The GIHON RIVER REVIEW

"The name of the second river is Gihon. No sooner has it come out of Paradise than it vanishes beneath the depths of the sea..."
—MOSES BAR CEPHA

Volume 4

Johnson State College

The Gihon River Review

Volume 4

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Andrew Miller-Brown

Poetry Editors
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Contents

POETRY

Ryan G. Van Cleeve	*Labors*	7
	Bukowski Writes a Haiku	8
	Lipping	9
Rawdon Tomlinson	*Geronimo and Coyote at the Depot*	47
	Wood Singing	49

FICTION

John Repp	*The Tavern Business*	11
Stephanie Dickinson	*Bayou Lafitte*	24
Trina Hikel	*Sex Ed*	50

NONFICTION

Barbara Cunliffe Singleton	*Hortensia Never Goes Out*	61

and PHOTOGRAPHY by Holly Simpson, Christina Mordasky, Karen Morison, and Brook Marcotte.

Ryan G. Van Cleeve

Labors
for Oneida

Upon learning that I write poetry,
my friend's mom, a Cuban woman
whose English vocabulary is as eclectic
as it is limited, said *I would love to*
view the fruit of your loins, to which
I said *con mucho gusto*, assuming she
meant "labors." I consider mentioning
it to my friend, wondering if she runs around
telling their Tallahassee postman that
the outgoing mail is aflame or AT&T
phone solicitors that she would like
to "purchase their supporters."
But the more I watch her pitter about
my friend's house, her fingers—deft
yet canalled with wrinkles, dark veins
sunken deep in the history of her hands—
work a sponge over counters, shelves,
creating *un nuevo piso del silencio*
in *la casa del hijo*, her child, my friend.
Love comes easily to some, how it blooms
and grows like air among mountain passes,
picking up steam until it has a momentum
all its own, a self-propelled machine that
might run forever. Poem as offspring,
as green-eyed children, creatures we might
do anything to crown their lives with laurels,
with coiling gold halos, with the simple pleasure
of a clean, clean house. Perhaps Oneida understands
English, understands poetry better than anyone.

Ryan G. Van Cleeve

Bukowski Writes a Haiku

know nothin' about nature
except the sun's sizzlin' red gas
and snow's cold as you

I hate stickin' to form—
you never know if you're gonna
get paid by the line
or if the next image you snag
(The twice-filled condom your daddy
threw out with the Chinese take-out boxes
the night before you were born
would have made you someone else,
probably someone better)
is the one you meant
before but missed
###

Ryan G. Van Cleeve

Lipping

The blue tint of my face is not my fault.
The charcoal-colored carousel horse
lurking behind me is not there. It's a mistake,
an error like the whack-thunk of lightning
that plugs into wet earth. Mark Strand would be
proud. He knows what it means to be
accidental, the type of old shadows that cringe
in coat rooms and gaps below desks.
I admit–no, confess–my checkerboard shirt
once was played on by Bobby Fischer
when he whooped Kasparov's fossilized ass
in 1974. These things I know are true:
Edgar Allen Poe's personal copy of Tamerlane
sold for $395,000; hijo de puta is not the way
to greet your Cuban buddies, at X-mas or anytime;
the white scar above my lip appeared
one night, a sickle-shaped cut I chewed through
without waking as I dreamt of future
brain scans, unusual things I'd long to do with rainbows.
My friend, Belly, shows me his trick tooth,
the extractable canine which comes out with a twist,
a yank--sometimes, though, he needs a penknife
to dig it free. It keeps me sane, this ability to come apart,
he says, lets a dribble of blood trickle
from his mouth, stain his collar like a military emblem.
Belly tells me not to drag famous poets down,
not to carry him kicking and screaming off into this
subterranean trajectory, this underearth of mine
where horses possess lupine jaws, slivers of teeth,
blood spittle like December roadslush.
I try to convince him that it's my brother's fault, the
heat wave, the hormones. But like stepping off

into space, I am there, I am here, holding my breath
for dear life, wishing Mark, or Edgar, or don Wallace,
dither close, goggle-eyed inside their anti-vacuum suits,
try hard to teach me their secret for ecstasy,
a near-sayable word, this gift of stars, lemon brightness,
this sunshower that I embrace like a lover, now returned.

John Repp

The Tavern Business

"Sarah, bring the witch hazel and a fresh apron," Mom said that last afternoon, slumping down in the shade of the sycamore. Off I went at a hard run to the kitchen, grabbed the jug, a wash basin, a couple of towels, and an apron, then hauled back around to the front yard. By the time I was ready, she had her breakfast apron, shoes, and stockings off, feet swollen red and stinking. She panted between long drinks from a mug of ice water, pulling at tufts of grass with her free hand, muttering "It's just fry-bacon hot" over and over.

It *was* hot, hot as it could only be hot there—no breeze, sky like tin foil, swipe a fly off your forehead and you're drenched. After the lunch rush on days like that, Mom would holler for me and turn the place over to Jesse and Peaches for a while. I loved to rub her feet and hated it, too, hated to see her come hobbling out the back door of that place after working like a cart horse since before dawn while Dad was off "checking the competition" or what-the-hell, probably just putt-putting around the countryside or tromping through junkyards, a bald, happy fat man dreaming up any which way his family could make him a few dollars. Even fifty years later, the occasional geezer shuffles up to me babbling about my genius father: Oh the contraptions he'd tinker up and how right he was about Atlantic City and the stuff he'd design on the backs of sales receipts—bam-bam-bam and he'd be done, problem solved, case closed. I let them keep their notions, but they don't know.

A steady stream of cars whooshed past, the usual Friday traffic. According to what Dad always said, half of it was Philadelphia Jews leaving banks and law firms and private tennis courts and what-all to beat sundown to the shore. Dad was big on Philadelphia Jews running everything, shoving their way to the head of whatever line there was and making money doing it. He'd be sitting at the end of the bar tallying the morning's take or paying the beer man or the meat man or sputtering over a doctor's bill and all of a sudden he'd jump up and holler to Mom in the kitchen, "Mother! Let's get ourselves down to Beth Israel and sign the hell *up*. I want to know the *secret*." Meanwhile, Nate-the-egg-packer or Bernie-the-mechanic or Mel-the-truck-

driver or Izzy-who-can't-hold-a-job would mutter into his beer, and I'd be wiping off tables or washing out ashtrays wondering how they could miss out on a secret that important. I was a kid trying hard to be a kid, missing the big things, but watching everything, soaked to the bone with all of it.

Legs splayed out, Mom sat flushed in the shade, looking toward the highway and the cornfield beyond it. Sweat darkened the fabric of her dress wherever it touched her skin, and her hair had come loose in the back, the long strands feathering her shoulders, the bun lopsided on top of her head. She drank the rest of the water and nodded to me, then lay back on the grass.

I was good. She told me what she wanted, of course, but I was good on my own, added touches she hadn't thought of. I took each foot by the heel in my left hand and poured witch hazel with my right, then moved both thumbs in little circles from the pad of the big toe all the way to the back of the heel, her the whole time sighing and moaning. I drew my fingers hard along the arches. I squeezed each toe between my thumb and forefinger and pulled it straight, then rubbed the raw, dank notches between them. When I was done, I soaked the towels and wrapped both feet tight. She fell asleep somewhere in there and ended up with her arms thrown wide and her mouth gaping. It looked as if someone had shot her. I imagined the people in the cars saying "Hey, what's that girl doing to that woman looking like she's been shot? Should we do something, tell somebody, what kind of place *is* that?"

A hard place, but most people had it worse, or so everybody said. They were right, of course, as far as that goes. People complained less back then and worked harder, but Mom beat everybody—twenty hours a day every day but Sunday, and even then she worked to get ready for the week. When I wasn't doing housework, I helped her prep orders, amazed at how she remembered everything my brothers hollered back over the counter, how she moved without hitch or hesitation, fixing whatever mistakes I made and showing me again and again and without fuss the right way to ladle chowder or assemble the roast beef special or slice ham so it flaked apart on the plate. Whenever one of the regulars plopped down on his favorite stool and spotted Peaches in the kitchen, he'd look at the mug Jesse had just drawn, shake his head, and say something like, "I'm just drinking till your mother's done with her nap. Your brother's a good enough kid but he don't know nothing about Matty Zucker's food."

Mom sat up after a while and looked around, blinking. A car pulled in the lot out front, then three more, clouds of dust drifting across the lawn.

She fixed her hair and unwrapped the towels, handing them to me as she reached for her shoes and stockings. "Have you seen to the laundry yet?"

"Nope."

"Would you do that for me?"

"Yup," I smiled, loading everything in the basin.

"Don't yup-nope me, Sarah, not today. I don't have time for dawdlers." She stood up and brushed herself off. "Laundry, then come bus tables," she said, stomping back to work good as new in those clodhopper shoes of hers.

It took four or five trips to the clotheslines to get it all upstairs to my parents' bedroom, a mountain of wash to my left, neat stacks growing to my right, but not fast because I *was* dawdling, such a gorgeous afternoon, even with the heat. I'd fold a few things then stand still and just notice—the wavy shadows the leaves made on the wall, the crickets and tree frogs singing, the way the tiniest breeze would belly the curtains out, then suck them back against the screens.

About halfway through the job, I fixed some lemonade to help get me through the rest. No sooner had I sat down on Mom's rocker than I spotted Peaches crouching on the shed roof fiddling with something, the sun so bright off the metal I couldn't see what. He messed with whatever it was, then sat back for a while, then messed with it again, then sat back. This was the time of day he should have been helping get the place ready for the after-work rush, but there he was maybe frying an egg on the tin, except he could have fried a dozen one right after the other as long as it took him to fiddle around up there.

I heard the tavern's screen door slap shut and turned to see Mom out looking around. She took the towel from over her shoulder, wiped her face, and walked a few steps up the driveway, yelling, "Peaches! Come on now!" I looked back at the shed roof, him still messing, acting like he hadn't heard. She called his name a few more times, said something I couldn't hear, and stomped back inside. Peaches sat back a long time. I drank lemonade and waited for something to happen, but he just sat, so I went down to see what was what.

I didn't call out as I walked toward the shed—tried to be as quiet as I could, in fact—and he didn't make a sound. I stood under the eaves for a minute or two—nothing. I started to think he'd snuck away in the time it took

me to get outside, but just as I was about to call his name, I heard a scraping on the roof and saw something slide off, something on fire, then another slid off, then a third and a fourth, and they just kept coming. His planes. Peaches was setting his planes on fire and sliding them into the air, propellers whirring, glue and tissue paper and balsa wood flaming bright yellow, each one collapsing on itself a few feet off the ground, burning a few seconds, then poof, nothing but ash blowing across the gravel.

I stood there catching flies with my mouth for I don't know how long. How could he? Peaches loved his planes, spent most of his free time working on them in the attic he and Jesse shared. When he finished one, he'd hang it from the rafters, so that by now he had a whole air force up there, beautiful things. Flying wasn't the point, he said, though of course they'd fly if he wanted them to. Once, I watched him brush a coat of lacquer on a wing, explaining how careful you had to be or you'd punch a hole in the tissue and have to build a whole new one because once it was torn, it was ruined. Now just about all of them were gone.

Peaches swung his legs over the edge of the roof and jumped, stumbling to his hands and knees after hitting the ground. He got up, brushed himself off, and shrugged. "Pieces of shit sure did fly, didn't they?" Then he strolled off to work.

Tears fell out of my eyes, but it wasn't crying, at least not as I'd known it before. It was surprise and excitement and sadness all jammed together—and fear, because this wasn't the brother I knew. Things had started to happen, but they'd been happening a long time already. They always do.

Peaches was Joseph to Dad that night, so we all knew it would get bad. If you weren't one of us, you'd never guess anything was wrong—Mom shooed a few regulars out and put the "Closed for Dinner" sign in the window, my brothers and I walked platters from the tavern to the house and put them on the sideboard, then I set the table, Jesse sharpened the carving knife and placed it to the right of Dad's plate, Peaches filled the water glasses and opened a beer each for Mom and Dad, she checked everything, and he sat in the rocker, smoking his pipe and watching, an easy smile on his face. We had half an hour, then everybody would go back out for dinner clean-up and the night crowd.

* * *

After Dad carved slabs of meat for all of us, the meal began. No one said much but pass-this, pass-that. Dad sat back from the table, legs planted on either side of his chair, hands folded on his belly. Mom heaped food on his plate, but he let it sit. He reached for the notepad in his shirt pocket, tore out a sheet of paper, and, without really looking at it, began folding it this way and that. It soon disappeared behind his huge hands, which kept moving of their own accord. Some fat men are light on their feet, but Dad had light hands.

Anyway, we ate and Dad didn't. After awhile, he looked at Jesse and said, "So, son: A man buys a beer and a burger and hands you a two-dollar bill. How much change?"

Jesse flushed. "Change," he said, gazing at the meat he'd almost finished. "A buck and a half?"

Dad chuckled. "'A buck and a half,' he says, and he's *asking*, Mother, he doesn't *know*. The boy's a whole suit short of a deck. Amazing."

Mom put her fork down and sat back, swiping her forehead with the back of a hand.

"Mother?"

"Let's just have our dinner, Henry. Please."

Dad chuckled, his belly sloshing around under his hands. "Your son's on the till half the time and he can't make change, Mother. It's a miracle the bank manager's not hauling away dinner."

"Jesse's fine, Henry. He can't help who he is."

"Who he is? I'll tell you who he is. From now on, he's Buck-and-a-Half. OK, Buck?" Jesse didn't say anything. Suddenly, Dad reached around and opened his fist in my lap. "Always remember, Sarah: Don't be like Buck here. Be smart. Be like a giraffe. Feed on the leaves at the top of the tree." There in his palm stood a giraffe, ears, snout and all. I took it, turning it every which way to see how he'd made the thing. I couldn't, of course, so I just sat it next to my water glass and thanked him. He withdrew his hand and clapped Jesse's shoulder a couple of times, then sliced a hunk of meat and pushed it into his mouth.

Everyone but Jesse kept eating, Mom breathing hard and patting her hair, Dad doing his usual systematic shoveling. Chewing the last of the food, he frowned at the ceiling, then let out a loud sigh and slugged the rest of his beer. "I wonder," he said at last, "how a sixteen-year-old boy makes himself disappear." Peaches looked at me and nodded yes ever so slightly, as if

he welcomed what was coming and wanted me to know it. "Do you know, Sarah?"

"No." I imagined Dad back from his rounds and no Peaches, the lizard way he smiled when he finally showed up, the calm gaze with which he regarded the bustle around him, camped at the end of the bar, ledger open, the day's receipts examined one by one, Jesse's miscalculations the subject of commentary the regulars amplified and Jesse did his best to laugh off.

"Mother?"

"What is it, Henry?" Mom dropped her fork and put her face in her hands. "Can't we just eat and forget whatever it is?"

"But it's a mystery, Mother, and you know I love to solve mysteries. Buck?"

"Disappear? A boy? No. I don't know."

"Of course not, Buck. That's all right. Joseph will help out, won't you Joseph? You're the clever one in the group. What do you think, son?"

Peaches shrugged.

"Let's work on this together now, Sherlock." What Peaches wanted—what we all somehow wanted—came then, Dad's whole right arm rocketing off his belly, the thick, loose fingers raking my brother's right cheek, the force of the blow enough to send chair and boy to the floor.

Nothing moved for a moment but the arm coming to rest on Dad's belly. Then Peaches got up, set the chair upright, sat back down and looked at Dad, who hadn't stopped gazing at the ceiling. "'The Mystery of the Disappearing Boy'," he said, "a boy who gets food, clothes, and a roof, and all he has to do is be there when he's needed. You could write it up, put it on the radio and sell soap, eh, Joseph? Make it a goddamned serial while you're at it. You have it worked out yet? Made any progress on a solution? I'm stumped. Everybody's stumped. Are you the family Sherlock or not?"

Peaches shrugged. This time the arm whipped up and around, the open palm smashing into the left side of my brother's head, him going down on one knee, the chair skittering to the wall. Mom held her face in her hands. Jesse hadn't moved since he'd become Buck. I sat still and scared like the kid I was. Dad kept frowning at the ceiling.

Peaches arranged himself at the table again. Blood seeped from the scratches on one cheek, and the other had already puffed out enough to stretch his mouth into half a smile. He looked straight at Dad, who ever so slowly dropped his head and leaned in close, chuckling and slapping his

knees. "I've got it beat, Sherlock. Dr. Watson has saved the day again. It doesn't matter where the Disappearing Boy was or what the Disappearing Boy was doing when his mother needed him. Uh-uh. The Disappearing Boy had us hooked on a red herring, but we won't be his dinner this time, no sir." He moved even closer, pressing his thumb into Peaches' swollen cheek. "What matters is the shithead's doing what the shithead's supposed to be doing when the shithead's supposed to be doing it. Is Dr. Watson right, my dear Mr. Smart-Ass Holmes? Has he got it beat, or what?" Peaches nodded. "What comes next, Buck?"

"We do clean-up?"

"Right, son. And fast."

Maybe the wind woke me, or the heat or the racket, or maybe the orange light washing over everything in the room. Before I knew what was what, Dad pounded through the door, lifted me from the bed and half-trotted out to the landing and down the stairs, and through every window we swept past, I saw an orange column of fire, tavern-shaped at the bottom, sparks everywhere, wind blowing from every direction, blasting in the house one second, sucking all the air out the next, the heat like a hand pressing hard against my face.

As we came out the kitchen door, I realized I was drenched with sweat, my nightshirt sticking to me all over, Dad panting, soaking wet and sweat-sour, saying, "Take it easy, pumpkin, take it easy," as we swung around the corner of the house into the hot brightness. He eased me down and Mom appeared, hugged me hard, then wrapped me in a bath towel, saying everything was fine, just fine. Shivering and stunned, I stood next to her as the two willows near the highway disintegrated, sparks rolling up in waves, burning branches tumbling out of the flames, pops and cracks and a big whooshing underneath all of it. Dad walked along the side of the house to the front porch and back, soaking the roof, whipping the hose along behind him as he moved. Peaches and Jesse and a few neighbors filled buckets at the old hand pump and ferried them to the front of the house, chucking the water against the walls, spreading it on the lawn and up as high on the trunk of the sycamore as they could. A few cars had parked across the highway, the people gawking at the show, faces bright and shining, a handful drifting toward the house to offer help. When the wind gusted, it blew straight down, making a shump-whump sound, then letting up so the fire rose again, then shump-whump-whump, the flames flattening over the ground.

Planted barefoot with her arms hanging loose, nightgown flapping like a flag, long hair blowing all around, Mom stood next to me the whole time in the heat and the wind, lit with that strange, pulsating light. Whenever I looked up at her, she was smiling as I'd only seen her do when we gave her what we'd made for Christmas or her birthday, an expression that took over her face as if it most belonged there. She'd done it, of course she had, the business with Peaches, the thing that finally made her say no not just to Dad but to the whole set-up, the whole endless thing that had her gimping around like a war veteran at forty and the rest of us yessir- and nosiring ourselves hoarse so the glass workers and chicken farmers and truck drivers and flat-out drunks came back to help keep it all going another day. No. My mother had said no. The longer I stood there with her, the bigger I felt, things changing by the second everywhere else, but right there with her stillness put down roots.

The tavern started to fold in on itself now. A part of the front wall creaked and groaned as it leaned in, the roof dropping down in chunks, shattered windows glittering in the smoking grass. Still soaking the roof, whipping the hose behind him as he lumbered back and forth, Dad hollered at Mom to get decent, he thought he heard sirens, then we all did, faint but getting louder. Mom took my hand, and we went in the house to get dressed, then back out, her grabbing me in a hug at the kitchen door, saying again we were all right, everything was fine.

Pretty soon, two fire trucks pulled in the lot, the men hollering to one another, unrolling the hoses, blasting water at what was left of the trees and the tumbled-down thing the tavern was now, shooing the gawkers on their way, checking on each of us. The crew chief pulled Dad aside, the two of them bent close for a few minutes, nodding together, one of Dad's arms draped across the other man's shoulders. When the fireman had gone back to work, Dad came over to where Mom and I stood and said, "They think with the heat we've had it could've been a short or lightning or a gas leak or God knows. Good thing I paid up the insurance." He roughed up my hair, said, "Quite a show, huh?" then turned to watch the rest of it. Peaches and Jesse sat with their arms on their knees up by the front porch, a couple of buckets upside-down on the grass in front of them. The neighbors had drifted off when the fire trucks came, and it wasn't long before they left, too, the crew chief throwing Dad a jaunty salute as he climbed into the truck cab.

The five of us stayed where we were for a little while, me the whole time watching Dad rock up on the balls of his feet and back down, arms

folded up near his neck, the machinery in his mind clattering out the best way to put us back to work so he could ride herd and dream. I hated him. Hatred filled me hot to the tips of my fingers and toes, and I looked down at myself shivering again in the hot night, hating everything we were and how he'd made Mom have to do what she did, and somewhere in there all the memories and feelings foamed over the brim, and I ran at him screaming the half-formed syllables of my hatred, pounding my fists on his back, kicking his legs, bawling and shrieking and ramming my head into his stomach as he grabbed at me and hugged me hard against him, saying, "Take it easy, pumpkin, it's all over," as I bawled, engulfed by the rumble of his voice, his smell and heat and the familiar weight of his huge arms. Fresh swells of sobbing washed over me till at last I leaned limp and whimpering against him, Mom by that time stroking my hair, Jesse and Peaches taking turns saying, "It's OK, Sarah, it's all over now."

But it wasn't. It never has been. To this day I wake up sometimes smelling that place, thinking I'd better get to a chore I haven't done in fifty-some years. It's never any of the other things Dad got going—the bread-and-milk route, the bait shop, the fruit stand Jesse built by the highway, the small-engine repair thing Peaches ran till he got sent to the Pacific and died there. It's always the tavern I wake up to, and the stupid wish that I could have said or done something that would have made a difference, but that's dreaming, I know it is, but I still wish it.

So—the tavern burned down, the commotion you'd expect went on for a while, then things got back to normal. Nothing much changed, not in the way things worked with us, anyway. Peaches got killed and we went on. Jesse lost a leg because he forgot to chink the wheels before sliding under the DeSoto to mess with the engine, and we went right on. I got married and Frank moved in, and everything went right on. Even after Dad died—cancer of the vocal cords, no less, weekly trips to the Main Line where an Orthodox Jewish doctor did what little could be done, a shot of morphine and a shake of the head toward the end—the same work went on in the same way till Jesse and Frank died and Mom sold the place and moved into the old folks' home and I took my girls four states away and they grew up and had families of their own, and still it goes on, but just in me, everyone else dead or free of it.

Where I ended up we get fifteen feet of snow a winter, sometimes more. Things get old-fashioned quick when it takes an hour and your life in

your hands to rent a movie, not to mention half a fortune to get one of those satellite dishes, so my grandchildren have heard the story of the fire and all the other stories many times. I leave out things they don't need to hear, and I puff up Dad's good points and make Peaches more happy-go-lucky than he was and Jesse smarter, and so forth. They always ask who burned the tavern down, and I tell them nobody did, maybe lightning or an electric spark or God with his aim a little off, meaning to punish the bad people and hitting the good instead.

Mom never talked about any of it, no matter how many times I asked, and I kept asking every so often right up until she died. The most she'd say was what she said the last time, lying there all shriveled up, breathing shallow as a bird: "It doesn't matter, Sarah. It was so long ago." I squeezed her hand. She was right. It didn't matter. I didn't need her to tell me. I had imagined what happened so often I may as well have done it myself. Past midnight on the hottest night of the year, Dad a rumbling mountain next to me, ten thousand days of mulish drudgery stretching out ahead, the vision of the tavern gone comes and fills me with contentment. How easy it would be to give everyone a rest, even Dad, surely Dad wants a rest from it all, too.

I slip out of bed happy, no aches, no worries, the wind picking up outside, curtains fluttering, a punky sweetness in the air. I glide downstairs and out the kitchen, the wind gusty now, yanking my nightgown tight, then letting go, whooshing up underneath and billowing it out so I about float through the tavern's back door. Inside, it's black as hot asphalt, but it's like being inside my own body, so I don't stumble once. I pile a few greasy towels next to the stove, look around the place one last time, strike a match, and walk out.

Stephanie Dickinson

Bayou Lafitte

"Three men can keep a secret if two of them are dead." —Carlos Marcello

April 1961.Chooseday. Moon Landrieu is council representative for the 12th ward of New Orleans. "One-Eyed Jacks" plays at the Do-Drive In. On KEUN Cyprien Landreneau fiddles "La Robe a Rosalie." And in my dreams Poppa and I live inside the trunks of bald cypresses, soft feathery needles above us. Swaddled in cinnamon bark, we reach out with leaf-arms. Pale green duckweed covers the water. We take deep slow breaths through our cone knees. Sometimes we love water. We love standing tall. Other times we are half-crazed from being unable to lie down, always hiding, throwing our shoulders against the round prison. And then we are trees lying on our sides. Dugout canoes we float off while the Egg Nebula spreads itself overhead

I

Dusk time in the bayou and most of the fisherman have gone in. I swing my cane pole over the side of the flatboat. Mullets jump from the water, one two three leaps. I watch my cork drift while Poppa—known in these parts as Wild Iris—reaches for another Dixie beer, taking it down in two gulps. With his hair slicked to his head and red bandana around his neck he looks like a Coonass Brando.

Poppa glares at the oars. His black diamond eyes have lost their sparkle. "Loyalty is everything to Carlos. That's the kind of man he is. Any minute he'll show."

I could tell Poppa something about loyalty. Listen, Poppa, I want to do well in school, but I'm always being made fun of. I'm the tallest and skinniest girl in my class. Taller than the basketball girls from the Projects. I've been called the Wild Iris's daughter since the time I could walk. Plenty of people say, "He's nothing but a good-looking go-fer, and his kid's plain nothing." But loyalty's the reason I comb my hair in a ducktail, and why I wear a ribbed undershirt with red bandana.

My cork dunks and slides, and then a bite jerks it under. I let out a groan. Today is my fourteenth birthday and this is the fish I get.

A gray mullet with big eyes hangs from my line. I let it flop next to Poppa's ice-chest.

Poppa sets his beer down. "Let me have him, boo. Mullets like to swallow the hook deep."

I shake my head no, wanting to show him how I've grown since he's been away. Thrashing, its air sacs expanding, I squeeze the mullet and try to raise the hook from its mouth. The smooth underbelly is as hard to hold as cold grease.

"You're hurting him, Karline. Come here, jumper." Poppa grips the mullet who lies perfectly still while he slips the hook from its lip. With a flick of his wrist he throws the mullet back in, and then takes a last sip of his Dixie, drops the empty into a K&B sack. My father has a natural grace. His own father was a one hundred percent Cherokee gambler who never traveled beyond the Vieux Carre. His mother, a British-Jamaican domestic. "*Poo-yee-yi* !" Poppa sniffs his hands. He leans over the side of the flatboat to wash them in the asparagus froth. "When I was away I missed this bayou more than anything. More than Carlos and you."

"Let's go in, Poppa."

I hate him for putting Carlos first. I hate the way Carlos's name comes up in every sentence. Why didn't he mention Velma? His ex-girlfriend, the woman I call Mama. Why didn't he mention my birthday? Half of me didn't expect him to remember, the other half was sure he took me fishing to celebrate my day. Now I want to go back. The sun will soon be gone, and Poppa hasn't fed a minnow to his hook all afternoon. When he pops another Dixie I bite the inside of my cheek. He's almost ruined what used to be the most handsome face in all of New Orleans. Two and a half years in Angola sandpapered his skin and aged him older than his thirty-eight years.

"Are you listening, Poppa? We'll have trouble with the water hyacinth. It's starting to move."

Mats of water weeds float out from the banks and the passage between the tangled thickness is shrinking. If we get caught we'll have to wait until dawn when the hyacinth returns to the banks.

"You don't hear what I'm saying, Karline," his voice growing steadily louder. "Carlos wets his line at the beginning of the week. That's law. Carlos, Franco Todaro, and me would always fish, and then finish up at Pier 90." He smiles lopsidedly and I notice a silver tooth

next to the right incisor. He sees me looking. "My cellmate knocked it out. Prison dentist gave me a steel tooth. Carlos will make it gold. The Wild Iris has a reputation for fancy dressing. Look at me. Teeshirts and jeans."

I drop my eyes. Carlos will make everything whole again, but what can he do about the two men from Dallas who came to Velma's asking after Poppa? The men went away only to return later. Eva Touchet from next door saw them kick in the porch window. She didn't call the police because that wouldn't be the neighborly thing to do on our street.

He takes the rest of his Dixie down. "I thought of fishing so strong when I was away," he adds in a husky voice. "One more cast, boo."

I slip the lid off the minnow bucket, bait my hook like he showed me when I was a little girl, the barb going through the minnow's side. They don't feel it, and keep on swimming. They don't have blood.

"Boo, you're gutting your minnow not spearing it."

His fingers glide the hook through the minnow. In one motion he lifts the cane pole and casts. His line flies out over the bayou. "I still have it," he laughs. "I missed the bayou. I even missed the *boscoyo,* the cypress knees."

Poppa and I are trees growing besides wild irises, in hot mud. There are alligators here who eat their young. Places in the mud and palmetto where pale green eggs incubate. Deeper in, always around another bend, mysterious fires.

"I'm hungry, Poppa. Let's go in."

"You've got *my-nez*. Eat that." He throws me the Miracle Whip jar.

I dip my finger into the mayonnaise, smearing my lips and tongue.

"Carlos will have a job waiting for me. He'll let me in the Beverley Club. Bouncer, slot-machine man. People loved me there. Jimmy Durante, Frank Sinatra. All the entertainers played there. Carlos needs me, boo. He'll pay off those Dallas thugs.

Carlos has a special foot-long pocket sewn into the left leg of his trouser which he fills with traveling money. I have to get my momen-

tum back. He's not going to like it that I'm working at a greenhouse. These hands…these enforcers… shouldn't be digging around in dirt."

I squirm on my seat. I've had to pee for hours. "Poppa, it's time to go in." Tree planting seems a better way to make money than waiting for Carlos to give you a handout. Yet I remember the harsh sound Velma made when I told her Poppa was getting out of Angola, that he was going to do gardening.

"Carlos will buy me a car. He'll see I need some wheels under me. A Cadillac. Carlos always orders about four of the newest model. I know my Karline likes green swamp and bayou. My grass girl with the silver-green eyes."

Carlos is the center of my father's life, Poppa who could still be so many things, kneeling before a shrimp, a squat no-neck 5'2" in built-up shoes, a bandy hen, who gets quoted in the *Times-Picayune* saying, "Stop being *coo-yon*. I ain't nuttin' but a tomato salesman." Carlos the subject, the star attraction that runs horse racing, gambling, pin ball machines, cock fighting, longshoreman insurance contracts, the warrior on horseback, the Shango, the Daddy Boy, the rhinestone Big Shot, the vodun walking stick, the power Poppa thinks is his too when he breathes the same air. Carlos is his Ya Ya Chicken, his Remoulade Sauce. In the past few years Carlos has been in the newspaper everyday.

Racketeer buys 6,400 acres of swampland to hide bodies in.
Mafioso Boss establishes headquarters in Cleoma's Tavern on Highway 90.
Who says crime doesn't pay? Kingpin builds twelve bedroom mansion.

I empty the bait pail, unknotting the rope that ties us to a sunken tree. Mullets, three four five, make, slow short jumps, flip onto their sides. The last of the sun glints on their silvery white stomachs. I reach for the oars.

"Stop!" Poppa hisses. "Carlos hasn't showed yet. I left word." He gets to his feet, starts to shadow box without a shadow. "Karline, close your eyes. You old man's about to take a leak." I hear his zipper. "*Cho! Co!* See that pelican? Where'd it go?" he shouts. "In those branches, see where the light zigzags through the trees. I love birds. I love fish." His water hits the bayou. When he plops down he's restless and drunk. The mats of hyacinth are almost touching the boat. He

punches his fist into the flat of his hand. "Velma's not going to let me step foot in her house tonight, boo. I'm in no hurry."

Velma's heart is big and forgiving. She let Poppa sleep on her back porch after the penitentiary turned him loose. Her one rule—no drinking. She has a beautiful wailing singing voice. She used to be best friends with a stripper named Stormy who was my birth mother. I have no memories of her. Billed as six feet of swirling tassel, Stormy danced to get out of Ponchatoula, Louisiana. Poppa managed and married her. Not even a year after my birth she ran off with a man who owned a dog-racing track in Des Moines. After Stormy left, Poppa fell in with Velma.

"Carlos must have been arrested. No other reason he's not here. I left word."

He slams his fist into his palm. He shadowboxes. I try to lift the mismatched oars back into the lock. The shorter oar wiggles itself loose. My hands slide and I run into Poppa's fist. My left eye fills with blue stars. I keep my head down. My eye tears, but I'm not crying.

"It's okay, Poppa," I squeeze out through my teeth. "Listen, you don't have anymore beer. Poppa, we have to go. We have to get the boat back."

He'll hear me about the beer being gone. That's why we're fishing so Poppa can get beer after beer inside him. I pull on the oars. The hyacinth fights me. Teeming wet weeds surround the boat. Each dip of the paddle catches in a syrupy tangle. I hurt so much when Poppa was in Angola, I missed him. I'm still missing him.

He reaches behind him for a sack. "I might not have beer, but I won't go thirsty."

I see the glint of a bottle neck. My heart kicks. Beer doesn't cause hurt like bottles do. Words gets slurred, sentences erased.

"Not the whiskey, Poppa," I warn him. "Velma won't understand."

"I can handle, Moon Pie. She's a soft woman."

"Maybe you should marry her, Poppa."

"Karline, she doesn't want me." He unfolds the pack of L&Ms from his teeshirt sleeve, shakes two free. "I always wanted my old man to offer me a cig. To show he thought I was a man. You're getting pretty grown up, boo. Want to join me, Karline?"

I bite the inside of my other cheek. Why don't you offer to row? Do you need all those muscles just to lift a bottle? "Nah, Poppa." I could have added that I don't need a cigarette to tell me who I am. My cheeks burn when Poppa takes his first swig from the bottle. He tilts his head back like the bottle is giving him deep tongue kiss. It makes me sick.

"Poppa, the rowing is hurting my arms," I snap at him, tasting my anger.

Bottle-sucking makes Velma sick too. She still sings at Archibald's piano bar, where my mother danced. Stormy gave me my green eyes and height, but Velma gave me everything else. Poppa and I lived with Velma in her shotgun house. Her father was a sheet rocker, and he took the Wild Iris into his business. Put him on stilts, gave him a putty knife. Poppa made $184 dollars a month, but when he was sent to the penitentiary the police opened his strongbox and found $120,000 cash money.

My ears prickle. From around the next stand of trees comes the steady hum of an outboard motor. I pray it won't be Carlos. Even for Poppa's sake.

"*Cho! Co!* Hear that? Carlos is on his way. He wouldn't let the Wild Iris down."

Around the bend comes a bass boat, shining its lights. Poppa's face relaxes, about to glow. I can see his dimples. The whiskey bottle is forgotten.

"The Little Man has got himself a new bass boat. Look at that."

The bass boat is creamy white with red stripes, and in the middle of the deck is a high seat for the fisherman. I'd hate to be a largemouth bass running from that man raised up and silent, armed with a six-foot pole and 20-pound line, running from the boat lights like an escaped slave in the old days when planters hunted with torches.

Wind comes up and just then the sky opens, blowing sheets of rain into the moss-draped cypress trees on the bank. The bass boat runs with its throttle open and brings bad weather with it. Waves from the wake rock us.

Poppa cups his mouth. "Carlos, it's me, the Wild Iris." Wind blows his words back into his face. Bayou weather is spooky. One minute sun, the next rain. The devil beating his stepdaughter. Poppa pulls his teeshirt off and ties it to the end of his cane pole. "Little Man, hey, it's your brother back from the grave," he shouts swinging the pole in the air.

I don't want the bass boat to see us, let it run past us thinking we're just a stick of driftwood. Let it go into the hyacinth and lily pads. A fat motor like that will chop the waterweeds to bits. I reach for my fishing hat and pull it down over my boy-hair.

"That's a heavy motor. Carlos is probably casting a jiggin' spoon."

The driver eases up on the throttle, and the bass boat sidles right beside us. A can of Dixie beer thuds into the flatboat. One then another.

"*J'ai gros couer.* Wild Iris," a low voice slips through the rain. "I said we'd have a beer upon your return."

Even idling the bass boat make waves about to swamp the flatboat. My sneakers are soaked, and so is the seat of my jeans. The tackle box floats.

"Hey, Carlos," Poppa grins, his voice low and sweet, as he picks up the beers.

Slowly I lift my eyes. A lantern hangs above him. If he weren't sitting on the high seat, the stocky little bald man wearing a gray suit with a wide tacky tie would have trouble reeling in. His feet don't reach the deck. I rub my eyes thinking they must be lying to me about the suit and the handkerchief in his breast pocket. So this is Carlos.

Carlos takes the kerchief from his pocket and wipes the palms of his hands, the rain from his forehead. "Greetings, my long lost friend."

I worry that the storm has stirred up the water snakes, that soon they'll swim against my legs, opening their soft wide mouths. Hundreds of them slithering in the hyacinth.

"Come aboard, Wild Iris and bring your young friend. We'll pull that flatboat behind us, won't we, Savela?" Carlos murmurs in a soft voice to the man piloting the boat. For such a fierce man his voice should be stronger. The motor coughs, shutting off.

“Now we’re talking, man.” Poppa puts his teeshirt back on.

The tall man behind the wheel gets up. He’s close enough for me to see the palm trees on his Hawaiian shirt. He gets to his knees, reaching out to Poppa.

“Wild Iris.” Carlos claps Poppa on the shoulders, and Poppa throws his arms around Carlos who slides off the high seat. His bald-head doesn’t reach Poppa’s shoulder. “Wild Iris, is this your daughter?” Poppa nods. “Where are your manners? Savela, help the young lady up.”

Feeling shy, I hang back. I’m not going to mess up their reunion. “Poppa, you go on. I’m going to row back to Pier 90.”

“Get in the boat, Karline, like the man is asking.” Poppa’s voice is stern.

Savela reaches out and I grab onto his long arm. Before my feet hit the deck Poppa has popped a Dixie and tips it to his mouth.

Carlos nudges Poppa. “What kind of *bebette* are you taking her out on a leaky flatboat?”

“She rowed. Karline wouldn’t let me touch the oars. See those arms, hey?”

Carlos nods and gestures me to a beach chair. I sit on the deck. He shrugs, turns to Poppa. “There’s a couple of guys looking for you from Dallas. Two of Joe Civello’s boys.” He presses the handkerchief to his lips. “I don’t want trouble with the other Mafs. Not with the Feds breathing down my neck.”

When he coughs that must be the sign for Savela to bring me a root beer. A bottle of bourbon for Carlos and Poppa. The liquor starts to melt Poppa’s tongue, and the talk keeps flowing out of him into Carlos’s ear. I drink the sweet root beer and stare out into the dark. The rain stops. “God took a quick leak,” Savela laughs when he brings me a blanket. I curl up on deck pretending I’m out-swimming the slithering snake, muttering to the wood ducks. I’m the pelican, skimming silently above the marsh. My future is inseparable from Bayou Lafitte a fortune teller on Royal Street told me. I belong here. A muskrat slaps the water with his tennis paddle tail. I’m sorry that Poppa keeps running his head. He’s saying the same thing over and over. And then I hear him mention Stormy, and it’s the first time he’s ever reminisced about my birth mother. “How about the time the polecats were peep-

ing into the Southport Club, pointing their guns at everyone? They took me out of the men's room at gunpoint. They cuffed Stormy, wearing only her tassels, pressed a baton across her neck and brought her outside by her arms above her head. Frigging polecats kept ridiculing her while they were taking her fingerprints because she was missing two fingers on her left hand. 'An alligator ate them off,' she told them."

My head jerks up from the blanket.

"A beautiful woman but goofy." Carlos shakes his head. "I remember her being a talker. She made your ears ring." He reaches down to pick up his tackle box. "*Pauvre* Stormy." He opens the lid, showing Poppa his best floating worms.

"Yeah, Poor Sainted Stormy," Poppa says, fingering the lures. "You were the one she truly loved."

"Truth and that woman can't be said in the same breath."

I realize my birth mother is dead. She didn't run off with a dog track owner from Des Moines. She's not going to someday show up at Velma's to see how I am. Poor Sainted Stormy. They know she's dead. She wouldn't be a poor saint unless she was demised. Savela ties the flatboat on behind, and then slides into the captain's seat.

"Where to, Carlos?"

Carlos lets out a long sigh, and then stares into his tackle box like he's really having to think. "Savela, let's show Wild Iris the new houseboat like we talked about. Believe you me, this motor literally chops up the water weeds. These new outboards are unbelievable."

Savela gives the motor gas, and the boat begins to move. In the back of my head I can hear Velma warning me against Carlos. He's got *envie,* a craving for young girls, boys, men, women. To him people are no different than crawfish, you eat their meat, suck their brains, and throw them away.

Carlos removes something from his tackle box. "Another root beer, Karline?" He doesn't give me a chance to answer before kneeling in his suit over the ice chest. "Karline, you can't see what's out here," he says standing up, a bottle of root beer in his hand, but all of it belongs to me, especially the alligators. I don't let anyone poach my gators. No hunting. No harvesting. I have a respect for the big lizards."

He sets a root beer next to me. It tastes sweeter and darker than the last one.

"There's more gators out here in Carlos's neck of the bayou than in the Everglades," Poppa says. "Carlos even discovered some white alligators. Their hide is smooth as white chocolate. Beautiful. He could have turned a pretty penny on them. Not Carlos, he sent guys with silencers to protect them."

There's a silence filled only by the outboard motor.

"I'm worried about Joe Civello's boys," Carlos finally says in almost a whisper.

"I bet they gave up and hightailed it back to Dallas. If they didn't I can handle them. Little Man, we're only talking $10,000."

People have been known to get lost in the swamps. The bass boat is taking us farther back, making turns new to me. I've been trying to memorize the rights and lefts. I see the denser darkness of overhanging black willow and tupelo trees. Water has loosened their bark like calcified capes. Poppa is drinking from a bottle. Carlos holds a plastic cup. He hasn't even wet his lips with it. All the turns are making me sleepy. I smell the nearness of raspberry bushes, the bloodsweet fruit the water snakes plunder.

"What about Karline?" Carlos asks. "She'll need protection."

I take another sip of root beer. My hands are faraway when I dig in my back pocket for my snap comb. It's not there, and suddenly I'm cold. Like I'm soaking wet and the wind is blowing. I can't stop trembling. *Keep me warm, Poppa. Velma, bring me milk toast.* My knees are knocking. My head feels big. I struggle to get up on my elbow, knocking what's left of the root beer over.

Poppa is swaying, sitting in the high chair under the lantern talking to the air. "Carlos, remember when they got Poretto to take the oath? He was one of your top guys. He takes the oath with a clenched fist."

"Life goes fast," Carlos comments. "You've got to swing your net, catch what you can. I've got a quick hand, and know how to listen. You talk too much, Wild Iris. You don't deserve that beautiful girl."

I'm going to be sick. I never vomit. All through the school years never once. And then I don't know myself anymore because I'm coughing up. Hot gravy. Roux dribbles down my chin. The same as

Velma makes for chicken and rice to lie in. I try to tell Poppa. I have to go home because my head is growing. My neck can't hold it up.

Huge birds, four pelicans soar off almost at once. Their wingspans must be nine feet as they curve their long necks. I try to watch them. They're coming back, circling above me. The black tips of their wings flash. I'm going to throw up. My tongue is so big. I can smell their salmon-colored bills. Bottom muck. Carrion mullet. They roll and scoop me up. Each pelican has an arm or a leg in his bill. They run with me before rising into the air. I am being lifted up. They are telling me their secrets. How old they are. Descendents of the ancient cormorants. 100 million years ago they lived on the same planet as the dinosaurs. "Where are you taking me?" I ask. To safety. When I question them about Poppa, they don't answer. I see the houseboat tied to a half submerged dock. Moon comes out from behind clouds and shimmers in the chaise lounges on top of the boat's flat roof.

I'm no longer flying. I'm being carried into the reek of insect repellent. We must be at the houseboat. "Easy, let's get her in and put her in bed." I'm dropped onto a mattress. I reach out, find a pillow there. I take it in my arms, and hold on. "Wild Iris, I left my tackle box on the bass boat, go get it for me." Poppa must half jump off the houseboat into the bass boat. There's a thump. "I don't see it, Carlos." If he yells anything else I don't know because the bass boat opens its throttle. I hear the giant outboard motor gnashing the waterweeds. Poppa, I try to call out, but my tongue stick to the roof my mouth. It's okay that you forgot my birthday, I love you anyway. I shiver, and then sweat. Someone brings me a bowl to throw up in. Strong hands steady my head. "You're going to have to stay here awhile, Karline." Carlos explains how it is. Men want to hurt Poppa for things he did before prison. They'll come after me to get to him. Carlos loves Wild Iris like a son. Poppa agreed this was best. "Nobody knows about this houseboat. Nanan will see to you." Who is Godmother Nanan? Someone brings a mosquito lamp inside. The plywood walls glow yellow. Birdlike moths fly into them. Their wings ping like the bells of a pinball machine.

II

At first I leave the bed only to use the toilet. My legs shake when I stand. The bathroom is like the one on a Greyhound bus. In the metal mirror my hair is a mess of dirty string, my lips welted with mosquito bites. The tiny steel sink drains into a bucket. Other than trips to pee I can't wake from my sleep. I swim to the surface of it, but don't seem able to pull myself up onto land. The gentle rocking of the houseboat keeps me drowsy. I lie under a green mosquito net on a bed. The spread is moss green. It smells of dry grass. Cloth dolls live with me on the bed. Knotty pine walls look on.

Poppa isn't anywhere in my line of vision when he starts running his head again. His voice must be inside my mind. "Listen, Karline, the secret to fishing is pissing. It makes even the sunfish run. When Carlos comes what color Cadillac do you think I should ask for? Fire-engine red? Silver? I used to have suits those colors. Remember my gabardine shirts, the gold Gucci loafers? How about the French blue suit with copper filigreed buttons? I could have passed for a luxury gambling casino. I had hand painted ties. You loved the palm tree, didn't you, boo? Carlos gave me a Salvador Dali original. I was the only guy who wore silver suits. I rode with the chiefs. As far from being Sicilian as they come. And there I was, a half breed, with Tom Riaauto and Nofio Pecora. And then Velma says a few words. I see myself sitting in my highchair watching her heat iron combs on the stove. I don't understand why she's burning her hair. "Karline, what I wouldn't give for your soft hair," she sighs, blowing her breath on my neck.

Nanan sits on the houseboat's tiny deck on a kitchen chair. I wonder how it can hold her. An old swamp woman, she tells me she sells live bait at Pier 90, drives a *patruck* hauling crawfish drums. Don't I remember that she rented a boat to my father the week before yesterday? she asks getting up. She rubs my temples, massages my feet, telling me how all the sickness in my body will be released through my toes. She moves agilely like a girl not a sloppy, dirty old woman. "Look at that. He made this look like a *sussette*, a baby pacifier. He thinks high high of you." When she bends over me in her overalls and teeshirt, I whiff crawfish and see how every hair on her salt-and pepper head is Bobbie-pinned. Yet her hands are gentle when she washes me.

"You had swamp sickness," she tells me in a flat voice. "You breathed in too much gas *piss-au-lis* releases. Take these headache powders."

The bitter aspirins are folded into wax paper envelopes. After weeks of Nanan coming and going, unchaining the door, feeding me, letting me sit on the deck while she cleans, I ask her not to padlock the chain when she goes.

"I won't leave, Nanan? But I'll go crazy inside the houseboat. Let me sit in the sun. Please, Nanan."

I hear fright in her voice. "Listen, a fisherman goes by and he knows this is Carlos's houseboat. He expects to see it chained up. Otherwise, he'll talk."

"But I'll hide if I see anyone coming."

"*Possedé,"* she snorts, reaching into the pocket of her coveralls for a can opener. She's a big woman five feet eight with solid meat on her bones, dressed as always in men's coveralls, her pockets sagging with carpenter's ruler, tobacco, and jack knife. It would be hard to force myself past her. She warns me about how I would get lost if I set out into the swamp, grown men are known to disappear, and a bad, mischievous kid would be eaten in nothing flat by the white alligators. Don't forget the water moccasins and quicksand. "Here, drink your powder." She padlocks the chain when she leaves.

The powder relaxes me. I open the picnic basket. Nanan is a good cook. Three day's worth of Frog Leg Sauce Piquant on rice, and Dirt Cake.

Days I lie on the bed day dreaming that the houseboat is a tower made just for me, a princess prisoner, that it will be my crypt. I visit New Orleans in my mind. I count the windows in Velma's house. I go to the house next door. I count the windows on the planter's mansions that face St. Charles Avenue. The next time Nanan comes she allows me to sit longer on the kitchen chair on the deck. I close my eyes to feel the sun better. My skin falls in love. Later I watch the brown pelicans fish. Vertical dives that should break open their whitish heads. Their throat pouches fill. Water drains from the corners of their mouth and they swallow sunfish. I hear gunshots. Is it fishermen shooting pelicans for stealing their catch? Alligator poachers? Three

times a week Nanan comes on a flat boat with groceries and headache powders. She empties the bucket under the sink, disinfects the toilet.

"I need to wash your *ste-pin*," Nanan says from the doorway.

The princess in her houseboat tower sews her panties from feathers and fish skins. I slide off my jeans. "Here," I say in a choked voice handing her my underpants.

"Don't worry. Carlos sent a sack."

I start to cry from loneliness. Nanan scowls, preaching to me in her monotone how Carlos spreads it around, give to others, he takes care of her and papaw, plenty of crawfish boil and beer. The boats and the live bait, and the girls who lie upstairs in their rooms where the fisherman go without washing their hands, the babies that slip from those girls' thighs, the dark-eyed beautiful children, the roosters that climb into the low branches of the oaks. All his. When she prays Our Father she is really praying to Carlos. "You should start praising him too. You don't know how much you owe him."

Our Father who art in New Orleans hallowed be Thy name. Carlos Thy Kingdom of the Fiery Throated Hummingbird and Big Lizard come. Thy will be done here on Bayou Lafitte as it is in Heaven. Thy will be done by Piotolly and Boudreaux, by Wild Iris and Karline.

I give her my letters to Poppa and Velma. "Please," I tell her, "put stamps on them."

The flatboat Nanan rides here in has a strong motor. Not as many horsepower as the new speedboat Carlos comes in. He brings binoculars and a transistor radio with batteries, a sundress and flip-flops. A set of World Book Encyclopedias, a shrimp basket with French Fries, Crispy Crèmes. He steps from one boat to the other in his flared pants and maroon tie. He never has a beard shadow. The barber must splash Carlos's short neck with rosewater. He wants you to forget he's ugly and wears platform shoes.

"Try these binoculars. You'll learn about swamp. Have you seen any alligator nests? They're heaped and round. Like beer bellies. Females are out there with their eggs. It's hatching season. I have my men watching for the white gators. They're worth more than a hundred slot machines. I've seen three twenty footers out there. Females guarding the nests."

How is Poppa? Does he send word? I tell Carlos I want to go home to Velma's. I've been notching the days on the table. I'll be left behind in school? Better to be left behind than die. He tells me to read from the World Books to him. Look at him. He has a fourth grade education. Besides he likes the sound of my voice. The most beautiful voice he's ever heard. It reminds him of his mother's. His family came from Tunisia by way of Sicily. Always he wears dark glasses even inside the sunless houseboat but he takes them off while I read. Sometimes he lies on the green bed under the mosquito net with the cloth dolls. He closes his eyes.

"Why do you lock me in?" I ask.

"To keep you safe," Carlos says, laying his hand on my head. I feel him rub a strand of my hair between his forefinger and thumb. The first time he has touched me.

For days after he leaves I peer into the swamp world with the binoculars. The radio is set to KEUN. I listen to the accordion on "Bayou Chene." I shuffle back and forth. Vines swarm over palmettos on bits of soggy land. I strain to see if cottonmouths hang in them. Are those floating logs alligators? Cranes wade in still water. Submerged trees claw the surface with their arms. I meditate on the knotty pine cabinets and follow cloud shapes in the built-in table. I read World Book. *Alligators are to be respected. Even small ones (five to six feet) can cause severe injury*. I write letters to Poppa and Velma. I listen to the radio. The radio keeps me in life. I pretend I have a sickness.

This week's KEUN top hits are Milton Moliot's "Les Flammes D'Enfer (The Flames of Hell)" with Austin Pitre on fiddle, Blind Uncle Gaspard's "Jolie Blon," Robert Jardell's "Waltz of Regret," and Happy Fats "Cajun from Church Point." Sometimes deep in the night I pick up Houston. The hits are different. "Runaround Sue," by Dion, "Baby Blue" by the Echoes. The songs don't cry Eh ha ha! No triangles or rubboards.

Last night I dreamed that I entered a New Orleans restaurant. I was naked except for the swamp slime. Men in white shirt cuffs toasted women who left lipstick smears on their goblet rims. I'd brought mosquitoes with me. Little Blue Herons. Sweat dripped from my eyelashes. I reeked of mugginess and crawfish.

I've decided to run away. I've stopped taking the drowsy powders. I'll pretend to sit on the deck full of sleep and sun while she cleans the bucket under the sink. Every so often she leaves the padlock hanging open from the chain. She forgets. In my imagination I practice stealing her boat yanking the ripcord, making sure not to flood the motor with gas. I'll jump into the water if that fails, dive to the bottom, I'll become a crab, all turquoise and brown-streaked, I'll swim backwards, disappear.

I'm still asleep under my mosquito-net when Nanan comes a day later than she's supposed to. I wonder how I would get out of the houseboat if no one ever came again.

"You want something to drink first thing?" she asks, wringing out a scrub rag, mopping down the knotty pine walls. I hear her breath crackling in her chest like a wing of a white ibis caught in a fan.

"There's nothing good to drink."

"Why you don't drink dat Pepsi. Carlos stopped by and you didn't offer him any refreshment. Same bottles are here. I tell him he should run the generator so the refrigerator work. He owns this houseboat."

"He owns you and papaw," I joke. "Go on help yourself."

"You're smart at that mouth like your mama was." Nanan spits into the wash pan, and then goes to the ice chest for a Pepsi. "That girl didn't last. Stormy, the prettiest spiced pork pie. She wild as wild squirrel with sauce piquante. Stormy, oh la la." Nanan rubs her thumb against her fingertips. "No grit to her. Too bad. She was my godniece."

"Velma's my mama," I protest, wondering why the sunlight dies when I hear Stormy's name. She left her nine-month old baby behind, and so I don't care if Nanan was Stormy's god-aunt. Neither are anything to me. Velma took me as her own.

"Your mama was a white girl. Beautiful hair, reddish gold, strawberry blond natural. Why she took up with that Wild Iris? I told her he's practically a colored man except for the Indian in him. She thought he so handsome," Nanan laughs bitterly. "Handsome don't last."

The sun shines in the houseboat door lighting up her Bobbie pins. Nanan was a strawberry blond. I study her in the face. Green eyes. Once Velma showed me a photograph of Stormy, her shoulder-

less dress had beaks of satin to cover her breasts. Velma said Stormy had legs men were afraid of. So long they could strangle you.

"Stormy would like this houseboat. All to her own self. That girl made sure she had a room to herself. She cleaned a closet out. Didn't care if tiny it was as long as she didn't have no- one else in it with her. She put up pink curtains in that closet. She was only fifteen when she have you but she look so grown up and pretty. It was a curse. Oh, she's dead. Someone make sure."

A shiver crawls down my spine. "Who made sure?" I ask, sitting up.

"So long ago who can know," Nanan dodges my question, wipes a black streak from her cheek. "Well, the sleeping girl sits up. She must be hungry. Wait til you see what I bring you in the basket. Today Nanan has a feast. She-crab and jambalaya and double-crust strawberry pie," she announces, waddling to the door of the houseboat where the picnic basket sits.

And then I see it. The padlock glinting in the sun, dangling open from the chain. "Let me see the strawberry pie. Oh Nanan," I call out. "Is there any whipped cream? My mouth is already wet. Have some with me."

She laughs and drags in the picnic basket, and then the water can. She loves to drink Pepsi and eat sweets with me, to talk her stories about the nutria rodents that are eating the buds of cypress trees so they can't have babies, and when the trees die out, no more swamp. All thanks to Mr. Tabasco who imported them from Brazil.

I try to swallow bites of strawberry pie. It might as well be lizard. The padlock keeps flashing in the doorway. Nanan begins to yawn after two slices, complaining that she still has to disinfect the commode and sink. I tell her I'm going to sit on the deck to sun.

"They say too much sun not good for your color," Nanan remarks, shuffling the plates to the cabinet. There's the creak of the bathroom door. Another creak which means she's picked up the sink bucket.

Sun sinks into the back of my head as I ease the padlock from the chain, and close the door slowly. A woodpecker steadily hammers. The door clicks. Nanan must hear something. I hear the thud of the bucket. She must have dropped it suddenly remembering the padlock

she forgot. But I'm faster, and in one smooth move my father would be proud, I've looped the chain and squeezed the padlock shut. Seconds later Nanan beats on the door. "He'll find *you tete dure*." More fists against the door. "The alligators will eat you, little hard head. Just like your mama and poppa."

The alligators are mating. I hear grunting in the brush.

III

I'm motoring east through the bayou, east toward Pier 90 and the dock. I'm wearing what I slept in last night, a teeshirt and boxer shorts. Mullets are jumping from the water. Two, four, six. They didn't come near the houseboat. The mullets look scared. Like the water's electrocuting them. Remember, Poppa, right after you popped your last beer, I felt a nibble? That last night. More mullets jumped. These have the same heartbreak in their eyes. Something they've seen in the drowned world. Oily white mullets. Five pounds at least. I can't tie the flatboat up at Pier 90. Papaw will see me and call Carlos. I'll let the boat drift in empty, but I'll have to get as close to the dock as possible. Once I see fishermen I'll wade to the bank. Where will I go once I'm on land? New Orleans. What if Velma's no longer there on Magazine Street? I hear Poppa, but it's my voice saying his words, "You know, Karline, they eat grease, they eat gasoline. They come for the hook not the minnow. They like to taste their own blood." I hear the mullet splash when long ago Poppa throws her back.

The motor dies when I take a curve sharp. I yank the ripcord, again, again until my arm is hurting again. I smell gasoline. I've flooded it. I stamp my foot. A sharp pain. The boat is littered with fishing poles and I've stepped on a hook. I wince, but don't let out a cry. The double barb has dug itself in. I hear Poppa. "Easy because she's full of eggs. Get your finger in her mouth. Easy, boo." I squeeze my foot and imagine it as a mullet's mouth and ease the barb out. I reach for the oars, and find only one. Poppa, tell me what to do. I grovel on my hands and knees. Has to be something here I can row with. When Poppa was freewheeling Velma and I would run into him at the Gretna Frost-top. He'd be wearing sunglasses and getting out of the limonene. He'd slip twenties into Velma's pocket, and then wink. I yearned to be with him, to travel in the glow of his silver suit. Now I know where his silver suit led him. I dip the oar on one side of the boat and then the other, as if

the flat boat were a canoe. But I'm going in circles that are taking me closer to the bank.

I'm only a few yards from the shrimp grass. I lower the paddle over the side trying to find the bottom. It's no more than a few feet deep. Carrying the paddle I step into the still tea-colored water. The muck pulls at my feet. Water gnats pinch my calves. I climb onto the soggy bank, my toes sinking into stagnant standing water. Before I can pull my left foot free, my right calf has sunk almost to the knee. There's a buzzing hum in the air. My ears are stung first. There must be hundreds. I shake them off, thrusting the paddle out in front of me hunting for solid ground, wiggling my foot from side to side. Mosquitoes swarm over my arms and legs. My hands are fidgeting with feelers even as I kill their brothers and sisters. Better to crawl or huddle in a shell here, pretend to be worm or clam. What had Nanan meant? The alligators will get you like your mama and poppa. Carlos, what have you done with Poppa? I want to shout. But not yet, I don't want to think of that. Velma will know what to do, how to find Poppa.

I remember good times. "Two to your one, Moon Pie," Poppa teased Velma whose yellow skin matched the banana-flavored moon pies. They'd shuck oysters on the stoop. Poppa slurping raw oysters from the shell. My room sat off a long hallway. Velma smelled of oysters and Poppa when she kissed me goodnight. Her soft lips were sea plums. With the lights out I looked for parts of me I couldn't find. Things I'd lost. Under the covers I felt for the missing mole that might be anywhere, between my toes, in the middle of my back. I slid my hand far down and twisted it as if I might surprise it. Things couldn't just leave my body like my mother had left.

Ahead there's a stand of cypress trees with knees protruding above the puddles of water, the trunk bases swollen and spreading. The beginning of soil. I make my way slowly, mud sucking my feet, blinking, mosquitoes stinging my eyelids, hand over my eyes. The paddle weighs me down, and I'm tempted to throw it away. I swing it against mosquitoes. Carlos's shiny shoes on the houseboat bed. More mosquitoes like buckets of them are being thrown from the trees, bomb diving, striking, until I get down to my knees to wipe them from my eyes. "Relax, take off your shirt, wet it. Keep it over your head. Protect your eyes and forget the rest," I hear Poppa's voice. I pull off

my teeshirt, soak it in the swamp water, and stretch it over my head. I can still see, and start to run.

Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of Carlos I will fear no evil, for the sapphire throated egret is with me. I will fear no Carlos because the yellow-crowned night heron. is with me. The steamertail and kingfisher, the barred hawk do comfort me. Yea though I walk through Bayou Lafitte, through ghosts of the old Jean Lafitte, through buccaneers looting the beady-eyed lizards of their skins, the half hour ride with Captain Zoom Swamp Tours, yea though I hobble toward Highway 90, across the white alligator breeding season, yea though I walk through Archibald's piano bar where Stormy dances and Velma sings mournful swamp songs Thou art with me. Thou art the trombones and saxophones, the steel guitars and mule teams, the she-crab soufflé and the grasshopper brandies.

There's more light breaking in through the tops of the bald cypress. I splash through the water and leaves, half blind but sprinting toward the sunlight. Pulses open over my arms and neck. My whole body is beating in time with my heart. I'm panting. "Breathe deeply, boo," Poppa reminds me. "This will be the best day in your life yet."

Rawdon Tomlinson

Geronimo and Coyote at the Depot

He comes riding up
on cool mornings of doves cooing
and grackles flapping in the rainwater
pooled in wagon ruts; he lies down
on the freight platform, shuts his eyes
and waits as sun heats the plain,
resin oozing from the pine planks
fragrant as Sierra Azul, whose deer and quail
wonder if he is lost.

He wears the same black suit,
shoulders broad as Frankenstein's,
the wide-brim black hat
shading his eyes, so the dude
stepping from the train to buy a bow
and arrows—or unwittingly, some Comanche's
beaded cane—can't tell exactly what
"Chief" thinks, as he slowly prints his name
and grunts, "Two Bits."

The train vanishes in sky, and appears
from sky . . . Coyote sells the bird
under his hat to another gold digger:
"Its silver feathers glow like abolone-shell
rainbows," Coyote drums, "but it keeps flying back
to me—you'll have to raise the hat
just enough to slide your hand under
and grab fast and squeeze."

Dizzy from fortune's whirl,
the White-eye greedily slips his hand from the hat
clutching one bare turd,
Geronimo and Coyote laughing, in another world.

Rawdon Tomlinson

"Wood Singing" (Geronimo)

for Michael Darrow

In the ramada's shade,
I place the fiddle butt
against my chest bone
and heart . . . across the plain

in a daydream a rider
ripples in the heat the wood
resonating bow-strike
cicadas waving in

and out of sound—to that place
the creek plunges whitely
through pink boulders along
terraces of corn

I follow Mother's and Father's
tracks over dirt they rolled me in
at birth, smelling the pines,
place singing me, the frail

squeaking staccato pitch
hot and cold, stutter part wail,
blessing of horsehair and hollow
stalk—fitting the pieces.

Trina Hikel

Sex Ed

The patina of my life was beginning to feel seamless. Friendships had endured. The old sores of my birth family had healed or scabbed over; we sent jokes by e-mail; holidays together were tolerable, even fun. Love had worked out, landing me a bunch of exes who counted as family friends, and a steady partner I could fool around with afternoons, even after twenty years of give-and-take. We had a couple of kids who had escaped to day school. A set of grandparents kicked off, leaving an unexpected chunk of assets; we had working vehicles, plenty of firewood, intact upholstery, and whatever we wanted to eat; and I still didn't have to take a straight job. People around town were getting used to me. The library gals stopped in for tea. Kids were allowed to sleep over. The hazy wake-and-bake aura of my California years had cleared away; radical feminist health-care politics had devolved into a few women grousing about their episiotomies over shopping carts in the IGA; and there wasn't much I could do about that. I was shaving my legs. My earrings matched; my tattoos didn't show; I wore suburban housewife fleece and clogs; I blended. Then one day I got a note from my mother, enclosing a newspaper clipping. It was the obituary of Bridget Hennessey.

The picture was a yearbook photo from her teaching days. She was plump, smiling, freckled. Her hair was short, in a springy ducktail; newsprint couldn't show how red it was, or how commanding her voice, or how nimble her hands, with their short, polished nails.

Still, if I saw someone like that today I'd think, dyke schoolteacher. But it wasn't so obvious then - not like our gym teacher Miss Merrill, who looked like Willie Shoemaker the jockey, but with more facial hair. And this was Kennebec, Maine, a plaid and woolly kind of place; after living on the alternative edge in Berkeley, coming back to see women at the supermarket in hunting boots and down vests, I remember thinking, Wow, everyone looks queer here. The last time I'd seen Bridge Hennessey, only the color of her hair had changed, its red

becoming silvery gray. I realized she was just ten years older than me. I stood with the clipping in my hand, recalling my escape.

It was just past the time the nostalgia market calls the Summer of Love. We got our drivers' licenses at sixteen, so most of us had already lost our virginity, on nights between days of getting out of school for funerals of boys killed in Viet Nam. We drank beer and wine, and smoked a little pot. Things didn't get really harsh till those who survived the war came back with their smashed dreams and bad habits, in time for the closing of all the factories in town. But this was earlier; we were still innocent. We ignored evil as much as we could, the way kids put it off when, at sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, there are the distractions of basement parties, and dances in closed-out storefronts or armories; or the way they do if they've been cuffed around and cursed at, and learn early on the ruses of endurance. There had been a couple of car wrecks, a few pregnancies, and the night when the beautiful Jewel LaBrecque, naked and luminescent, paraded downtown in a car full of stoned laughing boys. But in the rural towns of central Maine, separated by woods, farms and riveted bridges over rivers, the main substance we abused was gasoline. Most of us had hand-me-down economy cars. A few boys had motorcycles. Brooks Corson had a Camaro convertible. In the summer it was boats; and the weekend of Jarvis Plourde's eighteenth birthday, we all turned up at a camp on the lake that belonged to Miss Hennessey.

She saw what we were doing, but didn't look away or forbid us. She was sharp-eyed but friendly. She lived with her sister in their old family home, a tall-windowed mansion at the top of our street. She drove the first Mustang in town. She hung around with a bunch of guys who taught art and theater and ran a flower shop. She taught business courses and 'health', as they called it. She was adviser to the cheerleaders and the school paper; she leaked tidbits about other teachers to the gossip column. She chaperoned dances. She knew all the kids - vocational, clerical, college - by name, and maintained calm in even the roughest study halls, getting the wildest, most fucked-up kids settled into poker and betting games, teaching them probability.

As a neighbor, I saw more of her than the others did. It was she who nicknamed our street Rabbit Hill after its large Catholic families. If I were outside raking the lawn or sitting in the sun, she'd

stop to tease me about my brown skin, her own arms pink and freckled from driving with the top down. Out at the lake, when I walked by her cottage to the mailbox on the main road, I'd stop for a chat. Even if she had company, she'd invite me in and introduce me; that was how I got to know her friends. She was the only adult who ever asked what I was reading. It was she who gave me my first taste of Gertrude Stein.

I was never aware that she'd ever had a lover. Her close friends were other teachers, effeminate, bright, funny men, and sometimes their wives. They'd say, "We're going out to Bridge's *salon*." She'd say it's not a salon, it's a saloon. Those were days when everyone drank like mad to hide things. She went everywhere - to Quebec for winter carnival; to Colby College to see Janis Joplin; to the summer theater at Lakewood; to Mexico, the Caribbean, Hawaii; to Ireland, to visit her mother's family. She went to all sporting events at school; she sold tickets at the state fair; she had a lawn chair on the sidewalk for the Fourth of July parade. The younger marchers acknowledged her as if she were a chief dignitary.

She knew our parents, too. She never told any of our deeds; she only called people on what they themselves were doing. "Hey, Val," she said to my father, "When are you going to let those girls stay out past nine o'clock?" My father laughed, and it dawned on him how unreal it was to expect us home before midnight. Our mother was on the committee to get sex education in the health curriculum. Bridge told her, "With six kids, you can be our bad example." Our parents ate this up; never did they think we'd be anything but adequately supervised around Miss Hennessey. She made us use her formal name and title, in and out of school, until we dropped out or graduated; then we could call her Bridge. We were allowed to drink alcohol in her presence the second we turned eighteen. She didn't care if we smoked. She seemed to like us for all the right reasons.

And Jarvis Plourde, on his eighteenth birthday, was adorable. He had silky hair cut like Paul McCartney's. He had a heart-shaped face, hazel eyes, and a light dusting of freckles over his nose. He wore tight jeans and low slim boots. He played football, and was one of the stars, but he wasn't really a jock. He worked on cars, but he wasn't a motorhead. He got straight A's, could do trig functions in his sleep, was a connoisseur of modern fiction, but he wasn't a brain. What he was, everyone knew, was a lover.

He treated his girlfriends well. He never fought. He gave coveted presents - funky jewelry from Ma Roma's antique shop; Peter Max scarves from LaBelle; new releases from Al Corey Music. The other guys were still stuck at stuffed animals and Jean Nate. He gave me a book of Updike's stories because he liked them. He was the only boy we knew who regarded an interest in literature as a normal part of life.

The other guys, jocks and sons of car dealers, were already smothering their feelings in sports talk and beer. I didn't know what they were interested in besides drinking, driving, and gossip. There was the tall and dreamy Reny Beauvois, with whom I'd been carrying on a now-and-again sexual liaison, but he was messing around elsewhere, and I was steamed, and already thinking I should get him out of my system. The other girls seemed equally at odds with their regular partners. There had been some cheating, too much drinking, and the usual neglect of the girls by the boys, who seemed more interested in thrashing out the details of their own pecking order than in doing couples' duty. Already they were regarding women as accessories to their rank. Already they had reduced sexual connectedness to a reflex response to friction.

It was a sunny Saturday. People started showing up around noon. A strew of clunkers sat in the field next to Bridge's cottage; a bunch of boats jostled the bumpers of her dock. I walked the quarter-mile between her camp and ours, down the quiet dirt road fragrant with pine and the smell of the lake that I loved. The Hennessey cottage, built by Bridge's grandfather, had been the first one on the shore. It was gray-shingled with white trim. It had a deck facing the road, and a screened porch overlooking the lake. Inside, muslin curtains in the windows; majolica on the shelves; braided rugs on wide pine floors; old rockers and wicker furniture with cushions. It looked tidy and prim, like a grandmother's, until you looked closely. Framed postcards of oldfashioned pinup-girls in high heels and tight bathing suits with crotch panels decorated the stairwell. In the kitchen, photographs of vegetables whose folds looked like flesh. A movie poster of Raquel Welch in fur boots and hot pants, in the guest room; Josephine Baker, in sepia, topless, in the bath. Miss Hennessey's field hockey stick from college hung on one wall, near a rack holding

her fishing poles. There was a collection of old Esquire and Playboy magazines on a shelf. The boys loved those.

The cheerleaders had the idea of having Jarvis Plourde's party at Miss Hennessey's; they were unpacking paper plates and Tupperware like a squadron of housewives. Bridge looked over the setup then said she had to go out. "I'll be back for supper," she said. "Try not to burn the place down."

The doctor's son and a couple of chess players had tin film cans filled with pot, and were already in a canoe, paddling across the lake to get high and giggle over the summer-stock actors at Lakewood. I hung out with the other girls, trying to keep my eyes off the tanned and elegant chest of Reny Beauvois, who was outside talking car trash with the jocks and gear nuts, all drinking beer and burping themselves silly around Brooks's Camaro, screwing around under the hood, and having sprinting contests up and down the road. Finally they all piled into the car and roared off, leaving Jarvis sitting on a camp stool in his Hawaiian baggies, tuning his guitar while the cheerleaders lighted the grill. He liked hanging out with girls; he had sisters of his own. We'd all gone out with him on a friendly basis; it was a small town, and he was laid back, nonaggressive, and a good kisser, which meant that he would kiss you anywhere you liked.

It was hot out on the deck, in the high sun. We were in bikinis, with gauzy India skirts and other light bits of fabric over them. Jarvis went inside and played some cuts on Miss Hennessey's spanking new top-shelf KLH. He picked up his guitar and carried it back to the screened porch, where he stretched out on a padded chaise and strummed along with the music. It was cooler in there, with a breeze. Dappled light filtered through birches; sunshine winked on the waves. We girls drifted inside after him, drinking beer and vodka tonics, singing along, dancing. One of the girls put "Come Together" on the box. Jarvis set his guitar down.

We all looked good, and knew we did; but it was more than that. We had the moment; we should make something of it because we didn't know what would happen later. Nobody said a word. It started little by little as we danced around him, one by one. Someone's long hair brushed his shoulder. A kiss on the cheek, then on the lips by the girl with the foxy mole. Somebody closed the door to the living

room; somebody lowered the blind on the window facing the camp next door. Jarvis kissed the top of one girl's breast; then a nipple; and then we were helping each other unhook. The music was pulsing away. We giggled at the things Jarvis was saying to us. Compliments. Encouragement. "Oh, thank you," he said, as someone kissed him yet again. He loved what we were doing. We were approved, appreciated, and didn't want to stop. We kissed; we posed; we teased. The first time I heard the expression "lap dancing"—it must have been twenty years later—this was the afternoon I remembered. There was no full nudity; nothing really happened—that was the way we'd have answered our parents if they'd asked; but I'm telling this for our children. Finally, not caring by then what anybody knew about what I knew, I straddled him, my wrap skirt open in front and flowing over his bare legs. He lay back on the chaise, eyes closed, smiling, panting with delight. I pulled down the waistband of his trunks, and stroked his cock between my hand and my nylon-covered crotch, receiving his ejaculation on the pubis of my bikini. The cheerleaders applauded. As I mopped up with the hem of my skirt, Jarvis half-opened his eyes, looked around at us, and said sweetly, "I'm going to remember this birthday for a while."

The coals were white. Somebody handed around a pack of cigarettes. The Camaro came back, and the other guys trooped in like regular old men with fresh beer and a birthday cigar for Jarvis. It was Reny, sharp, fresh as a fox, who asked me, grinning, "And what were you doing with Plourde all the time we were gone?" I looked at him like he was crazy and said, "What do you think we were doing?"

We grilled; we ate; we swam; Miss Hennessey showed up in time for cake. It was sunset. People headed home to shower, change, and regroup for make-out dates or movies. As everyone was leaving, she said, "Sasha. Why don't you stay and help me clean up?"

There wasn't much to do; we were an orderly bunch. I picked up a few paper plates and cups, and lighted the citronella candles on the deck. The lake was still, the air mild; fireflies glittered in the trees. Loosened, tired from all the excitement, I sighed.

Bridge said, "It's nice, isn't it?" Then her voice sharpened, and she said, "Sasha. Get the hell out of here." It wasn't her cottage she was talking about.

How did she know? Could she smell the adolescent juices in the air? Because then she said, "If you keep on screwing the locals, you are either going to get pregnant and forget all about your work, or you won't have anything to bother writing about. You've got better things to do than become a baby factory." I didn't know why she was all over me; she seemed OK with everyone else going steady, getting laid, getting pregnant, getting married. But she went on. "Believe me. Travel is good." Then, softening, "These guys are OK, but you aren't going to get what you need around here. Now go home."

I went. The next week we took Jarvis downtown to the Selective Service office to register for the draft. He did a year of college; then they got him. I heard how wrecked he was when he came back; but there were other reasons I stayed away. I traveled. I didn't become a baby factory. I studied. I made guys take care of me. I wrote a lot of things that nobody read.

Another summer, a couple of years later, after eating my way around the Aegean on the high-dose pill that big-breasted girls were put on then, I came home for a cheerleader wedding. I put on silver bangles up to my elbows, and crammed my sundarkened self into the too-tight bridesmaid's gown I'd bought before I left. Bridge came up to me in a silk suit, handed me a glass of champagne, and said, to my surprise, "Sasha, you look ravishing! Gorgeous!" I was surprised; it wasn't how I felt, and I was in the throes of a long dry spell. She was the only adult who ever asked me, "So, how's your love life?" I said I was taking it easy, but not by choice, and we took off from there. She was full of fun and gossip, attentive, sympathetic. We stayed together, talking, throughout the party. It was then that I realized how she liked me; and, in that light, how unattracted I was to her. Still, it took me a long while to feel that I was living up to her expectations; in that way, she was worse than my parents. She invited me to her cottage after the party; but the spell was broken, and I was home in my own bed at an untypically early hour.

My mother said that traffic in town stalled for hours after her funeral. She said that Bridge had always asked about me. Despite her good will and my regard of her, I'd avoided her over the years, not stopping by when I was home visiting everyone else; never answering the one letter she wrote me. I now know how very careful she had

to have been. She would never have pressed a correspondence, or reproached any perceived neglect. But her attention seemed a kind of pressure that I couldn't handle, an obligation that I could not fulfill. I had already taken too much advantage of her love without giving anything back. We girls always knew when we were doing it to guys; we knew what we could get away with, and what kinds of pleasures we could afford to trade. But it would be a long time before I learned not to fear returning the love of women.

Barbara Cunliffe Singleton

Hortensia Never Goes Out
Havana, Cuba

Havana's cultural center, *Casa de los Arabes*, is about to close, and on the second floor I'm talking with the guide, Anna. Lively, laughing, with bronzy tiny braids in rows on her shapely head, Anna says, "I'm off duty in five minutes. Since you want a room, I can take you to my friend Hortensia's place. OK? I'll show you Havana on the way. Just let me get out of this uniform and I'll meet you out front!"

Waiting, I look again at the room that Anna says is Havana's only "mosque," one that only diplomats can use. Florid, crimson carpets are strewn over the prayer-room floor beside a staircase for an imam, and a *quibla* to show the direction of Mecca. I remember the lament of a Turkish traveler, "I ask, I ask, who knows where Mecca is?" So overwhelmed was he by a strange language and the loss of familiar landmarks, that he didn't know in what direction to pray.

By contrast, I feel lucky that Anna is going to orient me to the city and take me to a place away from the hotel. I go downstairs to meet Anna, now wearing a deep scarlet blouse with scarlet strings for straps, a color that blends well with her black skin. She teaches history at the University of Havana, except for summers, when she works at this Arabic culture center. "Come on. Let's walk along the Malecón," she says. "I *love* the ocean!"

From the wide walk, we inhale the salt air and pass fishermen leaning their lines over the sea wall. Here in the tropics, I always dash for shade to protect against the pounding sun, but not Anna. She walks in the heat, so I stay with her, wishing I'd worn my hat. Shying away from the rearing stallion of the statue of General Maceo, we leave the oceanfront for the streets of a Vedado neighborhood. Saying, "Wait here a minute," Anna leaves me on the sidewalk and slips through an arched doorway marked "*Agropecuaria,*" a farmers' market.

Waiting, I watch two women pass, one of them wearing the modish stretch pants whose black and white stripes widen and change direction with every step. Her black blouse laces up the back, reveal-

ing sunburn and no bra strap. Her black hair, loose, catches the late afternoon sun, as her carefree stride conveys happiness.

Anna reappears, carrying a wedge of watermelon loosely covered with plastic wrap. Laughing to be meeting again, we follow in the direction of the stripes. Below a wrap-around balcony we turn left and Anna rings a doorbell. No answer. Anna rings again, pauses. She turns to me. "Maybe the doorbell doesn't work." She pounds with her fist on the high wooden door that has a smaller door, the height of a person cut into it.

Anna backs, step-by-step, into the center of the street, peering up into the second-story windows. A white-haired neighbor comes to the patched balustrade of her next door balcony, saying, "I haven't seen Hortensia all day." She rubs her chin, looking perplexed. "She never goes out."

Anna and I stand in the street, wait, and look at the walls of cream watermarked plaster. The whole block of apartments is solid, flush with the sidewalk. Second floor doors are ringed with narrow nineteenth-century balconies. The third balcony from Hortensia's vents the smell of onions frying with fish.

A little girl appears from the neighbor's street-level door and Anna asks her, "Where's Hortensia?"

The girl brushes the hair from her eyes, shrugging, "I don't know." The white-haired woman on the balcony above says, "She hasn't been anywhere in the last half hour, because I've been watching…Maybe she's at the *panadería* (the bakery)."

Anna says, "O.K., let's go to the *panadería*. It's just three blocks."

I say, "How can anyone take this long to decide about a loaf of bread? It's been 45 minutes."

"Sometimes there's a line."

I feel humbled. I know bread's rationed. We walk there past pet dogs in the street and past a policeman on patrol, armed with no weapon but a cell phone. Around the corner, we pass three men crouching over a wide gameboard propped up by bricks. Two men squat on boxes, examining the domino layout while the third, barechested and brown, connects his dominos from his perch on the curb. There's no line at the bakery, but the rich smell of yeasty bread rises in

the hungry air. No Hortensia. We walk back, passing the domino players, again.

"The neighborhood doctor lives there," says Anna, with a gesture toward a second floor balcony no bigger than all the rest. "He has about 500 patients, knows them all, because he's lived here for years. He earns $30/month."

I know that the national average is $17/month.

Anna says, "Hortensia has a friend named Pucha, who lives nearby. They *love* to talk together. I wish I knew which apartment along here is hers."

I say, "We should call her from the street. Shall we shout together?" I cup my hands to my mouth and shout in stage whispers, "Pucha!" Anna laughs. From the window above us sings, not Pucha, but the wonderful voice of salsa, Isaac Delgado. Anna's vibrant soprano duets with him until we walk past the *Agropecuaria,* almost until our footsteps stop again in front of Hortensia's. Anna transfers the watermelon to her left hand and rings. She pounds the door until her fist must ache. We stand in the street and wait.

"Let's sit on the doorstep across the street," says Anna. We sit side by side on the sloping step, worn to the curve of a smile. We settle down and wait. A man steps out from the open doorway behind us. "Anna, *mi amor*! I live only to see you!" He tries to give her a kiss, but Anna laughs and puts him off. We get up and give him access to the street, then we sit back down. I think of my neighborhood at home, where people go directly from their front doors to their cars. The man walks away, the back of his T-shirt smiling at us from the much-laundered picture of Elian Gonzalez and his father, reunited.

We scan Hortensia's window. The little girl with hair in her face comes out again.

Anna says, "She looks like the girl in the family where I lived in Uganda."

"*Uganda*," I say with enthusiasm. "What were you doing there?"

"I taught history to high school kids for two years. I *loved* it. We Cubans teach in lots of African countries. The Cuban government pays us enough to live on." The rise of Anna's cheeks and ridge of her nose are amber deepening down to black. Her eyes grow warm as she

watches me. "Fidel says we work not just for Cuba, but, searching for the humanity we carry within us, we help those outside our borders."

I'm impressed. "It sounds like our Peace Corps, Anna." I describe their projects.

Anna's still holding the watermelon. She adjusts the plastic and sighs, "I'm tired of waiting. Let's eat!" She reaches into her purse and finds a pocketknife. She cuts, letting the juice fall on her fingers, and hands me a chunk. The scarlet of her dress attracts the melon's shades of red and the sparkle of ruby from her earring.

I bite the warm melon that reflects how hot the day has been. What flavor! It feels good to be sitting with her, chewing the icy-sounding melon, and spitting the slippery seeds into the gutter. We still have a wedge for Hortensia. Anna covers it with plastic.

A woman dressed all in white with a white cloche hat approaches. Anna whispers, "She's just been initiated into *santería*, an Afro-Cuban religion from Nigeria. She will wear white for a whole year." The woman recognizes Anna. Anna tells her, "We're waiting for Hortensia."

The woman shakes her white hat and says, "Hortensia never goes out."

"Well, she's not answering her door. I've knocked and knocked."

"Maybe she's sleeping. Or could be she's visiting Amelia."

"Amelia! That's it. Why didn't I think of her! She lives near the *panadería*." We walk back past the dark entrance to the *Agropecuaria*, around the corner past the lively domino players and up the street toward the bakery.

A mother with a three-year-old tyke hails Anna from the moldering mango balcony of a side street. The woman is lovely with disarranged coils of black hair. She exudes friendliness. Anna lights up, full of feeling, exclaims about the rather ordinary child, "How *cute* she is! How *preciosa*!" Another woman comes to the balcony, perhaps to shine in the reflected compliments about her grandchild. She squeals with delight at seeing Anna. After a few minutes Anna directs the chatter to Hortensia and where in the world she might be. The mother says, "If she's not at Amelia's, maybe she's at Filamena's. Filamena's father died yesterday and people have been visiting her all day."

With watermelon in hand Anna lingers over the sad news of Filamena's father, then takes leave of the balconied family. We cross back to the bakery street, still flavoring the air with fresh bread and stop at Amelia's door. Anna rings. I look back to see that we are still within sight of the trio at their side-street observation post. I wave and they flutter their hands at me. Dark shadows lengthen on our side of the street, but the balconies and windows opposite become palaces of gold in the sinking light.

Provoking the scarlet, spark of ruby and melon red in her profile, Anna hammers her fist to just short of pain. The door opens wide. A happy spirit, blond with honey eyes and nicely shaped eyebrows, denies harboring Hortensia from us, but Amelia has a sudden inspiration. "Let me phone. Maybe she's come back. Or possibly she's sleeping. Does Hortensia ever really go out?"

With good humor Amelia invites us into her living room. The chairs are draped with crocheted scarves. On the shelf stand knickknacks: glossy figures of lovers and cherubs, ceramic flowers, bears and horses. Framed pictures of relatives pose from the opposite shelf. Someone in the kitchen is preparing coffee. I perk up. Maybe it's for us. Anna gives me the watermelon to hold, while she goes to the kitchen.

Someone dials the phone and a conversation follows.

Anna brightens as she dances back. "Amelia's *found* Hortensia! In fact, she managed to rouse Hortensia from dreamland!"

Anna, effusive, thanks Amelia. We walk past the side street. Anna hails the mother and daughter on the balcony. "She was at home all the time--sleeping!"

We round the corner past the gameboard *aficionados*. Beer cans have joined the game. The *Agropecuaria* doorway is shut tight, but Hortensia's door is wide open. We climb her clean marble steps. Two dogs attack the air with vicious barks. We hear Hortensia's voice recommending to the dogs that they be quiet. Hortensia--paths combed between knots of hair, curled lashes over bright eyes--greets me, and throws her arms wide to hug and kiss Anna.

Anna confides, "Hortensia's like a second mother to me. I *can't* live without her. I used to come over after school to play with her daughter, Teresa. We were classmates all through school." She turns to Hortensia and asks, "What's the news of Teresa?"

Anna's compliment has brought tears to Hortensia's wrinkled eyes. White hair tangles among the springy black of her hairline. "Teresa's still teaching in Indiana. She teaches Spanish and now she's beginning to teach history, too. Now, sit down. Make yourselves comfortable. Did you come about the room? I rented it this morning." She looks apologetic.

Anna hands her the watermelon wedge and Hortensia crinkles with pleasure. "Sorry I was sleeping so soundly. I was out shopping all day!"

Contributors

Stephanie Dickinson was raised in rural Iowa and has lived in Wyoming, Oregon, Minnesota, Texas, and Louisiana. She's now in New York City. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in *Mudfish, Cream City Review, Chelsea, Fourteen Hills, Nimrod, Puerto del Sol,* among others. Along with Rob Cook she co-edits the new print literary journal *Skidrow Penthouse*. Her first novel, *Half Girl,* recently won the Hackney Award (Birmingham-Southern) for best unpublished novel of 2002.

Trina Hikel lives in Hinesburg, VT. She is a contributing writer for *Vermont Woman* magazine. Her writing has appeared in *Seven Days*, *The Portland Press Herald*, and *The North American Review*.

Brook Marcotte in a native of Barnet, VT. She graduated from Johnson State College in May of 2002. Vermont in winter is her favorite subject to photograph.

Christina Mordasky is a senior at Johnson State College. She will be graduating with a degree in studio art with a concentration in photography. Her goal in capturing the flower on film is to bring its abstract beauty to the viewer.

Karen Morison is a student at Johnson State College and the current managing editor at *Green Mountains Review*. She also writes poetry.

John Repp is the author of a collection of short-short fiction (*The Old West and Other Tales*, March Street Press, 2001) and four collections of poetry: *Soon* (Pudding House Publications, forthcoming), *The Meaning of Rock and Roll* (March Street Press, 2002), *Things Work Out* (Palanquin Press, 1998), and *Thirst Like This* (Devins Award, University of Missouri Press, 1990). His short fiction, essays, and poems have appeared recently or will soon appear in *Prairie Schooner*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Passages North*, *The Journal*, and the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette*.

Holly Simpson is a native Vermonter. She is working on her degree in Creative Writing at Johnson State College and hopes to pursue a career in photography.

Barbara Cunliffe Singleton received a B.A. in political science and an M.A. in English literature after a work-study at Antioch University. She has taught for the British Council's binational cultural centers in Lima, Peru and in Montevideo, Uruguay and in *Univeridad Juan Misael Saracho* in Bolivia. She has taught English in Tunsia, Turkey, Indoesia and Taiwan. She has written for *The Boston Review*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*, among many other publications.

Rawdon Tomlinson lives in Colorado. His poems featured in *GRR* are part of a larger project on the same subject.

Ryan G. Van Cleave's work has appeared in *The Iowa Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *TriQuarterly*. His most recent books include a poetry collection, *Ha Ha Tonka* (Higganum Hill, 2003), an anthology, *Vespers: Contemporary American Poems of Religion and Spirituality* (University of Iowa Press, 2003), and a creative writing textbook, *Contemporary American Poetry: Behind the Scenes* (Allyn & Bacon/Longman, 2003). He teaches creative writing at Clemson University.