

Fall 1994

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Valparaiso University

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The Lighter



Fall 1994

The Lighter

Volume **XL** issue one
Fall 1994

Valparaiso University

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“He gave himself up so wholly to the reading of romances that a-nights he would pour on until it was day, and a-days he would pour on until it was night; and thus by sleeping little and reading much the moisture of his brain was exhausted to that degree that at last he lost the use of his reason.”

Miguel De Cervantes Saavedra, Don Quixote

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Laundry Songs

I see your soft, Cheered hands forcing laundry
into a machine filled with soap and water,
your hair hanging down your face escaping
the jail of a tight braid. And when you're done,
and the machine beats the clothes in rhythm,
you sit on a cracked green plastic chair
to read your miscellaneous news.

As you sit there in the steam of your laundry,
ignoring the screaming baby and dog
that barks out the inside of your pickup,
I remember another woman in
a foreign land, beating my diapers
against the stones, and washing our laundry
in a large barrel, her hair like yours,
hanging down the sides of a humid day.
She would pull the washed clothes like new dough through
two rolling pins, and biting the end of
a clothes pin would hum songs to the child
strapped on her back, and to the small one
smiling at her feet and bare toes dancing.

As your laundry cart clanks a dull thud near
the drier, and you curse beneath your breath,
I am brought back to you, listening to
three friends jabbering over underwear,
and I know you to be kin to my mother
from a different age and how if you
were there then, you too would hum to quiet
the child reaching from the pampers, to sleep.



Heidi Sinisalo

"Charlie"

Imitating Dad

I was seven when I first stole
cigarette butts from your ash-tray,
and squirreled up guava trees
to smoke your leftovers, while
my little fingers filthy and ashed
with guava bark would shake
laughter at my sneakiness.

So afraid you would find me.

And when I was done,
I would disguise the smell
with guava seeds and mud
rubbing the smell in leaves.

Tonight,
I sit on a roof
outside a house I rent
with four friends, alone,
between the leaves
of my unfamiliar tree,
and I have borrowed
this cigarette from
a roommate downstairs.

So afraid you will hate me.

When you come this Thursday
I will have showered, brushed
and cologned my body in ointments
and you will never know me.

Willow Night

I

I know about the willow that drinks
from the river bank where you take
her Friday nights, and how the
green veiled curtain of leaves
cascades like rivers, covering
the thunder of your love-making.

When you sneak back into our bedroom,
and I silently pull back the cover
of our bed you are still, warm,
and smelling of damp leaves where
I lay my head on your chest dusty
with herb and thirst for your pleasure.

In the morning, when our bodies
together have tumbled in our dreams
arranging themselves with your arm
lightly wrapped around my waist,
your hand resting between my breasts,
all I feel is your cold hard stomach
hungering, with an emptiness for breakfast.

II

The woman under the willow is a nymph
in your imagination, keeping you from the
spirit of the Friday we swam with our child.
I go to the bank to drink herb water
pure like the felt of his cheek
newly washed by a mother's touch.

He is older now and so we play
hide and seek under the cover
of the willow leaves, and we dance
as if we were earth things detached
from a past and a whirlwind of pain.
He asks for you between games
as if you would come and nurse him
with your milk like you did before
he became confined to Friday nights
and the cover of the willow leaves.

And when I come home and you turn
your body away, coldness comes back.
Your mind like the whirlwind of leaves
scatters the image of your son into a woman
who you hate, and you rise in the morning with fear.

III

Father comes to play on Friday night
with penance riding on his shoulder,
so I forgive him with a little kiss, and
he laughs with me decorating his face
with moss, and covering his feet in dirt.

Mother's Garden

You were never among the sedentary one
Who thrilled to watch fortune's wheel spin at 6 PM
It made you dizzy.
Or gaze at fish suspended in pet-murky water
They drown your soul.

Instead you were your own companion with
A molasses butt 69 years large, the giant fulcrum
Of your indefatigable body which had only two occupations.
Bean picking was one of them.

And the cows (bloated insipid sages) knew—
Knew how everything when you stood yearned
For the earth.
Sagged, slung, and strained downward to break your
Human bondage.

You never argued. Down, down
To the dirt you swung the torso that bore the nine children
(the job less rewarding) who have all gone on
To brighter cities.

Your hand groped among the manure-enhanced
Soil: planting, nurturing, waiting to be a mother
For the first time.

And the cows (bloated insipid sages) knew—
Knew how everything under that trampled dirt yearned
For the sky. How they would
split, sprout, and swell upward to break their
Earthly bondage.

And they did.

But now the cows stare blankly at the irony—
How each could be granted their greatest wish, yet
In passing, missed their sweet reunion.

And to my mother (solitary under the soil)
I offer an apologetic plunk
As another lanky yellow bean
Hits the bucket.

Only eight more rows left to pick.

Akbar's Night

*I dreamt of my mother once again last night,
I dreamt she was near me, I dreamt she held me tight.
Mother tell me stories, mother tell me tales.
Mother scratch my head and back with your fingernails.
I dreamt I never left you, I dreamt we never parted,
I dreamt I was at home again, before my journey started.
The day I left you mother, that day I learned of sorrow,
That day I knew you'd not be there when I woke tomorrow.
I may not see you when I wake, but soon it will be night,
As soon as sleep comes to my eyes my dreams will make it right.
Mother hold me close to you, like you did last night,
Mother let me kiss your face, mother hold me tight....*

Akbar walked a little more quickly than was his fashion in the evenings. Nighttime was his favorite time, not only because he was closer to the comfort of sleep, but because the streets were truly his at night. He liked the cool air of the night, the fragile quiet, and the silvery sheen that the streetlights and the dew conspired together to make on the pavement. He usually walked the streets alone with his thoughts, paying no more heed to the night watchman who hailed him by name than to cross over to the far side of the alley to avoid his lonely chatter. His thoughts would usually cool down at night, and grow quieter as the gurgle of the streetside waterways grew louder, but tonight he was chased through the twisting paths of the city by the dark wingbeats of images he didn't want to see again.

It was almost too late to sing, but Akbar felt he had to break the hold of the unwelcome thoughts that drove him almost into a run with the soothing vibrations he felt in his own chest whenever he raised his voice.

*Darling Sara, my delight,
I want to be with you tonight.
Just a moment at your side,
Let me take you as my bride.*

He knew he shouldn't sing about Sara. He'd promised her father that he wouldn't anymore—after he had explained to him how upset she got to hear her name spoken out loud on the street. Her father, Haji Ghasem, was a fine man. A man he'd be proud to call father-in-law, as soon as he was able to pull together the dowry Akbar would require of him for marrying his daughter. Akbar had made it known to Haji Ghasem that he fancied his daughter, and the merchant seemed flustered at first. Akbar was not one to see the worst in people right off, though. He gave the man the benefit of the doubt and approached him in a way that no feelings would be hurt, and once he had learned of the secret, well, he was a patient man. Misfortune could strike like lightning in the bazaar, and could destroy a vast fortune like it was never there. Of course he couldn't wait forever, and if Haji Ghasem wasn't able to pull himself together soon, the man would have to settle for a lesser suitor. Sara was a fine girl, but Akbar had to consider himself as well.

Things were beginning to look calm to him again. Soon he would go to the stoop of the Akrami rug store, where Mashd Hassan Akrami would leave him a blanket and a mat to sleep on. On cold nights there would be two heavy blankets, but tonight he thought he might not even need the one.

Akbar was aware that as a son of the prophet, he had no right to accept alms, but he was also aware that there was a greater good involved. The mulla at the mosque near Hassan's home had told him that he could take the food that people gave him, and accept their charity, because it gave them the opportunity to do

good deeds, and Akbar should be proud to be the one to give them this chance to elevate themselves in the eyes of God. He knew that he would share in the almsgivers' good deeds, and so, every meal he ate, and every article of clothing he wore bore witness to his favored status in the eyes of Allah. The mulla told him a poem that he sang sometimes when the sun was hot on his head and shoulders:

*The sons of Adam are all the fingers of a single hand
God made us all from one clay and shaped us with one mold
To live in peace this is all we need to understand
We all must help each other whether young or old*

Akbar was happy to receive the help of his brothers and sisters, and he thought that the rule about alms wouldn't apply to him anyway, because the neighborhood was the only family he knew, so what they gave him wasn't charity after all. His mother called him Seyyed Akbar when he was a boy, and he had thought that this was his name, but it was strange to him that so many others also had names that started with Seyyed. Only after he became alone in the world, when his mother was exchanged for the many brothers and sisters he had now, did he realize that the Seyyed in his name meant that he was a son of the prophet. He told this to the mulla who led the Friday prayers in his old neighborhood mosque, thinking the man would embrace him. Instead, he frowned and asked how he knew it was true. Akbar had nothing to say except that it was the name his mother gave him, and surely the mulla knew his mother, Nargess. The mulla frowned again and told him he was just Akbar, Akbar agha if he was good, but that he shouldn't call himself Seyyed if he didn't know his father.

That was long ago, and since then he had changed neighborhoods. He didn't like to think about that old place, especially when he couldn't sing happy songs to distract himself, so he

decided to walk a little faster and to light one of the cigarettes that the night watchman made for him and gave him if he stopped near his spot for long enough to hear a story from his youth or a complaint about his age.

Nasroddin's cigarettes were usually good for forgetting things. He asked the old man why he rolled his cigarettes when he could get them ready-made from the corner stand, and the watchman said it was so he could put some of his chocolate in with the tobacco. Akbar had had chocolate before, and although it looked like the brown beads the old man rubbed into the tobacco, it smelled different. He thought the old man was being tricked by someone who was giving him spoiled chocolate, but he didn't think it was proper to mention it, especially since chocolate wasn't for smoking in the first place. It made the tobacco smell a little like the tar that would be boiling in barrels by the streetside during the summer months, when people coated their roofs to keep the rain from soaking in. Akbar had to be careful for a while after the tarring of the roofs, because it would stick to his shoes and people would know whose roof he had been on, watching the passersby or taking a midday nap.

The bitter, pungent smoke soothed his throat as it went down, and Akbar held it in until he was a little dizzy. Soon, he knew, he would be at Mashd Hassan's stoop, alone with the sound of the water, and already his eyes began to grow warm with the thought of sleep. Soon he would see his mother again, and she would sing to him, and tell him stories about the new place where she lived. Akbar would ask her again when he could come to her, and he hoped that this time she would say "Come to me, aziz. Come live with me again Seyyed Akbar jan." Always when he asked her, she would look a little sad, stroke his hair and pull his head to her bosom and say "Not yet aziz. Not yet my son."

He would have to remember to take her by the thumb tonight. Sara had told him that was what he must do that day long

ago when he had knocked on Haji Ghasem's door for his midday meal. Sara had said that if he took his mother's thumb when he dreamed of her, she would do whatever he asked her to. Never did Akbar remember to do it though, until he was already awake and the dream had started to fade.

Akbar saw that he has arrived at his bedroom, and felt almost too tired to remove his shoes, roll out his spread and fold his overcoat into a pillow. He lay his head down, pulled the blanket up to his chin, and felt the cool of the air against his closed eyes. His knees were hot. They burned and ached and felt hollow, like the coarse pumice he used to scrape the paste of dead skin from his heels at the bath. He hoped he wouldn't have to bathe in the morning—that his dreams would be of his mother and not Sara. Not Hassan.

The bath attendant would smile at him if he went there too often. Once he said Akbar should eat more yogurt and less fried food until he married. It would make things easier for him, and his dreams would be less troubled.

He liked the warm water and the soap well enough, and when he put his clothes back on afterwards and walked out into the sunshine, the streets seemed brighter and cooler to him, but he felt naked when everyone knew he had had a bath, when the peddlers would wish him "health after hot water." He thought it must be nice to have a home with a bath, to be able to sit indoors, away from all eyes but your family's, to stay inside 'till your hair was dry and your skin was smooth again. It would be nice to have your mother bring you cinnamon tea after the bath, and to sit inside and watch the street and the neighbors' homes from the window, to set your bare foot on the patch of sunlight on the maroon and purple patterns of the rug and to feel the heat that had gathered there turn your pink soles red.

The coarse, tight fibers of the rug bristled and scratched his feet, and worked through the fabric of his pajamas to make his

bottom itch. He shifted, moved his face into the sun and looked at his mother, who was sitting next to him. She had a dark chador with small floral designs wrapped around her middle, and she smelled like home. The fabric of the chador was cool and worn thin by the years, and as he put his head in her lap, he felt the loose folds of it drape over his face and filter the sunlight into a comfortable afternoon shimmer. He felt his mother's fingers running through the tight curls of his hair and over the smooth skin of his cheeks. Her fingers were firm and plump and orange from the henna she dipped them in. There was nowhere he'd rather be, nothing he'd rather do.

"Good health, aziz."

Akbar shifted his head on his mother's lap, just to feel the cloth of the chador slide, and to smell her comforting scent. There was dinner cooking on the stove in the kitchen. He could tell from the smell of greens cooking with meat and fried onions. There would also be a bowl of loose greens to eat with the food. Spearmint, basil, tarragon, parsley, green onions and radishes. He liked the tarragon best, so he would eat all the other greens from a handful first, and then chew on the tarragon alone until it made his tongue tingly and almost numb.

"Akbar jan, tarragon makes bad blood."

He had finished eating and was helping his mother clear the plastic spread that they ate from. He helped his mother wipe the crumbs from the spread, then fold it into a neat, thick rectangle. His mother would light the samovar to make fresh tea, and they would sit together and talk.

"Praise God, Akbar jan, you're growing to be a fine young man. Soon you'll have children of your own to take care of."

"I'd rather stay with you, mother."

"Seyyed Akbar jan, there's no joy like seeing your child grow before your eyes. You're my comfort, aziz, and my security for when I grow old and weak."

"Don't say such a thing mother. May you live in health a hundred years."

"May I live to hold my grandchildren, aziz."

"Mother, have you been out today?"

"You didn't get up early today, aziz. I stood in line for bread this morning."

"I'm sorry mother. I wanted to go myself this morning."

"Was there something we needed that I didn't remember, aziz?"

Akbar was silent for a moment. His mother knew what it was he wanted to go out for. "I wanted to stop by the bazaar to have my shoes mended."

"I took your shoes this morning aziz. I put them by the door. It won't do to have a handsome young man like you walking in shoes with open lips and frayed stitches. Go look at your shoes before you go to bed aziz."

Akbar got up and looked around the room. He felt that he was forgetting something. That something wasn't right. He looked to the door, and there were his shoes, shiny in the lamplight with new polish. They were paired neatly by the doorframe, perfectly straight, like the angels had put them away for him. He wished he could have seen them when they did it, but they were gone. He turned and saw that he was alone in the room, and the lamp was turned down low. His mother was sleeping, and he should take care not to wake her. He stepped carefully toward his room, and the shadows seemed to darken in the room behind him. When he came to his door he saw that it was open a little way, and that his bedroll was already spread out for him. The shadows were deep and he couldn't see anything clearly, but he heard a soft voice from below him whisper.

He couldn't make out any words, but it sounded earnest and enticing, as if someone were trying to tell him something, but couldn't make words. There was a shape there, a body. It brushed

against his foot, and he knelt down, electrified. He reached forward to touch the figure under his blanket. It seemed farther away than he thought it would be, but his hands rested on something firm, and large enough to be a person. It moved toward him. Was it her? Why couldn't she talk?

Akbar put his arms around her and pulled her into his lap from behind. He gathered her close, and whispered back. Something, he didn't know what it was he said, but it was calming. He couldn't see her, but he felt her rest against him, and sit easy in a way that made him feel like he was the one wrapped in a blanket. He wanted to take the cover off of her and see her face, see her body, but he couldn't find a seam. She was covered, and didn't know how to get out, and Akbar could find no way in. It would be like all the other times, and he would wake up feeling like he'd eaten too much too fast, like he wanted to regurgitate something oily, and he would have to go to the bath before the sun had really risen. He was told as a child that Satan showed men things in their sleep that would snare their hearts and make them follow him, but she felt good, not evil. He wanted to see her.

There was something he could do this time, if only he could touch her, if only he could reach under the veil. He stopped moving beneath her and unclasped his hands, held her with his arms as he moved his hands down to her lap, around her thighs and up to her sides. Carefully. He couldn't go to fast or it would be over before he could get inside. At her sides, just above the curve of her hips, there was a seam. It felt like a pocket. Holding her with his hands, he rubbed on the seam to open it, and it felt like it was giving way, like there was warm smooth skin underneath. "Don't move. Please, be still." He eased his hands in against the silk that was underneath, the smooth warmth of her skin. He almost convulsed, he would have swallowed his tongue if it could possibly have fit down the tight knot of his throat. Stop.

Slowly, he felt her arms. Slim, and taut, and unmoving.

Slowly he circled them with his fingers and moved them down to her hands. He knew what he had to do. She had told him, and this time he wouldn't forget. He reached forward, and started to say, "Show me. Please, show me." He almost had them. "Give me your thumbs!"

Her hands were balled into fists. He tried to open them, but he couldn't. She held her thumbs inside and squirmed against him in the blanket. "No! Stop! Please, show me, show me." She moved against him, rubbing, sliding, whimpering, and he couldn't stop. It would be like before. He felt himself shake, and his limbs tremble. It wasn't right. "Please, show, pls shw, plshw, pshwpsh..." He let go. Weak, unable to move, and unwilling to open his eyes to face the grey light of morning. Something was scratching at his fingers. He would have to go to the bath.

He opened his eyes, and Hassan's cat was there. Licking his fingers clean of the food he ate the night before. Looking at him calmly as he ran his rough tongue over Akbar's thumb.



Heidi Sinisalo

“Untitled”

Mehregan's Day

The knife cut through the greens with a crunch and hit the cutting board hard enough to soothe her with the fullness of its sound. Crunch tap, crunch tap—pause to change her grip on the chopped parsley and spearmint—crunch tap, crunch tap. She shaped this handful into a tight ball again and started to cut. It was almost fine enough; the ball was almost coming apart in her hands. A few more passes of the silver knife lacquered green with the blood of the parsley and this batch would be ready for the frying pan.

She gathered the cut greens together with her left hand and her knife, pressed them together so they wouldn't fall, and lifted them into the deep chrome bowl on her right. Two kilos of stewing greens didn't fill the bowl all the way once they had been cleaned. The mud had to be washed from the leaves and stalks, and the leaves had to be stripped from the stalks. She'd pick the yellow leaves off and throw them away first, then she would grip the stalk and run her fingers up it until it was thin enough to cook tender. The leaves would come off between her fingers, and as the stalk slid away, she would make a green flower that grew fuller as the stem shrank into her hand and emerged naked on the other side. The stem would finally snap, and there would be a sprig of leaves left in the center of her flower, like stamens waiting for a bee to tickle them.

When she was a girl, she would clean the spearmint because of the flowers. Now she cleaned it to feed Mostafa and Hassan.

The morning started for her when she rose to pray. Though she had until dawn to recite her morning prayer, she usually got up while it was still quite dark, careful not to wake Mostafa. She would raise the cover and sit up on her side of the bedroll and listen for a moment. The silence of the early morning made it hers.

And God's. There was no one else awake in her home, and as she made her way softly to the bathroom to make her ablutions, she took care not to make enough noise to wake her family. So unlike Mostafa, who liked to own his morning by bringing everyone else into it. Who would rise and rustle his clothes and make the water splash, and sing his morning prayer in loud enough a voice to wake Hassan. Who would warn his household of the coming of the sun, and in the short time in the morning when all were sure to be assembled under his roof, made his warm presence known.

She had the house to herself enough during the day, and she knew her family had her in its center. She was quiet with the water, and quiet with her morning prayer, as women should be. She didn't wish to rush the light that would bring the bustle of the day. When she finished her prayer, she would wrap her chador around her waist and start the samovar.

The smell of the kerosene in the samovar was the first smell of the day after the delicate scent of the clay tablet she would press her forehead to as she prostrated herself before her maker. She would pull the wick down as low as it would go and still light, then hold a match to it and wait for the flame to spread around the wick full circle. It would start as a single small dot of flame and grow until it went all the way around. Then she would raise the wick until the blue of the flame was just tinged with yellow, careful that it made no smoke.

The samovar would start to groan and pop as the sounds of heavy trucks became louder on the street, and would start to sing with the first chirrups of the morning birds. Tea would be ready for Mostafa and Hassan as the sun began to cast its first rays on the green tiles of her kitchen wall.

Hassan was an unhappy waker. He looked in the morning as though he had been at battle all night. His face was tired, and he slouched at the breakfast spread with his eyes almost closed, his hand warming on his glass of tea, chewing his bread and cheese as

if in a dream.

"Hassan has a test in geometry today."

"Hassan, have you done extra problems for your test?" his father asked.

"Mmmh." Hassan was still almost asleep, but Mehregan and Mostafa continued to require conversation of him 'till he spoke a full sentence with his eyes mostly open.

"I have no test today! Agha assigned five extra problems instead of a test. He said he would call three of us to the blackboard, and if we could do parallelogram problems from outside the book, he would add half a point to our final grade."

"Hassan jan, do you know your homework well enough to answer any question baba?"

"Yes baba jan. I did all the problems for today."

Sure that he was awake, and that his schoolwork was done, Mehregan started to clear away the breakfast cheese and bread, and listened with only one ear as Mostafa went over their son's homework and asked him to explain his solutions. For all the time he spent in his room with his books, he should have been making perfect marks at school. As it was, he was getting by, but he wasn't at the top of his class. She and Mostafa didn't know what else to do besides inspecting his schoolwork and making sure he was awake and early for the first bell.

There was a time when Hassan was like an open book to them. When they could tell what was happening with him from the way he sat or the way he looked off into the distance. Mostafa lost insight into their son first, and when it happened he didn't seem to mind very much. It was to be expected, he said. Hassan was growing up, and there would be things he'd keep to himself. It was never that easy for Mehregan. Hassan was her blood, her own. Hassan was from her. He was a part of her. How could she not read him? How could he grow apart from her?

"Maman, would you like me to bring you anything home on

the way back from school?"

He was trying to be adult, Mehregan knew. Most of the time she'd give him some errand to run. Some milk or some bread that would be her own excuse for leaving the house for a while. She'd humor him and ask him to do her pleasure. Not today though.

"No aziz. I have everything I need today. Bring me home good news about your day."

There was the usual morning commotion, the preparation and the anxiety of the leave-taking for the day. Mostafa and Hassan would seldom leave the house at the same time. Her husband usually left first. He'd kiss his son, then give her a warm look, as if he meant to hold an image of her in his mind until he came home in the evening. He'd go to the door to put on his shoes, pick up his brief case and go. Hassan would leave a few minutes after.

She could see why they didn't leave together. It must be easier to part ways at home than in the street, in front of strangers. A father and son taking leave of each other is a private affair. Not something to do on the side of the road if it can be helped. It was never discussed, but she was sure that Hassan understood the reason his father left a few minutes before him as well as she did.

Once Hassan was gone, after he wrapped himself around her neck and embraced her hard enough (he thought) to show his love (Mehregan had only to see his eyes) and closed the door behind him, shuffled down the stairs and let the outside door close too loudly behind him, she was alone in the quiet again. It was a different kind of silence now, a warm, noisy calm, with the sound of boiling water in the samovar, the street noises, the birds, the voices outside, and the sunlight making the tiles on her kitchen wall warmer as the morning drew on toward noon.

It was a silence that could be made better, not broken, with song. And sometimes she sang to herself as she went about her daily business. On holidays and during the summer when Hassan

was with her during the day, he'd protest her singing, as if he were bashful for his mother. It was amusing for her, because of course there was no one at home to be shy of. Did Hassan think there was some other witness to the daily happenings in their house? Someone to be shy of?

*Songbird sing of morning's glory now,
Take us with you on your flight today.
We would fly if you could show us how,
Sing if we could hear your minstrel play.*

*Songbird look! the sun has come to see
The beauty He reveals each time He looks.
The sun won't rise or set to humor me,
Your morning song will not be wrote in books.*

*Songbird bring me tidings from your home,
Tell me all you've heard and seen in flight.
Sing for all beneath this turquoise dome,
Sing! your song brings out the morning light.*

*Songbird pour your heart out to me sweet,
Tell me all your sorrow and your joy.
Look about you, all the world's a treat,
God made all the world to make your joy.*

The song lifted her heart and made her ready for the day's labor. Of course she sometimes sang as she worked, but it was more a murmuring than a proper recital. It wasn't often that she found her voice and her words at the same time.

Only a short time after Hassan had taken his leave, she went to the door at the beckon of the green-grocer and bought that day's stewing greens from his cart. The cleaning and the frying would

be a whole morning's work. That evening's dinner would be a chicken curry, but the greens would stew this afternoon and by tomorrow the *ghorme sabzi* would have set to her satisfaction. Stews always seemed raw to her the day they are cooked.

She started the task of washing the mud from the greens and purging the yellow and blackened stalks. There were enough to keep her busy, but not so many that she'd not answer the green-grocer's cry to his customers again. She could easily buy her greens from the store next to the dairy shop, but the peddler had to make his living, and she wasn't one to turn his bread into stone. If she turned out less good stalks than she threw away, she'd have words with the grocer next time he came around and then see what happened.

When the cleaning was done she started the mincing. Her wooden board became wet with the juice of the greens, and the house became fragrant with the smell of her cutting. When she was a girl, she had heard that when you die, if you've lived well and are favored by God, the angels of death come as bringers of good tidings, and coax the spirit from the body with the scent of heavenly greens. The scent of heavenly basil made the spirit follow the angels to the next world. Much better to live well and be coaxed into death almost unknowingly than to have the spirit wrenched from the body by force, by the angels that brought death to the wicked. Admittedly, they were the same angels, but the basil was not brought out for the wicked.

The rhythm of her cutting broke, and she felt the ice of the knife on her thumb, then the pain as the green juice made its way into the wound and mingled with her own blood. "Tarragon makes bad blood" she had heard from her mother as a child, but parsley and spearmint don't mix well with it either! She moved her hand away from the food as quickly as she could. There was no blood on the board, which was good. The surface of the board was notched with the tapping of the knife and she'd be hard put to

remove the blood from those fine perforations. The handful of greens on the board would be thrown away though. She wouldn't risk feeding her family anything unclean. Rinsing the greens would only serve to spread the blood over a wider area. The water would have to run clear through the contaminated food before it was pure again, and by then her day would be done.

She scooped up the greens on the board with her right hand and threw them into the wastebasket beside her sink, then held the knife under running water. She held her thumb tightly inside her fist to stop the bleeding. How she hated to bleed! The wound would take days to heal over, and she'd have to be very careful not to open it again for fear of polluting her home or her family's food. At least the blood on the dressing wouldn't void her prayers, she could be thankful for that. As long as there was less than a thumbnail sized patch of blood on the dressing she could pray.

Making ablutions would be harder for a while, and so would the tasks around the house. If she had a daughter, she would have scolded her for not paying attention to what she was doing with a knife in her hands. As it was there was no one there to scold or to share the event with. no one to share the pain and turn it into excitement and commotion with. She slowly eased the pressure from the wound and watched the white line blossom into red as the blood filled it and seeped into the fine lines and creases of her skin. She dried it with a clean rag that she'd later wash to get the stain out of, and pressed it again to slow the bleeding. It would dry in a little while, and until then there was nothing to do but wait.

She was used to waiting for blood. Every month she waited for it to end, for the days of her uncleanness to be over so that she could pray again. So that Mostafa would touch her again. So that she could take the purifying bath and the angels wouldn't shun her presence. So that she could be whole again, and well. She had known about menstruation long before it had become a fact of her life. She remembered seeing her mother sitting on her prayer rug

with the cloth that swaddled the tablet closed over it, silently saying holy words, but not praying; not reading the holy book. She was not to touch the holy book while she was unclean.

It was easy to wait for the bleeding to end today. It was only the back of her thumb after all. She could finish cutting the greens well enough, and the rest of the cooking and the housework would be no problem with a bandage on. It was something to remind her of life. The wound and its healing were signs of life, and she was thankful for them. No matter for the pain.

The afternoon wore on. Her day, already broken by her trip to the doorstep to buy greens, her cut, and her afternoon excursion to buy bread and other supplies, would now be broken again by Hassan as he came home from school. It was Thursday, and she was happy. Friday the family would be together for the whole day. The morning would be spent at home, the three of them in each other's company, and in the afternoon most likely they would go to see other family. She would have to give invitations for the following Friday at their home. It was time for them to entertain.

As the sun was starting to move from above to a more slanting position, she heard Hassan's voice in the street. It was a little sooner than his usual time to come back, and she wondered if he might want to stay out for a while longer before he came up. What was he saying? She thought she heard him whispering to someone down there. She went to the window and glanced down. Hassan was looking under a car, trying to coax the cat out again.

There was something about the wild things in the street that held children's attention, that engaged their imagination. Hassan was growing more like that cat himself. He was harder to reach, and harder to coax out into the open. She moved away from the window so that she wouldn't be seen looking into the street. Mehregan had enough to mind in her own house without worrying about what happened in others'. She didn't want to seem like a busybody.

She heard Hassan coming up the steps. When he came in she could see that something was clouding his brow. She was afraid to ask him about geometry.

"H'llo."

"Hello Hassan jan," She would try to draw him out. Maybe he would talk to her on his own and unburden himself. "How was your day at school?"

"Fine."

"Are you hungry?" She turned to the samovar to turn up the flame. "Come have some tea and cookies."

"I'll come later," Hassan spoke to her back, "I'll be in my room."

She turned around and faced an empty room. "Hassan jan," she said though she knew he couldn't hear her, "you are like holding a bird in hand." It wasn't meant to be. Maybe he would talk at dinner. Maybe Mostafa could draw him out. Maybe he was ill. She knew he liked the ice cream from the store by his school, and even though sweets can turn your stomach sometimes, there was no stopping a child from an after school treat. Maybe a few days at home with her would do him good.

It was about time for her to put the rice on for the evening meal. She had left it soaking in salt water since the night before. Now she would let it boil a few turns, and after the outside got soft she'd take it off the flame, drain it and line the bottom of the large pot with potato slices, oil, a little water and some yogurt, then heap the rice on into a mound and close it off tight with a towel covered wicker lid weighted down with river stones. The rice would cook in its own steam, and the potatoes on the bottom would brown and crisp with rice wedged in between like mortar. She knew Hassan loved the crisp rice and potatoes on the bottom, and would gladly eat only that for his dinner if she'd let him. It was good that there were only three of them and the bottom of the pot was large, because she and Mostafa also loved the crisp rice

on the bottom of the pot. It was Mostafa's job to scrape it off the bottom without breaking it up too much. To help him, she'd dip the bottom of the pot into water after she took it off the flame. The hiss of the water on the hot metal was a sure sign that the rice was done, and a pleasing closure to the act of cooking.

Mostafa should be home any time. She was waiting for the sound of his keys in the lock, the assured rumble of a key that is pressed into the lock by the master of the home. She listened, and instead she heard the song of Akbar from not too far away. She couldn't really make out what he was singing. She wasn't really listening to his words anyway. Her mind was on the rice and the curry, and she was hoping that Mostafa would come home soon, while the rice was still new.

She heard a knock on the outside door! Akbar's voice came rumbling up, "God give you your due rewards! Could you send some food down for the poor!" How could she ignore, much less refuse such a request! She opened the window out a little more and said "Akbar agha."

She waited a moment for a reply and then said "Akbar agha" again.

"Yes *khanoum*, God give you long life. Could I trouble you for my dinner?" His voice was more normal now, but could still probably be heard down the whole length of the street. The smell of her cooking must have carried far that day.

"Just a moment Akbar agha." She went to the intercom and buzzed the door open so Akbar wouldn't feel as though he was being neglected. She was confident he wouldn't try to come in. He'd been part of the neighborhood too long to risk losing favor by being untoward.

She thought there was enough food for her to feed Akbar and her own family comfortably, but just to be safe with her own conscience, she set out a tray and heaped more rice on the plate than she normally would have for Mostafa. She spread the chicken

curry over the rice, put a glass of water and silverware on one side of the plate, and a few pieces of flat bread on the other.

She called to Hassan to take the tray down.

There was no answer, so she went to his room to see if he was awake. She could see no light from under his door, so he must have fallen asleep almost right after he returned home from school. What a rough day he must have had! She almost didn't want to wake him, but he had to get up to eat soon anyway. She tried his door. It didn't open. Ever since she was small she had hated locked doors. She had tried to convince Hassan not to lock his door, not to shut himself off from the rest of the family, but Hassan would lock his door sometimes anyway. She knew he didn't do it to hurt them, the same way that his distant manner wasn't meant to offend. Yet she was annoyed. It was a small thing to ask, not to lock her out of his life. She rapped on the door. And then once again.

"Hassan." He should be awake by now.

"Hassan, are you asleep?"

"I'll be right there." She heard rustlings. His voice was tense. Right away she felt bad for having woken her son up so harshly. She remembered his dreamy, tired look in the morning, and thought it would have been good if Mostafa were home and she could have taken Akbar's tray down herself. "Just a minute."

"Hassan, your light was off; I thought you were sleeping." More rustling. Had he put on his bedclothes already? Didn't he want dinner?

"You won't be able to sleep tonight if you nap now." There was something wrong for sure. She'd have to make him talk after he came back up. "Why is your door locked aziz?"

His door opened and she walked into his room. He sounded apologetic, "I'm sorry Maman, I must have done it without thinking."

She looked about for a hint at what might be troubling him.

His pillow was on the floor by his window. He must have fallen asleep as he was watching the sky. Was he upset enough to have watched it darken, or did he fall asleep and dream of flying in a blue sky?

"I must have dozed off," he said. She knew.

"Come to the kitchen, aziz; there's something I want you to do please."

She saw Hassan look at the tray heaped high with food with questioning eyes, and then he understood what was happening without being told. She didn't want to spare her words for him though.

"Akbar is at the doorstep. He rang the doorbell and asked for some food. Take this down to him and come back up, aziz; it's for the good."

Hassan took the tray and disappeared. Did he look sick she wondered? She tried to look at his eyes to see if they were red, if they were puffy. When he came up she'd feel his forehead and check for fever. It would be good to run her hands on his head, along the bristle of his short-for-school hair. How many days had it been since he rested his head in her lap and she rocked him and sang to him? Too many. It wasn't bad that Mostafa wasn't home yet. Maybe her boy was shy to be affectionate with his mother in front of his father. Didn't he know that Mostafa himself would put his head in his own mother's lap to be caressed up until the time she passed away? A boy is never too old to be loved by his mother.

Hadn't he come back up yet? Maybe he was waiting for Akbar to finish his food so he wouldn't have to make another trip to get the tray. He should let him eat in peace! Akbar might think that Hassan was there because they didn't trust him. That would be terrible. Even worse if Hassan had stayed down not out of laziness but curiosity. Children were fascinated by Akbar, and Hassan was no exception. She had caught him at the window more than once as Akbar passed by with his songs. Sometimes she wondered

if Akbar wasn't just like the other peddlers, trading his songs for his daily bread. No matter. Hassan knew it wasn't nice to watch. She had told him as he stood by the window. And he must know it was even worse to stand and stare as someone is eating your food. She would have to speak with him about it. But not tonight. Tonight she would soothe him.

Finally there was the clinking of the plate and the silverware. Akbar rumbled something in thanks, and Hassan slammed the door. Too loud! He started up the stairs. She could hear the rattle of the tray with every step. And then, crash! He must be feverish. Oh her poor boy, he must have thought there was one more step than there was and lost his balance. She had taught him to step sideways so he could see the stairs! He left the tray and the broken dish on the stairs and ran into the house. He was so pale! Was he going to vomit? His skin looked almost green!

"Hassan!"

He just looked at her. He stood still as a stone.

"Hassan! What is it!" Mostafa should be here to take him to the doctor if need be. "Hassan, how do you feel?"

He looked at her with blank eyes for another moment, then his lids fluttered and closed and he crumpled into a dead faint where he stood.

Roanoke

No one should ever
hate little angels—
Bathed in white light

Art as savior.
My earliest memory
happens in an alley
amid the stones
behind Roanoke
apartments and I am
silently sitting
still (coloring)
on white rocks
with dark designs
surrounded by garbage
cans of questions,
sunmade angels,
snowflowers.

When you're young
everything needs color
(the world is plain pale)
you don't see
problems—see solutions
ADD COLOR.

The fading women give
you sweet sweets
and sit waiting while
mother is gone
their softened
linoleum smiles

frighten babies
and brighten sight in sound,
you don't notice
the lackluster wrinkles . . .

The beauty of life is
most fully noticed
in the absence of knowledge
that disintegrates decayed
just like the parents
you once knew too. Next

I am running slippery (sliding)
away from Roanoke Court in a street
ablaze with dark moonlight,
filled with a cold warmth
My mother is ahead—a body
of beauty, an artist
and my father is teaching
me the art of snowball
construction
the night is clear
and clarity pervades
my young mind.

The sparkling starkness
of the snow
blinds me.
I am oblivious
to the accidents
of yesterday, the problems
of tomorrow, perhaps the danger
of now.

I am still aware that the snow is cold.

A New Day

The chill morning air creeps through the room,
It's frosty accomplice licking the window.
Snuggling deeper under the heavy bed covers,
I reach for the warmness that greets me there.
It shields me from the brutal attack of morn.
But nature's alarm clock still rings,
Shattering prisms of sunlight across the carpet.
Swinging my foot over the edge of the bed,
Tingling toes greet the sun-kissed floor
A new day has begun.

Journeyer

Leaning back in your seat
on the London train,
with tilted head, tilted
back to look at the waning
afternoon England,
you embrace the journey;
Re-sembling mental
landscapes.

In the chasm-caverns
of your thoughts
are shadows,
created by objects of the journey:
the bike tire, the bag,
your hat placed firmly on your head.
You travel on—
along the underside, unnoticed.

You travel as shadow
move in grey spaces,
transcend and separate
shades of light,
distinctions of matter.
A troubled spirit
cannot rest, they say
it frets and flicks with time and object.

So you travel on;
tilting head, sliding eyes
across the land(e)scape
while light remains, looking
for mental objects,

but seeing only shadows—
shadows of truth,
indistinct matter.



Kate Kitzmann

“The Journeyer”

In March

The earth breathes again,
opens pores, mud
emits a thick odor
though smothered by snow
since dawn.

Now it breathes, heaving,
alive, soaked; weeping
in pungent convulsions.

How can the earth help
but swallow that which
seeks to hide it?

It thirsts; hungry, demands
consumation, recognition:
"Drink me, smell of me,
swallow me in one gulp
and we will be strong!"

Swollen pores show endurance,
brave resilience.

Heat rises to disintegrate
the cold and hard and odorless.
So nature's inner fire defends itself,
reveals itself, melts
snow's suffocating presence
that breath may come again.

Purple Study

Ach, shy violet
Nestled under leaves
Fanned on webbed fingers

To peer
Into the tight
Dark
Deep
Womb of you
And watch
Fetal budlets
Burst into flight
Is to see majesty
In a mother
Green veined
Purple haired
Golden eyed
Great and giving
To tiny beating hearts
Hidden behind furred doors
And through dim
Misty green corridors
To chamber most full

Ay, wee violet
Bounty wrapped
In a perfect cup

Ode to a Muffin

"You don't get tired of muffins, but you don't find inspiration in them."

George Bernard Shaw

O, dear, fluffy one
How warm and comforting
You snuggle on the plate
Blanketed in crinoline

Butter melts upon your flesh
Soft and tender
Fragrant as a summer morning
Leaving damp fingerprints
Upon my palm

Delectable with milk
Coffee or tea
Crumbling upon my lips
Whispering on my tongue

You are warmth
On a cold morning
As steam wisps like hair
Around your smooth
Brown face
Bonneted in crinkled paper

High-Voltage Visitors

Towers stride across the horizon—silver wire aliens on parade,
Their communication cables slack between them
So we can't hear what they're saying
(As if we can understand 620kV anyway).
Arms extended, they march south, never breaking rank
On their unknown (Yet no doubt electrifying) mission.

Sacrifice

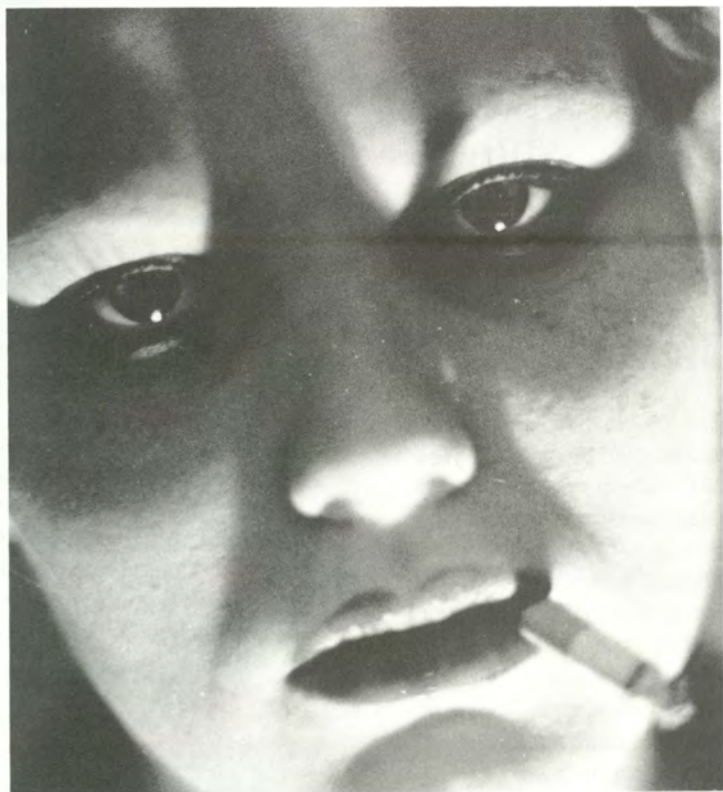
Death through breath
Blown hot, deep
Indulgence.

Homegrown pixie sticks
They burn in stages.
A seal to lock in
Wet beaded tongues,
Lovers, one-timers.

Drags—
Igniting new life,
Unknown places
fingers, nerves
A rush,
ripping new connections

Ties of addiction
Bond bathroom tribesmen
huddled in peaceful ceremony.
All strangers
Buried in common religion
Sending their stained sacrifice
To an open mouthed God.

In time
They shall all return.
Those who once walked
With humpback shoulders
To make tribute,
Joining their brothers and sisters
In sultry, dead, conversation.



Sofia Strehlow

"Untitled"

The Water in Which I Learn. . .*

Oh, would not frustrations mound
like dung upon a bank!
Defiling the cool waters,
that, by right, ought to be
a most enjoyable place.

I love to swim,
yet I cannot float in swill,
and so learning becomes a chore
where all progress is forestalled.

I yearn to fly through the water once more,
as I remember from times long ago.

The Waters there were free and clean,
and no mud blocked my view
of the sandy bottom
or moss-covered stones.

There I enjoyed the sights
surrounding me, supporting others
in their exploration
of the river's waters, but
the deeper waters
welcomed me; seduced me
into venturing down
where few would dare to dive.

The deep current caressed my hair
into a halo swaying above
my head. The sudden cool induced
my inner pulsing, and it flushed

throughout my excited breasts,
a singing cold that only increased
my urgency. My eyes, arms, legs
embrace my fellow swimmers
as we explored all the
deep, pristine waters could offer.

There my vision was filled
with new mysteries to master,
new reasons for the current that
swirled above, these motions
started deep, they started there.
But here I swim shallowly
and must always gulp for air.
And I swim fleetly,
but only because this swirl
clings to my legs, arms, eyes.

Here the water burns my eyes
and drowners, that I helped
in the clear current,
Pull me down. As I scrape off
their pulling palms,
my glance down exposes
only the fish-gnawed bodies
of their antecedents.

Others sit on the shore,
watching with glass eyes
as the swimmers struggle.
The shore-sitters have given up.
They have forgotten how
to swim.

I shun them, and I lunge away
from them. I am not the drowner,

and I am not the shore-sitter.
I am a swimmer,
seeking, not isolation,
but the clear current
that cleansed me before.
I was told the ocean ebbed
towards this horizon.

As the water turns salty in my mouth
and the brine stingingly kisses my cheeks.
I join the other swimmers,
who have survived the swill like me.
I am home at last,
not a stroke has been for nought.
I am in the Waters in which I can learn.

* after Li Young Lee, "The City In Which I Love You"

Vectors

The radicle is the origin of the root,
fighting to take seed within the established plants of the garden,
desires of the elements superimposed,
rain dampening only as deep as the skin,
feeding,
fueling,
with the surrounding comfort of the soil.

The radicle is the origin of the root,
soon swelling and bursting forth,
with shiny self-sustaining leaves,
rising up,
growing,
making food its well-nourished fruit.

The radicle is the origin of the root,
spreading and taking hold,
supplanting,
after the inevitable downfall of the feeble deadwood.

The Second Shares

I

Mirror, object of perception,
showing change and promise,
refreshing reminder of vibrance,
life's energy—breath and heartbeat—
in times past.

This day an urgent whistle calls,
the gaze responding with whiplash turn,
meeting no spectacle—potency fled in shadow concealed.
This day, the light shards reflect a stonefish,
mangled, blistered,
as the folds of skin have had a century's bath of their
vomit,
this day revelation, yet never absent,
oozing funereal demeanour at every pore,
drowning traces of vitality.

II

Breezes refreshing, washing over with calm and comfort,
recognition of summers past, more forthcoming,
each bringing a moment of halcyon, innumerable minuscule
wishes fulfilled,
yet fueling another spark of contentment, breezes then
snatching it into their shadowy void.
Breezes containing new and further fondness, while drawing
toward a still, empty day,
emerging from cloak to startlingly appear, posting welcome
soothing for a flushed face.

III

The sheet unfilled, white pages, casting brightness,
promise of arrivals,
each slowly burned away as sparks caught in passing leave
trails of hopes ignited, blazed, then flickering,
smouldering, until reduced to ash,
crumbling away, the last grasps the haze of memory,
wellsprings of yesterdays, pages and ash shuffled, until all
has turned to ash, blown away by the breeze.

IV

This day, only the barest spark remaining,
caught by a breeze, reducing the last remnant of hopeful
page to ash,
then ash fluttering away in same breeze, as completion of a
breath,
pulled by the current into the shadows and lost.
The stonefish reflexion contorting more,
as a bitter taste of liquorice seizes the tongue,
the fish's poison exploding and overtaking after long, long
containment,
coursing until the last gasp of absorption,
now all page, spark, ash, promise flown,
exposing the ghastly stonefish, this homely creature,
though its form soon fades, returning to void with the
breeze,
its ugliness, inescapable, lingers,
concealed in the ash and space of each laid page.

The Conversion

Chapter One: The Background of Modern Conversionism

“The purpose of religion is the same as that of any other field of science: it must provide theories and concepts in order to answer complex problems that perplex the common man. Once these guidelines are attained, the individual can incorporate them into his or her store of knowledge as a reference for future dilemmas. The problem that arose before the Conversion was that there were simply too many differing theological viewpoints than a single species can handle. Imagine the chaos that emerged from such a wide range of belief systems: the countless persecutions, the fruitless holy wars, saints and dances and other pointless rituals given equal status by different people in time of need, and who could ever forget the thousands of religious holidays observed by the thousands of religions, the dates of most of which falling on different days from year to year? Such confusion!

“It is from this disarray of humanity that the Conversion was commenced, and the Institute of Religious Engineering and Ideological Thought, simply known as the Institute, came soon after. While no religion was completely discarded, only the beliefs that could be proven through scientific methods were incorporated into the official world religion, Conclusion. Aptly named by Doctor Ian Lawrence R.E. of the University of Religious Engineering in Chicago, his famous quote is as follows: ‘In order to answer any question, a conclusion must be reached. Once one has done so, all the efforts of life will be performed with the results of that conclusion as a point of reference from which all other problems may be solved.’ More commonly known as the Lawrencian Creed, this quote is the very essence of all global religious thought today.”

Peter put his History of the Conversion textbook down and

gave a wide-mouthed yawn. He thought to himself, "Such elementary reading for a university student. Surely everyone in the class knows the history of the Conversion!" And if Peter's thoughts were being graded at that moment, he would certainly have gotten an "A". Everyone knew the subject well indeed--knew it as well as the sky above their heads, the blood running through their veins, and as well as the very year they lived in: 138 A.C. The fundamental teachings of Conversionism had been taught to the children as catchy tunes and through fairy tales, with the valiant freedom-fighters battling the evil worshipers of Diversity as an ongoing theme throughout. They were taught to accept the Conclusion unreservedly, and to always keep its teachings close to the heart. After all, who wanted to spend an entire lifetime in the confines of irrational thought and in the grip of the unproven? Only a small percentage of youngsters dared question the validity of the Conclusion, and when they did they were taken to a school that specialized in indoctrinating the gifted. Upon graduation, these children would have developed a very clear sense of the value of Conclusional teachings, and were revered worldwide for their strict and modest lifestyles, never uttering a single blasphemy, never straying from the flock.

As the noon hour was struck upon by the bell tower across the campus from his quarters, Peter jumped from his bed, as did his three roommates, and together they casually descended the stairwell into the lunchroom. Although the lines were growing increasingly longer, the level of noise remained the same low buzz. All of the young men waited patiently for their trays, each of which was already filled with the midday rations, and filed into their assigned seats without any hustle or bustle. When the last of the seats was filled, each eye was closed simultaneously for exactly thirty seconds, after which the food was eaten in complete silence. There was one boy, Peter knew him as Tim Polit, who accidentally spilled his water ration all over his tray, thoroughly

soaking the rest of his food. He paused only for a moment, then he picked up his fork and knife and proceeded to eat somberly, as if nothing at all had happened, or maybe exactly as if something had.

Lunch was ended thirty minutes later in much the same way as it began. Each of the men closed his eyes for thirty seconds once again, after which the occupants of the table closest to the exit rose in unison, trays in hand, slid their trays through the slot in the wall, and proceeded back to their rooms. Peter's was the third table to adjourn, and while he was walking back to his room, he felt a sick feeling growing in him. He was an upperclassman at one of the finest religious engineering universities in the world. He rarely got a grade below perfect, and when he did it was only just below it. And yet, he had this feeling that what he was learning was wrong. He had no explanation for such a feeling—it certainly wasn't a result of the food. It was his studies that were bothering him, he knew that much, but exactly what made him feel ill about them he was quite unsure. He knew what the school handbook said about such things, and it seemed the best course of action. He would see the psychologist early tomorrow morning. It would be Saturday, and he wouldn't need to worry about studying until ten o'clock anyhow. By then his problem would surely be solved, and everything would be back to normal.

Peter rose with the sunrise the next morning, as he did every morning, and took a cool shower. From the shower he returned to his room mechanically, as if programmed to complete the task of getting ready in the morning. No thinking was involved in the process—he had only three uniforms to last him the entire week, so he wore the same one as yesterday. Finally, when he had finished his morning duties, he left his room, went down the flights

of stairs, and left the building.

The psychologist's office was only four buildings down from his. When he got to the office he let the receptionist know that he was there, and she told him to take a seat. After waiting for close to fifteen minutes, Peter was paged by the receptionist, and he was escorted into the office of Donald Stronghand. Mr. Stronghand was a kindly fellow, at least from what Peter knew of him, and when Peter entered the room Mr. Stronghand smiled to Peter genuinely and said, "Well, good morning Mr...." pausing to look over Peter's file, "Mr. Lawrence, of course, how could I forget a name like that?" They both laughed at this for a small while, but business was soon commenced. "So, Peter, what brings you down to the S.A. building?"

Peter paused for a moment and remembered how Mr. Stronghand liked to use abbreviations whenever possible. He supposed it was an attempt to bring himself to eye level with the students. "Oh, I'm doing all right. Only lately...things have been bothering me."

"Things?" said Mr. Stronghand inquisitively, knowing that when a student was troubled by "things" it usually was sexual. "What kinds of 'things' are we referring to, Mr. Lawrence? Have no fears that any of what you tell me will get past this office." Mr. Stronghand then put in jokingly, "Unless, of course, it borders on the blasphemous!" He laughed heartily.

Peter did not laugh. He was starting to fidget in his seat, and he had that sick feeling again. "Mr. Stronghand, I'm not feeling very well lately. Kind of like I'm sick to my stomach, and my head hurts along with it."

Mr. Stronghand looked worriedly at Peter. He knew what this meant, and it wasn't good. It was a condition that some of the upperclassmen displayed when they were taking high level classes that taught about some of the formerly popular religions. The students were conditioned rigorously all throughout childhood. The

fact that some of them would be a bit repulsed by what they learned was most understandable. What wasn't acceptable was becoming physically ill over such matters. Mr. Stronghand had only seen or heard of a very few of such cases, and hearing these symptoms revealed to him from the source almost made him sick. But that was the key: almost. It could never go beyond that, or trouble would be imminent.

"Mr. Lawrence, I think you'll be fine in a few days. Probably just stress related or due to overwork. You should take the rest of the morning off, and if you're still feeling under the weather this evening, just give me a call.

Peter was relieved. "Thank you, Mr. Stronghand. I'm sure you're right. Just working too hard, I guess."

"That's right, you'll be one-hundred percent better ASAP."

Peter got up and shook hands with Mr. Stronghand as he thanked him once again. When he left the office, he was convinced that a little rest would do him a world of good. He got to his room, hopped into bed, and fell deeply asleep.

Just as Peter's head hit the pillow, Mr. Stronghand picked up the phone and pressed the top left button, the one with a red dot next to it. "Hello, sir? I think we have a problem. Yes sir. His name is Peter Lawrence. A senior. Yes sir, it will be done. Tonight. Yes sir. Goodbye."

Peter woke up in what seemed like only a few hours, but the clock on the wall in front of him said differently. It was seven o'clock on Sunday morning! How could he possibly have slept for so long? He sat up, or tried to at least, but he was fastened to his bed with leather straps. "What the?" was Peter's response to this. "Someone help me!"

His voice alerted the nurse to his revival, and she paged the

doctor immediately. A tall, clean-shaven man in his mid-forties entered the room with a big smile on his face. "Hello there, son, how are you feeling today?"

Peter, thinking the man a little too happy to be a doctor, gave an even bigger smile back and said, "I'd feel a hell of a lot better if someone untied these straps!"

With that, the doctor's face lost the smile. It was replaced by an emotionless glare that frightened Peter. He knew he was in big trouble, but how and why he was here was far beyond him.

"Mr. Lawrence, my name is Dr. Kilburn. Do not attempt to free yourself-- you'll only make it worse. If you follow my every command this whole procedure will be most painless. Well, almost."

"What did I do?" said Peter, very frightened. "I was asleep one minute, and the next I'm tied to a hospital bed. Tell me how I got here!"

"Well, if you must know, we got a call from the psychologist, and he told us that you weren't feeling well. We sent an ambulance to come pick you up, and when you struggled with the paramedics, they drugged you and brought you here."

"Mr. Stronghand called you? But he said I'd be fine if I just got a little rest, and I do feel better. Honest."

The doctor nodded his head at Peter and left the room. The nurse followed after him and switched off Peter's light, leaving him in complete darkness. Now seeing how far reasoning with the doctor would get him, he struggled to get free. But there was no use. He was trapped.

The next morning, or what Peter assumed to be morning since there were no windows in his room, Peter was roused by some very familiar sounds. He looked towards the far wall, and as he did so, he realized he had been seated upright, though still secured tightly. There was a telemonitor in front of him, and on its screen were distant memories from Peter's past. Clips from old

children's television programs were shown, as well as other pieces of stories, poems, and other such childhood conditioning devices. Peter was very happy for a while, memories flooding into his brain so rapidly he couldn't keep track of them all. Then, just as his pleasure was on the verge of orgasmic, the monitor shut off. Peter rather thought it was purposely done at the peak of his enjoyment.

A few minutes later, as Peter was still thinking about his days of youth, the telemonitor come on once again. This time there were no cute little poems or animated stories. There was a man on his hands and knees with his head bowed in front of what Peter was taught was an altar. The man's voice was very quiet, but Peter could make out something about keeping him and his family safe on some long journey they were about to make. It then showed the man and his family driving down a deserted road, laughing and having a good time, when suddenly, boom!, their car was hit by a huge truck. The car, now about half the length it was originally, was thrown into a ditch, where it subsequently exploded. The next part brought Peter to tears. He didn't know if it was simply his imagination, or actually coming from the monitor, but he thought he could hear the children screaming in agony, and for a moment, he thought he could see the face of the husband looking towards the sky.

Peter couldn't watch any more, but he was saved trying to block the sound out when the monitor turned off again. Peter was completely thoughtless, except for the man and his family, and how that man had asked some god for help and he got none. And yet, even as he lay dead with his family in the burning wreck that was his car, he looked to the heavens for an explanation from his master as to why such a thing happened when he had asked that all should go well. Peter's mind became filled with the teachings of his past. There was no god that could be proven, thus, there was no use in praying to one. The man thought there was a god, and

relied on him for safety, but in the end, he was not helped at all.

Peter now thought about his sick feeling. Had it not been a doubt in this Conclusion, that all things must be proven to be believed? Of course one couldn't trust in fantasy or in fiction, for there is no truth in either of them. There is only fact from facts, nothing more. Just as the old saying went, "blind belief brings kind deceit." How true, oh, how true. A moment of doubt in the current system had brought him so much grief, and total belief had brought him so little.

The doctor came in the door and switched o the lights. "Well, Mr. Lawrence, are we feeling better yet?"

"Oh, yes Dr. Kilburn! In fact I have never felt much better in all my life!"

Dr. Kilburn looked at Peter sympathetically. His training, rather retraining, was not a one-shot-and-go-home deal. It would take months, perhaps years to free Peter of his miseducation. And even after his treatment he could never be a religious engineer, oh no! His thoughts would be far too focused, to concentrated for work of such broad horizons. He would become very familiar with the techniques he would have worked with, though, but through the eyes of the experimented, not experimenter.

Peter still showed his enthusiasm in his newfound purity, but he wasn't released. "Hey, doc, you can untie me now. I'm all better, remember? Doc? Dr. Kilburn!?"

But the good doctor had flicked the lights off and was on his way out of the room. He turned around and saw Peter's anguish reflected from the light in the hallway. "Poor lad," he thought to himself as he closed the door.

Peter yelled for the doctor to come back, that he was cured, that it would never happen again. He cried out his sincerity. He would be the perfect citizen.

Just then, the telemonitor was turned on.

Eric's Jeans

You laid your dirty jeans
over my clean ones
(you always forget
dirty clothes go in the hamper).

Gathering them up, I smell woodsmoke
and don't want to wash the smell away.

Woodsmoke is you
standing beside a brush fire,
smiling,
dirt smeared on your chin,
telling some raunchy joke
heard at work,
kissing me "hello."

So many fires gone
to gray dust.
Twigs piled on newspaper
the way my sister showed me.
When embers smoked
and sputtered, we fed them vodka.
Great licks of flame, light and warmth,
the sudden dying.

For days after she died,
I wore her sweater—
powdery perfume and sweat,
and something like hickory.
I'd forgotten that, till now.

Finally packed it away unwashed.



“Untitled”

Jaturada Aksharamugraha

Fracture

I

The culprits were probably speed
and an oil slick— the kind
I would pause to wonder at
in K-mart parking lots
as a kid. The smooth,
silvery black liquid housed
rainbows, held magic before
I learned of refraction and
pollution. Here, blue
and red flash to siren sound
like the spectrum danced
on its puddle-stage.

II

Driving to the store I see
the man and his motorcycle
sprawled on the ground
like toys dropped
from hands too small
to hold them. High noon
sunlight reflects off
twisted chrome while
the cyclist creates his
own puddle for the
vampire ground to drink,
and for my widened eyes
to watch with wonder.

Sticky

We spent Saturday night
refilling your bean bag chair
which had become saggy
as a toddler's diaper,
And at least as uncomfortable
to sit on.

With two plastic tumblers,
we dipped into
the bag that contained
the minute, white
Styrofoam "beans,"
sticky with static electricity.
In constant friction,
the beans clung to each other,
to the cups, to our hands,
until we dumped them
into the chair with a force greater
than the one which held
them together.

I had returned from work
yet smudged with remnants
of somebody else's
wedding banquet.
I was tired but
able to laugh when
we would pour too fast
and scatter the beans
across the carpet
and under the bed
Then, we would pick them up
and begin again, certain

we would be discovering
maverick beans
in odd places for years to come.

How could I have know then
that we would become like
Styrofoam
And scatter with a
single, careless breath?
Now I find remnants of you
in the soiled pockets of
my waitress shirt and
in my hair that smells
of smoke from a banquet
that can't be ours.

Prophecy

for Margaret Fell

A prison may as well
be a desert,
for few exist to listen.
Most want to scorch
fair skin
like an unclouded sun.
Most want to scorn
camel-hair Quaker skirts.
Survival depends on
skillful acceptance
of the help you
are given.

You, the good prophet,
know that, in the desert,
What men misuse
to sting the skin
Must be consumed,
taken willingly into
the body
to sustain the spirit.
So you eat Scripture
like locusts,
and it is transformed
in your mouth
to drip like honey—
A welcome salve to
open a throat swollen
shut from neglect.
Now, with its
passageway healed,
A single voice
cries out in the desert
and is magnified
with the Word.

Talking with Kathleen Norris. . .

[Born in Washington D.C., Kathleen Norris grew up in a number of places, but spent many summers during her childhood in Lemmon, South Dakota. She attended high school in Honolulu, and went on to college at Bennington in Vermont. After graduation, she worked as an arts administrator at the Academy of American Poets in New York City. Norris has published several books of poetry, but is best known for her book Dakota: A Spiritual Geography. Dakota was inspired by moving to her grandparents' farm in South Dakota where she and husband have lived for 20 years. Norris has an avid interest in monasticism and is interested in the connection between place and the written word. As one of the WORDFEST events, she gave a reading at Valparaiso University on October 31, 1994. The Lighter was able to speak to Norris in conjunction with this reading.]

Lighter: How do you define "Spiritual Geography"?

Kathleen Norris: It's funny, after my book was published I saw a reference to spiritual geography, and I noticed someone else using that word, and I was stunned because I made it up. I think every place has a spirit. After you live in a place for a while, you become part of that place in really deep way. I know people who have lived in Brooklyn all their lives and they know Brooklyn and they love Brooklyn and if I want to know anything about Brooklyn I just have to ask them. They've become kind of one with the place. I guess that's what I mean by spiritual geography, that when you've been living in a place for long enough time, you know its effect on your own psyche, and you can understand a place in a pretty deep way.

L: When did you first start making connections with the monastic life?

KN: Exactly eleven years ago this month, I basically stumbled across them. I went to hear Carol Bly, who is a marvelous writer. She was giving a reading in this place that I've never heard of. I'd been out there ten years and not managed to connect with them at all—this monastery. Then I discovered that they had a series out there in the fall and the spring of very interesting speakers coming so I started going. I started talking to the monks, and I realized that I could go and stay and have a little retreat and write. I became more and more interested pretty quickly. After about three years I became an oblate, which is like an associate. But I basically just stumbled across them, it was like stumbling across a whole family. It shows how literature can get you in trouble, because I just basically went to hear a reading. Stay away from literature, it can change your life!

L: So how is a monastery like a big family to you?

KN: There's almost no place in this country where there isn't some monastic presence. Wherever I go I can participate in that and it's amazing to me.

L: Do you feel more comfortable with the monastic people or the people in the rural community of Lemmon?

KN: It's different. A lot of the people I know at Lemmon, I've known all my life, so there's a kind of comfort there, and most of them think this whole monastic thing is kind of weird. Mostly because they don't have a lot of understanding about what it is even though they live fairly close to this monastery. A lot of people don't even know monasteries still exist. It's just a very different relationship. I guess deep down, I would have to say, I feel more comfortable with the monastic people, partly because when you're with them, you're sharing prayer life every single day, four or five times a day, and that becomes a real closeness. Even though you might not talk to these people all that much, you have these experiences in common. You've been listening to the same words of the Bible, and there's something that happens that I really, really like. I feel very comfortable with that.

L: Is it hard to get back into that routine of prayer after being away from Lemmon?

KN: When I get to Lemmon, it doesn't take more than three or four days to get back into my own prayer rhythm. Getting up early in the morning, doing my prayers, going for a walk, starting my writing. If I just get myself over to my studio, I'm okay. That's where my prayer books are and most of my stuff.

L: So you have a studio separate from your house.

KN: A little studio, we bought it from a friend of ours about ten years ago. It's just a little one room thing.

L: Do you have a regular schedule for writing?

KN: Well, I guess it's hard for me to have absolutely a regular schedule. My best schedule is when I get up really early around five, and do my spiritual reading and praying and take a walk for about three or four miles, then try to settle in and write, and spend all morning writing. Then in the afternoon I can do business stuff, write business letters, talk on the phone, run errands.

L: How are you able to find all that time?

KN: You have to steal time for solitude. You sometimes, though, have to sacrifice something else in order to do it. Women with children have a really hard time. You know it's harder for them than me. Although it's still plenty hard for me. The world is not going to create the time and space for you to write or paint or do the reading you want to do. You just have to make it a priority, and probably give up other things. The one thing my husband and I gave up is watching television. And it's been real easy. We've gotten so much more done since we've done that. I don't miss it at all.

L: You write in *Dakota* about how your friends from New York didn't understand how you could move out to Dakota. Has that misunderstanding continued as you've been there for so long?

KN: A lot of people have expressed that they're curious about the place. For some reason the country is exotic to people who live in the city. But on the other hand, a lot of people who have said they're very interested don't have the nerve to come visit. It seems too crazy, you know, it's too far. But I think obviously now they understand that it was good for me to do it as a writer. When I was first going out there it was like "you're going away to the

ends of the world, we'll never see you again." I think Americans have a hard time understanding depravatio—to say it might be good for you to imagine that don't need thirty or forty channels on TV, and a microwave and all these other things, and you might be able to do just fine without them. I think Americans get so bombarded with the consumer culture, and I'm no exception, but partly living in the Dakotas and partly having monastic influence has trained me a little bit to kind of judge if I really need this or if its something I can do without. I try to judge those things a little bit better. I've got fewer shoes now.

L: In Dakota you are both critical and supportive of the provincialism you see in rural life, what are the nuances of this issue?

KN: I'm really interested in provincialism as a human problem. I think it exists everywhere and in every one of us to varying degrees. I think some of the most provincial people I know are New Yorkers. Sometimes the provincialism on the Great Plains, because people are so isolated physically and mentally, depresses me, but then I remember it's just really part of the human condition. People seem to slide into provincialism because it's easy. It makes them feel more important if they think they're the center of the universe. I think it's really one of the worst things about us because it shuts us off from so much. I'm no exception, I've got provincial attitudes about things myself.

L: To counter that, what about having a world view?

KN: In the town that I know best, the town people tend to be much more provincial than the country people. Which is not what Americans expect. They think the farmers are out there and that they're just dumb hicks, you know. It's just the opposite. I think it's partly because of their economy. They've had to learn more about the outside world. We are a minority group, and like all minority groups, we have to learn more about the outside world than they know about us.

L: Do you think the provincialism and the world view are able to co-exist together?

KN: Well, these two ranchers that I know are extremely rooted in their land. Their kids are going to be fourth generation ranchers.

They've basically become global to hold onto that land. Where you see conflict is some of their more provincial neighbors who've lost their land because they're not thinking as globally. Of course, they resent it. Instead of becoming global themselves, they just sort of wallow in this resentment and think "well that's not the way grandpa did it so therefore we can't do it that way." That is the ultimate provincialism.

L: Who is your audience for your books?

KN: *Dakota* has a really broad audience: country people, transplanted Dakotans, ministers, a lot of people like me who have left the church and are working their way back. So it seems to be a pretty broad audience.

L: Where did you find inspiration to write *Dakota*?

KN: Well, I had twenty years of stories from living up there and observing the land and the people. So that's really what into that. The first essay was published in 1985, so I tell people the book was eight years in the making, but it was more like twenty years. I accumulated so many stories that I guess I just had to start to tell them. I also translated some poems into prose to get them in the book. I stole from my own work quite a bit because it fit into the book. There were some images that I just didn't want to lose. So some of the shorter pieces and fragments of the longer pieces are basically translated, stolen from myself.

L: How does solitude contribute to the writing process?

KN: My husband can write in crowded bars if he doesn't know anyone and no one is going to come up and start a conversation with him. You don't always need physical isolation and quiet, but I guess you need that sense that you've got a little time to yourself and that it's not going to be interrupted. Sometimes I'll come home from a walk and have almost an entire poem in my head. Of course, I have to revise it.

L: How do you go through the process of revision?

KN: I guess there is no one set thing I always do except to keep in mind that every new thing is going to need revision. You have to let it sit for a while, at least over night, because somehow when you're working on something you get too close to it. You're going

to need a little time and space to judge it. I read out loud a lot. That's important when I revise.

L: Do you think writers have to be outsiders?

KN: I think they are outsiders because they're observing and writing about things, and most people aren't doing that. I think that there's just something about the art itself that makes you an outsider. But, I also don't want to make a big deal about that, because I think that writers have to be part of some kind of community, and try to keep a balance between the two.

L: It seems like there's a mysterious aspect to where writing comes from.

KN: I don't think it's all that mysterious. I think creativity exists in us. I think you have to try to live in such a way as to encourage a creative kind of thinking. I would call it attentive waiting.

L: What do you think drives human beings to write things down?

KN: Insanity, possession by minor demons, I don't know. I think people actually are storytellers. Someone called the human animal a "featherless two-legged story-telling bi-ped." And I think that's a pretty good description.

Nightingale

As fully grown humans
mainly consist of single cells
but give expression to
As brownish bird's song
Tend to talk
the sound of the song spent
Tend to talk in public
the song of conscious just
Don't see the value less personal
believe that they must tell
Discuss others with modesty
Sad songs sing females

females
are talk
in words melodious.
of male at night
at home silent
at once
quite much
one great deal.
details
real life.
never.
as nightingale.

A Small Crimson Spot

I saw a crimson spot
 On the white sidewalk,
 A tiny blood clot,
 Red as a red rose melting,
 Which drips from a puncture in the hot vein,
 From a stem of thorns sticking in the forehead skin.
 Yet, the teardrop was round as a disk,
 Like the candlewax sun in the western sky
 Lulling life into drowsy sleep.

Thus, the scarlet sphere took me into a hidden dream
 Where I was immersed in a black blind vois.
 A voice murmured faintly, gradually gaining resonance,
*The work of God is to be revealed
 When the sight of men is sealed,
 For night is coming and light is limited.*

I heard spit splatter
 Upon the ground, making mud.
 I felt warm fingers
 On my eyes, coating the orbs
 With the saliva ooze.
 Trembling, I stubled into a cold pool.
 I stood up shivering, drenched and heavy,
 Seeing before me the man, seeing
 For the first time.

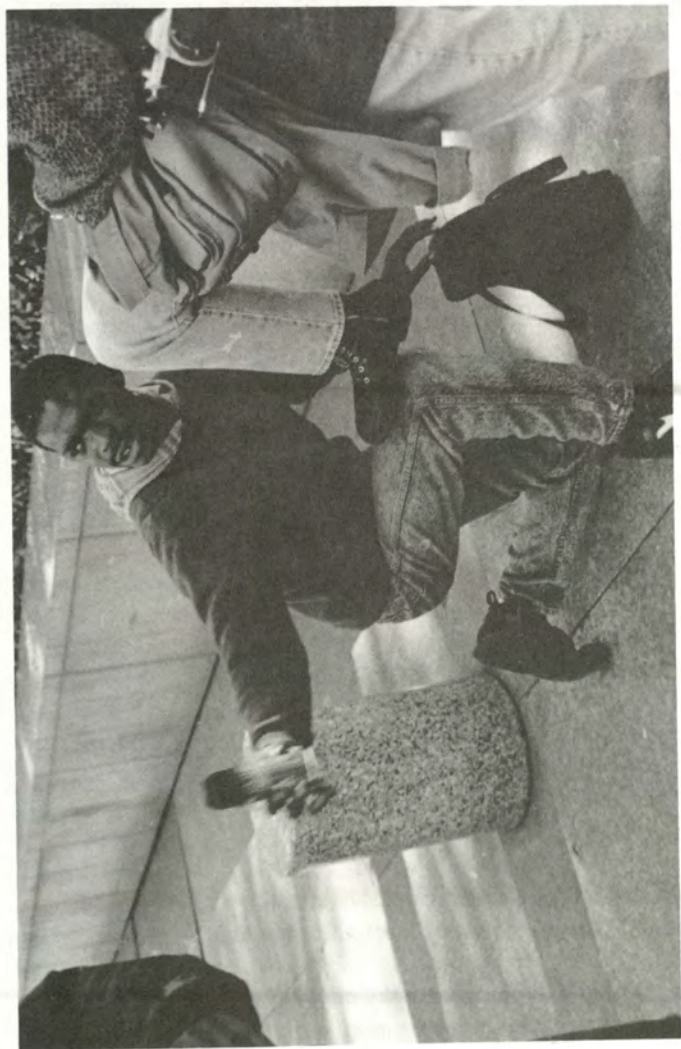
On his forehead, a bead of sweat ran
 Like thick blood and dropped from his cheek,
 Falling to the ground, dark
 And crimson; sanguine sweat expressing
 The labor of the work of God.
 I sweat now looking on th tiny drop,
 Remembering my hidden dream, remembering
 both its miracle and its new born bearing
 Upon what I see and what sees me.

Spitting Jesus

She taught me to spit, she taught me to die
It has a "t" in it, she said, make a circle and think "t"
Like kissing a crucifix,
Forgetting for a moment the resurrection,
And dying—like a man?
Like a woman. Severing
Self from Self from God,
Spitting, dying.

Life is easy. It's death that's hell.
Giving soul in search of no reward,
Speaking poetry (it also has a "t" in it)
in the face of silence.

She spoke the silence.
I turned to leave, lighting a cigarette, fire in wind,
Lighting the night with my dying,
Walking sidewalks, knowing—she will not forsake me—
I spat, like a "t," forgetting for a moment the resurrection.



“The Shoeshine Picture”

Heidi Sinisalo

Contributor's Notes

Travis Alber is a junior English/Pre-Med major, Business minor from Peoria, IL. She likes Chinese food, non-medical emergencies, and Kirkus.

Andrea Bishman is a freshman English major from Chaska, MN. She likes basketball and poetry.

Lindy Blackstone is a junior English/Secondary Education major from North Little Rock, AR. She likes Southern hospitality (Ye Haw!), country music and wranglers.

Katie Dueringer is a sophomore Mathematics major, German minor from Andover KS. She loves dancing on dirt roads and singing to the moon.

Lynne Flowers is a senior English major, Theology minor from Lansing, IL. She likes afternoons, the color blue, and liturgy. At one time, she knew everything there is to know about the Beatles.

Heather Gorman is a senior English/Secondary Education major from Western Springs, IL. She loves Ireland, October and Samhain. She also enjoys grading papers for the hundreds of high schoolers she is responsible for as a student teacher this semester.

Angela Janssen is a junior Mathematics/Theology/Humanities major from the home of *Gone With the Wind*. She likes cherry Chapstick and Martin Luther. Angela would like to say to the world: *De nobis ipsis silemus*.

Kate Kitmann is a senior English/Humanities major from New Ulm, MN. She likes burning incense, making lists and carrots.

Kurt Kluge is a senior Geography major, English minor from Wheaton, IL. He likes to play guitar, read, and play and watch sports. He will be more than happy to graduate in December.

Rhett Luedtke is a senior English/Theatre major from Orange CA. He likes warm ears in cold hats on furry Thursdays.

Tamara Minks teaches English at Portage High School. She is enrolled in creative writing classes at VU, and writes when she is not devoting her time to her husband, four-year-old daughter, and baby that's on the way.

Ali Mohajer is a super-senior Chemistry/Individualized/soon-to-be-declared English major from Tehran, Iran. He likes batting vegetables toward the Deaconess Center after midnight with his neighbors, and pushing the boundaries of acceptable children's literature.

Pornsarin Sanpatanoat is an Interlink student from Thailand.

Travis Scholl is a junior English major from St. Louis, MO. He likes to eat lasagna and listen to the blues.

Pam Seeber is a senior Broadcast Journalism major from Waukesha, WI. She is a TV news junkie who enjoys traveling, shopping, acting, and singing.

Rory Segety is a junior IECA major from somewhere between Canada and Europe. He never wears a watch, and is only deliberately late. He is also quite fascinated by squirrels (especially red ones).

Heather Taylor is a sophomore Computer Engineering major from State Center, IA.

The Author to Her Book

Thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain,
Who after birth didst by my side remain,
Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise
 than true,
Who thee abroad, exposed to public view,
Made thee in rags, halting to th' press to trudge,
Where errors were not lessened (all may judge).
At thy return my blushing was not small,
My rambling brat (in print) should mother call,
I case thee by as one unfit for light,
Thy visage was so irksome to my sight;
Yet being mine own, at length affection would
Thy blemishes amend, if so I could:
I washed thy face, but more defects I saw,
And rubbing off a spot still made a flaw.
I stretched thy joints to make thee even feet,
Yet still though run'st more hobbling than is meet;
In better dress to trim thee was my mind,
But nought save homespun cloth i' th' house I
 find.
In this array 'mongst vulgars may'st thou roam.
In critic's hands beware thou dost not come,
If for thy mother, she alas is poor,
Which caused her thus to send thee out of door.

Anne Bradstreet, 1678

The Lighter announces. . .

The 1994 WORDFEST literary prizes

Poetry \$50

Short Fiction \$50

Non-Fiction Prose \$50

Academy of American Poets

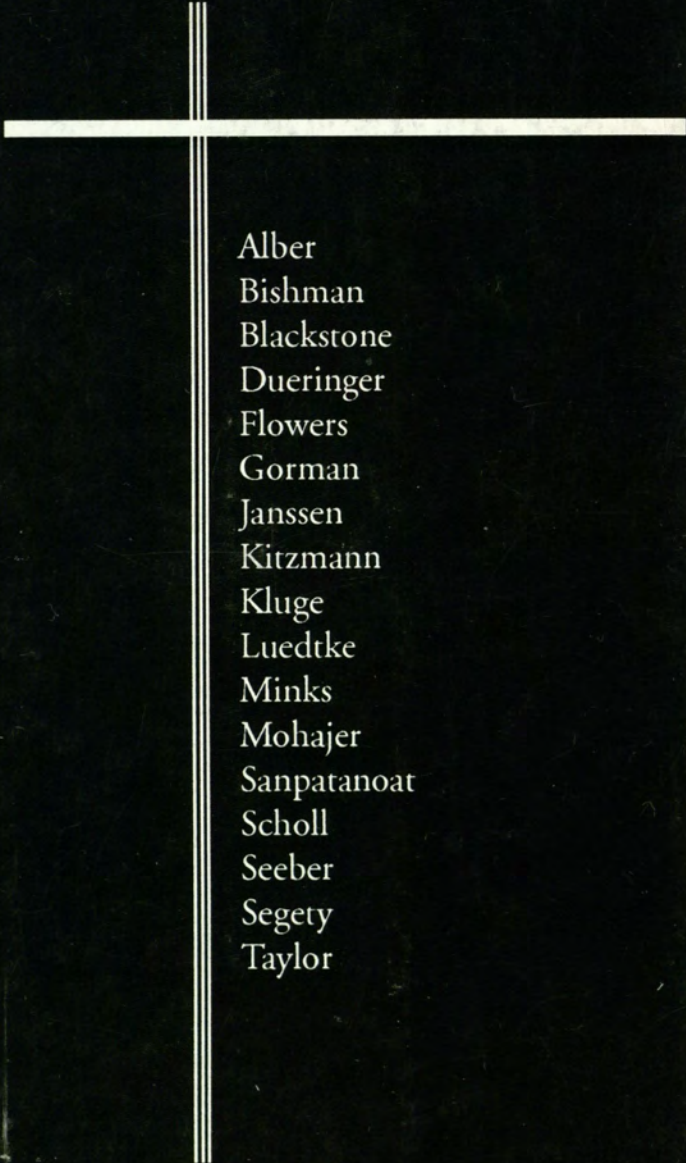
Prize

\$100

All Valparaiso University students are invited to compete. Submit one copy of your work without your name; attach a cover sheet containing your name, address, phone number and title(s) of work(s).

**Deadline for contest submission:
5:00 pm, March 24, 1995
English Department Office Huegli 224**

Prizes will be announced at a reading and reception on Thursday, April 27, 1995, in the Lumina room, Huegli Hall.



Alber
Bishman
Blackstone
Dueringer
Flowers
Gorman
Janssen
Kitzmann
Kluge
Luedtke
Minks
Mohajer
Sanpatanoat
Scholl
Seeber
Segety
Taylor