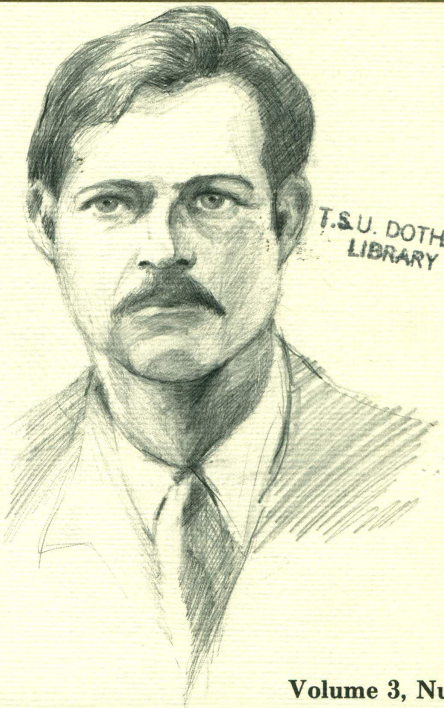
ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW



Spring 1989 Volume 3, Number 1

ALABAMA LITERARY REVIEW

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The Troy State University System

The great thing is to last and get your work done and see and hear and learn and understand; and write when there is something that you know; and not before; and too damned much after.

— Ernest Hemingway
from *Death in the Afternoon*

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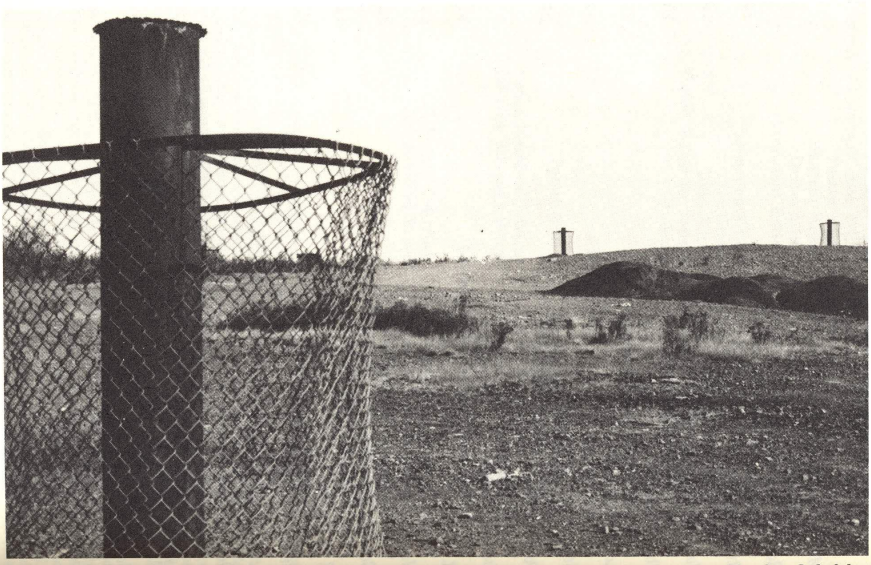


Charles Orlofsky

Stegosaurus

Mary Jane Mayo

A white opaque sky. It is the tail-end of summer. The air conditioner in Charlene's minivan has conked out, so she inhales the hot wind coming in through the driver's window. Her index finger pushes a black plastic button. "Playing for keeps . . . in too deep," she croons, turning right off the main road, heading up the hill, through the woods, towards Stella's house. She recalls the tentative voice on the phone last night, and Charlene, roused from sleep had said, "He's left you again." And the reply, "Well, yes, but that's not it. There's something I want you to see."

Charlene's heart accelerates as she approaches the final turn-off. I hope she didn't try to slit her wrists, thinks Charlene. Stella always gets weird when Jack takes off. She carefully maneuvers the van through the dogwoods and parks it under a thick live oak, zaps the music crescendo, pushes the door open. There is Stella, slouched behind the screen door. Coming closer, Charlene sees the pale blue eyes, red-rimmed and anemic, the brassy waves now a good half inch dark at the roots.

"Come on in," says Stella, holding the door open. As Charlene passes close to Stella's face, she detects the spicy smell of juniper, arches her eyebrows at the half empty bottle of Tanqueray, lying open, on the kitchen counter. "Couldn't sleep last night," says Stella with a listless shrug. He's really gone and done it this time, thinks Charlene. Bastard.

She examines Stella as she stands, centered in front of a stained glass window, doves and red rosebuds emanating from her head, in her holy sadness, a study in modern female martyrdom. Charlene sees the Mona Lisa smile on the pale heart-shaped face, the sunken cheeks, the jawline beginning to sag, the small patch of crepey skin. He's sucked her dry, thinks Charlene. He's drained her of all life. Stella

seems to have shrunk, her small frame dwarfed by her robe, a free-flowing caftan with a repeating print of some Indonesian destroyer god, an ugly violent dress that Stella, for some reason, picked up in Djakarta.

"This is what I wanted you to see," says Stella, hooking her tiny hand onto Charlene's sturdy arm. She leads her down two carpeted steps toward a teak dining table which is covered with squares of paper, in brilliant turquoise, folded into triangles. They all rise from the table, uniformly at forty-five degree angles like a sea of scales. As Stella leads her around the table, Charlene sees a vague neck, a hump, a long tail.

"Stegosaurus?" she asks instinctively.

"Good, you see it, too." Stella smiles. A brief moment of color brightens her sallow cheeks. "I've been playing around with the turquoise." She reaches down into a large cardboard box, retrieves a handful of the bright fuzzy-edged squares, lets one drop. They watch it flutter, come to rest lightly on the shag carpet. Charlene wraps a protective arm around Stella's bony angles.

"He'll be back," she says, sighing. "He always comes back." Stella shakes her head and breaks away, dabs at the corner of a wide sleeve. "This time I think he really means it." Charlene looks into the blue eyes, filmy and unreadable. "Two weeks he's been gone," says Stella. "And a brunette, an older brunette." She sighs. "And a Chilean. That's a first, anyway."

"You need to get out of this house," says Charlene, stepping to face her. Stella's house seems a poor choice for an artist with its small dark rooms. Today it is hot and airless, like being buried alive. A new theory occurs to Charlene that Jack has run away, not from Stella, but from this house. Perhaps he woke up from a suffocating nightmare, and decided to make a run for it. Then Charlene looks at Stella, fiddling with her paper squares, looking like some aging Woodstock refugee.

"Come on," she says, grabbing Stella's arm. "Right now. Let's get in my car and drive to the coast. We can stay all day. Eat seafood. Drink beer."

Stella eyes her warily. "What about Danny and Melissa?" she asks. "What about Clayton?" Now it's Charlene's turn to shrug and look away.

"The kids are down at the point with Bud and Myra," she says, picking at an irregular cuticle. "And Clayton's chained to the computer." Lately, Charlene has come to believe that Clayton is more compatible with IBM than with her. She squeezes Stella's arm, presses for an answer.

"I don't know if I want to drive all the way down there," says Stella, pulling back. "It's so hot. I'd rather go somewhere cool."

"Well, sure," says Charlene. "We'll just bop out to the airport and catch the next plane to Vancouver." Stella pisses her off the way she's always coming up with different answers, always opening everything up.

"Well, I have to take a shower first anyway," says Stella, heading back toward the bedroom. "Let's just think about it. Make yourself at home."

Charlene shakes out her white cotton slacks, eases herself onto the scratchy herringbone sofa. What am I doing here, she wonders. She hadn't meant to say she could spend the whole day with Stella, but, she realizes, she *does* have the whole day to spend. Lately, she seems to find herself with unexpectedly large chunks of free time. Now, in fact, there seems to be too much time, too much energy left over at the end of the day. Emotions burble up and spill out at inconvenient times and places, as she watches old ladies cross the street, as she stands in the checkout line at the Winn Dixie. Charlene's mother has noticed this. "You need a hobby," she told Charlene just last week.

Charlene scans the panelled walls, Stella's little gallery. Stella *lives* her hobby, she thinks enviously. Stella's weavings, and paper creations testify to her skill, and some of them, thinks Charlene, to her artistry. She wonders why Stella always seems to create the art when Jack takes off. Charlene hones in on an unfamiliar piece, pastel green paper, in three thick vertical rectangles, each embossed with a different bold pattern, matted on black, framed in silver. Condo in Boca, thinks Charlene. Miami Vice. Her eyes float back to the embryonic Stegosaurus. The trendy color, the campy theme, smell like success to Charlene. Maybe Stella could hit the big time with this one, actually sell something. All she needs is time, time to develop without her head being messed up. Charlene wants Stella to make good and break free. She thinks it would serve him right.

Charlene does not like Stella's Jack. Short, thick-lipped and stocky, with his paunch and pate and his anachronistic little wire rims, Charlene does not understand the source of his appeal, of his power over his female victims. Several things about him disturb and confuse her. Why doesn't he flirt with *her* at cocktail parties? And why does he make more money than Clayton, even though they both have tenure in the same department? And why has Stella put up with his crap all these years? she wonders, picking at her cuticle until she draws blood.

Lately, Charlene has become aware of the presence of a powerful idea, lurking around the walls of her subconscious, prowling, testing,

looking for an unguarded doorway. It has, so far, manifested in an avalanche of cliches, which swim around in her head, like floating pieces of a jigsaw puzzle every night as she lies in bed, searching relentlessly for a fit. *It takes two to tango. There's more than one side to every story, more to this than meets the eye. One woman's pain is another woman's pleasure. Everything is relative. You get what you give Karma.*

Charlene gets up, goes into the kitchen, fixes a tumbler of ice water and then another. The bedroom door opens and Stella emerges, mopping her wet curls with a maroon bathtowel. "Jesus, it's hot in here," snaps Charlene. "Don't you ever turn on the AC?"

"Never before noon," says Stella, smiling. "Jack's rule." She drops the towel on a chair, ties her sarong in a tighter knot around her neck. Huge copper triangles dangle from her ears. Charlene shudders. She is afraid of maniacs who might pull on earrings. *What has Stella just said?*

"Whose rule?" she asks, moving toward Stella. "What's with the long-distance obedience? What about you? You want to turn it on? Turn it on!" Charlene moves closer. "Go on, turn it down to 72. I'll back you up." Stella rolls her eyes.

"Just let me get my shoes," she says, and disappears into the bedroom. Charlene massages her temples to quell the throbbing. Now Stella's back, gripping a leather purse. "Where to?" she asks.

Charlene stretches, looks out the window. "I don't know," she says. "I don't know anymore. Where do you want to go?"

"How about the cathedral of tomorrow?" says Stella, smiling. "It's cool in there, and I need to get some more reeds at the arts and crafts store." Charlene smiles. Stella has started calling the mall the "cathedral of tomorrow," ever since she saw some show on PBS, a thin articulate Brit, making his case for the shopping mall as new age cathedral, dedicated to the worship of Mammon. Late Saturday in August, thinks Charlene. Filled with frenzied back-to-school shoppers. But then she sees Stella's face, expectant, like a small child's. "Okay," she says, "but no video games this time."

Outside, Stella carefully locks the bolt and doorknob, and they plod slowly toward Charlene's car, fighting heat with every step, their mouths open like landed fish.

"Can we stop at the nursery first?" asks Stella in a little girl voice. "I need to get some plant food."

"Sure, no prob," says Charlene. She knows that Stella's plants and flowers are her pets. "Your seat belt," she says to Stella who nods and straps herself in. Charlene starts the car, maneuvers back through the maze of dogwoods, and turns left onto the road, toward civiliza-

tion. She accelerates, feels the car's lagging response. "Needs a tune-up," she says apologetically, but Stella, fiddling with the strap of her waist thong, does not respond. They drive through the bleached-out day, under a colorless sky, through a tunnel of tired foliage.

As they approach the four lane road into town, Charlene looks left, then right, then left again (a 16-year-old girl was killed at this intersection, she recalls) then eases out into the road and accelerates. Several miles later, she sees the small white sign. She signals, brakes, turns right onto a narrow dirt road, expertly dodges several large potholes, and pulls up in front of a mildewed greenhouse.

To Charlene, the nursery in late summer looks like unfulfilled promises. Thousands of leggy bedding plants, strangled by their own white roots, their blossoms pinched and faded. "Think fall," says a cheery sign. Right, thinks Charlene. What's done is done.

Nursery employees in identical blue polos move systematically from quadrant to quadrant, guiding aluminum wands to produce artificial useless showers. Their cheerless efficiency depresses Charlene. She is seized by the urge to get back in the van and drive away from everything forlorn, from Stella and these blue robots. She will drive west on I-10, at the new speed limit, across the pine barrens, past the tempting sugar beaches, take in the craziness of New Orleans, conquer the concrete jungle of Houston and break free onto the red plains of west Texas. Then the final push across the desert to the end of the line in L.A. And then what? Hop a Pacific freighter? Join the Navy? North, thinks Charlene. North to Alaska.

A frail bitchy man in a sweat-soaked polo wordlessly snatches Stella's VISA card, rams it through the machine. "Sign here," he commands. Charlene watches Stella's hand shake, wonders how many green bottles Stella has gone through since Jack left. "Have a nice day," hisses the man. Charlene arches her eyebrows and gives him the look, but he has grabbed his aluminum wand and has moved off to wave it over another section of dying flowers.

She cannot remember why they are here. The point of the outing seems to have disappeared, evaporated in the heat. Back in the van, Stella says, "On to the cathedral, then," but Charlene doesn't laugh or smile this time. Something has happened. All of her energy seems to have been transferred, somehow, to Stella. She drives now, grim and determined, toward their destination, but as they approach the mall parking lot, Charlene see the acres of asphalt covered by a sea of cars and feels briefly that gagging reflex that she used to feel every morning for a month before she quit her job.

"God, it's jammed," she says. "We'll have to park way out here and walk."

"That's okay," says Stella. "I need the exercise." Charlene aims for a space between a white camper with an identifying wheel cover (The Papagiorge's: Barbara and Minous) and a red Firebird with a crumpled fender and bumper sticker that says *Shit Happens*.

"You know, it's weird," says Stella as they trudge across the blacktop. "There's nobody at all out here. I mean, they're all in *there*, trying on shoes, sniffing sampler colognes—"

"Shoplifting," interrupts Charlene. "Going into debt. Eating greasy food. Whacking their kids."

"We didn't have to come here," says Stella, looking hurt. "You could have said something."

"It's okay, I'm okay. Anyway we're here now."

Inside the dark cavernous room, it is cool, cold, leafy green. Charlene sees streams of people who cross paths but somehow never collide. People with a mission. People who know where they are going. She feels like a stray in some foreign ant colony. She does not know where to go. She does not know what to do.

"Look, they're turning it on," says Stella, moving quickly toward a geyser, rising higher and higher in the center of the room. Charlene follows and stands with Stella, admiring the slender fluid column, inhaling chlorine vapors.

"Let's have lunch," says Stella, grabbing *her* arm now, taking charge. "Go get that table over there, and I'll get us something, my treat. What do you want?"

"Pita pocket vegetarian," says Charlene automatically, though what she'd really want is a Wendy's double cheese with large fries. Yesterday, the bathroom scales hit an all-time high of 135, and last week she read some article about the connection between the giant burger chains and the destruction of the rain forest. Take a stand, said the article. It's all up to people like you and me.

Charlene watches the pattern of Stella's sarong melt into the crowd. She stakes out the small white table and plops down, feeling the wire grid on her back. At the adjacent table, an obese blond, constricted by tight blue jeans and red cowboy boots, is working on three chili dogs and a bucket of Pepsi. Charlene stares as the woman finishes the first one in four grim bites, stopping only to take a drink from her paper bucket before reaching for the second. Stella returns, waving a pita pocket. "Where's yours?" asks Charlene.

"Oh, I'm having a steak hoagie," says Stella, depositing the sandwich on the table. "Back in a flash." Stella disappears again. Being friends with Stella is like being friends with a butterfly, thinks Charlene. Stella *flutters*. Stella can be colorful. And now, maybe if Jack is gone for good, maybe Stella can be free, too.

A gaggle of teenage girls passes by, reeking of bubblegum and imitation Giorgio. Charlene's daughter will be one of them soon, though at eleven, she is still content with her pageboy and clothes from J.C. Penney. Stella has no daughter. Stella, in fact, has no one. She is an orphan from California, raised by some long-deceased aunt. She is rootless, childless, now manless, even catless. Stella answers to no one.

Charlene feels that she answers to everyone. There are so many people in her life that she cannot count, much less escape, them all. There are Clayton, Danny, and Melissa. There are Clayton's parents, Bud and Myra, and Clayton's brother, Lou, and his wife, Maverine. There is Clayton's sister, Laura, and her husband, Jason. There is Charlene's mother, and her stepfather, Carl. There are Carl's kids, Butch, and his wife, Suzanne, Debbie and her husband, Bill. There are all their kids. There is Duffy the dalmatian, Spooky the one-eyed Persian, and a wiry tom cat who has taken up at Charlene's house and refuses to leave. Family has become a dirty word to Charlene.

There ought to be some balance, she thinks, watching Stella juggle two paper cups and a large tubular sandwich. Some kind of cosmic scale. The fat cowgirl pounds her chest to release a loud belch, then crushes her chili dog wrappers into neat little balls, tossing them, one by one, into the empty bucket. She rises slowly and lumbers off, leaving her trash on the table.

"Jesus," whispers Stella. "If I looked like that."

"They ought to put up signs like they do in offices," says Charlene. "Thank you for not being a walking obscenity." They laugh. Stella unwraps her sandwich. Charlene's mouth begins to water. Her own lunch tastes like garlic-flavored cardboard, a stupid pointless gesture, she thinks now.

"Tell me about 'Stegosaurus,' " she says. Stella nods, swallows a mouthful of steak.

"It's gonna be big," she says, "about five by six, I guess. I'll put it in eighth inch plexiglass."

"No," says Charlene, "you know what I mean. Tell me how you got the *idea* for it." Charlene is fascinated by Stella's ability to snatch an idea out of thin air and turn it into color, form, *art.*

She envies her.

"What do you mean?" asks Stella shyly, taking a small bite of hoagie. "It's just one idea, like all the others." She looks at Charlene and smiles. "You shouldn't try to nail everything down."

"I'm just trying to understand it, that's all," says Charlene, staring at her uneaten sandwich. "Don't tell me if you don't want to."

"Okay," says Stella, moving her chair closer to Charlene's. "A couple of nights ago, I realized that Jack has been gone so long . . . well,

I thought maybe he's not coming back." Stella pauses, takes a drink. "And I just made myself *face* my fear, stare it down." Charlene nods uneasily. "And that's when I looked down at a magazine ad and saw a picture of a stegosaurus. So I picked it up and started looking at all those bony spikes and plates along its back. They're there to protect, you know, to *defend.* And what good did all of it do? We'll never see the likes of him again." Stella sighs. "Anyway, then I looked down and saw all those turquoise squares that I'd made, but didn't know what to do with, and it all just sort of came together. I stayed up all night playing around with it." Charlene stares, unblinking, at Stella, pondering Stella's private symbolism here in this public place. She feels the uncomfortable opening of ducts and pores. Stella pushes her empty cup away, folds her arms on the table, looks straight into Charlene's timid eyes. "Jack's gone," she says, "that's reality. And now I'm going to get on with it. I've wasted enough time on that bastard."

Charlene's eyes widen. She reaches out, touches Stella's hand, now cool and steady. Sitting next to her, in the cathedral of tomorrow, she forgets all about the manic consumers, the screaming babies, the insistent Muzak. All that matters now is that Stella is free.

11:56 p.m. A hard merciless rain. The season's first hurricane sits offshore, flirting with the coast. Charlene's eyes are wide open, and although she can see nothing in the blackened bedroom, she feels no panic, only a vague unease. For some reason, Clayton, who usually respects her sleeping space, has her pinned tightly to the mattress, his beefy arm tucked neatly around her torso. He is breathing, snoring into her ear.

Gently, she unlocks Clayton's grip, eases out from under, gropes her way cautiously around the edge of the bed, feels for the doorknob, closes it behind her. She pads down the hall into the kitchen. Charlene switches on the overhead fluorescent, shuffles over to the refrigerator, opens it and stares. Several seconds later, armed with a mug of milk and an unopened bag of *Chips Ahoy!,* she ambles into the den, eases back into the La-Z-Boy. She picks up the remote and presses a button. "The beaver is one of nature's most industrious animals," says a forthright male voice. She presses again. Errol Flynn, in an oddly frilly pirate costume, swings from a rope and drops onto a ship's deck, rattling his saber, exhorting similarly dressed men to do battle. "You tell 'em, Errol," she says, unfastening the clasps, digging into the cookie bag.

The past week has been a bitch. Clayton's mother, Myra, slipped and fell in the bathtub, fractured her hip and had to be hospitalized.

Bud, Charlene's father-in-law, has been at her house for dinner every night since, and while Charlene is glad to have him, it really ticks her off when he keeps on saying "nigger" even after she and Clayton have told him not to. Her own mother is scheduled for a hysterectomy next week, and yesterday, the vet excised a suspicious growth from the dalmatian's thigh, and has sent it to the lab for a biopsy. Charlene is becoming expert in dealing with everyone else's broken down biological systems. My new hobby, she thinks, reaching for another cookie.

She listens to the wind outside, hears it picking up speed as it rips through the pencil pines outside the house. She, herself, is not afraid of hurricanes (she once flew through Hurricane Camille). She's thinking about Stella, all alone out there in that dark little bungalow, underneath all those ancient, creaky live oaks. She closes her eyes and sees Stella's house, bisected by that particlular live oak which, Charlene has always thought, is much too close to the house and may be infested with termites. She envisions Stella's precious art, mutilated, waterlogged, ruined beyond repair by violent natural forces.

Charlene has not seen or talked with Stella since that day at the mall, and now her premonition has startled her, like the buzz of her oven timer, into an overdue awareness of Stella's probable pain and loneliness. She looks at the digital tv clock, 12:32, much too late to call anyone, she tells herself. She returns the La-Z-Boy to its upright position, switches off the tv, carries her empty mug and the wrinkled cookie bag back into the kitchen, and stops, staring, at the wall phone. I could say I was worried about her, she thinks, listening to the rain for the sound of a freight train which would mean the approach of a deadly tornado. I can always apologize, she thinks, her fingers reaching out to press a memorized sequence. She listens to the long slow rings, waiting nervously. A garbled sleepy voice answers, a confusing, disorienting voice, a voice out of context, and, therefore, unrecognizable at first. It is the voice of someone who is not supposed to be there.

"You're back," she says, feeling the pulse in the thin membranes of her temples. "You came back." She can think of nothing else to say.

"Who's this?" The sleepy voice becomes mildly combative.

"It's me, Charlene," she says, rubbing her forehead, hard, with her fingertips.

"Charlene." The hostility is still there. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, really," she says, playing for time. "I just called to see if Stella was okay." She cannot resist adding, "There's a hurricane on the way, you know." She hears the heavy sigh. Message received.

"Yeah," says the voice in a monotone. "I know all about it. Are *you* okay?"

"Oh yeah, sure," she says. No, you son of a bitch, she thinks. I am not okay. The wrong voice has answered the phone and now Charlene is rapidly reinterpreting the events of that day at the mall. Is Stella okay, she wonders. Or has she given up again? "Jack," she says quickly, before he can hang up, "did Stella finish 'Stegosaurus'?" She hears another yawn.

"Hmm? What's 'Stegosaurus'?"

" 'Stegosaurus.' On the dining room table." There is a long pause.

"Oh yeah. All those triangles. Yeah. I don't know where she is on that one. She put them back in the box."

Charlene feels her heart thumping against her ribs. "Back in the box?" she says dully.

"Yeah, for now anyway. Look, you wanna call back tomorrow? It's pretty late."

"Sure. I'll call her tomorrow," she says, surprised at the ease of her lie. She hears the click, replaces the receiver, stares out of the open miniblinds at the churning blackness: *a dark and stormy night.* She places the bag of cookies into the pantry, rinses the milk film from the mug and puts it in the dishwasher. Switching off the light, she plods down the dark hallway to the bedroom, darker still. Through the open door, she can see that Clayton has not moved. He lies, in peaceful deep sleep, a whitish immobile lump, in the middle of the bed. Groping her way carefully back around to her side, she eases back under the wrinkled sheets, slides back under Clayton's arm. Green triangles float through her mind, searching still. She closes her eyes, and with the noise of the approaching storm strong in her head, takes a deep breath, and waits.□

Cutter

Robert Cooperman

After he was mugged
he changed his name to "Cutter,"
half Arapahoe, he told strangers
at parties or meetings.
"Cutter what?" they asked.
"Just Cutter," he answered.

He studied karate
and carried a knuckle duster.
He played conversations in his head
that would lead to battle,
saw himself cave in the back
of an assailant with both fists
crashing in a crescendo
of justified violence.
He spat out threats in sleep,
his wife edging farther away,
her knees jack knifed ready to run.

Once she tried to wake him
by calling his old name
and patting his shoulder.
She nudged harder; he started awake,
one arm pulled back to punch her
through the window.
She lay stiff as a goat
in the tiger's embrace
while he tried to apologize,
their hearts crashing
like dinghies caught
on a jagged coastline.

They All Want

Rikki Santer

Some want me
to have a baby.
It's most logical.
I am 35.
I have a husband.
I own reservoirs of tender ways.

Most nights
a tiny, faceless mouth
sucks at me
gumming the small
of my back,
my elbows,
sometimes my breasts.
This mouth woos
with moist needs
but I know its teeth--
seductive jewels now
glistening in coral sea,
to grow later
sharp and selfish
hungry for my flesh, my salt
until I become famished for its.

These nights
miles away
my father's veiled eyes watch
over my slumber,
his damp eyelashes
fanning me with his longing
for the blessing that would;
these nights
my brother's wringing hands stir
a swelling melancholy
for his young daughter
and her lost link
which I will not forge.
And these nights
my husband's stubborn back
dank from confinement
whispers hazy misgivings
with each rising breath.

In the middle of nights I rise
to sleep under my bed.
The air is dispassionate there
just right
for a gambler with empty pockets.

Charles Orlofsky

Bread and Bathrooms

Jacqueline M. Guidry

Marjorie believed in omens. As other people studied the stock market or the heavens, Marjorie studied events in her own life for hints of the path she should follow to travel safely through her allotted days. Despite her reliance on omens, however, she was only compulsive about bathrooms. The bread hardly counted. Her daughter understood the bread, but remained confused about the bathrooms.

"Don't forget bread," Marjorie now reminded herself before grocery shopping. Her husband was killed returning to the store for a loaf of bread he'd forgotten. A steel beam, a bolt flung from the heavens, fell from a construction rafter, landing atop Samuel, crushing his back, killing him instantly. His death was a warning: "Beware! Ye who forget the bread will suffer swift and final retribution."

Julianne flippantly dismissed her mother's not so subtle hints about the importance of grocery lists and not forgetting needed foods, especially bread. "Too much trouble, Mama, and not worth it." Still Marjorie persisted with phone reminders timed to coincide with Julianne's Saturday morning shopping.

The bathroom fetish, if fetish it was, began soon after Samuel's death. Twenty-year-old Julianne arranged a shopping trip. After allowing her mother to mourn for six months, she was taking charge. "Now, Mama, you can't stay cooped up in this old house the rest of your life. Daddy's dead and we all miss him, but you know what they say, life goes on." Julianne sprawled on her mother's couch, dangling long legs over the armrest. She was big-boned and blond, as if she had Swedish ancestors and was certainly not related to petite, black-haired, olive-skinned Marjorie and Samuel.

Julianne twisted one arm back and forth to admire the glint of gold bracelets which covered her from wrist to elbow. "I'm cutting my Lit class in the morning, so I'll be free until 2:30. I'll pick you up at 9:00. Be ready."

"But I don't need anything. Besides, I don't feel like shopping." Marjorie protested, even while knowing her protest would be useless. While she and Samuel had tiptoed through life, convinced the next corner hid a mine field, Julianne hurdled forward, embracing each spectacular surprise and creating a few of her own. Unwary spectators were dragged along, willing or not.

"I won't take no for an answer. You need to get out. And, remember, I'm cutting my class so don't crap out on me, love."

"Julianne, please." Marjorie rubbed her hands against the sides of her skirt, as if removing dirt or other specks of uncleanliness. She wondered if all late babies—Samuel had been nearly 40, Marjorie 37 when Julianne was born—acted like her daughter. She sighed. Probably not. That was just Julianne's way, her destiny.

Julianne smiled at her mother, flattered by the chastisement. Since becoming an art major at the local university, Julianne had decided most words impeded communication and only language which shocked had value. If that were true, Marjorie was the ideal listener—easily and frequently and shocked.

"You should hear my friends talk."

"I don't want to meet such so-called friends." She sniffed twice. Julianne's major seemed decadent, useless, overly self-indulgent. The friends seemed the same. Marjorie still wished Julianne had taken a one-year secretarial course at the business college and found a steady nine-to-five job after that. She would be okay, or at least headed in the right direction, if she'd done that.

"Don't worry, love, they won't be coming tomorrow. See you at 9:00." Julianne swung her legs off the couch and sashayed out the front door.

Next morning, at 9:25, she pulled in front of Marjorie's house. That, for Julianne, was almost early.

Marjorie had been waiting since 8:30. That, for Marjorie, was almost late. She'd spent the time seated in Samuel's brown recliner which, since his death, she'd boldly appropriated for her own. She thought of Samuel, as she had done almost constantly since his death and almost never before it. If he had not died on April 1, they would have been married thirty years on the 30th of October. That was supposed to be a couple's luckiest year, the anniversary year which corresponded to the date of the marriage — thirty years on the 30th. But now Marjorie would never know, because Samuel had gotten himself killed. She didn't suppose she could legitimately celebrate her anniversary without a husband.

She had few pictures of Samuel. The latest one had been taken on Julianne's ninth birthday. Samuel had been the family photographer,

chronicling the passing years while remaining safely hidden behind the lens. Now, if anyone wanted to know what he looked like, Marjorie could only point to a family album entry which showed a youngish man of forty-nine, his hair, with mere tinges of gray, receding only slightly from his forehead, his stomach protruding almost imperceptibly over his belt, certainly not unsightly enough to be considered a paunch. He looked more like Marjorie's son than her husband. That is not how he looked when he died. But that would soon be all anyone would remember. Already, Marjorie found herself unable to recall certain of his features without assistance from the album. Once she saw him at forty-nine, she could quickly age him in her mind's eye to sixty. Soon, even that would be difficult, then impossible. She would be left with vague memories of an older man and pictures of someone who might have been the son she never had.

Though she had trouble reconstructing Samuel's individual features, Marjorie knew she would never forget his death expression. In his coffin, he'd seemed bewildered at his fate. She had never seen such intense surprise on a corpse. It was almost embarrassing. "All this just for a loaf of bread?" he seemed to ask. Samuel, who never stood out in a crowd, who never had his name in the newspaper, much less on the evening news, suddenly, with his death, became the center of controversy. Did the state have sufficient safety codes for construction? Had the building site been following state code requirements? Was negligence a factor? Should Mrs. Tanner sue the property owners, the state, the city, or all three?

Mrs. Marjorie Tanner sued no one. Despite Julianne's battle cry ("Sue the bastards!"), Marjorie recoiled from that possibility. She would have had to go to court, testify about the bread. It would have reduced Samuel's death to what it was, an insignificant end to an insignificant life. Let him remain a person whose death rendered him newsworthy.

Julianne's insistent honking startled Marjorie. She grabbed her pocketbook and trotted out the door towards the Volkswagen. Maybe neighbors hadn't heard the honking.

"Honking's cheap. I've told you before. You could get down, knock." She tucked her beige cotton skirt next to her thighs and clasped her hands over her pocketbook.

"Relax, Mama. Relax." Julianne glanced at her, then pulled into traffic. "You look nice, Mama. But, really! Stockings and heels? We're going shopping, not out on a hot date." Marjorie blushed. Julianne, dressed in the uniform of the day, faded jeans and t-shirt, laughed. Even as a child, Julianne, with her constant excessiveness, had known exactly how to embarrass Marjorie.

"Where are we going?"

"How about checking out the new Macy's at Cherry Tree Mall? We can have lunch there, if you like."

"You're in charge, not me." Marjorie disclaimed responsibility for most outings. If things didn't turn out as planned, no one could blame her.

Julianne turned up the volume on her radio. Blaring music rocked the beetle. As always, she drove too fast. Marjorie glued her eyes to the speedometer, but said nothing.

"Lucky we're doing this in the middle of the week. Last time I was here, a Saturday I think, I couldn't even get up to the jewelry counter without waiting in line. Guess everybody in the city is checking out the new store." Julianne turned the revolving stand which held pairs of gold earrings in various shapes and sizes—long, danglish beaded strings; tiny knobs which would be barely noticeable on a lobe; convoluted loops. She fingered a pair of four-leaf clovers, but must have decided the earrings were too conservative to deserve serious attention. She motioned her mother to the next department.

"You might not think this is crowded, but I do." Marjorie eyed the shoppers who pressed too closely. At least, though, they were generally properly attired. Despite Julianne's joking admonition, Marjorie was pleased to see most women wearing stockings and small heels. She was not conspicuous.

They had visited most departments, carefully avoiding the men's clothing area, when Julianne suggested lunch. She flipped through sweater racks while her mother made her customary premeal visit to the bathroom.

Marjorie was pleased with the women's room—it seemed designed for ladies in stockings and small heels. The walls of the outer waiting area were papered with burgundy velvet flowers against a pink satin background. Marjorie knew the paper wasn't actually made of velvet and satin. But the wall covering was sufficiently similar to the materials it imitated to give the reassuring illusion of being rare and expensive. Marjorie liked that.

After refurbishing her lipstick and combing her hair, Marjorie left the outer area for the inner one. Three sinks lined one wall. No one would have to wait to wash her hands at this Macy's. Three sinks in such a small bathroom seemed almost excessively opulent. Still, she reasoned, better to err on the side of providing too much to customers than not enough.

She turned from the sinks to the toilet stalls, then took a shocked half step backwards. The fattest woman Marjorie had ever seen, or even imagined, sat on the seat of one toilet. The stall door was open—

otherwise the woman could not have fit in the enclosure. A pair of black polyester pants drooped at her ankles. Her huge buttocks overflowed the toilet seat. Her legs, rooted to the floor, were folds of fat, ripples of flesh undulating like a small ocean. The woman's black hair, streaked with yellowish gray strands, oily from not having been washed, was tightly pulled into a ponytail at the back of her head. She held a peanut butter and jelly sandwich which she chewed between loud grunts. As she bit into the sandwich, portions of the filling squirted out. So, after each bite, she wiped the perimeters of the bread slices and shoved the results into her mouth with her index and middle fingers.

Three young girls, each also chewing a sandwich, stood in a semicircle in front of the woman's stall. They were miniature versions of the woman, her daughters or perhaps her granddaughters—it was impossible to tell which. The woman could have been any age—thirty, fifty, even seventy. The girls seemed to be studying the fat woman to learn what they would one day become. If the scene had not been so grotesque, it would have been touching—daughters gathered round the maternal altar of knowledge.

The silence was interrupted only by the fat woman's grunts. Her stench filled the small room, overwhelming the deodorizer attached to the wall above the sinks. Marjorie stood transfixed, unobserved, perhaps rendered momentarily invisible. Then, she was noticed, standing bewildered in the entry.

"Girls, get out of the way for the lady, will ya? Kids nowadays have no manners." her voice was deep, gravelly—she probably smoked. Her smile revealed a single gold crown surrounded by cracked, broken, stained teeth. The gums were darkened, as if they bled frequently, surely a sign of disease. The gold seemed foreign.

"Want a sandwich, honey? Plenty more in the bag."

Marjorie, who had made no motion towards one of the empty stalls, was startled to be addressed again. "Go on, take one. With those stick legs of yours, you could use it." She shoved the sandwich, wrapped in wax paper, towards Marjorie.

Marjorie didn't want the sandwich. She wasn't hungry. Even if she had been, she didn't want to eat anything contaminated by this woman. Anyway, she was about to have lunch with Julianne. She should have said that to the fat woman, "I'm about to have lunch with my daughter. There are things I must tell her. You understand." But she could not. She'd been hypnotized, had no will of her own. Instead of politely refusing the sandwich Marjorie grabbed it from the woman who released it somewhat reluctantly. Perhaps she had changed her mind about sharing her bounty. But Marjorie had the

sandwich now. Neither she nor the fat woman could get out of their bargained exchange.

Quickly, Marjorie unwrapped the sandwich and ate. Normally a dainty eater, Marjorie gobbled the sandwich like a woman starved. She broke large chunks, chewed with a rapid circular motion, then swallowed. Within minutes the sandwich was gone. Maybe now she would be allowed to leave.

"See there. Knew you needed that." Again, she smiled.

Still frozen, Marjorie smiled back.

As Marjorie ate, the fat woman had stopped grunting, mesmerized by Marjorie's moving jaws. But now, remembering the main purpose of her bathroom visit, she stared at the pink floor tiles and resumed her grunts, oblivious again to Marjorie.

The spell broke and Marjorie slipped into the waiting area. She collapsed on the loveseat, nauseated. How could she have eaten that filthy woman's sandwich? Even Julianne would have been repulsed. At least Marjorie hoped she would have been. Julianne was, despite their differences, still her daughter, her only child, flesh of her flesh. Julianne belonged to her just like those wiry girls belonged to the fat woman. And, just as those girls were destined to rotund bodies, Julianne was destined. Destined to what? Marjorie jerked erect. It was clear now. Julianne was destined to recognize and obey family omens. Marjorie's role was to study life's warnings, save them for the day Julianne, recognizing their importance, came to her. Until that day arrived, Marjorie would have to be satisfied with following the omens herself.

From that day forward, Marjorie tried never to be in a public place without having emptied her bowels and bladder beforehand. On those rare occasions when she was forced to use a public bathroom, she took appropriate precautions, wiping the toilet seat with crumpled squares of toilet paper, flushing the bowl twice, three times if it seemed especially dirty, guarding against diseases lurking in the toilet, ready to leap upon her. She would not be disgraced by dying from a disreputable disease.

Marjorie heeded the warnings of the fat woman and of Samuel's death, and waited for omens yet to come. She waited to share the knowledge she was accumulating with Julianne. When Julianne asked, Marjorie would be ready with portents for her daughter's proper life.□

36th Birthday

Tom Chandler

You say your childhood now seems
Like a dream you once had
Where you hid behind your mother's
Old stuffed chair, listening

To wrinkled relatives with cigarettes
And glasses talk of fading hope.
The light grew white and broke
Into the room with courage

And everyone sat and smoked
And watched the dust motes dance.
You hid behind your mother's
Old stuffed chair aware and heard

Them say that even the dead
Have hands but never wave hello
Or brush away the dancing flies.
Time flies off dancing

Into empty light and in the nights between
You've grown wrinkles like the beds
Of tiny rivers seen from space
That waste their weary waters

Beneath your child's eyes disguised
Behind your glasses.
You tell this to your mother
And she recalls your child's hand

Waving desperate lost hellos
From where you always used to hide
Behind her old stuffed chair that is
No longer there or anywhere.

Redbird

Larry McLeod

In the cold gray heart of winter
In December, January, February
It doesn't matter, just the emptiest of days
For me today
When the bright cock redbird
Sat swaying in the windblown bush
At the corner of the house

All there is to know
Is a living color
Against the drab bush
Of winter's heart
The reddest of reds, the sharp black face
A sudden flame
Thrust into the empty limbs
Small consolation, but real enough
An undeniable red

The many brown sparrows
Flitter and flutter
Small nothings
We barely notice
Blackbirds in their sweeping swirling pilgrimage
Blacken the green rye field, fill
A pecan tree, half the sky
Pale-breasted robins hop upon the lawn
The singular redbird
Holds on against the wind
Hard weather

The larger heart
The silent brooding self
Will not ever speak
Except through a cold wind
Tossing a redbird
We should never have thought
There would be voices
Only the redbird's coming
Bright red and real
Into a winter heart
Filled with blood and prayers.

Study for a Triptych

Stephen C. Behrendt

— Washington, September 1986: National Gallery of Art

Here in my soft-lit study, carpet and upholstery light,
warm against the drafts of forced air
that scale the wall of windows, peel back
like cresting breakers over this warm chair
that cradles me like a woolen nest—
here where morning sun is sliced by sharp white blinds,
undulating ladders suspended in the breeze,
I look out across the Mall, the reflecting pool,
off toward the Capitol, round stone pate rising
like a midday moon above the oaks.
It might be Paris, it might be St. James Park,
or the Thames-side walk that wavers in the sun,
that floats and shimmers in Turner's light.

Squirrels, lean and gray with frosted tails
that some Dutch master might have finished by lamplight,
hair by hair, with tiny yellow brushes:
these cull the tough green acorns
that bounce and rattle on inlaid walkways.
Lovers (for who is not a lover
in the late September sun?) pass here,
breathing in the warm southwestern breeze:
I watch and listen, imagine the sounds and smells
cut off, held out by double-paned reflecting glass.

Sirens intrude, blue line of cycling Visigoths,
motors screaming down the throat of Third Street:
the president of the Philippines,
smiling in her saffron dress, costume of renewal—
emblem to the masses who do not comprehend,
who find it merely pretty, and she but charming—
is passing in state motorcade,
coffinned in a long, sleek bulletproof
that wraps her like a tight black glove.
Behind her, a blocky war-wagon
like a fat metallic armadillo
bristling with watchful dark-clad guardsmen
who con the rooftops, whisper into black devices,
gesticulate to the grotesque train that follows
like frantic jet-black ants in chain.

The squirrels race for trees, dive into cover;
the lovers look up, wonder at the unfamiliar flag
that studs the great black cruiser, look away
disinterested: acorns fall as they have for days.
From beneath the Japanese yew below my window
rats—five great sleek brown rats—emerge
as if to gape, as if to claim their share
of this, this harrowing loud cortege,
writhe in the stunning sunlight,
and are gone.

Charles Orlofsky

The Mosquito

Paul Ruffin

This is not, of course, where a story ought to begin, given the current attitude toward stories set on college campuses, and it is almost suicidal to use writers and such as characters; but I've always believed, since my earliest days of poverty in rural Mississippi, that when you find something of value, no matter how you've come across it, you go ahead and pick it up and keep it and deal with the consequences later.

So there I was, a minor program participant at the Bennington Writers' Conference in the summer of 1988, sitting in an audience of probably a hundred people, listening to Herb Gold read from his new novel. George Garrett and Alan Cheuse were directly in front of me, New York photographer Miriam Berkeley was to my right, and sitting to my left was Darcey Steinke, heroine of this, my true-to-life, so-help-me-God story; I don't know who the fellow was directly behind me, only that he was tall and from Alpine, Texas. The rest of the people were just a blur, students and staff, some from as close as Bennington, some from as far away as California. They don't really matter to the story. You have to box things off to get a framework; outside the box anybody and anything will do.

Now, you have seen women like Darcey Steinke—just to my left, remember? Sleek. I'm talking steamlined. Not an ounce of fat anywhere on her, unless you count the padding around her kidneys, which I don't think is fair. You can't see it, after all. You ever notice how you never find yourself thinking about beautiful women's *insides*? Why should you? If you took one of Darcey's kidneys and mixed it up with kidneys from a priest, a faggot, and your grandmother, I doubt that you'd be able to put your finger on Darcey's. Maybe, but not likely. Besides, some great tragedy notwithstanding, you'll probably never have to.

All fe-male lean meat, and every square inch of it declaring that you'd better look quick before it changes because she won't stay like this long, like it's a butterfly stage or something, and innocence a big part of it because she hasn't lived long enough and hard enough to have tainted much. As if all of her has been headed for some sort of perfect plateau where she can't stay but a few summers. And that, friend, is the glorious state that Darcey Steinke was in.

Ok, you're saying, so you managed to get yourself seated beside a lovely, slender young thing that, the best you could tell, was as innocent as she was pretty. So what? It has happened lots of times to lots of fellows and it can't be that big a deal. And if you're saying that, you'd be right, right square on target, except for a little complication. And by little, I mean, by God, *little.* The size of a mosquito.

Picture this now, while you're trying to figure out just what was so unusual about a middle-aged man seated beside a beautiful young woman, perhaps lusting a bit, with his wife and daughter back at off-campus housing sweating in a fanless room and no t.v.: A mosquito, who must have thought himself loose in some sort of heaven of flesh, buzzed around above all those bare shoulders and arms and legs and finally selected what he judged to be the one spot of all on earth where he wanted to land—on Darcey Steinke's thigh.

And picture me there, but for a couple of pieces of professional correspondence between us a complete stranger to Darcey, watching that mosquito curl in, flare, and land. And then, oh, just preening and prattling to himself, he sharpened his probe, aimed it, and jabbed. Slipped the old prod into her up to the hilt as if he'd planned it for years.

Now what was I to do, an almost stranger, while this little bastard swelled on Darcey's blood, maybe drooling encephalitis germs or something worse? Should I reach down and wave him away? Slap him flat against her thigh? Nudge her and point so that she could dispatch him?

Any of the above? *Sure.* What if he disappeared while I was shooshing or squashing him or drawing her attention to her thigh? How would I explain that? My hand right at or on her lean white thigh, or my finger pointing at it—and no mosquito? How would I explain that to her? No sir. There was too much thigh there, and that shift-like silky dress sliding higher every time Darcey moved. Hell, women know you look at what they've got out for viewing, but you don't want to get caught doing it. In some sort of pristine world that we may be destined for someday men may be able to sit beside something like that and not look at it, not contort the corners of their eye sockets and hate the fact that their noses keep them from get-

ting a three-dimensional view, but we'll be making a few more revolutions of evolution before we're there.

They *know* we look, just like we know that *they* pick their noses and fart, but nobody with any class wants to get caught at it—unless, of course, he's out with the boys and the wolf-pack mentality prevails and he not only looks and whistles but wants to be seen and heard doing it. I did not want Darcey Steinke to know that I had any more interest in her long, smooth thigh than I would have had in George Garrett's khaki thigh.

But what about the mosquito? While I was sitting there pondering my options and Herb was going on with his reading and folks were tittering and nodding in rhythm, the mosquito was becoming turgid, tumescent. I leaned forward until my mouth was no more than a foot from Darcey's thigh and lightly blew. The mosquito's wings fluttered, but he made no motion to go, seemed indeed glad for the breeze. *Move, you little son-of-a-bitch, move!*

The closer my face got to him, the more fascinated I became. I swear he had his two rear legs cocked out and dug in, his middle two splayed lazily to each side, and with his front two he kept a steady rubbing motion going, as if he were praying or wringing his hands with ecstasy—his whole body, except where propped up by his rear legs, rested squarely on his prod. Call me crazy. I don't care. He was at exactly the right spot for my mid-forties eyes to focus on him, even in the dim light of that auditorium; an inch closer and he would have blurred, an inch farther off and I would not have been able to swear to what I saw.

I put my glasses on and slid down onto one knee and leaned forward until my nose was no more than six inches from the little son-of-a-bitch. Down the row everyone seemed to be listening intently to Herb; George and Alan had not noticed, I was sure, and Miriam had her open eye glued to the camera. The seat backs were high enough that the people behind were blocked from view, except for the tall guy from Alpine, who squinted at me once, then looked back up toward Herb.

Totally enraptured now, the mosquito was propped up on his deep-stuck prod, sides bulging, a crapulent scarlet icon poised on Darcey's pale thigh. I stared in disbelief as—and I swear to you that if I lie, my eyes are responsible, not my tongue—his head swayed back and forth on the sticker, lolled in gutful torpor, as if it mattered not to him whether he ever found blood again, ever flew again, his life having come to as glorious a summit as he could have wished.

It was then that, Herb's voice having risen to a climax, the room stirring to applaud, I turned my face up toward Darcey's, saw her cold eyes cast down upon me and felt the burn of shame on my cheeks. My eyes still locked firmly to hers, I lifted my right hand from the floor and pointed dumbly to her thigh and the mosquito, *who was not there.*

There was nothing to say. I rose from my knees, nodded goodnight to her, and stumbled out to the aisle. I looked back once toward the front, where Herb was bowing and smiling, and in front the brightness a dark speck, large as a housefly, rose steadily toward the lights just coming back on in the ceiling, ascended like some bad angel at dawn, driven from a night of debauchery in Paradise by the mounting thunder of God.□

My Father Has Gone to War

Judith Hougen

A year's turning of knobs
for brief, hourly news.
Packages of Oriental dolls
arriving in the afternoon mail
wrapped up with stories written
in a threatening tongue.

She'd wash, I'd dry
poking a fisted towel
into the single blue coffee mug
pegging it beside the other
dust tasting its lip.

The twist of the doorknob
a man, a telegram, it took
twenty minutes to
tremble the paper apart.
It only announced a baby somewhere
but she cried anyway.

Her dreams snapped on, off
like the bedroom light.
All night in our separate rooms
they bled on our front lawn
the faces of men
with astonished mouths
shining in streetlight
not moving
absolutely not moving.

Weekend Baroque

R. T. Smith

In John Clegg's driveway the green
Buick's hood is up, as he studies
the knock and rattle, touches

the plugs for tightness, listens
hard for any flaw in the guts, any
slippage of belt or raw scrape

of steel on steel. I'm no help,
leaning on the porch rail, sipping
morning-after beer. An engine makes

no claims on me, unless sheer
mystery qualifies as claim. Imagine
the wild baroque of Bernini, gold

leaf tortured to the holy. But
automotive science goes wrist-deep
in oil and grease, in shadow, I say,

more like de la Tour, all those
skulls in candlelight, sweet-faced
women considering repentence. An

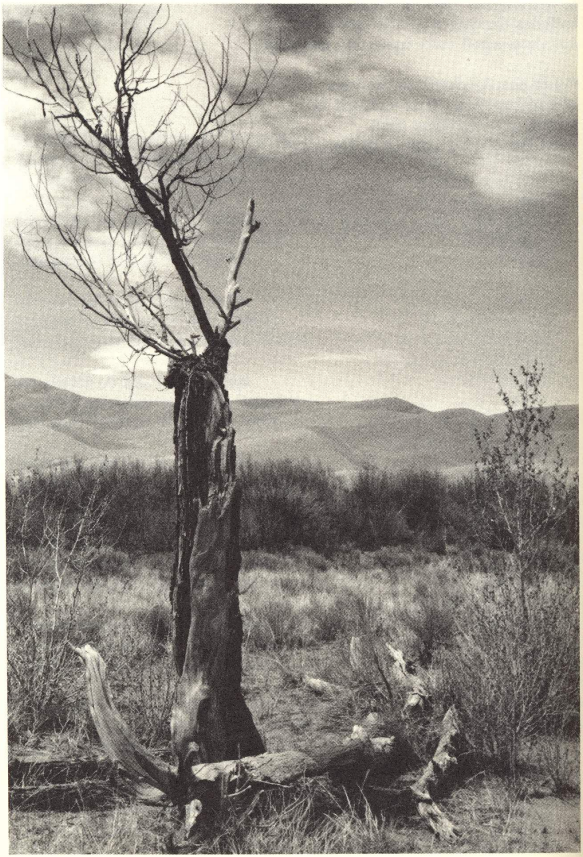
engine hums strange polyphony
to my ignorant ear, as if Vivaldi,
Bach or Scarlatti were amplified

over the Amazon, a high contrast scherzo
of Chris Wren worked onto measured
wind, the jungle pausing to wonder,

but John Clegg's skinny ass in Levis
lifts to the morning air, and all
the hint I get of a sonata's

agate coil of imagery is a drone
and some smoke from the exhaust,
so tilt another Bud for domestic
technics dancing free with art, even
John's cracked voice humming unkempt

Cajun chanky-chank to the tune
of a piston that's true and just in,
just in, just in bayou time.
Bend the can baroque to fit the mind.



Charles Orlofsky

The Vanishing Princess

Nancy Bartley

A bar, wherever it is, is no good without a mirror, she thought, as she sipped from the dusty bottle of Belikan, longing—deeply longing—for a piña colada in the damp, cool, air-conditioned bar back in Miami where the waiters wore bow ties and polished bar glasses to a silver-white sheen. There she could cross one long, lean silky leg over the other, scoot a little closer to the bar, lean on her elbows, and see herself framed by some of the best liquor in the world.

But this was Julio's Bar, Belize City, and there were no mirrors, only a dirt floor, a palm-frond roof, a flourescent light dangling from an extension cord, and a circular, open-air bar. Julio sat in the middle, resting an elbow on a shelf of dusty bottles, watching *Praise the Lord* television come quivering in from Miami, dancing monochromatic images on a static-speckled screen; little rays of tattered gray, filtering down the dark, dark night: "Praise the Lord, Sister. Praise him for his mercy."

A couple of American construction workers—shirtless, fat and sweaty as Midwestern hogs—talked of Cadillacs and Jimmy Buffett. They did not notice her make her entrance—her Julio's Bar debut—or how she clutched the bottle between her hands, neither woman nor saint.

From a shack a few feet away, a toddler with a ragged gray t-shirt ran to Julio who did not glance from the black-and-white screen. Through the dark night the message came trickling down, down, down the TV antennas right to the heart of Julio's Bar, Eve Street, right on the black Caribbean, the message came home: "Praise the Lord, Sister, and he'll wash you whiter than snow."

Phyllis Whitefield glanced at her own pale arms, riddled with insect bites, and smiled at the little girl who sucked on a grubby finger. A halo of mosquitoes swarmed about the child's head. The city was

full of many dark children with thin arms waving like palms in discordant choruses of "hosanna," their cries the sound of disease and malnutrition, the sound of poverty, black as the night that curled about you as you slept.

A rat, big as a cat, scurried across a shelf of bottles. The baby watched and pointed, her little brown finger stabbing the air. Phyllis thought of holding her, but instead she drank deeply. There was always another child, and another and another, spindly black or brown arms raised, swaying like palms along the beach, voices calling to the white, white moonlight, "Come, wash me whiter than snow."

The dream had come before. She was naked and the sun was glinting off her pale skin—her translucent white armor. Overhead, there were crows calling, circling, john crow—the carrion crow—poised and patient. All about her were silent dark faces; warm bodies imbued with the scent of the earth; yards of black hair uncoiled; hands reaching, floating out like sea-drifting tentacles on the hot, moist air. She was fading, sinking among them even as she tried to reach out to heal, to caress, to make gentle bridges, to leave her own faint signature. And all along, the people sang, lifting voices and arms, singing and dying, singing and dying at the orphanage, at the hospital, in the streets, singing and dying with a completeness she did not know.

She opened her eyes to the stark, green walls of her room, the humid, tropical air, the jangle of the patella vendor's cart in the street below and Cook's voice, lapsing into Creole, as she bullied the Girl Guides, scouts who earned merit badges for cleaning the manse.

"I wonder what john crow do before the jackass died?" a young voice asked.

"I do the Lord's work," Cook said. "Lord make me worthy. People never stone empty mango tree."

"Old mango tree got nothing I want," the Girl Guide scoffed.

"New broom sweep clean, but the old one knows the corners," Cook answered.

She was otherwise known as Miss Daisy Parsons, Sister Daisy, as members of Ebenezer Church called her. She played the wheezing old organ and sang in a voice clear as tropical rain. But for the last twenty years residents of the manse—who came from the states or Canada—simply called her Cook because that's what she did. She performed her task with the diligence of Martha and the devotion of Mary, Phyllis thought.

She listened to their banter as she lay in bed in the pre-breakfast

hours. Her head ached from the night before and there was Regina to contend with.

In the small bed across the room, her niece slept calmly at last. The girl had tossed all night, complaining of the heat that made even the sheet unbearable. Her hair was dark, limbs the sun had turned the color of coffee with cream, eyes the color of fireweed honey in the sunlight. She was June's child, grown up, married, something the family wondered why Phyllis had never done.

Phyllis had her suitors then, back in the war years when she was known for her tawny hair, her Garbo-esque face and her long, long legs that slipped so elegantly into fashionable "Princess Margaret" trousers. Admirers brought her crystal atomizers filled with perfume, silk scarves, gold lockets and gardenia corsages. She was beguiling like a queen of the silver-white screen, they told her. But she rejected them one by one and instead dedicated her life to the mission field. It was easy then, inside the cool, dark interior, kneeling in stained-glass pools of gold and ruby light—to believe in divine solutions, a heavenly crown, a radiant whiteness granting justice for all.

"Jesus loves the little children. All the children of the world," she sang from her perch on the seawall, her utilitarian khaki skirt tucked beneath her and her bare, brown legs swinging free as she drained a bottle. The breeze ruffled her cropped, tawny hair, moonlight blanched her skin. "Red and yellow, black and white. They are precious in his sight," she sang.

"Precious, precious," she whispered to the baby she found in a refuse pile not far from the orphanage. There were so many cast-off children of many colors, one for every bottle of beer she tossed into the waves each night.

"Talk to her please, Aunt Phyllis?" Regina asked that morning. She had flown several thousand miles to solicit support in hopes of mending faltering family bridges. "You know, Mom. She'll listen to you. I love him so."

How do you tell someone the war is long over? That your aristocratic Eden has ended? That Jesus loves the little children? It wasn't Regina's fault her love was color blind and there was a baby on the way, too. Fair, sweet Regina, naive Regina, Phyllis thought, so far away from her Pacific Northwest home and carrying her first child, dreaming of colorful worlds of perfect unity. She had packed a suitcase full of toys for the orphanage and another full of summer things for herself, six hundred dollars' worth, she said, cotton safari skirt, white lace nightgown, crisp little bermudas. She wanted to look

nice for the orphans, wanted to sprinkle a little goodness everywhere.

"Tell me everything about your work," she told Phyllis over coffee that morning. "Tell me about the children. I bet they are just darling." She wanted to look nice for the orphans, wanted to sprinkle a little goodness everywhere.

"Come with me to the orphanage this morning and you can see for yourself. Then we'll stop at the market and you can see the city," Phyllis said.

The orphanage was encircled by a stucco wall and an iron gate that slammed shut behind them. Phyllis walked briskly across the courtyard of bare earth. Regina followed, dragging her sack of toys, stopping to pluck a battered pink rabbit from the branches of a hibiscus tree.

"Miss! Miss!" a small boy, with an amputated leg, called as he swung forward on his wooden crutches to greet Phyllis. The other children followed in a curious wave of dark eyes, tattered shirts and outstretched hands. There were others missing limbs; a 12-year-old girl with a dwarf's toddler body; a blind boy who fondled Phyllis' skirt.

"Hello, Alfredo, Arturo, Margaret," Phyllis said, gliding through their midst. "Carmensita, what an interesting picture you've drawn. You must show it to Regina."

"Regina, this is Carmen," Phyllis said, thrusting a six-year-old into Regina's path. "Her mother died when she was only two. She draws pictures to tell us what she's thinking. The only sound she makes is the call of crows."

"Poor baby," Regina said, her words lost in the clamor of young voices. The child handed her a crayon drawing of a sky peppered with black birds.

"These are children no one wants. They are orphaned, or abandoned too sick or too young to take care of themselves," Phyllis said. "We find new ones here every morning, infants laid by the gate, older children sometimes tethered to the tree."

"I have some things they will like," Regina said, pulling a blond, high-fashion doll from her sack and handing it to Carmen, who apprehensively touched the blond hair. "Go ahead, it's yours."

"Look!" another child squealed, pointing to the doll. "What is it?"

"I have some for everyone," Regina said as she pulled toy cars and dolls from the sack. The children mobbed her. Uplifted arms swayed before her, little hands tugged at her clothing. Once Phyllis saw her almost lose balance and fall among them. Regina looked over the dark heads to Phyllis who avoided her eyes and walked away. Regina could handle them, pat their heads, pretend she was giving papal blessings.

The white, stucco building reeked with the wet-lemon smell of disinfectant as Phyllis entered. Down the hall a child screamed as a committee of nurses shaved and scrubbed his head to kill lice.

Phyllis pushed open the door to her office. The shades were drawn but the window was open and she listened to the children in the courtyard and the drone of Regina's patient voice. It was a simple room with a poster of a smiling Christ carrying a lamb and Phyllis' certificate of commission and dedication. Beneath it was a cumbersome metal desk cluttered with papers. As her eyes grew used to the dimness, she could see a doll of some sort between stacks of adoption records and her Bible. The children have been in here, she thought with irritation, and they've left some kind of plaything. As she reached to pull it from the desk, from somewhere deep inside her a scream rolled forth, echoing through the hallways.

"Rosa! Esther!" she shrieked. From down the hall the nurses came running.

"I'm sorry, miss," Esther said breathlessly. "We didn't think you'd be in today."

"Baby die, señora," Rosa added, the only words she knew in English.

"Doctor said we needed the bed for the new ones. The baby came here sick yesterday. Died last night. The undertaker should be coming soon," Esther explained.

"Get it out of here," Phyllis demanded.

"To where, miss? The house is full," Esther explained. "Morgue too."

From the desk, the shrunken face with skin tautly stretched stared back at Phyllis. It was impossible to tell the child's age. She appeared to be a miniature old woman. She had a clump of black hair, missing teeth, hip bones pushing at the skin. A tag fastened to the wrist listed the cause of death as starvation. The child's age—five. Weight—fifteen pounds. Phyllis had seen the mark of malnutrition before, it rattled and raked through her consciousness.

She shuddered and pushed her way out of the building into the courtyard where Regina was helping a Creole child dress a Malibu Barbie in designer swimwear. Regina looked up and her smile faded slightly as she saw Phyllis' face.

"What happened?" Regina asked. "I heard someone yell."

"A baby died," Phyllis repeated tersely, gripping the girl's arm and pulling her up.

"Poor thing. That's too bad," Regina said. The children once again crowded about her as she stood and prepared to leave.

"Oh, they were so precious. They're everything you said they were," Regina said as they walked through the streets, dodging stray dogs and the reclining bodies of beggars who slept in doorways. "I wish

Jeremy could see them. I hope our baby is just like them—those big eyes."

Phyllis was silent as they walked. She studied the cheekbones of the Wheelchair Lady who sat in the sparse shade of the city park where the homeless washed their clothes in the fountain and hung them to dry on its green-painted cement walls. There were many like the frail old woman. They were missing limbs or crippled by disease. Some had high Mayan cheekbones, the dark feline eyes of the Creole, skin in shades of black and bronze. They melted into a Belizean blend of color—the poor and the poorest—clustered in the city streets under the white heat of the Caribbean sun, selling peeled oranges, peanuts, sandals made in Mexico and tamales at noon day.

Inside the market strings of peppers and garlic and stacks of tomatoes gleamed beneath the bare light bulb—haloes of light ringed the shadowy interior. There were bins of dried beans and herbal cure-alls for bed-wetting, frigidity and the bite of a hangover.

"Señora, for the baby," a woman with a basket of herbs called. She shook a small package in Regina's face. "Make good fat babies. Or maybe you don't want baby," she said, taking another package from the basket and shoving it at her. "Make baby come out real fast."

"No, no thanks," Regina said politely, dodging the hands that plucked at her. She followed Phyllis down the rows where the sellers called to them, leaning over the bins and waving merchandise, singing its praises.

At the dock, lean, bronzed men pulled giant sea turtles from their nets. Phyllis grabbed Regina by the shulders and nudged her into the arena.

"This is Belize," she whispered.

"Hello, miss," the seller called. "Some of this, eh? Nice and fresh." Regina turned away and looked ill as a massive creature faintly paddled the rank market air and the men sliced through its pink-white meat.

Phyllis led her back to the manse. Regina lay in front of the electric fan, her skin flushed, arms folded across her chest and eyes closed. She appeared fragile, an endangered species, Phyllis thought, but more likely it was the nausea that came with her fourth month that had repressed the irrepressible Regina. Downstairs Cook sang in the kitchen as she shelled shrimp for jambalaya.

By evening, Regina had revived and lay in a hammock on the veranda as Phyllis and Cook reclined in folding chairs, Cook fanning herself with a newpaper and talking about the revelation. Phyllis sighed. Of course, it had come not to the bishop, the parson or the missionaries, but to the cook personally, a winged message from a god in whose

eyes she was favored. Phyllis' eyes burned and her head throbbed. She had heard about the dream too many times and now it was about to be recounted to Regina who politely listened.

"It was ten years ago, but I'll never forget it. I dreamed I was walking along the beach with crowds and crowds of people and a voice behind me says look up to the sky," Cook said, her melodic voice singing. "I looked up and the sun was coming dazzling down, down and all of a sudden the sky opened up and there was a cross surrounded with rainbows. It was the most beautiful thing. I said, 'Alleluiah! Praise the Lord!' "

"That's beautiful," Regina said. "What do you think it meant?"

"It told me that the cross was not just for dying. It's a road to a better place. Praise the Lord! A better place for all colors of the rainbow," she said.

Phyllis silently stared into the distance at the faint line of the seawall, her white fingers knotted together. Her fatigue was beyond rainbows.

Without warning, Cook rose and slid into shadows as dark as her skin. "Shhh," she whispered. "I don't want him to know I'm here."

Phyllis listened. Down the road from the Voice of America headquarters came the light laughter of party-goers—tinkling like champagne glasses raised high in toast—the rumble of cars cruising up the circular drive past the guards at the spiked iron gate.

Then she heard the soft footsteps and the jangling of the iron gate below. "Miss Daisy? Sister Daisy?" a man called up through the darkness.

With a sigh "of resignation, Cook retreated inside and reappeared a minute later. "I gave him a bun. I don't want to give him money, he'll just go to Julio's and buy Belikan."

"Full belly tell empty belly, 'Keep heart,' " the man whispered in the dark.

"I wonder where a beggar goes in the nighttime?" Regina asked sleepily. Phyllis had shown her the city with its families living in tiers, one in a ramshackle structure built on stilts to catch the sea breezes and another living below on the dirt. Regina had seen the open sewers, the rats, the morning bucket parade as families dumped their refuse into the sea. She had stepped daintily, compassionately over the old man sleeping in the doorway of the shop where she went to buy film and souvenirs.

She had seen the school children attending classes at the old church built from hurricane debris, heard their voices singing on the afternoon breeze: "Ebenezer. Ebenezer, God has blessed us." She saw the poorest sip the thin cereal given free because it was porridge day.

A car engine hummed as it rolled past the manse, followed by a pack of dogs barking and yipping.

Later that night, Phyllis went out alone. On the road to Belmopan, crosses from the cemetery gleamed bone-white in the headlights. She recalled an infant's funeral, the tiny wooden casket that refused to be buried, later floating to the surface as the water table rose.

The night was dark, mazes of truth and contradiction in black and white and gray. Phyllis pulled to the side of the road and removed a bottle from under the seat.

The night before Regina left, Phyllis took her to the carver's house on Water Street. A small crowd of tourists gathered outside. The word was out about his low prices for creations from black-and-white-mottled zericote wood. The carver was dark as the carrion crow as he sat in the small room, paring two-tone features of a woman. A bare lightbulb swung over the table with a display of black-corral beads, carvings of sharks, comic dolphins and seductive shapes of Mayan women. His wife made change. A green parrot squawked and chattered in a cage. Regina ignored the carvings—the tourist trade—and poked her fingers through wire loops to touch and croon to a soft black rabbit.

"I can't wait to tell mother all about your work. You've done so much for these people," Regina said on the morning she left. "I'm so glad you'll write that letter. You know how to love all people. I'm sure mother could learn to love Jeremy."

Phyllis had tried to write, sat in her room night after night, waiting for the revelation that could heal wounds. "Dear June," she began. "We are all dying, fading into one melting pot of color. Only john crow remains to clean the bones. He doesn't care about the color of his meat. I have learned white is not right. It simply does not matter."

In her despair, traces of a distant world named Miami called to her. Was it eight years ago that she was last there? Had she really been here 20 years? She thought of champagne cocktails, lobster thermidor, key lime pie, Nieman Marcus, chocolate-covered fortune cookies, the Fountainbleu Hilton, plumed parrots in gilded cages. She thought of john crow and the dying.

"John crow sings when the jackass dies," the Creole say.

She would forget the call of the carrion crow, the rattle of dry bones, and wallow in civilization. She had brought the misery of the poor to America, slapped it in the face of her horrified sister when she displayed photographs of starving children during June's Christmas Eve buffet. For years, Phyllis had shrieked of dying, but they had not heard, had not seen her wounds, her noble empty cross. She had

carried it along the streets of self denial and paid and paid and paid. If you pay enough you can isolate yourself from anything—but time. Now she trembled, and from her aging, slender throat her voice faltered at the pure-white "Faith of Our Fathers."

In the dark sea, she sought her reflection, her gardenia-white skin, an affirmation of being that echoed back the promise of a heavenly crown and the price she had paid.

In her dreams the trace of the perfume from long ago lingered and crept about her. The night air caressed her as a lover and the silk breezes brought visions of new worlds.

She dreamed of Regina and Jeremy back at their new home. She could see his dark features, their low, rambling house ringed in fragile Kwansan cherry trees; how he worked to tear away the brambles and vines; how his fire crackled, blackening the ground, purging the old. It was March and the wind socks on the front porch of the house would whip purple, red, yellow and green in the wind. Regina would be growing round as a globe.□

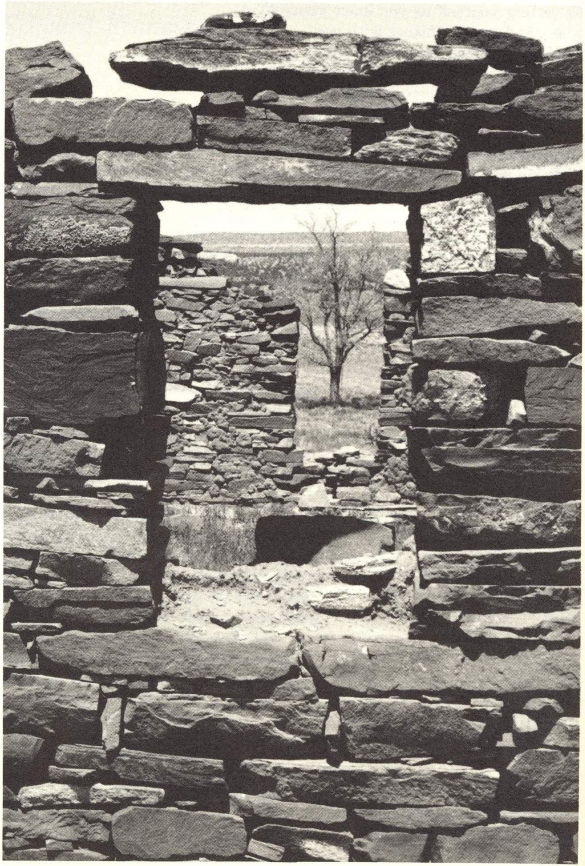
After Abraham

Edward Francisco

Kierkegaard said, Lord, you were beside
yourself, consumed by grief or love,
psychosis or lawless incomprehensibility
by which you once and for all showed
yourself as no thing, nothing like anything
of which we can conceive — all but one:
Abraham, illegitimate father of nations,
behaving unfatherly, without sensible
explanation, diminishing alarm at
innocent terror. Without single sign of
surprise, he withdrew from the human
dimension, obeying voices in a head
grown loud with your confused thunder,
ready to add his name of just one
more lacking precise information but
willing to risk the thought of all
he stood to lose, though never certain.

Hell demands a theory:
Abraham never once believed himself
capable of satisfying your absurd, impossible
happiness. Infinite love demands infinite
sacrifice and, failing that, he knew you
would demand of him, forever, the thing
he was least willing to give. So he
called your bluff, depended on his son's
stunned faith not to believe what was
happening under his eyes. By some
miracle he came out of it alive.
You, on the other hand, had to be
put back together on your high
tottering place of inhuman power
where, overcome by nameless grief

and the logic of despair, you trusted
in a trick of your own imagination,
forgetting yourself as you knew yourself
to be, and, sympathizing with one
who'd overlooked your inexcusable
carelessness, you conceived of another
which conception alone brought
into existence: a son, definitely
dead by a lapse of your enforced
concentration and the asking of a
question whose answer made you
victim to your own rapacious love,
at once, and forever.



Charles Orlofsky

THE FOURTH FLOOR FOLLIES
(A Literary Revue)

a one-act play by

F. R. Lewis

SCENE:

The fourth floor of Smithson Tower, a college dormitory, in the lounge during a women's writing conference sponsored by the Women Are Writing Union (WAWU—pronounced Wah-woo). The lounge is furnished in mostly plastic versions of "Danish Modern," none of which are in perfect condition. There is a three-person couch, a love seat, one arm chair, three end tables, a floor lamp, one table lamp with a movie star-collage lamp shade, one table lamp with a likeness of a Greek god (Zeus?) drawn on the shade in black India ink. Corridors to suites turn left and right off the top of the lounge and the stairwell—concrete-encased—occupies the middle back.

CHARACTERS:

CAROLANN, the narrator, in search of . . . something; speaks with a straight face, is a bit naive.

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN, a feminist, in her mid-40s, plump body, busty, good legs and face, salt-and-pepper hair clenched in a "Jewish Afro."

DUCKIE, the aphorist, between 35 and 45, hard to tell, short-haired, appears street-wise.

ZORINDA, the pornographer, tall, slim, blonde (bleached), around 40, has a tattoo on her right shoulder: rose with silver lightning bolt penetrating it. Her voice is high-pitched, quintessentially dumb-blonde.

OTHERS: Poet, Finding the Child in All of Us workshop leader and members, the monologist, the weaver, the tie-dyer, the readings "ringmaster," the fan dancer, the Southerner, miscellaneous women who can all be played by two or three people.

SCENE I

(Carolann sits in one of the two arm chairs and chats with the audience. A spotlight is on her, the rest of the stage is dark.)

CAROLANN: Come to find out, the other women, they have gotten together in the fourth floor lounge—right here—every night, almost, after the readings. And me? I had no idea. Not one. I must be coming off the stairwell through the wrong door or something. But there is worse. Not only do I not know what they do at night, these women, I do not even know who—besides me—even lives on the fourth floor this conference. . . . Well, no. That is not exactly true. What I mean is outside of Zorinda the tattooed woman—and the woman this morning with the poetry—I don't know.

Zorinda the tattooed woman, she is my suite mate.

(Light up on Zorinda, who is wearing a striped terry cloth robe and is carrying a douche bag.)

Zorinda the tattooed woman I have known about since right away. Zorinda is someone who even if you didn't know about her you would know about her. . . . See? . . . That little red douche bag? Every morning, Zorinda leaves that little red douche bag on the bathroom vanity like a calling card.

(Light down on Zorinda.)

The woman with the poetry I discovered this morning—or maybe it

was that she discovered me. See, the "Finding the Child in All of Us" workshop was meeting here in the fourth floor lounge . . . where the members could spread out. Well, about half-way through, the workshop leader says

(Light up on Workshop Leader.)

WORKSHOP LEADER: Each and every one of us when we were children loved to imitate animals and each and every one of us had a favorite, and if we think about it, each and every one of us still does have a favorite. So what we are going to do now is make noises and move our bodies, just like those animals we love. Pick your animals and let loose. Put your hearts into it, girls.

(The "girls"—including Carolann—are imitating calls of the wild, and the domesticated. Carolann is trumpeting like an elephant and swinging her arms, trunk-like. She cuts off mid-swing, when poet appears from left hallway, brandishing pen and paper like the proverbial whip and chair.)

POET: Scat! Damn you—I'm trying to work here. My sestina, the one that has been eluding me for months—no, years—my sestina is almost there. Please! Go play in someone else's yard.

(The animals pause in mid-imitation.)

CAROLANN: *(Reaches in her pocket and takes out a key, which she hands to the poet.)* Here. Work in my room. Back there. Four-oh-seven. The other side of the stairwell. It's concrete. The stairwell.

POET: Right. *(Pause)* Listen: Thanks. If there's no party tonight, we'll be in the lounge after the readings. Why don't you plan to join us?

(Exits to the left—the way she came. Lights down to spot on Carolann.)

CAROLANN: If you ask me, no party tonight is a sure thing. A last-night-after-the-readings party has been a WAWU conference tradition. At least for as long as I have been coming. WAWU—that stands for the Women Are Writing Union, by the way. WahWoo? Everyone looks forward to it, the last WAWU conference party, just about. The problem with the party isn't the party, it is where the WAWUers traditionally party. Which is the penthouse—the fourteenth floor—of

Smithson Tower. This tower. Not what you would call the Empire State Building, but the elevators don't run. About the only thing that does run in Smithson Tower is the women of WAWU. Up the stairs and down the stairs. And one other thing runs, too—the toilet runs, the one in the bathroom between where Jennette lives and where Zorinda and I live. Let me tell you something about Zorinda and the toilet. The plumbing is tricky—that's about the toilet. As for Zorinda . . . Zorinda is another story.

(Light up on Zorinda.)

ZORINDA: That's right. An auxiliary policeman. In the City. New York? Anyway, the week before I came up here, the department, they called to come to the 92nd Street bridge. On a Monday morning. Before work. For a drug bust. The cops needed me to direct traffic. Oh, it was inspirational. Truly inspirational.

(Light down on Zorinda.)

CAROLANN: Now, this very same woman . . . the one who directed traffic around a drug bust during the rush hour on a Monday morning? . . . This very same woman? . . . in six days she has not mastered our toilet. See, what happens is Zorinda starts the flush okay, but there is no follow through. None. Which maybe wouldn't matter, except for the flow, that the flow does not cease when the ballcock rises. And the cascade! I mean, the cascade, you hear it and you come to believe there is enough energy being generated to run the elevators, both of the elevators. And not just for the duration of WAWU, but forever. But it is only the toilet of fourth floor west—and Zorinda—in residence. That Zorinda! she never hears it, the water. All you can figure is her mind, Zorinda's mind just simply has not been on the toilet. Where it must have been, Zorinda's mind, is on this story. . . .

(Light up on Zorinda. Zorinda is sitting in her room, at the desk, with her fingers standing on the keys of a big typewriter—the kind you see in offices—like they are waiting for the next word to rise.)

CAROLANN: So, anyway, there I am last night trying to sneak into my room past Zorinda's door. . . .

ZORINDA: Hey. Carolann. You don't want to go in yet. Come on. You gotta see this story. It is incredible, this story. I have written a truly incredible story right here at this conference. And I am going to read

this story tomorrow night. Is that not incredible? Tell me.

CAROLANN: *(Thinking more of being snared by Zorinda than of what Zorinda has said.)* Incredible.

ZORINDA: You have to read my story, Carolann. Don't you want to read my story? What I've done so far?

CAROLANN: Oh, no. I'd much rather hear you read the story. Really I would. When it's all finished. Besides, I'm so sleepy I don't believe I could grasp it.

ZORINDA: Did you know—in town they rent typewriters? I was just so thrilled with the idea for this incredible story *(she fans the pages).* I jogged all the way into town—well, it's not all that far, really—and I have just been composing away, all afternoon. . . .

(Light down on Carolann, as though she has zipped into her room. Zorinda goes back to her typing. Light down on Zorinda and up on Carolann.)

CAROLANN: Let me tell you, those creation urges were rampant on Smithson Tower fourth floor west. Zorinda must have been up half the night finishing that story. And she never did close her door, which for Zorinda was a first and only, at least as far as I ever saw. I mean this woman, she locks her door just to go to the bathroom, even when she is only going to brush her teeth. And it is not like you can't see down the corridor if someone were trying to get into your room, or anything. Now this is scarcely worth note, I would be the first to agree, were it not for one thing. Around her neck, Zorinda wears this really thick, really gold chain. And on this chain she has police whistles, two of them, and besides the police whistles she has what sounds like dozens of keys. Now, every time Zorinda locks and unlocks—which is every time—this lavalier of hers hits the door with a thunk you can probably hear in the farthest corner of the farthest corner. The weird thing is that you never hear where the whistles and the keys hit on the return trip. God!—her chest must be a wreck.

Not her room, though, that is not a wreck. There was her door wide open this morning and you could scarcely even tell there is a person living in that room. Zorinda is in the room okay, tucked into her bed like a knife in a sheath. I mean without so much as a ripple in the blanket. That bleached blonde head sticking out of the covers was the only thing in the room saying, "Person." Now a lot of WAWUers—

the poets especially—they bring stuff like pillows *(fancy not sleeping)* and bedspreads and photographs and little pots and jars of vitamins and face creams and some of the black women bring these sashes and scarves from their tribes in Africa. I have things, too. A typewriter. Well, a portable printer, really. Six pounds. Ideal for traveling. And what I plan to do on the printer is write my own stories. Or maybe articles, for magazines. And I have a camera, too, and a tape recorder. All miniatures. Little necessities. But in Zorinda's room: Nothing personal. Not even the little red douche bag is showing.

(Lights down for a beat or two, then up again.)

SCENE II

CAROLANN: Well, at last it is tonight and time for the readings, the last readings on the final night of WAWU convening. Before the readings start comes another WAWUian tradition. This one woman who writes these mainstream tragi-comedies, she delivers this monologue to get the festivities underway. At least she had delivered a monologue at every conference I have been to, which is not every conference since the beginning, but close enough. Now, I think the monologue tonight is really funny, which is no surprise. What is a surprise—a surprise to me—is that everyone else seems to find the monologue hilarious, too. Believe me, all the women laughing could not possibly live on the fourth floor of Smithson Tower. All the women laughing could not even squeeze into the fourth floor lounge before bed time. Not together. WAWU just does not run that kind of a conference.

(Light up on monologist.)

MONOLOGIST: Ladies, this year we live among three kinds of women. First, we have those paragons, the most devoutly-to-be-wished for suitemates: the flushing non-smokers. And nearly as good, the relatively benign, only half-bad smoking flushers. Finally—beware, oh beware—those challenges of challenges to one's health and sanity that shall hereforth and forever be known as the smoking non-flushers.

CAROLANN: Well, she goes on and on in that way she has and wraps it all up with a suggestion.

MONOLOGIST: So next year, women of WAWU, confreres—or should I say *consouers*—I propose we should all return here tattooed. Not with ordinary tattooes. Oh no! Not flowers or naked men or sentimental sayings for the likes of us. For us, women of WAWU: BLOOD WORDS. Mother. Father. Love. Hate. Marriage. Son. Daughter. But one caution—not more than one tattoo at a time.

(Light down on the Monologist and up on the Readings Ringmaster.)

RINGMASTER: Before the final readings of the seventh annual Women Are Writing Union Conference begin, we have some extra-special treats: a Japanese fan dance, a small fashion show, the photography workshop, a wool spinner, and Hasi Hentov-Kopen.

(The spotlight is taken on a small blonde or red-haired woman wearing a kimono. The woman is neither Japanese nor graceful in performance. At the conclusion, she tucks her fan into the sleeve of her kimono and speaks.)

FAN DANCER: I know you didn't forget what I have for you in my room, women. Well, tonight—and tonight only—I will be selling the few genuine, all-silk kimonos that remain—the ones I sell regularly for two hundred and eighty dollars for the full-length and one hundred and eighty dollars for the jacket—for fifty dollars less. Per. My room is 1004. And I'll be waiting. *(She laughs and fans.)*

(Lights down on Fan Dancer.)

(Lights up on two "models" wearing or carrying tie-dye skirts, blouses, jackets. They stand to either side of the tie-dye woman who speaks with a German accent.)

TIE-DYE WOMAN: In my room, I am selling the rest of my stock—in one size fits all. For fifty PER CENT off, you can have them. And I am in Smithson 518. *(Lights down on the fashion show.)*

(Lights up on Carolann.)

CAROLANN: And the sheep-to-shawl demonstration by the woman who says she raises sheep, only not in her room, and the photography

person who introduces every last member of her workshop and every last member of her workshop stands and they all get applauded only we can't even look at their pictures until intermission. And last—but never ever to be confused with least—Hasi Hentov-Kopen.

(Light up on Hasi Hentov-Kopen.)

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: I know that many of you were bitterly disappointed when the somewhat limited supply of my invaluable handouts was rapidly depleted. Therefore, you will be immensely relieved to learn that on the WAWU table in the campus center of this splendid women's college—you all know where that is, aye?—you will find additional copies of the maps and guidelines from my extremely popular courses in "Loving Our Bodies" and "Getting to . . . Perhaps."

(Light down on Hasi Hentov-Kopen.)

CAROLANN: Well, at long last, come the readings. Here is a confession: I doze off for stanzas at a time.

(The words "poetry," "chapters," "essays," "poetry," "short stories," "poetry," etc., are flashed on a scrim, with Carolann nodding off here and there. Then light up on Zorinda at lecturn. She wears a stretch tank top which, when she half-turns to the audience, shows off her tattoo—a mauve rose outlined in black and pierced by a glittery silver arrow. She "deals" her pages onto the lecturn one at a time.)

CAROLANN: But, let me tell you, I am awake for Zorinda, my tattooed suitemate. Who could sleep through that voice of hers? But that voice of hers. . . . No kidding, she is at least one whole page into the story before I get it, what she is reading with that voice. . . . And what is she reading? This story, Zorinda's story that she is reading aloud in a room full of women tells about a prostitute who . . . uh . . . sucks. In the lollipop sense. During the ten minutes WAWU allots each reading, the prostitute practices her specialty on a dirty trick and bumps off three guys. Of these three guys, one is the sire of the prostitute's off-spring, Charelle—who daddy believes was aborted long before. As for the remaining two, they are gangsters hot to recover this satchelful of loot. Bundled fifties and hundreds, the loot, stolen by Charelle's rigormortified daddy. A good mom, the prostitute, she takes off, money in hand, thinking as she pussy-foots amid bodies and gore. . . .

ZORINDA: Finally for Tiara, there will be a bountiful Christmas.

(Zorinda collects the pages of her story and looks out into the audience expectantly. Only silence greets her. Suddenly, someone crunches a cheeseball into the quiet, an odd clap or two and scattered titters follow. Light down on Zorinda and up on the RingMaster.)

RINGMASTER: That's all folks. Now it's time to celebrate. And don't forget your bucks for the num-nums.

(Lights down. The sound of buzzing and shuffling as the women leave the readings.)

SCENE III

(Carolann stands at the non-working elevators.)

CAROLANN: No elevators, no party. No suprise. Even the women who didn't take "Workouts for Writers" have had enough exercise for one conference, I guess. But that's all right with me. Now I will meet the women who have been gathering in the fourth floor lounge. I can hardly wait.

SCENE IV

(When the lights come up on the lounge, a woman is sitting yoga-style—lotus position—on the love seat against stage left wall. Actually, she is not "seen." She is surrounded by smoke. The ashtray in front of her is overflowing. When the smoke clears, Duckie is sighted briefly, then is fogged in again on the exhales. Duckie wears a white polo shirt with the collar up, a pair of red canvas gym shorts, no shoes. She has close-cropped hair, freckles, no make-up. She carries cigarettes in the pocket of the shirt and in the waist band of the shorts. Carolann enters from the stairwell on the right. The Poet follows.)

POET: You know Duckie?

CAROLANN: I met her the first night, outside "How to Confer."

(Spotlight on Duckie. She walks over to Carolann and stands very close to her, leaning down to read the nametag. Everyone at the conference has a nametag, except Duckie.)

DUCKIE: So . . . Carolann . . . so, Carolann, you can call me Duckie. Here, have one of these. *(Duckie thrusts a black, satiny-looking matchbook at Carolann.)*

CAROLANN: A matchbook? But—uh—I don't smoke.

DUCKIE: Yeah. That's okay, Carolann. Just turn it over.

CAROLANN: "Put you message in the prospect's hands. Call Duckie in Freehold." Catchy. You sell matchbook advertising.

DUCKIE: Very good. I write aphorisms, too, Carolann. You know what an aphorism is, right? *(Carolann looks dubious but nods "yes," anyway.)* Sure you do. Listen to this, Carolann: I have an aphorism coming out next month. In a book of sayings to live by.

CAROLANN: That's just great, Duckie. What's the name? . . .

(Duckie returns to the love seat without answering.)

CAROLANN: She never said what the name of the book is. She never said what her name is. I mean, I could read her aphorism just by way of reading aphorisms and never know the aphorism was hers. *(To the Poet.)* Does she go to anything? Like meals?

POET: I don't know. I've only seen her here. I'm going to get what's left of my food and drink. Be right back.

(Poet goes off left. Carolann looks around her, bounces slightly on the balls of her feet, looks generally expectant. Duckie appears and disappears, as she lights new cigarettes from the butts of their predecessors. Zorinda bounds in from the right and starts a seemingly endless jog around the room, knees almost striking her chin as she goes. She continues her circuit as other women enter singly and in small groups and the get-together gets together. The small groups look around, then

leave. Other small groups form from the women who stay. The sheepless Sheep Woman with her spinning wheel sets up and begins to spin. Her back is half-turned to the audience. Carolann reacts with surprise, pleasure, amazement, shrugs, etc., as people come and go. Finally, Hasi Hentov-Kopen enters.)

CAROLANN: *(To the audience.)* Hasi Hentov-Kopen! I can't imagine that anyone—even I—wouldn't know where to find Hasi Hentov-Kopen.

(Hasi Hentov-Kopen pauses by the lampshade with the head of Zeus India-inked on it, then—with appropriate flourish—turns the face to the wall. She arranges herself in the most comfortable, least vinyl looking chair. Meanwhile, the Poet returns with a bottle of scotch, containing about two inches of liquid. She sets the bottle down on the coffee table near Duckie. She heads back to her room.)

DUCKIE: *(Reaches out from her smoke cloud. In one hand she holds a Dunkin Doughnuts "Big One" styrofoam cup and a cigarette. With the other she takes the bottle.)* Mmmm. Aged. Good stuff. Must've brought it all the way from home. Does great things for one's sestinas, I hear. *(She empties the remains of the Scotch into the cup.)*

POET: *(Returns carrying a shot glass, a paper plate, and two pieces of fruit: a largish plum and an ample peach.)* My husband sent a gorgeous fruit basket. It's our anniversary. The thirty-eighth. He had the basket delivered right here to my room. A doll, no? This is what's left.

(She sets the fruit on the end table near Hasi Hentov-Kopen and then attempts to pour scotch into her shot glass from the empty bottle. Seeing no scotch fall from the bottle, she sticks her nose in and takes a big sniff. Hasi Hentov-Kopen, who has been watching Zorinda prance around the room, turns her attention to the fruit. She selects the plum and begins to nip and suck at it with great appetite. Carolann meanwhile has scampered off to her room and races back with cheese and crackers.)

POET: Anyone have a knife? I'll divide the peach.

DUCKIE: Wait. *(Pads off to the right of the stairwell, in her bare feet and a shroud of smoke.)*

CAROLANN: *(To Zorinda.)* Does anyone else live on this floor, besides who's here?

ZORINDA: Oh listen, Carolann, we get visitors all the time.

(As if brought by magic, a voice with a thick Southern drawl speaks from the vicinity of the stairwell.)

SOUTHERN VOICE: Hasi Hentov-Kopen? Y'all here?

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: Yes. Here.

(A blonde woman wearing a velour robe and matching slippers and carrying a crystal captain's decanter and two glasses. She floats floorward at Hasi Hentov-Kopen's feet—or where Hasi Hentov-Kopen's feet would be if they were not tucked up on the chair.)

SOUTHERN VOICE: Hasi Hentov-Kopen, I have come here tonight to ask you a question—and you are the only person at this entire conference who can answer this question.

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: And who, may I ask, are you?

SOUTHERN VOICE: *(As if she feels Hasi Hentov-Kopen should have heard of her.)* Why, I am Sandra-Sue Kelsey, Hasi Hentov-Kopen.

(Hasi Hentov-Kopen waves a hand . . . pontiff-like.)

ZORINDA: *(To Carolann)* See, I told you. All the time visitors.

SANDRA-SUE: What I want to know, Hasi Hentov-Kopen is . . . Hasi Hentov-Kopen, am I a feminist now?

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: *(Appears to be considering her reply.)* I couldn't say . . . Ms. . . .Kelsey, was it? *(Sandra-Sue nods.)* What is it—exactly—that you do?

SANDRA-SUE: Well now . . . when I mentioned to someone at dinner this evening that I have raised not one but two liberated sons and trained one liberated husband as well, why she said to me, Sandra-Sue Kelsey, you are one swell feminist, and that's the truth.

ZORINDA: *(On the prance.)* Gee, that's what I'm going to do, too—

liberate my husband and sons. The minute I get home. *(Sandra-Sue and Hasi Hentov-Kopen behave as though Zorinda has not spoken.).*

SANDRA-SUE: So I was wondering what you, Hasi Hentov-Kopen would say. . . .

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: Yes. Well I say that's very nice. Commendable. But WHAT IS IT THAT YOU DO?

SANDRA-SUE: Do? Let me see. By my very own self I have accounted for more than sixty-eight percent of all the genuine true-to-life confessions and romances that comfort and instruct ladies. Ladies of every age and across the very length and the very breadth of America.

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: Very profitable, I'm sure. But I believe that political activism is required of a true feminist. I, for example, speak out in print. I LECTURE the length and breadth of Canada. I am interviewed on television and radio and for the newspapers and periodicals. I organize. I demonstrate. I march. . . . Now, bearing all this in mind, I ask you again: What is it that you do?

SANDRA-SUE: I am a kind of an officer. . . .

ZORINDA: *(Who prances by in time to hear Sandra-Sue's declaration)* Oh, wow, me too!

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: WHAT KIND of an officer?

(Duckie returns to stand by the stairwell in her cloud of smoke.)

SANDRA-SUE: Well—a kind of sub-officer? With the Florida State Republicans. . . . *(Her voice rises as though this last is a question.)*

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: Are you paid? *(Before Sandra-Sue can answer and as an aside to the other women)* Of course she's not paid. They never are.

SANDRA-SUE: *(Proudly)* I, Hasi Hentov-Kopen, am a volunteer.

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: NO WOMAN SHOULD VOLUNTEER HER SERVICES! A WOMAN MUST ALWAYS BE PAID FOR THE WORK SHE PERFORMS.

SANDRA-SUE: But they are very nice to me. VERY nice to me, Hasi Hentov-Kopen. Very VERY nice. *(She vigorously lifts and lowers her chin.)* I would go so far as to say that they are GRATEFUL, Hasi Hentov-Kopen. Really.

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: Yes, I'm sure they are. But you have not yet told me what it is that you do.

SANDRA-SUE: Letters. I write letters, and I talk to folks. That is what I do, Hasi Hentov-Kopen. Mostly.

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: Hmmmmm. On women's issues, perhaps?

SANDRA-SUE: Well, no. Not precisely, Hasi Hentov-Kopen. It's more like money . . . and things. For the party.

(Hasi Hentov-Kopen sniffs elaborately, turns a shoulder to Sandra-Sue and returns her attention to the prancing Zorinda and the partially eaten plum [which she continues to eat with aplomb]. Sandra-Sue lowers her head toward the goblet into which she pours wine and from which she sips as she sips as she lifts only her eyes—to search the lounge for support/audience. Neither is immediately forthcoming, but as Zorinda comes near. . . .)

ZORINDA: But Hasi Hentov-Kopen, everything that Sandra-Sue gets published is to help women, isn't it?

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: Help them remain prisoners, slaves . . . is that what you mean, aye?

(Zorinda shrugs and keeps running. Sandra-Sue eases herself up and mumbles something about seeing who's partying on the fifth floor and departs. She passes Duckie, who steps into the lounge and returns to her perch on the love seat.)

DUCKIE: Okay, here goes.

(Duckie pulls a fighter's knife from a silver-trimmed scabbard that she shielded from view as she crossed the lounge. The edge of the knife catches the light and gleams. The women are staring at the knife as if gore drips from it.)

POET: I'm not going to touch that thing. *(Nobody else makes a move toward the knife, either, and, in fact, draw away from it.)*

DUCKIE: I'll do it. I'll do it. Don't get yourselves worked up. Everyone having some? Not you, HHK.

(Everyone nods—except Hasi Hentov-Kopen, who does not look pleased with the appellation and is busy with her plumb. Duckie carves the peach like she is a brain surgeon, precisely and delicately. First she traces lines on the peach's skin. Then, as she cuts into the flesh, she licks at the juice that beads up around the edges of the cut and runs down her fingers and collects in between them. Everyone is VERY QUIET. Then, as though it has been choreographed, or was a ritual, the women in the fourth floor lounge—including the Sheep Woman who stops spinning and Zorinda who stops jogging—move together, in step, toward Duckie. Duckie goes around the circle—not moving from her position, just turning—bestowing on each in turn her portion of the peach. The women then move backward in unison, and each returns to where she had been sitting. Duckie removes the final piece with the knife and brings it to her mouth. She rubs the knife across her hip, examines it, pulls out a piece of shirt bottom to finish wiping the blade. When she is satisfied, Duckie returns the knife to its scabbard, then approaches Zorinda, pointing the silver tip toward Zorinda's middle.)

DUCKIE: Let's do a little . . . self-defense, Zorinda. What do you say?

(Duckie rotates the knife suggestively. No sooner does Zorinda nod than Duckie—whose nose reaches approximately to the middle of Zorinda's tattoo—moves in to stab Zorinda in the heart.)

DUCKIE: *(Handing the knife to Zorinda.)* Now you try.

(Zorinda and Duckie continue but Zorinda cannot penetrate Duckie's defense. Duckie grabs the knife from Zorinda.)

DUCKIE: My turn again. *(This time, Zorinda bobs, shifts, feints, while everyone watches—they are the audience, after all. Hasi Hentov-Kopen is still at her plum, giving good shlurps at the dramatic moments—not being one to sacrifice the spotlight to another, even to a confrere [consouer?].)*

DUCKIE: Good! You're not so easy now.

(Duckie paddles backwards, out of range of the knife and Zorinda's swinging key ring. Finally, Zorinda puts the knife on the coffee table next to Duckie's overflowing ashtray. Duckie sits on the love seat, lights up. Zorinda does another circuit of the lounge, then settles on the floor near the stairwell, opens her backpack, extracts a cigarette paper and fills the cigarette paper from a small muslin drawstring pouch [another treasure from the backpack]. When she lights up, the air fills with sickly-sweetish smelling smoke. Zorinda leans against her backpack, head back, and emits little grunts of pleasure.)

DUCKIE: *(Elaborately taking in a breath of Zorinda's smoke.)* You know, Carolann, what they say is true. These cops, they always do get the best grass.

CAROLANN: In the City people know these things, I suppose? *(Duckie disappears in a cloud of smoke.)*

(Zorinda takes a couple of drags then pinches off the hot tip between her thumb and forefinger. She does not flinch. She wraps the roach in some brown paper and returns it to her backpack. Zorinda pushes herself forward so that she has some space to stretch out on the floor—cigarette burn-pocked carpeting. She begins an exercise routine. First she's flat on her back, then her legs are up and she's pumping. Then she's up and down and twisting and bending and stretching and kicking. Now it's sit-ups, then push-ups. The routine continues, with intermittent jogging, as conversation resumes.)

CAROLANN: *(To Duckie, who responds again by expelling smoke from her not-grass cigarette.)* I always thought mellow was the object of grass.

CAROLANN: *(To Hasi Hentov-Kopen.)* Is your novel with an agent?

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: Lettie Rogerson.

ONE OF THE WOMEN: Wow! That's really impressive. Lettie Rogerson I hear is virtually impossible to place a manuscript with.

A SECOND WOMAN: I've had three stories published in three respectable magazines and she wouldn't even talk to me, much less read anything.

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: *(Snorts)* Hmmph. My first finished draft of the novel was seven hundred and forty-six pages. The writing and the revising of that draft occupied me for three years. Then Lettie said, 'Cut,' so I cut. I sculpted my novel down to a trim five hundred and eighty-eight pages. That revision took almost seven months to complete. This is the third month since I returned the manuscript to Lettie and I have not heard one word from her. Not even a postcard. I know she is sitting on my novel while she hatches other projects.

DUCKIE: *(To Carolann.)* That one wrote a novel?

CAROLANN: Yes.

DUCKIE: What would that one have to write a novel about? Life on the lecture tour?

CAROLANN: *(In a hissy stage whisper, not wanting to miss anything that might be said.)* Her mother's death. That was the chapter she read tonight. Watching her mother die. Cancer of the womb, the one she, the daughter, came out of. You would know if you went to the reading. And an affair, too, with a hardened criminal, a convicted manslaughterer. That chapter she read last year.

DUCKIE: *(Raises an eyebrow in Hasi Hentov-Kopen's direction, flicking the tip of her tongue at the corners of her mouth.)* This is a feminist?

CAROLANN: Committed. No question. Her husband knows. She told him. They're very close. It's okay. Or so she says.

(Zorinda plops herself on the floor next to the chair where Hasi Hentov-Kopen is rearranging herself. Hasi Hentov-Kopen scowls at Zorinda.)

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: Tell me, Zoe-rinda, what—exactly—is the point of the story you read last night. *(Zorinda starts to say something, but Hasi Hentov-Kopen keeps talking, undeterred.)* By which I mean to say that a story—to be a story—requires more than suck and shoot.

(Zorinda shrugs.)

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: DO NOT SHRUG! You write well, Zoe-rinda.

Technically, you are very skillful. Proficient. But—and this is a big but—you must have something to say.

ZORINDA: *(Her face assumes an expression that could be interpreted as mock-horror, were one to assume that humor—intentional humor—is Zorinda's mode.)* Oh, no! Listen. . . . *(Gets on her knees and leans toward Hasi Hentov-Kopen as if they are conspirators. The others also lean toward toward Hasi Hentov-Kopen, to suggest that Zorinda is speaking so softly they cannot otherwise hear her. Hasi Hentov-Kopen does not—of course—lower her voice. So, the group is back and forth like the tide rolling in and out.)* Listen, Hasi Hentov-Kopen—the men's magazines?—they are really into dominants. That's all they're buying now. Dominants. Really. *(Tips her head away from Hasi Hentov-Kopen and looks up at her, batting outrageously long eyelashes. One could suspect that the dumb blonde voice has become ever so slightly dumber-sounding, maybe a little sing-songy.)* You do know what a dominant is, right, Hasi Hentov-Kopen?

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: *(Appears to consider the question before answering.)* Once, on the campus of a college where I was the featured speaker—a seminar on body-image and eighteenth century literature—I met a professor of romantic poetry. The professor suggested that we meet in my hotel room. He indicated that he would be especially pleased were I to prepare for his arrival by dressing myself in leather. That is what you mean, aye? Leather.

ZORINDA: Oh, yeah! The dominant, she dresses in leather. The best is the leather with studs. And she beats the guy. Maybe he wants her to do . . . other things . . . too. *(She smiles. Not a lascivious smile, but one that is sweet. Almost beatific.)* It's fun.

DUCKIE: *(It is not clear to whom she speaks, unless she addresses her cigarette.)* I told you she is into kinky sex.

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: So, the professor telephoned me and telephoned me. The day did not pass without its telephone call from the professor. He called me the most exquisite creature he had ever had the great fortune to behold. He begged that I meet him. He said that he existed only for the moment when we would be together. . . . Finally, I asked the professor to describe me. Tall, he said. Slender, but sumptuous, he said. Flowing raven tresses, he said.

DUCKIE: *(Sounding like she is going to choke.)* What a keen observer!

So, HHK? Did you meet him?

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: After he had pestered me for a number of weeks, I suggested that I would meet him at the time and in the place he chose, but that one condition had to be met. 'Anything,' he said, 'I will promise you anything.' I said that I would be there only if I could bring my husband. I never heard from the professor again.

ZORINDA: So the professor wasn't into three's. So what? It happens. But you should have done it. You should have met him anyway. Husband or no husband. You should have met him. . . . Take it from me, Hasi Hentov Kopen: You would have LOVED it.

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: I don't think so, Zoe-rinda. To me this sounds very athletic, and I am quite lazy. Really quite lazy. Besides, leather is hot. And heavy.

CAROLANN: You could wear Ultra-Suede®.

SHEEP WOMAN: I can't wait to use THAT line when I spin my conference tales!

(Carolann beams at the compliment.)

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: *(Clears her throat, as if to call attention back to where she believes it belongs.)* Even with Ultra-Suede® ?—consider the start-up costs.

ZORINDA: Sometimes the man, you know, he will provide what equipment he wants. But even so, Hasi Hentov-Kopen, bringing your own kit is a good idea.

CAROLANN: She could carry it in a black leather bag. Like a doctor's.

DUCKIE: Yeah, or a metal suitcase. Like an exterminator's.

(Zorinda—as if Duckie's comment reminds her—pulls the wrapped roach from her backpack, unwraps and relights the roach, and inhales, her head back, her eyes closed. Hasi Hentov-Kopen shakes her head, disapproving.)

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: LISTEN TO ME, Zoe-rinda! *(Zorinda's eyes pop open.)* I direct a small progressive college in a large, stimulating

city. . . . I am forty-six years old and tri-lingual. *(Hasi Hentov-Kopen is on her feet, orating.)* . . . My husband and I own a chalet. In Vermont. . . . Our children are virtually grown. . . . I have paid sick leave. . . . I have eight weeks vacation. Paid vacation. . . . I have a dental plan. . . . I have eye care coverage. . . . A truly enormous pension awaits me. . . . I. . . .

ZORINDA: Big deal. With dominants, just one shot—so what if you're a beginner?—and you would earn five hundred dollars. Bare minimum. For a half hour—maybe an hour—of your time. No publisher is going to pay you that, Hasi Hentov-Kopen. And. . . . *(Has been wrapping the joint while she speaks and pauses here to put it in the backpack.).*

CAROLANN: And? . . .

ZORINDA: AND—you never have to pay any taxes.

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: *(Gets back into the chair, tucks legs up, and speaks warmly, caressingly.)* No taxes. Mmmm. You know, my accountant does say my taxes are about three times what she feels they should be.

ZORINDA: Hasi—Hasi—Hasi. *(Hasi Hentov-Kopen sniffs at the looseness of the address.)* You are a big strong woman . . . Hasi Hentov-Kopen. And—let's face it—you have got one GREAT pair.

DUCKIE: Great is the word.

(There is general snickering-behind-the-hands.)

POET: A custom-made-bras pair. Nothing less.

(Hasi Hentov-Kopen pushes the great pair forward, looking down her nose to examine them, and crossing her eyes. The others—except Zorinda—laugh as if on cue. Zorinda hugs knees to chest and springs erect. Her neck-weight slams into her next-to-flat, apparently braless chest.)

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: *(With a snort of derision. Zorinda is doing what looks like shadow-boxing or maybe self-defense movements with her shadow.)* I can hardly deal with knowing about the Southern confessor's outrageous income, so please don't tell me that you make a living writing filth like "Tiara's Christmas"? Aye, Zoe-rinda?

ZORINDA: *(On the bounce.)* Not yet, I don't. Right now I'm an executive secretary to the vice president of sales at an insurance company. A big one. When he doesn't want me, I write. . . . In the office, that is. In the office, there is a real nice Wang.

DUCKIE: *(Stage-whispers to Carolann.)* Can't do it at home, you know. Nothing but an old Underwood there.

ZORINDA: There are these two stories—I just sold them—that I didn't write in the office actually. Those I wrote in a motel on a beach on Long Island. In the Hamptons. I rented this room for two weeks and I wrote and I wrote. And the whole time I could hear the ocean through my window. Lap. Lap. Lap. Oh it was just a beautiful experience. *(She starts moving again, then pauses mid-thrust and parry and stands above Hasi Hentov-Kopen, looking down.)* You know, Hasi Hentov-Kopen, a woman like you would be busy ALL THE TIME. You would NEVER have to worry about bookings. Never.

(Hasi Hentov-Kopen yawns a chasm. The yawn sounds as though she is saying, "Enough already"—at least that is how it sounds to the other women who begin to chat among themselves—but that is not how it sounds to Zorinda.)

ZORINDA: And the truth is, Hasi Hentov-Kopen, when you are turned on, everything is fun.

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: *(Almost spitting.)* FUN! TURNED ON?

DUCKIE: *(Emerging from her shroud of smoke.)* Hey, HHK—you want the knife?

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: *(In control and icy.)* You're "turned on" now, aren't you, Zoe-rinda?

(Zorinda just grins at Hasi Hentov-Kopen, a grin that is lop-sided and looks more than a little dopey. Hasi Hentov-Kopen draws herself erect, which does great things for her great pair.)

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: There is more to literature than fun, Zoe-rinda.

ZORINDA: I'll bet Sandra-Sue has fun what with all that confessing.

HASI HENTOV-KOPEN: There is more to LITERATURE than fun, Zoe-

rinda. Should you have serious ambitions, should you intend to go further than some third-rate men's magazine—should you want to acquire a respectable agent—make no mistake, you had best be turned on to something more than slime.

(Zorinda is back on the floor, leaning on her elbows, rotating her feet and cracking her ankles.)

ZORINDA: Gee, Hasi Hentov-Kopen, I have something to tell you, too. Honest, Hasi Hentov-Kopen, I enjoy myself. I REALLY enjoy myself. *(She pulls the unfinished joint from her backpack, unwraps it and lights it up again, and inhales deeply.)*

CAROLANN: *(Lights are down on all but Carolann, who stands and walks downstage to speak to the audience.)* That's pretty much it for the last night of WAWU and this gathering and these women—at least that's it for what I can tell you. *(The snick-snick-snick of the spinning wheel ceases as Carolann speaks.)* There haven't been any more visitors and Hasi Hentov-Kopen looks drowsy all of a sudden and Duckie hasn't struck a match for at least five minutes. No one is saying a word to anyone else, like each of the women is intent on just holding her thoughts to herself. Trying to sort this out, I don't know. But what occurs to me is—that while the show is going on, sometimes there are things that you miss.

(Lights down and out.)

Hemingway: The Short Story Writer

Stephen Cooper

THE COMPLETE SHORT STORIES OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY, The Finca Vigia Edition. Foreword by John, Patrick, and Gregory Hemingway. Publisher's Preface by Charles Scribner, Jr. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987. 651 pp. $22.95.

The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway, The Finca Vigia Edition, fills a real need for a new collected edition of Hemingway's stories. Previously, the most complete collection was *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway,* which was based on the 1938 volume, *The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories.* This volume did not include the five substantial stories of the Spanish Civil War that Hemingway published in various magazines in the late 1930s nor the four stories he published during the 1950s. The new edition, named after Hemingway's Cuban residence, includes these previously uncollected stories along with a number of previously unpublished stories taken from manuscript.

Reading through this collection reminds us that perhaps Hemingway's greatest work was in his short stories. Today there is sometimes a tendency to dismiss Hemingway as a simple realist or as a journalistic writer who lacked the complexity of his contemporary Faulkner or his friend Joyce. In fact, he was seen as a revolutionary stylist in his own day—a man who wrote cryptic, difficult stories in a deceptively simple style. A fresh look at the stories of his first collection, *In Our Time* (1925; pp. 63-181 in the Finca Vigia Edition), shows this volume to have much in common with Joyce's *Dubliners*—a simple surface, an eye for detail, a mania for accuracy, an ear for dialogue, and an interest in epiphanic moments. Although he sometimes slipped below this level of excellence over the next decades, the first forty-nine stories include some of the finest and most influential short fiction written in the first half of this century.

The newly collected stories in this volume are another matter. They are often interesting and well-written, but rarely do these stories reach the level of his best earlier fiction. Among the more interesting stories

now collected here are his stories of the Spanish Civil War. Although known as a stauch supporter of the Spanish Loyalists, he was not writing mere propaganda in these stories. "The Denunciation" deals with the divided loyalities of a civil war. The narrator sees a man in a bar behind Loyalist lines whom he knows to be a fascist. Before the war the narrator had been friends with this man, and he is now torn between military duty and personal friendship. In another story, "The Butterfly and the Tank," Hemingway addresses the difficult issue of telling the truth in wartime under the pressure of partisanship. "Under the Ridge" honestly faces up to the issues raised by foreign and especially Soviet intervention in Spain's war and deals with the often harsh methods adopted to enforce discipline in a "people's" army.

For the most part, the new stories in this edition are not equal to Hemingway's best work. For example, the World War II story, "Black Ass at the Cross Roads," lacks the subtlety or suggestiveness of his classic war stories from the First World War, and it is not even up to his slightly lower standards of the Spanish Civil War stories. Instead of the clear focus and heightened sensibility of his earlier war stories, this story is filled with irrelevant details and a pervasive numbness. In the later stories in this volume, there are many flashes of the old Hemingway brilliance, but they are rarely sustained. This fact highlights the irony of calling this volume the Finca Vigia Edition. The Finca was Hemingway's home in Cuba for roughly the last two decades of his life. Since most of the new material in this volume dates from this period of Hemingway's life, I presume his sons and his publisher thought it would be appropriate to name this "definitive" collection after his beloved home. The irony is that this volume shows that the Finca Vigia era was a period of declining quality and output in his work. His best stories pre-date his move to the Finca.

The title was not the only unhappy choice made in the editing of this volume. The book is divided into three sections. Part I, "The First Forty-nine," contains the stories from the previous collected edition in the order in which they have been reprinted since 1938. Part II contains stories published in books and magazines subsequent to "The First Forty-nine." The last part contains previously unpublished fiction. Although there is a surface logic to this ordering, it creates some problems, particularly for a student or first-time reader of Hemingway. This order jumbles the chronology of Hemingway's career. The first four stories in the book were written in the mid and late 1930s, after the next forty-five stories that follow them. Thus, "Old Man at the Bridge" is fourth in the collection, separated by over 350 pages from the other stories of the Spanish Civil War. In terms of

both subject matter and time of composition, these stories belong together.

Because Hemingway approved the order for "The First Forty-nine" in 1938, the publisher seems to feel this order must be preserved. But "The First Forty-nine" is not a unified collection as is *In Our Time.* The 1938 edition reprinted the texts of Hemingway's first three collections as they were first published. The play *The Fifth Column* and five new stories were added at the front of the collection, the positioning of the new material being mainly a marketing decision. It is not unusual for a writer to put his new work at the beginning of a collection that includes his previous work. The marketing logic of 1938, however, does not hold for today. New readers would be better served by a colleciton that reflects the shape of Hemingway's career. They would also be better served by a collection that labels *In Our Time* (1925), *Men Without Women* (1927), and *Winner Take Nothing* (1933). Even though these collections are reprinted exactly as they were originally published, they are not labeled in the table of contents or in the text. This identification is particularly important for *In Our Time,* which was clearly intended to be a unified work and is often studied as such.

In addition to the problems of order in this volume, there are questions about the selection of material. Included in the section of stories published subsequent to "The First Forty-nine" are "One Trip Across" and "The Tradesman's Return," both published before "The First Forty-nine" and both incorporated with few changes in the novel *To Have and Have Not* (1937). Also included is another story from a novel—"An African Story" from *The Garden of Eden* (1986). Besides the stories from manuscript published here, there are fragments of abandoned novels published as stories, including a long fragment entitled "The Strange Country" which had been edited out of the posthumously published *Islands in the Stream* (1970). These previously unpublished fragments have an interest for Hemingway scholars and some intrinsic merit, but they do not seem to qualify as short stories. Also, although the book is called *The Complete Stories,* it does not include all the stories and fragments from Scribner's own *The Nick Adams Stories* (1972), nor does it include the five early stories published in Peter Griffin's account of Hemingway's early years, *Along With Youth* (1985). The point is not that all this material should have been included, but that the principles governing what material was included and what was excluded are not clear, and neither the foreword by Hemingway's sons John, Patrick, and Gregory, nor the publisher's preface by Charles Scribner, Jr. explains the editorial guidelines that were used.

The result of this questionable editing is a volume that is less satisfying than it could have been. Because of the new material it contains and because it is the most extensive collection of Hemingway's short stories we have, *The Complete Short Stories* is a welcome addition, but more thoughtful editing could have made it even better. ■

Female Spirituality in *The Divine Comedy:* Can Women Aspire to Dante's Paradise?

Deborah Logan Adams

The cultural influences that shaped Dante's personal ideology create a presence in *The Divine Comedy* that is particularly relevant to women. Perhaps one of the first questions to emerge following this statement would be, how should women readers approach a traditionally male-oriented text like *The Divine Comedy?* Contemporary feminist readers can apprehend this text's pervasive patriarchal influence on Western culture and cite it as one of the chief sources of stereotypical gender-bias that women continue to experience today. Therefore, as twentieth-century women and scholars attempting to unravel the threads of cultural assumptions tangled by centuries of social dogmatism, we can find in the often perplexing and evasive genius of Dante's greatest poem an invaluable resource. *The Divine Comedy* is rich in classical mythology, Biblical references, and medieval Christian mysticism, and in this way provides a variety of paradoxically converging influences. But of equal importance is the fact that Dante's own spiritual evolution is an inseparable element of the poem as a whole. The metaphorical journey through *Inferno, Purgatorio,* and *Paradiso* poetically parallels the inner spiritual pilgrimage of seekers everywhere, whether Christian or not. And herein lies the genius behind *The Divine Comedy.* For, despite Dante's undeniably Christian intent, this poem functions first and foremost as Everyman's spiritual pilgrimage. I could end this discussion here were it not for the disturbing fact that the "man" of "Everyman" clearly represents more than just a convenient expression that ac-

counts for both genders. For inherent in both the cultural and personal attitudes of *The Divine Comedy* is the implication that women have a less-than-honored place in spiritual pursuits. In attempting to account for this ambivalence toward the female, I've asked some questions of *The Divine Comedy.* For example, does the noticeable dearth of women in *The Divine Comedy* denote their corresponding lack of spiritual relevance? And, how representative is Dante's portrayal of women like Francesca, La Pia, and Piccarda as potential female spiritual seekers? Finally, does Dante's characterization of these women reveal a misogynistic bias (evidenced, for example, by his frequent invectives against Eve and by the Siren dream)? Or, is it symptomatic of his personal struggle to resolve the "mutually exclusive" issues of sexuality and spirituality within himself?

The influence of St. Augustine is apparent in the issues Dante addresses in the *Comedy,* like the problem of where to place sexuality in the Christian framework. Augustine's struggle to maintain celibacy resulted in some curious and authoritarian Christian doctrines. Elaine Pagels, in her essay "The Politics of Paradise," traces how Augustine's biased scriptural exegesis went virtually unchallenged at a time when it could conceivably have been labeled heretical. Instead, its influence was so pervasive by Dante's time that it had attained a degree of validity and divine authority equal to the Bible itself. Augustine's reading of Paul's Epistle to the Romans 5.12, reveals the inescapability of sin: "We are all that one man (Adam), since all of us were that one man who fell into sin through the woman who was made from him" (Pagels 32). What is particularly disturbing for women is the resulting doctrinal emphasis on Eve's disobedience, the idea that her "original" sin is sexually transmitted through semen at every conception, and the corresponding idea of the desirability of Mary's immaculate, passionless conception as the womanly ideal. In this way, women become the vessels through which sin is perpetuated, and represent that portion of the population whose all-consuming sexuality is antithetical to the spiritual path. My question is, if original sin is contained within the male essence of semen, then why are women—who are idealized as the passive receptors—held more accountable than men for the continuation of sin? One can only speculate how Augustine would respond to late twentieth-century experiments with artificial insemination!

Even this brief examination of Augustine's influence on medieval thought and, subsequently, on Dante, opens up intriguing avenues of conjecture about the women of *The Divine Comedy.* Francesca da Rimini is the only woman in *Inferno* Dante allows to defend herself verbally. Although he places her in the circle of the lustful where those

guilty of subjecting "reason to desire" are punished, he allows her to speak directly, and does not render her silent in deference to her male partner, Paolo. The lovers are doomed for eternity to be tossed about by Inferno's winds as they were tossed about on the winds of adulterous carnal passion. In his commentary, Singleton suggests that

> . . . according to the principle of just punishment, the heightened violence of the wind signifies that the love which led them in life and leads them now, was, and is, most passionate.
> (82, notation 75)

As an exemplary Christian, Dante no doubt felt compelled to denounce the sin of adultery; nevertheless, he tempers this by presenting Franscesca as a wistful, noble soul who suffers from lack of peace (5.99). And, although he allows her to speak lines from his early love poetry, this, too, is tempered by the fact that part of her punishment is the deprivation of that "fair form" through which she experienced earthly love. In other words, the punishment for sexuality is to be unsexed; and further, Francesca is doomed to eternal denial of the spiritual beauty we later encounter in Beatrice and Piccarda. Such beauty is the reward for chastity and a love that is focused unwaveringly on God.

Marianne Shapiro points out the importance of considering the Francesca encounter in light of the "conflicting issues that Dante resolves, through her, for the pilgrim ascending in virtue. . . . Subsequently Dante writes no more of such love but to revenge or mortify it" (80). Canto 5 concludes when Dante faints, apparently overwhelmed with pity for Francesca or perhaps fear of the sexuality she represents. The unity that is the ultimate purpose of love is grotesquely realized in this eternal sexless whirlwind wherein "love and death become forever inseparable" (83).

Dante clearly does not see Francesca as a woman of intrinsic spiritual worth, and yet the sympathy with which he qualifies her eternal condemnation to Hell seems to be a defense of her character. For here, as in other instances throughout *The Divine Comedy,* Dante strives to reconcile Christian doctrine with his own sometimes conflicting instinctual sense of justice. Francesca is not a bad woman; in fact, we sense her only real transgression is this one instance of adultery. As a Christian, Dante must make an example of her for breaking one of the Commandments. Yet, as a fellow human being, he pities her vulnerability to sensual desires, knowing himself to be similarly susceptible. Looked at in this way, it is but a short step to

the idea that the conflicts and resolutions presented in *The Divine Comedy* reflect Dante's inner struggle between his own sexuality and his internalized Christian repudiation of that sexuality. In Shapiro's words,

> He did not turn her into a monster. She speaks in the refined accents proper to the ambiance she represents. Morally condemned without reprieve, aesthetically a part of her is accorded leniency. Dante apparently had no wish to destroy the beautiful form of love poetry; yet the need to condemn its message is evident. (86)

Conceivably, Dante's foregrounding of the female character could be seen to emphasize her singular guilt. But here Dante deliberately aligns himself with the female sex, culturally regarded as his inferior, and in so doing accords women both spiritual and cultural equality. Further, as we shall see, he increasingly identifies metaphorically with the traditional feminine quality of nurturance as a source of spiritual direction as well as a way to eradicate sexuality.

This alignment with women opens up a network of textual possibilities. For example, Lorraine K. Stock's essay, "Reversion for Conversion: Maternal Images in Dante's *Commedia*," traces the parallelism of Dante Pilgrim's descent into Hell in order to ascend to Heaven with his regression into an increasingly childlike dependence in order to progress into the ultimate Independence. As a spiritual infant, Dante moves from one metaphorical mother-figure to another, regardless of actual gender. Stock notes that "part of Dante's education in the poem consists of his increasing ability to recognize the true mothers from the false, to distinguish mothers *in bono* from mothers *in malo*" (6). But among the range of issues inspired by Dante's heavy reliance on the maternal motif, the one that repeatedly surfaces and is of particular concern to this paper, is Dante Pilgrim's perpetual struggle with sexuality.

As a spiritual seeker, Dante's passion for Beatrice becomes a medium through which the sexual desire so antithetical to his aspirations becomes transformed and therefore acceptable. While I have deliberately chosen to exclude Beatrice from this study, it is worth noting briefly in this context how Dante's verbal maternalization of Beatrice removes the threat of her sexuality, in what Rachel Jacoff calls "Dante's particular form of sublimation" (8). In her essay "The Tears of Beatrice: *Inferno II*," Jacoff traces the language that accomplishes this maternalization to the resulting desexualization of Beatrice in particular and womankind in general:

> The maternal language has an analogous role in its attribution to Beatrice, where it subverts potential erotic tensions generated by the intensity and associations of the language Dante uses to describe her beauty and its effect on him. (9)

Carol S. Rupprecht's essay entitled "Swallows, Sirens, and Sisters: Female Transformations in Dante's Purgatorial Dreams," extends the consideration of the above contradictory erotic/maternal motifs to even further boundaries, with more serious implications than have previously been suggested. In Rupprecht's reading, Dante's text constitutes a

> . . . dismemberment and disincarnation carried out by Dante Poet on the female body as a necessary prerequisite for Dante Pilgrim's flight from female flesh into the Earthly Paradise and eventually the Empyrean. (2)

Citing examples of female disembodiment throughout the *Comedy,* she reveals how

> . . . the progression is one of dematerialization and desexualization until femaleness reaches its only acceptable form in the closing canticle of the *Comedy:* woman as spiritual goad serving man as inspiration and intercession. (3)

Thus, through a reading that seeks to explore an intricate and multileveled text by revealing its latent implications for women, Rupprecht demonstrates how Dante's "particular emphasis on body and body parts, on eroticism and violence and the relationship between the two" (6) has thus far been overlooked in the existing male-oriented readings. Taken to its logical conclusion, the defusing of the female sexual threat through maternalization becomes a disempowering of women by refusing to see them holistically. Such disempowering is accomplished through female bodies that have been "deformed and dematerialized, raped and violated" (15). Finally, the traditional readings have failed to account for a sublimation of suppressed sexual anxiety, the extent of which perhaps even Dante himself was unaware.

While the Francesca canto does not resolve Dante's sexual conflicts, it does at least reveal the central issues. However, as the Pilgrim's journey progresses and his spiritual perception gradually alters, the issues so readily comprehensible to readers' "infernal" sensibilities become obscured in spiritualized rhetoric. This ambiguity is evidenced

by Dante's presentation of La Pia in *Purgatorio 5.* Her actual words are few:

> 'Pray, when thou has returned to the world and art rested from the long way, . . . do thou remember me, who am La Pia. Siena gave me birth, Maremma death. He knows of it who, first plighting troth, wedded me with his gem.' (5. 130-136)

It is symptomatic of Dante's subtlety that her words convey a sense of gentle wistfulness and a sweet humility that is strangely compelling. For Shapiro, the significance and singularity of Pia's words center on the broken promise of the marriage vows which resulted in Pia's death: "The blind violence that accompanied her husband's crime disappears in Pia's words." Further,

> Her modesty in veiling the crime is *maidenly.* What we see is the destruction, as if *self-imposed,* of a delicate creature. She never commands perception of whatever anguish, despair, or tears attended her death. (46; emphasis mine)

Pia never condemns her murderer/husband, and Shapiro seems to suggest that, for Dante, this quality of maidenly modesty embodies the feminine ideal. Clearly, Dante still adheres to the chivalric code of courtly love, a very earth-bound concept. This is underscored by the fact that in this scene sexuality is absent, while there is a corresponding lack of substance in the female form. Pia seems to materialize in a literally disconnected fashion, she projects an "image comprising delicacy and modesty in appearance and speech" (65). Further,

> . . . she veils the crime committed against her. It would be unseemly to name the aggression and the aggressor; unseemly in a soul undergoing purification and particularly in that of a dutiful wife and a perfect lady. (47)

Both Francesca and Pia are characterized by a gentleness that suggests a helpless sort of girlish dependence. In proportion to the greater degree of spirituality represented in Pia, there is also a corresponding increase in the asexual personification that renders her more spiritual, and therefore more acceptable as a female.

A number of questions arise from this. What does the "ideal feminine" of courtly standards have to do with women of a higher spiritual realm? Does Dante invite us to draw this analogy because

ordinary words and concepts fail him in his attempt to accurately render Purgatorio? Or is he reverting to the time-honored patriarchal suppression of women by giving them an impossible standard to live up to, which he justifies by lending it a quasi-religious authority?

Dante's dream of the Siren occurs after La Pia and before meeting Piccarda, and reveals a greater degree of sexual ambivalence in him than previously expressed. In this dream, a monstrously deformed woman appears to him; as she beguiles him with sweet words, her appearance is transformed, her features "coloured . . . as love desires" (19.245). Dante is released from this dream with difficulty when Virgil perceives the danger Dante is in and, with his eyes focused on the "Lady Holy and Alert," he seizes the Siren, and exposes her belly. Dante Pilgrim now wakes "with the stench that came from her" (247). Clearly, the evil of female sexuality is overcome here only by literally gazing unflinchingly at ther personification of female purity, which is, of course, sexless.

Sinclair's interpretation of this passage points out that Dante is still not fully committed to divine ends; he is still vulnerable to the "sins of the flesh." This includes avarice and gluttony as well as lust, yet the personification focuses on the female form. In addition, the undeniable reference to the 'innerness' of female genitalia carries with it the implied fear and loathing men have traditionally held for the secretiveness of female sexuality, for the mysteries hidden from view and therefore threatening, and for the seemingly boundless capacity of women to devour men sexually—to literally swallow them whole—just as unequivocally as the gluttonous consume food. Further, that the Siren is superimposed with the concepts of avarice and gluttony suggests that female sexual satisfaction is obtained only when the man has been totally absorbed by her, annihilated by a fierce and greedy lust. But Sinclair's reading unfortunately does not address the following relevant questions: Why does Dante use the *female* personification here as opposed to any other, and why is Beatrice's ideal preferable only insofar as she is proportionately unsexed by Dante? The answer, as we shall see, reverts to the same unresolved sexual ambivalence.

Clearly, in this scene the Siren represents the bewitching ugliness of sin that is veiled from sinners while it is through Beatrice's chaste spiritual purity that "man is freed" from such false enchantment. Dante's Siren characterization is unmistakably misogynistic, and Singleton's commentary apprehends this fact where Sinclair's did not:

> . . . in this dream the Siren (later termed an old witch) can represent any aspect of the seductive *malo amor* that is purged

> in upper Purgatory. . . . But she never fulfills her (sexual) promise . . .since no secondary good can wholly satisfy our natural desire. (449.15, 451.22, 24)

The violence of Dante's repudiative representation of woman in this scene is indicative of his ongoing struggle with sexual desire. With Francesca, he reacted with empathy; with La Pia, he resorts to the language and ideals of courtly love that serve to remove or distance him from concrete sexual reality. But with the Siren, all the frustration generated within Dante by his "disobedient members" results in a revulsion that turns against the female form by creating a fictive monstrosity. Like Augustine, whose *Confessions* reveal his self-defeating efforts to rationally control all manifestations of sexual arousal, Dante expects his mind and imagination to be as celibate as his body. If, like Augustine, he views carnal desire as an obstacle on his spiritual path, one might ask why he objectifies his ambivalence on women, rather than on his own vulnerability or lack of discipline. Apparently, even a man of Dante's genius and perception could not extricate himself from the contemporary doctrines of church and state, in which women and their sexuality were most commonly targeted for blame. Such an ideology was further buttressed by the added authenticity of the will of God according to medieval scriptural exegesis.

The last of Dante's female representations that I will examine here is Piccarda Donati. Although Dante knew her on earth, when he meets her in Paradiso she is so transformed in spiritual beauty that he does not recognize her. Piccarda's place in the heavenly realm is the sphere wherein "all weak and inconstant persons who win salvation are connected . . . the nuns being chosen as extreme examples" (Singleton 66.30). Here, we are once again offered the matter of spiritual inconstancy, with sexuality and femaleness representing obstacles to male spiritual realizaiton. Given this, it seems to me that in Dante's attempt to personify Woman-made Beautiful through one-pointed love for God, he undermines his own purpose. For how are we to interpret this example of the consequences of "faithfulness marred by inconstancy" (of which Dante himself was found guilty in the Siren dream) that depicts a woman who as a nun *was* constant, before being forced from the convent into a politically-arranged marriage? Because she is a woman, her spiritual salavation seems somehow less consequential than that of a man. The dual implication here is that male spirituality is threatened by the feminine presence (for example, the sensual attraction the Siren excites in Dante) but the reverse does not hold true. For even as a renunciate

Piccarda is vulnerable to a patriarchal and political manipulation that clearly overrides any sanctified commitment she has made to God. Since she was thus figuratively and spiritually raped—and perhaps physically as well—why is she the one accused of inconstancy, and not her violators? Why is she granted the grace of Paradiso only to have it qualified by being relegated to Heaven's lowest level for this "crime" against her vows which she was forced into?

Piccarda moves gently in the "true light that gives [her] peace" (3.33), an appropriate contrast to both the turbulence of Francesca's infernal (and similarly qualified) state and that lady's longing for the peace she will never have. On one end of Dante's spectrum is Francesca, who willingly gave herself up to the carnal expression of love; on the other is Piccarda, who was forced into that carnality against her will. Francesca's punishment for carnality occurs in the highest or least severe level of Inferno, while Piccarda's punishment occurs in the lowest or least blissful level in Paradiso. But for Dante, Francesca belongs in Hell because of the wilfulness that not only led her into sexuality but also kept her there, unrepentant; and Piccarda belongs in Paradise because both her body and her will were victimized by force. Her vows thus broken caused her great anguish; yet her placement in the realm of inconstancy suggests that Dante holds her responsible somehow for the lapse in will that rendered her body vulnerable. Dante gives her these words: ". . . this lot which seems so low is given us because our vows were neglected and in some part void" (3.56-57).

Augustine's struggle to maintain celibacy led him to conclude that disobedience (those "disobedient members" responsible for his spiritual downfall) is God's punishment for Eve's disobedience and the subsequent spiritual downfall of all humanity. If this is true, then celibacy is *not* a matter of free-will at all; its failure is a predetermined punishment from God that functions as a continual reminder of our fallen state and further serves as a permanent obstacle to God-realization. The woman Eve was the initial cause, and every woman after her perpetuates the sin, the punishment for it, and the subsequent separation from God. And now my question is, how do we, as the inheritors of such thinking, go about separating a gender-suppression that has been put forth as God's own determinism from Augustine's own self-serving justification for failure of his free-will? If the starting assumption is this divinely established determinism, is it not curious that the female sex has become the scapegoat in the scramble to divert spiritual responsibility from men and project it somewhere—anywhere—else?

The attempt to write a conclusion to a paper that asks so many

questions seems like a contradiction in terms. But my intent throughout has focused on stirring up the issues rather than resolving them. In this way, I've attempted to challenge the traditional propensity to overlook or bypass certain discomfitting elements in *The Divine Comedy,* and provoke alternate readings. In the process, I've discovered that women are increasingly coming into their own as readers of the *Comedy,* as well as re-claiming the female spiritual tradition. The scholarship of women like Shapiro and Jacoff, Rupprecht and Stock, has made it possible for me to pose these questions; clearly, I am in the company of others similarly seeking a way both to value this text and retain their integrity as women and scholars.

The questions I've put forth here may never be satisfactorily answered; yet the very process of formulating them will perhaps provide new ways of looking at the text. For all of us writers, however mundane or divine their literary purpose, Dante is one who clearly never wrote a word that did not serve his overall intent. It is for this reason that the text of *The Divine Comedy* carries with it such an enduring challenge. Women readers in particular can ill afford to underestimate the extreme subtleties and complexities of style Dante employs; nor should we minimize the cultural impact *The Comedy* has had and continues to have. As fellow literary pilgrims, we need a greater awareness of the seductive powers of great poetry. For Dante seems to continually challenge our infernal perspectives with spiritually elevated insight, or at least an insight informed by that imposing body of medieval patriarchal values and justifications. The challenge our questions present to that system of values is indicative not only of the timelessness of Dante's text but also of the timeliness of our presence as women readers. That his poem continues to provoke such lively discussion, I believe, would please Dante infinitely. ■

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Alabama Literary Review
National Young Writers' Contest

The purpose of the Dorothy K. Adams Award is to encourage and reward creative writing at the secondary level. The winners for 1989 are:

Michele Forman
Birmingham, Alabama

Eartha Duley
Warrior, Alabama

Indian Summer

Michele Forman

Over the drone of the radio
banjo-strumming crickets
and cha-chaing cicadas
wrestle through a humid green cloud
        to sing
and celebrate the wetness
that makes my hair curl outward
when I brush it indignantly in

I Haven't Got the Answers

Eartha Duley

Where are you in this porcelain painting?
Where am I in this fragile structure?
We're neither here nor there nor anywhere
Our faces are cloaked and hidden
Sheathed by something still unknown to us
Our confusion, our ignorance, our shelters, maybe?
I haven't got the answers, I washed them down the drain
I saw that they were stupid and vain
I heard the questions sneaking behind my back
I felt them tear as I fell on my knees
I knew it was them that gathered together and
rolled down my cheeks
My body is worn and battered
My life, about the same
And I haven't got the answers, because
I washed them down the drain . . .
Questions are banging down my door
Step inside the four walls to search and explore
The answers they seek
Aren't written on my feet
But rather they've gone to be seen no more
Tell me things I don't want to know
Give me answers I don't want to know
The answers you give will be washed down the drain
Because I saw that they were stupid and vain
A secret lies deep within my stomach
No one will find it there
It's buried deep, under lots of old clothes and
Memories of childhood
Colorful and delightful now shrouded in black
What has made it pull the covers over its head?
I ask but no one knows the answers to the questions of my soul
All the wisdom has left the world
and the answers we no longer know
My secret sleeps in shame
Because our world is full of pain
And I do not know the answers
Because I washed them down the drain

Contributors

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