Painted Bride Quarterly
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FIN DE SIECLE

August has begun

to exhaust summer:

the end of this century

is becoming exhausted,

exhaled, spewing history,

all lost and ever-remembered pieces

flail out in the heat:

crumbling Edwardian couches

hold battered remains,

the mottled pages tell tales

of giants, heroes,

pouring paint, spilling wine,

crashing cars,

clinging to the light and indulgence

of a young century.

Icons and bits of stained glass

grow wild

in our untrimmed gardens,

trash lines the hedges:

at the edge of the freeway

a glass box keeps

the last holders of the age.

In the brown glare of August

you lie spent before this last precipice—

are you tired?

It’s no wonder

the heat sucks all air

and forces brains and bones to repeat:

the exhaustion of history

looks like raw canvas.
ABSENCE

Like an animal
who smells night,
smells fur and rain,
my body rings
and grace is something
palpable we breathe
in the dull light

and grace is not
what I find later
when there is not you
but just dull light
and the tedium of birds;
hollowed by the need
my body only breathes,
grace ruining me.
THE METHOD OF STORY TELLING

Born in 1929, Lu Wenfu has lived for many years in Suzhou, an ancient and beautiful garden city in South China. He was a journalist for a local newspaper for about 15 years and now is a writer and vice-president of the Suzhou branch of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles. Lu's work depicts ordinary life in Suzhou including, of course, its famous gardens. Careful tourists will have no difficulty in finding in these gardens the walls Lu describes in "The Boundary Wall." His story "Hidden Deep Lane," which made him famous in the 50s, has as its central character a prostitute living in one of the city's many lanes. In the early 60s, the late Mao Dun, a founding father of modern Chinese literature, wrote an article praising Lu's works. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) Lu was cruelly persecuted for his writing, but after the fall of the radicals in 1976, he started writing again. Two of his short stories and one of his novels won national prizes in 1978, 1980, and 1983. The present story was first published in the third issue of THE YALU RIVER in 1988.

Now that I am getting older, I think that I often make mistakes. This is mainly because I have known more and more stories. Some of them I learned from books or from operas; others were the happenings in my own life; still others were pure hearsay. These are not necessarily complete stories with climaxes and endings or complicated plots. Sometimes, they are just short sayings, anecdotes, maxims, or even disconnected daily trivialities. Anyhow, they are the things which everybody is familiar with and associates with certain moral values. Stories are past happenings. Anything that happened in the past I categorize as a story, which is then stored in my memory tank. They then become, without my realizing it, my moral code and philosophy of life. Whenever anything new crops up, I refer to it at a speed faster than that of the most advanced computer and judge whether it is right or wrong accordingly.

As soon as the word spread that Yao Xiaoming had been promoted to be an important official, I at once referred to the stories in my memory tank. Yao Xiaoming was once called Little Ming, the only son of Mr Yao Deming who lived in the lane. I had in my memory tank a lot of stories about Yao Xiaoming. For instance, when he was ten years old, at heart he was a street urchin, who would pick up broken tiles and bricks at the canal dock and give them to Chen Xiaogang to fight with other kids. But he himself would not take part in the fighting. To make a long story short, after working in the rural area during the cultural revolution, he returned to the city and passed the college entrance examination, achieving the highest total in six exams. Everybody in the lane was proud of him and came to Yao Deming's house to offer their congratulations, which cost Yao Deming twenty packets of cigarettes and half a pound of tea. Not long after that, people were talking about what a despicable creature Yao Xiaoming was! He had turned his back on his past. After entering college he had
deserted his fiancee in the rural area and he had become a modern Chen Shimei. That is too bad! Chen Shimei's refusal to acknowledge his former wife is an ancient story known to all. It is an unwritten statute book of morality. Whoever violates it is in trouble. Very difficult to be rehabilitated!

Never underestimate my memory bank! Nor should you think that I am the only one who has such a bank.

"Hey, I long ago predicted that Yao Xiaoming would surely become an official. When he was a boy, he picked up broken bricks for others to throw while he assumed an air of honesty. Nowadays, all the leaders like honest and obedient people. But when people are too honest, they can get nothing done. So it is best to appear honest while remaining an artful devil."

"This guy will certainly forget us once he becomes somebody. After he entered college, he became another Chen Shimei. Will he think much of you once he becomes a VIP?" Therefore, the story of Chen Shimei has taken on a wider meaning.

"Forget it. Official positions must be filled by people, anyway. The more important position Yao holds, the better. For the neighbors and local folks will certainly benefit from it. Remember Zhu Yuanzhang who became the first emperor of the Ming dynasty? Nobody in his home county—Peixian County—had to pay tax! If the king of Wu state—He Lu—had not been buried in the Tiger Hill, who would like to climb that mound? Now look at the numerous stalls, shops at the foot of the Tiger Hill. Many people earn a living out of it and some have even made a fortune!"

"That's right! Friends, let's ask Yao Xiaoming to find a way to smooth out our lane, repair the stone canal banks and the docks. Which VIP doesn't try to favor his local folks?"

"Hey, Chen Dakui! You are in luck now! Yao Xiaoming was brought up in your family. Now that he has become an important official, he will never forget you. Go and ask him to buy you a few cartons of good cigarettes, so that we can all share some!"

Look, everyone is checking his memory bank and digging out miscellaneous stories. These are derogatory and they also serve as touch stones: if he remembers these stories, he is a good guy; if not, . . . .
son. Though he had a bit of ambition, he did not want to push it to the
extent that the fish is dead and the net is broken. He knew too well that
only the big fish can break the net while the medium and small fish have
to squeeze out through the mesh and pay particular attention to their tails.
If they wag their tails, they may get stuck in the net. That was why Yao
did not brag, or even deliver an inauguration speech. He only wanted to
quietly accomplish three things:

Number One was to work out temporary solutions to the existing pro-
blems. When he assumed office, he would draft his own speeches instead
of asking his secretary to do it, or if he had nothing to say, he would not
speak at all. He did not want to waste others’ time and energy. In this
way, he hoped to create a new work style and a slightly different way of
life. Number Two was to get at the root of the problems. To the various
reports that needed approvals and instructions as well as the problems that
needed solutions, all the responsible personnel concerned must make de-
cisions, develop solutions. No more endless discussions or irresponsible “act-
ing at one’s discretion.” Taijiquan—traditional Chinese shadow boxing—
should be replaced by western boxing. Westerners need to learn Taijiquan
whereas Chinese should learn western boxing. This would enliven the life
of both. Number Three was a matter of being strict with himself, namely,
especially not exploiting his office for personal benefit. Certainly there was
nothing new, nothing outstanding, about these three simple rules. Even
if he could put them into practice, it would not qualify him as a reformer.
He was only thinking about his own job.

Yao Xiaoming did not realize that his simple rules would not work. If
he did not want to attend a particular meeting, people would say that his
absence meant he did not attach any importance to it. So he had to let
a chauffeur drive him to the meeting. Once there, if he did not speak,
people would suspect that he wanted to give a speech, only he would not
say so. They were afraid that if they took him literally, they would offend
him. If he made an effort to read up and draft his speech, people would
say that he had an excellent secretary to do it for him. What was more,
later on, Yao would discover that a speech over which he labored for hours
was useless. All his audience wanted was his approval for more funds or
the use of his influence for something or other. All the important ques-
tions were considered after the formal meetings. All this made him gradually
understand how he should go about things. He learned to let his secretary
write his speeches. Then when it was his turn to speak, he would deliver
one sentence—“Congratulations . . . .” As time passed, he acquired a
nickname “Congratulations Yao.” Well, as long as it solved the problem,
why bother about the nickname? It really did! Take for instance the open-
ing of the new plastic factory. He was asked to cut the ribbon. While visiting
the new workshop, the director of the factory asked him for increased
funding:

“In the beginning we had money, but there was no equipment available
in China. Now the equipment is available, but we have no money . . .
I know you have your own difficulties. But mine are greater than yours.
Money isn’t the only problem. Even if we had the equipment, we still need
people to operate it. Where on earth can I find skilled mould workers . . . .”

“Mould workers!!” An idea struck Yao Xiaoming. He immediately recalled the image of the overbearing Chen Xiaogang. On account of this childhood friend, Yao had received many a dressing down. Because he had refused to use his influence to obtain an apartment for Chen Xiaogang, his friend’s father Chen Dakui hung around in his home every day, sullenly smoking and drinking tea with Yao’s father. Chen Dakui’s somber countenance told Yao in no uncertain terms that he would never give up before achieving his goal. When this sit-down protest failed to produce the desired effect, Chen Xiaogang rushed to his house: “You people are getting on in the world. You are all determined to climb up the social ladder and you forget that we were playmates when we all had bare bottoms. Who would say that I don’t deserve to be called your true friend? When you were small, I took care to wipe your bum when you went to the toilet. During the ‘cultural revolution’, I acted as your hatchet man; I took the lead in occupying the headquarters of the rival T faction, I was stabbed in the shoulder and my ear was almost cut off. . . . If I am not in trouble, why should I look you up? If you are willing to help, you won’t fear a knife in your chest; if you are not, you wouldn’t swat a housefly for fear of getting contagion. Forget it. Anyhow, it’s taken me over thirty years to figure you out. Go ahead, you bureaucrat. . . .” Yao Xiaoming was so angry that his legs felt like jelly. Official posts were not designed for human beings. Everybody is opposed to taking advantages of one’s position and power. Yet if you really don’t, a flood of inventive will be poured over you!

“That’s right! To look for a competent mould worker is now ten times more difficult than an incompetent engineer. Look at that guy with a moustache. He is only a Grade II worker, but has an air of a Grade VIII worker. What can we do? He is the only one we can count on.”

Yao Xiaoming blurted out: “I can recommend a mould worker to you, a really good one. Only he wants an apartment.”

“An apartment . . . Yes, we have kept a few in our new apartment building for recruiting worthy people. No problem.”

This was much easier than Yao had expected: “You are a good guy.”

“Thank you. But the fact is that you’ve solved one of my big problems. Chief, how about the money. . . .”

Yao was equally brisk: “What else can I say? Now that you have heart disease, you have to see the doctor.”

Yao felt extremely happy and completely relaxed. It was just like the saying: Hit the mark by a fluke; score a lucky hit. It was by mere accident that the fish bone was dislodged from his throat. Otherwise, he would still be having a hard time with Chen Dakui sitting in and Chen Xiaogang cursing away. Then he examined his conscience: does this mean he had been looking after his own interests by taking advantage of his position? No! The difficulty in the plastic factory had to be solved. Sooner or later the loan would have to be made and the low interest rate was still within the limit; transferring Chen Xiaogang made the best possible use of the man. He would get an apartment and this would satisfy both sides. Yao was so happy, he broke with his usual practice and drank two more cups of wine.
All of a sudden, people in the lane began to show respect to Yao. Their attitude and talk were less casual than before. Nobody knew why. "Mayor Yao, have you had your supper?" The official title was now formally used in addressing him. Yao Xiaoming, Xiaoming, or Young Yao were all abandoned.

"The weather forecast says there'll be a thunderstorm tonight."

"That's good. After the storm, it'll be cooler." Yao responded to every remark. The questions were superfluous and the answers were off hand. He looked at the old people, calm, and at ease, and waited for them to put their cards on the table.

"Mayor Yao, when do you think our lane, the canal bank and the docks will be renovated?"

Yao smiled. It was not totally unexpected. After he accidentally solved Chen Xiaogang's housing problem, he intentionally inquired about the renovation problem. If you are interested in water power, you study hydromechanics. The same thing is true of people. Hydraulic drive is smoother and has less friction than gear drive. Though Yao had no definite ideas about solving the problem, he did not want to shake it off. Instead, he took the initiative:

"Why, you mean I should put in a word for it?"

"Yes, once you put in a word, it'll be solved."

"Things aren't that easy, I'm afraid. I told you before that this must be done under the direction of the city planning bureau. No individual has the final say."

"Well, ... in that case, we won't live to see it."

"You'll live to see it. You will. Ah, be patient." Yao Xiaoming did not give any definite answer. But he did not say that he wished everybody would live to be a hundred either. In his remarks, there was a note of certainty and hope. Please don't think that those old men showed no understanding of the times. They had experienced the hardships of life. Officials can only go so far in their remarks. Well, would you try to make them promise?! So one after another, they heaped compliments on him. Then, they turned to talk about the weather again.

If you hope, you have to wait. Only when things are so hopeless that you have given up hope and forget about it do your hopes come true. The following spring when flowers were in full blossom, the lane was turned upside down—the construction team marched in!

People poured out to welcome the workers as if they were combat heroes. People surrounded the team leader, asking him numerous questions. He answered them simply and directly: "Old uncles, you don't have to know the details. I only want to say that you are lucky to live in the same lane with a VIP. To tell you the truth, the canal is eight kilometers long. All the retaining walls and lanes on both banks will be reconstructed. But to complete the whole project will take God knows how long. But your lane will be done first of all as an example, as a show case; then we'll ask the government for more money. Just think: How could we do a sloppy job here? Would we do slovenly work in front of an important man's house?
Even if we don’t want to save face, we do want to save our skins! Stone balustrades, wooden ones and what not. You probably have no idea about modernization. This project is no small thing.” The team leader was rather talkative and humorous. He made the old men so happy that they all offered him cigarettes and four thermos bottles of boiled water.

Summer came again. Chinese wisteria climbed the trellis. Flowers smelled sweet. Trees gave shade. After sunset, every family set their small tables out in the garden, small stools and cane chairs for eating supper, drinking tea, enjoying the cool and chatting away. The young people wanted to create a new atmosphere. So they put up a temporary wire for a long string of flashing red and green lamps under the trellis. To the accompaniment of popular music, the young drank coffee, just as they would in a bar. Children were playing to their hearts’ content, shouting, running, playing hide and seek and so on. Their parents had nothing to worry about, for there were banisters along the river banks. No child would accidentally fall into the river. Night had become attractive and enchanted.

I could no longer stay in the house. Every evening I would come down to join others in enjoying the cool. Wandering about unhurriedly in this open-air club, I would sit down around a small table with my old friends, drinking strong tea and refilling our cups till strong tea became pure boiled water while we told and retold old stories and new ones.

Yao Xiaoming also came to join us. Instead of staying in his house to write speeches, he often strolled to our table, as if to mix with the people and get to know what was on their minds.

“How is everybody doing? What are you chatting about?”

My friends stood up hurriedly to offer him their seats. I followed suit, even though I was an old man.

“Mayor Yao, everybody is talking about you this summer.”

“Oh?! Am I worth talking about?”

“Everyone in this lane is saying that without you the garden would never have been built!”

“Ah . . . That isn’t really true. It was done according to the plan. I only spoke on your behalf during the discussion. I said I hoped they would not simply pay lip service to the welfare of the people. They should not only care about tourist resorts. And they should start work where the people have a lot to complain about.”

My old friends all admired him from the bottom of their hearts. They all felt that the man who had promoted him was really far-sighted. Who said Yao was Chen Shimei? That was not correct! When he went to work in the rural commune, he had a pretty fiancée. But that woman thought that Yao did not have a bright future and since she could not wait any longer, she married a VIP. However, the VIP was down on his luck when Yao returned to the city and entered college. So the woman regretted what she had done and returned to Yao, crying and wanting to go back to him. Of course Yao ignored her and poured water in front of the horse . . .
Once upon a time, there was a scholar in his fifties. His name was Zhu Maichen. He failed the national examination many times. He remained poor and his wife could not put up with that any longer. Finally, she left him. The next year, he passed the examination and came back to his hometown like a hero. He had red silk draped over his shoulder and was riding a big horse that was led by a servant. When his former wife learned this, she came, knelt down in front of his horse, and asked to go back to him. Zhu asked people to bring a pail of water. Then he poured the water in front of his horse and said to the woman: ‘‘If you can collect the water on the ground and put it back in the pail, we can be reunited.’’ The woman felt disappointed and insulted. So she went away and later committed suicide. What has been done cannot be undone.

According to the rules of story telling, Chen Shimei should be sentenced to life imprisonment for not recognizing his former wife, while Zhu Maichen, pouring water before the horse, was certainly innocent and should have red silk draped over his shoulder, and be proud and elated!

Yao Xiaoming was thoroughly rehabilitated. It was such a difficult job!
CANONICITY

If Eve had an alphabet besides bone,
wasn’t obliged to use rats’ ribs to stitch
waterbags, flint to carve her husband’s breech
clouts, or save scrap for catching blood each moon
she isn’t pregnant, we’d have more to go on.

Her story disappeared with the cook-smoke.
Cain’s dog whines and scratches at the mat, vacant
now for weeks, where her son slept. She suns
it every day, picking off nits, as if

he will come home. The river was a four
day walk and the reeds cut her fingers. Waste
nothing, evolution’s answer to the curse,
burns her up. She would like to laugh
as Adam digs with a charred stick lines in dust.
BEARING THE LEGEND

A white pickup, flecked with insincerity
Naked to the road, a ford
bearing the legend
Found On Road Dead
I am anxious and bleeding
from holes in my hands
Through the back window
The blackness of two
very close in the drivers seat
as sharp as choke chains
scissors and cigarettes
The disfigured bouncing butt
smokes out and scatters light
in its haunted crash
Turning from the road
to her his eyes tell
He traces a heart
I need some bandages
mercurochrome, gauze
a tourniquet
Into the guarding rail
CURSING SOFTLY AT THE FOOT OF THE GOVERNMENT

Draw a breath
With this piece of chalk
As you do this
Think of me
Walking without shoes without a home
The dust not sinking beneath my feet
Not swirling in soft haze in the ripples
And folds of my greatcoat
The birds not filling my ashen ears
With song and twine
With this piece of chalk
Draw the weight of my soul
Guess my age
Take my fortune
Leave me without a penny
Nothing but a greatcoat
You issue me, a sarcastic aside
No bar of soap to clean the worms out of these wounds
No bandages to stop me from giving
Out all that I own
I have given it to you
You in return have tied
A yellow ribbon that twists and winds
With wind like a finish line
Around this sweet last place
Draw a breath
With this piece of chalk
KEITH RICHARDS SINGS BACK-UP

I know so little by heart—
some country music, a bus
schedule and fear—most of all

fear. I left the window
open for my brother
so he wouldn’t knock; even

so I was always awake.
My room was the best place
for spying on the front door

as I was taught to do
when the bell rang and I
was home alone from school.

Early on I learned the rules
of who gets in and who
stays out, when to follow

the dog’s instincts and growl
or watch the road from the dark
house. A long time ago

someone asked me, “When will
you give me everything?”
When I can turn my back

to the road, sleep without
waking to a whisper
that isn’t only a branch

and doesn’t go away though
the lights are on and my
eyes are open, when I’ll

follow the dog’s instincts
and trust an open hand.
Even then it won’t be you.
DAMN NEAR

I try to avoid the kind a man
who doesn't stick around
when the rents due
or when the liquor runs out
practicing this
and knowing Jesus
has gotten me through alot
cause life
is always throwing
bowling balls
at your pins.
For instance
when I got the call
saying
after alot of searching
he found my name and number
and am I
his real mother.
I could a told him no
but lying doesn't seem right
when someone was inside you
for nine months
besides
he was calling long distance.
We met
sixteen and looking so much like me
damn near
blew my mind
like they xeroxed my face
onto a young boy.
And as strange as the whole thing was
all the questions
all the reasons
all the staring
it was a real nice visit.
THE BROKEN COLUMN: FRIDA KAHLO SPEAKS

You're a bunch of dopes
to believe death
is my lover.
Sure, I have skeletons
over my bed.
The doctor says
I can paint
only an hour today.
But I've just bitten
into a fruit,
peeled off
the bitter lime-green
rind, sucked
out the stubborn,
golden juice
till it wets my
slight moustache,
my chin, while
Tall thin flowers
watch.

Diego,
rose of my skull,
I wore a ruffled skirt,
a peasant shawl
to please you,
but even stones bleed.
The glass towers
of Detroit, the steel
rods of New York
have pierced me
through, a wound oozes,
little still-born
forms emerge,
and we are back
in Mexico,
but nothing heals.

I see my house
full of workers,
students, comrades.
No one paints
how you kill a chicken.
Wash a floor.
When I’m gone
you’ll be all that’s left.
You were always
more important
than painting.
Believe in your lives.

When I die
I will not be a ghost.
I want to be burned
to ashes, scorched
to a tiny tongue of flame.

Remember me
Remember I am in
a space
self-created,
a place where women,
who create everything,
have life everlasting.
WILD RESTS

Only musicians
who compose in moonlight
are aware of the wild
rests in music.

Critics will say, "'You
can only find these rests
in great symphonies.'"

But they've been known
to drop in on the simplest
folk songs.

They arise suddenly,
without apparent motivation
in previous bars, movements,
or motifs.

They arise spontaneously
as if they were simply drops
from the composer's ink pen.

Wild rests are not controlled.
They control the measure,
setting it free
in a way a composer only
dreams of in a wild dream,
where she was not she,
but music herself come to dance
in every colorful manifestation of soul.

You cannot beg, borrow, or steal
for wild rests.
You have to be lucky or smart
or an honest to goodness fool.
LOCAL TALENT IN A WESTERN TOWN

When he sings "Old Rugged Cross" at funerals, he's hardly there. The appropriate sounds, that's all he presents, dependable pomp.

When he sings at weddings, he wipes his head, hitches his pants up, and bellies to the organ: "O promise me that someday you and I..." His old style pumps the stale air.

His wife's outgrown him but remains true blue. This does not appear in his vibrato. His son has drunk himself out of college. The performance doesn't alter by a quaver.

Surely the one this man is serving is some dusty local god who rode the railroad into town with shabby apparatus to grant funerals their plain boxes, weddings their sandy duration, and fathers their endlessly silent, suffering love.
WHAT YOU CANNOT LEAVE BEHIND

Come back here, man, with your rope
and anger, with the clouds
circling like a black lasso. Your tie
loosened from your throat,
now pinned around mine.

I gave what you demanded,
the way clouds fill up
with the small black dots of the sea.
You gave back wide torrents of rain.

Rain, fall down around this huddled figure,
a portrait in still life, distilled,
as stilling as a wind that whips
the clouds to shreds.

I will gather you one day,
a picnic of forgiving,
The basket, loaded like a gun,
with what you cannot leave behind.
LET ME KNOW HOW YOU FEEL

I didn’t know that jacket
turned you on—thought it was me
I gave it away and now I can’t
get you to bed at all

hope the guy who bought it
for 50 cents from Goodwill
doesn’t show up here.
We keep too many secrets.

Was it the corduroy
the cut, the lined silk
inside sleeves or what?
the stuffed, square shoulders?

And you always tell me
get rid of your tired
your hungry old clothes
I’ll never do that again.
THE MEN ON THE MOON

Barbara passed out
just before our astronauts
landed on the moon
for the first time.
Bob was too drunk to stand up.
A girl I hardly knew
helped me remove
Barbara's clothes,
putting her to bed,
while Bob opened another beer
and watched TV.
We took everything off
while the men on the moon
sent their messages back.
Jenny looked at Barbara's breasts
and said, "Gee, they're big,"
touching herself.
She never had to wear a bra.
I remember
Barbara had yellow butterflies
sewn on her panties
and her bra size
was the biggest I'd ever seen.
The next morning
Bob wanted to beat me up
although I'd just tried
to help his wife
get comfortable, I said.
I don't remember
the names of the astronauts,
but history always was
my worst subject.
TWO CEMETERIES IN A TOWN IN THE KURPIE FOREST

In one the stones are rubbed smooth,
   names and dates erased,
petrified loaves of black bread
by which children without souls
who won't be buried here
picnic and bask in the sun.

In the other two mulish cows
staked to crumbling walls.
Two brothers who don't fetch them
play an accordion waltz:
each fingers with one hand
the slick raised markers.

In one the river robs the graveyard.
   All prayers for the dead
run off into water.
   Without a splash a still-mourned
icon of memory dances across,
just when spite and neglect
had rendered it ancient
and irrecoverable.

Lomza, Poland
DON'T DWELL ON THINGS THAT CAN'T BE KNOWN

Don't dwell on things that can't be known, meaningless signs, unsettling symbols. The wild swan you shot, then nursed—its mangled wing reminded you, you claimed, of something far and linked to you, destroyed. Thankless for your care, languishing, without a grudge. But when it had to die its burnished eye rebuked the one who drove it to another realm of being.

translated from the German by Leonard Kress
DANIEL LUSK

Hope persists in the poems of Daniel Lusk even when it might seem to disappear, as happens in this beautiful concluding image:

Bright fish of hope jumped
and fell back
into the lake of stars.

Here the stars retain, forever, the promise dramatically expressed by the 'Bright fish of hope' which jumped and fell back. These honest and consoling poems help us to look beyond the immediate intoxication of hope to the deeper state from which that experience has emerged.

'Church,' for example, reminds us that true light requires obscurity, shadow, also; and in 'Wings Folding Up' we understand that the heron (with whom the people looking out at it, will never be one) exists in a state beyond hope, in a state of simply being all that it can be.

The clearest expression of why we need hope may perhaps occur at the end of 'Surfacing' where Daniel Lusk brilliantly describes the very moment of awakening. As we pass from our boundless unconscious life to our limited, functioning daylight selves, hope is the remnant which remains to see us through:

Now the air, as light
overcomes us, is perfumed
with hope,
though daytime sky seems infinitely
smaller
than dawn, oceanic, promised.

The great gift which Daniel Lusk offers us in these poems is a glimpse of that 'oceanic, promised' life beyond hope.

James Haba
SOLSTICE

In a dream the boats are burning.
A woman lies on the dock,
starlight her only clothing.

Pure gold, the moon shakes free
of dark water, growing as it rises.
Now it is bigger than a man's head.

Lovers sweat without touching.
Outside the window, red birds fall
from the branches; no one sees them.

Magnolias swing their great heads
by the shore; they are blooming
with pelicans.

The sea backs away from the sand—
withholding, withholding. A woman comes forth,
unhurried, wearing her power.
WINGS FOLDING UP

Mistaken, the blue heron
appears at poolside,
compressing the air, stilts
lowered, wings folding up.

Drawn out of the upper world
by his own shadow on the face of the water.
A fisherman in tall waders and weekend hat,
he waits for what will be.

People inside the house
gather solemnly by the black piano,
looking out. They know
they will never be one with the heron, never
be wire-walker and billowing tent,
unhinged, like clowns spilling out of a kiddy car,
trapeze and swinger and net.

A child crossing the street
in Ulster, fists in his pockets, grows old
before he reaches the other side. Sister
crawls home from school on her belly
through the crossfire.

When you tell me this,
I feel why peasants weep
for miracles. How,
by its absence, money learns
to glow in the dark like magic.

A child turns out of the ticket line,
eyes confused like the eyes of an amateur
falling, in her dream the net
vanishes, the hands closing on nothing.

Alone in a kindergarten flock,
the child flies down the hill to the playfield
where elephants, like a forest of stumps,
like a wall, raised first these hopes,
the Christmases and birthdays that never happened.
Think what she would ask
the glittering woman from the bareback show
by her battered trailer, lipstick
on her teeth as she drinks coffee
from a paper cup:

do you ever get discouraged?
Are you ever afraid the others
will yell at you
if you do something wrong? Were you ever
shy?

Look, kid, let me show you
how to grow tall. Just
do this. Then "snap," and they believe it.
From the forbidden flap
the singing little voices of clangorous midgets,
scuffling for a laugh.

Real children go home
and tie crepe paper fire to old
hoops from the attic, and throw their
stuffed tigers and lions through. Look

how mysterious she is,
the cheap mascara like bruises.
Do you ever feel afraid
Mister?

Lifting one foot, heron
eyes the invisible tight-robe
over the water. Faith
in any other world skewed
like a miss in mid-air, the dream
falling crazily away.

This is the part where money
showering out of the lights turns fake
in the hand: the net
dissolved by the shadow
of the falling body.

Tired of its long bafflement, the bird
leaps for the magic rings
and sails away,
invisible wind alive in its rigging.
CHURCH

He worships at telephone booths.
Shouldering into these sanctuaries,
he takes the receiver in his right hand,
as if it were the fifth rung of a ladder
leaning there for him to climb.

So intensely he believes! Bringing forth
a quarter, he expects wafers
to transform again to flesh.

I have seen the look of surprise,
as if his clothes had suddenly been stripped away.
Once he ran his fingers through his hair
like someone walking out of the sea,
yet his lips were dry with words coming and going.

Maybe when he lifts up his head
a candle will continue to burn inside the box.
Maybe he believes in miracles.
There is no room in this church for shadow.
HOUSE OF PAPER LIGHT

She sleeps on the floor
of the room overhead. Listen
to the dark arpeggio
of elbow and hip, silk shoulder,
elbow and heel as she folds
into the ledger lines, the upper reaches
of your dream.

All the day long, light
in the inner stirrups of your ears,
the skirling leaves of her violin.
All night, count
the long hours of her rest, gather
wild notes fallen into your rooms,
light in the raglan sleeves
of the ferns, broken petals
in the parchment light.

You see you have
no choice in this. Windows
ring with a single note like the lingering on
of the tuning fork.
You dream awake to keep these days.

Once she has drawn
the pale bow of her body
across this room and into the next,
as if dream light could salvage china cups
from frail half-centuries of lips,
repeating herself like this above you,
elbow, shoulder, sweet hip,
patterns of lilac
on the walls of your mind,
do not call out.

You are no drunk
at home in his doorway,
groaning a love song
to his faithless wife, his
fickle brown bag.
Do not disturb
the tenuous dream.
You are the lover in this story,
leading pale, sleepwalking horses
up the glistening stair,
slipping forward into darkness,
dancing back
into paper light.
SURFACING

Trying to fathom
the bilious hour before dawn, floating
upward in shadow
of some shining raft,

the hum of the space heater, an audible
warning not to rise too quickly,
lest this bladder of dreams
explode.

Savor the blurry calls
of morning birds.

The teeth and outstretched arms of a backhoe,
heaps of earth laid bare in the field,
are pink with hope.

A mountain bursts
in the distance,
pretending to be mere
agitation of industry.

I think how the platelets
underpinning
the old, broken pitchers of history,
turtles of legend,
bearing land on their backs,
shift.

Like metaphors mistaken for blueprints,
they rattle, scales
thrust into light, translucent,
abandoned,
holding nothing
steady.

I feel I must strip now
and gather for the waiting
as we did then,
my father and I.
We peeled our sweated shirts
from our work-muscled backs,
bared our hairy loins, two animals
springing onto the blue saucer
of the abandoned quarry.

Gone now, he is still powerful,
swimming before me. I
come clumsily over hidden dangers,
drawn forward by fear of the bottom,
informed by cold
where the deep is most deep.

My faith may be the bright
translation
of stories overheard as a child
in the winter dark. If we survive
this rising out of memory and dream,
if we stand, rib-deep in our darkness
like houses in a flood,

what does it matter
that we do not know,
as rain sighs at our shoulders,
as the ancient extruding begins,

the continents nervous as boys at a dance,
which is cool water, which leaves,
which skin?

The crackling despair we wore
tied into the folds of our clothes,
sewn into bags
with a few dried seeds, the dust of sage,
we have left behind.

Now the air, as light
overcomes us, is perfumed
with hope,
though daytime sky seems infinitely
smaller
than dawn, oceanic, promised.
THE GUEST

After years of going wherever wheels may go, he is here in this house. The water is hot; the door latches from the inside. While he sleeps

the poets he loves climb out of his luggage to sit on the sofa, to lie together on the floor, shamelessly. He has told himself they mean no harm, yet there will be trouble.

Now the inhabitants will wake to the rotten breath of the she-bear, moist in the dark, and sweat will leap from the pores of their backs.

Sounds that were caught in the bark of old trees a thousand years will fall on the roof and window glass. They will lie awake listening to the hinges of their eyelids.
HOPE

"She was, of course, disappointed, as we all are."
—Wallace Stevens, said of his mother

1
He rises in the dark house,
wondering at all the hours lost
in sleep. Pockets of fog
on a faraway road; he recalls
the eerie reflection of carlights
off wisps of cloud,
like his own thoughts flung out,
and strangely overtaken.

A stone skipped tiptoe
over the goatskin of a lake,
the tympanum of its flight.
In the real bed next to his wife
his heart reverberates,
the way a sidelong glance at a group
of girls, like grapes among broad leaves
of shop windows, echoes for days.

2
In a slow, Sunday rain,
small birds swarm like stars,
tens-of-thousands, constellations
within galaxies, until he knows
the stream of their flight
must wash the far side of the county,
passing a window he can only imagine.

A woman turns in her bed
toward the light, breasts overflowing
the lace of her nightdress.
One of her hands is open, against
the pillow next to her hair,
a sign of welcome, or surrender.
The small birdsnest
in the hollow of her arm.
By the time he was born
the bodies and blood of saints
had reified to plaster
in the corners of cathedrals;
whitewashed sanctuaries of missions
in the grocery colonies chipped by bullets.

He longed to live "among the dolorous
and lovely."* He carries
still the glimmer of his hope,
like the pilot lights of faith
in the belly of his uncle's church,
the glow at the heart of father's radio,
luring voices from Guam,
and Rangoon, from Istanbul.

On the floor of his chest, near
the floating rib, next to the moldy shoes
beneath a bed that was his, he keeps
a dented, metal box.

Why must he keep the thin blue strips
of guilt he memorized on Thursdays
after school, about how much
the world was loved, what bargains
had been struck for how much pain.
Injections against Doubt;
spoon-sized antidotes
to the huge and faceless One,
who in time would shrink to fit
unsanitized imaginations.

He has tried to leave them behind
in truck stop eateries and service station
restrooms, but, like cheap sunglasses,
they are returned. Now they have grown
indelible as shadows merging
on a wall he will never see again.

*Seamus Heaney, Field Work
He has dragged this luggage
into job interviews, love affairs,
divorces, celebrations;
on a ship across an ocean, strapped
among the children and caged chickens
to a rattling bus through Mexico.

5
He keeps a picture of the old piano,
hailed up from a basement house
like an admission of failure, resisting
that abandonment, another move
in yet another junkman's truck.

Secured with rope
beside his brother on a cot
among the boxes in the shallow truck,
he rolled feet-first
into another dream. Above,
the night sky turned and stretched.
Bright fish of hope jumped
and fell back
into the lake of stars.

— for my brother, John
LIFT

What is spoken of
has less to do
with drawing our white roots up,
the damp earth clinging

and more to do
with shrugging our shoulders
precisely as wind
takes hold of our clothes,
faith in nothing
beneath:

relaxing our feet,
letting go of the quick branch,
and waving.
SHADES OF GRAY

1.

Today is a holiday and he doesn't have to go to school, but his mother has had to go to work. He and Louise are going to spend the entire morning in the park. Louise does not hold his hand as tightly as his mother does. It would be so easy to break away from her and just run and run until he can't run any more. But he likes holding Louise's hand. It is always very warm and dry.

Louise is the nicest sitter he has ever had. She is pretty too. He heard Uncle Ben say so. He misses his mother a little, but it's all right, because Louise is so nice. She never yells at him, even when he is bad. Maybe it's because she went to college and lost her child. He heard his mother say that when she was talking over the telephone to someone. He wonders how someone could lose a child and he hopes that his mother never loses him. He knows, too, that if Louise ever loses him, his mother would find him—quick, fast, and in a hurry.

The streets are full of shiny cars. And they make such loud noises when they take off. So many people going so many places. He wonders why they don't walk like he and Louise. But then he thinks that perhaps they all have to go to work just like his mother had to go to work this morning. And he and Louise are going to the park. He can't wait to get on the swing. He'll ask Louise to push him up high, as high as he can go.

2.

The late autumn afternoon has claimed the small, crowded room that serves as living room and kitchen. The room smells of boiled chicken. Shadows are long but the light is unusually warm through the sheer curtains that grace the single window. Water drips from a leaky faucet at the kitchen sink. It has been dripping for so long that neither he nor Louise hear it. Nor do they hear, locked as they are in their separate, tightly closed worlds, the radiator's hiss.

He has had his nap and a lunch of chicken noodle soup and crackers, three Oreo cookies and a glass of milk. He is not thinking anything now, but is drawing a picture he has drawn over and over again. He is fixed over the white, enameled kitchen table. He is breathing deeply through his open, slack mouth. All his concentration is collected between his hand and his eye. He holds the brown crayon, color of his dark eyes, tightly in his small hand. He is drawing the house now; it is made of logs. It will have a gray roof, four square windows with the window shades drawn exactly half-way, and a door. The door will be cracked just a little to let the fresh air in. He has never lived in such a place, but he knows it well. There will be bright green grass all around it, and a big leafy tree a little to the right of the house. A Mother and a Father will be standing outside in the grass, holding hands. They will be waiting for their little boy to come home from
school. There will be white clouds floating in a blue sky. But the blue won’t be right. It is never right. It is always too dark a blue.

3.

He knows Louise is watching him. He can feel her eyes on his skin. How can he feel her eyes when he can’t see them? But he feels them. They are big and brown, really big. They will look a little like the Mother’s eyes he will soon draw. He doesn’t look up, but he knows she is smiling, just like she was smiling last week, like she was smiling this morning when they came home from the park, as if her mouth were somehow broken. And there will be this funny look in her eyes, a kind of light shining out of them that is just a little scary.

She hugged him a lot in the park this morning too. The time he hurt his knee and he was crying, she kept on hugging him while he was sitting in her lap. She even kissed his knee to make it feel better. He had stayed in her lap and she had continued to hug him when her friend, Danny, came over to talk to her. He couldn’t understand what they were saying, but she continued to hug him even when she was crying. His mother doesn’t hug him a lot, but Louise does, and he’s grateful for that.

Suddenly he knows what he will do: he’ll make the sky gray, as if a storm is coming. And he will make dark gray clouds too. The Mommy and the Daddy had better hurry into the house before they get wet. Their little boy didn’t wear his raincoat, and he’ll be soaking wet when he gets home.

4.

The room is so quiet, it seems there is no one there. He imagines he can hear Louise breathing. He tries to fit his breathing to her breathing. When she breathes out, he breathes in. When she breathes in, he breathes out. He has not looked over at her yet. She is breathing faster now. He thinks they will play the game again today. And he wants to and he doesn’t want to. Last week when they played the tent game, it made him feel good and it made him feel scared, especially when she held him so tightly with her legs.

She calls his name. Softly. He begins to smile but doesn’t look up. Come on, baby. Come here now, she calls softly.

He looks up, smiling, just as she has raised her skirt, and he watches it billow down. And he remembers her eyes and her thighs and the deep dark gray of her skirt.

Come on, sweetie. I got somethin for you. Donchu wanna play the game we played last time? Donchu wanna come under the tent, huh?

Her voice is as fuzzy as the edges of a dream. Her whole brown face, cocked a little to the left, is shining. Her very black hair shines; two long braids fall down her back. Her lips are the color of something red he has seen but can’t for the life of him remember what it is. She has opened her blouse, and her breasts, two dark brown eyes at the nipples, full, and
(he knows) warm, sway, ever so slightly. She raises her skirt again, and this
time she holds it aloft. Her brown thighs are as brown as his face and it
seems he should be there, caught between them. A laugh is welling up
in him as he climbs down from his chair and runs to her.

The smell is sweet and dark, god knows, the smell is rank and sweet.
He breathes in deeply. He could die here, this child who is far too young
to have any real knowledge of death. In this warm place, so close to womb.
Too soon something in him could shut off and never open again. But he
will forget this, this lesson learned too soon, too soon. What can he know
of death and the mother and the dark and the sea, the all-embracing sea?
This scent of ocean he has never seen, the smell of mollusks, the barnacled
hide of a gray nurse whale, the wet, rank hair of a mermaid. The rasp of
nappy hair electrifying his hand, the open palm of his left hand, back and
forth, back and forth, the way she showed him, there, the last time, under
the tent and he felt her body begin to buck and buckle and he knows that
he could disappear here in this huge desert of ocean and he is afraid but
is rooted in this pungently scented tent and this fear will always be with
him, will be inseparable from the pheromones of women in sexual excite-
ment as their backs arch and they push the Mound of Venus through him
out toward heaven and her legs tighten and he hears through his blood-
blocked ears the animal sound of her raspy-breathed moan.

Her thighs loosen abruptly. He sits back on the floor and looks up at
her. He is out of breath, as if he had just run a great distance without stop-
ning. She is slumped back in the chair, breathing heavily. A light sheen
of sweat adorns her face. She is smiling. He will always remember that,
her smiling.

That was nice, wasn’t it?

Speechless, thoughtless, he nods his yes. She stands up, buttoning her
blouse as she stands. She is so tall and the room is so warm. He is looking
up at her. He is breathing rapidly, through his mouth.

Come on, honey, it’s time for your bath now.

He begins to rise from where he is sitting sprawled on the floor as she
reaches down for him. As she lifts him, he rises into those welcoming arms,
his head ready to fall on her shoulder.

Now donchu tell nobody, hear? This gone stay our secret, all right?
He nods his assent again. She feels the nod on her shoulder and
acknowledges it by kissing his cheek. She begins to hum softly as she car-
ries him to the bathroom.
BOARDED UP

sometimes I think we’re like
that mint condition 49 Ford
in the garage out back

that beauty the landlady keeps
locked up hidden from neighbors
but visits & admires

rumor says she kept the car
when the tenant-owner died
& he was too blind to drive it

so every 50’s boy dream is
gathering cobwebs & dust
still in cherry condition

with nowhere to go
no dangling dice baby shoes
or perfumed skunks

no wet thighs on naugahyde
no back seat forever promises
no do-bop-she-ba

just boarded up & waiting
for an old woman’s key quiver
kiss of air & sun & wind.
ONE NIGHT STAND

she steps out
of one of those
sad country songs
knocks on my
motel door

I'm drinking
of course
another town
another job
first night
loneliness

blonde hair swirls
whipped cream on a
sundae
eyes blue &
haunted say

Nevada desert
one armed bandit
coyote stole it

later at her place
talk of her ex
her kid how
it's hard
to find someone

talks on the phone
the way she says
momma
sound of the word
is music to me
goes with the lyric
of faded jeans & heels
painted nails
whiskey in a glass

bodies doing their
magic act
thru the night
rabbits bounding
from a black tophat.
A SEASON

I.
She is circling, Chango, ever circling. I feel Her in the wind, hanging low over trees, silvery with light. She moans like a whore, Chango, deep & full of pleasure even when the hills scream & the days move as slowly as Benito’s burro who is almost bald now & blind from the heat. Her belly twitches from a spasm of love. But we must not speak of that now, Chango. Now, there are only days stretching before us, no end to the horizon & this silence, Chango, always this silence.

You would never have known I was a girl who loved to run, Chango, loved to feel the wind between my legs, soaring, the brown dirt turning, my bare feet like wheels & I would be moving so fast my people thought I might disappear; just vanish into the trees & the silence like a brown wind, me, running, flying, melting into the line at the edge of the earth. Me, just be gone, Chango, like Benito’s brother.

Chango, sometimes I think we are such poor people since all that we have are our stories & other times, Chango, I think how very rich we are.

Did I ever tell you how much my mother loved to cry? Over anything, Chango, any sign of life; any twinkling or glimmer of sorrow or joy & her tears would fall. Slowly, surely, her eyes would fill with water that slid down her cheeks like pearls of salt. She was a big woman, Chango, much bigger than me. They thought my father a rich man because his wife was so big & everyone else was small, Chango, small like me. But when she cried my mother’s breasts shook like a fat man’s laughing belly, & her mouth opened wide, her lips were full & the color of pomegranates, Chango, pomegranates; her teeth were very white, and strong just like the rest of her. The sound of her crying would come out from inside her, somewhere deep in her stomach the sound would come out like all of the sounds of the world balled fistlike into her crying sounds. ah-oo-um ah-oo-um is kind of how it sounded, Chango, like if you close your eyes & listen to the sound of the universe breathing, that was the sound of my mother’s tears.

She is circling, Chango, always circling. I can feel her flying low to the ground, her belt of skulls rattling in the wind. The sound of wind whistling through the cracks of our house is Her, Chango. She moves through the air like blood flowing in our veins, Chango. She moves in us like blood.

II.
They would tell us in the camps that only a woman would run, Maya, only a woman. I still do not understand why it took me so long to go. I was seven when they snatched me. I cannot tell you the sound of my father’s laughter. My mother died pushing me from her womb, Maya. She died to give me life. I have felt her eyes watching, seeing what I had become.
I was dead at seven, Maya, but still walking & breathing & taking life. I have never been so dead as when I killed, Maya. There are things in me that can only be said in dreams.

When I was young & alive, I remember putting my head to the ground near the mountain behind our village & hearing a whisper rise from the core of the earth, Maya, a whisper rising. I could hear the sound that darkness makes, there, deep in the earth, ah oo um ah oo um ah oo um, a deep swirling hum. I promised myself that when I became a man I would follow that sound wherever it might lead me.

Death is not an ugly thing, Maya, it is the killing that will take your soul.

They took me to their camps when I was seven. There were other boys my age from different places. The first thing they had us do, Maya, was kill a goat. Five of us had to chase the goat & catch it, pulling it down to the ground where we used our hands to take its breath. Their guns looked like cannons pointed at our temples. I got the heart, Maya. I broke his brown coat. his flesh & bones & grabbed his heart. I knew the very instant his breath stopped. I will never get the sound of his rattle from my ears. Even now in dreams I see his eyes shining. Each time they told me to kill a man, Maya, I thought of them as goats & did as I was told, always taking the heart.

III.
I had never seen a man with so much stillness inside, Chango. So much quiet is in your eyes.

I am a cavefish, Maya. I move, love, feed in the dark. With you, my bones soften & I can just be skin. The darkness of your skin warms me, Maya. There is a light within your skin, glowing; a flame between your skin & bones that makes me warm.

The days you are gone I pretend that you never were, Chango, that our eyes never caught & held like paper between flint & steel. Do you remember the first glance? Yes? No. Yes? YES? Even with Her circling, turning our land into a whohouse?

& who among us has not whored, Maya? Debauchery bleeds into the very soil, how can it not touch us?

Touch us maybe, Chango, but never become us, like Her; circling: the skulls on Her belt rattling. Her moans swell the hills with our blood.

Have you tasted your own blood, Maya, or seen fresh blood pouring from an open wound?

I have heard the screams, Chango, & seen the blood of my mother drying in the sun, the same blood that turned my father into stone, that is the blood I have seen, Chango, that & the screams are enough.
IV.
Take my hand.
What?
Take my hand, woman, we are going to dance.
You are wild with heat, Chango.
Put your ear to the ground.....Do you hear it? The sound of water &
darkness?
It must be too far down.
No.
Too deep.
No. Listen with your heart, open your eyes to the sound, Maya.
Do YOU hear it?
It is what keeps me alive. Give me your hand. Listen.
ah oo um ah oo um ah oo um ah oo um that is the sound, Maya, the sound
of the earth humming, the sound of peace, of your mother’s tears. Now
move.
What?
Let your hips sway to the sound feel it flowing in your veins ah oo um ah
oo um ah oo um pick up your feet & put them back down heavy like a
man coming in from the fields or a woman walking miles with bundles
on her head move them like you are digging yourself back into the earth
back into your mother back home where the silence is paradise & there
are no guns no soldiers no children growing into machines move your hips
like there is a future full of green & there is great joy in knowing that you
are a woman & I a man ah oo um ah oo um ah oo um now slowly start
to move in a circle feel the weight lifting from your arms your back your
spine is rising toward the sun the tears falling from your eyes are your
mother’s tears bathing you with joy see how she laughs in her tears feel
the cleansing softness how bright the light from her eyes the warmth of
her love now spin faster watch the earth turn beneath your feet a brown
blur of light ascending your legs & you are one one with the earth & the
light & your mother’s tears & the ah oo um ah oo um ah oo um your arms
raise above your head your body is a holy prayer a sacred song your tears
fly onto your fingers & you are healed with the sight & sound & the salt
of the earth ah oo um ah oo um ah oo um ah ah ah oo um ah ah oo oo
oo um ah ah oo oo um oo ah um ah oo oo um ah oo um

V.
This is a time of silence; a time my tongue can not sound the language
of your eyes, black moons beckoning. It is a time when all around us is
filled with no sound our hearts can speak; the rhythm of trees, of flowers
folding unto themselves. This is the season with no name.

You come to this womb easily, Chango
It is time
The sun slips from the sky easy as a red dress from your shoulders
Are soldiers near?
I am all you have to fear
This is no easy feat, this small moment in the eyes of the gods
Your muscles curve around the bone, Chango
The cleavage of these brown hills will warm us
Even the stiff-winged birds soften in this heat
But not you, Chango
I am the rock in the river, unbroken
I am the water sliding through
Your nipples murmur
With you I am a river singing
And I, the rock in the middle
Are those footsteps?
All you have to fear are my lips at the base of your spine, circling
The easy parting of the trees
Sweet grasses beneath our feet
Your tongue in my ear
All of this roar in a world filled with silence, Chango
Your softening breasts in my hands
Fingers that have held guns
Not the way I hold your sex, softly, in these hands, stroking
Hands that have opened bodies
Easy as I am opening you now
This is not easy, Chango
I am the rock in the river, unbroken
I am the water sliding through
I take you into my mouth sweet as grass
Here in this time of silence
When my lips know no language that cannot embrace your eyes
And the only sound
My teeth biting into your shoulder
The sound of a river singing
PRESSED
for JRB

Premeditated garbagio
manipulations
trite paraphrases of the same sensual longings
disguised in hot talk
standard hot to trot processed fuckability.
The greatest challenge
to write a love poem.
Mastering the senses
untuned to language
dismissing language
forcing triteness into the love of warmth touching
soft fur rubbing patterns of arrhythmic sinusoids
musty tightening contortions
slithering fumes that would otherwise nauseate
gaping vulnerabilities.
That trust which demands
shy smiles of recognition, familiarity, contentment
reluctant seeking of locking looks that cannot wriggle free
and the amnesiac recall of what cannot be grasped in memory
only felt in the knees
and the gut
fearing loss.
GRAND DAUGHTER OF MAMA

for LaMer

As
anaconda
I entered
the cave of your mother
to find the egg of you
Surrounding you with love
in a lake of the sea
we waited—you emerged
dancing to the drum of time
As
long as this breath
ripples the grasses of life
and longer
my being is your servant
KNOW THIS
What art remains
in this vessel
is the meaty hump
of a dromedary
My life
a living ship
insuring your passage
across this sun-parched illusion
LETTING GO

Last night I dreamt you held my hand.
You kissed me. Not a goodnight parting—
a kiss I had longed for: powerful,
wet, sincere.

   It was my cat,
my tongue matted with Siamese hair.

We coupled on my king-sized bed,
my cat a substitute twice over,
a predictable surprise for open eyes.

This happened after I had pushed
that other dream, falling dust
down the long hallway of my head
with my invented broom,
useless on a Sunday afternoon.

You enjoy movies with other men,
my telephone an absurd convenience,
brown, quiet—a scab.
PERIPHERAL VISION

We’re from the city; we’ve been out here for about a year. We felt we needed a change, that out here in the woods we could find what needed to change about us.

This morning, I awakened in the dark and found my husband, William, lying beside me snoring without really being asleep. He does that when he’s sure there’s lots of trouble and tight places waiting for him today; he’s a lawyer.

While I was brushing the wrinkles of sleep out of my hair, my husband explained what his day would be. I listened with my jaw stapled shut, pretending to understand the seriousness. I acted mature; I should; I’m thirty.

Last year, on my birthday morning, at the minute William rolled from his sheet I said, ‘‘I made it! Turn around, look at me. I’m in my birthday suit. I’m 30.’’ He did look at me, his eyes tiny. ‘‘Nope, you still can’t count, you’re 29.’’ So we waited a year to celebrate: a rare steak cut into thirds to share with Ian, our son. William always speaks seriously to me. He says I need to pay attention to details. I need to respect money. He says he knows that I carry his money wadded in the bottom of my pocketbook, and sometimes I forget my change and wash it in my jeans. He tells me that maybe I have no understanding of my life. It’s a complaint I carry against me, too. My husband can explain me so that I understand me his way. He’s afraid for me, he says.

The clock slaps over its digital cube and William must leave quickly for the bus to the city; he is not a sure driver. When I am alone, I lock the bathroom door and get into the shower. Lather lifts; I shiver inside it, and feel too slick.

Then William is back, intruding with a bang on our bathroom door. It swings open under the hock of his hand. ‘‘No big deal,’’ I mumble. In our house the doors are weak because we are forever locking ourselves on the wrong side. An unexpected snap of a lock, no safety keys, so we take down the whole frame to get out or in. We’ve worn out all the locks; we tear our house apart to get out.

The humidity on the bathroom floor makes William skid. He almost loses his balance. ‘‘Come out of there,’’ he shouts. ‘‘I’m off the drive and stuck.’’ His arms fling up in the air, hopeless, nothing to hold onto. ‘‘Hurry, you’ve got to get me out of the yard, I can’t be late.’’

My bubbles grow, sounds are stopped up, I hear him farther away in a little damp chamber of my ear.

‘‘Step out!’’ he shouts. I do step out, steam like hot rings in my nostrils.

‘‘I can’t let that bus get away from me.’’ Already, he’s wiping his shoes on the bathmat, leaving.

‘‘Why can’t you take care of yourself?’’ I ask. He’s already gone. No one to catch my irritation. I wring the Hot and Cold knobs off together, slap back into the dark bedroom, scrubbing with a towel, and enter pieces
of my clothes so angry that my clothes snag on me. I quietly cuss him then borrow his big, heavy sweater for my warmth. I mean to look into the mirror, but he calls and my name hits the roof, and I'm already out of the room when my head turns to look. He has the power to make me appear and disappear. I give it to him.

Toes thumping against the steep stairs, I sail my voice back up towards Ian's door — ajar like it is breathing through a small mouth. "Your Dad's in a pickle. I'll drive him to the bus and be back before you know you're awake. Promise." As I slide into my cold garden shoes that wait at the door, I say, "Don't rush but if you get into your clothes for school, try to match." Our cat, black, springs out the door beside me, free.

My footsteps chirp across the deck and I am speedier now because the outside shaves me with its quick cold temperature.

I cuss again. There is our leased silver car, stuck. A good car, but he can't drive. He has both doors open, the antennae shaking.

The wind from the slope of the yard gathers my hair and pulls it.

William has missed the angle of our drive. He does not back up well, since he only uses mirrors. He won't look behind. He says, of late, it hurts to turn his head. He's afraid he will hear something pop. So he's backed himself into our soft frail yard. You just can't see enough out of the corner of your eye.

Inside the car, the heater is trapped on high. I throw my pocketbook on the floor. The air crawls. Fleas of heat jump up from my skin. Then I realize I'm still soaped and never rinsed properly, merely dried.

I bounce the driver's seat in position and tip mirrors. My husband says I have to get that look off my face and hurry. He holds tightly to his thermos of coffee that he will sip on the bus all the way to the city.

"I wish you'd do it yourself," I say, already doing it. "You're brilliant at the office but will you ever be able to get places by yourself? Even when you drive, I have to go with you, half the time, to hold your cigarette for you. And keep sucking on it so it won't go out." Now I am shouting.

Our son, clenched looking, stranded in the cold on the redwood deck, and my husband with his hot thermos beside me, are shouting to calm me, "Watch it, Mom. Easy. Easy."

I feel scared of this temporary hate for William which, it occurs to me, may not be temporary. I am in reverse, flying backwards into the stray gravel and last blooms of Chickweed, Catch-Fly, and Daisies. And then we are up on the road, the tires hollering. I am doing exactly what he wants: getting him there. I hear our nearest neighbor's dog. She is howling, I have awakened her and hurt her ears.

William's hair is mussed. It is thin and the brown of a soft chair. "You're wearing me out," he says. More hair seems to be missing this morning.

"Why can't you ever do this by yourself?" I say.

His smile crowds into the corner of his mouth. "I can't. That's what marriage is. Doing it together."

Wearing deep smiles, we pretend our argument isn't real. We are terrifying of late, what we say. We are too much for each other. An accumulation of ten years of marriage has hit. I put on the wipers to see. As if it
can get the dim morning light off.
Down the road, making excellent time, he takes an early taste of his coffee. "You can’t go out of your way for anybody," he says, as I swerve to avoid a small spot of cold-looking animal guts already spilled on the road. "It’s too much to ask you to shorten your shower."
He’s not letting up. Harnessing the wheel, I cannot maneuver even my eyes that could sting him like a nettle so that he’d throb inside all day. He is out-talking me. I feel him sliding past in the race to a finish we don’t know. Instead of using words, I strike out with my hands and nails. I lash blindside, he shouts, "Don’t spill my coffee," and I catch him on his heavy watch. It is made of gold and always set for five minutes early. "Look what you did," he says, amazed at my fury. The side of his watch looks like it has sneezed blood. It is embedded, stuck to him. "You never hit me before." He touches his wound and pats his penis in his pants. "I feel awful, look what you did." He fumbles into my pocketbook on the floor, finds a Kleenex and squeezes it to his wound.
"You ought to feel it from my side," I have tears on my breath. "I’m the one who did it so I feel worse."
My husband sits stuck with his wound. "We must make it," he mutters. He means the commuter bus to the city. The heat from the car bubbles in my nose. I need to lean my chin on the thick air and think a minute.
Something new has been introduced; I worry with it. Hitting him was my mistake, an impulse; it can stick now as my method. It will be easy to reach for this again as a solution. I feel I have grown a new ugly part of me.
Too late he says, "Sorry. You know I can’t drive myself." He makes it sound practical.
"So why did you move out here where you can’t get a taxi?" I start to laugh. I try to change this to funny but my sucked-in laugh goes down the wrong way.
"You wanted to move here, too," he says. "And you knew I couldn’t drive—still you wanted to move to the country with me. I’m trying to fix your life. To help you have something in the end, not just pieces. You used to have roaches."
I sit there, starched with soap.
"I want you to have the right dreams," he says.
I can see his point.
Down the hill, a block from the Junior High School parking lot, we catch the red light and wait and can’t see around the corner where the bus may be idling with its lights on, or has it already gone and left William with me for the day. I chew saliva and corner the car onto the buses’ road. It’s there.
"Let’s just stop arguing," he sighs, tired of both of us.
I’m already swinging the stick shift into park. I’m not mad at him anymore. He’s made me mad at me. I think that’s how he always wins the race.
He and I get out at the same time; he protects his thermos from the cold. I slam my door first. He slams second. The reflections in the car’s
window shrug. He comes to me with his chest barreled. I have to step back. I think he does that to take possession of me. But he extends to me his left hand, he offers to help. He is so friendly that it is exasperating. He plays with the peak of his lips after he’s said he loves me and that I’m the best thing in his life, and I won’t answer.

I’m still on my see-saw of anger. We stand in the current of diesel. I think I can taste the bus. It’s like a cold metal spoon in my mouth.

He goes back to his side and pokes down the button on the car door, and so do I on mine; a duel of buttons.

His smile bobs. ‘‘Ca-ro-line.’’ He spreads my name out. ‘‘Why did you lock it? You have to take my car to get back home.’’

‘‘Stop telling me what to do.’’

‘‘Just don’t forget you have to pick me up tonight.’’

‘‘Can’t you ask me please?’’

He looks at the bus, his watch, and groans at his wound.

‘‘How would you get home without taking my car? I would ask a stranger to say please. We’re closer than that. We are husband and wife. but okay—please meet my bus tonight? Please take my car home with you since you don’t have another way. But you’re on your own, figure out how to take this car and leave one to meet my bus tonight. What else were you going to be buzzing around with today?’’

‘‘My garden is ripe. I pick vegetables. Fix ’em. Weather’s changing.’’

William trots to the bus, making sure his hair doesn’t separate in the wind. How can he love himself so much when I’m hating him?

In the bus, there’s a club of six commuting husbands from this stop. Larry, the driver, has occasional mild but exciting heart attacks or stoppages or he overflows his valves, and the club covers up for him so he can make it to retirement. They grab the emergency brake and steer to the side and smoke and wait while he pants over the wheel.

Larry opens the bus doors to enfold my husband who steps up from the thin layer of parking lot sand and debris.

Once the bus doors suction closed, I smile obscenely toward the bus and the husbands watch me through the tinted, weather-tight glass. One waves. I’m stuck on watching William and his thermos shamble down the aisle. I call out, ‘‘Sometimes I think I’m married to your mother. You act just like her. That old slew-footed, skinny-legged mangy mammal. Mammal, mammal, mammal. You clone! I hate what she did to you—bullied you and made fun of you. But now you’re doing it to me! I wish she’d die, why doesn’t she just die. I know. I forgot. She did die. She died and it didn’t make me feel better. I forgot.’’

I think of the feel of William’s skin in bed, he’s so soft to have come from such a rough family.

Larry, with the skipping heart, pops the bus doors, William pokes his voice out in the cold. ‘‘They think you’re trying to tell me something.’’

‘‘I am.’’ We part for the day, me in a lope, him stubbing his fingers against the bus door closing on schedule. To punish him, I ignore the car and go in one side of the school to find a phone. I’ll call and have my son give my neighbor the key and drive my own car down here to me.
There are no phones. I go out the other side, smelling wet weeds from the Boro lake coming around my back on a wind. The cold ends of my hair touch my throat and I tighten a little into the brown fuzz of William’s sweater, soft and fine-spun as his hair. Next I have to get a ride up the mountain, and I’m shy. Trying to get back at William, I have made the wrong choice for myself.

I walk the worn-out center line of 23 North. I clench my teeth. Politey, I step over into the other lane for a few cars to pass. We’re right at the end of the state; traffic is thin. It is not going my way. I hold my thumb out from me, ashamed, and look the other way. The locals will stop for anyone; they’re not rushing; they’re already where they’re going. It is then that Roy Dee blows a funny horn at me and stops. He’s the one who cuts our yard in the summer. I get in and have to sit on my feet because he never cleans out his truck.

The scenery wiggles through his old truck windows. The motor is loud. We cannot talk. Finally, we’ve climbed the hill and we’re crawling along the ridge that takes me home. His foot sits on the brake when he sees my yard. He runs his finger toward the spot we made this morning. ‘‘Them’s ruts,’’ he says. ‘‘How you get ‘em? There gonna set in the frost. It’s gonna be hard to mow over them big wrinkles in the spring.’’

I thank Roy Dee for the ride. He can’t smile back because he’s missing his teeth.

Up on the deck, each step snapping and popping, frost just waiting to come in on stillness. My memory touches me on the back; I whirl around. I realize I’ve walked down an empty driveway. My car for me to use and get back at William is not here. I look quickly to last night; I drove through such thin blue mountain air, coasting along the bottom of a bowl of earth, the car murmuring under me, to leave it for the mechanic.

I told the mechanic I need the car fixed before it breaks down. He has assured me that no one ever knows what’s wrong with a car till it won’t go. But today, when I need the car, he is trying.

I decide to give up. Then I wonder how to do it. Through the glass storm door, cartoon colors shine out at me. My son’s before-school cartoons. With one foot pointed into the room, I lean on the kitchen wallpaper and watch all I can stand. They are chasing Wiley Coyote until he is caught under a truck. He is paper flat, merely an edge. They don’t bury him. They are pumping him up with an air pump. ‘‘Ian, I warn you, in real life you can’t fill people back up like that.’’

Ian, a small son, with a large friendly face, his eyes are a chipped-blue changeable by what he’s wearing. He rests his chin on a mug of granola and complains, ‘‘This takes too long to eat, it makes my mouth tired but I do it for you. Oh hey, Mom, a minute ago the phone rang, and the tape answered it.’’

The red flag is up. Too early for normal conversation, I look into my answering machine’s box and listen to hear the emergency. Has the driver passed away on the seats? What’s happened to William—everything I’ve ever hatefully wished for? Oh, god. I play it back. I’ve got a message I can’t quite understand. The tape, stretched with our erasing messages, talks
to me in a horrible drooling voice. As best as I can figure, I need to see the Boro Police. About our car in the parking lot. I've left it locked and the motor running.

It must be true. I have no keys in my jeans pocket. I look frantically up the drive. I can see Gary, my neighbor and the washing machine salesman, his key ring glittering on his belt. Gary's house is through the trees; the drive touches ours. He is playing on his drive with the dog. His wife is pregnant and sleeps late. He throws a scuffed Frisbie and runs to get it and then throws it again to see if the dog wants it. Across the yard I go. "Gary, I have a problem."

He keeps his hair close cut as down; and he rubs it.

"I got a call, Gary, I need to get downtown. I don't have my car today." His dog, Badger, paws around me.

"Who called so early?" Gary asks.

"Nobody. A place called," I say.

"Well, take my car; I've got my van." Badger whirls a small gravel storm.

"You woke the dog this morning," he says. Gary is a nice serious person. I often catch him watching people. There is a "buffer zone" between our houses but the undergrowth is skinny. He has seen me hit my funny bone during lunch on the deck and cry too long, though laughing, too, so I had to throw my sandwich away in the woods and go inside; he has noticed the hole I poked in a cane chair; and one day I was trying to neatly hang my coat in the closet when I failed and tore all the hangers down and he saw me come out and throw my coat in the garbage. Gary has seen too much, too one-sided, through the trees.

"You two sure get to it early, my wife's afraid you and William will have an accident one day."

"No. No," I say. "We just sound like an accident. We're both sorry for making noise."

"My wife believes if one day I had to, I could overpower him."

"No, no," I say. My pulse jumps into my ear. Maybe the car is running out of gas.

Gary peeks into my house before he goes in with me, the dog trots on the porch. At the junk drawer, I don't open it much cause Gary looks in with me and I feel for my spare and can't find it. I'm thinking how many miles to the gallon does a car get when it's standing still.

Instead of coffee, I haven't time to boil water, I take a drink of tap water. I remember the heady smell of William's early coffee. He would have shared, if I'd asked. I taste the iron in the water in my cup.

Gary gets Ian's quick nervous smile, then Ian gives Badger all the attention. As I walk Ian up the drive to his school stop, Ian is patting my back like I did when he was a baby.

Gary brings the car up. Badger shuffles the Frisbie with her nose.

The car is very light blue. I get into it carefully.

The engine is hot and ready to go.

Badger has put her Frisbie in the car with me.

"Just leave the car in the garage when you get back, push the patio doors and tiptoe in and put the key on the table." His house is as easy to break into as ours is easy to break out of. Maybe his wife will wake when the child is born.
"I wish you were a boy, Caroline, so we could be close friends," says Gary.
"If you were a girl," I say, "I could trust you." His pupils tighten. He rubs Badger's coat down the spine. Badger is pleased and the black lining of her mouth falls loose.

My son waits for his ride, drawing words with his shoes along the dirt edge of the road. He moves his mouth.

"What? I can't hear you with your face down."
"Don't forget I'm singing today Mom, at 10:00."

I don't remember. "What are you singing?" And why? But I am already down the road in the unfamiliar car, practicing the brakes.

I am careful not to touch anything in Gary's car. Though I do feel for the radio and turn it on. But I don't like it. Someone I don't know is singing. I turn it off. It's not my setting. The car moves faster, down slope, and I remember my son's singing. I must get there. I hope he'll be on key and his zipper will stay up; he's nine.

I stop by the parking lot of old cars and our one good one that my husband can't drive. The car sits idle. Locked. I'm afraid it's run down. My pocketbook is hiding on the floor. I turn around and watch the traffic light change. Town is dead. Old run-down men, old run-down cars; a salesman in a phone booth, gesturing, snapping his mouth, working his pencil, his car nosed close, next State license plate; women driving around alone with plain faces, all their make-up off, letting their skin breathe, till their husbands are due home. There is one prostitute, but she's 15, and she won't be out of school till afternoon. No trace of the Boro Police force, I think they have only two men.

My husband has cautioned me—never trust a policeman; they can guess the truth but they'll never tell the truth. He knows I have this latent impulse to tell everybody my whole truth. I have answers to questions no one would dare ask.

I park Gary's car in the empty space in front of the Police Station. I have to go in, but shadows form holes on the outside screen and the holes fly back at me.

I finger Gary's keys that feel so odd in my hand and hang them on the belt of my jeans. My jeans are tight so that it hurts to put much more in the pockets than the leftover grocery change I always carry.

Inside the hall is too narrow to be a municipal building. It's really just an old Boro house with several offices.

Past a sharp turn in the hall, I see the Police Department but the door is closed and locked. I hear the Police band radio inside talking, and a paper sign hangs from Scotch tape on the door and says "back in 20 mins. school crossing." Twenty minutes from when?

The Police have no place to wait. Outside, the traffic light changes and I cross the street on the red, headed for Prout's Diner.

I pull against the diner door to break the suction of cool outside and warm as coffee inside. It gives and I remember my garden grown weak and rank and wild to work in, so acid it will make my hands itch. As I head straight for the counter, I glimpse my mechanic sitting at the table with his friends. He waves at the corner of my eyes. He is not working on my car. He is here in Prout's eating pie for breakfast.
I swing into place on the stool, order and smile and drink coffee which is so bad I know not to waste cream and sugar on it.

The pulse in my legs starts beating. I feel the veins of my legs will break. I am worried about the Police. I'd rather spend the morning somewhere else. I look down at my garden shoes.

Between newspaper clippings too small to be interesting, menus, and Little League pictures pasted against the mirror behind the counter, I can see the white Boro Police car cross the glass. It's a Dodge with a souped-up engine. My mechanic has sharp blue eyes, he watches it. "Do you want to buy it? It only has 100,000 miles."

"The second time around," I say. The Boro Police car is backing into the garage.

The mechanic stands next to me. We are the same height, but he is much wider.

"Work is boring," says the mechanic. "You have to make a lot of jokes," he says sadly. "Since they closed down the movie house, a lot of locals have started fooling around with each other." Sweat from his hot coffee grows on his lip. "What are you doing down here?" he asks suddenly. "I have your car."

"It's a long story. I can't tell you cause it's not finished yet."

I don't leave a tip because the owner's working behind the counter today. My mechanic goes back to his pie for breakfast and his old retired friends.

"Work on my car, please." He waves a hand too big to fit in the engine anyway.

I walk against the light, open the door with a whoosh and the radiator says Pssst, Shhh, and hammers at me. I prepare to see the old faded redhead of a Police Chief.

I'm back at the P.D.'s door, where I don't want to be. I think now that I have parked Gary's car illegally and I haven't my wallet, just grocery change, so I don't have a Driver's License or I.D. with me.

The Boro Police turns, startling me, calling me my nickname, "Hi, Carrie."

I stiffen onto my flat heels. "You're not the Chief."

"Sergeant." Right away, he slips off new-looking gold rims, obviously they're for myopia, and hangs them on his shirt pocket like sunglasses. "I called you." He leans over a distressed-looking counter top.

I go closer and see that the wooden top is soft and marred with signatures, the pressure of pens signing for things, messages left. Maybe I shouldn't get so close without an I.D.; he is quite tall. I step back and leave the marred counter between us. He has a large mouth that rests open, as if he will ask and answer his own questions. His nose is beautiful, a policeman with a beautiful nose. When I'm too tired to fall asleep tonight, I'll think of that. It's past his hair-cut time. Whatever kind of blond he was as a kid has grown into a straight no color blond/brown now. The ends of his hair catch on his uniform collar. I like seeing it catch. It makes my neck itch.

The policeman turns sideways, there is a faint arch to his back, an arch of fatigue or spentness. He reaches below the counter.
“Ahh,” I say; he draws out my car key ring. But he puts the ring around his finger. He turns it round, thinking, “I know a lot about you.”

I don’t like this. I poke the tip of my tongue into the back crown of my tooth.

He nods toward the short ceiling. “You live all the way up the mountain. I’ve seen you through the trees. I’ve been in your basement.”

He’s full of spirit now. He lifts his head up to the light.

“Why?” I ask.

“Don’t worry so,” he says. “You don’t recognize me when I’m out of uniform.” He sags for a minute. “I know I look better in uniform. I’ve been to your house off-duty. I’m a friend of Gary’s. I help him deliver washing machines.”

“Gary. My appliances.”

“I can’t find a reason to get back up there without a delivery.” It looks like the pinpoint of his eye quivers with embarrassment; I’m embarrassed by this line, too. “I go to cook-outs on Gary’s patio.” He presses ahead, “I haven’t seen you close-up since last Christmas when your washer died. I brought in the new white one in the dark blue room. Sometimes you’re in the Junior High parking lot but you don’t come to town Sundays and go to church.”

“No, we stay in bed,” I explain. “I have lots of books at home that I haven’t finished yet. Right now, I have 17 checked out, from different libraries, of course; I stay busy.”

He tips his head to laugh; his hat is not there, just the rim line in his hair where it fits. “Three times I’ve been to your house. You...,” then he calls my husband by Mr. and his last name, “…and Gary kid each other so. I just like to listen when I come along.”

“We were all kidding? I don’t think so.” Now I stay quiet.

He rounds the counter that he shares with the Chief. He’s watching me, not where he’s going, he bumps his leg. He stops to rub his leg and I look away. I’m not going anywhere right now; he’s wearing my keys.

I’m afraid he can hear me breathing. I struggle to stay out of synch with his starched uniform shirt rising and falling near me. I do not want to enjoy this.

“When I finally got to your car this morning, it had been running for a while.”

“I never turned off the engine.” My heart slumps against my ribs.

“You left it running, doors locked, keys in the ignition. When I got the door open and got inside, that car was red hot.”

“No,” I say.

“But it smelled like perfume,” he says.

“Soap,” I say. “But it’s worn off now.”

There is the pale line on his skin where he has shaved; I feel like I’m seeing him just out of bed, rising.

“The school janitor was sweeping the parking lot. He thought a couple of times he saw exhaust, so when he went over and the exhaust was real and the car was running but locked, he called me. That’s my job—to help.”

He seems a little naïve about his job.
He leans back for support against the counter. It skids.

His fingernails are very flat, his fingers are long. I have a flash recall of him in front of the school parking lot. He has a malt-sized Dixie cup braced at the windshield of the police car. I was parked in my car waiting for my son and trying to figure out life from reading a novel by Sartre. That’s when I saw him check the speed monitor on the dash next to the malt. Then he walked to the narrow highway and by pointing his finger and stepping onto the macadam he pulled a car over onto the gravel shoulders. On foot, he had caught a speeder.

He says, ‘‘You must have been thinking about a lot to lock a running car.’’

“I wasn’t thinking,’’ I say. ‘‘Is it out of gas?’’

“No.’’

He looks at my mouth. I bite my lips.

“Am I going to get a ticket?’’ I ask curley, very daring since I don’t have my Driver’s License.

Then I’m thinking of him, someone in the peripheral distance of my yard. He’s in a white tee shirt in the snow that is iced over. His heavy ugly jacket and sweater are off. He’s been struggling hard on ice and he and Gary have this huge washing machine. They hug it and move it and protect it from the ice by hitching their jackets under its container and they are sliding with the washer on its side down to the basement door.

Halfway down the inside basement stairs just where the light is dull, I go to watch them bring it in. I ask to help, as they come through the outside door. ‘‘No, we have it. You just relax.’’ They are very strong about this and guard my washing machine from me. My husband stands on the last step, he chain-smokes and flicks the smoke off the end of his cigarette with a snap of his wrist. He is anxious after he has bought something to know that new really means perfect. These guys laugh and enjoy what they are doing. Gary says to William, ‘‘My wife won’t let me smoke; she wants me alive.’’ The inner basket tumbles and gives soft thuds to their movements. I squat on the steps to watch all of them down below me. My husband, wanting to join in, says, ‘‘My wife washes everything, even her money right in the pocket of her jeans.’’ And I think about the time I had a Tampax spare in my pocket and it went in with my clothes, through all the cycles—hot soak and cool rinse. It came out fluffed, it was gigantic; huge. I held it up to the light.

Mostly my husband is in his pajamas out here in this bedroom community, or dressed up tight for the city. But now, on this cold day, he’s in soft clothes and he’s one of them. I pay little heed to their words. Men together sound like they are speaking in tongues, no meaning to me. They are fiddling with the washer, telling each other how to do it. I spool my hair on my finger and watch.

But now I see them like I did that day—backlit against the door light. A dream shadow—the policeman in his undershirt; awake—the shadow is just my husband. They seem to have the same body.

The pressure of this image at my optical nerves makes my vision dance
up and I pretend to sneeze. "Bless me," I say, and shake this image out of my eye.

"Are you okay? The locked door and all." The Sergeant speaks gently, as if he's been a friend as long as Gary has.

"Could I have my keys?"

"Don't you want to know how I got into your locked car?"

The front of his hair hangs down, dry bangs. I think how silly of him to think wet would make it stay combed up. The policeman pushes the bangs back, trusting his forehead to me.

"I have a master key," he says. "A policeman can get in anywhere."

I apologize for the trouble I've caused.

"I'm glad it happened," he says, holding his bangs back. He looks at my car keys. "When I'm up the mountain, can I stop by?"

"I have to get home. I've got stuff to do, my son will be home from school." I try saying my son for our protection. "And I've got to hide my vegetables. The zucchini in my garden are growing bigger than babies. I've got to get them out of the garden before anyone sees them."

He laughs and says, "I'm going to help you with those zucchini. I'm going to arrest them and take them away in the police car as illegal aliens. And I'm going to show your son the police car, wouldn't he like that?"

"Great." I'm thinking of Gary seeing this.

I have to slide my car key ring off his finger. I don't dare look up. I watch his long, pretty hand let go of my keys.

"I'd like to come up the mountain." He looks very serious.

My heart beats but I don't breathe. I think I am taking him too seriously. Am I falling for it?

He holds out both hands to me. He doesn't have my keys anymore.

"I have to hurry," I say. "Tell the Chief hello for me." Though I don't know the chief at all. And I'm out of there, but he is walking with me, and on the periphery of my eyes the Osprey at my redwood house is flying low over my yard, wet from fishing in the pond, and I see the Sergeant lying in my yard. This time it's summer and for some reason all the ants in all the 52 ant hills in our grass have dropped dead. And I can lie beside the Sergeant and he is so long, his hair has grown so long, he lets it grow for me, and his mouth rests open and we have iced tea which we barely sit up and sip, and the first taste is full of lime. Everything is so calm.

Then I can taste Prout's coffee on the roof of my mouth. This is just a flirt, I make fun of myself, and pretend that I am being funny.

I walk fast with him and make the hall short. He stops hard in his overly shiny policeman shoes. "What is this?" he asks, pointing through the dust on the glass door.

"I borrowed a car to come get my keys. Is it illegal to park at the door?"

"This is Gary's car," He is excited by the idea. "Gary delivered you to me. That's his car."

"No," I say. I start moving past him, my footsteps sound doubled with his and then the police band radio clicks and blares and insists it's an emergency.
I push the door alone, not enough, and have to slide sideways to get free. I’m out. The wind fills my hair.

I make up so many things that I can’t even lift my dreams anymore. When I’m still wearing my old clothes of dreams, why want another?

I hear, “Stop. Stop.” An urgent call. This time I don’t like it. I think I’ve always found it safe to do as I’m told and later get mad about it. This time I won’t. Am I choosing the wrong time—just to choose? I let the minute go. Then I pivot once.

It’s the mechanic, his voice wrapped in the wind coming to me from the wrong side. He’s not talking to me, being busy shouting at his old retired friend who’s trying to remember from his youth how to back a tow truck with a car hitched on. They’re trying to leave old Prout’s hooked to someone else’s broken car.

That night, Gary takes me downhill. I sit low in the seat, ashamed, wearing my hair forward. No, I don’t want him to keep me company till my husband gets here. I wait alone in my husband’s car. The image of the commuter bus is big enough to fill my head and leave no room for thought. All six local husbands get off—the club. My husband doesn’t get off. Back up the mountain in the twilight pond fog, my son pops the door open and leans out before I’m there and says, “Our Dad’s on the phone.”

“’He’s your dad, not mine,” I say. We both laugh at his mistake. “Why isn’t he here? What does he want?” We talk while he hangs on in the city.

“Dad says he thinks he’s going to get sick so he’s staying and sleeping on the office couch.”

I get on and tell him that when he thinks he’s sick it’s generally because he’s had too much to drink and that he has made his stomach swell, and he’ll be all right in the morning. And to try to go to the bathroom. That always helps if he remembers. He feels that he is growing fat and old. Bloating is bloating I tell him. Bloating is not growing.

“How’s your wound?”

He seems to be moaning for me. “Oh, all right,” he says.

That’s it, I think. When he did it, I forgave him. But now I’ve done it, and I can’t forgive myself. Something is teetering.

“Are you all right?” asks my husband, when he is not sure.

“Are you all right?” I ask back, whenever I’m not sure.

“You dressed yourself like a little boy,” he remembers. “I thought you were so weak and needed taking care of. You didn’t hardly eat anything on a date. And now you are the strongest, most destructive woman I could have chosen.”

There is a pause for my breath and his. “I’m drunk,” he says. We hang up for the night.

Our dinner is on an unstable t.v. table but we are not watching t.v. We are watching night and the pond touch. William is the only one who ever terrorized me and hit me and held me down. And he is the only one who ever saved me from myself. Outside is one deep color now; the mountains are furry with the dark. The corset of my spine unclaps and unhitches.

Later, I lay stretched out in Ian’s room on top of the spread of one of the twin beds. Drowsiness rubs around me like a cat. I feel much better
now. I relax and grow full size. There is a cricket tonight behind the bathroom door making a fuss for us, giving us a song on his spurs.

Our cat hears the cricket, but she lets it live and seeks out my heartbeat and breath, and she lies—a great slick black stone of a cat—on my chest and when she breathes out, I have to shut my eyes, she’s that close. She smells like the summer Osprey I made up because I fed her sardines for dinner. "Wanna go fishing?" I ask Ian.

"Mom, you’re so silly. It’s night and almost winter."

I rise in slow pieces and have to settle the cat twice before she pins herself to the pillow. I search for a sitting spot and find one right where Ian’s little boy’s waist curves in briefly.

"Ian," I say. "Did you miss me?"

"When?"

"This morning. At school. I took too long. About the stupid car. No, the car’s not stupid. What I did was."

"What’d you do? Get lost in the garden?"

"I tried to hurt somebody and I got mad at myself."

"Again?"

"I’m sorry. I wanted to hear you sing."

"It was all of us singing. The whole school."

I’m rubbing my fingernails against my mouth. Without looking at Ian, I say, "Are you still listening to me?"

"I’m asleep," he says. Then. "Why did we move? We had bad times in the city, too."

I suck the lining of my mouth over my teeth till it draws thin. I take my fingernails and on Ian’s pajama chest, I draw a box house and tiny chimney and the one big window of his bedroom only; a child’s picture. I carefully breath my tears up my nose and say, "I love you, Ian."

I don’t pray. Am I going to play the helpless little girl with God, too? I get as far as hoping. It is not me that is the most vulnerable. It is the Sergeant. I hope that his first guesses about me, through the trees, are right and that what I know is wrong. He doesn’t know how deep I can cut.

I hold both of Ian’s hands, a child’s damp hands; he is asleep. I’m afraid I’ll hold too tight and hurt him. I make no sound, only my tongue tickles my palate. I see the Sergeant lying on my yard on the ice hill, he is slowly sliding toward us.
ANYWAY

I live to fall
In between what I think
And think later.
All the old snaps of sentiment
Hanging in the background
Of this odd ambition.
I know
To be amused is the thing,
Flying out of the arc
Of neurons
That is called music,
Being lifted from one place
To another strangeness
I cripple myself to name.
It would not scare me
To wake up.
It would not surprise me
To come to having dreamt
A few of the huge things;
Marriage, Flight
The taming of animals.
I get older and want less
Lyric, less analogue.
The pine wind
Is the same, sharp
Redolent stab
In the atoms heart.
Anyway
Down in the valley
Where the wood smokes
A ballast of pain
Holds down that
Which is interesting
Until it becomes
Beautiful.
EPILOGUES

Meaning has hungered
for the unfaceable light
but at last a
face must hanker down
to shaken worm
in claws of a golden bird.

Perpetually,
the sunlapped ground
fends off a
further mask
that each person makes
to moor morning to an appetite.

It is only to prey
on the ravished state
that words alight
truly. You have to know
your wormy own and
own the worm in the golden claws.
The lawn is gold beneath
the flicker of the clouds.

A worm arises, cobralike,
dancing to the charm
of some invisible shenai.
Then the bird swoops
and words are swept midair
as live bait wriggles,
captive. I’ve pulled my hat
over my face, hoping
to excuse my own eyes.
But meaning can be mean,
shall shake up earthcrawlers,
shall shake out cadent swoops.
Then a person, naked, can mean what moves.
THE PAVED WAY WHICH IS HARM—
BOB PERELMAN'S THE FIRST WORLD

There are many dangers one chooses to undertake in acknowledging the political/social side of our being. One of these is speaking the language of what you consider to be your oppressors, the brinkmanship of fighting fire with fire. Another is realizing yourself into a lack of efficacy, the cousin to complacency, and falling into a ‘‘Howl’’ of helpless resignation, or pure cynicism, which enables Air Force One to scoop the entire airport of possibility up with it and fly heavily over you like a public shower cemented up.

But, in The First World Bob Perelman, by investigating these two holes (hells) as well as many other nooks, crannies and lacunae of much of contemporary culture, has helped show how the individual may place himself flexibly in this or these worlds. He cracks the code that prevents the wall we’re banging our heads against from becoming weeds we can walk through or, better, that prevents television from becoming a video game which, although we can’t win, we can at least manipulate (“you can look, but it costs”). This, to be sure, is not a new poetic accomplishment. But by his unique combination of myths, or plots, be they Freudian, Christian, Marxist, Classical, Existential, Deconstructive-L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E, Cartesian-Dualistic, etc. with a common-sense sensibility and by the resistance that results when they rub against the body, he exhibits himself as one who gives the stuff of popular culture an added life in an exciting “scheme” of things.

In “Binary,” for instance, I feel the basic gist of how this mind works:

Two heads are better than one.
Sunlight on the grass is better than the power to dissolve oneself into a variety of blades.
The declarative sentence cut
lash die kill interrogate clear away
the blood-soaked body
no longer here the declarative would be something other than what it says except that “you are what I am”
is to “the unspoken forces that surround us” as “sunlight,” see above, is to “mental furniture,” trashed, sat on in state, loved, its wheels licked far into the night sirens, thighs, the whole gizmo going off or not and then why bother, except already bothered on both sides
Finally the I writing
and the you reading (breath still misting the glass)
examples of the body partitioned by the word.
Pie in the sky, tons, suspended
over one's heads
by a single declaration of desire.

A tragic curse
is dripping down generations
making mincemeat of the fully grown and operational
person, whose mother
may have said goodnight in the violet light
projected down the individual hall
in such a way that novel
was complete
inside that gesture.
All it needed were other people
in sufficient quantity
and limited lifespans.

In realtime drama, however, people suck
and what eventually lets down
is some earlier story
they only find out about later
chopped to bits somewhere barely on the map.
The spectators, duly echoing
in the amphitheater, must find
what identities they can.

He begins with a straightforward utterance in the first four lines. These
two statements, the first a cliché of popular culture, the second a more
metaphorical-symbolic convention of poetry, are easily seen as truisms on
the superiority or preference of the "external" over the "internal," the
"real" over the "unreal" or surreal. But, by becoming conscious of his
medium, his mechanism, he attempts to free himself from its slavery. He
undercuts this statement with a long digression which is also, in part, an
interpretation of that very statement. It is by making his interpretation,
which he reminds us is interchangeable with reading, overt that he exposes
the "unspoken force" of writer as reader-critic, traditionally the reader-
not-writer or critic's domain, and forces the reader-not-writer into yet
another way of reading. Ultimately, we realize that in the first stanza he's
saying these two worlds, inner and outer, blur becoming "the whole
gizmo." This blur "we" get when viewing the poem as a whole becomes
a split when "I" view the individual line. This is his shifting and/or my
indecision. But he is definitely making some clear statements here: "and
then why bother, except already bothered on both sides."

The next, second, stanza consists entirely of "declarative statements."
But, there are still explanations for why the ones that opened, in two senses, the poem don’t hold for him. The “I writing” and “you reading” is too easy and unsatisfying a, not to mention false, distinction, just as the ones in the first stanza are. The second sentence here is interesting and seems to implicate desire as the possible culprit. It is from desire, as I read it, that the sweet dripping out of reach clichés of material ideals come.

So, with the talk of this “tragic curse” in the 3rd stanza, I’m left wondering what it refers to. Well, of course, it’s language and what it’s a symbol for? But, what is it a symbol for? I think of pie in the sky, or as Candy Kaucher writes, “the sky and . . . its relation to the FBI,” the whole gizmo, society? The body? desire? Is he lapsing into puritanism here?

I don’t think so. I think this “tragic curse” is meant ironically. For the fully grown and operational person, now alone and complete, still needs “other people/ in sufficient quantity/ and limited lifespans.” In older words, “No man is an . . .,” but notice his use of economical terms for ironic effect and contrast this with “What I need is a single body” in “Anti-Oedipus.” Earlier in the stanza, the phrase beginning with “whose mother” and ending with “inside that gesture,” his voice approximates Ashberry’s. But, as he takes the reader out of that mode abruptly, so he makes that so-called self-contained person into mincemeat. This is, at least, what I want him to want me to do by his “simple declaration of desire.” So it’s the thirst world.

With the jarring introduction to the last stanza, we return, if ever we were there, to the real world of History and spectators; we are, in effect, let down like those few crumbs we can suck out of the pie. This poem ends with a sentence that is not only declarative, but normative. After the long digression on that first statement, this seems sort of a cop-out, his hands thrown up in frustration. But this only serves to show that the poem is one big vicious circle.

It is this sense of circular entrapment that comes “back to haunt” one that is the inescapable message of much of this book. There is no hope for Romantic transcendence when you’re “chained to these pictures (of rocks) by the sententious wriggle/ of the buttocks two classes down,” when “these things on my plate” are “not what I ordered,” when order, even poetic order, is in the final analysis a form of suppression, an unveiling of a veil.

Perhaps it is too obvious to say that throughout this book runs a strand of argument over poetics; an argument Perelman reduces to “fractals.” “Speeches to a City No Larger Than the Reach of a Single Voice” is a poem on which this theme centers. He characterizes and contrasts two prevalent contemporary styles with his own to come to a conclusion, albeit one that is left hanging, and finds them all to be unsatisfactory in the search for any kind of amelioration. An implicit question in this highly suggestive title is: How far can the single voice be allowed to reach? Elsewhere, in a different manner, “detached priests, angels with wings of erotic syntax” can be read as a lampoon of another kind of poetry not yet extinct.

In this sequence of poems, there is much cross-referencing. Like a Goddard film, it is difficult to pin down because so many issues recur, but in different orders or with different emphases. Perhaps, this is torture for the
"new-critic" type because, like life, it doesn't yield easy connections or answers. In the first two poems, for instance, he uses the words "because" and "which is why" without ever saying what is what. He violates margins and constantly, violently, regroups. In so far as content and form can be distinguished, he makes them approximate each other (the house standing solid . . . mortgaged). Yet, he shows he can flex his muscles for the network cameras with lines like "a mat of dusty humus nourishing/ the squat human stalks."

This is not a "pure" poetry, but it points the reader to the possibility of . . . I feel his goal is, in the words of Gertrude Stein, a writer for whom he and I share enthusiasm, to "cut up the paved way which is harm."

Although this book takes great pains to avoid the invective by its undercutting of the tone of authority that is common to most political poetry, it's easier to see what he's against than what he's for. Even so, this is not just political/social poetry, but one of consciousness. A consciousness that, taking everything it can grasp into account, is "bisected along external blame/ lines by vegematic ads 2 A.M." A consciousness that is silly enough to actually want the "anachronistic" public life, that wants the bravado, if not the power, of the bard. It's about the tragic urge for the individual to express his desire to impose an order on a system, even as he realizes that expressing it is all he can do. Even that is called into question. So, it's humanistic in concern. He grapples with the human vs. inhuman forces of civilization. It is the dependence on the latter that may be the ultimate culprit. But there is no ultimate culprit. If I strip away the political, I see he's complaining about other things as well: "forced to age,\" "memory, face? space?\" Reading this book I realize I cannot tell the difference between turning on the t.v. and walking onto the suburban subway where I'm hit by the sight of someone reading a hard-bound copy of How a Woman Ages. In The First World, I see someone trying to figure it out for himself.
THIS IS ABOUT ROMANCE

I'm your sweetness. I'm your light.
You want me to hide in the crevasses of you.
Last week you were so solicitous
when I told you I'd stolen the TV
and VCR from the people downstairs.
Then you vomited on the rug
I'd taken at the street fair last year.
You took the rug to be washed by the Persian
carpet man down the street.
Tonight you're bringing the rug back.
Maybe I'll be here and maybe I won't.

I'm so brave. I'm so brave, so audacious, you say.
Lizard Boy, you don't know anything.
You go to bed early and sleep late
under the rock of your clean apartment.
Then you're up on the roof sunning, airing
your legs, chest, face. And I saw you
in the park with the reflector under your chin,
hoping the sun will bake the fact of you out of you.

You're so big. You always ask me if it hurts.
You piss in alleys like my tom cat, swaggering like a dancer.
I'm the dancer. I dance with angels.
I go out and I dance with myself or I dance with angels.
You'll be here soon and I'd rather be dancing.
Maybe you'll dance with me this time.
ALTERNATING DIRECT CURRENT

A man standing on the shore looking into the waves... A man standing on the opposite shore looking into the opposite waves... "If you put your ear against the ocean you can hear its thin shell breathing!" Same sky... Same worn-through carpet swept under the sand.
LABORHOOD

Engines don't run and smoke doesn't find
Freedom in pink lungs or white clouds.
The switches rusted shut are dead,
never to respond to
Thick leather gloves and muscle.

The brick walls are worn and tarnished.
Glass panes randomly punched out by
Black children stoning the demon
Father detested, but needed for
Bread, beer, and string beans.

Exhausted metal mother
Pimped by the rich
Handled by the poor
Now at rest,

A giant mass basking in the sun
By the river, rest place for white birds and black rats,
Both nest in you.
JACKING OFF THE RHINO

A keeper at the Pittsburgh Zoo who had the job of coaxing a rhinoceros into giving a sperm sample for a program of artificial insemination for threatened species said, "That rhino really lights up when he knows I'm around."
ORIOLES

When men were new to nature
They said summer birds
Buried themselves for winter.
Imagine bright feathers balled
In earth’s darkness, the oriole
Asleep in the roots of its oak.
Imagine birds waking with heat,
Forcing upward, their beaks
Breaking ground, their wings
Unfurling like flame. Imagine the fire
Of feathers, the shower of earth
As they lift themselves to trees.
SWEET WOODRUFF

for Robert Francis

Those slips
of sweet woodruff
you gave as gift
stand in tribute
to our visits.
We brought fruit,
looked up words
you had saved
so they could be
as crystalline as
our friendship
and grounded in trust
like those slips
of sweet woodruff
that have taken root
with an aroma
that permeates
our memory.
CONTRIBUTORS

Lee Harlan Bahan has an MFA in poetry from Indiana University (Bloomington), and teaches creative writing through the University’s Independent Study Program. He is translating Petrarch’s sonnets, and a chapbook, Migration Solo, is forthcoming from Writers’ Center Press of Indianapolis.

Karen Cangialosi lives in Woodinville, WA. She is working on a collection of essays about growing up as a third generation Southern Californian.

Jane Collins is a native of Indiana living in Southern California. She has had work published in CQ.

Colleen Creamer has a BA from the University of Florida, and is a freelance writer/journalist living in Los Angeles. She has poems published in Kalliope.

Craig Czury lives in Fleetville, PA, and was wiring the outdoor buzzer system of the Yaquina Reef Hotel at Newport, Oregon, when he wrote “Alternating Direct Current.”

Michael D’Arcy is a Philadelphia poet, artist, and garden designer, who also works in the ornithology department of the Academy of Natural Sciences. His poems have appeared in Stone Country and Phoebe.

Jordan Davis is a poet from Briarcliff, New York.

Gregory Dimeo works for Temple University’s Center for Research in Human Development and Education in Philadelphia as an assistant editor.

Joan Fisher studied geology and philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania. She is working on a master’s degree in creative writing at Columbia College in Chicago.

Anne Friedman lives in Brookline, MA, and has a master’s degree in creative writing from Boston University. One of her poems will be published in an upcoming issue of Poetry East.

Stefan George (1868-1933) was, with Rilke, a major figure in the Neo-romantic movement early in this century in Germany. He died in Switzerland, a voluntary exile from Nazism.

James Hazen teaches at the University of Nevada, and is the associate editor of Interim. His poems have appeared in Blue Unicorn, Chattahoochee Review, Hawaii Review, Roanoke Review and other publications, and are forthcoming in the Kentucky Poetry Review and The Atavist.

Eugene Howard, a native Philadelphian, was awarded a Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Fellowship for 1987.
Wu Keming was born in Ningbo, East China, and graduated from Nanjing University. He worked on a farm, taught high school, translated for UNESCO, and studied at Bath University in England. As a visiting professor, he taught Chinese language, culture, and literature at Clark University and Assumption College. He is Deputy Head of the English Section of the Foreign Languages Department at Nanjing University.

Sean Killian lives in New York, and has written a play, Planets in Love. He has poems in Sulfur.

Arthur Winfield Knight is known for his studies of Beat literature. A new chapbook, Wanted, is available through Trout Creek Press in Oregon.

Kit Knight is co-editor of the unspeakable visions of the individual and poetry editor of the Russian River News in Guerneville, CA. She lives in California, PA.

Leonard Kress teaches at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. His most recent publication is The Centralia Mine Fire (Flume Press), and he was awarded a Playwriting Fellowship from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

Carol Lee Lorenzo has published three children’s novels (Harper and Row), one of them included on the New York Times Best Books of the Year List. Her short stories have appeared or will appear in MSS, Epoch, and Primavera.

Carolyn Ann Lucas currently lives in Minnesota where she works as a singer, songwriter, and storyteller.

Daniel Lusk lives in Holicong, PA. Most recently he has had poems in The Northern Review, The Southern Review, and APR. He is the recipient of two Pennsylvania Council on the Arts literary awards.

Al Masarik is the editor of Swamp Root, a poetry magazine. His latest collection of poems is Excuses to be Outside (Duck Down Press), and he is a frequent contributor to PBQ.

Caren Lee Michaelson currently lives in New York City. Her work has been published in Long Shot Magazine and Alpha-Beat Soup.

Ingrid Nagin is a graphic artist prospering in New York City. Originally from Pittsburgh, she graduated from Philadelphia College of Art, and still has many friends in Philadelphia.

Catherine Oates is completing a master’s degree in creative writing at Stanford University. Her poems have appeared in Ceilidh, Pig in a Poke, and Abbey. She was recently associate editor of Sequoia.

Sharon Olinka lives in Los Angeles. Her poems have been published in the Colorado Review, and are forthcoming in Apalachee Quarterly, Willow Springs, Quarry West, and Five Fingers Review.
Charlotte Watson Sherman is a Pacific Northwest native whose poetry and prose has appeared or will appear in IMAGE, The Written ARTS, IKON, Obsidian II, and other literary journals.

Clifton Snider lives in Long Beach CA. His two books are Blood & Bones (Applezaba Press) and Impervious To Piranhas (Academic & Arts Press).

Lamont B. Steptoe is a Philadelphia poet and photographer, and is the author of two chapbooks, Crimson River (Slash and Burn Press) and American Morning/Mourning (Axe Factory).

Chris Stroffolino has poems published in Cops Hate Poetry, Samisdat, and Chemical Imbalance.

Wally Swist lives in Cushman, MA, and has recently published poetry and reviews in Longhouse, Osiris, Outerbridge, Poetry East, and Small Press Review. He has three chapbooks of poetry published: Waking Up the Ducks (Adastra, 1987), Unmarked Stones (Burnt Lake, 1988), and Chimney Smoke (Juniper, 1989).

Lu Wenfu lives in Suzhou, South China, and is vice-president of the Suzhou branch of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles. Two of his short stories and one of his novels won national prizes.
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