

1989

Imprints, Vol. 5

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5-1-1989

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Miller, Melissa Jeanne; Herring, Melonie; Poovey, Chad; Stanley, Sandra; Calcaterra, Theodore J.; Fernandez, Beatrice; Choron, James L.; Lewis, Lathon; Williams, Christian; Gound, Joe; Meissner, Eric; Marsden, W Mallory; and O'Neill, Patricia, "Imprints, [Vol. 5]" (1989). *Imprints*. Book 1.

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IMPRINTS
1989

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Imprints is the official publication of Sigma Tau Delta, the English Honor Society. This 1989 edition includes winners of the T. E. Ferguson Writing Contest, two honorable mentions, and a number of other entries that we felt deserved to be published. I would like to give special thanks to all the judges of the Ferguson Writing Contest who helped make this publication possible, and especially to Dr. Patricia Russell, who once again proved to be an invaluable asset. Her dedication and love for the organization and all it stands for has made this one of the most successful years ever -- thank you, Dr. Russell.

Georgina Key
Editor and President

IMPRINTS

Literary journal of Sigma Tau Delta,
Stephen F. Austin State University.

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Published May, 1989

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Bound Feet

by Melissa Jeanne Miller

Our gang began to run out of playgrounds in the fall of 1965. The manager of the trampoline center on Campos Eliseos no longer tolerated our pushing and shoving. Sonya Gertz spilled Orange Crush all over the reception desk, and Anne-Marie, our leader, kicked the Danish Ambassador's daughter in the shins outside the girls' locker room.

Eventually, Monsieur Reynaud chased us out of the Dinam Exercise Spa with a broomstick and a string of French expletives. Our idea of fund that day had been to throw spitballs at the fat ladies working out on the mats or at the barre.

We couldn't hang out at the little drugstore on Poe Street. Anne-Marie had stolen too many tamarindo candies and 45's of Trini Lopez and The Supremes. She was caught smoking outside the Larin candy store during a game of marbles with the shoeshine boys. When the manager asked her to leave, Anne-Marie just signalled to the rest of us to pack up our jacks and judas dolls and move on to a construction site off Socrates Street.

"We have no choice," she told us one day. "Mexico City doesn't like us anymore. It's either Ana Mathilda's place . . . or nothing."

"Ana Mathilda is weird," Mimi Tyrell said. "I hate her slippers and her slanty eyes."

"Yeah, and I heard she put out a gypsy boy's eye with a penknife," Sonya Gertz said. "He was trying to steal a bag of Chamois chile powder."

"Well," my little sister Tina said, "at least she has malt candy and American peanut butter. I like peanut butter."

"You're stupid," Anne-Marie told Tina. "You're really stupid. I don't care about peanut butter. I just go there to hear the radio shows."

Ana Mathilda's radio shows were full of harrowing detail about impaled white women, sacrificed cats, voodoo witches from Veracruz, fiery deaths, and plagues of boils and sores.

I secretly liked Ana Mathilda's store. I always found the latest Classics Illustrated comic there, and abridged editions of Conrad, Dickens, and Poe. Lately, I had only been able to raid my parents' library; Dostoevsky was a little too morbid and complex for my twelve-year-old mind. I preferred a good sea story.

"Okay," Anne-Marie said, "we'll trick Ana Mathilda, test her out."

"Maybe you'll lose an eye," Mimi suggested.

"Shut up," Anne-Marie said. "The old bag doesn't know how to deal with me. She's too busy talking to herself and smoking her flat cigarettes that never die to notice us. But I wish she sold records."

"She sells Ray Coniff records," Marc Leclerc said.

"You're stupid, too," Anne-Marie towered over him, her thin red braids slapping the wind like the tongues of Alameda Park fire swallows. "Just shut up, everybody. Let's go to the store."

* * *

Mexico City in 1965 was full of grotesques . . . lye-scarred epileptics that had seizures in the middle of crowded parks; the Sumesa supermarket bag boy with the picket-fence palate and boil-covered lips; double amputee limosneros (beggars) who pulled themselves along Polanco's wealthy streets on dollies pleading for mercy and bread.

And then there were the Atayde Circus clowns, midgets, dwarfs, and imbeciles that made my little sister Tina cry. Family birthdays were celebrated at the big performances, and out family always got front row seats, close enough for Tina to press old Larin candy into the clowns' upturned, spider-monkey hands. Their sweaty palms were the color of wet cement and smelled sickly-sweet, like dead children.

But Ana Mathilda wasn't grotesque. Her weirdness was not fortuitous but calculated. In her baggy sweaters of Romper-Room-blues and pinks, mauled bedroom slippers, and regulation blue or green wash dresses, she shuffled about talking to no one, not really. But she knew when she got shortchanged, or when someone was about to steal or vandalize. She was not one to be taken in.

"Nah, nah," she would say in that guttural Chinese-Cuban accent, "naah, no take anything. I wanna hear the show. The lady got run over by train. What you taking, boy? You want a Carlos Quinto bar? Then pay . . . I can't hear the show. Okay, lady, you want New York Times . . . not in yet. You, hey you, no take the tamarindo."

Her monologue, and the radio shows, functioned as a screen of noise against an otherwise intelligible, normal world. But Ana Mathilda was not entirely abnormal or dysfunctional; even the frizzy braid with its smoky, loose strands, the nearly ingrown yellow fingernails, and the unfocused, multicolored Chinese eyes could not hide the fact that she haggled over every centavo and managed to import tobacco and coffee without paying exorbitant fees.

We should have figured out that we'd never get away with stealing Anne-Marie's favorite shoplifting challenge--a Carlos Quinto chocolate bar. The gold wrapping with its 16th century portrait of Charles V made it the most coveted item on our shoplifting agenda.

But Anne-Marie insisted upon testing Ana Mathilda. And she was caught one afternoon on the way out of the store with a couple of bars.

"You ugly girl," Ana Mathilda said, pulling Anne-Marie back into the shop by an unraveling braid. "Now you pay. Now you pay, ugly, big, American girl."

"I'm not American," Anne-Marie protested, breaking free from Ana Mathilda's grasp. "I'm French Canadian. There's a major, major difference."

"All the same to me," Ana Mathilda said.

From that point on, Ana Mathilda and Anne-Marie shared a mutual respect. Anne-Marie knew that she could not get away with anything, but that she was free to come and go as she pleased. Ana Mathilda enjoyed a good challenge, a child who would not scare or give up easily.

I started to think about schoolwork, Conrad stories, and piano lessons that fall. I was getting restless as a gang member; the pranks ceased to amuse me. I

was beginning to take life seriously; even Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov was rather intriguing, his moral dilemma far more absorbing than whether we could spray paint the pumps at the Andrew Geller shoe store without getting caught, or pull Lise Jovet's bra strap at the Lycee to humiliate her for growing up.

Anne-Marie knew that she was losing me.

"We'll go look at the weird people in the park," she said. "You know, the man without hands who cries to the birds. Or maybe we'll ring doorbells at the actor's house."

"No," I said. "I don't care to." I was reading a poem by Lord Byron. It was about the ocean, and it was romantic, sweeping, and very far from dull school days in Mexico City.

"You're getting to be a sissy," Anne-Marie said, lighting up a Camel. "You don't even smoke with me anymore. And you're second in command."

"Really," I said, reading.

"Yeah . . . and soon you'll be wearing a bra. And growing up . . . I don't want to grow up."

Despite the process of civilization that was going on within me, I still resisted a complete transformation. I still made fun of dwarfs, hydrocephalic babies, and the fat ladies at the Dinam. I looked through Ovaciones, the City scandal sheet, to find pictures of the last infant smallpox case on the continent, or the last (and dying) Cossack, or the latest burn victim. If there was a leper in the neighborhood, Anne-Marie and I were sure to find him. And when we did, we stared and laughed. But only Anne-Marie and Sonya Gertz threw orange peels. I began to find violent cruelty vulgar and unnecessary.

We were all aching for a true grotesque, for something really extraordinary, and the opportunity came up in November. Ana Mathilda let it be known that a relative of hers from Mainland China was coming to stay.

"Old woman, lady-in-waiting, royal court," Ana Mathilda said. "Not live in Cuba like me. She got bound feet."

"Imagine that," Anne-Marie said. "Bound feet. That's better than smallpox or chemical burns."

"I'm scared," Tina said. "I don't want to see bound feet." And she began to cry.

"Idiot," Anne-Marie shoved her. "Stupid idiot."

"Yeah," I said. "This is history in the making. They don't have bound feet in Communist China anymore."

The relative's arrival became the focus of all of Anne-Marie's obsessive energy. She discussed it in detail with Ana Mathilda. Ana Mathilda decided to make the arrival a paying event. After all, she said, how many times during your life do you get to see bound feet? Never, never.

A makeshift room was set up in the back of the store for the show. Pagodas were hung among stacks of old Miami Heralds. Anne-Marie burned incense daily to drive out lingering odors of cooked cabbage and fried eel. Ana Mathilda and Anne-Marie bought beaded curtains to make the paraffin-yellow, oily space look like an opium den.

The day of the show, Tina was sick with a runny nose and covered with milk chocolate mess. She embarrassed me with her whining. Why do we have to go, she asked. Could she have more malt balls . . . where was Mama, and did Mama know we were here. . .

I just wanted to see the ancient noblewoman. I was tired of Tina's complaints. We stood outside in the alleyway that led to the back of Ana Mathilda's store. All the foreign children of Polanco showed up and paid the ten peso fee to a couple of shoeshine toughs who sliced green apples with switchblades and spit tobacco juice all over our gym uniforms. Ana Mathilda had hired the toughs to keep us orderly. She was too busy unloading the daily cargo of American newspapers and candy.

I tried to appear casual about the event, but something about bound feet made me queasy.

"I had a nightmare last night," Tina said. "A big foot in a slipper flew around the room. I heard Chinese voices wail all night long."

Anne-Marie called me up to the front. She'd arranged for the gang to get the first look inside. Tina held onto my hand, but I just shooed her away; her fingers were sticky, and I had to wipe off the chocolate traces on my school sweater.

"You should see the feet," Anne-Marie said. "Really grand." She glowed, as if in love. "Something to see."

Anne-Marie pulled back the beaded curtains, and I found myself alone in the back room. The sweet incense choked me. I hit my head on a lime-green pagoda and nearly slid on the oil parquet.

I could see a lumpish shadow behind a lighted screen with a painted waterfall scene. I moved slowly to get a feel for the place. I pretended to be Oscar Wilde, or Poe . . .

Behind the screen, I saw only a vast green gown. Then I made out a threadbare,

liver-spotted cranium nearly engulfed by a high mandarin collar.

I had never seen a Chinese lady-in-waiting, but my instincts cried out against the way she was perched on a high stool, in a dress several sizes too big. The noblewoman stared at me with gummed-up eyes the color of baby drool. I thought that if I were to touch her, she would dissolve into thousands of brittle, liver-spotted moths. The skin under her quivering chin hung like scrolls of thin, thin rice paper.

Her hands moved randomly over the gown's surface, dried, stained lilies adrift on a sea of glittery, lime-green cloth.

I finally looked down at the feet. Ana Mathilda had made her wear hideous cobalt-blue brocade slippers with a sequin pattern around the sides. It occurred to me to leave the feet alone, to get up and get out of there. I had a faint notion of what it was like to be ancient and noble and surrounded by vulgar, foreign white children tugging at one's pained but venerable feet.

I hesitated. I looked up at her face, almost against my will, and saw a tear wind its way down the parched gutter of a deep wrinkle. She was pleading with me, and no one had ever pleaded with me before. Don't look, her eyes said. Don't look at my feet. I am alone, her eyes seemed to say, perched like a stuffed antiquity, cast out of China and dropped into the barbaric lap of a most favored nation.

Don't look at my feet . . .

It cost me to pull off the slipper and look. I couldn't fight off the ungovernable, childish urge, but the looking cost me. And all I saw was something exquisitely malformed, the

celadon hoof of a T'ang horse. There was nothing ugly, despicable, or grotesque about the broken shape.

I rose quickly and left, forgetting to replace the slipper, no doubt spoiling the ritual Ana Mathilda had calculated would heighten the excitement of her look-and-see.

I ran out into the alleyway and up the streets of Polanco in search of my vanishing childhood. All I could see was that tear, those gummy eyes, that hunched figure draped in a cheap and tasteless lime-green garment, that blue slipper dangling from the hoof . . .

I thought of Ana Mathilda setting the old woman on the stool, uttering and chattering stupidly, with those nah, nah's, old lady, sit still, good-for-nothing lady. Now they pay to see you, old lady.

Stupid Ana Mathilda, I thought, running toward the park across from the music conservatory on Ejercito Nacional. Stupid human frailty . . . stupid me.

By the time I got to the part, the contaminated city air had toxified my lungs. I collapsed on the dry, clumped, sulphur-brown grass and began to weep. I had never wept before; I had cried and whined and sniffled. But weeping was strange, grownup, almost dignified.

When I looked up a while later, I saw the limosneo without hands trying to relieve himself against a dead sycamore. The sound of his meaningless waterfall made me think of the painted screen, of the ancient noblewoman trapped behind it. I wept again.

The lady-in-waiting had dug up all the roots of my newborn pity, and now all the City's retarded supermarket bag boys, circus midgets, chemical burn victims, and

pockmarked streetwalkers would remind me of her pleading eyes. They would make me weep. And I would have to acquire the infinite, grownup patience to get over all the imminent heartbreak.

That afternoon, in that toxic wasteland of a park, I did not think I could bear the pain.

Love Repair by Melonie Herring

Daddy taught me to drive when I was fifteen. Shopping malls were still closed on Sundays then, and there was no danger of my hitting anyone. When we got there he told me to get in the driver's seat, sat down on the passenger's side, lit a cigarette, and put on a country-western station. "Do your worst, babe," he said.

Ricky Skaggs belted out a tune as we lurched across the parking lot. Daddy slouched back in his seat and gave me advice as he puffed on his cigarette. "Don't squash that poodle, honey . . . watch out for that light pole . . ." And so I learned to drive.

The day I got my driver's license Daddy gave me my convertible. "It's all yours, babe," he said. "Boy, I wish your mom could see you now."

Mom died when I was two. Coming home from the supermarket one night her red Trans-Am was broad-sided by a car salesman in a Lincoln Continental. The car was totaled and Mom was killed instantly. The groceries in the trunk survived.

Daddy had the car towed home. He wanted to salvage something, he said, so he rebuilt it. He found that he enjoyed rebuilding cars and began to collect them. He buys wrecks and puts them back together again. It's like a hobby. Daddy says it's therapy. "Auto repair--the poor man's analysis," he says. He has over twenty

cars now, plus a few junkers he keeps for parts.

Some of Daddy's cars are stashed at friend's houses. Some are parked in our driveway, and others in our backyard. He's got restored Chevys, Fords, Pontiacs, and job security. He has a red Studebaker in our basement because he took it apart in the driveway one summer and put it back together down there just to see if he could.

My dad never got remarried. He's got girlfriends. He's got loads of buddies to go drinking with. He's got me.

When he's at a bar and gets too drunk to drive he calls me and I go and get him. His buddies carry him out and put him in the back seat, where he sits with his feet up and a cigarette in hand.

"Where to?" I ask.

"East of the sun, west of the moon," he'll say, if he's really sloshed.

"Daddy?"

"Anywhere, baby. It's all the same to me."

And so we cruise the crowded streets of Houston. Up Westheimer, across town and down Montrose. Back up 59, past The Summit, where all the druggies hang out after the rock concerts. Around the loop and by Astroworld, if its' summertime and all the rides are lit up.

Eventually Daddy falls asleep and I drive him home.

* * *

I fell in love with Todd in his dad's Eldorado.

Daddy didn't like Todd at first. "He's too short for you," he said. "He looks like a hoodlum." Daddy was wrong about

that. He wore a beat-up leather jacket and faded jeans not because he couldn't afford better, but because it looked cool. Todd was a rich kid from First Colony. He had long, dark brown hair, beautiful green eyes, and loads of nervous energy, and he played lead guitar in his band. He was at our place watching television with a bunch of my friends. A girl I didn't like brought him, so I started to flirt.

I sensed Daddy lurking by the front door later when I walked Todd to his car. The girl that Todd had come with was long gone. Todd got in his Eldorado, and I leaned in the window of that gorgeous black car and kissed him good-night. That's when I fell in love with him.

"Call me," I said, dazed.

We gazed into each other's eyes for a few moments, and then he turned the key in the ignition. That's when the engine blew up.

The next thing I know I'm sitting on our front lawn, with Todd and Daddy running around the car, yelling instructions to each other, trying to get our old fire extinguisher to work and swatting at the fire with blankets. A crowd of neighbors came out to cheer them on, but the car burned to a crisp.

Daddy decided to like Todd then, either because he felt sorry for him or because he wanted the car for parts.

* * *

Todd didn't phone. Maybe because our kiss set his car on fire, I don't know. For whatever reason, I didn't see him for months. His band was playing at Daddy's favorite bar one night, and Daddy went to see them without telling me. I guess he was getting sick of my moping around the

house, grumbling about how the great love of my life had passed me by. Daddy had a pretty good time, I guess, because after the last set Todd ended up bringing him home.

Todd rang the doorbell. It was late, and the last person I expected to see when I came to the door in my pajamas was Todd. But there he stood.

"Guess what?" Todd said.

I didn't have to guess--I could hear my dad snoring in the back seat of Todd's new Chevy.

"Let him rest," Todd said. He got out his guitar and I put on a robe, and we sat on the warm hood of Todd's car, where he recycled all the love songs he had written for his last girlfriend. Between songs we kissed.

Hours later the car door opened and Daddy stepped out. Wrapped in the blanket I had thrown over him earlier, he looked like the drawing in my history textbook of Pontiac, the Indian chief the car is named for. He squinted at us sitting there on the hood. I could tell that he didn't remember Todd's bringing him home.

"Nice car," he said. "Is it ours?"

He circled the Chevy, patting the hood, stooping to admire the white walls, tracing the chrome with his finger tips. Finishing, he bowed to us and shuffled off towards the house. He paused on the front step. "Call if you need any help putting out fires," he said.

* * *

The next night I went to Todd's house. He had called earlier to give me directions. As I drove through his neighborhood I remembered when, a few

months earlier, some friends and I had driven through and laughed at how silly and grand some of the houses were. And Todd's was the grandest of them all.

Todd met me at the door with a skinny girl with dark red hair and thick glasses. She looked about twelve.

"I'm baby-sitting," explained Todd. "My parents are out of town. This is my sister, Gladys. She's a computer nerd."

"Computer hacker," corrected Gladys. "Want me to access your school records and change all your grades to A's?"

"They already are."

"Cool," she grinned. "But if you're so smart, what are you doing with my brother?"

Todd gave her a friendly shove. "Come on," he said to me. He led me through the house, which looked like something out of a magazine, to his room, which was at least ten times bigger than mine. Guitars and stereo equipment were lined up along one wall, and his record collection took up half of another. I'd never seen anything like it. We sat down on the bed.

"Where are your parents?" I asked.

"Europe." He sounded almost apologetic.

I'd never known anyone whose parents went to Europe and left them the entire house to hang out in. I wasn't entirely comfortable with it.

"I missed you," Todd said finally. Then we started kissing and I felt comfortable again, even in this outlandish place.

We got to the point where, if we had been in a car, we would have gotten up, dusted ourselves off, and gone for a burger and a cola. I began wondering how I was going to get out of this. Did I even want to?

Then Todd stopped kissing me and looked into my eyes. I waited.

"Want to climb a tree?" he asked.

Climb? A tree?

"We have to take Gladys, though. I'm responsible for her."

"A tree?" I asked.

"You'll see," he said. "It'll be fun."

It was. We drove to a small residential neighborhood where we cruised through the streets. "We used to live here," Todd said. "Then Grandpa died and Mom inherited." We got out of the car at a sleepy little park. There was an old birch with thick, sprawling branches--perfect for climbing.

We climbed to the top and sat on the branches, looking out over the park and talking. When we ran out of things to say, Todd and Gladys sang me Elvis songs. I had never been happier.

* * *

"And what have you been up to?" asked Daddy when I got home. I just giggled for a while, but that made him suspicious, so I told him about my evening. He laughed, too.

Todd and I started going out. We usually took his car. I'd sit beside him, my head against his shoulder, and the radio playing. He'd chain-smoke and we'd cruise and talk for hours. Or we'd just sit and talk and feel happy. I wanted to freeze those hours and put them in a time capsule somewhere.

All this bliss made Daddy a little nervous. "Don't get in over your head," he warned one night while we were watching a baseball game on television.

"Too late," I said.

"He's a nice kid," said Daddy, "but he's got a few problems." I got a kick out of

that. Daddy spoke as if Todd were a faulty engine that needed a few days in the shop.

"What kind of problems?"

"You think this boy spends a tenth of the time thinking about you that you spend thinking about him?"

"This is a relationship, Daddy, not a seesaw."

"Do you two ever talk about anything besides his music and his band and his plans? Do you ever talk about your plans?"

"I don't need to talk about my plans."

"That's not the point, and you know it."

Of course I knew it, I wasn't stupid. I knew deep down that I was in love with Todd and Todd was in love with my being in love with him. As neat and talented as he was, he was too insecure and unsure of himself to focus on me. But that would change. I would make it change.

It was as if Daddy could read my mind.

"That boy is a do-it-yourself model. You deserve a finished product."

I blew up at him. "I am not one of your cars!" I yelled. "Don't try to take me apart and then put me back together the way you want to!"

He smiled. "Okay, honey. I'll back off. But maybe you'll listen to an expert." He took a folded up piece of yellowed newspaper from his wallet and pushed it across the table to me. It was an old Ann Landers column about how to tell love from infatuation. I asked how long he had been carrying it around.

"Five, six years. You never know when something like this could come in handy."

"I was only eleven when you clipped it?"

"Just thinking ahead. It concerned the single parent. I thought I might need it."

"The overprotective single parent," I said. "The nose, interfering, single

parent." I didn't give a hoot about what some old lady had said five years ago about love. I was happier than I had been in a long time with Todd. Daddy would just have to trust me.

He kept poking around in his wallet. Finally he pulled out my mom's old high school picture and sighed. "You're the spitting image of her on the outside, but on the inside you're just as pigheaded as your old man."

"I could do a lot worse," I said.

* * *

A few weeks later Todd and I were sitting in his car parked in our driveway, and Todd told me that he wanted to break it off. "It's getting too serious," he said.

I had the feeling that wasn't it at all. He'd found someone new to listen to his love songs. He just didn't have the nerve to tell me. I tried to joke. "You want us to be more shallow?"

He stared at me, looking as if he might cry. He wasn't enjoying this, and my heart went out to him.

Then I realized that if I didn't stop myself, I was going to end up comforting him for breaking up with me.

"Ann Landers tried to warn me about you," I said as I got out of the car. I slammed the door and went to my Daddy's Olds, which was parked right behind Todd's Chevy. I started her up and turned the radio up nice and loud.

Todd came over and leaned in my window. "Where are you going? You live here."

"East of the sun, west of the moon."

"Can't we be friends?"

I was so angry I wanted to back up my Daddy's Olds, floor her, and smash into the

back end of Todd's car. You break my heart, I'll wreck your Chevy. But I'm my father's daughter--I couldn't do that to an innocent auto. Instead I set my dial on FM 107 and took off with a squeal of tires. Todd ran after me but I floored it until he was just a tiny dot in the rearview mirror.

The music was good. It carried me through our neighborhood and onto the freeway. I decided to drive as long as it took to get my mind clear. I love this car, I was thinking. Nothing can get me in here. It's when your out of your car that the trouble starts.

There was a groan from the backseat, and Daddy's face appeared in the rearview mirror. "Apparently a man can't take a nap in his own car without getting hijacked," he said.

"What on earth are you doing back there?"

"I was sleeping. It's usually pretty peaceful back here."

I glared at him. I didn't need this. Not now. I rode for a few moments in silence. I had planned to drive for hours--a heartbroken young woman, racing down the freeway, tears streaming down her face. I could see that it was funny, but having Daddy pop up in the backseat like that kind of ruined my picture.

A few miles later he asked, "Are we heading anywhere in particular?"

"Nope."

"Care to talk about it?"

I didn't really. I wanted to drive. Alone. I wanted to drive for miles and miles and wallow in my sorrow. But it was too late for that.

"There's a twenty-four hour car wash a few miles up," Daddy said. "Your mom and I used to go out there to talk. We figured that even if we didn't get anything worked

out the car would get clean." He smiled. "We don't have to talk if you don't want to. but the car could use a washing."

The most miserable night in my life and he was talking about washing the car.

Of course, the car did need to be washed. At the next intersection I turned on to the road that the car wash was on, giving the pedal the full weight of my foot. Daddy leaned forward to squeeze my shoulder, then settled back in his seat, smiling. "No rush. We've got all night."

Hunches

by Chad Poovey

Mrs. Rogers was a trunk-shaped woman with wiry nostrils and earholes, a profile like Spencer Tracy's. She moved like a wind-up toy soldier, hindered as she was by varicose calves and weight and rheumatism, but also by the newspapers she stuffed in every pocket of her calico smock and the telephone she lugged about like a ball and chain. She carried them always--as she cleaned house, put her laundry on the line, even as she weeded her vegetable garden. She was known throughout our neighborhood as a devout Lutheran, a steady worker, and one strong woman.

But she had to be. She had married a man who did not support her and then had the nerve to die, leaving her three children to raise. The oldest daughter married a mechanic who raced stock-cars at the local speedway. He always lost due to some technicality and seemed to compensate for his losses by making his wife pregnant. Babies popped out right and left and they always ended up at Mrs. Rogers'. The second daughter married a Portuguese man who accepted as his dowry perpetual free room and board. He simply refused to work. Instead he sat on the doorstep in his nightshirt and played the classical guitar. Darrell, the youngest child, was, as the neighbors put it, "not exactly right." He was slightly cross-eyed and could not help but spit on people when he talked. He worked at a filling station, and as

children, my brothers and I loved to ride by on our bicycles and taunt him, but that was only a game. In the evenings, he took us back into his musty bedroom, where model airplanes dangled in dogfights from fishing lines, and showed us his latest Spitfire or Japanese Zero.

Mrs. Rogers inspected socks at one of the hosiery mills. She also raised an enormous garden, canned what grew, taught an adult Sunday school class, visited her mother at the nursing home daily, and volunteered for Red Cross projects. Aside from all this she still found time to know everything.

She never turned off her police scanner. Before the wail of the sirens had faded, Mrs. Rogers would come bang on our windows and shout, "Three alarm fire at the Buford Mill!" or "Train just hit a station wagon over behind the water tower!" or "They's been another hold-up at the A-n-P. Better lock-up, the law's coming this way with dogs!"

She knew when there would be rain, storms, hail, frost, snow, drought, and record high and low temperatures.

She knew the infrastructure of every factory and mill in town, who really ran what, who was the most hated, who got the raises. She knew which shops were hiring and which were laying off. People came to her for advice before they applied for work.

She knew who was getting married and who was getting a divorce, who was having a baby and who was having an affair. She knew who was living beyond his means and who was tight as all get-out. She knew who liked and who didn't like the preacher. She knew when Tracy, my spaniel, had torn into somebody's garbage on the next block. She knew when I left the water spigot

dripping behind the garage. "Hunches," she called them, led her to these conclusions.

She was considerate--but brash. She never knocked before entering our house. Once, she told my father to replace the front tires on our station wagon. They created a hazard for everyone on the street, she said. And if my parents argued, she stood right outside the kitchen window and listened, just as she listened to all of our neighbors.

"What goes on here on this street has to do with us all," she would say. "You just never know. . . ."

Nevertheless, she always did.

No one in our neighborhood could put Mrs. Rogers in her place. She intimidated younger women like my mother, and what man would set straight a grandmother with so many problems of her own? Besides, we felt secure under Mrs. Rogers' eye, that is, so long as we did nothing wrong.

Still, Mrs. Rogers' omniscience did not protect her own hodge-podge family from misfortune. One of her granddaughters was hit by a truck and spent several months in a coma. The race-car driver began to drink, lost his license and was banned from the speedway. He retaliated against the state by providing it twins to feed. In the meantime, half of Mrs. Rogers' house had burnt while she was at church. And then there was still the Portuguese son-in-law who refused to wear a shirt or get a job. He played and played and played, but the classical guitar never really caught on in our small town. Worst of all, Darrell was drafted and sent to Vietnam.

At first, no one in our neighborhood believed the government could take Darrell from Mrs. Rogers. She had always ruled his

life omnipotently. She took him from public school when he was ten and placed him in a Lutheran academy, which she could not afford, to save him from ridicule. When he failed, she bullied the teachers until he passed. When the other kids bullied Darrell, she bullied their mothers. I guess we thought Mrs. Rogers might bully the government, or perhaps through her omniscience, blackmail some official and obtain an exemption.

Besides, there seemed no valid reason for Darrell to go. The war was almost over for the Americans--on the ground at least. There was talk of peace talks and Vietnamization. How effective could a stuttering, spitting grease monkey be pit against communist guerillas?

Nonetheless, he went, despite Mrs. Rogers' letters to senators and trips to the state capitol. Six weeks into his tour, Mrs. Rogers received a letter. Darrell was missing in action.

By this time everyone had heard of MIAs. They were usually either taken prisoner by the Vietcong, or their bodies were not recovered from the battlefield. Mrs. Rogers refused condolences for either case.

"We just don't know right now," she told my mother. "But I'm going to find out. There's ways of finding these things out, I know. . . ."

She began by writing to the leader of Darrell's platoon, then to every member. Some of them even wrote back. No one knew anything. Darrell had simply disappeared. Mrs. Rogers did not stop there. She went on up the military ladder, writing letters that were, upon reaching higher rungs, less frequently answered. The letters she did receive were mimeographed forms that referred her to other departments, which,

when finally contacted, referred her to still other departments. She got up in the middle of the night to make calls to Vietnam that in most cases did not go through. When they did she was put on hold for hours, then told there was nothing to tell. Her son was missing--that was all.

She began the whole process again, believing that she had overlooked some clue somewhere in her search. Once again, she wrote to the platoon leader, then to the platoon members, some of who already had been rotated back to the states. Then she wrote the base commander again and the regional commander, then a half a dozen generals. The peace talks began and it seemed Mrs. Rogers might run out of war and people to write. That was when she turned to the government with the intention of "straightening out the military over there."

She wrote to the governor and finally spent three days in his antechamber before she spoke with his secretary. The secretary was compiling a list of the state's missing soldiers and war dead. He assured Mrs. Rogers that Darrell would receive full military honors and have his name placed on any memorial the state might someday erect. Mrs. Rogers explained rather sternly that no such thing would ever happen to her son's name so long as she was still alive and no one knew for certain his fate. Then a guard escorted her from the building.

She wrote to every state congressman and both senators. The congressmen referred her to the senators who re-referred her to the congressmen. In the meantime, the preacher and a few intrepid neighbors tried to adjust Mrs. Rogers to the fact that perhaps her son was dead.

"You don't know that," she would snap. "How can you talk about something you know absolutely nothing about? Have you ever been to Southeast Asia? Well, I've talked to people who have. I got letters. . . ." And she would go get her letters and read between the lines.

She continued her correspondence. She wrote to the wives and mothers of POWs and other MIAs. She wrote to somebody in the Joint Chiefs of Staff. She wrote to somebody in the Pentagon. She wrote to Henry Kissinger. She wrote to President Nixon. She took a bus trip to Washington, spent most of her money on taxi fare and hotel rooms, then came home exhausted and missed three days of work. The peace talks began; people looked forward to putting Vietnam behind them. The neighbors stopped asking about Darrell and silently endured Mrs. Rogers' tirades about bureaucracy and the pointlessness of the war.

"I know what everybody's saying about me, but let me tell you one thing--I'm going to find out," she would say. "I know there's a way to know and they can't keep it from me forever. . . ."

The war finally ended, but she still had a notebook full of left-over hunches. When she had tried them all, she tried them all again. Only the Portuguese son-in-law seemed to respect her persistence. Whenever she tended the clothesline, or weeded the garden, he just stood right there, holding the phone ready in case Washington or Hanoi might open the line. He even added a steady, rhythmic pace to her search. He played and played and played until we could no longer recognize one song from another, then played right on until we no longer even heard his music, only its rare absences. But I have no

doubt that Mrs. Rogers learned to distinguish every note. I remember how she rocked the porch swing ever so slowly in the twilight, how she culled through her old mail, chewed her pencil and composed her letters, while on the steps below, a melancholy little man in his undershirt coaxed the sun to sleep behind the water towers and smokestacks, his lullaby pierced by factory whistles and far-away sirens.

Fisherman's Line
by Sandra Stanley

Take a problem
slide it on a hook
flip the wrist
so the rod casts the line far
spinning out
until (with a faint plop-plopping)
the problem drops
into clean-watered calm:
Underneath --
a big fat fish
nibbles it away
to a squiggly bit of
Nothing.

The Crow Dies Also
by Theodore J. Calcaterra

The first time I saw the crow was when it was perched high in the tree on the corner of our street. It stared down at me with its black pearls. I don't know why it caught my eye but it did. I was not frightened nor was I surprised. I sort of expected him to be there. He was black, of course, almost blue. All he did was sit and laugh. Laugh at me? I left him, promising not to return to look at the crow.

I would go to school and come home and there would be no crow. I went to sleep and there was no crow.

The second time I saw the crow was when I was twenty. It was perched high in a tree looking down at me. Still it had the pearls; black they were, pitch black but not as shiny as before. I was not frightened nor was I surprised. I guess I sort of expected him to be there. I guess he was there for me this time. I was the man with the white pearls, and it kept the black ones. It was the crow I had seen when I was ten. I knew that. But he was older now and so was I. Had I changed or had the crow? I left him promising I would not look at the crow again.

I would go to work and come home and not look at the crow. I went to sleep and dreamt about the crow. What happened to the glimmer in its eyes? Why was his black coat tattered and dingy?

The third time I saw the crow was when I was thirty and had children of my own. My youngest boy pointed the crow out to me. It sat high on a branch in the tree, sitting next to it was another crow. The other crow was black as pitch and had the purest of black pearls whilst the other had clouds in its gems. There they sat and laughed. Laughing at me and mine? I turned and laughed at them. I was not frightened, nor was I surprised, neither were my children. I left the crows, promising not to think about them.

I would go to work and come home and spend time with my children, but not think about the crows. I went to bed and thought about the crows.

The next day my youngest son came up to me and said that he couldn't sleep last night because he was thinking about the crows.

"Do you know that the crows are related, daddy?"

"No, how are they related?" I asked of my son.

"Well, the old one is the father and the young one is his son, just as I am to you."

We walked outside to look at the crows. There on the ground laid the old crow. He was dead, and the pearls were gone. High in the tree was the other crow, this time it was not laughing but crying.

I turned to my son who was also crying.

"You won't die, will you daddy?" He asked looking into the white pearls.

The Astronomer
by Beatrice Fernandez

Balancing high in the chill night air,
he peers into the past
pupils flaring wide as a cat's,
trapping the light, now his at last
after twenty billion years.

From the darkness he gathers light
with seven thousand eyes of glass
and two of flesh at his command
and all his eyes are pointed toward
a slice of sky
watching the edge of the universe
glitter with infant galaxies.

The ancient light has touched him
with its craze;
he will never be the same.

(Wo)man

by Beatrice Fernandez

(S)he hides behind the words
you are reading
(s)he is always there
tightly wound within
curves of parentheses
ready to spring forth
bound in footnotes
wriggling Houdini-like
to escape

(S)he lives under raised eyebrows
(s)he rents time
in smirks and leers
(s)he takes the odd job
in jokes and asides
(s)he is kept busy
performing for the crowd
(invisibly)
and (s)he is always laughing
(secretly)
(s)he is called (wo)man
but (s)he knows
(s)he is Woman

Uncle Erich
by James L. Choron

Hard as the steel in a Mauser bayonet;
he rode into Russia in 'forty-one
on the back of a Tiger tank.
In 'forty-five, he walked home;
two thousand miles of frozen Hell.
Grotesquely twisted ice statues
and crimson footprints in the snow's crust
marked the trail.
Little bald-headed, yellow men
shot at him all the way.
"For no apparent reason," he said
half seriously,
"except for the kind of clothes I wore."
No hatred, no bitterness;
his second war.
"We lost the first one, too.
Beaten, not defeated."
Ninety winters tend to make a man
bend in places.

Tranquillity Hill

by Lathon Lewis

When Persus Nil awoke, he found himself alone. He was all that existed in any space or time. He was one with everything, which in fact was nothing. Nothing except for him. He was the only presence in a continuing void, that stretched beyond all awareness. An electric feeling pulsed through his veins. He felt as though he was neither living nor dead. Then came that blinding white light that he could not only see, but feel. Persus felt the light explode through his being as he took on a physical form. The black and white blended together and burst into a brilliant picture of blue, green, and orange. Other prismatic colors came to life, and suddenly Persus was only a small part of a total existence. Life began to breathe around him, as plants and animals fashioned themselves into their destined forms.

He was now in a particular place. A mysteriously magical place that he seemed to control. The wind whispered soft phrases of reassurance. He was living in his very own world. There were no other people around. And everything did indeed seem to be alright. The environment was peaceful and the animals obeyed and respected him. Yet, a steady uneasiness rumbled quietly in his stomach, like the kind a practiced daredevil might feel before performing a familiar feat. Persus felt as though he had been through all of

this before, but deemed that to be impossible.

"Where am I?" he pondered. Suddenly the answer came to him, he was on Tranquillity Hill. Although he was not sure how he came to this conclusion, Persus knew that it was a correct one. He sprawled lazily on the grassy hill and gazed curiously at the sun. The orange ball began to glow in a strange way. Cracks appeared on its surface, as it soon broke into a multi-colored form with many jagged sections. The kaleidoscopic rays beamed down on his body and a smooth warmth swept across his skin. The massive sky screamed with blue delight, as clouds of puffy, white cotton began to take shape and form recognizable figures. And all was well.

A pink, fuzzy rabbit hopped to Persus' side. The creature, looking a bit worried, spoke with the voice of an old man. "My son," he said sympathetically, "why are you here again? Have you still not learned that artificial happiness only leads to despair?" Persus looked upon the rabbit with a threatening glare, for he realized that with a blink of an eye he could wipe the animal from existence. And so he did . . . the peaceful quiet that followed was interrupted by the rabbit's words which he constantly heard in his thoughts. The words brought a slight chill to his bones. A chill that made his spine tingle. A tingle that felt like millions of ants marching up his back. He was afraid to turn his head and see. The tingling continued its march upward, and soon it was looped tightly around his neck. In a sudden jerk he was thrust towards the sky, with his neck bellowing from the intensifying pain that it suffered. But once again the eyelid proved to be an all

powerful thing, as his troubles were cast away with a blink. As Persus fell back softly to the grassy surface of the hill, he proclaimed loudly, "I, Persus Nil, am the sole controller of my own destiny." And after another shot of inspiration, he fell into a deep, peaceful sleep.

Dreamy visions filled Persus' head as he slumbered. He dreamed of escaping to peace, to happiness . . . to tranquillity. Life, for him, only became better as he continued to dream. His company was shared by one other, and to him she was more beautiful than anything else that existed in his world. His only purpose in life was to share with her all of the love that he could.

Persus awoke with a good feeling flowing through him, his mood obviously set by the contents of his dream. He picked up a guitar and began strumming a soothing melody. The music immediately captured the attention of all the animals, and even the trees seemed to become alert. A most beautifully colored bluejay landed on top of his guitar. The bird wiggled its head in a peculiar way as if it was trying to communicate to Persus. Soon his strumming was accompanied by the cheerful chirping of the bird. All of the animals gathered around to witness the astonishing duet. And all seemed to be pleasant in the cool, summer breeze. But in the back of his mind visions of the pink, fuzzy rabbit appeared. He thought of the warning that was given to him; it was troubling his mind, because he was living a perfect existence and there was nothing that could disturb his peace. Nothing.

An uncontrollable twitch moved into the eye of Persus, and he soon found the musical gaiety that surrounded him to be

gone. He felt a bundle of ill-feelings unravel inside him, and then turned to find his recurring nemesis--the pink, fuzzy rabbit.

"I am not here to harm you," the rabbit assured, "only to try and save you from the celestial crash." And with that, the creature was gone.

Indecision filled Persus' mind, for he knew that he could go back to the brutal reality; forever leaving behind the illusion that others only dream about. Tranquillity Hill could be his forever, his and only his. For him, there were no other alternatives. There was only one decision he could make, and Tranquillity Hill would be his forever . . .

But on the thirteenth day a brand new feeling entered his emotional framework. And that was loneliness. For the first time Persus Nil experienced the painful side of being alone. There were no other people to share in the joy of his new world. He only had the animals, the figments of his vivid imagination. It could not and would not be enough. The ailing Persus roared out a cursing scream about his predicament. It didn't matter though, for there was no one to listen . . . no one to help. All sense of reason began to slip from his mind. He questioned the need for his tongue. There was no one to talk to, no one to sing to, no one to laugh with, so in a fit of sudden rage Persus ripped out his own tongue. Now he was in a permanent emotionless state. He felt a need to destroy his tongue, and he did. He burned it until it was black ashes that could be scattered by the blowing wind.

The pink, fuzzy rabbit made its final appearance. A tear formed in the rabbit's

eye as he looked at Persus. He then spoke the last words that Persus would ever understand. He said, "Too late." The rabbit was now gone forever.

Persus sat on top of the hill and realized exactly what the rabbit meant. It was too late. His imagination opened up and was soon extending beyond his control. The army of little blue pixes that can only attack you once, gathered around the ill-fated figure on top of the hill. Just like a small flame that is flicked towards the crashing ocean, Persus would soon exist no more. The blue pixes began their attack. They were armed with their needles of destruction. The last thing Persus remembered seeing was a psychedelic rainbow smiling across the sky . . .

* * *

"What's wrong with him, Doctor?"

"An obvious overdose. His brain is permanently ruined. The poor kid . . . he managed to cut his tongue out before anyone could stop him."

The doctor and nurse curiously stared at the straight-jacketed figure sitting in the corner. There was a patch sewn on his shirt that read:

Percy Nilsson

Age: 19

The nurse walked up to him and rubbed his cheek. There was no response. His pupils were unclear and unfocused. There was no expression on his face. His consciousness had fallen asleep, forever.

"Why do they do it?" the nurse asked.

"I don't know," the doctor answered, "but I hear some do it to escape to happiness, to peace, . . . to tranquillity."

In the middle of no place
by Christian Williams

In the middle of no place
I stood next to a railroad track.

In the background, majestic
mountains touched the sky.

The brilliant yet soft yellow and
orange glow of the sun surrounded me.

The snow peaked mountains in the distance
and cactus around me

allowed me to witness two of
nature's realms.

I could see a train in the distance
and I wondered where it was going.

It thundered by me and shook the
ground.

It passed me by and there I stood.

In the middle of no place,
I stood next to a railroad track.

Writer
by Joe Gound

He sits, or stands as the case may be,
no battlefield etiquette here.
Eyes glazed, stare straight ahead;
fingertips rough, callused, and hard,
from pressing the triggering keys;
no longer leaden missiles
but ridged metal plates
embedding a permanent wound;
stained from the chemicals coating
the cartridges he fires.

Logician, tactician, cartographer of doom
sweat-stained brow and darkened face,
chest crisscrossed by bandoliers
of carbon coated ribbons.
He is not the grunt of Dien-Ben Phu,
Da Nang or Saigon;
slogging through sweltering
soggy heat, knee-deep, sucking mud.
Warrior of the modern world,
remote controlled weapons--
pushing a button, turning a key--
damage on command.
His war is fought by scarring victims
with wounds that will not heal.

An eight-and-a-half
by eleven inch bunker:
death through life,
god-like power,
or versa-vice.
Banana-clip cartridges,
fall in the firing zone.
Enemy bodies litter the roadside,

under an ATV's tread;
oozing fluids not meant to be seen;
Glossy black carrion
birds walk the roadside.

Long, tall grass rustles,
did that body move?
"D'I hit him? Is he finished?
They all should be dead.
Hell, what will it matter?
I'll never see 'em again."

Soldier-assassin, enemy-friend.

Eyes struggle open
look at the sky
head turns to see
dead friends close by
black feathered shapes
surrounding the scene
bending, mouths working
nourished by death
a dark shape
unfeathered
moves closer
differences many
yet the eyes are the same
pause for a moment
the shape moves away
"they are all dead, but I am alive?"
He couldn't have missed from that range
there's no way.
Unless . . . I was meant to survive, walk
away.
Hell of a thing
to write home
and tell Mom,
that my life is owed to wounds placed too
well

Once in a Lifetime by Eric Meissner

My first memory was the sound of the ocean surf outside my bedroom window. A warm sea breeze lifted the curtains letting the sun shine through my window, turning my room a soft golden hue. My first leave after bootcamp had started. My first stop: The Grand Canyon. Outside in the driveway was my transportation, a new KZ 900 motorcycle. Truly one hot machine; gloss black with gold trim covering 100 horse power worth of speed. A cross-country motorcycle was a dream come true.

A hot cup of coffee and a small donut was all I could eat. The call of the road was resounding in my ears; nothing but an Act of God could stop this boy. By ten o'clock the outskirts of San Diego were far, far behind. By two o'clock I started across the Mojave desert. During most of the hundred mile crossing of the desert I had a strong, dry, grating desert wind beating me back, blowing directly in my face. Large desert locusts would whizz by me acting like little devils flying kamikaze missions against my body. Large sand twisters danced across the desert for as far as the eyes could see. "Fifty Miles Till Next Services" was the last sign I saw.

Thinking that I had enough gas to make the next gas station, I kept pushing on. All too soon it became apparent that I should have stopped to get gas at the last station, but it was too late to worry about that. After half an hour I had to switch to the reserve tank. The wind was still in my face and starting to strain my nerves.

The constant noise in my ears was deafening.

When I started to think that I was not going to make it, I saw a sign ahead. A minute later I could see a gas station up ahead on the right. I feel that God was looking over my shoulder, because about one hundred yards from the exit the engine cut out and I coasted to a stop in front of the gas pump. I decided that from then on I would keep better track of the amount of gas that I had. Getting stuck on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere is not the best thing to do.

As I left the desert I stopped at an overpass to look back at where I had been. I turned around to look at where I was going, and to my surprise, I saw two eagles flying overhead. Freedom, the luxury of making your own choices in life. "I sure am damn happy to be away from civilization," I said to myself.

One-hundred and fifty miles west of Flagstaff, Arizona I stopped at a small K.O.A. campground. Across the street, a small run-down cafe stood. Old men and young children sitting and playing around the steps brought back memories of the Old West. That night the view of the stars was unreal, almost a dream. From my campsite, on top of a mound, I could see stars from horizon to horizon. Shooting stars tracked across the sky a hundred miles above me. The sound of the creatures of the night lulled me to sleep, a rest so peaceful compared to the rest I had been getting the last three months.

The next morning I woke up before sunrise. Far to the east I could see the first rays of the sun. The temperature was in the forties. Clouds of steam came from my mouth and nose as I exhaled. Life never

felt so good and the air so fresh as it did that morning. As soon as my motorcycle was packed, I started out. About fifty miles west of Flagstaff I turned north on Highway 247. Seventy miles ahead of me was the Grand Canyon. The landscape moved by me at an incredible pace. The wind that had been in my face the day before was now at my back. The roar of the wind in my ears was gone. As I reached the entrance of Grand Canyon National Park, the landscape changed from scrub brush and tumbleweeds to a dense forest. As I rode through the park I started to wonder how big the canyon really was. As I rounded a sharp corner, the Grand Canyon opened up in front of me.

This must truly be the greatest wonder in the world. The vastness of the canyon was unbelievable. I felt as if I was looking out of the window of an airplane. The people that I could see on the trail took on the shape of small ants, moving slowly and in line as if heading towards their favorite picnic area. Looking across the canyon I found it hard to understand how it must have been formed. You could see thirty miles down the river as it cut its way through the canyon. Across the canyon on the north rim you could just make out a few small trees. They look small, but more likely are taller than a three-story house. I felt as if I was flying as I stood there looking. I felt that if I stared any longer that I would not be able to break away from this colossal sight. My heart was pounding with incredible force. Adrenaline was rushing to my brain, giving me a high better than any drug could give. This was the first time in my life that my breath was taken away by a natural sight. It is an experience like this that comes few too many times in one life.

I Vowed Last Night to Save My Life
by W. Mallory Marsden

Linda's upstairs fixing her hair
Jim's smoking in the park
Cindy's taken Daddy's new car
Chris is reading Oliver Twist

Jim takes out Cindy
Linda takes Chris

Chris loves Linda
And so does Linda
Jim doesn't care
Cindy loves suicide

Jim goes to the funeral
Chris goes to college
Linda goes to Hollywood

Just Wondering
by Patricia O'Neill

These days, when night time comes around
And I lie in my bed
In the hot and steamy room,
I wonder.

In the shimmering white dress,
I'll look through the filmy curtain
Down the endless aisle
towards the altar,
Towards my groom,
Towards forever.

The father, the immense Son
On the wall, overwhelming,
Draws me closer;
My rock;
But the eyes, all of them,
Like hawks;
Can they see the tiny feathers flying about
in my head?

There! children fighting, babies crying,
A husband's love grown stale
And the once gentle touch
Scrapes cold, rough as a brick on my
wrinkled skin.
Over there now!
My white, brassy, wiry hair falls
Along with my tears and me, too.

No more courting as in past summers
When the sun was warm
And skin was dappled
And eyes were bright;
No, my father, let me clutch your arm
A moment longer.

We are her,
So soon;
That young man is strange to me now;
Yet his eyes meet mine,
I awaken
The terror has floated away.