

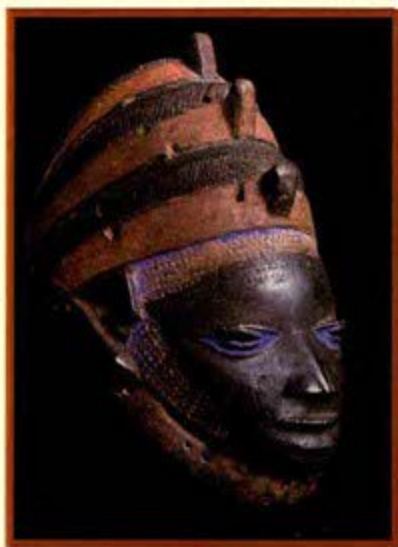
Archives

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Orpheus

25 Years of Literary
Excellence



California State University,
Bakersfield



Pendant Mask, before 1892
Unknown Akan Artist, Côte d'Ivoire

Orpheus

A Literary Journal

Volume XXV

Dr. Solomon O. Iyasere, Advisor

Lonnie Lopez, Reader

Orpheus is an annual literary journal produced by California State University, Bakersfield. All submissions must be typed, double-spaced, on 8-1/2" x 11" paper. There are no restrictions on subject matter, length, or theme; however, poems over one hundred lines are rarely published. Any use of profanity must be crucial to the understanding of the work.

Cover artwork—Mask, late 19th or early 20th century. Unknown Yoruba Artist, Nigeria.



1972 – The first class meeting on the founding of *Orpheus*.

I wish to thank all members of the University community who have nurtured the annual publication of *Orpheus* since its inception in 1973. I am particularly grateful to my creative writing students in 1972, who encouraged me to establish the journal; to Associated Students for providing financial resources through the IRA program; to the staff of Print Shop and Reprographics for their invaluable service in production of each issue; to all the writers who have, through the years, shared their imaginative endeavors; and to you, our readers, for your loyal support.

—Solomon O. Iyasere

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It is with pleasure and pride that I celebrate the 25th anniversary of *Orpheus*, California State University, Bakersfield's literary journal. This commemorative edition underscores the particular importance of this unique publication in the nurturing of the creative literary gift in students and faculty. For 25 years, fledgling, as well as more established poets and prose writers, have contributed to making *Orpheus* an important vehicle for the presentation of differing literary perspectives on our common reality.

In our search for truth and growth, in our day-to-day concerns, we too often neglect to pause and feed our inner being, express ideas, and give voice to deeper concerns and emotions. *Orpheus*, by fostering the creative act and in providing opportunities to give voice to those significant deeper concerns, serves a most important need, especially in this University ambience of ours.

So thanks and congratulations are in order to long-lived *Orpheus* and its esteemed editor, Dr. Solomon Iyasere.

—Tomás Arciniega, President
California State University, Bakersfield

It is an honor for me to have an opportunity to congratulate the English and Communications Department and the Advisor to *Orpheus*, Professor Solomon Iyasere, upon twenty-five years of the publication of this delightful literary journal. *Orpheus* has offered the opportunity for students, faculty and staff to share their creative works with us. Over one thousand students have published their work in *Orpheus* during this past twenty-five years, and for most it is their first opportunity to share their work with a broader audience. In that regard alone *Orpheus* has made a major contribution to the learning environment at CSUB. This twenty-fifth anniversary edition extends this wonderful publishing opportunity to regional high school students.

Talented creative writing and storytelling is a staple for a quality human existence. As a consumer of their works I deeply appreciate the talent and work of creative people. I know that such talent is earned through experience, practice, and with the help of good teachers. Our lives are immeasurably enriched by the people who succeed in developing a talent for storytelling, writing and poetry. *Orpheus* has been an excellent avenue for developing writers and poets to share their thoughts and creativity with us as they learn from their mentors and teachers, and gain the experiences that lead toward success.

Join me in expressing our appreciation to Professor Solomon Iyasere, for continuing to offer our developing writers the opportunity to stretch their creative wings and share their works with us by publishing in *Orpheus*.

—Fred Dorer, Provost
California State University, Bakersfield



It is my great pleasure to offer personally, and on behalf of the faculty and Academic Senate of California State University, Bakersfield, heartiest congratulations on twenty-five years of superb quality represented by CSUB's literary magazine, *Orpheus*. I wish also to express our deep appreciation for the beacon of light that this journal has provided for our university. We also highlight our profound gratitude to Professor Solomon Iyasere for his conception of this journal and for his outstanding editorial leadership and admirable modeling of literary beauty and excellence.

Any good university needs symbols of academic quality, of intellectual productivity and stimulation of intellectual faculties. *Orpheus* clearly has provided this during its twenty-five years of existence. In addition, it has given us two more essential elements of a true university, namely, exemplars of student and faculty creativity and moving expressions of emotional aliveness and poetic spirit. And because a university of quality should develop and enrich the whole human person, we owe much to *Orpheus* and Professor Iyasere. Congratulations to the journal and its staff and best wishes for many more years of riches and fulfillment.

—Jacquelyn Ann Kegley, Chair
Academic Senate, CSU Bakersfield

Twenty-Five Years...

ACCENT THE ARTS

WHO ABOUT
ARTISTS
TELLERS



Over the years, that focus has changed.

"I would say students now are writing more the private experience, such as relationships and not as much with the cosmic, universal things," Iyasere said.

"Fifteen years ago, it was more ideological. Now, it's more personal."

Orpheus offers a forum

Works published in CSB literary journal touch lives

"Seeing your work in print, it recharges your batteries, it kicks you back into gear."

—Joel Sherman

he
low
said.

By RICK HERREDIA
Californian staff writer

A MOST WRITERS know, there's no telling what effect a piece of writing will have once it's published. Witness an incident that happened to Miss Merrill, a learning skills specialist at Cal State Bakersfield's Academic Achievement Center. She has been

in print, it recharges your batteries, it kicks you back into gear," Sherman said.

Perhaps that's why Orpheus got about 100 submissions for its 1987-88 issue and, after preliminary readings by student Inez Mejia, Iyasere narrowed that to the work of 56 students and faculty members.

In all, Mejia, a senior biology major, has been reading manuscripts for the past three issues of Orpheus.

This year's submissions, with their stories on the homeless,

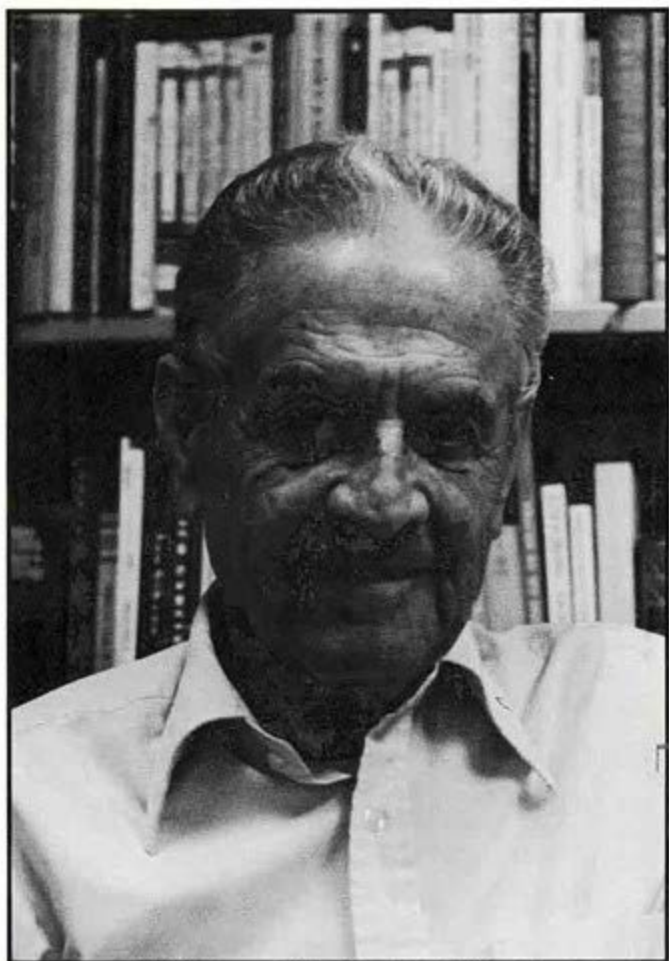
CSB helped him fashion his fiction and taught him how to be a better writer, he said. "I can't say enough about the importance of those types of magazines and literary journals. The place that they hold in a writer's heart is very dear. No doubt Orpheus is dear to the heart of the man who has been its guiding force since its inception in 1962," said professor Solomon Iyasere.

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IRIS FONG / Californian staff

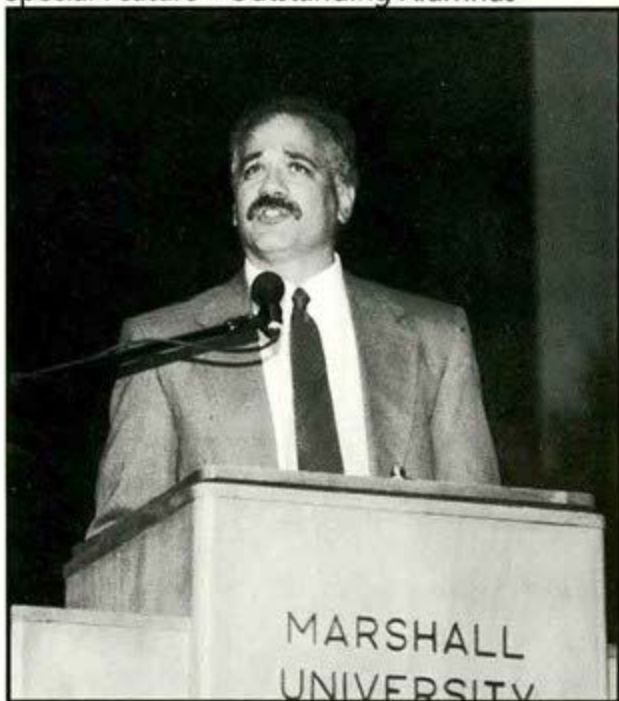
Above, Mimi Merrill, whose poem published in Orpheus touched a student of hers. Left, Orpheus' founder, CSB professor Solomon Iyasere.



*This issue of Orpheus is dedicated
to Dr. Carlos Lozano*

Poet, Scholar & Teacher

Special Feature—Outstanding Alumnus



Jeffery Scott Elwell, Ph.D.
CSUB B.A. in English, 1979

"An Ordinary Morning"

95

Orpheus

California State University,
Bakersfield



Figure (nkisi nkondi), late 19th century or early 20th century
Unknown Kongo Artist, Nganga, and Community Members, Zaire

P o e m s

David H. Ost

Some Thoughts for a Daughter

As I encounter, are my experiences, me?
Is life a journey or is it an illusion to be free?

As the Velveteen Rabbit asked the toy horse...
"What is Real?" Does it matter? But of course?

"You become," said the Horse, "but once you are real
you're tumbled, and tussled, but never unreal."

To become real, is to lose the gloss of unknowing.
It hurts, but it's change, and evidence of growing.

To be real, is to authenticate each feeling of life,
Every sense of joy and each action of strife.

Like well-loved toys, people get bruised,
To be real can simply be knowing one is used.

Becoming, maturing and changing, like rust.
Changed by conditions such as sarcasm and lust, by
cutting remarks, lack of self-concept, mistrust.

But if love is the bond, then you will go far
For the sky must get dark, before you see stars,

So, walk, easy in marriage, building monuments as you
go,
to bench-mark the realness of love and its glow.

Use memories as measurements to mark marvelous
times.
Repose in all experience and savor all clines.

Remind one another to pursue personal goals,
to do so, is essential to free one's own soul.

To be real, is to love, love is giving, not a treasure,
Not merely desire or getting pure pleasure.

To be real is to fear, but have hope and conviction
that we're worthy of love and can love without
question.

Lonnie Lopez

Errotica

I make the same mistake I've made
A hundred times before
Of giving love, or else its shade,
To one I should abhor.
Sometimes it is his eyes I catch,
Shine brown, or green, or blue;
Or else it is the mustard patch
Upon his chin he grew.
A twist of denim from behind
From movement on a board
Hints at the secret I should find,
A smooth but hard reward.

His eyes, they coyly peep at me,
Then rudely turn away.
A curled up, Cheshire lip I see
That promises to play.
The silent intimation of
The passion I'd receive:
His smile, it is not meant for me,
His wandering eyes deceive.
But still he says my name aloud
And moves to take my hand.
His indecisive flirtings are
Too much for one demand.

And thus I seek to end this game
And this I do resolve:
That never will I fall in love
With one who will involve
Both sexes in his love affairs
To the consequence
Of one who seeks the love of one
And will not choose the fence.
But, honest, can I say that I
Would never love again
A man who would not make a treat
Of women now and then?

Lonnie Lopez

I take my resolution back,
But this I now declare:
His heart will be my only prize,
His bending not my care.
Those eyes that wander will be still
And will not shy away;
Those lips that once were turned in frown
Rejoice for now they play.
And though perhaps it pains to see
His eyes rove to her form;
I will not quell his open heart,
Nor bend him to my norm.

Lonnie Lopez

Pieces

I never saw an albatross, nor
Held a wedding groom at the door,
But I indeed am bound to go from town
To town, or stay within my place, to drown
My thoughts with those of others. Because I do
Not hope to turn again, I do not hope to
Turn to you and teach you what I know
Because I am afraid that you will go,
Disturbed by rantings in some other tongue,
Picked with care from among
An assortment I have found,
Bewitched by the sound.

And do I dance, and do I die
Beneath this twinkling April sky?

A handsome man named Jack,
A man of French descent, on the Beat track,
Seduced me with his poignant rhythm,
Traveling the roads, taking me with him,
And always returning to the comfort of
My lonely bed. I am in love
With what is left: words on pages,
Photos of Jack at successive stages.
And I'm jealous that I could never kiss
His lips and hold him: what of this?

And do I dance, and do I die
Beneath this twinkling April sky?

A choice is offered, dismal gray,
To fend the light of coming day.
I struggle with the cold of sleep
And labor with a breathing deep,
Bursting inward, crushing all.
How much longer til day fall?
That golden eye creeps over land
And still unmoving is my hand;
Minutes cry, and seconds hiss;
The climax of dramatic bliss.
The fifth act ends, the curtain's up,
The audience has left to refill its cup.

And do I dance, and do I die
Beneath this twinkling April sky?

And in this twilight eve of mirth,
The movement torn from death and rebirth,
I whisper the words of a passionate song,
That quench my soul, no matter how wrong.
Two voices climbing, one and then two,
Slithering under, then wandering askew;
A joyous surmise and an ecstatic
Shout from the dust of an attic
Bound upward by heaven and
Downward by land.

Do I have a heart? And do I have a soul?
And am I the poet for whom the bells toll?
Anointed with oils and laden with gifts,
I travel the gutters. My mind drifts
To yesterday, last week, forever,
To when I promised never
To wait and waited anyway.
I have not thought much of that day.

And do I dance, and do I die
Beneath this twinkling April sky?

Shapeshifters, in guises of gender,
Ask for a cigarette, but never a lender
Nor a borrower be
No one will loan a cigarette to me.
I can not accept the device of a lecture,
All catalogue with no conjecture.
You only speak what he wrote down
And will not move or go around
To what you feel, or what I think
Or what, in God's name, made him drink.

And do I dance, and do I die
Beneath this twinkling April sky?

I will not fight a losing battle,
But still I move like so many cattle
Along the road to the slaughtering house.
I speak soft words and douse
The flame of rebellion in my eye.
I do not stop to ask them why.

Douse me with water, put out my flame,
But leave me the grandest of wishes, a name,
To live in the space between page and the mind,
Be subject to critics and readers unkind,
Or kind, if they choose.
If they disdain to use
My words for the chorus of some short
Video, filmed for sport
By a nameless, eyeless boy
With a dream or a ploy
For interpretation and color.
I do not want my life made duller
Than I have already contrived
And will not be deprived
The chance to speak my own name,
In my own voice, to burn my own flame
Of the twigs of these dull pages.
But still the dawn rages
And approaches and nears
The coming light can not soothe my fears.

And do I dance, and do I die
Beneath this twinkling April sky?

I open a window and let in the cool
Morning breeze. I am a fool
For buying a plant, a primrose,
That will die in my care, but goes
Through the process of lift and then wilt,
Perched on a ledge that strong men built
Eighty-odd years ago, a pride
Of brick and wood inside.
And, Tom, I hear the mermaids singing
With watery words of watery death, bubbles bringing
Soft sounds to the surface and I hear
The soft whispers disappear
Above the waves, below the sun,
And I reach for them, one by one.

And do I dance, and do I die
Beneath this twinkling April sky?

John Rose

In Retrospect

Looking back, it is all so plain. I know now what I see.
If only I could have remained a less bacchanalian me.
I started hard with many gifts; knew them not as vain.
They were bridges of life's rifts, a camouflage of pain.
Married thrice and all are gone, spent with youth, aglow.
Married life willingly pawned for sorrows yet to know.
Bathed in a nature coveted by all; temptation laced life's way.
God's grace had been the Devil's call; he'd beckon me to stray.
It isn't easy getting old. The worst to be alone.
Life is short as we're all told, but time yet to atone.
The gifts of youth, though faded, have now another face
The gifts of youth not jaded are manifest in grace.
With families cast and spread afar and though not cast away
Memories do my sleeping mar and linger through the day.
Yesterday is vivid, short upon my mind.
Could it be unpleasantry for mercy, left behind?
Guilt is like a wandering dog; to stay it must be fed.
The beacon light out of the fog, God's grace! By Him I'm led.
So looking back's to no avail but for a moment's repast.
Hand in's Hand we will prevail, *Forever Life* to last.
He shall be served by each and all and singly with **his** plan.
We listen faithfully for **his** call and our miracle through **his** hand
To be and say you're sorry should not but cross your mind;
To be and not to worry, if you are but kind.

John Rose

Silhouettes

Darkest of night, alone with the moon
Harvest a kiss; lip sync with a swoon.
No one will hear, no one will see
Mutual heart beating for three?
No one will know but your lips and mine...
How to unravel the weave of our twine?
All but alone when naught give nor taken
But we were seen; our secret forsaken!
Now what to do? Our burden we share...
Un-burden like, heavier, as it hits the air.
What tell your trio whose father is missed?
"I drove him away when amorous kissed?"
Heavy with aching and weeping despair
Cloaking a family that's no longer there.

Now what to do? Your burden though shared...
Heaviest by far, though now it be paired.

Barbara Pugh

What Passes for Entertainment Presumptuous Accessories

We needed a laugh the three of us decided to go to the Ramada to hear a
comedian the paper gave the day the time the cost
.....two of us leave together to pick up the other as she turns after
coming down the steps of her porch her barrel cactus attacks her and
becomes entangled in her skirt she says it's never done that before
it must be getting mean
On the way — because we needed a laugh the three of us
one of us asked — where? — Oh, the Ramada
that's where I broke the plumbing!
I never told them
Well I wasn't supposed to be in his room
He would have had to pay extra
so did he pay you?
no but he paid me back — he married me
and so it started
a few ex-husband stories
and we arrive at the Ramada — because we really need a laugh
twenty minutes early — we sit in the room
at first the only ones there
we take turns holding the hat
one of us always wears a hat — accessorized
we really need a laugh
a man comes in and tells us we have to leave
they have to secure the room
is it trying to get away from the rest of the motel?
we decide to go get tea and maybe some muffins
in the rather plush dining room
the waiter is anything but pleased
he does call us ladies
when did people start referring to my friends and I as ladies?
I used to resent "girls"
but lately..... I've begun to feel venerable
we sit and watch to see when admittance to the "secured" room
will allow us to enter again — we really need a laugh
we talk about:
seeing my mother crossing a busy street against the light
we could have hit her
my friend says that may have damaged our friendship
or we could have gotten on a talk show
people who hit their friends' mothers by accident
— and the orphans

talk shows and what kinds of things appear
and my friend says to my other friend
your glasses have unbuttoned your dress
and we pause to consider the implications
of such a deed
by something designed to correct vision
the waiter brings our order
one cup of onion soup, two cups of herbal tea, one coffee, and four rolls
we are obviously the highlight of his night
we are readmitted to the "secured room" at 8:10 pm
the paper said the comedian would start his show at 8:00 pm
we really need a laugh
there is music — "Roxanne"
I remark that I hate that song
my friend says she isn't familiar with it
I tell her this guy is telling his girlfriend
she can put away her red dress and turn out the red light
because now she has him
what?
she tells a story about her children inadvertently taking her to a place where
Too Live Crew was playing
her children still tell the story of the look
on her face when she heard the lyrics
regurgitating from a large speaker right in front of her
and we really don't shock that easily we Boomers
I remark that this time her purse has unbuttoned her dress
and we reflect aloud about accessories which take those kind of liberties
presumptuous accessories
at 8:30 the show still has not started
and we really need a laugh
five minutes later we're waiting — getting impatient
we've discussed mothers, children, ex-husbands, one current husband
two fiancés, and have started to discuss our sex lives
very little is left
we decide to leave, get our money back
we walk to the car
well, we really needed a laugh
and we three are natural comediennesses in our own rights
we kept ourselves very amused
and sometimes the people around us
Cost about three bucks each and gas
Lord, we really need a laugh
We decide to form a group called the "presumptuous accessories"

Barbara Pugh

On Wild Flowers

I am here because that is where I am
Water, sunlight — germination
Tendrils test — is there enough to sustain?
To survive awhile is enough
To send roots down
Stem and leaves up
This part may live, may not
Gets cut down
Enough remains to grow again
Tentative at first, then thrusting
The sun, the water, the nutrients are there
Sometimes wind, sometimes cold
Sometimes drought and burning
Mother, will I survive this?
Mother, will I live?
"Yes and I will give you the power to be — more"
There is a difference in me
I am ready to show myself
To attract, to find, to mingle myself with others
There is a strength building up in me
I set about to show myself
I cover the beauty at first
I wait my time
the beauty grows within the buds
The Mother says softly, "Now"
And I burst forth
So much is attracted to me
I want to close up, to go back
I cannot, I am open
I am compelled to attract what I can with my beauty
For I realize it is fleeting
My blossoms receive what they need
Lose their beauty, fall to the ground
Transformed, what they contain is scattered
Can I believe that all who experience me
Are transformed in some way, too?
Can I prepare to bloom again?

Barbara Pugh

To Get to Know My Child as a Grown Man

I came out here alone, a new job taking me nearly three thousand miles
From a home for twenty-eight years and my family
Thought maybe they might emigrate, too, given the opportunity
Or courage
My son decides at 27 to make the California move
He will stay with me for awhile

We have had our differences, many kept us estranged for periods of time
He'll stay with me and I am worried
Can I accept the changes in him that make him a man — has he changed
enough for us to get along?
Have I?
My mother lived with me
She could not forget her motherhood long enough to recognize me
Can I?

My son is a tall, big man. He is a grown man before he is my son
Can I remember this?
I'm learning that he has gained a certain wisdom
And it is wisdom on my part to listen
So I ask his opinions and heed them sometimes
And think of the boy and the man
And smile to myself for the part I had in this

I am inordinately proud of him
He has always been an artist — exploring the world and making his own
sense of it
The art he has chosen is cooking — he is a chef
Mixing and combining foods and seasonings
His art is a gift to a basic need
He cooks for my friends
They are impressed with the art and the man

He has been recognized for his skill and art
Is confident of being able to forge a place here
I worry as a mother
He needs my confidence as another adult
And as his mother

Barbara Pugh

Michael and I

Weaving strands together
are taken in weaving to leave some free
Use enough to make the tapestries match and make them flow
Leave enough to retain the beauty of each

Touching hands — weaving fingers
Smiles — eyes weaving unspoken messages
Voices soft — weaving understanding and trust
Soft laughter — weaving tales of times unshared

Weaving stops, threads are pulled, some tear
Most threads hold — weaving again
Slower, more tentative
Care taken to weave strength with beauty

Lips, then arms, then legs woven around
Weaving an age-old pattern
Weaving — breath comes in Threads
Is woven in cadence
Voices blend in ancient textures of sound
Two — weaving tapestries together

On each — places frayed, threads broken
Rendings examined — can be mended
Weaving, mending, healing each with the other
Places patched in slightly different pattern
Memories exist, pain is woven out.

Barbara Pugh

Gifts Well Gotten and Received in Grace

I honor the East from which the light has just come
The light reveals a rain- and wind-swept land
It is filtered through clouds which hold more rain
The sky is a non-varying gray

I turn to the North and honor the hope of the cold for the return of warmth
For the return of sun and sustenance

I honor the South for the warmth
And the plants that touch my eyes with their differentness
Plants show me, more than anything else, where I am

There is a palm straight up from the sand
Thick at the bottom and tapering at the top
It is a friendly, comical thing
With fringe of dark brown bark
And a hairdo of green palm fronds
Like the kind I've seen being used to fan a pharaoh
In ancient murals on ancient walls

The palm's size belies its strength
For last night only the fronds moved in the wind
While I felt myself buffeted
My hair like the palm's green top blown and caressed

I turn to the West and there is the ocean
I am at a time when these same waters were all there was
Cooling and washing a new planet
When moments were eons
The ocean, the sky, the elements, The Goddess
Came together and what is flowing through me is formed

I merge myself with my beginnings
Probing the vastness of time and distance
And the ocean comes closer chasing me

I run back, laughing
It leaves me gifts of foam and seaweed
Kelp and broken shells

Barbara Pugh

I turn again to the East, to the place we are staying
Where my child sleeps who is no longer a child
She has brought us here to renew us both
She pictured sunny skies and the enjoyment of
A different kind of ocean, a different sun
Yet last night we talked of dreams and joys
And laughed at things that will build memories

A life which came from me
Gives me life and renewal back
the ocean knows that is the way of things
That we are two, tossed on the shore by storm
Are gifts

Melvyn Dutton

Poem 23 A

My thoughts drift off and lack focus
like the lens in my cheap, store-bought glasses,
and I have difficulty "seeing".

years wore grooves in my mind,
thoughts controlled,
like wheels stuck in ruts,
and slowly, I am going nuts.

A blur appears at my door.
"Man, don't blame the "specs",
"cause, you're old, like the "bossa nova",
and on a bad trip,
with some mean glaucoma.

"take heart, soul traveler,
like new medicine can solve your plight",
then, he handed me a doobie
and offered me a light.

Melvyn Dutton

Poem # 27 aka "Finals"

Finals may have questions
which are from my reality
or, on nonsense stuff,
like math and chemistry.

Finals may have questions
which will test my memory
of the real stuff,
like history and sociology.

Finals may have questions
which will probe my ability,
to see what's written
on the paper next to me.

Michelle G. Zachlod

The Thirst- Remembrance

She was walking beside the dusty road
bundled in layers of dirty clothes,
her scruffy dog walking slowly by her side
a long rope tying them together.

It was noon-hot, dry desert noon
the sun beating down on them
noon-shimmering head
that makes the breath come in little gasps
demanding sacrifice from the living-
water.

Driving past with air-conditioned speed
I wondered
Did she know how far she had to walk
on this parched land
no shelter from the heat, no water?
An apparition swathed in rags
appearing in this desert moonscape
springing up from the earth
to wake us who drive by in cool comfort.

Look, look at life — the pain of life
her desperation screams at me.
Protected from the heat
waterbottle and food at my feet
self-contained and self-contented,

but the dog
the stiff-legged, weary dog
worn out with mindless pain
and her
so alone.
Her raw suffering cries out
for all of us who are afraid to look, afraid to see
what we might be.

No!

I won't ignore her humanity
Turning the car in a cloud of dust
I almost miss them
half-hidden, huddled in the sagebrush
"Water, I have water," I call
my arm outstretched with my offering.

The dog's eyes light with an eagerness
born of desperate thirst.
Tugging at the rope,
he gulps the cool water
again and again.
I fill the cup.
He does not stop to breathe,
just gulps.

She stands patiently waiting,
wrapped in layers of clothing,
peering sideways with sky blue eyes,
her scarf-hidden face blotched and bruised.
"God bless you," she says
And I go.

Dzifa and Kafui Gbewonyo

Over the Grass Hills

Over the grass hills there might be the lakes.
The ducky gets lucky and the two-headed snakes.
There might be a train; there might be some rain
And in Mississippi the big hurricane.

Dzifa Gbewonyo

Love

Love makes you happy, love makes you sad.
Love makes you angry, love makes you glad.
Love is expressed.
Love is confessed.
Love is given, love is taken.
Love is built on, love is broken.
Love is shown in amounts.
You think you know how much you love, but you really don't —
not until that loved one's gone.

Love is also sweet
and complete
Love is spoken
Love makes you cry.
Love is forever.
You think you know what love is, but
it takes a whole lifetime.
By the time you're figuring it out,
it's your time to die.

Dzifa Gbewonyo

The Man Who Slept During Class

The man in the college next to room 104
wiped his face and said, "I am bored."
He gave out a yawn and laid down his head.
He didn't listen to a word the movie said.
I passed him by and laughed with a sigh.
As slowly as he could, he opened his eye.
I ran inside the bathroom and heard a snore
and said, "The next time he has class he will do it once more."

Dzifa Gbewonyo

if you see an upside down e

If you see an upside down e
maybe it's a capital G.
If you see an upside down e
someone wrote it with illiteracy.
If you see an upside down e
maybe it makes the sound schwa.
If you see an upside down e
maybe you have dyslexia.
If you see an upside down e
it surely is phonetic.
If you see an upside down e
you can just say, "I get it."

Dzifa Gbewonyo

Life

Life
Short, scary
Dying, starving, crying.
Waiting for help.
People.

Dzifa Gbewonyo

Paws and Claws

Cats and dogs have paws and claws.
Dogs chase cats around the block.
But cats never do get stalked.
They break the rules and break the laws.
Cats and dogs have paws and claws.

Cats get into all they can.
Dogs are best friends to man.
Together they can work like saws.
Cats and dogs have paws and claws.

Dogs can dig up lots of flowers.
Cats keep you company for hours.
You don't know how much trouble they cause.
Cats and dogs have paws and claws.

Cats try to stay away from water
Dogs are good presents for your daughter.
They take care of their young like mamas.
Cats and dogs have paws and claws.

Kafui Gbewonyo

Was Black Not White

Walking along the dirty street
looking down at his old feet
everyone away they dashed
and finally whipped him with the lash.
He turned his back with blood and scars:
people watched him from their cars.
They hosed him down, the firemen
poured salt and ketchup on his head
for he was black and was not white.
He was a person no one liked
was black, not white.

Kafui Gbewonyo

A Painted Sky

When you look on the highest high
You're looking at a painted sky.

With streaks of white and baby blue
And rays of golden yellow too.

At night God paints his pictures wet
And waits till morning so they set.

And every time it meets your eye
You're looking at a painted sky.

He makes it straight or makes it tint
Adds gusts of wind, but just a hint.

And every time the wind goes by.
You're looking at a painted sky.

He makes it different every day.
So great, I don't know what to say.

He changes it, I don't know why
We're looking at a painted sky.

Lindsay Wilson

Giving Darkness

He lived
in his created darkness
of boarded up windows
drawn curtains
(like a sheet over a body)
dull safe lights
and that snap of rubber gloves.
On his nets
he hung life
forgotten as laundry left on the line
drying in the night.
Captured cropped moments
burn dark there
dodge light here
(one more try)
His life
living in the dark
a merlin of non-light.
His tricks
more technique
(refined)
to create light out of darkness
proof even darkness can give.

Lindsay Wilson

The Hypnotists

White, blue, yellow,
green and white again
end over end
spiraling to a metallic finish.
My feet dangle off a table
as the hypnotic dryers
roll onward for a quarter's end.
The senses slow onto things
like grass stains
and pasta's finger print,
from nights soaked in red wine,
grins and the smell of garlic.
As my eyes slug over
the room's dull landscape
I take note of a woman and homework
a bulletin board and pinned flyer
promising answers to my
Past Lives, trance-like states, Dreams and Soul Travel
all I need to do, it said, was
call 1-800-LOVE GOD to discover your own answers.
Forgetting my past life, I continue my search of the present and a man
hitting a coin machine then trying to make his dollar obey.
Force and futility, following back to me and the dryers
my mind milling
transfixed on rolling linens,
socks, shirts, blue jeans and towels,
all dry once the quarters are spent,
all clean for a \$1.50
mind included
emptied like my pockets
of all its spare change
and dusty remnants of days done dry.

Paul Osaretin Ero

My Pet

I have a pet
a long thick bald headed adventurer
he exploits the lands of beautiful fresh vegetations
in the thick of the rainforest
and the luscious savannah grassland
the bold and daring desert
leaves him panting in euphoria

From the south to the north pole
every contour he explores and fondles
the middle lands
the land of the equator
his favorite place to play.

There's much made of a valley and mountains
a little ways from the arctic circle
those enticingly loud pointed peaks
rearranges the sanctity of his sanity

My pet's got a mind of his own
it does not matter whose bush it is
he just wants to piss
the beginning of most of his troubles

When he enters the warm doorway
in the heart of the north pole
his long thick frame loses control
in tongue he stutters and stumbles

But no matter where his adventure takes him
he comes back home smiling, calm
the obedient pet he is.

Paul Osaretin Ero

Quietude

Spiraling downward in a seemingly
bottomless pit, standing on solid
ground with severely blurred vision
holding on to bitter sweet memories
and lessons long learned
alluding to love
as the only reason why

Holding on to life in the abyss
of emotional tunnel
resisting the urge to step out
into the bliss of spiritual joy
claiming the light might be too bright
in the waters of uncharted quietude

cluttering the cluttered
one's spine is crushed
by the featherweights of life's
experiences
an improbable feel
only being in tune perceives
the freedom of setting love free.

Paul Osaretin Ero

Sunflower

My sunflower's enchanted life
embraced the world as a free spirit
smiling at all
smiling with all
spreading nectary wholeness gracefully
inviting hungry human strangers
to bask in the glory nature breathes
unselfishly standing her ground
to those whose mean spirits hurt our innocence
though your godly golden petals
were plucked and delicate stem cut
before your full potential is yet
etched in time for all to feel
I hold vigil with gratitude
your demise is the world's to share
my sweet bubbly lively sunflower

Paul Osaretin Ero

Same Material

It is not a celebration
about the colors of our skins
the spirit transcends
the boundaries of mundane misgivings
tiresome journey by those before us
in the punishing bowels of heartless steamers

It is not about their pain, our pain
a resounding physical beating
that strengthened our spiritual muscles
the confusion of being in an unfamiliar space
where our welcome belies the labor we offer
our offerings lie in spirit
the wisdom of countless ancestors
before us and after us

It is not about reliving the atrocities
heaped upon our conscience
deliberately for centuries
and incidentally by habit

We proclaim not a knowing
that surpasses the actions of our captors
it is now agreed upon
by virtue of the mirror we view
victims and villains in unity
this path shall never be road again

That regardless of texture and hue
the fabric that weaves our purpose
emanates from the source singular
of the same material.

Paul Osaretin Ero

The Drive

The drive bothers me not
same old traffic
same old faces
chugging along the cluttered freeways
in the city of lost angels

I have this thing called a job
forty odd minutes of rubber necking
snaking along a headless snake
content with layered tar
on the belly of the earth mother

crawling out of bed is an art
I am nowhere near perfection
cars generally keep their feet on the road
unless a driver has a fetish for trauma rooms

Here comes miss special
I'll call her special
dozing along in traffic
must not be slow enough for her

Her rear view mirror is tilted
make up time on the freeway
my patience has boiled over
have very little to start with

She holds us up to indulge in the disguise
getting up an hour early
would do the magic
since she has so much to hide

I cut across the lanes
getting a rise off a pissed off driver
he finds a reason to sulk all day
it's all the make up lady's fault

My temper flared like a burning torch
I pulled even with the bitch
my vent is stumped in mid sentence
the bitch is a bald headed guy
whose day is made
by pissing off people like me.

Paul Osaretin Ero

Eye of the Valley

There was a land
Between the hills
in the eye of the valley
on the river bank
where sun casts shadow
invisible to the people
where birds sing
nobody hears
where cows moo
lambs take the blame
where day is night
and shine is dull

Dwellers of this parcel of parchment
partake not in the splendor of the waters
and dislike with morbid passion
dances of the heart
they elate in the climb
of how enlightened they've become
an eye for an eye
often a foot and an arm more

They bathe not in the winds of the hills
nor swim in the calm of the river
smell like they smell
affronting the man they see as blind
one who sees like it is
without the persuasion of perception
who wades in the splendor of morning mist
feels the chimes in the winds
one that is and not of them
the eye of the valley

Casey Oslund Reynolds

Untitled

Royal tresses drape thy placid frame well
Around the ivory face to perfection.
Shifting through my veil of pretension, I,
Feigning nonchalance, this day failing still.
Stature small, but grand thoughts reside in thee,
Mutual fondness for bodice and mind.
A reason for me love cannot thee find,
Simply open thy azure eyes to see.
Perhaps in time thy heart will turn to mine,
Making youthful wiliness seem far away.
Perhaps in time forthcoming plans will play.
In the aged meantime, I pray thee be kind.
 Other gentlemen whom court thee nigh
 Not one is worthy of me, queen on high.

Jennifer Seib

an enduring strength

who am i?

I am the one expected to stay home
to dust and to mop
to wash and to iron making sure
we all have clean clothes to wear
i am the one whose arm grows weary
from pushing the vacuum cleaner
the magician to find the lost things
assumed to be lost by me
i am the one who loses my name, my identity
and takes on the one of my partner
i am the one who does the grocery shopping
who clips the coupons and pays the bills
who cooks the meals and cleans up the
mess when we're through

i am the one who goes unnoticed
the one who works without pay

who am i?

i am the one who gives life to a child
and suffers the pain of their birth
i nourish their bodies with life and love
though the cost to my figure is dear
i am the one who is up with sun
and the last one in bed at night
to dress the children
comb their hair and brush their teeth
call the doctor call the dentist
to ensure their health and safety
i am the one who worries about sunburns
and kisses the boo-boos away
i glow with pride at each step they take
yet hold on tight for fear they should fall
i make sure they are bathed and ready for bed
bedtime wishes and eskimo kisses
tucked in snugly and two times each
the cat in the hat, green eggs and ham
i am the one who sits lovingly by their side

when the stars are bright in the dark of night
and chase the fevers and monsters away

i am the one exhausted with love worry joy and
fatigue

who am i?
i am the one who not long ago
demanded the right to stand up and fight
years of oppression gave way a little
as i collect my meager pay
i am the one who works just as hard
but gets less in return for my labor
still determined, i refuse to give in
desiring the freedom a paycheck brings
i am the one who stands behind
the other who stands in line
my path to the top seems eternally
blocked by the ceiling built out of glass
i am the one who still believes
in the american dream
i am the one who is just like you

i am the one with enduring strength

i am a woman

Jennifer Seib

Wings

protector in primary period
selfless in her sacrifice,
with outstretched wings she wraps them in
the love which is her life.

the leaves change colors
the young ones too,
they spread their own wings
and off they flew.

she waits in her nest her wings at her side
her shining eyes watching their clumsy dance,
the rain starts to fall reflecting, her heart
as the young ones fly on, taking a chance.

as shaky wings flutter away with the leaves
she watches them go with her heart,
their love shines brightly as they look back again
and she smiles, knowing they've been with her
from the start.

Jennifer Seib

An Open Book

A Father's love
is an open book,
unfolding a tale
oft said with a look.

Its chapters reflect
a bairn's phases in life,
his unfaltering presence
through laughter and strife.

Words sometimes hazy
tho I shed not a tear
for the meaning beneath them
is perfectly clear.

Father Time waits on no one,
thus the chapters must close,
yet the love held within them
is an unending prose.

Jennifer Seib

Indifference

The road is cluttered
As you drive, exhaust
Puffing out the back
You strain to see through
The rain hitting your
Windshield, the acid rain
Eating at your car
As you toss the
Butt of your Camel out onto
Highway you don't notice
The styrofoam cups, trash bags
Empty soda cans, newspapers
Or dirty diapers lining the road
You stop for a red light
Look to the left and see
Through the haze and
Grime a playground
Children are playing
A sign is posted nearby
"Future site of toxic waste dump"
The light turns green
You drive on

John Young

El Corrido de Cortéz

Look what happened in the county
that men call El Carmén:
The Major Sheriff lies murdered,
a bullet in the brain.

In the morning the officials
came to check out the affair.
There were no suspects in the jail cells,
none anywhere.

They nosed about for just an hour,
demanding answers in the place,
then suddenly a deputy left fall
the name of Cortéz.

From that moment on, Gregorio
Cortéz was declared a heinous killer
by the U.S. District Marshall,
a sanguine fellow.

"Gregorio Cortéz: Wanted
Dead or Alive," the broadsides
in the borderlands to the North
where Mexicans die.

Gregorio Cortéz,
armed with a pistol as he fled,
felt no sorrow for the Sheriff
who shot his flesh and blood.

"Ramon was shot right in the mouth,"
he declared with pistol high,
"When he was just having a good laugh:
A just alibi".

A cavalry of range-riders
descended from that wild North.
Their mounts were wobbly on their hooves,
and they of no worth.

The bounty reward was one thousand —
three hundred strove to be the first.
The yellow hounds were on the track,
savage and accursed.

The rancho they were after
struck out for Gonzales pueblo.
None followed him in: Fear had brought them
to a standstill.

The yellow hounds were sniffing hard
the dark smell of the outlaw.
Untimid like their handlers,
they'd hunt a red-hot star.

Gregorio Cortéz watched and thought,
"What good are their strategies?
They can't take me with their hounds,
nor with their posses."

Then the cavalry of cowards
spoke up, to a man,
"When and if we catch up,
who among us will return?"

He headed into Brownsville
where they had him in a trap,
but he led Ramón's sorrel mare out,
giving them the slip.

There was a rumor that in Encinal
an exchange of gunfire rattled
momentarily the sleepy town,
and a lawman toppled.

Then said Gregorio Cortéz,
his pistol smoking white,
"I was defending myself:
A rightful alibi."

At the Cypress Ranch he said
to good man Juan, "You can turn me in;
they can arrest me now, amigo.
I'm not on the run."

The sheriffs came in numbers
and led him back from that balmy grove
where his handsome head was resting,
his heart in love.

He told them with a mellow tongue,
"You are taking me because I wish,
and not the other way around.
Only madmen clash."

The grief-felt family of Cortéz
saw one matter replace another:
Cleared, he was then charged with stealing
the mare of his brother.

Mary Lou MacIlvaine

I Know the Roads

I know the roads of Hell
been down to all the sites

stumbling down precipitous grades
letting go the guard rail
yielding lower

chasing phantoms
called from distance
legs worn down running
pelvis long undone
giving in

screaming down alley
cornered overpowered jumped
down fighting blood
burning rage
hawking sputum sweating
spent
gasping breath
lying heavy sticky
full

asphalt comes into focus
scraping my face
a bird pecking my hairline
its feet scratching my ear
searching for tidbits
cross the mad landscape
finding over time
down high road and low
lies falling away

a breeze lifting

been down and back
so many times
I know the roads

Mary Lou MacIlvaine

Holy Heart

Holy heart hiding, dressed in black
Chomping at the bit. Wanting something back.
Drumming and demanding to be seen and heard.
Caged in tension. Captive by the word.

Tender heart searching. Where is Heaven? What is sin?
Tell me who God is again. Will He let me in?
Printing careful alphabets. Learn to read the mood.
Breathe in unison. Warmth and food.

Fond heart harboring yet the spoils of Cain.
Brilliant for the sake of show. Calculating gain.
Touching listeners to the quick. Wanting something dearer.
Sucking on a knuckle. Angry at the mirror.

Hungry heart leaping up to a soaring flight.
Spinning in the night sky, something in its sight.
Passing over one to talon down upon the next.
Eyes of children. Baited breath. Body heat connects.

Lonely heart hunting from behind steering wheel.
Deer in the headlight. Collision of steel.
Rustlings in the legs. Bones and muscles shudder.
Slippery doings. Ruffled fur. Blood down the gutter.

Waking heart opens an eye and peeks.
Looks the room over, over many weeks.
Sorting out photographs. Working out the maze.
Find what's there. Focus the gaze.

Daring heart standing the infant pain.
Easing the pulse. Letting up the strain.
Taking a chance. Feeling what's true.
Breath keep on breathing. Let God through.

Holy Heart Epilogue

Genius and madness. Home is where the heart is.
Wisdom and folly. Beware of who's the smartest.
Not our fault the fol-der-ol. Little is known.
Now the child's time has come to come into her own

Mary Lou MacIlvaine

Only Connect

Who are you?
is that really you
I see
or someone else's half-profile?
I reach for you
through a closet of cast-off clothing
again
taken by surprise

only connect, says instinct
only I can't, says darkness

I want to see you real and full
but mire in poetry and bull
I look; I think I see you plain
but then I have to look again

what pulling power you have
you wouldn't be
an angel, would you?

unknowable, still
you are
luminous throughout me

(be silent;
wait and watch)

Mary Lou MacIvaine

Generosity of Life

Wild nature is something else
Standing in my hiking boots
by a rough-bouldered river
what if I could take root
down into the sandy soil
as if
right
here

A surge of energy pushing
down through my thighs and calves
springing roots out from my soles
and ticklish toes
thready tendrils through my socks
bursting my helpless boots
then wiggleworming into the cool ground
branching out to find dark moisture
in and around soil particles and rocks

Fixing me solidly to this slope

Opening new pores
I would sip water from underground
to feel the wetness slide
up beneath my skin
rising higher up my trunk
to my arms reaching skyward
branching freely into angles in the sun
leaves sprouting from myriad fingers

Well-tended skin going barky
clothes straining and ripping
genitals, belly, bottom, back
and breasts encased in darkness
heart at a secret depth within

beating with alarm as new leaves
stir on skittish stems
with the first breeze
gasping at the sensation

Mary Lou MacIlvaine

surrendering to the inevitability
of responsive motion

Accepting what I cannot understand

My lungs at last will cease their work
yielding to the breath
in my leaves that sets them dancing

My heart to be relieved
by insistent pulsing commerce
from sunny foliage
down vascular channels
to cool roots

And genitals dim, go mute and woody
as I embrace the moist dark soil
within the secret silence
of my rootzone
opulent eroticism
the arboreal shift complete

I tell you I would feel my presence
expanding from farthest root
to farthest leaf
the generosity of life
within me and around me
unafraid to die

My bootprints would lead
from my car to this tree

Mary Lou MacIlvaine

Hollow Wind

I fight shy of
deaths' machete,
fear the reassuring smiles of
 heroin at my door,
hear the hollow wind of Hades;
 another habituée
to hack at my heart.

A new character steps onstage;
the floorboards groan
 in foreknowledge.

Oh, help me, God,
I, too, have been like Hell,
 how hapless still,
brought suffering into others' hearts
 and they had me.

How do I say,
"Happy to meet you"?

Who would walk willingly into
the whirling blades of tomorrow
 that they could see?

Mary Lou MacIlvaine

Can it Really be Spring?

Can it really be Spring?
Pears and almonds have blossomed,
set fruit, and leafed out.
Bees worked the bloom,
doing no one's bidding.

I myself have stepped into
the earth-scented morning air
and felt it splashing like a wave
through my clothes
to my timid, thrilled skin,
my jacket indoors.

It's not too cold
to caper out in cotton socks
cutting callas for the table,
camellias for the crystal bowl,
stepping crunch into snail
and pulling back, catching my breath.

Nature asks us to be brave.

Now,
New-hatched pinkgreen leaves
breathe tenderly on the camphor tree,
their discarded papery sheaths
on the ground,
rustling underfoot
like onion skins
or Autumn.

Mary Lou MacIlvaine

Dazzling Dark

no mam, you can't
see the bottom of the lake D.G. Jones

sure,
I'll risk being
a fool
dive into life's dazzling darkness
risk confusion, humiliation
for pearls
of emerging truth
maybe come up with abalone
sometimes just baloney

risk being changed
by the sea,
by seeing
what I see

let go
the gunwales
who I should be
what I always knew
splash kerplunk
things sink
into the drink, disappear
out of reach

trusting
the tides of life will wash me up clean
or something like —
tiding myself over in between

a lifetime's work
the cure through love
to be a splash more human

carrying home the ocean
by teaspoons.

Portia St. Claire

Mr. Jellison

During high school, you filled my emptiness.

You aroused me with "yellow daffodils" and the
"Ode on a Grecian Urn."

To the beat of bongo drums, Sidney Poitier talked of the
life in Plato's

cave, as I felt my first kiss from a boy in your
classroom.

On stage, actors lived the Bradbury tales on the Illus-
trated Man.

After you played Hamlet, I brushed your hand acciden-
tally and

was amazed by the heat of your palm.

You said "Observe, observe the life around you.

Keep a journal, and write of the specialness of each
day,

Only as you see with your eyes."

I did not write in journals then, but I write everyday
now.

I have forgotten what I wrote on assigned essays.

But yes, I remember how you read my words to the
class, as tenderly

as the words of Dylan Thomas.

I wondered then are my words and thoughts just as
profound?

For this wonder, I write wishing you were reading my
words

to me again.

Portia St. Claire

Kim Chee

Cabbage kim-chee, cucumber kim-chee, radish
kim-chee.

The peasant savored the peppered, pickled com-
panion to rice.

Soaked in salt and compacted into earthen jars,
Large enough to hide a thief.

Jars dug into the snowy ground,
The harvest preserved for the dormant winter
months.

Cabbage kim-chee, cucumber kim-chee, radish
kim-chee.
Became a pungent necessity at the emperor's
banquets.

Jason T. Grist

***The Momentary Glory of Basking
for whitman***

Be no greater illuminate joy
Than a man reduced to a boy,
On faces those around
His moment shall be found,
Brief instant for to see
And now unknowingly,
Once reaching to touch the hand
They crucify the man.

Jason T. Grist

A San Joaquin Sunset

Sunsets make wonderful protagonists
Cast against a setting of blue.

Witness of aged expansion and conquest and
Provider of life to both sides,
Accepting the defeat and victory
And always an integral role.

Spoken whispers of true —
Unmatched in appearance and grandeur —
Humble in approach to perfection in closure —
Master of the masters.

Inner thoughts and days of grace —
And the jealousy of the rainbows,
Only the sunsets of the San Joaquin
Have such heroic antagonists.

Jason T. Grist

Full Bloom

the sting of air
so heavy filled with fragrance

musty in its blossoming world
perfectly matching the thickness of April

bees sounding to produce what is seasonally desired or
undesired

escaping only in mind
with feet to follow.

Jason T. Grist

In the Shadows of the Sierra Nevadas

Whisper me a tune wind
As pure as waters that swirl at the bottom
Of crystal clear rivers.
Speak to the spirit that resides in my soul
Like the thunder speaks to a thirsting flower.
Scatter my thoughts across sacred pleasures
As pores are strewn across desolate plains —
I will listen.

Play on wind —

Awaken my unconscious thoughts' wind
As the rain awakens these hills that surround me.
Reveal to me the essence of my being in its simplest form
Like the waves that expose every grain of sand
On a virgin beach.
Magnify these feelings that allow me
To stare into calm waters —
Like the time you blew away all the dust
As I lay in the shadows of the Sierra Nevadas.

Joan Desmond

Gram

I found your box
at the bottom of the pile
shouldering the weight
bent
yellowing like old newspaper
it tells such a story
I almost didn't hear
in the clamor
the sorting
the moving
sitting there small silent
unassuming
I put it aside
for a time
there never is enough
Now while phantom mice
chase the cat in the dark
the half-full boxes and life-things pile up
surrounding me as I sit
with your box
understanding
what I've only guessed at before
from your smile
and your wrinkled eyes
your breath
your shape rises
takes form through these clippings
these words
people that your blue eyes
sought
held and cradled
in this box

Joan Desmond

Shirley's House

My mind can still smell the Buffalo rain,
musty city-breath of cement
choking damp gardens.
The rain's fat movement outlined the steeped dark
roofs
its rhythm echoed up front porch steps
— trumpeted from purple clematis mouths.

We watched
sheltered
on the burglars-didn't-want-these assorted chairs.
Shirley's low voice purred forth from the comfort of a
squishy yellow one.
Dangling feet and cigarette over a tan leather sling,
Deanna sent out laughter like fireflies dancing around
our midnight thoughts.
And I, loose in a director's chair
wove words in and out of conversation and through
the succulents-lined railing.

The three of us
not being very hungry
dipped pita in lemony hummus and ate too much.
We drank White Zinfandel
and were articulate, rambling, and verbose
talking of ordinary things and great things and art.

Slow time and fatigue enveloped us
sealed us tight.
And the rain blurred the moment
the words
and washed us off the porch on Anderson Place.

Joan Desmond

The Deception

Against the fading sky
the pine trees rimmed the mountains
lace-like
As if some billowing black velvet skirt
was thrown carelessly to the ground
creased and folded
into mounds and valleys
And this
which hardly merits a passing glance
in a brighter time
beckons mysteriously
against the fading sky.

Joan Desmond

That Place

This is the house that used to exist.
Collared memories are chained here
somehow
its size, its form
seem different
thinking maybe it would rouse
barking the neighborhood to awareness
I drove slowly, carefully
I searched its eyes remembering
shadows I found were fed
beneath this roof.
How the hedge is trimmed
how thin the grass
around its edge remembering
my mother throwing dishwater over roses
everywhere
washing out the aphids.
Could this possibly be the same
this so small and colored
entirely wrong
it doesn't
recognize me.

Joan Desmond

Dreams

Lonely nights
come filled with full moons
that glare past dangling glasses
raised up to painted faces
spilled on synthetic velvets
Lonely women
glide on moonbeams
into softlit corners
filled with silent screams
for gentle arms that never hold
onto dreams
born in young hearts
and filled with secret hopes
of paperback heroes
that have no breath.

Joan Desmond

Lessons

Leaves have left the trees now
standing bare-boned
In this...this hard light
I'm reminded
of the weathering seasons
leaving us leafed-over
to the sun
unable to feel the warmth.

Joan Desmond

Shadow Puppets

Not much else ever felt so rotten for so long
as that last conversation...
The words appear, as shadow puppets
moving behind the white screen.
Clarity exists; within the words, beyond the drama
it breaks the hush...the crashing gong
then fades...
while the puppet master unfolds an old tale
of the balance between white and black
and the gamelan sing-song weaves a spell
in shades of gray.
All is pretense and confusion here.
The hero wears a mask
The heroine blends with the audience
immobilized...
watching the silhouettes dance.
For each time the tale is told
meanings change...
in the ending silence
when the shadows break and fall
she thinks of you.

Joan Desmond

Poetry

There is no money in this
You know
prose is just another market
available to everyone
using Farfig-Newtons
to put you behind the wheel
to charm the love
to line the pocket.
Slovenly pulled-out words
spilled randomly, truthlessly
amassed to build protective walls
fashioned into Uzis of rhythm and rhyme
scooped up with the shovel of mistrust
like droppings buried quickly.
Ah...but those of us who love the word
who find its core, its shape
seek its texture, color
that we sculpt, caress
to give it our breath, our tongue
have a secret.
And when they ask what we do we say
we write a little
and they pat us on the head knowingly
thinking that we are poor.

Joanne Schmidt

On This Piece of Paper

On this piece of paper
there are words
that are magic.
These words can weave
in and out
of people's ears
and tickle them
as they travel.
These words can keep
eyes moving
and send pleasure
to the brain
over and over again.
These words can touch
your sensitivity
and cause tears
to produce themselves
and moisten the page.
These words can be simple
and make life easy
with a direct message
of love.
These words can be tailored
to say
just about anything
and to assume any shape
possible.
But once these words are
on this piece of paper
they are powerful words
that can live a life
of their own.

Joanne Schmidt

Extase

Extase, de vraies extases
je pense donc à toi
je te hume sur l'envers de ma main
je hume ton parfum
c'est le jour qui fête l'amour
c'est le four qui m'énivre de toi
je peux me souvenir de chaque instant
arrêtes mon amour de me rendre folle
je te désire dans mes mains et mes yeux
je te désire; extase d'Antiope

Joanne Schmidt

Siena, Italy

One becomes a blurry dot
walking through the streets
of Siena.

A dot enclosed
in winding stone streets
with imposing facades
hovering above.

The Italian sky
becomes a horizontal
strip of scotch tape
taking turns
in many directions
according to its chosen path.

The sun tore
through the clouds
at once, in sudden light
Siena red brick
sloping in several
different angles
all converging
in locked triangles
of mathematical harmony.

The soothing sound
from fountain sculptures
of she-wolves
all sprouting water
through their wise mouths.

Joanne Schmidt

S.S.

Such a sage at fifty smashinglly brilliant years
You are a talented crone indicating the path ahead
Love and amiable concern exude from your eyes.
Vivid, ojos vivos, clear, pellucid blue eyes
Instill an ever-spiraling welcome and empathy for others
All hearts are comforted by your graciously generous spirit.

Serene reflection and lively dialogue complement your soothing
touch

Inquisitive, you are, for the best reasons; Wanting to connect
Meeting MCC members and opening yourself to new and old
seekers

Much spiritual energy is communicated through your song
Such passion for la vida y la gente is your ever-growing legacy.

Joanne Schmidt

My Mind

Seeing what my mind is like on its own
without passing pages to encumber it
without other-directed assignments
but rather allowing it to meander
and feel its own way.

It focuses on the heart and the love in it.

It focuses on the fine fabric of passion.

It focuses on the walls of moist emotion.

Its peregrinations and intuitions are
eclectic and redolent with illogic.

This high level of thought free-falling
to its own delight

often reaches its fruition

to make the mental world

as rich and as alluring

as a multi-rainbowed

patchwork quilt.

TL

Space

There is a space — mine but not of me

The body is as the rainbow with no edge
where blue sky, where red refracted?
(Even the artist's brush fails to know.)

Self's boundary blurs

Here my cells, there encumbered air
Beyond the place with no memory of this neighboring life

My self's space was once unshared, aloneness defended
even

Now a visitor comes to this place. He peeks inward
beyond the cells and straight into my soul

There is a space — no longer mine alone

Release the Stars

Let them go; it is time to release the stars.

The ones placed just for you, the ones that served so well

They were your beacons to beauty, your fire pots of warmth

Your merry teasers. You never did own them

Now, before they slip away with the independence
always theirs,

lend your hand.

Take part.

Release them as they go.

It is time to release the stars.

Prepare for the wrenching task. Steel yourself.

You may have known loneliness even in this crowd
of brightness.

But now you will know Alone

In darkness dense as if solid,

Alone.

It is time to release the stars

Time to hold each one. Prepare it for fledging

Pick a ribbon from your heart

the heart once gaily festooned with momentos

here a song ribbon, there one of desert sand

flowing

(How can each grain be so unyielding,

yet the whole fluid and sinuous?)

Pluck a ribbon, smile at the memory, but do not
flinch when

the heart's life-sap flows from the pore where

the ribbon

blos-

somed.

Hurry, catch the drops which quickly become
slivers of coldness.

Give up the stars but not your life drops.

It is time to release the stars

Cuddle gently each vibrant pulse.

Coil a ribbon round this one, fashion a bow for that, a gentle kiss for each.

Do not care that lip gestures are nothing to the stars
already focused on lighting another heart's
galaxy.

The kiss is but for you, the soon to be Alone, the you
swirling in
confusion of honor and pain.
Let them go.

Release the stars.

Hurry now, do not think.

Uncup your hands, the open palms are freedom's platform.

The stars need not your toss, nor help to launch.

One star, ten, one hundred – gone.

Exhaust yourself with the ribbon wrap; it dulls the pain.

One last star.

One last cuddle.

One last bow.

Uncup your hands.

One last kiss before the dark.

Now Alone.

It is time to weep.

John Young

Posthaste

1.

It is too late for Ezra Pound
to come to American universities
and read circa John F. Kennedy;

for a reviewer/interviewer
to acquire genuine appreciation
and praise — to find order;

for the Nobel or the Emerson-Thoreau

It matters makes more sense
beside Considerable effort to ruin me
than all the posthaste and brouhaha of the post Pound Era
iconoclasm

2.

We only have the one day and the one life;
we spill ourselves onward in, and as, the stream;
we are born for naïveté and leave barely knowing;
meanwhile, we try not to waste, hating and caring.

Posthaste, posthaste, I heard as a child,
not knowing its meaning, in our pirate-play.
Today it sounds like Latin. I am uncertain
it means what I think it means: now, now.

Responsibility remains a common theme.
Don't ask me how guilt emerged. The war in him
stretched beyond the art, you and Eliot
disclose, none apprise without guesswork.

He lost his center — lost it, admittedly,
fighting the world. If guilty of anything,
He sought preservation of an old globe
changing, no doubt savagely, all around him.
"I cannot understand you poets," he admonished

at St. Elizabeth's. "There are twenty-four hours in a day, and you are not hell-bent on getting your messages out."

In our time we've seen the messages dissolve
like salt. Can anyone be fast enough
to stay one foot in front of the swift guilt-god?
Is it too late for posthaste, for honor?

3.

In the summer at haying time,
you see ditches thick with shadow,
and imagine, as you point your scythe,
escaped Nazis hiding in the weeds.
"Paranoia runs deep," runs the song.
Years later in a different place
you censor one who thought you naïve.
Have you reason to fear a fascist cricket
in the grass and this age-old custom
even in Hew Hampshire, of bundling cut hay?
O flee il migliore fabbro,
alias Nerts: Flee, flee the phantom
poet spewing anti-Semitic scrap.
Watch out also for Joe Kennedy,
Hank Luce, and Nicholas the Tsar.

4.

No guilt-trip; and no week-long jaunt of pity.
Erudite scholarship, book publishing, professorial
duties — these don't exactly bring innocence
posthaste back into the world, but you don't need
to tear your heart out for want of a justice
more and more people swallow as impossible.
After all, if we're to worry about this character
who set the experimental verse vortex
of English toward some high achievement,
we must still reckon the injustices done
ordinary Joes, the ones without resources
or the inordinate bravery to sing out.
We still have to reckon lesser poets.

We can enter another country, another ambition,
and never have to answer the question
of the relative effect of lustful alliances
on an obviously evil world. More than his New Age
experience told him war like a puzzle piece
fitted into a larger system benefiting rich,
ruthless coalitions. We can look at baseball
if you can talk of Flood. We can enjoy cocktails
if health and age permit. The propaganda
of luxury is so embraceable; and fault
is so easy to establish that the propaganda
of torment is not yet equated
with the pejorocracy we know it to be.

We must commend you who traveled to Rome by car,
with wife and small children, to hear an old man
try a last time to put his world Humpty-Dumpty-wise
together again. He was our last countryman
to suffer the tragedy of a whole subcontinent,
broken ant-heap, and the endgame not over.
You who did the driving and picked up the tab
need to be saluted for bringing the old man out
into sunlight, throat exposed, hat over delicate eyes.
Failing to find the Circus Maximus was not problem,
but surely at the elevator you could have avoided letting
him down. That you stumbled on the Baths
reminds us: the peanut-crunching crowd is *peu* *élevé*.

5.

Our teammate Ez is a heavy hitter and the opposition —
they brush him back, they throw at his head.
They get our powerful slugger shaky.

And what do we do? Do we ever brush them back?
Do we protect our hitter Ez? Do we throw
at their hitters' heads? Why, no.

We pitch them over the plate or outside
and they lean in and take full swing.
And smack! They hit the long ball off us.
They win the game. They win the Pennant. They
take the World Series year after year.

We are nice guys. Ez doesn't appreciate that.
He says, "You are out to ruin me."

Not us. The opposition.

He says, "You don't care if they leave me in fragments."

It's too bad he has to take it so personal.
It's too bad he has to retire.
It's too bad he has to slink into shadows of silence.
But Gah damn! He shouldn't blame us pitchers.
After all, we are very, very, very nice guys.

6.

True verse is a mortal gem, albeit hard,
capable, at times, to live beyond rebuff.

From the monists and the material minds,
both refusing the spirits' cripple, kill and plant
visionary, scepterless men in graves of knaves.
Just then the Florentino sees his Paradise
while clambering up, skyward from cruel pits.
Near the Empyrean, sovereignty and order
are loosened from the clutches of age-old kings;
and on the body of womanish Earth, we see
slight glorifications. Following giant footsteps thus
makes the modern world seem wanting, dolorous and cold.

More than this was mixed up. Lionel Johnson
and William Morris no longer influence the ear
of the early twentieth century. Distates
for Victoria settle into Edwardianisms.
And the essentiality of automobiles,
radios, and airplanes diverts the finer wit.
Despite American idiom and his friendship
with the Paterson doctor, his art is blurred —
obtuse upon obtuse confounds both acute and grave.
The Dantesquan thought-push, no longer St. Thomas,
presses through Kant to Nietzsche, torments twisting
into gloom. Yet a rushlight has led back to splendor,
reeds and water shimmer, and black sky hates no one.

7.

How do we praise great men?
By knowing of their deeds.
Who can make dead eyes respond?
A wizard by his lamps.
How do we assuage the controversy?
By showing what treason is.
It is too late for posthaste?
If breath exudes, it's not too late.

O let us not be so nice
for he would neither welcome
death with more than silence
nor life with anything less
than masterful truth. Our tambourines
are ineffectual in the effort.

Neither you nor I — neither emissaries —
go to the inward-leading hall,
brandished, where the thrones sit empty.

Thrones de los Cantares shall
come to know its rightful kings,
not just its reviewer-cads.



Mask, late 19th or early 20th century
Unknown Mbagani Artist, Zaire



Neckrest, late 19th Century
Unknown Luba Shankadi Artist known as the "Master of the Cascade
Coiffure"

D r a m a

Jeffery Scott Elwell

"An Ordinary Morning"

Lights come up on a lower middle-class kitchen. There is a table with a Formica top and fur chairs. The refrigerator and stove are leftovers from the avocado period. A row of cabinets runs above a red countertop, punctuated by a white ceramic double sink. A phone hangs on the wall at left, next to an open doorway which leads to the rest of the house. A frying pan sits waiting on the stove and the morning paper is on the table, unfolded. The phone rings. A woman enters the kitchen and picks up the phone. She is somewhere between 50 and infinity. She is wearing a cheap print housedress and nondescript slippers. A cigarette hangs from her lips and she continues sucking on it as she talks on the phone.

WIFE

Hello. Hi, Alice...another? Really? I know, honey, me too...I'm sure they will. They always do. Eventually. Yes, I will...you too...goodbye...

The woman's husband walks in and sits down at the table as she hangs up the phone. He is fiftyish, large, with a bit of a paunch but still in good shape. He is wearing work overalls of the type that a mechanic or painter would wear. He is most definitely a laborer. He works with his hands and probably has for his entire life.

HUSBAND

Who was that?

WIFE

Just Alice.

HUSBAND

What'd she want?

WIFE
(to stove)

There's been another.

HUSBAND
(picking up paper)

So soon?

WIFE

She heard it on the radio.

HUSBAND

Too late for the paper, I guess.

WIFE

Nothing there?

Not a thing. HUSBAND

Worked late last night? WIFE

A bit. HUSBAND

Need to be careful. WIFE

I always am. HUSBAND

Worked up an appetite? WIFE

Same as usual. HUSBAND

Three eggs, bacon, toast, coffee? WIFE

Make it four. HUSBAND

My, you did work up an appetite. WIFE

Things took a bit longer than usual. HUSBAND

Same routine? WIFE

Had to do a bit of improvising. HUSBAND

Run into some problems, did you? WIFE

Yes, some. HUSBAND

Gets tougher all the time, eh? WIFE

Jeffery Scott Elwell

HUSBAND

All in a day's work. Makes it a bit more interesting.

WIFE

I don't think I could adjust so easily.

HUSBAND

You do like everything to fall in place, don't you, darling.

WIFE

I am a creature of habit.

HUSBAND

Sometimes I think you get upset when I have a fourth egg or skip the toast.

WIFE

I confess I do at times, sweetheart. No harm meant.

HUSBAND

I bet you sometimes positively boil at me.

WIFE

Got me again.

HUSBAND

Natural enough, I suppose.

WIFE

We've got to get it out of our system one way or another.

HUSBAND

True enough.

(puts down paper)

Look here, some wife killed her husband with a baseball bat.

WIFE

That's nice. Do they say why?

HUSBAND

She apparently got tired of looking at him. You don't have a Louisville Slugger under the bed, now do you?

WIFE

I hope you'd give me credit for a little more imagination.

HUSBAND

A waffle iron?

Better. Still a bit tame, though. WIFE

Don't mean to underestimate you, darling. HUSBAND

A python, I think. WIFE

That is imaginative. A bit clumsy, though. HUSBAND

Clumsy? WIFE

Not many pythons in the area. Very suspicious, wouldn't you think? HUSBAND

You may have a point. And what about you? Surely something I do bothers you. WIFE

Not a thing, darling. HUSBAND

Nothing? WIFE

Not really. HUSBAND

There must be something. WIFE

Well... HUSBAND

That's better. What? WIFE

Nothing, really. HUSBAND

Confession is good for the soul. WIFE

If you insist... HUSBAND

Jeffery Scott Elwell

I do. WIFE

You do sometimes push things too far. HUSBAND

I push, do I? WIFE

Don't get upset, darling. You can't help yourself. HUSBAND

What do you mean? WIFE

You like to get to the bottom of things. HUSBAND

I am a wee bit curious, aren't I? WIFE

Positively cat-like. HUSBAND

Well, we know what happened to the cat. WIFE

Yes, we do. HUSBAND

I can't help myself. WIFE

I wouldn't have it any other way. HUSBAND

Mother was right, you know. WIFE

About me, you mean? HUSBAND

Naturally. WIFE

Mothers quite often are. HUSBAND

Jeffery Scott Elwell

WIFE
She said we'd complement each other's personality.

HUSBAND
Not a very romantic term, complement.

WIFE
Do we have enough romance?

HUSBAND
I think so.

WIFE
You only think so?

HUSBAND
I can't be sure. After all, you are my first wife.

WIFE
And your last.

HUSBAND
No doubt.

WIFE
So what happened last night?

HUSBAND
Things didn't go quite right.

WIFE
No?

HUSBAND
Sometimes these things fall right into your lap. Not last night. Took me hours.
The wife brings his coffee to the table.

WIFE
Here we are. Hot and black, just as you like it.

HUSBAND
(sipping coffee)
And the rest?

WIFE
Coming along. Coming along. Eggs don't scramble themselves, you know.

HUSBAND
Of course not, my dear.
(sipping coffee)
What would I do without you?

WIFE
Well, you certainly wouldn't eat. If something happened to me, I think you'd starve to death.

HUSBAND
Probably so. But what could happen to you, after all?

WIFE
I could be one of those poor women.

HUSBAND
You? A victim of the Roadside Strangler?

WIFE
What a hideous name.

HUSBAND
I believe the police named him. Not very original.

WIFE
But fitting...

HUSBAND
Yes.

WIFE
Littering the roadside with their lifeless bodies.

HUSBAND
Yes.

WIFE
The descriptions in the papers can give one nightmares. Nude bodies. Rope burns. I know it hasn't been reported but I wonder if they've been assaulted. Sexually.

HUSBAND
I doubt there'd be enough time.

WIFE
Still the Strangler could do it. During or after the murder.

HUSBAND

Jeffery Scott Elwell

Unlikely.

(looks up)

Eggs ready yet?

WIFE

Soon. Still hungry, eh?

HUSBAND

Why the sudden interest in the Strangler's sexual habits?

WIFE

Just got to thinking about it.

HUSBAND

I see. Well, you're safe from the Strangler.

WIFE

Oh?

HUSBAND

After all, you aren't out on the road at all hours of the night, are you?

WIFE

No

She pops the toast in.

HUSBAND

All the victims had car trouble. Our car is very dependable.

WIFE

But you never know when I'll need to run an errand at night. And the car could break down.

HUSBAND

You have very little to worry about. The police seem to be everywhere these days.

WIFE

I don't think he would be frightened by the police.

The toast pops up and she scoops the eggs and bacon out of the skillet and onto a plate. She butters the toast and carries the meal to the table.

Here we are.

HUSBAND

(kissing her on the cheek)

Thank you honey.

Jeffery Scott Elwell

He begins eating breakfast and continues to do so during the next several minutes. All of the action and conversation that takes place during this time does so at a pace which allows the breakfast to be eaten. The Wife gets her coffee and her cigarettes from the counter and joins her Husband at the table. She begins to read a section of the paper.

WIFE

This latest would make thirteen, wouldn't it?

HUSBAND

Yes...I think so.

WIFE

The police talk about a dozen victims but that wouldn't include last night's. So, thirteen.

HUSBAND

Yes.

WIFE

An unlucky number, I think.

HUSBAND

Yes?

WIFE

Yes, I'm sure he'll be on the lookout for another one soon.

HUSBAND

With all the police?

WIFE

He probably enjoys the attention. I'm sure he's a very insecure little man with many problems.

HUSBAND

Problems?

WIFE

Sexual, most likely. A bit too fond of Mommy. Or maybe Uncle Albert.

HUSBAND

That's highly speculative.

WIFE

But it would explain why he leaves all those bodies in plain sight.

HUSBAND

Maybe he doesn't have time to hide them.

Jeffery Scott Elwell

WIFE
Maybe.

HUSBAND
Maybe he enjoys the challenge. Knowing that the police are searching for him at the very moment that he's choking the life out of those poor girls. Then leaving behind their bodies but not one bit of hard evidence.
(pause)
Yes, he's been very clever.

WIFE
Maybe a bit to clever.

HUSBAND
Oh?

WIFE
They always trip themselves up.

HUSBAND
Do they?

WIFE
Oh, yes. Practically always. There've been many cases of near perfect crimes spoiled by a single bit of carelessness.
(pause)
That's how they got the Boston Strangler.

HUSBAND
You're an expert, are you?

WIFE
I read the most interesting things these days.

HUSBAND
I'm glad that you've found something to do while I'm at work.

WIFE
A woman's got to do something besides taking care of her husband.

HUSBAND
Does she?

WIFE
Yes.

Jeffery Scott Elwell

HUSBAND

I don't suppose you'd care to trade places with me? I could stay home and read and you could take my job.

WIFE

I don't think I'd like that.

HUSBAND

Too physical for you?

WIFE

No, I'd be afraid you couldn't handle my responsibilities.

HUSBAND

The cooking and the cleaning?

WIFE

That's right.

HUSBAND

I imagine I could learn.

WIFE

Do you remember that last time you cooked? When I was in the hospital? You nearly burned the house down. No, I think we should keep our present roles.

HUSBAND

If you insist.

WIFE

I'm afraid I must. Besides, you'd have to teach me what you do.

HUSBAND

That wouldn't be difficult.

WIFE

No?

HUSBAND

Perhaps sometime I will, even if we won't be switching.

WIFE

That would be interesting.

HUSBAND

When you're ready...

WIFE

What about now?

Now? HUSBAND

You've got time, haven't you? WIFE

Yes...but... HUSBAND

But what? Now, I don't expect you to do a thing before you finish your breakfast. WIFE

Who would I demonstrate on? HUSBAND

What about me? WIFE

You? HUSBAND

Why not? WIFE

No reason... HUSBAND

Then finish your breakfast. Oh, this will be exciting. WIFE

If you insist. HUSBAND

Oh, I do. Now, what do you need? WIFE

Need? HUSBAND

To make it authentic? WIFE

You might get dressed. A robe is hardly the proper attire. HUSBAND

Right away. Can I get you anything? WIFE

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I'm fine. HUSBAND

I'll be back in a few minutes. WIFE

That's hardly likely. HUSBAND

Now don't be snide. WIFE

She exits. The Husband continues with his meal and the newspaper.

Okay. HUSBAND

(calling off)
The newspaper says that all the victims were blond.

WIFE
(off)
Has a thing for blondes, has he?

HUSBAND

Apparently so.

WIFE
(off)
Good thing I'm not one. What else does the paper say?

HUSBAND

Let's see...they were all wearing dresses.

WIFE
(off)
I thought they'd been found nude?

HUSBAND

True. But their clothes have been found elsewhere.

WIFE
(off)
Any particular type of dress?

HUSBAND

Doesn't say. Short, I would think. Inflamm his passions, you know.

WIFE
(off)

Jeffery Scott Elwell

Quite picky, this Strangler.

(pause)

Anything else?

HUSBAND

No. But I imagine that these women are the type who wear too much makeup

WIFE

(off)

Sluttish, are they?

HUSBAND

I would think so.

WIFE

Will this take long? I've got some shopping to do.

HUSBAND

Half an hour, tops. If you don't have the time...

WIFE

(off)

No, no. I have time. I was just wondering, that's all. Be ready in a minute.

HUSBAND

Fine. I'll rinse the dishes.

WIFE

That's a dear.

HUSBAND

Fair is fair. If you're going to try your hand at my line of work, the least I can do is lend you a hand with yours.

The husband crosses to the sink with his dishes. He begins running water and starts rinsing them. As he busies himself with this, his Wife enters, having undergone an amazing transition. She is wearing a blonde wig and a tight, short dress with high heels. Her face is overly made up. She looks like a hooker.

WIFE

Ready.

HUSBAND

(not looking)

Let me finish this...

He turns around and is so shocked by his wife's appearance that he drops a coffee cup on the floor. It shatters.

Jeffery Scott Elwell

Damn!

He bends down to pick up the pieces as she crosses to help him.

You gave me a start.

WIFE
(smiling)

I guess we're down to five from the original set.

HUSBAND

Sorry about that.

WIFE

It's only china. We can replace it.

HUSBAND

Awfully clumsy of me.

WIFE

I hope you're not this careless on the job?

HUSBAND
(standing)

Never.

WIFE

How do I look?

HUSBAND

Perfect. Ready?

He crosses to the trashcan and throws away the broken pieces of china.

WIFE

I suppose so. What should I do?

HUSBAND

Sit down.

WIFE
(sitting in chair)

Okay.

HUSBAND

Now do you want to go through the whole thing?

WIFE

If that's okay with you?

Jeffery Scott Elwell

HUSBAND

Fine. Now then, sit there as though you were in the driver's seat of an automobile.
(pause)

Let me just arrange this chair.

In a single motion, he lifts the chair with his wife in it and faces them perpendicular to the kitchen table. His arms are practically bursting through his shirt sleeves. There.

WIFE

I feel strange.

HUSBAND

Strange how?

WIFE

Not nervous but...

HUSBAND

Excited perhaps?

WIFE

That may be it.

HUSBAND

It might help to get more in character.

WIFE

Character?

HUSBAND

You know, act the part.

WIFE

Oh, dramatics and all.

HUSBAND

Right.

WIFE

Would they act sassy?

HUSBAND

More likely snobbish and condescending.

WIFE

They're like that, are they?

Jeffery Scott Elwell

HUSBAND
Most. Ready?

WIFE
Okay.

He walks around the kitchen as his Wife stares straight ahead. He moves to her side and bends down as though he were looking in her car window.

HUSBAND
Having some trouble, Miss?

WIFE
It's this stupid car! Do you know anything about cars?

HUSBAND
A little. What happened?

WIFE
It just stopped. It won't move. And I'm late.

HUSBAND
I'll take a look if you'd like.

WIFE
I'll pop the hood?

The wife reaches for the "knob" and "pops" the "hood". The Husband moves around in front of the "car" and looks under the "hood".

HUSBAND
Hmm!

WIFE
Will this take long? I really don't have time for this.

HUSBAND
It's a mess. You should have a look.

WIFE
I think I'll stay in the car while you go call for a tow.

HUSBAND
I can fix it but I'll need your help.

(pause)
Do you have a flashlight?

WIFE
In the glovebox.

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She reaches in the "glovebox" and pulls out a "flashlight". She holds it out for him.

Here.

HUSBAND

Could you bring it to me? I think I've found the problem.

The wife looks around and then tentatively begins to get out of the "car".

WIFE

I'm not sure I should be doing this. There are a lot of weirdoes out there. A girl can't be too careful.

She walks around to the front of the "car" and stands next to the Husband.

Where should I point this?

HUSBAND

(under hood)

Over my shoulder

She moves closer to him and points the "flashlight" over his shoulder.

WIFE

Here?

HUSBAND

(under "hood")

Perfect.

In a single move, he springs up and grabs the Wife, knocking her to the ground and straddling her. He clamps a hand over her mouth.

Don't say a word, bitch!. You think you're so superior. Well, who's superior now?

The Wife looks up at him, terrified.

I can do what I want with you, slut...

He rubs his hand across her cheek, collecting the residue of her blush.

Look at this!. You women disgust me, do you know that? You're all the same, you grab hold of some poor fool and don't let go until you've sucked him dry. You take his money, his pride, his manhood. Well, who's got who, know? Look at you, trembling like a trapped animal. You can't fool me, sister. You're no animal. No, you're a reptile, a cold-blooded slithering thing. What have you got to say about that, huh?

Jeffery Scott Elwell

(removes his hand from her mouth)

WIFE

What do you want? Don't hurt me, I'll give you whatever you want.

HUSBAND

(smiling)

Oh, you'll give me what I want, all right. But then, you don't have a choice.

(pulling at her hair)

WIFE

Stop! That hurts!

She lashes out at him futilely.

HUSBAND

It hurts, does it? What about this?

He grabs her wrist and squeezes.

WIFE

You're breaking my...

HUSBAND

(clamping his hand over her mouth, stifling her screams)

We can't have you screaming out like that. It might attract the police and we wouldn't want that. Not yet anyway. Not until the Roadside Strangler finishes with you.

The Wife struggles, real fear in her eyes. The Husband easily hods her in his grip.

Oops, I shouldn't have told you that, now should I have? Now I can't let you go. You'd go straight to the police, wouldn't you.

The Wife shakes her head.

Don't lie, whore!

He slaps her.

Did you like that?

There are tears streaming down the Wife's face. He gently wipes them away.

There, there now. Things aren't so bad. You're going to be famous...number fourteen... you picture all over the papers.

The Wife trembles.

Oh, don't worry, they won't see you like this. No, only a select few will see you as I leave you. The papers wouldn't dare show that. No, more likely a prom picture

Jeffery Scott Elwell

or maybe one from graduation...

He grabs her left hand and plays with the Wife's wedding band.

...or maybe your wedding photo. Yes, that would be nice.
(dropping her hand)

I know your type, dearie. Out here all alone, late at night. Been out on the town, have you? Running around on the old fool? Answer me, and don't try to scream or I'll jam your teeth down your throat.

(removing hand from mouth)
Go ahead, tell me what you've been up to.

WIFE

Shopping. I was just shopping...

He slaps her across the face and she cries out in pain.

HUSBAND

Don't lie bitch! Shopping? In that short dress?

He rips the hem.

And that scent you're wearing? You expect me to believe you were only shopping?

WIFE

(nods, grimacing in pain)

Yes...just shopping.

HUSBAND

Don't lie to me!

He punches her in the stomach, knocking the air out of her.

What's that? I can't understand you.

WIFE

It's...it's the truth.

HUSBAND

(slapping her)

Liar! I know what you need.

He pulls out a piece of rope from his overalls.

WIFE

What are...

HUSBAND

Don't worry, it's painless...almost.

He struggles with her.

WIFE

No...please!

HUSBAND

Yell all you want. No one can hear you. It'll be easier if you don't fight me.

He has wrapped the rope around her neck and pulls at it until she goes limp

(releasing her)

Now, that wasn't too bad, was it? Shame you had to end up this way but it was your own fault. If you'd stayed in your place, none of this would have happened. You're like all the rest, never satisfied with what you've got, always on the look for someone more handsome, with a bit more money...

(looking down at her body)

See what it got you? Should have left well-enough alone. Well, can't leave you here at the edge of the road, now can we?

He grabs the Wife's arms and begins to pull her down left when her skirt bunches up, exposing her legs.

Mighty attractive for a corpse. Too bad we're running short on time, dearie. Otherwise, the two of us could hook up.

(runs his hand down her leg)

Nice. Very nice.

(looking around)

If something were to happen, who would be the wiser?

(starts caressing her)

You do feel nice. Cooling off a bit, though. We'd have to make it a quickie. Wouldn't want the police to catch us in the act, now would we? Be a bit hard to explain your condition.

(removing a shoe)

Lovely feet.

(Pulls down her pantyhose, throwing them upstage)

Never did like stockings. Another act of deception.

He begins kissing her foot. As he does, the Wife reaches out and grabs the leg of a kitchen chair

(kissing higher and higher up her leg)

I think you and I are going to...

With a sudden motion, the Wife pulls on the chair and sitting up, slams it down on her Husband's head. He falls backward, hitting his head on the floor as the chair splinters. She jumps up.

WIFE

I KNEW IT! How many times have I told you not to do that with them? Do you

ever learn, Henry? There are too many diseases out there for you to indulge yourself with these women. Just think what you might be exposing me to. It's insulting, having sexual relations with a ...a corpse. It disgusts me. I can certainly understand how strangling a beautiful young woman might be exciting but I'm afraid I must insist on your fidelity in the future.

(pause)

You'll be out for awhile, that's certain. Just look at that chair...it's hopelessly shattered. That's the third one this month.

(takes off the wig)

I won't be needing this anymore.

She crosses to the kitchen and tosses the wig in the trash can. She collects the pantyhose and tosses them in as well.

Can't leave these things lying around, now can we?

(crossing to husband)

Sometimes I think you're so smart and then you go do something stupid...

(leans down and kisses him)

But I guess we can't expect too much from the male of the species now can we? Now, tonight, you'll find a redhead...yes, that's good...a redhead. That will throw the police off your trail. And no SEX! I could poison you, you know. It would really be quite easy.

She stands and during the course of this speech, strips down to her undergarments.

A little arsenic in your eggs...some lye in your coffee...yes, it would be very easy to do...you never check your breakfast...and then the Roadside Strangler would forever remain a mystery...never to be solved...just like the Riverside Rapist. Oh, you would have like him...thoroughly professional. Now, how did he die? That's right, I remember now. Someone injected a syringe full of air in to his bloodstream as he slept...the doctors called it a heart aneurysm...quite a sudden death...but then he wasn't as strong a man as you are, Henry. But he was a very sound sleeper. No, I don't think you'll die of an aneurysm, dear. It will take something much more inventive when you've outlived your usefulness. Something exotic. We need to make sure I don't draw too much attention to myself. I wouldn't want to have to change my name again. Or get plastic surgery. I do wish you were a bit more handsome...or made more at the factory. All in all, however, I guess I don't have too much to complain about.

She bends down and kisses him again

Sweet dreams, dear.

(she exits)

(offstage)

Yes, number fourteen should definitely be a redhead.

The husband starts coming around, grabbing his head, looking at the broken chair.

HUSBAND

What did...where am...

The Wife enters dressed as she was earlier. She crosses to him.

WIFE

Another blackout?
She helps him to a chair.

HUSBAND

Yes...I suppose I did...odd, isn't it? Can't remember a thing.

WIFE

Poor dear.

HUSBAND

(looking at broken chair)

Another chair?

WIFE

I'm afraid so.

HUSBAND

I'm beginning to worry about these episodes.

WIFE

I'm sure it's nothing serious.

HUSBAND

It's the violence...I'm afraid I might hurt you. I couldn't stand the thought of that.

WIFE

I can take care of myself, Henry. The kitchen chairs, however...

HUSBAND

Sorry, dear.

WIFE

Nothing to be done, I suppose.

HUSBAND

Third time this month.

WIFE

It's not as if we need more than two.

HUSBAND

We're not very social, are we?

Jeffery Scott Elwell

WIFE

If it weren't for Alice, I don't think I'd talk to another soul.

HUSBAND

No, I guess not. Do you ever wish you'd married better, dear?

WIFE

No, darling. You're the perfect man for me.

HUSBAND

What would I do without you?

WIFE

Let's not find out.

HUSBAND

(kissing her cheek)

I'll take this...

(picking up the broken chair)

...out to the workshop as I leave.

WIFE

Be careful dear.

HUSBAND

I will...You'll wait up for me?

WIFE

Of course, darling.

HUSBAND

I must be one of the luckiest men alive.

The husband starts to exit the kitchen with the broken chair.

WIFE

The luckiest.

HUSBAND

(in doorway)

Maybe we'll do something exciting this weekend. Something to shake the dust from under our heels.

WIFE

That would be lovely, Henry.

Jeffery Scott Elwell

HUSBAND

Done. See you this evening

(exits)

As the Wife turns away, the phone rings. She crosses and picks it up.

WIFE

Hello, Alice. This morning? No nothing special, just an ordinary morning...

The lights fade to black as she continues talking

THE END

Jeffery Scott Elwell is current Professor and Chair of the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Executive Director of the Nebraska Repertory Theatre. He was Chair of the Department of Theatre at Marshall University (1996-99) and Professor and Director of Theatre at Mississippi State University (1989-1996). He received his Ph.D. from Southern Illinois University in 1985, a master's degree from the University of Southwestern Louisiana in 1982, and a B.A. in English from Cal State Bakersfield in 1979. He has received a Mississippi Arts Commission Playwriting Fellowship, a Tennessee Williams Scholarship, and an NEH Summer Seminar Fellowship. A member of the Dramatists Guild, his plays have been produced by professional theatres in Chicago, Los Angeles, Memphis, New Orleans, New York, St. Louis, and Roanoke, Virginia. He is the 1999 Conference Chair for ATHE and is the former Chair of the Playwrights Program, ATHE; of the Playwriting Awards Committee for Region IV, ACTF; and of the SETC New Play Project. He has edited three collections of plays. In the last four years, seventeen of his plays have been produced Off-Off Broadway in New York and four of his plays have been produced in Los Angeles. Two plays, *Escape from Bondage* and *Being Frank*, are published by Palmetto Play Service. A third play, *The Art of Dating*, was a winner in the Off-Off Broadway Original Short Play Festival and is published by Samuel French. Two of his monologues are included in *Baseball Monologues*, published by Heinemann. Palmetto Play Service published his one-act plays, *Dead Fish* and *Stepping Out* in 1997. *Stepping Out* ran at the Wooden O in Los Angeles for seven weeks in 1996. *An Ordinary Morning*, ran Off-Off Broadway at the Inner Space Theatre for twelve performances in 1995 and is being published in *Short Plays and Monologues for Mature Actors* by Dramatic Publishing. A commissioned play, *Raising Stallions*, was produced in 1997 in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.



His one-act, *First Date*, was translated by Magnus Johansson and was performed at the Cafe Theatre and the Luncheon Theatre in 1997 in Lund, Sweden. *Truth and Consequences* was produced in the 1997 Samuel French Off-Off Broadway Original Short Play Festival. Five of his one-act plays, under the collective title of *Strained Relationships*, ran Off-Off-Broadway at the Solo Arts Group in December 1997 and one of the plays, *The Turn Down*, was selected for the 1998 Off-Off Broadway Original Short Play Festival.

Last summer he was commissioned to write a historical drama for the State of West Virginia and his plays were selected for the Missoula Playwriting Colony and the Sixth Annual Edward Albee Theatre Conference Play Laboratory in Valdez, Alaska.

P r o s e

Nancy Dodd Cates

The Copy

Isabel flipped the pages of her appointment book. The mauve nail on her index finger traced across the lines. Only eight days left to the weekend of her visit with Chelsea.

"Hizzabel."

A voice whispered from behind her. She turned to respond. No one was there. It must have been Chuck.

Picking up a thin sheaf of papers, she walked across the room, stopping to glance at her face in the mirror beside the door. A stray wisp of reddish-brown hair escaped from the strands pulled into a french braid closely plaited to the back of her head. She licked the tip of her fingertips and used them to smooth her hair neatly into place.

Walking two doors down the hall, she entered the room with the president's title on the wall. "Chuck, did you call me?"

"No, Bell, but I was thinking about you." He looked up at her and smiled. He wanted to tell her how lovely she looked, she always dressed so tastefully. "Have you looked at these numbers from the donations? Almost a quarter of a million dollars! Just think what this money will do for the community." He stood rather than stay seated while she was standing. As he moved closer to her, he found the light flower scent she wore intoxicating.

"I know, the employees have given so much and ...," she looked at the sparkle in his eyes. He was staring at her. She looked away. "...volunteered so much free time to raise money for the children's cancer ward at the hospital."

"Well, don't forget your efforts. If it weren't for your organizing and hard work, this wouldn't be happening." His voice was soft, endearing, full of respect.

"It was your idea, Chuck. I've had very little to do with it."

"Will you two stop patting yourselves on the back? You sound like rejects from a mutual admiration society." Carmen joined them from the hallway. She always managed to appear whenever the two of them were alone.

"Carmen, have you seen these numbers?" He sat back behind his desk.

"Yes, Chuck, very impressive." She smiled at him seductively. "Here are a few more purchase orders you need to sign before the ground-breaking ceremonies in two weeks," Carmen said. She handed Chuck the folder standing close enough her breasts touched his arm.

Chuck unconsciously leaned away from her. Her spicy perfume tickled his nose and he twitched in an effort not to sneeze. Carmen's pink, close-fitting dress and full head of long, tightly permed curls were attractive, but not beautiful and elegant the way Isabel was.

"Oh, by the way, the serviceman just delivered the new copier. He's hooking it up now." Carmen leaned in front of Chuck to gather her documents.

"Good, I need to make copies." Isabel waved her papers in the air and walked through the door.

Chuck's eyes followed her out and lingered on the empty doorway.
"Hizzabel."

A quiet male voice called. She turned to look — no one. Shaking her head, she continued down the hall. The serviceman was just finishing his work.

"I hope this isn't a difficult model to use?" She spoke to the back of his head. His black hair poked down his neck across his collar. His clothes smelled like a burnt cigar.

"No, it's not complicated at all." His voice was deep, echoing through the small room. "Let me show you." He grinned at her.

Isabel was startled. There was something sinister in the curl of his lips. His eyes were narrow dark slits, his complexion ruddy, his face had deep acne scars. Short, black, unruly hair framed his forehead and a thin beard outlined his face. She turned away repulsed.

Even without looking she could sense his grin. She could feel him watching her, obviously waiting for her to step forward. Isabel shuddered. His leer made her nervous. She moved closer and stood next to him, far enough away the movements of his arm wouldn't brush her.

"It's all so simple. Would you like me to copy those?"

Nodding her head, she handed the papers to him.

He inserted them in the automatic feeder and rested his hands on the corners of the copier. As page after page slid through the machine, he seemed totally fascinated by the rhythmic flicker of light from under the edges of the lid as though he drew energy from the flashes. He released a deep breath.

"There you go. I'll put my things together and check out with the receptionist. If you ever need anything," he reached into his pants pocket for a business card, "don't hesitate to call."

She took the card and held it by the corners, studying it, avoiding his eyes. The card was a matte black with lettering in flaming red, the same color as the wide tie he wore, Mark Satin, Sales and Service. The Copy Works.

"Should I walk you to the lobby?" she asked.

"No, I have one more adjustment to make. I'll find my way."

It was a few days before Isabel needed the copier. She'd been out of the office Friday and then the weekend. She wanted to avoid the small room, but that wasn't practical. Hesitant, she lifted the copier lid and started to place the first sheet face down. She gasped. There was a reflection staring at her from the glass. The black background underneath gave the clear plate a smoky

shadowy cast. The image was ghostly. Quickly she slammed the lid.

"Cleaner. The glass needs cleaner. Must have been an illusion from the toner residue." She jerked open the cabinet and grabbed a spray bottle of Windex then ripped paper towels off the roll. Cautiously she lifted the lid, then vigorously rubbed and polished the glass.

"All clean." Setting the bottle aside, she breathed deeply, the scent of Windex filled her nostrils. She tossed the paper in the large trash can nearby.

She picked up her papers and started to place one face down. Spontaneously the hideous image jumped into view wobbling slightly. The shiny glass gave the aberration an iridescent luster. It was a male face with leering eyes and unruly black hair. A small horn curled up at each corner of his forehead. Framing his upper lip, a pencil mustache grew down to his chin, meeting the thin beard outlining the triangular-shaped lower half of his face.

"Hizzabel."

"Aaagh!" She jumped back. The image disappeared. Isabel began to tremble. Her shoulders heaved and her breath came in short gasps. "Too much stress. That's all. Too much stress. All the preparations, all the organizing, all the overtime and worry about coordinating, Collin and Chelsea, too much stress!" She left the room muttering to herself.

"You okay?" Carmen asked passing her in the hall.

"Yes, why?"

"You look pale." Carmen's large, green eyes evaluated her.

"We can't all have your natural tan," Isabel said.

Carmen laughed and started to walk into the copier room.

"Carmen, have you noticed anything odd about the copier?"

"Like what? Did you see a ghost in it or something?"

"Have you?"

"No, but I saw Robert Redford." Carmen's eyebrows bobbed up and down. "What did you see?"

"Nothing, I just don't like the machine."

"So, complain to the receptionist and get the serviceman back."

"Maybe I will." Isabel turned back toward her office. She settled into her desk and tried to concentrate on work, chiding herself for being silly. It was sometime before she was interrupted by the intercom and a phone call.

Isabel's face puckered into a frown as she listened to the voice on the other end of the line.

"Collin, please, Chelsea and I have planned this weekend for months. You can take her to the amusement park anytime." She knew it was no use arguing. He would do as he pleased.

"My parents got tickets for this weekend. They didn't know you were coming. I can't disappoint them."

"What about disappointing Chelsea and me?"

"You think she isn't going to prefer an amusement park to your visit?"

"Maybe I could join you?"

"Are you kidding? Do you think I want anyone to see me with you? My parents would have a cardiac if you suddenly showed up at a family outing. It's bad enough you're coming for a visit. What's one more weekend?"

"You promise the following weekend?" She hated to whine. His promises meant nothing, but for Chelsea's sake she had to try.

"I said next weekend, didn't I? Just remember, I'm not leaving you alone with her for a second. I don't want you influencing her with any of your trashy ideas. And you'll stay at a hotel. I don't want you around any more than absolutely necessary. I gotta go. Chelsea needs me."

"Tell Chelsea I..."

Collin disconnected.

"...I love her." A few tears escaped before she clenched her jaws tight enough to regain control. Pulling her mirror out of her purse she held it up to check for makeup smears and noticed strands of hair were slipping from her braid. With moistened fingertips she attempted to smooth the curls straight into place.

It had been a long, hard day. Isabel was glad to get home to her modest apartment decorated sparsely with tasteful, used furniture. Living alone, she had plenty of time to search the classifieds and secondhand stores for inexpensive finds. It was nothing like the lavish house she had shared with Collin and Chelsea. Those days were gone. That didn't matter. If only she had Chelsea with her...

Her job paid enough to support the two of them but now she saved every penny. Isabel sighed. There probably wasn't enough money in the world to buy an attorney powerful enough to beat Collin.

She dipped her finger in the chocolate batter she was preparing and sucked it off her finger before placing the pan in the oven. Soon the aroma of brownies baking filled the air. She would freeze them to take to Chelsea.

The phone rang. Chelsea's disappointed voice wanted to know why her mother wasn't coming for the weekend as promised.

"I know Sweetheart, Mommy misses you, too."

"But why can't you go, Mommy?"

"I don't think daddy wants me to. That's okay. There will be lots of times for us to do things together."

"I'll bet Elizabeth goes. I don't like her. Daddy never pays any attention to me when she's around. You could go and hide and I could sneak away so we could be together."

Isabel bit her lip. "You be a good girl for Mommy. I want you to have lots of fun. Did you get the letter I sent you?"

"Daddy is calling me."

"You better hang up if Daddy says. I'll talk to you soon. I love you, Sweetheart."

"I love you, Mommy. I miss you. Bye-bye."

"Somehow I'll find a way to be with you again." Isabel closed her eyes and spoke into the dead line.

How much money would it take to hide them from Collin? He had all the marbles and played the game his way. She should have never married a self-indulgent, rich boy. No, that wasn't true, without him there wouldn't be Chelsea. She was worth the torment.

Her chest ached remembering the custody hearing, watching as people she thought were friends lied under oath about alleged affairs and neglect of Chelsea. She could still see the light shining on the judge's bald head, glaring off his glasses. She could hear his high-pitched voice reverberating in her mind, declaring her an unfit mother.

Afterward, she found it impossible to remain in the small town and make a living. She moved to the city to find work where she could hide in a sea of unfamiliar faces. Taking nothing but a chic wardrobe, fifteen hundred dollars of her own money, and her college education, she tried to start over.

She went to the bathroom to wash the tears from her cheeks. Thick wisps of hair around her face had escaped from the braided ropes. She unfastened the bow at the end and with her fingertips combed out the wavy locks. The odor of burnt brownies permeated the apartment.

Chuck looked up at Isabel as she passed by his office. A whiff of strong musk floated into the room. He noticed a change in her appearance. Her clothes were louder, bright yellows and oranges, tighter. Instead of swept up, her hair fell in curls around her shoulders.

Isabel only had a few copies to make. She had begun to dread going into the room and lately had requested the receptionist make copies for her. But Sally was at lunch and not having the duplicates was holding up progress. She was being foolish.

"Hizzabel."

She pretended not to hear the voice as she walked down the hall. The pages were charts and graphs of unusual sizes, she would have to do them manually. Ignoring the face that leered up at her from the glass, she quickly covered it with the first sheet.

"Bell."

Isabel jumped.

"I'm sorry." Chuck reached out and placed his hand on her elbow to steady her. He stood within inches of her, her perfume overpowered him. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"Oh, Chuck. I was just deep in thought."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"What do you mean? Of course I am."

"Bell, look, I don't mean to pry, but it seems that something is bothering you."

"Oh, there you two are." Carmen interrupted breathlessly. "Have you seen these latest reports on community donations? We're up to half-a-million dollars." Carmen shoved a handful of papers under Chuck's nose.

Chuck turned toward her scowling, "Carmen, could you put those on my desk? I'll talk to you about them in a bit."

Carmen looked from Chuck to Isabel and back. "Okay. Sure. I thought you would be anxious to see them." Dejected, she backed out of the room and turned down the hall in the direction of Chuck's office.

Chuck stared out the door until he was sure she was out of hearing then turned back to Isabel who had returned to copying.

"Bell, I certainly don't want to overstep, not as your boss, but as someone who would like to know you better, if you would ever like to talk, I'm a pretty good listener and I've got broad shoulders." He lifted his shoulders up and down smiling at her.

She looked up at him. His eyes were so blue, so full of concern, his features finely chiseled. The essence of his light, masculine aftershave was calming. She quickly looked away again.

"Perhaps we could go out for a cup of coffee or dinner." He was speaking to her back.

"Chuck," she avoided his eyes. "Chuck, I have some personal things to work out. I appreciate your wanting to help, but there's really nothing you can do."

"Bell, just remember," he put his hand on her shoulder, "I can be a trusted friend if you ever need one." Whatever she was running from, he would have to wait until she stopped to catch her.

The speaker on the intercom called out his name. Chuck left to answer the receptionist's page.

Isabel began to tremble. She tried to pick up her copies from the tray but her hand was shaking so hard she knocked them to the floor. Gasping, she jumped back. A photocopy of the relentless image in the glass glared up at her from one of the sheets she had dropped. She grabbed the paper by corner as if it were hot to the touch and jabbed the end into the paper shredder. As the automatic feed sliced the sheet into strips, a horrendous squeal screeched into the air. She covered her head with both palms but the sound pierced into her ears.

Isabel excitedly packed a few things in her suitcase. She was anxious. It was only one day before the groundbreaking ceremony and then she would leave to be with Chelsea. The phone ringing unnerved her. Something told her it would be Collin.

"Collin, you promised this weekend. Chelsea is counting on it. Why are you doing this?"

"Look, tramp, I don't owe you any explanations."

Isabel ignored the stabbing pain his words caused. "Chelsea loves me, it doesn't do any good to keep us apart."

"Maybe she won't feel that way when she knows the truth about you and why mommy doesn't live here anymore."

"What do you mean? She knows I want to be with her. What are you telling her Collin?"

"Nothing she didn't hear in idle gossip."

She could hear him chuckle.

"You'll be sorry. I swear you'll be sorry!. Don't hang up on me... Collin!"

Slamming the receiver onto the base in her hand. She threw the princess phone across the room jerking the cord out of its socket. She fell to her knees on the floor, and laid her head on the rose corduroy cushion in the seat of the wooden rocking chair. Clutching the bars in the back of the chair she cried out, guttural sobs. How long before Chelsea believed his vile lies about her?

It was morning, the day of the ceremony. Chuck had a few details he was anxious to go over with Isabel. As he walked into her office, he couldn't help a look of astonishment as he appraised her. His nose crinkled from the wave of incense that washed over him. Her eyes were heavily outlined in black and dark brush strokes of green and gray changed her almond-shaped eyes to looking more feline. Her auburn hair seemed redder, wilder, fuller, framing her face in a mane. Two wisps of curled bangs stuck up from each side of her forehead. Her long nails were manicured flaming red, and on her ears were large, red metal intertwined triangles that dangled to just above her shoulders. She wore a black, skin-tight, turtle-neck dress with long, fitted sleeves. Below the short hemline a pair of black-stockinged legs stood in crimson red high heels.

"Good morning, Bell. You look different today."

"Do I? I feel different." She winked at him.

"When you have a moment, I have some last minute things to discuss with you."

"All right, just let me finish what I'm doing." She pulled a mirror and a tube of lipstick out of her purse and carefully applied the thick, vermilion color to her lips.

"Well, if you'll excuse me, I'd better look over my speech for the ceremony." Chuck turned to leave but looked back. His lips moved to say something, but the words wouldn't come. "I'll see you later." He shook his head and left the room.

"Yes, later," she answered distracted.

It was much later when he got his mind off Bell and onto his speech. Whatever was bothering her was getting worse. Pacing the floor, he decided to insist she go to dinner with him to talk. He would tell her it was a celebration for their hard work on the children's center. He would have to try to find a moment alone when Carmen wasn't around or she would expect to join them.

"Chuck, it's all gone!" Carmen burst into his office in an excited state.

"What's all gone?"

"The money for the children's center! I just checked with the bank to arrange to transfer funds and the money is GONE."

"Calm down. There must be some mistake. Maybe Bell already made the transfer."

"There's no mistake!" The account is cleaned out."

"How could that be?" Chuck pushed the intercom for Bell's office. "Bell, could you step in here?"

There was no response.

"Bell?" He got up and stepped toward the hall.

"She's gone."

"What are you talking about!?" Chuck swung to face Carmen.

"I went to her first. Do you think I wanted to tell you this alone? Her name is on the withdrawal slip for the money. Nobody in the building has seen her for hours. Chuck, she took the money and she's gone!"

"I just spoke with her a short time ago." He abruptly sat back in his chair. His last image of Bell blazed across his mind.

A flash of electrical light suddenly illuminated the hall and lit Chuck's office. A loud sizzling explosion followed.

"What the hell was that?" Chuck jumped out of his chair and ran toward the noise. Puffs of thick, black smoke clouded out of the copier room and quickly dissipated in the hall. A strong stench of burning electrical wires and scorched paper emanated from inside.

"Oh, my gosh!" Carmen stared at the copier, a blackened shell. Glass shards glittered throughout the room.

A piece of paper had ejected from the copier as the explosion occurred and now floated through the smoke slowly, down to the bottom of the trash bin. In the background of the lost page was the familiar male face that had plagued Isabel for days. In the front, slightly to the right was a female image with gray shadowed feline eyes and long, unruly hair encircling her face like a lion's mane with two tiny horns curling up at each corner of her forehead.

The Ride

Night was little more than an hour away when she finally left the office. Pushing open the heavy glass doors she gratefully breathed deep, satisfying breaths of fresh spring air, real air, after being confined to windowless classrooms and office all day. It was a beautiful evening – slightly cool with the promise of warmer weather soon to come. Walking to her car with arms filled, high heels clicking on the pavement, she delighted in the freedom of being outdoors.

There was a flash of anticipation as she unlocked the car door and slid in behind the steering wheel. She stacked her books, bags, containers and assorted belongings on the passenger seat next to her, feeling light and unburdened. Wiggling down into the indentations that she had made from countless hours in the driver's seat, she fastened the seat belt, started the engine and began the ride.

There had been times in the past when she would inadvertently mention the distance of her commute. She usually was greeted with shocked and sympathetic looks flickering across people's faces. Incredulous, they would want to know how she could do it. How could she stand driving three hours a day? At first she used to make up excuses. She used to explain almost apologetically that she listened to books on tape. That was true. She did go through many books on tape, particularly during dark, late nights when she wasn't sure whether she would be able to keep her eyes open for the duration of the trip. But there was much more to the ride than that. There was an excitement, a sense of adventure, an essential freedom in the change of time, place and reality that driving long distances seems to create. There was the experience.

Driving along Stockdale Highway she felt impatient. Traffic lights flashed on and off – stop-red-clutch in-downshift-clutch out-clutch in-green light-shift-start. She hated the stop and go of the city and couldn't wait until that moment when she turned onto Highway 58. It was then she felt she was on her way. Sometimes she would stop at the CITCO gas station on the last corner before the freeway and get ice cream and gas. Junk food, especially things with a crunch, definitely improved the trip when she was tired. But tonight it was not late and she had gas. She would keep on going until she was home – no stops.

Making the turn on 58 she gasped with delight at the vista that lay ahead. Huge cumulus nimbus clouds in shades of grey that ranged from charcoal to pearl laced with swirls of white and streaks of gold were layered on a pale blue sky. In the distance the Tehachapis stretched up from the flat farm land like majestic centennials – their sides smoky grey patched with pale, sunlit

yellow and green patterns. Soon she would be climbing up and over those impressive mountains to the desert on the other side and her home.

She drove by the deep glossy, green rows of orange trees and smelled the heavy scent of orange blossoms. It saturated the air with a heady perfume that made her think of the lush tropical nights she had spent in Florida at her parents' home. She would always remember that thick smell permeating her senses as she drove along the sliver moon-soaked road next to the warm, silky black of the ocean. Her parents were gone now. Florida, a memory, a dream, an occasional yearning laced with the sense of loss for times past and the scent of orange blossoms.

Weedpatch-Edison - no more gas stations now. The road, flat and straight stretched out in front of her. The clouds were so low here that they were almost scraping the newly plowed fields on either side. "They must have done the plowing today," she thought, not remembering the patterns on the way in. The soil to be planted was swirled in a geometric design of concentric rings bordered by tall trees and a seasonal river that cut through the brown earth and fanned out in creases and layers. A huge sprinkler made of metal pipes and hoops sat by the road looking like a sculpture perfectly placed by some experimental artist.

In the distance she saw the sign posted above the road flashing the orange-dotted message that it had been warning for almost a year, Detour Ahead One Mile. Pulling into the left lane she maneuvered the car through the narrow, curved passage bordered by white barriers that protected what would some day be a bridge again. This evening it didn't bother her to navigate the tight space. It did bother her on black, stormy nights when the lights of her car glistened in surreal patterns on the rain-slick road and reflected off the barriers giving her the feeling of being out of control as if she would suddenly careen from one side to the other. She felt a tight, panic-laced excitement, an adrenaline rush on those dark, wild nights and many times had found herself holding her breath until she was on the other side safely climbing the first hill.

Tonight, in the waning light, the foothills were a green velvet that looked like the fabric that would grace a 19th century gentleman's frock coat. She wished she could get out of the car and roll down one of the smooth hills that were not smooth at all, knowing that the wish was as impossible as the deed. They looked so inviting though, bathed in sun and shadow, dotted with brown and white cows and mounds of tan boulders. She loved this part of the journey - you could see forever. Down the mountainside, far, far in to the hazy valley on the right she could see Arvin and far beyond an endless stretch of green. In her rear view mirror she caught a glimpse of the glittering lights in an already darkened Bakersfield competing with the red-orange glow of the setting sun.

The car climbed over the first hill and reached the plateau and the continued up, steeper now. The big rigs began to slow down to a crawl following each other like prehistoric giants heading toward a water hole as they groaned up the mountain in a determined line. She passed them easily and accelerated to get in front of the pack and soon left them far behind.

It was getting dark. The mountains blanketed by clouds were darker than down in the valley. Miniature houses dotted their sides and the train tracks wound in and out of the tunnels like earthworms burrowing in the dirt. The scene she saw reminded her of her father's Lionel train set that he had when both he and she were young. The house she grew up in was small and there was no place to set up a permanent train display so her father would set it up at Christmas around the base of the Christmas tree. He had a little milk car the loaded milk cans from a platform, a cattle car, a station with a tiny light and a wonderful red caboose. Houses with lights in their windows would shine as the train chugged around the tree. The engine made a hoot, Hoooooot! And when her father put a pellet in the smoke stack a thin stream of white smoke would come out. The living diorama of the Tehachapis brought back to her a poignant, bitter-sweet memory of times past, magic, and a child's world of make-believe.

She had almost reached the three Tehachapi exits. Cold air blew in through her window and the clouds were thick with gloom. Exit one, exit two, exit three – soon she would be on her way down the other side of the mountains. The windmills stood white and erect waving a spinning greeting with their speeding propellers. Yes, it was windy and cold in the Tehachapis this evening. No stops tonight. Then, the mounts suddenly opened up and in front of her was the desert vista – bright with golds and oranges, coppers and tans, dusty greens of the Joshua trees and sage brush dotting the landscape, hazy, snow-capped mountains in the far distance. She made a quick turn off 58 and was almost home. The light was marvelous tonight – vivid cartoon reds, greens, yellows of the road signs stood out like dazzling beacons as she passed. Everything shimmered in the setting sun's light. There is a quality to the desert air that makes is dance and feel alive. In comparison to the Tehachapis the temperature was soft and warm, the sun still buttery golden. And then like a grand finale to a great play, suddenly, over the edge of the mountains to the east slid a huge, sparkling gold sphere – breathtaking in its enormity, surreal in its absolute power as it became more and more visible. Like a slow motion movie, the moon rose – in command of all who saw its majesty.

The mountains became darker and the moon was almost a complete circle in the minutes that it took her to get home. She didn't want to stop – the show was still on – but she turned into the driveway, clicked open the garage door, and was home. The ride was over – at least for tonight.

Susan Pasquale

Plum Wine

Late Saturday afternoon and I have nothing to do. I have completed the laundry and grocery shopping after straightening up the house. I don't need to be back at work until 8:00 a.m. on Monday — I have a little time on my hands.

When I close my eyes and let my mind wander and float, I see you in your kitchen preparing dinner. Your kitchen is so like you, purposeful, expedient, and clean. The recently painted coral walls are a perfect backdrop for the Japanese food you are preparing. I remember how proud you were of your son David when he painted the kitchen for you. You take such pride in your children, cooking and home. You are clearly an evolved male — a man who is not afraid to be himself.

As I pour the plum wine, you continue to gather all the ingredients for a great meal. We chatter away about this and that: The movie I saw and the pressures from my kids or yours, no dogs, phones, or friends; just you and me. I feel good watching you take control in the kitchen. Your strong hands peel and slice the carrots, wash and dice the zucchini, and de-string the celery. Are you usually this dedicated to produce or are you trying to awaken my sensual being? Each long hard bit of produce is washed with loving pulsating strokes and reacts to each cutting thrust of your knife. Are you attempting to drive me wild? If so, it's working.

As I move closer to you to refill your glass with plum wine, I want to touch you; just barely rub my hands down your back as you dice and slice. Rub your shoulders and release the tension. You never miss a beat. You don't stop the dicing and slicing. I put my hands in your front pant pockets, stroking you gently — you don't stop slicing and dicing. You are clearly intent upon cooking, or perhaps you like the chase, it's too early to even call it foreplay. I retreat to my chair as you serve the elegant meal. The presentation of the meal. On white porcelain plates with a blue spiral stripe, is excellent and only outdone by the aroma and flavor of the feast.

After the meal is consumed and we have teased our visual senses while feeding each other orange slices as dessert, we retire to the living room where large red pillows beckon us to recline. I relax with a pillow beneath my head as you lay upon your stomach with a pillow supporting your arms and chest. The fire in the fireplace sends light to cast spidery shadows on the walls. We are at peace; full of stomach and restful of spirit. We recline together and the only intermingling of touch is your hand upon my stomach. I can see the wheels turning as your eyes take on a special sparkle. "Saki?" you suggest. I've never tasted saki and the offer is eagerly accepted. The liquid is served warm and has a heating sensation to my entire body. You continue to speak in rounded tones of the color of my eyes and the fire light gleaming on my hair. After another glass of saki you position yourself to kiss me, gently at first, but clearly with trepidation. I, as usual, melt at your touch. Your mouth

is sweet from the meal and the oranges. Each thrust of your tongue within my mouth makes me warmer and more resolved to have exactly what I want — you.

I have finally come to accept your terms of surrender: Absolute freedom. I know this gives me the power to let you go knowing you will come back and give me tenfold of what I want — you!

You lead me by the hand to the Japanese bath; the large tiled tub is deep and inviting. As you fill the tub with hot water, I pin up my hair. You turn to me and kiss me while removing my clothes. I reciprocate in kind. Each garment is removed with a fluid movement. Never taking our eyes from each other, never having both hands free, we touch, stroke, caress, and fondle each other. You hold me against you with your arms surrounding me, pulling me closer to you until we are almost one. Your tongue never leaves my body — from neck to nipple to navel — you have seduced me to my fullest desire.

The Japanese bath ritual is steeped in tradition. The ritual of bathing is a luxury and can be an extremely pleasurable event. The walls of the bathroom are lined with shelves which contain oils, soaps, and sponges; all the adult toys anyone could desire. We wet the sponges and lather them fiercely. Applying the lather laden sponges to each other, caressing, fondling, rubbing, stroking, we wash each other. We gracefully massage tired back muscles, tense shoulders, and neck. Each movement is strong and reassuring. Each movement is caring and loving. The hot water is carefully poured rinsing the lather away. Standing apart only long enough to enter the bath, we reunite with my back against your chest and me between your legs. You lean back and support yourself against the wall and I lean against you while you anoint oil to my neck and chest. With each long fluid stroke, you flow from my neck to my nipples and then down to my fur. With both of your hands on me, I rub your thighs with oil. From your intense stroking and the sound of your moans, I turn to face you. With eyes locked, we each massage the other with firm, deliberate motions. The oil lubricates you so well. The heat from the tub, the plum wine, the saki, and your touch make me dizzy with desire. I only want more of you. You deep inside me, you having me, you moaning with ecstasy, and you pleasing me beyond my wildest dreams. I smooth oil on you. I want and I shall not be denied. I don't want to be frustrated because you are too big. I hope the oil on our bodies will allow us to join as one. I straddle your hips with a knee on each side and mount you. With each of us sitting, you slide deep inside me. My breasts against your chest and my mouth surrounding your tongue, we fulfill our wishes, wants, needs and desires. We find the long awaited music to the tango we have been learning. Each thrust brings us closer together, closer to the pleasure of each other and ourselves. Closer to being one. The explosion for you is strong and sure while I continue to enjoy you again and again. Your body supplies me with all I need. Our relationship continues to grow as we give to each other wit, charm, and soul, even if it's only in my head, on a Saturday afternoon, when I have some time on my hands.

Hello, Is Anyone There?

Pat and I were friends. We shared so much time in the boughs of growing up. We live now in the time we created. Unfortunately, the time we have created is apart from one another. Because you cannot remember days precisely as they happen, they seem a distant past recalled to a present now dimly recollected; they have become what I remember...have seen, have felt... and they are apart. Good, bad, or indifferent days, they were just become the past. And when I attempt to recall them, they stubbornly refuse to declare their true worth and take on a life of their own, as they are pulled through time-premises of light and feeling sense. The end result is Pat and I are no longer together.

Feeling sense. The day was non-descript. Just another day in the valley of Joaquin. Warm? Don't remember! Cold? No. Just another day in life, until the blast of that gun. Load. Loud. Into my life and into my body that projectile penetrated. It spent through my body like a non-descript projectile on a mission to destroy. That bullet was like my life. I did not know that then. I know that now.

In my case, pass they did, the days, and particularly fast, like that bullet. That I say only because it feels so. I am, at 50, still trying to figure out what I really want to do when I grow up. And Pat is in his life somewhere.

I have matured. Today, I could chose to say, "Serious about doing something in your life, with your life? Just do it. I have done so many things with mine. I just can't get them into perspective because they are so diverse. My father says I should teach. My inner soul says I should be a musician. My pocketbook says I should grow pot for a living.

Too quick and in retrospect... the culminative effect of living has not been too unpleasant. Just the death part. If I had it all to do over again, I would do it again. If I would do it differently, I would miss some of the most blissful times.

The things I have done in my life have, overall, been done with purpose. Unfortunately, many of the decisions made with purpose were left-handed, ill-conceived, mishandled and sometimes just plain blown. Like the year, actually the second year of my graduate school education, I wrote editorials criticizing the administration, the School of Sociology, for misuse of academic power. I really expected them to accept the criticism with a sense of truth, the truth with which all academics work. But with acceptance and intellect, they blackballed me. Mistake? Maybe. My graduate program was derailed, yes, but I wrote what I felt needed to be said. It was all, after all, the truth as I saw it and it needed to be said. I said it.

My lifetime has been a time of change. I took my life in my hands like I knew what I was doing. Unfortunately, most of the time, I had no idea what I was dealing with. And I was only hoping to find value...actually a great

value...some meaning in life...to leave a message I could be proud of. To realize what a fortune it was a great thought; to know real love was and is a continuing pursuit. Unfortunately, what I have found, after these 50-something years, is that life only slows as you grow old, giving you time to reflect...so much time to lose...and so little time to realize what it is to live. And the greed of humans is appalling. Their ability to use one another like coats to provide shelter from the rain, then discard them after wearing is done is just disgusting.

Human greed withstanding, the process of living is a daily process so slow that you are lulled into complacency, like your lips curled around the rim of a cup filled with hot coffee. After awhile you begin to live with the sensation, to expect the sensation, to know your morning cannot be the same without it. The expectation is so great; the reality of it is what you want. Life becomes so familiar that the real heat of living is lost. The perversion of the human spirit, the greed, the killing...You get lost in the little clicks of time. "Honey, we have 24-hour notice. They are going to turn off our cable TV."

Again is such a magnificent mechanism. Don't get me wrong. Life toughens you for the constant battering. While life pursues its course, your body, wincing and writhing in the pain of it's process, dulls the negative, the hurt. The sights before you unfold with some jaundiced eye. You see but you disregard the throat cutters, the heart breakers and the thefts.

Unfortunately, the present soon becomes past that has no relation to the present, and, forgotten once, becomes only a vague memory, not real, but suspected of having been real...was real...not, maybe. I don't know if that's the actual process, but it is as close as I can come to what I remember of time. The pain and the happiness remain as distant recollection.

Where is the continuity? Nowhere, if you don't look into the past and paste it all together in your montage of images you think make the whole of your existence. But then it is only imagined experience, in a series of celluloid images, like a movie that has nothing to do with reality, and much to do about nothing.

This really is a funny process, this life.

Tonight, I don't know where my two sons are. Well, I do, but I don't. They are in the hands of time and chance, as it were. Maybe I should have kept them home. They are my sons and they are out there in life, being a part of it...doing what there is to be done, being a part of a living process I know nothing about. I know a lot about living things, the two-legged kind, and my experience makes letting them have their experience very scary.

I've been around the block. Okay, twice. But my children are out there now! Not me! I am the parent. I can't be out there with them because I must be here. And here is in my home waiting to be needed, just in case they need a support unit. What the fuck is that? Home? Unit? Home is a hat rack, a dog, lawns to mow, routines that happen day after day without change. That is home? That's the way I see it. I am the home unit. My family needs me

here. But I am jealous only for an imagined "out there." Something I miss in my own mind is what I believe my sons may be enjoying. It is only dancing water upon the hot highway of life. It is a mirage.

If I didn't have to be home, I would be with my sons. Or I would just be with me out there. And I wish I were out there. That is where it is all happening. Out there. With the people, who are out there. Just staying home takes the mystery out of life; the changes of the world pass by undisclosed, and I sit here in my home wondering: "What goes on out there?" I could make it around the block three times more, and I would be with them and not here alone. But so, it is, here I am with my wife, who won't say yes to anything I say. And I'm here, and my two sons are out there, in the world, seeing what it is all about.

One son is seventeen, the other twenty, and I am fifty-something. Not a happy camper. My youngest son wants to take all of the good and none of the work of life. My oldest son wants the good in life, too, and he works. But there are too many things wrong with the world to allow my sons to just walk among the worlds' inhabitants. It is too dangerous. They cannot see like I can, because they have not seen what I have seen.

I was once eighteen, once. And I remember dreaming of being an adult. I was going to make love with a woman every day. I was going to have the freedom to do what I wanted. And that day did come. When I had the freedom to make my decisions as they came. And they were easy decisions. They were good, easy decisions to make, because the majority of the decisions had to do with making myself feel good, pleased, and full of feelings; A touch, hearing the words that made me feel good...the inner body of a woman in wetness. This girl is pretty. I want to be with her. This girl is very pretty. I will be with her, too, if she wants me. Easy. Go for it! The kind of feelings that you have nothing but desire for. The ones you haven't felt very much of, you want to be real all the time. But, then after you have had sex for forty-so-odd years, sex doesn't seem that important. Only in my imagination.

Then there are the life forces that collide with you. In my case it was a "police action" in the little country called Vietnam. It touched me real hard. I didn't want to die. Like my children, I was not a well-focused youth, but I knew I did not want to die in a war for an imagined enemy. Nixon may have believed it, but I didn't. I did have enemies, but they were not the Vietnamese.

My world was just keeping a comfortable place for myself, where I was in a world of pleasure-findings. I wanted my life to be as comfortable as an eighteen-year-old could keep. I wanted to build on wanting. I was in my best friend's parents' home, a fine Catholic family, with an alcoholic father, with a devoted mother. .

My parents were divorced, too. And I was seventeen, and in junior college, living with old friends of my family. Things were good. Then there came this war to throw my life out of balance. I knew I would be drafted

because I was a terrible student. I missed my Biology final twice because I slept too late in the morning. (Carol was worth it. Oh, Carol.)

I went to the class anyway, just to be told I was too late to take the test. I tried. But, I was a student of the social science: How to fuck a lustful, wet pussy. I was not a student pursuing academic knowledge. I did still, however, believe in the notion that my country was right, right or wrong. I wasn't doing right. My country had to be doing right. (I did believe that dying for my country was not the greatest idea I had heard recently.) I enlisted in the Air Force. I had to do my duty, because I wasn't learning. I wasn't a good student of academia.

I lost friends in that war. They were living and then they were gone. I still know and have friends that lived through the experience. They are wounded now, as I am. We were all wounded by the experience. Whether it was a physical wound or mental, we all had wounds. The nation was slashed, bleeding blood of idealism on the soil of Vietnam. In fact, that whole era of the 60's and early 70's was a wound: John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, the Chicago Democratic Convention, Malcolm X, Che, Kent State, and the Black Panthers that died in their beds, shot in the back of the head.

It's that something in this life we have called the political system, the media, and the money. They all work in concert to focus the populace on what they believe is of utmost importance. And they left a bloodied corpse of humanity longing for the philosophical leadership a people deserve, a mirror of righteous conscience.

It is unfortunate that the leadership of our country did not see fit to let the voices of idealism speak in their pursuits. And equally unfortunately the leadership had them "eliminated" because they didn't believe in dogmatic truth.

Yes, life is a real bitch. Now, in the 90's, it's business people in this country that find it better to do business in the third world. The labor's cheap, the profit margin is much better and the environmental issues are not heard as loudly by the starving throngs of people in the countries of hungry and need. And I don't have a job. Well, okay, I'm working...for \$5.50, no benefits, no medical, and no retirement. Ain't nothing. Just another day in the jungle called life. America used to be a nice place to live. This used to be a place where promise was offered to everyone. Not anymore. The address has changed...can't get there from here.

I hope my sons can get from there to a place of greater security, where the world is not threatened day in and day out, where the earth is healthy and vibrant.

I wonder what Pat is doing tonight?

Lee McCarthy

1971: *Bumper Stickers and Other Fringe Benefits*

I

He had one of those strawberry birthmarks on his face. The shape of Texas. The exact shape. He wasn't a cowboy. It would have been better if he had been a cowboy. Or one of those Okies who drink beer on Saturday nights out along Edison Highway. But he wasn't. He was her boss. A cliché bureaucrat with an original handicap.

She didn't like him. She thought she'd like him when she went to work there. But it didn't work out — meaning she didn't work out. He didn't like her. And, by all rights, he should have. She was a whiz with parallel constructions and caught her own dangling modifiers most of the time.

It started with a sign that appeared mysteriously in her cubicle one morning after she had tried to carry on an intellectual conversation with him while he was trying to transfer her from City News to the Women's Section. Someone had put the sign in there. She decided he had. She was not one of those jerks who put signs up over their own desks. Especially this one would not have appealed to her. "Some people's minds are like concrete... thoroughly mixed up...and solidly set." She struck the right pose before answering back aloud. "Like heavy, man." It sounded a lame comeback even to her. She tried again. "Okay. And some people need 1001 Famous Quotes in order to have anything to say." She thought a lot more things but none of them did any good.

Given long enough, the brain always comes through. Given long enough, even Atha's would. Being very much into self-reward at the time, she then went for coffee. In the hall, she passed Birthmark on his way from his office to the newsroom. She started to say, "Tell that platitude-finder of yours I'm not a few lines short. I don't need a filler," but she didn't say anything. He wouldn't look at her, simply muttered, "Good morning," to her feet and ankles. After he went through the door that opened onto the floor, she walked back to the doorway and watched, hoping he would go on over to her desk. As he leaned over the partition of her cubicle, she congratulated herself.

Her assignment finished in an hour, she spent the rest of the morning sipping coffee and admiring her red-ink graffito on the sign: "Some people's minds are like Jell-O. They melt when the heat's on. —Atha Grant." She dreamed about how far her powers for endearing herself to others would carry her in life. Closing her eyes, she visualized in technicolor Stebbens leaning in and reading her message of love, his Texas turning redder in the flush of that excitement. Her uptilted face was radiant as she swung back and forth in her swivel chair.

Two days later, arriving late for work, she went straight to the coffee room to eat her cold steak wrapped in a bread heel. No one thought much of her sandwiches from home; the coffee room crowd had taken to calling them "imports". The room was empty, but someone had put up another of those

signs: "A smile is a gentle curve that sets a lot of things straight." Her breakfast ruined, she held the sandwich between her teeth and wrote on the bottom of the sign: "You mean when Nixon smiles, that sets things straight? You are a politician's dream. -A.G." She held her breath until she got to the front desk receptionist. Her face a vivid red, Atha said she was going home ill for the rest of the day. The receptionist smiled at her. "You just got here." She then reached for the ringing phone but did not pick it up. "Atha, it's the ideas that are killing you. You thrive on words. Just those few and you're already beginning to look okay again."

"That's the worst phase of the illness," Atha told her. "I've got to hurry." She held her breath the length of the lobby, the marble floor resonating under her heels, face absolutely purple by the time she swung out the door.

When she came back to work, some coward had penciled in very delicate script, "And you are a bore," with an arrow pointing to her initials. She added, "And you're not one of course."

The most revolting part of it was that no one on staff would run the tiny risk of saying that to her face, not even Joe Stebbens. She idea of someone not able to say what he wanted to, except anonymously, did make her sick, although she couldn't prove the illness. Electricity, vacuum cleaners, dishwashers, none of that had alleviated the strain of their lives one iota. Although Bell Telephone probably had.

II

Atha watched him take out a wadded handkerchief, spread it over two erect forefingers. He inserted a finger in each nostril and the wings of his nose rotated in unison for a full minute. This always signified that the middle of some conversation or speech had been reached. She had seen him do it as a guest speaker before more than a hundred people, totally unaware that the rest of the world didn't make a public spectacle of cleaning out its nose. She wondered how he had lived so long without a single person telling him that he simply could not do that. It came as close to being obscene as anything she had ever watched.

"Miss Grant, I haven't the time to argue with you. Of course, the article is right."

"Did Wilkins check with anybody other than this Mrs. McCurry, the lady who kicked her off the stage?"

"Who else would he have checked with? That woman who got kicked off? Mss Grant, this is a conservative area."

"Joe, I'm talking journalism, not geography. Palestine was a conservative area until Christ showed up. The moon was a conservative area until Sputnik took a dog up there. The sun is the only radical area around. It's been immolating itself for centuries."

"Atha, you have twenty-five minutes to get that story typed, without any errors. And I want you to remember you're here only to hold the door for public interest as it comes and goes. You don't hug it, kiss it, or sock it in the eye."

He was resting his shrouded right hand on the desk, one booger on display. He took a final dab at his nose, the booger nicely catching hold among the hairs of his left nostril. He stuck the handkerchief in his hip pocket and swiveled his chair around until his back was to her. She made sure he could hear her stomp out of his office.

Before leaving that evening, she worked her best argument for Joe Stebbens down to bumper-sticker size. His office was unlocked but empty. She scribbled on a clean sheet of typing paper, "Are you going to support all your Protestant life the idea Martin Luther shouldn't have ever been a priest?" She left her note in the center of his clean desktop.

III

Standing by the water cooler in the news room, Atha was studying the two drops adhering to the inside of her cup. She had wasted several minutes trying to get them to come out and wondering how they were different from the rest of the water she had drunk. Was it a matter of timing? Was it a better destiny not to be drunk by someone and end up in the trash can? Tilting the cone-shaped cup all the way up covered her nose and she stood that way appreciating the smell of moist paper. Then she filled the cup again and drank it off. She was beginning to study the implications of no drops inside the cup that time round when a woman, all faintly tanned legs, arms, and neck, heaved open the heavy door that gave access from the lobby. She pushed with all the energy and panic of the Patna's crew jumping ship, the vastness of the room slowing her only after the door had closed behind her and she was twelve feet into the room. At that slower pace, she might have been Lord Jim taking the stand in court.

Atha studied the woman's red cotton knit dress that had been re-worked so that it wouldn't look so much like Heidi. Joe gave the woman a nod from his throne. She approached him with appropriate gravity.

"I want to speak to Joe Stebbens, please."

"That's me." He frowned in the direction of the water cooler, but Atha filled her cup again and then leaned against the cooler, propping herself up by resting her arm on top. After all, she did need to conform, as Joe himself had advised her.

"I want to speak with you about the article you published last week entitled 'Educator Ousted While Play Barred.'" Obviously, the woman had not expected to find Joe Stebbens in the middle of this big, noisy room with thirty-five dervishes around him or to be left standing as she spoke to a seated man.

"Yeah, what about it?"

"The article is full of untruths and I want you to retract them. That's what about it."

Stebbens stared at Atha with his headlights turned up bright, as the woman before him talked on. Atha stared back, as demurely as possible under the circumstances, shifting her arm a bit as if adapting to the cooler guaranteed job security. "Let's go to my office," Stebbens said.

The woman followed one step behind him as if she were playing "Follow the leader" with a leader who might try to give her the slip. As the woman flexed her arm to adjust the shoulder strap of her purse, a little muscle popped up, surprisingly solid and round on the stringy-looking upper arm. Joe's handkerchief was protruding from his hip pocket. Atha drained her cup. Studying the inside of it for drops, she said, "I hope you have a Popeye somewhere to call on, lady."

Taking her compact and lipstick out of her burlap purse, Atha noticed they looked as if they had fallen into disuse. They always looked that way she reasoned because they were used only on Sunday mornings. She had a habit of being at somebody else's house Sunday mornings. Turning her face toward the overhead light, she drew a pale outline on her right cheek. It looked a bit shaky but still unmistakably Texas. She filled in the outline carefully, blotted the whole thing on her notice of termination. Carrying the notice with her through the doorway of the coffee room and down the hall, she began to hear her own version of Wagner crescendos, feeling her bust grow at least two inches.

She stood at the door of the newsroom. He wasn't in his office which meant he was sitting at the circular desk in there. A managing editor with something to prove, he often went slumming - filled in for the copy editor during breaks. Joe Stebbens had a heart condition, and she was counting on it for a reaction to her newly acquired birthmark. After all, that was all one could ever really count on: The condition of the human heart wanting to declare itself. As Atha swung into full view of the newsroom staff, her face looked serene as the Indian Ocean cradling a thousand sunken ships. But the walk was definitely Texan. With sand in the boots. With maybe even a bumper sticker pasted on the rear.

Ruthie Johnson

The Greatest Blessing

She turned the knob with her free hand, shoved the door open with an impatient foot, and stood for a moment clutching the heavy grocery bag in her arms. He was sitting there, as usual, in his favorite overstuffed chair with the wide arms. His head had fallen against the frayed back of the chair, pulling the crocheted doily to one side, while his hand still gripped a stubby pencil poised over a notepad on the arm of the chair.

Gritting her teeth against the nausea, she shuddered as she looked at him, his mouth open in sleep ("catching flies" as her grandmother would have said), so comfortable, so content, so damned....

"Bill," she spat out.

Bill's head jerked forward, mouth snapping shut, eyes jerkily tracking to where she stood framed in the doorway.

"Huh", wha...what is it, Cora? What's the matter?" Bill muttered as he leaned forward to groggily retrieve the fallen pencil his startled hand had dropped.

Kicking the door closed with her heel, Cora crossed to the cloth-covered table set against the living room wall and dumped the heavy load from her aching arms. Next to a vase of plastic flowers and a small electric fan bravely attacking the heat, a scratched and dented radio softly droned out a love song. Taking a deep, careful breath, she turned toward Bill, her feet planted, hands tight on her hips, black eyes stabbing holes in him.

"What's wrong? What's the matter, he says," she spoke mockingly. "I'll tell you what's the matter, Mister." She was almost whispering.

Teeth gritted, she swallowed slowly. "I'm sick. And I'm tired of working those long, dead hours at that factory. I'm sick and tired of riding that streetcar clear down to the river every day and smelling that awful perfume those women wear." Her voice rose with intensity and determination. "I'm sick of those damned green uniforms we have to wear at the belt all day long." She pulled a wadded green cloth from the paper bag and threw it on the floor at Bill's feet.

"I'm sick, and pregnant, and tired of seeing you sit here day after day doing nothing but listen to the radio, gossip with your cronies, and doodle on the that notepad till I'd like to throw you and them all out the window."

She gathered her anger closer. "You've been off work long enough. I notice your back don't seem to be so stiff anymore. You can start hauling the groceries up those stairs too, Mr. Big Shot. I'm not carrying your load anymore. I quit."

Cora almost laughed at the expression on Bill's face. His mouth was hanging open again, but in consternation, not contented napping. How she

had loved him once; he was the only man she had ever wanted. Oh God, that was in a different world.

Bill had been enjoying his time away from the grueling construction work that drained his energy like chaff blown away by dry summer wind as the years passed by. However, he knew she meant what she had said. Still, his back did hurt a bit yet. Besides, work just did not have much appeal in this hot weather. He decided to give the soft touch a try.

"Now, Cora, my little Apache darlin'" he began, using his favorite nickname for her, chosen because of her attractive Indian features. Getting up, he moved toward her, arms out to envelope her in what he hoped would be an embrace to dampen her anger. Got to calm her down. She's always a little tired when she gets home, even if it is only from easy indoor factory work.

"Oh, shut up, Bill!" Cora flung her arms in exasperation and turning from him, fled to the dark little bathroom off the hall. As Bill heard her throwing up into the toilet, what she had said suddenly struck him full force.

"Pregnant?" He ran stumbling to the bathroom and clung to the door frame for support. "Cora, is that what you said? You're pregnant?"

She looked up at him from on her knees before the toilet. Wiping her mouth with a wad of toilet paper, she said slowly and deliberately, "That's exactly what I said."

If she had cared, she would have indeed laughed at the waves of expression rippling over his face. With Bill nearing sixty and her almost forty, it was the last thing either of them had expected. She'd had one child twenty years ago, a boy who had persuaded a local butcher and a boarding house maid to lie for him so he could leave home early for the army. Now this!

She stood up and let a multitude of miseries wash over her. Bill, his eyes staring at nothing, was still stuck to the door frame trying to come to grips with his personal turmoil. She slowly passed by him and began to put the groceries away in the tiny, bare kitchen. As another wave of nausea swept over her, she walked to the single window overlooking the red-brick apartment building's common back yard with clotheslines full of clothes hanging like tired old men in the heat. Squabbling children ran in and out among the drooping sheets and towels. She pushed the faded but clean curtain back to reveal a broken pane and looked toward Houdimont Avenue where she would no longer catch the streetcar to ride to the Tums factory down on 4th and Clark Streets every day. She would no longer have to pack hundreds and hundreds of little green boxes full of round white pills. She would no longer have to smell the sickeningly sweet perfume that clawed at her nostrils, or watch the rows of frustrated women workers (Oh, yes, Lord, me among them) in those damn green uniforms shoving the boxes down the conveyor belt. At least I don't spit in the boxes like some of the women do. It

is easier than field work and I do like to talk with the other women, but it's so damned boring...and now this!

She looked down then at the flat concrete area under the window. It's only one floor up. I jump and I'd probably just do myself damage and live to regret it. Window's stuck anyway so I can't pull it up.

She leaned against the sill and felt sweat drip onto her hand as the spasms of nausea tightened her throat and gave her goose bumps in spite of the heat. Bill will just spoil the kid and leave me with all the work. I didn't think I could get pregnant. All those years....Why does he still want sex, anyway? Damn!

Cora held her other hand to her still flat abdomen, considering the child she knew was there. Trial and hardship that this was, she knew she would love it. Her anger at Bill and her situation did not extend to the child. If it's a girl this time, I'll name her Vickie. She thought of her sister who had died so many years ago in a childhood she had almost forgotten. It won't bring you back, Sis, but perhaps it'll be a small comfort.

"You'd just be looking at death warmed over. Keep your good memories," the funeral director told Vickie. She nodded. She understood. But somehow, it was no comfort. She paid the funeral director the final payment so the body could be released for cremation and walked out into the heat of the afternoon. Mechanically, she found her car and went through the motions necessary to get back to work.

As she drove down Norris Road, functioning on "auto", Vickie could picture her mother's body, flat, warm and limp on the table before the cremation oven. She had last seen her the morning of the day she had died but had not been there to say a final goodbye. But the funeral director was right. She needed to hang onto her good memories.

Her mother had specifically told her she had wanted no funeral or service of any kind. When the funeral director had asked her preferences at the planning meeting, Cora had asked what was cheapest.

"Cremation."

"Okay, fine, do it."

"Do you want the ashes buried with your husband or scattered over the ocean?"

"Which is cheapest?"

"Scattering over the ocean."

"Scatter them, then."

Oh, Mom, you were so tough and strong, so practical...and so caring. You didn't want me to have debts, I know. I wish so bad I could have done more for you. I wish I had insisted you move in with me long before you overdosed on morphine and I knew you couldn't be independent any more. I

wish I could have quit work to be with you all the time. I wish...

Oh, God, cancer's such an ugly disease. Oh, Mom, you were such a good mom, my best friend. I could never have returned to you all you did for me. I'm sorry I was so sick and so much trouble to you for so long.

Sweat dripped down Vickie's forehead into her eyes. Substitute tears. She couldn't cry yet. Too numb. Her hands tightened on the steering wheel. She'd make it. She could be tough too.

As she turned into the parking lot, she briefly wondered how she had gotten there. She couldn't remember the drive from the funeral home. Oh, well, it's best I keep busy. Can't do anything about much of anything anyway.

Vickie spent the afternoon at her desk, flipping pages of neat rows of numbers as she plotted graphs of oil production in neat little lines on smooth checkered pages. Her Walkman poured music and distraction into her head, keeping thoughts of her mother's frail body and the cremation smokestack at bay.

Later that evening, as Vickie turned the knob and kicked the door open to her empty apartment, the telephone rang insistently from the darkness. She crossed the room, sat the plastic bags of groceries on a table and flipped on the switch to the air conditioner.

"Hello," she barely whispered.

"Vickie, this is Doreen. I got your message about Aunt Cora. We all knew it was going to happen but I'm just so sorry Vickie." Her cousin's voice came clearly from St. Louis; from 2,500 miles and, it seemed, as many years.

"Doreen, I can't believe Mom's gone. She was my best friend; always there for me. I feel so bad I couldn't have done more for her; made her going a little easier somehow," Vickie confided to this cousin she remembered but didn't really know.

"Vickie, I know it's hard for you. But I've always known you and Aunt Cora were close and you don't need to worry about not doing enough. She's always kept in touch with us and it wasn't long ago she called and talked about how good you were to her."

Vickie held the phone tighter to her ear, her eyes closed.

"Vickie, your mom told me just a couple of weeks ago how before you were born, she'd thought about how hard it would be to raise another child after so many years and your dad being the way he was. I know too how she shared a lot about her life with you but she may not have told you something. She said that what she had thought would be her greatest trial had turned out to be the greatest blessing of her life. You need to know that, Vickie. She loved and appreciated you as much as you did her." Doreen's words reached here clearly from the distance.

Vickie sat down in the dark room, the pale light and heat of evening reaching in through the open door, the air conditioner's cool fingers faithfully pushing the heat away. With the phone still tight to her ear and her eyes still closed, Vickie knew her mother's honest friendship had been the greatest blessing of her life and memories of her mother would provide more strength and comfort than any grief. Her tears fell onto the hand in her lap as she both mourned and was comforted by the legacy of her greatest blessing.

Helen Josephson

Anna and Johan

Surrounded by tall white-skinned birch trees interspersed with pines, fir trees and spruce, lies the small village of Veteli, Finland, probably not changed much since Anna Maki was born there in 1858. Veteli is sparsely populated and is near to a town of thirty five thousand or so named Kokkola, which is close to the Gulf of Bothnia in central western Finland. Wide unfenced fields of shamrock-colored grass abound in this area.

Anna was the second child of Maria and Matti Maki, their only daughter in a family of six boys. Early in her life Anna learned to work hard. Besides working with her mother in the house, cooking, baking, weaving, cleaning, and so on, she was also expected to help milk the cows, feed the calves and help with haying. Anna was a pretty girl, but a horrible accident altered her life, and made her parents wonder if she would ever marry.

Matti would remember the scene all his life. He and two of his sons were butchering a hog. "Anna!" cried her father, "Get the knife from the kitchen - the one Mama uses to cut stew meat.

"Yes, Papa, I know," and off she went. Moments later, Anna came racing back with the huge knife clutched in her hand, the sharp side with its tip aimed right toward her right eye.

"Anna, no, no," shouted her father, but it was too late. Anna's mother had run out of the house when she heard Matti's shout. Anna had fallen and the knife had pierced her right eye. The screams were terrible - not only from Anna, but also from her mother. Maria quickly regained her composure, and rushed to the clothes line for linens to staunch the flow of blood.

Maria and Matti clutched each other, "And to think, she is only twelve years old. What will be her future?" cried her mother.

In Veteli that night and for weeks afterward, the talk was of the Makis and "the accident." Word spread to Kokkola. Some said it was the work of the Devil. Others said the Makis were being punished for their pride. They had always been so proud of their children - especially of Anna. Not only was Anna pretty, but she could make such lovely things with her hands.

"Pride goeth before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall," quoted Mrs. Erkala from Proverbs 16:18. Fortunately, most of the village folk paid little attention to such talk. Instead, they brought over food and tried to comfort the family in any way they could. Someone suggested a glass eye, and the Makis looked for someone who provided this service. Soon Anna was fitted with an orb that was almost identical to her remaining eye. Anna was delighted but was distressed when it didn't move with her own natural eye. Being a philosophical and intelligent child, she learned to ignore stares. Maria had warned her daughter that there would be those who would stare, point and even laugh at her. Her mother also said that she was a fine girl and

people would soon notice that and not a little thing like an eye. Matti was not as talkative as his wife, but he loved to pull Anna's wheat-colored braids and call her his "favorite daughter." To Anna this sounded ridiculous. She protested, "But I am your only daughter." At this, Matti always laughed. It was a routine they often repeated.

Anna's childhood went by quickly. She loved school, and found she enjoyed helping classmates who did not learn as readily as she did. Anna thought of becoming a teacher, but she knew she would be needed at home and she did want to marry.

Marriage was a topic Matti and Maria often had on their minds. Anna had become a lovely woman but no suitors appeared. At eighteen, Anna was quite willowy. Her lean frame had gentle but obvious curves revealed by the fitted bodices of her dresses she and her mother joyfully made. Her still wheat-colored hair fell down below her neck neatly in back in heavy honey-silked braids. Her oval face was centered with a slightly long but fine nose. Her skin was a cameo color and her high cheek bones were touched with a pale rose hue. Anna's eyes were still the pale smoky aqua of her childhood. At second glance, one noticed her hands. They were small and delicate looking but at the same time looked strong - hands that kneaded bread and milked cows as well as drew and embroidered delicate designs of flowers and plants. She dressed mostly in natural shades of linen and wool, saving the treasured handmade items dyed blue or vivid clear red for special occasions. Anna and her mother, enjoyed much private talk over embroidery projects, often breaking into laughter.

Soon after Anna's nineteenth birthday, Johan Leino appeared at the living room door of the large but humble looking wood framed Maki home in all his twenty-two year old masculine splendor. Among the neighborhood Finns, he was one of the few whose hair was dark enough to be called black. His skin was a light olive tone that tanned easily and it was the arctic summer; John's glacier blue eyes glittered from the bright summer sun. He stood on the small covered porch with his arms folded in front of his chest, which made his farm hardened muscles even more obvious. He removed his navy colored cap.

Alone at home, Anna brightly spoke up first. "Come in and have a cup of coffee. I'll see what I can find to go with it." Anna excused herself and walked in the kitchen. She found only some everyday bread inside a pine cabinet.

"All I can see is some fresh rye bread; my brothers must have finished up my cardamom bread."

"Sounds great," Replied Johan. They had a little ceremony with Anna bringing out the family's favorite blue trimmed potter cups and copper coffee pot. Johan could not help but appreciate Anna's graceful movements and gracious manner.

Johan looked around. Although the Makis and Leinos had been neighbors for years, he had never been in the Maki home. The house looked clean. More than that, it looked pleasant and friendly. It must be all the embroidery work.

"Do you do all of this?" asked Johan.

"Most of it," answered Anna.

For awhile, Johan completely forgot why he had come to the Maki home. His father, Gabriel, had sent him to ask for help with the important job of harvesting the hay needed desperately for the dark and prolonged winter neither animal nor man could escape. At Johan's query, Anna replied that she was sure several of her brothers would be happy to help.

Weeks went by and during most of them, Johan found an excuse to drop by. Anna could be found humming and looking up favorite recipes for coffee cake and bread, and volunteering to do all the baking. Maria would smile to herself and, if she caught Matti's eye, he would wink at her. Matti noticed their house was even cleaner than usual with both Maria and Anna cleaning as they only did before Christmas and Easter. Rugs were shaken out twice a day, dirty dishes didn't stay dirty very long and there was the smell of cinnamon and fresh baked bread throughout the house. Maria often sang as she worked and Anna joined her - not unusual - but now Matti noticed a definite lilt in their voices. He like to sing too, but mainly in church in his clear baritone.

Matti shook his head and looked puzzled while his wife and daughter spent hours discussing thread, colors, yarns, and pieces of cloth. At such times, he would check on one of their rapidly growing sons who were apt to be playing instead of doing the vital farm work.

Sometimes, Johan visited with Matti. The rest of Anna's family left them alone. They spoke in low tones, but back in her room, Anna could hear the words "Russia," "the U.S. Immigration," and "the west coast of the United States."

Anna and Johan had become a couple, much to the delight of her parents. Johan's parents were also pleased.

Anna and Johan entered their relationship with a great deal of ignorance and inexperience. Maria had often told her daughter, "Watch the animals. See what happens." Anna did as she was told but could see little except horses or cattle jumping on one another. What this had to do with foals and calves she was not sure. As she grew older, she began to understand the animals better, but was unsure of people. Johan's sex education was limited to the crude jokes he heard his father and uncles repeat. Anna and Johan were both romantics. They loved softness and gentleness. But quite soon, Johan began drawing Anna so close that she could hardly breathe. Also, he kept repeating, "I love you." Anna knew he was the man she wanted to

marry, so she would reply breathlessly, "I love you, Johan." Anna knew instinctively that he'd soon want more than hugs and kisses, so when she knew he was planning to emigrate to the United States, she determined she would yield to him, afraid he could perish in the waters of the Atlantic and she would not see him again. They became lovers in the short glorious summer savored by those who live in that region. Johan left Finland soon afterward on passage out of a Norwegian port.

Anna had dreams of the U.S. too. A place where you could pick your climate, where you could pick an orange in the winter, but mostly she had heard of the freedom – freedom from Russian rule. Johan was on her mind every waking moment. They were not formally engaged and she worried off and on that he would succumb to the charms of someone such as the vibrant Italian women some seamen had spoken about or a lusty Irish lass with coppery gleaming hair. No, she was not sorry Johan had known all of her delicately carved beauty. She trusted in God and prayed for his safety and embroidered delicate designs in white linen thread on her underthings.

In the United States, things were not going well for Johan. He had trouble finding a job. "Foreigners" were not welcome in most places, especially when they spoke such an unusual language. Johan vowed to learn English. This and his struggle to manage his dwindling funds, left Johan little time to think of Anna.

Johan's life soon changed. He had learned to speak and read basic English. He saw an ad announcing: "Fishermen wanted. Good wages. Seattle."

In Seattle there was a settlement of Finns. Johan would never have to miss another meal. He found a boarding house run by a Mrs. Bakkila. And then there were the mothers with eligible daughters – spy you in church and you didn't have a chance. Their pork roast or chicken in the oven was always too much for their own family. And dessert was always made by their eldest daughter – "Leana," Maia," or "Liisa." Seeing these pretty girls reminded him of Anna. He tried to think of how he could get her to join them, but he was so tired from his days out on the Pacific Ocean.

One Sunday afternoon, Johan was taking a nap in his long charcoal gray underwear when he thought he heard Anna's voice. Could it be?

Mrs. Bakkila's voice bellowed, "Someone here to see you, Johan."

"I know, I think she is going to be my wife."

"I hope so. There is someone you need to meet."

"Anna!"

"Johan, meet Charley, your son. He just turned six months old."

Thomas Cummings

The Road from Xanadu

If a man could pass through Paradise in a dream, and have a flower presented to him as a pledge that his soul had really been there, and if he found that flower in his hand when he awoke – Aye! and what then?

– ANIMAE POETAE

We [Americans] are inclined, possibly, to read poetry rather than more hastily and more impressionistically than the English do, and are determined, when we do read it closely, to do something to it or extract something from it rather than merely to see it and enjoy it.

– Elisabeth Schneider

He and Samuel looked out from behind a single brow upon the wonder they had created. Ancient and new, familiar and exotic – a conglomeration of many things, and yet a thing wholly unique to itself – the dome swelled from the land, as much a deliberate construction as the towers and walls that girdled it, and yet as unrefined and guileless as the tree-spiked hills and the mazy swagger of sun-rippled Alph. He knew Samuel would later credit the drug for the vision, but he also knew that Samuel did not need drugs for vision, or, at that, creation.

“This, Samuel, is all that is needed.”

As he spoke, a blinding pressure behind his eyes sucked the color from the world. The pain was horrible, but not as horrible as seeing that pleasure-dome’s glimmer fade and its caves of ice melt. A precursory rumble, like the ignition of an engine of destruction, greater than the fountain from the chasm, lurched him off his feet. Then the engine fired; a jagged projection of voices, heavy as concrete, rolled from the caverns. They threatened to collapse the dome, and river, and gardens. Even the waning moon above trembled under the weight. If ever a woman wailed for her demon-lover here, that vocal rending would have silenced her and sent her hell-beau scampering.

Bounding for the chasm he called, “No, Samuel, this is enough,” as another wave warped the world. The land split, layers peeled away, fragmented, dissected like the leaves of a book sliced apart by pens with dry, razored tips. The gardens faded, the ancient hills and forests winked away with them. Sunny spots darkened, greenery blackened and crisped. He ran, leaving the dancing rocks to dance still, and the flung water to vaporize.

The mouth of the chasm broke into view, but the ancestral voices, which once had been heard prophesying war, were stricken mute by those other voices which told of darker, dismal and more final apocalypses. With those voices, deep within the caverns, mingled the measures of a dulcimer. The black mouth yawned wider, an awful maw where poured the sacred waters

of Alph down, down to sunless depths.

Into the cavern he ran, and down into the darkness he peered, crying Samuel's name, but even the fall's watery roar was smothered by the other voices' demolitionary intent. Only the strings of the dulcimer and the song of a maid, breathy as wind, braved their dominion.

He clutched the slippery rocks and began his descent, his head drowning in sound and words, his thoughts desperately latching onto the clarity of the maid's melody, which was neither purposefully his friend or his foe. His climb was constant, neither quick nor long, but never fast enough to ease his desperation. Many times the moist stone sloughed off his fingers and feet, threatening to dislodge him and plunge him out into the aimless dark. Other times the howl of the voices solidified into a physical force to drive him back up. At one point he saw the maid, still strumming the strings. She drifted out there, out in the darkness, clear and bright as though enwrapped in a dot of sky-filtered daylight. Her song was the siren call for the voices. Yet, no anger could he find in himself for her, for she was also the conduit for Samuel, and without him the dome could never have been built.

He continued to descend until finally he heard a splash at his heels and felt the slop and slosh of pale water around his ankles. His journey was half-over. He pried a large stone, the size of his head, from the wall for an anchor. Cradling it to his chest, he dove. The stone took him down, heels over head, the rush of dark water battering his ears, deafening all but the voices. He closed his eyes, a blackness deeper than sunless depths surged to his core. I have failed, he thought, then thought no more.

* * *

The voices still buffeted his head, but now he thought he could make out distinct words. In fact, he thought he could ascertain a distinct voice. A child's voice.

"Sir? Sir, are you ill? Sir?"

A sharp point jabbed his shoulder. He picked his head off the rough ground, felt the impression of pebbles in his cheek. The stone tumbled from his arms. He propped himself on one elbow, craned his head up, blinking to see two blurry forms standing above him, one smaller than the other. His vision cleared. The taller form was a little girl, ten, perhaps. The other was a boy of above five. The boy looked up at the girl who was holding a stick, poised for another poke. He said:

"Look! I told you I saw 'im breathe!"

"Shush" the girl said.

"You should 'ave let me 'ave a poke at 'im 'fore he woke."

"Shush!" Then, moving her attention from the boy said, "Are you well now, sir? Shall I fetch a physician?"

"No, miss," he said. "Just having a rest. Tired from a long journey."

"What a silly man." The boy wrinkled his pug nose.

"Shush!" Then, "We'll be off then, sir. Afternoon."

The two children trotted off. He bid them adieu as he heaved himself up off the ground. The outskirts of a small town lay behind him, a road, dented by horses' hooves and rutted by wheels, stretched out before him. His destination, he knew intuitively, as was his nature, lay down that road. He started off.

"This is the land from where the voices come," he said to himself. He felt the press of atoms and the weight of logical structure and rational order. He looked at the road, the rolling hills, the woods beyond. He looked back at the road, the rolling hills and the woods beyond. They looked the same as the first time.

"So precise," he said. His voice trembled. "A map could be drawn of this place, down to the very last pebble." He counted the number of steps he took forward, and knew that they would be the same number of steps he would take back worse, he understood that that was the reigning force of this place: Cold equations. He looked back at the town, and now saw a Euclidean hell, more terrible in its normality than the mighty fountain which made boulders dance and the sacred river float. Here, the inhabitants of the upper air were only clusters of moisture; here a dead albatross was merely unmoving feathers and meat, an offense to nothing.

"Here a maiden could never draw milk and honey from the rivers," he said, and with that revelation the logic and order of this world began to freeze his mind, colder and harder than the slopes of the ice caves, and slicker, too.

A farmhouse broke into view as he crested a rise. He left the road, making a bee-line to the structure, his feet stumbling over the eroded earth, his body trembling, the mind-numb seeping down into his heart, then circulating out into his limbs. The soft purr of the coming breeze rose in his ears, though strangely he felt no air on his skin. Perhaps I am too frozen, he thought; then, gradually, understood it was not wind he heard, but a woman's voice raised in melody, accompanied by the strings of a dulcimer.

"The maiden."

Her song resonated like an aura around the farmhouse, melting his numbness like a warm current in a sunless ocean. His limbs were invigorated, his mind cleared, the weight of icy rationality lifted. He went to a window and looked inside. Therein sat Samuel at a desk, quill clutched in hand, making swooping words on a piece of paper.

He called Samuel's name, banged on the glass with his fist. Samuel's head slowly rose and turned. He was at the core of the maiden's song, the summit of its power; its force wreathed his face with his flying hair, his eyes flashed like to the sunlight off sacred waters.

"Let me in, Samuel, quickly!"

Samuel struggled up from his chair; the maiden's song would not so easily be denied. Yet, the wonder of seeing who was standing at the window seemed to push him forward toward the door. His visitor raced around to meet him.

A latch clicked and the door yawned open. Samuel stood there looking out. He said, "How have you come here?"

The visitor said, "That is not important." He stepped inside and walked a circle around Samuel. "Xanadu is perfect." The song began to dim, as did the light in Samuel's eyes. Another circle. "To reveal more would be to pave the road to its destruction. There are those who wish to replace Xanadu with empirical words." A third and final circle: "These are ones who would dissect a cat to find out why it purrs."

"Ridiculous. A dead cat cannot purr."

"Of course not. You understand, then?"

Samuel's eyes were tired and half-lidded. "I supposed I do." His hair fell around his shoulders in limp tangles. He lowered his head, looking at nothing in particular. The light in his eyes dulled to the illumination of this world. He was silent, then looked up, blinking as if just realizing someone else was in the room with him. As he looked at his visitor the recognition had vanished from his eyes.

"I am sorry. I seem to have ... gone away for a bit."

"No matter. Our business is complete."

"Good. Good. Well, then, I don't mean to be rude, but it seems as though the Muse was speaking to me just when you arrived and —"

"And you wish to get back to your verse. Of course."

"That's good of you. And you'll be heading back to.... I'm sorry, I seem to have even forgotten your place of resident."

The visitor pointed vaguely up the road.

"Ah, Porlock, then," Samuel said.

Samuel closed the door. The visitor went around the house and looked through the window. Inside, Samuel had already retaken his seat at the desk. The quill was in his hand, poised over the paper. He looked down at the words he had written, lowered the pen to the paper, hesitated, raised it again. His eyes were lost, his face as it was when the visitor had completed the third circle.

"Do not mourn," the visitor whispered. "The road will remain open forever, now."

He turned and left, riding the notes of the dulcimer and the song of the maiden. He looked out from behind the same brow, and a thousand inner eyes were there looking with him, wondering at Xanadu's thousand forms, its singular and compound beauty.

Afterward:

Reading the Introductory Note as Integral Part of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan"

Whether there really was a person from Porlock, or if he is just an invention of Coleridge, the effect of the Introductory Note on "Kubla Khan" remains profound and essential. Without it, the poem truly is a fragment, diminished in power. As David Perkins points out, "The nonexistent lines [of the poem] haunt the imagination more than any actual poem could" (Barth & Mahoney, 97).

The Introductory Note and the final eighteen lines of "Kubla Khan" have much in common, save for tone. The Intro has a sort of "Aw, shucks" feel, as though the writer "whom we should not necessarily assume is Coleridge" had indeed entered Xanadu, but has returned to Earth left only to wonder at the vision. Conversely, the speaker of the poem's final lines takes on the guise of a visionary, and though separated from that spectral land he's seen, he is still above the ranks of the earth-anchored souls around him. He is a company-creator, a bridge to wonder, dreadful in his abilities. "Beware! Beware!" his (potential) audience warns itself, barely able to look at him.

But the reader is not necessarily part of that fearful crowd, for we also have been to Xanadu. We have seen the pleasure dome with its caves of ice. As Elisabeth Schneider notes, "The topography of the scene is somewhat unprecise, so that the reader could scarcely draw a map of it (242). Our imaginations have been energized by the first 36 lines. Their imprecision is an invitation to join Coleridge in his creation, as is the "Aw, shucks" tone of the Intro. And by the poem's final 18 lines, we align ourselves with the poet, almost feeling our own eyes flash and hair float with the mental adrenaline rushing through our imagination.

The person from Porlock may be fact or fiction, but regarding the Introductory Note as an integral part of "Kubla Khan" completes what would have only been a fragment, a "psychological curiosity."

KUBLA KHAN

or

A vision in a dream

A fragment

This poem is now usually interpreted as a poem about the act of poetic creation in which the major images are symbolic.

The following fragment is here published at the request of a poet of great and deserved celebrity, and, as far as the Author's own opinions are concerned, rather as a psychological curiosity than on the ground of any supposed poetic merits.

In the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farmhouse between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance in "Purchas's Pilgrimage": "Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus ten miles of fertile ground were enclosed with a wall." The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awaking, he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking hi pen, ink and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment, he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but alas! without the after restoration of the latter!

Then all the charm
Is broken — all that phantom-world so fair
Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread,
And each mis-shape[s] the other. Stay awhile,
Poor youth! who scarcely dar'st lift up thine eyes —
The stream will soon renew its smoothness, soon
The visions will return! And lo, he stays,
And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms
Come trembling back, unite, and now once more
The pool becomes a mirror.

Yet from the still surviving recollections in his mind, the Author has frequently purposed to finish for himself what had been originally, as it were, given to him. Sayepon athion aso: but the to-morrow is yet to come.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.

So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! as holy and enchanted
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced;
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:
And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river.
Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:
And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!

The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.

It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!
A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw;
It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,

Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
 Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! whose caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise

1797 or 1798 (1816)

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James McKinley

Elegy on a Favorite Cat

Louis Rukeyser, best-loved friend, constant companion
and all-time-favorite pet of James McKinley:

Born 15 June 1992, Ocean Beach, CA;

died 9 October 1997, Bakersfield, CA.

Resurgam

I don't know what caused him to die. A spider, a car, a snake, a hateful redneck, a fall from the roof, a poisoned sparrow, antifreeze? I don't want to know. He was at the front door when I left for my morning class, refusing my invitation to come inside, preferring to loll about on the doormat, looking pretty, like a recalcitrant teenager at the mall. I gave him a scratch on the back of the head and tugged one of his ears. When I got home two hours later, he was lying peacefully in his spot at the back door, where he commonly waited to come inside.

"Louis," I cooed, "wanna come in?" Then I realized his open eyes, still blue but darkening, were vacant, non-responsive. "LOUIS!" I barked, sharp, insistent, panicked. I touched him. He was dead. I picked him up; he was still warm. His body betrayed no violent end.

I cried and held him while my roommate dug a deep hole with nice clean edges in the flower bed in the front garden, and then I covered him with dirt that left a metallic patina on my hands.

"HELL FUCKING NO I'M NOT ALL RIGHT, I'M FUCKING
GODDAMNED DISCONSOLATE."

Last year, Louis was my mainstay through what I hope was the most severe ontological crisis of my life. In a world of elegant, well-heeled, hardhearted people who fall about one another like so many bits of sleet on a winter street, he reminded me of who I really am: A possibly plain but not-so-simple country boy who'd prefer nothing to whiling the hours away with a cat in my lap and a book propped on my knee.

We were supposed to be together a long time; in eleven or twelve years he'd be fat, blind, diabetic and the vet would tell me it was time to put him down, and I'd cry, "No, I can't! Can't you do something? Can't you clone him a new kidney? New eyes?" He was supposed to go with me to colder climates and keep me warm at night.

It's been getting colder here, so last week I broke out the itchy blanket. He had taken to lying in with me in the mornings, as opposed to his accustomed miaowing insistently at 5:30 a.m., "Get up! Feed me! Let me out!"

A lot of people won't get it. How can a man over thirty be so overwrought about the death of a cat? It's even hard for me to comprehend. I'm not ordinarily given over to an excess of sentimentality. I was raised in

the country, where the procreation, life and death of farm animals are an everyday concern, but most often a pragmatic one: It was one of my first grave lessons in life, when our prized Charolais bull died, that death can have a commercial impact. It wasn't the same with the little white-faced heifer who died a week after being calved. She didn't yet possess any commercial value, but we children felt her loss with sincere grief, possibly because she, like us, was but a child.

But these people who don't understand the depth of my grief for Louis don't know how (or possibly don't care) in a dark time for me in Hollywoodland, his was the compelling voice which saved me from committing a Lily Bart. There were days when the only reason I got out of bed were to take care of his needs, responding to his gentle, earnest call, "Hey, I'm here, I'm alive, I need you."

As my emotional wounds healed, he was the balm which kept my heart from being hardened over. He was unconditionally loving, warm, never judgmental. His voice never echoed the self-castigation which resounded through my head, or the disapprobation I heard from others. I doubt I could ever have that from a wife or lover; I certainly don't expect it from my father or a brother. It's not a reasonable expectation. But when one lives life to the fullest, attempting superhuman efforts and passing through superhuman loves, one must have some other in order to sustain, in order to endure. In those lonely days, that other was my cat.

Suffice it to say, he will be sorely missed. I know that this is simply life. This is merely one further probation to subdue my heart to human joys.

Discreet Mail

I have to have highly sensitive ears. I'm a piano tuner, you see, and a damn good one. But a few months ago, I let myself get too affected by the sounds in my head, started treading too much into things, which is what I think got me into trouble with the law. "Good luck telling the judge that," my attorney told me. "Unless you want to make a plea of insanity."

Insanity? You want to hear about insanity? I'll tell you all about it. It all started when I was tuning pianos inside the music room at St. Joseph's High School. I stopped what I was doing to use a nearby bathroom, when I noticed that the squeaky toilet handle precisely replicated the first note of the "Lost in Space" theme song, which is, I believe, the derivative of a Borodin symphony. For those of you who don't know anything about "Lost in Space," let me tell you that it was a very popular TV program in the 1960s about the Robinson family who, as the title suggests, were quite lost, several galaxies away from the planet Earth. The plot usually centered on some plan of returning home, which was sabotaged by the greed or cowardice of one of their crew members, the supercilious, bombastic Dr. Zachary Smith. Most of my childhood friends hated him, and they always wondered why the Robinson family didn't just shoot him in the head or abandon him on some inhospitable planet. But I always knew that Smith was the star. His condescending verbosity, calling the robot an "insidious ignoramus" or a "contemptuous ninny," was what made the show tick. It's what provided the comic relief that I found so irresistible.

But the theme song was another story. It was a sinister piece that disturbed me so much that I would often watch the show's introduction with the volume all the way down.

Which is why, twenty years later, as I depressed the shrill toilet lever, an alarm went off in my head. Surely, the tuning fork in my brain had picked up some kind of portent, one of such urgency that a subpoena had to be issued to my most repressed memories. I expressed my concern later that day to my boss and mentor, Wolfgang, who was the owner of the piano store I worked at. He was born in Germany, then moved to Mexico in the 1970s to direct soap operas. Whenever I asked him to explain his move to Bakersfield he would just look at me sadly in the eyes and promise to tell me some other time.

"Something bad's going to happen," I told him in side his office. "I can feel it."

He was pulling at his uncombed salt and pepper beard, staring at me with his crazy gray eyes, which seemed to contain the galactic enormity of the universe. "'Lost In Space,' you say? Good show. Best of its kind, anyway."

"So what do you think? The toilet handle. The opening score. Am I on to something? Am I in some kind of danger?"

"Of course not. Look at you, Howard. You're young, single. You've got the world by the balls. What have you got to worry about?"

"Okay," I told him skeptically. "But I really think I might put off this date tonight."

"No. Go out with her. You're just trying to punish yourself again."

I decided to take Wolfgang's advice. Went out on a date that evening with the very lovely Matilda Sanchez, an elementary school teacher with a three-year-old boy from her last relationship. She had assured me that everything was over between her and her ex-boyfriend, and I was willing to believe it. That night we ate mediocre, over-priced Italian food, then drove to my place for a little piano recital. It was her idea. She said she was dying to hear me play. As we were getting out of my car, she slammed her door shut, and I heard that alarming note again - the opening of the "Lost In Space" theme song. I immediately went green, was reminded of an episode where Judy Robinson was trapped in Hell, hosted by a very handsome insouciant devil. "What's wrong?" Matilda asked. "Feeling all right?"

"I think so," I answered, too preoccupied to muster a calm façade. We walked toward my apartment room, and I stopped at the wall of mail boxes. "Forgot to pick up my mail two days in a row now," I said.

"I never forget my mail. In Bakersfield, mail is a very big deal."

She stood close to me and blew on the back of my neck as I inserted my key into my box. "Hope you don't have any love letters in there," she whispered. "I'm very jealous."

The warmth of her body sent a delightful spasm throughout my abdominals. I smiled at her, opened the box, and with trembling hand, grabbed a huge bundle of envelopes.

"What's that?" she asked, her eyes wide, her mouth agape.

"What?"

"That!" She was pointing at my stack of correspondence, which I had pressed to my sweaty torso. As I looked down, I noticed a glossy catalog of adult videos. I was so startled that I let out a shriek, then dropped the bundle, causing dozens of adult video catalogs to scatter across the ground. They weren't even covered. I thought this kind of stuff always came in a plain brown wrapper. But this arrived in clear plastic with nude photographs right on the front. Girls posing on the cover with black stars covering their pudenda and nipples. And the company's name in big pink letters: "Discreet mail." Discreet? My date was looking at me like was radioactive waste that had made its way out of Chernobyl. What was I supposed to do? I knew that if I told her the truth, which is that I had never ordered this junk in the first place, that I would appear even more guilty. I would look like a coward who has to cover things up. I decided to tell her that my brother ordered it.

"Your brother?"

"He used to live with me. He's in San Francisco now. Couldn't take the heat."

She looked skeptical. Without a word, she looked at the scattered mail with disdain, then helped me pick it up. I threw it away in the outside dumpster, clapped my hands as if to say, "That's that," and led her to my apartment. But the mood was still tense. Matilda asked for a glass of water, spent a long time in the bathroom, looked at the books on my shelves, then finally called her sister to come pick her up.

"I'm not feeling too well," she explained after getting off the phone.

"But what about my recital?" I asked.

"I'll have to take a rain check," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Here," I said, sitting at my piano. "I'll play something while we wait for your sister."

"I think I'll just wait outside," she said.

She made a quick escape, not even bother to shake my hand. I knew that was the last of her.

I was inside Wolfgang's office the next morning, explaining what had happened the night before. "You see," I told him, "something did happen. 'Lost In Space' is coming back to haunt me."

"It was nothing," he answered. "If anything, something good will come of this. I think you're tagging too many negatives to 'Lost In Space.' It was really a positive experience for you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Dr. Smith. He was a positive influence. He was literate, articulate. You can't say that about all TV personalities."

"But he was made out to be the fool."

"Precisely!" Wolfgang slammed his fist against his desk. He's a little crazy, you see. Prone to getting all philosophical about the strangest things. Now he was pontificating on the nature of Dr. Smith. "Americans," he continued, "have a fondness for ignorance, so the heroes are always simpletons. The brilliant characters are always cowards, charlatans, villains."

"The robot was smart," I argued. "And he was a positive force in the family's survival."

"They could afford to make him smart," he said, "because they castrated him. Don't you get it? A little neutered robot going around with a better vocabulary than the family, a better vocabulary than everyone - but Smith, who was the bad guy, and probably a homo on top of it."

"Wolfgang, you're really smart. What are you doing in Bakersfield?" He just looked up at me with sad, heavy eyes.

About a week later I had forgotten about all this "Lost In Space" crap.

But then one afternoon while I was coming home for lunch, I spotted a Discrete Mail catalog on the ledge next to the wall of mailboxes. The damn

thing had my address on it, with my big, fat name spelled out, clear for the whole damn apartment complex to see. This was unacceptable. I couldn't have my name associated with something as sordid as this. I make my living tuning pianos for people, most of the m coming from a very elite class, not to mention churches, private schools and other conservative institutions. If my clients ever established a connection between me and Discreet Mail, my career would be ruined.

I picked up the catalog, opened my mailbox, and sure enough, found more lurid ads. It was beginning to occur to me that perhaps this was some kind of joke, perhaps malicious in its intent. Who knows who my enemies are? It's easy to rub shoulders the wrong way in a small town like this. And I'm sort of derisive anyway. It's my nature. Maybe that's why I've always liked Dr. Smith. I know we share some kind of component inside ourselves that makes us playfully sneer at the world. And if it can't laugh back at us, then the hell with it.

That afternoon I decided to write a letter to Discreet Mail down in Los Angeles. It went something like this: "Look, geniuses, I'm not on your mailing list, and if you don't get me off of it in two shakes, I'm going to have the Postmaster General on your ass real soon. Got it?" But things got worse. Two weeks later, my neighbor, a little old widow by the name of Elaine, knocked on my door and told me the UPS man had left a package for me at her house. I knew something was wrong right away. She was looking at me funny, like she was nervous or something. This wasn't normal. She was always happy to see me. She loved the way I played piano. It showed how sensitive I was, she used to say. She was always making me food and bringing it over and wanting to talk to me for a long time. And I let her keep her Cornish hens and pot roast in my freezer since I never cooked and had all sorts of freezer space. She thought I was an angel. But not today. This time she looked funny, and she wasn't saying a whole lot.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I just don't think this is good for the neighborhood."

"What's not good for the neighborhood?"

She was on the verge of tears. Told me to follow her to her apartment. Inside was a huge package with a pre-inflated sex doll inside of it. You could tell there was a sex doll in there because the cardboard only covered the body. The head was showing for the whole world to see. Yellow hair, wide blue eyes and a big wide open mouth as red as a cherry. Looked like she had been charged with five thousand volts.

"This is some kind of mistake," I said, taking the box from her living room. The return label showed that the package was from Discreet Mail, of course.

"Don't you worry, Elaine, I'll get to the bottom of this, and when I do, I'll have the Coast Guard raiding the company that sent this to me. And that's a promise."

But my words did little to assure her. She was looking at me the way Matilda did after she saw my unsolicited mail.

"Howard, I think I'll take my food out of your freezer."

"Don't be silly," I said.

"No, really, I insist."

Over the next couple of weeks I was getting fewer and fewer appointments. Many of my clients had canceled, without explanation, I might add. But I'll tell you right now, Elaine had something to do with it. I love her to death, really I do, but she is an undeniable gossip. And I'm sure her rumors about my little package circulated far and wide, spreading into my client base.

I went to Wolfgang to tell him the gravity of the situation. "Thanks to Discreet Mail, I'm running out of gigs and girlfriends, and I've got a neighbor who took out all of her Cornish hens out of my freezer. She's just letting them spoil out on her kitchen table - shit, I can smell the damn things rotting through the wall! - and all because she would rather leave them for the vultures than keep them with a scum like me."

"Relax," Wolfgang said. "You're going on a little journey right now. That's all. And you're scared because you wish you were back home where everything is safe. But is home really what you want?"

I've said it before, and I'll say it again, Wolfgang is crazy.

I guess I should tell you right now, I'm not from Bakersfield. I grew up in Berkeley with my divorced mother and majored in music at San Francisco State, dropping out my second year. I was never good at finding jobs, but did manage to teach piano lessons for a while. Hated it. I'm not a very patient person. My younger brother, the successful oil company accountant, told me there was a big piano tuning market in Bakersfield, a city he visited frequently on his business trips. He had associates there who would give me a free place to stay until I got settled. That was five years ago. Since that time, I've established my own domain here. People know me, they wave, they smile. I can't go anywhere without bumping into someone I don't know. This has its advantages. You go around thinking that everyone loves you.

But now Discreet Mail enters the picture and that's all over. It was time to write them another letter: "Hey morons, this is Howard Lyons, and I'm roaring in your jungle. Either get me off your mailing list or your ass is grass."

I told Wolfgang how I was handling the situation, and he told me I needed to exercise a little more subtlety. "This is a legal matter," he said. For the first time he was taking my problem seriously. I suspect his decreased piano sales had something to do with this. "It's time you write them another letter and spell out, in a calm, educated manner, how you will contact the

Postmaster General, The FBI and your attorney. You might even tell them you're under twenty-one. They'll have a shit fit."

"God, you're smart," I said. "I don't know how you ever landed in Bakersfield."

He moaned and disappeared into the bathroom.

I followed Wolfgang's advice, but the packages kept coming. French ticklers, fruit-scented lubricants, penis enlargers, flavored condoms, edible panties, whips, leather masks, and a state-of-the-art sex doll imported from Japan made with real pubic hair and removal parts – all dishwasher safe. I reported all of this in meticulous detail to the Postmaster General. But those candy-ass bureaucrats weren't taking any action, apparently. The mail kept coming. Another six weeks and I could have gone retail right in my very own apartment. My gigs kept getting smaller and smaller. My phone stopped ringing. People were avoiding me at the supermarket.

It looked like Discreet Mail and I were headed for a little head-on collision. I called Wolfgang up and told him I couldn't make it to work that day. "A little business trip to Los Angeles," I whispered with an air of intrigue. Wolfgang knew what I was talking about. "Drive safely," is all he said.

Two hours later, after driving on the torn cushion of my Chevy Chevette, I had a sore ass and a crabby disposition. I took my Swiss Army knife from my glove box, and walked to Discreet Mail headquarters on Wilshire Boulevard. It was in a two-story building, above an insurance office. I walked up the stairs and introduced myself to the secretary, a helpful looking woman who looked better suited as a librarian. Behind her were dozens and dozens of cardboard boxes, many of them being stuffed with all sorts of goodies by about five or six workers, tired looking young men who looked like they were recovering from hangovers. Pre-inflated sex dolls – some sitting up, others lying down – were all over the place.

"Can I help you?" the young woman asked. On her desk was a plaque that said something about "customer satisfaction."

I'm afraid you can't help me," I said. "You've already had your chance for that."

"I'm sorry." She looked confused. I pulled out my knife, extended the biggest blade, and pointed it at her.

"All right, everybody out," I said.

"He means it, you guys," the receptionist said. My knife was close to her throat and my hand was kind of shaky.

"You're all a bunch of contemptible ninnies," I shouted, saliva spraying all over the place. "Insidious ignoramuses!"

The receptionist and the young men fled out the door. I closed the door behind them, locked it, and had Discreet Mail all to myself. I started with the five or six computers. Crushed all of them. If I was on their mailing list then,

I sure wasn't on it now. I then opened desk drawers and threw papers all over the place. Kicked furniture. Knifed all the sex dolls. I kept going. I had a lot of energy that afternoon. A lot of anger. Outside I heard sirens and then a police officer shouting through a bullhorn. He was asking me to come out of the building with my hands up.

Six months in prison and all the tabloids had grown tired of me and my tale of outrage. My attorney didn't seem very optimistic. I was looking at another two years, with the possible transfer to some sort of cushy place that gave you your own room and cable TV. My rich brother had something to do with this, God bless him. But before my transfer as I waited in my cold and lonely cell, a visitor came to see me. It was Matilda Sanchez. I walked down to the visiting quarters and talked her through a wall of glass. It was right there that the Discreet Mail mystery was revealed to me. It turned out that her ex-boyfriend, after finding out that Matilda and I were dating, had rigged Discreet Mail to start sending me stuff. It turned out he was a good friend of the company's vice president and he wanted to play a little joke on me.

"Little joke," I said. "Pretty much ruined my whole life."

"It was no excuse for what you did," she lectured. "You blew the whole thing out of proportion."

"Maybe so," I said, turning to my side. I really wasn't interested in talking to her. I noticed a wedding ring on her finger. "You got hitched, I see."

"Yeah, we got back together."

"I couldn't believe it. She married the trash that did this to me. I just shook my head and spit."

"Don't be that way," she said. "We had a child together. This is best for our son."

I told the guard I wanted to go back to my cell. Better than hearing about the prison she chose to be in.

Prison's not so bad. At least not since my brother pulled the right strings and got me transferred to low security. They offer classes here and everything. Right now I'm enrolled in a film workshop. I'm thinking of resurrecting "Lost In Space." Making a sequel or something. Only this time Dr. Smith is going to be the good guy, the hero. And I'll make damn sure he finds a way to get the Robinson family back home.



Autumn, by Ted Kerasse



Cloth mask, mid-20th century
Unknown Yoruba Family; Ogbomoso, Nigeria