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CONTENTS

INSCAPE 1992

7 WHEN COYOTES TAKE THE BANDSTAND, THE SMALL HOUSES LEAN
Joanna Brooks

19 DAD IN THE KITCHEN
BJ Fogg

21 SEEING EGYPT
Mary Lynn Bahr

23 SAY "THANK YOU, JESUS!"
David Pulsipher

35 ART CAN BE NAKED
E. Brian Gentry

37 THE WEB
James Stanger

49 RING SELLER
William Powley

50 WHEN I HAVE THUMBS
Sean T. Ziebarth

51 UNKNOWN PAIN
Michael Hassett

53 TREASURE IN BLACK
John L. Adams

61 IF YOU WERE A PLUM
Jill Hemming

63 PARDON THE BLUES HERE
Joanna Brooks

68 ODE TO A STORM
Pilar Stewart

71 WONDER AND WONDERING: FIVE MEDITATIONS
Alison Craig

77 NOT ALL GIVING IS CHARITY
William Powley

79 AUTUMN HANDS
Laura Moulton

81 COMPANIONSHIP
Valerie Holladay

WHEN COYOTES TAKE THE BANDSTAND, THE SMALL HOUSES LEAN

JOANNA BROOKS

AT TEN A.M., ABUELITA HAS MY CHIN in her hand. She spoonfeeds me menudo, that steaming tasteless brown Mexican tripe soup. Sunday morning soup. Hangover cure. Sure do need a cure, since everything out here in the Mojave desert is in revolt and unhealthy.

What do you make of it all? There are brush fires on San Gorgonio, already it is 100 degrees, but my toes wither cold, like purple callalillies dead on the tile. Yes, things are unwell. The hairs on my neck stick up. And the August sky stinks hot, grey and red like a skin turned inside out.

"*Rojo*, see, red sky. A day for Changó," she says. Changó is another one of her voodoo gods. The god of passion, fire, and enemies. The red god. "See," she says, "a red sky."

"Grey," I say. I am a bad patient, and I resist the next spoonful of soup. My lips curl like cigarette papers. And things are stirring outside—winds from San Jacinto send dust devils to my door. Abuelita has brought her nephews along today. And while she makes the menudo and mops my floors, they sit outside on the hood of my car and play Mexican folk music. Today's selection, from Veracruz, *"El Canelo."*

"Was there lightning at the time of your birth?" she asks.

"Probably, Abuelita," I mock.

"Pues, naciste debajo del Changó," she says.

Now I choke. I was born beneath Changó. Changó—this red man—my patron saint? This passion-fire-enemies my life? Abuelita sees enemies everywhere. She sniffs for them beneath the ferns and the Navajo rugs. Abuelita drums enemies out from under my splintering floorboards with her walking. All night long, knees turned out, like a soccer player some decades past prime.

"¿Jugaba fútbol, Abuelita?" I ask, turning her attention from the tripe in my bowl.

"No, Cariña."

No, she says. She never played soccer. But right now, jamming this menudo in my mouth, her elbows soft and brown as firm as pork hinds, I can imagine her slide tackling a Spaniard.

From outside the window, two nephews, Jefe and Paco: *"Pobrecita quacamaya ¡ay! qué lástima me das . . . ¡Se acabron las pithayas ahora si que comeras!"* Brown battered desert birds scratch time at the roots of the oak tree outside and peck at the tires of my Chevy, gone half flat under the weight of three guitars and singer.

I do not buy this. First folklore. Then soul remedies from cow entrails. And now she wants to tell me the color of this sky? No. This is a battle of wills. "Abuelita, already there are fires in the mountains. The sky is grey."

Abuelita becomes serious and holds out another spoonful of menudo. "Red," she says, like a seller of Mexican blankets hitting bottom price. My neck is in the crook of her arm.

"Sí, hay rojo, rojo, rojo." Paco and Jefe and the fat cousin who bends my bumper to the dust under the weight of his bass roll their

r's in three-part harmony and smash José Cuervo bottles against the ground for finale. In the silence, even the morning birds stop and wait for my reply.

"Bueno." Fine, it is red. Will wilts. I am tired. Everything is strange. Coyotes are circling at the highway crossroads. Things are on fire. And the sky is a nosebleed red. A hemorrhage red, broke wide open.

Like Tijuana fireworks, the cousins *ayyayyaya* into the sky and are off, back down my backstreets. Soon Abuelita leaves too, for afternoon mass, and the gate bangs behind her.

In the long dry afternoon everything is wet about because the neighbors in the flat pink house have left their sprinklers running. Watering more earthen sidewalk than lawn, more crabgrass than lawn. Sure, you plant lawn first and guard it with your trowel and your teeth. But the crabgrass gathers on the hills at sunset and sneaks in at night and soon there is no more lawn, just crabgrass. Whatever works. This is the desert and what grows, grows. Chainlink grows waist high and shiny. Aluminum windmills grow like wildflowers tall along I-10 between Indio and Indian Wells. There is always wind. The neighbor's laundry hung out is all spotted red. What do you expect?

• • •

Monday, I take Abuelita shopping.

"For supplies. *Cosas importantes*," she tells me.

Yes, of course. More aerosol cans. El Espray de San Lázaro for sickness. El Espray de Caridad del Cobre for love. El Espray de Amor, which smells like patchouli, like urine and cowry shells. El Espray de los Siete potencias Africanas for difficult moments, when some supposed enemy sniffs at the window sills and rattles the blinds. No solvents or solutions or cleaners good enough. We need prayer juice.

I hire a cleaning lady, hoping for laundry and clean windows once a week. I get a high priestess, a santera. A healer. Someone who always returns, uninvited, yet expected, in comfortable shoes, carrying shopping bags. Silver teeth that I can hear clicking like

mariachi castanets late into the night. Prayers chanted during the folding of the laundry and the sweeping of the floor. The prayer for the lottery. The prayer to Santa Lucia. The prayer to Changó.

I have found her spells, scattered around the house like lottery ticket stubs. A week ago, under my bed, a picture of Nuestra Señora de Caridad del Cobre and a pumpkin hollowed out. Inside, an egg, five claws of a chicken, pepper, flower water, one of my turquoise earrings, and a piece of paper, upon which was written *"hombre"* in black pencil. What can I say? At least the wood floor is swept clean under my bed.

"Let's go."

Where do we go for these *cosas importantes*? Candles and powders and incense, such posters of La Virgen de Guadalupe and Santa Bárbara, oils, small talismans in gold? The botánica de San Miguel, downtown. Your exclusive Inland Empire dealer of *objetos religiosos*.

Abuelita gives me directions. "Right here. *No, no, a la izquierda. ¿Dónde queda?* Forgive me, Cariña. The last time I came with my sister Rosa and we talked the whole way and she knew which bus stop, but I do not know."

"Do you remember which street, Abuelita?"

"No, but it was big."

To make things simple, I drive downtown, down the long street that runs through the heart of our barrio.

"Look for it, Abuelita."

We drive down one side, back up the other. And there it is. San Miguel's. In the back half of Miguel's brother's bridal shop. And, there, under the glass of the counter, is the medal of San Lázaro and the Cross with the Eye of God. And gold charms carved with promises: *"¡Viaje! ¡Protección! ¡Romance! ¡Nuevo Hogar! ¡Cadilac!"* A gold charm that can get you a Cadillac. Books on herbal healing and card reading and crystal balls. Women come to visit Miguel, to pray at the shrine in the corner, behind the sewing machines, among the candles and the pink flowers and the garlands and the burning sticks of incense. To discuss what should be done about my Chela, about my Jose. So sick. So in love. El diablo lo

hizo. The devil again and again. There are no doctors we can afford and the priest speaks a different language, but the saints, they listen. This the priests and the papers call santería. This we call faith. This Miguel knows—he speaks their language; he drove the devils from Aña Viramontes's son Rudi; his father was one of the last naguales, the rural Mexican men who sat with el diablo and became animals under the moon. Because we believe in Miguel and Aña Viramontes and we fear Miguel's father, we do not quarrel over the price of these cans of religious aerosols. El Aerosol de Incensio de Congo. Five dollars for a spray can of prayer juice. On the can, a prayer. And in Spanish, Mark 9:23: *"Todas las cosas son posibles para el creyente."* All things are possible to those who believe. Just believe. Oh Abuelita believes, and pretends not to understand the English part of the label which reads, "Not a religious product. An air freshener only." Abuelita has faith because *"Sin fé, no hay nada."* Abuelita sets five cans on the counter and glares at me like a small brown hawk. Miguel's help figures the total on the back of a napkin. I sign the check.

On the way home, Abuelita the conquistadora tells me she wants to go to a different grocery store. First I trade roach killer for prayer spray and now my long well-lighted aisles for the maze that is Los Morales Mercado? No way. Leaving the shopping to her, I will be eating the strawberries her nephews didn't peddle that day on some suburban street corner. Someone should tell them. No one's going to buy your fruit if you wear your shirt open to the navel and look at the housewives with toro eyes, friend. English Leather, gold chains, the strawberries taste like rubbing alcohol. Leave the machismo at the border.

Hola machismo, meet *la hembra*. When I ran with my posse of women, in the city a few years back, wild like wolves, we'd think nothing of tossing back a Tecate and howling dusk-time at the Mexican men, stationed under street lights, down the long L.A. boulevard. We never feared them then, we women in our own land. We left the windows down and flicked wicked cigarette ashes like viper tongues. *"Ayyayyayyaa"*—with our necks back and throats exposed. Mariachi cry upside down. The nighttime like a convertible top torn.

In the daytime, they hang out on the sidewalk corners. Day labor. Sitting ducks for la migra.

• • •

So it goes these days. In the desert, there is room to lay out shadows on the sidewalk like Tijuana silver or cotton blankets and haggle for a fair price. These days, I am always shamed at bargaining. Abuelita? She could shame a cholo out of his Chevy. Not me. The shadows grow to great lengths against the cracked ground. The wooden gate waist high in my yard—when its door swings, the shadows brush the San Jacinto mountains on one side and the San Gorgonio mountains on the other. So it is with all the doors I've closed. So I moved out to the desert.

Maybe it was los coyotes that drove me. I hit a coyote about two weeks ago near L.A., driving a new road in a canyon just developed, where the orange street lights trace the borders of city and wilderness in dotted lines. I stopped to look for it amidst the sage. Couldn't find it. Yes, the driving is better here. Coyotes don't use the major desert highways because there is room for them to sun on the sandstone and run down ravines.

Today, before Abuelita notices, I go one hundred twenty miles more into the desert, to Rice, where there is nothing and no one even pretends to water their lawn because there is no one. Past Beaumont and Banning and Joshua Tree. Narrow hills grow from flatness suddenly like braile, buckthorn torn and bare. They are small raised dots that tell you where to drive and where not to drive. Everything is burnt past brown into beige, and the wind blows the long grass like sandfish spawning uphill. I bear down on a curve and there is now the flashing of red lights and a silver pickup launched like aluminum bullet into the hillside. And crumpled. Now the weeds are red like the endangered Indian Paintbrush. The sky reels and slows down, then speeds back up. The sky is still grey, unraveled like yarn.

When I arrive in Rice, the dust town, it is I alone and the gas station that was and the house that was and the shadows out of nowhere. A large sign says "Town for Sale." It is not kidding. I

sit—knees wide, kickers on my feet—contemplating such an investment. Someday, they'll want to build a suburb here and I'll own the whole damn desert. They'll want to plant lawn in the sand and build condos beneath the dark brown mountains that collect heat in the midday. I scratch out figures in the hard dirt.

Suddenly, a shadow is large over me.

"Cariña. Can we go home now?" Abuelita, as round as buffalo, that roundest endangered specie native to the American plain. *¿Qué?* The woman has no car. Perhaps she is nagual too, and changed herself into some small brown hawk. And flew. A flat tin can with lid ripped rolls about Abuelita's ankles like an open eye. The wind blows my hair to corn husks. So it is time to leave.

On the drive home, she asks, *"Cariña, ¿dónde está el río?"*

The river? Abuelita, perhaps you didn't notice, but we are in the desert. Half the lake beds dried up. The rivers? Freeways now. Full of rocks and lizards. "Ain't no río round here, I'm afraid."

Abuelita is silent for several miles, sitting quietly with her large white purse on her lap, back through Joshua Tree, through Yucca Valley. And suddenly, in red pepper Spanish, *"El río, Cariña, el río, debajo del freeway."* Abuelita will fall out of the car if I do not stop. She is clucking fast, spitting silver. The Colorado River Aqueduct. A concrete river, but a river nonetheless.

"¿Y porqué?" I turn to ask her why, but she is gone, clambering under the overpass, like a plump hen with sharp claws navigating the rocky hillside in secondhand heels, down to the aqueduct. In her hands, from her purse, the small pumpkin I found under my bed. Abuelita grimaces as her feet slide on the eroded hillside, only rubber rooted weeds catching her steps. She reaches sure footing and tosses the pumpkin into the aqueduct, then turns and squints into the sun, to me, smiling.

"¡Vá a regresar en cinco días!" She yells, her hand shading her eyes.

"What?"

"Five days. He will be back."

She is pleased with herself and climbs back to the car and sleeps for the rest of the trip, her head brown and buried into her chest,

bobbing with the miles. I listen to the static of the radio, watch the thunder clouds gather behind us. Who will be back? Where did she find this he? Reading my palms when I am asleep? Stuck between my life line and my heart line. Ayayai, I laugh.

• • •

Yes, when I look at this it is a story about travelling, which I classify as a hallucinogen. You get numb. Yup, when I feel choked up by the chapparal and the shadows, I reason that I could be to Olancha and back up 395, to Trona even, to the salt flats, to the ends of utter desolation in a matter of hours. Abuelita is my newest navigator, sitting sticky with heat in the passenger seat. Right now we are on our way to Lone Pine. If we make good time, I'll have coffee—two creams, two sugars—at Jack and Kitty's Egg Chalet before the sun sets. The map lays out our path in green dashed lines which mean "scenic roadway."

Abuelita reads the map intently. "This is not so scenic, Cariña."

Oh, Abuelita. The woman lacks nothing in observation. Nope, not scenic at all. The map makers have doubtless never been to Mojave, to Inyokern, to Little Lake. Scenic. You don't go to the desert to *see*. You go to *not* see. To take the thin lines back into the mining country where quite possibly no one could find your car or carcass if the engine overheats. You don't drive the China Beach missile testing range for aesthetic purposes.

But I don't tell Abuelita such things. Such darker purposes. She'd try to cast my mood out with some spray or spell. And now she is a little disoriented anyway. And now she is asleep, her purse falling off her lap a bit.

So the wheels just wind up desert and my stomach flops inside me like a fish on the cement of some dirty wet pier. Breaking its own back. Desert afternoons dry things like a sheet, a white sheet with red dust drop stains. Stiff in the wind. Dry like the long crimson chiles and raw cinnamon sticks—canelas—that stiffen like bones and hides in the produce section. Abuelita tells me that canela is herb of seduction, that when he returns I should keep a bit upon my tongue at all times. A bit of dried cinnamon.

She stirs for a moment as we pass Dry Lake. All dried up, high desert, but you can see it still. See the salt lines and the ground is different where the lake has been. You see, I tell you, what is gone always remains.

Abuelita says, half-sleeping, "You need a hombre, Cariña."

"¿Tiene Ud, esposo?" I ask her. Where is your husband, your family?

"Se murió," she says and her eyes close again, slow like a lizard's.

She is like the girl in Tijuana who asked me for a dollar, two children about her knees. "Where is your husband?" I asked. *"Se murió."* Dead, she said with a stony suddenness that made her eyes large. We both knew it was a lie. But I gave her five dollars for her choice of words. Yes, "dead" is a good word to describe the gone. To give them a daytime Christian burial. But they are never dead; they return at night riding horses, in the sound of cars sputtering exhaust down the dirt road, in the howl of the coyotes, wanting to dance.

By the time we get there and back it is definitely night. Night-times here spin in speckled midnight like the walls of the old cockroachy dance clubs in downtown L.A. Abuelita takes her skirt about her knees and clicks the heels of her shoes—white patent leather, sensible heels. Some flirt she is, a dollar a dance, and the tips. You can tell who will tip well by the newness of their shave and the brand of their smokes. Abuelita, she's a charmer. She gets all the men in this dance club, not just the old Mexican ones. Coyotes take the bandstand and howl like low sax, and the small houses lean.

• • •

Four and a half days have passed since she threw the pumpkin in the aqueduct, and Abuelita has left my house for the day. Some confidence, I think. When the day dissipates and ten p.m. comes, the rain begins and there is a knock on my back door. I open it and *"¡Hola!"* shout the nephews, strumming the biggest guitars I have ever seen. Yes, Abuelita returns, though I have told her—begged her—to take the night off. She carries shopping bags—corn husks, beef, chilis, fresh salsa, sangría.

"Abuelita . . . ¿porqué?"

"Sí. Porqué." Yes, because none of us can sleep. The thunder clouds gather outside and shake my house, the storm soaks my bones. Lightning. Abuelita looks up from her frying pan and watches the lightning strike. I count the seconds between thunder and lightning.

Ten. Now it is over San Jacinto. My blinds knock at the window frames.

Seven. Now Joshua Tree. The storm eats the sky up whole, gobbles it and swells like a snake. Outside, the nephews start up their songs under the shelter of that oak. Veracruz music.

Four. The lights flicker, then go out. Abuelita lights more candles. Lightning crackles like a forked tongue. Red puddles form in my driveway. My street—a river reclaimed.

And then the knock at the door.

Yes, there is a man at my door, Abuelita, stop craning your neck. She turns back to the tamales. And sets the table. With red dishes and white candles, sangría and salsa. She does not look at him, as though he is not right for her eyes. I watch her reaction, watch her carefully, that she does not go the cabinet for *el Aerosol de Amor*. Or cast him out with blood spells.

Yes, come in out of the storm. Yes, we have a phone. Are you hungry?

Abuelita calls for me from the kitchen. "Cariña, when he sleeps," Abuelita tells me, "take his hairs, and we will burn them with honey and the threads from the sheets of your bed." Santería. More magic.

"I know what you're thinking, Abuelita. He is here because of your spell-making. No, he is not. He is just here. Flash floods took out highway 247 at Old Woman Springs. So, no." My words fade shamed like smoke skywriting into the black. Without saying more, Abuelita saint-like blows out the kitchen candles and leaves into the storm. Thank God—or Changó, or Santa Bárbara, or any one of the fifty saints for whom Abuelita has lit a candle in the corner of my house—thank God, she is taking her nephews with her.

So we are alone now. Hello. And hello. Dinner is fine, yes. I ask him questions that fall on the floor like coins: So where have you been and where are you going and what do you know?

His language feels familiar to me, like road signs I have seen before and before. Like I know the way there and back already. Eyes are blue and tight like stars. His face, windburned. His fingers tie knots in this and that. The edge of the tablecloth. The wick of an unlit candle.

I play with matches in idleness, putting the flame close to my skin to bring me back out of this. Why the storm and the man and the wholeness now? Why the wholeness now? I drive hundreds of miles of highways through this great Mojave. I hunt hard like a coyote bitch, making bad tracks all through this desert. And it comes to me on the back of a thunderhead, a copperhead diamondback sidewinder making slow trails across wet dirt. Striking by surprise. Some spell Abuelita has cast on me.

So susceptible. So the sun is down and night runs down the sky like blue paint and it covers up the pinks and the oranges and him and I, it coats us too—dripping down our backs. "Blue moon," croons the woman in the orange house next door, accompanied by the fading sound of those nephews' guitarrones, tambores, violines. Her television speaks in tongues, in lights that flash like gunfire against the bare walls and back. Blue moon. *"Ayyayyayyay"*—those nephews cry from far away, head back, like coyotes. The woman yells at god into the blackness, and the coyotes and mariachis yip yip along the frontage road, where the cut glass in the asphalt sparkles like madness. Red rivers flood my front yard.

We sit on the floor, watch the sky crack into aspects. Time moves kind of cubist. And he looks marvelous and his face shines like fire through it, but the candles are too low to justify that.

Have you ever been to Spain? El Prado? I ask him.

No, he says. Have you been to the Chihuahan desert? he says. You like deserts, yes? Beautiful bajadas flowering creosote yellow and fruiting black crucifixion thorns. Russian thistle tumbleweeds burning at sunset.

We talk desert flowers into the night. The storm passes over us, and in phases the sky blooms and unblooms different varieties of color—red desert buckwheat and magenta indian blanket and purple milkvetch and pink palefaces. It becomes very late and I lie down, my head on one elbow. His voice is low, like a burr in the throat of a coyote. They are quite still tonight, no howling from the hills. Eventually the candles burn down and night falls like sediment into the room. Things blur.

Of course, when I awake in the morning, the sky is blue. No strange car parked out in front. Even the mustard weed has lost its strong smell. The sun is tall and casts short shadows.

Abuelita sprays the air fiercely with her Aerosol de los Siete Potencias Africanas.

For a few days, I am quite well.

"You see," she says.

DAD IN THE KITCHEN

BJ FOGG

I just might forget that week I've pasted in albums:
Luke two, a new puppy, Monterey sun.
But I'll remember Dad
handwashing through the holidays.

Pouring Palmolive and massaging suds to life,
Dad moved easy like a tall tree-swing,
his white pinpoint oxford
safely under an apron.

And then I'll remember how he stood
ten years ago in bare feet
and a Pendleton robe to make me breakfast
each weekday at five fifty-five a.m. How he opened
my eggs in pairs and nested empty

orange halves, and how I swallowed those mornings
without words.

SEEING EGYPT

MARY LYNN BAHR

In Luxor it is a holy day.
Tidal fists and turbans surge
with flash white foaming eyes
downstreet around your
uncapsizeable bus.
Don't drink the water.

In Aswan you can sail in white faloukas
and order french fries from the careful waiter
in the garden by the pool
and pay to see a troupe of Nubians
dance in green and yellow,
but the flour-armed baker and his dusty sons
will give you unsalted pitas
and the clothingstore boy with crooked teeth
will call his little sisters.

In the basement of the Cairo Hilton
you can drink Coke at slim white tables
and browse expensive imported boutiques
where everyone knows English,
all but some giggling black-haired
girls from the university
who smile and gaze and without words
give you the silver rings from their fingers.

SAY "THANK YOU, JESUS!"

DAVID PULSIPHER

"YOU HAVE TO GET A POLISH DOG from Max's," Shawn told me before I left his apartment this morning. "Max has the best hot dogs in town." It is a stroke of good fortune that I found it so soon. Chicago is a big city, and I'm going on sheer luck, wandering aimlessly through the maze of skyscrapers and dirty sidewalks. Now, with my Polish dog in one hand, and a large root beer in the other, I stand on State Street and wonder what to do next. The rest of the morning and the whole afternoon stretches before me. My ticket to the Monet exhibition isn't until three o'clock. If I can just get out of the shadow of these buildings, perhaps I can find the sun again. Maybe a nice grassy park to enjoy my meal and read *The Power of Myth*. Does Chicago have any parks? I put my

root beer on a bench and check the small stack of flyers that I picked up from a tourist booth near the train station. Grant Park is only a few blocks away. And there is a Gospel-Fest today. What luck. I stuff the flyers into my book and put it under my arm. Grabbing my root beer I walk to the curb and wait for the light to change.

Within a block I can hear the music, and within another block I can see the park, but I am blocked by railroad tracks. I follow the tracks south to a bridge, and the singing grows louder with each step. Finally, through the trees, a stage comes into view, set in the middle of a road. I weave my way through the small crowd to a shady spot under a large elm, where I sit on a curb and try my first bite of Max's Polish dog. It snaps between my teeth as the breeze from Lake Michigan tickles my eyebrows and the Gospel-Fest music bounces in my ears. The sausage skin is tight and thick and brown like the Lebanese man who was tending the shop, and each bite is like popping a balloon. Juice streams out the corners of my mouth and onto the pavement between my legs. With my thumb and forefinger I remove the pickle wedge and tomatoes and place them in the gutter as I shift my butt on the cement. Good hot dog, but with all due respect to Shawn, I've tasted better.

The root beer isn't fizzy anymore because of my detour around the tracks, so I place it carefully in the gutter next to the pickle wedge and hope that no one kicks it over. From where I sit I can see mostly legs, and sometimes through those legs I glimpse the stage, from which a large group of teenage singers is belting out praises to Jesus Christ. My hot dog is almost done, but the singing has apparently just begun. The bright round faces shout "Hallelujah!" as their shoulders—hundreds of shoulders draped in white cotton robes—bounce and shake to the rhythm of the electric organ. Young faces. Black hands. Short hair. White teeth. Loud claps. "Hallelujah, Lord!"

All around me clusters of black legs move to the music. Hips sway and bounce. Hands stretch and shake. My mouth moves to the rhythm, the hot dog pops to the beat, and I begin to move my head from side to side. Then I spy a man with starched legs and khaki shorts standing quietly among the bouncing black bodies. My

head stops moving because he isn't bouncing. The sight of his bleach-white legs reminds me of who I am and jars the rhythm from my head. I chew the last bite of my Polish dog and wash it down with a swig of flat soda. Leaving my wrappers and pickle in the gutter, I stand up on the curb for a better view of the singers, brushing a nervous hand across the seat of my jeans to clear off the pebbles and leaves.

With my head slightly above crowd the wind hits me more forcefully in the face. It blows from the lake across the open stage, through the singers' white robes, across the tight black curls of hair, to my pale cheeks. It feels good and clean and tickles my ears. The sun would be hot without the breeze, but the breeze would be cold without the sun, and across the lake, dark clouds gather and murmur and send a new gust across the stage. With one long "Amen" the singers lift a final high note to match the new chill in the wind. The crowd applauds and shouts praises, and the breeze flutters the young white robes as a large jolly man in a milky cream suit steps on stage and grabs the microphone.

"Lordy, it may rain yet. But we're a'prayin' it don't, 'cause we still got a lot of singin' to get done."

His chest rumbles each word, and the crowd, which only a few moments earlier was an ocean of rhythm is now quiet and listening. The dark clouds are beginning to move across the lake towards the park. Thunder booms.

"I'm sorry, Lord," the man says, looking back at the clouds. "I repent."

Laughter from the crowd.

"Praise Jesus. While the next choir is gettin' set, let's talk about why we're here. You havin' a good time?"

Shouts from the crowd.

"Say 'Hallelujah!' "

"Hallelujah!" shouts the crowd.

"Has the Lord been good to you today? Say 'Praise Jesus!' "

"Praise Jesus!"

"If the Lord's done anythin' for you today, that you know you couldn't have done by yourself, raise your hand."

Hands stretch towards the stage.

"Now that ain't very good. I said if the Lord's done anythin' for you today, that you know you couldn't do for yourself, raise your hands!"

More black hands. I see one delicate white palm.

"Now say 'Thank you, Jesus!' "

"Thank you, Jesus!" shouts the crowd.

"I can't hear you!"

"Thank you, Jesus!"

I move closer to the stage and lean against the pole of a dining tent, next to two women—one old, one young—sitting on top of a picnic table. Their hands are in the air with the rest of the crowd. I fold my arms and listen to the man in the milky cream suit.

"All right, now, I want you to turn to the person next to you, put your arm around their shoulders and say 'I love you.' "

The women next to me hug each other, and I hear them whisper, "I love you."

"Now turn to the person on the other side—black or white, it don't matter to God—put your arm around them and say 'I love you.' "

The older woman looks my way, and I stare at her eyes. My folded arms seem stiff and awkward as I try to untangle them, but she looks away, pretending our eyes didn't meet, pretending to study the man on the stage. I put my hands in my pockets and study her shoulders—pocked and scarred and bony, protruding from a sleeveless blouse—wishing I had put my arms around them and felt the scars on my smooth palms—wishing I had said "I love you." Pushing myself from the dining tent pole, I shuffle through the crowd and away from the stage, kicking pebbles on the park path as the deep voice in the milky cream suit rumbles behind me.

"Hallelujah! Now ain't that nice? Praise Jesus! Well, it looks like the next choir is ready, so I'm going to give them the mike and they're going to sing sweet praises to the Lord. Let's give a big welcome to the First Trinity Youth Choir."

The singing starts again, but as I walk it soon fades into the spray of Buckingham Fountains. The wind blows its mist into my

face and chills my cheeks. Three more hours until the exhibition, but I don't feel like reading now. I leave the pathway and follow the streets across the bridge and back into the city. I submerge myself into the shadows of the buildings, searching the nooks and the alleys for something to see, something to distract me. Walls of glass and steel hem me in, focus my path, limit my steps. It is almost like the massive walls of Zion Canyon in Southern Utah. But Zion's Narrows are silent and still, and the rock walls are warm in places. This city canyon is ceaseless noise and movement, and the steel walls are cold and impregnable. Looking up, I see a sliver of cloudy sky, which is growing darker with every passing minute. I crane my neck backwards trying to perceive people on the seventieth and ninetieth floors—people whose offices must sway in the wind and mist. I probably look like a tourist.

Then I hear the chimes—coming somewhere from that same sliver of sky. Chimes—echoing from windows, bouncing around corners, blending with the howl of the frantic wind. The echoes and the wind and car horns blur my sense of direction, so I simply follow my instincts, searching for the source of the music, trying not to look like a child lost in a department store. As I walk people rush past me with umbrellas, darting in and out of doorways. The wind that sweeps through the city canyon is chilly now, and its music finally leads me around a corner to the source of the chimes. Sandwiched between two large bank buildings sits a small cathedral made of brown marble. Pennants hanging from the street lamps advertize the attractions inside: *St. Francis: Love is Our Business*. I cross the street and as I dart through one of the three shadowed portals the raindrops finally begin to fall.

In the foyer I can no longer hear the chimes. The foyer is empty, but from the sanctuary I can hear the sound of angels singing. It's been over five years since I attended a Catholic Mass, and I am suddenly overwhelmed with yearning, so I walk up the stairs and through the doors towards the singing. As my eyes adjust to the dim light, I notice that the brown marble rises high above my head and plays into intricate patterns on the ceiling. The center aisle stretches in front of me to an altar far, far away. And around

the altar I see small figures in white robes that drift and float. One of them has a tall, pointed hat, which marks him as a bishop. Suddenly the singing stops and the bishop chants something about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. A friendly friar steps out of the shadows, hands me a program, and disappears. I look at the cover—"The Ordination of Friar Thomas, Friar Michael, and Friar John." What luck, again. I take a seat on the aisle so I will be able to see the priesthood candidates prostrate themselves on the floor. It's something I've only read about. As I study my program I am startled by a sprinkle of water on my head and cheeks. I look up to see the bishop walking down the aisle, purifying the congregation with an evergreen branch. He dips, then flings the holy water—right, then left, slowly down the aisle. From the balcony an angel sings.

The ceremony is long. But I sit on the hard bench and strain to hear every word and every note. Women read scripture. The bishop counsels the candidates to "Feed my sheep." He anoints their hands with chrism and says these words to them: "May the Father, who has begun this good work in you, bring it to fulfillment." And eventually the priesthood candidates lie prostrate in the aisle. As the three men lie on the floor, the congregation stands and from the balcony the angel sings.

"Lord have mercy," he sings.

"Lord have mercy," the assembly responds.

The men's faces are pressed to the cold stone floor, their arms outstretched. Their robes lie limp about their ankles. And as they lie, the voices of the congregation rise and fall on the indifferent melody.

"Christ have mercy," the angel sings.

"Christ have mercy," the assembly responds.

"Lord have mercy."

"Lord have mercy."

"Holy Mary, Mother of God."

"Pray for us."

"Saint Michael."

"Pray for us."

"Saint John the Baptist."

"Pray for us."

A man with neatly trimmed hair and a steel grey tailored suit slides into the pew in front of me. He greets the woman next to him with a clean kiss and an AquaVelva smile. Maybe he sells razors. Maybe he just came from a board meeting about a new line of after-shave. He looks at his watch. "Sorry I'm late," he whispers to the woman.

"Saint Peter and Saint Paul," the angel sings.

"Pray for us."

The AquaVelva man looks at his watch again, rubs his hands together, and strains his eyes forward towards the candidates on the floor.

"Holy Mother Saint Clare."

"Pray for us."

"All holy men and women."

"Pray for us."

After the new priests are ordained and blessed, they administer mass to the congregation, and then the service dissolves into a swirling mass of chatter and congratulations. The AquaVelva man quickly congratulates his cousin and abandons the chapel. Aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews hug and kiss and linger in the pews. The new priests greet everyone with serene smiles and gentle nods. "Thank you. Thank you," they whisper. And their nodding heads seem to say, "Bless you my child. Bless you my child," even to parents and grandparents.

Around the perimeter stand groups of friars talking about Michael Jordan and the Bulls. My mind swims with questions. Who are they? Why do they come? Who was the angel? What does his song mean? I loiter among the marble columns, hoping a congenial friar will notice my questioning glance and approach me, but soon the chapel is empty as the congregation moves to the foyer and basement for refreshments. I weave my way through the crowded foyer smiling shyly whenever someone's gaze meets mine, until finally I stand in the doorway and look at the damp street. The rain has stopped and now the sun shines in streaks through the buildings

and steams the asphalt. Amazing. The city smells almost fresh. Two friars stand with me in the doorway, and one squints at the sky.

"Think it'll rain again?" he asks the other.

"Well, it don't really matter," says his companion. "We've got to go, rain or shine."

The first one shrugs, "What the hell, I'm outa here," and sprints across the puddles.

I step onto the sidewalk and the smell of grease returns.

"Sir, could you help me get something to eat?"

The gentle voice startles me. I look at the man standing near the church door beneath an ad for suntan lotion which reads, "Love the sun. Worship your skin." His dark face is pleasant and his sky blue polyester pants are clean. I mumble something about not having anything and walk away, feeling the weight of three ten-dollar bills in my pocket. I tell myself that gentle faces are often the most dangerous, but when I reach the corner I turn around. He is gone. I have always had late charity. Once in a K-Mart parking lot, a deaf man accosted me, selling reference cards for American Sign Language. Ten miles down the road I turned my car around and returned to buy his card with a twenty dollar bill. That was rare, to find him again. More often, like this pleasant man, they are gone, and I have to live with my hesitancy for the rest of the day.

I have another hour before the Monet exhibition, and something draws me back to Grant Park, back to the sun and the wind, away from the city streets and the pavement. When I come to the bridge across the railroad tracks I can hear the raucous music again and feel the misty breeze. As I reach the stage and the small crowd, the singing stops, and the man in the milky cream suit appears again on stage.

"My, weren't they fine. Praise Jesus. Come on now, let's show 'em how much we liked their sweet praises."

The crowd applauds and shouts.

"Well, that ends our program for this stage. But we're not done yet. No sir. We're just a'gettin' goin'. In a little while the singin'll start again on the main stage, so everybody move over there."

The man steps away from the microphone and starts talking to a stage hand, and the crowd begins to mill and move. Soon I am in a swarm of black faces, sweeping me forward, carrying me towards a large amphitheater on the other side of the grass. People are smiling and laughing, but no one speaks to me. I avoid their eyes, looking at the ground or pretending to search for a friend whenever someone looks my way. Every chuckle seems to be a snicker in my direction. I don't belong here. But I'm trapped in the swarm of bodies so I stay. After a few minutes the crowd dissolves around me and I can see the main stage. People are filing into rows and rows of folding chairs. I notice a white man and woman sitting in the back near the center aisle, so I walk up to them and ask if I can sit on their row.

"Sure," the man says.

They move their legs so I can get in. His eyes are gentle—the kind of gentle I've seen in faces of tender men who suffer nervous breakdowns. His beard is flecked with gray. He leans back in his chair and crosses his bleach-white legs with athletic shoes that don't quite match his khaki shorts. Maybe they are the same white legs from the other stage. I sit three chairs away and wait for the music. I feel his gentle eyes glance in my direction, but I look at the stage.

"Do you like Joseph Campbell?" he asks after a few minutes.

I look at *The Power of Myth* in my lap.

"Uh, yea," I say.

Silence. I look at the cover and try again. "He has lots of good insight—you know—about love and life."

"I haven't read that book," he says, "but I was at a self-actualization seminar last year, and they had us read *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The whole program was built around his ideas—you know, the hero's journey?"

"Oh," I say, "sounds interesting."

Silence again. I muster a comment. "Was the seminar helpful?"

"Yes, it was. Although I don't think I really understand Campbell's ideas." He pauses for a moment, and sighs. "Actually, I didn't finish the book. But what I read was very helpful."

He smiles, and I smile and nod, and turn my face towards the stage, relieved that our conversation is about to be interrupted. Three large women have appeared on stage, and without an introduction they begin to sing "When the Saints go Marching In." The crowd stands to dance. I stand also. As the music starts, two women squeeze into our row between me and the man with the gentle eyes. The one nearest me is very large and dark, and as soon as she puts her cooler and purse beneath the folding chair, she stands and begins to clap her hands and swing her hips.

"Sing it, Lena!" she shouts.

Her movement is contagious, and as I stand next to her I feel my hips start to move to the left, but I check them. Still,the energy is irresistible.

"Oh, when the saints,
Oh, when the saints,
Oh, when the saints go marching in,
I want to be in that number,
When the saints go marching in."

Quietly at first, I clap my hands. Then I raise them above my head, and hope no one is watching. Looking around I see thousands of happy faces, all of them looking towards the stage, and I realize that no one is looking at me, making fun of my awkward attempts to participate. I am insignificant to their joy. Almost imperceptibly at first, my hips move and my shoulders shake. More. More. Faster and faster. The music rocks and tilts. I look at the man with the gentle eyes. He too is trying to clap and sway with the rhythm. Neither of us is very adept, but we keep clapping and swaying. After what seems like too short of time, the music ends.

"Whew!" says one of the singers, wiping her brow. "Hallelujah!"

The crowd shouts their love to her.

"I want to be in that number. I certainly do!"

The crowd shouts again.

"How many of you are saved?"

Thousands of hands stretch skyward.

"Say, 'Hallelujah!' "

"Hallelujah!" shouts the crowd.

"If you are filled with the Lord's love—and I know you are—I want you to grab your neighbor by the hand and say, 'The Lord is good!' "

Before I can react, two powerful black hands grab my delicate white palm and I look into soft brown eyes.

"The Lord is good," says the large energetic woman.

"The Lord is good," I answer softly.

The music starts again, the women sing, and the hands clap. I sway and laugh, and the breeze blows through my hair and across my palms as I bring them together in rhythm to the music.

AUTUMN HANDS

LAURA MOULTON

I am Autumn for Halloween and in the
Light, we paste leaves until the trashbag
Is covered.

When the light is gone, we climb into
Your car and you ask me if I ever
Wonder what's inside you.

I think of what it is to gut a pumpkin,
Handfulls of wet orange strands, bland
Seeds, autumn innards.

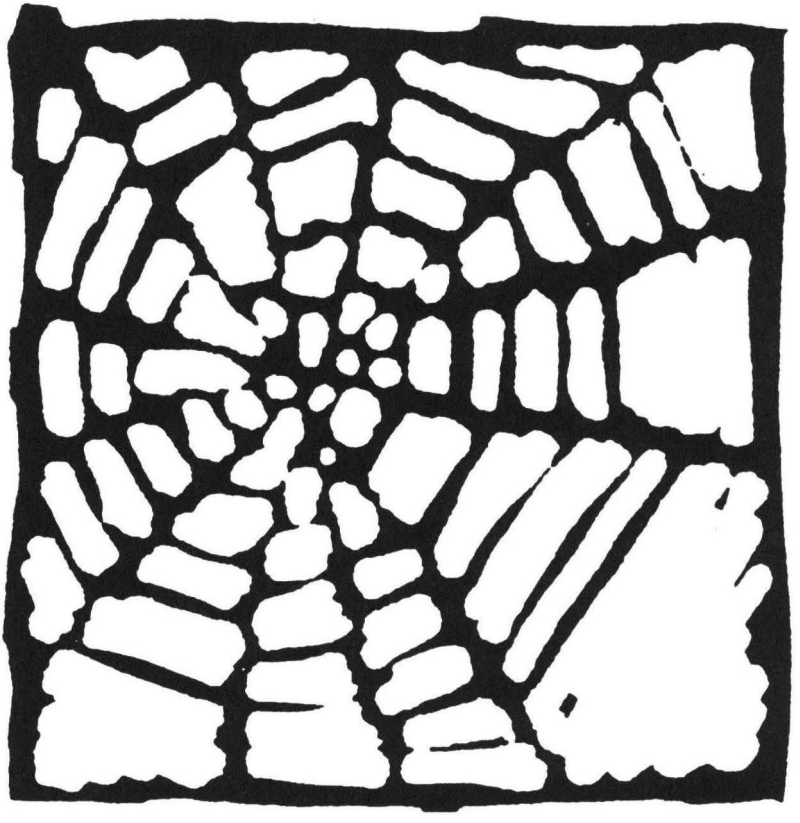
You needn't ask, I say.
I know then that you are leaving.

People won't know what you are, you
Say. They don't know what I am now, I
Tell you.

You laugh then, and I bite my lip. I will
ache when you are gone. All in all, our
Time spent together pasting,

Talking of seasons, of
Leaves that burn rust into the ground,

It is not enough.



THE WEB

JAMES STANGER

SARAH STOOD IN FRONT OF JASON AND held his hands before both of them.

"See, I take the string, run it in and out of your fingers like this, and . . . "

"And then I have a cat's cradle, right?" Jason interrupted.

Sarah smiled. "That's right. And then we can make all sorts of shapes out of the string. All I have to do is move my fingers like this, and like this."

Each time she said "this," she put her fingers into the web of string and made it take new forms. It was magic to Jason—taking a web like that and then making shapes appear. It tantalized him. Jason smiled and grabbed her hands.

"Ha—now I've got you," he said, planting a kiss on her forehead. "There's no escaping me

now—and your parents aren't even here to help you," he said in his best sinister voice.

"Really?" she said, sliding her hands out of his before he could get a tighter grip. "Nice try, guy," she smiled, and left Jason in the room, alone, staring at the empty web formed in his fingers.

He moved the cradle in front of his face, trying to get a look at each side of it. So many directions, he thought. All conform to some strange equation, some code. He then tried to make it work by imitating the way Sarah moved her fingers. It didn't work. He stopped and felt the tension of the string as it wound in and out of his fingers, and saw the empty space between the cords.

"Just empty space with a bit of tension," he said to himself softly.

When Sarah came back to the room, she stood in front of him with her hands behind her.

"You know," Jason said, "I don't think I have a heart." He didn't stop looking at the cradle the whole time.

Sarah looked at him, a bit puzzled. "What makes you say that?"

Jason looked up, cleared his throat and waited for his eyes to focus on her.

She still had her hands behind her. "Guess what I got."

"Got handcuffed by your little brother?"

Sarah raised her eyebrows and cocked her head slightly sideways. "Wrong answer?"

"Wrong answer," Sarah said, and brought her hands from behind to reveal a camera. She grinned with tight lips, the shutter opened with a menacing click, and Jason and Sarah's precious moment was captured forever on Kodachrome.

As she put the camera down on the table, Sarah looked over at Jason and frowned. "What do you mean, you have no heart?" she asked, mocking him good-naturedly. He didn't answer, and as they sat down on the couch, she put her head on his chest. Jason breathed in deeply the strawberry smell from her hair. "Sounds like you got one to me," she said, laughing a little.

When Jason left to go home, Sarah kissed him on the forehead. "Well, have a good time this weekend. Sorry I can't be there for all the fun," she said, and looked down at her feet. "You still going to the ranch and the party tomorrow?" she asked, looking up.

"Yup. Should be fun. Sure you don't want to go?"

"I've got to go to the coast with Mom and Dad this time—it's one of the last times I'll be able to go with them before college starts again."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. It's hard not to do something for the last time—it makes the memories a bit soft if you don't, know what I mean?"

"No," she laughed, "but that doesn't stop me at all. Goodnight, Jason," she laughed, and closed the door.

As Jason walked to the car, he looked over at where Sarah's bedroom was. The light was off, and in the darkness he thought he saw a silver web shine from the darkest corner of her window.

• • •

The phone rang, and Jason groaned. The phone rang some more, and Jason swore. The phone kept ringing, and Jason got up to silence it with an answer.

"Jason? It's me, Mike. Let's hit the river, bud."

"What time is it?" Jason yawned.

"Time for the river."

That was an answer Jason couldn't argue with. He rubbed his face and hair, and sighed. "So when do we go?"

They were to meet at the Selma store, the best place to meet because it was just before the cutoff to the ranch. Everyone was going—Dave, Sheryl, Tammi, Tyler. Everyone.

McCaleb ranch was a place too far out of the way to ever get too popular or crowded—except among a few devoted skinny-dippers and, of course, Jason's friends. It was on the Illinois River, a little mountain runoff that almost went stagnant by the end of the summer, but somehow managed to turn into a torrent every winter. Once, it took out all the bridges that crossed it, even threatening

a redwood suspension footbridge that spanned its depths—and it was over sixty feet high.

Yet even in the summer when the river got so narrow that Mike and Jason could spit across it, the clear waters gathered into pools that turned an emerald green for the depth.

McCaleb ranch, or "the ranch," was the best place for Jason and his friends to go. It was secluded, but not really that hard to reach, and it was home to the redwood bridge that had resisted destruction so many years ago. And, what's more, it invited jumpers—jumpers who knew how to do it right. Rumor had it that people who didn't know how to do it wound up with broken backs.

They all sat sunning themselves on the rocks, listening to Mike's latest obscure musical find, and watching the river.

"It's a band called 'Moby Grape.' Great stuff, eh?" Mike asked, twisting off the cap of his drink.

Some nodded, some laughed and shook their heads.

"So," Mike said, "who's going off the bridge with me?"

All of them except Jason looked up and laughed again.

"You mean it?" Jason asked, so seriously that the others looked at Jason, back at Mike, and then at Jason again.

Mike took a big drink and then set it down. "Yup," he said with a belch.

They climbed the wood stairs to the top of the rock that the bridge was fastened to, taking care that they wouldn't step on any rattlesnakes that might be sunning themselves.

When Jason and Mike reached the top, Jason looked down at the green waters below. Then he looked at the bridge. Cables stretched from each end of the bridge and wove in and out of the wood. Jason wondered how even all this weaving could hold a bridge against the elements. Wind and water sucked life out of things. He looked back down and saw the bridge's shadow on the water. It seemed to form a net across the surface, as if it were trying to capture the fluid passing through its shadow. Jason saw the shadows from these cables on his hands, even on his body. As Jason tried to make the shadows wrap around his hands and arms, Mike tapped him on the back.

"Well, bud," Mike said, "let's get out there and see what happens." He looked around himself and then at Jason. "Man, this is a scene right out of *Indiana Jones* or something, isn't it?"

Jason rolled his eyes.

The bridge began to sway and moan when they walked on it. As they made it to the middle, it seemed to shiver under their weight. And then Jason began thinking about what he had heard one time—that if a cat walked with a steady step across a suspension bridge, then the rhythmic force of the cat's stride would bring the whole thing down. Breaking his stride, Jason noticed the shadows of the thick steel cables on his chest. Jason rubbed his heart, and he could smell the creosote the state used to keep the wood from decaying through the years.

Suddenly the blowing wind made him feel cold. Mike was cold too; Jason could tell by the goose bumps on his back. He looked down through the wood slats that formed his floor, watching the river appear intermittently through the spaces—it was almost like watching one of those old movies.

"I don't know, man," Jason said. "It's a long way down, you know?"

"Yeah, I know," Mike said, and jumped over the side, just clearing his feet over the rails. He screamed the whole way down. After a couple of seconds, Jason could almost feel Mike's impact on the water. Then he heard the splash, and the cheers of those down below.

Jason was nervous, so he climbed slowly outside the rail and stood on one of the cross-beams. He could hear the others shouting things at him.

"I don't have the heart for all this, man," he whispered to himself. Then he thought about the cat walking, but that didn't scare him much anymore. The wind began to blow harder, and he could feel his heart straining at itself each time he looked down. As he heard the bridge creak and groan under his weight, he looked at his hands and saw the shadows run across them. The tension in his heart and the groanings of the bridge came together in a sympathetic harmony. His hands were shaking now, and he had

lost all thought of seeing the shadows run through them. As the creaking, moaning, and shivering grew more intense, he stretched his leg into the breeze and leant out into nothing.

The wind howled in his ears. He flailed his arms around and around, and finally straightened himself just before he hit the water. All was a wet, white jumble at first, and as he made his way to the surface, he noticed that his right side and chest had gone numb. He could still swim fine, but he couldn't feel the water touch him. Jason swam to the shore, crawled up the bank, and rolled over to watch his friends. They were clapping.

"Nice jump, Jason," Dave said. "Went in a bit crooked though. You all right?"

Jason groaned and nodded his head and got up.

"Yeah," said Mike, "first time I ever went in I did the same thing. I'll bet part of you is all numb, right?"

"So this'll go away?" Jason asked, sitting down slowly, and then getting up quickly from the heat of the rocks.

More laughter.

"Yeah, it will, but just wait until the bruise takes over," Mike said. "Then you'll want to be numb all over again."

"I think I already know what you mean," Jason said.

As they were talking, they all heard someone walking toward them.

"What's going on?" Jason said, pointing to two men in brown uniforms.

"Rangers," Mike said as he stood up. "Hi guys," he yelled, waving his drink at them.

The two men weren't smiling. They climbed down from the trail and made their way toward the group. One of them had a pen and a small pad in his hand.

"You jumped off the bridge, didn't you?" the one with the pad said. He didn't look up.

"Yeah, is that a problem?" Mike asked in his best good-ole-boy manner. The other ranger just looked at him.

"You did too," he said, as he turned his head and pointed at Jason.

There was an awkward silence, and Jason looked up to the bridge and saw its shadow on the river. He felt his chest. Still no feeling there, but his heart was beating so hard he could hear its thumping in his ears.

"There's no problem," the ranger smiled, "just fifty bucks each. You," he said, pointing at Mike, "your name?"

As the ranger wrote Mike's name, Jason noticed some movement next to the ranger's foot.

It was a spider, a big thing, wet-brown with lots of hair on its legs. It was spinning a web between two rocks. Jason was wondering why a spider would bother making a web in a place so close to the river when a butterfly flew into it even as he watched.

The spider stopped its weaving instantly and went for its prey. As the spider climbed on top of it, the web shook and shivered and the spider went about its work. Then the butterfly fell out of the web and lay shivering on the ground. At first Jason thought that it was free, and that the spider would go back to its weaving, but it dropped to the ground, crawled over to where the butterfly was, and went to finish its job. Then the ranger, as he stepped forward to hand Jason his ticket, crushed the spider and the butterfly beneath his boot. Jason took the ticket in his hand and kept looking at the ranger's foot. Nothing was left when he took his foot away—just an empty silver web that fluttered in the wind, half torn from its rock.

"Here's your ticket. You can pay this at the ranger station in town, gentlemen; or, if you wish, mail it in." They both turned and walked up the trail. Then one of them turned around. "And could you keep that music down? I think you're scaring the animals." The ranger sort of smiled, then turned to make his way up the trail after his friend.

On the way back to town, Mike sat in the back seat and kept waving his ticket in front of Jason.

"Well, put it this way," Mike sighed, "at least we'll have something to show for the day." He stopped for a moment and frowned. "They do give receipts, don't they?"

"Receipts? I'm not sure," Jason said, rolling his eyes, "but if you write a check, you'll have that to help you treasure the memory."

Mike smiled. "Good. I thought it was worth it, anyway. I hate going off that thing alone. It's nicer to go off with someone else. Makes things more memorable."

Jason smiled. "I guess so, Mike. Real male-bonding stuff, eh?"

"Male what?" Mike asked, laughing. "You scare me with that talk, bud. Pretty soon you'll be telling me that I smoke because I have an oral fixation, and am in love with my mother." He shook his head and turned up the car stereo.

Then Jason couldn't help thinking about the bridge. He thought about its wires and cables running over and under it, keeping the bridge semi-stable when people walked on it.

Sometimes he thought he wanted to just cut free from people, just drop from it all and crawl away. But then there would be nothing at all. An empty space without even a web of quivering cables and wires to cradle the people he knew. Nothing there that would shiver and grow tense and jump each time a new person tripped over him. He sat up and felt his numb side and chest.

"Hey Mike," Jason asked, "you sure this numbness goes away?"

• • •

Mike's big party was that night. People poured through the doors and over the back fence, and still more people came. It was a festival to Jason. He saw bodies everywhere he looked. The night was humid, and his clothes stuck to him like they were trying to become part of his skin, and whenever he touched anyone, his skin attached itself to them for a fraction of a second too long. Then it would finally release, so perverse and slow that it seemed his body was trying to communicate, to grow into others and attach itself permanently without permission.

Jason left the party early. He was tired after all the day's sun, and he was still a little annoyed about how much the jump off the bridge had cost him. Besides all that, his side felt like it had turned into one huge sun-burned bruise. He thought that as soon as he got home and took off his clothes, his whole body would look like

a huge black-orange blob. He would have to sleep square on his back tonight, or sleep would never come.

He was home watching TV when the phone rang. He answered it, and heard Sarah's voice. She was whispering, and sounded scared—and a little mad.

"Sarah? Are you calling from the coast?"

"No, Jason, I'm at the party—Mike's party. Listen . . . "

"I thought you were . . . "

"Jason, the cops are here. They've got a huge truck outside, and they're taking everyone who's not 21. I guess the party got too loud . . . "

"A truck? How do you know?"

"I can see it out the window—I'm in someone's bedroom. I ran up here as soon as I saw flashing lights through the windows downstairs. It's kind of scary up here."

Jason laughed.

"This is funny? Come get me."

"What?"

"You heard me."

When Jason arrived at Mike's house, he saw nothing but red flashing lights and cars driving away as fast as they could. He couldn't find Sarah anywhere, and as he turned around to go see if Sarah had made it home, he got pulled over.

"Great. This should cost me another fifty for some reason or another," he said to himself as he turned down the stereo.

The flashing lights and the heat were beginning to bother Jason, but he sat silent as the officer asked him the usual questions and smelled his breath. Not convinced that Jason was coming home from a church social, he kept asking the same questions over and over, asking him what he had done that day, who he had seen, and what he had just been doing. Jason listened for a while, and then something snapped inside him.

As the cop was checking the back seat of the car for any drunk minors trying to get away from the party, Jason opened the door a little, reached down, and tried to lift the cop's shoe like a trainer would a prize horse.

"What are you doing?" he asked, a little startled.

"I'm looking for the sticky remains of a spider and a butterfly all caught in a web," he said with a wide smile.

"Get out of the car."

• • •

Mike laughed when he saw Jason walking into the holding cell. "Hey, what are you doing here?" Mike asked, "You're not 21."

"Remember that fake ID you got me last year?" Jason said, sitting on the cot slowly. "It's really good. Fools everyone."

"Especially cops who are busy trying to call up the parents of a couple hundred kids?" Mike laughed.

"Especially."

"You know," Mike said, his speech slightly blurred from drinking, "I always said that lying gets you nothing but . . . "

Just then Jason started moaning and rocking back and forth in the cot. Mike got up and looked at Jason, a little frightened. "You all right, man?"

Jason stopped writhing, smiled, and looked at Mike. "No problem, Mike. You just sounded too much like my parents just then."

Mike chuckled a bit. "I'm sorry to hear that, man."

"So was I."

Mike sat back down on the cot and they both listened to the din of people's voices echo down from the other cell blocks. "Just about everyone is here, you know?" he said.

"Yeah," Jason said, "I saw them on the way in. They were happy to see me."

"But I didn't see Sarah," Mike said. "She must still be hiding at my place somewhere."

"Yeah. Lucky, eh? Your parents coming to get you out of here, Mike?"

"Nope. Don't even know about it. Over 21, footloose," his voice faltered as he looked around himself, "and fancy-free, right?" Mike laughed and then went over and tried to shake the cell bars. "No noise—no rattling. In the movies there's always rattling. Oh well, it felt good to do it anyway," he said, shaking his head.

He looked over at Jason and smiled. "Oh lighten up. Come on over and try it. It's good for the soul, good for the heart," he said, flinging his arms up into the air and beating his chest.

Mike stopped flailing his arms, turned around and put his back against the bars. "Man, arrested twice in one day. Not bad, eh? I guess we're making memories to last," he said, running his hands up and down the bars.

Jason nodded. "Yeah, I guess so. You don't suppose there's another way to come up with them? Maybe a cheaper way?"

"I don't think it works that way, bud," Mike said. "Memories cost money, I guess."

"They cost something, anyway," Jason chuckled lowly—it was almost a groan. He felt his side again. It hurt to breathe—even the beating of his heart made him wince. He looked at Mike sitting on the floor and noticed the shadows on his face.

Jason got up and sat down next to him, and lulled himself to sleep by moving his hands through the shadows, trying to make them elastic. When he fell asleep, he dreamed of webs turning in his hands, webs that became silver water through his fingers, making his hands ache with the cold. And then numbness.

• • •

Jason and Mike got out of jail on Sunday, the day after the party. They went over to what was left of Mike's place and found Sarah asleep under the bed. After they cleaned the place a bit, Mike got them to laugh about what had happened.

It was hot that day, so the three of them decided to go back to the ranch and cool off. Jason still felt like a walking bruise, but the trip would be worth it.

When they got there, the sun was in the middle of the sky. They walked to the middle of the bridge, climbed over the rails, and silently dropped into the air one by one.

And as Jason heard the wind in his ears, he couldn't tell if he was flying or falling.

RING SELLER

WILLIAM POWLEY

When we stop at Navajo Junction,
we see a girl's braid
drop down the center
of her bare back.
We ignore her as she sells
with her brown fingers
blue-green turquoise rings
cheaply laid out
at fifteen dollars each.

She licks her brown lips,
smiles when she sees my bare
ring finger. I look away
as she points at a ring
zigzag by her hot pink
toenails. Yet she looks
into my cheek bones
for one whole second,
our meeting somehow permanent.
When I hear the tailpipe
on my father's '67 Chevy burst out
a button of black smoke,
in my mind I touch her lips,
her brown cheeks
with my fingers
and run to the car.

WHEN I HAVE THUMBS

SEAN T. ZIEBARTH

When I have thumbs I will hitchhike everywhere,
I will suck my thumbs,
Sit in the corner and stick my thumb in a plum pie,
And paint a face on my thumb and forefinger, like a puppet,
and make it talk.

When I have thumbs I will learn sign language,
I will give everyone the "thumbs-up" sign,
Smash my thumb with a hammer,
And give people the bird, because I will finally have a middle finger.

When I have thumbs I will count to ten on my fingers
and not have to use my toes,
I will snap,
Play the guitar,
Thumb wrestle,
And when it's all over and I've done all those neat
Things
That only five-fingered people can do,
I'll ask God to take my thumbs away, and then once
Again enjoy the frustration of opening the lid of a
Yoplait yogurt.

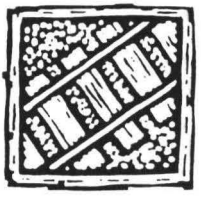
UNKNOWN PAIN

MICHAEL HASSETT

Every inch
of your skin,
your cloud-soft,
dry-ice skin,
is covered
by razor-thin
magnifying-glass-visible
hairs,
that somehow
I manage to pull
every time
we make love.
And I stare,
as you cry out
in pain,
and I wonder
how I hurt you.

TREASURE IN BLACK

JOHN L. ADAMS



SO HERE WE ARE, ME AND MY BROTHER Ez goin' home from school and kind of draggin' our feet 'cause we don't want to get home too fast. The minit we're home it's chores, chores, chores and then off to bed. It's better'n school, but this is the most relaxing time of day, just workin' our way along the railroad track to the edge of town where the house is.

"No luck today. No trains," I says.

"Not much coal left either," says Ez. He picks a chunk out of the dirt and puts it in his bag.

See, we just moved up to Abbington from our old ranch in Bear Valley (where most of us kids was born) 'cause Pa wanted the family by a town with people and jobs. It's a coal minin' and railroad town and plenty's goin' on. Problem is, livin' so close

to town makes it hard to find much wood for cookin' and stuff. We can't 'ford to buy much coal either, so it's our job to pick up what we find by the tracks on the way home from school—stuff that comes rollin' off the coal cars.

"Darn it. Someone's musta already been by to get the best stuff," I say, stoopin' to get a piece for my own bag. I look up and there's Ez runnin', balancin', down a beam of track.

"Ch ch ch ch ch ch ch—WOUAH WOUAAAAAAAH!"

He's pullin' out pretty fast. I pick up another clump and jump up to the rail to try to catch up to him. Even though he's a year older'n me we're about the same size, and I can do about anythin' he can.

"Ha! You're just a freight and I'm a passenger train from Cheyenne," I yell at Ez.

He turns 'round and starts runnin' back toward me.

"Somebody made a mistake and we're both on the same track!" he screams.

We collide and our books, bags, and bodies topple onto the ties in a jumble. I 'magine great destruction. At home we dump our coals into the storage box by the back door and head inside.

The next day our school buddy, Timmy Feldson, announces to us that he's goin' to ride with his Pa in a caboose of a train goin' to Utah. He always says someday his Pa will let us ride with him, too, on a short trip, but it never happens. Sure 'nough, while we're gathering coal on the way out of town, here comes Timmy and Mr. Feldson ridin' the back of the caboose. We wave all wild and friendly, but Timmy just acts cool like it's nothin' and barely waves at all, just holds his hand up like he thinks he's a signal man or somethin'. We kind of stand there envious until the train follows the track 'round the next bend near our house, which goes t'wards the red bluff outside town.

Then we look 'round and notice all the new coal that come tumblin' off the cars and we forget Timmy for now. This is chores-made-easy with all this new coal lyin' 'round and we're the first kids to it! I never understand why they stack coal so high above the top of the railroad cars when so much of it falls off before it gets where it's goin' anyway. But I'll never complain.

We get enough coal from Timmy's train that the next day we got time to stay in town after school and explore with our friends before it starts gettin' dark. Me and Ez saved enough pennies last couple months to go with Mark and Josie to see a movin' picture. Mark and Josie's mother died a year ago givin' birth to their little brother, and their Pa always gives them a few cents to entertain theirselves with 'til he gets home at night from the mines. They're lucky.

Anyways, durin' this picture we're watchin', the hero in it has to rescue some lady in lots of fancy clothes from a held-up train. Well a course the robbers aren't gonna stop the train to let the hero on, so the hero just runs along next to the train, which is just gettin' goin'. He grabs the handle by the door of a car and swings on up. Ez and I just look at each other like why didn't we think of that before. Then the guy goes in and gets the girl and takes her to the handle where he clumb up on so they can swing down off the train. The fancy lady faints at the sight of the danger so he swings down with'er on his shoulder. I never seen a lady faint from excitement or danger before. I wonder if a lady was watchin' me and Ez do that if she would faint, too.

Well, before we know it, we're walkin' down the tracks t'wards home again a few days later. I'm kinda quiet tryin' to 'magine some girl in school faintin' if she saw me swingin' up onto a train. Ez is balancin' on one of the rails behind me practicin' his train whistle.

"Wuoah WUOAAAAAAAAAAH!"

"Hooo HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

"Hey! That's perty good," I call back to Ez, but before I finish what I'm sayin', I see a coal train comin' slowly round the bend t'wards us. Like instinct, me and Ez jump across the tracks to the side that is outside the curve. The man in the caboose will always watch the train from the inside side.

"Are you thinkin' of tryin' that stunt from the movin' picture, Rich?" Ez yells.

"Heck, Ez! It ain't no stunt," I yell back, louder, 'cause the train's gettin' closer. "We can do it, easy."

"I dunno . . . ."

I can see the engineer all plain, leanin' out the window. My heart's really goin' now, but we stand back from the track, so as to look casual. Dang! them engines're so loud. Those girls from school'd prob'ly be faintin' already, on 'count o' the noise. We stand there and wave to the engineer. The stupid thing takes forever to get past us, it's movin' so slow. As soon as the engineer can't see us, we make like mad coyotes up the track bed and start runnin' along right next to the train. Heck, this thing's goin' faster than it seemed to be from further back, I think. Finally, I get runnin' fast enough that the cars seem to be passin' a little more slowly. A handle and a narrow ladder slowly pass by my head and I reach up, grab, and pull myself up with all my energy, it seems. I'm on! I can't believe it. I look back to see how Ez's doin'. He's just pullin' himself up on a ladder of the car behind mine. Finally he looks up'n sees me. I can see him let out a conquerin' yell, but I can hardly hear it 'cause the racket's so loud. We climb up onto the tops of our cars and fling ourselves down.

I never experienced such an excitement! Goin' along with the wind blowin' on us and the train makin' all that screechin' and whistlin'. I reach up to flip my hair back that blew in my eyes, and I see my hands are blacker'en bullchips. Great Sammy! I realize that I'm sittin' up on top o' heaps an' heaps o' coal! I look back at Ez. Our eyes meet and I know we're thinkin' the same thing. So we start rollin' 'round in a mock struggle to stay on the top o' the car and the coal's rollin' off in waves. A couple times I get so carried away I practic'ly go over with'em. We climb up to the top of our mounds, slippin' and slidin', pushin' the coals underneath our feet down and over the edge of the car. It'll be a week before we have to pick around for more coal!

Well, the train starts movin' 'round the next bend and up ahead we can see home. The turn takes the train away from the valley t'wards the bluff, so me and Ez edge carefully over to the ladders and climb down to the lowest rungs. Now I think I know why that lady in the movin' picture fainted when she had to jump off the train with the hero. It's easy 'nough to climb up with a runnin'

start, but how the heck d'ya get down? I look over and see Ez holdin' on and danglin' his feet down. He carefully touches his feet to the ground—barely—still holdin' on 'til he gets runnin' fast enough and lets go. He charges down off the rail bedding and heads for a clump of brush. I try it, too, and before I know it I'm runnin' off the bedding mound, but I'm runnin' too fast for my legs—takin' these huge, long bounds—and I trip and slide on my stomach right into the bush I was aimin' for, just in a humiliatin' way. I crawl behind the brush, coughin' on the dust, and wait 'til the caboose comes 'round the bend and follows the train behind the bluff. The man inside's lookin' out our side of the tracks, which is strange, seein' it's the outside o' the curve.

Well, now it's time to pick up the fruits of our labors. Ez and me, we're so excited about the ride and pullin' it off so well, we run back along the track to where the coal should be waitin' for us. We get back around the last bend, and we see coal layin' everywhere along the side of the track. "Black gold," they might say. I never thought a bunch o' coal would make me as happy as all that did.

"Maybe we knocked off a bit much," Ez wonders aloud.

"Let's see how much we can take home," I say.

"Heck, there's 'nough here to burn for a month solid!"

We fill our burlap bags in no time and drag'em over the ground 'til we get home, they're so heavy. We empty them into the storage container on the back of the house and head back for more. We get two more bags and could keep goin' but it's startin' to get a little dark so we think we'd better get inside. We get back to the house and there's Pa with his eyes about as wide as I've seen'em for a while, lookin' at all the coal we're bringin' in. His voice is all calm, though:

"Where'd you boys find so much coal?"

"Along the tracks."

—He's still lookin' at us, waitin' for more—

"I swear, Pa, we found it along the tracks, comin' home," Ez adds with as innocent a voice and face as only he can do.

I see Pa's eyes lookin' us over. I guess we look perty dirty, but I think anyone would be, handlin' that much coal, even if they didn't

ride on top of a railroad car. I can't quite read his face, but I don't dare look in it too long.

"Well, you boys hurry and get cleaned up for dinner. Don't keep your mother waitin'."

Me and Ez look at each other with relief that only brothers know and get busy cleanin' ourselves at the water pump. Well, wouldn'cha know, we're just comin' in for dinner when there's this knock at the door. Dad gets up from the table to answer.

"Hello, Mr. Feldson, what can I do for you?" we hear. Lucky for us, Pa doesn't open the door wide 'nough for Mr. Feldson to see into the house.

"He never come over here before, has'ee?" I whisper to Ez. "Maybe he knows, since . . . "

Ez just shakes his head, listenin'. Mr. Feldson's speakin'.

"Sorry to bother you at dinner, but I was asked by the railroad company to come out and check on a report. The last train going west out of town reported some possible trespassing on our moving stock. Since you live out here on the last stretch out of town, we hoped maybe you might have seen any of the suspicious activity."

"Well, I haven't noticed anythin', but my boys just came in from their errands. Maybe they've seen somethin' of the sort."

Pa turns to us for an answer and opens the door wider so Timmy's dad can see us standin' by the table. I'm so worried I can't hardly say—"No." Ez is much better at this and takes over.

"No, Pa. We haven't noticed anythin'." He looks as honest and innocent as I've seen'im in a while.

"Sorry, Mr. Feldson. We'll keep an eye on the area for you. Anythin' else we can do?" Pa leaves the door wide open in his friendly, hospitable way, and makes it so me and Ez can see him, and I'm awfully uncomf'terble. Seems like forever before they finally say their polite g'byes and Pa makes his way back to the table lookin' perty stern. He knows the whole story now, I just know it. He always figures us out, like he's a prophet or somethin'.

"Boys, you know that trespassin' is not right."

We nod meekly.

"So be sure and keep an eye on anythin' suspicious."

We nod again, "Yes, Pa." Maybe he doesn't know!

Everybody is at the table now—all nine of us—ready for dinner. We wait for Pa to ask someone to give the prayer.

"I'll say the prayer this evenin'," he says.

"Oh, God, we are so grateful to be all together this evenin' for our dinner, which Mother has made for us. We are grateful for your blessin' of food and health upon our family."

His voice rises a little.

"We are also grateful for the unexpected blessin' of so much coal, of which we are in so great a need, and we hope it hasn't caused trouble for somebody else."

He does know.

His voice is gettin' more authority.

"And if the boys do somethin' like that again, keep them in line—a little lightnin' and thunder or somethin' should do the trick. And now, please bless the food we are about to eat, to keep us strong. Amen."

Amen!

IF YOU WERE A PLUM

JILL HEMMING

If you were a plum
I'd take you in my pocket

to the orchard
and rub you on my jeans,

explore your creases with my thumbs,
find your deepest colors in the light,

turn your taut skin
between my bright teeth

and settling against a trunk,
I'd swallow you whole.

PARDON THE BLUES HERE

JOANNA BROOKS

"Human lives are composed like music. Guided by his sense of beauty, an individual transforms a fortuitous occurrence into a motif, which then assumes a permanent place in the composition of the individual's life. . . . Without realizing it, the individual composes his life according to the laws of beauty even in times of greatest distress."

—Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

"Where can I be headed for?
The blues crawled in my door
to lick my heart once more."

—Billie Holiday, "Deep Song"

EVERYONE NEEDS A GOOD FICTION NOW and then. You need to fill that sad space between reason and real life, so you make the religion and the mythology. There the unrequited love rules. The magic, the daydreams, the fiction, the voodoo. We all have our incantations, our imaginations. Who among us does not have a long gone lover built into icon? An emotion built into epic? At the convenience stores in my native Southern California, they sell crystalline Mexican candles with *la Virgen* painted on them. Twenty-four hours a day. Seven days a week. We want our fiction on demand.

And when my heart needs a good fiction now and then, I listen and give it what it needs. Usually that means blues. When everything's bad blue at

heart, it makes more sense if Bessie Smith's singing in the background, you understand? I have found life to be generally hard and heartbreaking and so I say *no pretending*. Let's put on an appropriate soundtrack and lay on our backs and watch the stars reel across the sky and stay here until they come back tomorrow.

I found my soundtrack last summer, at the end of a long, hot June spent alone in that great lonely city—New York. After work, we were sitting in a club where the waiters' ties are far too good for you and the menu changes as fast as it's chi-chi and no one cares if you don't catch on. Club Tatou it was. And at the bar of this Club Tatou, there were businessmen mixing with model-types in black velvet catsuits. Old blonde men with well-paid companions. And a seventy-year-old woman with a shaved head in a backless sequin dress and stiletto heels. The whole place was longing so hard that it was leaning. Totally at tilt.

So about eight o'clock, this old black woman in fire red bugle beads and bedroom slippers shuffled up the aisle between the tables, bone-tired bobbing this way and that. She made it to the front of the room and sat herself at a big black washed-and-waxed Cadillac of a piano. And she played the ivories. And she played the ebonies. And she sang in a low voice that frayed something beautiful as it dragged low across the floor, as it dragged on and out, sweeping everything up, and suspending everything about a foot off the floor. Minor key, minor key—that woman recast it all in minor key, her brown fingers beat thin with hurt beat out some real bad blues that night that shamed us all right off the floor.

And everyone shut up. And everyone stopped. And she sang, setting the rocks in our hearts knocking, making the subways rumbling beneath us seem not so far down. It was as if Billie Holiday herself came back from the dead, with Joe Guy on the horn and Tiny Grimes at the piano, and leaned on the mike and sang the whole of the hurt of this world in one perfect take. Near revelation. I tell you, when truth walks in half-drunk dizzy and sets everything back spinning in minor key, you remember every loss you've ever had, and it all stacks up on your table like a lot of lipstick-stained crystal. And you lean on your elbows, and you light a cigarette, and

no matter how fashionably safe you are, and no matter how *au courant*, all of the past settles heavy on your lap. And sits. And sits. Unsafe. Until the end of the set.

And when she was through, she rose from her seat, and cursed at all of us, soft and made-up, unfashionably transfixed. She shuffled and cussed to the back of the room, was propped up in a velvet seat, and served a drink, and a young couple bought her mimosas for another hour or two. And I think the couple was in love. And I hope they were in love. Because cab rides are so long. And the city is really a very dark place when you sit down and look at it for a while.

• • •

So during this comfortable Provo winter, I work late on weekends in a small cafe. You think Provo is much less strange than dark miles of shoreline? Much safer than New York City? Sure, you may not get shot on Center Street. But your heart's in danger here, friend. Heart hitmen (and I speak of hits in the traditional Mafia sense) must find easy pickings in a place like this, where love is a theology and everyone really wants to believe.

And I watch all this happen, mixing up mochas and clearing tables. I see two people meet, talk, flirt, leave together. And in two hours, they're both back, alone, looking for someone new. I see a lot of self-thought big shots playing small games. And I see a lot of senseless posturing, and I think when things are as clear and cold and black as ink outside, people should just be good to each other.

Anyways, after the bands go home and the amps sit idle, I move between the tables with my dishrag in hand and hum Bessie Smith blues in B-flat. And make eye contact with the microphone. And if I feel real bold, I pick it up. And sing to the great out there, the great unknown, the great unmet man with really black eyes. And sometimes I sing like this: "Sometimes you're right man, / And sometimes I'm wrong. / But I know that you're wrong, honey, / now that you're gone . . . "

Sure, the lines are predictable. As predictable as the fact that when you meet someone good, he'll soon be gone. As predictable as storms moving in, flowers shutting at sunset, as things falling

apart. As predictable as violence. Call it dramatic. Call it vain. I've already admitted both of those vices, thank you, and feel no shame. Everyone's got a vice or two, something to soften the edge of the hunger pangs—some motif around which to order things in this largely senseless place or some drug to knock all the false reason down. And if mine is singing blues and making my own fiction, so let it be.

Some say when you write something you make it alive, and when you don't write it, you make it dead. But quiet won't kill these blues, friend. In the quiet, the blues threaten to do me in, rub me out, black me away into the avenues somewhere east side midtown. They howl like coyotes in the moon-rubbed sage scrub at home. They took Billie and they took Janis Joplin and they take most blues singers before long, but I figure as long as I keep scattering words for them to eat, they'll stay. So I make lots of words. Late. When everyone else sleeps and the dark settles on the good souls' eyelids and the streetlights go out. I put words between me and it all. I make big fictions. The coyotes circle, but they keep their distance. They stay. Yes, tonight they stay.

And what keeps your coyotes away? What's your fiction, baby? What's your vice? Don't pretend you don't have one or two. Life's not nice enough to get through undeluded? What are you making of your life? What is this life making out of you?

NOT ALL GIVING IS CHARITY

WILLIAM POWLEY

When I offer you
a white ring
in evening fog,

your face says
not all giving is charity.
Your cheeks are wet.

I wish I could kiss
or touch you.
Charity is not all giving.

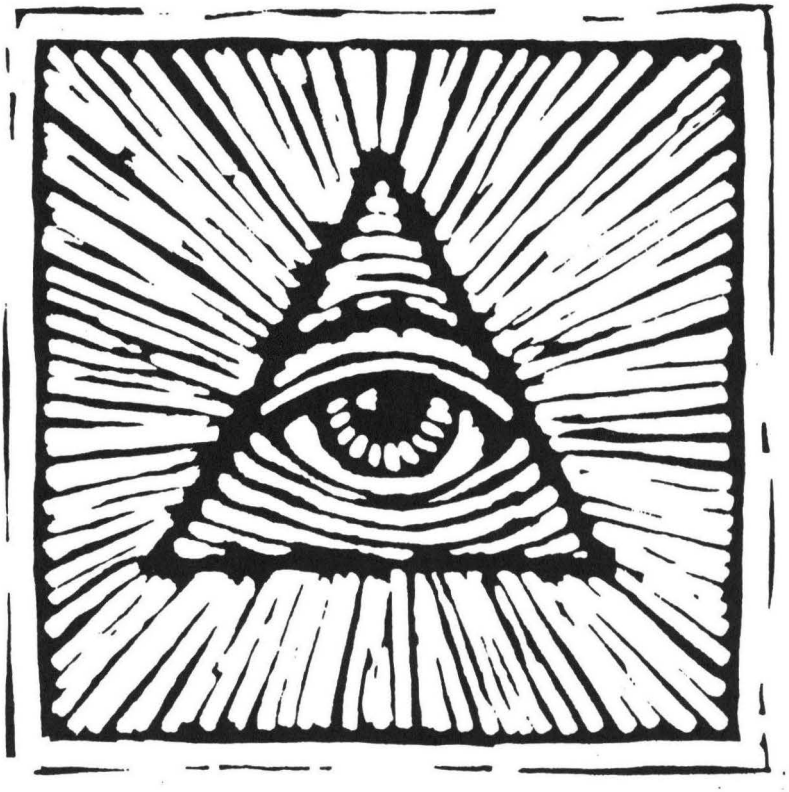
ODE TO A STORM

PILAR STEWART

Sometimes the deepness of quiet
loses me.
I do not understand
when trees stop the rustle;
birds refuse the song;
my heart's beat is muffled.
I retreat from this silence,
hobble as if sick
and pray for the storm:
the split sky,
rent like a carnival:
bright lights,
spinning air,
joyous noise.

When I have prayed
and the storm does come,
I know that
I shout
and the sky will answer;

I stamp
and the ground trembles;
I jump,
the world is hopping in orbit.
No longer is space
a silence
widened into a pit
but a struck chord
I grip
and can find my way
following the sound.



WONDER AND WONDERING: FIVE MEDITATIONS

ALISON CRAIG

I

I THOUGHT AGAIN TODAY OF HOW I used to sit where I could watch the signer for the deaf club at forums and devotionals. I knew the manual alphabet and recognized a sign or two, but mostly I watched without understanding, the signer's hands eloquent and expressive, echoing the words of the speaker. I'd see "thank you," a hand to the lips and then out; I'd identify the rapid-fire finger spelling of a name—much too fast for me to read. And at the end of the prayers, that beautiful sign "the Lord, Jesus Christ," the letter *L* moving diagonally from the left shoulder to the right hip, and then a finger in the palm of each hand. I was always crying long before the prayer.

I couldn't really understand why I cried—perhaps it was that I was watching speech made visible and it was utterly beautiful. But as I think of it now, it's not just speech it was revealing—it was the beauty of language itself—it was language as poetry—each gesture and movement standing for an idea, a thought, a name. It was the embodiment of my belief that in the beginning of language, every word was a metaphor—a tiny moment of poetry—and that in each of us there is a poet—one who understands and creates with poem-words.

I've also thought again of how beautiful the Salzburg dialect was to me when I first heard it—and could not understand it. It was lilting, almost singing, the vowels rich, the consonants dropped, swallowed or changed. But as I learned to understand the dialect, I could no longer hear its beauty—instead I heard, "The paper costs 10 shillings," or "We do not sell calendars."

If I learn sign language will I no longer see the beauty and only see the meaning: "Please exit to the right"; "Dress for Success"; "Vote Republican"?

The newly sighted people Annie Dillard reads about in Marius van Senden's *Sight and Sound* see a world of "color patches," "the tree with lights in it" (28, 30). Those of us who have seen since birth don't see that beauty anymore. Instead we see leaves, a tree, the meaning without the wonder.

My Greek teacher ridiculed the King James Version that describes the shepherds as simply "wondering" at the appearance of the heavenly hosts, but it's the perfect word to me, since it combines the idea of awe or amazement, but also the notion of not understanding. We seem to lose both kinds of wondering once we know.

Is that the tension—between knowing and wondering? Once we know the name, do we lose the wonder—both the wondering what it means and the wondering, the awe? In losing the one wonder, the other wonder also leaves.

Does this paradox apply to everything—that I can either see beauty and experience wonder or see meaning and not wonder? I fear it may. Dillard says, "[Beauty] is condemned to an eternal

danse macabre with meaning. . . . The color patches of infancy are lost'' (31).

Did Adam and Eve actually have to leave the Garden? Or with their new and knowledgeable eyes did they simply no longer see the paradise they had in their innocence seen?

The distressing conclusion to this is that the more knowledge I gain, the less beauty I can experience, until at last I'm the perfect encyclopedia—knowing it all, appreciating nothing.

But I reject this conclusion. I can't accept that to gain the good of knowledge I must forfeit the good of beauty. Surely God, who knows so much, also still sees beauty. His creations he declared ''good''—he can't have meant just mechanically accurate, all parts in place. Surely he also meant beautiful.

Will reclaiming the beauty be part of becoming as a little child? Again seeing with new eyes—eyes not dimmed, but made young, ignorant, capable of Eden?

Does this mean I have to progress again to ignorance as well as progressing to knowledge?

How does God see?

II

I remember hearing my father tell about a time when he reclaimed the beauty and the wonder. He spent a year on a ship in the Aleutian Islands during World War II. For most of the year, he was based on the outermost island of any size. There were no trees on the island, only low-growing shrubs on the hillsides. There was no town either, only a military base of quonset huts and temporary shacks.

But my father wasn't on the base; he was aboard his ship, his first command. And although he was involved in no battles during that year, he felt the tension of his new position and the stress of the hazards of constant wind and fog to his small, lightweight ship.

At the end of the year, my father was transferred to a new assignment. He arrived in Seattle at night; the next morning—his

first day back in the States—he boarded a bus for Tacoma. Standing in the aisle of the overcrowded bus, he saw out the window a New England-style village with a white church and houses scattered among tall evergreens. This peaceful scene was familiar to him from the past, but seeing it again after his year away, he began to weep and couldn't stop. A woman sitting on the aisle made room for him to sit on the armrest as he continued to cry at the wonder of what he had seen.

III

I remember when I saw it happen to my sister, when she found the wonder again. My sister had her first child at a birthing center, and I was there, nervously, as the family helper—the person to see that someone attended to the husband's needs.

Much of that long night I have forgotten, but I remember my sister, just a few hours into her labor, leaning against her husband as a contraction gripped her and moaning that she couldn't take anymore. She was already beyond her strength, and she had so far yet to go.

By morning, we were all on the bed with her, each holding an arm or a leg. The baby's head had crowned, but then it stuck there without moving for hours. "Nothing can be worth this agony," my sister moaned.

When, finally, the midwife, kneeling in a pool of blood, caught the baby, we were all weeping, in joy and relief, and my sister, holding her daughter for the first time, said, with awe in her voice, "It's already worth it!"

IV

There was a time, too, when I saw the beauty again: the second summer I worked at the state school for the handicapped.

Devon was what we usually call spastic—stiff and jerky in his movements, with little motor control. He couldn't talk, and he

couldn't eat regular food because he couldn't chew. But he could sit in a wheelchair, didn't need constant medication, and seemed to enjoy trips, so I was assigned to take him everywhere.

I was dragging Devon's wheelchair around the zoo for the fourth time that summer, and just to make some conversation I said, "Where's the deer, Devon? Point to the deer." He jerked in his chair, his arms flew up in front of him and seemed to lock together, crossed. I glanced away as he jerked again. When I looked back, one arm was stretched out, a finger pointing at the deer.

Before, I'd talked at Devon, or worse, down to him. After that I asked Devon to point at everything, until he would tire himself out and stop.

Margaret was my swimming partner that summer, her legs permanently crossed, her arms drawn up tight at her sides, hands curled over. I would roll her rigid body from her bed onto the gurney and wheel her down the hall to the swimming pool. Then I'd dress her, diaper and all, in a swimming suit, and carry her into the pool. For five minutes or so, I'd just hold her while her body warmed in the hot water. Then another worker and I would hold her leg, above and below the knee, and pressing gently, try to bend her knee—half an inch, an inch—and slowly straighten it again. Then her other leg, each ankle, each arm, each hand, slowly, gently. Margaret began to recognize me as the summer wore on. And I could tell how much she liked the water—and how much the movement hurt.

All the summer workers loved eighteen-month-old Miles because he would grin and gurgle when you talked to him. He couldn't sit up because his head was too large, but we took him to the Fourth of July parade anyway and tied his balloon to his wrist so he'd have something above him to watch as he lay on his back.

As I sat there beside Miles, waiting for the parade to start, I saw a child about his age running along the street in front of us. Nothing special, just a child running along the empty street. And suddenly I was crying. The beauty, the grace, the precision and timing

of his body—it moved together with such ease, each part in perfect harmony with all the rest. The miracle of it! And all that day, each child I saw was another miracle, each motion a surprise, a relief, a joy.

And throughout the summer, off and on, it would happen again. We'd stop in our special bus for gas, and I would see normal children and weep again at the beauty of their going.

V

How do these experiences apply to everything else? To learning to see again the beauty?

Perhaps there is a universal process at work here. Perhaps when I was a child—before I knew its name—another child in motion was poetry to me. But as I learned its name, I lost the wonder of the thing itself; its mystery faded. It became an ordinary and common thing—running. Instead of the beauty, I saw the meaning, the name. But when the bodies of Miles, Devon, and Margaret became ordinary to me, I could see again that poem in motion that is a child running.

I'm coming to see that once we have lost the innocence of Eden, the only way back is through the bitterness of the world, where there is horror and injustice and pain and evil. And though I've been thinking of our return to Eden as a return to the "color patches of infancy," it's a return with a difference. We don't return again to the wonder of not knowing. This time we return "and know the place for the first time" (Eliot 2134). And it is utterly beautiful.

Surely that's the goal: to know the name, but to experience again the wonder. Surely that's how God sees.

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ART CAN BE NAKED

E. BRIAN GENTRY

Dad's ugly Filipino carving
rocks when you walk too fast
by the piano.
I suppose remembering old voodoo dances.

Scarred from moves and tumbles,
it still demands respect
as the non-speaking member
of our family.

Uncle Dale respected it once
until his fingers noticed the nipple
and his mouth fell
at wooden pornography.

My friends called it quaint
and I asked Mom after they left
but she said it was art
and art can be naked.

COMPANIONSHIP

VALERIE HOLLADAY

IN SOME INDEFINABLE BUT DEFINITE WAY I had known when I was sixteen that I would serve a mission. At twenty I asked Bishop Veach to take my mission papers early; he just laughed and told me to come back when I was 21. He did let me put in my papers two months early, and I entered the MTC just after my twenty-first birthday. I had already memorized the first discussion in English and read Talmage's *Jesus the Christ* and *Articles of Faith*. I also attended three different missionary prep classes, using *Tools for Missionaries* and *Drawing on the Powers of Heaven* as my scriptures. I felt absolutely prepared for my mission.

In the MTC, although some elders complained they had never studied so much, I enjoyed the twelve-hour days. In fact, since I wanted to learn

all seven discussions I got up at 4 a.m. to gain two extra hours of study. My companion and I enthusiastically began the SYL—Speak Your Language—rule. We spoke only French, except for our weekly companion inventory; we even gave our personal prayers in French. Laughingly we used our "caveman" French as we announced our mail from home: *"Lettres, c'est bien,"* we said smiling. *"Manger,"* we said rubbing our stomachs before dinner. Food was the highlight of the day. *"Toilettes,"* we explained to each other the necessary but brief separations from our 24-hour-a-day companions.

After four weeks in the MTC, my companion and I were joined by a third companion, a French sister going to Fiji who spoke easy and exquisite French. My MTC teacher told me that sisters never learned to speak as well as the elders because they were in France for only 16 months, instead of 22. I hoped the Spirit would make up for my deficiencies.

Although I had prayed in French for the first two weeks, I felt strangled by the simple formula I had been taught to use: *Notre Père Céleste, Nous te remercions . . . Nous te demandons . . . Au nom de Jésus-Christ. Amen.* I didn't want to disregard the counsel of my leaders, but I couldn't talk to God in a language I didn't know. So guiltily I prayed in English. One morning as my companion got down from her bunkbed, I said distinctly, "Good morning. I'm speaking English because I'm going to go crazy if I don't. Please talk to me."

Immediately awake, she responded in English, "I feel the same way." Sister Gagnon, our companion, went to breakfast with two other sister missionaries and found us still talking when she returned.

• • •

In France I boarded the train to Bayonne, a little town in the southwest corner of France near Spain, with Elder Hamilton, my new district leader, and Elder Green from my MTC group. Elder Green reminded me of Cyrano de Bergerac with his large nose and his delicate manners. "It's so lovely," I marveled at the greenness of the landscape. Elder Green shared my enthusiasm, but Elder Hamilton read his scriptures silently, pausing only to say, "We

get a lot of rain. You get used to it." The elderly French couple who shared our compartment studiously ignored us. But a missionary was bold, I knew. So I told them I was a missionary from America with an important message for them.

"*Nous sommes allés au Grand Canyon*," the man said.

At my perplexed look, he repeated himself more slowly. The only recognizable words were "Grand Canyon."

"*Vous aimez le Grand Canyon?*" I asked cautiously. They both nodded and began talking at the same time, no doubt describing their trip to the United States although I wasn't sure. Elder Green looked at me in nervous admiration and Elder Hamilton just smiled but didn't join in. When we parted at the train station in Bayonne, my grandparents *adoptés*, as they had proclaimed themselves, kissed me on both cheeks in an affectionate French *bise*. I promised to come visit, realizing too late I didn't have their address.

As I stepped off the train, two elders came to meet us, followed by a tall, unsmiling blonde sister. The two Bayonne elders each took a suitcase from Elder Green and Elder Hamilton and walked away. One called back over his shoulder, "See you tomorrow," and my companion waved goodbye. I dragged my two suitcases over to her.

"Hi," I said, "I'm excited to be here." She gave a tight, little smile and led me out of the train station. Even with two heavy suitcases, I had to force myself to walk more slowly to keep her pace.

My new companion was not talkative, although I asked several times what missionary life was like. At the *bicyclette* shop I bought a bicycle and a lock, as well as some elastic straps to tie my discussion books on the bike rack. Then we went to my first French store, where I followed my companion meekly down the aisles, pushing my cart, buying exactly what she bought.

Soup, milk, apples, lettuce, eggs, cheese. At the cheese counter I was astonished at the different sizes, shapes, and colors. "*Un demi-kilo de gruyère,*" she told the clerk. I stared at the luscious cheeses—*camembert*, *brie*, and others with unpronounceable names—but my companion had already moved on to the square cartons of milk, about the size of a box of raisins, plastic-wrapped

in bundles of three and stacked with the canned goods. I was interested to see what it tasted like.

Back in our tiny kitchen, I sipped the heavy milk while looking out the balcony window. Our apartment overlooked the *l'Adour Rivière*, and across the river I could see a large cathedral and winding cobblestone roads. I was so absorbed in the view that I jumped when my companion handed me a head of lettuce.

"Wash it carefully," she said. "Bugs cling to French lettuce."

I washed it not once but twice, holding it carefully beneath the running water. After I had neatly torn several pieces, my companion gave me a carrot and a grater for the rest of the salad. She poured hot soup—made from an envelope—into our bowls. I said the prayer, my one accomplishment in French, and we ate silently.

I ate my salad first, as I always had in America, while my companion ate hers last, as do the French. As I sipped my soup, she poked the lettuce with her fork. "Ugh, a bug," she said, scraping her lettuce with her fork. "Ugh, another" and another. She found seven. Looking closely I saw several infinitesimal black spots.

"I didn't even see those," I said.

She looked at my empty salad plate and gave her first real smile. "I wonder how many were in your salad," she said.

• • •

On Friday mornings at 9:00 we met for district meeting at the *salle*, a house that doubled as the elders' apartment and as the chapel. The two elders I had seen the day before at the *gare* lived in the bedroom upstairs. The kitchen downstairs was used for Sunday School, and Sacrament meetings were held in the living room. I greeted Elder Green like a long lost friend. Elder Hamilton smiled a cool welcome to the missionaries, as befitted his new rank.

In the chapel, my companion sat next to a deeply tanned elder and talked to him until Elder Hamilton said we were ready to start. "Where's Elder Hite?" he asked.

"He's getting ready," answered the tanned elder, then turned back to my companion.

As the meeting began, Elder Hite appeared. He hadn't shaved, and his blonde hair, uncombed, stuck out in little tufts all over his head. He carried his shoes in one hand and his tie in the other. His white shirt was open to show the top edge of his garments and an abundant amount of chest hair. I tried not to stare.

My companion continued talking with Elder Stewart under her breath as Elder Cyrano-Green and I introduced ourselves and Elder Hite put on his shoes. Elder Stewart gave the opening prayer and then read a scripture. Our district leader read a few more scriptures, mostly about obedience and the Lord opening doors, and told us to set goals to work 60 hours a week, to tract every day, and have companion study and prayer. We closed with a prayer, to find the honest in heart and to bless the refreshments, amen. Elder Stewart had brought molars, chocolate-covered graham crackers, a popular French cookie with the missionaries. His last companion had set the mission record by eating eight boxes of molars with only a half glass of milk in twenty minutes.

After the meeting, Elder Hamilton took off at a rapid pace with Elder Cyrano-Green behind him. My companion had disappeared and I found her outside next to her bike and tanned Elder Stewart. They were going to fix her bike, she said. "Why don't you study your discussions?" I sat on the steps where I could keep my eye on her—the little white rule book said to never leave your companion—as I studied the plastic-encased discussion I carried with me everywhere. I had told Elder Hamilton that I would be ready to pass off the first discussion on Joseph Smith and the restoration the following week, but he had only said, "You better hurry. Elder Green already passed off his first last night and he's giving me the next one tomorrow."

As I sat on the cold, concrete steps to the *salle* and studied I could hear music playing from the upstairs apartment. But that was against the rules, wasn't it? No music except on preparation days and then only classical. It didn't sound classical to me.

• • •

After two weeks my companion and I had not tracted once. My companion urged me to sleep as much as I needed. "You'll have

jet lag for a while," she said. Although missionaries were to be up by six, she slept in until nine, letting me sleep as well. We spent most days at home reading the scriptures, although we did visit the few members in the Bayonne branch so I could meet them.

"You seem shy," said elderly Sister Dartis, patting my arm. "You need to speak more so you can learn the language." I asked my companion if we could speak French a few hours every day for practice.

"You can if you want," she said.

We visited our few investigators. Mme Montclair's son in Paris was going to baptize her this summer. Mme Maitrepierre believed in reincarnation and health foods. I tried to comprehend these discussions, which were nothing like those I was memorizing. Our third investigator was planning a baptism when she was eighteen. She and my companion joked and talked in rapid French that was meaningless to me.

On Sundays I smiled blindly through three hours of French that bore no resemblance to the language I had learned in the MTC. In southern France the language was strongly marked by the "Toulouse Twang"; the French said *"du pang,"* not *"du pain"* and *"le fang,"* not *"le fin."* On my first Sunday Sister Dartis gave me a friendly *bise* in the kitchen after Relief Society and talked with me nonstop for about ten minutes. When Elder Hite came into the kitchen for his scriptures he caught my eye and winked. Later he asked, "Did you understand anything she said?" I shook my head.

"I didn't think so," he said. "You looked so sincere standing there nodding your head. But she never expects us to answer."

I came to know Elder Hite quite well, since every time my companion and I were at the elders' for church or district meetings, she left me alone so she could talk with Elder Stewart. So as I studied I talked to Elder Hite, who was usually tieless and unshaven. He said the mission president was punishing him for not passing off his discussions. His companion had been in his MTC group. In order to motivate Elder Hite to learn his discussions the president made Elder Stewart senior over Elder Hite. "I was a pretty good missionary

until that happened," he said. "That really burned me, so now I don't care anymore."

He was a terrible missionary, I decided. Not only didn't he work, he listened to music, and he spent lots of money buying books, reading them instead of his scriptures. He drank Coke and left it in the kitchen where the members could see. He even went to the store without his tie.

• • •

As I began my third week in France, I decided to take things into my own hands. When Elder Hamilton asked our plans for the day after district meeting, I quickly spoke up. "We're going tracting," I said. My companion stared at me but said nothing.

"Good," said our leader and led his companion to their bikes. Poor Elder Green, I thought. When I had asked him how he was doing, he had sighed. They worked non-stop from 9:30 in the morning until 9:30 at night. His companion wouldn't let him even bring up the subject of home, because it would distract them. They could only talk about missionary work and their investigators. Elder Green's face showed his progressive misery each time I saw him. Actually, though, I was jealous. I wished my companion were more like Elder Hamilton.

In response to my persistent gaze, my companion led me wordlessly to our *quartier*. The apartment complex she nodded her head toward was four stories high, with two apartments on each level. We started on the top floor. She took the first door, I took the second, she took the next and so on. Except for our brief speech at each door, we were silent: *"Bonjour, nous sommes missionaires de l'Eglise de Jésus-Christ des Saints des Derniers Jours."* The French responses were meaningless to me, so I turned to my companion, who looked at me blankly until the door closed and led me to the next door. After two buildings of silence, I finally asked why she didn't help me talk to the people.

"It wasn't my idea to go tracting," she said.

"But we're missionaries," I said. "Missionaries tract."

"I was going to go home and read my scriptures," she said sternly.

According to the little white handbook, juniors had to follow their seniors, but it didn't say what to do about companions who didn't speak or work. "I'm sorry," I said at last.

I followed her to our bikes and rode as far behind her as I could without losing sight of her. She pedaled sedately ahead. At home she sat on her bed and opened her Book of Mormon. I sat on my bed and opened my Book of Mormon.

• • •

I didn't suggest tracting again. In our apartment during the day, I memorized the scriptures that new missionaries had to pass off. At the *salle*, I sat on the stone steps and studied with my fingers in my ears to block out Elder Hite's music while my companion talked to Elder Stewart.

One day my companion told me I was giving a talk in Sacrament meeting the next week. When I protested that I had only been in France three weeks, she shrugged and said, "I spoke last month." At the look on my face, she compromised. "Write a talk in English and I'll translate it into French," she said. That Sunday as I spoke to the fifteen-member congregation, I scarcely glanced at my companion's handwritten notes. The words seemed to come from somewhere other than the shaking paper I held in my hands, words that made no sense to me even as they flowed from my mouth. Was I making a complete idiot of myself, I wondered and interrupted myself to ask the faces that stared at me in amazement, *"Est-ce que vous pouvez me comprendre?"*

"Oui, oui, continuez. Ça va très bien," they reassured me enthusiastically. After the meeting they lined up to shake my hands, everyone marveling that such a new missionary spoke such fluent French. Even my companion smiled and told me I sounded almost like a native. The next day she surprised me with a visit to a *boulangerie*, where we celebrated with flaky, cream-filled *mille-feuilles* and *pain au chocolat*. The chocolate-filled *croissants* were still warm from the oven, and we ate them silently together.

That night she asked if I could give her a permanent; she was tired of her long, straight hair. As I rolled her hair, she gradually

warmed. She felt guilty for talking to Elder Stewart all the time, she confessed. She was afraid he wouldn't like her after they both went home. And she was ready to go home, she said. After a year, she was exhausted and discouraged. She hadn't baptized anyone, she wasn't getting any younger, she didn't know what she'd do after her mission anyway.

"I'll be going this next transfer," she said. "You'll get a better companion and can do things differently." I was torn between relief and fear, fear of having another uncommunicative companion, relief that this month of silence was going to end.

• • •

Despite my fears, most of the companions who followed were as communicative as my first companion had been withdrawn. As we tracted we ate Lindor chocolate, and in between doors we talked about our lives before we became missionaries and the lives we would return to. In the summer we taught German and English tourists in the park, using the *panneaux*, our bright yellow, four-sided sign with pictures of temples on one side, Jesus on another, families on a third side, and the story of the Book of Mormon on the fourth side.

Now, after nine months in France, I spoke French more easily. I liked the green freshness of southern France and the cold elegance of the many cathedrals. I liked the long, skinny loaves of French bread, the smooth, rich chocolate, and the wide variety of cheeses. I liked eating a lunch of bananas and yogurt as my companion and I sat on the hill that overlooked the beach, which was empty and desolate after September. And I liked the quiet evenings when we rode our bicycles side by side down the narrow roads, pedaling lazily in the cool, silvery dusk.

But at night I dreamed in incomprehensible French and heard slammed doors and angry voices. *How do you explain a God who lets my wife suffer with cancer? Religion is a crutch. We don't need religion.*

I heard my own words at my mission farewell before I entered the MTC: *My only desire is to serve the Lord. I want to be the best*

I can be so I can bring people into the only true Church on the face of the earth.

I still heard the words of my first companion: *We'll only be together a month, so why even bother getting to know each other?* My second companion, more cheerful and talkative: *We need to lose ourselves in the work. Just be happy and don't think about yourself.* My third companion, cool and aloof: *Don't take it personally, but I just don't like you.*

But the most insistent voices of all came from my mission leaders when I was awake: *Be obedient and the Lord will bless you. You are as successful in life as you are on your mission. Your mission is a life in miniature. You will be held accountable for all the people you could have taught if you had taken your responsibilities seriously.*

I spent seven months in Bayonne and a brief month in Beziers. Then I was transferred to Perpignon, another small town near the border of Spain, to be with Sister Little, an ironically petite, soft-spoken convert from England. We left at 9:30 in the morning and worked until 9:30 in the evening. After only one month she was transferred and I was made senior.

I thought of my first senior companion as I waited at the *gare* for my new companion. She was home in Canada now and I wondered if she was happy. I sat alone on the bench as the elders stood on the other side of the *gare*. Warned to avoid temptation, they avoided the sister missionaries, speaking to us only when necessary. They usually tracted 60 to 70 hours a week, teaching perhaps only once or twice. Most saw no more than two baptisms their entire missions; many averaged much less. They may have just been too tired to talk to the sisters although Elder Black and Elder Jackson took time to announce their yogurt-eating contest. They were going to eat 50 liters of yogurt each in one week.

The train rustled and whistled into the station. When it stopped, the doors slid open and a smiling French-braided brunette looked out the door and waved energetically. I smiled hello and led her to our bikes where we strapped her suitcases on to the back. "Toulouse was so great," she said over and over as she described the people she had taught there during her first month. "I know

they'll be baptized soon." As we pedaled toward our apartment, I could hear her singing behind me and recognized the children's French song from the movie *South Pacific*:

Dites-moi pourquoi
La vie est belle
Dites-moi pourquoi
La vie est gai . . .

"Why is life beautiful . . . why is life gay?" she warbled behind me as we rode home, where we unpacked her suitcases. We shopped quickly at *Mammouth*, the enormous store where missionaries could buy food, clothes, souvenirs, postcards, and other necessities. My new companion talked continuously as we shopped, telling me of her conversion in Quebec a year ago, of her decision to be a missionary, and her desire to do the Lord's work and baptize. Back in our apartment I gathered my laundry as she unpacked and talked. Laundromats were usually too far to use and too expensive, even for once a week. I excused myself to do my wash and closed the door behind me.

I scrubbed my garments furiously together between my hands, until my fingers were sore and blanched white, my nails clean and soft.

• • •

At district meeting the next day, I saw the familiar faces of Elder Hamilton, my new zone leader, and Elder Hite, who had just transferred to Perpignon. He'd spent the last few months in Toulouse so the mission president could keep an eye on him. In Bayonne he had convinced a young member to let him ride his *mobilette*, then forgot that French motorcycles are built differently than American ones—the brake is on the left, not the right. He braked too suddenly and flipped off, injuring his shoulder. Now he and his new companion entered the *salle* after we had already finished singing *Sauveur d'Israël*. He didn't seem much changed; although he wore a tie, he obviously hadn't combed his hair.

Elder Hamilton directed our meeting briskly, and when the other missionaries asked him what he was going to do when he went home

next month, he refused to answer. His life was his mission, he said, and he would consecrate his complete energy to the work until his last day. After our district meeting he pulled me aside to ask if I thought Elder Green had gone home early, after only three months, because of him.

I said only that Elder Green had been very homesick.

"I shouldn't have pushed him so hard," he said. I didn't disagree.

As I waited for Sister Duriet to talk to the other zone leader, Elder Hite stopped by my chair. "How ya doing?" he asked. "Fine," I told him.

"Sure," he grinned wryly. "Tell me about it. You and your companions were famous. Your name was in the mission newsletter for about four months in a row with all those baptisms in Bayonne."

When I didn't say anything he continued to wait. I thought of the baptisms of Christine and Dominique, both young college students, in a shining river one bright day in June, as several fishermen upstream looked at us curiously. Marielle, another student, and Mme Rigale, an older woman we had found while tracting, preferred baptism in the ocean. Nobody thought to tell Marielle to wear white underwear. Beneath the wet, white polyester dress that clung to her body, her black bikini was clearly outlined.

Mme Rigale hadn't really been ready, but the elders wanted her baptized anyway. She had gone home immediately after her baptism, not even waiting to be confirmed to receive the gift of the Holy Ghost or to hear the talk on baptism that Christine, the newest member, had especially prepared. Our district and zone leaders just asked when our next baptism would be.

When I called the mission president to talk to him, he said, "I'll be in Pau for conference transmission next week. Can it wait until then?"

In Pau I was shaking from hunger and fear as I waited for the president to call me aside to talk to me. I had fasted so I would be ready to talk to him and rehearsed conversations in my head. When I saw his wife, I asked when he would be seeing me.

"He didn't say anything to me," she said. "He's in meetings until two, then we're leaving right away for Bordeaux."

At the look on my face, she asked in concern, "Is anything wrong?" and motioned me toward a bench in the corner of the room where we could talk. As I stumbled over my words an elder passed by and she called out to him, "How are you doing in Tarbes? We miss you in the office." I waited until they finished speaking, and she turned back to me. She interrupted me a second time when another elder passed, then another. Finally I excused myself and she barely nodded when I left.

It was nearly two o'clock before my mission president signaled me. Pulling me into an empty room, he said quickly, "Make it fast," and looked out the window. Only a few minutes to describe feelings and questions that had taken months to build up. Only a few minutes to tell him how much I needed to talk to someone who could answer those questions and soothe those feelings. I couldn't tell him that now.

"It's nothing," I said finally. "I'm fine now."

"The trees are so beautiful with their different colors," he said, still not looking at me. "And even in November there's a rose still blooming under the tree." We gazed at the tree together and I took a deep breath ready to try again. But he had already opened the door and was waiting for me to leave.

• • •

But that had been two months before. Now Elder Hite was still waiting for me to speak. My companion was calling my name and pulling on her coat. "See you later," I said as I stood up.

"Hang in there," he said.

Back in our apartment, after a lunch of eggplant *ratatouille*, I told my new companion we had three *rendez-vous* that afternoon with new investigators—Mme LeFont at two, Sylvie at four, and the Conesa family at six. A native French speaker, she spoke easily with all of them, bore her testimony fervently, and made the follow-up appointments, which she apologized for after we left.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was just so excited. Since you're the senior, I'll try to follow your lead. But don't you think we should have both an opening and a closing prayer when we teach?" We

had skipped the opening prayer with the Conesa family because, from the moment of our arrival, Mr Conesa had barraged me with questions about death, since he and his wife had just come from a funeral. Since the conversation had flowed naturally from their questions to the plan of salvation, I had motioned to my companion that we would postpone the discussion we had planned.

After shaking hands and kissing cheeks, we left the Conesas and returned to our apartment. My companion looked at me in surprise as I took off my coat and sat down at the table. "It's only eight," she said.

"People aren't very responsive this time of night when you try to tract," I said. "Besides, sisters have been told not to go out when it's dark unless they have specific *rendez-vous*. There have been problems. We tracted three hours this morning and taught three *rendez-vous*. I think that's enough." I didn't tell her that a man had grabbed me the month before as I was following my companion on foot down a narrow street. He had quickly run off and my companion had brought me home immediately and put me in bed with hot chocolate.

Now Sister Duriet stood at the door in her coat, not putting down her scriptures. "There's someone out there waiting for us," she insisted. We stared at each other and after several minutes I stood up. Although it was nearly nine before we chained our bikes and walked to the first *batiment*, she was undaunted. We started on the top floor, as usual, and the people at the first three doors told us to leave them alone at night. Then, to my surprise, a short, balding Italian man and his smiling wife let us in. We told them about Joseph Smith and the golden plates. They were interested, but not convinced. *"Non, non,"* they said, when we asked if we could come back and teach them. *"Nous sommes catholiques."*

It was after ten when we got home, and Sister Duriet was silent as we undressed for bed. "What is it?" I asked her.

"If we hadn't wasted so much time coming home after teaching the Conesas, we could have tracted more and finished on time," she said changing into her nightgown. "I'm not going to keep dragging you out all the time. You need to do your part."

Without answering, I went into the bathroom and closed the door. I didn't come out until I knew she would be asleep.

She awoke at six and hummed as she braided her hair. We read our scriptures together for an hour, then individually for an hour. Before leaving the apartment at 9:30, we had our required companion prayer then rode our bicycles to our tracting area.

That day and on the days that followed she rode her bicycle cheerfully across town, singing gaily behind me. She was cheerful and affectionate to our investigators and to the branch members. When we taught, she bore her testimony frequently, tears filling her eyes. She loved her mission, she told everybody who would listen, and she denied any homesickness or desire to return home after her mission. She was going to stay here all her life, she vowed. She loved being a missionary.

When we tracted out Jean Michel, I asked Elder Hite and his companion to come with us for our second discussion. Jean Michel was young and single, and sister missionaries couldn't teach single male contacts just as elders couldn't teach young girls. My companion wanted to ask a more serious-minded missionary to come with us, but Elder Hite and his companion lived nearest to Jean Michel.

Elder Hite and Jean Michel talked easily from the beginning, while his companion attempted to steer the conversation toward the plan of salvation. Elder Hite's incessant double-playing on words kept us all laughing, but I noticed that when he taught his eyes were serious.

Although I hadn't been especially kind to him in Bayonne, Elder Hite always asked how I was doing. He wore a tie and combed his hair most of the time these days, but he was still late to district meetings, especially now that he lived several kilometers from the *salle*. On Sundays and at district meetings we always talked together; he was the only one who ever asked how I was doing, so I told him while my companion sat stony-faced on the steps of the *salle* studying her discussions.

One day as we taught Mme Font, I started to cry and had to leave the room. As we left my companion looked at me softly and put her arm around me. She thought I had been moved by the Spirit

and didn't understand when I pulled away and refused to talk about it. My companion and I spoke only when we made our plans for the day. We discussed our meetings with members and investigators, which *quartier* we would tract in—we had two areas on opposite ends of town—and which callbacks looked promising. Once a week we sat down at our table and shared a lifeless companion inventory to decide what discussions to teach our investigators. I heard her crying in her bed at night, but I didn't talk to her.

We both cried when Veronique was baptized, although not for the same reason. Veronique had been introduced to the Church at a young adult conference and had been deeply moved by the spirit she felt there. After our second discussion she asked to be baptized. She had been coming to church for nearly a month and the entire ward knew and loved her; nearly 50 people attended her baptism. Everyone thought it entirely normal that the sister missionaries would cry at this special occasion.

One evening, after a fireside at the *salle*, one of the young female members approached me giggling. *"Dites à Frère Hite que sa braguette n'est pas fermée,"* she whispered. None of the elders had noticed Elder Hite's unzipped trousers, although several young female members had. I remembered my embarrassment when I spoke at Dominque's baptism with my blouse unbuttoned several inches too low, as an elder pointed out to me afterward. A sister missionary can certainly tell an elder to zip his zipper, I decided, and sidled up to Elder Hite at the refreshment table. "Your zipper's down, Elder Hite," I whispered.

His face without expression, he bit into the round, flat *gateaux* in his hand, chewed slowly, and swallowed. "I know. I did it on purpose."

I choked and coughed, and when I could breath I laughed. Smiling crookedly he said, "That's better. You looked like you were carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders."

I coughed some more and thanked him for his thoughtfulness.

The next week after district meeting as I stood talking with Elder Hite, my companion said curtly, "I'm going to talk to our zone leaders." She walked across the street to a bus stop where they

sat together on the bench. As she wiped her eyes and pointed to me, both elders looked at me with an odd expression.

"Doesn't look good," said Elder Hite. He touched my arm quickly then left with his companion who stood waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

Standing on the steps of the quiet building, I watched my companion and the zone leaders talk. At last Elder Hamilton rose and came toward me, leaving our companions alone on the bench. I waited for him to speak.

"Do you know how unhappy you're making your companion?" he asked. "Did you know she cries herself to sleep at night?"

"Yes," I answered.

"She says you never talk to her or share your feelings, and she's exhausted from dragging you everywhere."

"I'm ready to go at 9:30 in the morning and we usually have *rendez-vous* 'til 9:30 at night," I said, "except for one morning when I was sick." I didn't add that when I told her we weren't going out she had grabbed her Book of Mormon and walked outside, slamming the door behind her. She sat on the front porch reading for over two hours and didn't speak to me when she came back in. She didn't ask if I was feeling better, and I didn't tell her.

"I'm sorry," I said. "But I just can't talk with her. She doesn't understand what I'm feeling. I don't understand what I'm feeling."

Elder Hamilton was silent, and then he walked away. I waited for my companion, who didn't meet my eyes as we walked wordlessly to our bikes. I pedaled slowly to our tracting area, her bike trailing in the distance behind me.

This issue of *Inscape* was illustrated by Quentin Lee Webb. Quentin is from Albuquerque, New Mexico, and graduated from BYU in August with a B.F.A. in illustration. He is now pursuing a free-lance career in his field.

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