



aurora

aurora

1975

writing festival issue

Spring/1975

Volume LXXXIII

Number 3

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Aurora is prepared by Aiken Composition Service, Inc., Decatur, Georgia
 Send all correspondence to *Aurora*, Box 768
 Agnes Scott College, Decatur, Georgia 30030

Colleges and universities in Georgia which submitted materials to the 1975 Agnes Scott Writing Festival are:

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Fiction and poetry appearing in this issue of *Aurora* were selected by a panel of student and faculty readers. Judging of best fiction and best poetry will be done by poets Richard Eberhart and Josephine Jacobsen. An award of twenty-five dollars will be made to the writers of those materials judged to be best fiction and best poetry.

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Two other stories printed in the last issue of *Aurora* were submitted to and are eligible for judging in the Writing Festival. These stories are not printed herein due to limitations of space. These stories are "The Hands that Bear Us Back to Earth" by Joy Cunningham and "Spearmint" by Becky Miller Levy. Copies of the *Aurora* containing these two stories are available.

Life

green mould
 on bread
 in the morning.
 dead grass
 out cobwebbed window
 in dew.

hole in rotting stump
 complete
 with old water rust
 in vacant yard
 as porch floor squeaked while
 grandpa rocked his
 war
 into fantasy.
 alive after his time,
 hoping for white marble
 and crabgrass
 soon;
 he gums prunes and
 waits.

— *Dennis Carpenter*

The Invasion

Lettie Brown sat on the front steps of her house and could hardly sit still she was so excited. The summer sun was beaming down, and the light breeze stirring the leaves on the towering oak trees did little to cool the air. She could hear her mother finishing the dishes in the kitchen and her father humming as he dressed. Why didn't they hurry! She was ready to go. She had put on a clean dress and even replaited her hair without being told. As soon as her parents were ready they would all go down and await the arrival of the most important train that had ever come to Aliceville, Alabama.

The excitement actually started almost a year before when it was announced in the *Pickens County Herald* that Aliceville was the town selected for the site of a Prisoner of War Camp. Every time Lettie went to town after that she saw people in groups talking about the camp. Hunters in Khaki pants and jackets and red hunting hats leaned on their pickup trucks and talked about it. The drug store stayed full with townspeople drinking coffee, clouds of cigarette smoke circling their heads, and they tried to determine if the arrival of the camp was good or bad. The ladies weighed all the pros and cons at the bridge tables and worried about the effect it would have on the town. Her mother came home every week with some new consideration. It seemed everybody forgot old grievances and misunderstandings and banded together against this outside threat.

Lettie clearly remembered the Sunday afternoon the war started. She was visiting in the country with her cousins and they had just finished a horseback ride and were startled to see her uncle at the gate waiting for them. They could tell by his face something was wrong.

"Hurry and put the horses up," he said, his face grim. "We've got to get to town."

Too afraid to ask what had happened, they did as they were told and climbed in the back seat of the car. All sat slumped low staring straight ahead till finally he spoke. "The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor and we don't know if anybody there is still alive." Her Aunt Sally started crying and so did her youngest cousin Jane. Lettie wanted to go home.

After that day everything changed. One by one the young men left for service. Every night her mother and father sat by the radio and listened to the war news. A big map of the world was tacked on the wall, and they followed the progress of the Allies across Europe and in the Pacific. Her father would sit leaning forward in his chair, occasionally beating his knee with a rolled up newspaper, all the time smoking and furiously grinding out cigarettes. Sometimes he would get so upset he would have to walk around the block, muttering about that damn Hitler.

They had air raid drills and her father would put on his helmet and inspect the neighborhood to make sure not even the light of a cigarette could be seen. Lettie and her mother would sit quietly in the dark till the all-clear siren sounded, as if being quiet would make them less visible.

One time, as they waited, her mother told her about the first World War, the one her father was in. She had seen the picture taken in his uniform, and the picture of his transport ship was packed away in the attic with his old gas mask. Her mother told her they were engaged at the time he left for overseas. She talked about how lonely and frightened she felt as she watched his train pull out of the station. Her father never talked about it.

Because of the war they ate lots of spam and rarely saw a candy bar. They grew a victory garden. They drove cars at thirty-five miles per hour with the little gas they got with an A coupon. They bought victory stamps. They wrote to service men on V-mail stationery. During music period Lettie lustily sang "Remember Pearl Harbor" and "Buy Bonds for Victory." When they went to the movies the newsreels showed the Germans marching through the cities of Europe as if nothing could stop them.

They didn't feel the real impact of the War until they heard a family had gotten a telegram saying their son had been killed, and soon they saw the gold star in their window. Lettie never knew what to say when her parents told her about someone dying, but she felt bad when she heard how hard the family was taking the news.

One night after she had gone to bed Lettie heard her parents talking about their friends in Tuscaloosa who had not heard from their son in three months. All they could do was wait. It all seemed so far away.

Nothing seemed real until the principal called an assembly and announced in a grave voice: "Thomas Napoleon Simmons has been killed in action. His family has just received word . . ."

His voice droned on while Lettie put her hands over her ears and clenched her eyes shut. That was Nap! He had been in school at the beginning of his term! She could see him now leaning against the tree in the schoolyard talking to Mary Margaret. She could remember every time he saw her on the way to school he grinned and called her "Pigtails". Now he was dead — dead in some country he probably never thought he'd see.

The very people who started it all were now coming to their little town as prisoners. With mixed emotions the whole town watched the camp being built. They saw the streets laid out and lined with barracks. They saw the camp all surrounded with double fences and topped with barbed wire. Guard towers stood at intervals along the fences, and everyone hoped the barbed wire and towers would keep the Germans safely confined.

They saw the town fill with American soldiers, and hundreds of families

arrived looking for homes. The interest mounted as the camp neared completion. On Sunday afternoon there was a steady stream of cars riding by to see what had sprung up in the old Horton pasture. The older people loved to count the cars and proudly relate that some had come from as far away as Birmingham to see our POW camp.

The long awaited day had finally arrived, and the German soldiers were coming. The train was due at three o'clock.

"Come on!" she urged her parents. She and her father waited in the car, and as soon as her mother appeared in the doorway, the motor started.

"Now, Lettie," her mother said, as she slammed the car door shut, "just calm down. We may have a long wait when we get there. And remember, don't go running around everywhere. There'll be a lot of people there, and I want to know where you are."

Cars lined both sides of the street leading to the train station. People sat inside and outside of the cars fanning themselves. Some had brought chairs from home, and others pillows to sit on the ground. Her father waved greetings and her mother smiled and nodded as she acknowledged friends and neighbors.

No one expected the train to be late. Lettie could just imagine it moving with military precision through the countryside till it stopped at their station precisely at three o'clock. The American soldiers were already lined up along the tracks, feet planted wide apart and hands clasped on their guns in front of them. They waited with everyone else for this drama to begin.

Bits of information filtered from one shade tree to another. These were Rommel's men. They were coming here straight from North Africa. That General Patton sure showed Rommel, didn't he? They had probably stopped in New York just long enough to be fed and were being transported here in only two days. No one knew why Roosevelt had chosen Aliceville as the camp site. It was hard to believe there were going to be German soldiers right here in Alabama.

Children played on the ditch bank, throwing themselves down on their stomachs and shooting imaginary machine guns. Boys too young for service clicked their heels and practiced the manual of arms until they almost could do it as well as the real soliders.

At the first sound of the whistle, the crowd left belongings scattered around the cars and pushed closer to the tracks. The train choked and jerked to a stop, and an American soldier hopped off and began giving orders.

Lettie found herself at the back of the crowd, so she wiggled and twisted her way through, murmuring "Excuse me," and smiling up at the

ones she jostled with her elbow. She dropped to her knees in the front beside one of her friends from school.

A murmur ran through the crowd as the first blue uniform appeared. They peered at him curiously and saw that he was tall, blond, and very young. Lettie gasped for he looked like he could be Nap's twin. They were about the same size, with the same blond hair, and she could just imagine that the German boy was going to grin and say "Pigtails." He looked out of place in this hot Alabama climate for he still wore his winter uniform.

One by one they filed out of the train, in varying degrees of dress, all heavy woolens, and took their place in line. One of them wore only an overcoat. He stood, shoulders down, seemingly embarrassed to have no shoes and such a heavy coat. He was small; he seemed even younger and more frightened than the others.

As she looked from one face to another, Lettie was surprised to find herself thinking that any one of these boys could have grown up in Aliceville. Any one of them could be a missing son.

The afternoon sun bore down and Lettie could see the stream of perspiration running from under their hats, the hair getting darker and sticking together as it got wetter. The Germans seemed oblivious to the heat and to the crowd, waiting unconcerned as the train emptied.

It seemed an eternity until they were all standing, waiting for their orders to move on. No order came. The American officers were walking back and forth checking with each other. Somewhere along the line the chain of command had been broken. The Germans stood stoically, looking neither to the right nor to the left. The crowd began to get restless. Their faces wondered what would happen next. Would the Germans all suddenly break rank and run?

Then quite spontaneously the young soldier who looked like Nap straightened, drew himself erect, lifted his head, and in a beautiful tenor voice began to sing. The boy next to him seemed to gain strength and joined him. The song moved through the corps until the whole group was singing. Not a soul stirred in the crowd of on-lookers. They stood stunned while hundreds of young voices sang one German song, then another. The townspeople relaxed, glancing at each other and nervously laughing when they recognized "Lili Marlene."

Lettie sat cross-legged watching these men who had come so far, still in their fighting clothes, hot and weary, standing in a strange land singing.

Now they were singing a hymn. It was the very same hymn she had sung in church, except the familiar words were now sung in German:

Lord, give us faith and strength

the road to build,

To see the promise of the day

fulfilled,

When war shall be no more and

strife shall cease

Upon the highway of the Prince of Peace.”

She glanced back at the crowd, afraid of her own feelings, and found her mother. She was standing beside her father, her hand on his arm, and tears were rolling down her cheeks. She'd never seen her mother cry in public before. Then as she examined the other faces she realized her mother was not alone. All down the line handkerchiefs were being pulled out and grown men were clearing their throats.

The hymn ended, a sharp whistle blew, and the soldiers quickly straightened into formation. Without using the peculiar goose step Lettie and her friends had so often mocked, they started on their march to camp. Their voices again joined together, this time softly humming. The crowd stood still, and no one moved until the last blue uniform was out of sight.

— Frances Guess

This Fettered Son

“The greatest griefs are those
we cause ourselves.”

From darkness to darkness, proud king,
You stumble on;
Pride inverted—
Your crown jeweled with guilt.
Blindness for blindness:
The debt is paid,
But your hands — reeking
With the blood of baneful eyes,
Still tremble for fallen fathers,
And grope into the black
To find another sphinx.

And if those hands had reached
Among the Gods
Choosing to be cursed,
I see you clearly.
But if your sin was only birth,
Then in what bed lies my mother
Waiting to test the weapon
Of her husband's slayer?
No, proud king,
This fettered son will see:
The riddle lies scorned,
The prophet cheated,
And you, Oedipus, will know
I sleep alone tonight.

— Michael Popkin

The Appearance of a Past Civilization

You must have dreamt
of a beach last night
because I woke before you this
morning and looked
and you still had a trace of sand
in your eye.

I could not pick away
those delicate yellow grains.
they mark the corner of your eye; and like some distinguished
landscape,
are there for the purpose of expression.

— Anicia Lane

“Impasse”

Pale and sweet the timber stood
In rows of grass
While morning moved wayside
To let day pass
Until a final blister
Burst alas
Upon the wood where evening stood
Like tinted glass
That cut the sun and made it run
The day's impasse;
I mourn the day:
The Eve of night —
I, Adam, am
A work of grass
With heart of wood
And words of glass
Of bitter good
and tinkling brass.

— Truett Leveritt

STOP AMERICAN EMBASSY HELPLESS STOP

When you came into George's he was in a booth on the right. The stools on the left were at the short bar and on the right the booths held four people each with a table between two each of you. On his table in his booth he had his bottle of Heineken. The green bottle stood beside the clear fluted glass that had been new in 1967. The distributor had come in with four cases of them and now the two dozen left went around three times a night. The old man sat at night in his booth and George brought him his Heineken and neither of them had anything to say about it.

He was there when you came in. You had to see him on the right alone in the booth with the bottle and the glass half-full and a hand-width to the left on a cardboard coaster of its own. He always sat to face the door and kept his hands up on the cold yellow formica table. They lay there with the bottle and the glass between them.

"He only drinks Heineken," said George. Tucker sipped a draft at the bar and watched while the Braves got twelve hits and lost. "That's what I get for him," he said. He dipped two handfuls of glasses in the hot-soap water then in the cold-rinse and set them on the drain rack. "I get it special," he said. "He drinks almost all I get. Him and that friend of yours." Tucker pushed the empty glass across to him. "He dresses very well," said George. "If you notice he always is well-dressed. His hair is combed and he needs a shave." George sighed, "He always needs a shave. That's how you know. If he could only shave he would be all right. There would be no way to tell." He set the full glass in front of Tucker and rang it up. He threw his white towel over his left shoulder when he used his hands. When he washed or cut a sandwich or drew a beer he threw the towel over his shoulder. Then he carried it on his right forearm again. George was very correct in some ways. He liked to be correct and run a correct bar. He did run a good bar. "He has on his red tie," George said. "Really it is maroon. It goes very well with his blazer and the pale blue shirt. It is daylight when he comes in and you can see then that he is very well-dressed. But he must shave," concluded George. He rolled his fist under his chin and tapped himself lightly. He was trying to understand it. He knew that understanding was important and that many of those who were young who came to his bar understood almost everything.

"Last night," said George, stroking his cheeks with his right hand, "last night he knocked over two glasses in a row. Around eleven o'clock I brought him one and he filled his glass half-full. When he tried to pick it up he knocked it over. It happens," he said. "In the spring he knocked one over almost every night. Just before he would leave he would dump one over and then when I wiped it up he would pay me for it and get up and leave. But last night he did two," said George. "I know about when he wants to leave. I did not want his clothes to be too wet when he went home. I caught it before that. Then he did it again." George shook his head. He busied himself with the cleaning and polishing of the bar. The bar shone when it was wet. Otherwise it was very dull.

"But then he poured another glass and knocked it over. He couldn't move out of the way and it ran onto his lap. I caught the first one on the table and wiped it up. But the next one ran into his lap and wet him. I could not do anything," he said apologetically. He gestured with his towel. "This was wet already. I had to reach for another and in the meantime he did it again." George was not irritated. He did not think badly of the old man. He wanted to understand why such a well-dressed old man would spill two beers. "At one time," said George, "he would sit at the bar. He sat there next to where you sit and watched the evening go by and if there was a ball game he would watch that. He was unsteady at the bar. I feared for him. A man who dressed as well as himself should not sit at a bar. So when I could I said, 'Let me bring you the Heineken in a booth. Sit back and I will serve you.' He agreed. He was becoming unsteady on the stool and I was afraid to see him there. He was happy to sit in a booth. Now he sits and watches the evening come in the door and I do not worry about him." George reached up and snapped off the post-game interview with the league's leading hitter. The league's leading hitter talked to the interviewer with his fingers laced together on top of his head. He faded out with his hands on his cap and his arms stuck out like skeletal ears. George came back over and looked across my shoulder.

"You ready?" he said. Tucker looked around and the man nodded and George took a Heineken from his cooler. He took it around to him and picked up the bottle there. "Want a sandwich?" said George. "You ain't had anything to eat all night." George spoke clearly and looked right at the man when he spoke. "Want a corned beef?" he said. He looked at George and nodded and poured his half glass of beer. He was finished with George. He poured into the side of his glass and poured slowly and carefully. He had steady hands as he poured his beer. It was no effort for him and when he had it half full he did not sigh or relax. He had been drinking many hours and he had drunk many days. He put his hands with the glass and bottle between them and the foam settled for him. His hands were thick and quiet on the table and he was at ease. George went around cutting the corned beef and putting it together.

"Want a sandwich?" he said. He looked up from slicing a roll.

"No," said Tucker.

"I have to ask him," said George. "He sits there all night if I don't ask him." He put the sandwich on a paper plate and fingered a pickle from the jar and put it on the paper plate. He took it around the bar and set it in front of the man. "There you go," he said. When he came back behind the bar he said, "Where's your buddy? Where's my other Heineken drinker?"

"He's out of town," said Tucker. "He's got a story in North Africa."

"Who's he writing for?" said George. "He's not still on the paper is he?"

"No," said Tucker. "He gets into trouble on his own now."

"He's not in trouble over there, is he?" said George.

"Yes," said Tucker. "He's in trouble over there." George drew Tucker another draft in a new glass from the cooler. It frosted on the counter and Tucker leaned over it to suck off the foam.

"Big story?" asked George. He leaned on the bar toward Tucker. The towel fell into the crook of his elbow.

"Too big for me," said Tucker. "They got him with ten kilos of hash." George

stood away from the bar and adjusted his towel.

"Shit," he said softly. "What can you do?"

"I don't know," Tucker said. "I think I'm doing it."

George went down the bar and filled a pitcher and set it across for the people from the theatre. Their faces were pale and scrubbed where they had taken off their makeup. They were not noisy, but Tucker knew they were there. He glanced over at them. They were in the big round booth.

The old man was humming softly. Tucker watched him humming and rocking gently in his booth.

"That's his song," said George. "When the place begins to fill he hums his song and he is alright." He rocked slowly and deliberately and he kept both hands on the table with his beer between them.

"It's not really a song," said George. "It's a tune. It's just a little tune. I believe he made it up. He does it when the crowds come in." Tucker could barely hear the old man. He saw him rocking evenly, steadily, and with calming dignity. "You don't stand back here," said George, "and look out every night and watch him waste his last beer." Tucker swallowed the bottom of his glass and George set him up another in the same glass.

"Does he always rock?" asked Tucker, "when the crowd comes in?"

"That's right," said George. Tucker was thoughtful a moment.

"Why?"

"I don't know," said George. "I don't care to know about that. He pays for his Heineken and he dresses very nicely and if he would like to hum, he may."

"No," said Tucker. "Why does our writer do that?"

"Do that in Africa?" said George. He was vaguely annoyed. His good speech was apparently wasted.

"Yes," said Tucker.

"I don't care to know," said George. He realized his speech was still good. He began to repeat it with the appropriate variation, but it was the same speech. "What they bring in that door," said George, "I don't care to know. I don't want this place full of worry. My worries alone could fill it."

"Are you worried?" said Tucker with a slight smile.

"No," said George. "No worries."

"You bet," said Tucker.

"You bank that bet," said George. The old man hummed louder and Tucker heard him plainly. The tune rose and fell on his short breath, emphasized by the ebb and flow of rocking. It barely was a tune. Tucker heard it for just noise. It was not a tune at all. It was an interval idling and pumping. It had no form or tune. George moved away to tend his bar and Tucker held the glass with both hands. He listened to the dull humming and wrapped his hands around his glass and held it down on the counter. He knew if he did not restrain it, it would rocket off the bar. "Hold tight," he said to himself. "Don't be stupid now." He took three deep, measured breaths and counted them out against his heartbeat. It was the simplest exercise he knew and it calmed him. He thought of the discipline and practice for the better ones, for the exercises of one's mind that could regulate one's body and twist and shape it for the moment or the millenia. Tucker relaxed and drank beer and smiled. The old man's chant rose and fell in drunken waves. The place

was beginning to fill up. The hum rose to meet it and George came past with a green Heineken bottle. Tucker tried not to look closely but he saw the old man pour the glass full. He laid his hands on either side of it and then swept his right hand up to the glass and knicked it broadside into his lap. George bustled from behind the bar with a pair of towels and threw one of the table and began to mop up the pool of beer.

"Okay," he said. "No problem. Hang on here one minute." The old man sat while George made his work. He paid George and stood up and before his coat came down straight over his wet crotch Tucker knew why he was spilling the beer. George brought the wet towels and threw them into the bag for the linen man.

"Come here, George," said Tucker. The old man went out without touching any wall or fixture to balance himself. He looked very old as he went out but he did not behave drunkenly. Tucker said, "George. You knew didn't you? You don't stand over him every night and not know he can't control himself anymore."

"I don't know anything," said George defensively. Then he said, "It's still a waste. That's what I don't understand."

"You're a shit, George," said Tucker. "You're a hell of a shit."

— Kent Murphy



Poetry Sequence

1

grindstone spurs
 doubtless linkage needles to feet
 to prod the till that tills the sod
 crescendo times maggot bed vacation

in the excesses lately
 lately since the washlady's raccoon cheeks
 puffed last
 i have corked the disease wholly
 vacuum packed dissipation syndrome

how's that, fat?
 relax.

brimstone spike
 nasal drive jungle lingo-land
 expedition tight and tired as marriage
 sparse transient wind
 in turret funnels your battleship eyes
 to stern your orange laugh
 peeled stacked

how's that, fat?
 relax.

2

acidfact dream
 love me hate me when your nose bleeds
 of sojourn mezzo-piano
 forte destroyers in the latelys
 skinned filleted indigested

impartial time
 displace me trace me every cyst grown
 in my meat the precision slice
 your brows slitting the limb
 into solstice your satin hair
 frictionless clear

how's that, fat?
 relax.

pleasureplay mime
 vertigo ride seamstress patching
 the pyramids you may not be home till
 late
 your sizzle teeth razoring the salt flies
 into solution the pantomime
 of your shingle-grey lips

how's that, fat?
 relax.

3

quadrawhisper
 chords discords in the syncopated
 panting your lobes pressed flat
 by the illusions in books you read
 last week
 shifter foreteforte

between the belching lately
 lately since the washlady's expression
 screeched my nakedness
 only now can i heave her
 into the saturate lining of my belly

how's that, fat?
 relax.

bloated base
 primal try early infatuations
 with chaos massed and sealed
 love laid carefully in your eye
 your body imbibed
 unnamed

how's that, fat?
 relax.

4

inventions lately
 rape me take me in when your smile
 turns dripping timeset
 in tomorrow's jug
 this is not the place that anchors eden

mechanistop
 predict it insist it not be malignant
 the scalpels in your wide skin
 the needles kneading your ether skin
 to skin your eyelids cup the brine
 from wet denim pores

how's that, fat?
 relax.

cosmiquiet
 sleep whisper the incisions of your nails
 in soil sleep
 your footprints dawdle in stone seasons
 your organs
 vanish

how's that, fat?
 relax.

—Joe Gill

A Friend's Poodle

I know about him. He is very old
 (Eighteen: more than a lifetime for a dog),
 Deaf now, and blind to all but light and dark —
 Knowing this, still I meet him unprepared.
 His eyes are milky, clouded with a film
 That shows a vestige here and there of brown;
 The strong and supple spine that was his pride
 Has stiffened, knobbing through his graying coat.
 I offer friendly prattle instinct prompts,
 Then swallow it: he cannot hear a word.
 And memory — is it dimmed and silenced too,
 As is his outer world? I wonder then
 If she has dwindled, disembodied, down,
 A long-fingered touch and an essence now.

I pet him, and he settles by my chair;
 Tongue busy as my hand, he licks my leg
 Because he cannot know where fingers end.
 I stroke the head he rests upon my knee,
 Try not to see his eyes, and talk with her.
 With time and conversation I forget
 Till later when he stirs, and wanting bed,
 Struggles across the carpet by her scent
 In jerking, creaky paces to her. Yet
 The tail is quick, moves smoothly back and forth,
 And faster as he bumps her lowered hands
 Which lift him up. I see him then more spared
 Than stricken: he, not islanded by age;
 His world, though pillaged, ever essential.

—Liz Hornsby

Rubus allegheniensis — Carpe Diem

Sun burns an image of mountains
 onto your eyelids.
 A negative imprint of skyline.
 Hands carry two blue cans,
 -good to the last drop-

Then given up to blackberries...

Between two fields,
 ploughed and lying fallow,
 Beyond a gravel road in a gully where a
 Murky vein of water trickles into a creek,
 There, the berries hang
 gorged on summer's sap,
 Bloated as the ticks who gather and cling like burrs.

(Once you found an albino tick, pale as hydrangeas,
 and watched her body fill with red-black fluid—
 a touch of a glowing match head—her feast ends.)

The berries do not cling as those blood-drinkers,
 but hang ready to fall.
 A touch bursts their skin—
 blue-black pigment
 Streams over your hands.

(For you will bear the stain for the sins of those
 home in hammocks.)

Mosquitoes swarm,
 sensing bitter juice
 and salty sweat.
 Dye spreads
 as your fingers reach into tangled briars
 To test and pluck the black gems
 leaving the magenta to ripen.
 Barbs flick across bare skin
 and snag cloth.
 Blood gathers in droplets.

Our Lady of Thorns (*Rubus Allegheniensis — carpe diem*)
 Ransomed by your scars
 their memory renewed on buttered toast.

—Kate Kussrow

SWEET AS SUGAR

Sweet as Sugar, that's my name. I'm the only one o' my kind in Muschleshoals, Alabama. That's right! 'Cause I'm a rock star. Not that I'm in Muschleshoals anymore — no way, people like me can't make it in hicktowns like that. When I realized I was born to be a rock star, I up and headed for the big city, leavin' that Muschleshoals and my Beethoven far behind me.

At the age of four a pillow was propped under me and I was forced onto the bench — the piano bench, you know? Oh, I had talent, enough. Aunt Myrna told me so, and so did Cousin Jack, and my folks never stopped encouragin' me.

"Why Jewel," said Alfred, my daddy-boy, "just watch Sweet as Sugar breathe life into that piano. I declare my daughter has the makin's of a great pianist!"

"Our daughter," Mama-Jewel corrected him.

The thought of bein' a great pianist sure suited me fine and I decided to work hard to achieve my life's goal. I got real intimate with Beethoven, him bein' my first genuine love. I would tremble all over when playin' his sonatas. When I was five I had really pounded those keys, but that was before I caught fire, you know, and by now I gently caressed them. I would rock back and forth and all that sweet music comin' from the piano sent chills down my spine. Then I would bend over and whisper onto the keyboard,

"Ludwig, Ludwig, if you could only know what you're doin' to me. My, oh my!" And I would feel very warm inside.

But he was only the beginnin'. I gave myself just as easily to Bach, Chopin, Debussy and all those countless others. Never could pass up a courtship. But Beethoven always remained my man, 'cause he was the "first" for me.

When I reached the age of 18, Alfred had me try out for the Muschleshoals Community Orchestra.

"Sweet as Sugar, you are as good as married to that piano. Why not make it official?" Daddy-boy always winks with his right eye when he thinks he's made a good joke that spells Truth with a capital T.

So I tried out. Me and Beethoven had gotten ourselves real well prepared, but when that director stood by the piano and wanted to watch me playin', I sort o' got turned off. Couldn't see myself gettin' intimate in front of no spectator and so I couldn't give myself to my music the way I was used to. It made me real nervous that that director was takin' notes.

"Thank you, we'll notify you if we need you."

They didn't need me. I waited for some kind of notification, but after

two months, Alfred couldn't take the tension any longer and made a scene.

"I ask myself why I ever got that piano, not to mention those 'spensive lessons. Why, young lady, I'll tell you why, for nothin'. N-O-T-H-I-N. Sweet as Sugar, I just want you to know, you have disappointed me, yes siree, broken this old, mighty troubled heart o' mine. Jewel, Jewel, come here right this minute. Do you realize that this daughter of yours might just be the death of her father! Why, lettin' herself go like that, disrespectin' all that I've done for her. Ungrateful thing! I can just feel a heart attack comin' on!"

"Alfred, Alfred!" I said. "No need you gettin' a heart attack. With Beethoven at my side I know, I know, we can conquer the world."

I wanted to add that he had spelled "nothing" without a "g," but he was grabbin' his throat with both his hands, as if he were tryin' to choke himself and so I just let it be.

"Sweet as Sugar," he croaked, "act sensible for once in your musical life."

I think this was the turnin' point. I knew that a great musical career was in store for me, but the blood of a pianist did not run through my veins. I had the blood of a rock star! So I acted sensible.

I gave up playin' with that piano and bought myself a second-hand guitar and a "Guide to Picking Strings." I got the hang of it in no time and was soon playin' to all my old records, learnin' the words, imitatin' the voices from good old Elvis to Earl Scruggs. Soon I had myself a nice little diverse repertoire and was ready to enter the bright lights.

Muschleshoals could offer me only four traffic flashes. They could never 'preciate the presence of a rock star in their midst. So I got together some necessities, wrote a good-bye note to Jewel and Alfred, and boarded a Greyhound to the next big city.

When I got to Florence, I couldn't think of any place I needed or wanted to go and so I just sat down in that unfamiliar bus station and started playin' some Tammy Wynette and Loretta Lynn songs.

I was secretly hopin' for some record producer to come by and discover me. So I sat down as ladylike as I could in my tight jeans which I had bought 'cause all rock stars wear them and flashed my brightest smile at all those men who looked like producers. I guess none of them was a producer, 'cause they just stopped long enough to throw some pennies into my open guitar case. I've never taken no charity, wouldn't allow it, but this was no charity, these pennies meant that they thought I was good and that really pleased me. Within my first hour as a rock star I made exactly seventy-eight cents. And then Ernie came along.

He squatted down beside me and closed his eyes and just listened to

my music. Then he asked me for my name.

"So they call you Sweet as Sugar? Hold it right there — don't say a word!" He creased his forehead, lit a Lucky Strike and started pluckin' his sideburns.

"What do you think of this?" He took a deep breath. "Oh, it's cryinn' time againn — for Sweet as Sugar. Her fingers try to warm the strings of her sole friend, the guitar, as it cries out to those passing Greyhound buses to take the heavy burden from her back and carry it far, far away. Mr. Busdriver, how much is the fare to be carefree once again."

"Gosh," I said, "what are you talkin' about?"

"Heavy stuff, huh? Baby, you have just heard the beginning of a short story I am going to call "Sweet as Sugar," and I'll be damned if it's going to be my best one yet." Ernie's a real talented writer.

"It's beautiful." I smiled at him. Publicity like that could only help. "Bet you've had lots of stories published?"

"Are you kidding? Our degenerate society does not know the value of good literature. It will take my death for them to know that I existed. Then they'll be sorry they didn't pay any attention to me while I was still among the living. Where are you staying, you talented, beautiful person?"

"Well, Ernie, I haven't really decided yet."

"You're in luck, Sweet as Sugar, you just got yourself a new home. You can stay with us."

Ernie lived with an artist, who introduced himself as Mr. Pibb, in a one-room apartment in downtown Florence. The walls were cluttered with his paintings. One of them caught my eye immediately. On pink painted canvas, Mr. Pibb had glued several shrumped up marshmallows in orange around a dried up chicken bone. But then I've never been able to interpret modern art. And I figured anyone livin' with Ernie had to be a genius.

"Ever seen anything like it?" Mr. Pibb asked when he caught me starin' at his depiction.

"Nope," I said. "Never looked for anythin' like it either."

Mr. Pibb looked me straight into the eyeball, and I figured I had said somethin' wrong, but I know he wasn't offended, 'cause he turned to Ernie and said, "This chick has a sense of humor. She can stick around."

So I stuck around. We got to be real buddies. Mr. Pibb soon promised to paint me, when he got around to it, and Ernie sat at his typewriter day and night chain-smokin' his Lucky Strikes. He was ponderin' over his "Sweet as Sugar" story, but never really got past the beginnin' before he threw a fit and tore up the paper. But he always started again. Mr. Pibb could only paint when he was inspired and would lie on the floor and gaze at his masterpieces on the wall.

We had no real furniture, only several tea crates, which Mr. Pibb painted green for me.

"Like the green, green grass of home, right Sweet as Sugar?"

And I sure did feel at home. I didn't mind not havin' any hot water to wash my hair and I didn't even care when I had to pawn my cashmere coat, a present from Aunt Myrna, to pay our electricity bill. But unfortunately after three weeks all my money had run out and that pawn shop was a rip off. So I decided I owed it to these two generous souls who had taken me in to find a job, since we could not wait any longer for me to be discovered. Ernie and Mr. Pibb encouraged my idea all the way.

"Don't let that talent go to waste, Sweet as Sugar. Those sweet lips, those delicate fingers were meant to bring joy to this deprived world."

I found a small restaurant that was lookin' for a singer to entertain their customers durin' week-night dinners. I applied and got the job. My career was beginnin'. At first, I really enjoyed myself, but after two weeks I was fed up. I simply could not concentrate on makin' music, while my audience was devotin' their attention to stuffin' themselves. I'd be reminded that I hadn't had a decent meal for a month and my stomach would start growlin' and be an embarrassin' disturbance to everyone. I also decided that bein' a singin' digestion aid was not my idea of a rock star. So I quit, before I got myself a bleedin' ulcer.

"I'm fed up, full of it," I said to the manager. "I am endangerin' my health. I quit."

"Okay," he grumbled. "I guess we'll have some trouble getting someone new."

"That's right!" I said. "Rock stars like me don't come in dozens!"

"Guess not. You were the only one who applied for the job."

"I've quit my job, Ernie, Mr. Pibb. I'm sorry, but that playin' in a restaurant was no life for a rock star. Too undignifyin'."

They were both really understandin'. Mr. Pibb didn't even bother to stop starin' at the wall, and Ernie just turned from his typewriter and said, "Understandable, Sweet as Sugar. No sweat. You'll just have to look for a new job. My typewriter ribbon just gave out and I'll need a new one if you want me to finish the story on you. You do still want me to?"

I nodded and sat down on one of the tea crates. Absentmindedly, I strummed my guitar. Ernie stopped beatin' the typewriter and gave me one of his cool, calm looks. But cool and calm like before the outbreak of a storm.

"Sugar, I am trying to work. One of us needs to, you know. Can you not get it into your head that writing takes utmost concentration? Try to be considerate, just once, and cut the god-damn racket!"

I know that Ernie's moods and outbreaks make him the unique person he is, so I just got up and headed for the bathroom.

I've locked the door and got myself settled on the toilet seat. I'm all alone with the echo of my words and the ringin' o' my guitar.

"Satin sheets to lie ooohhnn, satin pillows to cry ooohhnn..."

Mr. Pibb knocks on the door. "Let me in, Sweet as Sugar, I gotta go."

I look into the mirror. No, Mr. Pibb, it's me who has to go. "Please release me, let me go, 'cause I don't love you anymore, to live a lie would be a sin..."

—Jennifer Frank



Anaesthesia's Unused Napkin

Surely,
 a pomegranate luxury
 out of season
 renders Time
 a little boy again.
 Oh yes ...
 Time
 is,
 the present,
 indulging in itself.
 And now —
 just such a languid ease
 sweeps creases
 on my thighs, disguised
 as midnight-ripples in my bath;
 —and, like the early April fog,
 dies, giving birth.
 As always, I'm afraid I can only
 see you
 in a certain slant of light.
 You have become for me
 a spider's web
 retreating from my sight—
 dripping tears;
 a kind of filmy, sentimental
 taste
 of
 a memory parfait —
 overchilled, perhaps.

—David Silverstein

From Innocence To Awareness

Little black boys playing by the creek,
 Shaking the June apple tree, whipping a white boy's
 ass for saying "Nigger" for his crowd two weeks ago
 and saying "yes suh" to his Daddy when we went to get
 the bull to fuck the cow
 Running, walking all day over the hilly pasture, using
 nasty words, playing with our genitals,
 Gleefully anticipating, looking guiltily over our
 shoulders,
 Running down by Rock Branch all the way to the big
 gum tree waiting for the bull to strike,
 Counting the times and watching the arch of pawed
 up dirt get smaller and smaller as the expectant cow,
 Oblivious of the blood gorged flies on her back, braced
 and waiting. . .

A sandlapper skittering under poison ivy leaves,
 Crawfish in water rippling over golden sand with thin
 white flakes in it,
 Backing up from a jabbing twig, against a rock, limb or
 root
 Feeling its tail break water, clamping the obtrusive twig
 like Daddy hanging his scissors in John's nappy head
 Or tonging a clevis from hot coals
 Or Mama haggling with dull scissors at an egg skiffen
 "poltace"
 Over a pus filled nail hole sore got jumping out of the
 barn on a rusty ten penny left
 From making a wooden wagon to pull up the hill for the
 quick thrill back down again
 And getting in a fight with Joe Talley cause he said my
 Mama and Daddy had been "doing it,"
 Laughing like a damn fool, saying it over and over
 And saying, "Dey Santa Claus too". . .

The pondering, doubting, turning to shame, and disgust;
 Withdrawing, never to assert; fearing, trembling, grinning
 ceaselessly, hurting deep,
 Puking in the cotton field; standing by Mama in a red
 clay church yard,
 Grinning, eyes pasted to the ground, ashamed of being,
 saying "yes Maam" to Aunt Sefronia,
 Grinning, looking down at the ground,
 Wishing I could sink into it. . .

"Lazy, no 'count, good for nothing, trifling keep your
 mouth shut till somebody says something to you . . ."
 The ants, those tiny little creatures that bore holes
 and slink into the ground,

Those calm and respectful ants
 "Go to the ants, sluggard"
 Drop a crumb of bread or a horse fly's leg,
 Watch them struggle together toward the hole,
 Watch the creek go by,
 Watch blood specked dog wood blossoms foretell Easter
 And slingshot a thin chested blue bird right out
 of the sky,
 Bury it in a four inch grave with a flat pebble
 for a headstone,
 Cover it with wild daisies and weep.

— Cooper H. Smith

blue china mug

staring tired eyed
 down upon shattered pieces scattered about
 the slick tile
 of
 shining
 floor

gathering fragments together
 cupped in a shaking palm

matching again the shards
 to be joined
 pasted
 with
 glue

holding pieces still and fragile
 again a shape is seen

in cracked remains of an entity once fast
 oft shattered myriad shapes
 oft joined by
 shaking
 fingers
 of
 fear

knowing one day no vestige
 of a blue china mug
 will
 remain

— Anne Loden

IN THE SERVICE OF THE LORD

After the church moved out of the basement
 Of General Electric and into the new building,
 We used to go over during the week, in the morning.
 We rolled on the floor underneath the pews.
 We played church too.
 I led the singing.
 I knew two kinds.
 Up down for two two times,
 And up down thisa way that for four times.
 We took turns preaching.
 It was best.
 Standing up behind the pulpit shouting
 Till our faces were white, then running
 Into the nursery, sipping warm welch's
 And not even thinking once about the blood.

My uncle locked the doors one day after he caught us,
 Wading in the baptismal.
 We was soaked clothes and all, swimming, half-diving,
 Making noise to each other, and listening underwater,
 Trying to see, if we could tell, what
 Was being said.

—Janice Gibson

The Tabernacle

The turquoise gutters of the Golfland Motel made it look like a Shoney's restaurant or a K-mart store. She could tell by the way Thomas was gripping the steering wheel that he wasn't in the mood for talk. Jessie didn't feel like looking back, anyway. The last thing she wanted to think about tonight was the Golfland Motel and the stale morning sheets of seedy doublebeds. She turned from the motels and drive-ins next to the highway, straining her eyes for particles of mist reflecting the feeble, yellow headlights.

"I hope we have a nice time." She thought maybe they could talk since they were on their way to church. Thomas mumbled and flicked his brights on, then off again. It always irritated her when he ignored her, even if it was only small talk. The way he sat there like he was old enough to be her father and above all foolishness made her want to shock the starch out of his collar by saying a filthy word or that she hated his family or something drastic like that. But they were on their way to church, and it wouldn't do any good to go to church if you had to curse and argue all the way to the pew. Jessie looked out the window pretending to have taken a sudden interest in the signs along the roadside. The VW shot like a bat out o' hell past the steel and concrete outskirts of town and scuttled deep into the moss green countryside.

Ever since she could remember she had liked to read the signs along the road to Lake Lanier. It made the trip up to the family camping spot go by faster. Not just the red and white metal signs that all say the same thing like "LOT FOR SALE;" no, Jessie liked the bible-toting-Baptist signs, as her father used to call them, like the one at the turn-off to the lake that says "THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AT HAND" in thick black letters. Her family was always drawn to places that offered something better than where they were. Once, they decided to go see about a new lake development that was advertised on Sunday afternoon T.V. When they finally found the place, they had to pay two dollars at the gate. They followed the red clay road all the way around the development. The lots, which were no more than twenty feet wide and maybe twenty back, were bunched together on the hill in the middle of the red circle cut by the road. But people had their tents pitched and their muddy, wet bathing-suits hanging on the tent lines to dry, and, in front of one faded brown tent, sat an old woman in a straw sun-hat and an old man. Both just sat silently staring at the Jennings' blue Dodge station-wagon as it went around and around the circle trying to get its two dollars' worth. Jessie remembered how her father had cursed the man at the gate for his smile and how he'd told her mother to stop nagging when she told him she was

very tired and ready to go home and how silent she and her brother were all the way back home.

But almost as good as the KINGDOM OF GOD signs are the signs that go for about a mile until they finally finish what they're saying. Jessie would wait for each word as if she expected the message to have changed since the last time she rode by. But every time the signs said that "HE WHO BELIEVES ON ME SHALL HAVE EVERLASTING LIFE." She could just picture some poor soul standing on a cold Jesus shouting how she believed, like Dorothy swearing to the Wizard of Oz that there was no place like Kansas. Jessie thought the land of milk and honey was a hoax, just like the roadside souvenir stands with enamel statues of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, praying hands, and football players with springs for necks lined up in the front window, just fading in the sun.

After passing the Lake Lanier exits, the roadside changes. The signs stop, even the "LOT FOR SALE" signs. Only one road leads in and out of Duluth, Georgia, a town that looks as if it is drying up on the asphalt stem because Lake Lanier is getting first shot at the thick saps. In Duluth there are only trees and dirt, just yard after yard of Georgia pines, naked three-fourths of the way to the bushy top, and red Georgia clay that looks wet in the moonlight. The VW passed a deserted Esso station with painted windows and broken panes. They found the sign they were looking for:

THE FAITH TABERNACLE
A NON-DENOMINATIONAL CHURCH
PASTOR: SISTER WHITEWATERS

visitors welcome.

The car turned onto a dirt road and passed rows of house-trailers before coming upon the red brick building with the light from the marbelized windows and the loud music rolling into the still night.

Jessie had never been to a real tabernacle before. The word had always confused her, like the words, *Christian and virgin*. She had seen and heard the word plenty of times, though. When she was just old enough to read she found it in the Bible her Baptist grandmother had given her. She didn't have anything better to do at the time and when she found the passage about the Jews in the wilderness building a tabernacle, she laughed because she thought *tabernacle* was a dirty word for boys' privates and made up a song about a Jew in her class named Paul Rubens, who sat in the back of the classroom and broke wind out loud.

Do you know why Paul is crying?
Do you know, oh, do you know?
Can you guess why Paul is sighing?
Do you know, oh, do you know?

A fire is in his tabernacle,
This I know, oh, this I know,
A cloud is on his mercy seat,
This I know, yes, this I know.

She never sang it out loud, only to herself. Even then she knew better than to mock a person's religion or family or anything a person couldn't help. Whenever Jessie heard the word *tabernacle* she felt the way she felt when she saw a spastic. She wanted to laugh. She wanted to laugh when their neighbors, the Goodsons, invited them both out to the Tabernacle in Duluth. But she didn't laugh. Instead, she persuaded Thomas just to go along so they wouldn't hurt Christa's and Brad's feelings. Thomas didn't see any reason to go all the way to Duluth when there were plenty of churches in Atlanta. He went to church regularly from the time of his christening to the time of his marriage, dutifully responding to "May the Lord be with you" with "And with thy spirit" and learning the Nicene Creed and the stately Episcopal hymns all by heart. It was Thomas who showed Jessie how to overlap her palms while waiting for the communion wafers to come around, how to keep the wafer from sticking to the roof of her mouth causing her to possibly choke on the wine, and how long to kneel at the rail before going back to their pew. Their trip to the Faith Tabernacle was their first visit to a church in over three years.

They stalled around outside the church until the song coming from closed doors was ended and begun all over again. Then they walked inside. The walls were painted hospital green. Several people in the pews turned and smiled at them as if they knew they were coming. Ahead was a row of chairs lined up across the front of the rectangular room. An older man with a bald head and horn-rimmed glasses was standing in front of one of the folding chairs, clapping his hands to the down beat of the music and tapping his right toe to the up beat. A boy with a pocked-face, wearing a baggy yellow Izod and black trousers, was standing in front of another of the steel chairs beating out the rhythm of the music on a tambourine. A girl about Jessie's age, with curly brown hair and silver-rimmed rhinestoned glasses banged away at the piano wedged in the left hand corner of the room at the front, while a pale, sickly looking young man with black, oily hair and black thick glasses played the organ solemnly and slowly. Jessie and Thomas pretended they didn't notice people watching and went up to the pew where the Goodsons were sitting. Everyone looked at the newcomers and smiled. The two men up front nodded, and so did the girl at the piano. The organist didn't seem to see or hear anything but the keys before him. The pock-faced boy stepped

up to the microphone and raised his hands, speaking at the same time as one foot beat out the music.

"Okay. One more time. Let's praise the Lord Jesus with gladness and joy!" All the people stood up and starting clapping hard and stamping their stockings feet.

A woman with grey hair wound into a small bun at the nape of her neck was sitting in front of Jessie. She stood up and began shaking her head and beating the back of the pew in front of her. As she turned her head from side to side with the beat of the organist's music, Jessie could see her tight, tanned skin and her square brow and chin. She looked like an old Indian woman wailing about her lost sons, the way she sang with her eyes closed and her shoulders humped over. The music swelled. Jessie began stamping her foot, too, and, when the Goodsons stood up, so did she. She could hear that she was off-key, but so was everyone else. The boy sang loudly into the microphone and interrupted with a chant of "Call to Jesus, let him hear our praises on high!" between phrases in the song. Jessie noticed that most of the people in the pews were holding one or both of their arms out in front of them as if reaching for something; their eyes were closed and their heads tilted to one side and upwards as their ears listened hard for some thing faraway. The woman in front of Jessie was crying louder and bending over, mumbling nonsense syllables. Then she started jerking all over. No one took notice as the tanned woman stepped out into the aisle of the church and began turning and waving her angular arms. She stooped to pick up the black patent-leather shoe of a young girl who was standing in a row opposite her own. The woman lifted the shoe high into the air, waving it to the organist's drone and singing and shouting words that Jessie could not understand.

The bald man came to the microphone and motioned for the boy to return to his chair. He looked at the congregation and then at the woman holding the shoe up in the air and began murmuring softly,

"Oh Thank you, Lord. We feel you with us tonight. Oh, Thank you, sweet Jee-sus, and praise your holy name." He raised his hands on high and intoned, "Thank you, Jee-sus." the old man took off his glasses and wiped his eyes with the handkerchief lying on the pulpit. He closed his eyes and faced the ceiling mumbling over and over into the microphone with the same inflection every time, "Oh, Thank you, Jesus. Oh, sweet Jee- us." The music became mumbling.

The Goodsons at Jessie's side were repeating over and over, "Thank you, sweet Jesus," and, "Oh, Lord, we praise your holy name." Christa Goodson began speaking in jumbled syllables in a low voice that was speaking to someone through her upturned, unconscious mouth. Jessie shook deep in her marrow as an icy chill slivered up her spine. Christa was a stranger to her. Everyone in the pews was swept up in the rhythm of ex-

cited tongues coming from the man at the microphone. Thomas was sitting with his head dropped to one side as if he had fallen asleep.

The room suddenly grew perfectly still, quiet except for the drone of the organ. The bald man left the microphone and returned to his chair, nodding for the congregation to sit down. A side-door, leading into the room from the woods outside, opened. A stocky woman wearing a white choir robe draped over at least three-hundred pounds of powdered flesh and wearing no shoes appeared in the doorway, stark white framed by the deep night. Jessie noticed that the Goodsons had their shoes off, too, and that, in fact, every foot she could see was bare. Jessie whispered to Christa, who looked at her now quietly, "Why does everyone have his shoes off?" Christa held Jessie's arm and whispered back,

"Because the Lord said to Moses, 'take off your shoes for the ground you are standing on is holy ground.'" She told Jessie that the word had come to Sister Whitewaters one afternoon after she had been fasting and praying in her closet all day. The Lord had told her that the Tabernacle was blessed in His eyes and that everyone should have bare feet. Jessie slipped off her shoes, aware of a hole in the toe of her stockings. She nudged Thomas and pointed at her feet, but he turned away. She was about to whisper to him to tell him his shoes were supposed to be off, when Sister Whitewaters took up the microphone and began walking back and forth in front of the pews, humming and saying, in a deep, soft voice, "Thank you Lord, Praise your holy name." She dragged out the "Praise" until the note faltered and intoned with full breath the "holy name" part. Then, she began singing in a hoarse, intimate voice:

Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised,
In the City of our God, on the mountain of his holiness,
Beautiful for situation, the Lord of the whole earth,
Is Mount Zion on the side of the north,
The City of the Great King.

Sister Whitewaters sang by herself as the people in the pews began whining and swaying to her song. Then she began crying into the microphone. Her heavy shoulders shook, and she closed her eyes, forcing tears down her cheeks. She finished her song and fell silent. Jessie wanted to sob out loud. Sister Whitewaters wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her robe and looked at the congregation and then at Jessie. Jessie's face flushed hot; she closed her eyes as if she were praying. Sister Whitewaters called on Christa to introduce her guests to the brothers and sisters in the congregation. Christa spoke,

"This is Jessie and Thomas Wilson, friends from school, who have come here to praise the Lord and receive his holy word." Sister Whitewaters started down the aisle, but her microphone cord wouldn't reach; so she

took her place silently at the pulpit. Jessie breathed deeply and opened her eyes.

"Sisters and brothers, before I came in here tonight, I prayed to the Lord, asking him what I should deliver unto his poor, lost sheep this evening. He came unto me, bathed in a bright and holy light, brethren." A low drone swayed in the pews. Sister Whitewaters was whimpering. "And in his outstretched arms was a board, brethren, and on that board was a loaf of holy bread. He said to me, 'Take, eat, Sister, and deliver this bread to my sheep that they may be brought out of the darkness of sin and into the full light of grace.' Oh, he was clothed in a robe of holy light, brothers and sisters." She came away from the pulpit and stood before the congregation, her shoulders shaking to relieve a burden and her head lowered. "Brethren, I say to you that it is a grave moment in the Kingdom of God. It has been given me to give unto you this message: the reign of grace has ended, and the reign of judgment has begun." The congregation became perfectly still. "I say to you, cast out all sin from your hearts before you are cast into hell." With that the congregation swooned, swept by a mighty wave of whines, sobs and frantic tongues. People stood up one by one, all holding out their arms like children trying to avoid punishment. Sister Whitewaters looked around at them, drying her tears as her face hardened into severity. She walked back and forth across the front, getting more and more forceful with each crossing. The floor shook with the regular beat of her bare feet on the green carpet. The people stared as if they were in a trance and held out their arms higher before them. Christa fell to her knees and began praying feverishly in jumbled syllables. Jessie and Thomas were moving their lips; Jessie thought Thomas might have been praying, but she herself was moving her lips so the Sister wouldn't single them out.

A scared voice rose from the back, crying and screaming at regular intervals, like a woman in labor,

"Oh God, forgive me for my sins. I've sinned against you, Jee-sus. Please, please forgive me!" The woman sobbed and fell to her knees, dropping out of the view of the rest of the congregation. Sister Whitewaters began yelling, punctuating each angry word with the thud of her bare feet.

"I see the black mark of sin." She was looking around at different members of the congregation. Then her gaze fixed on Jessie. Jessie stuck out her arms the way everyone else had theirs. Her arms felt light. They tingled as if they were alive, and Jessie was afraid they were going to move without her willing it, because they felt like they belonged to someone else. Jessie's head swirled and she looked up, breathless and sobbing deep within, hoping maybe she would be blessed at last.

"Brother and Sister Wilson, the Lord called you here tonight. He told me there would be those among us tonight who needed to be delivered unto him. Come up here. He's waiting to receive you. The Lord knows your need." Jessie went quickly, and Thomas followed. The congregation murmured excitedly. Jessie couldn't look at Thomas. Sister Whitewaters placed her moist palm on Jessie's forehead and pushed with all her might. Jessie's neck arched painfully under the weight. Sister Whitewaters intoned, "Lord, cast out the power of Satan who has ruled this poor soul. Deliver her unto you, Oh Lord." The hand fell off her head, and Jessie felt a sudden release, as if a flood were rushing through a door deep inside her that had until that moment been sealed. Jessie laughed and cried all at once, shaking as she fell to her knees before the congregation. Something wet was sprinkled on her raised forehead. She heard Sister Whitewaters do the same thing to Thomas. When she finally did look to see if he was all right, she began crying again because he, too, was on his knees. Sister Whitewaters placed a hand on each of their heads and resolved gravely,

"Let these two be joined anew, Lord, in the baptism of the Holy Spirit, Lord, let them be man and wife before you." Jessie remembered their wedding, when her mother was so sick with loneliness that she almost couldn't come and her father and brother were off on a camping trip, or so she had heard, and she had been given away by an uncle who was a stranger to her.

"Brothers and sisters," Sister Whitewaters said weakly, "The Lord told me to distribute these tokens of his power and his mercy as he himself did unto his disciples before he left this earth. Come all ye disciples of the Lord God and receive the cloth of healing." Everyone left the pews and came up front to kneel with Jessie and Thomas, stretching out hands for the handkerchiefs the Sister was giving out and placing envelopes in the gold plate beside the pulpit.

The Indian-looking woman came towards them all, looking especially at Jessie. From the aisle she began screaming,

"I saw an angel standing behind the Sister as she spoke, and the angel told me that Sister Whitewaters was telling the truth." The Sister was laying hands on everyone and giving them cloths of healing as they cried whispers into her ear. Jessie looked to see if the Sister saw the woman, now unconscious on the floor, her face fixed in an expression of pain. No one noticed. They were all on their knees praying to God for deliverance. Jessie watched as Sister Whitewaters disappeared out the side door, followed by the bald man and the pock-faced boy, who carried the tanned, contorted body out into the night.

The fresh outside air rushed in as the front doors were opened once again. Jessie and Thomas were finding their way to the door when people

gathered around them, hugging them and telling them they loved them, saying "Brother" and "Sister" and "Welcome." A girl about five years old with curly golden hair and freckles all over her pale skin walked toward Jessie, extending a limp hand. Jessie shook the cold, clammy hand, absorbing the tremble. They finally made it through the crowd to the door. The music began again, the girl with the pointed silver glasses banging away at the piano keys and the sickly man resuming his droning chords. The people were swept into the music and began clapping and slapping the wooden pews nearest them, singing loudly and with joyful spirits.

Then Jessie and Thomas were in the dark. The car was damp inside from the night mist. Thomas turned on the heater and defroster, and they waited silently for the windshield to clear. Jessie could still hear the people singing as the VW turned off the shining road and passed the deserted gas-station. Looking back, she watched the pine trees blot out the lights of the Tabernacle windows. A slow rhythm in her temples gradually faded as the VW reentered the highway.

"Do you realize it's almost eleven o'clock at night?" He shifted gears harshly, letting the noise from the engine rise to a dull grind before shifting again. Jessie turned toward the window, hot tears burning under her eyelids, soothing herself with silent song.

Do you know why Jessie's crying?
Do you know, oh, do you know?
Can you guess why Jessie's sighing?
Do you know, oh, do you know?

A fire is in her tabernacle,
This I know, oh, this I know,
A cloud is on her mercy seat,
This I know, yes, this I know.
This I know, yes, this I know.

—JoAnne DeLavan Williams

"The Professor"

Your words dropped off like dust.
(We looked up from our notes,
pens suspended over paper.)
Your face was clenched
like a knot badly tied.
Your eyes jammed shut behind
the angles your face made.
Your hands clutched the table.

It was as if you stopped to think
with such force your mind bent up
beyond itself and mingled
for a humming instant
with the element of your soul.
We waited for the wisdom
that would explode from
such contorted inner workings.

But your voice rose slowly
like tired smoke below heaven's
own tired weight. No new
thoughts sparked around you.
Just a quiet effort
to resume the lecture.
(And pens trudged on again
across the page.)

I remembered then some references
to "doctors; medication." This was
no agony of thought. This was
a man keeping pain in its round
cavern. This was a body caging
pain within. Death was barking
through your veins and when
it raged alive you would kick
it back into its hollow...
until it crawled out again
anywhere, anytime, now.
The air sizzled from the strain.

We watched you living out your life.
We saw you work death into your life,
into your routine, and it went with
you like a briefcase, like your arm.
When you finally collapsed it was
not at your desk, or at your lecture
as it should have been,
but as you knew you would —
in a common midnight emergency.

We watched you hammer out your life
and life clucks on without you.

—John Doran

THE NOMAD

As the markings appear on his forehead at dusk
 dogs lay whining hungry at their empty bowls
 they howled at the moon as though in their
 reach it would drop charitable scraps in those
 open mouths yawning in weakness and thirst of the
 desert dryness

As the sand flew high in clouds above cactus and
 dead horses given up the fight of flesh-bound darkness
 and frying sun foaming whetted tongues to
 frightened gaspings for breath
 death winged scavengers invaded in numbers

As the space of showers between grow long and
 empty rain chants ignored
 and his eyes washed clean of sweat see the fire
 distant in its warmth
 a flash of gold and blue flickering slowly down in
 butterfly wing strokes by and gone
 swift visions pass on silver streams and sweetly row
 the oars of birth
 a memory lingers his mind shadowed in the moment of
 beginning
 it soon disappears and again the moon is turning and
 stars shouting whitely in contrast to the black
 surroundings and dull earth under

As he stands scanning the circumstance of this new
 summer silenter than the sounds of wind waking
 mountain to morning
 rodents rise to nightly searchings out of dumb
 pilgrims sitting awed in wondrous apprehension of
 a new day
 to strike with sharpened teeth and powerful jaws
 unhinged in expectation

As the battle and conquest ensue and end triumphant
 to the stronger
 his feet sinking sanded staring into the robes
 fallen exhausted about them
 watchful and wary the cloth rolls gently down the
 stretching slope of sand to find its own home
 and a violent thrust rises from somewhere deep
 without him
 something within sounds and lifts the seductive
 veils of rest from his body and screams i am man

As the sun pitches itself forth out of its
 sightless boundary
 and bursts white fire on the rocks below



