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Frank de Caro

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# *The Folklore Muse*

Poetry, Fiction, and Other Reflections  
by Folklorists



Painted by W. Galt, Esq.

Engraved by J. Sturges.

*The Orphan Ballad Singers.*

Edited by  
Frank de Caro

# The Folklore Muse



# The Folklore Muse

Poetry, Fiction, and Other Reflections by Folklorists

Edited by  
Frank de Caro

Utah State University Press  
Logan, Utah

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# Acknowledgments

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Most of the material in the book is previously unpublished. A few pieces, however, have appeared elsewhere. Used with the permission of the authors (and protected by their copyrights) are "Rock and Word" by Steve Zeitlin, which appeared previously in *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore* 30 (Fall-Winter, 2004): 5); "Historical Sign" and "Christmas Tree," by Ted Olson, published previously in his book *Breathing in Darkness: Poems* (Nicholasville, Kentucky: Wind Publications, 2006); "my mother's garden," "arrowhead," "shadowplay," "tag," and "red rover" by Susan Stewart, which were first published in the *American Poetry Review*; the chapter by Neil R. Grobman from his *Lost in Redskirt Forest* (Bloomington, Indiana: Author House, 2002); "Ballad Girls," which appeared previously in *Ballad Girls and Other Poems* by Frank de Caro (New Orleans: Garden District Press, 2005); and "Eating Alone," by Margaret Yocom, published previously in *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore*. "Wondrous Love," by Libby Tucker, revised for publication here, previously appeared in *Paterson Literary Review* 32 (2003): 244-46 and is used with the permission of the author and Maria Gillan, *Paterson Literary Review* editor. "Work Song," by Edward Hirsch, appears with the permission of Random House, Inc. "Legends, Rumors, Lore and Revelations (Some Incomplete) Involving Leaton Troutwine, a Local Eccentric/Celebrity/Hero (and Gordon's Owner)," by Matt Clark, appears with the permission of Matt Clark's literary executors, Michael Griffith and Josh Russell, to whom the editor expresses his gratitude.

*One of our contributor, William Bernard McCarthy, died in 2008 while this book was in press; in addition to writing poetry, Bill published notable books on the ballad and on folktales, and we note with sorrow his passing away.*

# The Folklorist's Endeavor: An Introduction

Folklorists perform signal service to American culture, although seldom are they celebrated for doing so. Finding, recording, and presenting traditions that might otherwise remain known only to a subculture or a small region; making verbal art less ephemeral in the historical and social record; trying to understand the vernacular contexts of the nation; bringing to wider awareness the arts and expressions that are self-made and community-made by those who are not our aesthetic and intellectual elites: these undertakings might be called the folklorist's endeavor.

This endeavor requires discovery—of communities and individuals who have created and preserved the traditional songs or stories or rituals or customs that may be little known to or comprehended by a larger world. To establish understandings and to make better known their discoveries, folklorists communicate with that larger world through lectures, documentary films, broadcasts, and public presentations and exhibitions, but—historically at least—particularly through writing and publishing, concentrating on both books for a popular audience and specialized journal articles for fellow scholars. Folklorists' writing may be diverse, but mostly it has been descriptive and analytical, focused on presenting the creativity of others—transcriptions of songs and stories, descriptions of folk performers, delineations of folk heroes and events—or has dissected the meanings of vernacular forms. It is prose which, at times, has been scholarly or claimed as scientific; it certainly has been ethnographic and explanatory.

This book presents folklorists' writing of quite a different kind: not ethnographies and analyses, but poetry, fiction, memoirs, and informal essays—their "other reflections."

In recent years, folklorists, along with others in the social sciences, have moved toward new modes of discourse. That folklorists have sometimes been talented and creatively inclined performers may have helped to stimulate this trend. In general, social scientists increasingly have become reflexive and self-reflective—more aware of the subjectivity inherent in their work and of how much they insert themselves into their ethnography and their socio-cultural analyses. In their professional writing they have been more willing in recent days to speak of the "I," their personal involvement with those they study, and the impacts their involvements have had. Such awareness inevitably has led to more creative and informal kinds of writing and certainly has been a factor in leading to poetry and fiction as writing that can express ideas about people and cultures encountered in the course of study.

In folkloristics, as in other fields,<sup>1</sup> this is by no means a recent development. In the 1930s, Texas icon J. Frank Dobie chafed at the bounds of scholarly writing on folklore and sought to publish writing on the subject that was more literary. More brilliantly, his contemporary, Zora Neale Hurston, pressed by the demands of trade publishing, created in *Mules and Men* a novelistic framework within which she could present her research into folk narrative and folk religion and belief.<sup>2</sup> But despite such illustrious landmarks as Hurston's work, serious folklorists resisted until recently modes of writing beyond the objectively scholarly, although there have been a few notable exceptions, such as Henry Glassie's books stemming from his Irish fieldwork. A special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* devoted to "creative ethnography" and "autoethnographic writing" was an excellent collection of more personal forms of writing about folklore that appeared only in 2005.<sup>3</sup>

The writing in *The Folklore Muse* is, in some ways, something new. Of course folklorists can pen fiction or poetry that has nothing to do with folklore or the ethnographic, but the authors represented in this volume were asked to contribute work—poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction—specifically related to their being folklorists. This writing speaks of many things: people, places, families, past realities, love, growing up, quests and dead-ends, death and resurrection. However, it does, in varying ways—sometimes more, sometimes less directly—engage with the folklorist's endeavor. This work is not ethnography, "creative" or otherwise, but—whatever else they may be—these stories, poems, and other writings are indeed reflections on folklore and on folklorists, the cultures they study, and the matters that concern them.

Sometimes the writing in this book speaks about folklorists themselves, how people happen to become folklorists, and how folklorists think and do their work. Essays by Steve Zeitlin and Daniel Peretti muse on connections between writing and their work in folklore; in his poems, such as "Julia" and "Margaret," Zeitlin writes of folklorists and the "kindred spirits" who also do ethnographic work, and in "Madhulika" and "The Quilters" of his encounters with folk artists in the course of his work as a public-sector folklorist. "I have long realized," he writes, "that we are not so much studying the folks we interview and celebrate as collaborating with them." Quite a number of the poems, essays, and stories here speak of the fieldwork experience, of the most basic thing folklorists do: go out and encounter the people who tell them about their cultural lives, their memories, their lore. Holly Everett's essay "One of My Mothers," for example, may deal with realizations about her own family relationships but interwoven with her fieldwork on roadside death memorials. Although Teresa Bergen's main character in her novel *Bigfoot Stole My Husband* is not an ethnographer, the first chapter, in which her narrator moves into a group of Bigfoot enthusiasts, recounts an experience very much like that of a folklorist looking at a folk group. Bergen herself researched the subculture of those who search for Bigfoot, the "sasquatch" of Northwest folklore and rumor, for her novel. Jens Lund remembers a singular fieldwork encounter in the Midwest, while several of Margaret Yocom's poems comment on the physical landscape of

the region where much of her fieldwork takes place. Cindy Levee takes us around a Southern town with one of her informants; Ted Olson into the countryside of his work.

Of course, folklorists, because of their training and interests, bring particular perspectives to the observation of life. Leslie Prosterman's three poems observe custom and ritual in a cultural group not always known for their folkways, yet she speaks of them as presenting an "ethnography of poetry readings," suggesting that folklorists are always observing (and sometimes participating in) cultural performances in certain ways. Jeannie Banks Thomas sees her poems "Woman, 41 (Motif GYN041)" and "Instructions for Installing Blinds" as stemming from her "ethnographic impulse" and her folklorist's interest in everyday realities. Libby Tucker's accounts of her treatment for cancer and the events surrounding it are full of a folklorist's perspectives and ways of referencing the world.

The writing here not only tells us about how folklorists think and have developed and dealt with their lives; it also extends the folklorist's endeavor. Though not ethnography, it is another way of engaging and explaining the folk culture that folklorists encounter and try to share their knowledge of. Jens Lund introduces us to a real community and gives us some of its ethnographic detail. Holly Everett is writing about both her fieldwork and American attitudes toward death. Kirin Narayan in her memoir and Steve Zeitlin in several of his poems address the issue of the importance of oral storytelling. Teresa Bergen's "Haints," though a powerful story about love and tense relationships, lays out conflicting social attitudes toward traditional belief systems. Margaret Yocom's "Eating Alone" shows how traditional foods mark cultural differences and barriers as well as personal ones. Norma Cantú is concerned with her protagonist's personal development but against particular cultural backgrounds. Jeff Todd Titon's story "Percy" comments on how what is authentic in folk art may challenge common conceptions while it raises questions about folk and non-folk aesthetics and the consuming of traditional arts. The role of visitors from outside and of tourism in the perception of folklore, with which the story deals, is something Jeannie Banks Thomas also touches on in her poem "Salem, Massachusetts, Playground at Gallows Hill," wherein the oblique reference to the gallows evokes memories of the famous witchcraft executions that strangely enough have led to a modern tourist economy.

Other writers here examine or play with or muse upon folklore genres (though the examination or the musing may not be the main point). In my own poem "Ballad Girls" I lay out some of the characteristics of the "murdered girl ballad," posing questions about the meaning of this type of narrative song. Neil Grobman works from folktale motifs in his fiction. Edward Hirsch brings the work song genre into new contexts, and Susan Stewart reminds us of the joys of children's games. In recent years, folklorists have been particularly oriented to performance-centered approaches; several contributions—by John Burrison, Matt Clark, Leslie Prosterman, Danusha Goska, and others—present fictionally realized performances or speak of performance in other ways. Although folklorists are hardly

alone in being interested in the nature of storytelling, they are inevitably interested in the narrative process, and they examine it in their ethnographic and theoretical writings, and in their creative work as well. "Ballad Girls" is about a narrative pattern, and Mary Magoulick's poem "A Cosmology of Women" came out of a course she taught on the nature of story and in particular what stories reveal about human relationships to the natural world. In addition to Magoulick's, other poems, like those by Carrie Hertz and Paul Jordan-Smith, grapple with those ur-stories, myths, and classical legends. Matt Clark's short story is indeed about how stories are constructed, his literary narrative taking shape as a storyteller is supposedly weaving his oral narrative. Clark even provides a poet and academic as a character who comments on the processes of myth and legend creation. Several of Zeitlin's poems are concerned with stories and how stories function and what they mean.

That several sections of the book deal with particular folk genres ("Legend and Myth," "Rituals and Customs") suggests that folklorists' interests in types of folklore can spill over from their scholarly to their creative imaginations.

Additionally, a number of the pieces in this book speak of families—in several cases, a folklorist's own—suggesting the closeness of personal and professional lives. Everett deals specifically with the role her family members played in her fieldwork, but other folklorists use creative work to explore their families, particularly in relation to folklore. The birthday ritual William Bernard McCarthy lovingly describes in "The Birthday Horse" draws from his own family's narrative lore. Elaine Lawless's compelling account of family and personal history ties that history to her professional work with battered women's personal narratives. Laurel Horton's "Grandma Effie and the Heirloom" was written after a conversation Horton had with her paternal grandmother about handing down a family quilt.

Steve Zeitlin proposed the creation of the Family Folklore project at the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife, and he directed that program from 1974 to 1976, so it's no surprise that several of his poems touch on family folklore and families, his own as well as others. In "My Great-Great Half-Uncle Horace's Bone-Handled Jackknife," Jo Radner alludes to family history, though history she discovered through an old newspaper clipping while emptying out a family house. Kirin Narayan's memoir, though it focuses on a family friend, the photographer and surrealist painter Stella Snead, is very much a memoir of family, yet one of its important insights is how folklorists become folklorists. And as Joanne Mulcahy remembers her mother and sketches out her discoveries about women's use of language, we get a mini-autobiography of her own progress toward becoming a folklorist.

Of course, folklorists long have been interested in how writers "use" folklore in their literary productions, and certainly most of the authors in this volume "use" folklore for some sort of literary effect or purpose. Do folklorists engaged in creative writing use lore differently than non-folklorist literary artists? One thinks that perhaps only someone like Danusha Goska, a folklorist who studied Asian shadow-puppet folk theater with a former *dalang* (puppeteer), would have thought

to re-frame the Ramayana stories as social satire in modern, feminist context while retaining the idea of a shadow-puppet performance. Other authors of creative non-fiction have written of their experience with cancer, but Libby Tucker's identity as a folklorist is so bound up in her own account that it would seem impossible to separate her folklorist self from the experience of encountering a dangerous disease. On the other hand, couldn't any fiction writer sensitive to local culture have drawn on local folklore as Matt Clark did on the tales and legends of the Texas Big Bend region? (Clark, more fiction writer than folklorist, particularly drew on the lore passed on to him by the "boatmen" who guide tourists on the rough waters of the Rio Grande.) Neil Grobman, in his fantasy novel *Lost in Redskirt Forest*, sought to "weave into the novel as many sacred stories, myths, legends, folktales, oral narratives as well as puns, riddles, acronyms, anagrams, jokes, games and word games as possible. Whether genuine folklore or folklore-like, the intention was," he goes on, "to simulate folkloric performance situations." As a folklorist, Grobman simply knows a lot of folklore, but many other fantasy writers have been caught up in and have used folk materials too; the genre is known for that.

This question as to whether folklorist writers who "use" folklore will do so differently from other writers is a legitimate one but surely is too complex to adequately answer here. It is, however, a question that I hope this book will stimulate discussion of, as well as the new ways in which folklorists can approach their endeavor. Steve Zeitlin notes that his "articles and books have encompassed ethnographic observations and set down the stories" he collected, whereas his "poems became a way to express my love for the people I was meeting, and a more personal set of meanings." Though the ethnographic and the creative are quite different approaches with somewhat different uses, the gulf between them does not necessarily loom large. Jeannie Banks Thomas says, "poems sometimes more quickly and effectively capture the *feeling* of the experience than do my field notes." Jo Radner argues that folklorists' fieldwork and research have their roots in personal issues that find expression in creative pieces. Joanne Mulcahy suggests that in setting out "a shared passion for the vernacular," personal writing can help to move beyond the academic/public sector split that has sometimes been a problem in folklore studies.<sup>4</sup> The fiction, poetry, and other personal writing in this book, then, function as multivalent pieces. They pull together a range of feelings and observations on life and offer literary approaches to human experience. Being by folklorists, they stem from or focus on particular cultural interests and offer personal, less formal insights into folk tradition, while they bring new perspectives and a new excitement to our comprehension of that tradition.

# Being or Becoming a Folklorist

Folklorists may have many individual accounts of how they wandered into their uncommon profession: a college course, a chance accident, an early or late interest in certain kinds of cultural experiences, a suddenly discovered love for certain kinds of traditional expression. A few years ago, a collection of short essays called *Roads into Folklore* was published in which folklorists talked briefly about how they had become folklorists—the roads were disparate ones.<sup>5</sup> In *The Folklore Muse* folklorists indeed muse on what it means to be a folklorist, and how they themselves may have found this undertaking. In the process they muse on other things as well: family relationships, folk crafts, reading, and other folklorists. What they have to say provides insight into a profession—some might say it's a calling or even an obsession—with its unique perspectives on culture, on what people do with their lives, on how people create and communicate.

Perhaps inevitably, being a folklorist can produce a way of looking at the world in general and perspectives on observing culture and responding to the world around us in particular. Here, for example, both Steve Zeitlin and Daniel Peretti address the question of how writing and folklore may fit together in the mind of the folklorist. Zeitlin compares the act of writing poetry, fitting words together, to the act of creation in the folk craft of stone masonry, a craft he tried his hand at after his wife, also a folklorist, had completed a study of it. Peretti recognizes how the ideas of several folklorists give him new insight into reading literature and into the importance of stories in his own life. Libby Tucker's suffuses her accounts of her treatment for cancer and the events surrounding it with a folklorist's ways of looking at the world. She expresses her experience in terms of fairytale motifs, traditional teenagers' party games, and a shape-note hymn. In "Work Song" Edward Hirsch looks at the performance of physical labor around his house and aspects of his daily life against a backdrop of folksong, notably one of Leadbelly's famous work songs.

Jeannie Banks Thomas sees her poems "Woman, 41 (Motif GYN041)" and "Instructions for Installing Blinds" as part of her "ethnographic impulse" and the fact that she, like many folklorists, is intrigued by everyday realities; she seeks to capture "the wonders of the mundane" and to reveal "how even the most mundane acts are imbued with significant meaning." In one of her titles Thomas even references the system whereby folklorists number the motifs that recur in folk narratives, creating an entirely fictional number for the situation of the poem, adding



“a new motif in recognition of the common but under-recognized story of the woman whose anger becomes heroic when she reaches mid-life.” Leslie Prosterman speaks of her three poems (which appear in a later section) as part of “an ethnographic cycle,” suggesting that a folklorist is ever something of an ethnographer when observing cultural phenomena, whether “folk” or not, and that being a folklorist may be a matter of taking on a way of conceptualizing a wide range of human existence.

Of course, that road to getting there—to becoming the folklorist who does certain kinds of work but who also comes to see the world in particular ways—may be a long and winding one, and several contributors write about what happened to them en route. Mary Magoullick takes us back to her days as a Peace Corps volunteer in Africa, and uses her experiences there for remembering and for musing upon social realities and social problems, as well as her ways of looking at things as a folklorist. Though she does not draw the conclusion directly, we cannot help but see her Senegal encounters as leading toward her later profession with its concentration on culture and society. Joanne B. Mulcahy ties her account of becoming a folklorist into descriptions of her mother’s use of language and her family’s reactions to that, as she tells us about her life’s progressions and turns. Much of what Elaine Lawless writes has to do with her “pre-folklorist” days, but we never doubt where she is headed; we certainly come to see important connections between her work as a folklorist and what came before in her own life.

Part of being a folklorist involves interacting with that small band of other folklorists, a subject of interest in several contributions. Steve Zeitlin writes of an eminent and eccentric folklorist colleague in “Barbara” and of a collector of folk lullabies in “Julia.” His “Amanda in the Mornings,” about his folklorist wife (also mentioned as being instrumental to his work in “Rock and Word”), inevitably takes on a different tone but continues commenting on the connection between folklorists as well.

## Rock and Word

*Digo da pedra, "E uma pedra."*  
Of the stone I say, "It's a stone."

—Alberto Caeiro (Fernando Pessoa)

My days begin—as they have for decades—drinking a cup of coffee and writing poetry. I consider it a form of centering, looking into a different kind of mirror—not to comb my hair, but to remind myself of who I am.

Yet, when I turned fifty, I felt the need for a new avocation. I decided to forgo poems and spend mornings building a stone wall with my two hands in the backyard. In fact, I was hoping to impress my wife, folklorist Amanda Dargan, who had recently completed a project on the stonemasons of Westchester County. Westchester is a great spot for a stonemason, an Ecuadorian mason told her, because its wealthy residents can afford stone walls, and local companies like IBM and Texaco often choose to surround their office complexes with stone structures that suggest strength, integrity, stability, and endurance. Building a stone wall was my way of trying to prove to Amanda that perhaps I had precisely those qualities and I could do something productive with my hands (not something I'm known for in the family), or that I could lift something heavier than a laptop.

Besides, I reasoned, poems are just a few coded chicken scratches on papyrus, or dots on an electronic screen. A stone has weight and mass: it exists as an object in the real world. My poems kept me at my computer, but finding stones for the wall necessitated a journey.

The journey led me on a pilgrimage back to my boyhood. With the years, we forget how a rock rests in our hands, how a boulder feels beneath our feet. Searching for stones took me into crooked streams and woods in Hastings—Steve Zeitlin, Master of Creek Beds—and down to the rock beaches in north Yonkers that run along the train tracks. It took me back to a childhood spent foraging in vacant lots.

And it brought me back to poetry. I soon discovered that stones, like words, are everywhere. The trick to building a stone wall is to find rocks that fit into one another perfectly and form a structure that won't collapse from its own weight. A poem is a dry stone wall, bearing only a passing resemblance to a wet wall, whose

concrete is like the music that holds a song together. My dry wall, like a poem, relies solely on rocks: words and their placement.

A rock-strewn creekbed triggers childhood sensations: the way the bottoms of your feet take on the shape of the uneven stones, and the way your body assumes the form of the boulders as you clamber over them. Writing a poem has some of that same joy, the words taking your own shape as you wander through creekbeds of syllables, with your own life rolling over them. I discover the thrill of unearthing the right rock for a particular spot on the wall, just as I would sometimes come upon the perfect word or line for a poem. I marveled at the way a stone wall—made of one of the planet’s heaviest objects (rocks)—has a lightness and delicacy about it as the stones touch and balance. The best poems—made of the lightest things on the planet (words)—demonstrate a sturdiness, coupled together so perfectly that a single one cannot be removed without destroying the whole.

Soon after I finished my motley 15-foot wall, I learned that artist Andrew Goldsworthy had built a 2,278-foot stone wall at the Storm King Art Center in upstate New York, a sculpture garden that celebrates the relationship of art to nature. Having built a wall myself, I paid a pilgrimage. I discovered a grand epic poem rolling across the countryside, at one point bending down into a river and appearing to rise out of it on the other side. Goldsworthy’s stone masterpiece wraps around every tree it passes so that it appears to alternately wall them in and openly embrace them. The five-foot-high wall was built with the help of five master stonemasons from England and Scotland, masons who (unlike me) knew how to split a rock along the grain, the way a good poet knows where to break the lines.

As folklorists become less bound by hard and fast notions of “tradition” in our work, we discover that folk culture includes not only crafts such as stonemasonry but poetry itself, even when it’s not handed down across generations, even when it originates with the individual—particularly if it’s part of the cultural expression of this nation’s subcultures, such as cowboys, loggers, cops, nurses, or fishermen. Poetry plays a central role in all the cultures I’ve studied or been a part of. Folk poetry is among the most participatory of the arts. (As folklorists are aware, the reason it’s so hard to find great poetry is that so much of it is embedded in the cadences and imagery of ordinary conversations—and it is rare for poems to rise to that level.) Our legacy of language leaves the possibility of artful communication open to all of us.

Ursula Le Guin writes of discovering a twelfth-century church in Wales with the words “Tolfin was here” scaped in runes on the stone. The words, she suggests, carry this message: “Life is short, the material was intractable, someone was here.” My poems often seem to me like those seemingly immutable chicken scratches on the stone prison wall that say, “I was here.” But my wall is an exercise not in writing on but composing with stone. From nature’s wondrous shapes, I labor to create a functional work of art in my backyard. Life is short, the material intractable, but still, undaunted, I continue to build walls of rocks and words on the unyielding landscape. How else to get blood from a stone?

## Shelfscapes

Stories, like Heraclitus's river, are never the same twice. Audience members—be they listeners or readers—bring to the text their own context. Not only that, each audience member brings a different mental context to the same text each time they experience it. In other words, variation occurs not only in the text but in people—even the same person at different times. Textual variation has been relatively easy to document. Changes in people's mental context, however, are slippery, fleeting, and intangible. Sometimes they find expression in texts, but more often, these changes are only observable in reactions and receptions.

I came across an opportunity to describe this sort of change, drawing upon my own life. It began when I received a book in the mail. The book was *Shatterday* by Harlan Ellison, a birthday gift from an old friend. I had read the book years ago, when another friend gave it to me as a Christmas present, so I merely placed the new copy, a beautiful first edition, on a bookshelf. Glancing a moment at it, I noticed the features of the books on the shelf. The variously sized spines rose and fell like rolling hills. Each shelf in the case portrayed a different landscape with its own topography. After this brief pause, I decided that receiving the book presented me with a good reason to revisit it. I read its introduction once more, but something was different. Something about it hit me, emotionally and powerfully.

Ellison is known for the essays he writes as introductions to his short story collections. They tie the books together, pointing out themes, demonstrating the geneses of the stories, why he writes them, and anything else relevant. This particular introduction revolved around a story about a night Ellison was a guest on a radio talk show.

Ellison, prompted by the show's host, revealed that a story of his was actually about the feelings he'd experienced when his mother was ill and under constant care. He'd written a story to read to an audience one night, and in the middle of reading "a section where the lead character is having the argument with his alter ego about his mother, I realized for the first time that I wanted my mother to die." He explained himself: "I didn't mean that I wanted her to *die*, just to be gone. . . . she'd been extremely ill off-and-on for years . . . she was like a shadow . . . and I wanted to be free of that constant realization that *she was out there*. . . . I just had to admit that I wanted her gone." He's not done: "And it was terrible, just terrible. I thought I was scum unfit to walk with decent human beings."

Though the conversation moved on, before long a woman called in to say, “Thank you. Thank you for telling that about your mother. My mother was dying of cancer and I had *the same thoughts* and I hated myself for it. I thought I was the only person in the world who ever thought such an awful thing, and I couldn’t bear it.” Ellison tells his readers that this is the job of writers, to say the things that most people keep hidden, to tell people that they are not alone in their lives. Other people have these horrible feelings. He calls them, and the introduction, “Mortal Dreads.”

This was what had hit me. This made it hard for me to speak.

But I’d read it before. I knew what was coming. The question is, why? Why did it affect me so strongly this time? Why so little at first? What had happened to me?

I had been teaching an introductory folklore class for undergraduates at Indiana University and reached the point in the semester when I attempt to demonstrate exactly why the study of folklore is important. I do this every semester, and not once have I done so to my satisfaction.

It’s similar to what happens when somebody asks me why I want to be a writer, why I would bother when nobody reads anymore. I *know* the answer, but I just can’t put it into words. The thing is, I should be able to. I’m not new to writing or to folklore. And isn’t my job as a writer and educator to put things into words?

At the time I received *Shatterday*, I had just passed that important point in my folklore class, and I had come to the decision that I could no longer put off writing for a living. I had done so earlier because I felt like I needed to learn a lot more. I continued to write, but graduate school was my priority. When the book arrived, I was at a point where writing professionally was once more an option. This meant that I actually had to sit down every day and write. If I wanted this to be part of my career, my effort had to become sincere.

All of this churned and bubbled in my head as I read “Mortal Dreads.” Other things had changed in me as well. I had become a folklorist, which meant I had been exposed to an entire discipline’s worth of new ideas.

It’s not difficult to see parallels between folklore and Ellison’s job description. In a 1928 essay in the *Journal of the Royal African Society* called “Some Aspects of West African Folk-Lore,” R. S. Rattray writes that folklore is an opportunity for people to express “things about which everyone knew, but concerning which one might not ordinarily speak in public.” This is similar enough to the writer making public mortal dreads, but I had not read Rattray’s article the first time I read “Mortal Dreads.”

Nor had I read Henry Glassie’s *Art and Life in Bangladesh*. I had not learned of his encounter with a potter named Garunga who had chosen to give up his life’s work. Glassie, returning to this man’s shop after an absence, found it collapsed. I’ll allow Glassie to describe the encounter: “Garunga met me there, in the scene of his life’s work, in the dusty beginning of an archaeological site. He told me that pottery was labor too hard for the current generation. The shop was done. I gave him the photographs I had taken of him, and we embraced. He had

now, he said, only one reason to live, and that was to see this book. The one who writes about the living has extra reasons to keep going, late at night, when the body complains.”

The first time I read “Mortal Dreads” I had not read Keith Basso’s “Stalking with Stories” in *Wisdom Sits in Places*. In it he describes how, for the Cibecue Apache, stories and landscape combine to help them live properly. He tells us that these things can change people for the better and stresses the importance of both narrative and geography. It’s not just the stories, but the ever-present reminder of their meanings found in the landscape where they’re set that steers people aright. The Apaches themselves have developed the hunting metaphor: Stories can be shot at people like arrows. They stalk like hunters. It takes the Apache to formulate these ideas, and it takes a folklorist (who may or may not be Apache) to bring them to the rest of the world.

Being a folklorist means writing a lot. It means letting people tell their own stories and finding meaning in those stories—as Glassie writes, learning together.

Harlan Ellison is my favorite writer. To read his stories is to delve into parts of myself that I do not necessarily like. He writes of mortal dreads, making public the secret fears we all share; he brings this into the open, states it unequivocally. He confronts his readers with “the ugliness of simply being human.” So I wondered: what ugliness do his stories force me to face? What mortal dread do I share with the rest of humanity?

Posed this way, the question is easy to answer. I look to the story I have read the most often, Ellison’s “On the Downhill Side.” I am struck by the language, the way it refuses to descend into cliché. But it takes more than that to make me read a story over and over. It takes a connection with the characters, and a realization that I might be a lot like them; or rather, I might have been, had the story not hit me right between the eyes.

At one point in the story, the narrator, Paul, describes to his companion the worst thing that ever happened to him. His ex-wife Bernice had been committed to psychiatric care and one night, years later, her mother called. She told him of the hospital and how poorly Bernice was doing. “And then she did an awful thing to me. She said the last time she’d been to see Bernice, my ex-wife had turned around and put her finger to her lips and said, ‘Shh, we have to be very quiet. Paul is working.’ And I swear, a snake uncoiled in my stomach. It was the most terrible thing I’d ever heard.”

I tend to get obsessed with my work. I lose track of the outside world and very much want to be undisturbed while I do this. I was one of those kids whom people describe as living in their own little world. As I got older, reclusiveness evolved into reticence, which was little better. I began to wonder why I was behaving this way, and in studying folklore, I found part of an answer. Linda Dégh, in her book *Legend and Belief*, discusses ostension, the idea that people act out legends. People respond to the possibility that the stories might be true and, in some cases, they

make them true. She gives examples: tampering with Halloween candy, poisoning Tylenol, school shootings, and copycat crimes.

The result of this is often quite terrifying, but other legends, less sinister but no less insidious, can induce ostensive behavior. There is a legend of sorts (perhaps folk idea is a better term) about writers and scholars existing in ivory towers, isolated from the world around them. They are left alone in their genius, to produce great works. To some minds, this is attractive. But aside from consigning oneself to hermitic isolation or a monastic lifestyle, it is quite difficult. It leads to conflict. It could potentially lead to a phone call such as the one Paul received. In other words, it hurts people. Existing mentally in my own little world, I was in some way enacting the legend of the academy. However, while people who cared about me and wanted me to care about them physically surrounded me, I was setting myself up for disaster. And like Paul in the story, the fact that I wasn't doing it on purpose didn't make it any better.

Ellison's story flew like an arrow into me, telling me not to live that way, to value the people around me as much as I value my words and work. He constantly reminds his readers that they live in a world that requires their attention. Ellison, as a writer and as a person, has continually attempted to demonstrate that writers don't have to live shut up in the ivory tower. He's known for his passionate speeches and activism, for writing stories in storefront windows, and for generally pointing out that we cannot avoid the rest of the world. To do so is madness.

And so I realize the importance of writing and of studying folklore; they are intertwined. The work matters to people. If we do not put stories into words on paper, making them permanent, we fail to facilitate the connections those words make possible between people who do not share the same landscape or the same time frame. We fail to make the connection between past and present, between author and reader. We fail in the mission of the writer: to make known the mortal dreads, to tell people that what they do and are and feel matters. We fail to let people know that they are not alone.

Ellison's book came at the right time. Reading of a potter in Bangladesh, trying to explain why folklore is important to a class of freshmen, experiencing anxiety about my career . . . these things coalesced into the right mental framework with which to appreciate Ellison's "Mortal Dreads." I had not been so profoundly affected the first time because I had not been the same person. As I read it again, I put the above ideas and events together and realized the importance of stories in my own life. Doing so made it easier to explain the potential of both writing and folklore to others.

With this in mind, I appreciate my bookshelves in a new way. My response to "Mortal Dreads" had not been an immediate epiphany, just as Paul's terror in "On the Downhill Side" did not immediately affect me. But a gradual understanding does not mean the changes were not as permanent. They required repeated readings. Of equal importance is the presence of the book. "On the Downhill Side" appears in a book called *Deathbird Stories*, and for me it defines that collection. It's

what I think of when I see the promontory of its hard cover jutting above the lowlands of the surrounding paperbacks. Through the story, the book reminds me of my faults and keeps me from climbing back up the ivory tower. Harlan Ellison and I do not share a landscape, but his stories still stalk me. Just as a story might stalk the Apache as they pass a certain landform, I have but to glance up to my shelf and see the spine of a book.



Travels

*1-22-02: Mermaid*

Driving to New York City through a hailstorm, through swirls of sleet. Not easy to drive down this wet winter highway, but who expects the diagnosis of breast cancer to be easy? Cramped in our car's back seat, I breathe stuffy air and long for a cold drink.

My husband drives; our good friend navigates. The two of them talk continuously: will parking be available at Sloan-Kettering? Will we have time for a pilgrimage to Ground Zero? I stare out the window.

Tense, eyes dry, I think about the books I read last night when I should have been sleeping. *Northern Lights*, *Spinning Straw into Gold*: guidebooks to an enchanted world I never wanted to enter. My legs feel cramped; my neck muscles clench. After two weeks anticipating this appointment with a well-known surgeon, I feel nervous, on edge.

We park our car, then splash through icy slush for several blocks before arriving at our destination. Imagining this place, I've pictured a tower with a gleaming sign:

SLOAN-KETTERING

but instead I see an underground office complex identified by a small, discreet plaque:

BREAST CARE CENTER

A nurse ushers me through the door of an examining room and gives me a seer-sucker robe. Not an ugly, faded blue-and-white gown such as I've learned to expect in doctors' offices, but a crisp new robe with salmon-pink stripes. This robe actually makes me feel attractive. My long hair curls over the bodice of my beautiful robe. Mermaid hair. When I checked this doctor's webpage, I saw that he had a friendly smile. All my web-surfing has made me feel like a mermaid. Webpage, webfoot, mermaid's tail.

I'm braced for bad news but excited, expectant. Perched on the metal examining table, I kick my feet, as if I were sitting on the edge of a swimming pool. The waiting time drags on: ten minutes, fifteen, twenty. Time enough for words from the language of breast cancer to wash over me one by one. Lumpectomy. Mastectomy. Chemotherapy. Bone marrow transplant.

At last, Dr. Marshall strides into the room. He's very tall, with dark, curly hair, and his smile looks even friendlier than it did on his webpage.

Dr. Marshall gives me a firm handshake, then tells me to lie down on his examining table. He's friendly, but he doesn't say much. His hands run up and down my breasts, searching for lumps, irregularities . . . who knows what? The touch of his hands calms me. These are highly intelligent hands, magic hands! Dr. Marshall is a healer who knows what he's doing. I start to relax, just a little.

Later, in his office, Dr. Marshall speaks sensitively to my husband, our good friend, and me. He has an excellent grasp of this cancer's patterns. "You're going to be fine," he tells me. "Ninety-nine to one hundred percent of these carcinomas are curable. I won't tell you to have your surgery here—that's up to you—but I'd recommend that you have your surgery here with me at Sloan-Kettering."

OF COURSE I'll have my surgery at Sloan-Kettering! A flash of recognition sweeps through our little group: my wonderful husband, our good friend, and me. This place, Sloan-Kettering, is just what we've been hoping to find. Dr. Marshall is a healer who inspires confidence.

One week later I have my surgery, a lumpectomy. The "procedure," as they call it, goes just fine. After I wake up, Dr. Marshall gives me a bottle of pink pills to take care of the pain. The pills work like a charm. That's good, because my breast feels raw and swollen. There's no bleeding, just pain and pink pills. If I don't take the pills often enough, it feels like there's a small, sharp knife inside my incision.

Ten days later, I'm back in Dr. Marshall's office, breathing stale air as I sit on the edge of a different examining table. The salmon-pink robe I'm wearing has a rip in it, and the curl has come out of my hair. An hour ago we took a taxi to Ground Zero. A cold wind was blowing there, and the sadness was intense. My eyes feel swollen from unshed tears after seeing the memorial pictures, the "find my dad" posters, the teddy bears and hats. And it's not just my eyes that are swollen. My left breast is three times its normal size. It still hurts, and it looks like a piece of Italian marble: purple, yellow, and pale-green bruises.

Dr. Marshall strides in. He slides off one side of my robe and takes a look at my enlarged breast. "Looks like I beat you up pretty bad, doesn't it?" he asks, smiling. I try to smile too. Is this a joke? Does he say this to all of his patients?

"The surgery was a success," Dr. Marshall says, "but I see you still have some swelling. I'm going to aspirate some of this fluid—looks like you still have too much in there." He grabs a foot-long hypodermic and plunges it into my breast. Quickly and efficiently, he pulls out some fluid.

I'm writhing slightly, trying not to complain. The needle doesn't hurt much, but the pressure feels uncomfortable. *Stop, please stop!*

He doesn't hear me. I let Dr. Marshall do what he wants to do. "Hey, I got two cc's!" he says. "I thought there'd be more, but this is fine."

*Fine for you.* The suddenness of his needle attack has left me feeling shaky, but I have no voice to say this. I don't want to be a wimp. I just want to get out into the fresh air. And I do.

The day after we get home from New York City, I can feel the place where Dr. Marshall stuck the needle in start to bleed. It bleeds when I clap after a performance of Dvorak's "New World Symphony." It bleeds when I pick up a load of laundry. It even bleeds when I lift my fingers to the keyboard to do e-mail, to look at webpages on the Internet. Webpage, webfoot, mermaid's tale.

Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid follows her prince through the sea to his kingdom on land. She loses her voice and her beautiful tail, cut into two legs by magic. Every time she walks, she feels like she's walking on knives.

There's nothing wrong with my legs, but my breast still hurts. The bleeding has finally stopped, and the swelling is going down. I feel pretty good. And I'm still grateful to be under the care of my doctor. He's a very capable surgeon with magic hands.

### *2-20-02: Moving Target*

I'm on my way up in the air for my third radiation treatment. When you get radiation, the table rises about six feet. The radiation technicians remind you not to get off the table when it's up high. As Stan, one of my favorite technicians, says, they wouldn't want to fill out the paperwork for the damage that would happen if you weren't careful.

Damage and destruction—teenagers' pranks, teenagers' games. When you play the slumber party game "Levitation," friends lift you up with two fingers. Their lifting seems like magic—it doesn't make sense for two fingers to lift you up so high. Sometimes, while you're rising, the others tell scary stories about monsters and accidents. Then they chant "Light as a feather, stiff as a board."

So here I go, up in the air. This process seems like magic, but it's also scary. Rising up, alone in a darkened room, I start to talk to myself as if I were my own best friend.

Calm down, I tell myself. Don't let it bother you that you can see a red "X" reflected on the surface of the screen above you. Yes, the laser "X" is centered on your chest, but that's okay—you're a target for good rays, not bad ones. Don't be scared when the machine comes down close. Don't let your reflection remind you of a dead body. Just don't go there, girlfriend.

My pep talk works. The round, white machine sends rays from the right, then whirs over to the left for a second round. It's good at finding its mark. When it does, it blasts a warning:

EE

Like an alarm clock. Like a microwave oven telling you dinner's ready. But different. This sound is more intense, more insistent. I'm relieved when it ends.

Down comes the table. Light as a feather, stiff as a board. Stan comes back. He's really nice. I like to ask him questions. "How much radiation am I getting?" I ask him. (My friend Pamela has reminded me that I should find out how much.)

“Oh, 180 Centigrade,” he says casually. This is hard to comprehend. CENTIGRADE? I do a quick calculation in my head. Three hundred fifty-six degrees Fahrenheit! Oh, no! My breast is going to roast like a piece of Perdue chicken!

When I tell Stan this worries me, he is quick with reassurance. “CentiGRAY, not Centigrade,” he says gently. “The centigray is a new international unit of measurement for radiation. You’re getting 1.8 grays —that’s 180 centigrays.”

This just proves how much I’ve missed by specializing in English. Centigray: I’ve never heard that term. It’s a great relief to know no part of me will be roasting.

I do, however, wish I could redecorate the radiation treatment rooms. Both of them are so white, so bleak, so plain. One has nothing on its ceiling; the other has an American flag.

“Has the flag been there since September 11?” I ask Stan.

“Yes,” he tells me, “it has.”

I figure the flag is meant to cheer us, to remind us of our country’s strength. That’s all right, but I’d prefer another image. Not completely different, just another image from the days after September 11. What I’m picturing is a golden retriever: a rescue dog I saw on TV around the middle of September. He looked patient and tired. Policemen were about to lower him into the pit of the World Trade Center, where he would try to save lives. The dog looked so serene, so beautiful. I can see the depths of his kind eyes.

Visualizing the dog gives me a good idea for redecorating this treatment room. It can be the “Golden Retriever Room,” with gold-upholstered La-Z-Boy chairs and real dogs racing around. A TV can be tuned to “Animal Planet,” and there can be soft cushions all over the place. Won’t that be fun? Of course, the dogs will have to go out of the room when the radiation machine is running.

The second treatment room can be the “Indoor Waterfall Room.” Yes, it will have an amazing waterfall that covers an entire wall. Handel’s “Water Music” will be playing, and there will be a comfortable couch in the corner. One side of the room will have an ice-cream sundae bar; the other will have a shelf of really wonderful books.

Okay, enough plans for improving the treatment areas. Treatment time has ended; it goes very quickly. All the way from getting dressed in a gown to changing back into street clothes, it only takes fifteen minutes.

“See you tomorrow,” I tell Stan. I’m already on my way out, moving quickly. It feels great to move. I’m a moving target, moving fast out of there.

### *3–26–02: Wondrous Love*

I’m spending the afternoon in nineteenth-century New Jersey. Fierce evangelical preachers, gatherings at rivers, powerful visions, and deathbed dramas. This is the world where my three-times-great-grandmother Sarah lived. Because her granddaughter and daughter were devout Methodists, I know she had a passion for the Christian faith. She grew up with Friends, married a seventh-day Baptist, baked cakes for revival meetings. She looked forward to famous preachers coming to town—some hot-headed preachers had come to Cherokee country when she lived

there. People on the evangelical circuit had helped her find her way east, helped her find a home with Friends. Deep down in her dreams, she remembered the woods and streams of her home. Deep down in her dreams, she remembered the healing ritual of Going to the Water. No matter how much she prayed and sang, she never forgot her people's customs.

My own story is dimmer than Sarah's now. I'm humming the nineteenth-century shape-note hymn "Wondrous Love" while doing laundry and baking biscuits. The tune is haunting, the words hypnotic:

What wondrous love is this, o my soul, o my soul,  
What wondrous love is this, o my soul?  
What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss  
To bear the dreaded curse of my soul, of my soul,  
To bear the dreaded curse of my soul.

My thoughts are blurring, my memory fuzzing. Books tell me that this happens sometimes, after a few weeks of radiation. Sometimes when I look at my computer screen, letters fade for just a moment. I'm not writing much. It feels better to travel to the nineteenth century through the Internet. I listen to Methodist preachers and leaders of Quaker meetings. I find out the links between slavery and the Trail of Tears. I find two men in Woodstown, New Jersey, who might be Sarah's great-great-grandsons. Webpage after webpage leads me to the answers I need.

Staring at my computer screen, listening to "Wondrous Love" over and over, I feel tears rising in my eyes. A veil of water is blurring the screen. So strange: I'm starting to see something that probably shouldn't be on this website. Shape-note singers are standing in a hollow square. Beautifully, with nineteenth-century intonation, they're singing

What wondrous love is this, o my soul, o my soul,  
What wondrous love is this, o my soul?

As the song ends, the lead singer introduces an old preacher: fiery eyes, a shock of white hair, restless hands. Near the preacher stands a young man with a sensitive face, dreamy eyes, wavy hair. About twenty or twenty-two years old.

I feel like I'm falling in love with this handsome young man. Am I seeing him through Grandmother Sarah's eyes? Is this her first glimpse of Elias, her much-loved husband?

The image doesn't last long enough for me to know anything for sure. I'm back on the roadmap of Woodstown, New Jersey, now. Did I dream of the young man with dark hair? All I knew about him before was the date of his birth, the date of his wedding.

Sarah married Elias when she was nineteen. Did she dream of wondrous love—love of God, love of a man? Love, rapture, and marriage. A life of religious devotion. Hot biscuits and laundry and christenings of six children, including twin girls. One twin didn't live very long. Wondrous love, wondrous love—give it to the Lord.

This morning I brought oatmeal cookies to my radiation technicians. They were pleased—"Oh, thank you! On such a dark, snowy day!" Amanda ate one cookie while I got my rays. She smelled of oatmeal when she came back. Such a nice girl. She doesn't know I've been baking because I've been in nineteenth-century New Jersey, using ingredients Sarah would have used: brown sugar, oatmeal, baking soda, unbleached flour. The more contemporary part of me has been building a tower of Ben and Jerry's ice-cream containers in my study. You shouldn't completely lose touch with your own century, after all. You might go mad, come completely unstuck, and that would be dangerous, wouldn't it?

After getting rays this morning I felt so good, so used to the place. I brought in cookies, the technicians loved me. Then I had to go get a CAT scan for the next stage, the "boost." Hop up on the table, look for your booster seat. A CAT scan is not supposed to be a problem, is it? I expected it to be easy.

"Get up on the table," John the Radiation Specialist said. No warm CATside manner. I looked at the machine: huge, gleaming white, brand-new. "Get off the table now, you have to wait in another room while the machine warms up!" said John. I went in the other room. It was cold there. I waited for ten minutes.

Finally, John called me in. "Up on the table now," he said. "You're going to go in under the machine." I put my wrist over my forehead. My watch was already starting to make a dent above my left eye. Going under the machine freaked me out unexpectedly. "I don't like this," I said. "It's too confining!"

"Don't move," John said, "it won't take long." His companion, a very large nurse, said, "Think about sand on a beach!" She sounded bored. Both John's and the nurse's voices were firm, insistent: "DON'T MOVE!" They had no time for a nervous person. Everybody knew a CAT scan was no problem. I closed my eyes and went in under the machine. Fast-moving wheels pressed close to my face and chest. I felt tears starting to form, but I didn't want to give John and the nurse the satisfaction of seeing me cry. Inside my head, I recited my lines for the Jenny Craig scene in Pamela's play: "Stand over there. Hop up on the scale!" This calmed me. I heard clicks, felt a warm glow. The machine moved me back and forth. Damn these impersonal CATpeople, anyway! They acted like they couldn't care less about the person moving back and forth through their gleaming new machine.

After the scan, I got down feeling calm. My lines had gotten me through. Curious to see what the inside of the machine looked like, I peered in. It was a hollow white doughnut, very shallow. No monsters, no cream filling. Why in frozen hell couldn't the two professionals have told me there was no back to the machine? I was hardly confined at all, but I didn't know. They didn't care. I hated them.

What happened at the hospital is already fading; I'm back in nineteenth-century New Jersey, eager to discover something new. What wondrous love is this, o my soul, o my soul. . . .

## Work Song

All day I'd been trying to write  
about the work song and the rhythmic origin  
of poetry, but I couldn't concentrate

because the dog kept barking  
at four or five hands from the museum  
tearing down the metal carport

and shouting at each other  
as they took turns jackhammering  
the heavy concrete in our backyard.

I wanted to say something about the pull  
and push of an oar, about hammers and anvils,  
about sea chanteys for hauling up sail,

but the rambunctious noise filled my head  
like a dentist's drill and the jack-  
hammers slowly turned our courtyard

into a floating island of white stones:  
my wife wanted a fresh green lawn  
and a garden with crape myrtles.

I just wanted to hear Huddie Ledbetter  
singing his version of "Take This Hammer"  
on a tape I ordered from Folkway Records,

though I had to wait until I snaked along  
through rush-hour traffic at three p.m.,  
picking up our son from school.

I had a splitting headache and a deadline  
and a boy who didn't want to hear prison songs  
since he was living in his own prison,

but when we got home the hammers had stopped  
and the workers were heaving thick stones  
from a wheelbarrow, grunting and laughing

and calling to each other in a soft music  
that syncopated their bodies in the late sun  
and sounded like *Take this hammer—huh!*

so that the two of us started to hum  
and sway in tandem, trailing the leader,  
our bodies hypnotized, our voices joining in.



## *Jeannie Banks Thomas*

### Instructions for Installing Blinds

Blind shade.  
But not dark  
enough  
to keep you from  
looking.

All dressed in black  
and a power drill.  
Sweating  
for the sake of work  
and darkness.

Down  
your  
nose  
that drop of sweat,  
to my belly,  
your lips.

What is it Simic says?  
Ah, yes,  
Love worker.

### Woman, 41 (Motif GYN041)

I know why  
at that age,  
on the bus  
Rosa, tired,  
not caring anymore,  
just  
all that unspoken-fuck-you anger

that  
becomes  
a love song

that  
welcomes in the world.

## *Steve Zeitlin*

### Barbara

Considered her body a basket  
in which to carry her mind

Ethnographic bag lady!

Collecting shadow puppets,  
skelly caps, evil eye charms

Until she met Max the Magnificent  
abstract painter  
who challenged her fascination  
with the traditional  
by filling the passion of her canvas  
with his deep red stripe

### Julia

Childless collector of lullabies  
(The first is the mother's heartbeat  
in the womb)

Julia's heart plays Brahm's lullaby  
but hears only  
the galloping horses of time

Yes, the old grey goose is dead!

And all the pretty little horses  
Ride Julia to sleep on muffled hooves

## Amanda in the Mornings

The cat nestles on her breasts,  
the children's arms and legs  
branch haphazardly across her bough

Until her laughter shakes the branches  
like the wind  
blowing limbs into their sleeves,  
and the cat out of the tree.

How many years must blow through empty covers  
till they calculate the value  
of that carefree intimacy  
lost forever in the branches  
of the mother tree

## *Joanne B. Mulcahy*

### “Affectionados”

#### What My Mother Taught Me about Language

“Every Nancy to her fancy.” “Live and Learn.” “Count your blessings.” My mother’s aphorisms spread across my childhood world like balm. Similar phrases still pepper her speech. When annoyed, she’ll exclaim, “That irritates my soul,” while a lively event is a real “barn burner.” We savor her mispronunciations. When my sister, Chris’s ESL students come to dinner, “Yuri” and “Hugo” merge to “Yugo.” In Italian restaurants, “risotto” becomes “rudito.” When I was young, my father, five siblings and I thought her speech funny and quaint, like the small Vermont town where she was raised. We laughed at her malapropisms, her “small world” tales of unexpected connection, and for going on beyond the story’s point. We thought our ribbing affectionate. Never did we imagine that we were denigrating her or a female, rural way of speaking.

Both my parents come from Irish-Catholic stock, but when I was growing up, I thought them profoundly different. If my mother was rural Vermont, orality, and folk wisdom, my father was urban Boston, literacy, and worldly knowledge. If my mother soothed with adages—“Your day will come”—my father delivered pronouncements, “Simple declarative sentences!” If her words blossomed in the private domain of family, his language surged into the public realm of power. Boston Latin School and Harvard catapulted my father from the working class. He rose through the ranks at the Campbell Soup Company, often bringing work home. As kids, we didn’t understand advertising or marketing, but we watched his piles of paper in the dining room translate into talks for business executives. His storytelling around the dinner table held us riveted; we knew he’d be grand in a larger arena. My father, we thought, was the person who laid out the path that my siblings and I would follow as writers, editors, and teachers.

\* \* \*

Mr. Kellog beckoned us to stand when we read from our eighth grade geography text. Despite my shyness, this put me at ease. I still jumped from the chair when called on, an auto response instilled by Catholic education. The year before, I had transferred to public school. My recitations shifted from how and why God made me to the capitals of Europe. Overall, my parents judged the move positive, though

no one, they still lament, could match the nuns for teaching grammar and diagramming sentences.

One day, Mr. Kellog cocked his buzz cut toward me—the summons to read. He indicated the page, a segment about a dowager queen. But the word that emerged from my mouth was “dogwagger.” Snickering filled the classroom, followed by silence. At dinner that night, I foolishly related the story to my language-obsessed family. Getting the floor at mealtime was a challenge. Talk was thick, fast, and witty. If you stumbled over words, you could expect stony silence or ridicule. The story made me the butt of jokes for weeks. Only my mother regarded my humiliation with compassion. One day after the dogwagger incident resurfaced, she tried to defend me. But the clan paid no attention until she made a comment about “language affectionados.” “Affectionados!” my sister shrieked. “You mean *aficionados*.” Everyone guffawed, choking on the tuna and pea casserole. I remained silent, marveling at how my mother diverted attention away from me. Years later, I would claim her move as a covert strategy, a statement of solidarity in the dizzying, competitive arena of words.

\* \* \*

On a late June afternoon, midway through a softball game, I remembered my mother’s speech to the school board that evening. I doubt that I thought of it as a “speech.” Oratory was my father’s arena. My mother taught gym and coached sports in a Catholic girls school, but her passion was public education. As a school board member, she had worked tirelessly to create an alternative high school with smaller classes and fewer restrictions. The project mattered nothing to me. At sixteen, I’d found my own alternative to the grim boredom of school: skipping classes to read Russian literature in a nearby library. A friend would pull my pink absence slips from the disciplinarian’s office. I’d bring my blue polyester uniform to the library, heading directly to my job at the Mari-Nay Diner. On Saturdays, I shopped on Philadelphia’s 69th Street for the white lipstick and black eyeliner that I carefully painted on even for this softball game. Makeup, friends, novels: these were the boundaries of my world.

Still, something pushed me beyond adolescent self-obsession the day of the softball game. I suspect we drank from jugs of Boone’s Farm apple wine placed on each base to enliven the game. Perhaps I teetered when I stopped on third to declare I was leaving. I biked to the board meeting at the township community center. The hall brimmed with people. I slipped quietly onto a rickety folding chair in back. My mother sat on the stage with a group of men in cotton shirts and baggy chinos. Other women served on the board, but I don’t remember seeing them that night. My mother looked casually beautiful in the way of athletic women who refuse to fuss over themselves. Her black curly hair was brushed back. Even after six children, she looked slim in drawstring cotton pants, a white blouse, and her ever-present tennis shoes. When my mother rose to speak, I held my breath. Then, the Red Sea parted. She argued eloquently for funding the alternative school—no

aphorisms, ramblings, or mispronunciations. The divide between us shifted. Mother and daughter became speaker and audience. Her words shocked me. Had I ever truly listened to her?

\* \* \*

My high school teachers would have described me as quiet, if they remembered me at all. I knew the local bar and the smoking room of my library retreat better than the halls of my high school. When I did meander into class, I never spoke. Maybe I feared the ridicule I remembered from junior high or that meted out to my mother at home. But silence can cloak many emotions; some silence is active, a nearly religious renunciation of speech. Such was mine, a low smoldering passion I nurtured in the library, communing with the dead. I moved alphabetically through the work of women writers, ending with Virginia Woolf. Sometimes I read aloud, borrowing the eloquence of Anna Akhmatova or Tolstoy's *Anna*, a literary ventriloquism that made me feel powerful.

I applied to a few colleges to satisfy my parent's dream of higher education. After one semester at the University of New Hampshire, I dropped out and resumed my job at the Mari-Nay Diner. A few months later, I left for Mexico with my friend, Holly. We journeyed by train through the Copper Canyon in Chihuahua, dozing on ripped leather seats with Mexican families, stray tourists, and the occasional rooster. The train stopped in tiny towns that spilled down the mountainside. Into the windows, women draped in blue and black *rebozos* thrust chickens, fully cooked. One woman touched my hand, offering a warm tortilla wrapped in thin paper. "Para ti, señorita," she smiled, her Spanish as delicious as the still-sizzling birds, the hand-woven *rebozo* dazzling in the sun, the life behind the dark hands an invocation. Here was language that begged for response but my mouth was empty. Was it then, or on the bus back from Mazatlan that I decided to return to school? Touching that woman's hand rekindled a yearning. I wanted to hear language from the streets, from foreign lands and distant villages, spilled from the tongues of real people as well as characters in books. Beneath those desires, not yet articulated, was this: I wanted to talk back.

The next fall, I started college at the University of Pennsylvania. One day, my Russian literature professor, Saul Morson, asked about a character in a Dostoevsky novel. Something stirred in me, a welling up akin to nausea. Hesitating, I scanned the room. Surely, someone else would say something brilliant before my hand even rose. Professor Morson nodded in my direction. I remember thinking the voice came from someone other than me.

\* \* \*

On a May afternoon, sunshine brightened the blue onion dome of the Russian Orthodox Church on Kodiak Island. I threw off my red apron after the early shift at The Mecca, grabbing my tape recorder from the waitress station. I'd joined my fisherman boyfriend in Alaska six months before. A few years out of college, I'd

refined my strategy for making a home as I moved around the country: find a waitress job and women to tell me their stories. Now, I crossed the boat harbor crammed with wooden dories and steel crabbers to the Senior Citizens Center. Katherine Chichenoff, a Native Alutiiq elder, welcomed me into her apartment. My tape recorder buzzed. Katherine mixed Russian and English as she recited nearly word for word stories I'd heard from other women about Kodiak's traditional midwives. "They were so much better than doctors. We never had problems before. They just knew what to do." What did it mean, "to know?" Later, when I transcribed the tapes, a new pattern shimmered, as though I'd shifted the figure/ground of a M. C. Escher print. This was not just medical expertise. "Knowing" celebrated Alutiiq culture, especially women's healing roles. Through centuries of Russian then American colonization, women talked back. Words rested beneath the words, if only I could learn to listen. A linguistic pentimento emerged, the shiny underside of meaning revealed.

\* \* \*

Graduate school was not what I'd expected. I moved to Madison, Wisconsin, to study anthropology, hungry for a deeper understanding of Alutiiq women's stories. I'd anticipated cafes brimming with students and lively intellectual debate. Instead, I spent hours alone in the library, poring over dusty tomes on structural-functionalism. That winter brought record cold. The chill deepened when the relationship with my boyfriend in Alaska ended. To battle depression, I studied, sinking into anthropological theory—the public language of power. Yet what I craved was a soft voice whispering that I would "live and learn" from my loneliness—the salve of aphorism, the solace of a story.

In a folklore class, the universe realigned. We delved into stories about star husbands spread over the sky in tales from Native North America, wondered at Coyote, the shamelessly talkative trickster, and explored women in fairy tales. Everywhere, women use stories to hint at what we can't say, to seek power when we have little, to find ways to be heard. My mother's aphorisms found a place in the pantheon of folk speech. Under the sway of stories, I began to find my path.

When I passed the qualifying exams, I joined another student, Peter, on the terrace above Lake Mendota. Over frothy Leinenkugels, we toasted our respective PhD programs. Peter would stay in Madison to analyze migration patterns in China. I was en route to the folklore program at the University of Pennsylvania. A grin inched across his face as he tilted his beer. "No more 'real science,' huh? Going soft and mushy—folktales and myth—all that story stuff?" "Yes," I responded, raising my glass to his, "all that story stuff."

\* \* \*

"A PhD in Folklore?" Strangers' eyebrows rose; their smiles condescended. "Expect to get a job?" I didn't really, so I returned to the Northwest and waited tables. A year later, I became director of the Oregon Folk Arts Program and happily plunged into

fieldwork. I could almost hear the whistle of the train roaring through the Copper Canyon, smell the sizzling chicken in the air. All over the state, I found saddlemakers and woodcarvers in their shops and scoured church bazaars for women's work. "I haven't done anything" or "there's not much to tell" often preceded a woman's story of quilts made, families raised, shops tended, or ranches kept.

That first summer, I sat with Eva Castellanoz in her kitchen in Nyssa, Oregon, next to the *metate* for grinding corn that her mother carried through a lifetime of migrations. For years, her family traveled back and forth from Pharr, Texas, to Nyssa to pick sugar beets and onions. They had come north from Valle de Santiago, Mexico, crossing the Rio Grande with a coyote and a palate of dreams. During Eva's early years in Oregon, her husband, Ted, remained in Texas to fulfill a work contract. Eva said, "Immigration would find me in the fields. I would be wet up to my neck because I was so small and the beets were so big. They would take me in and make fun of me in the car, saying that they had to get me my husband because I was so young and shouldn't sleep alone. At that time, I was very quiet; I didn't talk back."

I looked at this powerful woman—mother of nine and grandmother of many more, the matriarch of a clan spread through the Snake River Valley, recipient of a National Heritage Award for her wax and paper floral *coronas*, the first traditional artist to serve on the Oregon Arts Commission, a woman who calls herself *la mula* for her stubborn insistence on speaking the truth—it should have been hard for me to imagine her silent. But it was not.

\* \* \*

After many years as a teacher and a writer, I still circle the question of women and language. Here is a scene: I am teaching a feminist theory class, sitting in a largely female circle of students. I think about Adrienne Rich's statement, "When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing." I want students to awaken to language and describe their own worlds. But I do not know which path will empower them: the "simple declarative sentences" that my father taught me led to power or the sometimes-meandering personal voice; the authority of theory or the comfort of story. I turn to the group with a question. Melinda, a gifted writer, will surely have a response. Perhaps I'll hear from Lydia, the most theoretically savvy student in the class. I wait in vain. The only two men in the class raise their hands.

The next session, I try a new strategy. We write personal essays about gender. Everyone speaks now, unveiling through narrative what couldn't be directly stated, discovering through writing what we didn't realize we knew. On the terra firma of storytelling, fears dissolve, distinctions level. New theories unfold.

\* \* \*

In the Willow Creek Correctional Institute north of Anchorage, nine women sit around a long wooden table. From the far end, Norma volunteers to read her



writing. She grins crookedly, revealing gaps in her few remaining teeth. Even in English, her voice rises and falls with the musical cadences of her first language, Inupiaq. She describes her childhood home in Barrow, at the edge of the Arctic. The tale is dark—her mother dead at thirty-five, an abusive father who drank—but Norma sings the story with silver-tongued grace from a paper held close to her face. At the break in our workshop, I wander the room, talking to the inmates. Near Norma's seat, I glance down at a crumpled piece of paper. The drawing depicts people dressed in parkas skinning a seal outside a house; inside, a stove and refrigerator fill a small kitchen. Upstairs, next to a thin bed, a young girl cowers beneath a man with a knife. Nowhere on the page are there any words.

\* \* \*

I send a collection of my writing about stories and silences in women's lives to an editor in Boston. She writes back, "What I'd like to see is the story of how your passion for chronicling women's lives developed." She also wants to know why I "gave up everything" to pursue this goal. I think about Adrienne Rich, about my yearning to describe a world in which young women see themselves, about my profound need to help shape that place. I think about Alutiiq women's version of the past, about Eva Castellanoz's emergence from silence. I think about the women in prisons who write to be seen as more than the crime that sent them there. I think about Virginia Woolf and the proverbial room of one's own and the millions of women in the world who don't have a room or pen or paper or knowledge of what to do with those things if they had them. Yet these same women sing and praise life in stories drenched in meaning and lyric style. I marvel that I found the lens of folklore, pursuing oral tradition in subarctic villages, everyday artistry in Mexican American towns, and writing in windowless prison classrooms. This, I think, is what I will tell the editor. Then my eyes fix on the words, "why you gave up everything." There is only one image I can offer back to her. A young girl at sixteen, raw and vulnerable, on the cusp of becoming or not becoming the person she secretly hopes to be, ready for something to shatter the guard of lipstick and sprayed hair. She sits on a rickety chair in a hot community center, sweaty from a softball game and cheap wine. She watches a woman she hardly recognizes rise and begin to speak. She is stunned by the utter singularity of the woman's eloquence. She is stunned by the first glimmer of a truth she will pursue for many years: there are women like her mother everywhere.

## Mary Magoulick

### Women and Water in Senegal

In 1986, the United Nations sponsored an international conference on women whose major resolution agreed to find ways to relieve women of the universal burden of fetching and carrying water. Around the time of this announcement, I was on my way to Senegal, West Africa, as a Peace Corps volunteer. With other evident problems, such as child care, illiteracy, poverty, AIDS, malaria, malnutrition, and general oppression, I wondered why carrying water should figure so prominently. Undoubtedly there were levels of the discourse and politics at this conference that made agreement on other issues problematic. But once I lived in Africa for a few years, I understood the significance of the burden of carrying water. Most people in Senegal live in conditions quite unfamiliar to Westerners. In Africa and the rest of the world, women perform many taxing, time-consuming, and strenuous tasks daily in communities that sometimes can offer comforts and joys less familiar in our world.

In Senegal I grew accustomed to seeing women, from the time they are young girls, carrying loads on their heads as they walk. When young they might carry “only” a bowl of rice, or a platter of mangoes, or their schoolbooks. Women would carry what I often found to be impossible, Herculean loads—big, bulging bundles wrapped in cloth, large loads of firewood, huge platters of food, and most amazingly, laundry-tub-sized basins full of water (many buckets worth). Typically these women wore long, sarong-like *pagnas* of colorful, joyously patterned cloth, and contrasting colored and patterned, loose-fitting blouses. But rather than perceiving these ensembles as clashing, I came to see them as dynamic, lively evidence of richly patterned lives. The colors they wore, which washed out or seemed jarring when worn by Westerners, seemed more colorful and harmonious against the richly dark skin of women there. The women balanced their loads by gracefully curving one arm up; they walked in steady, slow gaits that were sure and graceful, reflected all the more sharply under the intense sun that brightened sand and trees. Perhaps carrying these huge loads lent Senegalese women perfect posture and the graceful, slow gait for which they are often admired.

Women need to carry large basins or buckets (or traditionally clay pots) of water because most houses do not have running water or even a well nearby. In the Sahel—the northern semi-arid part of the country—whole villages (scores of

families) might share a single well. I knew volunteers who spent their entire two years trying to help villagers build a new well. Sometimes they had to dig fifty meters or more, a long way to pull up gallon after gallon of water to fill a tub. Even in towns, women sometimes need to share wells or a community faucet. Motorized and mechanical transportation are limited and expensive. The need to carry heavy loads is surprising to Westerners only because we are disconnected from traditional and fundamental patterns of living. In cultures still living like all our ancestors did, there remain traditional ways of carrying loads like water or firewood; in West Africa using one's head wins out as most practical. One can carry far more weight on the head than one could carry other ways, but that does not mean it is easy. The basins of water I saw women carrying required two or three women to lift them into place or unload. Sometimes a woman had to carry this load a half-mile or more back to her home. I found it a tremendous feat to carry such a load so far, yet with practice the women there have become accustomed and do not particularly complain about it. And to meet the cooking, washing, laundry, and drinking needs of a whole family, a woman might have to make this trip to the well several times a day, however good she is at conserving water. Women use a doughnut-like circle of twisted cloth, which sits between the (often flat-bottomed) load and the top of the rounded head to help balance the load more than cushion it.

While I lived in Senegal, I usually enjoyed the luxury of running water. A "cold" morning there, in winter, might find the temperature dropping to 75 or 80 degrees, which felt cold after being accustomed to nonstop heat. The Peace Corps doctor told us it was because after six months in the heat our blood thinned a little. Those "winter" mornings I longed for a hot water heater, but since I had a stove, I could use some of my precious supply of gas to heat water if I so desired (which I did occasionally). Villagers rarely enjoyed heated water baths; in fact, for a while I thought they were unknown. But near the end of my stay, a pair of volunteers got married in a traditional Diola village ceremony that I watched. After a long, slow group procession through the village (where bride and groom were displayed), older village women ceremoniously washed the bride—Amy—while all the women gathered around her in a protective circle. Amy was worried about being cold from the bath, but she told us the water they used was warm, a luxury for a bride.

Daily complications of my life there included refilling my gas canister (for the stove) and dealing with a backed-up septic tank, a sporadic electrical grid, and screen-less windows that let in clouds of mosquitoes and swarms of flies. Such things made me feel like I was roughing it, yet I lived in relative luxury in a Western-style apartment in a village-like neighborhood on the outskirts of Ziguinchor, the capital city of the Casamance region of southern Senegal. My government-issued apartment was in the lower part of a stucco house that towered above the sandy streets with its two stories, a fenced-in, mostly-cemented yard, large windows, a sliding glass door, tiled floors, balconies, and even some landscaping (bougainvillea and eucalyptus trees). The neighbors on the other side of the wall pulled their water from a well. Many nearby houses had mud floors, mud and straw walls,

and patched tin roofs. Some women from my neighborhood who had no running water in their homes paid a monthly fee for the privilege of lining up at a community faucet where they could fill tubs with water to carry back home. The French family who lived in the main part of my house hired a guardian to keep away would-be thieves, vagrants, and neighborhood children who couldn't afford school. But my apartment had its own yard and entrance, and I resisted the typical foreigners' response of "guarding" oneself from the locals. My whole purpose in joining the Peace Corps was to get to know and interact with the people and culture of Africa.

The neighborhood children spent much of their days hanging outside my fence or on my fence (which had a little wall they could stand on at the bottom of the iron railing). They sought to catch glimpses of me as the breeze stirred aside the hand-dyed, sun-patterned pieces of cloth I'd bought at the market to hang in panels as curtains inside my sliding glass door, which I usually kept open to relieve the heat. They wanted to see how the "rich white woman" lived. I enjoyed fewer possessions during those two years than during any period of my life except when I have been backpacking. I had no television, no lamps, no fan, sparse wooden furniture (issued by the Senegalese government for foreign workers), a Peace-Corps-issued stove, fridge, a secondhand mattress, empty jam jars for glasses, a tin cup, borrowed dishes, a crummy hand-me-down radio/cassette player, a few small suitcases of clothes, and a knapsack of books. Yet I was rich compared to most of my neighbors. When I visited them, I realized that many had wells, no electricity, or only a bare light bulb and an old radio for which they needed electricity. Even those whose wealth rivaled mine probably did not have any store of possessions elsewhere (as I did). Of course, there are wealthy people in Senegal, but they live behind guarded walls so that for the most part their luxurious lives can only be imagined. Mine was the biggest house in the neighborhood and one of the only big houses in town that wasn't guarded. Sometimes when I cleaned out and defrosted my freezer I would carry outside large chipped-off chunks of ice to throw away. The first time I did this, the neighborhood children came running to ask me for these ice chunks, which they seemed to consider a great treat. So watching me and hanging on my gate all day was an amusing way for them to pass the time. In Senegal, I came to realize the relativity of wealth and luxury.

Whenever I had the pleasure of visiting villages (which I did every couple of weeks), my volunteer friends and I would carry buckets of water from a well Senegalese style—on our heads—for our own drinking and bathing needs. We would pour some of this water for drinking into a large clay pot set in a plate of sand. The sand would make the clay sweat, thus keeping the water inside the clay pot cool no matter how hot it got. We figured out early on how many liters of water the clay vessel held, so that we could calculate how much chlorine bleach to add to treat the water and kill parasites. When in villages, I got in the habit of fetching and carrying an almost full bucket (one bucket, not a tub) of water about a quarter-mile once a day. This was a strain for me, but the delicious kind that made me feel

I had earned a cool bucket bath as a reward. It was amazing how efficient I became at washing myself with only a few large cups worth of water, and what a luxurious refreshment these bucket baths were. The first time I performed this routine task of carrying my own bath water from a well several hundred meters away, I was already hot, exhausted, and sweaty just from the heat and humidity. I was so inept that I sloshed most of the water all over myself while en route, was left shaking from the effort, and was not effectively cooled down. I think it takes years of daily practice carrying lighter loads to strengthen the spine and improve balance to be able to carry those huge basins of water.

Carrying water requires skill, strength, endurance, grace, and humor but is only one of many daily tasks that most women face. Besides the very young, old, sick, or rich, most women work hard from before sunrise to well after dark. Imagine a young woman of nineteen named Kumba N'diaye, who lives in an average Senegalese village. She is married with a few children. She rises before dawn each day, awakened by her internal alarm. She rummages through her few pots and containers in her "kitchen" (a little hut) to get some millet, puts it in a wooden mortar as high as her knees and pounds the grain with a long and heavy (twenty pound) wooden pestle. Once she has achieved a fine texture that makes the millet palatable when cooked, she builds a fire (using up a scant supply of firewood she gathered the previous day), puts the millet in water she drew from the well the day before, and boils it into mush. Then she pounds some coffee and chicory beans. Pounding in the mortar with the heavy pestle is a routine her strongly muscled arms are accustomed to and she finds the rhythmic work familiar and soothing. Other women in compounds throughout the village prepare their families' breakfasts as well, so that the sounds of their pounding resonate and echo. The giant pestles make a noise like drums as they pound into the mortars of grain. The women play music with the rhythms they make, complementing and challenging each other in complicated patterns of beats and claps. It takes skill to manage the clapping because they have to clap while releasing the pestle on an up stroke, and catch it again in time to keep up with the rhythm. Such displays can inspire virtuosity. Mornings free of electrical alarms or radios are full of music and community.

Once everyone is fed, Kumba washes dishes (using more water saved from the night before), sweeps out the sand compound (which is usually immaculate), straightens in the huts, and then goes to the well (at perhaps eight or nine a.m.). Typically, she stands in line at the well for a half-hour or more, waiting her turn to draw water. The women purposefully time their trips to meet up at the well, to help each other and to visit. The well is deep (more than 100 feet), but there is usually enough for every woman to draw water twice a day. Standing in line gives Kumba time to gossip with friends and help others lift their full basins of water onto their heads. Each woman pulls up water using a rubber bladder at the end of a rope. Maybe there is a pulley or grooves worn into the rock or cement sides of the well from the ropes rubbing along the same track day after day. Once it is her turn, Kumba efficiently hauls up ten or more bladders of water and empties them into her

basin. Cool air comes up from the well and off the water in the basin to relieve the sweat from her work. It feels good in the 90-degree morning heat. Kumba's friends help her lift a full basin onto her head, and she walks back, through sand, to her compound. The sand is hard to walk through, but she is used to it. Her only footwear, called *batas* (rubber thongs), have hollows worn into them from the pressure of the balls and heels of her feet. They are comfortable and practical shoes for walking in the dry, hot sand that covers most of the village. The only exceptions are a few cement floors some people have in their huts. No one has or needs better shoes, not even for going to town for business or school. While walking, Kumba concentrates on her steps and on the feel of water in the basin. If she keeps a steady gait, matching her rhythm to that of the water, she can keep it from spilling over the side.

Once back, she will go in search of firewood, tend crops, and then prepare a lunch of rice and some minnows her husband caught in his net. She has a little oil, but she doesn't waste it on this lunch. Instead, she gathers some leaves, which she steams, mixes with dried okra powder, and whips into a frothy "leaf sauce." To the rice, she adds some salt from her store of it. It is a good lunch, and everyone feels full and sleepy after eating. Since this is not the busy planting or harvesting season, many people take a siesta now. The men sit under their big *nim* tree sipping strong, sweet green tea, three rounds of it that they spend hours preparing and chatting over. Each little pot of Gunpowder (a Chinese brand) gets progressively sweeter and weaker (as the same leaves are used in the pot for all three rounds), and the final round may have some mint added as well. A skilled tea maker will also be sure to build up a good head of foam in each little glass before serving it by pouring some tea back and forth from glass to glass from a great height. This rhythmic motion hypnotizes the watchers, and they appreciate the tea by sipping it loudly once it's ready. Kumba sits under another tree in the compound with all the other wives and older daughters. Except for a few who moved here after marriage, many are related and have known each other their whole lives. They might also make tea, or just lie back on straw mats they have woven, watching their children play, maybe weaving more mats or fans to keep away the persistent flies and heat. Their quiet chatter is interrupted only by their children's voices, whose tears and laughter sometimes demand attention.

After this rest, Kumba tends the animals, giving them scraps of food and cleaning their pens. Once she has washed the dishes, she uses more of her water to wash clothes. Her fingers are callused, so she can scrub hard, working the bar of peanut soap she and her sisters made into a good, fragrant lather. Later she washes the children, then prepares a dinner of dried fish, a small eggplant, some manioc root, and onion served over a large bowl of rice, which is enjoyed early in the evening, after the intense heat of the day. After washing dishes, and cleaning and sweeping the compound again, she takes a bucket bath in an area set off by a woven palm fence. By then, it is after dark, and she prepares her stores of food for the next morning before joining her husband for bed. They sleep on a foam mattress laid on a palm wood frame, covered with sewn-together, coarse, red and white checked

pieces of fabric. The modern mattress and “sheets” are a luxury from town they received when they were married. Every possession is valued and tidily cared for. The sheets will survive many years of washing by hand and hanging beneath the intense African sun to dry.

Kumba’s dreams are her own, rich and full of images she tries to decipher as she works through her days. They are not, and will never be, my dreams. How can I dream of planting millet or peanuts, of sleeping in a millet stalk hut, of the hot sun beating bright blessings on my children’s heads as they play? Although I observed every one of the scenes I just described from the imaginary Kumba’s life, such is not my world. Senegal surfaces only rarely in my dreams, at odd times that always feel intense and leave me wondering and remembering. Maybe my great-grandmothers, or more distant ancestors lived this way, but no one I know outside of Africa does.

Until you’ve seen it, it is hard to realize the fact that most women on the planet still live like Kumba, and apart from a few obvious modernizations (like plastic laundry tubs), have lived this way for millennia. We who live so disconnected to these patterns are the unusual few. What does fetching water mean in our world? Clean, fresh water is abundant so readily that we rarely think about it. We live with machines that use water automatically, washing our dishes and clothes for us, keeping a supply of hot water always on hand at several taps in our houses. I couldn’t help but remember the laziness and casual waste of my life as an American as I watched women carrying basins of water in Senegal. When I first left Africa, even though I was returning “home,” I would find myself baffled by my own culture—especially the extreme materialism of our lives—where, for instance, we must choose from fifty or sixty kinds of shampoo that we wash down drains with gallons of hot water, and where we watch built-in sprinkler systems spray uncounted gallons of water onto lawns that we promptly chop back down with loud, polluting machines. The reverse “shock” of such scenes eventually faded, as they inevitably do for cross-cultural travelers, but I never forgot those women’s lives in Senegal.

In my world of comfort today as a university professor, I sometimes recall my hot, sweaty, leisurely days in Senegal, where keeping the flies away might occupy hours and a bucket bath in the evening brought tremendous, cleansing, luxurious relief. I wonder about the fates of the women I knew there, the women I saw working day after day. Are they still alive? How many children have they had? How many survived? Have they succumbed to malaria or AIDS? Fetching and carrying water is only one small part of very long, hard days for women around the world, and I know that however disconnected and innocent we may feel, the socio-economic infrastructure around the world contributes to this global pattern. Yet, I met very few Senegalese women, no matter how hard their lives, who complained. They have little reason to hurry and little competition or media to push them to aspire for more. But does this make their lives comprehensible or enviable? Each task has its time and place and will be repeated thousands of times, day after day. Figuring out a new design to weave into a mat, a performative breakthrough in music or dance,

a happy laugh shared among women waiting in line at the well—all these moments add beauty, meaning, and humor to life. As a folklorist, I admire that and think that maybe it is enough, maybe there is even a karmic lesson here of working hard but staying balanced. Then I think that this is my Western romanticized notion of other cultures. Which of us would really trade places, after all? Most women have no opportunity of going to school, getting out of village life, or making decisions about marriage or childbearing. Well-educated and successful (in a Western sense) Senegalese women are from the cities, probably the capital, and most likely from privileged families. In the villages, if a family can afford to send anyone to school, it will be a boy. As a brief observer of these women, whom I saw tired, sweating, patient, and usually uncomplaining, though obviously exhausted at the end of each long day, I can't simply consider them lucky or admirable. I understand the impulse to want to help them, to relieve them of at least this one burden of carrying water.

I have not been back to Senegal in almost twenty years. I have heard that in many parts of the Sahel, the water table has risen, which is a hopeful sign. Maybe life is different there now, better for women, even if that only means an easier task of collecting water. There are aid and human rights organizations from inside and outside the culture working to help with birth control, AIDS, female genital mutilation, education, and other issues. But I suspect I would recognize the country and the people and places I knew as largely unchanged. Senegal has lived through a sort of civil war and significant unrest, so the economy has not significantly improved. Recently I taught for Semester at Sea, a program that tours the world by ship (with mostly well-heeled students aboard). We saw that around the globe—from Vietnam to India to Tanzania to Brazil—women still work very hard, carrying water and other loads, tending crops, caring for many children and animals, cleaning, serving, and working all day long. I saw women lined up at spigots just as I had in Senegal, struggling with huge loads they carried on their heads. I continue to be an outsider, an observer of such scenes. I went into the study of culture and became an educator because I thought that through education, understanding each other would be a way forward—but little changes. As folklorists, we celebrate the world, all the variations of politics and economy and resultant cultural expressions. As with Peace Corps volunteers, we get to know local people, learn their languages, and listen to their stories and music. Our politics are largely buried in the hope that by presenting and celebrating cultures we are serving the world and history well.

Under the African sun, I sometimes felt I was in the glare of an unblinking eye. No clouds except during the few months of rainy season, and then the clouds came and went within a few predictable hours. Where I lived, we had only one dust storm in two years, so virtually every day was bright and shining. That sun so close to the equator was always strong and predictable, twelve hours a day, day after day, staring, unblinking. It relentlessly revealed the patterns of lives, shining even into dusty corners, reflecting off the water women carried, glinting into our eyes just enough to be a little painful.



## *Elaine J. Lawless*

### In Search of Our Mothers . . . and Our Selves

on a torn and yellowed sheet, I found the following  
handwritten poem with a note inscribed  
“my birthday, September 29, 1978”

I went to hell this week

Alone.

I watched a man with gaping mouth

Scream with no sound.

Bent above the body of his dead wife,

He'd been screaming, thusly, for a million  
years

Knife in hand.

Below another knife I saw

A man and woman tear asunder

A child

Who had trusted both without question

But finally questioned both the same.

And, then, a mirror image of myself

Showed me the door and handed me

a bloody key.

I escaped

Wounded, but free.

—Elaine J. Lawless, *Women Escaping Violence: Empowerment  
Through Narrative* (2001)

### *In Search of My Mother*

My mother was the seventh child of a seventh child. She latched onto that like a promise. But before she was twenty, she knew it was a false promise full of superstition and born of fear and loathing. Being the seventh girl of fourteen children—all girls but one—only insured that she would be invisible—too young to be trusted, too old to be coddled. She could not ever remember her mother, Grandma Clara, taking time from baking and cooking and cleaning and canning and running to help other women give birth to more and more babies or to just sit down in the rocker that stood by the back door and hold her, or sing to her, or ask her a question about what she was thinking or had been doing all morning.

Caroline was a bright girl. She knew what she should be doing inside the farmhouse alongside the stair-step sisters in every direction, seven of them. They all had to help out, and Caroline did her share. But she preferred the milk barn. Sometimes she'd escape into the hay loft and hold her breath, praying none of her sisters younger or older would find her so she could have even five precious moments just to lie on her back and breathe the sweet smell of the hay, hear the mice running through the bales, or watch the barn cat stalk something just below her field of vision—his sleek, lean body poised for attack. Below her, she could hear her father, Grandpa Silas, talking in low tones to the horses, the mules, the old cows. He loved it out here, too, away from the din in the house, the bustle, the chatter, the shrieks of young girls' voices. When they came out here, they knew to talk low and move slow. Grandpa's anger was swift if the animals were spooked or the cow refused to give her milk. They knew the rules. And, for girls, they were quite adept at handling the mules in harness, running the saw or the sorghum mill, driving the plow, or winnowing the wheat on the hard packed floor of the barn. At fourteen, Caroline was brown and strong in her brother's old shirt and jeans; her lithe body could scale the air above the hay bales two at a time or climb the ladder into the loft without a second thought. Her hands were calloused from the harness reins, and her brown-red hair wet with sweat and the early misty rain curled into tight corkscrews all over her head, wild and unyielding in their fierce beauty.

As she drove the horses around and around for the sorghum, she left her body to do that physical work, and allowed her mind to skip down the dirt road to another, smaller farmhouse where Robert Foster lived. Tonight, walking to church, she would walk beside his short, dark body and let him grab her hand in the twilight behind the ever-watchful eyes of her older sisters. She would look into his eyes and know that she was not really invisible because she could see herself reflected in the pupils of his deep brown eyes. He was a boy of few words, but the depths of those looks drove deep into her soul and she knew love as her own.

When she would tell me about her life growing up, she said she always knew walking slowly back to her own home from the one-room church or the school that was just farther down and around the corner, when another baby had been born. She came to think of her mother as forever round, never slender, always bulging, waddling between the sink and the pump on the back porch, standing for a moment to look out over the brown fields, her right hand cupped over her squinting eyes, her left hand unconsciously supporting the constant pain in her back. No one ever mentioned the word "pregnant" and Grandma forbade any of the girls to talk about what happened when babies were born. Caroline remembered the sharp slap when she had remarked that one of her sisters had "had" her baby the night before. Women don't "have" babies, Clara had warned her, babies are "born to them." It is a miracle, a mystery, of God's doing and we don't need to go making it sound vulgar. Women aren't animals, after all. But Caroline learned quickly enough not to say the cow "had" a baby either, or the horse, or the mama cat that delivered litter after litter under the front porch steps in the dark August heat.

She also recalled how much that slap had hurt the entire side of her face and head. For nights now she had been stifling her sobs from the pain in her ears into her feather pillow that was wedged between the pillows of her three sisters who shared her bed in the room down the hall from her parents. She knew Grandma would not be happy if she awakened the younger girls from their fitful, hot summer sleep. Their nearly naked bodies glistened in the moonlight from the sweat that dotted their skin, a futile attempt to cool their softly contorted bodies.

Caroline's ears had awakened her every night for more than a year now. She told her mother, and sometimes Clara would drop warm vegetable oil down into her ears and tell her to run and play. Caroline wondered about the loud noises she heard in her ears, the rumbling and the hissing, and the explosions that occurred in her eardrums on a regular basis. She knew it would take a broken leg or a severe fever to bring the doctor to their house far down the dirt roads, miles from the nearest town. It would go away, her mother promised, but it never did.

Babies were always being born in their cold farmhouse. After the initial shock, Grandpa loved to tell the story of the night the triplets were born. He'd been letting the mules find their way slowly home in the thick twilight through the woods pulling a load of supplies in anticipation of an early winter. His mind had, no doubt, been wandering, or perhaps he had nodded off to sleep when the reins jerked out of his hands and the old horses tried to rear up, stamped their feet wildly, and refused to move. He froze as he saw, there above the sweaty, salty air about the animals' straining heads, three bright spots wavering, floating, filling the air with a crackling energy that illuminated the paralyzed faces of man and beasts. His tongue filled his mouth, his eyes filled with uninvited water, and his ears were ringing. He had dropped the reins in his moment of astonishment. Just as quickly as the lights had appeared, they were gone. The dark moved in around the heads of the horses, and Silas felt around his feet for the dropped reins. He knew what it meant, as he told it later; he knew it meant that Clara was in labor. It meant another baby was on its way. He slapped the panicked horses sharply; they were eager now to leave the place of the ghostly lights and pull the heavy load toward home and the safety of the barn.

To hear him tell it so many times over the next few days and years, Grandpa also knew that the three lights were a warning to him that, in fact, *three* babies were being born to Clara in the double bed they shared on the second floor of the farmhouse beneath the eaves on the south side. Caroline never really believed him when he told it that way, although it was easy enough to believe that, indeed, the three lights *were* somehow connected to the three incredibly tiny forms that lay on clean towels next to Clara's still large but now quiet body. Only a small kerosene lamp revealed all those forms on the four-poster bed.

As she watched them lying there so quiet with her mother on the high bed, Caroline strained to remember the first moments after her birth that she, too, must have shared with Clara, before the activities of the farmhouse enveloped them all and eventually moved her down the hall away from the warmth and security of

that miraculous moment. Grandpa told the story of the lights to everyone who stopped by to view the three tiny babies from the doorframe that led into the sanctuary of Clara's bed. He told it time and again as she lay there in the dark, trying without success to get the babies to suck her hot, painful breasts. The warm milk dripped down her gown onto the already crusty sheets, but the babies were too little or too weak or too premature to know how to latch onto that lifeline and suck as though their lives depended upon it. All night she would bring one after the other onto her still soft stomach and cradle the babies in her arms, sometimes holding two or even three, they were that small. Cooing, singing, crying—her tears mixing with the milk, diluting it. But it didn't matter what she did, two of the babies were content to lie next to her body and sleep. What color were their eyes? Clara couldn't remember. Had they even opened their eyes? Were they breathing? She would move her head lower, next to the small mound each of them made in the folds of the blankets, holding her own breath—trying to detect theirs. By midnight of the third night, she knew two of the babies were gone.

Only one kept breathing. She ate nothing for days, but she somehow kept breathing. Clara felt her breasts swell. She knew her breasts would soon fester, so she took the pan she had asked Caroline to fetch and held it beneath her throbbing breasts and extracted what seemed to her to be gallons of rich, white milk. Wasted life juice, no help for the two tiny forms next to her, the bodies that did not breathe anymore. She must have fallen asleep then, exhausted from her vigilance for three days and nights. She awoke at the unmistakable tug at her breast, a signal that the third girl wanted to live. Timid at first, the little one she named at that moment Virginia began to pull and tug at the swollen breast, relieving her mother of at least some of her pain. But nothing could ever have prepared her for the dawn when Grandpa and the deacons from the church arrived with tiny caskets and took the other two babies from her bed forever.

Clara had braced herself long before not to love her babies too much. There were too many of them and there would be more, she knew. He never asked her what she wanted. He never checked to see if she was ready before he demanded she "do her duty." He never thought of the strain on her body and on her mind. Her only defense was to steel herself against the pain and the loss and the multitude of mouths to feed and the mountains of laundry to do. Actually, what Caroline did not realize was that she was no more invisible than all the other girls were. For Clara, some days the girls just melted one into the other. She could barely distinguish them in her mind or in her eye. Getting through the day was a worthy goal. Soon enough they would grow up and leave. One less. Two less. Three less. And leave they did, early and young they left the farmhouse, stealing off to church or into town with the boys who had a little money to spend on them. Soon enough they were married, leaving little evidence of their habitation in the farmhouse. One bed had a little more room, a closet had three inches more space, Caroline had a new drawer for her underwear. When they came back pregnant and sad, Clara had no resources to gather for them. She listened with a kind of far-away look in

her eye, trying to recall what her own mother had said to her when she first married Silas at fifteen, but she could not remember one single thing her own mother had said to console her. So Clara sat on the back step and pretended to listen, her daughters' words washing over her like last week's dishwasher. Then she would rise and go into the house to prepare the evening meal for the eight that were left, and for Grandpa.

Caroline had watched the three babies for days from the edge of the bedroom door, sometimes slipping into the room to sit quietly in the corner on the floor, her knees up to her chin, her eyes taking it all in, wondering at these days of drama, of birth and death. She watched in secret and silence as Grandpa cried tears with no sound on the porch chair away from the sounds and smells of the birthing chamber. She knew he cried not because two of the babies had died. No, he cried because Clara had delivered yet another girl. She now had given birth to thirteen girls and one boy. How could she keep doing that? Why? How could a farmer make it with all girls? Where were the strong, strapping boys who could help him throw bales of hay with ease and control the spirit of the strongest mule, who could plow forty acres in a day without flinching? Was she doing this just for spite? Girls, all girls. Well, hell, he said to any and all. They would just keep trying. They would just keep trying until she got it right.

That night Caroline knew no one would notice her slipping away to run down the dusty road toward the sad, rundown Foster place. Robert (always Robert—never Rob or Bobby—only the formal Robert Foster even when I knew him later as my father) had instructed her to meet him at their favorite tree next to the smallest pond. She ran breathless through air that held just a hint of fall in it but stopped short of the tree to catch her breath and peer through the thin gray evening air to see him sitting there, already waiting for her. *For her*. No one had ever waited *for her*. No one. Unless it was her father waiting for her to harness the mules, or her mother for her to finish kneading the dough, or her sisters for her to finish the dishes. No one had ever waited just to be with her, to talk to her, to look into her eyes and tell her she was something special. But Robert did that. Maybe not with too many articulate words, but he was there, wasn't he? And he loved to hold her hand and look into her eyes and grin that crooked Foster grin when she shyly asked how long he'd been waiting for her.

By the time she was fifteen, she was standing in the front yard of her parents' farmhouse in front of God and witnesses pledging to love, honor, and obey Robert Foster as long as they both might live. He had lied about his age and joined the Navy the same day, although he did not tell that to his new bride until they had traveled to the city. But she was a quick learner, after all, and already knew better than to question Robert Foster. They moved for a brief time to St. Louis, and Caroline was completely enthralled with city life. She had never been beyond the low-lying fields and rolling hills before, and the lights and sounds and smells lured her in and captured her heart. The thrill of being Mrs. Robert Foster in the city was almost too much to bear.

But the glamour wore off soon enough. She was throwing up violently these days unable to eat any of the wonderful foods offered in the stalls and the small cafes. Robert was working nights in a greasy spoon around the corner, and she rarely saw him. Before she knew it, she was waving good-bye to a busload of rowdy boys, none truthfully older than eighteen, as they drove off in the back of a flatbed truck, bound for glory and World War II.

For four long years Caroline, the invisible girl again, scrubbed the entrance-way and walls of the grimy apartment house she had to move into when her husband could no longer help with the rent. She went home to Clara's house only long enough to let this stranger in her body be born. When she returned, she was seventeen years old, alone in the city with a new baby, waiting for a government check to buy day-old bread and watch for the mail. His letters were scarce, cut to ribbons by the censors, incoherent by the time she got them. Sometimes sixteen or twenty would come in one day. Then there would be months of nothing. She read and reread the letters, pasting down the tattered pages onto full sheets of paper, crying over the undeciphered love thoughts, making the paper tear more with every tear. She pored over those letters for a clue, anything, that would tell her where her new husband was in this god-forsaken world, but she never found his secret. Only when he returned did he steam off the stamps and reveal to her, too late, the routes of his travels to places she had never heard of and where he never wanted to return.

In time, she talked with the apartment manager and agreed to clean the foyer and collect the rent checks for him in exchange for some of her rent. It was the first time she had ever earned any money of her own—and it would be the last time she did. She and the little boy made tentative excursions to the park, around the block, walking circles that widened with each trip, exploring the city that both enthralled and terrified her. She realized at last she was relaxing a bit, learning to find the shops where people might talk with her, offer her a better cut of meat, or where she could buy cheap clothes for herself and her son. For a short time, she actually thrived.

When Robert came home, he scooped up his little family within a day's time and moved them all back to the farming country where he felt safe. He didn't think to ask Caroline what she wanted to do. Actually, she wasn't even sure what it was she wanted. The city had been a lonely and alien place during his absence, she agreed—although she thought its charm might return now that he was home. She tried to tell him that she had actually come to enjoy it a little, sometimes, once in a while. Certainly, the hard farm life, the calloused hands, the mules, and the outhouses did not appeal to her. But Robert had spent the last four years hidden beneath the ocean surface packed into the too-tight space of a submarine with four hundred other men who were terrified every time someone sneezed. The terror of his memories filled the rural nights. Caroline tried to soothe his body and his mind, but she never could reach most of the spaces that had been wounded beyond repair. It would be years before he would turn to whiskey to erase the memories and allow him a kind of stupor that would make all of it a bit more bearable.

For now, Robert bought a mule, and soon another, and set to farming the dry, hot sand, determined to erase the horror of what he had seen with each broad swath of the plow as it turned the earth over, replacing the topsoil with a clean slate. Caroline worked alongside him as often as she could, but she was pregnant again; her little boy was five and not too certain he wanted to be on this farm with his mother and this very strange man he was supposed to call "Daddy." He cried a lot at night, and Robert hated that. "Shut that kid up," he'd say to Caroline. "Just get that kid to shut up." So she would go and lie down beside the boy, as she had done so many nights before in the city, wrapping her body around his small frame, enveloping him in her misery and her love and cry them both to sleep.

Robert was not very happy when I turned out to be a girl. My mother had a long, hard delivery. Her mother came and at least one of her sisters, but I was stubborn, not certain I wanted to join this family, loving the deep, dark, wet spaces in her womb, unwilling to pass through the narrow passageway and claim life separate from her. But she was tired of me inside her body. She hated the weight, the waddle, the backaches, the way her breasts felt. She pushed hard and forced me to land in the world, wailing at her insistence that I leave her body and claim my own space.

I have no recollection of those three years when I had my mother all to myself, the only baby. I do not know if she loved me to pieces or put me down only to walk away and reluctantly return when I screamed for food. I have no memories of my father holding me, hugging me, even addressing me directly. I was a nuisance and would never be any help to him, he knew.

My first real memory is when I was three and my mother came home from the hospital with my baby brother. It was Christmastime and my father moved their double bed into the living room so that my mother and the new baby boy could sleep next to the gas stove we had recently put into our home. We all loved the flames visible in the glass front, and Mom felt blessed not to have to carry coal into the house in the broken metal bucket anymore and nurse the fire all day long through bitter winter months in a house that leaked cold air. I remember standing between the stove and the bed, barely able to peer over the top of the mattress and the heavy blankets, and staring at my mother holding a bundle close to her body, cooing and feeding him from her stupendous breasts. I remember how I would slither up onto the bed and slide under the covers next to my mother, hoping to be noticed, longing for her arms to curl around me, jealous of the baby's rights to her attentions. At three, I was expected to be a "big girl," but I desperately wanted to be a baby; more than anything in the world, I wanted to be a helpless newborn again. But my dad would have none of it. At three, he would order me into the kitchen to bring him a glass of water, a diaper for the baby, to shut the door, to call the dogs and feed them. I grew up quickly that winter, not at all pleased to have suddenly attracted my father's attention. He let me know even then what my role as a woman would be in his and any household. He guarded his pride for his sons.

Later, when my mother came home again with yet another baby boy, I was too old to crawl up into her bed and would never have admitted that my longings to be held and loved hadn't evaporated, just moved deeper beneath the surface of my most inner being. I was aloof and looked upon the new baby with disdain, as I did my mother for continuing to deliver these babies, all these baby boys. I was not number seven, but I felt just as invisible as my mother had been in her household of girls.

I knew my mother continued to be beautiful because everyone else thought she was not only beautiful but delightfully happy all the time, a joy to be with. Robert Foster was the luckiest man alive, they'd say. Aren't they a perfect couple? So handsome, so in love, so perfect. As she walked before him through the church door wearing her new homemade dress with the self-fabric belt she fashioned from a kit tightly cinched about her narrow waist—she walked expertly in her “high, high heels,” as she called them—my dad would grin his famous grin and say to anyone within earshot, “She sure cleans up nice, don't she?” I knew her heels were at least thirteen years old then, but every time she wore them, she cleaned them off when she got home and carefully tucked them away in the box they had come in. Even today, she has some of those same shoes, more worn now and rather tattered looking, but the styles have returned, and she finds it amusing to wear these old shoes that are again in vogue, not to mention that at eighty-one she can still wear them with flair!

I knew the woman who dressed to the nines to go to church on Sunday or to town on Thursday afternoons to buy groceries was a far cry from the woman who worked in the cotton fields with me, alongside my father and three brothers. We would try to keep up, filling our sacks with the white, fluffy stuff I came to hate with every bone in my body, trying to weigh in with as many pounds as the men and boys did. But no matter how hard we tried, we couldn't keep up. I came to resent the effort, the demand, the expectation that we had to be there in the field straining our backs dragging the weight of that dirty cotton sack.

Many afternoons I watched my mother as she rested under a shade tree at the end of the endless rows of cotton stalks. Here, she was exposed. Hot, sweaty, brown, lean, hard, quiet—fiercely quiet. I could feel her palpable anger, a kind of seething rage she rarely expressed. She would lean against the tree and rub her aching legs, or wipe her face with a wet handkerchief of my father's. Or she would sit and gaze off beyond the cotton, beyond the ditches that harbored snakes and worse, past the rows of planted conservation trees and government-supplied multiflora roses and leave this earth. I swear, she would leave this earth. Her mind would go somewhere else, there was no doubt in my mind. I could talk to her, but I knew she couldn't hear me. Often she would cry, sitting there in the middle of that sun-baked field; she would silently weep and the tears would run, making tracks down her dirty face. I knew not to ask. I even knew why she was crying, although if you had asked me, I wouldn't have known what to say. My mother's marriage was a complete enigma to me. I could not fathom how she could stay with my father. My guess is



that she could not imagine any other life. From my point of view, he was mean and brutal. He would come in covered with mud or sand or grain from working in the fields or at the grain elevator that he later owned. He would track up her house, sit on the chairs, and drop his clothes in the mudroom for her to shake out and pick up. Like Edith on *All in the Family*—which we all watched faithfully on our black-and-white TV and laughed at without once recognizing it as a parody of our own family—my mother would literally run between table, refrigerator, and stove, trying to get everything on the table at once, barking orders to me to help with dishes, napkins, the bread, the butter.

Dad would lose his temper if the butter was not on the table, swearing, “Caroline, where the hell is the butter? You’d think you could remember the butter, just once. Get the butter on the table.” “Caroline, how did you fix this meat? It’s just like shoe leather.” “Caroline, did you fill up the car with gas today? I thought I told you to fill up the car with gas. What were you thinking?” “I swear you are deaf as a doornail. Turn around. Hello!” He was laughing now at her inability to hear, sneering at us in derision, inviting us to agree that it was pathetic how she couldn’t hear a word if her head was turned toward the stove.

It took years before I realized that her childhood ear infections had taken their toll on her eardrums. She was, practically speaking, deaf. She would politely turn from the stove at my father’s rants and say, “Excuse me? What did you say?” And of course, that would begin the barrage anew. I thought perhaps he hated her, her presence, her deafness, her femaleness, her inadequacies—at least as he saw them. From his chair in the living room, he would clink the ice in his glass as a signal for Caroline to come fill it up, knowing she would never hear that tinkling sound from the kitchen, then rail against her because she did not run fast enough or respond quickly enough.

When he began to drink, he was an unusual drunk. But then, I didn’t know much about drunks. We were, in fact, hard-shell Baptists: we didn’t drink, and Dad was a deacon in the church—a fine, upstanding, God-fearing, respected man of the church and of the community. With only a junior-high education, he owned a business. He was respected and a little bit feared because so many people owed him money. We realized all of this later, of course, when we were older.

By the time I left for college, my family no longer had to work in the fields. My father had built a business around the only thing in the world he knew—farming. He had injured his back in an accident at a grain elevator where he worked for nearly a decade. Thinking he could run his own farm supply operation, he secured risky loans and built his own store and elevator in a small town near where he and my mother now lived with their two younger sons, my brothers. Years into the business, he began to drink at work. His business, the grain elevator, the feed and seed store, the truck scales, the huge storage bins for beans and wheat, the debits and the credits were actually a minefield of confusion and bewilderment to my father. He was in way over his head and would be forced years later to auction off this monster that had taken him by surprise and lose his shirt on the whole

endeavor. But by then he couldn't feel a thing. He was too numb with the alcohol and the pain. He kept a pint in the drawer at work. He never, ever drank at home, but he left for work in the early morning mist and by 7:15 in the morning, he would begin to sip. A sip here, a sip there. By 10:00 he felt great. Men would be in the office drinking his strong, bitter, free coffee and the stories and jokes would fly, yarns about local women and racist jokes about "niggers" would fill the air. He would sit at his desk and laugh with the best of them as they stood around his office and warmed him with their friendships and their farm smells. By three in the afternoon, he was getting woozy and mean. My brothers knew to avoid the office in mid-afternoon. The smiles were gone, as were the farmers, and Dad would begin to stew. He knew the business was in big trouble. He had not a clue how to save it—it was all he had. For ten long years, he hung on by a thread of clear brown liquid that ran smooth as silk down his throat. How much longer? How much longer could he hold it all together?

By 6 p.m. he would move very, very slowly—his head pounding, his legs heavy and throbbing—to his truck and he would drive, stone drunk as a skunk, down the four miles of fields to our house. His eyes glazed over, his hands shaking as he took the curves through sheer willpower and memory. And then he would walk into Caroline's kitchen covered with dirt and grain and drop his filthy clothes and shoes and sit at her kitchen table, his eyes glazed over, and be just as mean as hell to her. All day she had gardened, washed his clothes, cleaned the house, sewed clothes for us kids, mowed the lawn, cleaned the garage, washed the car—whatever needed to be done. It was a joy to her to be home. She had hated the fields as deeply as she had ever hated anything in this life. All day Caroline had hummed to herself, working briskly, enjoying the quiet of her house. She never turned on a radio or the television set. She hated the telephone. She did not want to talk to anyone. Talking was difficult because hearing was almost impossible. The telephone roared in her ears. She prayed it would not ring. For a few quiet hours when we were in school and Dad was gone, she would remind herself to relish the quiet, knowing it would all too soon end. And it always did.

She gave him her body, her soul, her mind for as long as he lived. She stood by him, she took his abuse, she cried silently, she never once complained. Her duty was to love this man who had loved her first. And love him she would, through thick and thin—she got her share of both. She made all his favorite foods; she catered to his every need, she tolerated his assaults and seemed to ask for more. Dad was the king, we knew, and we were accidents at best, worries most of the time, mouths to feed, nuisances, pains in the butt. And I hated him as intensely as she loved him, knowing the two were so dangerously close as to be life threatening. Years later, when he was very, very sick, he would revolt me with nasty, wet kisses on my cheek and mouth, telling me how proud he was of me and how much he loved me. I did not believe him then; it was too late.

Being the only girl at our house certainly did *not* translate into being "special." It meant no way could I get my license when I turned sixteen. It meant no way could

I go cruising in cars with my friends. It meant no way could I date boys before my eighteenth birthday. It meant I could never wear shorts or go to dances. From the beginning, my father was convinced I would be “married and ruined” before I turned sixteen. Even with all the rules and watching me like a hawk, my father totally expected me to get pregnant and drop out of school. But, in truth, the one place I could shine and get noticed was at school. I loved school; I loved to write and got good grades. My teachers quietly encouraged me. When I graduated from high school with top honors, no one at school was surprised, but my parents were not at all interested in educating a girl. Gingerly I began to talk about why I wanted to attend the teacher’s college only twenty-five miles away (although it might well have been a thousand miles). Since then, I have, on many occasions, heard my mother tell stories about this period in our lives. Her stories tell of *my father’s* resistance to my college education and her own support beyond the scenes, helping me fight his angry, stubborn, immobile stance. *I think* I got to college on my own. The way she tells it, it was only through her persistence and support that I finally moved my few belongings into the all girls’ dormitory in the fall of 1965. I don’t contradict her, but I know she’s remembering it all wrong. She was not supportive, that much I know. I wouldn’t get that wrong, would I?

### *In Harm’s Way*

Is it any surprise that I married a serious young man who looked into my eyes with smoldering intensity before he left for graduate school and then proposed by mail? He was the smartest person I had ever met, and he had noticed me. He had never had a girlfriend. He wrote from graduate school that it was time, he felt, for him to marry—that having a stable home life while in graduate school would be a solid base from which to launch his career in biology. He sent a series of collages to me that he had crafted from magazines, a pastiche of color and images. The one I remember the most vividly was a photo of a bride with her head cut off. I did not notice the omen then. Would I consider marrying him and move to Illinois? I should let him know by return mail. I didn’t even hesitate. It took me about thirty seconds to weigh this proposal against the prospects of marrying the good Baptist boy who groped for my blouse in the dark on our way to church functions. It took a little longer to wonder if my growing relationship with the quiet poet in my English class might blossom. But I knew my parents would never approve of him, and at eighteen I wasn’t going to make this my first battle with my parents. Except for insisting on going to college, I had been an absolutely perfect daughter. Only my brothers had acted upon the rebellion in their blood. I was terrified to speak my mind, usually I did not question. This Lutheran farm boy would fit the bill. He would take good care of me, and I knew he was my ticket out of the Missouri boot heel, into a world of books and more schooling, a world that was as alien to me as the stars or a black hole. So I answered back a meek, grateful “yes” to the boy who was in graduate school.

We married before my twentieth birthday and I moved to Illinois with him. Within nine months, I was not pregnant, nor did I give birth to a child until several

years later, but I did wind up nursing a bleeding ulcer. I had no idea who this stranger was that I had married. He was a cruel and hard man, unflinching in his criticism of everyone in the world, especially me. He sneered at my ineptitudes, took on an air of superiority that confused me. He had made a mistake, he said. I really wasn't as bright as he had thought I was. That frustrated him; he didn't make mistakes. I disappeared into myself. I spoke rarely and carefully, never to reveal my inadequacies, my lack of knowledge. I read vociferously. I could, eventually, talk about quantum physics, bioethics, and the metabolism of the animals he used in his laboratory experiments. I tried to learn the nuances of microbiology and electronmicroscopy. I typed his dissertation every night until the red sun came up over the tops of the buildings and lit up the keyboard, my fingers still black and greasy with the smelly liver I fed to his lab frogs. And my stomach bled as I held myself tightly so that I would not explode. One typo, I knew, and he might push me up against the door of the silent hallway in the deserted building in the silence of the early morning and tell me again, just for good measure, how lucky I was to be married to him. By virtue of being his wife, I would share in the glory of his brilliance. The world just might notice me, he jeered. I knew, as well, that I had made a grave and dangerous mistake. It would be nearly ten years before I began to leave him, driving around town looking for a place to live. Eventually, my graduate school friends cleared out a closet for me; I happily slept on the floor for months, safe in a yellow house on the corner filled with women.

Recently, I read about a woman killed by her ex-husband in Tennessee. He'd walked into the place where she worked and shot her four times, shot three people sitting close to her in the building, and killed two policemen on the way out the door. I cannot recall now if he killed himself or if he was shot. But I could not get that woman, and that man, out of my mind. She had taken out several orders of protection against her husband. Her story reminds me of all the stories I have collected in my work with battered women, getting their stories on tape in the back rooms of women's shelters. I had totally forgotten that I had also gone to court once and petitioned for an order of protection. Before that, I'd never even heard of an ex parte or an order of protection. Lucky for me, my lawyer was a hard, no-nonsense kind of woman who had no use whatsoever for John and all the men like him. She suffered through my bouts of doubts and my confusion and my fear with a sober face, and suggested I get everything I could out of this low-life, as she would call him. Well, I knew John was no "low-life." I knew he was superior to all of us, but I learned not to say that in front of my lawyer. She urged me to let the sheriff take me out to the house where John still lived and get half the furniture, our records, our son's photographs. We eventually agreed on joint custody. I was not in a bargaining position. Little did I know that because I had left my son out there in the house with my husband when I moved into the little yellow house, the court in this state would call that "child abandonment." I was grateful for the closet but remember listening to my own breath in the dark, expecting the worst. I had, he said, embarrassed him. *No one in his family had ever been divorced. Ever.* He told me that a lot.

What would he tell his boss, his advisor at the lab? Besides, he claimed smugly, *You won't get to the end of next week without me, you sorry excuse for a woman. How will you get around? Who will take care of you? You'll be back*, he said.

But I didn't go back. And I did just fine. I rode my bike. In fact, the first morning that I rode that bike from the little yellow house, across the railroad tracks and onto the university campus with my books in my backpack, I soared. Never, before or since, have I ever experienced the release of that amazing ride under the summer blue sky. I thought my heart would burst, it felt that good. At the first hearing, John didn't show up at the courthouse, but he showed up at my house that same afternoon, madder than hell. He seethed. He raged. He called me names. How dare I? What gave me the right to slander *his* name in front of a judge and other people? I felt myself backing out of the living room where he stood shaking his finger at my face. He followed me, a dark moving cloud. He picked up a glass and threw it past my ear and broke a hole in the wall behind my head. I do not know if his aim was off. I doubt it. Had he wanted to hit me with the glass, I'm certain he could have. Our son walked in and the tension dissipated ever so slightly. John backed off, taking his son with him out my front door.

After I stopped shaking, I called my lawyer. Months later, at the divorce hearing, I wore the only suit I owned, a thick wool tweed that I wore like armor. My girlfriends were dressed to go with me in their summer dresses, skirts, and sleeveless tops. They worried that I might just pass out in the August heat in Indiana, but I was determined to wear that suit: it was the only protection I had that day.

### *In search of our mothers, take two. . .*

Alice Walker reminds us to go in search of our mother's gardens to find evidence of the beauty they were able to create in their otherwise barren lives, and Virginia Woolf says we tell our own stories backward through our mother's and our grandmother's stories. When we do this kind of remembering work to bring our mother's stories into the present, there is, on the one hand, a sense of joy and nostalgia for the recognition of lives we perhaps never really knew. But there is to this work another side, a darker side that also reminds us that we are, indeed, our mother's daughters. For many of our mothers, their gardens were not enough to heal their wounds or enable them to be strong enough to help us when we most need them. I was not prepared to discover in the stories from battered women a persistent story of disconnection from their mothers. Their stories eventually led me to uncover some of the truth of my own mother's story and eventually link it back to the women's stories in this research. I believe this link is critical. Daughters all, we know the pain of abandonment from mothers who could bear no more pain.

Some time ago, about two years now, I asked my mother if I could tape record her life story. I had finished research on the life stories of women ministers and had embarked on a project collecting the stories of battered women. I was still high on the potential for these stories to tell us about each other and about ourselves. I wrote my mother a long letter outlining the usefulness of these stories and how

much I could learn about her from collecting her own, even appealing to her need to see me more often in order to talk her into a polite, even interested “yes.” What I received was an emphatic, resounding, “No.”

I was insulted, flabbergasted, and confused. How could she say no to me, the dutiful daughter, the researcher, the writer? But she did. She claimed that right with more power and authority than perhaps I had ever encountered from her. When I finished being angry, I was even more astonished that she had mustered up the courage to make this statement about her right to the privacy of her own life. Her answer? She said too many people were still alive; there were too many people who might possibly get hurt or misunderstand if she did this, knowing I meant to use the story somehow in a publication not yet imagined. “You tell *your* story,” she told me in a voice I had come to dislike over the years, “and in doing that you can also tell what you know about mine. But it will still be ‘your’ story, not mine, and you have every right to do that, you know.” At the time, I had no intention of ever telling my story, and I felt I only knew pieces and fragments of hers, not nearly enough. So I put the idea completely away, thinking the episode was over.

But as I began to work more and more with the stories from the women in the shelter and spent the long, tedious hours transcribing the tapes of the women who had agreed to tell me *their* life stories and the stories of abuse they had endured, I was haunted by the stories of my mother and grandmother, as well as my own. I heard our stories in the stories of the women on the tapes; I heard my words in theirs; their stories, my mother’s stories, my stories sometimes swirled together in my mind as I walked long hours on the trail near my house, trying to sift through all the transcriptions. In the air in front of my eyes, it seemed as though I could actually watch my mother’s and grandmother’s stories, and my own, weave in and out of the ones I had collected and listened to over and over and over again on tape.

I came to realize in a visceral moment that some of our mothers have been too wounded themselves to give to us a sense of our own value and worth. I have come to realize that their own pain and sadness were so overwhelming they simply did not possess the energy to actually “see” us and provide for us a safe haven where we could be nurtured to grow in positive ways. So we sought that empowerment, attention, and worth elsewhere. But because we had no sense of our own value going into relationships beyond our home of origin, we were ill-equipped to seek better situations.

*This* is a part of the cycle of abuse that is rarely acknowledged: for some of us, our mothers and grandmothers have perpetuated a sad tradition of neglect and pain passed through generations of abuse. They, too, left their mothers in a vague, dizzy moment of aloneness and woke the next morning to find themselves locked into abusive marriages that sapped their energies and left them vacant and pained. They passed this legacy on to their daughters, not by plan or intent, but just by who they were and what they were not able to give. In fact, I think their stories lay bare what is at the very heart of how some women come to find themselves in abusive

relationships, and why they cannot extricate themselves from the partners who abuse them.

Oddly enough, even though I have immersed myself in an ethnographic study of a battered women's shelter and have written a book about women's narratives of abuse and violence, it was only recently that I was able to connect the dots about my own life. By meeting a distant first cousin, basically "for the first time," I found a link in my own encounters with domestic violence. My cousin grew up in a loving family and spent her summers playing at our grandmother's house and her paternal grandmother's house as well. She told me how the rest of the family worried about my mother and the isolation her husband had imposed upon our small family, never encouraging visits, connections, reunions. While I have recently been able to write about the violence my father imposed upon those of us who lived in his house—how he "unmade our world," as Elaine Scarry puts it—I had not put my own household into the larger picture of violence and abuse that I was trying to study and write about. The work I am doing has helped me realize just how difficult abuse is for other women to live with and how varied are the ways in which we are demeaned, battered down, diminished. I'm the scholar. I'm supposed to know what I'm seeing under the microscope. How could I have missed it? It was right under my nose.

# Fieldwork, Folk Communities, Informants

Ethnography and intensive fieldwork live at the heart of what folklorists do. Going “into the field”—observing traditions, listening to people, recording their songs and stories and riddles and personal accounts and descriptions—is what provides the cultural understandings that folklorists use in their work. Folklorists come to know communities and “informants” (though that term, sanctioned by decades of use, may strike some as too impersonal, even slightly clinical), and complex relationships often evolve between folklorists and their folk collaborators, relationships that may involve years of human interaction and many layers of meaning. Though historically folk traditions have been presented analytically or, often, just as transcribed “texts,” more personal means of communicating how folklorists relate to the environments in which they operate and about the very processes involved become increasingly appropriate.

Several writers in this section speak of the fieldwork experience, of this process fundamental to folklorists and their work (folklore having been called a “listening profession”). Cynthia Levee’s poem “White Bluffs and Miss Lena” takes the reader on a field trip around a small Southern city, derived from Levee’s researches into Southern Jewish culture; it lets the reader hear how an informant makes sense of a personal cultural reality. My own “Oral History” conflates encounters with several informants who spoke of their lives during the days of the British Raj in India, while it also comments on some of the ambiguities of memory and recording memory. Jens Lund’s memoir “Karl and Janie” comes out of his fieldwork for the Smithsonian’s Festival of American Folklife in 1975 (and says much about how the folklorist, initially a stranger, learns about a community). Several of Margaret Yocom’s poems came out of her fieldwork, too, though in her case the connection may not be so obvious, as three of the poems are about the natural landscape of her fieldwork area in Maine, not her cultural encounters. There is, she says, “a loneliness to fieldwork . . . an aloneness that is right and fitting” and “these poems speak to that loneliness, to thoughts of distant friends, and to grace, grief, and sensuality that life continually places before us.” Her “Opening Camp” addresses the aloneness of first coming each June to the small “camp,” the cabin she and her husband John bought in her fieldwork area, to which John will not follow until later in the summer.

And though Ted Olson in “Historical Sign” and William Bernard McCarthy in “Second Growth” look at how the overlay of time affects present-day perceptions



of landscape—cultural as well as physical—they also speak of things encountered while poking about in the landscape of fieldwork, as well as the literal landscape. These are the sorts of discoveries folklorists make by accident and by design when they go out to encounter what's out there. In "Margaret," Steve Zeitlin speaks very much of personal involvement in the fieldwork experience, writing about an ethnographer and photographer who documented the lives of New York's homeless populations but who became more than a documentarian to some of these people. His poem "Cat," however, looks more at the "informant" side, giving us "a section from an oral history interview" with a former prostitute, one of two whom he interviewed for a radio commentary about a creative writing program for men and women with AIDS; they were "among the most articulate and passionate people I've ever interviewed," Zeitlin says.

Neither Jeff Todd Titon's short story "Percy" nor Teresa Bergen's novel *Bigfoot Stole My Husband* looks at fieldwork as such but both deal with the sorts of communities that folklorists often encounter. Titon's story—set on a Maine island like the one where the author is sometimes a summer, sometimes a year-round resident—examines fictionally how folk crafts are learned, how those learning contexts change, and how what is authentic in folk art may challenge common conceptions. The story has a quiet irony and a protagonist who remains true to himself while it raises questions about folk and non-folk aesthetics and the consuming of traditional arts, as well as the role of visitors from outside and of tourism in the perception of folklore. Bergen's community is less one of place, more one of intense organization around the shared interests that may constitute a lore, in this case, tracking down a legendary creature. Here we have only her first chapter, but it captures the outlines of the group, letting us in on some of its conflicts, concerns, and shared understandings.

Indeed, the centrality of fieldwork is hardly limited to the pieces in this section. In other sections, Rosan Augusta Jordan's poems stem from her fieldwork in Oaxaca, Mexico, observing the Days of the Dead celebrations there; Holly Everett writes of documenting the tradition of constructing roadside shrines for accident victims; Norma Cantú's protagonist looks at religious ceremonies in Spain; and other contributions are certainly based on fieldwork experiences, though the influence may be indirect.

## Oral History

Spools of memory take up the voice,  
Wrap up the past on rolling mylar,  
File used-to-be around whirring reels.  
The cassette spins like mad Andromache,  
Fearing loss of some yesterday  
The mind still holds, like a forsaken lover  
Holds a shirtsleeve, a letter, or a kiss.

It is the recorder that feels the passion  
To record. The speaker may strain to remember,  
May cast the past up with delight,  
Or try to dodge this bullet, recollection.  
Some speakers may be quite indifferent:  
“I only did that for two years, until  
More interesting pleasures came my way.”

He sits in an Irish seaside house,  
Never speaking when the interviewer comes  
Of what all his service called “Howard’s error.”  
He laughs at mistaking papaya seeds for caviar  
On his first train beyond Calcutta,  
Talks of engaging a syce in Dacca,  
Even of dressing for dinner once in the mofussil,  
As if to confirm a myth. But never of his error:  
How when a mob attacked his bungalow one night,  
He did not follow “standard procedure,”  
Did not just shoot dead the first man or two,  
Firing instead above their heads,  
As though Heaven would gently soothe this murderous gang.  
They beat him nearly dead and then moved on.

Howard’s error.  
This is his great secret  
That never finds its way to tape.

Another sits in a Shropshire cottage,  
Prime minister once of a small Himalayan state:  
Allowed to shake hands  
With the sons of the raja's official concubines  
    (never with the unofficial, who existed  
        but could not be touched,  
            a better class of outcaste).  
The taping over, he passes on *his* secret then:  
He was a Black Heart, one of the band of bachelors  
Who gave the celebrated Simla ball. They had a motto  
One secret word of which was always missing  
From its public printing. He tells the interviewer that word.

The interviewer takes no notes  
And in later years forgets  
This great comic minor mystery  
Of the Raj.

The spools of memory have their glitches,  
Their eighteen minute gaps.  
We cannot get it all, whatever's chosen:  
Tape, parchment, brain cells alone,  
Archives, computers, film.  
The heart evades, language fails, remembrance runs dry.  
We grasp at the pieces, netting butterflies blown by,  
And rightly marvel at their colored wings,  
Bright like the sea at Bombay,  
Rich as the carpets  
That came down the Khyber in spring.

## Cynthia Levee

### White Bluffs and Miss Lena

Rise sheer from the Tombigbee  
in Demopolis of the people a city  
*You can visit but  
I don't know if I'll have anything for you*  
The youngest of the handful of Jews  
at eighty-five picks me up in her Chrysler  
Eager to show the tourist postcard of  
*the house I grew up in  
Moved from a plantation after the Civil War  
I feel it's still mine  
Moved out seventy years ago  
See on the corner it's holding up well*  
We visit  
the Jewish cemetery  
the black loamy Alabama soil  
Her plot saved next to her  
*husband was so sick and then he died  
before he could look for this one cousin  
we thought was still alive  
in Czechoslovakia whatever they call it now*  
So I searched and found  
*the temple and the cousin  
so happy to meet me too*  
Acres of green grass  
Markers from 1800's  
wandering over  
The first Jewish peddler  
settled his family business  
King Cotton and hundreds of Jews  
into the twentieth century  
Valedictorian of her high school class  
She doesn't want me to take her picture  
*We saw every Broadway play by Lillian Hellman  
whose mother was a Newhouse from Demopolis  
grandmother a Marx  
sharp tough hard retailers  
Lillian looked like the Marxes  
knew how to trade  
horses and mules*

*North Walnut Avenue and Washington Street  
The Marx Brothers sold to the Robertsons  
Issac Marx built B'nai Jeshurun Temple  
Home of the Righteous and Beloved  
They'll let us visit  
They keep it up for us now  
Never had a rabbi  
Now a small wooden room  
Ten rows of chairs  
Three hundred year old Torah  
I do have wonderful memories  
Every Friday night  
we read in English from the Union Prayer Book  
I talk to my daughter every day  
She married locally  
He said the children could attend services  
but it was a different story  
after they were born  
So I have six grandchildren  
none Jewish  
but I read them the prayerbook  
and the other day one recited  
Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart  
    with all thy might  
Another calls long distance  
It's wonderful to have someone who takes advice  
My son went off to school has no children  
Helped set up the college fund for the others  
Time to sit down for chocolate cake  
a business partner of my husband still mails at Christmas  
Do you know Jews up north don't even have Christmas  
Dabs her eyes with a handkerchief  
Holidays are sad when those you love are gone  
My nice china and silver's at my daughter's  
Isn't it wonderful we had our weekend*

## Steve Zeitlin

### Margaret,

Photographing the structures of the homeless  
in early morning light

Homes resembling a nest, a cave,  
a house on wheels  
homes built in the darkness of a tunnel  
under the West Side Highway  
in the ironic hollow of a Bloomingdale's bin.

Mr. Lee's shanty covered with oranges  
for the Chinese New Year

Where Margaret arranged for the funeral  
for she was the nearest of kin

*—inspired by the work of Margaret Morton*

### Cat

I was a stripper  
I lived in a make pretend world of sexual images  
I danced in costumes  
I was happiest when I was in a dark room, scantily dressed

I tried to dance one last time  
I got up there on stage three weeks ago at this place where  
I'd danced in Chelsea  
I just wanted to capture the old feeling one last time  
and it had changed  
Leaving all that behind is a grieving process  
But it no longer works for you—  
I'm much too wise for all that now  
You're given the time that you're given and then it's gone

If I long for anything, it's the ignorance I used to have  
Every bit of wisdom narrows my path, that's cool  
I've got to walk the good path, whatever that may be  
But sometimes I just long for the fucking banal ignorance  
of that little girl junkie stripper motherfucker whore  
And that leniency I had on myself—before

*—transcribed from an oral history interview with Cat Yellen*

## Karl and Janie

Rook Lake is like many small towns in northwest Wisconsin. It is an ethnic mosaic of Slavs, Scandinavians, Germans, and Irish, and almost everybody is either Lutheran or Catholic. Streets are shaded by broadleaf trees, planted there early in the century. Outside of town, the area is surrounded by spindly pine forest, broken up by an occasional pasture. Most of the open areas are growing over in brush because the small-scale dairy farms that used to be so numerous here are now uneconomical. Most of the black-and-white Holsteins you do see are pets or one family's source of fresh milk. The pine woods were cut over late in the last century and most of the trees that weren't already harvested by then were taken away by a series of forest fires a few years later.

Unlike most of the other lake-name towns, Rook Lake's namesake is right in town; the town is built on its shores and many of the houses are lakefront property. Since there is little opportunity for employment in the area, most of the inhabitants are old. A few young people stay to work for the highway department or the school district or the hospital up in Werner or the nearby trout hatchery. There are, of course, also a small complement of service workers—store clerks, a plumber, a few bank clerks, two auto mechanics, and so on. A few people still log part-time, but the old timber industry and its sawmills died out by the 1950s.

Many of the retired farmers and loggers now live in town, filling up the double-wides on the cul-de-sacs in the developments on the far end of the lake. Beyond the developments is a small airport, formerly operated by the U.S. Forest Service and now used only by private pilots.

Several people told me that I should visit Karl Berg. He was a second-generation Swede, retired from both the farm and the woods. His primitive paintings could be seen in banks, in the local hardware store, and even in some of the area's taverns. The last was surprising because everybody said that both Karl and his wife, Janie, were strict teetotalers, who had quit the Rook Lake Lutheran Church years ago when a new pastor had allowed the serving of *glögg* at a Christmas party.

The Bergs were now said to drive all the way to Rice Lake to attend the Evangelical Covenant Church every Sunday—a good hour and a-half each way.

People liked the Bergs. They were nice folks but a little strange, especially devoid of a sense of humor. A tragedy had evidently happened to them at one time, but no one volunteered to tell me what it was. They liked Karl's paintings, most of which were landscapes, and many of which depicted rustic scenes of Holsteins in a pasture or dozers hauling logs to a mill.

The Bergs lived in a double-wide right on the lake. Unlike most of the lake properties, they had neither a boat nor a dock. I noticed this, because I had to go the back door, which faced the lake. The front door was not on a path and came right out into a planting of little bushes. It was obviously not in use.

A short skinny man in a seed cap invited me in and introduced me to his wife. Even though they were born in the U.S.A., both had a slight touch of a Swedish accent. They probably grew up speaking Swedish at home. He was very friendly and more than glad to entertain me and show me some of his paintings. His wife was very hospitable, immediately making a fresh pot of coffee for me, but her personality was much colder. She didn't seem to want to talk, but she often briefly interrupted him as he was telling me something, usually to correct a minor detail. Mostly he told me about his life as a farmer, a logger, and a sawmill hand, and how his father had also been an artist, working in watercolors, and how he himself liked these new acrylics. When I tried to steer the conversation toward his wife, to try to get a feeling for her life, she would reply to my questions in one-sentence answers. I found out that they had recently observed their fiftieth wedding anniversary. I asked Mrs. Berg if they had had a celebration.

"No," she said. "Nobody to celebrate with." I thought this was an odd remark.

"I hope you celebrated with each other," I thought, but I didn't think it appropriate to say that aloud. I noticed an autoharp lying on a nearby sofa.

"Do you play?" I asked. Karl started to answer but his wife cut him off.

"We only sing religious songs," she said stiffly.

"Would you play and sing for me?" I asked.

Karl sat down on the sofa and picked up the autoharp. He started to strum. Soon he was playing a lively version of "Golden Slippers." I couldn't help chuckling to myself that *she* probably thought that it was a religious song, rather than the sacrilegious song that it really was. Karl Berg was quite good on that thing. He could even play melodies and counterpoints, rather than just the chord progressions most people played on an autoharp. As the speed of the tune picked up, I noticed her giving him a cold stare. He brought the tune to a halt with a "shave-and-a-haircut . . ." and immediately began a slow version of "Fairest Lord Jesus." She sang it in Swedish, in a high reedy voice. She carried a tune well but age had weakened her vocal abilities.

Jane Berg kept me well-supplied with fresh coffee and eventually opened a package of Lorna Doone cookies, which she arranged in a little china bowl and set



on the coffee table. After a while, I could tell that they were both glad to have company. Maybe they didn't get many visitors. But despite this, she was uncomfortable with me being there, especially with Karl playing his autoharp tunes. Most were hymns, and she would glower if he picked up too much speed.

During a break in the music, she went out in the kitchen to start some more coffee. He immediately launched into his *pièce de résistance*, "Stars and Stripes Forever." I'd never heard anybody play that on the autoharp before. This man had talent. I wondered what else he could play. She came back into the room and spoke sharply: "Karl!"

"For heavens sakes, Janie, it's a patriotic song. Don't you like patriotic songs?" This was the first and only time I heard him talk back to her but the spirit of the tune was lost. He played it through one more time, half-heartedly, and then immediately launched into another hymn. I think it was a version of "There Is a Fountain."

I had now been there for a good two hours, and I feared I might be wearing out my welcome. I made up an excuse about another appointment that I had to make, and reached for my coat.

"Wait a minute," said Mrs. Berg. "Before you go, let me tell you something. We haven't always been this way, you know."

"Well, it seems to me," I protested, "you've been very nice to me. Shared your coffee and cookies and music and paintings. I certainly wouldn't ask for any more."

She kept going in her own direction. "We got this way because of tragedy. That's why. You can never know what it's like, the way we lost our son, last year. You seen that little airport over beyond them trees? That's where it happened."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I didn't know."

"Well, I'm going to tell you, now, and it's not a pretty story. Then maybe you'll understand." Karl sank deep into his upholstered chair. His chin dropped to his chest and his eyes closed.

"That airport over there," she continued. "Our son, he was a fine young man, a good boy, a Christian. Didn't care for none of that jazz stuff. Just had one fault. He loved them airplanes. Would do anything to get to fly in one. We're just plain, ordinary folks. We didn't have no money for no airplanes or no airplane rides. Jakey, he fell in with them flyin' boys, who used to fly for the Forest Service and some of them even just for the fun of it. Jakey'd hang around that airport just so he could get a ride. I told him not to, but he was a young man now and didn't always do what we said. One day, one of his flyin' fool friends was out there in his airplane, parked on the ground, motor runnin', propeller goin' roun' and roun'. He hollered at Jakey, 'Come on along! Want a ride?' Jakey ran out there, didn't look where he was goin', ran right into that spinnin' propeller. Whole top of him was cut to bits. Had to have the funeral with the coffin closed." She paused.

"Now you see what I mean? Now you see why we're the way we are?"

Of course, the tale was dreadfully depressing. I was embarrassed that I had disturbed the old couple in their grief. Still, Karl had appeared relatively cheerful

whenever his wife was out of earshot. I expressed my condolences awkwardly but the best I could. I bid the couple goodbye, excused myself and headed out to the car. Just as I was about to drive off, someone tapped on my window. It was Karl Berg.

I rolled down the window and he smiled and handed me one of his paintings. “You come again some time, OK? I’ve got lots more tunes. Sorry about the old woman. She’s still takin’ it pretty hard.”

“Well, I can certainly understand that,” I told him. “That was a terrible tragedy.”

“Yep,” he said, and headed back to the double-wide. I thought I heard a cry of “Karl?”

I drove back to the motel and lay awake a long time pondering the tragic tale and the continuing tragedy of the old woman who couldn’t let her husband get over the loss of their son.

The next day, I had another appointment in Rook Lake. It was with the Markivs, a Ukrainian family, who sang and played traditional Ukrainian music. Turns out they lived just across the little inlet in the lake from the Bergs.

And they couldn’t have been more different. A handsome, middle-aged father, his beautiful wife, and their three teenaged sons—all of them easygoing, laughing, full of jokes. They sang their songs and played their traditional instruments, accordion and many-stringed *banduri*. They invited me for dinner. It was a downright festive afternoon and evening. Mr. Markiv was a consulting engineer. He had grown up in the county and moved back after his business flourished. He traveled about half the year visiting various construction sites all over North and South America. But his passion was the family musical ensemble, to which he devoted most of the rest of his time.

“So, who else have you visited around here?” he asked me between mouthfuls.

“Well, for one, the Bergs, over there.”

“You visited Karl Berg?” said the wife.

“I sure did. And they were nice folks, too. Karl Berg sure could play that autoharp.”

“I didn’t know his wife still let him,” added Mr. Markiv.

“You met his wife, too?” asked Mrs. Markiv.

“Sure did. She fed me all afternoon on coffee and cookies, and every time Karl tried to play anything but a slow hymn, she’d interfere. In fact, she told me right as soon as I asked about the autoharp, it was laying on the sofa, that he didn’t play anything but religious music.”

The woman was now smiling broadly. “And I suppose she told you about her son, too,” she said.

All five of them started to titter.

“What’s so funny about that?” I asked. “What a horrible tragedy.” I was beginning to think that maybe the Markivs weren’t such nice folks, after all.

“And what story did she tell you?” inquired the missus.

I then summarized the tale of what happened last year at the airport.

“So why is that so darned funny?” I asked. “I think it’s perfectly horrible.”

“Well,” said Mr. Markiv. “I suppose it’s not really all that funny. Now, you’re a stranger around here, and you never heard any of this before, so I can see why you don’t see the humor in it. Folks who’ve lived here all their lives, they know the Bergs, and they know what Mrs. Berg’s like. She really is a sad case. It was a long time ago, back in the forties, when their son died in a mail-plane crash. She never could get over it, though. Has been saying it happened last year for the past thirty years or more. And her stories of what happened! I don’t how many different ones she’s got. You went back there tomorrow, you’d hear a different one, maybe even more outlandish. Cut in half by the prop, eh? That’s one of the more believable ones. She must’ve thought you were too smart for some of the other tales she tells.”

As I drove back to the motel, I thought, “No, it still wasn’t funny, although I suppose if I lived next door and heard different tale after different tale, year in, year out, I might start to laugh at it all, too.” After all, humor comes pretty close to tragedy. But I couldn’t help thinking about Karl Berg and how much better his life would have been if Jane had just let him get over it.

**Historical Sign**  
*(marking for passersby  
an abandoned plantation house  
in the Mississippi Delta)*

1.

Once overworked by black men,  
this plantation is no longer  
overseen by white men, it is  
overlooked by everyone:

drivers, when they venture  
from the interstate, race  
by this plantation house  
on their way to Stuckey's—

yet, distracted by  
their stomachs, they  
don't notice the fading  
historical sign. . .

2.

Whatever the State may say,  
these columns are not Greek,  
these are the flagpoles  
of a forgotten nation—

a nation that surrendered  
its offensive flag  
to save its estates  
from reconstruction. . .

3.

They loved their institution,  
those who owned this place,  
while those who worked here  
hurt too much to hate it,  
so this plantation survived  
the changing of the laws  
without changing, the house  
and shacks whitewashed

to mask the War's wounds.  
But one man couldn't keep it  
up—he lost his crop to weevils,  
then the sun deserted him;

his pride mixed with whiskey,  
he charged down the road  
past enemy shadows, to the river,  
where he slept, waiting for the day:

when first light flooded the fields  
his wife woke up alone—he and his Bible  
were gone; she prayed, then saw a sign  
God was on the land: his overturned boat. . .

4.

The sign does not say so, yet  
this plantation, once overworked  
by blacks and overseen by whites,  
still is understood by no one. . .

## *Margaret Yocom*

### Opening Camp

Even the moon is hidden by the mountain  
tonight. Lilacs are still ten dreams away.

The key in my hand turns the silted lock.  
Whose knife and spoon? Whose pen? Whose empty plate?

*You are here. You will always be here.*  
Repeat these lines thirty times. Every day.

January, February, March. I breathe ice.  
In the museum of cold, one glove is on display.

I gave away my field guide to the hours.  
Tell me, does the cedar grow by the lake?

Everything I thought I wanted lies frozen  
in this alabaster air. Come soon. Stay.

### Echo, at Lakeside

small waves  
at twilight

the drowsy call of bird  
to bird

open windows  
at morning's blue hour

all day  
your voice

## Where the Living Keep Watch

*If the hand, if  
the eyelid, if the one—*

Rain squalls out of the northwest, streaks  
this small pocket of lake silver  
then gray, then silver

Waves lash new-risen water lilies that  
float, sink and float, anchored  
by this season's roots

*if the one last dream of  
if—*

Fog claims the cove, moves  
ashore for one white pine, then another  
a continent away, death enters a room

*if the breath—*

A flutter in the air, traces  
of lavender and wood smoke  
the door

Beyond pine  
beyond spruce, fir, the chime of a fresh-again brook  
a Saturday mower begins his evensong

## In Jewelweed

The humming  
bird hovers at my feeder, sips  
    the offered syrup  
    again  
    and again  
I wheel and dip in your certain sweetness  
    flutter of fingers on silk, open  
    palm feathering open  
    palm, she

    lingers in jewelweed green  
dancer in foxglove, she, whirling  
    still in flowering quince, she  
    again  
    and again  
lapped in honey  
    lingers, yes  
    until limb to trembling

limb, we  
    drift beyond winds  
    beyond meadows  
    of blue

    in the loose-limbed pines  
small shadows whirl again  
    and oh—  
    again



# *William Bernard McCarthy*

## Second Growth

Autumn may be months away  
but this is a fine day  
to survey  
a new hunting spot.

The hunter knows  
that this is no forest primeval.  
Here once a man came  
with farm in mind  
to clear and till,  
to harvest and build.  
Here a woman followed,  
with home in mind,  
to garden  
and bear  
and cherish.

But they are gone now,  
gone man and wife,  
gone children,  
gone crops and buildings,  
the farm abandoned  
or sold  
in a time of depression  
or family grief.

Over years  
old-field flowers  
gave way to saplings,  
and so the forest reclaimed  
what it had never entirely  
abandoned.

He admires the oak,  
the beech with grey bark,  
the lobed leaves and red stems of the maple,  
and off to the left,  
that promising rustle,  
it might be deer or turkey.

And so he tips his hat  
to the northern hardwood forest  
whose triumph here  
seems complete.

Seems  
until  
he comes  
upon  
an impenetrable acre  
where all the underbrush  
is roses.

## Percy

Percy and I are about the same age. When I came to live on the island in the early 1970s, Percy was doing a little bit of blacksmithing but his main work was welding. I had acquired some older farm machinery at auction, plowshares that needed new points, so I soon made his acquaintance. With his bushy blond hair and full beard streaked with premature gray, his sinewy arms, broad shoulders, and powerful trunk, he certainly looked like a rural blacksmith to me, and I was happy to have found him to facilitate my adventures with a tractor. He knew, also, where there was likely to be abandoned farm machinery on the island, too far gone to use, yet with a piece or two that would, with a little adaptation, repair the hay baler or whatever else I had brought him.

Of course, there weren't many people on the island using farm machinery anymore, and Percy made most of his living repairing the steel fishing gear used by the scallop draggers and lobster boats and other vessels that were based here. Some mornings when I'd drop by, Percy would have some huge, octopus-like, steel contrivance laying on the cement floor of his shop awaiting his welder's torch, though at the moment I entered, he would often as not be discoursing about some local news or gossip with one of the island fishermen, the putative owner of the contraption lying on the floor in need of repair, their coastal accents thick and impenetrable as the ocean fog.

One day I came upon an ancient and broken five-string banjo at the monthly auction I frequented for farm machinery and other amusements. I had learned to strum a guitar and in moments of boredom had learned to do more than strum it; one thing led to another and for a while I had thought it would be nice to learn to play the banjo once I could afford one. Casting my gaze on the banjo at the auction, I saw the name "Fairbanks" stamped into the wooden dowel stick, and noticed that the metal rim that once had held the now-ripped skin over the head had sprung apart at the joint. The rest of the instrument looked healthy enough. If Percy could fix the rim, I would put the rest of it back together, and learn to play it. I won it for five dollars and the next day brought it over to Percy.

For some reason I left the banjo in my truck when I went in to see him. I can't remember why. Maybe I wanted to visit for a while and gradually bring the conversation around to the banjo. Or maybe he had been working on something I

had brought him, and my checking where he was at on it would have been the first order of business. It was long ago, and I don't remember just why I didn't pick the banjo up and bring it in with me, but I didn't.

Percy's shop was a nondescript, battleship gray, metal-clad storage building set back from the road, with few windows and with areas of bright lights and darkness inside. He liked country music and had his radio on whenever he worked; when no one was around he sang along, or so his wife told me. He dressed in brown, polyester-blend work clothes that his wife bought for him from the Sears catalog.

When I went inside and after we talked for a while—this time there was no one in there but Percy and me—I said I had a question for him, whether he could possibly fix something for me that I guessed he'd not ever tried before.

"It's a banjo," I said. He furrowed his brow. "The thing has a metal rim," I continued. "I suppose it must be steel, shaped like a ring, chromeplated, or what I mean is that it should be shaped in a circle, but the things come apart, and I thought maybe you could weld it back together."

Percy had a blank look on his face. I was getting nowhere, I could see. I started moving my hands in the air to outline an imaginary banjo, and then I touched the tips of my thumbs and first fingers together so that they made a circle. "See, that's the rim," I said. Then I pulled my fingertips apart. "But it's broken off. Can you fix it?" I was getting the feeling that the more I explained, the less he understood.

"Musical banjo?" he said at last.

"Yes, a musical banjo," I said, relieved.

"Let's have a look at her."

I fairly ran out to get it, and when I brought it inside, I took it out of its case and showed him what I was talking about.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know if the weld'll take." He paused. "And it won't look pretty."

"That's all right. It just needs to be smooth on the inside at the joint so it doesn't rip the skin as it pulls it down tight over the head."

"Well, if you want me to try it, I'll try. I'm not sure it'll take, and I'm not sure how strong I could get it even if it does take."

"I'd like you to try, yes. Getting a replacement rim would be just about impossible." The truth is that I could probably have bought a new rim from a banjo-manufacturing company, though getting it the exact size might have been troublesome; but I didn't know any of that then. Besides, I wanted to see if Percy would rise to the occasion.

I needn't have worried. Percy said he was backed up some, and it would take him a week to get to it, if that would be all right. I said it would be, and when I went back ten days later, I wasn't surprised to find that he had done a perfect and strong weld. The rim fit back down on the head smoothly, and the banjo was on its way to becoming whole again. That's the sort of person Percy was: modest, yet clever with tools.

There had always been a small artist colony on the island, painters mostly and a few sculptors, as the light was said to be very special for painting and famous artists like Winslow Homer had completed some of their best work hereabouts. But in the 1970s more painters moved to the island, along with a number of potters, silversmiths, jewelry makers, and photographers, and it wasn't long before galleries sprang up featuring the new artists while potters sold their wares out of their shops, sometimes encouraging people to watch them at work. The art colony's presence attracted more tourists, and then more artists, although not all the artists stayed, as the island was remote and the winters difficult. Among this influx of artists was a blacksmith, John Leverett.

Leverett piqued Percy's curiosity. Unlike Percy, who had learned blacksmithing from one of his great uncles who had practiced the trade on the island, this transplanted blacksmith had gone to a crafts school and then apprenticed to a blacksmith in Virginia near Colonial Williamsburg, who specialized in doing decorative ironwork, such as fences and gates, as well as elaborate hinges, door latches, candle stands, and fireplace tools. When he got good at it, Leverett was employed by Colonial Williamsburg, demonstrating blacksmithing for the tourists. Percy's blacksmithing had revolved around rougher stuff, for farm work, and not much of that; there wasn't enough demand to make a living at blacksmithing, and so although he once confessed to me that he preferred it, he spent most of his working time welding.

Percy was dumbfounded to think that Leverett could make a go of it with fancy work. Who would buy it? And yet it seemed as if Leverett had a clientele; Percy told me that on those occasions when he visited him—just out of curiosity, he said—Leverett seemed to be working on a piece for someone who had ordered it. The island historical society had commissioned a fence with an elaborate gate to surround their newly restored eighteenth-century house, which they were planning to open to the public one day a week, and Leverett had said that would keep him busy for half a year. Percy had never built an iron fence or gate, and never even contemplated it until now. Leverett, whose hair was tied back in a small ponytail, always was elaborately courteous to Percy, for reasons that Percy couldn't quite fathom.

Percy appreciated the older ways of life on the island, whether it was clamming or salting fish or making cider or tipping balsam trees for weaving Christmas wreathes, a seasonal industry around here. His brother-in-law loved old boats, not the wooden sailboats favored by the summer residents but the old motorboats, especially the Chris-Crafts from before World War II with their powerful engines that could make more than 30 knots per hour, their double-planked mahogany hulls, and their polished brass deck hardware; in their spare time they fooled around restoring them. The two of them also liked to race the old Saab three-bangers on the ice of Sims Pond, once the leaf peepers all had gone and the pond had frozen over. Every February they took a two-week vacation together with some other island men, heading far northwest to set up their ice-fishing shacks, where they dropped their lines, drank whiskey, told lies, and came back with loads of salmon. But Percy wasn't nostalgic for the old days, nor did he have a romantic view of life

back then. If modern technology was good, he wanted to take advantage of it. He filled his shop with the best power tools he could afford. In his welding, he sought the most efficient ways of working. At the same time, he always was ready to interrupt work and chat when someone came by to pick up or drop off something.

Leverett was not well-liked by the others in the artist colony, which, after all, was not a colony but a random collection of artists who had simply landed here. Possibly, it was a case of resentment, as he seemed to be earning a lot of money. Leverett and his wife had two school-age children in boarding schools—not the kind of thing the local artists could afford. Just as likely it was Leverett's politics—like many of his clients, he had supported the war in Vietnam. Whatever the cause, the artists who knew Percy wished that he could ease Leverett out of the lucrative blacksmithing commissions from the wealthy summer people, for we all knew he harbored a desire to do more of it.

It wasn't lack of talent that was holding Percy back but lack of knowledge; and besides, the summer people just didn't think of him as a blacksmith, if they knew him at all. He didn't know how to sell himself, or he didn't care. Leverett's workplace was made to look like an old-fashioned blacksmith's shop, set picturesquely next to a stream, water from which he used to cool the iron. Ironwork was hanging from ceilings and walls and was displayed in a section of his shop—latches and hinges, fireplace tools and andirons and cranes, sconces and bridge lamps, iron fernery and trivets—giving his clientele ideas as to what they might buy from him. He also had an area in his shop cordoned off with a rope where visitors could stand and watch him at work. He wore a blacksmith's apron, rolled up his sleeves, and talked in a voice that ranged from a stage whisper to a booming oratory, as if he regularly engaged in debates with Daniel Webster.

One fall day I was sitting in the shop of one of my potter friends. She said she'd heard about a crafts school down in Portland where a person could spend a month either in the summertime or all January and that they taught blacksmithing there. The school was somehow affiliated with Old Sturbridge Village, the living history museum in western Massachusetts, and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It had a good reputation, even though it'd been in existence for only a few years. She said she'd been talking with some other island artists, and they'd agreed that it'd be good if Percy went to that school. He'd learn to do the kinds of things Leverett was doing, or at least get a good start on it.

"How's he going to pay for it?" I asked.

"That's the great thing about it. They have scholarships for people who can't afford the tuition. Not everybody gets in. You have to show a portfolio. Percy would be perfect for them. He could learn the kind of blacksmithing that he wants to do and rub elbows with the kind of people who are doing it. They'd adopt him."

"Like a pet? I don't think so."

"What I mean is, half of selling a work of art to the summer folk or the tourists around here involves reassuring them that it's quality, something they'd be proud to

own because it says something about them, their taste, their discernment. I mean, how do you really evaluate a modern painting? You can't judge by whether the lighthouse in the painting looks like a real lighthouse, not any more, not when the painter is trying to show the inner lighthouse, the spirit of the lighthouse, instead of just the outer resemblance."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Lots of folks still judge by resemblance. Percy does, for one. He has seascapes hung on the walls of his house and paintings of birds on branches, all realistic. Once he showed me a canvas he'd found in the dump. Abstract art. You couldn't tell what it was supposed to be. 'Reckon this is right side up?' he asked me, and then he turned it upside-down and said he didn't know. Did I? And he knew I wouldn't know either. And I didn't. He laughed at it and said no wonder the painter had left it at the dump."

"But that's my point. Today's consumer of art, and they are consumers, after all, needs confidence. A bowl's not just a bowl any more; it has to have philosophy behind it. I mean, really, why should you spend five dollars for a handmade bowl when you can buy ten machine-made ones for the same five bucks at a department store? So Percy needs to learn how to reassure the summer folks and tourists that they're making the right choice, doing the right thing by buying his door latch and putting it on their back door, when they could spend one-tenth that for a door latch in Grainger's Hardware. He needs to learn to talk their language."

"Well, maybe he could."

"You know him better than any of us," said the potter. "Why don't you talk to him about it? I sent away for some brochures. They came the other day in the mail. Why don't you leave one with him so he can think about it?"

"All right," I said. "I'll do it."

A few days later, I broached the subject with Percy. He gave me an opening when the talk turned to blacksmithing, and he said an old fisherman had brought him a couple of buggy wheels to set. The fisherman wanted to have the buggy ready for Easter, and he knew to give Percy plenty of time. The spokes had gotten loose, and the fisherman had tightened them up last summer by soaking them in a pond; but in the fall, they had worked loose again and needed straightening and resetting. Percy kept an old wagon himself, but it was in disrepair—a project.

I told Percy as much as I knew about the crafts school down in Portland and asked him if he thought he'd like to try it. I handed him the brochure.

"I don't know," he said. "It would mean leaving the island for a month. I don't know how my wife would feel about that. I'd have to talk it over with her."

"Sure," I said.

"You ever been to a school like this?" He looked over the brochure. Many of the people pictured in it were thin and had long hair.

"No, never. But I've heard you talk about how you wished you could do some of that fancy blacksmithing Leverett does, and I guess this could be your chance to learn some of it."

“How much would it cost?”

“Nothing, if you can get a scholarship. You’d have to write up a little bit about your life and send it to them, tell them who you are and how you got into blacksmithing and welding and what you want to do, and that sort of thing.”

“I’m not a writer.”

“Well,” I said, “I can help you. You could just say it to me, and I’d write it down the way it should be, and then you could send it in and see what happened.”

“Let me talk to my wife about this,” said Percy.

After Percy had gotten his wife to agree that he could go in January, as there wasn’t much work he’d miss then anyway, we set a time for me to come by and extract his biography. But before I did that I wanted to learn what the crafts school expected, so I phoned their Portland number. The receptionist referred me to a Boston number, where I spoke with the director of admissions, a professor at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. He understood the situation at once, interrupting me as I was going on and on about Percy.

“No,” he said, “we haven’t had anyone like Percy at the crafts school in Portland. Most of our students are from what I would call the, ah, artistic bourgeoisie, if that’s not an oxymoron. They’re good artists, but they’re doing this as a pastime, filling a hole in their lives. They talk of moving down east and setting up a gallery, but, between you and me, they love Boston, or Portland, too much. And as I say, this is for balance. Of course, we do get applications from career artists, those who’ve made the full commitment, you know, and this is the kind of person who gets our scholarships. Now, Percy, would you say he’s working class?”

“Absolutely, an island native to the core. Worked all his life, as far as I know. Doesn’t own a sailboat. He learned a little forging from his great-uncle, one of the older blacksmiths on the island. They’re all gone, now. But it was the kind of forge work a person did for farmers, and today there’s hardly any call for it. Then another blacksmith moved to the island, doing fancy work, you know, for the summer people, and Percy wants to get into that, but he doesn’t really know how.”

“Does he have what it takes? I mean, is he talented? Can he send us photos of his work, a portfolio?”

“Well, that’s just it. He doesn’t have one, unless you want a photo of a plowshare with a new point or a wagon wheel. But he’s clever. He welded a banjo rim back together for me once, and he works with his brother-in-law restoring old Chris-Crafts.”

“Oh, those Chris-Crafts. We had one when I was a boy. Nothing finer for cruising. They’ll pull a water-skier, too. My, my, the Model T of motorboats. Well, Percy sounds like a diamond in the rough. He sounds like the real thing. It’s not every day someone like him comes our way. I’ll talk to the board, and I’m pretty sure we’ll offer him a scholarship.”

“That’s great,” I said. “I’ll help him with the application.”

“Don’t tell him it’s a sure thing, though. It’s not. We still have to see his work.”



I learned a few more things about Percy when he was telling me about his life so that I could help him with the application. His grandfather had been a sailor and had eventually captained one of the yachts that had cruised out of the island harbor every summer with wealthy “rusticators” on board from Boston and New York. His father had left the island as a young man to work in a paper mill, and it was then that Percy was born. I had been wrong about his being an island native, but he may as well have been, as his family went back several generations here, and it was more or less by accident that he was born off-island. When Percy was a young boy his father got fed up with millwork and hired himself out as a guide for the “sports,” or sportsmen who came to hunt and fish in the north woods. His father had taken young Percy along on some of these trips, and Percy became a good fly fisherman, something he still did when he had a chance. He didn’t care for hunting and hated the thought of killing animals. When Percy was about halfway through high school his father was killed in a boating accident, and so Percy and his mother moved back to the island, living with his mother’s parents. It was her father who taught Percy welding and blacksmithing, and he gradually took over the business. He regretted not graduating from high school, but he liked to read books and said he liked that kind of education better because he could set his own curriculum. I took down what I thought would be necessary for the application biography and helped Percy fill out the rest of the form. By the time we were done, he was convinced that he should go.

Around Christmas, Percy began to get cold feet. He’d been accepted by the crafts school and given a full scholarship, but he had been thinking about what life would be like there, living in a college dormitory while the students were on their January break, eating at a college dining hall and, hardest of all, trying to figure out how he could fit in. He phoned me about a week before his wife was supposed to drive him down to Portland. It was unusual for him to call me. He wanted me to stop by and talk with him about what I thought it would be like, to prepare him. I’d lived in the city; I was his friend and could give him some tips on how to fit in, he thought.

He greeted me at the door of his house and invited me in. His house was small and neat. Books on wild birds and animals filled a bookcase. There were some books on blacksmithing, as well. The framed prints of seascapes and birds were on the walls.

“What about clothes at the school? I’m all out of string ties, you know.” He was referring to Leverett, who wore one as a part of his costume for the public. Well, Leverett had done time at Colonial Williamsburg, where he might have had to dress this way, and I’d guessed he was just used to it.

“Oh, that’s just Leverett’s outfit. I’m sure the students at the crafts school dress casually. Shirts and jeans, and maybe overalls. And workboots, just like you. Do you have any jeans?” I remembered that Percy wore those Sears polyester work clothes, and he didn’t encourage people to watch him when he worked. In fact, he

preferred to work alone. When he had a shop visitor, he talked to him until the visitor left. Not long after meeting Percy I realized that my blue denim work shirt and Levis were a poor imitation of contemporary working-class garb, so I decided in the name of authenticity to buy one of those polyester uniforms; but I found it uncomfortable to wear it, so I went back to my original costume.

"Yeah, I've got some jeans, and even an L.L. Bean chamois shirt. Reckon I'll bring my blacksmith's apron."

"Perfect," I said. "What else?"

"Well, what about the food?"

"Let's see, a college dining room, that'll be mystery meat, lots of potatoes, green beans." I remembered my own college fare with distaste, but I imagined Percy would like it all right. "It's kind of the institutional version of home cooking," I said.

"Institutional? You mean like a hospital, a prison?"

"Oh, better than that! And you're in Portland. You can always go out to eat."

"Well, I don't know. What do we do in the evening?" Percy liked to watch nature programs on educational television.

"I'm sure there'll be TVs there for you. They also have lectures and presentations on the various crafts being taught, and at the end, you get to show your work that you've done there and talk about it. And there'll be time for gabbing with the other folks, I'm sure."

"Whatever will I say to them?" Percy replied.

"Oh, just be yourself. They'll love you there. I'm sure you'll be all right."

A few days later Percy's wife drove him to Portland. He had taken a few pairs of jeans, flannel and chamois shirts, and overalls, she said, and a tin of his favorite brownies that she'd baked for him. She was looking forward to spending more time with her girlfriends, she added, saying that in some ways it'd be like a vacation for both of them. He'd promised he'd phone her every night.

My potter friend had followed the whole story and was relaying the events to the island artists in her circle. A few days after New Year's Day, with Percy safely ensconced in Portland, she asked me to come by on my way back from the bank. She was in her shop, making the utilitarian bowls she sold by the hundreds in the summertime.

"Well, what do you think about Percy? Is he going to come back here and ease Leverett off this island?"

"Oh, I guess so. Who knows? But Percy's wanted to learn this stuff, and now he's doing it. His wife said he misses her more than she misses him!"

"Well, it's understandable, with all those strangers there, and he's in a strange place. She's still at home. Anyway, I just hope he's also learning how to be with these people. You know, we get business from tourists, painters sometimes buy from each other. Blacksmiths, I don't know. I guess there aren't too many of them."

"One too many for this island," I said.

"I suppose so. Will he be changed when he comes back? I can see him now, he'll have to build a new place, made to look like an old blacksmith's shop."

"I don't think so," I said to my friend. "He'll find one of those old abandoned fisherman shacks on the island, and he'll move it onto his property. You know some of those buildings are pretty old."

"Yeah, move it by boat. Perfect! And then make it into a blacksmith shop. Oh, it's so perfect. He'll putter around in that shop and the summer people will flock to him. 'Oh, Mr. Percy, would you make me one of those nice candle stands you made for Mrs. Gunther?' Leverett won't have a chance. Percy's the real thing. That's it, you see."

I smiled at the thought of Percy driving Leverett off the island. He wouldn't mean to. He didn't have a mean bone in his body, Percy. But it would happen anyway. Leverett could do his blacksmithing anywhere. Maybe he'd move on to Old Sturbridge Village, or go back to Colonial Williamsburg.

At the end of January Percy returned to the island. I expected him to invite me over to tell me all about his experiences, but he didn't. Probably too busy retooling for blacksmithing, I figured. He'd call me up when he was ready and had something to show. I knew better than to think he'd thank me. But a month went by, and he didn't phone. I saw his wife at the grocery store and asked about him. "Percy, he didn't feel well after coming back from Portland, but he's all right now. He said the food didn't agree with him."

"I was kind of hoping he'd get in touch and tell me how it went and what he learned, and what his plans were."

"Well, I don't know much about that myself. He's been keeping to himself. Of course, he wasn't feeling well. Why don't you come on over and cheer him up?"

I dropped by his shop the next Saturday. Percy was dressed up in his Sears polyester, welding on a heavy chain attached to an anchor. "I heard you weren't feeling so well," I began.

"Food down in Portland didn't agree with me," he said. "I was feeling poorly for a couple of weeks after I got back. No energy at all."

"It was that college food, then? Not as good as home cooking?"

"Not so good, no. Plus they had a lot of funny food, like yogurt and goat's milk and bean sprouts. And something they called rice cakes, but there weren't any cake in them."

"Oh, that's just hippie food," I said. "The artists around here eat a lot of it, too. Next thing you'll tell me they made their own bread."

"Well, they did. A bunch of them got together every few days and pounded dough. I couldn't believe it. My grandmother made bread every day of her life till she could get it at the grocery store. Soon's she didn't have to make it, she stopped."

"Was it any good?"

"Not too bad, except when they put those funny seeds in it."

“Did you go out to eat, then?”

“I didn’t want to spend any extra money that I didn’t have, but after a couple of weeks some of us got pretty tired of the food, so we decided to go out. I wanted to go to an Italian restaurant, but they chose a French one. I didn’t think we’d ever get our food. Must have had about ten courses, little bits of food on the plate, and soup in a teacup. I had to have the menu translated.”

“Huh. Did you like it?”

“The waiter in the white suit came by, they had two waiters, one in a black suit and another in white, and asked us if we wanted any wine. I was bold. ‘I’ll have the red,’ I told him. He gave me a menu with a list of the names of the wines they had. They must have had a hundred different kinds, and I was supposed to tell him which one I wanted, except they were in French, and I couldn’t read what they were, and even if I could have read it there was no way I could pronounce it.”

He laughed a little and went on:

“Then one of the men who came along with us, he was doing glass blowing, he asked, ‘Do you have a house red?’ and the man in the white suit said, ‘Yes,’ and then something I couldn’t make out. I guess it was the name of the wine, and the glass blower said he thought that’s what I would like. Then the rest of them passed that wine menu around and looked it over real close like it was a prop’ty survey, and then they talked it out with the man in the white suit and ordered a few bottles. I couldn’t follow half of what they were saying. This one had a nose, that one tasted like leather.”

I shook my head. “Wine snobs,” I said. “Were there any others doing blacksmithing besides you?”

“A few, yes. One was from Massachusetts. He’d lived in Boston and did farrier work mostly, shoeing horses, you know. But he’d moved out to the country in the western part of the state, he said, and he thought he could do better at decorative work.” Percy sighed. “That remains to be seen,” he said.

I’d wanted to ask him whether he’d learned enough so that he could start in on some of that decorative work himself, but he seemed so tired that I hesitated in pursuing it. I was standing there thinking what to say next, when he spoke to me again.

“You know, it was just a different class of people.”

I nodded. That was it. I might have known, should have known. But I thought I had left all that behind when I moved to the island. I wanted to leave it behind, so I was blind to it. But why did Percy and I get along, then? I had always interacted with Percy on his turf, on his terms. We didn’t talk about my ex-law practice or why I gave it up to move to this island. We never went to a restaurant together—though if we did, it would be to a place without a wine list, I was certain.

“So, did you get some good instruction on your blacksmithing, anyway?”

“Some, yes. I reckon I could do some better now if I put my mind to it. Is there something you’d like me to make for you?”

“Not really,” I said. “But I’ll think of something,” and at that moment I was sure I would. I’m sorry to report I never did. If Percy had made me a door latch or a

candlestick as a present, I'd have gladly accepted it, but he didn't. Nor did he redesign his shop, or get rid of his metal shed and replace it with an old wooden building tricked out to look like something out of Old Sturbridge Village. He kept his radio tuned to the country station and wore his polyesters. He welded for a living five days a week including Saturdays, but he did make one change: on Wednesdays he fired up his forge and labored on some unusual pieces—seals, fishes, and something big that he called the Loch Ness Monster. He was trying to get the seals to look like seals, the fish to resemble salmon, and the Loch Ness Monster—well, who knows what that was supposed to look like? His had some dragon in it, but it also had some walrus and maybe even rhinoceros. It was a monster, all right.

When I asked him if once he got the hang of it he was going to forge a bunch of iron seals and salmon and sell them to the tourists that summer, he said, no, he just thought he'd try doing iron sculpture, make a few good ones if he could. It was kind of a challenge, he said, to get a sculpture to look the way it should. You had to get it right from all angles, even the bottom. Sculpture wasn't easy like a hinge or a door latch or a pattern like a rosette on a candle holder. It wasn't even useful. It would take him awhile but he might work up to a merganser or a mallard. He had decided he wasn't interested in doing decorative blacksmith work for tourists or summer people after all; he wanted to do iron sculpture. It was just, well, he had gotten the shapes in his head somehow, and he wanted to try it to see what he could do with it. He was curious to see if he could bring it off. He didn't care whether the summer people liked it or not. It wasn't for them, anyway.

from *Bigfoot Stole My Husband*

*Chapter One*

Henriette Stiller flipped a garden burger on her hibachi. To her left, her husband, Robert Larrabee, laughed with his Bigfoot-hunting friends. To her right, the other Bigfoot wives cooked hamburgers and yelled at their kids whenever one strayed toward the enemy camp. Directly across the lawn, some thirty yards in front of her, camouflage-clad men stumbled in and out of Cray's trailer. Henriette was backed up against her old camper, just a charred garden burger separating her from the Bigfoot world.

She wished they'd leave the sasquatches alone.

This was only Henriette's second year at the Sasquatch Fest. Some of these men had dragged their wives to the Bigfoot Crossing Trailer Park in Johnson, Washington, for fifteen years now. Her own husband hadn't missed a year yet.

"Those guys are going to get hurt," said Lenny, a balding chiropractor, as he watched Cray's trailer. "They'll shoot each other before the weekend's through."

"Nah, they're just having a good time. In their way," said Robert.

"I hear Cray almost shot an animal control officer," Lenny said. "Came 'round to check on the cats and dogs here. Notice how they all have open sores? Cray thought it was the government come to take his guns away! Almost shot him." Lenny shook his head, bald spot wagging beneath the setting sun, video camera dangling from one hand. For once, he wasn't filming.

"Cray was a good Bigfoot man," Robert said. "Just needs to lay off the booze."

"You've been playing peacemaker for years. But face it, Robert. Those guys are psychopaths!"

Henriette leaned against the camper, listening to the men, staring over the line of trailers, past the brick restrooms, up to the pine-thick mountains. If she closed her left eye she could see solid green, unmarred by the brown expanse of a clearcut.

"Henriette!" Lenny laughed. "What are you doing to that garden burger?"

Smoke streamed from the blackened underside of the non-meat patty. She watched it burn, then looked at the women on her right, who managed to keep track of ten burgers and hot dogs and half that many kids, as they made cole slaw and unloaded ketchup, mustard, and relish from coolers packed with ice.

Lenny rushed over, his video camera aimed at the grill, and snatched the burning patty with his free hand. “The fire department would’ve come in another minute,” he said. He wiped his hand on his jeans and pointed the camera at Henriette. “Look alive for the camera. Now let us in on your cooking secrets.”

She pulled the box of garden burgers from a paper sack. They were supposed to be kept frozen, but had fully thawed hours ago. “Well, you take them out of the box”—she held a garden burger up for the camera, then dropped it on the grill—“and cook it until it’s black.”

They both laughed, but she felt a little cranky. She wished for a quiet night in the woods, just her and Robert, without all these people.

Henriette watched as Lenny turned the camera toward her husband. He was a tall man with a weatherbeaten face, sharp blue eyes, and sandy blond hair. A good, kind man whose passion for sasquatches had been endearing at first.

If he wanted to see sasquatches, she thought they should get a cabin in the woods. If he became as much a part of nature as trees, squirrels, and dirt, the sasquatches would grow accustomed to him. They wouldn’t hide.

The Native Americans saw sasquatches all the time.

Unfortunately, Robert, like most of his peers, was skeptical of Native American stories. But honey, he’d say, they think thunderbirds are real.

After they married, she realized that Robert wouldn’t be satisfied simply by seeing a sasquatch. After fifteen years of searching, he wanted to capture sasquatches on film and be interviewed by *Discover* and *National Geographic* and probably do the daytime talk show circuit. And instead of waiting patiently in the woods, Robert waited at home for other people to see a sasquatch, then raced to the area weighed down with cameras, night vision gear and measuring devices. This was the favored method among his colleagues, which was why they never saw one. And why they were so jealous of the Native Americans, who not only had the requisite patience and respect to not chase the sasquatches but could forego recognition and fame.

The new evidence promised this weekend would seal the sasquatches’ doom. She tried not to think about it yet.

“Henriette!” Lenny cried, bounding over again to stare in amazement at more burnt garden burgers. “I thought you were joking about that blackening technique.”

She glanced down at the grill. “Not much of a cook, I guess,” she sighed. She snatched her purse off the grass and headed for the vending machines, leaving Lenny to deal with the burning burgers.

She passed a group of trailer park residents, males in their late teens and early 20s, who sat around a picnic table passing a joint. They stared at her, making her acutely aware of her appearance. She wore a faded denim miniskirt, a blue tank top, and black flip-flops. Her toenails were painted red, her short fingernails neglected. She tanned easily, and her arms and legs were brown, but her face was much paler from the sun block she wore to protect against wrinkles. She was on the small side,

five-foot-four, size seven, and looked younger than her thirty-two years.

She stared back at the trailer park boys, idly trying out each in her mind. None fit.

At the vending machine, she bought a dinner of toasted peanut butter crackers and granola bars.

She heard footsteps behind her and turned to see Jake and Kirby, two of Cray's faction whom she knew by sight. Jake looked like he was in his early forties, maybe just a couple of years older than Robert. He was dark and might have been handsome if his face wasn't puffy and dotted with stubble. But Kirby, his younger sidekick, had hard features and icy blue eyes that stared into Henriette. Both men wore tattered camouflage pants. Jake wore a black T-shirt, and Kirby wore a heavy plaid jacket, despite the warm evening. A small gold crucifix hung around Kirby's neck.

Jake pulled a roll of quarters from his pants pocket. "Would you like a Coke?" he asked Henriette as he stood before the drink machine.

"OK," Henriette said.

Jake unrolled two quarters, stuck them in the machine, pushed a button, and handed Henriette a Coke.

"Thanks," she said. Silence. "So what are you guys doing in that trailer?"

Jake looked down at the gum-studded patch of concrete they stood on. "Just watching a movie," he said.

"Come on, Jake. Buy your drink and let's go," Kirby ordered. He fixed his cool stare on Henriette, who forced herself to look back evenly.

"See you," Henriette said, walking away before they could walk away from her.

As far as Henriette knew, none of the camouflage-clad men had talked to anyone from Robert's side, except her, for twenty-one years. Not since 1974, the year everyone was certain they were on the verge of finding a sasquatch, and debate raged over the ethics of shooting the creature. The three big names in Bigfoot hunting back then—Max Vaughn, Elmer Gribb, and Cray, whose first name had long since been discarded and forgotten—split that year. Max Vaughn, Robert's mentor, was a reformed hunter who said a good film would be proof enough. Hoary old professor Gribb, already the butt of his university colleagues' jokes, fervently believed that shooting was justified. After all, he said, the 1967 Patterson film was the best photographic evidence of the sasquatch to date, and only people who hung on every word of TV talk shows seemed to accept it as proof. Gribb and Cray had continued to work together, but Cray was badly damaged by alcohol and posed more of a threat to his fellow trailer park residents than to sasquatches.

Henriette held Gribb responsible for that faction. That Gribb would slaughter a rare animal just to boost his reputation qualified him as the most selfish person Henriette had ever met.

Henriette was not in a hurry to return to her husband's side. Halfway between the vending machines and her own encampment, she sat on a picnic table and peeled the plastic off the peanut butter crackers. She nibbled them, watching the strip of bright orange above the mountains, leftovers of the sun. This time of year made her want to swim naked in rivers, climb barefoot over rocks, fuck



in the forest. She took off her flip-flops and stretched her toes. She was so tired of being inside her classroom, teaching English to eager foreigners, bored foreigners, scared foreigners. She wished the woods could last and Monday would never come.

The trailer dwellers emerged from their trailers, dinner over, to sit in lawn chairs and digest. There was probably no prettier place to park a trailer, she thought, turning to see the dark mountains and trees that circled the place.

A van turned off the road and started down the gravel driveway leading to the trailer park. Both sides of the van were painted with pictures of sasquatches, and in the driver's seat sat Max, the most famous Bigfoot hunter of all. He was also the only Bigfoot hunter who regularly appeared in Henriette's fantasies. She watched him now, torn. He had the evidence to bring about the fall of all sasquatches. By the end of the weekend, his name would be a household word.

Hunters from both camps watched as Max strode from the van. His confidence was visible from 100 feet away. He wore his usual safari hat and snakeskin belt, made from a snake he'd caught and skinned in his native Australia. Although Henriette was a vegetarian, she got excited when she pictured a younger Max tracking and capturing snakes for a living, killing them for their skins, and catching them live for zoos. He was the epitome of competence. Henriette believed there was no problem that would stump Max.

Robert was fairly able. He could probably survive a winter in the woods, or maybe a month of winter, after which he'd emerge from the forest, emaciated and trembling. Henriette would have to stay home from work and care for him.

Max would stride out of the forest in spring, healthier than ever, bearing a bouquet of wildflowers for Henriette and months of pent up lust.

Max was a genius. He'd managed to get his Bigfoot research funded by some thoroughly reputable scientific foundation out of Albuquerque. The foundation paid him a salary, provided the van and access to helicopters.

The light had nearly left the sky when Henriette slipped off the picnic table and walked barefoot toward Robert, Max, and the other men. The women were in the restroom, doing dinner dishes, or in their tents, trying to make their kids go to sleep.

Max's followers gathered around him as he stood dignified but unshaven beside the charred remnants of garden burgers on Henriette's hibachi.

"What do you got, Max, what do you got," said Bill, brightening. Usually he was the saddest looking Bigfoot hunter Henriette knew.

"You'll all hear Sunday morning, my friend," Max said, his blue eyes twinkling.

"You're bluffing," Lenny said.

"It's my find, and no one's getting a head start on me."

Robert automatically put an arm around Henriette as she joined the group. His blue sweater had a hole in the right elbow. She looked at Lenny's stained sweatshirt and Max's stubble.

"Max, you want to go for a little walk with me?" Lenny asked.

Max smiled. "You will not get a word from me. Not until Sunday." He turned his sharp eyes on Henriette and smiled. "Hello, Henriette."

"Hi, Max."

"How's Robert treating you?" His eyes slid down her neck to her bosom, waist, bare legs. She was glad it was almost dark.

"He prefers Bigfoot to me."

"The fool." The other hunters laughed.

"Stop flirting with my wife, Max," Robert said absently.

"Hey, who was that?" Lenny said, squinting into the darkness. A man hurried away, pulling a dog on a leash behind him.

"That was Kirby," Robert said. "With Cray's dog!"

"They were spying," said Spud, whom everyone liked despite his conviction that Bigfoot traveled in UFOs.

"They had to be," Lenny agreed. "I've never seen that dog on a leash. Cray just opens the door and gives the dog a kick and lets it roam. Hell, I'm surprised they managed to dig up a leash. Yup, they were definitely spying."

The other Bigfoot wives returned to the camp to pull their lawn chairs into a semicircle around the bonfire, facing the parking lot. It was nearly nine o'clock, almost time for the entertainment to start. The conversation paused when a car drove down the main road, but it passed without turning in the driveway.

They waited for Lola Dee.

"Just forget her," said Penny, Bill's wife. "Set up the show without her." Henriette didn't like to look at Penny. The bad perm and extra pounds were unfortunate enough, but the deep grooves between Penny's eyes testified to eighteen years of being progressively forsaken for Bigfoot.

"She'll be here," Robert said cheerfully. "She's a professional. Anyway, I told her sometime after eight-thirty would be fine."

"A professional slut," Penny muttered.

Robert, Lenny, and Bill's cover band, The Yetis, practiced all year to play at the Sasquatch Fest. This year, they'd invited local sexpot Lola Dee to emcee the weekend events, horrifying the wives. The men refused to reveal the amount of her compensation, but the wives suspected it was five hundred dollars. A couple of things Henriette had in common with Penny were they both had full-time jobs while their husbands worked part-time, and they wondered who was paying that five hundred dollars.

"So this is really big, eh, Max?" Lenny asked, his face boyish in the firelight. "Should we call in sick to work Monday?"

Max smiled. Henriette's gut clenched in dread. Here comes the end.

Just the night before, Max had spent the evening at Robert and Henriette's and told them exactly what he had. Henriette could see it in her mind like the film was rolling on her eyelids, the soundtrack a clock ticking time downwards to Sunday's explosion.

One week ago. Twenty miles north of Johnson. Max was investigating a rash of unpublicized sightings. She could see him walking along an old logging road,

overgrown with bushes now, safari hat on his head, snakeskin belt circling his waist, weighed down by two cameras and a biopsy tip dart gun. He scans the trees on both sides of the path for unidentifiable fur. He finds a clump of auburn fur six feet off the ground, caught in a tree that overhangs the path. He holds it between his fingers like something frail and precious, sniffs it, grimaces at the stench. His pulse quickens, eyes open wide. It has to be a Bigfoot! Head down, sharp blue eyes comb the trail for footprints. He finds a huge dropping, too big for a bear. He walks two steep miles uphill, sweating through his khaki shirt in the summer heat, until he comes to a set of tracks. Eighteen inches long, twice as wide as his own foot. These are the freshest Bigfoot tracks he's ever seen. He stands paralyzed, the only human for miles around on the side of the hot, buzzing summer mountain. A good scientist would take this evidence, not expecting more. A good scientist would take the plaster casting kit out of his backpack and make molds of these tracks. But Max is more adventurer than scientist, and these tracks are fresh! He only hesitates a few seconds, then he bounds up the mountain, running on tiptoe, careful not to step in the tracks. He'll cast them on the way down.

He follows the tracks to a small clearing, where he hides behind a tree and peers into a scene that almost stops his heart. In a bramble of blackberry bushes stand two sasquatches. The taller is seven feet high, its straight back and powerful carriage covered with auburn fur. Its companion is less than six feet high and brown. Both face away from him, going about their innocent business of the forest. A smaller sasquatch—perhaps three feet high—plays at their feet, thumping a stick against the ground.

Suddenly all the sightings he's investigated over the years flash before his eyes, waving and pulsating and coming to rest in these composites before him. Max, who was born steady and invulnerable, thinks he might faint.

The shoulders are wide, the necks barely existent. The buttocks are firm, the torsos massive. The creatures tear branches from the bush, ripping leaves and berries off as they pull the branches through their mouths, left to right.

Max holds his breath, terrified of discovery, wanting this moment to last for years. The smaller sasquatch turns, and Max sees its face. He stifles a cry. The face is undoubtedly more human than ape, with deep-set, intelligent eyes over a wide nose and mouth. Long auburn tresses sprout from the top of its head, cascading about its shoulders.

It sees Max.

The young sasquatch whimpers, a frail, high-pitched noise, and slowly the larger creatures turn, their torsos, necks, and heads moving together in one piece, just like in the Patterson film. The smaller adult has large, hanging breasts. The sasquatches look right into Max's eyes. There's no time to shoot them with a camera and the dart gun, so Max grabs the gun, which is already loaded with a small but vicious metal cylinder that can take a chunk out of any creature. He holds it up and shoots the big male in the buttock as it strides away. It cries out, traumatized, a creature too big to have any natural predators, a creature that has never experienced attack.

As the sasquatches thunder through the forest, the smallest, the child, turns again and shoots Max a look of incomprehension. Max has found what he's spent thirty-three years searching for, and now he's shot them and scared them away within one minute. He hears them groan and cry to each other as they crash through blackberry bushes, indifferent to the thorns, wanting nothing so much as to get away from Max, who has waited his life to be with them. Then they're gone entirely and he hears nothing but insects and birds and an occasional small rustling.

The tissue sample is at a lab. By Sunday, Max will have a preliminary report to share with his colleagues. He'll have to reveal the site if he wants the scientific community to take him seriously, which he does after thirty-three years. He'll reveal it to a discreet anthropologist or two, and a biologist, and they'll leak it out to a friend or colleague, and within a week the whole story will be in *People* magazine, and on the talk shows in ten days.

The new expeditions will be thorough. Helicopters with infrared tracking devices. Hundreds of Smithsonian affiliates. Maybe the National Guard; next year is an election year. Nets and cages and traps. Armored trucks and freight cars. Primate research labs and zoos.

The sasquatches will be kidnapped from their wooded homes, their dignity stolen. Two years from now the last few specimens will be dejected and glassy-eyed as any other zoo animal, staring out at concrete expanses marred by squished hot dogs and pieces of popcorn. Matted fur, shortened life span, lowered sperm count. Zookeepers will pack sasquatches in giant wooden crates and ship them to other zoos to mate with other dull-eyed, weak-brained, dirty, spiritless, caged sasquatches, all the while talking about how much they've done to save a precious endangered species.

The whole thing will be unbearable. Henriette will have to leave Robert.

# Performance

Historically, when folklorists recorded an “informant” singing a song, recounting a story, or even speaking a proverb or telling a riddle, they rendered it as a “text”: a block of words that could be written and printed. Sometimes the singer or teller or speaker was largely forgotten; sometimes the circumstances of the singing or the telling were ignored. A few students of folk materials, such as J. Frank Dobie, Zora Neale Hurston, and the compilers of the Federal Writers’ Project anthology of Louisiana folk materials, *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, tried to engender more holistic approaches by providing fictionalized or journalistic frameworks. But such attempts were not received favorably by more scholarly folklorists, who sought a more “objective” (and perhaps, drier and more lifeless) approach. Gradually, however, folklorists—partly influenced by the functionalism of British social anthropology—came to look for broader approaches that recognized complex processes in the transmission of folklore. Influenced in part by the work of Erving Goffman, whose 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* “likened human interactions to a theatrical performance”<sup>6</sup>—they have come to performance-centered approaches that see even the most simple transmission of folk materials as a performance of sorts, as a human action with a performer and an audience and a context, however dramatic or undramatic. Looking at performance and performances has increasingly come to the center of what folklorists do, and a number of the contributions in this book focus on that from the creative standpoint, in some ways harking back to what writers like Hurston sought to do: provide a context, even if a fictional one, in showing the presentation of folklore. Given that the creative value of folklore itself has been increasingly recognized, too, it seems appropriate that creative approaches to examining performance should have an appeal. Of course, folklorists who write fiction or poetry are not simply using their creative writing to make a point; as writers they are sometimes merely drawn to the folklore they know (a factor that has sometimes influenced folklorists to perform as well as to observe).

Matt Clark’s short story about a local character can be seen as an account of a single, lengthy performance, as narrators tell a story to a listener (indeed a poet and academic, who comments on processes of myth and legend formation and meaning, integrating the performance to issues folklorists interest themselves in). It is a story about the process by which stories take shape, but a particular storytelling performance is at the center here (and in some ways this tale is like a throwback to the nineteenth-century literature of the American frontier and Old Southwest, in which

elaborate stories were told by fictional oral narrators). A performance is also at the heart of the chapter given here from John Burrison's novel. In the summer camp context of his literary narrative, there is an impromptu gathering, and at the gathering, the novel's first-person narrator uses the occasion to perform a toast, one of the narrative poems that come out of urban African American tradition (though the character is not himself African American). This fictional performance tells the reader something about why we perform folklore, but it has its literary purpose in saying something about how the character is trying to fit into the setting of the novel, too.

In "The Storytelling Wake," Steve Zeitlin deftly looks at a ritual performance, providing a poetic impression of how we use wakes as parts of funeral rites to tell stories about the departed, memorializing them through narrative. Jeannie Banks Thomas's poem "Shins Around the Fireside (Jig)" uses a musical performance to juxtapose such modern cultural trappings as "bipolar duplexes" and a "phantom golf course" with the stubborn persistence of traditional culture, raising questions about how tradition and modernity co-exist, looking at how "some contemporary groups of people in the same region 'warm' themselves with traditional music." In doing so she indirectly poses questions about the persistence of tradition and about revivalism in culture, but the poem evokes the magic of traditional musical performance itself, however tradition exactly comes into play.

Performance comes into play in many of the pieces in this book, including those that appear in other sections. Danusha Goska's whole play is modeled on traditional shadow-puppet performances. The family friend who is the main subject of Kirin Narayan's memoir might be termed a performer as she creates herself upon an informal stage. Rosan Augusta Jordan's poems describe elements of the performance of public ceremonies. The memorials to accident victims that are the subject of Holly Everett's fieldwork would be seen by folklorists as a type of performance, too: the performance of memory through physical constructs.

The folklorist's conception of performance is a complex one, one that does not entirely coincide with conventional understandings of the word. For the folklorist understandings of performance may resonate beyond the performance of folklore as such, making them especially sensitive to the significance of performances generally in our lives. Leslie Prosterman's poems foreground performances, although hers are those modern and postmodern performances tied to written texts called poetry readings, not performances of traditional genres, and she provides witty insight into the larger performance context. Prosterman describes her three poems as an "ethnography of poetry readings," suggesting that a folklorist carries around an ethnographic orientation when observing cultural phenomena, whether "folk" or not. William Bernard McCarthy's "Maybelle and Sara on the Porch" is not about performance as such, but the poem derives from McCarthy's observation of country music pioneers Maybelle and Sara Carter looking at old photographs while at a festival. It provides a poetic footnote to the history of American traditional music performers and performance, and of course, they happened to be there because they had come to perform, even if the poem focuses elsewhere.

Legends, Rumors, Lore, and Revelations (Some Incomplete) Involving Leaton Troutwine, a Local Eccentric/Celebrity/Hero (and Gordon's Owner)

I was the first to recognize the walrus as being Gordon.

Me, Briscoe, and O'Neal were sitting in the back of my truck—a normal Friday night—watching The Lights jump around out in the desert and here came Gordon, sliding out of the sand and cacti.

Up until that moment, the night was pretty slow. The Lights were a little lethargic, possibly on account of how the crowd was one of the puniest in recent memory. Besides me and the boys, there was a Family of Three (Father, Mother, Young Son with a Baseball Cap and Skull Earring) and a Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine (easily recognizable by his T-shirt, which read “I'm a Poet from Over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine”). Father read the Texas Historical Marker out loud to his tribe:

The Marfa Lights

The Marfa Lights, mysterious and unexplained lights that have been reported in the area for over one hundred years, have been the subject of many theories. The first recorded sighting of the lights was by rancher Robert Ellison in 1883. Various explanations include campfires, phosphorescent minerals, swamp gas, static electricity, St. Elmo's Fire and “Ghost Lights,” the lights reportedly change colors, move about and change in intensity. Scholars have reported over seventy-five folk-tales dealing with the unexplained phenomenon.

Young Son with a Baseball Cap and Skull Earring said, “So are they flying saucers or what?”

“Well,” Father began, and it was apparent from the tone of his voice that he was thrilled to have his son ask him any questions at all, “rationally—”

Then Gordon, covered in dust, wheezing, a tumbleweed stuck under his left tusk, came oozing out of the darkness, and the Family of Three skedaddled.

For a moment, The Lights' mystery paled in comparison. (In Marfa, Texas, you can go out to watch The Lights bounce off each other every night. But a walrus bounding out of a tar-black desert—I would be willing to bet my glass eye that's something nobody has ever seen before. Not ever. Not even in Marfa.)

“Lookit there,” I said. “Gordon.”

He came wallowing up to where we sat in the truck and gave us a good stare. It was obvious he wanted to go home; he sighed a lot. Evidently, a long walk in a dry desert, even one aglow with The Lights, was far from a grand experience in walrus terms.

By this time, the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine had come over and was examining the eskimo spectacle with crossed arms and raised eyebrows.

“A walrus?” he said.

“College boy.” Briscoe growled and took a long sip of Bud.

‘Course I’d been to college once a long time ago and could understand his naturally dumb and curious nature. “Genuine article,” I said, hopping down to pull the tumbleweed out from behind Gordon’s tusk. Even without words, I could tell he was deeply appreciative.

“I thought they only lived in the Arctic,” the Poet said. “What’s he doing out here?”

O’Neal and Briscoe both popped beers at the same time. The hisses, like twin stars hari-kiriing out of the sky into the Rio Grande, signaled the beginning of a long night. There were two coolers full of Bud, and the Poet held in his left hand a large green bottle of cheap Chianti.

Since the day of my birth, October 22nd, 1944, I have been in the eyes of most Marfans what has been called of late the “designated storyteller.” Unlike those unfortunate “designated drivers,” I am encouraged to drink quite a bit.

\* \*

In 1945, the big football game between the Marfa Sparks and the Alpine Tarantulas occurred in late October, a month in which Texans just expect the weather to be a little more crazy than usual.

And so, right up until Father Urban gave the pre-game prayer—“Oh Lord, don’t let any of these young mens’ bones get unnaturally bent tonight!”—it was raining like hell. Then the good father ’amen-ed and the downpour ceased. The sky, though, stayed as dark and cloudy as a new bride on poker night. The clouds couldn’t agree on what direction to move, so they clambered all over each other in a big swollen orgy. And lightning? Hot damn, the pyrotechnics off to the south were twice as captivating as the soggy scramble on the field.

Very ominous. No two ways about it.

Folks hushed themselves in reverence—reverence being closely tied up with fear, you know—beneath that sky of doom. (All but two men, that is. Coaches, the both of ’em. They did enough hollering for a Superdome full of Holy Rollers. Grunting and moaning and caterwauling reprimands and insults, dad-like encouragement.) Even the barbarous players were soft-spoken, the linemen’s typical rodomontade reduced to queasy stomach rumblings, the quarterbacks play-calling done in voices more appropriate for a confessional than a gridiron. They stood out



there like the pubescent chieftains of two tribes of outback mud-men engaged in a ritual to decide the fates of their villages, whispering strategies like hexes, hut-hut-hutting witch doctor prescriptions.

In the defensive huddle, a boy named Leaton Troutwine looked up, then murmured to his compadres, “Tornado weather.”

In the offensive huddle, a boy named Rolando Hidalgo said, “If we don’t score now, we may not get the chance to score at all.”

It was late in the fourth quarter, of course. The score: zero to zip.

The boys lined up across from each other and stuck their fists into the runny earth. They did not look at the eyes of the men they opposed. (Nothing scares an eighteen-year-old boy more than admitting that he is more sore afraid than a shepherd guarding his flocks by night.)

Rolando Hidalgo said three numbers—all odd—and dropped way back to pass. His eyes searched out the ever-blessed hands of his best buddy, Jesus Hinajosa, waving to him from the end zone. Rolando’s hope for West Texas immortality—invisible, hot—flew out of his mouth as he launched the ball. Both sailed toward Jesus in a spinning brown-white arc.

Leaton Troutwine watched all this with Nile-green eyes. Without hurrying, he moved to stand in front of Jesus so that the ball landed in his arms like a picnic-tossed baby. Then he ran like the devil toward the opposite end of the field, the kidnapped pigskin snuggled close to his runaway heart.

He noticed as he ran that the other players on the field—the enemy, his teammates too—didn’t seem to notice what he had just done. They looked beyond him, mouthpieces dropping out of their proper orifices to dangle all white and drooling from face masks. They let him pass without help or interruption, seemingly unaware that there was a big football game in progress.

Of course, they saw what Leaton Troutwine did not: a funnel cloud wrapping itself up into a tight black cone. Falling upon the Spark’s goalpost like a scorched dunce cap. Twice as black and loud as a coal train at midnight, it began to pursue Leaton down the field. Methodically. With purpose.

When Leaton crossed into the end zone, he turned to face the world behind him and grinned. The fans who should have been cheering his miraculous feat, however, only gawked at him. There were no cheerleaders leaping and cart-wheeling toward him. Instead, a tornado bounced in his direction like a sewing-machine needle. Leaton, unsure whether he should raise his hands above his head and clamp them together in victory or fall to the ground and clap them together in prayer, did neither. Instead, some crazy instinct took over and he tossed the ball smack dab into the middle of the twister. Watched it rise in a perfect spiral to Heaven.

Appeased, the tornado gathered itself up and climbed back up into the celestial stew that bubbled and boiled above. Only then did the band kick off. The clarinets, reeds still wet, squawked and squawked and squawked, like geese.

\* \*

The Poet nodded. “A mythic hero,” he said. “Not uncommon in regional folklore, although on a global scale we’re all probably more familiar with Beowulf or Odysseus.”

“Who?” Briscoe said.

“I’m curious,” the Poet said. “How exactly does your tale come close to explaining the presence of this walrus in the middle of the Chihuahuan Desert? Not that the story wasn’t charming but—”

“Shh, boy,” O’Neal hissed. “Patience,” he recommended.

\* \*

Leaton Troutwine’s mother set her baby boy in a swing one early fall day in 1929, left him floating there while she hung sheets—damp still from the wash, not flapping or billowing in the breeze—to dry on a sway-backed clothesline. While most mothers hung up sheets in the morning hours, Mrs. Fonda Troutwine preferred to hang the family wash in the waning light of a West Texas sunset, let them dry in the starlight, soak up the midnight aroma of piñon drifting over from the Sierra Carmen. When the Troutwine family lay down on fresh sheets, they fell full-force into a cotton-soft imprint of the desert outback.

Leaton Troutwine was two and watching his momma’s slim silhouette move betwixt a white sheet and a purple sundown when the Marfa Lights came and kidnapped him.

That’s the only explanation that I can offer you. And it was the first thing that came to Fonda Troutwine’s panicked mind.

“Leaton!” she hollered when she noticed he was absent from his swing. She looked up and to the south, where the lights were known to appear nightly. “Leaton!” she hollered again.

The all-night baby search involved the Troutwine family, the Marfa Sparks football team, cheerleading squad, and band. The volunteer fire department. The police force. The park rangers from Big Bend. St. Sestina’s Catholic Youth Organization officers. The Far Flung River Company’s raft crew (Repairs, Guides, Management). The waitstaff and cook of Casa Chuy. A passing circus’s entire cast: tight-rope walkers, clowns, trapeze artists, fat lady, dog trainers, thin man, strong girl, unicyclist, bearded woman, elephant riders, magician, lion tamer, fire breather, hair aerialist, gorilla boy, sword swallower, snake charmer, and hermaphrodite. All those people searched the Troutwine house, the Troutwine yard, the Troutwine’s neighbors’ houses and yards, the town, the desert. Mrs. Troutwine rode in a jeep with the sheriff: he, shining his spotlight behind cacti and tumbleweeds and she, keeping an eye on the Marfa Lights as they flickered around above, hollering for a while, then talking softly, whispering to them, “Give back my baby, please. You can come and visit him anytime you like, but give him back, OK?”

By dawn, the searching army was dead-tired and discouraged. Ready to give up. They’d gathered in the Troutwine front yard, anxious to discover if anyone had

had any luck, if anyone had any plans for the next leg of the rescue operation. Mrs. Troutwine, experimenting with a new form of hysteria—radical calm—had taken to looking under couch cushions, behind the calendar, in Mr. Troutwine’s trouser pockets. “Wait,” she said. “Let me check the backyard one more time.”

Which is where she found Leaton. In his swing again. Not looking pleased nor displeased. Not gurgling or crying or cooing or pooping in his pants. Looking fine and unimpressed in regards to whatever adventure he had so recently returned from. It was only after he had been picked up and kissed by every last member of the hunting squad that Leaton expressed some anxiety. Probably connected with the gorilla boy’s cologne.

The government came out to test Leaton for radioactivity, and for several years after that, they would pull up in front of the Troutwine home on the anniversary of the disappearance in Atlantic blue vans. Try as they did to debrief young Leaton, they never came away with anything more than a painfully recounted remembrance of the Sparks marching band’s victory tune serenading the Troutwine home until long after Leaton’s naptime.

\* \*

“Not surprising,” the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine said. “Oftentimes a mythic hero is subjected to some odd initiation by inexplicable forces—gods or whatever you choose to call them. Joseph Campbell, one of our most knowledgeable scholars in the field of mythological studies once said—”

“Wait,” O’Neal said, “Are the studies mythological or mythologically oriented?”

The Poet cocked an eyebrow, stroked his thin goatee, frowned.

“Trials and revelations are what it’s all about,” I said.

“Yes!” the Poet exclaimed. “The exact quote to which I was about to refer.”

“Well, hell, son. Just cause ol’ Joe Campbell said that don’t make him some kind of genius. That’s the kind of stuff you cull from the pages of life, not some dusty-paged journal of smarty-pants theory.” Briscoe’s son—currently a student of animal husbandry over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine—had of late been on his daddy’s bad side. Come home from classes one weekend to tell his Pa—a lifelong rancher, mind you—that he’d been handling the process of castration all wrong. “Before that wisdom got set down and marked up in a book, it was a free animal, belonging to no one but some great universal consciousness, amigo.” Briscoe paused, reined in his disgust and said, “I guess.”

\* \*

Murder wandered the canyons and gullies at his leisure, showing up wherever he felt like it, whenever he felt like it. Some nights you might be driving down to Panther Pass to borrow a book from one of the rangers, and you’d see Murder standing by the side of the road. Or he might turn up right around dusk, making his way up the face of Alsate, all silhouette. Bobcat Carter swore until the day he died that Murder would sometimes wake him up on sweaty August nights, poking

his horns and head and all—breath hot and wet and smelling like a century plant—into his old shack out back of the Cooper’s store. “He was trying to tell me something,” Bobcat used to say. “But, of course, I don’t speak bull.”

\* \*

”Murder?” the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine said. “While murder is regularly a factor in many heroic epics—going all the way back to the Oedipal myth and all males’ innate hatred of our fathers—I’m not entirely certain that I understand the nature of the murder about which you are now speaking.”

“Boy,” said Briscoe. “To be a Poet from over at Sul Ross State University, you sure don’t know how to put words together. Are all poets as clumsy dialogue-wise as you?”

The Poet puffed up like a spiny-tailed crack lizard.

“Here,” O’Neal said, handing the Poet a beer. The bottle of wine was empty. “Some sparkling Bud might help you with your persecution complex. Melancholy angst like you got doesn’t do nobody any good.”

Wisely, the Poet accepted O’Neal’s offering.

I decided a little backtracking was in order.

\* \*

In 1891, January 28, a bunch of the small cattle owners—that is to say men who owned not many cattle, not men who owned small cattle or men who were themselves small—got together a roundup at Leoncita to brand all the calves that had slipped through at the fall doings. About three thousand head of cattle were gathered up and the calves were to be branded according to the mark on its mother’s backside. Problem was, one little bull didn’t have no mother and no brand. So’s it was impossible to tell which ranch the bull belonged to. ’Course, two ranchers got into a fight about it—Fine Gilliand and Henry Powe (it’s spelled P-O-W-E, but you say it just like in Edgar Allen)—and couldn’t come to no fair resolution. Henry Powe, a one-armed Confederate veteran with the wooliest black beard you might ever hope to see, pulled a pistol out of his saddlepack and took to firing at the bull. Rather have him dead than a source of friction betwixt two neighboring remudas, you understand. Gilliand, though, did not see things this way. He preferred to draw his gun and shoot Mr. Powe dead. It was the kind of nasty thing that happened every now and then in the Wild West. Thus, was Powe muerte. Suddenly realizing the gravity of what he’d done, Fine Gilliand took off like lightning, guessing rightly that there’d be a lynch mob looking for him soon enough. Before that unpleasant gathering was called to order, however, the ranch hands, led by Gene Kelly (no relation to the dancer) caught the little orphan bull, branded JAN 28 91 on one side, M-U-R-D-E-R on the other, and turned him out of the herd. It run off into the Chisos then, already aware that it was a pariah through no fault of its own, but a cursed beast nonetheless.

\* \*

"So you've seen this bull Murder for yourselves?" the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine said. "Despite the fact that he would be over one hundred years old now?"

"Well, actually, he's been seen less and less ever since he met up with Leaton Troutwine."

"I saw him last spring out near Muerto Springs," O'Neal said.

"Course you did," I witnessed "That's on account of Leaton Troutwine, but even before Leaton, on account of the señorita's ghost, the spirit of Ofalia Sotol."

\* \*

The movies you see are wrong. The Treasure of the Sierra Madre, an out-and-out—but glorious, nonetheless—lie. Some banditos ride down out of the mountains very quietly. So it is that their raid on Don Sotol's hacienda came as a surprise to everyone sleeping therein. There was no jingling of spurs as they opened the courtyard gate. No clumping of boots as they moved down the hallways' tiled floors. No snarling, no teeth gnashing grins as they pulled razor stilettos across the throats of Don Sotol, Doña Sotol, the servants of the Sotol household. There was not a sound. There were shadows and there was silence and there was evil in the air like ragweed.

Only one person was left alive: Don Sotol's daughter, Ofalia. She was taken out of her bed alive, carried to the barn, and tied to one of her father's best horses. Still silent, the bandits rode away with her in tow, the hacienda in flames. Shadows on an orange-red background raced ahead of them.

For more than a day they rode. Never stopping to rest or eat or relieve themselves, until—finally—they came to a spring-fed pool deep in Boot Canyon. Cutting her loose, the men grinned at her. They opened their mouths as if to laugh at the horror on Ofalia's face, and the young señorita could see that none of the men had a tongue. One of them pointed at the ground in front of Ofalia, made it clear with his hands, eyes, and leer that she was to lie down quietly. She shook her head and began to cry. "Allow me this," Ofalia begged the bandits. "Let me bathe there in the pool. I am dirty with the waste of my own body." The men agreed, nodding their heads, miming a girl bathing, washing her hair. Then they set about making a fire.

It was not long, though, before the bandits were overcome with lust and went to the pool to pull the girl from the water.

Despite the grisly nature of their lives, they were shocked to find that she had drowned herself. They started to wade into the water to pull out the body—clutching a piece of granite to its chest—but stopped when a low cry began to seep from beneath the rocks around the pool, from the surface of the water itself. Louder and louder it grew, until the bandits fled, haunted for the rest of their lives by the otherworldly weeping.

\* \*

”So now the ghost of this Murder hangs out around a moaning pool?” the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine said.

“The word for bewitched in Spanish is *hechizo*. Those mountains over there are the Chisos. Strange things have always happened there. Nothing is surprising in the Chisos. Only mysterious.”

There was a long pause. The Lights—perhaps they heard the mention of mystery—seemed to grow almost frantic in their movements.

“So, OK,” the Poet said, “we’ve got this bull and a haunted spring. Now how does Leaton Troutwine wander into the picture?”

\* \*

Leaton Troutwine loved to ride. He’d ride anything. Anything. Horse, burro, mule, donkey, goat, sheep, ram, large dog, pig. On a family trip to El Paso, Leaton ran amok at the zoo and rode a giraffe, a hippopotamus, a yak, and a toothless lion before he could be apprehended and ejected from the menagerie. So of course, it would be young Troutwine who would end up riding Murder.

(Speculation has it, though, that Murder WANTED Leaton to catch him and saddle him and ride him.)

A dusk in late August. Purple sky, orange horizon. Leaton has spent the whole of his fifteenth summer tracking Murder all over the devil’s realm. Time’s running out. School’s preparing to open its trap doors and suck in all the catfishing good times, turn blood bait into geography, water whiskers into algebra.

Leaton, he creeps along the edge of Tornillo Creek, following the freshest set of hoof prints he’s found to date. He—a boy full of hope and purpose—sees a bull ahead of him, tail swatting at horseflies, neck lowered, pulling up bluebonnets gingerly with teeth together, big rubbery lips apart. He—a boy with a history of the unexplained resting laurel-like on his sunbleached hair—moves like a stealthy slug, closer. Closer. Close enough to see the brand, now grown over with hair, but that hair a silvery gray against the brown-black hide—MURDER.

\* \*

”Wait,” the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine said. “Before you go on, let me just say that I think you’ve left out the part where some mystic sage gives our hero an invisibility-rendering cowboy hat and a magic lasso.”

Briscoe and O’Neal looked at the Poet like he was nuts. “What in the hell would he need those things for?” O’Neal said. Briscoe said, “Where’d you get crazy ideas like that?”

“It’s classic mythology,” the Poet said. “You know, Perseus catching Pegasus, the Winged Horse? How else would Leaton capture this apparitional bovine?”

Briscoe sighed with disbelief. “Son, I believe you’ve had enough to drink. There ain’t no such thing as a horse with wings.”

“Then how did Leaton catch Murder?”

“He walked up to him with some sugar cubes, slipped a rope—an ordinary

rope—around his neck, put a saddle on him, and climbed up top of him. As far as magic lassos go, I believe that's one of Wonder Woman's gimmicks," Briscoe said.

\* \*

At first Murder didn't want to move at all. There were more bluebonnets to be had. But after a few swift kicks in the ribs, the old bull began to lumber along the creek. Leaton's heart was the size of a boulder, the consistency of warm taffy, alive with a fandango rhythm. He fully intended to ride Murder down Main Street Marfa, up onto the courthouse lawn, into the middle of the square dance crowd's clog-footed hoedown.

But Murder's plans were not synchronicous with Troutwine's. The bull turned south and began to trot, then gallop—if bulls going full speed could be said to gallop—then, almost but not quite, fly, toward the dark forests of the Chisos. Leaton, astride the bulleting beef, held on for dear life. It hurt, that ride. Leaton's bones rattled, his brain bounced, his balls were mushed ten thousand times over. But a fall, purposeful or not, onto the ground's assortment of cacti, rocks, and tarantulas was unthinkable. So Troutwine held on.

And rode Murder. For what seemed like hours.

Then the bull began to slow up, and Leaton could hear more than just his body alerting him to its aches and pains, Murder's heavy breathing, hoofbeats like bombshells every step of the way. He heard the wind in the trees. The Rock Slide, more than a mile away in Santa Elena canyon. Somewhere, a peregrine falcon. Coyotes. And he heard a moaning that echoed all around him.

It was more than dark by now. It was oblivion in Boot Canyon.

Tough to make out the pines and live oaks that Murder picked his way through. Tough to tell anymore if they were outside or in a cave. Tough to tell if the moaning came from a downed cow, a giant snoring cowboy, or a bruja giving birth. Tough to know, with just the sound of Murder's hoofs coming down into water, whether the bull was crossing a creek or plunging both he and the boy into some nightmare lake. Tough to be sure if the moaning was really getting louder or if Leaton's ears were getting bigger. Tough to remember the exact order of a Hail Mary: full of the Lord with you, grace, blessed women art, fruit, womb, sinners now pray, etc.

When Murder was deep enough into the water that Leaton began to feel the water creeping up over the tops of his boots and running down around his feet, all fear left him. The water was warm, and the moaning subsided into a kind of whisper. Murder went further into the water. The warm bath reached up around Leaton's waist, over his belly button, edged above his chest and encircled his neck. He was floating now, swimming in the pool. Off the back of Murder, who moved away into the shallows and stood looking at Leaton like a cow looks at anything: bored. The moaning-turned-whisper had now become a hum that vibrated through the water like a low-voltage electric current. It got inside Leaton's mouth and nose and ears and began to relate to him how lonely this pool was and how kind it was of Leaton to visit and how she hadn't been able to stop crying for what seemed like (and what

really was) a hundred years. She missed her father, she said, and her friends too. And now Leaton was here and would he please stay with her forever?

Leaton, a virgin, never kissed on the lips before or touched or wanted by anyone but his mother and father, fell in love immediately and was tempted to do as the water asked, to stay and dangle his feet in the pool until the end of time. But he suddenly grew as homesick for his family as the spirit in the water was for hers. He ducked his head underwater, blew out air so that he sank like a soaked loaf of bread, descended to the bottom of the pool. Opened his eyes to see Ofalia Sotol glowing, stretching out her arms to him without menace, crying tears of fire, telling him without bubbles or soggy tremolo that she loved him deeply. He opened his mouth and spoke, promised to come back to the pool at least once a month—more if possible—to be with her. Then he pushed himself up off the pool's leafy bottom, broke through the surface of the water, and took a tremendous breath.

It was very late and Leaton fell asleep astride Murder on the long ride back. He woke up a hundred yards from the circle of porchlight outside his house. Murder waited patiently for his passenger to take off the saddle, and when he was done, turned and ambled out into the desert without so much as a snort of goodbye.

\* \* \* \*

"Adventures sometimes end that way," I said. "As if they were a normal part of life."

"I'm surprised she let him go," the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine said. "Most women in folktales of that nature would have clung to the boy until he was drowned. Of course, you mentioned his virginity. That could be what worked in his favor. Although, to be sure, sometimes a virgin sacrifice is precisely what a spirit might need to escape its hated bonds."

By this time, I think Briscoe was ready to throttle the Poet. Strange, when you consider how gentle and good-natured Briscoe is normally, even when slightly drunk. Something about the Poet was a little galling, though. Some people are like that.

O'Neal, a veterinarian, possessing incredible patience after a lifetime of dealing with twisted horse guts and hyper-sensitive cat owners, said to the Poet, "Do you approach everything as if it were a text to be taken apart or an opportunity to impose some iron-fisted formula on life?"

"An artist's job is to impose order upon chaos. To make something better out of what life offers."

"Hoo-boy," Briscoe whooped, "we got us one of them fellers who presumes to define art in twenty words or less."

Red-faced, the Poet spit out, "The forms of storytelling are well-known and tired. The only way I can enjoy them is by trying to second-guess them."

"I bet you," Briscoe was in the boy's face now, "I bet you looked in your mama's closet every December 24th to see what it was Santa Claus was going to bring you, you sonnet-spouting little—"



“Here now,” I said, unhappy that the tale had been interrupted for so long. Especially for an exchange as silly as that.

\* \*

Leaton Troutwine did go back every month for more than a year. Even when there was a little snow in the Chisos, he would slip into the pool and spend a pruny-skinned afternoon telling Ofalia the day-to-day events that constituted his life. Homework. Chores. Keeping up with three pen pals. (Honest to God pen pals. Fellers behind bars for peyote harvesting in the Big Bend. First-year rangers, all three of them, all contained in the same cell. Planning an elaborate metaphysical escape.)

Then, of course, the tornado incident occurred, and Leaton became a favorite of the sweet young things of Marfa. Found himself in demand at dinner parties and beauty pageants and bonfire keggers, elected student body president and captain of every sports team Marfa High had to offer. (Understand this: Leaton was not an especially superior athlete, but players and coaches alike held certain beliefs relating to the appeasement of whatever supernatural deities watched over the Troutwine boy.) So there came a long pause in the love affair between Leaton and Ofalia.

It was only after a painful breakup with the captain of the cheerleading squad that Leaton remembered how things had been with him and the spirit at Muerto Springs. Guilt and hope raged in his teenage heart as he rode his horse to the mouth of Boot Canyon one evening late. (Even Murder had stopped coming to rouse him out of sleep, sick as he was of the boy’s “I’m-so-asleep-I-can’t-hear-you” masquerade.)

Leaton was halfway naked at the edge of Muerto Springs when he began to realize that something was wrong. Where the edge of the water should have been, there was nought but dry land, a layer of pine needles, and a broken robin’s egg. Leaton fetched his flashlight and hated every dry circle its beam showed him. There was nothing left of Muerto Springs but a puddle, a dark brown iris in a cornea of mud.

Near tears, he walked out to the puddle. His bare feet couldn’t recognize the dry rocks and sticks with which he had once been so familiar with underwater. The puddle, not much larger than a washtub, was dead-body cold to Leaton’s touch. Still, he did his best to get into it, to try and warm it up with his body heat, to call Ofalia up from the black earth.

His body grew numb as it sank into the near-freezing water. So much so that Leaton was almost unaware when a cottonmouth found his 98-degree flesh too much to resist, bit him good and hard at the back of his heel. Unsatisfied with the sad nature of the blood it found, the snake climbed up over Leaton’s belly and exited the pool.

What could Leaton say but “Damnation!”

Dizzy, scared, numb, ashamed, Leaton got out of the pool fully realizing that his

chances of getting home before the snake's venom had spread to terrify every last molecule of his lymphatic system were slim. He made it to his horse, pulled himself up onto its back, and wrapped the reins around his waist to help keep him on in case he should pass out. He knew, from a boy's life around ponds and stock tanks, what things might happen to him if he didn't get help. First swelling, then fever, nausea, vomiting, delirium. If he was too late getting help, he'd begin to bleed into his skin, out his mouth, ears, and nose, his eyes. He thought about that for a minute and couldn't help but remember the first time the water from Muerto Springs flooded his mouth, ears, and nose, stung his eyes, intoxicating him with magic and love. He started to cry as he whipped his horse on its hindquarters to get it moving. The tears burned his cheeks and he passed out.

When he woke up, he was not more than a hundred yards from Muerto Springs. It was late in the afternoon. His horse was tied to a live oak, calmly eating some hay that lay at its feet. He looked down at his heel and was shocked to find a dead chicken, slit from its beak to its asshole tied around his calf and foot. Another chicken, also dead, also slit from top to bottom, lay on the ground beside him. Its insides were a deep blue. There was a pitcher of water on his right, and a clay bowl full of some kind of powder and sliced pomegranates. A note next to the bowl—tiny, neat handwriting—read, “Eat. Sleep. Tomorrow, ride home.”

Which is precisely what he did.

\* \*

“Was he OK?” the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine asked.

“I'm surprised you care,” Briscoe growled.

“Who'd taken care of him? Ofalia? Who?”

I shrugged and moved on.

\* \*

Summer of 1957. Leaton Troutwine, living in Lajitas, runs tourists around in river rafts. Down through Santa Elena. Mainly just the tame stuff.

One tequila-hazy morning, Far Flung River Adventures gets a call. Leaton, sleeping closest to the phone, picks it up to find none other than Marguerite Lechuza on the other end of the line.

(Marguerite Lechuza. A woman with extraordinary powers. Rumored to be a witch. Said to have been seen sneaking down from the peak of La Mitre on full-mooned nights, where she may or may not have been consorting with El Diablo in his prison cave. Legendary for her love potions, revenge dust, and pecan pralines. Feared by sinners and saints, revered by all who fall in between those boundaries. Loved by children in the daylight hours; after dark they check under their beds to be certain she isn't lurking there to kidnap golden dreams. Consulted by jilted brides and suspension bridge engineers—“It's no good to build there: the coyote king's spirit will chase cars into the gorge every February 13th. . .”—Marguerite Lechuza, the town's eldest inhabitants will testify, could change herself into a gila

monster or an organ pipe cactus. She could hear through walls and into wombs, could see where the water lurked underground, ripe for the coming of a drill and a pip. The priest welcomed her to every social, although she never actually went to Mass, and her presence at the birth of a child was regarded as a sign that the child would be strong of heart, will, and liver. Marguerite Lechuza, unofficial but universally recognized Queen of Marfa.)

“Troutwine,” she said before he had a chance to grumble hello. “I saw you in a dream. Last night. A boy stood in front of a dust devil holding a football. Number 37.”

“That was me,” Leaton said.

“Yes. And you were talking with someone, Troutwine. Do you know who?”

Leaton looked around him at crumbling adobe walls and the fan that curled uncertainly in the window’s struggling breezes. He thought about the way his tornado had danced for him, how it had spun like a ballerina. “No. Who?”

“La Llorona. The Wailing Woman of the Rio Grande,” Marguerite Lechuza whispered, as if she was afraid her line was tapped and someone might overhear the secret she was about to impart.

\* \*

“Wait a second,” the Poet said. “Hold on just a minute. Two wet, weeping women?”

“The human condition can be summed up in one word,” I offered. “Coincidence.”

\* \*

(Leaton Troutwine had heard the Wailing Woman before. Some evenings just before he put the rafts ashore and cooked the tourists’ dinner so they could crawl into sleeping bags and prepare in moon-baked dreams for the next day’s adventure, Leaton would hear her sobbing. It always happened at the same place, a wide, high sandy beach on the Texas side of the Rio, perfect for camping. Across from that, twelve or thirteen feet above the glassy water, a fern grotto.

Leaton waited to see that grotto all day while he steered the rafts through the Rock Slide—through the Mexican Gate, past Dog Nose and Jupiter, over Rogue Wave, and to the side of Grabby Hole. When he caught sight of its feathery plants leaning out of the cave toward the chocolate brown water, he tuned out the oohs and aahs of Far Flung’s customers—mers, he called them, or peeps—and listened carefully for the weeping. It was no louder than the sound his oar made dipping into and rising out of the water. Brought back painful memories of Ofalia and Muerto Springs. His heart ached. His scarred heel stung.

Usually, one of the tourists would notice his painful-looking concentration and ask him if everything was alright. The weeping faded then, and was gone.

“It’s nothing,” Leaton would tell the peep. “Give me a hand getting this sun-dog ashore.”

Around the campfire at night, Leaton would tell the story of the Wailing Woman. “And so, out of desperation,” he would conclude, “the woman took her children to the high cliffs above the Rio. Being only babies, they could not have known what it meant when she tossed them down into the abyss. They made no sound, and the river took them just as quietly into its own dark heart. She meant to throw herself in after, but found that she could not do it. Some invisible hand kept her away from the edge. Ever since, the woman, or her ghost, has wandered the cliffs of the river, lamenting her runaway husband, her lost babies and her unbearable sin. Shh. Listen. Some nights you can hear her wailing. Shhh.”

The peeps, the mers were quiet then. Concentrating to hear anything over the campfire and their heartbeats. “I think I heard her,” someone would finally say.

But Leaton Troutwine knew that what the man or woman heard was nothing but the river humping against the rocks it loved. He knew the sound of the Wailing Woman’s tears, as if her misery was his own. But he had no way to describe it.)

“She was telling you where to find the gold, Troutwine,” Marguerite hissed into the phone. “She knows where it is hidden. And she told you in my dream. So when we find it, you and I, we will split it neatly in two.”

\* \*

Gordon sneezed, and Briscoe put one of the coolers down on the ground in front of him. The walrus stuck his snout into the cooler and sighed so that the empty beer cans danced and jiggled in the icy water.

“Let me guess,” the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine said. “The gold was hidden in the fern grotto. And Marguerite stilled the waters so that Leaton could climb up and claim the treasure. He became fantastically wealthy, owning as he does every Cosmic Drive-In Diner in the state of Texas—you see, I HAVE heard of your Leaton Troutwine before. I’ve eaten more than a few of his Marfa Melts. So let me finish this up for you: He lives happily ever after in a house modeled after the one in *Giant* not fifteen miles away from here. The end.”

Briscoe belched, snorted, popped another beer. “Wrong,” he said. “Wrong,” O’Neal echoed.

“Mostly wrong,” I granted.

\* \*

After Marguerite ran off with all the gold, Leaton Troutwine was pretty down and out, as you can imagine. HE was the one who knew where the gold was. The knowledge had been inside HIS head for who knows how long. HE’d been unable to reap the rewards his subconscious had mined for HIM.

So he spent a great many days wandering through the ghost town of Terlingua, and it was there that he realized what his life’s calling was.

Tater Tots.

Leaton Troutwine took out a small business loan and opened The Cosmic Drive-In Diner just outside of Marfa. It was the only dining spot in West Texas in

1957 where the consumer wasn't limited to a menu of nothing but chicken, beef, or sour cream enchiladas. Made a fortune in no time.

People flocked to the Cosmic.

You could see it from miles away, an oasis of neon and roller-skating waitresses. Patsy Cline's "Walking After Midnight" hit it big that first year the Cosmic was open, and for a while, driving toward the Cosmic, a hungry rancher with a convertible Caddy and a craving for Frito Pie could hear Patsy's voice wafting out to him on Highway 90. The Cosmic sign towered over the pickups and Ford Fairlanes. C in green. O in orange. S in blue. M in white, I in red. C in green again. Above the letters, neon reproductions of Leaton's beloved Lights blinked and zipped from side to side. "I stop to see a weeping willow," Patsy crooned.

Of course, Leaton expanded almost immediately. Began to sell off franchises all across Texas and New Mexico. Before you could say, "Que cruda estoy!" that young son of a gun was a millionaire. But not one content just to sit back and watch the president's faces roll in to him. As more Cosmic-like diners opened and competed for Leaton's business, he took to wandering Terlingua again, hoping to find the same spot of inspiration which gave him the idea for Tater Tots, anxious to evolve.

And one night, standing in the ruins where the Starlight Theatre had once shown films to the horde of miners that made Terlingua—for a brief time—a quicksilver boomtown, Leaton heard a voice say to him, "Alaska." He turned to see who might have snuck up to stand behind him.

"Alaska," the ghost said again.

(Leaton recognized the man to be a ghost, on account of how he was see-through.)

"Who are you?" Leaton asked.

"Used to run the projector here," the ghost replied. "Until no new films showed up for more than a month running. About the thirtieth time the miners saw the beginning of *Love Finds Andy Hardy*, one of them pulled out a gun, turned around, and shot me where I stood in the projection booth. Just as well, really. I couldn't have watched that damned film again myself."

"I'm the one who gave you the tater tots idea. Whispered it in your silken sow's ear whilst you roamed these same ruins, vituperating Marguerite Lechuz's venerable name."

Leaton, not scared—how could he be, considering all the weird things he'd endured in his life?—only curious, asked, "How'd you come to think up Tater Tots?"

"You say Tater Tots as if they ought to be capitalized," the ghost said. "But then, for you, I suppose, they would be. Listen, you sit in the desert long enough, watching the town you lived in turn to nothing, watching your best friend, a movie projector, rust, you come up with some notably bizarre ideas, poetry, recipes."

"Poetry?"

"It's a dead language," the ghost explained.

\* \* \* \*

“Now hang on there just one minute,” the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine objected.

“I’m just telling it like it happened,” I said.

\* \* \* \*

“Alaska,” the ghost insisted. “Something tells me you’d find whatever it is you’re looking for in that great new state. Bigger than Texas, I understand. The deserts there are all ice. No sand. No cacti. No agkistrodon piscivoruses up there.”

Leaton shook his head to show that he was not completely up with what the ghost was attempting to relate.

“Water moccasins. Cottonmouths. Too cold for ’em. May be too cold for you. But it sure would be nice to feel the difference, wouldn’t it?”

Leaton told everyone who asked that he was going up to Alaska to investigate the possibility of developing a new product for The Cosmic. “Blubber tots” he said. “Eskimos eat blubber like it’s valentine candy. Maybe—deep-fried—it could catch on down here.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Here, you boys,” I said. “It’s getting late and old Leaton may have discovered Gordon’s disappearance. Let’s get him up in the back of the truck and take him home. Me and the Poet will ride in the back, and I’ll finish up the tale on the way in.

“Leaton stayed with a tribe of Eskimos for almost two weeks. Every night they told him the next day they would take him to see the ice cave where they stored the blubber. (Leaton wanted to get an idea on the size freezer he’d be needing.) But every morning, if it was snowing but just a little, the Eskimos told Leaton it would have to be some other time. Those people live to make snow angels.”

Gordon hung his head around the side of the cab, caught the desert wind in his whiskers. Grunted appreciatively, his walrus sense of direction telling him he was headed toward home.

“Leaton gets tired of waiting, of course. That’s one of the things being a millionaire had done to Leaton. Made him lust for all that effective usage of time had to offer—namely more time. So one afternoon, just a few flakes falling on the tundra, he puts on his parka and heads out for the ice cave, taking with him a map he pestered one of the Eskimo women into drawing out.”

The Poet listened attentively.

“Not too much to tell really about this part. The ice cave was beautiful beyond words, Leaton’s said again and again. Like being inside a diamond, apparently. Full of whale blubber and a few sleeping walruses. Well, Leaton looked around until his hands started to sting from the cold, and he decided to go on back to his igloo. But a polar bear was blocking the door. Actually, it was lumbering toward Leaton on two legs, growling. So Leaton figured this was what the projectionist ghost was referring to. He’d come looking for something. Blubber, he’d thought. And found it.

Death. A great, big white death with hellacious teeth and cock-fight-sharp claws.

“So long, cruel world;” Leaton says he thought. He just relaxed his shoulders, thought about a mountainside of ocotillo in bloom, and got ready to be eaten. Except the bear didn’t get to him. Two walruses decided to take him on. One tripped the bear from behind with a well-placed flipper. The other one sank a tusk right into the bear’s hairy trunk. I’ve heard of dolphins pulling stuff like that against sharks, but this walrus story, well, it was a first for the world, I believe.”

The Poet, not able to resist the temptation, asked, “Did the polar bear manage to kill the two walruses before he died? Is Gordon those two walruses’ orphaned child? Is that why Leaton brought him back to Marfa, Texas? Out of gratitude?”

“Would it make you happy if I said yes?” I asked the Poet.

He had to struggle for a few seconds before he came up with an answer.

“I don’t know,” he said over the roar of the pickup’s tires, Gordon’s jubilant mewling, the beer cans making beer can music in the truck’s bed. “I don’t think so.”

“Then I won’t tell you.”

We pulled up to Leaton Troutwine’s house in a fog of dust glowing red from our brake lights. The Poet and I had to hold Gordon back while Briscoe let down the tailgate. As soon as we let go of our hold around his neck, he bailed out of the truck and lumbered up to the front door, turned around, and waited for us to catch up and ring the doorbell.

It was well after midnight. And the door was unlocked. And Leaton Troutwine didn’t answer to our voices calling, “Hey there.” And we knew, just from the way our voices echoed, that something was not right.

We found him in the kitchen, his face down on his arm like he was resting his eyes. But he wouldn’t wake up when we shook him, or when Gordon tried to get up in his lap.

There was a note propped up against a vase full of fresh-picked bluebonnets. (Don’t tell anybody that part. It’s illegal to pick bluebonnets instate. And I wouldn’t want to be known as the one that blew the whistle on Leaton’s only transgression of the legal system.) Note read:

I’ve gone out to live with The Lights. They were nice enough to finally invite me back, and I’d be stupid not to accept. Seeing as how they have asked me to stay for what we’ve come to call “good.” I would greatly appreciate it if somebody would take care of Gordon. Also try and corner some poet (I’m told they have one or two over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine) and tell him that he can have every last thing I own. I ask only that he quit whining about his infinitesimal soul and pay some lip service to the mysteries that blessed me all my life. (Who’d a thought Marguerite Lechuzza would save my life with two chickens, then rob me of a fortune in gold? People are strange.) There’s a typewriter in the basement.

Without regrets.

Leaton Troutwine

PS: If anybody can track down Lorna Tickfringe, please do so and tell her I’m finally over her.

“Who was Lorna Tickfringe?” the Poet asked. “The captain of the cheerleading squad? How did he know it was Marguerite Lechuza that saved his life with those chickens? How much stuff did you leave out?” the Poet asked me.

“Son,” I said, “you’re a rich man now. You could pay every person in Marfa to come in here’n tell you everything they know about Leaton Troutwine, and you’d still be rich but no closer to owning the whole story.”

“But at the end of *Citizen Kane* they let you know just exactly who Rosebud was. What’s the meaning of all this?”

I walked over to the phone to dial the funeral home. “In a world where a projectionist gets shot over a Mickey Rooney movie and a snakebite can make a man bleed out his eyes, you’re better off deciding what stuff means for yourself. That way, your disappointments won’t be many and a bad mystery novel’s only half as long.”

The Poet moaned, “I’m lost.”

“We all are,” I said. “Ain’t that fine?”

(Some years after that night, I sat on the Poet’s front porch [used to be Leaton Troutwine’s front porch] drinking wine. “Quote me a poem,” I said.

“I don’t know any by heart.”

“Not even your own?”

“Nope.”

I took out two cigars and passed one over to the Poet. “Then tell me about the night we found ol’ Leaton Troutwine ‘not at home.’” I said.

“Well, the Marfa Lights were big and bright,” he began, laughing. “Deep in my heart, I knew something was afoot. . .”

(I lit my cigar and passed him the lighter.)



*Steve Zeitlin*

## The Storytelling Wake

Gina bet against her in gin rummy  
Sarah summered with her as a child

When she died, the stories  
lay scattered  
around her absence  
like lost children

So we gathered first the stories  
of Abby as saint  
then, local sweetheart  
finally, the trickster tales

and we reconstructed Abby  
at the storytelling wake

*—inspired by folklorists Kelly S. Taylor and Kenny Goldstein*

## Leslie Prosterman

### Rant

I  
can  
not  
stand for  
one more minute  
the woman sitting  
next to me eating an apple  
during Kim Addonizio's  
"We part our lips, our mouths get nearer and nearer."  
She picks up the apple  
and digs her mouth  
into the mealy flesh,  
tiny eyes riveted on the poet,  
tiny teeth riveted in the apple.  
She puts it down, picks it up again  
without looking at it,  
rests it carefully on *Jimmy and Rita*.  
And then picks it up again.  
Immediately.

She is fat and soft and pale and  
does *not* put down the apple  
for two fucking seconds.  
Kim is reading the poem about death  
and the woman next to me eats on.  
How did the apple get so big?  
It must have apple extender in it.  
It never seems to diminish.  
She is the inverted Penelope of apple-eating,  
the apple renewing itself each minute  
instead of unraveling the night before.  
Or perhaps she's eating it slowly  
just to piss me off. She's stringing out  
the apple eating deliberately,  
turning it into a goddamn cliff-hanger.

She's waiting  
to finish the apple,  
to make sure there will  
be no poem read unaccompanied  
by slow, ruminative  
chewing, extremely slow,  
not unlike the cud  
revolving throughout the four  
chambers of a cow's  
stomach. I don't know  
why that came into my head just now.

Kim Addonizio acknowledges  
that the Rilke quote she is about to use is very well-known.  
Nora on my other side  
turns to me and says, yeah,  
it's on quite a few  
refrigerator magnets  
these days.

And the apple-eater says, I just  
bought that magnet. Isn't that weird?

Yes, that's weird.

She does not seem to realize  
how annoyed I am with her  
and her now mercifully-deceased apple  
and that I think she should get a new  
hairstyle and stop  
dyeing her hair  
so blonde  
when her skin is  
so pink.

She smiles at me  
tentatively.  
My indefensibly  
soft heart feels  
ashamed and tender toward her  
in the spirit of the New Age.  
I realize she is a person, too.  
She is anxious,  
hoping to please

like a new kindergartner  
on her first day of school.  
She would like to connect,  
she is sensitive,  
she is, after all,  
attending a poetry reading.

She is like me, we are one.

And then,  
she  
takes  
out  
another  
fucking  
apple  
and  
I *see* now  
she really is the antiChrist.  
She should get a new  
hairdresser,  
exorcise those  
cotton-candy textured  
blonde curls  
falling limply into sixes  
over her fuschia cheeks,  
stop chewing those apples,  
or confine herself  
forever  
to attending readings  
of grocery lists.

## Ceci N'est Pas un Metaphor

"I've lost my power here"  
as he holds his big  
microphone  
in both hands.

"Symbolism, he says, metaphor,  
no. Let's just talk about tone.  
Symbolism and metaphor merely  
confuse the issue."

Re-enthroning himself,  
he sits  
cross-legged up on the stage,  
non-metaphorical crotch  
slightly above  
eye level,  
big,  
though impotent,  
microphone now held  
by a  
four-footed  
metal stand  
instead of his  
five-fingered  
hand.

Now, a mere symbolic  
gesture of its  
former functional self,  
the mike becomes  
an agent of display,  
reinscribed as an  
artifact of sound and dominance,  
a figurative, useless  
amplification of authority.

## Painting Louise Glück

Five aspiring poets  
slid  
surreptitiously on their  
bellies  
to the podium. They  
whipped  
out five little bright bottles,  
dipped  
their tiny brushes in the shiny pots and  
smeared  
her toenails with jade and turquoise  
shellac

As she read “Prism” to the assembled crowd  
we  
accidentally  
embalmed  
her entire foot in  
formaldehyde-based  
glaze.

We  
realized  
we had  
slightly  
misunderstood  
the formula  
and, backing each other up,  
prayed and labored  
apologetically  
to release  
her from that  
subsequent  
layer  
of unnecessary  
varnish.

“My intimacies have always been forged  
with people who were capable  
of seeing the dark side of things.”

With these words, she  
cracked  
the second  
lacquered  
coat of precious  
gems  
and finally released  
herself.

from *Kamp: A Memory Novel*

Chapter 1

*Foretaste: A Night at Camp #3*

The all-day rain, light at first, worsened as evening approached, a ghostly mist rising from the warm hollows of the rolling terrain. Such weather exposed a dirty secret of the bunkhouses, which from the outside appeared to be in good shape, by highlighting the condition of the roofs; mine, for example, had a half-dozen leaks, one of them directly over the foot of my bed. On such a day, outdoor activities were pretty much ruled out, leading to a group sense of confinement not unlike what it must be like in prison. My bunkhouse boys spent much of the day sorting laundry.

After the supper dishes were cleared away that night, a torn, yellowed screen was set up at one end of the dining hall and a creaking projector, which deserved retirement in a museum, was clicked on at the other. The natives (including us counselors, who should have been maintaining order) were especially restless; when it became clear that the movie selection was the decrepit classic, *Ruggles of Red Gap*, the assembled multitude issued a collective groan and all traces of decorum vanished. At first we amused ourselves by shouting out clever responses to the film's dialogue, the older campers offering particularly ribald contributions made the more hilarious by one's affectation of an English accent.

Then things got physical: before I could stop them, my own table of campers was tossing lit firecrackers saved from their July Fourth celebrations for just such an occasion. Knowing better than to buck the resulting mass hysteria, I slipped away in the hope that by absencing myself my dereliction of duty would be less obvious. I wasn't that worried, since the heads of the Boys and Girls Sides—the real authority figures—were nowhere in evidence.

As I passed the front wing of the dining hall where the camp store was housed, Jerry, the canteen clerk, grabbed my arm and whispered an invitation to return later. You never knew with Jerry, but his dramatic tone suggested that he was planning something special in the way of a late-night diversion. Since it was my “night off,” which is to say that I had no patrol duty, I was free to do whatever I wished so long as that didn't involve leaving camp.

Joey, the youngest camper in my bunkhouse, had made one of his escape attempts the day before, and although a search party had combed the grounds and the local sheriff's office was alerted, his empty cot at "lights out" this night seemed to reproach me for not having done more to mitigate his misery. I was especially concerned about the homesick pain-in-the-*tush* being caught out in what was now a downpour. Waiting until my other campers showed every sign of falling asleep, I eased open the creaking screen door and sloshed through the mud back to the canteen, the rain making a roaring din as it bombarded my rubber-impregnated, green Army poncho.

Speaking of the Army, Jerry had been a PX clerk near Seoul during the Korean War, so he knew all the ins and outs of acquiring discounted and contraband goods. Camp #3's canteen stocked an amazing variety of items for camper and counselor alike, including under-the-counter alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, and marijuana reputedly grown by local Amish farmers. The camp's owner evidently turned a blind eye to such illegalities, very likely receiving a hefty kickback for letting Jerry get away with them.

Corruption aside, Jerry was a gregarious guy who always was ready with a good story, whether or not you had time to listen to it. As I entered the canteen he was in the midst of telling one of his favorites, about how he and a couple of fellow privates in Korea had plotted to kill their hated sergeant one Saturday night. They planted a landmine in the road the "sadistic sonofabitch" habitually took to visit his favorite brothel and waited on the hill above with their M1 rifles to finish him off if need be. But the sergeant's jeep never appeared that night, and the speculation that he'd gotten wind of the plot squashed any further assassination attempts. Jerry ended the tale by expressing his relief that the plan had failed, the point being, that he was not a murderer at heart. That was a good thing to know.

Jerry's audience consisted of about a dozen counselors, who were lounging on the benches at the few tables or leaning on the counter. The canteen offered a sociable refuge from the gloom outside, aided in no small measure by a sweet cloud of reefer smoke. I'd chosen, even in those heady 1960s, to abstain from drugs, but a contact buzz was unavoidable in the small room and it wasn't long before I was feeling mellow. Apparently Jerry wasn't ready to spring the surprise hinted at in his whispered invitation and was waiting for a few more staffers to show up. Meanwhile, I couldn't help noticing an uninhibited couple in one corner engaged in as much sex as they could manage with most of their clothes on.

The arrival of the camp's pastry chef and handyman completed the by-invitation party and also gave away the theme of the night's festivities, since both were noted tipplers whose bond of friendship was cemented by alcohol. Jerry ducked into the large refrigerator where the soft drinks were kept and emerged with a heavy cardboard case containing a treasure-trove of canned beer from a well-known Philadelphia brewery. (The brand would later go belly-up after its advertising slogan, "The Beer with Body," became a self-fulfilling prophecy; word got out that a vagrant's corpse was found floating in one of the vats, a smile on his face.)



The novelty this night was not so much the beer as its containers. Metal cans for beer had existed for some time but could only be opened with the sharp end of a tool affectionately known as a “church key.” It was in the early 1960s that manufacturers introduced the zip-top can, and our little group of happy campers was to be among the first to experience this innovation, which Jerry demystified by giving us a demonstration. To underscore his largesse as host, he was only charging us seventy-five cents per beer, a considerable reduction of his usual inflated markup.

I’ve never been a big drinker, but I can toss down a couple of cool ones with the best of them, especially in summer. So I joined the others in wrapping one hand around a can and tugging with my other on the tab. Clearly the technology wasn’t perfected yet, for all of us but Jerry, who’d been practicing, were visibly struggling to open our cans. The young women who were present complained of broken fingernails, and all of us received lacerations from the razor-like metal. An impressive quantity of blood began to flow, but that didn’t stop us from drinking as we created at least partial openings in the can tops. Blood mingled with beer, and our lips took on the hue of a sated Dracula. The sight of each others’ bloody fingers and mouths, the sting of our wounds, and our growing intoxication added up to raucous laughter. We were having fun now.

To encourage each round, Jerry would recite short, bawdy toasts from his military days. This inspired me to contribute a narrative “toast” I’d picked up from my black West Philadelphia schoolyard chums in the eighth grade (and which I still like to perform in the right circumstances). It offered a very different take on the tragic events of 1912 than the favorite camp song, “Wasn’t It Sad When That Great Ship Went Down.” A couple of counselors boosted me onto the counter as a bid for the group’s attention, and I launched into it:

Say, the eighth of May was a hell of a day  
When the great Titanic went sailing away.  
The ship hadn’t been at sea more than a wink  
When it struck an iceberg and began to sink.  
Now, Shine—he was the black porter—  
Was down below eating his peas,  
When Atlantic waters came up to his knees.  
Shine ran upstairs quick to tell the captain:  
“Captain, Captain, I was downstairs eating my peas  
When cold Atlantic waters come up to my knees.”  
Captain says, “Shine, Shine, get your black ass back down;  
I’ve got ninety-nine pumps to pump that water down.”  
So Shine went back down and stared through space,  
That’s when the water came up to his waist.  
Shine ran upstairs again and found the captain:  
“Captain, Captain, I was staring through space  
When cold Atlantic waters come up to my waist.”  
Captain says, “Shine, Shine, set your black ass down;

I've got ninety-nine pumps to pump that water down."  
So Shine went back down and was eating his bread;  
That's when the water came up to his head.  
This time, Shine didn't bother to find the captain.  
He jumped overboard and began to swim;  
There were dozens of millionaires on deck watching him.  
Now, Shine could swim, and Shine could float;  
Shine could outswim any goddam motorboat.  
'Bout that time the captain came on deck and said,  
"Yo, Shine, if you save poor me,  
I'll give you more money than any black man ever see."  
Shine says, "Your money may buy plenty on land,  
But it ain't worth shit on the sea.  
So jump overboard, motherfucker,  
And give the sharks a chase, like me."  
'Bout that time the captain's daughter came on deck,  
Titties in her hands and drawers all 'round her neck.  
She says, "Shine, Shine, if you save poor me,  
I'll give you all this white ass that you see."  
Shine says, "You hate my color, you despise my race,  
So jump overboard, bitch,  
And give the sharks a chase, like me!"

At this point, the canteen group was in an uproar, cheering me—and underdog Shine—on. I concluded,

'Bout that time Shine met up with Brother Whale.  
Brother Whale says, "Shine, Shine, you swim mighty fine,  
But if you miss one stroke your black ass is mine."  
So Shine speeded up to outswim Brother Whale.  
It made his arms ache till they were real sore,  
But he finally made it to the shore.  
Now, when the news got to old Philly town  
That the Titanic had sunk,  
D'ya know where Shine was?  
He was down on Broad Street, dead drunk!  
Now, if anyone asks who proposed this toast,  
Tell 'em it was Ishmael,  
Who's been from coast to coast.

Resounding applause, screams of delight, and shouts of approbation enveloped me as I jumped from the counter; Jerry even handed me an opened beer on the house.

Suddenly, a deafening thunderclap reminded us of the violent summer storm outside. At the same instant, the canteen's front door banged open and the tail end of a nearby lightning flash threw an unnaturally large figure into menacing silhouette. His face was obscured, but we all instinctually recognized the most

unwelcome of party crashers, Big Jack. Shocked into instant sobriety, our hilarity quickly deflated to nervous titters and then dead silence.

As luck would have it, I was leaning against the wall next to the side door. The beckoning doorknob persuaded me—a firm believer that discretion is the better part of valor—to call it a night. So I slipped out into the dripping darkness, hoping that the others would escape confrontation as easily as I . . . but knowing otherwise.

## *Jeannie Banks Thomas*

### Shins Around the Fireside (Jig)

In the church near the woods,  
bagpipes, and  
men holding hands  
and singing loudly  
enough  
to wake all the lambs in the cemetery.

In the town by the highway  
company housing,  
bipolar duplexes  
at war with each other's angles;  
on stoops, tenants dream  
the promises of phantom golf courses.

In the bar by the French-speaking sea  
young men in sandals  
play the instruments of their ancestors,  
but plug them in first;  
and the old men dance whether  
they've been drinking or not.

In the house in the snow  
shoeless old women  
wear tightly knitted slippers;  
they beat the tunes out hard  
with their feet and  
think about working up a rock 'n roll sweat.

While upstairs, the fire  
and the midnight dinner  
wait.

## *William Bernard McCarthy*

### Maybelle and Sara on the Porch

In straight chairs  
in fading light  
two aged ladies  
play the light  
of hand and eye  
over old and faded photos.

Meanwhile,  
behind,  
inside,  
like daylight,  
dinner—  
supper, rather—  
fades.

# The Powers of Narrative

Although folklore is hardly the only field intensely interested in narrative, folklorists do concern themselves with particularly fundamental forms of storytelling: the oral, the traditional, the stories that have persisted over time and space for long, long periods of time. They are particularly well situated to observe the power that narrative has to shape social meanings and convey cultural agendas, to see how very important stories are to human communication. Some folklorists have been great oral storytellers themselves, and it is appropriate that some of the contributors to this volume have chosen to turn to written narrative forms like the short story and memoir as means of expression. In other sections, John Burrison uses the novel to convey a sense of an important American experience, that of the summer camp; Jeff Todd Titon uses the short story to look at life on a rural island and at traditional and non-traditional crafts; Elaine Lawless, Libby Tucker, and Joanne Mulcahy tell us the true stories of their passages through the world.

In this section, Kirin Narayan's memoir focuses on a family friend, a noted photographer and surrealist painter, and is very much a memoir of family. One of its important insights, however, is how folklorists become folklorists; for Narayan, stories were a key part of that process. The Kirin of the memoir is very young, but she is aware of the power of stories and of how she needs to know stories to understand certain things. One cannot but connect that realization to her having become a student of oral narrative, and her piece is very suggestive about the centrality of stories in our lives. In my own poem "Ballad Girls," I lay out some of the characteristics of a narrative folk subgenre, the "murdered girl ballad," in which a young woman is slain by her lover. I hope to pose a few questions about the meaning of this type of narrative song, including why this story type has had a centrality in American tradition, and why it exercises the power that it must. Of course, a poem poses questions differently than an analytical essay, and whether the poem provides any answers is itself an open question.

In several poems, Steve Zeitlin looks at more specific storytelling events or stories. "Once Upon a Time" not only references the time-honored formulaic opening for a fairytale but comments on how a father-narrator interweaves everyday reality and fictive tale. "Mirror" comes out of having heard Holocaust survivor Boris Blum tell the stories of his experiences in a narrative session sponsored by the New York Folklore Society, while "Tickling the Corpse" also looks to a Holocaust story of horrors but strangely brings the powers of laughter to the fore against

the chilling backdrop of horrific death. (Zeitlin's "The Storytelling Wake," the title taken from an essay by Kelly S. Taylor in *Southern Folklore* but drawing also on comments made by noted folklorist Kenneth Goldstein about the mourning rituals for his own father, is in another section and looks at how the stories told about the dead "reconstruct" them.)

In other sections, writers, of course, demonstrate the power and appeal of folk narrative in many other ways. Folktale motifs are an important component to Neil Grobman's fiction. Echoes of legend come to the characters in Teresa Bergen's short story "Haints." Jens Lund has said that things he encounters as a folklorist often spur him on and become stories he tells orally in informal situations; some he then writes down. In the section that follows, called "Legend and Myth," several writers work with the materials from those genres, dipping into the great pool of stories.

## Ballad Girls

Those murdered girls:  
Laura Forster, Pretty Polly,  
Pearl Bryant, others unnamed.  
They die, reminding us  
Each time the ballad's sung,  
That men will try to run,  
That love is hard to know,  
That careless passion comes on back  
To stab us in the breast  
Or drown us in some river  
Far from home.

The lover sings their  
Willow garden death song.  
And when she has been immobilized  
By the Burgundy wine, he stabs her,  
Throws her in to sink,  
And (for good measure) announces  
The wine was poisoned anyway.  
Overkill, a thrice-told story  
That chills us to our singing bones,  
Making sure we understand  
Death behind the banjo's frolic.

So then the lover hangs:  
Tom Dula, Jonathan Lewis,  
Pretty Polly's man.  
There's no getting away:  
Only the gallows  
Of foolish desire.  
We're strung up to a lonesome tree  
Once we set foot on that forbidden road.



Sally Gooden, Buffalo gals,  
Cindy, Saro Jane:  
Fiddle-tune women.  
They make us jump up,  
Dance around the hall,  
And do a carefree buck and wing.

But those ballad girls,  
They're something else,  
Another, darker story:  
A tale of shadow selves  
That hide beyond  
The Camptown Races of the heart.

Stella Stories

*“I always pref-uhed to be a mistress than to be a wife,”* Stella liked to pronounce, nose airily turned upward. She used this line through most of her life. If her amazed listeners burst into laughter, she would hunch slightly, green eyes alight, allowing herself a throaty, slightly snorting laugh.

I first heard this pronouncement not from Stella, but from my mother. Quoting Stella, Maw took on a deep, breathy British voice, though her own bubbling amusement diluted Stella’s blunt imperiousness. Most people who encountered Stella could not resist trying to reproduce her voice, as though performing the timbre and emphasis might grant momentary freedom from binding roles.

Stella Snead was a surrealist painter turned photographer, twenty years older than Maw and fifteen years younger than my American grandmother, Nani. During the 1960s, Stella lived beside us in the same stretch of fenced property under the coconut trees in a beachside Bombay suburb. Stella was then in her fifties: tall, lean, and stylish. Her perpetual tan offset the white curls rising above her unusually high, curved forehead. Her face showed off the slopes of beautiful bones: rounded cheekbones that dipped inward, wide jaws. She often wore mossy greens the shade of her eyes, or else iridescent block colors: shocking pink, stunning purple, parrot lime green. She favored tailored pants, blouses that showed off her figure, and heavy silver rings, belts, and necklaces (never earrings, as though these might be too feminine). When smoking, she occasionally used a cigarette holder.

Just as Stella didn’t want to ever be a wife, she also definitively *“didn’t like children.”* We children rarely entered her house unless specifically invited over and chaperoned by our mother and grandmother. We did spy on her, though, peering through the bright fuchsia bougainvillea hedge as she came and went in her Ambassador car, or called for her cook “Za-cha-RI-ah!” or greeted smartly dressed visitors at the wide, folding porch door for cocktails and long dinner parties. Flamboyant, irreverent, outspoken, Stella trailed bright plumes of stories. As a little girl I was already gathering up the feathers.

I was the youngest child. Early on, I decided that collecting stories was a good way to compensate for being born so late. If I knew the stories from the long family prehistory before I was me, I wouldn’t always be tagging after, pleading “Tell me” or exclaiming “Really?” I listened, all ears, trying to memorize phrases and images

whenever my older sister and brothers recalled any events from the mysterious time before my memories joined theirs. I soaked up the stories that Maw told us or our changing circles of guests: stories about interesting places, quirky people, and amazing twists of fate that established her as more than a mother and wife bound to Bombay. I reveled in Paw's droll tales that no one was ever quite sure were invented or real. I begged Nani for stories about when she was a little girl in exotic Michigan sledding through snow, pulling golden strands of taffy, and eating cinnamon-scented baked apples. Since stories about Stella's adventures and sayings were so closely entwined with our family history, I attended closely to the stories about her.

Maw had first met Stella in Taos, New Mexico, in the mid-1940s. In those days, Maw was still Didi Kinzinger, a lively teenager with two thick braids who wore fiesta skirts with off-the-shoulder blouses and quoted Baudelaire. Maw's father, Edmund Kinzinger, was a German Expressionist painter who had opposed the Nazi regime and had sought emigration to his wife, Alice's country in the 1930s. He had founded a department of art for Baylor University (discovering that unlike the Wild West he imagined, this Baptist institution in Waco, Texas, did not allow drinking, dancing, smoking, or nude models). By the early 1940s, Edmund and Alice sought out cosmopolitan company in Taos, where he also taught a summer art school. Years later when new visitors at our house in Bombay had glimpsed regal, aloof Stella and wanted to know just who she was, Maw brought out the story of Stella's arrival in Taos.

***The British Mistress:** During the war, a Dutch herpetologist called Adrian, and his practical British wife, Yvonne, moved to Taos. Adrian kept rattlesnakes in a cage by their front door: instead of a bell, the snakes raised the alarm on visitors. Adrian played Spanish guitar and experimented with counterfeiting ancient Greek coins through the lost wax method. Yvonne was some kind of minor British nobility, but she worked as a secretary in the welfare office and kept the bills paid. In the fall of 1944, Adrian started announcing at parties that "his British mistress" was joining them. Yvonne looked blandly on. I was fourteen, and I couldn't wait to meet a real Mistress. And then she arrived, and she was Stella.*

Stella was in her mid-thirties, though her hair was prematurely white. She'd studied painting in Paris with Ozenfant and then had followed him to New York. She rented Edmund's studio for the winter. She and Yvonne actually got on very well together. At one point when Stella wasn't around, I heard Adrian talk admiringly about some other woman, saying, "What she really needs is a man." And Yvonne looked up from her knitting and said to him, "Darling, you can't take on ano-thuh!"

Adrian thought that he could mess around, but he didn't want Stella to have other lovers. Stella told Adrian he was 'too macho and too possessive,' and she dumped him. But she always stayed friends with Yvonne.

If the listeners showed rapt, admiring interest, Maw also sometimes told them about Stella traveling to Monument Valley. "Traveling is a love affair with the globe," Stella liked to say. (Even when she lived in Bombay, she would set off on expeditions around India, or to distant places like London, Mexico, Egypt, or Arizona,

bringing back black-and-white prints and color slides. Sometimes, after her travels, Stella summoned us all over for an evening slide show. Through Stella's lens, before I had ever heard of cultural anthropology, I saw distant places, art, and ways of life.) In the 1940s, though Stella couldn't travel very far, this didn't stop her from having adventures.

***The Piece of Ass:** During the war, gas was rationed and it was hard to get anywhere. Stella started hitching rides with mail trucks so that she could explore the Southwest. She got a ride out to Monument Valley with a mail-truck driver. It was getting to be evening, and he asked if she'd like to get a can of beans and go out and watch the sunset. So she went with him.*

*"Mighty purdee sunset, Ma'am," the mail truck driver said to Stella as they sat out in the desert watching the sun go down.*

*"Rather," said Stella.*

*"Would you care for a piece of ass, Ma'am?" asked the mail truck driver.*

*Stella stared at him. "I haven't the faintest idea what you mean," she said.*

*"You're old enough to know what I mean," he said.*

*"Oh that," said Stella. "Oh, no thank you."*

At this point, Maw always started to laugh, bringing along the laughter of all her grown-up listeners. I sniffed a tantalizing whiff of adult complicity in their amusement, but mostly thought this was funny because of the man's strange taste for donkey meat.

Stella never really got to know my grandfather, Edmund, whom she referred to as "the Bavarian." She did befriend my grandmother, Alice, or Nani, whom she labeled "the Puritan." Even in my hearing, if Nani was expressing an opinion that Stella took to be too confining, Stella chided, *"Oh Alice, don't be such a Puritan. There are altogether too many Puritans in America already. I daresay that Britain was better off after the lot of you took off on those ships for America!"*

Nani seemed mostly amused by Stella, whose colorful opinions and narratives probably were a fine diversion. Through the 1940s, Nani's own marriage was disintegrating as Edmund struggled with manic depression; Stella's disdain for marriage was perhaps a comfort, even as she provided occasional comradery. When Nani was driving Didi north to college at the University of Colorado in 1949, Stella was as usual up for an adventure and came along too. In Boulder, Didi met a handsome Indian-from-India studying engineering: Narayan, who was not yet Paw. Our future Maw took our future Paw home to Taos to visit her parents and at some point, he must have met Stella too, for Taos was the first backdrop for one of the rare stories that Paw told about our neighbor. When Paw was home, beer bottles staining circles into the table beside him, he told funny stories about anything at all, including Stella. (Maw often disputed these stories; for this one about Stella, she later countered that since he had visited Taos only in the winters, he was actually unlikely to have been an eyewitness to a scene well known to other Taos hikers.)

***Stella's Tan:** We went for a hike in the mountains around Taos, and I was walking behind Stella. Without any warning, Stella began unbuttoning her shirt. She took it*

off, and then she climbed out of her pants too. We kept climbing and one by one, her clothes all came off. I didn't know where to look! She stripped right down to the nude. She must have been about forty, but she had a great body. "Well now, isn't this a **perfect** day for a tan?" she said.

Stella had always loved sunbathing in the nude. In the 1930s, she had belonged to a Nudist club in Britain. Maw sometimes quoted what she said was "the beginning of a Stella story." She told only the first few lines before trailing off into laughter. "I once had a lov-uh from the House of Lords. I met him in the nudist club . . . I met my most **boring** lovuh's at the nudist club. . . ."

After breaking up with Adrian, Stella met a woman sculptor in Taos and they began a relationship. But then they parted ways, and Stella began suffering from what would turn out to be a prolonged depression. Barred from inspiration for her surrealist paintings, she was at loose ends. A year after Maw and Paw had moved to India, Nani decided to fetch her only daughter home, and Stella seized this chance to travel. Maw repeated a story about this journey with relish.

**The Cradle Snatcher:** *When Alice came to try and take me home in 1952, she brought two friends with her: Inez and Stella. They traveled by ship. On the ship, Stella took up with a British social anthropologist from Cambridge. Stella was forty-two and he was twenty-four. She called him her "Pink Blimp" because he got so sun-burned talking to her as she tanned on the ship decks.*

*Alice was scandalized. "You're cradle snatching!" Alice told Stella.*

*"You're just jealous!" said Stella.*

Maw loved ending the story with her nose in the air to recreate Stella having the last word, while Nani was silenced. Maw often chafed at Nani's disapproval and was clearly delighted by Stella waving Nani's opinion away. Hearing about these adventures on the ship, I was mystified: how could someone who *didn't like children* be called a cradle snatcher?

Arriving in India, Stella started sunbathing as usual, though she made the concession of wearing a bikini. Since my other grandmother, Ba, bathed even in her own locked bathroom with her sari on, wringing it out for the wash afterward, Stella's casual shedding of clothes down to what appeared to be underwear made for a local drama. Both Paw and Maw recalled the events in the extended family home.

**The Crowd Around Stella:** *Even in Nasik, Stella was always taking off her clothes to tan in the garden, which created a sensation in the neighborhood. Boys were lining up and climbing the wall and bringing binoculars to the balconies. "Let them look if they have nothing better to do," she said. We had to beg her to stop.*

Though Nani returned to Taos, empty-handed, Stella stayed on. After 1952, Stella freely came and went to the Nasik house, sometimes visiting the Pink Blimp in what was then Ceylon. She gradually began working on art again, although through photographs rather than painting. When my eldest brother Rahoul was born at home in July 1953, Stella was sitting in the next room. To celebrate her presence, she officially became his godmother. (Later, Rahoul, who shared Stella's irreverent humor, called her his "Good God! Mother")

Paw and Maw planned a move to their own Bombay home in the late 1950s. Nani and Edmund were divorced, and she was retiring from teaching art in Taos. Nani decided to build a house beside theirs. At first, Stella asked Maw to add on a darkroom for her to develop prints between travels, but Maw convinced her to build a house of her own. Stella's wealthy mother had recently died, and Stella could afford to try out settling down. The three houses took longer to complete than expected because Maw, the self-trained architect, was pregnant yet again—with me. “*Not anoth-uh!*” Stella objected. “*Didi, how **could** you?*” On the rare occasions that Stella talked to me while I was a child, she chided, “*You held up my house being finished!*”

Even as a little girl, I understood that the fun in all the stories told about Stella, and her quotable quotes too, emerged from her being a beautiful woman who enjoyed disregarding all the ways that people expected a woman to behave. She was undeterred by solemn condolences when strangers on her Indian travels cross-examined her to find that she had never married and didn't have children either. She had never been accountable to anyone but her mother and vehemently didn't believe in blandly deferring to men. Listening from Nani's porch as flamenco music strummed at her parties and glasses clinked, I sometimes heard her voice rising forcefully above the others:

—*Oh dear, not flowers. I do **hate** cut flowers!*

—*Don't be so **boring**. Go on, have a drink. It's ever so boring to be abstemious.*

—*Do talk about something else, won't you? I'm absolutely **not into** gurus.*

As Stella's godson, Rahoul was the only one of us with the special privilege of sometimes wandering over to her house. One of these occasions became the source of a special family saying which Maw explained through another story.

***Polishing a Snakeskin:*** *Once Rahoul went over to Stella's house. She hadn't the faintest idea of how to entertain a nine-year-old boy, and so she brought out a snake-skin she owned and started to polish it. It seemed like Rahoul was over there for hours, so I went to get him. Rahoul later told me that he felt sorry for Stella doing this boring thing alone, and so he stayed on and on to keep her company. And Stella later told me that since he was hanging around, she had kept polishing and polishing, not knowing how else to keep him entertained.*

For us, “polishing a snakeskin” referred to times when people end up doing something because they are humoring someone else, and that other person in turn isn't interested either but plays along to be nice. That Stella could polish a snake-skin just for Rahoul was my first glimpse of her softer side.

Stella and Nani were early fans of the Beatles. In 1963, Nani traveled to Europe and came back with a record and a button declaring “I Love the Beatles” that she sometimes pinned onto her sleeveless cotton dresses. For the next few years, we lived in anticipation of more Beatles songs. Stella, who traveled more often, acquired new records first. We knew that Stella was home when we first heard the strains of the Beatles' latest hit through the bougainvillea hedge. Within a day or two, she formally invited us over to listen to the songs and to admire the cover,

while drinking tea and eating cucumber sandwiches followed by cake. Nani and Maw—and my eldest sister, Maya, too—kept close watch on the behavior of us younger children as we handled Stella's mother's golden-lipped china with its patterns of brown and black roses.

Between Beatles' songs, the china sometimes inspired Stella to recall her mother and what she had told Stella about Stella's own birth. Stella was shy and brusque with us children, and so she usually spoke to Nani and Maw as though we weren't really present. This was how I first learned Stella had also, unbelievably, once been a small child.

*Running Away: My poor mother. I don't know why she married my father, really, it was such a mistake. My father married her for her money. I suppose she thought she needed to be married. I wish someone had advised her not to. He was a neurotic, you see. A depressive.*

*My mother liked to hint to me that I was an immaculate conception. My father was very possessive, you see. He couldn't bear that my mother gave me more attention than she gave him. When I was five my father tried to kill me. He'd gotten violent, he was dangerous to be around, and I'm told that one day he picked up a poker and was ready to strike me with it. The family doctor advised my mother that it was better for my safety that we left. My mother took me and Hetty the cook, and we went into hiding in the country. This was during the First World War. My mother was terribly afraid that he'd come after us. Luckily, the money was hers, you see. But then he was committed to an asylum and we never saw him again.*

I was familiar with the heartache around depressed fathers and grandfathers too, but even in this league, Stella had the most unsettling and dramatic story. Hearing Stella's almost offhand words, as though this was a story she had often told in the past, I also sensed something more tender hidden within jump out, like the walnut-brains that jumped from the hard shells that Nani smashed in doorjamb. It was astonishing to think of Stella, so grand and forbidding, as another little girl baffled by the dark moods of her father.

Stella sometimes spoke more about her mother, who, thanks in part to her own money, had also lived by her own standards. When Stella was a little girl, her mother had dressed her in white and had taken many photographs of this beautiful child with dark hair and a rosebud mouth. She also made Stella walk barefoot in the morning dew, declaring this was good for Stella's aura.

*Stella's Mother, the Vegetarian: My mother was sort of a theosophist, you could say. She was a vegetarian, which was unheard of at the time. When she sent me to school, she had to find a vegetarian school and you can imagine how hard that was. So I was raised a vegetarian and didn't even taste meat until I was nineteen. Vegetarianism, nudism, it all sort of went together in Britain in those days. It was really because I was a vegetarian, you see, that I joined the nudist club . . .*

In 1970, Stella declared herself to have "done India" and relocated to a studio apartment behind Lincoln Center in New York. I next met her when I was sixteen and had received a scholarship to Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville.

Manhattan was not so far away. Now that I had grown out of being a child, I was starting to be more acceptable to Stella, but I remained tongue-tied and dazzled in her presence. During my last two years of college, I sometimes visited her for the day and we cycled down the old Westside highway to Little Italy, where she treated me to a gelato before we cycled uptown again. She would then have been almost seventy, but I had difficulty keeping up with her as she sailed ahead of me, slender ankles flashing between her tennis shoes and capri pants.

My brother Rahoul, Stella's godson, had always been the family member she most adored; they loved egging each other on, complicit in irreverence. She enjoyed his becoming a fellow photographer. I recall a Christmas Eve—1979? 1980?—that Rahoul, Stella, and I spent together, the holly she had adorned her white topknot with, the flaming British pudding lighting up the striking slopes of her face as she emerged from the kitchen. As the evening went on and more liquor was shared and hand-rolled cigarettes smoked, she unexpectedly brought out old photographs from her childhood, and from our childhood too. She had already developed the habit of unexpectedly falling asleep, mid-conversation, neck sinking toward her chest. Rahoul and I looked through the photographs together until, as usual, Stella suddenly stirred and suavely continued talking as though there had been no gap.

Stella opened her studio apartment to Rahoul when he first fell ill in the spring of 1985. A few years after he died, Stella proposed: "Well then, would you like to inherit me from Rahoul?" and so from being his godmother, she passed forward to becoming mine. By then, my mid-twenties, I was acceptably grownup; I was even starting to be possibly interesting. I visited her for long holidays and occasional weekends, enjoying the chance to hear Stella's stories in her own words. Sitting at her round table over meals she had prepared, she balanced long More cigarettes with her silver-ringed fingers, talking about past and present events and sometimes offering alternate endings from the versions of classic Stella stories I'd earlier learned. For example, it turned out there was more after the mail-truck driver suggested a piece of ass.

***The Beautiful Moon:** And so we watched the sun go down and we ate our dinner. He was rather a quiet type. Then we drove back to the hotel, and a full moon was rising. He said, "No hard feelings, Ma'am?"*

*"Oh no," I said.*

*"I just didn't want you to think I was no flat-horse," he said. Whatever that means. But then he looked up at the big moon. "It's such a beautiful moon," he said, "Are you sure you won't reconsider?"*

*"Well, no," I said. And he didn't say anything else. He was quite sweet really, so polite and taken by the moon. I suppose he was sort of a romantic.*

The "I once had a lover from the House of Lords" also had more episodes beyond the Nudist Club. The House of Lords was once invited to visit a ship that had just been inaugurated. The Lord Lover took Stella along. They found their way to a state bedroom, locked the door, and enjoyed the afternoon. "Though



we hadn't anticipated that there wouldn't be any running water," said Stella. "And then we just slipped back into the group of boring Lords and went back into London."

With age, Stella grew more stooped. She remained strikingly beautiful, always dressing in bright colors and unusual designs, silver combs adorning her top-knot. In the streets of New York, she was frequently mistaken for Katherine Hepburn. She also softened, more visibly showing affection. By her eighties, she was calling me "ducky" and "darling" whenever I visited from what she called "the wilds of Wisconsin."

Stella rediscovered painting in her eighties, but finding that she didn't have the same surrealist inspiration as before, she patiently forged some of her older misplaced canvases that had been recorded in black-and-white photographs. I realized how she was reinventing the colors when I visited and recognized a painting she had once given my mother, with creatures dancing on mesas: all the colors, though, were different from what I had grown up with. At the same time, women surrealist painters were being rediscovered. Stella enjoyed giving interviews, and also talking of her friend Leonora (Carrington). A great moment of triumph for Stella was when, at ninety, she had solo exhibitions of her paintings in Paris and New York, amid great celebrations by all her many friends and admirers.

When I started writing a family memoir, I brought my manuscript to New York, where Stella lived with round-the-clock attendants. After lunch, I read aloud portions that featured Stella to her. "That's exactly it!" Stella called out, jabbing her finger in the air as I read lines like, "*I always pref-uhed to be a mistress than be a wife*," or "*Alice, don't be such a Puritan*."

"Well, I daresay this book will make me famous," Stella said with unbridled satisfaction. "More and more people will be wanting to come see me." (As the book evolved though to its published form as *My Family and Other Saints*, many Stella stories dropped away).

A year or two later, Stella's memory was scattering along with her strength. "I've become so boring," Stella pronounced over the phone. "I know I've had an interesting life, ducky, but I don't remember any of it. I don't have any stories anymore, and so I've become dreadfully boring."

"But Stella," I said, shouting into the receiver so she wouldn't chide me for mumbling. "But Stella, other people remember your stories for you." I impulsively started retelling the story of Monument Valley and the mail-truck driver.

Stella began to laugh even before we reached any punch lines. "Oh, what a mahvellous story," she said. "Yes, he was such a romantic, a sensitive soul, really. So polite. He was so affected by the moon . . ."

The very last time I saw Stella when she was alive, her attendant let me in the door and helped her sit up at the edge of her hospital bed. Stella was specially dressed that day in a silk shirt I had once bought for her in what I thought of as a "Stella green," accenting her eyes. She peered at me, head stooped down between

her shoulders, white hair curling around her face, green eyes ablaze with affection. Even at ninety-five, she didn't wear glasses.

"Remind me," Stella said, eyes following me upward after I'd embraced her. "So am I your mother or is Didi your mother?"

"Stella, you never liked children," I said, enunciating my words loudly. "Didi's my mother and you're my godmother."

"Oh *that's* how it is, is it?" asked Stella, breaking into a laugh.

## Once Upon a Time

My father, plum out of fairy tales,  
fashioned a tale about a boy named Steve  
who wolfed down his Cheerios and waited for the school bus  
came home to Kraft macaroni and cheese

and it took me a moment to comprehend—  
that child was me

But it became my favorite bedtime story  
the woof and warp of days  
braided each night before my Dad and I would part  
wound by a childhood charmer  
who spun life into art

## Tickling the Corpse

To laugh is to imagine a world  
In which the Holocaust never happened.

The Nazis killed the children first  
but amidst the carnage of the Warsaw ghetto  
Jewish children were seen  
playing among the limbs of the dead  
leaping over dead bodies

playfully  
tickling a corpse.

Fifty years later,  
though we're tickling our Jewish souls,  
laughter remains an act of faith

## Mirror

Packed into the parlor of a German mansion  
following the liberation  
Blum saw a mirror on the wall  
but of all the straggling skeletons  
could not recognize his own—

so he stuck out his tongue  
made funny faces

And, years later, recognized traces of himself  
in the story,  
mirror of memory,

pieced together from shards

of shattered silence

*—for Boris Blum*

# Legend and Myth

Legends and myths, especially those well known from classical literature or art, have had fantastically wide appeal to writers, including modern writers. One need only think of Joyce's *Ulysses* or Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" or even Giraudoux's *Elpenor*. It's hardly surprising that, in writing poetry or in other creative genres, folklorists—often professionally engaged in the study and teaching of these genres and so particularly involved in their nature—might turn to such "master stories."

Mary Magoulick's poem "A Cosmology of Women" actually came out of a course she taught on narrative. Along with Magoulick's, other poems grapple with those ur-stories, myths, and classical legends. In "Absent Gods" Carrie Hertz uses figures from classical mythology (for which she had a childhood love) to frame "a variety of male/female (power) relationships" but from female perspectives. Paul Jordan-Smith's poems "Glaukos" and "Shadow" are from a cycle on the Theseus legend, the first a telling of the story of Glaukos, the son of King Minos, brought back from death and taught the knowledge of divination by a seer, who, when banished, takes away that knowledge by having the boy spit into his mouth, and the second a "meditation" on the monster—the Other that is the Minotaur.

Danusha Goska turns to Indian mythic narrative, however, in her play "The Ramayana . . . as if Sita Mattered" to turn a "master narrative" on its head and play with its possibilities. However, Goska works not merely from a master narrative (the story best known from the Hindu epic, the Ramayana, is in fact a complex of mythic stories) but specifically presents her material as a script for the shadow puppet plays that are a staple of folk performance in several Asian countries—notably Indonesia—and which often do use the Ramayana as a basis for plot. The puppets, made of buffalo hide, are held on sticks behind an illuminated screen and "projected" through the screen by a *dalang*, a puppeteer of great skill, who manipulates figures, produces their voices, forwards the narrative, and directs the *gamelan* orchestra (gamelan music being the traditional type which accompanies the performances). Goska (who studied this folk form at Berkeley with former *dalang* Amin Sweeney) imagines the parts in her play being played by the puppets, which traditionally represent certain characters. As such, they often represent stereotypes, and Goska uses those stereotypes (giving some of her characters stage dialect, because traditionally the puppet characters often use forms of exaggerated speech) to further the larger purpose of her social critique. "ALL of the characters are meant to be stereotypes," she comments, "and, indeed . . . stereotypes on top of

stereotypes. . . . I am trying to put these stereotypes *in the dock*, as it were. To force audiences to question why we consider it okay to entertain this stereotype.” So her version of the Ramayana presents intense criticism of our social norms, notably directed at issues of class and gender.

Of course, whether folklorists use such stories in ways that other writers would not is a more complicated question to ponder.

# Mary Magoulick

## A Cosmology of Women

The World is Made of Pieces of Women  
So the *Enuma Elish* records  
    Marduk slashed Tiamat  
    His Consort, Mother, Corpse  
    Used to piece together the Heavens and the Earth  
Our World Made of Her

All Our Ancestors knew this story or another  
Of the slashing and piercing and piecing  
    Of Bodies Of Women

Long strings and stories of fertile ancestors  
    Lived out pain  
    And spun and wove  
    Threads and scraps and worlds  
Generations of texts and textiles  
Pieced like puzzles

Stories of Suffering and Survival pounded into Stone  
Of bodies caressed and torn whimsically  
    Like the trees that Gilgamesh ripped from the Gods' Grove  
    To show he could  
    To be a name remembered on slabs  
Proud Destroyer with pieces to clutch  
    Like the clutch of love or birth or death  
    In cold stone

Even Hardest Stone  
    Dissolves  
Faster than mimickers of estrogen  
Plastic Provides  
    More Pieces  
        Of Women  
        Parsed to  
    Remake our World  
Our End

We imagine newly beyond stone tablets  
In synthetics and new syntax

Still seeking continuity and saving ripped pieces

We Lean Toward Life at All Costs  
In love or violation the sharp stab settles into us  
The rip and pull parsing and piecing us all  
    Back together

Creating and Mending  
Coming closer to life's code  
We find our world and our selves  
    Full of ever more complicated Junk

Scientists say our universe is more Chaos than Cosmos  
Stars colliding in unimaginable violence and moral neutrality  
Only fragments of the genetic code we carry make us

Mirroring the universe  
We are mostly Chaos within  
    Ever seeking Cosmos  
Racing to decode DNA and hidden protein pieces  
We list again—TAG GAG ATTAC  
Finding our selves within “junk code”  
Bits of Endless Lists  
    Like in Myths  
Restraining order from pieces  
    In Infinitely Riddled Patterns  
From mostly scraps  
    Like old Quilts in Us

Cosmological strings speaking life  
Echoing  
Oldest stories and earliest cells

Cut Up  
    Pieced Together

To Visions of Order

We Weave the World



Absent Gods

I. Venus

Another man, a sweet man  
sitting across the table is pushing his last crab leg  
through the slicker of creamy butter sauce  
left on his plate. He is paraphrasing  
lame Neil Diamond lyrics at me  
and I am bored.  
I scour the restaurant for the waitress,  
“check please.” She has written  
her phone number on the back:  
*you're pretty. I get off at 10. please call me.*  
I can't help think: if my father  
had never screwed my mother  
I wouldn't have this problem.  
Tomorrow I'll go to Saks and buy myself something pretty.

II. Artemis

I like to spend my Friday nights  
at the gay bar on College and South.  
I can wear whatever I want,  
smell, act, dance however I want.  
Men don't ask me what kind of car I drive,  
or my favorite movie, compliment  
various parts of my body.  
They stay away.  
You see, I'm no Hippolyta, no Josephine;  
I'd rather watch a man  
torn apart by his own dogs  
than quiver like a deer at his charms.  
And the lesbians, I don't mind so much.  
A woman is soft, but she has hidden talents.

III. Hera

My husband's car broke down,  
for a week I picked him up  
from his job at Indiana University.  
(He works for the Kinsey Institute;  
spends long hours in the office.)  
Every evening he stood at the corner,  
a new intern, student, co-worker  
pretty in her tight angora sweater  
talked enthusiastically with her shoulders.  
I watched him, stout as a bull, shaking  
his hair, worn too long for his age,  
as if it was a shower of gold.  
But he always got in the car  
and placed his hand on my knee.

IV. Pandora

I roll over when I hear the door clap,  
stuff the 50 dollars from the night  
stand in the pages of the Gideon  
sleeping in the drawer —it's safe there.  
I have twenty minutes before the next;  
will he nervously scratch at 313B  
or fist the door like a satyr?  
It's a gamble. But now  
I must shower, powder, perfume  
all the pressure points. Wrap myself  
up like a present. This week, a new surprise:  
I think I have a flair-up of herpes.  
But no use in warning this one; to him,  
like the others, I'm just a box to be opened.

V. Ishtar

At 23, I look 16: my greatest asset  
as a stripper. Men want what they can't have,  
the danger and redemption of youth. They enter  
the club like a shrine, their pockets full  
of paper sacrifices. They search for revelations  
at the bottom of whiskey glasses and from the promise  
of my sweet lips and twisting thighs.  
Their brief prayers flicker and hush  
like the restless neon lights. Spilled libations, sticky  
crystal slickers make the stage flash like lapis, an altar  
built before them out of shadow and light.  
Together we are travelers, moving  
like cage-muscled lions. Our lives crumble, fade away.  
The world ends when I dance.

VI. Isis

I dreamt I was making love to you.  
Then awoke, remembered: you are dead.  
The beginning of another sad poem, the endless  
unrequited love song I've hummed now  
for two years. And I look twice  
at every stranger on the corner,  
every punk on the street. Who's responsible?  
I still wear my wedding ring. Everyday  
I expect to see you. I want to dig you up  
from the hard ground, sew the slack  
mouth of your wounds, and lay you out  
beside me. But when I wake,  
I want you to still be here  
breathing.

## *Paul Jordan-Smith*

### Shadow

"I know you," said the Hero.  
Said the Other, "And I you,  
and why you came" (smiling  
in sole possession of that truth).

Useless, the argument's bright edge:  
it can't cleave a shadow.  
Prowess-proud the Hero  
ascends along the knotted cord.

The Other is forgotten,  
save for a slight suspicion  
arising when sunlight strikes  
that unstained blade,  
casting a long shadow.

Why else return except to find  
new evidence of victory?  
Why else celebrate in dance  
all but the unstruck blow?

The shadow meanwhile turns its gaze  
to bright-edged towers rising,  
temples, memorials, monuments,  
and their long fall.

## Glaukos

Your gray-green child, now quick again,  
Still sticky, like bloom, with tears and honey,  
Crawls from the mouse-hole once his tomb.  
The shape-shifter adds another herb  
To his pannier and contemplates  
Your herds of cattle and mulberries,  
While you, horn-haunted, shamed  
By a darker birth, take hope.

You make promises and break them,  
Time and again, O King, yet only  
Betray yourself. This child you place  
Under the seer's tutelage will in time  
Learn much,

spit once,

lose all.

The Ramayana . . . as if Sita Mattered

(Gamelan music. After some moments, one instrument pounds out  
“New York, New York”)

Dalang: A tycoon lounges; his shoulders are massaged by a Swedish  
masseuse. Above him hang oil portraits.

(First puppets visible: Harlow [represented by the traditional puppet  
for Sita’s father]; Helga, a masseuse [traditional servant puppet].)

Harlow: I have so much to be proud of.

Sam: Yes, suh, you sure have so much.

(A bar, heretofore unlit, is illuminated; behind it, Sam [traditional  
puppet: Semar] is polishing glasses.)

Harlow: Look out those windows, Sammy, my boy. The Harlow Tower.  
We own one hundred percent of that. The Mercury Building.  
Sixty-five percent of that is ours. And over there, the Empire  
State Building—

Sam: We don’t own dat one, do we, suh?

Harlow: Talk to my lawyers after dinner. I just may have it for dessert.  
Look up there, Sam! (Gestures to portraits.) Pettibone “Bucks  
for Flesh” Harlow. The first to make the name famous. He cre-  
ated this empire—the Harlow empire.

Sam: Help me to remember, suh. He was in de Triangle Trade, ain’t  
dat so?

Harlow: Exactly. I think he even gave it the name.

Sam: De Triangle Trade. Molasses, to rum, to—

Harlow: Guest Workers. And there! Karl “Cartel” Harlow.

Sam: Teddy Roosevelt considered him de greatest—de greatest—  
what was it, suh?

Harlow: The greatest? Of course, he was the greatest! He wouldn’t have  
been a Harlow if he had been second greatest!

Sam: “The greatest robber baron.” Dat’s what TR said. Now I remem-  
bers.

Harlow: And “Ballistic” Bob Harlow, my personal favorite. When those  
inscrutable, slanty-eyed Japs were a threat, he pounded down  
every door in Washington warning the country to arm for war!

Sam: He knew better than those wimp pacifists!  
Amen, suh! He knowed cause he's de one who sold dem slanty-eyed Japs all de scrap metal to make all dose big ol' guns!

Harlow: It's called "foresight," Sammy. But as great as those men were, I have matched them. My ancestors have good reason to be looking down on me with pride.

Sam: It's often thought dere's plenty good reason to look down on you, suh!

Harlow: There. At the end. The empty frame.

Sam: Dat's Sita, ain't it, suh?

Harlow: Yes. No. That's just her frame. We haven't gotten her painted yet, just framed. That's quite enough, Helga, you may go. I have an appointment with my doctor.

(Helga departs. Harlow stands. A buzzing sound is heard.)

Voice: Dr. Feelgood is here to see you, chief.  
Harlow: Send him right in, Miss Cuticle.

(Dr. Feelgood [traditional puppet: Sengkuni] enters.  
He jogs throughout the following.)

Harlow: Ah, Dr. Feelgood. Wonderful to see you. Well, what's the good word?

Doctor Feelgood: I've been running steadily for the past forty days, minus sleep, of course. I've got my pulse down to forty BPMs. I trounced Deepak Chopra in the Men's Invitational Meditation Biathlon, and Shirley Maclaine says I was an Aztec God King in a former life.

Sam: I thinks Mistah Harlow be asking about his las' check up.

Doctor Feelgood: Sorry! Of course! You're dying.

(Harlow hits chair with a thud.)

Harlow: Omigod!

Doctor Feelgood: It's what we call multilateral-sclerotic-cardio-psyche. You've got very little time.

Harlow: Don't try to be kind. How much time?

Doctor Feelgood: Pay me now, or I'll bill your estate.

Harlow: (Grabs his chest.) Please! Sam!

(Gamelan plays Jimmy Cliff's "The Harder They Come.")  
(Scene two. Several aides [traditional puppets representing royalty] sit around a table. Sam is in the corner, polishing glasses.)

Harlow: Has everybody got it straight?  
Aide #1: I've got it, chief, but what about her?

- Harlow: She'll do it. Believe me.
- Aide #2: How can you be so sure? After all, she is an independent human being (all the others stare at him), sort of.
- Harlow: (Looms over others.) Look. I'm not a Harlow for nothing. We have foresight! Take everyday and don't live it. Live ten, twenty years in the future and plan for that!
- Sam: Dat's right! Y'all listen to Mistah Harlow. He ain't here now with y'all gentlemens. He already ten years in de futcha! He already daid!
- Harlow: Exactly. So years ago, after I had that unfortunate accident which guaranteed that I could never have a son—
- Sam: It was mighty white of you to forgive the late Mrs. Harlow for dat, suh.
- Aide #1: Heh, heh, heh! I remember how hard it was to keep that little operation off the front page . . . One tryst too many in that Hoboken love nest, eh, sir? And Mrs. Harlow let you have it!
- Harlow: Dr. Feelgood is the best surgeon in the country. He stitched little Harlow back on in no time. Bonded and secured. Just lost his aim, is all. So no son. To the matter at hand. I let Sita know that captaining a business empire requires a man's killer instinct, his fire in the belly. I built up in her a sense of pride and importance in our heritage. I—
- Sam: Cut a deal.
- Harlow: Exactly.
- Aide # 3: What kind of a deal?
- Harlow: Sita loves—fluffy blather. Beauty, harmony, nurturing, domesticity—folderol that has never earned anyone an honest dime. And she loves . . . how to put it. . .
- Sam: Having a roof over her haid.
- Harlow: You know how women are.
- Sam: Dey particulah bout dat. Specially in de wintertime.
- Harlow: So I let Sita indulge, but I *never let her forget* that sharing in the Harlow fortune had a price. She'd marry, someday, the next helmsman of the empire.
- Aide #4: But how do we find the man?
- Harlow: Simple, my lads. A contest.
- Aides, in unison: I like it! Intriguing! Hmhm!
- Harlow: The announcement must be handled delicately. Hallmark doesn't exactly make a card for this.
- Sam: So you slipped the contest announcement into de screen crawl on Bloomberg Financial Television.
- Harlow: Exactly. The challenge? The contestant who wins Sita will be the first to outsource forty companies that hire working-class



Americans.

Aids: Bravo! Touchdown! The master at work!  
#1: What if he gets busted by Paul Krugman?  
Harlow: He's forfeit.

(Gamelan plays "How to Handle a Woman" from Camelot.)  
(Scene three.)

Dalang: Baby blue, daffodil yellow, pink pastels adorn gingham comforters and dust ruffles. Our nostrils twinge against the odor of paint squeezed from tubes. Artists' easels lazily lean. A girl clad in lilac and fawn ballet leotards sits quietly on the floor. Her maid Angela speaks; is that her voice, or the sound of her fingernail file scraping against her nails?

Angela: I'm sooo envious. I can't believe you get ta wear that incredible dress with twelve yahds of satin! When I saw that, all I could think was, what if she gets huh periot?

(Sita is silent, head on her folded arms.)

Angela: Ya know, you're the only goil I know who can legitimately wear white on her wedding day. That's a real accomplishment. Whaddya think he'll be like?

Sita: What difference does it make?

Angela: What difference does it make—sheesh. (Looks at nails.) I tell ya, these nail extensions are the greatest invention of mankind. You should get some. It'll turn him on like crazy! I can take ya to this salon in Joisey—Unless he's the natural type. A hiker or a camper. Ya need more makeup to look natural for them types than for a regula guy! Hey—maybe he'll be an officer, and, if you're lucky, no gentleman!

(Sita jumps.)

Sita: Angela, how can you even suggest that? After I organized the campus last semester against the war—

Angela: That was school, honey. This is the real woild. Your daddy's been payin' for everything in your life until now, and you gotta do what he says, and like it.

Sita: I'll do what he says.

Angela: And *like* it. Look, Sita, I don't get what you're mopin' faw. I don't wanna break yaw haht, but there is no over the rainbow. That whole business of love and happily ever afta—it's a load of crap, honey, just like Santy Claus, something ta tell the kids so's they won't sniff glue.

Sita: Angela, I'm not as naïve as you think. I've studied hard, and

- Angela: there's my volunteer work with the inner city children—  
Tell me about it.
- Sita: Daddy says I don't have what it takes to run Harlow Enterprises . . . but those kindergarten kids loved me . . . that must be good for something!
- (Angela rubs her two fingers together.)
- Angela: Ya know what I'm doin'? Playin' the world's smallest violin. Yaw fatha's money has protected you, Sita. As for men? They're all alike—plumbing! Ya might as well get one that can make some dough so's you can afford to get appliqué's on yaw fingernails and all those things us gals like.
- Sita: I want to fall in love, Angela. First, I want to fall in love with me. I'm just a teenager! This guy can already outsource forty industries. My favorite meal is cookie dough! I've never worked for pay or—
- Angela: Ya don't have to. All ya gotta do is look pretty, and the younger you are, the prettier you are, so now's when ya gotta get married. Statistics prove that a woman over forty is more likely to find a human finger in a Coke can than to get married. And for every college degree she gets, she becomes less likely to land a man. PhDs are lucky to marry some serial killer on Death Row. Sita, have you been hanging around with feminists? Look out for them feminists, Sita. They think so much it's no wonda they're unhappy!
- Sita: Angela, for once, I want to take the initiative! I want to say, "Hey there, big guy, come over here and satisfy me!"
- (Dorcas [traditional puppet: Durga] enters.)
- Dorcas: Nu, I'd love to, but somehow I don't tink you're my type.
- Angela: You! Mister Harlow has given strict instructions—
- Dorcas: Never to function as his daughter's psychotherapist again? But my dear, that was years ago, and she's been seeink me for weekly appointments ever since. Except this past week.
- Dalang: The old woman turns the weary and yet lovely eyes of age, softened with crow's feet and compassion, toward the younger, whose face is unlined by either wisdom or time.
- Sita: I think you can go, Angela.
- Angela: I'll go! Straight to Mr. Harlow—
- Sita: If you breathe a word of this, I'll tell your husband everything you just told me about men being nothing but plumbing!

(Angela skulks out.)

Dalang: The older woman and the younger, a mirror reflection warped by time, stare at one another. Sita runs into Dorcas's arms, which are open to her.

Dorcas: My little stuffed cabbage.

(Sita falls to the floor. Dorcas begins to make tea.)

Dorcas: Nu, should I believe what I saw on the cover of *People* magazine?

Sita: Mm hm.

Dorcas: It's mad and passionate love.

Sita: Yup.

Dorcas: Between him and your father.

(Sita laughs.)

Dorcas: Between him and his conquest.

(Sita laughs and cries.)

Dorcas: Fight, Sita.

Sita: Don't make fun of me.

Dorcas: If I were making fun, I'd say, "Mazel Tov" and start scanning eBay for a bargain-priced, luxury wedding gift, still in the original packaging.

Sita: Let's not go into it.

Dorcas: Paper it over? Feh. My life experience has taught me never to do that. Sita, you're not struggling to save your life now because you have no life. This sheltered harem isn't life. You've got the world inside you, Sita, that's why you need to create. That's why you need to nurture. But for life to be born, blood has to be spilt. You can't teach those kids you love until you learn something yourself. And look at your canvases. They're like the wallpaper in a child's bedroom—

Sita: Sometimes I think my daddy's right! You are evil!

Dorcas: I'm not evil; the truths I'm speaking are. I have nothing left to lose. The world needs people like me, to provide captions for the pictures. When are you going to do the choosing, Sita?

Sita: I—have my art.

Dorcas: Cause daddy lets you have it. How many pathways have you never explored because daddy lifted an eyebrow or daddy turned down a corner of his mouth when you took initiative? When you ran fast as a child and won, when you got dirty, did daddy make a face?

Sita: Stop it!

Dorcas: Here. Drink some mint tea. It's good for the tummy.

Sita: (Muffled, high pitched.) Thank you. (Pause.) Daddy loves me. He would never choose somebody wrong for me.

Dorcas: Nu? Tell me.

Sita: Everybody does it, Dorcas. There is no over the rainbow. All men are alike. Nobody really marries for love, or stays in love, anyway. . .

Dorcas: Deep wisdom you're passink along, Sita. I wish I had a tape recorder.

(While speaking, Sita has worked her way over to Dorcas and now has her head in Dorcas's lap.)

Sita: Well, it's true!

Dorcas: It's not true. I've been in love with the same man most of my life.

Sita: Why won't you ever at least tell me this mystery man's name?

Dorcas: Look, if everybody doesn't marry for love, they marry for their own reasons, which maybe aren't love, but did you ever tink how different somebody's life would be if they lived with their own mistakes rather than somebody else's? Is this why we marched and picketed and circulated petitions?

Sita: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Baby Boomers saved the world. Everything was settled right around Woodstock! Look at Paris Hilton, Dorcas. Her daddy is almost as rich as mine and the best thing she can do is a soft porn TV ad for some greasy spoon hamburger chain. Be real. Two percent—*two percent*—of Fortune 500 companies are headed by women. Everybody hated Hillary Clinton when she was a smart woman trying to get health care for the poor, but boy, did they love her when her husband publicly humiliated her. Half the girls in my class are anorexic or self-mutilators or dating a bastard. And there's no solidarity among women. You saw how ready Angela was to rat me out. She's my friend—but she wouldn't so much as break a fingernail for me. Thanks but no thanks. I'd rather be Doris Day.

Dorcas: You're selling your birthright for a mess of pottage! You're gaining the world but losing your own soul!

Sita: I never know what you're referring to . . .

Dorcas: You damn secular humanists! You're single-handedly assassinating the allusion as a viable literary form!

Sita: I don't have any skills, Dorcas. Every time I tried to learn something useful, daddy told me it wasn't ladylike. Would it be better for me to be harassed in the office by some stranger or at home by someone I know and can manipulate better?

- Dorcas: (Holding door open.) There's only one way to find out.  
Sita: You're just a malcontent because you're old and fat and not pretty—  
Dorcas: You tink I was born this way, maybe? Lemme show you a photo taken before—so many tinks. (Dorcas reaches into her purse, pulls out a photograph, hands it to Sita.)  
Sita: My gosh! You looked just . . . like . . . *me!*  
Dorcas: We're so much alike, Sita. You don't know that yet because I'm further along the trail. I can look back at your twists and turns, but you see only the trail immediately ahead of you.  
Sita: I don't want to hear it. I'm beautiful! He'll put me on a pedestal! Won't he?  
Dorcas: Sita, you're livink in a fool's paradise. The contest winner is Ram, the hedge fund prince, and he has about as many scruples about whom he sleeps with as a bedbug.  
Sita: Dorcas, I want you to go.  
Dorcas: Right. I was out of line. Nu, this tea is hot. All right, Sita, it's time for me to take my own advice. I quit.  
Sita: What?  
Dorcas: Yes. I've been sayink to you that one mustn't shrink from the difficult thing. It's time for me to follow my own advice. I love you, Sita, but I can't watch you do this.  
Sita: Dorcas! You're my strength!  
Dorcas: Feh. You're your own strength, Sita. Maybe you'd see that more clearly without me around to be your alter ego. I remember you when you were eleven, twelve. You were curious, vital, sometimes outrageous. I'd like to see *that* girl grow up. But I guess I never will. Goodbye, Sita.

(Dorcas leaves. Sita is left standing alone on stage, trembling.  
Gamelan plays the 1977 Charlene hit, "I've Never Been To Me.")  
(Scene four.)

- Dalang: Ram and Sita's Wedding! Nothing can compare. Jay Gatsby's Jazz Age soirees? Mere bagatelles! Dennis Kozlowski's two-million-dollar birthday fête? A snore-fest! Liza Minelli's nuptials—Please! No expense has been spared for this, the crime—excuse me—the wedding of the century! Somewhere, Princess Di is thinking, if only Charles and I had thrown a bash like this, we'd be living happily ever after! In a wheelchair sits the impresario who oversaw every last carved ice swan and champagne fountain, Wilson Harlow.  
Harlow: Sam!  
Sam: Yes, suh.

Harlow: Sam, you go on over to Ram and see if he needs anything. I'm on my way out. It's time you go to your new boss.

(Sam finds Ram and Sita posing for photographers.)

Ram: Honey, that white dress.

Sita: Yes?

Ram: White reflects so much. It'll make me look washed out. I don't suppose you could slip into something, oh, brown?

Sita: Dear, it's sort of considered traditional for women to wear white on their wedding day. . .

Ram: Oh, yeah, right! With the excitement of winning the contest and all I sort of forgot that you were the prize . . . hey, baby, tonight's gonna be great, huh? Ya know, among my Skull and Bones brothers, I was considered quite the chick magnet.

Sita: Ram, should it, you know, concern me that lots of *frat boys* consider you sexy?

Reporter: Hey, Ram! Tell us again how you outsourced industry number forty!

Ram: Sure thing!

Dalang: Sita tries to stay pretty even though no one sees her any more. She wanders off into the night, seduced by the scent of flowers in the darkness, by the serenity of a deserted corner of vast gardens. She sits in the twilight, alone but for the moths and bats. (A puppet covered with a bag [traditional puppet: Ravana] approaches Sita.)

Raveneau: You're lonely, you're sad, and you're wondering if you did the right thing.

Sita: What? Who are you?

Raveneau: Someone who can read your thoughts and cares about you too much to waste time with small talk.

Sita: You look . . . you *sound* like somebody famous.

Raveneau: Like . . . Spike Lee?

Sita: Oh! Daddy said he'd invited you. But you look . . . so much bigger! Why are you wearing a bag?

Raveneau: Method Acting. I'm playing The Elephant Man in a new production.

Sita: Cool! Will you be directing as well?

Raveneau: Don't do that, Sita. Don't make small talk with me. There is so little time.

Sita: For what?

Raveneau: For the things that matter, once we figure out what they are.

Sita: Why are you talking to me this way?

Raveneau: Because I want to blow a wind through your mind that wipes

everything clean and allows for the truly new shoot to take vital root in place of the old, the fixed, the hopeless, and the ragged.

Sita: (Flabbergasted, laughs.) You ask a lot.

Raveneau: It's not anything you haven't done for me already, with your beauty.

Sita: I? How? But, pooh. They say every woman is beautiful on her wedding day.

Raveneau: You did this for me years ago, and it wasn't your beautiful face, Sita, though I'm sad to say it wasn't, your face is so very beautiful. It was your art. I saw that show you mounted in the Bowery, and I never forgot it. When Ram, who is . . . how to put this . . . a competitor of mine, won you, I knew I had to meet you in person before he claimed you as his forever.

Sita: You saw my exhibition? You didn't find it . . . it wasn't like . . . the wallpaper in a child's bedroom?

Raveneau: That was part of its charm.

Sita: (Plainly disappointed, but bouncing back.) Oh. Well, I guess it's quite the compliment to hear a famous director talk about my art that way.

Raveneau: What if I weren't a famous director? What if I were just a common, simple—oh, just some monster?

Sita: I'd still be thrilled, I guess. But you do feel it's too naïve?

Raveneau: Your art could grow from your growing. (He has found his ploy.) Sita, what if I offered you that?

Sita: What?

Raveneau: Experience? A deepening of your art?

Sita: That's the thing that's most important in the world, to me, I guess, the only thing I'm close to, now. Would I take what you offered? Of course.

(Without hesitating, Raveneau holds a handkerchief over Sita's face. She passes out. He jumps over a wall with Sita in his arms. Sam enters.)

Sam: Mistah Ram! Mistah Ram!

(Gamelan plays Adagietto from Krzysztof Penderecki's "Paradise Lost.")

(Scene five.)

Dalang: The scene before us is Dali-esque. Stacked tires rise in weird spires like skewed, profane parodies of the steeples of Gaudi's Sagrada Familia church in Barcelona. The hulks of junked cars gape and yawn, the upholstery ripped open like a torn dress,

- bleeding stained cotton and foam. Huge rats and haggard men, equally squint-eyed, have set up housekeeping within. Refrigerators not in vogue since the Eisenhower administration lie on their sides and are transformed into makeshift bathtubs. Effluvia of more recent vintage—potato peels, hairballs, molding pudding cups, dot the landscape. Garbage-hungry gulls twist and veer through air so filthy it billows like smoke. What's this? A smile? No, it's the silent snarl from the carcass of a dead mongrel. Raveneau is watching Sita sleep. As if she were a butterfly wrenching free from the strands of the web of a deadly spider, Sita shakes off the drugged stupor.
- Sita: Wh—wh—who are you?
- Raveneau: I am Raveneau.
- Sita: (Aghast) Aaa! I've seen you on the news! You're the notorious underworld kingpin, mastermind of a ten-pronged criminal empire—drugs, gambling, gun running, terror . . . But the last thing I remember, Spike Lee—
- Raveneau: That was I.
- Sita: But you said you were—
- Raveneau: I said I *sounded* like—
- Sita: What?
- Raveneau: A disguise.
- Sita: (Gasps, shrinks back.) I demand to know how I got here!
- Raveneau: You chose to come. Here is the price tag of your paradise. To keep your tiny percentage of the world so perfect, you have to dump all your garbage somewhere. Here is that where.
- Sita: Scoundrel! Ruffian!
- Raveneau: That's the best Wilson Harlow's Harvard-educated little girl can do? For *me*? You make me wanna cry. Babycakes, I am civilization's archenemy. I am the foiler of the man's best laid plans. I am the fly in every ointment, the worm in every apple, the snake in every green and dewy paradise. I, I will have you know, am Raveneau, infamous criminal mastermind. The *New York Post* calls me the "Ten-Headed Demon!" But what I said at the party was true. Unlike your daddy's precious Ram, I intend to let you do exactly as you like.
- Sita: Is that so? Then let me go!
- Raveneau: You're on a floating island in New York harbor. We can get you a boat and there's an A train on shore. Want a MetroCard?
- Sita: I'm leaving right now!
- Raveneau: (Reclines on a car seat ripped from a Jaguar.) Bye!
- Sita: I demand to know what's going on!
- Raveneau: All the facts you need are as apparent to you as they are to



me.  
Sita: There's something out there, some trap. . .  
Raveneau: Admittedly.  
Sita: Then remove it!  
Raveneau: It's not my trap. Hungry? I'm sending out for pizza.  
Sita: No anchovies.  
Raveneau: Chillin'.

(Scene six. Ram, Harlow, Sam.)

Ram: You simple-minded shortcut on the evolutionary tree! You believer in global warming! You New York *Times* reader! You're fired!  
Sam: Yes, suh. (Slumped, he leaves.)  
Harlow: Ram, think of what you're doing! Sam's the most loyal—  
Ram: Loyalty has no market value! I told him to check on Sita!  
Harlow: He did!  
Ram: Too late! I'll get Sita back if it's the last thing I do!

(Scene seven. Sita is pacing and eating pizza. Raveneau is watching a big screen color TV.)

Sita: I've got it!

(Using the remote control, Raveneau turns off the TV.)

Raveneau: Is it contagious?  
Sita: I walk out of here, free as a bird . . . So my new husband says to me, "Where'd you go on our wedding night, wifey dear?" And I say, "Why, the lair of a notorious crime lord, honey, who just happens to be six feet tall, black as the ace of spades, and with a long, prominent (they stare at each other) nose. And I left. No scratches, no bruises. . ."  
Raveneau: Word up. Now think like a man. What's the one thing you know about Ram?  
Sita: That he won me in a contest. He entered a contest. He likes competing, and he likes winning.  
Raveneau: You wanna keep your man, woman? You just better sit tight and wait for him to rescue you.  
Sita: I understand.  
Raveneau: Like I tole you. Pizza feeds your brain. Eat s'mo.  
Sita: Hey, thanks. We almost never have pizza on Park Avenue. Daddy says the two things a woman should never be are old and fat. I think that's why he hates Dorcas so much. She's both.  
Raveneau: Well, I ain't one of your sorry excuse white boys. Gimme a woman who feels like a woman.

Sita: (Sita stares at the pizza.) Raveneau, just how long do you think it will take before Ram rescues me?

(Gamelan “When the moon hits your eye  
like a big pizza pie, that’s amore.”)

(Scene eight. Ram is talking on five telephones simultaneously.)

Ram: I want all outgoing planes searched. I want every woman passenger publicly felt up by an overzealous security guard. I want a SWAT team member down every manhole, shouting, “Hut, hut, hut!” just like they do in the movies. I want someone to explain to me why SWAT team members shout “Hut, hut, hut!” I want all the hospitals combed, and their cooks lead off in chains. I want the libraries cased, ACLU be damned. I want to know who’s got overdue fines, and I demand to know just exactly who are these alleged adults who read Harry Potter books. Inspect the brothels. Which women are the most beautiful and the best bargains? Come to think of it, I’ll personally carry out this aspect of our investigation. I hear that that Madame Surpanakha is pretty hot . . . send her straight to my penthouse.

(The puppet Hanuman enters.)

Hannah: Hannah Omanio at joor service, chefe!

Ram: Who the hell are you?

Hannah: Hannah Omanio, subcomandante and generalísimo of the Spanish Harlem chapter of the Guardian An-HHels, chefe! We’re here to help joo rescue Sita.

Ram: Guardian Angels, huh? I fail to see what you can do that I, the FBI, the CIA, and agencies too shadowy to mention can’t.

Hannah: We’re willing to ride the subways.

Ram: Hmmm. Let me see your badges.

Hannah: We don’t need no stinkin’ badges. We got a message for joo from our crime-fighting psychic, Dorcas Westheimer.

Ram: Give me a break!

Hannah: Is about someone name Sam.

Ram: Sam? What’s the message?

Hannah: Joo must contact him.

Ram: The last thing I need is some little girl who can’t pronounce the word “joo”—I mean “you”—telling me that some old woman named Westheimer wants me to contact an old ni—. I mean “n word.” I mean African American. Get out of my way!

(Scene nine. Back on the island.)

Sita: Raveneau! It's been two weeks, and I think something is happening.

(Raveneau merely turns down, rather than off, his big screen color TV. He doesn't turn around.)

Raveneau: You talking to me?

Sita: Your floating island is so rancid and grotesque—

Raveneau: Well, I like that.

Sita: This is exactly what daddy threatened me with. That if I didn't have a man, I'd end up someplace like this. Well, now I *am* someplace like this, and . . . what's more, I've eaten *all the pizza I wanted*, and gained weight! I'm poor. I'm fat. I've survived my two worst nightmares! Maybe I'm not as empty as Daddy says. You know, he's right about one thing. I *don't* have a man's killer instinct. But I *do* have energy, a *woman's* energy. I loved working with those inner city kids. . .

Raveneau: Wow. Fascinating. Now could you wind this up so I can get back to the game?

Sita: I *don't* need a man. Realizing that, I'm outraged! It's not just the past two weeks I've been hostage. It's my whole history. Pretending I'm helpless so some man can look heroic. Every time I see my face—my *fat* face—in your fly-specked mirror and I don't see daddy looking over my shoulder, it's like I'm seeing me for the first time. *I'm* ready to take the initiative, to do things I'd always been afraid to do before! Forbidden things. Wild things! (With a growl, she jumps at Raveneau. He collapses beneath her assault, and her caresses.)

(Gamelan plays Helen Reddy's "I Am Woman.")

(Scene ten. Wilson Harlow is in bed. Ram attends him, along with Hannah Omanio.)

Dalang: Beep, beep, beep. (The sound of a heart monitor.)

Harlow: Ram. The time is growing short. You've got to find my daughter before I—

Ram: Don't say it, chief! You'll make me cry! You taught me all I know about reducing my opponent to an insolvent hulk!

Harlow: Ram, listen to Hannah.

(Ram turns to Hannah.)

Hannah: It's like I said, chefe. Every An-HHel is on the case. Joo oughta check out this Sam lead.

(Scene eleven. Sita is in front. Raveneau is reclining on a couch

in the background. There is wonderment in Sita's voice.

Gamelan plays, "I Feel Pretty")

Sita: I did it. I took the initiative. I've got to spread this feeling!  
Raveneau! I have an idea!

(Raveneau snores loudly.)

Sita: (She shakes him by his lapels.) Raveneau! Wake up!

(Scene twelve.)

Dalang: Again, we enter the tense, clinical air of a dying man's hospital room.

Ram: All right, if it's the chief's last request, I'm ready to allow Sam to rejoin our team.

Sam: D'you call for me, boss?

Ram: Sam! It's you! Standing right behind me, polishing glasses!

Sam: Hopes I didn't disturb you, suh.

Ram: We need to talk about your wandering off . . . but right now we have more urgent business! Sam, do you have any notion as to where Sita might be?

Sam: Well, suh, dere's some things I know dat you ought to know dat once you'd knowed 'em, you might not want to know.

Ram: This is no time for a display of your flair for Ebonics!

Sam: De story goes back quite a ways. . .

Ram: Yes?

Sam: Yes, suh. You wouldn't remember dose times, suh. Everything so much better, now. But can you believe it, dere was a time in dis country when a fella couldn't get ahead if'n he was black? Yep, it seemed like all de good qualities only white folks had, and black folks, well, dey was everything bad. Stupid, dumb, ugly.

Ram: I don't need a lecture. . .

Sam: I fell in love with a white girl. She got pregnant with twins. We knowed what we had to do. Either we was gonna have two chillun who'd both be halfway between us, light brown color, who'd get some hardships in dey life cause how dey looked, or we'd have to get ourselves a conjure woman to make it so at least one of our chillun could have all a de good things in life.

Ram: I can't believe the excuses you people come up with to air your grievances at every opportunity. . .

Hannah: I think I see where Sam is heading. Chefe, where'd joo grow up?

Ram: I grew up in Kennebunkport. My parents found me there,

actually . . . I was washed ashore in a great nor'easter. They say I must have been jettisoned from a sinking yacht.

Sam: Tweren't no yacht, Mistah Ram.

Ram: Are you still here? What were you saying?

Sam: Jest dat. Since you come out first, we was gonna name you Sam, after me, but my darling wife she say no, de white man's always gotta come first, so we name you Ram, cause "R" come before "S" in de alphabet. Dat conjure woman hoodooed and voodooed over yo' mama's belly, movin' all my dark skin over to Raveneau's side, and yo' mama's white skin over to yo' side. We name him Raveneau cause we know he gonna spend his whole life ravenous for what you have dat he'll never get.

(Ram goes to strike Sam.)

Sam: Hit me if'n you want, suh. But I'll tell you, you gots a birthmark shaped like a watermelon on yo' behind, and it's black as de ace of spades. And Raveneau, he gots an Oreo cookie birthmark on his behind, and dat dere kosher crème filling be lily white. Dat ol' conjure woman left does dere as a callin' card, 'cause we couldn't make de final payment. I'm sorry, son, but you ever try to find forty jars of mosquito hearts in Harlem?

Ram: To think, all the things I've said—you tolerated—as a servant would tolerate a master—though in fact, you were my father? Sam, you're an exceptional human being!

Sam: Thank ye kindly, suh. T'was you masters taught me all I knows.

Ram: How?

Sam: I hear you all saying, "Dem servants! Dey so lazy!" Though I gets up before you, goes to bed afta you, and am working de whole time. So I say to myself, "I ain't never gonna judge nobody." And you say, "Dey got nuthin' so they got no worries!" And dat astound me so much I say, "I ain't never gonna be so insensitive." You say, "Dey so paw! Why do they have chillun?" And dat hurt me so much, I say to myself, "I ain't never gonna say such hurtful tings to nobody." Ya'll drownin' in your riches and you don't appreciate 'em. I enjoys a glass of water better than you do your hundred years old wine.

Ram: (Turns to Harlow) See that, chief, I told you we were good for these people.

(Scene thirteen. Gamelan plays "There Is Nothing Like a Dame.")

Dalang: Raveneau's lair now looks like a glorious spread from the pages

- of Martha Stewart Living! There are flowers growing from junked cars! The garbage is in neat recycling bins! And Sita is at the center of the scene, on five telephones at once!
- Sita: No, I don't want the Texas Board textbooks. They're racist and sexist. There's a company in Berkeley you should contact. *Plane Geometry as if the Wretched of the Earth Mattered* . . . You sent the wrong uniforms. Half of them were to be for young girls . . . I'm sorry if you've never heard of girls playing football, but that's what they voted to play . . . All right, the flavored ones, do they contain sugar? They're meant for teenagers, you see, and I wouldn't want to give them anything that would be harmful to their teeth. Well, I don't see what business it is of yours how old the customers are for your condoms! . . . We absolutely do not want the ROTC on our campus. . .
- Raveneau: Sita!
- Sita: Yes, dear?
- Raveneau: Do you think you could show your man a little attention?
- Sita: How about a quickie? I've got fifteen minutes until my meeting with the writer ghosting my memoirs.
- Raveneau: Do you know how long it's been since I've had a home-cooked meal?
- Sita: Since you fired the maid, dear. But I have enough money to pay union scale and provide dental benefits—
- Raveneau: Makes no difference! While you're with me, you don't need your own cash.
- Sita: Of course I do, dear. For the school, and—
- (Raveneau hits Sita.)
- Raveneau: Don't you sass me!
- Sita: Because you look different, I thought you might be different from daddy and Ram—(Raveneau hits her again.) But I see that you're just the same.
- (Gamelan plays The Who's "meet the new boss, same as the old boss.")  
(Scene fourteen.)
- Dalang: Ram sits alone in Harlow Enterprises' executive suite. Sita's empty frame, he feels, glares down on him mockingly, accusingly. What's that? A noise?
- Ram: Who's there? I have a black belt in karate, a Colt Combat Commander, the best lawyers, and all the tabloids in New York.
- Raveneau: Chill out, bro. I come to make deals, not crack heads.

Ram: Raveneau?  
Raveneau: Can I sit down? Scaling a skyscraper ain't easy when you get to be our age.  
Ram: Wait—  
Raveneau: What?  
Ram: Could you drop your pants?  
Raveneau: What they say about you white boys is true.  
Ram: The birthmark—  
Raveneau: So the old man told you.

(Ram and Raveneau circle each other. Gamelan plays "Mack the Knife.")

Raveneau: We're twins. Deal with it. Now let's talk turkey.  
Ram: I demand Sita!  
Raveneau: Fool, she's yours.  
Ram: Huh?  
Raveneau: All those homeboys I had dealing crack? She's got 'em in ballet class. Girls I was pimpin' as hos? Fillin' out applications to go to NYU.  
Ram: But, capital—  
Raveneau: She's bleedin' it from you and Harlow Enterprises. Some computer scheme—  
Ram: Now it all makes sense! The Pettibone Harlow Third World Plantation Workers' Pension is exhausted. The Ballistic Bob Institute for the Advancement of Limited Nuclear War is laid waste. The Kartel Karl Fund for the Equitable Distribution of Toxic Chemicals is poisoned!  
Raveneau: Rescue her. And make it look hard on me. Gotta protect my reputation.  
Ram: Do I want to? I've got it sweet, brother. Old Man Harlow's about to kick off, and I inherit everything. If I take this new Sita back, I'm giving myself jock itch. Would someone please rid me of this troublesome wife?  
Raveneau: We could solve this very neatly.  
Ram: Are you saying what I'm thinking?  
Raveneau: We're not twins for nothing.  
Ram: I don't know. . .  
Raveneau: She's fat, man.  
Ram: Anorexic Sita?  
Raveneau: Pizza. And she starts every sentence with, "Yes, but. . ."  
Ram: Bullets stray in rescue missions. Fire can be very indiscriminate . . . Feasible—  
Raveneau: For a price. Look, you got uptown; I got downtown. I say we

- join forces and make this whole city ours.
- Ram: You're on, brother. (They shake.)
- Raveneau: Now that's what I call affirmative action.
- (They leave. Sam appears. He's been in the darkened corner this whole time, polishing glasses!)
- Sam: I can't believe dem boys is my sons! Hannah! Time to get your Angels in gear!
- (Scene fifteen. Hannah, the Guardian Angels, Sam, Angela, and Dorcas.)
- Hannah: Concentrate, Dorcas. We've got to find her.
- Dorcas: I'm tellink you. I think I'm too attached.
- Hannah: Like Jennifer Lopez says, don't fight joor emotions. Let them take joo to Sita.
- Dorcas: All right, already with the naggink . . . I see an island . . . and Sita! She's all tied up! She's bruised. She's cryink. But, I've got to say, she's lookink very well fed.
- Hannah: Pull back. Keep Sita in the picture, but pull back. What do joo see in your crystal ball?
- Dorcas: A bridge. The Brooklyn Bridge!
- Hannah: Joo heard her! *Ándale!* (Everyone runs.)
- (Scene sixteen. Helicopter sounds. Gamelan plays "Riders on the Storm.")
- Dalang: Holy Shiva! That helicopter is shooting fire! The office, the recycling bins, burst into flames! And Sita! She's tied up and can't dive into the river! What's this? She's jumping toward the fire! Behind her back, she's holding her wrists over red and yellow licking flames! The pain is exquisite as the fire scorches her delicate skin, so close to her veins! She winces! But the bonds singe. She struggles. Sita is free! Onshore, Hannah studies the scene through binoculars.
- Hannah: *Yemaja!* We must form a human chain to the island! *Todos!* Dive, dive, dive!
- Dalang: Without hesitation, Angels dive into the East River. Tall, short, skinny, fat, white, black, and brown kids from New York's mean streets struggle to hold together. Muscle-tensing effort exhausts them. Their limbs tremble against the cold sting of the water. Finally, they are five feet from the island!
- Dorcas: Sita! We're rescuink you!
- Sita: I don't want to be rescued. I feel like a tennis ball, knocked back and forth! I'm going to swim to shore myself.



Dalang: The helicopter lowers. Its blades roil a current that drives the human chain away from the island.

Angels: Help! *Nos ayuda!*

Dalang: It's a Cuisinart down there! The rescuers are being forced under!

Dorcas: Sita! Don't you see this whole megillah?

Angela: The chain needs another link, or we all go under! I broke my nails doin' this fo' you!

Sita: Angela! *You broke your nails for me!*

Dalang: Sita rushes to the shore and anchors the chain. Up above, Ram and Raveneau, seeing their plan foiled, fly off. The East River calms, and the human chain reels itself back to Manhattan.

(Scene seventeen. The sound of water dripping.)

Sita: My husband and my lover just tried to kill me. Why? Did I injure them, defame them, take their love and twist it around? No. They wanted to kill me because I made my own choices.

Angela: And because you porked out.

Sita: Yes. I can't go on. I'm going to jump into the fire of yonder homeless men.

(Sita moves toward the fire. Dorcas sneezes loudly.)

Dorcas: Just one minute, young lady.

Sita: Dorcas, you can't tell me what to do. You're my therapist, not my mother.

(Angels loudly gasp. A tenor begins singing "Ave Maria" softly in the background.)

Dorcas: Sita, it's time I dropped my mask of the mean old woman who says tinks you don't want to hear.

Sita: Whatever can you mean?

Dorcas: I was young. So young. There was a man, on the other side of the world, who really wanted to learn, so he came to one of the best universities, in Kraków. Sita, I was as sharp and quick as the kick in a shot of vodka. He was noble and handsome and when he looked at me across the old town square we waltzed toward each other. We didn't speak each other's language. It was as if we were in love before we'd ever met. Decades before the Nazis had marched into Kraków. They drew a line. You—you look like this, you come over here. You, you look like that, you go over there. That worldview is not entirely dead. My lover was on a different side of a line that had been invisible to me, but that suddenly became very apparent. He left. I drifted for

- a long time. One day, I was in New York, workink at a kosher delicatessen, when a man got a cravink for the foods he ate the last time he was in love. I looked up, and came to life again.
- Sita: Dorcas, I—
- Angela: Shh, honey, shh.
- Dorcas: He said that he was married and couldn't divorce her, he'd be ruined. I understood. They would raise you and give you all the advantages I couldn't.
- (Music swells, then fades slightly.)
- Sita: But! Daddy hates you! The things he says about you! Dorcas—whoever you are—he calls you a man-eater! He says that you'd like to have a chain of skulls to wear around your neck!
- Dorcas: What's your point? He's said all those tinks to me, and worse.
- Sita: He talks to you?
- Dorcas: We meet weekly in a Hoboken love nest. And not to discuss the weather. Sita, once he had walking pneumonia, but he took the train out there for my chicken soup. He can't make a business decision without me, 'cause I got instincts, he says. I call it intelligence. He calls it instincts. I could draw a map of the moles on his back, I've rubbed it after so many bad days at the office. That's why he can't let you know about me, Sita. He can't let himself know. I represent the side of him that's vulnerable.
- Sita: (Highly outraged, accusatory.) Then, you *love* him!
- Dorcas: As much as you can love a man who abandons you to the Commies—by then it was the Commies—and then has illicit sex with you in Jersey once a week, which, as it happens, is quite a lot.
- Sita: But you were my mother! Why didn't you raise me?
- Dorcas: He could give you everytink. I was a penniless outcast. And I was a wreck. I had to get my life together, go to school, figure out who I was—
- Sita: That's so selfish! You're the same as he! You've been trying to steer me without admitting who you are! You've been demanding that I accomplish what you never have! What kind of a role model are you?
- Dorcas: One who loved. So many times in that hotel room, I'd say to myself, Dorcas, figure out what he has that brings laughter more readily, that makes your cheeks glow and your heart beat quicker. Maybe it's some chemical that's also found in papayas or herring. But you know, after all these years, I have to keep goink back to the man to get more.

(“Ave Maria” reaches a crescendo.)

Dalang: A limousine screeches to a halt beside the group on the shore.  
A man jumps out.  
Harlow: Sita!  
Sita: Father!  
Hannah: *Madre de dios!* Joor supposed to be dead!  
Harlow: Dr. Feelgood had the wrong patient! It was really Donald Trump! He has a terminal condition rooted in his hair. It becomes more lethal every time he marries a younger woman. He’s now on life support!

(Angels cheer.)

Harlow: Sita, can you ever forgive me? Dorcas, you’ve told her everything?  
Dorcas: As usual, it’s Mr. Sherlock Homes.  
Harlow: To the moon, Dorcas! I’m gonna punch you so hard—  
Sita: Shut up, both of you! You’ve done enough to be ashamed of for a cycle of Greek plays! I’m so confused.  
Homeless man: Hey, lady! We can throw some more tires on the fire for ya!  
Sita: Shut up! Everybody, just, just, shut up. It’s my turn. Anything that drives mothers apart from their daughters, that drives men apart from their own vulnerabilities, anything that reduces a young girls’ life to a marketable product and drives her apart from her own best self until she is no longer young and needs to develop a skill to survive, anything that glorifies the murderous instincts of young men and never demands that they discipline themselves and learn to service some higher good, anything that decrees that a black man or a Jewish woman or anyone, because of how they look, must content themselves with anything less than the full range of human possibility, is wrong, and that’s all that I’ve inherited from you.  
Sam: You sure dat’s all, Miss Sita?  
Dalang: Why, there’s Sam, polishing glasses in a corner!  
Sam: Now, I may be jest a servant, but seems to me dat dere was also some people sayin’, “Let me see what I can do for dat person over dere.” We didn’t wait for de perfect world to come. We did what we could in the world we found ourselves in.  
Dalang: Why, there’s Ram and Raveneau! Perp-walking in handcuffs, ducking their heads as photographers flash!  
Ram: There was beauty, Sita. Beauty to transport you momentarily away from the rude, indifferent chaos, tedium, and heartbreaking ephemeracy of life.

- Raveneau: There was adventure, Sita. It made you feel alive. You loved it, and you were always ready to reach out for more.
- Angela: And like I said, there's this fantastic nail salon in Joisey. After everything's squared away here, I'll take ya there, I promise!
- Hannah: There was heroism, and cool uniforms! Although we do have to get to work on getting some badges.
- Angels: *Olé!*
- Harlow: (Clears his throat.) Harrumph, well, there was tradition, the known and familiar, in a changing world. And a home. I provided you with a roof over your head, Sita. With cost to myself, I might add.
- Dorcas: Very touchink, papa bear. You got an itemized bill for her, maybe?
- Harlow: Dorcas! Harrumph, I tried, Sita. There was great effort.
- Dorcas: There was love, Sita. And whatever has love will always draw you, no matter its imperfections. Where there's love, not everytink is perfect, but sometink in there is. Generation after generation, we've all been looking for it, and we all tink we've found it, but our kids come along and tell us we have not. So you can dive into the fire or you can do your job. Dive into the tink that has love and search! Exhaust all of your senses in searchink, for the jewel in the lotus, the kingdom of Heaven.
- Sam: When the words is wrong, try jes' listening to the music.
- Sita: I don't know. All I know is I can't take the injustice in what I used to think was completely beautiful. I have to find the better way. (Sita walks into a fire—the sun rising over the East River. Everyone follows. Gamelan plays the U2 Song, "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For.")

## Material Traditions, Material Things

Although folklorists long gave their attention mostly to verbal traditions, they have also been involved in the examination of material culture. They look at folk art and folk artifacts and at the processes of making and using folk objects, at the whole of folklife. Folk architecture has been of great interest, but so too have quilt making and blacksmithing, and even chainsaw carving, syrup making, and hide tanning. The popularity of Foxfire-type student and community projects and staged folk festivals has made the general public more interested in these aspects of traditional culture too, if perhaps out of a sense of nostalgia for the past.

Two poems here speak of quilts or quilt making. Steve Zeitlin's "The Quilters" depicts a group of Southern women now in New York City, who make quilts at a center for senior citizens, no longer in the domestic sphere of home or quilting bee somewhere else, no longer somewhere rural. But Zeitlin uses that slight disconnect to comment on the humanity of their activity. Laurel Horton's "Grandma Effie and the Heirloom" was written after a conversation Horton had with her paternal grandmother about handing down a family quilt. Although this was a very personal, family matter, quilt-expert Horton also thought about the larger question of the traditions that govern the transfer of quilts within families, thoughts reflected in the poem. Not only is a quilt in itself culturally significant; so too are the contexts in which the quilt exists, including its passage through time and through various hands. Both poems use their concentrated verbal space to evoke worlds of larger context, social and temporal.

In "The Quilters" a traditional art form, associated in some minds with a cherished past, exists quite happily in the modern world, and certainly traditional forms may continue to respond to the changing demands of life. Memorials to the dead are a very old form, but Holly Everett writes of a modern manifestation: the usually temporary erection of a memorial "shrine" to an accident victim at the place where the accident took place. Everett's memoir is concerned with her mother, other mothers, family relationships, and doing fieldwork, but the physical memorial and, less directly, the ritual of its enactment are at the heart of things here.

In other sections of this book, Rosan Augusta Jordan alludes in one poem to the physical constructs that are the altars erected to memorialize the departed in Mexico, and Steve Zeitlin and Jeff Titon both deal with traditional crafts: rock wall masonry and blacksmithing.

Of course, encountering the material is inevitable, as we do live in a world of the material (if not necessarily always of traditional folk objects), and folklorist writers may come upon objects in any number of ways. In “My Great-Great Half-Uncle Horace’s Bone-Handled Jackknife” Jo Radner alludes to family history, though history she discovered through an old newspaper clipping found when cleaning out a family house. The poem also relates to her attempts to “recapture . . . a tradition (whittling) that was my family heritage,” hence her late relative’s jackknife, an object itself, as well as one used in a traditional practice. The cane in Margaret Yocom’s “The Cane” relates to her earlier folklore fieldwork with her own Pennsylvania German family, family stories, and Yocom’s own memories of her grandmother, whose cane it was. It is a memory object, what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has called a “material companion,” and Yocom says, “As a folklorist who specializes in narrative and material culture, I find myself teaching about objects of memory and the stories people tell about them.”

## One of My Mothers

My mother's response surprised me. "One of my mothers had a daughter who was killed in an accident. They put up a cross. It's not there anymore, but I think she would talk to you about it." If my mother had told me about this before, I had forgotten. "Where was the cross?" I asked. I could not remember seeing it at the location my mother described.

One of my mothers. It was a phrase my mother, a primary schoolteacher, used often to describe the female parents of her first-graders. Her mothers picked up their children from school, accompanied the class on fieldtrips, sat in on math lessons, helped their sons and daughters with their homework. Just like my mother was helping me with my homework.

In this case, my homework was my master's thesis in Folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I had phoned home to Texas to talk to my mother that afternoon. One of the things I wanted to tell her about was my idea for the thesis—roadside crosses. I had realized, after a semester's worth of coursework in folklore, that the elaborately decorated crosses by the side of the road—the memorials to accident victims I had seen all my life—were a form of folklore encompassing belief, material culture, custom, and narrative. Straightforward and yet mysterious, beautiful and awful. But I was hesitant to bring it up with my mother. What would she think of the topic? Would she think it too morbid? Would she find it embarrassing to tell her friends? Death was the sort of thing I had been raised not to talk about.

I remember a hot summer day in the small west Texas town where many of my mother's relatives lived. My great-grandmother had died of a stroke. We gathered at her house after the funeral. The adults were inside, eating and commiserating. My younger sister and I were playing outside. I was determinedly balancing myself, carefully making my way along the cement block wall at the edge of Grandma Calhoun's front yard. My sister watched with her arms crossed behind her back, squinting into the late afternoon sun. I suddenly felt my mother's hand tight on my arm. Startled, I looked down into her stern face. "Get down from there and come inside." I caught my sister's eye. What had we done wrong? "It's not right to play outside now," my mother explained, "it's not a time to play."

“Why can’t we play now?” I couldn’t make sense of this. We weren’t engaged in any of the play we knew to be off-limits. We weren’t hitting, yelling, using bad words, or playing too near the street. I wasn’t picking on my little sister in any way. I was at a loss. “Today is a day to stay inside and think about your great-grandmother. Your grandmother and her sisters are very sad, and we need to be quiet.” This was the day I realized that death demanded more than proper behavior at the funeral and cemetery.

My great-grandmother’s death was the first of three in my mother’s family over a four-year period. Soon after my great-grandmother died, my grandfather had a heart attack. Some months later, my uncle—the baby of the family, just barely in his thirties—was killed in a farming accident. Crushed in a combine. A teacher at my junior high school had pulled me into an empty classroom afterwards and spoken to me in hushed tones about the difficult time my family was going through and the importance of talking to someone about my feelings. That evening, I glanced into my parents’ room as I left the kitchen. I wanted to tell them I was done with the dishes. My father stood with his arms around my mother, who was sobbing. Neither of them noticed me as I paused. I had never seen my mother so upset, overcome with emotion. I didn’t know what to do, so I went to my room and shut the door.

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“It’s right down here,” she said. My sister, Christie, was driving me to a deteriorating memorial she had spotted a few months earlier. She sent me some photographs she’d taken of the small, wooden cross and silk flowers affixed to a bridge. Where are we, anyway, I wondered. I’d lived in Austin for over twenty years, but I’d never been to this part of my hometown. I had taken pride in my knowledge of the city, enjoying long walks spent mentally cataloguing houses, restaurants, shops, neighborhoods. These rambles, I now realized, had covered only a small portion of the city’s sprawl, namely the older neighborhoods within and ringing the city’s historic core. I had unconsciously avoided the suburbs in which my sister and I grew up, and the newer housing developments that had sprung up beyond them as the city expanded. My sister’s easy familiarity with this area, alien to me, took me aback.

I was reminded of the afternoon I watched her write an essay for a university class. She asked me to keep her company at a coffee shop across the street from the campus while she worked. We talked for about a half-hour upon our arrival, going over her ideas for the paper and people watching. A couple of hours later, she had a rough draft. I was amazed at both her speed and concentration, which she somehow maintained even in the face of my attempts to distract and pester her. She may have regretted her request for company.

Although I’m four and a-half years older, I have often felt like the “little” sister around Christie. When I was attending the University of Texas as an undergraduate, Christie, still in high school, would occasionally spend time with me on campus. I would often introduce her as my older sister, a joke between the two of us.



Already taller than I in her sophomore year, Christie knew secrets of hair styling and makeup which remain unknown to me to this day. People readily accepted her as the older, more sophisticated sibling. Male friends asked me if she had a boyfriend. Professors asked where she was going to university.

Later, while I was working on my master's degree in Folklore, she was pursuing a bachelor's degree in Social Work. She had also recently given birth. Christie took photographs and helped me when I was in town, in between keeping house, taking care of her new baby, and attending classes. My own time-management issues seemed ridiculous in comparison.

As we drove through the neighborhood, the fullness of my sister's life overwhelmed me. She knew these streets and could find her own way. And she was helping me find mine.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I thought you'd want to see this," Lynda said, laying the paper down in front of me on the kitchen counter. I quickly scanned the article detailing a local controversy surrounding roadside memorials. The town council had sent letters to a half-dozen families, notifying them of plans to remove all memorials within the town's jurisdiction. Family members and their supporters were fighting the council's decision, speaking at town meetings and circulating petitions. Still weary from finishing my thesis on memorials in my hometown, I answered, "Oh yeah, thanks." I stuffed the article into my bag. I'm done with all that, I thought, but I'll hang on to this for now to be polite.

I hadn't known Lynda for very long, although she was my new stepmother. My father had called me one day in October 1999. "Guess what, kid? Lynda and I got married the other day!" With my father's mother as witness, they had been married on a small parcel of land my father had recently bought in the Texas Hill Country.

As I got to know Lynda, I also acquainted myself with the town in which she and my father were living, an upscale, planned community of about 90,000. Lynda had lived there for many years and raised her children there. She struggled with breast cancer there—it had been in remission for nine years when she found out it had metastasized.

"How'd it go?" Lynda asked one afternoon. Three newspaper clippings and several subtle prods later, I had just interviewed one of her friends, Laura, about the memorial for her daughter, Caitlin. The meticulously maintained assemblage stood for years near the main entrance to the community before a municipal road crew removed it. Laura and I had talked about Caitlin, her friends, and her funeral.

We had also discussed the detailed covenants that residents are required to follow, and the town council's wide-ranging efforts to control the community's image. Many viewed the council's desire to remove the memorials to be part of this impression management. I mentioned this to Lynda as she crossed back and forth, busily tidying the living room. She paused and looked at me sharply from beneath the brim of her navy blue baseball cap. "That's right," she said, returning

to her task. “There are no burglaries, no drugs in the high school, and no one ever dies.”

Two years later, I was shopping for clothes for a job interview. The campus visit would include four interviews, a public presentation, and various social events. Performance anxiety had manifested itself in an urgent desire for new socks. And that’s when I saw Lynda. My heart dropped into my stomach. It isn’t, I told myself angrily, you know it isn’t. Her baseball cap covered downy, post-chemo tufts of hair above her swollen, puffy face. I wanted to grab her, hold her. Tell her I missed her more than I thought I had right to.

But this woman was not my stepmother. Lynda had been dead for just over a year. The woman came around the display rack and stood beside me. I found it difficult not to stare at her as she looked over the socks. If I moved slightly to my right, my sleeve would brush hers. My heart, now back in its proper place, was beating unevenly. I had to walk away. It’s a sign, I told myself, glancing back over my shoulder. It’s a good sign. Breathe. My upcoming presentation, part of the campus visit for which I desperately needed those socks, concerned the memorial controversy Lynda had alerted me to years before.

\* \* \* \* \*

I’ve kept my eye on these memorials. I visit the ones I’ve studied when I’m in Texas for Christmas or a searing slice of summer. Some assemblages are gone now, removed to make way for construction, or completely deteriorated. One mother told me that on the day her daughter, Julie, would have graduated from high school, she would stop visiting the memorial. She believed it was important to Julie’s classmates that it be kept up until then.

Another mother wrote to tell me that she had decided not to maintain the memorial for her daughter, Ashley, any longer. She felt that she was finished with that space, the place where Ashley’s car had slammed into a tree. She would not bandage the scarred tree with flowers and ribbon anymore. Someone still visits the site, though. I find the evidence.

And I leave some of my own. My mother surprised me one day by agreeing to come with me on my rounds. I had asked as a courtesy, expecting a polite refusal. “We’ll drive around and drink Dr. Peppers, okay?” I said brightly. My mother’s favorite soft drink. Mine too. We’ll drink sodas! We’ll drive around! We’ll bond!

More than a decade after I’d stopped wearing black clothes and makeup every day—a mid-eighties, central Texas variation of punk—I was still trying to convince my mother that I wasn’t irretrievably morbid. But I believed it to be a deep-seated notion. Before I started elementary school, we lived in Alaska. In Sunday school one morning, our teacher invited us to take a piece of construction paper in our favorite color and draw our favorite Bible story on it. When my mother came to pick me up, the teacher took her aside. They spoke quietly with expressions of concern while looking at my paper. Watching them from across the room, I knew I had done something wrong, but I didn’t know what it was. The problem, which was

explained to me after we got home from church, was the color of the paper I had chosen. “Black can’t be your favorite color,” my mother said. “Because it’s not really a color.” I must have looked puzzled. She studied me for a moment and continued, “Well, it’s not a good color for a *favorite* color, Holly. You need to pick a happy color, like red or yellow. Or pink. You like pink, don’t you?”

Now, my mother and I stand looking at a memorial, shaded by a live oak tree in the middle of a median. Three lanes of traffic race by on either side of us as we take in the new coat of yellow paint, the Christmas decorations in red, green, gold, and silver, the tattered notes anchored with small stones and angel figurines. I lay down some flowers. My mother knows I do this from time to time, but having her watch makes me nervous. I wait for admonition. “Well, . . .” my voice trails off. I turn and begin to walk back to the car parked around the corner. “Hey,” my mother calls after me, her gaze still roaming over the assemblage. “Aren’t you going to take some pictures?”

## The Quilters

Sew themselves to one another  
as they reminisce about the South  
when all of life was structured  
around a makeshift quilting frame.

Today, at the Harriet Tubman Senior Center  
in Brooklyn  
widows sew wedding ring patterns  
in anonymous urban settings  
engaged in the radical, subversive act  
of quilting  
for in this day  
it's radical to be human,  
sewing hearts on tattered sleeves

Grandma Effie and the Heirloom

I can't give you the quilt.  
That's promised to your Aunt Virginia.  
The oldest daughter gets it,  
except that Leona left home  
and I don't expect she'd want it anyway.

Here's something you might like, though,  
but it won't hurt my feelings  
if you don't want it.

It's sort of old-fashioned.  
It's a pillow cover.  
I forget what you call it,  
this way you pull the yarn through.  
It's made of linen, you see here.

Exie Cable made it, and she give it to Little Mother  
or your Great-uncle Glenn, one.  
Exie had an eye for my brother Glenn.

Turfig, that's what you call it.  
You see here, you push the yarn  
through from the back  
and it puffs out here on the front side.  
Makes them flowers stick out like that.

Exie made it and give it to Little Mother  
as a present one time.  
She done the words real nice,  
here where it says "God Bless Our Home"  
in the middle of all them flowers.

Tufting, that's what some people call it.

We always called it turfing.

Same thing, far as I can tell.

Exie Cable really had a liking for Glenn.

Poor thing.

She was a little hunchback.

Now it won't hurt my feelings none

if you don't want to take it.

My Great-Great Half-Uncle Horace's  
Bone-Handled Jackknife

When I found it  
in the shed  
in the safe with the brass dials and tumblers,  
it fit.  
The gentle curve held my palm.  
The worn steel blade grooved my finger  
as if I had always whittled with it.  
    I thought, he must have held it so.  
    I thought, his hand must have been like mine.  
    I thought, *we* fit.

For twenty years it rode in my pocket,  
a comfort to my mind;  
to my hand, a challenge:  
could I carve the wood of Maine  
as he had done?  
My longing taught me—  
first, an egg from a kindling scrap,  
then, a finch (footless),  
a loon (the fine neck, the long, cruel beak)—  
delicacy building,  
precision,  
control.  
    Somewhere he's watching, I thought.  
    He knows I must be his kind,  
    a shaper of the world,  
    worthy of the knife.

Later I found the yellowed news clipping  
in the pouch with the lock of hair.

A SAD CASE OF MANIA—

*On Tuesday, the 13th inst. . . .*

his mother

merciless

his baby brothers

Moose Pond

all drowned—

*. . . A third child, about eight years of age,  
managed to escape her grasp,  
and by this means its life was saved.*

*Its life was saved? No—*

Horace had saved himself.

Don't erase the boy, the terror, the control—

After such knowledge, what did he save?

No ordinary life:

A maniac's child must live carefully,

the knife always handy,

ready to comfort

ready to shape

ready to sever.



## *Margaret Yocom*

### The Cane

was never  
in her hand  
where doctors  
said  
it should  
be  
No

We bought her  
another  
and another  
always wooden  
no metal  
no plastic  
for  
her

In her house  
they  
leaned  
on kitchen closets  
hung  
on dining room  
window sills  
slid  
down bedroom  
stairs  
Now

one stands  
in my bedroom  
corner,  
waiting

# Children's Lore and Language

Although children obviously belong to larger cultural groups, folklorists have long recognized that kids are also their own folk group with their own lore. William Wells Newell saw that in the 19th century when he published his classic *Games and Songs of American Children*, as did Alice Berthe Gomme with her similar work in England; and more recently *The Lore and Language of School Children* by Iona and Peter Opie has been widely recognized.<sup>7</sup> Children's play and traditional games obviously have an attraction (perhaps it is in part the charm of childhood itself) that translates not only into research but into creative approaches to traditional play, games, and children's cultures.

Here Susan Stewart's poems, though they are multifaceted and intricate works, play off the playful traditions of Tag, Red Rover, and hand-shadows and suggest, at least indirectly, something about the nature of children's traditional games (the poems are, in fact, from a series called "Children's Games"; a number of the poems from this series have appeared in the *American Poetry Review*). Steve Zeitlin's poems range across a swath of childhood. "Folksay" (a title borrowed from folklorist and anthologist Benjamin Botkin) and "The Tenderness of Swine" deal with family, notably children's, expressions, while "The Lulu Bird Nestles in the Daddy O Tree" is about a father playing with his child (perhaps not a traditional game, though within families forms of play may become traditions unto themselves). In an earlier section, Zeitlin's "Julia" concerns a collector of children's folklore as it evokes the lyrics of lullabies. Fantasy literature has adult, adolescent, and childhood appeals and aspects, and Neil Grobman intended his novel *Lost in Redskirt Forest* to be enjoyed by readers of all ages. Yet the youth of his characters and some of the folklore he works into the novel certainly make it appealing to younger readers and highlight elements of childhood. Grobman notes that he pays homage to two well-known fantasy writers, James Barrie of Peter Pan fame and J. R. R. Tolkien, who liberally used Scandinavian mythology in his work, by naming a character here Barrie, the toll king. (Folklorists may also find the reference intended to American folklore scholar Barre Toelken.)

my mother's garden

I lost my copper key  
in my mother's garden

I lost my silver knife  
staring at a cloud

I found my wooden boat  
hiding in the rushes

I found my wishing stone  
hiding in my shoe

I lost my copper key  
hiding in the rushes

I found my wooden boat  
staring at a cloud

I lost my memory  
when I learned to whistle

If you find my silver knife  
hide it in a stone

arrowhead

Perfect flint,  
we pried you up  
out of the clod when  
we built a hut  
or dug for potatoes  
at the end of summer.  
You were not a fossil  
leaf or chip  
of bark, or what  
we thought,  
but part of a world  
drawn from rock with rock—

sharp enough to  
penetrate  
fur, or hide  
or hated flesh, and  
pin it  
back to earth.

Power pulses,  
radiant, in and  
out, out and through  
the very grain  
of you: from what's  
persisting there  
unyielding—one  
small cliff-  
fall backing into  
another, an exposed  
spine like a  
hinge sloping  
down to an  
abyss.

Time has been honed  
by a chisel  
made of  
chisel, pure time  
aboriginal  
and vanished.

*What are we doing,  
where are we going,  
with not a thing to  
our name  
the weight of this?*

## shadowplay

I made a fist  
and it grew two ears,

long ears with  
a mumbling

mouth. Then  
I opened my hand—

it grew  
four feathers

and another hand  
rose to meet it,

and two  
thumbs made

a doubled  
dove's beak,

curving and  
nodding on

the windless  
white; one four-

fingered wing  
swinging out,

the other  
feathering in—

black birds of my  
bedroom wall

black birds  
flying faster

than the arc  
of headlights

emerging  
from the road

beyond the  
window, looming

and emptying  
looming then

emptying  
then looming

then emptying  
the room of light.

## tag

Before you touch me,  
I will run.  
If I touch you, you  
must stop.  
If I lose you, we  
must stop  
and run on  
as two  
forever.  
Try to touch the larch's  
bark,  
try to call it  
home.  
If you go beyond  
the grass,  
you'll have no  
voice,  
you'll have  
no one.  
Beyond the grass  
time stops —  
try to touch  
the larch's  
bark,  
try to  
touch me,  
we can stop,  
we can try  
to call it home.

## red rover

red rover, red rover, why can't  
you come over?  
Toward morning, toward evening,  
why not let go—  
and come over, come  
over, why can't you  
come over? Red rover, red  
rover, decider, permitter,  
red rover, red rover,  
why won't you let go?

## Steve Zeitlin

### The Lulu Bird Nestles in the Daddy O Tree

After all those Lulu lifts,  
twisting the child through his legs like a pretzel  
playing Daddy O and Monkey in a Tree

the sapling saps her father's strength.  
Lulu grows stronger  
as he loses strength,

until the tree is bent  
from bending over  
and father can't lift his tired limbs

### Folksay

I am from  
"Yo Sire"  
and "Jumping off the fifteenth-story window for a breeze on a hot  
day"  
from "Tell Ma the boat floats"  
to "Too tired to tuck"  
from a long story tucked into a family expression  
where to sing the hundredth psalm  
means to fetch a glass of water  
from the movies we internalized—  
"You were expecting something a little more grand?"  
"Get used to disappointment"  
Conversations that move from prose towards poetry—  
alliteration, rhythm, hyperbole  
"Thank God for the guts and the gristle"  
"Putting on down to Gourda"  
"Gone, Garfield, gone. . ."

—thanks to the Dargan, Hunter, Luckey, and Fugar families

## The Tenderness of Swine

Like Lords of the Manor,  
my brother and I greet one another—"Yo Sire"  
and when someone asked, "why?"  
Murray answered: "respect."  
And so my brother and I refined our communication  
into a work of art

but so did my children who call each other, "Swine,  
Hey Swine,"  
and when they're aggravated, "Swineherd."  
with delicious disrespect

yet no one's dissin' anyone  
just as black guys use nigga—  
for respectful disrespect,  
and gays claim queer  
as a playful caress.

For love can get inside a word  
subvert the prejudice  
bring out the tenderness  
of swine



from *Lost in Redskirt Forest*

*Some Useful Information on Characters and Other Things*

Don Wolfe—A Jewish American teenage boy

Eugene Youngblood—A Native American teenage boy

Miiko Akito—A Japanese American teenage girl

Dennis Akito—Miiko's brother

Edna Otika—Miiko's cousin

Trixie—Don Wolfe's female pet dog, a Schnauzer

Peter—Don Wolfe's baby brother

Grubsnig—A giant and a BIG businessman who runs a sleazy child pornography empire

Horigron—Where Grubsnig lives with his wife and child

Mrs. Grubsnig—The giant Grubsnig's wife

Hefner Grubsnig—The baby boy of the Grubsnigs and quite a huge Hefner

Barrie, the toll king—A troll who collects tolls from those trying to enter into Horigron

Palindromes—Usually a group of numbers or words that when read forwards or backwards spells out the exact same thing

Redskirt Forest—Where the story takes place and the misspelling of "trickster" when spelled backwards ("Triksder")

BANZAI is a little-known mystical Oriental board game popular among Oriental schoolchildren who excel at it. This ancient board game of strategy and skill has had an underground, secretive existence and following since its origin in the Orient centuries ago, but it is relatively unknown in the United States and among the western nations of the world. As a game of great antiquity and mystery, it is believed by Oriental cultures to hold the secret of the control of all powers in the universe: If you master the game, you can master anyone and any power at any time. Conversely, no man or any power can ever control you. You are a true "Master of the Universe."

*Chapter Six*  
*The Awful Giant Grubsnig*

An awful giant named Grubsnig lived at the huge castle in Horigron with his wife and baby boy. Grubsnig must have been at least twelve feet tall and was as mean as he was ugly. Mrs. Grubsnig and baby Grubsnig were pretty big, ugly, and mean too. But they were not as awful as the great Grubsnig himself. In fact, all the people of Horigron were pretty big, ugly, and mean, or so they say. It was a whole town of giants. Some even say that the town got its name from the melding together of the

two words “horrible” “and grown-ups.” And after all, who could be more “grown-up” than giants?

As the three children approached the huge castle on the other side of the wooden walkway, having crossed the colossal lake, the gates of the massive fortress swung open mysteriously, and Miiko, Eugene, and Don entered the dark, forbidding abode slowly and cautiously. But the door shut quickly behind them, leaving them locked within. The noise of the slamming gates startled the three, striking fear in their hearts. They were now trapped inside, and they did not know how they were going to get back out.

A huge voice cleared rather loudly and coughed three times, shaking the castle walls with immense force. The walls of the mansion reverberated and shook each time. The frightened youngsters heard a deep, booming voice ring out:

“Fee, fie, foe . . . what fun!  
I smell the blood of three children!  
Oriental, Indian, and Jew—  
Why, I’ll smash them all with my shoe!

Better yet, these prisoners three:  
A girl, two boys . . . now I see—  
I’ll abuse them here most awfully  
By using them in child pornography!”

Huge footsteps came clomp, clomp, clomping down the hallway, and the great Grubsnig himself soon appeared from around the very corner of the castle hallway in which the three brave teenagers stood trembling with fear. But they did not stand there trembling for very long! In a flash, at the first sight of the awful giant, they ran off down the narrow and winding hallway leading to nowhere in particular.

“Halt! Halt, I say!” Grubsnig screamed, shaking the very foundation of the palace as he pursued them doggedly through the curving corridor. “I’m Grubsnig the giant, and I demand that you stop immediately, or I’ll smash you all to tiny little bits and bones, even smaller than you already are right now!”

The three stopped dead in their tracks. The intimidation had worked. Grubsnig came huffing and puffing and panting from around the corner of the crooked hallway and stood over them, all twelve feet of him.

“Okay, you three hooligans,” he proclaimed loudly. “You have entered my home illegally and unlawfully, and so now you are my prisoners and slaves! Besides, you cannot escape me here. Wherever you hide, I can smell you out and find you easily!”

Grubsnig marched the children to a huge oversized room, which turned out to be baby Grubsnig’s toy room. In it were lots of wrapped, half-wrapped, and unwrapped Christmas presents and toys that were located all across the room. Mrs. Grubsnig joined them there and tied up the three children to the Christmas

tree in the center of the room with ropes, merrily singing Christmas carols and hymns while she worked. She was an eleven-foot, eight-inch Amazon with long, black, curly hair. She could have easily claimed the National Women's Wrestling Association Championship back home in Nebraska.

"Oh baby Grubsnig will love having human toys to play with this Christmas," Mrs. Grubsnig declared cheerily. "His name is Hefner, Hefner Grubsnig. Isn't he huge? He will surely love playing with you children. He loves real lifelike dolls with actual real working human parts."

The children gasped in horror at this thought but felt even worse after Grubsnig himself interrupted his wife with his own evil plans for them.

"O NO, the baby cannot play with these three until I get through with them. I will strip them naked, take photographs and videos of them in every conceivable position imaginable, and sell these products for enormous profits. This will be the most lucrative phenomenon of my entire pornography publishing business this year—ethnics are in! That damn troll king hasn't been letting many through these parts lately!"

Don could not believe that this was happening and that these remarks were being said. Here was a prominent, successful, and wealthy businessman, a giant in the Horigron business community, who was rich enough to live in a huge castle, religious enough to be celebrating Christmas, family-oriented enough to have a wife and his very own child, and yet corrupt enough to be talking about using innocent children as victims in a child pornography ring of some kind that featured nude photos and probably much worse. Values seemed to be rather backwards here in Horigron! Mrs. Grubsnig seemed nicer than Don had expected. Even as she was tying the three children to the Christmas tree, she chattered happily about all the nice toys and wonderful presents for baby Grubsnig and her husband. What a shame they would not get a chance to enjoy playing with these special gifts themselves. They were so useful. Don listened and watched spellbound as Mrs. Grubsnig described the magical items, wondering all the while whether he would ever escape from the giant's evil clutches alive.

"Why, here is the baby rattle that can change to different sizes and weights as the baby grows," lady Grubsnig declared. "And over there is the wristwatch that controls time, for my husband. Over here is the sack with my secret present in it, but I already know what it is—the goose that lays the golden eggs! And right over there is the magical lyre. Each of these gifts has special powers and comes with complete instructions."

After finishing her joyful holiday braggadocio, Mrs. Grubsnig departed from baby Grubsnig's toy room, leaving the three frightened teenagers locked in and all alone to contemplate their fate. Her large clomping footsteps could be heard stomp, stomp, stomping off in the distance.

"What are we going to do?" Eugene queried, breaking the silence. "My arms are tied together so tightly, I can't reach my knife from inside my belt so that I can cut myself loose!"

Don kept staring at the presents strewn across the room, scheming, plotting, thinking, and planning. What was going to be the next move?

Miiko laughed. "This will be easy," she said, freeing her hands. "Where did you say that knife was?"

"How did you do that?" Eugene asked, gesturing with his eyes to the bulge inside his belt.

"No problem—old Japanese trick!" Miiko replied. "You just stiffen out so that when your captor thinks he is tying you up real tightly, it is actually a loose fit once you relax all of your muscles! And besides, did you notice that this isn't really rope at all—it's actually wrapping ribbon, giant-size! Even though it's thicker than most ribbon that we use, it still does not really have the strength that rope has!"

In a flash, Miiko retrieved Eugene's knife and quickly cut away the thick ribbons holding Eugene and Don prisoners. They all stood up together, freed from the restrictive bonds that held them captive only moments ago.

"Now what?" Eugene mused out loud. "What are we going to do now?"

"I think that the answer to that question lies in these presents," Don replied uncertainly. "Mrs. Grubsnig said they were magical, that some of them had special powers . . . So maybe, just maybe they can be useful in helping us get out of here!"

"I don't know, Don," Miiko protested. "They are all so big and heavy for one thing. And we will need a lot more than magic to get out of this place alive! This guy is more dangerous than I had thought originally. Let's think about a really, really good plan . . . But, for now, if they come back here in this room anytime real soon, we will surely hear their loud giant footsteps, in which case we will need to cluster up back at the tree again quickly and pretend that we are still all tied up! Are we agreed?"

"Good idea," Eugene interjected. "Meanwhile, let's look around and see what we can use to get out of here!"

The three split up in the large room. Eugene searched for weapons; Miiko looked for possible escape routes; Don ran over to examine the presents. He was totally obsessed with them and the idea that they were the keys to freedom.

First, there was the baby rattle. It was just like the one he had stolen from the Five-and-Ten Store for his brother, Peter, only this one was as huge as a normal-sized weight lifter's dumbbell.

On the left near the center was an *L* for "left" and an arrow pointing downward. On the right was an *R* for "right" and an arrow pointing upward. Attached to the side was a tag with writing on it. It read:

"Twist me to the right—  
Pull me out, I'll be light!  
Twist me to the left—  
Push me in, I've got heft!"

Don tried it. But when he twisted the right side of the toy to the right, the rattle pulled out and got longer, becoming as heavy and as long as a super heavyweight's

barbell. And when he twisted the left side to the left, the rattle pushed in and got shorter, becoming lighter and lighter until it was the weight of a feather.

“AH HA,” thought Don. “I must remember that this contraption works backwards. It will make a great toy for Peter or maybe even Trixie. But also, I can use it to become the strongest, most powerful man on earth . . . or, at least seem that I am!”

Don moved over to the giant’s wristwatch. It looked more like a huge kitchen clock on a thick strap.

Attached to it was another instructional tag that read:

“Turn my hands counterclockwise:  
The past will then soon materialize;  
But turn my hands the proper way:  
And the future is today!”

“Oh,” Don declared. “How neat! This is a time machine—what a rare find! With this treasure I could stay young forever and have the time and the freedom to realize any dream!”

This was all so amazing! Don approached a third mystery gift. This one was a burlap bag, and inside it was the goose that lays the golden eggs. The goose had a tag on its foot that read as follows:

“Golden eggs I can lay—  
All night and all day;  
But tuck me in this sack real deep—  
I’ll think it’s night and go to sleep!”

“Great!” Don thought selfishly. “With this I could be the wealthiest and most influential man on the whole earth and buy anything I want anytime I want it!”

Don also noticed that there were some golden eggs already in the sack, so apparently the goose would still lay them while in there. The sack was actually quite huge and could probably hold all of the gifts found in the room all at the same time.

Finally, Don’s eyes turned to the beautiful, shiny, magical lyre. Like all the other items, it had a tag attached to one of its curved ears that spelled out the following:

“Twang hard the strings on this magical lyre,  
And a rousing tune will soon transpire;  
Twang softly and the sound, to say the very least,  
Twill soothe the soul of any savage beast!”

Gosh, with this gift in my possession,” Don mused, “I could become the most famous, most creative person in the whole world! Fame and fortune would be at my very fingertips—music would be my life and my career!”

The sound of Miiko’s voice broke Don’s spell and his fleeting reveries.

“Quick, guys,” she whispered loudly. “I think I have found an escape hatch out of this room and maybe even out of the giant’s castle altogether. This heating duct surely leads out of here!”

Eugene ran over immediately to investigate, and upon careful inspection, confirmed its potential as a ticket out of the awful giant Grubsnig's huge castle and the general release from their imprisonment within.

"I've found no great weapons," Eugene announced. "But, if we each stuff some of these huge Christmas tree balls in our pockets, we can throw them under the giant's feet whenever he is chasing us again. They will trip him just as surely as marbles would trip us!"

Don was slow to respond to the excitement being generated by his two colleagues. He did not really want to part with the giant's treasures during their escape attempt.

"Oh, leave those things alone, Don," Miiko affirmed angrily. "Those things are not ours to take anyway, and besides, how could we escape and still haul all of that junk out of here?"

The answer to this question stared Don directly in the face. There was a tag hanging from the drawstrings of the burlap sack that he had not noticed previously. It indicated that the sack was imported from another country and was, therefore, not a native Horigron product. It read:

"I'm an ordinary burlap sack—  
Carry me right on your back.  
When I'm empty, I'm as heavy as can be;  
When I'm full, a feather is lighter than me!"

Before Don could explain, Miiko and Eugene had loaded up their pockets and stuffed their shirts with the huge Christmas tree balls and were getting ready to leave the room in a hurry. Don began stuffing all the newfound treasures into the huge sack and, sure enough, just as he had surmised, although the treasures were collectively heavy, his burden was light. It worked exactly like the tag had said—perhaps the instructions were not backwards because it was an import from a normal country! All the other items were more like the giant baby's rattle and the general moral and ethical values found here in Horigron! With this unique sack, he could always have a light load to carry, a leisurely existence, and would never ever have to work very hard for the rest of his life!

"Come on, Don!" Eugene implored. "We are getting ready to leave! You won't be needing all that junk!"

Don scrambled over to the heating duct where Eugene had removed the cover. Looking like a young Santa Claus with an overstuffed bag of gifts flung over his back, Don did not mind taking the risk involved. And besides, the duct was plenty big enough for all three of them to walk through comfortably, winding their collective way through the maze of gigantic pipes and ventilation grills on the way to freedom. Don struggled with the sack at first because it was huge, clumsy, and dragged along awkwardly behind him. But, other than that, it was as light as a feather.

After circulating through what seemed like a mile long curvy tunnel, Eugene, who led the way in the manner of earlier generations of nomadic hunters and tribal

chiefs, discovered an opening in one of the vents. With a quick turn of a screen, the three daring kids found themselves outside the duct system. But, lo and behold, they were still inside the giant's castle in a long, winding hallway. They could hear Grubsnig breathing heavily, as well as the huge family dog, which was as large as a brown grizzly bear, growling nearby.

"Quick!" whispered Miiko. "Let's get out of here!"

The three of them ran as fast as their little legs could carry them down the gigantic curving hallway toward what they hoped would eventually lead them to the front door of the castle. The giant's huge dog, with its long, brown hair and razor sharp teeth, and Grubsnig, himself, smelled them out with their keen olfactory sense and pursued them through the castle corridors with humongous stomping giant steps.

"Hurry up, Don!" Eugene ordered. "Let's get a move on!"

Miiko and Eugene threw out a steady stream of the round Christmas tree ornaments they had collected toward the giant and his faithful dog companion. This plan worked out nicely because, just as Eugene had explained it, the large round balls acted like marbles, causing the giant and dog to trip over each other time and time again. Over and over they fell and rolled about endlessly, asses over tin cups, on these slippery circular impediments to their victory in the chase. In all ways, they tripped through the hallways, amazed and dazed, abused and confused, always amusing, always amazing, for those who observed the absurd. Our heroes watched in utter amazement.

For a while, the three prisoners were far ahead of their pursuers, but the hallway was a lot longer than they had anticipated. They could not figure out exactly how to escape from this palace prison. The place was a virtual never-ending series of long, windy corridors in the form of a giant rat's maze, just as if they were a part of some kind of bizarre human experiment in the giant's psychology laboratory of horror!

"Amazing!" cried Miiko. "We always seem to come to more and more hallways!"

Before long, the two giant figures caught up to the children easily, and Don was beginning to trip repeatedly over the sack he was carrying awkwardly behind him, dragging as it was, slowing him down considerably.

"Quick, do something, Don!" Miiko pleaded. "You are closest to them. Use something from your clumsy bag of tricks!"

No sooner than the little Japanese girl had spoken, Don tripped over the sack and the lyre fell out. Grubsnig and his dog were almost on top of them now, breathing down their necks. Quickly, Don began plucking hard on the magical strings and a beautiful tune was heard ringing throughout the palace corridors.

The three children watched with amazement as Grubsnig and his bear-sized canine stopped dead in their tracks and began to laugh and dance to the lyre's hypnotizing melody. This continued for quite a few minutes.

Don stopped playing and stuffed the lyre back into the sack so that the three of them could continue their escape. The tactic had stalled their enemies for a short period of time, but very soon after the music had stopped playing, the two Goliaths

were once again in hot pursuit. The thump, thump, thumping of their footsteps could be heard throughout the castle.

"Drop that bag of tricks, Don, for God's sake!" Eugene yelled back at him. "It can't possibly help us anymore!"

"No, no! Please trust me!" Don protested strongly and stubbornly, just like his famous fictional predecessor, Jack, from the old traditional folktales that bore his name. "It helped us once, and it will help us again. You'll see. We'll get out of here safely . . . Look . . . over there. There's a door leading out of here straight ahead!"

All three reached the castle door in a flash. Eugene was the leader. Next came Miiko. And Don brought up the rear. It looked like they had finally made it.

"Goodbye, Grubsnig!" Eugene yelled.

"So long, Mr. Giant!" Miiko shouted.

"Adios, big dog!" Don cried out.

Eugene pulled open the huge door and all three of them ran out—straight into the waiting arms of Mrs. Grubsnig!

"HAH!" laughed a very out-of-breath, heavily breathing Mr. Grubsnig, arriving at the scene wheezing and clearing his throat. "You are still my prisoners, and I am still your caretaker!"

Grubsnig held back his huge dog, just barely, as Mrs. Grubsnig carried all three of the prisoners back to baby Grubsnig's toy room where she tied them up once again, only this time she used rolls and rolls of thick red tape left over from the Christmas gift-wrapping. It was much too tight for Miiko to use her special "old Japanese trick" or any other trick for that matter. The giant's dog got much too close to her during this bondage ordeal, however, and Miiko, in her anger and frustration, was able to deliver a tremendous karate kick to the nose while one of her legs was still free. Unbelievable as it may seem, the gigantic dog whimpered and cried for a moment, then turned around and ran away in fear, and was never ever seen by the youngsters ever again anymore.

"What exactly are you really going to do with us, Mr. Giant?" Miiko demanded. "More importantly, what did you do with my brother Dennis when he got lost here in Horigron right near your castle?"

"DENNIS SINNED!" the giant replied curtly. "Say that backwards!"

"And what about my cousin Edna?" Miiko challenged her captor once again. "What did you do to her, big man?"

"DENNIS AND EDNA SINNED!" was the giant's mysterious response. "Try saying that backwards."

"You've got that all backwards is right," Miiko protested. "They were both very good people!"

"No, that's not the point," the giant argued. "Just say that backwards!"

Don was beginning to comprehend what the giant was trying to say. He quickly turned to Miiko.

"What was your cousin's last name?" Don asked his Japanese friend. "Was it the same as yours?"



“No, my last name is Akito,” Miiko responded. “Her last name was Otika. But why do you ask me this question now?”

“Don’t you see? Don’t you get it?” Don blurted out. “They are both dead and buried. He killed them! Why, I spotted their single tombstone just after Eugene and I crossed over the troll’s bridge to get here and right before we met you! It said: ‘DENNIS AKITO AND EDNA OTIKA SINNED!’ And that reads the same way backwards as it does forwards!”

“Well, then, that also explains the sign we saw in the woods that said ‘STEP ON NO PETS!’ ” Eugene exclaimed.

“Right . . . and don’t forget the troll, Barrie, the toll king, and his badge which said ‘GATEMAN’S NAME TAG,’ ” Don explained. “All those phrases also read backwards the same way as they read forwards! Why, this whole place is turned around backwards! Even the baby’s rattle and the magical lyre worked in the reverse way they were supposed to according to the instructions. I should have twanged it softly, but instead I twanged it hard!”

“Why, you rat!” Miiko shouted at the giant. “You killed my kin! But I challenge you to your own game!”

“AHA, little princess, do you palindrome?” the giant asked politely. “If you can create one longer than I can, I’ll let you go free!”

“You vile murderer,” Miiko shrieked. “You must let all three of us go free if I win. Then, and only then, is it a deal! Go ahead, giant. You start first, and I’ll still beat you!”

The giant nodded in passive agreement to Miiko’s proposal and began the contest. Here’s how it went:

Giant:	“A DOG, A PAGODA!”
Miiko:	“A DOG, A PAW, A PAGODA!”
Giant:	“A DOG, A PAW, A LAW, A PAGODA!”
Miiko:	“A DOG, A PAW, A LAD, A LAW, A PAGODA!”
Giant (uneasily):	“A DOG, A PAW, A LAD, A FAD, A LAW, A PAGODA!”
Miiko (confidently):	“A DOG, A PAW, A LAD, A FAN, A FAD, A LAW, A PAGODA!”
Giant (hesitating):	“A DOG, A PAW, A LAD, A FAN, A MAN, A FAD, A LAW, A PAGODA! Surely you can’t beat that!”
Miiko:	“A DOG, A PAW, A LAD, A FAN, A MAT, A MAN, A FAD, A LAW, A PAGODA!”
Giant:	(stony silence and consternation).
Miiko:	“AHA . . . I’ve beaten you. And here’s another one—A DOG, A PAW, A LAD, A FAN, A MAT, A CAT, A MAN, A FAD, A LAW, A PAGODA!”

Sure enough, Miiko had beaten the giant at his own favorite word game. She, too, had grown up in a family where words were carefully chosen and considered

sacred. But unlike Grubsnig, she had not perverted or compromised her love for the English language by writing pornographic magazine copy and establishing a lucrative but morally corrupt publishing empire that used and abused people, particularly juveniles like her brother, her cousin, and her. Instead, Miiko and her kin were more apt to compose marvelous haiku poetry about the beautiful mysteries of the universe.

Eugene could also appreciate the victory. In his particular Indian tribe, they lived by the oral storytelling skills of the master raconteurs. His living Bible was a running commentary of tales, myths, and legends that his grandfather passed on to each of his sons and grandsons. Every night they told the sacred stories and kept the culture alive for yet another generation. So, too, did this rich storytelling tradition exist in the Akito and Wolfe families with their respective proud ethnic heritages.

Grubsnig untied and untaped the three youths reluctantly. He was beaten fairly and squarely and he knew it. Being a man of his word, and certainly only a big man was capable of such integrity, he mumbled something barely audible out of the corner of his mouth as he let his three prisoners free.

“This is going to cost me a lot of revenue this year, you know, letting you three go just like that,” Grubsnig sneered. “I could have made an awful lot of money—megabucks, megaprofits—hawking your talents in the marketplace. After all, I have my corporate industrial image to maintain. And besides, my castle is almost completely paid off now, too!”

The three new escapees wasted no time. Once again, they found themselves exploring the giant's confusing but grandiose domicile. They certainly did not want to wait around any longer in case Grubsnig changed his mind again. Off they ran, straight for the same door that was nearly their escape route the last time, until Mrs. Grubsnig interfered. Sure enough, it was the palace entrance as they had surmised correctly previously, but they would still have a long way to travel across the long plank pathway that led from the castle grounds across the colossal lake and back into the heart of the mysterious Redskirt Forest. They started across the walkway.

Don did not forget to take his huge sack of gifts with him without the giant even taking notice of it. These treasures were as light as a feather on his back, just like the tag on the burlap sack had promised. But the sack's size did still make swift passage a bit uncomfortable, since it tended to drag along behind him, making him susceptible to tripping.

“Why don't you drop that sack?” Eugene warned. “If the giant ever finds out that his special gifts, like that lyre, are missing, he is sure to become very unhappy and try to capture us again!”

Even before all Eugene's words were completely spoken, the three heard a great roar off in the distance behind them. Grubsnig had obviously just discovered that his special treasures, his magical means of controlling the world, were missing! He came running after the three children as fast as his clumsy huge legs would

carry him. As big as he was, he was very fast because he would take real long giant steps as he ran. He was even beginning to close in on the troublesome trio. They were almost one-half a mile away, but if they did not act really fast once again, the thieves would probably be caught and tied up a third time. This time it would surely be for good. There would be no getting loose, no possible escape whatsoever if they were caught this time!

Pound, pound, pound! Clomp, clomp, clomp! Thump, thump, thump! Stamp, stamp, stamp! Grubsnig's footsteps came crashing down on the wooden planks of the walkway, shaking the bridge over troubled waters at every step he took. The three brave children could hear the giant's familiar wheezing, coughing, and habit of clearing his throat every time he made a loud announcement. All of this made the bridge tremble and shake, causing our heroes to lose their balance and footing more than once. But Grubsnig was getting closer and closer.

"Stop thieves!" Grubsnig cried as he approached the frightened youngsters, nearer and nearer, closing in fast.

"Quick. Do something!" Eugene shouted from the lead escape position. "Throw back the sack, Don!"

"Let's talk this over, Grubsnig!" Miiko pleaded from the middle position. "We can palindrome again or compete in the ancient Japanese game of BANZAI if you prefer . . . but you must first promise to let my two friends go free!"

"No deal!" the giant shouted back. "You don't play fair! This time I will be sure to kill you all!"

"I'll wrestle you in a fair fight," Eugene offered desperately. "Or . . . we can compete in Indian lacrosse . . . if you first let my two friends go free. I'm not afraid of you!"

"Never!" the giant answered stubbornly. "If you are not afraid, then why do you run from me? Stop, stop, I say."

Suddenly, the giant began chanting a rhyme even as he ran:

"I'm the great Grubsnig,  
I'll smash all your bones;  
I'll crush you to pieces,  
With sticks and sharp stones!  
I'll fix you three scoundrels  
So you can't tell the tale  
Of how this clever giant  
Ever let you out of jail!"

It was raining outside, just as it had been when they first approached the giant's mansion. A slow and steady, slippery and slushy rain was falling. Perhaps their only hope was that the giant would slip, fall, and hurt himself on the long bridge, losing his footing in the rain before they did. Or, if they could ever make it back into the forest again, perhaps the heavy weight of the giant's body would sink him into the dampened forest floor just like it was quicksand. But right now, this all seemed so unlikely.

Grubsnig was in hot pursuit, and there was hardly any distance between the pursuer and the pursued. There was just enough time for one last desperate plan of action.

Don was the slowest of the three escapees and in the rear position because he was dragging the huge sack of special gifts behind him while on the lam. Don knew well that he would have to part with one of the great stolen treasures in order to get out of this mess. He reached down deep into the bag and pulled out the huge dumbbell rattle. It was short and light at the moment, but would be perfect for their escape efforts. He twisted it to the right and pulled the handle out until it was barbell-sized. At this point, it became so heavy that it dropped out of Don's hands and rolled back toward the giant along the vast wooden bridge leading from the castle to the forest. It got heavier and heavier and longer and longer as it rolled. The giant saw it coming and his only chance of avoiding it was to jump over it or it would mow him down like pins on a bowling alley. As he got ready to jump over the hurtling barbell/rattle, it smashed a gigantic hole in the wooden bridge. The giant leaped, but it was too late. The hole was humongous, and the giant landed right into the gaping abyss the barbell created, falling, falling, plunging downward into the colossal lake along with the monstrous toy, which, in turn, sucked Grubsnig under like a powerful maelstrom.

"Save me! Help me!" Grubsnig screamed at the top of his lung capacity as he bobbed to the surface over and over again, time and again, until the three startled teenagers could finally see him no more! He sank like the Titanic.

"Great!" exclaimed Miiko. "Don has sure rattled that giant! He has sunk into the lake!"

"Fantastic!" declared Eugene. "He certainly won't bother us anymore!"

"Damn!" said Don. "The rattle is lost for good. No toy for Peter or Trixie. And now, I can never ever be the strongest and most powerful person on earth after all!"

"Yes, but look at all the great treasures you have left!" Miiko reminded her friend.

"And we will always be grateful to you for saving our lives, Don," Eugene added. "You have earned the right to all those treasures. Perhaps we had been wrong to continually chastise you about carrying them with you during our escape. Perhaps each one of the remaining treasures will serve to get you out of a sticky situation like escaping from the giant's evil clutches, just as the giant baby's rattle did for us this time!"

Don was glad that Eugene had taken such a generous and magnanimous attitude. Even though he had saved the day purely by accident this time, Don had not really wanted to share the stolen treasures with anyone else like he feared he might have to, since sharing the spoils of war seemed like the only fair thing to do. The three heroes finally reached the edge of the woods together with no further incidents, but decided quickly to part company so that each one of them could continue on his or her own path, fulfilling the cultural identity and quest each had started individually. . . .

## Ritual and Custom

Defining the term “ritual” can be problematic for folklorists and other scholars, especially as more secular behavior comes to be included under a rubric once reserved more for the religious. And the terms “custom” or even “folk custom” can be catchalls for a wide variety of things. Yet both seem to encompass a range of repeated, traditional behaviors that are special and capable of being isolated in some way. Ritual, of course, implies the ceremonial, even the liturgical, but rituals can be grand or small-scale, widely practiced or rather personal. Rituals may have a grandeur or just a reassuring familiarity, but their appeal is undeniable, whether we participate in them or write about them as scholars or poets.

In her poems here, Rosan Augusta Jordan uses the backdrop of the rituals for the Days of the Dead (*Días de los Muertos*) in Mexico—the Roman Catholic holidays of All Saints and All Souls in November—which have been the focus for some of her fieldwork. During this annual period, altars of flowers, food, and artifacts are constructed to memorialize the departed and all-night vigils take place in cemeteries as graves there are decorated. Jordan uses the occasion to muse on meanings of life and death in one poem and upon the experience of an accident in which she injured her hand during fieldwork in Oaxaca. Though her response is personal, the rituals in the background are societal and widely observed. The birthday ritual in William Bernard McCarthy’s “The Birthday Horse” is more restricted in scope, drawn not from actual celebrations but from stories the author told his children (suggesting that rituals are so appealing that sometimes we like to imagine them). Ted Olson’s “Christmas Tree” works from one of the most widely known rituals/customs of American society—the decoration of an evergreen tree at Christmas—though the poem uses barely a reflection of the Christmas tree custom itself to look upon the nature of the past and of older generations. Though it is a very personal poem, Margaret Yocom’s “Eating Alone” shows how traditional food customs mark cultural differences, even cultural barriers, that can reflect personal ones. Perhaps differences in eating customs might be said to take on the significance of providing rituals of social inclusion and exclusion. Steve Zeitlin’s “Madhulika” offers a glimpse of the Indian custom of painting a bride’s hands with henna (encountered by Zeitlin in the course of his folklore work in New York City), though he ties the custom to both a larger range of ritual behavior and to the essentially ephemeral nature of this traditional art form, which uses the human body.

Norma E. Cantú's novel *Cabañuelas*, two chapters of which appear here and which she refers to as "autobioethnography," aims in part to reveal the life and culture of *la frontera*, the Texas-Mexico border region where Cantú herself grew up. Cantú's earlier work *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* did the same, and the two books form part of a trilogy. This excerpt deals with much more than ritual behavior, but it does open up in Toledo, Spain, with the rituals attendant on the Catholic feast day of Corpus Christi featuring its procession of horsemen in medieval costume and giant puppets, which make the protagonist think of the much diminished Corpus Christi procession in her own Texas. The second chapter of Cantú's work then shifts elsewhere, in line with its intention of moving between life vignettes that have to do with the cultural encounters of the protagonist, taking us back to Texas and to events twenty years after Spain. However, though centered in particular, specific times, memories and flashbacks take the reader to yet other times and places, while Corpus Christi rituals continue to provide an anchor for the narrative.

## *William Bernard McCarthy*

### The Birthday Horse

In our little town in Arkansas,  
just as the child comes in for bed  
at twilight on the day he's six  
the birthday horse appears in the street  
and makes his way to the child's house.

Dainty and grey, he steps over the curb,  
crosses the sidewalk and takes the walk  
up to the porch, lifts one great hoof,  
and taps upon the bottom step.

Somehow, in our town, the rule  
is only summer birthdays here.  
The child comes forth in sandals and shorts.  
Some, of course, are scared, at first,  
and cling, and even whimper a bit,  
as fathers lift them overhead  
and settle them into the saddle.

But soon enough they grab the pommel,  
waving and grinning, but looking ahead  
to follow the course of their birthday ride.

Drawn by the distinctive sound  
of unshod hooves on pavement grey,  
the people of the town come out  
to stand upon their porches and watch  
to see who passes, whose day it is.

Children already gone upstairs  
to put on pajamas and say their prayers  
call from the windows and wave toothbrushes.

To Main Street, first he makes his way,  
past hardware store and drug store too,  
both open late, and the movie house,  
where teens in line don't even turn.

And in an older neighborhood  
widows who live with leaking roofs,  
broken fences, and sealed off rooms,  
take note of the hoofbeats on the street,  
but they are waiting for a different horse.

So back and forth, up and down,  
street by street, through the whole town  
the great horse paces, arching his hooves,  
curling them under in dressage,  
and rocking the rider perched on his back.

In an hour or so the horse returns,  
stepping again across the curb.  
Full dark has come, cicadas buzz  
and lightning bugs are signaling.

The young poster to the pommel clings.  
But, deep asleep, he'll not recall  
the moment home, sliding down,  
and riding a shoulder upstairs to bed.

And by the time the parent returns  
from tucking the birthday child in,  
all trace of great grey pacer is gone,  
save for a whiff, barely there,  
mingled with the smell of grass  
and the hint of a coming thunderstorm.



## *Rosan Augusta Jordan*

### In Praise of Bodies

As the bells of the parish church  
Toll the hour of departure,  
The whole village gathers  
In the cemetery of Teotitlán del Valle.

Being in the body, we feel—  
    Our pleasure, our pain,  
    The little aches in aging muscles,  
    The touch of friendly hands that greet us,  
    Offering food, drink, comfort.  
Those others, though, the *muertos*—  
Those spirits without bodies—  
    They no longer feel what we feel.

For these few hours they have been welcomed  
Back in their old homes,  
Their presence honored with candles on an altar  
And ritual offerings of their favorite foods.  
They consume the pungent flavors and smells,  
But never feel the full belly of the incarnate.  
They consume the pungent fumes of the mezcal—strong liquor—  
But do not share in the intoxication which the living seek—  
    Abandonment of the senses,  
    The possession of the spirit.  
After all, these *muertos* are already all spirit.  
    —No bodies.

And now it is time for them to leave again,  
A departure perhaps less poignant each successive year.  
And yet, mingling with the living gathered to say goodbye,  
There inside the walls of the village *panteón*,  
Where sunlight filters through the flowering groves,  
    They linger. . . ,  
    Relishing the smell of marigolds  
    And freshly-cut oranges  
    And cups of mezcal poured out for them.  
They are reluctant to leave  
Even this shadow version of sensate being.

But as the droning chant of the paid mourners fills the  
    cemetery,  
And the smoke of the burning *copal* incense rises,  
Their tenuous connection to their earthly homes loosens,  
And the wandering spirits drift off once more.

To have a body.  
    To feel.  
        They remember.

## Hands and Hearts in the Days of the Dead in Oaxaca, Mexico

My blood flowed on the streets of Oaxaca,  
in front of the Magic Hand,  
on this the day the dead walk among us  
and the living feed them.

What unseen force pushed me forward  
and wielded the invisible but deadly sharp obsidian knife?

Was it my heart they wanted?

Instead my little finger took the blow,  
deflected by some sympathetic opposing force for life.

The Indian women wrap the bloody torn flesh  
in a tattered handkerchief,  
and follow me back to the sign of the Magic Hand,  
urgently repeating, "A curandera waits nearby."

Instead, I am taken in a taxi  
to the doctor/priests at the Clinica Carmen.  
I am stretched out on the altar in the center of the room,  
where they huddle over my still bleeding hand  
and prepare for the ritual to come.

They examine the bone, the ligaments;  
They know the knife that cut me;  
They know the ritual that feeds the gods  
and keeps the forces of the universe in balance.

My heart races—  
I have had this dream before.

They consult the oracle:  
The bloodthirsty gods are satisfied.  
The hand is cleaned and repaired,  
the healing draughts assembled.  
The rest is up to me.

Christmas Tree

I'm winded yet warm  
right now, having climbed  
to bring them a tree:

though the thin air hurts,  
I came here because  
my body still works—

I thought I'd use it  
to help old neighbors  
endure this Christmas.

\* \* \*

This winter's vista  
little resembles  
the one they valued

when they saw green:  
their mountain's standing  
out from its shadow

like a gravestone,  
marking their absence  
from future landscapes.

\* \* \*

With my shovel I scoop  
a scrawny fir,  
barely a sapling—

its trunk narrow,  
its roots shallow:  
my cold hands cradle

what's left of the earth  
that nourished giants  
before I was born.

Madhulika

Drawing floral designs on Indian courtyards  
under a full moon

Painting with henna on a young bride's hands

Your art is not locked in masculine mausoleums,  
shut up in temples carved in stone,  
but proffered daily through an open doorway  
in ritual offerings to the Gods

the henna fading on the hands,  
powdered designs blown heavenward  
towards an evanescent Goddess of ephemera

## *Margaret Yocom*

### Eating Alone

I am from fields of manure and wheat,  
from cow corn high enough to hide in, from  
creek beds of violets, daffodils

I am from stone springhouses, from  
bottles of milk and cream  
shuttered, cool in August noons

I am from smokehouses, from  
hooks and hatchets, from  
blood and feathers

I am from farms with two houses,  
one for grandfather, grandmother  
when deep-veined hands turn from tractors, from

cauldrons of corn meal mush  
I am from winding staircases, from attics, from  
gauzy curtains in summer's night breezes

I am from jar after glass jar of tomatoes, green  
beans, peaches, applesauce, but  
I am also from chow-chow, dried corn, scrapple

shoo-fly pie, schmierkäse, sauerkraut, souse, and  
all those other foods you  
won't eat with me

## Norma E. Cantú

### from *Cabañuelas: A Love Story*

These two chapters are from *Cabañuelas, A Love Story*, the third in the Border Trilogy that includes the award-winning *Canícula; Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (University of New Mexico Press, 1995). The novel is set over a period of nine months, January to September, but in two geographical locations twenty years apart: 1980 in Spain and 2000 in South Texas. The protagonist is a Chicana folklorist from South Texas who is in Spain researching festivals and is involved with an artist, Paco, who lives in Madrid but hails from Asturias, the northern region of Spain. In the longer chapter, she is back in Laredo, Texas, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In both pieces the protagonist, Nena, fuses her childhood memories within the narrative structure and weaves time and place into an (in) coherent whole. Chapter 25 is set in Toledo, Spain, in 1980 and Chapter 26 is set in Laredo in 2000, but in flashbacks and flash-forwards, the narrative goes off to Mexico—Oaxaca, Chiapas, Guadalajara, and other locations there and in the U.S.

#### *Chapter 25* *Corpus Christi*

*Toledo, 1980*

It's June. A Thursday. And they are headed to Toledo for the feast of Corpus Christi as are so many others, both Toledanos and not, who go back annually to admire and enjoy the fiesta. The day begins gray and rainy in Madrid. They drive in Paco's apple green SEAT, Nena calls these cars the Volkswagen of Spain. Paco is driving and singing Asturian folksongs and laughing; Luis and Astrid join him. Along the way, the weather turns sunny and by the time they arrive in Toledo, it is a bright sunny day. During the drive in her usual morning quiet, Nena just listens and retreats into herself. Last night's dreams are still with her, although they slowly fade as she looks at the highway, the red poppies, and the yellow wildflowers she thinks so appropriate for this country whose flag has those very same colors, same shades of red and yellow. They arrive and park away from the Plaza Zocodover; traffic is already quite heavy, and Paco wants to make sure they can get out when they choose to leave. He has made this trip before. With his ex-wife . . . well, not quite an "ex," but the wife he doesn't live with because she went off with another

woman . . . there is no divorce yet; too difficult to get one even now, after the dark times of absolutely no divorce.

Plaza Zocodover is carpeted in thyme and rosemary, and altars are set up along the route where the procession led by the huge monstrance will travel. The narrow cobblestoned streets called callejones are full of excitement even though it's only about eight in the morning when they arrive. They stop at the Café Toledo for café con leche and churros. Nena asks for a tortilla española, and the others laugh. That's not for breakfast, they chide. I know, she says, but I like it; she enjoys the freshly made omelet of eggs and potato and a dash of garlic fried in olive oil. Paco says the best thing is to find a good spot before the Mass ends. But she wants to attend Mass and take pictures of the service. So she goes off alone while the others find a spot where they will wait for her to join them after Mass.

She manages to sneak in and is awed by the cathedral with its priceless artwork and so much gold. The place is already full, and only dignitaries and a few locals are allowed in. The organ is magnificent; before the Mass, the music booms, deep, tugging at heart and mind. Some women are wearing the mantilla and the peineta, the fancy high comb that holds the delicate lace scarf in place. She's glad that the laws have changed, and she can attend with an uncovered head. Remembers when she would have to use a hairpin to hold a piece of Kleenex tissue on her head to hear Mass, the time in Monterrey when she was escorted out of the church for not wearing a head cover. And how she loved to wear them, too, the small circular lace ones and the fancy longer ones. She had them in various colors. She remembers them all: the Easter crocheted hat her Tía Luz made for her when she was nine, the many chalinas her mother had bought or made for her. What acts of love, she thought as she daydreamed, waiting for Mass to begin. She finds a seat upfront right behind the authorities—military and civic—where she can observe the archbishop, the bishops, and the visiting priests. There must be over twenty officiating. It's the ritual she knows well and mouths the prayers; she stands and sits and kneels in unison with everyone. Their Spanish sounding familiar yet alien.

As soon as the Mass ends, she dashes outside with her Pentax ready to shoot as many pictures as she can. The first-communion boys and girls are all lined up, the cofradías, the stern-looking gentlemen and women, the nurses, the religious orders, everyone in place for the procession. The horsemen in medieval dress escort the first processioners. In the distance, she spies the tarrasca and the gigantes, the giant puppets, that have already paraded down the path earlier that morning, as they did the night before. Centuries old, the figure of Anne Boleyn atop the green monster, la Tarrasca, confuses Nena. She had not read anything about that. The gigantes, yes, the queen and the king and the others. Giant figures as tall as the white tarp that covers the area where the procession will parade. The outside walls of the cathedral are draped with rich tapestries depicting religious and mythological scenes. The Annunciation with Mary amidst the angels. The child Jesus before the rabbis in the temple. There are over fifty, and they are old and not very well cared for. The next day, the workers will pull them down,



fold them, and put them away for next year. There is a festive air although it is a religious celebration.

After scurrying through the crowds of Toledanos and tourists who have come for the Corpus, she finds her group. They have indeed secured a good spot on the steps of a church, and they eagerly await the coming procession. She tells them of the Mass and who is coming, and in what order. Paco has found a program of some sort, and she keeps it. He is helpful, telling her stories of what happened when he last saw the procession and how it seems changed and yet is the very same thing. And too soon it's over. She has taken two full rolls of film. He has offered advice on how to hold the camera for certain shots, pointed to particularly interesting photo ops, and for the first time, seemed really interested in her work. When she wants to go interview some folks he tells her who are the leaders, but she decides to not go after all, has decided instead to stay with the group. After all, the Corpus Christi processions in Laredo have stopped, not much sense to compare this one to one that, for all purposes, has ceased to be. The grand processions of Christ the King Church remain in her mother's memories and her own. She remembers as a child walking along with the group, candle in hand, in the procession. The priest intoning in Latin and the people responding. The old joke her mother tells. When the priest would intone, "Ora pro nobis," Alicia, her mother's childhood friend, would interpret it as "ora por dónde?" and laugh and say, "Well, if they don't know where we're going, we sure don't." And her mother remembers the old women, Catalina, Simona, and Altagracia singing off-key, Viva Cristo Rey! Nena decides not to interview anyone. What's the point?

## Chapter 26

### *Los maderos de San Juan piden agua piden pan*

*Laredo, 2000*

En Junio en Laredo the noon heat warns of the summer's worse time, la Canícula, the dog days. June 2000. It's time for weddings and time for summer vacations to Corpus Christi and Port Aransas to the beach, to San Antonio to party, to Guadalajara para conocer. And on the 24th, el día de San Juan, Mami cuts her children's hair, so it grows out full and beautiful. Nena keeps the practice, so her hair grows out beautiful, thick, and wavy, not too curly and not straight. Good hair. And it is time for riding around on Saturday afternoons listening to the radio and singing along with her favorite band, Chicago, "Saturday afternoon. . ." and stopping by the Glass Kitchen for a burger and fries after a morning at the library studying, writing papers for her college classes during the fall and spring, night school after long days at the office. Childhood. High school. College. All measured by summers. On Saturdays, the days stretch long and hot and the nights are full of fun, drive-in movies, and double dates. Nena and her college friends, mostly those that have already gone off to universities and colleges away from the border and come back to Laredo to work or merely for brief visits. With these friends, she

plans trips—to Monterrey to visit her family, Mamagrande, tías, and cousins. To Guadalajara to visit Palmyra's grandmother and her extended family. To Corpus Christi on the Gulf Coast to visit Mirtha's brother. They plan the trips carefully, and plan their fun as if planning a wedding. Palmyra, who has come back with her degree and is teaching elementary school. Mirtha, who works for a car dealership and is going to night school with Nena. Tere, who is about to leave for college after community college in Laredo. They are not children, these young women, so the parents relent and allow them these vacations. Es para conocer. Y es con las familias. Although Nena's Papi is opposed to the trips, he gives in. After all she is over twenty-one and earns her own money. But he fears for her, for his eldest daughter. What will happen if she doesn't marry? Why does she insist on leaving her good-paying job to go to school? What will happen to her?

It's 1970. And off they go to Guadalajara for a week. It's not Corpus but another festival, la Virgen de Sapopan, that they attend. They take the long bus trip and arrive tired but expecting great things. They will stay in a hotel this time. Palmyra's family home is too restrictive, and they want to go to discotecas, dance all night with strangers. They want to feel free. And Palmyra's boyfriend shows up. Drives all night to be there a few hours and drives back to be at work. What love! He must really love her. But a few months later, they have broken up, and the girlfriends get even and put a piece of gum on the side mirror of his precious car, a maroon Stingray, for he's gone to A&M and is loyal. And they use Nena's red lipstick to write CABRON on his windshield while he's at the RoundUp with another woman. Revenge. It's so sweet. Palmyra moves to San Antonio to another life, another teaching job. Tere goes off to college; Mirtha applies for and gets a job, and off she goes east somewhere to work for a federal agency. Her father and her stepmother stay, and Papi and Mami see them on and off at the bingo and they send regards to their daughters. The girlfriends go their separate paths and marry or not and move on.

In Guadalajara, one photo at Lake Chapala captures Nena's hair flying in one direction, their laughter, their joy. Strong bodies. Healthy bodies. They eat birria in home restaurants with makeshift tables covered with bright oilcloth and in fancy restaurants and get homesick for flour tortillas; they never tire of the fresh fruit drinks and the horchata at the fruit stand en la plaza. The girlfriends are madrinas to Tere's daughter—why not?—she can have four madrinas! It's not customary, so what? The priest thinks it odd but allows it nonetheless.

When they go to Corpus Christi, the town named after the religious festival, they stay with Mirtha's brother, who married an Anglo woman; his children are rambunctious boys. They go to the movies, watch *Dr. Zhivago*, they tease Nena for crying. She's read the novel and was expecting more. Not the schmaltzy love story that ends up making her cry yearning for a love as grand as Lara's. When they see *Love Story*, Tere says, that reminds me of you. Nena denies any similarities. Well, they are in college, and she's so smart. They tease and laugh. Nena wants to cry but won't. It's not funny.

The year she leaves the utility company job, finally resigns so she can continue her education, she takes her vacation to help her make the decision. She goes with her friend Paul, who is the priest at San Luis Rey Church, and her friend Sandra, who works as a social worker, off to Oaxaca, to Chiapas, to visit Monte Alban. When they get to Monte Alban, they miss the bus back and have to walk the kilometers to Oaxaca City. Along the way the children greet them, shouting, “Hello, gringos.” And they are invited to a small hut where they are served warm corn tortillas and black beans, the poor farm family shares what they have with them, and it is delicious. The father speaks Spanish haltingly but communicates and is curious about these gringos who speak Spanish and who are not americanos but are not mestizos either. *Qué son?* So hard to explain. Nena is humbled by the dire poverty, the beauty of the scenery, and the differences. Sandra, Paul, and Nena have long deep talks about the indigenous people, and the way the locals use them for labor, how they abuse them, how the mestizos continue the oppression of the European conquerors. This can’t last forever, Nena thinks, someday they will rebel.

Once in Tapachula they take a bus to Villaflores to visit the small hamlet where Sandra had done a summer-abroad program working with the local clinic. Tomas, a ninety-something Indian, guides them up the mountain for a day hike, and they pick up shards of preconquest worlds that come colliding into their 1970s world. That night, the marimba’s soft music plays on and on. It’s Saturday night, and the community is hosting a party for the foreigners, for Nena and her friends. . . . The doctor, who is their host, is gracious, his family had also hosted Sandra years before when she was a college student come to work here. He is paternal with them as he is with the indigenous people of the town. But they have such knowledge, she wants to tell him but holds back, mustn’t be rude. She allows him his patriarchy and feels sick. Tomas has married five times and has been widowed four. Has over twenty children. He smiles and winks when the doctor shares these facts of his life. He won’t speak directly to them because he doesn’t speak much Spanish, but Nena knows he does, he just won’t. The marimba is as strange as the food—the music so unlike the accordion and the guitar of her homeland. But this is Mexico, too. Chiapas. She reminds herself and her companions. Keeps the shards of pottery and the images: a face, a torso, and a child’s toy, a dog, in a special place for many years until in one of the many moves they disappear, never to return. Just as well, she sighs. The trip remains in her heart, as she thinks and thinks about what to do. Resign her job? Leave the office and finish college? Go to what? Teaching? Won’t pay more, and the benefits are worse. After all, when she began working there that was why: because teaching paid less than working in an office, although as a teacher she would have summers off. But the benefits were so much better at the utility company. Plus, after the scholarship money ran out, she didn’t have the money for tuition and books, and her siblings needed shoes and clothes for school. So after one year on a community college scholarship she gave up and began working, to help the family, to help her sisters and brothers. But only for five years. And the years stretched to seven. And her brother goes off to Vietnam and comes back

in a coffin. And her father's arthritis becomes disabling; the family needs her. So she gives in and works. In Mexico that summer, she made the final decision. On the feast of Corpus Christi. But no one understands. Why? It's a good job, with good benefits. And you have a chance to go on to study and advance with the company if you want to. But. How can she explain the anger that working there has germinated? How can she tell them that the office is using up her best years, her mind, her hands, and that there is nothing to show for it? How can she share her innermost fears, that she will grow old there. That she will become like her coworkers, Pepita or Betty, bitter, old, having to do without. Without what? She doesn't know, just knows that there is more to life. More to living. More for her. And in Oaxaca on a warm summer night with the marimba playing she decides. I must leave. But I will come back. I can't be gone forever. And later she will have to make the decision again. To leave or to stay? The border is like that. Pulling and tugging at your heart and also rejecting and off-putting. Difficult.

The Zapatista uprising did not surprise her that January 1995 when NAFTA went into effect, the treaty that rang the death knell on so many small businesses along the border. It was sure to come, how could it not? Wondered what the good doctor thought of it all. And his teen daughters who were waiting to be married and his young son who collected stamps. How are they celebrating this Corpus Christi?

That trip was worth more than gold, Nena muses as she remembers years later in Laredo with her friend Sandra, "Tanto que aprendí. And the decisions I had to make. Seems every time I have to make life change decisions I take a trip. ¿No crees?"

"Well maybe that's your way of getting away from the energies that bind you to the old."

"Maybe."

It's the feast day of Corpus Christi in Laredo in 2000, and the fiesta is the same as it has always been. And different. No longer are there processions at daybreak, but in some parishes, the adoration chapel is bedecked with flowers, and the perpetual adoration society celebrates in its own way. The procession path is around the block, prayers and songs by a few faithful, perhaps a guitar. But in Toledo it is solemn faces and a brass band leading the procession for a small parish. After the large citywide procession, they wind their way through narrow streets praying the rosary. After all, for over seven hundred years, the feast has been celebrated and has undergone changes. And it all started with the thirteenth-century French nun Juliana of Liege whose visions and voices asked her to celebrate a feast day in honor of the Holy Eucharist. She had no idea that for centuries the faithful would be holding pageants and processions as she dreamed. But even that is changing. While in Toledo the procession is as solemn as always, in Laredo it remains in the elder's fuzzy memory. The processions are now limited to some parishes and are much smaller than they used to be. And Nena dreams of another move. Should she leave? It's time to take another trip. Make decisions. Stay? Leave? The borderlands are like that: like the come and go of the Gulf waters, constant movement. Coming. Going. Coming back.

# Worldview and Belief

As conceived by anthropologists and folklorists, worldview is certainly a very broad concept: the characteristic way in which a society envisions the nature of the universe and how people and things and forces operate within it. It is made up of many constituent parts, including a variety of folk beliefs (though that term has usually been used as a more acceptable stand-in for “superstition”). Whether beneficent forces may be called in to protect us or witches wish us harm or fate is fickle or certain might all be aspects of a culture’s worldview.

Jeannie Banks Thomas’s whimsical “Salem, Massachusetts, Playground at Gallows Hill” presents impressions of a place, but a place forever linked to its past as the site of famous witch trials and executions in colonial times, to a former worldview very different from our own, though one which continues to fascinate us. Today, of course, the town uses its witchcraft past and our fascination with it as a focus for tourism, so Thomas is able to touch on the role of visitors from outside and of tourism in the perception of folklore. The “haunted house business” looms and a TV witch and great American writers who were intrigued by the gothic appear like ghosts.

In her story “Haints” Teresa Bergen looks at a conflict of worldviews and, indeed, of folk beliefs. Based on materials Bergen encountered in archiving a state-wide field recording project, the powerful story about love and tense relationships lays out conflicting social attitudes toward traditional belief systems, the conflicts in worldview mirroring those in the personal lives of the characters.

## *Jeannie Banks Thomas*

### Salem, Massachusetts, Playground at Gallows Hill

Poe comes North  
and bumps Hawthorne  
out of  
the haunted house  
business

Samantha Stevens is on  
the street corner  
twitching  
her nose

Fried dough in the cemetery

Get your cards read  
Everywhere

Fagan plays a boom box  
while a one-armed girl  
in a leotard  
assists  
the New Zealand contortionist

And then,  
the rain

and that bar  
with the Dominican slow eggs  
and the promise of live

music  
later.

## Haints

I guess that's love, when you give up what you want and where you want to be in favor of who you want to be with. And that's what I'm doing, so I guess that proves I love Natalie. This thin girl beside me, sitting on the bus headed east. She's huddled against the window under my big coat. I see her profile in the dark, her head bobbing against the pane as she sleeps.

Across the aisle, a mother scolds her son for fidgeting. The kid can't sleep. The woman is big and ornery. She caused a scene in Portland, stalling the line as she asked, "Are you sure it costs that much to Lafayette? Lafayette, Louisiana?" There was some trouble with changing her ticket, and we almost missed our bus waiting for her to resolve her stupid problem. Now she gets up every hour to go to the bathroom, and she swings one of her garbage bags against me. She carries garbage bags as luggage and takes one with her every time she goes to the bathroom. She can't leave that bag unattended for a minute. What's in it? Gold? Plus, she has a stupid straw hat on. The brim has come detached from the crown so that now the brim sits on her head like a brim should, but the crown is joined only by a plastic thread, which falls off her head every time she stands up. It hangs down her neck like a basket. Sometimes she fixes it, sometimes she doesn't. It couldn't have cost more than \$2.99. Why doesn't she throw that piece-of-shit hat away? I hate this lady and everyone on the bus, and I hate my life. And I guess I hate Natalie as much as I love her. I mean, why did she go and have a breakdown just when everything was going so well?

Look at the facts: We've both lived twenty-three years in Baton Rouge, our whole lives. Baton Rouge is a hellhole where I'll grow old and die long before anyone gives a fuck about my music. I waited for her to finish her degree because she said she'd go with me. I could have left two years ago if I knew she didn't mean it.

The bus stops in some anonymous town. I don't know if we're still in Oregon or maybe Idaho. Natalie doesn't wake up. I think, I could sneak off the bus. I could go back to Portland. They'd give me my job back at the restaurant, and I'd get that drummer back, and I could probably stay with him for a week or so until I found someplace to live.

But then I look at her. I remember when she drove in a thunderstorm to get me ibuprofen at four A.M. I remember how she looked sitting in front of a bonfire in our

old backyard, smiling at me with the flames behind her, the straps of her sundress falling down her shoulders, after the other guests had left. Beckoning me to join her on a blanket. Back when she liked me to look at her, to touch her. Before all the craziness. And I'm even willing to go back home if things can be that way again.

When things were good between us, she gave off a kind of glow that I could get inside of. If my skin were within an inch of hers, I felt waves of incredible well-being. I liked nothing better than to lie beside her, on the bed or the futon, and soak up that feeling. Now she gave off a vibe of being sick and broken.

I don't get off the bus to ditch her. I reach out and smooth her hair. But even in sleep, she flinches. My hand feels cold and falls away. These months of small rejections have taken on a life of injury. At first, I said to myself, she doesn't want to hold my hand right now. No big deal. She doesn't want me to touch her hair. So what? But day after day it added up and up. My touch became tentative, uncertain, and I tried to calculate the odds first. What is the likelihood that my hand on her knee will be brushed off like garbage? That she'll wipe off her mouth if I kiss her? That she'll move farther away, crossing her legs and arms, everything just for herself?

I consider sleep. On the one hand, I want to be awake every minute, to prolong this trip, not to be back in the place I hate. On the other hand, I'm so tired, so depressed. What good is being awake just to feel like this?

I long to put my arms around Natalie's thin shoulders and chest, to hold her against me as we sleep in our seats. But there's no way in hell I'm setting myself up for more rejection right now.

The bus isn't crowded. No one is sitting in the seats two rows up. I stand, trying to accidentally hit the fat lady across the aisle with my backpack, but I just hit the edge of her seat. I stumble up a few rows so I can stretch out a little. This is our first of three nights on the bus, and I know I'll only get more tired and more depressed.

I dream that we were living in a little house on a tree-lined street. I built a huge sculpture out of glass. The sculpture was so extraordinary that we gave away the dining room table and put it in there by itself. So I come home early one day from waiting tables, and I look in the dining room window and see Nat in there throwing canned peas and beans and corn at my sculpture, shattering it to pieces. I run inside, but she must have heard the door because she's hid all the cans and when I burst into the dining room she sits crying amidst the shards. "I was dusting," she says. "I lost my balance." Next thing I'm bandaging her cut arms, and I don't say a thing about what I saw through the window.

So I'm not one for subtle dreams that need experts to interpret them.

I wake up pissed.

Then I realize Natalie doesn't know I'm up here, and she is probably having a panic attack by now. The sky is light. I've been asleep a long time.

I spring up and turn to see Natalie talking to the horrid woman across the aisle. In Portland she'd developed an intense phobia of strangers. But now that melted away with the miles.



“Look, Randy,” she says when I reach our aisle. “This is Gina’s dog.” She holds a few snapshots out to me.

“Uh huh.” She’s stolen my seat so I climb over her and sit beside the window.

“Mugsy won a prize at the doggy parade,” Gina’s boy says.

“Now don’t go telling strangers all your business,” Gina scolds.

“That’s an unusual hat,” I say to Gina.

“You got something to say about my hat?”

“Never mind,” I mumble. I am secretly frightened of big, loud black women.

Gina looks like she might be forty and life hasn’t been easy. Her skin is dark and a gold canine tooth catches the light as she talks. “Lord, yes, I’m glad to be getting out of Portland. That weather! Them gray clouds hanging over the city every day! And the whole place stinking like that brewery downtown!”

“It was so cold and wet and . . . ghostly,” Natalie says. “I could only think of awful dank things the whole time we were there.”

She’d majored in English and read too many creepy Gothic books. “We were only there six weeks,” I say. “I’m sure it would have got warmer in summer.”

Immediately her eyes get that wet look. Jesus, she’s going to cry again. Everything I say she construes as blame. Which I guess it is. But it *is* her fault.

I can’t seem to get this one image of home out of my head. There’s this vintage guitar store where all the local rock kids hang out and talk about their bands that will never go anywhere. The place is crowded with musty old couches so it looks like a drop-in center for the homeless. There’s lots of cool guitars and parts of drum sets and tools and music magazines around. We all listlessly play the guitars and sit on the couches and complain about the lack of a scene and plan how one day we’ll get out of here and do something. It’s like a limbo for musicians. If you go there to buy strings, it will take two hours. Lots of the people have left Baton Rouge and come back. I always thought they were doubly losers. Once you finally get out, why the hell would you ever return?

The guitar store is owned by the king of local assholes. He made it out of Baton Rouge for a few years, during which time he played in some bands and had bit parts in some independent films. One day he came back—temporarily, he said—but then he got together with some cute girl ten years younger than him and next thing she’s pregnant, and so he stays and tells everyone his life is over. Twice we’ve been somewhere with a TV on, and he’s pointed to guys in rock videos and said he used to play in bands with them.

I don’t want to walk into that guitar store and announce my return.

“And is this your cat?” Natalie asks Gina’s son. Her eyes sparkle as she talks to the boy. I know she hopes to have a son and daughter of her own someday. Of our own. I think of that asshole who owns the music store and how his girlfriend got pregnant and his song writing went to hell, and I think, oh shit.

“Where are these animals?” I ask.

“They’re with a neighbor,” Gina says. “We’re gonna send for them once we get a place.”

I hear tension in her voice, a speck of strain, and I know she's lying. Who "sends for" their pets? How do you transport a pet across the country, anyway, unless you drive its mewling, crying ass yourself? If they had money to fly pets, they'd probably be on a plane themselves. One day the kid would look back and realize his mother had lied, that she had no intention of sending for the pets.

I told Natalie that I was going to sit by myself and try to sleep some more, and she just said OK. Like she's a totally normal person. Not like someone who stayed in a dark room for days, not talking to anyone but me.

I take my bag with me to the new seat because I don't intend to sleep at all. I get out my notebook to work on lyrics but everything I write sucks. I've lost something, maybe hope or inspiration. My words are too depressing for pop songs. It's like a fifteen year old goth writing in his notebook during a despised math class. Who wants to listen to that?

The day whizzes by, which I don't expect. Any bus ride should seem like forever. But maybe the bus drives twice as fast because it shuttles me toward what I don't want. I give up writing my lyrics. I stare out the window and see lots of trees and mountains and stuff people who care call beautiful. I see a deer at the side of the road, and I'm scared it will run in front of the bus just as I hope it does. It doesn't. Just stands there.

The driver announces a dinner stop at the Salt Lake City bus station, where our bus isn't scheduled to leave for three hours. There's snow on the ground, but the night sky is clear. I see stars as I get off the bus. Ten steps later I'm in the station. Greyhound, USA. Could be any city. Natalie is just behind me. "You hungry?" I ask, slipping my hand around hers, which remains cool and neutral, failing to wrap around mine. I let go.

"Not really hungry," she shrugs, back to her glassy-eyed Portland self.

"You need to eat, girl!" Gina says, clasping a hand on Natalie's shoulder from behind. Great move, I think, expecting my girlfriend to jump two feet at a stranger's touch. Instead, she lets her shoulder sink back into Gina's dark meaty hand.

"You think so?" she asks.

Then Gina guides her to a red plastic cafeteria table with four attached red plastic seats. Her garbage bags drag behind. "You wait here," she commands. "I'm gonna get you something to eat." Then she glares at me like I don't know how to take care of my woman, and she's off to the cafeteria line, her little boy dragging behind, attached by a hand. I sigh and shuffle around, feeling incompetent. "I thought you weren't hungry," I say, my voice coming out whiny and pitiful. She just shrugs and stares at the red table. "I'm starving," I mutter, wanting to get food but afraid to leave her alone. Jesus, she'd been a mess for a whole month, her eyes red and swollen, practically allergic to a light being turned on in our dark bedroom, totally unable to go out and look for a job or anything.

I perch on the edge of the table until Gina returns. I wonder what she'll bring Natalie. My girlfriend never eats at places like Greyhound cafeterias. She is very fussy and has paranoid attitudes toward food, especially grease and fat, which are probably staples of the Greyhound kitchen.

Gina brings back a heaping plastic tray, weighed down with all kinds of steaming shit. She unloads green beans, carrots, corn, and some grayish meat, maybe beef, in front of Natalie. I expect Nat's eyes to catch mine, pleading to help her escape this nauseating food. I won't bail her out of this one. I head for the cafeteria line, leaving her to deal with the mess in front of her.

Some weird kind of gnome woman—very short, with a hooked nose and excessively long fingernails inside plastic gloves—tends the hot food items. “What's it gonna be, fellow?” she asks, spatula poised over some grayish muck.

“Uh, nothing,” I answer, hurrying past. The little boxes of cereal look safer. I settle on a box of Fruit Loops, a stale bagel, and an apple. I wash the apple as best as I can in the drinking fountain, then polish it with a napkin. The station has a kind of diseased feeling, like when I went to Mexico once and even the water was toxic.

As I trudge back to the table, I can see Natalie eating her hot food, leaning in toward the loud woman with the stupid hat as if she had something fascinating to say. When I set my tray down they ignore me, except for the little boy. He has large luminous eyes in a big head. He gazes at me solemnly, his eyes looking even larger because his body is so skinny. When I realize Gina is talking on and on about her boy, I understood why he looks like he'd rather be just about anyplace else. Just like me.

“But why would someone put the evil eye on a child?” Natalie asks. She's eaten half her food and is still shoveling it into her mouth. I haven't seen her eat so much since we left Baton Rouge.

“Little Eden's father is a bad, bad man. A bad, powerful man. He's a hard to get to sort of man. So, I guess his enemies gone after my Little Eden instead. But they such fools! He just a weak little boy, not a big, strapping evil man like his father! They don't realize evil ain't always passed down. Look at my boy! Does he look evil?” Gina looks at me for the first time since I'd sat down, daring me to contradict her.

“Of course not,” I mutter, my mouth half full of bagel. “Bunch of superstitious crap.”

Gina gets red in the face and her hat's crown shakes on the string it hangs from. “Excuse me?” I shrug and keep eating. “Excuse me?” she repeats, louder.

“I don't believe in that stuff,” I say, avoiding her eyes, pretending something interesting is going on just past her.

Gina reaches across and suddenly her big hand is gently but firmly turning my chin to meet her gaze. “Look here, Mister I-don't-believe-in-superstitious-crap. What about this girl of yours, huh? Have you even noticed what's wrong with her? HMMMM?”

“She's been depressed,” I say through strained vocal cords, since she is still holding my chin, and through gritted teeth, since I am angry enough to stab her with my cream-cheese knife. “I think she has Seasonal Affective Disorder. From the lack of sunlight in Portland.”

“Wrong!” Gina snaps, releasing my neck with a little twist. She's probably killed a lot of chickens in her day, I think. My heart pounds. “Girl's got a haint on her.”

“What the hell?” I explode, but Gina turns her evil eye on me, and I shut up in a hurry. I have no doubt now that this big woman could break my neck if she wants to.

“A haint,” she repeats slowly. I glance at Nat, who’s stopped eating and sits staring at the traces of food left on her plate. “She got some kind of spirit on her. Someone set it on her, or maybe it just up and attached itself. Saw a weak girl, far from her family, all alone in a big city.”

“She wasn’t alone!” I cry.

“You ain’t strong,” Gina says in this powerful quiet voice.

“I. . .” but I break off under her gaze. Am I going to debate my personal strength with a stranger? Without thinking, I reach an arm around Natalie’s skinny shoulders, but she shrugs it off.

“See there?” Gina says. “Still trying to suck strength off that poor girl. She feeding you and a haint, and you both hungry.”

“This is crazy,” I say, unable to stop defending myself. I should make Natalie get up and walk away with me, maybe wait for the next bus to avoid this perverted woman putting sick ideas in my girlfriend’s head. But instead, I sink to engaging her. “I stayed with her day after day in the dark. Comforting her. I got her whatever she asked for.”

Gina shakes her head as I talk. “You kept this girl in the dark, waiting for her to tell you what she needed. The girl has a haint on her! How she supposed to tell you nothing! Time like this, you gotta be strong for her! You gotta tell *her* what she needs!”

“Hey, I respect Natalie and know she’ll tell me what she needs!”

“Girl got a haint on her, don’t know what she needs.”

“Look, you don’t know shit about me and my girlfriend.”

“You keep that little girl in the dark day after day. . .”

“She wanted it dark!” I interrupt. “She wouldn’t let me put the lights on!”

“You keep her in the dark, you rolling out the welcome mat for that haint. You saying ‘Come on in, Mister Haint! Make yo’self at home feeding on my girl!’ And what you mean, this girl won’t let you put the lights on? You saying this little thing stop a grown man like you from flipping on a switch?”

“You think I should boss her around? Tell her when to turn the lights on and off?”

“I think you should be a man when your girl needs a man. You ain’t very big,” she says, looking me rudely up and down, “but you still a man.”

“From now on, lady,” I say slowly, shaking with rage and gesticulating with a cream-cheese-covered knife, “from now on, you better mind your own business.”

Gina lets out a whoop of angry laughter. Her hand shoots out before I see it coming and pulls the knife from between my fingers. The laughter disappears fast as it came and her face looks serious as a thundercloud. “Ain’t nobody on God’s green earth gonna tell me what to mind.”

Natalie pushes back her chair, and Gina and I both flinch at the sound of metal

legs on Greyhound flooring. "I'm going to the bathroom," she mumbles, kind of staggering off.

Gina shoots me one last look, daring me to say a word. Then she turns to her boy. "Come on, Little Eden." She grabs his hand and follows my girlfriend toward the restroom. Leaving me alone with the remains of a cafeteria dinner, everyone's luggage, and a push-pull in my gut between rage and terror.

Look what I gave up for that girl! After I did everything I could for her in Portland, I gave up all I dreamed of to accompany her home, because home was what she said she wanted. How could I have done better for her than that?

We are in Salt Lake City, a place I've never seen. If I just pick up my own bag and ditch their luggage, I could creep into the snowy night, get my own motel room, have a look around. I could probably get someone to open the luggage compartment of the bus and give me my guitar. If Natalie prefers Gina to me, if she'd rather hole up in the bathroom with that voodoo bitch than be with me, what am I doing hanging around the Greyhound cafeteria watching their shit? Is it too much to think my girlfriend could have stuck up for me under Gina's tirade?

"Hey there," comes a voice from the next table. I turn to see our Greyhound driver, a middle-aged black man with a kind expression on his face. "I was just gonna get me some coffee. You like a cup?"

I miss a beat, wondering why the driver is so friendly. Then I realize he must have heard the whole exchange and feels sorry for me. "No thanks, man," I say. "I'm OK."

"You sure?"

I must look pretty much not OK. "Uh huh."

The driver keeps looking at me. "Don't let all that stuff get you down. Bunch of woman nonsense. I spent some time in Washington State, got a touch of Seasonal Affective Disorder myself."

"Thanks, man," I say, really meaning it despite my embarrassment.

The driver goes after his coffee, and I try to psych myself into a Salt Lake City vacation. What do I owe a girl who won't even defend me against a stranger? Just then, this image of Natalie at Mardi Gras pops into my head. It must have been two years ago. We were down in New Orleans and had spent a couple of drunken days and nights. Natalie really wanted to get up early on Mardi Gras day to see the Zulu parade, an all-black krewe that stuck to a jungle theme. I remember being hung over, hanging back against a tall, wrought-iron fence. But my girlfriend looked beautiful, despite the substances and sleeplessness. She'd made herself a skirt out of Mardi Gras beads. She jumped the police barricade to join the other people shouting and groveling beside the floats. I remember her skinny arms in the air, her dark hair hanging long down her back. A black man in black face reached down to her and handed her one of the coveted Zulu coconuts spray painted gold. She came right back to me, her eyes blazing, a huge smile on her face, and said, "Look, love. I've brought you a coconut." She hadn't even thought twice about it but brought her prize straight to me.

I can't take the cafeteria anymore, so I load myself down with my backpack, Nat's bag, and the two garbage sacks full of Gina and Little Eden's things. I manage to drag it all into the main part of the station. I head for the least congested row of chairs and plop down in a seat to wait. Gina's garbage bags repel me. I hate to even touch them. Yet I am dying to look inside.

They don't come out of that bathroom until our bus is announced. Gina bears down on me, grabbing her garbage bags from near my feet like I am trying to steal them.

"Denver-bound passengers to gate six," the voice on the loudspeaker repeats, then lists all the intermediate stops. Natalie doesn't want to meet my gaze.

"Natalie," I say in a low voice, wishing Gina would go far, far away. "Natalie. How you doing?" She shrugs, not looking at me.

My girlfriend sits with Gina on the bus, Little Eden across the aisle from them. I sit six rows up, stewing, unable to write even the lamest lyrics, wishing I knew how to fight for my girlfriend. I've always figured people want to be together or they don't. Maybe a girl would stop wanting me, and it would hurt like hell, but that was her right. But this is different. Something is wrong with her. She needs saving, and I fall short of the task. I feel a few tears but manage to fight them back. I can imagine how Gina would mock that proof of my impotence.

I fall asleep eventually. I wake dark and cramped at some ungodly hour of the night. The Greyhound is totally quiet except the sounds of the road and a few soft snores. I feel a living pressure beside me and almost scream before I realized those big eyes staring at me belong to Little Eden. I recoil from the spawn of Gina. "What are you doing here?" I whisper. He just stares. "What's the idea, waking me up?" No response, just those big eyes. "What do you want?" I ask, louder and angrier. The boy gives me the creeps.

"Mama says I have a haint on me, too. Like Natti."

I groan.

"Mama says the haint gonna keep me from growing into a man."

"There's nothing wrong with you. Your mama just likes to scare people." This kid would definitely be better off in a foster home. I have this vision of me and Natalie adopting him. Great, I think. Family of five: me, Nat, Little Eden, and their two haints.

"Mama says there's only one cure when a haint's on you."

"What's that?" I ask, not sure I want to know.

He shrugs. "Don't know." He curls up against the arm rest.

"You can't sleep here," I say. He ignores me. He doesn't take up much space. I start to move to carry him back to his seat, then realize I don't really want the creepy little kid to go away. I guess I must be pretty goddamned lonely. I fall asleep again listening to Little Eden's breathing. I dream I can see Natalie's haint, a gray cloud like thick smog hanging over her, with vague facial features. When I wake up, Little Eden is gone. I'm glad the sky is light. It helps me remember that I don't believe in all that supernatural bullshit.

I have to check on Nat. I stand reluctantly, my failure heavy upon me. I walk six rows back and find Natalie sprawled in two seats of her own, across the aisle from Gina and Little Eden. Gina's mouth hangs open as she sleeps. Little Eden meets my gaze, his eyes somber. I reach down and gently move Natalie's legs to make room for me. She wakes with a start, flashing a look of fear at me.

"Good morning, Nat," I whisper.

"I'm sleeping," she reproaches me. "Finally sleeping."

"Come on. You're moving up front with me."

"What? No, I'm right here." She struggles to look around me, and I know she seeks Gina.

"Natalie, tell me what's wrong. Why have you turned on me?"

"I haven't turned," she says, looking at the seat in front of her. "There's something wrong with me."

"Yes, we both know that. That's why I'm taking you home."

"It won't help," she whispers. Her dark hair hangs tangled before eyes shadowed by sleeplessness. "It won't cure me."

I sigh. "What will cure you?" I can't help sounding impatient. She shrugs. "Look, Nat, I want you to stop listening to that woman. I don't know why she gets her kicks out of scaring people weaker than she is. But you don't have to listen to her anymore. I'm taking you home to your family. Your mom will help you. And if you need more, we'll send you to a psychologist. Now just hold on. We'll be home in a day and a-half. Then you'll be better."

"Gina says there's only one cure when a haint's on you," she whispers.

"Goddamn! Did you listen to a word I just said? Now get your stuff together and move up to where I'm sitting. I don't want to hear another word about that bitch's voodoo bullshit!"

"Excuse me?" I hear from just behind. "Excuse me? Is the white boy yelling at his poor sick girl? What kind of man you ever gonna turn out to be?"

I take a deep breath. "Nat," I try again, my voice calmer. "Nat, we've had four great years together. Why are you turning your back on all that? You can pull through with this, with whatever's wrong with you. I want to help. I've been trying and trying to help you."

"Excuse me? Has the white boy lost his hearing?"

"Come on, Nat, move up to where I'm sitting."

"White boy not gonna answer me?"

I can't ignore the bitch any longer. I turn slowly and face Gina. The stupid hat is back on her head, crown balanced, for now, in its rightful place. "I'm trying to work things out with my girlfriend. From now on, please mind your own business and don't talk to us."

Her eyes narrow and intensify, and a chill seizes my neck. I can almost believe in the evil eye. "Boy, you don't know what you're talking about. That haint's gonna suck the life out of your girl, and you gonna be a murderer."

I look past Gina to the big bright eyes of Little Eden. He breaks my heart sitting

there next to a crazy mother who will turn him into a psychopath for sure.

“Nat,” I say. My voice has an ugly edge. “Come on, Nat.”

“Don’t talk to your girl like she a dog. She ain’t coming with you.”

“Good morning,” comes the driver’s bright voice over the intercom. “We are now approaching Denver. Denver Greyhound station. This bus terminates in Denver, so gather all your belongings.” He reads off a list of gates and further destinations. I hear “Dallas, gate four,” then stop listening.

The Denver station is almost a repeat of Salt Lake City. Natalie shrugs off any suggestions of breakfast, then lets Gina buy her eggs, bacon, and toast. But this time, I give up. When Natalie opens a pat of butter and spreads it on her toast, I pick up my backpack and walk out of the station. I have never seen that girl put butter on anything. She is totally under Gina’s spell, and I am starting to realize I cannot free her.

I have an hour to see Denver. I have to stick close to the station. I see a closed Chinese restaurant, a check-cashing place, an hourly motel called Blue Beard’s Bungalow, an hourly motel called the Mile High Club, several houses with slanted foundations and no-trespassing signs, and indications of my impending nervous breakdown or perhaps homicidal rampage.

Who am I kidding? I am definitely more suicidal than homicidal, and I hate myself for it.

When it is time to reboard, I pretend I’m traveling alone. I don’t even look for Nat. I take my backpack to my seat and sit down. It isn’t till three minutes before departure that I get frantic looking out the window to see if she is coming. When I see her approaching between Gina and Little Eden, anger replaces my panic. I pretend I am asleep, and don’t reopen my eyes until the bus starts moving.

I try to think of allies, other people who care whether me and Natalie stay together. My parents like her fine, but they are in Alexandria and we hardly ever see them. Her parents will stick by me. We’ve been together four years, and they’ve always taken us out to dinner every couple of months. I’ve cheerfully attended what seems like hundreds of cousins’ birthday parties and holiday dinners. But then doubts creep in. They hadn’t been happy when we announced our move to Portland. They hadn’t understood our urge—OK, my urge—to prove myself far away. And they don’t understand my music. They are the kind of people who always ask how well my CD is selling, not understanding that isn’t really the point. They don’t care if my songs are preserved, if I am able to grow in my song writing. They want all that conventional stuff for their daughter: marriage to a solid man who will support her financially and raise some grandchildren. This realization comes as kind of a shock to me because the motivations and desires of Nat’s parents have never been of real interest to me. And now I realize they might not be pushing for our reconciliation. When Natalie’s older sister married a radiologist in Minden, their parents could not have been happier.

There are my friends in Baton Rouge, guys I’ve been in bands with. But they only talk about girls in the crudest sense. None of them know Natalie that well.



She'd taken school pretty seriously and hadn't gone out to hear me play all that often, especially not after our first year together. Nat has some close girlfriends in Baton Rouge. They always talk up a storm, but I never paid much attention to them because mostly they seemed obsessed with the minutiae of their relationships. My presence seemed intrusive, their conversations too intimate for my ears. How do they feel about me? I suspect they are neutral, and if Nat seems happy they'd say keep him, unhappy, they'd say dump him. They probably wouldn't stop to take into account whether her unhappiness is my fault.

I feel my girlfriend slipping away with every mile, and not a damn thing I can do. How many times can a person beg and explain and implore his sick girlfriend while someone like Gina stands by insulting and humiliating him? There had been a part of me that didn't understand Nat ever since we arrived in Portland. That part was like a fungus on our relationship, growing in the damp of the Northwest. Now it is poison, and our lack of understanding is turning to dislike, and soon, probably, to hate. If only she wasn't sick! If she was plain evil, if I'd discovered that after four years she was simply bad, I could end the Greyhound ride. I could stop in Kansas City, get my guitar off the bus, and let her go. But how can I abandon Nat to Gina in her condition? I have a responsibility to get her home to her family.

My heart has grown a callous by Kansas City. I won't beg, I'll only look out for Natalie's physical well-being. This station has a Burger King, so I sit in the fast food booth with Natalie, Gina, and Little Eden, a view of dark and seedy downtown Kansas City outside the window.

"Who asked the white boy to join us?" Gina says, but she looks tired now and neither of us has much fight. Nat ignores me like I am just another person on the Greyhound.

Little Eden pushes his burger aside after a few feeble bites. "Does it hurt when they take the haint out?" he says in his whispering little voice.

"How should I know?" Gina asks. "I ain't never been unlucky enough to get a haint on me."

"So you're too good for haints?" I ask.

"Boy, I always been strong. It's the weak they go for. You better be careful, boy, 'cause I think a few be circling around you."

"No shit?" I ask sarcastically.

"Watch your mouth around my little boy!"

"OK," I say. "I give up. Tell me how you get rid of a haint."

"Ain't nothing I can do," she says, sticking three fries in her mouth, chasing it with chocolate milkshake. She is the only one really eating. "I ain't skilled in such matters. I only know where to go, get Little Eden some help."

"Where's that?"

"Lafayette. Why you think we riding this bus clear cross the country, white boy? For fun?"

"OK," I say. "OK. Let me get this straight. You're traveling all the way to Lafayette to get rid of Little Eden's haint."

“We tried people who said they could do it in Portland, but they weren’t no good.”

My head pounds. This lady is so crazy, so serious. “So what’s in Lafayette?”

Gina’s eyes narrow. “You just gonna mock me, white boy? You gonna listen to what I tell you, or you just gonna mock me?”

“I’m all ears.”

“A nun,” she says. “A nun is in Lafayette. We gonna see her.”

“A nun? Nuns are all over!”

“This one got special power. She black, but she just speak French. A *traiteur*, they call her. Means she treats people. She touch them, she pray, goodbye haint. Goodbye whatever—arthritis, sickness, whatever.”

“So you and Little Eden are riding all the way to Lafayette, then you’re going to find out where her convent is and just knock on the door and ask her to get rid of Little Eden’s haint?”

“She don’t live in no convent. She live in a trailer park.”

“Nuns don’t live in trailer parks!”

“This one does.”

I stare down into my fries, feeling terribly sad. What stupendous ignorance! The boy probably has a vitamin deficiency or something. All the money Gina spent on this bus trip, she could have taken the boy to a kick-ass doctor.

“I don’t want it to hurt,” Little Eden says. “I don’t want the haint to hurt me when it leaves my body.”

“Hurt you a lot more where it is,” Gina says.

“Nuns don’t hurt people,” I say firmly, catching Little Eden’s eye.

His brow unfurrows. “Nuns don’t hurt people,” he whispers to himself. “Nuns don’t hurt people.”

Natalie’s face looks even thinner than usual, with two charcoal half circles under her eyes and the cords in her neck sticking out. She rocks in the booth, just slightly. I hate to admit this, but my own girlfriend looks kind of creepy. If I believed in all that shit about haints, I might even think she has one.

Back on the bus, Natalie lets me sit by her, but she won’t talk. She doesn’t even talk to Gina across the aisle. Once during the night I take her hand. It lays cold and limp in mine, like a dead thing. It gives me a chill, and I drop her hand. Then I feel like a traitor. I wish we’d gotten married. If we were married, she couldn’t abandon me psychically and emotionally like this. And I couldn’t abandon her physically, which I realize I am maybe about to do. I give her ultimatums in my head. If you don’t get your ass into counseling as soon as we get back to Baton Rouge, if you don’t tell your Mama exactly what is up, if you won’t look me in the eye and say my name, I will have to leave. I don’t want to leave her. If we were married, all this would work out eventually. We’d be bound, till death do us part, and assuming we had normal life spans, that was a long time. Long enough to work anything out.

I sit in the dark by my spooky girlfriend and think of all the reasons I’d had for not getting married. What did we need a legal bond for when we knew we were

meant to be? Getting all our relatives together for a big event would be a giant hassle and a waste of money, but if we eloped, they'd be hurt. But most of all, marriage just sounded pretty uncool. Who wants to be called "husband"? It sounds so old and boring, almost as bad as "wife." And if I went touring with a band, did I want to tell the other guys I needed to find a pay phone to call my wife? I'd never cheat on Natalie—I couldn't live with myself—but if some hot girl on the road was coming on to me, I'd rather let her down with "I have a girlfriend" than "I'm married." Having a girlfriend, even if you intend to stay together forever, just doesn't sound as final. All those hot girls would come back to my shows every time I came through town thinking maybe I'd broken up with my girlfriend. It was all right to hope for that. But I wouldn't think so much of those girls if they were hoping for my divorce.

Nat had asked me once, when we were twenty-one, if we could get married. I'd put her off, saying let's wait till we're older. Maybe in a couple of years. Now here we are, a couple of years later, on a Greyhound bus, and I am about to lose her. She'd only asked to marry me once.

I don't know how long I'll wait in Baton Rouge once I get her home to her parents. Probably at least a month in order to see if she can be restored to her senses and if we can still love each other. What I will do in Baton Rouge for a month, fuck, that's like jumping back into a mountain of shit after spending twenty-three years climbing out! It isn't long enough to bother putting a band together. I could play solo acoustic shows at Chelsea's, M's, the Bayou, or the Spanish Moon, and if I'm lucky, get an opening slot at the Varsity. I know all the bar owners, all the booking agents. The thought of seeing all those people again, less than two months after leaving town, makes me want to kill myself. Seriously, give me a gun. When I played my farewell show two months ago at the Spanish Moon, I had this kind of elation thinking I will never walk into this building again. I will never stand on this stage. That elation was tinged with only the slightest bit of nostalgia. I was pumped up with anticipation of something new, something great. And I had almost got there.

Now, returning to Baton Rouge, broke in wallet and spirit, we face a world of grief. With Nat sick like this, she'll probably stay with her parents, and they probably won't greet me like a son-in-law. Despite living together for two and a-half years, I'll be on my own. I'll have to stay on friends' couches, unless I want to commit to getting an apartment of my own. The move to Portland had used up most of our cash, the bus ride back had exhausted the little remaining. Natalie's illness couldn't be less convenient.

We stop in a little town, maybe in Missouri. The driver doesn't announce it. Mostly, the bus sleeps. One alert person notices the stop and gets off to smoke. I see the driver call someone on a pay phone, and wonder about his three A.M. heartbreaks.

The town is very small, so small it doesn't even look seedy around the bus station. This could be our town! "Natalie," I whisper, gently shaking her shoulder.

“Nat, it’s our stop!”

“What?” she says, sounding normal, like she isn’t awake enough to remember her sickness. “Where are we?”

“I found us the perfect little town,” I whisper. “I know we’ll be happy here and things will be OK. I can just feel it. Please please please let’s just get off and live here.” I talk in this fast, urgent voice, desperate to get through to her.

She looks out the window, blinking. “What is this place?”

“Missouri, I think. Who cares? It will be perfect.”

“Where are you trying to make me live now?” she asks, her voice climbing with the question. “What are you trying to do to me?”

“Sssh,” I whisper. Passengers are waking up and turning around to look at us. “Natalie, I love you. I want to be with you forever. Take a chance with me. We got to solve this thing ourselves.”

“Take a chance,” she says bitterly. “Take a chance! I took a chance! Look where it got me! We’re in the middle of nowhere, and you want to live here?” Her voice is stronger than I’ve heard it in two months.

Across the aisle, Gina stirs. “You can’t shake off a haint, white boy,” she says, her voice gentle for once. “I done moved Little Eden three times. The haint ain’t never far behind.”

The driver is back on the bus. We are about to pull out of the station.

“Nat, Nat, please let’s get off here. Please.”

“Haven’t you been listening to me?” Her voice is piercing. “Don’t you listen to anything I say?”

The bus cranks up and we are on the road. I could picture me and Nat back in that town. If we’d gotten off, we’d be looking for a motel right now. We’d be walking toward a motel in the night. Soon we’d find a bed and we’d stretch our cramped legs and aching muscles. There’d be a bathtub full of hot water.

“You never ask what I want,” she says.

Now I am afraid to find out. “What do you want?”

“I want to be sitting in the Chimes with all my friends, ordering a drink.”

I’d expected something vicious aimed at me and got something plebeian. I didn’t know which was worse. “I want to be burning the Chimes down.” It just slipped out. I didn’t want to fight.

“You want to be unconventional. But there’s nothing behind it.”

“What do you mean!”

She sighs and ignores me. She rearranges the sweater she is using as a pillow. She balls it against the window, leans her head on it, and pretends to be instantly asleep.

I don’t want to let her get away with insulting me like that and then not explaining herself. Sick or not. But as I try to think what to say to her, Gina leans across the aisle. “Let it be,” she whispers.

I am so mad at Natalie that I want to find a seat of my own. But at the same time, I am acutely aware that our time together is limited. Soon we’ll split up, and I might

never see her again. This is unimaginable. Nat is the most familiar part of my life, the best thing that ever happened to me, my entire heart. I know every part of her body, and, until recently, I thought I knew her inside better than anybody. She is the one. So I stay where I am. I lean against her, put my arm around her and my head on her shoulder. When she tries to shake me off, I don't move. I am stronger than she is and determined to hold her. She gives up trying to free herself after a few minutes. Then her body shakes softly, and I know she is crying. We don't say a word. I fall asleep.

The bus drives into Texas the next day. The sun shines. Natalie and I have nothing to say to each other. Even Gina doesn't talk much. Little Eden asks Gina about his dog, whom he misses very much, and his cat, whom he misses less. She is short with him. We all look tired.

"I'm hungry," Little Eden moans as we pull into the Dallas station. We are all burnt out on Greyhound food. We buy Fritos and shortbread and hot cocoa from the vending machine and sit on the floor by our gate. The Dallas station is packed with people. We can't find two empty chairs together, let alone four. People sit in lines at every gate, afraid if they wander, they won't get a seat on the bus. There is a hostess at a little counter by the entrance door who gives out gate numbers to passengers. A hostess is an amenity I've never seen at Greyhound station. It was just like Dallas, posting a hostess. I'd played Dallas twice and the clubs were packed full of phonies.

"So you never wanted to leave Baton Rouge at all," I say to Natalie as we sit in line. "All that talk in college, and you just wanted to stay home?"

She shrugs. "You make it sound like I lied. I didn't know how it would be. Maybe if we'd just moved somewhere normal, like New Orleans."

"New Orleans is just down the road! It's hardly moving at all."

"OK. Maybe Atlanta." She doesn't look so much like she has a haint now. She looks like a grouchy girl who wants to get her way.

"Atlanta's not exactly the best town for my music."

"Your music," she kind of sneers. "I guess I'll be the one with a career if we want to live in more than one room and have some furniture."

I am stunned. She's always acted so supportive. And now this slap in the face! "You've always been OK with things," I say. "I thought you cared about music almost as much as me!" My voice trailed off. Of course she didn't care. She probably read one of those magazines that tell girls to learn about football to make their boyfriends love them. I don't care for sports. Why hadn't I realized?

"We're not in college anymore," she says. "I don't want to live like I am."

Pain in my gut. Now she wants all the stuff we'd rejected? What is she saying?

Gina coughs. "You all are tired," she says. "You all been on the bus too long for heavy-duty discussing."

"Yeah," I say softly. I have this floating, detached feeling. A person can count on nothing. On no one.

Natalie retracts into herself and looks miserable. Little Eden starts to cry.

“What is it?” Gina asks, a bit roughly. We all follow Little Eden’s eyes across the station, where two boys and a girl play in the drinking fountain, splashing each other and shrieking with laughter. They are probably all within a year or two of Little Eden’s age. Gina puts her arm around him. Her face looks sad and tired and old. “You gonna be all right. You gonna be just like anyone, only a little more special.”

We get back on the bus and the miles fly by. I don’t care anymore how long I ride the bus. It could circle the globe thirty times, and I wouldn’t say a word. I’d resign myself to it like some minor circle of Hell: Nat and I barely loving each other, Gina insulting me, Little Eden crying, our asses killing from sitting, stations full of dirty toilets, and nothing to eat but shortbread and overcooked corn.

Instead, the bus stops in Shreveport, and everyone gets off. It is three A.M. The driver announces two separate gates for Baton Rouge and Lafayette. Our party is splitting. Gina and Little Eden are due to leave at four, me and Nat at four-twenty. Gina gets some coffee out of the machine. Little Eden has fallen asleep on the bus, and Gina has carried him off, wrapped in a blanket, and laid him at our feet on the floor of the station. Me and Gina and Nat sit in a row. “Lord, this coffee is scalding!” Gina cries. Then we are silent for a long time.

Natalie seems completely introverted, like she doesn’t even know where she is. But eventually she says to Gina, “Tell me about the nun.”

“The nun,” Gina says, remembering. “The nun. She’s a *traiteur*. She treats people.”

“Yes, I know,” says Natalie. “But how?”

“She knows secret prayers. Not from being a nun. From her people. She learn from her grandfather, I hear. It get passed down, the gift. It go from male to female to male to female. Her grandfather got old, he pass on the gift. Gets tiring, treating people. That’s what they say. Takes a lot of energy out of a body.”

“So she just prays?” Natalie asks. “That’s it?”

“She pray, and sometime she touch you, and sometime she tie a string around a tree and when you grow taller than that place on the tree, you outgrow your ailment. That for a child.”

“Do you have an appointment to see her?”

“Uh uh. People just show up. First come, first serve. Like riding the bus.”

“You think she’s going to fix Little Eden?”

“Honey, I done tried everything else. I gotta believe in something or I might as well drop dead. This nun gonna cure my boy. Ain’t no other way.”

We are all real quiet for a couple of minutes. I think Nat has gone away again, wherever she retired into her head these last months. But then she says to Gina, not looking at me, “I want to go with you.”

“What?!” I explode.

“Please,” she says. “Take me with you.”

“What are you talking about!” I cry. “You’re going home to your family.”

“I mean it, Gina. Take me with you.”

I am trembling. I feel like I've swallowed my heart and it has gone down my windpipe.

"You go home to your family, honey," Gina says. "Let them see you still breathing. Then you come on over to Lafayette and see the nun. Maybe your Mama take you herself. That the best way."

"No!" Nat says. "I can't go home like this! They'll make me see a psychologist for a year! They won't understand. They won't!"

"Christ, Nat, it's my responsibility to bring you home. There's no way you can go see this crazy nun!"

"The nun ain't crazy," Gina says in her dangerous voice, but I stupidly ignore her.

"Nat, you need a psychologist. You don't need a bunch of mumbo-jumbo bullshit." Most of all, I don't need to explain to her family that she's run off to Lafayette with some black voodoo lady and her possessed son.

"Now wait a minute, white boy. I been real patient with you."

"Come on," I say. "You know that's not the sort of thing for Natalie."

"It's fine for me, hmmm, white boy? 'Cause I'm black?"

"I don't know," I say. I am exhausted! "It's more like some traditional belief or something. Part of the culture. But it makes no sense for Nat."

"A traditional belief," she repeats slowly. "Look here, white boy, the nun's gonna fix up my boy and that's no lie." Angry tears well up in Gina's eyes. Little Eden has awakened, and he quietly sobs where he lies. "That nun can help your girl, too."

"I thought you just said you don't want to take her."

Gina looks at my miserable girlfriend and sighs. She looks back at me, the anger draining from her face. "Your girl need help. She ain't gonna get it from you. She want to come with me, I'll take her."

"Thank you," Nat whispers. She looks weird, so sick and pale.

"Nat," I say. "You got to go home to your family. You absolutely have to."

She shakes her head. "I can't go home like this."

"But you just said last night all you want is to be at the Chimes with your friends!"

"After I'm better," she says. "After the haint's off me, then I'll go to the Chimes."

The driver calls the bus to Lafayette.

Natalie turns to Gina, her eyes wide. Little Eden turns over on the blanket, his face looking away from them. "I don't want it to hurt," he whispers.

"Well," Gina says. "Well."

We are all very quiet for thirty seconds. But when Gina stands, I seize Nat's wrist. "You have to go with me," I say, my voice desperate, my fingers clutching.

"You're hurting me." She tries to pull away.

Gina puts a hand on my shoulder. "Listen," she says. "Listen carefully. This should only take a couple days. You gotta let your girl do what she need to do. You go back to Baton Rouge, we be along in a couple days. I bring her back myself. You

just sit tight in Baton Rouge, we be there in no time. Now let go her arm, say a nice goodbye, we see you in a couple days.”

I can’t let go. Instead, my fingers hold tighter. “Ow,” Nat moans, twisting her wrist and making it worse. “Ow, Randy, stop!” She hasn’t said my name for so many days. She’s stopped remembering who I am, who we are.

“You let go of her.” Gina’s dangerous voice again. “You hurting her, white boy. This is not the time to make a scene.”

Gina starts pulling at me, and Natalie is twisting and tugging and crying out, and next thing I know I’m being torn from both of them by a big, black Greyhound driver.

“What’s going on here?” he demands. Now my wrists are held tightly behind my back.

“She’s got to come with me. I’m taking her home to her family. She’s sick.” I realize I am crying.

“This your wife?”

“My girlfriend.”

“You wanna go with him?” the driver asks Natalie. She shakes her head, not looking at me. “She don’t wanna go with you. You going to Lafayette, miss?” She nods. “You go get on that bus.” She stands there like she is trying to get the guts to look me in the eye. But fails. Gina shakes her head at me in disgust.

“White boy,” she says, “you gotta learn to be a man.”

They pick up their stuff and head for the bus. Only sleepy Little Eden turns back and waves.

The driver holds my arms until Nat has disappeared onto the bus. “You gonna behave yourself?” he asks. I nod, crying too hard to answer.

After their bus drives away, I get my guitar out of the Baton Rouge-bound Greyhound. I sit in the Shreveport station for a long time. The sun comes up. There is a pay phone ten feet away, and several times, I begin to search my pockets for change. I keep thinking of my responsibility, of calling her parents. But what could I tell them?

In the end, I don’t call at all.

I think of all those guys sitting in that vintage guitar store, guitars coming and going, years passing, and still sitting there, growing bitter with time.

I count my money. It doesn’t take long.

West. It seems like the only direction now. I want to sleep, but I want to leave Louisiana more.

I get directions to the interstate. I walk to the on ramp, backpack on my back, guitar in my hand. I stick out my thumb. I’ll be the first man I know to put this wreck behind me twice.



# Notes

1. The *Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly*, for example, has been publishing “creative” pieces for a number of years, and in anthropology this trend has led to such significant essays as Miles Richardson’s “Anthropologist—the Myth Teller,” *American Ethnologist* 2 (1975): 517–33 and to Richardson’s poetry and fine collection of fiction, *Cry Lonesome and Other Accounts of the Anthropologist’s Project* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). Of course Laura Bohannon had published her amusing “anthropological novel” *Return to Laughter* much earlier (New York: Harper, 1954; Bohannon published it as Elenor Smith Bowen).
2. Hurston’s celebrated novels certainly reflect her folkloric interests. In 1925, ballad collector Dorothy Scarborough anonymously published *her* novel, *The Wind* (New York and London: Harper), which became a movie starring Lillian Gish. Américo Paredes has been recognized as a great folklorist and as a pioneer Mexican American writer. On Hurston and Dobie, see Frank de Caro and Rosan Augusta Jordan, *Re-Situating Folklore: Folk Contexts and Twentieth-Century Literature and Art* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004), pp. 239–63. De Caro and Jordan also discuss, pp. 74ff, another book that attempted to provide a more holistic approach to folklore, the volume of Louisiana materials coming out of the Federal Writers’ Project, *Gumbo Ya-Ya* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1945); that attempt was a more journalistic one, however.
3. Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). The *Journal of American Folklore* noted its number 467 in volume 118.
4. Contributors’ comments in both the general and section introductions are drawn from personal communications with the editor.
5. Richard A. Reuss and Jens Lund, eds., *Roads into Folklore: Festschrift in Honor of Richard M. Dorson* (Bloomington: Folklore Forum, 1975).
6. Stephanie Rosenbloom, “Putting Your Best Cyberface Forward,” *New York Times*, January 3, 2008, p. E1.
7. William Wells Newell, *Games and Songs of American Children* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1883); Alice Berthe Gomme, *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, intro. Dorothy Howard, 2 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 1964; originally published in London, 1894–98, as part of the *Dictionary of British Folk-Lore*); Iona and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).

# Contributors

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**John Burrison** directs the folklore curriculum in the English Department at Georgia State University in Atlanta, where he is Regents Professor. Curator of numerous exhibitions, consultant to a variety of museums and organizations, he has been an advisor for film projects including the Academy Award-nominated 1989 film *Gullah Tales*. A noted expert on folk pottery, he is the author of *Brothers in Clay: The Story of Georgia Folk Pottery* (University of Georgia Press, 1983), which Claude Lévi-Strauss called “classic.” He published *Storytellers: Folktales and Legends from the South* with the University of Georgia Press in 1989 and has written many articles and essays. His most recent book is *Roots of a Region: Southern Folk Culture* (University Press of Mississippi, 2007). His *Kamp: A Memory Novel* is as yet unpublished.

Professor of English at the University of Texas at San Antonio, **Norma Cantú** received her PhD from the University of Nebraska and edits the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo: Borderlands Culture and Tradition book series for Texas A&M University Press. She is the co-editor of *Chicana Traditions: Continuity and Change* (University of Illinois Press, 2002). She is the author of the award-winning *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (University of New Mexico Press, 1995), part of a trilogy that also includes *Cabañuelas*.

**Matt Clark** (1966–1998) received his MFA from Louisiana State University, where he also studied folklore. He later joined the LSU faculty, was coordinator of the Graduate Program in Creative Writing there, and taught folklore courses as well. He was particularly interested in urban legends, which became a basis for his novel *Hook Man Speaks* (Berkley Books, 2001).

**Frank de Caro** is professor emeritus of English at Louisiana State University and lives in New Orleans. He received his MA from the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins and his PhD in folklore from Indiana University. His books include *Folklife in Louisiana Photography: Images of Tradition* (Louisiana State University Press, 1990), *The Folktale Cat* (August House, 1992), *Ballad Girls and Other Poems* (Garden District Press, 2005), *An Anthology of American Folktales and Legends* (M. E. Sharpe, 2008), and (with Rosan Augusta Jordan) *Re-Situating Folklore: Folk Contexts and Twentieth-Century Literature and Art* (University of Tennessee Press, 2004).

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**Danusha Goska** received her MA from UC Berkeley and her PhD from Indiana University. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Popular Culture*, *New York Folklore*, *Southern Folklore*, and *Polin*, and on Beliefnet, Comondreams and TheScreamOnline. She teaches in the English, Women's Studies, and Anthropology departments at William Paterson University in New Jersey. Her memoir *Love Me More* is available from Amazon.

With a PhD in folklore and folklife from the University of Pennsylvania, **Neil R. Grobman** taught English, writing and folklore at several universities, including the University of Kentucky and the University of Oregon. He is currently an editor for AstraZeneca Pharmaceuticals and lives in Delaware. His novel *Lost in Redskirt Forest*, was published by AuthorHouse in 2002.

**Carrie Hertz** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology at Indiana University and is editorial assistant for *Museum Anthropology* and *Museum Anthropology Review*. Her research focuses on museum and material culture studies with a special emphasis on clothing and self-adornment. Her dissertation will be an ethnographic examination of uniforms in the United States.

**Edward Hirsch** received his PhD in folklore from the University of Pennsylvania and taught at Wayne State University and the University of Houston. A recipient of Guggenheim and MacArthur fellowships as well as the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome, he is currently president of the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation in New York. His books of poetry include *Wild Gratitude* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), which received the National Book Critics Circle Award, and *Lay Back the Darkness* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2003). He is also author of such prose volumes as *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* (Harcourt, 1999). His most recent book of poems is *Special Orders* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2008).

**Laurel Horton**, with an MS in library science from the University of Kentucky and an MA in folklore from the University of North Carolina, is a folklorist and an internationally known quilt researcher. She wrote her thesis on quilt making in Rowan County, North Carolina, and is the author of *Mary Black's Family Quilts: Memory and Meaning in Everyday Life* (University of South Carolina Press, 2005).

**Rosan Augusta Jordan** received her PhD in folklore from Indiana University and had a long career teaching English and folklore at Louisiana State University. With Susan J. Kalčík she co-edited *Women's Folklore, Women's Culture* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), and she is also co-author (with Frank de Caro) of *Re-Situating Folklore: Folk Contexts and Twentieth-Century Literature and Art* (University of Tennessee Press, 2004). She lives in New Orleans.

After careers in antiquarian bookselling, academic editing and data processing, **Paul Jordan-Smith** received his PhD from the Folklore and Mythology Program at UCLA in 2005. His dissertation was on English country dance and he edited, with Laurel Horton, a special issue of *Western Folklore* on traditional music and dance communities. A grandson of folksong collector Ethel Park Richardson, he grew up hearing her songs and his father's folktales and eventually wound up retelling tales and legends in *Parabola Magazine*, which he helped found in the 1970s. He has contributed essays and articles to anthologies and folklore journals. Now retired, he teaches folk dance in Seattle and writes poetry, fiction, and nonfiction.

Curator's Distinguished Professor of English, Folklore, and Women's Studies at the University of Missouri, **Elaine J. Lawless** teaches courses across all three disciplines. She also holds appointments in anthropology and religious studies, directs the Folklore, Oral Tradition and Culture Studies Program, and is director of the Center for Arts and Humanities. Author of many scholarly articles, her books include *God's Peculiar People* (University Press of Kentucky, 1988); *Handmaidens of the Lord* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988); *Holy Women/Wholly Women* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992); *Women Preaching Re-Volution* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); *Women Escaping Violence* (University of Missouri Press, 2001), and *Troubling Violence: An Auto/Ethnographic Performance Project*, with M. Heather Carver (University Press of Mississippi, forthcoming 2008).

**Cynthia Levee** changed her name from Cynthia Levy "long before the season of Katrina . . . in honor of the embankments built to hold back the waters of the Mississippi and Lake Pontchartrain" from her native New Orleans. She received her MFA and PhD degrees from Louisiana State University, where she studied folklore, and teaches in the English Department at Southern University in Baton Rouge.

**Jens Lund** received his PhD in folklore and American studies from Indiana University. In addition to being adjunct faculty at the University of Washington, he has, since 1975, been involved in a variety of public-sector folklore projects for the Smithsonian, the Library of Congress, and arts agencies and museums in twenty-three states. He developed, researched, and edited Washington's Northwest Heritage Tours highway audio tours and has, since 2004, been program manager of the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission's Folk and Traditional Arts in the Parks Program. He was awarded the 2004 Benjamin A. Botkin Prize by the American Folklore Society. He is the author of *Flatheads and Spooneys: Fishing for a Living in the Ohio River Valley* (University Press of Kentucky, 1995).

Associate Professor of English and Interdisciplinary Studies at Georgia College and State University, **Mary Magoulick** is a former Peace Corps volunteer who received her PhD in folklore from Indiana University. Her dissertation was based on two years of fieldwork with Native American communities in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, and her publication and teaching interests focus on verbal art (especially Native American), folklore and literature, popular culture, women's studies, nature, and travel.

**William Bernard McCarthy**, who died in 2008 while this book was in press, grew up in East Tennessee and spent a number of years in Louisiana before studying for his doctorate in folklore at Indiana University. An emeritus professor at Penn State, he has also taught at three small Southern mountain colleges. His books include *The Ballad Matrix* (Indiana University Press, 1990), *Jack in Two Worlds* (University of North Carolina Press, 1994), and *Cinderella in America* (University Press of Mississippi, 2007). He married with three children and lived in Kittery, Maine.

**Joanne B. Mulcahy** directs the Writing Culture Summer Institute and teaches at The Northwest Writing Institute at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon. Her awards include fellowships from the Oregon Institute of Literary Arts, the British Council, and the Alaska Humanities Forum. She received the New Letters nonfiction award and has held writing residencies at Hedgebrook, UCross, the Mesa Refuge, and other centers. Her essays have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, including *The Stories That Shape Us: Contemporary Women Write about the West* (W.W. Norton, 1996), and *These United*

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Fiction writer as well as anthropologist, **Kirin Narayan** is professor of anthropology at the University of Wisconsin and author of the novel *Love Stars and All That* (Pocket Books, 1994). She wrote *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon: Himalayan Foothill Folktales* (Oxford University Press, 1997) in collaboration with Urmila Devi Sood, a Kangra storyteller, and is also author of *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels: Folk Narrative in Hindu Religious Teaching* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), which received both the Victor Turner Prize for Ethnographic Writing and the Elsie Clews Parsons Prize. She is co-editor of *Creativity/Anthropology* (Cornell University Press, 1993) and edited an edition of Mary Frere's classic folktale collection, *Old Deccan Days* (ABC-Clio, 2002). Her memoir *My Family and Other Saints* was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2007.

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A former president of the American Folklore Society, **Jo Radner** lives in the western Maine woods, "neighbor to weasels, bear, moose, and the ghosts of strong-willed ancestors." A storyteller as well as folklorist and oral historian, she creates personal tales and stories—and, occasionally, poems—about the people and history of northern New England. Professor emerita at American University in Washington, DC, she serves on the board of directors of the National Storytelling Network and was president of the Washington Storytellers Theatre. She conducts oral history classes in New England and occasionally teaches storytelling to teachers in the Lesley University Creative Arts in Learning Program.

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**Jeff Todd Titon** grew up in New York and Atlanta. After college at Amherst and doctoral work at the University of Minnesota, he taught folklore and ethnomusicology at Tufts. Since 1986 he has been a professor at Brown, where he directs the PhD program in ethnomusicology. His folklore-related fiction, "Letter from Ole Bull to Sara Thorp," was published in the Summer 2004 issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*.

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**Steve Zeitlin**, who received his PhD in folklore from the University of Pennsylvania, is co-founder and director of City Lore in New York, an organization that works for cultural preservation. Formerly a folklorist at the Smithsonian Institution, he has produced and developed programming for public radio and his commentary has appeared in *The New York Times* and *Newsday*. His numerous books include *A Celebration of American Family Folklore* (Pantheon, 1982) and *Because God Loves Stories: An Anthology of Jewish Storytelling* (Simon and Schuster, 1997). Zeitlin also directs the People's Poetry Gathering, a national poetry festival in New York City.