

ProCreation



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Editor's Note

What Brian Wilson Heard

Admittedly, my college friend Jimmy was a bit whacked out. Jimmy said that *Smile*, the unfinished rock opera of the enigmatic Beach Boy Brian Wilson, was a Zen riddle, a paradox through which we find God. Jimmy said all I had to do was meditate on the sometimes meaningless words and phrases looping through the tracks left from this aborted recording. Then again, Jimmy dropped acid during college; I didn't. One day Jimmy says he's got a bootleg of some new *Smile* tracks and why don't I come along to his dorm room, smoke some hash, and see what happens. I admit it. Part of me wanted to, but I made excuses, I declined.

Two days later Jimmy grabs me by the collar outside Psych class. "Steve, Steve man, I've been there. I've *seen* God!" For the next 20 minutes Jimmy rambled on in meaningless phrases – "ethereal box with no windows", "one hand tapping the essence", "rivulets of reeds and rizons", the "chromosomal kairos" – well, you get the drift. So, to pacify Jimmy I listened to Brian Wilson. And I *keep* listening to Brian Wilson to this day because I'm intrigued by what he heard. Unfortunately, part of his craziness was his inability to reproduce what he heard in his head, as if anyway could..

I doubt anyone would consider Brian Wilson a poetic genius. He was not. Words were secondary for him. He had little content to convey. Rather, his primary interest was in engaging the listener with sound, and in that he exhibited genius --- composing multilayered harmonies in strange keys that twist and wind through a tapestry of words that seem to be merely strung together as a framework to hang the sound on. And so, when you come to the end of a Brian Wilson song, while the lyrics may be trite, inane, or meaningless, you are captivated and moved by the *sound* of it. Yes, my buddy Jimmy was on to something. There *is* something in the sound of the music, something more than what is actually there.

Doesn't this same thing happen with a poem? Aren't we first captivated by the sound of it? Sure the images are critical, but without sound, there would be nothing to carry the pictures a poem stirs. It would be sort of like a silent movie – not bad, but a whole lot more arresting with sound.

In *A Poetry Handbook*, Mary Oliver's insightful guide to what makes a poem a poem, she says "poets select words for their sound as well as their meaning" (and, I dare say, sometimes *in spite of* their meaning). "Rock" is not the same as "stone", she says; with "rock" there is a "seed of silence at the edge of the sound." Like a good Brian Wilson song, a poem engages our ear with the rhythm of sound and silence, sound and silence; it stirs us in ways we cannot fully fathom.

In some weird way I think Jimmy was right: he *did* "see" God in the sound of *Smile*. Sound is like any created thing: it is an icon, a window through which we glimpse the transcendent. And like any created thing, if we look at it or listen to it too long, if we

give our adoration only to the thing and not what or who it points to, it will, over time, tend to warp who we are. Just imagine standing at a window and being able to describe in detail the windows panes and construction of the window and *completely* miss the landscape just beyond the pane. Even I have a tendency to fall in with a poem that sounds good, though it's content may be drivel. (That's why a co-editor is important!)

What Brian Wilson heard was something pure, elemental, and primal. The sound he heard was something built into who we are. It's the same thing I hear when reading a good poem. Aren't we just wired for sound?

Jimmy, I don't need a drug to hear it. Surf's up, and I can hear it. Now I only have to *name* it.

The Editor

- Our congratulations to Ruth Goring and Maureen Keenan-Mason, winners of our Year 2000 Writers' Contest. It was a difficult process to select only two; thus, many of the submissions will also be published in this or our Fall/Winter issue.
- Keep in mind that the deadline for submissions for our Fall/Winter issue, to be published on October 15th, is September 1st. Check out our new submission guidelines at www.procreation.org.
- Please consider a tax-deductible gift to support our small effort to provide a forum for good writing. You can do that by giving gift subscriptions (\$12 each) or simply sending a contribution. Either will be appreciated! And even if you cannot help in this way, let us hear from you – notes of encouragement or constructive criticism are very much appreciated.

Porch

Our house has no porch.
I sit in the bed of my truck,
Garage doors wide open, to watch
The rains fall from scudding clouds.

The green hue of the spring budding leaves
Pleases my eyes during the storm.
Bright in the overcast light, they tell the world
That the trees are pleased by the weather.

I smile at the sight of cat squirrels
Shucking and eating pine nuts,
Tails shaking, during a lull in the storm,
High above the open garage doors.

I watch a raccoon wash soggy dog food
On the back patio before it eats it
Not far from the seat in the truck bed.
A possum also watches from a sheltered fence corner.

No, I do not wish to come in and join you,
I tell my wife. Our house is entirely
A woman's house and has little place for me.
It has no porch.

Frank Bayer

Apology

Sometimes I bark when I should chirp.
Anger curdles my tongue
and words are spat out like watermelon seeds,
heedless of aftershocks
or abrasions.

Forgive me.
I am only straw and clay,
held together by thunder
and a few stolen feathers.

Marla Schoen

Driving Force

In the dark, potatoes shoot up,
their white tendrils touched with green.

We hated to fetch them from the basement
and loathed to break off
these weird fingers
and peel the knobby eyes
from which they grew.

If left to themselves,
would these fingers grow and grow
reaching through the gaps
between the stairs,
and under the cellar door?

Would they clutch our ankles,
grasp our hands
and not let go?

Now, an old woman
with hairs sprouting on my chin,
I understand potatoes.

Ambition still pervades me,
still yearns for nurturing soil
and the light.

Ruth Latta

Dusk

Perched on the far branch
of the dogwood, delicate and
eager with bloom,
the cardinal, vested
in crimson waits,
watchful for his mate.

Burnt sun slips
into an ashen sky.
Into the darkness
the dogwood disappears.

From within the stillness
the cardinal tilts his head listening
for wings familiar, fluttering homeward.

The neighbor's cat stretches,
its tiny claws caught in the moonlight.

Evelina Moulder

Waiting for a Sign (Shrove Tuesday, 1998)

We wait,
longing for a sign
among the stacks of pancakes
and sausage links of
Shrove Tuesday. Amid
savoring, swallowing, and sighs.

Full with emptiness, sighs
are offered up like incense while we wait.
Hunger, rage, and lust lurking amid
longing for a sign
of the Holy One. That is what we seek, we of
devotion, on Fat Tuesday, eating pancakes.

We of plump and fluffy pancakes,
stacked high, stifling telltale sighs.
There are paper crowns, confetti, strands of
beads and chains of sausages, while the U.N. waits
and Clinton searches for papers to sign,
and young Israelis wearing gas masks go dancing in bars amid

mock scud missiles, silencing fear with laughter amid
anthrax warnings. We pour golden syrup on golden pancakes
and miss the Holy One flashing the peace sign,
while a foot-tapping soldier beside a bomber sighs.
Alert, eager, he waits
for orders, for relief, for any hint of

attack, or retreat, or rounds of
ammunition, or bombs exploding. Amid
the cries of children, we wait.
Cleaning up the parish hall, tossing untouched pancakes,
planning Lenten deprivations while the Holy One sighs,
waiting for a sign.

Waiting for a sign
from the faithful of
Christendom, the Holy One sighs
while a young warrior frets amid
runways and munitions, longing for pancakes
and orders to go home. He waits.

Evelina Moulder

Maggie Valley: August

On Campbell Creek Road
black butterflies catapult
from wild clover to Queen Anne's lace.
The dusk purple and dawn red flowers
in the field between mountains
are their see-saws.
From high dives off black-eyed Susans
they spin across meadows
where lambs bleat.

We stub our toes on the gravel
from fixing our eyes on this dream.
People who live in cabins here,
stove warm in winter, mist cool in summer,
still rock in the lap of a wholeness
born from the land and their labor
and not yet dispelled by our image
on Campbell Creek Road.

Evelyn Mattern

Adagio penitento

In these slow weeks of Lent
we fast & wait for spring.
Snow falls slushy, sliding
over our windows. We look in.
Our souls starve
under the oppression of seven
deadly pharaohs. At our feet, a rod
begins to hiss & writhe; the river
flows red. Soon we will eat
together, weeping, as death
passes over like a cloud.
Soon, dear. Till then, live slow
& hungry, tend your fires & take note
of every sudden shining sign.

Ruth Goring

Amor Interruptus

If I'm really lucky, my brother will say, "Yeah, she looks good," especially if he's had a couple of drinks and is feeling kind of expansive. My sister-in-law, on the other hand, will level it off. She'll say, "We're all getting older, Rick."

As if he doesn't already know that.

That's in spite of my telling them -- on purpose -- how slim I am with aerobics and body sculpture twice a week and walking to work every day so that when my high school sweetheart shows up at their house in Naples -- Florida, that is -- for their long post high school reunion and he asks about me, one of them might just say something else besides: "We're all getting older, Rick."

That's the way my family is -- they understate things. I always keep a couple of friends on hand that remind me of my family and they'd probably say the same thing. As if, after thirty years since he sent me that Dear John letter -- or whatever it's called when it's the soldier sending it to the girl back home -- Rick doesn't already know we're all getting a little older. Except for me of course. I don't want him to think I am. I want it to be as if nothing about me has changed that much in all these years. I also don't want him to know I'm feeling palpitations as if it were only yesterday that he left.

Of course it's not like I've been thinking of him each and every day of my life this thirty-five years. Not until my brother mentioned him. Not at all. I'm not exactly Granny Weatherall. It's just that Rick kind of started me off. Before Rick, I never knew a man could love me. Or anybody outside the family where they have to love you. I hadn't mastered all those techniques my parents and everyone else tried to teach me. Like:

"Don't frown so much, Jean. It makes you look surly and you're going to get permanent frown lines between your eyes." (My mother.) Or,

"Try to keep your mouth shut a little more." (My brother.)

Then there was Seventeen Magazine which I started reading cover to cover at age eleven, when Rick moved in around the corner, and by fourteen I was bored with.

Rick was a city kid. That's what we called boys like him who moved to Little Falls from the city. He was five years ahead of me in school and played football with my brother. And, he knew I had a crush on him.

On Halloween I dressed up like a gypsy and, thinking I looked beautiful, went trick or treating with my best friend to Rick's house. The door opened very slowly, and Rick, hair slicked back in a D.A. and wearing pegged pants, jumped out from behind the door, shouting, "Boo!" When he saw who it was, he said, "Well, look who's here, the kid sister. You know I'm waiting for you to grow up and be my girl."

My skin was prickly for the rest of the day and I stopped trick or treating for the rest of my life.

Rick talked really fast, telling jokes and saying things I wasn't used to people saying out loud. Not in my family, anyway.

"The old fart got his bowels in an uproar, today," he said about the football coach as he and my brother were walking into the house. My mother, standing in the kitchen, ironing, looked over at me and raised her eyebrows.

"Yeah, well, we shouldn't have been fooling around," my brother answered, embarrassed we were there.

As I said, Rick was not a man of a few words like my brother who still hands the telephone to his wife when I call him in Florida.

Rick and my brother both joined the Air Force. That's what guys did when they were at loose ends in those days. That's the way they got straightened out. Straightened out if they didn't get killed, that is. Rick came home on leave and decided I had grown up enough. He had his mom's car and picked me up at the candy store where I hung out with my friends after school. Smoking.

"Hi beautiful," he said, all smiles. Just that, but it bowled me over.

All my father ever said was "Pretty is as pretty does," because a girl might get a big head if you were too complimentary. Pretty does never interested me.

Rick could say things like "Hi beautiful" with all my friends looking on. I thought that was pretty manly, not shy the way it seemed like my brother and all the other guys were around girls except if they'd had a few beers.

That was before being called beautiful in public by a guy made you a sex object. I had never heard of such a thing, then. At sixteen, I liked it.

I liked it that he took me dancing, the way guys did in those days, and I thought he was the best dancer on the floor. My brother taught me how to dance and he was good, too, in a cool way. He'd stand there, quietly beating time with his foot, maybe chewing gum, and put his hand out for you once in a while. But Rick would move his whole body, Elvis Presley-style, and nobody in Little Falls was doing that yet.

Rick took me into the city to a French restaurant and a Broadway show. I wore a black suit and French heels and a jersey skull cap I made myself which was very sophisticated for Little Falls High School and exactly what I wanted to be. We both ordered boeuf Bourguignonne which was about as far as my high school French went with a real French menu. C'etait delieieux.

Best of all, he respected me, as my mother would have put it, if she had believed he did. But she didn't -- because he was a city boy and she knew about city boys. We did come pretty close to doing it, too. Those were the days when pretty close was really nice.

Rick didn't want me to go off to college. "Don't you want a house with a white picket fence, a couple of kids and a dog?" he asked.

I actually hadn't thought about it.

"Just think about what beautiful kids we'll have," he went on. The part of him saying that, which meant we'd be having a lot of sex, was very exciting. For the other part, the kids, I was in no hurry.

"Can't we do it all when I finish college?" I asked.

"You're going to turn into an intellectual snob," he answered.

He gave me a gold charm bracelet with a heart and a diamond chip that said, "Love Rick," and I gave him a silver identification bracelet that he had soldered closed on his wrist. Then, after we both promised to wear our bracelets forever, he put on his uniform and flew away. It wasn't more than a few months later when I got the letter. I had graduated -- Rick even sent me a beautiful card and a graduation charm, a tiny gold mortarboard. I was getting ready to go away to college in the Fall. It was a short letter, very few words for Rick:

Dear Jean,

I've met a girl here on the base. Her father's an officer. She's not as pretty or as smart as you are but I love her and we're getting married. You're going away to college and you'll forget about me anyway.

Love, Rick

I spent the rest of the summer in tears.

Not taking any chances, I married the next man that came along. He was more like what I was used to: he never said I was beautiful. I hid the gold heart under the paper liner in my bureau drawer and it disappeared. For all I know, my husband found it and had it melted down for a tooth filling because he wasn't one to waste a gram of gold and couldn't understand pouring half a bottle of good burgundy into the beef stew. He wasn't Rick.

Maybe he was jealous, jealous of my past life, which is not the same thing as being jealous of what's going on now. That was about the time when we outlawed jealousy for a while because no one can hang out with just one person all their life -- like thirty years. Hanging out, of course, is a euphemism. In essence, it meant about the same thing as what my mother called respect.

Anyway, I left that husband so I don't know about any thirty years together. Maybe if I'd have married Rick who was flying a bomber plane over the same country I was protesting the war in, I'd know about things like that for sure. I often think about that. I often think if I'd have married him, I might have stayed put. I don't know what I would have done about the war, though.

And if the reunion weren't all the way across the country in Naples while I'm here in the city working out and walking to work, I could just saunter into my brother's house, even though I wasn't invited anyway, being behind them in school, and I could ask Rick how he ever got that soldered on bracelet off his wrist. With a hacksaw?

Rick asked about me, my brother says.

He said, "I was in love with your sister," which surprised my brother a lot, of course, and then he wanted to know how I look now.

"I told him you cut your hair short and you're not blonde anymore."

"Thanks." That's just about what I expect my brother to say.

"He's married," he goes on to tell me, not still married, but married again. "Three times." It makes me wonder where we would be, now, if we had ever married. I'd have been the first, maybe, but not the last. Or would I have been the one and only?

I wonder if I have become an intellectual snob.

"Still talks as much as ever and he's put on weight," my brother continues with his nifty knack for description. Then he hands the telephone to his wife.

"None of us are getting any younger," she says.

Joan Acari

Through the Dark Night

There was a time when I wrote the same way I lived -- breathlessly, as though I had to fill each page in order to find out what happened next. Stories came to me like dreams, unreeling themselves into my consciousness. In fifth grade, Mrs. Russo passed out thin composition books with flimsy blue paper covers; she laid two sharpened pencils carefully at each desk. This was a writing assessment. We had forty minutes to demonstrate our skills (to the Tarrytown school board? to the state of New York?) by either addressing the prescribed subject ("How I spend my spare time") or a topic of our choice. It was one of those rare moments in my public education where paper and time were provided to do with what I willed. Mrs. Russo set a cooking timer ticking on her desk. Heads bent, pencils began their scratching, and overhead the fluorescent lights emitted a high-pitched buzz.

I don't remember diving into my short story, surrounding myself with its watery, shifting hues and mediaeval narrative. Nor do I remember the character I became, nor how she carried herself through the labyrinth of my imagination. All I remember is the sound of her footsteps echoing off the walls of a marble-pillared hall. She approached and mounted a dais. The air was dim; there was the swish of heavy fabric.

A sharp "ping!" from Mrs. Russo's timer woke me. I came up for air, bewildered by the classroom's brightness. Sure enough, forty minutes had passed. My stomach grumbled. When Mrs. Russo came around to collect our composition books, I was certain that mine was cloaked in an aura of mystery. All it would take to return to that mythical place was to fold back its blue cover and follow the loops and dives of my childish handwriting. Unlike the fantasies that spun themselves out for the duration of long car trips, here was a world to which I might return, which others could inhabit as well. My body felt light. Something had shifted; something in me had moved from there to here. A sharpened pencil over an empty page would never feel the same.

There are moments when another story, rife with symbolism, superimposes itself upon the ordinary story of my day. Only with hindsight do I recognize it: my heart, quickened in its ribcage; fragments of unidentifiable colors swiftly fading; the heady aftertaste of heightened perspective. Sometimes it comes as a dream, its meandering plot and quirky architecture giving sudden dimension to what I didn't know was shallow. When I was a child, a story descended on me in the form of fantasy spun out on the page, or in spontaneous make-believe. Yesterday, picking chunks of sod from a freshly tilled garden plot, I saw, for less than a second, my life not as a struggle to eke out a meaningful living, but as the unrestrained adventure of a soul -- a soft shadow fluttering in the mulberry tree. Then that story was gone. My back hurt from bending over, and my arms smelled of acrid sweat.

Today, a low-lying morning with damp air chilling the house, story arrives in the form of depression.

A shrieking wind woke me at 5 a.m. The house's timbers creaked like bones. I kept waiting for the morning to grow light, but it didn't and I had to rouse myself anyhow. Now, hours later, it's so dark outside that the streetlights are still on. Swift changes in air pressure rattle my attic door in its frame. The house is cold. I can't muster the strength to pull my spirits above the mournful mood of the weather.

Our fifth grade class never got those compositions back. Some careless assessor (a New York regents officer? the superintendent? Mrs. Russo herself, with her piercing black eyes?) dumped the stack of composition books into a wastebasket and returned to us instead a roster of numbers. "Elizabeth," Mrs. Russo called me to her huge, meticulously neat desk; "You got a hundred. Excellent work."

I looked across the empty wooden surface hoping for some sign of my writing. My heart sank. The story had vanished just as my fantasies did, the same way dreams dissipate into the shadowed corners of a bright day. I walked back to my desk feeling hollow and strangely determined.

When I think of it now, a pattern emerges: the relentless pull onto the open page balanced by its subsequent loss; the rapture of creation balanced by its end and a journey inward. As a ten-year-old, that journey came as scowling moods and flashes of anger. Now it is the dark night of the soul. If sadness is a story, then I write to discover what it is about.

This melancholy arrived five months ago, at the end of October on a rainy day just like today. I had spent the afternoon teaching in another part of the city. By the time I pulled my car in front of the house, the air was so cold and penetrating, I decided that I needed to drag my winter coat down from the attic. I walked around a puddle on the sidewalk. First I noticed that the string of bells that usually hangs from the screen door was sprawled across the top step. I hung it back up, wondering if the wind had been strong enough to lift the bells off their hook. But then I saw the storm window leaned against the porch wall and glass shattered everywhere. The computer at my writing desk inside was gone.

Even before the shock of violation hit me (a hole punched into my house!), a familiar ache returned to the pit of my stomach: my writing, gone again. I had been working on an essay about how fantasy can pull us forward into expansive lives, but my memory of its wandering content suddenly vanished. The police arrived, swinging their wide hips up my front walk, brushing sticky finger-printing powder over the storm window and making confident pronouncements: "Ninety-five percent chance it was a neighbor kid. Offer a reward. Put the word out around the block." When they heard that I was a writer, the round officer shook a fat finger at me: "Think carefully about who might want what was in that computer." I watched a gripping mystery novel unfold in his eyes. Young author unknowingly discloses Mafia secrets. Writing prodigy strikes envy in the heart of other Minneapolis authors, resulting in criminal acts. I'm flattered.

No, my writing is always the casualty of wanton lawlessness. Some stranger craves my hardware, the megabytes of memory and the crawling insect screen-saver that entertained my cat for hours. The half-written essay, backed up on the disk still inside the computer; the latest edition of my column; lesson plans, inquiry letters, résumé -- all are airy and valueless compared with the keyboard-and-screen substance of a thousand dollar computer. Surely I've got my priorities wrong. Words are a risky investment. If they're not first lost, most often they yield a poor return.

Depression arrived; its low-hanging clouds pulled me like a dead-weight into the murky depths of a lake. Every loss brings with it memories of all other losses, unfairly multiplying grief. And then it's no longer the loss itself but long untouched hurts, now on the surface, that call up the tears.

From the midst of it, depression is as indescribable as a moment of ecstasy. It is deep in the body, moving like slow wisps of silt. Our language makes depression into a bad mood, sunken spirits or a hormonal swing, when in fact it is an illness, beginning as the flu begins, with a dull ache in the muscles and sweeping waves of nausea. Unwelcomed, speechless, still, it takes up residence.

But from the edges of depression (now mellowed down to a mild melancholy, five months after the break-in), the dark night seems more like my fifth grade writing sample: just a story, albeit a hard one. It emerges from between the lines of my ordinary life until it dominates even the smallest details. The surface narrative resonates with the undercurrent complexity of the human psyche. What I mean is that depression fills your body like a forest, all textured and terrifying, and you grope your way through. Work, play, relationships, exercise, prayer, all are small pebbles underfoot. Your life is about making it past these looming shadows which you can't even name.

When you enter the woods of a fairy tale and it is night, the trees tower on either side of the path. They loom large because everything in the world of fairy tales is blown out of proportion. If the owl shouts, the otherwise deathly silence magnifies its call. The tasks you are given to do (by the witch, by the stepmother, by the wise old woman) are Insurmountable -- pull a single hair from the crescent moon bear's throat; separate a bowl's worth of poppy seeds from a pile of dirt. It seems the forest will never end. But when you do reach the daylight, triumphantly carrying the single hair or having outwitted the wolf; when the owl is once again a shy bird and the trees only a lush canopy filtering the sun, the world is forever changed for your having seen it otherwise. From now on, when you come upon darkness, you'll know it has dimension. You'll know how closely poppy seeds and dirt resemble one another. The forest will be just another story which has absorbed you, taken you through its paces but then cast you out again to your home with its rattling windows and empty refrigerator-to your meager livelihood, which demands, inevitably, that you write about it.

When I was in seventh grade, Mr. Pollice assigned his classes to write autobiographies. "In five pages," my favorite English teacher commissioned us, "tell your life's story." I began tentatively, penning my earliest memories, chronicling years of Valentine's Day birthday parties, my line-up of best friends, the fire my family had witnessed in the San Gabriel mountains of California, the helium balloon with my name and address dangling from the string that I'd released in Tarrytown and that landed in Long Island. . . . What started as an assignment soon became a mission. I was twelve; I saw my early childhood memories endangered by the encroaching onslaught of adolescence. If I could capture them now in writing, they'd survive. My enthusiasm was dauntless. I wanted in my adult years to look back on my twelve-year-old self with gratitude and awe: what foresight to have preserved these fragile memories! When I turned over to Mr. Pollice the rough draft and final copy in my best handwriting, the manuscript was forty pages long.

At that point I was head over heels in love with Mr. Pollice. He towered over us from the front of the classroom, his thick eyebrows furrowed as he introduced us to "theme" and "metaphor" and "lyric." What a novelty in a teacher -- he was passionate about poetry! He understood the meanings behind things! Literature and life first became rife with symbolism when we read Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Berglaron" and

were prodded by Mr. Pollice's leading questions. In Harrison's futuristic world, people were equalized by handicaps and weights; Harrison alone could envision the wonder of individuality. Perhaps our culture (or even the social pressure at this junior high) weighs us down in the same way, I speculated. How can we shed our weights and dance more freely? The story alone released me -- there was so much more in the world than appeared on the surface. When Mr. Pollice looked across the classroom at me and winked, I was sure we had shared something precious: the deep insides of ourselves.

Two weeks after we handed in our autobiographies, Mr. Pollice turned to the class with a long face. "I have terrible news for you," he told us slowly. The gravity of his voice made my gut sink. What if Mr. Pollice had cancer? I couldn't bear to lose this man who revealed to me how life has layers of meaning.

He continued solemnly. "I had your autobiographies with me when I stopped at the Paramus mall to run errands. Someone broke into my car. They took a bag of clothes that I was going to drop off at the Good Will, a jar of change, and your stack of papers. I don't know why they took the papers. They probably just dumped them. It's not fair. I'm really sorry this happened."

I was in shock. Hours and hours of work, gone? For months afterward, I was sure this stranger -- a poor soul who needed clothes and a few pennies -- would finally read through the stack of our stories and have pity on us by putting them in the mail. He or she would read mine and realize, *Here is a piece that matters to its author; it ought to return home*. I tried to recall the anecdotes I'd labored over, the events which had composed my life which I then had composed into my first memoir. But they were irretrievable. The memories had been stolen from me as completely as the pages themselves.

Outside my writing window, the sky has turned a mean shade of grey. One of my porch screens isn't latched properly; the wind sucks its frame out of place and it falls into the yard. The windchime outside my front door is incessant. It's a spring rain; the grass glows an unearthly green against all this darkness. Stepping outside to fix the screen, I see that the worms have slithered from their muddy hiding places and sprawled themselves across the sidewalk, flushed out for the first time this season. They smell fresh, like the center of the earth or like a baby right out of the womb.

If the ego's interests are preservation, perfection, accomplishment and product, then writing is an act of ego. I write in desperation, holding on to what might better be lost, naming what might better be left unnamed. Ego precedes me onto the page. Hand over hand, dragging my heavy body behind me, I'm drawn to the shimmering illusion of writing's permanence. I thirst for that completed story, for the artistic presence which will somehow represent me to the world. I write to discover what in me is lasting.

But time after time the page disappears, along with all that I've made of it. The computer crashes, taking with it the carefully crafted sentences which were me in the process of becoming someone new. Or one computer's life ends, and the language in which the old machine recorded my creations is untranslatable by the latest contraption. Writing gets sacrificed to the anachronism of technology, a scrambled chaos of zeroes and ones, or to a careless education system, or to fire. A stranger smashes the window of my writing desk and pulls out my laptop, its brain stuffed with stories. Inevitably, the written word is a mirage, as fickle as thought and as fleeting.

Sometimes I see myself shedding; my life peels away from me like scales made of paper, whole skins I've unwillingly left behind. If the soul's interests are letting go, descent, quietude, connection and inward treasure, then writing is an act of soul. I reach into the netherworld of words to bring their numinous second selves into the light. Product is the joy of ego, and process is the joy of soul. When I lose my writing, all that is left is who I am becoming.

Years later, when I was in college, Mr. Pollice *did* get cancer -- a brain tumor which killed him four months after the diagnosis. He was in his early forties, married, with a five-year old daughter named Beth. I had been in high school when she was born, and dropped by the junior high to congratulate him. "I named her after you," he told me, winking. Without any explanation, I took in his meaning. *You are important to me, he was saying. I hope my daughter grows up to be like you.* During a lonely time, Mr. Pollice gave me a great deal of hope.

I was at a neighborhood garden party when I heard he had died, and was so grief-stricken I had to leave. It had happened suddenly, mid-summer. Hardly anyone had been notified, and, as a result, no students attended his funeral. A much beloved teacher, a remarkable, calm man, had been snuffed out without tribute.

Mr. Pollice had a long, bearded face, a lanky body, feet of intimidating length and hands so broad that he fumbled with stubs of chalk at the blackboard. Between classes, he stood just outside his classroom door tossing his keys from one hand to the other and greeting each of us by name as we entered. The few times I was brave enough to look directly into Mr. Pollice's brown eyes, they encompassed an intimate place in me, making my face turn red. After all, he was the first to read my poetry. The aching verses I wrote for the school contest brought his eyebrows up in a surprised arch. I won that contest -- poet laureate of Washington Irving Junior High in 1983. But my only copy of the poem was never returned. It didn't occur to me that it should have been otherwise.

Underneath most depression is grief and unexpressed or ill-expressed anger. Each memory I've forgotten, each story I've lost, is a life taken prematurely. Only now, after months of heaviness, do I demand to know why.

"You've entered the dark woods," my spiritual director says when I talk with her, in tears yet again. God is no comfort here, and of little relevance. I can see no end to my heaviness. She adds, "But you're halfway through."

"What makes you say that?" I ask.

"If you were near either end, you'd see some light." Her words aren't any comfort either. "That's one of the biggest criticisms of Christianity," she continues. "God didn't show up at the crucifixion when Jesus needed him most. Jesus dies first, painfully, and then is resurrected."

What the hell kind of religion is that? Perhaps at the other end of this forest, I'll be stronger or wiser; perhaps the dark night of the soul comes bearing gifts. God, it's often said, works in our vulnerable moments -- that our times of greatest hurt or grief or despair are also when we're most open to transformation. But from the midst of it, that information doesn't help much. It makes depression a blessing in sinister disguise, or a manipulative test of character designed for our betterment, or God's harsh tune-up of our shortcomings. It means God abandons us in our most difficult moments, only to swoop

down deus ex machina when the pain is over. I can't believe in a creator like that. If God is a player in the passion drama, then God missed his cue.

In 1995, I moved out to the country in order to write. It was a huge step, away from a tenured public school job into an artist's unreliable income. I pared down my possessions to a minimum, selling textbooks and giving away clothes in an effort to simplify my life. Friends helped me transport all my worldly possessions in a caravan of a few cars and a pickup. We stored the furniture, the bike, the boxes of books, journals and photographs in a garage until the apartment I was to move into was vacated.

But then, the night before my final move, a car with a faulty ignition caught itself on fire after its owner pulled in for the evening. Flames ripped through the wooden barn, leaping from one bay to the next until the area with my belongings was a fiery furnace. Every poem, every piece of fiction, every one of nineteen years of personal journals all went up in flame. Even if I had possessed the short story I wrote for Mrs. Russo or my autobiography or prize-winning poem, they'd all have been burned anyhow. Computer disks of drafts, of aborted ideas and polished, published pieces, melted; reams of unorganized papers, notebooks, index cards, margin-scrawled books, all burned. I stood outside the circle of heat, too stunned to feel the extent of my loss.

The fire heaved itself sideways in huge waves, and then shot skyward, sending sparks out to the stars. Its beauty absorbed me. A five-stall garage, workshop, two years worth of firewood, and six century-old Norway pines burned. The light was blinding, the roar volcanic. Even forty feet away, we felt its heat lapping at us. At the white center of the fire was a glimpse of the sun's surface (a molten, slow-motion fever), and at the top, fingers of flame whipped themselves accusingly at the night sky.

The fire burned for three days until just red coals remained, the rain spitting and sizzling on their open wounds. Finally it sunk in: I had lost all of my writing. The firemen were able to drag out a few boxes of books with their covers melted together and pages soaked from the hoses, and one box of my journals, the script washed clean, the bindings charred. My life's story had been obliterated. I climbed through the ruins moving beams and bicycle frames with a pitchfork until the soles of my sneakers were soft from the heat. Underneath was nothing but ash.

When I was little, I had a dream where I was to be put to death. I chose fire as the means. A small closet off to the side of a room was filled with slips of white paper. I walked into the closet. The air was poignant, tinged with. . . meaning? sorrow? Then somebody calmly lit a match.

A bit of what I lost in the fire I remember vaguely -- a blue and white, cloth-covered journal I kept on our first family vacation in Europe when I was twelve; a love story inspired by a crush on my fencing instructor my freshman year at college; free verse exploring fresh images of God that I had composed as part of an independent study with a liberation theologian. But I have no idea what was on most of those pages. Often people ask me, "Were you able to recover any of your writing?" Do they mean piece the ashes back together? The words are no longer inside of me, nor their form, nor their intent. I've heard of families (Salvador Dali's was one) who lose a child, then name the next child after the first. It's a pretense; that second child will never be the first, and

will never erase the first child's memory. I've written other stories since the fire, but no -- I have recovered nothing.

If writing can die so completely, martyred by circumstance, and its loss cause this much grief, then surely it has a life of its own and an indomitable spirit. Burned or stolen or published or tucked in a file drawer, every piece I've written slips between the cracks of my memory and sinks into my bloodstream. Half of who I am today is the stories I've written, only they've worked themselves into muscle and bone marrow. They've become the electrical charges between neuron synapses in the brain. Their spirit inhabits my breath. In the beginning they are words, but the words become flesh and dwell within me.

Love is never wasted, and neither is a story. Whether or not its external life is cut short, a story works on the inner realms, shifting molecules, moving memories. The changes are so subtle they appear only in dreams: I no longer swim to school holding my pencils and pens above the water. Or the changes float like a speck on the iris, my normal sight interrupted momentarily by a meandering bit of life. I'm confused; the foreground is suddenly too near. Stories have a spirit that can't be obliterated, even when their lives are. They make a difference. They dwell among us.

"The universe is made of stories, not atoms," Muriel Rukeyser wrote, and the universe is expanding. Who is to say that all that interplanetary dust isn't really ashes of narrative, sent heavenward in a raging fire? Or that dark matter isn't poetry, formed, finished and forgotten, somehow laden on the void?

And the story of the soul's night isn't wasted either. Depression is a wilderness we walk through, leaving behind us a meager trail of bread crumbs. We can't retrace our steps to get out. We can only forge ahead, be taken in by the witch, outwit her when we can, grab her jewels and run. If we make it to the other end, the father who abandoned us is still our father. The evil stepmother is gone; we don't know why, but we suspect that she'd still be there if we hadn't come this far.

God, it turns out, isn't a character in the story after all. Nor is he the story's author, scribbling away our fates from that great desk in the sky. God is more the unrolling story itself -- the narrative drive, the thread of purpose, the essence which transforms the story into something to live by and which gives it endurance. Nothing is so horrific that it can't be contained in a story, or at least in the silences between words. Sometimes the story gives meaning or context to suffering, and sometimes it simply holds it. When hardship strikes, the story digs down and touches metal.

My writing crawls out like infant sea turtles from a hole in the sand. It's a long journey to the water's edge. There's poachers and predators and violent weather. Perhaps one turtle in twelve arrive. It is a tremendous waste of life.

But then there's that one that makes it, that marches right into the salt water, ducks his head under and finds he's in his natural element -- he can breathe, he can flip his fins and swim. The water is black. Up through its surface he can see a white moon. Without a thought for his dead brothers and sisters, he kicks, thrusting his shelled torso into the depths.

Where does hope come from? I write this and every piece, cracking a silent egg open to the harsh world. Really it's not my writing at all but rather my life that I'm

rooting for. In the end, I am the one who wants to dive under the salt water. I want to come into my element. I want to arrive at that place where I know I am home.

Elizabeth Andrew

Miscarriage

Opening my hands
I let fall the thread
of names I have woven.
My fingers touch
only air.
I drink from a cup
of silence,
the quiet white
of no thoughts.
The heavy sleep
of the innocent.
I wake after no dreams
in the light of
so much freedom,
forgetting where I am
or why.
A string of tears
is placed around my neck.
The empty cup
pried from my fingers,
smashes into pieces
beyond counting.

Cindy Pinkston

Stroke

Somehow you are smaller, as if you were sinking
into another, deeper world, slowly crushed by the weight
of the world above you. I think I am prepared for the change,
until I see the crudely lettered sign by your head:
“I can understand simple sentences.”

Who are they to pretend they know what you think?
I will not speak to you as if you were the dog,
as if you were someone else. Now I have lost my own voice.
Your eyes are still brilliant blue. If only I could speak
of what has not changed.

These days you live in the muted light of a nursing home.
Bits of you have been stolen, pawned, resold.
First memory, then concentration. Now your voice.
You will be a silent actor. Now my lines will change
to speak for us both.

Cindy Pinkston

Burning Brush in Texoma

She loved the smell of cedar
when they'd clear the paths
from the winter's fall.
The brush, piled higher than her head,
would gasp as the flicker touched to its base
Fire howls, a brilliant topaz tongue
Laps at the moon .

She'd stand there,
Burning her face, and freezing her back
With curling toes inside her boots
like the smoke that rose
above the clearing's crown.

His hands rested lightly
on the shoulder of her
frayed plaid coat while
Sparks climbed the night
gibbering and babbling
on the ascent of the tower
to the gods.

Under the pale November moon
She kissed him, tasted the smoke,
that lingered on his skin. Whispered,
I love you, too.

In the morning, she awoke
to find ashes in her mouth.

Dawn Lee

Letter to Miranda

My tender shoot,
you have grown in the dark
and been pulled into the sun
by red rope braids
that slash the shoulders of your jumper.
You stand rigid by my side,
unaware of lies that furrow in the ground.

Your mother is drawn
by childish hands in crude sticks.
Let me crayon her for you
with broad green strokes
that would give you her eyes
and her blue wit that sharpened edges
against a smooth grey stone.

I want you to see
the corners of her mouth
rise like red smoke
in a private joke
that only she will know.

I'd like to give you more
than a shoebox of her things --
She was more than
snapshots, skateboard wax, antique earrings
tossed with bright plastic beads
we caught at Mardi Gras.

But what I have to give you
is a pocket full of poems
I have written in her name.

Dawn Lee

Carpet Sale

We spoke of India
With an old man
Who had flown there twice,
Our conversation absorbed
By numerous oriental rugs
Beneath our feet.
Said he wouldn't go back-
The water was terrible,
Their rituals wild without reason
And besides, the carpets
Could be sent by ship cheaper now.

The most simple design
Was The Family Prayer: \$1019.00.
Thin 7 year old hands cramped,
Weaving black & blue with fervor,
Backache and hunger swelling.
Eight months,
\$1.35
for a 12 hour day.

And he tells us
To walk right on them.

Corrine De Winter

Hale-Bopp, Hailed Below

I watch
winter's wink
at spring
slide
across sky,
an icy haze
skating
a trail of time.
Under stars
we stare,
my vision,
myopic,
yours,
clearly cosmic.
As you blow
eternity's breath
I, below,
hold mine.

Judy Lewis Hench

January 1, 1999

It is the first hour of the year,
But there have been dawns less bright.
I can see each separate pebble in the road,
The crusts of yesterday's snow.
The stripped-down garden stands on its head,
Pale trees reaching their skyroots
Into the bright wash of lunar light,
Drinking deep. I drink too.
It is a little-remembered fact that
The moon draws more than oceans —
Our salt-blood is pulled
Through its own dance of neaps
And spring tides, washing
In our thirsty veins, breaking
On our bone-beaches. We rise
From our beds to count pebbles
And thrust with upside-down
Midnight trees into
The white pool of reflected,
Sustaining light.

Susan Settlemyre Williams

Broken Tree

All winter it has been —
This giant torn tree —
Not just the focus but the reason
For the landscape,
The jagged exclamation point
That cried to me
Whenever I crossed the creek.
Since the Christmas icestorm
It has been a strident yellow wound
Slashing the grays and drabs
Of winter woods.
Now, as April decides on its
Animal mask, whether
To leap in on hooves or claws,
The tree is no longer shrieking.
The torn-off crown, still caught
By a membrane of bark,
Acknowledges it has died,
Begins to dull toward dun.
The trunk does not yet understand
Its death, but its pain
Is not so bright.
By November, when the shrouds
Are fallen and lie in tatters
Around it, the tree will be
A sharpness among other
Sharp and splintered shapes in
The long landscape of loss.

Susan Settlemyre Williams

Meditations on a Mountain Deck

I.
birds flickering to the feeder,
those throbbing bodies,
I am relieved when I see
them in pairs, two juncos,
two nuthatches,
mated wrens hopping in the ivy
of a planter — birds
especially seem to need
attachment,
they burn so rapidly.

II.
a breeze is turning
the young leaves into small
wagging tails
and I am spreading my washed clothes
to dry on sunlight,
spreading myself, a damp,
crumpled moth,
to sun and breeze, feeling
my winter-cocooned membranes and
my bright veins strengthen
and stretch themselves
in the sweet air, feeling
the pure instant when I am opened
and lifted in the sun-shaft.

III.
almost the pattern of
a Chinese robe:
blue silk sky oversewn with
the tiny gold embroidery of
unbudding leaves and twisted
dragon-branches;
the transiency of afternoon
and oaks abstracted, like art,
like the idea of pattern,
into a transcendent present.

IV.

I am
spending the silence hoarded
against need,
the genius of this place
calling forth my mute abundance,
transforming into quiet
what has been merely unsaid.
I begin to apprehend the archaic sense
of holy places, deltas
where finite and divine
flow together and
withholding of the silence
is without possibility.

V.

surely a white squirrel,
within its limits, has
free will the same
as I within mine,
so its showing itself cannot
be anything as crude as
a portent (neither of us
a personal omen to the other) —
this is how my mind departs
from the ancient view:
I believe in the squirrel's existence
beyond its appearing to me
(but I do not find our
conjunction meaningless,
only infinitely complicated).

Susan Settlemyre Williams

Their Spirits In the Garden

In the corner-place, that valley
dip over there
where a river runs
through this mountain
Eden, my children--lithe and winddriven
as whirligigs--visit this crag and that
field of strongholds, of rocks
and caves-cum-fortresses.

At dusk
they come back through the Gate, come
home to flesh and bone
and love that's never quite right, come
back to me strengthened by their climb
to higher places.

Sheryl Cornett

A Reading of the Dead Mime's Last Will and Testament

Robert Grey

Love, Being Blind

Joanne was sitting on the dark side of the picnic table, because she wanted the coolness of the shadows rather than the warmth cast by the patio light. I sat opposite her, watching her tilt back her head and its cropped brown hair, and rub her eye sockets with the tops of her fists.

It was hard concentrating on the game, on my next move across the Braille checkerboard, because I was wondering if she was rubbing her eyes because blindness made them itch or if she was trying to grind away the film that cloaked them in darkness. I moved one of my black checkers forward into a slot and Joanne picked up a cigarette and jabbed it between her lips, ran her fingertips over the board, clucked her tongue through the side of her mouth, put down her cigarette on the edge of the picnic table and jumped me twice.

"You're only...what eight...nine?" she said.

"Ten," I said. "I'm in fifth grade."

"You don't understand hormones, then? Do you, Luke?"

I remembered a joke a guy had told me at school...a joke about how to make a whore moan...by not paying her. But that was only a joke and it was dirty and it was Butchy Smith who told it and he didn't go to Sunday school like I do and I had walked away, even though a couple of the other boys called after me.

"They affect a young woman's moods...and hungers," said Joanne, "and you do things your parents warn you not to do. That's why I'm down here at Aunt Doreen's and Uncle Gene's."

I nodded, but then I felt dumb, her being blind and not being able to see my head.

"My parents think I should be a saint just because I'm blind," she said.

"They say it's undignified for me to smoke and steal the rum out of their liquor cabinet. I'm sixteen. I've got normal feelings."

"You have a boyfriend?" I moved a checker just to do it, not worrying if I was getting myself into a trap.

"He's got retinitis pigmentosa...some sight, but he's losing it. They caught me giving him an anatomy lesson. That's when they put me on the Greyhound." Joanne moved a checker forward and said, "You can crown me."

When she put the cigarette to her mouth, I noticed that her fingers were yellow-brown. Burnt and nicotine-stained, but I didn't know that then.

"He's not really a boyfriend," said Joanne. "We're just using each other to figure a few things out and put some excitement in our dull lives. No, you wouldn't say he loves me." She flicked her cigarette ash over one shoulder. "After we do whatever we do, he hates me. We don't call each other until our hormones flare up again. I've experienced a lot of things, but one of them's not love."

"Your parents love you."

"If they do, it's not because of me...it's because I'm their daughter and they think they have to...because it's part of their parental role."

"Jesus loves you," I said.

She lifted her plucked eyebrows. "You think so? How do you know?"

"The Bible tells me so."

Sometimes Mom licks her finger and dabs off a speck of ballpoint ink from my chin or a smudge of dirt from my cheek or a crust of blood from a cut. I was thinking that must be what spittle is. Something that soothes and heals. Like the spittle that Jesus used to cure a blind man. I knelt beside the fold-out bed in our family room, which was lit by the sunrise, and I bunched the fingers of my right hand and pressed them to my tongue. Carefully--because I didn't want to wake Joanne--I placed my fingertips on one of her closed eyes. Inside my head, I was praying, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus...heal her, heal her..." Joanne stirred and swatted away my hand like it was a gnat.

I re-licked my fingertips and barely touched her eyelashes this time and started praying again and then she grabbed my wrist and opened up her eyes. Her pupils shifted every which way.

"What are you doing, Luke? Nothing funny, I hope. You're not a groper, are you?"

"How could you tell it was me?"

"The milk on your breath," she said. "You weren't being naughty, were you?"

I wanted to defend myself, but the Bible teaches us not to tell the left hand what the right hand is doing when it's doing good deeds, so I was caught in a bind, not wanting to lie. I decided to tell a half-truth. "It's Sunday morning," I said. "I was wondering if you'd go to church with me."

"Hardly got an ounce of sleep last night." She squinched up her face in a yawn. "Why don't you go on ahead." She felt the bumps on her wristwatch. "It's pretty early, isn't it?"

"I like to get there before the other kids."

"Aunt Doreen thinks you'll grow up to be a preacher, laying on hands and all that. Maybe you'll be different, but I don't believe in the preachers I've been introduced to, not the way they've declared me healed and then treated me like an ingrate when I couldn't agree with them. There's the whole congregation shouting 'Alleluia!' and praising the Lord for restoring my sight and I couldn't see a crow if it was sitting on my nose."

"I want to be a cartoonist," I said. "I draw my own comic books. Stories from the Bible. The Miracle stories, mostly. Jesus has to choose you before you get to be a pastor."

"After you come back from Sunday school, why don't you take your fingertip and sketch Lazarus on the palm of my hand. Maybe I'll come back from the dead."

The Sunday school room, on the second floor of the church's education wing, was empty, which was what I expected, coming an hour early as I did

every week for the solitude. I turned on the light behind the stained glass of Jesus the shepherd boy with his lambs, and sat close to it, which gave me the illusion of sharing Jesus' halo.

My hands clasped, forming a church with a door and a steeple, I prayed to my Heavenly Father in the name of the baby Jesus. I explained about the spittle, and I asked Him to tell me how to cure Joanne of her blindness and of her belief that she wasn't loved. I asked for a sign, but an answer didn't come right then, so I started praying for my parents and my country and President Carter and all the poor little children of the world, black and brown and white and yellow, all the same in His eyes.

And then I prayed, as I had for months, that Jesus would come to me in a vision and remove any doubts I might have and then choose me to be one of his pastors. I felt a presence and I smiled, thinking it might be Jesus, but when I opened my eyes, it was Miss Sherill, my Sunday school teacher, holding a box of crayon stubs and a sheet of beige construction paper.

"Lucas," she said.

I had a crush on her...her blonde hair, her dimpled smile, her blue eyes...and I couldn't help but grin at her. She would make a good wife for a pastor.

"I was hoping you'd draw us a cartoon for the bulletin board."

My throat tickled in her presence. "Another miracle?"

"Not like the leper or the blind man," she said.

"Or the feeding of the multitude?"

"A different kind of miracle...in Old Testament times...before the baby Jesus. This story is from Genesis, the first book in the Bible...but you already know that. God decided to test Abraham's faith by asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham was supposed to put Isaac on a pile of wood on an altar and set him afire. What they called a burnt offering. Abraham was ready to do what God asked him, but then God told him not to lay his hand on his son and told him to sacrifice a ram...a male goat...instead."

I carried the crayons and paper to the low work table by the window and sat down.

"Remember to put horns on the ram, Lucas," said Miss Cheryl, "and a long beard on Abraham. He's just been blessed by God, so give him a big smile. And don't forget the halo."

As I was drawing the outline of the altar, I realized that God was giving me a sign. I needed to prove my sincerity if Joanne was going to be healed. There was something I needed to put on His altar. If I was going to ask for something from God and the baby Jesus, I needed to offer them something in exchange. And I needed to give it first.

Walking way home from church, I found a stick and pretended it was a red-tipped cane, like Joanne's. I closed my eyes and moved slowly down the sidewalk. I didn't know about echolocation then, how the blind tap their cane because sound echoes off objects in their path. When I tripped over a skateboard and banged my elbow to keep my Bible from hitting the ground, I

knew it wasn't going to be easy to be blind, but I figured I would get used to it. Someday I'll be able to picture the checkerboard in my mind and beat Joanne, even if she can see the checkers.

Three blocks from my house, I stopped at a park. It wasn't a mountaintop in the land of Moriah, but it was as close to nature as I was going to get in my neighborhood. I sat cross legged on the grass, clasped my stick with both eyes and prayed for Jesus to give me the courage to poke out my eyes.

My parents thought it would be a good idea for all of us to go for a ride. Get some fresh air. Ride out to Palm Springs and take the tramway up the side of the mountain. There might even be some pockets of snow up there. Joanne and I sat in the backseat.

I didn't feel like talking, being severely disappointed in myself for not having the strength to poke out my eyes. I had the strength to let go of my sight, but I got queasy about the thought of the juices flowing out of my eyeballs. When Dr. Caso would give me shots to get me ready for school, I'd have to steady myself and never look at the needle and even still, I'd turn green and once he had to hold smelling salts to my nose.

The three of them thought I was sleeping, but I was praying over and over for Jesus to show me the way. And then the car started to rock and surge, and I opened my eyes.

"Santa Ana winds," said Dad. "What's Plan B? If we go to the desert, the paint could be sandblasted right off our car. Ever see, a pitted windshield, Luke?"

"The new shopping center," said Mom. "Let's go for sundaes."

Leaves, twigs and trash were flying through the air, slapping our car. Insects splattered. Trees were swaying. Palms, in particular. VW Bugs were crossing over the lines. And then I saw tumbleweeds rolling and bouncing and skidding on and off the road. And I thought of Moses and the burning bush.

I got up on my knees, rolled down my window, propped up my eyelids and pushed my head out into the angry wind.

Mom was crying when she tucked me into bed after I got home from the emergency room. She adjusted the cool hand towels lying across my eyes. Dad told me he couldn't understand what had gotten into my head, said it sure seemed out of character, but he knew that boys can be daredevils. He said he once broke his leg leaping off the roof in a homemade Superman costume. Dad said he was a living example that God protects fools.

Finally, they left me alone with Joanne and she said, "What were you doing? Did you go crazy?"

"Hormones," I said.

"I don't think so."

"Can I ask a personal question?"

"As personal as you want."

My arm was still sore from the tetanus shot, so I winced when I turned onto my side to face her. I caught my breath and asked, "Can you see...at

all?"

"I'm still blind," said Joanne.

"Just a little ray of light?"

"Not a dot." I let out a deep sigh.

"Now it's my turn to ask a personal question. Is there a connection between me being blind and you sticking your head out the window?"

I gulped.

"There is, isn't there?"

Another half-truth. "I wanted to give a gift to God."

"Your eyes? For what?"

I didn't say a thing.

"So I could see a ray of light?"

My voice was breaking, "I want you to know that Jesus loves me."

"I see," said Joanne. "I see." She was quiet for a moment and then she said, "I don't know if Jesus loves me...but now I know that someone does."

That was my first miracle.

Orman Day

Who do you like best,

I begged and begged my best friend Nancy Lang,
whose father managed an outlying A&P,
whose mother wore plaid cotton housedresses.

Please, please, I'll keep it secret, I pressed her
the more she said no and turned her face.
Oh please tell me--me or Martha Vetter?

It couldn't be Martha,
mousy-haired, gray-eyed girl who moved in across the alley,
whose mother had to work, no father,

whose breast buds poked her dress,
while Nancy and I had boy bodies
and were on the trail

of a German spy at the candy store.
Oh please, just whisper it, I'll never tell.
It had to be me.

I had a father who owned his own store
and a yellow truck with our name on it.
Mother's friends lived up and down the block:

Bermans, Shribers, Holtzmans, Applebaums.
I had her cornered.
OK, she said, sallow, miserable. It's Martha..

Did my irises quiver even an instant
before I refused the wrong answer?
She didn't mean it.

Martha Vetter moved away the next year.
She was too stuck-up anyway with that little lisp from her overbite
and being invited to the first kissing party when Nancy and I were not.

Nancy wouldn't be, with those big teeth,
but in my case, the invitation must have got lost.
I was still waiting for days and months after,

as if the party where boys chased girls in the dark
hadn't gone by. That daydream kept me going for years--
that I'd been there and I was the one everyone wanted.

Sondra Zeidenstein

My father

used to talk to bums on the streets
ragged men with their dirty hands out
asking for change.

He'd slide the guy a bill in a handshake
like he was a maitre d' with a special
table to offer.

They'd whisper in voices I couldn't
catch and nod to each other. Sometimes
the man would wave

as we walked away. My father taking
my hand passed on the heat and damp
of a dying dream.

Bonnie Benson

I say to the pen. . . .

Find me a way
out of this maze of sorrow;
stop ending up
among rubble,
garbage cans,
the maimed, the homeless,
discover
the place
where silence sings hymns,
flowers shake hands with sunshine
the sun smiles
for at least half the day.

You keep writing
the same, old shit.

Pamela L. Laskin

The Sycamore

In shallow puddles sycamore leaves
weather under ice wrinkling like the
thin skin of my mother's hands, pale

sun too distant to warm white limbs.
Across a low stone bridge I wander
alone, feel yet an imprint of her touch.

The small stream murmurs.

Ann Horn

Ever Mine

*...Abraham buried his wife Sarah...in the
field of Machpelah...in the land of Canaan.
Genesis 23:19*

This plot will ever be mine,
like the field of Machpelah
a stake in an alien land,
not to be passed on to strangers
nor forgotten.

Mid mole trails and ant hills
deeply chiseled slabs
collect brittle things...
pine needles
dried grass
memories left for burial
faith...stirred by
breeze and
sound of leaf and bird.

Verge of eternity,
ever my Canaan.

Ann Horn

Faith

Outside the funeral home again
one afternoon last week I breathed
like I'd never tasted air. This time
it was a gun shot, or a car crash, a little fear

and neglect, a failed surgery, a bad age, a bad time,
or a bad decision--choose a reason for the residue,
the remains, the retinue in the weary line. In the end
the hand of God plays over the earth,

passing all the storied understanding;
it nudges and plucks, rights
some of what has fallen. I've reached
the awkward age: my curiosity doesn't always get

the best of me. I may not raise my hand,
and though I am making a neat list
in a precise script, I'm not worried. I'm not
worried. I can hold my questions for another time.

Larry Pike

Missing Pieces

Eloise knows a problem when she sees one. She has an eye for detail and a level head. Her boss told her that. She remembers it perfectly: "Eloise," he'd said. "You have an eye for detail and a level head. Keep up the good work."

So she notices the problem right away. It's her eye for detail.

She has been in her boss's office for only a very few minutes and already she can see that something is not right. She notices as she stands in front of Mr. Perkin's desk—taking his memo down on her pad—she notices that the angle of her vision isn't quite right, just a little. . . off.

She can usually see more of him over the lip of his desk, down to the second button on his jacket, just to where his gut starts to jut out and pull the fabric tight. She is used to the way the buttonhole stretches and pulls at the threads that hold the button on. But she can barely see his little, bronze-like anchor tie-clasp.

At first she thinks she is shrinking, but her level head comes to her rescue. That doesn't make any sense, she realizes. Eloise tries not to think about it, keeps taking dictation. Probably she shouldn't be paying attention to such a little thing in the first place—she is supposed to be taking a memo.

"Eloise, honey, is something wrong?" Mr. Perkins always was the concerned kind. He is a good boss. He cares.

"No. No, sorry," she says. "Go on." She flips the page and her pen stands at attention. Eloise thinks of her pen as her 'little soldier'.

He goes back to dictating—and Eloise writes everything down—but the little distraction gnaws at her. She tries standing straighter—maybe she can see his belly that way—not that she wants to see his belly, but, well, she should be able to see his belly. She usually can. Her eyebrows raise and she kind of bobs as she tries to be her usual height. But it makes her back ache after a while, and it doesn't work anyway.

Mr. Perkins pauses—he rubs his thumb and forefinger on his chin whenever he does that, like a philosopher or something—Eloise plucks nervously at the waistline of her dress. She looks down absently.

Jesus Chri--! Eloise almost drops her pen. She has no feet! In fact, everything is gone from the top of her ankles down. Mr. Perkins starts dictating again and she tries to concentrate on the words, get them all down just so, but she keeps shifting from one leg to the other to see if she can feel her feet. No luck.

"Stop fidgeting," he says. "What's with you today?"

"Nothing Mr. P," Eloise says in a high, tight voice she can't quite cover up. "I think I've got it now." She reads the memo back to him. It is perfect.

Eloise clumps out of the office.

Eloise notices her feet are back sometime after lunch. Her ankles too. They

must have popped in while she was working at her desk. It's a good thing she was sitting down when that happened because her feet are also very tired. She takes her pumps off to give her feet the chance to breathe. Eloise sighs, leans back in her chair, and closes her eyes.

What was that all about? she wonders. There is definitely some kind of problem at work here. She sighs again. This kind of thing doesn't happen to Eloise every day.

"Eloise, dearest!" comes a voice from another part of the office.

Oh, no, she thinks. Not him. Not now.

But Jon comes right around the corner of the partition to her desk. "I didn't hear you doing anything, dear. . . . Do you think you could get this typed up ASAP?"

Eloise looks at the pile on her desk: another late night. I wish your uncle had never hired you, she thinks, but she says, "Sure thing. No problem."

Eloise reaches up her right hand for the papers but stops: her two middle fingers are gone.

"Are you okay dear?" Jon says, apparently not noticing the missing fingers.

"I. . . I'm fine," she says, taking the papers with her left hand.

"When do you need this?"

Jon looks at her again out of the corners of his eyes as he is leaving.

"As soon as you can get it out."

Eloise knows that means 'today'.

"Yes, yes. . . You said that once." She speaks so quietly he can't have heard. Anyway he's gone back down the hallway.

Eloise holds the papers in her left hand and looks at her right. The two fingers are still missing and that is going to make typing difficult.

But Eloise is a professional. She can work around these things.

She slips the first sheet into the typewriter.

Geoff Fuller

Genesis 2:25

It's just the desire
for nakedness
that keeps us
in love, rubbing
at dull layers
of clothes
shame
with an old
rag until the
lover, shiny
like a trophy,
replaces God.

Marci Rae Johnson

Adam and Eve Hid Themselves

We heard the voice
of God he was
walking, trees
bending at the
waist invisible
wind all fire and
light without heat
in the cool of the day

but darkness clung
to us, shadows
hanging from these
branches, trees
 like hands
clutched together
in the tangled moss.

Marci Rae Johnson

On One Hand

At the head of the bed
a litter of stuffed animals

In the mirror
breath stained silver-glass

Laurie examines
the lines in her irises

the blotches of mascara
on lashes

the lay of her skin
on her nose

Pulling over slip
and dress and sweater

she leaves
The door locks behind

Long is the walk
without a drivers license

She counts the completed steps
she takes to rehab

Kenneth P. Gurney

In the Fine Print of Happiness

For you to understand
you must be able to see
the love that is in
the folded square
of a white t-shirt
set neatly in a drawer
set upon others of its kind

Set so every week
in a repetition of small acts
done so nearly invisible
that you never see
the perspiration
the small complexities
the devotion to detail
or how fingers hands and arms
work together

As they work the tight spots
out of your shoulders
at the end of your day
cold beer always in the fridge
and videos at home
to quiet kids being kids

Kenneth P. Gurney