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Marina Roscher

two poems

The Conch

The motorboat is gone
from the shallows off Coral Harbor.
The ocean's hide is taut
and vibrating with light. I am
a crystal on this membrane.
I'm naked, I've swallowed the sun
and my name. I've come for conch.

I dive and capsize silver sails
the fins of triggerfish
their tails are lyre-shaped.
This is a greener deeper place
and here I'd like to sprout and stay
live as an anemone. Roses
mushrooms, fern, old lace—
the polyps in their sagacity
build what they cannot name.

The caves are dark and veiled.
I think of sharks and octopi
but something dim behind my mind
remembers how it was
and if I died that way right now
I would go reconciled. Mother
I'm almost home—
Ocean, you owe me a sign.

As one, my fingertips and eyes
receive their alcoved find.
I lift my gift up on the rock.
The conch is locked and sealed
inside. Assaulted by the sun
the shell begins to sway—
it flutters like a heart that
has stopped but not yet died.
There is an angry primal noise.
Together with an inch of fish
the conch ejects itself in air
is twisted as if gripped:
a purple swollen tongue
already blackening.

Seven Days in October

I

The cat has dragged you into my kitchen
a teaspoonful of sundown sky.
Before her claws can slash again
my foot kicks out
and all green eyes she sulks away
white feathers in her turkish whiskers.
You turn your head to the mound
of my thumb as if it were
a deathbed's pillow. I put you down
in the two by five planter
near last year's starless poinsettia
and you belly in like a wingless thing
between leaves.

II

Looking as if you need crutches
from twigs, you climb
to the top of the indoor tree.
Earth clings to your slender bill
but you chirp, sounding surprised.
You take your bearings
flutter three feet. Plummet
like a blue lead heart. Stumble
stunned, back up to the treetop. Flutter
plummet, stumble
repeat. It goes on for hours.
Late afternoon, betrayed, you quit.
Hang in the grip of a branch
as if thrown there.

III

You're eating more
than seems to fit. You've plucked
the buds of my impatiens.
I call you Blue Max
after the nickname for *pour le mérite*
invented by pilots. When I enter the room
it's always the same: a three-tone
trill, almost a naming.

IV

Each morning *zur zree, zur zur zree*
in the *ficus* and a quick dance
of blessing. But for the evening

there is no warbling.
Until the watermark of gray
has swallowed every trace of bronze
you concentrate, facing West
and will the sun
impel it on, forward
East.

V

Shut out the winter color
that is not for you
and listen to a surging
in the wiring of your wing
a whisper from a distant telephone
that warns you of a missed
migration.

I've been watching you sleep.
Shudders run under your feathers
and ripple reflections.
Things go on beneath the surface.

VI

I touch your head with a fingertip.
You whip at sleep, but instantly
move to the nest of my hand.
It has beguiled you with sweetness
and blood, with raisins
crumbs and slivers of meat. How much
do you know of this hand? What of me is
perceived inside the fragile plum
hemisphere I caress?

VII

Bird-butterfly, Blackthroated Blue
a whee, zur zur zree
I hear your victory before I see
the loops and sailings
perfect landings at my feet.
We share a birthday-joy. My palm
has one more feast. You fly
my dauntless tiny blue balloon
on this brisk wind
that stings me.

Dan Campion

two poems

Vigil

A woman is a window black with rain,
her sister a ring of candlelight.
They circle the room slowly, shadows
vanishing in corners, concentrating,
reemerging from the folds of drapes.
All night their eyes deepen and brighten,
stars falling between ragged clouds outside.

Salt

A picture of salt: the salient sail,
blood on a plate, cube sugar in a cage.
Salt enters weeping, opens wounds, turns pale,
sells cheap, then winds up on an empty page.
A black cat scales each city's peak of salt
before the grain is scattered on the street.
Whatever happens next is no one's fault,
the table's lust for salt, the tongue's for meat.
Patches of snow smear each salt-sown field,
chalk on a slate where the whitetail flees.
One white plume of his salt lick's yield
flares in his breath as he falls to his knees.
Teeth white as salt, the wolves drag off their prize.
The day they're born, their mother licks their eyes.

Mary Scott

Three Poems

Cats

When the closet shadows deepen
and I am child again,
girl-child whose father-lover
drinks up all the light,
then there are cats.

Black, tortoise, white on white,
four-footed velvet
slipping into the corner where I crouch.

Cats, smoothing up to sniff my knees,
my putty face and leaking nose.
Calm and purring,
their fur lifts drifting into my mouth,
and curled paws knead my belly.

See, say their slitted eyes,
you are here, a grown woman-stroker whose
fingers touch only what they want.
Our ears, yes, just there,
now a little more to the right—
ahhhhh—
How can you not love these hands,
this warm lap made for dreaming naps?

Scratch, woman-with-poison-to-sweat,
you are only lost for a little while,
not forbidden from the path.
We are cats, we know,
we can see you through the dark.

For Julie at Tom Thumb

Just there,
shivering by the pay phone and Ice Bite,
I knew your secret name.
heard its presence weeping in the K-mart bags
you carried, stuffed fat with rags,
clothing tags, pop cans and cigarettes.
And underneath them the broken
fragments of skin cells, the burned feathers,
the naked skull and pelvic bone, the ash,
all souvenirs from the human desert
you had wandered longer
than any Buddha or bearded Hebrew.

Your woundedness was impossible for the wolf,
the oak, the black cat, the eagle, the ant
in me not to smell and fear—
the lostness of your chapped hands,
the trembling of faded jeans above
flattened gum wads and KitKat wrappers.
You stood, shaking, feet close together,
hoping the ground would give
but not devour you.
Or maybe that was your hidden hope.

What I had to offer, I gave:
a Luden's lemon drop,
three-day-old soup with bay leaf,
a coat I could no longer button around my
own strong and healthy haunches.
In the Pontiac, heat turned on high,
my neck and underarms sweated,
but even then the ache frozen into your bones
would not be melted.
And you shivered.

Your eyes, sister, I knew your eyes,
trapped and terrified, too unfocused
to see anything but the next headlight,
the next cold breath,
the gremlin shadows shifting
under the dashboard.
I saw your spirit fleeing, animal fleeing,
and knew for this night,
for this one furred and tracking hour,
your were one dirty tennis shoe
ahead of the hunter.

The Migrant Lovers

Our camp is dark and smoky tonight, fires fogged and
stews burning. The old ones watch and wait to scold,
but you find me anyway,
grab my hand, and we slip, shaking,
into a truck you don't own—
rusted Chevy with no license plate
and a fluorescent rosary roped
around the mirror.

Our breath steams the liquor-stale air,
your hands fumble for zippers and buttons;
yes, touch me . . . you want to!
We sink so easy into the smell of each other's skin,
and my best blouse crushed by the weight
of worn leather.
You laugh at my hair, static blue in the darkness,
and how it shocks your mouth.
Don't let go!
Body heat paints the windshield white, seals out
the cot beds and picking hats,
the hunger of the old ones
that food will never fill.
Yes, again!
But the sun is coming up and the sugar beets
wait like frozen deer hearts in
the Dakota farmer's fields.
You forget your green comb on the dashboard.

Daniel Green

Fitting in 1913

Fashion ruled the fad that boys
of three wear blue velvet suits
white lace collars, tasselled
shoes, and hair to shoulder length.

Innocence gave license to this
excess of embellishment, the puppet
played the part, endured a glut
of Oohs! and Aahs! and wet embraces.

At six the imitation Fauntleroy
rebelled, dragged his doting mother
to the barber-shop, to shed
his curls as she shed tears.

First graders had quickly taught
him their unwritten rules:
being cute or different didn't
count. Fit in or get out! He fit.

Helen Frost

Between the Church and its Mountain

This field in summer had always been
rich with blueberries, hands to pick them.
On one side, the church, graves.
On the other, wetland, cranes.
Far off, not to be gazed at, not to be named,
the mountain.

Then airplanes came, needing a place to land.

The Cat rolled round metal toes
through forests of living trees,
forests of burned trees, around swamp,
around lakes. It came to the people,
four houses and the church. Children
ran to watch the Cat roll
over and over the berries, over and over,
so airplanes could land,
between the church and its mountain.

They did land. They do land. They bring
flour, sugar, coffee, diapers, tea,
school, radio, Pilot Bread, doctors,
Spam, batteries, blankets,
boots, telephones, guns, teachers,
apples, priests, propane,
beer, whiskey, fur buyers, frying pans,
cigarettes, Blazo, snowmachines,
game warden, teakettles, parkas,
T.V., potatoes, mattresses,
shampoo, Oil of Olay. Almost daily now
the airplanes land. We meet them.

The church holds its ground.
A splash of berries edges the runway.
This earth has eyes.

Philip Lee Williams

Her Gray Study, With Wings

Very often, when I was a child and not yet as ill as I have been these past twenty years, I would count the wingstrokes of the birds in our yard. We lived in a town called Casington on the coast of Maine, and in the summer a low sun spangled the sea and turned it a silver-gray. When winter came, the air would choke with fog, an exquisite sinking of cloud and mist. Mamma would prop me on the day bed both seasons and point grandly out to sea and tell me that the ocean was a living thing, that it had heaved once in 1896 and swallowed her father whole. I would stare at the glassy swells and try to see him, my progenitor and flesh, struggling in the waves. When I did not dream him, rising and falling from the waves, or listening to Mamma reading or, even later, read constantly myself or listen to music, I would count the wingstrokes of seabirds. Each time a gull came pumping by, I would extend a single finger like a baton and count strokes until the bird had disappeared from sight.

I was doing that today just before you came. The act summoned a kind of religious unconsciousness for me, a delicate shadow of the soul, beating, always beating. I saw common house sparrows madly thrashing the air, some arcane seabird with its lumbering glide, squeezing its arms once only to catch a current of air. You see, that is what my life has always been, since I was a little girl, planes of light, an enduring world of ideas and images.

You must have come because of the story in *The Times.* I regret that it ran, and I did not cooperate. Of all human frailties, I abhor pity and sentimentality the most, and that article made me out to be some sacred monster, lordly over the inner kingdoms of the world. If I had known what that man would write, I could have told him how much easier it is to catch the vapored breath of a snail than the heart of a woman like me.

I did not ask to be trapped inside what passes for my body. But this paralysis of my muscle and tissue has not yet spread into my brain, and so I can sit with you on this pleasant afternoon and try to turn you toward some image, something nearer who I might be or might have been.

I require help. Jane will come in periodically to ask, and she will act as if you are not here. She is devoted to me, has been for all the years of this long slope toward motionlessness and silence. The rules are these: I will talk and you will listen. My voice as you can tell is wind on dry husks. The sound of rain on wet ashes.

Many years ago, I believed that we humans have the unassailable joy of freedom. I began to whisper it at first, then say it out loud, in the village in the late Teens, then in magazines and finally in books. I dared to live as my instincts dictated, and this was called controversy.

The man from *The Times* said that I was the High Priestess of the Lost Generation. What nonsense. I was nothing more than a woman with peculiar ideas, out of my time, and with the facility to express myself. Most people fear a woman who can express herself clearly. Now you want to pry that life farther apart for your magazine. What could you hope to find here?

I am in the position of graves now. Since I cannot stand, I cast no shadow. I can see sunlight and rain and anything which flies in that window or anything passing before my eyes in this room. All else is the wrack of memory. I who read Proust, shortly before he died, felt precious and fragile and long past anything which must breathe. But he understood where life ended and memory began, that anything not past is unworthy.

And so I value the wingstrokes of chickadees more than the whir of your recorder. I value Jane's help of yesterday more than news of my elevation into the presence of the elder gods. I can tell by your expression that you believe I am dissembling, possibly senile, even vindictive. So wrong. You want to go immediately to the killing, to wrench from me the night when the crystal globe of my life shattered. Very well.

Paris was in bloom. The horse chestnuts were overhanging sidewalks with their pale green shadows, and motorcars sloshed the most recent rain toward the bookstores and fabric shops I haunted. Nothing in my life sustains me more than that image. The aroma of water and soil, horses and bolts of cloth, old leather, both oiled and cracked. Sylvia Beach was so beautiful then, and we all adored her, men and women.

My first novel, *The Darker Room,* had just come to critical acclaim. Tell me, am I getting this in proper inverted pyramid style so you can take it down easily? Or should I jumble the facts, obscure the literal meaning? You decide. Do not mistake this for irritation on my part; since I barely have life, I hold art to my faint heartbeat now with a furious jealousy. That novel had made my fame among the expatriates in Paris, and even Hemingway, whom I loathed, had a kind word at a party give by Ford Maddox Ford.

The young man's name was not Thomas Arville, as you might have read in several books on that gaudy period. I did know a man with that name, but he arrived from God knows where, spent several days with Scott and Zelda, then disappeared. He was the kind of man with no character to his face but who wormed his way into every conversation. The man I really killed was an Alsatian named Yves Cotard.

I have kept that name private now for these seventy years, not out of shame or fear, but from a desire to protect the sense of privacy you feel it necessary to invade. But now that I am approaching history myself, now that the clock has caught me in its tender tickings, I see no harm.

Yves was a fisherman who cast his nets upon the Seine. He was tall and handsome but with a fatal quality of dissolution. He had literary ambitions. He wrote terribly naive poetry and tried to sell it to Krebs Friend or others of the literary circles. He once tricked Joyce into bringing Nora for dinner at a small restaurant then thrust this sheaf of terrible poems at him,

somehow believing the author of *Ulysses* might share his fame like a Thanksgiving dinner. Joyce was confused, but Nora effected their escape, and Yves's conduct was being chatted over the next day, a scandalous thing.

I was living then with Celeste Hunter in a small cold-water flat in the Latin Quarter, and now, many years after Celeste has been swept into that other world, her sweet gaze haunts me. She loved hot pastries and kirsch. We laughed and strolled the autumn streets arm in arm, watched the rain from cafe windows as we drank strong coffee and talked of our certainly impending fame. She was an artist, you see, and her metier was pen and ink. She was from Mississippi, a girl with huge dark blue eyes and hair the color of that season. We sang with the drunks at the Bal Musette. We danced on drizzly nights, went to museums, and sighed over the brilliance of new images.

But for Yves, it would have all continued. I tell myself that now, just as I tell myself those wingstrokes will always continue. Each fragile lie we tell ourselves is a gift; I lavish them upon this sunken heart. I deliberately told *The Times* that I had never met the man before that night. It is not true. We had spoken a week before when he'd come into a cafe, spotted me, and sat uninvited at my table. I as afraid. My heart was a bubble that drifted through my chest, ready to dissolve.

"You, you are a novelist," he said.

"Yes," I said. I watched his eyes. He was mad for experience, for fame, for this world.

"You must help me," he said.

I stared at him for a long moment, grasped my purse, and dashed into the dark afternoon without even paying my bill. My feet trembled. They danced without a tune, back to the apartment. I did not tell Celeste, nor did I tell Sylvia Beach or anyone else. I passed Ford, wheezing his way down the sidewalk, and he did not recognize me. I remember the strong aroma of tobacco about him.

Days passed. I forgot Yves, luxuriated in the benevolence of Celeste's arms, worked every day on my next novel, lived a small life on the money from my father's trust. Ezra Pound invited me to tea, and he kept rubbing his beard and talking rapidly about Remy de Gourmont and George Antheil. He played his bassoon, and the racket was terrible, while Dorothy swept around the room like a timid saint, wondering if I wished any more tea. I did not.

It was that day. Of no use to Pound, he finally dismissed me, and Dorothy showed me to the door. I walked for hours until it was nearly dark. I got home as the lamps were being lit and slowly ascended the stairwell to our apartment, sure of a meager meal and laughter later, inexpensive wines, our twin breath in the room.

I let myself in, and voices escaped from the room, a brief sound like steam from the kettle just as it boils and you take it off the heat. A heavy

blue coat was on the frail chairs we had bought, and I smelled a man's presence. I as breathing raggedly, the world upended with stark clarity, and I stepped softly to the doorway of our small bedroom and saw them there, Celeste and Yves. I stumbled away, hearing their cries, hearing Celeste say, hurry, hurry, she will be back soon. The room was terribly cold, the fire of the night before a bare memory. The only thing in the room I saw was the iron poker in its cradle, blackened from the flames.

Or was it a gun on the table I saw? Could I have walked into the alcove and taken the knife for our occasional hen and sliced his throat? Could you draw the rest of this picture for your readers, and let me lie here and watch the sparrows swimming in that glorious river of clouds?

You are smiling at me. You believe that I will tell the truth, and you will write it down. You will arrange the truth, describe what a woman gone in such age looks like. I am not a high priestess if I lie. I have only outlived my context. That is my penalty.

The iron poker came into my hands. I do not say that I lifted it, because there was no will; I merely found myself in the room, holding it, staring at it, moving without breath back toward them. Or, more properly, the bedroom moved toward me, and each color of each object was broken down, and swirling patterns of light pulsed over me. Then I saw Celeste's eyes.

I was gliding into the bedroom, arms over my head. I held it up like a baton. Had I missed his head, the poker might have gone through the bed, frame, floor, house, and earth. I felt something past anger, you understand. I do not remember bringing it down. Suddenly, swiftly, I was on my knees next to the bed, and Celeste was screaming. His expression was stupid, mouth working, and blood came from his ear like a faucet. He rolled once in a deep shudder.

When Celeste pushed from under him, stood, her dress falling back down, she could not stop screaming. His body moved slightly again, and I saw the terrible hole in his skull. I could have touched the pulpy dura mater.

Men arrived. Then the police. I told them that Celeste was being assaulted and that I had killed the man. Everyone on the boulevards believed me. Celeste moved away from me, and I went to the country, not far from Lyons, and grew asters and daisies.

I came back to Paris a year later, and they feared me. A most gentle woman, kind and bookish. They did not understand that some phantom impulse had taken my arms upon that man, not mere jealousy, something holy. I went back to the flat where Celeste and I had lived, and it was deteriorating and vacant. Pigeons fluttered and cooed in the bedroom. The boards sipped rain through the broken windows.

I was not ashamed. I began my magazine then, but by the early Thirties, all was changed. Adrienne Monier was kind, but even Sylvia was cool. Ezra Pound moved to Rapallo, and George Antheil went out of style.

You look down upon me now as Jane is turning me and wonder, could this woman have lived such a life? Perhaps not. Perhaps my life is my worst novel, the one whose plot includes wingstrokes but, alas, no murders.

You will get back to your desk and try to put this life and that death into their order. They have none, young man. Look out there at the sea and tell me where it begins. Go ask anything with a shell or fins if it has ever heard my name.

Jacqueline Hartwich

After Heated Words, the Snow

The snow started in my sleep
and grew silent drifts in the room
I dreamed. It whitened each flat

surface of chairs and tables
until they rose too high, too calm:
gates closing, saying, *just wait*

until we move. You can do nothing.
So cold, it sculpted me a tomb-
woman with arms outstretched, frozen

open. Next day, I walk outside
in dangerous new snow. It hones
the tree limbs into knives that cut

clouds into gray funnels. Salal bushes,
ice-stiff, rake the path. My numb
footprints fill, then erase behind me.

A branch explodes and falls, spraying
crystals. I am suddenly shot through,
burning, and I see your head crack open.

There must be some place you and I
can meet between *wait* and *gone.*
If we could enter the same dream,

come in from the storm, brush the snow
from each other's eyes, call this home
close to the fire. Asking is a thrown spark

that hurts less if you catch it. Taking
requires more: you leave the layered cold
and meet where the wood melts into light.

Mary Winters

two poems

Red Overcoming

Assault in your city neighborhood
in over-chic florist shops
at the flower stand on the corner
run by a couple of grizzled bookmakers
even in dime store windows among the
genuine plastic everythings: flowers

just too big and just too gorgeous—
chief offenders red amaryllis in pots
alone or in marauding groups
just the masked bud starting to attack or
full-grown wicked beautiful defeating you

their huge and troubling glamour a
slap in the face; you've been taunted
battered, left crushed and without hope—

little old everyday you.

So with that crimson holiday sweater
emblazoned with pearls and sequins
rubies emeralds sapphires diamonds
golden braid—lovely but refuting

it's just too much to live up to.

You'd need red red lipstick exactly
the color of those amaryllis
red that would finally force him to hear:

kiss me hard—and now.

Vision

Very modestly entertaining
nature trail, Cape Cod—
behind the pearl-gray post office,
Yarmouthport: just some
undemanding sandy paths through
low pine forest and
a guileless little lake . . . you

can't even get lost back there.

Rough-made bench by lake
a weathered board on
two barkless stumps; you moped
there one sunny August—saw
dozens of motionless frogs
suspended dazed-happy
in the shallow part; all those
tiny bumps in pairs at first you
just couldn't believe they were

something as precious as eyes.

Nan Fry

The Mother-and-Child Riddle

I.
Once there was a woman hungry for the world.
She couldn't have the world, they told her,
but she could have a man. So she married
a man of the world. He brought her diamonds,
rubies, emeralds. He put them on her fingers,
her ears, and her breast until
she shone with a cold fire.
He spent his days in the world
and came to her only at night.
Day after day she sat alone and grew pale.
She put her jewels away for she feared
their dazzle eclipsed her.
At night when she lay beside her husband,
she felt her edges blurring.
Then something began to grow in her.
Like the oyster, she created
from herself, her pain.

She rocked her pearl like the ocean,
held him in a milky dream,
and she found she could be the world,
the sun and the sky to her child.

But he grew, skinny tadpole,
jumping out of her lap and into
the world. At first he always
came back, bringing his trophies—
insects, marbles, cut knees, gold stars.
She'd bandage and kiss his scrapes
but she didn't like his other prizes.

The cuts healed and he grew tall.
One day when he was out, she made up a song
and sang it to him when he returned:

Little fish, little fish,
once you swam inside me.

When you swam out, I
fed you from the oceans

within me. You were the moon
pulling on my tides,
and I was your earth, your sun
and the sky that held you.

Now you're sturdy as a tree
and you walk away from me.

When he said nothing, she grew angry.
"Say my name," she said. "I thought
I was mother-of-pearl, but I seem
to be mother-of-a-tree." When he still
said nothing, she turned him into a tree
and went back to her jewels.
She collected them—diamonds,
sapphires—all the hard
brilliants. She wore them on her fingers,
put them in her hair until she glittered,
a forest of ice at sunset.

Her son grew in a green forest.
When the bark first hardened around him,
he was afraid. He tried to run,
to break through the woody prison
of his skin. Gradually his pulse
slowed and he let himself be comforted
by the twitter of birds making nests
in his branches. He tunneled
through soil, reaching
for the moisture of buried rivers.
His root tips sent out threads,
weaving a net that nourished him.

When his mother felt loneliness grow
in her like a weed, she'd strip
off her jewels, walk in the woods,
and visit the tree who was her son.
"I did this," she'd think, and marvel
at her power—her gangling boy,
who was always running off,
stilled.

She watched her son grow from a sapling
to a many-branched tree. She'd sit
in his shade and listen to the birds,

the small rustlings. She'd fall asleep
and dream of robbers taking her jewels,
of birds flying off with her rings
in their beaks. Panicked, she'd wake
and feel her arms and fingers bare.
Then she'd remember where she was,
relax, and sleep again.
Once she dreamt of being clothed
in moss and leaves. A light dew
fell, and the drops caught
the sun, covering her body
with hundreds of rainbows.
She woke damp but refreshed
and walked home slowly,
noticing the other trees,
the veins in each leaf, the green
light pouring through.

II.
One night, a girl, lost and bloody,
running from a robbery, crept
into the hollow of a tree.
She dreamt of underground rivers,
of fishing with a net woven from roots.
Casting, she caught a fish that gleamed
milky white in the darkness. She was afraid
to touch it, and when she did, it turned
into a dove and flew up to a branch.
Another joined it. They told her
to kiss the tree she'd slept in
and flew off, wings whirring.

She woke cramped and aching,
crawled out of her hollow,
and saw, from water glistening
on leaves, that it had rained.
Grateful for her shelter, she patted
the tree's shaggy bark and felt it
grow smooth under her hand.
She stroked the tree, and its bark
softened wherever she touched.
She heard the cooing of doves,
closed her eyes, and kissed the trunk.
The tree creaked and shuddered.
When she opened her eyes, a man

thanked her for breaking the spell.

And what of the mother? In the old stories
doves would pluck out her eyes or she'd be forced
to wear iron shoes heated red in the fire.
This mother goes barefoot, her eyes full
of earth's green light.
She realized she couldn't have
the world, but she could live in it,
a mother of trees.
She plants them as she walks,
scattering seeds like pearls,
like the jewels she left behind.
She beds them down in dark soil
and goes on, mother of root, branch
and leaf scar, mother of winged
pairs of seeds.

Her son, supple and pithy, and the woman
of the forest went to see the world together.
But it hasn't been easy. Sometimes he stiffens,
feels the old fear slow the blood in his veins.
And she remembers what happened before
she crept, lost and bleeding, into his hollow.
They draw apart then, let their roots down
into the dark soil, the underground rivers.
They've grown like two trees whose crowns
are separate but join to make a green, leafy shade.
Between them is a lively commerce of squirrels.

Jean LeBlanc

All in Good Time

"People come and go so quickly around here," says a perplexed Dorothy as Glinda, the good witch of the north, soap-bubbles off into the Munchkinland horizon. That could be a motto for our times. It's not the coming and going that is objectionable (after all, stagnation and sloth is no one's idea of happiness). It's the quickness of it all that has me as perplexed as Dorothy.

I wonder if every generation of humankind has complained about the speed its "modern times" has imposed. Did the invention of the wheel cause the shaking of a few heads in dismay, a few mumbles of "things will never be the same"? No doubt a couple of ancient Luddites grumbled about the improvements to horse-drawn carts, chariots, even sandals—anything that increased the hustle and bustle of daily life.

Speed and change seem to have become monsters we could not stop if we wanted to. Even the speed at which change occurs increases: The transition from horse and buggy to automobile to flying machine to spacecraft has taken less than three generations. We barely pause long enough to listen to the statistics: destruction of rain forest, westward and southward expansion of the Sahara Desert, drainage of wetlands, logging of old-growth trees, spilling of oil—so many acres per day, so many square miles of "undeveloped" land "developed," so much pollution. I go to sleep at night afraid I'll wake up the next day, look out the window and see a moonscape dotted with backhoes and dumptrucks and figures clad from head to toe in white chemical-proof suits.

I almost admire those who have become militant in their fight against this destruction. I say "almost" because I am at heart a coward, and anything militant makes me uneasy. But when I think of the moonscape outside my window, I can almost understand the use of force in trying to save even a tenth of a mile of marshland. If unspoiled habitats for wildlife and a clean environment for our children are the desired end, then the end justifies the means, right? Except that's the philosophy that got us into this mess.

I am far from militant in my actions. I contribute meager sums to a couple of environmental groups, and I see my contributions come back to me in publications and more solicitations. I write essays in which I hope to describe the beauty and wonder of this planet's flora, fauna, and geology; but these essays, I fear, are preaching to the converted. Perhaps my best work has been the walks I've taken with my young nephew who, when he gets older, may find the solution to the dilemmas posed by overpopulation, squandering of resources, and damage caused by our presence on this planet. And if he can't discover a way to resolve the problems of several generations' worth of pollution, at least he will be able to tell his children

what a few little parts of this planet were like before it all turned to moonscape.

❦

When we camped in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom, the logging operations made the mountains look mangy in places, but there were relatively unspoiled tracts of second-growth forest. The habitat was rich enough to support a variety of life from deer and moose and their predators to smaller creatures. I've heard people sneer at Vermont's audacity in calling the area a "kingdom," but I never questioned the term. The northeast corner of Vermont (and many other areas of the state, too) is a kingdom, not in the political or religious sense, of course, but in a way that transcends the arrogance and imposition of power that we usually associate with the word.

The naturalist-in-residence at the campground organized a day's hike up a small mountain. Our group consisted of the naturalist, myself and my nephew, and a troop of boy scouts and the men with them. An old lookout tower and cabin still stood on the mountaintop, relics of the days when watching for forest fires was a way to earn a living in these parts. I don't recall the name or elevation of the mountain. It never broke tree line and the hike up took an hour or less, I think. Maybe not even that long. But by the time I got to the top, it seemed like I had just climbed Everest.

When I made it to the clearing at the summit, the naturalist and the boy scouts were already climbing the stairs of the lookout tower, disappearing into the shroud of mist and steady rain. Wobbly knees, fear of heights, and no grand view as a reward for the effort convinced me to take a much-needed breather on the porch of the cabin. The naturalist, boy scouts, my nephew, and most of the men had made it to the summit long before I did. Only two near-obese men were behind me.

If this sounds more like a race than a hike, that is exactly what it felt like. I can understand the natural energy of ten-year-old boys, and I'm not at all surprised at their ability to run up the side of a mountain and climb a tower to celebrate. I did all I could to stay within sight of the naturalist, but it didn't take long for this seasoned hiker to disappear far ahead of me on the steep trail. He did slow down once, and when I came up behind him he pointed out a particularly muddy spot on the none-too-dry trail. Minutes earlier this spot had been a bear track. By the time I saw it, it was the slip and slide marks of a bunch of energetic young boys.

I soon found myself alone on the trail, almost too tired to be scared, rain-soaked on my lower legs and feet and sweat-drenched under my waterproof poncho. I must have been walking on instinct. At one point I seriously considered crawling under some saplings and ferns on the side of the trail, figuring I couldn't get any wetter than I was and that I could rest there until everyone came back down.

I have a dim memory of the trail, like a dark green tunnel. My memory of the summit is as misty as the weather was; there was a large patch of

some kind of fern only found at high elevations. I have a photograph of myself, my nephew, and the naturalist on the porch of the cabin; otherwise, I doubt I'd remember what the porch looked like. All I knew at the time was that it was dry. After I'd had a chance to sit for a few minutes, I was glad I didn't make a fool of myself by doing something stupid like throwing up.

I remember little of what was said as we all sat on the porch. The naturalist did explain that the cabin was still used by someone (rangers, I think he said) which would explain the neatly stacked pile of fresh-cut wood in the photo I have. I also remember, as we started back down, my nephew impressing the naturalist by identifying a wood thrush that was singing in the clearing.

Even with the mud, going down was much easier. About halfway, however, I suddenly realized that I had no idea where my nephew was. I couldn't remember if he had passed me with some of the other boys, or if he was still behind me on the trail. I tried to reassure myself with the thought that there were no side trails on which he could veer off in the wrong direction. My mind, however, was as muddy as the trail. I began to imagine him running down the trail, falling, breaking his leg. Then I pictured him being attacked by a bear. Then I knew for certain he'd somehow get separated from the other boys and wander off the trail, never to be seen again.

By now, I was running down the side of the mountain. I think I was far ahead of the naturalist. I passed one or two of the men and asked them if they had seen my nephew. Whatever answer they gave me just set me going even faster down. I decided to get to the bottom as fast as I could even though my nephew might still be behind me; I reasoned that I'd either find him there or be able to narrow down the number of places where he wasn't.

He was at the bottom, safe and sound. I was safe but not sound, and I took him aside and chewed him out for getting that far away from me on the trail. I either ruined his day, or else he forgot about it in that remarkable way kids have of overlooking the stupid things grownups do. Either way, I did no good for either of us by admonishing him while I was still shaking from exhaustion.

A few grainy photographs and the memory of a dark green muddy tunnel: That's what I have to show for my hike up that mountain in the Northeast Kingdom. I hope my nephew has better memories, something more than the rain and his hysterical aunt.

He and I have taken many other walks in the woods, all of which have gone better because we've gone more slowly. We've taken time, he and I, to stop and examine the animal tracks in the mud at the edge of a reservoir near my parent's house. We've taken time to sit and watch the birds. One summer we returned day after day to the same spot to see how the receding water level changed the look and feel of the place. The water got so low that the shore had a strange stillness to it. In places it looked like—like a moonscape, with oddly shaped stones and cracked, mud-caked ground. But

this moonscape was inhabited by turtles, herons, sandpipers, raccoons, beaver, mergansers, towhees, and chipmunks. The strange stillness that we usually felt there was the result of noontime heat. Ripples in the water and thousands of tracks in the mud were evidence that this place was, at times, anything but still. All we had to do was wait.

A swimming hole and wild blackberries didn't do much to encourage patient observation. My nephew and I saw a great deal, however, as we walked slowly along the water's edge and through the woods. I'll always remember the heron prints at the water's edge, prints longer than my nephew's or my own hand. I'm sure he'll always remember the small snapping turtle we nearly stepped on in a puddle of trapped water in a rocky stream, and the way I picked the snapper up by the tail and carried it to open water. We still talk about the beaver we saw swimming in the reservoir one day; we both like to imagine that the beaver lives there even now. My nephew and I talk about these times. Our stories of beaver, duck eggs, fish in the swimming hole have become part of our family lore. We never talk about that race up and down the mountain in Vermont.

Time is never wasted by itself; waste of something else always occurs at the same time.

"Hike" became a dirty word for me after that experience in Vermont. A few years later, this time in west-central Vermont, a friend asked me to hike the trails that snake through the Green Mountains. He planned to climb Bread Loaf Mountain, about an eight-mile walk round trip. Despite his reassurances that I could do this with no problem, I could only remember that dark green tunnel. When I told him of my fear, he confirmed something I had felt ever since that race up the mountain: The naturalist was a jerk for not pacing himself down to accommodate the ability of the slower, less-experienced walkers.

I did hike up Bread Loaf Mountain with my friend, and, despite wobbly knees on the way down, I felt exhilarated, not exhausted. We stopped often to look at gnarled trees, quartz-flecked stone, wildflowers, bright orange newts. We sat atop Bread Loaf Mountain and drank tea and ate peanuts, cheese, and raisins. Below us, swirling rain clouds competed with the sun for dominance over the lowlands. Time stood still.

Time is never wasted by itself; waste of something else always occurs at the same time. "Time is money," says the oil company executive scoffing at the thought of two people sitting on a mountain watching the clouds. "Save our environment now," says the protester. "I thought I was going for a walk, not a jog," says a weary hiker. For a species so obsessed with time, why are we at such odds about what to do with it?

It comforts us to think that our planet conforms to neat cycles, twenty-four hours per day, three hundred sixty-four days per year. Then presto, the planet is right back in the same spot it was last January 1, ready to begin

the orderly journey around the sun again. But Earth has its own rules, and every four years we must add a day to our calendar to compensate for our inaccurate division of time. And as if our calendar manipulations weren't enough trouble, several decades ago Einstein pointed out a few facts about the nature of time and speed that absolutely floored us. We had thought we had the time and speed thing covered with Newton. Our three-dimensional world was now complicated by a fourth dimension: space-time. Now we must constantly remind ourselves that everything is relative.

I walk slowly now whenever possible, slowly enough to see the path ahead as more than just a dark green tunnel. I walk slowly and let peripheral distractions catch my attention: a hawk perched in a tree, early morning sunlight on a pond, crystals in the rocks at my feet. Everyone, it seems, walks faster than I do. I don't care. I see more birds, more sunlight, more crystals.

How many people race through life seeing little more than a dark tunnel, remembering little about where they have just been and stumbling blindly on to another place they won't remember? I am haunted by that dark green tunnel, that unpleasant and potentially dangerous race up the mountain. We are all guilty of tunnel vision at some time. If we do not slow down, we might just wake one morning to find that the people with the deadliest tunnel vision have turned our world into moonscapes. There will be no footprints of those slower creatures—herons, raccoons, beavers—in the contaminated mud. And not long after that, there will be no more footprints of *Homo sapiens,* those creatures who once came and went so quickly around here.

Penny Harter

two poems

Moon Over the Sangre de Cristos

Across great distance, the moon
touches my forehead.
Threads of light pull me
toward this ancient god
who scatters blue fire
on the snow.

These mountains have not forgotten
how to pray.
They press their cold, lit faces
to the sky, offering
all they have.

Wind rises,
swirling white clouds
from dark boughs of spruce,
singing up slopes of bare aspen.

I give it my warm breath.

The Llano

Stark as piñon,
cows graze the horizon,
adrift in a field of light.

Around them, mountains
hold sky on dark flanks,
ancient muscles rippling
under the sun.

Above the cows a storm gathers,
herding lightning around the pasture
purple as twilight.

As the Earth tilts toward night,
the hills turn to blood,
and we come home,
kicking the dust of the road
into starlight.

S. Ramnath

Los Angeles, April 1992

the snake moves
in concentric circles,
in orbits that are decades apart,
with its venom, an old argument,
always in the center

and when it strikes
the whole city dresses in yellow and orange,
and red, which is the color of rage

there is no reveler in the street,
no child with wreath and olive branch:
they are sleeping in the chamber of the snake's song

the buildings are dressed like widows,
they are wearing black hats of smoke,
the street is a river of glass

it is a night we shall always remember

in the distance, as far as Golgotha,
the sound of hammer has robbed the women of speech;
the sap of all wood is stained.

Paul Pekin

All You Can Eat

In the beginning I mistook the gunfire for thunder—it was distant and away and jumbled together like a low growl—but lately I'd been making out single high shots that exploded in the air and shook the trees.

"All you can eat!" Grandma was pulling on her white gloves. Andy and Lucille were heaped before the television. Jessica was still in the bathroom.

Grandma had seen an ad in the *Tribune*. "You see here? All you can eat for $5.95."

None of us wanted to go. We no longer cared to eat out, not even at the Happy Day Inn. I had wanted to barbecue some chicken wings down by the lake where the kids could throw a line into the water and Jessica and I could bask on a blanket and pretend that many good things still remained. But there was Grandma to consider. I felt my paunch, which was heavy and creeping over my belt, and I thought that I did not need all I could eat. None of us did. Jessica was packing it in around the hips, the kids were fat as butter, and Grandma should have been on salad. Even the dog walked with a curious overweight waddle.

When Jessica came out of the bathroom, Grandma helped her adjust the flower on her hat. Jessica had been dressing all morning, changing outfits and jewelry and combing her hair until at last she had aged herself ten years. It would have been different down by the lake. She would have worn something casual and loose and she would have left her hair alone and I might have, as the day wore on, put my arm around her.

Breathless, dedicated, Grandma picked lint from her daughter's shoulder. "I called for reservations," she announced.

The Happy Day Inn could serve thousands and thousands and never fill up. Their parking lot is a stadium, their dining room a barracks, their kitchen a factory. An entire town could dine in the Happy Day Inn without a reservation.

I went out on the porch and listened to the gunfire. It seemed strange that no one else spoke of it. The Jaspersons came down the walk in their Sunday outfits, waved unconcernedly, and drove away. Mrs. Jasperson wore a purple flower on her breast. Suddenly I was nervous, anxious to get the afternoon over. I started the car and sat there racing the motor, exactly like one of those impatient middle-aged men I hate so much.

At last they came, Grandma walking slowly and carefully, helping herself on the porch railings, Jessica behind, looking like a stranger, and the kids. Andy had a book in his coat pocket and Lucille was carrying her transistor radio.

At that moment there was a terrifying explosion off to the south.

"Was that thunder?" Grandma asked.

"It sounded like fireworks," Jessica said. "It's getting close to the Fourth of July."

"It's the Dago carnival," Andy said. "Why can't we go there instead?"

Everyone got into the car. In the rearview mirror a great pink flower, part of her Sunday hat, blocked my view. "Do you know how to get there?" Jessica asked, a certain tension in her voice. "Of course," I said between my teeth, and that is the way it is between us at times.

Lucille turned on her radio.

The news was flipped away at once but not before I heard something—jumbled and indistinct—about the eleventh airborne and advancing forces and a statement the mayor would read later in the day. Then we had music, or what passes for it today, and I could not understand the words to the songs.

At every stoplight I turned and looked into the other cars. The women all wore flowers and their men had expensive ties knotted around their throats. They looked at me and I looked at them and we raced our engines, waiting for the green.

"It's a good thing I made reservations," Grandma said.

Outside the city we began to come upon the restaurants, in plastic, in glass, in imitation stone and redwood logs with fine cars parked around them. Oh, the restaurants! Charbroiled Steak. Country Style Eggs. Flaming Barbecue. All you can eat!

The sound of gunfire softened until I found myself concentrating on its memory. Outside of DesPlaines I made a wrong turn. "You should have gone left," Jessica said, and I said, "I'll go around the block." We went down a winding road with homes on one side and factories on the other and trees bending down over our heads. "The reservation is for three o'clock," Jessica said, and I took a side road where, as luck would have it, the blacktop soon turned into gravel and then dirt and finally came to a dead end before a huge fenced-in factory with no one around it. Warning signs said DANGER! HIGH EXPLOSIVES! and a smokestack poured yellow smoke into the sky. In the back seat Lucille opened a Snickers candy bar. "Don't ruin your appetite," Grandma warned.

So we had to go back just as we had come, back to the gravel surface, back to the blacktop, back to the original road where I had made the wrong turn which now proved to be less than a half mile from the Happy Day Inn.

"They'll hold the reservation," I said.

Grandma opened her purse and studied her wristwatch. She had broken the band three years ago and never had it fixed. "There won't be anything left. It will be all picked over."

Briefly—we must have passed through a "dead zone"—Lucille's little radio grew silent and I could hear the guns again. They made a low rumble like a freight train passing far off at night.

Suddenly Grandma cried out, "There it is!" A handsome sign sparked at the side of the road. HAPPY DAY INN! A man in green overalls waved me into

the parking lot with a rolled up newspaper. I turned into a wrong lane and he shouted, politely, but nevertheless he shouted, and the women began to scream and Andy, my son, my only son, called me a dumbbell, and Lucille kept her radio turned loud.

I said a certain word.

"You can be polite for one afternoon," Jessica said.

"Down that way, sir," the attendant ordered, and I could see that he regarded me as a child. Very humbly, very obediently, I drove down a narrow lane, first leaving my family out by the doorway of the Happy Day Inn. It was a hellishly big parking lot and Grandma no longer had stamina for any kind of a walk. When I was parked and alone, I am afraid I took a bottle out of my glove compartment and had a good snort.

On the way back I could hear the firing again. I asked another guy who was walking with me if he heard it. "Hear what?" he said.

"That gunfire," I said. "Take a deep breath and be quiet and you can hear it."

He was wearing a narrow-brim hat and a purple blazer. He may have been fifty. "I don't hear anything," he said.

Jessica, Grandma, and the kids were already at their places when I sat down. A red-haired waitress handed me a menu.

"Never mind the menu," Grandma said. "We'll take all we can eat."

And she laughed that high crackling laugh that I hate so much. I knew all the other diners must be watching, and to be sure, they were. I looked up and saw their eyes turn away. The clatter of silver started up again and filled the room.

"She is an old woman," Jessica whispered. I did not dispute that.

This immense room was jammed with people clashing their silverware against the china to the accompaniment of piped-in music. There was a great table in the center of it and a line of men, women, and children steadily worked around and around it. We took our plates and joined them. "You can go back as often as you want," Grandma said. Andy complained that his plate was too small. "All you can eat," Grandma said. "All you can eat."

"Take this," she whispered, tugging at my elbow. "It has shrimp, get your money's worth." I was looking for something simple, something pure, a few slices of cheese, some ham and cottage cheese. "Don't take that stuff," Grandma ordered. "You can get it at home. She actually cracked Andy on the knuckles with a tablespoon when he reached for a piece of sausage.

Andy was right: The plates were too small. A sardine, a bit of macaroni salad, and you had to sit down. "But that's only a sardine," Grandma cried. "You can have that at home!" Then she slopped something she claimed contained oysters over my salad and put a stuffed pepper on Jessica's plate.

Jessica and Grandma passed morsels back and forth, tasting. "Try it," Jessica insisted, pointing a spoon at my lips. "It's crabmeat." I felt as if

thousands were watching. “Eat,” Grandma commanded. “Get your money’s worth.”

I was full after the first plate, but I went back to make it look good. Grandma was getting more and more excited—her dentures were clacking together and her breath was coming in hard little snorts. “Look! Fried chicken!” I took a thigh and a small sausage and some baked beans and then I saw a bit of smoked fish which looked good and, while I was breaking off a piece, I saw the cabbage salad right next to the deviled eggs. “That’s it!” Grandma cried.

Throughout the great room people were rising, filling their plates, sitting and emptying them. All you can eat, all you can eat. I heard it from every side now. I began to eat a little faster.

Grandma was eating like a racehorse, shoveling food with both hands, chomping down on radishes, spitting out olive seeds, squirting tomatoes, dribbling mayonnaise. I looked at Jessica. She had a taste of everything on her platter, a colorful collage of calories. She was sampling, tasting, offering. She even offered a spoonful of jello to a baldheaded man at the next table, and I’ll be darned if he didn’t take it.

Lucille was still listening to her radio. Love, love, love, it sang while she filled her mouth with angelfood cake. Andy was finishing his ninth piece of chicken, his round belly beginning to swell. “That’s it!” Grandma cried. “All you can eat.”

I sat quietly for a minute, listening for the sound of gunfire. All I could make out was the chomping of thousands of frantic jaws and the radio singing love, love, love. Then I went back to the big table.

This time I found the roast beef. Then I saw the cold cut platter and the stuffed celery and the greek olives and a frosted doughnut that looked good. “All you can eat,” I cried to Grandma who was returning for another load. “All you can eat,” I shouted to Jessica when I sat down. Then I noticed that she was crying.

“Here. Taste.” I offered her a greek olive. Her eyes widened and the tears stopped. She offered me a taste of creamed asparagus. It was very good.

Lucille went back for more cake, and I picked up her transistor radio. Quickly flipping the dial, I found the news. Static, a few muffled words. Heavy casualties. Enemy claims. Fire warning. Citizen’s alert. Then Lucille returned and the radio went back to love, love, love.

Grandma was on her seventh dish. So was Andy. Jessica, having sampled everything, was talking to me, but her words were lost in a sea of belchings, slurpings, clatterings, sighs and dribbles. It was time to go to the bathroom.

“By the bar,” Jessica said. She had checked the location when we came in. Jessica is good at things like that. I walked heavily and slowly through the dining room. When I passed the big center table I picked up a chicken wing. I was still chewing on it when I walked into the bar.

A television set was operating on the wall. I recognized the newscaster and took a seat.

"What'll you have?" The bartender stood before me, hands on the counter. I hesitated. The television was saying something about limited evacuation.

It was getting dark in the parking lot. I had not realized that it took so long to eat all you can eat.

The man next to me spoke. "Come on, Charlie. Get the game on." The news disappeared. A football game replaced it, both teams in brilliant color.

"Hey, what's this?" I said. "How can they have football in June?"

"Exhibition game. Going to be a good one." The man next to me turned his back and began talking to a woman with pure platinum hair.

I had my drink and went into the bathroom where two enormous mirrors on either side reflected my fat middle-aged image back and forth, over and over again. I was infinite.

Someone had puked into the urinal. Despite the clean lilac scent of perfumed antiseptic, someone had puked. I went into one of the stalls and raised the plastic toilet seat. As I stood there pissing, I saw that someone who owned a red felt-tip pen had written these words at eye level on the wall. THE END OF LIFE IS A GOOD FUCK! Below, a dissenter had written, "I suck cocks. 253–2210." On the way back to our table, darned if I didn't pick up another piece of chicken.

"Wasn't that lovely?" Grandma said when the waitress brought our check. We had had all we could eat. We walked out of the dining room and another family took our place. Jessica showed me her purse. She had copped the entire bowl of breadsticks. Grandma brandished the doggy bag she had filled. It was dripping and full of dangerous-looking chicken bones. "Take it home for our dog," she said. "Poor thing."

It was getting dark in the parking lot. I had not realized that it took so long to eat all you can eat. I walked alone to the car while the family waited by the entrance of the Happy Day Inn, dabbing at their lips with bits of Kleenex. Now, in the quiet country night, the sounds of the big guns were quite clear and sharp. I lit a cigarette and leaned against my car, listening.

That night I stood on my front porch. The glow of flames rose in the southwest. The sky seemed to tremble. Above me, I heard the whoosh of great jet airplanes, rhythmic and regular. They must have been landing at O'Hare. The firing was getting frantic. I saw the Jaspersons pull up and park beneath the streetlight. Mrs. Jasperson waved and they went into the house. Then everything was quiet on our block except for a couple of cats screwing in the alley. I went inside. The kids were in bed. Jessica was watching TV, a late night movie about World War II. "Well, how about it," I said. "Did you get enough to eat?"

Hours later, while we were sound asleep, the dog choked on one of the chicken bones and puked all over the rug.

Robert R Ward

two poems

In the Garden

Peas, scallions, radishes, celery, Italian
tomatoes, calendula in several variegations, all
in a plot hardly larger than a handkerchief.
Pots filled with herbs, a sage plant big

as a bush, and who would believe feral carrots
grown as ornamentals? Dear one, you lavish
care on your plants, your pup, your husband,
and we respond, growing toward a radiance

that makes us lush. And all around that
careful cultivation grows a thicket, lilac,
hazel, hawthorne, crowned by the ancient
cherry tree whose umbrellaed branches cast

comfortable shade, offer sanctuary to cheerful
birds and their songs, welcome as your smile.
Evenings we lie on a blanket, your hand
comfortably enclosed in mine, and look up

at stars that are not so far away after all.
K. C. huffs companionably nearby, and the cats
hide in their nests. Small animals rustle
through the ivy; shrews, squirrels, perhaps

a possum or two, intent on their furry
business. All around us, the city grinds
to a halt while we taste air sweet with sun-
warmed grasses and the faint scent of blooming

carnations. Time steadies itself and when
the round moon rolls up over the horizon,
its reflective light illuminates our garden,
peaceful as leaves awaiting the fall.

Forever Is Not as Long as You Might Think

Hard-edged and nearly empty, the diamond
night swallows all but stellar light; then

the void opens, opens before your eyes,
bursts toward your startled perception,

an immense tunnel engulfing a shrinking
locomotive. You are, you realize, looking

down into what may be an infinitely
expanding pit. This is not an illusion.

A vast abyss surrounds you, cold, charnel,
implacable, and its perimeters are moving away

from you at ever increasing speed. Or, trapped
by a hidden weight, dark matter indeed, this

expansion may recoil, turn back upon itself
like a snake, crush all those fine intentions.

Either way, faced by a darkness nearly eternal,
you may be pleased to observe, along the eastern

horizon, a thin blade of white, a rising, taking
its position: sun, moon, one promising

the other. Darkness, while vast, is impermanent
and has little effect upon time's

real business, which is permanent and local.

Pat Dutt Komor

A Better World

When she came early in the morning, and Ruth opened the windows—the old building had windows one could open—she'd listen to the hum of city traffic, and become uplifted by a belief that life progressed in a positive direction, that prosperity was achievable for everyone. She stopped short of calling her job cushy, although she knew many people coveted such a job. She thought the company served a purpose, although it often went about it in circuitous ways. What the company accomplished was not always good, but it was not evil, not overtly evil. At times she could convince herself that what she did added to rather than detracted from society's well being.

Ruth paid her bills on time. She called her parents once a week, long distance, and never forgot their birthdays. She always gave the company its forty hours, sometimes more, and she did not cheat on her income taxes because she believed that the money was going to good uses: to help repair broken water mains or buy new books for libraries.

Ruth was on the last contour map and she did not think there was oil in the basin, but what was important to her manager, and his manager's manager, was that the lines be smooth and the colors, bold, and eye-pleasing. Also, her suit should fit well and look neither too expensive nor too cheap. It should look neither masculine nor feminine, but it should be gray. She knew this was all on the exterior, and she believed she successfully separated her work life from her real life. In real life Ruth was a young woman of twenty-six who put on gym shorts and rode her bike around the seedier parts of downtown. It was a way of proving to herself that she did not ignore the less fortunate. Sunday mornings she sat in front of the condo's second story window, in the sun, sometimes with her boyfriend, John. He read mysteries, and she read poetry and novels.

She understood at some level that the company wanted her to put just the right vigor in her step, and not eat spiced foods the night before an important meeting. If she could successfully dumbfound her colleagues with clever application of some geological concept, all the better. Her reports would be briefly glanced at and sent to the appropriate divisions. She accepted this as the corporate way of life, although the thought sometimes brought little solace. But there was not inherent evil in their demands; their purpose was to make money, the more the better, and they did pay her quite well. Most things did cost money. She had read that the Japanese were now paying for a breath of pure air. Her office was simply furnished, but the large window that opened up, twenty-six stories above Main Street, was enviable. As she was also twenty-six years old, she believed this year would be a turning point in her life.

Ruth was in her doorway when Emma burst in. Emma, a native Texan, wore ill-fitting sundresses which made her upper arms look thick. Her dark makeup made her look old and harsh, although she was neither. She had worked for the same oil company since she graduated from high school twenty years ago.

"Do you need anything for the meeting?" Emma asked anxiously. She had a gravelly voice that sounded gentle and homey.

"I'm all set. Thanks, Emma. I'm just going to get coffee."

Ruth was trying to cut down to one cup a day, but the company was in a slow time. After the hubris of the last few years, anything would be slow. The diminishment of energy was felt at all levels. Technicians regularly called in sick. Managers came late to work, and left early. No one had been hired for a year, which was when Ruth had been hired. Working for the oil company was her first job out of college.

On her way to the meeting, Ruth bumped into her boss, Jack Burson.

"How's everything, Ruth?" Jack said in a manner that tried to be chipper, and it usually was with the other explorationists. Ruth knew Jack's effort to put her into good humor did not stem from any motive to be genuinely kind, and so she shrugged off most of what he said to her. He examined her suit and looked at her hair. Last night Ruth cut her hair and the result hadn't been very successful. In contrast, Jack looked like someone who stepped out of a fashion magazine.

Jack often told his reluctant protege things like "Be positive. Have faith. We don't have to know everything," which is exactly what he told Ruth this morning before the farmout meeting.

At the farmout meeting, Ruth helped an Australian geophysicist pin up seismic sections. The geophysicist, who had a good fifteen or twenty years on Ruth, kept dropping the push pins. Everyone was sitting at a mahogany table, examining reports and maps the Australian company had provided.

"Those are fairly deep sandstones," Kelly Melancamp said. She sat straight up and played with her pen as if she were the company president. She was even dressed like a company president, had the president been a woman. Kelly was a geophysicist, Harvard, Class of 1980. "You really think there's secondary porosity in the lower sandstone?"

The Australian tugged his shirt collar with his finger.

"Why should we drill there?" Kelly had been at the company only two years, and she was anxious for a move up.

Ruth looked down at the table, ignoring Jack Burson's prompting looks. She pretended she was taking notes.

Ruth's other boss, Clay Hooper, who had interviewed her for the position a year ago, was also watching her. The farmout meeting, which seemed to be the event of the week, brought together the various managers and supervisors. They changed division and title so often that Ruth was never really sure of the hierarchy or how much it mattered. It was advisable, however, to put your best foot forward. During her initial

interview, Clay drank numerous diet sodas, smiling painfully as if he had an abscessed tooth. Clay owned a four-bedroom brick house near the art museum and three of his four children were in private colleges in the Northeast. Ruth remembered his corner office: sunlight coming through the blinds, making precise grids on two walls. The grayish room gave a feeling of a sixties TV show. The room focused power, but the essence of power came from elsewhere. Clay Hooper's boss, Floyd Pearson, had a bigger office, heavier furniture, and a private secretary.

"Ruth," Kelly said, "what do you think?"

Ruth looked at the sections again. She was supposed to say something that proved she was astute, a clever geologist, that would make everyone exclaim what a catch she had been. "I don't know," Ruth said sheepishly.

The Australian relaxed a little. He sat down.

In six years of college, Ruth never opened her mouth unless necessary. She thought she should know more about geophysics; she gathered geophysics was as much science as art, and she knew many geophysicists couldn't agree among themselves what was what. The goal was to get your name on a prospect, and this would make the numerous bosses smile, or at least spring for donuts Friday morning.

"You must think something," Kelly said. Her blue eyes, Ruth thought, were beautiful, but impenetrable as solid ice.

Ruth thought her time would be better spent working on her maps. The meetings were an event—they brought people together—still it did not matter much what Ruth said.

"This, over here," Ruth got up, and pointed to the middle of a seismic section. Her fingers made a round motion that followed a vaguely upbowed area. "This looks like an anticline. An oil trap in the Cretaceous."

The Australian smiled.

Kelly dropped her pen and looked dismayed. The room's bright lighting made her rouge and eyeshadow thicker, as if she were wearing a mask.

Ruth sat back down. It was only money, and Ruth knew the company wasn't going to enter into a multi-million dollar deal on her say-so. Ruth had no aspirations of becoming company president, or even a manager. She was her own person. She did not worship the dollar, though she respected it.

Ruth spent the rest of the day in her office reading science journals. From her window the skyscrapers became gold, violet or rouge, depending upon the sun's brilliance and the cloud cover. Below, the vehicles and people moved in orderly fashion, at some predetermined pace, in accordance with some plan. The order and symmetry made Ruth feel that she fit somewhere, in some very minor way, but one which was essential, and so this gave her the illusion that what she was doing was right. She loved sitting at her desk, watching the world move without any interference from her. If she was in a particularly low mood, she stayed in her office all

day, trying to maintain this invisibility. Before she got coffee, she would wait for the laughter in the hallway to end. After five, when everyone was gone, she put books and papers in her backpack. If she passed someone in the hallways, she would nod a non-committal greeting, but move briskly so as to discourage small talk—saying things she did not mean, or things which had no meaning made her uneasy, making her feel as if she had failed herself.

For lunch she went to a small park near the library and ate an apple. She sat down at a stone bench and watched the construction workers and delivery man. Her co-workers ate together, at a deli or a restaurant offering a special. Fridays, they went to happy hours. She could not deny that she was envious of their ease with one another, but being alone freed her: She was accountable to no one. She accepted her solitary position, believing that sooner or later, in the right circumstances, the real Ruth would emerge, and she would be appreciated for what she truly was, rather than mistaken for what people wanted her to be. When Ruth left that night, a short Hispanic woman followed her down the hallway with her vacuum cleaner.

Outside, Ruth squinted in the bright sunlight and looked down Main Street for her bus. A black man was selling pencils. He was blind and wore dark glasses. Despite the heat, he also wore a thick coat. A sign over his chest read PENCILS FOR $1. The wide sidewalks were full of people, but they walked around the man, lifting their briefcases, adjusting their strides as if the man were a misplaced tree. The streets groaned with buses. Taxis honked. Between the man's stout legs lay a yellow dog. Maybe it was the Gulf Coast humidity that made dog's stench so powerful. Ruth had only enough change for the bus and a five dollar bill, so she passed the man up too, giving only the yellow pencils a cursory glance.

Ruth took the last empty seat on the bus, which was in front of some school children. The children's clothes were either too large or too small. One child read from a book: *America the Great Democrator.* Ruth took the bus to assert some truth about humanity, or maybe to satisfy the idea that she herself belonged to humanity. And it was only a fifteen-minute ride from downtown to John's and her condo.

Their condo was on a boundary zone between the homes of tenured professors and middle executives and the pawn shops and unpainted concrete apartments. As the bus took her past the rundown shops, the monotonous government buildings, the gutted apartments with clothes hanging on tree branches, it occurred to Ruth that she should be handing out twenty dollar bills—the company paid her enough to do this—although she knew such a gesture was unrealistic. It would make little difference to anyone. They would just think, as her colleagues did, that she was odd. She did have a conscience, but sometimes it slept so deeply that it seemed to belong to someone else.

One early morning—the sun hadn't risen yet—while waiting for the bus, a man with a beard and paisley shirt hanging sloppily out of his pants asked Ruth what she did.

"I'm an oil pig." She supposed the gray suit and white blouse prepared him for something else. "Don't get so down," he said.

Like most people, Ruth enjoyed good wine, and a week's vacation along the ocean. If the company was going to pay her $30,000 to draw pictures and tell stories, then hell, she'd do it. Her father's generation had been different: They fed chickens and milked cows. Their work was something you could see. You ate the eggs for breakfast and drank the milk for lunch, and that made a difference. It would not be easy to go through life without making a difference. But, she told herself, even farmers needed oil. So what if you were in the right place at the right time? Oil could make you rich, and being rich could give you freedom.

Her job was theoretical. The way geology was done today was about as close to nature as someone in a jet rushing through the clouds, glancing down at a patchwork of land, unsure of what he/she was seeing. Oil companies had little need for the intricacies of pyrite cubes or staurolite needles. She longed for the student's total immersion in a problem for the sake of the problem. She sought to recapture this purity and innocence, but chances of this happening in her present situation were as remote as the continents moving back together.

Successful geologists were salespeople: They preyed upon one another's weaknesses.

✤

She got off the bus at Roselawn and walked a block in the heat to a dozen redwood townhouses with navy canopies. Two of Ruth's neighbors—Sheila and Charles—were outside arguing about parking spaces. Charles, a hotel administrator who held concerts in his apartment on the weekends, was concerned about the macadam giving. Already, Ruth saw fault lines in it, and hoped they didn't extend to the foundation.

Ruth barely looked as the two argued, and she escaped inside Unit C.

"I'm so glad to be home," Ruth said. She put her backpack on the counter and gave John a kiss. His reports and papers were spread out on the table just outside the kitchen. The kitchen was too narrow to hold a table. He had on his starched white shirt, but the sleeves were rolled up and his tie was loose.

The downstairs was long and narrow, and partially partitioned off into a kitchen. The front door had no window, for security measures. The opposite wall had two large sliding glass doors protected by metal grills. A tall, wood fence surrounding the back of the condo, another security measure, prevented much sunlight from getting in. Unit B and D formed the other walls of C. Thus, the downstairs was perpetually dim. Because of the building's zig-zag, two interior townhouses lacked the upstairs bedroom windows, but C was not one of them. The walls were white and the carpets

gold. But John and Ruth bought the townhouse new a few months ago with a mere $3,000 deposit.

The townhouses had been built quickly and without strict adherence to building codes. There was a major defect in the bathroom upstairs and a line to the central air leaked.

"What smells so good?" Ruth asked.

John looked up from his papers and smiled. "Clam chowder."

Ruth gave John another kiss. "I missed you," she said. She wanted the kiss to tell him how happy she was that she had one person on her side, that they were still young and healthy, that they had everything going for them, that they could do just about anything. And she wanted the kiss to tell him to beware of traps.

"I missed you, too," John said. He closed the manila folder he was working on.

"Ruth." John gave her hand a squeeze. "Friday. Let's break open the wine."

"Sounds great."

He got out the wine and poured two glasses and put them on the low table in front of the couch. The couch was against the wall that they shared with Unit B. A young corporate lawyer and his girlfriend lived there. John had another year to go before he finished law school.

"Celebrating something?" Ruth asked as she sat down. She turned the bottle around. "Isn't this expensive?" She thought John looked especially handsome today. His hair shone like a new copper penny. He had such a slender physique that he could have been a dancer. His eyes were quick and his movements graceful.

"I think," he said, handing her the wine glass which he had polished, "a move is in order."

"Move?" Ruth put down her wine. "What kind of move?"

"Listen, Ruth." John uncrossed his legs. "I know you like this place. But you won't know if you'll like another place better unless you try it. This neighborhood has changed. It's not the bohemia that it used to be. It's getting run down. Dangerous. Everyday there's more drunks and street walkers."

"They don't bother you, do they?" Ruth said. John had originally gone to law school to help the poor.

"It's a trend, Ruth." He stood up, his wine glass balanced exquisitely in his hand. "You can't be responsible for everybody. Anyway, it's suicidal to stay here." He started pacing around the townhouse. "I saw a magnificent townhouse near the Contemporary Art Museum. Skylights. Cathedral ceilings." He raised his eyes to the low ceiling. "A pool. Lots of rooms. Big rooms. Not a shoe box." He made his point by taking three steps and walking into the opposite wall. "If we can move, why not? It isn't as though we're only making six thousand dollars a year. Don't you get tired of drunks

digging through the garbage? Those men living in the gravel piles beneath the highway?"

"Those other places are sterile," Ruth said.

"Ruth, you work so hard, you don't even see what we're living in anymore. This neighborhood has gone to hell."

"Stop thinking about your job and look around," John said. "Feel the vibrations, Ruth. Vibrations of decay. Feel it?" In Unit B, the lawyer and his girlfriend were home, and the base notes from their stereo were coming through. "We could put down twenty percent. It would be a great tax write-off and investment. We could sell it in a few years and make fifty thousand. Maybe seventy. In good areas, real estate holds its value."

"You went in?" Ruth asked.

John blushed. "Everything there is first rate." John looked disdainfully at the white walls and the hotel gold carpet. "Do you want to live around people like Charles all your life? Or that crank, Alfred, in D? That graduate student who ties his mongrel to the hedges every morning? You like the big ugly dog licking your legs every time you walk past him? I've never seen an uglier dog."

John bent over toward Ruth and kissed her cheek. He whispered: "Let's face it, Ruth, we could do better. Much better. We could go to Europe. In style."

Ruth had never been to Europe. From the photos and movies she'd seen, it seemed like a fairy-tale land. Still, the townhouse's sparsity of furniture pleased her; at one time it had assured her that they aspired to ideals other than money.

"I've noticed this before in you, Ruth: You have to surround yourself with people who fail."

"Who's failing?" But she thought immediately of Charles and Sheila, her two neighbors arguing about parking spaces.

"You do it because it makes you feel better, so that no matter what you do, Ruth, you come out ahead. You're afraid to compete, and you're afraid that you'll lose, so you start out losing."

Ruth didn't tell John that she was thinking of quitting her job.

✤

"Peak evaluations in a few minutes, Ruth," Jack Burson said in his chipper voice that next Monday morning. He was wearing his thin red silk tie, the tie with the diamonds that he wore at farmout meetings. "Be right back—after I get some coffee."

Ruth pushed aside the prospect maps. There was nothing there. No porosity. No trap. No oil. It seemed futile to work the basin up, but she had to prove nothing was there. She even had some seismic maps from which she had been able to identify horizons. So she was teaching herself some geophysics.

When she finished the Hanson Basin project, she'd be without a formal project. Very few geologists in her division had formal projects now. Several small oil companies had gone bankrupt, but her company wasn't considered small.

When the laughter around the coffee machine abated, Jack appeared, although his smile was subdued.

"Ready?" Jack sat down opposite Ruth.

She nodded. Her chair faced the window, so she watched the city's skyline as Jack shuffled papers.

"We do this every year," Jack said. He adjusted his tie. Whenever he wore that tie, Cindy, the division secretary, was always after him, trying to pull it off. Cindy had been caught with Jack in the shower during last year's Christmas party.

"I know you've just been here a year, and in the first year you don't accomplish too much, but let's give it a go. For question one, it asks what kind of worker you are. See?" Jack pointed to the yellow sheet. Ruth's name was at the top. Ruth looked at her boss's fingers. The nails were rounded and shiny.

"I put down 'good worker.' Or I could say 'works hard.'"

Ruth nodded. Lines and lines and lines, all empty, except for "Good Worker" in pencil, which Jack erased, and put "works hard."

"And other things: gets work done in a timely manner. Meets deadlines." He pressed down on the pencil and wrote. "Tries innovative approaches. Punctual to meetings."

Ruth kept nodding.

"This question here asks how well you get along with fellow workers." Jack tilted his head, concentrating on the laughter. He looked outside Ruth's door.

"Is that important?" Ruth asked.

Jack regarded Ruth briefly.

"No, I mean, I know that's important, but," Ruth, her hands folded, looked down at her desk, "how important?"

Jack tried to stifle his smile. "Ruth, you have to relax. Don't be so serious."

Ruth's lips went rigid. She kept her face expressionless. She swallowed hard. "But what about the science?" It was as if she were asking "What about my sex life?"

"It's fine, Ruth," he said. "Fine." Jack kept his eyes on the piece of hallway that Ruth's door framed. "I'll be right back. You look that over," he said, stabbing the yellow sheet with his index finger, "and tell me what you think. On second thought, come to my office. I'll be there in a few minutes." Jack leapt from his chair. "Cin-dee," he said, as soon as he was in the hallway. "Ohhhh Cin-dee. Look what I got for you!" Between his manicured fingers, Jack was swinging his red tie.

✤

The next morning at the office was unusually quiet. No one was running up and down the hallways screaming, nor were there peals of laughter or boisterous guffaws.

Ruth was standing at her window, taking a rest from the light table, when Emma came in. Emma didn't have an office; she had a computer terminal in the map room, which she used to key in the geologists' horizon depths.

"Ruth," Emma whispered. "Did you hear about Frank?"

Ruth hadn't seen Frank this morning, but that was not unusual.

"Isn't he defending his dissertation?" Frank seemed to be the only person in the company that kept longer hours than Ruth. When she first started working, Frank had given her papers to read. Recently, he had showed her some seismic tricks. Ruth attributed Frank's recently gloomy looks to long hours spent rewriting "Submarine Fans of the Niger Delta." He was a perfectionist, which meant he took too long to produce. He had been hoping to finish his dissertation before his fortieth birthday.

"He's been let go," Emma said. "Fired."

"You sure?" Everyone understood you worked for one oil company until you found another one that would pay you more, or one that had offices in a more desirable city.

"You know how he never got along with Clyde Simmons? The division manager? The guy who has that big office in Lexington Center?"

"I didn't," Ruth said. She didn't pay attention to those details. She usually sat in her office and worked.

"Leo Berkowitz, too." Emma looked concerned.

Leo was a paleontologist who had taught Ruth how to interpret sand-shale lithofacies. They just had a fifty-year birthday party for him in the map room. A huge cake, gray-colored, like a trilobite. Oil companies had enough paleontologists. Almost anybody could identify the important fossils.

"I heard they offered him a transfer to Louisiana, but his mother's in a nursing home, and he doesn't want to lose his benefits."

But Ruth was young, and Leo was old. She could be molded. The companies wanted exploitationists (that's what they called them) who were computer-literate and could interpret seismic sections.

"Leo holed up in his office all day," Emma said. "You know?" Emma looked out the door. "Gotta go," she said.

Every time she heard footsteps, Ruth put her pencil down. Then somehow she became caught in a whirlwind and found herself—the first time ever—eating lunch out with her colleagues. Rather than being morose and somber, everyone was excited, like grade school children on a field trip, playing a trick on the teacher. Pitchers of beer were ordered and emptied in minutes. Everyone began speculating on who would go, if whole divisions would be amputated, or just the dead weight pruned.

"So, friends," Kelly said. She was enthroned at the table's head, her cronies gathered around her. "Who's next?" Her smile was composed and sophisticated.

"I think a more appropriate question is," Bob Roy, who was sitting at Kelly's right, said, "have you called your head hunter today?" Bob Roy raised his thin eyebrows and his moustache twitched. Bob saw bright spots in most seismic sections, but he was a very good businessman.

"If you're a geophysicist, or you know something about seismics, then you're in," said Kelly. "If not," she stuck her thumb down.

"The company's not going to get rid of us," said Judy, who was also from Harvard. She was clever, and especially clever at taking long lunches. Only recently had she acted slightly nervous when a manager asked her how her thesis was progressing. "We're the Elite Task Force, created to save the company. To get something done, by God!" She laughed with abandon.

Ruth was at the other end of the table, with the geologists, listening.

"Have another beer, Ruth," said Judy.

Ruth had another beer.

"So what if they let me go?" Kelly said flippantly. Kelly, like her father who was in the Foreign Service, had important connections. "I've always wanted to try something else," she said cavalierly, as if losing a job involved about as much adjustment as trying out a new restaurant.

"No oil companies are hiring," Bob said. "Haven't you been keeping track of the rig count? It's finally hit us. I can guarantee you, there are no oil jobs anywhere."

"It's a cyclical industry," Judy said. "It's just following its natural course."

When the waitress came for their orders, everyone ordered more beer and splurged on the hors d'oeuvres and ordered big lunches. They ordered more beer. Even if they did go back to the office, no one would work. Who could? Anyway, they were young, without families to support, without huge mortgages, and the day was young.

"We're safe," Kelly said. "If Jack gives them a good enough reason for keeping us, we'll stay. If not, well, it's not the end of the world."

"But you know Jack."

Several women suppressed giggles.

"Oh Jack. What a guy!" Judy laughed.

"It's a matter of clout: how much Jack influences Clay and how much Clay influences George, and how much George . . ."

"We should have invited them out to lunch." Kelly batted her eyes.

"Our first mistake," Bob Roy said.

"It doesn't matter what we do, one way or the other," Kelly said.

"It's all politics," Judy said.

"It's everything," Bob said. "Haven't you noticed how house prices are falling? You couldn't buy anything for a few years, and now you can buy

anything? Some real restate companies are predicting that the suburbs will turn into ghost towns."

They drank more and laughed more. Even Ruth. She did not even realize she was laughing. She looked around for Emma to see what she thought, but Emma was working. The technicians rarely went out to lunch; they couldn't afford it, and they had work to do.

As they put their beers down, or grabbed onion rings, Ruth noticed her colleagues eyeing each other.

Here she was in the heart of a modern city drinking and eating with people she barely nodded hello to when she passed them in the hall. But things changed, and it was exciting to be part of them. The Elite Task Force. Sometimes she thought they were shallow and vain, or merely foolish. Afterward, she felt ashamed of her cynicism and predilection to persecute people she hardly knew.

It was only when the waitress started looking desultory that someone decided they should leave. As they were leaving, Ruth saw a drunken woman walking quickly toward her. She tried changing direction, but the woman followed. Only when she felt the full force of the mirrored wall, and heard it vibrate, did she realize the drunken woman was her.

"Ruth, you should get drunk more often," Kelly said. "You're really quite amusing." Everyone laughed.

✤

Back in her office, Ruth drank black coffee. That Balzac died from caffeine poisoning, reportedly drinking fifty cups a day, was the initial impetus to cut down, but circumstances kept getting in the way. Tomorrow she promised herself she'd have no coffee. She took a pencil and smoothed over the contours on her maps. She thought again she was not suited to this job—that being hired had probably been a fluke. If she quit, she and John would quickly exhaust their savings. They would be poor. John wouldn't finish law school for another year, and they had thousands of dollars in college loans to pay off. Ruth imagined herself returning to college to take philosophy courses. No more science. Or maybe traveling to Africa, working as a volunteer, although John wasn't the volunteer type. If worse came to worst, she could work in a department store, or waitress at a pool hall, which she had done, although she hadn't liked it. She wondered if there existed a job she liked.

✤

The bus was crowded, and the air conditioner, broken. Sweaty arms and bare thighs pressed up against Ruth. The bus was modern, which meant the windows did not open, although some irate men in the back were doing their best to remedy that.

The bus stopped every block. Then it would jerk ahead as it started back up and arms would be thrown against her from the back, and then from the front. Usually Ruth read, but she'd been unable to get a seat.

Suddenly the bus stopped in the middle of a block, and the driver couldn't start it. "Sorry, folks." She saw his glasses in the rear-view mirror. "This bus ain't going nowhere. Everybody's got to get off. There'll be another bus in about twenty minutes."

The workers in suits groaned and some asked for their 40 cents back. The young men in the back, used to it, laughed or cursed. Ruth started walking.

She passed several new buildings with signs advertising thousands of square feet for rent. She also passed men who lived beneath Highway 59 in the gravel piles, probably in an intricate system of tunnels, like gophers.

She was about six blocks from home when she saw the blind man. He was moving up toward her neighborhood. He had his sign around his neck: PENCILS: $1.

Ruth put a dollar in the man's hand and said: "I'd like one, please."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, but he didn't smile. She looked into his eyes to see something, but bright sun and dark glasses prevented her from seeing anything.

She had just turned her corner when a scrawny man asked her if he could "have some of that." He pointed toward her. "Ten dollars," he said. His mouth was open and there was sweat on his forehead. He was breathing heavily.

"Get out of here," she said. She was angry, but she kept her voice even. "If I ever see you here again, I'll call the police."

When Ruth got inside Unit C, she noticed at once how clean the condo was. John was still in his white shirt, the sleeves rolled up. He was baking cookies.

"What's up?" she said. She put her backpack on the kitchen counter. She didn't want to tell him about the man yet. "The place looks great. Almost like new. You didn't have much work today?"

John looked down at the gold carpet. "Somebody's looking at the place. At seven."

"How can you do that, John?"

"They're only looking."

"John. They fired two geologists today. People who had been with the company for years."

"That doesn't surprise me. It's been coming."

"Does it surprise you that I'm considering quitting?"

"Ruth, hold on for another year." He put down his potholders. "Let me graduate. We don't want to get in any more debt. We'll never live like our parents lived unless we make money—now. Borrowing becomes a bad habit. You never get free of it."

"Is that all you care about, John, money?"

"You know I'm not that simple."

"What then?"

"You have to be practical, Ruth. Money is reality." John opened the oven and took out the cookies. "Want one?"

"Money's just more strings."

"You're fooling yourself, Ruth, if you don't think you need money. Money's in direct ratio to freedom and comfort. We make it now, we won't have to worry about it later. You don't want to have to live like before, do you? No air conditioning? Never eating out? No cars? Don't you want to go to Paris? Stockholm?"

"You're not in the situation I'm in. My job doesn't mean anything anymore. In the beginning it did. Now it's all motions, John. A big lie. You shouldn't have to go to a job that you hate. No amount of money is worth it. It's not just money, John. It's a way of life."

"Ruth, Ruth." He tried a cookie. "The peace and love of the '60s is over. We know what mistakes not to make. We know it's a game, and we know the rules. So you suffer a little. But play it as best as you can, play it to win. You play it for a while, until it's all played out, and then you try something else. We have to stick with plan A." He sniffed, and pleased with effect, he smiled. "They'll be here in an hour."

✤

The next day, Jack was in when Ruth got in. Instead of running around after Cindy, he followed Ruth into her office.

"Everybody has to do a presentation Friday," Jack said. He studied Ruth's map. "You need to do those contours again." His suit was rumpled and his eyes tired looking. He kept touching the mole on his forehead.

"You need to move that contour." Jack rarely gave Ruth suggestions on her work, just platitudes, so this came as a surprise to her.

"That will change the whole map," Ruth said. "It will look like a trap."

"See what you can come up with," Jack said impatiently. "See if there isn't some oil there." If Jack did everything right, he could retire in ten years with an adequate pension and still put his three kids through college. He walked briskly back to his office and didn't even stop at the coffee machine.

Ruth heard nothing else in the hallway. She looked out her large windows to the skyscrapers. They seemed metallic and lifeless, filled with people, perhaps doing the very same thing she was doing. She took out her yellow pencil, the one she had bought from the blind man, and erased contour lines. The pencil kept moving with little effort on her part.

Cynthia Gallaher

Northern Spotted Owl

**Forks, Washington: the self-proclaimed "Logging Capitol of the World." Population: 2500.*

The folks in Forks*
can't figure out why one lousy bird
needs 2000 acres to stretch its wings,
when all they want
is a half-acre homestead,
steady logging work,
one stop light
and a cup of hot coffee
from the Pay 'n Serve Café,
to fire their engines like
a hot chain saw every morning.

Fish and Wildlife
say the "owl vs. jobs" controversy
will be over
in a few years anyway,
won't be any more trees
    to fight over,
but to the youngest loggers,
five years are an eternity,
enough time to get a car,
charm a good woman,
and gather lots of wooly layers
before they ship out to Alaska
for new riches underground.
Meanwhile in minutes,
500-year Douglas Firs fall and break
the pristine silence of sky
like glass shattering.

And in the time it takes you
to count growth rings
that date back before Columbus,
the spotted owl has flown
from one end of his night turf
to the other, surrounded by
    clearcut stubble,
perhaps a feather or two
    falls on top
    of his ancestors' bones,
while white man's bones,

still alive in anxious flesh,
shake inside the White House,
the closet of environmental presidents
who carry chain saws,
and more than one crooked finger
from the cabinet
points to Forks as evidence
that conservation exacts
too high a price on commerce.

And while board feet continue
to sail around the world
like crazy toothpicks,
the spotted owl sleeps on
in the standing dead tree hollows
he calls home,
'til man makes himself
as scarce as Sasquatch.

T. Kilgore Splake

A Doomsday Library

a few favorite authors, their
paperback titles carefully tucked into canvas
waterproof daypack, side pockets filled with
collection of small “memo” tablets, precious
cache of black felt-tip pens,

a life’s valise full of Spartan comforts,
sustenance for lone, dangerous moments after
the apocalyptic upheaval, disintegration of
society, future when hordes, small gangs
ravish the rural outback, plundering, killing,
enslaving the weak, brutal few controlling
debris of metropolitan civilization, with
primitive rituals of “panem et circum,”
vulgar, garish celebrations amid ashes, past
remnants of culture, art, beauty,

lone bard seeking solitary exile from
teeming outlaw mass, existence, old man no
longer dangerous, wanting distance from
human dramas, adventures, carrying words of
“karmic healing” upon his back, soothing
balm for dark anxieties, fears, panic of
his inner self,

hunkered down isolated Kingston Plains
lair, warmed by eider down, feathers of
distant migrating northern geese, their ghost
partners, small tin stove, chipping slivers
from ancient white pine stumps for fuel,
like Jerzy Kosinski’s young Lekh, with
“comet” filled with hot coals, hiding out in
eastern Europe, escaping Nazi soldiers, the
camps, remains of old Grand Sable Forest to
the east, new haven, outpost if living off
the land turns thin, things get close, dangerous,

Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*
continuing comfort and reminder to listen,
listen, listen, rejoice in nature’s music,
her one continuous song and melody raising

consciousness beyond the ordinary, banal,
glorious background and chorus for colors
and aromas with the changing seasons,

Ginsberg's *Howl*, harsh indictment, society
as it used to be, sterility of cement, aluminum
metropolitan backdrop, impersonal silhouettes,
skyscraper, factory, suburban housing tract
neighborhoods, mass of opaque souls sacrificing
blood for money, life, soul, prisoner to banks
and loans, imagination numbed by passing machine
age, overwhelmed by technologies, yet mutely
waiting for new "machine gods,"

Cold Mountain poems by Han-Shanm, Oriental
wisdom in brief verse, fireside company on
winter nights when frigid temperatures keep
you still, close to warm coals, terse message
that one truly learns from nature by existing
in her heart,

Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* and odyssey of Japhy
Ryder's mountain-climbing expedition, remembering
to celebrate each separate day of life, loathe
routines, the fixity of world things, and revelling
in surprise, the "trickster" quality in life,

Faulkner's "The Bear" with appreciation of the
courage man and animals share, their appetites
for sweet berries, ladies, to spontaneously
dance and howl, and even when gray of hair and
long in tooth, desire to take on bloodhounds
again, dare a dark adversary, prove self one
more time,

copy of Hemingway's sojourn on the "Big
Two-Hearted, I, II," from his Nick Adams tales,
solitary fishing trip reaffirming merits of acting
on a whim, gaining momentary pleasure being lost,

John Gardner's *Grendel*, ridiculous hairy
ogre, outcast and poet, recalling his nights spent
listening outside meadhall doors, hearing thanes
singing war songs, praising dead kings, clear

reminder that most “see all life without observing
it,”

Brautigan’s *Springhill Mine Disaster,* quick
recollection of tender warm joys of young love,
Pasternak’s “Zhivago,” proof again spring is not
truly appreciated unless it follows a fierce
arctic winter worthy of respect, Thoreau’s
Walden, an invitation to co-exist with nature,
develop courage and cunning to continue to survive
without increasing misery, terror,

Roget’s *Thesaurus* of old unwanted words,
Hesse’s *Magister Ludi,* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*
except for Molly’s “soliloquy,” pages for
fire starter, damp hard balky days,

finally Peter Matthiessen’s search for his
Snow Leopard, comfort for time darkness comes
suddenly imminent, owls lovingly croon, “come
with me, come with me,” clouds sweeping by
masking the moon, company when I feel taking
nervous leaving of my shadow, moving to some
strange place, in limbo like migrating Canadian
Northerns, forced to land in the wilderness
having lost direction, trapped in fierce storm,

or like dead distant star momentarily
basking in hot, white light then suddenly gone,
dark forever, not even vague fossil blur, some
bleached, smooth surviving stone, solid piece
of evidence for the future.

Errol Miller

The American Artist

More than you imagine
goes into poetry, a unique blend
of cotton and the author's mundane soul
drip-drying for literature, longing for Tara's
aborted loveliness and the land across
the River Jordan, you take a mess of greens
and sweet potatoes and wild possum
you substitute chicken fat if necessary
you take a garter from your best girl
from the dimlit 40's, you buy a wooden frame
for the rainbow and check the price of red clay
you go to Oxford and study its bulletin board
you inhale the horsestuff air of Omaha's
deserted stockyards, you mix the pale color blue
with grey and achieve America's melting pot
you want a little country place
with hardwood floors and running water
you want a limestone branch of your own
and Sasha for comfort, you want
to speak the language of the fireflies
you wonder about Mama and Papa
and all the afflicted young men
across the hallway, you read art-books
and put a sunset in your pocket once again
you sharpen your plow and leave it
leaning against the smokehouse
you go to town for solace
sifting through public voices for material
you develop your own style
similar to New England in autumn
you imagine penstroke as brushstroke
activating an impressionist mood
you study last night and the possibilities
of capturing it one more time, you go
out into the darker pre-storm light
where insects swarm in hot heavy humidity
you study greater other brothers
their literature, their overload, their lives
you hoard the remaining sunshine of fall
into a paper grocery sack, the demands
of your job are growing, fascinated

with nature you arise with great aplomb
and blow out another birthday candle
the trees down by the river
making more of an impact than you
you scurry around among rustic rusty zinnias
and thirsty marigold, you do not get the grant
you can't afford too many more beautiful colors
you think, dwindling away like June
and July and August and September and October
and all the lovely paintings
from the fresh eye of early morning.

Candice Bowen Bowles

Our Common Destiny

Over a year ago I received a letter from Vine Deloria, Jr.—a noted Native American writer and historian—in response to a letter regarding a project in which I am involved. I was delighted that he took the time to reply. The letter was terse and to the point, in keeping with the Native American tradition of using and choosing words succinctly. As Chief Joseph said, "It takes few words to tell the truth."

Deloria is proud of his Sioux heritage and pays close attention to what his forefathers and the holy men have told him. It is a belief in many of the Native American tribes that the white man's stay on this continent may be coming to an end. This theme is repeated throughout many tribes in the United States. In the letter, Deloria says,

> I really think that the ecological crisis is so advanced that it is too late to turn things around. We are now on the back of a tiger and we have to ride it out. Hopefully some people will survive—Indian and non-Indian—and maybe they can make things right again. But I think that very shortly our system will collapse and many will starve and the land become barren and we will have a helleva mess. The prophecies all suggest this end for the white man's stay on this continent. And the medicine men tell me it will be within this decade . . . .

Deloria's words might come as a surprise to people who are unaware of Native American prophecies. Others familiar with these teachings will resonate to his words. Sadly, scientists and politicians are busy trying to deny what the Native Americans have known for centuries about our ultimate demise.

The Hopis were instructed by their god, Maasaw, to tell the white brother about the ending of the Fourth World. They have done so in the prescribed way. Their sacred mission accomplished, they watch the world powers ignore their words of coming destruction.

In 1855, Seattle, an obscure chief of the Duwamish tribe in the Puget Sound area of Washington State, spoke eloquently about the intrusion of the white man and his ultimate demise. In Seattle's speech to Governor Isaac Stevens, we are reminded of a people who were bound intimately to the earth and all of its creatures by fond affection.

Seattle spoke of ideas and concepts which were close to the heart of his people, but which are foreign to our way of thinking. We were and still are the invading, conquering culture. The Native Americans continue to uphold their intimate link to the land.

It has been said that we are still strangers to this continent, and we are still uncomfortable with those things that shape the personality of this land—the wild creatures, the virgin forests, the rushing waters. We seek to

tame and demystify those things that were natural and miraculous to those who resided here before us. We have taken a beautiful land and destroyed its beauty in the name of progress and the pursuit of money. We have efficiently wreaked havoc upon the earth, which was Mother to the indigenous people. We have created a hole in Father Sky. Respect was an integral part of the native way, and everywhere Seattle saw the white invader desecrate all that his people held holy and sacred. We have never tried to become a part of the land that we dwell upon. No wonder the red man fought the encroachment of the white.

Seattle's speech is filled with the pathos of the old chief as he discerned the future of his race. Accepting of things he knew could not be changed, Seattle said,

> But why should I mourn at the untimely fate of my people? Tribe follows tribe, and nation follows nation, like the waves of the sea. It is the order of nature, and regret is useless.

More prophetic words followed. As a child of the earth, an astute observer of nature, he had watched the cyclic, circular pattern of life and death. Nature showed him what he could not know from history books.

> Your [the white man's] time of decay may be distant but it will certainly come, for even the White Man, whose God walked and talked with him as friend with friend, cannot be exempt from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all. We will see.

We have become a nation of white knights foolishly and courageously wielding the weapons of fear and ignorance in order to defeat the Truth. But the truth is. Our weapons are becoming more and more cumbersome and unwieldy. We have used the Earth to the exclusion of all common sense. Our rivers and lakes are polluted, underground water tables have absorbed the filth of our decaying culture. We have obliterated forests, entire species of wildlife, and fouled the air we breathe. Yet can this nation turn its back on fear to face the radical and accusing face of Truth?

People are awakening from the enchantment of technology and material gain to the fact that the native peoples all over the world are the only ones who understand how to live with the Earth and its creatures. Yet, many people will continue to insist that technology has all the answers. They will act and speak from their heads and pocketbooks, not their hearts. They turn Nature into an "it" instead of a "thou," and labelling the Earth, its creatures, and the indigenous population facilitates the use and abuse of those things as commodities. The natives of this land thought with their hearts when it came to their Earth mother—the creatures were their brothers and sisters. Because we do not understand, we destroy, which appears to be a frightening pattern of our superior culture. It is easy to denigrate the primitive when we have lost touch with the primitive in our own natures. We cannot respond and resonate to all that is natural, beautiful, and primitive in our world. The tangible proof is in our lack of relationship to the Earth and to each other.

All things travel in circles—the seasons, the winds, the ocean currents. Man travels from childhood to childhood. How ironic that Western man, the conqueror, has become the destroyer, who will in turn be destroyed by his own creations.

Perhaps Seattle and Deloria are right—their People still survive and haunt this land they loved and still love. It is the Western man who dies a slow and painful death and is too obtuse to recognize the approaching inevitability.

As Seattle said, we may be brothers in destiny with the Red Man.

Time is short.

We will see.

Michele Wroblewski

Honeymoon

Because the lights from a souvenir shop
faded the pavement behind me,
I did not say:
    "the Horseshoe Falls are a magnet
    to the metal filings of these newlyweds,
    their vows still whole and dry on their tongues
    as communion wafers."
Instead I leaned dumbly on the wall
that ringed the gorge's lip.

My hands were curled and cold in my pockets
when I didn't say:
    "But Jackie Gleason and Audrey Meadows are as dead
    as black and white reruns allow them to be,"
because I knew our deaths waited
among lacquered tomahawks in shop cases.

I thought, then,
I knew why honeymooners here outnumbered seagulls,
and it had nothing to do with heart-shaped jacuzzis.

They gathered at the rim like champagne bubbles
to taste the ancient spray
of a gravity more certain than ceremony.
In all the pulling down, all the pulling down,
to feel the erosion and electricity
of falls that never freeze
despite neon, walls, Februaries.

But I didn't say so. Instead I said:
    "I'll take three peanut sticks,
    a crueller, two glazed,
    and half a dozen honeymoons."
You didn't laugh,
but beyond the falls
the moon rang through Pisces and fell
like water.

Christopher Woods

A String of Beads

I have these beads. Just some beads. Brown, wrinkled-looking things, very old. I've had them awhile, almost fifteen years. Buddy gave them to me, the year before he got sick. So they're kinda special, these beads are. Very plain, though, just the simple brown. But they're very old, like I said.

A thousand, maybe two thousand years old, I don't remember. So that's what I mean, when I say old. Know what I mean? Older than me, and that's for sure. Me, I'm only forty-nine. Have been for awhile. Ever seen a forty-nine year old tree? If you have, then you know. That will tell you what the years can do. But still, two thousand years? I can't fathom that.

Harry's coming over here shortly. Tonight's the Lion's Club Ball. I don't know, I don't dance so good. Harry says I follow better than anyone he's ever known. That's something, sure. And I can use the company, you see.

Harry's not so glamorous, but that's okay. Harry and Buddy were good friends. Best friends, if you must know. Anyway, Harry's lost about all his hair now. It's not so bad, I tell him, when you begin to consider the alternative. We know all that.

When Margaret, Harry's wife, was alive, she made him wear a black toupee. That's French for wig, if you didn't know. Margaret and I were best friends. We were in P.T.A. together for a thousand years. Well, maybe not that long, but an eon, anyway.

What I mean is this. Now that Margaret is dead, and Buddy's dead, and Harry and I are dating, Harry doesn't have to wear a lousy black toupee. He was always wearing it lopsided. It takes a certain kind of man to wear a toupee well, and Harry just doesn't have it. I like him bald just fine. And Harry, he says it's cooler this way.

I should tell you the bead story. Sure, Buddy gave them to me, I already said that. He got them from an old petrified woman in Peru. You hear? A petrified woman. We're not talking some slick boutique.

She's not alive, that petrified woman. She's like a stone, and a thousand years old, give or take. Buddy and I lived for awhile in Peru. He worked as a site manager for a natural gas company. They were digging in the mountains in Peru. One day, when they were digging, they hit something. Some old Indian burial ground was what it was. The way it was, the people buried there were sitting straight up. Honest to God.

And do you know what Buddy said? He said those Indians buried themselves sitting up because they knew it wasn't going to be very long before movies and television came along. Maybe the wind had told them about this. They were going to be ready for it when it came, all that new entertainment. That's what he said. In fact, that's the kind of guy Buddy was, if I had to give it to you in a nutshell.

They were rummaging through those graves and found this old woman in a box. She didn't have a name, and they didn't bother to give her one. There she was, sitting up, with all this old pottery sitting in the box with her. And around her neck she was wearing these old beads.

Buddy and his boys, they didn't have much choice. They had to move the old woman and her things. Her friends sitting up in their boxes had to go too. A pipeline had to go through, on schedule. When they moved the old woman, they got her bowls and her beads. Buddy took them, and brought them back for me. Maybe they're worth something, was what we thought.

He said those Indians buried themselves sitting up because they knew it wasn't going to be very long before movies and television came along.

Time went by, more eons, in fact. We came home again to the good old U.S. of A. My daughter Caroline used the bowls when she had tea parties with her friends. I said, "Caroline, use that nice tea set your Daddy brought you from Harrods in London." Buddy was traveling a lot, and always brought home nice things. Our life was good then. But Caroline would say, "But Mommy, we're having Indian tea now."

And I guess they thought themselves squaws. I let her go, playing with that stuff, until she had broken every last bowl. She was always such a careless child, you see. Then she wanted the beads. She pestered me for them. She wanted to play Hiawatha or something. I said no. I put my foot down and said the beads belonged to me. I knew that if I ever got around to restringing the things, I would probably wear them now and then. Maybe to a luau, maybe to go shopping. Nothing too dressy, though.

These days, Caroline's all grown up, and working for Buddy's old company. If she would only find a nice husband now, I'd die happy. But prospects don't look so good. Caroline's roommate, a woman named Doris, looks like a halfback and talks like a lumberjack. Me, I try to be smart. I don't ask questions, and I only drop in on them if I'm invited. It isn't often that I visit them.

The way it stands, I've got the beads still. After Buddy's funeral, Harry came over to take away his things. Suits, shirts, handkerchiefs, shoes, ties. Harry took it all to a Mexican mission. I wanted everything gone. When Harry was walking out the door with Buddy's fishing tackle, I called him back. I said, "Harry, save me some of that nylon string."

I restrung these old beads. The old string was kinda nasty, I don't mind saying. Unclean, somehow. I did a good job of restringing. After all, I wanted to be responsible. I was thinking about that old petrified woman. She had no use for them anymore. All those years, sitting there in the dark, maybe she was waiting for me to come along and restring them for her. You never know.

There's the doorbell now. Do you think I look okay? I'm no Ginger Rogers, but I think I'm okay.

As for the beads, I see it this way. I'm taking that old stone woman places she's never been, never even dreamed about. What are the chances she would ever have danced at a Lion's Club Ball? This way, I'm doing us both a favor.

Ann Fox Chandonnet

Iris Is Last

> *—For Shem Pete (1896?–1989), whom* USA Today *called "the last of his people." In fact, there are 700 living Tanaina Athabascans.*

After silence, music.
After the soft blue,
the hard pod.
Iris is the rattle
as they remember Shem.
Iris is last.

Before the Dena'ina carved homes for pebbles,
there was the sturdy stalk, the musical wand.
Before they strung kindling with puffin beaks,
there were the twirling aspen leaves.
Before they heard the carved raven chatter,
there was iris chattering in the wind.
Iris is last.

When the people walked the flats digging k'tilla,
their shins rustled iris pods.
The children jousted with them,
chanting, humming.
Iris is the rattle.

After silence, music.
After morning, evening.
We remember him in the evening
when fire casts riddles on walls.
Mourning sings its music.
Iris is the rattle
as they remember him,
the singer whose name means "sing."

Before white man flocked in numbers like blades of grass,
thick as reeds where terns nest,
there was iris blue as song.
Shem Pete steps slow on beaded soles.
Iris is the rattle,
the rattle of mourning.
Dancers he taught move in his honor.

Stories he told fall from their lips
as they remember him in the evening.
Iris is the rattle
as they remember him.

When the rattle starts,
the song sings itself.
Shem's song sings itself,
the rattle, the sturdy stalk.
Iris is the rattle
as we remember him.
Iris is last.

Dolores Stewart

July Moon of Bird-listening

What species of bird is this
who sings at midnight?
How he trebles and warbles
his heart out—a mid-tree song
whose darkest crooks and branches
not even moon most full
can enter. He sings for being,
I sing of him, and neither knows
the other—close, untouching songs.
I am shut off, shut away,
wrapped up in wood and
glass and names. Midsummer
somewhere singing. Which bird
sings when the others
sleep? Midyear, midlife.
Who hears if not myself?
Rapt in my listening, alone
and not alone, music midair.

Paul Grant

Fire Tower

Autumn has free days. Every leaf's a soldier
when the sun gives marching orders, and boys
seeking everything but forgiveness
will trespass anywhere.
We've cut out teeth on heroes
and must decline to see the sign warning
that whosoever goes up may fall forever,
so we tap for luck the steel beams sunk
in concrete, stare at he box swaying on top
of a spiral of stairs and hope as we start
to climb that we'll be able to spot from there
the missing pieces of what has gone to ground.
Halfway up, we see our old neighborhood
hemmed in by pines, and stop
to pick out each of our houses, sure
they'd burst with pride if they could see
us now, beating the wind from our hair.
Higher, the trapdoor lock is rusted
to an easily broken fault,
                but once
inside, the cherished adventure palls.
Haze hides the forest, and details we took
on earth for signs are too small to be real.
Now this empty king of treehouses must
become one of those moments after which
nothing is ever quite the same again.
We water all four corners before we leave,
yearlings angrily marking a place still fine,
in spite of the failure we brought in with
our expectations—and which will always be fine—where once
we came to see the world the thunder sees:
a field of tinder between shotgun towns
that trust God's lightning to pass them by or come
on down with the rapture of the promised fire.

Review

Red Creek: A Requiem by Margaret Robison
Available from Amherst Writers & Artists Press
P. O. Box 1076, Amherst, MA 01004; ISBN 0–941895–08–4.

Reviewed by Diane Kistner

Margaret Robison, in her introduction to *Red Creek,* describes this long poem in six parts with epilogue as "a journey I took in my memory, dreams, and imagination, a journey back to Cairo, Georgia, as I knew it in the thirties, forties, and fifties." I've never been to Cairo, but in reading this book I was transported to that small Southern town, to a world I felt I might have been dreaming myself.

Robison remembers, dreams, and imagines the town, its events, and all its people—living, dying, and dead—with all of her senses. It is extraordinary that she is able to convey so much of her own experience to the rest of us in a way that transcends the intellect: Through our shared senses, we cannot prevent ourselves from perceiving this world, from taking it all in, making it our own.

Beginning with the first section, I was hooked by Robison's lyrical cadences, by the sounds and smells, if not all the sights, that we share:

Fragrance of tea olive, mint,
water faucet dripping into the mint leaves.
Banana shrubs, dust rising slowly. Smell
from the stems of fresh-cut chrysanthemums.
Soft white gardenias, leaves
a deeper green than anybody's eyes.
Curious blend
at once nostalgic and funereal.

A room
that's been closed up too long and from its books
the musty smell of thousands of past rainy, humid
nights and days. Sweet powders in the bath.
Perfumes: My Sin, White Shoulders, satin bags
of pink sachets tucked into bureau drawers.

The rank smell of the pickle plant
that settles over town
while black men stand in backs of trucks
pitching shovelfuls of salt
into pickle vats. A bubbling
batch of turnip greens with fatback.

Turning the page, I was swept into the current of a poem so strong yet subtle that it is almost impossible to excerpt any of it without diminishing both part and whole. Simple images—a calf with a broken leg, all alone in a field, struggling to stand—are echoed across the sections and carry with them into a dream world peripheral realities where everything is at once significant, interwoven, and surreal.

To wake and see the walls becoming
fields to walk through, to wake
and see the floor becoming grass.
Sometimes the dream is more than I can hold of life.
But if I am both dream and dreamer,
I am the starless wall against the night.
I am the door through which the rivers flow.

Like Red Creek itself, the poem widens and deepens with each new texture, image, question, death, the rope knotted to a limb swinging out forever over the water.

The dead are never dead, and the river
never forgets the names of the drowned.
The dead are never dead, and the drowned
always remember the vowels of fishes,
the watery O that repeats and repeats itself.

I couldn't put *Red Creek* down until I had finished it—quite an unusual feat for a volume of poetry—so beautiful, "simple," and haunting is this work.

Whatever the chairs remember of the days,
whatever doorknobs remember of hands,
the roof of rain,
whatever the air remembers of the silence
that choked the children's laughter,
I cannot tell these stories.

But . . . does.

Margaret Robison

three poems

from Red Creek

Whatever color sorrow is, or death;
whatever music waits within the silence
of a girl's becoming or a woman's looking back;
whatever the blank gray
of certain childhood days
holds in a life; it's enough to know
that flower, leaf, and stem are one,
that the spider spins her web
from leaf to leaf to leaf, that everything
is joined by light.

Sunday Outing

What delight, that car's
sudden appearance
on the hill's crest, the old
overstuffed couch strapped
to its top.

A couch out for a Sunday drive,
and not dressed up for the occasion.
A couch—itself, unadorned, complete.
Comfortable in its maroon plush.

My heart leapt celebration at that
ridiculous marriage.
Couch and car. Alone
neither would have caught my eye.
I would have ridden miles, hills
asleep in their appropriate sky, fields
of dry cornstalks waiting winter's
starched sheets to put them to bed.

But that couch
came driving over the hill, its bursting
seams spilling a skyfull of clouds, its rusted
old springs singing.

Before the Moon Was the Moon

(Kindergarten Group Poem written with Margaret Robison)

Before the moon was the moon,
It was a lightning bug.
It flashed on and off.
It was the only light in Africa.
It was the only light in Egypt.
It was the only light in China.
It was the only light in Israel.
It was the only light on Earth.

There was no fire.
The lightning bug lit the whole universe.
One giant lightning bug.
One night the lightning bug got hit by lightning.
The lightning bug fell into a river,
A river in Africa.
The lightning bug drowned.
The river carried it to the ocean.
A wave threw the dead lightning bug on the shore.

God felt sad.
God loved the lightning bug.
God cried.
Then God lifted the lightning bug into the sky,
Carefully,
Carefully,
And turned it into the moon.

Notes on Contributors

Candice Bowen Bowles (Shaker Heights, OH) has a B.A. in psychology and is currently enrolled in the Master's program in English at Kent State University. She has had essays published in Cleveland's *Plain Dealer* and poetry in *The Dream Shop, Circle of Reflections,* and *The American Collegiate's Poetry Anthology.*

Dan Campion (Iowa City, IA) is visiting Assistant Professor of English at the University of Iowa. His poems have been published in various magazines, with new ones due to appear in *Ascent, Borderlands, Kennesaw Review*, and *Light.*

Ann Fox Chandonnet (Anchorage, AK) was raised in Massachusetts but has spent the last 20 years in Alaska. A former journalist and English teacher, she is the author of seven collections of poetry. The most recent is *Canoeing in the Rain* (Mr. Cogito Press, Portland, Oregon, 1990).

Helen Frost (Fort Wayne, IN) is the author of *Skin of a Fish, Bones of a Bird,* winner of the 1993 Women Poets Series Competition sponsored by Ampersand Press. She received the 1992 Robert H. Winner Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America. She is editor of the anthology, *Season of Dead Water* (Breitenbush, 1990).

Nan Fry (Bethesda, MD) is associate professor in the Academic Studies Department at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, DC. Her poems have appeared in *Plainsong, Cimarron Review, Stone Country,* and in a recent anthology from Negative Capability Press: *The Creative Process.* The poem in this issue of *Gaia* is from her first book of poetry, *Relearning the Dark* (Washington Writer's Publishing House, 1991).

Cynthia Gallaher (Chicago, IL) has published in a number of places. Her poem in this issue is from her recently completed manuscript, *Animal Crossings,* other selections from which were read on the "Earth Day: Chicago" cable TV program. Her first book, *Night Ribbons* was honored by the Illinois Library Association.

Daniel Green (Sarasota, FL) began writing at age eight-two, while seeking a form in which to tell his life experiences to his grandchildren. His poetry has appeared in many publications, including his book, *On Second Thought* (Fithian Press).

Penny Harter (Santa Fe, NM) has published nine books of poems and a number of short stories. She has won fellowships and awards from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, and the Poetry Society of America. Recent pieces appear in the anthologies *Life on the Line* and *The Dolphin's Arc.* Most of her work is ecological and environmental—writing for the planet. She teaches English and Creative Writing at Santa Fe Preparatory School.

Jacqueline Hartwich (Seattle, WA) has published poetry in *Primavera, Kansas Quarterly, Bellingham Review, Seattle Review,* and others. Over

the past five years, her work has won prizes from the Washington Poets Association, the Northwest Writers' Conference, and *Kansas Quarterly.*

Diane Kistner (Winterville, GA) is the Managing Editor of *Gaia* and has published poetry and prose in many places. She is the former regional coordinator of COSMEP. Currently, she is employed by Exploration Resources, an environmental consulting firm. In addition to literary endeavors, Ms. Kistner is a Certified Resource for the computer software, WordPerfect, and is the author of Composure, a style platform/keyboard utility program written in WordPerfect's macro language.

Pat Dutt Komor (Shoreview, MN) has worked as a geologist, an environmental consultant, and a science teacher. For the past six years she has worked for the U.S. EPA writing articles on how to clean up soil and groundwater pollution. She works at home and has written fiction for several years on a regular basis.

Jean LeBlanc (Fitchburg, MA) has studied biology and English. After taking a course in nature writing at the Bread Loaf School of English, she discovered that she could combine her love of natural history with her love of literature. She works in a law office in her hometown.

Errol Miller (Monroe, LA) defines himself as "The Woolworth Poet of America—dusty, shopworm, on the shelf for awhile." His recent work appears in *Aura, American Writing, Hiram Poetry Review,* and numerous others.

Paul Pekin (Chicago, IL) directs the Storyarts writing workshop and is a widely published fiction writer whose work appears in the Houghton Mifflin Anthology, *Best American Sports Writing of 1991,* as well as in magazines, such as *Kansas Quarterly, The Widener Review, Cavalier, Swank,* and *The Oxford Review.* His story, "Extended Care," won a 1991 Peter Lisagor Award from the Chicago Headline Club.

Chuck Moore (Athens, GA), having survived the terrors of sailing the Gulf of Mexico, continues his photography keen of eye and pure of heart.

S. Ramnath (El Paso, TX) works as an elementary school teacher and has a degree in Physics from the University of Calcutta and in English Literature from SUNY-Albany. His poetry, fiction, and essays have appeared in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction, Arkansas Quarterly, The Christian Science Monitor,* and many others. He has two collections of poetry: *Rings in a Tree Trunk* (Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 1975) and *In the Belly of the Flower* (Buzzard's Roost Press, 1991).

Margaret Robison (Shelburne Falls, MA) has served as a Poet-in-Residence in Massachusetts schools and has taught women in prison. She has published two books of poetry, *The Naked Bear* (Lynx House Press/Panache Books, 1977) and *Red Creek* (Amherst Writers and Artists Press, 1992).

Marina Roscher (Massapequa, NY) is a native of Germany and has worked as a professional translator in the United States and abroad. She is a

founding member of the *New York Quarterly* and has been contributing editor to other periodicals. Her poetry, fiction, articles, and essays have appeared in many journals and anthologies, including *The Beloit Poetry Journal, Southern Studies, Apalachee Quarterly,* and *Prism.*

Mary Scott (St. Paul, MN) is an artist, writer, and environmental activist who takes pride in her family's non-chemical, "equal opportunity" lawn. She has published poems in a number of journals and is currently exhibiting paintings in Grand Marais, Minnesota.

T. Kilgore Splake (Munising, MI) lives in the Pictured Rocks in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. He has new work forthcoming in the *New York Quarterly, OnTheBus,* and *Bouillabassie. Musings for Brautigan and Oona* is his latest chapbook.

Dolores Stewart (Warwick, RI) has published poetry in many places, including *The American Scholar, Chicago Review, Confrontation, Denver Quarterly, Literary Review, Massachusetts Review, Poetry Northwest, Yankee,* etc.

Robert R Ward (Seattle, WA) is editor of *Bellowing Ark* and the proprietor of a small menagerie of cats, dogs, rabbits, a 'possum, and a miniature African Hedgehog.

Philip Lee Williams (Watkinsville, GA) (Watkinsville, GA) published his seventh novel, *Blue Crystal* (Grove Press) in the spring of 1993. His novels have been translated into Japanese, Swedish, French, and German.

Mary Winters (New York City) published law-related materials until 1991. Since then, her poems have appeared in many journals, including *Descant, Northeast Journal,* and *Poetry Motel.* She works as an attorney in a civil legal aid office.

Christopher Woods (Houston, TX) is the author of a novel, *The Dream Patch,* and recently completed a new novel called *Fire.* He also writes poems and plays. His work has appeared in *The Southern Review, New Orleans Review,* and *Columbia.*

Michele Wroblewski (Richmond, VA) was born in Buffalo, NY, in 1970. She is a graduate of Gannon University in Erie, PA, and is currently pursuing an M.F.A. in creative writing at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. In 1992, she produced and edited *Earth Times,* a publication which exchanged literary and philosophical perspectives on the environment.