

1993

# UA68/6/1 Zephyrus

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# ZEPHYRUS

A Student Literary Publication of  
Western Kentucky University



  
WESTERN  
KENTUCKY  
UNIVERSITY

1993

# ZEPHYRUS

Spring 1993

A publication of the English Department  
of Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky



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**Editors' notes:** Our selection process is based on complete anonymity. If an editor recognizes an author's work, he or she abstains from the decision-making process for that work.

*Zephyrus* was electronically typeset in Times-Roman by John Warren Oakes on a Commodore Amiga computer using Professional Page software.

## **Robert John Wurster** (1926-1992)

Our English department lost one of its most dedicated teachers last summer when Bob Wurster passed away at his family home in Louisiana. Bob received his B.S. and B.A. degrees from Southwestern Louisiana University and M.A. and Ed.S. degrees from George Peabody University. He came to Western in 1961 as Assistant Professor of English, was promoted to Associate Professor in 1978, and took early retirement in 1988. Although his health had become a problem for him he continued to be an effective and inspiring teacher in our classes until his untimely death. Bob always was supportive of creative activities in the department, and was international student advisor for many years. At the memorial service held in September 1992, family and friends, students and colleagues came from all around the nation and the world to celebrate a truly caring teacher. In that spirit of teaching and learning, this issue of *Zephyrus* is dedicated to his memory and example.



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### Award Winners

Geoffrey McCelvey Memorial Award  
Ann Qualls

Browning Literary Club Poetry Award  
Brent Fisk

Ladies Literary Club Fiction Award  
Christopher Bratton

Wanda Gatlin Essay Award  
Jan Soucier

Zephyrus Art Award  
Leah Hogsten





**When My Parents Used to Go Dancing**

When my parents used to go dancing  
my mother rolled her hair  
and wore a pink plastic cap  
and my father, bare chested, shaved  
in a circle wiped clean on the bathroom mirror,  
I watched from the side of the tub while he  
mowed his face back and forth in even rows  
and my mother, in bra and slip,  
curled her eyelashes and smoked,  
tapping ashes and foot to the radio.

Twenty years later I dream of them  
whirling, half-dressed,  
their faces damp and shining.  
I am four years old.  
They jitterbug wildly.  
We are obscured by steam.

**Blackbirds**

I watch for them  
the last days of summer,  
their tiny eyes desperate as pinpoints,  
clouds of starlings--  
their feathers whisper in the slippery leaves;  
trees shiver with the movement of many birds.

By winter your fingers are wound  
like twigs in my hair.  
Crows build their nests there



### Public Nudity in a Strange Land

My cousin met me at Marita airport at ten o'clock. "Sorry I'm late," he said. "What time did you arrive?" "Eight-thirty."

He laughed. "I'd forgotten that it's such a long trip out here. Are you hungry?"

"A little, but I'd really like a good shower. I feel nasty."

"You'll have a chance to bathe," he assured. "Let's catch that train that's about to leave."

The train was not crowded, so I stretched my legs into the aisle. We drank oolong tea and ate dried-sardine snack mix. It was good to see Robert, because he had been away from home for three years.

"I live in a small apartment without a shower," Robert said. "You'll have to bathe at the sento."

"What's the sento?"

"The public bath."

"The public bath!" I thought. Several questions raced through my mind: "Do men and women bathe together?" "Is the bath outside for everyone to see?" "Is it one big tub?" I kept these thoughts to myself; I knew that Robert wanted to surprise me, and I did not want to disappoint him.

We finally arrived in Shibuya-Ku (the district of Tokyo where Robert lived) two hours later. We stepped off the train. The air was too thick. Breathing was like sucking air in and out of a plastic bag; I could feel the air--the vapor hot and moist in my mouth and my nostrils and my throat--as I swallowed it. I was dripping sweat, tired from changing trains four times and from lugging my heavy suitcase.

We left the station and walked to Robert's flat. The single room was like a human shoe box--just large enough for two

people to lie side by side--with extra space for his small refrigerator, television, architectural books, and clothes rack. I set my luggage in the corner. We stuffed soap, shampoo, towels, and fresh clothes in a backpack; then we slipped on our sandals and walked down dark streets toward the sento. It was about a half-mile walk. The outward structure of the sento was an old, wooden, square building, and the roof was sloped on each side like a hat, with the bottoms curling up in the style of the Buddhist temples. We walked through sliding doors into the vestibule. The floor was blue tile, and there were little square lockers around the wall for umbrellas. I heard voices through the wall in front of us. Robert removed his sandals, so I removed mine.

"We go in over here," Robert said, pointing to the door on the left. "The women bathe on the other side."

There was a brief silence. "They used to have mixed baths before the war," Robert grumbled, "but the Americans came over and told them that it wasn't cool, so they segregated." I shook my head, trying to share Robert's disgust.

We walked across the wooden platform on the left and opened the sliding door. Immediately inside to the right was a counter at which an old woman sat. Robert paid her 620 yen for both of us and exchanged a few words with her in Japanese. The old woman looked at me and smiled, nodding her head. I smiled and nodded back.

We undressed and stuffed our clothes into a locker. The tile was cool underneath my feet; the old woman, still smiling, was watching me. Embarrassed, I covered my private organs with a towel. Two young Japanese men were putting on their clothes, impassive to the hairy foreigner beside them. Robert, a man of efficiency, had already walked into the bath. I walked to the sliding-glass door, slid it to the left, and entered.



Steam rushed up my nostrils as I stepped across the threshold, filling my head with the essence of subtly-sweet soaps and shampoos, hot water, and clean human skin. Men were bathing on the left wall, on both sides of a mirrored partition in the middle of the room, and on the right wall. Robert was facing the left wall, sitting on a green, plastic stool with six-inch legs. It was just large enough for his skinny butt. I took a seat between Robert and an old Japanese man. I was giggling like a child. It was all very amusing to me.

I watched Robert. He sat on his little stool, filling a yellow, plastic bowl with water, and dumping it over his head. I copied his actions. There was a red knob on the right of the faucet, a blue knob on the left. I placed my yellow bowl under the faucet and pressed down on both knobs. Water gushed from the faucets, filling the plastic bowl quickly. I dumped it over my head. The water felt delicious as it ran down my skin and off my body. I dumped about ten more bowls over my head until I was completely wet. Then I lathered my body head to toe with Irish Spring.

"I'm getting in the hot bath," Robert said. "Be sure you rinse off completely before you get in. The Japanese get pissed if you get soap or hair in their bath."

I filled my bowl and poured it slowly over my body, rinsing the suds off. I relaxed and stretched my legs, thinking of food and sleep, and imagining what the naked women looked like on the other side of the wall. When I was lather-free, I walked over to the bubbling pool which stretched along the entire back wall of the sento. Robert was submerged to his neck.

"Get in," he said, "but be careful. It's hot."

I raised my right leg and stepped into the bath, immediately jerking my leg back out and cursing.

"That's hot as hell!" I said, gritting my teeth. "How can

you stand it?"

"You have to get in slowly," he said.

So, I sat on the tile retainer wall and carefully placed my right foot in the water. It was numbed by the intense heat. I put in my left foot, pushing my legs into the water and biting my lip to ease the pain. Finally, my whole body was underwater, except for my head.

"We are soaking in a natural hot spring," Robert explained. "The water is heated geothermically. Many believe that it cures disease and cleanses the soul."

I tried to relax as my skin was scalded, and the blood rushed to my head and flushed my face. The steam was hot in my nostrils; the hot water bubbles were massaging my tired muscles; and I was becoming sleepy, I soaked for another five minutes before stepping out of the bath and returning to my green stool.

I sat down and filled the bowl with cold water. My skin was ultra-sensitive as I poured the cold water over my head, and a quick, violent shiver shook my body. It was a refreshing shock.

I repeated these actions two more times--washing, rinsing, soaking, cold rinsing--until my body was entirely numbed and relaxed. I felt cleaner than I had ever felt before.

Robert and I were the last people to leave the sento when it closed at one-thirty. The old woman was sitting with her arms crossed, smiling and nodding as we walked through the sliding door.

We stepped into our sandals and walked out onto the dark street; walking toward Robert's flat, crossing the train tracks, scaling the cobblestone alley. The air cooler, with a diesel/fish odor. My hair wet and uncombed. I bought a tall bottle of Asahi beer from the machine on the corner. I unscrewed the top and took a drink. The beer was cold and refreshing to my dehydrated body. We reached his flat, and I collapsed on the tatami mat. I slept the most satisfying sleep of my life.



### Road trip

One farmer on this straight road  
has let his shrubbery go--  
they reach for mad air like wild  
hands, their twisted wrists  
bound by the same dirt which  
boasts orderly rows of corn.  
As you drive, your left hand  
distorts its promise in  
the window. Corn rows curve  
with your speed.

### Legacy

I remember from you  
the sight of an old man  
handing me spongy orange  
candy shaped like peanuts.  
You have his squint, the  
wrinkles around his eyes  
loose as a bag of Halloween  
treats. I want to touch  
your eyes to remember his--  
perhaps his voice, too,  
and any words he said with  
wisdom to a four year old,  
but your eyes are bluer  
than his, which aged gray  
as the gravel in girl pockets.



**Red**

Missing you, like driving  
on Christmas Day, is temporal,  
transitional, necessary.

Alone, independant, I flash  
my headlights as a mind game  
to stay awake, not for  
communication with other  
speeding drivers in between  
families posed for posterity.  
Anxiously grateful, they tap  
their brakes in the color  
of Christmas, passion, a new  
nightshirt on the floor when  
you return.





**Meeting My Father's Lover  
(After the Divorce)**

To a mall in downtown Memphis,  
We drove in late December  
without conversation.

In the section footwear

She,

the clerk,

stood

smiling

the thief of a successful night's raid.

Earlier, Father had given me sixty dollars:

bribery or requital

with which I purchased Mother's  
Christmas gift--

tennis shoes--

So that she could run painlessly

through the recreant night.

**Choices**

She stood in front of the mirror brushing her auburn hair, one stroke after the other. She glanced at the image that stood before her. The dark circles under her eyes were showing the wear of too much stress and too little sleep. Her chubby cheeks didn't seem ashamed to forecast her added weight.

Teresa frowned at the image she saw in the mirror, but closed her eyes to an image much less familiar but more pleasant.

She saw herself, thirty pounds lighter and twenty years younger, standing in that tiny black skirt she always loved to wear when she was wanting to catch someone's eye. He stood in front of her, tall and thin. She remembered the way it felt to look up into his deep blue eyes. Her heart began to race at just the thought. It seemed like such an adrenalin rush, a high. She missed that feeling so much.

"Hi, how've you been?" she remembered saying, in her softest, most delicate voice, a voice not commonly used any more. Teresa wondered if she would even remember how to use it. She played with her earrings and smiled seductively.

"All right, I guess," he answered. She could tell her charm was working. Teresa wondered if she could still charm a man like that. She hadn't tried in years.

"How are things between you and Gretchen," she teased, taming her voice back into a very offish, almost professional tone, knowing he would notice the difference. She loved the game, and she was good at it.

"Okay," he said, "I don't know. I just think she's using



me. I know I'm crazy. You would be much better for me."

Teresa knew the words before they fell from his lips. She had heard them before, but somehow they always made her feel good. She loved the way he looked at her, the way he made her feel. She always felt sexy when she was around him, and she liked that. She loved to think that he really wanted to be with her.

Teresa's eyes fluttered as she remembered how his hands had moved her hair away from her face. She could almost feel his kiss when her bedroom door flew open.

"Honey, are you about ready? We really need to get going. We're already late." The gruff man that stood in the doorway was such a contrast to the man in her daydream. His tall body boasted a large round center that often reminded her of a basketball. His voice echoed in the room with a tough commanding tone, common to his stature, definitely not like the tempting voice of the man in her memories. But he was a good man. Jack took care of the kids and her. He loved them. Teresa stared at him for a second, then turned slowly back toward the mirror. She felt self-conscious and wondered if he had noticed anything, if he could tell. She looked in the mirror one more time and saw herself, the real her. She sighed, fumbled with the bra strap showing from the corner of her blouse, and followed him out of the room.

The car was packed with kids, toys, blankets, pillows and just about everything else that could be imagined. Teresa sat in the front seat after checking everyone's seat belts. She buckled her own and waited for the long ride to be over, though it had not even begun.

Her husband began talking about the boys' baseball game on Saturday, and her oldest daughter turned up the radio twice, to her mother's disapproval.

Teresa looked out the window and began to watch. The trees rushed by in a swirling mixture of green against the

blue sky, forming what appeared to her an ugly gray hue that surrounded everything, the car, the kids, Jack and even her. Everything seemed so dull lately, the colors in her favorite bathrobe, the living room wallpaper, her soap operas, the children's school activities.

She twisted in her seat. The air seemed to be thickening around her. She tilted the vent upward toward her face, but it grew hotter, and she grew more uncomfortable. She loosened her collar to give herself more breathing space, and finally laid her head back against the seat rest and tried to relax.

The kids' laughs and screams began to fade into the distance. Jack's voice droned on and on until it died away into the hum of the engine. And, as if it were recycled somehow deep in the private parts under the car hood, it emerged as a song-- not a very popular song now, but Teresa remembered.

It began to play in her head, like a recording, over and over. She could hear the words clearly, and she even began to whisper them to herself.

"Whenever I want you, all I have to do is dream ... dream, dream, dream ... Whenever I want you all I have to do is dream."

Before long the children had disappeared altogether, mysteriously wilting away into the back seat. The car had transformed magically from a brown station wagon to a remodeled '57 Chevy. It was a nice car, but it wasn't the car that she had been interested in. And Jack, well Jack had been replaced ... replaced by him.

He sat in the back seat, next to her. Their friends were in the front. She couldn't remember what he had been wearing, but she knew he looked good. She also knew, she could see, what she was wearing. She looked good, and just thinking about it made her feel good. She liked the feeling. She liked to know that he was looking at her.



She remembered how cocky she had sat there, legs crossed. She had been determined that she wasn't going to make the first move. "If he wants her, then he can have her," she remembered thinking to herself. Of course all that spirit and determination disappeared as soon as he lay his head in her lap and took her hand in his.

"Teresa, why am I so stupid? Why can't I just leave her? I know that by the time I figure out that she's not the one for me, you'll be gone."

She ran her fingers through his hair and felt the soft strands between each finger, twisting his curls one at a time. She whispered to him. "It's okay, I understand." She remembered how bad it hurt, and wondered how she could have ever said that.

The words had stabbed her heart, somewhere deep. She remembered how his touch sent tingles up her spine, how the thought of being with him, forever, made her giddy. Even now, she could feel it. The chills ran against her back, dancing through the furry car seat cover and tickling her neck. Teresa had forgotten how much he had hurt her, how insecure, frightened, used and alone she had felt. She hadn't thought about the fact that he never left Gretchen, and it wasn't a part of the memory she wanted to recall. She tried to reverse the thoughts, to change channels, as if they were a television show she was tired of watching, but it wouldn't work. Her mind kept playing back those feelings, fast and furious, until her imagination just couldn't keep up.

"MOMMY!"

The shriek brought Teresa stumbling out of her daydream and back to reality, but for once, she didn't mind. She could start over next time and recreate a better dream.

The rest of the car trip was the same. Teresa had little time to remember, at least not in long sequences. Screams and cries filled her ears, in between questions of dinner

plans and interstate turn-offs. But even in the chaos, she was in another place and time. She looked different, felt different and was with a different man.

She really couldn't figure out why it had been this way lately. Every time she had a quiet moment to herself, she could see him. He stood there in the middle of the grocery line, staring out at her from the front of a magazine cover, or she could hear his voice calling her in the Christmas crowd at the mall. She often caught a whiff of his cologne when she was walking down the sidewalk and would turn quickly to see if he had just passed.

"What's wrong?" her husband would often inquire. "You seem out of it lately."

She would smile sheepishly and give some simple explanation, "too little sleep, just tired." And sometimes, she would even feel a bit guilty for her thoughts about the man from so long ago. But she couldn't help it, at least that's what she told herself. And memories had grown to become an expected, even happily anticipated part of her everyday life.

When they finally made it to the cottage, it was late, and everyone was exhausted. They all went to bed fairly early.

Jack lay next to her. She knew what was going to happen as soon as she got in bed. He rolled over on top of her and began to kiss her and caress her. She wondered what had happened to the sparks that used to be there. They were gone, and she couldn't figure out why. Before long Teresa began to feel dirty, as if she were sleeping with another man. In her head she was.

In her mind, it was him. The man from so long ago, who she never really made love to. She closed her eyes and felt his touch, his kiss. She knew the words he would say, even though she had never heard them before.

Teresa rolled over on her side, and her husband rolled



over on his side, and before long, Jack had fallen asleep.

But Teresa spent the night with *him*. In her world, life was wonderful, colors were bright, and everything was exciting.

When she woke up the next morning, it was dreary outside. She made breakfast for the family, and ate with them. Their exciting chatter about the day's events only seemed monotonous and frustrating to her. She could feel herself growing angry with every word they spoke.

In a rush, she finally jumped up from her chair and announced that she was going for a walk. The early morning fog swept around her like the dust from her kitchen floor. She hadn't wanted to come on this vacation. Jack had suggested it. She knew that he had done so partly because of her. He was worried about her. She knew that. He had said so.

"You seem so distant lately Teresa. Have I done something?" he had asked. She had shrugged him off. She didn't want to think about anything, not anything real anyway. She wanted to sit and dream and remember, and what if all of her memories weren't true? Did that really matter?

Teresa sat down on a rock near the lake and breathed in the stagnant air. It smelled of moss and fish, and she tried to cough away the taste that it created in her mouth.

She closed her eyes and tried to see him. It had begun to get harder lately, to picture him in the situations she imagined. For some reason, although she gave his image full right of access into all the secret chambers of her heart, it denied this right. She could not make the memory of him merge with the memories she had of her husband.

She tried to force his memory into more recent settings. She tried to imagine him at that very spot, by the lake, holding her. But it wouldn't come. She couldn't make him. Oh, she could see herself all right. She could imagine the

scene, but she couldn't picture him. She couldn't hear his voice or feel his touch or see his face, and much to her protest, another figure had forced his way in.

Jack stood there beside her. She knew it was him, although his body was much different than it was now. He was younger and thinner and had a little more hair, but it was definitely him. She stood up, protesting the entrance of this unwanted memory. She wanted the other man, the man from before Jack. She needed him. He was the one who provided the excitement, the release, not Jack. Jack was dull. Jack was ordinary. She didn't want Jack. She wanted him.

But everywhere she looked, behind the tree, across the pond, toward the cabin, she remembered Jack. She could see Jack, holding her close when her mother had died. She could feel his strong hands wiping away her tears. She could feel Jack kissing her gently and shyly on their wedding day, and the way he so softly held and touched her that night. She could hear Jack's voice calling her in the breeze, blowing across the lake, asking her to come home, and she knew Jack's patience, commitment and love.

Teresa sat back down on the rock and looked at her reflection in the pond. She wasn't 20 years old any more. She didn't weigh 125 pounds. She had a lot of wrinkles, and that little black skirt had long ago been given away to the Salvation Army. And it hadn't been him who had loved her all these years. It had been Jack. She knew that. She laid her head on her knees and tried to bring his image to mind, one last time. What she saw, what she felt, was not what she had wanted to remember.

"Teresa, I can't see you any more, not if I want to keep my relationship with Gretchen." He had tried to hold her hand, but she had pulled away gently. "I just can't give up on her, not yet. I've put too much into the relationship to just throw it away now."



Teresa felt the sharp pains, the same as she did the day he had told her those words. Her heart throbbed and her head ached. She tried to cover her ears, but the words repeated themselves over and over again. He grabbed her and held her in his arms, and she could feel his strength, his concern, and it hurt even more.

"I'm so sorry Teresa. I know I am making a mistake. I should just dump her and get you while I can. I know that when I finally realize that you are the one for me, you will have already found someone better, and you will be gone ..."

And she had. The thought weighed heavy on her chest, like her son when he fell asleep against her. She had made her choice, and she had chosen Jack.

"Why? Why did I choose Jack?" she thought to herself, not sarcastically, but in a simple questioning tone, but before she could answer she heard voices and laughter, and she looked up.

The sky had suddenly gotten brighter. The gray tones had disappeared from the air and, like a curtain pulled away, it revealed a beautiful day. The sun beat down on her rock, and she could feel the heat pelting away at her bare legs. The fish splashed carelessly in the water and the warm breeze invited her to dive in with them. Everything seemed so bright, so vivid. She wondered how the fog could have disappeared so quickly.

The laughter and voices grew louder and as she glanced to her side, she saw them coming. Her husband was wearing the swimming trunks she had gotten him for his birthday, and surprisingly enough, he looked very sexy, she thought. He carried in his right hand a fishing pole and tackle box and under his left arm two lawn chairs. She recognized one as her own.

Brent Fisk

### Fragrance

A woman I pass on the street  
wears the same perfume I once gave you.  
I inhale the past like flowers,  
like a thunderstorm, like  
bread so fresh it still burns  
the hands. The scent reminds  
me of loss.

Everything has a smell,  
coffee that keeps us up nights,  
cigarettes that sting our eyes,  
and the ends of things, like candles,  
good books,  
or the closing of a window.



### Contraceptive

We washed down silence  
with water  
just before it went bitter  
under the tongue--  
It made us regular, predictable,  
like the clock that  
unwound in the clenched muscles  
of our jaws.  
There was more ticking away there  
than we realized,  
more sterility  
than we could admit.

### Drowning

I remember volunteers  
forming a line across the lake.  
How men stood shivering,  
almost close enough to touch.  
How they looked to the lifeguard  
and past him to the mother and young sister,  
once frantic, now numb with waiting.  
The men dove and surfaced,  
dove and surfaced, like  
needles threading across fabric.  
Grim faces looking down  
into their own reflections,  
expecting to dive  
down and through themselves  
to touch death and bring it forth.



**A Winter, Long After His Death**

When ice falls from the branches  
of a tree, it makes the sound of angels.  
I knew winter was another name for death  
even before I had a word for it.  
I look back through the pages of  
a grade school yearbook, ask  
my mother about an old friend.  
Tracing a line back to a time when I knew him  
is like looking through a frost covered window.  
To touch his face was to thaw time,  
the way putting a palm to a frozen window  
burns a hole in ice.









### Becoming a Feminist

*One is not born, but becomes a woman.*

--Simone de Bouvoir

I recently served as a workshop director for a high school creative writing club. The very talented young women with whom I became friends led me on a merry search for the roots of my own awareness of being a woman. From these young writers I heard and read about the confusing issues of the nineties, i.e. relationships, family values, careers, etc. I was reintroduced by them to the anxieties of young womanhood and to the significance for teenagers of being attractive to young men. I found that although many of the defining characteristics of adulthood in the realm of the young American mind have certainly changed, the fears, inhibitions, and difficulties have remained the same.

An adolescent girl trying to define femininity and womanhood--in such a way that there is room for her within the confines of the definition--is involved in one of the most pivotal and challenging stages of her life. We each handle it differently because we have different issues. Studies show that between childhood and adolescence a girl's self-value drops markedly and to well below that of boys the same age. I was fortunate that I was thin and had clear skin; however, these factors, all-important talismans of acceptance and popularity for many teenage girls, couldn't ward off my particular self-esteem demons.

I have meant to write about the experience of having a hysterectomy when I was sixteen; in fact, I've tried to write about it several times, but until now it seemed to belong too much to me. In working with the young women in the





creative writing club it became clear to me that every woman must spiritually share every issue of womanhood. The character played by Dixie Carter on **Designing Women** once though she might have to undergo a hysterectomy and spent much of the show lamenting that she wasn't going to be a woman anymore. Because of the endemic nature of that belief it is ironic that a hysterectomy is how my journey toward becoming a woman began.

I read **Gone With the Wind** for the first time when I was thirteen. By the time I was sixteen I had been down Peachtree Street and through charred Atlanta a dozen times. It was a journey I made for the last time when I was in the hospital for the hysterectomy. The inherent difficulty for adolescents in defining womanhood was particularized in my experience because I had neither menstruation as present proof of my femininity, nor childbearing looming in the future. For a while, then, Scarlett O'Hara seemed the best model for me to follow.

Scarlett wasn't beautiful, "but men seldom realized it when caught by her charm." In lieu of traditional beauty, then, I could manipulate the responses of boys by using charm--Scarlett style. I practiced treating boys like kitchen utensils, or worshipping them beyond the realm of reason. I maniacally read bodice-rippers for tips on the love game, and argued that abortion should be forbidden in all circumstances, all while my feminist mother quietly waited for the absurdity to end.

Something else I could manipulate was the size of my waist; Scarlett's waist was the smallest in three counties. I could be petite and vulnerable and feminine with only minimal discomfort. I could starve myself right into womanhood. And, of course, I did.

It would be useless and self-defeating to be ashamed of the teenage girl that was me. I feel only compassion. I was insecure, frightened, and knew only that I was a freak of

nature, a mutant, who was allowed but somehow not included in the world of women. I needed to believe in Scarlett O'Hara if only as a yellow brick road, or as a skin I could put on when my own was painfully thin.

As most adolescents painfully do, I molted. At nineteen I was fortunate to have a pleasant first sexual experience with a young man who was a cherished a trusted friend. Again, I was validating myself via another. In most instances this behavior is self-defeating, but between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five, sexuality seemed to be the most concrete way to assure myself that I was a woman despite the absence of a womb. Having a satisfying sex life meant that I was, at least, a woman in the sense of reciprocal sexual pleasure.

I was married during a few of those years to a man who was my best friend. we played a lot; we worked as little as possible. I quit college to be a wife, and on reflection I'm certain I was testing the equation that wife equals woman. I write sentimental poems about a checkbook being a cold bedmate and how marriage saved women from the horrible fate of eating alone.

For a while the lifestyle and the marriage seemed to accomplish the subconscious agenda I had written. We lived on a dairy farm where differences between the sexes are clearly delineated. The bulls did their thing and the cows did theirs, and deviance was dealt with harshly, even savagely. That kind of atmosphere is like brainwashing. despite the way it was to change, I dearly loved my husband and I believe he loved me. It was enough for awhile.

I began to get bored before I began to get angry, and my response to boredom has always been to find something new to study. I investigated New Age mysticism, Shirley MacLaine, the Seth materials, and Edgar Cayce. I tried astral projection but became frightened when it seemed



possible. I read Somerset Maugham and Guy DeMaupassant and wrote wretched short stories trying to emulate them.

I wish I could tell a quotable anecdote about the day I bought **The Color Purple**. I'd like for it to be dramatic. But the elemental value of the day is that it piloted me to the essays of Alice Walker; it lit up the lighthouse and changed my life.

There were two significant transformations--and a host of smaller ones--in my approaches to life during the next couple of years. I began to respect and trust feminist literature, and through it I found the confidence to relinquish the sense of shame in being unable to have children. More importantly, I was able to understand that the shame I had felt for so many years had been instilled in me by a society that teaches nothing about what it means to be a woman and everything about what it is to be reduced to a reproductive/sexual system. Consequently, I knew I was a feminist, and I knew that it was important to be one. While these changes were good and necessary for my personal growth and health, they required me to reevaluate my marriage, my concept of love, and not only what I needed, but what I had the right to expect from a partner.

For many years I preferred to keep it a secret that I had a hysterectomy. But steeping slowly and thoroughly in the feminist literature and scholarship of leading writers prompted me to begin to reexamine my ideas about what constituted a woman, especially as to what constituted that woman that I was becoming. Suddenly, strong women who believed in women were attractive to me; thus, I became attractive to me.

I made the conscious decision to stop hiding from my life, to be open about the uniqueness of the life I've been given and the body that goes with it. It was the first time I made a resolution to confront my fears, the first time I

chose to do the more difficult thing because I my heart of hearst, in my gut, I knew it was the more dignified act. my husband didn't see it that way. He vehemently opposed me when I wanted to tell his parents I couldn't have children. he said it was because *they* wouldn't understand why he married me, but I knew it was because he was ashamed. it was the worst thing he could have done to our marriage, sending it into the tailspin that ended it; it was the best thing he could have done for me.

I went back to school. I took courses in English literature and learned to think. I participated in creative writing classes and learned how to better express what I know and experience. It was like coming home. One woman in particular, Mary Ellen Miller, became a mentor, a confidante, and a friend. I have many women friends I hold dear, but the relationships I formed with the women who taught me are different; they are built on helping not only each other to move forward, but in doing so to help women move forward. This new sense of community--shared between two women and encompassing all women--demonstrates how a relationship that is seemingly peripheral in nature actually springs from an internal source. I understood what Mother had been saying for years: that the worst thing a woman can do to the polity of women is to elicit, either professionally or personally, petty rivalries within the group.

Having for so long been on the outside looking in, I had a feeling of being enveloped by a world of women that was comforting and invigorating, and along with the surge of enthusiasm came a sense of personal strength previously alien to me. Once afraid of astral projection, I learned to fly a plane; once afraid of being without a man, I found that I delighted in living alone; once threatened by other women, I began to learn the meaning of sisterhood, its power, its ideal, and its nation. This was more than a bunch of women



with chips on their shoulders. It was a group of people claiming their right to decency, humanity, and access to life.

I know people who have gone through college without ever being exposed to the world that in many ways launched and continues to promote the best in me. It alarms me when someone says she believes in equal rights but isn't a *feminist* because I know it demonstrates the pejorative nature the label has assumed in certain powerful circles, the same circles that encourage the view that it's okay to be "a feminist, *but* not a militant one." I've yet to understand exactly what they mean by militant, though in truth I suspect they mean me.

It used to frighten me and send me straight to the nearest soapbox if I spoke to an educated person who behaved as if feminism was a dirty word. I wondered what was happening with those who are never exposed to a world other than the one of their foremothers. Are they bound to a life in which their primary purpose is to be a spouse and a parent? What does that definition say about me, and what options does it certainly close for other women?

I am less fearful of the answers to these questions today than I was four years ago, before I spent an emotionally fulfilling six months caring for my terminally ill grandmother, Mimi. Mimi, Mother, my aunt Patricia, and I succeeded in turning a phase of life typically associated with sorrow and regret into an experience of growth, naturalness, and joy at its most poignant.

Beside my bed I had a speaker that picked up all the sounds from the dining room where Mimi's bed was situated. She softly cried herself to sleep often, in discomfort and frustration, but one particular night when I turned on the speaker, instead of the soft weeping I was alarmed to hear her sobbing. Because her tumor was

located near the speech center of her brain, by this time she could barely speak at all. It took me several minutes to translate that she was crying because she couldn't pray out loud.

I was twenty-seven years old, taking care of a woman who had diapered me, fed me, lovingly showered me with affection. It seemed to me it would be arrogant to patronize her by telling her God could hear her if she prayed silently. That wasn't the point at all. I felt powerless and unutterably alone. I called Mother and Patricia.

It is one of my most vivid memories of Mimi's last six months: Mother and Patricia were sitting at my grandmother's bedside and I stood behind them. What made the moment so extraordinary was that not one of us said anything trite or cliché. Everything we said was intended to be comforting, but not to negate the validity and necessity of feeling. We didn't encourage Mimi to disguise or to ignore her fear or grief. She relinquished her role as matriarchal protector and let us witness her feelings and experience our own. I knew that I couldn't change the anguish for any of us, but I knew that it was okay because we were together and the moment was important.

There is a private and inviolable nature in the words between loved ones in times of sorrow. Anyone who has ever lost a loved one can understand. I know in all surety that we loved each other well in those moments. Standing there beside Mimi's bed it occurred to me that in the normal sequence of life events, long before I am ready, it will be my mother to whom I will be saying goodbye. Surprisingly enough, however, the wave of fear and loss that usually accompanies such a thought was absent that night. In its place was one of those rare glimpses of the part as a whole. It was on this night that I clearly understood what it was to be a daughter of woman. For the first time the significance of being a fifth generation first daughter



became more than just a tidbit for conversation. Instead, it became an element of being a woman in the way in which I define it for myself.

These days I seem to spend a lot of my energies arguing against the elements of the men's movement that are divisive and against the increasingly hostile attitude toward feminists in general, energies better spent working toward a world in which women enjoy the rights and opportunities to which they are by law and principle entitled. As a participating member of academe I am astonished daily by the pervasiveness of anti-feminism that appears to be systematic in that institution. I want to change. I want it to change for those young women in the creative writing club. I want to change it for my mother, my aunt, my grandmother, myself, and for all our children.

Despite the frustrations of the movement I remain confident in its possibilities. The most striking feature about my belief in women is that it daily renews my strength in all humankind. When I was launched into this most recent period of development I was certain I had found the key to defining femininity and the art of being a woman, as certain as I been that the key was Scarlett O'Hara, sex, or feminist literature. There will be other keys for me, as well there should be. We are evolving creatures; we thrive best when we are learning.

### My Grandfather Says

My grandfather says we're fat  
because we don't understand death  
like his generation.

He cleaned his father.,  
drew the creases and folds of him  
with a damp cloth,

scraped that morning's labor  
from his fingernails,  
plucked each piece of lint  
from the old blue suit  
worn to weddings,  
funerals and banks.

My grandfather says  
we young people don't touch death,  
and that makes it easier to eat.



### Mother's Dress

I imagined you behind the door,  
arms held high as the fabric  
crawled along your back, tumbling  
until your shoulders caught the hem  
below your knees, fingers  
maneuvering the buttons and hooks and belt.  
I imagined the mirror laughing,  
catching your hair up and away  
from your peached face.

We applauded your entrance,  
the way you twirled,  
color snatching at air around you  
like sparklers at dusk,  
the toss of your skirt,  
the pleasure your hands spoke  
as they crept over the silk.  
I wanted to paint you,  
record the exact color of your flush,  
the way your pale skin  
soaked up the pink of delight.  
Daddy rounded you up next to him  
and drew the curve of your waist and hip  
as he had done a million times  
without my concern,  
and when I kissed you good-night,  
I could taste his cologne.

### Barebacked

It rained on my Grandfather's funeral,  
a sure sign he went to heaven, my niece tells me,  
and how's Crocker can I ride him when?

My horse is long-necked.  
He stops to eat. I wait,  
sit clear of things like food,  
on broad ribs and narrow ankles.  
He loves morning.  
I know this because he looks up  
after each bite at the sun.  
I know, too, that he runs toward something,  
and I, being a child of rain,  
do not look back.



### Three Scars

Proud as Sunday I display my scars,  
ribbons of tissue scattered, a smattering  
of moments. Look, here in my eyebrow,  
my brother's rage is shaped like luck.

The fortune teller was stumped  
by this railroad running directly  
through the heartland of my palm.  
No one remembers where it came from,  
so I daydream about it,  
wonder if I'm adopted, though  
I look just like my mother when I'm inside out.

You aren't the first to say  
a person could lose a finger in my navel.  
This scar is tiny, barely visible.  
Amazing what they pulled from me from there.  
I've read that in their dreams, paraplegics  
dance on legs strong and sure as a father's hands.  
Often when I dream, my belly is thick,  
the skin stretched so tightly it would tear  
if you scratched it, and my navel protrudes,  
pouting--flawlessly!

### Doublemint and Wood

Parents leave  
doing parent things

Children discover  
Treasures of bureau drawers

Pocketed sock rolls  
Navy blues  
Army greens  
Dark brown to black  
Some have green at the toes

Cuff links like earrings  
Purposeless cuff links  
I LIKE IKE'S  
SOX POWER  
and Hale's Franciscan H.S.  
Chaperone trinkets

All of that stuff  
Kicking around  
An invisible cloud of  
Wrigley's Doublemint and wood

There... behind the  
Travel shaving kit  
That Sucrets box  
Pale with age  
Third grade picture frame  
His little girl shrouded  
Ball point blue  
Messages



### Two Men Carrying a Mirror

Two men carrying a mirror across a golf course at night. The mirror measures five feet by seven. At six second intervals the signal light from the adjacent airport sweeps across the perfectly planned hills and ponds of the course. First there is the brighter white beam, then after the mechanism completes 180 degrees rotation a blue light follows. Occasionally the two men have the mirror in a position that reflects the signal as a flash.

"Did you see that?" The young woman is sitting at the kitchen table looking out the kitchen window at the night sky. "It looked like someone's signalling from the golf course or taking photographs with a flash bulb."

"I've got sugar but no cream. How do you take your coffee?" The young man is standing at the kitchen counter with two cups of coffee.

"Black is fine." The young woman answers without turning from the window. He glances at the back of her head then opens a bottle of hot sauce, breaking the seal of red crust.

"There it is again. Did you see that?"

"See what?" The young man sits down at the table placing one cup next to her hand and holding the other cup for himself.

"That flashing light."

"It's probably from the airport."

"No. I'm pretty sure it's coming from the golf course." She picks up the cup lifting it to her lips blowing ripples across its black surface sipping coughing dropping the cup doubling over coughing. The young man grabs the wooden pepper mill that has sat inconspicuously among other common items on the table and strikes her on the head. She

collapses to the floor with a moan.

The sound of something heavy falling obscures the dialogue of the two characters on television.

"Good God. There he goes again." The man turns the television off and looks up to the ceiling where the muffled noises originate. "Martha! Do you hear that? He's at it again. Sounds like he's beating the floor with a sock full of rice." He listens. "We finally got rid of old lady Harrison and her stinking cats then this bozo moves in." He picks up the receiver of the phone that has sat inconspicuously among other common items on the end table. He presses seven buttons in a particular order and waits.

"Listen. I'm calling from the apartment downstairs. I don't know what the hell you're doing up there but whatever it is it's a racket. I can't even hear the tv. Now I've been patient up til now but if you don't cut it out I'm gonna hafta call the landlord and complain. . . . What? . . . This isn't apartment 4B? . . . Oh, I'm sorry I must have dialed the wrong number. I'm sorry." He hangs up the phone. The noise continues from the floor above. It's regularity like a mechanism counting off seconds. He stares at the ceiling noticing the swirling brush strokes in a field of white. The phone rings.

". . . Ah, hello? . . . No, there's no Kathy here. You must have the wrong number. . . . Yes, that's the number here but we've lived here for 13 years and I don't know any Kathy."

The young man in the telephone booth hangs up the receiver and looks down at the scrap of paper he holds in his hand. The name Cathy is followed by seven numbers in a particular order. He pulls his jean pocket inside out producing two pennies and a dime. Wadding up the scrap of paper and stuffing it and the change back into the pocket, he leaves the phone booth. As he is walking down the sidewalk a long black limousine with tinted windows pulls along side of him. He stops. The limousine stops. The front



passenger's window slides down. The young man leans in. There is a conversation between the young man and the driver. He tries to open the door but it is locked. A few more words are exchanged between the two and then the young man moves to the back door, opens it and climbs in the limousine. He closes the door and the car starts off. He is alone in the back with a panel of glass separating him and the driver. The young man picks up the phone, listens to the tone, tries all the buttons on the control panel. The television set flickers on but the only channel that comes through looks like it is from a security camera viewing an empty elevator.

The limousine enters the underground parking garage of a tall building. It stops in front of the elevator.

"Take the elevator to the penthouse."

The young man gets out and the limousine drives off.

He watches the numbers light up. 23 24 25 He is alone in the elevator. At the penthouse it stops. The doors open splitting in the middle and delivering a widening band of light into the dark room. The young man steps out and the band of light narrows until gone. An older man sits behind a desk. He is lit by a small lamp that sits inconspicuously among other common items on the desk. He uses a ballpoint pen to jot down notes on a page of typescript. The young man approaches and is about to speak, his lips forming an open circle, but the older man raises his left hand without looking up or hesitating in his work. The young man stops and stands staring at the man behind the desk. After several minutes he looks around and seeing some chairs against the wall he walks over and sits down. The older man continues his work. The phone that has sat inconspicuously by the lamp on the desk now rings.

"Yes."

"Are you alone? . . . I'm alone and I've got it out and I'm playing with it."

The older man hangs up the receiver. A bright sound and the widening band of light appears in the room falling across him and the desk. A shot is fired and as the light narrows on the older man he slumps down in his chair with blood running down his face. The ballpoint pen has stopped in the middle of a word and drops from his hand. The young man moves up to the desk and looks at the man then at the numbers above the elevator as they light up. 13 12 11 A flash of light from outside the window catches his eye. He walks over and looks out across the city.

"Did you see that?" The young woman is sitting at the kitchen table looking out the kitchen window at the night sky. "It looked like someone's signalling from the golf course or taking photographs with a flash bulb."

"I've got sugar but no cream. How do you take your coffee?" The young man is standing at the kitchen counter with two cups of coffee.

"Black is fine." The young woman answers without turning from the window. The young man joins her at the table sitting one cup in front of her and holding onto the other for himself. She lifts the cup to her lips blows ripples across the black surface sips.

"Hot."

He smiles at her. The phone rings and he gets up to answer it.

"Hello. . . . What? . . . I don't know what the hell you're talking about. Are you sure you have the right number? We're not making any noises here. . . . No, this isn't apartment 4B. I live in a house by myself. . . . Okay. . . . Okay. Yea."

He hangs up the phone. The noise continues from the floor above. Its regularity like a mechanism counting off seconds. He stares at the ceiling noticing the swirling brush strokes in a field of white. The phone rings.

". . . Ah, hello."

"Are you alone? . . . I'm alone and I've got it out and



I'm playing with it." When he hears the dial tone he hangs up momentarily and then presses another seven numbers in random order.

The phone in the limousine rings. The young man hesitates before picking up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Are you alone? . . . I'm alone and I've got it out and I'm playing with it."

"Are you the one I'm going to see tonight?"

". . . Yes. We could get together and have some fun. Are you touching yourself?"

". . . Yes."

"Is it getting hard?"

"It's big and hard."

"Are you going to come?"

"We just pulled into the parking garage now." The young man hangs up the receiver.

Alone in the elevator he watches the numbers light up. 39 40 41 There is a telephone conspicuously encased in glass but it does not ring. At the penthouse the elevator stops. The doors open splitting in the middle and delivering a widening band of light into the dark room. The young man steps out and the band of light narrows until gone. An older man sits behind the desk.

The young man is sitting in a chair against the wall when the elevator doors open and there is a shot. The older man comes from behind the desk holding a gun. The two of them walk together, stopping in front of the elevator, the doors of which open and close open and close. A black revolver prevents the doors from meeting. The older man taps the gun with his foot sending it sliding back into the elevator. The doors close cutting off the light.

3 2 1 The elevator doors open and two suited men step in. One pushes the 9 button. There is no conversation or eye contact between them as they ascend.

On the 9th floor they stand silently in front of an apartment door. One knocks. There is no response. One motions with his head to the knob and the other turns it clockwise until the door opens. Inside the apartment they look around with a minimum amount of touching. A spoon is found half buried conspicuously between sofa cushions. One extracts it carefully as the other looks on. After examining the spoon he sticks his tongue briefly to the bowl. The other takes the spoon and places it in his mouth dragging his thin lips across the bowl as he pulls it out.

"What is that taste?"

"Heroin." The other makes a face of disgust but the expression is interrupted by the phone ringing.

"Hello."

"Are you alone? . . . I'm alone and I've got it out and I'm playing with it."

"I think it's for you."

The other takes the receiver and listens for a minute. Then he hangs up. "Let's check the garage. See if his car is still here."

The elevator lights: 5 6 7 The doors open to expose the body of a middle aged man. One of the suited men steps in and kneels.

"Is that our man?"

"Could be. Hard to tell. He's hit in the face."

"Let's go back to the apartment and call in." The two start down the hall but when the elevator doors begin to close one jumps back to prevent them.

"Here. This should do it." He places the dead man's foot between the two doors which open and close open and close.

Back at the apartment one makes a phone call and says some things while the other sits on the couch tapping the spoon against his palm. When they return to the elevator its doors are closed. One pushes the button.



"I'm going down to the lobby. You stay here and wait for the elevator." He runs down the hall and enters a door marked stairs.

28 27 26 He watches the lights. The doors open but the elevator is empty except for a black revolver. He steps in and picks up the gun. As he examines it the doors close and the elevator begins its ascent. 13 14 15

It stops at the penthouse and the doors open. There is a shot from the dark room and flattening himself against the elevator wall he returns the fire with the black revolver. Shots are exchanged. One from the elevator followed by one from the dark room. The phone behind the glass rings. He smashes the glass with the handle of the gun.

"I hear shots. What's going on up there?"

"I've got it out and I'm playing with it."

"I'll be right up."

The elevator doors close and the descent is made. 35 34 33

42 43 44 The two suited men step cautiously out of the elevator with their guns drawn, pointed into the darkness. They find the older man slumped behind the desk, a bullet in his face. The edges of the room are in darkness and they look carefully at each shadow and outline. The phone rings but neither answer it. The young man bolts from out of the darkness making a break for the lighted elevator. One of the suited men follows him with his gun but the other is in the way. The other aims his gun at the young man but a flash of light from the window. . . .

"Did you see that?" The young man is handcuffed in the back of a police car. "It looked like someone's signalling from the golf course or taking pictures with a flash."

Neither officer turns to look at him. "It's probably from the airport."

Two men carrying a mirror across a golf course at night. The mirror measures five feet by seven.

## Those Summer Saturdays

When my mother would leave  
us alone on those Saturdays  
in the summer, we would find  
the smallest corners of the house--  
my bedroom closet, the dirt floor  
basement-- and we would show  
ourselves naked to each other.  
For each pebble or leaf I collected,  
you gave me a kiss. Back then  
that was love and my mother  
wondered why the pockets  
of my dirty jeans were  
filled with rocks.



### Escapade

Three lumps buried in the black skin.  
We worked them out like the last  
of the toothpaste.

Small birds were born from its  
mouth. Two full grown finches  
and a baby starling,  
their feathers slicked  
with bile, the branched  
legs wilted.

Their wingtips, recreated  
by the smell, fluttered against  
the walls of our stomachs  
and our legs balked  
for a moment before carrying  
us off the road and into  
the next field.

### What We Remember

I did not hear until that evening  
you had died in your sleep  
and all I could think about was  
having gone through the day  
with you dead and me in ignorance.

I woke up early to watch the sun  
creep up into my kitchen, the morning  
orange and unhurried, the coffee  
slipping from the white cup without  
leaving a trace. I met some friends  
for lunch and the laughter  
rung above our heads in waves.

When I got home that night I was  
just tired enough to enjoy the taste  
of a single beer and when the phone



**The Persimmon Tree**

A film of jelly stills the water against  
the wind and makes the bird bath  
a breeder of mosquitos. The grass  
along the chainlink fence hasn't  
been cut by hand. It surrounds  
the yard in a line of dead straw color  
and a kerosene smell. The apple tree  
has mottled the ground beneath with  
its sweet stinking fruit.

I grew up in this house that skirts  
the city. The backyard opens on  
the pastures and woods of the country.

The persimmon tree that stands in a vacant lot  
just beyond the property line bears no sign  
of having been cut to a stub after I took a machete  
to it, hacking it one joint at a time, relishing  
the feel of the blade sinking through the wood.  
It had never been much of a tree, two spindly limbs

branching out of a narrow trunk, its leaves sparse,  
its fruit small. Ugly but not as ugly as the naked  
stump that was left, that's what my mother had said.

It's a new tree now,  
its trunk almost  
as big as my waist, its  
leaves spread beyond my  
reach, its fruit bursting  
orange. I take a persimmon  
from one of the lower branches,  
rolling it between my thumb and  
two fingers. Its juice drips  
out making my palm sticky.  
From within its sweetness  
emerges the bitter aftertaste.  
Just as this tree was  
hidden in the gangling  
shrub a decade ago.  
Just as each day is cut  
from the last.





## Men

I first fell in love, I mean really in love, in the first grade. That was Trey Hester. I gave him some unsigned notes and even a box of chocolates for Valentine's Day. Someone told me later that his little sister ate them. He was beautiful, but he was the kind that would always hurl the ball at your legs a million miles an hour when the class played dodge ball in gym. When he would come after me, blue eyes fixed on my face, my body would twitch like a rabbit's as I waited for the last second to dodge the painful slap of the ball. I was terrified. I was in love.

Later I found they were all like that. You never really had their complete attention unless they were chasing you.

Matt was the first one to give me roses--two dozen in two weeks. "I'm going to spoil you rotten," he told me. I hoped he wouldn't give me any more, though. It depressed me to see them in the vase, dead, after a few days. And I always pricked my hands on those thorns. But they were still beautiful.

I met Phillip at a party during my freshman year in college. It had been raining hard, and my hair and sweater were soaked through. He had black, black hair and a profile so perfect it was almost snobbish. I came to the party with my friend Alicia. When Phillip and I broke up less than a month after our first date, he told me he wanted to date Alicia. Now I think he's married to a girl in Memphis that he got pregnant. But I hear he's very happy.

Maybe my first kiss came too early for me to romanticize it. At sixteen, your world is still sharp and every little detail is fairly snapping with meaning and your



skin prickles all over, all the time. What is more important than the sting of his cologne, the time it takes for him to find the back of your neck with his hand, the sound of passing traffic on the road above? At twenty-one, you notice little more than what his mouth tastes like, and how he looks at you afterwards.

"Tell me a secret," David would whisper in the darkness. He was my first. Each time we were together, lying in each others arms, he'd demand another secret. I told him every one I could think of, from the first time I saw a Playboy to the time I was caught shoplifting in Sears when I was thirteen. He had emptied me by the time he left me, later that summer.

My friends and I decorated the walls of the gym at every high school dance. Wallflowers are well-named--there are few girls as beautiful as those left wobbling on the stems of uncertain high-heels, their necks and arms carefully scented with perfume, self-consciousness suffusing their bodies like the color in damp, glowing petals. The girls who were chosen to dance were hardier, less likely to wilt in the heat of a sixteen-year-old boy's embrace.

I knew John loved me when he got drunk at an awards banquet and demanded that I dance with him. He told me I had legs like a racehorse. His long hands were loose around my waist. "Aw, hell, I don't know. Do you know what I mean? Do you know what I'm trying to say?" I laughed at him and pushed him away as the fast songs began again. I didn't laugh when he told me again, a few months later, when I let him take me home.

All of them were different. Matt was over six feet tall and lanky as a rail. One of his teachers called him a "tall drink of water," which cracked both of us up. There was Mike, with his thick glasses and small wiry frame, and Alex, whose wild gesturing once sent my hamburger and

soda flying across a restaurant. he was destined for the stage. We never really dated.

David was the most beautiful, his body shaped by years of swimming. He was the champion butterfly swimmer in high school. Even when his pale hair was slick and dark with pool water, and he would come to me smelling of chlorine, I still thought he was the most stunning creature I had ever seen. My friend Lee Ann saw him and asked, jokingly, if he had a twin brother. The funny thing was, he did.

It's easy to forget who you are when you're with them, to make yourself into what they want to see. I never resented this when I bought silk slips in their favorite colors, or began listening to their music, or picked up cooking tricks from them. Lately, though, I'm wondering if I can find the person I was before when they are gone again. Is purple really me favorite color?

I met a guy when I was in England, travelling with some friends. he was absolutely ordinary looking, but with a Scottish roll to his words that would warm me to my toes. He didn't think much of Americans, yet I spent many afternoons in the Oxford teashop, daydreaming about marrying him and moving to Edinburgh.

The problem with being chased by two men at the same time is you know either way, you'll break a heart. So, you think you can relieve that restless, lonely need in both of them and you feel a little like a whore doing it, but you can't do anything else and then one day that girl you work with comes in and tells you she's pregnant, and is almost sure who the father is. The cold shiver not only runs up your spine, but back down again, settling in the hollow of your back.

Then there was that one who promised to take me to Florida so we could go sailing around the keys, drinking salty margaritas and spending nights on warm, white sandy beaches. I didn't know him very well, and we only went on



one date together. "It would have been very easy to fall in love with you," he told me. I haven't heard from him in a long time, but I can still feel the way his long hair slipped through my fingers when I let him kiss me. And I always look for Florida's corner of the map when the weather comes on.

Women are just as bad as men when it comes to talking about sex. Possibly, they're worse. My roommates and I used to read every article on sex in magazines like *Mademoiselle* and *Cosmopolitan*, which then inspired discussions on what really was the right size, what really was the best way, and what we thought men thought about during sex.

I showed my friend Mark one of the magazines and asked him what men thought about during sex. "Most of the time, I'd say, they're thinking about...you know...." He started laughing. After a second, I laughed, too. "Where do you get these stupid magazines, anyway?" he gasped.

The worst thing about it is when they don't pay attention to what they are doing. They can be kissing you in the sweetest, shyest way, and then their hands pull your hair down your back until you nearly have to bend backwards. Or they will catch you with a sharp hip bone or bite your ear too hard and you want to bite them back and say, "I am here too! See me, why don't you!" but they are so embarrassed you can't stay mad.

One night when we were driving back from Casey County, listening to a Garth Brooks tape, Matt hinted that he wanted to propose to me. I made a joke about bubble-gum engagement rings, but he just nodded to himself, stroking my hand. I looked out the window at the darkened country hills and hummed along with "Lonesome Dove." I hated country music before Matt.

Sometimes I used to wander the streets around the college late at night, looking for someone. I didn't know

who it was. I still don't.

The hardest part is finding out what really matters. You can look into their eyes and hate them because you don't know what they're thinking, and the next minute you realize it's stupid to try to know them because they can't know you, either, because that's the way people were made and there's no way around it except by fooling yourself. So you can rage and rage against them, or you can subtract meaning from loving them and live in contentment. But neither gives comfort for long.

So you take their hands, then, and take each sweep of joy or sting of anger that comes from each moment because, in the end, they become only a series of moments in your life.

But those moments, you find, cast shadows longer than you would have imagined possible.



**Dieter**

I hold an image of her,  
spiky as a gum-tree pod  
prickling in my palm--  
once full and greenly alive,  
she has dried herself  
with diets, hunger  
rattling like seeds  
inside her new hard body. Yet  
I think she will  
soon tire  
of brittle weightlessness,  
and smooth flesh  
will again  
cover these sharp bones,  
growing as lightly  
as a snowfall.

**Piranha**

The water wears its green  
as thick as oil,  
and the men watch their legs  
disappear  
into the Tocantins River  
as they bathe.

The piranha, axe-blade body  
sleek in the current,  
opens its mouth  
to breathe water,  
the heat of the men  
passing over the icicle teeth  
like a dusky wine.

He floats his shadow  
across the indifference of their legs,  
planted like columns in the water,  
then slips  
down the river bed,  
rolling by  
like a heavy coin,  
a silver chunk  
of shine and scale.



**Climber**

It might have been  
a sly lick of moss  
or a crumbling shadow  
beneath his foot  
that sent him spinning  
from the bridge  
like a spider,  
rope trailing after him  
like the broken trace  
of a web. He hit  
with an impact  
you felt for months,  
reverberating in your fingertips.

The funeral  
scraped you raw  
and left your muscles in spasms--  
"He never parted his hair on the side,"  
you say, standing by the  
million-mile drop  
of the grave. You  
look down  
to gauge the distance,  
suddenly dizzy.  
"And they shaved him  
too close," you say.

A year later,  
there is still a heat  
I can feel  
in my hands,  
as if you were burning  
through them  
like a rope  
I cannot grip  
before it realizes its length.

**Blonde Lock**

He finds them everywhere.  
In his red Toyota  
Couch cushions  
Black overcoat  
Plaid flannel shirt  
And Red Sox cap.  
Somehow  
After three weeks  
They make him miss her  
Less.  
She never did know when to quit.



**Bedtime**

I slip into the welcome sheets, trying not to wake you.  
Hoping you will.  
Your breathing-- deliberate and slow.  
I roll into the rhythm  
wrapping each exhale around my ache.  
Dark minutes pass.  
I inhale your skin.  
Daylight depends  
on the tips of your fingers.  
Where and when they go.





### Wash Day

Annabelle sat on her windowseat, wrapped around Charles Dickens. She sat in the sun, but the fall day was cold. Her fingers on the book were chilled and stiff when she finally left Lady Dedlock dying in the snow. Tea was what she needed. She tugged her shawl back into place, sinking her hands into the cashmere, and went into the kitchen.

Yellow, yellow. She loved her yellow kitchen. Allison had been horrified at the color when she came to help paint. They'd clash, she said. But Annabelle loved the glowing light that filled the kitchen when the sun came up, the shadow dance that played on the wall when the breeze stirred the lace curtains. She loved the cleanness.

She peered at her reflection in the tea kettle as she lit the stove, wrinkling her nose at the mass of red curls that reflected copper back at the pan bottoms hanging from the rack. She pulled one wiry curl out, stretched it out long, and let it spring back. Leaning against the counter, she warmed her hands in the steam from the kettle. Sighing, Annabelle stopped watching it so it would boil. Her favorite mug, the blue one with yellow flowers, was on the drainboard. She fingered it, looking at its stained inside. It came from England, from the Dove Cottage souvenir shop. She readied it with cranberry tea.

The washer buzzer sounded. Annabelle marched into the utility room and kicked the laundry basket. She hated wash day. The cold laundry lay like a lump in the washer. She dragged it out, stuffed it in the dryer and added a dryer sheet. Flipping the timer, she walked away.

She settled down with her tea and her book, in her

rocker this time. Dickens lay forgotten in her lap while she sipped her tea, hands curled around the mug to hold the heat. She rocked slowly. Her neighbor Sylvie hung her clothes out on her line. She said she liked to let the sun do the work, and she liked the smell of air dried laundry. Annabelle used her dryer and softener sheets from a box that said 'STA-PUF fresh!'

The sheets smelled good when they were done. Annabelle fetched them from the dryer and made up the bed with them. They were rust colored, with green leaves, and soft from use. The nights were colder now. It was time to put her quilt on the bed. Kneeling by the foot of the bed, Annabelle listened for the familiar creak as she opened her chest. The quilt was inside, cedar smelling. She smiled down at it. It was all colors in a double ring pattern. Her grandmother made it for her, to give her a rainbow. She had made one for Jane, too, but it was packed away now and carefully forgotten. She lifted the quilt in both arms and held it for a moment, then spread it out on the bed. She fussed with the corners until they were straight, then stretched out on the bed face down. She breathed in the familiar scents of age and old stains and rubbed her cheek against a mend. They did not comfort her. Jane's quilt had been--red? It was a double star pattern. She remembered one patch was blue with little fir trees, but she couldn't remember the rest.

The quilt grew warm from her body. Annabelle pushed herself away from it when she began to grow sleepy, and left the room. She stood in the hallway, head poised to listen. The dryer made a soft gentle grumble in the background. The rest of the house creaked now and again in the wind and then was quiet. Annabelle found herself at the attic door. She kept it locked, like so many doors. The keys were in the utility room, on a little piece of plywood with nails and neat labels. She fetched the attic key. It was



the old fashioned kind, long and slender, with an ornate handle. The lock was stiff with disuse, but she could turn it with both hands. The draft from the open door made the dust bunnies scurry for cover. She went up slowly, her feet remembering the warped places in the treads. The only light came in patterns from the dirty windows. Cobwebs, dust covered and gently blowing, hung in long tapestries from the rafters. Annabelle fumbled a rag from the old rag-bag and wiped the panes of one window, to let the light in a dim square.

The old trunk was in its place, tucked away and nearly invisible under the eaves. It was brown leather, scuffed and mouse-nibbled and covered in cobwebs. Annabelle made a few swipes at the dust-coated lid with her rag, then tried to raise it. The unwilling hinges shrieked until the lid fetched up against the roof. Not enough room. She had to open it all the way to see inside, so she dragged it out into the light. In its place on the floor was a small rectangular space, quite clean.

Annabelle opened the lid. A little grey spider scuttled out and away. Annabelle peeled back the packing paper like Christmas wrap. Jane's quilt was red, cherry red. Jane had liked colors like that, burgundy and crimson and plum. Colors of boldness she had called them, wrapped in her quilt like armor. Annabelle lifted the quilt out. It smelled musty from disuse, and cold. She spread it out a little to see it, check for damage. It was wrinkled in permanent folds from its long imprisonment and the deep spray of brown-red that cut across the pattern of one star was still indelible. That stain would never come out. She folded it back into the quilt and set it on her lap, then peered into the trunk again. Nestled in the papers were her mother's sheets. The quilt had hidden them all this time; she had thought them lost. She set them on the quilt. They were old now, patterned with age and yellow flowers and a climbing vine.

Her grandma Harvey made these sheets. They were passed down and had been Jane's for a while.

They had played under these sheets on wash day, when they were little. They played houses and tag under the tent of the wet sheet when their mother hung it on the line. They hid under them, invisible until the wind puffed the wet slate smell against them and outlined them. They were found then, and had to run through the lines of wet wash until someone's back was turned. Then they hid again. The warm wet smell in the sun had been like rain.

The sheet had an old smell now, one that was familiar. Annabelle hugged the sheets and quilt to her chest and rose. She kicked the trunk lid with one foot to shut it, then shrugged and left it. Best to let it air. She went down the warped stairs and paused at the door. She left it open, too.

Annabelle stopped in front of the washer. Perhaps the fabric was too delicate to survive a washing. Sighing, she shook the sheet and the quilt until the dust flew and tickled her nose, then dropped it in the washer. She sprinkled on earth-friendly, biodegradable detergent and slammed down the lid. She flipped on the machine, then went into the kitchen to nibble a molasses cookie while she waited. She gazed out the back window at the old clothesline. It stretched from hickory to oak.

When the buzzer sounded, Annabelle dragged everything out into her arms, gritting her teeth against the wet smell, the wash day smell. She went out the back door, through the crackling banks of leaves to the clothesline. She draped the quilt and the sheet over the line like tents. She didn't have clothespins. There was a clothespin bag somewhere. She sat down in the leaves that had blown against the hickory tree.

She had still hidden in the laundry when she was older, old enough to hang the wash herself. She hid under the sheets, pressed the smell against herself, trying to



remember playing tag, trying not to feel her father's breath on her neck, trying not to see his body covering Jane's, his hand stroking her dark hair. She tried to hide but she couldn't, and she always came back to the wet smell of wash day.

The leaves cartwheeled against her. Annabelle looked away to the hills beyond her house, to the deep holly green of the fir trees, dark against the glowing flame of the sugar maples in ripeness. The wind was cold. She was numb and cold on the ground. She went to check on the quilt. It was still damp. The stains from Jane's blood hadn't come out. The yellow flowered sheet was dry, though, and clean from its washing. The fabric was still strong. She leaned to it, gathering it up. It smelled familiar. It was surprisingly warm from the sun. The wind blew and Annabelle raised the sheet and let it billow. She twirled and sheet wrapped around her, warm like her sister's arms once more.