



Thin Air  
magazine

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# Thin Air

magazine

2003

## Thin Air

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All submissions should be accompanied by SASE. Submissions from other countries should be accompanied by a sufficient number of international postal reply coupons. Please query before sending book reviews and interviews.

Address submissions and subscriptions to:

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# Special Thanks



*Thin Air* would like to extend heartfelt thanks to Ben Brzeski for his hard work to produce this issue. Without him, this issue simply would not be. Thanks also to our generous contributors and supporters: Ann Cummins, Associated Students of Northern Arizona University, Organization of Graduate Students of English (Anne Marie McClintock and Jeanne Arete especially), Aaron Norris, Mr. and Mrs. John Haeger, Jane and Allen Woodman, The Alley, Andy Harvey and Channel 2 News, Andy Hall, Miles Waggener, Monica Brown, Jeff Berglund, Jim Simmerman, Barbara Anderson, Metagraphix, and all of our patient and loyal subscribers.

## Letter from the Editor



It is with great pride and enthusiasm that we release our 2003 issue. After a brief hiatus, *Thin Air* is back, vital as ever, and moving under the guidance of an energetic staff of volunteers. *Thin Air* would like to update you on some of the recent developments within the organization.

In addition to the publication you are currently holding, *Thin Air* continues to contribute to efforts establishing a strong presence for the arts in Northern Arizona. Flagstaff has a history of nurturing a spirited arts community, and we are proud to be actively contributing to this tradition. Most recently, this has taken shape in the form of a reading series as well as a monthly poetry slam. The *Thin Air* Reading Series, held monthly on the Northern Arizona University Campus,

*Letter from the Editor continued p. 4*

has organized readings including faculty and students from the university, members of the Thin Air Staff as well as bringing in national and international writers. In February, we hosted the much anthologized fiction writer Ron Carlson, whose stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Esquire*, *Gentleman's Quarterly*, and others, his latest books being *A Kind of Flying: Selected Stories* and *The Speed of Light*. Thin Air will also host poet Loren Goodman, the recent winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award for his book of poems, *Famous Americans*. In addition to the campus readings, Thin Air holds a monthly poetry slam at venues throughout the community which is open to all interested participants, and even more importantly, hands out cheap prizes.

As a staff, we are proud to share with you the fruits of our labors in this current issue. We are confident you will find something of what you were looking for and, we hope, something you didn't realize you were. Look for our next issue in the Fall of 2004, including works by Abby Haight, Gay Baines, Jen Currin, Lisa McBride, and others. If you're ever in the Flagstaff area, stop by the Liberal Arts Building to see what's going on. We'd be happy to say hello.

The Thin Air Staff 2003



Enjoy!

## THE CUP

Dennis Vannetta

Barry Nathan suffered from the sort of curse a man can hardly bear: he understood himself fully. As he sat in his month-old Mercedes on the McDonald's parking lot, for instance, nervously fingering the glass mug with the golden arches decal and razor-sharp chip in the rim, he saw with wounding clarity that he was playing the fool and heading for a hard, humiliating, shameful fall.

"But what else do I have to play at?" he muttered as he canted the rear-view mirror down to check the ruler-straight part in his hair, the knot in his tie—perfect—and the fall of the double-breasted, navy blazer over his narrow shoulders.

"Natty. You are a natty dresser, my man," he said to the mirror. But even then that self that understood all said back to him: "Fussy."

Barry knocked the mirror up. He'd overheard his receptionist, Mrs. Klugman, talking to his new legal secretary just yesterday. He could still hear the smirk in her voice: "Yes, Mr. Nathan is a fussy dresser. I wouldn't be surprised to see

him turn up any day wearing spats.”

Spats! That’s what had hurt. “Fussy,” well, he’d prefer “natty,” but he could hardly deny the truth of “fussy.” But *spats*? Mrs. Klugman was in her early sixties, a half-dozen years older than Barry, but even for her spats must surely have been a dim memory at best and more likely a historical artifact. Was Barry so lost in time that he was an anachronism not only in the 1990’s—that he accepted—but an anachronism to his whole life? Such a possibility caused Barry to sag back against the soft, rolled and pleated leather of the car seat. But then he immediately straightened up and urged himself, *Even so, old fellow, onward, onward!*

With that, carefully holding the mug so that its chipped rim would not scrape his blazer, Barry got out of the car and, resisting an urge to pat his hair, headed for McDonald’s.

He swung open the door. . . . Oh no. . . . It was all he could do to keep from groaning aloud. Tracy wasn’t there.

He turned away from the counter and walked through the restaurant and into the men’s room. He entered a stall, took a dozen sheets of toilet paper and folded them into a pad, and began to pat at his face and neck.

Where could Tracy be? Had Barry mixed up his days? Impossible. She’d worked the early shift—excepting Fridays and Saturdays, of course—for months now. Two-week cycles of Sundays and Mondays off one cycle, Wednesdays and Saturdays off the next. Maybe she’d changed shifts. Maybe she was sick. Maybe she’d quit!

Barry pressed the sweat-dampened pad of toilet-paper against his eyes. *Don’t cry, damn fool, don’t cry*, he exhorted himself, and then aloud said, “Sorry, sorry,” as if addressing that unseen audience he always felt was nearby witnessing each fresh humiliation.

Barry collected himself as best he could, took the mug from atop the toilet paper dispenser, walked back out into the restaurant and around the corner to the counter and . . . There she was!

Tracy must have arrived late. Or—more likely, since she was an exemplary employee—had been in the back getting a bag of coffee cups or a fresh supply of maple syrup when he first came in.

Barry hung back until a couple with a small child got on Tracy’s line, then he joined them. The longer the line, the longer Barry would have to stare in wonder at Tracy’s every move.

It was her hair, he thought, that had first caught his eye. A short, almost Pageboy cut, it curled under at the ends, but when she turned her head the ends feathered outward, their natural brown catching the light and glowing with streaks of gold. How could hair—*hair*—be so alive, so imbued with zest, so fresh, so *young*.

Too young for Barry? He didn’t really know how old she was—he’d never worked up the courage to ask—but just use your eyes. She couldn’t be more than eighteen or nineteen to his, dear God, fifty-six. But if you’re going to be a fool in

love . . .

Barry began to hum "I've Got It Bad, and That Ain't Good." The woman in front of him turned to look at him, and Barry smiled at her. She shifted the two-year-old to her other hip and turned back to her husband.

"Make sure the milk is cold, Stephen. Ask the girl if the milk is cold. Is the milk cold?"

Barry tried to catch Tracy's eye, to give her a properly sympathetic what-are-you-going-to-do look. But Tracy ignored him and said to the woman, "Yes, ma'am, the milk is good and cold."

Barry nodded in satisfaction. Taking care of business, just like she should. But hardly businesslike. There was something about the way she said The milk is good and cold that was cute and quaint and fresh as spring. Tracy should do a television commercial for McDonald's. He could see her face on TV, bright blue eyes sparkling, that right incisor just a bit too long and slightly off perpendicular—a *careless shoestring does more bewitch me . . .*—and her voice a sweet song to stir his old blood.

"Daydreaming?"

Barry realized with a start that the couple and child were gone and Tracy was looking at him.

*There was something about the way she said The milk is good and cold that was cute and quaint and fresh as spring.*

Flustered, he stepped up to the counter. He'd meant to ask her . . . He'd meant to say . . .

"The usual?" she asked.

"Yes, please. And a cinnamon roll."

He'd meant to say to her . . .

"You know, you really need to get rid of this cup," she said, totaling up his order on the register. "You could cut yourself on this chip. Besides, you have to buy something to eat to get your free coffee."

The next time they run the 'bottomless cup' promotion, you should get one of those plastic jobs. They're only five dollars, and you don't have to buy anything else with them."

*Not on your life*, Barry wanted to say. *Not after I'd worshipped you from afar those many weeks and did not think you knew I was alive. But then you handed me this cup with your own lovely hands—a gift for a faithful customer,* you said—and *shed light on my benighted life . . .*

Raptly, Barry watched Tracy as she filled his order, and then he took his tray to the table at the corner of the dining area from which he could see the counter.

Ignoring the cinnamon roll, careful of the chip, he sipped at the coffee. Barry replayed the scene in his mind, turning over Tracy's words as a jeweler might examine a stone of great rarity. He felt so *rich*. On his part, of course, there'd been only fumbling and failure. He'd meant to say the thing he'd planned and practiced endlessly the night before: *Tracy, my name is Barry. Please call me Barry.* Instead he'd stood



there like an ass virtually incapable of speech. Still, though, the riches he'd been blessed with were not just, "Hi, the usual?" which was all he received day after day weeks on end, but a genuine expression of concern—"You could cut yourself on this chip"—and three or four, at least, sentences. That night in the long, lonely hours he'd reconstruct their conversation word for word—he'd remember each one of her words, he knew he could do it. Oh, how blessed, how blessed . . .

But even as his heart sang out *blessed, blessed*, that sterner judge whispered *fool, fool*.

Barry nodded, accepting the truth of both voices, and, to still their cacophony, began to hum a song that had become a favorite of his of late: "I Want a Little Girl."

\*

Still smarting from the "spats" remark, Barry nodded coolly to Mrs. Klugman and walked on into his office.

Instantly the oak-paneled walls, plush carpet, heavy oak desk, and leather chairs and sofa calmed him and at the same time stirred him with a sense of *noblesse oblige* that made him regret his childish pique. He resolved not only to forgive Mrs. Klugman but to give her an extra hour for lunch.

Barry loved his office. He liked to imagine clients entering the rather ordinary white clapboard two-story on Rockaway Beach Boulevard, climbing the stairs past the dentist Leon Loeb's office, then into the tasteful but hardly extraordinary outer offices where resided Mrs. Klugman and the legal secretary of the day, only to be struck upon entering

Nathan's chambers by the quality, the almost British richness of its furnishings. Genuine brass, genuine oak, genuine leather, polished hardwood floors with Persian carpets scattered here and there, each one worth more than the average client's car. He liked to think that his office somehow reflected him—unprepossessing on the outside but, oh, the richness within.

"Ha!" he barked out as he crossed over to his desk and sat down. Then once more: "Ha!"

The richness within, indeed.

Had there ever been a time when he'd fooled himself into believing that howler? Perhaps so. Perhaps that had been the problem. He'd been a good student, tops at Baruch, tops again at Georgetown Law. Then, rejecting offers from the big partnerships, he'd enjoyed the fight to establish himself, himself alone, in the ol' hometown of Neponsit, dear ol' Queens, New York. He still enjoyed law, the little things especially—watching his clients read over the lengthy legal documents, pretending to understand but inevitably throwing their hands up and admitting, *No no, it's too much for us. Help us, Mr. Nathan*. And he'd lead gently them through the maze of the law, and they'd leave comforted. Poorer, of course, but comforted.

*The richness within, indeed. Had there ever been a time when he'd fooled himself into believing that howler? Perhaps so. Perhaps that had been the problem.*

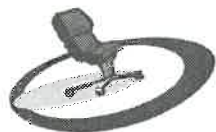
The money was good—that couldn't be denied—and he took great pleasure in the rich, fine things it bought. Still, in his heart of hearts he'd always known that a life devoted to the law and the things success in the law could bring him was a life of avoidance and self-deception. The boy Barry Nathan had been a shy, only child in his mother's house of antiques and antimacassars, and the adult Barry Nathan had found it easiest to avoid relationships that were difficult to establish and maintain. Realizing this truth about himself had not, however, been a strong enough impetus to reform, and for decades he'd managed to convince himself that this life of narrowed horizons had its compensations, was at least, well, *livable*. But then one day he'd stopped off for coffee at McDonald's, he'd seen a girl whose hair shone with streaks of gold, and without much hope but no choice in the matter, he'd set off in search of a new life.

Barry turned in his black leather swivel chair and slid open the door of the cabinet behind him, marveling at how the heavy glass moved smoothly and silently as if it floated on fine oil. He took a compact disk from the dozens lined up in alphabetical order and loaded it into the CD player. Advanced it to track four, pushed "play."

"I want a little girl . . .," the voice sang out.

Barry closed his eyes.

Hal Smith's Roadrunners—should be a country and western band from Arkansas with a name like that. Barry



wasn't sure where he'd first heard them or why he'd bought the CD. He shied away from contemporary groups. Davis and Monk he could tolerate in small doses, but Ornette Coleman and the like? Really now, was that jazz? Was that *music*? No, give him Coleman Hawkins or Fletcher Henderson or, of course, Basie or Ellington. Billy Eckstine. Give him Billy Eckstine. He could see himself taking a taxi all the way from Neponsit to Harlem just to listen to Eckstine, Bird on the sax, maybe Dizzy sitting in. Before his time? Sure, he'd have been a mere boy then, but can't a man who's an anachronism to his whole life at least choose the time of his dream?

He'd take a taxi to the Cotton Club. He'd wear a tux. On the floor at their feet would be a bottle of champagne on ice. *Their feet?* Tracy, of course. No smoky dive on 52nd Street for Tracy. He'd buy her the most beautiful silk dress. Or if not silk, then something with sequins. Sequins all over it. What a fine dream, to start life over, Tracy by his side.

"I want a little girl!" he cried out. "I want a little girl!"

The door to his office swung open on its well-oiled brass hinges. Mrs. Klugman stuck her head in. "Did you call me, Mr. Nathan?"

Nonplused, Barry said, "Yes. Take an extra hour for lunch, Mrs. Klugman. Please. Take an extra hour."

Mrs. Klugman frowned. "Well, thank you, Mr. Nathan, but it's only nine o'clock."



"I know, I know," Barry said with infinite sadness. "I know what time it is."

\*

He didn't buy her a sequined dress, but he did buy her something—a gift, a token of his appreciation.

*He didn't buy her a sequined dress, but he did buy her something—a gift, a token of his appreciation.*

something—a gift, a token of his appreciation.

"Nothing, it's nothing at all, Tracy, just a little token of my appreciation," he said, extending the sequined bag.

Then he groaned and turned away from the mirror over the bar in his den.

"Damn fool. Ass. 'A little token of my appreciation.' Why not just hand her a plaque for making employee of the month! Silly ass."

He turned back to the mirror, made a visible effort to compose himself, waited until his expression of self-loathing softened into as close to an amiable look as he could manage, and then said, "It's just a little something I happened to see in a shop . . . so pretty. It made me think of you. You've been so kind to me. Please accept this as a token of my appreciation . . . Dear God!"

There was that "token of my appreciation" feces again. Was he trying to put himself on a more intimate footing with a lovely young woman, or was he delivering a speech at a United Way fund-raiser? God knows he'd had more experience with

the latter.

Barry walked away from the bar and flopped down on the couch. Then jumped up and selected the Hal Smith's Roadrunners CD from the cabinet—larger than the one in his office, occupying half a wall—and put it in the CD player, along with the large-screen television built into the wall adjacent to the cabinet.

He flopped back down on the couch. Sometimes he played track four hours on end. Tonight might be another of those nights. Thank God for electronic advances, he thought, holding the CD player remote between index and middle fingers like a fat black cigar.

In his other hand he turned the bag this way and that, the sequins winking in the soft light of the den's recessed lamps. Was it an appropriate gift for Tracy? How on earth was Barry to know? Was it a bag, as he kept calling it, or a purse? It was slightly larger than the palm of his hand. Maybe it was a coin purse meant to go inside a bag. He vaguely remembered his mother having one when he was a boy. That was a long time ago, of course.

"Tracy, please accept this as a token . . . God damn!"

Barry sighed. Oh well. He had plenty of time to come up with something appropriate to say. Tonight, then Thursday night, then Friday night until she got off work at eleven. He had nothing else to do with his evenings. Write the script, polish it, rehearse it. Have a good exit line ready, too, and practice a little self-deprecatory laugh for when she turned him

down, or looked at him in speechless, baffled shock—not even recognizing the silly old bastard accosting her on the parking lot—or screamed, a boyfriend rushing up to pummel him good and proper. Anything could happen Friday night, but absolutely nothing would surprise him.

He fingered the sequined bag. He played track four.

\*

By 10:30 Friday night the tension had become too much for Barry. He left his house and drove up and down Breach Channel Drive, to calm his nerves listening to Coleman Hawkins. But that hadn't worked, so he gave up and pulled onto the McDonald's parking lot at 10:48, put the Hal Smith's Roadrunners disk into the CD player and listened to "I Want a Little Girl" three times, and by then it was almost eleven o'clock.

He got out of his car. Maybe he should have gone inside. Tracy was used to seeing him in the restaurant, after all. He could open the door for her as she was leaving, accompany her back to her car.

He hesitated. It was a chilly fall evening. A light mist drifted in from the ocean, and with it the odor of things that had died in the sea. He looked down at the sequined bag in his hand as if it might have been one of those things, something still lovely and glittering under the parking lot lights but, nevertheless, dead.

*What are you doing here?* Barry asked himself, shaking his head.

Tracy came out of the restaurant. She walked toward her car, a Ford Escort that had seen better days. Barry took a halting step forward, and Tracy noticed him. She looked quickly away, as one does in New York to avoid more than the most coincidental eye contact, but then she looked back. She stopped, did an almost burlesque double-take, and walked toward him.

"Oh, hi, it's *you*," she said, a look of utter wonder on her face.

Even in the most bizarre scenarios played out in the lonely hours of the night, Barry had never conjured up this reaction. *Wonder.*

"Tracy, I . . . because you were kind enough to give me the cup . . . just a little token of my appreciation, what I'm trying to say . . ."

He was paralyzed, unable to take a single step. He could do no more than extend the sequined bag toward her. Tracy advanced upon him, her face made angelic by that look of rapt, beatific wonder. Only after almost unconsciously taking the bag from him did she give it a single glance, mumble, "Oh, thanks," and then, inexplicably, walk right past him.

"Is this *yours*?" she asked.

Barry turned. "What—?"

"Is this yours? The Mercedes."

"Oh, the car. Yes, it's mine."

Tracy looked at the car from the right side and then

walked around and looked at it from the left.

"Are you *shitting* me? This is *yours*? Damn. This is the big one, too, isn't it? What's this baby cost—80,000 or so?"

Tracy did a complete circuit of the car. Barry looked down at the pavement, wet from the ocean mist. He didn't know what to do with his hands.

"How about taking me for a ride?"

Barry looked up. "What?"

"How about a ride? Come on. You never know—maybe you'll get lucky."

Barry looked at her. "What?" he said again, canting his head toward her as if to hear better with his left ear.

Tracy laughed. "I said, come on, give me a ride and we'll see what happens. Maybe this is your lucky day."

Barry's mind wasn't working. There wasn't a single thought in his mind.

He shrugged. "No. I'm sorry. I don't know why I said that—about the car, I mean. It's not my car. That's not my Mercedes. I don't know why I said that."

\*

Barry stood on the parking lot until Tracy drove away, and then he stood a while longer. Finally he was able to move, and then he got back in his car.

He sat for several minutes. Then he extended his right hand. He thought he was reaching for the controls on his CD

player, but he realized he wasn't. He was searching for the McDonald's cup that he washed religiously every day and kept in the receptacle beneath the dash.

He took up the cup and tested the chipped rim against his thumb. Oh yes, very sharp. Then he began to run the rim here and there over his forehead, cheekbones, chin, and nose. He knew it was cutting because he could feel his shirt collar becoming soaked with blood. And then there was the pain, of course.

He stopped when a thought suddenly occurred to him. Yes, after all he had learned something from this. He understood himself fully, true enough, but now he realized that he understood absolutely nothing else.

Barry considered this astounding discovery a moment, and then he turned the mirror down for a better view and raised the cup once more.



WANDERER NO. 3

WANDERER

W A N D E R E R



DAVE WITTIG

CHICAGO

James Crizer

W

### Wally's Museum

I never look directly at snakes, though  
the glitter of their molting flashes  
daily beneath my lids, in Wally's glass  
eye, his hardware store's basement.

I step from booth to booth:  
two heads share the neck of a lamb,  
double the legs on a sow's back, six  
hooves on sticks hang from a stuffed calf.

Wally at the switch, the cubicles glow  
green the goat, then purple, then red.  
The glint off his suspender-buckle caught  
in the dog-eared socket, a black flame

in the colt's blue eye—one of four,  
the one not brown, Wally's spare.  
I turn to the foot of the staircase.  
His paunch strains the buttons between

his straps. I stare fixedly at his belly,  
*Look, remember your manners when you move  
to Texas, it's like a zoo. They have a fence  
around it bigger than that wall in China...*

the swell of a swallowed robin—not the egg  
it left, matte sliver of sky beneath his brow,  
but his gut— an errant shot, a nest felled,  
the helter-skelter of a devilled yolk.

Stephen Davenport

**Instructions On The Back  
Of A Box Of Poetry**

for Howard Nemerov

Not a ledger for the real  
or a box or a sack or a shell,  
not the bones of a bird  
buried deep in the earth  
or a catalogue of patter  
for the counters and trotters.

Bottom line: a ride  
on great red wings  
to raise the dead  
and dethrone kings.

Norma  
Chapman

**Here are the rules**

Don't talk.  
Especially  
don't say  
What do you like?

Your tongue  
has its particular  
question  
for my  
skin.

When  
it's  
time

sleep.

In the morning, talk  
grind coffee if you want to.  
Eat your eggs over easy.

**Hobbies**

I care nothing for seriousness, for art. Knit badly. Paint crudely. A spirit of perfection is work, is your job, is the tidiness of death. My neighbor paints pictures on rocks she finds out walking. Big smiley faces, daisies, ducks. She works for the state. I teach at the university. She writes tax code. I write poems. Neither one popular reading. She gives me a rock— black-dotted lady bug—to guard my hobby, flourishing garden of zucchini and happy untamed weeds.

Jesse Lee Kercheval

**Homework**

You hurry  
toward the future or at least the ROTC ball,  
sliding your sixteen year old body  
into your blue slip,  
then a blue gown,  
like ocean meeting sky the day the world began.  
The doorbell rings  
and you leave laughing,  
older sister on your way  
to wisdom and a fast dance.  
Blue sky gone as well.

On my desk, the lamp shines  
a vacant yellow.  
Mother's in the kitchen  
fixing dinner,  
Father watching Cronkite  
in the den. I open up  
my books, try the problems,  
but you're the one  
with answers. Outside  
in the evening, moth wings brush  
against my window  
with a sound  
like someone breathing,  
as if *living* were the question,  
and each breath I take  
the only answer  
there will ever be.

Muted drums of factory and dock  
 Squat cobble-stolid in the quiet  
 Of slow and flowing fogwebs,  
 An uncondensed hour's almost  
 Secret respite whose interdrifting vapor  
 Sends variations on a theme in mime  
 Past the muted shadows of a silent  
 Rhythm section to fusions  
 In the park, a spell of haze  
 In hanging motion, held  
 In woodwind's breathing, just  
 The barest emanation, a dumbsong  
 Sung in hush of wisp and plume,  
 Whose floating uptown reach  
 Embraces thrust of bowstring buildings  
 To soften in the shawling fog  
 That sheering pitch, whose clouds  
 In glass muffle scale of neighbor heights  
 With noteless counterpoint and improvise  
 In the symphony this final movement of the night,  
 Ballet in grey, and epilogue in mist.

Stephen Malin  
 Urban Nocturne



Grey Held  
 Convertible



Uncle Irving took me for a drive on I-95  
 when the road was newly  
 cleared through the downtown  
 and I was twelve, and he  
 seemed so bold, almost  
 defiant in his 1964 Oldsmobile  
 outrunning those tame sedans at the stoplights  
 and the radio's volume maxed-out  
 on Mahalia Jackson's gospel tide  
 and the sweet caravan of backup singers.  
 It was cold with the top down  
 and the wind speeding over us, like faith,  
 wove itself into a roof. The speed  
 through space, the crucial truth  
 of movement made it solid  
 so that when it started to rain  
 the droplets couldn't get through  
 and we stayed dry.

Once upon a time, a woman fell  
 in love with a woodsman.  
 Or maybe more rightly, she fell in love  
 with his land,  
 the 7,000 acres of conifers,  
 streams that shimmered grey in the northwest rain,  
 and mountain meadows glittering with dry grass  
 that he woke to every morning—  
 and by extension,  
 since he seemed so a piece of the slash  
 piles and elk songs and fog on the ridge,  
 she fell in love with him.

Laurel S.  
 Peterson

Then she got on a plane and  
 flew home to New York where  
 the sleeping snow was three inches  
 rather than three feet,  
 where museum walls sang with sparkle,  
 where the street lamps hung like poems  
 in graphic design,  
 the stars glittered through  
 chiffon sheers of smoke and exhaust,  
 the streets smelled of grilled chicken  
 in 18 languages, and  
 taxi drivers could whistle in  
 grape, juniper, cactus or potato.

And the woman called to the woodsman,  
*Come see my world and sing in it.*  
*I will make you safe here,*  
*as you made me safe there*  
*and from the two we*  
*can make a magic third.*

*I can't,* said the woodsman.  
*I need the coyote howls,*  
*and the acres empty of asphalt*  
*the stars with no chiffon.*  
*Mine is the only world,*  
*and if you want me,*  
*you must live in it.*  
 The woman said, *How can I live*  
*in your world*  
*if you won't enter mine?*

The  
 Woman  
 Who  
 Loved A  
 Man Who  
 Refused To  
 Come Out  
 Of The  
 Woods



Peterson continued p. 26

Peterson continued from p.25

So the woodsman got on a plane  
and flew to New York  
and wandered in the granite forest,  
saw the migrant herds of morning  
and evening, forded the raging streets,  
and marveled that the woman loved  
this.

He said, *I don't know how  
to make a magic third  
from your world and mine.  
They are estranged.*

There was a long pause,  
and silence pooled in the pause,  
swirling in motionless waves.  
The woman and the woodsman stared  
at each other, two positives, pushing, pushing.  
Air fossilized, clear like amber,  
with all between them in its  
hardened, liquid suspension.  
For that moment, breath held its counsel.

The woman said,  
*I thought we could start  
by constructing a transition.*  
and she reached into her pocket  
and brought out a crystal and gold terrarium.  
*Look in it,* she said,  
and there in her hand was his forest,  
his stream, his mountain lying heaped up under the sun.

From the other pocket, she pulled  
a silver glass, sparking gold curls of light  
and he looked in it and  
there were her streetlights,  
her migrant herds,  
her raging rivers of morning and evening.  
*Every day, touch it,* she said.  
*Every day, walk around it three times.*

Peterson continued p. 27

Peterson continued from page p.26

So the woodsman got on a plane  
and went home to his mountain cats,  
to the dust that swirled like flickering flames  
and every day he touched  
his piece of her,  
walked around the glass three times,  
and thought about the distance  
between them.

And the woodsman thought about language and stars,  
the luster of wishes;  
he thought about how sparks flew from the moon  
to light the museum,  
how the streetlights' borrowed from the stream  
a rapid glitter,  
how the elk song swayed like peace  
through the city's night air.

The nights paled beside the blackness  
of his surety that no bridge existed  
to ford this crossing.  
December fell like ice,  
the sky carving its silver and grey initials  
on the windows, embracing his house  
until bones cracked—and his certainty  
covered his limbs like moss, like mold.

And in New York,  
The woman kissed her ritual gold,  
dreamed deeply of the bronzed sky  
over the ridge  
and the bear browsing across the canyon,  
and watched for the woodsman's heart to grow  
toward hers.

A year passed quickly like roses,  
like lemonade, like gold wire,  
and they looked back and discovered  
that despite the diamonds scattered in the mountain dust,  
the distance between them was the same.

Peterson continued p. 28

The woodsman called to the woman:  
*I don't know how  
to make a magic third  
from your world and mine.  
They are estranged.*

Afternoon followed evening,  
morning followed afternoon  
and the woman looked at the distance,  
and the distance became a looking glass  
with their future reflected before her:  
the ground littered with silver shards, slain  
coyote and mountain cats, the muddy trample  
of the morning hoards. The moon hung  
lusterless and fractured in two. The twinkling lights  
of her beloved city had dimmed.

*A transition would destroy everything,* she said  
to the woodsman.  
Yes, he said, as his fingers tightened  
around the silver glass and shattered it.



## Van C. Hartmann

### Sequins

Today I took the dog to search for you  
along the path we walked last winter,  
in that brief lull between the storms,  
and recalled the lines you loved  
from Doty's poem, "no such thing,  
the queen said, as too many sequins."  
We both agreed it should have been your theme song.  
As the dog and I approached the sign  
that always made you stop and do the bump,  
because, you said, that's what it said to do,  
a gust of autumn wind engulfed a grove  
of nearby elms and gave them such a shake  
they rained a shower of sequins,  
amber, crimson, emerald, gold,  
upon our heads. The dog went wild  
with chasing bits of fractured light.  
I almost heard you laugh. Outrageous, you,  
who once picked up your wine and placed it  
briefly on the table next to you  
because the pill you had to take  
said "do not mix with alcohol."  
Undaunted, you who told the hospice nurse  
you had to walk because you knew  
that if you stopped you'd die,  
and so, like tireless Hobson in Milton's poem,  
you walked and walked and walked  
until the nurse gave up all hope  
of ever laying you discretely to your rest.

Then you stopped. Rude impossibility.  
You whose laugh could crack apart  
the morning sky became a silence  
full of sequins, missing everywhere.

Lois Beebe Hayna

**Body Language**

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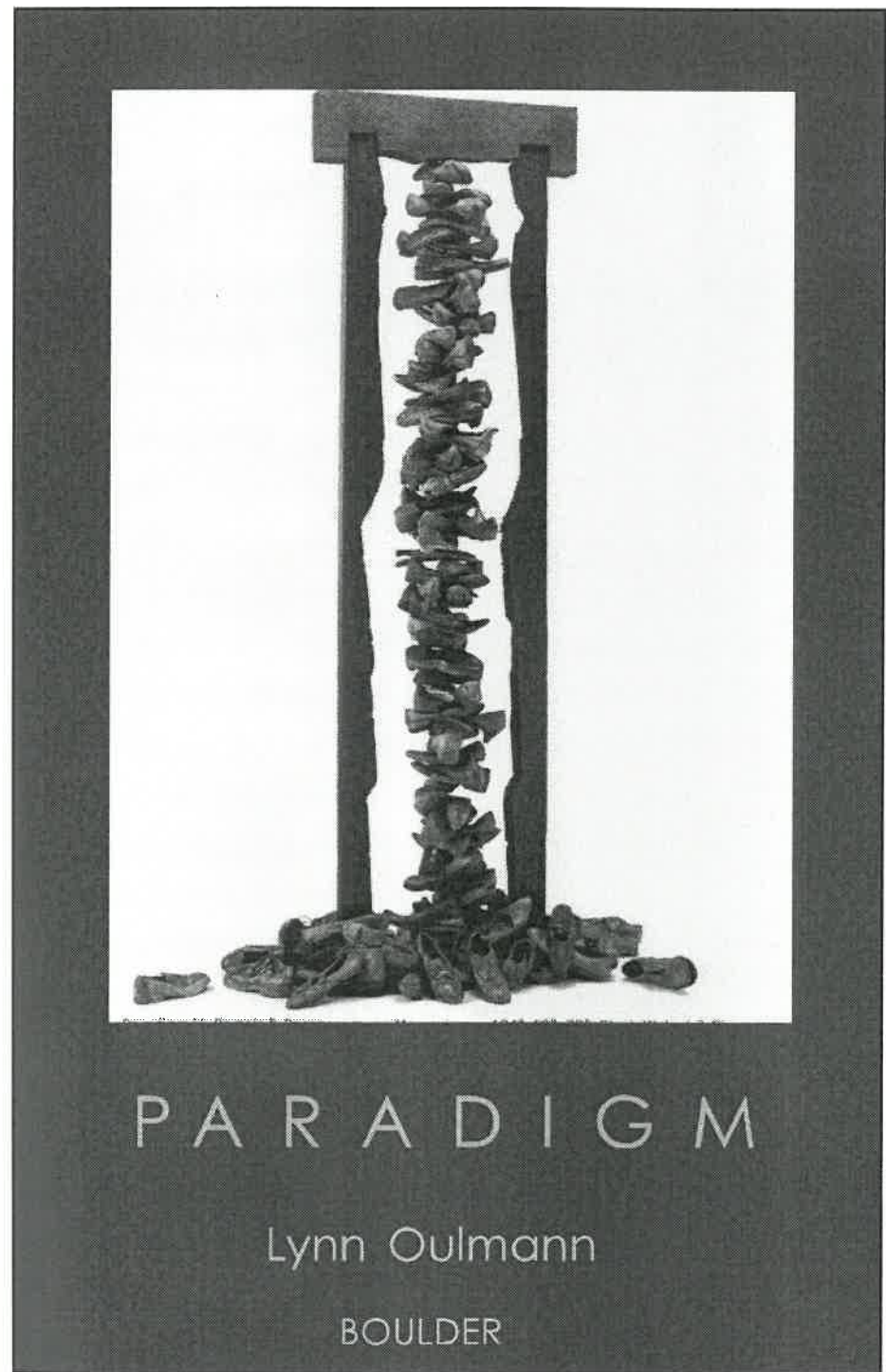
I came to the world  
with the beggar's gesture,  
my cupped hands  
pleading a brimful share  
of the world's wonders.

It flung me more  
than my hands could hold,  
tossed me such gifts  
I couldn't,  
in the swift spin of time,  
sort true  
from counterfeit.

I open my fingers  
to let fall  
back to the world  
what the world gave,  
naming it  
neither false nor fine  
but too abundant.

Even a beggar surfeits.

My hands clasp  
loosely now  
content with the morning's manna.



# REVERSE GENDER

Daryl V. Glenn

Yell her name and thoughtlessly toss the workout duffle bag on the coffee table where junk mail and overdue bills are steeped and strewn across the surface. She will complain about the mess as she has done almost every day of this three-year marriage that relentlessly trembles toward the impasse of irreconcilable differences, like the hand of a drunk man at 3:00 a.m. striving to fit the key in the lock, scratching and scarring the darkness that the niggardly porch light cannot dispel. Do not use the word "niggardly" because it is a transparent husk through which the dark seed in the middle glows with malevolence, threatening to burst into sudden ugly prominence and spread spiky suffocating leaves. Laugh dolefully, bitterly, because it would occur to no one else that, for example, the odious word "kike" would most assuredly never have been inserted like a poisonously beating heart into a legitimate synonym for parsimonious called "kikeardly" and been tolerated, neither that nor any other racial epithet. The mercury of hatred climbs in proportion to the degree of melanin in pigment. Let this thought wither before it blossoms into a wild

garden of hopeless societal indictment. Look at the duffle bag stuffed with comforting accoutrements of masculinity: jock strap in its humid fetal twist, keg-like container of Creatine, Nikes fashioned with NASA bulk and sophistication to crush and flatten gravity in the chunky threads of pounding soles, sweat-mooned T-shirt sleeveless to reveal thistle of armpits and accentuate biceps because there is nothing covering them. Consider removing the workout bag as the sort of small but significantly effortful "gesture of accommodation necessary to ensure the longevity of any healthy relationship" that the marriage counselor speaks of in the weekly Friday night sessions. Do not think of the snug small bear of dark allurements that surfaces from hibernation between the marriage counselor's legs as she crosses them and the gray Anne Klein skirt slides higher to mold thighs voluptuously before her fingers fret the hemline down – a despicable observation given the context of the sessions. Consider therefore removing the workout bag but instantly erect a Tinker Toy architecture of rationalization, a tiny city where one segment of the citizenry begins to be almost robotically preoccupied with all the regula-

*Consider removing the workout bag as the sort of small but significantly effortful "gesture of accommodation necessary to ensure the longevity of any healthy relationship" that the marriage counselor speaks of in the weekly Friday night sessions.*

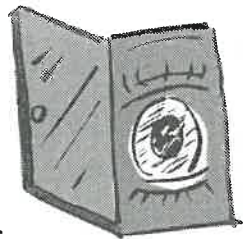
tions and edicts imposed by another segment of the citizenry and is slowly stripped of independent action and thought. Leave the workout bag where it is and wander into the bedroom. Wonder briefly at the cheerless centrality that Tinker Toys occupied in a childhood spent avoiding other kids who scribbled streets in a territorial hopscotch with chalk of cruelty, a childhood spent sequestered in the bedroom to escape their taunts ("proper talkin' sissy"), their always airborne fists. Brood on the probable fissures this may have left in the foundation of self image and take note of the black lacy maze of panties, bra, slip, sheer Haines nylons left on the bedspread. Fail to see how this is any different from the workout duffle bag on the coffee table. Sit on the doughy edge of the bed, hear the telephone on the dresser ring, do not answer it but listen as the machine engages with a modest beep: "You home? Guess not. Me and Tricia are gonna stop off at Acapulco's for some salsa and chips, maybe a margarita." Once again, hear the tone beep, this time with something disconsolate and dimly ominous about it. A mere year ago the invitation to join them was always extended, the last word heard in the message was "sweetheart" but that was then and now, now the absence of endearment and invitation nervously fingers some trigger of aloneness and regret, the barrel pointed straight at the chest like a mugger's gun. As though struggling to lift some barbell straddling the heart, make an attempt, rendered feeble with the weight of some-



thing like emotional exhaustion, to remove obstacles and find the clean clear space below the causes and origins of so much spite and so many recriminations that press bones deeper into chest. Think, don't feel. Dismiss the suspicion that the reasons for this growing estrangement are self-generated, a cataract of neglect that has been allowed to film the eyes, dulling the sight of her, or no, crushing the nugget that initially sparkled in her, the inner diamond compressed to a lump of coal. But mull over how it is impossible to see another person day after day and retain that freshness, the sparkle – just shrug, attribute it to human nature. Do not think, "What kind of man have I become?" Decide to take a shower – this may, or may not, prove to be therapeutic.

When the doorbell rings feel solar plexus contract in a wedge of anxiety and walk back through the living room slowly, each step a freefall from a high ledge crumbling into air. Jerk the door open and see no one. See no one. See nothing. No visitor, no solicitor, no arrogantly apologetic Dominos delivery boy trying to find the right apartment. Detect neither scent nor subtle displacement of air's volume, which would leave the shimmer of another human being's recent departure. Calculate that this has been happening off and on for a month, and only when Paula is not here. The doorbell ringing. Jerking the door open. There is no sound of children running, no evidence of youngsters playing pranks. No flyers have been left on the welcome mat, no advertisements, no newspaper. Listen to the dreamy tinkling of wind chimes from somewhere, an

airy confetti of toy-like tones. Whisper something that has no meaning, an expulsion of vowels and consonants, a phrase unstructured by syntax. As though being watched by eyes that are everywhere, nowhere, stand very still. Say aloud, arms hanging impotently at sides, "Fuck you," but say it softly, without conviction. Do not use the word "impotently" for obvious reasons, especially in conjunction with the word "fuck." The ringing of the doorbell, then nothing. Take inventory of all the things that have failed to make an appearance over the course of this lifetime, the absence of the providence or luck that seems to lead others to the right place at the right time, no welcome embrace of life-altering events, no sequence of moments combining propitiously in the lottery of the random world ... suddenly forget what has launched this spiral of thought. Remember again, like fingers snapping. Someone had been here, someone perhaps with a message to deliver, someone who would extend a box gift wrapped in vapor, a broken alarm clock, a withered branch. Someone who, if convinced to stay and stand and stare unblinkingly at this man holding open the door, would whisper hoarsely that the time has finally arrived or already passed, then turn and walk quickly away with lowered head. Wait, dear god, don't go, what is it? Watch the figure retreat. Come back, please, no more of these fucking charades, all this useless mystery, say something, what's the meaning of the broken alarm clock, the withered branch, the box gift



wrapped in vapor? Silence like thick slices of bread and these thin thoughts sandwiched in the middle. Close the door now and follow the trail of heartbeats that had fallen like fairytale breadcrumbs back into the bedroom. Think, "What is all this business with bread?" so that laughter like butter can smooth the walk to the bedroom.

Begin to remove clothes, though with no intention of showering. Women stand before long mirrors and seem reconciled to the reflection. Paula, disrobing, always watches herself, wishing for less weight here, more there, reading the body dismissively as though it were a Sidney Sheldon novel, merciless in self-assessment but never questioning the echo of herself in the mirror. Try doing what she does. Naked now, gaze into the mirror. Biceps seem permanently flexed from weightlifting, the thighs from running seem a sturdy trellis for vines of vein. Stare at the pubic hair as though it were a dark corridor leading to a door any sane man should be afraid to open. Look at the valve-shaped penis, recalling that Paula and her female friends laughingly refer to it – not this particular one but penises in general – as "package" or "unit." Suppress opinions because isn't self-image suspect and therefore unreliable? Realize that something is missing, some filament essential to irradiate understanding, this void now enjoining the hand to assume the shape of an examination table with the penis placed on it carefully like a sedated patient. Reflect on the pain that people inflict on themselves, especially young



girls who burn forearms with cigarettes, slice thighs with razors, whittle themselves away with the stiletto of anorexia, and imagine the unit's pain if skimmed forcefully with a scalpel. This is what Paula did to herself when she was younger, a troubled teenager living in Detroit, or so she had explained: Hurt yourself before others have the opportunity, savor the irony of the preemptive strike, because no self-respecting guy finds a serious challenge in further mutilating already damaged goods. She had said, Better to hurt yourself rather than to give that power to a stranger. She had said, Isn't this at the root of the appeal of virginity for men? She had said, If it's fair to say a woman is nothing but a parody of a man, something stripped by castration of an inalienable power, and you add the dynamic of race, then do you know what a black woman in America is? – A black woman in America is a just nigger without a dick. She had said ...

The doorbell rings, followed by a soft melting thud, like a dome of ice cream slipping from cone to floor before it reaches a child's mouth.

*Hurt yourself  
before others  
have the opportunity,  
savor the irony  
of the preemptive strike,  
because no self-respecting guy  
finds a serious challenge in  
further mutilating already  
damaged goods. She had  
said, Better to hurt yourself  
rather than to give that  
power to a stranger.*

Snatch a towel hanging from the bathroom doorknob and wrap it around the waist, then run through the living room. Towel trailing in flap and float enhances the impression of gliding, moving ghostlike forward. Glide on, the balls of the feet skimming carpet. Jerk the door open. Feel without hearing the rake of wind as though gusting off a tumbleweed prairie far away. Refrain, restrain, suppress. Looking right and left see nothing, no one, then catch in the pinched periphery of the right eye a dark object, a shape. Command head to turn and drop. Allow vision to spear the tiny body of a bird, dead from impact against the living room window to the right and above the mailbox.

A box gift wrapped in vapor. A broken alarm clock. A withered branch. A dead baby bird.

She had said, Better to hurt yourself than to transfer that power to a stranger.

The messenger has departed, leaving silence and secrets and a counterfeit currency of stillness.

Recall gliding through the living room ghostlike.

Peer down the row of identical townhouses and notice that at the very end there is something happening. Squint to pull everything closer. Observe what appears to be a family of four people with expressionless faces standing over a stretcher as though they are suspended in an aquarium of gelled muted activity. Two paramedics lift the ends of the stretcher and bear it away so that the wheels, spinning helplessly in the air, grieve for contact with solid ground. Step out, around, careful to

avoid the sparsely feathered baby bird lying in the center of the welcome mat, its new nest of forever thwarted flight. Stare at the body on the stretcher, tucked cylindrical in a sheet, the mummy sheet pulled over the head.

Try doing what she does and stand nude before the mirror. Do not ask where the towel is or at what point the towel became problematic in this respect. Where is the towel? Where is the box, the broken alarm clock, the withered branch? They are perhaps with the bird, in the bird. The location of the bird is most certainly known. Recall the words of the marriage counselor, "Embark on a journey of empathy, not a journey of refusals." Postulate that knowledge of the unknowable, an alternate identity, might be achieved by an act as simple as the rearrangement of anatomical parts on an unremarkable flesh and blood mannequin. Conclude that the body, this body standing here that resembles a mannequin, is perhaps good fortune, a lesser omen, and might be a place to start, a point of departure and arrival both. Start with the obvious. It's obvious now, isn't it? Walk to the bed and sit on its doughy edge, picking up the black nylon stockings.

Think about the guys, why twice a week the chessboard-in-motion of the basketball game played at the YMCA should be so important, a ritual that bridges the gulf between boyhood and manhood and achieves quintessence not on the sweat-puddled court but in the locker room, where rough palms and rough wet towels slap a Morse code of dire



camaraderie on muscular asses. Does the ritual have anything to do with the box, the clock, the branch? What would the guys think of what's about to be done here in the bedroom? Men are natural explorers, venturing from the place they know to discover other regions, while women embark on expeditions to arrive deeper into places they never left. Wonder which this is, how the guys, busy bouncing basketballs, would see it.

Reverse gender.

Try to remember the order, like seasons, in which Paula dresses – stockings first, then shoes, next slip and then panties and bra ... something like a spring, summer, winter, fall of undergarments? – but fail to recapture the sequence of progression, experience instead a brief jumbled autumn of confusion. Improvise, try to imagine what would be natural. Take the spineless eel of the nylons and lay them as though on display across the palm of one hand. Mash one of the stockings into a bunch, point the toes and insert the right foot, begin to tug. When Paula does this the stocking is already compressed into something like a ball and then she

*Try to remember the order, like seasons, in which Paula dresses – stockings first, then shoes, next slip and then panties and bra ... something like a spring, summer, winter, fall of undergarments? – but fail to recapture the sequence of progression, experience instead a brief jumbled autumn of confusion.*

neatly unrolls it up, nothing at all like this collapse of effervescence in the hands. Pull. Feel the hairs of the calf snip and snag at the fabric, read the biting alphabet of hairs scribbled beneath the black papery translucence of the stocking. The calf is a pregnancy of flesh, a pendant gourd around which the stocking with difficulty spills its stretch, but then it slides easily over the hard anger of the kneecap and begins to rise nicely around the football bulge of the lower thigh. Compare the thigh to the widening bell of a tuba, but hear the ascent of the nylon as a slurring flute. Do the same with the other leg and stand, the stockings tight and clinging desperately to skin like a raft that clings with all its might to waves as it splinters and sinks. Note with relief that there is no enjoyment other than that which attaches to a dry determination to see this complex pantomime through. Avoid as yet reflections that lurk in the mirror. As though watched by eyes that are everywhere, nowhere, look around the room. Feel, don't think. Suddenly remember how, many years ago, Uncle Elroy came every Saturday afternoon to the house when the family lived in Milwaukee, offering advice and instruction in self defense, an ex-middleweight boxer on the amateur circuit who was the masculine fulfillment of Mother's hint of broad shoulders and sturdy musculature, a promising talent until battles with alcohol took the place of opponents in the ring. Uncle Elroy, wearing the long Navy pea coat he always wore even as the smoldering viscera of August summer squeezed a last cramp of sweat from the body. See again the first thing Uncle Elroy

does when he enters the house, which is to find the Tinker Toy boy hiding in the bedroom and sweep back the wings of the unbuttoned coat, thrust his gigantic stomach into the boy's face, and with his great sculptured fists beat upon the booze-bloated keg of his own abdomen in illustration, bidding with baritone bark the child to similarly strike it. This right here and now for your pummeling pleasure is those other kids out there waiting for you, he says, those other little black heathen bastards. Mother watches, uncertain as to the validity of the wisdom being transmitted. Bounce, bounce the stomach closer to face. They call you punk, do they not? I'm told they call you a proper-talking sissy. Bounce, bounce the stomach closer to face. Flash of pint bottle like a fang from an inner pocket of the coat. Because you know the difference between a noun and an adjective, you have to TAKE THEIR SHIT?! But the Tinker Toy boy loved Uncle Elroy too much to assault the stomach and never did as he was exhorted. Look now into the corner of the room. Mightn't Uncle Elroy be over there, hiding behind the curtains? Reason that if theologians are right and death is but a passing over, then there must be dead who do not pass over, for reasons the living will never understand, and that those who do not are here, because where else could they go if they don't pass over? Decide to stage a belated exhibition for Uncle Elroy, who must always have been secretly disappointed that the boy's fist refused to pummel the keg-like belly. Curling upper torso into a defensive crouch, begin to shuffle, tensing in



and out of tentative rhythms. Weave and bob, swiveling from the waist to dodge the blows of the opponent: the box gift wrapped in vapor, the broken alarm clock, the withered branch, the dead baby bird, the man on the stretcher. With heathen glee cry out and throw punches hard, feinting and dancing backward, slicing with jabbing arcs, sweat skipping down the face like water beading on a hot tilted skillet. Coast with a tic-tac-toe of flurried footwork back to the ropes and lean into them, unable to evade the enemy's furious barrage. Anticipating the terminal blow that will catapult consciousness beyond the barrier of the head, cover up, tuck elbows in and hide. Catch a glimpse of Uncle Elroy, who has seen enough, and who buttons his coat, waves sadly goodbye. Realize that once again a failure has taken place, a diversion has been allowed to wedge itself between intention and accomplishment, and return to the matter at hand before it's too late and the mind burrows back into its molehill. Pull the stockings up, out of their forlorn droop below knees. Step into the slip and feel the elastic band stretch stubbornly to accommodate this larger waist, sense the tissue of static-cling in a weak force-field about the thighs and think about searching for the can she keeps in the kitchen pantry to spray the airy electricity away, then decide against it. Take the bra and do what she does, fastening the four hooks through the eyelets first, then slipping the entire apparatus over the head and maneuver arms through the loops. Make shrugging adjustments and pat. The cups of the bra are twin badges of deficient volume, flattened against the

chest like kites against sky. Do the job right if it is to be done at all. There is toilet paper in the adjacent bathroom, get balls of it and stuff the cups. There is a donut of white medical adhesive tape on the edge of the sink. Go get it and return, sitting on the doughy edge of the bed. When the penis, the unit, is firmly taped to the thigh, the legs crossed, study the mirror and muse that in a certain negligent light the effect of the reflection might be that of a handsome, solidly built woman. Is it distressing that the reflection in the mirror suggests a person who might have been a better looking woman than man? Don't answer that question. On the dresser is a small lavender make up bag, rimmed with beads meant to resemble pearls. Paula has never been given pearls as a gift and now it's surely too late. Carefully apply lipstick, of a brand purporting to be for "women of color," the phallic rise of the dark red tip protruding ironically as the tube is twisted, then find deeper in the bag a tiny brush with a powdery tip and a dime-thin case which when opened reveals a rainbow palate of small squares, tiny television screens tuned each to a different pastel frequency. Use the diazepam-blue and brush it on eyelids, smearing it in with the finger's tip. This association brings to mind her bottle of Valium in the medicine cabinet, find it quickly and read the label "one every four hours for anxiety" then place one of the aqua tablets on the tongue and chew.

Anxiety.

All that is needed now is a wig but there is no wig. Open

*Think  
what the  
guys,  
ceasing to  
bounce  
basket-  
balls,  
mouths  
agape,  
might say  
if they saw  
this, their  
lips wet  
with scald  
of invective,  
the  
word fag  
like  
chewed  
matter  
between  
the teeth,  
although  
they know  
there is  
not a gay  
bone in  
this body.*

the closet door and find a pair of black high heels, force toes into the tapered cavity of the shoes. At least five inches of heel overhang the edge so it is not possible to tie the trailing straps. Walk now. Experience how with every step she takes, even without the excess counterweight of heels, she must struggle to maintain equilibrium.

Uncle Elroy has returned and is hiding behind the curtains, watching from the corner of the room.

The doorbell rings.

The baby bird in its new nest of death.

The impulse to glide ghostlike across the living room and jerk the door open is an almost palpable magnetism. The messenger of everything unresolved has returned and this time, this time would not flee if the door was jerked open. The heart begins to hurry in the chest, unloading beats like gravel from a dump trunk. Hurry with the heart. Finish this.

Think what the guys, ceasing to bounce basketballs, mouths agape, might say if they saw this, their lips wet with scald of invective, the word fag like chewed matter between the teeth, although they know

there is not a gay bone in this body. One of the guys is Middle Eastern, one is Asian, one is Jewish, one black, friends of all colors and cultures, Americans all. Speculate why it is that the black community in particular seems to despise gay black males. Come to no conclusion regarding this observation ... or rather, come to myriad conclusions – same thing. Continue walking, even though one ankle and then the other seems to snap free of the socket, rolling painfully before reconnecting.

She had said, Better to hurt yourself rather than to transfer that power to a stranger.

The doorbell rings. If that ringing were weather it would be thunder followed by lightning.

Continue walking to and fro before the mirror. Try to let hips loosen, imitate the motion of water left in the wake of a sailboat, think of sails filling their aprons with air, of glaciers in their drifting ballet, of wheels turning within wheels, of a seismograph needle measuring an earthquake that curves gently, of children turning in bed as they dream of pink smoke, of red wine pouring lushly from a bottle. Think sinuously and let the thoughts extend down strange avenues of realization: that perhaps this should have been done years ago, that it should be mandatory, at least once, to dress little boys like this for purposes that have nothing to do with the sexual, but perhaps as a preparation for ringing doorbells, unseen messengers, a broader rite of passage. Conjecture that if the bedroom door of the Tinker Toy boy had been jerked open to reveal him wearing Mother's bathrobe he would have been whipped (for

the punitive blows of the belt were not called “spankings” back then and “time outs” had not yet been invented) by Father, with Mother watching, uncertain as to the validity of the wisdom transmitted by belts. And words, begin to dwell on words as well, the difference between nouns and adjectives, the encyclopedia of words hurled as adjectival substitute for the noun woman – bitch, slut, whore, tramp, ho, cunt, pussy, and so on, so forth, so on. Listen to Uncle Elroy remind you that the doorbell is ringing insistently now and that the messenger must be confronted, that these clothes must be taken off, take off the shoes, the stockings, the slip, the bra, quickly smear makeup off with the back of the hand. Do not think about finding the towel, there is no time for that, and barely time to tear the tape off the unit and glide ghostlike through the living room, when the tape is ripped free blood seeps from the outraged head of the unit, but ignore this and jerk the door open. Jerk the door open on the final ring.

See.

Look out from a face that suddenly feels exposed and vulnerable without make up. The purpose of makeup, beyond the ornamental, is obvious now, isn't it?

See Paula. She is always misplacing her keys. She is holding the baby bird in the towel that was left on the welcome mat. It is not clear whether she is resigned or is grieving for the bird because her eyes are screened behind stylish sunglasses. She is about to take those sunglasses off.

Do, or with whatever words are left, say something.



## FEDERAL BUILDING

DAVE WITTIG

CHICAGO

## Anne Blonstein

### schlaflose nächte

like light on either side of the rainbow.  
as her infrared expresses a hot body.

long wavelengths

quietly overflowing. words. slow sentences  
passing through borders. his ultraviolet burns  
up the air with anger and laughter. rapid lines.  
joysad. caustic old clown producing  
somersaults of love in the skin of space. when  
they meet what colors will they make?  
if they can meet. where? when? how?  
their touching could be destruction of time.  
amplification and modulation of their live  
frequencies. and the parting of their waves.  
the sun is the beginning of light. and the sea is.

### dunkles licht in ihrer nacht

joy.

and madness.

the woman without word immunity. not enough  
antilove in the blood. and her memory history  
complex depleted by night. above her head  
the butterflies with silk wings return. and still  
she cannot fix their colors. she's holding that blue  
glass bowl again. retraces its rim. hears music.  
the blind orchestra she once dreamed  
performing her unknown symphony. fusion of  
cells: algal and fungal / egg and sperm /  
macrophage and germ. fusion without touch or  
visual sound. but now she's heard a terracotta  
voice opens its lips; the lyre and windfall.

## Brad Buchanan

### Soap Opus

We save up the scum  
on the lip of each glass and  
scrape it together

for a kiss. A toast  
to the party, and we slosh  
tongues over teeth—clink—

here's to flesh and its  
servant substances: china,  
washed enamel, bone,

and the loving cup that  
holds its foam transparently—  
the martini groin

for which I carry  
a secret stem to raise when  
the dishes are done.



Bob Meszaros

### Neglect

For thirty years  
below the golden bell-shaped cupola  
each clock face was a compass point,  
giving time and direction.

Thirty years without repairs,  
thirty winters of pigeons and sparrows  
sheltering at the heart of Hamden, soiling  
the white and gold of clock tower  
and cupola, until the black hands stopped.

How do you set the dead heart beating?  
How do you make all times one?

The black still hands are missing;  
the white and gold on wood and copper  
ripple in the sun. Month after month  
scaffolding remains in place, waiting  
for restoration to be done.

Hannah Fischer

### Rhubarb: The Savior

Little remained after the Brits'  
bombed-out battle with  
cuisine. Only the rhubarb,  
its thick exterior  
hiding stripes of red,  
fruity flesh, stayed faithful  
as a never-setting sun.

Rhubarb, the dung-cape  
of purge, bitter bile, poison  
and sin excretion. Chinese emperors  
ate it to save themselves  
from the death of prostitutes.  
The Song dynasty consumed rhubarb  
and shat out  
its deep-rooted plague.

The last colonists of England  
left the land but  
kept the rhubarb.  
Magenta-red it steams  
on the trays of Britain's  
chilly cafes, feeding leech-like  
on ancient sins,  
purging them, sending them  
on their way, as the sky must do  
each day to its sun.



Stephanie Dickinson

### Apple Blossom

Apple blossoms soil the earth  
so she has to wade into the orchard,  
the tree groaning when the girl  
chins herself up, swinging her leg  
over the limb, nubs scratching  
her waistband, until  
she reaches the farthest branch  
where the blossoms are—  
an extravagance, apple blossom white  
lip-skin pink, each petal, a corsage,  
every stem and twig sweated in scent.  
She'd like to have this perfume,  
to revel in it, but a girl brought up  
by two strong willed women  
must be weak, tentative. The sugary-  
smelling mixes with manure pile  
and in the farmhouse kitchen  
hymns are being sung.  
She climbs higher into the tickling blossom,  
a veil between her and *How Great Thou Art*.  
Grandma's voice breaks like a crack in  
the ceiling when she tries to hit the high notes.  
The verses come in gray waves.  
If she picks the bloom what will happen  
to the apple? Will it shrivel, never live?  
She rubs blossom on her neck, her wrists,  
floating them down her shirt.  
She is dying of goodness and wishes  
these blooms were wounds.

Barry Ballard

**Cave of Ashes**

I gazed on you through the expanding burst  
of fire-light and carbon, watching you hide  
in its cave of ashes buried with the dirt  
in a Pennsylvania coal mine. Your eyes  
crouched like dying stars in its darkness, where  
you holed its sockets and wedged the timber  
of its hollow skeleton. It was there,  
under its heavy cloak of breath, that I heard

your childhood dying: your prayers venting  
through its draft-furnace from each hard word clenched  
like tablets of black slate in your hands. It's  
from there where I took you before you could see  
your fifteenth year, before you could escape  
its choke-damp and its artificial night.

Barbara DeCesare

**Topography**

A low slung C, the tissue there is tough.  
Beneath it, wire sews up your cheek bone  
Because you rode too fast, not fast enough,  
Or didn't see, or did, and then were thrown.  
It's beautiful, there, that sealed wound, I see  
It as I love you; whole, imperfect, true,  
As honest as a cut was meant to be.  
In the black bed my lips trace over you  
And search your skin for the new map drawn there,  
Where you lay dozing low in your pillow.  
I want to kiss the flaws that brought you here:  
The wrong turns, the bad breaks, the crash and throw  
That sent you off your path. I love them all:  
The spin, the stop, the flying and the fall.

Judy A. Rypma

**Superstition**

Moldavians plant a walnut tree  
in every yard line streets with them  
make marmalade from the green nuts swear  
they repel flies and mosquitoes.

They lace red wine  
with sugar and pepper (guaranteed  
to cure colds), paint buildings  
in fruit and nut shades  
as if there were a pattern:  
chocolate and banana  
for the fine arts,  
almond and tangerine  
for the sciences,  
cantaloupe and raspberry  
for the government.

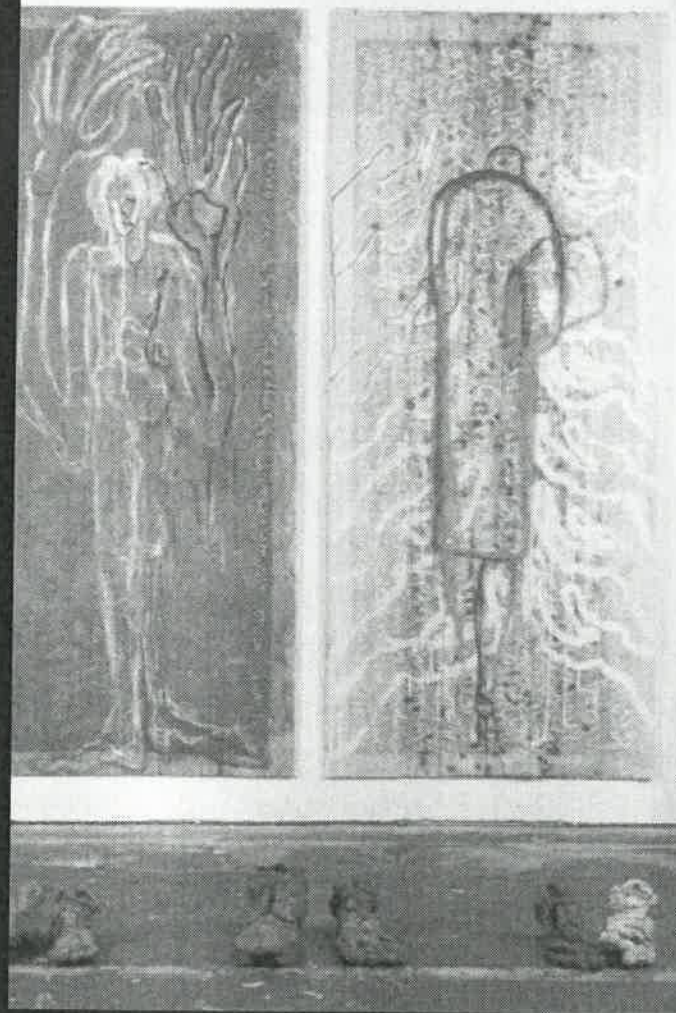
In our own milk and honeyed Midwest  
we scoff

plant mint  
to repel mice, burn citron  
when mosquitoes swarm,  
shower brides with rice,  
empty shelves  
of ginseng and garlic,  
paint our houses  
always white—  
the color we believe ourselves to be.

David Trame

**A God**

Just closing the door,  
quick, leaving home before dawn,  
you smell the street—  
damp stones, a tang of metal, the cold,  
and the forwardness of the steps and puffs of breath,  
the velvet darkness on the move, the starkness  
of the early things down on the pavement,  
sparse coughs lighting it like sparks;  
instants of a god in a rush, on the threshold,  
whispering with no words but elation,  
a nimble sky that touches and goes,  
the sprightly wave of a sidelong glance  
between hurry and silence.



SISTERS

Nel Bannier

HOLLAND

# QUEEN OF THE SUGARHOUSE

Constance Studer

From the hall, I hear Mama ordering the nurse: *Raise the window two inches. Don't put my suitcase on the top shelf. I can't reach it.* Electrified doors open and close. Workers in blue scrubs carrying machines, bags of blood, parade by. Doors go in and out like a breathing chest, and I sit helpless.

Mama is scheduled for six chemotherapy treatments, one series a month, all intravenous in the hospital. "Try this vein," she orders the nurse who has spent half an hour feeling her arm, putting a tourniquet on first her left, then her right. Finally the needle rests in the crook of her arm, and has to be tied to a board so she won't forget and bend it. Hot flashes make her ears glow red, her face darken, sweat collect on skin. She's shrinking. A steel pole ticks, counts each drop as the yellow liquid starts out on its search-and-destroy mission. No turning back. *An interesting torture this, watching my mother vomit bile.* She's fidgety, can't stand to be touched. It's hard to stay long with Mama's pain.

She retches. As I ease her back onto the pillows, the gown flaps up and I see the red mark where her right breast used to be. "Why was it that Dr. Lenowitz called me, and not you?"

"I didn't think you'd come. Denver is so far away. Do you ever wonder why people don't love each other more?"

"Don't start. You know why I left."

The nurse hurries in to check the IV. Mama's arm is puffy. Time to search for a new vein. I tiptoe out, leaving the door ajar so I can hear if she calls. I walk up and down the corridor of Sugar Creek Hospital, with its fifty beds and mask of polished floors and papered feet, gleaming machinery, closed doors where scalpels part skin. That sharp, clean smell of disinfectant. The terror of a child with a broken arm. Shock trails in behind accident victims. Loved ones lie still and breathless in small rooms.

When I was little, we used to sit on the back porch, when the Ohio night was clear, and watch the stars. *There's the Big Dipper and Little Dipper and North Star,* Mama'd say. Sometimes there were satellites moving through the stars. Sometimes a wolf howled. When I asked Mama if she was frightened of them when she collected maple syrup, she said *They don't mean us any harm. I trust them more than people.*

Maple sugaring was how we made our living. Spring came and we hung out the wooden buckets during the first

*When I asked Mama if she was frightened of them when she collected maple syrup, she said They don't mean us any harm. I trust them more than people.*

spurt of warm weather. There was a clatter as Mama and I removed the buckets, one by one, from the sled. Steam rose off the sweating backs of the horses. Nellie nuzzled Fred as if whispering encouragement. Mama stepped between them, adjusting their harness. *You poor slob*s, she'd say as their wet hides rippled beneath her hands. Far down the hill the sugarhouse appeared and disappeared in the mist.



Mama was always handsome and proud and ingrown like a toenail as she bartered jars of maple syrup for a brake-job for the truck. Either she came out ahead on a deal, or she took revenge on the closest person around, who was always me. The winter I was sixteen she had an accident and broke her right leg. The limp made her outrageously demanding. *Have you fed the chickens yet? Fetch more wood for the sugar house.* I used to cry whenever she tried to pull me onto her lap. Her touch could be a licking or a hug, I never knew which to expect. Even a treat like popcorn or chocolate could lead to appalling scenes, as if she'd forgotten how to give or receive pleasure. Somewhere during those growing-up years, Mama's bitterness was passed on to me, a family heirloom like the chipped Havilland, the Star-of-Bethlehem quilt pulling apart at the seams.

I drive Mama in for her doctor's appointment a week after she finishes with the last chemo treatment. She is still in the examination room putting her clothes back on when Dr.

Lenowitz turns to me and asks, "How much should I tell her?"

"Tell her the truth," I say. Lenowitz clutches Mama's chart and walks to where she's sitting.

"I'm sorry, Cora, but the last pathology report wasn't as good as I'd hoped. There were cancer cells in three of the lymph node biopsies we took. The microscope doesn't lie." His

voice trails off as Mama shakes her head. From the tight pursing of her lips, from her rigid back I know she's furious. "There's still some chance for a cure if you're willing to do six more weeks of chemo and radiation," Lenowitz adds.

"We'll let you know," I say as I help Mama on with her coat. We

drive in silence back to the farm. How golden a day it is, the valley strewn with maple leaves, the sky a featureless white. Green, brown, gold coins float down from the trees in front of the car. The water in the creek is shallow. Almost dusk. Wind picks up. Someone is mowing late October grass, a final shearing before snow falls. This is the time of year when anything can happen: eighty-degree sun-screen weather, or a blizzard. *Be prepared. Mittens. Winter coat. Boots. Shovel*, Mama always taught me. The evening sky is so pure it catches me in the throat.

"Why didn't I notice this when I was growing up?" I ask.

"You were too busy getting out of here," Mama says as she leans on my arm, short of breath. "I always knew you'd leave, Sue."

"I'm here now."

"Yes," Mama whispers. The woods in the back of the house are full of fire. Wind escapes its den. Mallards nibble frantically on the lawn.

First light slants through the maple grove. *Swing feet down, feel for slippers, floor slick with frost.* Jeans. Red flannel shirt. This farmhouse, gray from where paint wore off and never has been replaced. Iron red water runs through the tap. Shuffle to the kitchen. Only room for one person to move. *Scramble eggs. Add a little milk, whisk the fork around the bowl quickly so there won't be any white strings. Daub butter on rye bread. Boil water for peppermint tea. Arrange orange slices like a daisy on the plate.*

Her door is ajar and I kick it with my foot. She's sitting in the rocker, her head laid back, hair spread out like seaweed. Clumps of grey cling to the doily, parts of her falling away. Soon she'll be bald. She smiles as I hand her the tray.

"I don't know if I can eat anything. But it looks so pretty." The tray wobbles. I steady it just in time.

"Try something." A piece of bread falls into her lap. Her face shines with sweat. Her fork slides across the plate and nestles against a clump of egg.

"I feel like I'm being nibbled to death by sharks," she

says as the fork slides from her hand. "Help me back to bed." I half-carry her, tuck the quilt in. Already she's asleep. Through the window I hear the chatter of Sugar Creek as water ricochets off rocks, water flowing so close to the house.

When I said, *I want to be a nurse*, Mama laughed. *You, who can't stand to watch when I butcher pigs?* I protested, *Nursing is different.* Now I'm my mother's nurse, emptying the foul emesis basin, checking her biopsy dressings for drainage, carefully noting the time I give her medications, the way Dr. Lenowitz instructed.

Nursing is like tapping maples: You have to be sensitive to when the time is right, know when to stop. After I give her a back rub, pain lines around her eyes evaporate. I become expert at slipping a bit of morphine through tubing. I learn how to sit quietly, without having to give Mama anything, without having to take anything away for myself.

One afternoon I think Mama is asleep, but when I turn from folding laundry, her eyes plead, "Tell me about your life in Denver. Is there a man?" she whispers. I say nothing. With all her scars and bruised arms and stooped back, this is not the same woman who slapped me and forced me to work long hours in the fields. That was the woman I always feared, not this ruin.

After I tuck Mama in, I sit on the porch. A strong



breeze sweeps into the slim upper branches of maples, stirs leaves to a frenzy, fades, reappears twirling dead leaves onto the driveway. For this moment, there's no pattern to things, no scheme. Wind spins off the trees hissing, nagging, repeating its grudges. Somewhere a tractor groans up a long, invisible hill.

*People in this town can't be trusted*, she used to tell me. *What did they ever do to you, Mama?* I wailed. In Sugar Creek, six months can become six years with the deceptive ease of a film dissolve. Old-fashioned trick shot. A one-way street runs around the square. All cars park parallel. The tiny hospital is always in danger of closing. No hospice. No visiting nurses. I grew up in the middle of nowhere, an Ohio countryside so lonely that even stones seem lost. Walking is measured by hours instead of blocks. Foreclosure circles like a buzzard. Barbed wire cuts farms into lots and pens. The medicine of choice is stomping footsoles at Grange dances, booze, winter frolics between sheets. God is sun, rain, a prevailing wind moving across shaded windows, and maple sugar in a jar.

I worked alongside Mama that hot summer I was eleven, slapping paste on the dining-room walls. Rolls of paper. Cans of glue. Knives. Brushes piled into a basket. She wallpapered the living room with a floral pattern that had more than

*I grew up in the  
middle of nowhere,  
an Ohio country-  
side so lonely that  
even stones seem  
lost.*

a touch of purple. For months we couldn't eat in that room because it was stacked with rolls of wallpaper, stacked one on top of another, crowding in towards the small table and four oak chairs. It made a strange collage, flowers and vines and odd shapes all meshed together. The smell of paste hung heavy in the house. *Why can't she be neat just once, remember to smooth the sheets out, wield the knife carefully*, I had thought, but Mama had done the job when the spirit moved her, the whole time humming while I hated her for not caring enough to make our house look like everyone else's.

"Some day you'll be a great wallpaper woman too," Mama had said as I watched. Not one of my life goals. Mama worked with tremendous energy. In the hot afternoons, she rolled up her sleeves and I saw her sinewy arms.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked.

No answer. Mama turned on the radio and her whole body swayed to the high notes of Ella Fitzgerald. At the end of the day she sat lotus-legged in front of a newly blooming wall and nodded and smiled gently, rocking back and forth in delight. Layers and layers of wallpaper. It was as if Mama wanted to gather the walls into herself, build a wallpaper shell, a protection against the elements.

The phone lies dead in my hand. The floor lamp casts its pall. Purples-reds-cobalt blues of the old rug in the middle of the floor bleed into one dark cloud. Nothing more can be done to treat my mother, Lenowitz said, neither chemo nor

radiation, until she regains some appetite and a little strength. Mama's life no longer has a rhythm, only a regimen. *Medications. Dressing changes. Bath. Up on the commode.* Cancer is that lonely place where even a daughter can't follow. A month after she comes off all medications, Mama's hair grows back, thick and spiky and white, instead of gray. The fungus on her esophagus and stomach ulcers make meals horrors. She lives on a fortified drink, mixed with chocolate ice cream, that I make three times a day. Nothing tastes like it should.

I turn Mama over in bed, prop her back against a pillow. "I had such a strange, wonderful dream," she says. "I flew over the house with a full head of hair. Time is rushing. I don't want anything to rush past me anymore. I read about this preacher. He and his wife swallowed overdoses of sleeping pills. The preacher took fifteen days." Her cheeks are flushed against the pillowcase. "They left a letter saying they'd been planning it for a long time. Would you help me?"

Busily I tuck in the quilt, pretend I haven't heard. Slowly Mama closes her eyes. Shutting the bedroom door, I go into the garden to pick lettuce for dinner. Memories of all those summers I spent pulling weeds rush back. All around is thick honey stillness. Zucchini and tomatoes and lima beans line up in neat rows. Cantaloupe threatens to run over everything. Vines leapfrog over radishes and carrots. I hear a small sound and turn to see a small robin caught in the net trellis which holds up the snap peas. The bird lies very still, one wing outspread. I



*The only visitors who knocked on our door were salesmen and bill collectors. From an early age, I was the one who dealt with them because of Mama's temper.*

take the kitchen knife out of my apron and cut away the twine until the robin is able to soar free. Rain drizzles on long grass.



When I was little, Mama used to joke that even church mice wouldn't live in our house. Being poor never seemed funny to me. There was no humor in having holes in the bottoms of my shoes, or being the only kid in the class not to have money for assembly. Poverty meant my mother could blow up when I asked for a nickel, her voice harsh, shrill, accusatory. Mama, in her housedress, worked at the kitchen table cutting a cover for my school books out of a brown grocery bag. Anything to save a dollar. While other kids were rollerskating or going to the circus, I followed Mama between rows of sweet corn and maples, learned how to rub shadows on my skin like cool water. The only visitors who knocked on our door were salesmen and bill collectors. From an early age, I was the one who dealt with them because of Mama's temper. I was pounding spouts in maple trees, emptying sugar buckets, firing up the furnace while my classmates were hanging out at the drugstore, jitterbugging in the school gymnasium, filling out college applications.

Mama was Queen of the Sugarhouse and how she reveled in the roar she created. The old sugarhouse stood on the edge of Miller Swamp. It was a small rectangular wooden building with boards hanging loose on the sides and a roof in none-too-good-condition. There were no windows, but only a large solid swinging door at one side and two holes cut just below the peak of the roof at each end to allow steam to escape. In winter the floor was a sheet of ice.

Always there was the danger of burning embers escaping the timberbox and igniting the walls.

The spring I was sixteen, I had gone to bed early. Mama said she had to get the furnace going for in the morning. I awoke sometime during the night to shrieks and obscenities interspersed with deep racking sobs. From the back porch I saw embers shooting out of the chimney of the sugar house. I pulled on my jeans and raced across flat frozen earth, down into the shadowed valley, the last place for light to visit.

Mama, in her torn jeans and thick grey sweater, sat with one hand on her head and one hand holding a jar of whiskey. She had lit the arch. The evaporator roared as steam shot up from the boiling sap. The power of fire shifted coals, stirred wood. The whole sugarhouse was so dense in fog that I could see no further than a few feet. "Is anybody there?" Mama's voice boomed. The roof ignited. A falling rafter caught Mama in her right leg. I pulled her out just before the roof caved in.



She sleeps most of every day. Night is day. Day is night. She rarely speaks. Her arms and legs are as thin as a boat person's. I hold the glass while she sips coke through a straw to make the paste needed to get pills down. Two, three times a day, I empty the catheter bag, flushing away her will to hang on. Medications, bedbath, onto the commode. I give her a back rub. I slide a bit of morphine through tubing.

Pain fills my mother, like water filling a sponge. I fantasize about slipping into her room while she naps, leaning my weight and strength on a pillow, then restoring the scene to normal. *No one would ever know. I'm the only one she has.*

Days are a game of shutting everything out except helping with Mama's catheter and bedpan, cleaning mucus from her lips and eyes. Her organs are giving up. Washcloth to ashen skin that threatens to fall inward like dry wood. Even washing my own hands with green soap can't remove the smell.

All through high school Mama patrolled the phone. Our worst fight was when I was talking to Tom and Mama pulled the plug. I became an expert at lying: *I was in the library. Sue loaned me this sweater*, I'd say when I was really sleeping with Tom and I'd stolen the sweater from Penney's. The summer before my eighteenth birthday, I followed Tom to Denver and got a job as a bank clerk. Two months later Tom left after he fell in love with a bartender at Miller's Bar. It took six

months for me to call home.

"You'll never make it on your own."

"And there's so much opportunity in Sugar Creek?"

"You're just like your father."

"At least we had sense enough to leave," I said just before I slammed down the phone. He left before I was born. Someone at school told me he died when an oil rig caught fire. All Mama'd ever say about my father was *That loser*, her voice trailing off like a scratch mark against skin.

*She floats far out  
on an island of  
morphine, drifts  
on her small  
disintegrating  
raft. No way to  
row back.*

I move a cot into the corner of Mama's bedroom. She sleeps, her head awkwardly back, mouth slack, hardly rippling the sheets. White hair, wan skin, wrinkles at the eyes crumbling into desert parchment. I could circle her upper arm with a thumb and middle finger if I wanted.

"Oh," she says opening her eyes to slits. "You're here. Have you had lunch?"

"Don't worry. I'll eat."

"I'm always so tired." Her eyes close again. Long after I think she's asleep, Mama whispers, "No needles. No hospitals. Promise me." She floats far out on an island of morphine, drifts on her small disintegrating raft. No way to row back. Alone on her white narcotic beach almost free of the enemy

that never sleeps.

In the back yard, crickets have started their song. Some evenings the sky looks cobalt blue, bewildered, questioning and other times magenta, as if impatient for night to settle in. Tonight the sky makes all my senses sharper, as if I were waiting for something huge.

When I check on Mama, she's asleep on her side, just as I left her, all shriveled and still, like a monkey in a cage. There is a whistling sound in her throat. Her breathing is wet, as if her lungs were being rained on. I pick up the morphine vial on the bedside stand. *Keep her comfortable*, Lenowitz had instructed. How easy it would be to open the vial, slip in the syringe, give her the whole vial instead of a fraction. My hands shake as I pick up the vial, turn it over and over in my hands. And then quietly I set it back down on the table.

Gradually Mama gains enough strength to sit in the chair again. She keeps food down. She is strong enough to sit on the porch, to walk to the mailbox at the end of the driveway. Lenowitz wants to try one more round of chemo. "There's a new experimental drug that we can try."

"Let me talk to her," I say. Mama sits on the edge of the bed rubbing her bad leg. Her gown is up around her belly. Thin legs sway. "Lenowitz just called. He wants you to try a new drug. What do you think?"

"I told you. No more hospitals. No more chemo. Can't

anyone hear me?"

Mama actually gains five pounds, once again looks forward to real food from the garden: zucchini, ripe melons, melt-in-your-mouth sweet corn. A couple of days later we make a mad escape from bruised veins and medications for pain. The darkness of the Rialto Theater is twilight reverie. Mama relaxes, slides down in her seat, her spirit free. The dancing cone of light bounces off her white head, lined face. We sit hypnotized by sound, music, words dancing on a long stem of light. *Terms of Endearment* is playing, the movie that balances between funny and sad, moments of truth and moments of absurdity, a lot like life. Mama and I are up there on the screen, except it's the mother who is dying instead of the daughter. For two hours only fantasy is real.

As I guide Mama out of the almost empty theater, we both are a little dazed, wrapped up in the story we've just seen, feeling the cold. "Sleepy, Mama?" Her body is soft, limp, as if she were emerging from hypnosis.

"Am I like that mother in the movie? That domineering?"

"You never let me bring anyone to the house. Why?" With difficulty I help Mama get comfortable in the front seat, fasten her seatbelt. I start the Plymouth and back out of the parking spot in front of the theater.

"They might steal us blind." Every word ends with a question mark as if her life has become unbelievable.

"What do we have that anyone would want?"



I drive towards home, taking the shorter way through Slocum Woods instead of the interstate.

"All I knew when I was growing up was that there was something wrong with me. Everything was black or white. No in-between. When I was in high school, if you didn't like my conversations, I'd hear the dial tone. You never trusted me. Why were you so angry all the time?" "There was so much I wanted to do. I dreamed about robbing a bank so I wouldn't have to lug buckets of maple syrup. Traveling to Greece or Egypt. Buying a red car."

I park in front of the farmhouse and hold Mama up as we walk into the living room, with its cold fireplace and threadbare rug and Currier-and-Ives prints on the wall.

"You don't have to do it, you know." She's short of breath from the exertion, but her words are clear.

"Who would take care of you if I didn't?"

"I saw you in my room that night. You picked up the vial of morphine and held it a long time. People usually fall away from somebody with cancer, but it's brought you home," Mama says.

As I walk to her, she pulls me down onto the couch beside her, and tells me how, as a Depression child, she used to wake up to hear the sound of *Rags, Bottles, Sacks*. She heard the old man's cry long before she saw the tired, sway-backed horse, with his load, his eyes large with pain, ribs showing. She tells me she met my father when he hired on for the sugaring.

He was moving, always moving, fleeing the police. Maybe a new state, a new job would quiet his nerves, give him, at long last, the peace he was seeking. There were always ghosts to be fled, shadows that visited, noises that meant danger was gaining on him. A midnight departure was the only way he knew how to wipe the slate clean. Mama encloses me in her arms and we rock back and forth as if I were four and she were well.



Winter is finally over. Spring shows herself in faint, indefinable signs: a warmer sun, geese honking overhead, a softening of snow crust into slush. Spring was when Mama used to bore holes in the maples, insert metal spouts, hang wooden buckets. Juice weeped from the incisions.

*Bathe her. Wash her hair. Rub her body with fine lotion. Feed ice chips. Stroke her hair, hands, forehead.* Mama's restlessness weighs on me like a rock I can't put down. Water glasses slip from my hands and break. Every day I think, *She can't get any worse.* After many calls, Lenowitz installs a morphine drip. I assist him as he puts a needle with a plug just under Mama's collarbone. I wince every time Lenowitz tries until the needle finally hooks skin. Mama's face screws up as if she were crying but no sound comes out. As Lenowitz shoots blood back into her vein, Mama pulls back her neck. The blood is pale, not the deep red it once was. Lenowitz sets up the drip, the bag of glucose and morphine on a mechanical tree that holds the pump.



He shows me how to operate it, how to mix the formula, the shot of Heparin to keep her vein open. In my nervousness, I prick my finger. I try again and get it right.

"She'll be comfortable now," Lenowitz says. "I'll check in often." He takes his coat and leaves. Mama's sleeping, her face a full moon hung in a starless sky. Death is a subtle whittling away of function and strength, as slow as an IV drip into a tired vein, as unglamorous as day-old bread.

Around three, I'm suddenly wide awake. I strain to detect any sound or movement from Mama only a few inches away. It is silence that awoke me. I can't bring myself to turn on a light for the longest time. No angels, no light. Mama left as instantly as a balloon flying out of an opened hand.

I bathe her, put on a clean nightgown. When I disconnect the IV tubing from her chest, I glance at the bag of fluid hanging on the IVAC. The door that holds the tubing is open, the bag empty and I know that Mama cut herself out of the net.

Lenowitz arrives and listens with his stethoscope, checks her pupils with his little flashlight. "I found her when I

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woke up this morning. I slept on this cot.”

“Yes,” he says, glancing at the empty IV and back at Mama lying so peacefully in the clean nightgown. “I’ll have Schmidt’s come get her, when you’re ready.” He pats my shoulder as he leaves. “Your mother was a very stubborn woman.”

“Once she made up her mind, there was nothing anyone could do.”

Suddenly the small house is full of neighbors who used to make fun of my mother, full of confusion, and prattle and work boots clomping on bare floors. All the men and woman with whom Mama fought over property lines now come armed with roses, proverbs, casseroles, meat loaf, homemade bread. I don’t own a black dress to wear to the funeral and my mind clings to this problem like a crutch. White blouse and denim skirt will have to do.

Mama’s closed casket rests at the foot of the altar of the Baptist Church that she never attended. White-gloved church ladies pour glasses of water, set up folding chairs, wave away mosquitoes with paper fans. The chapel is full and very quiet. I see faces I haven’t seen since childhood, all my mother’s enemies, one-time friends. As chapel bells chime, everyone looks dark and solemn, as if everyone knew this was how Mama would end up.

It has become sugar weather when I wasn’t looking, that moment when sun and frost begin their contest, a see-saw, as sun draws sap up and frost draws it down. Along the creek,

shadows are long and dampness never leaves. Cottonwoods and poplars, straight and tall, reach towards light. I sit on my favorite rock, granite, scalloped with veins of ironstone, that I used to sit on when I was hiding from Mama. The scent of pine hovers. Wind ruffles leaves. Crows overhead cry, *Amen, amen*. Water rustles over loose stones. Splashing water has all the time in the world to get where it’s going. I think I hear Mama’s voice, then realize it’s only the sound of water over rocks. Tears are this river carrying me forward.



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## A T T E N D

The annual Northern Arizona Book Festival has drawn world-renowned authors including Czeslaw Milosz, Michael Ondaatje, Dave Eggers, Rick Moody, Russel Banks, Robert Pinsky, Rick Bass, Ophelia Zepeda, and many others. NAU attracts diverse speakers throughout the year including in years past, Gary Snyder, Grace Paley, Wendell Berry, Sherman Alexie and Sandra Cisneros.

Thin Air  
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