

**1993 Agnes Scott Writers' Festival
Distinguished Participants**

Judith Ortiz Cofer is the author of *The Latin Deli* (prose and poetry, 1993), *Silent Dancing* (personal essays and poems, 1990), *The Line of the Sun* (novel, 1989), and *Terms of Survival* (poems, 1987), among other works. She teaches English and creative writing at the University of Georgia.

Jorie Graham has published *Materialism* (1993), *Region of Unlikeness* (1991), *The End of the Beauty* (1987), and other volumes of poetry. She teaches in Iowa Writers' School.

Charles S. Johnson, author of the short story collection *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1986), was awarded the National Book Award in 1990 for his novel *Middle Passage*. He directs the creative writing program at the University of Washington.

Memye Curtis Tucker, author of *Holding Patterns* and 1990 Poet on Tour for the Georgia Poetry Circuit. She leads poetry workshops at Callanwolde and Kennesaw State College.

We wish to thank President Ruth Schmidt and Eleanor Hutchens for their support of the festival.

**Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival
April 15-16, 1993
Winter Theater, Dana Fine Arts Building,
free and open to the public**

Thursday, April 15

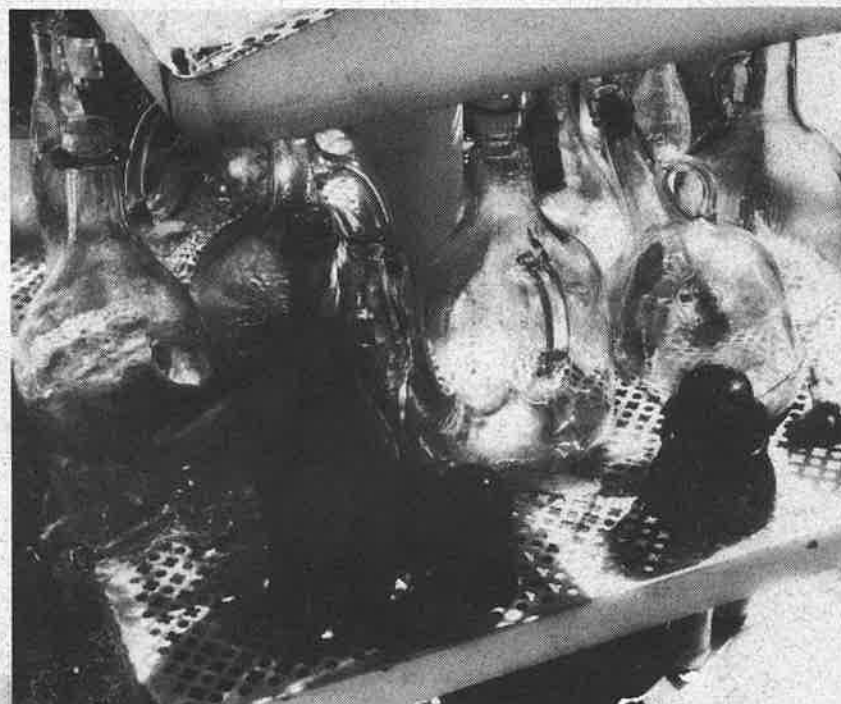
4:00p.m. Distinguished Alumna Reading by Memye Curtis Tucker
Reception sponsored by Alumnae Association to follow
8:15 Reading by Jorie Graham
Reception sponsored by *Aurora* to follow

Friday, April 16

10:00 Coffee and pastry
10:25 Reading by Judith Ortiz Cofer
2:00-4:00 Panel Discussion of Student Work
Moderated by Memye Curtis Tucker
7:30 Reading by Charles S. Johnson
Awarding of the Hutchens Prizes
Booksigning and reception to follow

For further information, call Bo Ball, 371-6255, Linda Hubert, 371-6241, or Steve Guthrie, 371-6206.

Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival 1993



writers' festival
1993

The Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival has taken place annually since 1972. Its purpose is to bring distinguished writers to campus in an atmosphere of community with student writers from the colleges and universities of Georgia. This year's participants are Judith Otiz Cofer, Jorie Graham, and Charles S. Johnson. Other recent guests have been Rita Dove and Robert Coover (1992), Sharon Olds and Gloria Naylor (1991), Josephine Jacobsen and Alfred Uhry (1990), James Dickey (1989), Michael Harper (1988), and Tillie Olsen (1987).

Spring, 1993

Editors

Bo Ball, Fiction
Steve Guthrie, Poetry
Christine Cozzens, Personal Essay

Cover

Cynthia Cole

The Selection Committee reserves the right to perform any necessary editing. *Festival* is printed by The Printing Store, 240 DeKalb Industrial Way, Decatur, GA 30030.

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The Distance

He would ignore her mostly
Hoping the leaves
Falling and sticking
To her coat would
Not make him
Have to brush
Them away and need
To step closer
Into her disarray
That spun
And misted
Their hair
With rain.

She watched his eyes closely
As if they were jeweler's glass
That saw
The open place
Inside her
Before his tiny
Precise tools
Could pare
And glean
And close.

-Deborah Cotton

Elegy in Three Parts

I.

Flagstone over Fall creek with
 the distance of chimes and the oblique slant of
 glass.
 And nights here spent under sleeping bags drinking
 tea and
 always the sound of water.
 I dreamed it was wind.

II.

Water tingles on my eyelashes,
 glistens on the bridge like web.
*Keep air like this in a jar three days and
 it will condense into a pearl.*
 He jogs behind me, laughing.
 Your hand drags the rail, but
 your eyes never move.
 My skirt twirls, frothy, red, silk.

III.

I write postcards, eat melon and
 bitter chocolate while he
 cracks crab legs and
 you play with spoons.
 The tinkling of china and mimosas.
 Money is pale green, creases lightly,
 our eyes soft like petals.

IV.

I think on four weeks and
 imagine writing, imagine moments.
 Night hovers and sweeps through cold,
 breathless as a mourning flock.
 I remember, earlier, a hummingbird
 like a dragonfly.

V.

Smearred grey-terminal afternoons of tapping keys
 I listen to you and him and
 something deep folds over itself, muffled.
 Cold, very cold.
 I huddle by a crack to feel a rush of air.
 My mind settles like random dust and machine hum.

VI.

In the fifth week there is flood.
 Five hundred thousand gallons of chilled water
 and the entire machine
 fizzles like a fuse.
 Windows push open like frayed wire and the
 silicon building is dark and stagnant.

VII. The Book of Questions

You answer in riddles of water.
 He speaks with discipline and
 I listen like he is
 precious, chiseled from pure, white stone.
*The water-- you try to make me understand
 breaks, dissolves--*
 you are shaking like vague laughter, so delicate,
 so common.

VIII.

Light is drunk and mottled.
 Your words sputter like green wood.
 You think I am quiet and luminous, a lacquered box.
 Let me tell you of fear.
 I do not move
I am so frightened--
 Nothing twitches.

IX.

From a watery stair tower
 the sun swims, misty.
 He spins around me.
 I move away from you, light
 as a balloon, feel everything.
 Waiting for damp air to
 snap into focus, wondrous.

--Laylage Courie

Last Will and Testament

riding the highway. summer vacation.
 we travel wherever there is hay. I am in a car, getting
 drunk on the road
 as any slack-mouthed child can. Eating too much, drinking
 larger than prescribed
 doses of purple motion sickness medicine.
 Mother can't find the sticky spoon.
 If she did, it would be covered with petrified french fry ends and loose tobacco,
 again I say
 wherever there is hay,
 straw so tall
 The mowers come with their big tractors, gnashing trimming
 squatting on their
 haunches, weigh the balance on the slopes-
 yes. and wherever there is hay,
 seeing this and that...I imagine
 that if I had a scythe with a long flat blade as sharp as
 one of them knives on tv
 I could get a lot of mowing done. Being careful would be
 the thing. Along comes
 a telephone pole-not paying attention not pulling it up in
 time
 and that blade only sinks in part way
 instead of slicing through arm caught
 frozen a few miles back and all that silence of motion
 a train movie where somebody is standing up on top right
 before a tunnel
 I think.
 It's awful holding that shotgun to your shoulder for the
 first time
 power of the kick, who could imagine.
 My friend was riding on the handlebars with his mother when
 he put his little boy
 foot in the spokes,
 thin metal snapped around his ankle and pulled him to the
 ground, bike and mother

orbiting around the boy sliding on his face
wreck. Son I told you not to, but I am so sorry
I ever thought about the two of us riding the highway.
running the big scythe would have to be smooth
and cautious. I could run the scythe because I have the
plan.

I'm just a kid, I said, probably the only one who does.
they'll let me.

and now I drive. riding the highway.
I travel wherever there is hay. I want to know
why any slack mouthed bastard can run a mower in the hot sun
and get paid more than I am. It doesn't matter what I do,
trust me.

When I think about lawnmowers or bush hogs now's
about the day my father ran over my turtle.
couldn't even keep the shell for all the pieces. help me
figure this puzzle out

it's awful how some things get chewed up.
bought two black goldfish the other day
washed the roots of a peace lily, shells from Jeckyl Island
put the whole works in a bowl
fine fish hamlet

woke up the next morning and smelled the bastards
There are dead goldfish in my house, get up
they weren't even black anymore. the water's too cold.

Feel-

No? my fish thought so. I had half-way named them Gadfly
and Io

since there wasn't enough room for them to move around.

Sounded too

pretentious, 'meet my fish, Gadfly and Io,'
forget it. they're gone. then I bought a mud puppy, same
end.

slick phallic thing, fern-fins splendid.

wanted to take his feet with tweezers and wrap him in gauze.
couldn't kiss him, like sometimes one says goodbye to the
dead-

didn't even get to name him, put him on the front porch
under a flowerpot.

covered him with salt. Warning: great danger to puppies
Beware.

last week I looked at him. Dachau and Women's Clinic are

out of line-
you get the picture, my mud puppy.
I would like to use your frame as the handle of a petite
handbag.
maybe give me some reason for holding on to you.

See this mowing isn't something I do consciously anymore and
burial isn't

something one discusses in polite company, but I figure
that's were where I'm leading

I don't want to be labored over in a room, draining, drying
like so many.

chopped up, pieced together, no ignominious entombment by
toilet, dead by smell.

I want burial by disaster, no warning and alone
don't enter here, you'll be severed like so much thatch,
seeded or no-

young, precious they'll say, unsaturated with old woman oil,
thick ropes of orange

ear wax and she doesn't even know it (poor thing) can't turn
her head,

known for blabbing about the dead she knew, remembered by
incidents like the

time it took her fifteen minutes to get up off the pot, so
she flushed it still sitting,

the water and stuff of her old woman bowels touching her
rump

and making her scream, no

leave me wrapped in so much baby fat to sand off, riding the
highway.

take my advice, I thought I had a solution to wherever there
is hay and the method

is not feasible. Listen

not many could cut so swift, so sure.

-- Rachel M. Davis

A Dozen Ways of Listening To A Blue Jay

I

Around a couple of mulch heaps
The only noisy thing
Was the shriek of the blue jay.

II

I was a bit discombobulated
Like a bush
With a couple, three jays in it.

III

The blue jay screeched in the breeze.
It was a chunk of the scenario.

IV

A man and a woman
Are two.
A man and a woman and a blue jay
Are three.

V

I wish I knew what I liked best,
Commission,
Or omission:
The blue jay shitting on the windshield
Or just a little before.

VI

Lower-middle class breath
Frosted the panes of the dormer.
The keen of the blue jay
Sorta bounced off it.
The sound
In the echo
Announced no ideas.

VII

Hey fat guys of Elizabeth,
Why are your ears cocked after phony ducks?
Give a listen to the jay squawking
By your own blue-stubbed chins.

VIII

I figure
It's not only what you hear,
But how you hear it.
And I also figure
The blue jay's in on this.

IX

When the blue jay shut up
It got quiet.

X

He road over Jersey
In a turbo-charged Trans-Am.
A couple times, his ear itched him,
'Cause he thought a dual exhaust
Sounded like blue jays.

XI

The creek is backed up.
The blue jay's at it.

XII

It was dinner at suppertime.
It was drizzling
With a 90% chance of drizzle.
From the gum tree
The blue jay called.

-- George Michael Donahue

The Missionary Writes to Her Fiance Concerning Hunger

Dear David,

This lost continent
 teems with parrots and teacups.
 The heat overpowers me.
 I brought six white linen dresses
 and a parasol to match,
 one lovely ball gown of emerald satin--
 in the moonlight it appears black.
 Young men ask me to dance
 and we move slowly
 like lilies on still water.
 Hands stroke my shoulders,
 whisper--"how beautiful, how pale."
 The air is delicious with vanilla--
 it makes me hungry.
 I eat and eat.
 I grow fat on sesame seeds and ginger.
 If you were to kiss me now,
 my mouth would taste of tangerine.

-- Melissa Morphew

a woman in pain once told me

a woman in pain once told me
 it is the tiny rituals which preserve us-
 not the lighting of candles, incantation of spells,
 but the careful measuring of the steps
 between kitchen and bath, the logged
 notation of the train's 5:46 whistle,
 entrance to the building by the proper portal.

she said it is not the state of being
 over the edge which bothers, but the clumsy slide
 to the precipice, like half-congealed butter
 rolling on a titled dinner plate.

i think it is the tantra of not-knowing,
 of looking both ways in the middle
 of the street, putting a key in the front door of
 a stranger's house, reading personals as if
 one could be, smelling a familiar flower
 without thinking the name, it is this
 waiting between teachers which menaces.

--Jeanne Peters

Visit at Midnight

I am one of those women you see holding themselves.
 I wax my arms like furniture.
 I grip the bed when motion comes with sleep.
 I speak of situation.

If I met her smiling in a door one night,
 then she chose me.
 She pulled my chest and bones into a rising heavy summer.
 Fireflies chasing off the itch and me scratching off the dry.
 I came close enough to smell the day on a hairline,
 the soaps and thoughts she toweled off.
 Always just out of the bath
 and then again
 we were.

Laid up late in shame,
 we face and face, supporting stares.
 She is cotton, burning brown.
 I am a hung object, unconcerned with action, heat,
 plants on the table or humans, rooting.

If I am a wall,
 then she leaned a weighted head.
 It shines below like gas station leaks.

I notice what she keeps:
 A black depot telephone with a loud sanitary ring.
 Plastic angels float in four corners.
 Her hands bless them, veined and craving symmetry.

I am one of those women you see holding themselves,
 sharing my possessions, identifying her soap.
 I am concerned with the pads of my fingers,
 their refusal to recognize the door knob.

I laugh at my hardening limbs
 and how the storm may taste when it comes.

--Kate Simpkins

Father, Son, Holy Ghost

I didn't receive when I served in the chapel yesterday morning. I told Father Bream Mom made me take some cough medicine a half-hour before Mass for my cold, so that's why I wasn't receiving. Lying to a priest, that's a mortal sin.

The chapel's in the convent basement. The Sisters have six o'clock Mass there every morning. When you serve there, you serve by yourself. There's no other altar boy, and if you don't receive, everybody can tell. And then they think you're not in a state of grace.

Sister Paraclete received. I held the paten up under her chin. Her tongue was kind of white and pasty-looking on top when she stuck it out for Father Bream to put the host on. My hand was kind of shaky. After Mass, Father Bream said if I didn't feel well he'd drive me home. I told him I was OK. When I was hanging up my surplice I got the idea to come down here.

Andy Bergstrom's dad built this bomb shelter when Andy was little. His dad worked for DuPont too. Andy brought me down here last summer, before they moved away. Their house is still empty. I climbed in through a window. I got my sack through without breaking anything; just a couple doughnuts got squashed. You go down to the basement to get in the shelter. It wasn't even locked. Nobody saw me come in. I left my bike in the weeds behind the dead end. It's a crummy bike anyway. I was saving up to buy an English bike, a three-speed.

Some words are mortal sins. If you say them and die without going to confession first, you go to hell. Sister Paraclete said I have one foot in hell. But maybe I'll keep the other one out if I stay down here and watch my mouth.

Me and Dad went to a Phillies' game last summer, and when Drysdale struck out Callison, Dalrymple, and Demeter in the same inning, a man said "effing Phillies," right out loud in Connie Mack Stadium, but he didn't say "effing"; he said the real word. Dad turned around and told him to watch his mouth and the man didn't cuss again the whole game. Dad says only foul people use foul language.

Art Mahaffey is my favorite pitcher. Don Drysdale is my second favorite. But if Drysdale was on the Phillies instead of the Dodgers, he'd be my favorite.

Kevin McMennamin and Larry Bellini say "effing." They say other mortal-sin cuss-words too. They're eighth-graders. And Kevin calls Sister Paraclete "Spike" because she's so short. Maybe it was Kevin she heard.

*Johnny Angel, how I love him.
And I pray that someday he'll love me.
And together we will see
How lovely heaven can be.*

Mom likes that song.

After Mass on Sunday, me and Dad usually drive over to Farnhurst to see Granddad. Mom goes to early Mass by herself. Granddad's been in Farnhurst a real long time. When I was little, he used to come spend Sundays with us. He took snuff and read me Prince Valiant in the *Bulletin*. That's what we get on Sundays, even though I deliver the *Inquirer*. Artie Milstein told me this joke one time. He said, "What's black and white and goes up the stairs backwards?" I said, "I don't know." He said, "*The Inquirer* ." I said, "I don't get it." Artie said, "Me neither. I get *The Bulletin*." That was a pretty good joke.

Granddad's too sick to come on Sundays now. Once I asked Dad why Granddad lived at a hospital and Dad said it was because Granddad's mind wasn't right. I kind of knew that already. Dad said Granddad saw things that weren't there and heard voices. I asked Dad what kind of things and voices, and Dad said, "Never mind." But I asked Mom later and she said Granddad thought he saw saints and heard Jesus. In the old days seeing saints and hearing Jesus didn't mean you were crazy, it meant *you* were a saint, but things are different in modern times.

Sometimes when we're driving over to Farnhurst, Dad tells me the facts of life. I feel kind of funny when he does. And he acts kind of funny too. He looks straight ahead when he talks, like what he's saying is written all down DuPont Highway. He doesn't look at me and he gets real serious. I already knew a lot of stuff because Kevin and Larry and some other kids told me. Dad didn't say anything about some of the stuff Kevin and Larry talk about, like blow jobs, so now I know they made all that stuff up. Kids lie. Grown-ups usually tell the truth. Especially parents and priests and Sisters.

Dad said ladies' things are called vaginas. That's Latin. I know a lot of Latin 'cause I'm an altar boy. I know some stuff in other languages, too. But vagina's not what Kevin calls them. Or Sister Paraclete. Dad said they're like big muscles that can stretch so that babies can come out. The babies get started when the man puts his penis inside the lady and squirts out some semen. I guess Mom and Dad did that, too, to make me. That's what Kevin was talking about when he called me dad's little squirt. I pretended I didn't get it, but Larry laughed real hard.

I wish I'd left Mom a note. But if I stayed home, she'd know something was wrong and make me tell. Here I can't tell anybody, so we're safe.

On Monday we had an air-raid drill in school. If we hear a siren or if Sister Agape comes on over the intercom, we have to turn our desks over and kneel behind them, with our arms over our heads. Then you're supposed to say Hail Marys. *Ave Maria, gratia plena*, that's how it starts in Latin. If your desk is in the row by the window, you have to go in the cloak room and kneel there. I'm in Row 4, in the back. Dad said that if a missile comes, Hail Marys will work about as well as anything.

My Dad's in the Navy Reserve. He's up at the yard, on alert. President Kennedy told Khrushchev to get his missiles out of Cuba. But Khrushchev won't do it. Now there's gonna be a war. A Russian missile can blow up a whole town.

Arty Milstein has my paper route this week, because I was supposed to serve Mass in the Sisters' chapel all week. I deliver *The Inquirer* in Colonial Woods, Chalfonte and Surrey Park. Arty delivers to Tarleton and Carrcroft, so it's not that big a deal for him to take my route. I do his sometimes too. *The Inquirer* is a Republican paper, Dad says. Dad voted for President Kennedy 'cause he's a Catholic. Nixon's a Protestant. Old egg-cheeks, Dad calls him. Khrushchev doesn't believe in God.

There's a picnic table, a mattress, and a big green barrel with H₂O painted on it down here, just like last summer when Andy showed me this place. H₂O means water. *Aqua*. It tastes OK. It's cool on my tongue. I mix it with the wine. I got the barrel open with my Scout knife.

There's a stack of old newspapers and *Life* magazines down here too. I've been reading and listening to my transistor. Hope they play "Duke of Earl" again soon. I want to hear it again before the missile comes. Because after that, there's not going to be any more music or any more words.

Dad hates "Duke of Earl." Mom says Dad has a tin ear, 'cause he doesn't like music. He never watches Lawrence Welk with her, and that's her favorite show. I take after Mom in music, but I take after my Dad in everything else, pretty much.

I listen to WAMS because they play all the cool songs, but I listen to WDEL news, Dad says WDEL's news is the best, and I change the station if I remember.

Good afternoon. This is Vern Armbruster for WDEL news. It's 1 p.m. on this overcast Wednesday, October the 24th. The top story of the hour: In a move that's certain to further heighten tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union,

the U.S. Navy began enforcing a sea blockade of Cuba at 10 o'clock this morning. The blockade, which U.S. officials are calling a "quarantine," is in response to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's refusal to remove intermediate-range ballistic missiles from Cuba, the Caribbean-island nation 90 miles south of the Key West, Florida. The quarantine, ordered last night by President Kennedy, is intended to prevent the Soviets from bringing additional offensive weapons to Cuba. As of yet there have been no reports of confrontations between American and Soviet vessels. Meanwhile, U.S. forces remain at a high state of alert.

I heard Dad and Mom talking Sunday night. They didn't know I could hear them. After Ed Sullivan I went up to my room, but I didn't close the door. Mom was saying she didn't think there was going to be a war, and that even if there was, the Russians wouldn't attack Wilmington. "What's in Wilmington?" she said. Dad said it looked like there would be war, and the first two places the Russians would hit would be Washington and New York, and we'd get the fallout from them. Fallout, that's like what happens after the missile. The stuff that floats around in the air gets on you and makes you sick and your skin falls off.

Dad told Mom the Russians might even hit Philadelphia, because of the Navy yard. If they did, Dad said Mom could see the mushroom cloud from their bedroom window. Mom said, "That's not funny, John." John's my Dad's name.

Once in Scouts we went to the Navy yard. We got to go on a submarine from World War II. It was called the U.S.S. Hake. A hake is a fish. I saw up a lady's dress when she was climbing down a ladder on the submarine, even though I didn't mean to. She had underpants on.

Before he went up to the Navy yard Sunday night, Dad came up to my room and gave me my allowance, plus an extra five bucks. He said I needed extra money to take care of Mom while he was away. "Your mother has expensive tastes," Dad said. He was kidding.

Then he gave me his ball. He got it before I was born, the year the Phillies won the pennant. Dad was up at Connie Mack and caught a ball Richie Ashburn fouled off. It was the fourteenth ball Ashburn fouled off in a row, waitin' for the right pitch. After the game Dad got Ashburn to sign it. Fourteen fouls in a row, that's a record, Dad's ball is worth a lot of money, too.

Dad said he didn't know how long he'd be gone. He said if war started and he didn't make it back, he wanted me to take good care of Mom. Then he left. he didn't hug me or anything, 'cause I'm too big for that kind of stuff.

After I served Mass yesterday morning at the chapel, I rode over to Dunkin' Donuts, 'cause I had to wait for Mr. McGillicuddy to unlock the school building. So I had some hot chocolate and a black-raspberry jelly-filled doughnut. Then I bought a dozen doughnuts to go: I got three more black-

raspberries because they're my favorites. I got a couple of strawberry-filled, three powdered sugars, a cinnamon, and two chocolates. I also got an old-fashioned plain. That's Dad's favorite.

Then I went over to 7-Eleven and bought a flashlight, some batteries, and a bunch of Slim Jims. They have free matches at 7-Eleven and they even let kids have 'em.

When I figured school would be open, I went back. First I went up to our classroom to get my transistor radio. I brought it to school to listen to the World Series. If you sit at the end of a row like I do, use the ear plug, and keep a book open, you can get away with it. Sister Agape and some kids were in the building, but nobody was in our classroom yet.

After I got my radio I went over to the church. It's between the school and the convent. I went back to the sacristy, 'cause I needed things for down here.

Nobody was in the sacristy. I had my sack from my paper route. I put a cassock and surplice in it. I wanted them to help me stay warm. I wore them over my clothes last night. I still have 'em on. I took three altar cloths. I spread one out on the picnic table. I used two for blankets last night, and this morning I put them with Dad's ball in the middle of the table.

I took a bunch of votive candles. They're lit all around the shelter. I also took a big Advent candle. It's about three feet long and thick as my leg. I lit it when I got here and it's been burning ever since. That's about 30 hours, and I guess it can keep on burning till the end. *In Saecula saeculorum*. For my penance, I said twenty Hail Marys and licked the Advent candle flame.

I took a bottle of altar wine. I wrapped it up in the altar cloths. I never had wine before. Dad only drinks beer, Ballantine. I wanted to see what wine was like while I still had time. It tasted kind of gross at first, but now I like it. It makes my tongue hurt less.

I needed something to drink out of so I took a chalice. You're not supposed to touch a chalice unless you're a priest. But now it's OK for me to touch it. And it's OK for me to steal. Anything I do now is OK, except tell.

First I pour some wine in the chalice. Then I pour in some H₂O.

I had the doughnuts and Slim Jims, but I thought I might need more food, so I took all the hosts in the sacristy closet. I had a doughnut and a Slim Jim for breakfast, but I only had hosts and wine for lunch. The Slim Jims are hard to eat with a sore tongue, but the hosts just melt in your mouth. Not in your hand, ha ha. It feels funny having more than one host in your mouth at the same time. They're unconsecrated but they taste the same as the body of Christ. Anyhow, you don't get that hungry when you're drinking wine.

This song is cool and a half. The guy who sings it sounds like Frankenstein:

*They did the Mash. They did the Monster Mash.
It was a smash. It was a graveyard smash.
It caught on in a flash. They did the Mash.
They did the Monster Mash.*

In religion class Monday morning, I couldn't remember all nine orders of angels. I knew angels, archangels, cherubim, seraphim, thrones and dominions, but I forgot the rest. Sister Paraclete told me to see her after school.

So I went into her classroom around 3:15. She was grading some papers. She asked me if I knew why I she wanted me to stay after, and I said because I missed an answer in recitation. I told her I knew the answer now: virtues, powers, and principalities. I thought maybe she'd let me go, 'cause I had the answer and all.

But she said missing an answer wasn't the only reason she wanted to talk to me. She said there was a bigger reason. I could tell I was in trouble and I tried to think of any bad things I'd done in the last couple of days that she might know about, but I couldn't think of any.

Then she said, "I think you know what the reason is, William."

So I said, "No, I don't, Sister."

She said it was my behavior on the playground. I didn't know what she meant, so I asked her what did she mean, and she said she'd heard me using foul language.

So I thought maybe she'd heard me say damn or hell. Or maybe even shit. But I wasn't sure, so I said, "What do you mean, Sister?" again.

And she said, "Don't give me this false innocence, William, I heard you myself." She was getting mad.

So I thought maybe I better admit to damn. So I said, "Do you mean like 'damn,' Sister?"

She said she knew I said worse than that and that not telling her the whole truth would only make the sin worse in God's eyes. So I told her I said hell, too.

That's when she said I had one foot in hell. And then she said, "And what else?" So I said "Shit." It was hard to say that in front of a Sister.

She said I was prefabricating and she wasn't going to put up with it any longer. She looked meaner and different than I'd ever seen her before.

She said I knew what she was talking about. She said she knew all about boys my age and what went through our minds. She said Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary were hanging their heads in shame right now because of me. She said telling her would lessen the hurt Jesus and Mary were feeling because of my sins.

I said if I'd sinned, I better go to confession, and then she got *real* mad. She smacked me in the mouth pretty hard. She said if I didn't tell her

right then all the filthy things I'd said on the playground, I would go to hell no matter how many times I went to confession. She said she had the special favor of the Holy Ghost because her name meant Holy Ghost in Greek. She said the Holy Ghost would send me to the most terrible part of hell if she asked him to.

I didn't say anything. I was tryin' not to cry. I'd already told her all the bad words I said. If I told her I never said anything worse, she wouldn't believe me, and I was afraid of what would happen then. And I didn't want to say anything worse than what I'd already said, 'cause it would be a mortal sin. And lying; two mortal sins. But if you disobey a Sister, that's like disobeying Jesus, or at least the Blessed Virgin Mary. Sisters are the brides of Christ. Sister Paraclete says so all the time.

Then she said she wanted to hear things I said against the ninth commandment, which is "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife." But it really means not to think or talk dirty.

So I thought of the dirty words Kevin and Larry said. I thought maybe if I said a couple she would let me go. So I said, "Tit."

Sister Paraclete said, "Tell me what that means." I said it was like a lady's bosom. Then she said, "Go on," so I said "Dick." She asked me to tell her what that was, so I said, "Penis." I kind of mumbled it, but she made me say it louder.

I started cryin'. I couldn't help it. I guess I really am a sissy, like Kevin says. I was hoping that seeing how I was cryin' and all, she would stop. But she didn't. She said that life is a bale of tears, and that I was only crying for myself, not for Jesus and Mary, who would never forgive me for being such a filthy, sinful boy, unless she asked them to.

So I said pussy and then fuck. They sounded so funny coming out of my mouth. It was kind of like the first time you say a prayer in Latin. My mouth was saying them, but it was like somebody else was talking out of me.

She wanted to tell her what they meant. I said pussy meant vagina, and fuck was when a man put his penis in a lady's vagina and squirted semen into her womb. But she wanted me to use the dirty words, so I said, "It's when the man puts his dick in the lady's pussy and squirts semen into her womb." I was afraid there might be dirty words I didn't know for semen and womb and that she would get mad at me for not saying them, but maybe there aren't, 'cause she didn't.

I was looking down at the ground the whole time. I could kind of see Sister Paraclete out of the corner of my eye. She had her hands on that big rosary Sisters wear around their waists.

She wanted me to tell her about semen. She wanted to know if I had any. I said I didn't think so. You gotta be older.

Then she asked if I'd ever seen a lady's thing. What she said was, "Have you ever seen a woman's pussy?" Her voice was real low when she said it. I said, "No." My voice was real shaky.

Then we heard someone talking out in the corridor. It was Mr. McGillicuddy and some kids.

Sister Paraclete told me to look at her. Her face was pink. She said not to tell anybody about our conversation. If I did, even in confession, she said the Holy Ghost would kill Dad and Mom and me and send us all to hell. She said if I didn't tell anybody, the Holy Ghost would forgive all my sins, even ones I hadn't committed yet. Then she made me say the Our Father. When I finished, she pulled open a drawer in her desk and gave me a tissue. I was cryin' kind of hard by then. I wiped my eyes and asked her if I could go and she said I could.

I didn't want Mr. McGillicuddy to see me. He always talks to you and fools around. But he saw me. And what was worse was that Kevin and Larry were with him. Sometimes kids stay after to help Mr. McGillicuddy clean up, because he's so funny.

When Mr. McGillicuddy saw me, he called out, "Hey Billy boy!" and he started to sing, like he always does. "Oh, where have you been, Billy boy, Billy boy?" He was showing Kevin and Larry how to use the floor-polisher machine. I said, "Hi, Mr. Mick," but my voice was still shaky and I guess you could tell I'd been cryin', because he stopped what he was doing and came over to me.

He asked if I was all right. I said, "Yeah."

Mr. Mick wanted to know if I'd been talking to Sister Paraclete. He just called her "Paraclete," without the "Sister."

I didn't say anything.

Then Kevin and Larry came over. "Billy's been cryin'," Larry said. Kevin said, like he was talking baby-talk, "What's the matter, did Spike give little Billy a spanking?" Mr. Mick told him to shut up. I told Mr. Mick I had to go and ran out the door and got my bike and rode down to the vacant lot behind the dead end in our development. I threw up the Lebanon bologna sandwich and the Tastykakes I had for lunch, and then I just threw up this yellow stuff, like from my insides.

I didn't want to go home right away, because Mom would know something was wrong. So I waited 'til about five, then I went home.

At dinner, Mom wanted to know why I wasn't hungry and why I was so quiet. She asked if everything was all right at school. I told her I didn't feel good and went up to my room. Later that night when I was getting ready to take another shower I heard her talking on the phone to Dad. Mom told Dad she thought I was worried about "the Cuba business."

Now she's probably cryin' her head off, 'cause she doesn't know I'm where it's safe. And Dad's probably worried sick, too, if he knows. Maybe if I asked the Holy Ghost, He could make it so Mom and Dad wouldn't worry. But I don't feel like praying. I feel more like cussing, even though my tongue still hurts. Maybe that's because I have one foot in hell. Maybe it's because I've had so much wine. And what if Sister Paraclete isn't really the Holy Ghost's favorite? What if she just thinks she is, like Granddad thinks he talks to Jesus? What if somebody just thought hell up too, somebody crazy, and everybody believed it? Then I wouldn't have one foot in hell, 'cause you can't have a foot in no place. Wouldn't that be funny? Wine makes you wonder about stuff a lot.

In *Life* magazine they have these pictures of babies that were born without arms and with webbed feet like ducks. The babies' mothers took this medicine when the babies were still inside their wombs, that's why the babies turned out like that. T-h-a-l-i-d-o-m-i-d-e. They were in England. My Dad's been there.

Womb is the part of a lady where the baby grows. Like in the Hail Mary it says, "fruit of thy womb, Jesus." Jesus started out in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Holy Ghost put him there.

I wonder what Jesus said to Granddad. I mean, what Granddad *thought* Jesus said to him. Maybe I'll ask him next Sunday. I almost forgot: there won't be a next Sunday. And I wonder what saints Granddad saw. If I could see a saint, I'd like to see one who got to be a saint because he was real pure. Or maybe a martyr, like St. Lawrence. He got cooked on a gridiron. I can't remember who cooked him, the pagans or the Romans. They call a football field a gridiron sometimes, but it's really something you cook on, like what they make hamburgers on at The Charcoal Pit. I can't remember his name, but one saint got his tongue yanked out.

I like football OK, the Eagles, but I like baseball more. I wish the Phillies were better though. Dad remembers when they were good. They went to the World Series in 1950, before I was born. That's when Dad caught Ashburn's fourteenth foul. Dad says Ashburn belongs in the Hall of Fame.

Wine makes you gotta talk, but there's nobody here to talk to. But that's good, 'cause I might tell.

Last night I dreamed I saw my soul. It looked like a big Wint-O-Green Life saver with throw-up on it.

Domine non sum dignus. That's Latin. *Kyrie eleison.* That's Greek.

When the missile comes, it's going to be bright and loud and hot. Like Pentecost, when the Holy Ghost came whooshing in like a big tongue of fire and made everybody understand, no matter what they spoke. Only this time, nobody's going to understand anything. It's going to be all roar and fire and blinding light. You won't be able to tell somebody cussing from somebody praying. When I hear it hit, I'll go upstairs and stand in the burning wind and watch everything turn into fire. Then there won't be Latin or Greek or English or Russian or tongues or wombs or penises. There won't be any foul stuff, or any fair stuff either. The Holy Ghost gets what's left. *Consummatum est. Et cum spiritu tuo.* I'm all filled up with wine.

Jesus spoke Aromatic. *Eli, eli, lama sabachthani?* was about the last thing He said.

*As I walk through this world,
Nothing can stop me now
'Cause I'm the Duke of Earl.*

Duke, duke, duke, Duke of Earl, duke, duke, Duke of Earl, duke, duke, Duke of Earl, duke, duke. Duke of dick, dick, dick, Duke of tit, tit, tit, Duke of fuck, fuck, fuck, Duke of shit.

--George Michael Donahue

Misplacing Alissa

My lover has a lover whose lover is Alissa. I know Alissa from my lover's conversations with her lover, which she repeats to me. Alissa is a chemist; she works for DuPont; in her spare time, she photographs urban architecture and sells prints to local corporate offices in Dallas; also, Alissa avoids traveling by airplanes; she refuses to eat eggplant and to own cats.

While on her second business trip during the month of April, my lover calls me on the telephone from Texas, four states away from me along the southern coast. Over the phone, my lover tells me about how she met her lover: My lover and her would-be lover drove for drinks to a small bar, just the other side of the border. As they drove back, they stopped at an overlook. They walked to the edge of the cliff and looked across the canyon. They kissed.

"I don't understand," I say. "You were standing atop a mesa? Looking down at the canyon? and she kissed you? Just like that? Kissed you?"

"Well, it went something like that," my lover says. "I mean, she says she likes me. She says she wants to know me better."

"She wants to know you better? What does that mean? She wants to fuck your brains out?" I laugh to let my lover know I'm hurt, but my lover says nothing.

Then, she says: "April is a *nice* woman. I like her."

My lover's voice is sincere; her sentences are precise. I wonder what she isn't telling me. I ask, "You met a woman? Named April? During the month of April? What if it's bad luck?"

"It might be good luck," my lover says.

It might," I say. "Be."

When my lover returns home from her business trip, we discuss non-monogamy over a pasta dinner and a bottle of cabernet. Afterwards, we drink cups of coffee and smoke pot. Also, we have sex on the new futon, the one that we've wanted for the past four years. Then, we sit cross-legged, facing one another, and smoke cigarettes.

My lover says she loves me. She says everything will be okay. I try to ignore the compressed pain in my belly. I want to believe her. I tell her she should do what she wants to do.

I think, maybe, I can find another friend, too. Already, I have a woman in mind, but I'm not sure if she does women. I think nothing of not knowing this information. All I can think is to find someone else to fill up my time when my lover is involved with her lover.

"Do what you want," I say again. "Maybe, it'll be fun."

After a few weeks at home, my lover takes another business trip for three weeks. She schedules the weekends before and after for pleasure, for time with her new lover. She calls me on the telephone to tell me she's having a great vacation in Texas.

I want to tell my lover these things: Our flannel bed sheets still smell of her; our collection of house plants are wilting, except the potted palm; and the light bulbs are burning out, room by room.

Instead, I tell my lover that our dog misses her. "During your absence, the dog has taken to strange behavior," I say. "She won't eat. She's tired when I get up in the morning. I think she's having a hard time sleeping at night."

My lover breathes into the telephone. "There's nothing wrong with the dog." She tells me: "Exercise her more, and she'll be tired at night."

I say nothing.

"Look, if you don't want to do this, then you need to tell me," my lover says. "You need to tell me now, before things get deeper and more involved."

I say nothing.

"Don't just sit there and say nothing," my lover says.

"I'm standing," I say.

"Stop it, Claire." I hear my lover smoking a cigarette. I hear her inhale deep and then blow smoke in one hurried rush. "Don't do this to me," she says.

"I'm not *doing* anything," I say. "Rachel. I'm not doing anything, to you. I'm trying to keep things going here while you're gone. There are bills to pay, you know. The house has to be cleaned. The dog and cats have to be fed. And the dog, the dog is acting very strange."

My lover breathes deep. "I told you: walk the dog."

I don't like this telephone conversation. I don't like the tone in my lover's voice, careful and controlled, as if she's talking to a child or to someone very dull and thick-headed. I tell my lover not to worry. I tell her: "I'll take care of the goddamn dog."

I take another lover. I know her from my classes at the university. She's intelligent and a performance artist. She wears wire-rimmed glasses,

which make her very attractive. She reminds me of every *nice* woman I've ever known. Her name is Clover.

"Clover?" My lover asks, "What kind of name is Clover?"

"She's a vegetarian," I answer.

"It figures."

"Perhaps," I say. "But 'April' during the month of April is trite, almost obscenely trite."

My lover says: "'April' is a *nice* name."

"Yeah, if you like rainy months."

My lover is silent on the other end of the telephone line.

"April, Clover," I continue. "Maybe I should find a woman named 'May.' It might make things easier to remember."

"Nothing," my lover says, "could make things easier."

I want to tell my lover more important things. I want to tell her about the disturbing dreams that wake me and keep me up at night, about my increasing inability to eat, about the recurring burn in my belly. Instead, I ask, "Whatever happened to simple names? Whatever happened to Alissa?"

My lover says, "Alissa is not simple. She's giving April a very hard time. Alissa is difficult. Alissa is impossible."

My lover tells me that Alissa has avoided April for two weeks. Alissa says she's busy. She goes to dance bars every night. She attends concerts to listen to live progressive rock music. Alissa told April that she took a new lover. Alissa says she's having a great time.

"She doesn't seem unhappy," I say.

"Well, she's been very difficult with April."

"Maybe I should be so difficult," I say

"This phone call is expensive," My lover replies.

I say to my lover: "I miss you Rachel."

"I know, Claire."

"I wish you were here with me."

"I know," my lover repeats. "You tell me, *every day*."

My lover repeats to me stories about Alissa's childhood. Once, Alissa's spiteful cousin threw the family kitten into a black wood-burning stove. Alissa has nightmares about it. She dreams that a cat is burning alive, hears it screaming to death, as she searches for the source of an awful stench throughout a house with many rooms. When she finds the black wood-burning stove in her dreams, it's cold and empty.

I'm impressed by Alissa's dream. I find it difficult not to reduce Alissa's pain to overwrought Freudian symbolism. I decide Alissa is reasonable

in her refusal to love cats. I try to imagine Alissa, looking like every nice woman I've ever known. I can only think of her as forever a horrified child.

I remember photographs of myself when I was a young girl. I imagine Alissa with dark hair, dark eyes, dark skin, like me, standing on our front porch on the first day of grade school and wearing a green and yellow plaid dress, her long hair pulled back with a bright yellow ribbon. Her hands are by her side. Her face is serious, unsmiling. My older brother stands beside her. He holds two fingers, a peace sign, over her head and laughs. My mother takes the picture.

Clover invites me to dinner.

"I have something I need to talk about," Clover tells me.

I swirl wine a glass. I hold its stem between my fingers. These days, I'm reluctant to engage in conversations that even approach double meanings. I think, I've had my fill of underlying agendas. However, I decide Clover is honest and trustworthy. Clover is direct.

"I don't think we should continue this relationship," says Clover. "I'm not in a place where I can have any demands on me. I really need some space right now to sort through my mixed emotions."

"I understand," I say, though I don't because this is the first time Clover has mentioned her mixed emotions.

Clover takes a breath, holds it, and looks me direct in eyes: "I'm trying to work things out between me and my boyfriend."

I spill cabernet on the white table cloth. I look down at my plate of lettuce. I set my glass precisely over the wine stain.

While Clover talks in a hurried, rehearsed way about some guy named "Scott" or "Bill" or something, I think: *Boy. Friend.* I let the two words swirl around in my imagination until they crash together and dissolve to a red stain.

Clover tells me that I'm an intelligent and attractive woman. Clover says she cares about me. She says she's my friend. She says, "I'll call you soon."

During the days, I try to write. Instead, I stare at the purple computer screen and blink at my reflection on its glass surface. Sometimes, I glance through my address book for names of friends to call. All my friends have answering machines. They're never home. Also, I spend hours creating schedules. I schedule time to eat, time to walk the dog, time to write, time to read, time to do research at the library, time to take the car (the one in Rachel's name) to the shop for repairs. I never keep the schedules. I forget to eat. I put off having the car serviced.

One day, I throw the dog's food bowl at the computer screen. The bowl doesn't break. The computer screen remains unscratched. I think: I'm the only thing that breaks around here. I'm the thing that is falling to pieces.

At night, I try to sleep. Instead, I have long conversations with myself, aloud. I don't know who else I'm talking to. Sometimes, I talk to my lover who ends the conversation by saying the phone call costs too much. Sometimes, I talk to an imaginary therapist.

I tell my imaginary therapist that I'm suffering from an inferiority complex. I tell her I'm masochistic as hell, neurotic and compulsive and manic. I tell her I have a great relationship with my lover.

One night, while talking to myself, I allow myself to cry. I lie face down in my pillow. I cry until I choke on tears and snot. I tell myself to stop crying. I tell myself I'm weak. I tell myself everything will be okay.

I tell myself I need too much. My lover tells me this, as well. I tell myself that I miss my lover less and less. Unreasonably, I tell my lover I miss her more. I fear I can do nothing now without my lover. I tell her: "Our life has gotten out of control."

"I don't understand," she says. "the cats shouldn't be any trouble. All you have to do is feed them. Throw the dog in the backyard if you don't want to walk her. I paid the bills for the entire month and mailed them already. Don't drive the car if you don't want to have it repaired, and you can fix the screen door yourself for cheap."

She breathes into the phone. "Why do you tell me these things? I can't do anything about them, I'm in Texas."

I want to tell my lover I hate our pets, our two cars, our house and the things in it. Instead, I remain silent. My lover is silent, as well.

"This phone call," I say, "is expensive."

Still, Alissa refuses to speak with April. Alissa sees no reason to discuss their relationship while April is involved with my lover. Alissa believes relationships shouldn't require work. If relationships need to be talked about, Alissa thinks, then they shouldn't exist. Alissa hates to process.

I disagree with Alissa. At night, I argue with her. "Communication is vital," I say. "How do we know what each of us wants, if we don't tell one another?"

Alissa remains unpersuaded. She's a stubborn child who dances escape to hard punk music. I drink my beer. I talk and talk, and Alissa remains mute, shaking her dark fist to a silent beat. I reach for her. Then, Alissa tells me that I'm a cat.

My lover tells me I should go to therapy. "Something is wrong with you," she says. "Something is very wrong. You aren't yourself, at all. Talking to someone may help."

"I'm talking to you," I say.

"I don't understand you anymore," my lover says. "You've changed, Claire. I don't know you anymore."

"You know me," I say. "You're just not listening."

My lover gets angry. She tells me that she calls me every day. She tells me that she can't do *everything*. She tells me that she's working hard to make money, and I don't understand the kind of pressure she's under to support both of us, since I bring in hardly any income at all because I'm a student and a writer, and I'm not even going to classes anymore, and I'm throwing away an education, and I'm not writing either, am I?

My lover asks, "What the hell is going on, Claire? Talk to me."

These are the things I don't tell my lover: I write words, lists of words for hours and hours during the day. I cry for hours and hours during the night. I don't go out of the house anymore. I don't even try to call my friends anymore. I only pick up the phone at seven o'clock when I know it's her calling me. I don't like her anymore.

I don't tell my lover these things because I've already told her. She told me to stop telling her; it hurts her to hear such things. She said she didn't understand; she couldn't do anything to help. She said she was in Texas.

"What the hell is going on? Why the fuck won't you talk to me?"

"This phone call is expensive," I say.

"Don't hang up, Claire."

I push the telephone button with my thumb. I hold it down for a long time and then release it. I listen for a dial tone. I lay the receiver off to the side of the phone. I decide to go to therapy.

My therapist's name is Valerie. At first, I think she looks like a tightass. Then, I decide she's just precise and tidy. The first thing Valerie tells me is that I'm normal. I suspect she says this to everyone.

"Seems like a normal problem to me. You're having trouble with your schoolwork, and you've never had trouble before. When did this trouble begin?"

"Oh, around April or May or maybe March," I say.

"And did anything traumatic happen at about that time?"

I bite my bottom lip with my upper teeth and raise my eyebrows. "No, not that I remember."

Valerie smiles at me. "Well, we'll figure it out."

Of course, Valerie reminds me of every nice woman I've ever known. She asks, "What do you think the problem is?"

I laugh, and she asks me why I'm laughing.

I answer "I don't know" to both questions.

Valerie asks me to tell her about my childhood and my family and my relationship with Rachel. I try to be honest with Valerie. I try to be honest with myself. Except, everything I say sounds melodramatic. I sound like a bad paperback version of lesbians, I think.

Valerie is patient. Valerie is kind. She says, "I can see that you're in pain." She says, "You're making perfect sense to me." She says: "I understand how that hurts you." And, "Do you feel jealous?" And, "Perhaps, that's why you feel out of control."

While my lover is away, I go alone to laid-back dyke bars, punk-fag disco dance clubs and mixed leather bars. I ask women back to my house. They have names like "Jody" and "Steve" and "Joan." They all look like every nice woman I've ever known.

When my lover returns, she says she doesn't want to have sex with me anymore if I'm going to have sex with so many other women. "You'll do anything that moves," she says.

I tell her to fuck off.

My lover and I stop having sex. I move my things into the extra bedroom. After a few days, my lover asks me to sleep with her at night. She says I misunderstood about the "anything that moves" comment.

My lover leaves for Texas again. I stop cruising bars at night. I start crying again. I try to remember the days when my lover and I fell in love. I remember rainy spring afternoons and hours of sex to Billie Holiday's voice, when work at my lover's construction job was cancelled. I remember sitting for hours in uncomfortable chairs, our cold dinner plates on the table in front of us as we talked and talked. I remember her blue eyes, her blue sweat shirt, and her paint-covered jeans. Now, I imagine her, standing in the sun with one hand raised: hello or goodbye.

Her name is Dana. She takes classes at the university. Also, I've seen her at the poetry readings and women-only events that I stopped attending sometime around the month of April. This is the story of how I met Dana:

I was in the grocery store, and I saw Dana, pushing her cart along the opposite side of the baking goods aisle. I pretended that I didn't recognize her, but she stopped and looked at me.

"Hi," she said.

I nodded my head at her.

"Did you have a nice summer?" she asked.

Dana didn't notice that I wasn't in the mood for polite chat. Before I could stop her, she launched into a story about her summer vacation. She said she worked in a record store and at a coffee shop, too. She told me about going home to visit her family. She told a funny story about her parents and how they don't understand why she's a lesbian.

I'm in the grocery store. I'm standing in the baking good aisle. Dana is talking to me. I'm laughing.

I asked Dana if she wanted to go for coffee sometime.

"How about right now?" she asked.

We walked to a coffee shop in the same mall with the grocery store. Dana sat across from me and sipped decaffeinated coffee from a thick white mug. She told me more funny stories. I laughed, and I kept on laughing.

While I command the dog to perform tricks for a biscuit, my lover sits on the couch, writing out checks to pay the house bills. I give the biscuit to the dog, sit on the couch, and look over my lover's shoulder. Then, I tell my lover the story of meeting Dana, but I leave out the laughing part.

We sit in silence for a few minutes.

Finally, my lover asks: "Are you going to finish your schoolwork from last semester?"

I light one of my lover's cigarettes. I tell her I don't want to talk about school.

"You don't want to talk about anything," my lover says. "Claire, you haven't wanted to talk about anything important for weeks, for months."

We begin to argue. We accuse each other and talk in loud voices. Finally, I cry. My lover sits in a rocking chair, silent, her body rigid and her eyes looking down. She stabs the ashtray with a half-smoked cigarette.

"I'm done talking to you," my lover says. "I don't want to process anymore. I'm tired." She walks out of the room.

Now, I'm numb from crying. I looks at the bills scattered on the futon. The check my lover was writing is made payable to "Southern Bell."

"Change happens." Alissa tells me, during one of my imaginary conversations with her. "We don't choose these things, you know."

I tell Alissa that I hate her now. I imagine my fist square in her face. Then, I imagine busting a hole through my bedroom's puny plaster walls. I call Alissa every obscenity I can think of and even make up a few. I turn my name-

calling into a game. I string curse words together into one unbroken, meaningless obscenity: "Jesus fuck jesus fuck jesus fuck." Then, I want to die.

"Change happens," Alissa repeats.

"I know this feeling," I say. "I *know* this feeling."

"Because it's old," Alissa says. "Because you've been here before."

When I enter the room, I find my lover sifting through papers on her desk.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

My lover's hands slide in two directions across the desktop. Sheets of paper fall like toy airplanes to the floor. "I've misplaced her."

"Who?" I ask.

My lover presses her lips together, gathers patience.

"Alissa," she says and blinks innocent.

"She's here? Where is she? What have you *done* to her?"

My lover laughs. She kneels and gathers her papers. "I've misplaced April's photograph of Alissa. It got mixed up with my things. April wants it."

I help my lover look for the photograph of Alissa. I find it in a book my lover is reading, between pages 38 and 39. I question my lover's judgment about using April's photograph of Alissa to mark her place.

I blink at the photo. Alissa looks nothing like I've imagined her. She has short brown hair and her eyes are red from the camera's flash. She stands in front of a Christmas tree. To her right is a fireplace with two stockings pinned to the mantle. She's smiling. She holds two fingers in the air--a peace sign.

I turn the photo over. On the back, someone has written in blue ink: Alissa, Xmas 1989. I look at Alissa's picture again. She looks like every nice woman I've ever known. Then, she looks like a stranger.

My lover walks up behind me and glances over my shoulder.

Together, we stare for a moment at the photograph. "Thanks," she says, and she takes the photo from my hands.

"Rachel."

My lover turns and looks at me. She smiles and waits.

I pause, and my lover turns her head to one side. She stops smiling for a moment and then smiles again, as if I'm an amusing mystery. Creases line her forehead. She blinks, and her face is newborn again. She says, "Claire."

At night, I awake to the sounds of a new neighborhood. Next door, the rooster crows, and down the street, a dog barks, seemingly out of some persistent misery, most likely from the cold night. I sit up and light a cigarette.

For a few minutes, the dog stops barking, but the rooster crows again. Now, I hear only the sound of myself, sucking smoke and then blowing it away from me. I press the remaining cigarette to the ashtray's glass bottom. Then, I think of Rachel.

I remember when Rachel lay next to me, every night for several years before the month of April. I remember her body's curve against my back. I try to remember if I ever woke during those nights to check her breathing, to touch her, to make sure she was still there, if I kissed her then, if I smoothed her hair with my palm. I never did. During those years, I always rested easy and slept hard in my lover's arms. At that time, I remember, there was no need for comfort.

Now, I think of Alissa, several thousand miles away from me along the southern coast. I wonder if she's awake, unable to sleep, haunted by a dead kitten's screams. I wish for her peaceful dreams. I want to give her something. Instead, I bend my knees up near my chest, wrap my arms around them, rest my head on my arms. Then, I try to imagine this moment as an ending, as some renewed sense of self. Instead, I think of my past, piece together the beginnings of my private devotion, my thoughts of Alissa, for Alissa, during the month of April.

--Amy R. Mattison

Silver-Haired Daddy

My daughter turned into the woman I hardly know a long time ago. Once rough and tomboyish, she cussed like a drunk oysterman. Except she was proud of her dexterity in finding never-before-heard combinations of four-letter words. In a strange sort of way I was proud too. She wore mostly dungarees, which was a good thing because she took to swinging her fists at boys who didn't appreciate her original use of words. She never took much to girls. Some things I wish had never changed. Like her name--for instance. In the summer of--must have been '76, she cut out Annabelle, snipped the -e off Lee, and fancy-stitched in i-g-h, Leigh. Even with three more letters, I could still hear the big hole in her name. She was enraptured with the idea of naming, something about the power of naming she had picked up in a book. She said she liked the sound of Lee because it was androgynous and she liked to spell it L-e-i-g-h because she was in love with Aurora Leigh. I was happy to learn that Aurora Leigh lived only between her imagination and the pages of a poem.

That's how my daughter came to give back the name of a beautiful maiden who lived by the sea. There were other things that worried me too--majoring in chemistry for one thing. Not stopping with a four-year degree like other people's children was another. The fifth year people didn't notice much, but in her sixth year I had some explaining to do. John Stewart from down the road a piece would shake his head and say, "Now how much longer does Annabelle Lee have to go in school?"

"She says maybe two years," I say trying to remember all she tells me about her oral exam, written exam, prospectus, and dissertation, but before long I start thinking of a jumbled heap of wrecked car bodies on I-75--the oral exam rams into the written exam which gets sideswiped by a prospectus and then they are all smashed flat by an eighteen-wheel dissertation. If she can't explain it to me, I reckon there's no use in me trying to explain anything to John Stewart.

"My grandson, Timmy, only took five years to get his degree," John Stewart says.

Well, at least I don't have to go pulling my grandchildren out of the sandbox. "Timmy," I say, "has a bachelor's degree. Annabelle Lee is getting her Ph.D. in chemistry."

"My grandson don't have no Ph.D., but he's got a good job selling insurance, a fat sassy wife, two young-uns and another on the way. He don't

never put on no airs either. You'd never know he'd been to college from the way he talks."

Today my daughter is sitting here absently tapping the steering wheel of her car, a black Saab. She flips on the switch of her radio and pushes the scan button. We hear Linda Ronstadt's plaintive voice singing: "Silver threads and golden needles cannot mend this heart of mine--." Annabelle Lee distractedly flips the switch off. She visibly tries to breathe deep into her belly, but her breath catches quick in her chest. Tall and thin--too thin, too severe looking. She refuses to curl her hair or to brighten her pearly white skin with make-up, and she wouldn't be caught dead in lace and ruffles. Instead, she wears mostly dark brown, gray, or black suits with stiffly starched white shirts, and that's how she looks--stiffly starched most of the time.

My daughter, age 38, is getting ready to see her Pa after eight years. He won't know her. He didn't know her last time, but I think she tried too hard that time to make him see this woman I hardly know myself.

"Your Pa is worse off now than you have ever seen him. He is so bad to fall, they sometimes roll him out in a wheelchair."

"How is his heart?"

"Good as gold. They took him off thorazine, and he stopped having those fits."

"You mean seizures?"

"No, he still has seizures. The doctors say he has an underlying predisposition to seizures and just about any medication will set it off--just like that time you took that medication for--."

"Okay, I get the point. You were telling me about the fits?"

"You know, the spells he had for several years. His heart would slow down to about 20 beats a minute and his blood pressure would drop real low. He nearly died every time it happened."

"He is better now?"

"No, not in the mind. He hardly ever knows any of the children, not even the ones who live close by. Don't expect too much, Leigh. His mind would have to go back a long way to find you."

"Perhaps, my mind would have to go back a long way to find him."

"What do you hope to find?"

"Something I treasured once. Something I lost."

"Sometimes it is better to let go of what is lost."

"Or stolen," she says, laying a weary argument at my feet.

"Lost or stolen, you are not the only girl in the world to lose a father to illness--even to mental illness." Annabelle Lee strings her losses together like seashells on a thread and then like a child refuses to believe she can't breathe life back into any of them. "You can't turn back the pages of time."

"No, mother," she says, her voice seeping around the edges of an empty well.

Annabelle Lee opens her car door and swings her long legs out in that decisive way of hers. She walks rapidly around the car and helps me out, and I think again of how she is more like a gentleman than a lady. There are easier daughters to have and to explain.

After walking down a long catwalk with my daughter wrapped in an overcoat of silence, we reach the double glass doors of the infirmary, one of which Annabelle Lee holds open for me. As she does, she brushes my coat and straightens my collar. She grimaces lightly at the feel of my vinyl coat. Not that it bothers me. A coat is to keep you as warm as you need to be. And if you are a lot younger than I am, you might care more about how it looks.

Once out of the stiffly starched suits she wears to meet the world, Annabelle Lee cares a great deal about how things feel. Her apartment has the barest, simplest furniture like the Shaker furniture you sometimes see in magazines and her color scheme is pure off white. I think bright colors hurt her. Nothing--it seems--can hurt her here. Not even the sheets. Her off white sheets are 100% cotton with a thread count of over three hundred. Her nightgowns are all cotton too--not the \$20 kind you get at Sears, but the \$100 kind. It must be from getting that degree in thread chemistry.

Polymer chemistry, I should say. My tongue always rolls over polymer easily enough, but the meaning slips out beneath the word. When folks would ask, Patsy Tweedle, for instance, I saw the same thing happening to them, so I took to saying "thread chemistry" instead. And, of course, Patsy Tweedle would want to know then how come Annabelle Lee didn't major in Home Economics like her oh-so-bright niece, Suzanne, if she wanted to know all about thread. Patsy Tweedle never cared much for when I tried to point out that Annabelle Lee taught people like her oh-so-bright niece, Suzanne. What Patsy Tweedle wanted to know the most anyhow was why Annabelle Lee wasn't married yet. Didn't she want children of her own? She loved her nieces and nephews well enough. And didn't she get lonely sometimes without a man around?

When we arrive at the ward, we are greeted by a cheery bleached-blonde nurse who wears her lipstick too bright for a woman past 40. Since I had called ahead, she had Malcolm--her "pet patient"--ready for us. Holding his hand and leading him forward, she announces in the cheery falseness of nurses and elementary school teachers, "Look who's here, Malcolm! It's your wife." She then turns to me and asks in a staged whisper, "Now who else do we have here?"

Annabelle Lee's face snaps shut like the two halves of an oyster shell backing away from danger. "It's our daughter, Annabelle Lee," I answer, growing uncomfortable with the tall, closed-face woman by my side. The

nurse's smile freezes on her face as she rapidly glances between me and Malcolm like surely she did not hear me quite right. So I tell her, "Yes, that's right. She is our baby girl." Not that it is easy to imagine Annabelle Lee as a baby, or as a girl.

"Oka-a-ay, Malcolm, Sweetie, look who's here--your--ah--daughter, Annabelle Lee." Malcolm nods the way that he does when he doesn't know something he is expected to know.

"This is Annabelle Lee, your baby girl," I say trying to help out. But Malcolm just stares straight through her.

The nurse turns Malcolm towards me and says, "You do know who this is today, don't you?"

Malcolm points one long finger of his ghost-white hands at me and says, "I know who you are. You are Myrtle Wilson, just about the prettiest girl that ever lived in Apalachicola." Everybody got a good chuckle out of that, seeing as how I am just a short, plump old lady with false teeth now. But it might have been true at one time.

A middle-aged black attendant comes to help Malcolm walk down the hall because he falls very easily. As we walk down the hall, Annabelle Lee glances repeatedly at her Pa. Once tall, his shoulders are sunken into the small pot of his belly, and he now stands at about the same height as Annabelle Lee. Through the silver in his hair, the same golden brown as Annabelle Lee's sometimes glints beneath the fluorescent lights. Annabelle Lee's hair is only beginning to dull through incoming silver hairs. She visibly struggles to slow her long, masculine stride so like her father's before he developed the funny, hop-like shuffle of the chronic mentally ill. Looking at her father's hands with their long, vaguely fluttering fingers and smooth, almost lineless palms--an idiot's hands now--she closes her own tightly and holds them rigidly by her sides. She has the same quick, easy hands that fly where others' crawl--just like her Pa's used to be. I used to think that he had hands like that male pianist down at First Baptist Church. The pianist's hands could fly like a bird over that keyboard. Then again, her Pa's hands could play any tune I would care to dance to. But that was long ago.

In the sitting room, the attendant eases Malcolm into a dark green chair. Annabelle Lee sits stiff and formal in a peach-colored chair. The velour fabric makes me think of peach fuzz and her brown suit a pit lying in the center of peach flesh sliced through and laid open. I find a small, ladderback rocker like the one I used to rock my babies in. Malcolm used to walk the floors with our babies in his arms, singing old songs to them. Annabelle Lee has wrapped a gift and brought a tin of homemade fudge, and before I can tell her better, she hands the wrapped gift to her father first. He lets the gift box fall in his lap and reaches eagerly for the tin of candy. "No, Malcolm," I say, "remember to open the gift first, and then she will give you the candy." He nods like he has heard

this rule before, and his fingers begin to fumble clumsily at the package. Annabelle Lee reaches over to help tear the paper away, and Malcolm snatches at the candy in her lap. He glances once at her smooth, cool face and stops, his own face blank as the wall in front of him.

Annabelle Lee draws from the package a pair of perfectly silly thick red socks with rows of white hearts on the bottom. "See, Malcolm," I say reaching over, trying to get him to look and to feel the socks, "how thick and warm they are. Touch the inside. There now, isn't that soft? Won't they feel so soft and warm on your feet? And look at the bottoms. These sticky little hearts will keep you from slipping on the cold, tiled floors. Is red still your favorite color?"

Malcolm holds the socks up only long enough to let me rattle on and then lets them drop to the floor, forgetting everything--the socks, the candy, the daughter he doesn't know, and the "prettiest girl that ever lived in Apalachicola," for that matter. He falls into a study of the sea-green walls. At such times, he could be thinking anything or nothing at all.

"Annabelle Lee," I whisper, "give him the candy now."

Annabelle Lee starts suddenly, and I realize that she has fallen into her own study of sea-green walls. She thrusts the tin toward him. He eagerly grabs the tin and starts to fumble at the lid, but his hands flit over the rim helpless as a wounded bird. He starts to hand the tin back to Annabelle Lee to open, but thinking better of it, he hands the tin to me.

Malcolm begins eating--in his usual way--one piece of chocolate fudge after the other. After about the fifth piece, Annabelle Lee leans forward and reaches for the tin. Malcolm looks quickly away from her and hugs his candy tin closer to his little pot belly. He goes right on popping pieces of fudge into his mouth--after all, there are 32 pieces in the tin.

As I leave the room to get Malcolm something to drink, I see Annabelle Lee's stiffly starched suit collapsed, a blob of flotsam in a sea-green room. The light from the window shimmers over her golden brown hair caught in the peach fuzz of the velour chair. She seems curiously shrunken and stares wide-eyed as her Pa devours piece after piece of fudge. I see the sickly grayish, green cast of her face, and I think of the baby boy I nearly lost emerging half-strangled from his birth waters.

"Would you like a drink too?"

"Yes, Mother," she says awkwardly, her lips forgetting the shape of words.

When I get back from the vending machine, Malcolm is down to his last two pieces of candy. I open the plastic coke bottle and hand it to him just as he places the last piece in his mouth. He raises the bottle to his lips, and he tosses his head back as if he is taking a long swig of water in the field on a hot summer day. Half of the bottle's contents disappear with the sound of dirty

water being sucked down a faulty drain. Annabelle Lee seems to have forgotten how to do even the simplest things for herself--like open her own drink bottle. I open her juice bottle--cokes agitate her too much--and hand it to her. She raises the bottle to her lips, leans her head back, and drinks the amber liquid with short, hungry, rhythmic motions.

Annabelle Lee's body creeps into her father's path of vision. "Do you know who I am, Pa?" she asks in a small voice.

"Yes," he lies, the way that he does when he thinks the right lie will make people leave him alone.

"Who am I?" Annabelle Lee asks. She doesn't seem quite sure herself.

"I don't know," Malcolm admits but shows no curiosity to know.

"It's your baby girl, Annabelle Lee," I chime in but the words don't get through to Malcolm whose eyes seem to look at something far away and long ago.

Annabelle Lee's eyes take on the ancient sadness of the very young or the very old abandoned without hope. I try again: "Don't you remember? She used to sing and dance for you--mostly church music because that was all the music we ever heard and it was sung mostly off-key. You taught her to buck dance once. You said that you half-suspected that her dancing had the spirit of the devil in it. Seemed like you never wanted to see her stop dancing."

No sparks of recognition shine forth in his eyes. "Do you still sing, Malcolm?"

"No. They don't like me to sing here. When I get happy and sing, they give me medicine to stop the singing."

"Oh."

"But, you," Malcolm says pointing his finger at Annabelle Lee, "can sing for me."

I stand, cross the room, peer into the lobby, and then close the door to the sitting room. Behind my ears, I think I hear the sounds of a jubilant baby girl crowing to her father as he walks through the door. When I turn around, my would-be warbler is perched lightly in front of her father, who looks directly at her now. She never could sing a lick--takes after me in that regard. She reminds me of a Northern bird I saw in an Audubon film once. That little bird tries for all the world to imitate various songs like the mockingbird does, but all that comes out are absurd little squawks. Who wouldn't love a great little squawker like her?

"The only song I can seem to remember is 'Amazing Grace,'" Annabelle Lee tells her Pa, apologizing. Malcolm nods his head for her to go ahead. "Okay," Annabelle Lee says and clears her throat to begin. The good thing about "Amazing Grace" is that it can be sung badly and still sound good if the spirit is right--kinda' bluesy like black women used to sing it while working in the fields. But Malcolm isn't listening for tone. He is intently watching

Annabelle Lee's face and drawing the spirit of joy forth. During the song, Annabelle Lee lifts her face to stare quietly into the twin reflections of her father's blue eyes.

Malcolm tells her, "Now I will teach you a song."

"Okay," Annabelle Lee answers.

"Say after me. If I could but erase those lines from your face."

Annabelle Lee reaches without thinking to touch the crow's feet advancing rapidly around her dark brown eyes. The rest of her face is almost perfectly smooth and bland. She answers in the grave voice of a child calling forth the powers of magic: "If I could but erase those lines from on your face."

"And bring back the gold to your hair."

Annabelle Lee sees again the golden brown glints in her father's hair. She must remember a man who once stood like a golden-haired god beneath the sun. "And bring back the gold to your hair."

"If God would but grant me the power."

At this, Annabelle Lee's whole body startles. Turning to me she says, "Is this really a song?"

"It's a song," I say smiling at her. "It's an old Gene Autry song."

Annabelle Lee's voice stumbles over the words put in her way: "If God would but grant me the power."

"Just to turn back the pages of time," Malcolm urges.

"Just to turn back the pages of time," she responds.

Sudden recognition dawns in our daughter's eyes, and she sings sweet as a house finch beneath the eaves:

I'd give all I own if I could but atone

To that silver-haired daddy of mine.

At the sound of the last note, she laughs with delight.

"Are you the one that could pick peas so fast?" Malcolm asks his daughter.

"Ten hampers of cream forties in a morning," she says proud--like this accomplishment ranked right up there with her Ph.D.

"You the one that went squirrel hunting with me?"

"Yes. Many times."

"You never minded much as long as the squirrels were dead when they hit the ground. But then one time, my aim was bad and... and... Do you remember the time?"

"Yes I remember. I even wrote a poem about it once at Berea. It went something like this. . . . blood squirting out of a silver's squirrel's head . . . shaking silver head shot through with pain . . . from the live oak tree he looked like he could fly . . . how could he know the ground would come up to meet him? . . . blood squirting out of a silver squirrel's head . . . shaking silver limbs can't twitch free . . . tiny hands grabbing at bits of light . . . children grabbing

at fireflies in the dark . . . how long . . . can a bleeding thing live . . . ? I named the poem "The Fall of the Silver Squirrel." The part about the tiny hands and children grabbing at fireflies made my roommate cry. I thought the shaking silver head shot through with pain was the saddest part. Maybe it would have been a better poem if I could have admitted that the squirrel was just a common gray squirrel."

"Do you remember what you told me after I finished killing it with the butt of my gun?"

"No, not exactly. It's been too long."

"You said you would never no more go hunting with me. Squirrels have as much right to live and to be happy as we do. Do you remember?"

"I could have said something like that once."

"You don't have to worry."

"Why?"

"Squirrels are born again. They feel great joy when they are born again into new life. Some squirrels live many lives."

"How do you know these things?"

"I've died and come back to life many times myself."

"Yes, I have felt that way too." She falls into a study, her eyes dark as pools of brown branch water deep in the woods.

They sit for a spell, their silence rocked by the rhythm of my small ladder back rocker. Then she begins to tell her Pa what she does for a living--something I've been trying to tell people for years. First, there was that child murder case in Atlanta when they convicted a man on a "thread of evidence." Then there were the fabrics from Indian remains she worked on. Lately, she's been working on thread residues clinging to gold coins recovered from a pirate ship off the coast of South Carolina. She teaches, of course. But to tell all this to her Pa? He had a hard time getting the name of her undergraduate college, Berea, straight several years ago. "Do you know what I do for a living, Pa? I teach. I teach school."

"You made a schoolteacher?" Malcolm asks in hushed tones of wonderment.

"Yes," she answers and then says lightly, "Don't I look like one?"

Malcolm nods his head like looks don't have that much to do with it.

"Teach them," he tells her, "what they need to know."

The middle-aged black attendant appears at the door. "Time's up, Mrs. Payne. Malcolm needs his lunch and his medication."

No one under middle-aged cares to work in this ward, and it's just as well. For the most part, Malcolm is handled gently--nothing like twenty or thirty years ago. How he lived through the shock treatments, massive doses of thorazine, one drug reaction after the other, seizures, falling spells, beatings, or even rapes I will never know. If lithium, the drug Leigh has taken for the last

eight years, had been available then, maybe these things would have never happened. Maybe this story would have never been told.

"My girl made a schoolteacher," he announces to the attendant.

"Sure nuf?" he answers kindly and then glances at her, surprised to find that such a thing might be true. "She looks like a fine lady to me."

"She is a pearl of great value," Malcolm tells him.

"I know that's right." The two men walk into the florescent airiness of the hospital hall.

Leigh stands still. She seems to watch an invisible golden thread unravel slowly down the path of a man walking with a funny, hop-like shuffle. His shuffle, she tells me, reminds her of the dance step of Indians calling forth their gods. The man with gray hair which looks silver under some lights disappears from our sight. He is received into a room of coarse white sheets, cold stainless steel, and sounds of human pain intermingled with cries of strange joy.

--Nancy Sherrod

The Soft-Boiled Egg

All at once, there was the splattering sound of the gravel. I'd been waiting for it. I stayed in the gazebo but I stopped reading. The print got smaller, too small to read. Too distant. I no longer felt the pages or smelled the grass or heard the rocking of my chair. I closed my eyes and listened. I wanted it to begin at that moment so I would always remember it. So I would remember when it started and what started it: the opening and closing of a car door and someone treading across the gravel. My mother opening the front door to greet him. Her voice. The man's voice.

I went inside through the back door and passed the kitchen where Valentina was preparing the silver coffee set. She turned and half-smiled at me, her hands on the apron of her uniform and her chin up. The light from the kitchen lit up her white-blond hair. Only her chest moved as though her breath might be quick. I moved close enough for her to take my hand. "They're going in the library. Go on. Get a look at him."

I crossed the hall and stood by the library door. My mother and the man sat opposite each other. She wore a white cotton dress. She smiled and pressed her palms together. Her hair was pulled back and her face moved as she spoke, her cheeks pinkish and stretching into smiles. I liked her terribly at that moment.

My father sat at my mother's left. He smoked his pipe and nodded to my mother's words. About the man's drive and the heat. About the pollen in the air. About when lunch would be served.

The man wore a yellow suit and held a black and white panama hat on one knee. I was not struck, as I had imagined, with the first sight of him. The thought, knowing, *this one*. Rather I thought of cartoon cats in yellow suits and started to laugh. They heard and they all turned to look at me.

"Eve," my mother said. "This is Mr. Lee." Mr. Lee stood and put out his left hand. I put my right into it and he accepted it, fingers first. His palm, warm and damp with fresh sweat, curled around it. With the other hand, he pushed away some of the black curls around his face. A plain, handsome face.

"How do you do?" he said. Then to my mother, "She's even prettier than in the pictures you sent."

He extended his arm to his left, offering me a place to sit on the sofa next to him. I sat and pulled my skirt over my knees. He was a big, muscular man and, as he sat, the sofa caved in, causing me to slide against him. "Oh, excuse me," I said.

Valentina came in with coffee and lemon biscuits. She served mechanically and never looked at me. She only looked at him, but carefully as she might look at any guest. She put out the cream and sugar and left.

Mr. Lee bit into a biscuit. "Umm," he said to my mother.

She smiled and took one herself. "Valentina made them. She's been with us since Eve was three years old. A jewel. A second mother to my dear Eve. Why, sometimes I get jealous." She laughed and adjusted a pin in her hair. My father blew smoke in the air and stared into his coffee.

My mother stirred her coffee and said to my father, "Dear, why don't you have a biscuit? You haven't eaten anything all morning."

My father either grunted or cleared his throat.

"May I have another, ma'am?" asked Mr. Lee.

"Oh, please. As many as you like. This is no time for watching calories. We want you to have your strength for this big day." She hunched her shoulders and winked at him. He took another lemon biscuit.

The cushion was slowly sinking. My hip touched his thigh, as hard as frozen meat. I could hear the biscuit in his mouth. I looked at his head, the way the temples pulsed. Beads of sweat crept out of his hair line and hovered around his forehead. His head had a shelf-like projection so the sweat stayed like glass marbles. He and my father were assessing each other as men do. The overserious glances to the point of melodrama.

"Well, you seem like a charming young man," said my mother. He and my father looked at her.

"And handsome too," she added. "Mr. Lee, I must say, you have a most attractive head of hair. Look at his hair, Eve." I looked at it. "Eve's hair color is so ho-hum. I mean, what color is *this*?" She leaned forward and took a clump of my hair in her palm. Mr. Lee leaned in to look, to be polite. "And it has always been so terribly limp," she continued and dropped the hair.

"Valentina and I used to try and try to put some curl in it. God forbid, can you imagine if she had a child with someone who had hair like hers? I must admit, Mr. Lee, I liked you initially for your hair." She giggled.

"Really, darling," said my father. "He's a smart, healthy young man. That's why we've...."

"Let's not quarrel. This is our daughter's big day." She shrugged and said to Mr. Lee, "At least we agreed. It's hard enough for us to arrive at the same decision."

My sun dress was damp on my back. Mr. Lee took up most of the sofa and I felt myself sinking into it and into him. I stood and opened the French doors to let the air in. I stood there breathing, letting the fabric peel itself off my skin.

I heard Mr. Lee shift behind me. "That's better," he sighed.

I looked back at him. He had taken off his coat. He was eating another lemon biscuit. I kept my back on them. The smell of lemon was thickening.

The air moved my dress around my calves. My mother was talking again, but I did not hear it. Only the voice as if it were too far away to be words. Ahead, the gazebo. The chair where I had left my book, the pages switching about as the occasional gust shot through. There were no other houses for miles. Only scattered trees, gardens, lakes and, distantly, the highway. From the porch on the other end of the house, the water was barely visible. But from the garden, the land seemed endless in all directions.

"I'm sorry you had to come on a Sunday," my mother was saying. "But today is the day. Oh, it's going to be lovely! My little girl! She's all grown-up."

I looked back at my mother. The barrette pulling her hair back, flattening it over the curve of her skull. I looked out the door again towards the highway.

"Valentina will serve lunch soon," my mother said.

"Very well," my father said and made the throat noise again.

I felt Mr. Lee come up behind me, the expanse of him like an invisible weight. "What's for lunch, anyway?" I heard him ask.

"Soft-boiled eggs," said my mother.

Soft-boiled eggs again. My mother believed eggs were the perfect food. The source of life. Protein. DNA. Where the beginning of life resides. All my life, we had eaten three eggs a week. When I was little and feared eggs--the smell of eggs, the idea of eggs: not plant, not quite animal--we compromised. Somehow, a soft-boiled egg was not as scary as an uncooked egg. Yet the eggness is still there. The yolk stays wet and fluid. But the white hardens and sticks to the shell. The mysterious amusement of eating an egg from an egg cup: the egg stays in place. Breaking the top and seeing into it like a cavern of warm white and yellow. The depth. The strong primal smell.

I turned around. Mr. Lee was wiping his brow with a handkerchief. Valentina came in the library to clear the coffee. "Valentina, is lunch almost ready?" my mother asked. She took Valentina aside and whispered, "And the dining room? Don't forget the fresh flowers. And Eve's nails. After all, this is a day to celebrate." Valentina nodded and started to leave. "When are the guests arriving?" my mother said to her back.

"Not until 2:00," said Valentina.

My mother looked at my father, "Well, of course," she said. "It is Sunday." Valentina and I smiled at each other. Her eyes glazed and her lips tightened. She swiftly left with the tray.

At noon Valentina served us lunch. My father at the head of the table. My mother to his left. Mr. Lee at the other end of the table in front of the

window. The sweat had disappeared and his hair was smoother. The light filtered through the half-opened curtains and fell across the stark linen tablecloth in changing, circular designs. The fresh flowers. A small basket of white bread. A salad of sun-dried tomatoes, endive, and olives. Soft-boiled eggs served in white china egg cups, the rim shaped like a curving flower, its petals beginning to open and separate.

I had always admired the way my mother cut the shell in one sharp smooth line around the upper quarter of the egg. Somehow it never seemed to burn her fingers. She turned the knife around it and lifted off the top in one swift incision. I looked down at my imperfect egg. My shattered egg. the yellow and pulpy white that sticks to the cut-off lid.

After lunch I bathed and dressed upstairs. Valentina did my hair, my nails, and helped me with my dress. "Don't be nervous," she said. "The worst thing you can do is tense up. Just relax and soon it will be over with." I saw her behind me in the mirror, her sweet face and her mouth tightening with the advent of tears. I turned and put my arms around her. "Oh, Valentina! Why do things have to change?"

The guests arrived a little after 2:00. Valentina had made champagne cocktails. When I came downstairs my parents were entertaining the guests in the parlor. My mother wore her yellow dress with the petal embroidery. My father had a flower in his lapel. In one hand his glass of champagne was beginning to tilt. His lips were wet and he was smiling more. He always came alive with guests to whom he could show something off. They were passing around the computer print-out, smiling over it and slowly sipping champagne. It was an outstanding genetic profile, so complementary to mine. "This genetic material," my father had told me, "provides a perfect infusion into our genetic line. You'll thank me for this someday." My stomach ached, the egg in it like a weight. I remembered doctors. The touching and looking. They had said it must be today.

My mother, at my father's ear, said, "Now don't be cocky, dear." I looked at him with his glass in the air. \$5,000. A small price to pay for the future. And then Mr. Lee would get into his car, and with the second crack of the gravel, be gone from our lives forever.

They insisted we not drink champagne.

I knew when it was time. Mr. Lee and I climbed the steps to my bedroom. The window was closed but the open curtain let the sunlight fall through it and cover the sheets with glistening white points of light. The sound of the guests, their clapping, their voices, faded. I heard it like a low murmur, like a memory of sound. My hands were useless. Cold.

He closed the door. His hands were on my waist, my back. The lovely dress fell like a piece of dead skin. I was to lie on my back with a pillow under my waist. I did this part myself and then, I nodded to him. His hands moved

to my waist. My stomach. My skin bristling. His skin like a hide. He pressed in and his shadow moved over me, covering the window and the afternoon sunlight. My legs collapsed. A cold pain spiraled from my stomach to my throat. My fingers curled like petals against the sheet. The different parts of him like instruments, each with its purpose.

When he was asleep against me I unfolded my legs and watched the sun disappear. I knew that when he woke, there would be more. Now only remembering it mattered: Knowing where it started and where it ended. To isolate it. To detach it from everything before and everything after--if there was an after. There was no way to be sure. I only knew the warm, slippery numbness and the pounding like something wanting to escape. He never kissed me but as he slept I watched his lips. What, perhaps, they *could* have done if we weren't here. If it weren't *this*.

I could feel his breath on my neck and cheek. Faintly, it smelled of the afternoon. Of soft-boiled eggs.

-- Kathleen Voss

I Find Myself in My Incarnation

The meeting didn't seem any different from its predecessors. As always, I entered Dr. Nordquist's office to settle in the squat chair beside his desk; as always, he laid my story out on his desk, so that we could go through it together; as always, his bushy brown eyebrows jumped up whenever we frequented a place where he had pencilled a GOOD in the margin; as always, the furrow between his eyebrows deepened when we reached a place where he had etched a NO, NO, NO on the paper; and as always, when we were finished, he said, "I don't believe this."

That was my clue to sigh, pick up the story, thank him and leave his office. I had the first three actions, and was getting up to leave when he said, "Why don't you write about your own world? You are Indian. Why don't write about Indians?"

Memory fails me as to exactly what I did after that. I guess I must have avoided those questions by mumbling something or the other, while edging out the door. But, afterward, those questions were something I was to think about in some depth.

Write about my own world. That idea had never crossed my mind, chiefly because my own world was something I was running away from--certainly as a writer. Being East Indian by ancestry, I was part of a small, recent, almost invisible minority in the South; a minority whose culture seemed as incompatible with the menu of Southern Literature as chicken curry with that of a steak house. Furthermore, very few people I knew in Savannah, Ga.--a list that included high school teachers and English professors--knew anything about writers of Indian descent, including the famous ones; most of them had never read a sentence by V.S. Naipaul and only knew Salman Rushdie through a death sentence.

Moreover, my own writing wasn't sparked by an Indian voice. When, as a junior at Armstrong State College, I finally made a commitment to writing, it wasn't Naipaul, Rushdie, Desai or Mukherjee I was all fired up about, but *William Butler Yeats*.

So I walked out of Dr. Nordquist's office to go on doing exactly what I had done before--attempt Updikian and/or Nabokovian fiction and produce poetry that matched, if not the poetical quality, certainly the dreamlike quality of "the Lake Isle of Innisfree." Over the next eight months, I was to have poems finish first and second in competitions by the Poetry Society of Georgia and publish in a local literary magazine called *Calliope*.

It was toward the end of that eight-month period that I started feeling completely used-up. That feeling didn't suddenly sprout out of nowhere, but developed gradually--very much like how an object burns, bit by bit until, finally, its entire surface is charred. For some time, I had been thinking that most of what I was writing simply reiterated what I had written before. Now I began to think that every word I was writing was merely repetitive. Finally, I began to look upon those poems and stories as not only jaded but phony, so much so that I came to view them as, to paraphrase Yeats, the self-born mockers of my adolescent enterprise. It wasn't long after that I started writing "Indian."

What rendered that Rabbit-infested prose, peppered by dashes of Lolita and Ada, insubstantial? What stirred me so much that I was no longer satisfied by mere imagination, no longer content in a cabin on an imaginary Innisfree? At that time I thought I was simply written out in that mode, and needed, therefore, to move on to something else. But the reason went far beyond writing style or literature for that matter. It was tied inextricably to the reason why I didn't write "Indian" in the first place.

All along, I had been running away from myself. From rudimentary things, like anglicizing my name, to outright rejection of all things Indian, I was the epitome of someone who wanted, desperately, to be someone other than what he was. And my writing simply reflected that urge.

This is not an uncommon urge in my generation of Indians living in America or Indian-Americans. Why does it exist? Primarily because we are consumed with the desire to merge into American culture; as consumed, perhaps, as our parents with the completely opposite desire to preserve culture.

These two very opposite yearnings face off against each other in most Indian homes throughout the U.S.. For the parents, America ends at their doorstep. After coming home from work, they disappear into a world of Hindu music and videocassettes. If America ever enters this world, it does so very briefly through the television set.

On the other hand, the walls of the kids' rooms are plastered with wall to wall posters of rock stars, sports stars and Hollywood stars. And the typical Indian kid in America is as much of a couch potato as his or her white and black counterparts.

Indian kids typically find their parents' obsession with staying Indian impossible to fathom. After all, this is America, they reason. But, on the flip side, America is a society of diverse ethnicities where many people retain their ethnic identities while being Americans. Then why do so many of us wish to shed our Indianness?

The answer lies in digging a little deeper into the reason why I wanted to run away from myself. Some of it was probably a reaction to elders. Kids generally rebel against parents, especially during adolescence. But a far more

potent catalyst was the fact that Indians are virtually invisible in the panorama of Americana.

Take television for instance. Indians rarely, if ever, appear on television, and when they do they are, in many instances, portrayed as objects of merriment--characters with whom no Indian wants to be identified. The same is true of movies. There are practically no Indians in the media. They don't occupy a single leadership position in politics. Furthermore, although India is very much in Asia and the Orient, the terms Asian and Oriental are understood to describe people of Mongoloid races.

Finally, there is the problem of India's image. India is a poor, overpopulated country, riddled with problems extremely difficult to explain to the Western mind. These very visible shortcomings in their country of origin cause young Indians, who don't know too much about India in the first place, to shy away from learning more and even attempt to cast off its legacy.

Hindu religious texts are very specific in their description of reincarnation. In the *Bhagwad Gita*, the Hindu god Krishna says that after death the soul changes bodies the same way a person changes clothes; in other words, after a body dies its soul simply enters another body. By running away from their Indianness, a large portion of my generation of Indians in America seek something akin to reincarnation; they seek to be reborn in another image, which is a painful if not impossible process, because shedding one's identity can be extremely painful if not problematic. Furthermore, donning another identity is excessively bothersome. And, even after a person thinks he or she has accomplished both these objectives, he or she remains overly insecure. This is because he or she is scared the new mask may drop off at any time. Therefore, the person is sentenced to feeling, perpetually, like a phony, because he or she is always conscious of the need to uphold the image acquired.

Few Indians of my generation will become great writers. But, in the end, I think many will return to their roots. For them, as for me, the realization they need to do so will, most probably, not come as an epiphany, but develop gradually over a period of time. For some time, after bowing to that realization, they might envision themselves as convicts who have tried every possible escape route, and now must, after successive frustrations, settle for life in prison. In time, however, they will learn they are not in prison in the first place, as they learn to appreciate other cultures while also appreciating their own, and, thus, find themselves in their incarnation.

--Vikram Kapur

For a Fat Girl You Don't Sweat Much

It's funny the things that stick with you. I remember an episode of *Gomer Pyle* in which Gomer was forced to go on a blind date with Sargeant Carter's sister. I don't recall exactly what his sister looked like. I think she had red hair. I don't believe she was terribly unattractive. Her eyes weren't crossed. She didn't have unseemly facial hair. Her back wasn't humped. But she *was* what we euphemistically term "pleasingly plump." And I will never forget what Gomer in all his North Carolina eloquence told her. Finding the only compliment he could he said in the nicest way he knew how--"For a fat girl you don't sweat much."

I am fat. That statement may embarrass you. It's one of those things we don't talk about. It may be even more taboo than sex. And I am a woman, which makes it worse. Fat is forgiven more easily in men--just think of John Goodman from the television show *Roseanne* who was voted one of the sexiest men in the country by the readers of *US* magazine. Of all the things his co-star, Roseanne Arnold, has been accused of, sexy has never been one of them.

This is the first verse of a poem I wrote when I was twenty-one:

I want to be thin
as a blade of grass,
a sliver of glass,
small, sharp, and inconspicuous.

I was a sickly child. I had allergies and severe kidney problems. At one point in my life the doctors thought I had a malformed kidney and might have to have it removed. My overprotective family worried about me.

In my family when you love someone, you feed them. I was fed and fed well. My mother fixed me bacon and eggs and cream of wheat and toast and hot chocolate for breakfast. Every morning after my older sisters and brother went to school, my grandfather would bring me a Sunbeam honey-bun hidden in one of his big coat pockets. At lunch time my father would come home with a piece of liver cheese just for me because liver is good for you and

helps build the blood. Whenever my brother and sisters went out at night to the movies or the drive-in, they would bring back a surprise for me--many times a fish sandwich slathered in tartar sauce from the Redwood Inn.

Of course I gained weight. Because of my health I didn't get to go outside very much, and I watched a lot of television and read books. But even though this lifestyle didn't do much for my physique, I count myself lucky because it developed my imagination. I think it's what made me a poet and for that I wouldn't change a moment of my past. Through the books I read, I could become other people--Charlie as he wandered through the chocolate factory, Laura Ingalls helping her mother bake apple pies in a sod house, Pandora unable to resist opening that box.

Everything was fine before I started school and had to associate with people outside my family. I felt very secure and even beautiful. I had long blonde hair and green eyes, a round chipmunk face and a pouty lower lip. I didn't know that I was fat or that fat made any difference.

Third grade. The playground. I hated the playground. I couldn't cross the monkey bars. Everyone else could cross the monkey bars, just like little spider monkeys. Hand over hand pulling their torsos easily to the other side.

"Hey you, Horsefat. Why don't you cross the monkey bars?" Blake Baize's older brother Howell, hanging upside down, the blood making his face pomegranate red. Laughing. The others laughing. Scurrying across like little spider monkeys.

"Hey you, Horse fat. Horse fat. Horse fat."

When I was eight years old my mother took me to the pediatrician's office to see if there was anything he could suggest to do about my weight problem. She was tired of my crying over the names that children would call me in school. I was in pain and she wanted to help.

The pediatrician, Dr. Qualls, put me on a saucer diet. At each meal I could only eat as much food as would fit on a saucer. However, on Friday afternoon after three o'clock I could eat whatever I wanted as much as I wanted until Saturday morning.

The first week of the diet, I was miserable, and I was constantly hungry. When Friday finally rolled around, I felt as if I had been released from a long prison term. My parents weren't home at three o'clock but I knew the rules of my diet and so I rumbled around in the refrigerator looking for something, anything to eat. I found a quart of lime sherbet. I sat down in front of the television set and ate every last bite of it while I watched Gilligan's

Island reruns. But that wasn't enough to make up for a week of deprivation. I cooked a frozen Totino's Pizza and somehow managed to cram all of that into my eight-year-old stomach on top of the sherbet.

I got very sick about thirty minutes after my feeding frenzy. My mother came home to find me throwing it all up in the bathroom. I threw up for the rest of the night.

That was the end of the saucer diet.

1976. I'm thirteen and I read too many gothic novels. Mary Stewart's *The Moon Spinners* makes a big impression on me. Haley Mills stars in the Disney movie. I want to be Haley Mills or actually I want to be Haley Mills being Nicola Farris heroine of the novel. The heroines of gothic novels always hate the heroes in the beginning before they fall madly in love with them. Nicola hated Mark Langley. I hated Steve Kilburn. I thought that made our union destiny.

Only he was a James Dean type. Junior hoodlum in the making. He was a year older than the rest of us because he'd failed first grade. He was part of the cool crowd. He only dated cheerleaders or basketball players if they were pretty enough. I was Polly Anna. He made fun of me in Art class. We fought so much the teacher, Mrs. Williams, had to take us out in the hall and threaten to put us alone together at a table in the back of the room for the rest of the quarter if we didn't straighten up. I took this bickering as a sign of sexual tension. I became more determined every day to become Steve Kilburn's steady, and eventually his wife.

At thirteen, I was five foot four and one half inches in my sock feet. I weighed one hundred and thirty pounds. People were fond of telling me that I had a pretty face, a beautiful face, that I would be drop-dead gorgeous *if*. . . if only I would lose weight.

No problem. Steve Kilburn was worth it. I embarked on yet another diet.

How had I gotten fat? I ate. How could I get skinny? Not eat. It was simple.

For almost three weeks I didn't eat anything. I lost twenty pounds. I never got Steve Kilburn.

But I found out what severe hunger pains feel like. I doubled over a few times and couldn't walk. I got very faint and dizzy. But that's okay. What's the old line, the one everyone in this country has bought, it's impossible to be too rich or too thin.

In her book, *Sexual Personae*, Camille Paglia talks about the Venus of Willendorf. That little primitive sculpture of an immensely fat woman. Paglia says of her--"The venus of Willendorf is comically named, for she is unbeautiful by every standard."

I looked very closely at the black and white photo of the stone age carving. Her large breasts fall down onto her protruding stomach. Her fat bulges out over her legs. More than anything else, she reminds me of my grandmother.

I only saw my grandmother naked once. She had gotten out of the bathtub and was drying herself off and she asked me if I would get her a pair of panties; she had forgotten to bring them with her into the bathroom. As I handed her the underwear, I got my first good look at an adult female body. My grandmother's size 44 DD bust had been flattened by gravity and sixty some odd years, but not knowing any better I didn't find that unbeautiful. Her stomach was huge and riddled with cellulite, but I loved Nanny and it didn't occur to me that I should be disgusted. To me my grandmother was a beautiful woman. How dare Camille Paglia tell me any differently.

And now my own body is closer to that of the Venus of Willendorf than to the bodies of fashion models like Claudia Schiffer and Cindy Crawford. My mother, my sisters, most of the women in my family could have been the inspiration for that primitive sculptor. The Venus of Willendorf's body is a reality for thousands of women all over the world. For thousands of others it's the thing they fear most.

--Melissa Morphew

The Hat

They knew nothing of the misspelled love poems, of the plastic ring I had to wear so everyone at the club would know I was his. The way he danced merengue with me. The promises.

No, my college girlfriend never understood the appeal of Pepe Rosado. Maybe it was the gun he let me touch just once. Maybe it was the way he said "mi amor." Maybe it was the beeper he wore on his belt. He was a Dominican from New York. I believed myself a social rebel for dating a black Hispanic ex-gang member. I called him my "capo." My girlfriends called him "the hoodlum." But I forgave him his past of gang wars and shoot-outs and felonies. It was the present that mattered. It was *Pretty in Pink* the other way around. Or *West Side Story*. I ignored the fact that he had shot people. I figured he must have had a good reason.

My taboo affair meant nights in dark smoke-filled salsa clubs and days of chance visits. The weekends we spent at Papatino's. We danced merengue, lambada, salsa. We sat at *his* table with his Dominican friends who drank straight whiskey with ice and talked business. They would speak in deep, hushed voices, their eyes peering over the brims of glasses, the smoke from their cigarettes curling above their heads. On week days he came on MARTA to see me at school. "Some day, baby," he would tell me, his eyes squinting with resolution, "I'm gonna have a car. A real nice car with a big back seat and I'm gonna drive you around Atlanta in it."

We would walk to the park and lie in the grass under the sun, I would squeal as he spoke to me in Spanish. Then as the sun disappeared, he would tell me about how things used to be when he lived in New York, when he was the leader of a gang. His nickname, Loco. He would reminisce about *those* days when he had nine guns, one for each car, about his street corner and a very special gang war and running from the police. At times I thought tears were forming in his eyes, but he would shake away the memory with stoic resolve. At night in Papatino's he would present me to his "cousins" as his "girl." They would kiss me on both cheeks, a solemn respect in their eyes. They knew about Pepe. I was wearing Pepe's ring; I had Pepe's beeper number. As such, that reverence extended to me.

We had been together for a month. When a week passed without phone calls or visits from Pepe, I began to fret. His cousins at Papatino's told me they knew there was trouble. I believed some rival gang member from New York must have been sent to torture my poor Pepe for gang secrets. But just to

eliminate another possibility, I tore through the blue pages, asking for Pepe Rosado at various correctional facilities. At last I found my beloved being corrected at the Clayton County Jail. That same afternoon I received a letter, a poem scrawled in pencil on wide-lined notebook paper:

Your eyes is brown
 And they so round.
 I been so down.
 I'd never frown
 If you was around.
 Love,
 Pepe

My roommate tried to convince me otherwise, but I believed it my duty to visit my felon boyfriend, especially since I knew he needed me so terribly. After all, any good Mafia wife would do the same. I hoped that when I visited him he might surreptitiously demand that I smuggle him a cake with something hidden inside. Maybe he would want me to deliver coded messages to some contact on the outside. When I explained to her the urgency of the matter, my roommate agreed to drive me to Clayton County. As I dressed, I thought of him in there. Defenseless. His reputation could save him or destroy him. Surely they had heard of Pepe--the legend. They would either give him the respect his name deserved--or do anything to bring him down.

I knew what I had to do. I put on my fully lined red suit with gold buttons, my black kid gloves, my black patent leather shoes with three-inch heels and my red felt hat with the black ostrich plumes.

When I passed the threshold into the lobby of the Clayton County Jail, the people behind the desk stopped their conversation and watched me. They must have known I was there to see Pepe. Their eyes glazed with suspicion. They whispered to each other. I knew they were saying "That must be Pepe's girl. Let's keep an eye on her." I knew the FBI might bug my phone now that they knew who I was. Maybe when I got home I would find the furniture overturned, drawers pulled out, cushions spread across the floor. They knew they'd never get to Pepe. He would never talk. I would be their only hope. They would try to offer me immunity, but my loyalty to Pepe would never crumble.

I stared icily at the people behind the desk. I carefully removed my gloves and put them in my purse. I smoothed the black feathers of my hat. I could not let them break me.

When they asked whom I had come to visit, I scoffed. They wanted to make me believe they had no idea who I was. "Pepe Rosado," I announced coolly and tossed my head to let the feathers dance.

When it was my turn, I had to give my purse to my roommate. A policeman led me into an elevator and through several dark brick hallways. I smoothed the feathers on my hat again. I knew he was waiting for me somewhere behind those looming brick walls. We passed through corridors, through glass and metal doors, past uniformed men and women. The only sound was my heels clicking on the tile. The policeman buzzed me through a final thick door into a room of cubicles with telephone receivers. He directed me to the one on the end where I sat to wait. I watched the glass in front of me until it was only my reflection I saw--the hat and the proud sweep of the feathers. Pepe would be there soon....

To my surprise, I was the only felon's girlfriend of my kind. The other women were older and tired-looking with babies and small children yanking at their sleeves. They talked into telephone receivers to their husbands on the other side. The men wore green uniforms. They leaned toward the glass, their eyelids half-closing, their faces worn and bloodless. No one smiled. One man put his hand on the glass, and his wife put her fingers there as if she were touching him. I listened hoping I would hear plans of escape or some piece of information I could relay to Pepe. But the women were only telling their husbands how the children were. The babies cried. The children whined.

At last I saw him. A policeman ushered in my felon on the other side. He sat in front of me. I put my hand on the glass that separated us. He only smiled and picked up the receiver. He wore the same green smock and trousers as the other prisoners, but I thought they suited him better. The color was especially flattering to his dark skin.

I looked on the wall beside me for my receiver. Pepe pointed down. I looked on the floor. No receiver. Pepe knocked on the glass and pointed down again.

"Oh!" I said and giggled. The other women took the receivers off their ears and stared at me. I found the phone under the table. I smiled at Pepe and put it against my ear, knocking the brim of my hat. I adjusted it primly.

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I don't want to tell you, baby."

"Please, Pepe. You know I might be able to help you." I had visions of baking things into cakes and letters with special coded symbols.

"I took a car," he said. Oh, yes, I thought. The car with the big back seat. The car that would drive me around Atlanta at Pepe's side.

"What's going to happen to you?" I asked. "Do you have a lawyer? Is there anything I can do?" The last question I almost whispered.