

PICTURES OF CHILDHOOD

by

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## MATCHBOX

Rene Meaker

My father left me five dollars in his will. After all these years I didn't expect anything from him. When I was six, Dad worked at the lumbermill in Durham, a hundred miles away, so he could support our family. Friday nights after work he drove the Nash home, arriving after my bedtime. Sometimes I would wake and see curved bars of reflected lamplight on the aging wallpaper of the stairway, and hear my parents' voices coming up from the living room. I could never understand what they said, but the tones of their voices were clear. My father's determination penetrated the door clearly and echoed from the corners. My mother's voice was the silence between his speeches. Grogily, I would wonder what they discussed; wonder if I sneaked downstairs and hid behind my father's big chair, what I might hear. But I never stirred from the safety of my bed, but drifted back to sleep.

Early Saturday mornings, I opened the door and tiptoed silently into my parents' bedroom, full of grown-up things like a mahogany chest-of-drawers and a full length mirror. The mirror, mounted on the open closet door, always caught me shaking Daddy's shoulder as he slept. His eyes opened wide, staring blankly; then his whole body jerked violently,

making me jump back in surprise. A flash caught my eye, and I knew the mirror had seen me jump--maybe it had made Dad jump. He climbed out of bed wearing boxer shorts and a t-shirt, and pulled on the dark green dungarees hanging from the closet door knob.

Quietly, he went to the mahogany chest-of-drawers and pulled open one of the two small drawers on top. The left one held not only his car keys and change, but also my great Grandfather's pocket watch, which didn't work anymore, a variety of matchbooks, and my first tooth, in an old olive jar.

Daddy almost never opened the drawer on the right, and I ached with curiosity to know what was in it. The first time I asked him, he only whispered a stern "no," and ushered me out of the bedroom. I never went into my parents' bedroom except to wake Daddy on Saturday mornings, so I didn't see how I would ever discover what was in the drawer.

But another Saturday he opened it. The drawer slid silently as he pulled on its carved knob; the dresser stood too tall for me to see inside the drawer, so he silently lifted out each treasure for me to see it.

First he unfolded his honorable discharge paper from the Army. I stood close to him so I could see each detail. The words on it meant nothing to me, but I noticed the paper had been folded and closed in that tiny drawer so long that

it curled even when it lay unfolded on his palm. He refolded the paper, and drew out a yellowed clipping from a newspaper with a blurry picture of Grandpa on it. The brittle paper had begun to crack along the crease and my father's big breaths made the dry edges of the paper flutter. He returned this treasure, and brought out two marbles. One was wooden and had been white once; the other was made of blue glass. He set them in his cupped palm, then rolled them around gently.

"Can I hold them? Please?" I asked, craning my head back to see his face.

"Shhh!" Daddy put his finger against his lips and pointed at my mother's sleeping form, a snowy mountain range rising from their double bed, and shook his head. He returned the marbles, with a single clack, to a little cotton-lined box which disappeared into the drawer.

His hand moved slightly and brought out a small pile of dollars weighted by silver coins. He leaned down and whispered into my ear that this was special money; he could turn it into gold, if he wanted. I looked at the money, picturing a golden dollar in place of the paper ones, and wondered how paper was turned into gold. The coins were special too. They looked like ordinary money to me, but he pointed out the raised profile of a buffalo standing on a tiny patch of grass on one, and a delicately carved picture of a helmetted woman on another. The money clinked on the

wooden drawer as he replaced it, and silently slid the drawer shut. It was our secret drawer now.

We tiptoed out of the bedroom, then out the backdoor; I felt glad I could make noise again. Dad opened the car door for me, and swept empty Carling Black Label bottles onto the floor. I climbed into the car, sitting on my knees while looking out the window. Dad slid behind the wheel, and backed from the driveway.

"Where does money come from?" I asked.

"From work. I get paid for working at the mill."

"Did you play marbles when you were a little boy?" I asked as we turned a corner.

"Yep. I was good, too. Beat everybody. Till I got cheated."

"Who cheated you?" I asked as we swung into a parking space.

"Nobody." He sounded agry. "Turn around and sit down."

I mounted a red vinyl-covered stool and took a glazed doughnut from under the clear plastic dome on the counter. I climbed across the empty stools lining the counter, and sat down next to my Dad.

"Hi, Sam," my Dad said, and Sam set a cup and saucer on the counter and poured coffee into his cup. In a minute he came back with a glass of milk.

"You're big as a tree root, Jerry," he said, grinning.

"He sure is," Dad said, "and curiouser than a cat. You should hear the questions. Jesus."

Sam set the coffee pot back on its stand.

"Bring me some sweetner for this coffee, Sam," Dad winked, and Sam took Dad's cup into the kitchen. I ate while Dad looked over the newspaper. He was still reading when I wandered down to the other end of the diner to flip the metal rimmed pages of songs in the jukebox. The man sitting on the stool nearest the jukebox sivalled around and looked me over. He wore a red and black plaid wool shirt, and the orange piece of cardboard pinned to its back disappeared as he turned.

"Who are you?" he asked, smiling.

Dad's angry voice froze my name in my open mouth.

"Jerry! Get over here!" I looked back at the man, his smile draining from his face as I turned away from him. Dad stared at me angrily while I walked back to my stool. He knit his eyebrows sternly together, leaned his head down, and pointed his finger into my belly.

"You stay away from him, you hear me?"

I dropped my head and nodded without looking. He grabbed me by the elbow, and a swat landed on my behind. "You don't ever talk to that son of a bitch." I knew from his tone not to ask him why. He climbed down, and we walked silently out of the diner.

Walking down Main Street, Dad stopped in front of the

store display windows, looking at the pies in the bakery, and the gadgets in the Five and Dime. Eventually he ended up in Jim's Sporting Goods, picking out shells for his shotgun.

"Go pick out a car," he said. "Be quick about it." I ran to the glass display case where the matchbox cars were stacked, then ran back and set the car on the counter next to the shells. I watched him give Jim Beckford the money, then hold out his hand, and take the change. Back home, our special time for the week was over.

I played with my Matchbox cars whenever I wasn't outdoors. I converted the empty space between the foot of my bed and the bedroom door into a village I created with a worn out braided rug. On a hill made of stacked Pearl Buck books, taken from the dining room bookshelf, I set up a ranch over-looking the village. It consisted of a cabin (the one the royal blue flatbed truck had carried), and two cows from the cattle truck. In front of the house, where the imaginary road ended at the driveway, I parked my favorite car. It was the yellow safari car with the brown canvas roof. I made up stories about the people in my village. I knew them as well as I knew Bobby, or the records that we listened to over and over on the radio.

One night I knew that school was coming up soon, because I heard my mother's voice come up the stairwell.

"Jerry's going to be in school for the first time," she



said, "and the boys just have to have clothes to wear. They're growing like weeds." I couldn't make sense of what my father said. A couple weeks later, Mom said I would be going to school in September and that Bobby and I needed new sneakers.

All the way downtown, Bobby kept talking about the clothes he was going to get, until Mom turned around and said, "You're just getting sneakers, both of you. We walked the rest of the way in silence. At Jim's Sporting Goods, we stood in the aisle where piles of sneaker boxes towered around us on all sides, even taller than Mom. I drifted to the glass case of Matchbox cars while my mother tried sneakers on Bobby.

I spotted a new Matchbox in the display. It wasn't another car or truck, but a bright orange crane with a balsa-wood log hanging suspended from the gleaming metal hook at the end of its rope. A ratchet, working crank on the cab raised and lowered the hook. I ran to my mother and tugged on her skirt.

"Not now," she said, and pinched my brother's foot through the canvas sneaker. "Sit down in this chair."

I squirmed through three pairs of sneakers too loose or too tight for my feet, and thought my turn would never end. When she laid the box of sneakers on the counter, I pointed at the crane below. My mother considered it through the scratched countertop.

"No, Jerry," she said, "we can't afford toys. We have to buy school clothes."

"It's a crane; it can pick things up, see?" I crouched in front of the case and pressed my finger against the glass.

"No, it's too expensive."

"I'll earn the money," I said. She handed the man the money.

"You're too young to earn enough money for this. It's too much for a toy anyway." She took her change, and we left the store.

I thought about the crane all day. I knew just where I would put it in my village, and just what it would do. I prayed silently that night for God to give me the crane. Thursday morning I thought about Daddy coming home tomorrow, and I knew he wouldn't say no. In the afternoon I set up my village and decided where to put the lumbermill.

I thought about the money in the drawer in the bedroom below, and decided to look at it. I went downstairs and opened the bedroom door slowly. The room looked much darker without my Dad in it. I tiptoed into the room, and paused for a moment, listening to the sounds and looking at the empty room. I stepped carefully over the floorboard I knew would squeak, and passed the closet door, slightly ajar. Standing in front of the chest-of-drawers, I felt my heart beating in my chest. Then I reached up, pulled on the black

mahogany knob and slid out the drawer.

Adrenalin made me pull too hard and the entire drawer came out, falling on the dresser top with a clatter. I looked around quickly, but the only sound I heard was my heart beating wildly and my quick breath. I groped blindly in the drawer, the scary shadows enlarging every second, and pulled out the first object my fingers felt. It was the money. Tiptoeing away I felt the floorboards give under my weight. The creak sounded unnaturally loud. Summoned by the noise, the closet door swung open and the full length mirror stared out at me, my image caught by its silvery surface.

I dashed from the room, pushed open the front door, and ran the two blocks to the store without even looking before I crossed Schuyler street. Red-faced, I rushed into the store and threw the wadded bills on the glass case.

"I want the crane, please," I said. Jim's son, Patrick, who tended the counter on weekdays after school, straightened out the crumpled dollars, slid back the glass door and took the crane from the case. I took it in my hands, and felt it all over, the cool orange-painted metal warming in my hands. I turned to leave.

"Hey!" he called. I turned around, surprised.

"You forgot your change," he said.

I ran back, held my hand up to the counter, and he counted the coins into my hand.

I walked home wondering if my Dad would be mad at me for buying the crane without him. It was the first time I ever bought anything alone. I would show him my village, and the way I had turned the ranch into a lumber camp. At home, I parked my new Matchbox carefully on the driveway while I searched in the grass for sticks. I felt eyes looking at me, and saw my mother looking at me out the kitchen window.

"Gerald," she called, "come in the house."

I knew, by my mother's voice, that she wasn't pleased. I picked up the crane, and noticed its paint was dimmed by a coat of dust. I dusted the bright orange paint with my shirt-tail while I walked to the back door.

"What have you got?" she asked, looking at the edges of the toy sticking out from my fist. "Show me."

"A crane," I said, uncurling my fingers, the crane displayed on my palm so she could see it from all angles. She bent down close to my hand and I noticed the dust clung to a tiny corner of the green wheel-well where my finger couldn't reach. The paint looked dimmer in the house. I pulled a tissue from the box to wipe the dust off, and my mother finally spoke.

"Where did you get this?" she asked, with disappointment in her voice.

"I bought it," I said.

"Where did you get the money?"

I couldn't tell her about the secret drawer, so I stood silently, and turned the crane over in my hands.

"I'm going to put this away until Daddy comes home and he sees it." She took the crane from my hand. I want you to go to your room and stay there."

"I want to wipe the dust off it."

"You wait until after your father sees it."

"But it'll be dirty," I said.

"Well, it'll just have to be dirty then."

"Can I go outdoors and get some sticks for the crane to pick up?" The crane would hoist the trees up to the giant saw to be cut into boards, and I needed to find the logs.

"No," my mother said, wiping her hands on her apron, "you go upstairs right now."

It bothered me that the crane was dusty; it wouldn't look brand new. I knew he wouldn't mind that I had gotten the crane. I remembered pulling the secret drawer open, and the clatter as it hit the dresser. Would he be mad because I had opened it?

Friday I stayed inside all day. I waited all day, buoyed by knowing Daddy would be home tonight. I waited up past my bedtime, willing my father to drive in the driveway this very moment. Laying awake only a little while after my mother tucked me in, I barely heard the slam of the car door in the driveway as I drifted off.

When I woke up Saturday morning, the sun streamed in

the window, and I listened, but the birds were past their early morning singing. I could hear hammers pounding on the neighbor's house. How could I have slept so late? I jumped out of bed and ran downstairs. My parents' bedroom door stood wide open and the sheets were stripped from their bed. Running out to the kitchen, I found my mother pouring the white laundry soap into the washer. My Dad sat at the kitchen table drinking a cup of coffee.

"Daddy!" I ran to him holding out my arms for him to hug me. But he didn't pick me up; my arms reached only half way around his chest and back, so I hugged his shoulder instead of his cheek.

"Sit down, Gerald," he said. His voice sounded serious, and his words came out clipped. I climbed quickly onto the chair next to him, mystified. What could be wrong?

He brought his hands up from his lap and held out the crane. It looked tiny in his palm. "Did you take the five dollars out of my dresser and buy this?" He bobbed his left hand up and down. His voice sounded very serious.

"Yes."

"Did you ask me for the money? Did you ask your mother?"

"No," and I knew he was angry because I opened his secret drawer. Outside the window, a greenish-brown bird--Dad would know what kind--flew from the maple tree to the cherry. I wished I hadn't overslept. Then we could

have gone to the diner as usual, and I could have told him about the crane, and how he wasn't home, and how I couldn't wait.

"You're a common little thief. I hope you're proud because you're no son of mine."

"George!" my mother gasped, and turned away from the pile of tossed linens. "You don't mean that!"

"Yes I do, goddammit! Those were gold-backed Treasury notes. You know what those dollars are worth! And he stole them," he stretched his long arm out and pointed at me, "so he could have a goddammed crane!" I leaned over and hugged him.

His arms brushed mine away like cobwebs. "I don't love you, you little thief. Get away from me."

Somehow it had all gone wrong, and he didn't love me anymore. My shoulders rose and fell as I heaved my breath in and out, trying not to cry. My mother reached out and put her hands on my shoulders.

"He's still your son," she said, but he didn't answer.

"Daddy!" I called, but he wouldn't look at me.

"Daddy!" He finally turned toward me, but his eyes were full of anger.

Mother led me, unresisting, up to my bedroom, where I stood in the empty space between the foot of my bed and the closed bedroom door. That's when I withdrew from him. Now I wonder if his bequest was one of enduring anger or one of

sadness that so little prevented so much between us.



BRONWEN

The first time I ever saw her, she peered around the edge of the tall reading room door, wide-eyed, and caught my eye.

"Is this the library?" she whispered loudly.

"Yes," I answered, rating from the new books shelf to the check out desk, and wondering why a grown woman was peeking around doors.

She emerged and walked a step or two toward the desk, then held back a few feet away as if she was shy of me or it. The desk was dark, almost black, and so tall that even adults found it uncomfortable. The first time I had seen it, I had loved it--it was just the protection I needed from strangers.

I barely had time to take in honey colored hair, and a well made-up face before she declared, "I feel so embarrassed, you know. You've been here a long time, and you know where everything is, but I've never been here before."

What should I say? As I began mentally fumbling for words, I realized she had begun talking again.

"Oh," she said, cupping her mouth briefly with her fingers. "I shouldn't have said anything. I feel just like when I was a little kid and got into trouble--I got in trouble all the time when I was a kid--just little things."

I peeked out the corner of my eye to see if anyone else

was catching this conversation, but it was a quiet Tuesday night, she was still talking, and I didn't want to look like I was ignoring her. Besides, I did want to hear the rest of her story.

"--my father. I was so little and he was so big. Not tall really, but muscular. I would just tell the most outrageous lies." She wrapped her arm around her waist and hugged herself. "He must have thought I was so rebellious! But I wasn't."

She looked up across the empty space, and into my eyes. I couldn't help but nod, even though I rarely tried to lie as a child. I knew I would get caught and it would make matters even worse. But I had often wished I was better at it.

"I just get so nervous, I start talking, and I don't know when to shut up. And then people think I'm strange. Now you think I'm really a number one weirdo, don't you. But I'm just nervous you know, and ashamed because of living here so long without ever having come to the library before.

"Lots of people never come to the library," I said, so surprised that I didn't realize till much later that I hadn't denied her suggestion that she was weird.

"But that's terrible," she said. "Libraries are wonderful. You know what I'm going to do? I called up a couple of days ago and volunteered to help out here on Tuesday nights. That way my kids can come to story hour and

I can work here."

Before the echo of her words had even come back from the corners of the room, she had turned, walked through the doorway into the house decorating section of books, and disappeared.

I sat back in the swivel chair and tried to absorb our conversation. Somehow, this woman made me feel as though we were friends from way back in seventh grade and she knew that I would understand; knew that I could be trusted with her feelings. I felt a strange sensation, as if high tide were rising in me. I felt flattered.

With a jolt I realized that I didn't even know her name. A flush of embarrassment swept over me as quickly as pleasure had. What had I said to this woman I didn't even know? I reviewed the whole incident and felt relieved that I hadn't said anything she could disapprove. I decided I had better get back to work.

A week later, just before she left, Rose announced that I would have a volunteer named Ron to help me that night.

"A volunteer?" I said.

"Honestly, Marion!" she said. "You're so jumpy about anything new or different. Think of it this way: you might not have to answer so many reference questions."

I didn't say anything. I knew Rose wanted to have the evening with her kids. I didn't have any kids so an evening off for me didn't matter. Besides, I was the assistant

librarian, which meant that I had worked there as long as Rose, but she had a library degree and I didn't. So after a pause I just asked her whether this volunteer had any training or not, but I couldn't understand what Rose mumbled as she escaped out the door.

But instead of a man, the weirdo woman, dressed in a soft, wine colored jumper and matching high heels, walked up to me and shook my hand.

"Hi," she said. "We talked last week, but I didn't tell you my name. I'm Bron."

"Bron?" I asked, still trying to believe that she was really the volunteer.

She chuckled. "My mother named me after a character in a book."

"How Green Was My Valley?"

Her eyebrows raised and a grin spread across her face. "Most people have never heard of it."

"It's romantic and so sad," I volunteered without thinking.

She looked me in the eye for a moment, then said, "I tried to read it, but I couldn't get into it."

"Marion Van Eisler," I said and smiled.

So Bron and I worked till closing at nine-thirty every Tuesday. Gradually we developed a routine of Bron doing whatever jobs she wanted, even though I was technically in

charge. Did I imagine it, or did more people come to the library on Tuesday nights?

Over the course of five months I learned that Bron was a housewife, married to Allen. She loved to restore antiques. She impressed me with her knowledge of the Victorians (which she said came mostly from reading historical romances). Ugh! Nevertheless, she always lifted my mood. And, occasionally, she'd had something to drink before she came to the library.

She was a volunteer, and I really had no right to ask her about it, so I tried to overlook it. But playing blind wasn't easy--especially when Bron seemed to get more tipsy as the evening wore on.

"What's your middle name?" Bron asked one night just before closing.

"You'll laugh," I said.

"No I won't. With a name like mine, I don't laugh at anybody." She smiled disarmingly.

"Louise," I said.

"Marion Louise Van Eisler," she said, as if she was announcing British royalty. You have a beautiful name, Marion. It's so romantic."

"Romantic?" I couldn't keep the disbelief out of my voice--she really had been drinking.

"Do you know what my name is?"

"Bronwen," I said, remembering how I had cried at the

end of the book.

"Bronwen Skeiver Smith," Bron said, giggling and swaying back and forth slightly.

I giggled too. "What a name," I said. "Where'd you get that?"

"It was my grandmother's maiden name. My husband told me when we were first married--I was real young--nineteen or twenty--that Skeiver was Swedish for Smith!" Bron began to laugh.

"How does he know?" I asked.

"I don't know. He probably doesn't!"

We laughed again and I began to hiccup. Bron slipped from the tall chair she had been leaning a leg on, and fell against the edge of the check-out desk.

"Are you OK?" I asked, still hiccupping, but inside me the brief flash of laughter had already passed. I noticed the dimness inside compared with the glare of the spotlight on the wrought iron porch railing shining on the Schuyler Public Library sign. I also noticed, as she struggled to right herself and pull down her dress, which had slid up her thigh, the way the rust in the crazy print pattern on her dress matched her hair. The flat fabric highlighted her glossy mass pulled back to a thick, wavy ponytail.

I reached out, putting my hands under her forearm, and pulled her upright. Her skin felt warm and slightly furred. "Bron, where do you keep the stuff you're drinking? You

were happy when you came in tonight, and now you're positively drunk."

She didn't deny it. She knew I admired her in spite of her drinking. This was the first time I had ever seen her drunk, but it only seemed to make her funnier, smile more. "Where's the bottle, Bron?" I didn't want to take it away from her, just keep her from drinking secretly.

"Shhhh! Wait till we finish," she whispered, even though the library was closed now, the front door locked, and we stood alone counting circulation cards in what had been, in 1843, the parlour of the Whitney mansion. Only the green-black corroded brass desk lamp shed any light. The dark green shade constricted the glow to a tiny lariat of light that we huddled in, trying to sort the cards by call number between Bron's funny stories.

How could I help but notice the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, and the deep crease that ran across her forehead in a long smile? Or the slightly pocked skin of her cheeks? But all these blemishes were almost hidden by the peach-toned make-up applied a little too heavily.

Bron had talked from the first night we met about the cosmetics she bought, and the imperfections she tried to hide. I never wore cosmetics, but I listened eagerly. Though she didn't tell everyone her imperfections, yet she spoke so willingly that I wondered why she wore make-up at all.

"Let me show you," she said, the cards counted, and she slipped daintily from the tall stool, eased around to the front of the circulation desk, and walked between the low shelves of gardening books and computer manuals toward the back of the library, where the work rooms were. I followed her.

In the high-ceilinged room, through the tall doorways and double doors with brass knobs that still hung on the carved frames, it was easy to replace the dark, boxy shelves of books with a horsehair settee (beneath the portrait of Elihu Whitney) and a doily covered marble-topped plant stand of ivy (in the corner by a window.) She was an elegant Victorian lady inviting me into her home. Her lacey, high-collared dress suited her perfectly.

Even though I knew she made all the clothes she wore and she had probably bought the shoes at a second hand store, Bron's artistic touch transformed everything. This mansion was hers, and her clothes were made by her dressmaker, and I was an ill-prepared time traveller. Dressed in slacks and a plain shirt, I stuck out.

We threaded our way through the reading room--the only room in the library that did justice to the original design of the house. We passed another doorway, and entered the back of the house where the rooms were smaller. From habit I turned right and stepped into the blackroom that must have once been the scullery. Bron snapped on a light, and blue



and yellow splotches of color burst before my eyes. "Bron!"

"I know, I can't see a thing, either. I hope there's not a mugger hiding in here because all I can see are these spots in front of my eyes. There, now I can see, Marion. Can you?"

"Yes, but for a while there all I could see were spots, too."

"Where do you suppose those spots come from? Have you ever wondered about that?"

I had, but I only stood there wondering how she could speak about it as if it was the most normal thing in the world; as if people wouldn't think her strange for asking about these things. But we were alone: the library closed, the people gone.

"Maybe they are the colors that are left out," she said.

She is drunk, I thought.

"You know," she said, and I smiled at first, then broke into laughter. Bron began laughing, too. We stood in the cluttered work room, between the white porcelain sink hanging from the tin covered wall and a long folding table that stuck out because of a chimney in the wall, and laughed holding our stomachs and bending over.

"You know," she tried again, "the colors that aren't really present in a room. Like this room is all ugly peach and green and red."

I glanced at the peach walls, forest green curtains, and the stacks of red library binders scattered on the table. "So how can your eyes fill in the missing colors when the lights are just coming on?"

She stared blankly ahead for a moment, then we began to laugh again. Swaying up against the sink, she fell, sliding along its edge, the gold and rust pattern of her dress standing out sharply against the white. Then my own center of gravity shifted and I fell against her, my breasts brushing her back, and we landed on a stack of dog-eared books on the floor.

We fell next to each other, me holding onto her--as if we were scared children in a bed--my arm around her waist, her thick hair in my mouth. I brushed it out, instinctively knowing I was fine, but that Bron had taken some of my weight in the fall. "Are you all right, Bron?" Pushing up with one hand and craning over her body, I felt a moment of panic--what if she's really hurt? unconscious?--then she moved, struggling to sit up.

"I'm fine. How 'bout you?"

"I'm fine. But we've got to be more careful." I sat up and grabbed the sink to pull myself up, feeling slightly dizzy. I should have eaten some dinner.

Bron was crying.

I looked down at her, sitting on the floor still, side-saddle, her legs slightly bent. The bare, weak bulb

gave a greyish cast to the room, and glinted off the tears in her eyes. "Bron, what's wrong?" I crouched down beside her. "Are you hurt?"

A tear slipped down her cheek and dropped onto her dress. "Bron?" I waited, staring at the black pipes under the sink while Bron let two more tears slide.

"I'm drunk." Her voice was flat. Somewhere between not caring and self-condemnation.

"I know," I said, and I couldn't resist the urge to touch her, to reach out, but I felt foolish and let my arm drop halfway to her face. "Do you want to tell me why?" Her eyes glistened. I could see the bright red blush through the make-up on her cheeks. I tightened my hands into fists, and held them firmly by my knees.

"I'm pregnant."

I had forgotten about her husband. I saw her only as a woman. I let the silence last for a minute while her news sank in. "Is that good or bad?"

"I don't know."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm never late," she said. "But I'm a week late."

"But you haven't been to the doctor."

"I know I'm pregnant. I can even tell you the night."

I tried to think of what to say or do next. "Don't you want to be pregnant, Bron?" She never told anyone her age, but she looked no more than thirty-two. She could be forty.

"I don't know anymore. And I can't have an abortion."

Why not? I wondered. But it was no use getting into that. I could tell by her voice that abortion was out.

A memory flashed into my mind as clear as if it had all been video-taped a few minutes ago, and was being played back now. Bron crouched on the floor next to a blond three year old, her head turned to his face, her lips pulled back in a smile as natural to her as my own smile is artificial to me. She opened the cover of a book she held, *Toad and Mouse Together*, and began to read to the toddler. He was mesmerized by her.

I felt a pang of love for Bron, for this mother and child picture. "Bron, you love kids."

"I do. At least I think I do. I thought I did when we got married. But Allen's always saying let's wait."

Her meaning sank in slowly.

Do you think Allen wants this baby?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"But you want this baby?"

"I don't know anymore."

I was in way over my head. I felt light. I hadn't eaten any lunch. Why didn't she divorce him long ago? She must really love him. Or being married was very important to her. "Do you really love him?"

She looked me in the eye. "Shouldn't I?"

I reached out for her shoulders and pulled her close to

me. I wanted to say, "It's not a matter of 'should'; it's what is." Instead I looked at her until she looked back at me. "Is it the baby or your husband?" I asked, and mentally added, that you don't want?

Bron stared at the stack of dog-eared books, glassy-eyed, while I noticed them for the first time. They sat in a zig-zag stack, the top book now tumbled to the floor, its cover six inches away, separated by our fall. Ten minutes ago? fifteen? we had been laughing at the check-out desk as we had done for the last six months. Laughing about anything, everything, nothing, our masks in place. I had had an innocent crush on this laughing, attractive woman. An infatuation. Now I felt sympathy for her, empathy. As I sometimes did anyway, I felt ashamed.

"You don't have to tell me, Bron, how you feel, you know?"

"Yes," she said, "but I need to sort things out. I can talk to you. But it's hard to talk about."

I nodded my head.

Reaching up toward the porcelain sink to pull herself up, she said, "I won't drink anymore. I can't drink anymore now, can I?"

She wasn't quite ready to laugh yet, but she was close, I sensed. How suddenly she changed! As suddenly fine as she had been suddenly crying. I wondered what had caused the change. "You need to touch up your blusher," I said.

"Touch up your blusher," she sang, to the tune of  
'Brush Up Your Shakespeare,' "start blushing up now--"

We laughed, our voices echoing off the walls at us,  
then made our way out to the check-out desk, locked the  
circulation cards in the drawer, and turned out the light.

POTATO REVELATIONS

Inside of one potato  
there are mountains and rivers.  
--Shinkichi Takahashi

My mother pulls a potato  
from the oven. With her thumb  
and forefinger she pinches.  
Under the skin, the bone-  
white meal yields.

Memories bump like  
boats at the dock:  
Deenie we are twelve.  
From my window, I see you  
kicking leaves alone.

I will be your rescuer.

You cocked your head  
and scanned other windows  
before we played  
side by side.  
I told you fantasies,  
transparent lies.  
When your playmates returned,  
you turned.  
Standing below my window, you  
exposed my lies,  
mocked me,  
pinched.  
I see now that  
defeat relieves.

I live meagerly on mountains and rivers.

## BEDTIME

"Our father," she moans.  
In her bed at twelve  
too old for a night light,  
she lies stiff,  
while the devil,  
standing at the footboard  
sometimes leering,  
snatches for her toes.  
From her Uncle Wiggly storybook  
the wolf's howl,  
shivers through the room.  
Her eyes sting as she  
strains to see in the black.  
She knows this is real  
though grownups  
do not understand.  
She moans again.  
If only the hall light snaps on  
or Mom comes to check.  
Most nights she sweats  
till sleep catches her and  
drags her away.



NIGHTMARE POEM

This is a poem  
about fear;  
not of saying  
I am angry  
with children  
leaning in the door  
asking, "what are you doing?"  
--too young not to tear at scabs--  
but of questioning  
the girl with no arms  
locked in a windowless basement  
while a sixty watt  
allows me to watch  
but not to wake.

LOOKING FOR THE LINE

I read a story about a woman  
who lost her whole body, everything  
but her mind.  
She wanted the unplugging  
her daughter struggled to offer.  
But slowly her room hallowed  
into a confessional;  
being became enough.

I sang while you drank and strummed,  
mocked yourself  
at the slanting kitchen table,  
the tall winter-black windows  
and the worn cupboard  
invisibly decaying into soil  
while we leaned into our spin.

Gloria,  
I don't know  
when death will come or what death is  
I know only we are alive  
when we know we live.

## COLLARED LIZARD

Wild grasses  
flowers  
and a collared lizard  
basking on a rock.  
When I talked to you  
you cocked your head  
and winked.  
You have great faith  
that the dew will be on the grass  
and the limestone hills  
will yield out-croppings of rock  
suitable haven from hawks  
that food will scamper,  
flit, or crawl by  
and it will be enough.  
From your gray-white rock  
the land swoops  
from escarpment to stream  
rises till the land  
caresses the sky.

Your tiny, knuckled toes  
touch the earth  
delicate as dandelion fluff;  
small fingered hands  
clasp the rock:  
You make real what you touch.

PLAYING 'SARDINES' AT YOUTH FELLOWSHIP

I am new to the game, though  
I have heard of it.  
"It is easy," a boy says.  
"You hide, and we will find  
you, hide with you,  
all scrunched up.  
The last person to find  
is it."

I leave the bright basement kitchen,  
race up the stairs,  
eager to find my hiding place.  
I look first in the Sunday school rooms:  
barren table, skeletal chairs,  
guarded by a crucifix.  
From beneath I see only  
spiked feet, gaunt ribs,  
eyes rolled toward  
the cracked ceiling.

I cross the foyer to the sanctuary,  
on ballerina pointe I peer within.  
Cliff-like walls frame  
a canyon of holiness.  
Spirits with medieval wings,  
satin robes that cling  
to breasts, thighs, ankles:  
tips of feet  
exposed,  
fly  
to a hallelujah chorus,  
hang  
like a great chandelier,  
swoop  
like Peter Pans  
in this vast expanse.

I pull on the handle.  
The door resists my tug  
as if the sky and universe, even doom  
wait on the other side.  
They will be seeking.  
I wrap my hand 'round  
the arched brass handle.  
Centering on this arm  
I no longer feel,  
I string all  
my let-me-ins  
on a rosary to this father

alien.

The strand breaks.  
The door yields, the weight;  
air itself pulling away.  
But what if there is no holiness  
and all I really sense or see  
is yellowed walls, stained-glass window,  
font that yields simply  
a dry steel bowl?

They must be seeking.

I enter slowly.  
Round the pew,  
mount the dais,  
draw back the red velvet veil:  
a shallow alcove,  
an empty icon ledge.  
Experimentally I snug  
my buttocks to the ell of  
wood and wall,  
feel the coolness of plaster,  
warmth of wood beneath.  
Nose brushing the curtain before me  
I wait,  
in my hiding place.

Dorothea Brande has written:

"It is well to understand as early as possible in one's writing life that there is just one contribution which every one of us can make; we can give into the common pool of experience some comprehension of the world as it looks to each of us" (Becoming a Writer. Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1981, 13).

In this afterword, I will discuss the process of drafting the short story "Matchbox," and the poem, "Playing Sardines at Youth Fellowship." I have chosen these particular pieces as representative of an important focus of my writing: pictures of childhood. These two works may appear to be very different: "Matchbox" deals with a man's struggle to break free of a troubled past with his family; "Playing Sardines at Youth Fellowship" deals with a young woman's confrontation with the idea of God and church. Yet the two works share important viewpoints and themes that are representative of much of my writing. For example, although "Matchbox" is narrated by an adult, it is a retrospective story, and all but the opening and closing are concerned with the six year old Jerry. The narrator of "Sardines" is an older child, yet still young enough to confuse angels with Peter Pan, and to be superstitiously convinced that it is God who keeps the sanctuary door shut against her. Though nearly all of the poems in this collection are focused on the ages between kindergarten and puberty, "Sardines and the story "Matchbox" focus most clearly on

both the anxiety and eagerness of childhood.

According to my mother, I have been telling stories since I was a very young child. For a very long time I never thought about the stories that I told, but simply gave words to the pictures that crowded into my head. As I grew up, I kept my interest in stories--both in telling them and in reading them. I noticed that many twentieth-century authors wrote stories which centered around families in which one of the characters, unable to cope with some stress, draws other characters into a vortex of destructive behavior patterns. For instance, "The Rocking Horse Winner" by D. H. Lawrence, "Why I Live at the P. O." by Eudora Welty, and "Home" by Jane Anne Phillips all focus on families caught in variations of this toxic web, with both tragic and humorous results.

In my sophomore year in college I signed up for a creative writing class. Here I found the pattern again when I read a short story-like excerpt of Frank O'Connor's memoirs called "Child I Know You're Going to Miss Me." O'Connor described his own childhood with an alcoholic father. At the urging of my professor, I decided to write a story exploring a family trapped by the father's domination. The difference that I sought from O'Connor's work, (in addition to being a fictional story) and other short stories I had read on this theme was to show mcharacter, Jerry, breaking free of the destructive family pattern.

The main action of the story was taken from my own childhood--a typical childhood experience of stealing some small item from a local store. My father had kept a few gold-backed dollars when they had gone out of circulation in the thirties. For me, these dollars were paradoxical and fascinating; simultaneously they were valuable and they were mere scraps of paper. The quixotic quality of the dollars seemed to be the ideal catalyst for a story.

At about the same time that I began "Matchbox," I finished reading John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* (NY: Knopf, 1983). Much of what he wrote in this book applied to my own unspoken questions. His statement that what will eventually become a story "begins as a largely mysterious dream in the writer's mind" awed and inspired me. The first line of the original version of "Matchbox" reflects both my uneasiness with not knowing where the story was going, and my first plunge into discovering where it could go: "I can't write about my father, because I haven't forgiven him yet. It's silly really, because we started out okay, but got off track and things have never gotten set right."

These two brief sentences captured the story's viewpoint and theme, and summarized its eventual plot. But it took three more drafts before I had a coherent story that I could show to the workshop. I eventually realized that the father's change in behavior at the climax was too great.



The mother's behavior when she discovers the crane was also unbelievable. Workshop readers wanted to know why she left the situation for the father to take care of rather than handling it herself.

Clearly, the challenge was to gradually reveal the father as dominating the family by his sudden changes in mood and his expectation of immediate and unquestioning obedience. When I compared O'Connor's memoir and my story I realized that in the fourth draft, I didn't have a clear enough understanding of the father's character to reveal him. I did know that all the sentences that inaccurately portrayed the father as flawless or only minorly flawed had to be cut, so I eliminated the line: "I couldn't imagine it [Daddy's anger] because I couldn't remember ever seeing him mad." I also knew I needed to introduce Jerry's parents and their relationship with each other into the story early, and in an unobtrusive way.

The third draft opening had focused exclusively on the father:

My father left me five dollars in his will. I knew he was dying, but I didn't expect to get anything from him. He left the five dollars though, and I recognized the bills without seeing them. I wonder why he did it: to raise the past? Or bury it?

The highlight of my six-year-old life was the time I spent with my Dad. During the week he worked at a mill a hundred miles away so he could support us. Friday nights after work he drove home, arriving after my bedtime.

So I added a sentence that focused on both parents, yet still involved Jerry: "Sometimes I would wake and see stripes of reflected lamplight on the aging wallpaper on the stairway, and hear the contrast of their voices coming up from the living room." This helped, but didn't do enough. I tried several different ideas, the worst of which was to drop the original opening, and have the story begin with the adult Jerry going back to his hometown for his father's funeral.

I abandoned this conventional approach in the next draft, and instead focused on imaginatively overhearing the conversations that echoed up the stairs to Jerry. This was the breakthrough I needed. I expanded the paragraph describing the parents' relationship to suggest the father's domination, the mother's grudging subjugation, and the hidden struggle between them:

I could never understand what they said, but the tones of their voices were clear. My father's loud voice penetrated the door as if it wasn't there and echoed from the corners. My mother's voice was the silence between his speeches. Groggily I wondered what they discussed; I wondered if I snuck downstairs and hid behind my father's big chair, what I might hear. I never stirred from the safety of my bed, but drifted back to sleep.

In a previous draft, I had added a scene on the way to the diner where Jerry asked Dad first for a bicycle, then a horse, and gruffly got turned down. Although it was a move in the right direction--showing the father's brusqueness--it

was a stereotype. I dropped this old scene and wrote two new ones. The first, replacing the bicycle and horse scene, focused on Jerry asking questions about where money came from. This scene retained the brusqueness--even emphasized it a bit--and worked with material already in the story. I added the second scene at the diner itself, by having Jerry meet a man that his father had a grudge against. This scene highlights both the father's mood swings and his demand for unquestioning obedience through interaction with an "outside" character, someone who was not a family member:

I ate and drank while Dad added cream to his coffee and looked over his newspaper. He was still reading when I wandered down to the other end of the diner to flip the metal-rimmed pages of songs in the jukebox. The man sitting on the stool nearest the jukebox swivelled around and looked me over. He wore a red and black plaid wool shirt, and the orange piece of cardboard pinned to his back disappeared as he turned.

"Who are you?" he asked, smiling.

Dad's angry voice froze my name in my open mouth.

"Jerry! Get over here!" I looked back at the man, his smile draining from his face as I turned away. Dad stared angrily while I walked back to my stool. He knit his eyebrows sternly together, leaned his head down, and pointed his finger into my belly.

"You don't ever talk to Diedrich, you hear me?"

I dropped my head and nodded without looking, afraid I would make him angrier somehow.

"You don't ever talk to that son of a bitch." He climbed down and we walked silently out of the diner.

I felt the father's character was finally becoming rounded. Temporarily satisfied with the middle, I shifted my focus to the ending. The versions up till now were melodramatic, not because the emotion was undeserved, but

because it was overstated:

I moaned. Mother led me, unresisting, up to my bedroom. I called to him between my sobs, and still yelled out at the top of my voice when I stood in the empty space between the foot of my bed and the closed bedroom door.

I pared the ending down to a single sentence: "Mother led me, unresisting, up to my bedroom, where I stood in the empty space between the foot of my bed and the closed bedroom door." Once the problem of melodrama was solved, I could see the larger problem. The current ending left Jerry mourning the loss of relationship with his father, and readers wondering how this event shaped the adult Jerry. Since I wanted the story to go beyond showing Jerry as trapped, I had to find a way for Jerry to forgive his father. For the child to forgive his father was impossible; only the adult Jerry could do that. But how could I get from the child to the man? Where could forgiveness come from? Nothing I wrote came close to this goal. Completely stumped as to how to rewrite the ending, I put the story away for the summer and worked on poems.

In the course of working on the poems, I noticed that monstrousness and helplessness were recurring themes in my work. Looking at "Matchbox," it was easy to identify Jerry's father as a monster figure. But why was he monsterish in some ways? Why had the father become so angry when Jerry had almost spoken to the hunter? What had

happened between the two men? There had to have been some grudge that Jerry's father held against the man. I needed to explore where the monster in Jerry's father had come from. The scene that led into the diner scene was the best place to suggest this resentment.

Although the idea of discussing money was a good one in some ways, it put too much emphasis on an already prominent element of the story, and distracted attention from the father's character. I left in a single mention of the money, but cut the rest and instead let Jerry ask his Dad about when he had been a little boy. The leap from one topic to another fit in well with the thought process of the six year old, and echoed the kind of handling that Jerry has already learned his father needs because of his prickly character:

"Where does money come from?"

"From work."

"Did you play marbles when you were a little boy?" I asked as we turned a corner.

"Yep. I was good, too. Beat everybody. Till I got cheated."

"Who cheated you?" I asked, as we swung into a parking space.

"Nobody." He sounded angry. "Turn around and sit down."

"Nobody" was an important key to the father's character. The grudge that the father obviously holds against the man in the diner suggests that he may have been the childhood playmate who "cheated" Jerry's Dad. But more

importantly, the father's refusal to reveal who cheated him shows that rather than holding no one responsible for cheating him, this man holds everyone responsible. Although none of this is stated directly, I think the connection is strong enough to be made by careful readers.

I made subtle changes to sentences throughout the story to show the father's quick temper and his unwillingness to face his problems. His avoidance was a form of helplessness that I saw would give insight into the father's domineering qualities. I changed a neutrally worded refusal early in the story, into a minor but definite negative: "The first time I asked him, he only whispered a stern "no," and ushered me out of the bedroom."

In the diner scene, I let the father's unreasonableness manifest itself plainly:

"You stay away from him, you hear me?"

I dropped my head and nodded without looking. He grabbed me by the elbow and a swat landed on my behind.

"You don't ever talk to that son of a bitch."

I knew from his tone not to ask him why. He stood up and we walked silently out of the diner.

From imagining the Friday night conversations between Jerry's parents, I knew that Jerry's Dad sometimes came home drunk and his parents argued about money. I suggested the drinking by mentioning the Carling Black Label bottles that were on the front seat of the car.

As the details began to fall into place, I realized

that there was a monstrous quality in seemingly helpless Jerry: although as a child he couldn't change his response to his father's destructive behavior, as an adult his refusal to forgive his father helped keep the wall between them. This realization allowed me to go back to revise the ending, giving Jerry my own realization:

Mother led me, unresisting, up to my bedroom, where I stood in the empty space between the foot of my bed and the closed bedroom door. That's when I withdrew from him. Now I wonder if his bequest was one of enduring anger or one of sadness that so little prevented so much between us.

I knew that the story had finally materialized at the place that I had only glimpsed initially. Appropriately enough, I had sensed Jerry's need to forgive his father in the first line of the original version: "I can't write about my father because I haven't forgiven him yet." I had finally come full circle.

When I began "Matchbox," my intention had been to show Jerry breaking free of the pattern set by his father. But because I was writing a story, I couldn't focus exclusively on Jerry. In fact, my main challenge was to focus on the father's character and bring his flaws and virtues to life. In addition, the father's flaws needed to be shown as affecting all the family members. Nevertheless, Jerry is the viewpoint character of the story; it is his consciousness that readers share. When I finally reached

the conclusion of the story, I realized that what Jerry was really breaking away from was his own past helplessness, and his contribution to the alienation between himself and his father.

Jerry's realization occurred within the constellation of people--his Mom and Dad, his brother, Bobby, as well as himself. When I turned to poetry, I found I was able to narrow my focus from a child within his (or her) family, to a child as an individual. The young narrator of "Playing Sardines in Youth Fellowship" is undoubtedly part of a family, yet her family is completely outside the world of the poem. My discovery of poetry's ability to hone-in on the child's insights alone was a late but important discovery for me.

\* \* \*

Although I've only recently begun a formal study of poetry, I have been interested in poetry since I first began writing. In my teens, I wrote self-expressive poems one after another, but later, after "finding" Christianity, burned them because they expressed my "animal" nature--something that Christianity opposed. Although I didn't write any poems during my undergraduate career, my need for Christianity was on the wane, and I began to associate with poets. Bly's concept of "leaping," rubbed off on me, and I knew that eventually I would want to write



poems that incorporated leaps.

A leap, says Bly (*Leaping Poetry: An Idea with Poems and Translations*. Boston: Beacon, 1975), is not a random act, nor a juxtaposition of the unusual with the usual, but is a fast association, or a "move from one world to another," a "jump from from an object soaked in unconscious substance to an object or idea soaked in conscious psychic substance" (4). This move is called a leap because it occurs in an instant and may vault a great psychic distance. "[T]he considerable distance between the associations, the distance the spark has to leap, gives the lines their bottomless feeling, their space, and the speed of the association increases the excitement of the poetry" (4). Although leaps are personal, they are not private; anyone can follow the pillar of fire that the poet ignites.

I quickly accepted the concept of leaping because I saw a link with ancient female culture. Bly says, "As Christian civilization took hold, and the power of the spiritual patriarchies deepened, this leap [to the unconscious and back] occurred less and less often in Western literature." But in the earlier "art derived from Great Mother mysteries, the leap to the unknown part of the mind lies in the very center of the work." Thus leaping became a significant concept for me because it connected with the value of femaleness and because it agreed with the way that my imagination works--in associations.

The history of my poem, "Playing Sardines at Youth Fellowship," is one of following a trail of associations. In fact, the idea for the poem came because of a leap that was triggered by a couple of lines written in a predawn letter to a friend: "the air hangs heavy with purple and black, / choir robes in a church closet, / thick and old, utterly calm."

These brief lines aroused a memory that had what Bly calls "psychic weight": The church's youth fellowship was playing a hide and seek type of game and I needed to hide. I decided on the church sanctuary, but when I pulled on the door handle, it wouldn't open. I remember very clearly, feeling that some One or some Thing was resisting me--did not want me to open the door. I also remember that playing the game another time, I had explored the dais area, and discovered a small, unused niche covered by a veil. All these happenings, as well as the feelings I had had, manifested themselves when I described the early morning feel and its association for me.

I ended the letter and began a poem, writing down what I remembered:

I can see myself then, exploring the church  
Playing sardines,  
leaving the bright basement kitchen, up the stairs,  
in the sunday school rooms I searched first,  
eager.

After all the sunday school rooms,  
barren but for a leftover Sunday school paper,  
the collection basket,  
a stack of Bibles in the corner.

I cross the foyer to the sanctuary.  
Slowly I pull back the heavy door,  
it resisting as if all of the sky and universe,  
even doom wait on the other side. It resists  
my tug, and I wonder why I must  
wrap my hand around the cold gold handle,  
alien as a science fiction creature  
a reptile monster on two legs.  
The resistance is greater than my  
strength centered on this arm,  
I no longer feel,  
but am stiff-jointed, frozen  
from the wood, glossy, warm,  
Into the brass handle plate  
all my molecules pour,  
my body unwilling to pull away,  
unwilling to pull,  
tips  
to the balls of my feet,  
another second  
over-committed,  
the door will drag me into its universe  
The door yields, the weight of the air itself  
pulling away.

The wall yields to grandeur,  
a canyon of holiness.  
dominating walls tower  
in the air that hangs,  
angels with their medieval  
wings and satin robes that cling  
to their thighs, knees tips of feet  
exposed, fly  
in a hallelujah chorus  
of swoop like Peter Pans  
invisibly in this vast expanse.

But what if there is no holiness  
and all I really feel, see,  
is yellow walls, darkened rosette,  
font that yields only a silver steel bowl;  
pulpit backed by a  
red velvet veil.  
What if the organ's pipes are casketed  
in a mahogany fleur de lys,  
and I am standing

where there is no air  
no ground.  
I round the pew,  
mount the dais,  
pull back the veil;  
there is only a shallow alcove.  
an empty Virgin Mary niche.  
Experimentally I snug my  
buttocks to the ell of  
wooden ledge and wall,  
feel the coolness of plaster,  
neutrality of wood beneath,  
shrouded by the heavy veil.  
If my mind has an occupation,  
it is puzzling the construction of the ledge.  
it is asking "when was  
a Virgin Mary housed here?"

This first version of the poem is chaotic: the organization of the stanzas is haphazard, many of the images are still private, and there's no explanation of the game. But this draft is the first, and in a way the greatest, leap: from the realm of potential (unconscious awareness), into the realm of the actual, the word (conscious awareness). A manifestation of this psychic energy at work is the number of images that are carried over into the final version of this poem. For instance, much of the third stanza of this version remains in the final version, almost unchanged.

In revising the poem, I realized that the game, Sardines, was an important way of structuring my struggle with the concept of God. So I added some description of what the game was like to play:

eager to scatter.  
I searched first in the Sunday school rooms.

I pass many; we do not speak,  
but slide silently by  
like water around fish.

But I gradually changed this description from a  
descrip-

about the act of seeking to just an explanation of the game:

the poem itself becomes the act of seeking. This change  
gave the

poem's narrator a foundation for questioning the existence  
of God in later stanzas:

"It is easy," he says,  
"You hide, and we will find  
you, hide with you.  
The last person to find  
is It."

Having incorporated the game into the poem, I could now  
work on the two center stanzas, which are concerned with the  
narrator's struggle with some alien force in order to enter  
the sanctuary. The center section was 31 lines long and  
conveyed not only struggle with the resisting door, but also  
my fear and confusion in understanding the significance of  
this childhood struggle. This is the "Great Mother" section  
of the poem; the part concerned (in this case, very  
literally) with mystery.

The mystery contains a least two layers that I've been  
able to distinguish consciously, although at the time I was  
revising, I could not have articulated them clearly. The  
first is my questioning: Who or what was shutting me out?

Why? What were the consequences if I didn't get into the sanctuary? What if I did? Only the last question is answered clearly in the poem.

These questions show up through focusing on the door or my sense that some alien force was resisting me:

Another second, over committed,  
the door will shut forever  
or drag me into  
itself.

A gladiator  
in heavy arcs would swing  
his weighty sword  
in vain.

this father/God  
alien as a science fiction creature  
a reptile on two legs."

The second layer is concerned with the body imagery that shows up in 10 of the 31 lines:

I wrap my hand 'round  
the cold metallic handle  
\* \* \*  
Strength centered on this arm  
I no longer feel;  
I grasp stiff-jointed, frozen  
the arched brass handle.  
All my let me ins  
strung as a rosary to this God-monster  
through my arm  
reach only glossy wood.

Arms and hands are mentioned twice each, and three different times they are spoken of as being numb. Looking at this poem alone, I might ignore these images. But the image that carries "Recurring Nightmare Poem," a poem

composed around the same time as "Playing Sardines at Youth Fellowship" is: "the girl with no arms / locked in a windowless basement." This second layer of mystery seems to unite two themes: helplessness, represented by numb arms or no arms, and monstrousness, represented by the nightmare. In this poem, I suspect the issue involves not simply an alien father God who is "out there," but also how much "alienness" or monstrousness is within? To what extent am I numb? Helpless? With whom do I struggle?

Although I have been able to untangle these two layers of mystery now, at the time when I was revising this section of the poem, I intuited them but was unable to separate them. These complex and not-fully-conscious layers of mystery were the most difficult parts of the composition. Three drafts later, I had smoothed out the initial seeking in the Sunday school rooms, but in the center of the poem I had merely shuffled words.

Knowing that I was spinning my wheels, I showed the poem to a professor, and to a group of women poets with whom I was working over the summer. All confirmed that this section of the poem was confusing and distracting. Three revisions later, I dropped one of the two center stanzas, except for one line: "The strand breaks." This took the struggle section of the poem from 31 lines down to 14. Though I reduced the section of the poem dealing with the mystery, the mystery at the center of the poem remained.

Eliminating repetition helped strengthen the overall poem. Also, the remainder of the stanza did raise tension, which the one retained line, grafted onto the fifth stanza, relieved:

I pull on the handle.  
The door resists my tug  
as if all the sky and universe, even doom  
wait on the other side.  
They will be seeking.  
I wrap my hand 'round  
the arched brass handle.  
Strength centered on this arm  
I no longer feel,  
I string all  
my let me ins,  
on a rosary to this father/God  
alien as a reptile on two legs  
a science fiction creature.

The strand breaks.  
The door yields, the weight;  
air itself pulling away.

With the tension off the center section for the time being, I was able to focus on the ending. The original version of the poem had focused on "an empty virgin Mary niche." In later drafts, this had changed to "my mind puzzles on this empty niche." Now, by making only subtle changes in the language, I was able to suggest a deeper and more positive image of the Great Mother than the virgin Mary:

pull back the red velvet veil:  
a shallow alcove,  
\* \* \*  
Nose brushing the curtain before me  
I wait,



in my hiding place.

"Nose brushing" suggests intimacy. Since "veil" is used several times in the Bible referring to the Jewish Temple and Christ's body, I hope that "veil" and "curtain" suggest the body to readers. "Red" reinforces this connection and intimates sex, death, and birth. With all these subtle references, I intend to suggest the primal link between mother and child--a more elemental link than patriarchal religion. To encourage this way of reading the poem, I added two lines to the opening which explain the game, and establish the poem's world: "I am new to the game, though / I have heard of it."

These two lines further reinforce the contrast between the narrator's experience with the line, "'It is easy,' a boy says." This statement also conveys to the reader, first, that patriarchal religion is a game, and second, that it is foreign to the narrator, who is identified as a female by the line, "on ballerina pointe I peer within." The placement of "though" in the first line acts as a qualifier informing the reader that the game is familiar, though unknown to the narrator.

What I thought was the final act of revision to the poem was to cut several lines from the fifth stanza. This stanza is the one in which the narrator doubts the existence of God. Although most of the stanza was effective, two

particular images late in the stanza seemed to be those of an adult rather than a child as is the rest of the poem:  
"What if the organ's pipes are casketted / in mahogany fleur de lys . . ."

Certainly "casketted" and "fleur de lys" are much more adult language than "Peter Pans" and "'round" in the third stanza. The double references to death are also too adult and inappropriate to the theme and tone of the poem, so I dropped these lines.

Convinced that the poem was as finished as I could make it, I put it away for a month. When I took it out, I noticed that the center stanza, focusing on the struggle, still contained a single distracting sequence: "Centering on this arm / I no longer feel."

The numbness and repetition of the body imagery--the hand is already mentioned two lines previously--which brought in the second layer of mystery, was still detracting from the effectiveness of the poem. I deleted these two lines, so the final version of the struggle stanza looked like this:

I pull on the handle  
The door resists my tug  
as if the sky and universe, even doom  
wait on the other side.  
I wrap my hand 'round  
the arched brass handle,  
string all  
my let-me-ins  
on a rosary to this father

alien

With this revision, the poem was a unified whole. Beginning as a childhood game, the experience becomes an adult confrontation with the church and God, compelling the female narrator to find a new relationship between these concepts and herself.

Other than that both pieces deal with childhood, the story and poem discussed here may seem to be quite different from each other. Yet in many ways they are very much alike. Not only are the two pieces told in first person, which lends them an immediacy that other viewpoints do not have, but they are also thematically very similar. Both works show apparently satisfying institutions--the family and the church--as being surprisingly unsatisfying or unstable. In the poem, the narrator's dissatisfaction raises an explicit question: "But what if there is no holiness[?]" In "Matchbox," the instability raises an implicit question: What if only one parent seems to love me?

In both cases the institutions have provided at least some satisfaction in the past and both protagonists begin their stories with bright expectations for the future. Jerry looks forward enthusiastically to the Saturday mornings that he will spend alone with Dad, and even feels that he shares a secret with him. The narrator of the poem has been told how to play the game, Sardines, and is "eager

to find [her] hiding place."

Both children find themselves confronted suddenly with situations which require adult realizations--realizations about the nature of the human condition. For Jerry the lessons are complex and interwoven: adults make mistakes; in fact, all humans are--himself included--flawed. As a child Jerry is tragically faced with the former truth, while as an adult he must accept the latter. For the narrator of the poem, the idea that God--the kindly father/protector--might not exist was unthought of when the game began. Not until the sanctuary door would not open for her did she begin to formulate and begin to struggle with this question.

Faced with these suddenly shifting circumstances, both narrators seek a niche in which to shelter--literally and figuratively. For the narrator of the poem, the "hiding place" is literal--an "empty icon ledge"--but also symbolic. For the narrator of the story, the refuge is figurative. Once the father angrily rejects Jerry, the boy takes refuge in a defensive distrust of and alienation from his father. The death of his father and the bequest of the five dollars stimulates the adult Jerry to question the unhappy form of shelter he has put between himself and his father. Even though Jerry does not experience a complete change in his attitude toward his father, yet he outgrows his old attitude and finds a new "niche" in which he is able to admit a new possible motive for his father's bequest: regret.

Finally, in both works, the protagonists are being confronted by fathers. To both Jerry and the narrator of the poem, the apparent rejection on the part of the father (whether literal or metaphorical), seems unreasonable, even irrational. So Jerry accounts for the loss of his father's love in the only way that his young mind can: "I knew he was angry because I opened his secret drawer." For the young woman, a mysterious, magical God who is partly Peter Pan and partly statue, becomes first an "alien," and then a fiction of the church and its iconography.

In both works, the fathers' rejections lead to loss. The narrator of the poem loses her belief in a father/God. This loss quickly leads to a replacement belief--presented symbolically by the narrator seating herself on the empty icon ledge. Jerry loses his father's love. He also loses his trust in his father, and his sense of the world as ordered and meaningful. Both the poem "Playing Sardines at Youth Fellowship" and the story, "Matchbox" stimulate readers to ask about the nature of these losses. Were they painful yet necessary for personal growth? Or were they unnecessary and detrimental to the two protagonists?

Although the confrontation and loss were stressful for the narrator of the poem, they may well have been beneficial. The fact that the narrator has found a niche for herself where the abstract and fanciful father/God had been implies an initiation. That the narrator is somehow

connected with a female image of the divine, suggests a growth-producing insight about the nature of divinity. As exercise tears old muscle, stimulating the body to build stronger tissue, so painful losses can lead to growth.

While some losses lead to growth, other losses wound. This seems to be Jerry's experience. It is only well into his adulthood and after his father is dead, that Jerry is able to reflect on his blighted relationship with his father. Yet with the death of his father, Jerry is finally able to escape the dance of destructive indifference in which both men were locked. With the end of the dance comes the possibility of forgiveness and growth. Finally, even deep wounds can be healed.

PICTURES OF CHILDHOOD

by

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## ABSTRACT

This M. A. Report is made up of three sections: two short stories, eight poems, and a critical apparatus functioning as an afterword. The afterword itself is divided into three sections. The first story is about a boy coming to terms with his contribution to the estrangement between himself and his father. The second story explores two women's momentary insights into each other's characters. The eight poems are free verse compositions, generally on the theme of childhood.

The first section of the afterword focuses on the process of drafting the short story "Matchbox" from its inception to its completion. The influence of stories which focus on families caught in destructive behavior patterns, such as Frank O'Connor's "Child, I Know You're Going to Miss Me," is also discussed. The next section of the afterword, on poetry, focuses on the process of drafting the poem "Playing Sardines at Youth Fellowship" from its genesis to conclusion. Robert Bly's concept of "leaping" as articulated in *Leaping Poetry: An Idea With Poems and Translations* is also discussed as an influence on the poems. In the final section of the report, the common elements of the short story, "Matchbox," and the poem, "Playing Sardines at Youth Fellowship" are explored.