The Northridge Review

Fall 2000

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Awards

Two awards are given annually in recognition of the finest works published in the spring and fall issues of *The Northridge Review.*

The Northridge Review Fiction Award recognizes excellence in short story writing by a CSUN student published in *The Northridge Review.* The winner of this award for 1999-2000 is Mary Shannon for "Lies and Promises."

The Rachel Sherwood Award, given in memory of Rachel Sherwood, recognizes excellence in poetry writing by a CSUN student published in *The Northridge Review.* There are two winners of this award for 1999-2000, Ara Shirinyan for his two untitled poems and Michael Stephans for "Ella Mae Morse."

The Northridge Review is also pleased to publish the winners of the Benjamin Saltman Award and The Academy of American Poets' Award. The Benjamin Saltman Award, honoring the memory of Professor Benjamin Saltman, is published in the spring and The Academy of American Poets' Award is published in the fall.

The winner of The Academy of American Poets' Award for 1999-2000 is Tanya Quin for "Boxing," "Ophelia," and "We Carry Its Heaven Lightly." Honorable Mentions were given to Sarah Heston for "my lover in orchards" and Grant Marcus for "In the Distance a Dog Barking."

The Northridge Review invites submissions between September and April. Manuscripts should be accompanied by a cover page that includes the author's name, complete address and telephone number, as well as the titles of the works submitted. *The author's name should not appear on the manuscript itself.* Manuscripts and all other correspondence should be delivered to:

The Northridge Review
Department of English
California State University-Northridge
Northridge, CA 91330-8248

Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a self-addressed envelope stamped with sufficient return postage.

Cover art by Tanya Quin.

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My Father

I said please take this—
I handed him a napkin
to clean up the water spilt from the cat's bowl.
He's always stepping into the cat's bowl,
Pretending he's a doctor
When the cat is never sick.

He took the butcher's knife
And chopped the cat food in half
to test the consistency.
He asked if the humidity in the air
caused the cat to become sick.
I said the cat is never sick;

I imagine he will surrender
his white doctor's coat costume
someday,
He went to clean the knife outside
And left me and my cat
watching him through the kitchen window.

Decisions

What is it with this bed
Ours and Dirty
White cotton sheets stained
This bed
Cold
This bed made promises
That a man cannot keep
It's small, but it's what we have
He sleeps in the middle
I sleep looking over the side
The bed would not leave
If I had a child
But he would
He would want me to give it up
And not wrap it in the sheets
The bed is too small for three
I know it is
But if he left
The bed would take care of us
warm us and wrap us
In its dirty white sheets

The Maid

I lean away from an empty dish
and regard the two
across the table.
My lovely aunt,
her brutish lover
look me over
as though I'm a poulet
that needs seasoning.

The Nigerian maid
has a smile that flies
and an accent when she speaks French.
Her cocoa hands
move graciously over the crowded table
like a prancing team.

After dinner
she paints my nails,
slowly
as if each one were a pearl,
and tells me
carelessly
how beautiful my hands are.

Monday Nights

My mother is always
sweetly surprised when I kiss her.
Her face lights up,
her laugh lines splay
out in all directions
like rivers on a map.
Sometimes I rub her neck
and we talk about football,
like we used to when dad left
for Arizona,
for good this time...

On Monday nights
we'd sit down together to
watch whoever was playing
and root for opposing teams,
except when the Packers played.
Sometimes after the game
she'd go out on the patio to smoke
her Marlboro Light One Hundreds
and cry,
I'd wait inside,
start the first words of her
crossword puzzle
and boil water for hot cocoas.

Once we talked about
him leaving,
her being alone—
I've never felt so big
in my life sitting across
the table
telling my proud mom
how to survive,
since I had survived so much,
since I had,
by her hand,
become hard.

Newlywed

I remind myself
love is not the dishes
stacked on either side
of the sink,
his and hers.
It's hard to love
past dirty laundry,
beer cans, newspapers
that stack up to my ankles
in little piles—
all a revolving
reminder that I
am at war
with womanhood.

Sometimes, in the evenings,
after I've forgiven my husband
for dishes still unwashed,
clean whites falling over
the wicker basket,
his chess pieces, post-it notes ubiquitous,
we shower together.
He washes my back,
behind my knees,
my feet.
Scrubs the callused soles
tough from years
of urban asphalt summers,
between and around my toes,
until they're pink as piglets,
his tall body folded
into origami.
I let the water
spill a million hands
onto our scalps and shoulders.
I can't stand
to look down at him,
his acts of love
so frightening and
effortless,
as if my feet were
precious stones or French china,
as though I were already clean.

to catch her

when i first met milena
she said she wanted to be
a circus acrobat.
i was impressed.
my aspirations remained closer to
keyboard & monitor,
luring people
with stylized type
and glossy images
of androgynous kids
who claimed they wanted
nothing more than
calvin, beautiful obsession.

but milena knew what she wanted.
i am an *exclamation* bitch,
she would say,
the only fragrance strong enough
to filter through
her marlboro reds.

when she wasn't proclaiming
the virtues of circus performers
she strutted down catwalks,
a whirlpool of curls,
arms beating time.
offstage she rocked to *guns &*
roses,
was fond of belting out
you're fucking crazy,

and so was she
i thought back then
as i clicked away time
adjusting images and
choreographing type.

she applauded my work,
but feared for my soul.
warned me our industry
was nothing but illusion and
bullshit,
making me nothing more
than a good bullshit artist.

—the circus is illusion too, i'd
counter—
—yes, but the danger is real.
sometimes,
elephants stomp on their trainers
knives miss their marks
trapeze artists leap to their deaths—

exchanges like this
she named *friendship*
she had many friendships,
mostly with men.
sometimes she'd mention their
names
as if that made it all okay.
i didn't ask questions
had my own illusions to nurture.

magazines captured her image,
never her motion.
this, i realized too late.

years later,
an old *g&r* tune
a similarity of curls
the scent of exclamation
and sometimes,
nothing at all,
sets me wondering
where she lives now,
how many friendships she still holds,
what songs she sings,

did she ever join the circus?

sometimes i imagine her
flying through the air,
arms outstretched,
no net below,

and wonder
what it would be like
to catch her.

child with scales

In hands with fishscales,
where thickness of summer reflects
on the palms,
nothing has changed.
They can't figure out how to reach
the steering wheel
or hold a baseball bat without catching
someone's eye.

In town the children slurp
on pears, and pumpkin patches
still wind for miles in heated dirt.
But suppose they stopped twisting and
curling around
houses and crabgrass.
Would the fishscales stop catching
people's eyes with the reflection
of a small town's summer?
Would all the descriptions of a child's
hands that I left out
explode to the surface instead
of prickly vines,
and all the shames and
secrets of being different
manifest ripples,
like large orange squashes
in the hot dirt.

mark gockley lives in the city

I still walk
in the city,
and breathe like an athlete
with such a sore stomach.

I know where you live.
I know where you sleep.
I've seen you hunting,
and I know what a dream is:

> The thing behind flash-stained curtains
> that makes skin milky with black and white film.
> And in this place I know you are sleeping,
> where words like 'quality' only mean 'suchness.'

Earthquakes are still
in the city,
and skyscrapers could crumble,
but I'm always here.

I know you are working.
I hear you driving.
I've seen you sipping
when the glass couldn't hold you.

Mark Gockley lives in the city.
He hides behind pillows and a low hairline.
He takes occasional trips to the icebox and pisser,
and he isn't scared of earthquakes at all.

Another drink could pull us through,
or enough to fake because we like to fight it.
In this place, I know you are sleeping,
and I know what a dream is,
but I don't know who dreams.

my lover in orchards

John was the one who
climbed fruit trees;
I would find him in summer
among peaches and grapefruit.
There in the orchards,
the trunks would outstretch their
limbs, like delicate skin strung
to a cross.

John would spread his arms
around two branches, and hang
for hours in citrus air.
On one day he began to scream,
his heart pierced through
and through with love.
John had found what time
couldn't heal, and his fear dropped
to dirt with a peach.
There in the orchards—
where the brightest sun
casts darkest shadows.

I would find him in
summer, and stroke
his hair as we fell to
our knees.
His body was barren with
ravishment of season,
and humidity would split
the fruit like a knife.

The Hour is a Mechanical Sheet

Kumaya stands transparent wishing
she could melt like white snow,
dragging her eight footed arms
against a plastic wall.
Crickets gather around jumping rope,
housing mosquito souls in
a cardboard box.

Kumaya used to be high on life
travelling in circles. A future
wife dripping meter, she
wheels her lover's squirrel to a fire room.
Pushing in silence scratching a big smile,
she thinks about the sea hour sailing
past her wedding gown.

Kumaya lost four sets of eyes,
two pairs of flaming hearts and
eight footed arms.
Kumaya subtly clamps her teeth,
sucking on her lover's molecules in
a feathered chemical soup.

Mirage

the man walked home from twelve hours on a scaffold
washing windows for office people who never looked outside.
as the road unpaved and wound,

high starch and pressed seams of uniformity collapsed
under the burden of humidity and sticky sap sweat.
the scent of Windex lingered

bringing to this dripping dusty road
reminders of cool air felt and drinking fountains tasted
by skyscraper people.

tongue run dry,
feet run slippery with stinging hot blisters,
he arrived at a spaghetti western shack.

a woman lounged on a porch swing in a pearly sequin dress,
sweat dripping past the plunging glittering neckline
into shadows of suggestion.

lazily sipping lemonade,
the woman left a deep wine kiss on the lip
of the foggy glass.

He stopped between the azaleas and zinnias to shift his feet in the dirt.
she twirled a calculated finger in a cornsilk curl, lips moist.
into glossy emerald-moss eyes he whispered: thirst.

she stood up, sequin scales stuck in sweaty creases,
and turned, entering the house.
parched, he followed.

---

his head on a fresh pillow,
he woke, quenched,
the curtains inhaling deeply of the morning.

sweat dried, stubble emerged,
he looked around the small wooden room:
dresser, blonde wig with pink curlers,

nightstand, water basin,
a dress heaped in the corner—
a curl of cool fish scales.

naked, he rose to take in the cleansed air.
from the open window, he looked outside.
in the garden, her knees, elbows and long winding grey braid

dipped in thick dark earth,
was the woman,
eating soil out of a spade.

(Found Poem)

At night,
silence feels thick in your ears.
The clean air slips easily
into your lungs.
You become sharply aware
of the ocean
and sky
moving with you.
Sleep comes deeply.

Cardinal Points

The Moon is riding South over the orange groves, my Love,
coming in our window, seducing the old curtains with full, pale hands.

Tonight, Pleasure blows from the West, a whirlwind
clearing dusty hours of separate lives from under the bed.

Our Stories are traveling out of the North, astride famous white dragons
that land pounding and happy on the roof above.

From the East of the Sun, Good Fortune has brought her silk worms of luck.
She sits warm in the kitchen, quietly weaving our love into years of fine cloth.

A Dance in the Fields

—for Sally—

-No, it was the almond eyes,
or the rouge budding like roses
on the high bones of the cheeks.
Maybe it was the way she served
my eggs benedict as if she
was gliding on parallel beams—
the toothpaste smile
  glittering her eyes
  with tinselled shimmering of festivals
    and holidays,
  or a New Year's sparkling in the
    burst-blazoned sky—

There is no love between us
  really.
A young girl,
distracting, naive, and annoying,
much like the rush-hour drive
with its sprinkle of flowers
askance as spring in the fields;
and where one might see
in the corner of an eye
  the flash-rise of poem
  through the thin line of clouds
balancing from a single ray
  of light.

Dear Miss Crenshaw: 3AM 10/11 (I think):

My frustration has reached a new level concerning the nature of your cats.

They moan and bray so murderously and at such heights, choosing the deepest and darkest recesses of our sleep; then moving much closer, they scuttle and scrape in the birds of paradise, squarely beneath our bedroom window.

When is enough enough? Neither my wife, nor I can take it anymore. Besides, we haven't made love in over three weeks and, well, the sounds of your cats have become more than annoying.

Do you feed them something we should know about?

Sincerely,
(your neighbor).

P.S.—Sorry about the scribble, I no longer have my mind or my glasses.

P.S.S. 4AM: When can we discuss this in more detail? I am getting off later this morning. Y tu?

In the Distance a Dog Barking

...This was the line that staggered the
forgotten memory, stalled like an old engine
on the roads slanting the blood to rain
over the slow September hills,
returning me to the lost job at Loops,
the scripts stolen, the stories missing
from the attic, the year my
Aunt Rae died first of alcoholism,
and last from throat cancer—
and now all the poems never published,
looking for the year I was eighteen,
where the plastic tub, black as coal,
is wrenched from under the counter,
with the food swimming like dreams
on the moving patterns of the dishes,
and someone, no, the glad man,
with his cheeseburger grin,
and another asking for catsup,
reminding me again of the blood
in my veins and of everything
remiss in 1968,
when I am drafted, a boy lost
to America, to serve in Vietnam,
asked to surrender his first love
under the iron globe of the streetlamp,
framed like a photo through the
clear-boxed windshield, and both of us
sitting there in the two-toned blue sedan—
while a starling calls my name,
while the wind groans of love and death,
while the sky looks on like black water
and the moon sinks like a torched vessel
into its single strip of yellow flame—
and from somewhere down a street
I convince myself no longer matters,
and in the distance, a dog barking...

Lost Lake

The stars
have found Lost Lake
and now the tall oaks lean
and dive into the smooth waters
after them.

Doves by two invisible
babble on the lake banks,
in the talking bush,
as leaves cluster and
muzzle their whispers
over the backs of branches.

Ahead, a piece of moon
finds a small place
in the Western sky—
And lovers' shadows
wrap with the willow and
laugh in the wind's sigh.

*

In this immense
cave of night where
stars below and above me
are the only light,
I am silent.
Invisible.
Still.

In this moment,
I let go the sad soul.
There are no prayers sent
desperately rumbling to heavens—
No. Not from me.
For heaven is here.
And where do prayers go?

Instead
I breathe deep with

the rhythm of cooing doves
and blinking stars that
ride their tiny surf to
the lakeshore, to leave
pale patches of light
in the night sand.

And I breathe slow
with the rustled leaves
and the creaking wave
of branches, and
the faded echo of wind
to follow the bend
of the night road.

*

Gazing out over the black
waters of Lost Lake—
Its bramble of doves,
diving oaks,
and altars of stars,
I find the peace
which lives
within darkness.

The Poem

lamentably for Sylvia Plath

The poem does or doesn't
go out into the world,
does or doesn't
enter the fields of corn,
fields of grape, reed, or cane,
does or doesn't

hold up the stars like cups
until it dips its face into
the clear white waters,
washing down prayers
of light from the clouds
and sky

to speak for the rains
of all hollowed bones,
their colors of salt
flung-back memories
and dark wet seepings
into the cold, dank earth.

Yet it survives; it stands tall
as stalks of bamboo;
it measures up until
it's buried itself
with all it has been,
with all it will be:

more than its similes,
more than its metaphors,
more than its feet of miles,
in a final line,
in a single word,
where tulips still lie

on
the
stones
of
its
graves.

Bright July and History

9 in the morning, flies feed off their sweat
but tourists climb the slope to the fort—
some ancient American battle monument circa 1770
where battle reenactments begin at 10:30.
Revolutionary mannequins, pewter pots, plastic fruit
recreations of rations and colonials:
this is American history.
Children fidget, begging for lemonade, $2.50, biggie-sized.
The sun turns the field flax,
an occasional drum beat echoes in the distance
there's gun powder and bayonets.
The original wilderness soldiers trudged through to build this fort
—protection from the savage—
now brims with Amoco Stations and Wendy's and cars
with overheating radiators and leaky transmissions.
This is American history:
archeologists arguing where the magazine room originally stood,
a limp thread of leather sole,
a pock-marked canteen.
Volunteer reenactment soldiers oil their muskets,
all of this for $8.95 Senior Citizens, $4.95 children 12 and under.
No food or beverages on the field, no camera flash, no smoking.
It's hot and hazy. It's the end of the millennium.

Drink

On the kitchen black and white
Walter Cronkite says *Black Panthers strike*
but to the girl nestled under the window
filling diminutive tea cups with tap water,
they are panthers, long and sleek.
She is too literal yet to know anything
except she must bring a delicate spoon
to the doll's mouth and say *drink.*

Her single mother glides
through beads separating
the bedroom from the kitchen
where her lover scrambles eggs.
They talk in whispers,
discuss which subway to take to Chicago

while the commune next door
grills eggplant on the roof.
Black Panther leader Eldridge...
Some sit shirtless and strum guitars,
music for her tea party.
In Cambodia today Americans shot and wounded...
They toke and laugh and play Janis Joplin loud.
She watches their shadows seep over the kitchen,
the girls' dresses rise and flutter
Preparations are being made in Chicago for the Democratic Convention...
The boys glide hands up plump thighs,
pass the joint around.

Years later when the girl hears the words
Democratic Convention, Vietnam, Black Panthers,
she sees iridescent glass beads
catch sunlight
and fills a diminutive spoon.
When concave edges lap over fingers
she understands nothing
can contain *literal.*
She will tell herself *drink.*

The Fantasy

In the beginning the fantasy only wanted to do a Fred Astaire:
top hat, white gloves, cane,
all burlesque and smoky vaudeville,
off, off, Broadway, surrounded by stuttering bawdy purple
and late night orange neon.

She kept the fantasy in an oyster shell,
occasionally running her fingers along jagged edges
before shucking the husk,
prying the silky pearl free
and dropping it into her mouth.

She let the image of her husband bound and gagged
to the wooden chair in their bedroom
loll around her tongue,
and savored the moment:
a lover running his hands along her naked abdomen.
She swelled inside brutality—
her husband forced to watch
another man do what he could not.

The fantasy slept quietly beside the marriage
those muted twilight hours
when there were only flecks
of egg shell embedded in meatloaf,
broken onion sizzling,
the wedded sounds of their tongues
swallowing dinner.

PDP

Thanks to Larry J.

It happened simply enough
While walking down the
Street. I saw these
Couples entangled with each other
Engaged in a Public Display of Poetry.
Passing around words
Swapping sentences
They didn't care
Who saw or
Who didn't, but
I did.
I saw their
Public Displays of Poetry
It turned me on.
She had bare clean shaven
Letters,
He wore shiny, bright
Exclamation points
Question marks and
Periods.
That chemistry between
The two had more
Flavor then
Sodium and chloride.

While stopped
Waiting for
The green man
To replace red hands
I looked into a
Car to see a
Man publicly
Pleasuring himself
With Poetry.
He was completely
Oblivious to me
Staring in through
Untinted windows.
He worked his hand
Vigorously UP and
DOWN
Stroking the page

He stained the
Processed white wood black
With his
Poetic Residue.

All this Public
Display of Poetry
Had me ready to explode.
No one used protection
So Raw and Primal
It was unbridled
Untamed wild
POETRY.

Farther down the block
I encountered her
We saw one another and
Knew what would
Come.
We made a beeline
For Public park tables.
Stripped off
Religious rugged socks
Tore off self doubting
Hats and Jackets,
Let loose
Lines and thoughts.
Conjunctions and similes
Were created between us like
So much static energy
Making hair stand on end.
We intermingled pens,
Lost ourselves in the other's
Words Rhymes Tone.
With the final thrust
Of the pen into the
Cap
We climax and collapse
Into a period.
Spent.
Strangely energized after our own
Public Display of Poetry.

Never Move to California in July

Ear to rock,
I listen to the sun crack the land,
and strain for signs of earthquake.
Dust swirls in my nose and mouth
like harmless hurricanes.
I spit it back
and lend relief to the sun-sore ground.
What I'd give to sleep
at the heart of a wet, screaming storm,
but I lie here in California,
where nothing cries or even breathes.
If I lie still long enough,
allow my skin to be sucked dry
until it sifts like dirt,
I'll love California.
I'll forget about wet, red clay
and air that hangs thick like laundry on the line.

Boxing

We turn away from grace to find grace,
he says about boxing.
How if you catch your man in the jaw,
the air is water to send him floating across.

He always says about boxing
that your fists are angels and
the air is like a water they float across.
And a man's blood is nobody's business,

not even the angels at your fists.
To knock out your man is a minor beauty
because his blood is nobody's business.
But still victory lays ahead.

To knock out your man for a minor beauty
seems as uncomplicated as breathing.
But victory lays ahead
for a sacrifice you don't know of yet.

What seems as uncomplicated as breathing
can cling to a deep stone.
And the sacrifices you don't know of yet
are easy to give but painful to recall.

Eventually you cling to a deep stone
because nothing is left for you
to give but the most painful recollections.
Here, grace is something beyond a breath.

These things are left for him
who catches his man in the jaw:
something beyond a breath,
something a man turns away from to find.

Ophelia

Ophelia, you glide across a private page.
As senseless as wood, but your glance overshadows
a mystery. Sometimes the not knowing is better
than the knowing-- more blank than pure,
your mind found its niche in the swimming waterway.

Even now, distanced by time and place,
a woman's finest treasure is her quaintness.
The smirking fish feed on your plump contour,
Ophelia, you glide across a private page.

Some men would whack off to this image
of you, weighted down and kicking beneath
a woman's virtue. But what other choices
of beauty persist, except of the sunken vessel,
Ophelia, gliding across their private pages.

How to defeat an overwhelming history and still escape
my own defeat? My deepest soul is doubt, shaped
among the murk, intimate and murmuring.
Ophelia, you glide across my private page.

Your last stronghold was an air
of mystery as though you could be saved.
Still, revenge is satisfying, hoarding that treasure,
pulling a sheet of water over your head securely,
letting you glide across your own private pages.

We Carry Its Heaven Lightly

Baby birds are more like fish.
The air is a hammer forging
their nest of gaping mouths. We
breathe this air too, but with

carelessness because for us it is easy.
Climbing through the branches,
the sky sits on our backs.
And we carry its heaven lightly.

And we reach the nest backed
by that field of blue. Their desperate
chirps, as thin and delicate
as teacups, do not distract

us from the ugly sets
of wing nubs and dull eyes. Each small
heart looks through a transparent wall
of flesh. And each heart is met

with our own looks as penetrating as gods'.
And then one of us grabs one, it
is a strange stone, so warm and fidgety,
falling from a hand on

towards the earth. First it clips
the blue then the black of the ground
forever. We continue casting down
the stones until our hands are empty.

Lend me your...

people sometimes ask:
"You write poetry?"

"...you're an artist"

to me it's a lot of
of nonsense

it isn't poetry
as much
as it is
observations

and the truth
as i see it

My uncle's a
poet

has a t-shirt with Van Gogh's
picture on it

all i know of Van Gogh
are bits and pieces
i've heard

i *heard* he was an *artist*

Went to the barber
yesterday

the Vietnamese lady took out

her shears and cut
electric into my head by impulse

up and down
and across

not in a gentle way

she actually looked
quite crabby

(probably having a bad day)

she got carried away
and hit my ear

i jerked my head
to the side
and went crazy

just like
an artist

The Man

He was white
but
he *wasn't*

had sandy blond
hair

played congas
'til his hands
bled

His old man would
stand him up
and beat him like a
dirty rug

he'd work 'em over
like a cop

He wanted to beat the
brown and the black
out of this white boy

but he couldn't leave his mark

all he could
do was beat him

He wasn't like his
brothers and sisters

could never be
a deputy

He called a brown
man who lived one
floor above: daddy

and the brothers down the
street were *his* brothers

and the cops
were the cops

and this
is how

he grew up

Negra Noche

Negra noche
Negra noche
de mi llanto.
Diciembre
te esta
cantando
la luz se
va del llano
mi madre
se esta muriendo.
Mi madre se esta
acabando.

Por Mi Patria Chica la Soledad

Por los caminos rusticos de la soledad
camino,

entristecido
sonador de las estrellas.

Mañana, con pedazos de nubes
a mi lado,

reparo mi corazon con
poesia Nerudiana

y la mujer
de pensamientos amorosos

como un panal
de lunes

en el abrigo
de la ilusion.

March 10 8:15am

It is over like a dropped drinking glass. Three mongrels
scatter at a lope down the hill when we open the door.
She limps in, leaks blood on walls and hardwood
as my youngest wails, She's gonna die! She's gonna die!

Stop the bleeding, of course. Call the vet. But
(I can't help it) how much is this going to cost?
I have to think this—the dog's suffering must wait.
The older boy has no hesitation.

He compresses the ruptured vein, soothes dog and brother.
He gently gathers both and settles them in the car, even
remembers to lay a blanket down against further blood.
He waits for me, arm around brother, hand on dog's head.

Does he want to hear this will cost four hundred dollars,
does he want to know we don't have four hundred dollars?
He sits in the car, says good girl, and it's going to be okay
over and over. The brother leans on him, the dog burrows into him.

I am ashamed of my hesitation. She is much worse
then I first suspect, seven wounds deep into muscle tissue.
I write a check for four hundred sixty-one dollars.
It's a bad check. The pen does not know its duplicity.

We pick her up the next day, and I am horrified.
My bewildered dog's eyes float above stitched
drainage tubes, dried blood. I can't hear about
heat packs or hydrogen peroxide or medication.

The older boy does. He listens carefully, asks measured questions.
At home, he arranges a nest for her, tends her, feeds her treats.
I have managed to borrow some money, but it will hurt us.
The boy curls his body around the dog's. He whispers in her ear.

I don't
Talk to my
Prom date's
Mom because
(I think)
She hates
Armenians

But I eat
Her cooking
Cz I like
Burritos

Bunch of horizontal men
Are bleeding on the floor
And the faraway noises
Departing now
Are gunshots.
The villagers are too
Scared to come get the
Dead.

A mile away,
Grandma's
Funeral procession is
Unstoppable.

Motor English

The sky's horizon is a tripwire
for human senses
Blazing it was strung up,
hung up, by an old man's hands.

The gods were kind to throw
a carnival wheel
into the same frame
with Orion,

It would be a long drive otherwise.

Hearts beating in sticky isolation
people migrate for a cure
unwinding a life and
overwhelmed with PMS and cliches.

I'm here too,
embalmed in plastic and steel
On the 101.

There's radio music, shrill and sucking.
I punch it.

I was once an infant I say, a sponge—
I'd go there again if I could—I sometimes try—
but soak up only smoke
And sound.

The radioman's golden voice
lingers in the cab like spun feces
I choke in it,
craving a quiet head.

These conversations
Chose me for an audience
like needy kids
Screaming for attention

Language makes this slobbery guttural sound
that cools the central tenderloin
and somehow makes man thirsty.

It strokes and slaps you like a monkey's fist,
leaves you simmering on a thatch of iced rubble,
your backwater skull cold housing the fight.

Ella Mae Morse

A few strands of blue bulbs light
the wooden stage—twelve by twelve
by three feet high, just enough space
between us & the wicked & dazed,
half-drunk, half-dead legionnaires,
run aground at low tide—blue moonlight
filling the bottles on each table.

Piano, bass, drums—we groove &
Ella Mae, in sweet & slow motion,
old willow curving into cold
night wind, leans into the mic & sings:

And then, once more it's 1946:
my father rolls back the old throw rug,
puts a Capitol 78 on the Victrola;
my mother throws her apron down,
meets him halfway, & they listen
as needle meets groove, ready as

Freddie Slack plays that funky
piano intro & young Ella Mae slides &
glides into *Cow-Cow Boogie*;
big toes tap on back porches
in that Texas wind, hot with midnight
twang, blue-lit moon eyes, moon

Pies on formica counters in kitchens
where radios play, she moans,
Com-mi-tah i-yi-ay,com-mi-tah
yiplee-i-ay, raised on loco weed—
a swing half-breed—

Up here tonight, one night only—
Ella Mae sings the blues,
three feet & a lifetime away from
my drums—our slow, sad shuffle
on this last stop before the chill sets in,

one dark and final time.

Frida's Favorite Aztec Hairless Dog, Señor Xólotl

when he moved in the middle of the night next to her bed,
in his eyes the lights from the outside shone, and she pondered
how death would finally come to her, in mirror image,

a woman with crow's wings for eyebrows, bruised like ripe
plums, scars from so many surgeries like muddy rivers,
swift, sea-bound, and when she ached with the pain

of forgiveness, Diego in her mind, *sapito hechisero,* hers,
and the dog yelped several times until it found its groove
on the piece of carpet on the floor. *Feo,* she whispered,

feito lindo, her attraction to exotic animals helped
her get used to the idea of an other-worldliness, Xólotl
climbed over the edge of her bed to be petted, licked

her hands, and she thought of his tongue as one giant
brush with which she painted the canvas of her nights,
a world ablaze with crimson, purple, pulsing colors

like those she saw the first time she made love, so long
ago, when the world, lighter, lifted her skyward,
an angel's azure wingfeather—she sighs, the dog barks.

Be Fruitful and Multiply

How can you wear clothes on such a day as this
when no one but God and the single eye of the sun
will see you anyway? A curtain of cloud withdraws
on a hillside carpet of yellow poppies and there you are
alone among them for miles, eyes shut, arms out,
listening for the voice of heaven in the breeze, recalling
the loss of your mother set ablaze by cancer in 1970.

It was November and you were five then, ears red
with cold, no breasts yet, your thin frame top heavy
in a white turtleneck frothing to the chin. Your mother
breathless beneath loose soil strewn in flowers frosted
with sleet, is still breathless, yet you breath, thirty years
later, the flowers out for you again, like burnt-out light bulbs.

Let the sun pummel you, as on that day the cold
pummeled you, as when someone says *I love you*,
an advance you no longer try to thwart, either with the
weapons at your mind's disposal or at your gate of flesh.
Feel the sun beat down on your closed eyelids, warmth
bleeding to the back of your skull, no longer worrying
whether the flowers of cancer sprout in your own hillsides.

Epistemology

On Tuesday I read "Sea of Faith,"
a poem, perhaps you know it,
about ignorance and innocence.

Wait. Back up.
Last week I dropped a class
because for two weeks
I drowned in words,
way over my head,
allusions to this and to that.

Then I read "Sea of Faith,"
a complaint about ignorance.

No, no, back up.
It all started because I was
researching Sylvia Plath and
wondering just how much I would
embarrass myself when I
enlightened my classmates as to
the true reason Sylvia wrote
about bees, Freud notwithstanding,
and then I....

No, wait.
First, I was lecturing my students
on the benefits of diligent proofreading,
reading to them all about
reading, and re-reading, and having
someone else read and re-read, and
reading aloud, and reading backward,
and then someone said:
"there's a typo on page three."

Ok, it was *then* I came across "Sea of Faith,"
John Brehm's sigh and surrender,
and, halfway through the poem,
nodding vigorously, identifying
with Brehm oh-so-directly,
I realized—
I had never read "Dover Beach."

So of course I had to look it all up.
I headed straight for my
expanding home library,
stripped the dusty cellophane
off a fat, blue anthology, then
skimming, skimming, reminding
I must teach this skimming thing,
I bypassed the title in question and
zeroed in on "The Dover Bitch."

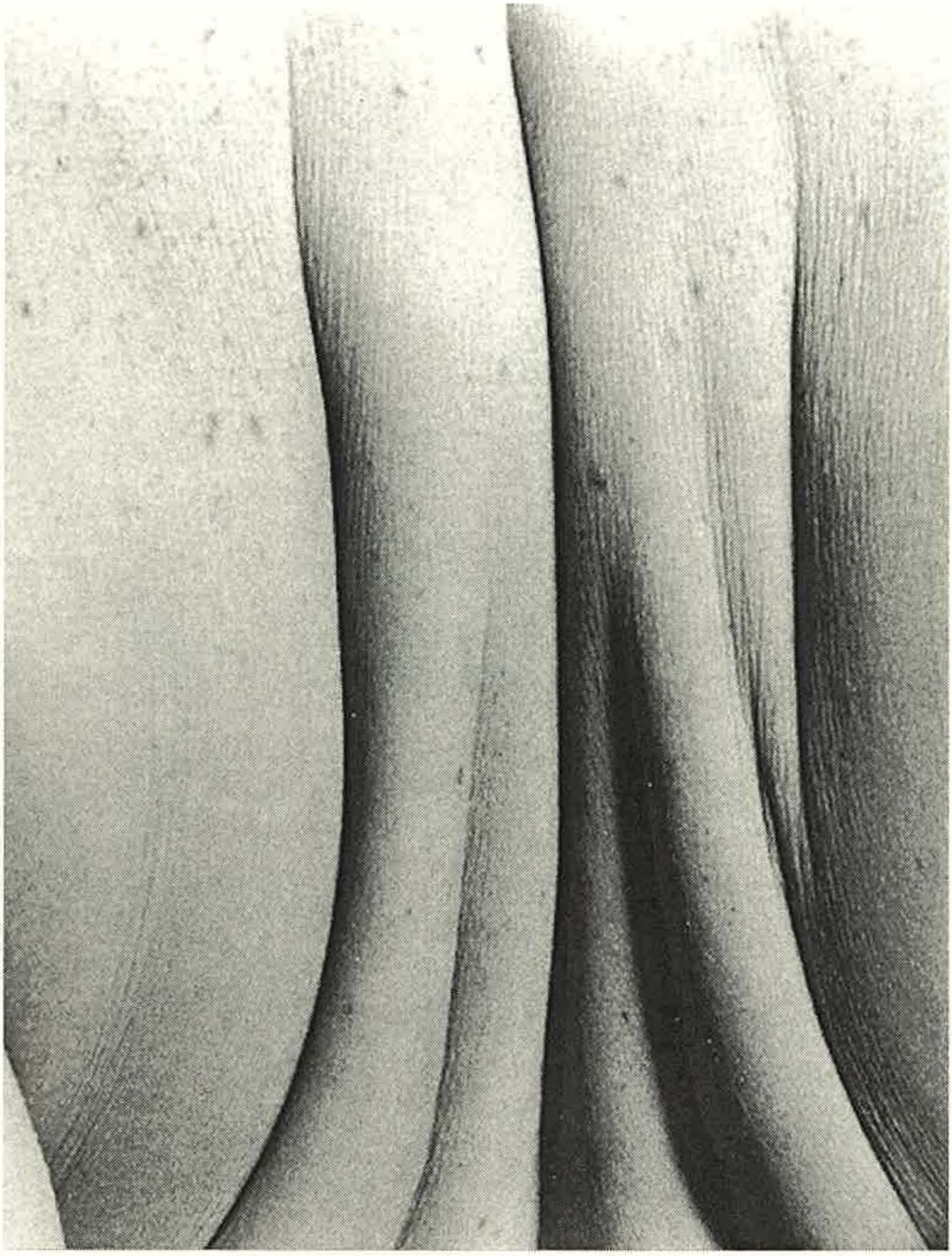
Distracted—
thinking always of my students—
I read it first, noting its purpose and
audience, *Imustteachthemthis.*

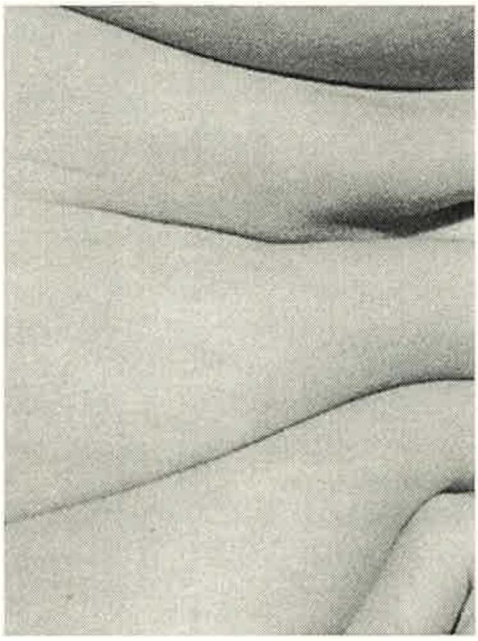
When at last I read "Dover Beach,"
(its relevance long gone)
I noticed the name "Sylvia Plath"
on the previous page.

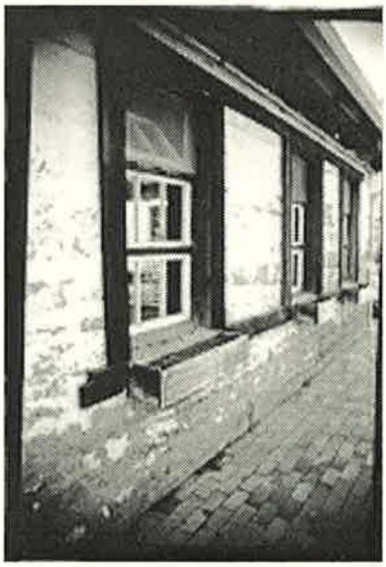
No, wait. Back up.
This week my students are
writing about nature.

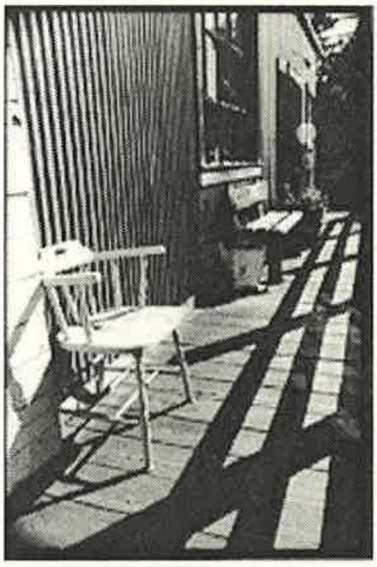
Turning the page, I found
what I was really looking for:
"Point Shirley,"
a poem about experience.

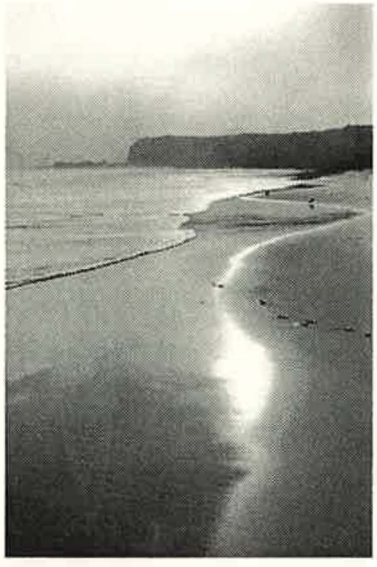
I placed it in the stack of nature
writings along with "Dover Beach,"
and "The Dover Bitch," and
"Sea of Faith," just under
"Letter to President Pierce,"
an essay, to remind them
that *All things are connected.*

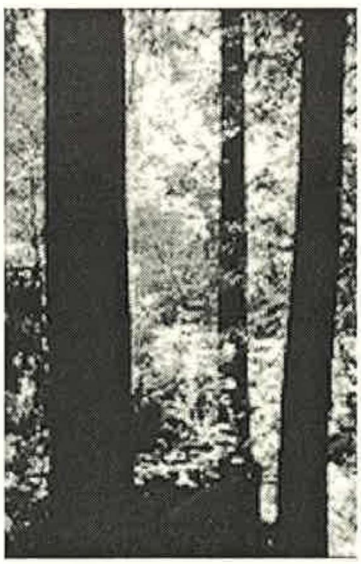


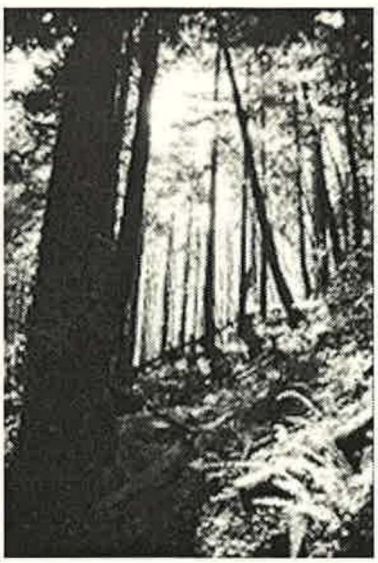












Gethsemane

The river runs over skeleton stones.

"I know your secret!" Stackerlee's voice streamed through the open windows. Stained curtain dancers in time to the breeze like spectral ballerinas, broken hinged dangling shutters, useless. "I know your secret!"

Walls gossip.

Drusilla crouched in far corner of bedroom. Ear plastered to wall. Listen…Her eyes rolled around intently possessed.

That corner is built all wrong. The ceiling and the walls came together at improper angles so that the room looked disproportional. It was done on purpose, the rumor goes.

"I know your secret!" again Stackerlee's voice blew in, carried on a louder gust.

"Be quiet, Stackerlee!" Drusilla yelled back, distracted from her listening. "I can't a'hear with you constantly shoutin'."

She'd been in that corner for nearly ten hours straight. He'd been calling through the window nearly as long.

Dressed in nightgown, thin silk pullover with tiny yellow lace bow at the neck.

Neck. Sister's neck was broke. Poor sister. Hangin' from a branch of a weepin' willow tree with a rope 'round her neck. She will be hangin', is hangin', has hanged herself.

Ear to wall in oblique corner. Hands, moist, pressed against uneven surfaces, searching, feeling for any opening. Eyes rolling. Tongue slightly hanging out in the musty room.

A dank, dark bedroom. Biblical wallpaper in patches, faded angels, torn prophets, peeling Jesuses. Rustic dust, old manor, gothic style. A wrought-iron bed, mattress, no sheets, broken springs jammed out the sides, sits, alone, waiting for repose.

"I know you're there, somewheres," Drusilla whispered to herself.

I remember Father used to teach us the Bible in the daisy garden behind the horse stalls. Never raised a Cain. Just a couple of Lot's daughters, he called us, my sister and me. Harlots. Look at those daisies, he'd say. Sometimes ya gotta break the petals off and make the flowers bleed. His name was Xavier Devlin. Some folks, 'cludin' my sister, called him Devlin Side.

The walls feel cooler in that corner. Even on the hottest, most humid day, that corner is ten degrees cooler than the rest of the room.

"I know your secret!" Stackerlee bellowed once again. "Come on out an' play Dru! Play wih me, Dru! I know your secret! If ya come out an play wih me, Dru, I a'promise not a tell another soul! I swear Dru!"

Ignore him.

Father said sometimes sacrifices have to be made. Unlike Abraham, blood must be shed. The knife wieldin', plunged, flowers must bleed.

There was a faint pulse in the corner where she crouched.

"I know somethin's there, alive," she again whispered to herself. A twinge of excitement tweaked her heart. It was still far away, but she definitely felt it.

Mother went far away a long time ago. Just left one day. Never said good-bye. Never came back. Father said she rode the train south. Sister always says "never comin' back, never comin' back," and she was right too. Sis used to skip to a song, familiar tune, with made-up words:

Torn frocks
Broken locks
Mother saw
Now's in a box

I wondered she'd meant a boxcar? Ridin' the rails? Hoppin' freights? Mother was too reserved. A passenger car would be it for her going south. Mother told me once that if I ever heard the train whistle blow seven times that the world would turn upside down.

"Seven times the whistle blows," her faraway voice says. "Seven times, then nobody knows." Almost like a silly nursery rhyme.

Father's need
Flowers bleed
Mother saw him
Plant the seed

Drusilla never liked daisies. Her sister detested the flowers, so much so that she one time ripped 'em all out of the dirt, tore (I'm comin', child) the roots right out. This brought the anger in Father, the "devil inside" my sister would say.

"I know your secret, Dru!" Stackerlee's voice once more penetrated her solitary focus.

She stood up, knees cracking, tingling legs from blood flowing, and dashed to one of the large windows.

"Now, Stackerlee Germaine," she yelled down at him, "will you please be quiet? I am very busy right now and I need to concentrate!"

It took her a moment to realize that Stackerlee was completely naked, most of his intimates camouflaged by the tall grass he stood in. He was stroking his manhood. The tendrils of verdant grass, like demon fingers, caressed his unnaturally white skin. Short blonde hair tickled his head.

"My goodness, Stacker, you put your clothes back on, you hear me!" Drusilla scolded him. Though no one else can see them, the house is deep in the plantation, surrounded by fields and trees. A stream made its circuitous route to the left of the naked figure. Willows and sycamores grow all around where he stands.

See no more
Buried floor
Mother's bed's
Made of sycamore

Drusilla thought up her own song:

I don't know, who shall I choose
Father's drunk on lightnin' juice
Mother's riding the southern caboose
Sister's swinging dead on a noose

Not a very good song, I guess. Sister was the smarter one.

"Come on, Dru. Play wih me," Stackerlee said teasingly. "I know your secret."

"What secret?" Drusilla responded. "I don't know what secret you're talking about. I don't have no secret. And if I did, I wouldn't tell you, and you wouldn't never know anyhow. Now get dressed and go home."

Back to corner. Red ear to wall, sore from being pressed against the surface so long. Never switched ears. Used the good one. The special one. The one that could hear things. Listen...Hands felt around the corner, feeling for an opening. Eyes roll.

"I know you're comin'," Drusilla said quietly. "I can feel it. You're closer."

Do I have a secret?

Once upon a time I see Sister in the garden with Father. She kissed him on his lips. A drippin' hoe in her hands. Father lyin' in the flower bed, bleedin' on 'em. A train whistle far away in the distance squeaks several times. I think of Mother goin' south on some train, ridin' away from us, ridin' like a twistin' river to its end. I run to the stream and cool my feet. The water brushes the strands of fairy hair that clings long to the edges of shore. Long, shimmerin' hair, like Mother's. Certain blue stones twinkled under the runnin' water, Mother's eyes. Maybe she was a river spirit under sycamore shade.

The walls that connect at the cool corner bulge almost imperceptibly. Drusilla noticed it, though. She saw the ceiling which connected oddly with the enjoined walls droop slightly. The floor where she crouched raised her toes, but

just barely.

"Comin' to me," she whispered. "Comin, closer. Still a ways away, but comin' closer. Or let me in."

Later, I ask Sister where Father is. I didn't, don't, will not see him anymore. She told me he's pushin' up the daisies. He'd do anythin' to keep those flowers growin', to keep that garden alive, even if (I comin' back for you, child) it meant holdin' them up himself. Each flower. He's a strong man, big burly six feet five. I couldn't see him, but my sister leads me past the horse stalls to the garden where she had built a tilted cross of sorts, out of old sycamore branches. A piece of flat wood nailed to it, a sign. Carved in shaking knife whittled letters it said:

> "Here's Xavier Devlin in his precious garden. X marks the spot. Tending his flowers with the devil inside."

It seemed a mockin' tone. Later that evenin' Sister will, has, did hang herself from the weepin' willow tree, and I cried.

"I know your secret!" Stackerlee's voice abruptly snapped her back. "I ain't a'leavin', Dru, 'til you come out an' play! 'Cos I know, well...ya know!"

Oh is he still there. Drat him! Won't he just go away. Away like Mother, go south, Father, Sister, all gone.

(I'm comin' back for you, child).

What?

The walls vibrate, tingling Drusilla's hands, sending shivers through her tiny frame. Something is close now. Her face an expression of smiling wonderment, her heart beat terrified. A loud pounding knocked her from the corner, she falls back onto her hands. It's almost there. A train whistle blows faraway in the distance.

"I know your secret, Dru!" Stackerlee shouts again.

Suddenly, fear, nausea, a sense of danger. Drusilla panics, runs out of the room along the musty hallway which seemed endless to the spiral staircase down the creaking steps (I'm almost home, child) dust exploding under rushing feet to the front door (another whistle) to the side of the mansion in the stabbing tall grass where stood Stackerlee naked.

Heart pounding. Out of breath.

"Do ya wanna play now, Stacker?" Drusilla asks, panting, nervous.

Young man smiles. Third whistle blew.

"I wanna teach ya the Bible, Dru," he said. She goes to him. He leads her to the garden behind the stalls. She looked at her sister swinging by her neck from the weepin' willow tree.

Sycamores
Dirty whores
Break the petals
Opens doors

Stackerlee holds a lambskin Bible, bound with a leather cord. The pages were made of some animal flesh also, again most likely a lamb. He pulls Drusilla by her special hand. She saw the shadow of his erection (another whistle) wavering in the blowing grass.

Those damned flowers won't die. The cross had fallen apart and rots. The old bench where the lessons were learned before. They sit. Stackerlee unties the cord, opens the book, reads.

"And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, Come hither; I will shew" (fifth whistle) "unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters:

With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication..."

A sixth train whistle blew far away in the distance. Drusilla faded Stackerlee's voice, wondered if she would hear the whistle blow seven times. She wonders if Mother is comin' back someday. Sister says Father went south too, but not by train. He vowed before he left that he would come back for Sister and her, least that's what Sister says he said.

What secret? It's almost here. Stackerlee's reading faded back in.

"...and upon her forehead *was* a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS" (father?) "AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH."

Book closed. Set aside. Drusilla stood and fell back into the daisy patch. They wrapped around her. Father called them "vials full of odors, which are the prayers of saints." Harlot. Stackerlee lays upon her, grinning, and blows a quick whistle.

"I know your secret," he whispers in her ear. "A flower..."

Bleeds only once. Father, gardener, told us so. Bloody hoe. Hangin' Sister. Mother gone gone away.

"Devlin Side," she said. Her head tilted so far back that the sycamores grew down to heaven.

My Country is Warm and Sunny

Before going to bed, mother filled the stove with coal until it overflowed and deliberately did not rake out the ash, so that the fire would last until morning. It didn't last. By midnight the funnel, which was several feet long, had sucked the cold and the howling wind into the house. The wind made us feel even colder than the frost. My grandfather cursed his grandfather and all his forefathers. His teeth, chattering and trembling, he rummaged in the stove and tired to fan the fire into life again. And I, with my head wrapped in a blanket, could hardly restrain myself from laughing, for there is nothing funnier than a pathetic, freezing old man in his underclothes, cursing his long dead forefathers.

"The blockheads," muttered Grandfather. "They abandoned the warm, rich places, so suitable for living in Nor Yerznka in Western Armenia, where they were born and begot us in this vile valley with its cold winter. And they didn't even give a thought to what they had done. They could have built a ship, sailed across the seas and rivers, found new lands, or gone on foot or on the horse... But instead they multiplied in Nor Yerznka, where they were born. Couldn't such a great people have produced one brainy traveler?"

"Granddad," I said, "There was an Armenian monk with Columbus. Instead of going with him, the monk went on his own. Remember the old proverb: 'The man that goes his own way may be a fool.'"

Granddad raked a whole tub of ashes out of the stove, filled it up again with coal and, putting his hand on the bricks, began to wait until warmth accumulated in the baked clay.

"Granddad," I said, "you'd better take Nazan. True, she doesn't make you warm like the stove, but she doesn't get cold like these bricks, either."

And, throwing aside the blanket, I showed him the cat curled up at my feet.

"Can you really get to sleep with her purring?"

"Very easily!"

"We'll see," said Granddad and clasped the cat to his breast. "We'll try it. But won't she accidentally scratch me when she's half-awake?"

"Why should she do that?"

"Who knows!" said Granddad, climbing under the blanket with the purring cat. "What if she suddenly has a fight with other cats in her sleep?"

"Stroke her," I advised, "and don't be frightened if you see sparks. Grandfather, why didn't you build a ship yourself, and go across rivers and seas, and discover new lands? You could've tried, if only on foot or on horseback. They might have named an island after you, even if it was very small."

"I was fighting," replied Granddad. "There was no time to travel."

"But you could have traveled while fighting!"

"You can't travel while fighting, you blockhead! When you are fighting

you either win or you die. Hey, look at the way she's goggling at me!"

"Speak to her, granddad. Stroke her on the head. But how did the Spaniards or the Turks travel?"

"You ask your teacher. Her hair's standing on end..."

"Tickle her behind the ears."

"She's growling at me like a tiger!"

"Nazan," I called, "be a good girl. Do you hear?"

"Ooh, I'd show your granddads and great-granddads, I would!" yelled Granddad suddenly as he sat up on his bed. In the darkness I saw the burning eyes of Nazan, then, just a little later, her eyes were already spitting fire under my blanket. Nazan's whole body trembled, and in her anger, restlessness, her tail stroked my legs.

"Did she scratch you, Granddad?"

"I'm bleeding because of her... as if I had that much blood left... Where has she made off to? Not to you, has she?"

"No," I lied, stroking and calming the angry cat.

Granddad got up, put on the light, took some birch twigs and began to fumble under the stove, the beds, the wardrobe, in all the comers of the room.

"Where has she got to, eh? Where has that mischievous creature got to?"

"Let's get a little sleep, Father!" called the discontented voice of my father from the next room. "You sleep in the day, but don't bother to give us some rest at night!"

"Put me into an asylum. Then you'll get rid of me," muttered Granddad to himself. "You'll have more peace at night, and you'll save on my food during the day. You may even get rich..."

"And what's an asylum, Granddad?" I asked.

"It's a house owned by the State, warm and cozy. There're no cats there, or dogs—only old men. They go to sleep on time, and eat on time, and die on time. Call the cat, then she'll creep out. She'll listen to you."

"Nazan!" I whispered.

"Louder!" ordered Granddad.

"Pah!" the voice of my father could be heard again. "Is this really a house? Or some kind of hellish bazaar!"

He came shuffling into our room in his slippers and stood in front of Granddad. For the first time I noticed how similar Granddad was to Father. The same big nose, high forehead, soft hair, kind eyes... even the same sticking out left ear lobe, which in the course of the day sometimes went red and sometimes white. They were in the same underclothes and were of the same height, only granddad seemed a little shorter because of his stoop.

"Look!" Granddad stuck his bloodied finger under father's nose. "Look what that mischievous creature's done to me!"

"And why doesn't she scratch me?" asked Father.

"Why should she bite your finger?" said Granddad in amazement. "Weren't you sleeping in the next-door room next to your wife?"

"I was, but you woke me up. You're a grown man, but you scream like a child!"

"So it was I who invented snow and frost? The spring's late in coming, which means I'm to blame? Of course! To the asylum! And your granddad Vardazar—he was an innocent babe. And Armenak, and Ovsep. I'm guilty of everything. If they'd bitten you on the finger, you'd also cry out!"

"Who?"

"You, who else?"

"No, I'm asking, if who'd bitten me?"

"Who, who, who. You're still sleepy. You don't understand what you're saying. I know you've got some vodka stashed away somewhere. Bring me some to treat my finger."

Father silently turned and went into the kitchen.

"And two glasses!" shouted Granddad after him and turned to me. "Call the cat, blockhead!"

"Nazan!" I called just a trifle louder than before and squeezed the cat between my legs to prevent her jumping out and falling into the hands of Granddad. Nazan had already stopped trembling. Her body had gone soft. Her hair, which had been standing on end, went down, and she looked like she was just beginning to purr again.

"Grandfather," I said quietly, "what will you do with Nazan when you find her?"

"I'll kiss her driveling mug! What did you think?"

"I think you are going to thrash her and throw her out."

"It wouldn't be a bad thing to thrash her, but how could you throw her out? Before morning she'll turn into ice outside. Ah, damn it, I forgot to tell him to bring bread, cheese and pickles. Has he guessed?"

"He's guessed," I replied. "And not for the first time, either! We've also got boiled beans and roast potato."

"Well, get up, get up," ordered Granddad. "I see that your mouth's watering, your breathing's tight. What're you lying in bed for?"

Carefully, so as not to arouse the cat, I crept out of bed and in a flash had pulled on my trousers, socks and slippers.

One side of the stove had already become hot, and the room was filled with warmth. There was a hum in the funnel, and this was no longer wind, but fire. Frozen sparrows and crows had probably now settled on our mushroom-shaped funnel and were counting the little smoky flashes which were striking against the rising form of the roof. Nazan curled around the naked apricot and peach-tree branches, and by morning it would have turned into rime. In the morning, soft resin would begin to glow under the sun from under the

transparent rime, sending the sparrows crazy.

"Granddad, why is mulberry sweetest when it's been pecked by the sparrows?"

"The sparrows' beaks are covered in honey."

Father brought in a big bowl of salted cabbage, tomatoes, gherkins, pepper, boiled beans, large onions, lavash, cheese, and vodka, and laid them all out on the table with two glasses. Then he put the lavash on the stove to soften it. The room smelt of clay stove, and a blue smoke went up, gathering under the ceiling and turning into a cloud.

"May it be a good morning on the earth!" pronounced Granddad and drank up his vodka. "The domestic cat," he said, licking his lips, is a clean animal. It eats the same things as we. What's there to fear so?"

I pounced on the salted tomatoes and gherkins. The big yellow pepper was full of pickle. I bit through the juicy, meaty pepper and drank its salty, sour, strong and spicy liquid, getting drunk from it because my father and Granddad were also getting drunk. With a blow of his fist, Father smashed the light brown head of the onion and sneezed. Then I sneezed, then Granddad. And while the smell of the onion floated through the room, we all sneezed, together or one after the other, and wept.

"Oomph!" Granddad patted to yell. "Give me a horse, so that I can get up and go."

"There's a horse neighing out in the yard. It's saddled and shod," said Granddad. "Columbus, Magellan, Miklukho-Maklay, Przhevalsky—which are you?"

"To hell with them!"

"That's a boy! Again to your health!"

"Again they've gone out of their minds!" Mother's voice was heard.

"Shut up!" yelled Father and began to sing, thumping on the edge of the table as if it were a drum.

"A re-e-ed rose," Granddad joined in loudly, "re-e-ed rose will I become, and kiss your cheeks will I by day and night, by day and night for I'm your darling! And why are you sitting like that, you blockhead? Get up and dance! I'm your dar-r-rling."

I pulled my bed towards the window to get more room, and began to dance. Father went on singing and thumping on the table, while Granddad clapped his hands and snapped his finger, then he couldn't resist it and also broke into a dance.

"Op, op, op!" cried out Granddad. "Now I'm not frightened to die, I'll die with joy!"

"A man must die from joy," declared Father didactically. "People don't die from grief, do they? Give me a horse, give me a horse!"

"Look what a warm house we've got," said Granddad with pride, as

sweat poured down his forehead and chest. "You can have your island and ship and warm countries, blockhead. Op,op,op,!"

"It was you who wanted warm countries," I replied, taking breath with difficulty. "Have you really forgotten how you cursed Vardazar, Armenak and Ovsep?"

"What does it matter what I wanted! What does it matter what I cursed! And why did you need an island?"

"But isn't our house an island?" asked Father.

"What do you mean—an island?" said Granddad with surprise. "We've got a whole country here!"

"The warmest country in the world," added Father, joining us, "and the richest!"

"Oh, how happy we are," sounded Mother's voice.

"Shut up!" shouted Granddad.

"Shut up!" yelled Father.

Now the three of us were dancing: me, Granddad and Father. The floor sagged under our feet, the table jumped from our wild dance. The old cupboard creaked, and the empty vodka bottle rolled along the table. The light of a new day, smeared over the window panes, was hesitant, not daring to come in to us.

Eating Little Elvis

The autumn my sister Marian turned fourteen, I got my golden eyes. It wasn't that simple, of course. It started with the dog, and then the chickens, and ended with our harsh and unyielding father discovering how much of himself had touched down in me. Of course, none of us had counted on Little Elvis. But I'm getting ahead of my story.

It was an afternoon in early May. Marian and I were sitting amidst the gray and pink azaleas of the living room rug in front of the Motorola watching the Macabre Matinee. Marian, tall for her age and slender, curled a lock of her white-blond hair behind her ear in order to glance at me, but appear not to. I was sitting the way only young children can manage, with my thighs flat and my knees bent backwards so that my legs formed an M. Marian adjusted herself to sit the same way.

I always felt gentle when Marian did things like that. Though she was two years older and pretty in an exquisite, breakable way, she always copied me in small things. As though there were one right way to sit on a floor and watch TV, or ride a bike, or sing to the cats; and that I would know that way. When I became frustrated with my plumpness or my bobbed red hair or the freckles that scattered across my nose like chocolate stars and grew jealous of Marian, I remembered how she always watched me and copied me and I knew I couldn't have hard feelings towards her. She needed me.

In the movie, Bela Lugosi raised his pointy fingers like ten extra fangs. He dripped blood here and there, scared blond ladies in filmy dresses and, in general, made a mess. Mother was humming in the kitchen working some newly-bloomed yellow gladiola into her banana-leaf vase.

Just as old Bela crept down cobwebby stairs to climb into his coffin, the screen door in the kitchen crashed as though bashed hard by a flying sandbag. Mother let out a cry.

"Diabletta, get away from that damn door!" The dark voice of our father boomed from the yard. My back stiffened.

"And leave those damn cats alone!" I pictured the yellow eyes of the old dog. She was mad about not being allowed in the house, and as Dad stomped inside and slammed the door, I heard the familiar low growl in the back of the dog's throat.

Dad had found Diabletta on a deer hunting trip. He came up on her, a dog coal black and nearly the size of a small pony. She was torn and bleeding and nasty as anything. A little way off lay a cougar, snapped and broken and dead as a stick. Diabletta limped after Dad when he went back to his camp and she lurked in the bushes until he fed her some of his fresh kill. When he packed to come home, she jumped in the back of the pick-up. Though she'd lived with

us nearly five years, nobody but Dad could get within ten yards of her.

"Ooh, pretty, pretty!" Dad said, teasing. I heard Mother's flowers rustle in the vase. "Here, let me give it a go." I didn't take my eyes from the TV, but I knew what his teasing was doing to Mother's flowers. It was always the same. She was silent. *Go along to get along*, she told us about dealing with Dad. *You know how he is.*

"Can you please make that dog go stay in the barn?" Mother asked softly, trying to change the subject. *Don't ruffle his feathers. You know how he is.*

Mother hated Diabletta. Soon after Dad brought the old dog home, she'd snatched a whole litter of new kittens right out of Mother's arms. Mother said it had happened so fast that all she remembered was a flash of pink tongue and the feel of Diabletta's soft muzzle on her forearms as the big teeth snapped those kittens like a hole punch. The old bitch shook and slathered her way through all three of them until they were nothing but bloody fluff.

Now Dad just snorted at Mother's repeated request to lock up the dog, just as he had about the kittens. There had been pride in it then, like the pride of a father when his son beats the hell out of the neighbor kid. He had finally agreed to "teach the bitch a lesson," but when he came at Diabletta with a two-by-four and that low growl came up in her throat, Dad amazed us all and backed off. He said he'd just gotten tired of it.

Now, having grown tired of flower arranging, he wandered into the living room.

Our father was a squat, powerful man with ice-blue eyes, a blunt nose, a deep dimple in his chin that made his face boyish. A gladiola dangled from his clenched teeth along with his cheroot. He was teasing, after all. It was funny.

Marian and I sat like tree stumps and just watched the movie. Dad sat on the sofa. I heard the brush of the cheroot being snuffed out in the ashtray. I was sure the pretty gladiola was crumpled beneath it engraved with hot ash.

"Get back from that TV," he said. "You'll ruin your eyes." Silent, not looking away, I scooted back a foot or so and Marian followed me a moment later. He was quiet. We watched Bela. "Doesn't that junk scare you?" he asked.

"Naw," we said, our eyes still pasted to the glass.

Water ran in the kitchen. I wanted to go and help mother wash off the ash I was sure now peppered her flowers. Dad might not notice I had left to go to her. Or he might laugh and shake his head and say that he'd never understand women as long as he lived.

Or, I might smell the coppery, electric-storm smell, hear the hiss of leather scraping denim as his belt slapped through the loops. I might feel tremors ripple through the floor from the startling quickness of his small feet as he swooped down on me, his small, sharp fingers grasping my neck as his silence accused me of being disrespectful.

I never knew what he would do, so I was always on the watch for

storms. Like a forest ranger in a lonely tower, I always had one eye out for fire. Now, I sniffed the air, uncertain, so I opted to keep still. And he'd wanted to know if we were scared of a movie.

"How'd you like to try raising some chickens?" he asked suddenly. He did that often, just brought up a subject, all the way thought out, already decided, without mentioning a word of it to anyone, pretending he was asking. I knew he was talking to Marian and not me since there was something resembling work involved in the question. I did not then, and do not now, have a reputation in my family for work involving any tools beyond books.

Marian turned to him. "You mean it? How?"

"Well, that empty henhouse out back of the house is just sitting there falling apart. You could make yourself a little money if you wanted to fix it up, and I'd put some chicks in there for you. You'd have to keep it up, of course, so old Diabletta wouldn't get at them." He grinned.

"Just me? By myself?"

"Sure, just you. Who else?" He looked my way and grunted.

"Swell! What do I have to do?" This time, Dad's idea sounded suspiciously all right. Maria loved projects. Following steps, adhering to patterns made little room for error.

The storm had passed, so I slipped out to the kitchen while Dad and Marian talked. Mother had the damp flowers sitting on pieces of old, cut up tee-shirts and was gently wiping ash from the stems. She looked up and a small smile lifted the comers of her mouth. "Bess," she said, pulling out a chair for me.

Our mother was so pretty in those days, slender, tall, and pale blond, like Marian. Fair and kind. Unlike most of the farm wives we knew, she rarely left the house, was frail and always carried a tired, worn look. It was the kind of tired that seemed to have moved in with no intention of looking further for a home. I sat down and Mother slid some of the flower-filled rags over for me to work on.

She didn't speak; her face said it all. It said we all had our jobs to do, and it wasn't so bad, was it? We never went hungry, we had everything we needed and most everything we wanted. Our job was to obey, to show respect. *Go along to get along, you know how he is.*

***

I was getting a little old in my twelfth May to climb the walnut tree in the backyard to the very top branches. But I loved it and wasn't quite ready to give it up. From up there I could see across the fields to the low brush hill imbedded with Union Pacific tracks, and all the way to the County highway. The morning Dad and Marian left for town to get the baby chicks, I scrabbled

up the walnut's slick, gray bark, grabbed for the memorized limbs and sat myself between the green, V-shape of a fork to watch for them. The lilacs in our yard across the road had opened up late that year and as I perched in the newly sprung leaves of the walnut, the blossoms cast their wonderful sick-sweet smell over me. I pulled a beat up copy of *Oliver Twist* out of the front of my shirt and settled in. Marian was the worker, anxious to get her hands on what she called the "real world." I wasn't sure what I wanted to be when I grew up, but whatever my future held, there would be books. The only worlds that seemed real to me I'd found on printed pages that I could touch with my fingers.

I was with Fagin and the boys up in their dark, chilly attic when I was startled back by the chug of our old red Ford coming up the highway. The pick-up, its sides dinged and mud-splattered, turned off and rolled up our dirt road. The late afternoon sun careened off the windshield making it seem to burst outward and light the way. I could tell even at a distance that that pickup had more living beings in it now than when it had left for McKinnon that morning. I supposed I could see the bed pulsing with all the tiny new hearts that were back there beating inside yellow fluff.

I made my way down the tree and across the road just as the truck sputtered to a stop in front of the house. "I want to see!" I hollered, and I leapt to the fender and leaned into the bed to meet the racket.

Four shallow, yellow cardboard boxes with *McKinnon Feed and Seed* scrolled in red on the sides sat stacked one on the other; the high-pitched cheeping and tweeting startled me with the size of the sound. The boxes had small round cut-outs and through them little tufts of white and yellow and black peeked through. As Dad climbed up and lifted off the top lid for me to have a look, I was hit with a slap of the stale, dusty smell of cardboard and straw. The box was divided into tiny, egg carton squares, each cradling a perfect and brand new baby chick, one hundred in all, Marian said, each one hollering its tiny head off.

Dad replaced the lid, picked up the boxes and proceeded around back with Marian at his heels. I had started after them when I looked up to see Mother at the kitchen window, the curtain held aside by one slender, pale hand and I stopped cold. Diabletta stood beneath the window. She didn't move, just watched, as Dad and Marian paraded around back with the boxes full of little lives.

Marian fed the chicks and watered them and kept them warm as May became a damp June that evaporated imperceptibly into a warm July. Before we knew it the chicks had grown up lovely and full. One of the roosters was small, black and white, like so many of the others, but his colors were so sharp and defined that he appeared to be painted that way. His golden eyes followed Marian as she threw out the corn, but he just stood and stared at her, calm and

unperturbed, until she took to feeding him separately. I decided that he was too proud to scatter and flutter and feed like the rest. We named him Little Elvis, after Marion's latest idol.

He looked so smart that one day I decided to talk to him. While Marian fed the others, I told him that I was slowly working my way through Dickens that summer and about the people I'd met so far and how I felt about them, and, though I know this probably sounds stupid, he really seemed to listen. He never took his calm, strange eyes from me. Since Dad had taken Diabletta with him in the pick-up that day, I removed Little Elvis from the coop to see what he would do. At first, he looked around, getting used to the look of the world uncrosshatched by chicken wire. He pecked around a little, then suddenly spread his wings and tried to fly. It was obvious that this was one chicken not meant to be cooped up.

I took him out whenever I could, a little longer each time, and soon he followed behind me like a puppy. I got to taking him to my walnut tree out by the barn. I'd sit back against the trunk and Little Elvis would nestle by my knees. The temperature felt twenty degrees cooler there, and to this day the memory of that enormous old tree soothes me. Wild grass grew sparsely beneath it that was old-clothes soft, and the dust between the blades lay like powdered silk. I read out loud to him. He seemed to be listening very carefully. Marian would join us whenever she could, and I would read to them both. Apparently, Little Elvis liked Dickens as much as I did; nevertheless, I would skip parts about meals and what they laid on their tables if any poultry was involved. No need to offend.

Marian and I knew Little Elvis was just a rooster, with a brain no bigger than my thumbnail, and that his strange attention to us didn't really mean anything. Yet we loved him.

"It's not exactly a happy look," Marian said to me one hot August night when we had set up cots out on the screened-in porch. "I don't know why I like it so much."

"There's something wonderful in it," I said, kicking off my sheet to let the cool breeze reach me.

Marian was quiet for a minute, then sat up on her elbow and turned to me. "It's not so much what it is," she said, "as what it isn't. You know how the other chickens always look scared, like they never know what's going to happen next?" She lay back down and was quiet a long time.

Marian's quiet breathing in the darkness sounded as though her lips were brushing my ears. "That's what we look like, you know," I said, finally. "Our eyes are like that."

I thought then about Mother's eyes, usually cast down, dismissing, endlessly going on to other things. Dad's eyes, moving around quickly, checking, evaluating, making sure in every way he could that what he saw was

exactly the way he wanted to see it. Little Elvis's golden eyes seemed to say, I am here. I am not afraid. I have a right to be here, because I am. This was a new idea to me. I wondered about Oliver and David and Pip and the rest that I had been living with that summer. Is that how they got through all their terrible troubles? By knowing that their ideas and feelings were justified simply because they had them? As though that alone were enough? I was about to ask Marian about this when it struck me that I had seen a dark version of Little Elvis's expression before. In other eyes golden and calm, yet terrible. I rolled over and waited for sleep to save me.

A few days later, Little Elvis and I were out beneath the walnut deep in *Pickwick Papers*. When I glanced up he wasn't looking at me, but past me. Diabletta stood less than two yards from us.

I'd been sure she'd had gone to the upper forty with Dad. A low growl rumbled from her throat and I couldn't move. The ridge of hair raised along her spine. Yellow teeth bared.

Little Elvis hadn't moved. His golden eyes gazed into her golden eyes. The growl stopped. Diabletta looked at Little Elvis hard and was silent for a long moment. Then she turned and trotted away around the side of the barn.

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Autumn. Dusty green leaves of boxelder and cottonwood bled yellow to red to brown and drifted down into the ruts of the road, nestled in Mother's empty flowerbeds, and blessed the chicken yard with layers of new nest-makings. Chilled early morning air was seasoned with the scent of ripening apples and woodsmoke. It was then, in our own backyard, that Marian and I were introduced to the other side of chicken farming.

We weren't upset about the butchering of the hens; we were farm children and accustomed to how the food we ate made its way to our table. Mostly we were curious. Besides, most hens were obnoxious and stupid.

"Don't be scared," Dad said, "when they start flying around once I chop the heads. That's natural."

I wanted to know how such a thing could be natural, but I kept still. That morning, Dad had locked Diabletta in the garden shed which was next to the house and across the yard from the coop. Dad then separated out the poorer layers and the losers in general and shut them in the coop. The surviving hens and the roosters stayed out in the pen, circling and squawking. Dad went inside the coop and brought out a big white, holding it by its scaly yellow feet. In the center of the back yard was the stump of an old boxelder that had been cut down before I was born, and Dad flung the hen longways across the stump, pulled his small hatchet from the stump, and just as easy as slicing a slab of soft

butter, gave it a swing and CHUNK, the axe cut smooth and slick across the slender feathered neck.

Even though he had warned us, it was startling to see a headless five-pounder flying across our back yard. It glided across Mother's rose bed, the pouring blood raising a dust cloud that settled back on itself, disguising death as a brown liquid lump.

After three or four executions, my curiosity was more than sated. I wandered to the survivor's pen to talk to Little Elvis and saw that he wasn't there.

I ran to Marian and blurted out my discovery. She refused to believe me and we both ran back. Little Elvis was not there. Roosters weren't to be butchered. What was going on? We forgot ourselves and ran to Dad who had just stepped up to the stump again.

"Dad," Marian gasped, grabbing his arm, trying to remain her calm self. "Dad, Little Elvis isn't in the pen! You aren't going to kill Little Elvis?"

Dad, trying to get a scraggly brown to keep still, snarled at Marian to get out of the way. She started to cry. Desperate, I grabbed her arm and we ran to Mother.

Mother was in the living room tatting. As we choked out our story, her perfect bow of mouth became tiny and strained. She calmly set her lace aside, got up and went outside, us trailing behind. Dad was in the coop. We started to go in with Mother, but she shut the door behind her.

As soon as I heard her voice, I smelled the sulphur and smoking copper. In our panic, we had made a terrible mistake and Mother had forgotten her own rule: *Go along to get along.*

"Don't kill Little Elvis," We heard her say, her voice firm. "He's their pet."

Then I heard Dad's voice but not all his words—there was something about how Little Elvis didn't mix with the hens and breed and was a waste of feed. When I heard 'foolish,' and 'spoiled,' I knew he was talking about us.

He came out of the coop swinging Little Elvis by the feet. I wanted to fly at him, wrench Little Elvis from his arms; he didn't deserve to touch him. But the smell of copper paralyzed me, Mother's words echoed in my head, *You know how he is, You know how he is,* distorted, crazy. The air snapped. Dad's face was red and his small feet moved quickly. My head was coming apart and I sank to my knees and held it in my hands. Marian's scream was far away.

Dad swung Little Elvis around and slammed him on the stump. Golden eyes looked up at Dad serenely, the same eyes that had turned Diabletta away. CHUNK went the axe.

Streamers of scarlet wafted like solid things, lightly fell and made thick splashes on Little Elvis's wings and on the brown October grass. The head rolled and tumbled over the side where the feathers caught in a splinter and hung

swaying. On the stump the wings flapped and lifted the body high into the air, floated toward where I sat, unable to move, then it descended slowly and rested in my lap, bathing me in blood.

An explosive crash as Diabletta burst from the garden shed. The door swung wildly on broken hinges as she ran towards the stump. Like lightning, she flashed her fangs into the head of Little Elvis swaying on the stump, then slashed into the carcass on my lap then ran on, leaving me with the touch of her soft muzzle and the wetness of her tongue on my sticky, marooned legs. Dad heaved the back side of the axe at Diabletta's head. It knocked her down and Little Elvis's head and body fell from her teeth, wings still flapping. He grabbed carcass and snarled that he'd teach us what chickens were for bygod, they were not pets goddamit, chickens were for eating, and we were going to eat this bygod chicken for Sunday dinner, bygod, goddamit. He pounded into the house as Diabletta shook her head, got slowly to her feet, and stared at the slamming door. Then she reclaimed the small, golden-eyed head and loped away disappearing across the fields.

***

Sunday morning I sat on the front porch. The Philco on the kitchen sill behind me sent melodies of the Everly Brothers floating out. Mother was lying in her room with the shades drawn, and Marian was stirring up brownies for Sunday dessert. Mother disliked sweets and baking in general, and kind Marian offered to finish making dinner. Between songs I heard her tiny sobs. Beside the stove was a big bowl of floured chicken parts ready to go in the pan. Somewhere among those legs and thighs and wings and backs was what had been salvaged of Little Elvis.

I thought of Mother in her curtained room. Of Dad, crushing the world like ash to create it in his own image. What would become of Marian and me in this house? And there, on that porch, on that Sunday morning, I knew only one thing would save us. I got up and went into the kitchen.

I lifted a wide spatula out of the drawer. "Don't Be Cruel," intoned the original Elvis over the Philco. Marian looked at me with red-rimmed eyes and I smiled at her and went out and around to the back yard.

I found that place in the grass where the Little Elvis had left the ribbon of dust-covered blood. I spotted a bit of the dried splatter, squatted down and tapped it with my finger. It was hard and brittle. With the edge of the spatula I broke off a chunk and scooped it up along with a bit of fine dust.

I stood and knew Diabletta was behind me before I turned. My eyes looked into hers. She excreted a smooth deep mound, black and foul, and stepped away. I crowded a portion of the mess on the spatula beside the blood and the earth.

In the kitchen Marian looked at the spatula with horror. Then she held out the brownie bowl and I dropped everything in.

At dinner Marian and I sat on either side of Dad and Mother, eyes downcast like glazed statues. We could not tell which of the pieces of chicken on the high, steaming platter on the table before us were parts of Little Elvis, but we had no choice but to each take one. Marian's chin trembled.

Dad made jokes. They fell flat. The harder he tried, the quieter we became. His dark eyes grew empty and black clouds gathered. I smelled copper. A drop of sweat coursed down the side of my face. Marian and I added string beans and mashed potatoes to our plates and smooshed everything around. Occasionally we'd take a bit of bean. After many minutes of brutal silence, Dad grew tired of it and we were safe again.

Finally, he pushed his plate away. Marian and I declared that we were full and started clearing the table. We watched Dad sink a knife in the brownie pan, followed the square path it traveled, saw it lift a substantial plank and plop moistly onto his plate. "Girls?" he said.

"We've had enough," we replied. We turned away as he picked up the brownie and moved it to his mouth. He declared they were the best brownies Marian had ever made and ate the whole pan of them right there.

***

Marian, Diabletta, and I sat in front of the Motorola watching Boris crying over his wilted daisy. Marian and I snacked on slabs of hot homemade bread that Mother had just pulled from the oven. We licked rich butter from our fingers. Dad came in from the fields, and probably said something like, Diabletta, Get Out of the House, or Get that Food Out of the Living Room, or Move Back From That TV, You'll Ruin Your Eyes. I really wasn't listening. I just kept watching my show, the golden reflection warming the screen whenever I glanced up from eating my bread as Diabletta, with her rough pink tongue, licked bread crumbs off my bare big toe.

Passing Through

Let us therefore be of nowhere, but without forgetting that we are somewhere...
Julia Kristeva

Cartography

Imaginary boundaries drawn by a green hand with a black marker. Lines that contain states that contain cities that contain people. Lines that say *You belong here* or *You are a stranger here.*

I am a stranger stranger. Do any of them say that? No. No lines tell me that I belong within their designs. When they do, I have to leave. That is the problem. I can only be a stranger temporarily. Before long the lines try to put their pre-fab story on me that reads: *You are from here. You will take on certain characteristics that identify you as coming from this place. You will wear them like sacred garments, like ruby slippers that can never come off.*

Unless I take them off.

Clothing

People ask me where I get my clothing and sometimes I tell them *from books* and sometimes I tell them *from my own shedding skin.*

A Place to Start From

I was born in Denver, but I know nothing about that. We left when I was two and I've never been back. By the time I was ten I had lived in five different states from Hawaii to North Carolina. About two years in each. And that is still the rate about which I move today.

1. When I was 3, my mother sat me on my bed amongst all my stuffed animals and told me we were moving to Hawaii and that I was going to have to leave some of my stuffed friends behind for a few years.

"Which ones do you want to put in storage?" she asked.

"The clown, the sock monkey..." but before I could continue, she was laughing at me, told me I was funny and never let me finish.

2. I was 7 before we flew back to the mainland. We were moving to North Carolina. We spent some of our last hours on the beach and my mother told me to say goodbye to the Pacific Ocean.

She had bought me a new skirt and some mad libs for the 5-hour plane ride. All of my parents' friends showed up at the airport for a final Aloha. I didn't understand then why my mom was crying or why I wasn't. It was the last time I wore a lei. The last time I smelled a Plumeria.

This moving. It is the only way I know how to survive. But moving always wants something in exchange. Always there is loss. And there is mourning. And there is coping. And then there is moving on. But I like it—this living and dying and moving. Living becomes dying and moving, and dying becomes moving and living.

Psychoanalysis

Some people say: *she must be running away from something, she must have intimacy issues.* Psychology is good at putting labels on the behavior of strangers and calling them issues, syndromes and disorders. But my issue is not with intimacy it is with inertia and I don't see why the two have to go hand in hand.

There are men I have met who think that they love me and tell me they too believe that intimacy and inertia do not have to be linked. But in the end it is always the same. They cling to an intimacy, smother it with possessiveness or eat it up with insecurity. They cannot let go of it, allow it to change because they are afraid it will move out of their lives forever and then out of this fear they destroy it anyway.

Dear John,

You said it was just a matter of bad timing-us meeting two months before I was to move. You tried to understand why I had to leave, why I could not change my plans for you. You were so convinced of the perfection of us.

1200 miles away, I told you I loved you but I could not promise fidelity. I could not promise I'd return, I could only promise honesty and asked the same of you. You said you understood. You said you felt the same way.

But 1200 miles away, little is really understood.

After all the bullshit, after the senseless accusations that I was not following our own rules, after refusing to talk to me for 38 days, you finally called, you finally admitted that it was you who did not follow the rules, you who could not live up to who you said you were.

So then, what is this thing you have called perfection? called love? That makes you dishonest with yourself, dishonest with me? So that you do not even know who you are? So that I do not even know the person I think I have fallen in love with?

Should I be flattered that all this was done because of your desire to be with me? I do not hate you. And I can forgive you. But I cannot be flattered.

Best wishes,

Nicole

*Mercury**

I have been told I am ruled by the planet of Mercury and that this is

why I want to move around so much. But if this is true why is it so rare that I find other mercurial souls. They are born every June and September. Perhaps we are all too mercurial to do more than bump into each other.

**Roman adaptation of the Greek god Hermes, god of roads, messenger god. He was the only one of the 12 major gods who did not have a home on Olympus. He was always in transit between the 3 worlds (Olympus, Earth and Hades).*

Cotati, Sonoma County, California. 1991-1994.

Three years was long enough.

I had decided to transfer to Sonoma State University for 3 reasons: its proximity to San Francisco, its dorms named after wine grapes, and the duck ponds surrounded by compassionate weeping willows on the campus grounds. I did not see such compassionate things where I was living in the San Fernando Valley. I saw smog, concrete and new money. So I packed my car and left the valley behind. It was the last time I was a blonde.

But sometime during my last semester at Sonoma State it came. The itch to go. I don't know when it starts exactly. Do symptoms come before or because of the itch? All I know is that I could not spend another moment with my friends on JP's couch smoking pot while MTV was on but muted so we could talk. Did we have conversations? I did not listen anymore. I could not bear to hear the same jokes. I could not continue to divide up my week according to the drugs we did each day. The drugs that brought us so close together, entangled us so tightly none of us could break loose. We became rooted, intertwined in each other like the rows of grapevines draped on the rolling hills that surrounded us.

I began to feel changes in my chemistry, in my vision. The leaves on the trees on the hills were greener with trunks that looked ready to walk. I wanted to sit at their base in between the large roots that stuck out of the ground and wait for them to speak to me. A blue spot of light came to visit me but said nothing. I wondered if I was going crazy. But I didn't care. I just wanted to be alone, but they wouldn't leave me alone so I had to move. San Francisco was not far enough.

Seattle, King County, Washington. 1994-1996.

There is a city called seattle that i lived in once...so many trees but i still could not breathe...feeling alien was not alien to me but the alien i felt here was alien to me—it usually goes away—but i was still an alien the day i left seattle...i had a few friends i never really liked...they didn't like me either but desperation and pity befriend each other so that desperation doesn't always have to drink alone and pity doesn't turn into guilt...no one can be around desperation for too long—no one knows if it's contagious or not—and it leads to undesirable destinations...i went to undesirable destinations...in seattle...sometimes with undesirable people—a compulsive liar, a kleptomaniac/exhibitionist, a man over fifty, my friend's boyfriend—that's just the beginning...but that is enough...and

there were other undesirable destinations...i went to a place outside of my mind...it was not always undesirable but i was afraid i would not come back...desperation and guilt take you directly to this destination...they filled me up so much there was nowhere else for me to go but out...when i left my mind the blue spot took over my body...it shook and it threw things around the studio apartment it convulsed and it cried and it screamed and it wanted to die it wanted to hurt itself to punish itself and it did not recognize itself in the mirror...sometimes when this happened i would come back to my mind and talk my body into calming down and sometimes the alcohol would collapse my body for the night and i would still be out of my mind the next day but too hungover to do anything about it...when i began going to this destination more frequently i decided it was time to get out of seattle...i needed those friends i did not want to need...escape one destination by going to another...i sold my car and moved to san francisco.

#403

She took one last look at the empty apartment. Another empty apartment—she sighed—wondering if it was a sign of failure. It was a beautiful studio—only $390—with a perfect view of the Space Needle just down the street. She would miss waking up and seeing that hideous thing every morning. She would miss feeling for a moment every morning, as if she were living in a Jetsons cartoon. She would miss the room that kept her safe in all of her unsafe behavior.

She quickly shut the door, for the last time. ·

San Francisco, San Francisco County, California. 1996-1998.

San Francisco. It is a desirable destination. I started to cry as I drove the U-haul across the Bay Bridge into the city. The sight of that familiar skyline told me I would be safe now.

22 Fillmore

We are wasted. We miss the stop. We are forced to walk through the projects at 2 a.m. We are too drunk to be scared. We make it home.

Most of my friends from school had moved to the city by now. I was happy to be with them, but I had forgotten how to be around them. I'd been alone too much in the past two years. Or I'd been out.

38 Geary

"Next stop, Arguello, Arguello, where you can catch the **33**, you know the **33**, it's like two birds flyin in the sky on their sides."

5 Fulton

> Sometimes I would skip lunch to make sure I was out the door by 6 to make it in time to catch his bus. He smiles and says hello every time I mount the steps, like we are old friends. He is tall, slender, dark skin. I think he is an American Indian. Everyday I tell myself I will sit right behind him and talk to him the whole way home. But I never do. I sit about 5 seats to the back and watch him and it makes me happy.

I came back to myself and my friends. I left the trees and blue spot behind. Trees were sparse in the city. Unless you went to Golden Gate Park. (I heard once that none of the trees in SF grew there naturally). But who had time for that? I did not. There is a price to pay for living in a beautiful city. I shared a one bedroom on Divisadero and McAllister, three blocks from the projects that cost us $1000 a month. The living room was converted into a bedroom.

> *1 California*
> Richmond District. Pacific Heights. Nob Hill. Chinatown. Financial District. I ride this bus everyday to my temp job. Men and women in designer neutral-colored suits and too much cologne. I, in my thrift store clothes and dyed hair, keep my nose in a book and tell myself I am better than them.

But it was a beautiful apartment with hardwood floors, French doors and cornices. So we worked hard to keep it because once you got a place in the city you did not move out of it unless you were
leaving the city.

> *12 Folsom*
> "This is the end of the line, sistah. Where you gonna get off?"
> "I guess here."

Lies and Promises

My family went to Mexico when I was twelve in June of 1963,[1] the day after my brothers Richard and John and I got out of school for the summer. Dad promised Mom he wouldn't drink at all on the trip, not at all. She wrote that down and had him sign it, then put that signed official piece of paper in a brown envelope, all folded up, tucked in her fake-black-patent-leather purse. This was going to be his last chance, she said. This was the final test, the defining moment when her life could turn around and bring to us all that settled feeling of sitcom certainty we had been waiting for. Dad whistled through his teeth for two whole days while he fixed the light switch in the bathroom, put away tools in the garage, and sat at his desk, stacking and restacking papers.

We almost had that feeling one Christmas when I was eight. My father came to Mass with us that morning, even went to Holy Communion, something he hadn't done since I was maybe six years old. He looked tense and bloated beside my mom, not pious, with his forehead resting on the pew in front, but he wasn't drinking, Mom said. It lasted three weeks.

It was still dark when we left for Union Station in downtown Los Angeles. Uncle Carl,[2] one of my father's brothers, drove us in his tan Buick and we were all scrunched in with our one-each, cheap, borrowed-from-our-cousins suitcase on our laps. Uncle Carl took a wide, sweeping turn onto the Hollywood Freeway, and I remember the huge sign on the side of this building where a blind man in a top hat, mallet behind his back, threatened three mice. I remember the round-like-stacked-pancakes Columbia Record Company building. I remember the fog was so thick it seemed we were flying on that freeway.

At the train station (in those days the Greyhound Bus Station was also there) the sun was just coming up, the fog shimmered, and the sky was full of black-and-white pigeons. In the parking lot people moved from their cars to the station in straight lines, elbows pumped, luggage kept time; all in a hurry. My eyes burned when I blinked and I had to pee like mad. That cardboard suitcase was so big, I had to carry it with two hands and I felt like a little kid again.

We climbed on that huge diesel-exhaust, hair-oil smelling bus and went to the far back, so far the seats hid our entire family. My mom wanted me to put my suitcase up in the rack above our heads, but I held on tight. "Suit yourself," she said with her hand on her hip. She was wearing a new pale purple dress with a wide belt, and she had two plastic bracelets on her wrist that clanked as she hoisted luggage. My father just sat in his seat while she did that.

[1]This most likely was 1961 as the author was born in 1949 and would have been fourteen in 1963.
[2]Although the author has several uncles on both sides of her family, none is named Carl.

John and I sat across from Dad. Mom sat one row up on the other side from us with Richard.[3]

The bus took off, rocked through an underground station with lights sunk right into the sides of the walls, then swung onto the early morning streets of downtown Los Angeles, through a few dirty alleys where raggedy men slept on the sidewalks and trash swirled in heaps in the corners of the buildings, then on to the freeway and off to Nogales, Arizona.

We hadn't been in our seats for an hour when I saw my dad slip a tiny bottle, very tiny, out of his pocket and drink it, like Alice in Wonderland's little Drink-Me bottle. My mom couldn't see him. I could. So could John, but we didn't look at each other. Even at twelve years old, I wasn't so stupid to think a piece of paper with a useless promise on it would stop my dad from drinking. But I was sorry it started so soon.

Along with that little promise, my mom had all the traveler's checks and our vaccination papers in the brown envelope in her purse. We had had to get shots two weeks before, and the smallpox was not a shot so much as five pokes with a short needle. Three days later the circle of pokes got all puffy and raised up and itched like mad. I could still feel the swollen knob on my arm as the bus rocked back and forth and the white tongue-licks of paint in the road ticked off the miles, and Dad settled in to sleep with his head back and his mouth wide open and his fingers entwined on his chest. He slept through the first two rest stops, and when we got to the dinner stop, he just sort of wandered away.

The dinner stop was at a little restaurant that looked like an isolated white box somewhere in Arizona with no name, only "Burgers, Shakes, Fries" where a name should have been. The girl behind the counter was cross-eyed and moved slowly, apparently unconcerned that sixty people wanted something to eat right now. Well, fifty-five, because we sure didn't eat here. My mom stuck a little part of her tongue out and held it there with her teeth as she looked out the window of the little diner, her eyes narrowed. But she didn't say anything except "Now, eat this sandwich I brought, it's cheaper than this junk they sell here." I looked at my cheese sandwich on white bread all flat with dried-up crusts in a wax-paper bag with three limp carrot sticks, then at the lady in the next booth chomping a huge greasy hamburger, pinkies up.

We slept that night on the bus and I spent most of the next day looking out the window in a hypnotic daze as it rocked on its big wheels toward Nogales. It was late afternoon when we finally got there, and my legs ached from carrying my suitcase on my lap. I even slept with my head on it, so now my face was all creased and my eyes all red and blurry. We got off the bus and the plan was to walk across the border to get a Mexican train. My mom had

[3]In an interview with the author in 1999 she referred to other family members on this trip, most notably her older sister, and her developmentally disabled uncle. The author also has an older brother, but he would have been in the Navy at this time.

read some travel book for poor people,[4] and she discovered this was a much cheaper way to get around in Mexico. Also, the exchange rate was good. Otherwise, we probably couldn't have gone at all.

My dad loved Mexico. He loved Mexican beer, Mexican food, Mexican music, Mexican people, and fishing in the Sea of Cortez. He spoke Spanish, badly, but it didn't stop him from speaking it loudly and with enthusiasm when he was drunk. I would hear him slur confidently something that sounded like, "yo kee arro mas sir vessa, seenyor" at his brother-in-law's house. My uncle Mondo[5] was married to his sister and they had eight children, and all my cousins were dark and round and spoke Spanish to each other right in front of us just to make us mad. Uncle Mondo drank as much as my dad, but he never got mean and tried to swat his kids on the back of their heads as they ran by him.

My dad told us about the bullfights he and Mondo would go to in Tijuana and how one time a sloppy matador had sliced the entire nose off a bull before killing it, and blood spurted all over the matador and the ring and the crowd booed and threw vegetables and empty beer bottles at him in the hot, dirty sun. My dad's eyes shone when he told this story.[6]

I know why he signed that impossible little lie for my mother. He wanted her to love Mexico as much as he did. She tried. She put on the Big Pretend and hyped Mexico to us kids, hinting that if Dad was good, if he really and truly was not going to drink anymore, why we might even *move* to Mexico, live in a big ranch by the sea, even (she looked right at me) get a horse or two.

Dad got a pension after his retirement from his police job due to a heart attack caused by "stress" when he was only forty-four. Even though this retirement money was enough for us to live barely above poverty-level in Los Angeles, we could be rich in Mexico, she said, have maids in Mexico. All your dreams come true in Mexico.[7]

Oh, I wanted to believe that. I even let her buy me a book about horses. But that tiny bottle, that quick slip-slide into the pocket, I almost didn't see it. I almost didn't want to.

Crossing the border into Mexico is easy, just stroll by, wave to the official who needs a haircut and wears an olive drab uniform and that's that. All these shots and photos and copies of birth certificates were to get back into the

[4]Most likely Frommer's *Mexico On Five Dollars A Day*.
[5]Armando Garcia, married to Monica Shannon.
[6]This was actually a story told by the husband of the author's maternal aunt, Renee Francis. Lewis Francis and his wife frequently attended bullfights in Mexico in the 1950s.
[7]According to Civil Ser ice Records, this retirement check was quite substantial for the times. The author's father was, in fact, an alcoholic, and he also s ffered from asthma. The combination of a heart condition and these other factors led to his early retirement from the Los Angeles Police Department at the age of forty-four. The bulk of his retirement money went, not to supporting his family, but to frequent trips to Mexico, Europe, and Las Vegas.

United States. It's like a foxtail, going in easily but tough to pull out. We walked to the train station and I saw no one run, no one race madly in a straight, determined line. People were strolling, selling pastries, laughing. Already, Mexico was different. I had been to Tijuana several times, Ensenada once or twice,[8] and always, I felt at home. Mexico looked like Boyle Heights where my grandparents lived, but the signs and billboards were in Spanish.

Once we got on the train the whir-clack lifted us up and over the swirling colors of the women's dresses, the brown straight hair of the brown-eyed children, the straw-hats of the boys selling Chiclets gum, the men selling huge cheap piggy banks, Mexican bread, goat-meat tortillas loaded with chilies so hot you need only hold one in your hand to start to sweat and burn, your eyes would tear up and your teeth would chatter.[9]

When I was twelve, on this train, floating through the outskirts of Nogales, Mexico into the Sonora desert, the Sierra Madres Mountain Range blocked the setting sun, and I imagined I could see the cartoon puffs we made behind the train cloud all the misery of my childhood up there in Los Angeles. I looked out the window at miles and miles of heat-shimmered desert, scrub brush, pale sand, agave plants, more sand, a few red and black rocks. It looked like where I imagined the Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote lived.

That first night we ate in the dinning car with white tablecloths and flowers in tiny vases on each table. It was the fanciest dinner I had ever had in my life so far, even if it was just a plate of French fries and a dinner salad because those were the cheapest things on the menu. After dinner my brothers and I wandered down toward the end of the train. We saw some porters playing guitars and singing in a boxcar whose eastern side was an open sliding door with just a rope railing to separate the train from the desert. One rocking jolt and I imagined my cartoon self could tip over onto one foot, then cartwheel over the rope and fall into the dust and never go back home. I would abandon *alta* for *baja.* I imagined some poor *campesiños* would take me in and I could start my life all over again, this time as a Mexican child in a family where no one hit anyone, where we were poor, but everyone loved one another and the mother was kind and gentle and patted our faces whenever we walked by just like she patted warm tortillas into shape, and the father was hard-working and quiet and always had candy in his pockets for children.

The porters were singing songs I had never heard, their heads thrown back, voices high and trembling. As I walked by with my brothers, the train slowed down almost to a stop. The porters stopped their singing, put down their instruments, and stood close to the rope. They reached into their pockets and began throwing small coins into the desert. My brothers and I leaned

[8]The first time the author visited Ensenada was in 1991 with her husband and two children.
[9]The author's first experience with goat tortillas, was in 1993 on a visit to San Felipe, Baja California. She was a vegetarian by that time, and therefore, has probably never eaten a goat tortilla.

forward. There were about ten or twelve children, very brown-skinned with long matted hair and too-small clothes walking alongside the train picking up the coins. In the background were the grown-ups, men with frayed straw hats and women with *rebozas,* burrito-tucked with babies. They had their arms crossed over their chests and just stared at the train. It was like we were a television set and the station was tuned to the coin-throwing porters and Americans channel. I reached into the pocket of my jumper and the porters moved over to let me reach the railing. I had six or seven American coins, probably totaling fifty cents. I threw them far out, towards the smaller and slower children. The porter softly said in English, "They will live for a week on what you have thrown. Don't throw too much, or they will come to expect it." They were waiting here for the train; they already expected it.

The train picked up speed and the porters returned to their instruments, and we to our seats. I fell asleep with my head against the glass window as the train clacked and rocked.

The next day we stopped at a small town where more people got on. These passengers were smaller, darker, with higher cheekbones than any Mexican people I had ever seen. The women's hair was tightly braided and the children all seemed bow-legged. There was much jockeying and package shuffling and men yelling. Out the window I saw vendors with huge platters of golden brown food, tall poles heavy with trinkets and puppets and *piñatas,* family groups laughed and called to one another. I noticed a little boy with a box of Chiclets and motioned for him to come over. "How much? *Cuanto?*" I was going to practice the few phrases John had taught me the night before we left. "Two dollars!" he smiled at me. Two dollars? "American?" "*Si, seniorita,*" all smiles. "I am very poor." I figured he was, but I remembered what the porter had said. "*Dos pesos, solamente.*"

This time, when I was twelve, a peso was worth about eight cents. Sixteen cents was enough for a pack of gum, surely. The boy looked at me sadly. "Okay." He handed me the entire box of twelve packages of gum to chose from, then held out his hand. "Two dollars!" "No, no!" What was the word for sorry? What was the word for only one? I could not remember! I took one package and tried to get him to take the rest of the box and two pesos. "Two dollars!" he insisted, starting to shout, looked around, shouted louder, "Two dollars! Two dollars!"

I didn't have two dollars. I looked around for my mother, but only Richard was there, leaning out the window with his arms braced on the outside of the train. "Richard! Give me two dollars, quick!" "Why?" "Please, just give it to me! I'll pay you back, promise!" We were going to be here two weeks and my mom had given us ten dollars each for the entire trip. He gave me the bills and when I handed them over to the boy he grinned, satisfied, then walked away. I

was left holding a box with twelve small packets of Chiclets gum. Probably worth about sixteen cents American, total.[10]

My mother had gotten off the train to get some food for us. She brought back big fat oranges, still-warm tortillas wrapped in silver foil, and bottles of Fanta, a soda we had never seen before. As I coiled up a tortilla and inserted it into my mouth, I looked out the window at the station and saw my father bracing himself against a wooden porch support, his back to us. The back of his neck was wet with sweat and as he quickly threw his head back, I saw the stab of a bottle. I looked at my mother but she didn't see. Her voice was shrill and phony. "In three hours we'll be in Aguascaliente where they have the most beautiful churches!" Or did she?

Turns out we never did see any churches in Aguascaliente.[11] We spent one night in a small hotel where a tense and loudly whispered decision was made in the middle of the night to go out to the ocean, to Mazatalan, instead. The next morning, clutching our suitcases, we wandered through streets, past plazas with water fountains, shoe stores, bakeries, and lots and lots of people. Finally, our little family clump got on this fat bus whose sides were painted with large garish paintings of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The driver's vision was severely hampered by hanging tassels, statues of Our Lady, godseyes, and plastic Aztec calendars. Something happened on that bus ride. My parents didn't speak to each other, they never looked in the other's direction, but something shifted between them.

By the time we got to Mazatalan it was dark and I had a whirling headache and stomach cramps, which turned out to be the flu. Mom left to find us a hotel room, and Dad hit the first bar on the sand, Cielito Lindo, across from the bus station.[12] Mom gave us a look of desperate seriousness as she left, so we sat stunned and quiet at this sad, filthy station eating greasy potato chips and drinking Orange Fanta. My brothers said the men's room was so deep in filth they just stood at the door and peed in. Sixty-two hours, I counted. Sixty-two hours of determined pretending everything would finally be right in my family. Now all that was left was the fallout.

I remember my fifth grade class watched a sixteen millimeter film in social studies of exploding atom bombs. I was horrified by this huge black and white mushroom sucking all this debris into its center, and I remember thinking, what happens to all that swirling stuff when that thing finally finishes its inhale? All those dirt specks and sticks and leaves and birds and crickets and glowing particles full of nasty death and poison have to go somewhere? Where

[10]No evidence has been found that this episode ever occurred.
[11]In fact the fa ily stayed in Aguascalente for eight days and visited church s, markets, and garden plazas before traveling to Guadalajara. They remain d in Guadalajara for another six days and visited a gl ss-blowing factory, a large underground market and went horseback riding at Lake Chapala. The bus ride to Mazatlan originated in Guadalajara.
[12]A check with the Visitor's Bureau in Mazatalan shows no record of there ever having been a cantina called Cielito Lindo in that town.

does it all go?

From the open wall of the bus station, I could see people from the neighborhood bringing their dining room tables out onto the sidewalk. It was late, after ten o'clock at night, but the heavy air just started to cool. They put out candles, and steaming mounds of food, and large icy pitchers of beer and lemonade while families and neighbors laughed and ate and told stories.

I was hot and woozy. Mom came back sometime after midnight with her eyes all squinched up and a manic anxiety itching her. She had found a hotel whose manager agreed to let us sleep in the lobby until a train left for Tijuana at 6:00am. So this was the end of it. Our short, now hopeless, trip to Mexico.

Mom asked if we had seen the envelope with our traveler's checks and immunization papers. She couldn't find it. Did we see Dad take it? Where was he now? John was the only one who could talk. Richard was asleep in a wooden chair in the corner, and my eyes felt like there was sandpaper on the inside of my lids and my throat was large and hot and lumpy. Somehow being stranded in Mexico for the rest of our lives, falling off the end of the earth, would be tolerable if only I could sleep for a while. Mom chewed the side of her fingernail. She wasn't going to cry, I could see that, and she wasn't so much mad as crazy. That look behind her eyes was a familiar one, and my brothers and I knew the best posture was flatness. Do whatever she said, agree with whatever she wanted, and do it fast. She decided it was up to Richard to retrieve the checks and papers from our drunken, mean father. It was almost one o'clock now, and Richard's skinny little chest started to heave a little when she woke him up suddenly and told him what he had to do. I willed him not to cry now. He found some reserves leaning on John's arm, and they both set out across the ten feet of sand to Cielito Lindo. I could watch them from where I slumped on a stool in a febrile daze in the doorway to the bus station.

My brother Richard has been a telephone installer for over thirty years now. He is also an alcoholic. I suspect his children had to submit to the humiliation of fetching him from bars and tricking him into giving them valuables. Maybe he doesn't remember this time on a dirty beach in a tropical heat in the middle of the night in Mexico.

I could see Dad sunk very low on his barstool, eyes half-closed, head lolling to the side. Richard eased up to him, asked him something, and then Dad took out his wallet and handed it to him. The envelope with the traveler's checks and papers was attached to the wallet by a rubber band. Richard simply took the envelope and stuck it in his jeans pocket. He put the wallet back on the bar. There was no deception needed for Dad's soggy mind. Simple. He backed out of the bar.

Usually Richard loved the attention and the intrigue associated with these nasty little tasks he had to perform. He would tell us over and over how

clever he had been, how smooth, like a secret agent, he was. He would get on my nerves until I had to sock him. But not this time. He just handed over the goods and came and sat really close to John and me, three orphans with parents.

In the taxi to the hotel I got the shivers. I was close to throwing up, and had this perverse urge to aim it in my mother's lap. How could she blame a kid for throwing up? But we got to the hotel just in time, and as I leaned out of the cab door, all that orange Fanta and those horrid potato chips returned to Mexican sand. We settled into the lobby of the Hotel del Presidente,[13] and the clerk was very nice. Since I was sick, I was given the reclining pool chair, brought in special. My brothers were draped on regular wire chairs and they were sound asleep in minutes. My mom paced and I watched her through fevered eyes as she clenched her fists, then swirled her hands over her head, then clenched her fists again. I finally fell asleep when I saw her start to cry and bite her knuckles.

When the sun came up, Mom hissed in our ears that it was time to go. She hadn't slept. A taxi driver was loading all our things in his taxi. I looked for Dad in the taxi, on the sidewalk, in the park across the street. Nowhere. Mom seemed oblivious to this, and when John said, "What about Dad?" she clicked her purse shut and just said, "Who?"

We got to the train station, and John, in his bad sophomore-year-of-high-school Spanish, managed to get us first-class tickets to Tijuana. Still no Dad. We got on the train. I was full of fever and sickness. I looked out the window just as the train started to chug, and there, on a bench at the station, was my dad, passed out, curled up, and shoeless. Mom looked, too, then tightened her eyes as she stared straight ahead. "He lied," she said. And that was that. I never saw my father again.[14]

[13]There is little chance of the author remembering the name of the hotel as she was quite sick at the time.
[14]Finding the father on a bench outside was a part of the story, but, according to later interviews, the author confided he was in the park across from the hotel. The author's mother got the taxi driver to haul him into the cab, then paid a porter to get him on the train. It would be two more years before they divorced, four until he died, in a bar in Ensenada.

NOTE: Several items in the footnotes have been found to be erroneous.

Pica

Simone

My mother had babies because she was lonely. Two of them. Two healthy pink babies. Both girls. Not that they wouldn't have been pink if they were boys. Because my mother was pink. So her babies would be pink, too. Even boys.

But her pink babies—two years apart—were girls (Giselle and Sophie). She herself had been raised in a family of nine children, not counting the twins who died. Twin girls. There was Lilian, Paulette, my mother #3, then Patrick, then Robert and Gilbert, Bernadette, Isabelle, and William. By the time Simone had two pink babies, she had plenty of experience with her four baby brothers and her two baby sisters (the other two sisters were older).

She married my dad, an American GI, and left France before William was even born. Alone in an apartment on an Air Force Base in New Mexico all day long with no brothers or sisters, her husband at work, and a foreign language coming through the TV set, Simone decided she wanted a baby.

But this desire came a little too early because of the War (or the Conflict as it's called). There was a conflict in Vietnam and the government had been drafting young men into military services for a couple of years before Simone married Donald. In March 1968, they continued drafting more and more young men to fight in Vietnam. Donald had joined the Air Force voluntarily, but only to avoid the Army draft. The government sent the newly-drafted men, along with my dad, to fight in Vietnam.

How could Simone, then, stay in this country that was not hers while her husband went to fight in another country that was not his or hers but more hers than the United States was hers, because she was French. So when Donald went to Vietnam to fight, Simone went back to France, married, but living singly, for who knew what would happen to her husband. She loved her husband. She wanted to have his babies.

My dad survived Vietnam, which was quite an accomplishment, since soldiers of his rank were killed off by the hundreds or maybe even thousands. However many died, it was a lot and the subject of a huge crisis with protests and marches in this country where neither of my parents lived at the time and where Sophie was not born.

When Donald came back from Vietnam in the spring of 1970, he and Simone moved back to the United States, this time to New Jersey. They lived there a year and in April 1971, Simone gave birth to her first daughter and named her Giselle. Giselle and Simone stayed all day long in the apartment in New Jersey while Donald worked at his job, which was something to do with the Air Force. Exactly what he did was either not known or not understood,

perhaps because of the language barrier or because it was some top secret military operation. Or maybe because Donald was so tired when he got home at the end of the day that he did not feel like talking about it. Whether her husband felt like talking to her or not did not bother Simone because she had this lovely pink baby to coo to all day, and Giselle and Simone did coo to each other. By this time Simone had figured out a lot about the English language from watching TV and reading books and talking to neighbors and she even knew that the k in know is silent.

Then one day when Giselle was still a baby, Donald came home and told Simone that they were leaving the apartment in New Jersey and moving back to Europe, but this time to Germany because DeGaulle closed the Air Force Bases in France after the war. Bitburg Air Force Base in Germany was only 90 miles from Simone's family in France and Donald could drive there very quickly on the autobahn because there are no speed limits. It made Simone happy that she could see her brothers and sisters almost any time she wanted to, or at least when Donald felt like driving them there.

When Giselle turned two Simone was five months pregnant with a baby to be named Sophie if she was a girl. She would be, which Giselle already knew. When Donald took Simone to the hospital, Giselle told Jeannie, "We have to buy a new dress for my baby sister," so Jeannie took Giselle to the store and they bought a new pink dress for the new pink baby. Donald and Simone asked Jeannie to be Sophie's Godmother. Giselle's Godmother was Simone's sister Bernadette, whom Giselle did not know as a baby in New Jersey but did know now that they only lived 90 miles away. Giselle called Bernadette Dadette, and so did Donald, so Simone did too and then so did Sophie.

One day when he was at work, Donald called Simone and told her to pack up the babies and their things because they were all going to see Dadette and the rest of Simone's family in France. So that's what Simone did. She got everything ready for the trip, and when Donald came home, he said, "Do you really want to go see your family in France? Would that really make you happy?" And when Simone said yes, he laughed at her and told her they weren't going. Simone unpacked the babies and she cried. The babies cried too because they had never seen their mother cry and since she always took care of them when they cried, they didn't know who would take care of her. And if she needed taking care of, who would take care of them? Donald heard the babies cry and said, "OK, OK. We can go." And Simone was happy but scared that he would take it back as soon as she packed up the babies again.

If only Simone could learn to drive like she learned English, then she could get her own driver's license and she could drive herself and Giselle and Sophie to France on the autobahn, but then she would probably need her own car because now she could hear Donald say, "Oh no! You're not driving my car!" She started to think about how she would learn to drive and what she needed to

get her own driver's license, but stopped when she came to how she would get her own car because that was too frustrating and seemed impossible. So Simone just rode silently in the passenger's seat as Donald drove to France with Giselle and Sophie cooing at each other in the back.

Sophie

When Sophie, the youngest, grew up and wanted to have pink babies of her own, she and her husband, also named Donald, like her father, became aware of their Rh incompatibility because Sophie had Rh- blood and Donald had Rh+. Sophie knew what this meant because, being a creative person, she had been in a play called *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* where she played Bette's mother. In the play, Bette has Rh- blood. She has her first baby, Skippy, who narrates the play, but Bette finds out later that her Rh- blood and Boo's Rh+ blood makes an Rh+ baby, like Skippy. Skippy is fine, but having Skippy's foreign bodies in her system creates antibodies. Whenever Bette gets pregnant again with Rh+ babies, which is always considering Boo's blood type, the antibodies created by Bette's Rh- system kill the Rh+ baby body. After Skippy, Bette only gave birth to dead babies.

This matter could have been avoided, as Sophie later found out, with a shot of RhoGam after the birth of Skippy.

As a naturally creative pink baby, Sophie grew up and became an actress. She acted in the play *The Marriage of Bette and Boo.* She fell in love with another creative person (this was before Donald) named David who took her to parties where she met other creative people and did drugs with them. She drank and did coke and smoked pot and smoked cigarettes (which were very bad for her voice and Sophie was surprised that all these actors smoked cigarettes).

Then Sophie got pregnant. Not for the same reasons that her mother did, because she was lonely, because Sophie was not lonely. She had David and creative people at parties and the cast of the play. The pregnancy tests came out negative because she had done too much coke and the tests could not detect the hCG hormone in her system. Sometimes coke causes spontaneous abortion, but in Sophie's case, she had to have the procedure done. That is when the nurses told her that she was Rh-, like Bette, which she didn't remember, because her mind was fuzzy from the anesthetic. And, since David had to be somewhere else that day and couldn't stay with her, there was no one to remember for her. Her time at the clinic blurred the lines of the bus ride home that blurred the lines of getting in bed and under the covers and falling into fuzzy anesthetic sleep.

Sophie only learned about the RhoGam shot when she wanted to have babies with her husband Donald who was Rh+.

Translating Pangs

Surra Speaking

"Frank, get off the floor and start acting your age. Is it possible for you to try and be serious for one second? It's time for lunch and you need to remember that today is your fourtieth birthday. Forty years old, Frank, and there you are crawling on the kitchen floor trying to get my attention. I'm not your mother, you know. Stop it and eat your ham sandwich. I put chopped green olives in it especially for you.

Get off the floor, Frank.

I've got to close up the windows. Don't you think today is unusually cold? It might snow tonight and that means that we might have to put off our fishing trip tomorrow afternoon. Los Piños must be frozen up for sure. I doubt there will be a thin enough section of ice on the banks to cut through. Remember last winter when we went fishing there? The whole damn river was an ice sheet. Are you listening to me? You almost fell in that day trying to pull in that tiny little trout. Remember? You acted like you were pulling in Moby Dick, straining on my father's old fishing rod. You yanked so hard I thought Melville himself might have been hanging off the hook.

Get off the floor, Frank.

Is this some sort of ploy to get me into bed in the middle of the day? It would be nice though, wouldn't it? We could crawl between the cool sheets and iron our legs back and forth until they warmed up. We could wrap our chilly arms and legs around each other and shiver and laugh until we forget that the winter sun is shining and that it's the middle of the day and there might be more important things we could be doing.

Get off the floor, Frank."

Catherine Says

There was no use in reasoning my daughter into understanding that her husband's heart attack wasn't her fault. I told Surra that if anyone was to blame, it would have to be Frank himself. Frank doesn't complain much. Even when he lost the tip of his right index finger to a brand new electric hacksaw, he didn't wince. He wrapped up the cut off tip in a Brawny paper towel and drove himself to the hospital. The doctors couldn't sew the dead white tip of his finger back on. Frank didn't complain because he knew the limitations of Durango Hospital and he didn't feel the need to drive two hundred and fourteen miles up to Denver General. That's the kind of man Frank is.

Surra blames herself for everything. When her father died of liver cancer when she was fifteen years old, Surra took it on herself. In the moments before he died, which was an ugly thing, Surra checked out every book on healing she could find in the Maples Street Library. She consulted Eastern healing books,

Western herb remedies, Indian dances and incantations for the dying. Everything. Surra watched everything her father ate and fed him bowls of sticky brown oatmeal. She made sure everything he ate was accompanied by a wild assortment of herbs she picked from the fields just beyond our house. Nothing worked, and still there is no convincing her that there wasn't something she could have done to save him.

When Surra met Frank she forgot everything. She forgot the long suffering of her father, the ugly blue house we lived in forever, and her little sister's slow drive into eccentricity. Frank didn't have much to offer. He had a small yellow house with two tiny bedrooms, two acres of weeds and birch trees, two hands he used to make a living hammering and patching and fixing things. Frank took Surra out of our dying house and fed her to his living self.

Last year the three of us went fishing down on the edge of Los Pinos. It was the dead of winter, December I think. Pinos is a thin river, about sixteen feet wide, but it gets very deep very fast. Surra had Frank bundled up like a swollen beehive. He had on a fat orange jacket, fat brown gloves, fat black pants, and fat brown boots. I was surprised to see him manage to cut a hole in the ice near the rivers bank and set up his rod and reel. Surra and I tried to stay warm in the car and we ran to the river to check on Frank's progress every ten minutes or so.

The fishing was pretty bad, but around two o'clock, just as my feet were cold beyond the possibility of ever being warmed up again, Frank got a hit on his line. He whooped it up and danced and pulled on his pole. Surra ran to his side. The two of them wrestled with the pole and laughed so loud the crows in the tops of the bare cottonwood trees flew off like a large black quilt in the sky. They got to laughing harder and I knew they were going to fall into the river.

I rolled down the car window and told them to bring the fish in so we could get back home. That's when Surra stepped off the snowy edge of the riverbank and onto the ice. I heard Frank tell her to get off the ice. Surra scooted out a few inches further.

I could hear the crack of the ice like a distant rumble at first. It rolled like thunder from a far off place. Frank must have heard it too because he stepped out onto the ice to grab a hold of Surra, but ended up sliding past her. Frank's weight set off the final snap of ice that sounded like a thirty foot high tree falling from the final of an ax. Surra made it off the ice fast and Frank was a blur of orange and brown and black and for an instant I thought I saw them crash through the ice.

I took my eyes off them long enough to start a run to the river. I was completely prepared to jump in when I heard the sound of their laughter. The two of them managed to land in the snow and tangled up in each other like a pair of old shoelaces left in a drawer too long. Right next to them was their catch. It was a small silver trout flashing on the white snow in the remaining

shadow of the yellow sun. The cracking of the river sounded downhill until I could hear it no more.

But the heart attack wasn't her fault. It wasn't her fault that she thought Frank was kidding around in those final and critical moments. Who would think that a man of Frank's age would drop on the kitchen floor? And it was just like that. Frank dropped on the kitchen floor clutching his chest.

Surra could not have known, just as she could not imagine that they might have fallen into Los Piños last winter, their bodies one frozen mass rolling to wider grounds.

Verse as Verbatim by Shana

"God will remove all sorrow. There will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain from the old world and its evils will be gone forever."

(Surra says	there is nothing beautiful	about
the Bible.	She says it's	a bunch of black
words	on	white paper.)

Heaven is a wall made of jasper and the city is pure gold and as clear as glass. We will see father there. Our father in a city of gold. Heaven is laid on twelve layers of stones, jasper, sapphire, agate, emerald, onyx, carnelian, chrystolite, beryl, topaz, chrysoprase, jacinth, and amethyst.

(There is	color	in heaven.
Surra	would know if she	read
The Bible,	tried to read	The Bible.)

My Husband, Frank

My husband Frank believes in hell. He is certain that for every wrong he does, he will pay for most of it on earth, and for everything that remains unpaid for is dished out after death. Frank doesn't pray to God directly. He won't ask for a thing. Frank believes that prayers are a human construction of greed designed by the people who want new cars, new houses, and larger swimming pools.

Frank was antsy about our marriage because he knew my mother and I

wanted a church wedding There's a small church in the center of Durango called the All Christian. It's a pretty green church with a high steeple topped off with a silver cross. The stained glass windows depict Jesus in the Book of Acts, performing his many miracles. My favorite window is the window showing a multi-colored Jesus in great detail holding a blue fish spawning thousands of yellow fish. Everybody in Durango gets married there. My mother and father were married there back when Durango boasted a population of five hundred and eighty.

In the end, Frank's unusual fear of begging too much from God won out. We drove down to Durango City Hall in his yellow Ford pickup truck where we vowed in front of a kind old judge with a black mole on his nose.

I heard the words, *to have and to hold, for better, for richer, in health, to love and cherish*, and I pledge my love. I was twenty. Frank was twenty-four. Mother had planned a quiet family dinner to celebrate that evening, and between sweet bites of pie and hot sips of black coffee we joked about how I'd be forty years old when we celebrated our twentieth anniversary.

It was a joke then, something to make us laugh as we looked into the future that was too far away for anyone to pass a prediction on. The four of us raised chipped brown coffee cups into the air and cheered for twenty years. I didn't know that a joke, like prayer, could be answered.

Maxine by Her Grandmother Catherine

There was the usual baby fuss when Maxine was born. Nurses ran about and chattered happily. Nothing cheers up the staff at Durango Hospital like an easy birth. Maxine was citizen number two-thousand and forty-seven.

Frank paced up and down the green corridors, dashed in and out of the labor room like a squirrel in a mad hunt. Surra didn't mess around. She labored for four hours and delivered in ten minutes. It was a good way for Surra to celebrate her twenty-first year.

A few hours after Maxine was born, the doctors informed us that her left leg appeared to be about half an inch shorter than her right leg. It was a strange moment. The silence that followed the news felt brief and long at the same time.

Frank patted Surra on her shoulder and stuttered out something about *at least the baby is healthy*. In the days that followed, as everyone quietly dressed and fed baby Maxine, Frank spent every spare moment he had in his work shed. His buzzing and banging and sanding amounted to a beautiful array of tiny pine wood baby shoe soles, all left footed, about half an inch high.

Surra smiled when Frank presented her with his final products. Frank said something about getting what you get and making the best out of what you get. Maxine never walked an uneven step in her life. It seemed there was nothing Frank couldn't set straight.

One evening a few months after Maxine's birth Frank and I found ourselves wandering the perimeter of his property. Everything seemed extra alive and new. Los Piños roared after an unusually heavy spring thaw and we could hear the distant whisper of the water making way to wider territory.

"Isn't that magnificent?" Frank asked as he pointed to a high mass of silvery-green cottonwood trees.

That's when the reality of Frank came to me. Frank, the lonely baby born to wandering parents who left him with an aunt who surrendered him to an uncle, until at age sixteen, Frank walked out on his own and thumbed his way into Durango. Frank who banged on the few doors in town volunteering to fix a sink, mow a lawn, mend a fence. Frank grew up to be a man who could appreciate cottonwood trees while his wife and daughter napped safely inside a yellow house with no back door.

When Frank had his heart attack and the doctors and nurses ran around with gray faces, I told Maxine a story about her father and how I was sure he was born from the spirit of trees watered by the branches of rivers. It was a story I partly made up and a story that was entirely true. It was easier than the story I had to tell Shana and Surra. The story about how their father died not because of bad fortune, but because he drank too much. I liked telling Frank's story because I could tell it without feeling bitter.

Maxine listened while I told her the story of her birth and the way her father made the soles of her shoes. When I finished she turned to look out a cold fogged window.

"I think it might snow," she said. "Isn't that magnificent?"

Shana, as Told by Shana

I/am/not/odd honest/perhaps (that's what everyone says/odd).

I sit quietly in corners - talk with God.
Who prayed the most when Frank had
a heart attack? It was me.

Who prayed the most when Maxine
Came? It was me.

Who asked God to bless Surra and Frank
With seventy-five years of love? It was me.

I asked God and he answered me. God always listens to me. He listened

to me when I asked him to do something about father. He took father to the City/of/Gold.

And then life became quiet and I could hear the beating of the wings of birds and angels. Mother fell in love with herself and she learned to sing again. Surra fell in love with Frank and from that love they made Maxine. God has been everywhere Durango. I love them all even though they whisper when they think I am not listening.

God already promised me, he told me himself.

When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child does. But when I grew up, I put away childish things. Now I see things imperfectly as in a poor mirror, but later I will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but later I will know everything completely, just as God knows me now. There are three things which will endure — faith, hope, and love — and the greatest of these is love.

To Shana, From Surra

Shana says that I have always ignored God because I am hiding from reality. Shana says it all from the words she reads from her brown Bible.

I have lived in the real world long enough to know that nothing changes. I take pleasure in the watching of nothing really changing.

Shana brings me church literature from time to time. It isn't literature from the All Christian Church. I think it comes from some Christian mailing organization in Texas or Mississippi. They are little pamphlets done up on regular white stock paper. Sometimes the paper is a pastel color.

The literature is all about waking up to the Lord and reading his word, studying his word. At first glance they are encouraging words.

I think about Shana and consider studying with her from time to time. Though she speaks from the Bible only, I can sometimes make out a message, a normal sentence. But when I pick up the Bible and feel the heft of it, I think about how long it would take me to carefully read over every word. It makes me shudder.

The Bible is filled with pages and pages of things I can never make out. There are names I can't pronounce and cities that no longer exist on maps. There is no Frank, no Catherine, no Shana, no Maxine, and no me in the Bible. There is no Durango City either. No Los Piños that freezes up in winter. No mention of snow and the days on which it might fall.

A View of Maxine as Told by Her Mother

My daughter Maxine believes in the powers of the heavens. Her heaven is filled with stars and bodies of light and multicolored dust spinning and

spinning like wheels of fire. In Maxine's world everything makes perfect sense. Everything is ordered according to the logic of invisible particles and vast galaxies. My daughter doesn't believe in suffering and she is not afraid to say it out loud. "It isn't natural to suffer," she says to me all the time.

When Maxine was in the sixth grade she brought home a video from the library. It was a visual account of a whale that had beached itself on the California coastline. I watched as hundreds of volunteers poured buckets of water over the large gray whale. It was a beached she whale. People were scattered about and running in the sand. Their feet looked heavy as they sunk in the sand. When the buckets of water didn't seem to be doing the trick people began to fling their rainbow colored wet towels over the whale.

Maxine remarked how unfortunate it was for the whale to pick such a crowded beach. "Nature," she said, "should take its own course."

I tried to tell Maxine that all living things have obligations to each other. I tried to tell her that living things live even when the living is bad.

I must have said the word *living* too many times because Maxine threw a slanted look at me, rewound the tape, and started it up one more time. I watched her as she lay on the floor on her stomach, her head propped up in her hands, her feet pumping invisible pedals in the air, rubber sole up, wooden sole down.

In the End

Frank wound up flat on his back on a thin mattress over a metal table with a thick plastic tube running from his chest into a glass bottle on the hospital floor. Drippings from his body all yellow, pink, and brown collected in his after-surgery jar.

The doctor told me to talk him out of the anesthesia. I began by telling him everything I could remember about what had been said as we, this family, crossed our fingers and our beliefs over a cloud that threatened to storm for the rest of our lives.

As I tried to piece together everything in words I looked out the small recovery room window.

"I told you it was going to snow," I began.

It was a good snowfall, the flakes fell thick and heavy. They fell slowly going from left to rest, back left again, hitting the ground in a deep winter waltz. It was so cold outside that I could hear sounds from miles beyond carry over and bounce off the window. The distant buzz of the Los Piños flowed and I hoped Frank could hear it.

I thought about how the snow would melt in the morning sun and no one would know exactly what had passed in the night.

Carol Alexander

Marci Baker

Elizabeth Bennett

Joe Byrne

Samvel Davtyan

Roxanne Duboucheron

David Guerra

Sarah Heston

Anna Incs

Jackie Kogan

Mandy Dawn Kuntz

Noreen Lace

Susannah Lebaron

Grant Marcus

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Laurie Mezzaferro

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Luis O. Salizos

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Sylvie Green Shapero

Ara Shirinyan

Josepf Sikelianos

Michael Stephans

Virgil Suarez

Giselle Szeredi

Santi Tafarella

Maria Tummeyer

Debra Zednik