrieking bundle, then she looked right at Gøril.

A little hand stroked Gøril's chin cautiously; tiny fingers caressed her. They sat there, both of them, and sobbed aloud.



## CAREYNELL

*Christina Sunley*

A year passed before she brought herself to visit again; it was the longest time Carey and Nell had ever gone without seeing each other. On the train from the city, she wondered what explanation to give her family. After all, there was no special occasion; it was not a holiday or somebody's birthday. Not that they would necessarily ask why she had come home, and they didn't, but she told them anyway: "I'll be visiting Nell."

There was nothing they could do anymore. And knowing that, her mother called to her as she was setting out, "Carey, if you must go, you can take the car."

"No, I'd rather walk."

On the edge of town, she saw that a new way out had been built: a sleek interstate stretching above and beyond the original highway. She found herself winding up the entrance ramp, avoiding the familiar route. Once at the top, she had to brace herself against the slap of air left in the wake of speeding cars, the force of it causing her to retreat behind the guardrail. Her legs scraped the sharp aluminum as she swung them over. Not a road meant for walking on.

She made her way along the narrow strip, feeling the sun grow hotter on her back, and listening to the insistent drone of cars: shrill rise of the approach, the dull falling away hum, over and over with barely a breath between the end of one roar and the start of the next. She could see the old road far below, the one she had known, all tiny and out of date. Landmarks (Skyliner Diner, Pacific Ironworks, Otto's Auto Repair) lay shrunken off the road's side. Her gaze followed to where the older route reluctantly merged with the new one. Somewhere beyond that junction lay the hospital. Still distant.

Two girls run along the edge. At first hand in hand, but then it becomes too hot and one breaks away, springing hard off the soft shoulder, pushing that stale town back into the past. Although if she glanced back she would still see it there — does, and falls hidden in the high grass. None knew, not one single person on earth knew where they were, even knew they were gone. Nell sweeps in beside her, rolls on top of her, whispering in a hush louder than the whip of cars: No one knows.

(Because over the years something had come to be known about them, something best suggested simply by muttering "Careynell," and maybe shaking your head slowly. When the two walked down the hall together they would hear this slurring of their names behind their backs, and it burned a hole inside Carey. Nell would only laugh, and tell her, "They're just jealous

that they can't be Careynell!" Nell didn't mind it so much because she had always been thought strange, long before meeting up with Carey.)

Carey reached the spot where the two highways met and began to creep toward the hospital. She walked on, although she did not seem to be getting closer. Somehow the cruel slope and the hot sun combined to keep the distance between herself and the hospital unchanging. Or maybe it had something to do with being the sole pedestrian. She was, after all, stretching out a point in time and space that was not really intended for occupation, that was meant only as a blurry reference point for those checking their progress as they soared onward to somewhere else.

Nell did not even know she was coming.

In the cafeteria, at the Careynell table (where no one else ever sat, for fear of contamination), Nell is slowly drawing some chocolate shake up into a straw, and quickly sealing it there with her thumb. She holds the straw above the cup, sometimes lifting the thumb for just an instant, letting a chocolaty glob drop back into the shake below. It's like precipitation, she tells Carey. Water gets sucked up into the sky, is absorbed by the clouds, and then when it rains it returns to the earth again. (She lifts her thumb, releasing a stream of liquid into the cup.) It's all a cycle, and you never know if the rain that's falling on you one day might have been some mist over Ireland last week.

Carey is sucking on a brittle piece of chocolate chip cookie. She could make one cookie last the whole of their forty-five minute lunch period. Maybe we could live in Ireland, Nell was saying, when we get out of here. And Carey was thinking (not for the first time), maybe we never will.

Inside the hospital it was cold and white, and she could not get the door open, could not persuade the unrelenting knob. Unless this was not even the right door. She found a sign, reading: Women's Locked Ward, 9-B. Of course. Funny, she had forgotten that Nell would be locked in, and she out. Carey found the bell and rang it.

Nell. I'm here to see Nell.

A nurse took her to the Dayroom. At first Carey saw only the red of Nell's hair, an obscene shock of color in the bland room. Then she glimpsed the flesh below it, a face reflecting the ashen tint of the floor it faced, nodding and mumbling.

Nell. Nell you have a visitor.

Nell looked right up into Carey as if she was expecting her. She said Carey you've come. Carey saw that Nell's hair was matted, unbrushable, and Nell asked Carey take me take me out, but the nurse took her instead.

Carey stood outside the hospital for a while after, counting the rows of windows up to the ninth, forcing her eyes into a sharp focus which would reveal Nell's face at the glass, but didn't. Still her eyes strained at the window,

as if she could pull Nell out. There had always been the need to escape, one way or another. When they were younger, they had a hiding place in the root cellar forgotten below Carey's house. Whole days were lost inside each other, deep down in that musty place. Then the glow of their faces at the dinner table became grounds for suspicion, cause for disgust. The nature of Careynell had become too clear to people; Carey saw that, and decided it was time for them to go.

They had run off. Carey shuddered with the shame felt when they were caught only three days later, dragged home by the police. But that terribly short time away was long enough for a verdict to be reached: Crazy Nell found guilty of spiriting Carey away. It didn't matter that it was Carey who had engineered the escape. In people's minds Carey seemed, if not straight, at least relatively sane.

The two were officially banned from each other's presence. And since it was obvious that Carey would never fit into the life of that town, she was allowed to make her way out into the world. And since it was equally obvious that Nell would never find a world to fit into, she was allowed to make one of her own.

It was during the last year of high school, after the great escape and without Carey to slip into, that Nell took refuge in the dark cellar of her self, which she called the Abyss. Carey would know as soon as she saw Nell — the voiceless face, the eyes seemingly unseeing, pupils dilated into shining black holes. On those days, which became weeks and then months, she knew that Nell was lost even to her. Deprived of Nell, Carey began to see that she could survive on her own, that there was life beyond Careynell. At the end of the year she left, moved to the city where she found a job and other women like herself.

The phone rings and Carey's lover answers it, calls out: Carey it's Nell and I told you I don't want her calling anymore Carey is that you it's me Nell Carey I can't swallow Carey I'm telling you I'm going to have our number changed, she can't keep calling here Carey I keep spitting all the time, my own saliva is poison and it's going to kill me it's driving me crazy screams the lover she's crazy says Carey, hanging up.

(Carey's parents told her all about it, how Nell refused to wear clothes anymore, insisting that they strangled her. How one day she was found storming the streets, and an ambulance came for her, took her away naked and spitting.)

Carey went home.

Nell was sedated. Without sleeping, she began to dream. Sitting with Carey at the Careynell table, sucking on cookies. Everyone has been

evacuated and they are all alone in the yellow tiled cavern. The table is covered in gold velvet, and Nell spreads Carey's legs and goes down on her. She goes down and she won't come up. She feels Carey trembling. Carey is shaking her, and slowing rising to the surface Nell gasps for air and then goes under once again. Drowning and welcoming the growing terror, familiar fear, the old friend this falling falling into the darkness the Abyss. She has lost her will if she ever had one to fight it, all she has to do is sink. Even that is done for her. She plunges below the surface of herself, the world outside unfathomable. No words no sight no sense: she becomes only the falling and the fear of falling.

Much later, she lay and waited for them to come. Knowing they had not lost track of her, that it was only a matter of time before she would be punished for this latest transgression. And in the timeless time they did come; she heard the ssst and then the ancient smell of burning flesh. In the light of day they would defend these scientifically proven methods of treatment, but for now they just snuck off down the dark halls, leaving her with invisible scars and the memory of pain.

On the second day Carey took the old road. Before she left, her mother said, "Honey I hope you're not visiting Nell again, there's no point, the doctors say she'll never get any better and besides we haven't seen you in so long. I always knew there was something strange about that girl, OK dear?"

She stopped at the Skyliner Diner for coffee. Same cups with the green ring around the rim, same miniature jukeboxes stuck to each table. She turned the knob that spun the stiff pages crowded with numbered titles. Mostly old, a few recent. Through the window, she could look up at the new highway, unseen.

Last night Carey had gone down into the basement, opened the trap door, landed on the cool packed earth of the abandoned root cellar (which Nell had called the Haven). It was dank and dark without the candles. All that was long gone: the candles, the mattress with the crushed velvet drape covering it, the writings, the rituals. Before running away they had ceremoniously dismantled the Haven for fear of its being discovered in their absence, of its being desecrated.

In the Haven, the girl Nell lights the candle and then slowly lowers the flame under Carey's face, her lips so close Carey can feel the breath slipping past them as Nell speaks: Now you are...an orphan. You live on the edge of the river, you never have to go to school. It's a houseboat, and you just wake up in the morning and catch fish to eat. You don't have any parents at all. I live in the town and one day I am walking by the river and I see you there. You're wearing sailor clothes and a black cap, your hair is short. And I ask if you're a girl or a boy. But you just look at me and smile. The next day I come

back and I ask your name and you just say "Carey", so I still don't know, because that could be a boy's name or a girl's. Then you invite me onto the boat. At night the waves rock us to sleep and in the morning we go fishing. But in the afternoon a terrible storm comes; it rips the houseboat off the shore and we go rushing down the river and out into the sea. And after many days we land on an island, the boat crashes on the shore and we are marooned there all by ourselves forever.

And Carey tells the ending: Once someone tried to rescue us, but we wouldn't let them!

Outside the Skyliner Diner it had been getting hot. Carey smelled a strong rust and realized she was downwind from Otto's Auto Repair, which still was as it had always been, a junkyard. A few body parts were scattered out front. Around back she found the auto yard had expanded, a mountain now of cars flung on top of each other in a mass grave. The odor of these rusting bodies hung in the hot air, and she remembered the crisp metallic wind on the highway the day before. She could see those cars above her now, slicing through the air, seeming to sail off the edge. Someday they'll be in here too, she thought, as she ran her hand along a bumper, the rust bubbling up like sunburned skin. She rubbed so hard the rust began flaking away, and her palm came up the color of dried blood. Waves of heat rose up from the hood, dissolving her face.

Otto came out. He was a skeleton himself now, yelling 'Boy get out of the yard!' She did, running, but her feet were weighed down by the magnet of hot tar and she collapsed at the side of the road, on the grass. Insects began moving over her body; she shuddered but was unable to lift herself. She lay for a long while, until a shock of revulsion jolted her to her feet and she saw nothing. It had been her own crawling sweat, and the course tickle of the grass. She continued on, each foot leaving its print in the hot black tar like snow, as she pulled it up and let it fall again.

Carey had come. Nell sat quietly in the Dayroom, knowing that she had to be good or they wouldn't let Carey visit that day. (Nell knew she would be back again.) Carey had come, and alone. Not like the last time, when was it, a year ago? When she had brought that woman with her and they all sat together in the sad yellow grass. Carey said Nell, this is my lover. Nell had looked and seen the weight inside the woman, the seriousness of her short stiff hair, and thought, how could this woman ever know my Carey? She was about to point out that the woman's eyes did not match her face when in a horrible glance she saw their hands pressed close. Saw the skinny Carey hand that she had held when they ran together, being smothered by the heavy one of that other woman and a vicious tingling began in her chest. It sank and spread through her, finally numbing her mind.

When she came to, she was confined. They had strapped her to herself

then her body to the bed but her rage was boundless — Nell was on fire: We were one and the same but you really are one of those, and you left me behind! She screamed, she slammed curses against the walls and they landed back on her again, echoes echoing echoes. For days after, Nell was a smouldering cocoon.

They drove back to the city. Even from a long way off, Carey could still see the jealous anger of Nell lying deadened in the yellow grass. She stared out the car window, watched the houses and motels floating past, then suddenly flying; her lover had speeded up, glaring at the road ahead of them.

“We drove all the way out here to get Nell out of your system—”

“—and now we’re driving all the way back. You know, Nell is not a disease that you can purge me of.”

That was a year ago, Nell told herself. Now it is a year later. Carey came yesterday, she will come back again today. The nurses told her “Be a good girl now Nell, or you can’t have your visitor back.” So Nell was being good. She sat quietly in the Dayroom, but as she waited she began to slip in and out. That was from the drugs they gave her, made her rock that stiff steady sway; her body became a metronome hypnotizing itself.

She sensed the inside voices coming. The nurses referred to Nell’s episodes as ‘that damned chanting’, but the other patients liked to listen to Nell’s voices because they rhymed. That was just the way they came out, and Nell had as little control over how the voices spoke as she did over when they would come, or when they would end. The rhymes comforted her, like a pattern.

Carey stood at the entrance to the Dayroom, entranced by the beat of Nell’s words, the rhythm of her body rocking. After awhile she began to hear what was being said:

I’m gaunt not round or grounded echoes sounded  
unwound a wound Carey came too soon  
they came for me at night entered my room  
ripped me from my own womb my tomb  
they tore me out wore me out they’d warned me  
and they came sneering and searing showed me  
stoned the witch burned her turned her  
then tried wired fired up and thoughts expired  
exploded reloaded —  
Don’t flinch! don’t wince or tense  
what I meant I sent I lent I lost I tossed  
I lay in moss my body greened I’ve been screened  
been seen so mean no meaning flinging kisses out the window  
cragging so low alone boned and toned and neatly sewn  
I moan I’ve flown

Silence came, and Carey clung to it, but Nell sensed her relief and would not release her.

Colder and colder I'm getting older bolder  
I told her I sold her I shouldered all the blame  
my old flame but just the same she's ashamed  
and I've been framed mounted molested I've festered  
quested and requested resisted been hit  
I've quit I lit a match I crashed and face it  
lace your drink you think lace your life

Carey saw this as the foam at Nell's mouth: Carey who had come from living such a careful life, left, and Nell went on without her.

In the elevator, the doors closed around her in relief but Carey thinking this is too easy began to drop. She descended slowly in a vacuum, a ferocious falling, her body not sinking as fast as her mind which was slipping out from under her. Still plummeting, she shrank to the floor, knowing this to be unending. The doors opened at one.

A group of doctors got on, stared down at her. Carey saw that they could take her away, knew that this was Nell's doing. Hands still pressed flat against the floor she looked up at the doctors, said I've lost my lens, slid her palms along the floor in search of something. But I can't seem to find it, bringing her hands up with the blood rust stain and making her escape. The doors closed, sending them on up to Nell. And Carey smiled to Nell, thinking maybe the only difference between me and you is that I can pass.

She lay in bed thinking of her after she left. Lay Carey thinking Nell thinking Carey in bed they not thinking of leaving lay her kissing her breast her legs her lips kissing her lips she was her after she left her lips her kiss on her.

And as they lay after were asked How was the visit today? And she pleating the sheet with her fingers into folds replied it was fine.

Carey's mother leaned over her and she could smell her no smell and heard the nurse say Nell let us brush it now or it will have to be cut off and we wouldn't want that now would we Nell cried leave my hair alone OK dear said Carey's mother but I just don't see why it has to be so short you look like a boy said Nell and you take me on your boat and rock me Nell rocking Nell slow, lost, slow, lost, slow the mother sang old in your rocking back to rocking baby once upon a time you were and lay her in the bed

she was tied down tied up bound and she ripped through all the whiteness the walls floors ceilings sheets skin rolling in white and out and the mother the nurse leaned over and said Shhh you're a nightmare ssst dear ssst her skin burned by the kisses pleating the sheets pleads the sheet please can't wake can't sleep can't swallow how they spit at Careynell and Nell swallowed Carey swallow me Nell spit me out trying to find where the Carey begins where the Nell leaves off and Nell saying both the beginning and the end of Careynell saying Carey

"Yellow has a life of its own. People think of green being closer to blue, but

that's only because they're both the same...strength of darkness. But yellow, you can always see the yellow in green."

Carey watched the yellow slip into blue and become green on Nell's face.

"I can't believe you still have that, Nell." For her thirteenth birthday, Carey had given Nell the color wheel. Nell would sit with it for hours, experimenting, passing one transparent sheet of color over another over another until they were all one muddled mass. Sometimes when they were down in the Haven, Nell would shine a flashlight through the wheel, spinning the colors out onto the wall. Now she held it up to the window, letting the sun drop the different shades onto her face.

"I can tell, just by feeling, which color it is." Nell closed her eyes, spun the wheel aimlessly, then stopped to let one random color onto her cheek. After a moment she announced, "It's red," and it was. Carey was not surprised.

"That's pretty good, Nell." She had forgotten the rosiness of that shade of red, now it made Nell's cheek look fresh, living. She noticed Nell's hand trembling, and reached out to steady it.

"Oh," Nell said. She put the color wheel down, and her face was left pale again. "That's not from the medication, it makes me shake. They're giving me new medication because of the voices yesterday. You know what? They don't even understand the differences between the inside voices and the outside voices." She shook her head in bewilderment. "So they just keep trying different drugs. And other treatments."

Carey didn't ask what the other treatments were, afraid to know. She felt a little apart from Nell, this Nell whom she knew and did not know. In the voices he could hear Nell, hear Careynell, hear nothing knowable.

"But the outside ones don't bother me so much anymore. They let me do what I want, most of the time." She picked up the wheel and began shifting colors again.

It was her third and last day there; soon Carey would be going back to the city. She noticed that there was no other color in the room besides the color wheel and the red of Nell's hair. A few older women had shuffled in and were sitting quietly across the room.

"Hey Carey!" Nell's voice was transformed, suddenly bright and quick like when she was a kid. "I've got one for you — why is a mental hospital like a coach motel?" She sucked in her breath and waited for Carey to answer.

"I don't know. Why?"

"Because you can check in but you can't check out! I made that one up on my own!" She waited for Carey to laugh. "Come on, it's not that bad, is it? Look Carey, don't go feeling sorry for me."

Carey looked away, guilty, unsettled by Nell's accuracy.

"You know what I always tell myself, Carey? When things get really bad? I tell myself, well I may be crazy but at least I'm not queer!"

Ellen saw Carey smiling in spite of herself, and she caught Carey's eye and



held it. “Just kidding,” she said, deadpan, teasing the laughter up from the depths of Carey taking her over the edge. The two of them were quickly enveloped in the uncontrollable hysteria of their Careynell days, screaming with laughter and pleading with each other to stop: I can’t! You stop! I can’t either — you stop first! No, you!

Laughter continued past the point of pain.

# OLA MAE

*Dorothy Randall Gray*

Evenings she'd sit at home practicing her inconsistencies on a steady stream of unsuspecting lovers who fought for the privilege of finding her in a good mood. She never smiled without a purpose and never left without knowing what time she'd be back. Men hated her pretentiousness then loved her in spite of it. They bought her silk scarves and lace handkerchiefs that would sit in the crease of her bosom soaking in pearled beads of sweat and toiletwater from the south of France. The calculated crossing and uncrossing of her legs emitted humid waves of violet scented vaginal musk, an inviting fragrance that threatened the kind of insanity men dream about.

After having her lovers bathe with hot water and lye soap, Ola Mae would lay them down on flowered cushions and stand over them, slowly unbuttoning soft cotton dresses that would melt to her feet. And always in the background, velvet sounds of Johnny Hartman or Coltrane or a Strayhorn composition mingled with white candles in tall glasses, magnolia blossoms and sandalwood incense. She'd dip her fingers into a white porcelain bowl filled with honey or preserves from some loving wife's kitchen and proceed to massage her nipples with the sweet substance, closing her eyes and moaning with the knowledge that most often she gave herself more pleasure than her lovers did.

The men, excited beyond belief with the sights and sounds of her naked body, would reach to pull her towards them. Half complying, she'd guide her breasts toward their mouths whispering, "Eat this." The taste of the dark overhanging nipples and the sticky sweetness would drive them further into the state of insensate arousal she required. Suddenly, she'd pull her breast away, stand, point to her pussy and command, "Now eat this!" Eagerly, men accustomed to giving orders, men whose tastes never went beyond meat and potatoes and Old Spice, men who knew nothing about foreplay and feelings when it came to their wives — these men would scramble to their knees and bury their faces deep into pubic hairs dusted with a mixture of cocaine and talcum powder that would keep them coming back for more.

# **SHIMMER HOSEN (Exerpts from a novel in progress)**

*Anna Livia*

## Sightings One: Shimmer Hosen

Three young women in a public toilet. Standard issue: lined with silver mirrors, trays of lurid lipgloss, eyestars, blusher, bloomer and blurrer in case of misplacement or cosmetic brainwave. The slats across each stall began a foot and a half from the floor and were only three feet high to prevent any illicit elixir drinking, resting or life-preserving. To prevent? To discourage, at least, all but the permitted defecation, micturition and such sexual combinations as were the fashion of the day, by the simple expedience of making all public. How, indeed, could the Citizens' Ordinances be enforced without total publicity?

Three young women, since to be alive was to be young, were precisely eighty, eighty four and one quarter, ninety and one half seasons old which, as there are six seasons to every year, meant three females of thirteen, fourteen and fifteen respectively.

The three young women took their places in the queue for the two available stalls. As they spurned the cosmetics, apart from a playful snort of nose powder, which caused not kicks but sneezes, it must be assumed they were there for evacuation.

"Queues should be outlawed," grumbled the youngest of the young women.

"They have been. Citizens' ordinance 4378," said the middle-aged young woman.

"Time wastage," added the oldest.

"Do you hear that?" whined the youngest at the two closed doors of the stalls, "You're wasting our time."

No answer was forthcoming, so she contented herself with lifting one satiny thigh and plunging her creamy toes in the blue lipgloss. She proceed to scrawl the profanity "CANCER" in large, sloppy letters across the silver mirrors. Her two friends smiled admiration, though the oldest seemed insufficiently aware of her advanced years, for her gaze was vague and introspective. She had recently, it is true, been in a kinky relationship with a woman twice as old as she, and so had for some time been on the receiving end of any admiration going. Still, were these laurels to rest upon? The youngest increased her aerobic jiggling.

At last one of the stalls opened and the first, she of middle years, dived in. The second door did not open. Despite the furious glances of the remaining young women, it remained steadfastly shut. Close scrutiny threw up nothing

unusual in the arrow-pointed stilettos, pink and puce shimmer hosen and elongated ankles of the present incumbent. Such ankles could not be natural, she had certainly undergone body-sculpture, but then, what young woman had not these days? What young man, for that matter?

The two young women mused for a while on the alluring possibility of a man on their turf, but the thought soon paled, and when even jiggling and showing her knickers lost its appeal, the youngest, who should, by rights, have gone first, shrieked loudly, "I think someone died in there."

Now this did produce an effect. The arrow-pointed stilettos drew themselves up sharply and the shimmer hosen was yanked over sculptured calves with no little risk of snagging. A sure sign of acute anxiety, the price of shimmer hosen these days. But still the occupant did not emerge.

Encouraged by her previous success, the youngest young woman accused, half triumph, half indignation. "She's resting."

At this final indignity, the toilet flushed, the trimmed ankles stood upon spiky heels, and the bolt was drawn. Shortly after, the other toilet flushed and the middle-aged young woman emerged about the same time as her neighbour. The youngest of the young could have bolted for that compartment and relieved herself, but rage and curiosity had hold of her. She allowed the oldest of the young women to pass in front, her own eyes fixed on the second, slowly opening door.

The woman who came out was weeping. Large, beautiful tears collected and splashed down her face. By the looks of the work that had been done on her, she must have been very rich indeed. Every operation, by-pass, graft, uplift, transplant known to the modern knife had been performed. The result was truly gorgeous.

The youngest of the young was taken aback at the sight of such sobbing splendour. Emotion energises, and this creature had put her through the gamut from admiration and mirth to wrath and bladder retention. All might still have passed off as the normal events of a hightened day if the weeper had only encouraged the youth's sexual suggestions, but she seemed incapable. Or revulsed.

The youth recognized something: hesitation? fatigue? not revulsion, certainly, but as certainly not the fullsome come-on she was used to.

"You!" she spluttered, "You nearly made me wet myself. I would have had to go around smelling like an old woman or an incontinent. You were coming, I know you were."

An involuntary flicker passed across the weeper's face.

"You've done well with the cosmetic surgery," pursued the youth, "but I wonder, now, was any of it life preserving?"

The last two words were spat with awful, malicious triumph as the youth grabbed the weeper's head, spun the hot tap full on, and commenced dousing her victim. The weeper said nothing. Pain? Exhaustion? Terror? Or sex-

ual thrill at indignity? The youth did not pause to discover. The water in the pipes ran scalding hot, peeling a pink layer off the weeper's face. A skin foundation? The youth yanked the head back by the hair. An enormous birds' nest came away in her hands, along with some grey straggles. The youth screamed surprise, and then horror as she saw that without the wig, her playmate was an old, old woman. Should have been long dead. Well over forty one. Years, not seasons.

In the interval of the scream, three things happened. The oldest young woman reappeared from the toilet. The middle aged young woman got tired of waiting. The youngest young woman began, indeed, to wet herself. She could not afford to go around smelling of urine, so she spat, "Keep her for me. Let her wait for punishment. Think how many've gone before just so's she could reach that age."

The oldest of the young looked at the very old woman: disgust, pity and interest equally mingled.

"Come on," she whispered urgently, "I'll get you a car. You can use my PIN number and I've plenty cosmetics so you can get homesafe." The old woman allowed herself to be supported out of the toilet and guided to a car. She accepted a blue scarf as a veil till she could rebuild her face.

The two women walked down the steps arm in arm like lovers. The old woman found herself lifted off the high kerb with a dance-step twirl. Her partner spared only a few thoughts for the trouble she'd be in if they were reported or the PIN number traced. By good luck, a car idled at the kerb; the driver merely mumbled from his screen, not looking up.

"Now you get in," instructed the old woman.

"Oh, of course. I'll see you homesafe. Besides, you'll need me to see to your face."

"No," said the old woman shortly, "I've done it myself these last fifty-five years."

Years, she said, not seasons.

"You take this car," she insisted, "I'll make my own way."

"Don't you trust me?" sulked her escort.

"No," the old woman repeated, waving the car off.

## Sightings Two: SUPERMAZE

Citizens' Ordinance 4378 banned queues on grounds of time wastage. Since they had only one and forty years apiece, no-one should spend a moment waiting, the citizens argued. All Now became second only to All Public. Since shortages, of whatever commodity had caused the queue in the first place, remained undiminished, and since this was a city of appearance and adaptation, the citizens learned to regard waiting time as unscheduled leisure for which contingency they prepared carefully before

leaving homesafe. Those who revelled in the interpersonal possibilities of public transport leapt joyfully from skateboard to bus platform at a passing traffic light. Nobody waited at a bus stop unless they had a fresh ground coffee, a hot croissant and the morning's paper.

[And many's the passing forty who fed solely on the cream and crumbs departing busses left in their wake. Some followed the bus routes as the poor of old had followed a horse, shoveling shit with thankful hearts.]

Those who made assignation at the raw meat counter at Floggins Super-maze might idle at the check-out, eyeing up the talent. They did not stare anxiously at their watches, count their change or complain. Watches were to measure speed-up, not stand-still. Only the old complained and, since to be alive was to be young, the good citizens grinned and turned every eventuality into a sensual experience.

Seventeen young people stood in a row behind a cash-desk, eyeing up the talent. They carried metal baskets full of cream-spray, sugar-fix, butter-burgers and other staples. Most were reading the paper. The names varied, but all papers gave the same news, honing the wording to suit the sexual range of the populace. Thus a new citizen's ordinance that all kerbs be raised to a height of two feet to reduce the wheelchair menace read:

*kerb crawlers Curbed:* affirmative action has been taken by far-sighted citizens to stop the present use of wheels to replace rickety legs. 'Basket cases have been known to preserve mobility,' said a spokecit, 'enhancing their morale and possibly continuing their own lives beyond natural departure at we know not what cost to scarce resources. When pigeons threatened to coat the city with lime, we coated the window-sills with acid: without feet the birds could not land. With two foot kerbs baskets cannot run amok. We overcame logic with logic.'

*Middle Of The Road*, mouthpiece of the missionary position. In *theophilos*, progressive journal for sex with the dying, the same item was labelled:

*Take Your Fill At The Crosswords.*" Coverage may be imagined.

At the next cash-desk, there were only two young people and a sign: THREE ITEMS OR LESS. The sign was spotted simultaneously by three young women from the first cash desk: a couple and a single. The single roller-skated, the couple waltzed. The single reached the second cash desk after the, quick quick, young woman but before her, slow, slow, partner. She was, therefore surrounded by their conversation.

"Did you see that?"

"Inhuman."

"Horrendous. Might rub off on you. All that loose skin."

"Wouldn't wanna get near it, let alone lick it."

"What I don't understand is why they go on after they get like that. They know no one wants them."

"I'm shooting up and sailing the car over Beachy Head in my burnt out year. Got a peer wants to come with."

"That's nice." (Pause). "I saw one once, you know."

"Sure it wasn't sunburn?"

"No, honestcitizen. It was down the market. She was buying fruit. They'd run out of injected apples but she said, no matter, she'd take them untreated, add the supplements at home."

"They're not allowed to sell uninjected fruits. Citizens' ordinance 4378."

"Precisely. That's what put me onto her. These old ones can't eat anything else. They say their stomachs. . ."

"Don't swear."

"Well, they can't digest: cream, sugar, fairy floss, chocolate chivers, anything. And they can't sleep; not past six o'clock in the morning."

"Didn't know there was a six o'clock in the morning."

"Elbows, knuckles, knees, neck, back. . . all the places you bend, they're stiff. And they swell. And they shrink. And they go a funny colour: brown spots if they're white; grey if they were black. And all their hair goes white. And their teeth fall out, and their eyes get covered over, and when they fall, their bones just crumble."

"Why are you telling me all this? Make me lose my appetite."

"I just don't understand it. Why they don't bliss out quietly on an overdose? No one's asking them to spill kerosene all over themselves if they don't choose."

"Be fair. Most citizens have a ball, burn out and bliss out. How many selfish old baskets do you see hobbling along the travelators?"

"I get this feeling there are more of them than there was."

"One is more than there should be and there's the community service to deal with them."

The shimmer hosen stretched tight in the public toilet. Fifty-five years of air that old woman had breathed. Was it pity that helped her escape, the single young woman wondered, or faulty citizenship? Should she track her down and turn her in.

### Sightings Three: SPARKLERS

Out of the mouth of an underpass glided a youngwoman on one leg, the other was raised behind her, silver skate glinting at ear height, in shimmering arabesque. Not only beauty and fragility, but the necessary angle of trajectory to avoid wind friction and premature spin. The underpass vomited onto a six lane highway guarded by a roundabout. The resulting crosscurrents could blow over a hoverpod, let alone a human figure naked but for flesh and lurex one ply. This figure had long, heavy legs, a powerful back and light, gracious arms as though they did no more than welcome you to the show. On solid ground she would have been a plain, rather unremarkable

Tramontane, but here, amongst the streak and flow of the traffic, she moved like liquid mercury.

Her thighs stored the momentum of the ascent: the underpass was too narrow to attempt anything creative and the skaters only used it as a starting boost. The air was cold and empty after the hugging clamour of the concrete; with the exhilaration of new paint and a clean canvas, Zay noted the absence of other skaters. She began at once to weave eights and spirals into the rigid rectilinear display before her. She struck a skate against a stationary wheel hub: by dint of steel on steel, the sparklers on her bodysuit caught light. To the straight lines of white headlamps and red tail-lights was added this sudden silver spray. Horns honked, brakes screeched, drivers swore and fellow skaters applauded. Shoppers, strollers and eaters paused: life was short, art even shorter. For a moment all the smooth lines of traffic wobbled into abrupt angles with the shower of sparklers dancing around them. It was such, short, perfect moments which showed, more than a volume of words, a week of speeches, the true value of the youth culture. This was the apex of artistic achievement, a symbol for life itself.

But passengers crowded to the back for a closer look. A pity, but it takes impeccable timing to orchestrate a city street and Zay, now speeding backwards, sensed that her busking time was up; she should sign her work and bow off. A warning shout would introduce a completely new theme, menacingly in the closing bars of the last movement. As Zay drew alongside the bus, the more musical passengers realised her intent, and improvised a retreat, but not all, and not soon enough. Zay leapt forward, the heavy skates weighing her down, cumbersome as storks' legs, until, like a stork, she found her balance in the air and caught the platform pole with startling grace. Around she spun, into the bus and out again. Her usual signature.

A sudden blow to the back of the neck caused one youngman to tumble from the platform into the road. As a red sports convertible screeched toward his fellow passengers shot a swift glance, seeking some sign of illness or disability which would make this untimely death more palatable. As the wheels claimed him, a clean red mark was noted upon his neck. So, the man was a sickie, unworthy of their nascent sympathy. As the hard tyres broke the soft body, the passengers tutted over internalised anger, emotionless condonation.

Zay, surrounded by fellow citizens showing their appreciation, pin-cushioned at the ready, was unable to see the road, though it was soon apparent that an Ack Ack had been called. Zay caught only stray sentences of feedback, clearly the life oration.

Life, do not fear.....presence of death amongst us.....No...insists on the significance of life.....scarce resources.....to more deserving...healthy, youthful.....only a drain on...Ugly, misshapen.....timely and



Zay, had heard it all before. They had all heard it before but the Ack Acks' speech never failed in its task of reassurance. Zay hoped the Ack would stick around, she had something to ask.

"This beautiful youngwoman...fabulous display...superb athlete." So he'd got onto her. Good. That'd increase the credits. And indeed the citizens pressed round her tighter than before till she almost concluded the best art ends in death. With the arrival of a band of Tramontanes, hoses in hand, Zay managed to slip away. Better not risk that comparison.

"Scuse me, cit, word in your ear?"

"In my ear, youngwoman? Now you can do better than that."

"Wherever," said Zay, "with skates on."

The Ack Ack paused to consider.

"What's the trade?"

"Ackademic credit."

"Teach a Tramontane to read, you never hear the last of it."

But he lead the way.

Zay thought how much easier it might be as a cleaner in the Ackademy. Skaters were artists and artists could only get credit. hard cash debases. Reputations sharpens performance.

When the Ack was through, Zay asked for her numbers.

"Come, come. You know this sort of thing is entirely counter-indicated. Ackademicks and Tramontanes: it'd never do."

"We just did it."

"Don't be coarse."

"I am coarse. I'm a Tramontane."

"Ackademic credit! Next you'll be asking for a distinction."

Zay raised her left leg into a graceful arabesque. She rotated an elegant ankle.

"You know you have a grey patch over your right temple?" she challenged, and with a sharp jerk she cut off a lock on the rim of her skate.

"I'll have you before a tribunal," threatened the Ack, "Tramontanes are very low priority."

"Shouldn't you be preparing for your burn-out?" Zay dangled the thin white hair in front of him.

"I'm only 240 seasons."

"I'd be forgiven for not realising that," Zay retorted, silver skate shooting out odd gleams of reflected light. "Now, that distinction you mentioned?"

The group of Tramontanes aimed their hoses at the high kerb, squirting the remains of the young man into the gutter. There was much that would not flow through the narrow grating and had to be scooped up by hand. Warm, soft lumps. Vomit swirled and eddied with the pink of watery blood. Ack Acks were accorded two leisure days for the responsibility of dealing with death. Tramontanes got to leave work early.

#### Sightings Four: Marbled Endpapers

Fine weather, moonlight and a three road runabout were the essentials for a book trade. At the conjunction of these three requisites, books and traders materialised. Though medium priority, books were regarded with great suspicion in some quarters. More than one influential spokecit had suggested downgrading. There was no objection to the numerous "Citizens' Well being" manifests; these were available at the check-out of every supermarket. The current flood of SEXUAL SURGERY and COOKING FOR FATHERHOOD tracts were at least leaflet formula: short, snappy and no nasty verbs. It was, not to put too fine a point on it, the old books which caused problems; no amount of euphemising about the 'twice-young', the 'ever green' or the 'well-thumbed' could change things. They were long, they had no pictures; what's more, they were manufactured in some distant age before the present citizens were born. The maxim of All Public prevailed: book trades could take place, but only in the open air, in a public concourse.

Zay jumped from kerb to roadway and began spiralling in as she skated round the roundabout. By the third spin she had reached the centre island. Her blue scarf she had given to the old woman in the toilet, but concealment would have been difficult anyway under the combined onslaught of motorway lighting and roving spots. These were so bright, so glaring that they created huge monsters by the starkness of their shadows. Perhaps Zay's singularity would be dismissed as overkill, not the sharp features of the Tramontane. Perhaps citizens whose vision was tunnelled to the books of the long dead had not scope for such observations.

All around yelled at Zay to think, eat, move, breathe, live faster. Where time was essence, speed was wealth. Credit bought that precious commodity, altruistic time, measured units of the lives of fellow citizens, as invested in comical promises to the bearer. Whilst it would not be true to say that the citizens were cannibals, in the proper sense, yet a wealthy youngman could consume the life of a pauper. Though destined to live but forty years apiece, the unit hour of the former had a higher exchange rate than the unit hour of the latter. Zay, determined not to be eaten alive, had put her skates on and accelerated.

The citizens' trade with the Tramontanes was just and rigorously logical, according to the highest principles. If zurbans wished to live in the city as Tramontanes, then their unit hour must have the lowest possible value. In a city where time is rationed to maximise enjoyment, outsiders must be rationed doubly, to compensate for the unrationed time they spend elsewhere. In fact the Tramontane hour set a minimum. If, on the other hand, they wished to lead zurban ways, they were at liberty to assimilate, enjoying a market like any other citizen. Precisely what constituted zurbanity had never been successfully codified, but common sense prevailed: the most apparent

feature of zurbans was the fact that they came from outside the city. Should they persist in this coming, which of course entailed also a going, then they could quite rightly be considered outsiders. Once this coming and going stopped, full citizenship could begin. In case this led to confusion and muddled thinking, it was clarified that as citizens had not come from elsewhere in the first place, they were free to come and go as they liked.

Zay, Tramontane solely through her mother-vessel, felt no burning desire to go exurbs, which was said in any case to be all scrub and sterility: a place where nothing moved, nothing sounded, where the pavement was flat and gravity heavy. No fear. Common sense declared a secondary characteristic of zurbanity to be the tendency to clan together; the post-assimilatory Zay steered well-clear of other Tramontanes. She had spend many of her zurban minimum hours on book, screen and stereo credits eager to absorb what she could of this youthful city, which was so exciting and so liberating, so open and egalitarian, and which still seemed new to her, being born not of but under it. The cassettes and reels were as slick and fast produced as the car-bodies on the street; only the books had taken time. Someone else's time. The older, the longer. Zay thrilled to finger a hand-tooled leather cover, a hand-sewn binding, the thick, yellowy wadding and fraying edges of home pulped paper.

Strange, in a city of spectators, performers and applauders, a city which devoted its concentrated attention to its fellow citizens, that such solipsistic, abstemious enjoyment should be tolerated. But toleration was the keyword of this open city. Throughout the book trade a hundred silent admirations were in progress, a hundred covetings. The headlamps of cars on the roundabout threw a passing yellow pool over this or that book trader, setting each more apart than before.

As it entered the roundabout and came toward the island, one such yellow beam flooded Zay's back, casting her shadow gigantic over the traders. As it swerved round to the left, the beam widened over a trestle and Zay's attention was drawn to a thick brown volume at the back of the stand. She picked it up. It was an old zurban atlas. Very old; the work of a quarter lifetime: letterpress with hand-inked maps, marbled endpapers and a gold embossed thumb key cut into the side of the pages. Had she a sense of smell, Zay would have detected real kid and a hundred years of dust.

"Pursuing your extra-mural studies?" joked a trader.

Zay smiled obediently. Then she flicked the fly-leaf.

"Please return to Ithaca Benaccar."

"Where did you get this?" she demanded.

"Fair trade," said the trader. "What's it to you? You can't afford it."

"What you asking?"

"What you got?"

No point stalling; you didn't bargain over this one.

"Ackademic distinction."

The trader whistled. "What you do to get that? Suck an Ack Ack? You must be good."

Zay thought of the lumps of flesh in the gutter. And of the old woman in her blue veil. Strange how death happens and doesn't happen.

"I'll take it," Zay said.

"Will you now?"

"Yes, now," Zay repeated firmly, seizing the book and quoting her credits. She reeled them off just fast enough for the trader to have to concentrate. Then she skated away.

Ithaca Ithaca Ithaca said her skate wheels as they clicked. They should not have been clicking at all. Ithaca Benaccar. Ithaca Benaccar. Please return to.

"Ithaca," Zay bleated. An unlikely noise for such a big woman, and she realized she was horribly frightened. What had forced Ithaca to part with the atlas? What had they done to her? What had who done? A thousand faceless citizens jumped for buses, sprang up kerbs, ate sugarfix and urinated in toilets. Ithaca would never trade that atlas unless her life depended on it. Was it a clearance sale? Were all the books on that stall Ithaca's? Zay wanted to go back and check, but she didn't want to find out Ithaca was dead. Instead she decided that, whatever it meant, she would obey the inscription in the book, and return the atlas to Ithaca.

## BEGINNINGS

*Randye Lordon*

She had a dream. A faithless ex-lover was making passionless yet gentle love to a stranger. She watched from the distance. Hugging herself she stared as a sweater sailed to earth; cherry red floating slowly to the ground, revealing breasts, shoulders, stomach. She didn't look up. Instead she squeezed her eyelids together and recalled the lost thrill of those hands caressing her flesh, those lips softly, comfortably exploring her body. The tingling subsided. She exhaled a silent sigh, opened her eyes and continued her voyeurism. Another nightmare. Another evening of being held captive in her own dream.

She awakens. Pulling the sheets and comforter over her nakedness, the silence of waking alone echoes in her ears with deafening persistence.

It is daylight. She peeks out from her womb of fabric security. Nothing has changed. The room, comforting only in the morning, has not altered during her sleep. All is as was. She moans, no one will hear her pain, and thrusts herself from the bed too large for solace or pleasure.

Her facade of many colors is worn like the second skin it is. A new day begins.

Too long alone. Too many secrets unshared. Too many fears kept locked away. The facade remains in tact.

Rubbing her arms, neck, legs...some contact with herself, she touches her body in a careless fashion, as if it were a movement of habit rather than need. She listens carefully as a friend complains about love going sour and sex replacing passion. Gently she caresses her ankle with her thumb and forefinger. Her eyes never wander from the anxious face across from her. She nods, riveted to her friend, trying to ask the right questions; trying to assuage the ache she sees in the blue eyes. She clasps her ankle and holds her breath.

She dreams. Dangling from a web, arms outstretched, breasts exposed to a mocking gathering below. Pinprick sensations shroud her body in her nakedness. Unashamed, she stares startled at the crowd beneath her and searches for a sign of affection. No one is there to comfort. No arms are reaching up to slice away the invisible web and free her from this display of helplessness. She dangles. The crowd disperses. A cherry red sweater lay trampled in the clearing.

She awakens. The pink of her room propels her back into the security of childhood; an unfamiliar sensation. She who is lavender and muave idly

wonders how pink came to cover her walls. She who is angular and erect smiles sleepily at the softness of the child-pink. The nightmares lose their potency. The past stumbles, like a somnambulist, back into the recesses of her mind. The day begins anew.

Glancing in the mirror her reflection smiles mischievously back at her. Facades. Other, less discriminate eyes, see her for more than she knows herself to be. No model of Strength and Virtue. Her laughter resounds in the apartment. She sees herself as a child wading through each day, groping blindly for a strong-hold, knowing it to be only around the corner. Knowing behind each corner is yet another corner. This day she takes delight in the maze. This day, filled with the crispness that only new spring can offer, she ventures into with an opened heart.

A lull in the day. Her hand reaches for the telephone receiver, stops halfway. A clenched fist snaps back. She considers what her Love might be doing, where her Love might be. A sequestered thought. A sequestered love. No. A love no more she chides herself as she pulls away from the memories too fresh to avoid.

The shroud of loneliness. It niggles its way into her everyday.

Nightfall. Alone. Again alone, she splashes light on her apartment. Most nights she sees the furniture and wall-hangings as though she were seeing it for the first time. Who is it that lives here? 'Ah yes, that's me'. She breathes easier. Silently she greets the plants, books, photographs.

She sits in the darkened livingroom bathing in the silence of the city. She holds her left hand in her right; a prelude to lovemaking. In the stillness of dawn in the morning there is no witness to the affection she lavishes upon herself. The gentle strokes, the loving caresses she longs to share.

She weeps. The juice of her womanhood scents her fingers and she cries into the folds of a pillow which cannot comfort her. On shaky legs she walks the mile to her bedroom. The cold, darkened room defies her to find warmth within its bowels. The draft from the rattling windows laughs at her solo journey into sleep.

She dreams. She awakens in a field of lilacs and roses, walking hand in hand with a faceless stranger. Warmed from the sunlight, she stares down and sees her feet are bare. A sheer dress adorns her body. Her hand is held tighter. She is crying and smiling at the same time. The stranger whispers "All things need not die", and holds her closer. Through her tears she peers up at the stranger and is met with her own reflection. Her own warm, loving smile soothes her; the smile, so familiar, propels her into laughter.

## MANGOES AND LENTILS

*gracepoore*

Mid-morning in Pune City. The market downtown throbs with life. Men unload bullock carts. Vendors sort out their produce. Women arrive on foot and in auto-rickshaws, their saris hitched above ankles to keep the muddy floor from soiling their hems.

Inside the enclosed market, color pours out of sacks and baskets as chives and chilies, eggplant and cucumbers glow against each other in the cool half-light, within the building's grey stone walls. From yellow pyramids, stacked high on wooden platforms, lime scents rise up to the ceiling. From guava piles and speckled papayas, warm aromas drift out the door.

As more rickshaws rush to the entrance and more feet enter the market, the pace inside the building quickens. Turbaned men shout out the price of onions. Old women wave customers over to look at pomegranates. Shoppers weave down narrow aisles to pick a pumpkin, feel a mango, squeeze a custard apple. Voices, high and low, haggle heatedly over a few paise difference. Cleavers split open gourds and coins pass from palm to palm.

Outside the market, vehicles and people compete for territory. Cyclists, scooters, rickshaws and white Ambassador cars—they trill and toot and swerve and lunge past pedestrians, sending dust clouds over everything. Suddenly, traffic halts. Five water buffaloes lumber across the road, their mouths chewing, their stares fixed. Within two minutes, horns blare, car windows come down and curses fly out. Oblivious, the buffaloes move to the other side in their own time. A second later, engines jump to life and tyres screech off along the dusty road.

Opposite the market, beside the main road, a little girl, Manjula, no more than eight or nine, is prodding among rubbish heaps. Using a broken broom handle for a scavenger's stick, she turns over piles of banana leaves and maize sheaths in search of rescuable items. As she picks her way expertly in and out of the refuse, she spots a mango lying half-buried in the heap. With her stick, she digs out the fruit and sets off for home, taking the route she always takes—past the sari shops and jewelry stores, beyond the city center and on to the curved road that runs by the hills.

Sometimes Manjula makes a left at the intersection by the bus-stop. Then she walks through the middle-class housing estate and spends an hour or two looking through crushed egg shells and faded flowers from family alters. If luck has it, she unearths some little treasure—a plastic sheet, a piece of cardboard, an empty bottle, a rag. But today, she will take the road straight home since, wrapped in her little cloth sack, is something more precious.

Two miles away, in a slum settlement, a three-year old boy lies partially

submerged in a disturbing dream. His mind is already awake, conscious of the rumbling in his stomach. He is alone, surrounded by darkness and his mother's brass cooking vessels that seems to fill the eight by twelve foot hut in which he lives. The pots stand mute beside the washplace, above which hangs spoons and tin cups, and an image of Ganesha, Elephant God, remover of all obstacles.

Soon, hunger forces the boy to shake off his lethargy but he cannot rise. The mud floor's coolness seeps up through the bamboo mat and lulls him as he lies blinking at light-filled crevices in the hut's walls. The walls are made of planks and clay, once whitewashed but now blackened with smoke. During the monsoons, the walls need patching, like the zinc roof that threatens to cave in when the rains come.

In time, the boy goes outside. His sister is not around. His mother is washing clothes for rich people and his father is heaving cement at a construction site. The boy sits at the doorway, sniffing. He is hungry. As he eulines quietly, he sees his sister coming up the lane and his gloom subsides immediately.

Manjula stops at a community tap to wash something she has in her hand. Then she comes over to her brother and begins peeling the mango. The boy's eyes widen with eager anticipation and he starts to smile.

As they sit outside their hut sharing their mango, the children notice Ranjan smoking a bidi. His hair, oiled and combed back, glistens under the sun. Ranjan is the neighbor woman's son. He fights with his mother every evening because she hates to see him without a job. She works in the city as a bidi roller, making eight rupees for every one thousand bidis she produces at the factory. At fifty, she is slowing down. She cannot roll her daily thousand much longer. Who will look after Ranjan when she dies?

Her husband, Murthi used to be a newspaper vendor but he was killed two months ago when an auto-rickshaw collided with his bicycle. Now, she is the sole bread earner and gets no help from her son. All Ranjan does everyday is smoke the bidis she brings back from the factory and oil his hair with the fragrant scented coconut oil he gets from his barber friend.

After his father's death, Ranjan could have gone to live with his uncle. But he refused. The uncle, an employee of the city municipal department, offered to get Ranjan a job cleaning out clogged sewers. But Ranjan felt the job was too filthy and the pay too low. Besides, he had other plans. He wanted to work as an usher at the theater so he can watch movies free of charge. Right now, the theater manager has no vacancy but Rajan keeps trying. He has already made friends with the other ushers so he gets in free during the matinees.

When standing outside his mother's house, Ranjan notices the children. He likes Manjula. She is different from the other girls in the neighborhood—



quiet, with eyes like a cat's, watching everything around her with a faraway look. At her age, she should be rolling bicycle tyres down side-streets or making mud pies with the rest of the children. Instead, she goes on scavenging missions everyday and comes home with garbage which she sells or eats.

Ranjan knows that Manjula is a survivor, a shrewed, sharp survivor with well-trained instincts that press her towards the city's garbage heaps each day. He has also observed the way she plays with the other children, like a leader, with a kind of fierceness that sets her apart from the others. Her littleness combines with her toughness to make her desirable to Ranjan. He wants to be friends with her but she is stubborn. She will not talk to him or take his sweets. Instead, she only stares at him like a crazy child.

Manjula sees Ranjan walking towards her. She takes her brother's hand and heads for the public wash-place where slum women are collecting water for their daily chores. She does not trust or like Ranjan. His eyes are often red and he stares at her when she is around. If he gets close enough, he pulls her braids and rubs her neck with sweaty fingers.

When Ranjan finds Manjula walking away, he calls out to her but she ignores him. He stands there in the middle of the lane, cursing the sun that makes him sweat under his arms, hating the flies buzzing about his face. Then, he senses the women are snickering at him from under their water pots, and he becomes angry. They are saying what his neighbors always say—that his mother keeps him. Ranjan begins to resent his mother now. She has shamed him. And the slum, the slum has taken away his manhood. With a scowl on his face, he takes off, hoping his usher friends will let him sneak into the afternoon show.

Several rows away, in one of the wooden huts, a pot of lentils boils on a stove. The stove sits on a dry earth floor. It gives off a pungent wood smoke that stings Satya's eyes and makes her cry. She brushes away the tears and picks up the wooden ladle to stir the lentils. As she stirs, she gazes steadily at the rim of the earthenware pot, thinking about her mother's stove, wishing she could have it because it is less smoky.

Satya is seventeen. She came to the slum two months ago, after she married Chandran. He works at the metal shop down the road. "A good job," her mother told her, "you don't have to worry about the harvest being bad." Chandran used to be a farmer like most of Satya's family. But the last drought had wiped out the village crops, and when the young men began moving to the city, Chandran followed. Living away from her family, Satya sometimes thinks about them, missing her sister's laughter, missing the sound of her mother pounding grain. But life here is better. At home, there are too many people in one house and nothing to do but work in the fields every day. Since coming to the city, Satya has gone to the movies with

Chandran. She has looked in all the sari stores on Lakshmi Road and she has time to think when Chandran is away.

At the moment, she does not have to bring in any money. Chandran makes enough for both of them. But after the baby comes, she may have to hawk vegetables. Or perhaps, she will ask the Muslim women living at the other end of the slum to introduce her to the incense manufacturer they work for. Incense-making will suit her. She can stay home and watch the baby while rolling incense sticks for two and a half rupees a day. But who will watch the child when she goes to the company on Monday to turn in her finished products? Well, that will come later. By then, she should have more friends in the neighborhood.

Presently, Satya has only one or two friends. And she is not familiar with the rules governing use of public amenities at this slum. She cannot collect water or wash clothes, even take a bath, any time she pleases. With only two government-supplied taps, each woman must observe her turn to use them. Newcomers and tardy ones must wait till the rest have finished or rise at three in the morning to beat the crowd. As the recent arrival, Satya must wait to be accepted by the other women. She cannot claim any rights to the wash-place yet. For the past two months, she has been collecting water late at night with those who have missed their turn. But she expects the old-timers from her caste group will visit her soon and ask her to join them at the wash-place. In the meantime, she will respect the order established by the women being here since the taps first came.

Satya's thoughts are interrupted by the fierce hissing of lentils boiling over into the fire. Sitting on a brick, her knees drawn up to her chin, the faded sari bunched together between her thighs, Satya pushes some of the burning wood into the ashes to stifle the flames. The afternoon is hot, perspiration beads gather on her forehead and over her upper lip. They collect in the crease of her flabby midriff and make it itch.

She must hurry, Chandran will be back soon for his lunch. As she sits by the stove, stirring the lentils, a hot, dry breeze blows into the hut through the slit in the plank wall. Satya goes on stirring; staring at the pot and sweating abundantly as the lentils bubble and give off an aroma.

Through one of the slits, a pair of eyes watches Satya. They notice her keeping stirring, the knees drawn up to her chin, the exposed midriff and the attitude of the woman at the stove.

When the door behind her creaks, Satya turns around. A strange face with staring eyes looms before her. Even before she can make a move, a hand is pressed against her throat. The man tears off Satya's sari. She screams. His fingers clamp down over her mouth. She reaches for a piece of burning wood. He stops her. The pot falls. The lentils spill. He mounts and the pain begins.

The door creaks. The man is gone.

In the street outside, Manjula and her brother walk towards the city to rummage for more treasures from the refuse heap. Perhaps, she will find some half-decent onions this time or even another mango.

From one of the lanes, Ranjan emerges. He pauses for a second to comb his hair. Then he heads for the city to catch a movie. Today maybe, he will find a job.

Meanwhile, in one of the huts, a woman lies huddled on the floor. She stares at the broken pot, thinking nothing, feeling nothing as the smell of lentils mask the fading sweetness of scented hair oil.

# DID MY MAMA LIKE TO DANCE?

*Shay Youngblood*

Grown folks could be so mysterious about certain things. Big Mama, Aunt Mae and Aunt Viola would bend my ears back about obeying God and my elders, talk about everybody, only in the most Christian way of course, and everything 'cept my blood mama, Fannie Mae. I was getting to be twelve and real curious about her. I used to not care much about her, hardly thought about her except on Mothers Day when Big Mama took me and Brother to the cemetery to put flowers on her grave. I thought about her the time I was at Jan's birthday party when Gwen Jackson told me I had no business pointing my finger because my mama was dead. The words stung worse than a belt lick on my behind. The sweet piece of chocolate cake Miss Louise cut for me tasted like a dry dumpling in my throat and my crying stained the pretty pink tablecloth. I got up from that kitchen table and ran home to Big Mama who set the table for a party just for me and her.

There were a few pictures of Fannie Mae around but the only way I could picture her was asleep at her funeral. It seemed like a dream. I was about six the day that Brother, all out of breath, bust in the room I shared with Big Mama. I was laying across the big double bed reading a comic book.

"Fannie Mae is dead," he said, looking hurt and lost. I almost asked him who he was talking about before I said, "Oh." The only thing I could think to say was, "That mean we can't go up north now?"

Brother fell on his knees and started crying.

"Please don't cry Brother." I begged him as tears of fear ran down my face. He was older and stronger than me and even when he got beat for doing something bad like cussing in church, I never saw him cry. He remembered Fannie Mae better than me.

At the funeral a few days later I remember sitting on the last pew in the church with Miss Corine the beautician on one side of me, and big fat Aunt Viola on the other. The church was full. People were standing in the back of the church when chairs and pews ran out. It was hot in there, and there wasn't a breeze anywhere, although a whole lot of Pitts funeral home fans were waving hot air around. A soldierly row of lady ushers in white dresses, white stockings and white lace hankies on they heads stood in the middle aisle humming with one white gloved hand resting over they heart. The two male ushers were dressed in black suits. They white golves looked like mime tools. The singing coming from the choir stand that day was sad and I could hear people up in the front crying and hollering. I remember being fascinated by the peculiar shine on my new black patent leather shoes and the lace ruffles on my new socks. The heat made me sleepy, so I edged up close to Aunt Viola and leaned into her softness and slept peacefully for a while. Somebody

shook me awake out of a nice dream. Aunt Vi took my hand and we started walking out of the pew. I thought we were leaving but we were headed for the front of the church. When we got there Aunt Vi picked me up and held me up over the long white casket surrounded by flowers and standing wreaths. Fannie Mae lay inside looking as if she had fallen asleep. She was so beautiful it hurt my throat to look at her.

"Do you know who that is?" Aunt Vi asked me.

"It's Fannie Mae ain't it?" I whispered.

"She in the lord's hands now," Aunt Vi Whispered back.

When I was a little older and wanted someone to remember my mama to me, all the begging I could manage wouldn't move Big Mama, Aunt Vi or Aunt Mae to talk much about her. Every time I asked Big Mama about her she would look off somewhere over my shoulder and get real misty eyed.

"She was a beautiful child. Cut down just as she was starting to grow. You just like her. Look like she spit you out of her mouth." Then she wouldn't say nothing for a while. Even though I would sit quiet waiting for her to go on, she never would.

When I asked Aunt Mae, who told me most everything else I wanted to know, she would almost get tongue-tied and start to cry or reach for a glass of whiskey to calm her down.

"Don't start me to crying baby. Your mama is dead and buried. Don't raise her up to haint me."

Aunt Vi would just start to rocking back and forth and humming when I asked her. I decided that I needed to talk to somebody outside the family. If anybody would know about Fannie Mae and tell me it was gonna be Miss Corine. She know everybody's business. Because she ran the beauty shop on Front Street, she was in a position to listen in on everybodys life first, second and third hand. She was also in a position to give her opinion on a lot of things. Standing over somebody's head for two or more hours gains their full attention.

Miss Corine was nearly six feet tall and she'd tell anybody quick she had pure American Indian blood in her. You could look at her red-brown skin and the long, black braid that hung down her back, high cheek bones and clear brown eyes that slanted upward at the corners and see that. She was also quick to admit to South Carolina Geechee on her Daddy's side, which is why some folks said she talked funny, ate so much rice and the reason her fingers could braid wind if she wanted to. On top of looking good, Miss Corine could put a hot curl in the shortest, nappiest of naps and untangle thick, sassy hair on a tender headed child without a single tear. Some called her a miracle worker. For me, going to Miss Corine's shop first thing on Saturday morinly was better than a birthday present. Usually, I hung around the shop hours after she finished with my head, helping out. I would straighten up the stacks of magazines empty ashtrays and collect the balls of hair that fell from ladies

heads over the course of the morning and afternoon sessions. I would collect the hair in a paper sack for later when Miss Corine would help me make braids and wigs for my dolls who all had the wrong kind of hair, all straight and obedient. At least their skin was brown like mine. Mostly though I sat listening to the other customers who Big Mama called the walking-talking newspapers.

Miss Corine's shop was situated in a small store front, in between Mr. Pitts Funeral Home and Fat Daddy's Rib Shack. 'Miss Corine's Beauty Shop' was painted in beautiful red and white script on the plate glass window of the shop. A crooked hand lettered cardboard sign was stuck in the lower left hand corner of the window. It read, "We Curl Up & Dye". It was a three chair shop built shotgun style, long and narrow. The walls and ceiling were painted a bright pink and the floor was covered in black and white squares of linoleum. One long wall was lined with six, low, red vinyl stuffed chairs with heavy chrome arm rests. A couple of low tables were stacked high with outdated hair and fashion magazines, as well as Black True Romance and a few comic books. A small black and white tv was kept on during business hours. It sat on a table in front of the window surrounded by Miss Corine's plants. There was a mirror running the length of the other wall and a ledge underneath it where beauty and hair supplies were kept. Three black leather styling chairs that swivelled and raised to the expert touch of Miss Corine were welded into the floor. At the back of the shop there was a big red and white coke machine. On the right was the door to the ladies room with a one seater and a cracked mirror above a pink porcelain sink, and another stack of magazines. A small window on the wall at the back of the shop looked on an alley that faced a red brick wall. Miss Corine has pretty pink curtains on that window. The raggedy screen at the other end of the shop kept flies out in the summertime, and invited callers year round. The shop door was always open and somebody was always hollering in at Miss Corine.

Once inside the shop the strong scent of Sulphur 8 hair grease was like a balm to my soul. I know I wasn't far from a good feeling. Miss Mary said Miss Corine should've been a healer because when she laid her hands on your head you were healed of whatever laid heavy on your heart and mind. Nobody could hardly keep from telling her what was on they mind.

Big Mama sent me to Miss Corine's every second Saturday to get my hair washed, conditioned and straightened out. Big Mama said she almost cry when she have to do my hair for school every morning, it be so thick and curly. Said she was getting too old to tangle with my naps. This one particular Saturday I had made up my mind to ask Miss Corine about my mama, no matter the consequences or reaction. I waited until Miss Corine had me sitting in the low back leather chair. My head leaned back in the wash tub under the pressure of warm water and her deep massaging fingers on my scalp.

"Miss Corine how long you know my blood mama?" I asked, knowing the worst she could do was not answer me like Big Mama. But Miss Corine don't hardly hold back nothing.

"Chile, I knowed your mama before she was knee high to a duck. She worked here in my shop for two years."

"What was she like Miss Corine?"

"Ain't your Big Mama tell you about her?"

"No M'am, not much. They say it hurt too much to talk about her. Sometimes Aunt Mae call me by her name and start to cry."

"She right. You look just like your mama. Fannie Mae was a real pretty girl and nice too. Even though she was high yellow she didn't have no attitude. Always had her nose in a fashion magazine. If she said it once, she said it a thousand times, 'Miss Corine I'm going to New York and wear dresses like that and when I do my dance everybody gonna scream.' When Carlos come through here headed North, I could see the writing on the wall..."

She paused a minute then asked me "What you want to know baby?"

"Did my mama like to dance? Somebody say she died cause of it."

Miss Corine didn't say nothing. She finished rinsing my hair, then wrapped my naps in a thick, white towel and led me to the styling chair. I was just about to repeat myself when Miss Lamama dressed in a long orange tie-dyed dress opened the screen door and stuck her turban wrapped head in the door.

"Corine, Rosa want to know if she can borrow one of your curling irons. She dropped hers on the concrete floor and they broke in two. She's working on Sister Williams next door."

"Sister Williams had a stroke didn't she? The pressure of all them crazy children of hers finally sent her to an early grave."

"Yes my dear, the good sister died in her sleep and she wasn't but 57 years old."

"I know Rosa will do her head justice. Give her these, she can have 'em, they a spare."

I was thinking that Miss Rosa probably curled my mama's hair when she died from dancing. I'd have to thank her one day 'cause Fannie Mae looked good. When Miss Lamama left with the curling iron, Miss Corine took up where she left off on my head and started to talk about Fannie Mae without me pushing.

"Your mama was consumed by love. Love is what took her away from us."

"What you mean?"

"She loved dancing too strong. When she and Carlos left here all Fannie Mae could see was a way to dance. I was in love wid something once so I knowed what it look like."

"Was she good?"

At dancing? Hmph. She was better than good at most things she did, but that didn't have nothing to do with it. You ever look out the back window at the brick wall across the lot?"

"Yes m'am."

"Well that brick wall is just as hard as your mama's head was then. She was stubborn. She kept forgetting she was a colored woman and that the year was 1956."

"What happened in 1956?" I egged her on excited by the beginnings of finding out anything about Fannie Mae.

"What happened? How old is you child?"

"I'm almost twelve," I said, like twelve was almost grown enough to know whatever she was getting ready to say.

"Then you old enough to know what happened. Fannie Mae was thirteen when she got into trouble the first time. Wasn't her fault either. She got picked up for talking back to a white man. She was buying some things from the grocery store and the store keeper was trying to cheat her. Now your mama knew her numbers. She wasn't nobody's fool. She knew how to figure so she called him a liar. He hauled off and slapped her down. Then he had the gall to call the police on her. They took her down to juvenile detention. Child, it wasn't no fence high enough to keep Fannie Mae where she didn't want to be. She broke out of that place and hitched a ride to New Orleans. But they caught her and drug her back in a week or two. Now your mama's pride was her long pretty hair, a good grade and thick too. She used to wrap it on top of her head like a crown. When she fixed up you'd swear she was a movie star. When they brought her back the last time them animals cut all her hair off. Yes m'am, they shaved that poor child's head clean. Not to be held back she found a way out again and hooked up with a soldier. They mounted over in Alabama. That was a joke. Your mama just wanted a way out of that stinking jail. On her honeymoon night she said she made that boy sleep on the porch of his mama's house. She run away from him too. Come back to live with your Aunt Mae. Then trouble seemed to run after her."

Miss Corine kept parting my hair and lathering each gap with Suplthur 8, sizzling the tension out of her words. She stopped for a minute to blow her nose and wipe the sweat out of her eyes.

Baby, I understand why your Big Mama and your aunties ain't told you about her. The telling hurts. It brings up too many memories. You getting to be a woman now and God knows you need to hear this. Hold still now I'm getting ready to put the hot comb to your head."

I held my head down, chin to chest, waiting for the sizzle of hot metal on a clamp, greased naps. Miss Corine's hands were steady, never jerking or burning the tender skin on my neck.

While waiting for Miss Corine to get to the next chapter in Fannie Mae's story Mr. Pitts from the funeral home next door hollered in the door.



"What you know good Corine?"

"Couldn't be better Pitts. How's business?" Miss Corine Hollered back at him.

"Dead as ever," he said, laughing at his own joke.

Big Mama said Mr. Pitts could make a dead man laugh. She said he could make you forget you was mourning somebody. He buried Fannie Mae. I heard folks say he was in love with her. As if she read my mind, when Mr. Pitts left, Miss Corine say, "Pitts used to take your mama to the picture show. Buy her all the candy and popcorn she could hold. He really loved your mama like she was his child. She made him laugh. Where a lot of mens would've taken advantage of a pretty young girl like Fannie Mae, he showed her nothing but kindness and respect and she give him the same. When she was a little girl, she was here in my shop messing around or over in the funeral home arranging flowers for Mr. Pitts and Miss Rosa."

There was a quiet space where I spoke my heart.

"I used to hate Fannie Mae." I confessed for the first time to anybody. "I hated her for leaving me and then for being dead. One time I locked myself in the bathroom 'cause I didn't want to wear no white flower on my new white dress on Mothers Day, letting everybody know my mama was dead. I cried so hard Big Mama felt bad for me. I ended up wearing a red and white flower. Big Mama convinced me how important it was to respect the dead as well as the living."

"I remember that. You almost broke your Big Mama's heart. She knew then how strong you felt about losing your mama and she felt so helpless, wasn't nothing she could do then."

There was a light tapping on the door and Miss Rosa come in. She was a tiny, elegant lady, like her brother Mr. Pitts. She always wore a hat to match her dress. I wondered if she slept in them hats. Her delicate smile was warm and her light green eyes invited your confidence and trust. She stepped into the shop gently and looked around for attention like she was about to make an announcement.

"Corine, on behalf of myself and Mr. Pitts I would like to thank you for the use of your curling irons," Miss Rosa said.

"You been working on Sister Williams, Jessie say."

"Sister Williams was a good Christian woman, a nice looking woman, but she aged so quickly. All those children I suppose. At any rate, I thank you for your generosity."

"Rosa, you know you welcome to them old irons and anything else I have. When is Sister Williams funeral?"

"Tomorrow morning and I do not look forward to dealing with her heathen children. They chose the cheapest casket and arrangements for the dear woman and I know for a fact that her insurance policy would have more than covered a decent burial." Miss Rosa coughed a delicate cough then

cleared her throat a few times. I took my chance to thank her.

"Miss Rosa, I don't remember my mama very much, but I remember how pretty you made her look for the funeral. Thank you for making her look so nice."

"Why thank you child," she said as if seeing me for the first time. "You look so much like her. She was a lovely girl, so smart and talented. We all loved her, her passing was a great loss. In all my days I never seen so many grown men cry at a funeral. Mr. Pitts wept the whole time he worked on her. He sent her the money to come home but she never made it. Didn't she love to dance, Jesus?"

Miss Rosa sniffed and wiped her teary eyes on a black lace hanky she had tied to her wrist.

"She really loved you and Brother. She wanted you two to be with her. I believe she's much happier with the lord."

Miss Rosa stood there staring at me for a few minutes then threw up her hanky and stepped gingerly out the door.

"Everybody loved your mama. Like I said she was a good girl, but trouble seemed to follow her." Miss Corine said.

"What kind of trouble?" I asked, a little scared of what I might hear.

"When your mama turned 15, she got a scholarship to a lil integrated dance school downtown. She and this white girl, Patty I think her name was, got to be good friends. One day Patty and Fannie Mae was holding hands walking in the white folks park. Fannie Mae forgot all about them signs and things. She and Patty got to laughing and dancing down the street and over the grass them white folks claimed was theirs. Fannie Mae was so pretty. Some white boys noticed them and asked Patty what she doing holding hands with a nigger. Before they could run or holler or anything them boys caught them both."

I was hurting when she said that. My throat tightened up, but I held back the tears. I'd come too far to turn around.

Uncle Buck say that's why Brother is so light skinned and that's why he always in trouble with the law. One of 'em was a policemen's son. Nobody talk about my daddy. I don't care who he was, really. Aunt Mae say all the good 'mama's baby, poppa's maybe.' I just want to know about Fannie Mae."

Miss Corine looked at me in a sad knowing way and kept on talking.

There was a big trial and if the lawyer hadn't been so scared of that policemen's weight, your mama would've won. She bent after that. But you know she was more determined than ever to keep dancing. She worked out one night after she worked here in the shop with me. She was still a child at the time she had Brother and 16 when you were born. Your Big Mama fell in love with you and Brother and took to keeping you more than your mama. After a while she didn't feel she could claim ya'll anymore. All she had to do was love and that don't feed hongry children. She left here and went up

north and found a job cleaning up in a dance hall. Your Big Mama and Aunt Mae felt like it was they fault she died on that dance floor, fell out from a brain tumor. Some say a broken spirit."

Miss Corine paused with the hotcomb in mid-air. I could see her reflection in the mirror, proud chin set tight, eyes trying not to cry. I couldn't hold back no more. I cried until my eyes hurt, til my heart was empty and my soul full. I whispered thanks into Miss Corine's full breasts for the pain she had to bear to tell me the truth. She held me close stroking my head and rocking me back and forth.

"Now that's all I know baby, from A to Z. It wasn't all a pretty picture, but it's the one I saw."

Miss Corine wiped my tears and gave me a tissue to blow my nose in. Her rich hands caressed my back and eased the pain that truth could bring.

"If you don't remember nothing else I tell you, baby you remember this; if you have to dance or dream, go forward, one step at a time and always remember that somebody had to lay the way."

## SOMETHING IT ISN'T

*liemor*

When she first quoted Groucho Marx to me, I didn't realize she was trying to tell me something. I took it as a sign that our budding romance was meant to be, that she was as much a lover of paradox as I am. Not that I would have called it a romance then; no, not at all. I was planting my first garden that year in my fenced-in yard — three varieties of lettuce, radishes, four full rows of beets — and was virtually addicted to the feel of my hands in humus-tooled dirt, to the idea that things could grow. According to my *New Witcher's Almanac* all I had to do was plant each seed on its chosen day in some neat though zig-zagged row, and wait for signs of life.

On the eighteenth day of my gardening, an auspicious day for bulbs, Isabelle arrived, leaping gazelle-like over the fence. I had never seen the woman before, but she apparently felt no need to explain herself and only nodded slightly in my direction, pulled a trowel from her back pocket and started digging. It annoyed me that she could arrive like that, not in the least bit predicted in any of the daily newsletters on perennials or the bimonthly scientific journals I'd been reading religiously, not a part of the plan I'd plotted out for myself and the garden that spring. But I tried to hide my confusion and chatted with her in a neighborly way, even venturing onto a seasonal discussion about whether or not any great social upheavals were likely to occur now that so many hagaddahs were being rewritten to reflect a lesbian-separatist point-of-view. I must have managed to make her feel welcome, because every day thereafter she returned, bounding over another section of pine board fence. Her backyard, it turned out, bordered on mine.

I confess to having been amazed by her seductively agile wrists that flung the rocks about, as well as by her round ripe lips which spoke not so much to the broccoli (as woman have been doing since the book *Your Plants Are Feminists Too*), nor particularly to my cat Edna (with whom I myself was wont to share those deepest thoughts and neuroses only a true friend can understand), but to the rocks and dirt themselves. With the advent of Isabelle I approached my moments of gardening with more zest. Yes as much as I studied my almanac, my migratory birds calendar, my Stonehenge dictated moon-phase date-book, my hourglass and my pocket calculator, I could estimate with any creditable accuracy when Isabelle would arrive, though she claimed over and over that I would know when she would return.

"Sholem aleichem," she cried a few days later plopping off the fence.

"Aleichem sholem," I echoed, looking up from a precocious row of cabbages. I was thinning, trying not to show that I'd been worried she wouldn't turn up that day as it was nearing suppertime.

"They're begging for a few jerusalem artichokes in the back, but don't get too carried away. Rocks adore artichokes so much they end up growing like weeds. Did you put in any rhubarb like I told you?"

Everything that I'd read had agreed rhubarb wouldn't grow in my yard. "Don't I always do everything you say?" I asked, handing her the unopened packet of rhubarb seeds she'd given to me a few days earlier.

"Yeah, and so do the bib lettuce. And so do the planets and stars. That's why there's such an easy and logical flow to the workings of the world."

I stood up and grabbed a shovel, sneaking Isabelle a quick hug with my free hand. That one fraction of a touch stirred something in me and I clutched my micro-sundial to calculate how many hours of Passover had already passed. Knowing this with precision somehow calmed me. "You're in some mood, Isabelle. Should I look up your biorhythms for the day?"

"Don't bother," she moaned. "It's a simple case of the nostalgia simplex II, the missing of a world in which we can know something, some one thing, even to know that nothing is knowable. What a relief that would be. Then also, of course, Bertha would have to come by to visit this morning."

She had mentioned Bertha's name once before. Apparently together they had produced a line of lesbian shoelaces depicting famous dykes throughout history. But I knew nothing more about this Bertha than that.

"The two of you going to try your hand at feminist fortune cookies maybe?"

"And you, my smartie Chachem, how is it you support yourself through the exigencies of day-to-day capitalism?"

"A little bit of this, a little bit of that. I taught driving for awhile, delivered pizzas, repaired toasters, washed airplanes and played oboe in the Oakland Philharmonic. But ultimately I got bored. I heard one too many "Have a nice day" as I handed anchovy pizzas to multi-millionaire ex-hippies. Even well-washed 747's didn't completely make the world make sense to me." The shovel in my hand had been tossing the same dirt around for too many minutes, not digging any deeper. I noted that the sun was at an exact 40° angle to my right shoulder. "Who's got chutzpah are those women who get rich quick teaching courses on prosperity for women. Or, as the expression goes, 'If the wealthy would pay people to die for them, the poor could make a wonderful living.'"

I expected Isabelle to share an anti-imperialist laugh with me, (Edna apparently had found it funny and was brushing her fur against my leg), but instead she was going wild with the rhubarb seeds.

"Hey! *The Organic Lifestyle Manifesto* says it's next to impossible to grow rhubarb here."

"Yeah? Well maybe your organic gurus don't like rhubarb and they figure if they grow it they might find in truth that it's delicious, then they'd have to eat it which would be horrible because they can't bear the stuff. I think that goes

dammed Bertha wants to be in another relationship or something." Isabelle looked ready to cry.

"You jealous?" I considered hugging her tentatively again.

"Jealous?" she laughed. "It's with me." My imagined hug turned into a general caress of the air. Isabelle went on, "Fortune cookies aren't a bad idea. Though I think mezzuzas with quotes from, say, Alix Dobkin inside would be more like it. Chachem, tell me quick, what is life about?"

Luckily my companion minute-by-minute horoscope guide had warned me not to indulge in philosophical exertions during the first part of the week, so I merely smiled at her question. "Myself, I go in for slightly less enormous enigmas, can't you tell? Like how often should I water zucchini. Or how can I love my brussel sprouts forever and eat them too." I stuffed a few of the thinned radishes into my mouth and offered a handful to Isabelle who was throwing kisses in the direction of a newly-planted mound of potential spinaches. "I've forced myself to forget about making sense of the whole. I'm into knowing with precision what each moment means. Like today, April 17th, three-quarter moon, great for flowering shrubs."

It was hard to tell if Isabelle was listening to me, since she had her ears flat against the ground and was running her fingertips along the edges of a clay pot that had halfway biodegraded into the earth. She stayed until the sun went down and it was too dark to hope to see any more carrot tops grow and I could no longer read aloud my chosen harvesting schedule. It was 6:45, not long before the moon was due to rise, when she sighed, brushed the mud off her sleeves, and rose with the suddenness of someone making a life-shattering realization. (I wondered if she'd left something in the oven all this time.) I got up too, out of politeness, sensing she was about to leave, my finger still inside my almanac. We stood close to each other, lit only by a streetlamp from Shattuck Avenue. Isabelle leaned toward me like an initiate at a beginning trust game encounter session, and that's when we hugged, our first embrace of any consequence. I whispered something into her neck; I couldn't tell you what it was now—some passionate effusion or another, to which she responded by leaping onto our mutual fence from where she called out, almost affectionately I thought, "I refuse to belong to any club that would take me as a member." And then she was gone, leaving only a cecropius branch swaying in front of her upstairs window.

Edna and I took a last look at the sky, which was decidedly void of stars, and walked inside the house.

The next day as I was webbing a string for the beans to climb, Isabelle tipped up behind me and gave me a peck on my crown chakra. She looked glad though radiant. "Guess who I ran into today, Chachemel."

I racked my brain for who we might be acquainted with in common. "Bella Abzug? Lili Tomlin? Ella Fitzgerald?"

"Guess again."

"Cleopatra?" Edna's ears twitched.

"No. Debbie."

"Gee."

Edna, strangely lethargic that day, lifted her head and one front paw in a pretentious yawn, and promptly fell asleep.

"Pretty weird, huh? I was just down at the hardware store. Is that a crime? And in she walks. I'm haunted, I tell you. How many times have I told her, no more risks. She was asking for long-life lightbulbs, no less."

"Pretty weird alright. By the way, who's Debbie?"

Isabelle didn't seem interested in any heavy gardening that morning; she was barely paying attention to the rocks. I went blithely on with knotting strings for the beans. "I'll spare you the part about how Debbie and I ceased to cross paths—at least I thought we had. She can't fool me with her lightbulb bit. I bet you anything she's still after me. And to think how much I could have cared for her. But, I will tell you how we met." For this I gave her my full concentration. Even Edna's tail stiffened, then curled around the early strawberries.

"One beautiful day a few years back I was wandering in Tilden Park with a mysterious sort of story going around in my head, when a tall and frantic woman came up to me saying she was lost and could she please walk with me, which I allowed her to do if she'd listen to my story, and this is the story I told as we walked: One beautiful day a few years back I was wandering in Tilden Park with a mysterious sort of story going around in my head, when a tall and frantic woman came up to me saying she was lost and could she please walk with me, which I allowed her to do if she'd listen to my story, and this is the story I told as we walked: One beautiful day a few years back I was wandering..."

I would have believed she went on telling the thing ad infinitum (and the way her voice was growing on me, I might have been contented listening), except that instead I heard her call as she clambered up to the fence and crawled across the eucalyptus branch up to her window, "Debbie was to me as beautiful as that day. But she won't listen. I don't do risks." At which point I thought she threw me a kiss, but it turned out to be a paper airplane, which opened up and smoothed out was a turquoise flier that read:

**THE FLYING FARTUMELEHS**

*Most Amazing Jewish Dare-devil Act Since  
Their Hike Thru the Red Sea  
Zeno Hall / April 18 / 8:30*

Even without consulting my date-book I knew the 18th was that very night. Scribbled in at the bottom of the flyer was, "You might wonder if this is my version of asking you out. You might wonder. But look at it this

way—maybe I'll see you there. And don't miss it. They're known to be extraordinary." I decided, against Edna's better judgement, to construe this as a date. (Edna was always accusing me of latching on to women just because I recognized their souls, before checking out their karmic propensities during this particular incarnation.) I didn't feel like eating dinner somehow and I just sat in my old stuffed chair with the flyer in my lap and Edna on top of it. "Edna, do you think this could be, well, something?" I asked her after about an hour of ungainful sitting. She answered thoughtfully by scratching at the front door, longing to get out.

"No risks, huh?" It was Saturday and I was considering it my day off, according to the Sabbath tradition. I lay somewhere between the muskmelons and mounds that Isabelle still claimed would soon be covered with rhubarb. From time to time I would blow gently on my peachwood recorder while Edna leaped back and forth across my outstretched body in a mesmerizing game of hopscotch.

Isabelle stood over me, and when she finished greeting the various parts of the ground, she addressed me. "What are you doing lying around?"

"It's the day of rest."

"Challeh, my darling, this is Thursday."

I felt for a timepiece but found none within reach. "Is it? Yeah, yeah, but I bet you didn't know that today is a good day for new opportunities and practically all the famous women alive in 1922 fell in love on this day and in seven or eight hours a comet can be seen from the southern end of the western hemisphere, if anyone's watching."

"And if no one's watching? Will it make a sound?"

I answered her with a puzzle of my own, "So Isabelle, what's this about no one?" Isabelle's performance the night before had been electrifying, especially her flight between two tightropes while swallowing fire. In her rough-cut Fartumeleh t-shirt and tights, she'd looked ferociously sweet. She was pretty adorable juggling matzoballs too.

"I've always said, the problem with emotional relationships is they are too often performed without nets."

"Could you move over a little, Isabelle?" Her shadow was blocking the sun. She sat down beside me, her fingers separating the grasses, her eyes focused on my knees, it seemed.

"Chachel, you don't know how disappointed I was not to be able to go out with you after the show. But you'll never guess who showed up to surprise me, if it were."

"You're right. I never will. Still not Cleopatra, I guess."

"Penny."

"That was my next guess."

"I'm telling you, what I didn't do for that woman, the hours lying awake



trying to come up with adequate responses to her saying, 'I love you.' Couldn't she be a little understanding? I explained to her that I can only tell women I love them if I don't, then when I say it, I usually start feeling like I do love them, so then I can't say it any more. Or feel it. Or something."

"Well, what do you say?"

Her fingers had moved to my knee by then. "Something like, 'Think how few and far between are good friends' or 'I zucchini you, but don't get carried away' works for your more imaginative thinker. Nothing worked with Penny. She just plain wouldn't stop."

"Stop?"

"Loving me. Wanting to be lovers. How I could have cared about her otherwise. So I couldn't possibly have any feelings about you, Chacheleh. If you know what I mean." I guessed to myself that I did. "I mean, that is, unless I can be certain that your feelings were, well, that you didn't...wouldn't..." Isabelle started to stroke Edna who had stretched out across her shoulders, but no sooner did her hand reach out than Edna leapt away.

Isabelle sighed and seemed to sink deeper into the soil, like a first time meditation student taking literally the suggestion to imagine your tailbone like a root growing down down into the earth. Edna had jumped up on the fence and was staring toward Isabelle's window. I played "Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries" on the recorder, then put it down beside me thinking to take a little nap. Only suddenly and ever-so-tenderly Isabelle was kissing me, our second embrace of any consequence. Afterwards I didn't stir. I waited for the skies to grow calm, then I said to her, as heartfully as I felt safe to allow, "Isabelle, Isabelle! Do you ever wonder who's buried in Grant's Tomb?"

I had her there. "All the time," she answered with equal openness, "literally all the time."

For once, that evening, she left through the gate and with a sludge to her step. Once outside the fence her words to me were, "It's going to be an extraordinary couple of seasons; I wonder what Rosh Hashona will bring. Chachem, what is it the French say?"

I looked up to Isabelle's window towards which she would usually be retreating, and saw Edna sitting on the sill, looking at nothing in particular.

"Oh lá lá?" I guessed.

"No, not that. *Il ne faut pas chercher á comprendre.*"

That first garden was grown over with rhubarb and uncontrollable volunteer asparagus, and it is almost undoubtedly because I was never willing to be lovers with Isabelle that we have enjoyed such a long-lasting lover relationship. Way back when I stopped counting the hours, the months, the embraces, and it never occurs to me to notice the years go by.

## A NEW DAY FOR WILLA MAE

### *Sapphire*

One step at a time, she told herself, one hand over her heart the other on the banister, a large tote bag on one shoulder, another sliding from her other shoulder to her elbow. "Yes!" she exclaimed softly, "the storm is passin ovah! Yes Lord, the storm is passin ovah." She lifted one large leg to the next step. In this fashion, one step at a time, calling on the lord when needed, she made it to her apartment on the third floor, her and her daughter's she reminded herself.

"Whew!" she exhaled loudly as she placed both bags on the floor and reached inside her worn vinyl purse for her keys. Wiping perspiration from her brow she opened the door, she bent over to pick up her bags at the same time pushing the door open with her large rear end. "Lord, them steps gonna be the death of me yet," she sighed. Her daughter appeared in the hallway opposite the front door. She stood in the opening and looked across the much lived in living room at her mother's huge, wite-uniformed body, the worn beige coat slit at the seam under one arm, the two large shopping bags and worn vinyl purse, her big bosom, her huge stomach that fell into the large apron of flesh that rested on top of her thighs, the flesh crammed into wite stockings, the straightened hair pulled back into a little knot on the back of her head, her deep shiny brown face, the little nose, wide lips and large deepset eyes with smokey circles of fatigue under them. Mama's face looks like a big brown bowl with black holes in it she thot. She looked up over her mother's eyes at the beads of sweat on her forehead and told her, "Mama you oughtta lose some weight."

Willie Mae Justice looked in her daughter's eyes and told her wondrously in her soft voice, "Youse the only something I know goes roun tellin they Mama what she oughtta do. You set them limas to boil and make the rice and cornbread like I asked you?"

"I forgot the bread Mama."

"Well why dont you do that steadda standin there lookin at me."

Willie Mae handed her daughter a bag full of greens, cornmeal, flour, tur-ope, maple syrup and bananas. She took her coat, pocketbook and the other shopping bag down the two hallways, shaped like a big L, to her room which was at the end of the hallway past the bathroom and Jadine's room. Their apartment formed the corner of their building. The living room, kitchen and Jadine's room all having windows that looked out on the street. Willie Mae's room, down and across the hall from Jadine's room, was set on the inside of the building, its only window facing the vacant-looking red back and window of another apartment.

Everything always became a little less troubling or burdensome when she

stepped into the large quiet room with the huge strong mahogany bed Johnson, her first husband, had bought, made up in the stark white sheets Mrs Goldstein had given her when she switched over to the designer ones with flowers and cubes printed on 'em. Willa Mae looked at the big black velvet circle in the middle of her quilt set in the midst of the dark blue wool that made up the rest of the quilt except for the border which was made up of the same black velvet as the circle in the center of the quilt. She didn't have time to quilt up here but she had known what she was doing when she made that one. That circle had spoken to her so many times with its black voice telling her to relax, that there was more to the whole thing than she could see and that trouble, indeed, did not last always. The quilt had been packed in her trunk till Jadine was five or six or so. Then she'd remembered it when Johnson had left, had took the shiny red thing all puffed up and purty he'd bought and took it to Mrs Goldstein, asking her if she had use for it. She'd given Willa Mae so many nice things, Willa Mae had brought this to her. That was when Mrs Goldstein began to think Willa Mae might be very different from the previous colored girls. But Willa Mae wasn't that different she'd been relieved to find out later, just another large colored girl with a child she had to feed, benign contempt for the people she served, clean, a good cook, a little late sometimes and never available Wednesday evenings or Sundays.

Willa Mae took off her worn white shoes and sat on the side of the bed, lifted the bag onto her lap and took out the box. Shoes, NEW BALANCE, \$49.99, pretty shiny blue nylon and soft white suede. But my god! Forty-nine dollars! They may as well just gone say fifty dollars! But Jadine's feet was gonna fall off if she ran in them ones she had anymore and the man had said these was the best. She cocked her head listening to the belligerent sounds of Jadine fixing dinner, slid to her feet and padded barefoot down the hall to Jadine's room and placed the box by Jadine's bed, a box spring and mattress on the floor.

Sitting back on her bed Willa Mae pulled the bag up on her lap again and took out a tissue wrapped package. Carefully she opened it gazing in delight at the mound of red lace and satin. She took the slip, looked at it and fingered the lace. "Now when have I had something like this!" she exclaimed. She got up and locked her bedroom door. Then she pulled off her uniform and her slip, let her breasts fall out of her brassiere, stopped in front of her dressing table and looked at her large body with satisfaction. "Its mine," she sighed. She pulled the slip over her head, as the smooth material fell over her hips she began to twirl around, air gathering under the frothy, flared bottom of the slip causing it to fan out as she danced. She wasn't so old she thought gazing at herself in the mirror. Forty-six wasn't old. She smiled at herself in the mirror, then took the slip off, folded it and put it in her dresser drawer. She was closing her drawer when Jadine called, "Mama! Dinner's ready!"

Willa Mae sat across from Jadine and asked, "What we got daughter?"  
"Salad, beans, rice and cornbread."

"No meat?"

"No Mama, no meat. You know I dont eat meat."

"Well you not the only someone eating."

"Mama!"

"Jadine."

"Every time I try to say something its JayDEEN!"

"What are you trying to say?"

"We dont *need* meat."

"What do we need?"

"The amino acids."

"The *whats*?"

"The amino acids is what makes up protein and they in almost everything. Beans got em, rice got em. And the rice got the ones the beans dont have and the beans got the ones the rice dont have. Cornmeal, flour, egg, milk—all that went into the cornbread, that's enuff protein for a thousand people!"

Not no *thousand* Jadine and Dr Harris says—"

"Oh Mama fuck Dr Harris! Look at him! How he gone tell anybody nothing?"

"Well I ain gone fuck Dr Harris—"

"Oh Mama you know what I mean!"

"No I dont, cause to me fuck mean to fuck and if you dont mean that use another word."

"Oh Mama you never listen!"

"I *am* listening to you!"

"You hear what you wanna hear!"

"Jadine its time for you to be getting a job."

"I got a job. I'm a dancer and a runner. Arent you proud of me?"

"Dont none of it put no amino acids on the table! You cant make no money running. And when your dancing gonna make you some rent, some food! Some clothes? When you gonna help me? When I was 26—"

"When you was 26 you had *had* me and was on your own, had come to New York City and found out what *hard* was, you hear me," Jadine mockingly repeated what Willa Mae had told her so many times.

"Well its the truth!"

"Well Mama what do you want me to do? I'm jus gittin into dancing! You want me to have a baby out of wedlock like you—?"

"Wedlock! You sound like wite folks Jadine. I been married, just wadnt to have. It ain no sin go have a baby by a fool but to marry him sho is."

"You make me sick talking bout Daddy like that! You the fool! He just want you."

"Well whatever, I really dont know. But if you love your Daddy so much you sure can go to him."

"You dont want me! You never did."

"I did. At one time I did."

"You think I'm gonna sit here and let you insult me." Jadine pushed her chair back from the table.

"JayDEEN! You didnt eat nuthin."

"I'm not hungry Mama. How can I digest my food with you talkin to me like that."

"Well eat later."

"Mama sometimes I really dont like you."

"You dont like yourself sometime."

Jadine didnt answer her mother. She was walking out the kitchen now on her way down the hall to her room. Jadine's room was painted lavender with gold trim. Books and records lined the walls. A bicycle sat near the door, on the other side of the door there was a closet. There were no chairs, only a chest of drawers, a rug the mattress and box spring sat on and the milk cartons that held her books. It was all she needed. She'd decided a long time ago if you really wanted something, you had to sacrifice. Sacrifice alot. That's what Mama didnt understand. It was a sacrifice for her to still be here. She could get a job and help Mama or get her own place but she couldnt do that if she wanted to keep on dancing. Plus Mama would be lonely if she wasnt here. She didnt see the shoes till she had flung herself on the bed. "Oh Mama!" she gasped softly. "NEW BALANCE." She sat up on the side of the bed, stretched out her long legs then slid her feet into the powder blue and wite shoes. She padded into the kitchen where her mother sat quietly eating her dinner, seeing her daughter she looked up, "That was some good salad Jadine. Dont bother with the dishes, I'll get em." "Mama the shoes!" "Chile them ones you had was fallin apart." "Thank you Mama." She looked at her mother, the blue and black plaid robe pulled across her body, the neatly pressed hair pulled back behind her neck held in a small wispy cluster by a barrette, her hands in her lap now and a certain tenseness in her neck that would not leave her body until Jadine left the room. "Mama why you drinkin coffee this late?" "Is it late daughter?" "Seven-thirty." "Its not that late, anyhow I'm expecting Mr Henry in awhile. "Oh well," she signed, "thank you for the shoes Mama. I really appreciate em." "Its alrite Jadine honey, Its alrite."

Willa Mae sat back on the clean with sheets, propped up on one elbow, her legs curled under her, the slip against her body damp with perspiration, the lace finding a home around her knees, molding itself to her breasts, the smooth satin over her stomach made it look like a shiny red beach ball falling from under her breasts. She watched Mr Henry take off his shirt, undershirt,

belt, pants, socks; he walked to her dresser set his wallet and watch on top and asked Willa Mae, "Lemme switch out this overhead lite heah an put on this little one top de dresser."

Willa Mae was still as Mr Henry slid over into bed pulling the sheet over them. His huge hands were on her body now, one on the side of her encouraging her to slide down in bed, the other between her thick fat moist legs separating the mounds of flesh, his hand trying to find a home in the heat between her legs. Pulling her slip up he started to caress her belly with his tongue, one hand still exploring the area between her thighs, the other gently kneading her breast as his tongue and now his lips pulled sucking the endless flesh of her belly. He moved down in the bed turning on his stomach, his arms pulling her down; both hands now rubbing her thighs, her hips, moving and kneading her stomach, thighs. Lightly licking the insides of her legs, her calves, his hand pushing, gently pushing her thighs apart, parting her thighs, inching up to the soft warm space he'd come from till his tongue found the pink opening between her legs and danced in her vagina exploring till he found her clitoris. He stroked it gently, persistently holding tight to her huge hips, her violent exhalations of breath exciting him as her large soft body began to rock, pitching forward and back again as she uttered deep incoherent sounds. She was shaking now covered with sweat, vibrating on the bed like a big red and brown fish hollering ooh ooh as she went into uncontrolled spasms. He kept manipulating her clitoris with his tongue while she came. It was doing its own hi red dance now as its owner lowered shaking tears from her eyes.

He rolled over on his back pulled off his shorts and dropped them gently on the floor beside the bed. He moved himself closer to the head of the bed and pulled the red slip the rest of the way over her head. He started to caress her face, her hair, freed it from the rubber band. He lifted himself on top of her, up down, his penis gently probing between her legs till his body found home, thrusting hard slowly, her holding onto him, him laid out on her, kissing each other, one hand exploring her body still, her own hands—one on his shoulder, the other on his buttocks. She was feeling over full now, like a volcano, aware and afraid of her own heat. She pulled him to her like a suction tube absorbing him in her mass, the heat—his, hers fusing them together as he thrust into her again and again, his body shaking, her holding him as he exploded into little pieces inside of her. Mr Henry was very still now, his big body beside hers, two different shiny browns glowing, quiet and still beside each other.

Jadine opened her slim black legs and wrapped them around Mr Henry's neck. Her vagina was a moist ocean begging for his lips, the slippery wet soft touch of his tongue—stroking, stroking past life, past this planet, someplace full of dreams, grunts and cold fire. "Come on Mr Henry," Jadine breathed

her little hips squirming, her tiny black-tipped breasts defying gravity shooting like little arrows to the ceiling. Mr Henry had not loved Willa Mae when he had started with Jadine. He was scared now, scared and angry. He felt used by the one he'd thot he was using. She was like a big sticky wite painted line; every time he crossed it, he left tracks. Tracks behind him, in front of him, something always messing up the deep blackness he felt with Willa Mae. The little black body of Jadine keeping him from the total absorption and peace he sought.

Her tiny black body was like fire under his hand now. She was tite, hot and vacant, incapable of going deep only far; his dick and tongue being the vehicles for transporting her someplace she did not take him. He took her legs from around his neck and pulled her sweaty body down. "You ain nuthin like yo Mama," he told her. "Why you bring up Mama?" Jadine pouted. "I jus said you ain nuthin like her." "Well you think I wanna hear about Mama when you layin up here with me! Mama ain nuthin but a wore out ol hog!"

Mr Henry flipped her over like she was a pancake, grabbed her shoulder and began to push his penis up her anus. "Mr Henry u hurtin me!" He pushed harder and harder trying to tear her tiny opening apart, hurting her, hating her. Her youth, her beauty, chances, all, everything he intended to rip apart with his dick. He pushed harder like an elephant trying to get into a mouse hole. His hand was a hard paddle coming down on her face. His dick was moist with shit now. He rammed into her again. He grabbed her hair and pulled it back and rammed into her again and again till he saw blood and the groan escaped from her like she was dying. His dick wasn't hard anymore and he was satisfied. Willa Mae found them together, him asleep and Jadine whimpering like a little kitten over and over, "mama mama mama..."

Mr Henry woke up to a meat cleaver slicing thru his right arm and Jadine whimpering, "Mama no, no Mama I love him." Willa Mae brought the meat cleaver down again, this time Mr Henry's right hand fell to the floor. "Mama," Jadine moaned, "I just wanted something you'd had, some of you." Willa Mae looked at Mr Henry and said, "Get out. Take yuh hand and that gal wit chu."

Willa Mae sat down at the table and carefully placed some butter in the middle of the steaming pile of grits. The steaming witeness and yellow so different from Mr Henry's brown and Jadine's black. She shook her head trying to force Jadine's shiny black legs out her mind as she mashed her grits and eggs together with her fork, gently sprinkling the mixture with salt and pepper. She buttered a biscuit, well, she was gone now, she thot, placing the golden edge of the biscuit in her mouth following it with a bite of sausage. She ate slowly deliberately, her thots which had been staggering thru her

with razors stopped and the world became something to serve, observe, buy, eat, consume and bear again. The wite and yellow of the grits, eggs, butter and biscuits so different from the browns and blacks of Mr Henry and Jadine. Lord have mercy! Did she smell like that? The thot stopped the methodical movement of her hand from her plate to her mouth. No, of course not. Mr Henry had done something wrong to her baby. For a minute everything was all black and brown, her baby all black and bloody, smelling like a fart, face all swollen and Mr Henry all hard and dead looking. Why hadnt he got his ass up and left? She shoulda chopped his head off. Wish something had been boiling, wish Jadine hadda been cooking and left something on the stove—grits preferably. Bastid! She got up to refill her plate taking the five little sausages that were left in the skillet and placing them carefully on her plate.

She chewed slowly concentrating on the bland taste of the grits, the oily comfort of the butter; soon there was no sound but her fork scraping the plate, no colors but yellow and wite and the golden brown of the biscuits. She really oughtta call Miz Goldstein and tell her she wouldnt be in tomorrow. She really did hafta tend to her own house now. Willa Mae sighed, what was she gonna do with all Jadine's stuff? Her fork was poised in the air and the reassurance there's always the Goodwill came to her. She should call Miz Goldstein now, she really should, she thot putting the last of the crispy brown sausages in her mouth.

It was Thursday, one o'clock in the morning, when Willa Mae Justice in a blood-spattered wite uniform she'd had on since seven that morning called her employer and told her she would not be in in the morning 'nor Friday neither Miz Goldstein. "I got some things here I gotta take care of..." Mrs Goldstein listened attentively, Willa Mae did not get pay for sick days and in ten years had not missed a day of work. "W... well Willy what happened! Is you fine *alrite*? Are you *alrite*?" "I dont know where Jadine is and I'm *alrite*. I got some things to do—" "I mean... I... its so early and not like you but O.K., I'll see you Monday." "O.K. Miz Goldstein." "You're sure Willy? I can get Charles to help you, he's district attorney now. If Jadine has gotten into some trouble..." she trailed off. "I'm sure ma'am," Willa Mae said with facility.

Willa Mae put the phone down and went into the kitchen and got two large plastic bags from under the sink. She walked to Jadine's room and stood in the doorway looking. The books, the bicycle, the records, record player—all these years she'd never had a record player. She'd keep the record player, books too; the bicycle, she couldnt do nuthin with that or the tape recorders of that long-haired nigger from Jamaica. Somebody could use the bicycle tho, the mattress too. Willa Mae ripped the shit-stained, bloody sheet from the mattress, the blankets and bedspread followed them into the top of the mattress cover. She picked up Jadine's little wicker basket,



threw its contents and it into the huge plastic bag. Willa Mae looked at the milk crates full of books and began to tote the crates one by one to the hallway near the front door lining the crates one after the other neatly along the wall. She did the same thing with the albums, Jadine could come and git em or if she didnt Willa Mae would listen to em as she liked. Sweating she touched the underarms of her uniform, looked down at it and became aware of the blood splattered on it. She took the uniform off standing in the hallway next to Jadine's books and records that she was gonna read and listen to if Jadine didnt come and get em, or she'd get her own she concluded bundling the uniform into a ball and dropping it on the floor. Willa Mae peeled off her slip and brassiere dropping them on top the uniform. Her girdle, stockings and drawers followed.

She stooped over and picked up the pile of clothes and her shoes and padded barefoot to Jadine's room where she dropped them into the huge plastic bag. Willa Mae stopped shocked. She stared at the floor in disbelief—Mr Henry had left his hand! She picked it up—frogs, fetuses, buggers and dissection flying thru her mind. Disgust. Extreme disgust. Nasty dirty UCK! The enormity of what had been done to her and what she had done still not registering. Her face was not contorted with grief, no sob shook her chest. She pinched her lips the way she did when she encountered the squeamy condoms in Mrs Goldsteins's sons' wastepaper basket or the buggers Mr Goldstein left on the bedroom wall next to his bed or the nastiness of Mrs Goldstein herself, a once clean woman, who had grown accustomed to having her underpants picked up off the floor, washed, folded and placed back in her dresser drawer by Willa Mae. How she approached these situations was how she approached Mr Henry's hand, placing it in the black plastic bag along with her blood spattered uniform, underclothes, her shoes, Jadine's posters, ashtrays, rolling papers, cigarettes and magazines. Mr Henry's hand was not more and it was not less.

Willa Mae twisted two plastic ties around the bag and hauled it to the door; she'd take it down tomorrow. No, she'd take it down now she realized and got her coat and boots out the hall closet, put them on and dragged the bag out the door and down the steps. The mattress and bicycle followed.

Covered with sweat, flesh peeking out the hole under the arm of her tan raincoat, her boots unzipped and flooping around her ankles Willa Mae Justice was mounting the stairs to her apartment as Wakefield Green, the building superintendent, was descending the stairs from his apartment on the fourth floor. He looked in disbelief. Willa Mae drunk? No no no! Not in all the years he'd known her. Coffee, tea and a little lemonade in the summer. "Willa Mae," he said in the voice Jadine called sour, "Willa Mae," he repeated, "you alrite?" "I'm fine Mr Green jus fine. What gits you up so early?" Now that he was up on her she didnt look drunk, jus kinda wild and tired. "Well, I puts the trash out on Thursday. What you doing up yourself?"

She sighed looking at his big scaly hands, dirty overalls and beat up shoes. "I was jus cleanin up, thas all, jus cleaning up." "Early." "Well its like that sometime," she said. "I heard that," he said looking down at Willa Mae's bare legs. He was about to pass her on his way down when she turned to him and said, "I need some paint Mr Green." "Some paint," he echoed. "Yeah, I got these walls Jadine painted, well I painted em. Jadine wanted em painted and I painted em for her. Lavender, they's lavender." "Well you needs primer. Put dat on the wall, let it dry, paint on top of it and you'll be able to cover that lavender up with one coat." "Alrite Mr Henry, I mean Mr Green, what you got?" "Well I got a green, real pale like and I gots grey—" "No grey Mr Wakefield." "Well I gots a real purty pink, almost wite but not cold, its warm like, creamy, a little like that color when the sun come up." "Now that sounds real nice Mr Hen...I mean Mr Green." "Willa Mae just call me Wakefield hear." "O.K. Wakefield that pink sounds real nice and I still got that gole trim left over from when I painted the last time." "I'll bring the paint up soon I finish in the basement and outside, O.K.?" "O.K. Wakefield."

Willa Mae emptied Jadine's dresser drawers into a second black trash bag, along with her shoes, jewelry, vibrator. She stopped a second at the vibrator—wonder what they did your hand couldnt. She threw Jadine's address book, little scraps of paper from on top the dresser, dirty panties, jeans, tiny lace bras, sweaters, neatly folded t-shirts, panties and socks into the bag. She hauled it to the closet near the front door, if Jadine came for it it'd be there. Willa Mae hauled the rug, then the dresser downstairs then came back perspiring, standing in the doorway of Jadine's room, staring, trying to figure out what to do next.

She went and got her bucket, rags, pinesol and broom. She swept, tackled the door, closet and the plate around the lite switch with her pinesol and then got down on her hands and knees to wash the baseboards and floor. She was thru when Mr Green knocked on the door with three cans of paint. When she asked for a ladder he asked quite humbly if he could paint the ceiling and a foot down for her. "I want that there," she pointed to the decorative plaster trim that ran around the wall a foot or so down from the ceiling, "done up in gole." He nodded, "Well O.K. Willa Mae that aint no problem." And it wasn't, together they had the room glowing quiet pale pink and gold by daybreak.

Willa Mae was scrubbing the floor of what had been Jadine's room for the second time, the fumes of the drying paint around her head, in fact first she thought it was the paint messing with her head causing her to see colors in front of her eyes, but it wadnt. She saw it clear as day, clear as day. The soft pale wall was lit up with the Star of Mississippi, what her grand had quilted, but it was a brighter star, more yellow set against a deeper blue, the red so sharp it was like a dog biting and a border of green, purple, pink, brite blue, black and silver pyramids different from the pattern of the star. Willa Mae bent

down to put her rag back in the bucket and when she looked back up it was gone. It had been there she assured herself as she finished scrubbing. It had been there.

She came back to the room after washing the dishes and scrubbing the kitchen and bathroom floors to pour salt in the corners of the room and set a bowl of water in the middle of the floor.

It was still early, six or seven, when Willa Mae left her house to take a walk in the cool morning air. Willa Mae was looking at the women standing at the bus stop with shopping bags full of uniforms and aspirin when she saw her grandmother's full frame sifting thru pieces of material. It was then Willa Mae knew she wasn't going back to Mrs Goldstein. Wasn't nuthin to even think about. She'd find a way. She shook her head smiling while tears rolled down her cheeks. Willa Mae couldn't stop the thoughts or feelings now. She was thinking about Jadine, how she had felt when her tiny mouth was on her breast. The soft sweet flurry it sent thru her body and how good it felt to be someone's sole source of nourishment, security and love; them coming from you, being you. It was the only feeling that had ever made her feel important. Willa Mae thought about the nickles, dimes and dollars that had bought Jadine's shoes, toothbrushes, color books and dolls and later things Jadine should have bought herself—diaphragms, dope and that poodle dog Jadine had starved. Willa Mae was crying thinking about when Jadine had been eighteen and left home and how she had gone to get her, telling her she wasn't ready when it was Willa Mae not ready. Well, I didn't know then like I know now she mused. I just didn't know. Her mind turned to the scraps of brightly colored cloth in her closet and under her bed, the riot of color, the possibilities. Well, you just be wrong sometimes, she concluded, wrong as two left shoes, but what's past is past, can't change the past. Tomorrow ain't promised. I got today, yeah I got today and life to live. And I am.

## THE 90th BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION

*Eva Claeson*

The old dining-room table—her old dining-room table—that had been set—that she had set—for so many occasions, was extended to its fullest size and set once more for an apparently very festive occasion. It did look good, she had to admit to herself: the candles and all the yellow roses, and the—how many—eighteen place settings. But the linen cloth looked worn—she would have picked another one—for, she had not set this table, the occasion had nothing to do with her.

The doorbell rang again, someone else went to open. The newcomers' cool bright young cheeks touched hers—they smelled of the fresh December cold:

"Happy birthday, Grandma!"

So that was it, she'd forgotten again, it was her 90th birthday, and the dinner was for her. Dinner? She'd forgotten about that—what were they doing in her kitchen—better go and check. She got up.

"I must check the dinner" she said to the people around her.

"No, grandmother, there's nothing for you to do, it's all done already" and she was pushed down firmly. She submitted. "Nothing for me to do ... anymore..." went through her head.

We drove up earlier that day. Karl drove. I submitted. The roads were wet, frosty at times. The sky was pale—mild, and the brown countryside was powdered with sugar snow. We passed a blue van: "Potatoes are honest food" was painted in big yellow letters on it. I was in the middle of Sweden alright, in the middle of honest-potato-Sweden, boiled-potato-Sweden and brown gravy, and mild pastry with powdered sugar. No strong feelings allowed to show, just obey the rules and you'll be like everybody else. We passed an ambulance, and then two cars crumpled in the ditch.

"Be careful, drive defensively," I said. "People forget that," I added. He smiled in acknowledgement:

"I don't."

Distractedly I watched the flat cafe-au-lait countryside pass by us. Thought about the girl interviewed on TV the night before: a rehabilitated alcoholic, she said that her greatest dream, while wandering aimlessly through the streets, had been to be "like everybody else", to have a place to go, a reason to hurry, a purpose, a reason for existing. It suddenly occurred to me that I had felt like that long ago. Contentedly, I relaxed in the comfortable bucket seat. We drove through the town of T. where a 72 year old man had sabotaged a train recently—he had had a purpose that day, I remarked to myself mockingly.

We were passing through more northerly country now. The lean bare

trunks of the defoliated trees were illuminated to a warm brown by the pale midday sun. Black-green pines alternated with slender frosty birches and white glazed fields. Why did people have to shatter this mellow calm winter atmosphere with garish christmas decorations? Calm seems insupportable for most people—synonymous with emptiness, the most scary of states, I reasoned. I touched my husband's arm and smiled agreeably. He smiled back, was happy with my behavior. I had nothing to say. I had closed my eyes. For the next few days I would be like everybody else, I'd exist on the outside, I'd obediently follow the others. It was my present for them.

One of the young ones, she couldn't remember who he was, was guiding her towards the festive table:

"Come grandmother, you sit at the head of the table." She wondered why, but sat down obediently. The room was very noisy and bright. She wasn't hungry at all. She tried to listen to the chattering animated faces around her and made an effort to remember who they were. The nice looking man at her left—yes of course, it was Karl, her eldest—raised his glass to her. She raised hers and smiled at him. He was the one who was married to that foreign woman. She didn't really know why, but she could never feel at ease with her, she wasn't like everybody else—"No, not like my capable Ingrid, a good solid girl who takes care of her family." She searched for Ingrid across the roses. "She does look tired," she reflected. "Oh well, women now-a-days can't take it."

A wave of warm relief washed through Ingrid when she finally sat at the table. It felt good—maybe it was just one of those hot flashes—"Doesn't matter, am really glad this is over with." She looked around the table with satisfaction and stopped when she got to me: "Of course that one could have been helped, she never does anything—wonder what she does all day with no children at home and not even a full time job—I can't understand her—Karl spoils her—really unfair."

"So nice to see you again, Jane," she said pleasantly across the flowers, "it's been a long time..."

"Yes, grandmother's 80th birthday."

"Really, 10 years! You do look well, I must say!"

"Thank you, so do you," I lied.

"She doesn't look well at all," Ingrid was thinking, "really getting grey—but, she's keeping her figure—it's easier for those foreign women—besides, she's got all the time in the world to take care of herself..."

"Some more wine mother?" The oldest son was making conversation. "Poor mother," he was thinking, "but well, that's the way it is—nothing you can do about it—I'm really glad Jane is behaving so well—finally fits into the family—even Ingrid seems to like her—but she's drinking too much as usual—well, can't do anything about it."

People were getting more relaxed. Voices were louder. Food was being

passed around again. "Amazing that they can eat so much after all that cake this afternoon," I thought as I took second helpings. I decided that you reached a point where you didn't feel anything anymore—not even whether your stomach is empty or full. Or maybe it was a way to ward off non-existence—filling the inner emptiness with food. I smiled an empty smile at the boy on my right as I handed him the platter:

"How's Maria? What a shame she couldn't be here today!" I had nothing more to say. Somewhere I existed, but not here.

"Skål" someone said. We all raised our glasses and obediently looked into each other's eyes all around the table before and after each swallow. Thank God for these rituals. Later Oscar got up and made a speech—something about golden old age and wisdom. I looked at grandmother at the head of the table—had almost forgotten about her. She had sunk into herself, it seemed, and with a polite smile was looking into space, like an additional guest, discretely uninterested in this family's affairs. She raised her glass then, like the others, but didn't drink. "Too much of this dulls the senses, and I'm dull enough already," she thought sadly. "Besides, this isn't my dinner, I didn't make it—they think I'm not able to anymore—I wonder what they're drinking this time. It's so hard to listen to this chatter—what's more, I can't understand them and the young ones are the worst—so unruly and really no modesty—not like in the old days, when they knew how to keep their mouths shut until asked to speak. A better world where there was a place and time for everything."

Grandmother's cheeks were flushed and she was sitting rigidly straight, her mouth frozen into a permanent smile. Suddenly I felt very sorry for her. Why can't these people leave her alone—she's really not enjoying this at all—not any more than I am—it isn't her world any more than it is mine—she's just submitting—trying to play her part just like me! I wanted to talk to her, to tell her that I understood.

They were clearing the table. It was time for Ingrid's great work of art: the proverbial dome of homemade ice-cream, and then the birthday poem read by Karl. By now everyone was tired and hot, impatient to leave the table. Grandmother had turned towards her favorite. You could tell that she was following his words. Her faded eyes were shining. For the first time she seemed to be happy about her celebration.

Up early the following morning, I sat alone with black coffee. The old kitchen had grown familiar even to me over the years of visiting. The glow from the polished copper pans on the yellow-white walls, the pink and blue hand-woven runner on the oak table in front of me, the pink paper flowers, the snowy just-for-show towels, even the smell from the old oil furnace, felt strangely reassuring in the dim light from a 25 watt bulb. I inhaled this safe little world, her safe little world, fashioned over the years by the imprint of her being, and I understood so well her fear, her bristling defense against all that

was new. The house, relaxing after yesterday's strain of unused to liveliness, creaked comfortably, and the great clock in the hall ticked and moaned and ticked and moaned, old and tired it too, but reliably doing the duty it was created for: to mark life's passing seconds.

I thought about the celebration—who's celebration? Not hers—it had belonged to other generations. With all that food and wine and noise they had invaded her world, taken away her home. It had been an alien place last night where she hadn't known the rules. She had submitted. I thought again about our common plight, and wanted to tell her about it.

When we woke her with breakfast she was surprised to see us. She thanked us perfunctorily when we reminded her of the celebration. She was in a hurry to get up, had much to do. She rushed around with her long time habit-duties, efficiently dusting the dustless surfaces, watering the already drowning plants, polishing the shiny table tops. Warily I made myself offer to help, and was no-thanked with icy politeness. She had a purpose to hurry for, like long ago, a reason for continuing to exist. She had retrieved her world, and wasn't about to let me in. I couldn't tell her about our common experience—and didn't want to anymore.

Arriving home that evening, we phoned her as we always did, to let her know we had had a safe journey. It took her a long time to answer. She had been lying down.

"So nice of you to call ... I guess I'm a little tired ... I've been working a lot in the garden, you know..."

"But mother, It's December ..." She ignored that.

"It's so nice to talk to you like this," she sounded hurried as usual, "but how about coming to visit some time? It's been so long!"

# THE WEEPING BRIDE

an excerpt from "Dogeaters" a novel-in-progress

Jessica Hagedorn

There it is, the centerpiece on the presidential table: a twelve-tiered, gold and white cake trimmed with silver sugar doves. No...it's a twelve-tiered, white and silver cake with white sugar doves and gold filling, created especially for the occasion by the Alacran family dentist, Dr. Benita Zamora. Her nephew is a poet of the underground, and *she is not at the wedding*. The perennially smiling dentist has been detained by four unsmiling members of the Special Squadron while on the way to her car after baking the magnificent cake. The car, a modest gunmetal blue Toyota Corona, is still locked and parked in front of the Dental Center's steel and glass entrance. A half eaten ham sandwich lies rotting on the back seat, wrapped in wax paper. Everything's left undisturbed. There seem to be no witnesses to the golden event. *Dr. Benita Zamora is simply not at the wedding*. According to the Manila Times Daily, she has been placed under house arrest for insubordination and inciting to riot; or rather, she was placed under *office arrest*. The popular, affluent dentist, *dentist to the stars*, has chosen to spend the rest of her days within the confines of her professional environment. "It doesn't matter, anyway. I only go home to sleep...I'd rather die in my office," the unmarried dentist reveals under torture.

No. It's actually a twelve-tiered hallucination, a golden pound cake with white vanilla and rum icing, white marzipan doves with silver eyes, sculpted white chocolate bows attached to silver filigree butterflies imported from Spain, no, actually the filigree butterflies were constructed by sixteen blind nuns from the Convent of Our Lady Of Perpetual Sorrow. The filigree butterflies are a wedding gift from the First Lady, filigree butterflies suspended to invisible wires, flying out of the bottom tier of the phenomenal cake.

The dentist is dead. The dentist never existed. The unforgettable wedding cake has actually been designed and baked from scratch by the bride's glamorous mother, Isabel Alacran. "I never knew she could cook!" The First Lady exclaims, visibly impressed by the intricacies of the edible construction. "My wife was trained to be an architect," Severo Alacran whispers confidentially, lying to the First Lady and the President. The beaming President grunts with admiration. He hardly moves at all, swollen and rooted to his chair. He and his wife are guests of honor at the wedding.

Holding hands under an arch of violet, spun sugar flowers, the customary bride and groom figurines stand poised on the top tier of the cake. The First Lady grins. She is served the first slice, and takes a healthy bite. The President shakes his head and points to his potbelly, refusing the cake. The First Lady signals for more. A waiter with Elvis Presley hair rushes to serve her.



Senator Avila once said: "Food is what's important. The center of our celebrations and our sorrows... You can't describe a real Filipino without listing food, music, dancing, and love... most probably in that order. Food is the pleasure that doesn't talk back."

So the Senator once said, so even his enemy the General agrees. So the weeping bride dreams the night before the Senator's assassination: buttery cakes melt in her mouth, tomatoes and onions are stuffed in the slit bellies of grilled fish, she bastes the roasting brown flesh of pigs with honey, and smothers the lacquered pigs with banana leaves, wearing her floor-length white veil crowned with a wreath of garlic. "I INSIST!" her glamorous mother insists, hanging a necklace of garlic bulbs around her daughter's neck for extra protection. "You can't be too careful nowadays," the sinister groom grins, flashing his canine teeth.

It's the pungent vinegar perfume of pork and chicken adobo the weeping bride smells, the pungent vinegar perfume a man rubs against his skin before pressing a woman closer to him ... Taxi dancer, blondie, whore, a man's home away from home. "What's the matter, blondie? Can't stand my cologne?" The President laughs, rubbing more garlic and vinegar behind his ears. His bodyguards laugh with him. He's definitely one with a taste for blondes; although he likes them all, actually. Dark or fair, fat or thin. Nubile, or matronly. His personal physician's put him on a strict diet, and it's all for his own good. No pork, no cake, no women. He wards off death. It's all just a memory to him now, some image he pulls out of the night while he strokes himself down there, all dry and crusty between the legs.

The weeping bride recalls her father. She wonders when he too, will die.

*Senator Domingo Avila has been shot dead.*

Mourned by his stoic widow Luisa, his missing daughter the beauty queen Daisy, his bewildered teenage daughter, Aurora; now mourned by his resentful brother Oscar, Oscar's wife Delia and only legitimate daughter, the artist Clarita; now mourned by the weeping bride, Rosario "Baby" Alacran. She has just married Oswaldo "Pepe" Carreon. She does not know why she marries, or mourns.

She is not a political person. She is not someone who knew the Senator well. She is not someone who knows anyone well. Baby recalls his kindness to her once; no, maybe three times in her brief past, when she was a solitary child. Some generous gesture on the Senator's part, even she finds hard to remember—but it was there, just the same. It's the essence she holds on to, as she mourns his violent death at the hands of unknown gunmen, in spite of herself.

In spite of herself, she has longed to invite him to her spectacular wedding, and made the mistake of mentioning it. She was ridiculed, as usual. She was

dismissed. The weeping bride knew better, of course. It *was* impossible. It *was* silly. She had no control over the situation. Even with an invitation, the Senator wouldn't have shown up.

The wedding banquet never stops. A nauseating feast for the eyes, as well as the body and soul. Oxtails stewed for hours in peanut sauce, ethereal egg custards set in pools of burnt sugar syrup, silver tureens filled to the brim with belly and steaming hot black *dinuguan*...It's the black blood of a pig she pours on her head, the black pig's blood stew she bathes in to mourn the death of a man...

"Imagine," she once confessed to her cousin Girlie, "I've been eating and enjoying *dinuguan* for years, never even considering... *Dugo is dugo, dugo* means blood! My god, it's the black blood of a pig, and it's terrible and delicious! My mother laughed when I told her. Now I can't eat it anymore. Just the thought of it makes me sick..."

"You're really weird, making a big deal over nothing," Girlie Alacran said to her younger cousin, with no comprehension but some sympathy.

Senator Avila has been shot dead, by unknown assailants. The weeping bride has been in bed for the past week, with a mysterious illness: aching bones, lack of appetite, occasional chills, and frequent nightmares. *Maybe it's the flu*, she tells her mother on the telephone. The weeping bride apologizes for being ill, as she apologizes for most things in her life. Her mother says nothing in return. She is more annoyed than concerned with her only child's frail health. Her daughter immediately senses this, and gets off the phone.

She has not said anything to her mother about her skin. The tiny, itchy, watery blisters that have suddenly appeared on her fingers, after so many years. She tries not to think about it, and applies more ointment from a secret tube she keeps under her pillow. Her furtiveness is unwarranted. Her husband is never home. Her husband makes flimsy excuses, blames it all on his job. Somehow, she thinks he may be telling the truth. *His job*, he has told her proudly, *is his whole life*. She never forgets anything anyone says. Her brain is a file cabinet, stuffed with snatches of conversations and memories.

She remembers her servants. How quietly then enter and exit, bringing her hot kalamansi juice, camomile tea, aspirin, icebags for her headaches, hot water bottles for her sore muscles. They take turns massaging her, saying very little. The whole house to herself, ghostly servants on tiptoe, at her beck and call. She imagines they must mourn the dead Senator, and wonders if he is their hero. She is ashamed of feeling connected to them, and somehow feels unworthy. She tries, once again, to think of something else.

Her husband has been gone for two days, this time. She isn't sure, but she expects something ominous about this new husband of hers who works

with the General. She picks up her remote control, turns the color television on. Two o'clock in the afternoon, time for her favorite talent show. Lopito's jovial face appears on the 19-inch screen, to the comforting sound of laughter and applause. If her mother knew she was addicted to this show, she'd make another one of her cruel, snide comments. Endless talent shows and soap operas are something the weeping bride has learned to watch and enjoy in secret. A furtive, innocent life—how she spends all her afternoons.

Someone starts to sing. A quavering, female voice. *Soprano*. The weeping bride is unable to concentrate and finds her familiar images painfully depressing: anxious singers and clumsy dancers, earnest elocutionists, lewd comedians, and even the aging, jocular Lopito... It's all so sad and vulgar, just as her mother always said. She is suddenly afraid, for no apparent reason. *She does not want this baby*. She wonders if it is too late to see a doctor. She fantasizes phoning her worldly cousin Girlie. Surely, Girlie knew a competent abortionist. If not in Manila, maybe Tokyo or Hongkong. Money was certainly no object. The weeping bride chokes on her tears, turning off her noisy television.

Laying back against the sweat-drenched pillows, she closes her eyes. The weeping bride invents a cleansing ritual for herself. She makes it up as she goes along, this movie starring herself, this movie that goes on and on, this movie that is the only sure way she knows to put herself to sleep...

*Senator Domingo Avila has been assassinated.*

It's the black blood of a pig the weeping bride pours on her head, the black blood stew of pale pink pig entrails she bathes in, mourning the death of a man she never knew.

## **SPiRiT:** For my mother, Marietta Guido Rappise *Rachel Guido deVries*

It was the Fourth of July and we had counted on seeing fireworks. My sister Bernadette was six. We lived just outside of Paterson, New Jersey and it was 1954, and one of those hot and muggy summers. My brother, little Tommy, was a baby, not even a year old, and I was nine. My father had promised to take us all to the fireworks at Hinchcliffe Stadium. The year before had been wonderful: me and Bernie fell asleep but woke up just in time for the grande finale: red, white, and blue filled the sky. I burned my hand on a sparkler, but my father bought me an Italian ice, lemon, and the burn cooled off.

A year later, everything had changed. My father was hardly ever at home. He drove a truck during the day; at night he bartended at a place called Nick's Three Vets. He came home very late, in the middle of the night. I knew when he came home because my mother would be pussy-footing around the kitchen, which was right outside Bernie's and my bedroom, and I always woke up when my mother did. I could hear her bare feet on the linoleum; she never wore shoes or slippers in the house; she took her shoes off the second she was in the door, winter and summer, and I loved her feet. They were square, sort of, with fat little toes, and bunions on her big toes and pinkies. They were the only thing about my mother that I associated with freedom and luxury because of the way she sighed when she took her shoes off; it was the closest sound to contentment I ever heard come naturally from her, except, perhaps, when he was gone to Nick's for the night, and we would play hang-the-man or Huckle-buckle-Beanstalk, or judge and jury.

But he changed everything, even the sweet sound of her feet whispering past my bedroom door. I could tell when he was home, which made her feet sound different than when she walked past the door earlier in the night to get a slice of Italian bread and a raw onion and a can of sardines. Or when she glided past at 6 a.m. to make the coffee. She would sit in the kitchen and drink her coffee and smoke her cigarettes and read her science fiction paperback, until it was time to wake us up for school. Sometimes she let it get a little late, and I would lie there next to Bernie who never woke up and start to worry. Somehow I knew I had to wait, even if it meant getting yelled at by Mrs. McThomas; I knew the early morning was Mama's time. I smelled the coffee, I heard the match strike two or three times; knew when she poured her second cup, and knew that she poured her third just about one minute before she came into our room saying, "Rise and shine, the coffee's on." Every once in a while she'd whisper to me, "Say you're sick and I'll let you stay home. We'll go downtown, Say you're sick," low under her breath so Bernie wouldn't hear. Bernie was still too young to go downtown with Mama.

So I would pretend I had a stomach ache or a sore throat and have something to look forward to.

When Pop came home, Mama's feet rustled and sped instead of gliding and whispering. They became nervous feet. When he came in the kitchen through the back door I held my breath, for the first few moments were crucial. Sometimes she just made him fried eggs and toast, and they'd both sit at the table and whisper. But more and more often they would start to fight. He'd say things like, "What the hell'reya doin' up? What'reya waitin' fer me, checking up? Fer chrissakes." Or "Oh, please, Ma, not again, fer chrissakes I'm beat." I never could hear what she said; she always whispered. The best he could do was keep his normal tone, which by then was mostly bossy and always on the verge of rage.

Well, it was the Fourth of July and all day me and Bernie had been waiting for dusk so we could leave for the stadium. We were very excited for little Tommy, because it was his first fireworks. We bought sparklers at the corner store and kept them near us all day as we played hopscotch with the Limongi kids who were also going to the stadium. Both me and Bernie were just a little edgy because all day Mama had been very quiet. Around three in the afternoon Pop said he had to go someplace and that unleashed full-blown panic. We begged him not to go. Mama kept saying, "C'mon, Tom. You promised them." And he replied, "I know. I'll be back in plenty of time."

When it got to be dusk, we were all huddled together on the front steps, Mama, me, Bernadette, and little Tommy in his stroller. Mama smoked cigarettes and tried to get us interested in one of our favorite games: pick a number from one to ten. Then count the cars until you reach your chosen number and the car that matched your number revealed the man you would marry, or the first car you would have, or the color of your next dress. Me and Bernie tried, but it was no fun. The Limongi's pulled out of their driveway across the street and stopped their car at our house. "Come with us," Betty Limongi yelled, "let Big Tom meet you there." "Oh, no," Mama said, "he'll be home any minute." I wanted to die, I wanted to jump in their car, because I knew he wasn't coming, and so did she. But she protected him, and I protected her. I *would* die before I'd double-cross and desert my mother and jump in anybody's car, even if I wanted to.

Bernie started to cry. She was the most disappointed because she didn't understand yet that he never kept his promises. I felt so bad for her I had to turn it to mean; I started to make fun of her for crying. Mama shot me a look, bit her lower lip, so I held back and tried to think about something else. The street became more and more quiet; everyone was gone to the stadium. It was getting darker, and later.

Mama stood up. "C'mon," she said, "let's try the Haledon Rec." She looked at me: we both knew there were no fireworks at the Rec field, but it was within walking distance, two miles from home. Bernie's face

lit up and she squeezed my hand. Even little Tommy got excited, he grinned up at us from his stroller where he had been sitting too quite. My heart sank and jumped at the same time. Mama smiled at us. "We can at least try. And we can get a lemon ice on the way home." And off we went, Mama pushing the stroller, and Bernie and me holding on the either side, walking very quickly, so that just in case there were fireworks we wouldn't miss too much. We got there, and it was, of course, deserted, and worse, it looked sad and scruffy because it was empty, and the grass was dry and brown, and there was no sign of any fireworks. We stood, the four of us, close together in the middle of the block across the street from the field, and for some reason I walked away from Mama and Bernie and little Tommy toward the corner. I just didn't want to look at that field. Mama must have felt the same way because she walked in the other direction. When I was furthest away from them, I heard a dog barking and just like that it was on my heels, a big, gray german shepherd, snarling and barking; I started racing toward Mama but then realized I'd lead the crazy dog to all of them so I ran across the street with that dog right after me, I was crying and screaming all at once and in the back of my mind I could hear Mama saying Theresa, Theresa, it's alright, keep running you're doing good. I threw a look over my shoulder and there they came, all three of them, Mama running furiously and Tommy laughing his head off with excitement, and Bernie was keeping right up with mama, yelling, "Get away from her," still holding onto one side of the stroller. And just as suddenly as the dog started chasing me it stopped, distracted or bored or who knows what, it just stopped and crossed the street, still at a mad pace.

By the time Mama caught up with me my crying was serious, I was sobbing and gulping and scared to death. But I took a look at Mama, and at Bernie still glued to one side of little Tommy's stroller, and Tommy was laughing and laughing and something caught me and all of a sudden we were all laughing hysterically, wiping our eyes on the hem of Mama's dress and laughing our heads off.

Mama caught her breath, said to me, "You're alright?" I nodded, a big laugh and a sob still in my throat. "Got your sparklers?" Me and Bernie nodded. "C'mon, then. Let's have some fireworks." We walked to the middle of the field, at first one at a time, then all together, we lit our sparklers and watched the tiny and beautiful stars light up the night.

## **her & geronimo**

*ruthann robson*

october marks the beginning of the season in indian river county, florida: the rainy season; the citrus season; the tourist season. during the season, the lands between the indian river & the atlantic ocean are flooded with migrant farmworkers from the south & retirees escaping the cold of the north.

claire comes with the retirees, although strictly speaking she is not one of them herself. she comes with her husband, mortimer, a semi-retired dentist in chicago who believes himself transformed into a fisherman when he is in florida.

geronimo comes with the migrants, although strictly speaking he is not one of them himself. he is a crewleader, a labor contractor, just as his father had been. unlike his father, geronimo tries to be fair & to keep the migrants' pay from falling too far below the minimum wage.

both geronimo & claire come to indian river each october, at least in some measure, to see sylvana. claire vacations at sylvana's trade post campground with its authentic looking cabins & man-made well-stocked pond where mortimer fishes. geronimo sells the excess oranges & grapefruits his workers have picked to sylvana's trade post fruit company, a tourist trap perched alongside u.s. highway one. both claire & geronimo share sylvana's bed in the erratic intervals she dictates.

it is the promise of sylvana's vagrant passion that excites geronimo & claire as they pull off the road into the imported gravel of sylvana's parking lot for the first time this season. separated in time by a few hours & in style by the virtues of a yellow mercedes contrasted with the romance of a red ford pickup, claire & geronimo are both greeted by the same scene. the trade post fruit company is occupied by a few desultory teenagers arranging oranges. about one hundred & fifty yards to the southeast, the cabins look clean, but virtually deserted. in the middle the house boasts a spot of bright color sitting in sylvana's spot under the orange awning. both geronimo & claire are disappointed that it is not sylvala, but bilma leaning back on the steps in a persimmon caftan.

bilma sports the honeyed tan & accent of a boat-lift cuban. she has never been a rich woman & therefore loves gold, which she wears in dozens of chains around her neck & wrists. she does maintenance & more & more management for sylvana, who teases her about the jewelery, but never forgets to commemorate an occasion with links of fourteen carat. bilma is not an unfriendly person, but she shuns both claire & geronimo, evading their questions about sylvana's whereabouts.

"donde esta ella?"

geronimo acts as if bilma cannot speak perfect english. or perhaps he thinks his use of spanish will forge a connection on which bilma will slide him the answer. if he only knew. bilma finds his spanish torturous. his native language is mayan, which he speaks to some of his laborers. it is a language of agriculture. & poverty. it is full of pretty sounds & has seven seasons. but geronimo thinks spanish is the language of culture. & seduction. english is for important business.

“her-on-ee-mo!”

bilma pronounces geronimo’s name correctly, starting with its spanish h sound & including the i like a very long e. still, she says it like a reproach, as if to ask *donde* were an intimate question about one’s mother. his huge shoulders slump towards his chest & he looks like a cowering bird. once, bilma had referred to him as a good looking vulture who had obviously done a lot of body building & sylvana had laughed.

when claire comes to bilma, she avails no strategies. she can speak only english & does not see the need to know any other language. she also does not see the need to cajole a mere maid. in her world, she is the one who is catered to, by mortimer & by their son, roger. though she will admit indian river seems to be a different world than chicago. even mo is a bit more distant here, preoccupied with his hooks & baits. she has even found herself cajoling sylvana. but a maid, no, she will not sink that low.

finally, in the second scorching week of october, sylvana replaces bilma on the steps of the house. sylvana had used the weeks since she had come back from blue cypress lake like a washrag to scour the exhilarating stain of summer off her body. but she is getting older & does not work as fast as she did thirty years ago, when she first started visiting the old woman, who was old even then. too, sylvana’s flesh is less obliging now, & its crevices need to be coaxed to yield to autumn.

while sylvana was scrubbing & thinking of the old woman, geronimo & claire have been circling the house, evading each other, exchanging polite words, their reconnaissance never ceasing. for more years that either would like to remember, they have been surveying each other’s terrain at the trade post, each knowing that the other had a special relationship with sylvana & each suspecting the intimacy. both of them dammed their own insecurity which would not allow them to risk upsetting the fragile balance with any demand for honesty or fidelity. this autumn, they track each other like two starving cats trying to be casual. the competition is fierce to see who will get to sylvana first.

It is geronimo.

he comes upon sylvana brushing her hair outside as she always does, cleaning the boar bristle brush with her fingers & giving the fine tangle of



darkness to the wind.

“for the birds, for nests”

she says, though he hardly hears her. her long strands hang to the wooden steps like a loose bouquet of industrially thin copper wires. she never braids her hair; it is her vanity.

“do you want to go to sebastian?”

he has gained his composure & is determined to act as if they have been separated for a few moments rather than a few seasons.

“what for?”

she doesn't like to travel unless she has a reason and loving geronimo is not reason enough.

“to drink. to dance. to catch up on the news & spend my new money.”

she goes inside to change her shirt & brush off her pants, clean this morning. he does not follow her, but keeps his left boot on the step, wary of claire.

only when they are on the highway several miles north of the trade post does geronimo settle into his success & relax his guard. he feels like he is dreaming. a usually attentive driver, sylvana has to remind him to flick his windshield wipers on.

the bar is not crowded, the downpour is not good for business. they both drink too fast & are too shy to dance in the lonely wooden space set aside on the floor for just that purpose. besides, there is no music. they go to another bar, not because they want more noise, but because they want to feel less obvious. it is equally uncrowded. they drink too fast again & again they do not dance. but they touch more & more.

back in the truck, geronimo asks sylvana what she did at the lake this summer.

“nothing much”

“for four months, you did nothing much?”

he thinks he is teasing her, but she is neither enticed nor provoked.

“what's to do at blue cypress lake?”

her eyes glitter like those of the old woman & she sees that geronimo can not only be stupid but callous. but she thinks that she might still love him. so many years must mean something. the sharp rationales for their loving have been sanded down like the rain & wind must have sanded down the land that has become the flatness between the river & the ocean.

“you're right. nothing much.”

but he knows she was doing something. the same thing she does every summer, though he has no idea what that could be. why go to a lake when the ocean is practically your backyard? he is annoyed & fascinated with sylvana's predictable eccentricities. they are something he admires in the same way he admires the way her jeans fit or the way she swings her hair. he cannot imagine sylvana apart from him. because he does not want to.

the lights are off in the house as well as in all of the cabins, including the one shared by claire & mo. geronimo notices that sylvana has abandoned her shoes as she pads across the long yard filled with mud. this time, he follows her up the stairs.

she lights a candle & lies across her double bed diagonally. he sits on the edge of the bed, each of his huge hands holding one of her feet. stroking. stroking. the smell of scotch blends with the ozone. rain splatters through a window which sylvana never closes. the rhythm of the water is its own intoxication.

wet & sweet, they kiss like old friends.

until the friendship gets wetter & sweeter & makes geronimo's fingers clutch sylvana's hair at the nape of her neck. tightly. almost too tightly. he is looking at her.

"puta. puta."

"lo que tu necessita es un buen rabo.

a good cock. my cock. & you need a fast fuck, too, don't you, maricon?"

she is twisting as if to be free but making no move to untangle herself. she is sweating & he is sweating. he is calling her *cuno*. *cunt*. *cunt*. he is taking off her jeans & telling her she is a *resingada*. one who has been fucked a lot. he is mixing up his spanish & his english & forgetting mayan. he is forgetting where he has been since the last time he left this bed.

& sylvana arches her back & says

"quiero templarte."

i want to fuck you.

& they do.

they do.

it is still raining before dawn when geronimo leaves for the labor camp. he is proud that he is a man with responsibilities & to wake up with a woman ten years older than himself on a wednesday morning is not one of them. even as he says this to himself, he does not believe it. & all day, the branches of the citrus trees remind him of the tangle of sylvana's hair against the sky blue of her sheets.

sylvana is drinking tea at her laminated table when claire's knock interrupts bilma's shout that claire is here.

"c'mon in."

sylvana means both of them, but bilma leaves to check on some reported roof leaks. the touristas in the cabins must be kept content.

"where have you been?"

claire can sense that geronimo has beaten her once again to sylvana's bed & she cannot hide her annoyance. her voice grates sylvana.

"around. where have you been?"

"here. waiting for you."

"since last march?"

"don't be ridiculous. for the past two weeks. just as i always  
come here for you, sylvana."

"how's mortimer?"

"don't bring him up, for god's sake."

claire hates for sylvana to mention her husband mo, the semi-retired dentist  
now fishing on the stocked pond, even in the rain. claire wants to pretend  
that she & sylvana are the only two people in the entire universe.

"i just asked a question."

"don't be mean, sylvana."

"i'm not. would you like some tea? it's just that i've been busy."

sylvana is trying to soothe the younger woman. she wishes claire did not  
have her hair cut so short, so bluntly. she wishes claire were not so angular,  
so harsh; that she wasn't married to a semi-retired dentist twenty years her  
senior; that she had an angry independence rather than an adolescent sar-  
casm. sylvana knows she wishes too much for claire & tries to refrain from it.  
claire's whine interrupts.

"with who? busy with who?"

"bilma. her & i have been cleaning this place."

"she. it's she & i."

sylvana tilts her head at claire. she wonders what makes claire presump-  
tuous enough to correct her grammar. it couldn't be money, though claire  
was rich if viewed as an extension of mortimer, which she was by virtually  
everyone except sylvana. is it because she fancies herself a writer, working  
on that stupid book, though she doesn't even scribble sylvana a letter in nine  
months? sylvana wants to know, but doesn't ask her questions. once she  
had loved claire, she was still sure of that. when claire had told her about the  
lakes in illinois & how the wheat grew right to the edges of them. what she  
wasn't sure of was why she still loved her, if she did.

they let their cups grow cold in silence, the silence easing out of its tension  
& becoming softer, even compassionate. they allow gazes into eyes, blue to  
brown, brown to blue. the silence traces their hands from ceramic to the vinyl  
of the placemats & from there to flesh. thumb on knuckle. finger outlining  
vein.

*how could they have ever quarreled?*

it is the silence that asks this. & they answer by gliding into sylvana's  
bedroom & stripping the sheets before they ease into the bed. this is a dance  
they remember. the silence is playing their song. sylvana sees a cool blue  
lake with stalks of wheat as straight & as golden as claire's thighs. her hands  
are a silent wind. searching. maybe they could be in love again instead of  
merely lovers. for an hour, neither woman can hear the rain.

claire is talking about mo while sylvana is shaking a warm metallic feeling from her body. she must have dozed.

“what i need”

claire is always telling people what she needs,

“is a financial base. i can’t walk out on mo without any money. you don’t understand. you own all this land. this business. money is independence. & what about roger?”

sylvana wants to scream *fuck roger*, but claire hates profanity. sylvana hates roger. for her, he is a spoiled & immature *maricone*. he uses his homosexuality to manipulate his mother, who has never divulged her activities with sylvana. the mother & son conspire to hide the truth from mortimer, though claire is supposedly writing a book about her adaptation to her son’s sexuality. she wants to document her trials & therapies & is sure it will be a bestseller.

“& then i will leave mo.”

she tells sylvana, who is again asleep.

bilma wakes sylvana past noon to report on the leaks.

“nothing much & the rain is stopping too.”

“you look tired.”

“i am.”

“then why do you do such crazy things?”

bilma hopes she sounds merely curious instead of annoyed. she tries not to watch sylvana getting dressed & not to think how she became undressed.

“who knows? but two in the same day is no good. stupid. you know, i sit out at blue cypress lake all summer & never give anyone else a thought except the old woman, of course — & i’m back here acting twenty three instead of sixty three. crazy, ain’t it?”

on the porch, the two women reminisce about bilma’s husband, how he beat her, how sylvana ran him off the property with a shovel, how the cops came & wanted to arrest sylvana. those were strange days, they agree. & they were long enough ago so that the women feel free enough to inflate the october afternoon with their laughter.

until a paler female with plucked honey eyebrows & flawlessly shaved legs joins them. claire. then the three women speak about the weather. autumn comes, & all that.

then mo approaches the porch, attracted by this subject like a hungry fish.

aragonimo is striding towards the house, sweaty & wet from the groves. he had thought to check on sylvana, but he can’t say that, so he pretends to think he has left his wallet inside. his new plan is to let everyone know, to let claire know, that he spent last night with sylvana.

“it ain’t in there.”

sylvana says. geronimo is stunned by her conviction. he spins as if to leave, but suddenly understands that it would look like defeat, so he joins the weather conversation. he has seen a lot of weather — during the season & elsewhere.

bilma sees the rainbow first. three perfect arches spread across the sky to the west. each one has a complete spectrum, the blue visible against the background of clouds.

“rare.”

they all agree, commenting on their favorite parts of the phenomenon.

“the way the rainbows are connected at the bottom, like they are holding hands.”

claire clasps her own hands together in appreciation of her observation.

“that’s not true.”

sylvana is amazed at her own vehemence.

“yeah. it is. they are connected. i mean, not like holding hands, but connected, yeah.”

geronimo agrees with claire.

“no. they are *not* connected.”

sylvana tries to look through the eyes of the old woman, to check her own perception. what she sees is that what is connected is not the rainbows, but claire & geronimo. she sees their hands joined solid as prisms. she shuts her eyes tight. tighter.

“well, maybe it’s done with mirrors.”

mortimer laughs alone & long.

in embarrassment, the minature crowd disperses, leaving sylvana & bilma alone again.

“stupid. stupid. stupid.”

sylvana repeats the word like an incantation.

“who?”

the trying to be merely curious bilma asks. but she cannot decipher sylvana’s mutter. did she say *her & mo?* or *geronimo?* or something else? bilma turns the syllables around in her mind, looking for an answer.

over the next two weeks, geronimo brings sylvana dulce de toronja, a complicated desert of sugar and grapefruit pulp, which claire eats, licking the tartness from her fingers & saving the sweetness on her tongue. claire brings sylvana fried fish from the pond, which geronimo takes from the refrigerator & eats cold & greasy. sylvana sleeps with geronimo again & then with claire & then with claire again & then with geronimo & again & again. her lovers are like a parquet floor & make a pattern she cannot see because she is too close.

claire & geronimo swell with the comfort of their routine & neither notices

sylvana's new habit of averting or even closing her eyes.

it is the last day of the month that sylvana again drives north to sebastian. only this time she is alone. this time it is day & it is not raining. this time she is not going to a bar.

but to her lawyer. francisco alster, esq. does not make sylvana wait very long. he is a prompt efficient man with a passion for representing migrant farmworkers & suing the shit out of crewleaders & growers for decent wages & good housing. his small but steady practice of representing clients like sylvana supports his passion.

alster has always liked sylvana, even when she had chased guys off her property with shovels. he appreciates the way her hair seems to stretch & shimmer even when she is sitting perfectly still. he admires what he sees as her integrity, as her self sufficiency, although he thinks she is not always honest. but he is also unsettled by her. perhaps he knows too much about her. or perhaps he intuits that what she so easily inspires in others is not something she will allow for herself to succumb to. once he thought he might love her, but he thankfully talked himself out of it.

the years have made alster cynical. he sees what sylvana is doing as a selfish act rather one of generosity. still, he cannot help admiring her. he has the papers ready per her instructions.

the secretary, dressed as some kind of court jester or a clown, comes in the lawyer's office along with the receptionist to witness sylvana's signatures. the receptionist is dressed as an indian & sylvana is mildly offended, though she isn't sure why.

sylvana writes out a check for alster, shakes his hand & suddenly kisses him on the cheek.

"how will i be able to contact you?"

"you won't."

sylvana smiles. the secretary & receptionist smile. alster smiles. sylvana leaves & they almost regret not asking her to stay for their halloween party.

she drives west rather than south. inland. inland. she can hear the old woman's voice getting stronger & stronger. she can see the old woman sitting on the shore of blue cypress lake & drawing in the soil with a stick.

claire & geronimo circle the house searching for sylvana. they spot each other & are relieved. but they think it is not like her to be gone alone all night; all day; a few days; a week.

mo makes his annual plans to head further south, but claire will not go. he cannot leave indian river not knowing about sylvana. mortimer can & does.

the night geronimo comes to claire's lonely cabin it is cold. the predictions of frost have been borne out. some of geronimo's crew are tending smudge pots in the groves, lit to keep the citrus from freezing. he has brought her his favorite desert, dulce de toronja, thinking she will find it unique. he tells her how difficult it is to make, how one must constantly change the water while cooking the grapefruit pulp. claire is enchanted by the sweetness; by the sweetness of a man who can cook something other than fried fish. not all men are like mo, she tells herself. men can be gentle. like roger. like geronimo.

claire's hair is too short & too bluntly cut & it rebels against geronimo's grasp.

"quiero templarte."

she does not understand his spanish, but claire likes the rugged sound of it almost as much as she likes the wide smooth spread of geronimo's back. his muscles vibrate like animals caught in a brown velvet sack. even in the dark, she can feel where the tropical sun has summoned his pigments to the surface of his flesh.

bilma knows claire & geronimo are lovers before they do. she can't help but find the pair amusing, though as the new owner of the trade post campground & trade post fruit company, bilma has little time to engage in amusement. the season is in full swing. she vows to manage the place more aggressively than sylvana did.

"to tell you the truth, the old woman let the place go downhill in the past few years."

bilma has no one to tell this to & so she says it to a small bird building a nest near the porch. the bird does not sing back to bilma about the absence of hills in this wet land between river & ocean.

at blue cypress lake, two old women squat & chant & braid each other's hair. they look into the sky and see the fine mist of rain which collects colors around the sun. they look at their shadows, which form a single dark mountain on the sand. they look across the water for hours; for days; for seasons. & when they do not like what they see, they do not shut their eyes.

# Poetry



Mabel La Grave 1981

Eugenia

Paria, Venezuela





# NEW YEAR'S MORNING JANUARY 1, 1986

*Sapphire*

for the prostitutes and lesbians in Mozambique  
who were sent to re-education camps after the revolution

Our mother who art in heaven  
shattered, annihilated and desecrated  
was thy name

For you were the kingdom  
and the glory  
and the power  
till the men came

Now it must be as it was in the beginning  
or forever and ever and ever  
will the earth cry out your name

the grass won't grow  
the rivers won't flow

The world as we know it is coming to an end  
oh mother help us to survive the transition  
The men cry among themselves, master and slave alike,  
want to know which group of men will reign  
when the battle is over

The world cannot be led by men again  
our funeral approaches

we put nails in our coffins  
when we don't call these men on their sexism  
when we don't read these men on their homophobia  
All the revolutions will be huge wheels  
grinding us to dust if we don't fight  
everywhere as who and what we are:

homosexuals, prostitutes, women

The women issue cannot come after the revolution  
unless you want to be hung at the victory day parade  
or be re-educated

Do you want to be re-educated in the missionary  
position and how to serve men  
be given incentives to breed  
or not breed

still be illegal

still be an enemy of the state?

Whores, outlaws, bulldaggers rise advance  
your time came a long time ago  
but they broke the clock

# THE COURSE OF THE LETTUCE

*Marjorie Agosin*

*Translated by S. Jill Levine*

María Asunción Ribero,  
bloodied by colors of flesh in  
my apron dizzy with  
greens  
I know the leafy ecstasy  
of cutting a lettuce  
into many-colored, infinite pieces  
like a sky printed on  
the tablecloth  
I slowly cut  
the lettuce  
as if combing the hair of my beloved  
I touch it, caress, slice  
and bathe it,  
and place  
the invincible lettuce in  
a pool of oil and vinegar  
and she takes on that majestic green  
we see only in chloroform dreams  
magnificent, she approaches the  
mouths of intruders who will  
never understand  
this perpetual surprise:  
cutting a lettuce  
bought in a flower market  
chosen among the beautiful  
so that she alone  
celebrates  
on the table of concave mirrors  
on the lame table of the poor fortunates  
speaking from the mouths of those supposed  
masters of recipes  
when María Asunción Ribero  
knows the truth:  
cut the lettuce  
twisting before the mystery of her fingers  
beginning to write  
within its leaves  
a green poem.

# MI ESTOMAGO (MY BELLY)

*Marjorie Agosin*

*Translated by Cola Franzen*

Naked and as if in silence  
I approach my belly  
it has gone on changing like summer  
withdrawing from the sea  
or like a dress that expands with the hours  
My belly  
is more than round  
because when I sit down  
it spreads like a brush fire  
then,  
I touch it to recall  
all the things inside it:  
salt and merriment  
the fried eggs of winter breakfast  
the milk that strangled me in my youth  
the coca-cola that stained my teeth  
the nostalgia for the glass of wine  
we discovered in La Isla  
or french fries and olive oil  
And as I remember  
I feel it growing  
and bowing down more and more ceremoniously to the ground  
until it caresses my feet, my toes  
that never could belong to a princess.

I rejoice  
that my belly is as wide as Chepi's old sombrero  
Chepi was my grandmother  
and I pamper it no end  
when it complains or has bad dreams  
from eating too much.

Midsummer, at seventy years of age,  
this Sunday the seventh  
my belly is still with me  
and proudly goes parading along the shore  
some say I am already old and ugly  
that my breasts are entangled with my guts  
but my belly is here at my side a good companion  
and don't say it's made of fat  
rather tender morsels of meat toasting in the sun.

## IN SPITE OF, AND BECAUSE

*Jacqueline Lapidus*

No thanks to God when I was born,  
no sigh of relief, no phallic pride,  
no ritual mutilation masked with prayer.  
Years later, in my baby book  
I find an unfamiliar name  
in a language I never learned to read  
or speak.

*Yes. You are still a Jew.*

"I don't go to *any* church!"  
says the child, puzzled, to an inquisitive nun,  
"I won't go back to Sunday school,  
it's silly and boring," she tells her parents.  
She is not in the minority  
at P.S. 164. She hangs up her stocking  
on the bookcase and knows  
perfectly well who changed the dolls' clothes  
and built the dollhouse — the same  
agnostic immigrants who explain the Maccabees  
and give the kids a present for each candle.  
She asks the Four Questions. She finds  
the *afikoman*. She wonders  
why Aunt Sophie can make gefilte fish  
and not Mom. She gets "floaters"  
in the chicken soup.  
She fasts on Yom Kippur — once.  
*Why not? She is still a Jew.*

For a while she attends "junior services"  
on Friday night, for the cake  
and the boys, but she would really rather  
sit in the kitchen with their mothers.  
Once she walked a mile and a half  
for a chat with the caterer's wife.  
She dates a boy with dark skin,  
she refuses an award  
from the Daughters of the American Revolution.  
She's in love with another valedictorian.  
She helps organize the Atheists'  
Seder, she serves bagels and lox for brunch  
after the senior prom.  
*What else? I was still a Jew.*

I never went to the Hillel Club,  
I gave no contributions,  
planted no trees in the Promised Land.  
I know more about the Tudors  
than the Torah.

On a college weekend I got drunk in French  
with my best buddy's best buddy  
then hurt him forever by  
forgetting to write. I had  
a Viennese doctor in New York  
who asked no questions.

I gave in to a brute who sang basso profundo,  
on the balcony of a freezing fraternity house.  
The night before exams, I called home  
and cried for two hours  
and took them anyway, and got high honors.  
*Good. She is still a Jew.*

From my office on the 28th floor  
I stared out at steel beams and vertiginous  
space — a place  
to begin an odyssey,  
trailing a WASP writer-to-be  
who shipped out on a freighter.

I prayed to the ghosts  
of Chaucer, Shakespeare and Eliot  
in the appropriate cathedrals.  
I cooked and sewed buttons for a Swedish  
student in the Cambridgeshire fens.  
It was pouring in April in Paris.

I sneaked past the desk clerk with a guy  
whose mom used to bake the best cookies  
on the block, but I couldn't do it.

With a pang of envy I left  
a girlfriend from NYU working for UNESCO  
and checked my bags through  
to Athens. I sent my grandmother  
photos of myself at Knossos  
with a Greek professor in horn-rimmed glasses  
and she said, "He looks  
just like a nice Jewish boy."

*Hmm. Looks like you're still a Jew.*

Suddenly everyone began to tell me  
stories about Jews. My landlord,  
excusing himself for not saving his neighbor's  
children during the Occupation.  
My dressmaker, survivor of a Sephardic family  
from Thessaloniki. My father-in-law,  
respectful of two thousand years' worth of history  
and a scholarly tradition. "If ever  
you forget you are a Jew,"  
wrote my mother,  
"a Gentile will remind you."  
Even with light hair and no religion,  
even without the nose or the name,  
even with the gold ring  
on the wrong hand.  
*Of course. I was still a Jew.*

When I spotted the colonels  
and tanks in the street  
I didn't wait till they came for me  
— back to Paris  
with one suitcase, four books  
and a typewriter,  
leaving behind a full set of dishes  
for the political exile's mimeograph machine.  
Only my own people kept finding me:  
the millionaire's mistress I worked for,  
who'd fought in the Sinai with Israeli  
troops and kept the scars  
to prove it, the friend  
who'd escaped being sent to the camps  
and loved talking about her shrink.  
The Hungarian literary agent  
shuttling between Hollywood and Long Island  
recognized me the minute I applied  
for a job. I tried  
alien tongues, unfamiliar  
gestures, mixed the milk  
with the meat,  
disguised myself as an American,  
denied I was American,  
broke every commandment except the sixth,  
got high  
in the name of universal truth

then I fell for a Jewish doctor.  
He took off for a distant revolution,  
leaving no seed  
but plenty of resentment against patriarchs.  
*Ha! Guess who's still a Jew!*

I traveled a long way to get away  
from certain limitations,  
carrying anxiety in my heart  
like a yiddische mama,  
and I found joy just where you might expect:  
the women's movement,  
the ultimate worldwide kaffeeklatsch  
where even the lesbians made a beeline  
for the kitchen! There was one  
beautiful woman at a Chanukah party,  
I knew her  
from somewhere — college,  
it turned out,  
imagine running into her over potato latkes  
in Paris, but the thing is,  
it could have been anywhere.  
Meanwhile, my lover, born in Brazil,  
was treating me like Shylock.  
I gave her a blitz course in European history,  
the bankers, the peddlers,  
the ghetto, the Inquisition, the Diaspora,  
six million wiped out, three  
generations of Zionists blooming in the desert.  
I repeated her father's name  
aloud, and then her mother's and grandmother's  
I traced her profile with my finger.  
*Yes. She too was a Jew.*

Twenty years have passed since I left  
my mother and my mother-country,  
not on purpose but following  
my destiny, holding fast  
to the few verbs that make sense.  
Watch me shrug my shoulders and you'll know  
where I come from. Walk a few steps  
beyond the synagogue and you'll be standing  
in front of my house.  
Look for me among the angry thousands



in the street after a bombing,  
wearing a pink triangle inside the Star of David.  
Nothing can be done to silence me.  
*Never. I will always be a Jew.*

# THE BORROWED POEM

*Jacqueline Lapidus*

1.

Ever since I was a little kid  
I wanted a poem  
but mom was afraid of them.  
She said they made  
too much mess.

2.

My one-room inner-city flat  
is tiny and full of plants.  
Having a poem in here is  
out of the question.  
Still, I've a terrible longing to feel one  
snuggle up against my feet.

3.

A friend who's going away on vacation  
lends me her poem. "Now  
be good," she says to the poem,  
and to me, "don't  
worry if it whines at night."

4.

At first the poem is wary of me.  
It refuses my overtures.  
It sits in the corner of my head  
and sulks. It sniffs with disdain  
at the words I leave in its dish.  
It tries to chew the blankets.  
When I lean down to caress it,  
it snarls and bites my ankle.  
When I bring a lover home, it howls.

5.

Twice a day I take it for a walk.  
The poem strains at the leash.  
The city is conducting a long-overdue  
cleanup campaign. The streets  
are full of signs saying  
“Curb Your Poem”

6.

Just when the poem has got used to me,  
its author takes it back.  
I come home expecting it to bark  
hearing my footsteps, I miss  
its familiar smell.  
The silence is overwhelming.  
I need a poem of my own.

# HUNGER

*Jacqueline Lapidus*

Too many books, too many  
words, every shelf piled double  
and still they go on writing  
and still I go on buying  
while my latest collection  
ages in the drawer like cheese,  
victim of changed times and reduced subsidies.

What can the world do  
with so many poems? Last  
night, watching volunteer doctors on TV  
tube-feed emaciated children  
in Ethiopia, I asked  
that question for the hundredth time;  
today I'm sending my book  
to yet another publisher.

Great Mother, why  
have you made that child's mother  
limp miles under a relentless sun  
from arid, rebellious Tigré province  
only to collapse in a refugee camp,  
and given me a press card, bathtub, oysters?  
I am not hard enough to sit here silent  
while famine kills that infant  
and that woman  
and their corpses feed the flies.

I am not dead enough to stop hungering  
for lives some government has written off.  
I am not written out. Make room,  
world, for another poem.  
Feel it rumbling in your belly.

# SCAVENGING APPLES

*Rachel Guido deVries*

Down in the creek back of the house  
I used to live in I guess the trout  
still find a desire to leap and sparkle.  
Every now and then a cardinal might lend its  
red to a slender branch of oak or maple.  
My own yard was full of trees, apple  
was the best: all those blossoms  
in spring and the wonderful smell  
of windfall in early autumn. Before  
the fire my mother and I collected what  
was usable stunted green apples by  
the dozen and made into three pies my  
father ate as his right. But it didn't  
matter. The pleasure was in the making.  
We laughed that day, my mother and I  
bent at the waist and searching. The grass  
had just been cut and a neighbor grilled  
steaks. The dog was in a frenzy of joy  
chasing the apples we tossed away her  
red collar darting late afternoon. It  
made us remember, scavenging apples,  
dandelion greens and all that pasta,  
minute rice for breakfast in winter with  
the oven door touching our knees as we  
sat in straight-backed chairs before school.  
No coal and no work but that breakfast memory  
can still warm me, like now, twelve below  
zero and a ways to go toward comfort.  
Warms me more than that fire the latest  
one that took away what I still don't under-  
stand. A friend who studies Sufism  
said I made it happen and I far enough  
away from dandelions and the chill of coal's  
absence had a moment of wonder in my book  
lined room. But I take what is left and  
make something with it. Something  
simple as apples borrowed from windfall.  
I might see a cardinal from another window. I  
can still hear the creek rushing whoosh whoosh  
through the seasons better than the sound of  
burning, better than burning.

# WARRIOR WOMAN

*Annharte*

A nun would cry out (faking innocence)  
in shame of her school (boarding and hoarding food)  
Indians were all too polite (bickering and backbiting)  
to tell the poor kid she's cruel (yes sister, you sister)  
A whiskey made you fight her (we all laughed she broke down)  
beaten up with a tongue of real leather (tortured and tied up inside)  
After that nun was taught her place (nice it was in public)  
she cried so cute so clever (still makes me laugh)  
You rode out in all glory (our real Indian leader)  
slobbering silently on a sister (passed out performance)  
There was still always some whiskey (you hogged the bottle)  
drowning down your tiny whiskers (missing a mouth of words)  
You said to be a good sister (sitting in the backseat listening)  
listen to the men balling (we get noise and not enough sleep)  
Blaming but not bitching at all (you left us the dirty work)  
hope you can hear your cow calling (Cow pie hits cowboy)

# HUDSON BAY BILL

*Annharte*

after so many years rupert wants  
that I should pay  
a bill of what he owes me  
sent by the bay

I am still for the most part savage  
my credit is no good there  
someone takes my fur before I get it  
leaving me a Skin all bare

my story of exploration in history  
has not been told

I was not in anyone's path  
until I was somewhat old

some trappers liked my dark face  
I know the settlers did  
we could make a good party sometimes  
when their wives were properly hid

touching trinkets is dangerous too  
there were a few in my underwear  
so I was jumped and put in jail  
because of the thought I stole these

not to say it was my way of being honest  
as it is a doubt about heaven  
I want my fair share now from this land  
so I do not always end up begging

## **ACHIMOTA:** From The Story My Mother Taught Me *Abena Busia*

There is a place between Accra and the Legon hills  
where they built the famous school.

Everyone thinks of that  
today

then the name Achimota  
is heard.

Yet the new school takes the name  
of the place  
but does not reveal what that name means.

The name is *A-chi-mo-ta*.

It is a forest still, beside the school,  
the roads, the railways, and the streetside markets.

But the forest came first,  
and has always been there.

The trees still stand,  
but they do not speak the history they have seen,  
*A-chi-mo-ta*, no, not at all.

And only the name remains the reminder  
of who we are, what we have been,  
and what we have been through.

Sometimes it seems we are forgetting,  
but so long as there are people alive who remember,  
we will remember the meaning:

Here we came, fleeing  
to a place of shelter,  
escaping the chains and lash  
we would not submit to,  
and these trees hid us.

So, when travelling through  
here, searching,  
you do not call  
by name  
in this place.

*A-chi-mo-ta*,  
you do not call,  
by name,  
out loud,  
no, not here.



The underground railroad had its precursor  
long, long before on this side of the world.  
No one will tell you that today.  
We too have been taught forgetting.  
We are schooled in another language now  
and names lose their meanings except  
as labels.  
We are being taught forgetting.  
But some remember still  
Achimota and its history  
a forest, and its meaning —  
the place, and its silence.

you  
were saying —  
but I did not let you finish —  
thrusting my tongue to the back of your throat  
slashing your words

in berlin  
boot  
heels clicked on the shingles  
I opened my  
eyes  
catching sight of the thick black lines  
another  
kind of sound  
cartridges  
and I pressed my mouth  
tighter to yours  
metal edges feeling  
the blast from the rooftop

in berlin  
you  
jerked  
the sound piercing you in slow motion  
your teeth reacting by sinking into my  
lower lip  
glistening red and swollen

in berlin  
you said it was impossible  
you promised death  
I took your photograph  
a woman in a white room  
a crimson  
flower  
black stem at her feet

## **BERLIN**

### ***Achy Obejas***

piano bench black on the far wall  
white room  
a woman  
naked woman on  
the floor  
crimson flower at her  
feet  
black stem

in berlin  
on the wet film  
of a cobblestone street after a storm  
snipers  
the black lines of political posters  
and snipers  
on the running rooftops  
men in uniforms  
stalking shadows  
chasing patches of black  
against the steel sky

you were saying it  
was impossible  
I traced the outline  
of my napkin  
a cafe  
conversation  
I was taking your photograph  
in black & white against your will  
I pinned you  
with my hips

you were saying it was impossible  
and yet I stood alone in the middle  
of the street  
and no one screamed  
no shots came  
and though you had predicted death  
had maybe  
wished death as evidence  
the consequence  
instead was tapping on your shoulder

# MONTROSE HARBOR

## *Achy Obejas*

Unbelievably  
night —  
every sound amplified,  
echoed;  
every  
liquid shadow  
magnetic.  
There's a way the wind  
turns,  
a lightning storm backdrop,  
paper planes in suspension,  
not landing.  
My feet are dry  
on the water.  
We're  
having a laugh,  
you at your  
bay window,  
resting  
your wide hips,  
your small lips.  
My hands are still on the  
table drumming,  
smoking.

This is the hard part,  
the infrequent rapture of an  
unbelievable night.  
Chapped hearts thumping,  
thirsting  
for the silhouette,  
the black lines on the moon,  
the vein of lightning in May.  
These are the secrets for  
which to find words.

**GOING TO**  
*Mary Jane Sullivan*

Skin swells from nettle  
Constricts from salt laced wind  
With you I walk inlets of sea water,  
Loins of sand shaped by cloud covered mountains.  
I choose not to look west  
Where the ease-dropping green of afternoon  
Disappears into a granary of stone.  
The puzzle of elements listens to the scales of wind  
For a moment nothing is violent.  
The motion of sea sparrows  
turns sleeplessness into a sigh  
Breathes messages across the night of thought  
Touches the tongue of response.

# WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A COUNTRY AND A HOUSE

*Mary Jane Sullivan*

I

At a glance  
an airport, a dual highway  
green hills, a lough as wide as a bay

Looking closer  
rings of razor wire  
a perimeter of grime laden factories  
walled in by military checkpoints  
a turf unmarked by international  
travel agency guided tour brochures.

The leaden air thick with the breath  
of distilled fiber, the pathetic smile  
of cigarette memory  
waits for the nameless to come forth  
and test the moist diggings of sod  
beneath the concrete mound.

II

The poet deciphers stone etchings  
upright in fistfulls of dirt.

His gleaning eye questions  
why this is.

I hear him speak as gypsies light fires  
children push prams of younger ones  
or charge down the foot of Black Mountain  
as if they were the A-team on TV.

I read the palm of history  
the pulse which moves me  
goes back to the belly of Ruth  
  
the eyes and bones of women are mine  
the deep wounds  
the slow coming to love  
because blood flows everyday.

### III

In hours of deep sleep  
soldiers storm my door  
tear apart my bed

suspect

I live in Armagh Gaol  
another name for concentration camp

A blue shrouded moon fades  
behind prison walls  
words are contraband

Words are women with names,  
faces, families  
jailed by no-jury courts

strip-searched everyday  
by women screws who judge intimately  
hold the nakedness of body against you

nothing is the same

messages on certified toilet and cigarette paper  
passed down the wing disperse this cruel silence  
to the outside.

### IV

Armoured steel against the curb of urban streets  
boys drafted into riot gear  
while Whitehall debates  
the oratory of munitions.

The show of power is not always white  
but hewed in the dust of broken bricks  
where sunlight fails  
to follow its own nature.

I watch the weather change  
into a multiplicity of sculpted hills  
and bogside earth

How rich is the downturned eye to look at itself  
this very second

Who can tell me there is nothing to nature  
outside long waits along queues

## V

With short-sighted eyes  
it is possible to see the outline  
of a man's well-worn jeans,  
a storefront of just baked bread,  
a half-opened door of the corner pub.

It is possible to walk by  
thinking this is the way it is—  
a cloudburst of choppers screening each street  
a patrol of faces with lips  
you can never imagine having.

I look at the children running in sneakers  
or trailing each other on bikes,  
these faces are ambushed by the tilted beret  
the crack of the high gloss boot.

I look at the sky  
terror pulls back the skin,  
paralyzes the artery of inspiration,  
follows the deliberate walls  
of a child's separated city,  
the scope of the bicycle wheel,  
the kick of the soccer ball,  
the high-heeled overdressed princess  
walking under flags she's yet to understand.

I look back to memorizing constellations  
along a sill of an open window,  
a grandmother's lullaby on my tongue.

How can I tell them there's something else  
when they know;

how can I tell them to look  
when they see boundaries  
I have never crossed.



## ***Marilyn Hacker***

Though sometimes, now, we sound like fiancées  
curmurring futures that augment like growths,  
I've never touched you underneath your clothes,  
or seen you more than twice in seven days.  
I venture it's a trifle premature  
to sign the china-pattern registry  
before you are, at least, at liberty  
to hang your p.j.'s on my bathroom door.  
A funny pair of homebodies we are,  
as wicked as we like to paint ourselves:  
I kiss you till my clit's about to burst,  
and catch myself reorganizing shelves.  
Let's go to some disreputable bar  
and do a little fancy dancing first.

## ***Marilyn Hacker***

First I want to make you come in my hand  
while I watch you & kiss you, and if you cry,  
I'll drink your tears, while with my whole hand I  
hold your drenched loveliness contracting. And  
after a breath, I want to make you full  
again, & wet. I want to make you come  
in my mouth like a storm. No tears now. The sum  
of your parts is my whole most beautiful  
chart of the constellations — your left breast  
in my mouth again. You know you'll have to be  
your age. As I lie beside you, cover me  
like a gold cloud, hands everywhere, at last  
inside me where I trust you, then your tongue  
where I need you. I want you to make me come.

## WHAT YOU MIGHT ANSWER

*Marilyn Hacker*

"I'm going to do what *I* want just this once!  
Plums dropped in laps are often overripe.  
I don't eat liver, and I won't eat tripe.  
Nobody needs her Frye boots cast in bronze.  
I don't like crowds, and now I'm feeling crowded.  
I can speak tongues, but not the ones your friends  
gossip with you about me in. The end's  
still moot, jackboots. I have to think about it.  
Two yards of hair, two miles of legs — and she  
is also who's, for years, seen what I've seen.  
We both need to be twenty-five years old.  
You want a masturbation fantasy?  
Some girls you know put out a magazine  
full of them — but I'm not the centerfold."

# STRICKEN BY THE LIGHT

*Kathryn Ryan*

Midtown Manhattan  
The Whitney sculpture garden at 42nd St.  
Segal figures dance like Matisse's  
Caught mid-flight  
The moment frozen, Degas like dancers  
Lyrical under the trees  
Intensely red flowers  
Bloom next to a car wreck sculpture  
A Calder hangs, tranquil in flight  
Over the bubbling Jamaican accents  
Of the workers, the high voices  
On the disco radio station  
  
These glass walls enclose  
Bums and Park Avenue ladies alike  
All seeking shelter from the bitter weather  
The vast democracy of Manhattan  
Where we all co-exist  
Like fish on a reef  
No suburban fantasies of class separations  
We all swim upstream together here  
Me with aching tooth  
Knowing it's two months at least  
Before I can afford a dentist  
Feeling positively flush  
Next to the bag lady in the corner  
Talking to her saints.  
  
We are surrounded by canyons  
Stunning in their beauty  
A weathered brick building  
Fronted by gothic porticos  
Next to a wall of impossibly shiny black glass  
That reflects back the buildings near it  
Some lyrical gift of this cold winter day  
The sun perhaps, or just the Hopper light  
Illuminating the buildings  
Pierces our hearts with joy...this quietude  
As though we are frozen in the timeless moment  
With Segal's figures  
I wander to work, stumbling for the bus  
Stricken by the light.

# THE STATUE

*Luzma Umpierre*

Eh eh  
Au eh eh  
Flower child  
Twirling  
around a yellow full moon.  
Trinkets crowning her long messy hair,  
glossy bead droplets encircling her neck,  
magma, chalazas,  
metal links as insignias,  
imprisoning rings.

“Peace,” she says;  
“Love,” the victoria sign on her hands.  
Flowered blazer from Saks on her back;  
loafer shoes mold her feet;  
Calvin Klein faded jeans  
with the brand name torn out—  
Flower child.

At the core of her fabric and emblems:  
economics, gastronomics,  
the computer,  
the lag of the jet,  
quintessential histrionics  
flower child.

Twisting faces,  
mutilating backs of the  
dark colored faces.  
“Whip,” she whimpers in silence,  
“Chain,”  
“Dow Jones,”  
“Apartheid.”

Flower child-slave making ant  
in a midnight assembly of forgeries,  
transferential concoction  
Love to Hate  
Peace to War  
"Listen, man" to "Obey"  
Hip to Yup  
Black to White  
cornucopias to cauldrons  
Vietnam to El Salvador  
*Esprit* to *corps*  
1960 to 1985  
flower child.

Hoaxing-child  
flower-forayer  
legendary-facade  
transforming in the night  
to stand and to lie on the Hudson  
at bay,  
fully neonized,  
fully galvanized,  
fully modernized  
face-lifted fully,  
Brook Shields  
or  
Madonna of "Liberty",  
theatrical forgery  
in her treasured island,  
flower child  
can-symbol of the U.S. of A.  
glory-hole of the nation.

## **committed sex**

*Cheryl Clarke*

bump the supreme court and edwin meese  
i'll read anything, do anything to be sexually aroused  
i'll be a lesbian, queer, whore, a sleaze  
and it won't be a peep show i aint caroused.

i'll steal a vcr, make my own videos to be sexually aroused  
to get my mind off star wars and other wars  
and it won't be a massage parlor i aint caroused  
to dance with my own kind, to flash my ass to the stars  
to get my mind off the cia, contras, and other wars  
in beirut, belfast, sharpeville, philly  
to sleep with my own kind naked under the stars  
to pose in a harness, to kiss her pussy  
in tegucigalpa, la paz, luanda, miami  
we gon bend down and tickle our asses  
and straddle her face and lick her pussy  
we'll fight like wolverines for our asses

we gon bend over stick our fingers in our asses  
no closets, quarantines, kitchens, calvin kleins  
we'll fight like gorillas for our asses  
like a vietcong, a sandinista. for all time

no camps, bantustans, monogamy, calvin kleins  
like a rebel slave or rebel comanche  
like swapo, the plo, the anc for all time  
we'll watch any scene, play any part we fancy

like a wild maroon, like a two-faced-ed mammy  
down with supreme courts and edwin meeses  
we'll fuck, suck any genital we fancy  
we'll be lesbians, queers, whores, sleezes.

# THE UNSAID OR WHAT SHE THINKS WHEN SHE GETS MY LETTER

*Alicia Ostriker*

"Bug off, mom.

You know I love you

But bug off."

Or she passes it to the boyfriend

While taking a regal drag of her joint,

And speaks through the smoke:

"Here's another one.

Jesus Christ, is she confused."

Maybe she feels sad for my sadness

And thinks "Poor puppy dog,"

Just as I at times

Charitably think about my mother.

Maybe she only wonders

How to outwit me.

The honest truth is, it is several years

Since I even pretended

To know what she thinks.

While the pond of our love lies undiminished

Somewhere, doubtless, in the murky landscape,

I am an old bat batting around

Barely missing the trees.

I think how she could yawn, she could tear it up,

She could forget to open it.



# EVERYWOMAN HER OWN THEOLOGY

*Alicia Ostriker*

I am nailing them up to the cathedral door  
Like Martin Luther. Actually, no,  
I don't want to resemble that *Schmutzkopf*  
(See Erik Erikson and N.O. Brown  
On the Reformer's anal aberrations,  
Not to mention his hatred of Jews and peasants),  
So I am thumbtacking these ninety-five  
Theses to the bulletin board in my kitchen.

My proposals, or should I say requirements,  
Include at least one image of a god,  
Virile, beard optional, one of a goddess,  
Nubile, breast size approximating mine,  
One divine baby, one lion, one lamb,  
All nude as figs, all dancing wildly,  
All shining. Reproducible  
In marble, metal, in fact any material.

Ethically, I am looking for  
An absolute endorsement of loving-kindness.  
No loopholes except maybe mosquitoes.  
Virtue and sin will henceforth be discouraged,  
Along with suffering and martyrdom.  
There will be no concept of infidels;  
Consequently the faithful must entertain  
Themselves some other way than killing infidels.

And so forth and so on. I understand  
This piece of paper is going to be  
Spattered with wine one night at a party  
And covered over with newer pieces of paper.  
That is how it goes with bulletin boards.  
Nevertheless it will be there.  
Like an invitation, like a chalk pentangle,  
It will emanate certain occult vibrations.

If something sacred wants to swoop from the universe  
Through a ceiling, and materialize,  
Folding its silver wings,  
In a kitchen, and bump its chest against mine,  
My paper will tell this being where to find me.

## WARNING

*Alicia Ostriker*

I will no longer lightly walk behind  
a one of you who fear me:

Be afraid.  
—June Jordan

Let them grow afraid  
Not only in the dream  
They do not consciously remember.

The dream is: beautiful mother  
Slices you up like cooked liver.  
Although your shirt is on  
She raises you  
Writhing upon her fork prongs.  
You try to hide  
But you are skimming through the air  
To look into the lit  
Theater of her palate  
Ridged like a cave and a cathedral,  
Hanging while she casually laughs,  
Saliva spraying you.  
The dream is: beautiful mother  
Takes away her hot breasts  
Her sweet stench and large eyes,  
Their speaking lashes.  
She takes away her fountain,  
The dream is your own thirst.

Let them grow afraid  
Not only in the dream  
They do not consciously remember.

The fact is: Beautiful girl  
Wearing a short skirt  
And laced boots  
Who strides across Washington Square  
Taunting you,  
or dumb mud-eyed girl  
Behind the Woolworths counter,  
Or fat mama on the fire escape  
Sipping her beer,  
Bosoms like five pound sugar sacks,

May be a warrior.  
You do not know which ones are warriors.  
They shall conceal themselves among us.  
When you go to rape her  
When you fling her open  
And think to own her,  
And punish her  
When the bars of that prison cell sweat,  
She may stab you,  
Filthy fool,  
Your own salt blood may fountain from your throat.  
Let them grow afraid  
Let them grow afraid  
In real life let them grow afraid

## **FRAN**

*Donna Masini*

Fran smells like juicyfruit  
going down the elevator she says  
last night I ate a whole gallon of ice cream  
I didn't even taste it it was so cold  
I don't even remember the flavor I was so numb  
she is one dyed and teased attempt to be  
an Italian Movie Star  
a floozie they call her at work with her  
red, red nails and gold hoop earrings  
guinea rings they call them  
but they let her do their hair  
she's good with hair  
she did mine once  
I watched the black pieces fall around me  
like a dog she says  
I watched my father die like a dog  
for weeks he was in pain  
flopping up and down like a bird  
they gave him valium it only made him cry  
I don't want you to see me die he told me  
I said you're not dying I'm dying  
you're crazy.

No one to shop for she says leaving  
the house is empty now  
it was different when I was shopping for two  
there was more to bring home  
big bags to wrap around  
I never go to the supermarket now  
I buy things a little at a time  
in small stores  
in small packages easy to carry  
there are never leftovers.

# HOLE IN THE WALL

*Donna Masini*

He doesn't want his silver flute  
to get ripped off  
so we go in to test the room  
before he takes it.  
He checks the windowlocks  
I look for men hiding in the shades  
hands colder than his instrument  
rip off my shirt  
I tell him no one has ever gotten inside  
the walls are thin  
tourists in the hallway yelling  
nuts, anyone got nuts?  
He is trying his best to crack  
into me thinking of the nuts in his bag  
across the room  
watching the crack in the wall  
above the bed

He is cold and hard and silver  
says  
Come on, baby. Come on. You can do it. Come on.  
Like you talk to a car that won't start  
he pushes me over  
tries to come in behind  
my head grinding into the pink and white  
flowered comforter

When he finally drives through  
it is on top of me  
a silver grin  
his trophy gloating high and hard.  
He says this is an omen  
and takes the room.

# TO MY FIRST LOVER. TO RUTHIE.

*Lynda Lou Ease*

Our mothers  
use to laugh and tease us  
that we got  
fussy when we'd  
been apart  
too long.  
See, they'd say,  
that's what  
was the matter.  
They thought  
we were  
so cute.  
And we were.

We played  
and planned  
through childhood  
scrambling over  
gates, balancing tops of fences  
to reach our favorite magnolia  
tree, burying our faces  
in its blossoms,  
falling laughing into  
the loft filled with hay.

Until I thought  
to write this poem  
I never had  
considered you  
my lover,  
though you were.  
and the reason I know  
is simple.

It is because  
we loved each  
other,  
because we often  
lay beside each other  
talking asking laughing.  
it is also because  
we made love.

We were  
young,  
I know.  
Eleven?  
Twelve? Were we older than that?  
But, Ruthie,  
if someone asks you,  
if your white-man  
psychiatrist asks you  
if you've ever  
made love with a  
woman,  
the answer  
is yes.  
You have made love  
with me.  
You have made love  
to me.

If you just think back  
you will remember.  
You will remember  
how you touched me  
and how gentle we were,  
sensually devoted.  
I'm scared you don't  
remember  
and I'm scared you do.  
and I would like  
to scream  
now, Ruthie,  
because I haven't  
remembered  
and because now I do.

With the back  
of your hand  
flat  
against the  
inside of my thigh  
you opened my  
young legs  
we opened our  
young hearts

and what we were  
given for those  
young acts  
was old guilt.  
One then  
older now.  
Our magic  
replaced  
by guilt  
so strong  
it would wake me  
at night  
push me out of bed  
pace me across the floor  
drive me to  
tell  
my mother  
what we had  
done  
what we would sometimes do.  
(Funny  
how she didn't seem  
to take me  
seriously  
patted me  
brushed it away,  
anxious for me to  
quit talking  
stop confessing  
to her  
that I did it  
and  
it felt good.)  
I think  
of that day  
you and Janice and I  
sat talking all afternoon  
in the backseat  
of my mother's  
car.  
At the beach, in the bathroom,  
we had seen  
drawings



of fucking -  
drawings of penises  
crashing their way  
into  
vaginas  
on the wall.  
We were  
lamenting  
dealing  
with our horror.  
How could our mothers stand it?  
Later, your voice  
quiet  
your head  
down  
you said  
I have done it  
with Eddie  
my brother.  
Four times  
he has made me  
and a friend  
of his  
too  
and  
I  
hate  
it.  
You were crying.  
This is the verse I don't want to write.  
This is the part I don't want to say.  
It's about  
what I hear of you  
now.  
That you  
keep having nervous breakdowns  
that you  
keep being put away  
and  
cannot stop crying or  
take care of your children

or  
love  
your husband  
properly.

Oh  
please  
tell me  
why  
it gets divided  
in this  
way.  
I call myself  
lesbian  
while we  
all  
call you  
crazy.

## TWO POEMS FOR MY SON

*Karen Elias*

I.

This is a poem to Rob, my son,  
who at 19 came home again  
to live, who reclaimed the rooms  
of this house one by one, who dropped  
behind him as he went the husks  
of his anger: clothes wadded and contorted  
beyond use or recognition gathering  
in corners, under beds — legs thrown  
out of joint, arms dismembered, spilling  
into the halls like the casualties  
of some misconceived and useless war.  
It was peaceful here before you came,  
bearing the failures of your childhood  
home on your back like dirty laundry  
whose stains refuse to wash. One morning  
you will check your watch, pack a meager  
lunch, and set out for reasons only yours.  
Whistling lightly, you will step — as if  
from habit — off the porch. Behind you  
I will gather laundry — as if from habit,  
as if the rooms you've left could  
possibly, or ever now, be mine.

II.

You trail behind,  
curses raining against  
my back, your hand out  
dry and wanting. It is never  
enough. Always, your mouth  
opens again in the clenched  
fist of your face to ask  
for more: the moon, the money  
under my tongue. My son,  
I fear if you marry,  
this empty-handed rage  
will drive the nails into  
the boards of your house,  
will blacken both her eyes.  
And my god I will hear  
her cries at midnight,  
I will hear her cries.

## A FINE LINE

*Jean Johnston*

The woman next door is drunk again  
she spent her welfare check on cocaine to come  
down she traded a ten dollar food stamp for a 5th  
of Bacardi light and 30 mg of methadone for some valiums  
the walls are thin  
i hear her crying she cries so much  
i hear her hitting her kids  
more than once in a cocaine crash  
pounding her furious fists on their bony backs  
falling to the floor like wounded puppies wailing  
she gets madder when they're helpless and crying  
crying for her to stop  
and be like the mother on T.V. the mother  
next door the mother who finally drinks herself to sleep  
and stops hitting her kids for the one night  
she gives them valiums to calm them down  
by 5AM her apartment is dead silent  
except for the T.V. which stays on all night long  
so she won't have to sleep alone  
and i wake up to the star-spangled banner  
to the swollen face in the mirror  
walk into the room where my kids lie  
bruised and dreaming in their valium sleep

# WHAT MOTHER NEVER SAW

*Jean Johnston*

I never sent my mother a picture postcard  
when I ran away from home  
She never saw the bullpen at 100 Centre Street  
twenty-seven women  
sharing an 8'x10' cage, a broken toilet  
and splintered tales for fifteen hours  
waiting for release

conditionally discharged to a shooting gallery on Ave. A  
cigarette-burnt and blood-stained  
brown rocks cooked up  
in a blackened bottle cap  
emptied into my veins  
my first O.D.

My mother didn't receive one photograph of me  
in the E.R. at Cabrini  
arms and legs strapped down  
tubes shoved up my nose  
tubes shoved down my throat  
phenobarbital shot into my urine soaked ass  
alcohol withdrawal/convulsions controlled  
my blackberry-brandied breath curses the question  
'Mother's name?'

# LAYMEN'S PSYCHIATRY

*Elizabeth Rees*

Don't tell me you want to know  
how a woman's body feels. A woman  
will not tell you, Dr. Prime,  
because her body gave in  
gave up lay down a long while ago,  
and said, alright, if you must.  
And the man, Dr. Prime, the man  
who felt need knot his prick,  
convulsed into her, a rather meek dog-cry  
finally, when finished, turned over  
onto his arrogant back, forgetful and limp.

If you wish to discuss fucking, Dr. Prime,  
I will admit it a savage thing  
to cut off my body but still lug it about.  
At first I felt regret, but soon forgot  
my covered ribcage, my legs,  
Dr. Prime, I coveted trees.  
I squatted over fires and tried to stop them  
with my piss, to spite Herr Freud  
with trickles of that and feces and blood,  
all my textures, like childhood mudcake.  
I forgot how good my feet had felt, trapped,  
squirming, the moon in them squashed.

I see, you see, what you mean  
by fucking everyone just to finish with it,  
because the mind, if left to open,  
will rush down the spine and ask  
the limbs to continue inspite of no  
electricity. I know this power, Prime,  
my vagina, what you call Holland Tunnel,  
which even now chokes you as we speak  
in some dark, closing donut shop.  
I know why you reach across the table  
and touch my hands, abruptly answering  
alright, alright, all right.

Every woman has it, you see, this  
personal responsibility to pretend  
the color of your balls is urgent blue,  
a problem that at least deserves looking into.  
If you wish to discuss fucking, Dr. Prime,  
let us start with the ancient phrase, schnorer.  
Did you ever notice the startling accuracy  
of the Bible? The truth isn't as compact as hatred,  
nor is that I was harmed as a child.  
The rain also pretends as it comes, in shudders.



# DISSECTING A SCREAM

*Elizabeth Rees*

My lungs are glass bowls,  
economic carriers of air.  
Tonight I will not scream  
that I am guilty of squander;  
I will organize pain like a map.  
I will know nothing  
but the shrinking of a breath.

To understand the inside of a scream,  
I gamble with several glass bowls.  
I hurl the first one out of a window,  
then I smash another with a suitcase.  
The third bowl breaks easily:  
it splits in boiling water,  
and the next goes after gravity, up  
until all the stars stick.

Late at night,  
screams divide, unfurling  
from their invisible edges,  
and become intricate continents.  
Continents calmly accept  
the properties of space.  
Unlike glass, they do not shatter,  
gathering speed.

"Prognosis improving..."

And this was said (in  
Japanese) in forty-five, as well.  
How many prayed to believe?  
And what was the reply?

A woman crouches, sways, vomits.  
Again. Again.

Blasé as a coroner, a medic  
pushes past grandmother  
who sleepwalks wide-eyed  
to a crumpled bundle

(The navel's like the knot  
tied in a balloon.)

Her lips move slowly.  
Has she no one else to tell?

"...only time will show..."  
say doctors, who breathe easily,  
planning titles for medical journals.

The "survivors of the poison gas"  
listen to their lungs, which were  
never intended as enemies,  
and imagine the sun.  
The heat of the pyres  
chills them through.

## **DAYS LIKE THESE**

***M.S. Taraba***

Often  
yet never prepared  
I am startled  
by your face  
transposed on a stranger's.  
My heart leaps and falls  
at the jarring image.  
Your mouth stretches  
into someone else's grin.  
Or by a tiny treasured scene,  
the back of your small grey head  
bending over a book.  
The head turns  
and the features mock me,  
not yours at all.  
Or by your long stride taken up  
with another's purpose.  
I hear your footsteps ahead  
and hurry to catch up  
but it's never you  
only a strange contortion  
of mind and memory,  
a city filled with imposters.  
I catch myself  
staring  
longing to touch  
the you that is nothing like you,  
wanting to run to  
the stranger so familiar  
so distant.

Days like these  
I can't recognize  
myself in the mirror.  
I wouldn't know your voice  
if you returned  
whispering my name,  
couldn't taste the promise  
lingering on your tongue  
or solve the mystery  
lurking deep in your eyes.  
I could not yield  
to the urgency of your touch:  
These are long and bitter, bitter days.

## FOR RITA

*Linda Quinlan*

I wanted to make it  
past the bedroom,  
past your father's fingers  
that crushed grapes  
year after year  
and failing  
to make wine drinkable.

His fingers put up pictures  
of nudes  
in his cobbler's shop  
which you left every day  
to deliver repaired shoes  
to neighbors who asked about him  
with eyebrows raised.  
You were sure they knew  
about your cowering corner  
where his breath lingered  
on your breasts,  
where black and blue pinches showed  
as you bruised easily.

Meeting him for the first time  
like this in death  
I glare at his hands.  
I want to pull  
at his shut eyelids  
to feel the meanness  
and fight for you,  
to have him let go  
knowing he will not.

His inheritance came  
and you couldn't not take it,  
explaining why: he owed you  
his accounts in twenty banks,  
this worker with so much hammering  
against deportation.

He couldn't let you go.  
You couldn't stay with me.  
I smashed our wine glasses  
behind you as you left.