

## FALL 2009 ORLANDO POETRY PRIZE WINNER



**MARY ELLEN SANGER** lived for 17 years in Mexico, and has published short stories and poems in Spanish and English in several Mexican journals, including *Luna Zeta* and *Zocalo*. Her essay "A Grammar of Place" was anthologized in *Mexico, a Love Story*, published in 2006 by Seal Press. She was a finalist for the Room of Her Own Foundation "Gift of Freedom" in 2007, and was awarded a writers' grant from the Barbara Deming Memorial Fund/Money for Women. She is currently writing a collection of stories inspired by the women of Ixcotel State Penitentiary in Oaxaca, Mexico where she spent 33 days and nights falsely imprisoned in the fall of 2003.

Mary Ellen leads a creative writing workshop for Mexican immigrants through New York Writers Coalition ([www.loslunes.wordpress.com](http://www.loslunes.wordpress.com)), another for people in the early stages of Alzheimer's, and volunteers with PEN American Center on the fiction committee for their annual Prison Writing prize, and as a mentor in the Prison Writing Program.

### "Secrets of a Wooden Saint in a Church in Jalcomulco"

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The mothers look into the lake and see the whole sky.

They believe I can keep their children safe.

They come, photos snipped to stamp size, and pin their daughters' faces on my robe.

Carmela, Rosamaria, Inocencia, Flor.

They come with a lock of their sons' hair, a snip from his work shirt, a prayer.

Roberto, Marco Antonio, Anastasio, Gil.

The mothers come with snot and tears

to beseech me

to caress my feet

to leave me field flowers

to light a votive

to festoon me with the lives of

so many young men and women.

They tack them into the flesh of my arms.

They sneak them into the brocade folds of my vestment.

They fasten them with metal twist-ties to my staff.

Yes, I will send your prayer to the one and only.

Yes, I will align the angels.

Yes, I will call their names in the night when others sleep.

But I cannot make the desert cool,

Or the great river quiet.

I cannot make *el coyote* less cruel,

Or *la migra* blind.

The mothers, they look into the lake and see the whole sky.

They look at a wooden saint on a splintered shelf in a church in Jalcomulco  
and see a warm bed in Milwaukee , a meal of *enchiladas con crema* in Atlanta.

And sometimes a mother comes to spit at me,

to take back a lock of cat-brown hair cut from her son while he slept  
on the night before he took two pairs of jeans in a backpack to *el Norte*  
saying he'd be back soon, he loved her, he'd call.

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## FALL 2009 ORLANDO POETRY FINALIST EXCERPTS:

BRIDGETT JENSEN, "EATING CROW"

It would be the only time  
he brought food to the table,  
and he almost skipped,  
dancing up behind her  
as he flourished the rose-  
colored napkin over her shoulder,  
and onto her lap with his right hand  
while serving the dead crow  
with his left.

TERESA STORES, "IF MY FATHER WERE MR. ROGERS"

. . . He might write,  
You are a very special person, and I like

you  
exactly as you

are, and, for that father, I would change all  
my flights on this day of his death, to call

upon the neighborhood next-door  
to this business in Baltimore,

and visit the Smithsonian,  
just to worship his cardigan.

JARI THYMIAN, "A WOMAN CAN'T BE TRUSTED"

She becomes the feral cat just before dark  
who rolls in the center of the road until  
moments before wheels and lights  
zoom down the street. She is not sure if  
she's going dead or daft  
from all the irony blood.  
She doesn't know who she is  
without a mother she lived against.

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FALL 2009 *ORLANDO* NONFICTION PRIZE WINNER



**PATRICIA HENRITZE** is a writer and theater artist whose collaborations have taken her from Atlanta to Chicago to Budapest. She has received grants from Theater Communications Group, Fulton County Arts Council and Poets&Writers, Inc. Currently, Patricia is Artist-in-Residence at Gardenhouse Dance, teaches theater at Clayton State University and is a member of Working Title Playwrights.

*Learning to Talk*

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## Truth is for Sissies

My father never uttered three honest words in a row. He lied like it was a gift, like it was his right, like there was no difference between truth and lies and it was petty and small minded to think otherwise. He taught me to parcel out truth in the smallest increments - grains of truth, layered between lies to confound the listener and make them doubt themselves. Or maybe I'm lying, because fathers don't do the things I want to write about. They don't pour bright capsules of speed into their daughter's young palms or visit pornographers who gaze through boozy eyes, as if you were a pastry and they were starving men. Father's don't give grocery money to the tailor and eat steak when their kids can't afford to eat at all. It's preposterous to think that a father, the defender of the family, the symbol of God himself on earth would let a child float off into oblivion when he could easily reach out and simply save her.

Besides, I can't remember what the truth was; who can say what really happened? I dreamt my life into being everyday and invented my memories until I'm not interested in the 'real' story anyway. Did she try to kill me? Did he bring the thief to dinner? Did they wash my hair in a waterfall? Did I jump off the roof to prove I wasn't afraid?

Following in my father's sly footsteps, I became a liar, too. Not gifted, perhaps, but I was thirty before I could answer a simple question like "What did you have for lunch?" I would tell you tuna when it had clearly been egg salad. It wasn't any of your damn business, anyway. The trick, and this I learned from Daddy, is to be committed. Never give it up. No matter how they pound with accusations, stand your ground, because a normal person will not believe that another human being whom they love and trust could continue to lie to them - look straight into their wide eyes, and swear it was TRUTH. This will work every time, in every situation, with mothers, lovers, teachers and even cops. Police are people, too. And even if convicted, maintain your innocence and you will be forgiven. My father was a lawyer and the first man in the state of Georgia to ever be readmitted to the bar after having served federal time for a felony. We were all so proud.

In this upside down world I learned to live my real life inside art, embracing it with its easy lies. I loved music because it sang a kind of truth that wasn't binding or substantiated. There's no proof for a song or a short story, only an authenticity borne of the singer or writer. Guarded in all other things, I abandoned myself to lyrics, movies and books. I spent my days wrapped up in novel after novel, where every single false word rang true.

But I myself couldn't say or write a word. I couldn't speak up in a crowd, I couldn't make a toast or answer a question because it might reveal something about me or him or them, and a life of deception requires vigilance. Thank-you notes were too personal and letters impossibly long and detailed - out of the question for someone private to the point of phobia. My handwriting, with its lurching letters askew on the pages, painfully revealed too much and I took to sending postcards. Short missives, with the fewest words scratched across the back, were left to speak through the eloquent images on the front. Announcing their arrival with famous art or evocative photos, I chose them to be oblique, but brilliant, and the pictures told you everything you were ever going to know about me. Being knowable is a liability.

My father taught me to laugh, to dance, to charm, to talk and talk and talk. And never say a word.

Hide Your Stash - Here come the Feds.

In September 1974, the FBI entered an office building in downtown Atlanta where my father practiced law. They slipped quietly past his secretary in their dark suits with warrants in hand, slapped handcuffs on his wrists and confiscated a square package sitting on the edge of his desk. Then they took him straight to jail and booked him for the importation of a controlled substance. The substance was a pound of golden, aromatic hashish mailed from Holland. It had crossed the ocean layered between delicate Dutch chocolates. The package had been tracked since entering the country a few days prior having been mailed in Amsterdam by a man my father once represented.

In those days, before mandatory sentencing, an attorney could make a good living defending drug dealers. In fact, he could have a damn good time doing it. The dealers paid in cash or motorcycles or, sometimes, drugs. The money flowed and the good times rolled. Sometimes they rocked.

I imagine my father's ride down the elevator, dashinglly rumped in one of his striped suits, his hands snugly cuffed behind him. He'd started drinking again, after fifteen years of abstinence, and the arrest was the culmination of the thousand "screw you's" he'd flung at everyone around him. He'd begun to feel dangerous to me.

I wasn't afraid he would intentionally hurt me, but he couldn't or wouldn't protect me from the fallout of his recklessness. Madness ricocheted around him and it seemed inevitable that anyone standing nearby would end up taking a bullet for him. With dark Irish good looks, he was impervious to the consequences that splattered those of us closest to him, but this time, headed for jail, he seemed good and caught.

A long, long time before the day they led my father away, my mother, my brother and I had indulged in a period of great hope. When my father moved into the building they eventually dragged him out of in handcuffs, it was a great day. We went to see the offices for the first time and my brother and I rode up and down on the elevators, hopping with glee at every floor. I felt shy about the grandeur of the shining office building, knowing, perhaps, that we were imposters and bound to be found out. The building still stands out in the Atlanta skyline with its strange mix of curved concrete and wide windows. It reminded me of a pagoda. It was brand new when my father rented suite 1313 to start his own practice. He was given a substantial break on the rent due to the unlucky numbers 1313. I've often thought of those numbers since. Most buildings today don't even have a thirteenth floor, but my father, who didn't believe in that particular superstition, gladly took the bargain. He reveled in his large office overlooking downtown. He loved being a lawyer.

We had the kind of hope lots of people had in the sixties: that everything was going to be all right, that we would drive a new car, that there would be no more suffering and that our house would be clean - literally and metaphorically. The Kennedys were in The White House and my mother went every week to the hairdresser and returned curled and dried until her hair itself looked like the stiff pillbox hats that the young Mrs. Kennedy wore. We went proudly to the Laundromat; my mother had done all the washing - sheets, towels and clothes - by hand until then.

I went to grammar school, scrubbed and eager, but crushed that I couldn't be parochial like my cousins with their uniforms and mysterious rituals. My father was as fallen as a Catholic could be and there would be no Sister Mary to teach me the enigmatic prayers my cousins recited rapidly each night, droning the words. I admired the great speed with which they prayed - chanting their prayers with heads bowed, their faces blank and lips flying. My school was called Garden Hills. It had a large, wide yard in

the front encircled by a long drive. I was pleased with it. The name rolled gently off my tongue: Garden Hills Elementary. Who wouldn't be safe there?

Two kids, a father in a suit - we were like a TV family. Everything was perfect, but we hadn't gotten there easily (and wouldn't stay there for long.)

In the old days you didn't need a college education to become a lawyer. The phrase "read for the law" meant just that and if you could pass the bar, you could become an attorney. My father never graduated high school; he dropped out at seventeen to join the Marines. After he returned from the Pacific, he briefly attended William and Mary College, or at least signed up for some classes. However, he was not the normal kid who yearned for knowledge and a higher education on the GI bill. He wanted to drink.

My father spent his nights in dark bars, living his own Raymond Chandler novel full of tough guys and broads. He went to boxing matches. He read great books - from Bertrand Russell to Ford Maddox Ford to W. H. Auden - but had no interest in regurgitating his thoughts in a classroom. Never capable of doing anything that required discipline for long, and with a deep hatred of authority born of his Catholic School years, he quickly forgot about college and started laying bricks. Enamored of himself as a blue collar scholar, he lay bricks by day and drank by night. Oh, and somewhere in there he married my mother. She casts a small shadow on this time. She was virtually captive in a small house with a toddler and a belly full of her second child: me.

Without money for groceries, a telephone or a car, she sat at home on those long nights waiting for the contractions to announce my entrance into the world and wondering if my father would come home at all. Mostly he didn't. When I finally did arrive, my mom took my brother by the hand and walked to a neighbor's house. She didn't really know the family, but they had a phone. She called the bar where she knew my father would be. *It's time*. He drove home, picked her up and dropped her off at the front door of the hospital. Then he went back to the bar. No doubt she strode into the hospital, lovely in spite of her condition. No doubt he garnered a few free drinks that night, aglow in the glory of pending fatherhood while my brother slept at a stranger's house. He'd been left at the neighbor's and my father wouldn't retrieve him till the next day.

But all that was before my father stopped drinking, before he had divorced and married my mother again, before he buckled up or down and passed the bar and long before we embarked on our own pursuit of Camelot, with our pillbox hair, two floor apartment and dreams to match our new shoes.

When my father was arrested, I was at college. My grandfather, my father's father, had left my brother and me some money when he died; knowing that leaving it to my father would have been the equivalent of setting it on fire. With that money and a scholarship, I headed north to school. I was free. The whole summer before college, I took deep breaths as if to relish my goodbye, breathing in the air of my past and exhaling it forever. *North*. My father insisted on driving me up. He was the only person who seemed excited to see me headed out into the world.

My aunts and uncles, barely looking at me, asked the air why I couldn't go to school in Georgia; I was both extravagant and irresponsible. After all, who would care for my long divorced, beautiful, martyred mother? It had always clearly been my job to act as daughter/husband/nurse/confidante to my mother. I don't know whether my family thought that it was my duty or whether they believed that I flourished under the system, but I do know that nothing was as foremost in my mind when searching for

colleges as distance from Georgia. It had to be far enough that I could live unfettered by the demands of southern daughterhood. *Away.* I had made my escape.

On the day my father came to pick me up for the long drive to New York, my mother looked at me with her orphan eyes, as if to say "I'll die," as if to say "don't go," but aloud she whispered "Call me when you get there."

It's hard to imagine how my mother, straitlaced and puritanical, ever let me in the car with that man. Of course, I was eighteen and wasn't asking permission. Gazing at him through the open car door, he was already so high he was almost blurry. He pulsed with a kind of Dr. Gonzo vibrancy and I surrendered to it as I threw my duffle bag into the trunk. *Here we go.* He poured some speed into my hand as we pulled away from my house, my mother waving from the stoop of our now empty house. I took a pill. *And we're off.* We drove all the way to Delaware where I got drunk on daiquiris and spent my first night in a hotel room alone. The TV in my father's room buzzed through the walls between our rooms. I got in the shower and washed myself sober enough to sleep. Later that semester, I got a clipping in the mail that my father had been arrested. The details were all there: the Feds, the drugs, the pending prison sentence.

I was living in an old Tudor house that had been reborn as an all-girl dorm. Thirteen freshman women lived there. Cut loose from home, we drank bourbon on our single beds and danced in our PJs at night - every man's fantasy come to life. With leaded glass windows and a grand piano in the living room, it was as far as you could get from anything I had ever known - but not far enough to keep news of home from finding me. *Away.*

Sitting in the French windows, I wept with annoyance. In the doorway was a nice boy (well, not too nice) who had come to take me on a picnic. He had a bottle of wine and sandwiches in a basket and I shooed him distractedly. The clipping lay on the floor. It had been too hard to call and tell me so someone had simply dropped the article into the mail. It might have been my mother. *Don't go.*

Of course, I knew immediately that it wasn't some misunderstanding. My father wasn't persecuted or wrongfully accused. I wouldn't stand on the courthouse steps, weeping in dismay. The road he had been traveling always ends this way: he'd go to jail, he'd be disbarred. I had a friend, many years later, who practiced law; she too was a defense attorney and they are a special breed of individual. Living in the nether world between the law and crime, they resemble gamblers and cowboys more than business folk. When I asked her how her law practice was going after the death of her child and her divorce, she grinned at me. "I flew that plane into the side of a mountain," she told me, referring to the destruction of her practice with a sort of wild pride. Ah, I thought: I know that mountain well.

From the moment my father was arrested it was the beginning of a new period for our family. We didn't talk about it. Fractured and isolated, we drifted along not noticing how far it took us from one another until we found ourselves miles and miles apart. I remember sitting on that window sill, looking out the dorm window at the sky, crisp and blue, and every detail of that time is etched clearly and forever in my mind.

### Dark Comfort

I was always afraid of the dark. As a child I lay in bed after being gently tucked in, not resting but waiting - waiting for the creak of the steps, the stirring beneath the bed, the strained breathing of the

soulless man who lingered patiently in the hall closet or the cellar or the bushes just outside the door ready to grab me. Once in his massive grip, he'd kill me and then slip back into the dark night, unnoticed.

We lived near the railroad tracks. "There's the train," my mother would smile and I would nod, comforted by the swaying sound of the endless cars. In the house where we lived during the Daddy Years, the years when I remember my father actually coming home most nights, you could see the train tracks from the front or back doors. The trains ran all night long, chugging through the dark anonymously. It was my job was to walk the dog for the last time in the evening and I paced, terrified, right outside our front door. Across the footbridge and up the hill lay the tracks with shadowy figures who wandered from North to South along the rails. Worse than the silent, empty tracks and their promise of hoboes and murderous thieves was the sound of the train moving slowly through the night when I was outside. The trains would slow down, sometimes, when passing along this stretch of track and they'd roll by forever, car after car emerging and then disappearing into the deep woods on the other side of the road.

Standing in the yard, the leash in my hand, the dog always barking at something just beyond my sight, I envisioned caskets sliding off the freight trains like old Dracula movies. I was convinced that Dracula and Wolf Man were both real and I lived my young life somewhere between terror and passion for these creatures. The casket, I was sure, would slide to the ground in the moonlight. A pale hand would slip out from the satiny inside and push open the top to reveal the vampire. Escaped and hungry, this monster would open his red eyes, able to sense, to smell a young girl with her clean, damp hair on a still summer night. The dog wouldn't stop barking. The rhythmic hum of cicadas hypnotized me. I trembled with fear and anticipation as I broke free from my trance and dragged that damn dog back inside. I listened to the lock click behind me. My back against the door, my palms sweaty, the living room was glowing and warm. My mother glanced up from her reading. *There's the train.*

Upstairs in my room, my own room, I would look out the window and play my radio, hoping to surrender to sleep even as I fought it. I had rituals. I would leave the window open in case Peter Pan came by - just an inch or so - hoping we would fly away together. I didn't believe in tooth fairies or fat bearded men at Christmas, but flying boys who promised freedom were worth the small effort of an open window. After raising it just enough for Peter's strong fingers to reach in, I would wait for my favorite song to play on the radio. Willing myself to sleep while it spun around for a few short minutes, I'd hear the train coming and let it rock me safely asleep inside the house and away from silky caskets and grinding metal wheels.

One night, when I was afraid, my father came in and sat beside me in the big metal bed and I told him. *I'm afraid.* The soapy scent of his cheek was close in the darkness. He always smelled clean shaven and perhaps he was. Most likely he was on his way out somewhere; he was always in motion and leaving was his favorite form of movement. With unruly clients a good excuse for disappearing at any hour of the night or day, he dashed in and out of lives daily, weekly, and eventually yearly. He sat next to me on the bed, smiling and handsome, freshly showered, his pants creased and his shirt starched. He held my hand, called me pet names and tried to soothe my fears before he left us. "There's nothing to be afraid of," he said, brushing the hair away from my face. "No one's going to come in and hurt you. Don't worry." He smiled. Leaning in toward me, he spoke in a smooth whisper, telling me, "Ninety-nine percent of the people who are murdered are murdered by someone close to them, someone they know and trust." Patting me on the head, he walked downstairs and out the front door. Thanks Dad, thanks. I feel better.

## Gold Out Of Straw: Jack spins his truth

Everything from my father's arrest is etched clearly in my mind. Or is it? My father's friend, whom I'll call Jack, had represented him at the trial. In fact, the case had gone all the way to the Supreme Court before they were finally defeated and my father headed off to prison. He was sentenced to 7 or 8 years, although in the end he served less than three. So, I'm talking to Jack and telling him what I remember from that time, when he starts laughing, "Not Amsterdam, you've got the A right. It was Afghanistan." Afghanistan? "Yeah, and your father had nothing to do with it. Nothing. He really wasn't guilty of anything. Just some guy he knew mailed the thing to him without telling him. He never even opened it." Then exactly what do I remember? Not Amsterdam?

Jack is one of my father's oldest friends, possibly his only real friend. Many folks had come and gone but Jack was the only person who seemed to survive knowing my father without having it end badly. My father tossed dynamite behind him as he moved through his life, blowing up bridges without looking back. He rarely held a grudge and seemed dismayed that other people did, even those whose lives he had carelessly dismantled. To say my father was difficult doesn't quite give the flavor of the situation. I always tell people "My father may not be conventional, but when the chips are down, whenever the shit really hits the fan, whenever I desperately need someone to turn to, you can always count on my dad to *let you down completely.*" My brother likes that joke. Jack somehow seems to have avoided the bitterness that accompanies most people's memories of my father.

When I met Jack, he was married to his first wife and I was madly in love with her. I wanted to be her. She was *so* not southern. She put my father down in joking asides as she breezed by and argued with him about books. He hardly ever talked to her like she was an idiot. She and Jack lived around the corner from my father and one of his wives: the third one. I would babysit my two-year-old half-sister while they all went out for steaks, which was what people ate when they went out in those days. I'd smoke a joint from my father's stash (which he kept ill-hidden in his sock drawer) and crank up Simon and Garfunkle on the large stereo. I'd dance all night with the baby on my hip, afraid to turn off the music because of what I might hear outside in their dark, looming yard. It was a happy time, except for my father's other mistresses, my mother's depression and the rumblings of the future debacles.

Now, a lifetime later, Jack has troubles of his own and has been disbarred. He brushes it off when I asked him about it on the phone, but when you read the details on the Internet it sounds pretty serious. Nerves of steel, those cowboy attorneys; he laughs at his own folly. "I've got most of that straightened out," he promises as we're making plans to meet for lunch.

"This is what happened," he tells me. "It wasn't the Feds, it was Postal. The Postal guys came in. They delivered the package and left it on the secretary's desk. She took it into your dad's office and put it on his desk - it was addressed to him by this guy he'd represented and gotten off and the guy had mailed it from Afghanistan. Your dad probably knew something was up, so he took the package off his desk, and dropped it off on the front desk again and left the building. A couple of minutes later, the Postal guys came in, handcuffed the secretary, then drug her off and booked her." Okay. It was sometime later that my father was arrested, after his secretary had been cuffed and humiliated. There was no dramatic scene in the elevator as I had always imagined. Hearing this story, some of it rang true to me. It nudged my memories and they began to resettle in Jack's version. Evidently things had shifted and rearranged in my mind over time. Facts had mingled; separate events had melded to become a composite. Now, as Jack began to straighten me out on certain facts, I remember that the secretary

never forgave my father for getting her involved and happily sealed his coffin at the trial. Of course, all she had to do was tell the truth and he was a goner. The new information prods my lazy brain and I can see memories reemerging through a dusty, sepia drenched past. Jack was there at the time and I know his account is correct. How could I have forgotten such important facts?

### Snapshots from the Other Life

#### *Vigilance*

My mother locks all the doors. And windows. On her knees, she peers into the oven to find a flame. She sniffs for danger and holds her hand beneath the kitchen faucet, hunting down drips and danger. What if there's a leak? She unplugs things - toasters, percolators, lamps and even TVs just in case: they could explode. Convinced of a room's safety, she strolls out, popping back in to surprise the unruly appliances. They might come alive when you're not looking - like the Land of Misfit Toys - and begin to burn and fume, killing us all in our sleep. If we could sleep. Windows, already locked, are nailed shut, and our old car is surveilled through sweeping blinds - my mother daring the engine to sputter and start on its own in defiance of her vigilance. *Not tonight.* With the whole world locked and secure, she sits in the dark, smokes a cigarette and falls asleep in her chair. Year after year.

#### *My Mother in Love*

Late at night the phone rings and I know it's him. Only my father calls after we're in bed. I've never met him; my parents divorced when I was six months old. I'm sleeping with my mother. We have only one bedroom and my brother is tucked away in it with model airplanes dangling from the ceiling and boxes of Tinker Toys crowding the floor. My mother and I are on a pull-out underneath the bay window in the wide living room. The moonlight splashes the walls and I can see everything. She rises at the sound of the phone. Down the hall, through the arched door - my mother is whispering now - the bright dot of her cigarette leads me to her in the dim kitchen. I stand in the hallway, three years old, silent in my bare feet. She inhales. The tip burns orange as she draws deeply and my mother laughs out loud like a young girl. She speaks in a voice she saves for him. Although I've never met my father, I know him. He's the man who calls in the dark.

#### *The Bulrushes*

We walk across the field, my mother, her mother and I. Three generations of quiet company on a hot summer afternoon. Slicing through the tall hay, we swish along as it parts just enough for us to pass and then closes the path behind us. The golden sea grows up as high as my head. Bugs and heat throb in the air around us. I keep my mouth shut so nothing flies in. The walking stick my mother swings ahead of her is taller than I and as big around as my arm. It protects us from the copperheads and rattlesnakes. The noise in the hay, as the stick leads us forward, warns the snakes and other critters of our approach. *They're more afraid of you than you are of them.* My grandmother carries mismatched towels and hums mindlessly, hopping a step now and then to the songs that never stop playing in her head. She dances a turn and catches up to us as we make our way toward the rumbling creek to bathe.

Each year we build a dam - messy and ill-constructed. The slick rocks are piled high by children's hands; the dam holds just enough clear water for us to wash and play. On one side of the creek a heavy rock is wrapped in wire. The other end of the wire is twisted around the branch of a deep green hemlock tree that grows on the edge of the bank. The fluttering pine creates a curtain to ensure our privacy from

the dirt road that winds along the other side of the creek. Cars rolling down the gravelly drive are rare, but when they do pass we stop like deer in the forest, alert and still, invisible in our bathing hole. My grandmother sits naked on a warm rock that's as round and smooth as she. Her body, speckled with auburn freckles, is white as fine china. I'm fascinated by her breasts which hang all the way to her waist. She's fat and her skin is loose, but she's famous for her showgirl legs which stretch out from beneath her voluminous belly tapering off into slim ankles and perfect, pretty feet. My mother is dark-haired and muscular in contrast to my grandmother's softness. They soap me up until I'm covered, slippery as a fish, and I dive under the freezing mountain water and come up clean.

### *The Burn*

"Your father ought not of done your mother that way," is all my grandmother says. He's everything a man should be in her eyes: handsome and attentive to her. They flirt and dance, and his betrayal takes her utterly by surprise. His dishonor smolders inside me as if I had done the deeds myself.

### *Our Rememberers*

"I was never naked," my mother insists, sitting in her chair, working a crossword puzzle. Without her false teeth she looks like a sweet, wrinkled baby and talks with a pouty lisp. "Maybe in my bathing suit," she concedes, but I remember her body, strong-legged and shiny with water. But I don't argue. Shrunken and lost in the big chair across from me, my mother doesn't meet my gaze. "I was never naked," she says again, then pauses. I sit quietly looking out the windows of her tiny apartment. She never goes outside. "Then again, you remember everything," she says, "My forgetterer is better than my rememberer. You remember everything."

"I don't remember anything," my brother says, "And I don't want to."

### Say What? The Supreme Court.

Somewhere in my bookcases, tucked between god-knows-what is a slim volume from the Supreme Court of the United States with my father's name on it. Every appeal gets its own booklet that outlines the original case, details the appeal and then discloses the decision. Even though I haven't seen it for years, I'm sure it's there - it's not the kind of thing you toss away. After several minutes I find it in my office on the top shelf among my old book collection. It's a faded, thin blue tome. With water marks drizzled down the front and a broken spine, the frail book looks like a refugee from a hard life. It is.

IN THE Supreme Court of the United States, October Term, 1975. Walter Henritze, Jr.  
*Petitioner*. PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE FIFTH CIRCUIT.

Certiorari is simply another fancy word for writ, I think. Dictionary.com defines it as, "A writ from a higher court to a lower one requesting a transcript of the proceedings of a case for review." Whatever the particulars, and I'm not a lawyer on purpose, I'm glad to see the book again.

Jack is listed there on the front along with his address in the Healy building, which he had informed me was where my father had his office when he was arrested. It wasn't in the tall pagoda building of my childhood, he assured me. Besides, during the pagoda years the office had been run by an ex-Playboy Bunny and she was not the one who had been arrested. I remembered her well; she wore her platinum hair piled a foot high and it easily exceeded her skirt in square inches. Wrong secretary, wrong building -

there was almost nothing of this momentous time in my life that I had remembered correctly. Thank god for Jack and this book. Now I know what really happened.

Well, not exactly. When I begin reading the appeal, the first word that jumps out at me is Amsterdam. It *was* Amsterdam. Even Jack, the Attorney of Record on the case, had updated his memory into a more modern reading. Afghanistan is much more sinister in the days since 9/11 and Jack has somehow converted his memories into our current lexicon for danger and drugs. I was right. Reading further, I notice another discrepancy:

On the following day, September 12, 1974 (Pops had driven me to college a week before) DEA Agents Dorsett and Faz entered the premises at 2311 Bank of Georgia Building, between 9:50 and 10:00.

Okay. No Postal guys, DEA Agents went into the building. They're Feds of a sort and to top it all off, the Bank of Georgia Building *is the pagoda*. However, most what follows seems to fit Jack's description.

In the interim, the defendant had proceeded down stairs to the lobby of the Bank of Georgia building (*pagoda!*) He had been followed down stairs by Agent Williams. Defendant was searched after being apprised of the fact that a search warrant was existent. Nothing being found on him, he left to go to the Federal District Court.

Left to go to the District Court? I have to smile at the idea of my father leaving the DEA agents behind, stepping out into Marietta Street on a September morning. He must have reveled in that day of freedom, running all the way down to the courthouse. He must've gotten really drunk that night.

After that, of course, everything hit the fan. My father gathered his whole life into a pile and set it ablaze while we danced around the bonfire. He had a contest with himself to see how much a man could lose, topping his own personal best over and over. The only work he did was on his appeals and the endless motions that were sent to every court in the country right up to the Supreme Court - a mad lawyer's dash to the finish line. We all stayed stoned just to survive.

Midday, you could find him with his girlfriend, the shades drawn, the music pounding the speakers. We would sit all afternoon, listening to the same song over and over, while he pontificated on his philosophies of life, pronouncing all others fools and himself a hero. I'd sit in the dark with a cold beer and he'd tell me how much alike we were. It's not exactly what a young woman wants to hear from a man who's about to go to prison.

### Denial of Motion

"I never worry about you," my father said to me. Bobbing atop an ocean of secrets I stay easily afloat - *I know your mistress has blue eyes: I won't tell. I know you check the stove all day: I won't tell.* I'm the port in their self-created storms, their pint-sized confessor. The opposite of an Oracle, they come to me for silence. There's only one catch. You can't teach a child to lie and expect her to be honest. You can't bind her to your secrets and be surprised that she craves freedom. With no call for help, no hint of distress, I began to float away.

No one seemed to notice; no one worried. I was the 'happy child' and it didn't take much to keep that illusion going. Or maybe it wasn't an illusion. Split in two, I could be the happy child *and* the other

girl who lived along side her. My duality kept me alive. The well behaved, happy little girl kept people from looking too closely. I was a magic mirror; you could gaze at me and see only yourself smiling back. My soothing voice promised, like a little doll with blind eyes, that all was well. *Everything is going to be all right.*

It must have been very reassuring, but maybe parents aren't meant to be reassured. Maybe children aren't meant to be so well behaved. They should make a ruckus. They should be annoying. They should ask for help. Teaching yourself to tie your own shoes isn't precociousness; it's the act of a child with her eyes wide open. If you're on your own, you'd better figure out how to keep your shoes on.

In the end, the petition was denied. All the motions were denied. My father served two and a half years. People who've never been to jail always say "*just* two and a half years." Anyone who has been to jail, whistles and shakes their head. He disappeared one day, weeks before he was to report to the prison to begin his sentence, and I never knew where he went. Three weeks after he got to prison he married a woman I hardly knew, although I had met her a few mistresses ago. "Married men get out first," he told me.

Opening the Supreme Court booklet from my father's case, some papers fall out into my lap. One is my father's Order of Restoration of Civil and Political Rights Commutation from the State Board of Pardons and Paroles. A legal length sheet of crusty paper, it's dated and sealed for March 28th, 1980. He was fifty-six years old. I hold the stained paper and scrutinize it, searching for him there. Was this a good day, when he got this in the mail? Or do you go down to the court house and pick up your Restoration of Civil Rights? It was years before he was readmitted to the bar, but this must have meant he could vote again. There was an election that year, 1980. Carter vs. Reagan - we all know how that went. My father, a yellow dog Democrat, would have voted for our homeboy Jimmy.

I can see him, sauntering in to cast his ballot, winking at the old lady volunteers who marked off his name. They'd have murmured and blushed as he floated by them, but then didn't women always? To this day I run into women who have stories to tell me about my father. Their eyes flutter - young, old, black, white, gay or straight - and they whisper to me about the red, red roses he sent or some other kindness he extended. Their warm, throaty memories are recounted to me conspiratorially, as if we all knew what a saint he was. He was always kindest to strangers.

Reading the Supreme Court account of my father's initial trial, there's a page that summarizes testimony relating to whether or not he had prior knowledge of the infamous package full of hashish. Two women give conflicting testimony; each swears they had lunch with him that day and each swears the other wasn't there at all. I have to laugh: A court room cat fight. One of the names clangs a long silent bell: a married mistress? Was she lying? Or was the other? Or did they both have lunch (or more) with him that day? Did he manage to slide between tables and charm them into thinking they were the only ones - a gigolo ninja, moving unseen from breathless woman to breathless woman?

Putting down the book, I realize there is no more truth inside it than in Jack's memories. Or mine. Who knows which woman tells the truth? Maybe neither. There is no past to be discovered or verified. There are only memories and perhaps my mother is right: our forgetters are better than our rememberers. Did I ever sit on that window sill? Was there really a clipping in a letter? Or did someone call and sensibly give me the news that my father was going to jail. Even if I caught those moments on film, they wouldn't necessarily be more decipherable. Viewed through a lens, the picture is still

misleading. What's taking place just outside the photo or behind the camera? Why does the Mona Lisa smile?

There is no single truth to find. As carefully as an archaeologist, I sift through my father's history, my history, piecing it together, tenderly guessing at the meaning. Did he wear a new suit? Did he love me more than all the other girls? These court papers only offer another version, an alternate biography written by an unknown author. Even for the people who were there, every moment is only remembered as witnessed and, as my father taught me, eye witnesses are notoriously unreliable. The tree fell in the forest. Can we at least all agree on that?

### Nostalgia for the Gutter

Mixed with the queasiness that comes over me when I think about those days, is a longing. The jittery fear that must have carried my father down to the Federal Court the day after the package arrived is kind of hyper-living that I sometimes miss. It wasn't all bad. Or maybe it was, but the jolt of danger was invigorating. My best friend lived with a drug dealer in New York in the eighties and we would ride around in limos, vibrant with possibilities - both good and bad. AIDs had not quite hit and crack was just beginning to bubble itself into being. Each day held the promise of adventure and disaster.

In the wee hours we would return to her illegal loft, surveying the dim streets as we picked our way through the messy New York night. Only life at its most uncertain felt like life at all and I found a kind of happiness mixed into that madness. We slept all day and spent our last pennies on liquor and fresh flowers. Of course, my beloved friend is long dead and her boyfriend served eight years in a jail out west somewhere.

Abandoning respectability altogether rewards you with a freedom that 'the straights,' as my father used to call them, never know. These days, when I'm off to some appointment, my hair smoothed down and important papers folded crisply into my briefcase, I sometimes see a ne'er-do-well sitting on a brick wall, drunk in the bright light of day and there is a part of me that envies him, however briefly.

For a while there was a couple I watched around town. He pushed her along the streets in an old wheelchair; she had one entire leg wrapped in bandages. I would see them careen down the street, drinking out of paper bags and laughing. They seemed in love. I'd follow them, sometimes, for a block or so, almost wishing I could ditch my life and go live in their box under the bridge. I'm not being cavalier. I know the value of a hot shower and a visit to the dentist. Having done without both, I revel in a long bath and a good floss. But there is something insidious that seeps into your life along with safety. Petty fears arise and you begin to judge yourself as others do and sometimes the desire to piss it all away beckons me loud and clear.

The French call it "nostalgie pour le boue." Nostalgia for the gutter. The beauty of defeat can be as freeing as triumph. *Freedom's just another word.* No matter how grown up I seem or how different I am from my father, some days the oasis of respectable living is hard for me to see when the sun is in my eyes and there is mayhem to be made. I'm a grandmother now, through marriage, and a step-mom. My youngest grandbaby calls me "Cha cha" and I'm a safe place for her to play. I have degrees from universities and insurance for my car, my health, my home. My husband loves me and the cats count on our routine: awaken, go downstairs, open the blinds and start the new day. And yet.

I am not altogether a full citizen of my own happily ordinary life. I love the soft sofas, pets and children, but am never certain that I'll stay, despite the evidence that I already have stayed. Am staying. I live my life in reverse. Where others feel comfortable, I feel constrained; where others are settled, I'm a visitor. 'Safety', for me, is the possibility that things could change. Years of decent living have left me content and secure, but there is a wanderer inside me who looks through the window every day and thinks about leaving. *Away*. The wild, blue yonder calls as clearly as my husband's voice on any given day and I keep one foot in the land of the disreputable, just so that I can feel at home.

### Learning to Talk

Sometime in my thirties I began to speak. Small truths leaked out. I began to consider the difference between truth and a lie. Or did it exist? Did people deserve blanket honesty or did they earn truth which remained mine until it was meted out? As I saw fit? I practiced answering questions. At first it took an act of will just to respond. "Is Patricia there?" was a threat from the other end of the phone. "What are you doing tonight?" was a minefield. Physically restraining myself, I forced myself to tell the truth. I'd choke out the facts, spitting them like sand from my mouth. Planting my feet where I stood I'd answer questions, trembling and exposed as if I had confessed to murder. "I had tuna for lunch," I would blurt out, sweating with effort and honesty. Sometimes I cried. Becoming knowable was like scraping off my skin.

To someone who's always told the truth it must sound like a lie to say that I weighed every word as if it were priceless and once given away, irretrievable. *Loose lips sink ships*. Growing up in a world where keeping track of 'who knew what' was required of toddlers, my chronic deceit was as much survival as trickery. My 'coping' skills were more suitable to an international spy than a regular girl in a regular world. Close friends nicknamed me Secret Squirrel and even when I stopped lying I was so accustomed to silence that I would forget to mention important things. I still forget. Recently I spoke to a good friend. She asked me how my mother was. "Didn't I tell you she died?" I asked, "...Last year?" Apparently I forgot to mention it.

After I practiced talking for a few years, I started to write. Scratching out sentences in a journal, I protected them like the Grail. I shopped for invisible ink. I wrote in my will that the books should be destroyed. The more honest I was, the more terrified I became. The more terrified I became, the more I wrote. Writing was my religion, my daily practice. I had faith in it - although like any good disciple, I had doubts. I wrote to become human, to see myself on the page and to prove it wouldn't kill me; for a long time it felt like it might. And of course, I did it in secret as I had done everything else.

### The View from Here

Ultimately, my own descent lacked the flair of my father's. There were no newspaper articles or Supreme Court documents. I wasn't notorious or even very interesting. I floated away as thousands had floated before me: one drink at a time. Mystery bruises and stranger's beds were painful, but unavoidable evils. Blackouts were mercies; gifts of darkness. Mostly, I didn't want to remember anything, anymore, anyway.

When I finally flew my own plane into the mountain, it was my father who appeared out of the smoke and wreckage. Not fixing it, not talking about it (god knows), but not judging it either. He didn't ask me how I'd fallen so low or how I'd failed so utterly. He didn't give me advice or make any promises.

He bought me lunch, gave me a hundred dollar bill and lent me an old clunker to drive. Slowly, I began to piece things back together.

When I think of him now, I remember these last chapters of our story best. Instead of giving me a lecture, he gave me books. Instead of taking me to a shrink, he took me to the movies. Instead of telling me he loved me, he hooked his arm through mine and proudly walked around downtown Atlanta introducing me to everyone we'd meet including, and especially, the guy who parked his car. He allowed me the privacy of my own personal hell and stood by me when others could not stand to watch.

My father never lived to see me write, get published or win awards. He remained reckless and unashamed, practicing law in his tiny office into his seventies and dying quickly one crisp October. In those last years, however, we often met to squander the afternoon and gossip about family. We'd laugh until we couldn't breathe - causing a scene in the café and then tipping the waiter outrageously. Sometimes we told each other the truth, although neither, perhaps, knew when. As I remember it, we became friends. As I remember, he saved my life.

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## FALL 2009 *ORLANDO* NONFICTION FINALIST EXCERPTS:

PAT CARR, "THE GRASS CREEK MEMOIR"

There also seemed to be a distinction between what passed for truth in my family and fairy tales and myths. I didn't really care for the brothers Grimm or the child's version of the Greek gods and goddesses that came with the encyclopedia my father bought from a door-to-door salesman who'd once wandered through Grass Creek, but one myth, that of Santa Claus, was especially hard to avoid. All the adults in my life—even Ed, who rarely talked but did nod a yellow-toothed grin while he pronounced the name all wrong—told us about Santa and urged Mike and me to believe in him.

And we did believe.

At least until the Christmas Eve I was four.

My father was helping us hang our stockings on the back of a chair beside the Christmas tree—whose illumination came from silver foil icicles and glass balls glittering and reflecting the wavering flames of the gas lights—when all at once he tilted his head and whispered, "Listen! Do you hear that? I think it's Santa's sleigh bells."

We paused and could indeed detect a jingle jangle of bells outside in the snow. Mike's eyes opened to huge circles as my father added, "I bet that's Santa coming now." The bells rang cheerfully for another few seconds. Then we heard a loud thud, and all sound stopped before a voice sputtered, "God damn it!"

My father didn't try to explain the all-too-familiar curse echoing from the snow darkness, and a minute later when my mother limped in the back door and wiped sheep pellets—laid down for her next spring

garden—from her chin with a furious, “I tripped over the gas pipe,” my father didn’t try to explain that either.

#### LISA OHLEN HARRIS, “SEEK SHELTER”

Around dinnertime on March 28, 2000, the skies over Fort Worth turned an ominous green. Warning sirens screamed, and at 6:20 p.m. the first tornado slammed into downtown. Another followed. Both were categorized as strong F-2 or low-end F-3: they spun at 150 - 200 miles per hour and were capable of tearing roofs off frame houses, demolishing weak buildings, and flattening manufactured homes or trailer homes. In a tornado this strong, large trees are snapped or uprooted; semis and boxcars are tossed on their sides; cars are swept off highways.

In Reata, the restaurant on the top floor of the Bank One Tower where my attorney’s uncle had his offices, people dashed into the stairwell for shelter while powerful winds sent furniture flying and blew apart interior walls.

The tornadoes killed four people and injured over one hundred.

Large sections of downtown were closed off for weeks; in the buildings struck by one tornado or the other, broken glass hung loosely and then plummeted in sheets, collapsing against the ground. Six large commercial buildings downtown were badly damaged. Experts estimated the overall damage to Fort Worth at more than \$450 million. In the months following the tornadoes, some buildings, such as the Calvary Cathedral, were razed, while others, such as the Cash America Building, were rebuilt.

When I moved to Texas in 2003, two condemned towers still stood vacant against the Fort Worth skyline. The once shimmering, thirty-seven-floor Bank One skyscraper lost 80% of its windows in the storm. They were replaced or covered over with plywood for safety, so that locals called it Plank One Tower. Asbestos insulation prevented safe demolition, and the lack of a buyer willing to renovate meant that the city could neither tear down nor rebuild.

Cash America, one of the buildings hardest hit by the tornado, housed the FBI. The tornado spun their files out into the streets like a millionaire tossing his money to the crowds. FBI agents scrambled to gather the scattered documents, their secrets thrown to the winds.

#### NATALIE SERBER, “SHOUT HER LOVELY NAME”

“It’s not my fault,” she sobs.

“Oh, Lovely.” You shake your head, review the many theories that google dredged up: genetic predisposition, a virus, lack of self-concept, struggle for control, post-traumatic stress disorder.

“I didn’t want this,” she says.

“Of course you didn’t.”

“The voice scares me.”

“Voice?”

“My eating disorder. Tells me I suck and it never shuts up, only if I restrict.”

Pay attention. This is language that you haven’t heard before. Watch. Listen. Mood swings. Suicide ideation. Changes in behavior. Be terrified about everything. Ask with nonchalance, “This voice, is it yours?”

Her skin goes pale, the transparent blue of skim milk.

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## FALL 2009 ORLANDO SUDDEN FICTION PRIZE WINNER



**ALYSSA COOPER** began her writing career while studying art history at the University of Texas at Dallas. Her fascination with writing as a medium of art—meant to depict—soon took focus, and she graduated with a B.A. in Creative Writing. Ms. Cooper maintains that it is her love for visual and performance art that provides the creative lens for her written works, and she finds inspiration while dancing or strolling art galleries. “The Way Back Home” was the recipient of the 2006 Gulf

Coast of Creative Writing Teachers Association Undergraduate Fiction Prize. Ms. Cooper’s stories have been featured in *An Honest Lie: Volume I* and *Carve Magazine*, where she currently serves as a reader and editor. She has recently completed a collection of first person narratives that explore the boundaries of the female norm and the inner trappings of self-perception, entitled *A Whore Like Me*. Ms. Cooper currently resides in Dallas and is researching graduate school options to further attend to the art of writing.

### "Tin Man Tick-Tock"

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It’s like someone forcing you wide open with metal hands that can’t feel. (I sure do love redheads, sweetheart.) It’s like that Tin Man grabbing around on your insides and wrapping your intestines all in his hard cold fingers that never numb you but just slice like ice. (You’re just pink and red everywhere, aren’t you now?) You reach out to grab him back but his razor sharp skin leaves shrapnel in your fingertips that grabs onto your nerves and migrates through your system all the way to your eyeballs until all you can see is metal and blood. (You seeing red, sweetheart? You squirm just like I thought you would.) And when he roots his hands around enough—gets that hole inside you big enough—he sits his hard cold self right down inside your base and in your being where you thought that you could keep things safe. He leans down real close to speak in your ear because now he thinks he owns you like the lover you have at home, waiting on you—unaware. (Aren’t you glad I’m here?) And then that Tin Man pisses his venomous liquid, freezing cold—just like him—with metal shards that flow from his insides now. (Feels like I’m the only thing that’s ever been inside you.) And those shards travel in mercury currents up through your veins and into your throat and everywhere in between. Shards of him just sticking into you all along the way where you know they’re going to stay no matter what you wash them down with. (Shh...sweetheart, don’t cry now.) And you can’t scream because if you open your mouth to try and force all the poisonous metal parts out, those bits and pieces of him just dig down deeper into your throat until you can’t even speak above a whisper. You think of your lover and how he loves your red hair, burying his face in it and breathing in deeply as if the smell of your hair has the power to wash his sins away. But you can no longer hear, no longer see, and you feel this wound forming that not even your lover’s sweet words could ever close up. And once you’re nothing of yourself and all hard cold metal inlay—with thoughts of a Tin Man ticking in

your brain—that hard cold metal man is just going to walk away. (I told you it'd all be alright, sweetheart.)

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## FALL 2009 ORLANDO SUDDEN FICTION FINALIST EXCERPTS:

KAYLEEN DUNSON, "STONE SLAB"

With the cigarette still in his mouth, he pulls the knife from its sheath at his belt. I know it is sharp. We sharpened it together at the kitchen table. We sharpened it using short circular strokes on a long gray stone. A long gray stone we wet with our own spit.

The stone slab is cold.

He pulls the knife from his belt and stands over me. The buck paws the ground out of sight, bearing silent witness. I watch Dad.

I watch the weight of his choice darken his face. I watch and wait for the moment when he decides. I know what he will do. I brace myself.

WENDY LEVINE, "ART THERAPY"

Only one spot remained.

I maneuvered between two older women--a stroke victim and an amputee. Twelve-inch squares of canvas were laid out around the table. Three bowls containing primary colors were placed on either end. In a line down the middle sat Dixie cups of hot wax, with brushes, but no pencils.

Eager to begin, I reached for a brush and cup of wax. But when I did so, the art therapist chastised me and took away the cup. Victims had to listen to instructions first.

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## FALL 2009 ORLANDO SHORT FICTION PRIZE WINNER



**LYN HAWKS** holds a BA in English and an MA in Education from Stanford University. She has taught English and creative writing in middle and high schools, and currently she develops curriculum at Duke University Talent Identification Program. Lyn is co-author of *The Compassionate Classroom: Lessons that Nurture Wisdom and Empathy* and *Teaching Romeo and Juliet: A Differentiated Approach*. She writes fiction and maintains a writers' blog called *A Writer's Journey*.

**"The Flat and Weightless Tang-Filled Future"**

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Ronalda lights a Camel but leaves it burning on an egg-crusteD plate. Everywhere she sees what needs doing: stovetop glazed with grease, counters studded with crumbs, corners laced with cobwebs. She swabs the counter while the boys' jeans clink against dryer walls, while the baby squalls from the living room, while her head spins as fast as that silly, don't-go-breakin'-my-heart song jabbering on the radio. Thank goodness Diane's coming through the door, no knock needed.

Diane glides in, all legs in her shiny red running shorts. She points at the cup on the counter. "Let me guess -- cup's full but the coffee's cold?"

Ronalda starts to say, "Fill her up again," the cue for Diane to make a fresh pot while Ronalda changes the baby. Instead Ronalda says, "This cup's half-empty and I'm half-dead."

"I'll fix us a fresh and we'll have us a good sit-down." Diane pours coffee down the sink and rinses the cup.

The baby's wailing so hard he's choking. Ronalda says, "Sit down? I want you to look. This filth -- and all the beds unmade." She heads to the tiny living room where the sun is already strong like a fist behind the shutters. Maybe one day it will melt the whole world and send a flood of tar and creosote and pop tops pouring through these windows. Even then they still won't have the money to paint or furnish the room that could make a home civilized.

Things get dark at the edges as she leans over the playpen and lifts Bradford, red-faced and snot-nosed, heavy as a stone. "Stop it," she snaps. "This ain't the day. This ain't the day."

Funny how Diane could just pass him by when she came in. Then again, she's done her time with her own three.

She carries Bradford to the kitchen, jouncing and shushing. She runs a dishrag under cold water and wipes his face. Crying turns to hiccups.

"I think you're a poet," Diane says.

Ronalda laughs. "Law, me who never graduated?" She grabs a diaper from the stack on the kitchen table.

"You're smart, emotions kind of smart."

"I sure hope I'm something. Crazy's more like it. Maybe I am a poet."

"Remember how you said boys only bring trouble and traction while girls bring the high drama and heartache? Where'd you get that kind of stuff?"

"I don't know, I just get stupid sometimes."

"How about the time you said we got to have flowers so our hearts can grow back every morning?"

"You know my zinnias are doing great. Only this one don't smell like a flower." She taps Bradford's bulky bottom and he giggles.

Diane spoons Folger's into the filter. "I'm going to make a book of Ronnie sayings." Diane doesn't care a lick about flowers and jokes she's got a black thumb. RONALDA has almost given up on hints about Diane and Bobby doing something about their yard.

"Make me that cup while I get this one done. Law! It is hotter than a match in here." RONALDA leaves with Bradford for the bathroom. She lays him on a towel on the counter. The old diaper hits the floor. Sweat drips from her nose. She swabs his bottom with wet tissue. She wraps him with the fresh cloth and seals the deal with duck-shaped pins she used on the other two. She sits him on the bath mat while she shakes the turds into the toilet and flushes. Bradford squeals when she dips the diaper in the fresh water and wrings it out. The diaper hits the pail with a wet clang. As she scrubs off in the sink, she sees her hands aging faster than the rest of her, so red and lined and ragged with hangnails. No poetry in these paws.

When RONALDA comes back, Diane has the radio turned up to "If You Leave Me Now," all mournful and begging. "Ronnie, songs are like poetry, you know? What I meant to say was, you got what they call 'a turn of phrase.'"

New coffee percolates. The smell is all of a sudden nauseating and not a good sign. RONALDA says, sharper than she means, "You're the one turning heads when you talk."

"Don't know about that. Bobby don't - he doesn't seem to look no more."

"Then he ain't got sense to get out of the rain," RONALDA says. "Look at you -- hair not a strand of gray in it, still dark as chocolate, and legs a mile long; you would look good on the TV." RONALDA does not add, Bobby's always been a fool. "You got a case of think-too-much. It'll drive you crazy."

Diane says, soft, "O teach me how I should forget to think."

"What's that?" RONALDA sits Bradford in the high chair and rifles through the cupboard.

"Something I read." Diane gets pink, grabs cups from the shelf, then looks hopeful. "You ever read Shakespeare?"

RONALDA pulls out a jar of applesauce. "They made us back in school, but I never could keep my eyes on it. Mama always said, Books collect the dust. Traded all of ours one time at the swap meet."

"I been picking it up again - Romeo and Juliet? Kind of sounds like the Bible."

RONALDA wonders whether that's blasphemous. Instead she says, "Darryl took me to the movie one time, that Zepparella one. All I remember was it had naked bodies in it. Darryl took it so serious. I was teasing him and I said, 'Look at you, all tore up' -- but he just kept saying, 'It ain't right. Ain't right. No way out. Fate's got us all screwed.' I couldn't make heads or tails of it."

"He must have meant the Prince," Diane said. "He's the one who said, 'All are

punnished." "Funny how they talk," RONALDA says. "How do you keep it straight? And who has the time?" She wrestles with the lid.

"Here, give it," Diane says. She taps the jar against the counter, then uses a dish rag. The jar pops and she hands it back. "What I wouldn't give for some time. But I can't help thinking."

RONALDA finds a bowl and a baby spoon. Bradford waves his arms. The sauce is slow coming but finally glops into the bowl. She puts some in his mouth.

Diane says, "Don't you ever want to, you know, figure it all out?"

"What's to figure?" Suddenly RONALDA's heart starts hammering; she doesn't know why. "Mama used to say, the more you stir the s-h-i-t, the more it stinks. That enough poetry for you?"

Diane cackles. "Yes'm. I don't know, I just like imagining things, like life's a bunch of doors. Price is Right: Door Number One or Door Number Two? Which you going to choose?"

RONALDA points at BRADFORD. "One of these and you got no choice." He waves fat fists at them, beaming, his face muddy with applesauce. They laugh. He gurgles, deep and chugging like an old man with phlegm.

Diane taps red nails on the counter. "Ye-e-es, babies do slam the door on some things. A lot of things."

RONALDA sees the shadow cross DIANE's brow quick as a summer storm. Diane catches her looking and puts on her happy face. RONALDA says, nice as she can, "Don't be like Darryl driving himself crazy asking what if. I tell him, 'Shut off the brain, it's closing time.'"

BRADFORD screeches as Diane says, "Well, it's just so hard."

"What's that?"

"It don't matter." Then she says, "Hey, that's new. Isn't that nice." She points at the family portraits RONALDA had taken at Penney's and finally got hung late last night: LAIRD with his new college girlfriend, that skinny thing who needs a good mama; RONALDA with Darryl and the three boys, her grin too crooked but her eyes about closed from the bliss of getting them all in the same room; and her and BRADFORD, drool glistening on his chin, but at least not colicky. KENNY, always monkey and sullen in the middle, he flat refused to smile in any of them. It still eats at her.

"We come a long way from that," Diane says, pointing at the tinted one, moved to a lower tier beneath the new glossies. In another age back in Saxapahaw, long before life in Charlotte, RONALDA grins in a dress made from a flour sack, tiny blue flowers she used to think pretty, Darryl next to her, gangly and a face full of acne, proud as punch on the stoop of the old home place.

"Yes we have." RONALDA's head gets light again, then taut at the temples. That photo goes back twenty years but feels like someone took it this morning, like someone shoved her on a space ship and sent her right into the flat and weightless Tang-filled future.

"Where's one of you and me?" Diane says.

"We need to get one done, don't we."

"I know what. I'm going to snap one of you scrubbing the floor. That's you all over."

"It never gets done. Every day you get up and there it is to do all over again." BRADFORD smacks her on the arm. RONALDA pours more in the bowl.

Diane says with a grin, "I think you like it. You never come over and just sit."

What to say? DIANE's place is so, well, dirty. Diane always looks like a picture -- RONALDA can't abide those who can't keep neat. Here she goes saying something about her Polaroid camera. Then the dryer buzzes and Diane jumps. "Loud as the apocalypse!" Diane she says. "Lord, I will never get used to that. Anyway, I meant to tell you, Flannery called."

"Don't say." Flannery is the one who left and has boys by two different men. How she came from good people, RONALDA doesn't know. Well, yes she does: Bobby used to be no good. As for DIANE's twins, Eudora and Katie Anne, there's hope yet. Least they can go to the bathroom by themselves, and Diane can leave them for a spell while they play in the sprinkler. BRADFORD plunges his hand in the bowl and

flings sauce on the floor; Ronalda grabs the dishrag and mops him off, then the floor, then tosses it back in the sink.

"Got herself a job," Diane is saying.

"Good for her." Ronalda's knees creak as she straightens from the squat.

"How'd you get Laird to go to college?"

"I don't know. He just wanted it." Suddenly her throat fills up with a throbbing nausea; she has to swallow hard against it.

"But how'd you get him to want it?"

"Couldn't tell you." Ronalda steadies herself against the counter and swallows again. "Least he helps us pay."

"Flannery don't seem to be the type to go, ever."

Because she's a spitting image of Bobby, Ronalda thinks. Meanwhile, Laird is just like Darryl. If Flannery had once ounce of Diane's or Darryl's kind of brain...Ronalda yanks the cupboard door open and finds the Saltines. She scrambles in the box and stuffs three in her mouth.

"If I'd gone to Carolina..." Diane is saying, looking dreamy. "Well, I wouldn't have got much done. I'd have followed Todd around like some pitiful thing. Son of a - " She gives Ronalda a devilish look.

"Don't say it." Ronalda watches Bradford smack his high-chair tray with sticky hands.

"Well, it's true. Didn't think he was the type to run....but he did get that scholarship. Can you blame him?"

A moment of silence for men who disappear when they fear girls are pregnant. Ronalda remembers the story different; the scholarship is a new twist. She can picture Diane still a girl in Elizabeth City, living for steamy nights beneath the bleachers and promises of honeymoons in Morehead City. She was left high and dry in those stands by one who could throw touchdowns and smile like Paul Newman. Ronalda does the math, wondering if she and Diane could have been friends if they'd lived in the same town; maybe not, since by that time Ronalda had dropped out and married to Darryl, with Laird on the way. A silly door to go through, dwelling on things past.

Diane shakes her head. "Mean as a snake. He wouldn't have been any better."

Ronalda looks sharply at her. Husbands aren't brands to pull off a shelf. They are what you get, maybe even what you deserve. But all she says is, "Where's Flannery at?"

Diane says, "The StopNGo," and her face twists with sadness. Finally: "It's a job."

"Yes, it is. It's like I keep telling Kenny: there's no shame in honest work."

"You and Darryl teach him right."

"Kenny hung on me when he was a baby. Now he don't have two words for me."

"Baaa!" yells Bradford. "Ba! Ba!"

"Says he wishes he could go live with Laird. Acts like he hates us, especially his daddy." Suddenly Ronalda wishes she could hit something; the boy can be that stupid. "Darryl made him quit that Record Bar. Has him running errands at the shop."

"That Record Bar has too many delinquents."

"It's got too many colored and too much hard rock. The owner's from up north. Got his hair this high - " Ronaldalida lifts her hand several inches above her head "—then scalped like an Indian on the sides. It's not right." She feels her heart speed up. "Then he tries to sneak out to drink and carry on."

Bradford screams. Ronaldalida shoves a big spoonful in. Diane squeals, "You like dat, little boy? That's right, you eat up." She comes over and rubs his bald head.

Bradford chokes and spits up. Diane backs off while Ronaldalida mops him off, sighing. "You can pour me that coffee." How can a woman fail to get the littlest thing done? The coffee's cold all over again.

Diane finds cups and pours. "Sit down. Your cigarette's half gone."

"I can't sit."

"You will when you fall down."

The radio shrills with horrible sound. Then the man says, "This is a test. For the next sixty seconds, this station will conduct a test of the Emergency Broadcast System. This is only a test." Another blast of sound. Bradford yelps and swats his ears. With Diane's back turned, with the drowning blare, Ronaldalida hears herself say, "Darryl's cheating."

Bradford tunes up, eyes full of tears.

The signal cuts out and the man says, "This is a test of the Emergency Broadcast System. The broadcasters of your area in voluntary cooperation with the FCC..."

Diane has been holding the cups forever, frozen like an ad for a cute waitress who will serve you right. Bradford opens his mouth wide as a church door, waiting. Diane says, "How do you know? Have you seen her?"

"No."

"But how do you know?"

Not a question Ronaldalida expected.

Diane keeps on. "Does he -- ignore you?"

Her heart flutters, like a bow scurrying across strings. "No more than usual." She's hit Diane with too much - dirty laundry of the worst kind. Ronaldalida waits for Diane to say the right words. She always says, Darryl's a good, good man.

Bradford starts to cry.

Ronaldalida scoops him up. Diane sets the cup at the end of the counter where Ronaldalida stands, jouncing Bradford. Usually Diane brings the sugar bowl and a spoon. Ronaldalida knows she's said it wrong and scary. She tosses Bradford even harder, walking around the kitchen table, then into the den to lower the radio that got her into trouble, then around the coffee table. Back into the kitchen, settling him on her hip, feeling her shoulder tweak, saying, "Come on now. Enough of that." He simmers down. She feeds him again, thinking maybe if she tells Diane about how Darryl jerks in his sleep, hot with Jolene nightmares, what he said to her after the fireworks the other night, then Diane would see.

"You said you feel half dead." Diane sounds distant, eyes somewhere else. Ronaldalida panics: is Bobby cheating, too? Then they're all going to Hades tomorrow, this whole street.

Ronalda feels her eyes fill up. She says to Bradford: "Diane, it's killing me."

Diane picks at something stuck to the counter. "I bet it's all in his head. Men get thoughts. Long as they don't act, no harm in that, right?"

Ronalda feels a lump in her throat so hard she can barely talk. "He stays in his room for hours. Plays George Jones all the time."

"That's it?" Diane looks relieved.

"I've known the man since 1953. I know when his heart is somewhere else." Ronalda feels a gap between her and Diane for the first time. Her heart pounds in her ears and a sweat comes over her, then a surge of anger, prickling all over. Maybe it's being thirty-eight with a one-year-old and two boys almost grown. Maybe it's being married to a man who kills himself at the shop every day. Maybe it's all just her body, the change come too early, making her crazy as a loon. But she thought Diane would at least ask about this woman, about how Ronalda imagines her, fills her out like a mannequin who blinks long lashes, twirls on stick legs, and purses full lips like a Barbi Benton. Then Diane should tell her not to worry, how if there is this other woman, she's like to be sorry and no count, and even if Darryl has gone through that door, he's like to come back. Ronalda almost says, "He's taken up reading," but then again, so has Diane, and Ronalda doesn't want to hurt feelings.

The front door bangs. Kenny bolts through the kitchen, a blur of curly blond hair too far past his ears and a tight, sweat-stained t-shirt. He sees them, grunts, "Hey, Mrs. Strayer," and heads for the room he used to share with Laird.

"What're you doing home?" Ronalda yells. "Not even noon!"

He hesitates, always with that cornered look about him, big eyes staring. Gets on her last nerve. "I quit."

"You what? Your daddy let you walk out? How'd you get here?"

"I walked." Now he looks defiant.

"You walked?" Diane says. "Ronnie, that's five miles and some highway in there. Poor thing, look at him."

"Poor is right. Always wants the best of everything, now how's he going to get it?" Before Ronalda can catch a breath, Kenny disappears down the hall and into his room. In seconds the walls are shaking.

Beat on the brat

Beat on the brat

Beat on the brat with a baseball bat

Diane laughs. "What is it? It's not even rock music."

"I'm telling you, that's how he spends his money. That and her." Ronalda stuffs Bradford in the high chair. He screams.

"I got him." Diane moves at Bradford with a huge grin. "Gonna getcha!" She pokes a finger in his belly button and he giggles.

Ronalda hustles to the boys' room. The hallway is dark and she stumbles on rippled carpet. Diane calls after, "Ask him who it is. I never heard such a racket, but now I'm curious."

"Kenyon Ray!" Ronalda bursts through his door.

"Mom, dang it!" Kenny is hunched over, stepping out of his jeans. He clutches them to his waist, glaring at her. From diapers to Fruit of the Loom in a heartbeat. The room buzzes and rattles with drums and electric guitar, beating so fast they could knock out walls.

"Turn that off! Your father's like to kill you!"

"He ain't here! When's he ever here!"

"You watch your mouth!" Her throat feels raw. There's been a lot of yelling lately.

"Get out, I'm changing! You ruin all my jeans!" He turns away from her, tossing them on the floor and reaching for another pair.

"What you mean, ruin? I don't see you doing laundry!"

"I keep telling you, don't put them in the dryer! You never listen. They're all damn high waters. I can't afford more. That's what you say." Back still turned, he steps into a fresh pair, pale blue, tight against his bottom, so many years beyond a baby's.

"You quit your job, then you got chores here." The room is a disaster with clothes, books, albums everywhere; on his bed, a black record cover with a ghostly silver triangle smack in the middle. It looks from the devil. Ronalda isn't much religious, but she is God-fearing. That triangle might just be the long and the short of everything that's wrong. She stalks out, almost slamming the door.

The music lowers a few decibels, but the beat is relentless. Diane coos at Bradford, all smiles now, waving his arms.

"Went and quit a good job," Ronalda fumes. "Darryl will kill him. Diane, this might be it."

"He'll get another. He'll see when he can't buy records."

"He even told us he'd vote for Carter if he could."

"Lordy, lordy." Diane seems amused.

Ronalda shakes her finger. "Watch yourself. Even if Darryl does say g-d every five seconds." Her cigarette is ash, and something about the way Diane hovers over Bradford Ronalda just can't bear. She scoops him up. Bradford whimpers as she holds him tight.

Diane says, "Honey, it'll be all right."

What does Diane know? She's stopped wearing red lipstick, only pale pinks and oranges now, and she's stopped ratted her hair, just does curlers and spray. She even jokes about getting a pageboy. It's boy stuff, girls getting into the Navy, bra burners in the streets, standing things on their head. It's not country but city, so far from where they came from, this place only five years young to Ronalda and still not home. It's not family.

Ronalda blurts, "You don't know it'll be all right."

The music cuts off like someone pulled a plug. Kenny slouches out of his room, shirt fresh and hair combed. Waves of Brut aftershave surge their way as he comes up to the counter, picks up the phone, and dials.

"Who you calling?" Ronalda says.

He says into the phone, low, "Come get me? Okay. Bye."

"Where you going?"

"Karen's."

"How you getting there?" RONALDA already hates the answer.

"She's picking me up."

RONALDA considers whether to make him stay, but she doesn't want a fight in front of DIANE. "This is between you and your daddy. Wait till he gets home. You'll see."

Kenny gives her a look that could break glass. Then he says politely to DIANE, "Goodbye, Mrs. Strayer."

"Kenny, what's that music you're playing?" DIANE says.

Kenny looks shy. "The Ramones."

"Where they from? I never heard a thing like it."

Kenny looks proud. "I think New York? It's so new they don't got a name for it."

RONALDA snaps, "Sounds like cats squalling."

DIANE chuckles. Kenny's face reddens and he leaves the kitchen. RONALDA follows him down the hall and out the front door onto the stoop. "I don't like her collecting you," she says to his back.

Kenny turns and glares. "She doesn't collect me."

The sun is fierce out here, the air thick, and she can see a fine line of sweat dampening his t-shirt, his taut back. "She'll think she wears the pants."

"Give me a car and then we all get what we want."

His eyes are so green with casual betrayal, she gets dizzy. They all hate her. He starts down the steps.

"I'm taking away those records," she says. "No job, no nothing."

He stops. "Why don't you take Dad's," he says over his shoulder, and then under his breath, "Hypocrite."

"What'd you say?"

"Nothing. Least I'm honest."

"You don't make any sense." She hears her voice, faint against the sound of her heart beating crazy. What if she's got something wrong with her?

Kenny squints at the sky, then back at her, his look almost sedated. "I'm sick of all the lies."

"Tell me one lie I ever told you."

"It ain't you. Never mind. You don't get it."

"I get you're acting crazy. Don't get above your raising."

Tires squeal from a distance. Karen's butterscotch Mustang convertible zooms up.

"That's what I'm talking about," RONALDA snaps. "Spoiled rotten. I don't know how they afford it." She hears the phone ring back in the house. Very like to be Darryl, probably in a rage.

Kenny tumbles down the remaining steps, eager as a puppy for this blond, her hair in bangs, the rest soft cascades falling away from her face. She smiles shyly and wiggles her fingers at RONALDA, other hand on the shift.

Kenny turns at the bottom and says, as if to a child, "This thing's fuel efficient."

The phone keeps ringing. Kenny gets in her car; Karen glances at Ronalda, almost apologetic, but then looks ahead as if something important is through that windshield.

They are gone. The thick air makes droplets crawl along her scalp and pool between sagging breasts. She hears the murmur of Diane answering the phone, saying, "It'll be all right. It's the age. They rebel. Don't do that. No. No. Give it a while. Give him time." Diane's voice is soft, firm, knowing. "I know. It's all right." Ronalda waits, chest tight, waiting for Diane to call, "Ronnie?" But she doesn't.

Then Diane says with words where you can hear the smile, "You, too." Soft. Then softer, "Take care." Words of a smart woman who knows what to say when teen-agers stray. Who isn't about to faint or scream on this stoop. Words that can be said smooth as liquor to another woman's husband.

No, not the one friend she has. No! He might, just like a man, but not her. Him last week, July fourth, his whistling good mood as he hovered around Diane at the neighborhood picnic. Their jokes about barbecue and the swine flu, talking about wanting to see All the President's Men, talk that bored Ronalda to tears. Little things she catches now, suddenly painted loud in stripes of red, white, and blue.

In the yard next door, Diane's twins skip through the sprinkler, a rotating spray with barely any pressure. The girls are giggling. The water still looks good enough to join them. What if she does? Darryl would say she was a damn show.

"Hey, Mrs. Block!" calls Katie Ann.

"Whatcha doing?" calls Eudora.

Ronalda almost says, Going crazy, but instead: "Hey girls, how you?"

"Come on over, Mrs. Block! We couldn't get Mama to, but you can! Please!"

Ronalda feels her body moving down the steps, grass tickling her ankles, and sweat pouring from every nook and cranny.

"Yay, she's coming! Tag, you're it!"

A small hand stinging her arm but that's okay, the water's fine, just a trickle but warm, welcoming, spattering her stiff hair and taut neck and jiggling torso. She chases the girls around and around through dandelions till the crabgrass spins and the brown patches about come up in her face.

"Hahahahaha!" Eudora is shrieking, pointing at Ronalda's blouse -the white gone dark and stuck to her bra. Now the neighborhood can see her intimates.

"Learn some respect!" Ronalda yells. She steps on the hose. The sprinkler tilts and shoots into the bushes.

The girls' faces fall -- from evil to crushed. Ronalda stalks around the corner of the house and twists the water off. "Go inside. Get! I'm sending your mama over with a belt!"

The girls scatter.

Ronalda hustles from the yard, hands slammed across her breasts, feeling wild, not right. She bursts through the open door into the foyer and sees Diane like a light at the end of the hallway's dark tunnel, singing and waltzing Bradford around the yellow kitchen to "Afternoon Delight." He giggles. The curve of her arm as she twirls, the flash of a red manicure; the woman moves like songs were made for her.

Now Ronalda knows what she knows. It's true, even if she didn't find it in a book. She laughs, a cold hard bark, grim as a reaper come due.

She heads to their bedroom - the room that might have been a dining room but he said, What use we got for that? and built a door. It gave them some extra room, but like all things in this house, he is the boss and she cleans up. She squats before the stereo cabinet, pries it open, and yanks out all his LPs. Osborne Brothers, Stanley Brothers, Jimmy Martin, Bill Monroe, Buck Owens, the records slide across the carpet like a huge deck of cards. What if she broke the George Jones, ripped his smirking face off the cover? Her blouse feels slimy now, like another thick skin.

"Ronnie?" Diane calls from the kitchen, her voice light and breezy. Ronnie, not her name, don't call her that, even if the other fits like a shoe too tight. "You got a boy's name," said Will Hunt, the first day of first grade. "That name's ugly," said Betty King, whose daddy owned the supermarket, destroying all hopes of free Bit o' Honeys. Ronalda went home that day and asked, "Why I got this name?"

"It's your daddy's," said her mother, not mean, but not nice either, just busy.

Ronnie, Diane calls her. Today it seems fake as the Astroturf that makes Darryl so mad, or credit cards, or gas prices. Never mind Diane's name isn't real; she once told Ronalda she picked it up when she moved here. Back home she was Harriet.

Ronalda sits down hard. Beneath her bottom, LPs crack. She feels tears. What he said Fourth of July, now it means the world: "Don't you ever stop long enough to think?"

She'll stop all right. Stop the nonsense.

Once there were two, supposed to be one; now there are three. Well, then. Where there was one, make it two. Split the beds apart. He may be doing the adding, but she'll do the subtracting.

She moves to the beds, twins shoved together, since there's never enough to afford a queen. She squats and yanks one her way, budging it a few inches to this corner, now wrestling with the other, till there's a small channel between the two. Make it a canyon. Push hers against the window, then his all the way against the wall. Let him come home and see her handiwork. She won't sleep with him again, not till Gabriel blows his trumpet.

She pictures her son in a girl's bedroom across town, shy but insistent, slipping inside something he doesn't understand but will pay for the rest of his life. Fifteen, same as her when she took up with Darryl. Here, back with the grownups, there are no touches, just words and longing glances across a fence. You could write a book about all the feeling trapped inside people's heads. She's the only one who picks something and sticks to it. Goes where she's told. Doesn't look where she's not supposed to at a cookout, get led astray by explosions in the sky. At the end of every party is punishment; any fool knows that.

Why is everyone else blurring the lines?

When she looks up, sweating, she sees Diane standing in the doorway, staring at her, Bradford in her arms.

"Ronnie, you okay?"

Slow, with a sneer, Ronalda says, "Don't you got some poetry to read?"

The air tightens like a tuned string. Diane's blue eyes stare bad as Kenny's.

After a moment, she lays Bradford on Darryl's bed. He wriggles there like a fat little worm. Diane leaves without a word, that sway in her hips, that tiny waist still there after three, grace she doesn't deserve.

There is no one here but Ronald. That must be that woman's lib: go it alone because there's no one to trust. Just you and a choice of how many feet between the beds, a space where you can wave your arms like crazy, till you take off or fall to the floor.

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## FALL 2009 ORLANDO SHORT FICTION FINALIST EXCERPTS:

GAIL DUBERCHIN, "HAVEN"

"Standing at the easel she noticed something black moving on the other side of the lagoon. She'd been hoping to sketch some Canada geese before they flew south. Their lovely gray-brown feathers, long black necks and white chinstraps were beautiful, but the birds were skittish, making it difficult to get a photograph that wasn't blurred. Maybe if she pressed the camera lens onto the window, in an opening between the branches, she might capture a few birds landing on the water. Such an image would add the vibration of life to a large landscape mural of the lagoon that she planned to paint on one of the walls here. . . Daydreaming. Daydreaming. Now she'd lost the chance at that bird. She picked up the binoculars and focused them between the branches. The black object was still there. Cattails bowed and danced in the wind. But the black flutter was only someone in a black slicker sitting in the bird blind, a wooden platform with built-in benches that jutted out over the water. A person, not a bird."

CECILIA PINTO, "HORSE STORY"

"On the night in question she takes a bold step. She goes to him in her little sports car, her little roadster, say it was red. She wears a pressed, white blouse that can be unbuttoned, that can easily be pulled from the waist of her slacks. She wears a locket or a charm bracelet. She hurries through the stables, past horses who slumber. She is wearing flats that make little slapping sounds as she runs; slip, slap... He has been looking at a photograph taken on a bridge somewhere else, some time other than this. He has been remembering. He comes to her from somewhere else. He looks at her in surprise."

SALLY SCHLOSS, "MY LIFE AS A BUM"

"I make my presence in these borrowed homes I live in, as small and inconspicuous as possible. I wipe every crumb from the counter after I've eaten, wash and dry every dish by hand and replace them exactly where they came from in the cabinet. It feels like I'm sweeping my footprints from the sand as I walk along the shoreline. I don't want to be judged.

Quite the opposite from my mother disappearing. She is loud and demanding. She insists on her right to take up space, to be attended to, to be told the truth. Of course I lie to her. I don't tell her she is dying primarily because it would kill her and I want my mother alive. It's a wish that surprises me because I have often wanted her dead."

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## FALL 2009 eMESSAGE WINNERS:

### JENIFER BROWNE LAWRENCE

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If you have to give up an hour of sleep to write the poem--write the poem. Sleep deprivation increases the odds of connecting with your wild, perfect, unconscious self. Remind yourself the best poem you ever wrote came while half-asleep. This is true, even if it is not fact.

### NANCY GRANDFIELD

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Women must splay the fish, and access being themselves. To the women who render reinvention- I give my heart. For we are soulless until we know that pouring out is as important as pouring in. We must reign within and over ourselves to become the weft that turns to wake.

### RACHAEL PELLETIER

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When you go within, you are never without.

### ADELE SLAUGHTER

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This is the truth of the truth: whatever you write will reflect you, and you is what we want. It's okay if you have doubts. The doubts will come through, and they will be a part of your reflection, a part of your brilliance.

Write: *I AM* worthy. And begin.