

**THE  
NORTHRIDGE  
REVIEW**

**FALL 1994**

# AWARDS

Prizes are awarded annually in recognition of the finest works published in the Spring and Fall issues of *Northridge Review*.

The **Northridge Review Fiction Award** recognizes excellence in short story writing by a CSUN student published in *Northridge Review*. The winner of this award receives seventy-five dollars.

The 1994 winner of this award is **TARA KOLAREK** for "Random Lesbians," published in the Spring 1994 edition. We would like to thank Jan Ramjerdi for evaluating the fiction.

The **Rachel Sherwood Award**, given in memory of Rachel Sherwood, recognizes excellence in poetry writing by a CSUN student published in *Northridge Review*. The winner receives seventy-five dollars and will be acknowledged alongside the name of Rachel Sherwood.

The 1994 winner of this award is **SHARON BECKER** for "Hollywood Bed" and "All Stripped Down," published in the Fall 1993 edition. Thank you, Dorothy Barresi, for evaluating the poetry.

The **American Academy of Poets** awarded three prizes this year. The winner of the contest was **ROBERT WYNNE**, for his poems, "Camping" and "Under Mine." Honorable mentions were awarded to **CLIFFORD C. KANE** for "Joe," and to **AMY REYNOLDS** for "Malibu Fire, November 93." *Northridge Review* is grateful to Robert Reid III for chairing the evaluating committee, and to professors Gibson, Stiebel, and special guest reader, Ben Saltman, for evaluating the submissions.

# **SUBMISSIONS**

NORTHRIDGE REVIEW invites submissions continuously between September and May. Manuscripts and artwork should be accompanied by a cover page that includes the author's name, address, telephone number, and the titles of the works submitted. *The author's name should not appear on the manuscript itself.*

For editorial responses and/or return of submissions, include an appropriately sized and stamped SASE. To submit manuscripts and artwork directly, send to:

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**Submissions without SASE cannot be returned.**

# **NORTHRIDGE REVIEW**

**FALL 1994**

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## **SPECIAL THANKS TO**

**AMY REYNOLDS**, for her invaluable assistance in the production of this journal. I am grateful not only for the hours she spent inputting documents, but also for her emotional support in my moments of technological despair.

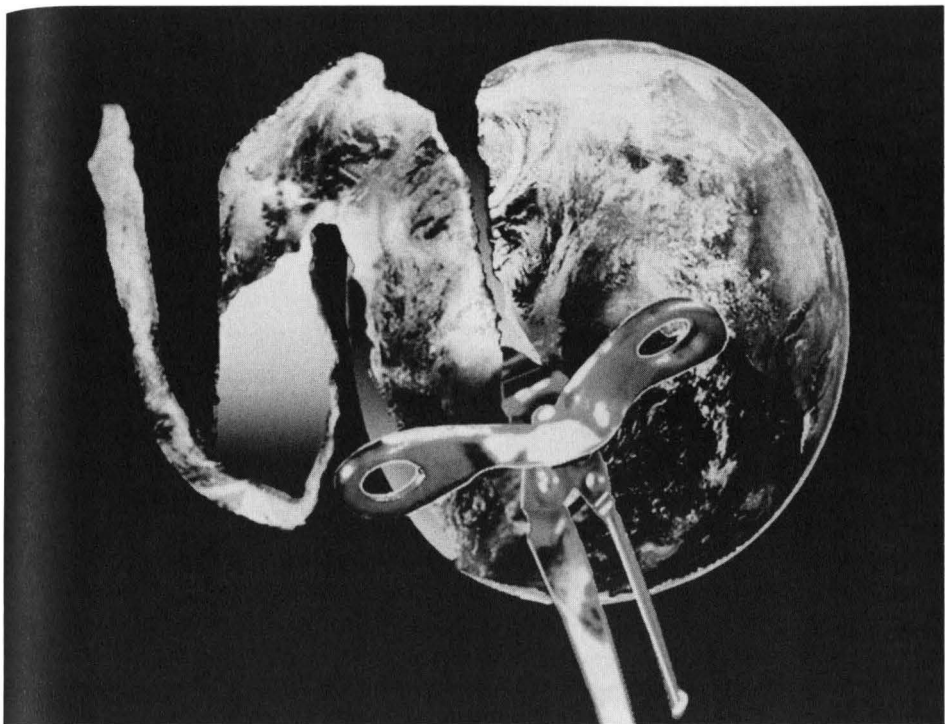
**STEVE DAN, GAIL SAID JOHNSON, BOB OBERWAGER, CHRIS SALES**, and all the rest of those kind and patient **COMPUTER PEOPLE** who let me invade their high-tech space with my low-tech sensibilities at the most inopportune times.  
Thank you!

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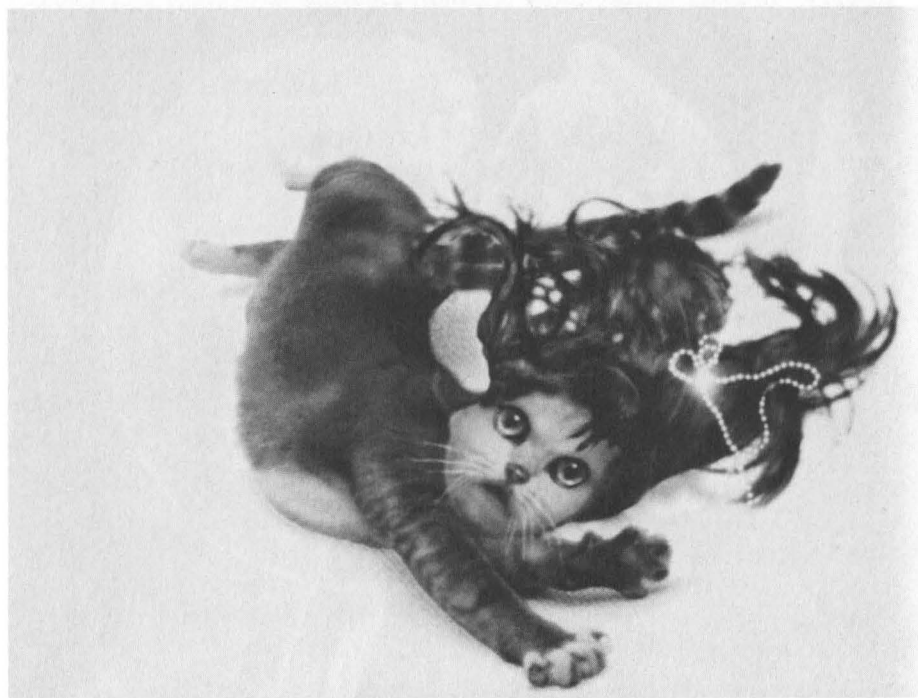
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**Eva Swider**





**Eva Swider**

# WAVES

---

AMY REYNOLDS

**My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh,  
and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth.  
Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye  
my friends; for the hand of God hath touched  
me.**

## Job 19:21

**S**he was falling apart. If it rained another day she would surely lose it. Outside the rain fell steadily, as it had for three days, drops pattering against the broad leaves of the camellias outside the bathroom window. Lauren sat on the closed toilet lid, wrapping her finger in a bandaid. She had been at the kitchen table writing a letter to her sister, biting her nails, when she had torn off much of the nail in her teeth.

Lauren was writing to her sister, to her sister's husband, more precisely, to say that she could not find them another placement, that they would have to stay where they were. She looked at her hands. The nails were all bitten down, and cat scratches marked the backs and wrists. She had tried to drown the cat the day before and now the scratches were welting up and showing signs of infection. Lauren had been fighting the urge to do it for months, because she held the cat responsible for the drowning death of her son the previous summer, so yesterday she'd tried and found out that it was much harder to drown a cat than to drown a two-year old. All it took for a child was a moment of inattention. A cat required a burlap sack. So she hated all the puddles and the constant drip of water, and the cat.

She went back into the kitchen, poured another cup of coffee and returned to the letter, writing awkwardly now because

of the bandaid. She explained to her sister that she could do nothing for them, that they lived in the only sheltered housing for the deaf-blind in Southern California and that furthermore--she thought, but did not write--she could not bear to see them, to be battered by their unceasing unhappiness, by the inability to understand or be understood, by her sister's plaintive, moon-white face. She did write that she would speak to the administrator to see if something could be done about the annoying neighbor, the one who kept mistaking their apartment for his own. She closed, promising to see them soon, that she would get their television fixed.

Lauren realized that she could not even imagine going to their apartment, or speaking to the administrator. Before her illness, Lauren's mother Evelyn had always managed Susan. Soon enough, she would be Lauren's problem.

Lauren bit off another nail. She sat still, listening, aware of a momentary stir of expectation; then came the brief rustle of another aftershock.

The fact was, thinking of her sister made her want to run like hell, made her feel as if she couldn't bear her own skin, not because she was a bad person, a wicked person (even though she had tried to drown the cat), but because she was an incapable person, incapable of caring for creatures like cats, or children, or forty year old deaf-blind adults with the minds of pre-adolescents, or, for that matter, herself.

She checked her watch. Four o'clock. "I'll deal with you later," she told the black and white cat watching her from the corner. She would have to find that burlap sack.

Her mother was asleep when she got to the hospital, so she sat awhile reading the newspaper. Her mother's breathing was slow and thick sounding. An intervenous drip of antibiotics, meant to stop the pneumonia developing in her lungs, didn't seem to be working. Behind the curtain the woman in the next bed talked to herself, babbling about waves, and then quieting down. Lauren made a mental note to speak to the doctor about getting her mother moved. Then a young man came in and went to sit with the woman. "Ma," he said. "Ma, it's Jimmy."

"Watch out! Here it comes!" she cried out.

"No, Ma - wake up."

The nurse came in. "Everything okay, here?"

"Oh, god, all the people - where's Jimmy?" Her quavering voice suddenly filled with panic. "Jimmy!"

"Ma I'm right here. Here, I've got your hand." He lowered his voice, turned to the nurse. "How long has she been like this?"

"Not long. She's just having a bad dream."

She was lying, Lauren knew. On duty just since 4:30, the nurse had no idea how long she had been delirious. Rain beat against the windows. The room darkened. The woman babbled softly.

"I think she's hurting again, I think she needs something," the son said.

"Oh, I think she just had some Demerol an hour or so ago."

"Would you check on that? I think you should get her something."

The young man's tone changed. He was starting to get the hang of this. Lauren had demanded pain medication a dozen times now, pushed the nurses for fresh sheets, for jello and apple juice at ten o'clock when her mother roused herself and suddenly wanted to eat. Rather early, she had realized that this was the ward of no return and that these nurses had more promising patients elsewhere.

Suddenly there are waves, drawing back, gaining height, waves of the most miraculous green, luminescent, shimmering back a midday sun. Drawing back, and then the roar of the water cuts out into silence, as the hum of the engine cuts out when you fall asleep in the car. Not a sound, but still, hot air out the window of the coffee shop. She opens the door and the wave is there -- shining green and flecked with bits of seaweed, drawing back and up, high above her. She stands, unable to move, watching the wave build and crest, and then crush down against the shore, racing toward her in a swirling, bubbling foam, sweeping people from the beach. But before it hits, she is suddenly conscious of her son standing silent beside her, a ghost-child watching the wave come, but she hasn't time to pick

him up and run, only to clutch at the ground, and struggle for breath.

Lauren woke to her own whimpering, the familiar sensation of unbearable grief. After a few moments her heart settled down, and she heard the rain still falling outside, the splash of drops in the pool.

Wide awake now, she stared into the darkness. She thought she could hear the roar of the wash, beneath the rain sounds. She got up, pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, her yellow rain slicker, boots. It was raining hard as she walked toward the bridge and the wash, four blocks away. Without a moon the neighborhood was dark. Water ran curb-high in the streets, and sloshed into her boots as she crossed. She came to the fence and stared down into the concrete riverbed. Shining in the dark, the black water rushed by, no more than five feet from the top of the wall, splashing against the underside of the bridge thirty yards away. Was it rising higher? She couldn't tell. Her hair was soaked and drops fell into her eyes; the rain was not letting up. All over the city, the flood control system, the arteries of concrete that fed into the Los Angeles River and then into the ocean, were full of turbulent water and twisted debris from earthquake wrecked houses, broken, blackened tree limbs, wrecked cars, the bodies of ten year old aqueduct surfers, derelicts. She felt a drop of icy water slide down her back, saw the image of her child's body, floating like a leaf on the surface of the swimming pool, and she shivered, chilled to the bone. She turned and walked quickly, nearly running, splashing across the flooded road back to the house.

Another aftershock at dawn stirred her awake. After the initial jolt, the bed rocked gently a few moments, and then subsided. She became conscious of the rain falling, still falling, while the neighborhood dogs woofed and howled. She lay in bed tracing the cracks across the ceiling. She wondered if they were structural or cosmetic.

She was feeding the cat when the phone rang. It was the hospital. "You'd better come," said the nurse - it was Ellen, the night nurse. "Do you have a priest, or shall I call the chaplain?"

"No. No priest," Lauren told her.

She splashed her car through the flooded streets. The traffic lights were out at several intersections, whether from the aftershock or the rain she couldn't tell. She was grateful, at least for the early hour, the light traffic. When she got to the hospital she felt a little dazzled by the bright lights, the white corridors after the shrouded morning. She punched the elevator button and headed up to the fourth floor, turned left to her mother's room, to the chart hanging by the bed with the big words across it, "Do Not Resuscitate." She expected to be too late, but her mother's eyes were open, glittering, lucid. She actually smiled.

"I'm going away now," she said, matter-of-factly.

"You are? Where you off to?"

"I think someplace where it doesn't rain."

"Mom - how do you know?"

"I don't really. I just wanted to see you today. I told the nurse to call you. Did you feel that one this morning?"

She grasped Lauren's hand with her chilled, bone-brittle fingers. All her life she had battled her weight, and now here she was, practically a waif. These moments of lucidity came farther apart now as she grew preoccupied with the awkward and painful process of unburdening herself of her body, of finding the exit.

"Yeah, it woke me up," Lauren said.

"Where's Steve?"

"In Chicago, Mom."

"Still?"

"Yeah, still. He likes it there."

"Whatever." She waved her hand to indicate she would not pry further.

"What happened to your room-mate?" Susan asked her.

"Disappeared. Angels took her, I suspect." She looked sly for a moment, the unnerving dark glint in her eyes. "Susan and Rafael were here yesterday," she went on. "You've gotten them all excited - you don't want them to move in with you, do you? You're not up to it, Lauren."

"No, of course not." Lauren fidgeted. She wanted to leave.

"Well I've told Rafael he can go wherever he wants, but Susan has to stay. She's safe there. She'll drive you crazy, I should know."

Evelyn knew better than anyone. She had dealt endlessly with the government, taken her daughter to promising special programs, arranged for the Braille tutor whose infinite patience soon wore out, the New York boarding school that sent Susan home because the teachers said she "encouraged" the boys. Then Rafael came along. Deaf and mentally about twelve, he proved the perfect seeing-eye person. He liked to shop for them at the Target store, and had been picked up recently for shoplifting refrigerator magnets and Matchbox cars.

"I just said I'd ask Mrs. Clark about a different placement - that's all," Lauren said. "They hate it there."

"They don't understand. You'd better write back and tell them you can't do it. You'll be stuck," she warned. "I'm dying, you know." Her glee at being nearly through with Susan glimmered. "Did you bring the travel section? Anything about cruises to the Mediteranean? Someplace where it never rains."

Her mother lay back, ready to listen as Lauren found an article about yacht tours in the Greek Islands, a place where it rarely rained and where the sea lay calm as green glass.

Lauren worked at the airport, a bookkeeper for a little helicopter charter service. All day long she watched the newscopters from the outfit next door lifting off in the constant downpour to cover the flooding. Her place was grounded - no one wanted to do any sightseeing. But from where she sat in her tiny office on the second floor, she had a great view of the field, the river which had begun to form at the north end and which was now running down the middle, widening, rushing now toward the flood control basin at the south end of the runway. By eleven the tower had closed the field. At noon, her computer blinked once, started to reboot, and then went dark along with the lights. She lost the fourth quarter report she'd been working up all morning. Her boss came in, looked out the window a while, and told her to go home.

Every street, every intersection ran hub-cap high with the brown water. The power was out to the whole west side of the Valley, knocking out the traffic lights. Lauren could hardly see the lines in the road through the driving rain against the windshield. Lightning flashed. Stalled, abandoned cars clogged

the streets. Lauren felt the strange excitement of the emergency, knowing they were airlifting people out of the Sepulveda Basin, that houses in the canyons were washing away, that the fire wrecked hillsides above Malibu were sheets of sliding mud. People were sandbagging their neighbors' homes, neighbors they had threatened to sue just the other day.

She fought her way home through the glutinous traffic. In the mailbox was another letter, via airmail, from her brother-in-law. Nearly indiscipherable, but the tone was clear - she had failed to write back quickly enough: "Do you will write on the paper to me?" When would she find them another place to live? Why wouldn't she come? The house was dark, the power out. As she entered she smelled chlorine. She crossed the living room and stepped down into the kitchen, ankle deep into cold pool water. The steps up into the living room had confined the flooding to the kitchen and laundry room. She waded in and unplugged the washer & dryer, in case the power came back on.

The cat sat on the top step and meowed at Lauren as she climbed the steps. Her food dishes were submerged and she didn't like it. She was a black & white cat, with a moustache, still young, very cute. She was thin and rangy and liked to catch flies and water bugs from the ivy next door and eat them loudly and with much gusto. She loved to hunt small birds and mice and bring them into the house, shred them up and pretend to eat them on Lauren's pink damask bedspread. The cat had been given to their son for his second birthday, but no dear companion, she would lie in wait for the child to walk by the big chair in the living room, attack his legs with all four claws and a mouthful of teeth, draw blood, so that soon the child was terrified of her. In fact, the cat was sitting by the pool when Lauren discovered the child, drowned, and she had always wondered if the cat had chased him in somehow, that day when she'd been on the phone, and he had pushed the sliding glass door open, and climbed the gate. He had been a resourceful child, a busy child. He had always been too quick for her.

Lauren stood at the top of the stairs staring at the flooded kitchen. She had no insurance for this. She noted that the floors, the walls, the carpets, the appliances, the drapes were all



ruined. Cracks in the walls. She stood there, chewing her nails, ripping another down to the quick. The cat meowed at her, begging.

"Shut up, you," she said.

She turned to walk away. The cat grabbed at her ankle with her claws and sunk her teeth into the calf of her leg. Lauren yelled and kicked. The cat went flying into the deepening pool in the kitchen and its head went under.

Lauren stood and watched it struggle. It started to paddle toward her, but she stuck her foot out and pushed it back, pushing its head under again. "Meow!" the cat cried when it came up again.

It clawed against the kitchen cabinets, but couldn't get hold of anything. Its head went under again and when it came back up, it yowled piercingly.

She sat down on the top step to watch in the growing darkness. Suddenly she heard a pounding at the door. She ran to open it and there was a cop in a rain slicker with a flashlight. Water from the porch roof poured down on him.

"You gotta get out!" he shouted. A crack of lightning shot across the sky, illuminating his face. "Evacuation ordered for this whole area! Do you need assistance?"

She heard the water pouring into the kitchen from the backyard, heard the cat yelping and splashing. She fought back a moment of vertigo, tried to focus.

"Uh - no - where do I go?"

"Red Cross Shelter - Granada Hills."

And then he turned and raced away to the next house.

"Oh God, oh god," she said in the empty doorway.

She grabbed a towel and slogged into the kitchen. The cat, paddling helplessly around the kitchen, lunged for her, its claws digging deep into her arms. She scooped it up into the towel and wrapped it tight, held it against her.

"What else what else what else?"

Nothing else. A wave was coming. It would wipe out this house, drown this pool, sweep away the hospital, her mother, her sister. She grabbed up a photo album, her handbag, car keys. The cat squirmed. She wedged it tight under her arm. She ran out into the driving rain. Got into her car, with the roar of waves

in her ears. Headed for the freeway - North - the wet cat  
shivering in her lap.

# WIDSITH'S LONGING

---

LAURA EPPICH BRYCE

Long nights I spend in the hall,  
the polished wood and strings silent  
across my lap.  
Every night, no exception.  
When the shadows stretch into dusk and  
the mead starts flowing,  
the thanes too deep in their cups  
to really listen,  
that's when they hammer their fists  
on the benches and call for me,  
when I have only half their attention.  
Widsith, give us some music!  
Like mead and fighting and fame,  
I'm always in their thoughts,  
even when they don't understand.  
I stand with my harp by the greasy hearth,  
touch my fingers to the strings,  
and pretend the blood spilled by these men  
is worth something,  
that death and joy are one,  
that the wheel of vengeance is spinning  
toward some destination I can name.  
Every night they call out for a different song,  
and yet every song is the same.

# THE HANGING TREE

---

LAURA EPPICH BRYCE

The creak of a withered branch,  
wind sighing sad acknowledgement,  
perhaps pity.  
A rope splintered by bark,  
burning the place  
where it was so hastily knotted.  
The tree groans,  
bent double,  
unable to free itself  
of the contorted weight  
clinging on its arms.  
The shadows must be peeled back,  
dawn shining,  
hands reaching with knives:  
for this it must wait,  
to be released.

# FLAWS

---

LEE DUKE

Your teeth are not straight, not white--  
you say  
your hips too wide,  
breasts not firm,  
eyes too small;  
you say  
your ass sags.  
But I know you are beautiful.

It isn't an act of faith.  
Your loveliness is real, palpable:  
the despised belly lush, a meadow of heather,  
your scent aphrodisiac,  
and more:  
your smile,  
your eyes...  
I could go on.

I may be lost, misguided,  
but I stumble through your garden  
and find it beautiful  
because you're there.

# **RAILIN'**

---

SCOTT COVELL

Tear down the highway  
I'm on the fly people  
headphones so loud I'm ragin'  
Mario Andrettian' 85 on the 405  
got to do it, got to have it  
"Nirvana" like a derailed train in my brain  
powered charged electric riffs  
sucking decibels like frozen juice  
the b-cells have warped into pandemonious  
disharmonious  
no hearing in ten years...oh well...,  
I gamble the physical..  
only today and I play  
loud louder loudest  
railin' into the dark into the light  
narrow angle zone drivin' into the gray smogged vastness  
green sign red lights  
cutting into the powerland circuit land  
Yes, I'm gonna leave it all  
behind

the whole tangled mass  
the complete urban jungle  
I leave it all behind  
the glittering glass shards  
the smashed carcass fragments of  
unfortunates on the side  
the crushed and withered effluvium  
cast to the shoulder  
by the whippin' wind of my machine...  
Leave it all behind  
the young frozen in fear loitering with fire  
and glass in alleyways and shuttered-room  
asylums, the suits and ties, the mean-  
spirited thugs with nothing to lose,  
the miracle-women rising up to face the towers,

leave it all behind  
the unhopeful, there on 6th and Los Angeles,  
and on the benches of Venice under the sewers  
every street corner Ralphs lot highway entrance and exit  
in the whole fucking town there  
to chew the cardboard dust and  
watch the neon dispel them...

Leave it all behind

Leave it

all

behind

and you

crouched there

on the rug like a fetal life

clutching the words close to your chest

like a cord wrapped so tight

around you, you can't breathe

I leave it all behind!

I, on the fly,

ragin', railin',

hands rigid as steel

I leave it all

behind...

# IMAGES

---

MARK QUIGLEY

A face  
strong  
and intense  
with eyes  
that accuse  
and know  
in their furious  
state  
that all this  
in deep rage  
cannot continue.

The mouth posed  
sparks  
form  
jagged  
angry lines  
that cannot continue.  
about this

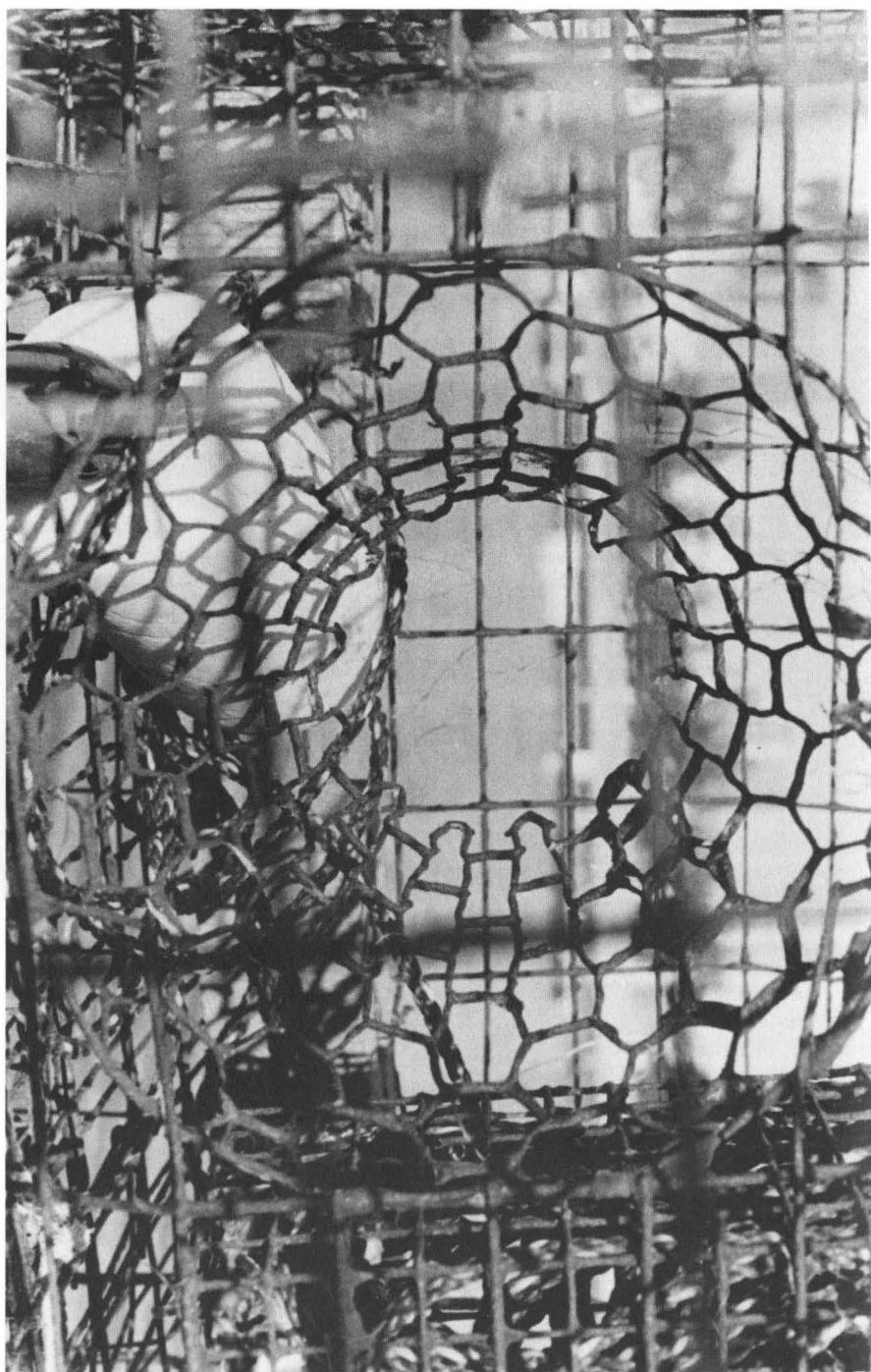
Revolution.  
Truth.  
Change.

Now only  
images  
on a blue  
flickering screen.





**Josh Greenberg**



**Josh Greenberg**

# **SMALL GREEN PILLS**

---

MARK QUIGLEY

She picks them up  
from the pharmacy every  
couple of months-  
one bottle with about 100  
small green pills.

She takes them so  
she won't hear voices  
or transmissions from the  
thoughts of strangers who  
walk down the broken  
sidewalk in front of  
her apartment.

When she doesn't feel  
right she says:  
"It's like there's a  
telephone in my heart  
that always rings and  
hangs up."

Rings and hangs up.

She smiles while she  
says this, then suddenly  
becomes ashamed, guilty.

She cries. She is afraid.

The promise in small green pills.

# THE MEXICANS LIVED BEHIND OUR FIELD

---

MATTHEW COSTELLO

The sun is where it was  
years ago  
before a row of bushes  
and a pitiful pine tree  
came to live  
on our infield

homeplate, batter's box  
carved with  
hands, bat, feet--  
built-in red brick  
backstop catcher--  
enduring asphalt sidewalk  
pitching mount--  
outfield across the  
street.

The houses were our wall

cars drove through.  
slow motion music  
rolled by,  
ice cream inside--  
the only half-time  
baseball ever knew

"game-on" - game resumed  
game on the line  
in my child mind.  
"this one's going to the Mexicans"  
who lived behind  
our field,  
separated by an alley,  
a language, a history

casual periodical  
green tennis ball

homerun flights  
were our only  
connection with them--  
we wanted no  
broken windows,  
no bad feelings.  
I wondered if  
they hated us  
and our complaining  
american ways

infield became unfield--  
the weak bond  
broken by a tree,  
some bushes, and  
years of growth.  
The balls that may have found themselves  
in that back alley,  
now sit untouched  
beside the cars  
in the garage.

## **strolling half-consciously**

---

MATTHEW COSTELLO

strolling half-consciously  
on Hollywood streets,  
I walked toward the  
distant bass beats and  
floating strings,  
taking my place  
in the steady, graceful  
sauntering race

the crowd swarmed  
its way into form  
in the distance--  
bodies trudged  
drudgingly, tumbling  
forward over one another--  
an intoxicated gait,  
leaning into the music  
and adding, perhaps  
unknowingly,  
to the droning tone  
of the masses ahead

we all walked  
in the midst of interests  
so much greater than ours--

the Rainforest Action Network  
needed signatures to  
stop the destruction  
in Sarawak and Sabah--  
states in the far away  
Malaysian haze.  
I have not heard of the  
Panan, Iban, or Kayan  
people. I have not  
seen their trees.  
"should I sign my name?"

a holy crusader,  
megaphone in hand,  
wandered almost unnoticed--  
bleating the beliefs of  
a found sheep,  
seeming not to wonder  
"how can I be  
ignored?" or  
"can anyone be changed?"  
certainly not by  
high-volume monotonous  
megaphone nonsense, but  
I silently admired his  
publicly personal preaching  
truth

a slumping, dirty  
beautiful black man  
saxophone player blew  
his hungry song,  
nodding at passing  
coin-droppers, but not  
stopping his song, not  
pausing to count money--  
"should I sit with him  
and listen? should I  
ask his name?"

with all of this  
in mind,  
the asphalt passed  
under my feet.  
"concrete ground is  
the most fertile,"  
I thought, but  
what of it?  
my harvest feeds no one--  
my coins are better  
than my truth.

# SUMMERLAND

---

SUSY CHO

Thinking  
about my arm

dangling  
out of

Caryl's car  
we pass

the sign  
to Summerland.

The heavens  
dry up

and as  
on

the mustang  
in the right lane

the sky-blue  
exterior

flakes off  
turning

translucent  
like fish

food falling  
into the water.

That soporific  
noise

of echoing  
cantinas



# SUMMERLAND

---

SUSY CHO

Thinking  
about my arm

dangling  
out of

Caryl's car  
we pass

the sign  
to Summerland.

The heavens  
dry up

and as  
on

the mustang  
in the right lane

the sky-blue  
exterior

flakes off  
turning

translucent  
like fish

food falling  
into the water.

That soporific  
noise

of echoing  
cantinas

and cafes  
the entrancing

static  
of bloated pink

skin and hot  
white hair

disassociate  
themselves from me

on the way  
back.

Santa Barbara  
could have

fixed anything  
but

the arrow  
to Summerland

pointing  
west--

right off  
the cliff--

insinuates  
another place.

# **AFTER DINNER HERE**

---

SUSY CHO

After dinner here

father goes upstairs  
and closes his door.

Kitchen light on  
my neck, at the counter.

Your arms of oranges  
emerge first;  
refrigerator shuts in garage.

Rice warmth  
out open door and windows,  
while peels fall  
heavily on their backs.  
across eye circles  
and hair of a woman in work.

Shadow

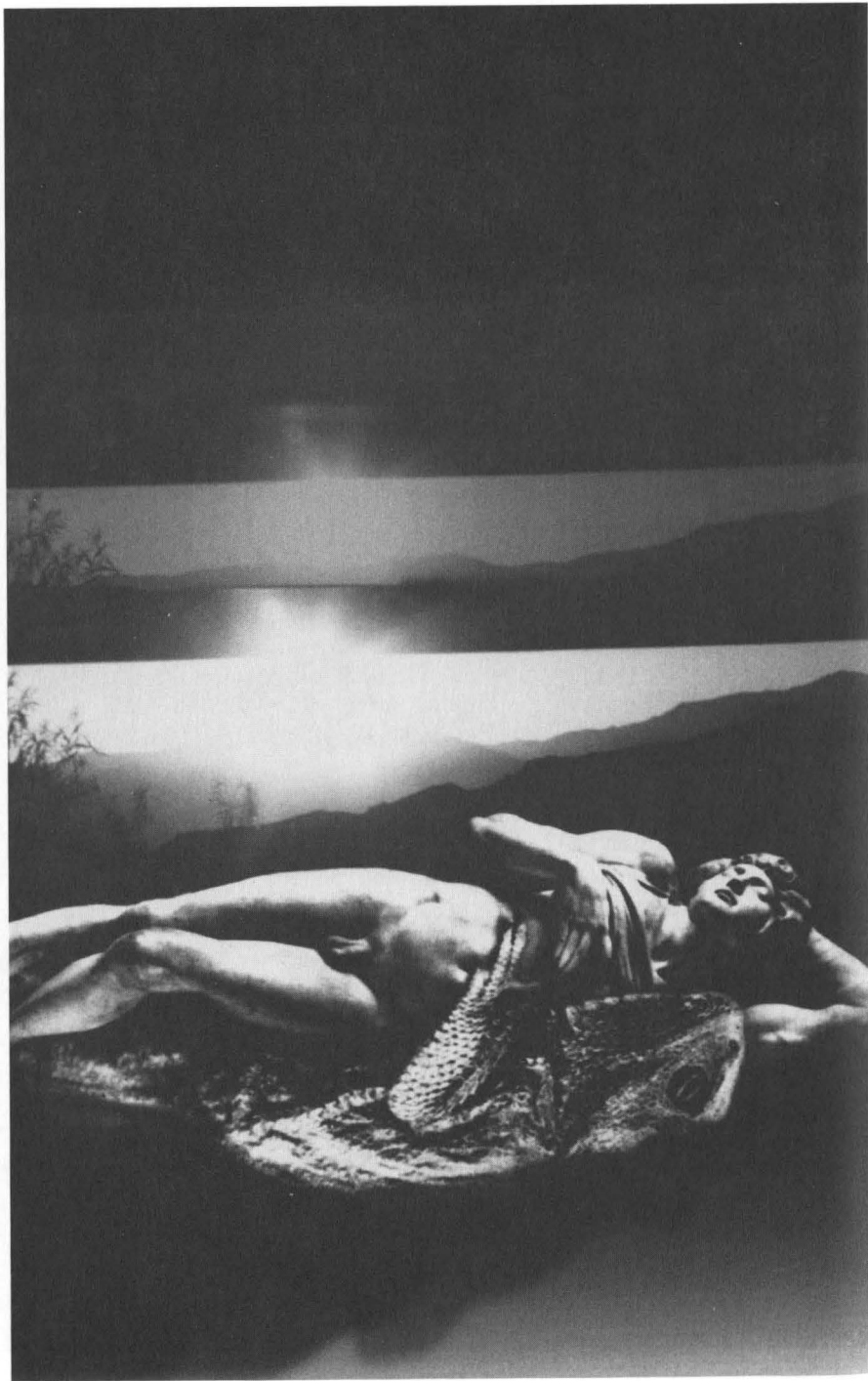
Listen tasting,  
and arranging  
sections in a flower pattern on the plate.

Gold miniature  
forks two-pronged  
picked out of drawer.

You carry these  
on a tray to him  
who is waiting orange scaled palms  
sugar on knife.



**Eva Swider**



**Eva Swider**

# WOMAN IN A GYPSY DANCING DRESS

---

MARY ANN HEIMAN

This is something I've not seen before:  
my mother--perhaps it's the drink my uncle fixed her--  
bringing out the photographs in the wooden box, unbidden.  
Pink roses and blue inlaid in cedar--who makes things like  
this anymore--a fine box just for holding pictures.  
She reaches in and pulls one out--great grandmother, I think,  
stern, germanic, not a loose hair anywhere, her shirt sleeves  
stop an inch above her bony wrists and mean enough to scare  
twin babies clutched up against her chest.  
I can always tell my mother, she's the wide-eyed one and  
sleepy uncle,  
he won't take the picture as I pass it to him.  
"I'd do things different, if I could go around again."  
"What?" My aunt is interested now, fearing, I think,  
it might have something to do with her, but no--  
"I'd be more assertive," is what he says.  
We all think of my grandmother.  
I find her, tiny in perfect early 1900's bustled gown,  
waist held in tight, a man's hands could circle it,  
she used to tell us,  
under a hat upon which a bird is poised to fly.  
Here she stands beside my grandpa,  
the top of the hat just reaching his shoulders.  
And here he is with spotted hunting dogs and hanging feather  
bodies that must be ducks,  
a rifle casual underneath his arm. "You know he used  
to stash bottles at the club house," my aunt tells us.  
No comment from my mother, only more pictures:  
herself and me as a baby.  
She was quite beautiful, hair dark and gathered at the neck  
and then again almost half-way down her back.  
I don't remember this beauty, at least I don't remember  
knowing it. And what must she be feeling?  
She won't tell me but she is returning or recreating  
that other life before my father and inviting me in, oh, not

directly, never directly, but shyly,  
"and here's Aunt Margie and Uncle Jerry's wedding."  
He looks assertive here, shoving cake into Aunt Margie's  
face. She's laughing.  
And she laughs now--the same laugh, for our essential  
selves don't change that much.  
Just yesterday she told me that my uncle's  
stopped flushing the toilet and she doesn't know hey.  
They've been married over forty years--  
forty years and four children since he shoved cake into her  
face.

Here now my favorite: mother and father at a lamp-lit  
restaurant table on the evening of their wedding--  
His eyes are half-closed; a cigarette dangles from the corner  
of his mouth.

And she, impossibly slim, is gazing somewhere through  
the film that glistens on her eyes into that dream she thinks  
will be her future.

I see something I'm sure they don't see  
a forties movie, and they are the stars,  
an apartment with crystal canisters for drinks,  
something about that golden elixir shining through the  
glass--it's better as a picture.

In an art deco world nothing bad can happen. Or  
if it does, it's funny.

I don't like these later pictures. My mother seems to lose  
her sense of style, or is it just the fifties  
living on the backs of cereal boxes, long-play record jackets  
and that new thing called t.v.

or maybe it's myself I don't like seeing  
--as if my being somehow compromises  
a life that could have been,

a man that could have loved her, not fat fingers  
groping for her,

for any of us, to keep him company when she rejected him.

What happened to the woman in a gypsy dancing dress,  
on the front lawn of that tow-story house where  
she lived as a girl.

I remember her upstairs room: built in bookshelves lined with  
books no one now has heard of

but I read every one of them while everybody else was sleeping  
when I stayed there with my grandma.  
And I would play with the silver-backed  
brushes and mirrors still laid out on her vanity  
as if she had placed them there that morning,  
and imagine I was her.

I don't like these later pictures--my father khaki-clad.  
Everything broadened; there is nothing fine about him.  
He's dead now. I find one I've never seen before--  
he must be eighteen and cocky, I would have been  
drawn to him--farm boy comes to the city to  
audit the books at the Kroger Grocery Store. Where did he  
learn to do that? I'm one generation from the farm,  
and we don't have any pictures from his family, only  
some stories passed down that made them seem like hicks--  
when they got indoor toilets they would only flush them once  
a day because they thought the water would get used up.  
We're back to that now, but then it just seemed stupid, and I  
wanted nothing to do with my cousins from the country.

But now the pictures must go back into their box,  
the late-nite news is on: my mother watches Ginger Rogers  
receiving an award and doesn't comment on how fat she's  
gotten.

No sign marks her face as she puts the box away.  
I once heard that when we reach a certain age  
a natural anesthesia is released that stops the pain  
that comes from knowing time's become a finite box of  
pictures that cannot be removed or changed or even taken out  
and only a few more can be slipped in on top,  
travel pictures mostly.

I wait until the three of them are sleeping to take  
the pictures from their box again.  
Black and white has faded into color.  
Is this what sets us off from jungle beasts--  
we seek to capture moments in our lives, wrench them out and  
trap them for display: a smile,  
a hat upon which a bird is poised to fly.  
A man chases a woman on an urn. In the next picture  
they pose with their two lovely children and



years later, we see him with his second wife  
pretending to push her over Niagara Falls.

There is one more picture I need and  
in the morning I will ask my Aunt to take it,  
a picture of my mother and myself  
posed together not quite touching, on the couch.  
I will place it on the chest at the foot of  
my bed beside another picture waiting there:  
she at thirty and I at four in matching purple dresses.

# SUSAN MILLMAN

---

MARY ANN HEIMAN

She's a friend of someone  
who works in my office and  
what I know is this:  
fifteen years ago she had a date  
with a man I've started to see.  
Since then, she's heard his name  
and that he married and divorced,  
had kids and raised them by himself,  
and she's encountered him occasionally  
over cabbage at the all-nite grocery store.  
They had a 'nice time,' she remembers,  
slight jolt of familiarity,  
the electric comfort of a blanket,  
and yet they hugged only once  
and said goodbye.  
Now this man who hugged her once  
and said goodby has  
startled my reflexes:  
he lives in a big house with red Spanish tiles  
and a dog on the side,  
and kid and a nephew who have their own rooms...  
I went to visit and the house sucked me in,  
(I guess my anti-stabilizing shield was down)  
through the hall of yellow umbrella photos  
taken by his daughter,  
past the giant's kitchen table  
holding coffee cups of mottled gray  
each encircled by a strident color  
to ensure no drinking from the other person's cup,  
past the washer stacked with kid clothes  
into the living room blue couch which  
had no lamp beside it because it was  
just for looking out the window  
into the sparkling city.  
There we sat getting high and talking  
our words spinning out and touching  
mingling and repelling until

we had a square of cloth between us  
and when it grew lacy,  
I knew I had to go.  
He walked me to my car.  
I wanted to say I like you,  
you're really special but  
as he came toward me  
arms open like his house,  
my shield shot up and  
all I could do was scream  
SUSAN MILLMAN!  
He hugged me once  
and was gone.



name, age, background, job.  
He reminds you of this old lover  
or that family member.  
What would your kids look like?  
Can you see her rocking  
next to you on the porch of  
a cabin near a lake?

The world's fate rests on this relationship.

You must not blow it:  
be confident but not overbearing,  
eager, but not desperate,  
caring, not devouring.  
The weight becomes too much and  
you sink beneath it,  
jettisoning all thoughts of love--  
who needs it?  
You're happy with yourself.  
You pour yourself a drink or  
light up a joint--  
succumb to happy melancholy.

Then, you hear a knock on your door  
and open it to find  
the object of your late affections.  
"Come in," you say.  
"I dig your polypeptides,  
Let's kiss."



**Josh Greenberg**

# Malibu Fire, November 93

---

AMY REYNOLDS

The air smelled of houses  
burning in the November wind.  
The baby's hands were hot,  
his face blotched with viral sores.  
He couldn't stop crying,  
overwhelmed by the maddening  
injustice of autumn heat,  
and chicken pox.  
I curled against him on the bed  
where we could look  
out at the eucalyptus trees  
tossing in the hot wind.

At my back, t.v. reporters  
recited the names of neighborhoods  
and canyons now in flames,  
Malibu Canyon, the Palisades,  
Topanga Canyon Park where  
my husband and I had married.  
That day the lilacs were blooming,  
clouds of silvery lavender  
against the April green hills.  
As we said our vows,  
a red dog, a flame dog  
ran across the hillside,  
brilliant fur flashing,  
a flame of love in the grass.

A flame dog.  
A flame dog flashing  
like a flame of destruction  
in the dry grass of November,  
igniting the eco-logic  
of mesquite and sage.

The baby's cries slowed,

eyes finally closing  
as he stroked my breast,  
fell asleep in the curl of my body.  
All I can do is mother one child  
while the world burns.



# JOE

---

CLIFFORD KANE

I remember, as a child  
listening to the body counts on the news  
while my mother cried  
I can't recall the figures  
but I know that they were a lot  
and I can't recall  
but I think that  
they must have announced them for both sides  
like the score of a football game  
I remember driving past  
the cemetery on the 280  
commuting with a teacher from my school  
he said  
"even in death they make them look the same"  
I was moved  
it was the best thing he ever taught me

He drank Gallo Hearty Burgundy  
out of the jug  
while he played John Prine songs on guitar  
it was a long time ago  
nobody seemed to care  
that he drank wine at school

He had been there  
most of them had avoided it  
but he had been there  
he worked in a medical unit  
he would tell us stories  
about how they would sneak in and steal  
spools of copper wire  
and shoot them with arrows  
into props of helicopters  
stories about doctors  
and really dumb guys  
or how he and Connie used to go see  
this old black blues singer  
in Oklahoma

who doesn't want a better guitar  
than his old Harmony  
because nobody could  
play better than him anyway  
he never told us much more  
but it was enough  
to make me understand resourcefulness

# CAMPING

---

ROBERT WYNNE

There is an indentation  
in the riverbank  
from the cup that held  
your caramel colored coffee.  
The curved face molded  
moist earth around it  
before folding crimson and yellow  
flowers with its weight,  
slipping into the current.

I hear the murmur of your chest  
rising and falling  
under the shiny blue canopy  
we bought for this trip,  
and I search the ground  
with my eyes  
for any other ornament  
of last night.

My instinct is to run,  
to follow the falcon  
that floats toward the tallest tree.  
But there is no refuge;  
leaves swirl down, trees rot,  
and candles extinguish themselves.

The knot in my stomach  
separates frayed ends  
which yearn for each other,  
silk-like flame spreading out  
from the cluster of cord  
to two identical wicks.  
Thin white thread  
spins itself into ash.

## **UNDER MINE**

---

ROBERT WYNNE

Paper folds each day  
into carefully uneven sections,  
floats memories out windows,  
tickertape spiraling down to the street,  
moments carried away  
on the bottoms of shoes.

I keep the picture in a drawer,  
shuffled among unsent thank you cards  
and misplaced phone numbers.  
Every time I hold the photo  
it bends a little more,  
edges asserting themselves  
against my skin, corners curling  
in toward each other, longing.

It's the only way  
I can remember your hand  
under mine, blood coursing  
life like breath on a mirror,  
color soaking into fingers, fading.

## **GUM ALLEY, S.L.O.**

---

ELISSA CARUTH

I've only been there in the dark  
seeing the gum.  
the shadows fallen deep into the pits  
of mostly white gum  
with some wads of green.  
I've been to Gum Alley  
and seen the designs  
made from salivated inspiration  
stuck onto the bricks  
which can still be seen  
behind chewed up memories  
underneath gummy dares  
underneath good times that have hardened  
onto the alley wall.  
pits and divets  
teeth and finger marks  
preserved in a sticky museum  
uneven hard gum  
dirt and spit  
on display.  
admission,  
walk through  
with a stick of gum  
and leave your mark  
your chewed identifier  
and become a part  
of the wall.



"Scattered Dreams"

Paige Marie Banculla  
5/94

**Paige Banculla**

# HEAVEN

---

## MELEE

Their father fell away from them gradually, in pieces, with small plops and soft thuds. He fell like the apricots did when they got too soft and heavy to hold on anymore.

July sat between her sisters and had to keep covering her eyes with her hands to keep them from opening.

"I see ferns," said June. Her eyes stayed shut by themselves, but she was older than July by two years so it was easier for her. July watched from between her fingers as June's still, calm lips curved upward. "And I see cellos," June added.

July shook her head. "Tambourines and sunflowers," she said.

Augusta fidgeted under the table and batted out the creases in the Chip 'n Dale sheets; the three of them huddled safe inside the fortress of bright cartoon trees and clothed rodents.

"Heaven," Augusta said when her turn came, "is a garage sale." And when the older two laughed she placed one stubby finger to her lips and regarded her sisters with grave, gray eyes. "It's true," she said. "I swear it."

Augusta was seven years old. She was the youngest and the smartest of the three. She was her daddy's favorite. "The child is a true pragmatist," he used to say, proudly. He'd just about burst the time she traded her Barbie doll with the little girl down the street for a zip-loc bag full of pumpkin seeds. "Excellent source of vitamin A," Augusta had explained.

"The child is a monster," their mother argued, but she always wrapped her arms around Augusta and nuzzled the soft dusty folds of her neck when she said it. Augusta would wriggle away then grumbling about being treated like a baby, and June and July would stand there with their mouths hanging open because that kid never did get in trouble for anything.

But Augusta was their baby too. She let them dress her up in scarves and pearls and old fedoras and glittery gold pumps.

She sat still for them too, as still as a movie star July said, when they painted her finger and toe nails. She only just sighed now and then, understandably, when they fumbled the Fiesta Red or the Crystal Violet or the Suddenly Cerise up onto her tiny cuticles. But she never pulled away.

"Redundant," Augusta said once, when their father's familiar but wavery voice singing "You Are My Major Chord" floated in and out with the breeze through the knotted boards. They were up in the tree house, listening to an old recording of the first and last song their father had ever written.

June and July looked at each other and giggled, then took turns pumping her for answers.

"What is? The pickles and sauerkraut?"

She pursed her lips and shook her curly hair no.

"The gray hat and tie? The pink and rose rhinestones? The flies and mosquitoes?"

Augusta closed her mascaraed eyes and folded her plump arms across the wide satin cumberbund her sisters had safety-pinned around her chest. Wrong wrong wrong wrong she said to every suggestion.

"She doesn't know what the word means," July whispered to June as loud as she could.

Augusta sniffed at her sisters and did not bother to open her eyes.

"Then prove it," July said.

Augusta's Shiny Pink Champagne lips slid into a smile. She nodded back and forth to her sisters as an orchestral conductor nods to his strings, his winds, his brass, his percussion. "June," she said, with dignity. "July." Slowly she cranked her veiled face heavenward and lifted her sticky arms to the sun. Gravity sent thin pink rivulets of melted red popsicle trickling toward her armpits. "Redundant," she said, "is being up here and happy at the same time."

June was the talented one. She would one day be a concert pianist, or a ballerina, or an opera singer. June loved ferns and cellos and ballet-pink slippers. That was why June said what she did when they played "Heaven."

"Heaven" was one of their favorite games. They draped sheets over the dining room table and chairs, then hid



underneath and watched the sun make shapes on their arms and legs when it streamed in the window, strained through the lace curtains and the patterned sheets. They pretended to be in heaven and they told each other what they saw. They were allowed to see anything they wanted as long as it was real -- that was the only rule. No misty airborne stuff like "happiness" or "more time together" or "peace inside our family" --all those had been tried at one time or another and judged to be invalid. In order to count, they decided, it had to be real enough to see or touch or taste.

This was not a game that could be played without sheets. They could not, for example, talk about heaven while actually sitting in the chairs and eating food off their plates with their mother and father. Their father had his own definition of what was real, and games (even pretending games about God or Heaven or other things that scared him because they looked to him too much like nothing), he pushed back and away with a grunt and a scrape, just as he pushed his chair from the table.

July invited their mother to play with them once. She thought it might cheer her up after her younger sister, their Aunt Poppy, died. She'd remained in a coma for a week after the crash, but then she died. "She just let go," July's mother told them when she came back from the hospital that day.

"She should have held on," July said, but that made her mother frown and turn away.

"Come on," July said then, because no one else was saying anything. "It's fun." Their mother smiled with just her mouth then crawled underneath and folded her legs Indian-style, like they did. But when the sun fell on the swirling arabesques in their gold linoleum, their mother saw something that made her not want to play anymore. "What do you see?" July asked, but her mother didn't answer so July pulled Augusta into her own lap and they all just sat there. When her mother finally spoke again it was to tell the girls it was time to put away the sheets and to set the table for dinner. She told them to remember to fold the napkins like diamonds because their daddy would be home soon.

June was getting too big to be playing "Heaven." Her legs were too long under the table and always in the way. They were scratchy because she had just started shaving, and no one,

not even their mother, knew about that except July. June was twelve years old and growing breasts. That worried June but July assured her that they were small, good, careful breasts. So far. June said there was a chance they might still go wild and grow all out of control. July promised to keep her fingers crossed for her sister to keep that from happening.

July was still only ten years old -- the middle child. She overheard her mother talking about her on the phone one day and learned that she had "middle-child syndrome." July asked her mother what that was and how you can tell if you've got it. Her mother sat on the floor and banged through the pile of cake pans and muffin tins in the bottom cupboard to find a cookie sheet. "You're probably just fine," she told July. "Don't worry about it at all." But then she called her office and told Wanda that she couldn't see any students that afternoon and the two of them baked chocolate chip cookies. Her mother didn't follow recipes and the cookies came out kind of salty and brownish, but she kept on hugging her daughter throughout the whole sifting, measuring, leveling, creaming, folding procedure and July could tell that it made her feel better.

Truth was, July didn't really care if she had the syndrome or not. She felt just fine and what people didn't realize about being sandwiched between a beautiful, talented older sister and an adorably brainy little one, was that she was the one they told their secrets to.

The three girls had birthdays scattered all over the year but were named for the summer months because Mr. Turrett felt strongly that one should pick a theme and stick to it. He had landed a job as a taxonomist right after June's first birthday, and informed his wife that he had found his true calling at last. "Organization!" he'd say with one finger in the air, gently chiding her for serving foods of too many different colors at the same meal.

Then Mrs. Turrett would just shake her head but July could tell that her mother was happy when her father was like that, when he was working and immersed in something, anything, again. She'd even scrape the green peas or the red bell peppers off his plate and onto her own, if it really offended him. She humored him on the "season" thing too, but was really pushing for spring instead of summer. All the way up to the day of July's

birth, Mrs. Turrett had held out hopes of going backwards from June, to May, and then maybe April. But their father lost another job just before July was born and he started acting so strangely (dropping the spoons right in with the forks and once hanging a claw hammer on his workshop wall in a space clearly outlined for a coping saw), that their mother gave in.

July eavesdropped sometimes when her mother talked on the phone. She'd duck around corners and watch as her mother wound herself up in the cord. She generally caught only little chunks of the conversations. "I kept hoping that Carey ... I didn't know that he... all that crap..." was about it most of the time. But she'd watch her mother fan the fruit flies away from a bowl of bloated nectarines as she spoke, or fan her own face with an article on dolphins. The phone cord around her mother's neck made her voice come out sharp and narrow, like wind squeezing through a tunnel. "But we're all fine now," her mother always said before she hung up. That was how July knew when to tiptoe back down the hall.

He'd been at a convention when Augusta was born. July remembered that Aunt Poppy was the one who brought her and June to the hospital. Children weren't allowed in the room but Aunt Poppy led them through a muddy garden filled with red oleanders, then propped them up on her hips against the window. Their mother was in a high bed with white sheets. Her hospital gown was a pale green, exactly the color of honeydew melon, and it made her arms look fat and white. When she saw them all at the window she smiled and held up a pink and puffy Augusta. Augusta had little mitts over her hands and July wondered if she had paws instead of fingers.

Their mother's face was pink and puffy like the baby's. July couldn't remember why. She mainly remembered Aunt Poppy carrying them back over the mud and the oleanders and plopping them into her big red car, then driving somewhere real fast and buying each of them a root beer float in a frosted mug. The ice cream bobbed up to the top of the glass and was prickly crisp where it touched the sweet foam. The girls kept laughing, July remembered, trying to smash the ice cream down with their spoons, but it always managed to roll over and wiggle out from under and bounce up to the top again.

Augusta was three and a half weeks old when their father came back from the convention. July remembered wondering what conventions were and why they took so long to be over with. Their mother was nursing the baby in the brown wicker rocking chair (it still had tiny drops of breast milk and spit-up from the first two babies splashed along the bottom part where their mother never looked) when he came back.

July was trying to climb up on her mother's lap with Augusta; her mother's nightgown was peach colored and silky and slippery as wet moss. June was playing the "William Tell Overture" on the piano.

He stuck his key in the door and walked in.

His eyes were red. He dropped his suitcase on the sink counter without looking up. He went out to the garage and came back with a beer. June stopped playing. They all watched him, even Augusta, July remembered, as he petted the cat, blew the crumbs off the top of the toaster, glanced at the headlines and straightened the edges of the newspaper. Then he crossed through the dining room to the piano. He touched June first -- petted her hair as he had Apollo's and kissed the top of her head. She didn't speak to him but turned back to the keys and began playing "Eleanor Rigby."

July had just barely finished her slippery climb to the top of her mother's thighs when he stepped in and lifted her up, away from her mother's soft milky breasts, away from her baby sister's soft silky hair -- he lifted her far away and held her high in his hard arms against his wide hard chest. She held tight to his neck and let him hold her, let the stiff whiskers on his cheeks prick her face, let the rough wool of his sweater scratch her bare arms. He felt just like the rough grey block walls that lined their alley -- the walls that kept the huge black snarling heads of Mrs. Washtay's German Shepherds from leaping over and eating her intestines. That was the first time July cried without knowing why; she brushed the tears quick away because it was a stupid time to cry and because she didn't want him to put her down.

She kept clinging to him like a monkey as he leaned over to kiss her mother's cheek and peer into the grave, gray eyes of their newest Turret. Augusta looked skeptical, even then. Her mother didn't speak so July filled up the silence for her. "She's alive," July said.

Her father nodded, then bent his knees to lower her back to earth slowly, gently.

"Monica," he said to their mother and when she looked away and buried her face in Augusta's silky baby hair, he knelt down and buried his in the slippery folds of her gown. July stared at them for a while. Then she ran and sat by her sister on the piano bench. They pounded out "Heart and Soul" over and over, until the baby finally started crying and their parents had to take her into another room to calm her.

July knew their father held on for as long as he could. He changed the baby and mowed the lawn and put antifreeze in their mother's radiator and repainted the eaves every spring. It was true that he fell a little further into himself each fall. But he stayed on anyway, and that counted for a lot. He told June she looked pretty in her new braces; he helped July paint planets for her solar system mobile; he coached pee-wee soccer for Augusta's team; he bought lilacs for his wife when she finally had her wisdom teeth pulled.

"He's doing his best," July said. But June wouldn't agree. It was an argument that had grown up through the seasons the same way they had. June was mad at him again, this time because their mother was crying in the bathroom. Their mother had been smiling in a crisp and shaky way when she scooped out their cantaloupes for breakfast, but when June asked her what was wrong she went straight into the bathroom and locked the door. They heard the whoosh of kleenex being ripped from the box, then a sharp burst of water from the showerhead.

"It's Sunday morning and he still isn't home from his meeting last night," June said. "What do you think?"

"He won't go away," Augusta said with a mouthful of Kix.

"I don't think anything," July said, and she tried hard not to but she did anyway. Little pieces of her father had been falling away for some time already. First his hair, then his stories, then his diamond-folded napkin at the table. He was trying still, July told herself. But he'd just lost another job and they were all getting heavier and he couldn't (July realized as she stabbed into her cantaloupe and lifted it to her lips but forgetting how to swallow spit it back into the bowl again) hold on much longer.

July was the only one who cried when he left. June banged him away from the piano with a Chopin waltz. It was the piece that swirls and spirals and climbs like a vine up a trellis. It always made July think of girls in long white dresses and magic dancing shoes who stood on their tip-toes and stretched their arms up to heaven. They dance slowly at first, then get faster and faster until they're spinning like tops, until they're dizzy and crazy and sad, until they weep out loud and claw at their long blowing hair, until they collapse in exquisite agony and madness into heaps of white petals and then they die.

That's what that waltz used to make July think of, but after he left it made her think of her mother dressed in baggy jeans and a flannel shirt. Her mother yanking weeds out of the pumpkin patch as her father drove away. July at least brushed down her bangs and put a barrette in her hair before she saw him off. She did that much for him and she didn't care if her mother liked it or not. She hugged him for a long time; he finally pulled her arms away. "He's leaving," she kept saying to her mother, trying to get her to look up at least, at least to wave.

Augusta stood in the driveway wearing her new patent leather party shoes. July worried that Augusta might take it the hardest, but she smiled just as she had in the tree house, and blew bright kisses to the car. "I'll see you tonight, Daddy!" she called. "I'll make you a surprise!"

Mrs. Turrett took a second job at night, with a caterer. Wanda had a sister-in-law in the business who said she could probably manage to take on one more server if she had to. Four nights a week, after dinner, Mrs. Turrett changed out of her pretty Art Teacher clothes into a coal black skirt and a starched white apron. She pulled her hair back tight into a bun or a braid and always drank coffee before she left.

It was fun for the girls at first -- having the house to themselves, being in charge of themselves, but after a while it settled into a routine -- of July always cleaning up the dishes, of Augusta dragging old picture books out from under her bed, of June always talking on the phone to her friends and playing "West Side Story" over and over again. June did that even when July was trying to do her homework, even when July slammed

her books on the table to get her to stop. Even then June kept on, thought only about herself, until one day July hauled off and smashed her sister's bud vase on the kitchen floor. But that only made June laugh in a mean way and say that she didn't care about the vase anyway because it was only from Pic 'n Save. "And just wait until Mom sees what you did to the floor," June added, turning the stereo up louder.

When June started junior high she stopped telling July her secrets altogether. She began wearing make-up and July would've been only too happy to help her hide it from their mother, except that no one ever asked her to and besides, their mother never noticed. One time, June asked July if she had ever kissed a boy and July's heart raced, thinking finally her sister was back and here they go just like before. But before she could answer, June flicked on the stereo and started singing "A Boy Like That" with Maria and Anita; she was making her eyebrows arch and tears pop into her glassy eyes and July knew she had lost her again. July noticed that June's breasts were growing again, and wondered if June realized that. They were still good breasts, July pointed out to her, but leaning dangerously to the other side of careful. But Tony and Maria were singing "Somewhere" then and June had to run to the mirror to see what she looked like when she cried. July stuck her hand right in front of June's face and first crossed, then deliberately uncrossed her fingers. "You are such an idiot," June said.

July hated her mother's white apron. It changed her into a different mother. Just by tying it around her waist she became one of those mothers with rounding backs and dark circles under their eyes.

"Tell me stories about my mother," Augusta said sometimes. And July would remind Augusta of the time their mother had polkaed each one of them in and out of the hallways and around the apricot trees in the front yard. Or she would remind her of the time their mother stood on the coffee table and sang "Old Man River." But the stories sounded like stories, July noticed. Like a "once upon a time" up front would sound just right.

Augusta worked her way backwards, from encyclopedias, to Black Beauty, to Dr. Seuss, to the "I CAN READ" books. Her favorite was Little Bear. She brought it to

July at 2 o'clock in the morning sometimes, if their mother wasn't home yet. "Read me 'Little Bear Goes To The Moon,'" she'd say in a phoney baby voice that made July want to smack her. "Read me 'Little Bear's Wish.'"

But July never did smack her and she did read her the stories every time she asked, because Augusta was still just a little kid and she still needed parents and it wasn't her fault that her own mother couldn't just look up and smile, just look up from her stupid weeding and just smile at their father one last stupid time, when it might have changed everything.

And besides, July kind of liked the stories too. Mother Bear was large and soft and plump and wore long dresses with pinafores. Mother Bear took care of everything, patiently, tirelessly, without any Father Bear there at all. July wished Mother Bear lived at their house.

July gave their mother the note from Augusta's teacher after dinner. Her mother read it and sighed. "Oh, Baby," she said to Augusta and tears fell out of her eyes. It wasn't like she cried anymore, it was more like the tears were so close to the edge now that they fell out whenever she tipped her head to one side.

"And the worst part is," their mother continued, and her lips were really quivering then, "is that I can't even stay here to talk to you about it." She squeezed and kissed Augusta, then stood up angrily. "Because now I have to go and get dressed," she said, narrowing her eyes. She hissed out the last word and bit it off at the end, as if it stood for everything she hated.

She came home early. It was only nine o'clock when the headlights slapped across the kitchen window. July watched as they focused, then dimmed. Augusta was in the tub with an old baby doll she'd found in a box marked "Goodwill." June was lying on the floor in the living room with her pointe shoes on, listening to "Tonight." July's hands were pruning up in the sink with the soapy tupperware.

July ran to the door without drying her hands, still holding a burpless seal. It scared her a little -- her mother so early, the way she was smiling. "What happened?" July asked.



Her mother's smile swelled into a laugh. "Screw em," she said. "That's what." She stepped inside and untied her apron. She wadded it into a ball and tossed it into the dirty dishwater. July watched it sink. June wandered in when she heard their mother's voice.

"America" blared from the living room. "Arriba! Arriba!" their mother shouted above the music, clapping her hands over her head and stamping her feet on the linoleum. "Ole'!"

Augusta came running out of the bathroom in her pajama bottoms. She wound her wet arms, still dripping with bubbles, around her mother's hips and let herself, giggling, be bounced and jiggled and swung around; her feet barely missed hitting the hard rungs of her father's chair as she flew through the air.

July remembered this mother but was a little afraid of her. "I'll get a new washing machine..." she sang loudly, flatly, in her best Puerto Rican accent.

"What will you have though to keep clean?" her mother joined in, singing and whirling Augusta at the same time.

June jumped up on the coffee table and balanced on pointe. "Everything's free in America..."

Her mother jumped up on the coffee table too. "...for a small fee in America..."

Augusta and July climbed up and shoved their way in; they nearly knocked each other off, bumping and grinding and fan-kicking, pretending they were Puerto Rican dancers on a tenement rooftop, like in the movie. They froze in their poses for the grand finale of "America" and held them, unsteadily, through the little ridge of silence in the record. Then Mrs. Turrett began snapping her fingers and shaking her head, loose-lipped, to the opening bars of "Cool." July and her sisters snapped their fingers too, hunching forward and pretending to be West Side gang members. They followed their mother as she lead them (singing "Boy, Boy, Crazy Boy, stay loose, Boy...") off the coffee table and (July first dashing into the bedroom for one of her father's Trojan sweatshirts to slip over Augusta's head) into the Chevy.

On the way to the store their mother explained that she'd had it, that's all. She said that the silver trays were breaking her back and that she hated it when Roquefort dressing oozed down

the side of those huge jars and onto her fingers. And besides, she missed them.

July wanted to leave it at that: the night sky fresh and blowing right into their own car, the mother bright and apronless and there, the little sister damp and small and smiling, the big sister giddy, asking only the right kinds of questions -- nothing about how they would be able to buy new jeans now, about how they were going to pay for June's recital costumes, about how they were ever going to be able to fix that hole in the kitchen floor. She felt like kissing June, for asking such good and stupid questions, for making their mother laugh as she answered.

It was in the ice cream aisle, while Augusta drew hearts in the little frosty windows on the ice cream lids, that Mrs. Turrett told her daughters the rest of it. She told them in a whisper (because people were all around them, poking their nose heads down into the frozen sections) that one too many men with one too many gold chains and one too many Old-Fashioneds had grabbed her from behind. Augusta pulled her frosty finger away from the cartons. "So anyway," their mother continued, in a low voice. "Tonight I grabbed one back."

"You grabbed a man's butt?" Augusta said before July could stop her, in a voice that ricocheted off the frozen peas.

Mrs. Turrett stood up straight, nodded to Hal, the store manager, and said "Yes, French vanilla, I think." She checked the prices on three different brands, decided on the cheapest, and whispered no, that's not exactly where I grabbed him. She lowered the ice cream into the cart next to the root beer and a ten pound sack of potatoes.

July was the first one out of the car and into the house. She ran to the cupboard for the plastic Sea World mugs which, despite the Shamus, looked a lot like the frosted ones she remembered with her Aunt Poppy. As they watched the root beer sizzle and fizz, their mother assured them that everything would be okay. She told them she was thinking about giving private art lessons out of the house, or maybe even freelancing because she was still that good, she knew she could be, even though it had been years since she'd done anything but teach.

July filled her mouth with ice cream. She closed her eyes and frowned. "Ccooldd" she said. But really she was

making her eyes and mouth stay shut in order to keep her mother's promises from leaking out and dribbling away.

Augusta dug out the Chip 'n Dale sheets. Mrs. Turrett crawled underneath with her daughters, laughing because her ice cream kept bopping up to the top of the float.

June was silent so July began it.

"Sunflowers and tambourines," she said.

"Root beer floats and bright, brave daughters," said their mother.

June began to cry.

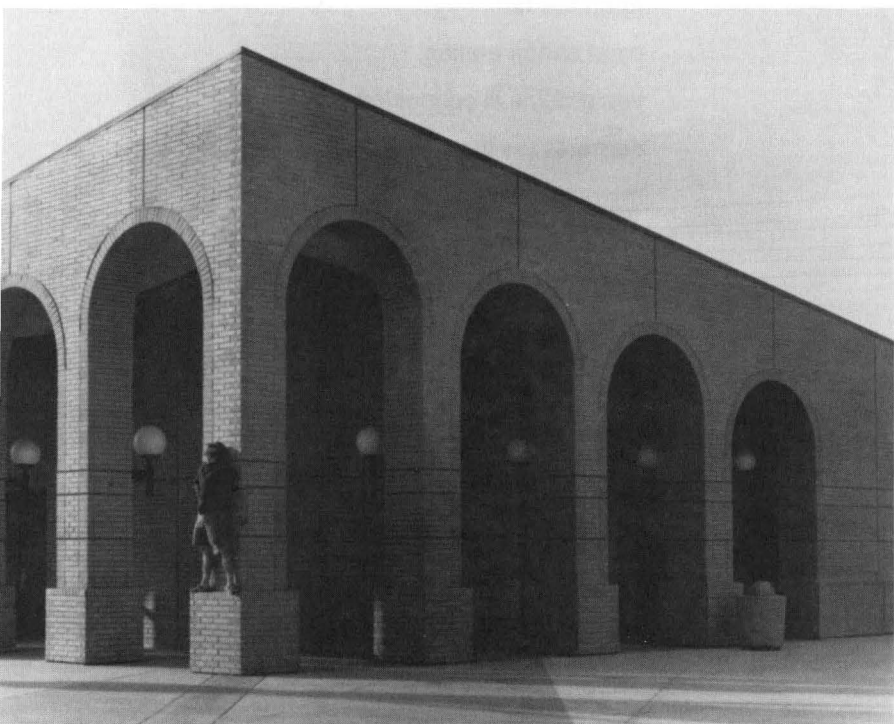
"Preposterous," said Augusta. The moon threw a lacy pattern over Augusta's cheeks when she said it that really did look a lot like ferns.

But by then July was studying the deep, jagged trench the vase had gouged out of the floor. She was wondering if those globs of ugly black tar had always been down there beneath the golden linoleum. She wondered if they had been just been biding their time all along, waiting, like evil trolls beneath a bridge, for some stupid kid to stumble by and set them free.

Her mother had stopped smiling too; she was studying the deep black gash. Her mother must have been seeing the same things July saw because her eyes were blank and round and white as the moon.

"Cellos," July said, nudging June in the ribs so she would start please June start playing Heaven so July could stop thinking. But June kept on crying, and their mother just kept staring at the raw, black, angry tar.

July pulled Augusta's head against her own heart, forcing her sister's eyes away from the terrible hole in the floor. She scooted them both backwards, closer to the wall, and moved her feet away from it, just in case. She couldn't take her own eyes away. She worried that she might be hypnotized. She worried that the evil might already be seeping out of the gory ooze and into their own atmosphere. "Hold your breath," she told Augusta. She worried that it might never be fixed.



enlarged and is given

some additional

space and is now

used for

the purpose

of the

of the building is now

# **MINE**

---

HELEN LAURENCE

ripen the fertile eye:  
blind chaos easing,  
yesterday's ill concealed  
cornerstone trips  
my undocumented I  
become mine  
selfhood at last / lasting:  
a rich mine.

all this is  
mine together however i  
will, whenever i make  
soft hills and pollen  
greenpurple valleys yellow  
butterfly into me  
their motion pouring me  
poring us into pleasure.  
I encircle, enter,  
become rivering radius  
climbing center.

escaping body  
spiriting along  
the diameter of feeling my entry

wedge is women and within all  
the concentricity  
wild electricity favors  
craving all

# **AFTERNOON WITH ENYA, MOZART, FERRON**

---

HELEN LAURENCE

more connected when more alone,  
music crosses / permeates  
all i becoming am

did you know i pizzicato  
your distant strings,  
pluck deep vibration  
and sounding you  
into my swelling self  
listen?

tonight we will speak  
erasing miles by wired sound  
but what will we hide?  
wouldn't it be simpler if  
i played  
enya or even vivaldi into  
your ready ear and wordless  
we could grip our sense  
of sameness?

alone now i pretend you  
here. taut, tuned,  
i am played

# UNTIL

---

HELEN LAURENCE

while morning smiles  
our nuzzling widens  
blending us until  
our flower yellow creams  
when mist  
grey fingers long  
the clinging ferns

crow bounces pine  
branch boggles  
unleaved paper mulberry  
dripping sweet to  
our touching lips  
our day along

until all the blue-spindled  
white-gray brightness  
hangs  
until



# SWIMMING I WAS

---

HELEN LAURENCE

*"Going as far as you can go and still  
come back  
seems a worthwhile motto."*

Dorothy Barresi "For Domenic, My  
1970's"

swimming alone those unprotected  
years (mother where  
were you when all the sand let go?)  
each time going out so far i had to fight  
body and soul to regain shore  
almost always sure of it but  
what a way to learn  
swimming (mother what  
made you so afraid?)

raised to fear: unwilling  
sacrifice raised  
to your harsh Almighty darting  
venomous fangs at exposed infants trying  
to nurse (mother how  
could you reconcile helpless with severe?)  
no wonder  
cancer found welcome  
and i swimming  
smooth diving under breakers  
swam away.

seaweed forest: only the first time fearing  
entanglement (mother why  
were tales of ocean life denied?)  
and the panic of capture  
with legs unable  
fighting for wet space  
dry air. but that was before  
learning the ropes

surging and i remember grunion  
and fires on the shore when sandy  
sweatshirts floated home the best of smells:  
ocean, blackened wieners, driftwood  
smoke (mother when  
did you name the sea your enemy?)  
urgent innocence felt content,  
fulfilled seeing

those moon-silvered grunion racing to renewal  
and not caring how wet my clothes became  
from waves (mother who  
did you believe i was in your story?)



# THE LIFE STONE OF SINGING BIRD

---

(an excerpt from the novel)

MELODY STEVENSON

**A**fter all those years of talk, of flying rumors, of mean excuses, of lies, in the end it didn't matter whether or not Singing Bird was invisible. No one saw her.

She crouched in the shadows of the sycamores, steeped in the fragrant tea of the morning forest. The rising dampness of sodden mosses and mushrooms clung to her trunk, her throat. Centuries of layers of dead wet leaves sank beneath her moccasins and gave up their steamy histories, rising like a smokescreen to shield her.

Six of them shouldered a great wooden box. The dark procession of bending figures trickled past Singing Bird like rolling tears. No one saw her. No icy fingers warmed near her ragged breaths. No crumpled hearts unfurled. Their eyes were dead, their ears were dead, and their slow shifting shapes did not even awaken the air.

Singing Bird traced with one bent finger the long welted scar that still divided her ancient face. The point of the knife had been inserted there, just below her right eye, and had been dragged firmly, righteously, across cheekbone, nose, lips, so that a part of her smile would be left forever dangling.

"Daughter," Singing Bird moaned, and the word tasted like Great Sea water on her tongue. But her voice was swallowed by the moaning of the wind. No one heard her.

A girl child with yellow hair trailed behind the great box. From time to time she'd reach up and press a tender palm against a sharp corner, then stop to examine the round mark left in her flesh. She made soft sounds like raindrops falling on a lake. Singing Bird longed to draw the child near, to tell her of her mother, of her grandmother, of Lost Man, of the Life Stone. The child looked at the blackened,

outstretched arm of Singing Bird but saw only another branch of sycamore. She did not stop.

The soft dropping sounds of the child's chant fell into a rhythm with her footsteps. Singing Bird glided through the shadows to follow, her coral bracelets tinkling delicately in the mist like fairy cymbals. The child stopped once, abruptly, and hit the box with her fist. The words she cried out were not in English. Singing Bird's heart rose at the words, with wings that strained to break through her brittle breast. But Singing Bird pressed her heart back inside with both hands and reminded herself that the child couldn't know. She was too young and no one would have told her. Certainly not India. No, the sounds the child made were only a few more soft splashes of innocent grief on the many pools of sorrow. And the Life Stone was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

A pavane, you call it. Very nice. I want to thank you for hearing me. For being my voice. I would thank you just for that, even if I didn't like what you'd written, but I do. Really. It's stately and dignified. Just right. Just about right.

A little slow, perhaps. A little sappy. But no matter. You have begun it! Whoever you are. You heard my prayer and I am more grateful than you'll ever know. And if you lose some of our readers along the way, so be it. It is to you I am indebted. Not to them.

But just to be on the safe side, let's try it this way: I'll scoop up all the stories and drop them like acorns at your feet. Then you can size and sort them at your leisure. Make some of them into meal if you like, or mush. Just be sure to leech out the bitterness first, or even the squirrels will nose them away.

Here. Let me first get you started and then I'll leave you alone. One shell you'd better crack right away is that one, over there in the shadows. You really should know, before you sink any more sympathy into that poor old woman, that she is my one true enemy. They call her Singing Bird and her story is ground into my own like dirt in a wound and will be just as hard to get out.

I don't know where to begin. At the ending I guess, where the edges are sanded, the hinges are hung, and all that's left for you to do is turn the knob and step inside. Then you can feel it all whole, in one piece.

I'm already dead then, completely.

The good thing about my being dead is that I can see in so many directions at once. I can see past, present, future, mothers and daughters and daughters and men who stayed and men who left, and the crying, laughing, colors, contradictions, all butted up together, all on one big screen without edges without endings vast as the plains as the sky limitless. I can see my mother, giving birth to me, my father, small, already old, kissing her hand quick before he catches me as I slip out, Boy Found watching all of it. I can see my mother's mother at her daughter's wedding, smiling victoriously, dry-eyed, while my mother's father, silent in the pew, weeps with fear and rage.

The other good thing--the only other good thing far as I can figure--is that now I can show it all to you. And you can make it real again.

I am the one in the great wooden box. I am India. But you must know that much already. Except that I'm not really there. There's no life in that box. No space. No color.

The man you see walking, the one behind the little girl, is, was my husband, Jesse. He is a good man, and strong in his own way, though you see him stooped there and dragging his feet through the mud. He loved me. That's the part I want you to see first. But not just yet.

The two men carrying the front of the coffin (both are wearing dark brown homespun coats, so that won't help you tell one from the other) are my sons, Brodie and Cam, the only two left of six. They are still boys, really, sixteen and eighteen, but they are tall like men, and dark like their father, and flawed, and proud. The other four are all gone, thanks to Singing Bird. She breathed a fever into Colin and Kiel, sent a snake after Jesse Jr., and Dwelly she changed into a little yellow bird, to keep her company I guess (since her own son refused to) up there in all that blue.

In the center are my brothers, Hugh and Henry, and the two men carrying the rear of the coffin are neighbors. The older man used to be friends with my father. His name is Stewey. He was the one my father punched at my mother's boarding house. That was long before I was born, but if it hadn't happened I might

not have been. Stewey and my father were still friends after that, or at least Stewey thought so. My father didn't forget much. Stewey turned out to be okay, though. He brought my mother a bouquet of blue lupine and a side of salted bison later on, after my father died. And he was the only one who put his arm around me at Dwelly's funeral. I don't forget much either.

Stewey's getting old now. He's really too old to be carrying so much. See, I knew it, he stumbled. Cold beads of sweat pop out on the thin, freckled skin of his forehead and he struggles to get that box back up on his bony shoulder. My husband runs to help. I knew he'd do that too. He smiles at Stewey and shoulders the burden himself. I'm glad he did that. It will make him feel better.

That little girl--the child that Singing Bird is itching to get her claws into--is my daughter, my baby. Seeing her like that, alone, bewildered, knowing that it is my death, my fault, that she must press her tender palm into the sharp corner of her mother's coffin in order to bring back some part of her living world, if only the painful part, cuts me, drags like a knife through my soul. It isn't fair. Singing Bird got off easy compared to me; only her face was disfigured. My soul is scarred and dangling and yet I am powerless still, in death as in life.

Worse, because now you are the only one who can hear me. You, who do not love me and whom I do not love. You are nothing but an artist. A seller of confidences. A keeper of pain. Worse, because now I will always hear my daughter's cries, always know that now she is deaf to my words of comfort. She thinks I have left her alone.

My daughter is blonde like I was, and pretty. Not that I am pretty now, though I could have been if I'd cared to be. Fact is, when you die you get your choice of resting in any of your living bodies, or none of them. The young and pretty one is not the one I chose. For a while there I preferred my old worn and comfortable body. The one I had just before that thing started growing in my lungs and eating up my breath. Men talked to me in that body, about the price of wheat and about their dried up wells. And they listened to me too. And their wives started giving me their softened eyes and their recipes for berry pudding and scalloped apples instead of the rustle of their stiff, starched skirts. But young and pretty was something I let go of with as much relief as regret. I gave up some power with the beauty I'll confess, but that power

was never one I could rest against. It opened doors I wanted shut, and it blinded the very people I most desperately needed to see me. But now, it appears that I've wiggled out of my flesh altogether, so none of that matters anymore.

My daughter is smarter than I was, but she is not, I must tell you, any wiser. I can see her future filled with reds and purples and blues and yellows, just as mine was. She will love richly and miserably. Her life will fill up and up until it overflows into death. And she will find the Life Stone of Singing Bird. Even though I've done every single thing I could think of since the day she was born to keep that from happening.

But before I drop any more acorns, I should probably warn you against believing everything you will see and hear from this point on because all of our visions are limited, even mine. Even yours. What I am trying to tell you is that your cynicism is appreciated. In fact it is required. Do not suspend your disbelief too far or you may, like me, like him, be lost forever.

\* \* \* \* \*

My own mother, Iris, married for love. That was why my grandfather wept. He knew how love weakened, consumed the self, muted the voice. He knew because, loving Isabella, he had been weakened, consumed. His own voice was now so muted that he could do nothing but weep quietly in his pew. With fear for his daughter. And rage.

My grandmother, however, did not believe for a moment that Iris married for love. That was why, during the wedding march, Isabella was able to smile the smile of one who knows better. Iris wanted to escape, that was all. Just as she had, at her age. It was history repeating itself. And although Isabella would sorely miss her first born daughter when she left, she understood her need to fly away, to leap onto the back of a well-heeled, well-muscled young man who would carry her far away, to a place where she could escape her childhood, her neighbor's expectations, the stultifying air of respectable captivity. Isn't that what Isabella had herself accomplished? And hadn't it turned out rather well? My grandfather had happened along at just the right moment. He was a rich, propertied young American traveling in



France, sent there by his parents to flaunt their wealth in the faces of the Europeans.

Henry had been crushing golden leaves with his heavy boots on a gloomy sidestreet in Paris when he saw her. It was twilight and he was wandering, lost in hard-won melancholy, savoring his romantic illusion of moving with neither will nor direction. Isabella was sixteen, panting and flushed from tearing down the broken sidewalk after her little brother. Her black curls were bouncing damp about her face and falling, falling like the Roman Empire, Henry thought, and instantly, forever for Henry, Isabella embodied the forbidden, the far-away, his first burning sip of Bordeaux wine, the perfume of the Seine, the purpose of his suffering, the object of his quest: his beloved.

Later, when Isabella was telling her girlfriends about it, she remembered Henry's strong, aquiline profile, and the gentleness of his gaze, and the tender quiver of his touch when he raised her fingers to his lips, but just then, to be frank, she saw only the trim cut of his waistcoat and the fine leather of his boots. She saw a man who was taller than she and who probably would not hurt her, and who just might be strong enough and needful enough to lift her out from under the suffocating blanket of tradition and pre-determined fates, and up into a world where mornings were fresh with possibilities, where the air, American air, was still new enough to breathe.

When Isabella ran home and told her mother that she was going to marry an American and sail away, her mother was not understanding. She locked her in her room, in fact, forcing an elopement, forcing Isabella to mourn her mother even while she lived, forcing Isabella to relive the tender moment of parting that should have but never did precede her journey, over and over again, until little lines of regret and bitterness settled around her mouth. I will never do that to my daughter, Isabella vowed. I will understand.

But Isabella did not understand; Iris really did marry for love. And Iris did not want to leave her home, her family. She loved Virginia, loved the plantation her father had given her mother as a wedding gift. She loved the smell of the sweet alyssum and she loved the long summer afternoons spent under the shade of the live oaks chatting with her sisters, and with the young men who came by with their fists full of violets. Those slender young men were pretty and pleasant and harmless.

Except Oren. He was different. His family came from New York and had only just relocated in Virginia to pacify his mother after her breakdown. He was slender and pretty like the others, but instead of lingering in the shade, instead of resting at her feet and fingering the satin of her hem, Oren was always in a hurry, as if there were something very important he had to do before it was too late. He'd sweep by and drop a bundle of books in her lap, usually muttering something like "You must read these" before he'd rush off again. The other young men would laugh when he left, or sometimes cluck over his intolerable manners, but Iris never laughed. The books felt heavy in her lap, foreboding. Sometimes she'd flip through a volume of Keats or Shakespeare and blush to imagine what Oren was trying to say. Other times she'd brush them like spiders off her skirts, roughly, angrily, without even glancing at the titles, so frightened was Iris that her future might be written within.

On one cold and sunny afternoon, too cold and too bright for pale sisters and earnest young suitors to accompany her outdoors, Iris sat alone in the lengthening shadows and shuddered. Oren. She felt him before she saw him, and when she saw him she looked away. How long he had been standing there, watching her, fitting his own long shadow into the shadows of the willows, she did not know. She closed her eyes as he approached, turned her face to the sun, focused on the orange and russet shapes that danced and flickered behind her eyelids, knowing what she would see if she looked at him, knowing what she would hear, knowing that that would be it. The end.

Oren stood still over her like that when he asked her. Without kneeling, without fingering her hem, without looking in her eyes even, for she kept them closed. Iris said she would. She would marry him. She would go with him. She would be his wife and she would love him forever. And when he left she wept, like her father, with fear and rage, because it was all true.

\* \* \* \* \*

When my mother gave me the Life Stone, years later, she wept again. But she was a different woman then. She walked with me far into the cornfields, where no one else could find us. She looked all around, suspicious, alert, though there was plainly

nothing to see but cornstalks, tall and green and boring as always and it irritated me, I remember, the way she was acting, as if even the lizards might be interested in what she had to say.

Iris was a different woman. She had long before made peace with her fear and her rage. She had learned to welcome and embrace them. Like old enemies who had done their best to destroy her and failed, she now invited them into her kitchen and poured them a cup of hot chamomile out of her copper kettle; she listened to their impotent boasts of future conquests with tolerance, pity, and a certain condescension.

Oren's death had been only the first step of many in the transformation of Iris. For a long time she blamed herself for his death. She thought (I can see now, though I never guessed it while I lived) that she had called for it, attracted it somehow, just by fearing it so compulsively. She imagined that the force of her premonition, the paralyzing weight of the dread she could not expel, the noise it made when it knocked around in her body, drew tragedy same as blood drew vultures.

Oren died of idealism, but an arrow in his temple was the more immediate cause. He had been reading Rousseau that morning, early, by the light of a kerosene lamp. He had awakened Iris to tell her about the Noble Savages they were bound to meet. His voice grew deep and rapturous, filling their small wagon with tales of purity and goodness, of serene, uncalculated love for the world and everything in it. Iris, already heavily pregnant and exhausted, kissed her husband on the arm because that was the part of him closest to her mouth, then turned over and went back to sleep. She dreamt, as he spoke, of a long narrow river, roaring with the rush of new rain, biting off chunks of earth as it sped past, swallowing every bank in its path, churning them into mud, carrying them away.

When she awoke, he was gone. She fried dough in fresh suet but could not eat. The wagon train prepared to move on. After a time she realized that she must climb back up on the wagon and drive the team herself, or she and Oren's unborn child would be left behind. She didn't cry or tell anyone of Oren's absence, fearing that the sounds of worry might make real their cause.

The caravan had stopped again, for supper and sleep, before Oren's old bay found her wagon. Oren was slumped over its neck, the arrow still lodged in his skull. My mother didn't scream, just tugged and tugged until she got it out, with small chips

of bone caught on the barbs. She stuffed the hem of her skirt into the hole, halfheartedly, knowing that she couldn't keep the life from leaking out, knowing that she had always known it would. She tried to lift him off the horse, but succeeded only in pulling him down into the dust, on top of her. That was when she cried, to have gotten dust all over him like that. And that was when the others came running. Three women caught a glimpse of Oren's bloodless, dusty face, then hurried their children away from the sight. Two others cried bitterly, dejectedly, for they were cold and filthy and nothing had turned out to be what they'd expected and this on top of everything else was more than they could bear. Four men hefted Oren into the back of my mother's wagon.

"Goddamned cut-throats," one of them said. "They're gonna pay, little missy, don't you worry." The wagon master told her that they'd have to wait until morning for the burial as the light was already shot.

\* \* \* \* \*

**Singing Bird arose with the sun. As a small child she awoke always with a smile and wandered around camp chirping little morning tunes outside of each tipi until the tall people stirred. The Men Among Men were generally indulgent with their children, and viewed idiosyncratic behavior as evidence of a smiling god. They did not, therefore, chide Singing Bird for disturbing their rest, but tolerated her morning visits. At least at first.**

**The tall people did not know that the reason Singing Bird sang at the flaps of their tipis was because new days frightened her. Singing Bird never knew what might happen and wanted some company with her when it did. Sometimes the clouds would turn black and rumble and shoot great spears down at Singing Bird and her mother. Other times the chief, One On The Wind, would send all the boys away, and when they came back they were bleeding and different. Now and then the tall people would paint their faces and chant and dance and that was wonderful. But it could also happen that another tribe might come and steal away little children like herself and club their fathers to death.**

**She sang a special song for the chief, for he was powerful and good, and for this consideration he honored her with the name of Singing Bird. He called her his special child, and instructed her mother to stitch coral beads into all of her garments, and to paint golden orbs always on her cheeks. He instructed the people of the tribe to arise when they heard her, and to welcome her songs, for she was the guardian of the morning.**

**As the years passed she continued her morning ritual, and her people continued to tolerate it as instructed. But as her desperate need for companionship waned, so did her enthusiasm for the task. Her limbs lengthened, her voice deepened, and some of the boys who had come back bleeding and different glared at her as she passed. She wished she did not have to pass the tipis so early in the morning because sometimes those boys would hide in the darkness then jump out at her with a shriek. That made it difficult for her people to welcome her dawn arrival, and after a while they began to blame her for the disturbance, covertly, with frowns and sideways glances, rather than blaming the boys, now regarded as young braves and beyond reproach.**

**She cried to her mother to speak with Chief One On The Wind, but her mother continued to stitch coral beads into her garments and to paint golden orbs on her cheeks and she yanked her hair, as she braided it, every time Singing Bird spoke of the matter. Singing Bird knew better than to go to her father. Her father, Dark River, had more coups to his credit than any other man in camp, and felt acutely the responsibilities of his rank. The skin on his face was stretched tight, like scraped hide on war drums. There was no elasticity to it, no surplus. Singing Bird knew that any extra strain placed on that skin, as that made by laughing, or by worrying, or by scowling to understand, would make it split apart at its invisible seams.**

**\* \* \* \* \***

Well I suppose that might have been what her early years were like. At any rate your readers might like it and I know I've got my blind spots where Singing Bird and truth are connected. She's

still a problem for me, you know. I can't seem to find her. The ironic part is that while I was living, I couldn't get away from the woman. I saw her everywhere. But now that I finally have a chance to find out why she chose me, why she needed me to suffer with her for her sins, why she made me do the things she did, now she is as invisible to me as she used to be to everyone else.

This frightens me. This failure in my vision. It makes me wonder what else I cannot see. How can I know how much else I'm missing, hidden in the tall grasses, or in the shadows of the giant oaks, or in a crowd at a barn dance, if I don't even know it's there?

\* \* \* \* \*

I was eighteen years old and real close to being married off the day I walked into the cornfields with my mother. The oldest Bean boy (that was their name, can you imagine?) had been hanging around for months, kicking up dust, telling my mother that she looked mighty pretty, helping my father get rid of our rats. He was okay, really. He had a shy smile and I liked the way he stumbled over things--rakes, rocks, hogs--whenever he looked at me. But I didn't love the boy, and when I told my mother that she looked relieved. She told my father I guess, because I saw him put his arm around the Bean boy one sunny morning and say, in his Scottish brogue, "You air a fine lad, my son, but you'd best be fishing where they'll be taking the hook."

Then came the others. Plump, soft boys with overbites, big boys with dirty fingernails who sweated too much, rich boys whose fathers owned the General Store or the Tribune but who just could not kiss, and one by one, my father took them each aside while my mother watched from the porch and rubbed her hands up and down her muslin skirts.

One scorching midday, my father having just come in for supper, and we all of us just nibbling on our dry cornbread and staring out at the empty sky, we saw a huge herd of Longhorn go stomping right through our cornfields. My father saw it first; he ran for his shotgun and started shooting. Right away then we saw the cowboys wake up and start riding like their lives depended on it, which they did. After a while my father stopped shooting and the

cattle started to calm down and the cowboys were able to get them herded a bit, way out on the edge of our field, so far out that they looked more like a thundercloud gathering than a herd. Then two of the cowboys came galloping back to my father.

My father kept his shotgun lifted and I noticed that when they saw that double barrel aimed at their eyebrows, they took off their hats and kind of raised up their hands as they rode. The heavy-set one shouted "Sorry Mister" and they slowed their horses to almost a walk. When they reached my father's porch they explained that it had been a mistake, that they had been on the trail for weeks, and that all the men were so worn out that they must have drowsed off in the hot sun. They were powerful powerful sorry, the one man kept saying.

The other man, the one who didn't talk, was taller and skinnier and I noticed, a whole lot younger. He smiled at me while he dusted the corn silk off his thighs and asked me real quietly, while his friend was still apologizing and while my father was still spitting Celtic curses, if he could trouble me for a drink from our well.

I saw my mother roll her eyes before she retreated into the cabin. I stepped off the porch and felt the boy watching me walk. Then I heard his boots clunk down into the dust right behind me and I had to stop myself from turning around altogether. I pulled up the bucket and plunged the metal dipper deep; I filled it so full that the water ran down my arms when I handed it to him. He said something to me about my hair looking like sunshine, or maybe he didn't but I heard something like that and it made me glad I had taken my friend Callie's advice and rinsed it with lemon juice that very morning. The way that cowboy looked at me as he took the water, and this part I know for sure happened, made my hand shake so much that I guess my father saw it all the way from the porch because then he hollered at me not to be sloshing our good water all over the feet of those blamed itinerants.

I followed my mother around for days afterwards, recounting every little detail about that cowboy. His hair was dark and straight and greasy, like an Indian's. He wore a grimy blue handkerchief knotted around his throat. His skin was brown as fresh coffee and did she notice how that long, hard muscle in his right arm bunched up and pushed out from under his rolled sleeve when he lifted that metal cup to his lips? My mother's smile grew a little sadder with each telling, until one day she took me by the

hand, kissed my father good-bye, and walked with me far into the cornfields.

As I started to say before, Iris was acting strangely in that cornfield, wary and suspicious. I kept asking her what she was looking for, squinting her eyes to see farther, deeper into the stupid corn.

"Nothing," she said, but her glance kept darting around while she spoke. "I have something to give you," she said, unbuttoning the top buttons of her blouse and reaching deep inside. She pulled it up in her fist, and kept her closed fist before my eyes. "This," she started to say, but I interrupted her and pointed to Gonner's Cliff.

"There she is again," I said. My mother whirled to her left; her weepy eyes dried up real quick but she kept her fist clenched.

"Who is it?" she asked.

I didn't have any idea. But I saw her all the time, standing always far enough away to ignore, watching me.

"Is she an Indian," my mother asked me, "with long black braids?"

"More like gray," I told her.

"Her face is disfigured?"

"Really ugly," I said.

She turned back to me then. "I can't see her anymore," she said sadly, though I still can't understand why that would have made her sad. "It must be your turn now." Slowly she opened her fist, palm upward, to reveal a plain brown stone attached to a coarse steel chain. She unclasped the chain from around her neck. "Daughter," she said as she reclasped it around mine. "I am giving you the sacred stone. Wear it always, as I have."

I tried to appear excited, for her sake, but I hadn't eaten in hours and was suddenly anxious to get out of that buggy cornfield and into a plateful of black-eyed peas. "I just love it," I told her, and touched the brown stone for emphasis. Then suddenly, strangely, I began to tremble. My teeth chattered and I clutched at my own arms to stop the shaking. My mother pointed to the stone. It was glowing gold, and leaping like a tethered cat on my breast.



## CONTRIBUTORS

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miracle of yellow and the fiction in truth. **MARK QUIGLEY** is a Hollywood native whose primary concerns include the interaction of humanity through film, literature, and art. **AMY REYNOLDS** is endlessly obsessing about finishing her MA in Creative Writing at CSUN sometime before the millenium. She has two spirited children and four cats. She plans to teach (probably basketweaving). **MELODY STEVENSON** hopes this issue finds you well and enjoying good, nutritious foods. **EVA SWIDER** specializes in a photo-computer technique that combines ordinary photographs and conventional illustrations to create images that stretch reality beyond imagination. Her work has been shown in over 40 juried exhibitions and won many awards including a Bronze Medal at the 2nd European Tiennale of Posters in Belgium. **ROBERT WYNNE** is a founding member of Dichotom and is finishing his MA in Creative writing at Epicenter University. His work has appeared in Red Dancefloor, Caffeine, Shiela-Na-Gig, and Verve. He received the Academy of American Poets Award in 1991 and 1994.