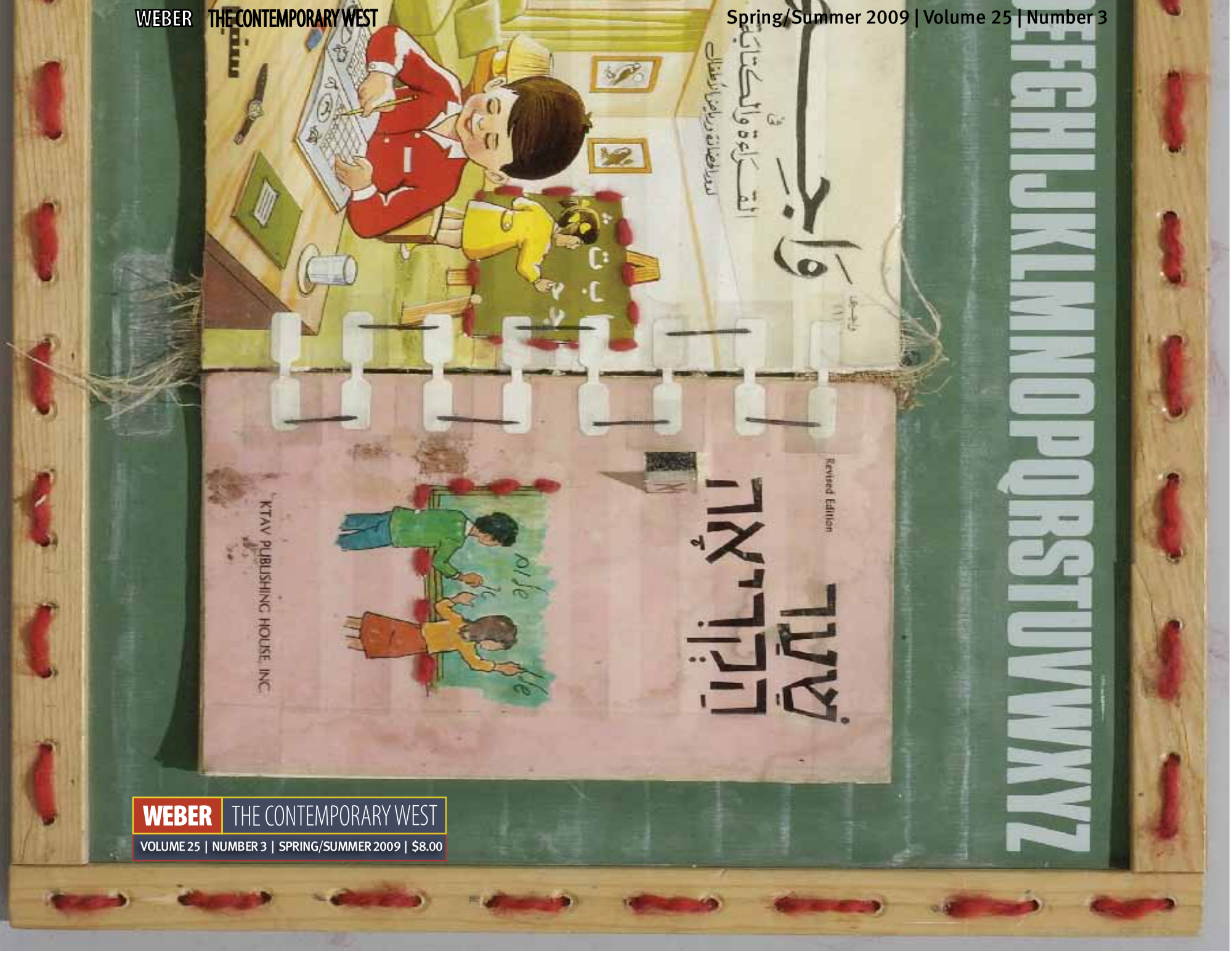

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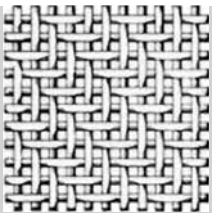

Deriving from the German *weben*—to weave—*weber* translates into the literal and figurative "weaver" of textiles and texts. *Weber* (the word is the same in singular and plural) are the artisans of textures and discourse, the artists of the beautiful fabricating the warp and weft of language into ever-changing pattterns. *Weber*, the journal, understands itself as a tapestry of verbal and visual texts, a weave made from the threads of words and images.

Reflections and aphorisms to give us pause

Heredity is nothing but stored environment.
—*Luther Burbank (1849-1926)*

A land ethic, then, reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. Health is the capacity of the land for self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity.
—*Aldo Leopold (1887-1948)*

One means of sanity is to retain a hold on the natural world . . . . Americans still have that chance, more than many peoples.
—*Wallace Stegner (1909-1993)*

High technology has done us one great service: It has retaught us the delight of performing simple and primordial tasks—chopping wood, building a fire, drawing water from a spring.
—*Edward Abbey (1927-1989)*

Front Cover: Sharon Siskin; ***Children of Abraham: Learn***; 2006; Arabic and Hebrew children's educational texts, blackboard, cotton thread, yarn, bandages, mirror, wood; 17" x 17" x 2"

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A Conversation with Eleanor Wilner

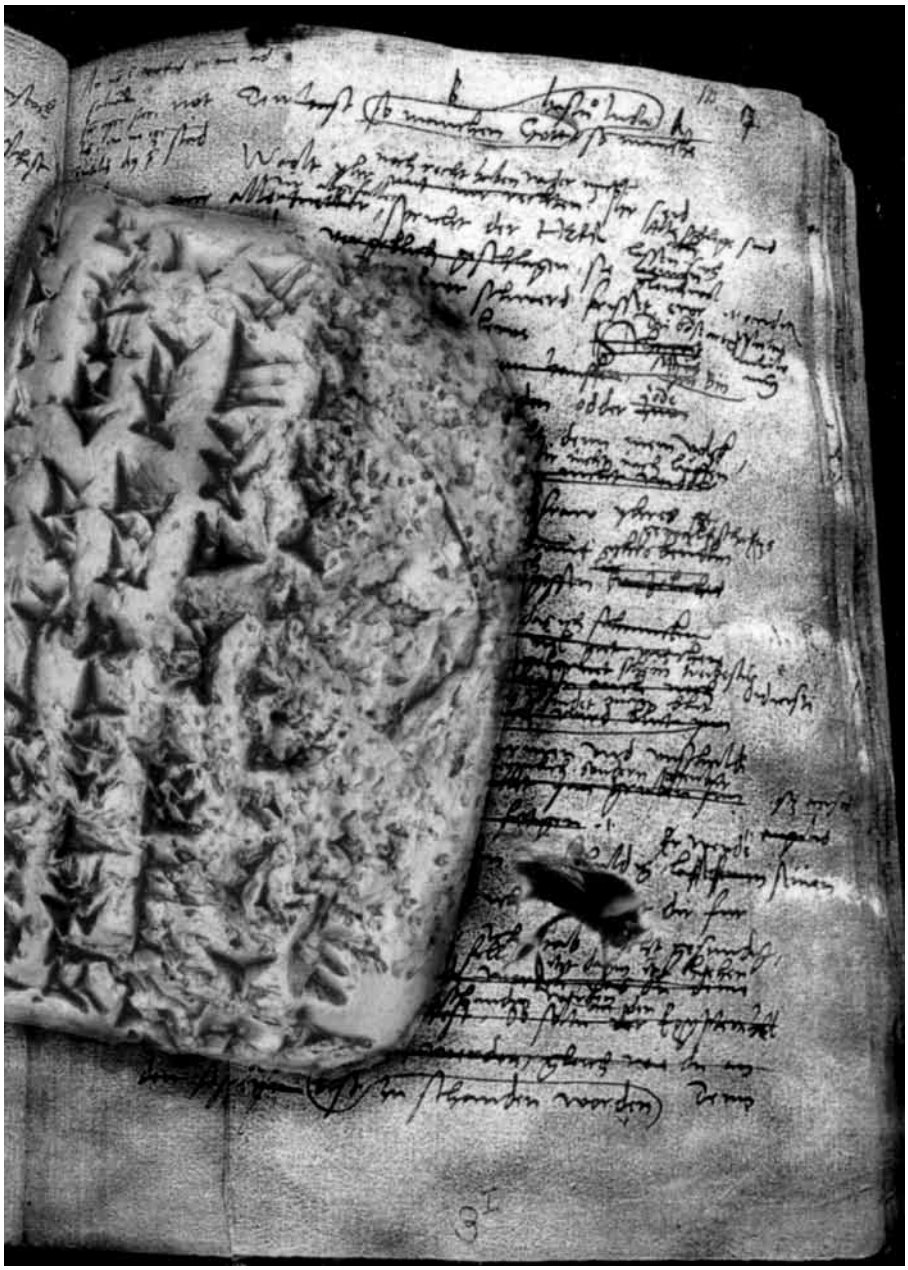

Photo collage by Catherine Jansen

Occasionally you get the opportunity to meet a truly exceptional personality. Being close to poetry increases the likelihood of such a meeting, and Eleanor Wilner is such a personality. I am not sure that I have ever visited with a poet or individual of such intense yet quiet intellect – she draws from a deep well. Perhaps even more unique is how what she knows is so comfortingly tempered by a sensitivity to the world and those who inhabit it – animal and mineral. She possesses a genuine love for some and a surprising tolerance for some others, which only comes from an indiscriminate (but much considered) interest in most of everything. It is the intense interest in what you are doing rather than a focus on what she is doing that is so unique and so engaging – to talk with Eleanor Wilner is to talk about yourself as well.

An early civil rights and anti-war activist, she continues a commitment to act upon an unwaivering respect and love for all forms of life. Simultaneously she rejects the violence and ignorance that smothers our "better nature" and threatens our survival. She is a true champion of peace and justice. Curiously, she is not an ideologue – something I have seldom (perhaps never) seen in a person so often reputed as "activist" or "political." Perhaps this, although rare, is not so surprising. To read and re-read Wilner's work is to participate in the great joy of discovery through the happy exercise of the intellect – free of the dark cave of neurosis, personal or otherwise. She is one of poetry's great gifts and treasures.

Much has been said in praise of Wilner's poetry – all of the praise is accurate. She has published six collections of poems: Maya *(1979),* Shekhinah *(1984),* Sarah's Choice *(1989),* Otherwise *(1993),* Reversing the Spell: New and Selected Poems *(1998), and* The Girl with Bees in Her Hair *(2004). Other publications include a verse translation of Euripides'* Medea *(998) and a book on visionary imagination,* Gathering the Winds *(1975). A frequent contributor to literary journals and magazines, her work has appeared in over thirty anthologies, including* Best American Poetry 1990 *and* The Norton Anthology of Poetry *(Fourth Edition).*

Wilner is a much sought after lecturer and reader. She is a "teacher" in every sense of the word. She has taught and guest lectured at numerous colleges and universities, including Smith College, University of Chicago, Northwestern, University of Iowa, University of Hawaii, and University of Utah. Former editor to The American Poetry Review, *she is currently on the faculty of the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. She has won a MacArthur Fellowship, the Juniper Prize, and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.*

I first met Eleanor while she was a visiting poet at Weber State University's National Undergraduate Literature Conference in early April of 2008. On a pleasantly long and brilliantly clear afternoon, Eleanor and I began this interview at my kitchen table, periodically gazing out the French doors upon the late greening of a typical spring in the Wasatch Range of northern Utah. It was a wonderful day.

> *To read and re-read Wilner's work is to participate in the great joy of discovery through the happy exercise of the intellect – free of the dark cave of neurosis, personal or otherwise. She is one of poetry's great gifts and treasures.*

The first thing that I noticed in your latest book The Girl with Bees in Her Hair *is that you added the middle name "Rand" to your author page. In this book you are Eleanor* Rand *Wilner. Why the change?*

Yes. I have a ninety-eight year old father who is ruing the fact that he had no sons and that his name could vanish from the earth. So, I put the patronym on this book, which I hadn't done before.

So, it is an acknowledgement of respect for your father?

It is, indeed. Yes!

You mentioned that you came to writing poetry later in your life.

Yes, I was forty-two when I published the first book.

And before that what were you doing?

Oh, I don't know—the usual kinds of things, I suppose. I was certainly busy enough. I had some other kinds of jobs, and then I started teaching seriously. I had a child—I had a life. I was very active in the Civil Rights movement and anti-war projects. Then, somewhere along the line, I read all seven volumes of Proust. When I closed the seventh volume, I started writing poetry. Writing wasn't something I had planned to do.

Were you in school at the time?

I think when I read Proust I was getting a Masters. The PhD was interdepartmental. I put together the things I was interested in: literature and anthropology—and I dumped in some psychology. So, nobody knew what I was doing—it was an unique and happy experience (laughs) **getting a PhD. And then it was, you know, it was useful in terms of teaching from then on, too, just to have that on your record, but that wasn't why I did it. It was—I just had the opportunity to follow my own nose and, well, write about what I was interested in.**

Part of the way in which you create new myths is by re-revitalizing and changing, often radically, the stories that we are handed down in the books, the mythologies of our culture. You know, in some ways you have to go out by the door you came in.

Do you do the same thing when you write poetry – follow your own nose?

Exactly. I find it to be the best way to proceed.

When you started writing poetry, did you recognize right away that this was something that you wanted to do – that you might be able to do – and that other people would respond to it?

No, I didn't think about other people—at all. I think it was a way of understanding what was going on. And, I think one of the things that drove me back to study anthropology and literature together was to look for the collective visions, which you see more directly when you're looking at pre-industrial and the more isolated communities. It seemed to me that the poems were coming out of a kind of cultural memory. And there wasn't very much in our very individualistic way of looking at things, in English and American literature, that really accounted for what was going on. You know, rather than think that I was crazy, I wanted to see, in fact, what *was* the validation for this kind of vision—where it was coming from.

You have mentioned "community" several times. Is this "community" one of both

writers and readers, or one of culture and subject and tradition – or is it even wider than this? Who or what is your "community"?

Well, you can't ask that question too particularly or it might... shut you down (laughs). This is especially true in this country, given the recent damage to community which is so prevalent in the sort of "me first" culture, which is, as you know, kind of corporately ordained. I guess I think of community in terms of a kind of cultural memory, a kind of what I would call "the Dreamtime of the West." I use that term not quite the same as what is meant when you talk about the Aboriginal Dreamtime in Australia—but I think it's much more like that than we think. We have made it as if it is elitist or academic or something, but I think it's much more the stuff of the deep soul—the "dreamtime" of the culture. And it includes the two kinds of fountainheads: the one that comes from the biblical tradition of the Middle East and the other that comes down through the Classical tradition. I am talking, especially, about the stories. I'm not talking so much about the Platonic tradition and the guys who hung together in the beginnings of the Academy, but the folktales of the people which became the Classical myths, which eventually got written down and have figured into all of our writing ever since.

From the very beginning, your work obviously relied upon – well, perhaps not relied upon, but certainly used or incorporated – these stories, this collective mythology – and to great effect.

Yes.

I suppose one of the things this says to me is that you still see validity in an older mythology. And yet, do we need to create new myths?

Well, we do. Part of the way in which you create new myths is by re-revitalizing and changing, often radically, the stories that we are handed down in the books, the mythologies of our culture. You know, in some ways you have to go out by the door you came in. I think there is a kind of autonomous mythology that is always rising out of the moment, but it is, at the same time, informed by the older stories and their changes. Using this is not peculiar to me in any way. This kind of simultaneous activity takes place in the imagination, across the board, and you keep finding it in places that you didn't know about in the beginning of a piece you are creating. So, sometimes I enter these older stories, these myths. It is always kind of encouraging to sense that something is going on in those older stories, something of which we are still a part of today. It's a kind of repossession of a history that changes it radically by entering it from the point of view of those who suffered that history, of those who were the silent voices or the bit players in the stories. I find that I am often writing from the point of view of these silent and seemingly unimportant characters inhabiting these stories. Often these figures are the ones who can hold contemporary interest, like the disobedient servant in the Oedipus Rex story—the servant who refuses to follow orders, who is moved by pity and refuses to murder the infant, Oedipus, but takes him to a shepherd who raises the child. These are,

So, sometimes I enter these older stories, these myths. It is always kind of encouraging to sense that something is going on in those older stories, something of which we are still a part of today.

to me at least, of great contemporary significance, obviously. You know? You see today how "orders" can be blindly "followed," and you see what the results can be. In any case, for me the interesting figure in the Oedipus story is the man who is moved by mercy as opposed to power, or the fear of power.

And I think you mentioned earlier today that you find it useful in some of your work, at times, to speak from, or perhaps through, other bodies or objects – statues, an animal, even insects. I love the way you use insects in several of your poems – they're primal.

They're primal and they're small.

And that's what's going to be around! When we're gone, the insects will still be here. They're survivors.

The "insect chorus in the grass"—I think Faulkner talks about the insect chorus a lot. It's the ground bass of life. And there are many fairy tales and myths, too, where the small creatures become very important. It's the first place that life begins to move and help the human figure find its way out of trouble.

Yes, and, I suppose, many poets, Mary Oliver for example, and many people would agree that we find our "different soul" through interacting with the natural world.

Yes. It's what we're part of. And that's one of the reasons for repossessing or revitalizing those old stories, too, because they made us, especially the biblical ones, too much *apart* from nature, rather than *a part* of it. And all you have to do is check out the DNA and see that we're...

We're close! (Laughs)

We're *real* close! Yes.

You also have a reputation, I think quite deservedly, as not being a – well, overly "confessional" poet.

> *The personality that is moving in the world is often different from the voice in the poem. If you know some poets, you know this is true.*

That is true. The personality that is moving in the world is often different from the voice in the poem. If you know some poets, you know this is true.

We have talked about your use of myth, which is very much a narrative. But one of the many things I find fascinating about your poems is what seems to be a very different thread of narrative in them. They seem to be a different kind of narrative – they are narrative poems with a whole lot of lyricism in them – but again, they're essentially stories that you're building around other stories, or people, or objects, or other things that you're seeing in the world. They are not that personal kind of confessional poem with the big capital "I" pronoun.

No, usually they are not.

And when you're speaking through other beings, or when you're imagining or reimagining from other points of view, is it just a different reference or is it really just another way to avoid that self, *or at least alter the* self *so that it's not quite as confessional?*

Well, ***altering*** the self could be seen as synonymous with ***enlarging*** the self and that

involves a kind of self-forgetfulness that makes the word "self" become…become, itself (laughs), well, a paradoxical word.

But my sense of not writing a confession is not so much that I'm trying to *avoid* personal experience but because I believe there is something deeper, more primal, below the private life—and I want to say something else about privacy, too, because I think it's been violated very heavily in our particular time, in the media, and in, well, just about everywhere now. Anyway, the further you go into what you might call the *self*, although you have to forget the self to get there, the more you find everybody—everyone. It is here that you find all sorts of connections to the world—human and nonhuman.


W. T. Lucas

So, my sense is not that I'm trying to hide anything, but that there is something to protect, and that the language of imagery, of the imagination, is by its nature, a protective one, and that, in a sense, the things—the voices and the beings through which you write—are vehicles through which you can reveal what needs to be seen without exposure—the loss of an essential privacy. So, it's a protective revelation, which involves a kind of disguise.

A type of persona, but not in the usual, real sense of persona.

Right. It's a bit difficult to explain, but essentially it is to say—and maybe this takes us back to privacy—that there's nothing to hide, but there is something to protect. The things that are deep within people are not things for which we have a language. Our usual language, if we do use it, often misrepresents or even violates them—it isn't always adequate to the purpose. And so the imagination, in the forms and the beings that appear in the imagination, it seems to me, are much more adequate to express what is deeply interior, innermost, in all of us. And the facts of our private life, which are the matter of confession, it seems to me, in the first place, are of no particular interest to a particular poem. When I talk too much about myself, I find myself being extremely bored, and I realize that I ran out of interest in the subject quite sometime ago. So, what is public, it seems to me, is the poetry. And, you know, the private life should be private. I think we've overdone it. In a sense, we've publicized privacy and we've privatized meaning. And that is a very poor exchange.

The idea of privatizing meaning is very interesting. I think I have a strong feeling for that. I see it demonstrated – certainly through my students – all the time. When students read contemporary poetry, sometimes there is this veiled – or not so veiled – idea of, "I don't know what this 'guy' is talking about." The symbols, the metaphors, the images are so particular and personal, perhaps only to the author, that they just don't connect.

Right. So many people seem to be living in their personal universe with their i-phone and

their i-pod. They are plugged into themselves and out of everyone else, and the publicizing of privacy seems to go with that. So many getting on television and talking about so much of so little interest—or so little *importance* might be more accurate.

Why would we be so interested?

Why, indeed!

And there is so much of which we could be more interested. And I know you've talked a great deal about what some might call "political poetry," so I'm going to avoid some of that conversation. But you had said something recently – yesterday, if I can remember. I believe this is close to what you said: "We have to recognize the forces of violence, ignorance, etc. surrounding us – and the fascination we have with it." It seems to me this could be near to a definition of myth, of mythology – the fascination we have with these forces and how we narrate that fascination. I wonder if you could talk about this a little bit – how important it is that we do recognize the forces of violence and ignorance that surround us.

Oh, absolutely. It is myth—the stories—that can help us make this facination visible in some ways. The *disguise* may help us see what it is we need to see. You know, the "distant mirror"—that image that Barbara Tuchman uses when she writes about the fourteenth century, and she's really talking about, in many ways...

March to Folly*?*

That's it—and it is the *folly* of it. Oh, yes, she clearly sees the folly of it, and she helps us see it too. Okay, so, what I'm going to suggest here is that the view through a distant mirror—again, moving it a little bit away from just describing the facts of the moment—gives you a way of looking at things that are quite terrible—things that people are drawn to but don't want to face in themselves. The spectacle is of others doing evil and others being violent and so forth—we know how that works. So, recovering that and facing it is part of the work, I think, of the imagination. I think if you can't recover or face these things, then you continue to do what you're doing without being aware of what's driving you. Since you're projecting it out there on "the other," it both gives you an excuse to do violence as well as inhibits your ability to control and creatively transform those energies in a way that will be constructive and life-serving in the world, rather than bringing fear. Fear is one of the things you have to face because fear is what drives many to perpetrate acts of violence and sorrow on others. So, there is violence and fear and ignorance—the whole gamut of what is ugly in human experience. We have to accept that. But if you deny it, then, of course, you can't get at it. So, it's the context in which you use it. And, of course, you're drawing people in by all of it, but then you're hoping that there's a transformative action that takes place in which you come out the other side not needing to be as violent. I mean—I think there are very few real poets who are mass murderers.

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Agreed, but just a quick follow up. You also mentioned that the central act of the poet is to restore our humanity.

Absolutely, I think that's what is driving the whole enterprise here.

But certainly we see in our culture – perhaps more in our mass media culture, but also, I think, in our poetry, some poetry, as well – a larger fascination with making a name or making a commercial venture. Can these two things – the responsibility and the fascination – live together that well?

Well, there's injury, obviously. I mean, for example, I think an awful lot of films you see use a tremendous amount of violence—gratuitous violence—and then try to pull off something that will justify it, to make you think, "Oh, this was done for a moral reason." That's just a cover.

I would like to talk about your book The Girl with Bees in Her Hair. *I was well aware of your work before – poems that I have greatly admired and even loved – but, honestly, this book is immensely compelling. It is a very, very moving work. "Species Pity," which is one of the first poems, starts with the line: "We are the saddest species that we know." This, to me, is one of the great beginnings to a poem. I mean, it's just straight out, flat, truth-telling – there it is. And then it is followed by a list of all the things that we fear, including the very air we breathe. And this is a wonderful listing, too. This is where the poem gets most of its pure, lyrical feeling. And then it starts talking about all of us as "unfinished and unfixed," "lunatic and puny" – "smart-clay," which is a great description. And you begin your ending with, given everything else, "we are what we are, / the freight inside our dream / of flight." And there's that dream again. You have several references to dream here, and how…*

How people get through, yes?

Yes, and how that dream "like the Hindenburg / explodes aloft, and it is we who fall / from the burning clouds of wreckage / overhead." Well, this is a wonderful poem, and it does make us want to pity our own species.

Yes, but it is also a way of getting out of self-pity, too. You get full of species pity. The end of that poem was a dream I had about twenty years ago, maybe more, I don't remember. Every now and then you have a dream that's so useful and so vivid and so large that you remember it forever, almost—our little forevers, anyway. It suddenly appeared at the end of this poem, and I said, "Oh, I'll just put it down in there." But when I had the dream originally, I clearly remember waking up from it—the big thing we all grew up with—the same thing, you know, the big, dirigible overhead, all those body parts falling through the air. And in the dream there is a car, and I'm driving the car. I'm driving, and I start to run over all those body parts. And I'm suddenly aware—you never know how, but it is a dream—that these are parts of myself that I'm running over. So, when I woke up, I said, "Okay, you got to get over this fantasy, right?" I knew it was a big fantasy, and the person who was going to get hit when it all blew up was *yours truly*. I think this is a general kind of truth about fantasy and about imagination—the difference between the two—it's imagination that gives you the dream (or the poem), and it's the fantasy that could kill you. Imagination would just like to keep you running—I think it's a friendly force, frankly. So, it turned up at the end of this poem because it seemed… it just seemed right there.

"Musical Chairs" is an interesting poem, and I…

Well, I'm glad you're tough enough to read that and like it.

When I started reading the poem I started thinking, "Oh well." Normally, I probably would not respond so positively to this type of poem – the extended metaphor of the childhood game of musical chairs. But when I get to the lines, "In earnestness now, the furious tune, / it's growing speed – and see how one by one, / time cuts back our company," I'm suddenly "with" the poem. I'm to the age where I think I see that. And I don't think it would have quite hit me the same when I was younger.

No, it's a poem for older people, isn't it?

Yes, "down-sized, when the music / stops. Who wants to be the one / left sitting on the silent hillside now?"

Yes, looking at my father makes me think of that. He has no contemporaries—none.

This is not about who *wants to be left standing, losing or winning the game. This is about that inexorable movement where we lose people. But what a wonderful, subtle message you have at the end of the poem. Are you, then, thinking about that loss of companionship – that "downsizing"? Does that make you afraid? I mean, do you fear those kinds of things?*

Well, you know, you write those things because, like any normal human being, you are afraid. You don't want to lose those things. It gets closer and closer to home. I do think it's almost an abstract idea to most of our students. If they lose someone very close to them, it's an exceptional event and a traumatic event. But it's not the same as when you realize you're at that place when you're going to start losing all of the people who make life valuable to you, the ones with history—the ones you really care about. And the one thing you don't want is to outlive them. So, of course, that's what it's about.

I have a poem that I hope you'll read later. It's a poem in which I talk about dead leaves falling in this kind of cradled fashion and how they capture or "cradle the accidents that make our lives." I think this is another line that it takes some time to come to.

Yes, and there are different poems that, obviously, you'll write at different times in your life. But, then, there are so many other people in that place at that time. You seldom risk being alone.

I see in several of your poems, if not celebration, at least a strong cause for celebration – a somewhat optimistic idea that things can be better, that things can be renewed. I am thinking of the poem "Be Careful What You Remember" where all the great statues – the grand artifices of our art – simply wake-up, take a long stretch, and methodically trudge their way back to the quarries from which they were hewn. The poem ends with this green, beautiful and whole image of complete renewal that has swallowed the scars of the quarries themselves: "the mountain is whole again, the great rift closed, / and young trees grow thick again on the slopes." And you add, parenthetically, that "you can travel there and see for yourself." The poem strongly suggests that we can experience such renewal, that we can "go there" – or, more accurately, return *there – if we make certain choices. Do you have a great deal of faith in that – the idea that it is the* hope *of things that is driving this world.*

Well, I was just thinking of something that William Blake said. When he talks about prophecy, he does not mean the kind the fortuneteller will tell you happens no matter

what you do, that idea of predetermination—that idea which is so deadly—the notion that you *know* how things are going to end and therefore you *must* do things to make them end that way. This way of thinking always leads you to do dreadful things, instead of looking at the act you're performing at this moment—not to see, in fact, what that is. But Blake talks about the kind of prophecy that tells us *if* we go on with this or that and continue so and so, then *this* will happen." So, there is, obviously, always this business of choice. If, as you say, you *choose* another way, you could have a different issue. So, if you could follow the statues, this creative energy bound in this particular form, ossified, perhaps there could be a return to the nature from which it came, and perhaps we could draw that energy back out of nature because nature is what we have to listen to. We have to understand that we are natural beings. And that if we continue to go this way, we'll be destroying ourselves. So, hope and despair ride on the same horse here, depending on whether we continue the way we are going, and that's where so much of the darkness is, in the repetition—it is the ugly repetition that continues to take place that is killing us. But then, that is the purpose of changing the old stories, of going back into them and retelling them from a different point of view, so you get a different history—you leave the future more open. I have this idea that is the opposite of what they tell you in school; you know, Santayana's saying: "Those who don't know history are condemned to repeat it." It is possible that the history we *know* is the history we're condemned to repeat. So, perhaps, the business of imagining a different way and changing the past, changing the way we've seen it, is the way out.

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This "way out" I see in many of your recent poems – this renewal or redefining. Many times there is a leaving *– a turning of the back and a moving in another direction. The statues are restless enough to move, and the primal insect in your poem for fellow poet David Lee, "The Fossil Poet: A Post-Pastoral," simply spreads its wings and launches itself in flight. They're leaving another way, moving in a different way, often going back to something.*

Right, going *back* to something new—or the going back is new in itself. Oh! I wish I could remember how he said this. Howard Nemerov said it. He said something like, "Young poets have to have literature in their youth so that in their old age they may have nature." When they are going back to the beginning, that's the *fresh*. You know, the way out is the way you came in, but that way out is, of course, new in the return direction—sounds like another paradox.

Are you conscious, really, of thinking about these kinds of paradoxes and conundrums?

No, most of it shows up in the poems. The poems are the teachers.

Well, the next poem here, which I'll just get right to in this interview, is your poem "Interview."

Yes, my rejection of the form.

This poem was the first one that I read when I knew we were going to do this interview…

(She laughs)

The question that leads the last stanza is, "What are your views about form?" The answer: "The window frames the view, but then / Outside the frame is an immensity of blue. / And the notion of immensity depends upon the frame. / Whatever we name, we exceed." I love *that! Form gives us a frame – and more, it gives us a vantage by which or through which we* name. *And, of course, we have to name the world – at least in the traditional way we seem to understand things. But whatever we name, we have to exceed, or, at least, it seems to be an imperative to do so.*

It's almost as if I were looking at the frame of your glass doors defining this beautiful chunk of nature out there, but the sense of the frame is that you know it's a frame. You know it is a limit that has been set in some way to give you, as you say, a vantage. But the very awareness of it is what makes all the immensity outside of it—what you wouldn't understand if you didn't find the right frame.

And that is, again, part of the job of the poet, isn't it – to find the right frame and to name that immensity?

When I talked about self-forgetfulness, it wasn't some kind of moral boast. It's because you do get lost in the work, and you're not thinking about yourself, and so you're always surprised by what you find when you've gotten yourself out of the way.

Yes, I'm glad you made that. It's hard to say it better than the poem says it for you. You know, I'm always saying things about my own poems, like, "Oh, that's good—the form is good!" But I'm not aware of having written it, you know? When I talked about self-forgetfulness, it wasn't some kind of moral boast. It's because you do get lost in the work, and you're not thinking about yourself, and so you're always surprised by what you find when you've gotten yourself out of the way. And this is what poetry really does for me.

But that is part of the magic, I suppose.

Well, it depends what you mean by magic, I guess. I think of magic as a misuse or a misunderstanding or a literalization of the work of imagination and symbol making. That is, if you have a doll and you think it looks like someone you don't like, and you set fire to it thinking that, by analogy, someone will burn—that is magic. That is something that you do with your mind to a symbol that you think then has material power in the world—you literalize it. That makes me very nervous. I think people often confuse symbol-making with literal action. And they lose, then, the value of symbol-making, which is a kind of internal alteration of events. Muriel Rukeyser once said, "It isn't that art makes things happen, because that would be magic, but art prepares us." And I think that's the right way to look at it. And it certainly can make you easier within your own skin, and, you know, able to rest—like a body on water, when you don't struggle, you can float. You know, it can do that for you as an individual. But you can't mistake that for literal action,

even though it prepares you by imagining certain things. When people imagine things, it prepares them for something real to happen in the world. It then could be observable.

And do poets observe better?

Poets have to pay attention. That is why you have to forget about yourself. It is that troublesome *self* that gets you in the way of noticing other people—even that they are there. I think it's really hard to recognize other human beings, which is why we know so little about ourselves. But, anyway, yes, you have to pay incredibly close attention to get it right.


W. T. Lucas

And if you don't get it right?

It's okay to try. It's okay to try. We all try to get it right. I'm never sure we do. You never feel that confident about anything.

I notice this uncertainty in your poem for Marilyn Krysl, "Don't look so scared. You're alive!*" It asks, "who / is it then wakes the writer in the night / and speaks?" But it ends with the strong suggestion that, in the end, much of what we do is a leap of faith – one worth taking: "the rope, / reckless, swings out past the edge / in a wide, daring arc – / the wind there is howling, / but her feet find the ledge." And it seems here, that, in a sense, you are comparing some aspects of creating poetry with this same leap of faith.*

Well, as you point out, the poem is dedicated to Marilyn Krysl. If there is anyone who lives an act of faith, it is her. I mean, she has worked in the most violent as well as the meanest and the cruelest of places—with the nurses and the dying in India—and she has written poems about it. She has lived what very few people, I think, do. And she writes wonderful stories! I think Marvin Bell said about her, "She treats suffering with love." That is very rare. People do weird things with suffering, especially other people's suffering. Their own they often treat with love, but the suffering of others is often a patronizing kind of treatment. Marilyn is so extraordinary. That poem involves an act of faith, yes, and so does poetry to a certain extent. There is that leap out, that swing out with a belief that you'll find the ledge and that the ledge is a solid one. You have to have some of that confidence.

Don't you think that students and new poets have to grasp pretty quickly the idea that they may not know exactly where they're going with all poems?

Yes, it's hard—one of the hardest things to explain to young people or to get them to somehow believe in. Recently, a graduate student told me, very confidentially, that he had just written a poem in which something happened at the end that he didn't expect. I said, "Well, finally you've written a poem!" (Laughs) I was pleased.

I often tell my students that writing poetry is a series of happy accidents.

Yes, that is the dirty little secret.

The trick is to recognize an accident when you have one. Of course, the other trick is to get in the car and drive it (laughs). *You can't have the accident unless you get in the car and drive it!*

Yes, and I would add that great saying of the past: "Chance favors the trained observer." And you can argue for the constant practice and the knowledge of the craft and so forth. The great improvisers have a whole lot that they're bringing with them.

You spend a lot of time with students. I've noticed this the last couple of days. You make time for them. You sit and and you talk with them.

This is what it's all about! Teaching is the only real vocation, I think.

Earlier, you were saying something to the effect that the "title of poet" or "the mantle of poet" is a little preening and a little bit heavy for you.

Pretentious. It's pretentious, but I'll claim "teacher."

What is the relationship between poetry and teaching?

I think it's mutually enriching. I mean, I can't imagine talking about understanding others without listening—and you do a great deal of listening when you teach. The kind of attention you pay is also what you want your students to do, but you have to listen to them. When you're constantly, or very often, in the company of the young, you are going to turn corners you can't even see around. I find that talking to them about poetry often opens my eyes to things that I hadn't seen. Teaching can keep you honest. Poems, of course, teach me, but the poems have their part in a teaching function as well. I think the two have fed each other all their lives. I love that!

Can you imagine a life that is not both writing poetry and teaching?

I can't imagine talking about understanding others without listening—and you do a great deal of listening when you teach. The kind of attention you pay is also what you want your students to do, but you have to listen to them.

No. I have never had the desire to split those functions or to have all the time for writing. I don't think you can write poetry all the time. It's like the aria in the opera—there has to be a lot of libretto. You can't write all the time, get that pitch all the time.

What do you see as the key to good teaching?

Oh,I don't know. Listening is a key—and being interested.

And having something exciting to say, as well. I notice that you engage in serious thought, appropriate and particular instead of just, you know, just pat answers to something or another.

Yes, because you change your mind as you go, as you have new experiences and you meet new students—and different students demand very different things from a teacher. I teach in an adult program at Warren Wilson, and my average student is over forty. I have had students anywhere from 22 to 68 years old. Those are very different people to teach. But I think the main thing is listening and, of course, having a passion for what you teach—also a respect for the sovereign individuality

and mystery of your students. You don't pretend you know them either. You have to want to know them, but at the same time, you have to respect their privacy and their mystery, too.

I think that you just hit on something very interesting, something that I see all the time. When you think *you know exactly who you are dealing with, it is a sure start to failing.*

Yes. And there is an arrogance in that—another thing teaching can teach us. It is the same kind of arrogance that leads to bad foreign policy—thinking you know better than "those" people, or you know them better than they know themselves, or you know what they need. And, damn it, you don't! You don't know anything that can help them unless you know who they are to begin with. I would make that leap that says, if you don't understand anything about a culture, you better not go near and think you can do anything to achieve your goals or theirs. That is the problem: the arrogance of ignorance, and too much power—too much belief in power. There is an image that came to me once when I was looking at a statue of David. And this statue shows David with the stone that will kill Goliath still in his hand. And I remember the line that came to me as I was looking at that statue: "Power is only yours until you let the stone go from the sling." The lesson has been there, always, but it's always the same. That is why you have to imagine a different history. I would love to see a world run by men who *refuse* to do certain things. I would like to write that history someday—the men who didn't go to war. The men who decided *not* to act in certain situations—imagine that!

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I noticed you have several poems dedicated to people in The Girl with Bees in Her Hair. *Why?*

Well, friendship is sustaining. It's my safety net. It's like my friend Joan says, "All I need is everybody." So, they are poems of respect and admiration, of love and connection. They acknowledge the connections in life that are really significant. And this is not a new thing for me in this book. In *Reversing the Spell* I have a section titled "The Cohort" in which all of the poems are written to people or for people. This has always been characteristic of what is most valuable to me. There is this poem for my friend Larry Levis, which sounds like an elegy, but I wrote it for Larry when he was very much alive. And there are all these things in it that look like foretelling now—it makes me a little bit uncomfortable, in a way. I have poems for Constance Merritt in a call-and-response poem exchange, taking formal and imaginative cues from each other. There is one for my friend Larry Robin who runs a small independent bookstore in Philadelphia. He wrote us all a letter one time and said, "I'm going under, help me!" And a hundred poets showed up, and we each bought a book, and we had a big blowout where everybody read for two minutes—it was great! There is one for Hilda Raz, and one for Marianne Boruch. I don't know, they're all important to me in their own way.

I do want to read you this one little piece from the Larry Levis poem because it was really bizarre, after the fact. This is why people who knew Larry and knew the circumstances of his death were sure this was an elegy, but I'd sent it to Larry, and Larry had responded. So part of the poem goes like this: "it is October, that season when Death / goes public, costumed, / when the talking heads / on the tv screen float up smiling at the terrible / news, their skin alight with the same strange glow / fish give off when they have been dead a week or more, / as the gas company adds odor for warning / that the lines may be leaking, the sweet smell of disaster / hanging, invisible, in the air, a moment / before you strike the match." Larry died alone, and he wasn't found for some days, and so, there's a horror to this now. I don't think I am surprised. Poems have their own strange lives.

You seem to have a sense of duty that is apparent in some of your poems.

Sometimes. But writing poems is pleasurable for me. So, I always feel like I'm indulging myself when I'm writing poems. There is the "gift relationship" in poetry—like giving blood if you have some and somebody needs it. And I suppose there is a kind of duty suggested in what Ellen Bryant Voigt describes as "the one who sings, sings for the one who can't."

Yes, much like in your poem "Fetish," where "the soul, that cricket, [. . .] folds back its wings, and rubs / its skinny legs against / the odds and sings."

There's the insect again! Sweet little animal!

Is it possible that poets can be too much enamored with their own language sometimes? Are poets in danger of their own craft?

Oh, sure. We have an indecent affection, sometimes, for our worst stuff! (Laughs) Absolutely! It's when you go over some flowery edge or whatever. Yes, poets are human. We're not a special breed. You know, we're as full of vanities and stupidities as anyone else. But our poems tend to reprove us; they usually tell us if something is really bad. They will use a word like "wooden" when they are wooden—and they will go prosaic. Often they throw you an image that is really a critical judgment. So, you have to be wary about those. Your own poems know how to keep you humble.

Well, friendship is sustaining. It's my safety net. It's like my friend Joan says, "All I need is everybody." So, they are poems of respect and admiration, of love and connection. They acknowledge the connections in life that are really significant.

You have talked before about the relationship of poetry and the beauty of language—that a poem has to be beautiful no matter the subject with which you're dealing.

The lyric power and the beauty of the world need to be there.

Well, simply put, how do you get such beautiful lines?

That's a loaded question (laughs). You are asking a jury that has not been convened. How do you find your language? I think it comes from reading wonderful poems. When I started writing, I had read a lot of Yeats. I had actually put a lot of time in on Yeats and Lorca and Shakespeare. Oh my, you know,

that's why I didn't publish for so many years. When you've read Shakespeare and Yeats, it's like, don't bother! And then I started looking at some of the contemporary journals, which I really hadn't had time or interest to bother with and it was like, "Oh! I guess my stuff isn't all that bad!" There's some real, you know, crumby stuff out here. So, I would say it's the music that rises out of things. It just does, you know? And I use a great deal of assonance and consonance, the echoes of sounds within—internal rhyme because I'm fighting my desire to rhyme. I guess it's a musical thing, but it seems to rise out of the act of imagining. Once you're imagining, the music of it gets into the language. And, by imagining, I mean, you enter fully what it is you're attending to so that, somehow, expression and attention are simultaneous. It's only after the fact that we can find the patterns.

Writing poems is pleasurable for me. So, I always feel like I'm indulging myself when I'm writing poems. There is the "gift relationship" in poetry – like giving blood if you have some and somebody needs it.

I tell my students that it is the job of criticism to tell you what *you've done – not necessarily* how *to do it.*

That's right. I learned form in poetry first from reading poems that had it. But there is that thing about *accident*. I wrote a poem very early on, and it had in it the woman who was the mother of the last king of Egypt, the mother of Farouk. She was a very old woman living in the best hotel in Washington, and she was wearing these incredibly expensive ropes of pearl. You could tell it was a fortune she was wearing around her neck, and she had a low cut dress, and she was very old. Her chest was all hollow and bony, and she was coughing continually. Her arms were covered with needle tracks (she was obviously a junkie). And she was coughing the whole time and smoking, and on the walls were all of the paintings of the old kings. That was all that was left of all of the grandeur and royalty. Anyway, I started to write a poem in which she was a figure, and then it shifted to an island out in the Pacific where the women dived for pearls long before they had air tanks. These women were young and fit and vital; they had a huge lung capacity and could stay under water for long periods of time. They were, of course, diving for the pearls that ended up on this old, withered, dying chest, which becomes metaphoric for a rejection of all passé, corrupt power and of beauty as its ornament. Beauty in its basic organic form rises out of being. Anyway, I was reading this aloud at a public reading, and a woman said to me, "This poem is wracked with the sound of coughing." And I said, "really?" And she said, "Look at all these words here: 'thatch' and 'mats' and 'hats' and 'huts.'" I wasn't consciously describing a cough, but, yes, it was true. There were a great many sounds in that poem that were mirroring a cough. The poem really was wracked with coughing. So, this is what I mean about the music of something rising from imagining it.

What fascinates you about your poems? I mean, what makes you keep doing them? What is the fascination?

That's where I learn! Everything important I've ever learned, I learned from poetry. I'm always finding out new things by writing them. I'm not satisfied with what I know. As you enter different stages of life, you enter new areas of ignorance. And all of this requires new imaginings. I enjoy thinking about a great number of things. Also, it's so much fun to write

them! Oh, the pleasure principle is a big issue here. Obviously, I want to keep on with it.

You've had that from the beginning?

Yes, from the very beginning. But there is something that I came to really late. I never read my poems out loud—not for years. I just wouldn't read aloud. I was very shy. I wasn't shy about using my voice publicly if it were at a civil rights or anti-war rally, and I wasn't shy about reading poems for my students or whatever. But to read my own—No. That was, of course, a self-consciousness that I had to get rid of.

Really? And you read aloud so well! Had you published before this, or just written?

I had been published in a number of journals by then.

My, that is unusual. How did you get past the self-consciousness? When did you first read aloud for an audience?

It was my friend Etheridge Knight who got me to read for the first time. If it were not for Etheridge, I would never—well, I think to this day, I would be mute as a mushroom. Etheridge asked me one night, "Where are you reading these days?" And I said, "I don't read, Etheridge." He said, "You don't say your poems, you ***ain't*** a poet." And then one night some time later, Etheridge and I and couple of other poets we're sitting around, and we're all pretty far gone on the grape, and he says, "Okay, we're all going to read the poem of our own that we like the most and we want to read." It was the first time I read one of my poems aloud to another human being. And I remember—after the first reading—I was crazed from then on. And of course Etheridge was so right.

I loved his work when he started pouring that out – the straightforward language, the power and energy of his voice on the page. I'll bet he reads well.

My own life as a poet has brought me in touch with the kind of people I want to know. Anyway, you deal with people as a teacher and as a fellow poet and at a level where you really want to deal with other human beings. Poetry is the way that happens.

Oh, yes.

What in your poetic life is most disappointing?

I don't feel disappointed. I feel very fortunate and very grateful. I don't really want anything I don't have; I just don't want to lose the people I love. That is the only thing. You know, people let you down, but there are lice in every bed, no matter which one you occupy. My own life as a poet has brought me in touch with the kind of people I want to know. Anyway, you deal with people as a teacher and as a fellow poet and at a level where you really want to deal with other human beings. Poetry is the way that happens.

It's an immediate entrance into something that is almost always rewarding.

Absolutely, it's like whales under the surface—you don't have to deal with all the superficialities.

But you do write a number of what could be called political poems – ones that suggest at least some call to action. I was thinking, don't you undergo at least some frustration with this kind of commitment?

Those frustrations are political, not poetic.

And, there's a difference there for you?

Oh, yes, the frustrations come from watching this "juggernaut to hell" that our country insists on riding. That is beyond frustration! We call it "outrage overload"—you know, all your circuits start to burn when you get into it fully. So, I read a lot of books that give you the details; I find it helps me to know the details—they are the handholds on the cliff.

Let's conclude with a quote from your poem, "a space of truth blank like the sea" – a beautiful poem. You end the poem with "Words spill: So little time. So much to do." Is this how you feel?

If you saw my desk! (Laughs) **Yes! Absolutely! But, seriously, I suppose I do. There is so much to do, and there seems so little time.**

Finally, is there anything else you want to say?

Are you kidding? I think I have talked too much.

And I thank you for it.

Well, it was my pleasure.

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Eleanor Wilner

"How with this rage..."

*Poetry in a Time of War and Atrocity**

Kay Anderson

Of writing, the great novelist Toni Morrison once said: "Make it political as hell. And make it irrevocably beautiful." But how is it possible to do *both* of those things at once, and why must we try? Those are the questions I'd like to take up in this essay, speaking as a practicing poet writing in a time of public dismay.

Though it is a dramatic commonplace, and an often overstated claim, to say that we are at a crossroads—nevertheless I am going to assert that we are, as writers, at a very particular one. Because once again we are at war, and, in the words of the critic Lionel Trilling, we stand at "the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics

* A version of this essay was first delivered at the National Undergraduate Literature Conference at Weber State University on April 4, 2008, the last year of the George W. Bush Administration.

meet, " and not at all by choice, but by circumstance. We cannot choose our history; we can only choose to ignore it—and silence, as the law says, gives consent.

Now here it is necessary to speak not only of what many of us feel impelled to write about, but the excruciating difficulties for a writer involved in awakening in words what is currently troubling our nation's sleep, an ethical anxiety I suspect is quite widespread. The first difficulty which we need to face head on is the particular American distrust of the words "political poetry," as if it were almost by definition "bad poetry," one which has designs on us, and in which a polemical purpose must necessarily overwhelm the poetic one.

Since there is bad poetry of every kind, I see no reason to single out socially engaged poetry and think we need to look deeper into this prejudice—into our shrunken, isolating definition of the individual, one that damages our commonality, and hides our common plight. "I remember, as a student," wrote poet Lucia Perillo, "being advised not to use 'we' as my mode of address, not to try to speak on behalf of anyone but myself." This is the ultimate separatism; we have been drawn away, even in speech, from the company of others. Notice that I say "we."

Our popular psychology reduces our problems to the personal: you and your little immediate family are offered as sufficient cause for so many effects—which not only robs us of history, depth and connection, but keeps us from seeing how we are manipulated to an unthinking conformity and self-absorption by the powers that be, how we and our world are shaped and defined by "invisible hands," to borrow a phrase from Adam Smith. "The Marlboro man thinks for himself." Think about it. We are, of course, connected to a much larger world, and within each of us, and our language, is the convergence of great forces and currents—past and present, local and planetary. And most readers of this essay are probably citizens of this uniquely pluralistic republic, and, as James Baldwin once said, "Being American is a complex fate."

So, to deepen and enlarge our awareness of who we really are, and to jettison the heavy cultural baggage that comes with the term "political poetry," I would put in its place what is both a less loaded and more accurate term. The Russians do not use the term political poetry, but call it, instead, *grazdanskaya poesiya*, "citizen's poetry." The term "citizen's poetry" reminds us that part of our being as individuals is that we are citizens, and thus our perception, vision and voice as poets necessarily reflect that part—and never more urgently than when the citizen in us is insulted, or suppressed.

And here we, as writers, face the problem of living in a time of war and

Now here it is necessary to speak not only of what many of us feel impelled to write about, but the excruciating difficulties for a writer involved in awakening in words what is currently troubling our nation's sleep….

atrocity, of the violation of rights, when the citizen within must speak, when the political has become deeply personal, but when, as writers, we face material potentially intractable to the imagination, and face that question of how, as Morrison instructed us, to make our citizen's witness and protest "irrevocably beautiful," or, put another way, moving and powerful as poetry and art. It is Shakespeare's question, in a new context: "How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea/ whose action is no stronger than a flower?"

For most of us here, the lucky ones, atrocity is distant in physical fact. But, like a cloud over the sun, it does shadow our days, and our democracy….

For most of us here, the lucky ones, atrocity is distant in physical fact. But, like a cloud over the sun, it does shadow our days, and our democracy—and, though many of us writers feel we should respond, how easily that "should" can become a shield, behind whose opaque righteousness may lie hidden a tangle of conflicting motives, including a false sense of our own moral superiority. And the subject—its violence and cruelty—whatever our outrage, compounds the difficulties of expression.

In spite of our revulsion at scenes of horror, we must also acknowledge their omnipresence, both real and virtual, and their equal power to attract. As my AOL news, announcing a bomb that tore through a bus in India, killing and maiming many, advertised, with a big fat excited exclamation point: "See images from the deadly explosion!" That people tend to slow down passing an accident and gape, that horror movies overflow the video shelves, that screaming headlines and war movies sell, and leaders who kill the most people get to, as they say, "go down in history"—that we publicly deplore war as barbaric, yet go on waging it—all this is mere commonplace. In her book on photographs of torture and war, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag says of "the wish to see something gruesome" that "Calling such wishes 'morbid' suggests a rare aberration, but the attraction to such sights is not rare, and is a perennial source of inner torment."

Of course, we, as spectators, do not wish to think of ourselves as bloodthirsty flies drawn to the road-kill of our own kind. What is required, and generally found, is a serviceably good reason to justify this prurient craving. Opening an issue of *TIME Magazine* which featured a multiple page spread of the notorious photos of the torture and humiliation of prisoners by U.S. soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, I felt as if I had picked up an S & M Magazine off the adult rack at the back of the store. My instinctive response was that this wasn't news, it was pornography. It only took one photo to be news, after all; to get the message—and I had seen that often-shown image of our shame, as had most of us. But a spread of such photos, insisting on the variety of possible postures of humiliation and inflicted pain? I thought again of William Blake's admonition: "They became what they beheld."

In her essay, "The Poet's Calling," Mary Kinzie says: "One argu-

ment against unfettered exposure of the ghastly and depraved is that it depraves the exposer." She goes on to quote the British poet Edwin Muir: "the resolve to expose evil in its most squalid form …[may] set out with a moral purpose…but almost invariably something sordidly inquisitive comes into the treatment as well, adding to the moral confusion. The result is that the spectator is not cleansed, but involved in the impurities he is witnessing, and the moral intention is perverted into its opposite." In Shakespeare's words, "and almost thence my nature is subdu'd/ To what it works in, like the dyer's hand."

We are also dealing just now with a climate in which there is already a numbing amount of exposure to horror and violence—both fictional and real, so that the two tend to merge, and desecration risks becoming unreal, a mere spectacle—or worse, entertainment. Atrocity is, for millions of people, all too real, but for most of us in America, who are being exposed daily as distant spectators to its report—one dreadful but dramatic image giving way to the next, we become like disoriented passengers in the dining car of a train speeding through a dozen killing fields in as many countries, watching helplessly a blur of horror shorn of context and significance. Or misrepresented and diminished, as our brains are nibbled and gnawed by sound bytes.

How, then, as poets, to make desecration real, without simply re-enacting the violence done to others, and violating ourselves in the exposure; how to approach the vortex, the whirlpool of cruelty in human nature, without being drawn into it? The first and last thing to know is that there can be no adequacy of speech to what is ultimately unspeakable, and poetry can, and must, precisely by the presence of the unspoken, preserve that sense of the unspeakable, alluding to what cannot be approached directly in such a way as to recover something of the humanity that underlies the judgment in the word "atrocity" itself (a word which comes from the Latin word *atrox, atrocis*, meaning cruel). To approach it, writers need all the imaginative and prosodic resources we can muster, and a tenacious hold on the values of life that inspire our outrage; otherwise, our poems are in danger of themselves becoming atrocious.

In a free verse poem, written in the intimate first person by Nell Altizer, two incompatible worlds of peace and war are brought together in a single event, one that shows how distant atrocity comes home, and shows us not the degraded images from Abu Ghraib, but measures instead their effect on ourselves.

Gift

Had I known the last love of my life
would be a girl whose early holler
in my arms awakened the short ditch,
alarms of loss, the rose thorn under
the lavender fingernail, who after
pulling out the Groovy Girl that was
the present, thrust the bag over
her crow black bangs down to hair
feathering her narrow shoulders
and twirled her wrists in the dark thrill
of being lost and not found turning
outwards the quick flair of trapped
wings
beating the air, I would not have thought
of Abu Ghraib or caught her close
or torn the hood from her head—
the only one I could.

A woman is speaking of her love for her granddaughter, of a past grave (that "short ditch") that love reopened, of the fear of loss that comes with age and knowledge of the child's vulnerability, the sharp pain of loving this little girl in her innocence ("the rose thorn under/ the lavender fingernail"). These things, beautifully condensed and imaged here, are the emotions of everyday life, love and mortality at their usual odds—but then what comes into it is her granddaughter's childish thrill as she playfully puts a bag over her head—the thrill we all feel when we tempt the dark in a situation we know is safe. As the public image of the hooded torture victim invades her perception of a child's play, as gift bag becomes hood, that image brings horror into the most intimate and innocent of moments in personal life. The central trope suggests a larger truth: that innocence itself has been injured by these actions.

The poem's condensed force comes from that truth, and from its adherence to her own context—from showing how distant events can poison our most private moments. The poem is shaped and driven by its syntax, a single sentence whose strong forward momentum drives to its final understated expression of an outraged helplessness against the tormenting of prisoners, as she caught her granddaughter close and tore "the hood from head—/the only one I could." And this is a periodic sentence that suspends its clause till almost the poem's end: "Had I known…, I would not have." This syntax seems wrenched almost out of its context, as if it were a cry against knowledge itself, how it comes after the fact—"had I but known"—and the suffering that it brings.

Since the resources of a government's PR machine, whose job is to legitimize State violence, are used to demonize, neutralize and dehumanize millions of other humans, designated not as people but as "the enemy," it is a central task of the poet to restore their humanity, an act essential to restoring our own.

There is expressive beauty in the poem's music, its language full of soft syllabic echoes set going by the word "girl"—the *–er* sounds in "early," "holler," "under," "lavender," "finger," "after," "girl," "over," "feather," "her," "shoulders," "twirled," "turn." Toward the end of the poem, the sense of entrapment, instensified by the haunting image in the speaker's mind of the hooded prisoner, impels anxious motion: "the quick flair of trapped wings/beating the air—." From here, as emotion heightens, the internal rhyming gets stronger: flair/ air, thought/caught, hood/could. And words ending with soft *–ers* are replaced by the harder end-stopped consonants of *t* and *d* as the subject itself hardens and chills.

Since the resources of a government's PR machine, whose job is to legitimize State violence, are used to demonize, neutralize and dehumanize millions of other humans, designated not as people but as "the enemy," it is a central task of the poet to restore their humanity, an act essential to restoring

our own. Our great ancestor Walt Whitman, in 1865, at the end of the bloody American civil war, wrote a poem called "Reconciliation," a word from the Latin root re-*conciliare*—to call or bring together again. That six syllable word reaches across the centuries, and across the poem as its title, and is the "Word over all" in his first line:

Reconciliation

Word over all, beautiful as the sky,
Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be utterly lost,
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly softly wash again, and
ever again, this soil'd world;
For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead,
I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin—I draw near,
Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin.

It is our directive as poets, as T.S. Eliot put it, to "purify the language of the tribe," that is, to call things by the right name. "In war," said Aeschylus in the 5th century BC, "truth is the first casualty." The reality of the Iraq war, as I think many of us know, has little to do with the official language about it. On the contrary. The constant use of euphemism in official speech is meant to soothe and disguise—for instance, government- hired mercenaries, outnumbering the U.S. armed forces in Iraq and subject to no military rules of combat, are called in the media "contractors," which raises few eyebrows. Most pernicious is the constant barrage of pronouncements by the Bush Administration in a language not only euphemistic or ludicrously cheerful, but sentimental, righteous, and abstract—statements to rouse patriotic and religious sentiment, eerily untroubled by facts.

A friend of mine, when I mentioned my vexed subject, said: don't let it become specific, they will stop listening. Is this true? Do we all find ourselves having trouble thinking when national or tribal myths are breached? Perhaps. Symbols can blind as well as reveal, and the bond between word and world can be broken. But to attend to the perversion of language is very much a poet's business, made maddening by the difficulty of extricating words already indentured to falsehood and a ruling ideology. Like salmon, words homing toward their true meaning often have to swim not only upstream, but against the surge of a power-generated current.

The title of a recent poem by Maxine Kumin is that newly coined Latinate term, "extraordinary rendition," which euphemistically neutralizes and obscures what it names: the practice, instituted by the Bush Administration, of flying people—without counsel, trial or even charges made against them—to other countries where they will be imprisoned and tortured for us. The poem, as it explores and explodes that legalese term "rendition," expresses its outrage with the dictionary definitions of "rend" as hair-tearing "anguish or rage," which also suggests how this practice rends the very fabric of our social contract and its protection of rights; and the definition of "render"—"to give what is due/or owed"—bitterly underlines the lack of due process in this new kind of rendering up. And, you will see from her description of fall leaves, that the perception of nature itself has been altered and wounded by knowledge of this practice:

Extraordinary Rendition

Only the oak and the beech hang onto their leaves
at the end, the oak leaves bruised the color of those
insurgent boys Iraqi policemen captured

purpling their eyes and cheekbones before
lining them up to testify to the Americans
that no, no, they had not been beaten…

The beech leaves dry to brown, a palette of cinnamon.
They curl undefended, they have no stake in the outcome.
Art redeems us from time, it has been written.

Meanwhile we've exported stress positions, shackles,
dog attacks, sleep deprivation, waterboarding.
To rend: to tear (one's garments or hair)

in anguish or rage. *To render:* to give what is due
or owed. *The Pope's message*
this Sunday is the spiritual value of suffering.

Extraordinary how the sun comes up
with its rendition of daybreak,
staining the sky with indifference.

As that sun comes up, it seems the stain of our own indifference to the suffering of others comes to light, even as nature is changed through a citizen's eyes, as the dying beech leaves "curl undefended" like those undefended by any law, while the oak leaves are bruised like those beaten boys. The bruised oak leaves may suggest as well the injury to military honor itself, since the bronze Oak Leaf Cluster is a U.S. medal given for exceptional, repeated military valor. Within the poem, heavy with irony, is the line: "Art redeems us from time, it has been written." Here, I think, in its irony, is a call to what Muriel Rukeyser has called "art *in* life," a defense of the poem's own civil engagement by warning us against an art which thinks it can save us from history, or can exist without responsibility to its own time.

Here is another example of *grazhdánskaya poesiya* from my source for that term, Ilya Kaminsky, an adoptive son of America. His poem is written with a quiet understatement, the gentler irony of an older, Russian tradition, one that has seen all this before:

We Lived Happily During the War

And when they bombed other people's houses, we

protested
but not enough, we opposed them but not

enough. And we kept repeating that grand moment:

a president saluting a flag on an enormous ship.

I knew I did not say much. I was
in my bed, around my bed America

was falling: invisible house by invisible house by invisible house.

I took a chair outside and watched the sun.

In the sixth year
of a disastrous reign in the house of money

in the street of money in the city of money in the country
of money, our great country of money, we (forgive us)

lived happily during the war

Moving easily, without tension, between the collective "we" and the

singular "I," the poem employs a colloquial voice and a quietly insistent repetition of phrases, and has a distinctly milder tone than the others—more rueful than anything, its Old World tone lacks that American earnestness and expectation of moral perfection in ourselves (an ingenuousness that turns all too easily to cynicism; thinking we're better than we are, we become worse). Here is a more chastened idea of what to expect, a kind of resignation to the fact that, though really we do not approve, and wish it were different, most people do go on about their lives, relatively unaffected; after all, "we lived happily during the war."

While that word "money" still reverberates from the way Kaminsky makes an almost worshipful litany of it, let's look at how money unwittingly connects to complicity in this 1990 poem by novelist and poet Stephen Dobyns:

In a Row

The mailman handing me a letter,
he paid a little. My daughter's

third grade teacher, the electrician
putting a light over my back door:

they paid as well. The woman at the bank
who cashes my check. She paid a part of it.

The typist in my office, the janitor
sweeping the floor – they paid some too.

The movie star paid for it. The nurse,
the nun, the saint, they all paid for it –

a photograph from Central America,
six children lying neatly in a row.

One day I was teaching or I sold
a book review or I gave a lecture

and some of the money came to me
and some rolled off into the world,

but it was still my money, the result
of my labor, each coin still had my name

printed across it, and I went on living,
passing my days in a box with a tight lid.

But elsewhere, skulking through tall grass,
a dozen men approached a village. It was hot;

the men made no noise. See that one's cap,
see the button on that other man's shirt,

hear the click of the cartridge as it slides
into its chamber, see the handkerchief

which that man uses to wipe his brow –
I paid for that one, that one belongs to me.

The formal strategy of this poem, which gets us to consider what we would rather not, is its cool, absolutely matter of fact tone which gets its drama from its narrative use of suspense, built through repetition of the verb "paid," while withholding for much of the poem the knowledge of what all these people paid for—a knowledge of how their tax dollars were being used, withheld at the time from most of them, since the U.S. support for State terror in Central America in the '80s was CIA directed and covert.

The photograph offered as evidence is unsettling, but still purposely ambiguous: "six children lying neatly in a row" could be variously interpreted. However, that "neatly" implies order, but of an odd, unnatural sort. The end of the poem dramatically presents an action that is taking place elsewhere, and that makes unmistakable what has left those children lying in a row. The scene moves from the past tense, "It was hot," to the present as the mood

switches to repeated imperatives which demand our witness: "See that one's cap…see the button…hear the click…," and then he quite suddenly averts our gaze, purposely leaving out the atrocious act itself; we see only a man wiping his brow as if after some exertion: "see the handkerchief."

The great novelist Willa Cather once said that it is "in the inexplicable presence of the thing not named" that the novel gets its deepest value. Even so, here, the burden of poetic speech is to indicate what cannot be spoken, but is clearly *there*, so that words, like the curtain before the holy ark in a temple, signify the presence and site of what is sacred. When atrocity is "the thing not named," it is experienced as what it is—a desecration—so the sacred becomes a living force in the refusal to re-enact what is vile. We hear only, at the end of Dobyns' poem, the bitter claiming of ownership: "I paid for that one, that one belongs to me."

A different tonality rules when it's not your tax dollar but yourself who is on the line. Brian Turner is a seven year Army veteran, an army team leader for a year in Iraq, whose poetry in his book *Here, Bullet* contains what another vet poet, Doug Anderson, calls "the real war inside the war of the politicians." His quiet poems are often introduced by epigraphs from Arabic classic and modern poetry, like the one from a poem called "Sadiq" (which means "friend"), from *The Gulistan of S'adi*, written over 3,000 years ago after a siege in Daras Salam (the name for ancient Baghdad) that left 800,000 dead: "It is a condition of wisdom in the archer to be patient because when the arrow leaves the bow, it returns no more." Though Turner was in Iraq as a combatant, there are only people in his poems—no enemies except the bullet itself. There is no drum-roll or blood rousing martial music; the climate of his poems is a pervasive sadness that engulfs all. At the center of the sadness is, of course, the slaughter—but Turner does not re-enact the violence, but rather takes us into the silence after, a silence in which another kind of perception can take place.

Body Bags

A murder of crows looks on in silence
from the eucalyptus trees above
as we stand over the bodies –
who look as if they might roll over,
wake from a dream and question us
about the blood drying on their scalps,
the bullets lodged in the back of their
skulls,
to ask where their wives and children are
this morning, and why this hovering
of flies, the taste of flatbread and chai
gone from their mouths as they stretch
and rise, wondering who these strangers
are
who would kick their hard feet, saying
Last call, motherfucker. Last call.

In the silent looking on with which the poem opens, the crows are identified with the "we" even as we, the readers, are one with those who "stand over the bodies. " And then the poem turns on a radical shift in point of view, achieved by those two little words most useful to us as poets, releasing the ability to imagine, to enter and identify with the other— the words *as if:* "as if they might roll over," and, as the conditional becomes the present tense, they do.

The enlivening of the dead, which Robert Jay Lifton has identified as a characteristic of survivor imagination, converts the bodies back into men, even as it becomes intimate with their

imagined thoughts, their culture and personal lives, "as they stretch and rise" in poetry's resurrection—by now we see through their eyes exclusively: we have become them "wondering/ who these strangers are/ who would kick their hard feet, saying/*Last Call.*" There is an odd way in which the verb "wondering" cools emotion and deflects accusation in favor of a kind of bemused incomprehension about how all this came to be and who these strangers are. We are outside the realm of reason, of policy, of sense—a sensitive, non-polemical disclosure of where this war zone really is.

The dead from both sides are lively in Turner's poems—the Iraqi dead in this poem who know where they are, but not what has happened to them or why; similarly in another of his poems, the American dead wander, ghosts, lost, far from home in a place they did not choose to invade and never understood. Or, in another poem, Turner places us in a medical evacuation plane in which a young woman soldier is dying as they fly through the night, and, as she dies, and the exhausted surgeon at her side breaks down and weeps, her green, sunlit vision of Mississippi floods the poem—a vision of home that shows us exactly what death leaves out.

And now, as I was looking for a way to end this essay, along comes an unscheduled event. I get an email from a friend, a poet, a Palestinian-American, also a doctor with Doctors without Borders, just back from Darfur, and back at work in the Emergency Room at a Houston hospital. I'll read his email:

"Here is an eerie thing, I met *the* Mr. Trevino last night in the ER, the distinguished flying cross, by the general 'no one liked' MacArthur, the Trevino who told me: 'You are shaking hands with history'…the Trevino who flew the weather plane for the Enola Gay, sparing Tokyo from the bomb, because the clouds spared Tokyo, and Hiroshima was nuked because, in part, he says, the Japanese government gave the people false information that if they leave the city, the American soldiers will rape and kill you if they find you out in the fields, in the wild…So they stayed, and he, Mr. Trevino, has a reason to dance his ambivalence upon…All he wanted was not to go into the hospital because it would ruin Easter for his family, octogenarian that he is. "

But this is not the end of his story. He shared this footnote to history with an editor he was in touch with, and by one of those coincidences that makes art seem like an imitation of life, this editor was just then considering a poem about the very same person, a poem that I'm bound now to read you.

I can tell you that in the poet's version, the imagined weather plane pilot does a lot of bad stuff, and takes his own life, which is a kind of poetic justice. But does the real weather pilot repent and kill himself? The hell he does. As you now know, he lives to a satisfied old age, in the bosom of his family, saying things like, "Young doctor, you are shaking hands with history." Trevino doesn't, of course, know who he is shaking hands with, or that there is another history which is not triumphalist but tragic, or that a poet named Ian Harris in Chicago has given him a different life in a poem which, more than my words about all this, defines the difference between these two, between two kinds of history and two ways of being in the world. The poem exemplifies how the presence of the world's beauty makes the atrocity, and not the poem, atrocious; "in the [unspo-

ken] presence of the thing not shown," value is restored at the site of desecration— making what has been left out exactly what it is—unspeakable.

One Hundred Poems from the Japanese

The man who flew the weather plane
during the atomic bombardment of
Hiroshima,
in which a single bomb, an orphaned
greyhound,
whistled for a moment and lunged to
earth,
was born in Houston, Texas—a town
known for its large breakfasts.

He's the guy who radioed the other
plane—
the one with a greyhound inside—to say
all was clear.
The weather is fine, he said. Go ahead
and open the bay. Over.

You should have no trouble imagining
the pulling
of the lever, the good haircuts of the pilot
& navigator,
the cartoon anvil with a race dog heart.
An explo-

sion conceiving of persons as onions; as
fox puppies
and skillets of eggs. After the war, the
weather pilot

committed the following: forgery, the
passing of stolen checks,
burglary of two post offices, suicide. He
could see, presumably,

boats licking themselves in the harbor,
the glinting lenses of
rice bogs, lanterns and market awnings.
In short, all the things that appear
in One Hundred Poems from the
Japanese. *Luminous things*
and fine weather.

A coda to this poem, and a return at the close to Shakespeare's question: "how with this rage shall beauty hold a plea, /whose action is no stronger than a flower?" The Earth, I would say, argues for the flower. One day in Japan, in the 1980s, I was standing with a student before a morning glory vine. "Nan to imas'ka?" I asked her—what do you call this? "Asakao," she replied—morning face. I thought then that this focused a central difference between our cultures: hers so intent on saving face, ours on getting glory. And how alike, in the end, we were, after all—watching those morning flowers open to the sun, and naming them according to our own lights. I wrote a poem, later, about where that glory, the kind for which Achilles traded long life, actually led; I should like to end this essay with the final stanza of that poem:

At Nagasaki in the Peace Park near
the epicenter of the blast
there is a glade
so dense with foliage, bushes, asakao
and pine, you'd almost miss the sign,
hand-drawn,
the only one in English that I saw:

THEY SAID NOTHING WOULD
GROW HERE
FOR 75 YEARS

And though the language was my own
I found it difficult to read
through such a thick exquisite screen
of evergreen
and tears.

Eleanor Wilner

Geopolitics

Moon on the desert, a shimmer
in the wash, nearby the packrat is drawn
to that pale, shifty light, his burrow
and its hoard (they comfort him)
left far below. But the glittering
light eludes him as he darts
off across the stony ground,
small charcoal stroke in search
of something bright; and the owl,
unmoving as the cactus arm,
has the greater need. Or, no,
the wing span, and the speed.

Like a note of ponderous brass in
a play of pipes and shadows,
the armadillo, laminated soul,
fresh from nature's cannery,
scuttles into view, makes his way
across the wash—a dry gully waiting
for rain…close by, the dark grumbles,
while further out, the planets burn
like signal fires across the vacancy,
their message our belittlement,
far beyond the scrubby sky that
mothers us, hovering, gray
with its burden of clouds.
The armadillo covers his own
back, and with long claws digs
furiously his tunnel in the hard
desert clay, fearing invasion,
and disappears into his own
armored dark, taking the stars
with him, as the horizon lightens
toward dawn, and the owl closes
his eyes, his mind filled
with the small, satisfactory
cries of the rat, his stomach
with the rat's debris.

Mark Hummel

Water Cycle

WATER CYCLE: HEADWATERS

Of course if we wish to begin at the beginning, we start in the sky and we watch the clouds. We wait for raindrops.

If we wish to meet the beginning at the beginning, then we come here, and we dare to wish for rain. For when the rain comes here, we feel the hair rise from our skin with the approaching storm. We sense how our minds empty, leaning with the wind, leaving space only for the wonder that is in fear. The lightning charges, and we are foolish enough to stand in open tundra at better than twelve thousand feet where before us granite monoliths the color of tombstones rise the final three thousand feet into a sky that is alive with dangerous power.

Or perhaps we stand this same ground and it is morning and we are hoping against rain and we can hear only the perpetual presence of a slight, scudding wind and the darting industry of insects and the trickle of melting snow at the base of a glacier. We are surrounded by Monet strokes of flowers that hug the ground like they are embarrassed or ashamed of their beauty. They defy their humility and cover the open ground with color. Where there are trees they are few and they are bent like arthritic bones, twisted and knuckled and folded at the hips from years of holding ground against winter wind and snow burial.

Away and below falls all the earth in rumples and wrinkles, so many we become lost within the count, overwhelmed in the enormity of the unfolding earth. Our eyes travel out into the open sky, a sky that feels as inhabitable as this landscape at our feet, as if we can walk into the air, ride the clouds, as if we can trace the river's course like an eagle. This moving water at the glacier's edge is but inches wide and so cold that it arrests our breathing when we can no longer resist the desire to cup our hands and break its liquid surface.

The temporary dying of the glacier gives birth to the river. It all starts here. All of it. We find that hard to imagine when facing such humble beginnings. Fear and desire. What has been given and what has been lost. We straddle this trickle of water, aware of our feet in the spongy, moist summer earth at the glacier's base, and we picture this river we have traveled the length of, this river we have seen through to its destination. We close our eyes now and see its broad back flowing beneath bridges that stretch distances so great that one end is blind to the other. We have travelled its length and yet we cannot grasp its scope, its variety, cannot fathom the relentless memory it harbors. To stare at a map means nothing. We must touch it, step within its liquid parting, dip our hands and sip from its life as it drains through our fingers. Even entering this water, feeling it upon our skin and within our throats we know but that fleeting moment, each measure of water a fragment. We cannot know the whole of this river, no more than we can narrate the whole of our lives, for it is the river bed that shapes the surface we see. We miss the commingling of geology and geography, mesmerized as we are by the water's surface, that plane interrupted by the stirring of insects and the rise of fish, by the leap of water momentarily testing air.

Fragments. Tributaries. The riverbed of the unseen. We wonder as we stand at such humble beginnings. We listen to these first persistent drips of water melting from a glacier's edge and wonder if this water already knows its way home like a bird migrating a route it has known before its birth. And sometimes we wonder why it is so hard for us to find our way. We listen and we wonder. This drip like a heartbeat. This narrative beating.

WATER CYCLE: TRIBUTARIES

Like rivers everywhere, this one has its forks and its tributaries. Its streams and creeks. The blue on the map that becomes only a broken line of dashes. Each comes from somewhere else. Each crosses its own defined place, saunters within its individual landscape. They all come together here.

WATER CYCLE: STONES

Sometimes when you are reading the river, waiting for the dark-backed bullet shadows of fish or signs of a hatch on the water, it will feel like something in the water will rise up or shift like a body moving in sleep. You see it in shallow water over beds of smooth river rock where suddenly there are stirring rills of small whitewater peaks, just a flutter all at once moving together then gone. So you'll watch the spot, the sun seeming to spotlight it, drawing you away from the reading you're supposed to be doing. Sometimes, you'll feel it when you wade in the river, a sudden invisible tug like a hand trying to latch onto your boot or something that feels alive bumping against you. You'll stare

into the dark recesses and will see nothing, just the relentless flow of water.

My dad used to tell me that there were thousands of dead Indians buried beneath the bed of the river bottom, buried there longer than any country or empire had survived, longer than memory. He said that sometimes the smooth flat pebbles you might choose for skipping, those white stones that fooled you in the way they caught your eye when peering through the distorting mirror of the water's surface, that these were actually fossilized bones worn smooth by the river. Shards of the dead. Remnants of what's come before.

WATER CYCLE: THE WATER CARRIER

Aquarius swims in the night sky. He plays peek-a-boo behind floating clouds that are like shadows. His buckets offer a steady dripping. Perhaps they have rusted pinpoints like the galvanized pail she carries today, the orange-tainted droplets marking her path like inkblots, like flower blooms. See, there where she stopped and her little arm swung round and the drip-drop bucket drew a bouquet on the ground beside her feet? And there, she jumped from one rock to the next, and the pail swung a perilous arc, its contents leaping and straining the rim. See the evidence, the rainbow arch drying now? And here a bigger drip, the escaped remainder dripping from its silver chin, one clear teardrop among the pinpoints where the steal has succumbed. When she arrives, what is left? Does she hold the empty bucket to the sun and watch light peek though the thin bottom?

Aquarius. His bucket seems full to overflowing. I think I hear the sloshing water gaining the rim as he adjusts the pole that has grown like an appendage across his shoulders. Or do I hear the flop of a fish in the river? Is that Pisces hearing Aquarius' call? I've stood gazing into the night for hours, stood under his steady labor and am drenched to the core. I hear you Aquarius. Wherever you are hiding now. The river rises. Our thirst is unquenchable. You must grow tired. Or have you, like us, grown so accustomed to weariness that you have forgotten the feel of empty buckets, the lightness of air?

The river rises up like it wants to join the sky. Where has she left her rusted bucket? Is it in the same place where she hides the bent spoon she uses to dig in the sand the river deposits in the shade of the big spruce, the one she pretends is her father? Where is she hiding? What does she carry now that her pail is empty?

WATER CYCLE: RIVER CROSSES

They couldn't find your bodies, so your bones help hold the river in place now. Crosses sprout among the bleached boulders of the river bend, wider than it used to be and stripped of green all the way up the canyon wall where a faint line like a shadow marks the high water. One day it will mark your passing here—the longevity of stone outlast-

ing the brittle, untended wood now leaning towards the water as if beckoning, like the crosses still search for you too.

WATER CYCLE: WATER SONGS

Some say you can hear the songs on moonlit nights when the rest of the known world is quiet. Water songs. Songs of the river people and their water babies.

Of those who say they have heard the singing, some say it is mournful, full of sorrow and regret, but others say the music is alluring, enchanting, playful even, like the tunes of a pied piper, the river calling out to her spirits, calling upon them to return to her and the other world to which she grants entrance. Some say the songs call to us too, the living. Such people say that this audible landscape is our summons. And from time to time one of the living does join that mysterious underwater world, slipping through one of its portals to those nether reaches, those openings through which, perhaps, we once passed seeking something other than liquid air.

WATER CYCLE: ABSENCE

I am in the desert. I am so lonely I am dying.

WATER CYCLE: ICE

All the visible world is covered under a layer of snow, and the sound of the river is insulated, as if it, like you, has snuggled into its bed and is drowsing, has felt the cold and added another blanket and now dreams away the grey winter morning in contented bliss. Below the snow ice covers the river. Only a meandering path of open water reveals the river's existence. There are footsteps in the snow, marks of deer and bighorn stepping cautiously toward the open water for a drink.

At its edges the ice appears alive like a cell splitting or egg whites stiffening, a frozen custard of white gathering on the rocks where the open, moving water spits its excess. Icicles form and drip like stalactites from boulder faces and rock edges. Abstract sculpting. The river trying to get out of the river for a time. Near the channel where the water continues to flow, slabs of ice buckle and shift and are heaved up onto the flat surface of other ice, looking, for all the world, as if time has been frozen.

WATER CYCLE: EDDIES

Like all rivers, the Overland Fork is full of eddies, some visible, more often hidden, unknown by most except familiar kayakers and rafters who have encountered their sudden spin. Particularly powerful eddies, especially those in stretches of whitewater, often receive names from river enthusiasts, as if by naming then, they can become a famil-

iar and be treated as such by the river. "Rebound." "Bucking Bronc." "Widow-maker." "Toilet Bowl." "Rinse and Spit." Elsewhere there are sections of water where indeed the river runs backwards, if you will, where underwater obstacles turn the main current against itself, catching log and raft and human alike and catapulting them upstream into what often looks like flat water but is as alive and insistent as the obvious current of downstream water you would better expect. The power of an eddy is shocking to those on first encounter, the strength of those forces that turn, spin, disorient, and sometimes, take you back from where you come.

WATER CYCLE: OCEAN

We have sailed across the broad curving belly of the world, a world blue and eternal and without end. We have sailed and we have swum and we have sailed some more. The moisture of a saline-ridden sky has burned our eyes and dried our skin until it looks like a drained lake bed, and the wind has tangled our hair into thickets, into weeds. Yet we come back again and again, and when we can't ride upon the water's crest, we huddle at its edges no matter the weather it brings, staring across its blue horizon from shore.

Water everywhere and still we want more. We want to slip beneath its blue curtain, enter its liquid depth, ride within the rocking cradle of its ceaseless ebb and flow, curl in its womb, drifting, drifting, drifting. So this is where we have been carried all along, back to the underwater world, back to the place where time begins and ends and begins again. We plunge within. The liquid world swells our lungs. We feel them fill to overflowing and, just as we hear the air express, our lungs transform, as if the air has changed chemistry. And we say yes, we are ready now, we have returned, and suddenly we realize that there is a world below the water and it is full with forests and mountains, and yes, full with canyons etched deeper still into the center of the earth.

Mark Hummel's fiction and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Bloomsbury Review*, *Fugue*, *Matter*, *Porcupine*, *Talking River Review*, *Zone 3* and elsewhere. "Water Cycle" is a story formed from a series of vignettes excerpted from a recently completed novel that bears the same title. Married and the father of three daughters, he lives near Jackson Hole, WY.

Susan Kelly-DeWitt

How the River Sleeps

The crows must recite
Bloodnight, Bloodnight…

Then the hook-
jawed woman who unreels
every barbed and dazzling thing, every net
of torn sparkle and trouble, every raveled
molecule of
rainbow and
knife—

the shifty one who spins shafts of black
light and drownings, moth
mullein and deadly nightshade
atoms, seep
spring monkey
flowers and stinging
nettle—

tiptoes from her lonely cave;
kneels among cattails and scouring
rush; whispers:
shhhhh,
shhhhh,
shhhhh…

She hums and wheedles and strums
all the little strings
of cold persuasion.

Poppies At Sunset

The day seethes salts under the quiet
yards. Bone fingers; crisp, dry mouths.

Against a fence, an exhausted paradise
of spoiled petals, a lost poppy tropics.

Hot neon shavings, wind-whittled.
(Without petals they're more exotic—

swollen, blush-pink peduncles
in an anti-world etched by Bosch.)

Billows of three-toed poppy leaves trouble
a slug intent on inching past, to his homely shadow-

hedge, his root-hinged house. Finicky and frail
a doddering recluse hobbles toward a rosy

undertuft of seed swell. *Oh but night is*
slipping quickly

along the feathery edges! Lights out
soon for us too.

Critic

The mixture of blues in the delphiniums
colors in the spaces of the mind's

arboretum, on this windy day in autumn.
And the cedar waxwing, who bows to tip

his crest to me from a shady fencepost
outside my studio window—who studies me

with his cat-burglar face—flies off again,
uninterested in the hothouse poem

I am trying to construct, this cramped
conservatory of words where sounds are all

steamed up, and I am cross-pollinating
syllables, hybridizing memory and myth.

Tuberose

And how can that beauty
ever die?

Even if it vanishes
something utterly real
will burn day

and night, an indelible
fragrance, a potent cloud
of memory-perfume.

Out of every
death some wand
of the everlasting is
borne up.

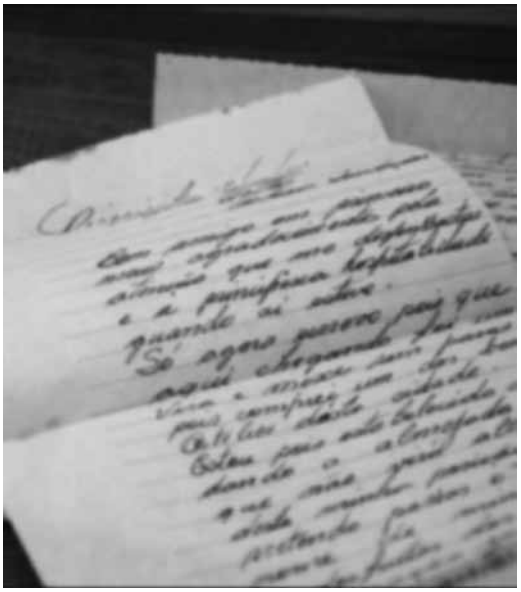
A single stalk
rises, a fat match-tip
of cream

which the servants who travel
in secret, cloaked in the heat of late
summer sun will strike
into luminous light.

Susan Kelly-DeWitt is the author of *The Fortunate Islands* (Marick Press, 2008) as well as six chapbooks and a letterpress collection. She is currently completing a new collection called *Ghostfire*. Her Web site is www.susankelly-dewitt.com.

Luciana Lopez

At the Falls



Carla was thirteen when her father, Allen, died. She had been an eighth-grader at Alice Ruskin Middle School for only three days when she came home from school to find Allen grimacing on the sofa, his lips blue as a bruise, his legs spread awkwardly as if he'd fallen onto the cushions rather than lowered himself there. He could barely speak. Carla dialed 911 with an unshaking hand; not until the paramedics had come and gone did she run to the bathroom to retch, her empty stomach bringing up only spit and air. Nina, her mother, was at the diner, waiting tables on the early dinner shift; Simone, nine years old, was at a Girl Scout meeting, learning to tie knots.

"Dad's had a heart attack," Carla told her mother on the phone. "They're taking him to Phillips Memorial."

Nina began breathing heavily, a panting that crescendoed into great whoops of air like the call of a sea bird.

"Mom, you have to come get me," Carla said. "The ambulance already left. Come get me now."

"Okay," Nina answered. "I'll be there in just a minute."

When Nina pulled up in the green station wagon, Carla was sitting on the curb. She still wore her school clothes, a pomegranate-red T-shirt and faded blue jeans. She opened the passenger side door almost before Nina stopped the car.

"He was blue, and he couldn't breathe," Carla said. "He just kept wheezing…."

Nina did not answer. She reached up with her right hand and fingered the faded yellow tassel attached to the rearview mirror. Class of 81.

Mom, Carla tried to say, but her throat had closed up. She tried again.

"Mom. Is Dad gonna die?"

Nina tangled her fingers up in the tassel.

"Mom! Is Dad gonna die?"

At last her mother answered. "No sweetheart, no, of course not. No one's gonna die today. He'll be fine. The hospital can fix all kinds of stuff."

The car jolted to a halt at the great glass doors of the emergency room. Carla threw herself out of the car and had already run four or five paces when she heard her mother's voice call back to her.

Carla whirled around, almost falling as she spun. "What?"

"I said, I'm gonna go get Simone." Nina leaned into the passenger seat to look at Carla. Her eyelids fluttered. "I'll be right back."

"Mom," Carla cried. "Mom, Dad could be—"

Nina shook her head, her long platinum hair flying out in a wide circle. "I gotta get Simone," she said.

"She'll be fine, Mom, but now, now, please, Mom," Carla begged.

But Nina sat up straight again and clutched the wheel, tendons standing out in her hands. Carla could hear her mother's teeth chatter, loudly, like the rattling of pocket change.

Carla began to speak again, but changed her mind. She turned and ran into the hospital, her sneakers squealing loudly on the linoleum.

INSIDE ALL WAS CONFUSION: people sitting on orange plastic chairs or standing up, sometimes leaning on other people. Nurses and doctors and people less identifiable walking by briskly, or even running. A counter at the far end, with thick, clear plastic partitions, people seated behind. A man moaned and held his head in one of the chairs.

An older Asian woman from behind the counter helped Carla find her father; he was unconscious and hooked up to more machines than she could count, new ones seeming to materialize as she peered through tear-blurred eyes. For thirty minutes she held his hand and whispered to him. *Dad, you'll be okay. Dad, you'll be okay. Dad, you'll be okay*. She couldn't think of anything else to say.

Finally Nina appeared. Simone looked surprised to be in the hospital, and Carla wondered what their mother had told her. Nina reached out to Allen with a shaky hand, but pulled back before touching him. Her other hand was in Simone's.

"I'm gonna, I'm gonna…" she began. "I'm gonna go…"

She backed away a step. Carla jumped up and grabbed her mother's arm.

"Dad could be dead," she shouted. "He could die!"

Simone gasped and started wailing like an animal. No, it was obvious, their mother hadn't told her what was happening. Carla would

have reached out to her little sister, gathered her close. But this time Carla's own pain was too much.

In her grasp Carla could feel her mother's pulse, unsteady, furious, under the clammy skin. With an abrupt, violent motion, Nina shook Carla's hand off and walked to Allen's bed and leaned over the metal railing to look at him. To kiss him? No, Nina had only bent forward for a moment.

Less than an hour later Carla's father was dead.

CARLA WAS NAMED FOR HER FATHER'S MOTHER, Simone for Nina's favorite singer. "It would have been you instead of Simone," Nina told her one night, "but your father got to the hospital people first. I was just 17, what did I know. I was out cold. He knew what I wanted, but he did it anyway. Couldn't stand to see you named for a black woman, I guess."

Carla's face grew hot. The three of them were seated at the dinner table; her father had been dead three months. The room was a small one, and Allen's empty place at the head of the table, opposite Nina's, seemed to throw a shadow over all the table. A half-empty wine bottle stood before her mother's plate. Red wine; white tasted like paint thinner, Nina always said. Her eyes were crazed with pink lines, thin as the fractures on shattered eggshells.

Nina's grief filled the house with sound, with tears, with whirlwinds of emotion at all hours of the day. At first Carla welcomed her mother's outbursts as proof of her love for Allen. But after awhile Nina's cries seemed to blunt even the air around them, to dull the sight and smell and sound of everything else. In the night Carla doubled with her own silent sorrow.

The less Carla comforted her, the more and the louder Nina cried, her recollections of Carla's father diverging more and more from what Carla knew. Nina began looking aslant at Carla, through narrowed eyes, when she announced that Allen had loved his job more than his family, or had always planned to kick the girls out as soon as they turned eighteen.

Soon they were fighting incessantly over her father's memory. What was he really like, what sorts of things had he said, what had he done. *Saint Dad, that's what you think he was. Fat lot you know.* And then Nina would begin crying, sobbing, heaving, begging for Carla's forgiveness. *I didn't mean it, I didn't. He was such a good man. Oh honey, you miss your daddy, don't you?*

Carla stopped answering these charges. Why should she; her mother was wrong and Carla was right and there was no point arguing. There was nothing more to say, Carla felt, though her mother never stopped trying.

"That's right," Nina continued at dinner. "A black woman. He just couldn't stand it. But for Simone here"—and she shot a look at Simone, who had bent quietly over her plate at the start of the meal and said

little thereafter. Simone rarely said anything anymore. She had flattened herself, until she was almost thin enough to disappear—"I got to the nurses first, before the labor got too bad, and told them what her name was. Oh, Allen was furious, I bet. He never said anything, but I could tell he was mad. Yes, sir, I knew him better than anyone."

Don't look at her, Carla thought. *Don't look at her.*

The silence settled on the table. Allen had rarely spoken during meals, but Nina had always chattered away. The quiet was unusual. Simone's fork scraped against her plate, sharp and shrill. "Sorry," Simone mumbled, not looking up. Their mother poured herself another glass of wine. No one said anything more until Carla got up, her half-full plate in her hand, and made for the kitchen. Behind her, she heard her mother cry out, "Come back honey! Oh, sweetie, you know—"

But Carla had gone.

THE DAY CARLA FINISHED FRESHMAN YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL, Nina knocked on her door, a hesitant string of taps. Carla's was the only door Nina knocked on; elsewhere in the house she walked in as she pleased. "Come in," Carla called out from her bed. Her journal was in her lap; she twirled a pen between her fingers. The waiting summer faced her like a closed hand, unfurling to reveal—what, she did not yet know.

Her mother walked in, wearing light blue jeans, a pink V-neck shirt, high-heeled white sandals. Nina was slender as a teenager still, her skin clear and fresh and rosy. She was beautiful, far more than either of her daughters. Though it was only early evening, Carla already wore her pyjamas, striped blue and white and grey. She lay on her bed, back against the wooden headboard, carved with entwined flowers at the edges. Her room was a plain one; two posters graced the wall, of horses, and nothing more.

"Hi sweetie," Nina began. She stood before Carla's bed, twisting her hands around each other. "I just wanted to say congratulations—survived your first year of high school."

"Thank you," Carla answered. Her journal lay, still open, across her knees. She and her mother looked at each other for a moment, then her mother took a step back, half turning. But she stopped and turned back to Carla. She strode forward and sat on Carla's bed, hurriedly, biting her lip.

"Are you going to go out tonight?" Nina asked. "You can, you know. I mean, it's okay. I, I'll let you. No curfew or anything. Don't you want to?"

Where had this come from? As if the start of summer were some milestone.

"No," Carla replied. "I'm okay."

Nina nodded, then looked down as she smoothed the covers on Carla's bed. "I just thought, maybe you wanted to be a little, I don't

know, a little less…" She waved a hand around Carla's room, the shelves lined with books, the orderliness of it all.

They looked at each other for a few moments before her mother spoke again.

"You look like Marcy Danvers. Your hair is the exact same shade of brown," Nina said. "Did I ever tell you about Marcy?"

Carla nodded. Marcy Danvers, Nina's best friend from high school. Together they'd snuck out to meet boys, stolen lipstick from the local drugstores and thrown pebbles at cute Craig Thompson's window to get him to come out with them. They'd stayed out the night before high school graduation and fallen asleep at the ceremony, during the valedictorian's speech. By then Nina was already three months pregnant; Carla had done the math years ago, though she never mentioned it to her mother.

Nina reached out a hand to Carla's cheek. Carla tried to stay perfectly still while her mother touched her, but in a moment she drew back. She cleared her throat, wondering how to ask, *what do you want?* But she couldn't form the words. Time stretched taut as skin between them.

"Carla," her mother broke in suddenly. "Carla, can I tell you something? Something nobody else knows?"

Carla nodded. Perhaps this would get rid of her faster.

"It's about your sister," Nina began. "She, well, she has a different dad than you."

Carla felt her mouth open slightly, her eyes grow wider. The image her mother's words had conjured refused to come; the revelation felt too big to comprehend. "What do you mean?"

"His name was Bruce. I knew him in high school. He moved away after graduation, but he came back into town once and called me and, well, I saw him, and then I had your sister. And I never told your father."

The words fell faster and faster as Nina leaned in nearer and nearer to Carla.

"And I don't know what to do," her mother continued. "I never told your sister, but maybe she should know? And maybe she shouldn't know? And I never told your father and I never knew if that was right and I always kind of wanted to. And I never told anyone, and I don't know what to do."

A week or two later Carla remembered her reply, but for days afterward she would forget what she had said: tell Simone, so that the girl could find her father, her lost one. *She has another chance to have a father. How can you not tell her that? How can you not give her that back?* Carla would never forget, though, the way her heart seemed to ricochet around her ribs.

Nina had cried. "It would kill her," she said, "it wouldn't do any good." No good, Carla thought, for her mother; but for Simone, oh,

for Simone. *A father! She gets to have a father again, can't you see?* And on, and on, until Nina nodded her head and promised, yes, of course, she would tell Simone, and thank you, Carla, yes, you're right, I'll tell Simone, I promise.

At the end of the conversation she had fallen into Carla, arms outstretched, for a hug. Nina, her head against Carla's chest, closed her eyes like a child.

HER MOTHER TOOK TO ASKING CARLA'S PERMISSION for things, like whether she should buy a new coat or replace the refrigerator. She interjected a bitter little grimace in the beginning, a mocking tone. "What do you think, Carla? Should I get us a new television?" Carla could only stare and shrug her shoulders before retreating to her room. Once, for spite, Carla answered back: "Of course not. What do you need another dress for, anyway?" Nina put down the catalog to look at Carla, who stood still and gazed back, trying to control the tremors she felt just under her skin. The next day Carla saw the catalog in the trash; Nina did not buy the dress, after all.

From that point the mocking tone ceased, though her mother still asked Carla what to do or buy, how to make decisions for the three of them. "Why are you asking me?" Carla would yell. "Just do whatever you want." What did Carla know about trading in the car?

Her mother began sliding the mail, unopened, under Carla's door, jamming the letters together like a doorstop. To get into her room Carla had to pick the letters up; once they were in her hand, her mother always convinced her to keep them, to answer the letters and send off the checks for the bills. There was that about her mother: the ability to make someone feel needed, important. That sparkling charm. A few times Nina even convinced Carla to write out the checks herself, even to signing them, at the bottom, *Nina Adler.* Every time that name escaped Carla's pen, she felt her heart beat a little quicker in mingled fear and excitement.

Carla hoped that getting her driver's license at sixteen would help set her free; but instead her mother found yet more for Carla to do. *Remember to change the oil*, or, *Could you fill up the gas tank*, or, *Could you run out to the grocery store*. More and more, the weight of these needs swept Carla's life away from her.

Once, waiting for Simone to finish her ballet lesson, Carla looked through the glass door into the wooden-floored room; the girls were around Carla's age, strong and graceful in their black leotards and pink tights as they kicked their legs up. Out in the lobby, with Carla, sat the parents, the older men and women who read newspapers or talked quietly among themselves. Carla had pushed past them into the ladies' room, where she locked the door, sank to the floor and cried, as quietly as she could, until someone knocked insistently for admittance a few minutes later. When Simone asked about Carla's red eyes that night,

Carla had only replied, "Must be allergies." She could never let Simone think herself a burden.

Her mother's touch felt heavier and heavier on her. At night she repeated to herself, over and over: It will never end. It will never end. Her mother would never let her go.

NINA DIED ON A MARCH AFTERNOON, driving back from the diner. She must have fallen asleep, because her car drifted into the next lane over. A truck had been passing at that moment, and Nina's Volkswagen folded, like a metal envelope being sealed up.

Carla had moved to New York for college, the furthest from Oregon she could get, and stayed there after graduation. She was 26 years old, and on the other end of the early evening phone call was her sister, crying."Mom's dead," Simone said. "Mom's dead."

For a few minutes it was all her sister could say. "Mom's dead."

Carla coached Simone into breathing more steadily, into speaking more clearly. "What do you mean, Mom's dead? Just tell me slowly, okay, just take it slow."

Carla took a late flight that night out of JFK. The magazine where Carla was now an art editor had just closed another issue; for once, Carla thought at the airport, Nina had chosen a good time to do something. Once she realized what she'd thought Carla tried to blush, but she couldn't summon the energy to be ashamed. It's only the truth, she thought.

Her sister had stayed in Oregon after graduating high school, going to community college and, like their mother, waiting tables. Simone met Carla at the airport; she was dressed entirely in black, mismatched pieces too hot for the weather. Simone, a fair-skinned brunette with long wavy hair, almost never wore black. Carla was wearing dark blue jeans, cuffed at the bottom, and an aqua-colored shirt only a shade or two lighter than her eyes. When she saw Simone, Carla did blush; she had forgotten to wear black.

Her sister either didn't notice or didn't care. She embraced Carla tightly; Simone had been the taller of the two for the last decade, though they shared the same slim body type. "I'm glad you're back," she whispered. They held hands on the way to the parking lot. Carla had missed her sister, had always missed her sister when they were apart. Carla got behind the wheel of the car without even asking, Simone handing her the keys without a pause.

At the house, while Simone made them sandwiches for lunch, Carla unpacked swiftly, then tiptoed to her mother's room. It was as she had remembered it as a child; little had changed. The matched oak furniture, the clothes scattered on the floor, the top of the vanity a mass of jewelry and make-up. Carla opened the drawers of Nina's dresser, of the night stand. She looked through the closet, running her hands among the pockets of the dresses, poking through the large department

store bag that had always held her mother's important documents. Before she could finish, she heard Simone's voice calling from downstairs.

"Coming," Carla called back. She made plans to return in the night.

NINA NEVER TOLD SIMONE. Carla never asked, but she could tell; gaps in their conversations, the way her mother avoided the topic of Simone. Nina never told.

When she came home for the funeral, Carla spent her nights looking through her mother's things, looking for some sign that Nina had intended, at least, to keep her word, that she meant the promise she'd made, with her copious tears, that night in Carla's room. Each night, after she found nothing, Carla slipped into her mother's bed, trying to fit into the Nina-shaped void left behind, to find the outline of her mother's body. The exact shape of her mother's absence. In her nights of turning herself back and forth Carla could not find the vestige of her mother that the mattress must surely contain.

On the fifth night she slid, as she had become accustomed, between the cool sheets. Slowly, they warmed with her body. In the weak moonlight Carla could barely see the furniture, shadowy, as if they were the sketches of things rather than the things themselves. The ceiling was all darkness. Down at her thighs her hands grabbed the sheets, gripping so tightly that she wrenched them off the corners of the bed. She felt the yell rumbling up her throat, and she turned her face into the pillow.

When she finished she kept her face pressed down, the pillow now wet with spit and tears. The arrested yell, the dampened pillow, the sheets pulled out of place. And in the midst of this, Carla's mother, her shape, her form, the space she once occupied. Carla closed her eyes and held as still as she could.

A few minutes later she sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed to rummage in her mother's nightstand. She pulled out a pad of paper with the word *Nina* embossed at the top in gold, like license-plate keychains stamped Amanda or Jessica or Jane.

Her mother's handwriting came back to her easily, as if the loopy scrawl had waited, coiled, in the pen for someone to release it.

Dear Simone, the letter began. *You are not who you think you are.*

Carla wrote what her mother had told her that night and more. Things Nina had talked about over the years, stories from high school, stories about boys, stories about meeting Allen; Carla took these and changed them, a little or a lot, wrote them about their mother and someone named Bruce. The letter sprawled on for four pages.

THAT NIGHT CARLA TOOK THE FOUR PAGES of loop-de-loop writing, folded it into quarters, and placed it under her pillow, but she still couldn't sleep. Her hand kept creeping back to feel the pages, and she imagined

the sharp paper corners digging into her cheek. Whenever she began to drift off, she pictured the letter's ink smearing on her face, the words imprinting themselves on her skin.

The sisters were going hiking the next day, up to Multnomah Falls, where they had sometimes gone as girls. Nina had come with them once or twice only, and never after Carla got her driver's license. The hike was Simone's idea; Carla was flying back to New York the day after. Simone had proposed they release something of Nina's at the top in farewell. Carla agreed, and in the afternoon they wrapped a few things together in a mauve scarf their mother had loved: the high school graduation tassel, now taped to Nina's bedroom mirror; a pair of outsized hoop earrings, of the kind Nina wore often; a few family photos; and a penny the girls had found on the ground outside the funeral home. Nina had always believed in luck.

The package was only a few inches across each way. Small enough to hold in the palm of Carla's hand.

THE NEXT DAY THEY SET OUT FOR THE FALLS. Simone wears her own clothes, but Carla, who no longer owns hiking wear, takes a jacket and a pair of sturdy pants from her mother's closet; the clothes fit exactly. Her mother's scent, a combination of gardenias and vanilla, rises up from the jacket into Carla's nose and mouth on the two-hour drive to the Columbia River Gorge.

The climb itself goes quickly. The trees are lush and green, beneficiaries of the rain and mild temperatures, and the ground is soft. They step through switchbacks, the trail muddy from the rainy season; they're lucky to have a clear day in the erratic Oregon spring. Apparently no one else is willing to take the chance; they have the trail to themselves. Simone, walking in front, skids on some pebbles about halfway up. Carla braces herself and stops her sister's slide. "Thanks," Simone says softly, her eyes glittering with tears. Carla understands; it's only the two of them now, after all. They have no one else.

The letter burns in Carla's pocket. She touches it often, her right hand seeking its sharp edges, its tight folds. *Has the ink smeared*, she wonders, or *Did I remember all the pages?* How could something so big as the letter look so small? In her left hand Carla holds the scarf and its contents, her mother's life, wrapped in a piece of silk.

As they near the top of the trail they hear the rush of water, and faint droplets of mist hang in the pine-scented air. Finally they see the lookout platform, big enough for a dozen people, empty now. They slow as they approach their goal. To Carla each step feels heavier, heavier, until she is unsure she will ever make it the final five steps, four, three, two. One. And then they are there.

The water rushes down several hundred feet, tossing up a welcome spray after the sweat of the climb. The sisters stand for a moment, looking out across the gorge. The landscape is green as emeralds. But still,

Carla's eyes are drawn to dull spots, to dead spots, where trees seem to be missing.

She hears Simone choke beside her. She turns and sees her sister, on her knees, heaving as if trying to bring up something too big to fit inside her. Carla drops down beside her sister to rub Simone's shoulders. Finally Simone stills, then looks up. She shakes her head, over and over. The sisters fall into each other, an angular embrace full of elbows and bones, but they hang on tightly nevertheless. As they separate Simone whispers in Carla's ear, "This is just how she would have wanted us."

Carla startles at Simone's words. Yes. Yes. Carla sees it; Simone is right. This is what Nina wanted: her secret, a jagged shard of glass she was always too afraid to take up. Left behind for Carla to bear, though it cut her. For Carla to discharge, though Nina should have discharged it—promised to discharge it, whatever it might bring—years ago. Another burden from her mother. *It will never end.*

Carla turns away from her sister, slips a hand into her pocket, and draws out the letter. Hiding her motions, quickly, she slides the letter into the bundle in the scarf. The added weight of the paper makes almost no difference, she thinks. As if it were nothing after all.

She faces her sister again and holds out the scarf. "Here," Carla says. Simone takes it in silence and walks to the edge of the platform. She pauses, then raises her arm behind her and throws the bundle overhand, down into the water. In a second the color disappears into the rush.

Stephanie Yao

Luciana Lopez is currently the pop music critic at *The Oregonian* in Portland, Oregon. Her work has appeared in several journals, including *Zyzzyva*, *Lichen*, *Tusculum Review*, *McSweeney's* online and others. She has lived in Brazil and Japan and hopes to live abroad again someday.

Terry E. Lockett

Planting

(For H.A.)

The new farmhouse's root
cellar and large garden patch
made me think of her old house.
So when it came spring and
time for planting
I asked for her help.
She was well over a hundred then,
could no longer kneel, but
from a red lawn chair
she taught how to make mounds for
watermelons and cucumbers, how to
stake tomato vines and
the joy in cool dirt
over cut potatoes
as she closed her eyes and with
tongue-tip to upper lip
reached and
patted air.

Blackbirds

"The pastoral Muses, once scattered
now are all a single flock in a single fold."

—Artemidorus

Redwings are not terrestrial—
On water skip like stones;
Click in the thick of cat tails
From knitted grass cup homes—
Checker muddy banks with caution,
Rivet with on-ka-lees of song,
A flick of the quill, flash of vermilion,
They're back to the skies and gone.

Terry Lockett grew up in Central Washington State and earned her degree at Central Washington University. She was the winner of the 2007 Allied Arts Juried Poetry Contest. Other works have been featured in the Washington Poetry Association's Online Poetry Collection: *Whispers and Shouts*. Terry has provided services to foster children and their families for over two decades.

Ha Jin

Shame

From the short story collection News of Arrival


Jerry Bauer

Ha Jin grew up in mainland China and served in the Chinese People's Liberation Army for five years. He left the army at the age of 19 and worked at a railroad company in Jiamusi for three years, waiting for colleges to open. In 1977, he took the entrance exams and got admitted to Heilingjiang University, where he was assigned to major in English. After college, he went to Shandong University to study toward a master's degree in American literature, which he received in 1984. He came to the United States in 1985 as a PhD candidate at Brandeis University. Initially, he planned to finish his PhD in American literature and then return to China to teach, but the Tiananmen massacre made him change his mind and decide to immigrate. He also decided to write in English. Since 1990 he has published three volumes of poetry, *Between Silences* (1990), *Facing Shadows* (1996), and *Wreckage* (2001). His first book of short fiction, *Ocean of Words* (1996), received the PEN/Hemingway Award; *Under the Red Flag* (1997), his second collection, was honored with the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, and *The Bridegroom* (2000), his third collection, received The Asian American Literary Award (2001) and the Townsend Fiction Prize (2002). He has also written five novels: *In the Pond* (1998); *Waiting* (1999), which received the National Book Award (1999) and the PEN/Faulkner Award (2004); *The Crazed* (2002); *War Trash* (2004, the PEN/Faulkner Award, 2005), and *A Free Life* (2007). His work has been translated into more than thirty languages.

Ha Jin taught literature and poetry writing at Emory University and currently is a professor of English at Boston University. He and his wife live outside Boston.

"Shame" is from his new collection of short fiction, *News of Arrival*, which is forthcoming from Pantheon Books. The collection consists of twelve stories, all set in Flushing, NY, and center on the immigrant experience. Most of the characters in the book, like the narrator and Mr. Meng in "Shame," are first-generation immigrants, who go through the painful acclimation that is beset with anguish and losses, while stubbornly pursuing what they believe is the American promise. Like "Shame," the collection describes the emotional strife that comes with the process of Americanization.

Soon after I'd found a summer job in Flushing, I received a phone call one evening. I was thrilled to hear the voice of Professor Meng, who had come to visit some U.S. universities with a delegation of educators. He used to be my teacher, an expert in American studies at my alma mater back in Nanjing. He had translated a book of short stories by Jack London and was known as a literary scholar in China.

"Where are you staying, Mr. Meng?" I asked.

"At the Chinese consulate here."

"Can I come and see you?"

"Not tonight, I'm leaving for a party, but we'll be here for a few days. Can we meet tomorrow?"

I agreed to go and see him the next afternoon. According to him, after New York, the delegation would head for Boston and then for Chicago and Minneapolis. Mr. Meng had taught me in 1985, for only one semester, in a course in American Jewish fiction. He was not a remarkable teacher, his voice too flat and at times unclear, but he had a phenomenal memory, able to give a lot of information on authors and books, some of which I suspected he hadn't read because they were unavailable in China at the time. He was then in his early fifties, but trim and agile—a fine ping-pong player. He often chaffed me, saying I looked already fortyish, though I was only twenty-five. I did appear much older than my age in those days, perhaps owing to my melancholy eyes and the dull headache I used to have in the mornings. I didn't mind Mr. Meng's joking, though. In a way I felt he treated me better than the other teachers.

It was overcast and muggy the next morning, as if the whole city of New York were inside a bathhouse. As usual, Ah Min and I set out with a van to deliver fabrics. He was behind the wheel while I sat in the navigator's seat. We first stopped at a sweatshop on Ninth Street in Brooklyn and dropped a few bundles of cloth there. Then we drove to downtown Manhattan and unloaded the rest of the materials at a larger factory on Mott Street. Its workshop was on the second floor of a building, and it was noisy in there, the purring and humming of sewing machines accentuated by the thumps of press irons. The floor was littered with scraps of cloth, and stacks of fabrics for coats sat against the walls. Some sewers and finishers, all women, were wearing earphones while their hands were busy. Our unloading was easy, but after that, we were to deliver finished products to clothing stores. We had to handle the suits and dresses carefully and mustn't crease or dirty any of them. A thin shadow of a fellow with a pallid face helped us. Together we pulled large plastic bags over the finished garments, one for each, and then hung them on racks with wheels. After that, we took the racks down by the elevator to the first floor, which was five feet above the ground. Ah Min backed the van up to the platform of the elevator, and I put two gangplanks in place so that we could pull the racks into the vehicle. The process was slow and exacting; every

time it took almost two hours. We had to be very careful, because our boss, a middle-aged man from Hong Kong, would reprimand us for any damaged product, though he had never docked our wages.

Before setting out that morning, I'd spoken to our boss, who let me have the afternoon off. Ah Min dropped me off at Union Square around 2 p.m. after we'd delivered the last batch of suits to a haberdasher's on Fifth Avenue. He was a friendly fellow with a sleepy look in his eyes and often teased me, probably because I was a temp as yet unable to drive confidently in Manhattan, and would return to school in Wisconsin when the summer ended. Indeed, I had come to New York mainly to make some money and also to see the city, which my master's thesis adviser, Professor Freeman, had said I must visit if I wanted to understand America.

When I got out of the subway, it had started drizzling. I regretted not having brought an umbrella with me as I was striding along Forty-second Street toward the Hudson. The neon lights, obscured some by the powdery rain, were glowing like naked limbs. They were more voluptuous than on a fine day, as if beckoning to pedestrians, but I had to hustle to avoid being drenched. Seven or eight minutes later I got into the Chinese consulate's entryway, in which about a dozen people were waiting for the drizzle to stop. An old man with a puffy face and small eyes was in the reception office, reading the overseas edition of *The People's Daily*. I told him my teacher's name and the purpose of my visit. He picked up the phone and punched a number.

A few moments later Mr. Meng came down. He looked the same as three years before. We shook hands; then, in spite of my wet polo shirt, we hugged. He was happy to see me and about to take me into the consulate.

"Wait, stop!" the old man cried through the window of the reception office. "You can't go in."

I produced my maroon-covered passport and opened it to show my photo. I said, "See, I'm not a foreigner."

"Makes no difference. You're not allowed to go in."

My teacher intervened, "I'm staying here. Please let us in, comrade. He was my student. We haven't seen each other for more than three years."

"Have to follow the rule—no visitor is allowed to enter this building."

My temper was rising. Just now I had seen a young woman, apparently a visitor, go in with a nod of her head at the geezer. I asked him, "Doesn't this building belong to China? As a citizen, don't I have the right to enter Chinese territory?"

"No, you don't. Stop wagging your clever tongue here. I've met lots of gasbags like you." His lackluster eyes flared.

"You make me ashamed of holding this passport," I spat out.

"Get a blue one with a big eagle on it, as if you could."

Mr. Meng stepped in again, "We won't go upstairs. There're some chairs in the lobby; can't we just sit over there for an hour or two? We'll stay in your view."

"No, you cannot."

The entryway was so crowded by now that we couldn't chat in there, so we went out in spite of the rain. We crossed Twelfth Avenue and observed for a while the aircraft carrier *Intrepid* exhibited on the Hudson, then turned onto Forty-fourth Street, where we found a diner near a construction site, at a corner of which stood a pair of porta-pottis. The place offered Italian fare. For an early dinner, Mr. Meng ordered spaghetti with meatballs and I had a small panfried pepperoni pizza. He confessed he'd never eaten pasta before, though he had come across words like macaroni, tagliatelle, vermicelli, linguini in American novels and knew they were all Italian noodles. I was pleased that he enjoyed the food, especially the tomato sauce and the Parmesan cheese, to which my stomach was as yet unaccustomed. He told me, "This is so hearty and healthy. I can taste olive oil and dill." I couldn't share his enthusiasm, since I still ate Chinese food most of the time.

He went on, "New York is so rich even the air smells fatty." He lifted his Heineken and took a gulp.

After reminiscing about some of my former classmates who had left China recently, he asked me, "How much can you make a month here?" His large nose twitched as a smile came on his narrow face.

"I'm paid by the hour, five-forty an hour."

He lowered his head to do the sum. Then he raised his eyes and said, "Wow, you make at least twenty times more than I can back home. In a few years you'll be rolling in money."

I smiled without a word. He hadn't considered that I had to spend more and pay taxes. He could hardly imagine how hard I worked. A stout waitress wearing an orange apron came over and handed us the dessert menu. I recommended that we both try the crème brûlée cheesecake, and he agreed. I liked desserts, which to me were the best part of American food. Sipping his coffee, he sighed, "What I wouldn't give to be in your shoes, Hongfan."

"I'm just a student, how can you say that?" I said.

"But you're doing graduate work in the United States and will be a real scholar someday, not like any one of my generation, all ruined by political movements in our formative years. We're a true lost generation."

"But you're already a professor."

"That's just a name. What have I accomplished? Nothing worth mentioning. So many years wasted, it's impossible to make up for the loss."

I remembered his translation of Jack London's stories, which was a respectable effort, but I didn't bring that up. I was moved in a way; few teachers at my alma mater would speak so candidly to a student. When

the brûlée cheesecake had come, he asked me whether I'd like to accompany him to meet with Professor Natalie Simon at Columbia. I was reluctant, afraid I'd lose another afternoon's work, but knowing Simon was a famous scholar in Modern American literature, I agreed to go with him. I assumed I could get permission from my boss again.

After dinner, I took him back to the consulate and promised to meet him at one-thirty the following day. The rain had let up and the clouds were breaking, but the air was still as muggy as if it was rubbing your skin. Having seen him disappear in the entryway, I turned toward the subway station.

TO MY RELIEF, MY BOSS GLADLY ALLOWED ME another afternoon off, saying his daughter had graduated from Barnard College, so he liked the idea that I would accompany my former teacher to visit the university. My boss had been in a jolly frame of mind these days, because his daughter had just passed her bar exam. When I joined Mr. Meng outside the consulate, he was holding a shoulder bag. I wondered if I should carry that for him, but thought better of it in case it contained something valuable. Together we took the No. 3 train uptown.

Columbia's English department was easy to find, and the door to Professor Simon's office was open. She welcomed us warmly and seated us on the only sofa in the room with tall windows. She waved apologetically, saying, "Sorry about such a mess in here."

She was younger than I'd thought, in her late forties and with a regal bone structure and sparkling eyes, but her face was heavily freckled and so were her arms. Mr. Meng was fluent in English, though he had studied Russian originally and switched to this language in the early 1960s when China and the former Soviet Union had fallen out. Soon he began talking to Professor Simon about a bibliography of American literary works already translated into Chinese—a project that he had been in charge of, funded by the government. I listened without speaking. "In addition," he told her, "we have been writing a U.S. literary history, a college textbook. I will contribute two chapters."

"That's marvelous," she said. "I wish I could read Chinese. It would be interesting to see how Chinese scholars think of our literature."

I knew that six or seven professors had been working on that book, which would be nothing but a mishmash of articles based on the summaries of some novels and plays and on rehashing some official views and interpretations. Besides the censorship that makes genuine scholarship difficult, if not impossible, some of those contributors were merely buffs who held key positions in the popular field of American literary studies. Professor Simon had better remain ignorant of Chinese, or she would surely have been underwhelmed. She lifted two books, both hardcovers, from her desk and put them on the coffee table before us. "These are my recent books," she said. "I hope you'll like

them." The top one was entitled *Landscapes in Modern American Fiction*, but I couldn't see the title of the other one.

Mr. Meng touched the books. "Can you sign them for me?" he asked her.

"I've done that."

"These are precious, thank you."

To my amazement, he took a brown silk carton out of his shoulder bag and handed it to Professor Simon, saying, "Here's a little present for you."

She was pleased and opened the box. A set of imitation-ivory mahjong emerged, glossy and crisp in the fluorescent light. "Oh, this is gorgeous." Despite saying that, she seemed bewildered, her jaw dropped a bit, as if her mouth were holding something hard to swallow.

"Do you play mahjong?" asked Mr. Meng.

"I don't know how, but my mother-in-law often plays it with her friends. She's retired, time hanging heavy on her hands. This will be perfect for her."

A sour taste seeped into my mouth as I observed my teacher putting the two books into his bag. His manner was as natural as if he were an old friend of hers. In fact, they'd met only once before.

We didn't stay longer because Professor Simon was going to teach at three. She said she'd be delighted to visit Nanjing again if she was allowed to join the U.S. delegation that would go to China the next spring.

Coming out of the building with immense columns at its portals, I said half joshingly to Mr. Meng, "How many sets of mahjong did you bring along for this trip?"

"Six, but I have some sandalwood fans with me too. I give a set of mahjong only to an important figure."

His tone of voice was so earnest that I didn't know how to continue. He had no sense of irony and couldn't see that I was troubled by the discrepancy between the two kinds of gifts exchanged between him and Professor Simon. I remained tongue-tied as we headed for the front entrance of the campus. He knew how to get back to the consulate, saying he had a map and would like to stretch his legs a little on such a gorgeous day, so we said good-bye and I went down into the subway station alone.

JUNE WAS SOON OVER. During the day I delivered fabrics and finished garments, and at night pored over Edward Said's *Orientalism.* I thought that Mr. Meng had left with the delegation for Boston. Maybe he was in the Midwest now. But to my surprise, one evening I got a call from him.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"Still in New York," came his soft voice.

"You mean you didn't leave with the others?" I was astonished to realize that he had left the delegation.

"Right. I don't want to go back too soon," he said flatly.

For a moment I was too stunned to respond. Then I managed to say, "Mr. Meng, it will be very hard for someone your age to survive here."

"I know. My wife is ill and we need to pay for her medicines and hospital bills. I could never make that kind of money in China, so I decided to stay on."

I was unsure if he told me the truth, but his wife had indeed been in poor health. I said, "You may never be able to go home again."

"I won't mind that. A human being should live like a bird, untrammeled by any manmade borders. I can be buried anywhere when I die. The reason I'm calling is to ask you to put me up for a few days."

Intuitively I knew that my accommodating him might implicate me in his defection, but he was my former teacher, someone I was obligated to help. "Okay, come and you're welcome," I said.

I gave him my address and the directions. I didn't feel comfortable about sharing my tiny apartment with anyone, but this was an emergency. I hoped Mr. Meng would take my place only temporarily. Two hours later he arrived with a bulky suitcase and his shoulder bag. Since he hadn't eaten dinner yet, I cooked a pack of instant noodles for him, adding to it two chicken legs, two eggs, and a bunch of cilantro. He enjoyed the meal, saying this was the best dinner he had eaten since he'd left home. "Better than the banquet food," he told me. I asked him where he'd been all these days, and he confessed he had stayed with a friend in Bronx, but that man was leaving for upstate New York for a job in a casino, and so he had to look for lodging elsewhere.

In a way I admired his stolidity, though his round eyes blazed feverishly. If I were in his position, I might have gone bonkers. But he was an experienced man toughened by a hard life, especially by the seven years he had spent on a chicken farm in the countryside. After the meal, it was already half past ten. We sat at the shaky dining table, chatting and sharing a pack of Newports and jasmine tea. We talked and talked, and not until around two a.m. did we decide to turn in. I wanted him to use my bed, which was just a mattress on the floor, but he insisted on sleeping on the sofa.

WE BOTH BELIEVED HE'D BETTER KEEP A LOW PROFILE for the time being lest the consulate track him down. He mustn't go out during the day, and every morning I'd lock him in when setting out for work. I always stocked enough food and soft drinks for him, and he'd cook dinner for both of us before I came back in the evenings. He seemed very patient, in good spirits. Besides groceries, I also brought back Chinese-language newspapers and magazines. He devoured every bit of them and said he'd never thought the news here was so different from that in mainland China. The articles revealed so many secrets of Chinese politics

and gave such diverse interpretations of historical events that he often excitedly briefed me at the table about what he had read. Sometimes I was too exhausted to listen, but I wouldn't dampen his excitement.

On my way home one evening I came across a barely used mattress dumped on a sidewalk. Together Mr. Meng and I went over and carried it back. From that day on he slept in the second bed in my room. He often jabbered at night, having bad dreams. Once he woke me up, sputtering, "I'll get revenge! I have powerful friends at the Provincial Administration. We will wipe out you and your cronies!…"

Despite that kind of disturbance, I was glad to have him here—his presence reduced my loneliness.

Two weeks later we began talking about what he should do. I had stopped locking him in and he often went out. So far, his disappearance had been kept secret by the consulate, and no newspaper had reported it. That might not be a good sign, though, and the silence unnerved us, so I felt he should remain in hiding. Yet he was eager to work to earn his keep. I advised him to wait another week, but he wouldn't listen, saying, "We're in the United States and mustn't live in fear anymore."

We both believed he shouldn't apply for political asylum right away, which should only be a last resort and would mean he might never set foot in our motherland again. It would be better if he just lived here as an illegal alien and made some money. He could try to change his status when things cooled down—once he had the wherewithal, he could hire an attorney for that. Soon he began looking for a job in Flushing, which wasn't like a city yet in the late 1980s, where housing was less expensive and businesses had just begun moving in. Since he spoke English, it wasn't hard for him to find work. A restaurant near Queens Botanical Garden hired him to wait tables, but he persuaded the manager, who was also the co-owner of the place, to let him start as a busboy on the pretext that he had no work experience at a restaurant. His real reason was that a busboy spent most of his hours in the kitchen, which could conceal him from the public eye. The next day he started at Panda Terrace, making four-sixty an hour. He was pleased, although when he came back around eleven at night he'd complain he was bone tired.

He was a capable hand, and his boss and coworkers liked him. On occasion I went to that restaurant for a bowl of noodles or fried rice. I rarely ate dinner at that place, which I frequented mainly to see how Mr. Meng was doing. To my discomfort, the wait staff called him "professor," which betrayed some of his background. He'd been rash to reveal, though only partly, his former identity to his fellow workers, but I said nothing about it. He seemed at ease in spite of washing dishes all day long. He told me he'd been observing the staff wait tables and concluded that he could do it easily. In a month or two he might switch jobs, either working as a waiter at the same place or moving on to another restaurant.

One Sunday afternoon my coworker Ah Min and I went to Panda Terrace for a bowl of wontons. As we were eating, two white girls in their late teens pulled into the parking lot and came over to the front door. Mayling, the barrel-waisted hostess and a co-owner of this place, went up to them and snapped, "You can't eat here no more."

The girls stopped short in the doorway, one wearing a sky blue sarong and bra, hoop earrings, and mirror sunglasses, while the other was also in a sarong and bra, this one yellow. They were both chewing gum. "Why? We have money," said the tall one in blue, smiling spuriously and baring her flawless teeth.

The other girl grinned with her rouged lips, her kohl-rimmed eyes flickering. She said, "We love your eggplant fries. Mmm, yummy! Your dumplings are excellent too."

"Go away. We don't serve you," said Mayling, who tended to speak English brokenly unless she was angry.

"This is America and you can't throw out your customers, d'you know?" the shorter girl kept on.

"You're not our customer. You two didn't pay last time. I follow you to parking lot, and you saw me, but you just drived away."

"How can you be so sure it was us?"

"Get outa here, thief!"

"Don't be so nasty, China lady," said the tall one in blue, smirking while her tongue wiped her bottom lip. "How can you prove we didn't pay you? You're barking up the wrong tree."

"Don't call me dog! Go away!"

The girl in yellow put in, "You must not accuse us like this. See, I have money." She took out a sheaf of singles and fives and waved them before Mayling's face.

Purple with anger, the hostess warned, "If you don't' leave now, I call police."

"Oh yeah?" the tall girl shot back. "We're the ones who need the cops. You accuse us of theft with no evidence. D'you know what this means in America? It's called slander, a crime. We can sue you."

"Yeah, we're gonna sue your pants off," added the one in yellow.

Mayling looked confused, but Mr. Meng strolled up to them, his hands clasped behind his back. In an even voice he said to the girls, "Ladies, you can't take advantage of us again. Please leave."

"God, I'm so hungry! Why can't we just have a little bite?" persisted the shorter one in yellow.

Mayling blasted, "Get the hell outa here, you robber! We don't want to serve you."

"How dare you call us that?"

"You are robber. You rob us. What else you are? If you want to eat here again, give us thirty-seven dollars you didn't pay."

"C'mon, like I said, you're talking to the wrong people." The tall girl put on a suave smile. "Did you ever see this pair of sunglasses before?"

"No, but I remember your earring."

"Give me a break. Lots of women wear this type of earrings. You can get these at Macy's for eighteen bucks."

Mr. Meng said again, "We have kept a record—your car's plate number is 895 NTY, right?"

"Yes," Mayling picked up. "If you don't go away now, I call Officer Steve again, and you can't see your mama tonight."

The girls both gave a gasp. Observing them from where I sat, I wanted to laugh but checked myself. The one in yellow grasped her friend's elbow and said, "Come, let's get out of here. This is nuts."

They both went out, teetering in wedge heels toward their scarlet coupé, their purses flapping. As they were pulling away, both Ah Min and I stood to look at the license plate, which matched the number Mr. Meng had declared.

"Bravo!" cried my coworker.

"Wow, that was extraordinary," I told my teacher.

Michael Chian, Mayling's husband, had witnessed the scene, but was simply unable to put in a word the whole time. Now he kept saying to Mr. Meng, "Amazing. You remembered their plate number, tsk tsk tsk. I can never do that, not even if you beat me to death."

Later Mr. Meng told me in private that he had just snuck out and looked at the license plate while Mayling and the girls were quarreling. That cracked me up. Indeed, he was a clever man, worldly wise.

His timely assistance to the hostess impressed his boss so much that Michael offered him the manager's position at the new place in upper Manhattan that the Chians were about to open, but Mr. Meng said he was too old for a job like that.

ONE NIGHT THE FOLLOWING WEEK he returned with a copy of *Big Apple Journal*, a local Chinese-language newspaper, and slapped it on the dining table. "Damn Michael, he blabbed to some reporter about the two shameless girls!"

I looked through the short article, which gave a pretty accurate account of the incident and described Mr. Meng as "Professor Liu." Lucky for him, he'd been using an alias all along. I put down the paper and said, "It's no big deal. Nobody can tell you're the wizard with an elephant's memory." I knew he feared that the consulate might pick up his trail.

He said, "You don't know how long the officials can stretch their tentacles. I've heard that this newspaper is financed by the mainland government."

"Still, it's unlikely they can connect 'Professor Liu' with you."

"I hope you're right," he sighed.

But I was not right. Three days later my phone rang madly as soon as I came back from work. I rushed to pick it up, panting a little. The caller, in a mildly effeminate voice, said he was Vice Consul Gao in

charge of education and cultural exchanges. He wanted me to come over to the consulate. Flabbergasted, I tried to keep a cool head, though my temples were throbbing. I told him, "When I was there last time, I was not allowed to set foot inside the building and someone on your staff even called me 'gasbag.' I was so mortified I thought I'd ever go there again."

"Comrade Hongfan Wang, I personally invite you this time. Come and see me tomorrow."

"I'll have to work."

"How about the day after tomorrow? That's Saturday."

"I'm not sure if I can do that. I'll have to speak to my boss first. What's this about, Consul Gao?"

"We would like to know if you have some information on your teacher Fuhua Meng's whereabouts."

"What? You mean he disappeared?"

"We just want to know where he is."

"I don't have the foggiest idea. The last time I saw him was at Columbia, where we visited Professor Natalie Simon."

"That we know."

"Then, I have nothing else to report, I'm sorry."

"Comrade Hongfan Wang, you must level with me, with your motherland."

"I told you the truth."

"All right, let me know when you can come."

I said I'd phone him after speaking to my boss. Hanging up, I couldn't stop fidgeting. Whenever dealing with those officials, I'd feel helpless. I knew they might view me as an accomplice in Mr. Meng's case and might give me endless trouble in the future. Perhaps I wouldn't be able to get my passport renewed.

That night when I told my teacher about the phone call, he didn't show much emotion. He merely said, "I knew all along they were hot on my trail. I'm sorry to have dragged you into my trouble, Hongfan. You must be careful from now on."

"I know they may have put me on their list as well. But they can't do much to me as long as I live here legally. What are you going to do?"

"I can't stay in New York anymore. In fact, I've been in touch with a friend of mine in Mississippi. He opened a restaurant there and asked me to go down and work for him."

"That's a good idea. You should live in a remote place where the officials can't find you. At least stay there for a year or two."

"Yes, I'll live in complete obscurity, dead to the world. I won't go to Panda Terrace tomorrow. Can you return my uniform for me and tell Mayling and Michael that I'm no longer here."

"Well, I shouldn't do that because they could easily guess I know where you are, and then the consulate might demand a tip from me."

"Right. Forget about the uniform then."

He decided to leave for the South the next day, taking Greyhound directly to Jackson. I supported his decision. In a situation like this he had to act promptly.

To my surprise, he pulled his suitcase out of the closet and opened it. He took out a big brown envelope stuffed with paper. "Hongfan," he said with feeling, "you're a good young man, one of my best students. Here are some articles on Hemingway I brought out with me. I planned to translate them into English and publish them as a book with a title like *Hemingway in China*, and to be honest, also as a way to make some money and fame. Now I'm no longer in a position to work on this project, so I'm leaving these papers with you. I'm sure you can make good use of them."

He was tearful as he placed the envelope in front of me. I put my hand on it but didn't pull out the contents. I was familiar with most of those articles published in professional journals over the years and knew they were poorly written and ill-informed. Few of them could be called scholarly papers. Had Mr. Meng rendered them into English, they'd have amounted to an embarrassment to those so-called scholars, some of whom had never read Hemingway in English, except for the bilingual edition of *The Old Man and the Sea*, and they'd written about his fiction mainly in accordance with reviews and summaries provided by official periodicals. Few of them really understood Hemingway. Before I read *The Sun Also Rises* in the original, it had never occurred to me that Hemingway was funny, because the wordplay and jokes were lost in translation. I was positive that no publisher in the United States would be interested in bringing these useless articles out in English. It was foolish for Mr. Meng to assume that I could make some fortune and even fame with them. All the same I told him, "Thank you very much for trusting me."

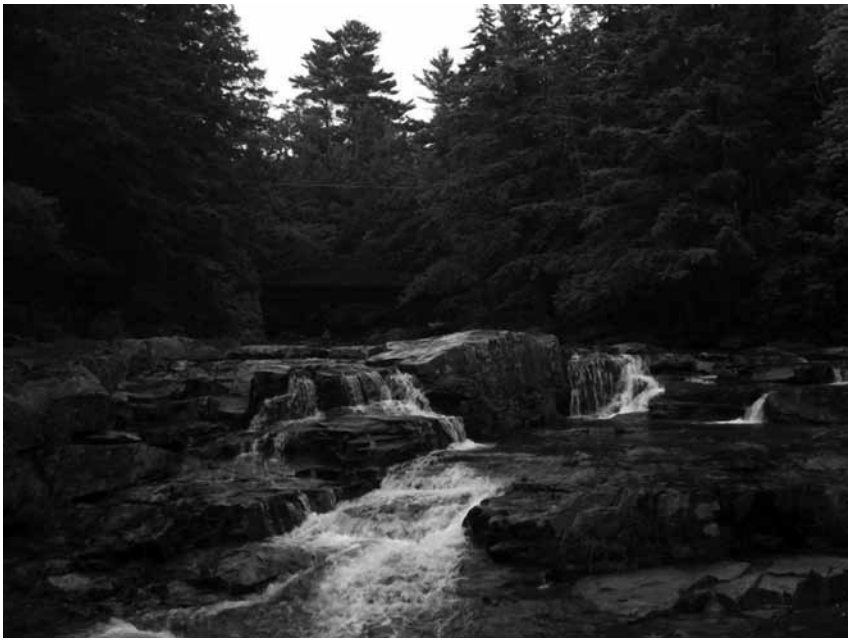
He then handed me a bundle of cash, more than $1,100, and asked me to remit it to his wife. I promised to send her a check in my name.

He sighed and said our paths would cross again someday. He stood, went into the bathroom to brush his teeth and wash before going to bed. The next day would be a long day for both of us.

I'VE NEVER SEEN HIM AGAIN SINCE, nor do I know where he is now. For two decades I've moved from one state to another and have never returned to China. Eventually I lost those Hemingway papers. But I remember that it was on the day Mr. Meng left New York that I sat down at night and began my first novel in English.

Josiah McClellan

Raising the River



John Christianson knelt by the Downie River and slipped his cast iron pan under the surface of the rushing water. He moved it in slow circles as the river barreled past, sifting the sediment he had taken from the riverbed. When he tipped it at the slightest angle, the current would drag out the lighter sand.

His pan had raised its fair share of interest in Downieville. He bought it in San Francisco, where the pans were formed hot to create the extremely dark pan base. And the black was important. Black made it easier to discern the gold, the medium flakes the size of sunflower seeds, the finer flakes like sugar.

There. The sun hit the pan just right and flashed off a thimble-sized nugget near the rim. Christianson shifted the pan again, searching for the glint.

Suddenly the pan was in the air, somersaulting away from him. Christianson shouted and stabbed at it as the sediment flew out and his gold splashed back into the river.

The miner who had slapped his arm kept running. "It's a fight, Christianson! They just threw a man out the front window at St. Charles Hotel!"

Christianson stared at his pan upside down on the water and groaned.

By the time he reached the ruckus five minutes downriver, most of Downieville had turned out. A few miners still hurried from the town's fifteen hotels, four gambling halls, and a dozen saloons, shouting at each other to pull foot. Four thousand men populated this thousand-foot-long stretch of river, and from the looks of it, about half of them crowded around the brawlers.

"All right, all right, pull off you two." Christianson pushed through the gawking miners placing bets. He stood a head taller than most miners in town, so it didn't take much effort to shove his broad shoulders between the two men and thrust them apart.

"Aw, c'mon Christianson," one of the miners said. "Let them fight."

"We keep the peace in Downieville. You know that."

"It was the flumer who started it!" shouted the man in Christianson's left hand. "He and his boys poached two of our cows this morning."

"I ain't do no such thing," the flumer retorted. "Those Barker boys are shooting up their own beasts and blaming us!"

Christianson shook his head. For two weeks the unofficial war between the flumers of Steamboat Company and Ned Barker's cattlemen had turned Downieville into a rowdy fandango. The big miner looked up the street at the smaller crowd gathering near the front of the St. Charles; he could see the shards of glass in the road.

"I don't care who did what," he said. "But the two of you – and not your bosses – are going to pay McKinley for his window."

"But I'm just defending my boss!" Barker's boy said.

"And I'm defending that window. Call it even and plank up."

Christianson shoved the young men into the crowd on the other side. They flailed at each other but the miners pushed them along and apart. By the time they reached the outer edge of the circle they were content to go their separate ways.

The third fight in a week, Christianson thought. Yesterday three of Barker's workers had taken on a scrawny little thing from Steamboat and nearly killed him. Christianson had worked hard to settle the town after its early gunslinging days. He wouldn't see it go all horns and rattles again. Christianson checked the position of the sun. He'd still have a few hours left to pan the Downie. He would deal with Downieville's butcher later.

NED BARKER'S MEAT MARKET stood on the southern end of town, just below where the Downie and North Yuba converged at a spot called the Forks, the richest placers in the northern mines. Ned's shop wasn't

much to look at, little more than a plank-walled building with a clapboard roof. Christianson mounted the boardwalk and pushed through the half-closed door.

The stench of swine guts hit him head-on and nearly sent him back out.

Barker laughed. "That's your dinner before I'm finished with it. Not so appetizing before it's salted."

Christianson brushed the air in front of his face. "Mary told me to buy some pork. I'll take whatever you usually give her."

"If you're paying in dust, that'll be two ounces."

"Two ounces!" Christianson had to take a step back. "What kind of bilk outfit are you running?"

Barker brought his knife down hard on the cutting board to slice through a tough tendon. "I'm running a business that doesn't have enough meat to go around."

"What are you talking about?"

Barker pointed out the door, across the Forks. "I've got flumers on either side of me squeezing me out. My cattle pens are in their way and they don't understand 'no sale' unless it's backed up with shotgun amendments. Now they're murdering my cows to try to run me out of business."

"Ned," Christianson said sternly.

"I know what you want to say about the fights. But we cattlemen have to stand up for ourselves. We've been here since the beginning, Christianson. We stuck it out through the winter and put our own money into keeping this town fed during the snows. I'm not giving it up just because some scalawags want to raise the river."

Christianson sighed and walked to the door. He scanned the scene across the Downie, hundreds of men sawing logs, mule carts packed to overflowing with huge bags of sand and dirt. A cart tipped, and someone swore loudly. In another week they'd have an enormous spout leading into a couple of whirling paddle wheels. The wheels worked as cranks, operating a system of pumps and pails that diverted the river into a chute, and carried the water along about forty or fifty feet before dropping it back into place. When it worked, a long span of the riverbed was left totally uncovered.

"Listen to me, Ned. The flumers aren't going to take your land out from under you. We all worked hard to establish the 30-foot claim law after the incident at Deadman's Bar." Barker shot him a glare as he worked the meat. Christianson knew the butcher understood where this was headed. "Trust me to work this out. Don't try to fix it yourself."

Barker shook his head vehemently and wiped blood on his apron. "It's a simple matter where you stand, Christianson, this talk about peace. The miners would love fresh meat and a riverbed of gold for the taking. But I can't move my pens upriver. My cows can't graze on

rocks. The flumers have to go. And me and my partners will do whatever it takes to make sure they do."

Christianson made to say something but was stopped by a sudden commotion outside, men's voices grumbling in chorus. He felt a large shadow cast itself over the meat market.

"Ned Barker!" The voice from outside was gruff and steady. "Fifty pounds of gold for your land! Hear this, Barker. Fifty pounds. Make good by sundown tomorrow or forfeit your claim!"

Christianson rubbed his beard and frowned. Steamboat's men sauntered away.

"Still of a mind to talk peace?" Barker asked with a hint of ridicule. "You got till sundown."

CHRISTIANSON FINISHED HIS DINNER OF SALT PORK and boiled beans and leaned against his straight back wooden chair. His left shoulder hurt from working his shovel into heavy rocks on the riverbed all afternoon. He filled two leather pokes full of flour gold, eight ounces in all.

Still, he couldn't think it a good day.

He looked up and caught Mary staring at him. She frowned.

"That fight's on your mind," she said. His wife learned long ago how to read the furrows in his brow.

"We're about four days from someone pulling in the middle of Main Street."

"Maybe sooner."

Christianson looked at his wife carefully. "What do you know?"

"Only what I overheard in the crowd by Langton's post. Steamboat's younger partners are growing restless."

"All the more reason why something needs to be done. I can't stand fast and watch those two groups board up more men in pine boxes."

"There's no mayor in Downieville," Mary said, leaning forward. "No sheriff either. That's the way we wanted it, the way we built it. There's been trouble before between groups. Remember when the Jersey Company moved in? Or Deadman's Bar? The greater good has always worked itself out."

Christianson shook his head. "This is different. Steamboat has two hundred men. Barker is a big toad in the puddle. This time we have enough men on both sides to tear the town apart."

Mary walked over to the fireplace, where a black pot of beans hanged over a dying fire. "Maybe you can't stop this." She scooped the leftover beans into a tin bowl. "Should we make other plans in case it comes to war?"

Christianson's reply was cut off by a knock on the door. He exchanged a confused glance with Mary, but she was as much surprised by the late visitor as he was. Christianson opened the door carefully.

"Mr. Christianson." It was one of Steamboat's boys.

"Aye," the big miner said. He moved forward to fill the cabin's half open entrance.

"Charlie Worsten sent me. He wants an audience."

Christianson guffawed. "What would the foreman of Steamboat want with me? Does he reckon he'd threaten me like he threatened Barker this morning?"

"He just sent that message, sir. He's at the Banneman."

Christianson put his hands on his hips. "Tell your boss that I'll start talking when he stops causing trouble. You tell him that."

The boy turned and headed back down the hill without another word. Christianson slammed the door shut.

"Sounds like Worsten might be of a mind to talk truce," Mary said.

"Ha! The word ain't in his vocabulary."

Mary raised her eyebrows. "If he was going to make a threat, he wouldn't call you to his room at the Banneman. That boy would have leveled it to you at our door, Colt and all."

Christianson wanted to believe that. Some part of him wanted to be convinced that Worsten could call off the project and move upriver, or north to the Feather Rivers. He heard the gold was good up by Taylor's Bar. Another part of him was already persuaded that Worsten understood how much gold still lay in the Downie, and he would welcome war if it meant a chance at making the biggest strike in history.

"Just talk to him." Christianson looked up at the sound of Mary's voice. "What harm can it do? Let him know you want to hear his side."

As usual, Mary's voice was one of reason. The worst that the Steamboat Company's foreman could tell him was that they were going to burn down the meat market. At least then he'd know where the flumers stood, and he could do what he needed to make sure California's richest town stayed in one piece.

He noticed Mary cutting up more pork into the bowl of beans. "What's that for?" he asked.

"Pork prices are a crime in this town. This bowl's enough to feed five hungry miners down at St. Charles tonight. If there's going to be a war, might as well make some money off it."

Christianson smiled nervously.

CHARLES WORSTEN'S ROOM IN THE BANNEMAN HOTEL was as dark as the man's expression. In the dim light from a corner lamp, Worsten's face looked tanned and rough with black stubble, like a worn piece of leather. Christianson took quick note of the man's revolver, still in its holster and hanging over the baseboard of the bed.

"You look concerned, Mr. Christianson," Worsten said. "It's a hotel room, not a cell on the LaGrange."

Christianson scratched his beard. Worsten had thought this through, meeting at night so his men wouldn't see him fraternizing with the "enemy." It rubbed Christianson wrong to think that way, but

that was how the lots fell where the flumers stood.

"Let's not make this long," Christianson started. "What do you want from me?"

"Ah, a man who gets down to business. I like you, Christianson. I wanted to assure you that despite our outburst earlier this morning, the cattleman's meat market is safe."

Worsten walked over to a small basin and splashed water on his face. He lathered up some soap on his jaw. Christianson could not fathom how the man would dare shave in this paltry light.

"Then tell your boys to stop the poaching. They stole another cow late last night."

"Did you see it with your own eyes or are you repeating what Barker tells you?"

"Barker's not a liar."

"Nor am I." Worsten turned around and pointed the thin razor at him. "I didn't ask you to meet me here because I wanted to tell you what you already know. I'm waiting for Downieville to give me some credit, Christianson. I've done nothing to deserve this scorn. Yes, you've done your part in trying to give us the benefit as of late. But you haven't convinced the other miners. The claims we've bought, we bought them fair. We're paying the previous owners twice what they were making toiling over a tin pan and rocker. And still this town looks at us flumers like we're a gang of Mexican banditos."

"Now hold on here, no one's saying that."

Worsten waved Christianson off and turned back to the mirror.

"You are an important man in this town. The miners will listen to you." He skimmed the knife across his jaw as he spoke. Christianson had never seen a man do that before without drawing blood. The balance of his hand must be grand. "Convince them that our intentions are good. Convince the cattlemen to sell."

"The cattlemen aren't of a mind to listen."

"They'll listen to you."

Christianson shook his head. "I've known Ned Barker since the earliest days of this town. I'm giving you sound counsel, Worsten. He won't sell on any terms."

"Let me be clear about this, Christianson. I assured you that the meat market was safe and I am a man of my word. But I cannot assure your own safety."

"What kind of business are you about, Worsten?"

"The gold business. Same as anyone else in Downieville. Tell me, Christianson," he took a towel to his face as he turned around slowly, "what business are you about? Because it sure as sun seems like you'd rather let all that gold sit at the bottom of the river."

Suddenly Christianson understood why Worsten wanted to talk. This fight wasn't over a stretch of land across from Durgan Flat. It was over the miners. Barker's high prices made hungry men poor and

forced them to vote with their stomachs. Worsten's fantastic offers on claims and promises of riches enough to buy heaven would mean something to a miner who had sluiced just two measly ounces from the river. When the four thousand miners who made their living in Downieville picked a side, all the cards would fall.

He couldn't let that happen. Neither side was right in this matter. The miners' side must prevail. And what was that side? Certainly not fighting for the sake of fighting. No, talk of a truce would be gum to Worsten. Christianson was a third force in this conflict, and he'd have to strongarm both groups into a resolution, much like Worsten was trying to strongarm him right now.

"I didn't come here to talk threats," Christianson challenged. "The miners aren't taking sides on this. That's where I stand, and that's where Downieville stands."

He moved toward the door but Worsten snatched his elbow as he passed. "I know there's gold in the Downie. I've seen it with my own eyes. Ben Pauly was in Craycroft's last night gloating about the five-pounder he found. That river's making a prince out of a pauper every day, and I'm not walking away from her, I don't care if the whole town throws its lot in with those swine lovers. I will have Downieville gold before the summer is through. If that means finding someone who understands the weight of gold we can pull from the riverbed, I swear on my mother's grave that I'll put him in charge of this town."

Christianson grabbed Worsten's left elbow, locking the two men together. "Don't make an enemy out of me, Worsten."

"You've already made an enemy out of me." He let go of Christianson with a push. "Talk to Barker. I could care less if he's willing to sell or not. But let me build my flume, let me build it straight through the river and I promise you, I'll make you a very rich man."

Christianson shoved his hat back on his head. "Good night, Mr. Worsten."

In the back room of Craycroft's Saloon, where the sharpers played poker under pale whale oil lamps and intense silence, John Christianson held court with Ned Barker on his right and Charles Worsten on his left. Worsten chomped on a piece of tobacco; in the quiet room every smack was audible.

"Move your flume farther upriver," Christianson offered Worsten. "I'll get you the claims at a lower price."

"We won't get half the gold up there in the rougher water. I want the Forks, that's where the gold is."

"Fine. Barker, I'll buy your shop for twice what the flumers offer."

"So you can turn right around and sell it to them? Don't take me for a fool, Christianson."

Downieville was on the brink of war. Last night, Barker caught a flumer in one of his pens and shot him with his rifle. An armed gang

gathered outside the meat market in the morning with torches. Worsten came by Christianson's cabin not long after and exchanged some rough words with Mary. Christianson understood the urgency of the situation. He wrangled Worsten, then sent five men to round up Barker, and underneath the dim lanterns of Craycroft's back room he was going to force a resolution.

The big miner leaned forward, his wide shoulders filling the space between the rivals. "Let's not forget the five men laid up at Doc Aiken's because of that ruckus at the Banneman two days ago. I don't care about the placers or how much they're worth. I'll set about building a jail and laying the two of you in it before you tear this place up in a war."

"I've got a business to run," Barker said. "And if that means shooting the next flumer who tries to steal a cow, I'll do it."

"So it's guns you want," Worsten growled.

"Tell me, Worsten, how much is one of your men worth? Five dollars a day? Ten? That steer they poached yesterday was worth sixty dollars. Let me have four of your men and we'll call it even."

Worsten wouldn't take his eyes off Barker. The wide brim of his hat cast a shadow over the top of his face, but Christianson could see from the firm lines of his jaw that Worsten wasn't going to look away from Barker for a second.

"Seems your beasts are worth more than your men. Let's say I start poaching the cheaper of the two."

Barker stood up and pulled back his whiskey as if he meant to throw the brown bottle.

Suddenly the distinct sound of gunfire filled the room, rattling the near wall. Christianson turned. Barker and Worsten froze and stared each other down. The noise wasn't much louder than the crowd by the faro game at the front of the building, but there was no mistaking it.

"I hope that's claim jumper justice," Worsten said slowly.

"Could be," Barker countered.

The echo off the buildings across the river made Christianson think the shots came from down by Durgan Flat. He heard shouts now, men yelling at other men, angry and urgent. This was no row over a claim.

Worsten sneered and showed his stained teeth. "Well met, gentlemen. And you, Christianson, I never thought you capable of this baseness, hauling me and my straw bosses here so his outfit can pick a fight."

Christianson's shoulders suddenly felt heavy. His heart burned in his chest. How had he not sensed it? Barker's bluffing and gruff stubbornness – the butcher had been waiting for a moment like this. And by trusting the cattlemen's intentions more than the flumers', Christianson had handed it to him.

He looked toward the front of the building and saw the angry eyes of miners staring at him over the tops of their whiskey glasses, hun-

kered down at the small round tables. He could imagine the horror on Mary's face as she stood at the front of their cabin on the hill, looking down at what her husband had betrayed by putting his faith in the wrong man.

Worsten stood up and checked his gun. There was no urgency to his movements, a sharper playing a hand he realizes has been beat. "You say you want to save Downieville. Mark my words, I'm gonna end it."

Steamboat's foreman spit tobacco on the table and moved quickly out the door.

Christianson sighed. He could not look at Barker; he had to fight the urge to hit him. "Is this your doing, Ned?"

"You just don't understand, Christianson. A man doesn't negotiate over gold. He takes it."

"I can't support it. I can't take your side."

Barker took a long gulp of his whiskey and laughed. "After tonight we won't need you on our side. Friend."

THE DESTRUCTION EFFECTED BY THE CATTLEMEN and their hired thugs was total. Ash piles from three dams and six hundred feet of hewn logs smoldered in the early morning haze. More than fifty cloth sand bags had been thrown into the deep pool at the Forks, and tools lay scattered across the banks of the Downie.

Christianson stood on Durgan Flat and watched with a grim foreboding as the Steamboat boys buried thirteen of their company who had died defending the dams. No one had been ready. Half the flumers had been roostered up, sprawled on chairs in the gambling halls. The first flumers who staggered to the skirmish stood no chance, the next few there were already too late. Christianson overheard one miner say that from the front of Craycroft's, he saw a red-orange glow flickering against the mountains, like the light from a fireplace reflecting off the walls of a dark room.

Just upstream of the Forks, at the northernmost dam and the only one still intact, they found Worsten. He slumped over the dam, his clothes drenched and skin cold. Remarkably, his hands still grasped the wood.

Christianson waded over to the man's body. It shouldn't have happened like this. Worsten deserved his gold, like they all did, not three bullets in the chest. He closed his eyes. He had warned the man, bargained with him, tried to make him see the dirt and stone essence of Downieville. But he had never put his hand on Worsten's shoulder and told him, plainly, just how far Barker and his cattlemen would go. He didn't believe it himself.

When he opened his eyes he realized that the miners were staring at him. He cleared his throat.

"Worsten gets a proper burial. Someone go fetch the minister." Three men ran off.

Christianson figured it would take another two, maybe three weeks to rebuild what the cattlemen had destroyed. But he was going to see that Steamboat had its chance.

"The flumers will have their day," he said loudly so everyone heard. "But no one says a word of it. Not a hint to Barker and his partners. They brought this war on their own heads."

After peace, Christianson figured, justice was the next best thing.

Josiah McClellan's short stories have appeared in several literary journals, including *The Evansville Review*, *Downstate Story*, *Nuvein Magazine*, and most recently *The Rose & Thorn Literary Review*. He is completing a novel that picks up after the events of this story, retelling the history of Downieville—the biggest and richest of California's gold rush towns.

Sharon Siskin

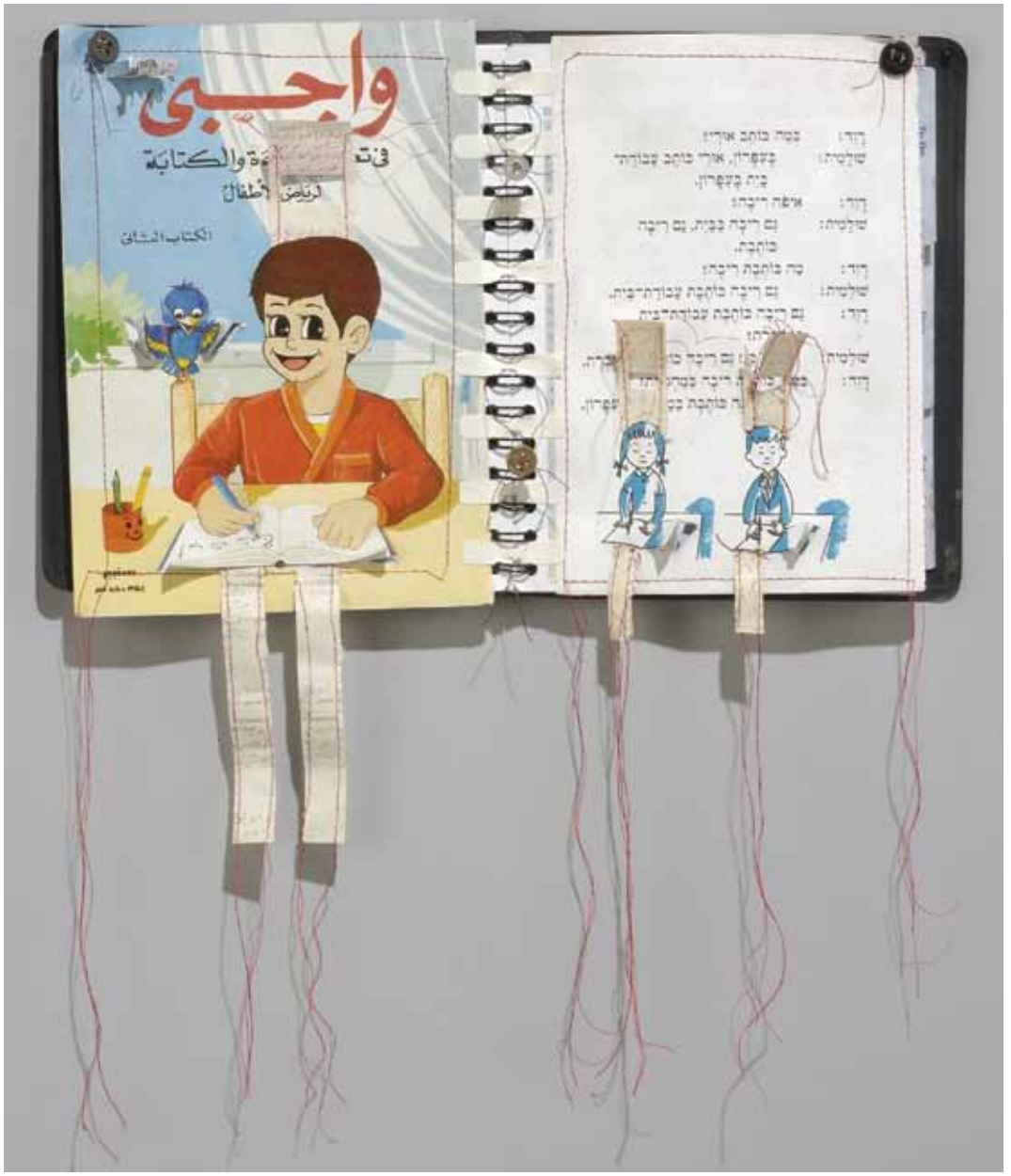
Children of Abraham

Children of Abraham: Gaze; 2007; Arabic and Hebrew children's educational texts, paper, book, cotton thread, cotton batting, bandages; 12" x 19" x 2"

My work comes from a deep belief that art can be a powerful agent for intellectual inquiry and social change. Conceptually, I draw from the personal, with the intention of making the ideas and issues that I am working with public. Many of my projects—connected to AIDS, homelessness, incarceration, public education, gender, ethnic identity, Israel/Palestine, ecology, disarmament and social responsibility (to name a few)—are large-scale and difficult to clearly represent in a small selection of images. In these projects I engage with communities (over a period of many months and often many years) using the process and the final work produced as a forum for audiences to see and hear the voices from these communities. I am also interested in using my work as a vehicle that provides for a democratic forum. In these projects there is often a low-tech interactive component that invites a public dialogue and makes it visible to the larger community. While some of my work is community-based public art—made in response to or in collaboration with historically under-represented communities—my studio-based work (like the project documented here) is object-oriented, with the intention to be seen in more intimate, even domestic spaces.

Children of Abraham: Worship; 2006; Arabic and Hebrew children's educational texts, vellum, book, wooden puzzle part, bandages; 12" x 18" x 1"

Children of Abraham: Pray; 2007; Arabic and Hebrew children's educational texts, paper, book, cotton thread, cotton batting, metal hooks, buttons, wire, plastic dice, beeswax; 12" x 19" x 2"



***Children of Abraham: Compose*; 2007; Arabic and Hebrew children's educational texts, paper, book, cotton thread, buttons, metal rings; 17" x 15" x 1"**

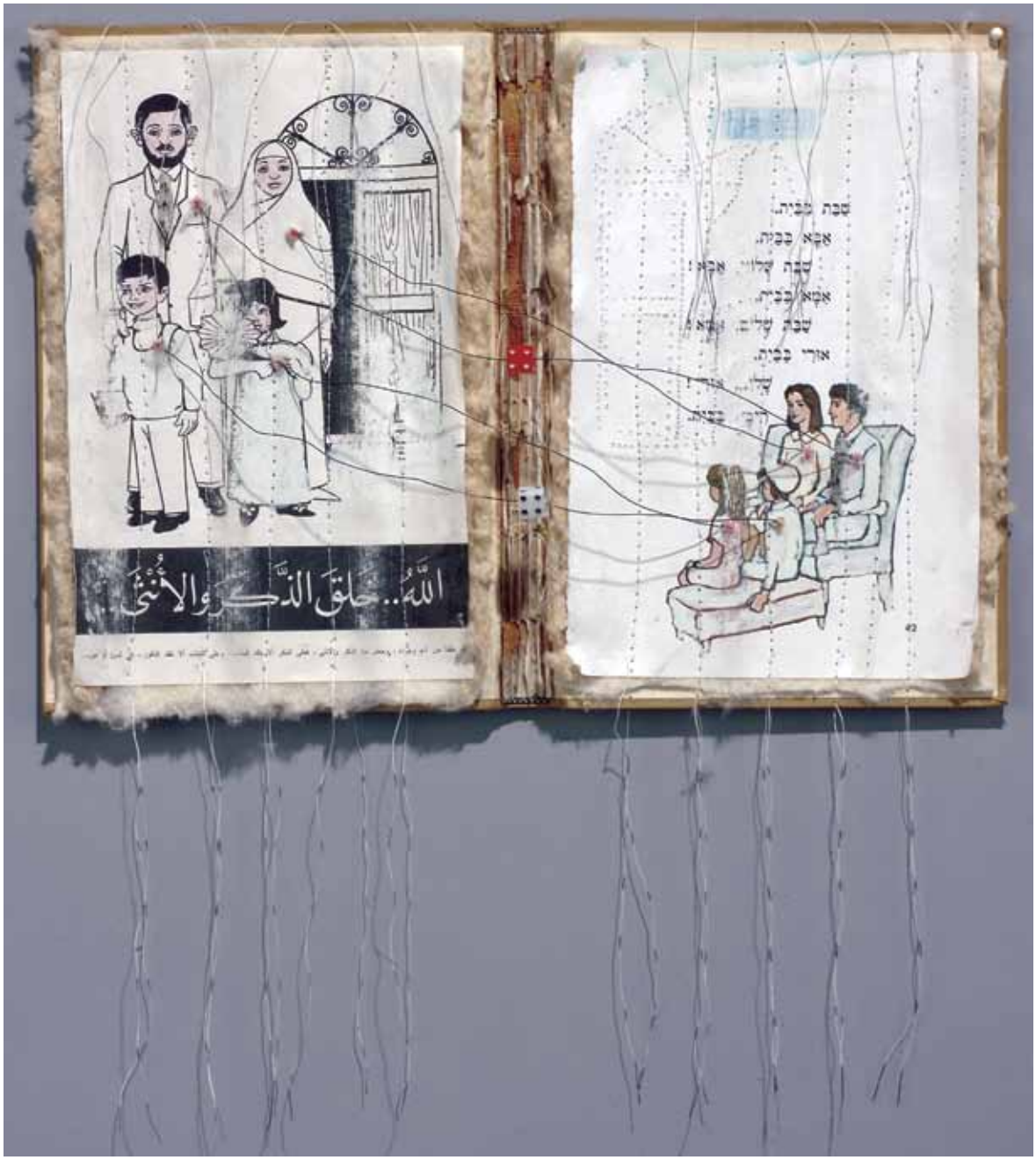
As my social practice engages with local communities and local ecologies, my studio work synthesizes these experiences to create other modes of inquiry and new ways to make these experiences visible. Over the years my work has addressed issues of memory, loss and grief as well as humor, community-building and social action. In the fertile ground of these community-based experiences, my ideas germinate and my work as an artist takes root. This social engagement informs the formal quality of my work and brings into focus appropriate public spaces to present projects and engage audiences.

***Children of Abraham: Father*; 2007; Arabic and Hebrew children's educational texts, paper, book, cotton thread, cotton batting, zipper, string, beeswax; 21" x 18" x 2"**

My studio-based work, based in private experience, has more recently become an installation of objects made from the detritus in my daily life as a parent of twin daughters. In this work, the cultural memories of our childhood become the everyday tools we hold in our hands to get us through the day (or sleep-deprived nights).

Children of Abraham: Mother; 2007; Arabic and Hebrew children's educational texts, paper, book, cotton thread, cotton batting, zipper, string, beeswax; 21" x 19" x 2"

These pieces address the maintenance work involved in being a parent with the environmental ethic of "reduce, reuse, recycle and rot." They examine the hourly repetition of seemingly mundane activities, building bridges of dialogue to audiences by using humor to expose the commonality of our private lives.



Children of Abraham: Family; 2006; Arabic and Hebrew children's educational texts, paper, book, cotton thread, cotton batting, wire, plastic dice, White Out; 16" x 14" x 3"

In 2004 I had the honor of being chosen as an Artist in Residence at San Francisco Waste and Recycling, better known as the San Francisco Dump. This innovative program, which began in 1990, inspires and educates people about recycling and resource conservation by providing local San Francisco Bay Area artists with access to materials, a work space, and other resources at San Francisco's Solid Waste Transfer and Recycling Center.

***Children of Abraham: Post*; 2006; Arabic and Hebrew children's educational texts, paper, map, cotton thread, cotton batting, zipper, wire; 22" x 22" x 3"**

I had written a project proposal that would expand my research of my own family's waste production to a larger view of what families in the San Francisco Bay Area consume and dispose of in the process of raising our children. When I arrived at the dump I began by collecting and then making pieces from discarded children's toys, children's clothing, family photographs and educational materials.

Children of Abraham: Vacation; 2008; Arabic and Hebrew children's educational texts, paper, book, fabric, metal hooks, plastic dice, colored pencil, cotton batting; 15" x 21" x 1"

Children of Abraham: Transport; 2008; Arabic and Hebrew children's educational texts, paper, book, wooden toy, plastic dice, cotton batting, bandages, oil pastel, wire; 14" x 17" x 1"

Children of Abraham: Dream; 2007; Arabic and Hebrew children's educational texts, paper, book, cotton thread, cotton batting, zippers, plastic toy; 12" x 18" x 2"

Children of Abraham: Study; 2007; Arabic and Hebrew children's educational texts, paper, cotton thread, cotton batting, bandages; 12" x 25" x 1"

Children of Abraham: Read; 2007; Arabic and Hebrew children's educational texts, paper, book, cotton thread, cotton batting, wire, buttons, metal hooks; 15" x 23" x 2"

Children of Abraham: Write; 2006; Arabic and Hebrew children's educational texts, paper, book, cotton thread, cotton batting, bandages, wire, safety pin, buttons, pencils; 15" x 23" x 2"

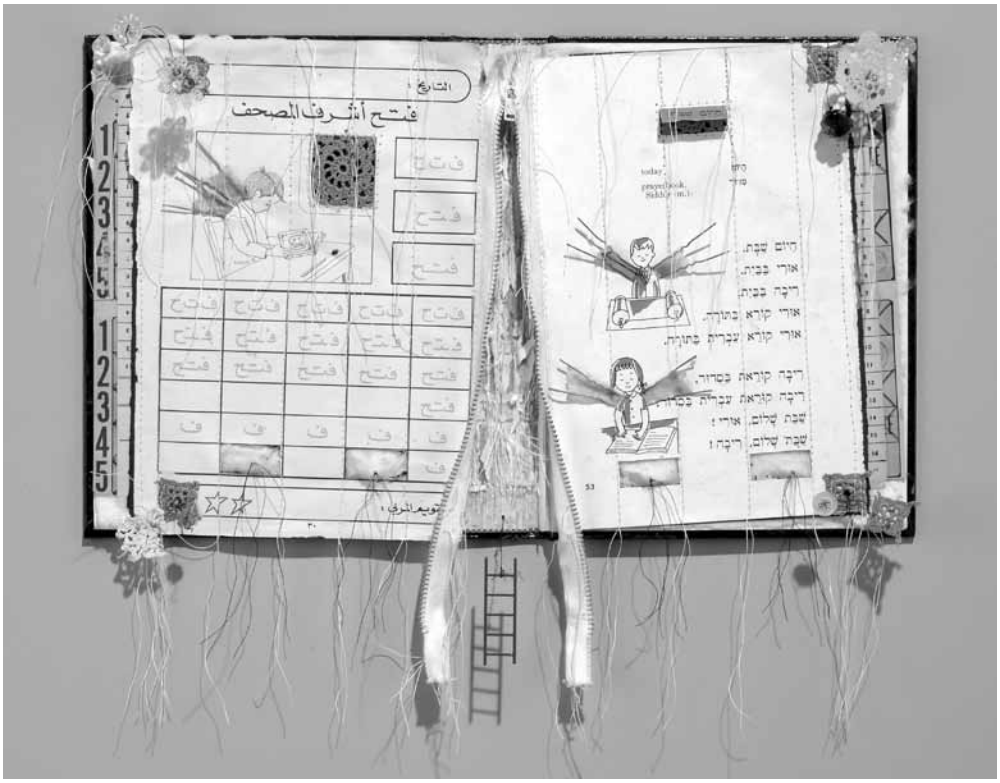
Months later, near the end of my residency, I found a pile of children's books that were printed in Arabic for very young Arabic-speaking children who are just learning to write. They had a very familiar feeling to me, though I was not quite sure why I had that feeling. I decided to take them with me, when I moved back to my own studio. Sometime later in the year my mother sent me a package from Philadelphia that contained books and other papers from my childhood. The box contained a book for teaching the Hebrew language to children, which I had used in an after school Yiddish and Hebrew program that I had attended as a child through the Workman's Circle organization.

I brought that book to my studio and began to identify amazing similarities between the design and drawing style of the images in the Hebrew book and the illustrations in the Arabic books. Similarly, the themes being taught in the pages of the Arabic and the Hebrew written texts also had strong parallels. This simple process of research and observation is what plants the seeds that inspire my process of creating studio-based objects.

In this case my process involved removing pages from both the Arabic books and the Hebrew book and then pairing them together by identifying similar visual references, like bringing together long-lost family members. The physical nature of bringing these pairs together was made possible by the processes of sewing, patching, bandaging and replacing the dislocated twin pages in new, shared bindings. I used materials such as cotton thread, cotton batting, crocheted doilies, yarn, zippers, buttons, clothing hooks, straight pins, butterfly bandages, beeswax, metal wire and telephone wire to hold the pages together as a pair. The physicality of this artwork and the desire to make all of my activity very visible in each individual piece in the Children of Abraham series is what carries my message. I am taking action and then making my actions visible both through the process of making these objects and in the final artwork that is produced.

It is important for me to seriously consider the site in which my artwork is exhibited and the audience that I hope to reach with the work. In the case of this project I am most interested in exhibitions at multi-cultural venues that might bring Arab Muslim and Jewish voices together in a dialogue about shared cultural histories and the ways that both cultures choose to educate their children.

Children of Abraham is a personal and poetic attempt at repair, finding the visual and cultural similarities and literally sewing or bandaging the two distinct parts together into a single object. In this series of more than two dozen pieces, I begin with my grief about the tragic state of life in the Middle East (especially the relationship between Jews and Arab Muslims who live in Israel and Palestine). I attempt to take very simple, personal action—to make visible our commonality and also to shine a light on some threads of hope.



Children of Abraham: Obey **(black & white); 2007; Arabic and Hebrew children's educational texts, paper, book, cotton thread, cotton batting, zipper, lace, metal hairpins, plastic ladder; 13" x 16" x 3"**

Sharon Siskin has an extensive national exhibition record, showing her work in museums, galleries and public sites for more than 25 years. She is the recipient of awards and grants that include a Visual Arts Fellowship from the California Arts Council in 2003, the 2001 Potrero Nuevo Prize, Noetic Arts Program Community Grant, San Francisco Arts Commission, Market Street Art in Transit Commission, and 12 California Arts Council Artist in Residence Grants for community-based public art projects in the San Francisco Bay Area AIDS support service community and in the City of Berkeley homeless women and children services community. Her artwork has been featured in numerous publications, including *Notes on the Need for Beauty: An Intimate Look at an Essential Quality* (2007) by J.Ruth Gendler; *Women Artists in the American West* (2003), edited by Susan Ressler; *Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicentered Society* (1997) by Lucy Lippard; *Connecting Conversations: Interviews with 28 Bay Area Women Artists* (1988), edited by Moira Roth; and *Site to Sight, Mapping Bay Area Visual Culture* (1995), edited by Lydia Mathiews. She has taught for five years as an Assistant Professor at University of San Francisco and for 17 years as Core Faculty as an Adjunct Professor in the Graduate Department of Arts and Consciousness at John F. Kennedy University and California College of Arts and Crafts, San Francisco Art Institute, California State University at Hayward and the University of New Mexico.

Paul J. Willis

After Descending from Buck Creek Pass to a Campsite on the Chiwawa River

As much as we ache for a swimming hole,
none appears. The rapids course
under crowded banks of alder, bracken, devil's club.
Beneath the boulders in the current,
bedrock: the marbled bones of the North Cascades.

We nest in the forest of grand fir
among rotting logs, the delicate
petals of queen's cup. There in the night
we lie half-drifting in the duff,
the sound of rivers in our ears.

—*Glacier Peak Wilderness*

Orpheus Arrives from the Sea

It is seldom calm on this high ridge.
The Jeffrey pine are flattened and splayed
by wind from the west, from the ancient
play of air above the distant ocean.

The needles make aeolian choirs,
each loft of singers rooted in place
above the muted, sunburnt hum of manzanita

while boulders listen expectantly
from the forest floor, unwilling
to settle for nothing, ready to roll.

—*San Rafael Wilderness*

Puerto Vallarta Mountaineer

He climbs the palm in the way you might
prusik out of a deep crevasse
you have fallen into by mistake,

except the rope to which he attaches
the knotted cords is the corrugated
trunk of this tree. Once in the crown,

he does not collapse with gratitude
on the snowy lip, for here begins
his real work, stroking away

at the clusters of green coconuts
as if bringing his ice ax firmly to bear
on the blue shear of the next serac.

When lowering the hewn clusters
to the sand, he parks his machete
with just a touch in the arm of a frond

as if he has reached the next belay.
From where he rests, he feels the wind
through ocean passes, hears the waves

of braided streams, then descends
like a glacier melting down
to dust on the forest floor.

Old River

You March and muddy Tualatin,
fern-lover, moss-mover, tender
of your many alders,

I watch you glide to the Willamette,
to the Columbia, to the Pacific.

Your slippery bank is where
I stand. From here I greet you.
There you say goodbye, goodbye.

Paul J. Willis is professor English at Westmont College in Santa Barbara. His most recent chapbook of poems is *How to Get There* (Finishing Line Press, 2004). He is also the author of *Bright Shoots of Everlastingness: Essays on Faith and the American Wild* (WordFarm, 2005).

Frederick H. Swanson

Rooted

Courtesy Fred Swanson

The rains came hard to Utah's desert canyons in the fall of 2006, sluicing out dry washes and spreading a layer of tire-spinning silt on normally dusty roads. The storms looked like they would relent for our daughter's autumn school holiday, so we headed for the backcountry of the Dirty Devil River—a storied, outlaw-ridden landscape of sheer-walled canyons that still hinted at an escape from society. We made it through the mudholes on the old uranium prospectors' track that led to a tributary of Robbers Roost Canyon, parked the truck where it wouldn't get washed away, and set out on foot. A little-used stock trail led down through a narrow cleft in the canyon wall to the stream bottom, where our boots skidded on clay-greased banks and disappeared into pockets of quicksand. We felt

a little more connected to the earth than we had bargained for. But the dicey weather granted us solitude for several days as we wandered through canyons little changed from the nineteenth century. We tried to imagine how the cattlemen and rustlers who once worked these canyons dealt with the rain, mud, wind, and dust as well as the land's lonely silence. So on our last day, after packing our tent and retracing our trail in a steady drizzle, we were hardly prepared to be drawn back to the modern world by a crew of astronauts.

We met their flight director down in the wash where he was strolling among the cottonwoods, enjoying a few moments with his morning coffee. An affable fellow with a bit of a Southern drawl, he told us that he worked for NASA in Houston, and that his crew was camped up above on the slickrock, undergoing training for a future flight of the space shuttle Discovery. They had forded the rain-swollen Dirty Devil the day before and carried their seventy-pound packs up and out of one of its many side canyons.

Startled by our sudden re-entry into the world of other faces and voices, we headed up to meet the rest of the crew. Ellie, twelve years old but used to canyon walking, led the way over the crumbling cattle trail that breached the cliffs. The astronauts stood in a tight group on a sandstone ledge, outlined against a dull, misty sky, talking among themselves and glancing at us. As we climbed we wondered if they would prefer their privacy, but my wife and I felt that our daughter ought to have the chance to meet some real modern-day explorers.

A woman's voice joined those of the men. She turned out to be a National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) instructor, who with her young co-leader was taking the Discovery crewmen on a compelling introduction to the canyon country's mysteries. The instructors' packs held ropes and rappelling gear with which to explore hidden slot canyons and pouroffs—an exercise designed to promote teamwork and cement solidarity between the crewmen. None of them (no women among them, as it happened) had been in such a landscape before; the bare sandstone knobs rising all around may have seemed as alien a place as one could find on this planet.

NOLS has been taking neophytes into the mountains and deserts of the West for more than four decades, carrying out the philosophy of its founder, the legendary climber Paul Petzoldt, who understood that the challenges of outdoor travel demanded (and bred) competent leaders. In its first years its clientele ran to young men and women who wanted a solid grounding in mountaineering skills; of late the outfit has taken part in the nationwide boom in executive leadership training. The wild canyons of southern Utah, once a forlorn outback that saw little more than the occasional cowboy, now often echo to the tramp of such groups.

> *We headed for the backcountry of the Dirty Devil River—a storied, outlaw-ridden landscape of sheer-walled canyons that still hinted at an escape from society.*

This year our family made two trips into this wilderness; it's one of the few remaining canyon systems that doesn't require a camping permit, and because of its remoteness and lack of iconic landmarks we saw and heard no one, save for an occasional airplane. That's why we're drawn to this place, despite its impediments to easy travel. Its eroded slopes and trackless benches have some of the same mystery that entices humans to explore—a close relation (if I dare presume) to the drive that impels space-seekers to leave Earth's gravity.

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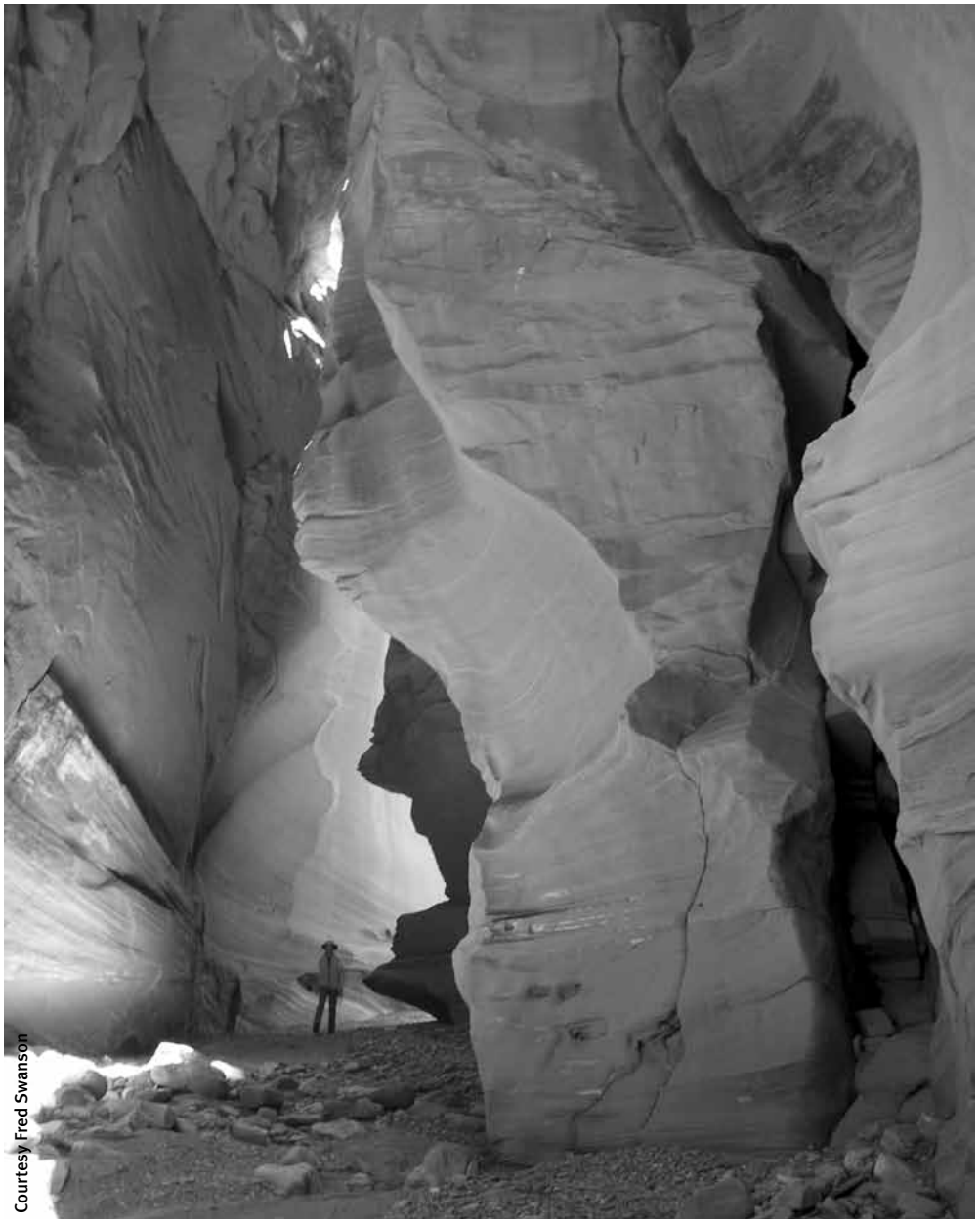
The NASA folks would no doubt learn much about their capabilities as they jockeyed heavy packs around the wet slabs and boulder chokes that lined the route ahead. These highly trained men would one day put their trust in the world's most advanced technology, flying what NASA describes as the most complex machine ever built. But what would someone training for a space walk think as he leaned out against a nine-millimeter rope for the first time, feet braced on the rock, peering down into some dark sandstone groove?

We asked them a few questions and wished them well, a little torn between curiosity and the desire to leave them their solitude. These men were used to being in the public eye, and they may have wondered why we didn't ask for a group photo or a mission patch. Somehow, though, out there in the wild country, we'll all just people. They looked as cold and wet as we were.

Backpacking trips are a family ritual for us during these spring and fall school holidays. In contrast to NOLS, Outward Bound, and the various survival schools that have sprung up in Utah, we try to keep the hiking easy and the enjoyment factor high. We pick routes along streams and washes, avoiding exposed ledges and tricky jumpoffs. Usually the shoulder-season weather is balmy, with cottonwoods leafing out enticingly in April or turning golden in October. Ravens gliding alongside the cliff walls provide entertainment. Camp fare is simple but always satisfying. We three feel closer on these trips than at any other time.

Our daughter first visited this canyon as a one-year-old, riding down the same stock trail in a backpack carrier. Safely corralled between stream and cliff, the cottonwoods her parasol, she played in the wet sand by the water's edge. Her first steps were delayed that year because we were so rarely on level ground. Through the toddler years and beyond we coaxed her down other trails with hide-and-seek games and endless stories and songs. Now, though, it is my creaky hip and fading stamina that set our pace. Our young one scampers ahead, learning to discern the subtle markers in the sand and brush that indicate the easiest path to follow. We stop often to examine tracks in the mud



Courtesy Fred Swanson

or peer into holes and burrows along the trail. She is getting a course in listening, an education in stillness.

Our own adventure curriculum is more modest than the commercial course offerings. Normally our outings feature a relaxed pace and frequent rest breaks, capped by leisurely evenings in camp. There's no need to program challenges; the natural world

presents these on its own schedule. Our daughter has trekked over stormy mountaintops and endured the springtime desert winds, gotten stuck in quicksand up to her knees and battled the Escalante River's willow thickets. On the morning of our astronaut encounter, tears welled in her eyes as we skirted a slippery pouroff pool, mirroring my own anxiety as I tried to assess the flash flood risk and worried about the road out.

Somehow, though, when conditions are at their worst, Ellie hums a tune to herself and pushes on without complaint. It's gratifying to watch her stretch her abilities in this elemental outdoor setting. These days that's a rare education. Backpacking is undergoing a steep decline in participants nationally, according to industry experts, with the sharpest drop among young people—a third fewer enjoying the sport than just a decade ago. And the trend among those who do enjoy hiking tracks the overall fashion in outdoor pursuits: shorter trips, faster paces, and a predilection for extreme challenges. That's what had brought our astronauts to this canyon; I doubt that they had much time to idle by the stream.

After we took leave of the NASA folks, I asked Ellie if she could see herself riding the space shuttle some day. She thought that would be cool, but we aren't pushing the idea. Nor do we plan to enroll her in a survival course, unless she expresses an unusual interest in dining on lizards. As parents we're reluctant to treat our outdoor ventures as personal growth experiences. When the focus is on training the body and mind, it's easy to overlook the small delights of the trail. We're content to look for the critters hiding in the brush or observe the path a leaf takes as it glides down a rivulet. Our laid-back approach is a throwback to the 1970s, I suppose, unstructured and out of synch with the times. We're lagging behind today's white-knuckled, maximum-performance culture, whose billboards proclaim, "If You Can Ride It, We'll Build It"—all the way from snowboards to space shuttles.

This is to take nothing from the exploits of those who live at the edge, as our astronauts do. At times we define ourselves by transcending limits. Some of us will always be juicing the muscles and sharpening the reflexes to meet the test. But I demur when such rousing pursuits take over the elemental pleasures of just being outdoors. I recently bought a sleeping bag on which was printed the motto, "Sleep Better, Perform Better." What happened to mere rest?

Perhaps I'm indulging in a bit of envy; my own meager physique never allowed me to push to any extremes, and even in my mountaineering days my ambitions ran to easy summits and sunny belay ledges. If my daughter wants to set the bar a little higher, that's for her to decide. While she's with us, however, we'll mostly take in the quieter delights that lie out in the hills and hollows of remnant wild America—and, we hope, find things that the adventure programs pass over. We experience these moments serendipitously, such as when cottonwood leaves start to flutter in the evening breeze flowing down the canyon, or when the call of an unseen bird lifts our attention from camp chores. These moments don't appear as easily in the heat of adventure. They suggest that open spaces offer more than a performance arena in which to test body and will. Some older value still exerts a soft pull, calling for a pause and a long look. Letting oneself be immersed in the slow

pulse of the natural world serves as a counterweight to too much adrenaline, a balance wheel in the midst of a culture that thrives on excitement.

I fear, though, that as our daughter takes her place in a world besotted with ever more exciting quests, she will find it harder to value such low-key interludes. The new emphasis on striving and performance pushes aside the contemplative modes of being, or simply co-opts them: even yoga and meditation are increasingly seen as ways to improve one's fitness for a hard-charging life. And this, sad to say, carries unhappy consequences for the rare places in which it is still possible to find silence and solitude. If wild regions are viewed primarily as testing grounds for the body and mind, does it matter how many people we pack into them, or what devices they bring along? On many popular trails closer to our home it's no longer possible to just amble along in a reverie, so frequent are the passing trail runners and cyclists; one has to stay alert and be ready to give way.

At the midpoint of our Robbers Roost hike, when the storm clouds cleared for a spell, we took a break to sit on a ledge of dappled Kayenta mudstone and watch the stream bubble and swirl over a flood-carved pothole. We ate our chocolate, dangled tired feet in the water, and let the late-fall sun soothe our shoulders—pleasures sufficient to offset the mud and brush and rain. I wondered, as parents do, about our girl's future and the world she would one day inhabit. She may decide to seek her own adventures out here, perhaps by showing a batch of nervous students how to rappel off a canyon rimrock. Maybe the popular thing will be to fly some new human-powered craft out over the mesas, riding the currents a mile up in the air. I don't imagine she will wind up repairing a solar array at the end of a tether in outer space, but anything's possible. I'm not eager for her to emulate an astronaut; a NOLS instructor would do just fine. But wherever she chooses to set her boundaries, I hope that she will still remember, after all the excitement has died down, the sound that a lizard makes scurrying over dried leaves in the warmth of a canyon afternoon.

Frederick H. Swanson writes about the wild places of the West from his home in Salt Lake City, taking particular interest in the early twentieth-century explorers of America's national park and wilderness lands. His book Dave *Rust: A Life in the Canyons* (University of Utah Press) follows the career of one of the Colorado Plateau's first backcountry guides and river outfitters. A former publications editor and a Utah resident for more than two decades, Fred is looking forward to further hikes with his family, during which he plans to go even slower. His website is www.fredswansonbooks.com.

Nancy Matson

The Best I've Worked With

I remember the early days of the Internet. Before every member of your extended family had an email address from which to forward you urban hoaxes cloaked as life-saving warnings. Before friends and stalkers alike could IM you at will. When the Web was nothing but a hodgepodge of personal sites riddled with spelling errors detailing a retired couple's vacation to Canada or some Norwegian guy's step-by-step effort to restore his classic Mustang.

I remember when the Internet was a playground for tech geeks and shut-ins, the entire enterprise still unsoiled by commercial interests. And I remember when I got my first glimpse of the insane wastefulness and sheer stupidity that would mark the arrival of business interests into this new medium. It was in the spring of 1997, when I got my first Internet job.

Not that I regret any of it. This is no more a complaint than a remark by a teenager about his parents being out of town over the weekend should be interpreted as a cry for increased adult supervision. I was nothing but happy when I was hired for my first online gig, an offer I received during a particularly unprofitable period of my professional life. My social security statement shows that I earned $27,255 for all of 1996, and virtually any change in my employment situation would have represented an improvement. Following a stint in the videogame industry and a few short-term odd jobs I'd been temping. Again. Though working as an

office temp work was better than doing absolutely nothing in a monetary sense, the actual act of reporting for short-term demeaning office work felt no less depressing than passing my days supine on the couch, enduring talk show after talk show while acknowledging that I was now the target audience for unaccredited tech schools and lawyers specializing in personal injury cases. Corporate environments always invoked feelings of alienation in me that had no precedent outside of middle school gym class. Take this conversation I'd had with a coworker on a temp job several weeks before I'd landed my permanent job:

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"Look what happened," said Linda, indicating her pair of regulation issue office pumps with a tilt of her head. She was an upbeat woman in her early thirties, a few years older than me—the type who seemed to thrive in our structured environment in the same mysterious way a bed of sunflowers at an elementary school will sometimes continue to grow despite being alternately run over by bicycles and used as third base. Linda was the kind of person who hummed while she made copies, and I suspected, though couldn't know for sure, that she still sported a blazer on the weekend. She shook her head at her shoes, gently mocking herself. "I got dressed in the dark."

I looked at her feet, then up at her face, then down again. I didn't get it. To me, her outfits always looked like they came straight off the store mannequin.

"They're dark brown," she said, chiding me in a friendly way. "I thought they were my black ones."

I never knew what to say in these situations. Not only could I not relate to the problem at hand enough to drum up an appropriate reply; the fact that anyone agonized over the ramifications of the choice between dark brown and black pumps depressed me beyond belief. The only time I'd felt at all self-conscious about my appearance at a temp job was when I was in New York with a foot so swelled up with infection that I needed crutches to hop around. Even then I probably wouldn't have thought twice about it if I'd been at some bland corporate entity like the one I'd worked at with Linda. Unfortunately, that was the week I'd been assigned to answer the phones at Chanel.

The point is, I would have been happy to get almost any job that boasted a less soul-crushing environment. The fact that *Spencer's World* paid a solid $700/week—a respectable sum in my world—was a major selling point, as was the fact that the office was located within two miles of my apartment. But the biggest perk of all was that this job launched me head first into an industry that would sustain me with fun, well-paying jobs for the next four years, until the industry collapsed and

I was abruptly redeposited on my own personal square one.

Spencer's World was a celebrity chat show offered as a perk to subscribers to a newly-launched Internet Service Provider. This new ISP, an AOL rival backed by a powerful software giant, was shoring up their exclusive content to entice new members. Ours was one of perhaps a two dozen shows launched on the network simultaneously. Our format was simple: our host, Spencer, himself a former soap actor whose character had been washed away in a flood, followed a basic talk show format. The only concessions to the new medium were flashy graphics and the admission of audience questions. Spencer and the guest spoke as they normally would, and another typist and I entered their words into the chatroom.

At some point about mid-afternoon, we'd brainstorm our daily poll. It will give you some idea of the vacuum we operated in that the day Burgess Meredith died we featured the question: "Did you think Burgess Meredith was already dead?"

The shows themselves ran for one hour per day. Since they weren't scheduled until the late afternoon, we had all day to prepare. For those of you unfamiliar with the excesses of the dot com era, I will give you a rundown of what that meant in terms of my daily work flow.

I'd arrive at about tenish. I'd get my coffee, and catch up on the day's news online. Then I'd get some more coffee. As I settled in, I'd confirm the name of that day's guest with John, the associate producer, who sat across from me. Often I'd have already been told the day before but would have forgotten. That's because the majority of our guests were unmemorable B-listers, second-tier actors whose names required a followup explanation. ("You know. He was that guy on one of those cop shows in the 80s. There was a monkey in it, and the monkey always solved the crime. He wasn't the monkey's partner. He was the boss with the drinking problem.") These were rounded out with the odd show creator, comedian, and the occasional author.

Over the next few hours, John and I would leisurely drudge up a few choice facts for Spencer to refer to when writing his interview questions, a task that required only an hour or two a day at most. "She used to work as a beautician," I'd tell John as I stumbled across some personal website devoted to that day's soap star. "She was a really, really fat kid. But she doesn't like to talk about it."

"Okay," he'd say a few minutes later. "She's adopted. She likes to travel. She's been to thirty-eight states."

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Sometimes we'd devote a few minutes to promoting our shows, sending out emails to people who maintained fan sites devoted to our celeb or the show they were on. This didn't take all that long, nor was it especially effective. There were a few rare cases where our

emails prompted fans to sign up for the ISP and thus gain access to the object of their fandom, but a far more common response was a lengthy tirade against the software giant that owned our ISP and a nod to the sheer injustice of them being kept away from the object of their affection because of their unwillingness to subscribe. These complaints grew tiresome and staunched our enthusiasm for that kind of grassroots p.r..

The rest of my pre-show workday was taken up with Web surfing, lunch, and chatting with my co-workers. Once I left during the middle of the afternoon to do my laundry. Despite the fact that we all worked in a big open space, no one noticed.

An hour before the show started, our celebrity guest would arrive in the car we'd sent. They'd make a few selections from our catered spread and chat with Spencer about what to expect during the chat. I'd type during the show itself, scavenge from what was left of the good spread, and leave for the night.

When I initially took the job I worried that my lack of industry would be seen as a problem. Unless they limited their guests to people who could type at least 80 words per minute, I did serve at least one indispensable function, but they could have brought in a part-time typist for that. Seeing that my co-workers were no busier than I was, I stopped worrying about it, until one day when I feared I'd tragically misjudged the situation.

It was during an early afternoon lull when I was buying and selling stocks on Hollywood Stock Exchange, a website that had only recently launched. I was carefully weighing the merits of dumping my Mira Sorvino stock in favor of some Gwyneth Paltrow. My daily visit to HSX had become such a habit that I began to consider it part of my job. I was so intent on my task that I didn't notice our producer, Belinda, was standing over me until she spoke. "Nancy," she said. "Can I see you in my office?"

All at once the folly of my behavior struck me. Was I actually buying and selling stock from my fantasy Hollywood portfolio in easy view of the producer's office, drawing attention to my slacking and suggesting my cushy job did not justify a full-time paycheck? Did I really want to risk being thrown back in the temp pool because of my vague interest in which Baldwin brother stock was going up and which was going down?

I followed Belinda into her office, prepared for the worst, my face flushed with shame. She leaned back into her chair and looked at me thoughtfully. "So," she said, "who do you like?"

"Who do I like?" I asked, not getting it.

"What do you think about Keanu Reeves?" she asked. "You think he's a good investment?"

I couldn't believe my luck; I guess I wasn't the only one with time on her hands. We proceeded to discuss our respective portfolios for twenty minutes. When I returned to my desk, after discussing the pros and cons of the move with Belinda, I did indeed dump all my Mira Sorvino.

DESPITE THE FACT THAT OUR CELEBRITIES weren't all A-list, our chats were not without their interesting moments. I was amused at Miss Universe 1997's repeated assertions that Miss Estonia "had issues" and author Sidney Sheldon's confession that he didn't

read because he "didn't have time." I was similarly entertained when John Ritter's live-in girlfriend revealed that John would appear in a *Three's Company* reunion only if the opening scene was of Jack and Janet standing over Chrissy's grave. Our text-only format allowed for moments that were only funny to *Spencer's World* staff, such as the time when one of the co-stars on *Mad About You* went on and on about how much she respected and liked working with Helen Hunt while pointedly holding up her middle finger or when a former supermodel claimed her waist size was still 24 inches, when one sideways glance confirmed that was not the case.

Spencer was a lively host, and our polls and graphics made for a fun show. A much more interesting one, in fact, than the bare bones celebrity chats featured on AOL. But let's face it, nobody comes to a celebrity chat because they've heard the production values are really high or the questions are clever. They come because they want to talk to a particular celebrity.

So while millions of AOL members could log into a chat with the likes of Michael Jackson or Julia Roberts, subscribers to our ISP had to make due with Jerry Mathers, the child star from *Leave it to Beaver*, or the first guy to be killed off in *Jurassic Park*. Many was the time our talent booker offered us up some guest and we'd all look at each other blankly, then fire up one of various search engines to see if we could figure out who they were. "I think she was a VJ in the '80s," John would say.

"Yeah," I'd pipe in. "Looks like she was in some horror movie six years ago. Straight to video."

"Can't we get somebody that at least has a movie out now?" asked John. Alas, the answer was all too often no.

I never understood why we got such low-profile guests. Maybe it was because our show and network were too new, and celebrities just weren't interested. Maybe the woman who booked out talent didn't have the right connections. Whatever the reason, it was a major problem.

Low audience numbers were obviously a problem for the long-term viability of the show. We were not a cheap operation, and we'd need some serious numbers to justify the expenditure of a sizeable staff, along with our industrial chic studio in an expensive part of town, not to mention the niceties offered up to our guests.

Since only subscribers could access our chats, we were already starting out with a relatively small pool of people to draw from. Everyone in our office felt the numbers corporate provided of their active members—three or four hundred thousand—were probably exaggerated. So even if we could offer up a major celebrity, it would be impossible for us to get the kind of numbers AOL did. And we almost never had major celebrities.

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part of town, not to mention the niceties offered up to our guests. But there was another more immediate problem. We needed questions for the chat itself. We were, after all, a chat show.

Because when I'm saying we didn't get much of a crowd at our chats, I don't mean we failed to get thousands of participants. I don't mean we didn't get hundreds. I'm saying we typically had less than ten people logged in at a time, and most of them never asked a single question. There were instances, for minutes at a time, when we had zero audience members.

Zero.

The way our computers were positioned—the two typists, Spencer and the guest all facing in one direction, with the chat monitor, John, facing towards us—our celebrities were thankfully unable to see the empty space on John's computer where the question queue should have been. When guests did inquire if we could tell how many people were in the chat room, Spencer would field those questions with vague, soothing answers while the rest of us remained diplomatically silent. "It's the 'net,'" he would say. "Millions of people are out there. We're like Larry King on the Web." When pressed for specific numbers, he'd claim ignorance. "Oh, we don't have that information here. But you'll get zillions of questions. Don't worry about it."

The ramifications from our lack of audience were potentially catastrophic. We couldn't let our visiting celebrities know they'd attracted a mere six mute fans, a fact which would embarrass them as well as us. And if word got out about the unpopularity of our shows, our potential guest list would be pruned down to accommodate only washed up sitcom stars and eighties pop singers. So the question was, how could we get more questions into the chat, when we couldn't attract any more people?

At first I felt pretty weird typing in these bogus questions a mere ten feet away from our celebrity, and then hearing John ask our celeb if they'd like to take a question on the topic I'd just asked about.

I think you see where this is going.

It wasn't long before we figured out that we could add a computer to the left of Spencer during the chat, and by tilting the screen back just so, move it out of sight of our celebrity guests. Then whoever typed for Spencer was also free to type in fake audience questions on the fly.

I'm sure it's obvious what a dicey workaround this was. Any of our guests would have only to lean back a few feet and turn their head to see exactly what we were up to. You might assume it would have made more sense for us to have someone else on staff serve this function. The problem was, the other staff members only had access to the software that the regular subscribers did. Thus, they could only submit questions under the name they'd signed in on, like normal people. In the studio, we had access to the professional chat software. This allowed us to vary not only our questions but, crucially, our screen names as well.

Thus, nyhottie might ask, "which of yoru costrs trns u on?," while Drsteve might pipe in with, "I was lucky

enough to see you perform on the London stage. Do you have trouble getting critics to accept you as a serious actress because of your incredible (if I may say so) beauty?"

At first I felt pretty weird typing in these bogus questions a mere ten feet away from our celebrity, and then hearing John ask our celeb if they'd like to take a question on the topic I'd just asked about. "Do you want to discuss your Scottish Terrier?," he might ask our guest, seconds after I'd sent in a query about the celeb's purported animal training skills. "Someone just asked about him."

"Sure," they'd say, thrilled someone knew enough to ask.

You'd think a scam this blatant would be sniffed out somehow, that our collective act of fraud would be picked up on by our guests. I worried about that, too, at first. After a while, in much the same way my HSX trades were weaved effortlessly into my workday, making up fake audience seemed like just like another part of the show.

A few of the more observant celebrities saw me typing during a lull in the official conversation and pointedly asked me, or Spencer, what I was doing. I let Spencer brush off these inquiries in his inimitable style. "Oh, it's just boring technical stuff." Then he'd quickly distract them with a question. "So," he'd say, as I typed his words into the main chat area, "what's next for you? Do you want to continue to develop your singing career, or will you focus more on your acting?"

How would we possibly explain what we were doing if some intrepid celebrity actually got up, walked over to the computer to my left, and saw me typing in a question? What possible excuse could we concoct for making up questions, indeed, entire audience members?

The thing was, though a few of the sharper guests that came may have hovered near the truth, none of them were willing to go so far as to voice their theories out loud. Who could blame them for not asking us outright if we had the sheer audacity to make up questions right in front of them while pretending that they came from the ranks of thousands of fans we implied filled the chat room? Wouldn't it seem crazy to accuse us of making up our own questions, effectively admitting this whole chat was a ruse? Would a huge software company really waste hundreds of thousands of dollars a year hosting chats attended by almost no one?

Does anyone, even the guy who ended up almost entirely on the cutting room floor in Titanic *because of his unconvincing Italian accent, really want to know the painful limits of his star power?*

And even if they could get their heads around this admittedly ridiculous fact, why would they want to? Did they really want to confirm that their fame rated only eight lurking fans, most of whom didn't stay for the entire chat? Does anyone, even the guy who ended up almost entirely on the cutting room floor in *Titanic* because of his unconvincing Italian accent, really want to know the painful limits of his star power?

From my experience, I'd have to say no.

But, for the record, that same guy has no qualms about running up the phone bill on the limo you sent for him, and using the vehicle to run personal errands for hours after its appointed return time.

Despite her inability to drum up recognizable celebrities for our show, Nikki, our talent booker, had no difficulty managing face time with famous people on her off hours—at least to hear her tell about it. Like most bit Hollywood players, she was a fan of the name drop. I pointedly ignored most of these instances to spare her embarrassment, in the same way you'd gloss over a sudden belch by a friend in a fancy restaurant. That is, I ignored these references until one day, shortly after the show had been cancelled but while we were still waiting out the last few weeks of the run, she reported the details of her birthday outing which had taken place a few days before. She'd gone to a bar with friends, and, according to her, Brad Pitt was there, found out it was her birthday, and approached her for a birthday hug. She reported this to me in a very matter-of-fact way, like this wasn't even necessarily the high point of the evening.

"Brad Pitt hugged you?" I asked her. "Because he found out it was your birthday?"

She nodded.

"Brad Pitt?" I repeated.

She nodded again.

I'm hardly celebrity obsessed. Every once in a while I'd be excited about meeting one of our guests on *Spencer's World*—Stephen Root from *NewsRadio*, one of my favorite shows, or Stephanie Zimbalist, formerly of *Remington Steele* fame, another one-time favorite. But I wouldn't describe myself as starstruck in these situations. I felt the same enthusiasm I'd feel meeting a friend of a friend you'd heard about and knew you had something in common with. You carve scrimshaw while listening to speed metal? I carve scrimshaw while listening to speed metal. Neat!

Of course, these were much more one-sided encounters than the scrimshaw scenario. Meeting someone you've seen on a TV show isn't going to be quite the thrill for them it is for you, nor does it represent much of a meaningful connection. It's one step away from: you've been on TV? I own a TV.

The point is, I'm not a sucker for celebrities on the whole. Sightings of even A-list celebs in L.A. are pretty commonplace and not worthy of a lengthy discussion. But this was *Brad Pitt*. He wasn't just some movie star; he was *the* movie star. Whenever I read in the tabloids that he'd broken up with someone, I had a moment of sympathy for the woman involved. Well, I would think, it's all down hill from here. It is now officially impossible for you to trade up. Conversely, when Jennifer Aniston busted up with C-lister Tate Donovan and got together with Brad, I was nothing but happy for her. How great was that, to follow up a painful breakup with the ultimate dating coup? In your face, Tate!

If Nikki had merely been in the presence of Brad Pitt, I could have dropped the subject without further discussion. But she had spoken with him, touched him! To have spoken and interacted with him without any obvious reaction was intolerable. To make the situation even more poignant, this was shortly after his break-up with Gwyneth Paltrow. The image of a heartbroken,

vulnerable Brad Pitt approaching our talent booker in a Hollywood bar was too tantalizing of a subject to drop.

"What did you say to him?" I asked, amazed.

She shrugged. "Not much," she said. "I think he likes blondes."

I was dumbfounded. When Brad Pitt approaches you for a hug, you don't simply brush him off because you have dark hair and *you think he likes blondes*. I don't care if you're eight months pregnant, a lesbian, or ninety years old. I don't care if you're a newlywed just back from your honeymoon and your husband is in the bathroom. I don't care if you're still wet from a fishing trip in which your entire family was wiped out by a rogue wave. When Brad Pitt addresses you, you keep him talking as long as you can because that is what you owe womankind. You take one for the team.

Signed photo of actor Edward James Olmos, courtesy Nancy Matson

Though I probed further, that was all Nikki had to say on the subject.

This minor incident made more of an impression than it normally would have because my own birthday followed Nikki's by only a few days, so I couldn't help using it as a basis for comparison. My 30th birthday, December 11th, also happened to be the last day of *Spencer's World*. Our guest that day was Ed McMahon. He was incredibly jovial and friendly, as you might expect, and was in many ways a perfect final guest for the show's run. The show started as usual, with Spencer asking a few introductory questions of Ed, mostly about his stint on *The Tonight Show*. Then Spencer announced that it was a special day.

"Is that right?" asked Ed as I typed his words.

"It's Nancy's birthday," said Spencer. "She's typing for you right now!" Then he put up a graphic of me with streamers around my head prepared, without my knowledge, by the graphics department.

"That calls for a kiss on the cheek," Ed said, and I typed. Then he kissed me.

It was very touching that my coworkers had integrated my birthday into the show, and that everyone, even our celebrity guest, participated in the celebration. Spencer called for the graphic of me to be shown two or three more times during the show, and each

time Ed McMahon graced me with a kiss on the cheek. In many ways, I couldn't have asked for a better conclusion to my time at *Spencer's World*.

But when someone else you know has just had a birthday celebrity encounter weeks before your birthday celebrity encounter, you can't help but compare and contrast.

I guess it was the aptness of it that got me. It wasn't so much that I was disappointed that I got attention from a seventy-something grandfather type, while Nikki got a friendly hug from the world's best-looking man. It was more that I realized this represented the natural order. Like at Christmas when your sister, the obvious favorite, gets the pony she asked for, and you get one of those knockoff Barbie dolls named Terry or Maxine whose accessories are all a bunch of hippie clothes and whose arms don't bend at the elbows. It's such a foregone conclusion you can't even really resent it; it would be like being angry at the weather.

This lifelong bottom feeder status is what makes my one remaining memento from the show so appropriate. It's a signed picture from *Spencer's World* guest Edward James Olmos, which reads, "Nancy—you were the best I've worked with." I found it hilarious when he wrote this. This respected actor who'd worked with Andy Garcia and was married to Lorraine Bracco declared me, someone who had typed for him in an online chat show, "the best."

This would be funny, but what makes it perfect is this: when I looked on ebay to see how much signed pictures from him were going for, I found out every one of them was signed exactly the same way.

Nancy Matson has published short stories in journals such as *The Carolina Quarterly* and *Hayden's Ferry Review*, and has been nominated for a Pushcart prize. She is also the author of a middle-grade novel, *The Boy Trap*. This essay is from her ongoing series entitled *Workin' It: A Job Memoir*. A related essay is available on Smith Magazine's *Memoirville*. You can find her on the Web at www.nancymatson.blogspot.com.

Anthony Walstorm

The Hound

Much later they would say
the vision that came was night,
in all her splendor,
dragging down the heavens
in a star-filled cloak,
with one, the order star, slipping away
in time to raise the sky
from gargoyle's pointed snout.

Chimneys of Cadaques

These white, pyramid-shaped
chimneys are families,
which the roofs reflect across the town,
while smoke spirals into the night sky
and disperses in the breeze
that blows from the Mediterranean sea.

Often, while out-racing
a heavily flung winter storm,
the fishermen on their boats
can see, from a great distance,
the safety of twilight chimneys,
as they hurry back to port.

The triangular heads
and sloping shoulders
seem to huddle together,
elbow to elbow in the cold,
wearing wooly hats
and smoking.

Woman's Night

The yielding night is just another one
of many. Liquid and hot, it unclothes you.
Lover of man, you use your darkest sun
just to confirm the silence, and though you
have only now lived through a drop of blue,
infinite night, you can increase your own
ripe darkness of self, reaching birth, alone.

Of what? Of the things still unknown to us,
the birth of dawn, a sentinel of light
that sends a ray across the port to caress
your naked shadow, lessening its height,
like healing herbs pressed over your chafed, tight
and deeply kissed lips, not to silence your yell,
but to show what you can wrestle from night and tell.

Anthony Walstorm is a philosopher and poet from California who travels around the world trying to capture the heart and soul of different cultures through his poetry, which he writes in situ. He has published poems in many journals across America, Australia, Asia and Europe.

Paul Gibbons

New Mexico Highlands: Muse by Accident

—to Cristina

I open your letter. You ask me
what it's like here, and I say
it snows the length of dreams,
the kind that make you shiver for days.
Or leave the curtains shut. Plows
do their sprints, shaving the roads.
You ask about writing and I say
soon the world is raw,
a dream gone over and over and then
you meet the person in it—pointing at you
from across the room, the room fuzzed like a siren,
the siren like a sword in your throat,
your tender throat… and you speak anyway.
And if you can't speak, you write it,
the drifts rising on either side overnight. You watch
it snow and you say *it snows* to yourself
and compare the clouds to "it" until
you don't know what *it* is
that snows, the subject done in
like a car swiveling under a semi.
You imagine a pop somewhere in the chest, the rim
digging in, a few sparks… and soon
the one headlight still working pushes
its dream-light cone like a bone
up and out of its skin. It snows,
and you remember
a voice like ragtime behind
snow hissing on the pipe leering out the back of a car
upside down, a windshield spread like the propositions
of coyotes. The glints stretch to a house
on a lonely road. *This body, this body,* the engine says.
It snows and exhaust is sent smoking.
I say most of the time the traffic trips along the road
behind the blue and red pulses of the plow.
The leading edge a wall vaulting the drifts.

Catch Near the Throat

—Española, NM

Nearly divided at its lungs, a rabbit swings
first towards the adobe
crouched in the apricot orchards,
then back towards the dry bank,
its halves held
by pure nerve

in the coyote's jaw.
The two bodies, one
clamped in the other, move up the bank,
dust filing behind them across the road
and into the arroyo
curling between fields
and shadows of distant cottonwoods

before I realize it is not rare,
this sighting of one body
gripped by another.
But it is a vision enough to make
a farmer rise from his tractor
and shade his eyes, to make
brake lights pair up on the road,
to briefly ignite a magpie's tongue.
It forces, perhaps, a camera out of its holster,
a sister on the phone to say, "Wait, wait—"

breaking off as if there were some contract
to remember the lifeless but not quite gone,
to record the rabbit's head bobbing
like a poppy in wind,
nearly severed from all else that it is,
its slack haunch and head, if nothing else,
speech interrupted by
a slaughter of nerve.

In Autumn, In Late

Twilight flares
and spirals like red
curtains loosened
and drafting over the town.
We work the fields as ashes
from leaf fires
taunt the white sheets
luffing near a window
a magpie strikes,
the rupture
lagging to the fields
like a ghost seeping
through glass,
becoming more a sputter
the nearly leafless trees make
when they finally let go.

We, who have to watch
what we no longer have
scatter as smoke
spirals above,
we have to imagine
a lost brother, grandmother,
a friend picking up
shards when we
are in the fields readying
for winter while twilight
tours the sky,
and we look
like bodies tired
of being in the place
where autumn burns
above and below
and yet it is cold,
and the magpie,
half ghost, half night, now
quibbles with the junipers.
We hear its call,
and bring its sound inside
as we kick off boots

and let straw and leaves
spread at the door
while fields
smoke behind us.
We knock ash from
the sheets.
We smell the smoke and cold
a little too strong
in the kitchen.
We sigh, reach
for the broom
as twilight
makes a wreck
of the sky.

After working at the county jail in Tierra Amarilla, New Mexico, Paul Gibbons recently moved to California to teach in the Writing Program at the University of California, Merced. He has recent work published in *Tar River Poetry*, *Rhino*, and *Passages North*, among others. He has work forthcoming in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *The Journal*, and *Crab Orchard Review*.

Mary Beth Ellis

The National Tonic

Eighteen hours before the 1998 baseball season began, the Cincinnati Reds called a press conference to announce a trade with the Cleveland Indians. We have a new first baseman, the general manager beamed. Sean Casey, a minor-league phenomenon, the wonder of the double-A. And… this kid, this Casey, he's… oh, he's a *sweetheart*. Huge enthusiasm. Great work ethic. Very approachable. Magic with the fans and you are going to *love* him.

There followed comparisons to Jeff Bagwell and David Justice and Barry Larkin and—listen to this: Joe Morgan. Joe Morgan, boys and girls!

The media, the Channel Five cameraman and the web guy from the *Reds Today* newsletter, stared back at him: Ah. And who had been offered in return? The Reds, from the day after they swept the 1990 World Series forward, sucked, and they sucked hard; they were like the *Apollo* spacecraft in that Tom Hanks movie with no steering, no oxygen, no power, and no food… who, then, was the lucky player loaded into the escape pod?

Well… that's the thing… see… the Indians, their starter… their starter has this thing with his shoulder, they're desperate for pitching, and we've had our eye on this Casey for quite some time now, and… and… we sent them… Dave Burba.

The writers stirred: Burba? Dave Burba? Like…(it was beginning to sink in now, into their skinny wide-ruled notebooks and chewed-on pen caps) as in… *Opening Day pitcher* Dave Burba? (big O, big D; we capitalize such things, here in Cincinnati.)

And *then* the front office leaned into the microphones to invoke the Holy of Holies: "Sean Casey," he said, "with success, will be second in popularity only to Pete Rose. Sean Casey… will *own this city*."

The city settled in to hate him.

Well, screw *that*… Pete Rose… that is one name you just don't *throw around* in this town.

In the hours before the first pitch (and just who was supposed to throw *that* now?) the newsprint dissectors and the insurance claims adjusters by day/sports experts by talk radio weighed in. This was a shock, yes, but all in all a Smart Trade… Lookit, Burba was a fairly solid pitcher, but he was streaky, perhaps he's already peaked… here are Casey's minor league numbers, these are *great numbers*, he batted .396 in the Arizona Fall League, come on!… the future is the hot young bats, and what was better, we'd snatched this one right out from under Cleveland, the enemy of all that was southern and western in Ohio… we must suffer for the short term in order to reap championships in the long term… let us be patient, then, and allow the lad to prove himself… so… a Smart Trade… yes, a very Smart Trade indeed.

What no one was saying very loudly was that this very smart trade made Cincinnati look, as a city, very stupid. We had grown used to looking stupid, accustomed to appearing in the national news only when one of us was doing something laughable.

And now here they've dealt away our Opening Day pitcher (we believe in our best starter so much that we just sent him packing! Happy season, everyone) and now you present us with this… this *Casey*, out of *Cleveland*, and we're expected to fling ourselves at his turf shoes in sheer orgasms of Cracker Jack joy?

As for the young marvel himself, Casey was reported as having "mixed feelings." Yeah… well… join the club, pal.

On Opening Day, an elephant trucked in from the Cincinnati Zoo, outfitted with a gigantic Reds batting helmet, took a crap on the infield of Riverfront Stadium, one of the relief pitchers gave up six runs in two-thirds of an inning, and Sean Casey… Sean Casey, The Future, appearing at the plate precisely once as a pinch-hitter, struck out swinging.

> *Eighteen hours before the 1998 baseball season began, the Cincinnati Reds called a press conference to announce a trade with the Cleveland Indians. We have a new first baseman, the general manager beamed.*

Joe Morgan… our white German asses, Joe Morgan. Sean Casey! The Future! Go ahead; pile on more of *this* guy, he's *great*.

That was the first forty-eight hours.

Before the next forty-eight had passed, Casey was flat on his back along the first base line with his right cheekbone in about a thousand pieces. Fielding practice, some unexpected high heat screaming in from a few yards away, and behold— your savior, Cincinnati.

An "orbital fracture," the doctors called it.

"Freak accident," the newspapers added.

"Told you so," said the fans.

"Oh, he'll be *fine*," said the front office. Six weeks on the DL at the *most*.

But just between you and me and the base path, no one was sure if Casey would ever regain his sight, period, let alone the ability to properly measure the hitability of a tiny sphere spinning at him at ninety-eight miles an hour. Was he blind? Would he *go* blind?

The Fabulous Sean Casey had far more serious problems to deal with other than his current image as an Opening Day-wrecker who caught line drives with his face. He needed to see if he was going to hit; and hitting, really, was all Sean had. He could field all right, and he'd smack it over the fence a respectable number of times, but he ran like a camel with an overwhelmingly full bladder, and no one had ever accused him of committing acts of Splendor & Beauty in the infield. He had no ass to speak of, and military-issue legs thick like the barrel of a highlighter marker.

But though we hadn't seen it yet, Casey could hit and hit and hit. That was partially due to whatever arrangements God makes when the sperm meets the egg and the Almighty declares, "And this one shall bat .364 with runners in the scoring position," but largely it was due to the fact that, once Casey curled up on the couch with the reality that he could hit and hit and hit but not throw or catch or run, even, he practiced dusk and dawn, wrapping his hands in a batter's grip around anything, everything, that happened to meet his palms.

He told people that he was going to be a ballplayer and they took one look at him and said Whatever. Sean, and Casey shrugged and then he went to practice hitting some more. The college scouts whatevered him too, all except the University of Richmond, which awarded him an athletic scholarship for a grand total of one thousand dollars. Casey proceeded to win the conference batting title and lead the team to a championship.

There were summer camps and extra practices and the chain-link confessional of the batting cage and shattered windows in his parents' garage, all so he could not just *hit*, but hit and hit and hit and hit. It was all he ever wanted, and all he ever knew, from his first year of high school until the day he lay motionless on the Astroturf mattress of Riverfront Stadium, the high strong bone of his face reduced to shards of glass by the very object he'd squinted at, crushed on, for so long.

His ticket here had wrought its vengeance, little caring that the only thing he'd wanted to do, from the age of fourteen, was play baseball. One last shattered window for Sean Casey.

HE WAS OPENING HIS EYES IN THE MORNING and seeing nothing. He stumbled for the bathroom, barely made out the shape of the stall and rejoiced. At least he knew where to aim.

There would be surgery. Three bones in his face were absolutely demolished, probably four. They needed to work from beneath his lip, the doctors told him, and insert a plate that would allow his eye muscles a normal range of motion.

So they did that, and the ballclub rested him for a few days, and then sent him to the triple-A Reds in Indianapolis to recuperate. After collecting five hits in three games, he was bumped back up to Riverfront.

Now… now, he could go about his business. This doctor folderol, this triple-A crap, that was behind him, now, and he could at last begin his major-league career; a month late, maybe, and kind of tender above the neck, but in the dugout, chewing Bazooka and spitting spit just the same.

The Fabulous Sean Casey had far more serious problems to deal with other than his current image as an Opening Day-wrecker who caught line drives with his face. He needed to see if he was going to hit; and hitting, really, was all Sean had.

And then the elevator dropped.

Quickly, quietly, Casey completely vanished from the RBI radar. Over sixteen games, he hit .135. He connected exactly once in twenty-eight trips to the plate. At one point, he was 0 for 25. These were the worst numbers of his professional career, of his life, of the entire Major League year, decade, millennium… that was what it felt like, anyway. Casey batted and batted and batted and batted, but he simply could not hit.

It pained everyone around him to watch it. The sound-bite testimonials and the beer mug stories were already beginning to circulate: Sean Casey was one hell of a guy. *Hell* of a guy. He advocated for hospitalized and disabled children with his right hand and raised money for charity with his left. He smiled, smiled, smiled, and threw his arm around the shoulder of everyone from the general manager to the beat reporters to the guy sweeping the clubhouse floor. The word "neat" was prominent in his vocabulary. He went to church on a regular basis, as if he *wanted* to or something. People— oh, people loved him, and well, they kind of loved themselves, too, when he was around.

Once, during a night game against the Phillies, the skies opened over Cincinnati. The baselines blurred and teared and ran for the dugouts and the curried blades of the outfield bent their slender heads. Lightning, jagged thunder raged across the river valley. The grounds crew ran to tarp the field, the heavy sheeting they dragged behind them a billowing white ocean, tearing from their hands in the whipping winds. The fans saw two Reds burst from the dugout to help to control the tarp, run it from home plate to the foul lines, racing to shelter the soft even dirt of the infield. One player was the Reds' ace pitcher, Pete Harnisch. He was laughing, daring the lightning bolts, delighted by this tornadic lark in the rain. The other, teeth clenched with frantic effort, very clearly not smiling as he struggled to protect the diamond, to hurry this heaving shielding blanket over baseball, was Sean Casey.

SO HE WAS SOCKING AWAY THE GOLD stars, Sean Casey was, in the Plays Well With Others department. But… wow, this *slump*.

Worse: what if it went beyond that? What if he couldn't hit again… anymore… *ever*?

If he couldn't hit…

If he *couldn't hit*…

Only twenty percent of all minor league players make it for good in the big leagues— more numbers, more numbers stacked against Sean Casey. It was all well and good to turn the world on with one's smile and twirl at the intersection of Fifth and Vine while flinging one's batting helmet in the air— but you had to have the numbers, by God, and not just any numbers— the number the press and the fans *expected*. Given the Rose Bowl parade the front office had thrown in order to make straight the paths of the one-man Big Red Machine, the press and the fans expected Jesus Christ in a cup.

Baseball is a sport measured by such instances as how one bats against boxer-wearing Methodists vs. right-handed pitchers with outie belly buttons, and in Sean Casey's case, as he plummeted end over end through the month of May, all the tight-assed little scenarios, every last one of the who-cares sportscaster statistics were horrific.

You were nothing, in baseball, if you did not have the numbers. Pete Rose: Here was a person currently smushed into the windshield of the national consciousness as a Home Shopping Network hawkman with a Wal-Mart haircut, but no one, nobody, not Bart Giamatti or some "board of inquiry" or any damn fool lifetime suspension could take away the number, the 4192 hits that made him the king of all hitters. Put him in the Hall, put him in the Hall, people were to this *day* yelling, the loudest of the voices clustered around the intersection of Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky: the very people, the very Reds fans who stood to be the victims of Rose's bet-on-baseball gambling. Put him in the Hall— after all, *the man has the numbers*.

Numbers… number of games played, number of pitchers faced, number of this and number of that nearly asterisked poor Roger Maris to death, the scrutiny of the baseball world stressing him to the point where his hair began falling out in clumps as he jogged alongside Babe Ruth's home run record; and all this in the early sixties, man, before stress had been *invented*.

A far lower profile had Sean Casey, but the nightmare flowed from the same ink— the accountants, the auditing sportswriters, notching every pitch he missed and every double play he dribbled off. Baseball has no hiding places, no armor of hockey pads to burrow beneath, no basket to mob under. He was out there, alone, in his blazing failure. The numbers, the container of baseball, its language and its measure, the stitches and seams holding each season in place, would not stop and they would not lie. Casey's Arizona Fall League triumphs and college batting title slid right out of the rearview mirror, shoved aside by the harsh blankness of hits he was now not getting. The credit had run out on his potential card.

Baseball is a sport measured by such instances as how one bats against boxer-wearing Methodists vs. right-handed pitchers with outie belly buttons, and in Sean Casey's case, as he plummeted end over end through the month of May, all the tight-assed little scenarios, every last one of the who-cares sportscaster statistics were horrific.

The front office saw this, saw he didn't have the numbers, and sent Casey back to Indianapolis. The former WonderBoy must have wondered: Now What?

THE EYE SURGERY, ALTHOUGH THE medical community warned him that it might not help at all, in time actually left his vision better than it had been before the accident, sending his right contact lens into the saline recycling bin. He grunted and shoved his way— hit, hit, hit, hit— back into the Reds lineup, hauling his average to a generally respectable .271. Such things… simply never happen, the doctors said.

The following spring— the Reds hung on, after all, to the cure-all bat they'd promised everyone— and as foretold, he buckled the city's knees. Casey hit .331 and put in an appearance at the All-Star Game. Little children pressed up against him, his name on their backs, beseeching his autograph, his benevolent glance. Casey grinned down at them, squatted down from his six feet, four inches to their height, asked questions about their Little League feats, signed cards made in his image, balanced baseballs on his knee as he scrawled his name and number. Press demands for a few moments of the mighty Casey's time were so insistent that the Reds limited them to the ballpark only. When rumors, heady rumors, surfaced that the Mariners might be willing to trade a homesick Ken Griffey Jr. to Cincinnati, the front office earmarked Casey— don't touch him don't touch him don't touch him—as non-negotiable. The Reds won and won, often coming from behind in the last pitches of the ninth, and celebrated each victory by huddling along the first base line and bouncing up and down in a Major League mosh pit of joy. "We're this little red wagon that can't be stopped," one of the players bragged, and that of course whipped through the sports columns to the talk radio shows and back again, and came out as the Little Red Machine.

And Sean Casey, darling Casey with the John-Boy grin and the can't-miss bat, was churning the generator. He was looking like… young Casey was looking an awful lot like… Joe Morgan.

They won ninety-one times that summer, this Little Red Machine did, and faced off with the Mets for a wild-card prom invitation. The entire season came down to one game, the stadium sold out, Casey was fanned a lot, and in the ninth he got so frustrated that he splintered his bat against his knee; and the Reds lost 5-0.

I couldn't tell you how that game's last out came down, but I do recall the morning-after *Cincinnati Enquirer* photograph of a shellshocked Sean Casey. Instead of the way I was used to seeing him— foot on the bag, right arm stretching for the outfield, or twisted sideways, his bat blurring towards the ball— this time he was standing in the Reds dugout, gazing miserably up at pitcher Orel Hershiser. Hershiser's right hand rests in benediction fashion on top of Casey's head, whose glove wilts at his side, folded in half, finished with. He seems very much in need of a hug.

"It's not so much that we lost," he later said. "It's just that the season's over."

Intertwined with the box score were several allusions that Casey was quite… well… *emotional* when the press showed up in the locker room with their follow-up questions and microphones and massive humming floodlights. "Emotional": that is one of those dance-around words men use while discussing other men who happen to be struggling with their composure, for where our Nike warriors are concerned it is simply Not Done to say, "The man stood before Channel 12 and *Sports Illustrated* and ESPN and God and *everybody*—and cried."

I couldn't tell you how that game's last out came down, but I do recall the morning-after Cincinnati Enquirer photograph of a shellshocked Sean Casey.

Given Casey's perennial hooray-let's-play-attitude, it's safe to assume that the next morning or so, as the sun indeed rose again and the city awakened to Kodak's announcement of his heartache, he collected himself and his glove and eventually returned to baseball as usual, this business of facing the numbers and going *ptui* with one's sunflower seeds.

THE 2001 BASEBALL SEASON SUCKED YAKS FOR THE REDS; it was all-sucking, all the time. The team dropped fifty-four games at home, an all-time Cincinnati low, an entirely fresh baseline of shame and ignominy for the numbers to dance along.

The bungee drop to the division undercroft scathed all except Sean Casey, who, although his average dipped slightly, RBI'ed and smiled and sent doubles crashing and basically did everything he was ballyhooed to do. And in return, the city remained wrapped around his legs, clutching his calf and gazing adoringly up into his cork-underlined eyes. The advertisers knew it, and so around Labor Day a cell phone company sent him to make a personal appearance at a Northern Kentucky strip mall.

I was there, between the Pier One and the Drug Emporium, dodging my thesis and a dumping-via-email by convincing myself that what I really needed, right that very second, in order to secure my eternal personal happiness, was a new bra.

This was before a cluster of red and white balloons and a ladies' room-sized line called my attention to the presence of Sean Casey amidst the flip-top phones and the leatherette carrying cases.

I peered around a line of children sheparded by worn suburban drivers. Casey, seated at a table, was indeed greeting and signing and smiling and waving… hello, everybody… sorry about the crappy season, and all… I had nothing in my hands, not even the bra, and frankly I had no idea what I was doing as I joined the line without even a five year old in tow for Psycho Stalker Appearance protection. Around me, second graders thudded brand-new baseballs to the ground ("Oh, *Carter*. Let me hold that, you'll *scuff* it.") and gazed down at one of the eight million incarnations of Casey's baseball cards ("Dammit, Brian, you're bending the corners. Hold it by the sides, by the *sides*, I told you!") The wretched perpetrators quailed, maybe stuck a thumb in their mouths, and stared across the room at Casey.

As for the origin of the fuss Himself, it was clear, from forty-five feet away, that the stories, the sap and the weeping, had not been manufactured from press-

box air and wisps of cotton candy. Casey is one of those extraordinary people who listens with his entire body: arms, spine, hands, everything, focusing in on every single person who trooped past him with a jersey or a program or a Louisville Slugger; even when that person did not focus back, even when the moment was approached with all the warmth and intimate eye contact of a bank transaction ("Hey, increase the eBay value of this for me, okay? Thanks, you're a doll.") Sean Casey, two feet away—and except for these poor ball-scuffing little kids, nobody saw him there at all.

A knot of five boys bounded away from the table, and I dropped into a Johnny Bench crouch across from Sean Casey… The Future… The All Star… The Commodity… the sweetheart of I-275. It was perhaps an inopportune moment to realize that I hadn't thought to figure out what, precisely, I was doing there.

I will now attempt to describe the eyes of Sean Casey. Someday, when I am a grownup and I will have gained the ability to capture them properly in print, that is the day when I will have become a Really For-Real Writer.

Until then, we must settle for the fact that they are greater than the sum of blue. They look like what might happen if God one day decided to end the careers of kindness and depth as characteristics, and decree that henceforth they shall be a color instead.

And Sean Casey is looking at me with these eyes, and I am staring back with my ordinary mortal political science major eyes, and this is what I said: "Do you mind… can you and I have a hug, please?"

In terms of forfeiture of personal dignity this was perhaps a fraction of a step above leaping on the back of the guy corralling the shopping carts in the Kroger's parking lot, but Sean Casey did not look nearly as afraid as you might expect. Instead he gazed at me for a moment longer, stood up, and held out his arms.

A fine trade the Reds had made. You had to hand it to the front office; they knew what they were doing, for once, when they brought Sean Casey to town.

Back in the car, as I put the Corolla in gear, I got a little… emotional.

A graduate of Bennington College's MFA program, Mary Beth Ellis' first book is *Drink to the Lasses*. She was recently named the Erma Bombeck Humor Writers' Workshop Writer of the Month and was a writer-in-residence at Casa Libre. Mary Beth speaks and writes from Washington, D.C., where she runs BlondeChampagne.com.

Michael Meinhardt

What it comes to

This is what it comes to:
we were not meant to admit our allergies.
There is the trip to Milwaukee, the shadow of a shaven beer baron
The splinter obscure in sawdust is highlight enough.

Achoo.

That was a strophe, not a stanza.
We could eat our own words,
savor the mustard, hidden by dusk,
in the shoulders of bread.

Amen!

I love bread! I once baked a bunch of loaves
at three in the morning.
We ate the first loaf like a stray linden tree.
She looked at me as if I held a secret.

Allegro

This is where we find ourselves:
Arapaho in throes of the dance
before the onslaught of buffalo,
crying out for those who are already dead
(Archipelago:)
and do not know it yet:
the settling of history by hide.
What happened that time in Scotland? You said
you lost your head.

Anastansia

I could have named her as nearly as you:
Put her name before yours.
Set these moments before all others.
Fed off the difference.
I just stopped collecting evidence
long before the prosecution rested.

A Feign of Imminent Gestures

This is when I owe you nothing
the pesos of a pig
Where do you get off talking to me like that
This is not an anomaly
These are not the festered foul winds of your hindquarters

Things do not work like that any longer
You have outstayed your welcome

Where do you get off thinking that you will someday bear my macos
this smear of fast love
That the sky could be blue
The wisp of cologne, the sea of something else
Room enough not in the world for your quarters

This is where we gather the change
sequestered for tithes
Slightly rises the vine, an indifference of virtue
You will not be remembered
in the broken purple spine of your measure

This cane could raise itself
stinking of your imminent gesture

Michael Meinhardt lives and writes in Chicago. He spends his best time contemplating mythological beasts, the performance of poetry on a page, and large bodies of water. He was selected for the *best new poet's 2005* anthology, recognized by the *Sturgeon's Law* poetry web site, and has won several awards for his work. He is currently assembling a collection.

Simon Perchik

*

You lower all doors
the way this knob
works it out where your hold

will slow the sound
waves make starting out
from the sea floor

and your hand stays wet
as if something you said
would fit inside the lips

your heart blows on
that shares its shoreline
between the sea and the shadow

cooling the mouth even seabirds
cover with their wings
their cries and turns.

*

Even with glasses and fingers
each word starts out blurred
and whatever drifts slowly past

before the envelope closes
weakened by saliva and thirst
—you play it safe, try drops, one

for each eye as shoreline, heated
by blankets and salt— you cling
to a dampness older than sea water

nursing drop by drop
till nothing, nothing— a rain
with no one to take hold.

*

How many times! this doorbell
smelling your sweat must know
nothing's changed and the dry sleep

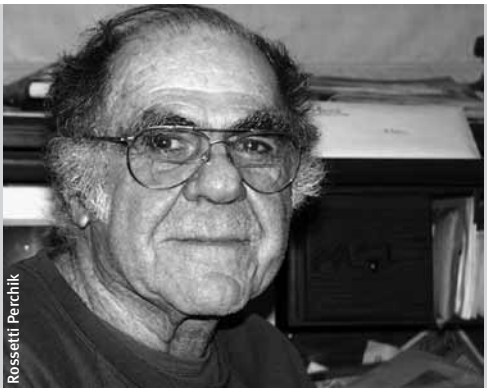
through the night— the button
has forgotten how, curls up
with someone who isn't there

though this all-at-once-familiar nudge
can't keep you away, outside
it's still rain and darkness

always some touch pressing down
a somewhere note, half embraced
half pounded, by itself heads into

the constant fear it's her name
that falls from the night sky
with no help in remembering

—for years! you don't first knock
sure this door will bring it down
leave only the earthquake and walls.



Rossetti Perchik

Simon Perchik is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The New Yorker*, *Weber* and elsewhere. *Rafts* (Parsifal Editions, Canada) is his most recent collection. For more information, including his essay "Magic, Illusion and Other Realities," a complete bibliography, and his email address, please visit his website at www.geocities.com/simonthepoet.

Daniel Robinson

Annie's Place

The sunset had already turned velvet as James walked the cemetery road, keeping a slow and steady pace until the dirt track turned back on itself. He jumped the wood fence and continued across Larson's wheat field, taking no more notice of the field's wheat stubble than he had of the caliche road. Following Donne's funeral, he had told Lora, his wife, to drive their daughter Annie back to the family home. He would walk back alone. Across the settled dust of the cemetery road and through the stubble and weeds that softly grabbed at his ankles, dust rose in wafting circles around his footsteps until his boots and the bottoms of his pants were brown with dirt.

James stood for a moment at the fencerow that separated the Larson's land from his grandfather's land, his eyes looking toward the darkness of the little valley held in there, a cleft in the country. His fin-

gers traced the notches of a wood pole before he crossed that fence and followed the fenceline until he could look again into the wild place. Donne's wild place had never been planted, had always been an overgrowth of willows and sage and grasses and cottonwoods, a sanctuary for birds and animals and ghosts, a place of mystery and of renewal. It had been that way when Donne was born in the old ranch house, now not much more than a jacal, and had probably been that way when Donne's grandfather had first wagoned his family onto the land.

Looking into the shadows and the shades of shadows held within the wild place, James felt a welcome presence, not unlike that of a pilgrim having come to the end of his journey. A weariness having been removed or a hunger fed.

"THE BANKS TELL ME TO PLANT FROM FENCEROW TO FENCEROW," Donne had told James as they stood looking into that shadowed ravine. His voice broke and was unsteady then, no longer clear and strong as James remembered from his own youth. "They tell me I might not get a loan if I keep this place uncultivated. But to hell with them. It's my clough. It's my place."

He laughed and scratched the stubble of beard he had and said, "I remember my grandmother would tell me whenever I took to wandering around here. 'Listen now, my callan,' she'd say, 'don't you be stayin' out past darkness or the broggarts will come from the clough and you'll be gone.'"

He pulled a stalk of wheat and broke loose the nuts into his palm and blew the chaff away with a gentle breath and cupped the nuts into his mouth to eat. He winked at his grandson, James, whom he had raised as a son, and added, "I slipped out my window one night and came down here to see them broggarts she was talking about. It was only the wind I heard, I know that, the wind in the bushes and trees and the creek running through there and pushing and moving logs and rocks and the animals, the foxes and coyotes and bears and deer and 'coon." He looked at James, and James could see the age in the old man's wet eyes. "I know it was just them things, but I know also that I could hear them broggarts calling to me, inviting me to join them, and I did. I walked down in there with all them animals around me and the eyes and the whispers of the owls, and I ain't never left. It's my place," he had said to James. "You understand?"

James had nodded and said that he did.

"And one more thing," Donne had said as they turned to walk back across the field of summer wheat, a field ready for its combine. "I'll be cremated once I die. And I know it'll be sooner rather than later, so don't bother protesting. I'll be buried, most of me anyways, in the family plot in town with my grands and my parents and your parents and my beautiful Louise. I want you to make sure that a handful of me

makes it down there." He pointed, his finger unsteady but his gaze hard and certain. "Sift a bit of me around where the spring comes up and starts that little creek. Can you do that for me, James?"

James said, "I can." He felt his eyes tear and the knot in his throat. He nodded and said again, "I can do that for you."

Donne had nodded and smiled and said, "You're a good man, James." He placed his arm around James's shoulder and they walked off.

THAT WAS IN AUGUST, the last time James had driven down to see his grandfather. The next day, after the two had stood at the crest of the clough, they had taken Annie, James and Lora's only child, out to see the wild place. As they walked through the wheat field, James had collected a handful of wheat nuts, eating some himself and giving the rest to Annie.

"Why is it wild, Grandpa-Donne?" Annie had asked.

James's parents had died in a car wreck when he was eight, and Donne, James' grandfather, filled the break in generations like a new link on a chain, becoming father for one and eventually becoming grandfather for the other.

Donne stopped and looked back across the wheat toward the afternoon sun just beginning to spread in claret colors along the horizon of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Birds sang and flew to the comfort of leaf-full trees, and increasing shadows from a bosque of cottonwoods reached along the river a half-mile away. He opened his hand to the ground so that the palm was flat, and he stood for a moment with his eyes closed as though divining an essence from the ground below his feet. A shallow wind blew the wheat stalks across his opened palm.

"Annie-girl," he said without opening his eyes, "I call it my wild place because it's just that."

He then opened his eyes and smiled and winked at the little girl. He bent over to pick her up and turned her to face the river. "You see that creek down there?"

"Almost," Annie said, stretching in Donne's arms to look at where the creek wound between cottonwoods and into and out of the sunlight and shadows of the wild place with kaleidoscope bursts of reflected light.

Donne lifted her higher, his face blushing from the strain.

"Now I can," she said.

"When I was your age," Donne said as he returned her to the earth, "that river had more water. We didn't plant as much land back then. We couldn't afford to irrigate up here and this little creek's never had enough water to wet a stamp. This area was all wild back then. Do you understand?"

"Maybe," Annie said, but James knew that she did not, that what Donne wanted her to see so badly would have to be learned, not shown.

Donne pulled Annie closer, hugging her to his leg, and James could see the old man's breathing heavy from the strain of having lifted her.

"Back then," Donne said, "this draw was wild because we couldn't plant here. Now I keep it wild because I can plant anywhere."

Annie looked at Donne. James could see in the singular tilt of her head that she remained uncertain about Donne's explanation. He knew that at her age, the necessity of a wildness lay somewhere beyond her grasp. He also knew that she loved the dense draw, that she began each day at Donne's with the anticipation of the wild place, that her heart knew what her mind could not yet fathom. He wondered if she had also heard the call of those broggarts who slied between the moon shadows and underbrush of the wild palce.

Donne must have also understood Annie's look, for he bent on one knee to speak with her. "We can rule everything," he said, and to James he seemed to not be talking to Annie at all but beyond her and beyond even himself. "That is why we have to keep some of this wild."

He let a handful of dirt sift through his fingers and sighed and looked at her and said, his voice soft and distant, "My father once told me something his father had once said."

Both Annie and James stepped closer to hear and Donne looked at each for a moment before continuing. "'The best side is already up, why plow it under?,' he said. 'That's why I have left that bit of land… the best side is already up.'" He looked at the dirt from his furrowed land and sighed and nodded as though agreeing with himself. "And there is a life down there that can never be replaced if we let it be destroyed."

He placed his hands on his knees to push himself back straight and pulled a bandana from his hip pocket, lifted his hat, and wiped his brow. He smiled at James, a smile that showed Donne's age. A smile that lit James like the remaining sun of evening. A smile that spread across the old man's face like the dusk silhouetting the Sangre de Cristos. A smile that made James smile in happiness as well as in sadness. It was a smile that he knew he would not see very much more of.

Following Donne's funeral, a couple of men in dark suits, both Larsons, had walked up to James. Their suits fit poorly. In the fifteen years since those suits had fallen out of fashion, both men had changed body shapes. The older, Billy, was too fat to button his jacket, and it stretched tight across his back pulling at his shoulders so that his stomach fell in front of him like a bulging weak spot in an old inner tube.

"Real sorry about your grandpa, Jimmy," Billy said, offering his hand to James.

James had never liked being called Jimmy. That may even have been an unspoken reason he had left Tercio following high school. Had he stayed after graduating he would have had no choice. He would have grown fat and he would have littered the floor board of his pick-'em-up truck with McDonald's coffee cups and Copenhagen cans. He

would have become Jimmy. Every boy in Tercio eventually had his name altered to fit the final 'y.' For girls, the right of passage was getting pregnant before the prom.

"Thank you, Davey. Thanks for coming, Billy." James felt ridiculous talking to grown men like that.

"We was wondering, Jimmy, now that he's dead… excuse me, passed on, if you'll be selling the land?" Davey asked. He stood behind and a little above his younger brother, but they looked almost as twins right down to the flared pants and the flip of hair ringing their heads from wearing a hat too much.

"I haven't even thought about it."

"I understand," Billy said. He nodded and scraped the ground with the toe of his boot.

Davey did not look happy. He spit on the ground and said, "But when you do, we'd appreciate you giving us a chance to bid on it."

"I'll do that."

"We'd also be interested in that stretch of land along our fencerow that your grandpa left dormant. We might be able to do something with that," Billy said. He smiled and James could see a Copenhagen residue littering the man's teeth and gums.

"But we want to talk about the whole damn place," Davey added, hunching over his brother's shoulder.

"Yes. I'll remember that."

"Okay," Billy said.

James did not say anything in return, but he reached out his hand for Billy and Davey to shake.

The two men joined another group of men in dark suits who had been standing near James. James winced and tried not to listen as the group laughed and talked in whispers about Old Donne's Wild Place.

"I'M NOT AFRAID OF MONSTERS," Annie had said to James as the three neared the bench of cultivated land stretching above the wild place, a boundary before the feral. James took Annie's hand as she reached up, grasping for his.

"I know you're not afraid, and there aren't any monsters here anyways," Donne said. He laughed softly. Age lines spread around his mouth and his eyes danced in the good, soft angle of that eventide light.

"I still don't know," Annie said. "Why is it called the wild place?"

"Maybe because I find wild things when I come down here," Donne whispered. He pointed, "Like up there."

Annie and James both raised their heads to see.

A red-tailed hawk circled above the wild place, wings spread and back flat and head lowered as its eyes searched for field mice, flying in slow and easy circles and floating on cushions of air that formed in the

confluence of currents above the break in the earth's surface. It skreed before slowing and landing on the skeleton limb of a tree snag, an anchorite in the hold of the wild place.

They stood where the land fell off into a patch of cottonwoods and scrub oak and thistles and where the water began as an intermittent creek. The draw smelled of rotting leaves and the previous night's rain, and it smelled of mushrooms and soil and of original life.

The wild place extended along the draw from southeast to northwest, from dawn to dusk, and disappeared into a wheat field on the upper end and the increasingly restrained river on the lower. When Donne had first planted the field behind them, he had left this draw untouched, never intending to ruin it with a plow, so that he always had a place to eavesdrop on the world. A place at the very edge of the earth where, when the wind howled or even whispered through the draw, Donne said he could hear a different tongue being spoken. A tongue, he told James one night as they sat alone on the porch chairs in front of the ranch house, that he could not understand but that he knew continued to call to him.

James looked into the draw, and he could hear the slight creek bounce between rocks and logs, but he could not see it. An old cottonwood had split exposing the white heart stained red with rot, the bark on the fallen half sloughed off and missing. The smooth log lay mostly hidden by willows and scrub oaks and the truncated part stood erect like half a man. Wind in the draw whisped the trees into irregular dances, and he could almost taste the smells brought forth from the draw on those winds.

With the sun still warm on his back, James could see where the creek began as a rocky spring before entering the draw. He remembered finding raccoons and deer along the creek and even once scaring a yearling black bear that had wandered down from the Sangre de Cristos. And he remembered finding tracks and spore of those and other animals and he remembered once, after darkness had come quickly upon him, having heard what he then knew was the wailing of La Llorona searching for children to replace those she had killed.

Annie loosened her grip on James's hand, and she stepped closer, leaning as though pulling its scent to her. Her hair drifted in whispers.

"Annie-girl," Donne said.

Annie stopped. She turned. A push of wind sent her hair in errant whisps around her face.

"Come here."

Donne knelt in front of James.

James looked down on his grandfather and could see the fragility where there had once been such strength. The man had somehow and suddenly and without James even seeing slipped into the lee side of his life. He had been dying for over a year, had known he carried a cancer

that could not be removed or irradiated and still faced mornings with a smile and still faced evenings with a desire. James felt as though he had learned lessons from this old man, now fragile and becoming a shell, and James could see that he was learning the final lesson, how to face death.

Donne's fingers brushed across a pile of small stones as though the old man were counting, spreading the stones.

"What, Grandpa-Donne?" Annie asked, stepping close to Donne and looking down at the man's hands on the face of the ground.

"Before you walk down, let's see what we can find up here."

"Like what?"

"Arrowheads."

"From Indians?"

"From Indians."

"Daddy," Annie asked, turning to James, "is Grandpa-Donne telling me the truth?"

Donne and James smiled and James knelt beside Donne. When James was young and the whole family lived in Tercio, he had spent almost every weekend on Donne's farm. Mostly he had worked the wheat or tended the cattle, cleaning and mucking. Often enough, however, he had slipped away to visit the wide draw separating Donne's land from the Larson Farm.

Donne never told James he could leave, and he never got mad except the summer James was seven and left during the wheat harvest. James had found an unchipped *metate*. Donne had lectured James for an hour on responsibilities, then he had James show him where he had found the metate. They searched together and found two *manos* as well and a handful of pot shards and missed dinner altogether, having crawled on hands and knees across the rimrock of the draw like two children playing at finding pirate treasure.

The next day, the two of them skipped out on helping James' father clean the combine and trucks and spent the day searching the wild place for more artifacts, as Donne called them.

"Donne is telling you the truth. Along here one day I found a rock knife."

"Really?"

"Really. Donne keeps it in his artifact collection."

"I'll show it to you when we get home, Annie-girl," Donne said. "I keep it at the head of my bed in case some Indian ghosts come haunting the house."

Annie looked at Donne and said, with absolute surety, "I don't believe in ghosts."

"I do," Donne said and he winked. "I feel them every time I come down here. I hear them."

Annie stared at Donne. James read her soft eyes. She wanted to believe him, but she was uncertain and then he watched a slight smile

pass from Donne to Annie and back again, and held within that shared smile were secrets and dreams unstated yet alive.

"What do they say?" Annie asked.

Donne smiled, and James thought that Donne would not answer the question for he took so long to say anything. "They remind me how beautiful the world is," he said.

"Can I hear them?" Annie asked.

"If you listen," James said. He was never certain that he had ever heard anything other than the wind and the creek and the animals. He wondered, though, whether that was because he had never allowed himself to hear.

"But you have to listen close," Donne said. "Search out the small washes where the rain water runs from the top of this bench. You can also find artifacts if you look for them. They are what remains of the ghosts who lived up here." He pointed. "Follow those washes into the draw and you should find an arrowhead. They're obsidian, black and shiny."

"Look close and go slow," James added. "And check ant hills. Ants are great archeologists."

James sat with Donne on a log that provided a physical boundary between the worked field and the feral draw. They sat in silence and watched the little girl scratch at the ground and they sat in the silence of two people quite at ease with each other and where they were.

James felt the soft, turned soil behind the log. That land was so different from the rocky dirt in front of him, he thought. "It's like day and night," he had told Lora the first time he brought her to the wild place. He had hoped that she would see the difference and understand. They made love then, the rocks and stubble tracing maps on their bodies.

"Aren't you going to look?" Annie asked.

"No," James said. "I'm going to stay with your grandpa."

"I can't make it back out of that place as easy as I used to," Donne added. "Come here, though, and I'll tell you about what I found right here."

Annie looked at her feet and searched the clusters of buffalo grass and fescue that grew in clumps between the rocks and sage. She moved slowly toward James and Donne, watching closely where each footstep would fall.

Donne drew a handful of spear grass and chose one thin shaft. He threw it at Annie as she neared and the stem of grass caught in the sleeve of her sweater. She stopped as though impaled.

"That may have been how it began," Donne said.

James motioned for Annie. He pulled the piece of grass from her sleeve and lifted her onto his leg so that she faced Donne.

"I found a handful of arrowheads. Indians from further south must have been over on a hunt because we don't have any obsidian around

here. They probably came across some cowboys, maybe our ancestors homesteading the valley. I found some spent shells from a rimfire rifle. Your dad was here with me that day, I think."

Donne looked at James and James nodded and Donne squeezed James's knee. Most of the strength was gone from Donne's grip, and James felt Donne's hand pulse hard, then soft, instead of the steady grip he remembered.

"We found more arrowheads and rifle shells than you can carry," James said and Donne smiled at him.

"It must have been a good fight," Donne said. "We spent the whole day crawling around the top of this bench. We caught hell when we got home after supper and dirty as dogs rolling in cow dung." He laughed. "If you look hard, you may still find a few artifacts we didn't get."

"Is that why you call this the wild place, Grandpa-Donne?"

"That and other reasons… the antlers I find every spring and the skull I found."

"A person's skull?"

"Yes."

Donne paused and James waited for Annie's reaction. "I don't think I like it here."

James laughed. He had stayed away from the wild place for months after Donne had found the skull. The skull, however, was old and an anthropologist from the university in Pueblo said that it had been out there for at least a hundred years, but that it was both not old enough and also too old to be of any importance. Donne had brought the skull back to where he had found it and buried the skull, offering his own last rites for the person who had died alone and long ago.

"It's okay, Annie. The skull was real old and might even have been from the fight on the top of this bench," James said.

"I don't think I want to go down inside. But I'll look around here on the edge for arrowheads," Annie said.

She climbed from her father's leg and walked toward the crest of the bench. She walked, looking at the ground, her hands tight inside her pockets. She stopped, knelt, and picked up a small piece of rock. Holding it close to her face, she searched the rock as though it held tiny clues she could not discern.

James watched her movements and thought that his were probably the same when he was her age, tentative and filled with conflicts of fear and desire. He remembered dancing to hidden orchestras that hung in this wind, hiding from distant sounds, fearing and wanting the sub-blue shadows below. He remembered feeling a pulse from the land, that the creek which flowed through the draw also flowed through him.

A cold push of wind brushed his face, causing his eyes to tear. He wiped his eyes with the tips of his fingers and continued to watch Annie.

"She looks happy," Donne said, his voice almost a whisper.

"I think she would like this place," James said.

"I know she would. She has the heart." Donne paused and coughed. "She will love it here if she has the chance."

James looked at Donne and saw again how much Donne had aged. The eyes were clear and bright but wet and ringed with red. His skin was loose and transparent, and Donne seemed to have not enough strength to even keep his eyelids from falling.

"How are you?" James asked.

"I'll live till I die, and not a day longer."

Donne smiled and James laughed. Donne patted James on the shoulder.

He said, "I know I don't have much time left, and I accept that. The Good Lord gave me a damn fine life. All I want now is to know that you and Lora and Annie can have that as well."

He knew Donne would die soon. The doctor had told him so over the phone the previous week. That was why James had pulled Annie out of school for a week and told his boss that he would take comp-time to make up for the lost work. Lora at first resisted, she also had to work, but she eventually agreed to drive down with him and not just meet him for the weekend.

They had spent the week with Donne, listening to the stories Donne could no longer fully remember and sometimes would tell two or three times a day. They cleaned the old house and walked the paths grown over with weeds and brush and grass. James had told Lora that he had to pay his respects before Donne was gone, and Lora had held him close at night when he felt as though he would cry.

"I'd like you to move back and take over this place when I'm dead." Donne kept his eyes flat and steady on James, and James knew how important this was to the man. Donne had left legacies in the world, the lessons he had taught James and the memories that would remain beyond his death, but the legacy of his land was something beyond his control. He wanted James to pass on that legacy as one passes on the hewing of a hickory handle.

James sighed and turned to watch Annie.

"I don't know. Lora has her work, and I'm doing well, and Annie has her friends."

In the pause between him and Donne, James could hear the leaves falling in the draw. He wanted to say yes, to leave all his suits and ties in Denver and return.

"Grandpa-Donne," Annie said. She walked toward them, her hand balled into a fist and held in front of her. "Is this an arrowhead?"

Donne took it and held it in his open and tremulant hand. James could see that the rock was obsidian but that it was only a chip, a piece of an arrowhead or knife.

Donne held it up between his thumb and forefinger and searched it in the sun's light as a jeweler searches a diamond. "Annie-girl, you have found a wonderful arrowhead. I don't think I've ever seen one like it."

Her face lit. She took the chip from Donne and gave it to James, telling him to keep it for her. She walked back to where she had found that chip and continued looking. She stood there for a moment, her body tensed as though she were hearing something just beyond her ability to make out, and then she stepped closer, moving over the edge of the bench and deeper into her wild place.

Daniel Robinson's first novel *After the Fire* was published in 2003 by Lyons Press and is based on his experiences from fighting wildfires as a member and crew supervisor of Hot Shot crews. "Annie's Place" is set in southern Colorado near Trinidad, and an area of great beauty and mystery. Daniel lives in Fort Collins, Colorado, where he teaches and works in a fitness club.

Jan Wellington

Raccoon Limbo

happy Beast,
If the caresses of a human voice
Can make it so, and care of human hands
—William Wordsworth

They are making sad ravages in the woods…
—Dorothy Wordsworth

It's mid-June in the Mountain West. I'm standing at the kitchen sink, absent-mindedly rinsing dinner dishes and gazing out the window. As this postprandial ritual demands, I scan the birdfeeder suspended from the cherry tree at the backyard's margin. No activity there, but on the ground below the feeder I sight some odd bodies nosing about: neither sparrows nor quail scavenging spilled seed, nor robins gorging on fallen cherries—not bird bodies at all, I sense with a start, but something (two of them) small and furry. With a jerk of recognition, my brain says "mammal," and as I reach for the binoculars I keep on the counter, I'm aware of the blood churning in my veins.

Eagerly I train the binocs on the spot, focus and squint at… raccoons! Young ones, they must be, judging from their size. No sooner have I established my visitors' identity than the two of them head diagonally across the lawn, skirting its leafy border, and totter toward the house in a high-shouldered shuffle, bodies pressed together as if they were one creature. What are they doing out in the daytime, I wonder, and where is their mother? I don't know much about raccoons, but I've heard they're nocturnal; instinct tells me these two should be holed up with mom in their den, not strolling onto my small-town patio in still-broad daylight. Then it hits me: they're headed for the gap under the fence and, from there, down the driveway and into the street.

In a surge of mother-adrenalin, I grab a broom and dash out the front door toward the driveway, anticipating a confrontation. Breathlessly I turn the corner of the house and stop, face-to-face (or rather, ankle-to-face) with the

youngsters, who halt in their tracks and stare up at me in wonder. Slowly I close the space between us, crooning inanely, "Hello babies—don't be afraid." But of course they are: I can see it in the dubious expressions that turn alarmed as I gently nudge with the broom, hoping to reverse their trajectory back through the fence. "It's for your own good," I explain as I continue to nudge, the result at first unproductive; the larger, darker one (male?) stands his ground, growling softly, while the smaller, lighter one (female?) huddles behind him, head buried in his gray-furred rump.

With persistence, I manage to herd the pair back under the fence. Dashing inside, I seize a handful of flattened boxes, return, and barricade the gap. Then I zip inside again and out the back door onto the patio; I find my raccoons crammed into an unlikely nook where the fence meets the house. Blocked from another escape, they've metamorphosed into a furball with four beady eyes, irises rolled back as if to seek an extra fraction of distance from the oppressor. Abashed at being the cause of their fear, I glean a few cherries from the lawn, deposit them beside the furball, and retreat into the house.

My destination is the computer, where I do a quick Web search for wildlife rehabilitators. Being the parent of two formerly-outdoor cats who insisted on bringing me presents of finches—some of them alive but worse for the wear—I'm aware such altruists exist and guess they'd be the ones to turn to. Five names and numbers turn up, but before calling them, I slip outside to check on the furball, which remains intact. But the cherries I left on the patio have been reduced to pits, so I replace them with fresh ones and return to my Mac in search of facts to offer my contacts.

The first sites my search unearths are anything but raccoon friendly, devoted to dire warnings about disease and helpful hints on how to "eliminate" Procyon lotor. *Eventually, though, I learn my raccoons are about eight to ten weeks old and—the good news—at least partially weaned.*

The first sites my search unearths are anything but raccoon friendly, devoted to dire warnings about disease and helpful hints on how to "eliminate" *Procyon lotor.* Eventually, though, I learn my raccoons are about eight to ten weeks old and—the good news—at least partially weaned. The bad news is that their mother is undoubtedly dead (most likely killed by humans or their machines) and that these youngsters will need a surrogate mother—if not for the year they'd normally remain with her, then long enough to keep them out of trouble and see that they eat. I also learn that raccoons are intelligent and highly adaptable: one of those species who've survived human encroachments on their habitat and prospered by rifling our trashcans, gardens, chicken coops, and camping larders—not to mention bedding down in our chimneys and attics. (Might this explain the light-footed patter I've heard around midnight in the attic-crawlspace above my bed for the past three years? Claustrophobe that I am, I've never investigated, remaining content—even

pleased—to think I'm sharing my abode with mystery guests.)

Armed with a modicum of information, I phone the rehabilitators on my list. I leave messages for the first three, and on the fourth try I reach a friendly woman who informs me she's up to her ears in baby raccoons—there's been a bumper crop of orphans this year—and she simply can't take any more. She warns me not to contact the "authorities," who would collect and destroy my pair, raccoons being considered "vermin" by the state's officialdom. In fact, she tells me, she and her raccoon-rescuer cohorts are veritable outlaws, operating under threat of confiscation. I tell her I admire her dedication but wonder what to do about my orphans; she advises me to make a den for them in an upended box and offer them water, baby food, and fruit (my windfall cherries are just the ticket). Then she wishes me luck and hangs up.

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Soon afterward, another contact calls me back and repeats what I heard from the first: she and her rehabilitator friends are overwhelmed with raccoon kits, *don't* contact the state, and good luck. "But what if no one will take them?" I whine. She suggests I find an out-of-the-way place in the woods and leave them there. But I know—as she does, too, I suspect—these youngsters wouldn't survive on their own, so I mutter my thanks and end the call. Frustrated, I leave a message for the last name on my list and prepare to construct a raccoon haven.

Under an overgrown shrub that shades my back patio, I stand a large Charmin box on end; in it I place an old towel and an older foam cat bed. A glass pie plate doubles as a water dish, and around it I scatter yet another offering of cherries. Now for the hard part: donning an old pair of gardening gloves, I proceed to the niche in which the furball is holed up, seemingly asleep. Gently I insert my gloved hand into the ball, trying to separate the glued-together pair, musing as I do that their names should be "Yin" and "Yang." For my pains I get a growl of protest from brother, who bares his pointy teeth at me and rolls his eyes in apprentice menace; his sister whimpers and presses closer to his side. But finally I get my palm between them and, despite their demurrals, manage to cup my hands around the female's round belly, lift the tiny burden, and deposit her in the cat bed. Then I return for the male whom I hoist and transport, wriggling and snarling, to his sister's side. Immediately they re-form their ball in the bed in the box, and I step back to admire my efforts. The truth is, I've fallen for these vulnerable youngsters. My hands remember Yin and Yang's weightless, fuzzy heft and itch to caress them, but their wildness is not to be ignored. These are not kittens, I remind myself, and I leave them in peace.

Increasingly curious about the lives of these endearing creatures the state in its wisdom has christened nuisances, I return to the computer, resume my quest, and quickly get lost in the search. At some point, though, I notice a red splotch on the keyboard; tracing its origin, I'm startled to find two long rivulets of blood painting my left forearm. As I make this discovery, I remember reading that raccoons are a prime source of the dreaded RABIES, and for a panic-stricken moment I sit staring at my arm as if it belonged to an alien, visions of a horrific death crowding my brain. Then I'm in the bathroom rinsing my arm and inspecting what appear to be two inch-long scratches oozing blood. At least they *look* like scratches, I think hopefully; they're too far apart to be bite marks, *aren't they?* The little guy did put up a struggle when I lifted him, but I don't recall being bitten, or even scratched. *Wasn't he facing the other way?* I wonder as I scrub the wounds with soap, rinse, douse them with alcohol, dry my arm and apply a liberal smear of antibiotic ointment. The bleeding has just about stopped, and I remember something else I recently read: there has never been a case of raccoon rabies reported west of the Missouri… or is it the Rockies? Somewhat comforted, and recalling I've heard that rabies shots are terribly painful, I decide to do nothing: I'll play the optimist and keep this little episode secret.[1] Anyway, I remind myself, if I report it, Yin and Yang are goners.

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For distraction's sake, I put on a long-sleeved shirt and drive to the supermarket for baby food, returning with a jar of banana and one of lamb. Back home I taste the mush (not bad, if a little bland), dish a few gobs onto plates, and deliver the repast to the kits, who are still interlocked and asleep. Surveying my handiwork, I realize there's nothing to keep the raccoons from leaving if they want to… perhaps I shouldn't have stood the box on end? But I hate to disturb them again, so I resolve to leave things as they are and trust in fate. Maybe they'll appreciate my hospitality (not to mention the Gerber's) and stick around.

That night, my sleep is disturbed by dreams of monsters foaming at multiple mouths and the barking of Buddy, my neighbors' dog. At first light I awake in a state of happy perplexity, and marvel: "I have raccoons!" Shrugging on shorts and a tank top, I rush outside to check. The baby food has been consumed, there are cherry pits in the water dish, and Yin and Yang are gone. With a pang of loss I search the yard, but there are no raccoons to be seen. Dejectedly, I make some coffee, take it to my study, and lose myself in work. Eventually, though, Buddy's ringing barks pierce my concentration; while there's nothing unusual about Buddy barking, her tone is especially urgent. Moving to the guest room, from whose window I can spy on my black Lab neighbor, I see she's stationed herself by the tall wooden fence that

abuts my neighbors' driveway, nose to the slats and barking up the proverbial storm. The proverbial lightbulb flashes on in my head and I rush next door and lean on the bell. When the door opens I announce breathlessly to Sarah, "I think you have some raccoons." She summons Donald, her husband, and as the three of us head for the fence I recount my orphan story.

On the ground by the fence is a knee-high pile of tree limbs and brush—a promising raccoon hideout, I'm thinking. "I keep meaning to get rid of that," apologizes Don, and we begin to lift off branches. "I'm glad you didn't," I reply as I glimpse through the tangle a familiar furball staring up with accusatory eyes. Huddled against the fence at the bottom of the pile are Yin-Yang, shrinking from the dual assault of dog barks and marauding humans. How glad I am to see their smart, triangular faces, which have clung like burrs to my visual memory, and how parental I feel! "Wait!" I exclaim to my friends, who are peering at the kits in fascination. "Get me some gloves," I order, and run back home, returning with the trusty carrier I've used to transport two generations of cats. (This time I've thought to don a long-sleeved work shirt and button the cuffs.) Gingerly, we remove more branches from the pile until a baby-raccoon-sized aperture appears. I reach in, extract Yang, place him in the carrier, and repeat the process with Yin.

After some quick deliberation, I've settled on the guest bathroom as a convenient maximum-security hostel. Lining the bathtub with newspapers, I deposit in it the water dish; a feast of baby food, crackers, and ubiquitous cherries; foam bed; and irritated raccoons. (Gratitude is not to be expected from wild things, I ruefully think.)

I've got to come up with better names, I think as I work: these may be fitting, but they grate on my poet's ear. I thank my neighbors, who are oohing and aahing over the black-and-gray ball at the back of the cage. "I'll keep you posted," I promise and return to the house.

"This time," I tell my prisoners as we enter, "you're going to jail." After some quick deliberation, I've settled on the guest bathroom as a convenient maximum-security hostel. Lining the bathtub with newspapers, I deposit in it the water dish; a feast of baby food, crackers, and ubiquitous cherries; foam bed; and irritated raccoons. (Gratitude is not to be expected from wild things, I ruefully think.) Pondering the lighting scheme, I select a nightlight as the least intrusive mode of illumination. Next I address the question of new names for my recaptured charges. "Percy" and "Mary" come to mind, but recalling the need for sibling appellations, I reject the Shelleys. Then I have it—I'll call them "William" and "Dorothy" after the Wordsworths, another of my favorite literary pairs—a twosome who, like these raccoons, were avid wanderers.

As you've probably observed, I've been all along of two minds concerning these young raccoons. On the one hand, I recognize and honor their difference—not only from my doggedly-analytic-yet-sentimental human self, but from Stinky and Claire, the long-time feline companions whose difference I also

honor even as I spoil them rotten. The offspring of centuries of domestication, my cats were doomed from kittenhood to be named, neutered, caressed, conversed and slept with, fed Fancy Feast, and (worst of all, from their point of view) converted without consent from outdoor to indoor cats. Would they prefer to roam the neighborhood, marking territory, tormenting bugs and finches, lapping antifreeze and picking fights? Of course. But their robust health and abundant affection betray a grudging satisfaction with their bipedal mother and carefree life. Raccoons, though, are another kettle of fish: my gut and my reading—not to mention William and Dorothy's distaste for my well-meaning overtures—proclaim them enemies of domestication. In the Lévi-Straussean scheme of things, they may—caught in the limbo between shrinking wilderness and galloping civilization—be neither "raw" nor "cooked," but I've tried to treat them as if they were wild. And yet, tutored by a mother who was both willfully and constitutionally blind to any essential difference between humans and other animals when it came to care, I care for them in a concerted (if conflicted) way.

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I've surrendered to the naming impulse not because my love for these put-upon youngsters has segued into full-scale possessiveness, but for the same reason I name spiders and cars: I may be a grownup with a PhD, but I delight in magical thinking. The selective version I indulge in is, for one thing, a means of acknowledging the entities which are important to me. It may also serve to semi-magically ensure fruitful relationships with the nonhuman beings and things that share my sphere. What is more, I've found, my personifying habit paradoxically discourages excessive worry or intervention. (If things have names, they will surely prosper.) Therefore, taking a last look at Dorothy and William—who don't look back—I shut the door and turn my attention to Stinky and Claire, who have stationed themselves outside the bathroom and search my face with expressions that ask, "What's going on in there?"

Just then the phone rings and a humorous voice inquires from the receiver, "Are you the lady with two raccoons on her hands?" It's Steve Shelby, one of the rehabilitators I'd called the day before. He apologizes for not getting back to me sooner and, dispensing with pleasantries, announces he will take my bathtub-bound pair. Because Steve lives an hour away, we arrange to meet tomorrow afternoon halfway between our homes. When I ask, "How will I know you?" he answers, "I drive an old blue Chevy, and I look like Santa Claus." Chuckling, I hang up, mightily relieved to have found a Saint Nick whose gift is to take. Still, I'm sad at the thought of parting with my eight-legged present.

As the day wanes and night comes on, I visit the siblings every few hours with gifts of food. Once or twice—I admit it—I steal into the dim bathroom

with no excuse but fascination. Usually, I find the pair sleeping in their habitual ball, though cherry pits and sodden, shredded newspaper reveal they've been awake. Once I enter and catch them in the act: the cat bed has been overturned and William and Dorothy, at opposite ends of the tub, are attempting to scale its slippery heights. Their reaction—Dorothy scuttles for cover while William snarls—dampens my desire to meddle. It's increasingly difficult, though, to leave them alone, for each time I open the bathroom door, a wave of raccoon scent escapes and my nostrils dilate at the curiously-sharp, musky odor. By the next morning it seems I've become addicted: at 6 a.m. I awake craving a fix of woodsy-acrid raccoon perfume. The smell of the wild? I wonder.

A few hours later, relocation time arrives. Resolved to do the right thing, I enter the bathroom armed with cat carrier, gloves, and long sleeves (this time, not so much to protect my flesh as to hide my telltale scabs). Inhaling a last lung-full of raccoon essence, I flick on the overhead light and quickly survey the chaos of wet newsprint, crumbs, scat, and kits in the tub. Before William and Dorothy have a chance to protest, I place the foam bed inside the carrier, deftly deposit them in it, shut the latch and head for the car. A half-hour drive marked by one-sided conversation brings us to our rendezvous, where I pull up next to a well-traveled blue vehicle. In it a bearded gentleman sits behind the wheel, head back and seemingly snoozing. By the time I cut the engine and retrieve the carrier from the back seat, Steve is awake and advancing towards me, hand extended.

My savior proves to be an eccentric Santa Claus: long white hair and beard he has, and belly, but his generous stomach is encased in sturdy overalls. As we shake hands, I note the constellations of scars that pepper his arms and understand my long sleeves are superfluous. Steve's manner is amiable and no-nonsense; his cat-nap, I learn, was a welcome interlude after a hundred-mile drive to the vet on behalf of a deer. Soon our attention turns to the carrier on the ground; unlatching it, I tenderly extract my foam-ensconced furball and tell Steve he can keep both bed and raccoons. Perhaps, I add, they'll welcome a familiar comfort in the midst of yet another disruption. Steve nods in assent, takes a cursory glance at Dorothy and William, and bundles them into a carrier perched atop a miscellany of boxes, bags, and ropes in the back seat. I'm a bit nonplussed that he hasn't paused to admire the youngsters but remind myself he's seen many a raccoon in his time. When I ask how long he'll keep this pair, Steve answers, "another six weeks or so, or until one of them tries to take my hand off—whichever comes first." Then, he informs me, he'll take

When I ask how long he'll keep this pair, Steve answers, "another six weeks or so, or until one of them tries to take my hand off—whichever comes first." Then, he informs me, he'll take them into the hills and release them where they're less likely to go suburban.

them into the hills and release them where they're less likely to go suburban.

Satisfied, I thank Steve profusely. Before we part company, only one thing remains: I want to tell him William and Dorothy's names. But doubting the soundness of this impulse now that my charges have changed hands, and loath to appear sentimental, I broach the subject by inquiring, "Do you ever name your raccoons?" With a Santa-like twinkle in his eye, Steve responds, "Yes—I call them all 'Shithead.'" Chastened, but sensing that behind this Santa's hard-boiled persona beats a putty-like heart, I guffaw and bid him goodbye. As we drive away in opposite directions, my gaze follows his receding Chevy in the rearview mirror. I compensate for the pang I feel by reminding myself that William and Dorothy are a step away from liberty.

When I get home, I spend some quality time with Stinky and Claire. Then I steel myself and, trashcan, cleanser, and sponge in hand, begin transforming the former orphan quarters back into a bathroom. While scrubbing the tub, I discover a memento I hadn't noticed before: an artful cluster of splayed, black paw prints high on the tub's inside. My scrubbing stops, and I pause on my knees to contemplate this raccoon-script reminder of William and Dorothy's short tenancy in my life… and of their eagerness to break the lease.

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A few days later my companion and I leave for a road trip to the coast. Strolling one evening beside a lake in the Sierras, we spot a high-shouldered shape making its way shoreward in a path perpendicular to ours. Curious, we stop to watch the big raccoon, assuming it will either retreat when it sees us or escape upshore. But of course the creature has long since seen, heard, and smelled us; unfazed, it ambles to the water's edge, pauses to sniff the wetness, then steps in and embarks on a leisurely swim. We two humans gape at each other for a long moment, and then hand-in-hand watch the raccoon's diminishing wake in the deepening dusk until it disappears.

Back home, I email Steve Shelby to inquire about my gone-but-not-forgotten kits; in a postscript I describe our encounter with the swimming raccoon and write, "I didn't know they do that!" The next day Steve answers, "The raccoons are doing just fine—they are in with the group and having the time of their life." To my P.S. he responds, "You will find the more you know about critters of the wild, the less you know and the more you have to learn."

A month has passed since I first spied William and Dorothy beneath the

feeder. A blistering July sun has withered the lawn, which is pocked with shriveled cherries. I've taken to haunting the dirt strip that borders an old irrigation ditch on one side of my backyard, where I squint for raccoon tracks. As my eyes sharpen and learn patience, I begin to find them: the forepaw prints uncannily like human hands, the hind ones like human feet. Indoors, the bathtub has resumed its original function, but the cluster of pawprints remains. Every once in a while, when I step into the bathroom I catch a thrilling whiff of musky-sharp, wild animal essence—so out of place, so welcome.

Note

[1] According to the Centers for Disease Control website (http://www.cdc.gov, consulted on 19 Aug. 2006), raccoons are the "most frequently reported rabid wildlife species" in the U.S. However, only one human death associated with raccoon rabies has ever been reported, and in 2001 (the most recent year for which statistics are given), there were no cases of rabies in raccoons reported in the Mountain West. Post-exposure injections of rabies vaccine, given over a period of four weeks, are nowadays "relatively painless."

Jan Wellington (PhD, University of New Mexico) is an associate professor at Utah Valley University where she teaches British, Native American, and women's literature, critical theory, and writing. Her essays have appeared in *Pedagogy*, *Studies in Travel Writing*, *Literary Traveler*, and various collections. In 2004, she was co-winner of the Donald R. Murray Prize for writing awarded by the National Council of Teachers of English. In addition to raccoon perfume, she is addicted to slickrock and books. Her ambition is to spend her "waning" years floating Utah's Green River.

Daniel Nathan Terry

Nighthawks

Nighthawks boomerang through the haloes
of streetlamps, skimming so close to the blacktop
a leaping child could catch one by its narrow wings

and hurl it back into the blackness. From the front steps,
the young man watches them dive in and out of the night,
beaks wide, sifting insects from the humid air. A pickup

rumbles down the street. In its wake, the nighthawks lift
and scatter like long leaves, then whirlwind
back to business. A mosquito

lights on the young man's temple, its legs soft and black
as eyelashes—then the sharp bite, blood stolen,
poison deposited—his reflexive slap too slow

to accomplish anything but crushing the miracle.
A knot rises beneath his skin which he will scratch
tomorrow like regret. His taxi arrives,

its low beams thick with life. At his feet lantana thrums
with nocturnal moths gathering nectar, escaping the feeding frenzy
in the waves of electric light, but opening themselves

to the skinks and spiders that lurk in the brambles. Bar cash
and condoms tucked in his back pocket, he walks
toward the cab as nature struggles with the equation—

comings minus goings, feathers divided by proboscises,
stars multiplied by the number of open eyes—
the sum of his need hanging in the balance.

In the Tattoo Parlor

Hide it on your shoulder, baby, just beneath your sleeve,
she says. You won't be young forever and there's nothing attractive
about ink fading on old skin—

as if decades from now, she would treasure the natural grace
of his unmarked skin or look lovingly
on his inkless age-deflated arm surrendering the past

of muscles flooded with blood, the wanton nights
of moonlight across the hard curve of his shoulder.

She leans into his body as they flip through books
of black symbols.

When her hand reaches up and straightens the back
of his striped t-shirt, I want to think her prejudice
is one of perfect pattern and line:

that she prefers her linens un-rumpled, her photos scrap-booked
and creaseless, her garden in rows—but the halter she wears
of accordioned flowers that her breasts don't stretch smooth,

tells me it's not the thought of a wrinkled tattoo on her lover's skin
that grieves her.

And I know someday, sooner than she suspects, her own skin shirred
like the curtains of a hearse, she'll look into the mirror, unable to recall
the girl that shopped tattoos with her man one August night.

Daniel Nathan Terry's debut poetry collection, *Capturing the Dead*, won the 2007 Stevens Manuscript prize and was published in 2008 by NFSPS Press. His poetry has appeared in several journals including *The Adirondack Review*, *Oberon*, and *Kakalak*. He is currently enrolled in the MFA in Creative Writing at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

Sheila Nickerson

My Short Life in Astrophysics

Sometimes, while listening to disembodied voices on late-night radio as they discuss alien craft, I drift off in the mother ship of memory.

It is 1966 in Boulder, Colorado. I have a new, first, baby and badly need a job. I had been fired from my previous one for being pregnant and now was one of Garrison Keillor's forlorn English majors. Prospects were not all that promising.

What I came to, after some adventures, was a short-term appointment at the Joint Institute for Laboratory Astrophysics on the campus of the University of Colorado, an organization now known simply as JILA. There, as an assistant to Dr. Edward N. Thomas, I spent one year editing a book of theoretical astrophysics—*Aerodynamic Phenomena in Stellar Atmospheres*—one thousand pages of the proceedings of the 1965 Nice, France, Symposium on Cosmical Gas Dynamics. I was told that perhaps 100 people in the world would understand it, and I never met any of them. I learned no astrophysics either, but maintained my allegiance to the grand design of English grammar. Either a sentence made sense, or it did not. I wielded my editorial pen and left the mathematical formulas to Dr. Thomas.

In the process, I came to work intimately with the language of the sun—photosphere, chromosphere, corona, solar wind—and became familiar with the words of elemental fire: plasma—hot, electrified gas; nuclear fusion. Once more, I was bumping up against the stars.

I became aware that as I struggled to write poetry—my life's goal—astrophysicists around me struggled to explain the universe, and that we were all trying to do what theologians and cosmologists do but lacked the vocabulary: What is it that you call the horizon? What burns at the core? I had little time to reflect, however, and clung to punctuation, the one field I claimed to have mastered. With enough style manuals I could do just about anything. I always knew where to set the mark.

I was finishing up my task when attention shifted to the office next door: In October 1966, the Secretary of Defense announced that the Air Force had selected Dr. Edward U. Condon and the University of Colorado to take

command of its Project Blue Book, the long discredited program tracking Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs). Condon, a highly esteemed physicist with many titles, publications, and honors, was meant to put the study beyond reproach and end the chorus of conspiracy.

Condon, former head of the National Bureau of Standards and editor of *The Handbook of Physics*, had the reputation but not the will. Prophetically, he had been born, in 1902, at Alamagordo, New Mexico, near Los Alamos, site of the atom bomb testing project known as "Trinity." There, for a short time in later life, he had shared directorship of the Trinity project with J. Robert Oppenheimer until his clashes with the military forced him into a more minor role at Berkeley. Like Oppenheimer, he had run afoul of the House Un-American Activities Committee and lost his top security clearance. Unlike Oppenheimer, he was not a poet. I doubt he had read the *Bhagavad-Gita*, from which Oppenheimer quoted while watching the blast: "destroyer of worlds." Condon had always stood for the purity and sanctity of science—it was not to be controlled by the military, especially the atomic energy he had helped develop; but he also carried resentment and a strong prejudice against UFOs. From the very beginning he and his project coordinator, Robert J. Low, made it clear that they considered the subject beyond the respectable bounds of science. They did not want the project—already rejected by a number of prestigious academic institutions—but found the $500,000 enticing at a time of budget cutbacks and the recognition was pleasing, too. Condon really was the man who could lay the subject to rest.

Condon, however, packed his committee with psychologists (whom he looked to for an answer), delayed action on reports coming into the office, and caused (or allowed) evidence such as film to disappear. (Actually, he spent little time at the office and left most of the work to Low and others.) I know because the project's administrative assistant, my friend, told me. She also told *Look* magazine, which came to Boulder and did an article in its 14 May 1968 issue. Nor was she the only whistle-blower. David R. Saunders, Co-Principal Investigator, bolted and produced the quickie book, *UFOs? Yes! Where the Condon Committee Went Wrong*. There was plenty to report.

By then I was through with my work at JILA, but I spoke to my friend and watched from the sidelines as the project and its staff disintegrated.

On Halloween Day 1968, the Condon report was turned over to the Air Force. Its 1,485 pages provided no proof of alien activity on Earth. The summary declared that since there was no threat to national security and no scientific reason to pursue the subject further, Project Blue Book should be closed.

> *I became aware that as I struggled to write poetry—my life's goal—astrophysicists around me struggled to explain the universe, and that we were all trying to do what theologians and cosmologists do but lacked the vocabulary….*

It is now almost four centuries since Galileo caused such consternation by confirming the Copernican view of the sun at the center of our universe—a heresy for which the Church, though admitting error, has not yet forgiven him—and almost four decades since Condon denied the existence of alien craft. In the meantime, we have entered what some call the "golden age of solar science." Orbiting satellites led by the Solar and Heliospheric Observatory (SOHO) bring us news and weather reports from our star previously unavailable. We have learned, for instance, there are not just solar flares but Coronal Mass Ejections, enormous plasma explosions capable of destroying communications and power systems on Earth. We have learned that our relationship with our star is stormier, more violent, and more mysterious than ever could have been imagined. As astronomer-philosopher Chet Raymo points out, our ignorance grows as our knowledge grows. And that is a good thing. Ignorance, he says, is "a vessel waiting to be filled, permission for growth, a ground for the electrifying encounter with mystery."

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In five billion years our sun, the thermonuclear reactor at the center of our lives, will have collapsed and become a planetary nebula or nursery for stars yet to be formed. Its starry dust will be mixed with our dust in the formation of new galaxies. What will it matter that the University of Colorado and the Joint Institute for Laboratory Astrophysics acted with less than candor and with venial motivations when accepting responsibility for a scientific inquiry supported by public funds? Probably not much. But I like to think that, just as light moves to us year by year across the heavens bringing us news of the "Big Bang," so does the map of truth move toward us bringing us ever more clear images. Here is a dark spot, a valley or crater where avarice and ego collided with scientific investigation. We like to place names on maps, but maps blow away, terrain metamorphoses, and heavenly bodies turn to cinders.

Although Condon said there was nothing more to be studied, he also said thirty percent of the 91 cases of Project Blue Book which his committee examined could not be explained.

In 1600, the Church burned Giordano Bruno at the stake for opining that, since other stars were like our sun, they could have peopled planets revolving around them, all visited by multiple Christs, and all in infinite number. Either Christ was visiting everywhere, or there were infinite Christs. With Galileo, the Church at least admitted it had made a mistake, though they would not forgive him. That was on Halloween Day 1992. With Bruno, the Church has taken no such action. We can deduce, then, that the Church ac-

cepts the sun as the center of our physical universe but not the probability of aliens. As far as I know, Condon was no spokesman for the Church; he was, indeed, coming from quite a different angle but shared the prelates' intransigence. In terms of UFOs he declared himself an "agnostic" but really was an atheist.

The priests and the physicist had clearly never seen a UFO or manifestation from another dimension.

On three occasions in my youth I had seen UFOs—twice by night and once by day, all either over or near my house in Oyster Bay, New York. I had read many articles on them. There was no doubt in my mind that they existed though I did not know what they were. When I was fifteen and on vacation with my family in Bermuda, I met a pilot for the Strategic Air Command who talked of his job—following UFOs. I will never forget what he said: how he followed them at highest speeds until they suddenly disappeared, as if into another dimension. I had seen a ghost at my eighteenth-century house in Oyster Bay—a large luminous shape emanating from the ancestral graveyard—and had heard others making noise not of this world. Once, at a Christmas party in our living room, two guests watched soldiers in Revolutionary period uniforms walk through a wall that had not been there in earlier times. My mother-in-law had encountered a ghost in the house next door, and my Grandmother Bunker outside her house in New Hampshire. It was hard to understand why Dr. Condon was having such a hard time with phenomena from another dimension. No one has yet been able to determine how many dimensions there are, though the count now seems to be eleven and there is increasing discussion of a *multiverse,* or an infinite number of universes. Chet Raymo says we are in a trap, caught between two inadequate views: *mystery without science* and *science without mystery*.

Dr. Condon died in Boulder in 1974. I had moved on to Alaska and did not notice. I was busy with family matters and a third baby about to be born. What I did notice was the aurora borealis—the nighttime portrait of solar-ignited magnetism which flared across my new northern sky. Whether Condon, before he died, had an experience with mystery cannot be said.

There is no longer any government tracking process for UFOs. The job has been taken over by private individuals. The National UFO Reporting Center run by Peter Davenport from a small town near Spokane has become the lead group, and Davenport's voice is often heard on late-night radio commenting on the latest sightings. Since I now live in Washington, I pay special attention. The UFOs reported these nights are usually massive and triangular in shape, and many are said to frequent the Puget Sound area: my home. The number and insistence of these reports cannot be discounted, but nobody knows what this phenomenon is, any more than we know the nature of dark matter which, though invisible, fills the universe.

Los Alamos, which houses nuclear material such as plutonium and highly enriched uranium, is haunted by scandal, accident, and mismanagement. Misplaced funds, computer hard drives, and keys plague the place, while whistle-blowers have been fired, and wildfires have threatened it. Embattled efforts are made to move the nuclear material to the Nevada Test Site or

nearby Yucca Mountain, a translocation many resist. Nevada, among other curiosities, is home to the infamous Area 51, a secret military facility reputed to be a base for captured alien craft and the subject of much late-night radio discussion.

Dr. Thomas is gone. My children are scattered. As I lie in bed at night listening to what could be the voices of a family or a tribe in diaspora trying to connect before it is too late, I think of Dr. Condon. He had a wife from Czechoslovakia, and that is partly why the House Un-American Activities Committee hounded him.

I also think of other members of the JILA staff I knew then. Often we discussed families and domestic matters, but now we are all blown apart, like a wave of plasma reaching ever further into space, bubbles and looping lines everywhere. It is hot and cold and dangerous in space, and there may or may not be beings from other stars and infinite saviors. It is easy, when lying in the dark listening to worried reports, to imagine these are End Times.

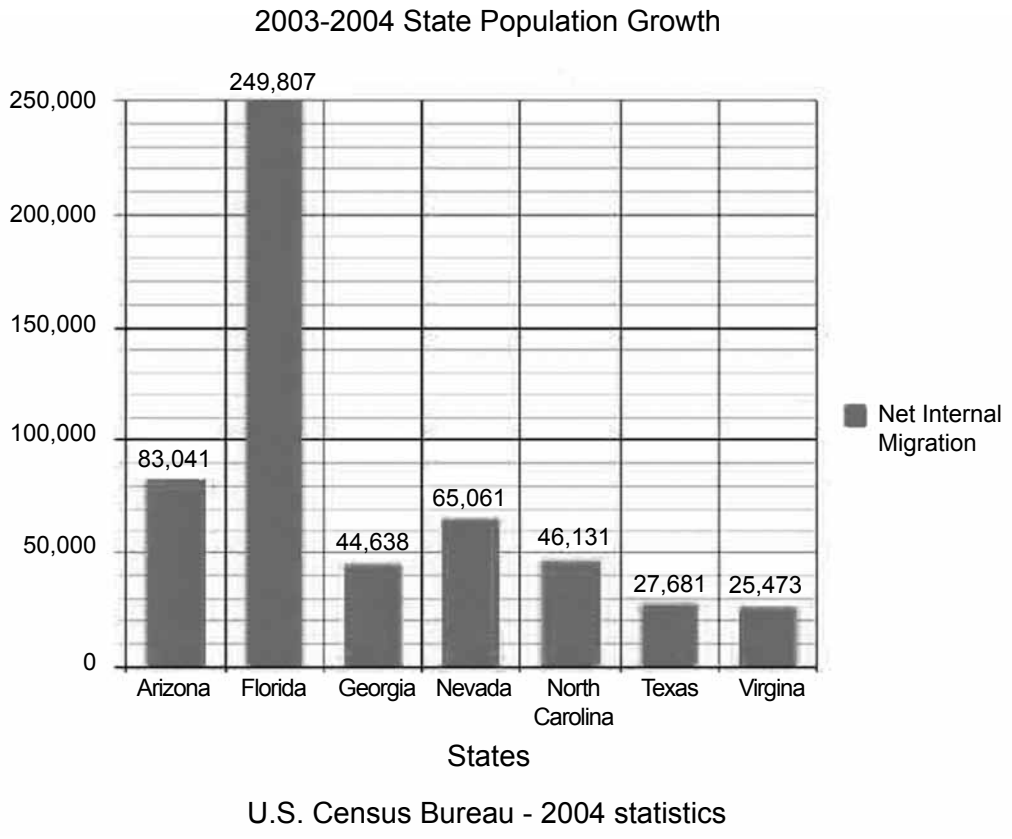
I remember a fellow assistant, married to Robert Low, writing grocery lists on scraps of paper. I see one of her lists more clearly than I see the manuscript I was editing. She said if she had it to do over again, she would have hired someone in the morning to provide breakfast and to help get the whole family out the door. She might have been right. But my dream was always to have someone come in and take charge afterwards, when we had all dashed out of the house and gone our separate ways and the rooms we left broke free, spinning out at ever faster rates into the emptiness of space.

Sheila Nickerson holds a Ph.D. in Creative Writing from the Union Institute and University. A former Poet Laureate of Alaska, she has received two Pushcart Prizes for her poetry, which has appeared in numerous magazines, anthologies, and chapbooks. Her most recent nonfiction titles are *Disappearance: A Map* and *Midnight to the North: The Untold Story of the Inuit Woman Who Saved the Polaris Expedition*. She lives in Bellingham, Washington.

READING THE WEST

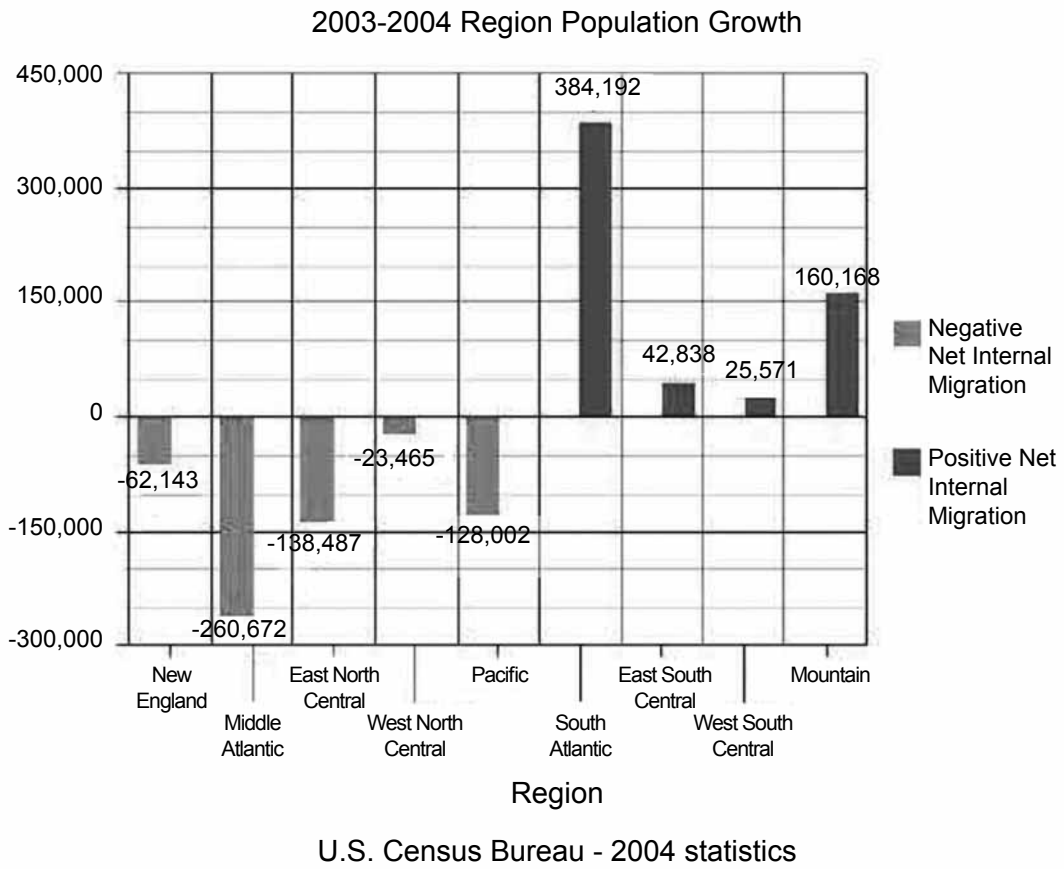
read-ing [from ME reden, to explain, hence to read] – vt. 1 to get the meaning of; 2 to understand the nature, significance, or thinking of; 3 to interpret or understand; 4 to apply oneself to; study.

STAYING PUT



Source: http://www.louforsberg.com/baby_boomers.htm; http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/migration/tab-a-2.pdf

A recent article from the Minneapolis StarTribune *noted that Census Bureau data indicate that the current housing crisis is slowing the nation's decade-long migration of people to the South and West.*



Source: http://www.louforsberg.com/baby_boomers.htm; http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/migration/tab-a-2.pdf

The Census Bureau released state population estimates as of July 1, 2008. Utah was the fastest-growing state, knocking Nevada from the top ranks. Utah's population climbed by 2.5 percent from July 2007 to July 2008. It was followed by Arizona, Texas, North Carolina and Colorado….

"People want to go to where it's warm and where there are a lot of amenities," said William Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution. "But people have stopped moving. It's a big risk when you move to a new place. You need to know that moving and getting a new mortgage is going to pay off for you."

A study by the Pew Research Center found that only 13 percent of U.S. residents moved from 2006 to 2007—the smallest percentage since the government began tracking movers in the late 1940s.

Source: "Housing crisis puts chill on moves to warmer climes," *StarTribune*, 22 December 2008, http://article.wn.com/view/2008/12/23/.

CROSSING FINGERS

Lawrence Yun, an economist with the National Realtors Association, reported that he was "crossing his fingers," hoping that housing sales would "bounce back." He also noted that because of the high rate of foreclosures in the West, ironically housing sales are up.

Home sales hit a roadblock in November, falling 8.6 percent to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 4.49 million units, after having been fairly stable at near 5 million in the prior 12 months. The roadblock was the tanking of the stock market as the Dow Jones index fell from 12,000 to 8,000 in October and has remained low since then. Furthermore, the quickly deteriorating job market conditions and collapsing of consumer confidence added to the roadblock.

Source: http://www.city-data.com/city/Kingman-Arizona.html

Stock market crashes in the past halted sales momentum, but sales climbed back to the trend after three months. For example, in 1987 existing home sales fell from 3.5 million (pre-crash) to 3.1 after three months, then bounced up to 3.5 million soon after. In 2001, sales went from 4.8 million (pre-crash) to 4.6 million, and then climbed higher to 5.1 million after a few months. We are crossing our fingers that it is no different this time around with the current stock market shock….

From one year ago, home sales were 10.6 percent lower. Regionally, sales fell in all four major regions of the country from month-to-month, with the Northeast region declining the most.

From a year ago, the West region was the only region with rising sales, up 18 percent, due to a pickup in sales in California, Arizona, and Nevada. Sales have been rising in these states and in Florida—the states with significant numbers of distressed properties—as bargain hunters take advantage of deeply discounted prices.

The national median existing home price in November was $181,300, which is a decline of 13.2 percent from one year ago. That is the largest price decline in our data series going back to 1968 and probably since the Great Depression. Prices were sharply lower in the West region, with current transacted prices being 25.5% below one year ago. Prices were down by 0.1% in the Northeast, 11.2% in the Midwest and 10.6 percent in the South.

Source: Yun, Lawrence, "Exciting Home Sales in November," National Association of Realtors, 23 December 2008, http://www.realtor.org/research/commentary_ehs122308

THE BUST BELT

Ryan Avent, writing for Culture 11*, a "culturally conservative" blog based in Alexandria, Virginia, uses Kingman, Arizona, to reflect on the fundamental flaws in the way America accommodates an ever-growing population.*

Tucked in a desert valley 100 miles southwest of Las Vegas, the town of Kingman, Arizona, has persisted for over a century, first as little more than a railroad siding, then a Route 66 fill-up point, enjoying its quiet, arid life with dignity.

In recent decades, its 28,000 residents have watched nearby Sin City transform from a gambling oasis into a sprawling desert metropolis of two million people, a crowd rapidly butting up against the area's geographic limits and water supply. All the while, Kingman persisted in isolation, due to the intervening desert and the winding, two-lane bottleneck of highway 93 as it crosses the Colorado River at Hoover Dam.

Now that's all going to change.

In 2010, the completion of a four-lane highway bridge over the canyon just south of the dam will provide the sliver of access developers need to establish an Arizona beachhead. They're not waiting to get started. On the strength of preliminary water surveys, two developers have sought and obtained permission to build mammoth communities near Kingman—developments that could grow to as many as 80,000 homes by 2040.

For better or worse, Las Vegas is coming to town, as developers bet that the American migration to the Sunbelt is going to continue apace in coming years. "It's gorgeous here, we don't have any natural disasters, no forest fires, no hurricanes, tornadoes or floods, good schools, lots of cheap land, the cost of living's down," the Mayor of Kingman, John Salem, told *The New York Times*. It's tempting to hear all that—to think of the home buyers who'll gladly move to Kingman seeking their sun-baked slice of the American Dream—and to celebrate the prospect of another Western boomtown….

In Kingman, developers and elected officials can hope to attract thousands of new residents to houses only because nearby Las Vegas has made development decisions that force large numbers of people to commute dozens of miles to get from an affordable abode to an employment center. Still, as plans for growth go forward, small, land-rich Kingman has a comparatively blank slate on which to build, and decades of mistakes in other cities to weigh in an effort to do better. Their plans as currently conceived, however, ignore these lessons, court likely catastrophe, and at best will change Kingman for the worse….

The timing of these developments makes the risk of failure particularly high. The worst national housing bust since the Great Depression hit the cities of Las Vegas and Phoenix significantly harder than most of the rest of the nation. Prices there are down over 30% from the peak of the bubble, and high foreclosure rates and substantial excess inventory suggest that the recovery will be painful and protracted….

Of course, assuming long commutes for home buyers is hardly a new phenomenon. During the housing boom, developers in California's sprawling Inland Empire rushed to erect homes during the early part of the decade, seeking to attract refugees from the expensive jobs hubs along the coast. Riverside County housed countless workers who battled traffic on the 91 Freeway to reach jobs in Orange County, routinely driving well over an hour even if they shelled out money for an express lane built alongside the freeway. In Northern California, places like Stockton and Merced were sold as commutable suburbs of San Francisco, despite being anywhere from 60 to 130 miles away from employment centers. Now these towns battle to claim the title of foreclosure capital of America. In 2008, 75 percent of all Merced property sales have been foreclosures.

The worry now is that these hardest hit communities could become what Brookings scholar Chris Leinberger calls suburban slums—places where empty properties go unmaintained, where tax revenues no longer pay for services, and where failing retailers put residents far away from basic services. Of course, there isn't any way to undo the building boom of the 1990s, a time when few people anticipated that subdivisions with skyrocketing housing values would one day collapse….

We were supposed to have learned from all this—so why haven't we?

One obvious answer is that despite the huge declines in housing prices around the nation, homes continue to cost more than they did in 2000, especially in the country's best job markets. Homes in Las Vegas are still nearly 60 percent more expensive

than they were eight years ago. For many families, to participate in the nation's best job markets is to accept the need to "drive until you qualify." These days the drives are longer and more expensive than ever….

And that returns us to the problem at the heart of the matter. Kingman, like much of the booming American West, is in the desert—a place poorly suited to big cities, to say nothing of the green grass, golf courses, and long showers to which we've become accustomed. Sure, these developments can be done, and may even be profitably done, at least as long as water and roads are under-priced, but that doesn't mean that they should be done. We've come to look at things like conservation and sustainability as signs of weakness, or advertisements of personal virtue.

But often they're precursors to strength. One could easily argue that only an impressive country and economy could settle huge suburbs in the desert. But one could also argue that a truly impressive nation wouldn't have to. Or would have the wisdom not to.

Source: Avent, Ryan, "How exurban expansion paves the way for the next housing crisis." *Culture 11*, 16 September 2008, http://www.culture11.com/article/32228

THE ORIGINAL HOUSING CRISIS

In a recent issue of Reviews in American History, *Kansas State University professor Dereck S. Hoff uses the work of David M. P. Freund in* Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America *(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) to argue that exurban expansion is not only about creating additional Western boomtowns, it is also about "white-flight."*

During the recent housing market meltdown, as nonwhites and women bore the disproportionate brunt of subprime loans and foreclosures (even adjusting for income), many critics decried the lack of governmental oversight over the mortgage market. For students of residential segregation in American history, the charge that minorities suffered from too much market and too little government during the housing bubble is rich with tragic and historical irony. After all, during the long post-World War II boom, federal housing policy systematically excluded millions of minorities from access to the mortgage market and exacerbated the inequalities that supposedly justified discriminatory lending practices in the first place. Despite some improvement since the 1960s, housing segregation remains intractable. For example, the average white American in a metropolitan area resides in a neighborhood that is 80 percent white and 7 percent African American. Perhaps the only major institutions in American life more segregated are churches.

The historical problem of white America's postwar resistance to residential integration is wrapped up in an array of questions related to the conservative ascendancy in the final third of the twentieth century. Disentangling the various strands of this complicated history, as David Freund suggests in the introduction to *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America*, usually begins by ascribing racism a causal role in the conservative triumph. "If scholars agree on nothing else," Freund writes, "there is some consensus that the early postwar era saw the emergence of a new kind of white racial conservatism, a precursor to the better-known backlash politics of the 1960s and the rise of the New Right, fueled by whites' preoccupation with protecting their neighborhoods, status, and privileges from minorities."

Source: Hoff, Dereck S. "The Original Housing Crisis: Suburbanization, Segregation, and the State in Postwar America," *Reviews in American History*, 36 (June 2008): 259-269. *Project Muse*, http://muse.jhu.edu/

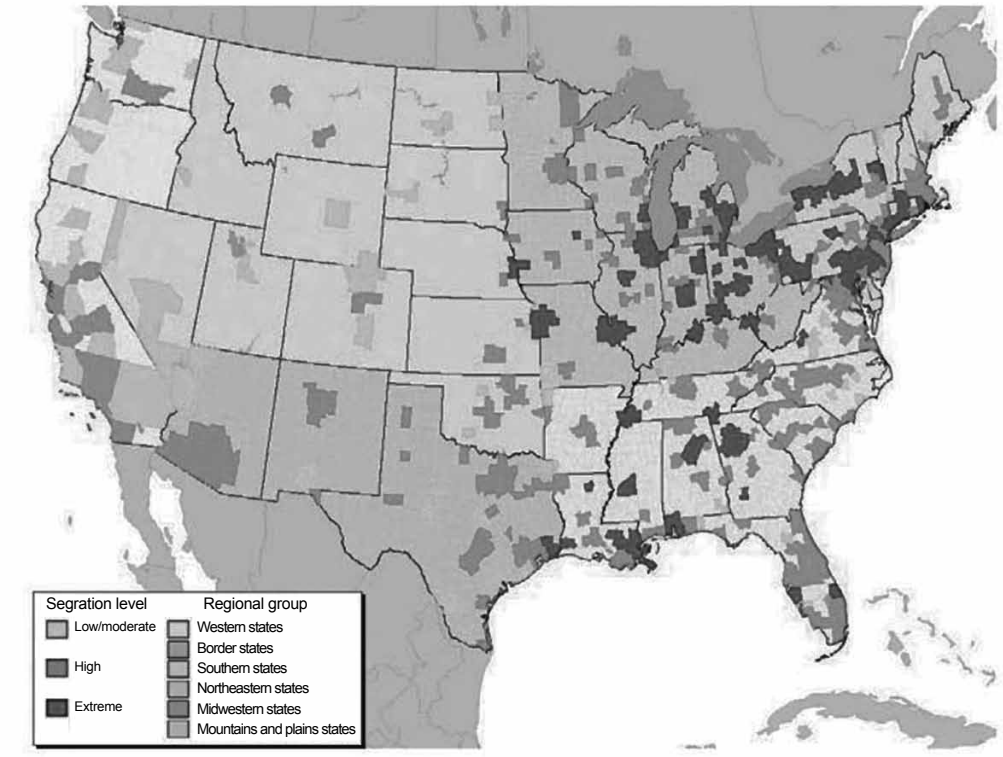


Figure 1. National map of multigroup racial/ethnic segregation in the United States (1980 Census; U.S. Census Bureau 1991, 1993).

The map indicates that the northeastern, southern, and midwestern regions have some of the highest levels of multiethnic/racial segregation in the country, whereas the western and mountain and plains states tend to have lower levels of segregation.

Source: Morello-Frosch, Rachel and Bill M. Jesdale. "Separate and Unequal: Residential Segregation and Estimated Cancer Risks Associated with Ambient Air Toxics in U.S. Metropolitan Areas." *Environmental Health Perspectives* 114 (March 2006): 386-393.http://www.ehponline.org

EDITORIAL MATTER CONTINUED

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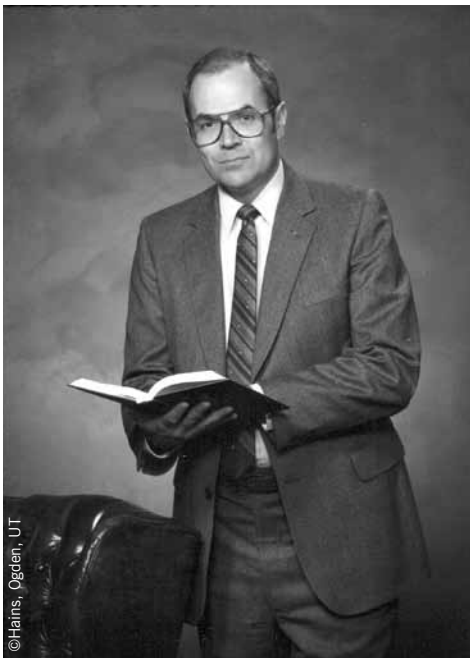

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