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FROM THE INVISIBLE COAST

Poems and Stories

By

Pamela Uschuk

B. A., Central Michigan University, 1970

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

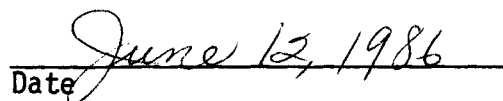
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This book is for all those I love and who
continue to bring fire to my life:

Judi, Val, John, my parents, Jennifer, Joy,
Sandra, Lyndy, Bronwyn,

but it is especially for William

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THE BLOOMSBURY REVIEW:	"Banking The Fire"
CALLIOPE:	"Undertow"
CALYX:	"Awakening"
CIMARRON REVIEW:	"A Gift Blue As Light"
MISSISSIPPI MUD:	"Sleeping Under A Meteor Shower On The Straits of Juan de Fuca"
NIMROD:	"A Dream, My Child"
POETRY:	"Black Ice," "After Reading Louise Bogan's Journals" and "Meditations Beside Kootenai Creek"
PORCH:	"View From The Hammock No Wind Rocks"
PRICKLY PEAR QUARTERLY REVIEW:	"What You May Have Thought Was Empty"
raccoon 14:	"Drawn To Light"
SING HEAVENLY MUSE!	"Departures"
TELESCOPE:	"Of Simple Intent"
TENDRIL:	"Through The Dark, A Brilliance"
YARROW:	"The Minotaur"
ZONE:	"Wildflowers" and "To Play By Heart"

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and Pipedream Press, which published two poem-length chapbooks, *SLEEPING UNDER A METEOR SHOWER ON THE STRAITS OF JUAN DE FUCA*, accompanied by prints by Jochem Poensgen, and *MEDITATIONS BESIDE KOOTENAI CREEK*.

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WHAT YOU MAY HAVE THOUGHT WAS EMPTY

WHAT YOU MAY HAVE THOUGHT WAS EMPTY

Perhaps no one was home
so you went, quietly,
for a walk in the arroyo
swaying with the sun's dry current.
Maybe you were restless,
looking for a place to sit and watch
your shadow stain the ground.
While your feet rearranged broken feldspar
like angry words, you saw
a black beetle big as your ear
even with its head broken off.
You stopped, thinking it moved.
But it was empty,
a stranded desert nautilus.
So, with your skin pricked by rose quartz,
you sat, mica gleaming
like constellations around your feet,
the beetle that became a shell.
You walked inside,
spelunking for the ganglia,
prospecting the missing heart.
When you awoke, you might wonder
that you picked the shell up
and brought it home.
Maybe you were thinking about your lover
or your children
or what to have for lunch, and instead
of answering the phone
that rang distant as a vireo's solitary call,
you sat at the shady table
placing the beetle on your plate.
For a moment you imagined eating it
so that black indifferent husk
would fill you but you could see,
inside the thorax
you thought was empty, a tiny light
sharp as the flash of animal eyes
struck by headlights on a lonely road.
Your hand opened.

WILDFLOWERS

for Anna Petroska Jackinchuk

I

I arrange Cornflowers, Brown-eyed
Susans, roadside Purple Rockets for you,
years since you taught me their names.

You say wind scours words
from your head as sun catches us in your kitchen.

Grandma, Babushka, again I ask stories
of the old country, the mountains
blue as aging veins, cures
boiled from mushrooms you picked, and the time,
coming home late, you hid in river
willows near gypsy camps
rocking to balalaikas smouldering
like icons in your mother's bedroom.

How the dark pulse caught you early
next morning, when instead
of capping beer in the family brewery,
you danced on straw-covered ice
until you fell
unconscious, and the wind began.

You thought of penance
when your mother shipped you at twelve
to American alone, knowing
no English,
your sole welcome to Ellis Island
an Atlantic storm.

II

You remember yellow roses,
 amethyst lilacs,
 Kiss-Me-Over-The-Garden-Gate,
 whose tongues held no alien voice.

Their country was sanctuary
from my grandfather who betrayed
his promises of Dahlias and lace.
Even as you planted the Tea Rose,
he ran whiskey from Canada, bought cars
and fancy clothes to win
women whose faces lined silk rooms
you never saw.

(stanza break)

His laughter scratched at each bloom
while you cooked Russian meals and danced
for his Purple Gang friends.

Your payment, boiled
potatoes and sour milk.

Bullets tore the roots from your dreams
even after he was shuffled,
a black-hearted king, to prison
and back. His last parole, he beat
your oldest son unconscious,
then suffocated, his head smaller than you remembered,
inside your stove. For years, gas
stained yellow the kitchen air.

You warn me about men, your second husband
so alcoholic he doesn't recall
how whiskey drove anger like a grass fire
through his heart when he split
the kitchen table with a cleaver meant for you.
Now, mowing the lawn, he cuts
the simple tongues of Snapdragons,
Miss Rose,
Snow-On-The-Mountain,
cursing stems and petals clogging his blades.

Pushing you to sign over your house
to his son, he can't uproot
what holds your ground.

III

Complaints are foreign
as I will become to you. Memorizing
your hands, weightless
and resilient as bird bones, I've come
to say goodbye. You point to the Magnolia
opening the yard with blossoms
healing as your absolute laughter.
So far North, you marvel
it's survived winters
and their surfeit of burying snow.

I tell you I'm going alone to mountains
I've never seen. You repeat,
wildflowers can't be transplanted
I want to die in my own house

(stanza break)

Grandma, you love best
dark petals,
 black marooned roses,
cinnamon deep azaleas, and you give me
the deepest for my hair.
I can't turn from
your blue eyes that tend a garden
becoming my own.
There is no sound
loud as this passing when you say,

*I'll see you again in the clouds
when the wind stops.*

UNDERTOW

for my father

I

Beyond Holland where we never stopped
to look at tulips locked in waterlight
like Seurat's points of color, you
drove us to Tunnel Park.

Through its stone mouth,
we raced where wet sand chilled names
in red chalk,

Mark & Sandi tru luv 4 ever,
and we heard Lake Michigan boom
then grumble like wind through cellophane.

This miracle--you and Mom
vacationing from daily griefs--vast dunes
shimmering blonde heat
we hurtled down, lucky not to break our necks
cartwheeling to your feet.

Pocked by the gentle regularity of water,
we dove again and again pretending
we were sharks no one could bully.
When you taught us to jellyfish float
like the dead, to bodysurf,
you said, when you were young,
Johnny Weismuller
taught you to swim.
We copied your ape call's perfect pitch.

Each weekend we built forts
doomed to rising surf, then dealt hands
of *Shoot The Moon* to lotioned aunts
and cousins while bright sun and brighter waves
washed the assembly line, your bad temper,
oleum and grease from our lives.

You said,
get an education
stay out of the factory

We never wanted to leave the lake
but slept floating all the way home.
Creaking tides of crickets woke us complaining
to farm land flattening our hoase.

(stanza break)

Every night I worried you home
 from the shop where you fought
 those who wrote *Commie Red* on your machine.
 Few could pronounce our name, didn't ask
 if your father left Russia
 before the Bolsheviks came. I counted
 the cigarettes you smoked--
 three packs of Chesterfields a day--
 and couldn't sleep until I heard
 your snores roll up the stairs.
 I hid when you tossed your supper
 to the floor, cursed civilians who didn't care
 you fought in both theatres of the Second World War.

II

The last weekend driving to the beach,
 white light veered across
 dew-drunk farms we passed. Through the tunnel
 red flags warned of undertow,
 revolting waves, but we swam
 daring the current's gray anger.

Safe on shore, we heard the story
 of a body washed up South.
 I imagined its lungs
 burst like ripe plums.
 With each new wave claiming sand, its face
 bloated above the locked throat,
 its endless scream for the key.

Wading surf, I shrank from the soft thrust
 of drowned flesh, water's formless touch on my knees.
 Father, caught in the silence
 of a wave's violent trough, I saw you
 knocked from your feet, and I knew
 even you, who seemed so firm on land,
 could be lost.
 I screamed as you sank,
 and the stone of that secret fell through me.

III

So many years since you struggled
 back to shore, I've lived near water
 watching it swell, then subside
 over the shifting catechism of my life.
 I live with a large man
 dark as you are light,
 who smokes too much,
 who's drowned several times.

(no stanza break)

At night I love his snores.
Often I try
understanding this, sometimes catching
myself, a pe call warm in my throat.

What's more, when I imagine you
it is in the deadly silence
of waves that separate us and drown
what we'd reveal.
What is enough, Father, I think is
what lives in dark water
flowing between us, in those tunnels
only dreams permit.

BURN

for Dennis Krasicky

Maybe you think I've lost track,
 forgotton how,
 almost twenty summers past,
 a pan of gasoline suddenly flamed
 in your hands and you ran,
 a screaming torch,
 torso and legs blazing
 before your brother tackled you
 with a kitchen rug, smothered
 that deep blue fire.

*I drive through the afternoon's heart,
 the bright rind of sun passing
 over winter fields I can't decipher
 for the glare.*

How could I forget those weeks
 I paced during skin grafts,
 operations to loosen scars
 that daily closed a leather vest
 around your breathing. I wanted
 to make your burns mine.
 As if words were cures,
 I read you stories, talked against
 fever that took you deeper
 into your raging skin, while you lay, radiant
 as hot metal flowing
 into the dark and back again.

*The mind remembers what the body endures.
 Under the utter blue sky's fire, a horse
 paws through punky snow to discover
 last season's grass, frozen, perfectly preserved.*

I don't remember what I read, just
 that I couldn't sleep knowing
 your breath struggled in white pools
 surrounded by acrid gauze.
 We were first-love young and I would have
 kissed each of your wounds
 but even the air hurt your skin.

(stanza break)

*Driving away from sun that falls
over McDonald Pass, dying snowbanks ignite
like nesting birds. As they extinguish
in the rearview mirror, I borrow their wings.*

Don't imagine we ever lose
what we've loved. I've never lost the days
you taught what ashes fertilize
nor the nights we loved
innocent as flares
smouldering in each other's hands.

*I drive daring curves above burning
snow the sunset fuels. Over the Missouri River
the sun is white magnesium flaring
behind frosted glass. Its winter eye stops the horizon.*

For years I've not mentioned
you living like some hawk
in a blood-bright field that cuts
across my dreams. I cannot forget you
who crossed into the cauterizing light,
how deep burns heal.
When I think of you, it isn't
the scars I see but the implacable fire
and what rises from it to survive.

BANKING THE FIRE

for Jack Heflin and Walter Pavlich

Like midnight all of it came true,
 the leaded glass doors
 tattooing rainbows to early snow,
 a closed casket,
 the windless flag,
 the mourner on crutches
 who shook my hand.
 Three nights running
 the same dream, the funeral of a friend
 whose face I couldn't see.

Until insomniac I stared
 into flames green as new pine losing
 the faithful terror of omens,
 the premature cold.
 Banking the fire, I almost refused to answer
 the phone call telling us
 John was dead of the blue path
 the suicide bullet traced through his brain.
 Finding him three days later, his mother said
 Mozart played again and again
 on his stereo to no one but snow
 falling early and steady as dust.

Like silhouettes dancing
 behind frosted glass, messages were never clear.
 The single time I saw
 a daylight meteor, it dimmed
 the sunset as it burned
 an arcing orange eyebrow above the fiery eye.
 A coincidence, some claimed, that earlier
 that afternoon, the local clairvoyant died,
 a sudden failure of her heart.

II

Now this move back North after
 two years in the desert living with signs.
 How glad we are to be
 here in the house of friends, knowing
 the things we share are dreams
 beyond the power of wounds we endure.

(stanza break)

From the porch we trace the flight
of ravens sure on morning updrafts,
the way Pasque Flowers resurrect the woods,
the bright yellow heart of Balsam Root,
and it is good, we say, to see
snow shrink under trees,
to unbutton our heavy shirts.
Winter was easy now that Trillium bloom
with spring. Perhaps this is all
we need to understand.

Morning coffee gone, we turn
to the daily forgetfulness of routine.
Walter, you tell me
your grandfather comes to you as a raven
and you can't decipher
what he wants to say. I believe you
and I know we've not learned
to live with our dead.
Splitting fir, I know.
I think of the fire
we'll bank tonight, sharing the center
of a season so old it needs
no maps to conjure the heart's territory.

GETTING CAUGHT
for Eric

You revved your Harley
into our startled lunchroom, your first day
of school.

At fifteen, you were the only sixth grader
I knew with tattoos fitting
a skull and wings on your arms, hate
and love blue across each knuckle.
I hadn't heard
of Brando or James Dean.
While we threw erasers, you flipped
a stiletto like a silver pass
end over end scattering playground wimps.
No one doubted
you'd kill them if they told.

By high school, you were wired,
full-blown with a charged code
firing your habitual ride over the weak-chirned boy
whose mistake was to sit
in front of your studyhall seat.
And the shop teacher,
like some rain-hammered stork, shook
and ran out when you stabbed the kid
with a math compass, its stylo buried
a half-inch in his plaid back.
The kid swore it was all in fun, took half
the blame, and none of us
disputed this yellow lie.
When weeks later, fueled by so much
freedom, you lit
the kid's new white shirt
with the Zippo inscribed to your missing dad,
no one was surprised.
It was a rough year; we hated
each tough new rule after you were expelled.

No one knew where you went, just
that the Harley shone black
as your stiff D.A. I never knew you
to share a single ride
or swear at me or any girl.
I remember you outside the building, fingers hooked, thumping
your thick belt or smoking Camels
while all the busses left you behind.

(no stanza break)

Sometimes a smile gurned across
your handsome face rendered
almost tender as you caught my hello.
I couldn't tell my friends what I saw
in you. Maybe it was the slight shake
I heard in your goodbye
or the cigarette burns pocking
the back of your hand
or the way once I watched you,
skipping class in the empty winter hall
that smelled like stale wool,
watched you hold the Zippo's flare under
the fingers of your own left hand,
hold them trembling as the flame
singed again and again
your flesh hissing in the wordless air.

DEPARTURES
for Judi

I

Under your eye, a tiny red lump
you fear is skin cancer,
recalls the days you lay like the skull
of an agate sipping the sun.
Sister, I think of you
in some anxious office
where a physician hums, marking
delicate tissues he will cut.

As you lean back from his hand, your son plays
in my yard where a Southern wind chimes
brassy in oak branches that lose
a few leaves to our windows.
This desert is years from sand
dunes we climbed, blinding us
above Lake Michigan. Each time we fell,
our mouths held the earth.

When sun like a Lady Slipper slid
into waves, we understood
the empty glare that blinds all departures.
By summer's end, we feared
we'd never see again
that open wound of water,
lilac in final light.

II

There are ways of believing
you've healed everything.
I tried with the first man, insisting
on love as if our bones would graft
like plum branches. Failing, I thought
relativity would save me, that even
as our sweat evaporated, it became
light leading the air.

Divorced at twenty, you laughed
at my romantics, loving only
your small son who poured us red wine.
We smoked when you told me
about your ex-husband who beat you
then tried to murder your friends.
Drinking every night, we failed
to find connecting veins
no knife could slice.

(stanza break)

When I moved to the woods, I gave you
a moonstone, its milky dome identical
to mine, whose shadows might predict
what could protect us miles apart.
Stones weren't enough.
Your ring had to be cut from your finger
swollen with heat,
the flesh dying there,
skin transluscent as raspberries.

III

What connects? Sometimes I watch
coals open their lips to wind
that blows down the chimney and I hear,
among the bird-scratchings of fire, my love
as he works, his room blazing
with light he writes by. Each night
he is hunter and prey, comes to bed
late even as sunrise rattles his breath,
even as his words circle
departing ravens.

He dreams perhaps
remembering when his infant shoulders
jammed in the dark pelvis.
Already a month late, he had no voice
to complain to the light-soaked world.
Under his blind chakra
 beating under
the wet hair thick on his crowning skull,
what message leaked to his grandfather
to begged for a final try?

What message for his exhausted mother from the blood-softened world as she watched her first born squinting against the lamp's face from her father's hands?

Believing in what love defies, she watched him curl red on her swollen belly, smiling.

(stanza break)

Sister, I admire you all these years
 raising your one son alone. While you nurse
 the critically ill, he stays
 by himself unafraid of the dark. How slight
 he makes his nightmares seem.

IV

I welcome your return, your car
 spirming webs of dust in the drive.
 You show me your eye,
 the vein cauterized, benign
 the healing ash.

Mourning doves call the dusk.
 while the sun dies, its funerary nesting
 in treetops birds return to.
 The last green slit of light is
 a saucer's edge ravens thread
 flying to the eye of Mercury.
 It is no accident
 sunrise and sunset are celebrated
 by wings, each arc more distinct
 as its shadow joins it.
 We laugh as slow stars appear,
 the dead charting us bright as the living
 whose faces move the sky.

AFTER READING LOUISE BOGAN'S JOURNALS

Outside on this floodplain
 subdivision, the hiss
 and pant of irrigation hoses
 disturb day and night.
 Their's is an awful breathing,
 the monotonous whisper of locusts.
 Relentless witness,
 ubiquitous desire, it is
 the sound of water that soothes and erodes.

What peril life places us in
 when love fails
 the heart. The heart,
 the watershed of the mind.
 What peril when the flume claims us
 and we become
 the woman whose hand rakes
 the parlor wall to stop the flowing
 as we sink into water so transparent
 we see no arm above ours,
 no lips saying no.

There rises in each of us
 a mad woman as afraid
 of water as of losing love. She cries
 when we walk into surf, wounds
 us lying beside rivers
 whose currents could cleanse our tears.
 She is what we always hear
 listening to the sad frenzy
 of tides. What could drown us
 we drink to live.

I won't say I know
 how it was for you, just as I can't
 reproduce in my garden
 the exact red-rimmed yellow eye
 of the marigold that caught yours
 in your mother's hospital room.
 It silenced all the roses just as the crash
 of the mill flume deafened your ears
 each time your love fled.

(stanza break)

During breakdowns you refused
the awful anxiety of roses friends brought,
their red petals fussy
drawing rooms you couldn't enter.
Water was aluminum in the painful pitcher
beside your bed, keeping you awake
with its thin waves washing
against unyielding shores. Giving up
the fickle husband who broke your dreams,
you gave yourself to words
that emptied around you when the last attack came.
They echo still. I would have
told you then it is
water that would carry you, that finally
water forgives the heart.

TO PLAY BY HEART
for my mother

I

You do not smile
as you sit behind Father
in the picture I pinned above my desk.
A blue glass vase your mother bequeathed you
holds Sweet Williams, hiding your hands.

*The photo doesn't betray
your lithium shake, the laughter
that breaks on your lips.*

Mother, I remember your hands
playing the piano, Mozart
or Liszt, Rachmaninoff's dark
straining chords. How intelligent
they found the keys, and I loved their music,
often pretending I could play as well as you.

II

What ceremony cures grief?
The Christmas your father crashed
into a semi, weeks after
your favorite brother suffocated,
chicken pox lining his lungs, you stabbed
out *La Polanaise* on the organ,
to make their ghosts forgive.

Makeup scribbled on your white face,
you spun in the swivel-rocker, laughing,
your mouth a splitting tomato
of thick lipstick, your eyes
bruised inside penciled rings.
Nightly, we hid
from the wound of your howl.

Neighbors kept their children
away. Your wild hands agreed
with every accusation spread.

(stanza break)

After you stitched closed
 the top and bottom of a skirt,
 insisting it fit, they committed you.
 Oh, mama, the silence was
 blue as your electric face.
 Thorazine made you sleep, even
 with your eyes open.

I held your bottle of red and grey pills
 and would have taken them all for you
 but I feared the way
 you sliced faces from pictures
 in the family album.

I learned to play French Horn,
 dissolving my bedroom with High E.
 Watching my face bend
 inside its silver bell, I gave
 each note like a prayer to you listening.

III

For years now the only talk
 between us is small talk, weather,
 how many bread and butter pickles you put by.
 You no longer play piano and I gave up
 French Horn before I left home.
 You never ask why I have no children,
 as if it was settled long ago.

In the mail, you send fall
 leaves, their brittle carmine unbroken.
 I hold them while I listen
 to Liszt played like swallows
 taking light in their beaks, and night
 defines the desert around me.
 Crushing them against my face, they tell
 more than any words you write.

Mother, your face waltzes, mirrored
 above the keys, and I begin
 to see beyond discords I've blamed you for.

(stanza break)

*In photos of you at my early marriage,
you stare, a deaf decoupage, into
buried crevasses that undermine
the flat Michigan plain.
Perhaps this was the register I failed
to read, what you couldn't tell me
of domesticity. I didn't know how
I could hug you home.*

What reply can I send you now?
I learned to play without technique
music's riddled heart.

WAITING FOR RAIN

AWAKENING

Past sleeping dogs it slid,
sly as a finger courting
stiff landscapes under a quilt.
It was a man or
the shadow of falling grass, the ash
of motion mistaken
for an eye trick, and I almost
didn't wake when it leaned
over me as I lay
granite-boned with dreams
on the couch. And I nearly
didn't catch its breath
nor the fast black curve
it cut like an eclipse
through the sturned door nor
the way the dogs choked,
woke midsnore, and fell
back complaining
of the sudden cold while
the room minutely rearranged itself.

THE MINOTAUR

after an etching by James G. Davis

Suppose he's not given to revenge.

Still,

he must dream of Ariadne

and feel a little

sad when he thinks of the waxed thread ball.

Perhaps she'd tried the trick

first, and he remembers

the taste of cloves on her breath,

why he'd slept

so long the next day.

Suppose he's not given to revenge.

Still, fists are

a startling alarm clock

and he cannot forget dying.

Perhaps, even now,

when he drinks too much,

he can smell the nettles and his blood

spicing Theseus's hands.

Sometimes, he remembers

too much, lives

alone with his own walls under roots.

He is a little like us,

perhaps wears jeans,

hides in his cave, and when night comes on

he hears his own shadow coming home.

If we visited him,

we'd wonder

at the skull sprouting

child's arms like a philodendron

under the T.V.,

the dog-faced roast

untouched on his table,

but he'd tell us

after all these years,

he's learned about metaphor and he'd smile

that crooked bull's smile,

his horns white as skate blades shaking

in his dark arena.

(stanza break)

He is alone most nights
and often fingers with man's fingers
his beast's head.
He owns no mirrors
but knows each shifting
boundary between cloven hoof
and human ankle,
between thin voice
and shaggy face.

He's not given to revenge

but some nights the road brings
a car,
maybe carrying a family home from a picnic.
Not revenge
but his shadow leaps
out before him onto the dusky lane
and the car swerves into nettles.

And maybe
the family won't talk about
what they'd seen,
saying it was something silly like
a trick of the eye.

It is then, dreaming of Ariadne's face,
round as a waxed thread ball,
the minotaur waves
at the white faces like balloons
in the windows rushing by.

DRAWN TO LIGHT

With ferocious softness,
a sulfur moth
catches on the adhesive surface
of my wine. It floats,
baffled by transparent shores,
as I watch, knowing
that to lift would cripple it. Released
it soon will die; drowning
it circles, a yellow kite
gorgeous in the clarity
of its numb red sea.

I think of attraction, how each
familiar touch is bane
and cure. Love,
we yearn toward such murderous light,
renew the scent that burns.

Bewitched

by frailty, we fly
from darkness
hoping to ignite, lift into bluest flame.

You walk toward me now,
rise through this wine, inverted,
then we touch
and disappear like rubies there,
slowly, blood-thoughtless in our flight.

30
The desert can be all things to man;
but above all it is a symbol of what has
been most deeply denied in men's own
spirit: it is a kind of bright mirror
wherein they see the arid reflection of
their own rejected and uncared-for selves.

Col. Sir Laurens van der Post

OF SIMPLE INTENT

Another side of sunset faces San Pedro Valley--
here mountains are primordial tongues
comfortable in a thirsty world
our words are useless to describe.
What they tell us is like a stone
of simple intent in our hands.

Here is the mirror
from which rolls land the healing seasons reveal.
Rocks like thunderheads guard
trees so short we reach their tops surprised
how easily our hands charge with dying light.

We are house-weary,
tired of news,
the Middle East wars, soaring
defense budgets that create doomsday
weapons for the hands of men
whose careless hearts frighten ours.

Even in this old landscape
Titan missiles wait underground
like restored Minotaurs for our youth,
the final sacrifice of a burning world
none can survive.

Following you,
I watch earth, the small tracks.
of rabbits, turpentine bushes
that conceal the scorpion's sting,
a sidewinder's lair.

When I look up
I see among heat-burst stones,
a yucca tree
bathed in the tangerine blood of last light.
Sword-haired and black
as a buffalo's back, it twists up
while its three faces muse,
stop the wind, and we
touch again powers our contrivances
are shrunk before.

(stanza break)

Here is a Titan we believe in, rising
from a landscape conjuring shapes
no computer can imagine.
Radiant with ungovernable light, this is
the intelligent heart we bow to
as we watch it grow,
backlit by the sky's burning tides.
For a while,
 our world settles
in the arms of this giant suddenly awake.

VIEW FROM THE HAMMOCK NO WIND ROCKS

Lying in the hammock rocked
not by breezes that stir
like carp fins the warm stream
but by the suffocated pulse,
the anxiety of careful breath,
I watch our house from a small hill.
It is like approaching a mirror
that shows the backside sliding away,
the arm turning from itself.
The house is empty,
its adobe crumbling and thick,
paste of mud and straw, mica
and wind.
How strange to watch our house
where we walk,
talk or love,
where we live like crustaceans
hardening over our secrets.
At this distance, mud looks wood-dry,
mica does not shine.
Strange, too, you've been gone so long,
the dogs hidden in manzanitas, our house
a home for strangers
we haven't time to know,
and I on this hill waiting for signs--
the subterranean clamor of your car's approach,
the crash of gravel in the wash.
I listen for the small swaying of houseplants,
your footsteps as I rock
safe but for the thrill of falling,
the rare scorpion that drops
from stirring trees.
What magnifies the desert
is the light shifting
with each turn of the wind
beginning to blow me back to old adobe and
its secret walls scarred white.

A DREAM, MY CHILD

When in the thrift store
I found that child's satin dress,
its miniature sleeves opening
the air like lilac scent, I thought
of you who so often in dreams
swim in a quick release
of dark water from my inner thighs.
There is no pain, only a rush
rocking like a tide reversing.
Your head is slick with black hair
and you do not scream at displacement
but lie with glowing eyes.

You have remained a dream, my child,
and as often as I have held you
nursing above the tightness
in my womb, I have awakened startled
but warm. If there is anything
I can tell you now, it is that
I bought that dress, knowing
its folded wings may never open.
It lies with eyes shut
in violet light among my clothes.

My child, you have become
the words that breathe across
the empty pages, an imperfection of longing
whose arrival is incredible.

CULTIVATING STONY GROUND
for Sandra Alcosser

I

Everything's returning. Strawberries
sprout advance guards
through sandblonde straw near Hawthorne
and roses you set off with logs
fat as tropical thighs.
You've left what spite disintegrating
snow, what grows from seeds.

I find them and your Bitterroot house
where I've driven from the Sonoran Desert
you've never seen.
There I learned the fingerlight gymnastics
of the Coachwhip Lizard, the way
Rock Wrens scaled adobe walls
prospect for fire ants.
Scorpions dropped from our ceiling,
woke me screaming with their quick transparent tails.
But I loved the light,
a painter's inescapable light that spoke
back from mica-jeweled soil.

II

Last winter when I lost
my love for a while, I saw
a thick-bristled javelina step into
the sun in front of me.
In that waking light, his tusks cut
crescents below his gray eyes
surveying each tilted shadow he passed through.
From inside his boar's face
he stared so gracefully, I'd have let him
carry me into the mesquite.

While you fought record Louisiana floods,
I watched my chickens, slack-beaked,
starve in the yard.
Too old and stringy to butcher, they accused
each day there were no jobs
I could stand in line for.
Sometimes I still see
their wings like paper fans
strike the kitchen windows as they leap
for potato peels,
the occasional empty eggshell.

(stanza break)

Your gardens tangle comfortably
in the woods, their roots
divining water through
soil more rock than loam.

They lean to surrounding light
so each line is focused even when dusk comes.
It is as if your shadow
like sudden insight passed through me
so that my movements among these plants
are not my own.

This summer I will grow
Nasturtiums, maybe a few vegetables
against winter and its inevitable endurance.
I'll let you know how it goes.
If I should leave, a friend,
perhaps a woman who's lost
could come as snow melts and see
what defines itself in soil,
what fills a rock-stunned barren place.

Sometimes there are no startling introductions
into love, just this
deliberate hunting in solitude
followed by quiet reunion.

 To these tortoises
shuffling through their purposeful lives,
I am already forgotten
as they circle each other
 then lie together in the shade
while the world turns
inferno around them.

'There are three things that will not be satisfied,
 Four that will never cry, 'Enough.'--
 Sheol, a barren womb, a land short of water,
 And fire which never cries 'Enough!'"

Proverbs 30: 15b-16

WAITING FOR RAIN

I

Tiny lines track
 the corners of my eyes, testimony
 to sleepless quarrels,
 all worries, petty or not.
 I wake in glass, my face
 cloned and distant there.
 I wake in glass, watching the Orb Weaver
 spin silk webs
 while children wrestle over her back.

In the mirror, I stretch my neck
 with a monster smile, raising my breasts.
 Firm as nectarines, they dare
 gravity, wonder what mystery
 a small mouth might urge.

I'm thirty-three,
 born the third zodiac sign, oldest
 of three sisters and their luck.
 I call for monsoons,
 lightning to snap my ground.
 My third marriage rummages up from sleep
 as I rinse my face convinced
 this obsession with threes must end
 or another year will pass dangerous as any lover
 who called me beautiful too often to believe.

(stanza break)

II

Thunder lifts dry turrets
 of mountains while the first electric
 air before a storm dyes desert
 improbably green.

 We watch sky
 whose seasons shift each hour,
 whose light is the face of memory
 old as carbon.

Rising with sunset, the Sacred Datura
 blooms white one night, dies
 with stars, its whole sexuality
 completed before the moon sets.

 And each day,
 after rain, new blooms!

Sky swells, its horizons
 cracked by thunderheads trailing
 rain spider-legged and distant.

What passes between lovers
 in houses held tight
 against storms, we guess
 reinventing each new and familiar touch.
 Love, your eyes follow flashes
 that split the dark breasts of clouds.
 You bite my lips and rise
 while lightning dies of its own crazy bursts.

(stanza break)

III

ein Drang nach dem Kinde
 My dog is pregnant and lies
 in the shade. Her eight breasts stretch
 charmed as Kali's
 whose witch's milk fed all.
 Her eyes are narrow
 black moons. She speaks
 in low moans, is virgin,
 one-in-herself.

Ishtar

Artemis
 Aphrodite soon forgot
 their mates, killed their sons.
 My dog is pregnant. I love
 her slow bloom as each day
 she opens, grows radiant
 as air after typhoons.

If I had a daughter, I'd hold
 her fingers to this dog and run them
 around thick wriggings under fur,
 telling her this is only one thing
 vessels are used for.

My stomach is flat.
 I don't know what to do.
 What to do. Remember
 how quick rain escapes
 down dry riverbeds,
 wetting topsoil enough
 to make grasses grow, enough to polish
 manzanita bark blood-bright.

(stanza break)

IV

You leave with your daughter
 to wander the Grand Canyon and see
 all the colors harvested by sky.
 Each vista will multiply
 until your mind refuses the infinite
 it can't take in.
 Light and shadows will fly
 like angels across your faces
 as you hike back to your small camp.
 There will be storms tonight.
 What will you tell her?

Once, driving with my father
 at night, I saw
 a tree on fire in the middle of a field.
 It rouged the faces of herefords
 lowing around it, a bodiless chorus warming
 above their white and cloven hooves.
 At home, my mother mad with ghosts,
 said the tree meant
 someone we loved would die.

For months she was gone,
 drugged away in soft rooms.
 Visiting her, we passed an old woman
 cradling an empty blanket who sang

lost, lost, lost

to its blue folds.
 I remember my mother's sudden screams
 for her children to save her
 but I was too young and ran out
 sick all the way home.

Mother, I am still saving you.
 In some sterile room within my heart,
 a stone swells, fixing its curse
 on any seed that would germinate there.
 We could split it
 with an axe honed blue as thunder.

(stanza break)

VI

Our first dreams levitate
inside the dividing cell, swim careless
as phosphorus fish seeing all but themselves.
Later we wake or fly
in those falling nightmares
whose black landings could kill us.

We climb to a cliff's edge
disintegrating with each step, and before
we jump, we remember
dropping from our mothers,
our mutual understanding broken.

In other dreams, we look
for the openings through
which we might fly
from horses who rear
behind the moon's boney eye.
Their hooves are anthracite,
their wombs dilate
red mouths calling us where the dead gather
among fires, white as silk.

Child, there is never enough time.
In this land of thirsty arroyos, dreams are
quick as lizards running to shade.

(stanza break)

VII

Tomorrow you come back.
 Testing each curve
 that gives or firms, I perfume
 my skin, wash my hair in lemon,
 brush it shining around my breasts.
 Tonight there will be
 a new moon, its thin arms discovering
 their exact capacity above us.

Quiet as dusk, the Datura
 dies into its seductive blooms.
 Moon-blessed and lovely,
 even closed, it draws
 water up through its poisonous roots,
 sister to Belladonna,
 Deadly Nightshade.
 A pinch of its pollen brings
 strange dreams.

A wind snakes in from the South,
 cool as scales, and stars
 extinguish one by one
 devoured by voluptuous clouds.
 Leaf-colored mantises stalk
 mates on the darkening porch.
 From lightning veins, ozone
 splashes, ripe as musk, and I walk out
 alone in this thirty-third year
 to meet the slashing rain
 that could open my house.

MEDITATIONS BESIDE KOOTENAI CREEK

THROUGH THE DARK. A BRILLIANCE

You always think the untended
will fail
like the amaryllis
left for months in a dark bedroom.
You remember

to water it when you're sure
this time it's dying.
And it is deserved
if its leaves turn brown and it slumps
around its pot, not like the roses
you carefully prune,
pinching off the dead
blossoms to make way for new ones.
The rose you believe
is immortal,
the Lazarus you guard so close
the flowers blind you
to the roots, the way
they rot in floods underground.
When it finally dies
despite the fertilizers,
the patient attention to the blooms,
you wonder why it reminds
you of love whose showiness promises
the illusion you sustain,
not wanting to know what reveals the dark
like blind fish in subterranean streams.

Then you remember the amaryllis,
its own shepherdess,
who even now sprouts the stalk
whose bud will become
its trumpeting blossom, a brilliance that is
a surprise sustaining itself
through months of dark and mysterious longings
your careful hands would learn.

CHECKING THE TRAPS

Like a man riding a kite across
 a pan of blue light, the fisherman rows
 past girls who claim the splashing shallows.

His hands wrinkle on red oars
 creaking above the immaculate skin of his boat.

Lifting green traps, he hears
 the sudden ascension of laughter as the girls
 swim back to the heat-struck shore.

He pretends he doesn't see them gather
 soft white shells
 they'll later carve over gossip, crude
 angels of hope and fear.

Instead the fisherman hides
 his smile, shy as the striped
 minnows that flash from his traps.

Maybe he remembers lying
 on the blind whiteness of stones
 like boys who read paperback romances between swims.

Or maybe he recalls the first time
 he saw his wife when he rose
 from the uneven rocks impressing
 red crescents in his back.
 She wouldn't look at him but that was another
 time when fish were plentiful
 and fat as sunlight glittering water.

Now he lifts his last trap,
 finds only a young sole
 its twin eyes staring blankly toward heaven.

Dropping it in his craft,
 he looks through the sun's clear wind,
 then rows, cautiously threading
 rocks breaking surf offshore.

His arthritic hands understand
 each turn of the oars as well as they know
 the curves of his wife's arms.

Stopping, he readjusts his grip
 as the girls carry clean dripping handfuls
 of water to surprise the boys
 who pretend not to notice them
 clattering with their shadows over the rocks.

JUST ABOVE

the glazed teak
 of the ferry's rail, passengers witness
 Aegean waves whose white tops spray
 then toss rainbows in fans,
 cutting air into small opals
 disappearing in the sunken wake.

In the West, water catches
 fire like magnesium strands that relight
 in the eyes of the man beside me
 studying waves and their irregular depths.

Fed up with their hypnotism, I watch
 him beat time on his sweater sleeves
 with his thin blue hands. He says
 he'd like to scoop up a breaker
 to get lost in.

Survivor of dictators
 and two world wars, he tells me, now
 his wife is gone after thirty years.
 From his pocket, he takes her—
 a dark girl in white muslin
 floating before a painted ocean,
 a cardboard moon.

*You see, the scar above her eye
 You could hardly notice*

His eyes redden the sea as I search
 for her invisible wound.

*Pneumonia—two months ago
 I wasn't home*

Nothing more, just his elbow shaking.

We lean over
 empty waves that storm
 from our ship's descending prow.

It's a long trip from the mainland
 to the outer islands, and he'd settle
 for a dolphin's rise, some sign,
 finds nothing but the constant
 span of wind tense on water.

(stanza break)

Sharing a bottle of Amstel,
we watch the last bruised light
pearl across the swells, and I
tell him I must return
to my lover who naps inside.
Behind us the cabin's walls
vibrate like metal hearts
remembering the deepest wounds.

Knowing no words,
to ease loss, I press his hand
laid like a shadow on the rail
where spindrift casts its finest salt.

A GIFT BLUE AS LIGHT

I

In the museum's gift shop, I held
faience beads, small as wren's eyes,
recalling the way they charmed melancholy,
turned the evil eye.
Guard to bones, they curled
four thousand years in an Egyptian tomb
where air settled on dust.

As the walls vanished, I heard again
sand grind temple stone
under the feet of men crossing red tiles
to find me. Ill' or dark-fated,
they wanted prophecies and cures.

no rain fell, only lapis beads
clicked on ankh,
on opening flesh
as pilgrims entered the priestess
whose name they never cared
to ask, the priestess
whose dutiful touch became the indifferent
response of moon to sun

II

When you wandered in
from the gallery, retrieving me,
I didn't tell you where I'd been.
Did you feel the desert walking my skin,
my return imperfect, when you gave back
the beads to the wondering clerk?

I couldn't speak of the soft light
gossiping from each petal
of Monet's *Waterlilies* you lead me past.
I remembered that identical light
lilies blinked blooming like vulva
to rough fingers prying their lidded moons.

(stanza break)

Nor could I explain how,
 what you admired most, the oil's
 violet flow, was exactly plum as bruises
 pressed by beads into her annoyed breasts,
 that diminished the priestess as she stiffened
 like papyrus under wealthy men.

*light consumed,
 then pitched and fled
 male eyes, closed
 during the final surge,
 as they begged Isis
 to save them, heedless
 of her smooth skin curving
 from their own heavy charge of bones*

Passing canvasses eloquent
 with brilliant adjectives of light, I turned
 from your eyes asking how many fortunes
 I cast for friends, why my days begin
 with shadowing brown
 my light sensitive eyelids.

Did you expect answers
 articulate as Rousseau's lion that
 bluey stalks the gypsy's dark sleep?
 It was you who disappeared
 to secretly buy the beads.
 Driving home that afternoon, my hands insisted
 your thigh's tight pulse,
 your whispered invocation of my name.

III

Lacing the beads around my neck,
 you teased they'd belonged to a priestess,
 would bring good luck
 to our first cross-country trip together.
 I loved their blue startling
 as the quick wings of Lazuli Buntings
 flying from our yard.

Now I hold them after
 our last move to the desert.
 Wearing them, I dream your hands
 salting my skin,
 your words folded
 into my hair, charging me open.

(stanza break)

Behind your shoulder, the moon climbs
naked as the skull of a lily
overturned in some ancient stream.
You smile at the beads swinging
between my breasts as we turn
to the wind that hisses
from a sudden outreach of feathers
lifting blue herons against early stars
we can almost touch.

SLEEPING UNDER A METEOR SHOWER ON THE STRAITS
OF JUAN DE FUCA
for Jennifer Lorca Root

I

Meteors claim us
with their fire windows
opening clear perimeters of night
over our spread sleeping bags.

Stars turn sky the way boulders
turn the shoulders of bears
who walk across them.

We are alone with the water,
this trip our last of the summer.
For now we feel like a family,
your father,
you and I, who am not your mother.
You worry in night's shadows.
I would tell you I was a daughter, too,
and often unable to talk,
like you my leaves coiled inward and held.

II

The dog barks at beached kelp,
thinking its bulbous heads stuffed with fangs.
She cannot hold still
with those long tails curled at her feet.

Small creatures move the grass,
upset oyster shells
in their hunting paths. Watching
us play in driftwoods, they are

easy in their tides. We hear them
breathe and see their green eyes
ignite sleeping weeds. Surf breaks
with its thousand intelligences,

dwarfing us, making us laugh like baboons
who grin from obedience or fear.
We throw ropes of kelp for the dog,
who gauging us, never tires of our games.

(stanza break)

III

This time you spend with your father
 is short as the hiss of stars
 smothering in the sea. You strain
 against confrontations, cling together
 outside of impatience.

Girl, he takes you in his arms,
 leaves you dizzy with his dark size.

Beside the white night waves
 for which he named you, he watches
 over your sleep. Riding all that
 vast sizzle of water, his eyes hold you
 and the distance between waves,
 ore apparent in the dark.

You sleep beneath Cassiopoeia
 grooving night's skull. Exiled constellation,
 she burns far from her father
 unable to save her
 against the quick jealousy of gods.

Let this night save you
 as dive in dreams to find
 the transparency of surf. Sleep
 with the ocean's large breathing.

IV

I was a daughter who once sat
 beside a snow-banked fire
 watching my father split wood,
 his figure defining the whiteness of hills.

He sang old army songs I couldn't
 repeat at home, this secret
 our code, shining as the knowledge
 in the night eyes of raccoons.

We stayed late in the woods,
 drinking chocolate and counting stars
 that fell with our wishes in snow.
 How could I want to go home when I clung,

a laughing jealous stole, above
 the fuel he'd cut? And the one
 perimeter left to me now is that
 opening to his private heart.

(stanza break)

V

Wrapped in separate sleeping bags
both of you roll phosphorescent as tides
while meteors split the dark.
I wonder if, in some ballroom
of sea-flexed dream, you dance
unashamed, weightless in each other's arms
or if, in some cloud forest,
you forget the chop of hours and listen

to the night tales of creatures passing
who inform the wild grasses
until morning coasts in with the fog
and you wake to alert light dispelling
the charmed stars, wake to those
who would claim you,
to things that must be done.

BLACK ICE

I

How easy it is to slip.
 Slowing for a switchback's glazed
 curve, I catch
 the radio's news: a bus
 carrying wrestlers
 from Browning to Whitefish over this
 same unrelenting glare has slammed
 into the tanker jackknifed
 across both lanes. Then flames
 killing nine in the quick cold.

Along the polished carbon
 dip and swell
 of the Blackfoot River, I drive
 over ice so darkly transparent
 the pavement is a well
 whose varnished shaft pulls me
 sliding, an awkward
 creature, away from home.

What needs our sorrow? What passed
 between the stunned drivers
 when the bus brakes locked
 in that short skid? During the first
 thoughtless seconds, those boys
 becoming men dragged friends
 from the sudden fire, then watched,
 helpless as rocks dislodged
 by current, those they couldn't reach,
 their screams lost to wind
 biting across the dreaming world.

To drive so far in this weather--
 the afternoon half-blasted
 by wind gray as old wood--invites
 hypnotic dreams.

I recall checking
 the rearview mirror to see
 your waving arm shiver,
 then shrink in silver light.
 How often we're forced apart.
 Nothing is so visible as this ice,
 black-humored, a stoic beyond desire.

(stanza break)

There is nothing I can offer
 those boys healing
 as their daring, their hearts.
 Tomorrow I'll teach
 high school not far away. I slow
 cursing these roads hunched
 spinal with no shoulders for escape.
 Listening to the tick
 of studded tires on ice, I know
 how fragile the traction holding us,
 what suffering edges induce.

In the furrowed rush
 of black water, frost-grained waves
 grind back into themselves,
 intent on motion to avoid
 the final freeze across. Smoothing rocks,
 crisp hulls of caddis,
 stone flies, last summer's storm-rendered
 windfall, the river carves
 its trough deeper
 widening its embrace.

II

Like a snowbank bursting, snow buntings startle
 from my tires threading
 the river's rough hem. I envy
 the birds' close escape
 as they rise--
 moth fluttery, sudden
 confetti folding black on white
 above the snow-flocked highway--
 safe to the wild shore.

Below the indifferent grade,
 the current endures. In dim light,
 its dark arms turn
 from themselves, deceptive
 as the familiar lover. I can almost hear
 water's broken clatter
 against an iced log above rocks
 that bump gratefully inside the swirl
 or hold their own.

(stanza break)

Only the small ceremonies
of comfort and soaring can cure.
Unable to build roads
for safety, I will each speeding log truck,
each oil tanker back-skidding
to stay in its narrow lane,
to grip what can't be held.

I wonder what job is worth
these winter drives, clinging
to slick roads unpredictable
as the meteorology of the heart.

Even though my eyes burn
tired of the constant play
of gray light on dark ice,
there is not time to rest.
I drive through
this wilderness following,
against the curve of pavement,
the river and its restless strain.

FROM THE INVISIBLE COAST

I

*It is so still beyond the mountains
beyond the she-bear
who prepares her bonelit cave,
beyond the blind blue eye
of another storm moving in
from the invisible coast.*

I trail maple leaves
into the house where our dogs sniff
them for messages I can't read.
For them the code's easy,
stored by ritual licking before they curl
back to dreams twitching through their paws.

*It is so still I almost hear
heartbeats in the stones,
the sad thud of wet leaves
falling in the fenced and waiting yards.*

Between autumn storms, the dogs and I walk
the river where the ceramic clatter
of stones underwater silences passing traffic.

Chasing Brown Trout
and flat-headed driftwood into the shallows
the dogs shatter their reflections,
splash through the silver surface
swirling past my feet.

I growl, thinking myself bear
wrapped in the strict robe of wind,
wading water that breaks,
licks itself and reassembles downstream.

For a time, there is no cold.
Above the golden clamor of leaves--Maple, Chestnut,
Mountain Ash--I trace the Sapphire Mountains
lifting the sky like leaded glass to the sun.
There is no cold, and the wind
slows the heart of this valley.

(stanza break)

II

This I write you in Scotland
 where you're just waking to the green vigilance
 of hills attending the River Ness.

*Here, a Peregrine Falcon
 climbs with sun
 to his day's first dive above
 the Mallard nesting like a brown shadow
 on the early shore.
 Straight down
 at a hundred miles an hour, the falcon breaks
 the duck's neck tucked
 under his small tearing weight.
 There is no malice
 in the falcon's yellow eye.*

I imagine you touring cairns near Inverness,
 enchanted by rock,
 as you enter a wilderness of stone mounds
 where balance is the relentless metaphor—
 one cairn is heavy as a collapsing lung,
 the other opens and opens
 to invisible light.
 The code is clear.

*In New Mexico, I remember descending
 into a kiva where light wound
 snake-dusty down the entry hole in the adobe dome,
 and with the light,
 the subterranean rumble of songs.
 I touched then the vast memory
 of earth and sky,
 stories lucid as the shifting
 face of seasons I could read.*

You ask what souvenir I'd like.
 Walk the river to Loch Ness, find
 what the mistaken call Monster surviving
 quick black waters,
 intuiting days,
 then bring home its blind blue gaze.

III

This afternoon robins crowd the backyard,
 their backs wet slate, slight yellow legs dim
 against an orange migration of leaves.

(stanza break)

Gossiping, they shuffle through dying grass,
overturn foliage and fallen twigs,
gather a small harvest
for the long journey
some won't survive.

How perilous each migration
whose heart is the clarified knowledge
that impels dreams. Oh and how soothing
the motion.

I'd rise with robins from their shadows,
rise circling into a single body
that flies through a gray tantrum of clouds.
But the birds vanish with their voices,
like scraps of black cloth
clinging to the smallest wind.

There is no snow,
Mist freezes the coasts
of the rivers, and above their reflecting faces,
fog assembles cold air.
There is no snow,
just the suff of feathers
and the descent of the sun
whose failing eye hugs
the dark horizon closer. And the waiting.

I count small acts--
the dogs playing at my feet
and the light framing asters
blooming in the yard despite nightly frosts--
this grace its own rite.

IV

Beyond the settled mouth of the canyon,
a sow bear licks the wind for scent
while her feet decipher talus
stammering like broken plates under her.

Descending to her winter cave,
she feeds on small windfall apples
then leans over a creek where salmon fan
like sluggish arms
burning their final journey home.

(stanza break)

V

I pace before
the window framing mountains
where snow begins to blind the peaks.
One last time I run out
to bury myself
in the buttery light of maple leaves.
I sleep in their dying musk.

From under them, my warmth sails out
to the thick blue faces of cloud,
and I hear the wind start.
As the storm blows leaves free,
there is nothing more I want.

Love, I dream of you sitting late
in a pub's amber eye
listening to stories old as peat
over the long wheeze of bagpipes
naming each of the night's dark stones.

"If you have candy beside a river, sooner or
later, the girls will come to you."

Bruce McGrew

WATERCOLORIST IN THE STREAM
for Bruce

Maybe the girls are sculpins,
rare darters and minnows
starting like dark flames
from your toes that nudge the upstream flow.
Your eyes read distance and shadow
on each cottonwood or are snagged
by the washed-up bones
from last year's wild pig.

You come upon light and canyon wrens
flicking their tails against
red canyon walls.
With watercolor paper pinned, a drawing board
rides your shoulders, making a stiff-winged
angel of you wading Aravaipa Creek
until you find the place you render,
the right curve
of water and shade.
You take a sharp bend, soak rag paper
and begin, lifting like semaphores
brushes to the wind
alert above blank, raw fields.

The first stroke is crucial as the flexing
wing is to the final music
of any bird--each transference
of nerve, eye-song to heart, is beginning
and end, the rite
old as eating
rising from plates of color
until this canyon drops its sheer rock shoulders
and heat bursts from each mineral
into the water breaking around your feet.

Here, blue
cold as the underbelly of ice, floats above
a geography of tongue and talon, the brilliance
of mica-laced granite widening the paper
while your hands paint, intuitive as mediums.
There, a single slash
of yellow, and you are alone in the place
you create and that bears you.

(stanza break)

Perhaps it is now the girls approach,
laughing across your open skin
and you believe
ancestors never die,
lovers cannot betray you and each severed limb
of hope is re sewn whole
and fully articulate even in blackest air.
What you say
dries on your paper, and it is for us
who wander these canyons looking for birds, rare
fish and the constancy of plants,
to come upon you
in your wilderness of color
and shape.

Water refracts a thousand fingernails of light
that beat across your paper
as we head back downstream
under the desert sun whose wings
burn above everything we'd know
or would have. While you paint us,
you wife stoops to claim
the pig's bleaching skull. Before us, such astounding shadows.

MEDITATIONS BESIDE KOOTENAI CREEK
for William

I

Sometimes I become what I least desire,
old as bone, uncomprehending
as the memory of pain.
Perhaps dusk comes into a room
and a woman rattles up
out of my throat, her eyes
empty as candles set aside for the dead
who no longer care for such light,
her flesh gone to the birds.
It is then
in gray light, she tells me
my skin sags, my heart is incomplete in its beatings.
I haven't learned to love
as much as the stars
who are at least not cruel.
Then, as if in a dream of fire along a foggy ridge,
I walk out,
hands sprouting green flames,
eyes not blind enough from blue smoke,
and I hear
from its sad shadow in wet grass
the sudden up-cry of a meadowlark
and I believe I will never be alone again.

II

Listening to the wild applause
of water as it clarifies rocks we step across,
we hear what we'd name,
Western Tanager
Song Sparrow
Lazuli Bunting
and, over a gray patch of river dim
in cedar shadows, the thick bilious
laughter of Ravens.

You say
walk in the cold water
let it burn your feet.
When you dive into the stream
I see you float for a while
grabbing at the current with your pale hands,
and I remember your fingers
like coals stroking my breasts.

(stanza break)

Your black hair waves like tentacles
 or a negative halo radiant
 in its aquamarine pool. I see
 your fingertips bump like blind fish
 against the smooth skulls of stones underwater,
 and for a moment I think you'll drown.
 But you rise
 streaming a chandelier of watery light
 even our dark sides love.

Last night I dreamt of blood
 and beatings, of giving away
 a bright red slip. I tied my mother to
 a gypsy wagon and drove it West,
 while her arms like kites
 waved at passing weeds she blessed. Over
 and over she asked,
*If the eye is blue as beach glass, will it see
 itself leap to the bottom of the stream?*

I watch a Water Ouzel now
 whose name you won't believe.
 It dips in and out of sizzling foam,
 its thin yellow legs canny
 on moss-covered rock I'd slip on.
 I watch it disappear beneath white water
 that seems to flow backward,
 consuming itself above the bird
 who emerges sky-gray, triumphant on the opposite shore.

III

Ordeal by ice--

*twice twice
 I'd change my heart to ice
 suspend it twice in air
 to sprout wings for the wind's care
 then cage it for the bones of flame
 to unlock the twins from separate names*

Even as a young girl, I'd sit
 beside a dry creek
 I'd wish was full,
 and sketch the Tanager, shading
 black wings on its heart-red sides.

Sitting alone under
 the vast loneliness of trees in that small woods,
 I heard voices huge with wind
 and the coming dusk that wouldn't let me go.

(stanza break)

Who could I tell but the dead?
 What name could I give passion?
 I watched the way animals surprised
 grass, then pretended I was
 a lion no one could kill.

Summer's demise:

Gemini rises just
 before midnight in the Southern sky.
 Castor and Pollux,
 from icy toe to icy toe,
 I'd trace with a twin's eye for balance.
 Even the dead must have this simple joy.

IV

After all these years, what
 we come to, wet branches beating
 against our chests as we wade
 to the other side of the creek.
 Reaching for slippery knuckles
 of roots clinging to clay banks, we fall
 into water we can see through.
 Cedar perfumes us
 as our numb fingers finally hold that musky bark.
 How deliciously we shiver.
 This is the journey the heart makes,
 back through water,
 under stars filled with the certainty
 of submarine light.
 We count the times
 we've drowned to live.

Climbing back to shore, I watch you
 splash water straight
 into the air at my feet. This time
 I can love, and shove away the dead.
 You splash again.
 It is that simple. I wait
 for the Ouzel to come back downstream,
 wait for its small piping,
 your splashing already deep inside me.

THE DAILY SHIFT
Short Stories

These stories are dedicated to my grandmother, Anna Petroska Jackinchuk,
who died October 23, 1983 but who will always be alive.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

ZONE^{..}

"Getting Even"[™]

I would like to thank Bill Kittredge for his help in advising me about the stories in this manuscript.

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2

THROWING HATCHETS

Mid-morning and the sun floats up over the Sapphire Mountains. Across the valley floor, light slips over rotting stacks of last year's hay, over pastures, over the bunched backs of sheep and cattle, over new calves nestling in grass, sparkles off the river, then swirls in the tops of cottonwoods and makes its way slowly up the soft musculature of foothills.

Mid-morning and here, a couple thousand feet above the Bitterroot Valley, light opens the clearing, defining black, frosty shadows thrown by surrounding fir and tamarack trees. Running behind the bar, the creek makes hollow gurglings below birds racketting from branches. Again and again, a raven squawks.

I sit on the steps leading to the porch. The worn boards shine like metal. Giving over to a wave of after-breakfast fatigue, I'm not looking forward to the long day ahead. I sip strong coffee, watching Ben and Warren warm-up for the afternoon's hatchet throw. Ben winks at me when I wave but there's distance in his eyes. It's always been like looking into a tangle of brush. I keep waiting for the bear to come out.

Only once I really saw him blow. It was just before we moved West. I was working full-time bartending. He was home, laid-off,

pink-slipped after only a year at Inkster. He hated the job, bars on the windows, tires slashed in the parking lot, but he didn't know what else to do. Then he threw a kid across the map table in his Geography room. It wasn't anybody's idea of life. That night I came home late after kicking out the drunks. The house was a mess. Ben was sprawled across the bean bag chair with travel books and beer cans scattered around his feet. When I said one word, he kicked over the TV, dragged out the sofa to the backyard and burned it. We left Michigan.

"I think we should have put your hat on him," Warren smirks as the hatchet flies from his small, jerky hands. It slaps the target with the side of the blade, then falls harmlessly to the ground.

"Too bad, man." Ben laughs his short laugh as he hefts the hatchet with his name engraved on its head. "Don't want you on my team when the other guys get here."

"Sure, boss. Anything you say." Snorting, Warren turns and stares at me on the porch. I ignore him, rising to set out the plastic cups for the barbeque. He says something about parapelegics under his breath. I think he's perverse, and, at the very least, a jerk. Sometimes I hate Warren but he's Ben's partner at the body shop so I put up with him.

"Watch this, cutie." Yelling even though I'm only a few feet away, Warren points. Ben swings his hatchet slowly in an arc from his knees to a point above his head. Stopping to light a cigarette, Warren yells again. "Come on, Buddy, kill the sucker." This time it quiets the raven.

Ben's aiming for the head. His hatchet flips end over end, then strikes into the fir log, but it's a bad hit, low and to the side. Slowly, Ben walks to the log to retrieve both weapons.

Quick and nervous, Warren scoops up his can of beer from the ground. Doing a sort of pirouette, he laughs, "Great shot, Benny. Let me show you how it's done."

Ben walks to the sundeck attached to the old bar. Finished with glasses, I wonder if I should put out the keg. Without looking me in the eye, he squeezes my shoulder. It's been a long time since he and I've had a bad argument, and that scares me a little. The body shop's doing well enough but I can tell Ben's getting restless. He just got a new Hammond atlas in the mail.

It's starting to cloud up, and I'm cool in just my chamois shirt and jeans and tennis shoes. There's potatoe salad to make. Just as I'm about to enter the bar, Warren sprints up and grabs my arm. At first I think he's going to offer help. Ben's already back at the line, sizing up his next shot.

"Look at him," Warren hisses, lighting another cigarette. His voice lowers further and his green eyes stare hard. "Are you watching this?" He flicks his cigarette. "How do you live with that?"

"Happily, Warren. Lay off." I pry his fingers from my arm. "Go on and check the coals. I want them ready when Fast Bobby gets here with that side of beef."

Once again I watch Ben lift the hatchet above his head and slightly behind it. When he throws, his arm follows the weapon's trajectory until the hatchet connects with the uppermost section of fir. I admire his smoothness. Ben's thrown it so hard, the hatchet topples the dense log to the ground.

Something follows me. Whether it's a bird or a shadow or a hand,

I don't know but it's heavy as the granite boulders warming in the yard. I remember my grandmother telling me how just before she had her first major stroke, she'd seen a shadow rise over her as she slept. It leaned over the davenport where she lay and breathed in her face when she tried to get up.

It won't be long before the guests get here. Now it's quiet except for the creatures and the shushing of the creek. There, last week, I saw a Water Ouzel, with her slate gray chick following, hop straight into the current, muddy with melt-off. I thought they'd be killed. While I imagined how I might save the bird family, they emerged on the opposite shore, walking in sand and shaking water from their feathers. It happened during the hour before any customers filter into the bar, the hour when I can sit beside the creek and watch the water slide and dip past.

Back on the porch after peeling a couple dozen boiled potatoes, chopping celery, green onions and olives, I blow on my coffee, watching Ben. The wind starts. It's cold, and the air turns that peculiar poignancy of green that signals rain. I feel slightly dizzy. My palms sweat and my stomach aches but I know I'm too young to go through menopause. I'm not pregnant. Whatever it is, I wish I could shake it. Above the bar, clouds slide over the peaks of the Bitterroots. From this height, I can see the valley and its green fields where the sun shines. Cottonwoods mark the river's course. The pines whisper and rain rushes in so quickly, I just have time to run inside before fat drops pock patches of old snow. From the doorway, I see Ben hurry to the barbeque and pull its cover shut while Warren laughs, covering his

balding head with his hands.

Neither Ben nor Warren will come in while the other is throwing, adding this dare to the stakes of their game. What I can't figure is why Ben remains so fond of Warren. It's a question I've asked for years. He came with our marriage, like an unwanted brother-in-law or part of the family business. Sure, they grew up together in Detroit but Warren is untrustworthy as they come.

The growl of an engine breaks the rain's patter. Fast Bobby's dented pickup, beef bouncing in back, fishtails up the drive.

(five line break)

"I'm not interested. Plain English." I wipe the bar around Warren, who leans over his Rainier, staring. Juice Newton belts out one of my favorites, "Queen of the Silver Dollar," from the jukebox. Tired of Warren's propositions, I consider turning up the volume one more time. I'm tired period, a bad sign. The barbeque's just getting underway. From outside, I hear someone whoop.

"We could be in Vegas tomorrow. What ya got holding ya?" With his stubby red fingers, Warren taps the bartop, inching closer to my hand. "This job? Family? Long winters with your loving husband?" He laughs. The rain's stopped, and I listen, above the music, to a few men arguing about the best way to cook beef.

When he touches me, I glare at Warren's forehead where a purple scar runs into his eyebrow, marking his most recent encounter with an engine block in the shop. "It isn't on my account he keeps taking you back after you foul things up."

"He needs me," smiling, Warren raises his arms and laces his fingers

behind his head. "Too much business alone."

My teeth grind. Called in on an emergency ball-joint job for some tourist, Ben's been gone over an hour. "That's why you're down there helping, you little--"

"Now, now, sweetie. It's not my fault he trusts me. You don't understand. While you were painting your hot little fingernails and dry humping to rock & roll, we were lifting stuff from grocery stores and trying to avoid being murdered by our boozy fathers. The only difference between Ben and me is he switched from crime to books. There's a part of him you'll never know."

"Yeah? Well, most of me you'll never know." Twisting the towel, I toss it in the dishwater half-way down the bar, wishing I'd slapped Warren instead. "Who do you think you are?"

"How's the best bartender in Montana? I recognize Herb's voice. He's a regular, a friendly whose face is wide and strong and open as a Golden Retriever's. His plaid shirt and jeans are filthy from working timber, but I'm happy to give him a hug. "This dude givin' you trouble?"

"Hey, man, pull up a seat. I'll buy." Warren's already pulled back the stool next to him. "How's that transmission doing ya?"

I make Herb a Velvet and water. When I place it in front of him, he takes my hand and kisses it.

"Not you, too," I only half-complain. His lips are gentle.

"Just reading your palm. You're going to party with a tall, handsome man, an outdoors type, with blue eyes and--"

"Cut the shit!" Warren chops in, peevish. He's ripping a bar napkin into little pieces. "It's sickening."

"Who the hell are you to talk?" I yawn as I pull my hand not too quickly away. I'd like to leave it there to warm.

(five line break)

Although there are clouds on the horizon, it's cleared up nicely. Sun deepens the greens of the fields, the denser green of alfalfa, and the river that shines like silver coins as it winds through them. The Ponderosa Pines and firs sparkle against the blue sky, and the creek rushes, rocks clattering like porcelain in its swift runs.

Most of the men stand back of the throwing line. A couple of women sit on stumps near the creek, sipping their beers and laughing. I envy them. The air smells of new rain and charcoaling beef. My boss, Al, has cornered Fast Bobby near the barbeque, probably telling him, as he does me every working day of our relationship, how he's going to build onto the ancient bar, add poker and keno machines and make a killing. Fast Bobby just nods and drinks his beer.

"Dammit, Warren, quit following me." For the umpteenth time, I've turned around and run into him.

"Jeez, you're touchy." It's Mel, another regular, a middle-aged carpenter who's had a hand in building most of the new ranchettes that have begun to eat up the valley floor.

"Not touchy enough for me." Warren winks. He swivels his hips. "You don't know what you're missing, lady."

"Thank God," I wish for a pistol and spit. Mel looks from me to the ground, standing awkwardly, a hatchet dangling from one hand.

I'm in the wrong profession. If men aren't trying to hit on you, they're trying to make a Dear Abby of you. I'm getting to old. I just want quiet and to have a semi-normal life with Ben. I want to try again

to have what he no longer wants, a family. Every day I swear I'll quit my job but something keeps me coming here. When I think of having a baby, I lose my nerve.

Bobby's left the cooking long enough to take a turn at hatchets. He winds up like a helicopter, and I wonder if someone might lose his head. Somehow and miraculously, Bobby lets it fly at precisely the right moment, and the hatchet does a magnificent end over end before bouncing off the target.

As Warren scurries around placing bets, I hear Al yelling, waving at me. He points at the door where four men enter the bar.

"You want to buy those boys drinks?" Waving back at him, I hurry up the mossy, rotting log steps giving Al a broad, unconvincing smile before he can answer.

(five line break)

"That Norma is mean," Gus finishes his favorite diatribe, cackling like a pullet, into his whiskey ditch. "She's got enough mouth for two sets of teeth."

"Be careful, Gus, Norma's coming." I wink, catching sight of Warren, who is sneaking back in the bar.

"Nurse! Nurse!" I don't have to turn to recognize that voice, but I do and see Warren holding his beer upside down over the bar. Already, Herb pushes him down into a seat. It doesn't shut him up. "Nurse! Bring me a brew!"

"Keep quiet." It's Herb and he means it. Still gripping Warren's shoulder, his large pale fingers make crevasses in Warren's red sweatshirt. I almost feel sorry for him.

"Jesus, what's with you?" I ask, walking the length of the bar. I

toss him a towel. "Clean it up. You need another beer like you need another mouth."

"Let go, Herb, ya goddamn creep. Back off!" As Herb lifts him, Warren kicks like a child. "Can't I have any fun?"

Dropping the squirming little man, Herb opens and closes his fist. Quickly I shake my head, and Herb frowns, turning back to his drink.

Snatching the towel, Warren mops at the beer, sloshing it on Ray, Herb's logging partner. Ray's about a foot taller than him, and he's mean. Warren ignores him and keeps up with his whining. "Nobody takes a joke. Miss Smart Ass, you going to get me a beer or do I have to--"

The next thing I know Warren is lying on his back, a bar stool cross-wise on top of him. Ray grins, standing like a boxer over him. His voice slows, low and cruel. "Ask her nice, shitface, or you'll be talking out the other side of your asshole."

Looking tiny and pitiful, Warren lays there between the two large men, one of whom could twist his head off easy as twisting a cap from a beer bottle. Hoping he won't say anything stupid, I feel sick as if I'd just seen an animal get hit by a car.

"Sorry...Judy, could I please have...for God's sake, Ray." Ray's boot twists into Warren's chest. With each word, his breath whistles. Otherwise it's so quiet, I can hear the ice fall in the ice machine that's in the back room.

Before I can get the beer, Ray jerks Warren to his feet, warning him to be more careful who he spills beer on if he doesn't want to end up a hell of a lot shorter than he already is. I set down the can in front of Warren who's glowering at his hands. He won't look up, reminding me of a kid who just got caught stealing hubcaps from the

town bully's car. Ray leers at him, a smirk wide as Texas across his acne-scarred face. Tipping his blue softball cap back with his index finger, Ray leans closer to Warren, making obscene smacking noises with his lips. I break in, offering him a drink on the house.

"What's going on?" I hadn't heard Ben come in, but I'm glad to see him standing at the end of the bar. He bites on a toothpick.

"Nothing much, hon. Warren just got a little sloppy, that's all." I smile and pat Warren's arm, which I'm surprised to feel is shaking. He looks pale, not even turning to answer Ben.

"Trouble again, huh?" Walking to Warren, Ben speaks slowly, not raising his voice. He has the kind of volume that carries so the bar becomes quiet again. Herb and Ray are especially attentive. "I thought you said you were sick. That you were going back to your apartment? Dammit, I was up to my neck in grease and you're--"

"I was sick." Forgetting me and the men on either side of him, Warren whirls on his stool, nearly falling off. I expect a smart-assed answer. "I thought a drink might straighten me out."

"Don't bullshit me. Don't." Ben grabs the back of Warren's stool.

"I'm sorry, Ben. Really, man--"

"Sorry. Yeah, you're sorry alright. Get this sorry bastard another towel to cry in, Jude. I'll take a double Bushmill's and a Stroh's."

Warren's hands are visibly shaking. His eyes are red. All he repeats is "shit, I didn't mean anything" into his beer.

"Ben, he really did just come back a little while ago." I don't know why I lie or why I protect Warren except somehow he doesn't seem to fit in the world. I understand feeling crooked and always bursting out the wrong way. All I know is I can't look at Warren. Ben frowns

and shrugs. I know he believes me.

Depsite the sun outside, it seems to have gotten colder. I remember how my grandmother would sit on the warmest days, gathering sun. She was generally cold--bad circulation, the doctor said--but I believe it was something else.

Just as Warren gets up to give Ben his seat, Fast Bobby makes a great show of coming in with a huge platter of steaming beef. Setting it down on the table next to the potato salad, he makes a long sweeping gesture and the men don't have to be told twice to help themselves. All but Warren. Trying to joke, he takes my hand, apologizing.

It makes me mad. "Warren, you know the difference between a doctor and a bartender?"

"What?" he asks dreamily, stroking my fingers that drum on the bar.

"A doctor only has to see one asshole at a time." I smile. "You owe me."

(five line break)

Herb and some other happy drunks tore down one of Al's rotting shacks and burned it as a bonfire. Al didn't get mad, though it was Warren's idea.

Somebody's kids broke into an abandoned log house near the bar. Neighbors saw their flashlights and called the police. The county sheriff came. Because he knew us and the kids, he just gave them a warning while enjoying a free plate of barbeque. The house hadn't been lived in in years, and the kids didn't vandalize it. They were simply curious about what lived in the dead house.

When we dropped Warren at his apartment in Florence, he was

talking about moving to Brazil. Ben says he doubts that it'll happen but I'm not so sure. Before Warren got out of our pickup, he leaned over and smothered us in a long boozy hug, saying we were the best friends he'd ever had. I'm so used to drunken affection that it didn't affect me. Ben's eyes were wet as we pulled away.

(five line break)

Ben and I are in the living room where a fire pops and howls in the stove, warming the open two-story cave of our house. The log walls are golden and move with shadows from the fire and the lamps.

I'm reading a book on animal lore where I find names so old they're reassuring. I like their feel, soothing as ice, in my mouth.

"Charm of goldfinches, drift of swine, exaltation of larks, grist of bees..."

Ben closes his book. His black hair is wild and tossed, making weird shapes in back of him on the wall.

"Animal names," I smile "Old one. I love them. Sleuth of bears, murder of crows. There's something in just saying them that makes me feel strong."

"They're supposed to." Ben leans back in his chair, looking at me like he's just noticed I'm here. "Sounds like you're casting spells."

"Maybe I am," Crossing my legs, I pull the afghan my mother knit for me over my shoulders. The fire is so warm it almost puts me to sleep. I like being hot, and I feel myself float slightly off the couch. I think of the story my grandmother told about the time my mother had pneumonia. She was a child, seven or eight. Grandma said it happened during one of those slushy Michigan winters that brings flu and other nasty diseases. The fog was so thick, she said, she

couldn't see across her front yard, and each dusk the daily rains turned to ice.

My mother had a fever that worsened as night came on. They lived far out in the country and it was storming. In the attic, my grandmother had hung vegetables, fruits and herbs to use all winter. She got a couple of large Bermuda onions, then took them to the kitchen where she cut them into thick slabs. The spirits burned her eyes. When she'd arranged the slices on my mother's chest, she wrapped her in layers of flannel that had been heated over the woodstove. Then my grandma sat up singing to her through the night. My grandma said she believed my mother's fever rose and moved into the onions, and the songs helped it hurry on its way. I was a kid myself when she told me the story and I believed it and still do. My mother survived when so many others died that winter. Before my grandma died, she told me we'd lost the cures.

"Pills," she said in her Eastern European accent, "do nothing. They have no power in them." I watched her dump a bottle of medicine for high blood pressure into the waste basket.

As a child, I went with her to the woods back of our barn where she taught me the names of wildflowers, Bergamot, Queen Anne's Lace, and herbs, Poor Man's Pepper and Leeks, and what they were supposed to do. She'd tell me how they used them in the "old country" until Czechoslovakia seemed like a place out of a fairy tale. Most of the names she taught me stayed with me. Each spring she concocted a horrible-smelling green broth from dandelion greens and other weeds. She and my mother would drink, a woman's tonic, they said. When I

tried it, it tasted like dirty water, but I believed it was magic and I drank it every time.

It's still raining. My grandma told me if it rained on my wedding day, I'd be rich. It was a sunny day, full of the kind of promise written in Hallmark cards. I always wonder what it would have been like if it would have poured.

"Ben," I say, letting the afghan fall. "I need to talk."

Over his head I see through the window that fog is steaming from the last rotting piles of gray snow. It's so thick, I can't see the trees in the yard, just their ghosts sizzling in the floodlights from the porch. Pasque Flowers droop silvery-purple near the house. My grandma would have liked them.

"I'm going to quit my job. I can't stand it, babying those guys anymore."

"Ok." His tone's flat as he looks back into his book. Clearly, he doesn't want to be bothered.

"Ok?" I sit up straighter. Having expected some resistance, I'm a little disappointed. "Aren't you going to tell me we need the money?"

"No. It's a lousy way to make a living. You must get tired of all those men." There's a note of what I hope is jealousy in his voice. He laughs quickly. "Maybe we can see only three-dimensional things, Judy. What if there are all sorts of other dimensions we can't see?"

"What the hell has that got to do with me quitting my job?" In a way, I know.

In the bar a few weeks ago a man told us about two Crow Indian boys he and his wife adopted. He'd taken them fishing at his cabin

North of Pryor. The boys were fine except at night, when they'd become frightened for no reason. They wouldn't go out, not even to take a pee, and when they went to bed, the man discovered, one of them or the other would stay away, keeping guard.

The man's questioning got him nowhere. The boys would only stare at the floor, until the youngest finally broke down and told him that they saw short ghosts about their size that wandered around the cabin each night. They were afraid of the ghosts' crying.

The man said he never saw nor heard any ghosts, but when he got back to Billings, he did some detective work in the historical archives. He found that his cabin had been built on the site of a Crow winter camp. After the Whites had started moving into Montana, smallpox broke out among the Crows. It happened at that winter camp. Almost all the children died during the epidemic.

I feel something else in the room with us. It makes me cold. When I see Ben lower his head to read again, I feel like going over and grabbing him.

"It's like that blind spot we have in our vision," he says, turning a page. "The brain automatically fills it up because we need to see a picture. Well, I was thinking that maybe there aren't any pictures."

"What? Ben, look at me. I'm no ghost."

"What?" he sighs loudly and looks up from the book. I expect him to say he wants to be left alone, but he doesn't say anything.

"I was just thinking about those Crow boys."

"I haven't forgotten about them." He runs his fingers through his dark beard. Before he returns to reading, Ben looks at me. His eyes are soft and dark, like an animal's in firelight, like they used to

look sometimes when we were first dating. "Parents always lose their kids, one way or another. I was glad when my dad died." He sounds angry. "Isn't that a hell of a way to feel?"

Maybe it's just that I've had a couple glasses of wine. Maybe it's the moon waxing full even behind the clouds. I get up and stand near Ben. Even though I know the timing's not right, I can't stop. "How would you feel about having a baby?"

Slowly Ben lowers his book to the floor beside his chair. His hands are steady but I feel his muscles tense. His beard twitches as he bites his lip. "I knew you were working your way around to it. How many times do we have to go over this?"

"Ben, I want a family. I'm not getting any younger." I feel my limbs go numb. My hands slip from his shoulders, and I step around to face him. "What's so wrong with that?"

"Nothing." Just as he always does when I say something to upset him, Ben rubs his forehead with his right hand. The lines seem to deepen there. "I'm just not going to argue with you."

"You mean you're not going to talk about it." I know if I don't keep prodding, he'll sink back into his book.

"I'm just not ready." His eyes flash. "And don't tell me I'll never be ready. That won't work."

"I don't mean this very second." I try to speak slowly. I know he'll be mad if I cry. "Soon."

"Judy, we've been over this again and again. I just don't know." He looks away and I know he's thinking about some memory from his own childhood, something he'll never let me in on.

"It doesn't have to be like it was between you and your dad, you

know." I feel myself grow hotter. "You're not an alcoholic."

"You don't know anything about it." Glaring at me, his hands tighten into fists. "You don't know how I'd be."

"You've taken care of Warren nearly all your life." I blink back tears but don't look away. "You forgive him more than you've ever forgiven anyone."

"Look, I didn't say no, but the more you resist..." He rubs his forehead harder, then gets up to poke at the fire in the stove. I know the conversation's ended. "Anyway, Warren's different. He's not helpless like a baby."

(five line break)

Before I go to bed, I walk out on the porch. Ben's hatchet is gleaming on top of the woodpile. I don't mind the chill or the fog and, for a minute, think about walking off into it, just to lose myself. What I don't want is to look behind me into the window to see Ben calmly absorbed in his book.

The nearest neighbor is a mile away, and I can't see his light nor can I see any trace of the valley below. The house seems to be an island and could be anywhere in the world. Reaching into my robe, I find the card of birth control pills. I let my fingers trace the round plastic caps that keep each pill in place. I imagine I pop one out of its foil and draw it from my pocket. Is is small as a bird's eye and blue. In my mind, I see myself drop it on the porch and crush it with my slipper. It would blend with the rough-sawn weathered surface of the floor boards.

I run my hand over my stomach. Our child would have dark hair like Ben's. I see myself turning on a night light, then sitting on

the child's bed, telling her a story about my grandmother. We sing together. Coming to the door, Ben joins us with his croaky voice. We laugh until Ben jumps on the bed with us. Then we roll like animals over each other.

Ben is still bending over the book, Rilke's STORIES OF GOD, he's been reading all week. He's told me about the dark angels, how they are in everyone. A powerful potential for evil and for good, a power that must be recognized. I feel a sudden fondness for Ben and for his books. His target shimmers there in the fog, three sections of fir stacked neatly on top of each other. I imagine it moves. As I turn back to the door, Ben looks up then lowers his head back into his book.

II. When The Hills Are Cutouts

GETTING EVEN

When Caz phoned to say he was flying to his parent's house, I knew he wasn't coming back. His things are boxed, the way he left them a month ago. Last week, while he was delivering his paper in Toronto, he sent money to ship them to San Diego. From where I sit in the nearly gutted livingroom, I can see Caz's letter taped to the refrigerator. Why I didn't burn it, I don't know. It's written on erasable bond, more like a form rejection letter than anything.

The last year he'd worked on his thesis, a research piece about the Seri Indians of Mexico, while I worked as a waitress until I was laid off. Through the hot spring Caz and I were like two icebergs on collision course. We walked carefully around each other, a low snarling underlying our conversations. Because I liked to spend time by myself, walking in the desert or reading, he thought I was seeing another man.

I remember one of our last conversations just before he was invited to Toronto. The opportunity had arisen, all expenses paid by the university, to visit a Seri village on the Gulf of California. Caz turned it down and I was furious.

"Have you seen their ironwood sculptures?" I asked, laying vegetables out to make a salad.

"My paper's coming along fine without me getting food poisoning in a ~~crummy~~ place like Mexico." Caz was barbequing hotdogs on the balcony outside our apartment. He chewed on his pipestem, his teeth clicking when he talked. "I need all the time I can to work. Val, why don't you go to the University pool if you want to swim?"

"Why don't you make an idiot of yourself studying Indians from books?" I chopped green onions faster.

"Don't get hysterical." He turned, coolly flipping a hot dog. It rolled off the grill onto the concrete floor. "Now look what you made me do."

"I can't make you do anything."

(five line break)

In the heat waves, fire ants seem to stagger as they navigate sidewalk cracks outside the Shanty Bar. The last blossoms of spring hang yellow from dusty Palo Verde lining the street. The barrio is asleep. I should be, too. I fan myself with the Citizen's want ads and uncross sweaty legs under my cotton skirt.

When the fat woman saunters around the corner, I look away. Discouraged from applying for jobs where bosses have checked me out for "the right kind of attitude," I'm in no mood for chit chat. Neither am I ready to go back to an empty apartment. I don't have enough money even for a draft, and the woman is looking back and forth from me to the bar door.

"Got a light, honey?" She grins. Shuffling through her white vinyl purse, she brings out a cigarette. Her other arm is weighed

down with a plastic mesh shopping bag full of books. Her breath comes out in fast puffs, but her voice is good-humored and smooth.

There's no way out. I'm smoking. Silently, I hand her matches. From where I sit on the low concrete wall which fences a wilted orange tree planted in the sidewalk, I see rolls of fat wobble under her tight green mummy.

"Looks like a dog bit you." She sucks on her cigarette, handing back the matches.

"Just the heat." Watching a cat cross the sidewalk and sit in the shade, panting, I resume my fanning.

"Well, looks like it bit you in the ass." A deep laugh heaves from her caked red lips. "I know because I been bit plenty. You look like you could use a drink."

"I need to be left alone." Crossing my legs, I feel my face redden. Imagining a lime floating in an icy margarita makes my mouth drier.

We stare at one another, and her eyes don't turn aside. Shaded by a green clear plastic visor, they appear to be underwater or sad. Finally, I look down, dropping the newspaper in my lap. "I don't have enough money so you might as well find somebody else."

"Come on, honey. I'm buying. It's hotter than Pancho Villa's whores." She's already made up our minds and grabs my arm with her spongy hand.

God knows why I don't simply refuse or why, three hours later, we're still sitting inside, soused. Billi tells me she's a hairdresser, that she's divorced but owns her own beauty parlor in back of her

house and gives herself permanents. Her dark hair is short and so tightly curled, you can see the outline of her skull. What I like is that she tells a good story.

I'm glad I've given up job-hunting. I laugh into my straw, and my margarita bubbles around its ice cubes. "I hate working for someone else. My real talent is retirement. At least that's what Caz always told me."

"You have that one down." Turning to the bartender, a tall dark boy with a thin-lipped surgical smile, Billi winks. "Love, make me another Collins. My, but you're cute."

"Incremental retirement. Work six months, take off six. You never get sick of your job." I'd reached that plateau of drunkenness where everything is clarified and calls for another drink. "What I really want to be is an archaeologist."

"And, study all that dirty old stuff? Honey, you don't just want something, you go out and do it." She screws up her face, biting into the orange she's pulled from her drink. "I know a real nice man that works at the museum you must meet."

"I don't think--"

"You know, I always wanted to be a dancer." Billi taps her feet under the table and laughs. "Do you good to meet a nice man."

(five line break)

When a few drinks later, Billi begins to tell about her ex-husband, a cop here in Tucson, a college kid, shooting pool, sneers. Unaffected, Billi smiles.

"He's living with a woman who's got a Doberman, you know, skinny

as a junior senator and twice as crafty. Well, I fixed her wagon."

Billi pounds my arm but I feel too heavy to move it.

"I snuck up on their house, just to keep track. Anyway, they were arguing, which I liked. Right when she called Jim an uncaring bastard, Marge opened the damn drapes. Imagine! I stood there grinning like a possum. She screamed and called the dog. Oh, that woman has a voice!"

I try to imagine what kind of woman Caz will live with next but I'm interrupted by Billi's coughing. When I try to help, she pushes me away, taking deep breaths until the rasping trails off and her face fades from purple. Lighting another cigarette, she continues.

"Adolph! What a voice. There was the dog, all racketty bones and teeth. I crooned at him like he was my own. 'What's a matter, pup? Didn't your mama give you any tonight?'" Lifting the frosted glass, Billi sips her Collins. Some of it sloshes on the table while I light my cigarette, concentrating on holding the flame steady. Caz wouldn't let me have a dog.

"Well, I pulled a ham bone I brought on purpose from my purse. Anyway, he stopped. Those dogs are supposed to be trained not to take food but this one didn't even growl. I tell you, when he came for the bone, it was quiet enough to hear a sweater shrink. When he got close, I threw it."

"Why?" I asked, thinking I might look for a dog. Billi laughs, and I remember reading baboons laugh from obedience or fear. Neither fit her.

"Use your imagination, honey. Was Marge pissed!" Ignoring the

spilled whiskey, Billi slaps the tabletop imitating Marge's stride.

"Adolph took off, and I asked Marge if she had him fixed. Then I lit out. Jim never came out, but I swear I heard him laugh."

"Charming." I look into my empty glass. My head is pounding, and I know I should at least switch to beer. "Should we have another? I'll pay you back."

After ordering, she reaches over and feels my hair. "It's a wreck, honey. I'll fix it. Now, let me finish. The next Sunday, I went to church, as usual. I was carrying our baby, Cherylee. After service, I caught up with them in the foyer. I told Jim our baby missed him, and wouldn't he like to come for dessert that afternoon."

"Jim said I winked. But I wouldn't do that. Marge slapped me. Hit my eye. Hard. Right in front of the preacher and deacons. It didn't hurt as much as I let on. I yelled at her to stay away from my baby, and Jim pulled her out while the preacher fussed like a hen over me."

"I'd hate to get in your way." I lean back and fumble with my beer. My mouth is numb and I'm smoking too much. My laughter sounds too loud.

"Don't, I sued her. Even got a deposition from the preacher. Poor Jim! Honey, see..." Raising her drink, Billi wipes away her tears with a bar napkin. She frowns. "He still sees me. Yes, there was Marge, glaring and snapping at the judge. That bitch has no sense. I didn't crack a grin. I got \$5000 and court costs."

The bartender, whose T shirt is embossed with Tau Gamma Delta, is laughing and offers us free drinks. Even the pool player smiles over his bank shot. The rest of the bar is deserted except for the full-time drunks who sit like stuffed monkeys at black formica tables under pink neon flamingos near the bathroom.

Before Billi can finish, a tall man enters. In the gash of sunlight from the door, his features are indistinguishable. Billi looks up and smiles. "What really got her though was when I forgave her. Her lawyer had to hold her or she'd have socked me again. Revenge is stupid, my dear, but if you're going to get even, do it good."

"Billi, what's up?" I didn't hear the man come to our table. His voice is deep and soft.

"Felipe, I was just telling this beautiful lady, she should meet you." Billi pulls back a chair, grinning.

"Don't worry, she's always telling people that. Guess she feels sorry for me." Holding out his hand, he smiles. I am clumsy and nearly drop my drink when I reach for it.

"This is Val, and she does talk. What'll you have?" Leaning forward, Bill winks at him.

"Sorry, I just came in to use the phone. I'm on my way to the museum." He runs a dark hand through his brown hair. I'm fascinated by his eyes that are green. "Call me, though."

"Nice meeting you," I remember. When I light my cigarette, my hand shakes. Immediately, I think of Caz, and feel cold.

"Maybe, I'll see you again. My name's Felipe Vargas. If you're ever in the Art Museum, stop by. I work in Artifacts."

"That old stuff." Billi pats his hand.

When the man leaves, Billi tells me her daughter is staying the week with her mother. Her eyes harden, and she says nobody is going to take her little girl from her. I don't doubt it for a minute.

"Felipe comes and plays with her sometimes. He used to be my neighbor. Now, that's one good-looking man."

I peel the label from my beer bottle, remembering his green eyes.
"Vargas. He seems ok."

"I should have you two over to dinner!" Grabbing my hand, she shakes me. "Hey, you listening?"

"I don't know. I just don't feel like getting involved with anyone for a while." Small tatters of label fall off the table when I lean back.

"So what you gonna do? Become a nun? An alcoholic?" Sighing, Billi gets up and stretches. "Time to head out."

I feel as if Billi's been sizing me up all afternoon. Why does she care about me? I balk when she asks my address. Walking beside her, I see she stands tall and walks sure. She says she guesses it's safe. I ask why.

"I taped a stick of dynamite on the inside of Marge's engine." She laughs, gushing like a waterfall, so I'm uncertain whether the dynamite is a joke or real.

The sun has slipped in the West. Already the desert sky is making a shadow of itself, the purple silhouettes of the Tucson Mountains flaming from their edges. Inca Doves fly, their blood-red underwings against their soft gray bodies. It's so beautiful I wish I wasn't going back to the apartment. I could be a bird flying into all that light.

It isn't until I get into my VW that I hesitate before turning the key. My hands shake on the steering wheel as I pull away, and my eyes burn but not from smoke.

(five line break)

The swamp cooler chugs, sounding like a giant goldfish burbling in the window. I sit up in bed, sipping a coke. The sun is high enough to make a bright square on the rug. There are no clouds and no breeze. Traffic sounds like surf on Speedway Avenue, even though the windows are shut.

I remember the two weeks Caz and I spent just before he left for Toronto. He took me to dinners, to movies, concerts, paying more attention to me than he had in the two years we'd lived together. I think he did it the way some people take out life insurance policies before they put someone on an airplane. And I couldn't wait for him to leave.

After making love he stared at me, his brown eyes small in the dim light. "I won't look at another woman, and you better not mess around with anyone either."

I laugh now, thinking how ridiculous that was. A man wasn't on my mind. I wanted to be alone. Now, I was alone and not enjoying it.

When the phone rings, I almost hope it's Caz, but the woman's voice reminds me of margaritas. Billi's made an appointment for me for the afternoon to fix my hair. Although my hangover pounds, I accept.

Billi's call makes me think again of Felipe and his green eyes. I decide I will not see him.

(five line break)

Billi's salon is on the South side of town, in an older suburb where dusty yards are snarled with huge cactus, prickly pear and ocotillo, the occasional saghuaro with its arms raised to the sky.

Some optimists have spray-painted their gravel yards green. Junked cars, the dense skeletons of engine blocks or forgotten sun-bleached toys are scattered in driveways beside houses whose windows are studded with heavy black wrought-iron bars. Still, it's more pleasant than the apartment complex where I live. Each apartment is a clone, complete with a neat balcony and nightly invasions of cockroaches.

She has no air-conditioner, and it's hot in the salon. An ancient rotating fan clanks near the floor model hair dryer. Billi hums as she mixes the hair conditioner. With one hand on my head, she starts in again on her ex-husband.

"That man loves me, honey, but times he almost killed me. Stop squirming. You're in the hands of an expert." Pulling the translucent plastic apron dotted with tiny roadrunners around my neck, she laughs. "Did I tell you about the time Jim was seeing another hairdresser up the street?"

I tug the apron where it chafes my neck. "This might not be such a good idea. My hangover's killing me."

"You must have seen her place, The Pink Lady. Her name's Ellie," she says, pushing the chair back so my neck rests on the rim of the sink where she begins to wet my hair. "We never did see eye to eye. She gives lousy haircuts."

When she pushes me back to an upright position, I lift part of the apron and wave it up and down to cool my legs. "I'm not seeing too well today. The water feels good, though."

"Yeah, well, Jim didn't think I knew. I just acted sweet. One day Jim said he wanted a haircut. He said he knew how busy I was, and

he asked Ellie to do it. Spread the business around, so to speak. Bastard." Billi pumps the foot pedal to raise my chair. "I cancelled all my appointments. What could he say? His dear wife giving up her time."

"Not much. Caz never ran around. He didn't have time." I duck as she begins to massage my head harder. "Hey, be careful."

"I cut Jim's hair, alright, and then fixed up a conditioner he'd never forget. You know what Nair is? The hair remover? While he lay back in this very chair, I rubbed that stuff in his hair. Then, I got an idea. You listening?"

Roughly, she kneads my scalp. Sweating, I nod.

"I rubbed it on his eyebrows, his mustache. I said they looked awfully dry." Giggling, she stops to cough. The phone rings but she doesn't move to answer it. When she catches her breath, and as the phone rings a final time, she continues. "This is best. I put more on his beard and cozied up. You may not think a plump woman like me can be sexy, but I unzipped his fly--by this time he wants me to take a feel--and I rubbed the cream all over his pubics."

Ducking, I miss being clubbed as Billi throws her arms wide. I am laughing, though, and she hugs me.

"I'm not done. He was heating up, and I told him, 'Sweetheart, you let this work. Take a nice nap while I get champagne and steaks.'" Leaning close, Billi breathes stale coffee and cigarettes. I press back. "Then I set the alarm, telling him that when it rang, he should shower and wash off the conditioner. I'll never forget his grin."

"I wouldn't have wanted to be around when he woke up." I say, wondering what Caz would look like without hair. Billi coughs again.

Patting the top of my head, she runs on.

"Honey, I didn't waste time waiting to be murdered. I got my baby and hopped in the car with Jim's credit cards and check book. Then, like Sherman marching to the sea, I spent money from here to Alberta. When I saw those mountains in Banff, I knew I'd found a place. I got a room in the fanciest hotel, on Lake Louise."

"Canada?" I lean forward and stretch. My scalp burns, and I rise only to have Billi push me back in the chair. "Is that when you broke up?"

"No. You know, I really miss my little girl." Sighing, Billi walks to the radio and snaps it on. The music is soothing, The Brandenburg Concertos. Coming back, she lays her hand gently on my shoulder. "I sent Jim postcards and called him but I'd hang up the minute he'd start in. When he stopped yelling, I came home. Two weeks. He didn't mess around with Ellie any more, and for a while we were closer than ever."

"Caz's been gone nearly five weeks." I stretch my stiff neck. "What time is it?"

"Time for you to sit under the dryer." She chuckles. "Poor man wore a baseball cap." Rubbing my scalp, she adds more conditioner. My head feels heavy, making me queasy. Despite the soft music, Billi breaks into "Canadian Lovesong" in a key I am sure it's never been sung.

"How long does this stuff have to be on my hair." I twist to face her.

"Don't be nervous, sugar. This stimulates the hair follicle." She rubs more gently. "Trust me. I'm not going to hurt you."

"That's what they all say," I grin. "My hair might have been dry but at least it was hair."

"Don't worry so much. When I came back, Jim was so sweet." Billi wraps a clean white towel around my head and pats it. "He said he'd never find another woman as interesting as me."

"Interesting? I would have murdered you." I say, reaching up to the towel. Billi shuffles to the hair dryer and turns the switches.

"Come on. Get under here." She motions to me, lifting the hood. When I sit down, she unwraps the towel, then fluffs my damp hair.

Sitting under the dryer, I hear nothing but the rush of warm air. It is like being inside a comfortable cave where I can watch Billi clean up. I see her lift up the phone but I can't hear what she says. Flipping through a People magazine I find an article about Angelica Huston and read her account of living separately from her long-time lover, Jack Nicholson. She says they are happier than a normal married couple and spend almost every night together but she has her own little cottage next to his house in Beverly Hills. There is a full-page color photo of them sitting together on Jack's soft white couch in his enormous living room.

It seems I have just drifted off when I feel someone shaking my arm. The hair dryer is no longer running, and I see Billi lift the hood. I also see we're not alone. Leaning on the counter, Felipe is looking at Bill's miniature cactus garden that takes up the entire double window sill.

"Surprise. Look who popped in?" Billi leans over me, checking my hair. "Looks good, sweetie. Come on over to the chair, and I'll

brush you out."

Rising I catch myself in the mirror opposite me. My hair lies in clumps. Some of the shorter strands are standing straight up. When Felipe turns, I try to cover my head with my hands.

"Billi!" I watch her laugh as she walks to the pneumatic chair. "I usually don't look so gorgeous."

"Don't worry about it." Felipe's green eyes are even greener in the daylight. I hadn't seen how striking he was yesterday. Tall and slim, he smiles. "I've seen Billi perform miracles here. She really is good. Besides, you should see me when I wake up. My hair always looks like it slept in a blender."

I can't look in the mirror again. With the hangover and little makeup, my hair in wierd clotted spikes I wish I hadn't awakened.

"Billi, why didn't you tell me?"

Pulling my head back after I sit down, she begins to vigorously brush my hair. What I see in the mirror shuts me up. My hair, brittle from the desert sun, is gleaming. The black is blacker than I ever remember it, almost blue black, and somehow she's managed to make it thicker. With scissors, she trims off the ends, so it's even.

"Felipe's staying to dinner. I told him you were, too." Billi twirls my chair so I'm facing him. She's humming. "Felipe, be a doll and get that bottle of wine I have chilling in the frig."

(five line break)

The desert sky is a deep cerulean blue, and each star seems brighter than any I've ever seen. The moon is high and so bright, I see the laces in my shoes. Rabbits scatter with their shadows behind

crumbling rock. The wash is like an old highway that leads up the canyon. Palo Verde, turpentine bushes and cactus dot the gravel rises on either side of us while we walk. An owl, probably a Horned Owl questions the night ahead of us. Soon, I hear the reply, another owl to the right and over a small hill.

I've taken Felipe to the foothills of the Tucson Mountains, one of my favorite spots. Caz would never come with me. He didn't like the desert at night, always afraid he'd run into a cactus or be attacked by a javelina.

"This is where I go when things get to be too much." I step over a small Teddy Bear cactus no bigger than a cat's head in my path.

"Do they get too much for you often," Felipe replies, stopping and breathing deeply.

"Not any more." I lie. I stand a few feet away from him and can almost feel the heat from his body, like a radiator, on my hands. "My ex-boyfriend and I used to fight a lot. It drained all the energy out of me. He was jealous, convinced I was seeing another man, but I wasn't. I needed this place, no matter how much he hated it when I came here."

"It's beautiful. I go to King's Canyon." Felipe rubs his arms. "Sometimes I think about the Kahlahari Bushmen. When the women have a baby, they hold it up to the stars so that the baby will have a star for its heart, and it won't ever have to be alone."

"I like it." I hear coyotes bark, hunting in the distance. Walking again, I see Cassiopoeia, her W near the moon. "Sometimes I wonder if men and women can live with one another."

"You don't believe that." Felipe has caught up with me and walks beside me without touching me. He moves easily as a deer in a meadow.

During our walk, I've expected Felipe to make some move, to hug me or kiss me, but he doesn't. Although I wouldn't have minded, it's nice to talk to a man without pressures. When we part, after he's followed me home to make sure I get there alright, he promises to call.

(five line break)

Clouds are forming over the Tucson Mountain. Every afternoon they gather, making swollen dark fists around the horizon. It rains in the mountains but not in town. Even the palm trees hang like dirty laundry outside the windows.

As I dress for work, the job Felipe got me in the museum catalogueing ancient pottery, the phone rings. When I hear Caz's voice, I can't breathe. He's at the airport and wants me to pick him up, saying he needs to talk to me. I tell him about my job, and he asks me to call in sick.

On the way to the airport, I turn onto two wrong streets. I don't know what I'm going to tell Felipe. We've been dating for a couple of months now. It's an easy relationship. We walk in the desert, go to movies and laugh. Between he and Billi, I haven't been lonely. Once, Felipe took me on a dig with him, to a site near the Seris. He's been out of town for a few days, at Mesa Verde in Colorado. While he's been gone, Billi and I have haunted Second Hand stores for furniture. My new home is near the Museum, near the barrio.

I remember the day Caz got on the plane for Toronto. He didn't even turn to wave. I remember the windows of the plane staring like blind metal, and that I felt as if I'd swallowed too much water. The sun was glaring in a pure clarified sky, and heat waves drowned the

plane as it taxied down the runway.

Now, things are crawling in slow motion. I see Caz, lounging beside his suitcases, two large leather ones, against a pillar in the lobby. His beard is neatly trimmed, and he's still smoking his pipe. Dressed in an off-white linen suit, he is handsome. When he sees me, he smiles and walks toward me.

"Well," he says hugging me. "How do I look?"

"Great, just great." I push back. "You look like you're doing well."

"I am." He sucks on his pipe. "You're looking at a professor. I got a job at San Diego State. I missed you, and I'm sorry. I couldn't call until I was sure. Now, you can come back with me."

"Wait a minute." I rub my neck, shaking my head. "I have a life here."

"Oh, I know. You're mad at me, and I don't blame you." He knocks his pipe on the metal ash tray near the pillar. His voice is cheerful. "That's all over. I've decided you are the woman for me."

"You've decided?" I breathe deep, feeling like I'm going to hyperventilate. "Caz, we'd better talk, and this isn't the place. Where can I take you?"

"To our place, of course." He shrugs.

"I'm not living there anymore. I have a house." I wish I hadn't quit smoking.

"No?" Caz lights his pipe, inhaling in short, quick puffs. "Well, let's see your new place."

"Caz, I'm seeing someone." Feeling my purse strap slip, I pull it back on my shoulder.

Caz laughs, but he won't look at me. "Seeing someone. That's just

great, Val. Anybody I know?"

Exhaling a cloud of smoke, Caz knocks the lit pipe loudly on the ash tray. Sparks fly on the floor and on his shoes. He stamps. His mouth is set in a hard smile. A couple walks by with their arms around each other. They are joking, then stop to kiss.

"You didn't call or write except to get your things." I bite my lip and reach for Caz's arm but he pulls away. "Do you want to go to a restaurant? For coffee? We can talk there."

"Sure, coffee." He scoffs, picking up his suitcases. When his pipe clatters to the floor, I retrieve it.

(five line break)

In the car, it's quiet. Caz stares straight ahead. He doesn't even complain when I pull into the left lane, cutting off a Saab. Traffic is heavy, but my concentration is off by miles. Lightning explodes dark clouds in the East but no rain falls, and there isn't the slightest breeze.

In the Sheraton Hotel coffee shop, we sit in a corner booth. I'm chilly from the air-conditioning as I face Caz who stirs sugar into his cup. Light popcorn jazz drifts over the room, while a waitress hurries from table to table refilling coffee. A pretty, young platinum blonde, the girl never stops smiling.

"We're not living together," I sigh, lifting my cup. Not answering, Caz puts another spoonful of sugar in his coffee. "We go out. I like him, and we have fun together. I don't know where it will go."

"I thought you'd be happy to see me." Filling his pipe, Caz tamps down the aromatic tobacco. When he lights it, a musky cherry scent thickens above our table.

"Caz, it was you who dropped out." I open the pack of cigarettes I bought when we came in. I light it and immediately am dizzy. "Three months."

"I wanted to teach you a lesson." He looks up, grinning.

"Lesson?" My hands shake, and I'm no longer cold. I felt like I've swallowed a steel fist. "What the hell does that mean?"

"You thought you were so independent. I knew you couldn't stand to be alone." He sips his coffee, staring over the cup's rim, and he is still grinning. "Listen, Val, I'm making a lot of money. If you know what's good for your life, you'll come back with me to San Diego. We won't tell mother and dad anything about this other fellow."

"There you go." I lean back, balling my hand. "Maybe I like this other fellow. Maybe he doesn't try to run my life."

"Oh, come on, Val. Don't be ridiculous." He keeps his voice down but his words hiss like a leaky radiator hose. "I'm just trying to help you."

"Like you did when you left. I don't need that kind of help." I can feel myself slipping into the same defenses I always used with Caz. Nothing's changed. He looks sad, and I'm sorry for saying that.

"Someday, you'll thank me." Reaching over he pats my hand, but it feels like electric shocks, and I jerk it back.

"You have a lot of nerve, Caz." Any pity I had for him, dissolves. I wish he was in San Diego, that he'd found a woman to marry. Even his little boy smile doesn't touch me. "Why did you come here? I was doing fine. You can't just disappear and expect I'd wait for a phantom."

"You're just upset, Val. Don't make any rash decisions." Draining his cup, he motions for the waitress and the check.

When he wants to spend the night, I refuse, and he checks into the Sheraton. He asks me to talk again tomorrow. Although I want to say no,

some kind of nostalgia overwhelms me, and I tell him I'll meet him for breakfast. When I leave him in the lobby, I'm confused, and it isn't until I'm driving home that the tears start.

(five line break)

Night comes quickly in the desert. There is almost no twilight. I pace the house; checking out the front window, half-expecting to see Caz stalking around the yard. Since getting home, I've almost smoked the entire pack of cigarettes.

After seeing a movie, Billi stops by. She's brought green corn tamales she made. As she sits on the sofa, she brushes away Diablo, a cat I brought home from the Humane Society last week. He rubs on her legs, purring.

"Just tell him to hightail it back to the coast, sweetie," she says quietly, unwrapping a tamale.

"I should." I agree, arranging salsa and napkins on the rattan coffee table. A roach skitters from the table to the bookshelf, and I remember it's time to call the fumigators again. "But I'm just having breakfast with him. Billi, I spent two years with Caz. Doesn't he deserve a chance?"

"I'd say he's already had it." A bit of tamale drops on the floor where Diablo sniffs it, then hunkers down, licking it up. "Look, Jim was a good-for-nothing who never got over the habit of sleeping around. I swept that mother out with the trash." She makes hasty sweeping motions, nearly upsetting her plate.

"Caz never ran around on me." Picking up my plate, I nibble at the tamales. I see Billi shake her head. "Once I was in love with Caz. There's part of me that still feels that."

"What about him ditching you? And what about Felipe?" Reaching for her beer, she stares, and I look away. "And where does anyone get off thinking they can teach someone a lesson by running out on a person? Don't let this man make a fool outta you, Val."

"Look, I'm just having breakfast with him." The phone rings. As I walk into the other room, Billi calls after me.

"Don't be stupid, you hear?"

Felipe isn't angry when I tell him about Caz's unexpected visit. Even long distance, his voice is calm. He only advises me to do what feels right for me, and then he tells me about the dig. When I hang up, I feel calmer, glad Felipe and I are friends

Later, as she prepares to leave, Billi warns me again to get rid of Caz. She grabs my shoulders and stares hard.

"Look, honey, I still love Jim, too, but I can't live with him the way he is." She hugs me. "I 've watched you the last couple of months. You've been happy. Now, you're nervous. Look at yourself in the mirror, and tell Caz to head out of town."

(five line break)

Caz doesn't leave, though. He books his room for a week, and we spend each day talking. Sometimes it's alright, others it's like swimming through glue. By the end of the week, I'm exhausted enough to tell Caz he has to leave.

It is the afternoon before his flight. Caz and I sit in the shade of a Palo Verde. The backyard rings with bird cries, the croaking of Grackles, the flute runs of the finches and the changing tune of mockingbirds. Coach Whip Lizards race up the adobe walls, disappearing into slim cracks.

We sip ice tea as clouds roll in from the mountains. I get up to prune dead blossoms from the potted begonias ringing the small slate-floored patio. Caz starts at the other end, helping.

"Just think about it, Val." He straightens near a pink-flowered plant. I hear his thin cotton shirt rustle as he walks closer. "It would be different this time."

"I have thought about it. That's all I've done this week." I pinch off the brown papery petals. "It won't work."

"You're always so sure," he snaps, returning to his lawn chair. "You know, you look beautiful."

(five line break)

After leaving Caz at the airport, I wonder why I let him stay the night. It didn't make parting any easier. I'm supposed to meet Billi at her salon. Over the phone, she said she'd cancelled her day's appointments and that she had something to tell me.

"When it's over, you ain't gonna see anything but elbows and asshole, honey." Billi sits, the dryer hood raised like a turtle shell above her. A bag of Oreos is nestled beside her thigh, a can of diet pop in one hand.

"No. Absolutely not." I gulp my soda, wishing life could slow down.

"Nothing but elbows and asshole," laughing, she passes the Oreos.

"Stealing police cars is a felony," my voice rises with a lump in my throat. Sweating, I fumble with the bag, dropping it on the linoleum.

"Think of Cherylee."

"I am. Jim's mother is threatening to take her. Says Jim should have custody because I'm irresponsible. That's why I sent her to my mother's for the summer."

I squat, picking up the spilled cookies. If I could, I'd run away. "Nobody can take Cherylee away from you. Besides, this is not going to help."

"If that old bag of arsenic knew her precious son was banging me on the sly, she'd die of apoplexy. I hope." Nibbling a cookie, Billi rests against the turquoise plastic chair. She frowns.

"Calm down. She's not worth it," I plead, putting the cookies on the counter next to a small bin of pink curlers. "I'll be damned if I'll visit you in prison."

"Prison? Come on, we don't have much time." Billi glances at her watch. "Jim's gonna be here soon."

"This is really stupid, Billi,"

"You don't have to help," Billi sighs. Rising, she looks in the mirror and combs her hair.

Walking out to the porch, I hear a plane roar overhead.

(five line break)

I've never been inside a police car. Wire mesh separates the front seat from the back. There is a rifle in a leather boot on the driver's door. I run my hand over the blue plastic seat. It is cool and slightly damp. Billi has on the air-conditioner. For once, she's not saying anything. Between us on the seat are Jim's clothes, his uniform, underwear, socks and shoes, and, tilted on top of them are his badge and pistol.

When she dropped me at Shanty, where I sat drinking a beer, Billi went home and waited. When Jim arrived at noon, she asked him to shower. As soon as he went in, she made off with the clothes, turned up the stereo and drove away. Since he was supposed to be on duty, she knew he wouldn't report it for a while.

Our first stop is an elementary school near downtown. It's an old stucco building with a statue of an angel over the door. In spite of Billi's jokes, I sit outside in the running car. Children are playing a softball game in the yard. I know Billi's plan. This is where Marge teaches fifth grade.

It seems like an hour before I see Billi emerge. She's grinning and flashes me the ok sign from the door. I am amazed no one follows her.

"You should've been there. If her class hadn't been out to recess, I wouldn't have had the heart. I dropped Jim's shorts and shoes on her desk." Billi guns the car and spins out, waving at some kids who are staring. I hang on to the seat belt I haven't had time to refasten.

"Heart? I feel sorry for her." I say, feeling my pulse quicken like tappits in my temples.

"Lighten up, Val. She didn't say a word when I told her where he was, but as I was leaving, she whispered, 'keep the bastard.' I didn't laugh at her when I closed the door."

"Why don't we just call this enough?" I watch the road as we pass cars. Billi turns down a side street.

"Not nearly. You can't do a half-assed job." Reaching for the radio, she clicks on a local AM station. I expect an all-points bulletin but hear Michael Jackson repeating the same line of a song over and over. Beat it.

We pull up to a small brick house surrounded by ceramic animals, deer and ducks and squirrels frozen in their march toward the sidewalk. The house looks unoccupied with its shades drawn and no car in the drive.

Grabbing socks, pants and Jim's driver's license, Billi opens the car door. "Alma should be watching 'Guiding Light' at this hour. Place always looks like a mausoleum."

I watch her spring up the sidewalk and onto the small cement stoop.

A few minutes later, an elderly lady opens the screen door. I can't hear their exchange, but the woman's face contorts as she squints. Almost simultaneously Billi steps back and woman snatches the clothes, then slams the door. Billi shakes, laughing, as she re-enters the car.

Whatever Billi says, I'm not listening. I can't understand why I stay with her. Any decent person, I tell myself, would get out and go home. The old lady looked harmless. I don't want to get to a point with anyone where I take this sort of revenge. Feeling self-righteous and also confused, I look at my friend. I know her as also being generous and kind, someone who's kept me from going into seclusion.

"Now, we're going to have some fun." Driving back downtown, Billi turns on the siren. Its gattling screeches clear a path for us. I imagine going to prison. What I could tell the judge.

Swerving in and out of traffic we surprise on Speedway, Billi sings but I see tears run down her cheeks. I feel like I'm in a bad movie, and there's no avoiding the tragic ending. And what to tell Felipe? Billi's voice strangles now and then but I'm too nauseous to put my hand on her shoulder. I don't think she knows I'm here.

"God, Billi. What's going on?" I feel my cheeks wet, and think every person in every car we pass is some tragedy, that everyone's lonely, and, for some, there's no escape. I'm a fountain by the time we get to the police station.

"Now, sugar," Billi turns off the siren and the motor after she parks. Turning, her hand falls to the revolver. "You get a cab and go home. Give Felipe my love."

"No way. I've come this far, I might as well go in." I sniff but my stomach feels empty when I notice two uniformed officers walking

across the lot. I hope they don't see us.

"Sweetie, don't worry. I know the Captain. I'm just going to turn over the keys to this jeep and this revolver and badge, then tell him the tax payers are wasting their money."

"I could wait outside." Wiping my eyes, I reach across the seat and hug her. "I will."

"No. Go home. I'm not sticking around, and you'd be in the way. Now, go." Her smooth voice is hard as graphite. Returning my hug, she holds tight briefly before pushing me away. "Go find Felipe. Don't be a fool."

(five line break)

For weeks I waited to hear from Billi. Except for the chop of police helicopter, patrolling for transients and vandals, the neighborhood's been quiet. As I watch the daily shift of street people panhandling down the street, I count myself lucky. How thin that line that demarks their lives from mine.

It's almost the end of the rainy season. Sometimes it seems as if the heavy rains that fill the Santa Rita with muddy swirling currents will flood the desert. Everyday, after rain, the air blues with ozone, a smell I love as much as the wildflowers that materialize in the foothills. Just when summer's nearly ended, it turns on itself and mimics spring. The city quickens.

It is this time, after rain, that Felipe and hike the desert. I teach him the names of plants--creosote bush, mesquite, cat's claw. He tells me about the Bushman or the Anasazi. We are considering buying a house, a run-down adobe mansion, in the barrio.

We miss Billi, and each time I hear a siren, I shudder. Her house is locked tight, and mail still arrives. I've kept it for her, a stack

filling a straw fruit basket in my bedroom.

I have to work tonight but I'm sitting on my back porch, reading Bushman myths about Mantis. Every time Inca Doves burst from the undergrowth, their soft gray bodies open with a gash of carmine from their wings. When I hear the doorbell, I'm surprised. I'd thought Felipe would be busy the afternoon with meetings. I check myself in the hall mirror before I answer. My long hair is shiny and I'm heavier. I like what I see. The doorbell rings again, and I almost think it's Billi but I shake my head.

"Well, sweetie, I ain't no witch, and he's no warlock. Ask us in!" Dressed in a bright print mumu, Billi grabs me. She's crying. I'm stunned. Both of us babble questions and answers at once. When I can focus, I see a tall man standing slightly behind Billi, smiling shyly. He's balding but very warm looking. His brown eyes flit from mine to the door.

Pulling him with her into the house, Billi stops just before entering the livingroom and puts her hand on my arm. "Here, now. I almost forgot. I want you to meet somebody. This is Jim."

"Jim?" I shiver at her joke. As he shakes my hand I try to guess who he really might be.

Billi shakes my arm. "I'm not kidding, Val. This is my one and only."

I stumble over my nice-to-know-you, and he laughs.

"I know how you must feel. I'm not here to arrest you." He winks at Billi, and, for some reason, I feel angry.

"Now, both of you, let's go and sit." Leading me by one arm and Jim by another, Billi leaves me at the couch, then motions Jim to the

bentwood rocker.

"What's going on?" I ask, crossing my legs.

"Billi thought you'd be surprised." Walking close to her, Jim gently puts his arm around her waist. She looks slimmer. "She told me you're her best friend, and she wanted to see you before we leave town again."

"Again?" I look at them while they pull their chairs together. They smile at each other like newlyweds. "What is going on?"

"Oh, Val, that'd take too long! Jimmy and I are going back to Tennessee to get Cherylee. It's home." She squeezes his hand. "This desert's no good for us."

"I resigned from the department. I can have my old job in Memphis." Jim takes a handkerchief from the pocket of his lime polyester pants and wipes his forehead. "I never liked this heat."

"Tennessee?" I rub my eyes.

"Honey, Jim went to a lot of trouble to find me." She smiles.

"I bet," I remember Billi walking into the police department, Jim's revolver held out in front of her.

"That's true. I'd do it again in a heartbeat." He rocks slowly. Billi's hand is on his knee. "I was a damn fool, and she's not getting away from me again. How could I live without her?"

I resist the obvious reply.

"When all that happened," he continues in a deep voice, the same gentle smile directed at my friend. "I could have shot her. Then, I finally saw she was right. I was the jerk. She loves me. Beside, if I don't live with her, she might end up killing me. No, we belong together."

"Would anyone beside me care for a drink?" I sigh, feeling dizzy and wishing Felice would drop by. "Billi, why don't you come and help?"

She follows me to the kitchen, making cracks about my paleness.

"Honey, I hope your liquor situation has improved. Got anything beside beer? We need to celebrate." She laughs when I pull the door shut. "Relax, Val."

"Sure. What the hell is going on?" I lean against the counter to stop from shaking her.

"Jim hired a private detective. Scared hell out of me. I thought he put out a contract." Opening the refrigerator, she pulls an ice tray free of thick frost. "Here, hold this. Jim flew to Guadalajara--where I was--and he asked me to take him back. I couldn't resist. You saw him. Isn't he handsome? Cherylee's delighted."

"What about Marge?"

"Who knows? Still teaching, I expect." Snooping through my cupboard, Billi comes across my stash of Tangeray. "This is more like it. Must be Felipe's influence. He's still around, isn't he?"

"Of course." It isn't him I want to talk about. "Are you nuts? After all you did to that man? What if he decides to get even? And his womanizing?" I spit out the questions not stopping for breath as I pop icecubes into glasses. "What are you two going to do? Raise the ante?"

When she turns, I know better than to argue with the gin bottle. We glare at each other. Then she sighs. "There are no guarantees, ever. You don't know shit about life yet."

"I know enough to quit when it's called for. I haven't heard from Caz, and I'm glad."

"We'll take it as far as it goes." She uncaps the bottle and sniffs.

"All the way to murder?" I don't care any longer whether she hits me or not.

"Happy or hurt? He had plenty of chance for revenge. Jim and I understand each other." Billi moves closer and lowers her voice. Setting down the bottle, she scratches her head. "Val, every once in a while, you have to give a push."

"Ok, it's your funeral." Slowly, I start to smile, then laugh. We look at each other. I think of the story I'll tell Felipe. "You should have been a dancer."

"Let's get that poor man his drink before he dies of boredom. Don't worry so much, sweetie." As she pours the gin, she hugs me.

They don't stay long because they have packing to do. I offer help. I can't help liking Jim. When they get up to leave, I promise to bring Felipe over in the morning, and Billi smiles.

"Hang on to that one. Now, sugar, you keep that bottle of gin handy. I might drop in again." Winking at Jim, she takes his arm and looks graceful as they walk down the steps. "Keep laughing, honey. Now, we got things to do."

It gets dark earlier each night. Felipe has called to say he'll pick me up from work. I drink coffee to sober up. The sun sets as I walk to the museum. This is my favorite time of day, when the hills are cutouts of themselves, dark and defining the limits of the sky. In the dusk, even the outlines of jagged palm fronds look soft.

III. Yellow Light

VISITATIONS

"These'll be something to remember you by." Nicky grinned, chewing on a toothpick.

Jiggling her heavy glasses, Marya rubbed her eyes to see her son better. "I'm not gone yet."

"What good are chairs in an attic?" Nicky sneezed and dropped the oak chairs to the threadbare oriental carpet. Sunlight filtered through the heavy lace curtains, but the air was stuffy.

"I said you could have them, Nicky. Use them." Laughing, Marya pushed back her short silver hair. Leaning forward, she lowered her voice. "He's been drinking all morning again."

"Oh, Ma, come on, what else does he have to do?" Nicky laughed.

Marya didn't answer but watched Nicky drum his fingers absently on the back of one of the hand-painted chairs she had gotten from his father, her first husband, as a wedding gift sixty years ago.

"Betty's gonna love these. This stuff is in." Grinning, he lifted both chairs to shoulder height on either side of him. "Cheer up, Ma, he'll sleep it off."

"But you, can't you stay and talk?" She smiled, looking up.

"I can make tea, and we have cookies. Sugar cookies."

Clearing his throat, Nicky started carrying the chairs to the door. "Gotta go. Betty'll get mad if I'm late for lunch." He kicked the door handle with his knee and the door sprang open. "I'll call you Friday."

"It's better things are used," Marya sighed, shaking her head as if to clear it. Craning forward in her swivel rocker, Marya called after her son. "You and Betty come next time, yes?"

The door slammed, and Nicky shouted through the screen. "Ma, Betty's real busy, and you know she can't drive."

"It's only six blocks," the old woman smiled, then rocked slowly back and closed her eyes.

The clock chimed, her walnut mantle clock with delicate filligree hands. It sat in an alcove behind and slightly above her chair. Just as it rang the hour, Nicky came back. He no longer had the chairs. "Hey, Ma, how'd you like to give me that clock?"

Marya stiffened, folding her slight arms. Her right hand balled into a fist in her lap. "Since I come to this house, the clock has been with me. Your father bought it. Nobody is going to have it until I'm gone to the angels. Ah, Nicky, you come Friday and I make you a nice lunch."

Nicky shrugged.

Looking at her son, she could only distinguish the hazed outline of his form at the far end of the room. She knew, to his left, would be the three-legged table her older son, Yash, made her when he was twelve. She couldn't see that either, even with her thick glasses and the laser surgery.

Once the door slammed, there was a dark hole in the center of the room where Nicky'd stood. He was her handsome boy, her dark-haired boy, like his father, Alexi. Alexi had been slim and wore elegant clothes. She'd always been proud of the way he looked. Marya rocked. How different Nicky was from her other children. There was a strange country in his eyes that she'd never been given a passport to. That made Marya feel sorry for him. It was this that had passed from father to son.

When Nicky had taken the furniture stored in the attic, Marya made no move to stop him. If the old man hadn't been so drunk or, rather if Nicky hadn't helped him get so drunk, he would have raised hell. But Marya felt somehow that furniture from her first marriage belonged to Nicky all along.

From the old man's bedroom, Marya heard the irregular snoring. Thank God, she thought. Despite their fights, it would be bad if he were gone. Alexi's face had been blue when she found him the day he'd locked himself in the kitchen and turned on the gas stove.

A sudden tingling in her forehead iced her thoughts. Marya felt herself list, even as she sat perfectly still in the rocker, as if she was being pushed by a dark wave. She felt herself falling backward through the chair while the room turned electric black. No pain, just pressure like being on the bottom of the ocean.

"Take me," she said out loud. "I'm tired." But the spell passed. She straightened. She'd been ready a long time. Where was her strength? She looked at her arthritic hands, hands that had scrubbed so many floors, had wrung out the laundry of rich women. Her fingernails were pink and uniformly filed, a ritual she practiced daily.

It hurt her, though, to see her gnarled hands on a cane, not to work in her garden or do any of the fine sewing she once enjoyed. Her doctor told her she had arteriosclerosis. He gave her red pills. She took them for a few days, noticed nothing and decided they were no good. No amount of medicine could cure death. If she only had some mushrooms, the fat dark kind she'd picked as a girl in the old country.

The doorbell surprised her. She and Mike had so little company lately. She rose, gripping the arms of her chair, then reached for the cane Mike had bought for her at Woolworth's. When she got the door unlocked, she recognized the tall form of one of her granddaughters through the summer screen.

"Grandma. Zdrasvitya!" Deftly, the dark young woman was at Marya's side, hugging her then grasping her soft arm. She held a bouquet of daisies. "I missed you. Here. I didn't grow them, but they're pretty."

The voice was familiar but it was a few moments before Marya could determine which granddaughter this was.

"So, it's you. Honey, I get so old I didn't know you." Marya smiled shyly, feeling foolish when her eyes cleared. "You been away a long time. Put the daisies in some water, honey girl. They are so beautiful."

When instead the girl began to help her, Marya shook her arm free, nearly throwing herself off balance. "I should do this myself. When I am really old, then you help me walk."

"Fine. Fine." The young woman walked slowly beside Marya as

she shuffled back to her seat.

"Thanks God I have my health." Her eyes clouded as she sat heavily, then smoothed her skirt. "Where is that husband of yours?"

Ann walked to the kitchen and fussed with the flowers. She hesitated as she returned, catching her breath. "I'm not alone. My dog is in the car."

"Don lets you come so far alone?" Marya leaned forward and patted Ann's arm when she sat next to her.

"Grandma, we're not getting along. I don't know if this marriage is going to last." There were tears in her eyes.

"Don't cry. Tell me about it." Marya's small white hand lay on Ann's blue-jeaned knee.

"Don't tell mom and dad. Don doesn't want anyone to know we're having problems." She wiped her eyes with her fingers.

"And you?" Sighing, Marya slowly shook her head. She took Ann's hand and stroked it. "Remember when you stayed with me when you were small. You slept on a cot beside my bed, and when you had a night-mare--"

"You'd make me wake up and tell you. Then you sang. I always felt better." Ann laughed.

"Tell me now. Ah, dear girl." Marya saw Ann's frown and paused. "You'll be fine. Just remember, marriage is like a garden. When the plants are sick, you have to take care of them."

"But, all Don ever wants to do is work. He hardly touches me anymore and we don't talk. I think he might be seeing another woman."

"Did you ask him?"

"No." Ann shifted on her seat and cleared her throat. "He knows I'm unhappy."

"You should talk to him. How can he know if you don't talk?" Marya heard Mike's snoring. She and Mike hadn't talked for a long time, not about their feelings. "Just remember, it's hard to stay warm in a bed alone. Especially at your age."

Ann began laughing and Marya joined in. They laughed until both had tears in their eyes, and Ann leaned over to hug the old woman.

"Maybe, you're right. Where's grandpa?"

"Asleep, drunk again. His talk! He says he's going back to Russia and be a hero. Show the family how rich he is. And his pension check is used up in a week!" This made them laugh again.

Marya thought about Mike. His pension and the scars on his arms. Besides being wounded in World War I, he'd been mustard-gassed in France. She'd never been able quite to picture what this gas was. His relatives would think him rich. In the old country, they were constantly writing him and asking for money and clothes. After her own brother had been killed in the Crimean War and her father had died of pneumonia, her mother had sent her to America, alone, at twelve, believing the streets were paved with gold, believing her only daughter would be rich and happy.

"Honey girl, you should go back home and talk to your husband. Maybe, he is sad, too." Marya's eyes were wide, magnified by the refracting lenses of her trifocals. They pressed down on her nose. "It's too late today. You can stay here tonight."

"No, I want to see some friends." Ann looked steadily at Marya.

"I don't want a man who ignores me. I don't know."

Marya reached under her glasses and rubbed her eyes. They ached. Since the operation, they watered. This gave her a look of permanent melancholy, or amusement, depending upon whether or not she was smiling. Now, she smiled. She wanted her granddaughter to be happy, and for some reason she couldn't explain, she wanted her to stay with her husband.

"When I came to this country, I was lonely. I couldn't understand what anyone was saying. I couldn't speak English. My mama cried when I left. She wanted something grand for me. She thought I'd marry a banker, but money doesn't make the heart laugh."

The old woman stopped to laugh again. Then she continued. "When I got here, I worked in a big shop, they called them sweat shops, in Philadelphia. I worked in a dusty room, sewing buttons on coats for twelve cents an hour. Then I met your real grandfather. Alexi was rich and he was so handsome, like your uncle Nicky. But he wasn't a banker. His voice was sweet." Flying like swallows, Marya's hands illustrated the story she so often told. "He showed-off and bought me fancy dresses, real silk dresses, but he was no good. A hoodlum with a gang that carried whiskey from Canada to this country. The police were always searching our house, but I didn't know any of that until after we were married."

"Daddy hated him." Ann scratched her scalp, then ran her fingers jerkily through her thick black hair.

"Money. He had fine clothes and cars with white tires. How that man loved to dance, but he stopped buying me silk." The old woman

paused, looking through the fog of the livingroom. She could see Alexi, dark and thin as a thoroughbred. She saw his black eyes, burning eyes that turned from laughter to hatred. He laughed, saying something she couldn't make out. Marya wiped her eyes, wishing him gone.

"What'd you say?" Ann scooted her chair closer, then crossed her legs.

"Nothing, honey. I was just thinking."

"Daddy says he remembers him taking Nicky and he with him when Grandpa made his runs. He said they'd have to hit the floor of the car when the bullets started flying."

"Ai. His Purple Gang. Murderers. But Alexi loved your father and Nicky. I remember how he played with them when they were babies. Whenever he wanted take them for rides, I was scared. We would fight and he would hit me, and then he'd cry and cry. He was so hard to understand. He was always so sorry." Marya panted. She stopped to take a deep breath. She'd never told the girl that part of the story.

"Once he tried to drown your aunt Sonya when she was tiny, just because she couldn't remember the Russian word for lake. We fought and I thank God I got her away from him. We were at the Looking Glass River with his cousin, Darya. She was an alcoholic. All day she drank and stumbled around looking for crawfish. Then she'd put them in a big washtub and boil them. We had to watch her so she wouldn't fall in and drown. Alexi was so kind to her. He never got angry with her. He treated her like a child."

"How wierd. Too bad he didn't treat everybody like that." Ann laughed and uncrossed her legs.

"Once Darya was so drunk she peeled them, poor things, out of

their shells while they were still alive. Then she ate them raw. Her pot boiled and boiled. Such things!"

Ann made a face and shuddered. It was quiet in the house, except for Mike's snoring. The clock chimed the half-hour. "Grandma, should I make us tea?"

"What, honey?" Marya felt the black wave building in her left temple this time and she closed her eyes, leaning into it. In the center of the blackness, she saw Alexi dancing.

"Grandma?" Ann raised her voice, shaking the old woman's arm. "Do you want some tea? Are you alright?"

"Tea?" Marya's voice sounded hollow in her ears. She let the wave crash and subside before attempting to rise. "Let's sit in the kitchen. Don't worry. I'm fine."

As Ann slowly walked Marya to the kitchen, she towered above the top of her gray head which just reached the girl's shoulder. How many times Marya had walked the flowered carpet. She'd kept the house warm and clean, and it had smelled of the lilac toilet water she was fond of. Now it rankled with mildew and body odors.

"Daisies. Daisies." Marya sat at the formica table, fingering the white petals.

"Give me your answer, do," sang Ann, reaching for the tea on the shelf above the stove.

"Mine were big and all colors." Marya pulled one of the flowers from the vase and held it to the light. "This year, I won't have a garden. The old man loves his lawn, but he cuts off the flowers with his mower. Last summer he even ran down some roses. Can you

imagine? He just wants it to look nice."

Humming, Ann ran water into a pot and put it on the stove.

Marya looked out the window. "Anya, look. That magnolia blooms every spring, without me or anyone to help it. So pretty, like ocean shells. They smell so good. That tree is older than you."

(five line break)

"Anna! Anna! So you come, hey?" Mike coughed as he walked in, bringing up phlegm which he spit in the sink. He coughed some more, then ran the tap. He splashed cold water on his face. "You drive all the way today? Where's Don?"

Drawing back from him, Ann told him Don was at home.

"You be more careful, lady. There are all kinds crazy people." He pointed with his forefinger as he talked but his voice was good-humored, and Ann laughed. Mike was as old as Marya, nearly ninety, yet the years hadn't bent him. He stood straight, his black greased hair untouched by gray, his eyes yellow from years of hard liquor. Only his face was deeply lined, and he smelled of sweat and stale whiskey.

Marya sighed loudly and put the daisy back in the vase.

"Charka. We have some charka, no? You grow to such a nice-looking woman." He winked at her and laughed until he coughed. "You want charka, hey? Something to make your blood strong?"

Ann shook her head. "We're having--"

"No more today, you old fool." Marya's voice rose. She placed her hands flat before her on the table. "You had enough. You'll be sick."

"Talk. Talk. Where's Nicky? You have some whiskey, old woman."

Mike laughed. "It's good for you, give you pep like me."

"No whiskey now. Nicky went home a long time ago." Marya looked at Ann who was fidgetting over the stove. She winked at her and smiled. When she spoke, her tone was softer. "Mikhail, you have some tea with us."

"Just a little." Mike laughed again and sauntered to the white cupboard just out of his wife's reach. He raised what was left of the bottle of Canadian Club. "To clear my throat from sleep."

"You don't know what little means. You should eat." Marya watched Mike pour two glasses half-full. She half-rose, then sat back down.

"What's the use? Why are you being such a frog?"

"Frog, hey? You're an old cow, then." He swirled the whiskey in his glass. "Anna, hey, have some charka. Don't listen to your grandma. It makes your blood healthy."

Ann took the glass from Mike, holding it in both hands. When he raised his glass, she returned his toast.

"Good, hey?" He drank, while Ann took a sip. "Old woman, you have some?"

"No, sir." Marya folded her arms and leaned on the table. "That's enough, mister."

"Okay, see, only a little." Mike said, holding up the empty water glass. It looked small in his hand. "I go read the paper. It's nice you come, Anna. Don't listen to your grandma. Drink your charka."

Anna nodded, then turned back to the stove.

"Alright, Mike, go read your paper and leave us talk. Here, you take these." Reaching behind her on the counter, Marya picked up the

white bakery bag of sugar cookies and handed it to him. She turned and gazed out the window where she imagined she could see the pink outline of the magnolia tree igniting the small side yard.

When Mike was out of the room, Ann walked to the sink and poured out the rest of her whiskey, then rinsed the glass. "Too early for this stuff. How can you stand it when he talks to you that way?"

"Oh, dear girl. That. He doesn't mean everything he says." Marya picked up her cup and began to pour the hot tea into the shallow bowl she used as a saucer. First cooling it, she then sipped it like a cat. "When I was young, I dreamed of being a fine lady. I wanted china cups, lace, someone to wait on me. Foolishness. Mike and I fight sometimes. We all fight sometimes. So?"

Ann stirred sugar into her tea. She sat without looking at her grandmother.

"Most of the ladies I worked for, I didn't like. They thought money and clothes and whether people thought they were important was life. My family was important. I learned that, and it didn't matter about the money or the clothes."

"It's not like it used to be, Grandma." Ann tapped the side of her cup softly with her spoon.

"Do you like to dance, Anya?"

"Sure, it's fun." Moving her chair closer to the table, it moaned across the linoleum.

"I loved to dance when I was your age. You and Don should dance." In the yellow kitchen, Marya's blue eyes were soft as cornflowers. She saw herself dancing with other children in the old country. They danced in the barn where they kept the ice under straw for the family brewery.

"We used to dance. Now, he doesn't have time." Leaning back, Ann shook the hair out of her eyes. She snorted. "Lives get too busy, Grandma, and it squeezes all the love out of them."

"Too busy. I never thought I'd get old. I just did what my heart said. You don't have time to worry when you have three children. I worked." Marya thought of the loads of laundry she'd hauled into the basement to wash in galvanized tubs to make money so the welfare people wouldn't take away her children when Alexi died. It had hurt her that her oldest boy had to quit high school to help. "No sir, I worked."

Ann shifted on her seat and looked from her grandmother to the window. Her voice was edgy. "How did you make it? It's too hard."

"What was I to do, give up?"

"Look, I didn't say I gave up. I just need time to think." Biting her upper lip, Ann tried to smile. "Maybe I'll go home and talk to Don. I didn't say I wouldn't."

"Anya, you love Don?" Marya sipped more of her tea, looking over the rim of her saucer.

Ann tapped her fingers on the tabletop. "He says he loves me, but I don't know."

"If you love him, you must believe in him. There is more to marriage than romance." Marya sneezed and wiped her nose with a handkerchief she pulled out of her belt.

"Bless you." Scratching her head, Ann frowned. "I know all that stuff. But what about day to day. What do you do when you're unhappy?"

"Oh, honey, we're all unhappy sometimes." Marya chose her words

carefully, thinking as much about herself as her granddaughter. She rubbed the water from her eyes. "What else is there, if we don't care for each other?"

"I know." Ann stirred her tea although it was nearly gone. "But, I have to think about myself, too."

"To respect the person you live with, you have to see his pain, too. Everybody wants his own way." She thought about the time Alexi had come home from prison, on parole. He'd beaten Yash, knocking him through the back porch window. How she hated Alexi, then. How she wished he was still in prison. Then he fell to her feet and cried, and she could not bend to touch him. "We all hurt. We suffer but when we enjoy our suffering, it is wrong. So many times I only saw my own hurt."

"I don't like to be unhappy, if that's what you mean." Ann moved on her chair, crossed and uncrossed her legs. "I just want a happy home and children."

Marya thought about Nicky. He never said he was sorry. And Alexi was always sorry but it didn't stop him from being cruel. She'd had her children, one after the other, and, at first, Alexi had played with them, had held them and told them stories. Then, when they went to kindergarten, he would no longer hold them. He taught them to dance so they could perform for the members of his gang, and if they fell or made the wrong move, he would cuff them. Maybe the girl was right to think carefully about these things. She'd wanted exactly what Ann did. She wanted everything to be perfect, happy.

When she was only nineteen, she'd had Yash, then a year later, Sonya, and finally two years after that, Nicky. She felt like she

had gone from being a girl to a woman overnight. One moment she remembered dancing with Alexi in Philadelphia, the next she had three children, diapers to wash, meals to cook and floors to scrub. Her days had been work. She learned to grow vegetables, kept chickens, butchered pigs, dried fruits and vegetables, then hung them from the attic rafters for winter. And Alexi came and went, always dressed in fine silk shirts and dark suits, shoes polished like mirrors. Even when times were bad, she sang to her children, talked away their tears. She looked up, not recognizing her own kitchen or Ann for a moment. And, she'd called Mike an old fool.

Ann had gotten up and walked to the sink where she rinsed out her cup. She ran a glass of water and drank it, then came back to the table. Sitting down, she stretched her arms above her head and yawned.

"Honey girl. Listen to your heart. Sometimes it's hard to understand when someone mows down roses, why what's beautiful dies. The roses will come back this year." Marya reached across the table and squeezed Ann's hand. It was cold.

"I hope so." Ann smiled, then laughed, shaking her head. "Thanks."

"Be strong. You're a good girl, Anya." Letting go of Ann's hand, Marya rubbed her eyes. She leaned back and looked up, taking a deep breath. "Now, I am getting tired."

For the first time in weeks, the waves stopped breaking in Marya's head. She was sleepy and closed her eyes. The clock chimed once again. She imagined its lacey hands move like expensive gloves around its calm ivory face. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I love the chimes. Sixty years and still the clock keeps its time."

From the front room, Mike swore in Russian. He shuffled the papers

and coughed loudly. The two women sat like vases, Marya with her eyes shut, and Ann staring out the window.

Finally, Ann turned, looking at Marya whose head jerked slightly with sleep. She reached over and traced around the rim of her cup.

"Gram, I have to go."

Marya opened her eyes. Her granddaughter's face looked as if it rippled with heat waves. Taking out her handkerchief, she dabbed at her eyes until she could see. "Maybe we have to make a home in ourselves first."

"I'll call Don." The two women had nothing left to say. Ann got up finally and walked around the table for a hug.

(five line break)

Marya didn't hear Mike until he was beside her.

"It was nice she come to see you. She's a good girl." Mike chuckled, putting his hand on the back of Marya's chair.

"Good. Mike, how do we get so old?" Reaching up, she smoothed a wrinkle in his shirt.

"Old woman, you want to sit with me in the front room?" Slowly he moved his hand until it was resting lightly on her shoulder. "You can sleep there."

"Yes, my legs got stiff." Marya thumped her feet on the linoleum.

"Here, I'll help you." Mike lifted her arm. Marya reached for her cane with her free hand. When she stood, she was smiling.

The biting odor of stale whiskey and cigarettes seemed a rich, almost warm smell, and Marya did not pull back. Once she loved to lean softly on Mike's arm while they walked at twilight around the block and greeted neighbors on their porches. She squeezed Mike's arm, her

fingers gentle on the slack muscles beneath his cotton shirt. He helped her sit down, then covered her lap with an afghan before he returned to his papers. When he turned, she saw how loose his pants were, how they bagged in the seat. Almost like a child. She must remember to make him eat more.

After the short walk and the visits, Marya fell into that ether between wakefulness and sleep. She felt her body rise from the chair and float. She could see Mike standing at the far end of the room. When she looked closely, she saw it was Alexi, and the room his room in Philadelphia. The light intensified, and he said something, teasing her, motioning her close. White lace curtains blew as if breathing in and out. Alexi removed his blue coat and laid it on the bed. A large gold watch fell from the pocket, chiming. *Come on, silly goose.*

Why wait?

In the cold breeze from the windows, Marya stood before him, laughing. He stared at her, his black eyes growing larger and softer. The wind gusted, and her chest tightened. She tried to run, but couldn't move. When she tried to talk, wind blew away her words.

Alexi walked closer and closer. He had on only a shirt, a striped silk shirt that swelled, puffy like a kite. *Come my goose. Don't shake. Dance with me.*

His fingers were icy on her cheek. They were blue and he worked them into her auburn hair. His eyes were sad and she wanted to talk to him, to tell him it was alright. When she kissed his face, she stumbled backward, fell.

Marya heard chimes above her and struggled to see them. The air

was white. She heard Mike cough, shaking her. Another chime and she saw the magnolia, taller than the house. The room glowed with yellow light.