

# The BOOKPRESS

THE NEWSPAPER OF THE LITERARY ARTS

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FREE

## A Missing Star

Paul West

Certain much-heard voices impose themselves on posterity. My old friend, astronomer Carl Sagan, had such a voice: a tutored baritone no doubt practiced in bathroom or laboratory, bouncing about among tile and glass, a calmative among the wets and clinks, the squeaky faucets and the hoarse Bunsen burners. In the old days, when he never wore a suit, the voice wasn't quite so manicured, so crisply mahogany in hue, when we chatted about salary, Swinburne, and stars, and in a much later year I wondered how that voice had fared when, reduced to heart-broken banality, he found himself saying to his dying father, "Take care." I knew his parents quite well, having become a fan of his mother's potato pancakes, of his father's burly wit; besides, his mother, Rachel, knew my books and urged them upon her son, who complied.

I live in a house only a short downhill walk from where Carl now lies horizontal in a box, still a neighbor I suppose, motionless and dumb. And this new image of him fills me with ontological horror that his cherished cosmos has done this to him at sixty-two, renewing Beckett's warning that death does not require us to keep a day free in the calendar. We abide its whim and its deadly design with what the Greeks called *frike*, a hair-raising shudder, and then hope to think of something else. Surely it is naive of me, child of the Nazi blitz, to feel such shock and outrage at the demolition month by month of a friend. I felt the same way about my mother, who surprised us all by dying at ninety-four, also of pneumonia. We had thought she'd reach a hundred easily, but she was weary of us, of life. Irrationally, for months, I fretted that her corpse would feel the cold. Clearly, I did not believe in death, in its ability to wipe things out, but, in some kind of defiant nostalgia, denied it. I still hear Carl's voice, just as I still feel my mother's warm square hands. Indeed, trapped in some post-mortem passacaglia, I live on, hearing and sensing the dead more and more, as if they have at last come into their own, invulnerable and stark, uniquely reliable.

There is such haste to get them out of sight, certainly in Carl's Jewish religion, even in temperate climes. Perhaps this is a more majestic version of our eagerness to warehouse us as soon as we begin to age and no longer fit the eugenic paradigm of flawless maturity in the best of possible worlds. Sometimes, when it's snowy in the Finger Lakes, bodies await burial for months, hoarded-up until the ground softens again, and I wonder about the housing of the dead in attic, outhouse, or gazebo, erect as in a catacomb or at some wakes, remembering a Hemingway story in which the bereaved hang a hurricane lamp on the deceased's frozen lower jaw.

There is something to be said for keep-



Jack Sherman

ing the dead with us longer, hygiene be damned, so that the state they have entered becomes a piece of the real, like their loquacity, their sarcasm, their charm. Death, about which, as distinct from dying, we know too little, deserves to be better known, looked at with less disgust, almost as if it were what Aristotle, who knew everything, called a form of imitation without a name. They are trying to be like us, and something holds them back, but they are wonderful in their hidebound striving.

Could we bear it? Could it be worse than living among those compound ghosts of the departed cobbled together, in Carl's case, from the sailcloth crackle of his brand-new yellow swimshorts as he once plunged into the waves off Cocoa Beach, the way he held a tape recorder to his chin as if shaving, the empathetic irony in his voice when he called me long-distance on my fiftieth birthday, I in darkest Pittsburgh, to reassure and fortify, he four years younger? Perhaps what horrifies us is the smidgen of death we allow our-

selves, shunting it away from us like the plague. We suffer from synecdoche, taking part for whole, when we need corporeal impact — no more memorial services sanitized by the body's having gone. Maybe death comes first, then the dying begins; or death happens in a sea of dying that both precedes and follows it.

There is another problem, in this man's case anyway. More seen on TV than in life, he may have achieved a replica of immortality anyway, in which case, according to what I have just written, we need to see his body even more, weekly on the tube, lying in state like the Crab Nebula. I think I saw him as much in life as ever on TV, perhaps more, so I have a double image of him to cope with, complicated even further by the fact that, only months before he died, I finished an autobiographical novel in which he, as Raoul Bunsen, figured as the character who talked a pair of lovers into astronomy, taking them along with him to Cape Canaveral, as it then was, the Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena, and many other holies of holies

usually denied to novelists and poets. In this love story haunted by astronomy, he lived again before he even died, all the way through what I think of as his golden days, when he excelled at the graces of the amateur, the fervent savant, before the prospect of nuclear winter filled his mind.

The upshot of all this is that, at least until the novel gets published in 1998, I will have his remainder, or rather my purloined version of his body, on my premises, more or less to myself, which is perhaps better than trying to deal with him as a cloud of disembodied memories. Congealed in cold print, not by him but by me, he will haunt me still because I know now, as I did not while writing the novel, that the real person, of whom Raoul Bunsen is an imitation, a translation even, lies a little way downhill from the house, yet oddly dispossessed of himself, a star that winked out, whose image continues to travel through space.

Paul West's most recent novel, his fifteenth, is *Sporting with Amaryllis*.

# Staying on the Line

Barbara Adams

## A Slender Thread: Rediscovering Hope at the Heart of Crisis.

Diane Ackerman  
New York: Random House, 1997  
305 pp.; \$24.00

Last winter, Diane Ackerman's non-fiction work *The Rarest of the Rare* celebrated several species of endangered animals; a year later her most recent work celebrates the endangered human. *A Slender Thread: Rediscovering Hope at the Heart of Crisis* is a meditation on people in *extremis*, in particular those who reach out for the lifeline of a crisis center's telephone counselor. Three years ago Ackerman herself became one of the 75 people trained to staff the Suicide Prevention and Crisis Service hotline based in Ithaca, N.Y. (where she now no longer counsels but serves on the agency's board). That experience led to this work, an insightful commentary on the neighboring worlds of humans and other animals.

As a writer and naturalist, Ackerman has always acknowledged the continuum of life forms in her work. When I interviewed her last winter, she said, "Sometimes people think that I write different kinds of books—some books are about animals and some are about people. But to my mind it's all part of the same quest, to understand the human condition and what life on earth feels like." At the time she was discussing the risk of species extinction, but had just completed *A Slender Thread*, and the connections were apparent: "If you're like me, you think that life is an extraordinary happenstance for matter to get itself into, and that it's wonderful to have as many life forms around the planet as possible—for novelty, for beauty, out of a respect for their dignity and right to exist."

In *A Slender Thread*, Ackerman shows us that while a belief in human dignity and the right to exist surely motivates crisis counselors, they also recognize another pull of nature—the inevitability of death, and, for humans, the right to autonomy and choice. Not acting as therapists, the counselors are rather trained listeners: sympathetic and patient ears attuned to others' pain, witnesses to the intricacies of human suffering. Witnessing is, in fact, what constitutes this book's complex emotional tenor: both nature and human nature are continually observed, paralleled, respected.

While writing this work, Ackerman sometimes told people it was "about squirrels and the dark night of the soul," and that delineating phrase heads the book's second chapter. Observing the personable squirrels in her two-acre backyard was a National Geographic research project but here becomes a metaphor for nature's cycle and the struggle to survive. The writer scatters nuts on the snow, knowing that feeding the squirrels intervenes with nature yet recognizing intervention as a natural human impulse. Person-

alities emerge despite the naturalist's intended objectivity, and we watch one squirrel, nicknamed "The Pleader," pass, over several seasons, from territorial ascendancy to defeat, battered in body and spirit.

It's only a quick side-step to the human callers on the crisis line, known also at a distance, anonymous except for observed, shared details of their lives, sometimes given distinguishing names by the counselors, and like the squirrels, seeking a way to endure deprivation and somehow continue. Ackerman's parallels of humans with animals are never reductive, but compassionate and occasionally ennobling.

The repeated juxtaposition of the two worlds constitutes the basic rhythm of the book, and we ferry back and forth, at first somewhat startled, eventually quite easily. Anyone familiar with Ackerman's previous works, particularly her "natural histories" of the senses and of love, will recognize the pattern: a delightful crazy quilt of fascinating facts and essential digressions. Here, we learn that goldfinches prefer thistle seed, that rats can't vomit, that squirrels may live 20 years in captivity but only a year in the wild, and that hummingbird hearts, normally beating 500 times a minute, slow to a dangerously torpid 36 beats during sleep.

Ackerman brings a special vision to the natural world, the poet's exquisite attention to "falling berries, scuffling voles, a skink rising from its bog" and to "Canada geese chicks—all fluff and waddle with bones delicate as twigs." And the writer in her happily dominates the scientist in many anthropomorphic but perfect descriptions—of "small fence lizards doing rapid push-ups as part of their territorial display," of mating mallards "taxi dancing" or three standing in a row "like gents at a urinal," of "large glossy crows [who] sound as if they're gagging on lengths of flannel."

From time to time, a passage describing nature will turn decidedly purple: "the aubergine drapery of the forest" or "in the lavender hours after daybreak, before the sun leapt onto the blue stage of the sky to begin its light opera of soul-searing heat...." But the occasional overwriting and a proneness to prettiness in Ackerman's style are tolerable; enthusiasms simply because there is so much else here that's freshly seen and ably stitched together.

Humanity and nature overlap intrinsically and repeatedly in Ackerman's lushly metaphorical prose, from phrases like "a wind-fall of memories," "a bustier of stars," or "the hard gardening of therapy" to her recollection that Emile Zola once remarked that "on some mornings, you first have to swallow your toad of disgust before you can get on with the day." But beyond metaphor, what's finally most important about Ackerman's vision of nature in *A Slender Thread* is its direct relationship to human life: Animals also get depressed and

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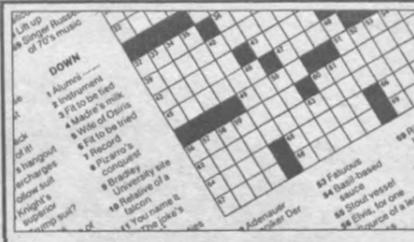
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## The BOOKPRESS

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**Off Campus  
At The Bookery**

This presentation is part of our ongoing series of readings and talks upstairs in the DeWitt Mall.

Sunday, March 2, 4:00 p.m.



**Elizabeth Holmes'**

poetry has appeared in *Poetry*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and many other journals. Ms. Holmes came to Ithaca in 1985 to earn a master's degree in writing from Cornell University and has worked here as a writer and editor ever since. **The Patience of the Cloud Photographer** is her first book of poetry.

Saturday, March 8, 8:00 p.m.

**International Women's Day**

In celebration of **International Women's Day**, the Durland Alternatives Library and The Bookery are co-sponsoring an event featuring the work of women writers from a variety of countries and backgrounds. Stories and poems will be read by an "international cast" of women, including: Helena Maria Viramontes, Anne Adams, Helga Schmidt, Ofelia Ferran, Jane Mt. Pleasant, Zulma Iguina, Magdalena Janusz, Cheryl Higashida, Maria Iannacome Coles, and others.

Sunday, March 9, 4:00 p.m.



**Elisabeth Sheldon**

Just in time for Spring planting, Elisabeth Sheldon will offer a discussion and slide presentation on the use of hot colors in small gardens as outlined in her newest book, **The Flamboyant Garden**. As an alternative to the rather tyrannical English style, Ms. Sheldon will help you enliven your garden in a distinctly American style. Ms. Sheldon, author of the popular *A Proper Garden*, lives in Lansing, N. Y.

Sunday, March 16, 4:00 p.m.

**Sheldon Flory**

The Bookery is proud to host a reading and fund-raiser for **Hospicare of Ithaca**. Poet Sheldon Flory will read from his "poems from hospice," a collection based on his work at the Ontario-Yates Hospice.

Sunday, March 23, 4:00 p.m.

**Susan R. Suleiman**

Ms. Suleiman, Professor of Romance and Comparative Literatures at Harvard University, will discuss and read from her personal memoir, **Budapest Diary: In Search of the Motherbook**, an account of her return to her native city of Budapest before and after the the fall of communism.

**The Bookery**

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some even commit suicide (generally an altruistic gesture); like us, they compete, quarrel, and nurture; build and depend on community. If we exile ourselves from nature, she fervently believes, we become hollow. Turning to nature, our one prayer should be "Teach us about ourselves."

When a hawk spectacularly swipes a chipmunk out of her back yard, Ackerman recognizes the drama as simultaneously cruel and beautiful. This kind of normal "biomischief" is examined thoughtfully in the book, particularly in relation to the perilous states in which the crisis line callers find themselves. Anxiety, panic, anger, violence, helplessness, confusion, despair—these psychic realities are inevitable and natural, yet, in our most human of responses, evoke empathy and solace.

The teeming fields and woods and lakesides of Ithaca contrast to the barren, unidentified room where the crisis phones are answered. But that room—and Ackerman's book—is peopled with a wealth of individual callers' stories. At first, the vividness of these narratives makes one feels like an uneasy voyeur, despite the clear prefatory acknowledgment that details have been thoroughly altered to ensure confidentiality. (Profiles of crisis line callers from other cities have also been merged here, and local counselors helped review the manuscript for anonymity.) Gradually, though, the reader's feeling of trespassing is replaced by a sense of respectful relationship and shared concern.

Ackerman has not only set her presentation of individuals in crisis in the context of a redemptive natural world, but has also wisely included herself as a fallible narrator. As a counselor, she may make mistakes, become distracted, fear saying the wrong thing. We glimpse her in other settings as an over-sensitive teenager, an impatient invalid, a homeowner with a leaking roof. In one chapter, she even presents herself breaking the sacred counselor/caller boundary by attending an evangelical church service where she hopes to see one client she's especially concerned about. The woman is there, and though Ackerman does not speak with her, she finds herself—as the minister channels the dead to the living through a bouquet of carnations—curiously both participant and observer.

This traversing of boundaries—not primarily as a counselor, but as a naturalist, writer, and thinker—is exactly what's so appealing about Diane Ackerman's work. She's messy; she mixes it all up, throws it all in the pot. This quality and her commitment to the sensory world suggest that she is in her element as an intuitive, synthetic writer, a poet at heart. For her not only nature, but language itself, provides the soul asylum.

*A Slender Thread* is both easy and difficult to read—easy because it gives great sensuous pleasure, difficult because the human sorrow it contains constantly ambushes the reader with painful awareness. The work—callers' stories, scenes from nature, reflections—proceeds in such an apparently repetitive way, like the ebb and flow of waves on a shore, that we may fail to see its direction. But we are hardly immune to its power. In the final chapters, when Ackerman relates how two people's lives were, against all odds, truly saved, we discover just how far we've been carried—and how much we've invested.

Barbara Adams teaches writing at Ithaca College. Her profile of writer Paul West appeared in last summer's Creative Nonfiction.

**We Die**

for Carl Sagan

*We die despite appointments and feuds,  
while our toddler  
who recently learned to say No  
opens and shuts drawers  
a hundred times a day  
and our teen braces for the rapids of  
romance.*

*We die despite the contracts  
and business trips we planned,  
when our desk is untidy,  
despite a long list of Things To Do  
which we keep simmering  
like a pot of rich broth.*

*We die despite work we cherish,  
marrying whom we love,  
piling up a star-spangled fortune,  
basking on the Riviera of fame,  
and achieving, that human part  
with no known object.*

*Life is not fair, the old saw goes.  
We know, we know, but the saw glides  
slow,  
one faint rasp, and then at length another.  
When you died, I felt its jagged teeth rip.  
Small heartwounds opened and bled,  
closing as new ones opened ahead.  
Horror welled, not from the how but the  
when.*

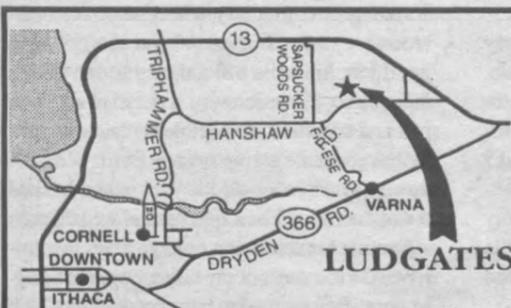
*You died at the top of your career,  
happy, blessed by love, still young.  
Playing by evolution's rules, you won:  
prospered, bred, rose in your tribe,  
did what the parent gods and society  
prized.*

*Yet it didn't save you, love or dough.  
Even when it happens slow, it happens  
fast,  
and then there's no tomorrow.  
Time topples, the castle of cards collapses,  
thoughts melt, the subscription lapses.  
What a waste of life we spend in asking,  
in wish and worry and want and sorrow.*

*A tall man, you lie low, now and forever  
complete, your brilliant star eclipsed.  
I remember our meeting many gabfests  
ago,  
at a crossroads of moment and mind.  
In later years, touched by nostalgia,  
I teased "I knew you when  
you were just a badly combed scientist."  
With a grin, you added: "I knew you  
when  
you were just a fledgling poet."*

*Lost friend, you taught me  
I longed to learn, and this time one I've  
learned  
against my will: the one spoken in  
silence,  
warning us to love hard and deep,  
clutch dear ones tighter, ransom each  
day,  
the horror lesson I saw out of the corner of  
my eye  
but refused to believe until now: we die.*

—Diane Ackerman



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## A Broken Gol

## Harvey Fireside

In an earlier section, "Kikerizpotschen/Kristallnacht," (Bookpress, December 1995), the author recounted his memories of Vienna before and after the Nazi takeover of March 1938 known as the Anschluss. The story resumes here nine months later. Half of the city's Jews have fled. Now the remainder are being forced into a ghetto by secret order of Reichsmarschall Goering.

By the end of 1938, the Nazis who ran Vienna had evolved a policy of what in today's jargon is called ethnic cleansing. Jews residing in twenty of the city's twenty-three *Bezirke* (districts) were given short notice to vacate their houses and apartments. Henceforth they would be allowed to live only in three districts that had been the traditional "lower East side"—mainly Leopoldstadt (district 2) plus segments of two other neighborhoods (in districts 9 and 10). The Prater, for example, with its broad boulevards and amusement park, was in the second district but had at once been declared *judenrein* (cleansed of Jews).

The original working-class area had housed the Jewish quarter centuries ago when it had become a magnet for refugees from the Austrian Empire's eastern reaches, especially Poland (with its Galitsianer) and Czechoslovakia (source of Bohemians). The latter brings to mind a children's jingle:

*Jo, Jo, Jo, dei Vater is' a Boehm'  
Ich hab ihm bei der Taborlinie  
Ziegl schupf'n g' sehn.*

(Yes, yes, yes, your Daddy is a Bohemian/I've seen him at the Taborstreet[car]-line/pitching bricks.)

In sixty-year hindsight, this seems to be a derogatory rhyme about Bohemian immigrants who worked as bricklayers. At the time, I knew it only as a tongue twister, which was supposed to be recited at top speed in a fake Czech accent and was invariably met by a round of laughter from a Viennese audience preening its German culture.

In any case, by the 1930s, the Jewish quarter encompassed a variety of social classes. Some of the families stayed on even after they became commercially successful. They may have grown accustomed to their native sounds and smells; others may have welcomed the proximity of dozens of synagogues in the area, only a short walk away on Shabbos. The ones who moved away, including my father and Uncle Willy, were drawn to distant parts of the city where they could adopt the protective coloration they needed to assimilate and prosper in a *goyische* world.

How were over one hundred thousand Jews who suddenly found themselves homeless in 1939 supposed to find a place to live? "A simple matter," snapped the Gauleiter. "Jews are supposed to be as thick as thieves. Well, they can ask friends or relatives in the newly declared ghetto to move over and let them squeeze in." The loners were ordered to report to the rat-infested abandoned barracks in the Simmering district, from which few ever returned.

After New Year's Day 1939, groups of hunched-over Jews could be seen leaving their houses in all parts of Vienna carrying boxes and suitcases. Somehow they lugged all that remained portable of their possessions across town to the ghetto. Everything they left behind had to be signed over to a "*kommissarischer Verwalter*" (appointed administrator), who distributed it to worthy Aryan neighbors. Theft was camouflaged as an orderly transaction. Meanwhile, the non-Jewish population of the city merrily danced its way through the seasonal round of holiday balls.

It was another of the cycles of legalized robberies by which the Jews were picked clean. Any that left the country from now on had to do so literally with the clothes on their back. The less fortunate ones ended up in concentration camps where they were forced to contribute first their labor, then the gold fillings from their

teeth, finally the bones from their emaciated bodies to make soap for Hitler's war effort.

It was a grim picture that came into focus only gradually. At the time, we were unaware of its final shape, like the ant that laboriously carries its tiny grain, not realizing that a pair of hobnailed boots is headed its way. Yet, as I search my memory, I find an echo less of horrors than of finding shelter among kind people.

Perhaps my memories of the sixteen months in the ghetto were softened by the painful experiences of my previous nine years: the suicide of my mother, the rejections of assorted relatives, my stays in the orphanage and in the hospital, the fitful attention that my father paid to me. Now I was suddenly plunged into the midst of nine individuals and a stream of visitors, a fascinating parade that welcomed and generally embraced me.

When we were evicted from the Josefstadt, where I had lived all my life, we were taken in by the Sonnenscheins, cousins of my stepmother Sidy, on the Franz Hochedlingergasse in Leopoldstadt. There were the elderly parents with mournful faces, and two grown sons, Karl and Pepperl, who, though in their twenties, already seemed like fussy old bachelors. Their sister, Dora, had managed to escape to England before war broke out.

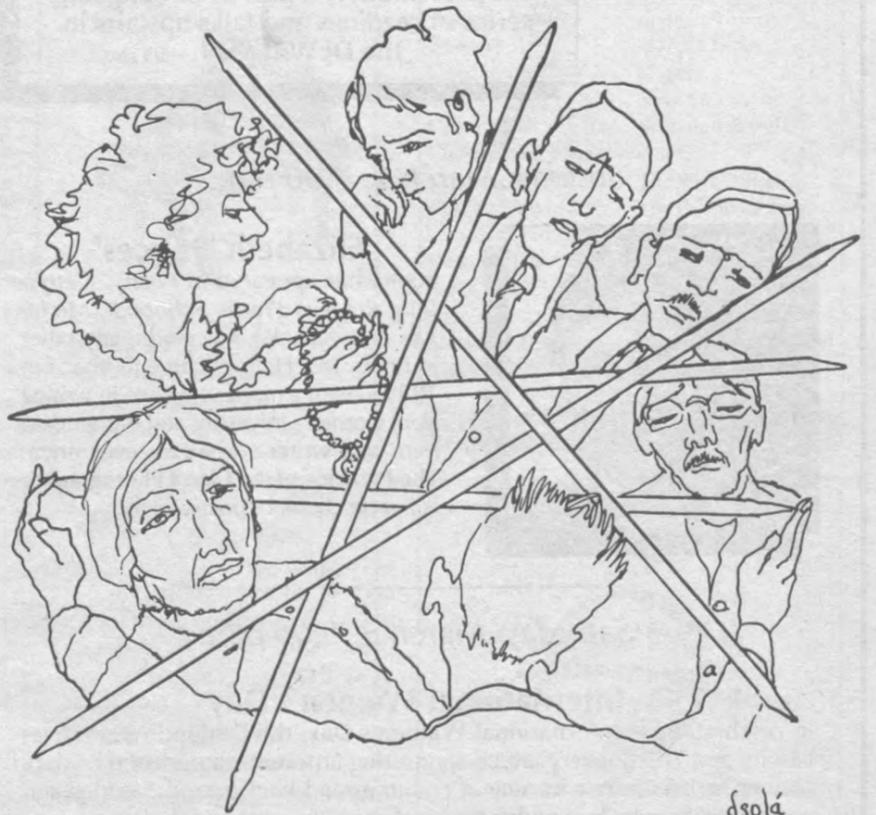
The Sonnenscheins had owned a knitting goods factory and were quite well off. My parents occupied one of their spare rooms, which had once been reserved for the maid. I shared another smallish room with my stepmother Sidy's mother, whom I called Grandma Rosa. She had the bed, while I slept on a cot. Soon we were joined by two more waifs, an entertaining young man named Zalmen and a woman simply called Yente die Roite (something like "the red busybody"), in honor of her auburn hair and non-stop gossip.

Zalmen became a ghetto entrepreneur, able to cull our few remaining trinkets and convert those in demand into pieces of wood or coal that we could burn in the living room stove or trade for a cut of meat we might add to our meager diet. Yente would disappear for days at a time, dressed in a low-cut, flowery Gypsy-style outfit. When she resurfaced, she was a purveyor of the latest news—a precious commodity, since we had been forced to surrender our radios months before and relied strictly on the grapevine for bulletins from the outside world.

The most central figure in our menage was Grandma. Everybody else was always flitting in and out, but her stout form remained ensconced in an overstuffed chair near the stove. She always had time to listen to everybody's tales of fear and woe, which she gently punctuated with clucks of sympathy. Her eyes were set above giant pouches of skin, yet they always maintained a kindly, interested gaze.

I'm afraid I took merciless advantage of her patience. She taught me to sew. Out of scraps of cloth I began to make credible versions of heart-shaped pin cushions, which served as presents to female visitors. Grandma also brought order into our chaotic household. It was her calm influence that made me keep a notebook containing all the birthdays of assorted friends and relatives. A handmade greeting card invariably made all these distraught folks smile for a few minutes. Because our lives had been declared officially worthless, we needed a reminder that each human being could be celebrated at least once a year.

Grandma also indulged my unquenchable appetite for games to pass the long afternoons. After all, we were in a kind of prison with an indeterminate sentence. To while away the hours, we played endless rounds of gin rummy. When we had extra partners we set up the board for "*Mensch aergere dich nicht!*" (loosely, don't fret yourself), a form of parcheesi. If you rolled double-sixes you got to throw the dice another time. A cry of triumph was obligatory when you knocked an opponent's piece off the board. I was the resident champion of Mikado. In this version of jackstraws, you grasped a bundle of sticks in your fist, then released them into a tangle. You had to extract the pointed sticks one by one without disturbing the others.



solá

Daphne Solá

Most of the grownups had bad cases of nerves, so their hands were not very steady.

When Grandma was dozing and no one else wanted to indulge me, I took refuge in my playhouse. It was a cardboard box, which housed furniture—tables, chairs, beds—cut to scale. This was my little private world, an escape from the crowded quarters I lived in.

I still had my stamp album. Everyone saved colorful stamps for me torn from envelopes from every part of the world that carried messages telling us we were not welcome anywhere. Until June 1939, the dictators of a few Caribbean and South American countries, like Santo Domingo and Paraguay, accepted refugees ready to hack their new homesteads out of the jungle. Then they, too, slammed their doors in our faces.

My father refused to give up. He enlisted my help in browsing through an atlas looking for possible escape routes. I think it must have been as a result of a rumor conveyed by Yente that we focused on Manchukuo. That was the name given to Manchuria by its Japanese occupiers. They had actually allowed a few thousand Jews to trek to the far-off capital, Harbin. I checked it out on the map as a destination most likely reached by the Trans-Siberian Railroad. We already visualized a reunion with relatives in Shanghai, only a few thousand miles south. But the Japanese must have taken a hint from their Axis partners in Berlin and soon withdrew the lifeline they had thrown the Jews.

New rumors galvanized Jews to line up at other Asian and African consulates around Vienna. Ever the optimist, my father roused himself to track down these elusive visas. It was not a risk-free undertaking. The Nazis periodically directed their minions to seize some of the Jewish men shivering in the cold before the consuls opened their doors. The applicants turned up at Dachau instead of Dahomey.

"It is a fact," Goering had pontificated, "that Germans and Jews can't stand each other. They don't like us, and we want to get rid of them." At first, the Germans had tried to create an exodus, then they blocked the way with incredible obstacles.

It all comes back when I look over my father's Austrian passport. "Reisepass No. 35849," issued by the German Reich on October 1, 1938, is stamped with a big red J (for Jude). That stamp was added on November 15 for an added fee of 3 Reichsmark. Then on January 10, 1940, a notation indicates that my father and I have both been given the middle name Israel—required of all Jewish males and providing an excuse for another fee.

The passport was valid for only one year

unless it was renewed. It permitted the bearer a one-way trip to Great Britain, the Netherlands, United States, South America and Australia. A special exit permit costing 8 Reichsmark then allowed the departure of my father and me from the Nazi empire. The two of us were limited to carrying out a combined fortune of 20 Reichsmark, equivalent to \$7.65. An insert certifies that I was reinoculated for smallpox and displayed the proper reaction on May 18, 1939.

Each of these documents, certificates and stamps entailed days of waiting in line, humiliation before assorted bureaucrats, and the payment of our last few pennies. My father had to screw up his courage for a day or two before setting out on another sally into the bastions of Nazi officialdom. Sometimes he took my stepmother or me along to allay his anxiety.

I recall one gray morning when we walked up to an imposing building, looking for the office that had to issue us some precious piece of paper. The front door was flanked by policemen who didn't deign to look at or talk to us when we approached. The directory in the lobby indicated that we had to trudge up three flights of stairs (elevators not open to Jews). After limping up a steep staircase, my father told the secretary in the outside office why we had come. By then the hand in which he held mine had become clammy. The secretary had us wait for what seemed like hours.

Finally, a voice from the inner office barked "*Rein!*" (come in), and we obeyed. Behind the desk was a middle-aged man in a police uniform, who in an officious voice asked my father what his business was. My father opened his briefcase and, bowing to the Herr Direktor, held out a file. The official riffled through the papers that proved our identity and the payment of fees to various city agencies. We steeled ourselves for the usual nasty comments directed at *Saujuden* (dirty Jews). But to our surprise, the official looked down at me and asked me what grade I attended. I remembered my good manners when I replied, "The fourth grade, *gnaediger Herr* (dear Sir)." On the corner of his massive desk, I spotted a family photograph in a silver frame. The couple was standing next to a boy who must have been around my age. "*Na, mach's gut, Junge*" (do a good job, kid), the official said to me with a faint smile. He unscrewed a massive fountain pen and scrawled an illegible signature topped by the requisite stamp on our form. We both bowed as we received the papers and backed out of the room. For a split second we had seen a genuine human being emerge from the uniform. On the way out my father gave me a hug. My presence seemed to have brought him luck on this venture. "Who knows," he told me on

# Golem

the way home, "on another day, he might have gotten up from the wrong side of the bed and ripped up our papers."

Overall, the defeats outweighed the few victories on the road to our liberation. In August 1939, Hitler had sent his foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, to sign a pact with his opposite number, Vyacheslav Molotov, representing the former arch-enemy in Moscow. Hitler and Stalin seemed to have arrived at a *modus vivendi*, and the immediate losers were Jews, who saw their escape routes to the east now blocked off.

In September, the German *blitzkrieg* swept through Poland, up to the line of territories that had been ceded to the Red Army. The attack on Poland triggered off declarations of war against Germany by France and Britain, Poland's treaty partners. It was not long before the status of Polish Jews became ever more precarious. Not coincidentally, the Jewish elders of the Viennese *Kultusgemeinde* announced that same month that all men, women and children had to be formally registered.

We obeyed instructions but with a sense of foreboding. Our vital statistics were checked and entered into ledgers. It wasn't long before the first consequence of our census transpired. My father was one of some two thousand male Jews who received an invitation from the authorities to become "pioneers" in a new zone set aside a couple of hours north of Cracow. He was supposed to pack the "tools of his trade" and to show up at the *Bahnhof* (railroad station) in two weeks with one suitcase and no more than 300 Reichsmark (about a hundred dollars). Once the men had set up stakes, they would be able to send for their families.

At that low point in his fortunes, my father felt he had no other option. Dutifully, he packed up the portable studio camera he still owned. The small suitcase had room left for only a couple of changes of clothes. I was terrified I would never see my father again as his departure date approached. To all my arguments, he replied with a shrug, "I'm just sitting around doing nothing. How much worse can it be in Poland?"

The answer to his question was provided when Yente stormed in the day before he was supposed to leave. She pulled out a card she had just received from a cousin, Feivel the tailor, who had shipped out as a pioneer on a train the previous month. "We are all thriving," Feivel had written. "Food is abundant and the living accommodations wonderful. A new life awaits us. Wish you were here, Feivel." Above his signature, Feivel had put the Yiddish words, "*Pinkt verkehrt*" (vice versa).

My father blanched when he understood Feivel had managed to send his warning under the nose of the censor. Read in reverse, he was telling future "pioneers" to avoid a life of starvation and misery at all costs. But for my father there seemed to be no turning back. If he didn't report for the next transport, surely an armed squad would come to drag him along.

At that point, my stepmother sprang into action. Through her brother she knew a decent Christian doctor who might do her a favor. She came back in an hour, triumphantly bearing an official-looking paper. The physician had certified that my father was suffering from a contagious disease. He was absolutely forbidden to leave his bed, let alone undertake any travel.

The next morning, my father remained huddled under extra blankets in bed, his night table stacked with old prescription bottles. Sidy left for the Aspang Bahnhof. During the tearful scenes of leave-taking on the platform, she had managed to submit my father's medical certificate without much trouble. In the general confusion, who cared about one Jew more or less?

It was a tense day, as we listened for footsteps on the stairs. Would the storm troopers come to check up on my father's condition? By evening, we could all sigh with relief. I am sure, though unbeliever that I was, I must have said a prayer of thanks for my father's deliverance. Sidy rose greatly in my esteem. Without her courage and practical sense, my father would have been lost. We went back to our routine of

living from day to day.

Still, ghetto life wasn't all gloom and desperation. At least once a week we tried to have a festive air permeate our dinner. No matter what the meager fare around the oaken table in the dining room, we all sat down with expectant faces.

One particular Friday night, I recall the elder Sonnenscheins, our hosts, at the head of the table. They began the festivities by mumbling a *Broche* (grace) before the meal. Karl and Pepperl, their two sons flanking them, chorused an Amen. Then Sidy and Yente brought out a steaming tureen of something we hadn't savored in a long time: chicken soup.

How had this miracle happened? Zalmen had managed to swap some costume jewelry for a bag full of chicken scraps at the butcher shop. There were bits of innards that all the others smacked their lips over. I, still the finicky eater, slurped the soup but turned up my nose at the reptilian-looking chicken feet on my plate. I was chided by my father, "How do you expect to get any nourishment when you keep picking at your food? At least, give it a try."

I chewed at one curled-up chicken claw and promptly gagged. Some kind soul—it must have been Grandma—whisked the offending morsel from my plate and substituted a serving of hearty kasha. Now that peace was restored, we began telling jokes. They were all in the category of *Galgenhumor* (gallows humor).

There was one about the SS man who was about to slit the rabbi's throat, when he had second thoughts. "You Jews are supposed to be so smart," he said. "Tell me your secret and I'll spare your life." "That's simple," the rabbi replied. "We eat herring tails. If you give me fifty groschen, I'll give you one every day and make you smart also." The SS-man agreed to the bargain. By the end of the week he burst in on the rabbi screaming, "Now you've had it. I've been paying you fifty groschen for these tails, and I just found out I can buy a whole herring for only ten." "See," said the rabbi, "You've gotten smarter already!"

There were also jokes with double entendres, mixing the Prussian pronunciation of the Germans with the Viennese dialect. In one, a German officer marches into a local bar asking, "*Kann mann hier ein bischen Rum kriegen?*" (Prussian for, can you get a tot of rum here?—but Viennese for, can one crawl around here a little?) The bartender answers, "*Wenn's lhna Spass macht!*" (If you get a kick out of it!)

Since our move to the ghetto, I had said good-bye to my old school under the steady hand of my longtime teacher, Herr Maschek. By January 1939, I was enrolled in a new establishment at Kleine Spertgasse 2a, sponsored by the Jewish *Kultusgemeinde*. Retired teachers were recruited to staff the three schools in the ghetto. My new teacher was Dr. Amalie Loew, a bespectacled white-haired lady, who looked over her fourth-grade boys and girls with a quizzical air. Her doctorate indicates that she probably had been teaching respectful gymnasium (high-school) or even college students.

Rumor soon had it that Dr. Loew was descended from the legendary Prague rabbi who had made a golem out of clay. The golem had been brought to life by the miracle-working rabbi because the Czech Jews needed someone to defend them from their enemies. Why couldn't we reawaken this creature as our champion in Vienna?

The school offered the regular subjects—reading, writing, arithmetic, history, religion, natural science, drawing and music—plus "*weibliche Handarbeiten*" (female handicrafts, probably sewing) for girls. My lowest grade appears to have been in deportment. I must have been one of the *Lausbuben* (rotten boys) who were provoked by the unaccustomed presence of female classmates to throw spitballs and make rude noises. Perhaps Dr. Loew allowed us to be especially obnoxious because she knew we were reacting to the frustrations of ghetto life.

In the autumn of 1939, I was transferred to a new school on Castellezgassee 35, with a nonsense male teacher, Herr Popik, who kept

order with a ruler applied liberally to the knuckles. This teacher did succeed in teaching us a few things that might have been of value. In the space of about one semester, I learned dozens of useful words in "*Ivrit*," colloquial Hebrew, just in case we might somehow wash ashore in Palestine. We began our classes by saluting a homemade blue-and-white flag and singing the "*Hatikvah*." The Nazis seemed to tolerate such Zionist pretensions as one means for getting rid of their Jews.

During that harsh winter of 1939-40, we Jewish boys were sometimes confronted after school by a gang of Hitler Youth outside. If it snowed, we just had to dodge snowballs; at other times, it was rocks and other missiles. We were under strict instruction from the principal, Dr. Steiner, never to fight back. One lucky blow by us might prove disastrous for our parents. Jewish families had been shipped to concentration camps for less. I still feel the chagrin of my enforced cowardice. The best I could do with my bottled-up aggressiveness was to yell back "*Arschloch*" (asshole) at the little Nazis as I raced by them.

There was no point in describing my running of the gauntlet to my parents, since there was nothing they could do about it. Anyway, they had weightier problems on their minds. In addition to the frustrations of trying to leave the ghetto for good, they had to figure out every day how to survive in it.

After war broke out in September 1939, there were even more severe shortages of all necessities: food, fuel, clothing, etc. Ration cards were issued item by item. Of course, Jews, who occupied the subhuman ranks of the social scale, were given allotments for less than the minimum needed to survive. To make certain that they might not bribe shopkeepers into giving them a bit extra, Jews were allowed to shop only during the last hour of the day when the shelves were almost bare.

We had long ago said good-bye to the fabulous pastries that we had taken as our birthright. No more *Schaunrollen*, *Sachertorten* or *Apfelstrudel*. Our rebellious stomachs had to accept bread that tasted as if it were baked with sawdust, washed down with ersatz coffee composed of roasted acorns and chicory. My father found it almost impossible to give up his cigarettes; I helped him stuff papers with some kind of acrid tobacco substitute.

Had it not been for the soup kitchens of the Quakers and American Jewish agencies, we could scarcely have survived. No doubt, the officials who ladled out their nourishing stews to the long lines of famished ghetto dwellers every noontime were aware of what was going on. They must have passed the word to their central offices in New York or Toronto or Rome of how the noose was closing around the 135,000 Jews still stranded in the ghetto by the fall of 1939.

We kept waiting for someone to come to our rescue, but nary a pope, president or prime minister stirred. Nor did the ghetto grapevine report any foreign protests about how we were being ground down. The golem lay broken in the dust. We kept mumbling our prayers, yet it soon became evident that if we were ever to escape this ghetto alive, it would have to be by our own efforts.

After two years of receiving our pleas, Uncle Mike in Danville, Illinois, finally sent us an "affidavit of support," guaranteeing that we wouldn't become welfare cases if we came to the U.S. In April 1940, on the eve of Passover, we packed the allotted few pieces of underwear, shirts, socks and handkerchiefs and set out for Trieste. Our first decent meal in over a year was the seder given us by the local Jewish community. Then we boarded the "Roma," an Italian steamer, for a three-week voyage to New York. Virtually all the friends and relatives who had bid us a tearful good-bye in the Vienna ghetto were sent to their deaths a year later.

*Harvey Fireside, a refugee from Vienna, is a visiting fellow at Cornell's Institute for European studies.*

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# Apocalypse Lost

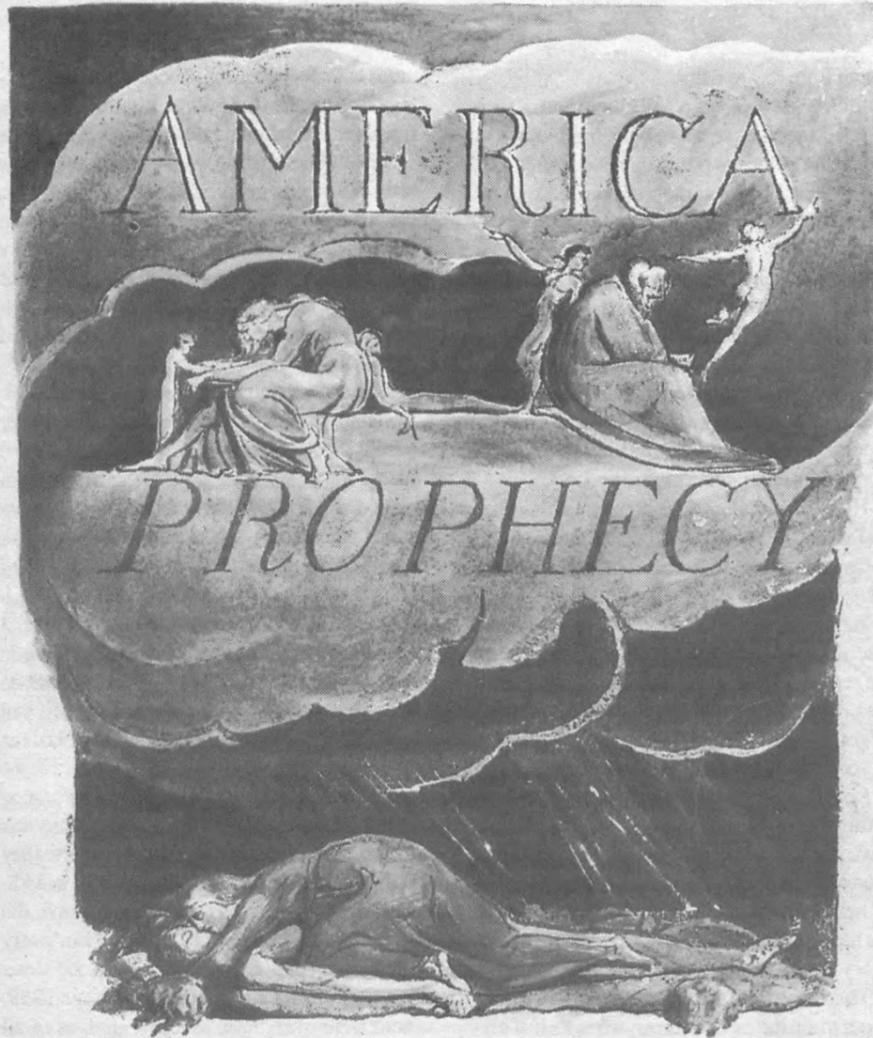
**Omens of Millenium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection**  
Putnam, 1996  
272 pages; \$24.95 paperback

Peter Yoonsuk Paik

In Bruno Schulz's surrealist fable of 1934, "The Comet," the narrator's brother comes home from school bringing news that the end of the world is imminent. Far from throwing the household, as well as the general population, into terrified pandemonium, the impending apocalypse draws eager crowds outside who gaze with awe at the cosmic spectacle unfolding in the night-sky, where new stars begin to teem in the path of a comet hurtling towards earth. For this ultimate cataclysm will take place without the tragic pathos of a last judgment nor the sublime grandeur of God's Wrath, but is the result of "a mutual agreement" reached in "an atmosphere of friendly understanding." Indeed, this universal demise, "splendidly hocus pocus" and "bogus-experimental," would be "the most progressive, freethinking end of the world imaginable, in line with the spirit of the times, an honorable end, a credit to the Supreme Wisdom."

Schulz's comic sensibility (one of my students once described him as a "technicolor Kafka") was probably affected by the propaganda of the official presses in World War One, which at its beginning held great appeal across large segments of a European civilization that had grown queasy over the apparent dissipation of the manly virtues. However, in this story, the very rage for the final destruction succumbs, cannily enough, to fashion. The enthusiasm caused by the sheer novelty of this inventively festive doom proves no match for the principle of novelty itself, as the transience and depthlessness associated with modernity effectively drive the comet off-course into "universal indifference." This apocalypse turns out to be just another fad, its timeliness dissolved in the narcotic suspicion that the world itself is eternal. Thus, made "richer by one more disappointment," life goes on. Apocalypse, it seems, would always remain a perennially fashionable topic.

Schulz, a Polish Jew who was killed in 1942 by Nazi soldiers in his native town of Drohobych, most likely did not foresee what horrors were to come in a century that has not lacked for apocalyptic terrors. But amid the specters of death camps, atomic weapons, and environmental catastrophe, it seems to be the laws of arithmetic that have most prominently conspired to arrange a day of reckoning for the present era, to which no concrete upheaval as yet has given a name. Clearly, the end of the millennium in the year 2000 boasts a kind of menacing finality that other years calculated by various sects and institutions for the Apocalypse, such as 1260, 1367, 1420, 1588, 1666, 1843/44 (the years of the so-called



LAMBETH

*Printed by William Blake in the year 1793*

William Blake

## America a Prophecy 1793

"Great Disappointment"), and 1948 cannot quite match. In his latest book, Harold Bloom takes on various contemporary phenomena that register most trenchantly our turn-of-the-millennium jitters.

The widespread belief, in this country, in the existence of angels, near-death experiences, and prophetic dreams are not to be dismissed *tout court* as insipid New Age pabulum or fundamentalist superstition. Rather, as Bloom demonstrates with his formidable erudition, such patterns of imagery stem from traditions and systems of thought that predate the normative forms of the three major monotheisms of the West: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

### I. The Angels

Angels, of course, are among the most commonplace of religious images. Given reassuringly human-like features by the painters of the Italian Renaissance, these beings, who paradoxically partake of the substance of eternity while participating in

the affairs of the temporal order, have been understood as messengers from God or as the personal guardians of mortal men and women. But what is it about them, apart from the saccharine cuteness of cherubs, that accounts for their popularity and perdurability in an allegedly secularized era? Bloom cites statistics which reveal that sixty-nine percent of Americans believe in angels, forty-six percent claim to have their personal guardian angel, and thirty-two percent say that they have actually felt angelic presence. Such figures, Bloom tells us, testify to the millennialist consciousness that has permeated this nation since the frontier revivals of the early 1800s—our sense of having been chosen deriving less from Judeo-Christian sources than from older religions centered in Iran.

Continuing his thesis from *The American Religion*, Bloom contends that our national faiths have little to do with traditional Christianity; rather, their sense of "cosmological emptiness" and sectarian valorization of individual experience and vision make them

the unknowing heirs of Gnosticism, the heretical tradition that the official Church strove to eradicate. Angels, as we shall see, play a far more active role in various non-orthodox strains of thought than they do in institutionalized theology. Indeed, Saint Paul, worried about the temptation of polytheism posed by God's intermediaries, more often denounced angels as disguises for Satan than extolled them as divine messengers. Bloom suggests that the angels exert a particularly powerful appeal in the present, in spite of their lack of grounding in much orthodox doctrine, because they are secondary creations and thus reflect our own feelings of cultural belatedness. Or, perhaps angels have become the avatars of a national sectarianism grown so splintered that, instead of a single universal Father in heaven embracing the great multitude of believers, the upper spheres become mobbed with celestial advocates upholding the rights and interests of the "even the least deserving of us." Yet the joyless spectacle of lawyers feuding in the skies nonetheless mirrors to an extent the likely inspiration for the complex hierarchies of angels in Judaism: the vast, elaborate imperial bureaucracy of Babylon that awaited the newly exiled Jews.

The angels, as figures of mediation, surely trouble any orthodox insistence on clear-cut distinctions between the major faiths and their shadowy predecessors as much as they, as figures of transcendence, unsettle the opposition between God and human. Bloom points out that angels originated in the ancient Persia of Zoroaster, circa 1500 B.C.E. Zoroaster was the prophet who, though his religion now knows few adherents, established many of the ideas that the major monotheisms later converted into doctrine. His innovations include the cosmic struggle between good and evil, the apocalypse, the arrival of a messiah, and the resurrection of the dead. Zoroaster's relative obscurity appears completely out of proportion with respect to his enduring influence on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and it comes as small surprise that Herman Melville chose to make Captain Ahab a participant in the fire ceremonies of the Zoroastrian Parsees. The Book of Daniel, written at the time of the Maccabee uprising against the Macedonian rulers of Syria, owes much to the Zoroastrian imagination in giving names and prophecies to the angels, but this work's angelology is surpassed by that of the non-canonical books of Enoch, which most provocatively disclose the relations and affinities between the orthodox monotheisms and the heresies they suppressed.

Enoch, in the Book of Genesis, is the patriarch who, at the youthful age of 365, was taken up into heaven by Yahweh. According to the heterodox lore of the Kabbalists, Enoch was then transformed by the purifying fire of Zoroaster's vision into an angel called Metatron. Metatron is a truly unique angel, one who transgresses the barriers separating

**A Place of My Own**  
*The Education of an Amateur Builder*

Michael Pollan is the author of the award-winning *Second Nature*. He is editor-at-large of *Harpers Magazine*. Pollan also writes a column on architecture for the new *House & Garden*. He lives in Cornwall Bridge, Connecticut, with his wife and son.

**Michael Pollan**

from the New York Times Magazine, photograph by John Peden

At a turning point in his life, writer Michael Pollan found himself dreaming of a small wood-frame house—a place to work, but also a "shelter for daydreams." Ordinarily more at home among words than things, the author was seized by the improbable idea of building the place himself, with his two unhandy hands.

Thus began a two-and-a-half-year journey of discovery, recounted in an absorbing and often comic narrative, that deftly intertwines the day-to-day work of design and building—from siting to blueprint, from pouring the foundation to finish carpentry—with reflections on everything from the way we invest a space with meaning to the question of what constitutes real work in a technological society.

With one eye on Thoreau and the other on Mr. Blandings, Pollan dramatizes the satisfaction of transforming a tree into a house, the power of place to shape our lives, the warring perspectives of architect and carpenter (personified by two vividly drawn characters the narrator calls his prickly Virgils), and the philosophical significance of leaky roofs and contemporary architecture.

Available in March from Random House  
Hardcover • 320 pages • \$32.00



the divine from the human to the point of causing a veritable riot to break out among the heavenly orders. For the angels become infuriated by the arrival into their ranks of one who is the product of the "white drop" of sexual union. Metatron is "scarcely Yahweh's servant, and not at all Yahweh's messenger," but rather "the lesser Yahweh." The heretical scholar Elisha ben Abuyah had a revelation of Metatron seated on a throne, which drove the visionary to cry out, "There are two Powers in heaven."

Metatron's many roles reflect this radically ambiguous status, for as Bloom writes, "[s]ometimes Metatron is called the heavenly scribe, recording our deeds...He can be our defense attorney in the heavenly court, or a minister of the throne...later he takes the place of Michael the prime archangel." Other sources identify him in metonymic fashion as the rainbow that appeared to Noah after the flood, the "back of God" revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai, the chariot of Ezekiel, and even "the phallus of God." Most importantly for Bloom, Metatron becomes the guardian of secret wisdom, "the master of the divine mysteries of Torah" and "patron of the *Zohar*, the central book of all books of classical Kabbalah." "All those images of God that normative Judaism tended to reject but that nevertheless could not be excluded from Jewish traditions" come to cluster around this man-angel, making him into a cipher of the dimly embryonic illuminations that have underlain the institutionalized forms of the major monotheisms. Restating the intertwined nature of these heterodox faiths, Bloom concludes that "Metatron becomes the esoteric link in angelology between the divine and the human, fusing these realms in the manner of the Iranian 'Man of Light,' whether Zoroastrian or Sufi [Muslim]."

It is clear that our "bloody sacraments," to borrow a phrase from William Gaddis, "have known other voices and other rooms." For what is doctrine other than the negation of history—the insistence that a certain set of ideas and practices can be made into the unique and transcendent expressions of the deity's presence on earth? If the institutional forms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have denied or concealed their syncretic histories and synthesizing appropriations, they have often done so by attacking as heresy the imaginative attempts to reinvent religion—which in themselves, as Bloom shows, comprise a rich counter-tradition.

This counter-tradition would encompass the Jewish Kabbalists, Gnostic Christians, Muslim Sufis, as well as the now-extinct Manicheans—whose founder, Mani, brought together the figures of Zoroaster, Jesus, and Buddha—and the Cathars, who were annihilated in the Albigensian Crusade. They thus form a veritable laboratory for the religious imagination, making explicit the continuities between rival orthodox traditions, challenging the accepted and acceptable readings of the sacred texts with idiosyncratic allegories, and

always bringing the spirit of improvisation to bear on their quest for higher wisdom.

II. Gnosis

What unites these varieties of "self-affirming spirituality," which, unlike the "self-abnegating" sort, has always posed a threat to dogma, is the radical dualism which goes by the name of Gnosticism. The central tenet of Gnosticism equates the Creation of the world with the Fall from a primordial state of unity. The material world is the doleful handiwork of an inferior deity, the Demiurge, who is by some accounts inept, by others malignant. Usurping the place of the true God, this imposter attempts to cover up his error by "obscenely naming the Fall into division" as the Creation and by "renaming the original Fullness" as "the Abyss, or chaos."

This double dispossession of the primordial God and the human "throws" us into this existence, giving us over to the daily pathos of "forlornness, dread, homesickness, numbness, sleep, [and] intoxication" and placing us under the rule of the Demiurge's hostile lieutenants, the Archons, who administer the universe like a police state. With this withering parable Gnosticism settles the problem of justifying God's bewildering ways to man by positing a "transcendent stranger God or alien God," who, in his exile from the cosmos, has become hidden and ineffectual, "a nihilistic conception." This God cannot be held accountable "for our world of death camps and schizophrenia."

"Born in throes, 'tis fit that man should live in pains and die in pangs!" One hears the whispers of esoteric cosmologies in Captain Ahab's imperious fury against the order of "omniscient gods oblivious of the suffering of man." Our lives on earth would be nothing less than an unremitting nightmare, were it not for the fact that we possess, most of the time unknowingly, a remnant from that luminous primordial oneness, the divine "spark" or *pneuma*. Gnosis refers to the "solitary act of knowledge" whereby this spark "find[s] its way back to the uncreated, unfallen world." The *pneuma*, which existed before the Fall and is thus not a part of Creation, is our deepest self, to be distinguished from the psyche, or the merely individual identity, which, as the work of the Demiurge, is barred from entering the place of the originary Fullness, or Pleroma.

For the Christian Gnostic Valentinus, Gnosis is what causes the resurrection to take place while still in this life, as this illumination awakens one out of the material world, the realm of illusion and death. The Gnostics' aspiration to experience the resurrection while still alive made them interpret the resurrection of Christ not as a literal, historical event but as a kind of living metaphor for spiritual insight. The agony of the Passion gives way to the bliss of Illumination. Suffering is accordingly the result of ignorance, which one may therefore overcome through "a renewal of knowing the estranged father."

Troublesome as the idea of knowledge might seem in matters of religion, Gnosis, Bloom maintains, constitutes a mode of experiencing the divine that is not to be confused with faith or belief, for this "knowing represents itself as mutual, in which God knows the deep self even as it knows God."

This illuminating oneness, according to Bloom, yields the image which the omens of millennium—angels, near-death experiences, prophetic dreams, and apocalypse—only haltingly trace: the androgynous Anthropos, or Adam Kadmon, the unfallen giant who is "at once man and woman, God and human, our forefather and our foremother." This God-Man is what is restored by the resurrection of the body.

III. The End of Apocalypse

One of Bloom's most resonant formulations concerns the chain of totalizing disappointments that eventually strains toward an apprehension of Gnosis:

Gnosticism...in my judgment rises as a protest against apocalyptic faith, even when it rises within such a faith, as it did successively within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Prophetic religion becomes apocalyptic when prophecy fails, and apocalyptic religion becomes Gnosticism when apocalypse fails, as fortunately it always has and, as we must hope, will fail again. Gnosticism does not fail; it cannot fail, because its God is at once deep within the self and also estranged, infinitely far off, beyond our cosmos.

Gnosticism is thus made invincible by the sum of what it surrenders. Often the victims of persecution, its teachers ridiculed the simple-mindedness of orthodox believers but never enjoyed their institutional power to damn. However, as Elaine Pagels points out in a recent book, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* (Random House, 1989), the elitism and individualism of Gnosticism, which tended to limit its appeal to intellectuals and philosophers, brought it into conflict not just with the Church's desire for monopoly but also with the Christian message of freedom. The idea that each person, regardless of sex, nationality, or education, whether barbarian or slave, possessed a sacrosanct value by virtue of having been created by God had an enormous part in attracting converts, especially among the disenfranchised.

This egalitarianism was bound to upset the rigidly hierarchical social order of the Roman empire. Pagels notes that three-quarters of the population of Rome were slaves or descended from slaves, who were "legally classified as property" and "subjected to their owners' abuses, fits of violence, and sexual desires." The most zealous among the Christians broke completely with the Roman order, refusing to honor pagan ideals of civic obligation to family, social class, tradition, and state. Writing to the emperor, the philosopher Justin defended the Christians on the basis of their "moral

rigor," which they willingly embraced after casting off pagan norms: "We, who used to take pleasure in immorality, now embrace chastity alone; we who valued above everything else the acquisition of wealth and possessions, now bring what we have into common ownership, and share with those in need; we, who hated and destroyed one another, refusing to live with those of a different race, now live intimately with them."

The utopian fervor of the early Church, which seems a far cry from present-day Christianity, arose from the eschatological expectation of Christ's imminent return. The Gnostics' individualistic cultivation of a visionary cosmology, by contrast, seems to have precluded working out a durable communitarian ethic.

However, the elitist temperament and enigmatic esotericisms of Gnosticism enabled it to avoid the fate of the Christian ethic, which progressively lost its mystery as it was institutionalized and absorbed into secularizing abstractions. Gnosticism's ideal of imaginative spirituality, its inwardness infused by mysteries, dreams, visions, and secrets, has endured in the minds of poets, like Blake and Rilke, and seers, like the Quaker George Fox, and Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism. Nevertheless, lest the dichotomy between a spiritual discipline that pits itself against worldly power and one that overcomes the power of the world appear insurmountable, Bloom's thesis that American millennialism is an unknowing, popular form of Gnosticism attests not only to the explanatory force of this radical dualism, but also to the fact that its assumptions are readily available to serve present-day anxieties. Is it not conceivable that, in a culture that wants for encouraging images of fatherhood, many might want to project onto the "alien God" of the Gnostics the irresponsible outlines of an absent parent, the God of the Beyond as a kind of ultimate, cosmic deadbeat Father? But it was the freedom of interpretation, particularly the freedom to read not literally but allegorically, that animated the world-negating enthusiasm of the Gnostics; though their specific wisdom might be lost, their restless drive to invent and imagine illumines the dim reaches of the knowledge shared by both makers of poetry and founders of religion.

What Bloom has given us is a labyrinth of this interior expanse, where, guided by the thread of the elusive Metatron, we encounter Freud fretting about telepathy, Spenta Armaita, the feminine earth angel who stands at the left side of Ormazd, Lord of Light, the Gnostic Christ, who was not incarnated, and the Shi'ite Sufi Shaikh Ahmad Ahsa'i, who discerned an astral as well as angel body in each human being. Bloom may take as his starting point contemporary anxiety about the millennium, but by the end, after a masterful display of insight and scholarship, he rewards us with a taste of the fruit of unacknowledged legislation.

Peter Yoonsuk Paik is completing a PhD in comparative literature at Cornell University.

Happily Ever After

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Jack Zipes is Professor of German at the University of Minnesota. He is the author of *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, *Don't Bet on the Prince* and *Creative Storytelling*, all published by Routledge.

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# Leaving Home

Lois Brown

## The Saskiad

Brian Hall

New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1997  
380 pages; \$23.95 hardcover

*The Saskiad*, Brian Hall's latest novel, portrays a young girl's search for her identity as a journey of epic proportions, an odyssey replete with delicious daydreams, various temptations of the flesh, and private ruminations about the nature of life, love and parents. Hall's imaginative and fluid narrative chronicles two years in the life of Saskia White, a young girl whose exploits include writing her own autobiography, supplementing her meager allowance with marijuana sales, and unraveling the secrets of her parents' life as hippies in Indian ashrams and a small upstate New York town somewhere along Route 96 North.

The novel's primary setting is White-on-the-Water, a half-abandoned but still operative commune of sorts, whose rituals and rhythms do not always bring out the best in people. The commune is located in the rainy town of Tyler, a place that justifies flights of fancy, set as it is like "a sore thumb" among the towns of Hector and Ovid and not named after "a Greek or Trojan warrior, nor a poet, but a president no one ever heard of...and not even really named after him, but after a postmaster who lived at a lonely crossing next to a cornfield in the nineteenth century." Saskia White's home lies just beyond the reaches of a civilized upstate New York town named Ithaca that is home to a university referred to as Huge Red, a Farmer's Market frequented by multi-lingual academic types, and an Alternative School in which students with romantic names like Matteo and Haven actually thrive. In spite of Tyler's mythic inadequacies, Saskia's home is a colorful community unto itself. In addition to the main house, there are the trailers inhabited by Bill, her mother's current boyfriend, a haiku poet and aspiring novelist, and Jo, a deserted wife, mother of five and Saskia's father's former lover. Later on, Saskia's worldly friend Jane Singh and long-lost father Thomas become temporary residents as well.

In this novel Hall makes good use of the skills he honed in his two previous documentary travel narratives, *Stealing from a Deep Place: Travels in Southeastern Europe* and *The Impossible Country: A Journey Through the Last Days of Yugoslavia*. *The Saskiad*, too, may be seen as a travel narrative, one in which a young girl navigates turbulent waters and ultimately sets her own course for home. As in his earlier works, Hall is concerned with questions of place and belonging, images of home and family, the nature of friendship and alienation.

Hall's title invokes *The Iliad* and, over the course of five sections, he stages a series of battles that are about emotional and psychic territory. As the plot develops, it becomes increasingly clear to the reader that Saskia, in order to succeed, will have to leave the ordered chaos that is White-on-the-Water. This process of disassociation begins privately as she enters into an extended relationship with imaginary pirates, ships and secret rooms. In scenes reminiscent of C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, Saskia ascends to the top of her house where she finds ships and castles, sea-captains presiding over nautical intrigue, feasting warriors, and maid-servants pouring water from golden pitchers into silver basins. In this ethereal realm she is "bathed and...anointed with olive oil...wears a tunic as sheer and soft as the skin of an onion, shining as the sun shines" as she attempts to reinvent herself and her origins. It is in these mythical domains that she prepares for junior high school angst, peer pressure, and the sometimes painful consequences of ambiguous family relations. Saskia's creative meditations are filled with allusions to Greek myth, Tolkien-like fantasy stories, and ancient explorers' tales that redefine the notion of "the real." As Saskia herself declares: "Like all real people, I go under several names."

Standing on the threshold between adolescence and adulthood, Saskia, is a child who is older than her years in some ways and right on



Scott Werder

schedule in others: she calls her mother Lauren by her first name, is the best cook in the house and, for all intents and purposes, serves as a substitute mother for the four waifs that Lauren is housing. Yet Saskia's imaginative powers enable her to surpass even her mother in her ability to transcend the distractions of daily life, needy children and bothersome neighbors.

One distracting element in this book is that Hall's depictions of Saskia in her imaginary worlds sometimes becomes a tangled series of code words. Some of this private language is derived from literary works, mythology or foreign languages. Other elements of it are simply fanciful constructions. Readers will attempt to decode these wordy phrases or cryptic hip terminology—it is an unavoidable impulse borne of the desire to enter Saskia's world and psyche. Hall could have aided his readers a bit here, a glossary of terms would not necessarily have undermined his project. Readers may be frustrated or miss the symbolism inherent in Saskia's

excursions into worlds that are a cross between Namia, Lewis Carroll's Wonderland, ancient Arabic kingdoms and mythological realms.

After Saskia, Lauren is one of Hall's most intriguing characters. A disappointment to her rich family, but an heiress nonetheless, her identity as a modern-day Earth Mother is inextricably linked to her ability to disappear—mentally and emotionally. She communes with the produce she sells at the Farmer's Market, but refuses to allow her love interests to spend the night in her bed. Hall's descriptions of Lauren's activities often slyly satirize upstate New York lifestyles in the shadow of Cornell University. The Farmer's Market where Lauren sells her vegetables is described as an "old jousting field just outside Ithaca...covered with stalls and tents." Buyers come "from all over Vastamundus, drawn by the far-flung fame of Huge Red. They would descend from the glass and stone buildings on the hill to wander among the stalls, inspecting the wares and murmuring out-

landishly. Listening to them, Saskia knew that one day she would go up the hill to Huge Red and learn those languages. Then, when she was running her own stall someday, she would greet every wanderer flawlessly in the right language. Soon they would buy only from her."

Lauren's capacity to both preserve and reinvent tradition—an ability most delightfully illustrated in her vegetarian Thanksgiving casserole and tenderly portrayed in her fleeting mother-daughter chats with Saskia—is the most important legacy she passes on to her daughter. Saskia scrutinizes her mother, intuitively grasping her character, and thereby freeing herself from the need for maternal protection. Later, it is Saskia's father Thomas who becomes the chief catalyst for Saskia's growth, rebellion and sexual distress as the novel focuses on his relationships with Saskia, her best friend Jane, and Lauren.

Thomas is a key transitional figure between the real and unreal worlds. He appears midway through the story and sparks a number of crucial awakenings. When Saskia and her good friend Jane meet Thomas in Scandinavia and accompany him on a mission of ecological intervention, Saskia thinks that she will finally get the answers to some of her pressing questions: what does her name mean, why did her father leave, will he come back, and what is her paternal family history? Saskia delights in Thomas, a muscled man who wears "seven-league boots," has never been seen asleep, and who, upon greeting his daughter for the first time in years, manages to "divid[e] the world like the Gordian Knot," inaugurating for Saskia the "Neo-Thomas Age." In the Scandinavian wilderness, a place that Saskia comes to think of as Paradise, her fall from innocence really begins.

For both Saskia and the reader, the relation between memory and fantasy becomes increasingly uneasy once Thomas resurfaces and gradually reestablishes patriarchal and domestic order at White-on-the-Water. Thomas alternately occupies both psychological realms as the novel gives way to an extended meditation on him as Father, Lover, and Confirmed Bachelor Hero. Hall's previous use of the traditional elements of the epic form in Saskia's vivid descriptions of other-worldly battles, mythological intrigue, and references to supernatural elements now gives way to the larger themes of rejected authority, disobedience, and unapologetic individuality. Saskia begins to spiral out of control, alternately dismayed, intrigued, and disgusted with the new communal order that Thomas installs at White-on-the-Water, destroying its accustomed rhythms. When Thomas abolishes Thanksgiving, dismissing the suggestion that it's a celebration of the winter solstice, it triggers a series of disturbing flashbacks in Saskia. She becomes increasingly wary that, despite some of her father's new rituals, such as telling stories to the children of the house, whom he gathers "under his arms like Brussel sprouts on the stalk"—Thomas will soon be on his way. White-on-the-Water recedes into the background as the gritty world of junior high school and underage drinking and petting parties comes to the fore.

Nearly one hundred years ago, the New England novelist Sarah Orne Jewett penned a letter to one of her readers in which she considered the function of fictional characters. "People in books," she wrote, "are apt to make us understand 'real' people better, and to know why they do things, and so we learn to have sympathy and patience and enthusiasm for those we lie with, and can try to help them in what they are doing instead of being half suspicious and finding fault." The richly drawn characters in *The Saskiad* invite the empathy of which Jewett speaks. On her journey towards truth, Saskia gradually relinquishes the realms of myth and fantasy as she forges her own identity. *The Saskiad* is a haunting quest built on persistent and universal oppositions—fact and fiction, mythology and reality, man and woman, parent and child—a journey of initiation and coming of age.

Lois Lamphere Brown, an assistant professor of English at Cornell University, is writing a book on the life and works of playwright, novelist, and journalist Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins.



# Quarterly



## Elegy for Rocktown

Stephen Marion

We had bread and fruitsalad that could not wait. It had been three days, and Sunday before church the dishes multiplied on folding tables in the fellowship room. Houses saddened by the smell of beans cooking in the early morning, we dressed the children for Sunday school, and dressed ourselves for the service, and entered the damp church basement single file, worrying over the state of food on the table as we do with the

someone said the wheel at the top of the headrig was not moving, and several agreed, but the men said, Yes it was, that it always was, because elsewhere where did all that limestone come from? The gray bare lake of sand, so familiar the eye no longer registered it, reappeared to us then, whiter and glassier at the end of a dry month such as August. Crossing the river bridge five miles from town we all looked for the rescue squad boats, but only some cranes stood on the bank, waiting. Then we turned back along the

loway told us. No matter what. Crack a window. My legs are sticking together. She flapped at the hem of her skirt.

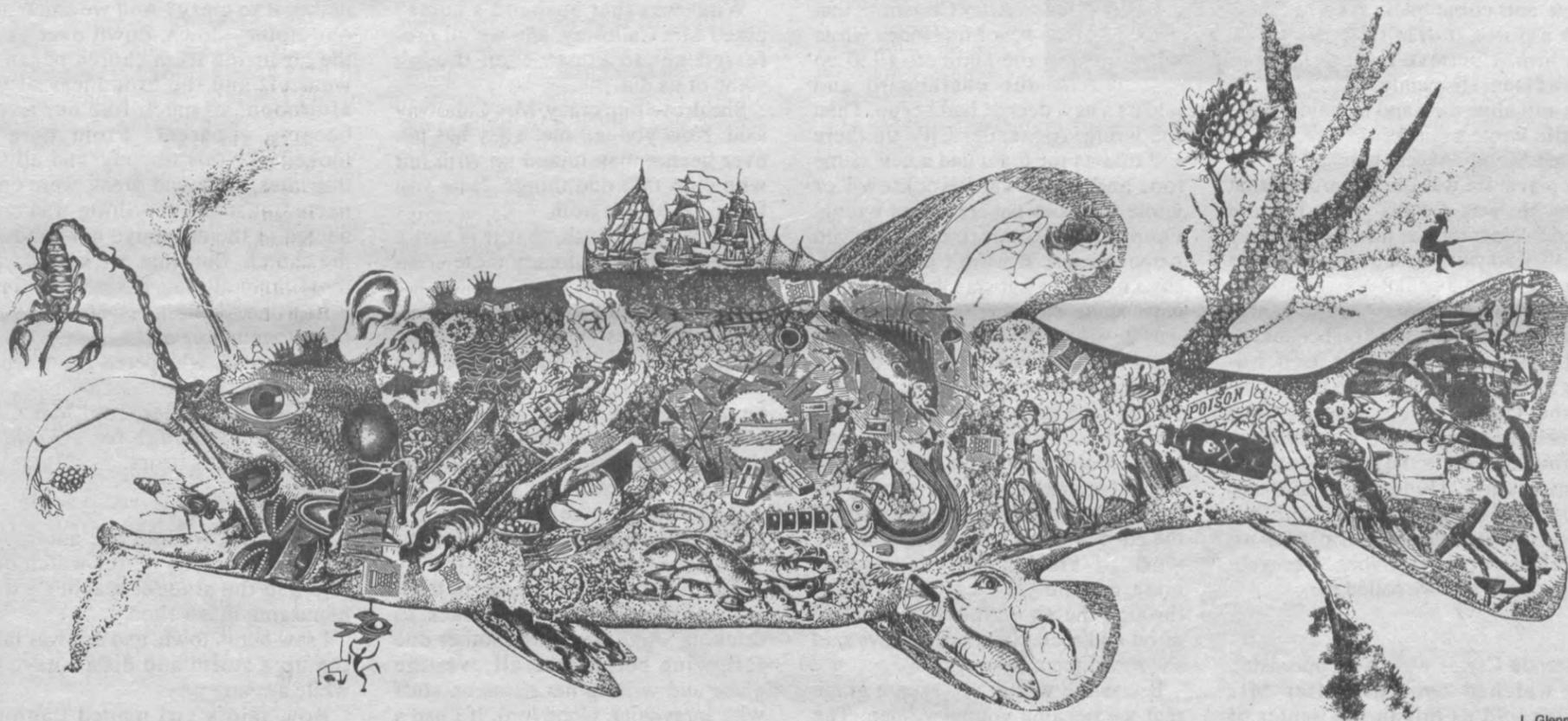
We sank at the fullness of their bags, the gnatted teats jutting out at funny angles like stretched places in a balloon.

Well I feel bad, said Ruth, and we turned to her, the strange blackred hair she always complained was too thick to brush. Here we come with food and they haven't even found the man. Nobody even knows for sure if he's drowned.

She's not a girl, said Ruth. She's a woman. Brenda is my age.

Oh Ruth, you all are girls to me. You all are too young to remember doing this same thing thirty years ago. She sighed again, the high-pitched singsong her students in Tennessee history had imitated for nearly forty years, until it was part of our vocabulary, indelible as the fact that the Volunteer State bordered more states than any other. Women did it in the kitchen when they broke a plate.

The horsefly circled above the ribbed flesh of the last cow. It had



L. Glenn

coming of any death. How many mornings had these same dishes gone out, a name taped beneath each, and then come back washed clean as shells from the water?

In the back seats we leaned into curves toward the Carter place, church bulletins shielding our skirts from the clumsy warm bowls we held on our laps. We left town. It disappeared quickly into the pale August leaves, until only the water-tower and the churches and the zinc mine headrigs remained. Because we didn't have anything to say,

water, patches of empty green behind the trees. A white boat passed going downriver and our husbands laughed, saying if they could not find Moody Myers in three days they might as well give up.

They ought not to be out there on a Sunday anyhow, said Ruth Puckett.

Some work cannot be avoided, said Mrs Calloway, who, because she had taught us all in school, had no first name we could say aloud. She sighed.

Milk seven days a week, Mrs Cal-

loway told us. No matter what. Crack a window. My legs are sticking together.

It's not for us to know, said Mrs Calloway. It's a sin to cook when there is a death in the family.

Ruth leaned her head to the window. It would all spoil, wouldn't it, she said, answering our stares.

The final cow across slung back her head at a horsefly on the ridge of her spine. The heavy skull popped, blue eyeball unleveling in its socket, but the horsefly was too far back to reach.

It's the girl I feel sorry for, Mrs Calloway was saying.

brought blood, we saw, a perfect red bead that faded into the pitch dark of the barn and the smell of green manure and silage. Itches glowing on us in spots we could not reach, we drove on.

Nobody can know what that family has gone through, Mrs Calloway pronounced.

The voices rose in agreement. Yes, we said. Her real daddy was taken in a wreck on the highway. Now this.

There was no wreck on the high-

*continued on page 2*

### Inside:

"Message from the Deep," by Linda Healey

"The Floating Woman," by Emoretta Yang

"Were the Wild Things Were," by Micah Perks

Poems by Paul Hamill, Ko Un, David McCann, & Margaret Nichols

way, said Ruth. He died in his sleep.

It was, said Mrs Calloway. It was a wreck.

Ruth shook her head.

We'll just remember it however we want to, said Mrs Calloway. It's past history.

How can that happen to somebody?

He was a good looking man. Bowen Carter, her daddy. He drank some but I believe he was a good man. He was still good looking when he died.

He flew that airplane, we said. It landed in the flat place beside the river. He never wanted to farm. You could hear him coming and run out on the porch and he would tip his wing. He took them two children up with him. That boy is just like him but he don't have the looks.

He flew under the river bridge that time. He turned a car over in the middle of town and climbed out the side door and walked off. I was coming out of the movie with my mama and daddy.

He shot a man. He got mad and walked home and come back with a pistol. It didn't kill him. I believe it was a Gann. His daddy was still alive then and he paid off the sheriff, wrote a check.

That Moody Myers married her for that place. He was always around that cave. He was always going back in yonder. Now look at him. Dead. They didn't find nothing but his boat and three fishes.

With Mrs Calloway in the center picking at the thick hose on her ankles, and saying, History repeats itself, history repeats itself, we came to the gate at the Carter place. The cardoor squeaked and we heard field crickets singing this late in the day, so fall was coming early. Under the white sky dusty weeds hung over the lane. Children in a strange bright place, we clutched our little dishes. The gate swung open and we rolled in.

Brenda Carter was to be our sister. We watched over her after Mrs Hodge told us this in the winter of seventh grade, but she would barely look at us. Mrs Hodge never called on her anymore, and at lunch our sister followed us in the back of the line, her face ruddy and swollen like a drunk's, always wearing the same dirty white sweater. Everyone talking in the halls back then, the clatter of plates and trays and the mossy smell of milk in cardboard cartons, and it looked to us wrong and embarrassing that Brenda Carter still accepted her brown paper towel for handwashing, still could bring the spoon of whipped potatoes to her mouth, even though her daddy, her crazy daddy

we all knew, was dead and she had become ours, our sister. We swore the white sweater was never washed, never even taken off.

On the shrunken January afternoons our school buses shot past the road where the church had put up a little white cross on a wire post. Then a feeling settled on us, as if we were trying to remember something, and we were scared inside the way we were when we did not expect to find Brenda in her desk the very next morning, waiting, a look of great impatience on her face. Sometimes it was noon before the fog from the river dissolved and the world outside Rocktown Primary School appeared again. It is hard to remember it, hard to know for certain if those mornings were real, because inside we prayed again and again for our flat building to disappear in that fog. Still the spirit smell of purple ditto sheets woke us, and the barns and fencerows and a leaning merrygoround warmed up like figures on an old television, and we took out books and lead pencils in homeroom. We listened at the call of the roll for Brenda's voice.

After Christmas that year Mrs Hodge wrote the numbers 1950 on the chalkboard and told us a new decade had begun. Then she wrote, Alexander City, up there and told us the town had a new name too, and if we said Rocktown or wrote it on our papers it was wrong. People had gotten tired of the old name because it wasn't progressive, she said, and what was the town anyway, made out of rock? So the time was new and the place where we all lived was new, and we looked out our window onto the fields with their cedars, and it was still empty as the ping and click of the metal radiator. In the cold afternoon recesses we walked around buried in coats, laying our numb ears to the big iron grate at the edge of our boundary, hearing the work of zinc miners down deep underground. We called to them through the air vent, which smelled of oil and rock. Someone always said she heard them answer back.

It was the winter of seventh grade that we became young women. The boys were ordered outside to play football. They cast unknowing glances back at us, and the door slammed, its sound carrying down the hall past the rows of lockers, and suddenly we were part of a solemn congregation. Our minds skipped from Mrs Hodge to every woman we knew in town, all bound together as if by the newly twisting muscles in our lower backs. We watched on Monday mornings to see who would arrive with little loops of thread for earrings. Who can forget holding the chunk of ice to the earlobe until it was red and numb, the dull scratch

of the needle sliding through? Brenda leaned over her desk with her ears plain, arms folded tight as if she were cold.

And just how in creation does all that blood gush out? said Rockie Luttrell in the back of the room on the very next day. With that cherry in there to stop it up.

Each afternoon his three licks echoed down the long hall. Smack. Smack. Smack. The boys made low hurting sounds after each, and he always came back smiling, wet a finger to his lips, lowered it to his backside, and said sssss to us. He was the preacher's boy, and we loved the way he walked and stood, each part of him in some kind of wonderful accord. He told us Rocktown had been named after him.

That, we said, must be why they changed the name.

We told fortunes. Pick a color. Pick a number. What do you think will happen?

You will marry Brenda.

Hell fire, said Rockie Luttrell. I can't marry her. She's our sister.

Nobody could love Brenda.

What was that husband's name? asked Mrs Calloway, and we all professed not to know, even though some of us did.

She drove him crazy, Mrs Calloway said. Now you tell me. They has not ever been a man mixed up with her who didn't do odd things. Now you tell me if it's the truth.

I think, said Ruth, that it is just a matter of what is already there coming out.

It comes out all right, said Mrs Calloway. It comes out all the way. You seen what her husband done. He couldn't take it no more. What was it he was?

A psychologist, said Ruth. And they were divorced. They had been divorced for a while, a year maybe, when he did what he did.

Killed himself, said Mrs Calloway. We were quiet.

And that builder she used to date, she continued, he started back to drinking. And they was another one following her around all over the place and writing her name on stuff with spraypaint. Good lord. If I had a child, and of course you know me and Jimmy couldn't have no children, I'd be afraid to put her in that dance school. I'd be afraid that Brenda would teach her some of that stuff. When a woman starts to moving this way and that men start feeling things. They can't help it.

It could happen to any of us, said Ruth as we walked toward the porch with our dishes and our bowls. It could happen to any of us. Sally Ann Myers' face appeared behind the screen. It had a look of anguished surprise, the way they all do.

Oh mercy, said Sally Ann Myers, reaching open the screen door for us. Mercy. I wish you'd never done this.

We filed past, scratching our feet on the rug carefully even though we didn't need to, and gathered round a table so piled up with Moody Myers' books and papers and maps that we couldn't set down the first dish. We shuffled around together, wondering what to do, but still we caught ourselves smiling. That house! Rocktown used to have a whole hillside covered with them in the forties and fifties, portable plain white squares split into two big rooms for the families who came to work at the New Jersey Zinc Company, but now they

appeared only in the backgrounds of old Easter photographs, old snow pictures. These were fine little houses, we thought, looking up at the roof, but cold. Still, even the coldness of those winters is warmer now. And most of the little houses were sold and busted up for firewood. We had Moody Myers to thank for hauling this house down here. Only he could think that up.

Bowen Carter would not have allowed arrowheads scattered on the table or weeds in the lane the way Moody Myers did. Bowen Carter operated the ferry until they built the bridge. Our fathers let us ring the bell that brought him across for us. Who can say what makes us remember the clap of that iron bell over the river, and stretching our necks to see who was already on quilts in the grass around Indian Cave, instead of the frozen slopjar under the bed and our feet numb on the floors of these hard little houses?

We don't know any better, that's why. And still searching for a place to lay down our burdens, and glancing out the window toward a pool of men gesturing under the catalpa tree, we wondered, Is it us or them? Who makes it so crazy? And we smoothed our clothes down, down over us as the cleansing from church began to wear off and the broadness of the afternoon, so much like our lives, became apparent. From here it looked like this tragedy, and all the tragedies, little and great, were connected, just as everything was connected in the air above our heads in the church. But time, we knew, scattered them all out. It scattered them all out until the next one brought them together again.

It is worse, whispered Ruth, when everybody knows.

I think it's better, said Mrs Calloway, loud enough for anyone to hear. I think it's better.

She steals, we told one another in the bus line. You better watch out. She had the student teacher's diamond ring in her shoe.

I saw her in town, and she was talking up a storm and didn't have no white sweater on.

Boy, said a girl named Lagloria Major to all the boys, who called her stuff because it was said she stuffed her bra with toilet paper.

Boy. You ought to see Brenda in yonder. She pointed to the brick room where we changed for gym class. She's afraid of us and us all just girls. She waits until we're gone.

You're too busy stuffing. Stuff.

I swear. It's true.

Stuff.

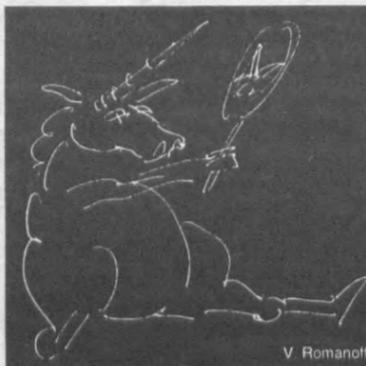
I am not. And I'll prove it to any one of you that's man enough.

I have seen the light, called Rockie Luttrell from atop the bleachers as we squaredanced. Go ye to it. Swing your partner. Get ye all ye can.

Brothers! he screamed. And sister, he whispered. I tell you they won't let the girls wear pants to school. No sir! And by god, if Mr Sweeten ever caught one in pants he'd rip them things off right there and lay the rod to her.

By god, chanted the boys. Lay the rod to her.

This is what we come from, all one body this way, coiling out and around like the amoeba we studied in books. We took our places in the rows of desks, latitude and longitude for the



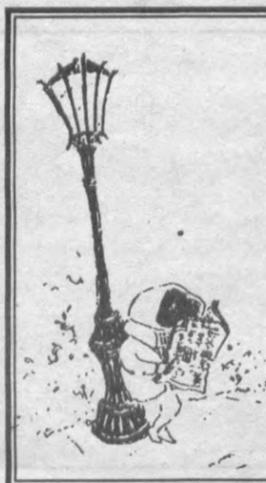
V. Romanoff

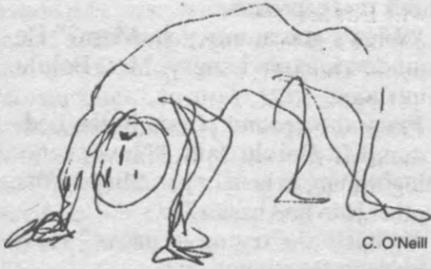
## The Bookpress Quarterly

### Statement of Purpose

*The Bookpress Quarterly* is a journal of fiction, poetry, essays, and artwork, published as a supplement to *The Bookpress*. It shares with *The Bookpress* the goals of encouraging literary community and conversation in upstate New York and showcasing that region's best writers and artists.

Illustrations by: J.M. Barringer, Laura Glenn, Marianne Loveland, Catharine O'Neill, and Victoria Romanoff





short winter days, and we had to name the seven continents out loud. Antarctica, we said under our breaths. Europe. Asia. The oceans. Once the moon could be seen in the afternoon, the color of spiderweb, and Mrs Hodge said it was pulling the tides.

Tides, we said.

She gave us all a number so we could be kept up with. All the numbers are forgotten now except Brenda's. It was the number twentythree. We could not ready our papers for the spelling test without crossing her. She existed in math problems and the names of highways.

Brenda is really a very pretty little girl, said Mrs Hodge once when she was not around, and something hurt inside us.

She returned unaware, but we looked at her and felt the size of the statement. It had not been said of Dawn, who was the prettiest girl in the room, nor of any of us.

It was cold as a brass monkey, we said. And she didn't wear nothing but that old white sweater.

She's got her crabs to keep her warm.

We had a day in which we all brought an object to school for science, and we were surprised that she brought a contribution. It was a jar filled with rubbing alcohol and seven baby mice, curled up like little pink thumbs. Them mice come out of her hair, we said. Mrs Hodge set the jar in the window, and it made us think of those glass bubbles filled with water and glitter. The tiny embryos settled, and cold sunlight came in, exposing the shadows of their bones like an x-ray, and bars of dust angled to the floor, little vapor worlds we passed our hands through. Outside, rags of snow and the winter pine thickets and the one steel mine tower.

In the gradebook Mrs Hodge recorded each item we carried in. There was a hornets' nest of spun brown paper, a hand of tobacco, a piece of transparent rock from deep in the mines, the skull of a horse, the wing feather of a turkey buzzard, a pine gall, the bones of a housecat in a paper bag, a cannonball of packed hair from the stomach of a cow, a ter-rapin shell bleached with age, and a radio someone's father made that would bring in the local station. We huddled around the window listening to it, wondering what could be made of all these objects, and someone knocked over a vial of mercury that had been contributed. The silver beads flew, skating on the tiles, and they had to be swept up.

Don't they look like the stars? said Mrs Hodge, sweeping them.

The weather that year stayed cold on our faces and the winter continued as winters continue in childhood. Rockie Luttrell took the jar of mice in his hands, shook it up, and laughed. Looking into the pink cloud of flesh, settling like glitter, Brenda still didn't cry. Now, sweating in Moody Myers' house with only a tiny fan, it is hard

## Four by Ko Un

15 April, 1992

Stayed home all day.  
Friends came,  
friends went.  
After they were gone,  
there was a rainstorm.  
In Lhasa Tibet, the head lama died.

16 April, 1992

Stayed home all day.  
Nobody came.  
The lama's body was moved to a hill-top.  
Among all the starving vultures  
on the Indian continent,  
a few dozen gathered and began to  
tear at the sacred corpse.

17 April, 1992

Another day at home.  
Read an encyclopedia  
and straightway forgot what I had  
read.  
The lama's bones, what remains.  
O truest Nirvana!

18 April 1992

Another day at home.  
I realized  
there were sons the dead lama didn't  
know about.  
At night, one made off with the lama's  
remains;  
after the sun rose, made a pair of neck-  
laces.  
One to wear,  
one to sell to the American poet,  
Allen Ginsberg.  
O Nirvana of New York and Lhasa  
from now on, already!

—Ko Un

(translated by David R. McCann)

## From The Honored Guest Cheju Island Poet

From mountain temple to seaside village  
he wandered, "twenty li after break-  
fast,"  
as the saying goes; ten, perhaps, as the  
crow flies.  
Hills, valleys, forests, shoreline rocks.  
A hungrily acquisitive soul, he took  
to asking those he met on his wanderings  
to tell about their homes, the stories  
and songs  
that ran from place to place like trails.  
He started a notebook. One morning  
after a late-night chat with a lonely  
farmer  
who must have walked all night to  
report him,  
the police tracked him down and  
hauled him away.  
They whacked him on the ear,  
the deaf one, now, and shouted he was  
a spy.  
When he denied it, they whacked him  
again,  
shouting "Listen up! Listen to us!  
We will tell you what to talk about,  
what not. Talk about fish, plant names,  
the sizes of rocks, but not  
about these people. Not allowed!"

They tore up his notes,  
shoved him out into the street and  
screamed  
"Not allowed! Not allowed! No asking  
these islanders about their uncles and  
aunts,  
fathers, daughters, sons and wives;  
the ones who caused all the disorder,  
who marched around the government  
office,  
harassed the local police, and when that  
wasn't enough, ransacked the station  
and stole

a dozen rifles. Those people, the ones  
we finally chased back into the hills  
and cut down and stacked like firewood  
while their villages burned and the  
streams  
ran red to the sea all around.  
Not allowed! Nothing is perfect,  
and even less when your type starts  
nosing around."

So he wrote another type of book, then  
another, until by now it takes  
a mobilized army of admirers to keep  
up with his stubbornly prolonged reply.

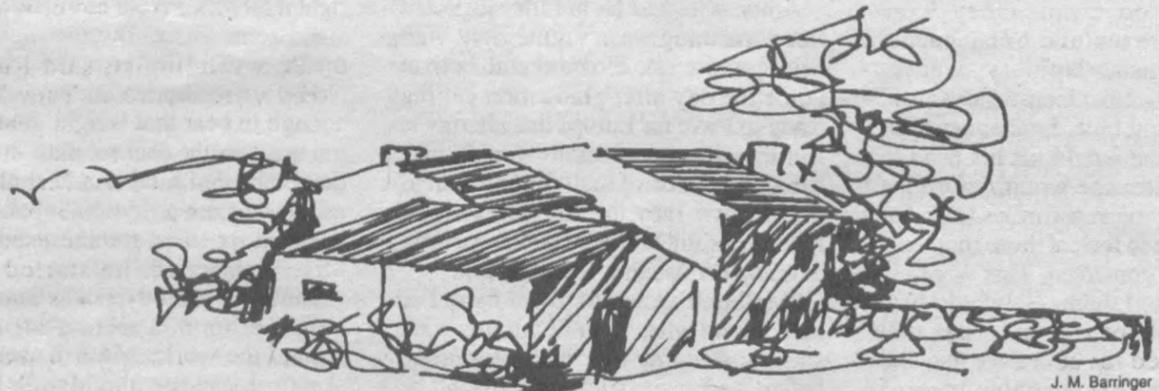
He savors the infrequent luxury  
of unnoted travel, avoiding  
the passionate inquisitions of friends,  
the banquets with certain notables.

Awesome hunger inhabits the guest,  
and he pays, mornings after, by incessant  
writing, reading, and writing again.

He tells the young writer who drove us  
about  
the island, Keep at it. Never quit. Be  
serious always.  
It is as hard as approaching the demon  
king,  
but do it. Then send me something  
good.  
I will find a place to publish your  
work.  
But choose only your very best for me;  
anything less, I will blow my nose on it.

—David R. McCann

David R. McCann is a Cornell Univer-  
sity Professor of Korean Literature. His  
most recent publication is Korea Brief-  
ings: Journal Reunification (M.E.  
Sharpe, 1997).



to imagine that winter. It is hard to conceive of ice.

Sally Ann Myers, her gray hair down over the back of her housecoat, steps barefoot around the dishes we have placed on her floor. We want her to eat, and we tell her so. We want to see her eat right there in front of us, but she refuses, the way they always do. She wants us to eat. They always do this too. Eat, she says, waving at the dishes. You all eat. No, no, we say, reveling in our hunger. We can't eat. We can't eat. No. Where is Brenda? Where is her brother Tony? They will eat.

Tony is out at the river, Sally Ann tells us. Brenda is with her son. They can't eat. They are not here. She is alone. Don't be alone, we tell her. She is standing outside in the yard as we leave her alone. Down in the field is where Bowen Carter used to take off in his little airplane. Look, Sally Ann says, and the heads of three catfish appear on the burnt grass at her feet. Then their tails appear, hardened and opaque in the sun. But there is nothing between, only the heads and tails. The eyes are fogged over.

You see, she says to us. The sher-

iff did this. He came and cleaned three fish in my yard. From Moody's boat.

Let us. Let us outside. Let us, we pleaded, but we could not stand the cold when we went.

At the end of January there was a warm winter day. One of those days you can't trust, and some of the teachers opened windows and the false breeze entered like spring, rustling our papers. Once we heard the radio of a passing car, and thought of riding with the windows down. The grass thawed, yellow, splattering under our feet.

Watch out, said Mrs Hodge as we fled from her. Watch out! It will snow next week.

But we had running fits across the playground, into the stubby fields, blurring in and out of the cold shadows. Someone spotted a workman who had taken off his shirt on top the big flat building. We paced our limits, slapping back strings of hair, skirts blown up against our legs. The boys played football as if their lives depended on it. We heard their breaths shoot up in moans. Rockie

Luttrell zagging in and out with the leather ball, his shoes tearing the sod like shovels digging in.

But we are called in by Mrs Hodge's raised hand, her old thin body far off giving the signal we all know, pouring us from all directions toward her. Children that we were converging in one small perfect place, and the sight of Brenda's arms bare in the weak sun, like something not formed yet, her sweater on the ground beside her. We hated her and loved her and we did not want to look at her as if she were too bright, so Rockie Luttrell grabbed the sweater and it passed in keepaway, flying one to the other, suspended in the air between us.

Bowen Carter is dead. Moody Myers is dead. We have all given ourselves away. Leaving the Carter place we are strangely winter hot, sweating, hearts beating, believing only in Rockie Luttrell's hands on the little jar of mice, and the pink whirl of flesh in the cold, alcohol wind.

Stephen Marion has an M.F.A. from Cornell University, and lives in East Tennessee. This is an excerpt from his novel Elegg for Rocktown.

# The Floating Woman

Emoretta Yang

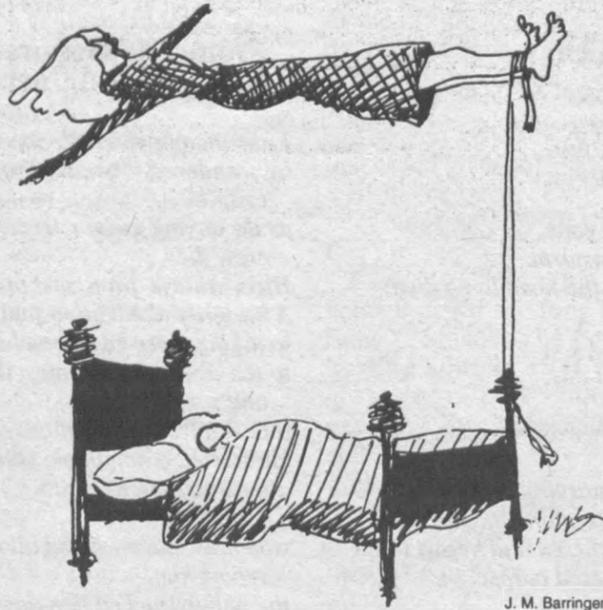
At night Mrs. Pololu kept two blankets and a quilt over herself, even in mid-July. In the first years of her marriage, her husband would end up kicking the blankets away where they sprawled over his perspiring feet. She didn't want to risk his finding out in those days how light she became in sleep, that she barely hovered there over the bed, her night dress falling in a cascade onto the lower sheet, disguising the thin pallet of air that lay between her body and the bed.

As she fell asleep her body would become lighter and lighter, and when sleep overtook her, suddenly she would pop up gently in the air, like a rubber ball released at the bottom of a pool. With two blankets and a stem-stitched quilt weighing her down, it was really very difficult to divine that she wasn't actually on the bed, that really she floated above it. And if, in fact, in the split-second before falling asleep, she had not always had the sensation of a quiet and abrupt suction of wind raising her body upward before she lost consciousness of it altogether, Mrs. Pololu herself would not have been aware of this floating, since it appeared to be a condition only of real and unfeigned sleep. The only further evidence she had that some such thing was happening to her was that when she awoke, she fell back onto the mattress with a plop and a light bounce, so light and simultaneous that she was never quite sure if it was the fall which had awakened her, or if her awakening had occasioned the fall.

Perhaps some other man would soon enough have discovered the weightlessness of his wife's sleeping, but Mr. Pololu was a deep and dedicated sleeper. He was in the carpet trade and often he sank into dreams from which he could recall no events, they were dreams of pure texture: bristlenappe, sounding plush, lapidary weave. Soumak weft-wrap, cloud-band Kazak, Kula yellow and blue. Sometimes after making love, he would lift his head to look at his wife; she would return his gaze with an expression he took for contented, and in fact, at those moments she often *was* contented. This wordless exchange suited them. He would turn over, she would one by one neatly pull the blankets and the quilt over her, and as the sound of his breathing became regular and resonant, she would hear her own in the interstices, her eyes would blink shut, and the sheet on her side of the bed would tug upward toward the ceiling.

In those early years, she took care to regulate her daytime activities. She shopped, cooked, decorated, cleaned, did the laundry, drove her husband to work and picked him up at the end of the afternoon. On Tuesdays they went to dinner at her sister-in-law's. On Wednesday nights after dinner, he played cards with the men, and she played the piano for church choir practice. At all costs she avoided taking naps if people were going to be around, because when her eyes closed and her head nodded, a disturbing feeling of buoyancy ran through her body, and she would have to shake herself like a sparrow in a dustbath.

It was when Mrs. Pololu became pregnant that the sleepfloating ceased, at least for a while. Mrs. Pololu was sure of that; for Mr. Pololu was so delighted with the prospect of becoming a father that as Mrs. Pololu's abdomen grew visibly larger, increasing with the weeks, he, unlike before, would stay awake to watch her as she fell asleep. In bed he lifted himself on one elbow and beamed



at her, silently. The skin around his cheeks stretched and shone with his smiling, just like the skin around Mrs. Pololu's stomach where he ran his hand in slow circles.

First it was little Minor who kept her full on the ground; and three years later, little Miss Amor Annaliese. And for all the time that her children were at home, from their infancy to their first days at school, from Minor's first Little League game through Amor's senior graduation piano recital, they served as the two counterweights of Mrs. Pololu's anchor; never would the ground feel as solid to her as when she could straighten her son's lapel, or comb her daughter's long, brown gold hair.

On the day after Amor Annaliese graduated from college, Mrs. Pololu popped up completely into space and had to relinquish all pretense of trying to maneuver on earth.

Amor, who had all her life suspected that something wasn't quite right with her otherwise placid mother; had been at home the day after graduation getting ready to leave for Europe that afternoon. Her traveling companions were to pick her up for the drive to the airport, and as they drove into the driveway, Mrs. Pololu was still hurriedly pressing a skirt, advising her daughter what to pack.

"Mother, I've got to travel light. I'm only taking what I can fit into my pack and my sleeping bag. That skirt's too bulky. And anyway I probably won't be wearing any skirts. They tie you down."

Traveling to Europe and not taking any skirts! Just a pair of blue jeans, sweat-shirts and some jogging shorts! Going to see cathedrals in your pajamas and underwear! Mrs. Pololu did not want to imagine it. Still, she said nothing; after all, here was her baby going off, who knew what would happen to her, would she be safe, could she really take care of herself, what kinds of people could spirit her away? A mirror hung over the dresser in Amor Annaliese's room, and next to it was a photograph of Mrs. Pololu at the age of nineteen or twenty. Why did Amor keep that? Mrs. Pololu looked from the photograph to the mirror just in time to see her daughter's profile as she paused in her last-minute packing, and at that moment, she felt a rush of air, both humid and burned, flowing up out of her collar. Her shoulders lifted, her hips skewed, a slipper fell off her foot. She managed to hook a corner of the dresser with her heel, caught the bed frame with her hand and settled herself down, as if seated, on the bed.

Amor Annaliese looked up from her packing. She was used to these unexpected commotions of her mother's, but had never stopped to think about them. There was something peculiar, though, this time, in her mother's eyes, a funny

blank look that the daughter had never noticed before. She thought her mother was still admonishing her about the skirt, so grabbing her backpack and sleeping bag, she clattered downstairs to the car. After Amor Annaliese and her friends had driven off, Mrs. Pololu released her hold on the bedframe and felt herself go up, slow and calm.

Of course, Mr. Pololu was surprised. But a lifetime of making rug deals, negotiating with shippers and capricious government officials had taught him the value of keeping his flabbergasted reactions to himself. Because he saw his wife's floating as a kind of indisposition, he gave himself over to caring for her.

Mr. Pololu tried out a number of ways to help his wife carry on the semblance of a normal life; he found a way of adding false bottoms to the soles of her shoes (boots worked best) and into these he poured cement and pebbles. It was all right if all Mrs. Pololu had to do was just stand somewhere. But the minute she tried to walk about, everything was lost. No lace, no strap, no button was sturdy enough to bear that weight. She would move across the cocktail floor in a stride that embraced lumber and shuffle. No use. It was not a rhythm anyone could maintain for social gatherings, and soon Mrs. Pololu's secret was out.

The news passed quickly through the neighborhood. Calls came in from around the world. Most of them were skeptical, and Mr. and Mrs. Pololu did nothing to dissuade those callers from their skepticism. One national news agency sent a writer and a photographer especially, and then after that, a call came from a television station, who sent a three-man camera crew and a famous reporter.

The TV crew set up their shot in front of the Pololus' house. Mr. Pololu had tied a string around his wife's ankle, and the reporter asked a few questions, mainly of Mr. Pololu. There was a shot that lasted two seconds of Mrs. Pololu floating on her back about twelve feet off the ground, as filmed from below, at an angle. Most of the time, the camera was focused on a middle-range shot of the reporter, who was speaking earnestly, looking directly into the camera's eye. On the monitor, Mr. Pololu could be seen in back, standing a little self-consciously, rocking on his heels, with a little undirected grin on his face, the string attached to his wife stretched diagonally across his raincoat. As the reporter spoke, clutching his microphone in front of his chest, Mrs. Pololu hovered just off-camera, slightly above the two men, the hem of her raincoat bobbing up and down in the background, now and then the heel of her shoe just visible in the upper right corner of the screen.

Minor called that night from his

Connecticut apartment in a state of shock and reproach.

"What's gotten into you, Mom?" He sounded hurt and angry. Mrs. Pololu kept quiet.

From the second phone in the bedroom, Mr. Pololu said, "Now everything's going to be all right, Mines. Your mother is in fine health."

"What's she trying to prove? How long's this been going on?"

"I'm not trying to prove anything, Minor."

"Do you know what people are saying? They know it's my hometown. They're all asking me if you're any relation. Can't you do anything about it? Jesus, I don't dare admit I know you!"

"There's no need for you to admit anything, Minor."

"Look, I have to catch a plane for Colorado; I'll call you tomorrow night. Maybe I'll think of something."

"That's fine, Minor. You don't have to think of anything."

And while Mr. Pololu went downstairs to talk to the medical specialists, the particle physicists, the paraphenomenologists, and the autograph seekers, Mrs. Pololu bobbed around in the bedroom, thinking of Minor's voice, all pinched and tinny on the phone. So now there they were, her two children, off running around in the world, really managing quite well, thank you Mother, by themselves: Minor, of course, just out of law school, with his first job, clerking for a judge, it sounded so crisp and efficient, earning money, meeting other young men and women. And Amor Annaliese, too, in her own way, setting out like this, all by herself. Because this younger generation of women Amor's age, well, like them, Amor didn't want to get married too early, was waiting for "the right moment", when she knew what she wanted to do with herself, get really started on a career, *then* she would think about starting a family. *How different it was for me!* thought Mrs. Pololu. What a combination of relief and regret she felt, when she pictured to herself her children; the way they had been, so small and stumbling on their feet. The world could be so full of danger, and they were so helpless. Back then, she used to find herself wishing *If only I could just tell them what I know, give them my eyes, my hands, my feet!*

The excitement of Mrs. Pololu's floating passed; the phone calls dwindled in number. Minor got a new job with a law firm in southern California. Amor was staying on a bit longer in Europe; she wrote a postcard once a week, then once a month, then every other month. Minor called on Thanksgiving, on Christmas.

In early spring someone from NASA called to invite Mrs. Pololu to speak to some of their people in training; all she had to do was describe how it felt, up in the air like that, and maybe answer questions. The honorarium and the idea of being in Florida was tempting, but Mrs. Pololu declined, saying she had just been a housewife all her life, she was too old now to be doing new things, and what, she could never talk to all those scientists, astrologers and podiatrists. And anyway, she thought to herself, how could she describe what it felt like, floating around? What was there to say? It was, well it was just like *floating around*. Mr. Pololu supported her decision.

That was the last call that Mr. and Mrs. Pololu ever received from anyone from out-of-town. At home, things stayed unsettled for a while. She had to quit playing piano for the choir, since the preacher felt a little uneasy about her

*continued on page 5*

going on. Well, it was all right with *him*, he said, but some there was felt it was *difficult*, and though he considered their feelings *misguided*, as spiritual guide, he felt he ought to undertake their re-instruction gently and above all, *slowly*, with an absence of provocation and so on. That was all right. Mrs. Pololu understood just what he meant. Anyway, playing the piano had become more and more difficult for her, since, as Mr. Pololu explained, any expenditure of energy in a downward motion results in an equal and opposite motion: striking the keys only made the condition more pronounced.

There were plenty of other ways to keep occupied. She played magician's assistant for a PTA fundraising night. It went over big. And for the Independence Day Parade and Picnic, the volunteer firemen asked Mr. Pololu if his wife could do something, so she helped the mayor inaugurate the festivities by raising the flag at the fire station, where the parade started. Mr. Pololu held her at the bottom of the flagpole, with a rope around her ankle, and as *Oh say can you see* came over the loudspeaker, he let her go. In her trailing

white tunic and long white gloves, Mrs. Pololu let herself glide slowly upward, guiding her ascent with her right hand on the flagpole, the unfurled flag nestled in the crook of her left arm. Just as planned, she reached the top at the words *and the rockets' red glare*, fastened the flag and unrolled it, just as the volunteers chief set off Roman candles. From where she was, she could look down and between the undulating waves of the flag she could see all her neighbors and their children, pointing, laughing and applauding, the flapping of the fabric sharp in her ears.

Now this is how I see them: with a rope tied around her ankle, my neighbor Mrs. Pololu, and her husband out for their daily walk. The fresh air seems to do them both good, and she seems to love being pulled along on her back, watching the clouds in a blue sky. This summer, with school out, the children on my block follow them and shout up twenty questions to Mrs. Pololu, until the ice-cream truck jangles along, and they scoot off.

If they go by my house and I'm in the garden, sometimes we chat. Or at least, *he*

stops and chats—the rope has been getting longer and longer (I think *she's* asked for this), and she's usually too far up to have a regular conversation; she looks down, smiles and waves. He's always neighborly, and sometimes it seems he needs to talk. The weather *has* been nice. Yes, we've been moving a lot of rugs right along; in fact, there's a shipment of new kilims coming in next week. The kids? Ah, the boy's off on an assignment negotiating trade contracts in Australia; the girl, well, the girl has been married for three months to a young Italian fellow, well, an aerialist, that's right, it *had* been a bit of a surprise. No, we're not exactly sure where, it's a kind of extended working honeymoon, you know, his work takes them *around*. The last postcard had come from Laodicea. We didn't know where that is either, we had to look it up.

Oh, *those* days. We're glad they're over. That was something, every day, all those people, all the time, what a headache! One night I dreamed: my wife, my kids and me, all sitting on a rug, it was like a beautiful Kabistan, fly-

ing all around the world. But you felt queasy on it, always up and down, like waves, and you were never sure about the edges. I was always saying, "Stay away from the edge!"

Now your garden's doing nicely, the rain last week was a godsend. Well, it's funny you should mention it; the missus has been having a little trouble sleeping, but we think we've got that problem licked. At night, Mr. Pololu tells me, he ties his wife to the bedpost, with enough length of rope to keep her from bumping into the ceiling. It's warm, you know, he says, with all the heat up there. Because don't matter how many quilts, they won't keep her down now.

*Emoretta Yang* worked as a graphics editor for diacritics: a review of literary and philosophical criticism and as a curator in the Asian department of the Johnson Art Museum at Cornell University. She collaborated with Kumi Korfon the artist's book *Silk and Secrecy* and currently lives in Salmon Creek, New York with a mixed terrier named MacDuff Lewis.

## in the year of the blue snow

*In the year that had two winters back-to-back, when even the snow turned blue with cold—the year when Paul found Babe and thawed her but she stayed blue—, words spoken out-of-doors froze in the air, sifting onto the ground with a noise like sleet. The intended hearer, spotting the flutter of lips, might cup both ears or lean as into a gale, but all he'd hear was that soft spilling and his own snort of frustration.*

*It was a long hard pull: scrawny turnips to live on, onions black with mold from far back in the cellar. Paul and the hunters found meat to give around: often, a herd of deer or cows found frozen by surprise, like statues on a lawn. Hauled on log-sleds to dooryards of farms, or placed as if staked to graze on village greens and frugally shared around, they let the north survive.*

*Paul's unquenched robustness was light and warmth to the people. His words didn't freeze, or if they did they struck the ground like cannonballs, cracked open and roared: the echoes showered the distance like gravel. People longed for a glimpse of him striding by and perked up at the sound of a crash outside, which might be a bough or the cap of ice on the waterfall collapsing, but likelier was Paul and Babe out tramping.*

*When words began to freeze many felt weak and ashamed, recalling the girl not asked to dance or marry, the child not praised, the banker's terms accepted dumbly, panic at schoolhouse questions—all the futile wordlessness of chances missed, locked hard in the glacier of failure. Longstanding silences, so grievously sustained in many lives, began to ache in the fallen cold like terrible rheumatism. The Pettigrees of Bath*

*committed suicide by leaving a door open: found at table, shirtsleeved and aproned, he looked aside while she looked straight at him, rigid before the cold hit. Friends recalled the stillness that ruled between them, though both were sharp-tongued and quick to resent. Whether a wordless pact or a stubborn refusal to rise to warm the other brought on their end was debated, and the coroner was urged to thaw them in their house, to see what warmed-up words might tell: but he adjudged it "indecent curiosity" to make them talk in death who never would in life.*

*Famously taciturn as some of the races were who spread where Paul was logging—Downeasters, Swedes, and Scots from Canada—, their few warm words in isolated cabins were like the penny sweets the traders brought from town, wonderful in the mouth and savored in memory.*

*Outdoors, a wave of greeting could touch the heart: men working on either side of a log would hold each other's eyes feeling a strange discomfort. The movement of hands and bodies at work together in silence grew eloquent, a union across space like a dance, if they had thought that way: a few recalled, uncertain why at that moment, how leaves swayed in many directions in breezes on sunlit trees.*

*After fourteen months of permanent February, dab flat at the mercury's bottom, the thaw unfroze the words in a spring flood of noise: a torrent of mutters, cries, greetings, complaints of cold, laughter and objurgations leaped into the air abrupt as cracking ice in a deafening brouhaha, a backwoods pentecost!*

*The misty air held a madhouse*

*where everyone was talking, singing, or shouting at once, ignoring all the others. It made a person think the world is a kind of asylum but with the roles played out a few at a time, or in secret. The dank ground snapped out vowels, the town street cried and rumbled like a storm on election day. A woman who'd lost a child heard its voice at play and was broken again for months. Lovers were sometimes touched by how much of what erupted around their house was theirs; or they felt cold at hearing how far apart they sounded: they'd shield their eyes from each other, fleeing the revelation like Jonah taking ship. At first the din was fearsome but soon the hearers turned giddy from silly coincidences: oxcarts voiced opinions, a dog dug up a growl. Now and then a sentence grave but unconnected would rise like a phrase remembered from a nightmare about lawsuits.*

*It took a matter of weeks for the last straggling voices to break from shaded crannies; but the accidental aptness of the air's unbidden asides might ring in the mind for years. One man heard the word "And!" Just "And!" It brought to mind additions and replacements, seasons following seasons, crop upon crop and ache upon ache of stiffening joints as the years mounted and passed. Bonds of love and need came to his mind, and how a person lives through losses to the next day, and next. The single word was a treasury filled with collection and surplus, which he would hear again in each day's common speech. Its gift of connecting and adding would warm his heart against the sterile accumulations that drift on human years.*

*Speech out of trees and boulders upset some folks: it seemed what indians might hear,*

*unchristian; whereas Paul seemed wondrous but quite natural, the pure result of a land where everything—the moose, the endless passing flocks, fresh-water seas, above all the inexhaustible tall timber—grew past measure. Still, that year was so cold, and the rambunctiousness of nature and of men that came with Paul was such that it was some relief to hear of Paul's move westward to find new forests worthy of his ax and Babe's shoulders.*

*Everyone agreed that no one was the same who lived through the two winters. A few years afterwards, a man from Michigan went slightly mad when caught in the deep woods one night by a far-spreading snowstorm. He was well nestled in furs and under leaves and snow, unable to see a thing, when suddenly he divined the flakes he felt were words, a myriad of soft words and words of delicate crystal, flowing from Canada across the long ice shelves of the still-open lakes, across canals and orchards and brown and grey-stoned mountains, and on to the Atlantic to join the weary swells. Under one tent of storm, under one blanket of white, the towns and fields and woods were unified, a story no ear, not even Paul's was grand enough to hear! Although he could not see them, that man from Michigan could feel the small, sharp words melt down his face like tears.*

—Paul Hamill

*Paul Hamill* is Director of Academic Funding at Ithaca College, where he also teaches. His poems have appeared in many journals including *The Georgia Review* and *The New England Quarterly*. He is seeking a publisher for his first collection.

# Where the Wild Things Were

Micah Perks

Leave the cities, the towns, drive for half a day, the trees pressing tighter and tighter against the narrow roads, to the very eastern edge of the Adirondack mountains. Onto the county road, one side a ridge of spruce and rock, the other a precipice down to a blue lake. Watch for logging trucks, they hog more than their share of road, shed bark, branches, whole trees as they careen through the turns.

Take a right onto what the locals have begun to call Funny Farm road. Drive over dirt for miles, water on both sides. Say it's the late sixties, and late June. Blue flag and daisies line the ditches. The car plows through white butterflies that cluster on the road, wings pumping like breath. Dragonflies glitter. Turtles doze on the logs in the creek. Red fox whisks across the road. Great blue heron swims through air.

Over a fragile iron bridge beside roaring twin water falls. Pass an abandoned brown house, windows shattered. They say they found the old woman starved dead in there, had been eating cat food near the end. Wearing layers of clothes against the cold, no running water so she stank bad. They say the house is haunted.

Another collapsing, one lane iron bridge over a shallow creek. On the other side, a saw blade nailed to a wide pine is painted with an ancient Mexican hieroglyph of a water lily. It looks like a red heart pulled in opposite directions surrounded by a black picket fence. The name of the commune school is written underneath.

Up a small hill, and down into our valley. The valley is a long spread of green, surrounded by dark woods on every side, cut in half by the road. On one side is the stream, widened in late June into a marshy pond. The skinny highland cattle graze in the field, tossing their yellowed curving horns. Their shaggy, matted coats are orange to rust to white. A mess of red barns on that side, too.

On the other side, first the bunker, a long cement one story building painted with brown dancing figures. Then the three red and yellow domes set up against the ridge. Turn right at the barns, past the flag poles, a British flag, a flag with a green serpent that reads Don't Tread on Me, some strange yellow flag from a country you never heard of, all three smacking in the wind. The farm house is a riot of yellow and red. There is a long chicken yard pressed against the house. Past the chickens, the valley stretches up a hill to three teepees.

Long haired hippies and their half-naked, dirty children are playing some kind of game in the field. Bell bottom jeans, afros and fly away hair, hoop earrings that brush past shoulders, bare chests, laughter and cursing. Open the door of the car, step onto the cool wet ground of Spring. Smell sun warmed mud and manure, balsam and mildew and sweat. The black flies whine. The chickens fuss. One of the hippies yells something but there is wind and you can't make it out. It probably isn't polite. They wash towards you, grinning. You're here.

## The Life of a Warrior

One sunny, September day I came upon my father in a field. He was crouched on a giant circle of canvas, painting the figure of a man on horse-

back. My father was British, a color-blind artist. He was bucktoothed, skinny, electric. He smelled of gunpowder and rum. My mother thought he looked like Honest Abe Lincoln, her idol. My father was painting a teepee—he had decided to form an Indian warrior society. He let everyone join.

When it was time to begin our lives as warriors, the whole school gathered in front of the barn carrying blankets, except my father, who had a buffalo robe slung over his shoulder. There were eight teachers, twenty disturbed adolescents and thirteen of us—the children and babies of teachers.

We straggled up the dirt road edged in chicory, milkweed and goldenrod, through a hay field, then climbed a hill at the edge of the valley. Most of us loitered around while dad and some big guys chopped down trees and stripped them to make teepee poles. The three painted white triangles looked pretty, up against the high, thin blue sky and the hills just beginning to burn red and gold.

My father lined up the children. He told us we would be living off the land from now on. No store bought food allowed. He handed out a knife in a leather fringed sheath to each child. "Hunt for your supper," he said.

We spread out through the woods, searching for small animals to kill. Soon, we gave up hunting and turned to berry picking. We took shards of grey slate, leftover from building the roof of our log cabin, and heaved them into the brambles. They settled, making tunnels into the prickles. We crawled in, but the blackberries were all gone. Still, we sat in our thorny caves telling secrets until the afternoon. When we grew hungry, we sucked on white clover. Then we chased each other in and out of the teepees in the last of the cool September light.

Meanwhile, the disturbed boys were being initiated. Dad and the other male teachers lined the teenagers up by the stream in their underwear. They stood in a ragged line—drug addicts, run-aways, truants, and thieves. Skinny boys with shaggy hair, goose pimpled arms crossed over ribs, smirking nervously. My father poured cow manure over their heads. They had to jump in the cold stream to wash off. Then, they were warriors.

For dinner there were blue jays and squirrels, skewered on sticks and grilled over an open fire. Dad had cooked this dish for my sister and me at home, and we hated it. Anyway, there wasn't enough meat to go round. We were really hungry now. My mother had learned how to make bannok when we lived with the Eskimos. We all gathered round, watching her fry the soft, oily bread in a cast iron skillet over the fire. She began to lift it off. The heavy pan tipped. The bread slipped into the ashes. There was a wild scramble as teenagers and children grabbed for the bannok, tearing it out of each other's hands. I held my piece of blackened bread close to my chest. I remember the satisfying taste of soot and grease.

The night grew cold. Inside the teepees, we rolled ourselves in blankets on the hard ground. My sister and I snuggled up against my mother. In another teepee, we heard Brandy, a toddler, crying from cold. My father took him into his buffalo robe.

In early morning, we threw off our frost covered blankets and ducked out

the teepee door. Brandy had peed all over my father's buffalo robe. Everyone was famished and whining. We gathered up our blankets and marched down the hill for breakfast. Living off the land had come to an end.

## A Brief Trip Into The World

Then I was almost five. My mother said I was going to school. My father said I didn't have to if I didn't want to. My mother said, Try it. She waited with me in the grey morning by the barn. The chickens clucked and squawked. A huge bus trundled through the early morning fog. It stopped and the door opened. I climbed on. There was no one else on the bus but the driver. I chose one of the hard, slick, green seats. The bus turned around in our driveway and started back down the dirt road. We picked up Mrs. Sage's teen-age daughter next. Mom had asked her to sit with me. She did, and we were alone on the bus for a long time. But then there were more houses, and her friend got on and squished into the seat. They both had

had been severed from its body. He cleaned out the enormous shell and gave it to me for show and tell. But I was too shy. The teacher showed it for me. The outside of the shell was covered in faint grey and green patterns. The inside was ridged, like mountains. I held onto the turtle shell for the rest of the day.

Once, coming home on the bus the Sage girl was not there to wall me in. Two boys from Kindergarten class sat beside me. Talk, they said. I wouldn't. They hit me. Talk, talk they chanted, getting a rhythm going, drumming on my shoulders and chest and back. If you just talk, we'll stop hitting you, they pleaded. I cried, but just tears, no sound.

A few days later, I started to cry soundlessly again, in the middle of cutting and pasting. I held my middle so Mrs. Winifred thought I had a stomach ache. She asked one of the other girls to walk me to the nurse. The nurse lay me on a cot behind a curtain and left the office. Suddenly my voice erupted in a wail. The nurse's heels clicked down the hall towards me. She yanked



V. Romanoff

big girl butts that pressed me against the wall. They talked and talked and the bus filled up with kids, screaming and calling to each other. I looked out the window.

My teacher's name was Mrs. Winifred. The boys had crew cuts and striped shirts. The girls had dresses and straight hair to their shoulders. Everyone seemed blond, and it was hard to tell them apart. The desks were all the same, too. I felt strange in my new dress and tight braids. At nap time I put my mat by the teacher's desk and lay there in the dim room, not sleeping. At show and tell a girl brought in a round toy that made animal sounds. Two kids tried to hold hands, but the teacher said, Hands to yourself. We cut and glued and pasted and colored.

The next morning there was school again. My father said, You don't have to go. My mother said, Try it, and walked me down to the bus. This went on and on.

My father ran a snapping turtle over in the car, brought it home and made turtle soup. He showed me how the turtle heart kept beating, just sitting there like a grey tear drop all by itself on the butcher block, faithfully working for hours, not realizing it

back the curtain, "I could hear you from all the way at the principal's office. Be quiet," she hissed. But the noise kept coming.

Then my father was there. On the way out he lifted me up to drink from a water fountain. I never went back.

A few weeks later my mother received my report card. We were graded with either a smile face or a frown face. In the box for Social Skills, there were no faces. Mrs. Winifred wrote that I had not spoken once in six weeks.

## Povungatuk

My parents told us we were going sailing in the Virgin Islands for our summer vacation. We would spend a month on a yacht with a captain and his first mate. This vacation idea scared me—Dad had read me Treasure Island, and I was afraid of a mutiny. Then my father said maybe instead we could go live with the Eskimos. He asked for my opinion. Definitely the Eskimos, I said, voting against the pirates.

All right then. My father said he'd arrange it with a French Canadian

continued on page 7

priest he knew. This priest had been a missionary in a village in the Canadian Arctic. But that night I overheard my mother worrying. The Eskimos kept sled dogs, and in the summer they ran wild, sometimes attacking children. Now, I was not looking forward to this vacation either. My father wrote a letter to the priest, and received a letter back, saying that we could live with the town garbage man. The letter also reported that the dogs were now kept on an island in the summer, no need to fear.

We drove to Montreal in our Landrover. Then we took a plane to Timmins. From Timmins, we boarded a world war two sea plane and trundled off for Povungatuk on the Hudson Bay. There was a huge roaring in the cabin, so that we had to yell to hear each other. The pilot left his door open so we could watch him fly the plane. It began to rain and water leaked onto our seats. We were given towels to hold against the roof. From the little window I saw that the world had become half grey water and half dark green tundra, forever.

Finally, the plane began to turn and descend. I saw a straggle of pastel colored shacks. Then we landed in the ocean. The plane rocked. The pilot cut the engine, and heaved open the door. Waves splashed his feet. We were about a hundred yards from shore. Four canoes were making their way towards us. They were paddled by dark haired men in parkas. A canoe pulled up alongside the door to the plane. The pilot lifted my sister and me onto the floor of the boat and the men paddled away. I gripped the sides as we splashed through the waves. The men were talking and laughing in a language I couldn't understand. Mutiny, I thought. My sister was silent, so the whimpering must have been coming from me. When we neared the shore, the man in the bow jumped into the frigid, knee deep water and drove the canoe onto the pebble beach. A crowd of people circled us, all of them with dark, straight hair. They watched my sister and me as we were heaved out of the boat by our armpits. My mother and father and our luggage arrived. We all stood there.

Then the crowd parted for a big, yellow dump truck. A small, smiling man with a dark brush cut leapt out of the cab and introduced himself—Jimmy Sivouak. He laughed and pumped my father's hand. He threw our luggage into the back. We climbed in after. The dump truck ground its gears, surging up the beach and onto the one dirt road, past the two churches, the pink and blue houses that all looked the same, past the

Bank of Canada shaped like a huge white igloo. A packed taxi with no doors passed us. People ran beside it and swung themselves on; others leapt off. The taxi had no breaks, so it didn't stop until it ran out of gas.

Jimmy's house had a kitchen-dining room, and two bedrooms. There was a couch, a table and not much else. It was clear that Jimmy's wife and daughter did not want us there—the little girl hid from us, covering her face with her hands to make herself invisible. The woman kept her mouth in a grim line, but Jimmy stayed up every night, drinking tea, talking and laughing with my parents at the small Formica table.

Besides the priest, Jimmy was the most important man in Povungatuk. He was one of the only people in the village not on the Canadian dole. He delivered everyone's water and took away their garbage, driving the only motor vehicle with breaks. But Mom said he was frustrated. This pond is too small for Jimmy, she said. Later, when liquor reached Povungatuk, he would become an alcoholic, then kill himself. But back then, the Canadian government still kept alcohol out. Jimmy told us a man had broken into the Hudson Bay store, stolen a bottle of perfume and slugged it down, hoping to try out drunkenness.

There was not much food. A big supply ship made its way down the bay twice a year, but it had been stuck in ice and the ship was months late. The shelves of the Hudson Bay Store were nearly empty. There was a roast left in the freezer, because nobody knew what to do with it, so my mother cooked it for Jimmy's family. Otherwise, we mainly ate bannok, a soft white bread fried in the shape of a huge donut. We drank tea with sweetened, condensed milk. The toilet paper had run out too, so we wiped ourselves with catalogues.

The sea washed on and on, the wind blew off the water and rustled the tundra that swept on and on. The tiny village huddled in-between, and I was a stranger to all of it. The color of the world had narrowed. Dull green scrub, flat grey ocean, dust and pebbles and brown birds. We picked bitter white berries on the tundra, and the taste made me lonely. The constant wind made my eyes and nose run, as if I were always weeping. Jimmy explained that we were the first white children in the village. The other children ran away from us, shrieking laughter.

We visited the carver's coop. My sister was given a small piece of soap stone. We sat out in front of Jimmy's house. She carved and I watched. Time moved knife scrape by knife

scrape. Then, two girls in red plaid shawls sidled towards us. They put their hands over their mouths and giggled at the gauges my sister had made on her stone. Girls don't carve, they told us.

Minnie had a narrow face with high cheekbones and carried her niece on her back. Mina wore bangs, was round and sweet faced. They both had numbers instead of middle names, given to them by the Canadian government. They both wore black rubber boots over embroidered mukluks. Neither of them could stop laughing. My sister dropped her stone on the doorstep, and we ran off with Minnie and Mina.

Now, Povungatuk seemed like the best place on earth. We got to eat fried white bread and drink sweet tea all day long. The sun never set, and we played outside past midnight, under the northern lights. Mom bought us rubber boots and embroidered mukluks. When our group of girls charged through the village, I loved to look down at all the identical black boots scaring up dirt. There was a movie every evening shown in the community center. The movies only cost a dime, and if the children didn't have the change, they just strolled in anyway, because a blind man collected the money at the door.

Mostly, we played in a big group of girls led by Minnie and Mina, but there was a half-white girl our mother took us to visit sometimes. Lizzie's father had worked at the Hudson bay store, but he was long gone. The other girls did not seem to like Lizzie much. She looked a little like me—we were the same height and had the same dark blond waist length braids. Lizzie and I sat quietly drinking tea in her grandmother's kitchen. She seemed mournful and pale and I preferred Minnie and Mina, who always laughed.

Jimmy took us to meet a woman who had been in the first documentary ever made, Nanook of the North. Later, in college, I watched the film. Nanook paddles a kyak to shore. One by one, his entire family pops out of the recesses of the boat, all huge smiles. Watching the movie, I remember feeling suffocated, imagining the whole family curled against each other inside the kyak, pressed against fur and skin. This woman had been a little girl in the movie, but now she was an old woman with no teeth. She told winter stories of people losing their way in snowstorms, just trying to walk to their neighbor's house for a little company. She said they would be found a few feet from the house, and always naked. All alone, unable to see anything but

white, you went crazy. You felt hotter and hotter. You ripped off all your clothes, burrowed into a snow bank and fell asleep.

Finally, the ship arrived. Everyone went down to the shore to help unload, passing wooden crates up the beach. It was like the fourth of July, like Thanksgiving. The whole village turned giddy, crazy for sweets. Jimmy went to the store and came home with four huge bottles of Pepsi. His wife poured pink candied popcorn into the baby's crib. The children walked around eating licorice and pretzel sticks. Jimmy drank the Pepsi quickly and sent my sister and me to the store to buy more. We felt very important. On our way back with the bottles, a boy yelled, Ugly white girls! He threw a stone at us.

I felt stripped, bleached. We hugged the Pepsi and ran, the bottles slapping against our stomachs. Later, I told Minnie and Mina

what the boy had said, waiting for their laughter to wipe the words away. But they

just shook their heads. They said that Jimmy's little girl told everyone we were ugly white devils. I hid my pale hands in my pockets.

Then Mom asked if we would like to take an Eskimo girl home with us. How about Minnie and Mina both? I asked. Mom said it had to be Lizzie, because she was half white and shunned by the others. Lizzie's mother wanted us to take her away for a while. I was disappointed because Lizzie was not much fun.

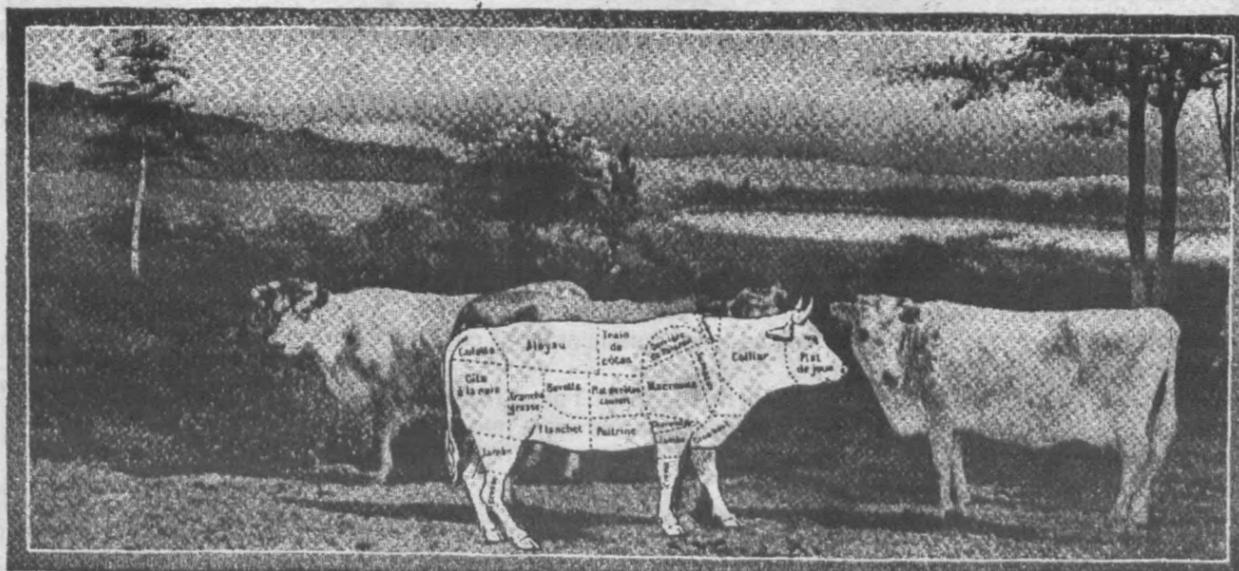
The night before we left, I went to Lizzie's to help her pack. There was nothing in her room but a couch cushion on the floor where she slept. She gathered up a small bag of clothes. On the plane, Lizzie's face greyed and her mouth puckered. She wouldn't talk to me. I thought she was sick, but Mom whispered that she was scared. When we reached Montreal, Lizzie saw her first tree. She kissed it.

In Montreal, Dad bought Lizzie, Becky and me winter dress coats. Even though it was the end of summer, we all wore our white fake fur coats around the underground mall. Someone asked Dad if Lizzie and I were twins. Dad said, Yes, we were. Lizzie smiled and took my hand. Then we all drove home.

*Micah Perks lives in Ithaca. She teaches at Hobart, and is the author of We Are Gathered Here. Were the Wild Things Were is from her memoir-in-progress.*



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# Message from the Deep

Linda Healey

It was strange; when I had to see you, when my hunger got the better of reason and resistance, you were inevitably on the street. One rainy Saturday afternoon I'd gotten up and walked out of "Les Enfants du Paradis" with half an hour left to go because I'd known without a doubt I'd find you at the taxi stand; I did. And yet there was always that element of surprise, the duck-duck-goose suspense of walking along the line of cabs, looking for your dark green sedan.

On nights like this one, forces were at work. It was certain I could step out onto the avenue from the side entrance to the Yard and find you—bam!—first in line. Seeing you was like coming into a warm house from a blizzard, like a baby recognizing its mother's face. The cab itself seemed hyper-real; it was more angular, more deeply colored, more brightly lit than all the rest. When I saw it, my heart sat up and beat Yes, a clac of delight and apprehension. Because seeing you was a dare, seeing you was going AWOL. I punctured my universe and floated free, relaying my flight plan to nobody.

I opened the door and slid into the front seat.

"Hi."

"So, you came." Your astonishing smile laid open your face for a single beat before the mask came over it again and you reached for my hand. I felt the warmth of your fingers and it was all right: I was here, I was here.

You slid the gearshift into Drive and we moved up Mass. Ave.

"You are going home?" you asked.

"I was going home."

"And now you want to go with me?" You threw me an arch glance. "But I am working."

I pushed the cigarette lighter in and looked out the window. We were heading in the direction of where I lived, but I waited.

"I started only at ten, and there has been nothing," you said. "One dollar, two dollars—that's it." The lighter popped out and I lit a cigarette. There was a short silence as you appeared to concentrate on the road. "You were out?" you added finally.

"I went to the ballet. Then I went and had a drink with these obnoxious Harvard people." I glanced at you. "Don't look that way."

"What way?" You shrugged. "You are free."

"That's right," I said. "And here I am."

"I have to work a lot," you went on. "I have to make many payments." The cab made a smooth right turn off the avenue, back toward Lechmere. "We need to buy milk. I don't have anything," you continued in the same aggrieved tone.

I relaxed, exhaling smoke. And now the night shook itself and uncurled.

The night itself is marginal: secret and insomniac. Driving through the streets, we passed dark houses and cruising police cars, the faintly glowing windows of jazz clubs and white-lit 24-hour convenience stores, their interiors as starkly exposed as X-rays. We stopped at one in Inman Square and I waited in the car while you went inside. The evening I'd spent—the theater, the conversation, the illness-at-ease—shrank up into a tiny dot, like the fading image on a worn-out TV tube, and disappeared.

You drove slowly, deliberately, and held my hand. We didn't talk. Your hand felt like a balm.

We parked on your street. Your building, faced in tarpaper shingles, had an almost frontier-town look; the wooden steps were weathered and gave



L. Glenn '64

slightly under our feet. As we went in you gave me a look that meant "Quiet!" and we made our way silently upstairs to your door.

Inside, I had the feeling of having escaped to another country. The heroine in a fairy tale enters the robbers' cave and sits down by the fire, removing her shawl; I took off my coat and laid it over the armchair, then chose a cassette and snapped it into the tape player. You'd gone into the kitchen.

"You want to eat?" you called.

"I'm not hungry."

"I can make soup."

"I really don't want anything, really."

I sat on the bed and smoked. My shoes were on the floor, my feet tucked up under me. The long black skirt I was wearing spread around me in a circle. I'd put my scarf around my shoulders; the room was chill.

After a while you brought in the tea and set it on the table by the bed. "I am making soup," you said, giving me a pained look I couldn't quite identify. "I haven't had anything."

"Go ahead—please. I just want some tea, that's all."

You could make soup out of anything, out of water and ketchup: delicious hot soup, thick and spicy. Your kitchen always looked bare to me—a bottle of oil, a bag of dried mint, a head of garlic—but you were constantly making pots of rice or potatoes, omelets and soups. Black olives, peanuts, honey—those were the tastes of being with you.

You sat with me and ate, breaking off pieces of round bread. The heater flamed up, warming the room, while the voice of a thousand-year-old man wailed at us out of the tiny speaker. He sounded ancient and sad, as if he knew about every sorrow I would ever have and was telling me about them. A deep feeling of contentment settled over me.

"You want a date?" you said, offering me the package.

I took one. The date was papery on the surface, dense and jammy within. I felt its sweetness dissolve on my tongue.

"These dates are terrible," you said. "If you knew the dates of my home like honey. They are big, on the stem, gold-colored. They are fantastic. This is not a date." You put one in your mouth.

"They taste all right to me."

You gave me your look. This look was difficult to classify, but part of it said: American. Part of it said: child. It was an expression of disdain not without fondness, a look of irony. You reached for a paper towel, but I grabbed your hand and put one of your fingers in my mouth.

"What are you doing?" you said, startled.

"It tastes good," I insisted.

Your face changed again, became intent. You took your finger back and made as if to draw me to you, but I sat up and said "Wait." Then I went into the bathroom.

When I came out you were standing. I went over to you and we put our arms around each other. With one quick gesture you flipped up the back of my skirt, and your hands found the garters, my skin.

"What is this?" you said, your voice heavy with displeasure. I didn't answer, and after a minute we lay back on the bed.

In the beginning you'd sometimes frightened me. You did odd things. On a nail on the wall, next to the bed, hung a strange object made out of metal and wound wire that suggested some familiar, everyday item I was always just on the verge of identifying: a cheese slicer or a cocktail strainer or a geometry compass. One night you took it off the wall and held it up in front of you, like a hypnotist. "Watch," you said, turning it this way and that. I watched, thinking how ridiculous it was and trying not to show how nervous you were making me. Another time you asked me if I could hear the bedsprings vibrating. "They are vibrating with the stars," you said.

You took off my clothes, carefully pulling my sweater over my head, unzipping my skirt, tugging my slip down over my hips. You turned me, and as you unfastened the tiny unfamiliar hooks I felt your Opinion taking form over us like a cloud, although how much was disapproval and how much desire was hard to say.

Then we were both naked, we were under the covers, we'd passed over the wall. I shut my eyes and saw you, your father, your grandfather, your great-grandfather—all your forebears stretching back in an unbroken line. I saw bright sunshine, latticework, whitewashed walls, a blue door; a carpet, a tower, the sea.

We moved. We moved in a pattern as time-honored as a woman drawing water from a well, as a man picking up his son in his arms, as two hands breaking open a loaf of bread. Nothing could have been more prosaic—the moment when you groaned and came to rest upon me, the way I twisted your hair in my fingers, your brief kiss on my collarbone—but we gave no thought to the power of prosaic acts.

We slept.

I woke up in your arms, my cheek on your chest. The lights were on and the room had the dark-side-of-the-moon feeling of 3:00 a.m. You were asleep, the light rimming your profile, following the ever-so-slightly aquiline curve of your nose. In sleep your features took on the nuzzled look of the drugged lion cub I'd once seen paraded on the beach at Alicante: blunted rather than vulnerable. You looked both older and younger than you were. The line of your chin softened, but your forehead smoothed out and, for the moment, suspended judgment on the world. Your black lashes, your eyebrows, your black beard and black, black hair...your skin was chalky from the long winter, lighter than mine and more velvety. I watched you breathe.

I was sober now, and my mouth felt gummy. The room was stuffy and I knew I should turn the heater off. I got out of bed and put on your striped bathrobe, stepping carefully over the black garter belt.

In the bathroom I washed my face and brushed my teeth with your toothbrush, and drank a glass of water. My eyes in the mirror looked back at me steadily; they seemed for once devoid of any editorial comment that I could trace.

Back in the big room, I turned off the heat and the lights and crept into bed beside you.

Linda Healey is a former resident of Ithaca who is currently living in Paris. *Message from the Deep* is an excerpt from her novel-in-progress.

## January

*What feels like the season of endings*

*Sometimes marks a beginning:*

*In the white, snow-reflected light*

*Things are real and plain, illusions*

*fall away.*

*I sit at the kitchen table, finger*

*hooked to the morning coffee,*

*Black in a white cup.*

*In dreams I was held at gunpoint,*

*My father kidnapped by people in ski masks;*

*But this morning is too bright for*

*crime,*

*the kitchen table stays where it is told,*

*The coffee steams discreetly.*

*I must be beginning to understand*

*this world,*

*Because it scares and confuses me.*

*I cling tightly to the clean white coffee cup,*

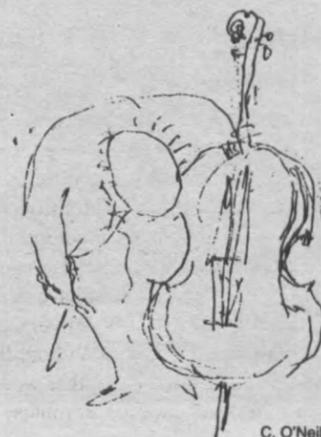
*The kitchen where everything is in place.*

*It's a beginning.*

—Margaret Nichols

In my mind's eye, the unmapped territory of our deeper selves is shut off from the daylight world of everyday life by a huge paneled door. Poetry is what happens when that door unaccountably swings open and we get a glimpse into the other, truer world. I see poetry as a gift from the unknown part of oneself—the speaking of a voice you didn't know you had, saying things you didn't realize you knew.

Margaret Nichols is a rare book librarian who lives in Ithaca and works at Cornell University. She has recently returned to writing poetry after a 15-year silence.



C. O'Neill