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AWARD WINNERS

Geoffrey McElvey Memorial Award
Tammy Oberhausen

Browning Literary Club Poetry Award
Jennifer Robinson Perillo

Ladies Club Fiction Award
David P. Goguen

ZEPHYRUS Essay Award
Rebecca Carter
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Tammy Oberhausen

AND THE CREEK DON'T RISE

Now and then, when I wake up in the morning especially, I have this terrible feeling that something bad is going to happen. Sometimes, the feeling is faint and far-away, but other times it's so bad I can't even get out of bed. It sounds weird, I know, but I feel like there's a crazed murderer around somewhere who's looking just for me. Mama says it's just because I had a nightmare and I can't remember it. I think it's a premonition.

There's a difference between a fear and a premonition. You don't think about premonitions, see. They just come to you—like a vision. I mean, you can't just be sitting on the couch watching t.v. and decide to have a premonition. But you can sit on the couch and watch t.v. and start thinking about something scary—that's a fear. But I was having a premonition. I wasn't trying to. It just happens whether I like it or not.

That's the way all this got started. I woke up one morning with this "feeling." All day long I felt like I was walking around in a dream. You know, everything was so hazy and slow. I'd look out the window, and I wouldn't even recognize the road in front of my house. It looked different even though it was the same. And I'd look at somebody in my family and think, "Do I know you?" I know it sounds crazy. Anyway, my brother Earl and Portia, his wife, were home again. They're always moving back in with us between jobs.

"Lord o' mercy, Alice Marie! You look puny this morning!" Portia has such a way with words.

Mama stops measuring out corn starch long enough to turn her head and say, "She's been lettin' those crazy dreams bother her again."

"Dreams!" Portia snorts. Earl looks at her and then snickers. He always has to make sure it's okay with Portia before he does anything.

Portia is flabby and lazy. Every time she and Earl move back home, she'll moan and carry on about how times are hard, and then she makes Earl go with her to church and go up to the altar to have the preacher pray for their finances, and she cries and moans and makes a lot of commotion. Then when the church takes up collection to help her and Earl out, she stands there and says how she had faith all along that the Lord would speak to these good people's hearts and tell them to give. But I happen to know that she
keeps a Buddha in her dresser drawer for prosperity. The booklet that came with it says that if you rub Buddha’s belly, you’ll come into some money. Portia says she won $58 at the dog fights in Mr. Dixon the day she got the thing.

You would think that instead of running home to us and crying to the church every time they needed money that Portia might get herself a job. That’s a joke. She’s always complaining about what poor health she’s in, and she’s healthy as a horse. Well, now she’s pregnant (poor baby). She was always large, but now she’s huge, even though she’s only four months along. And she has the biggest, ugliest feet I’ve ever seen in my life. She has these thick, thick ankles—and now they’re even more swollen since she’s pregnant. So that’s her big excuse not to do anything. I’ll bet after this one’s born she’ll have lots more kids so she won’t have to work and everyone will be so proud of her and will feel so sorry for her all the time. She’ll probably have a household of brats that’ll never take baths, and they’ll wipe their noses on their sleeves and drink milk out of the same jug in the refrigerator and have colds all the time. Portia says that she wants to have “a big, loving family to offer to God.”

So Mama said I was having bad dreams, right? And Portia and Earl find that real humorous. Then Portia says, “Well, I had a dream last night you wouldn’t believe!” She looks around at everybody like she expects us to be interested. Then she laughs a little bit into her stubby little fat hand. Nobody even looks back at her, but she starts telling us anyway. It was something about some talent scouts from Nashville hearing her sing at church and being so impressed that they beg her to come sing on the Grand Ole Opry. I think she made it up.

“Is that the kinda dreams you been havin’, Alice Marie? Uh-heel uh-heel!” Earl has the dumbest laugh you ever heard. He takes these little gasps of air so it sounds like he’s choking.

“No, I haven’t been having dreams.”

“Wahl, Mama said.”

“Just nightmares she can’t recall,” Mama says with her back stiff as a board. She puts something in the oven and then bangs it shut like that was it. Nobody said anything more about it.

Sunday morning I woke up and realized I was still alive. Four days in a row was the longest I’d ever gone with this feeling. Usually, it went away in a day or two. I pulled the cover over my head. Agnes, my sister, came in my room making a lot of noise. Agnes is twenty-two, and she tries to act real sexy. She’s been married and divorced twice already.

“Let me borry your panty hose, Alice Marie. Get out of bed, girl. You’ll be late for church.” Agnes hardly ever goes to church. I wonder what’s up. “I don’t want to be late. Rev. Taylor’s younger brother is in from West Virginia. He’s somethin’ else, they say.” So now I know. Agnes already has her hose out of the drawer and on her legs before I can speak.

“How am I gonna get ready when you’re wearing all my clothes?” I yell at her back as she runs out of the room. I don’t feel like fighting with her, so I just go hoseless.

Downstairs, over breakfast—biscuits, gravy, sausage, scrambled eggs, fried eggs, grits, and country ham—Dad is grumbling about farm machinery prices and such, and Mama is dishing out gravy on everybody’s biscuits whether they want any or not. Earl looks sideways at Portia about fifteen times until she finally makes his day and puts his leg under the table. I am sick. He looks like a wet dog with his thin, black hair all slicked down from where he stuck his comb under the faucet. Agnes shakes a bottle of nail polish, and it all comes running out of the loose cap, red as blood all over Mama’s white tablecloth.

I suddenly felt like I was choking or something and I had to run, so I jumped up, knocking my chair over, and ran into the living room and stood there, holding onto the hard, wrinkled vinyl of Dad’s chair and listened to them all talking about me.

There is a vinyl stool at the foot of the brown vinyl chair. An old t.v. that doesn’t work is in the corner of the room. We are the stars of all its shows. Some straight-back chairs, two framed paint-by-number pictures I did as a child—a mill and a train station—a large radio and lamp on a scuffed antique table, some dusty plastic fruit in a glass bowl.

“What’s wrong with that girl?” Dad asks.

“I’m going to tell Rev. Taylor today,” Mama says.

“I’ve heard about these things,” Portia whispers loudly. “People bein’ possessed. It’s in the Bible, you know.”

“I’m callin’ Jeff Harrison to see if he’ll come get me,” Agnes says.

“She ain’t possessed,” Mama says.

“Thought you were wantin’ to go to see the preacher’s brother,” Earl says.

“That don’t mean I have to look like I’m desperate, though.” Agnes walks into the living room. “Do you know Jeff Harrison?”

“Yes.”
“What do you think?”
“About what?”
“About him.”
“He’s your type, not mine.”
“What does that supposed to mean?”
“It means he wouldn’t look at me cross-eyed.” That seemed to please her, so she went in her bedroom and called him.

So after everyone was ready, we piled into the car—Dad behind the wheel, Mama next to him, Earl and Portia all cozy in the backseat. I opened the back door and plopped down next to them, making as much of a disturbance as I could. Portia shifted and grunted, “Uugh!” like I’d sat on her or something, and then she blew. “Pfew!” I crossed my arms and stared out the window.

All my relatives were already at church when we got there. We all sit in one section together, and if anybody who doesn’t come to church much comes in and sits in our area, it’s like a major crisis. Everybody points at them and whispers, “Where’s Don and Lucille gonna sit?” So, anyway, when we got there, they all scooted over in their seats to make room for us. Agnes wasn’t sitting in our family section. She was sitting with Jeff Harrison, in direct eye-shot of Wendell Taylor, our preacher’s brother. He was sitting next to the pulpit, facing the congregation, with his hands folded on the Bible in his lap.

We sang some hymns, but I couldn’t concentrate on the words for my Aunt Martha’s high-pitched squeaking. And my eyes kept going back to Agnes in her tacky little sundress with her bare little shoulder rubbing against Jeff Harrison’s arm and the preacher’s brother staring at her and getting pink around the ears. Even when I turned my eyes in another direction or shut them I’d still see Agnes and Jeff and Wendell Taylor. So I took my finger and made a big X in the air right where Agnes was sitting. But I still couldn’t get Aunt Martha’s voice to go away. It was just getting louder and more off-key by the second.

I had to get away so I started moving to the left in front of Dad and Mama, but she grabbed me and shook her head.

“I’ve gotta go the restroom,” I hissed through my teeth.

“You stay right here.” She had hold of me, and I couldn’t move to the left or the right, so I just kind of stood there in front of her and looked down at my shoes.

After the service was over, Rev. Taylor asked who needed prayer and Mama pulled me up to the front and told him that I needed prayer because I’d been having nightmares. So he took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves and stood over me, all slicked-back and sweaty. He started yelling at the demon nightmares. (Doesn’t the Bible say somewhere that the Holy Spirit is a comforter? Four babies started crying, and I know all the old people were having heart palpitations by the time he got through.) I lifted up my eyes and saw Wendell Taylor looking at me like I was some kind of freak.

Dear Lord, it seems like I come to you only when I need something, but where else can I turn? When I was a child, I went to my father, and he could always make things right. Like the time I let one of our neighbor’s calves out of the pasture to play with it, and it got hit by a car. Dad went to the neighbor’s house and straightened things out, and I didn’t get in too much trouble because I was just a kid that wanted to play with a little calf… It was such a cute calf. It would eat grass out of my hand, licking me with its sticky tongue. I used to go over to our neighbor’s house and sit on the front porch with Mr. and Mrs. Hunt and snap beans. They’d give me a glass jar, and I’d listen to Mr. Hunt tell stories about things he and his brothers did growing up, and I could fill up that jar faster than anybody. Mrs. Hunt would always give me a quarter and say, “You are the fastest I’ve ever seen at snapping beans.” When their grandchildren would come stay with them in the summer, I used to go with them and Agnes down to the creek. Usually, Agnes and I would be hot and dirty and brown from working in the tobacco. So we’d jump in and get cooled off and clean, and the others would get in slowly, shivering with each step, since they didn’t have a creek near their house and they weren’t used to the cold. Except Danny Hunt would jump in like we did because he didn’t want to look like a sissy.

Now, where was I Lord?

“Eighteen years old and already crazy as Aunt Wilma,” Earl was saying, shaking his head.

“She told me last week, now, that we were all out of our minds and that she was going to get away from us all. She says ‘I’m goin’ up north to a big city and get away from this town,’ and I says ‘I’d be scared to go to some big city by myself if I was her,’ and she says ‘I’d be safer up there than I am here around all you people. You’re driving me insane.’ Then she says ‘Well, I might join a commune, then,’” Portia was saying.

“If I ever left here, I’d go to New Orleans,” Agnes said.

“What for?” Portia asked. “What’s there besides night clubs and
"Drinkin'?"
"It's a beautiful place!" Agnes said. And they argued about it for a while.

While all this was going on, I was lying on the bathroom floor with the light off where nobody could see me. I thought, "This is what it will be like when I'm gone." They all sit there in the living room and talk about this and that, and it'll be like I'd never even lived here. I watched them—Portia talked, then Mama talked, then Earl talked, then Portia talked, and it was just like I had never been born, and it really didn't matter because everybody could get along just fine without me.

Anyway, I wasn't really serious when I said I was going to move up north to a big city or join a commune. I just told Portia that for the fun of it. I would like to go away to college, though. My teachers told me I might've gotten a scholarship if I'd tried for it.

"I don't know what's gotten into Alice Marie," Mama whined. "She's acting stranger than I've ever seen. Last night I heard her talking in her sleep, and I went in there, and she was just distraught. Then she woke up while I was standin' there and begged me not to leave, so I sat there on her bed 'til she went back to sleep."

"I have a cousin that joined a commune," Portia said. "He gave them all the money he had and sold his house and car to give them more. Forty-two thousand dollars in all."

I wished I hadn't ever said anything to Portia in my whole life.

At the end of the second week of my premonition, I had a very vivid feeling of what my gruesome end would be. I can't describe it exactly, but it was like my brain exploded, and a white light flashed in my eyes, and a terrible surge of sound assaulted my ears. Then there was a sharp pain in my back and a dulling of my senses and this sickening smell of blood. I felt of my back and when my hand came back around it was red with blood.

I sat up in my bed and screamed and screamed until my voice was hoarse, and I began to realize that people were in the room with me. Mama and Dad were sitting on my bed; Agnes was holding onto my bedpost, and Earl and Portia were standing in the doorway peering in.

"Tell us what you dreamed, Alice Marie," Mama coaxed. I shook my head and covered my eyes. "Not... a... dream," I croaked.

"Yes, Alice Marie. You were asleep."

"No! It was not a dream!"
Dad grabbed my hand. "Tell us what it was then, sugar."
"I'm gonna die! I'm gonna die! I'm—"
"It was a dream, Alice Marie," Mama said.
"No, dammit! I'm telling you—someone's going to kill me! Why won't you listen to me?"

Mama's mouth snapped shut. Dad dropped my hand, stood up, walked to the door, and pushed Earl and Portia, hovering there like vultures, out of his way. I couldn't believe what I had said. Nobody ever cursed in our house, not even Dad. Pretty soon, I was all alone in my room, wondering what was going to happen next and wishing that someone, anyone, even Portia, would come talk to me. Finally, Agnes came in and handed me my bath robe.

"Put this on and go get cleaned up," she said quietly.

I looked toward the bathroom. "I'm not goin' in there by myself," Agnes put her hands firmly on her hips. "And why not?" I sat on my bed, unraveling the designs sewn on my bedspread. Agnes slapped my hand to stop me. "Well?"

I didn't say anything.

"Why won't you go in the bathroom, for goodness' sake?"
"It might—happen—in there," I said under my breath.

I expected her to make some crack about Psycho, but she just walked toward the door, turned around, and said, "Don't ever say I didn't try to help you."

My cousin Harold is taking me. I get into his pickup truck, holding my head high, wearing my newest dress and carrying an ugly straw purse Aunt Nelda gave me for the occasion. Dad wouldn't take me—he is in the house with the door shut and won't even come out to say goodbye. I probably wouldn't speak to him anyway. Mama is standing by the truck surrounded by Earl and Portia, Agnes, Aunt Frannie, Aunt Nelda, Uncle Pete, and Aunt Martha. I look straight ahead and pretend not to see them—all standing there reflected against the window. When Harold starts up the motor, I feel my heart jerk, and I have to turn and look at everyone. I see Portia slap her fat, droopy arm to scare off a bee. She squashes it right there on the spot, and yellow juice runs all over her hand.

I don't say anything to them while they stand there saying goodbye and see you soon, waving uneasily. I try to think, "I am escaping at last," but I'm really thinking, "Don't forget me."

When we get there, Harold pulls out a ten-dollar bill and hands it
to me. "Here, keep this," he says in his slow easy drawl.

I thank him. Once, when I was sixteen, I went out with this real crude hick named Bubba Thomas, and he offered me $20 if I'd "do it." I said, "What do you think I am? A common prostitute?" And he said, "I'm sorry if I insulted you, Alice Marie. Will you do it for free then?" The nerve. So I took the $20. I still have it, too, and I put the ten dollars gave me next to it in my billfold.

Harold spat on the ground and looked up at the sun over the big, brown brick hospital. "Guess we should check you in." He walked ahead of me with my one piece of luggage in his hand.

Inside, a nurse showed me to my room. Harold shuffled along behind me, and, after placing my suitcase on the bed, he cleared his throat and said, without looking at me, "If n' you're ever needin' anythang, why, you know where to call.

I always did like Harold, even though he is kin to me. He's a fine fellow.

I'd been there one week, and was already much better. The "feeling" had gone away. I was ready to go home, or somewhere. In fact, my whole ordeal seemed sort of silly.

Part of my quick recovery, I am sure, was due to the new friend I made. His name was Gary Camp. Gary is a balding 29-year-old who loves to read and has a degree. I was sitting in the TV room watching some program approved by the staff, and Gary walked over and sat down next to me. He said, "What are you afraid of?"

I said, "Excuse me?" and leaned away from him.

He smiled shyly and said, "You've got this frightened look in your eyes."

"Are you a doctor?" I asked.

He laughed and extended his hand. "If only I were. I'm Gary Camp, a patient here like you."

I shook his hand politely. "Alice Marie Wilson."

Gary exhaled sadly. "Perhaps I should change the subject." He had a very nice sad sort of smile. I decided to speak.

"I'm glad to meet you. I haven't had anyone to talk to. Besides the doctors, I mean."

"Well, Alice Marie. You seem to be a very level-headed girl. What are you doing here?"

"My family...thinks I'm crazy because I..." I hesitated to tell him, but then I thought, what the heck—he's crazy, too. "I have premonitions."

"Visions?"

"Yes, sort of."

"I can tell."

"How can you tell?" I asked.

"I...see things too. It's very frightening. But it is a gift many people have." He began to tell me about prophets down through the ages—prophets in the Bible and those since then that have been ridiculed.

"So you think we're prophets?"

"Probably not," he laughed. "They're right, most likely. We're just insane." I laughed with him.

Gary was the first person to ever believe in my premonitions. He accepted them as normal and even admirable. The doctors only pretend to accept what I said. They'd say, "Uh-huh" like you'd talk to a child who's just said he was Superman. I felt like it was useless to talk to them so, after a while, I'd just tell them what they wanted to hear. No, I don't have visions anymore. Yes, I know they were only dreams. I realize that it was just my imagination, doctor, and I want to thank you for helping me see that.

I discovered that this was Gary's third time in the hospital, and he'd been there for ten months, his longest time yet. He felt he'd finally come to grips with the world and was ready to face it. "I'll play the game their way this time," he told me. "No sense bucking the system. If they say black is white, I'll agree and go on my way. So should you, Alice Marie."

So the next time I talked to the doctor, I took Gary's advice and had myself a good laugh. The doctor asked me if I had any great fears, and he started naming some off: water? heights? closed places? open places? nuclear war?

"Yes," I said, nodding and trying not to laugh aloud.

"You're afraid of nuclear war, Alice?"

"Yes."

"Do you think about it often?"

"Yes."

He kept asking me more questions, and I kept telling him more lies, and when the session was over, he felt very proud of himself for solving yet another patient's problem. I told Gary all about it, and we had a big laugh.

"Sometimes," Gary said, "I think we are the only sane ones in this place, including the staff."

Gary is the son of a high-society lady in Memphis. His father died when Gary was very small, and he doesn't like to talk about him much. It is the only thing he doesn't seem to want to tell me about. He says, "I can hardly remember him. What's there to say?"
But he did tell me about something that happened when he was in high school. A group of boys, very rich boys with influence in the community, got a little drunk and decided to go cause some trouble. One thing led to another, and, by the end of that night, two of the boys’ cars were totaled, an old man’s grocery store was practically demolished, one black boy was dead and another had lost an eye and never was exactly right after that. Strings were pulled with the police and all the right people. None of the boys got so much as a slap on the wrist, and two of them ended up with new cars. Gary knew what they’d done—everybody did. But nobody did anything. Gary told his mother that he was going to the press with the story, but she managed to convince him that they already knew, and somebody was paying off somebody else. He’d just be disliked, and she’d be off the social register. So he never said anything.

“That was my first lesson in justice,” he told me. “There isn’t any.”

“Sounds like something that would happen in a small town like where I’m from,” I said. “I didn’t know people could pull strings like that in big cities, too.”

“Welcome to America. It’s the same way all over.”

I find myself lying awake nights and wondering. “Is our age difference too great? What will our children think? Will they think their father is too old like I did? What sort of house would he like to live in—a cabin in the woods, and antebellum mansion, a little cottage with a white picket fence? Would he prefer a housewife or one who works?”

Agnes came to visit me on Friday. Dad and Earl were working in the fields, and she got away before Portia could find out where she was going. She spent nearly an hour telling me about the new guy she’s been dating from the factory. Finally, I just broke in and said, “Listen, Agnes. I want you to meet someone.” We walked down to Gary’s room, and I introduced them. We talked awhile, and then Agnes said she had to get home.

“Well, what do you think of Gary?” I asked her.

“Who?”

“Gary. The guy we’ve been talking to for an hour and a half.”

“Oh,” she said. “He’s nice, in a boring sort of way.”

That’s real funny, you know? A knot on a log would be more interesting than the hunks of meat Agnes dates.

I walk into the room overlooking the courtyard where honeysuckle grows but not much else. It is wonderful to smell. I can hardly walk past it without picking a blossom, pinching the green stem off, and licking the sweet juice that drips out. Shadows are falling across the room, making pretty flickering images of the branches of a tree. Gary is painting a picture of wild ducks on a river. I sit quietly, watching him.

“Where will you go when you leave?” Gary asked suddenly.

“Back home?”

The thought is nearly as depressing as being locked up. “I don’t want to,” I say, “but where else can I go?”

Gary cleans his brush and turns to me. “Where would you most like to be right now?”

“Oh, Hawaii maybe. Or New Zealand. It’s far away. In another hemisphere, even. What about you?”

He smiles and looks off into space. “On a cool green bank of a river, sitting under a willow tree with a book of poetry, feeding the ducks that come paddling by, with the blue sky over my head and nobody else around—except you.”

My heart does a little flip, and my mouth won’t open. I try to swallow, and then I say hoarsely, “Really?”

“Yes, really. Does that surprise you?”

“I guess it does.”

“And I thought you were a prophetess!”

I laugh a little. “When will you be getting out?” I ask him.

“A week from tomorrow.”

I hadn’t realized it would be so soon. I can’t make it here without him, and I tell him so.

“You don’t have to worry about it. The doctors know you’re okay. They’ll be releasing you before long.”

“Yeah, they probably will,” I say.

“I’m going to buy a little house somewhere on Duck River. My mother will give me the money. She doesn’t want me back in Memphis where all her friends can see me. I’ll find out when you’ll be getting out, and I’ll come take you back with me,” he smiles and takes my hand, “God willin’.”

“And the creek don’t rise,” I add, smiling back at him.

Maybe I had seen her before. It’s always hard to say for sure after the fact because you relive it over and over again until all the facts get muddled in your mind and tangled with the thoughts you had later—and it’s unclear and unreal. But I think I’d seen Lisa Hope.
staring at me with hatred in her eyes. I can’t be sure, though.

So—I had just come in from a walk in the courtyard with Gary.
The next day would be his release date, and he was telling me that
his mother had an old acquaintance in the town he might move to
who might give him a job. He’d support me, she said, and I could find
a job there, too, if I wanted. Or I could go to school. There were lots
of possibilities.

Back inside, he placed his hand on my shoulder and smiled. “I’m
going to change. Go ahead and get in line for dinner. I’ll find you.” I
picked up my tray of roast beef and potatoes, carrots, and a roll.

Then, a pain—so piercing and familiar. I held my breath and sank
to the floor, choking and gasping, the smell of warm blood and a
dulling of my senses.

Haven’t I been here before?

They are all around me again. Mama, Earl and Portia, Agnes, the
others, but Dad is there this time, looking older than the last time I’d
seen him, the morning I left for the hospital two months before.
Mama is white and shaken. She extends a cool hand. “How do you
feel?” she asks softly. I don’t answer.

“You won’t be going back, Alice Marie,” Dad says. “I’m gonna
take care of you now. You were right all along.” He begins to cry.

“I told you so,” I whisper.

This is what I am pretending happened as I lie here in the bed of
another hospital. But I did not really get stabbed by Lisa Hope. My
prophecy isn’t fulfilled. I really got food poisoning from the roast
beef.

“We’re going to take care of you now, honey,” Dad says.

“Yes, we are. We love you, and we’ve missed you.” Mama says.

“Where is Gary?” I ask.

“Who’s that?” Mama asks.

“Gary Camp, my friend. Has he been here? What is today?”

“It’s Thursday. You’ve been pretty out of it since Tuesday night,
baby,” Agnes says.

“And we haven’t heard from a Gary Camp,” Mama says.

“Ask someone. A nurse or doctor. Are there any flowers?”

“Yes, there’s some from the Sunday School and from the
Malones and from Harry and Theresa.”

“From Gary?”

“No, Alice Marie,” Agnes says gently. “I’ve been here since
Tuesday, and I haven’t seen Gary. Is he out?”

I nod. A nurse comes in to check on me and asks my family to
leave so I can rest a while. They all pat my arm and rearrange my
flowers and leave.

“Have you seen all my visitors?” I ask the nurse.

“I think so. I’m always here during visiting hours. Your family’s
been very worried, but you’re doing fine now.”

“Have you seen a man—almost bald, about thirty, big brown
eyes?”

“No, I don’t think so. All I’ve seen is your family, hon.”

I am growing sleepy, but I want to find out more. “I’m sure he
came by. He was released this week.” My voice sounds funny, and I
feel groggy from the pill I’d taken. “He’s from Memphis. He
would’ve stopped to see me before he left... I’m going to the river...to
see Gary...”

“That will be nice.”

I smile at her behind half-closed eyelids. I dream I am sitting on
the cool green bench of a river listening to Gary read poetry while I
lean back and watch clouds white as a wedding dress drift between
me and the sky, and I listen to the raspy duck calls.

But it is just a dream. There’s a difference between a dream and a
premonition, you know.
OCTOBER

I plant garlic
when the trees begin to change.
If I wait too long,
the sound of leaves
is like tapping rain.
The earth is cool
as I turn it shovel by shovel.
Bees and butterflies come
to smell the damp crumble
between my fingers.
I remember things I had forgotten
I had forgotten. Pieces
fall like a tiny avalanche.

I find a thumbnail frog
sitting on a mustard leaf,
tiny mustard green.
He hops and hides
in the shadow of a curl of leaf.
I leave the greens to seed.

My shadow over the fresh earth
is broad and solid
like the firmness of garlic bulbs
wrapped in layer
after layer
of delicate paper.

A NOTE

"I went on without you.
But the kitchen is clean.
I hope you’re not depressed."

The glass I pulled out of the rack was dirty
and next and next with crumbs and scum.
Right away I knew he was gone.
All the dishes put away just wrong.

The table pulled an inch askew,
wild flowers set at center,
a chair shoved against my impatience,
metal sink scrubbed to high reflection.
But the dishes -

A woman with a heavy breast,
long braids dampened at the ends,
ignores the crumbs inside my mended cup.
Or one, seven children strong,
who washes dishes in her sleep,
stands with feet apart mastering my sink.

I straighten table and chair, begin
dish by dish. My fingers know
every chip and bump of glaze,
every turn of every handle,
the past life of each
and its broken fellows.
QUESTIONS THAT FALL

Brilliant yellow maple tree
against a blue sky.
Burning bush bright red
but no pictures this year

Birthday
Flowers keep coming
until we’re overwhelmed.
No one knows what else to bring her -
she is dying.
The biggest bunch - the collection of
rust, gold, and maroon mums -
sit wilted in their copper vase.
"oh Mom. We forgot the water."
We hug until we cry.

Wedding Day
That damned jam cake
Frank’s wedding comes and goes -
the happiness is bittersweet.

Election Day
An absentee ballot from I.C.U.
We’re kindly allotted
three visits a day.
Fifteen minutes.
Each.

Thanksgiving Day
Hot turkey and two place settings.
We wait in silence.

They called us at Jerry’s, Meg and me.
Cold whole-wheat toast.
Untouched bacon.
Coffee with cream.
They called us there.
They said, "She’s gone."
But they didn’t say where.

Mollie Moran

SPRING DISAPPEARED

Spring disappeared
overnight.
We woke to wind,
cold and bitter through the window,
and a heavy gray sky.

Later, I woke slowly
to Vivaldi
and saw the Sunday paper strewn
across the room.
And you.
I looked into your eyes and thought I saw you.
We shared a blanket, touching
to stay warm.

I fed you oranges and
we drank our coffee
from one cup.

The rightness scared me then;
now it scares you.

I read Kate Chopin
while you slept.
But this was my awakening.
David P. Goguen

THE FIRES OF GEHENNA
(As Seen from the Shore)

Katama is a rugged beach on the southwest corner of Martha’s Vineyard. The barnacle-covered rocks that line its shores are constantly pounded by the restless waters that pass through the Muskeget Channel. People as far away as Edgartown gather at Katama after a storm to sift through the mounds of seaweed and splintered wood that washes up on the shore. Sometimes, they find the remains of a shipwreck—a battered sea chest or a greasy, tattered rain cap. Other times, they may find a body. But on the night of January 16, 1846, a man and woman taking a stroll on the road above Katama noticed a peculiar light flickering on the foggy horizon. The mysterious glow did not have the power of a signal lantern. Nor did it look like the oil torches of a whaling ship. Instead, the faint glimmer moved eastward until it slowly faded into the darkness like a spark climbing into the sky from a chimney. The man and woman looked at each other and shrugged: "Who can explain the oddities of the sea?"

On a shoal sixteen miles southwest of Monomoy Island in Nantucket Sound, the whaling ship *Harvest* ran aground and was devoured by the powerful arms of the sea. A small whaleboat escaped from the wreckage and was thrown mercilessly from wave to wave.

At the bow of the boat, the word "Gehenna"—the Latin word for Hell—was painted on both sides. It was christened with that name in Brant Point Shipyard by an old salt named O’Bryan. The Irishman was the sole survivor of a shipwreck many years before and spent several days drifting alone at sea in a similar whaleboat. After the ordeal, the old man gave up whaling.

Inside the Gehenna were five survivors. The rest of the crew was lost. When the ship broke up, the sounds of their screams could not be heard over the roar of the waves. But what haunted the survivors more than the loss of their shipmates was the wintry air—icy gales that gnawed at their bodies and spirits.

"How far do you think we are from Edgartown?" asked Simmons.

"We’ve been heading west ever since the storm quit," said Hawley, straightening his woolen cap over his oily, gray hair. "I figure we ought to be driftin’ into Chappaquiddick or Oaks Bluffs in a
couple o’ days.”

At the bow of the boat, Hines was curled up and unconscious. Massy and Tabor were huddled together in the middle.

“It was the stillborn, I tell ya,” Massey droned. “It was that dead calf that brought this on…”

Hawley shook his head from side to side. There was an old superstition among whaling men that an unborn whale found in a harpooned cow would bring bad luck. Just two days before the Harvest ran aground, it was Massy who shot the pregnant whale.

“We ’ad the greasy luck before the storm,” Hawley said, “but I’ll be damned if we didn’t lose every bit o’ blubber in the hold.”

“Is that why we ran aground?” asked Simmons. “Hines said we overloaded the hold.”

“I never seen the Harvest that low to the water,” Hawley acknowledged.

“It’s those sperm whales,” Massey said, “them big ones are a damned lot! We never went out that far—greed!”

Tabor was unconscious on his side and gently rocking with the boat. The collar of his coat was pulled up close to his ears. It was his first whaling trip. Just one year before, his father’s body had washed ashore near Great Point in Nantucket. He was the oldest child in the family, and the financial burden rested on his shoulders.

At night fell, a large wave slammed into the bow of the boat and soaked the men. The air grew colder and the wind beat on their leathery faces.

“I’d give my soul for some lobsauce,” Simmons said. The others moaned in agreement. “Yessir, a bit o’ lobsauce and a warm bed in Edgartown…”

At the bow of the boat, Hines went into convulsions. When the spasms stopped, he rolled onto his stomach and lay motionless. Massey crawled to the front and shook him.

Hines did not move.

With his powerful hands, Massey grabbed the motionless figure by the collar and looked into his face; it was a bluish-white color and swollen. The dead man’s eyes were yellowed and bloodshot. A gold pin had drained from the corners and dried on his cheeks. Massey grunted.

“It was the stillborn, I tell ya,” the harpooner said, while trying to pull the dead man’s coat off.

“Leave ‘im be,” Simmons growled from the stern. “It ain’t right to take from the dead…”

“It ain’t gonna do no harm,” Massey shot back. “I’m gonna give it to the kid.” He nodded toward Tabor, who was now unconscious. After he wrestled the coat off Hines, the harpooner laid it over the boy and crawled back to the bow to heave the frail body overboard.

Suddenly, a gust of wind rifled across the water and shook the boat violently.

The survivors shuddered.

Hawley felt sluggish. His mind ached and the damp clothes that clung to his body seemed to absorb every bit of warmth that radiated from him. It was not the first time that he was at the mercy of the sea. Back in the summer of 1838, he was the headsmen on a whaling boat that harpooned a right whale and went on a Nantucket sleigh ride for two days. The mother ship tried to follow the whaleboat, but the injured bull pulled the small craft out of sight. Three days later, they were rescued by a ship out of New Bedford. After the ordeal, Hawley vowed to give up whaling, but he knew no other profession. Within a week, he was back on board the Harvest.

“It’s God’s will,” Hawley thought, as he tilted his head back and stared into the hazy blackness. He began to think about a woman he once knew; her name was Anne. He could still remember the glint in her olive-colored eyes as he slung his seabeag over his shoulder and headed toward the docks. “We’ll be married, lass,” he had reassured her, “as soon as I come back, we’ll be joined…”

Now Hawley twitched nervously. He remembered how she was gone when he had returned. The villagers said a large wave surprised her and swept her off her feet one night while she was taking a walk on the beach.

Hawley thought about Anne’s warm smile. He imagined her strolling on the beach in the darkness, looking out at the restless ocean. With a soft moan, Hawley stared into the blackness and wondered if she was looking for him that night.

Shortly after Hawley fell asleep, he was awakened by a scream. “GOD TAKE ME!” Simmons shouted, while crawling past Massey and trying to pull himself over the side of the boat. The harpooner grabbed him and pulled him back.

“LET ME GO!” Simmons cried. “I’VE JINXED EVERYONE!”

“He’s gone crazy,” Massey said, mustering his strength to hold Simmons down. The harpooner held him until he stopped fighting. Hawley looked at Simmons’s bluish-white face. He had heard stories about him. Before Simmons had joined the crew of the Harvest, he worked on another whaling ship called The Blue Lady.
At the bow of the ship there was a wooden figurehead of an
elegantly-dressed woman. One night, after The Blue Lady sailed
into Edgartown, Simmons was seduced and robbed by a woman
who bore a striking resemblance to the wooden figurehead. The
next day, Simmons boarded The Blue Lady with an axe and began
to chop at the likeness. He was restrained by his shipmates and told
never to return. Several days later, The Blue Lady was stocked with
supplies and returned to sea.

It never returned.

The widows of The Blue Lady’s crew blamed Simmons for the
ship’s ill fate. They believed the wooden figurehead brought the
vessel its good luck. When Simmons attacked it with the axe, he
jinxed the crew.

Now, Simmons was on his back staring blankly at the sky. The air
was getting colder. He watched as Massey flipped his collar up and
rested his head on the gunwale to go asleep. When the harpooner’s
eyes were shut, Simmons gathered his strength and tried to pull
himself over the side of the boat.

As he slept, Massey dreamt of the gardens in back of Captain
Moyer’s mansion in Vineyard Haven. He was with a woman—a
sturdily built lady with sandy-colored hair rolled tightly in a bun at
the top of her head. They were surrounded by an ash-colored fog at
dusk. Together, they stared downward at a small square of freshly
dug earth. There was no marker on the grave. The woman’s hand
was clasped tightly in Massey’s powerful fist. It had been a boy, but
he was born dead.

Massey winced in pain when a voice in his head whispered the
name they were to baptize him with—Nathaniel. It was Massey’s
father’s name. “I never would’ve let him go to sea,” Massey
thought, “I never would’ve let him wrestle with Hell…”

In the early hours of the morning, the Gehenna’s creaking
timbers woke Hawley. Next to him, Simmons was hanging over the
side of the boat; his body was swaying with the current.

Tabor was dead. Hawley crawled over to the boy and covered his
face with Hines’ coat. Massey stirred at the bow.

“I think I see the Cape Poge Light,” Hawley said, trying to bolster
the harpooner’s hopes.

“It’s over,” Massey muttered, “there is no light out there…”

“If we only had a signal lantern,” Hawley said, “we could signal a
ship or the land.”

“There is no boat or land anymore,” Massey said. “We’ll die in
this damned sea—it’s God’s will.”

Hawley reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, rectangular
object. He propped himself up against the stern and looked at
Massey.

“I think this flint is dry enough to use…”

Massey chuckled and moaned. “What are you gonna burn?”

“We can take the coat off the boy and use it as a torch—a light!”

Massey shook his head and pointed to the boy. “It soaked up all
the water at the bottom of the boat, it’ll never burn.”

Hawley reached over and felt Simmons’ coat and pants. They too,
were moist from the ocean water.

“There must be something we can burn as a signal,” Hawley
said. “To Hell with the signal, no one is gonna see it!” Massey said,
his voice getting weaker. “Just burn the damn boat! At least we’d
die warm—like in a bed in Edgartown!”

“We could drift in there tomorrow,” Hawley said.

“We could also be east of Siasconset…”

“We can’t be that far out to sea.” Hawley said. “The winds were
from the northwest when we ran aground.”

Massey began to cough. His massive chest heaved violently.
There was a trace of blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.
Hawley could see the bluish-white color in his face.

“BURN IT!” Massey groaned, his eyes blazing with terror. “I
don’t want to die in warmth…for the love of God!”

Hawley reached into his coat and pulled out a pocket knife. His
swollen, blue hands fumbled with it until the blade was out. He
began to shave wood off the gunwale. His gnarled fingers worked
slowly as he gathered the shavings into a small pile in his lap.
When he had enough kindling, he banged the flint against his belt
buckle. The sparks flew wildly, but the shavings would not burn.
Massey was quiet. His big chest did not rise or fall. He watched
Hawley work in vain to ignite the shavings. “The stillborn…” he
gasped, “the stillborn…”

After several attempts, the shavings finally caught fire. Hawley
cupped his hands around the pile, brought it up to his face and
gently blew it. A small flame appeared. He held the burning
shavings under a dry section of the gunwale.

The flame sputtered. Then, slowly, the old timbers began to burn.
The flame became stronger as it began to consume the wood.
Soon, healthy flames engulfed the dry sections of the top of the
boat. Hawley crawled to the bow and tugged on Massey’s collar.
The harpooner was dead.
Sighing, Hawley propped himself up against the side of the boat. The heat from the fire felt good against his face, but he knew it would not last. His body was numb, now, and he could not move.

At the stern, Simmons' body was still hanging against the side of the boat. The heat made steam rise from his damp clothes. After a while, the fire-weakened timbers gave way under the weight of his body. Water seeped in slowly and the boat began to sink.

Hawley listened. The sound of the waves hitting the shore was clear now. He could hear them through the hissing of the fire as the flames met the ocean-soaked wood. The flames moved desperately in his direction.

As the arm of his coat caught fire, Hawley tilted his head back and watched as the sparks from the dying fire spiralled upward. But the sparks did not completely penetrate the blackness. Instead, they rose only as far as the grayish night haze before their energy was gone.

The shores of Katama were crowded on January 18, 1846. A violent storm came during the night and large waves covered the beach with debris.

The pickings were good that day. When night came, the people of Edgartown lumbered back to their houses with old seabags filled with junk.

At the end of the line was a man and a woman. As they started to disappear behind a snow-covered sand dune, the man stopped to look back over the beach and sea. He noticed the silhouette of an old man hunched over a pile of unwanted wreckage.

"Who's that?" he asked.

The woman stopped and turned toward the ocean. She squinted at the mysterious silhouette.

"It looks like Molly O'Bryan's father," she said. "He's visiting from Nantucket—works at Brant Point shipyard."

"Well, I hope he can find his way back in the dark," the man said.

The woman laughed. "He's an old seadog; he can find his way."

The man shrugged his shoulders and put his arm around the woman. Together, they disappeared behind the dune.

Back on the beach, the old man twisted a piece of charred timber out of the wreckage. He turned toward the ocean and looked out at the waves swelling in the distance. Sighing, he looked back at the burnt wood and fondled it as it were one of his own children.
desperately seeking pavement.
Near leafless trees
I feel the shadow of the swing
and hear the “swoosh”
before bark flies
and inner wood is exposed.
I see his form
etched in clouds that
brought rain when he left,
drifting away and uncovering
blue pallets.
And I remember his face
showing no emotion,
when through a thick husk
he felt—and knew—
that some ears
must be left to battle winter.

David P. Goguen

IMMIGRANTS
I see their
silhouettes above
through frosted glass
designed to diffuse
light for my eyes.
What made them think
this was the land
of opportunity?
They snuck in like
Mexicans in boxcars
awed by the light—
prisoners
who found my wastebasket
smelling like pine-scented
ammonia. They starved
while food crumbs
were sucked into
my Hoover.

I heard them
buzzing at night—
jets trying to fly home
through my window forcefield.
I turned on their dream
and watched them
slam headfirst into the light
like boxers...

They came to
final rest in my lightshade—
hollow bodies
under a false sun.
Their shadows haunt
like forms on Hiroshima walls.

Irishmen...

Blacks...

Chicanos...

In their corner
a new boxer waits—
America likes a fighter.
IN THE EVENING

Out here in the left-over heat of the day
I seem to hear more than I really do.
My thoughts, jammed like rainwashed leaves,
or rolled up like a Sunday paper,
now yesterday's news
lying aloof in the corner of an unswept porch.

Last Sunday:
lunch in Reservoir Hill Park—
chicken, fried, and Buffalo Wings;
playing stick-tease with my dog;
& me, watching you not saying
your mind and bothered
it didn't matter to you
I needed conversation...

Every evening sounds alike on the patio:
tree-frog cries and cicadas identical
to the pulse and zing of an earache;
car brakes like phone rings.

Gifted and magical,
I almost hear through the walls
the water waving in my semi-motionless bed;
it barely visible steam is subtle and, rising,
it roams the room
like this left-over ghost of Sunday,
looking for a place to condense.

David P. Goguen

DOWNWIND

It approached
ravaging brush
surefooted,
passing arm's length
with budding antlers
fearing mistake
and moving on.
It danced
where town feet
step uncertain,
swallowed
by valley green—
its forest perfume
lingering,
like an Indian legend.

LaNita Kirby
MOMENTS THAT HELP ME BREATHE

There is a plane overhead, a turquoise light burning its smooth, non-stop path to Phoenix, changing the first autumn constellations because it moves like a star.

I only woke up to get a drink from the patio faucet. The water always comes out coolest - there, but now I find I'm not really thirsty.

Pegasus is losing a feather, and I'm wide awake to catch it.

Rebecca Carter

LOVE LETTER TO A CITY

I love Lima. Tell me that it's polluted, disorganized, and dirty, and I can't disagree. But for all her wrinkles, the old lady has a certain mystique—a charm found nowhere else. Founded by the Spanish conquistador, Fransisco Pizarro, on January the sixth of 1553, the city acquired the name of "The City of Kings" because of the Catholic holiday celebrating the arrival of the Three Wise Men at Bethlehem. Lima became known as the jewel of the Spanish crown—a combination of New York, Paris, and Las Vegas. In those days, Peru was synonymous with riches and wealth. People would exclaim, "Why, it's worth a Peru!" to express an object's great value.

The city is wrapped around a curve of coast. At night it shines like a collar of diamonds around the throat of the sea. Following the advice of some supposedly friendly Indians, Pizarro chose this site for his capital. Peruvian wits dismiss this as a most cleverly wrought piece of revenge. Due to an Antarctic Ocean current and the Andes Mountains, it never rains in Lima. The only source of water flows down from the Andes in the form of the Rimac River. Summers are brilliantly bright and tempered with ocean breezes, while winters are gray and exceedingly damp. Though the mercury never even approaches freezing, the bone-penetrating moisture makes it seem much colder in the concrete houses that have no heat.

With a population of over eight million, one in every five Peruvians lives in the capital city. The expression, "Lima is Peru" is all too true and almost any matter of importance means a trip to Lima. Everyone has some family or friend in Lima to stay with when he comes, and everyone wants to be from Lima. Bump into a Peruvian in Paris or Tokyo and in reply to the question of his hometown, the answer will be "Lima"—even when lisped through a tell-tale provincial accent. Despite efforts to stem the tide, Lima's population swells daily—more people to share less space, water, and air. The problem is not unique to Peru, but common in all the poorer countries where the provinces offer less employment, resources, and, at times, little safety. Slums, euphemistically referred to as "new towns," rise up on the less desirable hillsides.
surrounding Lima like sores on a leper's skin. Their residents now outnumber the city proper. During the day they pour down like an invading army to sell in the markets and street corners, work at any menial jobs, pick pockets, beg, or look for the scarce jobs offered in sweatshops and factories. At night they leave and a new shift of flower and candy vendors, beggars, and thieves move in to take their places.

The outlook for a newly arrived Indian is bleak. Often he doesn't even speak Spanish, but Quechua or Aymara. Accustomed to a life of hard work, he expects to work, but there's not much demand for llama herders or farmers in a metropolitan city. Women seem to be able to adapt better than men. Young girls can become maids with room, board, and a little spending money. They often finish high school at night and, if they can escape the snare of pregnancy long enough, they can integrate themselves into the mainstream and marry someone of their class. Properly used, becoming a maid is the way up the ladder for an Indian girl—alternatives are few, grim, and usually a dead end into poverty. If a young man can master a trade, there's a pretty good demand for craftspeople, but without an education, opportunities are limited.

There are cities within the city of Lima; they range from the aging, to the solidly middle-class, to the well-off, to the vulgarly rich. Magdalena Nueva is one of the declining areas. Zoning laws are unknown and the market has grown like a cancer entangling once elegant homes with traffic, noise, and the stench of garbage. In the alleyways between the huge homes that have been subdivided into apartments again and again, are the single rooms where whole families often live. Probably the best way to distinguish middle-class homes and those of the well-off is the absence or presence of a garage and the size and splendor of the tiny garden out front. To the American eye the cities of Peru resemble vast condominiums—row after row of dwellings shoved wall to wall. The lower middle-class ones are like shoe boxes with a waist or shoulder-high fence outside and few feet of walkway to the front door. The space between is supposed to be a garden, but it is usually dirt. As the owners become more affluent, the fence will either grow into a wall admitting a front door with a buzzer, or disappear altogether to show off a manicured yard of perfect grass fringed with the omnipresent geraniums that thrive in Lima. These houses are not all the same like their counterparts in America.

Whether the architecture is a copy of the colonial style with a one story Baroque facade around the front door or contemporary with round windows, all windows will be securely decorated with ironwork. The design and style will vary greatly, but its reason for being will never take second place to artistic considerations. The metal cobwebs are to keep out thieves—the homeowners' greatest fear after earthquakes. The really rich people are tucked away in exclusive suburbs on the outside of the city where there is room for the tennis court, the swimming pool, and an eight-car garage.

Usually the more money a family has, the more "Americanized" their customs and habits—at least superficially. This is true until the highest rungs of the social ladder are reached, and there the watchword is "European." The fashionable part of the city is filled with more boutiques and less of the huge department stores. Though there are several large, successful chains, they don't emit the exclusivity of a more intimate boutique. American influence and the expensive dollar make the sprinkling of Pizza Huts, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and McDonalds anything but blue collar strongholds. American influence is also seen in fashion. Fashion arrives in Lima before it does in New York due to the reversed seasons. It would be impossible to distinguish a Peruvian teenager from his North American counterpart, munching on an order of fries. Young affluent strut in the latest stuff, preferring costly name brand clothing with the proper embroidered tag or designer signature. Imitations flood the market since demand greatly exceeds the expensive supply; imported goods are priced according to the dollar plus a one hundred percent tax.

But the epitome of Lima and Peruvian society is downtown Lima—El Centro. It's an assault on the senses. Elegant, wealthy men cross the streets beside short Indian women who bob along like exotic birds under their brilliant burdens of skirts, hats, and the omnipresent babies carried on their backs. In front of a four-hundred year-old cathedral the traffic is bumper to bumper, horns honking, exhausts spewing out pollution. Tiny bakeries tucked into the space of a living room have ceiling-to-floor glass cases stuffed with aromatic breads and intricate pastries of every conceivable size and shape. From other stores alpaca furs spill out in shades of brown and beige like giant cats sunning themselves; from afar their softness impels you to reach out and caress them as you pass by. Every fifteen feet a street vendor passes, chanting in rhythm
his or her wares. Together with the traffic they form the Greek chorus against which the major characters play. A man selling sweaters and mittens has swallowed up by his merchandise, and all you can see at first is a shuffling mound of bright woolens. Tracing his voice, you find his brown face wreathed by leg warmers. A boy slaps together an armload of metal coat hangers in time to his call. In his other hand he clicks a fistful of buttons on men’s belts that hang down like snakes. Women are stationed beside gigantic baskets of fruit and homemade pastries.

Outside the churches are the beggars, the lottery salesman, and the vendors of religious objects who sell plastic rosary beads, saints, prayer cards, and “miracles.” Miracles are little pieces of tin hammered into the shape of ornate hearts. They were once silver or gold, but those were other days. Anytime someone wants to express his gratitude for a miracle, an answered prayer, or a resolution to a problem, he buys a miracle and hangs it in the church as a thank-you note to God or to a saint. The old churches have special walls covered with them—cluttered like an old maid’s jewel box beginning with gold and silver at the top and descending into tin within reach. Some silver miracles are more specific and emblematic of the childlike faith—both beautiful and primitive of the buyers. There are silver eyes, hearts, feet, even little cows and sheep.

One whole street is dedicated to the silversmiths and jewelers, their windows reflecting ancient splendor now only a memory to both the Indians and their conquerors. Here silver means sterling, and gold by law is at the least eighteen carats. The jewelers’ cases display earrings measuring their length in inches. They look like lace dipped in gold or silver thread crocheted into tiny antimacassars. You may choose to wear the ancient god of an unknown people at your neck or an abstract piece straight from its European designer. The tiny price tags seldom reveal price; they tally the weight of each piece and from them the savvy buyer can calculate a rough estimate based on that day’s price of the precious metal. The silversmiths display platters of astonishing size and tea sets all hammered from pure silver. Furious roosters frozen in a gesture of their deadly fight are reflected in the silver-framed mirrors beneath them.

Among the skyscrapers and modern concoctions of square and rectangle in concrete and glass hang the balconies. The old colonial buildings, or their reproductions, boast intricately carved boxes suspended from their sides. They are made of dark wood with rectangular, long-latticed windows that can be propped open at the bottom. Later creations are more simple and full of clear glass windows that allow their occupants to be seen. There are even a few Art Nouveau and avant garde creations that grow out of the sides of buildings adorned with stony vines and crowned with women’s faces. But the most intriguing and lovely are the colonial balconies; in my mind’s eye their shadowed interiors are never empty, but always the gilded cage of a dark Lumenian beauty whose silhouette ends in a slender hand holding a red rose—a message of love to be tossed to one certain passerby.

Over the centuries the street life of Lima has changed, but Lima’s life has always been in its streets. In colonial days one never needed a watch for each vendor had his or her appointed hour. If it was a man selling firewood who just passed by, then it must be around seven in the morning. Carriages and horses were common, but most people traveled on foot. Proper ladies of Lima could go about unescorted by day, but their identity was always protected by a black shawl, becoming a veil exposing only an eye to public inspection. While this may seem restrictive, at the same time it allowed a great deal of freedom, for custom prohibited anyone from pulling back the cloth to reveal the face of the lady. Women could come and go as they pleased travelling incognito. At night no woman wore a veil when husbands and father, no doubt, rebelled against its wonderful potential for mischief.

Saints and sinners roamed the street and Lima had plenty of both. Outwardly rigidly religious, Lima was the only place outside of Spain where the Spanish Inquisition sacrificed sinners to save their souls. But the city was drunk with power and easy wealth, the shine and sound of gold and silver could drown out the tiny bells rung during the Mass. Because of, or in spite of, this powerful decadence, Lima produced more saints and blessed men per square mile than the slums do soccer players today.

There was Saint Rose! who became the patron saint for the Americas and the Philippines. Saint Rose! was born into a well-to-do family of Lima who refused to honor her wishes to become a nun. When they presented Rose! with her future husband, she frightened him by cutting off her hair and scratching her face with
rose thorns. After that Rose was allowed to spend her days as a Dominican nun helping the poor. She built a tiny adobe house scarcely bigger than a closet to live in. It is still preserved at her shrine surrounded by a rose garden in downtown.

She was excellent friends with Saint Martin of Porres, the first mulatto saint. Saint Martin was never more than a lowly brother and limited himself to the most humble tasks but these he turned into miracles. After a while he performed so many miracles that the Bishop found it disrupting and forbade him to perform any more. Faithful Martin obeyed until one day while he passed on the street, a worker started to fall from a high scaffolding. Instantly, Martin put up his hand and stopped the man in midair. In the next moment he remembered his promise to the Bishop, so he called out to the man telling him to stay where he was and Martin ran off to get the Bishop’s permission to perform just one more miracle.

Perhaps the key to Lima is based on its contrasts, the bright woolen skirt alongside the denim miniskirt, the Mercedes Benz being watched by a ragged boy while its owners shop, the Baroque cathedrals full of dust and candle drippings. Other places are mixtures of opposites—ancient and modern, saints and sinners—but I know no other city where they melt and clash as beautifully as in the City of Kings where it never rains.

STANDING AT THE WINDOW

Waiting for the water on the stove to boil,
I think of how soon it will be
until cooking for one will be my specialty again.
This one’s for the girl sitting down there in the grass.

I’ve seen you once before
as I passed by in the car.
Yours is a part of the hollow face
of all people
on all trains.
But I was looking and you knew, Strong Face.

And now I see you,
thinking that no one is watching,
that no one looks out windows anymore.
Thoughtful people take the grass
strand by strand,
gleaning green curls
with a thumbnail’s precision.
As the shredded tufts pile up beside you,
The grass lacks only to be red
to be your hair in your hands.
Terri Pullen

OCTOBER IN TRANSITION

There’s a hollow smell
in the air,
the culled-out
scent of smoldering.

Somewhere in the distance,
summer is heaped up and burned.

And only the ducks seem certain
how they’ll make it
through the change of seasons.
And even though
the sun sucked up their water,

They swim and circle
in what is left,
etching trails
that widen until filled.

And when autumn surrenders
except for the brittle sound
of the deep brown leaves
of the red oak in the treeline,
And the house I live in
will be a warm lie,

The ducks will walk the frozen water
and know its difference from a pace.

In the dusk of autumn chill,
they may as well be swans.

Daniel MacVeigh

SITTING ON A GUARD RAIL
AT DUSK IN CIMARRON CANYON

Not without light
but with darkness
that comes out
from under trees.

The river
fills the canyon with sound—not quite loud
enough to cover
the roar
of passing semi’s.

Late, late at night
I imagine
the canyon breathes
better without me.

John Broyles

STOLEN SWIMS AT FOUR A.M.

We drop below the suspicions
of neighborhood dogs
and mouthfuls of murky pearls
rise glowing to our ceiling

The silence, embryonic.
Imagine tectonic plates grinding
imagine a quiet so deep
you have to hold your breath.
Cristopher Bratton

CLUMSY

The mammoth stumbles
breaks both front legs.

Like a burial mound
he sits. The freeze
numbs his pain.
He eats buttercups.

A common pattern
where mammoths die
these broken bones.
Some things were not
meant to be.

Now his skeleton
decorates a museum.
Limbs mended with coat hangers
an old mortician's trick.

The children file by
to pay their respects.
They mistake him
for an elephant
and their teachers
correct them.

It's hard for them
to imagine the skin and fur
much less the eyes
as they were.

No one sees
the horrible fissures
where his legs
folded up under his heavy body.
They have been dusted over.

At night
the janitor
mopping up
calls him "johnson"
and composes a whistle
just for him.
Something almost silent
like calling
for a good dog.
HENRIETTA’S NEW SHOES

Hank Joines’s troubles with his wife Henrietta began the minute old Fernie Holloway decided he was gonna have some fun at the expense of his new neighbors. You see, old Fernie was what you could call the town liar.

Now anybody that had been living in the mining community for very long knew of Fernie’s tendency towards lying, but young Henrietta was a relative newcomer who had moved to Branch Creek from nearby Clayton when she married Hank back in the summer.

One evening, about three months after the newlyweds got settled into their house across the road from the Holloways, old Fernie happened to see Henrietta out in her back yard feeding the chickens, and he decided that the time had come to put a little excitement into the young couple’s marriage.

Fernie was just getting off work down at the mines and knew that Hank was still down at the company store waiting for word on the next day’s run. He also knew from talking with his wife that Henrietta had developed quite a reputation amongst the women-folk for being a jealous woman, and he wanted to see just how much of a ruckus he could raise by telling a tale on Hank. The way he figured, it would make for an interesting evening.

So he moseyed on up to the chicken-wire fence, smiled that toothless smile of his and said, “Ev’nin’ Missus Joines. A happy birthday to ye.”

Young Henrietta turned from the chickens, smiling that smile shared by all newly married women who are still enjoying the thrill of honeymoon. “Why, Fernie,” she said, “Whatever give ye the idea that it was my birthday? It ain’t til October.”

Fernie shifted his face sudden-like, so that it took on a look of utter surprise, pulled in a deep breath and began, “Well, I just assumed it were yer birthday. I seen Hank down at the company store a buyin’ a pair o’ shoes, women’s shoes, and I just figured he was a buyin’ a present fer yer birthday.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, excited by the thought of Hank bringing home a surprise. “I can’t imagine why Hank’d be buyin’ me a surprise. Why I . . .” Her voice stopped, for the thought had just entered her mind that Hank was buyin’ the shoes because he was pleased with her lovelakin’, and for a slight moment her smile widened, then she began to blush and dropped her head, embarrassed at the thought.

Fernie seized the opportunity offered by her downward glance. “My Gawd!” he cried, “Yer husband ain’t home yet! My Gawd! I done went and spilt yer surpris!” He then clamped his hands over his mouth as though he were trying hard to push back in what he had already let out.

Henrietta raised her head to find Fernie standing there flushed, shoulders drooping, and head bowed hang-dog like, sad and moaning, just what he wanted her to see. What she did not see was that he had fixed his eyes upon the toe of his left shoe because he was afraid that he would give himself away if he looked up.

She reached across the fence and placed her hand on the liar’s shoulder. “Aw, that’s all right, Fernie,” she said, smiling again. “I’ll just pretend I don’t know about them shoes when Hank gits home.”

“Naw, naw. It ain’t all right, Missus Joines,” Fernie mumbled, still looking at his foot. It began drawing one small circle after another in the dirt just outside the chicken-wire fence. “It just won’t be the same.” He took another deep breath and commenced moaning loudly.

“Don’t worry, Fernie,” she said, patting him softly on the shoulder. “Hank’ll never know ye tol’ me a promise.”

Fernie raised his head carefully, keeping one eye still shut, the other cocked half open. “Well,” he said, “Ok. If ye say so, Missus Joines. But I tell ye, yer sure gonna be proud of ’em. They’re the purdiest pair o’ women’s shoes I ever seen. In fact, I thought so much of ’em that I was gonna git my wife a pair, but yer husband done bought the last pair they had. Them sure were purdy though. But I reckon ye’ll be see in’ that fer yerself soon ’nuff.” He slowly opened both eyes and began to grin. “Hank should be comin’ along any minute now. I saw him leave. I saw him goin’ up over the hill from the comp’ny store, and I just figured he was headin’ home.”

Now, it wasn’t any accident that Fernie mentioned the fact that he had seen Hank disappearing up over the hill because Sadie Lou Morgan lived up on that hill, and Sadie Lou fit into the liar’s over-all scheme of things, for you see, Sadie Lou was quite a popular woman with the miners.

Though she had never been married, Sadie Lou was the mother of three or four young ‘uns whose daddies she wouldn’t or couldn’t name. Consequently, she was the object of lots of strong talk, especially amongst the womenfolk, and Fernie reckoned that
Henrietta would know all about her because, the way he figured, Henrietta was a woman, and all women gossiped about things they didn't know about but wished they did.

Fernie wasn't disappointed. He watched as Henrietta's gaze shifted to the direction of the hill. Her brow lowered, and her smile gave way to a frown. He figured it was time to head home.

He bid her good-bye and hurried across the road to his front porch where he settled himself down in his big oak rocker, pulled out his pouch of tobacco and roll of cigarette papers and rolled his first smoke of the day. Across the road, Henrietta stood, still staring in the direction of the hill. Half-way through the cigarette she took up watch by the front gate. It was clear from her stance that she intended to meet Hank when he came down the road, no matter how long it took.

Now, it just so happened that young Hank had decided to take the short-cut across the hill because he was in a hurry to get home to Henrietta. He considered his wife to be the prettiest woman in camp and felt awful lucky to have married her. Indeed, he had never thought that marriage could be so good.

Such were his thoughts when, half-way down the slope, he saw Henrietta standing by the gate watching him descend. He raised his arms and began to wave and shout. Henrietta just stood there, arms crossed, unmoving like a cigar store Indian, and Hank sensed that something must have set her off.

His steps grew shorter and slower, and he began to re-play the day's events in his mind in an effort to discover something he might have said or done. Then he went back to the day before, and the day before that. Suddenly, it came to him—somebody had told Henrietta that they had seen him with Leathy Piper the day before yesterday.

Now, since the time Henrietta had come upon him talking to Lottie Mae Hensley, Hank had been mighty careful about talking to women, especially single women, for he had felt the brunt of his wife's rage at one time, and it had been enough to last him a lifetime. But he had wanted to hear about Leathy's brother Buddy and his new job in the big city of Chicago. He now wondered if, by the evening's end, he'd be wishing he was in Chicago.

From his chair, Fernie marked Hank's progress through the changing expression on Henrietta's face. Her frown quickly changed to scowl, and by the time Hank had reached the road-bed, her face was as red as any Indian over on the war-path, and her body trembled with her anger.

Henrietta had made up her mind, for there could only be one reason for Hank a comin' down that hill empty-handed. She knew the path was good ten minutes quicker than taking the road, and if Fernie had made it home before Hank, then Hank must have stopped along the way. And there was only one place between here and the store, Sadie Lou's. She wasn't gonna put up with any lyin'.

Hank was gonna 'fess up right there at the gate or he wasn't gonna git in.

Hank approached the gate, his stride reduced to a slow walk. He had decided it would be best not to look at Henrietta. He intended to walk right through that gate and into the house without saying anything because he didn't like the idea of fighting outside where the whole neighborhood could listen in.

"Where's them shoes?" she demanded as he reached the gate. She reached out and lifted his chin so she could glare into his eyes.

"I wanna see them shoes that ye bought down at the comp'ny store!"

"Shoes! What shoes?" Hank asked, taken aback that Leathy wasn't the source of his wife's anger. "I ain't bought no shoes."

"Oh, yes ya did!" she countered, scrambling now, made even more angry by his denial and the fact that he looked guilty. "I done been tol' all about 'em. I done been tol' they was black and real nice. What'd ye do with 'em?"

Hank reached for the gate only to have his hand smashed away.

"Ye ain't comin' inta my yard 'til ye tell me what ye did with them shoes!"

"What ya talkin' about, woman?" Hank said, finally angry enough to glare back. "I..."

Henrietta cut him off with a swing that landed on his left shoulder. "Ye don't have to tell me. It's plain as day what ye did with 'em. Why else would ye be comin' down that hill fer? When ye left that store ya headed straight up that hill to her house. Now didn't ye? That's where ya took 'em. They ain't no use lyin' cause I know!" She spun and stormed into the house, leaving Hank standing silent and confused outside the gate.

It was worse than he thought. He might have explained away Leathy, but there was no explaining this, because he didn't understand it himself. He asked himself where Henrietta could have gotten such an idea and again thought back to his visit at the company store. He hadn't even gone inside! He had waited outside with the others.

Just then young Hank heard the sound of a throat being cleared. He glanced across the road and saw Fernie sitting on the porch. The
old liar raised his arm and waved, grinning.

"Damn!" Hank muttered. "Fernie did it!" He turned and begun to stare at the front door where Henrietta had disappeared. He asked himself how he was gonna convince her. "Damn!" he muttered again. He began to shake his head. Finally, after several minutes, he took a deep breath, hiked up his coveralls, opened the gate and began walking towards the house and what he knew was gonna be a very long night.

Darkness had settled when Missus Holloway joined her husband on the porch. She arrived just in time to hear Henrietta screaming from across the road. "Yer just like the rest of 'em. What ye git at home ain't good enough fer ye. Ye got to be goin' somewhere's it's easily gotten. Well, let her take keer of ye. From here on, ye won't be gittin' nothin' else from me!"

"Lord Almighty, Fern!" Missus Holloway said, "What's all the ruckus about?"

"Durn'd if I know," the old liar said, his grin hidden in the darkness. "But," he paused and took in another deep breath. "I reckon the honeymoon's over," and Fernie began to chuckle.

Susan Bingham Hollis

NIGHTWATCHER

Watching shadows dance across pastel walls
he fantasizes origin of movement:
candles flick unsteady silhouettes,
a ceiling fan beats a tropical rhythm.
Filled w/red oil & turned low,
a hurricane lamp wafts a cinnamon scent
toward the window where he waits
in steamy darkness.
Low voices slip through the louvered door;
he imagines one of them is his,
he imagines his fingers
untying ribbon, his hands
touching silk.
He lingers until all is dark inside
& silent.

Beyond the garden,
where his bare feet warm on clay tiles,
the Atlantic churns.
Close enough now
he dives in,
salt water rolls over his body
like silver dollars, his skin
shines like fish scales in the moonlight.
& as he swims
he turns, thinking he hears a sigh.
Susan Bingham Hollis

PATTERNS

1.
Lounging in a deck chair
rescued from an antique store,
you read your latest poem for me.
As your voice fills niches
in your new apartment
words echo through rooms,
trace patterns on old quilts,
& curve around lamps, glowing behind them
like a bulb turned bright
to make me see.

2.
She studies patterns you make in ink,
touching the poems as she reads.
She feels the paper, wishing the letters
were raised, written in Braille,
then announces predictions
as if she might be a gypsy woman
who could foretell your future.
Your words are tea leaves
clinging to the bottom of a china cup.

Susan Bingham Hollis

MOCKINGBIRD

Each night
as two luminous green hands
point ceilingward
& streetlights stripe the walls,
I hear the maniacal twittering
of a robin, but I know
robins sleep now.
Wait—there's someone else's song,
then another's.
Whatever book it is that night
closes,
drops to the floor,
& I drift toward morning
on stolen songs.

Susan Bingham Hollis

CANOE DREAM

Sun hot on my back,
I skim over
clear green water
like a stone
skipped across a pond
many dreams ago.

After sundown,
when the night air
hums w/crickets
& pine needles,
darkness
signals to the sky,
blackening the river,
making it deeper.
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