

Writers' Festival Guests

- 1972 May Sarton, Michael Mott, Marion Montgomery
1973 Robert Penn Warren, George Garret
1974 Hollis Summers, Larry Rubin
1975 Richard Eberhardt, Josephine Jacobsen
1976 Reynolds Price, Michael Mott, Nathalie Fitzsimmons Anderson
1977 Eudora Welty, Guy Davenport, Josephine Jacobsen
1978 John Young, Larry Rubin, Josephine Jacobsen
1979 Harry Crews, Donald Davis, Josephine Jacobsen
1980 Howard Nemerov, Josephine Jacobsen
1981 James Merrill, Theodore Weiss, Josephine Jacobsen
1982 Margaret Atwood, Doris Betts, Josephine Jacobsen
1983 Donald Justice, Josephine Jacobsen, Gretchen Schultz
1984 Richard Wilbur, Linda Pastan, Gretchen Schultz, Kay Stevenson
1985 Maxine Kumin, Greg Johnson, Gretchen Schultz
1986 Denise Levertov, Andrew Lytle, Memye Curtis Tucker
1987 Tillie Olsen, Memye Curtis Tucker, Jane Zanca
1988 Michael Harper, Anne Rivers Siddons, Memye Curtis Tucker
1989 James Dickey, Memye Curtis Tucker, Elizabeth Bartlett
1990 Josephine Jacobsen, Alfred Uhry, Memye Curtis Tucker
1991 Gloria Naylor, Sharon Olds, Memye Curtis Tucker
1992 Rita Dove, Robert Coover, Greg Johnson, John Stone, Memye Curtis Tucker
1993 Jorie Graham, Charles Johnson, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Memye Curtis Tucker
1994 Carolyn Forché, Melissa Fay Greene, Lee Abbott, Mary Kratt
1995 Michael Harper, Peter Carey, Julie Kalendek, Memye Curtis Tucker
1996 Alicia Ostriker, Philip Lopate, Joy Williams, Sally Ann Stevens
1997 Jane Smiley, Katha Pollitt, Pearl Cleage, A. Rashida Ahmad

AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE WRITERS' FESTIVAL MAGAZINE



25TH ANNIVERSARY
APRIL 3-4, 1997

AGNES SCOTT COLLEGE

WRITERS' FESTIVAL

25th Anniversary

April 3-4, 1997

The Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival has been held annually since 1972. Its purpose is to bring nationally acclaimed writers to campus in an atmosphere of community with student writers from the colleges and universities of Georgia. While on campus, our distinguished guests give public readings, award prizes in the Festival's statewide literary competition, and conduct workshops for finalists in the competition. The guests for this year's 25th Anniversary Festival are Jane Smiley, Katha Pollitt, Pearl Cleage, and Agnes Scott alumna A. Rashida Ahmad.

The Writers' Festival competition is open to anyone currently enrolled in a college or university in the state of Georgia. The works printed in this magazine have been selected as finalist entries in the competition. Final decisions are made by the visiting writers during the festival, and a prize of \$500 is given to the winner in each contest category.

The Writers' Festival is made possible by the James T. Kirk and Ella Rather Kirk Fund. We wish to thank President Mary Brown Bullock, Dean of the College Sarah Blanshei, Eleanor Hutchens, and the estate of Margaret Trotter for their support.

April, 1997

Editor
Steve Guthrie

Selection Committee
Poetry: Steve Guthrie and Waqas Khwaja
Short Fiction: Christopher Ames and Willie Tolliver
Personal Essay: Christine Cozzens

Cover photo
Anne Ely

All works printed in this magazine remain the property of their authors and may be submitted for publication elsewhere. Finalist entries are submitted on disk or by e-mail, and their authors are responsible for proofreading. The magazine's publication schedule prohibits editorial conferences with the authors. In prose categories, the editor corrects any obvious typographical errors he notices while formatting the magazine. For entries in poetry, the editor assumes that all diction, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization are intentional. The Writers' Festival Magazine is printed by The Printing Store, 240 DeKalb Industrial Way, Decatur, GA 30030.

Send correspondence to Steve Guthrie, English Department, Agnes Scott College, Decatur, GA 30030; telephone 404-638-6206; e-mail sguthrie@ness.agnesscott.edu.

CONTENTS

POETRY

Michael Antonucci	<i>January in the Fairgrounds (Blues: for Davidson & the Rest)</i>	5
	<i>Crump</i>	5
	<i>History's White Tornado</i>	6
Laurie Boggs	<i>For Camus</i>	7
	<i>Untitled: Unmeasured leaps were made</i>	7
	<i>What Was There All Along</i>	8
Audra Brecher	<i>Call Me Eve</i>	10
	<i>bic</i>	10
	<i>You with Your Voice</i>	11
Kamilah Aisha Moon	<i>Tough Love</i>	12
	<i>Me & My Friends Circa 1981</i>	13
	<i>An Afternoon at the Mall</i>	14
Rebecca Willard	<i>Becoming Home</i>	15
	<i>Self-Image</i>	15
	<i>Dear Ilsa</i>	16

SHORT FICTION

Philip Brunetti	<i>Victoria</i>	17
Marisa P. Clark	<i>False Positive</i>	24
Jill Russell	<i>The Silver Jet</i>	28
Len Sugar	<i>Ratter</i>	36

PERSONAL ESSAY

Marisa P. Clark	<i>Fire</i>	44
Debra Dobkins	<i>Maiden Ladies</i>	48
Man Martin	<i>Musings of an Unacknowledged Legislator</i>	52
Samantha Stavely	<i>A Quiet Place Between Us</i>	54

Poems by Michael Antonucci

January in the Fairgrounds
 (Blues: for Davidson & the Rest)

*"The white man's burden.
 Oh, the pity of it, Iago."*
 ---Sterling A. Brown, reviewing *I'll Take My Stand*, 1931

In those vacant lots along Southern,
 past the switching yard,
 via ducts and pigeons
 that camouflage the
 northside of Orange Mound,
 tall men stand, watch
 and pound full fisted forties
 in the look away hours
 of another (frosty) morn.
 Lacking a fugitive's bravado,
 they simply smash their empties
 against these cold ruins,
 as the crackheads clown,
 and play out their stony blues
 in the shadow of the Coliseum.
 "No work when the Man don't show."
 Further down the tracks,
 where no-one knows Warren
 from Ransom,
 "zero tolerance" is the word.
 people say:
 "this is the 'dome."
 "its all in a day."
 just like Same-ass-Tina
 turning tricks, an acrobat,
 outside the gates of Libertyland---
 " it don't make no differance at all."

Crump

*"O the river is up & the cotton is down.
 Mr. Ed Crump, he runs this town."*
 --Memphis Folk Song circa 1915

Thee mules in the
 tent,

the band playing

'Dixie',
 & a whiff of scandal blowing
 down Hernando Road---
 Handy pens those Blues,
 and magistrates
 shake, rattle, roll
 scatter
 ready
 to hit
 the deck;
 everything's in motion,
 'cept the Boss.
 Ol' Red Snapper in the center,
 at the helm
 High Stepppers,
 Easy Riders
 beware.

**History's White Tornado
 Loraine Hotel, April 1996**

To glimpse
 these scrubbed yellow bricks
 framed
 by steel and
 flawless poured concrete
 speaks volumes.
 It is triumph---
 tribute to
 a fresh coat of paint
 and the wonders of
 white wash.
 Evidence that an "eyesore"
 might become a source
 of civic pride
 if treated with (expert)
 care.
 Here, they blot away the mess,
 playing Ajax,
 leaving it stained,
 clean
 as a
 whistle.

Poems by Laurie Boggs

For Camus

you lived in your philosophy
 and taught us nothing

a crazy man was fishing in a bathtub,

and loved us though we were meaningless
 and tried to save us from suicide

*a psychiatrist asked him,
 Are they biting?*

and taught us to live within the irrational
 and tried to reach us through the dust of time and terms

he responded, Of course not,

and were honest
 and didn't pretend

you fool, this is a bathtub

and you wasted your stories on us
 Camus! for all your genius
 you wasted it on us

he kept fishing

And we read you and forget you
 And we lean over to see
 the fish at the other end of the pole

And we remark on their colors

Untitled

Unmeasured Leaps were made
 in less distinguished parts of
 our play world, sending spews

 of gravel into unprescribed orbits.

Teachers' folded arms missed the
point, but never missed a scolding

and on the other side, we laughed at
the flying-pebble flingers in time-
outs along the fence, arm-lengths apart.

They pretended not to care when we
touched the Swing, touched each other as
we clamored for our turns. Bottom secure

on a burlap strap strung between two silver
chains, and the coined-money smell closed
up in my sweaty fists, I inhaled distinction.

My mustered, thrill-hopeful breath was a
force released, suspended will broken, and
energy spilled over my sandalled feet, stretching

for 1982 fame and friendship. But I never cared
for theirs. They had made the Leap, transgressed
all natural laws and it was my duty to despise the

survivors. Back then, I didn't understand why
the Teachers thought pebbles should stay inside
the fence, and I never asked or tried to sneak

them out. I stood by the Swing and absorbed the
glory of vertical movement that never took us
anywhere, and I missed my chance to try to

really fly. Years later, I find myself still
Swinging. Worn burlap straining, the
chains in my hands rusting and stinking.

What Was There All Along

He must have pulled on trousers at 6am while
the same woman he woke up with every morning was
snoring on her side, shrinking from the sun
pillowed hair made softer in her sleep.

16 yrs of marriage to a mild Grady county wife
couldn't have prepared him for the burning smell at 6pm
or the ugly fear of summoned guilt,

the flash of sin-image: a 15 yr old girl's
smooth face red nails tempting hips
before he shook jerking and fell suspended

His body bouncing on the porch.
She'd stopped stirring the bean soup
in some certain craze of decision
Pushed aside winter coats and felt hats
to close her fingers around the smooth
wood of the hall closet twin-barrel shotgun
Slow smile Hand on knob
Count his steps Open fire

The "no" that stuck in his throat.

Like tomato guts sticking to the burnt
bottom of a pot on the stove.

How later, when the police had gone,
and the memories had become written records
in flimsy files, I found my way back
to the wooded spot where the house had stood
The porch where she lost it, lost him, lost herself
sunk into the rotten dirt surrounding an ancient cedar

I gathered fragrant limbs to add to my winter woodpile
Watched the scarlet blue and gold flames circle up
on gasps of ice-wind.
So these are the vivid fruits of death
Alive, crying when uprooted.
I am not cruel, I am a savior.

Giving beauty breath
above the tomato-soil of murder.

Poems by Audra Brecher

Call me Eve

I wouldn't have needed a serpent in the garden
 as soon as God turned his back,
 I would have wrapped each milky thigh
 around the base of that massive trunk
 I would have inchwormed my way up the barky shaft
 would have plucked that virescent plum
 held it up to my prescient lips in both hands
 my eager fingertips indenting the plush skin
 I would have nodded to the cloud forest above
 before incising my toothy yawn in the pulpaceous fruit
 like a honey creeper, I would have slurped out the serum
 of knowledge until it lamellated in the pit of my gut
 struck brilliant, my eyes a tremulous flutter,
 I'd let drop the ravaged core
 my mouth bleeding a diluvial stream of sap aglimmer rushing for the
 precipice of chin clinging still to the incurve of neck
 the outcurve of breast.
 And staring down at poor dull-witted Adam,
 I would have said *find your own fruit, boy.*

bic

My razor is out for the kill again.
 It's hammerhead body leaving trails of nonfoam
 swishing its tail around the rocky formation of kneecap
 that too calm movement before the attack
 now the darting chomp of my ridgy shin
 he's scooped out my chummy flesh
 and that white ovalled indentation is cleaned
 by water carrying away velutinous bloodclouds
 only on dry land does the wound spurt
 a crimson waterfall which paints my foot.

You with your Voice

Born in the middle of the 1975 Rolling Thunder Revue
 I never saw Bob Dylan through the *dirt of gossip*
 and I can't even say my daddy wore out the vinyl of
Blonde on Blonde cause he didn't
 if you hang on my walls or your brittle voice is cut
 digital in my car my bedroom if I've heard
 "But the man can't sing!" as often as 1963's *Freewheelin'*
 it's because I put you there it's because I knew right off
 that your singing voice was rocky and fine
 I knew you were pushing something I only wanted to-
 on canvas, in my dreams, my walk, my poetry
 so I never made the mistake of taking the art for the man
 I never cared to know you never bristled over Medgar Evers
 nor cared to crusade for anything
 save your dusty guitar and loamy lyrics
 When I finally did catch up to you in 1991, I hardly frowned
 when you forgot those words in your willful lethargy
 I'd already taken what I needed
 and could play it over and over again if I liked
 what *the sad-eyed lady of the lowlands* meant to you
 is gone it's the sound of her that I have loved.

Poems by Kamilah Aisha Moon

Tough Love

my great-grandparents wouldn't believe it
 even Mom asked
 so what's it like to live with a white person?
 but we got past the novelty laced with wariness
 ate dorm food together
 treated each other's homesickness
 you curiously watched me oil my scalp
 and I admitted that hey
 Nirvana wasn't bad
 you noticed for the first time
 that the comics were homogeneous
 and held your sides after I pointed out that
 Nancy's parents are never mentioned and
 girlfriend has a serious 'fro
 we even shared secrets in the dark
 as we drifted off to sleep
 in a semester we were
 attempting to cross a gap
 wider than the Atlantic
 deeper than 400 years
 the difference between
 master/slave
 ma'am and maid
 being legally whole or a mere fraction
 removed officially for decades in real time
 nanoseconds in human history
 bridge-building is grueling work
 that's why I won't take offense *this* time
 after hearing you say "I don't see color"
 the phrase grates worse than
 the pseudo b-girl inflection you slip into
 only around me
 I don't think you are aware of how that sounds
 You Go Girl!!! I like you so much
 I'm gonna overlook the fact that
 you weren't born just like me 'cause
 you're one of the cool ones
 ignoring the melanic sheath that belies my humanity
 until deemed acceptable by you
 leads to the mentality that allows
 a card-carrying member of the Aryan Nation
 to hang a Michael Jordan poster in his son's room

without pause
 well honey, that's your issue
 it has always been about you seeing my skin
 and despising it
 I want you to see it and love it
 like you love your own
 not pretend it's absent or doesn't matter
 because we all matter
 the rich hues of the leaves adorning
 my family tree are a tremendous source of pride
 for you not to see color
 is like flying to the Bahamas in an aisle seat
 then never leaving the hotel
 about as pointless as
 us becoming bad imitations of each other and
 never truly connecting
 never fully appreciating each other
 thought I'd point that out
 from one friend to another
 now that's out of the way
 are we still ordering pizza later?

Me and My Friends Circa 1981

we liked sittin' on the swings
 eating 25 cent frozen fruit cups and
 spittin' out the styrofoam
 dependin on the mood of the day
 we'd roll around on our
 blacktop skatin' rink
 or pedal to Fleming's Market on banana-seat bikes
 with plastic streamers in the handlebars
 at least half of us walked around wearin'
 constant kool-aid mustaches and fresh knee scabs
 we played hide-n-seek before
 everyone discovered the fun
 of hidin' in pairs
 and it was always cool to make
 a sidewalk gallery
 Henry O. Tanners
 chocolate Matisses and Picassos
 armed with
 crayolas or pastel chalk
 would spread out on Lenore St. and
 express themselves

yeah
 makin' our mark
 on the inner city
 in somethin' other than
 blood

An Afternoon at the Mall

Does one ever become accustomed
 to the smell of chitline?
 Does it matter if you walk in unaware
 or if you saw the bucket in the sink earlier?
 NO
 the nostrils are accosted the same

Although this happens all the time
 and the training instructs them
 to closely watch folks like me
 so that while Jill leaves the dressing room
 with an extra bulge
 eyes track me like the infrared dot
 on an AK-47
 a cold voice offers assistance
 it clearly hates to give

Despite bracing my dignity for
 yet another blow
 it still gets to me
 attacks my senses

it always
 stinks

Poems by Rebecca Willard

Becoming Home

This is a sad house,
 without enough to take care of.
 Just one woman, alone
 two dogs and a cat.

Water moans its way through the pipes;
 Windows sigh and refuse to budge;
 Chimney vents wheeze and snort
 at the injustices of old age.

If you took this house apart,
 pried brick from beam,
 everything would be left in place,
 a transparent box of grief.

Self-Image

There is a picture, tucked in the corner of my mirror,
 frail ghost image of the woman I am to become.
 Blond, without guile, she turns to smile at
 what approaches, over her right shoulder.
 The need to strangle her comes, like always.

I want to crush her fragile neck, feel bones and cartilage
 turn to sticky pulp. When I see her, I know
 I did not want to die the time I was fourteen,
 only wanted to cut away some already dead part of me,
 let the ugly past bleed out, the way a faucet
 runs rusty, red-brown incriminations spill down the sink.

Paring away at each end, chewed nails, razored calluses,
 I prepare for myself portrait, avoiding extremities
 I stare at the center of me: planes, angles, curves,
 ribcage torso breasts--In the mirror, flat--
 My body tells me nothing.

Dear Ilsa

Last week I thought I saw you,
turning the corner from Church to Medlock
before I remembered, you are dead.
I've begun to think of you again.

Three months of talking to no one
and then you were back,
careful not to say where you'd been.
You brought me a bird of paradise,
because I had not seen one,
and a bottle, which I kept.

Of course I choose to remember
your thoughtfulness, the gifts; I choose
to carry my grief, ignore your goodbye
whispered through cold, even teeth.

I am every good survivor,
I know your choice belonged to you.
But I wish your brother hadn't told you
to suck in your stomach; I wish
we had never called you Peppermint Patty;
I wish I had written this letter two years ago.

I could say I wish you hadn't killed yourself.
But nothing you did surprised me;
I think I must have known your death
The first time I saw you.

Fiction by Philip Brunetti

Victoria

I heard them in the next room making love. I heard the bed springs squeak to the rhythms of sex. I heard her moans and his deep breathing. I'd known this would happen from the night before when the door had been closed so gently and there was the soft click of the lock. I'd lain awake all night waiting for it to start, but they'd drunk a lot during the evening and they'd fallen asleep. But this morning they woke up early to make up for it. She, Victoria is her name, went to the bathroom before they started. I'd heard her bare feet smack the wooden floor, the toilet flush down the hall. She came back to bed and then it began. It was not loud, but it was there, behind the drab green wallpaper. I stared into the wall. I listened.

It was last night that Victoria visited and brought this man with her. I'd been listening to John Coltrane when they'd knocked at the door. I was eating a cold dinner, alone in the kitchen. I'd been ready to spend the night alone. I was planning to do some drawings and sketches, after I'd eaten, to wile away the time. But Victoria came and she was very happy to see me, though a little nervous. We don't know each other so well — Victoria and I — but we've had a strange connection from the first day. She was very enthusiastic about the Coltrane music and she looked around the apartment at some of my drawings. Usually I keep them hidden if company is coming, but like I said, I didn't know. This man Manuel, who was with her, said very little. He didn't want to be here. He didn't know who I was, but I suppose he saw me as a threat. I was another man — a fairly good-looking man. Victoria spoke of me with an excited voice. It was her idea to visit me, even though she planned on being with Manuel.

The John Coltrane filled the apartment and they sat at the kitchen table and watched me finish my dinner. I didn't like eating in front of them. I had nothing to give them. But Victoria insisted that I eat. Manuel looked uncomfortable at first, but he got used to it. He stared off at one of my drawings. He told me he liked the woman with straw hair in the sketch. Victoria also said she liked it. But it sounded like a lie.

*

Victoria is a young woman I met in a park one day. It was raining that day. I had been reading and, when the rain came, I put my book inside my coat to protect it. Victoria was walking through the park with an umbrella, at the time, and she happened to see me hide the book and it impressed her. I'd shown great care in that particular gesture, she told me later. She said a man that would shield a book from the rain would be a good friend to a woman. That meant little to me, at the time, but I walked with her.

Victoria and I walked huddled under her umbrella in the rain and soon she became hungry. We ate sandwiches at a small, nameless cafe that she knew about. The people there knew her. She talked with the man behind the counter who made the sandwiches. He enjoyed speaking to her, but eyed me suspiciously. That was fine. I felt a little suspicious, a little out of place.

We sat at a table and ate with our coats on. The place had almost no heat and it had turned out to be a rainy October day. Victoria chewed her food and made comments about different men in the cafe. This man looked like a monkey. This one had beautiful hair but was too proud of it. He would never love anyone. She spoke to me as though she knew me well and trusted me fully. I didn't know why. I didn't know what we were doing there together except that she had brought me. She had control of me that day. And the rain outside was very cold and hard and it made it feel good to be inside, even in a drafty old cafe.

After the sandwiches we ordered coffee and drank a few cups between us. The coffee made Victoria sleepy. She said all drugs had the opposite effect on her. She said she had taken many hard drugs in her life, but none had done what they'd promised. For her, coffee was a relaxer and it made her sleepy. Cocaine also put her into a trance or an odd, dreary state. "Drugs are only good for certain people," she said. She named several artists who'd been addicted to drugs. Billie Holiday and Charlie Parker were among them. She said drugs were good for these people because it kept them in the world a little longer and let them create beautiful things. There's no way they could have lived past childhood without drugs. They weren't meant for this life. They were outsiders who lived to give what most people could never feel. The drugs were necessary.

So Victoria entered my life and said many strange, memorable things. She was in the closet, she said, but told me only of male lovers. She said I was in the closet but was made to love women. The way I drew and painted was a woman's way. But all artists are women when they're doing it right, creating, she said. Then she kissed me with her tongue and talked about fire inside the human body. The fire was always burning but never seen in the majority of people. A kiss was a way to taste other people's fire. My fire was strong and wild, she said. My kisses were soft, but my life was going to start soon. I didn't understand the connection. My kisses were soft because I was afraid of my fire, she explained. I would live when I was no longer afraid.

Victoria's thoughts about fire excited me. They also made me afraid. I liked being told that my fire, in particular, was bold. After a while I leaned toward Victoria to kiss her. But I'd waited too long and she turned away.

I went home that night and painted a picture of a woman walking naked in the woods. The woman was hunched over so her fingertips nearly grazed the dirt path on which she walked. Her body drooped because she was tired, but her eyes gleamed with light. She was making her way through the forest because she loved someone on the other side. She'd been walking all night and the sun was rising. I knew none of this when I made the picture. I knew only that it felt good to work and that somehow Victoria made the picture with me.

*

Closets hold a lot of things — clothes, old notebooks and photographs, sexual preferences, skeletons even. There is a closet in the room where Victoria and Manuel make love. Inside it I have a jig-saw puzzle of movie stars that I've never completed. I feel almost like telling Victoria and Manuel about it. I feel almost like barging in on them and giving them a go at the puzzle. But I must wait until after the lovemaking is over. Victoria would be more pleased that way. Victoria strikes me as the type who would like to work on a puzzle while naked. She would sit on the cool floor, cross her leg over her knee, select pieces. Manuel would stare unhappily at a puzzle that was only partially completed. Victoria would care nothing for the finished section. She would be fascinated only by the pieces she held in her hands, the stiffness of the cardboard, the little blurs of light and color on the surface. She might chomp her teeth into a piece or two. I imagine her on the floor. Her body is long. Her hair is brown and silky. Her breasts hang over her lap. I suspect she would conceal her breasts if I were to walk into the room. She wouldn't even let me see her bare toes. She doesn't want me as a lover. I am a man who's from the outside, she says. "Work on your art — do your drawing and painting," she scolds. "The world needs more like you," she says. "But the world would never be this way if that were to happen," she adds.

Often at night I sit dull and sad before a blank sheet and nothing comes. Victoria says it is because I am not yet in love with death.

*

Days have gone by since the morning they made love in that room. They left right afterwards without a good-bye. I've locked the room because I'm afraid to smell the sex she has left behind. I want to smell it, but am afraid. Victoria and Manuel love each other. He is a great ape, a strong man. He wears denim overalls and heavy sweatshirts. He carries a comb in his pocket and shoots pool in the afternoon. Victoria tells me these things on the phone. She tells me that Manuel is not half the man I am. He can never be. But he is the man she loves. He holds her in his arms and keeps her warm in bed. His muscles ripple when they make love. He has tight skin. He doesn't want children or a marriage. He wants only her and she wants only him, for now. Maybe tomorrow she'll want other things. "Maybe tomorrow I'll want a woman," she says. I hold the receiver in my hand and hate her for calling but cannot hang up. I look at the paint splattered around the rooms of my apartment — on the floor, the metal chairs, the kitchen cupboards. I tell her that I need to take drugs because I am an artist too. She says maybe that's true. In fact it is true, she says. She tells me to take whatever drugs I feel are necessary, but not to call. "Don't call me high," she says. "I don't want to lose faith in you."

*

Rain pours down. I sit at the window smoking hash in a pipe. Great colors. A world within a world. Revisions of the rain. All of these dull fantasies I try to have and hope for. But nothing happens except the hash makes me giddy and nervous. It shows me pictures in the window of Victoria in Manuel's arms, sucking his thick penis, making him groan. Victoria in a bed at night, touching herself while calling me on the phone. She'll make a sharp sound as we talk and then let silent seconds go by. "That's good for you," she'll say. I don't know what she means. I smoke the hash and remember the day we met in the park in the rain. I was scared of her from the beginning. She followed me around, caught up with me and offered her umbrella. Women aren't suppose to do that. It's dangerous. She was bold. I went with her more from fear than anything else. And that cafe where it was so cold you could practically see your breath. What was that place? I can't even remember where it was and it has only been several weeks. They all knew her there. She was a regular. She snapped her fingers and two waiters appeared. One brought her cream. One brought her sugar. Each studied Victoria and acted as though my seat were empty.

*

Christmas came and went and Victoria gave me nothing. A few candles — that was her gift. She told me I needed more than she or anyone could give. She laughed after that remark and I stood with the candles. They were wrapped in cellophane and nothing else. She didn't even bother wrapping them up in gift paper. "You must burn them," she said. "You must stare into the flame and see things. That's your gift."

*

Love is not good. I love Victoria and I don't love Victoria and neither makes me feel right. I know that she can get on well without me or without Manuel even. She has her outbursts, her looks, her bizarre personality — with these she could get by. She could be anything — a seal trainer even. I don't know what she does for money. She told me once she'd been in shows. An Actress. Another time it was recording with musicians. I don't like mysteries. I don't even know if she smokes or what she eats. Of course I know — I've seen her do both, but I don't really know. I'd like to live in her pocket for a day, keep track of her movements. Maybe she does nothing. Maybe she spends her days in bed with lovers. I'd like to know. I want to see her workplace, her paycheck. All of that is unimportant, she tells me. "It's you who have work to do. Get to it," she says.

*

I gave Victoria the painting of the woman in the woods for Christmas. She smiled a little, but then shook her head like I'd failed her. "You'll do better," she said. "Don't give gifts too soon." We ate dinner in my apartment that night. She cooked for me. We drank wine. I was drawn to her all night. She wore a black leotard and red skirt. Black tights. "I'm not sexy," she said when she saw my eyes. "I look like Mickey Mouse tonight."

We took a walk together because she saw I was burning. The air outside was cool and still. Victoria mentioned the painting. "The woman's all wrong hunched like that," she said. "But the trees' shapes are severe. They are terrible and right."

We smoked cigarettes by an outdoor fountain. The sound of the water spraying calmed me. Victoria told me a story about her childhood. She said she was a terrible child. Her brother was blind. He would tell her to bring him the phone numbers of pretty women. She was only twelve or thirteen and he was twenty. She didn't know women, but the brother was desperate. She took numbers from pornographic magazines she saw on newsstands. "These are sexy women," she said to her brother. "But they'll cost you." A month later the credit card bill came. Hundreds of dollars. Victoria had punched in the parents' card number each time the brother needed to make a call. "He would talk for hours," she said. "His penis was the first I saw."

*

I don't know what life is. One day I walk in the park and it rains. A woman comes to shelter me with an umbrella. She talks about how she could tell I'm a good man by the way I protect a book. The book I was reading in the park that day was Van Gogh's letters. The letters are filled with passion and courage and a deep need to see the world. Victoria never asked me about the book. But she seemed to know all along what I'd been reading. She seemed to know who I was, the things I cared for and hoped.

*

Victoria starts a sentence small and ends it big. She compares little trivial things in life to greater things. A bird seed to a flock. A dead tree stump to a thick green forest. Everything small counts in her picture of the world. It is all connected. It all grows into one another and dies together in some way to be reborn. We sit in the dirt at the park. She pulls up a wild mushroom by the root and talks about its base. "Under the soil," she says, "there's a great shell that grows around the world. This mushroom grows from that shell. I can pluck it out of the soil, but I cannot break the connection." She smiles and puts the mushroom in her hair. Sometimes her face looks like a man's face, sometimes like a baby girl. She grasps me by the coat collar and lifts herself off the ground. "I'm going," she says. "I've a date."

*

Victoria and I speak to each other as we speak to no one else. I am part of the life inside her. She acknowledges this, but tells me that she has control, for she sought me out. "You're a young man and I'm a woman. But we don't do it together. You must know the reason." I sit in a hard chair with my head on my fist. I hear wind rush through the cracks in the window frame. Victoria lights a cigarette and sinks into my couch. She wears jeans and sneakers, looks like a teenage girl. But she is older. A woman. I smell the smoke she exhales. I think of the fire burning inside me. She has told me about the fire. I feel it. It burns me. "Why not me?" I say. She coils her hair around a finger. Blue smoke outlines the top of her head. "Life isn't full of every wish," she says. "Besides, you want something else."

*

It is evening. I drink wine from a green bottle. I've torn the label to shreds, picked away at the glue stain. There is the marching sound of hail on the pavement. Many storms have come this winter. I sit with a pencil in hand, sketching an icy explosion. The window is in front of me.

In the street the cars are bombarded by rapidly falling hail balls. A woman shields herself under her handbag. She wears a kerchief, pale stockings. Her face is red from too much excitement. I want her to fall on the street and be pelted by ice. I'd like to see some violence. The phone rings. I don't answer it. It's Victoria's time for calling and I want her far away, out of my life. But it was just yesterday that she was over. She wore a pair of pants that she asked me to paint a design on. "I can't paint while you're wearing them," I said. She slipped off the jeans, smiled. She wore no underwear. "When's your birthday," she said. "June," I said. "Well you have some months then."

I painted dark, rich colors on the thighs and hips of the jeans. Several coats of each color. When she walks the colors will hurt her. The pants will be stiff and uncomfortable. She will not be able to wrap herself so freely. I told her it was better with many coats so the paint will not fade. She looked at me as though I were confessing a lie.

*

When Victoria was fourteen years old she slept with another girl. It was one of the most tender experiences of her young life. They laughed together in the tub. They held hands under water, guided fingers to the proper spot. No one was home. There were no parents around. Only the two girls and the thrill of their encounter. "I like women as much as men," she said. "There I've told you what you always suspected and wanted to know." She had her arm in a sling. It had been twisted behind her back, almost broken by Manuel when he found out her sexual ways. It seemed senseless. But Victoria's confessions could make a man wild. And Manuel was a fool. I imagined he was probably already out with other women.

Victoria sat on the steps of my building and flipped through a magazine with her good hand. She did not look at the pages. She looked through it to forget. "Lovers are like sneakers," she said. "They wear out."

I took Victoria inside and she cried. It was the first time I saw her vulnerable. It was almost like looking at someone else. I let her cry. I led her to the kitchen and we huddled near the electric stove. The heat had been turned off. I'd missed several payments. Victoria pressed her face into my chest. I stroked her hair. It felt like the world was against us. I remembered her lovemaking back in the room with Manuel and how she had seemed so far away and how it had hurt me. Now she was close — in my arms — and it hurt still and scared me.

A good book cures a man of sickness sometimes. I lay Victoria down in my bed and read her some of Van Gogh's letters. She stared at the ceiling, almost in a trance, not hearing my voice for a long while. But finally her gaze relaxed and I could see she was listening to what I was reading. Van Gogh's words were true words from an open heart. After a while she sat up and leaned on one elbow. She looked into my face as I stumbled over some words. She touched the cover of the book to get my attention. "He got what he deserved because it's better not to be here," she said. Her voice was gloomy. She was still in pain.

"You're wrong," I said. "Don't you hear the words?"

"Read some more," she said.

I read a few pages more. Very shortly after she fell asleep.

*

Victoria is not my lover or my girlfriend or my wife. She holds other people for that feeling. Sometimes when they are desperate she comes to their aid, but she thinks the desperation I feel helps me. "You're not so bad off when you're desperate," she says. "You need that for now."

She tells a story about true desperation. Her brother — the blind man — would go to the refrigerator at night to eat a snack. Everyone was asleep except for Victoria. The brother —

Paul was his name — would build things with food to get the feeling of a woman's inside. He would take moist cutlets and butter or cream and blindly wrap them together. He would heat the whole concoction in the microwave and then carry it off to the bathroom. Victoria would hold her ear to the door, listen to Paul bring himself off. "And the next morning my mother would find bits of cutlet on the bathroom floor," she said. "Maybe everyone knew. But of course no one said anything."

*

Today I've sketched a picture I'm proud of. It shows only the quiet, tilted head of a woman, sunning her face with eyes closed. The picture is simple, but the lines of the drawing strike me as true. This is a woman sunning her face. And not just that, the picture makes her alive, so she can be thinking any of a million things. Life enters her body, which can't be seen, but there's a body below that's hidden in time and space. If I had to draw the body, I could not, but some day I'll be able to. I look at the picture. I have the urge to call Victoria, to invite her over and let her see the woman. "That's very nice," she might say. "But you called me here for this." I decide not to call her. Instead I'll hope for her. I'll hope the picture is good enough and something in the air tells her she must come here.

*

Jesus walked on water. Some people saw that and still didn't believe. He may not have walked. He may have swum with the balls of his feet. Maybe some onlookers thought this. None of it makes any sense. If he walked, it makes no sense. If he didn't walk, then his outcome makes no sense. Nails are driven through flesh, not shadows.

"Don't talk to me about Jesus," Victoria says. "Don't start thinking you're him."

It is days later. Victoria did not come to see the picture I made. Nothing in the air directed her here. She was not outside to sense the hushing wind anyway. A girl had her in her arms in some bed somewhere else. Now she talks to me on the phone. I tell her about a dream I've had — this Jesus walking on water. "Dreams have meaning," she says. "But don't get carried away. You're just a man who draws."

I don't understand her fears. I'm not associating myself with anyone, least of all Christ.

"You're scared," she tells me. "Still."

*

A week later she visits my apartment without warning. Again I am listening to John Coltrane. I listen to the sounds of the saxophone that are incomplete sentences, more effective that way. Sharp cuts of sound make the space in my apartment seem bigger. Everything's more comfortable. I open the door. Victoria stands in the doorway with a girl on her arm. They wear sunglasses. Their coats are bright blues and greens, so vibrant and alive. A shaft of sunlight catches the frame of Victoria's glasses and creates a sparkle. I stare at it and keep them in the doorway. I realize I've been sitting indoors for days and they bring sunlight and colors. Their bodies glow. I feel excited that they are here.

"This is Patricia Carrera."

"That's a good name," I say.

"We're here for the feast," Victoria says. She stands on her toes to peek over my shoulder.

"What feast?" I say.

"It's Easter Sunday," she says. "I thought you'd be glutting yourself with food. Come on. Patricia and I will take you out."

We return to the cafe where Victoria had first brought me. The waiters wear white jackets and are more well groomed than last time. The place is sunny and warm and everything looks

a little more formal. Wonderful food smells fill the tiny dining area. I crave meat. I want roast suckling pig. I want roast duck. Something roasted and carried out on a tray — a vast spread. I've eaten next to nothing for days. Victoria touches my sunken cheeks. She butters a roll for me. "Eat, you starving artist," she says.

We do eat. All of us. We feast with eyes closed to taste the deeper flavors of turkey, duck, many vegetables. Wine bottles are brought in. A young Spanish man carries a stool from around the bar and plays songs on his guitar. "We're still having fun / And you're still the one." He sings crazily with a Spanish accent. All the food is delicious. Plums and apricots and chocolates are brought out for dessert, along with exotic coffees and liqueurs. Patricia and Victoria feed each other chocolates with slender fingers. There is much laughter. I drink the wine. "Living is the way," Victoria says. She raises the small liqueur glass and clinks it against Patricia's, mine.

We drink a glass and then another. The Spanish singer slaps the face of the guitar. He is his own rhythm. He wears pointed boots that I look at too long. I have a desire to take the boots, his guitar, the fruits and wines and tablecloths and paint some wonderful picture. But that is old and tired art. I know new things must be conquered and my mind is excited because Victoria is here. I feel maybe I can forge them. Human forms are more interesting. And sounds. All things that move air.

*

It is night. Rain water drips from the gutter onto the windowsill of my apartment. Victoria and Patricia are down the hall. They dive between each other's legs. The taste must be sweet.

Victoria is here, now, in my life. She is here to make sound. She is here to shake the walls and scream aloud. The walls have a voice when Victoria is here.

There are mushrooms in the park that she says are connected to the entire world. She plucks a mushroom from the dirt as she plucks people from the street. Victoria's legs are open and Patricia will go there. She will eat.

I am like the blind brother who must build his own way. I see through his eyes and the world is a great noise. I must take noise from the air. Give it form and color. I must leave Victoria's pleasures in the background. She is the song. She is the body and I am the rest. Her body holds a well where raindrops become notes and outsiders freely walk.

Fiction by Marisa P. Clark

False Positive

David faced the Capital Building, the noon point on the directional clock Claudia had made up for him. That put the Washington Monument at six o'clock, the Smithsonian Castle at three, and the Holocaust Museum, their next destination, at four-thirty. Or so that was the way Claudia had explained it, but it meant nothing to him—he still felt lost, uncomfortable. There were people everywhere. The only one he cared about was Claudia. He wanted to make sure she was near. She was the one who had the map, the sense of direction. She was like a big sister to him, a few years older, already in her early thirties, responsible.

He heard his first name called and jerked his head toward the sound. It was coming from the person at the microphone. It was what they were doing, the Names Project coordinators, getting volunteers to say the names of all the people who had panels on the AIDS quilt. The speakers were friends, lovers, relatives. Their roll call was endless.

He knew he had a common first name, but he had never thought much about it until he kept hearing it again and again. David this, David that, he could never make out the last name—just enough to know that it wasn't his own—the person at the microphone was not saying David Dunbar. Still, it made him shiver to hear it so often. Or maybe he was just cold. The wind was blowing, and the sun wasn't coming out, even though the sky was glary-bright.

His mother had wanted to name him Antonio, after one of her Italian ancestors, but his father had objected, had wanted to name him something simple, something Anglo that went with Dunbar, a D name. All the kids had gotten D names: David, Debbie, Dennis. Sometimes, nights out, David introduced himself as Antonio, though. Tonio for short. He preferred the sound of it. It was exotic. It turned men on. It turned *him* on.

He couldn't help it. Every time he heard his first name called, he turned toward the microphone stand. The speaker had changed. Now it was an older woman. Somebody's mother, probably. Then he checked to look for Claudia. He hoped she was keeping up with him. He had a bad habit of walking ahead, not checking behind, leading as if he knew where he was going. Hell, he didn't even know where the hotel was. It was close; that was all he knew. A Holiday Inn.

Last time he had seen Claudia, she was taking a picture of one of the panels. He had gone over to her, had reminded her that he wanted to stay close, didn't want to risk getting separated. He had already told her that twice. She said that: "You've already told me that twice." That was when she had pointed to the Capital Building and made it twelve o'clock.

He looked for her again. He didn't see her. He felt the moment's panic, a seizing-up of his gut, and tried to remember what she was wearing. Nothing that distinguished her, unfortunately: jeans, a black sweatshirt and denim jacket, camera around her neck. Then he saw her. She was squatting near but not looking at a panel. She was stuffing her pockets with Kleenex.

David started toward her. He stepped delicately. He didn't like the crisp smack of his footsteps on the black tarp between the panels. He didn't trust the ground to be level beneath it; he felt as though he might lose his footing. He heard his name as he crouched down beside her. He asked her what she was looking at. She looked at him. Tears streaked the lenses of her sunglasses and hung from the frames. He looked at the panel before them: plain, just a name and a date, no personality, no panache.

"Nothing in particular," she said. "All of it." She stretched out her arms to designate the entire Mall, the entire quilt. "Actually, it was the Kleenex that got to me."

David noticed for the first time that boxes of Kleenex stood at every corner of every patch of the quilt. He noticed, too, the crying people. Many people were crying. Just standing there, transfixed in front of this or that panel, crying.

"I saw Rock Hudson's," he said. It was true. He meant it as a kind of gift to Claudia, telling her about it. Maybe it would make her feel better. Maybe it would stop her crying.

She blew her nose and said, "Where was it? Do you remember? I'd like to see it."

He couldn't remember. He couldn't remember anything about it, just that it was Rock Hudson's. He certainly couldn't remember where it was. "No," he said. "I don't know. Over there somewhere, I think." He had seen a panel that he thought was Ryan White's too, but he wasn't sure—it seemed too cynical, Ryan White's name in a cartoon tombstone, something like that. He didn't tell Claudia about it. He couldn't remember where it was either.

He could see her eyes through her sunglasses. She was looking right at him. She was frowning. He didn't ask why. A man at a microphone spoke his name, David, and then a last name, a D name, that sounded alarmingly like his own. Claudia turned her head toward the man. A tear made it down her cheek.

"What time is it?" David asked.

"We've got thirty minutes," Claudia said.

"I'm going over there." He pointed in a random direction. He picked his way across the tarp.

In a half-hour, they would be entering the Holocaust Museum. It was Claudia's whole reason for visiting D.C. David didn't know why, exactly. She wasn't Jewish. If anything, she was just alarmist. The Holocaust haunted her, she said. She believed it could happen again. She believed history could repeat itself. It had something to do with her being queer. At the time she had made the vacation plans, she hadn't known that the AIDS quilt would be displayed. David had been the one to tell her about it.

According to the brochure, it was the last time the quilt would be displayed in its entirety.

It had gotten too big. There were over 40,000 panels now, over 70,000 names' worth—that was more names than at the Vietnam Veterans' War Memorial, Claudia had told him. It was spread from one end of the Mall to the other. Everywhere David looked, people were walking in neat lines between the panels. Their progress reminded him of ants, that orderly and that slow.

The panels were laid out chronologically. The one he was looking at had a 1989 date on it. It was as boring and bleak as some of the very first ones, just names and dates written in marker on drab bedsheets. The newer panels were so colorful they were almost celebratory—the rainbows, the personal effects. Letters from friends and lovers, bright satin ballgowns, here and there a baseball cap or a pair of stiletto-heeled pumps (ladies' size 12), feather boas. Bibs, teddy bears, and baby clothes on some of the children's panels. David had forgotten about the children.

There was a time he had tested positive—that was almost two years ago. He had put all those people through all that pain, the kind of pain he saw happening around him at the quilt. He told his friends, not his family. He had considered telling his parents—but didn't want to because he didn't know how, didn't know where to begin, didn't want to start with *Mom and Dad I'm gay* and follow with *I'm HIV-positive*. They knew so little about his life anyway. Besides, with the way his friends reacted to the news about his being HIV-positive, he could not imagine and did not want to find out how much grief and horror his parents would experience. He remembered all too clearly the expressions on his friends' faces. The sameness of their reactions became predictable to him. First the still grimace of their shock, then their tears. Just before they cried, their faces became ugly to him. David never cried, not in front of his friends, not while telling them. He just repeated what the doctor had told him, assured them that he could probably be

kept alive and relatively healthy for another fifteen years, maybe twenty. Hell, what with all the medical advances, he might even live to see fifty.

Among his friends, Claudia had been the hardest to tell, even though he had known her longer than almost anyone else. They had been friends for over five years—she was one of the first people he had met in Atlanta. She was the one who was always unimpressed with David's Monday-morning tales of his weekend conquests. She was always the one who said, "I hope you're being safe. If you ever tell me you've got HIV, I'll kill you before it does." Whenever he assured her that yes he was being safe, yes of course, all they'd done was mess around some, a little of this, a little of that, just oral sex really, she would ask, "And did you wear a condom during oral sex?" No. Of course not. And Claudia would give long lectures, quote from the medical research documents that crossed their desks daily at the library where they worked, the ones that reported the ways people could get HIV, oral sex among them. David denied the statistics, said it was nearly impossible to get HIV from oral sex, told her he'd done anal sex only a few times, didn't much like doing it or having it done, had always been protected. She winced, turned away so as not to hear, then turned back around and punched him in the arm—she packed a hard punch for such a small-framed girl—and told him how pissed she'd be if ever, how she'd kill him if ever.... He reminded her that he got tested every six months, assured her he picked only the cleanest of lovers. Claudia pointed out to him that an AIDS test didn't *prevent* HIV transmission.

She said she was sick and tired of always being introduced to David's "new" boyfriends; she said she'd praise the day she got to spend time with an old one or, better yet, a permanent one.

She was right, but face it, David was attracted to trouble. He was attracted to men very much like himself, the kind of men that Claudia referred to collectively as "the Body Beautiful." They had broad shoulders, hard-muscled bodies, narrow hips, hairless torsos—David shaved himself, chest, arms, back, and neck, in order to be hairless. They wore baggy jeans and tight t-shirts, had brown eyes and dark, close-clipped hair and trim goatees. They knew they were good-looking. They worked hard at being good-looking. Hours in the gym, hours in front of the mirror. How Claudia had teased him that morning as they got ready to spend their first full day in D.C.! "Four," she had said inexplicably, so that David was curious enough to follow up on it. When he asked *Four what?*, she said, "That's your fourth visit to the bathroom this morning." She had been ready in less than thirty minutes.

So Claudia was the last friend he had told. He had waited almost two weeks after finding out. He had avoided her; he refused to respond to her e-mails or join her for breaks or meet her for a drink after work. It broke his heart: She thought she had done something to offend him. She asked him if she had. Finally, he invited her to step outside the library with him. He walked her all over the building. They ended up behind the cafeteria. And as soon as he had verified that they were alone, he told her outright, said the words. *I've tested HIV-positive*. Her face went hard and mean, and he found himself afraid of her anger, afraid of her lectures. He babbled to her what the doctor had told him. But her first words stunned him: "I hope you've been tested again." Yes he had; he had indeed. Then she called him a dumb fuck. She looked at him and said, "That's it in a nutshell. You're a dumb fuck." It was as harsh an indictment as she had given him.

His next test came back negative. Every test in the past twenty months—and there had been at least a dozen of them—had come back negative. Four different doctors had told David his bloodwork was negative, had assured him that he must have just had a false positive. When the big test, the expensive one, the least error-prone, the be-all and end-all of AIDS tests, had come back negative, Claudia had taken him out for margaritas, had toasted him, had said, "I'm so glad you're negative." They laughed at the pun. She laughed until she cried. She told him she

never wanted him to give her that news again. "I was so pissed at you," she said. "I'm still pissed at you. But I figured what you needed was understanding." She punched him in the arm harder than she ever had. "Now what you need is a drastic behavior change."

He could have sworn he heard his name called. It was creepy.

He looked for Claudia, spotted her in the distance. She was focusing her camera; it seemed to be pointing at him. He shouldered past people to get to her—families, gay couples—and was annoyed to find her still crying. "What's next?" he said. "I'm done with the quilt." He faced the Washington Monument. Six o'clock. He headed toward it.

He came to a stop in front of a young couple with twins in a stroller. They were blocking his way. He waited for them to move. They were looking at a panel. He heard Claudia's whisper too near his ear: "Excuse me' might work. Here, let me show you how it's done." She sidled in front of him. "Pardon me," she said to the family. They wheeled the stroller out of the way. "See?" she said when they were past. "With a little kindness, you could probably part the Red Sea."

"It's faster the other way," David told her.

On the way to the Holocaust Museum, he confided to her how disappointed he was in the quilt. He hadn't seen anyone who appealed to him. He wanted some eye candy, he said. He hadn't seen anything he liked, though. So many gay men, so few of them worth a second look. It was a damned shame.

Claudia made no reply, and David realized she wasn't walking beside him. He stopped suddenly and looked over his shoulder in time to see her raise her sunglasses and mop at her eyes with a crumpled Kleenex. "I took a picture of you," she said, "when you weren't looking. I'm going to make you a copy of it. It's the only way I want to see you on that quilt."

"Of course," he said. He couldn't think of anything else to say. He was aware of the sound of the names, the endless list of names being read. The distance made them faint and indistinct, a buzzing in his head. He was glad when Claudia spoke again; her voice covered the noise.

"You dumb fuck," she said. She punched him in the arm. She started crying really hard.

Fiction by Jill Russell

The Silver Jet

It was about the time my parents' marriage was officially being declared dead and I was busy falling in and out of passionate love at the age of fifteen that my brother became a rock star from Reese, Mississippi. My brother had escaped, and he was on his way to stardom, without so much as a wave back to us.

Reese. Population 2, 402, at last count. Within the city limits, there are 24 churches. "A Good Christian Town," the signs say. Of course, if you get a little bit farther into town, you'll see the other signs: the sun yellow ones with huge red letters saying "JESUS IS LORD. HE IS COMING SOON. BE PREPARED." And then: "GOD'S GONNA SAVE US. IS HE GOING TO SAVE YOU?"

My family, the Beddings, have made their home in Reese for as long as the town's been in existence. Apparently my grandfather, my father's father, a gruff old man who loved to call me by the wrong name, once owned the grocery store, hardware, auto parts store, a used car lot, cement company and 1,236 acres on which he had a beef farm. Then as he grew older and grew bored with Reese, as anyone in their right mind would do, he sold it off, piece by piece. This made quite a fortune, or at least for these parts, and he bought a Winnebago, in which he and my Grandmother Emily drove back and forth between Reese and their newly constructed beach house in Gulf Shores, Alabama, until they both became so decrepit that my father decided it was time for them to sell the old Winnebago too. My father said they were liable to kill someone, if they hadn't already and just forgotten to tell us about it. I think that was his idea of a joke.

My grandfather died a year ago, a month after my seventeenth birthday, and now my grandmother sits in her dark house waiting to die too. She does nothing but watch *Wheel of Fortune* and crochet tiny sweaters for the dolls I haven't played with in years. Every week or so, I go to visit her. We sit in the dark living room and she asks me about school and my brother, and why my parents didn't come along. She doesn't remember they're no longer married. Sometimes she shivers and asks me to build a fire in the fireplace, saying she's about to freeze. I remind her that she doesn't have a fireplace, and I get her a sweater, kiss her on the cheek, and drive home.

I am Jenny Bedding, my brother is Jimmy, and my father is Johnny. My mother is Louise, and I once heard my brother say that her name, as compared to the rest of the family's, was a perfect example of our parents' incompatibility. I suppose he knew better than I did. He was six years older, and for the most part, I always assumed he knew better. When I was a kid, six or seven, he would lead me to the top of our grandparents' barn, the one we were forbidden to enter. It hadn't been used since long before our births and had fallen into disrepair. There were hornets' nests everywhere, and the top floor was liable to fall in at any second. Jimmy would instruct me to follow him; only he knew which parts were safe. We walked in straight lines across the beams, so as not to fall headlong through the decaying floor planks. The beams led to the triangle, the gaping hole through which we peered at the tin roofed house and all the land that surrounded it. Our heads dared to slip past the edge of the hole only a little, enough to be blinded by the sun for a moment, the sky close to us and the ground a mile away. Jimmy took my hand and whispered, "You'd best keep your mouth shut about this, Jenny. They don't need to know. They can't see us here. This is the only place where we can be bigger than them."

And I guess it was. For me anyway. I was the softspoken one, the cautious one, my bolder brother's shadow. My father hated my quietness, my deliberateness. He believed himself

to be quite passionate, and passion, he thought, required vocalization. As for my random bouts of sobbing at the drop of a hat, that wasn't passion, he said. That was whining, another example of me being the baby. "The only time you open your damn mouth," he'd mutter as he plopped down into the sinking recliner, "is to let out one of those God forsaken whines."

Unfortunately, my boyfriends seemed to share my father's opinions of me. One month still stands as the longest, although if you add them all up, you get closer to a year and half, which sometimes acts as a consolation of sorts. Not that my ex-boyfriends believed themselves to be overwhelmingly "passionate". Most had little idea of what the word actually meant, much less what place it had in their lives. (I maintain that the same could be said of my father.) They all grew quickly impatient with me, my silent stares and sudden outbursts, and disappeared one after the other.

Andy was my favorite, and the closest to making it over a month. A month and a week, but I don't count the last week because he wouldn't speak to me. He played soccer on the high school team, and although I never knew what position, I knew he was number 14. He was taller than me, which I liked because I was 5'8", and his hair was softer than any boy's I'd ever felt. I liked him because he let me lean down with my head on his leg and operate the pedals of his car with my hands, and because he didn't try to unzip his pants while my head was in his lap. He said that he liked that I didn't kiss his ass like the other girls; he liked that I wasn't always saying stupid things. I took that as a compliment. I loved Andy for his soft hair and his hands that stayed away from his zipper, but after a month I started sobbing because he didn't get a goal, and because I thought he wanted to kiss me too much, and because he didn't pick up my books once when I dropped them. So Andy decided that he didn't love me for anything, and that was the end of him.

My mother told me once that I was too much like her, that if I wasn't careful I was gonna be swept away by a sinful man. Apparently, my father was qualified as such, although I always imagined a sinful man to be suave and good-looking. My father was neither. I certainly wouldn't have considered him to be Godly, which is what my mother came to want. She insisted that was what she had always wanted: a good, kind man, respectful of the Higher Powers. She said she was simply entranced for the half hour or so it took to be legally married, put under a spell by his motorcycle and silver glitter helmet. As for the whereabouts of her intentions during the fifteen minutes or so it took for my brother and me to be conceived, she always remained without comment.

My mother relied on the Lord for inspiration and guidance. Her need and acceptance of His guidance usually varied from day to day, depending on whether my father had come home the night before, or whether his girlfriend had called for him, under a false and ridiculously transparent name like Crystal, or for the more practical ones, Irene. On good days, when my parents must have made love the night before, or my father was acting the way I imagined he acted twenty-two years ago, my mother sang hymns in the kitchen. She sometimes called her friends from the First Baptist Church, her only friends. And she would gossip as much as she ever did, not very much. But she smiled on those days, even if it was somewhat vacant and wistful. On bad days, she heard the thunderous voice of God in her thoughts, in every room and every movement. On those days, she would read aloud to me from the Bible until she had sufficiently calmed God's persistent nagging.

As the summer progressed, bad days became more and more frequent. By early July, I could occasionally hear her reading scriptures aloud in the kitchen long after my father had

slammed the door in her face. She became quieter around me though, calmly going about her various activities while I watched *The Love Connection* or, on my rare intellectual days, *Jeopardy*. Although she always had the Bible at her side, she read it to me less and less, except to occasionally shout out a random scripture that she felt applied to my life. You could sometimes see it when it was a bad day, without her having said a word. Then, her bedroom door was locked for hours, and my dinner was Lucky Charms.

I hid in my room on those days, or went on my bike into downtown to sit in front of the A&P and read *Cosmopolitan* or *The National Enquirer*. Sometimes, my brother would let me go with him to work; he had gotten a job driving a UPS truck, and I would ride with him all day, reading my magazines and hopping out to throw packages onto people's porches and ring doorbells in the sweltering summer heat. The UPS truck didn't have air-conditioning; I suppose they thought it didn't need it with the open door. There was only one seat, so I sat on the larger boxes to keep from burning my legs on the ridged aluminum floor.

Jimmy was never home; he had rented a small house right outside of Reese with a couple of friends from high school. He had a cheap guitar from J.R.'s Discount Music that he planned to sell once he could afford the one he really wanted: a Silver Jet. I didn't know that guitars had names, but I listened with wide eyes. "Always trying something new and using my damn money," our father had said, in his truly passionate style. But unlike me, Jimmy was old enough to leave, so he packed a couple of bags and was out of the house by the next afternoon. He would come by during the day, when our father wasn't there and Mom was locked in her room with the Bible or occupied in the kitchen, and sit with me in my room, showing me new records he'd gotten, telling me about Nerve Bible, the band he was in with his friends. "You just wait, Jenny. One day, soon...I'm getting out of here. Mississippi's making me crazy. And then I'm gonna come get you too, and get you out of here before..." He would stop there, on the days when he talked about leaving like it actually might happen. I was used to his talk.

Jimmy was the only one who ever saw my various boyfriends, or even knew of their existence. Our father was only concerned with his family and the ways in which we related to him, and my mother, well, she knew of one or two, the ones whose names I accidentally mentioned, but those names barely entered into her world. Jimmy knew them all, if not personally then by word of mouth. Andy may have been his favorite as well, because he's one of the few that Jimmy ever actually mentioned to me. However, since he knew most of my boyfriends, most of my boyfriends also knew him; and since he was at least four years older than most of them, they were afraid of him. I lost several boyfriends due to Jimmy. He never actually did anything, but in Reese, news traveled faster when it hadn't actually happened, so the news of my brother's attack on my former boyfriends would reach their ears and they would be gone. I never got angry. Most of the boyfriends I lost--Evan, Jason, Eric, Ben--tended towards the loose zipper type, so I said goodbye to them gladly.

David was a year and a half older than me and drove a dirty blue Buick. He wrote poetry and liked to use big words so that he could watch my face when I didn't know what they meant. When I looked the words up later (something he never would have given me credit for), I often realized he hadn't used the word correctly. I never told him of his mistakes, although I probably should have. His hair was the color of coal and hung to his chin, and when he shook his head, it swung in a circle around his face. He smelled like Ivory soap, and he let me wear his sweaters. I loved his eyes, the softest green, because they always loved me, even though his mouth was usually telling me that I should read Shakespeare instead of *Cosmopolitan* and that I needed to be

more outspoken. But after three and a half weeks, his eyes wouldn't look at me anymore, so I decided that was the end of that too.

In late July, when we sometimes went camping up in Tennessee, my mother decided that they needed to go talk to someone. A counselor, to be specific, a good Christian one who would lead them down the path to salvation and loving relationships. When I told Jimmy of the latest development, he rolled his eyes and said, "They should have been led down the path to annulment." I nodded and looked at the pink carpet. Jimmy reached to change the record, which had come to an end and was making that scratchy, whirring noise like something dragging from a car. "Don't worry about it, Jenny," he said. "We'll see what happens."

The night of their first and last meeting with Dr. Carlisle, I had been sitting on the front porch playing clock solitaire, the most impossible card game in the world to win. Jimmy had taught me how to play a few months before and I was hooked. It's a funny game, because you'll catch yourself thinking that you're winning, when all along it's nothing but luck and you can lose before you know what's happening. And as soon as you can shuffle the cards, they're dealt out again, you with your fingers crossed, thinking to yourself that this time the fourth King will be the last card, and then you'll win. I never thought about whether I would keep playing if I did win one time, because I had never won.

This particular evening, it was about an hour before sunset, but still hot enough I didn't want to move from the shelter of the porch awning. The sun sat on the top of the trees and the yard was still, not even the tiniest bit of wind. It was that kind of heat where you walk into it and it feels like you can't move. The bees in the Bradford Pear were going crazy, swarming all around and up and down the tree, so I was sitting on the other side of the porch. I've always been afraid of bees. I was stuck in a clock solitaire mood after what Noah had pulled that afternoon. Jimmy had been by for about an hour, to sit on the porch with me. We played a few games of Crazy Eights, and he told me about Nerve Bible. They'd gotten booked somewhere in Athens, Georgia, a good six or seven hours away. I had never heard the band. I trusted Jimmy when he told me they were getting good; they had been messing around for a couple of years probably. They'd been playing little clubs, nothing farther away than Memphis or Birmingham. "I've almost got enough for the Silver Jet, Jenny! When I get it, I swear, it may actually be worth all those days in that damn UPS truck." His eyes got all squinty, and then they got wide again while he was talking, and then shrunk up, back and forth. His cheeks even started to get a little bit red just from talking about it, although it was hard to tell if that was just the heat.

He hadn't asked when they were going to be back, but when I glanced at my watch, he looked over at the Bradford Pear and said, slowly--he had calmed down again--"I better go, Jenny. Band practice at six." He paused as he was walking down the creaking steps. "You can call me tonight if you need to. I should be home about ten." That was his usual farewell, telling me I could call him if I needed to. It was habit as much as anything, just something to say. Jimmy had never been one for goodbyes.

When I heard the car door slam from the garage another hour later, I stood up slowly and walked into the house, up the stairs to my room and closed the door. The house was quiet, and I waited to hear the sounds of my father screaming, or hopefully, my mother singing "Just As I Am". But it seemed like there wasn't any sound. The sink was probably dripping, someone's dog barking, footsteps in the hallway downstairs, but maybe I was listening so hard that it all disappeared.

I waited and waited, getting up once and pressing my ear against the door, leaving it there until the whole right side of my face was red and pushed in, but there was still nothing. I dealt my

hand again and played game after game, twenty-five or thirty. My hands were trembling; they had been all afternoon and were slowly worsening, and I kept dropping the cards when I picked them up. At 9:30, I went to the phone and called Jimmy's apartment. On the fourth ring, he picked up.

"Jimmy?"

"Uh, yeah... hey."

"It's Jenny."

"I know who it is, Jenny," he laughed. "They get home yet?"

"Yeah, a couple hours ago, I guess."

"Are they freakin' their shit?" he almost chuckled.

I paused. "Well...if they are, they're being real quiet about it. Are you busy? You think you could come get me?" My voice felt like it was shaking almost as much as my hands.

"Uhm, yeah, I guess. How come? Is it them, or is it something else?"

"No, well, it's weird, I can't really explain, I feel weird. Can you just come get me?"

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

I sat on the fading pink carpet against the door and closed my eyes. There was still no sound from downstairs. My eyes were burning, making my eyelids feel like they were on fire, and my head was filled with lead. My hands shook steadily, and I lifted them to my temples, pushed hard on my skin, tried to push out why I was so scared, why I wanted to disappear.

Noah was beautiful, with little wire glasses that he wore when he read, and hair the color of pine shavings cut close to his head, and skin that had never seen a pimple. I loved his name, more than any of the others'. He had a dirt bike, a Kawasaki KDX something or other, that he rode in one of the fallow pastures near my house. Sometimes, when it wasn't too hot, I would go and watch him jump over dirt piles on the side of the dusty highway. He lived one block away from me, and would give me a ride home on the back of the green and blue bike. We had been on one real date, to see a movie in Batesville, and halfway through he slowly reached over and took my hand. That was the first time I noticed. His hands were perfect; long slim fingers and cut, clean nails, skin as soft or softer than mine. His hands made me want to do anything almost. But after a month, Noah got impatient and didn't reach so slowly anymore. He figured out that I didn't want him to put his hands and mouth and everything else wherever he wanted, and he decided I just needed some convincing. When he slapped me hard across the face and pinned me down, then kissed me like his sour tasting tongue was supposed to change my mind, I heard the zipper. My knee went up fast, and I left him curled in a ball on the hardwood. On the way out of his yard, I scooped up some dog shit in an empty flower pot and used a stick to smear it onto the seat of his bike.

Jimmy walked into the den about the time I did. Our mother sat on the couch, her Bible in her lap.

"I'm going over to Jimmy's for a little while, Mom," I said, the words thick when I said them.

She looked up at us. Her hands fluttered restlessly over the tissue thin pages of Proverbs.

"You both have your father's eyes," she said, slow and soft. "I never noticed how much, but with both of you standing there, right beside each other..."

Jimmy and I were quiet, allowing her to talk, or maybe afraid to interrupt. I think I was afraid; I don't know about Jimmy. It never seemed to occur to him to be afraid of things.

"Dr. Carlisle, we talked to Dr. Carlisle today. Johnny, your father and I," she said as she stood up, and her voice was strangely quiet, and smooth. "He, Dr. Carlisle, thinks your father needs some space. He's going to move out, just for a while." The fan whirred above us. "But I don't want you two to worry. Everything's going to be fine, just fine."

I nodded, hoping she was finished so I could run to Jimmy's car and leave, go to his apartment and listen to records, get him to show me a picture of the Silver Jet.

My brother was the one that moved when she collapsed to her knees on the carpet, tears flowing down her face, words coming out of her mouth like a lullaby, in her smooth, quiet voice. "It's going to be alright, it'll be alright, God will make it alright if I just have faith." Jimmy held her shoulders. He knelt in front of her, trying to console her, his words blending with hers in harmony. "It'll all be alright, Mom, everything's gonna be fine, it's going to be alright." My mother fell into his arms, a high wail coming out of her body. She was limp in his arms, tiny and frail. Her howls went on and on, breaking into deep breathed sobs, forming no words, cutting the silence and echoing through the halls. I closed my eyes and imagined it was noon, and the sun was melting onto the ground. There was no wind. The air was thick, solid, and I pretended that was why I couldn't move.

In the silence and sobbing, a motorcycle went by on the road, and I wondered if it was Noah, on his way to show another girl his perfect hands.

Two weeks later, when my father had gotten the apartment and emptied his closet, my brother still hadn't come back to the house. I was there little, riding my bike around downtown and sometimes all the way to Jimmy's apartment, usually coming home long after dark, on the days when I didn't sleep there. When I was at home, my mother did not see me. Aunt Debbie was there, making sure she ate and left the house some, or at least onto the porch. The only times she had gone out in the past two weeks was to go to church and to Dr. Carlisle. When I was home and my mother happened to be out of the bedroom, she would sometimes look at me distantly and say, "You can get dinner?" My father informed her that he wanted a divorce; he was already planning to marry one of his girlfriends, and when I told Jimmy, he said nothing.

Noah had called me several times (He had gotten over his anger about the dog shit.), begging me to get back together, saying it would never happen again, that he had no right to hit me. I listened quietly each time until he had finished, and then hung up on him.

It was mid-August now. School would start in three weeks. Rain hit Mississippi, and the days were unbearably humid, the air floating in waves around me as I flew through Reese on my bike. At Jimmy's, I finally saw the Silver Jet in all of its precious glory. A Gretsch, he said, and by his tone I assumed that was a good thing. The case was thin; black leather with gold clasps securing the contents. And when he opened the case, I understood why my brother had been dreaming for so long. The surface of the guitar was smooth and untouched silver glitter. When he held it in his lap, the top edge went up in a small curve, then down and up again into a bigger, rounder curve, forming the silhouette of a pregnant woman's breasts and belly. Jimmy's eyes widened again, looking at the instrument cradled perfectly in his arms. "You wanna hear something?" he said. He played for a moment, and stopped.

"Jenny?"

"Why'd you stop playing, Jimmy? C'mon, keep going."

"Jenny, we're gonna make a record. Somebody heard us play in Athens and they want us to make a record with them. But..."

"But what? That's what ya'll wanted, right?"

"Jenny...I'm leaving. We have to move to Atlanta. All the guys. I wanted to tell you, but I didn't.... I don't know." He was fiddling with the strings of the Silver Jet, his teeth gnawing on his bottom lip.

"Wait. What? When?"

"Next week. We've already got an apartment and everything."

I pulled my legs up to my chest and held my shins. Jimmy's room was tiny; if two people sat with their backs against the farthest walls, their feet could almost touch. If I had scooted back, I would have run into the pile of books and magazines, old records and dirty clothes. But I didn't want to be in Jimmy's room anymore; I didn't want to feel him looking at me, waiting for me to say something, just like everyone I had ever known, always looking at me and waiting for me to say something. Jimmy had gotten his dream, and in a week would say goodbye to this town that made him want to go crazy, probably never to see it again.

"You're not ever going to come back, are you, Jimmy?"

He looked at me and I swear, even now I swear to God, I saw tears.

"I don't even know if I could, Jenny."

I nodded, and for the first time in my life, sitting there in that cramped room, I felt like I wanted to cry and couldn't bring myself to. I think maybe that then I realized what I had known for as long as I had known him; that Jimmy was more than I was, that he had been born my brother almost out of luck, and that he would be gone before I could try to stop him. I rode home slowly, letting the soft evening rush past my ears and blow in circles around me. I cried, and I meant it.

When Jimmy left a week later, it was my sixteenth birthday. Three times in that week I had ridden halfway to Jimmy's and turned around. Only once had I made it all the way there, and then I simply stood in the driveway, staring at Jimmy's car until I had memorized the license plate and every dent on the fender. I had gone back to Reese without even knocking on the door. I was the only one there to say goodbye to him. I sat on the steps of his apartment building and watched him load his belongings into the trunk of his car, while I played game after game of clock solitaire. Jimmy said little. When I stood and handed him the last item to be packed into the car, his beautiful Silver Jet, he looked at me quickly and mumbled, "I'm sorry, Jenny." The days were slowly getting shorter, and as he hugged me once, handed me his address and drove away, the sun was beginning to set. I watched his car for a few blocks, until he turned onto Baker Street, which would take him to the interstate and pull him into another world, far away from here.

I think about that day, about whether I could have made him stay if I had tried. I think about why I barely noticed when my father disappeared from my life, and why it killed me so much to watch Jimmy be swept away that Mississippi summer.

I'll tell you this much. Andy was the closest I have come to true love, and maybe David was the closest to real love, where slowly, ever so slowly, his eyes don't look at you anymore, and you either live with that or keep looking for someone who will keep looking at you. And if I could somehow pick up my brother and change him just the tiniest bit, and sit him down somewhere with a name like Noah and never having heard of Reese, Mississippi, then he would be the only man I've met yet that I could ever marry. But he is my brother, and he's gone away with his Silver Jet and his rampant dreams, the dreams that my parents may have had, that I have, that may or may not come true. He's my brother, Jimmy Bedding, the wonderful rock star from Reese, Mississippi. He's the brother that I have not seen in over two years, who four times a year writes me letters giving scant descriptions of the places he goes, the places he is moving to, the brother

whose name you probably hear more than I do. I tell myself that maybe, someday, he will call me out of the blue, come get me and take me away, like he promised the summer before he flew away to stardom.

Fiction by Len Sugar

Ratter

Peggie poured gasoline from the ten gallon jerry can down the shaft, flooding the mine fifty-five feet below. Agile and strong for a man his age, he moved quickly despite his wooden leg, tossing the empty metal can precisely where the others lay, taking another filled to the brim. He continued pouring. Heavy acrid fumes engulfed the hot Australian night, punctuating the eerie stillness. Stone-faced opal miners stood silent, their heads bowed, their hearts cold, their decision ordained, as the trapped ratter below begged for mercy.

With the last jerry can emptied, Peggie spat down the shaft: "If you believe in The Maker, ask for his forgiveness."

Deftly he struck the match on the wood of his leg and stepped back before tossing in the tiny flame. From up the shaft a column of flames erupted to singe the stars and smother the thief's final plea.

"May God have mercy on your soul. Be thankful that Jesus Christ our Lord forgives thieves," said Peggie, crossing himself.

Into the burning hole a bulldozer pushed mullock heaps of sandstone, soft clay, toe-dirt, opal dirt and bits of opaline. The work completed, several pickups, stacked cab to bed with opal miners, were driven to the Lightning Ridge pub, "the Gem Stone."

A dozen miners pushed open the lounge doors and bellied up to the bar. Twenty others rounded up sundry chairs and tables for a brief wake. Stuart Smart and his cousin, Lloyd G. Nelson, pulled up two chairs at the far end of the far table.

"You feeling crook, Stuart?" asked Lloyd.

"No, I'm okay -- just a little shaky. I haven't seen a man burned alive before."

"It's the law, Yank," Peggie said, sitting at the next table. He angled his chair towards to Stuart: "Catch a ratter, kill him. No judge. No jury. No mercy. Says the miner's law. That's how we warn thieves who are of a mind to dig in another man's claim. It's been the law for a hundred years. Us opal gougers obey the law: We dig by it. We live by it. We die by it." He pointed a calloused finger at Stuart. "You'd best remember that, Yank."

"The man was a thief, not a murderer," said Stuart.

Lloyd stared at his cousin and walked off with the old miner.

A pall of melancholia enveloped Stuart. He thought of home, New York City, Manhattan, bright lights -- day and night. Longed for the crushing weight of the crowded streets and subways.

Eyes closed, he envisioned theater marquees and restaurant signs. He ached for the smell of spaghetti and meatballs, Peking Duck, gefilte fish with red horseradish, spanakopita, chocolate Italian ice, potato knish with mustard, New York cheese cake, foot-long Nathan's hot dog on a bun with mustard and sauerkraut, bagel and lox with a slice of Bermuda onion, hot pastrami on rye with a side of potato salad, and a bag of burnt chestnuts on a cold winter's day -- tastes sold on any street, from Brooklyn to Staten Island.

"Hey, Yank, you, Stuart," said blind Bluey Boucher, "Come join us."

Stuart moved closer to the man, touching him on the shoulder: "How are you, Bluey?"

"Right, mate. Where's your beer," he asked, feeling for a glass.

"It's on the way."

The publican and his wife, with help from two miners, plunked down four trays crowded with schooners foaming with beer. "Somethin' to eat, gents? The kitchen's closed but the Mrs

can wrangle up a bite, I reckon: meat pies, pasties, sausages."

The order taken, the publican and his wife returned to the kitchen; the miners returned to their prattle and complaints. Stuart, listening to the eastern Europeans, New Zealanders, Canadians, Englishmen, and Australians, realized that he and his cousin were the only Americans in the pub. He became nostalgic. He thought about the recent presidential election Richard Nixon had won. He considered phoning his parents to say hello and ask for a temporary loan. But he could not. On the Ridge a man depended on himself, made it on his own, was fair dinkum. He lived by the rules of the Ridge, an inviolable code -- every man for himself. Yet in times of need, danger, or defense the men stood shoulder to shoulder like some mystical phalanx. Immutable rules or romantic ideal, the miner's code saved many a down and out opal gouger from starvation or worse and provided him with a ticket home or stake to a new claim.

Stuart was too proud and independent to ask for help, especially from his parents. Hadn't he on his own graduated from the University Magna Cum Laude and won an account executive job with an international advertising agency. Yet his parents remained ever diligent in their quest for him to reach the top, exploiting family, friends and business contacts. Stuart rejected their contributions, thwarted every attempt they made. Why won't they accept me as an intelligent and able person who can succeed on his own? he asked himself. But the answer, he knew, were too pat, too unpleasant, truths he couldn't look square in the eye.

When just a kid trying out for little league baseball, he remembered, his father and mother wined and dined the coaches to secure him a place on the bench. Were all his childhood victories as hollow, a series of lies? he wondered.

On the Ridge he had no family but his cousin, Lloyd, whom he once believed was a stand-up guy, someone to depend on. Lloyd is blood, he had thought, and his father is my uncle, my father's brother. But feelings between the cousins have been strained since Lloyd postponed the merging of their two claims.

During the past year Lloyd struck several valuable pockets of black opal, which he sold to the Canadian buyers. Stuart, however, uncovered color of marginal value: stones that didn't face (show color from only one angle), and mug stones (poor quality opal not worth the cost of grinding and cutting).

Money running out, Stuart became desperate, innovative. To tourists he sold mug stones as quality gems, provided tours of empty mines for a dollar a head and licensed noodlers to fossick in molluck heaps for a half share of whatever they uncovered. His entrepreneurship was good old American know-how, ingenuity, marketing smarts, he told his Australian and European mates.

What he had become was a hustler, a New York hustler, no different than the hustlers on the streets of Manhattan or Brooklyn or the Bronx, shuffling walnut shells and tantalizing suckers to risk a dollar to find the pea; selling urbane New Yorkers Rolex watches made in China and directing naive tourists to alleyway discount stores for his percentage off the top.

Oftentimes guilt overwhelmed him. Yet he clung to his pride even as he grew more desperate. Adamant to accept nothing from his parents, resolute to refuse from Lloyd sustenance to maintain life or a breathe of air to breathe, Stuart was determined to succeed on his own. Lloyd, like Stuart's parents was the enemy, an opportunist, an exploiter who remained as smug and smarmy as the day he and his family returned to New York after living down under.

"We'll dig up opals as big as oranges," Lloyd had said, working to recruit him.

"You're bull shitting me, Lloyd."

"No, coz, black opals are mined like diamonds," he said.

Naive, foolish, dreamer -- all of which and more Stuart was guilty. It was an honest guilt, an eager guilt, a willing guilt predicated on smoke, mirrors and wishful thinking motivated by his desire to break free of his parents, his friends, his ennui.

"I've gotta give my boss two weeks notice, sell my apartment and dispose of my things. That'll take time. I don't know if I can meet your deadline, Lloyd."

Beautiful Australian women, nude beaches and an indulgent lifestyle bursting with lust, luxury and lassitude was considered a fair trade by Stuart for his cushy job, unlimited expense account and bachelor apartment on the upper east side.

The myth now disabused, Stuart, virtually penniless, having quit his job and sold his worldly goods, was now a filthy, sweaty opal gouger, the luckless owner of an unproductive hole in the ground in a godforsaken region of terra firma in the southern hemisphere.

Bush, brush and box trees dotted the landscape. Red dust as fine as talcum powder covered his clothes, peppered his eyes, nose, mouth and ears and crept into private body parts. Stuart sought relief each evening in bore water spewing out from mother nature at a cool 125 degrees Fahrenheit, water especially refreshing after digging in a cold shaft instead of noodling for bits and pieces of color in the 105 degree temperature.

Stuart stood with the miners as they concluded the wake, clinking glasses and shouting for more beer.

"May that bloody bastard have a grand time in hell," Bluey said.

The miners muttered in agreement.

"It's easier sinking a shaft than drinking a beer," said a tall Australian, ignoring the solemnity.

"Noodling. You're wanting eyesight like a bloody hawk," said Peggie.

"Noodlin'! Wet puddin'! Bulldozers! Them's not the ways of an opal gouger," said a redheaded man.

Stuart drank his third beer and slipped slowly into reverie.

"Some call bulldozers progress. Bullshit--"

Lloyd shook Stuart awake: "Pay up coz. It's time to go home."

Stuart, sleepy-eyed, dug into his pocket and pulled out his remaining cash to pay his share. He noticed Bluey struggling with a wad of bills.

"Let me help you, mate," he said.

"Thanks, Yank. I can usually feel the denomination, but not today. Drank too much piss," he replied, handing him the money.

As Stuart pulled a tenner from Bluey's roll, he palmed a twenty and slipped it into his pocket. Immediately he felt the weight of his conscience, squeezing, pushing, pulling -- tearing at the side of his brain where guilt resides.

"Confess. Confess. reveal your guilt," said the voice in his head.

"You right, mate?" said Bluey.

"Sure, what makes you ask that?" said Stuart.

"Instinct I guess. When you're blind there are things you just know."

Stuart retrieved the twenty from his pocket and added it to the wad he returned. He took the blind man's arm to help him up.

"Thanks, mate, but I can see bright lights and shadows. That's enough to get me to the door for my lift home."

The warm and comforting breeze outside helped abate Stuart's self-loathing. He climbed into Lloyd's red Ford pickup and feigned sleep for the fifteen miles to their humpy, a tin-roofed shack constructed from smooth stones and used lumber, with a dunny and a makeshift kitchen

outside in the open. The door, rough hewed, remained ajar, an invitation to all passersby. Three lone front windows, smallish, lacking glass, shuttered and screened, thwarted mosquitoes, flies, ticks and other critters that couldn't find their way in through the door.

Inside the one-room, each man silently slipped into his own section. Furniture was scant and second-hand, purchased from bankrupt miners, many of whom fled the Ridge to avoid creditors, some of whom spent their final moments consuming alcohol before shooting themselves in the head.

Stuart plopped down on the bed of straw and lay awake waiting for his death dreams: he died nightly consumed by fire with no one but his cousin to wrap him in a ratter's grave without a kind or loving word.

* * * *

After a thick cup of morning java and a plate of rabbit stew, Lloyd left for his digs, while Stuart dawdled.

"I'll see you at the pub about noon. It's supposed to be a scorcher today. 110. That should dry up the remaining mud holes from the big rain. Any more frogs pop out of the dunny to bite your ass?" said Lloyd.

"The frog thing. He's always gotta taunt me about the frog thing," Stuart mumbled, recalling the incident.

It hadn't rained during the early months of the year; although, the average rainfall for the Ridge over twelve months was predicted at 17.88 inches. But in June, the month before the ratter burning, all eighteen inches fell continuously within one week. The excessive moisture engendered a larger than usual mosquito population, which attracted toads and frogs. It was during this part of the evolutionary cycle that Stuart made a night passage to the dunny, where he encountered several large, ugly frogs jumping up from the waste onto his buttocks. He remembered running from the dunny to the humpy.

Lloyd, however, recalls the incident as a comical tour de force and performed the joke for every person the cousins knew. Humiliated, Stuart waited for his revenge. Several days later thousands of poisonous snakes arrived to feed on toads and frogs. Stuart paid an aboriginal tracker fifty dollars to trap three death adders (whose venom can kill a man in sixty minutes), remove the poison glands and place the snakes in a pillow case for easy release.

Before Lloyd arrived at his digs the next morning, Stuart tossed the adders into the shaft. Within minutes of clambering down the ladder, Lloyd exploded out of the mine screaming for cover.

Stuart remembered laughing so hard he slipped and almost fell into his own shaft. He spat out the door and drove to his claim.

The gasoline powered electric generator illuminated all the passages but the section where Stuart had experienced a feeling of foreboding. Despite having uncovered a valuable stone at that exact spot, he changed locations -- yet, now, desperate for money, he returned to a sprinkling of dirt and rocks. Sensing a cave-in, he retreated from the tunnel as the sprinkle became a shower. "Crack!" "Crack!" "Crack!" The sharp whining and splintering of the load-bearing posts collapsing drove him to run for his life.

When the debris settled, Stuart inspected the damage and decided not to dig. Instead, he retrieved a rusted coffee tin from where it lay buried, pried open the lid and spilled out the contents. On the ground lay several pieces of opal, few of which showed good color. A solitary stone danced in the light; blood red pin points sparked hot. As an incentive for the Canadians to

purchase the parcel, Stuart had to package the poor quality stones with the one precious gem. He dumped them all into a pocket of his jeans and climbed the ladder to the surface and his beat-up Chevy.

Despite it was Saturday, the weeks busiest shopping day, the drive to town seemed faster than usual, but finding a parking space was difficult. Townies and miners poured from the pub, hung around shops, or stocked up on goods needed for the coming week. As he sauntered towards the Diggers Hotel, where the Canadian buyers worked, Stuart approached the smaller of two groups of miners.

"Bloody ratter must of been digging all night," said the tall Australian Stuart knew from the pub.

"He visited me a fortnight ago," said an old aboriginal.

Stuart listened to the men for a few minutes before moving on.

Peggie tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to a stranger surrounded by several men: "That bloke arrived yesterday and struck color today. Bloody lucky bastard. And now the poor wood duck is showin' off them stones like they was candy. Passing 'em around. Lettin' that mob look at 'em. Touch 'em. A mistake if you ask me. Somebody'll steal 'em for sure."

"Here, mate," said a man standing alongside Stuart, "Look at this here one. Lots of fire. He handed the red and blue-green gem to Stuart, who feigned dropping it as a ploy to switch stones.

* * *

Cash reserves gone, Stuart contemplated suicide but soon realized that a fifty foot fall down a shaft would break his legs or back but not kill him. Frustrated, indecisive, he returned to work his claim.

Digging began with little vigor. Each strike of the pick increased in fury, freeing nobbies shaped like flattened bulbs, nobbies slightly ribbed, nobbies encasing black opal.

"Holly Christ," he said, picking one up.

Excited, hands trembling, he wiped away the dirt and gently chipped a sliver from its dark surface. No color showed. He licked the spot with his tongue to draw out the fire. No color. He chipped the nobby again. No color. Enraged, he threw the worthless stone to the ground.

"Hey, down there," echoed a male voice from above.

Stuart froze. The rhythm of descending boots against wooden rungs engendered panic. Quickly, blindly, Stuart stuffed his pockets with junk nobbies to conceal his failure.

"Found a couple, hey, coz?" said Lloyd, kneeling to inspect two nobbies Stuart had overlooked. He brushed away the opal dust from the first and discarded it as worthless. He chipped the second and cleaned away the dirt before licking the exposed area. Nothing appeared but black potch, the genesis of black opal.

"Yep, cousin, you've got yourself a couple of worthless stones. Congratulations." He tossed the nobbies onto the ground. "With your luck, mate, you might consider returning home. But that's not why I'm here. Bluey is missing. The miners are gathering at my place to organize search teams. I expect you'll want to be included."

"Yes, I'll be right there."

"We'll be waiting on you, coz."

* * * *

Stuart and Peggie, comprising search team number ten, climbed aboard the old Chevy for the bumpy trip across the back roads to Deep Belahs.

"It's been a few years since I've worked this field," said Peggie. "Plenty of good color -- nothing big. No real money. If you work hard and have a little luck you can do all right."

Stuart reconnoitered: "Not much activity. Why'd Bluey choose to dig here."

"Lots of abandoned claims. Easy to stake one out. I heard he found a shaft with a ladder and windlass in place. Began digging that day," said Peggie.

"Must be a couple of hundred empty holes, assuming he fell into one. Maybe he wandered into the bush and was taken by dingoes," said Stuart.

They pondered the possibilities and concluded that Bluey must have fallen down a shaft. At first they worked as a team throughout the cool morning and into the hot afternoon. Each man took his turn climbing into derelict shafts, most of which Stuart and Peggie descend by rope, climbing hand-over-hand into dark, often, snake and spider infested mines.

As he searched, Stuart obsessed over Lloyd's visit. Lloyd had straight out implied he would not honor his promise to merge their claims. "I am too unlucky, he said. The man is a liar, deserves no respect, no consideration," said Stuart, climbing a rope.

"What did you say?" Peggie asked from above.

"Nothing, I was just talking to myself," said Stuart, who had decided to steal the gem opal from Lloyd's mine. For him the decision was inviolable, as if decreed by the miner's court.

Somewhere along three o'clock they paused for a break. Stuart motioned for Peggie to drink from the canteen: "We'd better split up. It'll be dark before long."

They divided the remaining shafts equally. Each man carried a seventy-five foot length of rope, flashlight, and a canteen of water. They synchronized their watches to meet in four hours and split up.

There are damn few places where Bluey might be trapped, Stuart thought. If he's not in his humpy, if he's not in town, he's gotta be on his claim.

The mine had been searched twice, first by the miner who discovered Bluey missing and then by Stuart and Peggie. To search the claim again was illogical, Stuart concluded but decided to search anyhow.

He traveled easily through the rabbit warren of a mine with the help of the electric lights. Stuart paused to rest. From where he stood he noticed that the tunnel continued beyond the lit bulbs. Flashlight in hand, he traveled the darkness until blocked by a wall of rocks and dirt.

"Cave-in," he said, feeling the wall as if to determine its size and bulk by touch. Stuart listened: dead quiet.

"Bluey, if you hear me, yell, make noise, do something, so I know you're here."

"Help. Help." said a distant voice from deep inside the wall. "I have little air."

Stuart gathered up a pick and shovel to dig out his friend. Air was running out: not a moment to waste, not time enough to call Peggie for help. Carefully, Stuart picked his way through the first foot of debris, working slowly, calling out encouraging words, calmly reporting his progress.

"I see you," Bluey said, his words clear and crisp. "I feel the fresh air."

Within minutes he was freed. His right arm appeared broken. Stuart concluded his right hip was also fractured, and he was suffering from shock and dehydration.

"I know you're hurting, Bluey, but I'll have to carry you out of here. The roof is about to give way."

Bluey tensed, biting his lip. Stuart easily shouldered the man, gently carrying him through the tunnels back to where the ladder awaited their climb. The pungent odor of perspiration filled the shaft. Stuart worked hard at breathing.

"I'll leave the canteen while I get Peggie to help me lift you up to the surface."

"Thanks, Yank," he said, sipping on water.

Fatigued, Stuart struggled to reach the top. He called Peggie. No answer. He scanned the horizon. The Chevy was gone. He called Peggie again but attracted only a distant kangaroo. He contemplated his predicament before climbing down.

"I don't understand, but Peggie's gone," said Stuart. "I'll have to carry you to the surface myself." He shouldered the blind man again, placing the flashlight in Bluey's hand. "Don't drop it. That's the only light I have to guide us to the surface. One slip and we're both goners."

His hands riddled with splinters from the antiquated ladder, Stuart continued climbing. With each step up, his legs grew heavier. He struggled with his load, shifting his weight. As they ascended, the air heated, increasing Stuart's fatigue, causing the tips of his fingers, toes and nose to numb. Bluey's breathing became labored. Stuart's survival voice told him to jettison Bluey. He pushed on.

Reaching the surface, Stuart gently lowered Bluey to the ground and then dropped onto a mollusk heap, stretching out his numb limbs stressed from the climb. Bluey's labored breathing worsened; his skin appeared cold and clammy.

Fearing for his friend's life, Stuart pressed the canteen against Bluey's lips: "Hang on, mate, I'll get you to town, but I'll have to carry you myself." He hoisted the blind man onto his shoulder once more and walked towards Lightning Ridge.

The young man from New York City searched the heavens, silently seeking guidance, following the stars, trusting the laws of the universe.

Sweat mixed with swirling fine dust plastered his face and eyes with layer upon layer of red mud, oftentimes blinding him, causing him to lose his footing. But he regained his balance, defying the law of gravity, remaining on his feet -- advancing forward with Bluey moaning and struggling to hang on.

From out of the darkness headlights appeared. Stuart recognized his truck.

"Bloody hell, mate, looks like I found you in the nick of time," said Peggie.

He leaped from the truck and rushed to aid Stuart. They placed Bluey in the bed and drove straight for town.

"He's in bad shape. Hip and arm broken. Dehydrated, shock -- you've seen it before," said Stuart.

"What bloody well happened?" said Peggie.

"Cave-in. Pure luck that I found him."

They drove in silence, Peggie bursting with questions, Stuart taciturn, dedicated to his resolve.

"Drop me off here," said the Yank.

"Don't be bloody stupid, mate, you're a hero."

"Bullshit. Let me out," Stuart said, opening the door. It's payback time, he thought, Lloyd owes me. Peggie slowed the truck; Stuart jumped.

The moon scudded behind a cloud, leaving blackness in its wake. Stuart stumbled, groping the darkness, tripping, falling. He was in his cousin's mine, gasoline dripping, a plea for mercy on his lips. Startled by his own cries, Stuart awoke draped over the shaft in which the ratter was entombed. He thought he heard the man screaming but realized he hadn't heard the man speak since the match was dropped.

He climbed onto the mullock heap cropped and torn by the bulldozer, which stood as a monument to the law. He sat to watch the stars one last time and offered up to the gods of Lightning Ridge the nobbies from his pocket. Do ratters have a god? he wondered. He threw the nobbies hard against the dozer blade; each stone created a distinctive metallic sound.

Resolute, yet contrite for past transgressions, he apologized to God, lowering his head, closing his eyes in prayer. An incandescent moon burst through the clouds. Stuart's eyes opened to the glitter of fire-red points of light.

Essay by Marisa P. Clark

Fire

I worry about fire. I play *What If: What would I save first if the house caught on fire?* I always respond with the same two answers: my dog and my journal. The dog wouldn't take much effort; she obeys me, and she prefers being outside anyway. I would struggle, however, to get the journal to budge. It's no mere book, and it's no small collection of books, either. It's volume upon volume of them, 33 of them bound, and a thick, frayed batch of loose papers, all of which fill a steamer trunk. It's too heavy for me to lift; I'd have to drag it. I keep the steamer trunk near the front door, just in case.

On particularly phobic days, I take the *What If* game to an extreme: *What if the house caught on fire when I wasn't at home?* I refuse to think of Cheyenne's death—her happy innocence makes her seem indestructible. But it's all too possible—in fact, it's easy—for me to picture the journal a heap of ashes eleven years in the making. The thought horrifies me—my throat clenches; my stomach seizes up; my breathing becomes shallow. I want to take action to prevent such a catastrophe.

Anais Nin kept the volumes of her diary in a bank vault. That doesn't seem safe enough. I have it in my head that I'm going to photocopy the whole thing, some 10,000 or more pages, put the copy in its own steamer trunk, and ask a trusted friend to store it for me. That's been my plan for several years now. I'd better get with it.

Phobias are made things. I wasn't born with an irrational fear of fire. I learned it. Years of experience fed and intensified it.

My mother bought me my first diary when I was seven. Its pages had wide lines that easily accommodated my kid-big print. It was pink with a floral pattern and had a golden buckle-lock. Every day I wrote about the most interesting thing that had happened. One day, the most interesting thing that had happened was that my next-door neighbor Gregory and I went into the woods behind our houses, and he showed me his penis. I wrote that word, "penis." I panicked and ran away before I showed him what I called my "vagina." It was a brief paragraph. I don't think I actually described his penis. My entries were entirely plot-driven, all *action* and *event*. After I wrote it, I locked the diary and hid the key. Several days later, my mother came at me with the diary, spanked me for having gone into the woods with Gregory, called me nasty, and destroyed the diary. I'd had it all of a month.

On November 11, 1983, I was home from college for the weekend. I had plans that night to attend the Police concert with Bob Ivey. I'd been keeping a journal for several months—long, complicated, honest entries about myself and the 32-year-old woman I was in love with, who did not know the extent of my love. That diary had a gold satin cover with a maroon Oriental brocade; its pages were thin and silky and took ink without bleeding through. When I left for the concert, it was at the very bottom of my luggage, underneath clothing and makeup and shoes and textbooks and whatever else I couldn't live without. When I got home from the concert, my father was holding a cigarette in one hand and my journal in the other. The living room was cloudy with smoke. He cried that night—one of three times I've seen him cry. He told me I needed help. He told me he would send me to a psychiatrist to correct my homosexual tendencies. He told me we must never tell my mother. He'd gone looking for the diary, he said, because he feared I was doing drugs and having sex. (I wasn't. At 19, I'd never tried marijuana, and I was still very much a virgin, not just "technically.") I sat at the edge of the uncomfortable wooden

rocking chair and listened to him babble as he smoked cigarette after cigarette. All I could say was "Oh my god" and "Oh shit"—and every time I said "Oh shit," I worried that I was going to get in trouble for cursing too. The next morning, the day of his birthday, he woke up early and did the yard work. He made a pile of limbs and leaves. He lit a fire. He burned my diary. I watched its pages char and curl and burst into tall, bright flames. I cried. I didn't write again for almost a year.

That pair of episodes places bookends on my parents' repeated destruction of my writing. Growing up, I invented increasingly complex hiding places. I kept one yellow notebook under a neat stack of t-shirts. In it I'd created a male character my age who was lucky enough to be the boyfriend of all the girls I had crushes on. One day I opened it and found an entry in my mother's handwriting: *We need to talk about this*. In tenth grade, I invented an elaborate numerical code so that I could keep an honest diary. If it was ever found out, I never knew. I got tired of it. It slowed my writing, so I could never sufficiently say everything I had to say. And it took too much out of me to proofread and translate the numbers into words. As a college sophomore, I considered converting to Judaism. I bought a small blank book with a velvety black cover and took notes in it from library books about Judaism. I brought it home on weekends so that I could study it. It said nothing of my thoughts, fantasies, or aspirations, so I felt free to leave it out after studying it. I still have the stickie note my mother pressed onto the first clean page: "O Insidious One, I found your 'plant' and decided not to read it. Shame on you. Mother." Her foolishness gave me a good laugh; if she'd have dared to read it, she'd have never left the stickie note. Nevertheless, that invasion put an end to my note-taking about Judaism.

I am not sure what happened to my many attempts to begin keeping a record of my life. I always envision fire, though. My mother knows I keep a journal now. In fits of anger, she promises me that if I die, she won't read it—"it's just trash"—she'll burn it all. I have never doubted her word. No, I take that back. I'm sure she'll read it first. *Then* she'll burn it. It's the family's answer to problems. My grandmother, a genius at needlework, goes into rages when she makes mistakes; instead of tearing out the offending thread, she burns the whole piece. Burning mistakes, destroying embarrassments, makes it as if they never happened. My father burned my diary as if destroying it would make a heterosexual of me.

In the past 12 or 13 years, I've had several spells of absence from my family—no contact whatsoever. The first of these spells coincided with my living with my first lover. I mention her here because she was the one who inspired me to take up the pen again. She was my first *constructive* critic. She took the poems I offered her and crossed through line after line of abstractions, underscored concrete images and placed exclamation points beside them in the margins, gave me a clue about how to write a poem. Much more importantly, having her as my lover made me float through day after day with the certain that *I could have what I wanted*. Possibility became likelihood. Fantasy merged with reality. I was far too fascinated by this, my first full-blown sexual relationship—with a woman, at that, and better still, with a woman I was deeply in love with—to let it go unchronicled, unanalyzed. That's when I began keeping the journal that is now in my steamer trunk, the one I've never stopped writing.

During the times my parents and I are in touch, my mother sometimes says, "Your father and I have been thinking." Without fail, this sentence is followed by "We'd like to come for a visit." Then my mother tells me the date I can expect them to arrive. They insist on staying with me in my one-bedroom home.

By now, it is no secret that I am a lesbian. It is clear that this is not merely a phase I'm going through or a form of adolescent rebellion. However, any visit from my parents sparks a

protective instinct in me. Their coming is the equivalent of having my house set on fire. I begin cleaning immediately. Cleaning does not just involve mopping the floor and dusting the ceiling fan and the top of the refrigerator. Cleaning means concealment. Cleaning means arming myself against their invasions of my privacy.

I lock file cabinets and floppy disk holders. Of course I lock the steamer trunk too. Then I hide the keys. I box all loose scraps of paper—fiction attempts, correspondence with friends, work memos, doodles, newspaper clippings, every random piece of paper—and tape the box and hide it in a closet behind other boxes. I also check between the pages of every book on every shelf and remove any stray bits of paper I've used as bookmarks. I hide photographs in the same way. I don't have any truly offensive photographs. I just don't care to explain them. So they get boxed too, and that box gets taped and hidden too.

I didn't go through as intensive a cleaning-and-concealment ritual when my parents last visited me (this time at my invitation), because we had the use of a friend's house—Trish was out of town for the weekend. I borrowed a huge gym bag, big enough to fit myself inside, and loaded it to capacity with papers and photographs. True to character, my mother picked her way through Trish's house. She inspected Trish's photographs, thumbed through Trish's books, and read the notes Trish had attached to the refrigerator. And I felt myself safe inside the skin of the gym bag.

On the first full day of my parents' visit, my mother keeps bringing up the necessity of my having a will. She knows how it is now, to have to sort through a dead person's belongings and wait for the government to take its cut and then finalize the paperwork. "It's no fun, Ree," she says. Again and again, she tells me I need to have a will leaving everything to my father and her; doing so will "make it easy" on them when I die. Again and again, she narrows her eyes and says, "Because I don't want my cousins benefiting from your death. They're vicious people, Ree."

Finally I can't stand it any more. I'm not accustomed to having outbursts in front of my mother—I fear her punishment (another "made" phobia)—but at 32, I've finally had enough. I point out to her that that's the third time she's "buried" me that day and I haven't once heard a note of grief in her voice; all I hear is her worrying about what's going to happen to the piddly amount of money I have in savings. "You erase me," I tell her. (I'm talking off the cuff, really; I'm not yet conscious of the metaphor.) "It's like I don't even exist for you."

I tell her I don't like her habit of burying me. I tell her it feels as though she has a near-constant wish for my death. I dare to tell her about the will I wrote in 1991, the day I bought my Honda Civic. That day, in the middle of an esteem-crippling tirade about my being gay, my being too thin, my being too ugly to be loved, my mother had told me I needed a will. "If you die," she said, "I don't know who's going to get your car." The will I wrote that day said something like this: "If I die, it'll most likely happen while I'm driving the Civic, but I bequeath to my mother whatever is left of the car." When I tell her this, her mouth drops open. She stops gaping long enough to say, "That's a horrible thing to think." I tell her it's a horrible thing to wish death on me all the time.

When I'm calmer, I tell her it upsets me and makes me nervous to have to discuss my death with her. I remind her that if the natural order of the universe is followed—and I know the natural order of the universe is occasionally disrupted—she and my father will die long before I do. Calmer still, I suggest that we put an end to the subject. I tell her I'll be glad to arrange a time in the near future to have a logical discussion about what I want done in the event of my death.

Over the weekend, my father and I have the chance to spend some time alone. We have dinner at Manuel's, at his suggestion, while my mother naps. (It's safe to leave her behind. There's nothing of mine in Trish's house that she can snoop through.) My father brings up the matter of my having a will again. He's careful about it. He just wants me to know it's time I start thinking seriously about it.

I decide to confide in him. I remind him that his name or Mother's is on everything I own of any real material value—my Jeep, over \$300,000 in inheritance investments. I want Cheyenne to go to my friend Gail—and my savings too, for Cheyenne's care. I tell him this. Then I tell him about the journal, that it's to go to my friend Judy. I say, "Mother has repeatedly assured me that she'll burn it because it's trash to her."

My father looks into his plate. I look at the tanned top of his bald head. He mumbles something I can't make out. When he looks up, he's grimacing. He doesn't look at me. He takes a bite of his burger and chews frowning. His expression tells me he's heard it too. She'll burn it. She'll destroy the thing that is most beautiful and special about me. *Cremate me, I want to say. Burn my body when I die. Burn my body but not my words, not my journal. Let my journal stay and continue to be what it is to me now: proof that I've lived.*

Essay by Debra Dobkins

Maiden Ladies

It is time, the day I've been waiting for. I'm going back to the mountain.

My great-aunt Violet and I have gone every summer for as long as I can remember. We take great pains to get our suitcases ready for Grand-daddy's truck. She always gives me my favorite case, the little tan one with red stripes on it. We check my pink plastic purse: the lacy-looking black fan that Aunt Violet usually saves for funerals or revivals, my best white gloves with the little pearl buttons in case we go to Sunday school (although usually over on the mountain I don't have to go, which is my idea of real freedom), and the freshly ironed handkerchief with pink embroidered flowers. (Aunt Violet's is just like it except hers has blue flowers.) She keeps the Juicy Fruit because I can't be trusted with a whole pack.

My grand-daddy drives us over and then comes back in a month to get us because Aunt Violet can't drive. She's never wanted to learn how, she says, because riding in a car makes her head crazy. We stop on the way, just like we always do, at Mrs. Scales' dusty, crowded store that has all those cement birdbaths nobody ever buys out front so I can get a bag of lemon drops for the trip. Grand-daddy hates to stop once we start but Aunt Violet puts her foot down. She knows how I love lemon drops. I bet if she knew how to drive we'd get to stop at lots of places.

We're going to the mountain to stay at Aunt Violet's homeplace. She moved away when she was only three to live in the new house her daddy built, the house where she and I live, but two of her cousins still live in the old homeplace. They're maiden ladies, too. (Aunt Violet's mama and their mama were sisters who grew up together in that same house.) One of them, Claudia, is even older than Aunt Violet. Claudia is named after her father, Uncle Claude, but nobody ever calls her that, which I think is a shame since Claudia is a glamorous, romantic name. Everybody just calls her Claudie. She can't walk anymore because she has that same muscle disease that Aunt Violet has but Aunt Violet still walks just fine. Claudie gets around inside the house pretty good, though, in a little rocking chair with short legs that she scoots around in by shifting her hips and bottom.

The younger sister is named Clara, like the sad, pretty sick girl in *Heidi*, but nobody calls her that, either. Everybody calls her Clara Belle, which she hates but tolerates except when she signs her name just Clara. Clara Belle is beautiful with sparkly clear blue eyes. She has a tinkly laugh and whistles "The Tennessee Waltz"; sometimes she sings the words. I make up secret stories about a sweet, very romantic lost love I desperately hope she has. She's a nurse's aide at the hospital but mostly she just takes care of Claudie. The maiden sisters love Aunt Violet nearly as much as I do and call her Sis.

The house where Claudie and Clara Belle live is always called the old homeplace. It's the only house up there and it looks like they just carved a hole in the side of the mountain and tucked it right in. You have to take a long, twisty, dusty dirt road around and around the mountain and you can't miss the house once you find the road because the road ends at their front yard. The house is big and old, made of unpainted wood, with a front porch, side porch, and back porch. It has a tin roof that makes such a splattering, rattling, drumming racket in the rain that you'd think it's raining all over the world.

I love the yard. It's tiny and has no grass. Clara Belle sweeps the dirt clean every day. You can hear her whistling. Big old oak trees frame the house and yard in front and all around the rest of the house are just wild woods. It looks like the woods are gobbling up the barn and

the smokehouse, and the corn crib leans over nearly double like a crippled up old woman. Scattered about in the yard and woods are chickens, guinea hens, banty roosters, and, wonder of wonders, peacocks. It's a real disappointment to me to discover that peacocks are as mean as snakes and that they hate little girls.

There's only one cow left but Claudie still loves to churn her own butter so they keep her. She puts it in a little wooden mold that leaves wheat sheaves on top of the cake of butter. One summer, a cat gone wild had kittens out in the barn in the cow's straw. They hadn't even opened their eyes yet when the mama-cat ran off. We tried to save the babies by feeding them milk with an eye-dropper but they died anyway so I buried them in a shoebox and had a funeral for them. Maybe she'll come back and nurse her own kittens next time.

My favorite place on the mountain is the spring house where, before refrigerators, they kept their milk, butter, and cheese or anything else that needed to stay fresh and cool. It isn't really a house or even a building. It's rocks stacked to make a square in the side of the mountain and instead of a roof it has boards propped across the tops of the rocks. Honeysuckle, wild roses, and other vines grow across the boards and make a kind of live, green ceiling that blocks the sun out except for little slants that shine through. It's shady and minty and damp in the spring house and always smells clean and sweet. There are little, low, mossy stone walls that I use for benches and a creek with icy cold water that runs under one wall. The branch comes down from the very tip-top of the mountain and I imagine that it becomes a raging river roaring all the way to the ocean, which I have never seen. (Neither has Aunt Violet.) In the spring house, you can lift up a board that straddles two big rocks and dangle things in the water. Sometimes we put a watermelon in the feed sack tied to the board and let it nearly freeze before slicing it into fat, juicy wedges.

Even when it's so hot that the dirt in Clara Belle's yard bakes into hoe cakes filled with shimmering isinglass slivers, it's nice and cool and very secret in the spring house. It's the best make-believe place I know. It may be a fairy castle with a lovely maid locked up in it or it can be my perfect, cozy cottage where I have tea parties for elegant ladies with the little yellow cups and saucers and the teapot with roses painted on it that Clara Belle lets me bring outside.

The mountain is a magic place. There, everything in summertime is greener than green. The trees grow thick and lush and tall--hardwoods, too, not just pines. The briars and underbrush are so tangled and dense that you can't even see any patches of red ground, except in Clara Belle's garden. I know with a delicious and horrible shiver that millions of snakes must live here on the mountain--hidden, hidden. I have always wanted to go out to the spring house at night, lie on my back and watch the stars through the viney beams but I am too scared. It's the snakes' turn at night.

The rowdy sounds of crickets, katydids, and tree frogs nearly deafen, especially at night. After dark, too, you can hear the owls that roost in the barn and the whippoorwills whose calls always give me a lump in my throat even though I don't know why. On clear nights, the house is bathed in starshine and the stars seem so close and real that, if you really put your mind to it, surely you could touch the Big Dipper, at least from the top of the mountain. I am not allowed to climb to the top, though. I think one reason why is that it may be haunted. This is one of the most magical things about the mountain.

The story is that, once upon a time, there was a beautiful Indian maiden who was in love with the tribe's handsomest brave. They planned to meet on top of the mountain one night when the moon was full. But the loyal maid's daddy, the big chief, found out and refused to let her see her true love. The lovely maiden was heart-broken and in her despair she leapt from the top of the mountain to certain death below. (I'd like to think that when the brave found out, he

jumped too and joined his beloved for eternity, but I only made that part up.) Anyway, Clara Belle says that if you listen hard on wild, windy, full moon nights you might hear the Indian maiden's mournful cries. Lying in the child-size feather bed, I imagine that along with the wind whistling through the creaking old house and the steady striking of the clock, I hear long, sad wails and soft, low sobs. I wonder what the Indian maiden's name is, but nobody seems to know.

Nearly thirty years later, it was time to return to the mountain. I just started driving in that direction one dreary December afternoon and kept on till I came to the road. It wasn't dirt anymore and subdivisions dotted the mountain, which seemed more like a hill. There it was, though, the old homeplace still at the end of the road. I'd never seen it in winter.

The house was a rickety shack, little more than a hovel, and tiny. Everything looked so bare, frozen and poor, like those pictures of poverty-stricken Appalachia, the kind that beg for pennies a day to save a child. I scarcely believed this could be the place, but I knew it was.

The magnificent oaks wore gnarled gray twigs for limbs and few pines colored ever-green dashes in the woods fringing the house. The barn was a pile of rotting lumber; the corn-crib and smokehouse gone. Clara's prized square of clean dirt was a jumble of yellow clumps of grass amid straggly weeds. I couldn't make out where the garden was supposed to be. The front porch sagged and slumped; I'd never noticed before that its posts were whitewashed tree trunks skinned of bark, stripped of branches. A wheelchair ramp tacked onto the side porch was stacked with flower pots and fruit jars. No peacocks strutted.

The place looked deserted. No lights flickered from the windows even though the afternoon was as dark and dim as twilight. I'd made a mistake, should've called first.

A huge, homely mutt barked ferociously with no sign of stopping and, scared to get out of my car, I considered backing right back out that paved road when I saw a face peep from behind the kitchen curtain. I sweet-talked the monster who rolled over and slobbered all over me when I patted his massive head. I gingerly crossed the creaking, slanted porch and called out, "It's just me."

Slowly the back door opened just a crack and a blue eye squinted out, then crinkled into a smile.

"Why, Gal, you better come on in here. It's too cold to be a-standin' out there and you with a bare head! You'll catch your death." The voice was unmistakable, tinkly sounding.

Clara flung open the door and enfolded me in a tight hug. She wore an old-timey checked house dress, tattered but clean, and a ravelled up men's sweater. The smile was the same and her hair hadn't turned either--still coppery with just the lightest dusting of gray. Clara had stayed beautiful but she'd shrunk on a scale with the house and the mountain.

The rich savory smell of food cooking flooded out into the sharp air. She shoved the warped old door shut behind us.

"Just let me get a look at you, Honey. You lookin' too skinny, Miss. I bet you ain't eatin' enough to keep a fly's strength," Clara fussed, holding me at arm's length. Suddenly she dropped my hands and flew across the uneven, uphill kitchen floor.

"Lawsie me, I'm a-burnin' up the supper!"

She startled me, using the tail of her sweater as a pot holder for the sizzling skillet of sausage she set off the burner. Good heavens, this old place would catch like wildfire. At least it was an electric stove, not the blazing wood-burning cookstove she used back then.

I noticed a child, a girl of four or five with dishwater hair stringing down the back of her red jumper, sitting at the old scrubbed pine table, eating a hunk of fruit stack cake. Spicy dried apples smeared brown on chin, cheeks, and corduroy. She wore cowboy boots.

It was her niece's littlest girl. Kept her three days a week, Clara said. Quit her hospital job when Claudia got so sick that last time.

I leaned in close to the table and the grubby child.

"Why, hello there, Sweetie. That's an awfully pretty dress and where did you get those boots? I used to stay here, too, when I was little. Aren't we lucky to get to come to the mountain?" I was crazy about little girls, probably because I had never had one.

The child simply stared at me with clear green eyes and stuffed more cake in. Didn't say a word, just acted like we weren't there, and kicked the toe of her boot rhythmically on the wobbly table leg.

"Is it like you remember?" Clara kept asking as I walked around the dusty, cluttered old place.

"Yes," I lied.

"Oh, yeah, Hon, I been a-savin' somethin' for you. I swan, I was skeered I was gone have to mail it. It's in the front room."

Propped on the mantel, waiting for me, was an envelope with my name on it in spidery pencil. Inside was an old, faded brownish photograph of two smiling young women wearing carefully curled hair and corsages on the shoulders of their Sunday dresses. It was Aunt Violet and Claudia standing in front of the old homeplace with their arms around each other. Laughing, I thought. It must have been some long-forgotten Easter. Why else would they be wearing flowers tied with fancy ribbons on their best dresses?

"I just knowed Sis'd want you to have it," Clara offered.

I swallowed hard and slipped the envelope gently into my purse. The heart-scalding from Aunt Violet's passing was newly healing, the scar still thin and easy to bleed.

"Thank you, Clara, for everything. Guess I better head on home before dark."

She hugged me again fiercely.

I waved goodbye to the little girl, who pretended not to see me, scratched the giant's ears, and started back out the mountain road. Halfway down, I realized that I forgot to look for the spring house. I'd have to go back up after the thaw. Take something to surprise Clara.

I wondered if she still whistled "The Tennessee Waltz." Wondered if she ever told the child about listening for the Indian maid.

I'd never seen the old homeplace in the springtime. Yes, in the spring, when the laurel's in bloom and the mountain is green.

Essay by Man Martin

Musings of an Unacknowledged Legislator

Percy Shelley, or if not Shelley someone a lot like him, once said, "Writers are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." The fact Shelley and company tried spreading such an outrageous rumor probably accounts for the reputation we writers have as the foremost self-righteous fat heads on Earth. Who am I, you ask, to disagree with Shelley? Shelley was a better poet than I, smarter, and had more hair. But I am living, and Shelley is not, and the living always have an edge in an argument with the dead.

Asserting global legislative powers is far fetched enough without throwing in the bit about being unacknowledged. If writers are so all-fired unacknowledged, why did Shelley have to go and acknowledge us? In my limited understanding of these things, those in positions of absolute power prefer to remain anonymous. Al Capone never had to tell anyone he was an unacknowledged legislator, Cardinal Richelieu never had to say it, no one in the Trilateral Commission or the International Diamond Cartel ever comes out with something like that. So it looks fishy when Shelley says it; it's like tooting your own horn about how modest you are.

The truth is, if Shelley hadn't said it, no one else ever would have. It's pretty unlikely that some conspiracy nut will ever finger a secret cabal of writers as the real power behind the powers that be; "You know the grassy knoll? The disappearance of Elvis? Those fake moon rocks? You know who's really responsible for all that don't you? John Updike!"

Not that Shelley's claim is without some standing; writers, especially those that are also teachers, do wield some power to strike terror in the hearts of others. No non-writer, not even the most intelligent and self-assured, is ever really confident of his grasp of grammar. All a writer needs do to make someone blanch with guilty shame is to softly correct grammatical mistakes in conversation. "No, not *lay*," you murmur softly, "*lie*." It doesn't even matter if the lapse is genuine or the correction hogwash. I've seen a simple muttered "whom," spoken at intervals, appropriate or not, reduce a four-star general to tears.

Still, even with such devastating powers at our disposal, many in different professions might make similar unacknowledged global legislative claims of equal, if not greater, merit. Plumbers might also feel themselves fairly unacknowledged, world wide legislation-wise. Plumbers don't write about plumbing, of course; they only plumb, and so their significance in the arena of global government gets not as much attention as it deserves. Even Maya Angelou's most ardent fan does not await her next poem with the same urgency as someone standing ankle deep in fecal matter awaiting the arrival of the big van with the happy-face plunger on the side.

And what of eight year-olds? If anyone rules with an iron but undetected fist it is the nation's third graders. Try sleeping late Saturday with a child in the house and you'll see what I mean. The Dow Jones Industrial Average watches breathlessly to see what the Christmas retail sales will be like each year; Christmas, as far as I can see, is a leading indicator driven exclusively by the still-haven't-lost-that-last-baby-tooth set.

Moreover, plumbers, children, and others in positions of tyrannical authority have the good sense not to mope about their lot. Usually a writer who comes out with a line like being an unacknowledged legislator one moment will begin whining about how little writers earn the next. This makes our profession seem not only delusional, but bratty and demanding. Look, you're either a world ruler or a yuppie looking to make the payment on the Volvo; you can't be both. If your pay is so bad and your powers so vast, do what other legislators, the acknowledged kind, do; vote yourselves a raise.

To see how silly writers seem to others, imagine meeting someone for the first time. You ask what he does, and he replies along these lines: "I am an Unacknowledged World Legislator. I create literature to enlighten and entertain the public, and reviews to say whether the public should be enlightened and entertained. I write expert treatises in such turgid prose the layman falsely imagines he cannot understand them, and I write popularized versions of the same treatises that are so simplified the layman falsely imagines he does understand them. I write philosophical essays that say whether humans are intrinsically good or evil; I am avidly read in either case, for humans are intrinsically nothing until they read about it. I write tracts that are atheistic as well as God fearing, and whenever I write there is a God, it is I who records what, if anything, God has to say about it. To maintain awestruck attitude in my subjects, I merely whisper 'lie' when they say 'lay,' and 'whom' when they say 'who.' I am the creator, memory, conscience, and guide for the human race; I am, as I said before, an Unacknowledged World Legislator."

Certain that at any moment this lunatic's keepers will pop out from the shrubbery with tranquilizer guns and a strait jacket, you play for time. "Very impressive," you remark, sidling away from him.

"Yeah, I guess so," he mutters, "but I don't have a dental plan!"

Imagine that, a megalomaniac on the verge of striking for higher wages.

When you come down to it, writers don't have a great deal of pull, not a bad thing considering the hare-brained lot most writers are. The inside of my car, for example, is a constant fire hazard. At any moment the smallest spark amid the crumpled papers on the floorboard, and my little Subaru would go up in a giant fireball. I often think that those cars that go rolling down cliffs in cop shows and inevitably burst into flames, are *writers'* cars. Can you picture putting someone like me in charge of even a small part of the world, say, the environment of the rain forests? I don't think so. Within a week, all God's critters in the Orinoco river basin would be deluged in cubic acres of Del Taco wrappers, empty Big Gulp Cups, and mislaid dry cleaning receipts.

Moreover, were I a world legislator, even an unacknowledged one, I would not quail as I do now before IRS auditors, eight year-olds, policemen, head waiters, plumbers, dentists, and other authority figures. I would greet these chilling personages, if not as a superior, at least as an equal, not as the quivering supplicant I now am.

Five years ago I might have agreed with Shelley, even though my car was no less littered and my confidence around grim figures of authority no greater than now. I would have said on coming upon Shelley's words in a public library, "Right you are, Shelley. World legislator, that's me, although craftily I remain, heh, heh, heh, unacknowledged." Then I would tremblingly approach the librarian and meekly pay my fines. (My house is sort of a Roach Motel for library books.) Having prostrated myself before her, I would go on my way, complacent in the misapprehension that in the Great Scheme of Things, writers are the true architects of civilization beside which mere librarians dwindle into insignificance.

The great world and wide, however, has taught me my place. Not that I'm complaining, mind you. I don't want to legislate the world, in an unacknowledged or any other capacity. I'll leave that to people who are unimpressed with elevator operators and people who have clean cars. I'm happy with my lot in life, however peculiar that lot is. And I suspect, no more than suspect, I know, that in whatever star chamber the true unacknowledged legislators of the world meet, they turn with a sigh from setting the production of petroleum, fixing all the presidential races, and determining library fines for the next millennium and imagine, just for a moment, how glorious their existence if only they could be writers.

Essay by Samantha Stavelly

A Quiet Place Between Us

As the movie credits rolled, I leaned over to wake him up. Tonight was a special night—my 21st birthday—but nachos and jumbo margaritas at El Amigo followed by woozy trips, at least for me, through Wal-mart for Dran-O to unclog the bathroom sink and through Winn Dixie for milk, cereal, bread, juice, rootbeer, cookies, and other essential bachelor foodstuffs had worn him out. After we had unloaded groceries at home, we curled up on the couch in front of the t.v. to watch *While You Were Sleeping*, a sentimental flick which of course I had chosen, it being my birthday and all. Otherwise, Fred would have opted for a more action-oriented movie. With my awareness fuzzy from alcohol, I had propped my head in his lap and fully expected to fall asleep myself during the movie, but he surrendered instead. The movie's engaging simplicity and predictable plot delighted me. Fairy tales have inbred a love for perfect endings in us all.

"I can't believe you let me fall asleep that way," Fred chided, grimacing as he rubbed his back and neck. Like a halo fallen askew, his hair swept toward the ceiling, opposite from the way he had inched down into a slump on the end of the couch.

While he changed into boxers and a t-shirt, I rewound the movie and ventured into the kitchen for some oatmeal cookies as a midnight snack. The small brown disks were already a bit stale and suddenly did not appeal to me as they had in the store.

"Fred, do you have a clip to reclose these cookies?" I asked as he passed through the kitchen to the den, still looking a bit disheveled and disgruntled. "I can't find one anywhere."

"Just use that rubber band on the table," he said.

"But that won't close the bag tightly—they'll get stale." Never mind the fact that they already were.

"Just use the rubber band. It's right there," he repeated, pointing to the end of the table.

Making a big scene of my task, I upturned stacks of bills on the table in search of a clip. The rubber band would not suffice. "It won't work," I said.

"You are the biggest whiner sometimes, you know?" he huffed as he stomped into the kitchen, jerked the orange plastic bag of stale cookies from my hand, marched straight to the pantry to get a clip, and clipped the cookies shut. The rubber band still lay on the table.

I cringed at his peevish tirade, which made me feel about an inch tall, but I had to respond to such childish behavior. "Well, excuse me," I forged with faked haughtiness. He walked back to the den and turned up the volume of the Late Night Show. I stood silent for a moment, waiting for an apology. This place of naked silence seemed vaguely familiar; the stillness of the room forewarned a long, lonely night. My own obstinance reigned. I retreated to the bedroom, without apology, to change into my pajamas, wash my face, and go to bed, leaving him to sulk. To make as little noise as possible, although I doubt he could have heard me over the blaring t.v., I stilled the waves as I climbed into his waterbed.

From the t.v., obnoxious voices issued a myriad of flickering shadows which lit upon the walls. I prepped myself for the anger I would face when I marched in the den to flick the damn t.v. off. He had no right to be mad at me. But instead of confronting him and settling matters up front, I lay in bed and buried my face behind his pillow. He hates it when I submit my own anger to silence. What we dislike in ourselves reflects so easily in those we love most.

At El Amigo, the green slush of lime and tequila intoxicated me before even a third of it had disappeared. My body warmed to the liquor, and I began to release the tension of pending

deadlines at school; I no longer worried how I could afford to spend this time with him when I had a history exam Tuesday and a research proposal to submit Wednesday.

"Can I get y'all anything else?" the waiter asked when he brought us flaming shrimp atop a plate of chicken, steak, peppers, and onions, along with a dish of flour tortillas.

"We're okay for now, thank you," I said. As the waiter walked away, I grinned and asked Fred a bit loudly, "Do you think he can tell I'm drunk already?"

"Yeah, he can tell all right," Fred teased. His tolerance level was obviously higher than mine; the tequila hadn't hit him yet.

"I feel really nice about now," I said. I licked some of the salt off the side of the glass and took two long swallows, savoring the sweet-tart taste of the mixture. Since Fred hates grocery shopping and rarely has many groceries at home, I devoured chips and salsa when we first sat down, but they were still no match for the jumbo margarita. With little resistance from the oatmeal I had eaten early that morning, the margarita disabled my barriers quickly. Relishing the meal before us, I prepared and ate two tortillas, with sour cream and salsa dripping from the ends.

My lightheadedness leveled off and I broached another issue. "Can we go to Canada for our honeymoon? Or that week-long cruise in Alaska?" I asked.

Six months before my twentieth birthday, Fred had proposed to me. First of all, he had surprised me with a weekend visit. Then, during a morning excursion to the farmer's market, he had persuaded me to buy fresh strawberries. Go figure. We returned to my dorm room to take an afternoon nap. I lay down with my back toward him and waited quietly for him to join me. He kept fumbling in his overnight bag for something. I turned; he pulled out a small box—a ring box. And oh my god—it was a diamond ring. And a question lingered in his eyes, but I had not heard it for the awful buzzing in my ears. What was happening? All I could think at that moment was "Oh, no. Not now."

Of course, I knew we would eventually marry. Later that evening, we shared the strawberries and some wine he had brought from home for the occasion.

As we sat in El Amigo drinking margaritas and munching chips, we still had over a year to plan our wedding. And unlike him, so it seems, I like to be prepared. I wanted to settle our honeymoon destination right then.

"You know I don't like schedules," he said. Yet his lazy drawl barely concealed his own excitement. I had several brides' magazines which mom bought for me, and I had caught Fred looking at their ads for those once-in-a-lifetime rendezvous. He told me that where ever we went, he only wanted to fish.

As I lay in bed that night, I sensed we had been previously to this place where the same tenacity prompted each of us into opposite corners of the ring. Shadows and noise from the t.v. continued to disturb me, and I wondered if he had fallen asleep on the couch or just kept the t.v. on out of spite. I contemplated turning it off quietly, nudging him, and asking him to join me in bed. I did not particularly care to sleep alone on my birthday. I dredged up memories of a similar night: Side by side we lay, without touching. I don't remember what I had done to peeve him, but we didn't speak throughout supper. He went to bed first while I watched a rerun of "Sisters," a weekly network drama series. Out of my own weakness of wanting him near, I joined him in bed. But I did not touch him. He would sense the draft between us, clearly indicative of the wrong he committed, and apologize. My pride created boundaries that my tears alone could never break. Loosely founded uncertainties about the quality of our relationship bombarded me in moments like these. After two, possibly three, such skirmishes in our four-year relationship, were we doomed to lives of angry silence? I wanted to reach and touch him, to hear the soft cadence of his heart. He had fallen asleep then, too, and I wanted to pummel him senseless for dismissing

me and—above all—having the audacity to sleep so soundly. Hours of inner turmoil prompted me to stroke his neck, his belly, to span the widening gulf between us. Naught was the shame for resorting to such manipulation compared to the satisfaction of proving to myself that he could not ignore me so easily.

He snapped at me because I woke him from an uncomfortable position. That was all.

Earlier that evening at Middle Georgia Package Store, I proudly flashed my driver's license to the cashier for my purchase of one pint of Smirnoff vodka. The cashier carefully studied the identification, branded "UNDER 21" until I renew it in four years, and quickly proclaimed "Happy birthday, sweetheart."

Fred had already gone to crank his truck. "He called me sweetheart," I said as I climbed into the truck and placed my purchase between my legs on the seat. "And he gave me this free sample of vodka from Finland." I fished the tiny bottle from the bag to show Fred.

"I told him I wanted to get you slap-ass drunk tonight," Fred said. "For your birthday."

"Some birthday present," I said. "I think I already drank my limit." My body and my mind still indulged a flighty, warm sensation from the one, albeit huge, margarita. Maybe if I could get Fred to drink some more, he would dance with me in his kitchen, like the husband of my fantasy who courts his blushing bride as they wind down after a hard day of work to a James Taylor favorite, "Something in the Way She Moves." Dinner they have both prepared simmers on the stove as their socked feet slide against the tile kitchen floor. This husband caters perfectly to my every whim. I have no doubt that only I validate his very existence. Certainly, he could never survive without me and never be miffed at my—yes—flawless character.

The pressure of another body in the waterbed alerts me to Fred's presence beside me. My back aches from sleeping on my stomach. A waterbed is uncomfortable regardless of and especially when you are in it with someone else, because you have to reckon with the ripples which spread from another's tosses plus your own and the heat of body against body, heat which builds like the fever of a night-worn pillow. The pillow is bearable only by flipping to its coolness underneath, which will only be diminished by another cycle of mounting heat. I open my eyes to find him staring at me.

"You still mad at me?" he asks, the timbre of his voice entreating me above the early morning murmurs of ice maker and fish aquarium in the kitchen.

Evanescence light filters through the blinds of his bedroom window. Rain trickles on the tin roof of his trailer. I stare at him for less than a minute and say, half-truthfully, "I wasn't mad at you." How quickly I brush aside my doubts, previous nights of disquiet. "What time did you come to bed?"

"Oh, about four. I fell asleep on the couch—I thought you were coming back," he says, with a sheepish grin.

"I thought you needed some space." I leave unasked the absurd questions which had haunted the night. Again, I get the feeling we have been to this place before, a place of quiet concession without jarring silence, and I turn to snuggle into the curve of his body. Someday—perhaps on our twenty-first anniversary—I will hold him accountable for the many apologies he owes me. But I don't count on it. He could all too easily demand the same from me. The morning light will usher in countless unresolved disputes, along with the quiet comfort of recognizing in us both a fleeting likeness.

"You didn't get me slap-ass drunk last night," I say.

I wonder if he knows the cookies were already stale. I will certainly never tell.