

TOUCHING BASE /

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## Musing on Flower Poems

(to muse comes from a word meaning "to stand with an open mouth")

Such roses may come out!  
Such thick thorns and scented petals  
blooming out of our tongues --  
it's hard to close the lips  
after a while -- even mulch  
can keep the jaw slack  
and the pen sifting, a pause  
here and there for the pruning shears,  
the show judges, the occasional  
problem with aphids. But such  
fragrant sounds: like spring

So we stand with our mouths open  
like fools, making our puns and gestures  
till a garden comes twisting out, all wild  
at first, maybe just budding --  
we lick and kiss it, breathing  
it back into our lungs and out again  
till the petals open and each is framed  
by green. Roses rest like pendants  
around our collar-bones and shoulders,  
like a braided chain of words that scratch  
and blossom. Shoots wind back in.

The fingers we use to place the vases  
are sprouting. If we gape long enough,  
the whole body turns to summer.

## PRISON TOWN

In fourth grade on the way to school,  
Billy Archuleta, whose dad was a con,  
found a cat in the ditch  
on third street. I remember  
its eyeball had been squeezed  
out, and rolled wetly over its black  
cheek, as Billy swung it around and around  
and around, his own head thrown back.

I had a crush on Mr. Martin,  
but Julie Kellerman and I pledged  
undying loyalty to each other,  
forsaking all others, twining our fingers  
into patterns only the two of us knew.

In fifth grade the Wilson boys,  
arsonists in the family tradition,  
would sit under the old railroad track,  
early, and spit chew at Diana Washington  
as she walked to school. Dianna was pretty,  
but she was allergic  
to everything, even grass.  
At my tenth birthday party, she sat  
carefully on a blanket  
while we chose sides, and watched.

In sixth grade Annette Johnson  
shaved her sister Twyla's eyebrows off,  
held her down and did it  
on Griffin street, almost on school grounds.  
Annette slept most of the time. Her mom  
was a hooker, so she stayed awake nights.

Then junior high and the bus,  
and kids from all over town;  
we found we were from the wrong school,

the one 'retards' and 'con's kids' went to --  
and everyone stopped talking to each other.

Maybe they knew it was happening.

Diana and Julie and I,  
all the guards' kids left them --  
Billy, the Johnsons, the Wilsons, the rest --  
behind, like kids do,  
relieved, doing what we're told,  
moving with the crowd.

TIRZA

(for Tirza Porat, the first Israeli civilian casualty  
of the Palestinian uprising that began December, 1987)

At 15, I was no innocent;  
knowing, itself, is enough,  
as my parents' parents said  
to the allies. How could we not be  
aware? We picnicked with guns.  
At 15 I was 25 years younger  
than my country which, although young  
itself, never pretended to be innocent.  
We had survived a holocaust.  
At 15 I was wary and coy, old enough  
to know soldiers are men  
like all men, and subject  
to girls and spring.  
Young enough to be smug  
like a baby who believes  
no one else really exists.  
At 15 I was very smart.  
I knew the guns could fire.  
I had heard Romam Aldubi  
brag, how he killed Arabs  
in Nablus, so they sent him home,  
and said it was army business.  
Those soldiers! I was almost their age.  
That morning, we saw the gun  
at Romam's side. We were not shocked.  
The hike was pleasant. We watched  
young Arab boys working the fields.  
We ate and laughed and sang.  
Then when the first stone landed,  
and Romam raised his rifle,  
I was not 15 any more.  
The Arabs came and tried  
to take the gun away and Romam  
screamed. I do not remember  
what age I became.

## LATE MAY ON THE COLORADO GRASSLANDS

Pale as all the pawnee grasslands,  
blue shades cling drily to their roots:  
wilderness fades, snapped in our hands;  
dust and prairie ants laying hold  
of this spring, bare and clean  
as unbreathed air. But now -- the press  
of a storm is coming in:  
the startled ripple of a bird  
just out of reach, a gathering  
of the breezes. The earth raises  
up a dry ground, blurring  
where the sky meets.  
We lean into the sex of rain,  
the little bouquet waiting  
by the low winter-carved bed of the plain,  
while long grass found deep in the dark  
mud of a mountain's thaw  
shifts slightly, opening the raw  
desert to the clouds.

## OUTSIDE THE HOSPITAL

Even the air is confused,  
pressing, hail clouds  
round as marbles in the sky.  
Off in the distance,  
a tornado builds  
a tunnel on its side  
ready to swing down and  
touch the earth to which  
it belongs: dust swirls.  
Balls of orange clouds  
stretch over and in --  
the motion a toss and turn  
like the poisonous insides  
of my father: the fevered  
sky, the thick of  
humid silence.

Mother and I stop  
in the parking lot,  
foot-bone jarring gravel  
under heart and eardrums:  
we're a magnet together,  
pulling the wind. Over us  
the evening lies pink and  
salmon in the sky.  
It is August, and the strip  
of azure behind the building,  
over the rolling sunset  
and the other side of the black  
cone which pulls closer  
to my father's bed,  
will soon give way  
to stars. In a few hours,  
the silence will break  
like the rain;



drops will spatter our cheeks,  
and the hospital staff  
will say they'll take care  
of everything.

So we climb back  
over the lack of bird  
songs or baby cries  
and over the giant  
stillness of doctors  
and their gravel remedies;  
We climb over that crackling  
quiet of nature's  
agreement that something  
is going to happen when  
everything on earth is alone.  
We'll climb into the tornado  
when it comes --  
or we would never  
be able to face the sky  
again, as it turns  
to night and the stars  
blink at the past  
coming toward them.

## RAIN

Stillness patters:  
Uphill from the river  
a little riff of water  
played like soft jazz.  
Cottonwood trees leaned  
over us, collected drops  
in their round leaves  
and spilled them all at once  
as we walked by, doing a half-step  
in the rain. Stones were smaller  
there along the creek:  
patterned in filtered sunlight,  
so smooth they looked translucent.  
At sixteen, the cadence  
of rain on water was still  
new to us. The color  
of everything was deeper.  
Little pools slid down  
the skin of your arm.  
The river rose up.  
There were no bird songs,  
only the songs of the water,  
making sand out of marbles,  
out of rocks, out of boulders.  
You pressed me up against  
the side of a tree, and we  
kissed, for the first time.  
Rain can be absolutely silent.  
Today I listen to it:  
on again, off again, watering  
the irises along the stone  
driveway of this building.  
That creek is way up  
in the mountains, rolling  
its tune to the river, still.

## The Map

There was a map of Vietnam  
above the television set, and mother  
said it's a war all right. We  
watched it over dinner, keeping  
track of it all as best we could.  
Then as Dad read  
the evening paper he'd say  
long day. It's been a long day.  
We'd wash all the ordinary things  
after supper, put away the potatoes  
and extra pork chops. Robert  
would snap at me with a dishtowel  
so I'd cry and he could get away.  
Mother made him stay. You  
do your duty, she said.  
No matter what. You were raised  
that way and don't forget.  
Later, during cop shows  
and homework and more dessert  
we would listen to Dad snore  
in his chair. Mother held on  
to his hand. He's a good man,  
she said. Your father.

When he couldn't breathe,  
and I was back from college  
for the summer and Robert  
was away, Mother didn't say  
anything. We watched  
the sky turn dark and light again  
and we put on masks  
when we went in to see him,

and we washed everything  
the nurses were afraid of.  
I guess we'll be all right,  
Dad said, when he'd fought it off.  
The doctors, amazed, wrote him  
up for possible future  
strategic maneuvers.  
They studied him like a map.

Then when mother  
got cancer, and I was away,  
Robert stayed, doing the dishes  
and rearranging the cupboards  
while he kept an eye on Dad.  
After the plateware,  
Robert filed the soup  
and the crackers  
in neat rows for reference  
in ascending order of taste.  
He said, when I called  
frantic from Kansas  
after the third surgery:  
It's like a war I guess,  
but as long as we keep  
track of each other  
and calm,  
we'll be all right.  
He said:  
The two of us learned  
early, you know, to do that.

## BATS

I was seven when we got rid  
of the bats that shared the walls  
of my attic room. The house was old,  
and hollow. It was theirs first.  
My family would sit on the porch at dusk  
and watch them fly out the window  
in great dark bursts. I thought  
they were birds. At night I'd sit  
in the low ledge of the window  
and look out at the moon  
checkering through the screen  
and tell myself what I'd be  
when I grew up. While I was  
asleep the bats would come back  
home. Call me crazy, but  
I liked having them there.  
Eventually my parents spent the money  
and got an expensive man  
to shoot crystal moth balls from a gun  
into the holes around the window.  
I wasn't allowed in the room for a week.  
Afterwards, I'd watch the moon  
from the window and wonder  
about the future, but  
it wasn't ever the same.

## GRANMA

1

blue, bird's blue  
shiny china:  
your cup of old  
blue bone, shiny  
bone of flowers  
on blue of steam  
and morning  
blue, scallop-bone  
of china's gold  
rim and rose,  
the bone of roses  
on blue.

2

You give me  
your bone, too,  
with this cup  
of scallop soft  
petals on blue  
china blue. Inside  
your lace of skin  
is scalloped rose:  
the bone-colored  
judge of tea,  
the white of bone  
free of tannin,  
so deep  
it sits in blue,  
the lovely cream  
of bone for tea  
at sunrise,  
lies budding,  
your bone.  
Your rose bone.

3

So true -  
no glaze but days  
and days of mornings  
filled with tea  
could free that rose,  
that open-work  
on the handle.  
The fit so perfect  
in the saucer,  
the blue, blue, blue  
of that scalloped  
saucer to sit,  
in the after-  
mornings, the delicate  
bone, the champagne  
of blue, the silver  
of gold  
of your cup, your  
cup of bone,  
the bird's-blue.

## LIGHT FABLE

Darkness loves the moon. Long ago she knew the world without him. Now he has become a part of her Self. Every night she drapes her voice across earth and invites him, her Heart, to view the world with songs and scenes the daylight doesn't know. Her air is different from lighttime air.

One deep night, when Cold had settled on the part of earth they shared, Darkness discovered that the moon cared for another.

"Snow is a lovely woman," he said, as they studied the lacy cilia iced onto a fallen twig on the skin of the water, the length of it smoothing bubbles flat and out into the open stream, "because she rolls to fill each curve of earth, and rounds down to her edges."

"And what's that prove?" she glistened. The light from two new stars startled out into shining air. "She's cold, the color of mourning. Marred by drifts past."

"I know. But see, she never melts in moonlight. She fills in footprints."

The pines began to sway. Darkness examined tracks by streamside. "Wind moves her," she countered. "But my shadow is the voice of air. I keep hardness on her."

"You fade," he replied, adjusting. His voice was dry. She breathed a clearing into the distance. Frost held smoothed stones a moment. Water paused.

"Such stillness!" He hovered. The crescent of his being on that specific night reflected on the stream. Moon pondered on the differences of sun and stars. "We share our time with flakes and droplets. The fragrance of our air becomes their form, the falling snow a veil."

"They change!" she cried, and deepened into midnight. "Not me -- I call out for you every star in vision. Each patch of earth we share, we share together. In Sun's leftover heat, on the ocean's careless distance, there is always us together!" An unsure breeze; a swirl of wings in flight.

In silence: he answered "I change." A woods owl crunched pale fur on white expanse. Steam rose. Darkness moaned away another star for her offence.

"We are each other," she said, gone soft. "Night. We need no snow or brook. Existence takes our breath alone, distance and the close of lightness."

Paled clouds parted. The stars moved on. Darkness stayed close to the rounded world. Moon reflected little, where he went.



On a gentle evening, Moon viewed the world through lightness. Sun across from him, facing his arc in the corner of the sky. Deer broke the roundness of the snowbank, lapping at the flow of streamwater. Long shadows interspersed the pines.

"Brother," called Sun, waning, "Is Night so different?"

There was study. Sun began to paint a huge abstract in the clouds. Darkness seeped slowly in around the edges. "Yes," answered Moon. "There is mystery."

Darkness called quietly from the forest. "I hid the mud from you." The north star took position by the gray-most cloud.

"I'll come back again in daylight," Moon answered. "Though the colors are not mine -- their light is bolder. Darkness sings a warmer song, while my light is her only light."

Darkness reached up to the breaking clouds. Stars appeared, tentative by the moonlight.

"We are each other," Moon conceded to his lover, relieved of the blinding bright clarity of his brother. "Night is both of us."

She reached up to embrace him.

## AQUARIUS

1

There are fishermen who pull stars from the ocean,  
who gut them on deck while they steam  
breathe the scaled-down light of fish sides.  
Little mica slices lodge in the cracks of the hands.  
No curse or grunt of a sailor can hide  
moonlit silver on the grease as the angled  
knife slides down and to the right:  
deft plunges between feather-flesh. We eat  
the sky. Pull it through our teeth, drop it  
down our tongues. Bits of nebulae on  
the plate. Our gravity drains the ocean.

2

So much is reflected. Everything viewed  
through the microscope is already old. When  
the suns glow with travel on the water  
of this world, it turns beneath us  
in great arcs. Fish soak in starjuice.  
The moon hovers over boats. We bask  
on nightly hillsides, or gather rock-like  
shells on the beaches. Our feet sink;  
sand swells between our toes. We open  
our palms to the sky in the delta:  
our dish for a rippling universe.

The Practice  
(For Karen Genoff)

the brush of  
toes to wood  
heel last and  
five turn six  
down seven  
the chalk of  
grit on soles  
and eight up  
one plié and  
Two she  
centers in her  
dancers those  
three swirls  
rebound and  
four with  
in those swirls  
as five in sound  
the time  
down six is  
found in neck-  
romancers whose  
eight arms un-  
furl around  
she's one  
circular inside  
two outside  
three down to  
brush four of  
toes to wood  
heel last and  
five

## SPIDER DREAMS

It is time. She cannot hide from sleep  
forever. Thickly she pulls herself  
inside, to find a smooth, hard  
slightly dusty surface in the dark  
-- like the backside of a dresser.

She lies down against its side  
and throws out all that is left  
of herself, everything she's saved  
up, around her, and it sticks  
as always to the wall.  
She gets it out, all out:  
all the loops and patterns  
she's ever wanted.

She dreams she's caught  
herself, buzzed into the web,  
given in, put to sleep as she's wrapped.

Nothing but a husk now, she falls away  
as all the rest have,  
in the only spider dream there is:  
of nothing left to weave, to trap, to wind.  
She stretches out her legs and  
dreams, into the little ones  
who break open the nest and swing  
down, and to the side, and out the window.

### The End of the Season

Curling up at the edges,  
a summer petal fades  
under your awning -- there,  
suspended pink to peach  
to cream-pale, held  
next to the crease dust  
of yellowed worn paint.  
The breeze makes us  
notice it in the old web.

There are strands  
in our bodies  
that somehow cling to the barest  
touch of bark or skin  
or color of summer --  
The breeze changes  
depending on where we set up  
our sticky, invisible lives.  
We all string  
these things behind us,  
we weave like violins  
the music in our arms,  
our legs, in our sensitive feet.  
We wait for shadows  
like that to make us  
known to each other.  
And we're found out --  
even hidden here, in autumn,  
under the corner of your porch.

Dust

(for my grandfather, Carl "Billy" Roberds, 1908-1980)

All of it. Stones  
and grass, flowers spiked  
by wires, random colors muted  
by the length of plain and  
sky. Everything small, washed  
out, watercolor children  
in the churchyard. The sun  
dry, empty.  
But, your horses, Charles  
Russell, Jesus your savior,  
all are one again: May your sleep  
on the trail be full  
of stars.

## SPRING

In the campus creekbed  
flows a rocksheet, pale  
as the ice that covered it  
this winter. Still-frozen  
algae wakes tendrils  
from cracks, sunshine  
reaching the roots somehow.

On the outdoor mall  
a magician charms  
bras and playing cards  
out of volunteers --  
his tassles waving gold,  
he bends his purple sleeve,  
pulls Ohhhs from children.

This March wind ruffles  
those tassles, his beard,  
the little waves falling on still  
parts of the creek in wan  
spring sun, blue reflected  
on ice under the bridge,  
seeping away like winter.

Every Spring is the same:  
the player in the park,  
music in the distance;  
students watching captive  
water come alive, green  
out of pebbles, cold  
flowing magically out to sea.

## JULY

Pores are the secret of skin  
(as anyone made of clay will tell you) -  
I have a glazed bowl on my shelf  
that can only hold. Breathing,  
it says, is secondary.  
When in July, as we lie together, and  
our sweat keeps us together -  
when our scent shares even our  
deepest moisture - we are one  
alive being, porous and melted,  
tongues and fingers fused. In the kiln  
heat of our bodies, there is no bisque  
or breakage or glaze; but we glisten.



the rubdown

while we notice  
the strong back  
of a man, mineral  
oil as it slides  
under palms,  
candlelight  
smoothing skin  
as much as darkness,

while pressure  
moves with us  
from the inside  
shoulder muscles  
to neck  
to the blades  
to ribs  
to spleen  
to kidney,  
the sides of his  
body, back  
up the spine,  
the shoulders  
again, knead  
again, we notice

his man-scent  
of evening,  
the skin  
of this man: and  
under outstretched  
wrists of our  
woman's arms,  
we knowingly  
mold him,  
we carefully  
shape his rest,  
we lovingly  
slide him into  
our own dreams.

## SATURDAY AFTERNOON IN MANHATTAN, KS

There's nothing wrong with this little town --  
the folks are drawn  
like American Gothic: except  
smiling, with no pitchfork.  
The family having a picnic,  
their hot dogs roasted on clothes wires,  
has never heard of Grant Wood.  
The colors are right, it's spring  
and green and blue in giant swaths  
across the landscape.  
Bicyclists are out in force,  
pedaling geometrically. Synthetically  
smooth music drifts across  
the park, something pop  
and flat, easily lip-synched.  
Church steeples are everywhere.  
Nobody here wants to leave.  
If this were a painting  
all the faces would be washed  
out in the sunshine that shades  
everything green, then blue,  
the dark places for eyes and mouths  
smudged artfully, the whole scene  
placid, universal, quaint,  
as the bicyclists go round and round  
the town, trapped and happy.

## MYTH

We've become too literal:  
we can't take a joke  
or a pill or a chair  
without prodding, sniffing  
like scientists:  
there's a story  
about a man who kissed  
a statue and it came  
to life -- well, what then?  
Did she tell him  
about his bad breath,  
the way his mother  
folded towels was wrong,  
that he "smothered" her?  
Or was she, new to the world, not  
concerned about hygiene or habits  
or her own dull prospects?  
Want to know?  
I can see her: poking at herself,  
not trusting a mirror,  
kneading the thin skin  
of her arms, angry  
at being made real.



## Say Amen

Brother Roger liked his church because it was his. His church, his congregation, his sermons. When he'd worked at the plant he'd had to take orders, but here he was his own boss. He thanked God every night in his prayers that he didn't have to answer to anybody. He had a good congregation. Yes, a good group. They liked his style.

When Brother Roger called "Amen" to the congregation he expected an "Amen" back and never a snicker from some unsuspecting visitor. This was God, after all, that he was talking about. "Oh, my Brothers and Sisters!" he would raise the call from the pulpit. His thin young body would begin to vibrate, and the Bible in his hand would shake, and he would let his passion for the Word, spoken by -- Yes, he would think to himself, his own voice -- carry through to the congregation. "My Brothers and Sisters we are here to find JESUS today! Say Amen!" And the congregation would say in unison "AMEN!" And he would nod to them and say "YEA!" and they would say "YEA, Brother," and he would point his Bible at the confused -- maybe snickering -- faces in the back and say, "I call upon the LORD to save your soul," which would shut them up. He was awfully good, usually, at shutting people up when he wanted to. He had God and he had style, an unbeatable combination.

Brother Roger used to wear just any old jeans around, but since he became a preacher he wore only the best. When he'd been growing up his mother, God rest her soul, used to tell him to always dress up when the preacher came over, and now that he was a preacher himself, even though she was gone he didn't want to disappoint her. He figured she was watching. He tried to always wear a white shirt, or at the very least a clean colored one, though it was hard in the summer months to stay looking saintly. He gave it his best shot, though. He never wanted to disappoint anybody.

A couple moved to the city from Texas and the wife called Brother Roger at home. Her voice was low and firm.

"Brother Roger," she said, "we want to move our membership to your church."

"Why of course," he replied. He always got a little nervous when someone he hadn't personally converted came into the fold. He was grateful she'd warned him. "I hope you enjoy the sermon Sunday morning."

He sweat over that sermon. He wasn't highly educated, but he liked to think his style made up for that. When he preached to new folks, though, he tried to make the best impression possible.

That Sunday morning was a day so warm the sunlight was shimmery on the sidewalks. As the cars pulled into the dusty parking lot and the mothers in the basement clucked over no air-conditioning in the Sunday-School rooms, Brother Roger checked a mirror and thought about tying a headband on until the sermon, because the sweat was so bad on his face. He was in the office of the church, a tiny wood-panel lined room that the people passed on their way to the classrooms. He heard a man sneeze in the doorway behind him.

"Brother Roger," said the woman who had called him the day before. He recognized her voice although it seemed even deeper than it had on the phone. He turned to greet the couple. "We came a trifle early to meet you. This is my husband Jim." She gestured to a very tall man in the doorway who was sniffing into his hankie. Brother Roger knew Jim could see the little bald patch on the top of his head. He went to shake Jim's hand. The woman stepped back so he could reach past her and he smelled how clean she was. He was conscious of the sweat marks ringing his armpits.

"Brother Jim," he said, pumping the man's hand, which was big and a little clammy. "I'm mighty pleased, mighty pleased to meet you and your little

wife, here. How do you like our city?"

Jim sniffed. He looked at Brother Roger like he was sizing him up. "We got told about you and your work, Brother," he answered. "We was admiring how much you done in such little time." Jim glanced around the office, and flicked back a lock of his hair, which was dark and a little over-long.

Brother Roger stepped back and the wife eased back out the door to stand by her husband. The heat was beginning to flatten the careful curls by her ears. She held her Bible tightly under one arm, next to her side. "Where did you study?" she asked him, smiling slightly.

Brother Roger stiffened a little. "I started out a lay preacher," he said. "The good Lord has just been using me as He will, and I haven't had time yet for formal school. You could say the Bible's been my only teacher."

"Only one you really need," answered Jim. He started a nervous chuckle, but sneezed again, barely able to get the hankie to his nose in time. Mrs. Hatch looked at Brother Roger. Her eyes seemed to narrow a bit. Brother Roger thought about his shaking hands with Jim, and about germs. Then he thought about how close she held her Bible. She said, "You teach the adult class."

"Yes," answered Roger, though she hadn't said it like a question, and got his Bible. He closed his eyes and thought about Jesus for a quick second on the way down the hall, as he always did in moments of nervousness.

Before the sermon Brother Roger introduced them to the rest of the congregation. "Mr. and Mrs. Hatch wish to move their letter of membership here from Texas and I say 'Praise the Lord.'"

"PRAISE THE LORD," they responded. Jim sneezed. Mrs. Hatch smiled shyly and looked at Brother Roger like she was a little girl and he was her daddy. With his fingers Brother Roger had tried to comb some hair over his bald spot but didn't have enough and it was all slick on his head anyway.

"All in favor of the Hatches say 'Aye,'" he said.

"AYE," They answered. There were no nay votes. Brother Roger mentioned that the ladies of the church should do something next week to welcome the new members. Mrs. King, the busybody, stood up and proposed a potluck Wednesday night. They all voted on that. The Hatches went and sat down on the front pew. Mrs. King said "Praise the Lord." The congregation answered "PRAISE THE LORD."

Brother Roger gave Mrs. King a stern look, and Mr. King a sterner one, and looked at his watch resting on the pulpit. He didn't like to wear a watch that they could see because he didn't want them to know that he knew when he went overtime. He cleared his throat. Jim sneezed, and blew his nose noisily into the sodden hankie.

"My Brothers and Sisters," began Brother Roger. He picked up his Bible and opened to a page about halfway through. He hefted the open Bible in his hands. "THIS is why we're here today: We are here to hear the words of JESUS today!" He slammed the book shut and into the pulpit in one smooth motion. "Today we will talk about prayin'."

By the time the sermon ended Brother Roger wasn't sure if he would be able to bear the Hatches. Instead of shufflers or snickerers he now had a sneezer. Whenever he would call "Amen," he would get a great "AMEN" back, with a sneeze. In fact, he decided, the sneezes were timed -- were aimed at the very dramatic moments in his sermon. As he called for the congregation to stand for the final prayer and then the closing hymn, he blinked at the salt from the sweat on his forehead. He was glad this morning was over.

He stood at the doorway shaking hands with the folks as they left.

"Brother Roger, we would be pleased if you came to dinner with us," he heard Mrs. Hatch behind him.

He saw Mrs. King working her way towards him; he knew that she would



try to corner him into letting her do the solo next Sunday. Mrs. Hatch was looking at him with big brown eyes as deep as gravy on Thanksgiving, and her cotton dress held a little spot of sweat right where her breasts met. He thought about her husband. He thought about how tall Jim was, and how short she was, and how he was going bald.

"ACH-oo, ACH-oo, A-A-ACHshshsh..." Jim sputtered right behind him. "It's too hot a day to fix for yourself." His voice was gruff.

The Hatches had rented a little house about a mile from the church, right off the highway leading into town. There was a lot of corn growing around, and dogwood trees, and Roger was glad that he sat in the backseat of the car while Mrs. Hatch drove. Jim sneezed and sneezed. She didn't seem to notice or mind. Roger noticed the dimples in her elbow as she shifted the gears in the little hatchback. Her fine hair had lost all its curl and was clinging limply to the back of her neck. Brother Roger was grateful for the breeze from the open windows, but worried that his own hair would get messed up. They had insisted on driving him out here, before he could change. "You can come back with us tonight for Training Union," Mrs. Hatch had said. Her round, pinkish mouth had pouted so slightly he had to say all right.

"Nice little place you got here, Brother Jim," said Brother Roger as he ducked out of the car. He looked around at the few starving weeds in the bare dirt lawn and listened to the cars whizzing by just a few feet behind him. "What brings you out from Texas?"

"Just testing my luck, I guess," answered Jim. He wiped his nose. He studied Brother Roger with eyes that were red-lined and tired. "You want some ice water?"

"Sure."

"Mandy keeps some cold all the time in the 'frigerator." He went on in. Brother Roger followed him, noticed a small mirror on the wall next to the

door and did a quick check.

Mrs. Hatch -- Mandy -- came out of the kitchen with hotpad mitts on. She had already twisted her hair into a tight bun and looked noticeably cooler even though he could feel the extra heat from the kitchen boiling out to the hall where he stood, careful now not to look at the mirror.

"The roast is done," she said. "I put it in before we left this morning so we wouldn't have to feel the heat." She wiped a mitt across her forehead. She batted her eyes at him. He was only startled a second.

Brother Roger heard a sneeze and followed it to the little dining room, where Jim was already laying out the dishes. He looked at Brother Roger with a sheepish grin. He was a big man, but Brother Roger noticed for the first time that he was shaking slightly, clinking the silver and ruffling the napkins.

"My wife, Brother Roger," he said, kind of low, but like he had phlegm in his mouth so Brother Roger had to lean over the table, "she means a lot to me. A man tries to make his wife happy." Jim sighed. He looked at Brother Roger like he was going to spit. "You've never been married, have you, Preacher?"

"No," answered Brother Roger. He didn't see any reason to get so defensive about setting a table. "I'm only thirty."

In a couple of minutes Mrs. Hatch brought bread and butter to the table and dished out the roast and potatoes and carrots that had cooked all morning. Jim sloshed the ice water down by his place and brought over a box of tissues to get him through the dinner.

"Those allergies are pretty rough," commented Brother Roger, sympathetically.

"Will you say Grace, Preacher?" said Mrs. Hatch, folding her hands by her face. She narrowed her eyes to look at him as steam rose slowly all around her. By this time Jim's sneeze did not come as a surprise. Brother Roger bent

his head.

"Father," he intoned in the voice that had got him through so many bad spots in the past, "we thank you for the bounty you have laid before us, for the wisdom you have shown us in giving us this Day and grant, Lord, that we may do your will in our actions and thoughts. Amen."

"Amen."

"My Daddy was a preacher," she said as she passed him the potatoes. She was clearly proud. "He was the preacher of the biggest Southern Baptist church in Childress, Texas."

"A fine man," said Jim. He was slicing up the roast with real zest. "Her Daddy could keep people in their places." He nodded at Brother Roger.

"He believed in scholarship," she said. "he studied and studied that Bible."

Brother Roger always got uncomfortable with this subject. His back came up. "The call to preach takes more than book-learning," he said. "I preach what I think ought to be said instead of lettin' some commentator talk through me. The Lord tells me what to say. I don't need no school to teach me how to minister to my church."

Mrs. Hatch's eyes seemed bigger than ever. Brother Roger knew that he was blushing, but hoped they'd take it as a sign of the heat. Jim was sitting quiet, watching them. His eyes panned from one to the other like he was waiting for one of them to start a fight, or leave the table. After a long pause, Mrs. Hatch dipped her head back to the meal. "How long you been preachin', Brother Roger?" she asked, like regular conversation.

Brother Roger looked at her. He wished her hair was down. He forced himself to relax, pick up his fork. He smiled at Jim, who had narrowed his eyes. "Almost a year now," he answered. "And I've been blessed by startin' in a fine place, with fine people. One day I was just prayin' about what to do with my life -- I'd been laid off at the plant -- and I was feelin' so low, when

the Lord pointed me here. He closed the window and opened a door, you might say." He always felt better when he thought about how blessed he was. "And I been doin' a fine job of preachin', if you don't mind my sayin' so."

"Why mind?" answered Jim. He shoveled in a mouthful of carrots. His full head of hair flopped forward. "A person can say most anythin'. To my mind, the actin' is the test." He began sawing at his roast. "Everybody gets tested eventually, don't they, Preacher?" he asked, glancing at his wife. "O'course, we knew your record when we came here. You look to be as upstandin' as we all should be."

"Well, thank you, Brother Jim," answered Brother Roger. He began to feel a bit reassured about his style.

When the meal was through Brother Roger insisted he help with the dishes. It wasn't as though he liked to do dishes, in fact he didn't really feel it was a man's place to try to do housework, but she looked so frail, he decided; she looked so frail and fragile that her wrists were almost see-through, so she shouldn't do them on her own.

She poured a big sinkful of suds and gave him a cloth to wipe with. Jim stayed to put things away when Brother Roger finished drying them. The kitchen didn't seem to have any air in it at all, as though they were all three swimming around like the plates and serving spoons. When she handed him the first glass he noticed that her fingers were calloused, and around her fingernails was red and flaking skin. But the back of her hands and her forearms were so very white and smooth, like just-squeezed milk, that he couldn't help but wonder about the rest of her under that cotton dress. Jim began to sneeze again. And again. He went to the bathroom for a roll of toilet paper to blow his nose with. When he left the room she turned to him and leaned her elbow on the sink, almost in the wavy suds. She wiped her right hand, wet from the dishwater, over her breast, and suddenly he could see the

outline of a nipple standing up under the cotton.

"My husband doesn't like to leave me alone in a room with another man," she said. "But a preacher would understand, wouldn't he?"

Brother Roger stood there, holding the plate and towel, noticing the way her hair was falling back down, around her face. He thought about how he was taller than she was. "Sweet Jesus," he said, and he was under the current, he felt himself pushing toward her with the weight of the whole ocean that whirled up into his brain, all he could see was her little mouth, and her brown eyes and her nipple pointing up at him and he bent forward.

"Mandy!"

He heard it, gruff and nasal and angry, and he dropped the plate, it fell and fell. Jim was in the doorway. He came in like slow motion, his arms outstretched. He took her cheeks in his palms, like he was going to kiss her, but instead he pressed, and pressed, while his own face contorted with pain. It seemed he was trying to crush her face in. Roger watched him crush her, watched him press her, waited for the plate to sound crashing on the floor. She flailed out and grabbed at his arm and Brother Roger came to.

"Stop it, stop it!" he yelled then. He pushed back at Jim's arms. Without seeming to notice Roger at all, Jim fell away from her, sneezing and coughing and sobbing all at once. He put the palms of his hands into his eye sockets. He staggered back. She leaned against the sink, put her hands on her cheeks where his had been. She looked at him for just a second, then she grabbed at Roger.

"You wanted it, didn't you?" she whispered at him fiercely. "I know you did. They all do." Brother Roger tried to back up, but she had hold of his shirt. He gaped down at her.

"You promised me," muttered Jim. "You promised me . . ."

"You should have known better," she said to her husband. "Testin' me like

that, self-righteous bastard." She looked at Roger. "Don't expect I'll be sorry," she spit the words at him. "Though I promised I wouldn't do it to another preacher." She smiled, almost coy. "We left Texas after I did them all, all I could find. I guess he thought you'd be different." She smoothed down his shirt, her damp hands seeming to be right on his skin. He jerked back and hit the sink.

Roger steadied himself against the counter. He looked at Jim, who was crying silently to himself. He looked at her, the steam rising up to him like it was smoke, from all around her, from the whole room. He thought about all the work he'd done on that sermon yesterday, about praying. He closed his eyes briefly, but he couldn't clear his mind to think about Jesus. She laughed, softly.

"You should have known better," she murmured. She went over and put her arms around her husband. "You can go now," she said.

"I --" he said. He looked at the shattered plate on the floor. He shook his head, stepped over the glass and let himself out of the house. The air seemed almost cool. He stood still a moment and listened to the cooing noises of Mrs. Hatch, soothing her husband; and to the cars speeding by on the highway. By the time he walked back to town, he thought, he'd have figured out what to do.

## May

Her name was May, she was twelve years old, and she was God's own girl. These were the important facts of her life, that everybody knew. But she didn't tell anyone that God spoke to her, too; May knew they wouldn't believe her if she said so, and she knew somebody might tell her daddy. May's daddy was a religious man, but he wouldn't put up with any tom-foolery, which is what he called it when her mother and then she and her little brother went around saying they'd be missionaries if it wasn't for something else, like being too young or too old. When they talked like that her daddy would throw down his paper and say, "Just stop with that tom-foolery, woman; I've a good mind to have the preacher talk to you," and her mother would hush May and her brother and bring Daddy some more coffee, and then go into the kitchen and rattle pans.

May's talks with God didn't come while she was praying, she tried that sometimes for hours but He wouldn't come to her then. No, he came when she was trying to get to sleep at night, and kept her up; or He came while she was getting ready for school in the mornings, and made her late. She didn't blame Him for this, of course, after all He was God and surely He knew what he was doing. She figured God wanted to teach her humility by choosing such inopportune times for conversation. One morning while the radio was on and she was combing her long brown hair in front of the mirror she heard clear as day: "May, you are going to be My missionary." She paused a moment in her combing. She looked in the mirror to see if someone were there but she knew better because God had spoken right into her mind. "Why me, Lord?" she had asked, although already in her there was a little thrill of pride because she

knew why. "You are going to be My missionary to foreign lands," He answered, "and bring the unredeemed to the light of Jesus."

He didn't say any more. But she was made late anyway, because she'd waited by the mirror, combing and combing, waiting for Him to come back, squinting at herself and her hair and trying to look like a missionary ought to. Her hair hung past her waist; it had never been cut, like her daddy and the preacher said was proper. The other girls her age in school were wearing makeup now, even though it was a Christian school, but May was glad for it, because her abstaining would make her look more holy, besides it being the law her daddy made. She waited there and studied herself until her mother came and got her: "You'll be late for the bus, honey!" Her mother had told her, and shook May a little by the shoulder as she followed her down the stairs. "Don't be so lazy."

At night she would sit in the moonlight where it streamed blue from the window onto the bottom left-hand corner of her bedspread. She'd curl her knees up to her chin and make speeches that she'd whisper to the night time about why she believed in Jesus and how she would save men's souls. She'd whisper and whisper for hours and sometimes God would come and say to her: "May, I want you to be Mine." She would know, then, when He was coming because in the dark there would come a shine like silver just beyond the window-light's reach, and she knew there must be angels now to greet Him with her. She would rock back and forth on the bedspread, rubbing her legs up against the wooden foot of the bed as she moved, trying to think of something else so He wouldn't change His mind about coming. Finally she'd hear it, starting in the back of her head and growing in loudness: "May will be My missionary." She would sit still then in the angel light with her eyes closed and hear it over and over: "May will be Mine."



She didn't spend much time with other people. Her brother Billy was just going on the fourth grade level and didn't know much except hymns and how to pick a tune on the piano, so she didn't pay much attention to him, though she was proud in a distant way. Her daddy didn't want her getting any strange ideas from folks that weren't like their own, so she only talked to the other girl from her own church that went to school at Liberty Baptist, but that other girl, Shelley, was dull and couldn't even read the Bible without stumbling over words. May was careful to never even look at the boys. There were Christian children from all over town at Liberty Baptist, but only five of them went to her particular church, which was held in the basement of Brother Joseph's home a short ways out of town. Brother Joseph had three children but none of them were old enough to talk to yet and he'd sworn to teach them at home anyway when they reached the age. So May didn't really have anyone to talk to but God and her parents. Actually, she wouldn't know what to say to anybody else anyway, she was always tongue-tied in front of strangers. She read as much as she could of the books her schoolteachers and the preacher picked out for her, and snuck some books about Africa and Asia on the side, so she'd be prepared.

She wondered sometimes, looking up from a book in her little cubicle at the school, what she would say if God came and talked to her while someone else was around. She touched her fingers across the little poster of a flower and a puppy that she had up in her cubicle -- the students all worked at different "levels" so they didn't sit in desks and hear a teacher talk but taught themselves from "packets" -- and she wondered if when she was a missionary God would have her baptize people and speak to them in tongues. In her church only men could do those things. But she had only heard of God speaking to men, except for Mary, Jesus' mother, and the Mary at the sepulchre, so she, May,

must be special. If God came and talked to her while the preacher was around she would study and see if he could hear, because the preacher was the only one she personally knew whom God had spoken to.

She didn't want to talk to the preacher about God's talking to her because she knew what he'd say to her, that it was the devil because God talks only to those He has ordained and He only ordains men. May had heard her parents say of the preacher that he wasn't ordained either, that he'd gone from lay-preaching to full-time when God had spoken to him to do so. Her mother didn't like the preacher and said to her daddy he was ignorant. May didn't like to admit it to herself, actually, but she didn't really like the preacher either. He never would let anybody else speak his mind, without interrupting.

\* \* \*

I suppose you think I'm some kind of crackpot talking about Jesus all the time, but I'm not, I'm a man same as you and I've got the same troubles as anybody else keeping house and home together. I've had my tribulations. I just try to see the Godly side of things, that's all. I wouldn't say this to anybody else but sometimes I wonder whether I'm even doing the right and honest thing being a preacher. It's certainly not gravy, I can tell you that. I hold services in a half-completed basement and the plate never brings in more than twenty dollars a Sunday -- just enough to cover my expenses -- well, once I brought in forty, but that was Easter and that only rolls along once a year. I'm a normal man. I think of these things. I just have to keep up appearances, you understand, in front of the flock. I'm not a hypocrite. I'm a leader.

What I have are thirty souls, all told, counting the young ones. Thirty that come faithfully, rain or snow, that tell me their troubles, that lean on my comfort. I asked God what he wanted of me one day, and this is what he gave

me. I used to preach to a hundred at a time, sometimes more, when I was just a lay-preacher and filled in for congregations on odd Sundays. When I started up on my own, did any of them follow me? No. Just the Tuckermans, and between us we've brought in and kept the others.

The Tuckermans, those are wonderful people: Brother Earle works out of his own garage, and he brought in his partner, Joseph, who is indispensable to the Church. And then there's Sister April, a sweet woman but she's almost too devout -- you know she'd be a nun if she were catholic. Of course she'd never think such a thing, God bless her soul, she knows the catholic are heathens as much as Africans. She's one of those, you know, who would just go off the deep end if it weren't for the church. And Earle, of course, keeps a firm hand on her so she don't go too wild-eyed. It's a chore sometimes, he tells me; she's got her own ideas.

With the little money we have, we can't save too many souls at once, you understand. Earle and April, they have two children. The boy has such a musical talent -- I can't wait until he's old enough to play for the congregation -- of course by that time we'll be larger and can afford a building and a better piano. He's a quiet boy, and very religious. He was one of my first saved.

Well, there's a daughter, yes, but she's odd. May don't talk to anybody. She's pretty enough, I suppose -- every girl's pretty at that age -- but she just reads and reads and never looks up enough to show you the color of her eyes. Earle's proud of her, you can see it when he looks at her, but he never says it. He keeps his women in good order.

You know, I suppose it's not right for me to say, being a preacher, but it seems sometimes like May ought to go to public school for awhile -- just till she learns to be a little more open around folks. One Tuesday evening I was

visiting over at the Tuckerman's and she ducked upstairs right after supper, almost like she was hiding something upstairs and was afraid she'd be found out. Earle looked at me and said no, she wasn't in trouble, he said, "May's not much of a talker, but she's bright." Then along about ten, just as I was leaving, she come downstairs in her nightshirt and just looked at me, bold as you please. Just looked and looked at me, like it was study. I said, "May, can I do something for you? Do you want to talk?" And she just smiled and said excuse her and left. I tell you it was strange. So I know she's not shy. Well, her parents where a little flabbergasted too.

I have a son, you know, who's thirteen. He says she's smart as a whip but never does anything but read and look far-away. He says she doesn't know anybody else is alive. If he weren't so young I'd say he has a crush on her, but even though she's from a good Christian family she's just too strange for my boy. Joshua is a fine son, even if he's not too bright, and I figure one day he may work for her daddy at the garage, but not as a son-in-law. A man shouldn't have to pay too high a price for financial security, unless it's God has called him to it.

\* \* \*

There was music, and then there was the awful old piano in Brother Joseph's basement. Billy Tuckerman knew them apart. He knew he couldn't expect to make real music on those keys, but it was a start. He learned that "C" wasn't at the "C" key on Brother Joseph's piano but at the "B-flat" and he was able, for the most part, to take it from there. He taught himself the hymns from an old hymnal that his daddy had taken from the First Redeemed Southern Baptist church where they used to attend, and he was working on teaching himself new songs from the book that he didn't already know how they sounded. This was difficult, because the piano was so bad, but Billy's ear

was good and he was getting better at faking the keys. Brother Joseph's wife didn't mind him playing down here because he kept an eye on her twins, who when church services weren't being held would be set up in a portable playpen next to the piano. He would yell for Sister Ruth if one bashed the other but otherwise he didn't bother them and they left him alone to his hymnal.

Billy didn't know much of God except that He was responsible for the prettiest music in the world, and that was enough. And Billy knew that God had made his sister, too; and that was enough.

\* \* \*

May was reading her Geography during the afternoon study time when Shelley passed a paperback book with a pasted cover to her. Their cubicles were next to each other. "Read this," Shelley hissed at her. "And don't show anybody else."

May couldn't see a title on the book so she opened it up, carefully, to the frontpage. Dirty Girls, Part II, she read. She wanted to say to Shelley, "what is this?" but she didn't want to talk and bring attention to herself so she began to read it. She read two pages. Then she closed her eyes tight and squinted them to hopefully block out what her mind was seeing. This is it, May thought, this is what I've been sheltered from. Thank you God, she said silently. Now please let me forget this.

She passed the book back to Shelley without saying a word. "Don't you want to read more?" Shelley whispered loudly. "Couldn't you just die?"

May blushed and felt the red crawling on her skin. Shelley winked at her. "I've got it hid," she gestured at the book and showed May how it fit under a slot in the bottom of her cubicle desk. "When you want it you can look at it but only when nobody will see you."

That afternoon when May got home she hid herself upstairs and wouldn't

come down until her mother called her to peel potatoes. She couldn't bear the way her mother looked at her. Her mother said: "May, honey, what's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost, baby." Her mother turned on the radio and May tried to lose herself in the music, but it was hard, because the family listened to the "easy listening" channel and the lyrics would slide past her ears like the skin off the potato she was peeling. She poured cold water over her hands in the sink, but she couldn't stop feeling flushed over her whole body. God didn't come to reassure her.

After that Shelley began writing notes during study hour and sending them to May, secret notes; and she called May her best friend. May never answered her notes, but still they came. Shelley told May how she got the book, that her uncle had given it to her. And she told May that she liked Joshua, the preacher's son, and also Steve, a boy that went to the Foursquare Church where everybody spoke in tongues all the time and they had healings every Sunday. She told May she'd seen her own mother and father fooling around once when they didn't know she was looking. She didn't ask May any questions that might require an answer, only questions like "Couldn't you just die?" and "Gross out, huh?"

\* \* \*

Billy didn't like May's new friend, and he didn't really think May ought to like her either, but he wasn't going to say anything to May about it unless he was asked. He knew May wouldn't ask, but he hoped maybe his mother would. Billy thought Shelley looked fake all the time, like words put into songs that didn't really belong with the music. Her hair was short and curled and blonder than necessary, and she wore blue eyeshadow even though she wasn't supposed to. He didn't trust Shelley at all.

He watched Shelley take May's arm during lunch break and whisper to her

and giggle, and he didn't know why but it made him mad. It was February but the day was warm, so everyone was outside with their sandwiches and fruit and potato chips. Billy sat a ways off from most of the others, pondering May and Shelley. May's hair was so long and thick that the breeze didn't move it. He thought of May like he did the hymns he hadn't learned yet; he knew what they were made of and what they'd mean when he was able to play them, but he knew he didn't have all the notes right.

The teacher proposed they sing a song when everybody was finished eating, and she looked over at Billy as she said it. He blushed. He didn't like to sing when other people would hear him, it made him embarrassed because afterwards they'd all treat him differently and look at him like he'd changed. This teacher, Miss Johnson, had overheard him singing to himself one afternoon as he was cleaning up his cubicle, after the other kids had left, and now she wouldn't let him alone but must have him sing all the time. "Billy," she said now, "what would you like to sing?"

"I don't know," he muttered, and pulled at the yellow winter grass between his legs.

"Let's sing 'Kum Bai Ya,'" squealed Shelley. "I love 'Kum Bai Ya.' It means 'Come by here.'" She looked at May with an air of proprietorship and conspiracy. Her fingers twined in the curls of her bleached hair.

So they sang "Kum Bai Ya" and Billy chimed in very quietly, here and there adding a note of harmony because he couldn't help himself but for the most part not loud enough to be heard. Miss Johnson had only looked disappointed for a minute, because she liked the song too. Afterward she said, "Now let's do like we do in Church, and everybody shake hands with the people next to you."

Billy noticed that Joshua, who had sat a little behind May and Shelley, had his hand out for May but was on the wrong side, because Shelley grabbed it

first and held it for a little bit before letting go. May shook it next and dropped it after only a second, but Billy saw Joshua's face the second that he was touching her, and he knew the preacher's son was as hooked on May as he was. Billy shook hands all around too, and thought for the first time that this might not be so stupid a custom as he'd thought, after all.

\* \* \*

Shelley was confused by May when she thought about her, so she didn't do much thinking about her. Shelley only knew that she wanted May, wanted May to be her own property, like one of the necklaces Shelley's mother had that was made of real jewels. She didn't see her want for May as anything wrong. Her parents said over and over again that May was "right for her," and Shelley agreed with them. May was smart, and she had beautiful hair, but Shelley didn't want her for those reasons. No, there was something about May, something she couldn't put her finger on, some air that she had of holding a secret, that made Shelley yearn for her unlike anything she'd ever wanted before, or ever imagined wanting.

Of course, Shelley wasn't blind to other attractions. She wasn't so stupid, she told herself, as to see only May. She wanted a boy, too; in a sneaky, thrilling way that she understood much better. She had only read about boys. But when she sat close to Josh at church -- which she tried very carefully to do each Sunday and which wasn't hard because they met in such a small space -- she felt the little tingling going up her arms and legs that she'd read about, and she studied Josh to see if he'd felt it too, like he was supposed to. She looked forward to Sundays for this reason. While the preacher talked and gestured and raised his arms toward heaven she watched her jewels, her wants, and studied over them with an impatient fascination.

Josh sat always in the front row, his shoulders hunched slightly, his head



bent to the side so he could watch her. When Shelley caught his eye he would turn red and look away, which she took as a sign that he was thinking dirty thoughts also. Next to her May sat with her head always facing the preacher, or looking down at her hands or the Bible in them. She never looked to either side so Shelley could study her at the same time she looked beyond her at Josh. She wished that Steve went to her church so she could study him too.

Shelley was frustrated at the teachers always telling her to study more, read more. They didn't understand that she was studying all the time, studying people, which to her was much more important than books. Her people mattered more to her than anything.

\* \* \*

At dinner, their mother announced to the family that the schoolteacher, Miss Johnson, had telephoned her that day about Billy's musical talent.

"She says that we must do something about his gift, Earl," she said to their daddy, who barely looked up. "That's what she called it, a gift."

Billy hunched over his creamed corn and played with his fork. He was mad and embarrassed both. His daddy looked up at him without raising his own head.

"Well, I know he likes to practice at Joseph's," his mother went on, "but the way she talked we should maybe get our own piano, and get him some lessons. He's already eight, she says, and that's almost too old to really learn."

"I know how old my own son is, don't I?" He was clearly offended. "What makes her the expert?" He stabbed another piece of beef. "You want lessons, son?"

Billy knew his daddy wanted him to say no. He knew that lessons meant learning other kinds of music. He knew that lessons cost a lot of money. He

knew that his daddy thought his music was just something to fill time. "Yes, sir," Billy answered, still looking at his corn.

May turned and looked at him so hard he could feel her eyes on him without seeing her. Even his mother looked surprised. Then he could feel May smile just a little.

"We-ell," said his daddy, the piece of beef still raised and dripping gravy. "Well... how do you suppose to earn 'em?"

Billy put down his fork. He knew he was flushed all the way behind his ears. "I don't know," he mumbled. "I never gave it any thought."

His daddy raised his eyebrows. "Well, when you get some idea, you let me know." He looked back at his wife. His own face was flushed; he looked very much like his son. "I don't want no one saying I'm depriving my family."

With no explanation their mother burst into tears and ran upstairs, her plate still half full of dinner. The family heard a bedroom door slam.

"Eat your dinner," their father sighed. "And just leave your mother be tonight."

\* \* \*

May got down on her knees that evening at the foot of her bed, across from the moonlight corner, and folded up her hands on the bedspread like she'd always done to pray. She closed and squinted her eyes.

"Oh God," she whispered, "send me a sign, please, if you won't talk to me anymore, and tell me what you want me to do. I don't like Shelley but I'll be her friend if you want it, if only you'd talk to me some more..." May was confused, and her words came out in a jumble, she didn't know what she wanted except to be told something, and He wasn't talking anymore, not since the dirty book... her thoughts and words came out in a jumble. She took a deep breath and started over. "Dear Father," she prayed, "Do you still want

me? I'll do whatever you want and I won't care what I look like or what I have to eat or anything. I'll even stop reading if You say so -- well, I wouldn't stop completely but I know You wouldn't want that anyway . . ."

After a long while of this, just when she was exhausted and about to climb into the bed and give up, her mother came into her room and gave a little cry. "Honey, honey, it's all right," she said soothingly, as she picked up May and tucked her into bed. May was dazed, she'd been concentrating so long on praying that she had difficulty hearing what her mother was saying.

"There's no need to worry, nothing is your fault and your daddy and I will work it out, honey," she was saying. She soothed May's damp hair back from her forehead. "We don't want you to be upset about it -- but I suppose there was no keeping it from you, was there? How long have you known about it, May?" She reached down and held her daughter's hands over the blanket.

"I don't know," answered May, sleepily. Her mother often said absurd things, she told herself.

"We've been through rough times before, you know," smiled her mother nervously. May couldn't see very well because the light was behind them, coming from the hall through her opened bedroom door. "With the Lord's help we've weathered every storm, we've always managed to stay together, so don't you worry about this one. You must promise to talk to us about it whenever you need to, please hon? We know you're growing up, and you see more than you used to, but you know we're used to seeing you as a child still, otherwise we wouldn't try to hold back our problems . . . do you understand, honey?"

"I don't know," answered May again, confused but so tired she told herself, I'll think about this in the morning whatever this all means. She fell asleep with her mother patting and smoothing her hand. Puffy and apologetic, her

mother's eyes stayed with her as she dreamed.

The next morning she still had difficulty understanding just what her mother had said to her. None of it seemed to make sense, really; she didn't want it to make sense. But she didn't want to ask anyone because she was supposed to be smart, and her mother had said it like it was obvious. She was so confused about it that she tried, after awhile, not to think about it at all, but to concentrate instead on her own troubles with God and Shelley. She now had the conviction that Shelley was God's testing of her, her cross that she had to bear.

\* \* \*

Well, they came to see me, the Tuckermans. It was clear she didn't want to listen to me. I tried to set them right, tried to explain that she was wrong when she said he was "stifling" her. What a word. He's just trying to be a good husband. We went over the scriptures -- she's done some studying -- I couldn't reason with a woman who can twist the Bible to her own way like that. Brother Earle himself was almost convinced she had a case. Well, it's true she's an intelligent woman and still young, but like I say it's a sad thing when someone with a wild streak like that wants to leave the church. Wants to leave her husband. I've prayed about it since they've gone and now I don't know. I think I might have been too dismissive. It's just so crazy to me that April Tuckerman should have ambition outside her home -- that I'm supposed to counsel these people -- I was called to lead a congregation but God didn't prepare me for this. I just said it wasn't to be done, to her. I said Earle, I said stick to your guns. Then she said -- it pains me to tell this -- she said I was an ignorant fool who had no right to be a preacher. Well, I kicked her out right then. But Lord, now I think on it, maybe she's right. A preacher has to know more than what Paul said about marriage. I asked my wife, God rest her soul,

before she died and she said the Lord knew what He was doing when He called me and she believed in me but now I don't know. I just don't know.

\* \* \*

May dreams: Her mother wearing a long black dress like the pilgrims from the Mayflower. She's in the jungle, and behind her rise tall thick green stalks that wave slightly. The ground smells damp and pungent. May steps off a big boat, that has come from home to look for her. "Where have you been, where have you been?" asks her mother. They are all alone. "I came looking for you," May says. "I've been here," her mother answers, looking confused. "Here in the backyard." Then May begins to grow, bigger and bigger, like Alice in Wonderland. She forgets her mother in the grass and her brother's toy boat that he'd abandoned in the yard. She runs to the swing her daddy had set up for her. She begins to swing, higher and higher. She wakes up when she starts to fall.

\* \* \*

May found another bunch of daffodils in her cubicle. Someone had been leaving them for a week, but with no note. She had thought the first day that they were from Shelly, but she said no and it wasn't like her not to take credit. May put the flowers in the glass on her shelf where she had the others. It was Friday, and she knew they'd all wilt over the weekend if she didn't take them home. She wondered who she'd tell her mother they were from. Shelly was angry.

"You must have some idea who's giving them to you," she said, as the classroom began to settle in for the day. "Somebody who you're not telling me about." She pouted. It drove her mad that May didn't seem to care who it was.

One of the older teachers came by. "What pretty flowers, May," she said. "Are you bringing Spring in for the classroom?" Other students craned their

necks over to see what she was talking about.

"I don't really know where they've come from, Mrs. Cartwright," answered May. "But I do like them."

Mrs. Cartwright smiled at her. "Oh," she said, with a wink. "You've got an admirer." May blushed and ducked her head. Shelly glowered. Mrs. Cartwright could tell she'd said the wrong thing. "All right, class, let's get to work," she called, and went on.

May did want to know who was leaving them for her -- she wanted to know who knew she liked flowers. She just didn't know who to ask. She got out her book but couldn't concentrate. If only praying could work like a magic saying and show her things that she wanted to know!

She went to the library after school, after she had caught Josh and given him back the flowers, and tried to find some answers in a place she hadn't looked before. She was too nervous about what she was doing to check out any of the books she looked at, but she skimmed over enough to know she would be coming back, maybe on a Saturday when she had more time. The "teen" section of the library was designed well, because it was set off from the rest of the stacks of books and she felt like she had enough privacy to concentrate. When she went home, she felt better than she had in weeks.

\* \* \*

That Sunday morning May knew something was very wrong because her daddy went to church early to visit with the preacher, and her mother had waited upstairs until he was gone. Billy had been listless for almost a month, since the talk about music lessons, and sat at breakfast without eating anything. Then her mother came into her room and said, "What do you think about leaving the school for a while, May? Would you be happy in a different school?"

May felt confused. The two of them sat on her bed and looked at one another. May could see her mother had been crying. "I like school," said May. "I'm way ahead in all my subjects. I don't understand what you want." She still didn't want to tell her mother about the daffodils. She didn't want to tell her mother she'd begun reading in the "teen" section of the library. Her mother made things so complicated, just by saying simple, weird things. May frowned. She wondered if Joshua, whom she had seen running his hands along her cubicle desk during lunch break when she had come back from the bathroom, would bring her flowers this morning for church. She waited for her mother to say something more or leave.

Her mother looked around at the room: at the wallpaper, the curtains; she smoothed the bedspread underneath her. "Are you really happy, honey?" she finally asked.

"Yes," answered May. "I wish you were." She didn't know what else to say.

"Oh, baby," said her mother, crying a little through her red eyes. "I wish I were too."

\* \* \*

Shelley was angry, but there was nothing she could do. She felt cheated, betrayed. May had used her all along. Used her to get to Josh. All the time Josh had been looking at her May had been there, getting in the way, making Josh notice her over Shelley. Now they were going to hold hands at school. It was clear after how May had given him back his flowers and thanked him and smiled at him. May acted like she didn't care at all what Shelley thought about it, didn't care how Shelley's feelings were hurt. May was all wrapped up in herself, completely selfish. And Shelley couldn't even complain about it, because her own mother said that 'poor' May was going through an awful tough time. It sure didn't seem that way to Shelly. She wrote note after note to no

one, and tore them all up, in little pieces, in her room.

\* \* \*

They got to church a little late, but everybody had waited on them. May could tell that Billy was terribly embarrassed by this, but her mother held her head high and smiled at the preacher with a little quivering of her lips. She sat down on one of the folding chairs in the back, instead of going on up to sit with her husband, and motioned for May and Billy to sit by her instead of wherever they might want to. The preacher cleared his throat.

"Brothers and Sisters," he began, "Our text today is Ephesians, Chapter five, Verse twenty-two."

May didn't pay a lot of attention to the sermon.

At the end, while the preacher was waiting up front for someone to come forward and be saved, and the congregation was singing "Come Home," Joshua slipped back to where May was standing next to her mother, who had hold of her shoulder like it was a support.

"Are you all right?" he whispered to her. These were the first words she could ever remember him saying to her, although she knew he must have talked to her sometime before. She nodded at him. "I, uh, I brought you these," he said then, and pulled from behind his back a little nosegay of daffodils, already slightly wrinkled and sad from being held in his palm through the long sermon.

"Thank you," she said, and took them. She found herself smiling at him, not shy at all. The congregation sang on, not paying any attention. Billy leaned around his mother and saw Josh looking at his sister like he'd found god at that minute. Billy couldn't help himself, he started to cry. He reached out and held his mother by the waist and she, not even seeing Josh or the daffodils or the preacher fuming by the pulpit, bent down to hug him back.



When Billy was packing his things to leave, his daddy came into his room saying, "can I talk to you, son?" like he was really asking a favor. Billy didn't know what to say so he just nodded.

"Your mother and I, we're not finished, you know," his daddy started. He looked at his hands and then ran them through his graying hair, sat down in Billy's old green armchair in the corner. "I know she's gonna come back after a time, I know she still cares about this family and about what's right." He hesitated, then squinted at Billy like he was trying to see through him, see him clear for the first time.

"But son, I don't know that about you. I know you think I've let you down. I don't know, I've prayed and prayed about it . . ." he started to sputter.

Billy had never seen his daddy like this. He went up to the armchair and ran his hands across the frayed corduroy, next to his daddy's elbow. He couldn't think this time what his daddy would want him to say.

"I don't think you've let me down, daddy," he whispered. His daddy grabbed him up and hugged him.

"When you're at your Aunt Anne's," he said to Billy, "Are you gonna behave yourself? are you gonna make us proud of you? are you gonna practice and practice?"

"Sure, Daddy," said Billy. "I'm gonna learn to write songs, too. I'm gonna learn to play more than the piano, mother says. She says I'm gonna go to school where they've got a band and everything."

His daddy sighed and let him go. "I wish I could know what the Lord wants of me, son. I wish I could know."

\* \* \*

Well, I tried, God knows. The Tuckermans, the congregation's most

important family, is splitting apart. They just wouldn't listen to me, to what the good Lord was trying to tell them, and now the whole church will likely fall away. The tension's already getting to us. Little Billy and April gone to Kansas City, Earl and that May of his, left here and moping. Well, Earl's moping. I was negligent more than I knew, because now Josh is lost in that whole mess, out of his moon-eyes for the girl. Earl and she've had us over for dinner there. She seems nice enough, though strange, like I say. At least the kids are powerful young. They'll get over it, like the young get over everything. The notions people have when they're that age --actually, I'm seriously thinking of just moving on. Starting up fresh somewhere else, wherever the Lord leads, of course. It's been a tough winter. Seems like we need a breath of new air. A gust of strong, fresh spring wind. Yes.

## Margaret

Neither woman had said anything for a long time; Margaret snapped each thick green bean at each end and then at the center. Three little pops and she would reach for another bean, which would always feel curiously dry even though it soaked with the others in the cool tap water from the sink. It seemed she'd been snapping beans all her life; picking them and washing them and snapping them every summer, boiling them with hunks of bacon, canning them, fixing them in the winter so they arrived steaming at the table with a thick pot roast. So now she didn't need to look at what her hands were doing; her fingers moved of their own accord. What she was looking at was Judith, who was drawing Margaret's picture with soft colored pencils.

They listened to the popping of the beans and the smooth scraping of the pencils on Judith's thick paper. Margaret was looking at the picture upside down, but she thought that Judith had, perhaps, made her hands much too big. Judith was coloring them in now. She had poised them in mid-snap.

Orren, Margaret's husband, came in through the kitchen door behind Judith and stopped a second to look at the picture.

"You do that all the time, don'tcha?" he said, thinking he might try to open a conversation. He felt nervous around Judith, and he felt bad about feeling nervous, because this was his son's wife that he knew he could never consider family.

"That /s what she does for a living, Orren," answered his wife gently, like she was talking to a child. Judith didn't look up from her work. "You didn't seem to mind when she was drawing you."

"Well," Orren said, shuffling behind their chairs to the refrigerator, "that's not what I meant, anyway." What he meant was that Judith never seemed to do any work, which was what she came here to do, but he couldn't

say that because then Margaret would feel bad. But he hoped Judith would take what he said to mean that he had noticed her in a nice way. He knew Jim was proud of her always drawing and painting. He stood in front of the open refrigerator door thinking about this. Lately he'd had to do a lot of thinking about everything he said, and he wasn't used to it.

"We'll be going for a walk after Margaret's finished," said Judith to her picture. "It's such a glorious hot day outside." She switched pencils, looked up and smiled at Margaret, then gave a little wink. "I bet you can't wait 'til you can go riding and really cover some ground."

Margaret stopped snapping a moment and sighed. "Are the horses being properly groomed, Orren?" she asked, a wistful tone in her voice.

"Of course they are," he growled, pushing things around in the refrigerator. "Don't we have any ice tea made?"

"There's some sun tea brewing on the back porch, honey," answered Margaret.

"Jim really loves ice tea too," said Judith, who was putting thin streaks of silver into Margaret's brown hair. "I never knew anybody who could drink so much of it. Back home in Connecticut we never made it at all."

Orren finally settled on a coke and turned back around so that he was behind Margaret and facing Judith. "That's a shame," he said. "Ice tea is one of the best parts of summer. The only thing that makes it bearable sometimes."

It had been one of the hottest Augusts on record in Las Animas County, Colorado. At the high altitudes of the mesa land of Branson the sun seemed to burn through even the toughest buffalo grass. So as Judith and Margaret walked down to the stables after the beans were all snapped and cleaned and put away in the freezer and the pencil drawing that recorded it was put back smoothly

into Judith's huge leather portfolio, it seemed positively cool even though the thermometer was stuck somewhere in the low eighties. Margaret wore a huge straw sun hat. She had never made such a concession to her skin before, which was thin and had never really tanned even when she was a young girl and rode all over the country on her favorite horse. She worried now about Judith, who had only her mass of dark hair falling in her face to shade her.

"You don't realize how close we are to the sun, dear," she explained. "There aren't any mountains to see because we're already on a mountain. All these mesas are plateaus on top of plateaus on top of bigger, wider mesas. And the sun can really burn skin that isn't used to it."

"Not to worry," said Judith, a little irritated. "We won't be out long enough for me to get burned." Judith had dark hair but very pale skin and blue eyes. Margaret had the impression that Judith never went outside at all but stayed in during the days, painting and sculpting carefully lighted still-lives and busts of squirming children. Jim and she made money from the commissions she had for the children or an occasional portrait of a family, but she spent the bulk of her time making strange configurations of pears and apples and grapes super-imposed on one another. Both Judith and Margaret knew that Judith did not want to be "mothered," but that Margaret could not help herself.

"Do you ever draw animals?" Margaret asked to change the subject. "We have some of the most beautiful horses in the County, Orren and me. When I was a young girl horses were the only thing I ever tried to draw."

"I drew them when I was a teenager, too," said Judith. "But they were usually unicorns or with wings or part dragon or something. I got tired of that by the time I went to college. I used to sketch them next to my notes about oceanography, you know, but then I never knew what I'd missed of lecture next time I went to study. Eventually I just stopped drawing them. My art

instructors thought they were silly."

"Oh," said Margaret. She hadn't gone to college and always felt a little out of breath when Judith began to talk about it. They got to the stable house and she felt more at home. She stopped at each stall and checked for cleanliness. The horses roamed free most of the time, over the range of the mesa, but Margaret liked to know that they could come in, if they wanted to, to fresh-smelling and comfortable homes. Orren still thought it was kind of silly, but she had always done this chore herself, and now he was doing it because he wanted her to feel as though nothing was different. She mentally thanked Orren, again, for doing the work that she had always done. The horses were her children, her babies. Orren wouldn't have had but one or two of them on the place if it hadn't been for her treating each foal like a bit of her own flesh.

The horses were used to being groomed around this time most days of the week, so several had gathered at the top of the nearest ridge to see if someone was coming out today. When they saw Margaret, they whinnied and trotted down to nuzzle her and wait for her patient hands to get to them all. She ran her hands down the neck and ribs of each, noticing that they had all been recently groomed and brushed down. Judith watched her hand-feed each one and murmur as a head was tossed, a hoof was stamped.

"How long will it be before you can ride again?" she asked.

"Oh, the doctor says not too long, but I'll have to be careful I don't take more than a trot for at least six months. There's the chance of the scar opening up if I get jarred too much. Though it's so stapled and glued, I feel like a bound book."

"Jim says you rode even when you were pregnant."

"Yes, well, there's no chance of that complication now." Margaret said wryly. "Besides, when the boys were coming along there was too much work to

be done for me to stay in the house. At that time we could only afford one hand, and the men had to mess all the time with the cattle. We didn't have a pickup then either, it was all on horseback. I'd only stay in the last week or so."

Judith was a little scared of horses, but she took the brush Margaret handed her and tried to follow her lead, firmly smoothing down the side of the nearest quiet neck. "Was it a big help, having three boys?"

"Well, not for the first five or six years, I can tell you." They laughed. Margaret paused a little, then took the plunge. She'd been nervous about asking this question, but Jim and Judith had been married for three years. "Are you planning to have any, Judith?"

"I don't know," Judith wasn't really offended. She'd been expecting this ever since she'd been on the ranch. "We could afford one, I guess, but I haven't ever really felt the desire to have a baby."

"Oh." Sometimes Judith said things that Margaret didn't know how to answer. Since her operation, Margaret had felt a great desire to have a baby, but she couldn't explain why, because she was fifty-two years old and God knows, tired. Her first boy, Frank, had come much too soon, when she was too young to appreciate the experience; Jim had been inside her during the lean year of Orren's back surgery when it looked as if the ranch would be lost; and Andrew had seemed like he should have been a girl, because he was so quiet and never moved. When he had come they couldn't bring themselves to shorten his name to Andy, because he was always so serious and still. After him Margaret had waited for a daughter, and read the magazine articles about what underwear Orren should wear for them to have a girl and what foods she should eat and not eat. But there weren't any more; Andrew had been born when she was twenty-four and that was a long, long time ago.

"It's too bad Jim had to work," Judith broke in on Margaret's thoughts. "He would have loved taking care of the horses."

"Really?" asked Margaret, genuinely surprised. "He always complained to me about cleaning out the stalls." They laughed again.

"No, really, he talks about this ranch sometimes with real longing." Suddenly Judith's horse shook his head and startled her away. She hesitated a second before stepping back up to its neck. "But I don't think he'll ever come back to it."

"That's all right. I know," said Margaret. She turned her back a minute and went to another horse. Judith followed her and just stood a while, watching Margaret groom him, a deep-red bay with a long mane that fell over his left eye. "This one's called Killer," said Margaret. "The Anderson boys down east of here named him when he was foaled." They laughed again. Killer threw his head in disgust at such foolishness and whistled through his teeth.

That night Margaret had the dream again, about waking up during the surgery and knowing . . . knowing what the doctor was taking out of her. She tried to struggle, to call to him, that doctor far away on the other side of the table, but she was too drugged, her head spun, her hands too heavy to lift. She couldn't feel anything. The doctor's face was covered by a pale green mask and his hands were grayish white. She saw him reach down past where she couldn't see and knew he was cutting. Then around her were hands, also in gloves, pressing just barely as if they knew she was about to awaken and could stop it. They were the other doctors in the surgery -- she hoped the anesthesiologist would not put a mask on her face, too. Then she looked down and the doctor was holding it up, bloody from her and squirming, a little baby



-- its fists were waving. The hands pressed her down more firmly, until she felt pressed against the operating table so hard that she woke up anyway, gulping little, shallow breaths.

She blinked a few times, looking up at the dark ceiling that she knew so well she could trace the crack without seeing it. Beside her Orren snored softly, tired after a hard day of close work on the car, with the horses, on the house -- work that had been hers until recently. She decided she needed to go to the bathroom.

She got up as quietly as possible and struggled into her robe -- she had never gotten out of the habit of wearing a robe outside their bedroom even though they had been the only ones living in the house for years -- and slipped down the hall to the bathroom. On the way there she passed Judith's door, which was open. Margaret was always surprised by this. Judith seemed like such a private person, a girl who rarely said or even gestured what she thought about things. And here every night her door was left wide open. Margaret had always felt that sleeping is the most private thing you can do, and she shut the door when she was in bed. She looked in for a second. It was too dark to make out more than a lump in the sheets.

On her way back from the bathroom Margaret checked again and then remembered always doing this when the boys were small. The two oldest had shared this room. She and Orren had moved the bunkbeds to the far bedroom when Frank had gone. Judith stirred a little, but Margaret could tell she was sound asleep.

Margaret went to her own room, shut the door, and slid between the sheets next to Orren. She tried to shut her mind to everything, to fade to a quiet sleep that would give her rest for tomorrow's drive to Folsom Falls with Judith. She found herself thinking about the green beans from that morning and

that led her to gardening. It was pleasant, she was musing when she finally drifted off, to work with the earth that way.

To get to Folsom Falls, Margaret had to drive down from the ranch into Branson, about eighteen miles, and then take the highway that circled around the "big hill" on its way to New Mexico, until the turn-off, about another ten or fifteen miles.

"Where would you end up if you didn't turn off there?" asked Judith.

"Well, the closest bar, in Folsom, New Mexico, or the closest emergency store," answered Margaret.

"What's an emergency store?"

"It's a general store that's so badly stocked, you only use it in emergencies."

"Great," Judith chuckled. "And how far away are we from these important resources?"

"About thirty miles, give or take a couple."

Judith just looked at her. God, she thought. This is the wilderness.

"Do you mind," Margaret asked, "if we stop in town for a few minutes? I want to check with the Post Office."

"Sure, no problem," answered Judith. She was thinking to herself, a Post Office? In a town with only one paved road and not even a gas station?

"Actually, you came at the right time of year," said Margaret, concentrating on the road, which was dirt and very steep. "In the winter this is impassable and in the spring the mud makes it a really very dangerous drive."

"How did the boys go to school?" In spite of herself, Judith began to hold on to the dash, trying not to be obvious.

"Oh, for the worst two months of the winter there usually isn't school. All the kids around here are ranchers, so it was just understood they wouldn't come in. Some of the rest of the time they'd stay in town with cousins. But the State did supply a jeep for bussing." Margaret got to the level part of the road and began to pick up speed. The land was fenced off away from the road now, which had been baked dry and smooth by the heat, and she had been waiting a long time to let go. She pressed down on the accelerator. Judith gave a little yelp but didn't say anything for a while, just watched the sparrows try to get out of the way in time. Eventually the car got to the highway and Margaret slowed down to a respectable 65.

The Post Office in Branson is a tiny little one-room white clapboard building that looked, Judith decided, something like a large play-house she'd had as a child. When they went in Margaret didn't have to check the box; it would have been too small anyway.

"My Lord, will you look at you!" exclaimed the postmistress, who handed Margaret a huge package of letters bundled up with string. The package was made of several smaller bundles bound together with rubber bands. "You just look great. I was saying to myself just this mornin' I was wonderin' how Margaret was doin' and here you are lookin' just great."

How's the Post Office business, Shirley?" asked Margaret. She was beaming around the room, looking at the familiar posters and wanted men pictures and crayon smudges on the lower part of the wall by the door. It was the first time in months that Margaret had been able to drive into town and pick up the mail herself. Shirley, usually very quiet but excited now because Margaret was there, talked on for a while and she and Judith met and talked some; and Margaret looked through the bundle without taking it apart. Mostly there were get-well cards, some from return addresses that she didn't

recognize. Some were doctor and hospital bills. She cringed a bit at that: she was afraid that the chemotherapy alone had cost more than she and Orren had ever made in their lives.

"It's been a hard time, I know, for all of us, but we are so glad she's better, and gettin' well, and now here showin' you off! I think that's great," said Shirley. "You'll love Folsom Falls. It's so pretty up there, all lush and green, even this time of year. It's been an awful hot August, too."

Folsom Falls, New Mexico, was pretty, although it was not what Judith had expected. It certainly wasn't "wild country." There was a picnic table and a dirty fence shortly off the highway, and only a short walk led them to a creek of water that was just trickling over a dark charcoal bed of volcanic rock. The porous rock had frozen in lumps as though the lava hadn't had time to settle, and the water was trapped here and there in little pools until it was filled up enough to spill into the next puddle.

"Well," said Margaret, "it has been an awfully hot summer."

But in another twenty feet or so somehow the creek had collected enough water to become a gurgling stream, and then Judith saw the edge of the earth fall away suddenly. There was a thin path that turned away from the lava bed, and the women wound their way along it, down to a gradual slide that circled back to face the small pool formed by the stream's fall. When they got around and turned to see it all, Judith gasped a little at how beautiful it was, and how unreal it was that this unspoiled place was just a few steps from the car. The drop at the creek was a good twenty feet of sheer black rock, which circled around like a man-made quarry hole until softer dirt and rock allowed for the path down. The pool was large and, Margaret had told her, quite deep for a good ways around the Falls. On the other side of the black wall that half-ringed the pool, tall grass and wildflowers seemed to deny the heat. Behind them tall

evergreens and cottonwoods rose up and disappeared into forest. And trickling out of the little valley of the pool was the same thin stream, winding its way past the grass and between more volcanic boulders for another mile or so before disappearing altogether into the dirt.

"It looks like some god just grabbed up the big boulders and tossed them in the stream-bed," said Judith.

Margaret was startled. She could never think in terms of *some god*. It seemed a very strange thing to say. "I just think it's beautiful," she answered. "When I was in school I would always skip class to come here, just to be alone. Or I'd come with school buddies and we'd hunt crawdads."

"Crawdads?" asked Judith, suddenly excited. "I've never actually seen a crawdad. Jim says they're just like little lobsters."

"Well, there's one right there by your foot, if you want to see." Margaret was amused. Never seen a crawdad?

"Wow," breathed Judith, stepping backward so quickly she almost lost her balance. They were standing at the end of the path, right on the water's edge where the creek started up again. In the shallow water underneath the boulder on which she'd been resting her hand, a five-inch crawdad scuttled around, waving his antennae. "Wow," she said. "Jim was right." Judith thought as she was saying it that she sounded like she was back in school, using that expression.

"If you really want to see a bunch of them," said Margaret with a smile, "look over here, under the ledge." She pointed to the shaded underside of the black wall, that fell away again right before the water's level to form a natural shallow cave. When Judith looked she suddenly realized that the pool was absolutely crawling with the insect-like animals. They were so thick they were running into one another, crawling over one another.

"They're actually all different colors," breathed Judith. Margaret went and sat down on the boulder. She was a little winded by the steepness of the trail down. "I can't believe I didn't bring my sketch pad with me," Judith continued.

"I can't see why you'd want to sketch crawdads," said Margaret. "They're only good to eat." After all, Margaret thought, if drawing horses was silly, I can imagine what those instructors would think of crawdads. But she didn't really want to say that.

"Why are those two fighting?" asked Judith, pointing.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe they're both males, or maybe they found something to eat at the same time." Margaret was bored, all of a sudden. She wished Orren were here, someone to talk to who was from her own world. She was always having to explain things to Judith. Margaret had wanted to come to the Falls not just because she figured Judith was bored at the ranch, but also because she wanted to touch base again, to feel at home, to get rid of that restless feeling that had been put into her when most of the rest of her was taken out. She couldn't explain it to Judith, or to Orren either. Margaret sat watching the stream sparkle past the black wall -- the wall so polished by the water that it seemed to gleam, too, in the morning sunlight that was beginning to steam away the smaller drops of spray -- and she thought about how she and Bill Clayburne had come down here the night before she'd first gone out with Orren, and how everything looked the same; the stars reflecting so clear they had as much light as now; and Bill had sworn he'd marry her or no one, if she'd just wait until he came back from Korea. And she'd thought she would, then.

"What's your favorite memory of this place?" asked Judith.

"Oh, I don't know," said Margaret, coming slowly out of her reverie. "I guess maybe the time I was fourteen and a bunch of us kids had a big picnic

down here but one of the boy's dogs ate all the crawdads we'd managed to catch before we knew it."

Judith knew that she was supposed to be helping Margaret recover from the cancer but she was frustrated, most of the time. Jim had told her that Margaret was fiercely independent and not to "press" her with offers to do what Margaret was still capable of doing. But when she had gotten to the ranch, after that long and silent ride with Orren from the Pueblo bus depot ("the armpit of Colorado" as Jim had described it so aptly) she had discovered that there was nothing Margaret was not capable of doing. When she stepped through the ranch house door Margaret had called to her from the kitchen and had breezed in to the big living room to take her coat and give her a good, mother-in-law hug and peck. When she was led back to the kitchen Judith discovered that Margaret had been cooking all day to get ready for her arrival.

"That trip is murder, I know," Margaret clucked over her as she sat her firmly down and handed her a fresh piece of cake. "I had to take chemotherapy in Pueblo every day for almost six weeks, you know. That was bad enough, but you've been on the go even longer -- was the flight into Denver okay?" Margaret hadn't stopped fussing over her until they were all set down around the dinner table, feeding on a huge roast and corn bread. The next morning when she had woken up, Judith had wandered around a good while through the house until she found Margaret in the basement, unloading a heavy washload of Orren's coveralls into the dryer. It had been that way since she'd arrived; when she would offer to help with anything Margaret would say it was all right, the chores helped her feel alive and at use. Judith almost wished she had come while Margaret was going back and forth to Pueblo, instead of letting Margaret's old friend Gracie drive, but she knew that wasn't fair. Margaret had

asked for Gracie then and Judith came when it was her turn. But she couldn't help but feel she was letting Jim down by not doing more for his mother, who, after all, had raised not a bad son.

Judith had written only a couple of letters to Jim, because she knew he wouldn't be worried about her here, and she and Margaret had it set up to talk to him every Sunday afternoon, taking turns calling. She and Jim weren't especially close anymore, like they had been when he had first taken Judith to the ranch, so it was all right. The first time she had visited, Judith remembered with some embarrassment, they hadn't been able to take their hands off each other. But in the past year they'd both been too busy with work to worry about losing that intimacy. Judith shrugged now, when she thought about it.

Margaret noticed this shrug on the ride back, after they'd gone on to Raton for dinner (Judith driving so Margaret would be strong enough to drive back) and seen a family of pheasants marching sedately across the highway.

It had been a very full day and Margaret was exhausted. Orren had been away with chores and she didn't want to tell him she'd been out so long, and so she was glad that Judith didn't jump in to tell him about the trip to Raton.

"The way down to the Falls is tricky," he said, as they ate sandwiches for dinner. "It's steeper than it looks."

Margaret left the table earlier than usual. Orren said, "Are you doing okay, honey?" and Judith answered, "Oh, we just decided that I'd do the dishes tonight. Right?" Margaret looked at her thankfully and nodded her head.

"I'm going to take a bath," she said. "And get some of the dust of the road off me."

A few minutes later, as she rested her head back against the tiles behind



the tub, Margaret tried to remember when she'd first gotten sick. This was something she didn't spend a lot of time on anymore, because it was in the past, after all, but occasionally she'd think: if only I had done something about it sooner.

But she knew she wouldn't have done anything sooner. If it hadn't been for Orren she'd probably be buried by now. She remembered: those awful cramps she'd had, for almost two years, for no reason. She'd given up coffee, and then tea because she read somewhere that one could develop an allergy to the caffeine or the acid; she'd given up sweets -- well, almost had -- because she thought that might be the problem; she'd taken to wearing the baggiest jeans and skirts she owned not because she was gaining weight but because they didn't cut in at the middle. Eventually she found she couldn't bear anything with a waist built in and wore sack dresses and the sweat pants that Frank had sent her for her birthday, which she barely pulled together enough to ride over her hips.

Margaret sighed. At least she could always enjoy hot baths.

When the bleeding had started and she finally called up a doctor she'd been told not to worry, it was her "change of life." So she put up with that too, waiting for the change to be over so she could get back to normal. She told Orren that she felt like an old woman now. He seemed concerned but he didn't say anything. Orren didn't usually want to talk about areas in which he had no expertise.

But one day, the pain had been so intense, so unbearable, that she had left the stables before she finished grooming the first horse. In the middle of the day she had struggled, bent double, up the hill to the house and into the bathroom, had peeled off her sweat pants and almost fallen into the tub, which she had had to fill with scalding water to make it warm enough to feel. She

didn't even turn the cold tap on. Her skin had gone suddenly crawdad red but she didn't feel it -- only the relief in her belly that the pain was easing out of her, into the heat of the bath.

Then while she was sitting there, steam wisping up around her, Orren had walked into the bathroom. He had come to wash his hands of motor grease. When he opened up the bathroom door she had turned her head slowly, languidly, to look at him; not caring -- for the first time she could ever remember, really not caring -- that he saw her this way, in pain. The open door let some of the steam escape and the room seemed colder, although the house itself was warm.

"My God, Margaret," said Orren, which is as close as he had ever come to cursing. He had suddenly looked frightened -- and that had frightened her. "Get your clothes on. We're going to the doctor."

That had been March. They had driven to Trinidad, Orren driving, gripping the wheel too tightly for safety, not saying anything. The operations after that came once a month: April, May, June. Orren had Frank and Jim come to work the ranch whenever they could with their neighbor, Anderson; while he stayed at the hospital in Denver with her almost the entire time she was there. He had never said much; it wasn't his way. But for the first time since they'd been newlyweds he'd brought her flowers, awkwardly placing them across the foot of her bed when he'd come in the room. He told her there were some kids selling them across the street of her hospital wing every morning, and he figured he could afford flowers, what with all the other expense. Then he would sit and hold her hand while they watched TV, or read the get well cards she had gotten, when she handed them to him. The doctors would come in and tell them they were amazed at her progress. She had had the cancer so long, they would say. It was so widespread, another would murmur, shaking his head.

We cannot believe you are doing so well. Remarkable. What a tremendous constitution your wife has, sir, they would say to Orren; and he would nod yes, and smile, running a hand through his thick white hair that had once been the color of Indian paintbrush.

Margaret smiled to herself, her eyes closed, as the steam of this bath rose around her. And Orren had never even mentioned the scar, that ran down the length of her body from slightly above her navel to almost between her legs. He touched her when she was ready and said not a word. God bless him, she thought, and she felt one of the few true moments of contentment she had had since the chemotherapy.

Orren and Judith went into the kitchen together. He sat and watched while she cleared everything from the table and put the meat and cheese and lettuce away. He cleared his throat.

"How's she doing?" he asked, finally.

"All right, I guess," answered Judith. "But this is the first time she's let me actually help her."

"She's a stubborn woman." Orren had a way of saying things that left no space around them. Judith couldn't really reply so she just nodded, slightly, and they were silent for awhile.

"You can smoke if you want," she finally said, as she got out her sketchpad from the pantry shelf, where she'd kept it since she realized that most of her work would be done in the kitchen.

"Nah, I gave that up," he answered. "Last Spring."

"That's good." Judith spread out her pencils, sighed. "I wish I had some charcoal."

"You didn't bring any?"

"No, I had thought when I got here I'd be so busy I wouldn't need..." A pause. "Well, we'll do something else, then," and she took up a forest-green pencil, sharpened it quickly, and began to render a stalk of wildflower in tall grass. Orren watched her hands until he could tell what she'd chosen to do. He didn't want to distract her.

He remembered when he had first heard of her; he had known at that moment that Jim was lost to the ranch, by the tone of his voice. It was the same voice Orren had used when he'd first told his Uncle Ames about Margaret: it had a slightly pleading tone, a tone you couldn't argue with. Jim had been the one son he'd thought he could leave it all to: the land, the cattle; and retire when it was time. But that dream was over when Jim had come on the line and said "Dad, I have met this girl, she's an artist, and she's from Connecticut, can you believe it?" and Orren believed it, and just said, "You follow your heart, son. But let your mother meet her first."

So they had come out to the ranch, she and Jim, kids so in love he couldn't hate her like he wanted to; and Margaret had said to him that night as they lay together, thirty years married, that Judith had seemed all right and Jim had a good head on his shoulders. And what could they expect with Jim in college -- it was unrealistic that he'd fall for a country girl. But Orren had still been disappointed, though he kept it inside his heart. He had hoped, actually, that Jim would come home from college a single man, and marry a new schoolteacher, like Larry Gilstrap had done, or find some sweet high school girl from town who didn't want to leave Branson, like he, Orren, had done. But he resigned himself to the fact of Judith, and when he called Jim to tell him about the cancer, Judith had gotten on the line -- the first time he'd ever really talked to her -- and said anything they needed, just ask. And she meant it.

When Gracie and Margaret were finished with the driving, and Margaret just needed to "rest and recuperate," according to the doctors, Orren called Jim's and she was in the bus station three days later, apologizing for taking so long. He had been at a loss for what to say to her. But she hadn't tried to break the quiet and talk about anything. One thing Jim had done right: he had found a girl who understood silence. Orren was grateful for that. He felt himself realize that even if Margaret did work as though Judith weren't there to help her (a fact that had been disturbing him), that it would be all right, that Judith would be there when needed, and Margaret must have understood this, he thought, long before.

He looked up from the wildflower drawing at Judith, and she looked up too, and smiled at him. They settled there and that's how Margaret found them, thirty minutes later, when she came out of the bathroom to get a glass of milk.

On Saturday, three days later, Margaret insisted that she was able to go out and show Judith the "Indian Caves" southeast of Branson.

"You can't come to visit this part of the country without a trip out there," she told Judith. "Orren and Jase will go with us so it'll be safe." Jase was Orren's retriever, a beautiful golden short-hair that wasn't allowed inside the house. "Just stay close to Orren and Jase and there won't be any problem with snakes," Margaret added. Judith dreaded the whole idea.

Orren called the people who owned the land. Margaret fixed a backpack full of food: oranges, sandwiches, candy bars; and six cokes to keep it all cool. Judith brought a camera slung around her wrist. In the car Jase rested on the backseat with Orren, not looking out the windows.

It was just about noon when they finally pulled off the road and onto the buffalo grass of a shallow valley. A distance beyond them lay a small mesa,

blocked by cottonwoods and pinion trees. "Oh, it's probably two miles," said Orren when Judith asked. She looked at Margaret, and he shrugged. "I just follow orders, sometimes," he said with a grin. He hiked up the backpack on his shoulders. "Ready?"

They took off in single file: Jase, Orren, Margaret, and Judith, who trailed partly because she wanted to keep an eye on Margaret (who seemed full of energy) and partly because of that warning about snakes.

"It's too hot for them to be out on the plain," Margaret turned around to reassure her. "They'll be in the shade of the mesa now. Don't worry."

"Who said I was worried?" muttered Judith, and Margaret knew she'd said the wrong thing: she was "mothering" again.

"Just in case," Margaret said.

"Has Jim ever taught you about arrowhead hunting?" asked Orren, suddenly stopping before a large red-ant hill.

"No, but he's shown me some of his arrowheads from when he lived here," Judith answered. She had never understood the attraction Jim had for his rocks and pebbles.

"Well, here," said Orren, squatting down in front of the hill and sweeping away the crown of it with his forearm. "It's time for some education."

"Why would an arrowhead be in an anthill?" asked Judith. She squatted down beside him but at some distance from the milling insects. Margaret pulled her hat brim down a little and watched them.

"Ants carry 'em," Orren said. "It's flint. It's light. Ants like pretty colors." He began to sift through the tiny stones that made up the hill.

"Won't you get stung?" Judith asked, watching the ants crawl up his fingers.

"Nah," Orren answered. "Just brush 'em off." He looked up at her. "Actually,

I haven't looked through this hill in a long time -- at least a year since I've even been in this part of the country. They're bound to have found some new ones for me." Orren enjoyed Indian lore. It was one of the few things he had actually, consciously studied.

Jase came jogging back from the gully he'd disappeared into a few minutes ago. "I can't stand here all day, Orren," said Margaret. "Won't there be a better one higher up?"

Orren sighed. "I guess so." He stood up and brushed the ants off him, kicked the hill a few times. "Well!" he exclaimed. "There's one!" he reached down into the flint sand and brought up a thin clay-colored sliver. "See," he showed it to Judith, "you can tell it's been worked." He put it in his pocket and they hiked on.

"You'd think that all the arrowheads had been found by now," said Judith, glad to leave the anthill, where more and more quarter-inch-long red ants kept showing up.

"Not hardly," said Orren.

When they got to the trees, after navigating the deep gully that Judith had not even seen from the car, she looked back and saw that they were high above the level of plain the car was parked on. Orren stopped and broke off a thick gnarled branch of dead cottonwood for Margaret as a walking stick and Judith felt stupid that she hadn't even realized that they'd been going uphill. And in this heat.

"Are you doing all right, Margaret?" she asked.

"Well," Margaret puffed her breath a little, "I'm all right, but I'll be glad when we get there." They all paused awhile. Orren wandered around in a circle while Margaret leaned back against a boulder. Margaret couldn't figure out what was wrong with her. It wasn't tiredness. Not really. It felt too good to be out, to be moving; she knew her adrenaline was flowing; but the restless

feeling was back, with a force. She wanted to sit and she wanted to bolt. She felt suddenly out of place in this place she'd grown up.

"Aha!" Orren said. The women looked at each other. They knew he'd found another anthill. "This is a great place," he said. "This is where they probably had a look-out. They could sit up here and work." he chuckled. Judith went over to investigate. Orren was already digging through the ant hill. Past him lay the valley stretching out in three directions, unblocked by trees. He tilted his baseball cap up and smiled at Judith.

"I guess I'll try," she said. Orren looked like a kid on Christmas. Jim had never told her about this side of his dad. Besides, there didn't seem to be nearly as many ants at this hill. She squatted down on the other side of the hill from Orren. Almost directly beneath her knee lay a wafer-thin blue stone. She held it out for inspection.

"Check it for ridges," Orren told her. He dug out the red stone from his pocket that he'd found earlier. "The tip's off of this one, but you can tell, it's been worked along the edges. Sharp. And here there's the groove by the broken off part, where the blood could flow out."

"Lovely," said Judith. She checked her blue stone. Too thin, she decided, to be a real arrowhead. She looked around some more, hoping there'd be another on the ground so she wouldn't have to dig. "So Indians really lived up here?" she asked, after awhile.

"Well, they camped here," Orren answered. "These were Navajo. They didn't really live anywhere."

"They must have had a life of total freedom," they heard Margaret and looked up. She had moved closer and was watching them. She was agitated about something. Her body was almost rocking back and forth as she sat back on another boulder. "They were never tied to any place."



"Well, they did come back to the same places, over and over," said Orren. "They stayed in the same general country until we drove them out."

"That's not what I mean," said Margaret. "I mean whenever they got tired of one place they could just move on."

"They moved on with the Buffalo," Orren said.

Margaret was getting frustrated. He didn't understand at all, and, she realized, neither did she. "But the important thing is, when it was time, they moved. When they got sick, they died," she said. "They moved on to the Great Hunting Grounds. The Navajos never sat around and worried that they might already be dead." The words were out before she realized what she'd done. She sat there with her mouth open. Orren and Judith both sat back and looked at her, their faces, suddenly, empty. For some strange reason Margaret had a split-second thought that they looked like father and daughter. They all three studied each other for what seemed like a long time.

"That's a freedom, all right," said Orren finally.

Judith began to shake, just a little. There was an ant crawling up her arm but she didn't feel it.

"I'm sorry," said Margaret. Orren got up and brushed himself off, his face still impassive. He went over to her and put his palms on each side of her knees where they rested on the boulder.

"Hon," he said. "I *love* you." He had not said that in front of another person for as long as she'd known him. Margaret knew he didn't want her to cry, because then he might cry, and Judith was here; and Margaret was glad of it because she didn't want to explain herself, not until she could rest. She felt, suddenly, very tired. All her adrenaline was gone. "I'm okay, really," she said to him. She put her hand out and rested it on his forearm, squeezed it the slightest bit. "it's just . . . been a rough time, you know." He looked away for a

second and nodded then. Judith got to her feet and began wiping the ants off, like Orren had shown her. "Let's go on up to the caves," she said, in the calmest voice she had.

Jase came back around and romped a bit at their feet again as they continued the hike up to the thrust of the mesa's cliff. Orren held on to the back of Margaret's elbow most of the way.

When they got to the caves, Judith was lost in the beauty of the place. There was chalk in the granite and the wall rising up from the trees was naturally painted in thick streaks of red, blue, and yellow. The streaks weren't straight up and down but waved, like a giant child's fingerpaint tracks. The three walked along the wall for a ways and when they turned a rounded corner they came to a series of deep but low caves, carved out of the naturally indented rock into smooth, oblong dwellings. Carved in relief in the caves and on the wall surrounding them were still-stained drawings of deer, buffalo, palms of hands, birds, stars. Judith traced one of the stars -- seven points -- with her fingers. "Wow," she said. "Nobody told me."

Orren had Margaret sitting comfortably before he built the fire; a small one so mosquitos wouldn't be tempted to swarm into the caves. He knew they got thick in the late afternoon. The ceiling of the cave was still black from the Indian fires of a hundred years ago; built, he was sure, for the same reason. While he gathered the deadwood and Judith snapped pictures of the cave drawings with her camera, Margaret rummaged around in the backpack and laid out their lunch. She tried not to think about Indians, or anything at all.

That night Margaret went to sleep right away, but when she woke after the dream Orren was lying on his side, watching her.

"How can I make you happy?" he asked softly, an old phrase between them.

"Oh, Orren," she said, with a little catch in her voice, "I just don't seem to know how to be happy anymore."

"Let me show you," he whispered, and leaned over to kiss her. She pulled away from him.

"No, that's not it," she said.

"Then what is?" he asked, sounding almost angry.

"I don't know," she whispered back. "When I went in to the radiation I thought when it was over I would be the same, but I found out I wasn't content with that -- with being the same," Margaret stopped, looked at Orren. He wasn't really angry. "I just want to feel alive again, Orren," she said, and let herself start to cry. "I want to be young, I want to be independent, I want to feel life inside me again. I don't -- I don't want to be old, or dead, either." And that was the problem, all along. She turned then to Orren and hugged him to her, and he held her, too, finally, in complete understanding, and stroked her hair like he had when they'd been first married.

The next morning when Judith came into the kitchen, Margaret was at the table, writing notes to those people who had sent her cards and gifts while she'd been sick. She looked up quickly and smiled widely at Judith, as if to say "I'm all right" without having to say anything. "I didn't make breakfast this morning," she said. "There's coffee made, cake and rolls or eggs and bacon at your disposal."

Judith was surprised: Margaret always made breakfast. It had been one of the chores she was most insistent about. "Okay," she said anyway and poured herself a cup of coffee. She went to the refrigerator and pulled out eggs and bread and started her own. She had gotten into the habit of breakfast when she and Jim were first married. While she was scrambling the eggs, Orren came in,

and she realized that for the first time since she'd been here he had slept late. He nodded to her, sat down and patted Margaret's writing arm; she stopped and looked up, gave him a smile. Judith turned back to the eggs. She could tell her presence was an intrusion, this time.

"What do you say we go riding this afternoon?" asked Orren. He and Margaret held hands across the table.

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" asked Judith, looking at the toaster.

"Of course I will," answered Margaret. "I've been riding since I was a little girl. Now I'm grown, I'm even better at it." She looked at Orren and giggled. Judith put the eggs and toast on a plate and sat next to them at the table.

"Well," she said, glancing at Orren, whose face hadn't changed but who seemed different, too -- maybe it was that they were holding hands? Judith didn't know but she understood a little. "You two go on without me."

So later, when the hottest part of the day was past and Orren had come back after chores and he and Margaret had gone down to saddle up, Judith poured herself a big glass of iced tea. She sat down and drew it to scale, and then added a full lemon and then a lime, drew curls of peeling off the lime and into the glass. Then she put her drawing supplies away. She sipped slowly and dialed Jim.

"Honey?" she said when he came on the line, "I think it's time I came home."

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## I Fiction and Poetry

William Stafford writes that "Sometimes it seems to me that a writer habitually touches the earth, touches home, clings to all that passes. Even to start a poem is to unreel stingily from the starting place ..." (*Writing the Australian Crawl: Views on the Writer's Vocation*, University of Michigan Press paperback, 1978, page 43).

Stephen Minot has defined fiction and poetry in his book *Three Genres: The Writing of Fiction, Poetry, and Drama* (Prentice Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliff, New Jersey, 1965) as art forms with complementary but clearly separate goals. Fiction can cover a wide spectrum of forms, only including as necessary such elements as tension and character; poetry is more formalized: it employs lines, which lend the genre a distinctive structure, although within the structure is an almost infinite range of possibilities. Along with the line, poetry uses a more pronounced rhythm than that of ordinary language, from traditional rhythm structures such as the iambic pentameter to syntactical rhythm very close to prose; a heightened sense of sound, seen in techniques such as alliteration, consonance and assonance, and in more subtle connections between words such as clusters of like-sounding vowels or consonants that do not rhyme but ring familiar chimes in the reader's mind; poetry also employs compression of image and experience. Fiction usually fleshes out the scenes which in poetry are often only suggested.

Conventional stories must have clear beginnings, middles and ends, while poems, especially lyric poems, are not bound by this rule. A poem can be in a kind of "floating" state in time, although some sense of time is needed within the frame of the poem for the rhythm to work. Frost's poem

"Acquainted with the Night" is a good representative of a lyric poem that carries mood and time with its rhythm.

William Stafford's narrative poems like "Traveling Through the Dark" allow him to have the best of both genres. He writes a story with plot and characters (the speaker and the deer), and a clear beginning, middle and end -- even a climactic moment where the character might change: "I thought hard for us all" -- and yet this is a poem in every technical sense. The tightness of construction, the mood, the voice, are all consistent and beautifully controlled. The sound devices, (alliteration, assonance and consonance) of the first two lines tells us that what we have found is most certainly a poem, or at least, very "poetic": "Traveling through the dark I found a deer / dead on the edge of the Wilson River road."

Poetry has personae, and sometimes characters, but because the genre is so condensed, it's almost impossible to represent an interaction of conflicting ideas that together can change a central character's mind about something. A short poem can be about a persona's or a character's reaction to having changed, but does not usually allow the change to occur in the actual poem itself, because of the condensed structure. Or it may manipulate the reader into seeing a change coming, as much minimalist fiction does. Fiction allows any of these options or all of them in one story.

Regardless of genre, based on my reading of Stafford and others, it seems clear to me that even if the material is surreal, the language a writer uses should be accessible, perhaps even to appear ordinary. I think "ordinary" language has the ability to express extraordinary power, but it is subtle and therefore difficult, like "playing tennis with the net down," to recast a phrase from Frost.

This goal has itself become a theme in what I write. I try to show, in both genres, that ordinary experiences are powerful, and ordinary people can

be extraordinary.

Stafford and Flannery O'Connor, who have influenced me in both poetry and prose, are masters of language and theme. Both use the natural, ordinary world as both theme and imagery throughout their writing. Both show the most "common" people and "common" things as being of overwhelming importance. For instance, in Stafford's "On a Church Lawn," dandelions are purveyors of the great truth: "God is not big; He is right." And O'Connor's least pretentious characters are her most favored.

There might be some argument over the simplicity in O'Connor. She writes about anything, some would say, but the ordinary. Her characters are bizarre, obsessed, often perverse; but they are also written about in such a matter-of-fact voice, and are placed in such a recognizable, ordinary world that they are completely believable. If her characters were to come to life and walk down the street they would be indistinguishable from ordinary pedestrian traffic -- until they began to converse. Also, I believe that many of the characters who seem grotesque in her stories are really not drawn differently than people are in real life. Rather, they are just studied to the point that their grotesqueness becomes apparent, instead of it being hidden or obscured (most people manage to avoid scrutiny of the kind O'Connor brings to her characters). I have been accused of writing caricatures, as I'm sure she was. But clergy like Brother Roger and the unnamed preacher in "May" have very firm roots in fact. There is nothing of caricature about them except in the minds of readers who have not yet met people like them.

Stafford has been criticized by some for his "common" language; his poetry has been called "non-poetic" and even dull by those who don't appreciate beauty in the simple, or who were too obtuse to figure out his imagery. He is not simplistic, as critics like John Ashbery have called him. He is a genius of the subtle. He suggests ideas to his readers -- he assumes



they are clever enough or interested enough to pick up on what he is saying. From the beginning of his career Stafford has been able to pull off the feat of using ordinary language, ordinary images, to express powerful forces.

In both my poetry and prose I try to stay true to the idea of Stafford's simple language and O'Connor's careful characterization.

Moral judgments, which are a part of poetry as much as they are a part of fiction, are embedded in poetry's mood, even the rhythm, and more often have to be extracted during explication of a poem. Fiction, because it has those individual characters and space in which to explore a plot, can be more explicit about moral judgments because it has more room to move around in. An example of this would be almost any of O'Connor's stories, which deal with religious themes throughout. The language of poetry is so condensed that a reader will be able to pick up immediately on any didacticism, so that should be avoided as much as possible. Otherwise the poem will wind up categorized as "religious poetry" or "political poetry," even if it's quite good outside of such limits. George Herbert's religious poetry gets short shrift compared to John Donne's secular work, when technically the two poets are peers.

This difference in my conception of the two genres has of course influenced the themes I write about in each, as much as the technical differences between prose and poetry have. I cannot see myself writing about religious issues in verse.

Robert Frost wrote some of the best narrative poetry in this century. He did not write fiction, even though some of his pieces are quite long ("Death of a Hired Man" is 176 lines, "A Servant to Servants" is 177). If Frost's "Death of A Hired Man," for instance, had been written in fiction, we would have found out a lot more about Silas and his relationship to the farm. We would have understood his difficult relationship with the brother he would

not go to when he knew he was dying -- we could have had a story just about Silas. Or we might have had a story about Mary and Warren, and their relationship to their hired hands, and each other. After reading a prose story about these people, we might have a good understanding of the kind of people who live and work on farms, and how strongly they feel about the land and their connection with the places they have worked. The poem, however, actually deals with much more than the bucolic life -- the rhythm and the diction make the theme of home the central issue, rather than the characters and their individual concerns.

Also, because it is a poem, the genre implicitly invites the reader to see the universal theme. It is implicit in the sense that it is all-pervading -- it is part of what is expected of a poem. In fiction such a theme would have to be much more explicit because the reader would have more distractions, if you will -- the reader will be drawing conclusions about the characters and inferring all kinds of individual motives on their actions and relationships that don't come up in the poem. Because it is a poem, either Warren or Mary could have said "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in." In fact, Frost sets that line apart, with only understood attribution, (rather than writing "Mary said") as he does the next: "I should have called it / Something you somehow haven't to deserve." In fiction, those lines would be required to clearly belong to one of the characters.

There are times when all writing can get away from you, when the words just seem to take over and spill out onto the page, the writer looking on in astonishment. This is fine, but such occurrences turn out differently in different genres. Let's say you wanted to write a poem about a certain incident from your childhood. As you start to put lines together what happens instead is that memories of a certain person, who may have played a peripheral part in that incident, begin to take over the poem. You end up

with a poem about that person rather than what you originally intended. If this were still a poem, then you would have to go back through, and take out the references to what you had originally intended which had themselves become peripheral to the poem that emerged. This happens often enough in poetry; as Minot points out in *Three Genres*: "The poet . . . usually selects a single aspect of the episode, reducing this by analysis and rejection of peripheral elements until he has a hard core with which to work. He usually abandons the dramatic elements and concentrates on a set of sense responses or images . . . or a set of emotional responses" (page 127).

If the poem had, instead, turned into a story, then you would need to back through and flesh out that incident and others like them where the person who originally inspired the work can become a character moving through the story's action.

In the first instance, you might end up with several poems, as long as you kept going back to the original incident you were trying to comment upon. In the second (that of the story) you would end up with a different main character but still be commenting upon the incident -- perhaps commenting upon both. A story can change its focus, shift a little here and there, and still contain enough of a core of what you originally started with to be satisfactory. A short poem cannot afford a shift in focus. It will become a completely different piece.

Sometimes writing that starts in one genre but belongs in another isn't clear until you've done a considerable amount of work on it. This happens to me quite a lot. One example, with "Margaret," is covered in a later section of this afterword.

I usually start fiction very deliberately, however, with a clear idea of how I want to begin, and the personality of the characters. I usually try to know the characters well enough before I start a story to feel comfortable

with their speech patterns. Each of them is an individual in my mind before I start writing anything.

This pattern is consistent with what Minot describes: "By the time one begins to write a story, the plot is usually established and serves as a guide. But a poet may begin with only a line or, more frequently, just an image" (page 199). This also, I think, affects my treatment of theme in the two genres -- in poetry, theme is usually an outgrowth of the image that starts me off, while in fiction, I usually have some ideas clearly in mind.

Both the poems and the fiction necessarily express a woman's sensibility, but I hope that my language is ordinary enough that masculine readers can see what I am trying to say as well as other women. The creative writing in this report is all feminist, not in the early sense of feminism as confrontation but in the sense that women now must take what advances have been made by the women's movement and do something with them, make them apply at an individual level.

I can be more direct about feminism and/or my feelings about organized religion in prose rather than poetry. The two genres allow for different approaches to various themes, with poetry requiring more obliqueness, because it usually doesn't have characters who do the speaking for the writer, or action that affects those characters.

## II Poetry

I want to start out this section with an in-depth, line-by-line explication of one of the poems from the collection, "Prison Town." (page 2) This is one of the poems about growing up, and as a narrative poem, combines some of the elements of fiction within the genre of poetry.

Even though the poem is based on my own experiences, I have fictionalized the names of the people. I want to step back from it and

discuss it with the children as characters, and the events as strictly representational. This is an example of work that has "unwound stingily from its starting place": the poem started out a simple scene from walking to school, but turned into an indictment of the social system that everyone learns early in life.

The first line, "In fourth grade on the way to school," starts out prose-like; it could easily be the first phrase of an opening sentence for a fiction story. Internal rhythm is begun, but for the most part all it does is set the poem in place and time, and it gives the reader knowledge that this will deal with children.

"Billy Archuleta, whose dad was a con," connects with the title. The reader sees that this is about a real prison town, and that the narrator has a classmate whose father is an inmate. Everything is still very prose-like. Then Billy "found a cat in the ditch / on third street. I remember": and at this point a rhythm will have been established. "On the way to school," "whose dad was a con," and "found a cat in the ditch" all have the same rhythm, and so do "In fourth grade," "Billy Archuleta," and "I remember." These groups, intertwined with one another, begin the movement of the poem. This rhythm stays fairly consistent through the first four stanzas.

There is not a lot of sound play with the words, except for a little alliteration, with "con" and "cat." The line breaks are important, however, and really set this off from prose more than any other distinction.

The "I remember" can be taken as a reliable narrator's comment or not, but the reader is here warned that there may be some distortion.

The cat is mutilated: "its eyeball had been squeezed / out, and rolled wetly over its black / cheek . . ." This is graphic and violent -- readers and listeners have flinched or gasped when I've read it -- it's especially shocking to be here so early in the poem, when the reader hasn't been led up

to such an image. I've even been told in workshop that the image should go, it's just too offensive. But I want the emotional but subtle violence that is done to the children of this poem to be brought with force to the readers' attention. Putting this very strong image in their heads at the start of the poem makes the rest of it resonate with a gory, senseless quality.

The enjambement is very deliberate with "cheek, as Billy swung it around and around / and around, his own head thrown back." I want Billy and the cat to be connected in the readers' minds. The cat is swung around and so is Billy; a picture of emotional disturbance should be inferred from the actual picture of the cat's corpse to what's going on inside the confused kid. He's twirling the cat, literally.

The next stanza leaves the last one behind in every respect but time: "I had a crush on Mr. Martin / but Julie Kellerman and I pledged / undying loyalty to each other, / forsaking all others, twining our fingers / into patterns only the two of us knew." This goes back to the reader's first expectation on the mention of fourth grade: innocence -- when kids are only nine or ten years old and first experimenting with peer contracts. This whole stanza is one that almost anyone, especially women, can identify with, because this is the age when girls become completely serious about their "best friends." They try to identify with each other, to the exclusion of all others. Boys sometimes make pacts with their friends, too, but rarely in the monogamous way that little girls do. It is not a sexual kind of relationship that's formed, rather it is a movement by children away from parents and siblings but in as secure a form as possible. It is a natural developmental stage. The "undying loyalty to each other" is somewhat ironic, because such pledges of course never last and the narrator has a crush on Mr. Martin even while taking her pledge. Also there is some foreshadowing, for in the poem, the characters of Julie and the narrator don't separate, because

they move away from the others in the crowd of guards' kids.

The next stanza brings the first back in rhythm and introduces a companion pair of characters to Billy. "In fifth grade the Wilson boys, / arsonists in the family tradition," lets the reader see that they are in the same social structure as Billy, and braces the reader for something dramatic, like Billy's cat. But instead the tension breaks because they are shown doing something not very delinquent or threatening, they "would sit under the old railroad track, early, and spit chew at Diana Washington / as she walked to school." This is a different setting from the first stanza and yet the same, because it is on the way to school. The boys are clearly aggressive and are described as threatening if need be -- they are "arsonists" and they are lashing back at their dysfunctional world even if in a mild way (or, this could be taken in the innocent interpretation that they might have been spitting at Diana just to get her attention, like boys of other generations who dipped girls' braids in inkwells. They are at an age when members of the opposite sex are sometimes considered attractive adversaries).

The Johnsons are described in terms more distant than Billy. They are not spitting at the narrator but at someone else. They are not shown setting fire to anything. They seem less ominous than Billy, although there's no way of telling if they are or not. Diana, however, is directly linked to the narrator, as much as the boys are linked to Billy. She is also on her way to school and is witness -- she actually comes under attack -- to the boys' actions.

Diana symbolizes her social class in a way the narrator can't, because she can be described more objectively: "... Diana was pretty, / but she was allergic / to everything, even grass." She was attractive, the first comment in the poem about anyone's looks, and it's clear that she represents something that is missing in the inmate's children's lives. But she wasn't

welcoming anything. She wasn't even tolerant. The most common of all plants, grass, was literally an untouchable to her: she is a symbol of the caste system the children will soon encounter. At this point, her allergies are to plants, but with peer pressure the allergies can extend to people.

"At my tenth birthday party, she sat / carefully on a blanket/ while we chose sides, and watched." At that age, children are for the most part integrated with no conception as to social differences, and teams are made up to play games without thinking about who the teammates are -- it only matters that they can play ball. But Diana's passive observance lends an ominous cast to the choosing of sides -- making it more important than just games. She is again a symbol of the narrator's sensibility. She doesn't participate actively in any discrimination, just observes and accepts, as she accepts her physical allergies. She goes along with it all unquestioningly, but holds herself aloof.

The next stanza again connects with the first and third, moving in time to the next grade and again introducing new characters to go with Billy and the Wilsons. Again something happens on the way to school, this time the most sinister of all. "In sixth grade Annette Johnson / shaved her sister Twyla's eyebrows off, / held her down and did it / on Griffin Street, almost on school grounds." Again the reader faces an aggressive, violent act committed by a child. At this point the reader is almost expecting something bizarre -- but perhaps not with the sexual overtones this stanza holds. She "held her down and did it" almost sounds like a rape, as in a symbolic sense, to those characters, it was. It was Annette's way of making her sister ugly, which may have been to protect her or may have been out of jealousy. By the sixth grade girls are just beginning to think in sexual terms. These sisters were clearly from an abusive situation as much, or more so, than the boys, as the rest of the stanza makes clear.



The last comment about Annette doesn't make sense unless the reader connects Annette's violence toward her sister with what she has witnessed or experienced at night. "Annette slept most of the time. Her mom / was a hooker, so she stayed awake nights." -- whether her mother pimped her or not, Annette is clearly not an innocent any longer. The line break after "her mom" is again a deliberate breakup of the sentence to make the reader think about the implications for Annette. School is her place of refuge, where she feels secure enough to sleep. Annette's awareness is a precursor to the main shift in the children's lives -- junior high and the bus.

The next stanza offers a complete change in rhythm as well as time -- it should be clear this is not supposed to flow from grade to grade any more. A change has happened just in the word "bus" -- the reader sees that no more observations will be made on the walk to school. "We found we were from the wrong school / the one 'retards' and 'con's kids' went to" -- the social class structure is made clear by the most powerful, all-important group of that age: peers. The classmates stop seeing one another as individuals. Their names have been dropped in favor of all-encompassing epithets. Once the names have been left behind, there's no going back, "and everyone stopped talking to each other." The class break is complete. No one says a word about it. The whole thing, in childhood retrospect, is a foregone conclusion.

"Maybe they knew it was happening." This one-line stanza went through several incarnations, but as it stands it's as strong an indictment as I can make and still try to be subtle. The whole system is so passive. No one protests, no one even mentions what is going on (even among the kids who stay in the same peer group, like the guards' kids) -- so there's a question whether the kids realized what they were going through or doing to each other. Probably some of the more perceptive ones did, although there was no vocal reaction.

The line was originally in a stanza of its own, buried in a few other lines about the break-up of the children. It was melodramatic, bringing back Billy and the cat and Twyla's eyes, so I decided to cut those lines, but when I put the important line onto the previous stanza it again seemed buried. It didn't work as the first line of the last stanza, because I didn't want any confusion about who "they" were -- I wanted it clear that I meant the kids left behind as much as the guards' kids. So it seemed strongest to place the line by itself and let the question hang.

Then the last stanza becomes a denouement, a rationalization of the break. "Diana and Julie and I, / all the guards' kids left them -- / Billy, the Johnsons, the Wilsons, the rest -- / behind, like kids do," in more ways than the social. These kids, the reader knows without the narrator's being explicit, never stood a chance in the educational system. They were never really allowed to catch up socially with the other kids and therefore couldn't keep up academically (the two do go hand-in-hand). Naming them, the narrator remembers them again as individuals in a way she hasn't since that time -- the poem has moved up to the adult's reminiscence, on to the persona who stepped out of Billy's story with "I remember." The grown-up is trying to remember the kids and rationalize what happened, even though doing both is bound to bring on a moral problem.

But the narrator admits she was "relieved," at the break. The kids left behind, to be honest, were scary. They were unpredictable. The kids who moved on were "doing what we're told, / moving with the crowd." They were doing the right thing -- or so they were led to believe. The last two lines function as both rationalization and indictment. The guards' kids were only exercising their human nature at taking the way out with these disturbed kids. But it is disturbing that such is human nature.

The poem is about a particular community but it is also universal in

several ways. First of all, it is about the development of prejudice and class consciousness. The kids are not really aware of racial discrimination (in fact, most people in the actual community would deny any hint of racism because there are almost no minorities in the town) -- what they are learning is class differences, caste systems. This lesson is about as universal a one as children get. The peer pressure and the bigger melting pot are the avenues by which the children act out what they already want, even if they can't articulate it: to get away from the crazy, disturbed kids.

The adults in the system are supposed to be the ones to help children in difficult home lives, but to kids, adults are a million miles away, and all they can understand is what they see of their peers. Before junior high, the kids are integrated because they are few, so they know one another by name and character and can work or play with each other. As soon as there are too many to know everybody, new groups of choice form, with the social classes of kids closely resembling that of their parents.

This poem is, like others in the collection that deal with growing up, almost excessively prosy. It's poetic devices are few. I don't think I could just take away the line breaks and have a prose piece -- even a vignette. Yet the use of rhythm and the symbols that the characters themselves become preclude this becoming fiction. A prose story of this same group of children would have each child an individual and each child's action or passivity significant, when what I want represented is a comment on passivity and discrimination that everyone can see in his or her own childhood.

I am not going to explicate so thoroughly poems from my other rough divisions, love poems and poems about poetry. But I would like to discuss a lyric poem very briefly. "Spider Dreams" (page 18) is about poetry and it is also somewhat feminist. The spider who pulls herself inside the room and builds a nest represents both a writer who tries to avoid the work of

writing (even though it's a compulsion that can't be avoided), and a weary woman who does what she has to do. The whole thing is kind of surreal, which I like, and dreamlike. This poem is more representative of the classical idea of poetry being different from prose in theme. It is uncommon, for one thing, to find a story commenting on itself, or on the genre of fiction. When it does happen it usually takes the life out of the story -- the whole thing becomes so self-centered that the characters lose their main functions in moving the story along. In poetry, however, such comments are often embedded in the work. Just about every person who has ever attempted poetry has made some kind of comment on the art within a poem. Some of the best are the modernists like Frost and William Carlos Williams. I find myself writing such poems quite often. This one started out much more explicitly, with the writer a character in the poem, dreaming along with the spider about weaving. I cut the poet out because it was too confusing the way it was -- readers told me that they weren't sure where the spider dream ended and the poet's began. In one sense that pleased me because I wanted the connection between them, but I decided finally that the trade-off wasn't worth it, and I just stayed with the spider, hoping that she could make the writing analogy clear enough by herself.

So the spider is a writer, who works with rhythms. The rhythm in this poem is very pronounced, especially in the final stanza, where the spider/writer gives herself completely to her dream: "nothing left to weave, to trap, to wind." The poems she produces are her little ones, who leave her, a husk, as they go on with their own lives. The spider is also a woman, a parent. This poem is multi-level. But I am happy with readers who end up saying that they just enjoy the sound of it.

The spider goes through the epiphany of her life, from resignation to action to reincarnation through her little ones. The poem happens in such

fragmented time that it could have taken place in an hour or a lifetime, yet time in both poems leads to the "now" in the reader's mind. The adult comes back at the end of "Prison Town" to speak to the reader, taking the reader away from the world of childhood and back into now. (This also happens in "Rain," page 8). When the little ones break open the nest, it is now. But the adult speaker doesn't have to make it so explicit. Successful poetry all has that quality of happening again every time it is read -- it's part of the emotional value of the genre. Even historical poetry has that sense that what is being experienced is happening currently, and surreal poetry too. If rain is coming, as in "Late May on the Colorado Grasslands," or if a young girl is killed, as in "Tirza," it happens in the reader's mind now. So poetry, which must be heard with an inner voice if it is to be really remembered, must be rhythmical. This also goes back to the very primal roots of poetry.

Theodore Roethke, in his essay "Some Remarks on Rhythm" (*On the Poet and His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke*, Ralph J. Mills, editor, University of Washington Press, 1965), has written that the childhood rhythms that we were born with and which made up our kid's chants and nursery rhymes, are the most powerful of forces, and the poet who can play with those rhythms can tap into the most primal aesthetic of all. Rhythm, he writes, "gives us the very psychic energy of the speaker" in a poem. Roethke, although in his own poetry usually formally structured, disagreed with the notion that poetry must be fit into an established pattern. Instead, like William Blake, he believed that "the nervousness, the tension, the energy in the whole poem ... is a clue to everything" (page 79).

Roethke also discusses the concept of the rhythm helping to make a poem more tactile so that the concrete images stand out in bolder relief. He refers to the "auditory imagination" of Eliot: "the sinuousness, a rhythm like the tail of a fish, a cadence like the sound of the sea or the arbor bees -- a

droning, a hissing, a sighing" (page 80).

Roethke writes: "But what about the rhythm and the poem as a whole? Are there any ways of sustaining it, you may ask? We must keep in mind that rhythm is the entire movement, the flow, the recurrence of stress and unstress that is related to the rhythms of the blood, the rhythms of nature. It involves certainly stress, time, pitch, the texture of the words, the total meaning of the poem" (Mills, pages 78-9).

Levertov's comments about poetry, expressed in "The Poet in the World" (New Directions Books, James Laughlin, New Directions Publishing Co., New York, 1973), are very political and, to me, revelatory. She brought me to see the necessity of universality of even the most personal of poems. That element, that leaving of yourself behind in order for the reader to get past the poet and into the word, was very explicitly discussed by Levertov. Eliot's idea that a poet should not be seen at all in his or her work is condemned here; I needed that at the time I read the book. The poet, as the dancer in ballet, the painter in oils, the musician in jazz, is a part of the art and gives it its human, universal quality. Even the most confessional of poems can have that element of universality, as modern and post-modern poets have demonstrated repeatedly in the face of Eliot's assumptions.

I also believe, based on the war poetry that Levertov and others produced who were writing in the Vietnam era, that political poetry must have some kind of confessional quality in order to work. Kinnell said the "the best poems ... have been those whose outrage does not cause the author to forget that he and his enemy are brothers" (Galway Kinnell, *Walking Down the Stairs: Selections from Interviews*, University of Michigan Press paperback, 1978, page 3).

"Tirza" was an exercise in this assumption. It was a reaction not only to the tragic situation in the occupied territories, but also to the

anti-semitism that was growing in people around me on the K-State campus because of the idiotic Israeli policies toward the escalating intifada. In workshop another student brought in a poem that was, to me, horrible: didactic, self-righteous, judgmental. Nobody in the class would criticise it because everybody sympathized so much with the writer's anger at the Jewish state. But the more I considered the piece, which although cathartic was not poetic, the more disturbed I became. The same day, Tirza Porat was killed. The poem was really my first attempt at true political poetry. The poem is in the form of a dramatic monologue, spoken by the kind of person I imagined Tirza to be -- her age was the biggest clue as to what kind of persona I was creating.

I wanted the irony of the whole situation to permeate through the poem: not just Tirza's own senseless death at the hands of her ostensible protector, but the Jewish state, born out of holocaust and persecution, paranoid and brutal toward the Arabs who live among them. The first five lines are meant to set this stage.

It was partially Tirza's age that made her death, the first Jewish death in the uprising, so sad, and yet seemingly so inevitable, and I wanted to make her age of supreme importance. After all, it is the young Arabs who are waging the uprising, and the young who are being destroyed in that part of the world. Her death by Romam Aldubi's gun was so very appropriate, almost as if it had been set up to make the Israelis consider what they were doing. Her smug attitude in the poem is partially the result of just being a girl of 15, and partially the result of her being Israeli in 1987.

The line in the center of the poem, "I knew the guns could fire," is intended to show her innocence even though she proclaims how jaded she is: she could never really know about those guns until she lost her certainty about everything else. I wanted her to represent, at least in a small way, the

entire Israeli nation.

The final major influence in my poetry would be the King James Bible. Combine Stafford's advice about simple language with my strong background in the King James Bible and you have the kind of rhythm-making that I try to accomplish. The KJV was what I learned to read from; I started memorizing verses long before I knew what they meant. The tendency to revere rhythm, therefore, was instilled in me young, but the modern poets that I studied helped me learn what to do with it. I feel sorry for other writers who didn't get to learn literature the way I did but instead, bored with TV, had to search for it themselves. The voice of the court of King James, in the Bible and in Shakespeare, has always been a treasured undercurrent in my head. I don't -- can't -- write in that voice, but it gives me grounding.

Psalms 90, (attributed to Moses), is like all the Psalms in that its poetry is filled with rhythm:

Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.

Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.

Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men.

For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.

Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up.

In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth. . . .

For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told.

This is very much like modern free verse. The rhythm runs through the repetition, the flow of word patterns, and the breath structure worked into the sentence patterns -- the poem "Prison Town" uses much the same techniques.



### III Fiction

My stories don't lean much on action, but rather on explorations of character. Indeed, the characters are all so real to me that if they were put in any fictional situation I don't think I'd have any trouble knowing what they would do. I tried, in the stories presented here, to put them in situations that would make them understandable to readers -- by that I mean in their own environments. The main characters are all in the world that created them: the environment of the church, or in Margaret's case, the natural world.

The stories included here are conventional stories; they don't fit into any kind of standard genre of fiction except the most traditional. I haven't yet gotten to the point in fiction where I feel I could successfully play with forms. At this point, characterization and setting are what I am concentrating on, hoping that the reader will feel "at home" in the stories, can fall into the world I am describing, without too much trouble. For several reasons, I believe that "Margaret" is the most successful of the three in that.

First of all, the three characters in "Margaret" are all, for the most part, sympathetic, whereas in "Say Amen" and "May" the characters are, for the most part, unfamiliar types, and are not immediately likeable. In fact, for some readers, particularly those whose only knowledge of the kind of fundamentalist church I write about is that gleaned from TV preachers, the characters never really become real people, because the popular culture caricature of the type is so strongly ingrained. But Margaret and Orren seem like family right away -- almost everyone knows people like them, in every kind of setting. Judith is also a familiar type of person, with her feeling of

being at a loss much of the time, especially in this world that she is unfamiliar with. Being married to Jim, though, makes her a part of this world by default. The three are easy to identify with, but I hope that they are not just stock characters. What they are going through -- Margaret's recovery from cancer -- is something many readers have gone through themselves with their own loved ones.

Secondly, the setting of the story is unambiguous. The other two stories could take place in communities just about anywhere in the country (probably the south or midwest), so it was a little harder to actually place the people geographically in a reader's mind. Branson is a real place that one can find on a map (well, a detailed map), and the description of it is as detailed as I could make it, especially the scene at Folsom Falls. This "reality" helps bring the reader closer to the characters.

Another thing the setting in "Margaret" does is make the characterizations more understandable without my having to do a lot of exposition. Orren, for instance, is barely described, but a reader will know a good deal about the kind of man he is from reading about the kind of ranch he's worked all his life. Margaret and Orren's sons are also characterized by the setting, although none of them comes on the scene at all. A reader will have a good idea of the kind of people who live or have lived in such country.

Third, the crisis that Margaret is going through in this story is not a crisis of faith, which for many readers is uncomfortable or unfamiliar. Brother Roger, being a difficult character to appreciate as an individual in the first place, does not find a lot of immediate sympathy when he realizes that his entire world-view has fallen in on him. May, being a young girl, is barely aware of what is actually happening to her at all. Her family is also difficult to get to know, partially because they all barely speak to one another. "May" is a subtle story in a lot of ways, but is unfortunately

overshadowed by the character of the preacher, who is again taken by many readers to be a caricature. His failure to effectively counsel the Tuckermans draws some readers up short. It has been difficult for me to figure out a way to explain that the man just doesn't have the education or the innate skill to handle such a situation.

In Margaret's case, the help that both Orren and Judith try to give her is clearly as much as anyone could expect -- she is a strong woman on her own, and what help she doesn't get is by her choice. Her crisis is one that many people almost expect to face themselves someday. Her reaction then is one that many readers admire. This is in contrast to Amanda Hatch, who reacts to her own crisis in a very different, and upsetting, way.

"Margaret" went through several stages of composition. It started out a completely different story, with only the characters of Margaret and Orren and the setting of Branson the common threads. The original story was about Margaret falling from one of her horses, breaking her leg, and having to rely on an illegal Mexican immigrant to rescue her. (Illegal immigrants often jump the train which goes through southern Texas and New Mexico, and get off when the train goes through the area, because the land is fairly flat, the train always slows down while rounding the mesa, and the city of Trinidad is only about 50 miles away.) But much of the plot was illogical, and Margaret did not come out a sympathetic character, because of her fear of the Mexican. I scrapped the story, although I think I may go back eventually to write about that. However, I didn't want to scrap Margaret, because even though the story which was her first vehicle was not successful, I liked the character, and I wanted to do something more with her.

I also wanted to do something more with the setting. Branson is a very special place to me; even though I was raised in Cañon City, Colorado, I have more emotional ties to Branson. I like to write about that area for the same

reason that O'Connor wrote about the south -- because it's where I have the most ties and where I understand the people best. Setting is to me as important as it is to O'Connor, I think for the same reason. The people we describe are part of a landscape.

Several months after that first draft of "Margaret," I wrote the following for poetry workshop:

#### HUNTING FOR ARROWHEADS

"Look for 'em in anthills," he says.  
 "That's where the flint goes." He  
 squints a little at the Indian Caves,  
 not too far off behind us.  
 "Finding traces is no different,  
 really, than walking through tracks  
 in wet mud. Your own feet  
 move 'em, slide 'em down  
 so you can't see for your own  
 progress. Or it's like parched ground.  
 Dust rises up, no one  
 looks at where it settles.

"Ants collect 'em." Early morning,  
 the pinion and cactus still dewy,  
 he squats down and pushes a giant  
 hill over with his arm. "Never mind  
 the ants," he says. "They're red ones.  
 Tough. Tomorrow no one could tell  
 we've been here. Look for what glints."

It's the gritty feel of wet dirt.  
 Tiny boulders packed together  
 with smaller sand, still dew-heavy  
 and smelling of fresh earth.

I find one. It is pale blue  
 and thin. "Check it for ridges.  
 This red stone here --" he shows  
 me another -- "see how it was chipped?"

The tip's off, but you can tell,  
 it's been worked along the edges.  
 Sharp. And still there's the groove  
 by the broken off part, where  
 the blood could flow out.

This is a good place," he says.  
 "They kept a look-out here,  
 and worked their weapons."  
 The ants mill around. I brush  
 them away, and sift, like he does.

The poem was an exercise in dialogue, but it wasn't successful. For one thing, there really isn't any dialogue. There's only one speaking voice, and the persona seems to be barely paying attention. It's not really successful in a more crucial way, however, because there seems to be no point to the poem, no moral center, no edge. It is clearly just an exercise.

The poem is set in Branson, at the Indian Caves described in "Margaret," the second version. I decided at first that I would have Margaret go arrowhead hunting in her next story, and I wrote a short section of a story in which she goes on the trip with a friend, which I decided then didn't have enough depth, either. So I made the arrowhead-hunter her husband, and did a short character study on my own of Orren. But then it became clear that I needed to put an "outsider" there who could be surprised by the ant-hills -- both Margaret and Orren, of course, would have been long aware of the phenomenon.

I was dealing with the illness of my mother when I started this version, so Margaret's cancer was my way of working out some of my anxiety about that. It seemed logical that the cancer would be the catalyst to bring Judith into the story.

So really the story was written backwards, from the climactic scene at the Indian Caves to the kitchen table, snapping green beans.

The first stanza of the poem was of course entirely dumped. The comments about "finding traces" have some connection with the story, but are obscure, and really couldn't work in either version. I like the rhythm of "... Your own feet / move 'em, slide 'em down / so you can't see for your own / progress." But while that line was my favorite in the poem, it would not work as a comment by Orren. He would never be so vocally philosophical.

The line breaks in this poem, like the ones in "Prison Town," are the single overt concession to genre. Again there is not much sound play. However, whereas "Prison Town" would still sound like a poem, I think, if the line breaks were taken away, the prosiness here is an example of how "Hunting for Arrowheads" is unsuccessful. "Early morning, / the pinion and cactus still dewy, / he squats down and pushes a giant / hill over with his arm," is an example. Line breaks in this sentence really seem nothing more than arbitrary. Perhaps if I had changed the diction and added sound patterns the poem would have worked, and I don't have the excuse of the man's voice for the diction in that line -- it belongs to the narrative persona, who could have been more structured in word choice.

"Margaret" holds some language that fits Minot's example of poetic diction, specifically in the scene where Margaret takes Judith to Folsom Falls. The images there are not as condensed as they could be, but the sound of some lines could be put into a poem: "Margaret sat watching the stream sparkle past the black wall -- the wall so polished by the water that it seemed to gleam, too, in the morning sunlight that was beginning to steam away the smaller drops of spray -- and she thought about how she and Bill Cayburne had come down here the night before she'd first gone out with Orren, and how everything looked the same; the stars reflecting so clear they had as much light as now ..." There is a lot of alliteration here, with the "s" and "sh" sounds, and individual clusters of words would work: "steam

away the smaller drops of spray" would perhaps be too contrived if the phrase stood alone as a line in a poem, but buried here it sounds smooth enough. Also, "seemed / gleam / steam" has rhyme and the rhythm in "everything looked the same; / the stars reflecting so clear / they had as much light as now" could work broken into lines. Other places in "Margaret" could lend themselves to poetic explication as well.

The advantage of fiction here, however, is that I can flesh out scenes that in a poem could be only suggested, and at the same time I can be more subtle about my theme, building it gradually. In "Hunting for Arrowheads" the proposed theme is clear from the first stanza. "Margaret" builds a relationship between the characters as it unfolds.

One of the things that most frustrates me in writing fiction is that I often want my characters to change gradually, over time, and not through some single great event or revelation. This was accomplished more successfully in "Margaret," than in "May." I think that eventually I will turn to longer forms of fiction, novels or perhaps novellas. The family in "Margaret" is one I can spend a lot of time on, and one I have left myself open with, because several players were introduced without becoming part of the story themselves. Eventually I may have a collection of interwoven stories about Branson and Margaret's family.

I do think that in spite of its limited audience appeal, the religious themes I write about are important. I think that the spiritual side of people is often their most interesting side, because it is the side that reveals them most intimately. I think O'Connor had the same notion. Her most interesting characters are those that have had their faith questioned, and are trying to deal with it.

Consider the woman in "Revelation," O'Connor's story about Mrs. Turpin, the "wart hog from hell" who was shaken to the core by what a "lunatic" girl

had to tell her. Mrs. Turpin had believed that she was better than all the other people in her world, but when she was made to see the truth, instead of being humbled she became furious at God, who she believed had misled her. Her crisis of faith revealed her as exactly what the girl had called her.

O'Connor's stories are filled with characters like Mrs. Turpin, who think they are in charge of their own lives, and think that God has given them the right to judge other people whom they don't approve. Such characters run the gamut from Mrs. Turpin in "Revelation," and Mrs. May in "Greenleaf," to Mr. Head in "The Artificial Nigger." She also has many characters whom she judges more harshly -- those who feel superior and discount a God, such as Johnson in "The Lame Shall Enter First," or Julian in "Everything That Rises Must Converge." All these characters stand alone as individuals in their stories, of course, but taken as a whole community of people created by O'Connor, they say something about the world that O'Connor saw around her. A crisis of faith was waiting for everyone eventually, according to O'Connor. And it would go hardest on those who never questioned faith in the first place.

O'Connor found this in her native south, and I write about the same kind of theme (in "Say Amen") because I grew up in much the same kind of culture, although it was southern Colorado rather than Dixie. "Touching the earth, touching home, clinging to all that passes" -- the difficulty is creating the characters who can work through our own questions while still remaining subtle enough to be seen as real human beings.

What I look for when I read is subtlety in characterization, even in the broadest characters. I try to write about characters in such a way that whatever crisis they go through is something shared only by the reader, and not a lot of other characters. I can often find this in poetry, with a single persona speaking to the reader. It's harder in fiction. Setting, as in "Margaret," helps



to create such characterizations.

I recently met the fiction writer, William Kitteridge, who discussed the importance of "place" in fiction. I was encouraged by his own use of it -- his stories are very sensuous, full of the sounds, smells and idiosyncracies of the land where they are set (primarily Montana). Kitteridge said that geographical setting in stories is "coming back" into vogue, that readers are again discovering how much richer stories are when they can feel the grass itself under their feet.

Although O'Connor has been a great influence on me in that I admire her writing greatly, I don't presume to say that I write like her, or that my stories are imitations of her. She is an inspiration. As far as other writers that I enjoy whose style I might have imitated, I'd have to say that perhaps Anne Tyler has influenced me, although I have only read her novels. She is interested in the same kind of people I am -- that is, ordinary folks with extraordinary inner lives or who spark reactions in other people that lead to extraordinary events. Her characters are also usually cut off from the mainstream, and so are mine.

#### IV Conclusion

I am a firm believer in the "morality" of writing, regardless of genre. John Gardner writes, "Telling the truth in fiction can mean one of three things: saying that which is factually correct, a trivial kind of truth; . . . saying that which, by virtue of tone and coherence, does not feel like lying, a more important kind of truth; and discovering and affirming moral truth about human existence -- the highest truth of art." (*The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1984, page 129) This is a pretty abstract concept, one which requires a writer to be aware not

just of what his or her characters are doing, but why, and translating not just their actions but their reasons to the reader. When characters do things for no other reason than the writer's commercial hope of entertaining readers, then the result is not art. Gardner explains what he means by "moral truth" as that sort of truth that can stand up to scrutiny: "Though the artist has beliefs, like other people, he realizes that a salient characteristic of art is its radical openness to persuasion. Even those beliefs he's surest of, the artist put under pressure to see if they will stand. He may have a pretty clear idea where his experiment will lead, as Dostoevsky did when he sent Raskolnikov on his unholy mission, but insofar as he's a true artist, he does not force the results" (page 129). For a writer, the challenge of moral writing is a large part of the obsession to write in the first place.

I agree with Robert Stone about "The Reason for Stories" as he writes in his article in the June, 1988 issue of Harper's magazine. If a writer's own value system is left out of a piece of fiction or poetry, then it cannot stand on its own, in the sense that the reader will find no new sensibility, no new affirmation about what it means to be human, be alive -- the reader will not find a work of art. People read in order to connect with some other sensibility, not just to have their own stroked. Sometimes the writer and reader have the same kind of sensibility to start with -- but there are always subtleties that individual stories and poems create within their own worlds that bring a new insight to a discerning reader. To give up hope of finding those insights in reading, and only look for surface excitement, (like the readers of, say, Sidney Sheldon) would doom us all to supermarket tabloid fiction -- a waste of time.

This is one of the reasons I write about my religious background, and why writers like O'Connor and others write about their own inner worlds, as well

as their physical ones. Writing is our test, our proving ground in a sense -- it helps shape the writer's own values, or at least helps put them into perspective. And for many writers, myself included, the writing then stands for our vision, or critique, or indictment, of our worlds. Our characters are means toward creating our visions of what matters in our own lives.

The reader is free to disagree with the values of the writer, but the reader should be aware of what those values are. Poor writing, or commercial writing, often tries to hide a writer's own sense of the world in order to attract readers who might want no challenge. Of course, didacticism, the other extreme, doesn't work in literature either. Propaganda turns off a reader, or if "successful," brainwashes a reader so there is no contemplation. Take for example much of the "action" fiction being published today, where the villains are always working for some foreign government or represent some diabolical force for the (usually) political left, and the heroes are strong silent macho types with no qualms about blowing people away first and asking questions later. There has been so much commercial stuff written along these lines, not to mention the films that fall into the same category, that many readers simply can't think to question the value judgments about society that are inevitably ingested along with the action -- that due process is a ploy, that freedom of expression is dangerous, etc, etc, -- basically a fascist kind of world-view. Whether the writers intended this kind of moral judgment is not the issue -- the point is that bad writing often falls into propagandising tactics, just to get past the characterization and into the "entertainment" material. This kind of writing abrogates the responsibility of taking pen to paper. But at least, it does keep the discriminating or sophisticated reader away because such people want to draw their own conclusions.

So a writer must be clear about what drives the characters, what

motivates the lines, what undercurrents run through the setting. And then the reader may choose whether or not to go with that.

O'Connor writes about dogmatic characters, and lets the reader decide what to make of them. Readers can believe in them, spend time thinking about them, discuss with others their reasons for action, try to rationalize them. Why waste time struggling with characters meant to be just a diversion? Why waste time with them at all?

Although I think that I have finally reached the point where I can stop reacting so morbidly about the church and my upbringing in it, I know I will continue to write about people who are struggling with faith. I think it is a timeless theme. I hope I am moving, however, in a more constructive direction. I believe that people are for the most part good, just complex, and the more complex they are usually the more problems they create for themselves. I want to get to the point in my writing that I can write complex stories about complex people and yet have everything make sense to the reader and give him or her something to think about.

In my poetry, I am continually trying to expand my range. I want to continue to use the simple yet sophisticated language that I admire so much in Stafford, Mary Oliver and others, while at the same time moving further and further along technically.

I hope that my poetry and prose can complement each other. As I use more personas in poetry, and more complex language in prose, I hope that someday they may actually merge, as in Gabrielle Garcia Marquez' work does. Of course, I am certainly not counting on this miracle. But I will keep working on the writing, and so I guess as long as the obsession to write keeps on leading me, the material will have to pace itself, and come out onto the paper when its time comes, unwinding stingily from its starting place.

**TOUCHING BASE**

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June 1985

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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requirements for the degree

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## ABSTRACT

This M. A. Report is made up of three sections: 21 poems, three short stories, and a critical apparatus functioning as an afterword, itself divided into four sections. The poems are on varying themes, in free verse. Two of the stories are of a generally religious theme, the other is about a woman coming to terms with mortality.

In the first section of the afterword, a definition of the genres of fiction and poetry, as defined in Stephen Minot's book, *Three Genres, the Writing of Fiction, Poetry and Drama*, is attempted. The somewhat autobiographical nature of the creative writing is discussed.

The next section, on the poetry, classifies them into three general kinds: poems about growing up, poems about love and sex, and poems about poetry itself. The genesis of and theory behind the poem "Prison Town," a "growing up" poem, is discussed and the poem explicated at length, followed by short discussion on the other two categories of the poetry. The influence of poets such as William Stafford, Galway Kinnel, Denise Levertov, and Theodore Roethke is also discussed.

In the fiction section of the afterword, the concentration is on the story "Margaret." The genesis of the story and the movement from poetry to fiction of a crucial scene are discussed, with comments on the influence of Flannery O'Connor.

In the final section of the report, the necessity for "moral" fiction, as defined by John Gardner, is discussed, and plans for the direction of future writing mentioned.