

THE UPWARD TENDING

by

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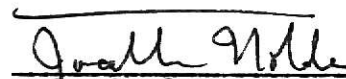
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ABSTRACT

CATCHING

When I was five I didn't know bats.
But one morning my brother's skinny hand
flicked one loose from under the picnic table
and into a mason jar;
then the sinewy muscles of my brother's arms,
which were not quite muscles yet,
tightened the lid.

The bat looked me square in the face
and screamed for all the world like I should know,
held me to account though I was five,
opened up its jaws and clenched
the teeth like diamond pins, over and over,
and all the screaming echoing the fix that was in.

I suppose you have heard that scream,
the kind catfish make
when they're beached and have a treble hook
lost deep somewhere,
and the scream is really gill plates rubbing
muscle and gristle.
But fish are noncommittal and look at the sky
with the one eye, until it films.

TO MY BROTHER'S CHILD, BORN SOON

They told me I was born in St. Louis,
but here is where I was born
really,
on the windy side of the barn,
on the side where pipes lie and lose
a rusted half-shell,
where the light red siding
is stacked and cracking
right up to the window, where children call for ghosts
at night when the old man's kitchen light
is gone.

They have peeled back the screen
to see what in dark, in barns
may be.

I know.

I have seen a white cat drag her belly
through the opening one evening,
and what she did there later
cried
all across the garden
and up to the yard
until, a web strand clinging to my mouth,

I searched
in the dark, the boxes, hay and old sleds
and found nothing.

The old man plants by signs of the moon;
I have watched his shuffling,
my back against the siding
and my arms ticked with damp weeds,
and I have spread my fingers wide against
black ground beside the barn,
taken the grains of my nativity in one palm--
earth, yellow stem, a flake of coal,
a piece of blue willow-ware, fragment
of an old man's mother.

I do not say you any town
or anywhere
nephew, niece,
I do not say you here,
sleep on,
perhaps beneath layers of grasses
under the eye-arc of a catbird
you wait now,
chin curled around an orrisroot,
for an opportunity in early June.

BUCK FEVER

for my brother, Dan

If you had just brought him up to the house

I could have walked out into the yard

to touch his ear in the snow.

As it was

I sat pouting in my saddle shoes,

and the chair rung I was kicking

was really you,

pinned across the linen,

telling it

until Uncle Oscar wheezed through his nose and with a mouth full

of potatoes laughed

"Buck fever!" loud enough

that your freshly washed ears burned red.

Twelve years later

on a road near Louisville, at noon,

I feel the sun press all at once

through the red veins of every leaf

on every tree,

and I want to ask you:

Was it like his blood rushed

sudden into your face
and the heart that had been beating
near your collar as you crouched
was beating in his ribs where it was warm?
Did you see it see you
turning with the sky, while
your hand on the bow-string pulled
against yourself, and froze?
Was it how, for all my life
your right hand near the white plate
still trembles?

THE TREACHEROUS DEATH OF JESSE JAMES

"It was little Bobby Ford,
that dirty little coward,
who laid poor Jesse in his grave."

It would be Eddie, his son,
sitting on the wooden porch
after breakfast, leaning
against the screen door and
making it bang with his elbow maybe.
Inside,
Jesse smells the grass
through dusty screen wires,
the creak of the springs on the wind feels
sharp on his shoulder blades.
Standing on a chair in the parlor,
his sock feet clinging
slightly to the crack in the cane seat,
he wipes the haze of dust from across a face,
his face when he was twelve
or someone's face who was
or likely was,
framed in wood with gilded edgings,
rubbed with his sleeve and bang

as he turns his head,

the gilt edges blending in his hair when he was twelve;

Son not so hard.

THE WATER STRIDER DOES NOT QUITE

like to be touched.

As close to the water as it can,

it spreads itself thin

without actually

denting it;

not a feeler's tip

breaks through.

What it sees

is not its reflection,

being too close, as I

have been to your face,

touching

neither air nor smelling

water but surprised

by my shadow across the rocks

deep in your brow,

I quick

retract arms and legs,

skim by.

THE UPWARD TENDING

After night rain, we could hear bass rising
twelve miles away. We came up from the cellar
with coffee cans, stood outside in wet grass.
That yard had loosened fishworms everywhere.

They were gleaming. I was small.

I turned the flashlight beam above my head
and lost it in stars, turned a bright circle
around a fishworm, clamped down my hand.

There is that upward tending bass know
toward evening, out of mud-clouds stirred
by a fin. It is nothing less than I've imagined,
following this inward current of my own,

to wake from sleep, how the face twists
toward the clearer waters, a different grade
of light, and after quickened breathing,
to lie in wet grass completely golden,
bruised only at the lip.

THE WAY TO GO

In late September, the whole
body of the orchard ticks
and strains in fragrant

indecision. Pears, never so alive
as when they begin to remember
the ground again, break

open into blind-drunk wasps, sink
in the high grass where crickets
race pulses--all the best deaths

used to sound this way, the last
singer lost on the road home,
forgetting whether it was wedding

or wake. Something each year must
give us the old directions.

Three sparrow-hawks on a wire

watch my car pass, and one falls
like ash to lift again beside me, faster
than my foot can press the pedal, his glance

blooming into mine, the road moving
us too quick until we are still.
I blink him past the dark corner of my eye

to other fields. There he takes the shape
of familiar objects under snow,
the way strangers passing

tuck their heads against the cold, imagining
each other's face. Reticence rolls up
between them like tempered glass,

and like the compass on the dashboard,
they become the way to go.

THE PROPRIETRESS OF BALTIC AVENUE

This afternoon the last of the residents
broke up their rabbit hutches,
packed their traps and spaghetti-stained
children and moved to towns up-stream.
They were not sorry to go. I paid them.
Considering the river cuts under most
of Baltic Avenue faster than they could push
their junk Buicks over the bank to shore it up,
I paid them well.
Tonight I leaned a Vacancy sign
against the wash-tub full of carp
in every yard. Whether the fish were left
in haste or token of gratitude,
I do not know, but I listen to their fins rub
quietly up and down the street,
and I think of you. I think of how hard it is
to fight this gradual relaxation, mostly at night,
when I know each shack I've converted
is sinking, that a new hotel each year
will only add to the natural ebb, the undertow.
One day I'm afraid you'll return to find
the avenue and I have entirely disappeared.
You return so seldom on business or pleasure,

I can scarcely convey what a shame it would be
not to catch you.

CROSSING

Two bucks lift their heads
from the surface of the pond
where they are drinking.
Their eyes have no fear,
but they have stopped
what they are doing.
They watch my slowing car,
probably only blur to them
and sound, then
wheel,
bumping shoulder and jawbone,
scrambling for the brush,
tails flashing
once, twice,
many yards away.
Immediately they slow
to trot across the plowed
field as if to gather
dignity, their horns just
budding from their heads,
their eyes focused
on the line of trees edging
nightfall, and when I know

they have gone in
where they do not feel
me watching them, or care,
I watch instead the stars
above the field a long time
until they enter the pond.

THE POND IN WINTER

Under the ice, flowers of air bloom:

large white roses, so delicate

a small girl in plastic boots should break

one open and see beneath the white tissues

the black, cold movement of the pond in winter.

A wrist could sense the slight current, perhaps,

before growing numb.

At night the pond slows, forgets,

and, another layer is frozen,

excepting the places where flowers of air

are allowed for. Those who have nearly drowned

say this knowledge could save you.

OWL CATCHING

I

My son left this morning to catch an owl. I know what he wants to do, not because he told me, (he wouldn't tell me) but because I heard the owl myself last night. I was crossing the field near the old place, the old farm where I grew up. The house is gone now, but the barn is still there, half rotting and pitched toward the river. We fill it with hay bales now but keep no other store there, and it houses no animals. When I was a boy you could pass by there at night and hear the cattle breathing in their stalls. Last night I heard a barn owl's voice fill the air around the building and the timber behind it, and I paused in climbing up from the river. The owl called again, low and strong, and I knew as I neared the barn that it was in the loft. I turned the corner of the building and heard a beating above my head, the sound of something dragging its weight across the floor and a softer beat against the corner. I hurried on. There is something in the sound of creatures out of place in the dark, wounded, that sets your blood. And then, I had caught no fish that night and wanted to get home.

This morning I heard my son down in the kitchen, moving so as not to wake me, pausing after each creak in the floorboards. He left with a pair of leather work-gloves and a gunny sack under one arm, and he was heading north toward the old place. Catching a wounded

owl is no small trick, even for a boy of seventeen, and I wanted to lean out the window and call after him. But no one must know when you set out to catch your wild creature, because when you fail, there must be no dishonor in it. If you tame a wild thing like an owl, there is no more for you to do as a boy. But he will fail, and I won't make him miserable by it.

He will fail, because of all the things he must do in his young life, this is the most perfect. And his timing will be off; he will become frightened or hesitate in that last moment; or he will tell himself that the owl doesn't hate him completely. I lie here and think of him hurt, carrying home cuts, proof of his failure, and I can't bear his shame.

II

I could have it by night-fall. Here is the thing I remember: falling asleep in the upstairs window to the sound of owls in the yard, the barn owl I saw in our loft here last winter as I was milking in the evening; maybe this same owl. It was the color of cream and turned a face to me full as a moon. At night it called softly at my shoulder and I felt its claws flex round my arm, squeezing the toes against my forearm, never touching my skin with its talons. With all my arm's strength I lifted it to fling it at the sky. The feathers brushed my face as it took off from me, and I felt the tick of one talon against my collar. Then it was a dark shape near the

hedgerows, circling back and over the field. A hawk would not be so fine a hunter. I would sit outside on the pasture gate and watch it dip and circle in the half-light.

I will be patient; that is the thing I am not, so that will be the thing I must be. I will sit all morning outside the barn, and talk to the owl quietly. Then I will go inside in the afternoon; it will be able to see me then and I can make it calm. Toward evening I will be near enough for it to see its face in my eyes, and it will know me. I will have blocked its space to run past with bales of hay, and when it is gentle, I will slowly pick up the gunny-sacks. I split two of them last night and sewed them together with heavy string down one side; they make a square that will cover the owl. I must be half again as fast as I ever have been in my life. In one fling, I must cover the owl and climb on top of it, pinning the wings back in one motion. I know the broken left wing, the jutting shaft half-way down, and I know that if I pin back his wings at the shoulder, I won't harm him further. If I can avoid his beak then and pass the cord underneath and around his body, I can tie him up and then bind his legs so the talons are useless. Then I will tie cloth strips over his eyes so that he cannot see; this will quiet a bird from all that I have heard said.

III

I will empty all that I am out into the air tonight, and I will

be heard. But this is not the right thing. My body is against the wood again, and again. The right thing is gone away. I caught a rat in the corner and ate him, but did not replace what is gone away. The rat has become more pain. The place with edges knows where the right thing has gone; I am caught in the place with edges.

IV

I sat there all morning; sometimes he would call. By noon I was hungry but I didn't care if I saw home again. I didn't care if my father was worried about my being gone all day, because he wasn't real to me. I had left home and all that was real was the owl and me. By afternoon I moved into the barn and saw that the owl was still in the loft. I kept talking softly to it as I had outside, and I sat slowly down on a bale of hay. but it ran back and forth in the loft, dragging its wing. I was surprised it hadn't wedged through the loft rails, but perhaps it knew that it would likely fall to its death if it tried. It couldn't fly over them, nor could it fly up to the open window above its head in the loft, though when it first saw me it banged crazily against the wall in an attempt to fly. I climbed up the ladder to the loft one rung at a time, but by the time I had reached half-way up it began to fling itself against the bales, the walls, the floor. I could see that it was tearing its wing, so I hurried up.

Everything was wrong. I got it cornered finally, but against

the rails. It held its wings out and hissed, so that I could see the blood on the injured one. Then it began beating its wings against the rails so that it might lift and attack with its talons, but the rails were doing as much damage to the one wing as to the other, I thought. I think that is when I panicked and threw the gunny-sack cover at the bird, only meaning to quiet it somehow. But my approach was from the wrong side, facing the bird, so that there was no hope of pinning its wings. I hadn't thrown the sack well anyway and it was out from under it soon enough, hurling itself at me, trying to back me into a corner. The wing was horribly torn at the shaft now, but it was all I could manage to dodge past the owl and climb over the loft rails again. I tried to get hold of my sacks again, but the bird was standing over them. I looked at the wing and started to feel sick; it looked beyond repair. The bird seemed to hold the other wing out slightly from the shoulder and the wing seemed to tremble.

Tonight, some distance from the barn, I can hear my father's cattle. I want never to go home again, or to return to the barn. Soon I must go home while I can see. Then I will return again in the dark with a lantern. I must return again tonight. There is only one right thing.

GARAGE

The thing of it is, I told him everything I knew about the car.

"It chugs a little going up hills, even around here," I said.

"I don't know what it'll do in the mountains. My friend said you could put something in the carburetor or something like that. I haven't been in the mountains since I was a little girl, so I don't know. I don't know how a ten year-old Impala will do."

He just smiled. "I was in Idaho in sixty-five, I believe it was."

I wondered about him. I supposed that he was fifty and had children and a station wagon in sixty-five and a wife who wore one of those handkerchief scarves that flapped when she stuck her head out the window, pointing at the mountains. He had a pleasant, wrinkled face. In fact, he would look a little like John Chancellor if it weren't for that quarter-inch of white forehead below his hair-line. And the cap saying "Florence Motors."

He was a jolly cuss.

"So, you're going to the mountains; don't fall off! HA!" He laughed just like that, an explosion. I liked him. I liked the way he sat in my car like he owned it, throwing my laundry basket with the empty Coke bottle in it into the back seat, glancing at me and laughing as I climbed in. He took off from the garage much faster

than I had driven in, swinging around the corners, speeding through school zones. "So where are you going to stay?"

"Oh, well, my friend has this little cabin in Lesston, that is, the family owns it, and we're going to stay two weeks. Do you think the car will take it? I mean, the brakes have been giving a little and...."

"We'll get it checked out for you. Now where's your house?"
I had told him the street but not the house number.

"Stop here!" The car slammed to a halt.

The mechanic laughed. "Wouldn't want to have to go knocking on the neighbors' doors to find you, now would I? HA!"

I had a mental image of him coming to the door unexpectedly. I would be in my robe and slippers. "I tried to find you everywhere," he would say, standing there sheepishly.

"When will the car be ready?"

"Oh, we're awful busy, what with the Fourth coming up. I'll probably be by to get you about three."

Thirty-six hours later, Charlie and I were unloading my car in front of his uncle's cabin in Lesston. It sat back from the road among the pines and about thirty other cabins like it, but it was nice. It was made of pine wood, that is, the outside of it was, and it had the most marvelous front porch overlooking the road. The trouble was the ten steps leading up to the porch, and all the suitcases and books and Charlie's typewriter (he's a poet) and I just wasn't used to the altitude. But once I got inside, it was nice. Orange

deep-shag carpeting, a fireplace and a picture-window overlooking the road.

Charlie immediately poured two glasses of wine, handed me one and went over to look out of the picture-window. He pulled off his turtleneck sweater and slowly stretched out his arms like he wanted to embrace the view. I had never notice he had so many moles on his back. We hadn't known each other very long. We both taught at Florence High School--Charlie taught English and I taught social science. I was going a little nutty and Charlie needed to write, so even though there was no attraction as far as I was concerned, when Charlie offered, I said okay. Like I said, I hadn't been to the mountains in a long time.

"Oh, Idaho, I've missed you," Charlie said, with a note I'd never heard in his voice. Like something was too tight. He walked slowly over to me and planted his feet squarely in front of my chair, looking at me with that same pained expression. "Do you know what 'abandon' is, Romona?" I didn't answer. I wasn't sure I was supposed to. "Do you know what it means to relinquish?" He pulled me over to the window and gestured toward the road. "Idaho and I...we're going to teach you what it means...to relinquish."

He began pulling me down. "Charlie," I said, "the car windows are still open." He had his hand inside my blouse. "I think it's going to rain." My blouse was open now and Charlie's hand was trying to unsnap my Wranglers.

"Relinquish," he panted. I was panting too, and I think that

was exciting him except that I was panting because of the altitude and not because of Charlie. But a voice within me said that I should really try to relinquish with him, so I moved into a rhythm that was somewhere between relinquish and abandon. After what seemed to me to be quite a lengthy period, we were finished. Sex in the mountains is a lot like cooking, it takes a long time.

The next day when the windshield wipers went out on the mountain pass in the rain and I was hammering at one of them with a rock to try and loosen it, I realized that there was an enviable quality about Charlie, a quietness. Nothing ruffles him, he just sits back and evaluates. Maybe that's what makes him a writer. He could see, even through the rain streaks on the windshield, the tension that was in my neck and forehead. When I climbed back in he was silent, just smoking and looking out over the ravine. "Ramona," he said, "when we get back to the cabin, I'm going to play you some of my relaxation tapes. I have one tape that was recorded inside the womb of an expectant mother. It sounds like the sea breaking against a cliff. And I have another I bought in Malibu, the sound of whales breeding in a shallow bay. You can close your eyes and smell the blueness."

We took the car to a garage in Indian City. They couldn't fix the wipers there, but recommended a dealer in Pine Tree who would be open on Monday. We went back to the cabin, and Charlie tried to get a little sleep in. Charlie tries to get a little sleep in whenever he can because for about two years he has been working on a

dream cycle called "Mirabus." He has about seventeen poems now but he is trying to fashion a long poem to fit into the section called "The Silver Pike-staff." I didn't tell you how Charlie sleeps but just now it seems important. He sleeps with his hands folded over the blankets, and every once in awhile he flexes his fingers, folding them back into place. Other than that, there is little movement. He sleeps like he is praying. I tossed and turned all night, but it never disturbed Charlie, and he said my unquiet rest was because I didn't do Yoga. But I tried it once with him, and you had to take off all your clothes and I don't like rolling about on carpeting that strangers have walked on.

We spent most of the next day in the waiting room of the dealer at Pine Tree. Charlie was a good sport about all of this. The man came in after about an hour and told me that I would need new brakes, so that it would take a little while longer. Charlie just folded his legs into a Yoga position on the vinyl couch and said he was going to meditate. "Ramona, when they come in to tell us the car is ready, don't get alarmed if you can't wake me. It takes a little while for me to come out of this, about five minutes." I sat there wondering how I was going to pay for the car. I about ten minutes the man came in and said I would need new brake drums too. Charlie began to make noises. They weren't really noises, I guess, it was deep breathing, slower and deeper levels of breathing. The man looked at Charlie, and Charlie began to jerk with his eyes closed. Little muscles around his mouth and neck began to twitch. I smiled and said

that he was asleep, but he didn't look like he was asleep. He was sitting upright and he looked like he was having an attack.

It ended up costing me two hundred dollars. I kept seeing the Florence mechanic's face, how he would react when he realized he hadn't checked the car properly, that he had spoiled my trip. Charlie said he personally wasn't upset about the trip and that we would have plenty of time to see and do things. He said this in bed while he was massaging my back and trying to get me to relax, but there were muscles along my spinal column that Charlie said were like knots and just wouldn't give way. He said that he thought I needed some time alone to listen to his tapes and meditate, and that he needed some time to rediscover Idaho. He stroked the back of my head and kissed my neck, but I just rolled over and told him I would talk about it tomorrow. He folded his hands and went to sleep.

I thought about it most of the night. The next morning while we were eating toast and yogurt, I told Charlie that I really didn't want to spend time alone.

"Why?" Charlie asked in the middle of a bite.

"Because...I'm not sure I'd feel comfortable here without a phone or a car. And I don't know anybody..."

Charlie closed his eyes and smile, moving his chair closer to mine. "I think I'm picking up something about you, Ramona. I saw it in the garage in Pine Tree, and I think we ought to discuss it now. I'm really glad that you're sharing your feelings with me in this way, because I want to share some of my impressions with you."

"What?" I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

"When you were talking to that mechanic in Pine Tree, I was picking up some really inhibited vibrations from you. You were uncomfortable."

"I wasn't sure I could pay, and..."

"Now you're being defensive. There isn't any need for that; I'm not criticizing you. You see, Ramona, it's just that I've come to a point in my life where I like to...hang loose and be someone else for a change. Like, you see, it's too confining to be... like...."

"Right," I said, and suddenly I knew exactly what he meant. I wanted to be alone in that cabin that very minute. I couldn't wait until he drove away the next day. I turned on the whale music and lay in my underwear on the rug and watched the weather-scan on t.v. all weekend. I ate yogurt and "Chips-Ahoy"'s and felt a kind of abandon. And when he returned on Monday I was ready for him and he was ready to go home. Idaho had changed, he said.

We couldn't leave the next day, however, because somehow, he didn't know how, he had run down the battery. When the service station looked at it they told me I must have another one and that with installation and cables would cost me another hundred dollars. I paid the money, and we left for Florence. And that is when I began to see the mechanic's face, the one at home. At first it was only a bus-boy in a little diner on the road, but then I saw his face on a highway patrolman who passed us on the road and turned a wrin-

kled, kind expression toward me. Then I began to dream about him.

A few days after we returned, I received a letter from the state Attorney General. It said that his office had been trying to reach me about a recall of my vehicle and that I should take it immediately to a dealer for my own safety and the safety of others. I'm telling you exactly what it said: "We have been trying to reach you." He had probably been trying to reach me long before the trip. True, the recall didn't concern anything that malfunctioned during our journey--it was about a wheel-bearing--but the point is that he was trying to reach me about it.

When I drove the car into the garage again, I couldn't see the mechanic. The man in charge said that they could easily fix the car and that if I would return in three hours they would have it ready. As he spoke, my eyes searched the room for him, straining to see feet beneath a Malibu in the corner. Then suddenly he was there, directly in front of me, strolling with that assurance I'd admired. I was sure he didn't see me and I didn't know if I would speak to him or not. Then our eyes met and I knew that he recognized me; his glance flickered and then he turned away. I knew he was embarrassed.

In three hours I returned for my car. I could see him in his grey pin-striped overalls, standing near the open hood. He was pasting on a tiny white sticker. Glancing up, he looked at me as if nothing had happened.

"Got to put this recall sticker on to show we did the work, then she's all yours."

I looked into the engine, trying to find words. This was going to be it, and then I would drive away, and nothing would ever be settled. The thing that was really troubling me would never be settled.

"What's wrong with the car?" I asked slowly.

"Oh, the recall?" he asked, scratching beneath his cap. He smiled and looked at me out of the corner of his eye. "I don't know," he said with an exasperated, comic sigh. "We just replace the bearings."

"I mean, what's wrong with the car?" I asked again, looking at him directly.

"Nothing other than that, that I know of anyway. Why?" he asked, looking puzzled.

I tried to keep his eyes focused on mine. I wanted him to see my controlled anger. I felt my heart beating. "Tell me what's wrong," I said. The mechanic only looked at me with astonishment.

It became clear. He wasn't going to answer me, and I don't know why I thought he would. None of them will ever really tell you.

LETTIE

My vegetable love should grow

Vaster than empires, and more slow.

--Andrew Marvell

A small drop of yogurt fell from the tip of her plastic spoon to the middle of the page she was grading. Cathy Paddleford's face came to mind, the round wire-rimmed glasses, the faint glint of oil on her nose, the articulate eyes that would squint: "Why is there food on my paper?"

"Catherine, you ask inane questions," she thought as she tried to lift the congealed drop off the page with her middle fingernail. The drop smeared.

The pink day-glow clock on Ivan's desk said 3:20. It was time for Ivan. In a moment the door opened and their small Temporary Instructor's office was filled with the aroma of "Wood-hue Gold" pipe tobacco. Ivan was next to her, laying his butter-smooth brown leather driving cap on the stack of manuscripts he was proofing for StokeRiver, his poetry journal. Bending over his desk, he murmured hello without looking up, tapped and straightened his pile of graded compositions, paper-clipping the left corner. She watched the back of his head out of the corner of her eye and noticed how evenly the hair was clipped across the nape of his neck. "Ten minutes 'til

post-time," he said as the door clicked behind him. Both she and Ivan taught 3:30 Comp. I classes; Lettie had six more themes to grade.

"Just six," she said and pressed the side of her palm onto the paper. Her voice grew deep: "It's 3:23. Your Comp. class meets at 3:30. You have six more themes to grade. What will you do. What will you do." She thought of Karl Malden standing outside of her classroom looking concerned in his felt fedora, and she pressed her palm harder onto the paper, fighting back the smile. 3:24. Usually in these last few minutes everything became funny, tension eased from around her neck and shoulders, her head felt light, she could watch the other T.I.'s in the office, Dave and Pam, shuffling their papers and realize that whether their lives were in order or not was unimportant because a year from now, it won't have mattered. They wouldn't be doing this forever, after all; none of them was over twenty-seven, and Lettie herself was only twenty-six. But today she fought the urge to relax, because it was only four weeks into the semester and she was deeply in debt. She owed time to everyone. There were the resumé's to send out, the reading she was to help organize for the lit. club, there were the letters to write, a house to clean, there were poems to be written, there was her husband, Willy. Lord, she was always in debt to Willy. 3:27. Well, she could live like Ivan, a dewy jonquil just plucked out of the flower cart, but everybody hated Ivan's guts. How in God's name did he find the time to edit StokeRiver, publish poetry and still sleep with half the men on the

faculty. At one time she'd had all those ambitions but the sepia--toned S.O.B. had driven them out of her. And now she was late.

Standing in front of the class, her finger traced down the list of names on the roster. "Alan, Pete, Penny, Raymond, Alsalih, Barb..." She paused for effect. The six were watching her. "You six will just have to beat me up out in the parking lot, because once again...." She waited for the laugh, but it didn't come. The other class had laughed at that line the last time she failed to grade the papers on time. No, wait. God, it was this class; she had used the same dumb line on Monday when she didn't have all the papers graded. It had saved her then, but now there were only sharp sighs and the flash of Pete's t-shirt out of the corner of her eye as he slumped back into his chair. Admittedly it had been a weak joke, but just at this moment she was pressed for a better one.

Her smile trembled stupidly around her open mouth. The limegreen anthologies on the student's desks reminded her that she had forgotten to read the essay she'd assigned for today. Feeling their eyes following her, Lettie walked over to the window, a move calculated to buy her a little time. Her students watched her as she leaned back against the pane. "This is a writing class," she said finally in a low, level voice. They watched; the dramatics were something different. Allowing herself the luxury of observing the piece of pink insulation hanging from the cracked ceiling panel above Randy's head, Lettie became uncomfortably aware that inspiration could not be expected to rush to her aid today. She needed more time. The best

she could do was fold her arms and beckon with two fingers like a mother urging her children to eat: "So...write," she said quietly. They continued to watch her. She continued to gesture at them with her two fingers until a couple of the more dutiful girls turned back the covers of their Spiral notebooks and located their pens. The rest began to groan.

"Write about what?" Adrienne asked.

There was no answer to that question. Today Lettie's mind was like the inside of a fluorescent tube.

"You don't need me to answer that for you. Just write something," she said, and lowered her eyes from Adrienne, who had the same open-mouthed, quizzical expression of stab-victims in the movies.

"Are you going to look at these?" the girl asked. Lettie already had two stacks of unmarked themes at home and didn't want any more, but if she said no, she realized the students would only pretend to write. She said yes.

Sitting down at her desk, Lettie frowned at her open grade-book. Most of the students began to write, or clutch their forelocks, or scribble, a miracle that never lost its wonder for her although she had seen it happen thousands of times. Methodically Lettie turned the pages and made small pencil checks next to names from past semesters, flipping back occasionally as if to verify a questionable entry, a perfectly meaningless activity but one that gave her time to relax her shoulder muscles and regularize her breathing. Slowly

she slipped off one of her penny-loafers under the desk and began to explore the crack in the linoleum with her toe. The floor was cool. She slipped off the other shoe.

This would be an hour she would give herself like a present, she decided, settling back against the wooden chair. The room was quiet except for the hum of the light over-head and the sound of hands moving across paper; the late afternoon glow on the pink cement walls was pleasant. She would use this hour to plan. Not just plan for her next day's class, although that was important; she would use this hour to plan her life. Why not? It could happen like that. It could happen that in a warm and congenial hour in a room full of students that she usually liked, life-altering decisions could be reached.

Like what she was going to do about Willy. Last night had been particularly unpleasant for both of them. She had promised him a long, lingering evening of wine and old Fats Waller recordings, an evening in which they would, in her words, "cook together, for God's sake, just like those stunning young couples in House American or whatever the hell it's called. We can wear cable-knit sweaters!" She had come home late from a faculty meeting and had forgotten to go to the store. They had argued. Their arguments had recently reached a new pitch, so that it was now difficult to achieve emphasis without screaming. Screaming was not unusual for her, but last night was the first time she had heard Willy scream, and it frightened her. And when she lay down in bed that evening and thought about

it rationally, it was only the one burner on the electric stove that she had left on low all day while they were at work the had caused him to throw his arms wide like the painting of John Brown and rage at her until she could actually feel a fine spray of spittle on her face. Against her shoulder in the bed, even in his sleep, his back felt tight.

And tonight she could not make it up to him because she not only had themes to grade, but a pile of mid-terms from her Intro. to the Novel class. If she could have one day that was entirely her own with no interruptions, just as this hour was, then she could get caught up and the next day could be Willy's. At the same time, she was acutely aware that she was wasting her time even as she thought about it. "How much time do I spend like this?" she said. Blushing, she realized that she had asked the question half-aloud. Glancing up, she saw a couple of students' eyes focused on her.

Their attention was quickly diverted from her, however, and she was relieved. A squirrel had decide to make its careful trek along the long window-ledge to the right of the students' desks. Although it was snowing outside, the classroom was stuffy enough to warrant several of the windows being half opened, and when the squirrel stood up to put its paws against one of the panes, its breath made a dense little circle of white steam against the already fog-covered window; steam from the heaters rolled out around its belly and seemed to hang in the air, covering the body until all she could see was the head and the bright, black eye. She glanced

at her students, who were entranced by the animal. She glanced back, and was surprised to see the squirrel hadn't moved, then looked to her students who also hadn't moved; smiled and opened her mouth to say, "It's the heat..." but saw in that moment that although students who had been writing were still looking down at their papers, their hands had stopped. So she said, "It's the heat. The squirrel likes the heat," to the absolute quiet of the room, and seeing no movement, she closed her eyes and wetted her lips. She opened her eyes again a few seconds later and the class had resumed writing. The window--ledge was empty.

Lettie felt a stab of anxiety in the pit of her stomach but chose to ignore it. This was an experience she instinctively felt was best left uncatagorized and unclaimed. Cutting class a little short, she walked back to the office.

Ivan was quick to remark that her eyes looked awful. Ivan was always quick to assess the state of her life with an appraisal of her eyes. What stung her was his usual accuracy. "Things going okay with you?" he asked quietly as she sat down at her desk next to him and removed her coat. "Your eyes look like you don't feel so good."

"Yeah...well," she said, shrugging and smiling. She didn't know why she always affected this sheepish tone with him. "I just need to learn to get some more sleep at night. I was up late grading papers."

"Say," he said, tapping one finger on her desk. "Have you ever thought you might be getting too much sleep in the day? He paused

for her answer, but she could only manage to frown with half-hearted interest. "I mean it," he said, "I mean, you have afternoon classes like me. Why don't you do what I've learned to do? Get up early. Get up with the sun. There's just something about it--the air is...it's invigorating..." he held his hands out expressively and grimaced at the ceiling, searching for words. She found it difficult to concentrate on what he was saying; Ivan's head was too big for his body. "You'd feel so much more productive," he finished, turning on the casters of his chair and wheeling back into the desk.

"You're probably right," she said, shaking her head and smiling. She took out a ditto and began typing an exercise on the uses of the semi-colon. "Let's face it," Lettie thought, "he is right." Right in his insinuations about her state of mind and her home life and her productivity. He was not right in his suggestion that she was sleeping too much in the day. She was not sleeping at night, which necessitated her sleeping in the day. She was not sleeping at night because she and Willy were not making love. They were arguing and going to bed angry. And Willy somehow was turning the whole thing into an artistic coup--when he wasn't teaching at the art center he was working day and night on his light sculptures, and they now had an edge she had never seen in them before. She had tried to write but nothing came of it.

Maybe, she reasoned, she was giving Willy, with her distance, the time he needed. Maybe anger was what he needed. Anger, quite possibly, was what she needed as well, but she couldn't feel any

anger—didn't want it.

Ivan was gone now; this was his time to meet with his editors of StokeRiver. The others were gone too and she felt suddenly that she could write: there was something about the way light was cutting across the tile in their office that reminded her...but good Lord, that was Emily Dickinson. Still, there was something about it. Lettie began to type: "2. The group included Mr. Brown, the banker of the town; Mr. Hale, a retired farmer; and Dr. James, the dentist." And then without thinking about it--because it had already happened--she knew everything had changed. For a long moment she focused her eyes on the bar across her typewriter, tensing the muscles in her forehead, internally commanding herself to read the numbers etched across the rod. Then her eyes blinked and remained shut. She knew that she could keep them closed and pretend that it wasn't real and that it would go away. Outside the office, she knew, everything had stopped.

The chair squeaked familiarly as she rolled backwards and stood up to open the door. A student's eyes confronted her immediately; Lettie was startled. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor of the hallway, looking at her with curiosity. About eighteen, he was pimply-faced and sullen, his hair cut short at the sides and in bangs across the forehead. His big, ruddy hand, half hidden by the sleeve on his over-sized letter jacket, clutched a Fortran IV text. Lettie allowed herself to perceive that the boy was not moving. He did not have to be; he could stare at her endlessly with that puzzled look that said there was something he meant to ask although he didn't

know her. He or anyone could do that and nothing need be changed. She could turn around and go back into the office easily.

Lettie looked to her right down the corridor and saw a man frozen in mid-stride, and another, a friend from the Math department, stopped in the middle of a quick turn, his arm held out awkwardly at his side. She watched them carefully. The boy looked as if he would speak, and Lettie's arms fell. Her shoulders found the concrete wall. The corridor was quiet. Her friend was beginning his turn...he had forgotten. Her whole back pressed into the wall's surface. The boy looked as if he was trying to remember. She slid gradually down, the crusts of paint scratching her as her knees sank underneath. Someone had forgotten. She was breathing hard, her legs and fingers and palms finding the floor. The corridor would not give way.

As the refrigerator door swung open, light arced across the walls of their small, darkened apartment; Lettie caught the door and closed it quietly. Willy was already sound asleep in bed when she returned home at 5:30, and when the rooms had begun to darken later in the evening, she had only turned on a small light on her desk. She didn't want to disturb him since he had been up all last night working in the basement he rented for a studio. Tossing the orange she had removed from the refrigerator up lightly and catching it in her palm, she thought of a softball, and somehow the childlike motion reassured her. Methodically she began to slice the orange

into even sections on the cutting board. She had chosen to wait until she was fixing dinner in her own kitchen before thinking about the incident.

When she had come to her senses in the hallway that afternoon, she recalled, she had heard the scuffle of feet and had raised herself quickly from the floor and stumbled back into her office, closing the door. At her desk she had covered her head in her arms, believing that surely any moment the door would open and that someone who had seen her in the hallway, perhaps the boy, would enter. But no one enquired.

Lettie put a frozen dinner in the oven and began eating one of the orange sections while standing at the counter. She wondered why no one had asked. Perhaps she had raised herself so quickly from the floor that they did not see her, or perhaps thought she had only been tying her shoe, or that she had dropped something. Once she had read a story about a man who had his first epileptic seizure in his late twenties; the author described how going into and coming out of the seizure had felt--turning the experience into an artistic statement that Lettie could not, just this moment, categorize. The story had been beautiful nonetheless. She asked herself if it were possible that this was a first sign of epilepsy or some physical disorder. But the question was posed more as a way of resting her mind than anything else, because she knew before she asked it that she could now or anytime she wished, stop things. She could do so in the utter clarity and utter awareness of her surroundings.

Lettie decided to retire early. She found Willy's long frame was stretched almost diagonally across the bed, making it difficult for her to get in without waking him. He looked somehow tonight more like a vulnerable thirteen year-old than the thirty year-old man she had married four years ago. He slept clutching his pillow, damp beneath his open mouth. She undressed and got into bed, moving him gently, discovering he had at least had the presence of mind to undress before collapsing. As he breathed, he grunted and made little clicking noises inside his mouth; Lettie lay very still so as not to wake him. She could feel in the slight dampness of the sheets that he was sweating as usual, and she pulled the blanket next to her so that he would not wake from the heat. After a while, she began to notice an ache in her legs and realized that she was holding herself very stiffly. It occurred to her then that she was afraid, somehow, of waking Willy. For a while she lay there listening to him breathe, and then got up, dressed, put on her coat and walked out of the house.

The air was cold but the wind had stopped blowing so hard, and the foot of snow on the ground made the streets quiet and gave the illusion of close warmth as she walked. Her body was comfortable inside her long down coat and stocking cap, and she tried to concentrate only on the slight burning sensation the chill night air gave her face, and on the foot paths she had to discover where the sidewalks hadn't been scraped. After several blocks, she crossed the street to the baseball diamond and followed a path that she supposed

children had made that afternoon to the bleachers. Most of the snow had been trampled from the seats, but she swept a space clear and sat looking across the diamond to the trees in the park. Lettie was cold now, but she felt clear headed, and she knew she must think about this thing before she could go back to the apartment. In the row of houses across the street from the ball-diamond, she could see that almost all the lights were out. She thought how easily and with how little harm she could do it now. A creaking sound behind her and overhead caught her attention then. The sound increased and reminded her of an afternoon when she was a child, sitting in front of a bay-window, watching a porch-swing blowing crazily in the wind. She knew she would let it happen.

In the quiet she glanced upward to where the sound had last come. Through the chimney smoke and reflection of the moonlight from the snow, the long "V" of a flock of geese shimmered against the black sky, but did not advance. Looking down at her feet, she saw that the blue and red sparkles the street lamp overhead reflected on the snow were now etched, unchanging. Across the diamond the shadows that had moved underneath the elms in the light breeze were still. Lettie hugged herself closer, then broke suddenly into a high-stepping lope across the infield, the snow plowing before her. On the pitcher's mound she began springing up and down, clapping her hands, hugging and slapping her arms. Slipping off her mittens and letting them fall to the snow, she ran her fingers across the skin at her temples, her brow-bone, finding the shape of her cheek-

bones, trying as her hands trembled, to imagine her own skull. She felt the stab of cold in her lungs as she panted in the night air, felt the cold begin to numb her knees and legs where she had sunk down. With her eyes closed, Lettie tried to see inward, trying to focus on the power that must lie somewhere behind her eyes. It looked black, like always, but she could feel the center of it.

When she began to shake with the cold, she got up and started home.. Snow was falling now through the circle of light the street-lamps made and disappearing into the dark. Large flakes brushed her eyelashes and stung her face; Lettie wondered if she could stop them all, felt sure she could. Would one melt if she took it in her hand?

But she had already decided to stop thinking about it; it frightened her. She did not understand how it could be happening to her or how dangerous it might be. There was no proper way to think of it at all, and yet, as she reached for the apartment door, she knew she could not go in until she had finally settled it in her mind. "Give it up for Lent," she thought, and paused, as she felt the warm, stale air of the open doorway.

"Look," he said, pushing the calculator across her desk and tapping at it with his pencil. "You said all I had to do was get an 'eight' on my last theme and you'd give me an 'A' for last semester. Lettie stared down at the red numerals on the plastic screen, then nodded calmly at Richard. "And so I just want to know what the

deal is, because I have added that grade up every way I can think of, even counting in-class participation which I don't know what you gave me on it but..." Watching her own reflection in the lenses of his black plastic glasses she saw that she was leaning forward, her face registering an appropriate concern without looking intimidated. Richard was a big boy whose voice and frame trembled with feeling; she asked him to move around beside her so that they might look at her grade-book, a positioning tactic that managed to calm most students. Adding the scores from her grade-book on his calculator, she found she was not in error.

"Well, see, I'm afraid it was your in-class participation score that did it, Richard," she said, becoming dimly aware that another student was supposed to see her now. What was it? Oh yes, she was supposed to have a paper graded.

"Well, like, you said I was gonna get an 'A' I thought...I mean, if I only got a 'B' on this paper."

Lettie sighed, "Quite frankly, I don't remember telling you that, Richard." She could see only his hooked-nose profile; he had turned away from her and was staring at the wall with his arms folded. "I'm not saying you're wrong," she added quickly, noting his posture.

"I'm not wrong," he hissed.

With her left hand, Lettie felt around on her desk top for Margo's theme. Margo had already taken a vacant seat in the office, and was glancing at the clock. "I'm just saying that it would be

hard for me to tell you that before I had figured all the scores."

"Look, you were standing there right after class, and I come up, and you had your grade-book..." Out of the corner of her eye, Lettie could see Ivan's head rise. He was listening.

"Richard, just a second. I have to...to talk to Margo." Margo was standing at the desk.

"I have to be at a chemistry exam right now," Margo said, beaming.

Lettie smiled back. "Margo, I'm...I'm really sorry, but I don't have your paper graded. Could you come..."

Margo's eyes flew open. "But you said you'd have it graded yesterday. I have to go to work after this; I can't come back. Isn't my next theme due tomorrow? I kind of need to see this one first, don't I?"

"Well, I tell you what, you can turn your paper in late this time. I won't count it late." She could feel Richard smirking beside her.

"But then I won't have a final draft to discuss with the others in class tomorrow--am I supposed to sit there? Will this be an excused absence if I miss? How much will it count off on in-class participation?" Richard was now shifting in his chair to keep from snickering. Ivan had stopped grading entirely and had turned his head to watch.

Lettie felt her stomach leap up under her ribs; there had been no conscious will on her part. She knew it had already happened.

She continued to look at Margo's folded paper, then slid open her desk drawer and removed a green pen. Reading the paper once, turning over the stapled pages slowly, she acquired a vague notion that she was reading about a skiing trip to Aspen, Colorado. Without looking up from the paper Lettie began marking spelling and punctuation errors, found an unusual phrase, marked the word "Fresh" in the margin next to it, and circled a 'C' at the bottom of the page. After marking the grade in the grade-book, she sat quietly, watching the shadows of fine twigs that had stopped moving on her desk, and when they had started to move again, she smiled up at Margo. "Oh, my mistake," she said, handing it to her.

Willy was in the basement studio that evening when she returned home. She entered the room to find it nearly steaming--Willy always had to have the rooms hot to create. In cut-offs he squatted in the darkness before the red glow of his plexiglass light sculpture, concentrating on the pattern the light was casting on the wall beside him, his weight shifting on his heels, his raised index finger seeming to follow one of the center lines. When her heels clicked across the stone floor behind him, she was surprised at how quickly he stood and turned from his sculpture to her.

"How's it coming?" she asked.

"Great!" he said, hugging her and kissing her on the cheek.

"How was school today? Let's go upstairs and you can tell me all about it." This was unusual. She was used to receiving a half-hour recital of the day's catastrophes and successes, as well as the vague

reservations he had about his work. He stroked her back. "I want to know what you did today. I never get to see you, sweetheart."

The last time Lettie could remember Willy calling her that was after she had thrown up in the ladies' restroom at her Uncle Frank's funeral.

"Sorry, lamb pie," she replied, regretting immediately the irony in her voice. Both she and Willy relaxed their embrace. "No, really," she said, covering quickly, "nothing much going on today."

Willy turned on the overhead light. The late afternoon sun glowed against his blonde hair and fair skin. He had that sullen look that had attracted her to him at first, dark calm eyes that obviously saw everything with an intensity that only the involuntary muscle twitches around his lips and jaws betrayed. He stood there twitching and looking angelic, a fine glaze of sweat over his face, glowing like porcelain.

She had grown tired of him ever so slowly.

What she unconsciously feared would happen had happened. Last night after she had returned from the park, while they were making love, she had wished to be elsewhere. At that moment she had felt his whole dead weight sink into her arms as she held him, as she lay pinned beneath, struggling to raise her shoulders and turn him from her. Feeling that he was not breathing, she had become terrified. With great effort she had rolled him to her side and reached up to turn on the lamp, grabbing his face in her other hand and searching his tightly closed eyes. Frightened not to feel his chest

rise with his breath, yet not wanting to let the moment begin again, she lay propped on one elbow, frozen, staring at him a long time. Slowly she had pulled him against her and waited until she felt him breathing again, and feeling his breath on her body, she had cried. Willy tried to soothe her.

As he stood looking at her now, she was aware that her silence was disappointing him more than usual. He switched off the light. "It's going to be another quiet evening," he said, and turned to climb the basement stairs. She followed him up. Suddenly, in the stairway, he turned sharply around so that she had to take a step back. His face had the look of extreme hurt that she had seen lately, and she was surprised once again at its suddenness. He took a great breath, then said "I'm getting tired of you never wanting to talk to me." Lettie put her hand against the wall and lowered her eyes from his, concentrating on his mid-section. She felt the even tone of his voice and knew that his eyes were closed. "You come home, and you mope around, and you mumble. And I'm getting tired of it, Lettie. There's nothing to you anymore."

"I don't know what you want me to do," she said finally.

"I don't know what you want me to do!" he exploded, and grabbed the stair-rail. His white knuckles frightened her; he turned his hand back and forth, gripping it. "What do you want me to do? What in God's name do you want me to be?"

Lettie did not answer. She knew he interpreted her silence to mean she did not want to dignify his question with an answer, but

she knew the answer. She did not want him to be anything. She did not want him to be. He waited, his eyes searching her face, but she could only concentrate on the clear light through the storm-door above his head. Willy turned and began climbing the stairs again. When he was opposite the storm-door, she noticed that the wind had stopped in the trees. She pushed her body against him, turning his shoulders at an angle as she squeezed slowly past. Outside, it was a bright, clear day.

CRITICAL APPARATUS

The stories and poems in this collection were written over a four-year period at Kansas State University, 1979-1982. I think of myself as a young and essentially inexperienced artist who is learning the craft of writing through studying other writers and their work, and through trial and error. At this early stage in my growth, I naturally see each work I undertake as a separate experiment: the works appearing in this thesis were not conceived as integral parts of some larger opus. Yet I have collected them here with the hope that by reading these works and my remarks about their composition, the reader might come to a better understanding of the nature of the creative act, and more specifically, the process of maturation in a particular writer. To emphasize the developmental aspects of my work, therefore, I have ordered the poems and stories respectively according to their date of composition.

Taken together, all the works in this thesis share the common ground of my experience. That is not to say they are strictly autobiographical, but only that I draw heavily on the moments I have lived through or am living through with the people I have known. My familiarity with the small Kansas town in which I grew up, particularly my own family, and the people I met when I went to live in the university town near home; the voices, feelings I've come to know, my place in it all--this is where the material begins.

More specifically, the process of composing a poem or a short

story seems to usually begin with an image of something I have experienced, an image which will have an emotional claim on me, the nature of which I will not necessarily have defined. I repeat "seems" and "usually" because I am not always conscious of my thought process, if it is indeed a process--I don't always remember how a work started or why it came to be. I am also certain that nothing is more prone to inherent fallacy than an artist's analysis of his own work: At best he is too close to his work to judge it objectively at all times. At the worst, he can lie. Whether motivated by the truth, personal delusion or the "imp of the perverse," Poe, in his "Philosophy of Composition," for instance, imposes a rational structure on the invention process of a creative work, yet because we now tend to see composition as a process motivated as much by the irrational, i.e. inspiration, intuition, as the rational, his essay is suspect.

Nevertheless, through my writing experience I have noticed certain similarities in the way the composition comes about, and I will use one of my poems for a detailed example. When I began to write "Catching," the earliest of the works in this project, I remember that I began with two images (I don't know which came first). One was the picture I carry in my mind of a small brown bat hanging from a pile of wood stacked on a picnic table. I found the creature one early morning when I was a child, did not know what it was, and so was startled by it. The fear and puzzlement, I am sure, made the image more vivid to me. Of course the image in the poem is slightly altered so that it would be easier for the reader to visualize and

easier to say.

The other image was of the bat screaming inside the glass, the mouth opening again and again. That picture has always been painful for me, although at the time I began writing, I was not able to recognize that I felt guilty about it. I only knew that I was fascinated and disconcerted by the image at the time I began composing the poem. It requires the distance of time, if not always the "tranquillity" Wordsworth spoke of for me to come to terms with the emotion in my poems or stories.

The bat's silent screams reminded me of the quiet noise fish, particularly catfish, make when they are out of the water, gasping for air. It is rather more like the sound of a hand edging into a wet rubber glove than it is like a scream, but late in my childhood fishing career when I had begun to feel sorry for the fish, I associated the sound with screaming.

Although the images came to mind without my having to think about how they were connected, I knew on a simple level that they did connect: the bat and fish were both caught, and I felt uncomfortable about it. I must admit that I am most secure about committing words to paper in cases like this one, in cases where I feel something like the sure footing of a theme shaping up underneath my feet. This is a fault caused by my own inexperience as a writer, but it is one that I think I will eventually overcome. In talking with writers with more experience, particularly my writing instructors here at Kansas State--Helen Williams, Ben Nyberg and Jonathan Hold-

en--I have consistently received one piece of advice: learn to sit down to write without always having to have a notion of where the work will ultimately lead. I have found that the pressure to make everything in the work conform to a pre-conceived pattern usually leads to stale writing, or worse, a fear of failure which often means no writing at all. Emily Dickinson once wrote: "I dwell in Possibility--/A fairer House than Prose..."; and while I think good prose and good poetry can be equally "fair," I agree with the implication that any writer who wants to be a master of his craft must somehow learn to settle comfortably into that house. Hopefully, I am moving my furniture in a little at a time.

So with these three images and my sense that they had not only emotional significance for me but perhaps a common thematic bond, I suspected I had a poem. I did not know if I could put the poem together, or if it would work for me or anyone else, but experience suggested that the possibility for poetry was there. I could simply begin to tell the story of how the bat got into the jar. Of course I had to do much experimentation before I found a way to say it. My mind is flooded with several images of that morning: running upstairs to tell both my brothers, standing outside under the grape--arbor with my mother and brothers, all of us peering in the glass at the thing, my brothers laughing at it, and at me for being so frightened. But the one image that seemed to streamline the narrative--as well as evoke the pre-pubescent, semi-innocent cruelty--was the "sinewy muscles" closing the lid. That is not an image I have

of that morning, but it is one that came to my aid when I needed it. In the stanza about the bat looking at me, I simply tried to get as close to the actual image and feeling I carried away from the experience as I could. In the third stanza, I expanded the fish analogy with several of the worst memories I have of fishing.

I had all the elements, but still the poem didn't seem to work. Because I felt secure about the images, the tone, the diction, I wasn't ready to abandon the poem by any means--I felt I could make it go. At this point in the composition process, however, the second and third stanzas were reversed, and I had added a couple of end--lines about my relation to the bat's predicament that do not appear in the final version. Very unsatisfied with the ending, I took the poem to the advanced creative writing poetry workshop and found that while the class liked the rest of the poem, they agreed with me that the ending was weak. Jonathan Holden, however, suggested that I might already have an ending if the second and third stanzas were reversed, and the two weak lines removed. That, as far as I am concerned, was a breakthrough. It served to reinforce an important lesson about writing as well, and that is that when a work *seems* to have all the essential elements but still lacks force, the problem may not be in adding more, but simply in re-structuring what is already there.

That, as closely as I can recall, is how the poem, "Catching" arrived in its current form, and as I have suggested, the way the poem was invented and developed is typical of the composition process for most of my poems and short-stories. A particular image I have

in mind will have a special clarity that will encourage me to focus on it. I will wonder why it is so distinct, what the nature of my feelings for it are, and why I feel the way I do about it. If the image connects as it often does with other images in my mind, I will have the same questions about them, and I will also wonder why they connect. And if I begin to put words to paper at this point, and continue writing, it is mostly so I might figure out the answer to those questions.

In other words I almost never start with an idea. I do not think easily in the abstract. In fact, I think it would be safe to say that any idea I ever had in my life started with a concrete image, because I think in concrete terms almost exclusively. I suppose that is why I seem to associate a different image with every word I hear or see. Yet I must admit that my inability to think or express myself as convincingly as I would like in the abstract has frustrated me to an extent. There are many writers I admire who are particularly at home in both worlds: Stienbeck, Auden, Joyce Carol Oates, Jorie Graham, to name only a few. I just don't happen to have their facility.

I would now like to briefly discuss the other works in this project, and I will take them up in the order they appear.

Like "Catching," "To My Brother's Child, Born Soon" is a poem in which I am satisfied with the tone and diction: I am able to blend the informal voice: "here is where I was born/really" with the more sophisticated: "for an opportunity in early June" in a way that

pleases me. Other readers have told me that I go a bit too far with my unusual use of the verb "say" in the last stanza, but I happen to like it. Quite frankly, at the time I composed this poem, I was steeped in Dylan Thomas, and I know that the poem is surely as much an imitation of "Fern Hill" as it is my own creation. But there is no better way to learn the music, rhythm and sheer possibilities of the language than studying Thomas; I think it has helped me. Of course, when one concentrates fairly exclusively on music, as I did in this poem, it is easy to sacrifice control. Richard Hugo pointed out to me that the poem is longer than it needs to be, and that the third verse might be deleted or shortened. I think he may be right.

Control is also a problem in the poem "Buck Fever," in that the narration is a bit muddled. Part of the difficulty I have had in revising the poem is that the incident is clear in my memory: We are sitting at a table; my brother admits he could not shoot a deer he saw while hunting ("buck fever"); he is ridiculed by my uncle; and I am angry because I am too young to have a concept of the animal's death; I simply feel I've been cheated out of the opportunity to see and touch the animal. After trying several revisions of the first stanza, I finally was able to show the poem to Dave Smith, who commented that perhaps the problem with it is that I am trying to be too cagey in my narrative description, too poetic, and that I should simply try to state what happened in plain terms. I must admit, however, that I have never been able to clarify the narrative without spoiling the rhythm and diction. One feature of the

poem that does satisfy me particularly is the cumulative effect of the questions at the end; they build and heighten the drama.

The narrative incident in "The Treacherous Death of Jesse James," is, I feel sure, more difficult for the reader to apprehend than the one in "Buck Fever." I am not as concerned about that in this poem, however, as I was in the latter. The reader does not require special knowledge of the circumstances of Jesse James' death; I would be satisfied if he simply came away from the poem with a sense of a single moment frozen and fully evoked. Of course, I think it would help the reader's appreciation of the poem if he knows who Jesse James was, that he was a folk hero who was a real man. I wanted to catch that real man in the moment he is losing his life, and I wanted to slow down the time slightly to heighten the sense of reality. But by slowing down the time, I change reality too--and that distance, the distance between the imaginary and the real, is something I hope the reader might think about.

A rather more light-weight poem in the collection is "The Water Strider Does Not Quite." Unlike the last poem, I think the problem with "Water Strider" is in my failure to begin to realize the potential of the subject. I think that the poem might have been much longer; the idea of skimming the surface of things is quite interesting to me and contains many possibilities for development. I include the poem, however, because it has a sureness of movement that I like and because the turn in the poem seems right and surprising.

"The Upward Tending" is a more successful effort, I believe.

Like "Catching," it deals with the idea of capture, with the power that we humans do have over other creatures, ourselves, and the power we don't have, the power nature exercises over us. The poem also obviously has its roots in childhood experience. I suppose the reason water, ponds, and fishing figure so largely in my work is that when I was a little girl, the one thing I looked forward to more than any other was the chance to go fishing and camping at a large, wooded farm pond near home. I am filled with memories of that place. But like "Water Strider," this poem has a fluid and surreal quality--in this particular case, the ambience may be the result of its having been written, almost in its entirety, directly after I had awakened from a short sleep. I had been conscious, as I was waking up, that my closed eyes were adjusting to different "grades" of light coming through the bedroom window. Thinking about that after I awakened, I was reminded of something I had often tried to imagine, and that is how the variation of light must appear to a fish that is rising up from the bottom of a lake to feed at the surface.

The poet Jorie Graham remarked to me that she was disappointed that I called attention to the fact that I am waking from sleep in the poem. She felt I was trying to mark a distinction between reality and fantasy that was inappropriate, since the poem seems to want to break down those distinctions. I decided, however, to keep the phrase. An important part of the irony, for me, is in the fact that there is an awakening at the end, a very subdued, beautiful, perhaps incomplete awakening if viewed in one way, and a harsh and glaring

one if viewed another way.

In "The Way to Go," I explored a similar irony--the irony of apex, that moment of time in which nature is at once at its height and its decline. It is, of course, the same sort of apex I was trying to capture in "Jesse James." The poem started not with an idea, however, but just with an image I have of the windfall under my grandfather's orchard. I used to have to mow under the trees there, and the crushed, rotten, insect-ridden fruit that I had to walk over seemed almost consciously decadent. When I began to write about it, however, I became more attuned to the delicacy of the scene, to the restrained and yet strained feeling of that moment in nature. It was actually written toward the end of a particularly hot summer, at a time when I was wishing for cold weather to arrive again, and I began to wonder as I wrote whether the change of seasons could be a conscious decision on the part of humans as well as the rest of nature. The poem wonders about that, and it does its wondering in terms that are more abstract than most of my poems tend to be. The reason for this is that I was consciously trying to imitate the style of Jorie Graham, whose poetry takes much of its effect from the intricacy of her wit. It seems to me that poets who are writing on the forefront today have rediscovered the beauties of the abstract, the inter-play of wit, the illumination of concepts with generalized language. It is more rare than ever to find a poet, who, like William Stafford, tries simply to evoke a particular incident and let the incident speak for itself. Personally I find the sort

of poem Stafford writes to be often emotionally richer and more telling, but I admire the genius of a poet like Graham. My particular style, as I have suggested, is perhaps more narrative in structure. But I have learned from my attempts at imitating poets like Graham.

"The Proprietress of Baltic Avenue" is an example of a poem whose initial concept is more interesting than its execution. It is an unusual poem for me in that it did start with an idea. I decided that I wanted to write a poem about somebody who would live on the Monopoly property, Baltic Avenue, which along with Mediterranean Avenue, is the most valueless on the board. In the first version, I had the picture of a faded woman sweltering on a summer city street, trying to maintain a hotel made out of plastic that is melting a little more every day. I envisioned her spurned by her old lover, but still stoically, defiantly and even insidiously making "improvements" on the property, so that if he might land there again some day, she could make him very sorry. In the present version, I set Baltic Avenue in a tiny Kansas river town I'm quite familiar with, and it seemed for once that I had broken the poem open. But I still have trouble liking the work, and part of the reason is that it is all so contrived that I feel very little for the character I've created. Still I like her rather grand tone, and I'm pleased with several of the lines, including those about the town slowly ebbing away beneath her.

"Crossing" started with the memory I have of two young deer jostling and kicking in their haste to get away from me one evening

after I had surprised them, only to slow to a dignified trot a hundred yards away. It seemed to me at the time that they were not far away enough from potential danger to feel secure at a trot, especially across an open field, and so I ascribed a human sort of face-saving to their action. As I began writing about them, however, I realized the only element in the scene that was awkward and out-of-place, emotionally as well as physically, was me. I tried to let the ending evoke the sense of completeness in the scene, completeness without me, but in an earlier draft I'm afraid I tried to pound a message home with a final line: "I drive away, blur and sound." I'm grateful to those in the advance creative writing workshop who pointed out to me that the poem said what it needed to say without the additional line.

I realize I haven't said anything about verse form in these poems. The decisions I make concerning rhythm, line breaks, stanza breaks, are generally intuitive--the poems written are essentially free verse. But I trained myself fairly rigorously in strict form when I began writing poetry, and I will always be grateful to my first poetry writing instructor, the late Dr. Helen J. Williams for encouraging me to write in formal verse, and to Dr. Brewster Rogerson, who taught me metrics. That period of my training was, I think, essential for me in developing an ear for the language and an appreciation for the care that must be exercised in constructing a poem. Something else that has helped me in the last couple of years is a discussion I had with Gerald Costanzo, editor of Three Rivers

Poetry Journal, about line breaks. I now tend to break my lines more consciously on "strong" words, words that carry important meaning, although this is not always the case. But pace, rhythm, rhyme are other important factors in the decision of where to break a line. In the "Water Strider" poem I was consciously trying to imitate the skittery movement of the bug in my line arrangements, something I see now as slightly precious. As in "The Way to Go," my decision to break "The Pond in Winter" into short stanzas was an attempt to evoke the delicate tentativeness of the subject.

Both "Crossing" and "The Pond in Winter" were written during a time I was immersed in Robert Bly's poetry anthology, News of the Universe, and in his essays about poetry contained in that book. One point that he makes there, a point that has been made often before, is that it is more than difficult for poets of this century to write about objects or to give them "honor" in themselves. Bly writes:

The poet dispenses with the object and begins immediately with "I." "There is a kernel of hate in me," or "My grandmother in her old picture resembles me." If the poem does begin with an object, the poet usually--I have done this often--leaves it part way through to return to the "I."

In both of the poems mentioned, I feel I've come closer to seeing the natural world than I have in any of my other poems, and part of the reason is that as I wrote them, I was concentrating harder on the object than on my own feelings about it. What measure of unity I achieve with the object in the poem is not a result

of my conscious attempt to see how I relate to it as a human animal, but instead a result of my trying to see it as clearly and wholly as I can. And that has been an important lesson for me.

I would like now to briefly discuss each of the short stories in this collection.

"Owl Catching" started with a memory I have of my older brother, John, telling me he wanted to catch a wounded hawk that was trapped down in the foundation of an old abandoned house. I have no idea if he ever followed through with his plan, but in this story I simply tried to imagine what such a struggle might be like. I decided to change the bird to an owl, I suppose because I had recently been reading James Dickey's "The Owl King," and had a sense of the mystery and eeriness that bird evoked in the poem. I think I probably also got the idea of breaking the story into three points of view from that poem, which speaks from the points-of-view of the Owl King and a blind child. Another conscious influence in the story is Robinson Jeffers' "Hurt Hawks," which has long been one of my favorite poems. Aside from the obvious similarities between my story and "Hurt Hawks," I have tried to emulate the unity of consciousness Jeffers' persona achieves with the wounded hawk. That unity of consciousness, of course, is a hallmark of Dickey's writing as well. Both these writers are amazingly able to step inside the minds of the characters in their work, and that ability to think through another mind

is the single most important skill a writer can possess.

The story is different from most of the rest of my prose fiction in that it has a more heightened tone. Obviously, the heavy influence of Dickey and Jeffers on the work itself contributes to the slightly poetic language; I felt, however, that a more formal diction was appropriate to this particular story, because it does present a kind of heroic struggle in miniature. I did not make a conscious decision about the narrative tone in the story, however--the narrative simply took its cue from the father's voice, and that voice seemed natural to me at the time I began to write.

"Owl Catching" is also unusual in that I wrote it in less than four hours and with only a few word changes--the result of my having to meet a class dead-line. But I had also been reading Leon Surmelian's Techniques of Fiction Writing and was "inspired" by his account of writing his first published short story all at one sitting, with no word changes. I felt that if he, as a young writer, was capable of pulling off such a feat, so was I. Surmelian's book has been helpful to me in the writing of the stories included in this project. One piece of advice that has helped me enormously has been the suggestion that one block out scene and exposition in an outline of the story before beginning the writing. That suggestion was particularly useful in the process of writing both "Owl Catching" and "Garage." As I have suggested before, the main difficulty I have had to overcome as a writer

is my notion that the work must be perfect in a first draft. Thus, I tend to agonize endlessly over the first draft, be it poem or short-story, working it and reworking it until I am satisfied that it reads well the first time through. The problem with this method is that my critical faculty inhibits my unconscious, and it is the unconscious that most needs to be given free reign in a first draft. By outlining the story first, I find I have been able to satisfy my critical faculty's need to know where the story is tending, as well as save myself the time and effort I usually spend taking the story into unnecessary territory. Of course, the finished product may be very different from the outline; I may indeed decide to strike off in a new direction, turn exposition into scene, or scene into exposition, but the outline gave me the security I need to begin the writing. I have also consciously forced myself, in the stories that appear in this project, to work out an essentially unrevised first draft before I begin work on a second one. I have finally recognized that the intense revision of a first draft is, in my case, simply a cop-out--it keeps me from having to face the next blank piece of paper. I have also found that the poems I am most satisfied with have been produced using the same method--an unrestricted first draft.

In other words, improving my writing has been a process of learning when to think critically and when to give my imagination free reign. Ben Nyberg, in helping me to learn fiction writing,

has suggested, for example, that I not spend time worrying about which point-of-view to adopt in my narration, that the story will naturally adopt a point-of-view for me. That is to say, the voice I hear telling the story, whether it be first person, third person omniscient or third person limited, will usually be the "right" voice. Thus, I cannot admit to selecting a first person point-of-view for the story "Garage"; I simply heard the story through a particular woman's voice. But the choice of first person narrator in this particular story is a satisfactory one, I believe. Ramona has adopted a role--the blithe naïvé--and that can be an endearing characteristic. The only trouble is that it begins to break down for her by the end of the story, just as her car breaks down, and the most effective way I could present the breakdown in facade was to allow her to tell the story herself.

That does not mean that the story is a complete success, however. The most important flaw in "Garage" is its lack of development--it is much too short. Romana's intense questioning at the end seems almost unmotivated, so that the change in her feelings, although revealed by her narration, does not seem well accounted for by the story itself.

"Lettie" was also written from an outline of scene and exposition, but unlike the other stories, it is not quite as ambitious as its initial concept. In my original plan, Lettie would exit through the screen door and into the town to carry out a number of fantasies: a shopping spree at the local grocery store where

she would scoop up sets of tacky dinner ware; a few abductions of prominent local citizens whom she would place in compromising situations...and so on. Obviously, I had envisioned "Lettie" as a rather more zany tale than the finished product, but as I began to write (and develop a deeper sympathy for the character) the story set another tone. Although I like the element of black humor in "Lettie," I wanted to create a more serious story. I felt it was important to create a character with whom the reader could identify. I became more and more aware that I did not want the reader to simply laugh at Lettie, but instead to consider whether time could actually be suspended for her, and if it could, why. I wanted the reader to believe there actually could be a Lettie. Thus, I ended the story on a more tentative and more serious note because I wanted the reader to focus on the "bright, clear day" and think about what it might mean for her.

A few readers have asked me whether I think Lettie has the ability to stop time, or whether she is simply losing her sense of reality. Eudora Welty has written: "What I do in writing of any character is to try to enter into the mind, heart, and skin of a human being who is not myself." Although I do not have anything approaching Welty's skill, that is what I attempted to do in constructing Lettie's character. And because Lettie herself does not know what is happening (indeed, her refusal to face her own truth makes it impossible for her to know what is happening), I don't know either. The important question is not whether or

not time has really stopped, but why, for her, it at least seems to have stopped.

In other words, I could not have written a character I was satisfied with if I had constantly distanced myself from her to answer all her internal questions, to act as critic and judge. At this stage in my development as a writer I have come to understand that my most important task is to see, hear, feel, and to a certain extent, become my subject--until I have done that, my critical evaluation means nothing. That is not to deflate the importance of a conscious control over matters of technique, form, and ability to evaluate and revise a work. But initially, the more removed I become from the object or person under my view, the less able I am to capture that object or person. "As rational human beings, we recoil in terror from the rule of the irrational," writes Leon Surmelian, "but no theory or fiction can ignore it--as no man can in his own life. The irrational is part of us and represents one side of the dual process in artistic creation."

THE UPWARD TENDING

by

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ABSTRACT

This Master's Report is a collection of poems and stories composed while a student at Kansas State University. That the developmental aspect of the work might be underscored, the poems and stories are ordered respectively according to their date of composition. Each of the compositions in this project were conceived as separate experiments, but taken together they represent stages in the maturation process of an author. It is that process that the Report seeks to illuminate through the appended Critical Apparatus. The Apparatus discusses the writing of each individual work--structure, technique, influences and relationship to other work--and notes the insights achieved through completion of each experiment. The author concludes that her growth as a writer has been in learning not to demand critical distance from her subject in a work's earliest stages of development.