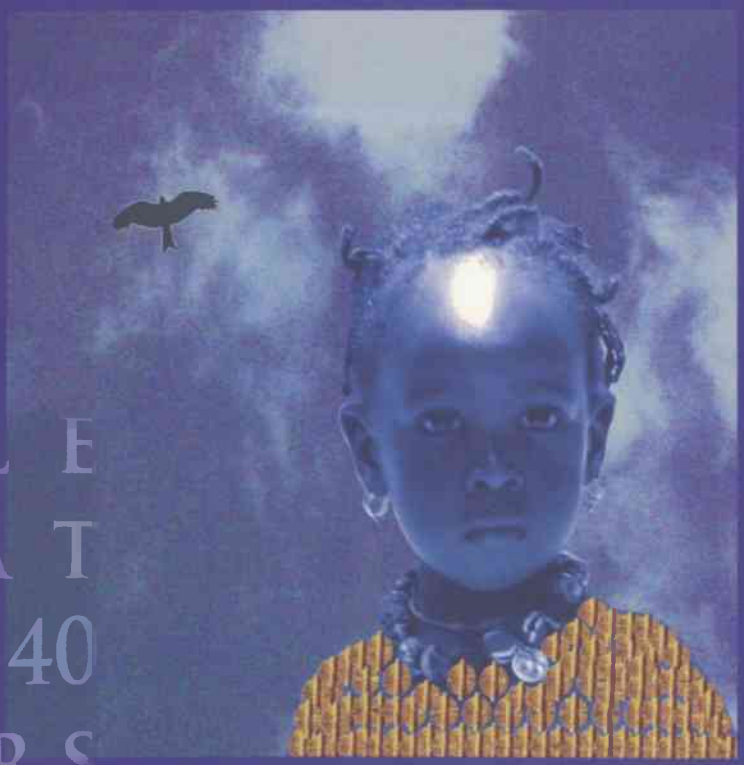
FOCUS2007



CELEBRATING 40 YEARS

Focus 2007

1967-
40 Years of Voice

Acknowledgements

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Special thanks to Dr. Arturo Lindsay for our cover image, "Golden Girl."

Contents

Editor's Note

At forty, *Focus* is still a child. Old enough to look back at itself in wonder; but too young to be jaded, too young not to be absolutely fearless in making its forward steps.

This Focus celebrates the act of looking backwards. It pays specific honor to Sharan Strange and Paule Marshall, in whose work the perspectives of the small are glorified—who draw their power as artists from the rich soil of childhood, the big world of the little one. We also dedicate the issue to all those brave voices who have given Focus its shape, and those future voices who wait their turns.

Focus began as a supplementary section of *The Spelman Spotlight.* We hobbled to our own feet to take our very first step in 1967, when we began to appear as an independent, annual publication.

And we said our very first words. Timid words? Half-formed, frothy, toothless ones? No way. From the very beginning, Focus has been charged with the power of the voices of women who refused to be silent. Look for some of their words in this issue. Now, Focus also accepts work from beyond Spelman's gates, though we remain, as always, a haven for the voiced experience of the black woman. As Ariele Le Grand, *Focus* editor from 2004 to 2006, made clear:

"We passionately support the small group of publications, academic programs, and spiritual endeavors that specifically sustain writers of color."

This year we celebrate *Focus*' childhood, and wonder at what it will be when it grows up. Happy Birthday, baby.

—Chantal James, Editor-In-Chief

Back

Poetry from the Focus Archives, 1963-1999

WANDA COLEMAN
Focus 1994

Ars Poetica

he came down the mountain
with a full growth of beard, smiling
the new MS taut in his mitts
precious gold of months of solitude/thought/work
he'd done it—conquered the bitch muse
made a nympho out of her
begging at his boots to be taken
he felt proud. proud as any man who can
wear pain well
he showed it to his old lady, the black chick
who'd had a hard life. a woman of little mercy
in her heart and less in her vocab
he unwrapped his dream carefully, cautioned her
to wash her hands before touching a single page
after a guttural sound from her throat
she obliged, angry at having her
chores in the kitchen interrupted
he sat her down and read each event. when he
finished, cast eyes to reel her expression
"how do you like it?"
she watched his hope dance. "that what you went away fo?
it real nice for some poetry"
"is that all you can say about it?"
"no. i could say more"
"well say it—for god's sake, say it!"
she took off the sanitary napkin she was wearing
and plopped it on the page
"needs more blood in it"
and went back to the kitchen

MAISHA PESANTE
Focus 1993

Jamas

Nunca mas
no lo doy
no lo doy mi corazón
lo pongo en una caja
una caja de promesas ya rotas
de lágrimas perdidas
de amor recharzado
como puñales encendidas
la entiero muy bajo en mi pecho
rodeado de las fuerzas increíbles de esconder
para que no la encuentres
la protego con los soldados de mis miedos
que luchar contra la entrada
y la bandera dice
"No entres, nunca más,
no entres."

Translation:

Never again
Will I give it
I will not give my heart
I put it in a box
A box of promises already broken
Of tears wasted
Of love rejected
Like burning daggers
I bury it deeply in my breast
Surrounded by incredible forces
Of Hiding
That You don't find it
I protect it
With the Soldiers of my Fears
That struggle against your entrance
And the war flag reads
"Don't enter, ever again,
don't Enter."

NOLIWE ROOKS
Focus 1987

On Understanding Star Wars Is For Real

Today was the first time
I prayed since deciding
God didn't have no
ears
I prayed

harder than the time
I knew I'd
die if this
boy didn't
want my telephone
number

or
when I thought my mother
found out I had
snuck out
the house
all night

I
prayed even harder than
when I missed
my period

'cause
today I prayed
the world
won't explode
tomorrow

ANDREA M. WREN
Focus 1989

A Day at School

Go t' School
Come Late
Smoke Pot
Drink Booze
Get High
Fight Teach
Bell Rings
Open Door
Gun Shot
Brother's Dead
School's Out

DONNA HILL
Focus 1987

Epigram for Athena

Let no one tell you that
kitchens
Don't have prison bars
Or that
Asylum walls aren't
padded
with the down of mattresses.
White picket fences
scrape the
evening sun until it bleeds.
I feel the embedded seed
Inside me
Swell too big for my
garden's skin think walls.
Yet Unborn
My Athena aches.
Tall and Dark
She is my dream
Opening the arms of woman
Wide enough to link the
East to west
Her olive branch bridges
Man's paranoid raging sea.

MENDI LEWIS
Focus 1993

Meeting

It had been an overcast day.
He had worn yellow in spite of the fact.
Now the night sky absorbed the glow from orange city lights.
They had met in front of a large picture window
Where they could see
    the flying wind catch leaves unsuspecting
      and the trees warring in the distance.
Politely, she said no.

ALICE WALKER
Literary Supplement to Spelman Spotlight, 1963

I, Too, for Freedom

I push against the binds of assimilation
I rebel against those ropes of hostile stares
Why must my hair be straight when its
tendency to curl is my pride and joy
My song is like the beard of the maestro,
it symbolizes my struggle for freedom—
Why can't I sing it or is it, too, to
be hidden under the coldness of shamed
respectability?
How much has been stolen but how much
has been foolishly thrown away
When the thievery of our birthright is
completed,
Then we will be a rootless people and
society will be sorry
But I'll be glad
That I rebelled.

Then and Now: Today's Focus Talks to Yesterday's

STEFANIE DUNNING, EDITOR OF FOCUS 1994-1995, REMEMBERS HER YEARS ON STAFF AND SHARES HER VISION OF FOCUS' FUTURE.

FOCUS: During what years did you work on Focus?

STEFANIE DUNNING: I was at Spelman for two years. 1994 -1995.The first year I was the editor, the second year Kiini Salaam co-edited it with me.

FOCUS: What do you do now, and does it have any link to your experiences with Focus?

DUNNING: I'm an English professor. I'm still dealing with language and literature. I'm still editing people's work. I'm a reader for *Meridian* and *Feminist Studies.*

FOCUS: What was Spelman like while you were here?

DUNNING: In1992 there was a big Afro-centric resurgence. There was a lot going on. Arrested Development was a big group. The way blackness was represented in pop culture was more representative of the way we wanted to see ourselves. There were organizations like Kemet, and Afro-centric sororities. That was reflected in Spelman in general. Some of that was reflected in the work, in our writers' trying to come to terms with feminism, womanism. And there was a great deal of interest in Focus. The second year especially; the staff had a sense that year--'will there be enough copies?'

The first year I was sort of on my own, editing Focus. Kiini had been the editor before me, but she was abroad. That year we did all the graphic work on this girl's computer. Later, I felt that I really wanted a more professional look. So you can see a big jump, between1994 and 1995. We modeled the format of the second Focus on the African-American Review. We used professional-looking fonts, as opposed to the more fun but less professional ones [Our] first focus was white and had like an abstract picture of a face on the front. It was about the size of a Jet. The second one had a picture on the front but it was outlined by a blue border, the paper was ivory, and the picture was bigger. We found someone to set it. Each section had an Adinkra symbol associated with it.

FOCUS: Did you keep track of what was going on with Focus after you left campus?

DUNNING: No, I didn't.

FOCUS: What kind of writing do you like?

DUNINING: I like good art. There isn't a particular genre of writing that I prefer over others. I have a tendency to read more novels than poetry, but I do read some [poetry]. I like Elizabeth Alexander, Wanda Coleman, Tom Siebles

FOCUS: Are there any pieces submitted to or published in Focus while you were on staff that particularly stood out

FOCUS: Are there any pieces submitted to or published in Focus while you were on staff that particularly stood out to you?

DUNNING: It was about eleven or twelve years ago now. I can't remember very much of what was published. I do remember that we published a poem called "Hot Donuts". It was about Krispy Kreme—I assume they still put the hot sign on. There were a lot of really great people submitting poetry. There was a contemporary of mine at the time named Mendi Obadike Lewis. She's a poet now, but I don't know if she submitted to Focus then. She has a book called *Armor and Flesh* which is very good. She's a very accomplished writer.

FOCUS: Are there any interesting stories about being on staff that you can recall?

DUNNING: There was a lot of drama. The first year, a friend of mine wasn't doing the work, I went ahead and did it on my own. The magazine came out and she basically knew very little about it. She went to Dr. Warner and complained that I had shut her out of the process. It all turned out ok. I won. I didn't get in trouble. This girl had to say, 'ok maybe I wasn't as available as I should have been.'

The second year, when we had a more sophisticated format, the graphic artist that I was working with was upset. She'd done the design for the first one and she wanted to do the second. We wanted to grow and go in a more sophisticated direction. Ultimately, everybody got over it.

FOCUS: What do you think are relevant issues to Focus today? Do you have any hopes for Focus in the future? Is there anything you can see it becoming, or that you would like it to become?

DUNNING: It's a school literary magazine. It's ok if it just functions as a literary magazine. For people who want to go into publishing and editing careers, it's good. To learn techniques, to learn what's good and what's not. I knew a lot of people submitting work, and when it was rejected it was like, 'how dare you'. Well, that's my job. Student organizations help you to professional. And students should be interested in pushing it to be as professional as it can possibly be. Before I came, I think Focus published whatever people submitted. If people outside the community want to read Focus, that's fine. But the stuff that you're writing about in Focus is not necessarily the same as what people outside of Spelman need. There's a big difference between being a Spelman student and living across the street from Spelman. What Kiini and I did with about nine other people was to found another magazine. It was called Red Clay. It still exists in another form. We did Red Clay and really worked hard to get it out into the community. That was us.

Focus represents Spelman. It's a launching. As advanced and competitive with other literary journals as it can be, that's the goal.

Forth

Focus now. New text, new voices, onward, and upward.
2007's best.

Brittny Ray

Shed

Today
I make my tea
With the
Help of
The vanilla
Soy milk you left

It clouds the cup like
The birth of a star
Embraced in porcelain
Like the dissipating
Breath a drop of
Blood makes in
Clear water

When you come to me
You leave things
Like a tapestry of well meaning
Stains in the shape of recognizable things,

Woman, who left her blood
In my bed as a goodbye
Like a note in a rocking chair

Take yourself
With you
Leave no trails like a slug

I carry the scent of you
On my hands for days like
The frame of a decrepit
Dying cherry tree
Or perhaps an arthritic claw
Struggling to make a fist
To pound your many healthy
Skeletons to ash and powder

You are the word caught sideways
In the tender pink of my throat
A baby plunked in the neighbor's
drinking well like a coin
My breast weeping milk as I walk away

MICHAEL JOHNSON

Eros and Thanatos

Everything that grows
from embryos
dies on schedule. In autumn, weeds
wither, and cornstalks crumble. Elephants
drop to their knees
and topple like stone monuments
at their century's end. Each month
human uterine cells cash in their chips
in vaginal apocalypse.
Only microorganisms remain
forever young.
And even as I sing,
I slough self; and sex subtly slips
away, leaving its evil twin.

JAMES E. CAMMON

Sit and Wish

Last week
He marveled
at the wobbly ride
and sudden lift
of falling
from bike bars.
He scraped his knee
and lost a tooth…
and had to go down
stairs when he wanted
to drink water from the sink
and his mother
told him no

This week
He memorizes
the familiar-faded colors
of the moving truck next door.
They have
things
like he has
things, broken,
but still good,
but they don't have kids,
and his mother won't let him
watch them unpack their lives, anyway.
She speaks ghetto into the lock,
and slides right the freshly painted chain.

Next week,
He'll mimic
the strange sounds
he'll hear through his walls,
and the stranger
who sometimes spends time,
to make stranger, strangled sounds
come down the hall, past the sink,
from his mother's room.
He won't be able to go outside, still,
so inside, instead,
he'll grip cyclist hands around his ears and eyes
and imagine roads and scrapes, what wishes might be like.
Outside, in this new place he can't go
that might someday be home.

TERESA LEGGARD

double dutch

smooth, balanced, and clean,
at first they fit together—
so connected it was hard to tell
where one stopped and the other began.
floating on air…
swaying to perpetual song…
stepping lively
rhythm lovely
this tango of nicks and scrapes
was still a beautiful dance.

pick up the pace…who skipped a beat?

adjust the tempo.
try to get it back, but
tripped by a stone.
rhythm blown.
tango turns
break dance.
their go is over
who's next?

FRANZ NEUMANN

Skinny

Pioneertown can be heartbreakingly lonesome. There's no one thing that makes it so, nothing I can put a finger on. It's more atmospheric in its workings. A kind of loneliness that makes me wish to be somewhere else, rather than discover its source.

For now, I'm drinking a decaf inside the Red Dog Saloon, here in Pioneertown, both built in the mid-40s for shooting Westerns. Dark clouds cake the sky, and though there's blue in the distance, it's too far away to do more than tease. The wind has changed in the hour I've been here, the gusts folding back the delicate hands of each snowflake into mean cold grit that stings the cacti and the stained wooden fronts of the bank, hotel, and livery across the street, buildings that have been private residences since the last production crews left. At the end of this snow-dusted street, Louie will ride in. I study the Coors clock mounted above the bar, its idyllic depiction of snow-pack endlessly melting into a cascade of ice-cold water. He's late.

I'm a stop on Louie's bicycle trek across America. Ten years have passed since I've seen him. I've been married and divorced in less than half that time. Louie and I were once a couple, back when I was going to school in Seattle, my other life before my father became ill. I was going to be a botanist. Louie was studying to be a teacher and is one. Louie and I used to go out for breakfast every Sunday, a place called Eggs, then go back to my apartment, make love, then lounge in bed until far past noon. It's how I remember those mornings, anyway. Another thing I recall is his great back massages, his thumbs like steamrollers, his knuckles like pneumatic drills.

Louie might not recognize me. I'm thirty-two, but my face looks forty, with deep wrinkles from squinting and a tan that looks like it goes straight down to my bones, even now in winter. I am the toughest-looking woman I know. And though I've got good friends, make just enough money, and have no mortgage payments and no debts—nothing to cause me to look the way I do—I still look like one of those Dust Bowl mothers in those black and white photos, a crowd of gaunt children at her apron strings, the woman leaned against a doorjamb from the fatigue of simply standing. I'm not fond of mirrors.

My name is Melody, by the way. A while back, a friend of mine put me in the personals section of the local paper. I have the clipping on my fridge for kicks. It reads: SWDF, 29, THIN, FUN & FULL OF HEAT. Everything up to and including THIN is right. The rest is like seeing the Virgin Mary on a fruitcake. I received a reply from the ad. And I'll admit I was curious. I caught myself thinking about things, like how it feels to kiss a man you love, or how it is to see him from afar when he doesn't know you're looking at him yet. That heavy smell in bed, on his clothes and in your car, even when he's not there. But the want ad instead confirmed the desert's limitations. The single inquiry turned out to be from my ex-husband, who lives nearby in Landers. I first met him after my Dad passed away. I was married to him for a couple months of fun and a few more years of misery. If there was any consolation to receiving just one reply to the ad, it was that my ex resorted to personal ads.

While waiting for Louie, I've been talking to an older couple sitting at another table. They're the only other people in the Red Dog besides me. They just retired to Pioneertown and are surprised by the snow, coming, as they have, from someplace back East. People think of desert and are they think of heat, cactus, sand and mirages. But it's cold here in the winter, especially at night, I say. This is high desert. Cold as a witch's tit, the man from the other table puts it to his wife. I can tell in his voice that he'll be okay, though. For the past half hour, he's been talking it out, getting himself used to the differences between what he expected and what he's finding. And it sounds like his wife loves it. Even has on a fringed suede jacket.

Not to make this some sob story, but I moved here to take care of my dad. He's gone now. While he was still alive, I managed an amicable relationship with the desert by willfully sweeping the rest of the world away. I

ignored the Pacific Ocean. I clear cut visions of forest from my head because of the longing I would feel if I allowed them to be. But I eventually thought of moving. First after my father died, then after my divorce. But contemplating a move and carrying it out are two distant relatives. Leaving means the house will need to be sold—no small feat considering that empty lots nearby sell for near nothing, and the repairs the house will need. With moving, there's the matter of finding another place to live and another job. Until recently, these uncertainties have made me hesitate. The desert has a way of clamping down on people, emotion and time until nothing wants to move or change, or ever hope to. I did not want to come here, nor stay, but so many years in one place and I lost momentum. And then, suddenly, I am pregnant and can feel change coming.

It was last year that I decided I wanted a kid. The desire came to me gradually, spreading a cloud over all other priorities and generating its own insistent weather. There's this guy I'm with who has a great build, a good smile and is also mild-mannered and kind, the sorts of traits I hope are hard-wired into genes. His bad traits, and there are enough, seem acquired and less likely to pass themselves on. Until recently, I had been sleeping with him at every opportunity, wearing him out. He takes me for a nymphomaniac, I think. But that's okay. He's held up his part of the undiscussed bargain, done his deed, sowed the oat I needed and remained oblivious. Right at this moment, he's outside the Red Dog Saloon, getting shot, stumbling, clutching his imaginary wound and falling to the snow-dusted ground. He'll get up again in a second. There, see? His name is Harold, but he goes by Hank. He's part of a group of us in town who reenact gunfights. Unlike most of us who do this, Hank sees being a cowboy as a lifestyle decision. After making his money in software, he moved to Pioneertown and filled his house with Western memorabilia: wagon wheels, branding irons, and saddles for kitchen stools. He doesn't even own a computer. You'll only find electrical outlets in the bathroom and kitchen and that only has to do with meeting code. Coming into his house, the first thing that's noticeable is the smell. It's warm and permanent, a combination of oil, leather, candles and old wood. After the force of the smell comes the sound. The boot-worn wooden floors creak with every step, even mine, light as I am. On the walls of Hank's bedroom are photos of Pioneertown in its Hollywood heydays. It's a trip, his house.

Watching him feign his death, I don't feel sorrow. Not even a pang, as a true cowboy might say. Is it wrong to move this way between hearts and beds? Maybe. Should I have chosen more carefully from the men in Pioneertown, ventured down into Landers perhaps, or Palm Springs or L.A., and there spent a couple years finding myself a future husband, a new job, another house? Decide some Sunday morning, while lazing away the hours in bed with Mr. Husband, that we want children, and change our love-making, our fucking, into the act of procreation? Please. Getting what you want from life is like trying to finish a 1000-piece puzzle with 500 pieces. I'll be old, gone more likely, before I ever get a chance to glance at the box cover of my life and appreciate what I've missed. So, when I get stuck one place, it's best to start over in another. If pieces are missing, that's no fault of mine. This is my new philosophy, one I have yet to put into practice.

For now, I've been calling my baby Kermit, Kermit being his embryonic, tadpole name. It's far too early to know if this place-holder name reflects the right gender, but I feel it does. Last night, dreaming, I watched Kermit grow. He sang The Rainbow Connection as he grew larger, lost his tail, gained appendages, sharpened his features. This isn't the first dream I've had about him. This dreaming must be hormonal, because I normally never dream. I'm more of a day-dreamer. The most amazing thought I've had since becoming pregnant is that Kermit doesn't yet know he exists. He is oblivious to his own being or my wishes for his early childhood. And no one knows about Kermit but me. No one in the entire cosmos, a gazillion light years wide. And again, not even Kermit. I find very little in life that's astounding. This idea, though, makes me feel like I could swell to bursting.

Outside of the Red Dog, there are more fantasy cowboys arriving. Hank shuffles his feet through the snow, waves to me, and sits outside on the stoop, for a minute, where he has a cup of steaming coffee waiting. He crosses his legs and spins a boot spur with his open palm. He hurts himself and sucks on a finger, then spins the spur again. During summer, a wayward tourist might find us engaged in elaborate shoot-outs, complete with spectacular rooftop falls onto bales of hay. We've been hired as entertainment for weddings and anniversaries. One of us was even in a 4 x 4 commercial you may have seen. The retired couple are standing outside now, watching the men and a few

women square off and fire their blanks. Focusing closer, I watch the snow pile up in the corners of the windows, fine, like the sand in egg timers. I press my finger on the glass and the snow melts on the other side. I'm nervous waiting for Louie to arrive. I take out my antique pistol and spin it around my trigger finger, first one way, then the other. This is my Yo-Yo, my baton, my nicotine replacement after too many years—and far too few—of smoking.

Louie doesn't show. It's not the first time. When I had to leave Seattle to take care of my father, Louie had only a semester left of school. Then he was going to look for a teaching job down in Southern California, someplace not terribly far from Pioneertown and me. In the beginning, we kept up a kind of correspondence, sending cassettes back and forth with music mixes and just us talking. He'd complain about the rain in Seattle and I'd complain about the desert heat. Louie and I both knew my father was dying and one of the things that kept me going was knowing that I wouldn't be in Pioneertown forever, that we had plans lined up. On his better days, I'd even talk to my father about my future, and he'd nod his head and say they were good, sensible plans. Helping him imagine where and how I'd be after he was gone made his burden a little easier, I think. Louie's arrival now is a decade belated, and for an entirely different purpose. I go out and shoot.

After our killings, deaths and resurrections on Pioneertown's main street, I find myself back in Hank's cowboy bedroom. The sex feels habitual now, purposeless, but still good. I wonder what Hank would say if I were to tell him I'm currently carrying a one-inch long tadpole of a child, the evidence of one of our earlier nights together? He'd probably be thrilled, and I'd live a life with a crackpot cowboy and a son teased for wearing chaps and speaking with a mouthful of acquired, over-the-top, slang. Kermit's conception began here in Hank's bedroom, where I'm lying on the narrow antique bed with springs that sing while we're at it. There's the authentic Calico dress Hank likes me to wear first, now on the floor, but usually hanging from a nail driven into the wood wall. There's the bare yellow bulb that tends to sway gently from the ceiling cord, the mattress sagging and sagging during sex, so low it hits the porcelain chamber pot beneath, the one Hank uses afterwards for an ashtray, still filled with the stubs from my so-recent smoking days. On one night like this night, the chromosomes embraced.

At home, I take a long shower and eat half a cooking pan of brownies. Then I mist my orchids and the clay-colored roots rising out from the soil of woodchips. Just as I'm thinking of turning in, Louie calls me on his cell phone. He's entering town and is a little lost. Outside, I walk to the main street, feeling the snowflakes melt as they touch my face. At the other end of the main street I see a bicycle light. Closer, I can discern that Louie has one of those bicycles you lay back in, like how I imagine an EZ-Boy recliner's skeleton would look if it had one.

I don't mean to say holy shit when I say holy shit, but Louie, getting off his bicycle, laughs, so I say it again. "Holy shit, Louie!"

Louie was heavyset the last time I saw him, not fat, but big-boned. He was maybe 220 that day he lifted boxes into my rented trailer, talking about visits, great desert heat and other lies and distractions. The kiss goodbye. The see-you-soon. Now he's daytime-talk-show fat. Two-seats-on-an-airplane fat.

"Not quite the same, huh?" Louie says, slapping his belly. "Should have seen me when I started this crazy ride. You could take another fifty pounds to this. I was really copulant."

I'm pretty sure he means to say corpulent, but his mistake makes me smile. "You're a Sumo wrestler," I say. We hug for a moment, but I can't manage to get my arms completely around his orange wind breaker.

"I keep a bathroom scale in my pack," he says. "I was 420 pounds this morning. Two pounds less than Friday morning."

He looks like he weighs even more, but I don't say that.

"The British have a better word for this," he says, grabbing at his stomach. "Stones. Doesn't that better imply a burden? I need to lose stones. But you. Shit, Melody. You're still so skinny."

It's the first time in a long time someone's called me Melody, not Mel, and this makes me feel nostalgic. And about the weight, it's true. I was a hundred pounds when I was with Louie, a hundred pounds when taking care of my dad and a hundred pounds now. Give or take a pound.

"Where did you spend last night?" I ask.

"About twenty miles back. Off the road. You didn't say I'd have to pedal up so many hills to get here."

"You should've called. I could have given you a ride."

"No way. That would be cheating." His voice is serious.

Louie still has the familiar way of rubbing his chin when he talks, though it's less a chin now and more a broad driveway from his neck to his lips. I thought I'd forgotten his mannerisms, but they've come back now, like words to old prayers or smells from childhood.

"What's with this place?" he asks.

"Roy Rogers helped build it," I say.

"It's like Westworld. The movie with Yul Brynner. He's a robot gunslinger."

"I know. They did make the Cisco Kid here, though."

He takes a long look around. We're the only ones about. If it weren't for the smoke rising from a few chimneys, and a few dim lights in between all the empty space, the town would seem deserted. Even the strange dance of tracks in the snow left from this afternoon's gunfights are now covered in white. There's no wind and the snow is delicate and large now, like ash.

"Do you remember in the movie that the only way you could tell if someone was real or a robot was by the hands. The robots hands hadn't been perfected."

"It's been a long time since I've seen it," I say. Actually, I've never seen it. "C'mon. You must be cold. I'm not too far away."

"I'm never cold," Louie says, as he squeezes my shoulder. I bring his hand down into mine for a moment before letting go. His hands are so chubby and childlike. Real enough. Naked, he probably looks like a newborn.

It takes ten minutes to reach my house, but only two to show him around.

"I thought you said you worked in a greenhouse," he says.

"I do. This is my personal stash."

I have orchids on the dining room table, carpeting the floor, on top of the bookshelves and even on the TV set. There are foot-long blossoms draping, hanging and sprouting in every color from pale pink to sinister black. It's like a jungle in here and makes me feel rich and earthy. It's the same smell which makes it easier to wake and face work at Gubler's, an enormous orchid nursery down near Landers. Those of us who work there call it the Garden of Eden. In addition to cultivating a variety of orchids, we also grow carnivorous plants, my favorite being Sarracenia purpurea, the Pitcher Plant, which can dissolve mice. I wouldn't want to actually see it dissolve mice, but I've seen it do a number on hamburger meat. The plant has hairs inside that point down at its pit of digestive juices and make escape difficult, if not tortuously impossible. I tell Louie this while showing him my favorites.

"I've got Farbspiels, Super Novas, Phalaenopsis and others," I say, "though they're not all in bloom. We grow the showy orchids for the kind of people who are used to buying plastic flowers, and the rare and delicate orchids the serious collector keep to themselves. Or use as studs. The nursery even has one named after me. Melodiopsis. It hasn't bloomed yet, so who knows if it'll sell.

"What do you do there?"

"Fill orders mostly. I also give tours. When collectors come in you can see them jonesing."

As I'm telling Louie all this, I realize how much I hate the sound of my own voice, thin and fast, carrying on like an over-eager salesperson, like I'm at work giving him one of my tours. I'm blabbering, when really I just want to know how he got so fat. I want him to say I was the only woman for him and when I was gone he ate out of heartache. Or guilt for not following after me. These fantasies. Instead, I ask him if he's hungry. Louie politely declines. Instead, he pulls dehydrated spaghetti from a bag in one of his packs. I start another load of laundry for him. With the addition of boiling water, Louie's dinner swells into a meal that doesn't look half bad. After eating, he takes a shower and comes into the living room in another track suit. He continues to sweat. As I grab an armful of his clothes from the drier, all I can think about is how fat he is.

"Didn't you have a cat?" Louie asks.

I dump a basket of his dried clothes on the couch and begin folding. "I had to give her away. My Dad was allergic to her. You?"

"What?"

"Any pets?"

"A dog, from the pound. Here, give me those clothes. Thanks."

He folds his clothes into tight bundles. I hand him what I've folded. I think these are the largest pants I've ever seen, the widest shirt, the loudest pair of boxers.

"I overfed him," Louie says. "My dog. He died. I was going to bring him with me. Have him run and lose weight with me. I even bought a little trailer I was going to pull that he could lie in."

"It must get lonely on the road."

"Nah. I'm occupied enough with finding a good place to spend the night, or a good route that's not filled with trucks running freight. Practical thoughts. Besides, I'm not alone. There are a lot of coasters, too. People riding from one ocean to the other. There was a family on one long bike raising money for their youngest kid. Five of them. They were going East-West. The kid was riding with them and looked fine, but I guess his condition, some rare blood thing, was about to kick in at any moment. They'd already raised $40,000. I gave them a twenty. I also met these two sisters rollerblading to Mexico from their homes in Vancouver."

"Wow," I say, envying such a long journey.

"You should have see their legs."

"I bet they were huge."

"Shit. Like flying buttresses."

We spend the evening talking about Louie's ride so far, even while we're in the kitchen doing dishes. Things like what he's been keeping track of in his logbook—in addition to his weight. Four snakes, twenty-eight deer, a dozen feral cats, thousands of head of cattle, packs of dogs, lone rabbits, desert tortoise, and more, both the living and the dead. And also the junk, the endless blown chaff of cigarette butts. Enough metal cans to build a Navy destroyer, as he puts it.

"And glass," he says. "So much glass. It's like there used to be a giant greenhouse over the whole country and it just shattered. There are enough shards out there to puncture every bicycle tire in America."

"What keeps you going?"

"Music. Talking Heads, Bach fugures. Books on tape. I also like keeping my log while I'm pedaling. I can do it pretty well while riding, though sometimes I can't read what I wrote and it ends up being incomprehensible."

"Show me."

Louie pulls a notebook from one of his packs. We skim a few pages and find phrases we simply have to guess at: sandwiches are beautiful losses, or flirting traces miles.

"What does that mean?" I ask, setting my finger on a line neither of us can make out.

"I don't know," Louie says, then laughs. "Who knows what I meant to say?

Louie is snoring when I get up the next morning for work. Coming out of the shower, I stand in the doorway and listen as the air blubbers out of his mouth, then creeps back in with a carnivorous snore. It's still dark outside and the only light comes from the bathroom behind me. Louie smothers my couch, lying on the sheets I'd given him. The blanket has fallen off most of his body in the night. Standing there, I can't help but feel that if I looked hard enough—perhaps in the navel, or concealed in an armpit—I'd find a nozzle that needs just a pinch to release all the air that he sucks in with each snore, a valve to deflate him and return him to normal size. He snores while I dress and while I eat breakfast. He snores while I draw a rough map of Pioneertown for him in case he wants to get a cup of coffee or ride around town. I think of how much I missed his body, once. How much hurt I felt from his willful absence. How much I wish we were ten years younger, and back in my apartment in Seattle. That this child in me was ours and that there were no detours ahead. No counting on false promises. No loss. I haven't slept with a man I love for years.

I climb out of my clothes, pull the sheet from his body, and climb on top of Louie as he wakes. He seems too sleepy to be surprised, though I can see surprise in his eyes. We don't say anything. He comes in no time, and I

climb off him then, gather my clothes and use the bathroom. I feel weighed down by a dissatisfaction of all parts: body, mind and spirit. I hope Louie remembers this morning when he's long gone and in another state. Melody, the woman he could have had for good. Not now, no it's too late for that. But once. Ten years ago. When I come back out, he's asleep again. I can even hear him snoring from outside, in the dark, as I climb into my truck and get it warmed up. I am late for work. The snow on the ground is the color of pewter and I can hear his snoring still, in my mind, as I pull on my wool gloves. A cold breeze has carried through the night and blows out the stars one by one on my drive to Gubler's. The only color comes from Christmas lights strung around the eaves of a few homes, one eave extending its circumference of chasing lights to warp around a nearby Joshua tree. I feel terrible. Just awful.

At work, standing amid thousands of orchids, I cry. Overhead, forced air billows down long plastic tubes, animating the surface and seeping hot air through the many perforations. I crouch down and bawl. I can see under all the tables in every direction. I see the legs of someone I work with far in the distance. I see Spike, the nursery's pet Labrador, sitting under a table, and he sees me. I expect him to sense how I feel, to trot over on his soft paws, working his way to me among the forest of table legs to comfort me with his animal compassion. He stares disinterestedly, never rousing, and looks away. I take a deep breath of humid earth, push myself off the ground, and continuing filling my cart with an order.

A few stars have peaked through the clouds by quitting time. My ex-husband's truck is parked next to my house. I pull up behind the empty truck and approach the house. It's been dark outside for a good hour and the living room window is bright with light from inside. Louie's bicycle sits in the open garage. Through the window, I can see Louie sitting on the couch watching a video. In the chair sits my ex. The video is of gunslingers, one of a few videos I keep in the TV cabinet. On the screen, I'm pacing down the main street of Pioneertown with a gun at each hip. They have the set turned up loud and I can hear myself. On the video, I let out my best whooping and hollering. You've been treating me bad, Hank, I yell. Real bad. And I'm not taking any more of it. I'm giving you to ten to high-tail out of here. It's a warm summer day in the video and the picture is bleached and faded with sunlight. Oh yeah?, Hank shouts back with false vehemence.

Hearing this, my ex laughs and slaps the arm of the chair. "Oh yeah?" he repeats aloud, mimicking Hank's southern accent.

I'll open up a can of whoop-ass on ya if you don't, I shout. I can hear both of them laughing in the house, now. In the video, Hank stands with his feet apart and a hand above his holster. I'm quicker, though, and whip out my pistol to fan shot after silence-shattering shot, the loud cracks echoing off the buildings, then off the hills. Hank gets in one chanceless shot, then grabs his chest with his free hand. He spirals on his descent, crumpling into the dirt like something burned up and withered by a great heat. Playing the dying part is really the best bit, not the shooting. Watching the video, I feel a bit of the sadness that comes while acting out these gunfights. For all the play-acting, some lobe of my brain always keeps the fiction out and makes me think, for a moment, that I have killed a man. But only for a moment. Through the window, I notice that Louie is holding my pistol in his hands as he watches the video. He puts a finger on the trigger. It looks like a snug ring on him, as though the faintest twitch could set it off.

I could walk in and ask them what they're doing, what's up, how was their day. My ex drops by a couple times a month and it could be like one of those times. I never do much more than listen to his complaints anyway and maybe Louie's being here will have us talking about something else. But I can't bring myself to enter the house. It's coming back, the things I'm angry at each of them for, the reactions I'd thought long-gone and overcome. Together, they're too much for me right now. I get back in my truck and continue driving down the road to the next lot, the one with the slab foundation that was poured a decade ago, and which has never been built on. I pull my truck right up onto the concrete, stopping beside the pipes that rise up where a kitchen or bathroom was planned. I kill the lights and ignition and watch the house. I'm there for maybe a half hour, listening to the radio. From where I'm parked, it's a gentle slope down to the house. I feel like putting the truck in gear, releasing the brake, and letting it roll down the hill without me. Into the house. Into Louie and my ex. Into the place and people which have taken

time from me, forget heartache, forget loss. Just then, the two men come out of the house laughing, like real pals. I can't see them, but I can hear them get into my ex's truck, one door slamming, then the other, and I can hear the truck start up and see it, finally, as it clears the house and heads out onto the road.

I want to keep everything in front of me from Kermit. I don't want him to know the town or the desert or the emptiness or share even a geographic similarity to this region of ups and downs and the mostly long, endless stretches of flatness. I don't want him to sense that I'm angry, frustrated, discontent. I want my child to start off someplace else, with a mother who is someone I'm not, yet. I want Kermit to grow up in a city with a population of at least 100,000. To watch him touch damp bark and watch raindrops radiate in puddles. In Portland, perhaps. Or back in Seattle. This is the power I have. Not to guarantee him a talent, or good looks, but to shape the earliest of memories. Instead of a childhood of endless squinting, long schoolbus commutes, and the near-ignorance of grass, I can furnish lushness, company, movement. I will love him for what he becomes.

Entering the house, I notice what's changed. My pistol lying on the couch. My ex's billfold, left on the same corner of the table he'd place it after coming home from work, back when we were married and living here. There's one of his cigarettes still burning in an ashtray. In the kitchen, on the grocery list stuck to the refrigerator, are two notes. One, in Louie's hand, says that Hank called about BBQ for dinner (Hank's code for sex, a word he often uses when leaving messages for me at work). The other note is in my ex's scrawl. Took Louie to Red Dog. Considerate, but presumptuously unsigned.

Back in the living room, I pick up my ex's worn billfold. It bulges with credit cards and business cards accommodated thanks to the conspicuous absence of cash. From the fold, I pull out a folded page from a men's magazine showing a woman with the largest breasts I have ever seen. She is resting them on the tops of Corinthian columns, like the kind we use at work to display some of the orchids. One breast per column. I dread to think what happens when she decides to walk around. I dig deeper. On the back of an expired medical card is the signature of someone to be contacted in the case of an emergency—my signature. I find another photo, this one of myself, at the foot of a wad of credit cards, deep in the dark, crumb-filled recesses of the leather wallet. The photo is scrunched and worn by the edges of the cards and I'm unrecognizable. I doubt he knows he's been carrying my photo around. I certainly don't carry his.

I put his wallet back at the edge of the table and pick up the cigarette he's left behind. I take a couple drags to bring it back to life, my apologies to Kermit. I pull out a couple sections of today's paper from beneath the ashtray and hold a tip of the paper to the end of the cigarette and take a few more drags until the newsprint catches. I point the corner up and watch the silent flame lick down, leaving nothing but a curled shell of black ink as the fire descends. Since I was a girl, I have always played with fire, especially candles, pushing in the soft wax edges, waving a finger through the flame. This feels different The only thing in this entire room that interests me now is the flame, and not what I can do to it, but what it can do to everything else. The house doesn't interest me, not even the orchids. Not even the variety named for me, Melodiopsis. I am tired, I realize, of false flowers.

Calmly, I walk the burning paper over to the drapes. But by the time I'm there, my arm is shaking so badly that I have to hold it still with my other until the flames cross over from paper to fabric. My fingers are black. I light another section of newspaper with the flames from the drapes. The chair's fabric burns, so too the sheets I'd put out for Louie. I maneuver among all the orchids and furniture in search of the inflammable. The wardrobe of clothes I've hardly added to in ten years erupts in flames so quickly that it's disconcerting. So much won't burn, though, stubborn to comply. I find myself laughing because it shouldn't be so had to set things alight. I have one section of the newspaper yet unburned and I put that under the stack of extra wood beneath the fireplace. Everywhere, the fires are quiet and reluctant to expand. But for the fact that the flames aren't in a fireplace, they look almost cozy. Then, I begin to feel the heat and the ceiling darkens from the smoke. I open the front door and let in a breath of air that instantly brightens the fires. I take the remains of the cigarette out from between my lips with my shaking hand and place it back in the ashtray. Is it arson to burn down your own uninsured home? No, it's not my home. It's my fathers. My ex's. Never mine. I take the pistol, step outside and walk past the open garage. There's a nook filled with paint cans and other junk left over from my father's tenancy. That'll take, soon enough. Outside,

tiny yellow lights from homes blink in the darkness.

Inside the truck, I roll down my windows and turn to see the glow of the house. The air is cold, definitely below freezing, and makes tiny stabs at my lungs. The smoke is slow and heavy. I stay there, the truck idling, until the fire is bright and makes the sound of a stove sucking in air. There is no point in waiting, of course, but it's satisfying knowing that each and every second there's less to go back to, less to hold me here. As I pull onto the road, I hear shots, what must be the blanks catching the heat and exploding, there, in the bedroom, in the bottom dresser drawer, in the box below my lingerie.

I drive north through the dark, passing the Red Dog Saloon and continuing out of town. Then through the ancient lava fields, the cinder cone in the distance, invisible but for its black triangular cast on the night sky. A light sprinkle of rain turns to big wet flakes of snow as the truck climbs a hill, then changes back to rain just as easily when the truck heads downward. Snow again. Then rain. I continue through desert that hour by hour, loses its Joshua trees, its creosote bushes, silver cholla and bur-sage. I drive all through the night, gassing up three times by the time I cross into Oregon, feeling in turns nauseous, then giddy, the whole way up. With one hand on the wheel, I root through my truck, tossing everything out the window, cassettes, unopened bills, empty soda cans, the remains of a box of tissues. Last of all, I throw out the pistol, hearing it ding the side of my truck before I see it again in the rearview mirror, dancing on the blacktop. I suppose I'd like to picture Louie riding this way and finding my trail, but then I remember that his bicycle is in the garage. The thought of him, in the desert, knowing no one but my ex, makes me burst out in a punch of laughter. At dawn, the only contents of my truck are me and the owner's manual in the glove compartment, just as the truck was when I bought it. I begin to feel how it is to give away all your possessions, everything you've had to maintain, support, remember. It's then that I pull into a diner and order the trucker's breakfast. Four egg omelet, hash browns, steak, stack of buttermilk pancakes, toast, and a tall orange juice.

Now, I'm alone in a booth. My empty dishes have been taken away. I'm just sipping at my coffee. It's okay if Kermit is a bit wired, because today is an important day, worth remembering. I'm trying to catch the waitress' eye. There she is. Hello. She's reaching into her apron for the check as she moves this way. I can't predict much, except this: she'll put the check away. Because I'm going to order another omelet, a side of bacon, another orange juice, and maybe a short stack. The phrase eating for two comes to mind, but Kermit is only an inch long. He hardly needs anything yet. This is my own appetite. I have never been this hungry in all my life.

JOANNE LOWERY

Multitasking

While the cells of my body heal from surgery
I lie on the couch reading about Persia.
Later I need to pay the water bill.
My cells overlap like winged maple seeds
piled up around the back door.
If I scatter them, one or two
will sprout from my incision.
Such is the purpose of saplings
with their hairnet roots.
Slowly down the street a truck
with an unfamiliar sequence of gears
disrupts the spring afternoon.
I wait to see where it will stop,
but what would it bring me?
When I am well I will walk across mountains
and oceans to learn the names
of every spice in the bazaar.

Imani Marshall

On Easy Street

Before my little body began to develop
Or I made my first steps into womanhood
Before my face got made up
Or my mind was made up
About my future
There were infinite possibilities.
I had big dreams and small worries.
Running toward the sun with two afro puffs
As grandma blew puffs of smoke.
I'd watch her smile and I'd smile,
Revealing a metal mouth
Laced with color-coordinated rubber bands.
Licking rainbow-flavored Italian ices
Or washing down 10-cent sunflower seeds
With 50-cent juices.
Taking candy trips to the corner store,
Pockets jingling with change.
I made sense out of cents
And made dollars.
Pop Rocks, Blow Pops, Ring Pops, Push Pops
Brought on the sudden sugar rush
As I rushed to give mama some sugar.
Running along, rope in hand,
Straight rope or Double-Dutch were the games.
But when the crowd multiplied
The people divided
And added new games to play.
Some tackled Red Rover
Or asked Mother May I?
While others eagerly listened
To what Simon had to say.
Then when darkness fell
My L.A. Gears lit the way home.

I remember this like yesterday.
Back then, when time stopped
And the journey ahead
Seemed longer than forever.
Back when Reality

Was a foreign language
Spoken by our elders
And I believed fairies
When in 24 hours
I transformed myself
Into a princess
Into a superhero.
I remember
Back then,
Back when
I lived.

KATRICE J. GRAYSON

Becoming

"We can be. Be and be better. For they existed." –Maya Angelou

I was frozen by a tattered manila envelope stuffed with loose papers. I'd planned to celebrate Thanksgiving week at home with my family. Instead I found myself stunned by the task of memorializing my grandma.

I've attended countless funerals, but only when I received the task did I realize that there always had been and always would be women charged with writing a loved one's obituary. How do they write them? How would I? Sitting idle at my dad's computer, I longed to move to the other end of the office where I could look onto the front yard. I understood the importance of my task so I chose instead to stay at the desk, swiveling between the monitor and the bookshelf behind me.

I was a senior at Spelman College, and had mastered writing research papers. But an obituary was not schoolwork; there would not be any feedback or grade–whatever I wrote would be the final word. Even though I'd known my grandma my whole life, once I started thinking about what I could say, I couldn't think of anything. I turned away from the keyboard and started thinking of why she meant so much to me.

I called her 'Grandma Grayson.' Using the surname clarified the difference between my parents' mothers, who lived within a mile of each other, both less than five miles from me. My family was a community where all of the adults shared in caring for the children. Though I was close with all of my relatives, I had a special relationship with Grandma Grayson. Her influence was almost equal to that of my parents.

Despite the size of our family, there were numerous occasions when I spent time alone with Grandma Grayson. She loved baseball and adored her Detroit Tigers. We would watch them together in her living room, the entire house quiet except for the announcer's play-by-play. After she began receiving season tickets, we would go to the ballpark and enjoy the action live. When she didn't feel up to it, she would share her tickets with me and I would take a friend. While I played softball in high school, she would come out to the ballpark and watch me. So attentive, she'd give me pointers where I needed improvements.

Most times I think of her, I am thinking of New Years Eve. I was in New Liberty Baptist Church at 12 am every January 1st holding my grandma's hand as the preacher prayed for prosperity during the annual watch-night service. She stood about 6' tall and had a frame and size proportionate to her height. When we embraced her arms circled my shoulders and I could breathe the soft fragrance of her skin. In church, my hand in hers felt protected. There was no other place I preferred to welcome the New Year.

Everyone loved Grandma Grayson. For her 75th birthday, her children organized a surprise two-day celebration. Four of her sisters and some of their children also joined in the festivities. During the first evening, she and her sisters thumbed through a photo album recounting stories of their Alabama childhood. I had never thought of my grandma as a whole person who'd made tough decisions, joined the great migration North, and raised her family through a transformative time in American history. When I looked at her I'd seen only my grandma, whose desserts spoiled me, whose love warmed me, whose face I could see in my own.

Even though I'd learned of her rich past, I still didn't start thinking of Grandma Grayson as more than just my grandma until the summer of 2002. It started with a family gathering organized to celebrate our family being together on a sunny afternoon. There was food cooking in the kitchen and on the outdoor grill. My young cousins were battling each other in playground games in the backyard. My mom, her mother, and her sisters were in the kitchen out-talking each other, as they loved to do. My father was relaxing in the living room with my Grandma Grayson and some of his brothers and sisters. It was a great afternoon and I enjoyed moving about the house taking part in a little bit of everyone's activities. I could referee the kids according to their made-up rules. I could be wallpaper in the kitchen until an observant aunt sent me on an inconsequential errand. And I could sit in the living

room with Grandma Grayson.

None in our family would have guessed that one among us would not make it to our next celebration. Grandma Grayson's eldest daughter spent the next few months in and out of the hospital. I was enjoying my senior year at Spelman oblivious to the reports of her deterioration. From the little I did know, I expected her death though the reality of it still shook me. I can only imagine how my grandma, my aunt's longtime housemate, was working through the tragedy.

I had never attended the funeral of such a close relative. I met my grandma with a hug in a side aisle of the sanctuary. She held me close and said in a voice I'd never before heard, "Oh, Katrice, I just don't know what I'm going to do....I'm so glad you're here." I hugged her tightly and we walked to the front of the church. I was there for the rest of the service, but I couldn't get my grandma's vulnerability out of my mind, it moved me. The difference was intangible though I knew I had transitioned into the realm of adult knowledge.

Throughout that day, I couldn't quite figure out why my grandma shared that moment with me, one of her younger grandchildren. She had always been there for me, so perhaps I needed to be there for her, whatever that meant. Did I need to call or visit more often? Should I start writing her letters? Would I clip and send her newspaper articles as she always did for me? I went back to school with this new resolve to be a resource for her.

A few weeks later I was back in Detroit for Thanksgiving. During the drive from the airport, I learned that Grandma Grayson, then 79, was in the hospital.

I called and she explained that she was all right, just tired. According to her, people who stay tired for too long check into a hospital for a little rest. She told me to relax and joked that she would not be making banana pudding, my favorite dessert, for the holiday. The family meal traditionally served at her house would be at mine, so I committed to helping my mother prepare for it. I'd never assisted beyond peeling or chopping but that time I helped everywhere my hands found something to do.

After we ate I had a strong urge to see Grandma Grayson. I had an apron on and my hands were covered with suds when I convinced my dad that we desperately needed to get to the hospital. We couldn't stay for long because the end of visiting hours was approaching. I told her about the day we'd had and she asked how I was, saying that I looked tired. She wanted to make sure I took care of myself so I wouldn't be sick while taking my finals. Lying in the hospital bed, m y grandma appeared to be resting peacefully, just as she'd explained earlier. My dad and I kissed her good night and headed back home. She died the next morning while I was in an art museum with my mom.

By the weekend all the family that hadn't been in town for the holiday was there for the mourning. Everyone's reserves were low as a result of losing two of our matriarchs in such close proximity. What the family desperately needed was someone to lead us through the coming week. As the next eldest child, m y dad filled the void, assisted by two siblings. This trio delegated the short and long term details to other family members. However, when it came to the obituary, no one was prepared to act. My dad asked if I could handle it, and I said yes. I didn't actually know if I could do it–my response was quicker than my thoughts–but I had given my word and fear would not stop me from honoring the responsibility.

The cursor still blinked at the top of the screen when I finally decided to open the manila envelope. To my surprise, my grandma had drafted her own obituary at least five times. I didn't know what precipitated each draft, but I was intrigued by the information she included in each as well as by the details that only appeared once. "Thank you for the help, grandma."

It didn't seem like me pulling together my grandma's life, and hours passed before I moved from that desk. I typed her core biography, and then set about choosing what from the rest ought to be included. Arranging and rearranging became one action until the screen filled with the final composition. My dad accepted the obituary from me with no pomp or circumstance. I'd met an obligation just like one assigned to everyone else in the family. I didn't expect or deserve any recognition because I was a part of the whole that was working in unison to prepare for the final day.

The service was quickly approaching. I helped choose the pictures that would be included in the program.

I was at the printer with my aunts and uncles approving the chosen fonts and layouts. I was at the florist evaluating blooms that would withstand Detroit's December cold for days after internment. Even after doing all that, I couldn't walk further than the doorway of her bedroom where my aunts were picking her burial clothes.

From the moment I learned of her death until the moment I entered her funeral, my life had been consumed by the methodic completion of preparatory tasks. Besides the family concerns, I coolly informed my professors of my loss, rescheduled a week of exams, and rebooked my returning flight. But once I was in the sanctuary where Grandma Grayson had shared an intimate moment with me just weeks before, I didn't know what to do with myself. I couldn't sit still, but there was nowhere to go. All the rational calculating energy that I'd built up had been spent. I didn't want to be there. The sanctuary where we'd joined hands on New Year's was gaining new connotations, but I desperately wanted to hold on to the old ones. I did my best not to absorb the service until I was granted release at its conclusion. I was fighting a losing battle to stay in the car at the cemetery. The gaping whole waiting to receive her was overwhelming. By the start of the family dinner, restlessness had bested me. I granted myself solitude by going home early.

It has now been four years. On All Souls Day, I was talking to a close friend about how we can think that we are disconnected from our deceased loved ones. He had recently lost his mother and was preparing to spend the afternoon at the cemetery. Considering how he would celebrate her on that day led us to think of how we remember our loved ones every day. He spoke of her as a presence constantly assuring him that he is on the right track, a knowing that nudges him back to it when he strays. He never felt alone when he thought of her so he appreciated the connection. Similarly, many parts of my day link me to Grandma Grayson. When I am sitting to a meal I can hear her admonishments against drinking too much of my beverage before finishing my food; every night I write in my journal using a pen that I found among her possessions.

Death cannot break our bond because Grandma Grayson is always here when I need her. Knowing this has sustained me every time I need to step outside of my comfort zone. I always had her support as I moved forward and her embrace when I fall back. And I still do. Grandma Grayson enables me to become the woman that I am. I will be better for I grow in the legacy of her nurturing love.

The Risky Thing: An Interview with Pearl Cleage

PEARL CLEAGE, SPELMAN'S OWN BESTSELLING AUTHOR AND PLAYWRIGHT, TALKS TO FOCUS ABOUT UNDERSTANDING AUDIENCE--AND ABOUT RECONCILING ONE'S ART WITH A MODERN WORLD.

FOCUS: Your first real novel was picked up by Oprah.

Cleaege: [Laughs] My first novel of any kind!

FOCUS: How did you find out about that?

Cleage: She called me on the phone. I had interviewed her several times for Essence when she'd lost some weight and when she gained some weight back. And then I had just interviewed her at the same time that my book came out--I had interviewed her about Beloved because Beloved had just come out. My husband and I had gone out of town, and when we came back, we had several messages—"our boss really wants to talk to you, please call us back." I'm thinking Oprah's calling me about the story I had just written for Essence. I thought she wanted to add something, but when I asked her if she wanted to add something to the story she said no, that she was sure it was fine. Then she said that my book was the October pick for the book club, and I was really very pleased and very excited. She got the book from Susan Taylor, who is a good friend of mine—I've worked for Essence for a long time—Susan told Oprah that she had to read the book, and then Oprah picked it for the book club. It was a wonderful experience. The book club introduced my work to millions of people who may never have found me. The book spent nine weeks on the New York Times' bestseller list and it got up to number two—these are very important things when you talk to publishers…[Laughs]

The problem became, for many of the writers who were picked by Oprah, that [those writers] couldn't tell the difference from that writer's audience and Oprah's audience. When Oprah holds up your book and says that she really likes the book and that you all will like it too, then instantly a huge percentage of her audience goes out to by the book. That doesn't mean that the audience then belongs to me. That's still Oprah's audience. The good news is that some of the people who find the book through Oprah will look for other books of mine, but it's difficult for some authors because they feel like every book they write will be on the New York Times' book list because the book that Oprah picked was on the booklist.

So that was confusing for people at some times, but I always understood the difference between her audience and my audience. And I was very pleased to have the exposure that that book got in particular because it was written because I was really trying to talk about the problem of HIV/AIDS among heterosexual black women who were, at that time, visibly pretending that we didn't have to worry about it. So I was happy that she picked it for all the commercial reasons, but also because I thought that that book would really help people feel differently and deal differently with people who are struggling with HIV/AIDS and also help us take better care of ourselves in terms of the choices that we make about our sexual expression.

FOCUS: I've visited your website, and it's great. Do you think the Internet has aided in selling your books?

Cleage: It's hard for me to tell because I'm so computer illiterate. I have a great guy who works on the website for me but I'm of a different generation. My younger writer friends tell me I need to get a blog, but I tell them I can't do any of this—leave me alone! Don't talk to me about this! [Laughs] I'm sure that my presence in that [online] world has been helpful. People send me things that people have written or said about me that are moving around in cyberspace. But it's one of those things where you say at this point in my life there are certain things that I know I'm not going to do. I'm not going to be a mountain climber. I'm probably never going to learn how to ride horses. I'm really not going to get real comfortable with the Internet. I would love to—but I'm not going to spend the time to do it. I know I should, but I try to be real with myself.

FOCUS: How did you transition from writing poetry to writing fiction and plays? Was that transition hard for you?

Cleage: I had been writing poetry for a long time, and I had been writing plays for a long time. I'm actually trained in playwriting—my degree is in drama with an emphasis in playwriting so writing plays was something that I was trained to do and that I came to naturally. I was one of those kids who around the holidays I made my family sit down afterwards and recruit my cousins and make them do a play about the founding of America…So I always was interested in theater, and I had never really thought about writing novels. And I had the idea for What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day, and it just wouldn't fit on a stage—a play has to be two hours long, you have to have the break so that people can go to the bathroom—and it just wouldn't fit into those two hours. So I decided to try to write it as a novel. I tried several approaches—I tried writing third person, and that just wasn't good for me. And then when I started writing first person, which is really the character telling you the story, talking to you about what happened to her—that seemed much more familiar to me. As a playwright, I'm always making people talk—that's what they do. The novel was almost like one extended monologue, and once I started writing first-person, it was very comfortable to me. One of the things that made me very happy about the book was that a lot of people never go to the theater, never ever go to the theater. People sometimes, in a setting like this, an academic setting, feel like they should, but they don't most of the time… I would venture to say that you don't sit down on the weekend and say, "I think I'll go see a play." Most of your friends probably don't either, which is not a bad thing, it's just the truth of the matter. And so that as a playwright, I was always trying to get people to go see my plays—"they're here, there, everywhere, please come and see my plays." And my neighbors would be so proud to see my name in the paper, that I had a play, but they would never go see the play. But novels are different. You don't have to get dressed up, go downtown, sit with strangers you don't know in an experience that you're not familiar with and comfortable with. [With novels] you can go to Amazon.com, get the book, and in the privacy of your own home, with your shoes off, enjoy it. So fiction has a much wider reach than poetry, which people still think of as esoteric form, and plays, which require you to get out of your house and experience them. And so I was very gratified by the fact that I was reaching such a wider and more diverse audience.

FOCUS: Speaking of plays, do you believe that your plays are performed as you would have wanted them?

Cleage: Sometimes they are. That's the risky thing about theater –it's so collaborative. You can write a great play, but if you have terrible actors and a bad set and no money for a good set, then it's going to look shabby once it gets to the stage. I've seen wonderful productions of my plays, with wonderful actors, great directors, beautiful sets—and I've seen really bad productions of my play with bad actors, bad directors, where the set was wrong, all that. But there's a whole lot of space in between—from the really bad ones and the ones that were absolutely what I had imagined when I was sitting in my office by myself. There are also all of the efforts where people do a good job, but they don't have a lot of money so the set isn't as elaborate as it would be in a theater that has more money.

I saw a really, really bad production of one of my plays one time. Flyin' West was the play. It was a small black theater, and I was doing a book tour. It was a Wednesday night, and they asked me if I would come by and see the show, and I said of course. I got there towards the end of the play. The theater was packed—there were maybe 400 people, and the theater was absolutely packed and on a Wednesday night! I said, wow this is interesting. But the production could not have been worse--the actors were awful, the set was terrible, and I'm sitting there thinking that after the show is over they are going to introduce me at the end and it's going to be a nightmare. At the end of the play, the people in that theater went beserk. They applauded, they jumped to their feet, and they didn't even know that I was there. They loved it. Because they got past all the stuff that was worrying me—she said that line wrong, the chair was wrong—but they got past all that to the message that I was doing and to the truth of the characters that I was doing, and it taught me something really valuable: anybody in the modern world who takes the time and effort and money to put a play on the stage deserves the benefit of the doubt from the playwright. They don't have to do it. Nobody has to do theater in the modern world. It's really hard to do because people want to see movies; they want to see videos; they're really not into what theater requires of you...My experience in that theater when I saw the people so excited to see a live production, and then they were so thrilled to meet a playwright because most of them had never met a playwright before. They stayed and asked me questions for another hour. And it took away from me all that ego-driven stuff when you say, "it's not perfect, it's not perfect." You have to get past that to this: is it true? And if it's true, if what you wrote is true, then all of the other stuff falls away, and people will respond to the truth of what you wrote.

Onward

Photographs by two Memphis-raised, AUC-bred soulshakers.

intisar abioto : boy on a bridge

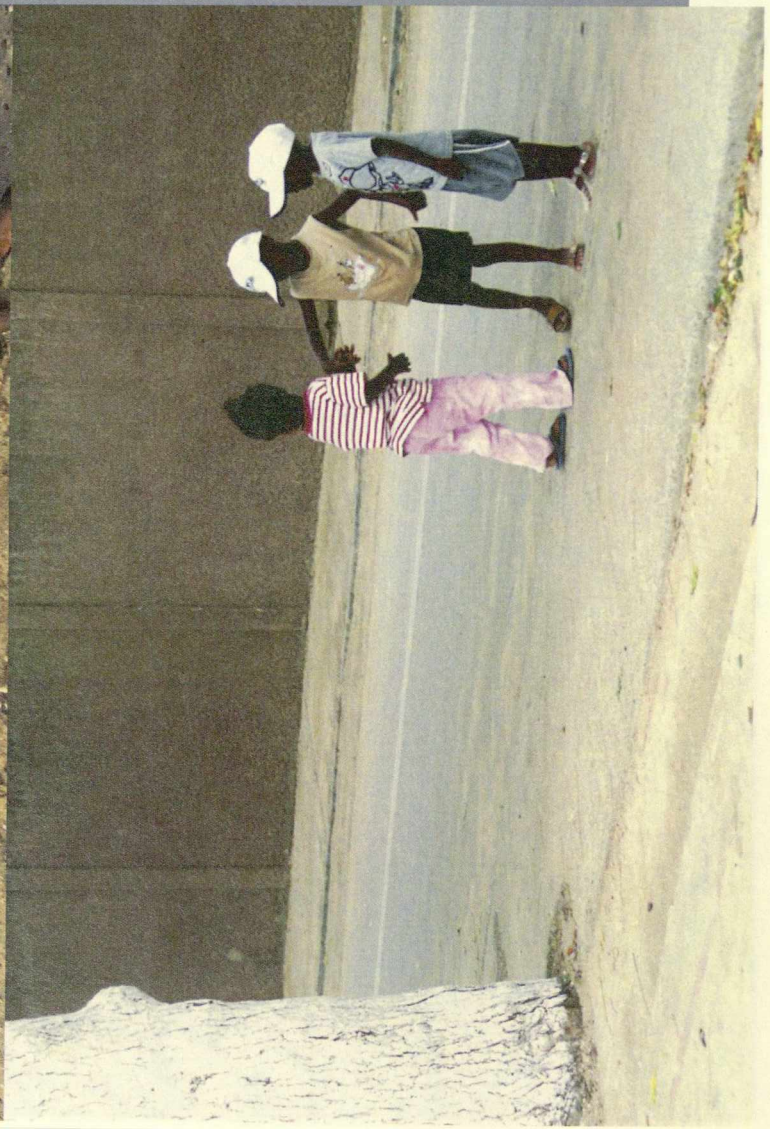
page 39 fred salyers : what god intended

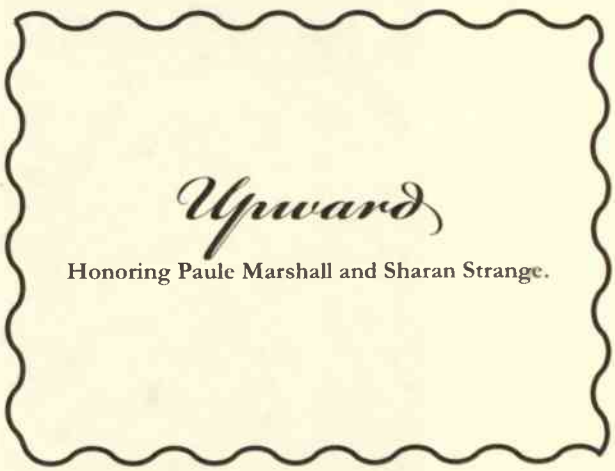
page 40 fred salyers : waiting on cake

fred salyers : the fear to fly

intisar abioto : pink spirit

intisar abioto : we three




Upward
Honoring Paule Marshall and Sharan Strange.

Paule Marshall

PAULE MARSHALL

from "Shaping my Art"

In order to talk about what I believe to be some of the important early influences which shape my work, it will be necessary to take a giant step back to that stage in life when, without being conscious of it, I began the never-ending apprenticeship which is writing. It began in of all places the ground floor kitchen of a brownstone house in Brooklyn. Let me try to recreate the setting for you. Picture if you will a large old-fashioned kitchen with a second-hand refrigerator, the kind they used to have back then in the thirties with the motor on top, a coal stove that in its blackness, girth and the heat it threw off during the winter overwhelmed the gas range next to it, a sink whose pipes never ceased their rusty cough and a large table covered in flowered oilcloth set like an altar in the middle of the room.

It was at this table that the faithful, my mother and her women friends, would gather almost every afternoon upon returning from their jobs as domestics—or to use their term for the work they did "scrubbing Jew floor." Their work day had begun practically at dawn with the long train ride out to the white sections of Brooklyn. There, the ones who weren't lucky enough to have a steady job would stand on the street corners waiting in the cold—if it was winter—for the white, mainly Jewish housewives to come along and hire them for a half day's work cleaning their houses. The auction block was still very real for them.

Later, armed with the few dollars they had earned, my mother and her friends would make the long trip back to our part of town and there, in the sanctuary of our kitchen, talk endlessly, passionately. I didn't realize it then but those long afternoon rap sessions were highly functional, therapeutic; they were, you might even say, a kind of magic rite, a form of juju, for it was their way to exorcise the day's humiliations and restore them to themselves.

The people they worked for were usually the first thing to come under the whiplash of their tongues. For hours at a stretch they would subject their employers to an acute and merciless analysis. And they were shrewd students of psychology. They knew those Jewish housewives far better than the latter would ever know them. But then this has long been a standard phenomenon in Black-white relations in America. The oppressed has to know the enemy—his survival depends on it. While the oppressor, to defend against his guilt, usually chooses not to know us. Baldwin writes eloquently of this. I never saw any of these women they spoke of—and had no wish to; it was bad enough that I was forced to wear their children's cast-off clothes—which my mother sometimes brought home in a brown paper bag—yet my mother and her friends made them visible to me with their deft and often devastating descriptions. In doing so, they began to teach me all the way back then what is perhaps the most invaluable lesson for a writer of fiction; i.e., the importance of skillful characterization, the novelist's responsibility to make his people live and have their being on the printed page.

Then, because my mother and her friends were poor peasant women who had emigrated from Barbados just shortly after World War I they often spoke of home: the people, places and events that had been so much a part of their former lives. The people: "C'dear, how I could forget Eunice Ford from Rock Hall, and that woman had a face like an accident before it happens." The events: "Remember old Mr. Steed's funeral. Poor soul, he had a hard life, but a sweet-sweet funeral. They put him away proper." They would describe the weddings they had attended in great and loving, if biting, detail:

"Soul, lemme tell you bout the time that young girl Birdie Worrell marry that old-old man by the name of Mr. Gay Lisle Pembroke. You remember old Mr. Gay Lisle, an old man been down here since God said let us make man. Well, Birdie and old Mr. Gay Lisle had this big wedding. Wha'lah, it was a wedding to end all weddings. Birdie was in a gown with more lace than the law allowed, and old Mr. Gay Lisle who was old enough to be her great grandfather call heself stylin in a high collar and tux. Birdie mother spend money she din have hiring fancy cars from town, and the little flower girls (I was one them) was hanging out the window of the cars puking and crying for their foot hurt in the shoe 'cause they wasn't used to either car nor shoe…

"And the reception! Jesus-Mary-and-Joseph. It was a reception to end all reception. After the guest had done yam up everything in sight then they had to perform. It seems somebody passed a remark about Birdie looks (she was another accident) that old Mr. Gay Lisle heard. Well, he up and give the person one! And soon the whole place was like federation. The chairs tumbling. Bruggadung. The women and children falling over each other like bombs were falling. Buggadung bung. Some jealous somebody went and smash the windows of the fancy cars from town. And the women that had been living with old Mr. Gay Lisle long long years before he met Birdie, and had seven children for him, went and near tore the gown glean-clean off Birdie…

"And what—after all the money spent on the beautiful-ugly wedding the honeymoon didn't last the night. They wasn't in the house no time before old Mr. Gay Lisle come flying out in the road with not a stitch on and Birdie pelting rock-stone at he."

"What she was running him for?" Virgie Farnum asked.

"Now you mean, nuh! That man was too old to raise up a finger never mind anything else."

As part of the late afternoon ritual they also recounted endless tales of obeah, which was the name they gave to their form of conjure or roots or mojo or vodun or what have you; their way of dealing with the inexplicable and unknown: like true Africans they had great respect for the powers that pass man's understanding.

"Lemma tell you, Soul, when I was a girl home I did see obeah work on somebody and the person is dead-dead today…You did know Affie Cumberbatch? A good-looking clear-skin girl from up Hillaby with hair half-way down she back. You know the person I talking 'bout?"

The other nodded.

"That girl die when she was only twenty and in perfect health. Now tell me what she die from?"

"Woman, how could we remember and that thing happen donkey years."

"Then lemme tell you and listen and believe, oh ye of little faith. This Affie was running with my wuthless uncle, and when his wife, my dear-aunt Dorie found out she swear she was gon work obeah and kill Affie Cumberbatch dead-dead. She took me with her to the obeah man. I hear she tell him she want to work obeah on Affie and she pay him good-good money. And I see the bag of the obeah man…"

"Yuh lying now."

"Who tell you I lying? I see the bag, muh. It had in some rusty nails and feathers and broken glass and thing. He took some out and put in a bottle and bury it, and all the time he doing this he chanting. He give my dear-aunt duppy dust to put in my uncle food so that he would pass it on to Affie when he was in bed with she. He told my dear-aunt not to worry, that Affie Cumberbatch was as good as dead. And I kiss my right hand to God, when you hear the shout, Affie Cumberbatch had took in sick. Her people spend money enough on doctors and still cun find what was wrong with the girl. They even boil lizard soup and all and give she, but it din' do no good. Affie said she felt like a crawling under the skin and she continue cry for a pain. She said she heard the duppies walking pon the roof at night and a hand cold as death 'pon she body. And by-Jees, before the year out Affie Cumberbatch was in she grave. Now tell me that's some game-cock bring ram-goat story?"

And they often spoke about the sea, which hemmed in their tiny island and which they said was visible from every point on the land. "The sea," they used to say with great respect, "ain't got no back door." Meaning it was not like a house where you might escape out the back way in case of a fire. Meaning it was not to be played with. Many years later when I visited Barbados and actually saw the sea at Bathsheba, Walker's Bay and Cattlewash—places that had been familiar to them, I echoed their sentiments. It was not to be played with. I tried capturing the feeling and thoughts it aroused in me in my last novel, thoughts and feelings about the Middle Passage:

> It was the Atlantic this side of the island, a wild-eyed-marauding sea, full of dangerous currents, lined with row upon row of bar rier reefs, and with a sound like that of the combined voices of the drowned raised in an unceasing lament—all those, the nine million and more who in their enforced exile, their Diaspora, had gone down between this point and the homeland lying out of sight to the east. This sea mourned them. Aggrieved, outraged, unappeased, it hurtled itself upon each of the reefs in turn and

then upon the beach, sending up the spume in an angry froth which the wind took and drove like smoke in over the land.

(The Chosen Place, The Timeless People. cf. p. 106)

The sea, the old sod, their former friends and family—all these formed the nostalgic content of their talk. But mixed in with those memories, tempering the nostalgia were the bitter, angry recollections of the poverty and the peculiar brand of colonial oppression and exploitation they had known on the island. "You know what it is to work hard and still never make a headway?" one of the characters in my first novel bitterly asks, and it could well have been my mother or one of her friends speaking on those long ago days. "That's Bubados. One crop. People having to work for next skin to nothing. The white people treating we like slaves and we taking. The rum shop and the church join together to keep we pacify and in ignorance. That's Bubados. It's a terrible thing to know that you gon be poor all your life, no matter how hard you work. You does stop trying after a time. People does see you so and call you lazy. But it ain' laziness. It just you does give up. You does kind of die inside...that's why I wun let my mother know peace till she borrow the money and send me to this man country."

And of course they talked about "this man country," as they somewhat contemptuously referred to America, the blatant racism they encountered here, the Depression which was still very much with us at the time, and their sometimes troubled relations with American Blacks who called them monkey chaser and Black Jews, and whom they in turn labeled shiftless and servile. The white man had succeeded in dividing our house. Economics, sociology, psychology—and politics. Roosevelt, who had rescued the country from the economic morass of the Depression, was their hero but so, too, I remember, was Marcus Garvey. His name was constantly being invoked, for he had been their leader in the early twenties, the revolutionary who had said the end to white domination, the deliverer who had urged the black and poor like themselves to rise up: "Rise up you mighty race," who had declared Black is beautiful to women like themselves who had been brainwashed into believing they did not possess beauty. Garvey who had said economic self-sufficiency and Black nationhood. Who had said Africa...

Because of their constant reference to him, he became a living legend for me, so that although, when I was a little girl, he had been stripped of his power and was an old man living out his last days in obscurity in England, he was still an impressive figure, a Black radical and freedom fighter whose life and example had more than a little to do with moving me toward what I see as an essentially political perspective in my work.

All this then made up the content of their exhaustive and vivid discussions. For me, listening unnoticed in a corner of the kitchen (seen but not heard as was the rule then), it wasn't only what the women talked about, the content; but the way they put things, the style. The insight, irony, wit and their own special force which they brought to everything they discussed; above all, their poet's skill with words. They had taken a language imposed upon them, and infused it with their own incisive rhythms and syntax, brought to bear upon it the few African words and sounds that had been retained. In a word, transformed in, made it their own. I was impressed, without being able to define it, by the seemingly effortless way they had mastered the form of story telling. They didn't know it, nor did I at the time, but they were carrying on a tradition as ancient as Africa, centuries old oral mode by which the culture and history, the wisdom of the race had been transmitted. Theirs was the palaver in the men's quarters and the stories the old women told the children seated outside the round houses as the sun declined. They were, in other words, practicing art of a high order, and in the process revealing at a level beyond words their understanding of and commitment to an aesthetic which recognizes that art is inseparable from life, and form and content are one.

Moreover, all that free-wheeling talk together with the sometimes bawdy jokes and the laughter which often swept the kitchen was, at its deepest level, an affirmation of their own worth; it said that they could not be either demeaned or defeated by the daily trip out to Flatbush. It declared that they had retained and always would a sense of their special and unique Black identity.

I could understand little of this at the time. Those mysterious elements I heard resonating behind the words, which held me spellbound, came across mainly as a feeling which entered me it seemed not only through my ears but through the pores of my skin (I used to get goose pimples listening to them at times) to become part of my

blood. It sings there to this day. I couldn't define it then, but I know now that contained in that feeling were those qualities which Black people possess no matter where you find in them in the hemisphere—and which to my mind make us of one people. Ralph Ellison in Shadow and Act defines them for us: "The faith," he cites first of all, "the humor, sense of timing, the rugged sense of life and our manner of expressing it." These qualities are part of our force as a people; they derive from the emotional core deep at the center of Black life, and which perhaps has its source in our archetypal African memory. The Black critic and scholar, Esther Jackson, refers to it as "the underground aspect of our experience." Larry Neal, the poet and editor of Black Fire has termed it "our emotional history." Amamu Baraka in a beautiful poem about his mother simply calls it, "that nigger feeling." "I wanted to know my mother," he says in the poem, "when she sat looking sad across the campus in the late 20's into the future of the soul. There were Black angels straining above her head, carrying life from our ancestors, and knowledge, and the strong nigger feeling."

It was this nigger feeling—Afro-Caribbean perhaps, in its particulars, but solidly Black at its base—which informed what those women at the kitchen table had to say. In turn, it was this marvelously complex expressive quality, this energy as Baraka refers to it, along with their skill with language and the strongly political cast to their talk, which I believe, helped to shape me as a writer at that unconscious level where it must always begin. For instance, it was they who taught me, without either one of us being aware of what was going on, my first lessons in the narrative of art. From them I learned that the primary responsibility of the fiction writer, if he would be a storyteller in the African tradition, is to tell an interesting tale on that first level, no matter what else he is about in the book. It was this perhaps which led to my love of the novel as a literary form, a love which was later reinforced when I came to read Hardy and Mann, Conrad and Wright. I realize that it is fashionable now to dismiss the traditional novel as something of an anachronism, but to me it is still a vital form. Not only does it allow for the kind of full-blown, richly detailed, visual writing that I love (I want the reader to see the people and places about which I am writing), but it permits me to operate on many levels and to explore both the inner state of my characters as well as the larger world beyond them.

Essentially, then, you might say that it was those women long ago, perhaps more than any other single factor, who were responsible for laying the foundation of the aesthetic—aesthetic taken to mean here the themes and techniques—which most characterize my work. Because of this, the best of my writing, where it is strongest and most truthful, is really a celebration of them.

PAULE MARSHALL

To Da-duh, in Memoriam

a short story

"....Oh Nana! All of you is not involved in this evil business Death, Nor all of us in life."
--From "At My Grandmother's Grave," by Lebert Bethune

I did not see her at first I remember. For not only was it dark inside the crowded disembarkation shed in spite of the daylight flooding in from outside, but standing there waiting for her with my mother and sister I was still somewhat blinded from the sheen of tropical sunlight on the water of the bay which we had just crossed in the landing boat, leaving behind us the ship that had brought us from New York lying in the offing. Besides, being only nine years of age at the time and knowing nothing of islands I was busy attending to the alien sights and sounds of Barbados, the unfamiliar smells.

I did not see her, but I was alerted to her approach by my mother's hand which suddenly tightened around mine, and looking up I traced her gaze through the gloom in the shed until I finally made out the small, purposeful, painfully erect figure of the old woman headed our way.

Her face was drowned in the shadow of an ugly rolled-brim brown felt hat, but the details of her slight body and of the struggle taking place within it were clear enough—an intense, unrelenting struggle between her back which was beginning to bend ever so slightly under the weight of her eighty-odd years and the rest of her which sought to deny those years and hold that back straight, keep in tin line. Moving swiftly toward us (so swiftly it seemed she did not intend stopping when she reached us but would sweep past us out the doorway which opened onto the sea and like Christ walk upon the water!), she was caught between the sunlight at her end of the building and the darkness inside—and for a moment she appeared to contain them both: the light in the long severe old-fashioned white dress she wore which brought the sense of a past that was still alive into our bustling present and in the snatch of white at her eye; the darkness in her black high-top shoes and in her face which was visible now that she was closer.

It was stark and fleshless as a death mask, that face. The maggots might have already done their work, leaving only the framework of bone beneath the ruined skin and deep wells at the temple and jaw. But her eyes were alive, unnervingly so for one so old, with a sharp light that flicked out of the dim clouded depths like a lizard's tongue to snap up all in her view. Those eyes betrayed a child's curiosity about the world, and I wondered vaguely seeing them, and seeing the way the bodice of her ancient dress had collapsed in on her flat chest (what had happened to her breasts?), whether she might not be some kind of child at the same time that she was a woman, with fourteen children, my mother included, to prove it. Perhaps she was both, both child and woman, darkness and light, past and present, life and death—all the opposites contained and reconciled in her.

"My Da-duh," my mother said formally and stepped forward. The name sounded like thunder fading softly in the distance.

"Child," Da-duh said, and her tone, her quick scrutiny of my mother, the brief embrace in which they appeared to shy from each other rather than touch, wiped out the fifteen years my mother had been away and restored the old relationship. My mother, who was such a formidable figure in my eyes, had suddenly with a word been reduced to my status.

"Yes, God is good," Da-duh said with a nod that was like a tic. "He has spared me to see my child again."

We were led forward then, apologetically because not only did Da-duh prefer boys but she also liked her grandchildren to be "white," that is, fair-skinned; and we had, I was to discover, a number of cousins, the outside children of white estate managers and the like, who qualified. We, though, were as black as she.

My sister being the oldest was presented first. "This one takes after the father," my mother said and waited

to be reproved.

Frowning, Da-duh tilted my sister's face toward the light. But the frown soon gave way to a grudging smile, for my sister with her large mild eyes and little broad winged noise, with our father's high-cheeked Barbadian cast to her face, was pretty.

"She's goin' be lucky," Da-duh said and patted her once on the cheek. "Any girl child that takes after the father does be lucky."

She turned then to me. But oddly enough she did not touch me. Instead leaning close, she peered hard at me, and then quickly drew back. I thought I saw her hand start up as though to shield her eyes. It was almost as if she saw not only me, a thin truculent child who it was said took after no one but myself, but something in me which for some reason she found disturbing, even threatening. We looked silently at each other for a long time there in the noisy shed, our gaze locked. She was the first to look away.

"But Adry," she said to my mother and her laugh was cracked, thin, apprehensive. "Where did you get this one here with this fierce look?"

"We don't know where she came out of, my Da-duh," my mother said, laughing also. Even I smiled to myself. After all I had won the encounter. Da-duh had recognized my small strength—and this was all I ever asked of the adults in my life then.

"Come, soul," Da-duh said and took my hand. "You must be one of those New York terrors you hear so much about."

She led us, me at her side and my sister and mother behind, out of the shed into the sunlight that was like a bright driving summer rain and over to a group of people clustered beside a decrepit lorry. They were our relatives, most of them from St. Andrews although Da-duh herself lived in St. Thomas, the women wearing bright print dresses, the colors vivid against their darkness, the men rusty black suits that encased them like straitjackets. Da-duh, holding fast to my hand, became my anchor as they circled round us like a nervous sea, exclaiming, touching us with their calloused hands, embracing us shyly. They laughed in awed bursts: "But look Adry got big-big children!"/ "And see the nice things they wearing, wrist watch and all!"/ "I tell you, Adry has done all right for sheself in New York..."

Da-duh, ashamed at their wonder, embarrassed for them, admonished them the while. "But oh Christ," she said, "why you all got to get on like you never saw people from 'Away' before? You would think New York is the only place in the world to hear wunna. That's why I don't like to go anyplace with you St. Andrews people, you know. You all ain't been colonized."

We were in the back of the lorry finally, packed in among the barrels of ham, flour, cornmeal and rice and the trunks of clothes that my mother had brought as gifts. We made our way slowly through Bridgetown's clogged streets, part of a funeral procession of cars and open-sided buses, bicycles and donkey carts. The dim little limestone shops and offices along the way marched with us, at the same mournful pace, toward the same grave ceremony—as did the people, the women balancing huge baskets on top their heads as if they were no more than hats they wore to shade them from the sun. Looking over the edge of the lorry I watched as their feet slurred the dust. I listened, and their voices, raw and loud and dissonant in the heat, seemed to be grappling with each other high overhead.

Da-duh sat on a trunk in our midst, a monarch amid her court. She still held my hand, but it was different now. I had suddenly become her anchor, for I felt her fear of the lorry with its asthmatic motor (a fear and distrust, I later learned, she held for all machines) beating like a pulse in her rough palm.

As soon as we left Bridgetown behind though, she relaxed, and while the others around us talked she gazed at the canes standing tall on either side of the winding marl road. "C'dear," she said softly to herself after a time. "The canes this side are pretty enough."

They were too much for me. I thought of them as giant weeds that had overrun the island, leaving scarcely any room for the small tottering houses of sunbleached pine we passed or the people, dark streaks as our lorry hurtled by. I suddenly feared that we were journeying, unaware that we were, toward some dangerous place where

the canes, grown as high and thick as a forest, would close in on us and run us through with their stiletto blades. I longed then for the familiar: for the street in Brooklyn where I lived, for my father who had refused to accompany us ("Blowing out good money on foolishness," he had said of the trip), for a game of tag with my friends under the chestnut tree outside our aging brownstone house.

"Yes, but wait till you see St. Thomas canes," Da-duh was saying to me. "They's canes father, bo," she gave a proud arrogant nod. "Tomorrow, God willing, I goin' take you out in the ground and show them to you."

True to her word Da-duh took me with her the following day out into the ground. It was a fairly large plot adjoining her weathered board and shingle house and consisting of a small orchard, a good-sized canepiece and behind the canes, where the land sloped abruptly down, a gully. She had purchased it with Panama money sent her by her eldest son, my uncle Joseph, who had died working on the canal. We entered the ground along a trail no wider than her body and as devious and complex as her reasons for showing me her land. Da-duh strode briskly ahead, her slight form filled out this morning by the layers of sacking petticoats she wore under her working dress to protect her against the damp. A fresh white cloth, elaborately arranged around her head, added to her height, and lent her a vain, almost roguish air.

Her pace slowed once we reached the orchard, and glancing back at me occasionally over her shoulder, she pointed out the various trees.

"This here is a breadfruit," she said. "That one yonder is a papaw. Here's a guava. This is a mango. I know you don't have anything like these in New York. Here's a sugar apple." (The fruit looked more like artichokes than apples to me.) "This one bears limes...." She went on for some time, intoning the names of the trees as though they were those of her gods. Finally, turning to me, she said, "I know you don't have anything this nice where you come from." Then, as I hesitated: "I said I know you don't have anything this nice where you come from...."

"No," I said and my world did seem suddenly lacking.

Da-duh nodded and passed on. The orchard ended and we were on the narrow cart road that led through the canepiece, the canes clashing like swords above my cowering head. Again she turned and her thin muscular arms spread wide, her dim gaze embracing the small field of canes, she said—and her voice almost broke under the weight of her pride, "Tell me, have you got anything like these in that place where you were born?"

"No."

"I din' think so. I bet you don't even know that these canes here and the sugar you eat is one and the same thing. That they does throw the canes into some damn machine at the factory and squeeze out all the little life in them to make sugar for you all so in New York to eat. I bet you don't know that."

"I've got two cavities and I'm not allowed to eat a lot of sugar."

But Da-duh didn't hear me. She had turned with an inexplicably angry motion and was making her way rapidly out of the canes and down the slope at the edge of the field which led to the gully below. Following her apprehensively down the incline amid a stand of banana plants whose leaves flapped like elephant ears in the wind, I found myself in the middle of a small tropical wood—a place dense and damp and gloomy and tremulous with the fitful play of light and shadow as the leaves high above moved against the sun that was almost hidden from view. It was a violent place, the tangled foliage fighting each other for a chance at the sunlight, the branches of the trees locked in what seemed an immemorial struggle, one both necessary and inevitable. But despite the violence, it was pleasant, almost peaceful in the gully, and beneath the thick undergrowth the earth smelled like spring.

This time Da-duh didn't even bother to ask her usual question, but simply turned and waited for me to speak.

"No," I said, my head bowed. "We don't have anything like this in New York."

"Ah," she cried, her triumph complete. "I din' think so. Why I've heard that's a place where you can walk till you near drop and never see a tree."

"We've got a chestnut tree in front of our house," I said.

"Does it bear?" She waited. "I ask you, does it bear?"

"Not anymore," I muttered. "It used to, but not anymore."

She gave the nod that was like a nervous twitch. "You see," she said. "Nothing can bear there." Then, secure behind her scorn, she added, "But tell me, what's this snow like that you hear so much about?"

Looking up, I studied her closely, sensing my chance, and then I told her, describing at length and with as much drama as I could summon not only what snow in the city was like, but what it would be like here, in her perennial summer kingdom.

"...And you see all these trees you got here," I said. "Well, they'd be bare. No leaves, no fruit, nothing. They'd be covered in snow. You see your canes. They'd be buried under tons of snow. The snow would be higher than your head, higher than your house, and you wouldn't be able to come down into this here gully because it would be snowed under...."

She searched my face for the lie, still scornful but intrigued.

"What a thing, huh?" she said finally, whispering it softly to herself.

"And when it snows you couldn't dress like you are now," I said. "Oh no, you'd freeze to death. You'd have to wear a hat and gloves and galoshes and ear muffs so your ears wouldn't freeze and drop off, and a heavy coat. I've got a Shirley Temple coat with fur on the collar. I can dance. You wanna see?"

Before she could answer I began, with a dance called the Truck which was popular back then in the 1930s. My right forefinger waving, I trucked around the nearby trees and around Da-duh's awed and rigid form. After the Truck I did the Suzy-Q, my lean hips swishing, my sneakers sidling zigzag over the ground. "I can sing," I said and did so, starting with "I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter," then without pausing, "Tea For Two," and ending with "I Found a Million Dollar Baby In a Five and Ten Cent Store."

For long moments afterwards Da-duh stared at me as if I were a creature from Mars, an emissary from some world she did not know but which intrigued her and whose power she both felt and feared. Yet something about my performance must have pleased her, because bending down she slowly lifted her long skirt and then, one by one, the layers of petticoats until she came to a drawstring purse dangling at the end of a long strip of cloth tied round her waist. Opening the purse she handed me a penny. "Here," she said half-smiling against her will. "Take this to buy yourself a sweet at the shop up the road. There's nothing to be done with you, soul."

From then on, whenever I wasn't taken to visit relatives, I accompanied Da-duh out into the ground, and alone with her amid the canes or down in the gully I told her about New York. It always began with some slighting remark on her part: "I know they don't have anything this nice where you come from," or "Tell me, I hear those foolish people in New York does do such and such...." But as I answered, recreating my towering world of steel and concrete and machines for her, building the city out of words, I would feel her give way. I came to know the signs of her surrender: the total stillness that would come over her little hard dry form, the probing gaze that like a surgeon's knife sought to cut through my skull to get at the images there, to see if I were lying; above all, her fear, a fear nameless and profound, the same one I had felt beating in the palm of her hand that day in the lorry.

Over the weeks I told her about refrigerators, radios, gas stoves, elevators, trolley cars, wringer washing machines, movies, airplanes, the cyclone at Coney Island, subways, toasters, electric light: "At night, see, all you have to do is flip this little switch on the wall and all the lights in the house go on. Just like that. Like magic. It's like turning on the sun at night."

"But tell me," she said to me once with a faint mocking smile, "do the white people have all these things too or it's only the people looking like us?"

I laughed. "What d'ya mean," I said. "The white people even better." Then: "I beat up a white girl in my class last term."

"Beating up white people!" Her tone was incredulous.

"How you mean!" I said, using an expression of hers. "She called me a name."

For some reason Da-duh could not quite get over this and repeated in the same hushed, shocked voice, "Beating up white people now! Oh, the lord, the world's changing up so I can scare recognize it anymore."

One morning toward the end of our stay, Da-duh led me into the part of the gully that we had never visited

before, an area darker and more thickly overgrown than the rest, almost impenetrable. There in a small clearing amid the dense bush, she stopped before an incredibly tall royal palm which rose cleanly out of the ground, and drawing the eye up with it, soared high above the trees around it into the sky. It appeared to be touching the blue dome of sky, to be flaunting its dark crown of fronds right in the blinding white face of the late morning sun.

Da-duh watched me a long time before she spoke, and then she said, very quietly, "All right, now, tell me if you've got anything this tall in that place you're from."

I almost wished, seeing her face, that I could have said no.

"Yes," I said. "We've got buildings hundreds of times this tall in New York. There's one called the Empire State building that's the tallest in the world. My class visited it last year and I went all the way to the top. It's got over a hundred floors. I can't describe how tall it is. Wait a minute. What's the name of that hill I went to visit the other day, where they have the police station?"

"You mean Bissex?"

"Yes, Bissex. Well the Empire State Building is way taller than that."

"You're lying now!" she shouted, trembling with rage. Her hand lifted to strike me.

"No, I'm not," I said. "It really is, if you don't believe me. I'll send you a picture postcard of it soon as I get back home so you can see for yourself. But it's way taller than Bissex."

All the fight went out of her at that. The hand poised to strike me fell limp to her side, and as she stared at me, seeing not me but the building that was taller than the highest hill she knew, the small stubborn light in her eyes (it was the same amber as the flame in the kerosene lamp she lit at dusk) began to fail. Finally, with a vague gesture that even in the midst of her defeat still tried to dismiss me and my world, she turned and stared back through the gully, walking slowly, her steps groping and uncertain, as if she were suddenly no longer sure of the way, while I followed triumphant yet strangely saddened behind.

The next morning I found her dressed for our morning walk but stretched out on the Berbice chair in the tiny drawing room where she sometimes napped during the afternoon heat, her face turned to the window beside her. She appeared thinner and suddenly indescribably old.

"My Da-duh," I said.

"Yes, nuh," she said. Her voice was listless and the face she slowly turned my way was, now that I think back on it, like a Benin mask, the features drawn and almost distorted by an ancient abstract sorrow.

"Don't you feel well?" I asked.

"Girl, I don't know."

"My Da-duh, I goin' boil you some bush tea," my aunt, Da-duh's youngest child, who lived with her, called from the shed roof kitchen.

"Who tell you I need bush tea?" she cried, her voice assuming for a moment its old authority. "You can't even rest nowadays without some malicious person looking for you to be dead. Come girl," she motioned me to a place beside her on the old-fashioned lounge chair, "give us a tune."

I sang for her until breakfast at eleven, all my brash irreverent Tin Pan Alley songs, and then just before noon we went out into the ground. But it was a short, dispirited walk. Da-duh didn't even notice that the mangoes were beginning to ripen and would have to be picked before the village boys got to them. And when she paused occasionally and looked out across the canes or up at her trees it wasn't as if she were seeing them but something else. Some huge, monolithic shape had imposed itself, it seemed, between her and the land, obstructing her vision. Returning to the house she slept the entire afternoon on the Berbice chair.

She remained like this until we left, languishing away the mornings on the chair at the window gazing out at the land as if it were already doomed; then, at noon, taking the brief stroll with me through the ground during which she seldom spoke, and afterwards returning home to sleep till almost dusk sometimes.

On the day of our departure she put on the austere, ankle length white dress, the black shoes and brown felt hat (her town clothes she called them), but she did not go with us to town. She saw us off on the road outside her

house and in the midst of my mother's tearful protracted farewell, she leaned down and whispered in my ear, "Girl, you're not to forget now to send me the picture of that building, you hear."

By the time I mailed her the large colored picture postcard of the Empire State building she was dead. She died during the famous '37 strike which began shortly after we left. On the day of her death England sent planes flying low over the island in a show of force—so low, according to my aunt's letter, that the downdraft from them shook the ripened mangoes from the trees in Da-duh's orchard. Frightened, everyone in the village fled into the canes. Except Da-duh. She remained in the house at the window so my aunt said, watching as the planes came swooping and screaming like monstrous birds down over the village, over her house, rattling her trees and flattening the young canes in her field. It must have seemed to her lying there that they did not intend pulling out of their dive, but like the hard-back beetles which hurled themselves with suicidal force against the walls of the house at night, those menacing silver shapes would hurl themselves in an ecstasy of self-immolation onto the land, destroying it utterly.

When the planes finally left and the villagers returned they found her dead on the Berbice chair at the window.

She died and I lived, but always to this day even, within the shadow of her death. For a brief period after I was grown I went to live alone, like one doing penance, in a loft above a noisy factory in downtown New York and there painted seas of sugar-cane and huge swirling Van Gogh suns and palm trees striding like brightly-plumed Tutsi warriors across a tropical landscape, while the thunderous tread of the machines downstairs jarred the floor beneath my easel, mocking my efforts.

Sharan Strange

SHARAN STRANGE

Hunger

1.

Combing the papers for summer jobs,
nothing that seems absurd now, or
the obvious hustle, was beneath us;
our need was rampant as newsprint,
those endless columns of pulp dreams.
Not old enough for hire, I fantasized
my fortune in stuffing envelopes.
Seductive ads beckoned: Make $$$!
No experience needed! (Just gut-
wrenching desire for anything more...)
I'd make thousands, save the family,
buy my way out of loneliness,
invisibility. I sent off letters,
stamps tasting of promise,
expectation swelling in me like a secret.

2.

I yearned for glimpses of freedom
like clearings stumbled upon,
meadows of unbroken green
edged by trees, yet seemingly endless.
Like that, but interior, as in the mind's
infinite reaches, hinted at in dreams,
or the openness the heart allows each time
we choose love. Going into fields where
my grandmother eked out a sharecropper's wage,
before I learned they weren't hers,
they too seemed unbounded by horizon.

3.

What I wanted I couldn't name,
but the longing felt more real than
what I could touch, consant as labor.
Some nights I lay on the ground for hours,
drunk with that view of the heavens,
as if those thousand stars each
held me by a thread, their imperceptible shuffle

spinning around me some cosmic cocoon.
So I endured the days, and months,
and years that kept me from adulthood,
the time of fulfillment. Or so I thought.
Growing up brought an end
only to a kind of indentured servitude,
taught me to distinguish loss from lack.

4.

These days it's TV commercials---
the happy clan hawking cars and
fortified cereals---a kind of contentment
bartered for with longing or need.
Anything is attainable in fantasy.
It takes so much to learn just this:
The things we need we don't get in this world.
Some say we're lucky to be alive, to have
our chance each day, to fight, get by. I say
what's luck, or chance, or choice for that matter?
I take the offerings of this slim life,
hunger, like memory, some kind of assurance,
the body, open, unable to be filled.

SHARAN STRANGE

Childhood

Summer brought fireflies in swarms.
They lit our evenings like dreams
we thought we couldn't have.
We caught them in jars, punched
holes, carried them around for days.

Luminous abdomens that when charged
with air turn bright. Imagine!
mere insects carrying such cargo,
magical caravans flickering beneath
low July skies. We chased them, amazed.

The idea! Those tiny bodies
pulsing phosphorescence.
They made reckless traffic,
signaling, neon flashes forever
into the deepening dusk.

They gave us new faith
in the nasty tonics of childhood---
pungent, murky liquids promising
shining eyes, strong teeth, glowing skin---
and we silently vowed to swallow ever after.

What was the secret of light?
We wanted their brilliance---
small fires hovering,
each tiny explosion
the birth of a new world.

Toi Derricotte

An Interview with Sharan Strange

TOI DERRICOTTE: Your poems about childhood are particularly compelling. "Jimmy's First Cigarette" reminds me of "The Whipping," though your poem has a slightly different twist. We often have in the Black community stories of how parents have to prepare their kids for the harsh realities of the world. Is he an urban kid?

SHARAN STRANGE: No, actually the setting of the poem is rural, which I think matters less than other issues in the poem, except to the extent that as a rural kid he might be less exposed than an urban kid to certain harsh environments, to certain earlier, and consequently perhaps, more jarring truths about life.

DERRICOTTE: What issues was it important to explore?

STRANGE: The main issue is how this child, and by extension, children in general, can be exposed to harsh, and often painful lessons, emotionally as well as physically. It's about loss of innocence--and for male children this can indeed be harsh. The poem deals with the arbitrary cruelness adults commit in teaching children certain lessons. And how, paradoxically, it is often the ones whom the children are entrusted to, whom they trust and look to for love, kindness, sustenance, nurturance, protection and those kinds of things--you know, parents, family. I don't believe my father and grandmother deliberately planned to teach my brother that particular lesson in that particular fashion, but acted possibly spontaneously to punish him for overstepping his bounds--although he was acting out of a natural curiosity, and a desire to act out a fantasy of being a man by imitating his father. He was around 13 or 14 at least--so these things are understandable. But I wrote about this incident--it haunts me still I suppose--because I couldn't fathom my grandmother's actions, or my father's extreme reaction, except as a way of teaching my brother an unforgettable lesson. Or maybe they were reenacting some draconian rite of passage from their past. I don't know. Nothing was explained.

You mentioned Hayden's poem. At the time I wrote the poem, I hadn't read that. But yes, I like that poem, too. Hayden does give us a sense of the woman's pain though, some idea as to why she whips the boy so cruelly, which was because of her own pain. But I wanted just to present the sort of baffling situation my brother was in, and the poem proceeds rather benignly until the last stanza, which reveals the beating, and that is understated. I was trying to impart some sense of the irony and [End Page 291] absurdity of it, and perhaps the understatement lessens the sense of the abuse which takes place.

DERRICOTTE: Are the childhood poems early poems? Are you still writing them? Are you writing other things now? Are your poems evolving in a particular fashion?

STRANGE: "Jimmy's First Cigarette" is an early poem, but I continue to write about childhood. They're probably still the majority of the poems I'm writing at any given time, and they continue to come. Lately, I've been thinking alot about dreams. They're compelling to me because of their surreal quality and their "compressed" nature--a complex narrative or an entire philosophical argument can be dealt with in the "space" of minutes or seconds even. I'm fascinated by this. It is what one tries to do in a poem, you know. The dream takes on a kind of momentum, with its own imperative, without a past or future frame of reference. The discontinuous, disjointed nature of the dream, its language of imagery, its patterns, its relation to "waking life"--all this intrigues me.

DERRICOTTE: I'd like to talk about affect in the poems. I sense an emotional reserve. The self in the poem is contained. Personal outrage is not expressed explosively, although a great deal of brutality is expressed, especially in the childhood poems. Would you address the deliberate personal emotional reserve--why the lack of expressed outrage in the poems?

STRANGE: Yes, the poems are reserved, partly because I felt it important to tell it, to make a record first of what happened--much like a photographer or documentary filmmaker, even though it's my life, yes. Just to say, See, these things happened. I witnessed it, and I have not forgotten any of it. I had written poems that have more of what you would call explosive rage in them, but I considered them unsuccessful. It was difficult to control or contain the rage. I don't know that I successfully can or even need to impart explosive rage in my poems. In the childhood poems, I mean, I have lived those things half my life ago, and at the time I had to find a way to quell, to channel the rage in order to keep living with some of the very people who caused that rage and pain. I feel that I have come through that fire. Did these things anger me, did they cause me pain? Yes, of course. But I am less concerned with saying, in "Jimmy's" for example, "You horrible people, how could you do that to my brother?" than with saying, "I saw, I remember, this is what you did." Or, in "The Crazy Girl," "A girl was raped, and the damage was permanent, encompassing; see, this is how; look, it is written on her very body." But this issue of control or reserve is something I haven't entirely resolved. I want to bear witness to these things, not simply react. I want there to be a sense of outrage, though not necessarily the "explosive" kind.

DERRICOTTE: My next question concerns a paradox: your use of the pronoun "we." Sometimes you use "we" speaking as a self within community, sometimes as "I," a self outside community, alone. I'm thinking of poems such as "Hunger," "Words During War," "February 19, 1994," "Froggy's Class," and "Dorothy." "We" breaks down to "I," the "I" congeals to "we." It's expressing a dialogue between "I" and community that goes back to an Afrocentric model of aesthetics. Is there a dialogue going on? What's it about? Is there a conflict?

STRANGE: That's an interesting question. I suppose that there's dialogue. And conflict, too. Oftentimes I speak as an individual, but even then the context out of which I speak is one of community, even when the "I" is privileged or when it emerges from the collective voice. I'm aware of telling a story from my point of view, but also I'm aware that I'm telling a story that involves others, encompasses other points of view, especially with the childhood poems. For instance, my sister writes poems. She read one of my poems once and remarked, "I've wanted to write about that, too." So her poem may not yet be written, but I am aware that the story is hers, too, and that she may not tell it quite as I have. In that way I hope I make room for a dialogue.

In "Hunger," in the first section I refer to "we" and then move to "I," continuing with that voice until the "we" returns in the last section. The "we" in the first section is the collective of family, immediate community, but by the last section it has become the collective of nation and humanity as a whole, which is important, I think, because this hunger is an existential condition. We all have our hungers; they inform our lives, [End Page 293] our humanity in a basic sense. In this poem there is the conflict, I think, especially in the last section. The "I" reasserts itself at the end out of dissatisfaction and disagreement with the "we," this community (real or imagined) of "haves." For the "I" is decidedly a "have not."

DERRICOTTE: I'm interested in your use of "body" in your work--particularly in poems such as "Dorothy," "The Unintended Life," "Natural Occurrences," "First Sight," and "The Body." Are you saying something particular about the body as a young Black woman poet?

STRANGE: I have these notions of the body . . . I mean Black women's bodies are freighted with these immense

psycho-socio-historical connotations. I'm thinking of how the body has been our sign, the marker of our very beings, whether by the labor extracted from it, or the babies produced by it, the pleasure taken from it, the objectification of it, the commodification of it, the fetishization of it, and so on. So to speak of the body, as a Black woman, I would hope I am reclaiming it in some way.

DERRICOTTE: I'd also like you to address your relationship to the past. In certain poems--"The Stranger" and "Jimmy's First Cigarette," with its ghosts--one senses influences that are extremely meaningful, but not present. Do you think ancestors are important?

STRANGE: Ancestors are very important. "The Stranger" tells of a relative whom I've come to identify with, based on that one story about her. I imagine her as an artist, perhaps a thwarted one. In "Jimmy's," the setting is the countryside of Orangeburg County, South Carolina, my grandmother's place in the backwoods. I remember the air always feeling "thick" there, having this weight and presence. It seemed to me that I could feel history in that place, the history of family and of the South. It was a marvelous thing to me. And that "thickness," that pregnant quality to the air, that was the "traffic of ghosts."

DERRICOTTE: How did you come to this belief? What does it have to do with you as a poet?

STRANGE: I grew up with this belief. Among my family, as part of the Black Southern culture I grew up in, there's a strong connection to ancestors. And later when I studied different religions, particularly Yoruba, this belief was reinforced. One of my earliest memories as a child was of attending a funeral and witnessing the ritual of passing the most recently born child over the grave. I believe it was to make that connection of the line from those who had passed on to those who were still living, to connect the past to the future. I was reminded of that by Julie Dash's film "Daughters of the Dust"--which is set in the Sea Islands off South Carolina, and has as a central theme revering the ancestors--when the character Nana spoke of the "last of the old, first of the new." I never knew that much about our family line, just bits and stories here and there. Many of my forebears are shadowy, phantom figures, and I have a lot of curiosity about them. But I've always felt a connection to the past, not a mythic past, but the force of history, what has come before me. Perhaps my being a poet is in part a way of saying "this is what has made me."

DERRICOTTE: Ancestors seem to embody your interest in the spiritual. What ancestors are important, poetic ones and others? How are they important, and how do you keep them alive?

STRANGE: Black literary ancestors are especially important. Naming names is tricky because I'm sure to leave someone out. I go back to the slave narratives of Brent, Douglass, the speeches and essays of Sojourner Truth, Ida Wells Barnett, DuBois. Frances Harper. Langston Hughes. Jean Toomer. There are many . . . James Baldwin's and Audre Lorde's humility, their vision and spirit are sustaining. Ralph Ellison. Robert Hayden. . . .

My maternal grandmother had a profound influence on me. She didn't have much formal education, and the only things I remember seeing her read were her Bible and other religious materials. But she taught me that largeness of spirit is more important than any material wealth. She taught me the importance of struggle, how to embrace and overcome hardship. She taught me, above all, the importance of love, at a point in my life when I was in danger of becoming hardened with anger. She was a healing presence. So I feel blessed that she was a part of my life and I continue to celebrate her spirit.

And in the Dark Room we speak of having "living literary ancestors" who're very important. The influence of people like Toni Morrison and Yusef Komunyakaa on my own work is immeasurable. There are many artists, living and passed on, who've affected or influenced me--poets and writers such as Pablo Neruda, Kamau Brathwaite, Gwen-

dolyn Brooks, Derek Walcott, Rita Dove, Chinua Achebe, Wilson Harris, Helene Cixous, Marina Tsvetaeva, Anna Akhmatova, Bob Kaufman, Ntozake Shange, Toi Derricotte, Thylias Moss, Chana Bloch; musicians like Bob Marley, John Coltrane, Thelonius Monk, Amina Claudine Myers, Parliament/Funkadelic; visual artists Romare Bearden, Bettye and Alison Saar, Renee Stout, Ana Mendieta, David Hammons, Martin Puryear, William Johnson, Horace Pippin, Remedios Varo; Garth Fagan's choreography; filmmakers Akira Kurosawa, Ousmane Sembene, Charles Burnett, Julie Dash, Maya Deren, Frederico Fellini, Francois Truffaut, and others, of course. They've given me visions, ideas, solutions, hope. They've energized me. I'm always returning to them. I become transformed because of the contact, so that whatever I write carries something of them in it.

DERRICOTTE: Do you sense that your responsibilities and privileges are different today than they would have been 20 or 30 years ago?

STRANGE: I've certainly been privileged in ways that my parents were not. With education, for example, and with certain social and political freedoms. So, yes, I feel I have more responsibilities as a result. I think the social and political battles haven't lessened, have become subtler and more insidious; and with the rampages of poverty, violence, AIDS, and political conservatism, the prospects for the youth seem more grim even, so that agency is terribly important. In just one generation there've been such remarkable changes technologically, and I feel it's important to not get left [End Page 296] behind, to learn new strategies for survival, and to share what I know, through teaching, writing, however I can.

I feel a responsibility especially to my students, some of whom, due to the harsh circumstances of their young lives, have become cynical; some for whom the whole educational process they've been subjected to is stultifying and lacks significance. I try to show them that what's important is to discover their own passions--whatever is significant to their true selves, not what their peers emphasize, nor what their parents expect, nor what feels "safe," but whatever they truly care about and has meaning for them--and to explore and celebrate those things. Some are reluctant to express themselves or find it difficult. I want to help them discover how to do so. I want to help them become more knowledgeable, compassionate and committed people; to know our history so that they might better envision our future; to see and understand what's happening in their lives and to show them worlds (real and imagined) beyond what they know or find comfortable. I feel a great responsibility to keep alive in them a sense of possibility.

As a poet, I feel it important to honor certain traditions of the artist--that is, to bear witness and to speak with truth and clarity, or, as Ntozake Shange puts it, to "deal in honesty and primal response." Given the kinds of resistance and hostility that artists, especially artists of color and other "marginal" groups have met with in this society, the kind of policing and silencing we've been subjected to, and continue to be subjected to, the distrust and disregard that many people have for what we do, I feel a real responsibility to honor this identity of "poet." For me, that means, among other things, taking very seriously the notion of craft, which necessarily involves investigating the traditions of poetry, if only to break with them. It also means committing myself to what is often a very solitary and difficult enterprise, regardless of whether it brings material rewards or instant celebrity. Those things can be nice, but they don't have anything to do with craft. I want to create poems of significance, poems which have meaning for others as well as myself, essential poems which have truth and therefore have a kind of beauty. And that kind of poetry doesn't come without its price, without work and commitment.

DERRICOTTE: Do you have advice for young Black women poets writing today?

STRANGE: Live fearlessly, do what you need to do, and apply that to your writing. Be involved with others who support and sustain you and whom you can support and sustain.

DERRICOTTE: Do you belong to a community of writers? Is that important?

STRANGE: Yes, for me it has been crucial. The Dark Room has been a place where I can share similar struggles with writing with other Black people. It has been a way of overcoming isolation. It has been a place to read my work publicly and feel supported while doing so. It has been a place where I can support and nurture others. It has given me more immediate access to other young writers whose work I respect and admire. It has been a place to give and get feedback, to be criticized, to be talked about, in both good and bad ways; you know, all those things that help keep your feet on the ground!

I also feel that I'm part of a larger community--the many young writers I've come into contact with on the East Coast and in the Midwest. We're all aware of each other, and, wherever I am, I try to read and hear their work, to keep up with what's happening in these other communities--in Boston, Brooklyn, Harlem, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, Atlanta, and in DC...to have this kind of contact and relationship with my generation and younger writers is stimulating and exciting.

DERRICOTTE: Do you see yourself evolving in terms of form, writing more prose poems for example? Are you using other elements, traditional elements? Are you playing with form? If so, how? Why?

STRANGE: I'm not playing with form, in the sense that my style is experimental. I have turned to working with the prose poem lately, because I'm less interested in the rhythmic possibilities of the line right now. And it may be a natural move for me, because I've always preferred the freedom of free verse, where I would play more with syllabics than with meter. The prose poem feels more spacious to me. I'm still in a room, but it's a bigger room. I feel more comfortable taking strange leaps, making odd juxtapositions. These prose poems started out as a series of metaphors based on stories. Each one is, to paraphrase Grace Paley, "the story's story." I'm interested in the vignette and the fable, in the kinds of things Eduardo Galeano has done. So I see the form working in that way.

DERRICOTTE: There's often something in your poems that plays on expectations--the betrayal in "Jimmy's First Cigarette," the racist teacher who encourages in "Froggy's Class," in "Words During War," the "twisted, glowing wreckage / of their land like a lovely machine." Would you comment on the twists, the argument about what reality is, or the denial of one reality by another? Your poems are maybe containing several viewpoints of the same thing?

STRANGE: Yes, I believe reality always has a subjective aspect. I try not to deal in absolutes, because our experiences are so much more complex, complicated, and contradictory usually. I felt it important to give, in "Froggy's Class," a more complex portrait of the teacher because she was just that. She was terribly narrow-minded, yet she reached beyond that at times. And that sinister image in the last line of "Words During War" is meant to convey an irony about war and its science of destruction. I imagined how the victors might see a perverse artistry in the efficiency of their weaponry, so that even the devastation they caused has a "beauty" to it. They have ceased to see the humans involved. The twists and multiple viewpoints reflect my concern with seeing things in all their messiness and complexity. And I want to highlight this, or at least recognize it, in order to avoid a kind of emotional complacency.

Contributors

Intisar Abioto grew up in Memphis, TN. She attends Wesleyan University in Connecticut, yet spent her freshman year at Spelman College. She is currently studying the impact of the works of the late children's book author Virginia Hamilton on the dream states of her generation. In her life she wants to fly.

Kirstin Bryrd is a native of McClellanville, SC and has lived in Virginia since the age of twelve. Her interests include poetry, music, fashion design, philosophy, and studying the day-to-day dynamics of social psychology in her environment. She graduated from Spelman in 2005.

James E. Cammon is a senior at Morehouse College majoring in English, and often daydreams of having a minor. He also ponders daily on having something witty yet insightful to insert during quiet moments of conversation. Whenever he grows up, he'll want to be young again.

Toi Derricotte is Associate Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh, where she teaches courses in creative writing. She is author of three volumes of poems: *The Empress of the Death House* (1978), *Natural Birth* (1983), and *Captivity* (1989). *The Black Notebooks,* her autobiographical prose, was published by W.W. Norton in 1997. She was born in Detroit.

Michael Johnson is Professor of English and chair of the Department of English at the University of Kansas and author of *The New Journalism.*

Teresa Leggard is a graduate of Spelman College -class of 2005. She is a writer of poetry, and would like to explore other genres in the future. Right now she's an editor at Hallmark Cards in Kansas City, and a recovering procrastinator. She returns to Atlanta at every opportunity.

Joanne Lowery's poems have appeared in many literary magazins, including *Birmingham Poetry Review, 5 Am, Passages North, Atlant Review, One Trick Pony,* and *Poetry East.* Her chapbook *Diorama* was the winner of the *Poems & Plays* Thirteenth Annual Tennessee Chapbook Prize. She lives in Michigan

Imani Marshall is a graduating senior English major/Creative Writing minor at Spelman College. Hailing from the Bronx, New York, she has enjoyed expressing herself through writing since before she can remember. For her, writing is a channel through which she connects with the outside world.

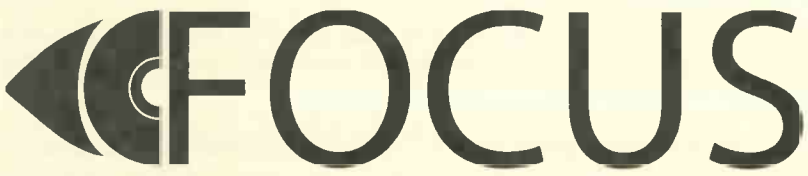
Paule Marshall grew up in Brooklyn during the Depression and graduated from Booklyn College in 1953. She is a MacArthur Fellow and won the Dos Passos Prize for literature. She currently holds the Helen Gould Sheppard Chair of Literature and Culture at New York University. She is the author of six acclaimed novels and numerous works of short fiction.

Franz Nueman writes beautiful novels and short stories from Long Beach, CA.

Brittny Ray is a natural haired negro woman from Texas. Her work has been featured in Static magazine as well as Agnes Scott's Annual Festival magazine and Spelman's online literary journal L.I.N.K.E.D. She is glad to say her work slowly continues to improve. She hopes that by the time you read this she has learned she has been granted a Fulbright so that she may help bring the gift and curse of English to the world. She wishes to be a bad mutherprofessor one day like her many mentors at Spelman. She enjoys shoes, kittens and glass. She is not a vegetarian.

Frederick Salyers, now a student at Morehouse, is a varied artist concerning the forms of writing, dance, and photography. his career aspirations are to be an educator, and eventually found his own school of the arts. Salyers also aspires to continue his artistic endeavors throughout his life, gaining experience as a photographer, as well as publishing a novel in the next 5 years.

Sharan Strange grew up in the Funky South, and has returned after a long hiatus to teach creative writing at Spelman College. Her colloecion of poems, Ash, won the 2000 Barnard New Women Poets Prize, and she is widely anthologized [and loved].



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