

AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE WRITERS' FESTIVAL

March 24-25, 1994
Winter Theatre, Dana Fine Arts Building
All events free and open to the public

Thursday, March 24

4:00 p.m. Reading by Melissa Fay Greene
8:15 p.m. Reading by Carolyn Forché
Reception to follow

Friday, March 25

10:25 a.m. Reading by Lee Abbott
2:00 p.m. Panel discussion of student work
Memye Curtis Tucker, moderator
6:30 p.m. Alumnae Association Dinner (by admission)
Distinguished Alumna Reading by Mary Kratt

Readings by Carolyn Forché, Melissa Fay Greene, and Lee Abbott are free and open to the public. Mary Kratt's reading is open to the public with an admission charge for dinner.

For further information call 404-371-6294 (after March 12, 404-638-6294).

AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE WRITERS' FESTIVAL 1994



**1994 Agnes Scott Writers' Festival
Distinguished Participants**

Lee Abbott is the author of *Living After Midnight* (1991), *Dreams of Distant Lives* (1989), and *Strangers in Paradise* (1987), among other volumes. He has received numerous awards for his fiction, including Pushcart and O. Henry prizes. He currently directs the Creative Writing Program at Ohio State University.

Carolyn Forché is the author of *The Country Between Us* (1982), *Gathering the Tribes* (1976), and the forthcoming volume *The Angel of History*, and she is the editor of *Against Forgetting* (1993), a new anthology of twentieth century poems of witness. Her books have won the Lamont and Yale Younger Poets awards. She is currently a member of the writing faculty at George Mason University.

Melissa Fay Greene is the author of *Praying for Sheetrock* (1991), winner of the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award and the Lillian Smith Award, among others. She is currently at work on a book about the bombing of The Temple in Atlanta in 1958.

Mary Kratt is the author of *On the Steep Side* (1993) and *The Only Thing I Fear Is a Cow and A Drunken Man* (1991), among other volumes. Her poems have appeared in *Nimrod*, *Shenandoah*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and other journals.

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

WRITERS' FESTIVAL
1994

The Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival has been held 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 Carolyn Forché, Melissa Fay Greene, Lee Abbott, and Mary Kraft. Other recent guests have been Jorie Graham, Charles Johnson, and Judith Ortiz Cofer (1993), Rita Dove and Robert Coover (1992), Sharon Olds and Gloria Naylor (1991), and Josephine Jacobsen and Alfred Uhry (1990).

Spring, 1994

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mariette

I. field

here my hands
are wet, stained
with the blood of grapes
and jesus.
i sweat and
wonder what my mother is doing.
the clouds fly over the sun sometimes
making patterns on the vines

if i look too long i forget to breathe.

II. mass

my rosary glides through
fingers scrubbed clean.
hail mary full of grace
and babies
my back aches as i look at the cross—
his back ached too
he bears our burdens—
i try
but all i see are swollen knuckles
and the hem of my dress.

III. pray without ceasing.

i am tired
and ask for rest not sleep.
my eyes are heavy
with pictures of words, sides and grapes.
in the darkness
i squint to see the angels flying overhead.

—Rachel Bowell

Garden

I.

Afternoons, heat seeps through branches,
vines bloat, curl around the roof posts.

He squats in the corner, listens
to insects scurrying in the grass.

She sits with her palms pressed against the ground,
heat pressing against her forehead.

When he speaks, it hums with static.

II.

When she thinks it is of wind.

if there were only wind, she thinks,
a wisp of hair, a leaf whispering as

it falls. Sometimes she runs in the open,
for the feel of air tickling around her

belly, for the feel of change.

Her mind is still as a ripened fruit
swollen on a branch, poised.

III.

She steps through the tall grass.
He stands at the door.

Her body flickers, limpid, the heat
fingered, rising, her body moving

through the heat as if she is blind,
feeling her way through a room,

moving towards the shade, the shadow, a
tree, alone, ripening in the heat.

—Laylage Courie

Mississippi

The sewing. Only shellac and painted iron
Built in a place where a knife serves for half the tools
and every mother has said to her child
beans and cornbread are better than steak.
There's hard times all over & Mr-Dickle & Mr-Daniel's personal
friends a/mine.
*Miasmic threats to the gears and cogs hazard little
concern to dust
the decay, the filament sized fragments of all the
stitches before collectively
a thread so staunch none need be supplied
the Warmth and the Wetness
carded deep within the groin, it is a bevy of all things past.
In the sleep of the machine, the bobbin feeds itself when and
where and how it wants*

amuck.

That first cold eatin' acorn bread & wint er field salat.
And the needle is sharp.
And it hurts me like you did

Just a machine very little oil,
cobwebs and Daddy long legs from storage
missing belt &
sphinx on the neck w/spinning wheel Singer.

—Rachel M. Davis

By Whatever Degree of Sun

The peach grew far too ripe
 before falling,
 beyond preserves,
 beyond brandy,
 only a seed around which
 rotting pulp would wash
 away in late rain
 (if the drought broke)
 or corrugate, unrecognizable,
 beyond resurrection,
 by just that same degree
 the first persimmon
 chanced falling, so bitter-green
 the least experienced forager
 would know to avoid it;
 I sole witness
 to the simultaneous events
 accepted burden of interpretation,
 declared to self aloud
 that for some things
 it is far too late
 and for others
 too early to hope.

—Mildred Greear

Frog of My Heart

There are so many horny backs and goggle eyes
 with squat rumps splayed out here

at the National Museum of African Art. I want
 to sweep a brassy handful into my bag and flash

this one's grim stance with nipples skin
 that looks hairy and takes me home

in a sunsuit where I waded in the branch
 and flopped in a trance, got sand

in my crack and scooped tadpoles into a mason jar
 to watch them wiggle. But what a gangbang

last night! PBS flipped me out of that stream
 recalled in tranquillity. Forty frogs fucked

in what the narrator said was her foam
 and his sperm, whipped 3000 eggs into such spume,

what rapture! Something like the meringue
 of a baked Alaska, but I can almost taste

the flavor of cod and mellow out while fishtails
 shimmy and melt the glaze, quiver and cling

like slow tears and plop into the pond
 as I lean in for a close-up of a cloaca. Later,

lions rip out the belly of a wildebeest and lick
 each other's bloody jaws. Never mind who says

what have cats got to do with frogs, or what's the point
 of dumping raw meat and screams next to trees

where frogs glide limb to limb like flying
 squirrels. I might toss frogs into the grass, spotted

like leopards. Will they get carried away, blowing
 in the wind, and rain out of the sky like that old legend,

or bring up Bob Dylan? Maybe you get titillated
 by a frog that can make a dog drop dead, then peel

off its own pelt like a toxic T-shirt over its head
and eat it. But this is not a frog

pinned to a board trapped in a lab to be dissected,
And when even a lame cub can grab a bone

and gnaw gristle, who wants to croak
on one high-pitched flute, or even a raspy sax,

for one dull blunder? To both see and hear out of eyes
that are more nearly human! Doesn't that tense

your laterals and make you itch to leap over
a wild bull, straddle creekbeds with flat feet

and sport a wart in the crease of one nostril?
Wouldn't you like to flick your slick tongue

through the liver and hide of a Goliath and suck
out songs like a siren? What would you give to come out,

come out from under that stone wherever you coddle
your turds like a Midwife Toad as if they

were not merely the first, but all you ever dared
hope to be, or make, of your own creation?

—Jalaine Halsall

Ottobre

Your passing falls slow onto streets
of Dorf Tirol like yellow leaves,
lapsing the six hours between us.

By the time workers arrive at the castle, the first snow
will have fallen, and I think of their thick hands
moving slow and heavy in the sudden winter.

But before the spectacle of their solemn march
past a small herd of hand-shorn sheep, that I imagine
as shivering stains on the hillside,

before they wind their way
along the terraced-garden
slope of the mountain like ants,

even before they rise, before daybreak,
unable to see beyond their own hands, which soon will be cold
and tainted with the blood of ruined fruit,

before any of this,
I cry for you all night.
But perhaps not,

perhaps for myself, for the spent youth
that kept me awake many nights,
afraid I might miss it altogether.

Sunrise finds me searching graves for answers.
I begin to run as light
paints the sky in ashen streaks.

I move faster to beat the chill
bellowing through vineyards
full of too-ripe grapes, waiting to be harvested.

Trains thrust me northward into snow.
Outside the window, Germany glows like dawn all night.
On a plane, I am too stunned to notice Amsterdam

shift below me as patchwork, stitched with water.

Flying into darkness, forever it seemed,
my mind stayed fixed on rotting grapes.

When I finally reach you, it is daylight. You seem to hover
just above the egg crate mattress. From the spotless sheets
of the hospital bed, you wave your final goodbyes.

Your skeletal fingers,
like trees stripped bare and stretched across the sky,
open and close like a hand-puppet talking.

Tomorrow, in the Tirol, all saints
will fall from their gold
to a cold white,

capping the tops of mountains
so they burn orange
in the morning, like matches.

By midday the snow will have vanished
leaving only an unsoiled scent
in the air.

—Larry Wayne Johns

The Old Man Checks Stock

He works alone nights, so there is no one to ask
when after unpacking evening wear
he opens nested boxes
and finds a breast, graceful, honey brown,
its hosiery skin smooth and scentless.
He lifts it, his dry palm remembering
her fullness nights on the porch swing,
fireflies burning brief arcs over the yard.
He grieves past unfastenings,
absences which can't be filled.

A woman will learn balance with this breast.
He knows she will seem whole again.
Received he writes on a paper, closing the breast,
turning to another box.

—Gordon Johnston

Taking Out the Trash

I would have
fried
your eggs,
paid
for your pizza,
filled
your belly,
until
your last belch,
but you
sipped
slurped
sucked
through the bottom
of the cup
and the door
to the kitchen
is closed.

I am fucking someone
who takes me out to dinner.

—Heidi Kitchen

The Venus Thread

I
Here is the gold coin spinning.
It gains dimension, fills out, a world
metallic and full of light. Yellow,
the egg explodes, the monthly
half-day agony, goodbye she waves
to each possibility, the globe stuffed full
of choices, of bodies,
blood clotting in the endless
hot bath.

The coin has rough edges. It isn't gold.
But a Mardi Gras doubloon, dull nickel
under the patina of gilt
which flakes off in the boy's pocket
carried clear to Sweet Thursday
along the waterfront where the rats grow big
as loaves of bread.

II
pinch me in case I might be
dreaming hurt my body *here*
so my pain will have a way to listen
the birches are white in the twilight
the naked bodies of white people watching
the white bodies of naked people
not watching, but listening
the green curtains rustle

III
She who is left holding hearts
or the Queen of Spades loses.
Hearts once were Cups, a hundred years
before you were born, little dealer.
The suit that could be filled or emptied,
inverted in the 7, but the Ace—
ah, there everything emerges,
rainbow, flower, a hand pointing skyward.

IV
After your family left town
we played in the empty house, my brother and I.

We crept into the bedroom that had been yours.
He found the web of a used-up nylon
in your mother's bedroom closet
and a pink plastic comb
wound with your blond hair.

V

The venus thread will cut the circulation
left too long on a ring finger, a blue reminder,
spun, stretched out, thin and fine,
bitten off by sharp white teeth,
not yours, but someone's.

VI

I'm on a train riding backwards.
This way the world recedes.
objects disappear just as
they enter your field of vision.
The woman across from me leans into the window
face forward into every small town we pass.
We never linger.
Stranger, we have three games in common:
Scissors, Rock & Paper, I am counting my fist
three times into my palm, hoping you will notice
as the fingers flatten out, ready to cover or be cut.
I know Red Rover, the game we never played
once my cousin broke her wrist.
Tic Tac Toe, the game you cannot lose.
Stranger, if they send someone over,
will our hands hold fast or will we break apart
ready to welcome them, to change
who we are and what we will become?

—Janet McAdams

A Story of Innocence

Summers in the garden,
my cousin Isabel and I
played hide-and-seek
among eternities of bean-row
weighted with morning glory vines,
purple flowers closed in late evening dusk.

She taught me to waltz,
dancing in our petticoats, white
apparitions under the moon.

Chasing fireflies,
we made japanese lanterns out of mason jars,
their bronze lids riddled with holes.

Isabel had a bottom drawer lined
with wedding gown lace;
she said it was full of things
we all need— baby clothes and china cups.

In the quiet of the cornstalks
chewing raw green beans,
she told me our destiny was to marry,
to let a man enter our bodies.

"He'll touch you here," she said
her pale fingers between my legs,
warming the starched cotton center
of my panties.

She kissed me on the mouth.
Her skin smelled of new dirt
and the bitter yellow of tomato blooms.

—Melissa Morpew

When Geese Fly South

Your tee shirt and uniform blues
over the back of a chair
rustle in the cool breeze
drifting your musk scent
across this wide bed.

Engulfed in flame
an airplane dives, dives
into the deep blue
of the small dot marking
the expiration of our t.v.

Silver handcuffs over chairback
glimmer in the quarter moon's slow light
crossing the expanse of the white wall
embracing your father's rifle.

I rise above myself, float out the window,
over the net of silver
barbed wire surrounding our farmyard.

A flock of geese make an arc above
me. Magnet to the hunters' aim,
we grace the sight of the blind,
fly into the wind.

Discharged, a puff of smoke
dissolves into the night
and I am back beside
myself, you a dark spot
beyond the light of my cigarette,
the feathers in our bed soft
against the rifle's barrel.

Your grandfather's gold packetwatch lies
on the nightstand, too close, it
ticks off each second
of our breathing, our lives spent
under this roof a clockwork
of sirens and prayers.

The rifle does not go off

but like a brother, father,
Husband, it comforts me,
in my deep sleep caught
in the cotton sheets
so clean, so twisted.

—Katherine A. Nelson-Born

On Viewing "Festival of the Peaches of Longevity"
Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)

Fully twelve feet
of gold and ink on silk
scroll unfurls the mysterious story
of the amber peaches. These trees are heavy
with fruit borne once
every three thousand years,
fruit whose sweet flesh
offers immortality.

Workers climb tall ladders,
rungs the width of a black hair,
their own hair feathers, cobwebs, they await
the Queen Mother to begin the ceremonial harvest.
Shaoshi, high peak of Mount Song,
central tower of the Five Sacred Mountains,
rises into the golden air, a stalagmite
of malachite convolutions binding
Earth to Heaven. Gilded edges suffuse
the openings of one thousand caves—a good place
to spend Passover; I could vanish into Enlightenment...

On Monday the office would wonder,
trace my last moments... March 23
at the Metropolitan Museum...
In the *Star*... "Woman Disappears
into Anonymous Work"...

For nine years
I would ride the dragon
energy of holy mountains, noble, gnarled
roots of the pine, rise into early spring air,
return to cool earth on Autumn nights.

Look for me in the sun.
Listen for me in the house of sacred geometry.

This is the cave of Paradise,
The fifty-ninth in the Blessed Land

You must find your own way.

—Rena Patton

Spring Snow

*Snow is wrong in April, Marin thought. And the sun is still
shining. This is wrong, too. Then: Today is Maundy Thursday.*

The sky was a silvery ash-gray and the snow fell in thick,
wet clumps that covered everything: the fields and dirt road;
the scrubby bushes; the rows of faceless, three-story brick build-
ings.

Marin stood on the street corner stamping her feet.
Snow melted on her cheeks. Her steamy breath plume rose and
disappeared. She was with Corso's cousin, Ninamary, some little
thing with wide eyes and pupils the color of mud. The girl was
always flirting and blushing even though the stupid thing couldn't
even tie her own shoes. She followed Marin around like a little
dog. *Ella quiere ser una puta.*

The sky and land merged into a single band and the
street looked as if it went nowhere at all and she thought: *What
if Corso has left me?*

Corso—He had long graying-black hair fastened at the
nape of the neck with a girl's clip. The first time Marin noticed him
he was in the Greyhound Station looking at her; then, when she
stepped outside, he was standing there, waiting. Now she sold
for him. For his biting her fingers as he ground against her.

The West 25th Street Projects. This is where they came to
buy, everyone knew. The rows of three-story brick buildings. The
courtyards and abandoned playgrounds. A labyrinth of crum-
bling brick; concrete overgrown with moss; caved in roofs; gray,
dim half-shadows. It was easy to crawl through a gap between
the stairway and an apartment, to lose yourself, become a
shadow; invisible.

The neighborhood Marin lived in was beautiful, exciting.
Tremont. It was a neighborhood of duplexes and row houses
and old single-family houses converted into apartments. Sun
glinted off the brilliant gold and blue cupolas of the Orthodox
churches. Salsa music and rap echoed and converged be-
tween narrow alleys, secondhand clothing stores and pawn
shops. Marin spent most of the winter with Corso in the back
room of his apartment: high ceilings; bare light bulbs; the restless
wind chimes on the porch. Lying all day in bed. Waking up
breathless, shaking, drawing each other close. The steam heat
turned way up, hissing. Stroking his bruised sinewy arm.

A car passed slowly. An old Mustang with a cracked
window and doors wired shut. It stopped and a boy leaned out
the window.

"Are you holding?" Dark half-smile, cloaked eyes.

Marin just looked at him and he knew.

Marin liked to wear tight black jeans and a Guns and Roses T-shirt and a fake leather jacket and a woolen cap. The jacket was covered with jewelry and pendants: a little B-52 bomber, a BMW insignia, a skull and cross bones. The pair of silver pistols clipped on her collar caught the sun at odd angles. Her scruffy Dr. Marten boots had faded to no color at all. The heels made sharp clacking noises against the sidewalk.

Marin was as nervous as a baby. She had so much money in her pockets that she had no room for her hands. She couldn't believe it. It was a terrible, beautiful, giddy feeling.

She turned the corner and saw three girls standing outside La Mia Quick Mart. Sometimes they chided Marin; other times they ignored her as if she were some little baby. Girls not much older than herself, already their faces looked old and their eyes were drowsy. All three wore pretty clothes: tight jeans, stiletto heels, dark lipstick, expensive bright ski jackets. One of the girls lurched towards Marin, unsteady on her heels. She was older than Marin had first imagined — twenty-five or -six, and as she came closer Marin could see that she was drunk. The woman wavered on her heels and spread her hands for balance. One of the girls, the one in a beautiful Head ski jacket, grabbed the woman from behind. The third girl, some blurry little thing with corn rows dyed red with henna, just stood there, bored, indifferent.

"*Putat! Putat!*" The woman in the heels hissed at Marin. Her lips were cracked and dry. "*Putat!*" Her pupils were pinpoints, eyes glassy.

Marin stared straight ahead.

One of them, the girl in the brilliant Head ski jacket gave Marin a tight, little, knotted look. "Little thing, you're Corso's girl. I know."

Marin bit her lower lip.

"So, so," the woman said, slurring her s's, "Corso's girl." Marin felt the anger unfurling inside her. A taut ribbon. The woman reached towards her with a slim veined arm.

"Speak English. You can talk."

The girl in the Head jacket laughed. "You're Corso's girl." Marin saw the slender purplish scar on the corner of the girl's mouth. "Corso's little baby." "Dark sweet thing. Little baby-girl," the woman said blurrily.

Marin kept quiet. A metallic taste filled the back of her mouth. With all the money in her pocket it would be foolish to show anger, fear, anything. Her lower lip began to hurt. She made a little fist. "Leave me the fuck alone, okay."

The woman grabbed the corner of Marin's jacket and gave her a quick tug. "Corso's girl."

"Ho! Bitch!"

"Listen, you just listen. Corso fuck you like he fuck himself, like he fuck everybody else. Don't kid yourself."

Marin stared off towards the girl with the henna corn rows. Her lips glistened. "Corso's little *puta*."

To come and circle her tongue in his mouth, bite down hard on his nipple, tell him that he looks like a girl. Then afterwards, lounging about, eating a ripe plum or orange, sucking on the stringy pulp, tangy bitter juice, mouth sore and swollen, head bursting.

There were times when Marin wanted to talk to him, wanted to tell him things. She needed him to look and see her; only her.

Corso lit a cigarette and Marin said, "Me too." They were in the kitchen. Wallpaper hanging in strips. The stove blackened with grease. Water dripping. One window covered with cardboard. The chilly draft. The sickly sweat smell. In the light, she could see the delicate veins of his arm, blue and exposed.

"Listen to me." Marin felt herself slipping through the crack in her voice.

"Corso."

"Let me get high first."

His name faded from her mouth.

Corso sat down at the kitchen table and pulled out his works: a propane torch, a pear-shaped glass bowl and its two long, slender stems. He held the torch between his knees and pushed the wire mesh into the end of its stem. Then he lodged the second stem into the other end of the bowl. Marin looked away. She smelled the propane, heard him strike a match, and light the torch. She stared stupidly at the floor. The tiles were black and peeling. She could see the older wooden floor exposed in spots. Tiles had been torn up. The torch hissed.

"Look at me," Marin whined.

Corso put the crack pellet into the mesh and tickled the larger stem with the flame. The crack melted down into a brown ooze, and he sucked at the smaller stem, producing a fine white mist in the bowl.

She could feel it herself. It was too much. There were marks and bruises all over his hands and arms and legs and feet and stomach. He sucked on the pipe like a greedy child.

If only he would look at me!

This is terrible you're killing yourself

can't you see —

Marin felt his hand against her cheek. "Close your eyes." Corso said it softly, whispered it and Marin obeyed. It was everything.

Corso was the one who had found her sitting in the Greyhound station, late one night. It was quieter there than anywhere Marin could remember. The only sounds she heard were the buses and traffic echoing in the distance like some ocean. She was hungry and the pain in her stomach began to grow. Her mouth watered for some greasy fries. She had eaten three of them but she was still hungry. She looked in her wallet. She knew it was empty but she looked to be sure it was still empty. She opened the coin pouch and looked at the lint and four pennies. Her lips moved. She counted the pennies.

When she looked up Corso was standing there. Then she was eating greasy french fries and licking the salt from her hand.

In the bedroom, the sun was muted by brown paper blinds. The blinds were old and stained and faded a dull tobacco-gold. Sometimes Marin opened the blinds and stared listlessly at her wavy reflection. She thought of Ninamary. "*Si no puedes platicar, no puedes vivir.*"

Marin felt clumsy and hideous. She was tall and big-boned and her eyebrows were thick and ugly. Her eyes were shadowed and her lips looked swollen or bruised. Some days she seemed to shrink inside herself, become nothing. She was barely sixteen and looked like an adult, or almost an adult. When she had been in school everything had been so horrible and twisted. No one ever looked.

All this changed with Corso. Afternoons were the best when they would sit around the kitchen table, smoking cigarettes, blowing smoke rings. He told her about the scars on his neck, the tiny purple tattoos on his left arm, prison, everything. And, he never lied.

Once Corso asked her about the thin scar that ran along one corner of her mouth. Her face flushed. She brought one hand to the bony ridge of her chest. He never hit me hard."

"Your daddy?"

All she could do was nod. At such moments, all the loose bits of her life were drawn together like a cat's cradle. Marin hated what her father did, but she never hated him, and she never thought that it was his fault, or that he knew what he was doing. It simply happened and Marin accepted it because she, as Marin, had chosen him as her father, in heaven, long

before she was ever born.

One afternoon Marin came home early and found Corso with Ninamary. They sat together on the mattress Corso had thrown in the front room. Marin stood in the dark entrance way and watched the dull arch of his joint as he brought it to his mouth. After inhaling deeply, their lips met, and Corso exhaled the smoke into Ninamary's mouth. When they saw Marin waiting in the half-shadows, both sets of eyes floated up wearily. Marin emptied both pockets of money and stormed into the bedroom. She tried to go blank. Her anger was white hot, vexed.

Sometimes Corso disappeared for hours, days. Then he was back. She wanted to hit him it made her so angry. Marin approached him screaming and cussing.

A long time ago, Marin believed in all of it: the drugs and money, the heated promises, the dreams and excitement. It had been thrilling at first, lying about on the hardwood floor of their apartment and cutting pictures of beautiful things out of magazines. They bought a stereo and some CDs, spent hours listening to Public Enemy, Body Count, Ice Cube, Anthrax. In July, he bought an air conditioner, a big window unit, and Marin liked to sit before it when she came in from outside, running her fingers through her hair, drying the sweat from her face and neck, listening to the cool steady hum of the machine. At nights they sometimes went to the Crystal Lounge, where Corso knew the owner and everything was okay. Marin would spend the rest of the evening numbly sipping on a warm sangria, and listening to Corso, just listening.

Corso pierced Marin's ears. She let him. He held a slice of raw potato behind her ears and inserted the needle. Then he was stroking her hair and whispering gently. He gave her a pair of gold and pearl earrings. He positioned the tiny wires exactly in place and kissed her gently. They were as delicate as a snowflake. Then they were at the Crystal Lounge. Marin and Corso sat in one of the tiny booths in the back. They were eating: *paella*, fried sweet plantains, a grape sangria, rolls and wine. Marin took a sip of Corso's whisky and held it in her mouth until it burned.

In the shower Marin soaps her body slowly, belly, breasts, armpits, thighs. Hot water reddens her back, legs.

The women of the neighborhood. Diah. Jilin. Ananti. Verneda. At the *Cabarrojeno*, they sat in their booths narrow, tall and still. Legs dangled at the counter. Thin brown and white

and yellow girls. Exotic girls. They were not like the girls Marin knew on the streets. Their voices were warm and brimming with happiness. Sugar brown and honey. Drinking slow cups of coffee. Marin sat with them sometimes, when she was lonely, or cold, or both.

At the counter, Marin stirred her coffee slowly. She could see out past the train tracks, the Cuyahoga and across towards the LTV mills where a bright flame burned at all hours from the stack above the metal tank buildings.

Marin was with Reena, a woman who was a nurse's aid at night, an older woman with dark-henna-colored hair; steady eyes and faint wrinkles appeared at her mouth when she smiled.

"Are you listening to me?" the woman wanted to know.

Marin nodded. She stifled the urge to cry.

"I'm only telling you this for your own good. Corso's no good for anybody. The way he smokes he ain't gonna last the summer. You just wait and see."

Marin felt her voice grow weak. "Maybe he could get a job."

"Girl, who are you kidding. Corso can't get a job. He's got too many tracks showing."

"I don't know."

"Look, honey. Get out while you can."

"He owes me."

"No one is paid in full. Not in this neighborhood."

"You don't understand."

Reena touched Marin's wrist lightly. "Boy, if there's a girl in the world who needs a mother, it's you."

Outside, it could have been anytime because there was still the dull arch hanging over LTV and a rosy dust-like light filled the room. The *Cabarrojeno*'s big red sign hummed motionlessly.

"Look, sugar, it's just that you should know by now, they want what you got but they don't want you."

"Corso loves me."

Maundy Thursday and Sunday is Easter and it is snowing. Falling and turning. Scarfs of snow.

Marin stood outside of one of the city schools: faded brick, fluted columns, whitewashed flag pole, high meshed fence. It was cold, but not too cold. Cloudy sun. A flag rippled in the breeze. Some of the black kids were shooting basketball on a cement court; their voices drifted to her across the playground.

"You're high," Marin said to Ninamary. She grabbed the girl's wrist and tugged. The girl reeled backwards. She

looked at Marin like she didn't know what hit her.

"*Nunca! Nunca!*"

"Girl," she said furiously, "speak English."

"*Tu no eres nada.*"

"Bitch!" Marin blurted.

A car passed slowly. An old Mustang with a cracked window and doors wired shut. It stopped and a boy leaned out the window.

"You got Meth? Sell us some speed ball."

"Crack. Ten dollars a rock."

"We're looking for some Crystal Meth."

"Ten dollars."

"Come on now. We know you're holding."

"Ten dollars."

"Bitch!"

"Boo-yah, boo-yah," Corso's cousin blurted.

The boy grabbed Ninamary by the wrist. "Say, you want to come with us?"

"Fuck off."

"It'll be fun. Shoot some kill."

Marin's shoulders grew tense, her face red. The boy smiled. Marin took a closer look. There were four of them. Dark wet eyes. Cool half-smiles. They grinned and smirked and all of them were smoking cigarettes. She had seen them before, these boys. They drove around in their little car all day too bored, too stupid to do anything else. One of them, a boy her age, younger perhaps, sat in the passenger seat. She saw that his skin was soft and velvety. Her reflection was broken up against the window.

The boy kissed his fingers, wanting to shoot and shit, his collarbone curved like a gull's wings against his T-shirt.

"What? What?" She said.

He repeated. This time his voice was loud, strong. Marin heard every bitter word clearly: "*Eso no es nada que sabor.*"

All four of them laughed.

"Corso's going to mess your shit up." Marin stepped back. The car swerved a bit and splashed mud against her legs. She stood there for a moment, open-mouthed, too angry and upset to say anything. Then she looked at Corso's cousin. The stupid thing smiled. Her nose was runny, her face blotched.

"What do you think you were doing?" Marin said. "You can't even tie your own shoes." She held back the urge to strike the girl. "Baby."

The girl hid her face beneath skeins of hair. Marin wanted to smash the girl's brown mouth, scatter her teeth.

Marin curled up on the mattress, arms crossed, knees drawn up, holding. Four thirty in the morning. Four thirty-two. She listened to the snow, stared off towards the blank, blistering wall. Water leaked in through the ceiling. Marin watched the stain on the wall grow. It made pretty patterns, ochre and spreading. When she looked at the clock again, the big white-faced dial said five thirty-seven. She closed her eyes and moaned. Ninamary.

Corso disappears. Corso comes back. How many times? How many times now he left? And that bitch! Ninamary's presence was everywhere to be found. A strand of hair. A blackened spoon. A stained Kleenex. Messy fingerprints. The thought of Ninamary and Corso clouded Marin's perpetual thought. *It was too fucking much —!*

At St. Malachi, Marin stood in the dim half-shadows of the church, watching the snow through the stained glass windows. She felt the spirit, through her flesh, as she moved between the pews. Ancient orishes stirred beneath ghostly patinas, beneath the plaster Virgin. Candles sheathed in glass. Marin heard soft whispers broken up against the morning traffic. So many doors, so many passages, so many ways out. Marin whispered, "*Elegua*," and continued. Her legs, her body were weightless. She stood at the altar, outside of herself, and watched the priest as he touched her forehead and whispered softly. For a moment she was still. Then she took the little glass of wine, the bit of bread, and repeated.

Outside, snow swept past the freeway cyclone fence, drifted into alleys and dark viaducts. Down by the warehouse district, the ground was knotted with forgotten railroad lines that crossed and intersected, led to nowhere, uprooted, forgotten. Men stood in open loading docks huddled around fires built in rusty oil drums. Everything seemed soft and distant and out-of-focus. A hollow aura. Numbness struck everywhere.

Marin found Ninamary outside Lia Mia's Quick Mart. Long, thin-boned fingers, dark-rimmed mouth. She was standing out back, near a stack of wooden pallets, drinking from a paper bag. When she saw Marin, the girl backed up against the snow-clotted cinder-block wall.

Marin could not take her eyes off of her.

"What? What?" The girl said.

Marin punched the girl in the arm.

"What?" Ninamary huddled against the cinder-block wall.

"Corso."

The girl dropped her bottle and clutched at both sides,

moaning. "No no no no."

Marin turned and began to walk away. "He better come back to me or I'll mess your shit up."

Ninamary cowered.

She was the one who found him lying on the bathroom floor.

She was the one who wiped the pillow clean.

She was the one who sold.

Marin clutched Corso desperately. Rain and snow blew against the window. The air was close and the radiator was knocking and if Corso loved someone else she would die.

"Your cousin," she said. "Little *puta*."

He stroked her hair and repeated, "Only you. Only you."

"Fucking *puta*!" She wanted to hurt him, she wanted to love him, save him. Her voice rose, "Tell me that you love me."

Corso kissed her breast.

"You're such a little girl."

Then they were on the waterstained mattress. Marin groaned and shouted and tore into him, more and more violent until she thought that she might lose consciousness. "Tell me, tell me!"

But he was too strung-out.

"Tell me," she groaned.

"I love you."

"You're lying." She bit at the soft flesh at the base of his collarbone.

Corso said calmly, smiling, "I am not lying. I don't lie." His teeth were small and even, but slightly discolored. "You're mixing me up with somebody else, maybe — your daddy, maybe. I don't lie."

"Tell me that you love me, please. You don't have to mean it. Just say it."

"My baby." He lowered his mouth to Ninamary's ear, pushed her hair aside and kissed her forehead. "My little girl."

The room was dirty everywhere and there were empty bottles and plates and big, skittering roaches.

collapse wither whiten—Marin felt herself shrink from his gaze.

Corso had a large foil package in his hands. When he opened it the harsh medicine smell curled up in the back of Marin's throat. She saw the test tube, stirring rod, syringe, pliers and rubber hose all neatly laid out. She pressed her body against him and took one long sinewy arm. She could see the veins, bruised and exposed. They made a delicate pattern that

faded into the flesh and bone. She ran her fingers up and down looking for a vein to pop. When she found it she tied up his arm, found the syringe and jabbed. Leaning over his arm, watching the blood mix, she stopped and looked into his eyes. It was just the two of them, sweat-soaked and desperate. A shudder ran through Corso's body and Marin was lost in a world of grief so heavy that she could not, would not look into his eyes.

Outside it was still snowing—large lacy clots. Everything smelled different in the snow. Her clothes, her hands, body, too.

At the *Cabarrojeno*, Marin sat at the counter and ordered fried eggs, bacon and toast. She ate quickly. Her hair hung in long wet strands against her forehead. When Reena came through the door she walked right up and stared Marin down. "You still living with that guy?"

All Marin could do was nod. She thought of Corso, lying there like that, back at the apartment, alone in his perpetual half-dusk, a cloud of pain. Then she was soaking up the runny eggs with her toast.

Marin had always been very hungry.

—James Richards

Words for Sale at the 10¢ Store

I learned to think logically at the age of twelve. Life made such perfect sense before then. I knew somehow that bears were related to men: they were both very huggable, but I stayed away from bears and men without strong chains. I knew that deer were too beautiful and rare to kill. I knew that the greatest riches in life were wild pink azaleas coming back every spring and the perfect rainbow I'd seen once and once only at the age of four. I knew that my father's madness was divine and that the holy could see it. There was a time when I knew that I was somebody and did not have to grow up to be somebody.

But things changed in the summer of my twelfth year. A local tobacco farmer, Mr. Cowpen, needed help gathering his tobacco crop, and since Negroes, women, old men, and little girls could be bought for almost nothing, he was willing to give me my big chance.

My Aunt Sadie, the valedictorian of her high school class, bought into a tired old dream—a man could make her happy. In a few years time, she was stringing great green tobacco leaves upon a stick all day just to make ends meet. She was proud though—she did it so much better than anyone else, including the laughing black girl named Sweet. I was young enough not to know any better than to like Sweet. She laughed so much and went off in all directions, never meeting in the middle.

Early the morning of my first day of tobacco gathering, Aunt Sadie thought it best to set me straight. She whispered in my ear that not long ago she heard Sweet talking on her telephone party line, saying all kinds of nasty things to a man. "Like what?" I asked. She said it was all too shocking; nice little white girls like me didn't need to hear such things; but Sweet went on talking like that for thirty minutes or more. "You listened to her talk like that for thirty minutes?" I asked. She didn't answer me right off, but then the subject changed to when she was young herself and right pretty, measuring about 36-24-36, with the nicest spring in her step. She used to come home from the fields and take sweet-smelling baths so that she could feel pretty and fresh when her husband came home from his nice grocery store job downtown. But then her babies came too close together, scarring up her insides, and Arthur—that's her husband—hurt her because he was too long. After awhile she stopped taking nice baths or trying to fix herself up because Arthur wouldn't leave her alone. "Didn't he know he was hurting you?" I asked. She looked like she was surprised to find me still

somebody all the way gone.

Days got better and better. I wore my pinks, light blues and greens. All this was possible with ten dollar bills.

I smiled a lot, but never said much out loud. People liked poor country girls much better when they smiled real sweet and dressed, like me, so neat. All that stuff I used to do was so silly, I could see now. I used to strut like a bantam cock—some folks liked it, but most were not amused. I used to scream, curse, and swear—all because somebody didn't like my hair. But I got it permed up in nice, little curls so neat, and man it's sweet—all the gods bend down and kiss my feet.

Where does Paradise end? I asked myself each day. I washed my clothes and ironed them. So careful. Each pleat just so. My mama said I should wash my brothers' clothes, but I had to draw my lines somewhere. Mama said I was sorry, lowdown, and mean. Betty-Ann, the new girl, laughed 'til she cried every time I said something funny. Hmmn-hmmn-hmmn-uhh! Great day in the morning! That girl is a bee full of honey.

I laughed out loud and backed into an iron sitting in the middle of the room. Mama's ironing board was broken, and I didn't have the money to buy one now. I leaned on my rusty iron bedstead, half afraid to look. Now this wasn't funny. My leg was burned bad and I'd learned not to cry.

There were no bandaids or salve anywhere in the house. Mama said I should've thought of these things when I had all my big money—when I was throwing it away on pinks, light blues, and greens. She said, "Why can't you ever learn to think?" I said, "It's because you tell me one thing in the summer and another with winter coming on. Aunt Sadie tells me something altogether different. I try to connect it all with what I think today which is different from what I thought the day before.

"Hush, girl," my mama said to me. "You talk mighty fancy to be so poor." She broke off a tip of aloe plant and rubbed it on my burn, but it was way past the soothing Mama could've given me. "I can't help things being the way they are. I bought a tank of propane yesterday which cost more than I take home in two weeks. You think you got troubles, you should put your shoulder under mine for awhile."

I awoke the next morning to a pretty little bird that changed his song every minute or so like he couldn't make up his mind which song he'd like to sing. He was my mockingbird, but he never knew he was mine. I pulled on sheer white pantyhose—the only pair I had left—and clear water leaked through the criss-cross fabric, looking like stripes and plaids. My leg was such a dread—angry bright red, with shades of indigo and purple creeping around each edge. Even the mirrors in my

biscuit-polished shoes couldn't pull my eyes away. I felt like a fool, but I did the best with what I had. I put on my light blue miniskirt with the pleats ironed just so and headed for school.

I got there right on time—I always got to the right places at the right time, though it didn't always seem that way. The girls were all there—the old and the new. Betty-Ann smiled when she saw me. I smiled too 'cause I'd thought of something funny, and I thought I could put the words together just right to say out loud and make her laugh. I made spit to slide the words out, but the words kept rising in my throat and backing down like my stomach was scared for them to come out. Just as I got a mouthful of words good and wet, the girls all laughed like they already knew what was funny. I smiled too like I'd swallowed my own joke. Betty-Ann pointed down at my red-and-white sore, edged with purple and indigo, and running some more. "Didn't your mama ever tell you not to mix stripes and plaids?" The girls all shrieked and ran away in dread. All I wanted to do was bash their heads.

I felt bands of iron holding in my chest. How could I fight the lies I believed myself? My heart swelled so mighty, hot and high, and I ran out of my body, draining into the ground near my feet. If I didn't stop this soon I'd lay down and die.

The days came and went, and all was pretty much the same. In the morning, I'd say, "I'm here," and in the afternoon, I'd watch time oozing away as fast as pine resin. The windows in the classroom would not let me breathe. There were some mighty live oaks over by the sky, but I knew the branches were too tangled to let me through. I thought I would be patient and lie very still until the branches let go of me, and then I would reach the clear blue sky. When I got to the tipmost branches just beneath the westward sun, I'd dance like a ballerina crazy woman, laughing 'til I died.

The year was soon gone, and I didn't know what'd happened since the day I first arrived—all decked out in pinks, light blues and greens. My report cards had C's, D's, and F's lined up in neat little up and down rows like the grid of a waffle iron and its undeniable logic.

About that time I had a Black teacher, tall like my old friend Sweet. Her shoulders were stooped low from the burdens she'd carried too many years. She could've learned something from Sweet, who still knew how to shrug. One day my teacher came up to me and said, "My dear, I have a mystery I'd like for you to help me solve. I know a girl who scored grade level seventeen in verbal skills and grade level thirteen in math. She was the talk of the teacher's lounge a couple of months ago. Since that girl is only in the seventh grade, I'd say she is pretty

smart, wouldn't you?"

"Sure," I said, not knowing what's what.

"Yet this same girl makes C's, D's, and F's on her report card. Do you know anyone like her?"

"No," I answered, "honest to God. No one I know seems that smart to me."

"You mean no one ever talked to you? Those scores came back two months ago. Come here. Look in the mirror behind this door. That's the girl I'm talking about."

"What does all this m-m-m-mean?" I stammered, wanting but not wanting to know.

"It means that in math you are quite skilled, and in words, my dear, you can't be killed. I myself have seen you put words together better than some college girls."

I looked at her like she was a crazy woman gone wild. I'd never had anything that couldn't be bought with a ten dollar bill.

She smiled at my eyes. "Now can you tell me what this C, D, and F stuff is all about?"

I wished my eyes were in the ground. How could anyone ever know? The things that used to make me cry, scream, curse, and swear were all dead inside.

I looked at her skin the color of flue-cured tobacco and said, "Can I say high-yellow and make you understand?"

Her eyes opened wider to make sure she was taking me all in.

I said, "I feel like a high-yellow trying to pass for white. I try and try as hard as I might, but there is always something wrong with me. All my pretty pinks, light blues, and greens, my pretty little curls done up just right, my shiny little shoes, and my sweet little smiles never changed the difference I feel inside."

"Oh, it's a bad, bad feeling—I know that's true. We blacks and high-yellows call it the Blues," she said with a twinkle near the center of her eye.

"So that's the name you give to what I got?"

"Yes, but it's not always the same Blue. Sometimes, it's purple, indigo, bright stripes and plaids—colors that clash with anything you've ever had. It's a joyful happy thing to be different inside. You give it the right name and learn to take it in stride."

I couldn't always follow the places she went, but I sure did want to have me some purples, indigos, bright stripes and plaids. I knew it was true I was different inside; I could name it; I knew that was true too; but I didn't believe I'd ever learn to take anything in stride.

I awoke the next morning to the song of a mockingbird.

I heard the sounds of purple, indigo, bright stripes and plaids strung together like beads on a string about to spill. I pushed the screen from the window frame and reached out with both hands to catch the pretty sounds spilling down.

The next year I found math was really no trick. I got the right answers, but my connections kept slipping like glass beads through my fingers. My math teacher was a man, and he couldn't understand how I got the right answers if I couldn't show him my connections on paper. He said I only stumbled on the right answers; I didn't think them through in my head. I said, "I think so fast it gives me a fright, but I couldn't show my connections if I stayed up all night."

He said, "I wish you would stop talking in rhyme. It gets on my nerves to hear it all the time. I—I—mean that's not acceptable. Slow down real slow and think like other people think; I'll never give you credit if you can't show your connections."

I tried to keep my mind on establishing connections, but thoughts broken into pretty pieces like the song of the mockingbird came more naturally to my head—thoughts too pretty to smash flat into the grid of waffle iron logic.

Words, words, words—now I liked words. Years would go by before I thought to show another teacher—this one was white—how I put my purples, indigos, bright stripes and plaids all over my paper with no up and down rows; she couldn't read my colors from left to right no matter how hard she tried. She said I needed to learn the words aesthetic and anesthetic. I already knew those words, but I didn't tell her so. I liked the words tintinnabulation and hullabaloo the best. That bitch still doesn't know what I can do.

I know how to put words together just right, so they sound sorta funny, real sad, and a little bit mean. I'm going to take words down to the 10¢ store. Words are real cheap—people will buy them for a dime. I'll put my tintinnabulations up front with my purples, indigos, bright stripes and plaids. You should hear the laughing hullabaloo they make when you say them out loud. I'll put my aesthetics and anesthetics in the back with my pinks, light blues, and greens. Then I'll sell red cherry soda to people who think I'm sweet.

It'll be such fun to make them laugh out loud. Some people will laugh so hard they start to cry. Not me. I'm going to laugh 'til I die. I'll keep laughing and dancing just as hard as I can. "Tsk, tsk, tsk," they would say in books, but it always sounded like the chatter of squirrels to me. People will say, "She's headed for an early grave."

When I die, my funeral will be better than Huck Finn's. People will come from miles around to see this loud-mouthed, bad woman laid in the ground. I'll order myself a coffin all decked out in the colors that could never contain me—pretty pinks, light blues, and greens. My purples, indigos, bright stripes and plaids will be laid inside with me. I'll have a whole bunch of tintinnabulations placed in my folded white hands. They'll make such a hullabaloo 'cause I look such a fright, but I'll be laughing in my coffin way into the night. I'll go easy on the ones who know what all this crazy laughing is about. Then I'll laugh only a little—just enough to make the earth rumble—at the people who thought they were sipping red cherry soda when they first tasted my words. Then my laughter will blow sky high and rain down like tintinnabulations on the heads of people who bought my aesthetics and anesthetics colored in pinks, light blues, and greens—all for a dime, when 50¢ would have bought my purples, indigos, bright stripes and plaids. This is the way the world ends, not with a bang, not with a whimper, but with a laughing hullabaloo.

—Nancy Ellen Sherrod

Pudge Hoffman, My Best Friend

I am leaving the barber shop when I see him pull up in his delivery van. *All-American Bread* it reads in Gothic script. Pudge looks ridiculous in his undersized powder blue double-knit uniform and clip-on bow tie. But the bakery has stenciled his name on the side of the van. Raleigh T. Hoffman, as if he were a fighter pilot.

Although I have known Pudge all my life, I lurk in the barber shop, anxious to avoid him. It has been at least twenty years since we have seen each other and I believe we would both be disappointed. Besides, there are things between us which are still too painful for it not to be awkward.

Pudge slides open the door to the van and dismounts. Then he reaches in and removes two metal racks filled with pastries. Turning, the momentum of the racks and his girth propel him toward the convenience store, where he kicks open the screen door before disappearing into the dark. I'm not surprised that Pudge is as big as an upright freezer, but his hair now is as white as quicklime. White I associate with great stress or trauma. I figured him to be too adaptable for that.

The screen door swings all the way open, but Pudge is too ponderous to make it outside before it can smack him. He is pyramidal from the top of his head to the middle of his thighs, leaving a gap between his mechanically wallowing legs and the empty racks which dangle from his fleshy hands.

Inside the van now, he glances in my direction and for a moment I believe that he has recognized me behind the painted plate glass. But he only adjusts the side view mirror. Soon his jowls twitch as a sign he is shifting into gear and the van slides into traffic.

In the sixth grade Pudge and I were in the middle group of boys. We were not among those who were chosen for the safety patrol nor were we truants like Sammy Echols. At least I had the school newspaper and some notoriety for wisdom due mainly to my pale complexion and eyeglasses. Pudge was all the way average except for his being plump. Since he was quiet and sweet-natured and fat people were supposed to be jolly, he was popular.

Pudge grew quickly after we started junior high, though he didn't string up like most of the other boys. He just swelled and puffed out until his features became blurred. This made him the butt of the usual jokes. But Pudge reveled in his new physique, believing he now possessed the main qualification for a career

in professional football, somewhere on the line perhaps, a guard or tackle. Since that was usually his position in the sandlot games, he could easily visualize his dreams coming true. The line, of course, was where we put the boys who were too slow to go out for passes and too awkward for quarterback.

It wasn't long before other boys with lean muscles and aggressive personalities were shooting past Pudge in height and thrusting him aside in sports. But since he had neither the motivation nor the ability to master school work, he continued to visualize himself in a muddy Redskins uniform much as I imagined myself to be Alexander the Great.

I was Stan Laurel to his Oliver Hardy, doomed to be slight and clear-complected until my late teens. There is a photograph, which I hated and my mother loved, of me on a window seat in khaki shorts and striped crew-necked shirt, looking small and delicate.

If mothers had their way, I'm sure all boys would stay weak and passive like I was then. Mine would never have allowed me to spend so much time at Pudge's if she had known he lived in a three-story walk-up in Scott's Addition. The Hoffmans' apartment was back among the warehouses and hand-to-mouth assembly shops where the only other dwellings were porchless row houses. It was a grim and dangerous neighborhood especially in the winter, although the Hoffmans' place was warm and clean. Pudge had plenty of space by his bed for his O-gauge electric train set. On cold afternoons Mrs. Hoffman made cocoa and home-made chocolate chip cookies.

Luckily for our friendship, my mother thought Pudge had nice manners and asked no questions about where I was going as long as I was with him. She also liked Mrs. Hoffman whom she took for an aristocrat because she called Pudge "Rolly" and referred to "li-tra-choor" with her lips pursed. For all the afternoons I spent with Pudge, though, I have only a vague recollection of his mother. She seemed tired and shapeless, more like a grandmother.

I remember Pudge's father more clearly, although, like my Dad, who was a Sales Manager with the whole Eastern seaboard as a territory, he wasn't around much. Still, I have locked in my mind a recollection of his massive head and shoulders leaning out of a Peterbilt cab, angling out of a narrow alley into the side street.

When Pudge turned thirteen, he took a paper route. Suddenly he had a lot more money than I did. While I was getting by on an allowance that barely paid for the third-run matinees at the Bluebird, Pudge was springing for sodas and

candy nearly every day. Sometimes I would avoid him out of the rapidly escalating obligation I was building.

Pudge was exactly the kind of boy the *Eagle* wanted. Although he had a tiny route made up mostly of rooming houses and vacant lots, his energy and personality quickly added ten subscribers. As a reward the District Manager put him on a morning route. He was carrying twice as many papers now and was also delivering on Sunday with its nickel extra profit. He had done so well that he was able to persuade the District Manager that I ought to inherit his old territory.

I was a lackluster paper carrier. There were several reasons for this, not all of which were my fault. The route was not only the smallest in the District, it was the most remote. Instead of a sturdy, utilitarian Schwinn, I owned a three-speed European bike with hand brakes and gear shift which got in the way of the canvas carrying bag. This meant I had to drag the papers in a slat-sided Radio Flyer my kid brother had outgrown. I was always a half-hour late getting started.

But the main reason was my uncontrollable craving for the printed word. Each afternoon, about halfway through my route, I would park my wagon and open my personal copy of the afternoon paper. Then I would read it from cover to cover, indifferent to the impatient eyes peering at me through lace curtains. The route which had grown to sixty papers during Pudge's tenancy soon shrank to the more normal fifty-two.

Being a paper boy was supposed to be a lesson in business management, but it was tough work in which the *Eagle* took few risks and the carriers made no more than half the minimum wage. District Managers counted out the papers every day and collected the money on Saturdays. The difference between the amount the District Managers expected the carriers to turn in and what the subscribers paid us was our profit. I spent Thursday and Friday nights collecting. If I couldn't catch the deadbeats then, I would have to make a surprise visit on Monday or Tuesday.

But it was the sales contests that really soured me on the job. The paper figured that, as long as we were walking the neighborhood anyway, we ought to knock on all the doors that didn't subscribe. For the carriers who brought in the most new customers there were prizes, a trip sometimes, for which I stood little chance, being a shy sort with a halting and pessimistic spiel. But the District Manager required us to submit logs of our contacts along with our money. Since I was too insecure to lie, I grimly complied.

Those nights I would finish my route too exhausted to go home right away. Fortunately, my last customer was a Mr.

Robichaux, who would invite me in to chat and serve me grape Kool-Aid. Mr. Robichaux lived with Mr. Turpin in a row of two-story apartments in a sunken alley beside the Boy's Club, the boundary to my territory.

Although both names were on the order form, Mr. Robichaux was the one who always paid. He would come to the door in sandals, sea-green Cossack pants, and baggy shirts with enormous collars that pulled apart at the throat, exposing his tanned and hairless chest. His apartment was decorated all in black and white; sinuous *art nouveau* lamps, a chalk-white leather sofa, Picasso lithographs. The only color came from a larger than life painting of orchids, speckled pinks and soft greens.

From the first Mr. Robichaux took a liking to me. I found him to be an interesting man who talked incessantly about his roommate. He had a photograph album with pictures of himself and Mr. Turpin in Germany after the war. Mr. Robichaux would sit on his ankles, lay the album on the coffee table, and turn the pages with his index finger which he had first dampened with his tongue.

There were snapshots of the two of them with big smiles in front of the wreckage of the *Reichskanzlerei* or with jauntily tilted garrison caps and ceramic beer steins at a sidewalk cafe. Rubble was everywhere. Judging from the photographs, Mr. Turpin looked a lot like Mr. Robichaux with the same soft sandy-colored hair, but not so thin.

For each picture there was a story, often related to the history of the place in the photograph. One series of pictures was supposedly taken at a battlefield from the time of Frederick the Great, though the place looked more like a farm to me. All you could see was a half-timbered barn nestled in gently rolling hills in the peaceful background.

One shot showed Mr. Turpin displaying a jagged hunk of black metal. Mr. Robichaux claimed this was a piece of a cannonball, and that they had brought it back with them. "And that's not the only souvenir," he told me. There were pistols and swastikas and a complete S. S. uniform. Upstairs.

He promised he would show me his collection some time, but he never got around to it.

It wasn't until some months passed that I met Mr. Turpin. Even then it was almost by accident. It happened because Mr. Robichaux got me engrossed in a lecture about Neuschwanstein castle in Bavaria, which was built by Ludwig II, a very strange man, I gathered, given to the Baroque and other strange tastes. I have always had an affinity for the exotic myself and I drifted into a dream world of wonder which was only interrupted by the

shifting of slippers on the stair runner. I turned to see Mr. Turpin's head thrust through the bannister rails. "Excuse me," he said, an embarrassed O on his face.

"This is Bobby," Mr. Robichaux said. "Bobby, Francis Turpin."

Mr. Turpin cradled his chin in his hand, drumming his upper lip with his fingers. "This one is not like the fat one."

"You are *soright*," Mr. Robichaux told him. "Much more interesting, much more sensitive."

"I would be *careful*," Turpin said, trotting back up the stairs.

"Do you know Pudge?" Mr. Robichaux said, turning back to me.

"He's my best friend," I replied.

His angular face stiffened. "You ought to get him to do something about that weight," he said.

Mr. Robichaux's remarks were an interesting connection and I couldn't wait to tell Pudge, but it was several days before I could get him alone, since Pudge and I were working different schedules. The weekends were often the only times we were able to be together and, for one reason or another, not always then. When we did find the time, we tried to make a long Saturday of it: movies, a little touch football, spending the night at his house or mine.

The paper route was about the only thing that made Pudge feel successful, I think. When we got together, he had a thousand stories to tell — about customers, the substation and the contests he won. He rambled on until I was forced out of self-defense to switch on the television. But that week I had actually sold a new subscriber and had something to talk about on my own. I went from that triumph to Mr. Robichaux.

"...He asked about you," I concluded a long account of the photograph album and various interesting related stories.

"What did he say?" Pudge asked, a hint of anxiety in his voice. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, fat hanging like a skirt over his jockey shorts.

"Oh, nothing," I replied, wrapped in an Army blanket, a pillow cuddled under my chest. "Just that he remembered you."

"Do you ...?" He paused as if unsure of whether to go on. "Have you seen the souvenirs?"

"No," I said. "There hasn't been time."

"You ought to see them," he sighed and rolled over into his bed. "They're real neat."

"I will," I told him. "He's a very interesting man."

His springs creaked as he turned out his Batman lamp.

I drifted into a little boy dream about flying a jet plane which turned into a long, pleasant walk in the woods. I was on the edge of a hill, then, staring up at a boulder. I imagined it lying on my chest crushing the breath out of me. A pencil poked into my stomach. I awoke to Pudge's moon face. He was fondling me.

I could only compare the feeling to the time in science class they passed around a cat embryo, cool and oily in its little translucent sac.

"What are you doing?" I wailed. I squirmed to get away. The cot let off a harrowing groan and then crashed to the floor.

Pudge's shadow rose into the dim glow from his window, wrapping something about itself. He looked like an angel tucking into its wings. "I thought....," he began.

We could hear the sound of footsteps hurrying toward the room. "Don't tell Mother," he said. "Please."

The glare of the overhead lamp stung my eyes like salt water.

"What's going on back here?" Mrs. Hoffman's voice shifted from agitated to calm. "What happened?"

"The cot, sometimes...." Pudge replied.

"Oh, yes," she said, "of course. It's soooooo flimsy. Bobby must have been restless."

"Yes, ma'am, I guess I must have been." My eyes squinted open. Mrs. Hoffman's arms were crimping her quilted bathrobe. Pudge was cocooned in my Army blanket.

"It'll take you father to fix the cot," Mrs. Hoffman said, eying the twisted aluminum supports. She turned to me, "You'll have to share the bed with Pudge." She ducked her head and, edging the door closed, pushed the button to turn off the light.

I was not about to get into bed with Pudge so I crawled into the collapsed cot and listened for the sound of shifting sheets. For a long time there was only Pudge's gradually diminishing panting. Then his bed moaned surreptitiously.

I didn't know what to expect next. Wakefulness seemed the only defense. Once or twice in the night I sat up and looked over at Pudge. He was on his back, staring at the ceiling.

In the morning I avoided the least hint of friendship for fear that it might be misinterpreted. I wolfed down a bowl of cereal alternating between being morose and uncontrollably talkative. Then I made my excuses and left.

The walk home alone was confusion. What I needed was a confidant, but I knew it couldn't be one of my peers. What Pudge had done was not the sort of thing I could risk talking about. I had heard all the terms boys use when they are off to

themselves and seen the faces of those who said them. It would be too easy for it all to be turned against me.

My mother wouldn't understand and who could predict what my Dad would do? Only when I rationalized that he was not around much and might be neutral did I dare approach him.

My Dad's face was a cordovan color summer and winter. It came from lying in the sun at every moment that leisure or a sales call could be made to permit. But when I told the story, he went sallow. "And you," he said. "Did you go upstairs with this Robichaux?"

"No, sir," I told him.

"Then, I think I should talk to him."

This was not a good outcome. I tried to explain to him that it wasn't Mr. Robichaux I wanted to talk to him about, it was Pudge, and that it wasn't action I wanted him for, it was comfort, advice, and confirmation.

But he was not to be deterred. He told me that there was a certain type of man that preyed on young boys and tried to alter them and that he wanted this Robichaux person to understand that his son was not to be one of his victims. And, he went on, I was going to have to go with him in case Mr. Robichaux tried to lie his way out of it.

I am by nature uncomfortable with anger and just imagining the confrontation evoked an anticipation of embarrassment that intensified the closer we got to the Boy's Club.

My Dad's silence only made it worse. Staring through the split windshield, he gradually stiffened, his face becoming gray and still. When he pulled up to the sidewalk next to the concrete basketball court, he stepped out of the car without so much as a glance my way.

I watched him stride across the basketball court and down the steps into the well. The top of the door gapped open and then closed. I was alone with my thoughts.

It was a January afternoon and the car slowly drained of warmth. I stared across the bare concrete at the netless hoop against the bleak gray sky, the chill intensified by the geometry of anxiety.

By the time my Dad rose up the stairs and strode purposefully across the asphalt I was huddled in the dead cold. He slid over the squealing plastic seat covers and laid his arm across my shoulders. "You will have no more problems with Mr. Robichaux."

"But he is my friend," I said.

"That kind of friend you don't need." He clutched me to his chest as if someone had just died. Then he sank boneless

against the seat, slipping into a wistful concentration.

It wasn't until we were at home and he was in his easy chair that he was willing to say anything more. "I think you should stay away from Pudge Hoffman for a while." He took a puff of his Chesterfield.

"Pudge?" I asked. "What will happen to him?"

"I'll do what I can," he said, "but some people just can't help themselves."

He tried talking to Mrs. Hoffman, but it must not have gone well, because the next week he met me on the way home from school and said he had been to the principal who had concluded that Pudge might benefit from the kind of psychological counseling they give troubled boys. A few days later Pudge was called out of class in front of everybody. Within the week everybody in school knew what it was for. It was then Pudge phoned me.

"You really know who your friends are," Pudge said.

The righteous anger in his voice sapped the strength out of my legs. "I just wanted to help."

"Help?" He was sobbing at the other end. "You've ruined me. I'll never, never, never, live this one down. Thanks to you. Thanks to my *bestfriend*."

After that I didn't see much of Pudge, who took on a second route and barely had time for school work. When he got to high school, he dropped into the general curriculum and was always too busy for the clubs I joined. There were stories about him, ones you would hear whispered but couldn't be sure about. He was always at the football games, though, in the stands with the rest of us.

It worked out all right with Mr. Robichaux, who was polite and formal whenever I collected, but who never asked me in again. A few months later I quit the paper before the District Manager could fire me.

There are quite a few men, I learned later, who will reach the wrong conclusions about somebody like me. I must have had a dozen embarrassing encounters before I was twenty-five. Men approached me on the street or at parties wearing little sideways smiles and making small talk and gazing into my eyes. The bold ones suggested assignations. It happened with so much regularity that I was convinced it was something in me that did it, this gruesome sensitivity most likely, which I grew to loathe. I overcompensated with an intensity which was often taken for confidence, since most people are too unimaginative not to take you at face value. Around the edges there were these little failures. They tell me my heart is as cold as marble. Still, I've become used to what I am. In a way that's the reality. You

go against the grain so long that you might as well finish up that way even if you wind up with nothing but splinters.

* * *

It was only three weeks ago that I saw Pudge again. Now I find that he's dead. It must have happened yesterday.

There is a funeral notice in the newspaper, "Raleigh Timothy Hoffman, 38, Bread Truck Driver, after a brief illness." There is no obituary. "Survived by his wife, Maria Kay Hoffman, and two sons, James Russell and Raleigh Timothy, Junior."

Maria. Not a name common to this town. I wonder if she ever knew Pudge. Or did he wrap it all inside of himself, covering it over and over until it suffocated. It is easy to imagine how he must have died, his heart laboring and clogged, squeezed and shrunken to the size of a cupcake by the mountain of yellow tallow he grew inside himself.

I believe this burden he lugged around was a kind of subliminal penance for a life crosswise with his inclinations, and so his manner of death was always with him. In a kind of whimsy, all the DNA and the conditioning and the etched memories, all that constituted Pudge, made being ordinary more important than long life, the key to happiness, elusive.

I cannot bear to go to the funeral. I will send flowers, though. Tonight I will sip a brandy in Pudge's memory and then try to forget him.

—Michael M. Stockdell

Listening To Emily Claire

I sit in the room, waiting. There are five other women whose clothing hides illness and despair. Their dresses are pink and baby blue. I expected dark colors, shades of rain and stone. Men are scattered, reading magazines upside down. They talk about the Braves, the office, anything immediate and safe.

As if through a microscope I am clear and small. Precise and then blurred. I narrow my eyes to see more, but the images merge, and everything fades except the red door, luminous behind my chair.

We drove two hours to get here. As the skyscrapers diminished, the landscape seemed to hump on endlessly, green and fertile and strong. Pressing my face against the window, I watch the asphalt rushing by. I think of opening the door and falling out. It would be so easy; it would seem like an accident. Tomorrow my mother would call from Tennessee wanting details. She would mourn, but most of all she would question. "Where were you going?" she'd ask Alan. I wonder if he would tell her. Probably not. He would wait for the autopsy report, hoping they wouldn't check too closely.

My mother has always had a fear of my living in Atlanta. Someone once told her the story of their daughter who ran away from home to the city in 1968. The next time they saw her she was dead in the back seat of their car, returning home finally for burial. I would like that, to be dead in my mother's car, instead of packaged in an unfamiliar coffin. I do not move and look instead at my hands. They have betrayed me; they won't open the door.

Now there are four other women in the room. The oldest, with stringy blonde hair and a toddler, has disappeared behind the red door. Her little blonde girl sits quietly in a chair, smiling at me as she licks a purple lollipop. She must be two, but she isn't terrible. How can her mother not want another little girl, so sweet and sticky with eyes that seem to know exactly where she is? Alan ignores her. Her father goes outside for a cigarette, and still she sits quietly, until he returns reeking of rain and smoke.

I tried smoking. And drinking. I quit eating for two weeks and swallowed prescriptions that were not mine. Last Wednesday, I threw myself down the stairs. Nothing happened, but the blue and yellow-brown circles on my arms and thighs remind me that I'm trying. I looked at them again this morning. They are still round and colorful, like fruit — an apple, an orange, a pear, bruised and pungent and sweetly rotting. I think that would be

nice, to release a fragrance as I die.

The youngest woman moves towards the door after her name is called. "I'm only fifteen," she told me earlier. "I had a fake license made just for this." She pauses, hesitating, and then quickly turns and runs outside. She is gone; she is free. I think of following her, of asking to go with her. I think of driving home to my mother, of explaining. I think of spending my life stuck between the mountains of Tennessee. I do not move and pick up a magazine instead.

The fourth woman must return another day, says the nurse. There is not enough of her blood type to save her if something were to go wrong. She gathers her purse, her keys, her untouched paperback, and leaves.

I tried to cut my wrists when I first found out. Alan's pocket knife in my left hand, I locked myself in the bathroom and filled the tub full of cloudy, hot water. With the first foot in, my body grew numb. I felt hazy and calm and ready. I opened the blade and with one quick jab sliced a ridge into my finger, missing my wrist completely. I closed my eyes, waiting for blood. A small drop formed and quickly clotted. I knew then that I could never cut an opening large enough.

The nurse returns to speak to me. It is my turn. Without looking back at Alan, I follow her through the red door, down a hallway to a smaller waiting room. "Take off your clothes," she says. They sound like Alan's words. I wonder if she hears the irony. To free myself I must be stripped; I must be naked. I can't believe I am here. The room is cold. The green gown I wear is open at the back. In the mirror by the door I look hollow, diminished, yet know that I am full. I pick up another magazine. There are no family volumes, no *Parents' Magazine* or *Family Circle*. Even in this room, so close to the end, they try not to remind us. I think of the girl who left. She is probably home now, or maybe still driving, trying to get away. She is free — but not really. I see now that there is no escape, only different kinds of freedom — freedom from and freedom to. I know that I can leave, but with this extra weight, I cannot see a way to go.

A doctor calls my name. I look up to a man who is handsome and safe and looks like someone's father. I decide I like him. Somehow, it is important that I like him. He introduces himself, but I do not listen. I am watching from another place. I am now more than microscopic, I am a collage of myself, barely recognizable — empty arms, tiny red stretch marks and a too ripe belly — a patchwork woman, full but incomplete. I walk into a room full of light and metal tables and lie down upon the closest one. I am not thinking at all. I have locked shut. They ask if I want to be awake or asleep. "Asleep," I say. Yes, I want to

sleep. There is always the possibility I will not wake up.

I am underwater, pushing towards the surface. I do not remember sleeping and want to ask if it is over. I wonder how I will know. "When you are ready, there's a changing room over there," says a nurse. I feel nothing, but when I move, there is barbed-wire pain, as if something inside of me wants out, or something is trying to get back in. In the small room I am surprised to find a sanitary pad with my clothes. Finally, the blood I have been wanting to shed, but I wonder if it is my own.

I move to another waiting room to be observed. They have to know that I am okay. I am surprised they still care. Here are the two women who walked through the door before me. It is almost time for them to leave. Another nurse brings me ginger snaps and 7-up. I feel empty as I eat the cookies one by one. I cannot sit down because it hurts too much. Inside, I am a twisted corkscrew so the nurse brings me the first of many pain killers that never kill anything. From here I return to the first room, where Alan waits next to a sleeping man. He looks eager. "Is it a boy or a girl?" I expect to hear him say. At this thought I laugh, but really want to cry. He stands up and places his arm around me as we walk out the door. I know now that I hate him. I should have come alone but wanted him to see me hurt, to see me hate him. Instead I need him, and as we walk to his red car, I wonder if he knows.

I lie on the back seat as we drive to Atlanta. I remember the hills I saw from the window this morning. Now I see flat gray sky. Again I want to fall from the car. Again, I want to die. I think of the girl from 1968. I want to be dead in the back seat of Alan's car. He deserves that. The pain becomes my thoughts, my language. I cannot move, and every rise of the highway is a contraction, a push, a shove.

At home I lie in my bed. I do not speak to anyone and shut my eyes against the darkness of the room. I know I am not safe; I am not free. I feel the blood rushing down my legs and do not care. I just turn and move, trying to push away the pain. Alan and my roommate order sausage pizza. I hate them for it.

Three weeks later I try to overdose. I cannot take enough Lortab and Medrin to push away the pain, so I take more and more until they're sure I'm dying. As the doctors pump my stomach I remember my baby and realize I cannot die as easily as she died. Even then I thought of her as real. She was never just a pregnancy, a problem; she was always my Emily Claire. This February would have been her first birthday. Today, she would be nine months old. Each month her presence weakens. Now she is just a shadow, but she will not go away. She reminds me that I hate ginger snaps and sausage pizza, and that 7-up

makes me nauseous and weak. In the faces of little blonde girls I confront her blue eyes and whisper that I am sorry. And when I want to die, feeling that I can never forgive myself, I remember her, and she tells me that I must live because she could not.

—Josie Hoilman

X-Ray Vision

I remember seeing advertisements in the back of comic books when I was a child, magnificent ads for periscopes and disappearing inks; but the item that intrigued me most was the one that promised X-Ray Vision: glasses that let you SEE! Your own bones! The picture was always of an ecstatic boy looking at his skeletal hand, with an insert of a woman walking by who was stripped of dress and skin and flesh, down to bare bones, when looked at through these deluxe lenses. What interested me was how they worked—how would mere glasses be able to see through solid clothes and flesh? I always pictured that they would come with a tiny picture of a skeleton painted inside the lenses, so that everything I looked at would be the same—a bony human frame imprinted on my father, the television, the cat.

But the real reason I never saved my weekly 50 cents allowance and ordered them was because I was afraid they *would* work. And how would you control them? How would they know where to stop dissolving? What if I looked at you, and your skin and flesh melted away, leaving bones, but then the bones faded and I could see the couch and mirror behind you, where I saw myself reflected, disappearing stage by stage until, like a menacing cheshire cat, all that remained of us were these cheap black glasses, falling with a soft plop to the carpet. I guess I realized even then that I respect solidity; I wanted to believe that there are things we can't see through.

Seeing my X-rays after a recent accident reminded me of all these speculations. More expensive by far than those \$3 glasses, flashes of light in a dusky room gave me huge pictures of my skeletal self. —Hold your arms up; lift your head; are you sure you're not pregnant? Turn to the side; hold your breath; exhale; wait. —And moments later I'm rewarded with snapshots of my real self, the one that doesn't tan and fade, thicken and thin, bleed and heal.

I see my skull: a thought-balloon suspended on a rigid string of spine; how painfully dense this sphere seems. And how precariously positioned at the top of this slim abacus of nerves. My unseeing eye-sockets are black blank holes without a hint of retina or iris, soul or sight. A curve of bone gives my jaws a macabre grin, smudged with bright white fillings.

From the side, my S of spine curves in a neat stack of collars, each perfectly spaced above the last, seemingly suspended in air. My ribs branch off like thin spider legs, swooping around to hold their invisible treasure of heart and lungs. My breasts make delicate vaporous arcs, imperfect half-spheres

which surprise me: why are they the only flesh I see?

Through all these views run ghosts; organs, I suppose, and cartilage linking these stark bones. But they appear as shades of gray flowing into each other, ghosts within ghosts within ghosts, haunting me throughout.

My last view is as haunted as the rest: a straight totem pole of spine running up the center of my back, symmetrical ribs and pale orbs of breasts murky in threads of gray. This is my true totem pole, my center of spirit, movement, knowledge. It rises austere. Dark indentations on the sides of vertebrae make them seem a tower of squat silent heads, knowing all my tales. They perch impassively, as if they could reveal the secret of the universe—and they have discovered it to me. It is this:

We are dead, we are dead, we are all already dead.

These bones are everything—they are all there is. My lover's skeleton embraces mine, but my heart flattens and blackens and slips between the bony joints of my fingers. We join in a dance of denial, pretending we don't hear the white clatter of bones, pretending they're clothed with flesh and shape and skin, pretending we haven't seen this X-ray vision of ourselves.

This is what I was afraid of all those years ago: seeing through someone too clearly. I watch the vaporous outlines of love dissipate, leaving our clutching desperate bones, our futile attempts to refresh. I have seen too much, and now I can't shut my eyes.

—Karen Weekes Perry

If a Train Was to Rumble

A thick, fresh pile of notebook paper and your favorite pen. One of those days where spring and fall meet. A freshness and excitement. Running down the driveway barefoot. Or warming up your flute in a small room, low notes and high notes humming, bouncing to create a world of your own. Thrilling with a spark of energy. And you want to write about that lady, fabulous serenity and a foolishness that passes for deep knowledge. And her husband even crazier. Both of them rambling, filling that small trailer in mountainous, rural Tennessee, filling the memory with sparks of laughter, potential, a newness, that uncommon hum yet instantaneously recognized chord of what people call life. Eager and breathless, having just run up three flights of stairs to the top where birds and ladybugs drown out cars and sirens, you remember and you want to write. Not so much about the bright blue slippers or toothless, dazed grins, but the voices. The voice that rocks in the rocker, chides, and tells a story:

"If a train was to rumble by here right now I'd probably never brush my teeth again. You would fall down and I'd have to unravel your night hat and start all over. But it's not going to. Trains do not rumble and we don't have no trains and I am not going to give you this needle. Understand, I had lost that needle for weeks and that baby on that commercial had on the same outfit for two months now. How could I sew it a new one without a needle? And it was grandma's needle and her grandma's needle too and someone's cousin snapped it right in two one time but we glued it back together. It just takes longer to sew. You have to be careful nowadays. And I was being careful except someone must have moved my Bible because it was in there, and then it was gone. So for weeks I prayed to God to find it and I even thought about St. Andrew, but he's Catholic, and I'm not so I just prayed to God and looked to the Bible and you know I read it everyday. Well even though I hadn't finished my red popsicle I sat down and opened up the Bible with inspiration and there it was, that verse, the one in Colossians on the page right next to that bookmark with the bear and green hearts: 'And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.' And of course God knows I love that needle, I love my grandma, and I love God and what does a needle do but bind? That is when I knew I was going to find the needle and I did. Right when that crazy girl who rides that bike came up I looked down and there it was. Right at the edge of the rug. And then I dropped the Bible, I almost fainted, and the Bible plopped open to that verse in the Old Testament: 'I love

the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. And that is right. My momma was old. She probably liked the Old Testament, and I found that needle. You can't have it and you can't sew nohow."

That's exactly how she'd say it, too. Bursts of words straight out, bibles dripping with popsicle, broken needles and solid will. And you'd understand. Somehow the energy and crazy dreams of this woman were real. You'd sit, bursting to feel this world, to live with night hats and commercials, to forget that third gear comes in between 30 and 40 m.p.h. and curling irons run up electric meters. You believed. Up here on the mountain, away from home and family and people, you believed. Believed that grape popsicles were the root of all evil and that angels flew on bicycles. Somehow the world away from this trailer, down from the mountain and gravel roads, that was crazy. Here you were free. You could live and laugh and you could believe in that voice. The many words that thrilled and spurted out. A pause. And then up and out again once more sharing and creating a life to believe in:

"Well gracious. Here comes that girl on her bike waving our mail all over the place. Looks like she has a dirty comb in her pocket. And throw away that silly sweepstakes envelope if that's what she's got. What would I ever do with a million dollars? Wouldn't want it nohow. 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy.... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.' Matthew 6:19-21. That's the truth. Now give me that thread."

There she'd be. Spouting wisdom worth more than a million dollars and grasping that thread you didn't even know existed. But it did exist, and that old man existed. Before you even had time to figure out who this little girl was he'd be standing in the middle of the room. He'd answer the woman and clutch his pants, covering the broken zipper and smiling like he knew you wanted to see. And then you'd figure out that he wanted to sew his pants back up, but you were wrong. Always wrong. Trying to make his conversation match hers, to figure out who exactly was talking. But you never could. Even though this old woman and old man knew exactly what was going on, even though they understood this world of half finished sentences and laughable logic, where even the shadows outside the windows danced to a tune of their own. And in the end you understood, too. You'd stop thinking, the brain shut off and your head full of images that didn't need any connection. They just were, up there, on top again, and you believed and you listened as the old man answered:

"Well, you sew then. Sew all the air you want because

that's all you're going to sew if you know what I mean and you should. You just think I bought this thread at the store for you but I didn't. I bought a comb instead and lost it and I've actually had this thread since the War and it is amazing it hasn't disintegrated. Because the enemies had uniforms this color and we parachuted through the same air you're sewing and infiltrated their tactics and maneuvered their peace priorities. If the United States of America government knew I knew any of this the thread would be gone and so would I. You wouldn't even have the air to sew because they'd buy it if you know what I mean and you should. Somebody told me the other day that there was not air during the War but I know. Yes I know. I know a lot of things. Top secret things about the President and all the inner workings of the government and bombs. I was a higher up, you know, and I heard things. People don't know half the things I heard and you can be sure. I have books and documents mind you and all sorts of new information has just come to my attention. This demands action and how can I put these secret documents together without a needle and thread, because glue doesn't last I tell you. Plus I have only sewed my collection with precision and this exact thread for centuries now and believe me I know about being careful with something and stealthy. I know about the War if you know what I mean and you should. No thread, no sewing, and even the President would know."

Then you'd watch and hear, watch the old woman's silence. Hear her close the worn pages of her Bible, tilt back her head with her hands wrapped around the arms of her rocking chair. Watch a single sentence, placid, yet compelling and nervous all at the same time: "Give me the thread." And the tone that melted all you thought you knew, withered that English teacher and his "C-'s" into dust and oblivion, bounced right into the air, forgotten but not ignored. An invitation for the old man to answer and once more tell his stories that shaped a world without you; and the old lady and old man argued back and forth:

"No. I do not reckon that your god ever said 'no' but I am not god and I do. I say 'no' and I have had 'no' said to me if you know what I mean and you should. That word came straight from the President himself and that is why we don't live in Washington today. Mind you I snuck this thread from the pockets of the President's trousers and you cannot have it."

"I never in all my good many years of living ever heard somebody in so much need of religion. I can mind myself, but it seems you can't. Taking the President's name in vain, and him having that cute little dog framed over our T.V. Animals are blessed you know and if I am right my Sunday school teacher

told me Jesus had a dog. It's just not wrote in the scriptures. If the President said 'no' he said 'no,' and if God said 'no' he said 'no,' but you are not the President or God and you had better say 'yes.' Hand over the thread and let that crazy girl in."

"Maybe I will let her in. But she is crazy. Always telling me her foot is crispy. I do not like anything to be crispy except maybe my bacon and cornflakes. I have a suspicion of her. Think she might have sabotaged that middle step. It wasn't that creaky when we put it in. The government probably sent her. I'm getting too close to their classifieds if you know what I mean and you should. Don't think she's even ever introduced herself. Can't trust a girl with no name. The enemy never had a name. Wouldn't do to call 'em by name and then shoot 'em. And I've shot my number. Hey girl. Watch that middle step and I'll let you in. No need to yell like that. We ain't stupid."

And it would end and continue with that girl and her bicycle somehow disrupting it. But then the brain would forget and you'd keep listening and it wasn't disrupted after all. The little girl and her crispy feet became one more image, an energy that one remembered on blank pages and blue skies where tree branches connected the feeling and smell of seasons. When you'd run down the driveway barefoot dodging pinecones wishing that the old woman's name was Olive. And it probably was. Beautiful child with dark braids and an old lady with wispy white strands tucked under a pink scarf. You believed her name was Olive and loved it. Loved that images needed no connections and life was what you made it. Going back up to the mountain on drops of red popsicle and seizing the energy and hum of voices and stories to live and laugh back on the ground.

—Lara Webb

standing there and still listening, to boot. "Never mind," she said, turning a nervous pink. "Stay away from black women; they can make you think troubled thoughts. And Sweet is one nasty-talking black woman."

At the end of my first day of work, Aunt Sadie told Mr. Cowpen I was a good worker and ought to be paid the same as a grown woman because I did a grown woman's work. Mr. Cowpen looked surprised like he ain't been around half the day himself. "She only looks about half-grown to me," he said, his eyes sliding over my small breasts and down to my thighs. He fingered and caressed the wad of green bills in his hands slow like he couldn't quite get it into his head what Aunt Sadie had just said. "Are you sure?" he asked real slow, meaning to hold on to half my pay. "Are you sure you want me here next week to string your tobacco?" Aunt Sadie asked to speed up his thinking a bit. Mr. Cowpen said, "Alright then," and the man put into my hand a magic, crisp ten dollar bill. My eyes lit up and I began to babble like a fool. All the grown-ups laughed hard.

"What you aim to do with all that big money?" Mr. Cowpen asked.

"I'm going to buy me a red-and-white bikini from the Sears Roebuck Catalogue." I smiled, proud as a pea.

"You'd better spend that money on new clothes for school," Aunt Sadie said.

Aunt Sadie was half-crazy, but maybe she was right. I had three hand-me-down dresses last year, and none of them fit. My shoes were ripped on both sides. Ugly as my shoes were, I was too big a fool to wear my brother's socks to keep the cold out. No use in putting ugly on top of ugly.

Mama got a maid job down at the Holiday Inn, and she said to keep any money I made this summer; I got to learn to fend for myself. I could buy me a real pretty purple dress down at J. C. Penney's with my ten dollar bill.

Aunt Sadie said like she was looking through the hole in my head, "You could save that money and buy a whole bunch of pretty dresses for school. You'd look like the girls with money then—hold your head up high; they wouldn't all have to know how poor you are or where you live."

Now the woman began to make sense! Daylight wasn't wasted on me. I'd save my money, buy all sorts of pretty things—purples, indigos, bright stripes and plaids. I'd forget I was ever a poor country girl—so sad.

My Aunt Sadie looked sideways through the well dug in my head. "I'll go with you to pick out your clothes. You're a fair child and need to wear pastels."

"But I like bright colors!" I cried.

"Just stop and think a minute, Dear," my Aunt Sadie said. "You'll look so pretty in pinks, light blues and greens. While we're at it, I'll take you down to Jackie's and get her to perm your hair in soft, fluffy curls. You've got a pear-shaped face just like your Pa's, and, God knows, you can't do much with what you inherited from your Pa. Besides," she whispered loud enough for black people in the next county to hear, "only whores and black women wear loud colors."

I stopped talking. Everybody went about their business. Sweet whispered into my ear, "I think you should buy that red-and-white bikini and worry about pinks, light blues, and greens later." She winked big to see her words slide home and I laughed out loud. But maybe Aunt Sadie was right. That red-and-white bikini was a silly thing to set my eye on. The nearest public swimming pool was bought up by a pool club to keep black people and white trash out. There was not much point in paying \$14 for a red-and-white bikini to wear swimming in a cow pond. If I wore the colors that only whores and Black women wore, people would think I was loud and my colors clashed with anything they'd ever seen.

The Summer passed, and I was so smart! I saved three hundred dollars to get what everybody else had already got. I didn't waste 50¢ on cokes or candy bars, either. I worked hard—and not just for Mr. Cowpen; I worked for the Browns, the Grahams, and the Willebys. I stooped down to pick peas, squash, and tomatoes. The butterbeans were down so low, I had to crawl the earth for my ten dollar bill. Before long, I started thinking that I'd do anything for a magic, crisp ten dollar bill. My hands got old before their time. They were red and knotty, but at least they were still mine.

When I would start to get really tired, I'd look at the tall Georgia pines over by the sky. I'd think I could fly. I knew that wasn't true. The trees seemed to call my name in deep undertones: Over there, over there—way up high, over there—is where you belong. I stopped my ears with all my might. I thought I must be half gone.

The first day of school, and you should've seen their faces! I was all decked out in a pink mini-dress; my little heels were so cute, but not too high. I looked like a kissing bandit with my black mascara and cotton-candy pink lipstick. It was the rage of the seventies—and such a handy disguise. Old girls who never were my friends cut their eyes and said, "It can't be her." But a new girl came up to me and said, "You're so cute."

The world stood still.

Nobody'd ever said that before. I looked like it must be somebody else you mean. She said, "I mean you." I laughed like