
Charles A. Peek

Reapers

The group is now
studying closely
the map of Nebraska

(for the 31 teachers of the Plains Literature
Institute, 1993)

Nebraska lies flat,
a squat band
more or less a mile either side
of I-80.

Accelerating its length,
one sights here and there and mostly to the south
the thin blue line of the still flatter river
whose meandering shallows end up the only geography
of what is not enough to even be
space.

Just above and below these limits
on peripheral vision in motion
place begins.

There and far beyond, nothing travels
through the state of mind
of billowing dust
slowly settling
on tall grass,
on mother's coffee table again so soon,
on old headstones
guarding gravely the infrequent trees
of shade.

Near Hyannis,
a blue heron fishes in the cattails
and hay lives stiffly out its golden aspiration
to cud,
disturbed from time to time by the stars,
paper thin on flat maps.

NEBRASKA TERRITORY WINTER 1994

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William Kloefkorn

SOUND

Down the street a block or so,
or maybe somewhere in another

country (on such a cool windless
evening sound carries as if both

gravity and drag were fiction),
someone is nailing down something--

a new roof, probably--and perhaps
because it is Sunday, a time

for both code and de-coding, or
maybe because the last of the large

yellow marigolds has laid its bloom
at my feet, I want to rise and

make myself useful, I want to join
two apparently disparate woods, I

want to be the means whereby the pieces
become the whole, I want to conceive

sound as if the portent of something
living, I want to deliver it then

curtly and smartly into a world where
I want to believe someone else sits

as I sit,
ready and waiting.

YOU HEAR ME?

When old Mrs. Shoemaker calls me brat and thief
I throw what is left of the stolen apple
in the general direction

of her white Persian,
then hightail it home to listen to the Dodgers
lose another World Series

to the Yankees. The apple wasn't very good,
anyway, too green,
probably would have given me a bellyache,

and because its core was solid
I should have taken a more deliberate aim,
should have reared back and fired a fastball

smack into the heart of old Mrs. Shoemaker's
precious feline. My friend Carlos says,
When you hate something enough

it's best to hurt whatever it's
closest to. Night believe it or not
occurs,

and in sleep I do the dream of the warped
historian: I guide the apple
into the bull's-eye

of its target--but I feel no better than
I did before, old Mrs. Shoemaker
holding the cat in her arms

like a soft sack of pelt, her eyes saying
brat, saying thief, saying
murderer. The next day

I apologize--not to her face, of course,
but to that sorry excuse for an image
I see in the mirror. The trouble

is this: it is early fall, and I have nothing
to do. Johnny Mize, that traitor
who should have stayed in the National League,

won the Series for the Yankees. Again the day
is supposed to be sultry and
windless. Mother is a 78-RPM

stuck in my ear: You hear me? You hear me?
If I sneak away
to do some fishing in the sandpit

I'll have to dig for crawlers all the way
to China. Carlos has the mumps.
Tonight,

should I windowpeek on my older sister? ah,
sin is whatever the body has to do
to keep it sufficiently

aroused. I tell you, the hours are long,
long, long, and the days never
end. You hear me?

The days never end.

UPON LEARNING OF THE DEATH
OF MY HAIRDRESSER'S BABY

--for Carmen

First I remember
how with her delicate hands
she waved me into the chair,
how as she snipped and trimmed and talked
she couldn't stop smiling.
She had lowered me
for the soap and the rinse,
and with my eyes closed
I had felt against my thigh
the heave and the swell of the child.
Rising, I spoke to her then in the mirror,
her young face roseate,
her dark eyes
quick like the fish we sprinkle food to
in a bowl of purest water.

And I remember next
how in the mirror
she paused from time to time
to press her hands against the weight inside her,
following with a comb the movement,
how she watched herself in the mirror, too,
how her dark eyes
flashed to see mine in the mirror watching her,
how the small bright aromatic room
enclosed us, each heartbeat
saying whatever it is the heart responds to.

And what I cannot remember I imagine,
the child imbalanced
fisting its disadvantage
onto the face of something huge and faceless,
sucking air that finally
was not there.

Now my own house lies cool
in the aftermath of an early-morning rain.
In the mirror I am readying myself
for another day. Already April. Already
this sad white hair in need of another trim.

Yet how can I possibly take myself
to where she stands
to face her? Beyond the glass
I see my grandchildren
rising to romp their fortunate parts
into the beckoning teeth
of another morning. Excuse
not only me, I'll want to say, but
all of us (her delicate hands
waving me into the chair) for living.

PATIENCE

I don't like patience.

It takes too long.--Nate Longoria, 4

It's what Aunt Mildred's older sister
all her life had plenty of,
in her casket then
her form serene,

as if the man she so patiently never had
at any moment might somehow yet appear,
children she so patiently never had
in hand beside him,

and they would stand together
at the grave and weep,
and each child having dropped a clod
onto the coffin's lid

would goad its father
with the oldest question: When
will we get there? And the oldest
answer: Soon enough. Be patient.

To the hum of tires
they would sing and sing:
The ants go marching two by two,
the little one stops to tie his shoe,

until they'd see the deermeat and its blood
so lavish upon the blacktop, and
in an instant then would trade
one passion for another,

oblivious to the point of jubilation
counting
as long as the fingers last
the roadkill.

FAMILY REUNION

Before eating we bow our heads, some of us,
and during grace Aunt Mabel, one
hundred last October,
continues the dialogue she carries on
almost constantly with someone not
visible to the naked eye.

I watch as well as listen--her eyes bright,
her hands drawing swift conclusions
in the stale Sunday air--while the children
stand motionless in clusters,
mouths dropped open as if a unified attempt
to ensure some distant understanding.

Is this what prayer is? Bless this food,
a thin old woman talking mumbo-jumbo?

Where we are, the American Legion,
is a crypt of cinder block and echo,
reverberations of our small-town
wartime dead. Glory and God
and human sacrifice. Bless this food,
a thin old woman talking mumbo-jumbo.

During the meal, Aunt Mabel goes silent.
In ten months
she will die passively in her sleep,
and at her funeral nothing the pulpit says
will hush those abrupt and disturbing
sounds put forth by children.

Leo Dangel was selected as the 1993 Nebraska Territory Elkhorn Prize Winner. The prize is a Crumline trophy buckle.

Congratulations!

AFTER WATCHING A TV WILDLIFE SPECIAL,
OLD MAN BRUNNER DREAMS HE'S A PENGUIN

He's driving his battered Chevy Pickup
across a white plain, thinking he's lost
in a Dakota blizzard, when
he sees penguins walking up ahead.
The pickup stalls, he steps out,
and follows them over the snow.
The sleeves of his chore coat
turn into black flippers, and white feathers
sprout from his chest--he's one of them,
an emperor penguin in the Antarctic,
headed for Cape Crozier, sixty miles away.

Old Man Brunner has no idea how
he will choose a mate--the female penguins
all look about the same.
Then he sees one, perched high on a rock,
who reminds him of Mae West,
his favorite movie star, the full,
soft body (he has had enough leanness
in farming the dusty prairie), the way
she cocks her head, flirting so openly.
Her fluttering penguin eyelashes say,
"Come up and see me."
He puts his right flipper around her waist,
holds her close, her warm breast ballooning
against his, and they waltz across the ice
and lie down under a warm snow blanket.

Afterwards, Old Man Brunner feels young again.
The swaggering penguin walk
is natural to him, as he leaves to feed
with the males, who playfully
bump shoulders with one another
and congratulate him: "Still can get
the engine cranked up, you old son-of-gun."

But on the journey back, he aches with fear.
The males will take over incubating
the eggs while the females go and eat.
Old Man Brunner has always thought
birds stupid, but at least with pheasants,
or even chickens, the roosters
have sense enough to leave hatching
and caring for the young to the womenfolk.

Old Man Brunner doesn't want the egg.
But an old force, like obsolete,
rusty farm machinery moving inside him,
makes his head bob, signaling
Mae West he's ready to accept.

He stares down in disbelief at the egg
balanced on his feet, which still
look like his cracked work shoes.
He sighs and squats. Huddled among the males
at the end of the earth, in howling gales
and darkness, Old Man Brunner
feels as though the egg is the world
cracking under him.

Hungry, faint, the warmth flowing down
from his body, he sees her on the horizon
in the winter dawn stillness,
Mae West coming home, and he has,
right here on top of his feet,
this new life she hasn't yet seen.

Already in the world between
sleep and waking, Old Man Brunner realized
this dream is the best story he knows,
but it's one he won't be telling
to the boys at Elmer's Bar.

Jack Ridl

EX-CHEERLEADER

Pulling the iron across
the sleeve of her blouse,
she laughs, remembering

when days were filled
with fears
of splitting her tights

as she leaped
in front of the fans,
leading them on.

She can feel
an arm around her waist,
the smell of young sweat,

can see her locker door
open, the sound of
"See ya at the game"

resounding down the hall.
How she loved
to pull on her sweater,

turn a look
over her shoulder
at her own body

firm in the mirror.
She would spin,
her skirt flouncing,

her head back, her
hair dangling. Then
she'd laugh long,

loud, shake her shoulders,
lean down, her hair falling
over her face.

NEXT TO LAST GAME

Heading to Sayersville, to scout the Panthers, Assistant driving, Coach, looking out the window at the mud of early March says, "I think I wanna be cremated." "Yeah?" "Uh huh. Look at all that land." "Lots of land there. I've thought maybe when I get a head coach's job, I'd buy some." "Have a garden," Coach says. "Cremated, huh?" "Yeah, I don't wanna take up space. Cemeteries are a bad idea." "Think we can beat these guys?" "Nope." "Think they'll beat us bad again?" Coach nods. "Where you want your ashes, Coach? You want 'em scattered?" "I think so, yeah, unless Claire's around and wants to keep them in an urn or something." "You want me to keep a shot chart?" "Yeah, just that. Scattered, yeah, all over town."

THE LOVERS

In the top row of the bleachers,
in the corner, with plenty
of space between them and
the fans, the lovers
stare into each other,
let their arms
hang over one another's
shoulders, his right hand
close to her breast,
hers lacing his left,
their knees touching, while
below, the ball gets
tossed, shot, rebounded,
stolen, dribbled, slammed
to the floor or through
the hoop, and the crowd
moans, cheers, rises or falls with each
move up
and down the court until
the clock overhead
shows not enough time
and the home fans' hopes
start to drift from brain
to belly to nowhere.

HEAD CHEERLEADER

At halftime, she
finds an open mirror, checks
her make-up, sweat
glistening on her forehead,
clinging to her upper lip.
She runs her tongue along it,
pulls a comb through
her long brown hair,
pushes it up on the sides,
adds a new line of lipstick,
pulls at her skirt, turns,
looks over her shoulder.

Barbara Crooker

25TH REUNION

A quarter of a century
since we left high school,
and we've gathered at a posh restaurant.

A little heavier, a little greyer,
we look for the yearbook pictures
caught inside these bodies of strangers.

Some of our faces are etched with lines,
the faint tracing of a lover's touch,
and some of our hair is silver-white,
a breath of frost. And some of us are gone.

But he's here, the dark angel,
everyone's last lover, up at the microphone
singing "Save the last dance for me;"
he's singing a capella, the notes rising
sweetly, yearningly toward the ceiling,
which is now festooned with tissue flowers,
paper streamers, balloons.

And we're all eighteen again,
lines and wrinkles erased, grey hairs gone,
our slim bodies back, the perfect editing.

A saxophone keens its reedy insistence;
scents of gardenias & tea roses float in the air
from our wrist corsages and boutonnieres.

No children or lovers have broken our hearts,
it's just all of us, together,
in our fresh young skin,
ready to do it all over again.

BARBI AND KEN MAXIMIZE THEIR OPTIONS

have a jacuzzi and a jenn-aire in their condo,
time-share their vacations, drive a porsche
and a jeep. Buy extra-virgin olive oil,
wear natural fibers, faux furs.

Only eat organically grown fruit,
free-ranging chickens, oat bran pizza,
drink dry beer. Barbi works in an industrial
park; Ken's in military intelligence.

When wintering in tropical
paradise, they use sunscreens with SPF's of 30+.

Don't use aerosol sprays. Floss religiously.

Barbi and Ken eat chilled steamed jumbo shrimp
on their air-conditioned patio. See Barbi at the pool,
stretching out her long, long legs, her ever-pointed
toes. See Ken smile his blinding white smile. Look
at his hair: it never needs mousse or gel or
conditioning creme. Why, they are perfect, forever
young, no laugh lines, crow's feet, fallen arches;
eternally non-biodegradable.

Rod Ready

COWBOYS DREAM IN TECHNICOLOR

On prairie nights dreams are severe:

Standing in the center of a blowout
Skeletons whisper from all directions
Streaked in crazed royals and indigos
I steady the horned skull of it up to my
Ear to hear what wisdom it has to teach
As it dangles hawk feathers from one horn-

The wind rides out waving and
Whistling and driving and punching

Our nonpareil blues fade to
Midnight hues when riders
Lay peacefully called to sweet
Serenade by the sharptongued wit
Of a poet speaking as a coyote through
The windows and doors and all the
Little cracks deep in the consciousness
Of cowboys and normal people

Our songs and stories like bones buried
In silt that unearth only at night
We gleam in the color of moonlight
Our pelvis is crisscrossed by thin cracks
Our most hued skull is streaked and hung
On the highest lamp post smiling
Like a clown at the layers of hills

Know that you too will ultimately drift
Or be spooked or punched or driven away
By wind riders and evaporate like fog
That sweeps the slow ripple of your
Rivers and your waves of deep blue
Consciousness...

It seems to keep repeating that over
And over so I drop the skull from my
Ear and it shatters like a sea shell
I should have thought to bring it back
As a keepsake when I fled my sleep

THE WIDOW'S QUILT

She can recount their honeymoon
like it happened last night,
because she rehearses it nightly.
Loneliness is sewn by hand.

They come like arthritic seams,
memories that itch like bites,
stitches that bound like black spiders
from the barn to the house,

paths now overgrown with sage.
Tumbleweeds scratch on the
screendoor in the cold stiff
space of a kingsize brass bed.

From heaven, the Platte Valley
farm is only half a hemmed patch.
She can't get out from underneath.
It smothers her in her sleep.

TOUR OF THE WEST

Wires bring you the news: a dying in the West
And night hiways make love to the
Tired rush of wind and wheels

Smiling steel wires recline on an
endless row of crosses stained by weather
In boredom you can try to start
Counting them as they pass you by
In boredom you'll lose count and stop trying
Like naked people flapping their arms
Inmates starved into skeletons
They've grown used to the chatter of
The birds perched on their heads.

Stop! Don't come any further!
This road leads to nowhere!

But you just look at them and continue on
Pressing the wright of sleep and
Hellbent against all their warnings
Cutting smooth black lines in her skin
Because night in the West is a woman
Her many eyes wink down and
Flirt you into submission

You can touch me she says
But she is so very distant
You can speed up tearing easily through
The blackness like lightning that
Rips through her dark sky
And you'll never get close to her

I want you to have me she says
But her heart is too big
You get lost inside

So the rows of wires and lunatics shout:
Turn back East while you still can!
But their bodies form an arrow in the distance
Whizzing across the night aimed square
At the deep center of the West

And you'll continue further on
Waving at travelers who have turned back
Another glowing exit passes you by
The last place to turn around

LONGHORN BAR AND GRILL

Bulls - 97, Trailblazers - 88. They show it on the screen propped up in the corner. It's right under where the rustic paneled walls meet a flat tiled ceiling stained tan by water leaks and cigarette smoke. You can't really see the stains at night since the barroom is dim, as dives always are, because the people in here are all fugitives from their outside lives. The darkness and drink offer them a few hours of sublime oblivion; they accept it gratefully. I guess some people could use a few hours of that, but I'm here to watch the game and observe the wildlife. The Longhorn is the closest thing I have to a regular hangout. I can't hear the game because of the flat murmur and clinking glass, but that's all right. I keep my eyes on the game and my ears on Den Willisent's custody battle:

"I told her I didn't want it like this," he says between gulps of Old Mil, "I told her she could see the kids anytime she wanted if they could live with me. I said I didn't even want the courts and lawyers in on it. The kids said they wanted to stay here with me-at least that's what Sue and Rowdy said. Tug and Justy are a little young to decide yet."

I nod my head intermittently and shoot him a quick glance whenever he says you.

"Hell you know damn well someone else is stirrin this up. Cuz I talked to her a few weeks ago and she seemed like she was wantin to work things out. Then I come back from this bull sale up in Torrington and she and the kids are gone," he says bull like cowboys do, by sucking in their lips on the buh and pronouncing the ull like ool. Mbool.

"En I git this notice from her lawyer an' all this. Then they slap that restraining order on me an now I can't even talk to her. Then you know somethin's up." He lifts his cowboy hat and runs his fingers through his greased hair. Then he puts it on again and tilts it back.

"Sounds like a dirty deal," I say, and look up to see what the score is, hoping to get a break in the story, but I don't. He goes on:

"I just told her we ought to be able to work out our problems without messin up the kids. I just wanta do what makes them happy, you know? She seemed to agree, then while I's gone they git that judge to award her temporary custody. They're tellin him I'm drunk all the time and all this cockandbullshit."

He tilts the can up to get the last drip then orders a Jack and Coke. While Doug mixes his drink, he slides off the stool and staggers back toward the restroom. He's got 'Den' in bold leather letters on the back of his belt.

I ask Doug what the score is and he says its something like 110-104, Bulls. Doug's not a cowboy. He says bull like normal people. When Den makes his way back, people wait until he passes, then look at him from behind, noticing how wobbly his skinny birdlegs are in those tight Wranglers.

He sits there for a while drinking and not saying anything, then he starts in again:

"Yeah the whole deal's gotten pretty nasty. Rowdy called me up cryin Thursday night. I just don't know what the hell she's tellin em...I just don't know, you know?"

He shakes his head, staring down at the little square 'Longhorn' napkin, and rubs it slowly over a few droplets of water on the counter. He talks slowly and deliberately, but I can't tell if that's because of the alcohol or if he just talks that way. I don't know him that well.

"What judge is this?" I ask, then kick myself for egging him on.

"That idiot Werbek up there in Ainsworth." He pauses to sip. "His brother's that sonofabitch that sold my dad all that bad hay three years ago. D'you hear about that?"

"Yeah." I hadn't, but I didn't want him to tell me about it. There was a minute forty left in the game and I had my money on the Blazers.

"Makes a man wonder..."

He keeps on talking, and a disturbance back by the pool table doesn't even phase him. Some guys from the road crew are standing each other off over a pool game while their buddies try to soothe them by buying them drinks. They finally convince the one guy to leave, and he snatches his red bandanna hanging on one of the antlers of the stuffed elkhead. He walks out past us, still staring a challenge at his adversary.

"...that's just how I get sometimes," Den finishes, but I don't know how he gets because he'd lost me. I'm not about to ask him to repeat himself.

The game ends with the Bulls on top, and I get ready to leave. I know I'll be back in tomorrow to watch the final game. I head down to the cash register to pay my tab. Doug sees me and follows me down from behind the bar.

"Colloquial little bastard, ain't he? Your ears still attached?" Doug likes to use those 50 cent words sometimes. I assume this one means 'talkative' or something like that.

"Yeah." I nod and give him my money.

I pass Den on my way out. I tell him to take it easy. He's in the middle of a drink, but he raises his index finger in acknowledgement. I step outside and let the bugs and the heat slap me in the face. I notice the smoky-frenchfry odor of my shirt collar, and I'm hoping the place isn't as busy tomorrow when I come in.

The next day I come in and park myself at the corner stool right under the TV and away from anyone else.

"Coke Todd?" Doug asks.

"Yeah. The game started yet?"

"Just did." He sets the sweating can and a glass of chopped ice in front of me.

We watch the game for awhile in silence. We are the only people in the front end of the bar. The Blazers are down by five, and at the first commercial break, he walks over with a flyswatter to splay a fly sitting on the 'Smoking Permitted In This Entire Establishment' sign.

"Got em," he says.

"Say," He says, as if it almost slipped his mind, "did you hear the big news about Den Willisent?"

"What...about him and his wife?"

"No. I guess last night he rolled his pickup off a bridge up at Goose Crick."

"Really?" I never know what to say to news like that.

"Yeah, they said you could see right where he went off that third bridge just past McQuinn's place. Jesus...must've been so drunk he didn't know what hit him. Kind of serendipitous he didn't have one of them kids in with him. They were saying the tracks didn't even look like he tried to hit the brakes. I guess they found him 50 feet from his truck."

I look at him while he wipes out shot glasses and sets them upsidedown on the counter. I don't know how to react, but I just know that idiot's going to stand there and give me every gory detail and then not tell me if he lived. But he doesn't.

"I guess the funeral's supposed to be Monday."

I keep the composed tone in my voice and manage to get out:

"Too bad...poor guy."

"Yeah." He says, and messes with the remote trying to turn up the sound. I stay as long as the end of the first quarter and then take off. Somehow the game doesn't seem all that important anymore.

Marjorie Saiser

RETURNING

a flock of cattails molting
in the long grass of the roadside

a farmer with his cap on backwards
waiting at the intersection
on his Minneapolis Moline

a long dirty train in the sun outside Valparaiso

the sides and rumps of two horses
shining dark in a dark barn;
a Holstein lurching up the
bank of North Oak Creek

Why will these make you happy?

This late spring
late morning
rising inside you
outside you

a stand of old cottonwoods
catching the light

STAND TONIGHT IN A BLIND

Stand tonight in a blind
facing the river, watching.
The cranes will come
at sundown from the fields,
will drop in a noise
to the river,
dark silhouettes hanging, tilting.
They will land on the sandbars.

You will be quiet
in the night air,
the sound of cranes
speaking to someone in you.

Only the sound of the cranes
and the rasping of your sleeves
against the body of your coat,
the sound of your boot
as you lift it, put it down.
On the river the cranes do not rest,
gray moving against black.

Stand for hours, stiff in your coat.
Imagine grains of sand
moving under the toes of cranes,
the Platte flowing fast
over their feet
while the small cold moon rises.

When you are in your bed,
the sound of cranes will come
into the air of the room.
The language of cranes
surfacing in your ears.

CENTRAL STANDARD TIME
IN THE SANDHILLS

Morning after morning,
spring after spring
a geography of swells.
Wind washes
through your hair.
The tips of the yucca
tremble. Bluegreen
stems of grasses moving
delicate as earrings.
A hawk, circling.
The sky like a clear lake.
In the west, blue banks of clouds.
White anvils,
thunderheads pushing up.
Wind bringing a smell
of dust and rain to your face.
Lightning uncontained in lines,
sheets of rain in a stubborn direction.
The angus in the open
turning her tail to it,
waiting it out.

THE MOON LAST NIGHT

Think of the moon last night,
wrapped as she was
in her filmy shawl.

I love the way she made you
make me lay down my paper
and take your hand,
made me follow you,
your boots long
steps to my bare feet
on the tiles,

to the yard,
and she made us step back
so she would be uncrowded
by the black lines of the
roof and the cupola,
a white ball
between black trees:
to be held, to be enfolded,
arm of oak,
arm of ash.

REAPERS

Alice stopped working and leaned on her rake. "What's wrong, Dear?" she asked her young daughter-in-law.

Ann sighed. She was near tears. "I don't know what's happening here," she said. She dropped her rake and stared down at the colorful pile between them. "Frank wasn't like this before," she said. She thought about adding, "not until we moved back here," but she didn't.

Ann slipped an industrial-strength trash bag out of her back pocket. "I don't know what's happened to him," she went on, unfolding the bag and shaking it hard to open it. When it billowed she slipped an elbow inside and held it open for her mother-in-law.

"I'm sure it's nothing, Dear," Alice assured her as she began filling the bag. "It's just going to take some time for both of you to adjust to the move."

Ann looked across the yard at the great Colonial home surrounded by sycamores and white oaks. She thought of their bungalow on the west coast, of California sycamores and Engleman oaks, and the tears came into her eyes. She missed the warm Pacific and the scent of cypress trees.

Ann stood silent until the bag was full, and then she blurted, "I wish we hadn't moved at all." She felt her face flush as she twisted the top of the bag to close it.

"Oh nonsense, Dear," Alice said, taking a roll of twist ties from the breast pocket of her flannel shirt and stripping one from the roll. "Things will brighten up; you'll see. Frank's just pretty involved right now. It'll take him some time to get used to the idea of working with his father."

Ann shook her head. Alice put her hand on her daughter-in-law's arm. "You know," she said, "Frank used to tell Ernest he'd never work here. His father tried to tell him there were more opportunities here than anywhere else in the country. Ernest has often told me that every really important assignment he's ever been on has been right here in Washington, D.C."

Ann shook her head again. "Frank once told me he hated it here. He told me he hated the whole business."

Alice smiled. "He was younger then, Dear. You both were. Ernest and I understood that. And I think Frank learned a lot by getting out of the business and away from here for a while. But we knew he would never make it as a salesman. And as soon as we heard Frank was trying to start the business up out there in San Diego, Ernest told me it wouldn't work. I'm sure southern California sounded like a great place to start over at the time. And Frank may have done all right there too, if it wasn't for this immigration thing. But you know how impossible it was for him to get work there. And I know Frank would have been happy to do business with the newcomers. But let's face it, Dear, we are rooted in a very different culture. Our entire business is."

Alice remembered the tie in her hand, and twisted it onto the bulging bag. "I know you and Frank are open-minded, but you really can't expect a Spanish-orientated people to embrace an enterprise rooted in New England. It's hard enough expanding the business in English-speaking regions right here in the east."

Ann nodded. Alice took the bag from her and hefted it into the back of the pickup with the others. When she turned back, Ann was leaning on her rake and staring down at the pile that remained.

"D.C. is a fine location, Dear. You'll see. Frank has an opportunity here to earn a good deal of respect, and find some real satisfaction in his work. Why, just look at the prospects. Look at what his father has accomplished here through the years. Ernest knew as soon as he set foot here that D.C. was the place for him."

Ann sighed. "I suppose so," she said as she slipped another trash bag out of her pocket. "I just feel like Frank and I are slipping apart, like I don't really know him anymore. I feel like he spends more time with his father now than he does with me."

Ann unfolded the bag and popped it hard. When it opened she held it for Alice. "I guess I'm a little jealous," she said in a soft voice, and smiled.

Alice smiled back and took her hand. "It'll be alright, Dear. You'll see. This is a big adjustment for both of you. Frank has a great deal more to do than he's ever had before. And that means you're having to spend a lot more time without him."

Ann nodded and smiled. "I guess I should be happy I have more time. This is such a big place. I never seem to have time enough to keep things picked up around here. And I really am glad to be able to help him out like this."

Alice smiled as she began to fill the trash bag. "There always seems to be plenty to do, doesn't there? And they do need our help, Dear." She looked up from filling the bag and gazed across the wide yard. "Just look at the way things get thrown helter-skelter when they're working. And they never seem able to find time to pick up after themselves."

Ann followed her mother-in-law's gaze, and staring at the cluttered yard she laughed. Alice laughed too, as she twisted the bag closed and loaded it on the truck. Then she walked over and put her arm around her daughter-in-law. "We're neighbors now," she said. "And you know I'm always available to help out like this."

"Yes," Ann said, "I do know. And thanks. I really appreciate your coming over today. I've been moping around, letting things pile up. I think that's part of what's been depressing me. I just have to get with it. And you coming over today really helped. I feel a lot better about things now."

"I'm just glad I can help, Dear; and I'm so glad you're feeling better," Alice said, and hugged Ann again. "And it looks like we're just in time." Ann turned and looked where Alice was pointing, and for a second she felt like crying.

Frank and his father were racing home, thundering over the yards on their heavy, muscled beasts, their coal-black stallions lathered and proud, snorting hot mist in the cold October air. It was quitting time and they were riding hard, looking long and grim in their wild black capes, each man cradling a blood-stained scythe, cutting loose a heavy string of heads from his belt as he rode by.

Alice sighed and reached for her rake. "Well, Dear. It looks like they had another busy day." She glanced at Ann and saw her looking sadly across the cluttered yard. She shook her head and shouted after her husband, "Ernest Reaper! You two might be a little neater!" Then Alice walked out into the yard.

Ann leaned on her heavy rake and watched her mother-in-law begin gathering the fresh stock, rolling the heads into a pile at her feet.

"Oh," Alice said, looking down. "A representative!" She bent to look closer. "He was head of the committee to appoint sites for hazardous waste disposal. I believe Ernest told me he also had interests in a couple of chemical companies in the South. There's so much of that anymore." Alice looked up, and smiled. "Do you see why Ernest wanted Frank to enter the business here, Dear? Everyone's the head of something in Washington. There's so many heads making deals with other heads, the body of the country's been forgotten. We have a lot to do here, and it's so important." Alice smiled at Ann, then turned back to her work. "It's such a busy place," she said, and she began to sing quietly to herself.

Ann smiled, and nodded to herself. Frank would need his supper when he finished putting up his horse. And she would make sure he got it. And she'd listen to him at the table, even if it was all about the business again. "His work is important," she told herself, "and I need to be more supportive." She nodded her resolve as she walked out to help her mother-in-law finish bagging the day's take.

Mike shivered as he started down the long walk. Great white billows lined either side of the path he was on, and the snow swirled wildly around him. It was a hell of a day. He hated this walk during the winter season. It was the only real drawback to his job. But he knew it was necessary, summer or winter. A whole lot of people were depending on him.

He couldn't see far through the swirling snow, but he thought he saw someone coming up the walk. It appeared to be a woman in a mini skirt. At first he couldn't believe it, but then he saw who it was. It figured. He glanced left and right looking for a reason to go out of his way and avoid their meeting, but there was no good excuse. Tugging his collar up high on his neck, he mumbled, "Good morning, ma'am" in a hopeless attempt to pass by without being recognized.

The mini-skirted figure stepped directly in front of him and he stopped short. "It's a goddamned shame the way this planet's been polluted," she said with disgust. "You can hardly breathe the air or drink the water anymore. The countryside's full of trash, the ozone layer's all but gone, and there's so much smog and water pollution, people don't even remember what clean air or water looked like. The entire planet's beginning to look and smell like hell!"

Mike nodded, bundled deep in his coat, wishing to God he was anywhere else at the moment.

"I think it's about time something was done about it!"

"Well, ma'am, there's really not a whole lot I'm in a position to do about things right now. I mean--"

"Just what do you mean!?" she interrupted. "You're a representative here aren't you? Just what in hell is it you're representing? The masses, or the irresponsible rich who've created all this mess!"

"There's a great deal more involved here than you seem to realize, ma'am. I'm not entirely clear on some of the issues myself, but I am trying to look out for the interests of the people as best I can. The fact remains that this is a changing world. And you should know as well as anyone that I personally don't have a lot more say in how it's changing than anyone else. I believe we all must simply retain a little faith in the human spirit here. We--"

"Faith, my ass! Either you guys up there plan to do something about this or you don't! Don't talk to me about faith!"

"You know as well as anyone, ma'am, that I personally don't have the authority--"

"And stop calling me ma'am, damn you! You know my name as well as you own!"

"I'm sorry ma'a--, uh, I mean Lucy." Mike let his collar drop back down, exposing his face. He shook his head. "Sometimes I get a little caught up in the official jargon, Lucy, but you know I don't have the authority to just change things. There's a lot going on right now that I'm no more aware of than you are. You should sit in on some of the debates. I sometimes wonder myself if there's anybody up there who really does know what's going on."

"I'm pretty damned certain there isn't, myself! Just take a look around you Michael; the entire planet's damned near ruined."

"Aw, come on now; it's not *that* bad Lucy. Sure it's changed some the last hundred years or so, but I wouldn't call it ruined."

"And just what would you call it?"

"Well, it just seems evolution is speeding up a bit. This planet's not in an entire state of ruin. It's not even clear yet what pollution is all about. Things are changing more rapidly than they have in the past, and that's a little frightening. But even the thermal pollution of air and water

has caused little more than some bursts of floral growth at this point. That in turn has had an effect on fish and fauna in some areas, but such effects are to be expected in the course of long-term change. At this point--"

"At this point! What about the future? You never seem to show any concern for the future; you just hope for the best!"

"Of course I'm concerned about the future, Lucy, but you must realize that I don't know anymore about what's going to happen in the future than you do. I do what I can; we all do. We just have to trust that what we're doing--"

"Damn you and your trust! I've heard enough 'trust me's' to last an eternity. If you guys don't intend to do anything about what's going on here you can't be trusted to run a shoe-lace factory, let alone what you do. I swear to God if I was running things there'd be some changes made here, mister! I can guarantee you that!"

Mike shook his head at Lucy, and was about to respond when a familiar voice boomed behind him, "What in hell is going on here!?" Mike groaned and turned to face the music.

"Michael, I thought you were on your way to the Midwest to see what kind of flood damage was incurred, and to offer the people some hope out there."

"Uh, yeah, Boss; I was. But I, uh, ran into Lucy on the way down and--"

"Oh. I see. Well, why don't you see if you can get on down there before the people give up and write us off as a bunch of uncaring autocrats. I'd like to have a word with Miss Lucy myself."

Mike nodded. "Okay. I'll see you later then, Boss." Mike turned to Lucy. "See you," he mumbled, as he turned and walked on.

Lucy turned to watch Mike leave, but the voice brought her back around, "So, what are you doing here Luce?"

"I was on my way up to see you."

"Good. I always look forward to seeing you again, Luce. By the way, nice outfit. Where in hell'd you get it?"

"None of your damned business. I happen to like nice things. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"Well I have to admit you look damned fine in it. In fact you're looking better than you have in a long time. I don't doubt you're a regular queen back home. By the way, how are things down there these days?"

"The same as always; hot and dry as hell. But it's no worse than here anymore. This entire planet's nothing but a nightmare. It's like some disease spinning through the universe, spreading its contagion, and all you're doing is watching it go, not lifting a finger to stop it."

"What do you suggest, my dear?"

"You could start by getting serious about what's going on here. I think it's time to rid this planet of everyone who's had a hand in polluting it."

"Be a rather barren ball of dirt then, don't you think?"

"What do you care? You're the one behind this whole scheme, remember. I'd just like to know one thing. Who in hell put you in charge? You're using this planet as a dump for every worthless scrap of trash that's been created in your ruthless attempt to stay on top! Damn you and every one of those bastards you've got working for you, you no good son-of-a--"

"Well Luce, you always were a pessimistic little hellion. I never have been able to understand you. If you don't like the heat, why keep crawling back into the fire?"

"What do you care anyway!? You're responsible for this whole damned mess; not me! And I don't have to live here; I've got options!"

"Sure, sure. I know you don't want to hear it, but it's your own fault you don't get on very well here. It's your attitude, you know, that keeps you in such deep shit. Why, this place is a paradise, really. It's everything it can be. You'd see that too, if you weren't so damned set on having it all your own way all the time. You really are a thankless son-of-a-bitch, you know. The world is what you make it, Luce. Everyone's responsible for their part in it. If everyone took care of his part or her part, and let everybody else take care of their part, the world would become a paradise overnight. But it's political upstarts like you who screw it up. If you and all the rest of these power-hungry political shakers and movers would mind your own damned business and tend to your own damned lives, and stop meddling in everybody else's, the world would heal itself overnight. Everybody's got a God's plenty to do just taking care of their own affairs. There's no place in this world for you political crusaders, and every one of you knows it. That's why you keep trying to change the world. You might try changing your own damned attitude for once and leave the world be. If all you self-ordained 'world leaders' could learn to mind your own damned business, there wouldn't really be a problem, now would there."

Lucy turned, "I ain't listening to anymore of this shit. It's the same old story--you trying to blame somebody else for the mess you've created. You did it! All of it! And I'm damned if I'll stick around here and take the blame for it!"

"All right. If that's the way you want it. You're always free to go back where you came from. Just remember, Luce--"

But walking away now, hands clapped tight to his ears, Lucifer simply wouldn't hear the rest--

"My door's always open."

Pam Herbert Barger

LIFE IS GOOD

The light's long been red.
I'm blowing my nose, feeling for fever,
pissy but tolerant.

Quite late, a navy business suit
enters the crosswalk.
The belly's so big that at first
I think he's pregnant.
With vigor, he thrusts elbows and arms,
racing the light.
Engines rev.
The hands are flap flap flapping,
ballerina hands on fast-forward,
frenetic, graceful.
Wrists plummet as fingers rise.

Black shoe touches curb,
light turns, traffic moves.
Life is good.

VOLUNTEERS

A half mile from my house
grows a mulberry tree,
the closest one I know,
yet here, next to my foundation,
are two young upstarts,
arms raised, hollering,
"Pick me! Keep me!"

I'm thinking of some sparrow
gorging on that tree's wealth,
flying heavy to the eave
of my house,
shitting small seeds.
I'm thinking of purple feet,
purple splats on windshields,
cracking basement walls.
I'm thinking
Where is that saw?

SORTING LAUNDRY

Moving clothes from plastic to washer,
I invoke campfire ghosts--
smoky smells of twenty questions,
laughing at the pointy moon,
finding big dipper,
zipping nearly-grown daughters
into their tent.

I look past this thickening body
as I sort clothes not mine:
minute lace underthings,
soccer shorts,
socks embedded with burrs.
All those times past,
and all future times I will wish
to be left alone--
I mourn.

I see August wildflowers,
yellow, purple.
I hear summer's spinning out;
chorus of cicadas,
scraping of crickets.

AMONG LEAVES

When I was four
lying under red wool awaiting sleep,
I wondered
Where did seeing come from?
I shut my mouth, but the
hall light continued.
I plugged my nose then
covered my ears.
Still the light shone.

I closed my eyes.
Back then I imagined
there had been a Me,
an invisible thing,
maybe waiting in the branches
of the ash in the front yard.
Why this body?

Now I close my eyes
and my head pops off.
What experiment proves I'm still here?
Skin peels like layers of onion, and
I am big as creation,
small as a seed.
I wait in a multitude of leaves.

INCREASE

Moving through air during sleep,
she longs for more than rising
and letting down.

Human,
she's never learned to fly.
Now substance loses its pull,
and feeling the soft flap
of fabric against skin,
she chooses abandon;
her head reels.

Cumulus come larger, nearer.
But wait--
The dark roof of the dear house
with Those inside
is now small,
barely distinguishable from
other rectangles below.
What can she do but turn back
before she's lost her way?

In the day,
she stands on rock road
watching the hawk's smooth glide.
Up high,
there is a skilled shift of strong wing,
a sweet turn cloudward.
She studies,
ready to take with her to
sleep,
ways of control.

Don Welch

SANDHILLS SONNET

The mother of my father, she took me out
to fix her fence, a skinny woman in overalls,
the widow of assorted gaping pockets
and two loops. In one she slung her hammer
like a gun; on the other side dangled
staple pullers, calipers to extract
the wisdom teeth of posts. The barbed wire
broke.

Snaking back, its rust venom
whistling past my head, it always found
her hands, ripping open their blue hummocks.
With jaws locked, she handkerchiefed her wounds
and rarely spoke. For five blistering summers
around that realm of rotten wire we walked.
Like wiping your butt with a hoop, she said.

1936, AT THE HEIGHT OF THE DEPRESSION

Right there between
shit and shinola,

we were walking
toward Berwyn,

that snurm
of a town,

when she said,
Look,

the sunlight's
on gravel,

and I looked,
my clodhoppers on,

and, by god,
it was,

it was just like
walking on diamonds.

JAMIE WHITE EAGLE

Six-foot five, three hundred pounds,
a mountain of a defensive tackle

walks across the campus,
under the frieze of the Parthenon,

the name on his letter jacket
Jamie White Eagle.

Around his forehead is a headband
of the Blackfoot, Crow;

tilted rakishly upon his head
a ball cap of the Cubs.

His letter jacket, Taiwan silk,
is Antelope blue and gold.

Lumbering with a grizzly's grace,
he wears the Nikes of Michael Jordan,

his face bears the three-day stubble
of a movie star.

It's Homecoming, and singing a country western,
he walks toward the Student Union

where a sign saying **WELCOME**
invites him to a breakfast

laid out by students from
China and Nepal.

His game face almost on,
he pauses at the door.

Read it. It's All-American.

TWO SONNETS FOR SATURDAY

**Saturday Night at the Calico Coach,
Neon Moon and His Electric Slide.**

Feet which hustled them to work, lockstep,
or drove them from bedroom towns to IBP,
have now been showered clean. Those unguiculates
they even cover up in bed, lest they hammertoe
or bunion dreams, are now enthroned in Tony Lamas.

Doc Wallader sprinkles Argo on the floor.
Across the way Ed Pronske spears his filet mignon
beside his New York cut, while Dot,
whose metatarsals support the winding
of oil filters, and Leroy, the arc welder,
fuse and unwind like the prince and cinderella
to the music of the spheres.

* * *

Upon completing the week, remember the undone.
Upon drinking your beer, reflect upon its flatness.
Those chattering castanets were really the false teeth
of Lucille. That eagle's scream, an oboe's bellow.
Everything set, the iris of your world fell in.
Somewhere between Thursday and Beirut,
each chute you opened, ripped with shock,
your zinc became sulfuric lead.

Here in the sonnet there's supposed to be a turn.
You're supposed to Shakespeare it. Or Donne.
Here is where you suture wounds with words.
Instead, you engine knocks.
Gloom fouls instead of taking wing.
The weekend's like a crow whose split tongue pings.

EATING BLUEGRASS MUSIC

Certain words carry their weight in memory. "Bluegrass" takes me to a Missouri hillside where smiling people toss long hair and wave musical instruments. Children and dogs ramble, dancing with some invisible ensemble. Trees twang the shy's silver strings; rare notes ripple from the grass.

In the Missouri hill country, on steamy summer afternoons and in cold damp nights, I learned to love bluegrass. Unable to play a portable instrument or paint, I drummed my fingers on the table, my toes on the floor. But the bluegrass country in years is behind me; this cabin sits in northern hills, deep in snow.

Most of the people gathered around the stone fireplace are children, nieces, or sisters of a man I've never met, who lies in the hospital thirty miles away. Paralyzed for fifteen years, he's been the one who upheld their spirits. Now his ability to buoy them, and himself, seems to have disappeared into his agony. They are only having a party to celebrate the middle of winter, to encourage spring's coming, but they play for him. Perhaps they understand this is what they're doing.

Their faces are solemn: they stare across each other. The music is alternately fast or slow, but consistently mournful. Fiddles thrum through the fireplace smoke, banjos screech, mandolins and guitars wrap the melody in lamplight, drums pound like a steady pulse.

A ten-year-old boy lies along a rafter shaking a can full of dry beans. Occasionally he falls asleep and misses a few beats. Thirty miles away the crippled man must sleep heavily. Does he dream the muted sound of fiddles, the thump of booted feet, of dogs' tails beating the floor in time?

Lean, muscular hands fly over the frets, apparently by instinct. The musicians' bodies are undeniably present: the playing lifts and involves and swirls us all away. But their eyes are elsewhere. They do not eat the carrot cake or fudge or gnaw on cold fried chicken. Icy glasses quiver with the beat, coffee or tea steams nearby, but they do not reach for refreshment. They seem hardly to inhale. The music is meat, vegetables, drink, liquor, dessert, and consuming flame.

Now the boy has climbed down from the rafter, passed the bean can to someone with empty hands, and is jigging around tables and over dogs and feet. He seem unaware of the crowd; he dances quietly, without smiling, watching his father, as if he, too, has a duty to keep the music flowing smoothly.

The man in the hospital, someone says, was lamenting his useless body today. Would he find it frustrating or encouraging to see the casual way these people--all of his blood and sinew--tap their toes, bounce their knees, all unaware of the brilliant engineering behind each move? A whole silent symphony of motion flows through the musicians' circle, separate from their playing, and on another level than their eyes and minds. How many unseen, unheard symphonies go on in a room where such music is played? Three per person? More? Is there any manner or motivation for counting?

This symphony is extrasensory perception with gestures, sounds, mustache twitches and eye glints. Writing the complete score of this gathering would involve grace note smiles, bearded

sixteenths, great deep whole notes in hiking boots, and long convoluted runs with blonde hair and blue eyes.

The little boy has climbed to the sleeping loft, wrapped himself in a blanket, and closed his eyes. His round face hangs above us like a moon, a blessing.

The electric bass stomps out of hiding like a dare, snorting like a moose on a rampage. "It's alive," someone shouts. A thundering note shakes the stones in the fireplace, pounds along the rafters, cracks a tree on the hillside, and makes the mountain rumble. The boy's eyes snap open. The man thirty miles away trembles in his sleep.

A young woman comes in, kicking snow from her hiking boots. Everyone nods at a different instant and goes on playing, so the music flows on, uninterrupted. The newcomer takes off her coat, pulls a flute out of the pocket, and begins to inhale rhythms circling the room like wind.

The bass drops below consciousness. Conversations occur between notes; some of them involve words spoken aloud; these are perhaps the least satisfactory.

A dark haired man in cowboy boots enters, smiling, leans toward the host and whispers. He has just come from the hospital. A few people cluster close, gently playing single notes as they listen, ask questions. The crippled man is feeling better; his headache is gone; he thanks his visitors, many of whom are in the room, for the back rubs, the good cheer. He wants to get out of the hospital, come home. He has gone to sleep without drugs, smiling peacefully.

The words scatter through the room without intruding on the music. The circle opens. The music bubbles, sprouts like a vine, uncoils and races up the walls, runs along the rafters, swings from the hanging plants, and envelopes the stone fireplace. The boy in the attic sits up and looks down upon us in smiling astonishment. The man in the distance must be dancing.

Seeing a capo in lean brown hands slide up the neck of a guitar can shake my soul, remind me that healing night. A single keening note in the winter wind will do it, if I am alone in the half-dark of later afternoon. If I have no other cause to remember.

ROADKILL OF THE MONTH

Many Native American tribes arranged their years by moon cycles, naming each month for natural events; by the unwritten calendar of Indian time, fall brought Moon of Chokecherries Ripening.

Growing older, month by moon, is a natural event, despite advertising suggesting otherwise. Female bodies, like nomadic tribes of Plains history, are ordered by lunar cycles. Lately my body has dragged my mind toward major changes in my life as a woman, and I have thought curious thoughts.

When I travel, I drive by choice, welcoming long hours of silent musing. On the Plains, as elsewhere in America, we organize our lives around cars; gasoline-powered vehicles announce our images of ourselves, and each year we cover more of the world in asphalt, as though we couldn't move without rubber wheels. We are lemmings, rolling toward the cliff where we will find no gas station, no fuel for the big metal monsters we love more than anything else.

Modern tribes, unlike historical ones, often remember years by unnatural events: Desert Storm War Month. What if we combined our love of cars and unnatural events, naming months for animals most likely to die under our spinning wheels?

Regional variations would occur, but a typical Year of the Dead on the Plains might look like this:

January: Dead Cat Month

(hungry felines drift further from the ranch where they were born, searching for dwindling colonies of mice)

February: Dead Coyote Month

(mice gone, or hiding too deep in the snow, desperate coyotes must leave natural range, hunt highways)

March: Dead Skunk Month

(sleepy from hibernation, foraging skunks are not alert enough; most drivers observe the ritual of rolling up windows and driving faster)

April: Dead Rabbit Month

(baby rabbits tremble in headlights, flatten so completely even the crows find little to eat)

May: Dead Meadowlark Month

(bundles of yellow feathers blow down prairie roads)

June: Dead Rattlesnake Month

(some drivers run over any snake they see, wiping out more predators of moles and mice)

July: Dead Grasshopper Month

(ranchers and farmers zigzag at seventy miles an hour in twenty-thousand-dollar trucks weighing four thousand pounds to kill a one-ounce insect two inches long)

or Dead Crow Month

(feeding on other roadkills, they fail to hear the deadly whisper of tires)

August: Dead Antelope Month

(some die more slowly hanging from fences that caught them as they fled in terror from a highway)

September: Dead Porcupine Month

(ivory quills glint among asphalt reflections)

October: Dead Raccoon Month

(curled at the edge of warm pavement, they seem to sleep)

November: Dead Deer Month

(stretched on fenders and roof racks, or torn to bloody rags by speeding trucks)

December: Dead Grouse Month

(hungry, windblown, searching for cover after being driven out of their bushy habitat by hunters and deep snow)

What if death brings us face to face with every animal we've killed? The reception committee for a hunter might be enormous: rows of deer with ragged holes in their shoulders or bellies, antlers wired to skulls with dangling gobbets of flesh and hide. Wild turkeys gobble in the background; an elk paces like a drum major before the deer. Coyotes shot along the roadside for sport stagger on shattered legs, yellow eyes maddened by pain. Mourning dove season has been popular in my state; whole flocks of the little birds, nothing much left but bloody feathers, would coo a welcome as the hunter wobbled through the gates of death.

Meat-eaters might meet a herd of cattle, glossy steers reeking from months belly-deep in a feedlot, waste pooled around their ankles; so stupid with fat they no longer try to escape their own wastes, like many humans.

Facing the long-distance truck-driver will be the ragged, split bodies of dozens of antelope, rabbits squealing in pain unheard from the trucker's high cab.

In fairness, some road-slaughtered animals will greet highway-builders as well. Human corpses will wait, bleeding and gibbering, for each drunk driver; the legislator who insisted on a wider, faster highway for his district will meet a mixed crowd of humans and animals.

No one will be immune. Teachers who told students they were doomed to fail because their parents drank, or their kind is lazy, will cross over to confront the eyeless skeletons waiting with bony claws open. Vegetarians may be met by acres of rotted spinach, shattered carrots, quivering tofu; ministers will face those ignored by the church because they weren't the right color, or sex, or didn't tithe enough.

If every living being we've killed or hurt is waiting on the other side of that dark curtain at life's end, how will we drive the road from here to the horizon?

Nearly a year before my husband died, I dreamed myself grieving over a death, my father's arms around me as he said, "I promise that even though I leave you in the flesh, my spirit will be with you always." Startled by incongruity--my father seldom hugged me, and rarely went to church, or quoted the Bible--I woke and sat up in bed, and looked out my bedroom window.

In his old pickup, with no brakes or lights, my father was on the highway, heading for the pasture on the other side. His dream words were so strong in my mind I leaped out of bed and began dressing, intending to race after him, stop him, save him. I tried to picture myself explaining. He would laugh.

I've always kept paper and pencil by my bed to capture any brilliant ideas revealed in dreams; rarely has a thought that seemed clear at midnight been intelligible in the morning. A few nights after I dreamed of my father's promise, I saw myself in a dream writing a remarkable series of poems. All were arranged on one large white sheet of paper, almost a diagram of the complicated way one poem's concept led to the next. Struggling to wake, I scribbled an outline of the ideas so they would be clear to my morning mind. I was certain that this time, perhaps because I've practiced writing poetry so much, I had captured a worthwhile, even brilliant, series of ideas.

In the morning, I eagerly grabbed the pad and read:

"Obituaries with titles like 'If Missionaries Had Mothers.' Death, then one poem about learning to go on."

I copied the words into my journal, and added, "I wonder what that MEANS," but didn't take the message seriously.

The day before my forty-ninth birthday, three years after George died, I dreamed of opening a shallow, clean box filled with bones. At once, I knew the bones were George's by the size of his hands, the long bones in his arms and legs. Gently, I wept as I touched and lifted each bone, clearly feeling their rough texture against my fingertips. Love surged in me, remembering how gently those hands always were on my skin; tenderly I placed each bone on a blanket.

As I worked, my rational mind reminded me that if I were really to dig up George's coffin, the skeleton inside would not be so spotlessly white and tidy. Scornful laughter resounded in one hollow room of my mind, accusing me of avoiding reality, of refusing to find a solution to my father's increasing frailty of mind and body.

As if I'd punched a button, the sweet bone-gathering dream switched off, and I was flying through the air. A sturdy harness around my chest, waist, legs, and ankles held me securely; for a moment I enjoyed the sensation of looking down on a carnival as I dangled above it. The pressure of the straps gradually increased as I flew higher in a great semicircle above the earth.

Then the velcro fastening around one ankle parted; the sound startled me into looking down at my body. One by one, the straps came loose: my ankles were free, then my legs, waist.

Only the straps around my chest still held me, and I knew the power of my motion would tear them open. Fear frightened me awake.

Now, four years after George's death, a few months after the deaths of my father and my closest friend, I keep going on because I know how to do nothing else.

"You've had a lot of disasters in your life," a reporter says, "Are you a gloomy person, or cheerful?"

Neither, consistently. But following those I loved into death would abolish my options. Only the living fly and can write about it, can savor with fear and anticipation launching out from earth's gravity, all restraints vanished.

Sandra Coke

THE TOURIST ATTRACTION
IN QUAY, OKLAHOMA

That's it! There's the tree.
The one where grass widow
Idabelle Massey shot the outlaw, Homer Dooling.
Plugged Homer Dooling, already dead.
Not for his short comings but
for the sheriff's bounty.

Homer had the flu that time,
breathed his last the second day.
Idabelle dressed him, dragged him down the back stairs,
propped him up against that tree,
cocked his pistol, fired,
and collected two hundred dollars for her trouble.

CEMETERY DECORATIONS

Purple flags grown in avenues
line the chain link barrier
contrasted against the spot colors
of red, yellow, and pink plastic.

Amid the prison of green and granite,
one grave, forgotten under the cedar,
is decorated with the orange and black
of monarchs against the gray.

Somehow I think Gertrude M. Wieser,
born Nov. 18, 1890--Died Nov. 24, 1918,
rests in peace.

Twyla Hansen

LOSING A BROTHER

might sound like the beginning
of some story ending tragic,
except in this one he lives, isn't dying
any more than I am,
only a seven years' head start,

and on this Christmas eve,
the family for mother's sake
assembling itself, except for those
who won't learn the salt of ties
nor savor underlying bonds,

perhaps explaining the distance
with which he surrounds himself,
my brother having grown up farm
and poor like the rest of us,
now eyeing his wrist, insulating

his own perfect world,
cutting off
those who want to go on believing
the best, overlooking indifference--
like strangers we sit in idle

chatter, talking around what matters,
this kinship having turned on different paths--
same father's love, same mother's fuss--
yet somehow like the vast, dark horizon,
boding sad.

BACK YARD

It's that place after
I've gone everywhere,
seen everything,
I can't wait to return to,

trumpet creeper and sumac and
bluestem,
prairie small enough
to be taken in--

and I sit at dusk
with a fatcat on my lap
watching blue in the form of jay
become red in the form of sunset,

my back yard unable
to contain itself, already
a half moon nesting atop the ash,
and I'm like that myself, I guess,

at home but not contained, already
my wild heart beating
as if those wings
sufficient to have brought me back,

in spite of all
that's so secure
to lift me somehow far,
far away.

NOT LONG AFTER THANKSGIVING

I walk the evening neighborhood,
its houses closed and curtained
against the late November chill.
Inside, in front of their tubes,
they're missing the real nightshow:

Jupiter and Venus facing off
from opposite corners, a new moon
low and barely visible on the horizon,
clouds stretching east ahead of a front
soon to swoop down from Canada.
I forget, foolishly, how detached
the world has become--so many
gizmos competing for our attention,

which might explain Jones' incredible
Xmas display--lights over every possible
window, angle, corner, dip & curve
of the house, every branch, twig & shrub;
Santa, reindeer, snowmen, stars, light--
colored lights, clear lights, floodlights
running the full length of the driveway
to the tune of Jingle Bells & topping all,
a cross blinking like a New York marquee--

overload to make a seventh-grader
go "WOW," to be bored with it,
like I am, going back to the
business of my walk, walking out
some primal need, turning my back
on the glitter-patter claptrap,
my face into the surprise of
clear, black air.

JOURNEY

"If there is magic on this planet,
it is contained in water."

Loren Eiseley, *The Immense Journey*

And so this journey begins:
bodies filled already with magic
now touching, now together flowing,

connecting though not confining,
like a tree's xylem and phloem
forming sturdiness,

blossoming then to create
its own sweet fruit,
leaves touching sky,

our father,
roots drawing nourishment from earth,
our mother,

bodies paying homage to the hands
that came before us. God, they say,
is in the details,

affection shaping the home we inhabit,
its rooms and furniture as visible
as the small, daily kindnesses

we call living. Storms meanwhile
ignite the prairie,
water rising to fill

again the aquifer,
that silent underground sea immense,
though never yet as deep, as love.

--for Steve & Joei

THE MAN WHOSE MOUTH IS BABBLING

already has disengaged
his brain,
already has set the autopilot
toward that ozone of utterances
that will get him nowhere,
his eyes glazed from too many
tradeshows, too many salestalks,
chestpuffs and coinjings
to understand that

I notice
already he's measured me--
ankles, hips, breasts--
his egomouth babbling at me
like I'm his wife, or worse,
some ladyfriend just wanting fun,
someone he will never
really know,
somewhere long ago having decided
to judge: white vs. black,
male vs. cunt, ego vs. the cosmos--
smug through his small saleslife
his mouth goes forever
on and on
babbling.