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poetry.

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read without prejudice.

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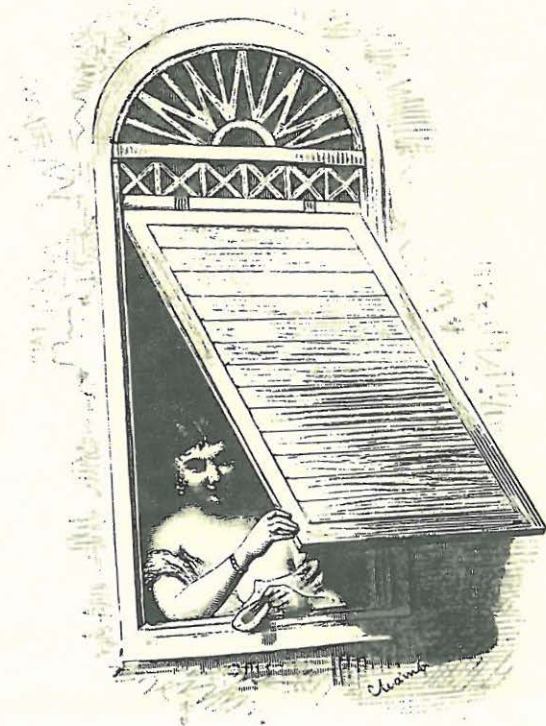
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Tim Houghton

PICTURE, CIRCA WW II

Wearing his uniform
my father's home on leave.
We're about the same age

now. The sun is high,
judging by his shadow
and the even look

of his face. Behind him
the picket fence he built
bolsters tomatoes

whose ripeness is hard to gauge
in this black and white
picture. That same fence,

more shredded and less sturdy,
is still out back,
still with its shadow

stretching through
the neighbor's yard
as the afternoon progresses.

Heading toward the background
like everything then,
and now too, at least here.

Bea Opengart

SMALL POEM IN NOVEMBER

Kicking through leaves in search
of fallen pears, this happiness,
who can take it from me?

Once, in dreams, I could fly
without effort and land
without losing the sky.

I remember the pepper tree
in the first back yard,
its leaves like feathers,
wind-blown across my cheek.
That day I climbed for peppercorns,
their scent between my fingers.
I thought I could do anything,
so far from the earth.

Running toward me with clothespins
clipped to your sleeve, Mother,
you were stern and lovely.

Bea Opengart

ON CATCHING MY FIRST TROUT

I drew the rod back
slowly, elbow bent
just so. Then
pitched it forward,
arm straight, the line
tracing easily its clear
curve above the water.
Better still, the weight
of the catch resisting
the long pull
from the river bank,
the boulder I crouched on
to untangle the fish
from the reeds. I can
still see that first trout
flopping at my feet,
the mouth hopelessly open.
Such perfect teeth
should have protected it,
somehow, from my determined
efforts. Twin rainbows
the length of the body
and crescent flaps
laid open to the barely
quivering gills. How
carelessly I fingered them,
as if telling freely
someone else's secrets
to withhold my own:
the pleasure
I felt watching the fish
go limp, the hook
I pulled from the pearl-gray
lip and baited again.

Bea Opengart

THE ELDEST DAUGHTER

I sleep on a plank bed
hung beneath the window,
a long slit cut in the east wall
of your house. I wake
in the dark, the moon yawning
above the goat shed, the last star
pierced by the highest
spindly branch of the chinaberry tree
that shades the dirt
around your door. The same
dress circles my throat
four buttons up the back, the pocket
in front for folded hands, cheese
or pebbles. The good shoes
you made for me I tie
at my ankles, every morning
of my life. Last,
the blue-veined pebble hangs
in a muslin bag around my neck.
When I bend, it falls
away from me. When I rise
it hits the bone between my breasts
and there are two hearts beating:
one is for you, Father, and one,
my own muffled heartbeat, is for me.

Bea Opengart

MINIATURE

The painter sees her face in pieces.
A flowered robe conceals her breasts.
Her hands are a problem:
crossed at the throat,
they want to be less stiff,
busy with light on a coffee cup
or color the light rejects.
The red chair startles,
yellow drapes are a milder emphasis.
Blue is the sky through a window
and beneath it, the painter's husband
reading at the table.
His features aren't clear.
It could be no one else.
She has captured his sloping shoulders,
the set of his feet on the yellow floor.
A small red swallow doesn't fly
from his arm though the wings
are raised, the forked tail lifted,
the body poised in readiness,
a piece of light the painter shaped
as she saw it, a piece of light she kept.

Janice Dabney

JAKE AT 90

He has forgotten the others call it dreaming.

So he wakes, blue spilling from the stripes
of his pajamas in the breakfast room and sees
a rose upon his plate.

I knew I would eat flowers, he states
with proud conviction. Last night
he dined again on jasmine, gardenias,

terraced words upon white linen.
This is the finish to that meal.
All the ladies were so kind, so fair.

The hand finds the face it has known
for all these years. Our bacon curls,
the eggs bleed gold and disappear.

But he'll continue to savor the imagined,
happier to feel
those petals touch his dry throat.

Geraldine C. Little

CROWS JUST AFTER DUSK

Startled
up from a roosting
dream, like a great rush
of water, wings
pour away dark
into darkness.

Judith Berke

AT NIGHT

It is 3 AM, and my breath
rises and falls
like a hushed sea.
I wish even for the squeak
of my neighbor's chair
the screech
of the upstairs children.

This is the time when creatures
emerge from cracks
in kitchens.
When in lawns
the grass suddenly moves.

It is the dark shift.
The time of the inside-out
people
the midnight scribblers.
When those who live in light
dream.

I imagine your breath
on my cheek.
If you could breathe as I breathe
this quiet air.
If you could feel this glass
with your fingers.
If, softly, I could walk
into your sleep.

Judith Berke

IN THE FIELD

The long hill of your back
leaning away.
I want to call it beautiful
but you will think
of a vase
a poppy
a woman
and a flush will rise
in your hair.
I see a swan sailing
into the sky.
You will call it a cloud
or God
and still we turn and turn
in this endless bed.

Gary Fincke

THE WOMAN USING THE PHONE AT MIDNIGHT

The woman using the phone at midnight
Believes she is a highway in the rain,
Long and wet and curving elusively
Into rolling hills. All of her quick calls
Are to lovers too distant to visit.
Their answers travel upon her, take roads
Turning East, clouds shielding a half-filled moon.

The woman using the phone at midnight
Knows her body sweeps through drenched farm country,
And she speaks of things growing beside her,
The green rush of May through fertile mucklands.
The winter you read about is over,
She often says; take Route Five and find me,
Turn hard left where the city commences.

The woman using the phone at midnight
Dreams she is beginning a vacation,
Taking herself away. And she talks on
In the damp darkness by the door, senses
Herself speeding through the streets of her skin.
She is rushing West, stretching, a freeway
Tracking the sun, ending where she can crush
Warm earth year-round under each eager lane.

Gary Fincke

from GENERIC LIFE
THE WHITE LABEL

1

Handle the white label
as if you love it
and look for signs
it accepts you:

smile, gesture,
a suggestive
movement near
its edge. . .

Others have been aroused
by this pale charmer.
Here, take it to your house
and wait in your room
for this bloodless lover.

2

Peel the white label
and carry it with you
to work. Sometime
this afternoon you will
reach into your purse
or pocket and touch again
its surface. You are
better for this talisman.
When the office is quiet,
you may wish to hold it
and read your fortune,
turning it over to see
its private secret.

3

Answer the door
The white label
is surprising you

16

Gary Fincke/THE WHITE LABEL

with a party that fills
your house with snow.

Welcome these friends
willing to honor you;
they are dressed as gifts.

Appreciate, then,
sacrifice as simple
as this, stocking
the kitchen with
each happy martyr.

4

One morning you reject
the white label's advances,
claim a headache or
a poor night's sleep.

It sulks, threatens
to leave you. When you
ignore the warning,
it begins to pack.

Imagine the house dark;
imagine it colored.
Make up with the white label
while it still accepts
occasional sin.

5

Hold the white label up to the light.
You cannot accuse it of being false.

Forgive me, you nearly say, everyone
Has weakness, and I have often been hurt.

Lately, you are not opaque. The label
Believes you; the light, too, has been
Behind you when the label has rested
Close to your infatuated heart.

Gary Fincke/THE WHITE LABEL

6

The night you cleaned the house,
The white label took each picture
from the wall and wiped it clean.

There was nothing left in them
you recognized. The woman
and children were strangers.
the young man a spy. All
of the faces could as easily
hate you.

Somewhere else may lie
the purpose for this change:

the pictures were left
by other owners; the likenesses
are poor.

Nevertheless,
something in the hallway
makes you hurry. Inside
each frame might be the one
who wants your wallet
or your life. You have moved,
it seems, to a decaying
urban block. Vandals reach
the hall lights; the white label
hands you a portrait to hold.

7

Adding numbers with the white label,
you discover all sums have
identical answers. Look, you begin,
this nonsense cannot last.

J.B. Goodenough

SHE SAYS

Gumming a carrot, sucking
A marrowbone: nobody's dying
That I know of, she says.

Nodding she says I'm not
Dying, she says what goes
Down comes up anyway.

She says if you listen you
Can hear it bellying up:
Bread-dough in the bucket.

Or cream she says, take cream,
If you listen you can hear
Cream rising in the pail.

Watch out she says, if they
Put me under you just listen,
You'll hear mushrooms.

Listen she says, the little
White ones in the burying-ground,
Some will be fingerbones.

Nancy Kay Webb

TWO SISTERS

"Anna? Anna? Won't you get up? New Jersey's on fire again. Won't you come watch?"

"Oh, Minnie...Don't you dare turn on that light. What time is it?"

"It's barely 11:30. Come watch with me. I've baked chocolate chip cookies."

Anna grasped her sister's forearm and hoisted herself into a sitting position. Then she swung her thin legs around and carefully slid her feet to the floor.

In their nightgowns the two women sat side by side at a table set against a bank of steel casement windows high above the Hudson River.

Across the river a barge was burning. The essence of the flames, lunging at the dark sky, echoed in the slow water, so that from the opposite side, from Manhattan, it looked as though all of New Jersey might be ablaze.

"Have a cookie, won't you? I've eaten a whole tray full myself. Here."

Anna picked up a hot cookie. "I might as well take it. You'll just go on and on and on til I do." The chips were like bubbles of molten chocolate in her mouth. Chewing hurt her teeth.

"Isn't this simply beautiful," said Minnie. "We certainly are lucky to have this view, Anna. Lucky, lucky, lucky. I never take it for granted, you know. We've lived here over fifty years and I've never once looked through these windows without appreciating the view. No, I never take anything of beauty for granted."

In the morning Anna awoke to the vision of her sister leaning on her thick walking stick while trying to pin a small, black hat to the top of her head.

Nancy Kay Webb/TWO SISTERS

"Don't you ever sleep?" she asked, crossly.

"Well, now, Anna, I do have trouble with sleep. You know that. Why, as soon as I close my eyes I think of a hundred things I meant to do and didn't. Or I'll commence planning for tomorrow til I get myself so worked up I can't lie still. No, no, as a matter of fact, I don't sleep too much, Anna, I really don't."

"No. I guess you don't. It's because those muscles that aren't attached to the cerebrum never get tired. Did you know that? No, Minnie, you don't sleep much. Only people who use their brains need plenty of sleep."

Anna Pettigrew had the most remarkable ears. They didn't protrude from her small head in an unsightly way, but they were enormous. They were like two enormous dried pear halves. And from each fleshly lobe she hung an ancient and intricately worked 24K gold ornament.

Her hair was yellow--not white, yellow--and she wore it in a chignon covered with a blonde net.

She was a small woman. Her face was small and white with round, deep eyes set above a nose shaped downward, avian. Her handsome mouth was wide with small lips she always painted red.

Minnie resembled her older sister but, because she carried 20 or 25 more pounds around on her small bones, her features were less distinct, like items of jewelry cast but never filed or buffed. And her hair had aged not to yellow but to a variegation of yellow, browns, and grays which she fashioned into finger waves. Her skin was peach colored crushed velvet.

Anna sat down in her folding chair, and arranged the lap robe on her knees. Every day she sat here

Nancy Kay Webb/TWO SISTERS

in front of Sloane's Supermarket. Once, fifteen or so years back, she had tried the park around the corner but the park bored her, so she returned to this place on Broadway.

Between the close buildings what she could see of the sky, with its stem of space, seemed today to be solid stuff, the template forming the insubstantial brick and concrete to its own cerulean shape.

The people moving before her were not separable one from the other, but were life, life flowing, gradually wearing grooves, forming systems.

She hadn't left her own block for over a quarter of a century because she knew that life looked the same anywhere as it did here, that this part of the city was exactly like all other parts, that they were completely interchangeable down to the drunk on the corner, who was at this moment, ranting volubly about his blackness.

"And my mother was black," he said. "And her mother before her was black."

Anna sniffed with scorn at the obviousness of these contentions.

Two teenage girls with tight pants and frizzed hair stopped near her chair. They were inspecting a kitchen one of them had found in a trash can the week before.

"...and he keeps losing weight."

"Maybe he's got a little virus."

"Or a chronic disease."

They began to laugh, opening wide their pretty mouths.

Late in the afternoon, Anna found herself examining her hands. The fingers were cramped and the blue veins bulged. On her right hand she wore a large fire agate, borne majestically by a tall gold setting. The stone looked like a baby preserved in a jar. As she looked at it she was pondering something Aristotle had said, something she had always doubted, when all at once, she realized that he might have been right.

I must tell someone, she thought. Minnie. I must tell her. Minnie...She looked to the clock on the

Nancy Kay Webb/TWO SISTERS

bank. Where is she? Anna fidgeted with her crocheted lap robe. She felt as restless as the pigeons in the gutter, as impatient as the noisy drivers who stopped at the traffic signal to her right. Finally she caught sight, in the next block, of her sister lowering herself from a #104 bus, her walking stick preceeding her like a mole's cautious snout.

"Excuse me."

A young woman had stopped beside Anna and had touched her lightly on the arm.

"Excuse me. I've seen you sitting here before and I wonder if I might ask you a few questions."

Anna looked at her but said nothing.

"You see I'm a sociology graduate student at the University." The young woman waved her hand vaguely toward the north. "And I wonder if you would be so kind as to tell me something of your history."

Anna stiffened. Her large earrings began to swing back and forth.

"I haven't any history."

"No, no. Maybe you misunderstand. I just want to know a few things about your past. You see, my thesis..."

"I misunderstand? You are the one who misunderstands. I repeat: I have no past. I can't be bothered with such nonsense."

The young woman began again, kindly, "If you are saying that you don't remember too well or..."

"Be off, you silly girl! Be off! Go!...Ah, Minnie, come here quickly. I have something to tell you."

"Why Anna, who was that talking to you?"

"Be quiet a minute, Minnie, I have something to tell you."

"And I have something to tell you, too: You know, today I went to see *Carmen* and--well, can you just imagine?--that nice, young usher let me in for free! I guess he's beginning to recognize me, wouldn't you say?"

"Listen to me a minute, Minnie..."

"And the show was wonderfully sung, too. Toree-a-dor-a-tuh-ta-tuh-ta-tuh."

"What a ridiculous woman you are," Anna muttered.

Nancy Kay Webb/TWO SISTERS

"Here, Anna, let me help you fold that chair."

"You help me. That's a good one. You, with your cataracts and your bone spurs, help me. I've heard them all now." Anna, sniffing scornfully, fumbled her chair closed and started down the block with the small slow steps of her brittle feet.

She was saying to herself, It's not enough that I'm surrounded by fools and morons. I also have to worry with a crumbling body. What an absurd existence: As soon as a person has lived long enough to begin to reach some understanding of it all, her bones begin to give up, they've had enough by then.

Minnie came to supper in a red blouse with a wide ruffle about the shoulders.

"I feel like Carmen," she said.

"Well, you look like Bozo." Anna served them each a bit of baked fish and some hot tea.

"Now, don't you be so cross, Anna. You're a lucky woman. A very lucky woman. So am I. We have everything we want, don't we? I can go to the theater six or seven times a week. And you can do what you want to do without the nuisance of some silly employment. And best of all, we have this wonderful apartment." She pulled her body around to glance at each of their three well-kept rooms. "Can you imagine where we might have to live if we didn't have Papa's little nest egg?"

Anna's lip began to curl. "I would die before I'd let myself live in any shabby old place full of Negroes and Jews and, and...old people. Ugh."

Minnie sighed. "Papa's little nest egg," she said with a smile.

"What an old fool he was...I believe he hated us, too, just as much as we hated him."

"And yet he's the one we have to thank now for our comfortable life, Anna. Remember that."

"A more foolish, small-minded, unreasoning, thick-witted, inconsiderate, caustic, misogynous

Nancy Kay Webb/TWO SISTERS

old benefactor two women never had."

"Here's to Papa..."

The sisters lifted their tea cups in sham reverence. Their humid eyes laughed over the brims.

On the morning of Minnie's seventieth birthday, Anna and Minnie sat together eating their bowls of hot farina.

"Oh, Anna, last night I saw the most unusual piece. The climax was when they marched us all--yes, the whole audience and cast, everybody--out to the playground of P.S. 61 to watch the leading man have his head lighted on fire...it was very unusual. But today my legs are hurting me so...I believe I'd better stay in for a change."

At noon Anna went as usual up to Broadway. The day was a bit cold, but clear and sunny. She sat. She watched what was before her. She made her innumerable natural calculations. She traveled through the stop and go traffic of her endless abstractions, until mid-afternoon, when she left her chair for a while to go into Sloane's Supermarket to buy a small cake for Minnie's birthday.

When she returned, though, there was someone in her chair. An old man wearing a greasy hat was bent over his shoe, the laces of which sprawled outward from either side of his foot. He sat hunched forward, staring at his untied shoe, apparently unable to remember what he wanted to do to it.

Anna was disgusted. This person, she decided, has contaminated my chair. So she left him in it and went home taking her lap robe and pink cake box.

The 12th floor apartment was quiet. Anna brewed herself a cup of hot tea and carried it into the livingroom. Wondering where Minnie was, but not terribly concerned, she sat down on the ancient sofa and switched on the radio just in time for the beginning of a Bach cello suite. It was either the First or the Fourth. Anna couldn't remember which.

Nancy Kay Webb/TWO SISTERS

She used to know so well, but lately she had begun to confuse these two, the First and the Fourth. And this annoyed her. To misremember anything annoyed her considerably. And yet, and yet, she reminded herself, forgetting is not a pathological state. Memory is completely independent of intelligence.

Minnie flung open the front door. She was smiling and her cheeks were flushed.

"What an adventure! What an adventure!"

Leaning heavily on her walking stick she shuffled into the room where her sister sat drinking tea and listening to the music.

"What an adventure...We're going to be heros, or rather heroines, I should say, you and I... Listen, Anna: Today a man came from the bank..."

"What bank?"

"Why, our bank. And he told me about a terrible thing: Two men have been posing as representatives of some sort of investment company and have been swindling people--especially old people--out of all their savings."

"Those people who get swindled are nothing but greedy fools, trying to get something for nothing."

"That may be true, Anna, but they still have a right not to be cheated. And it's still a good citizen's duty to help apprehend the criminals... although how anyone could trust a man who wore a suit like that..."

"And how would you know what kind of suit a criminal wears?"

"Oh, I saw this one, Anna. Mr. Drake showed him to me."

"Would you tell me what in the world you're gabbing about?"

"I'm trying to, Anna. I've told you already that right after you left today, Mr. Drake, who's a special police agent..."

I thought you said he was employed by the bank."

"No, I said he *came* from the bank. He went

Nancy Kay Webb/TWO SISTERS

there first, and then came here. They know who the criminals are and they need our help."

"Rubbish."

"No, it's true. They need us. And I said we'd be glad to do whatever we could. So Mr. Drake took me to the park. Then he showed me who the man was, the con-man, I mean, and told me exactly what he would say when he made contact. Then he sat me down on a bench and went down the walk a piece to watch. And sure enough, the man came up and started talking to me. Said exactly what Mr. Drake told me he would say--that's how I know Mr. Drake was telling me the truth. I pretended to believe him--the con-man, I mean-- but the truth is I never really could have believed anyone wearing a cheap, shiny suit like that. But I pretended to believe him, and we went to the bank where I drew out all our money and I gave it to him. When he was gone, Mr. Drake said, Good work, Miss Simon. And for me to go home and not worry about a thing, that a policeman would bring us back our money in a week. I told him it mustn't be much more than a week, because our rent is due the first and we never like to pay it late."

Anna leaned her head back on the clean antimacassar. Her heart beat so hard it shook her whole body, rocking the sofa like a cradle. The Suite continued. She heard the cellist's fingers slide along the strings, a wheeze, a gasp. The music moved, over and over, outward and back again to the same two notes until the prelude was finished.

Minnie moved about the apartment as if in a trance. She carried a thousand broken bones in the sack of her face.

It was 9 A.M. and Anna was tightly lacing her most comfortable pair of shoes.

"So how do I get to City Hall?" she asked.

Minnie's mouth worked itself up and down, but no words came out.

Nancy Kay Webb/TWO SISTERS

"Straighten yourself up, you silly woman. Can't you understand I need your help?"

"Oh, Anna, oh, Anna...Oh, Anna, can you ever forgive me?"

"What for?"

"For what I've done to you? To us?"

"There's nothing to forgive. Worrying about what's already done is the most absurd of all the world's absurdities. A waste of time and energy. Now stop being such a fool and tell me how to get to City Hall."

Anna Pettigrew, who had not left her immediate neighborhood in over a quarter of a century, who had never traveled in anything but a taxi or on foot, who was still given to wearing a great deal of black lace, descended the steps of the subway station at 96th and Broadway.

When the train entered the station Anna became lost in a cathedral of sound. Shaken, she drew her hand to her left breast to assure herself that her own rhythms had not been stunned by the soaring walls, the flying buttresses of noise.

Anna was grieved by her new financial disaster, and she found, as well, the speed and noise of the subway train to be a trial, but other elements of the trip failed to unnerve her. The life that trapeded through the gray glare and flat cigarette butts of her car was the same life that passed before Sloane's Supermarket: The shrunken Italian woman with her enormous shopping bag; the business man reading his paper, oblivious of the fact that he wore one green sock and one brown. Anna even continued to feel smug when the company of black youths slowed their choreographed advance to jeer and laugh at her large ears.

After a screaming stop or two, Anna leaned back to survey the writing which covered the walls. She wondered why it was there. Directly in front of her she read: It not what kin a marker you use/It how much you name get around.

Anna knew her trip to City Hall was useless.

Nancy Kay Webb/TWO SISTERS

If the local police department was impotent why should she expect something different elsewhere? Patient. That's what they told her to be--patient.

With her whole jostling body she could feel the rhythm of the subway, and it bothered her. She did not like the speed and the jolts; she did not like the noise. Grieved, she was headed downtown on a silly, futile errand, a mere ritual. And she did not like rituals.

At Times Square she had to get out of the car she was riding and change to the EE train on the BMT Line.

"But, Anna. But, sister. I'm not at all sure I want to die."

"Whyever not?"

A long silence. They watched the blue sky through the window.

"I dreamed I slept for a little while last night."

"What nonsense you talk."

Anna drew herself slowly out of her chair, and, with great effort, moved the heavy table away from the windows. Then she sat down again. She felt as though she had a handful of tacks in her lungs.

"Oh, Anna, I do so love to watch the towels move in...My, oh, my, did I say 'towels'? I meant clouds, of course, but I just opened my mouth and out jumped 'towels'."

Anna got up again, and began to crank open one pair of metal framed windows. When they were opened as far as they could be, she placed a chair beneath them. Then she began removing her jewelry--her heavy earbobs, her finger rings, her brooch. She placed each item in a dish on the table.

"I don't want any old hobo touching my gold," she said.

Minnie nodded, her mouth open, her features mute.

"Come along now, Minnie."

Nancy Kay Webb/TWO SISTERS

"Oh, Anna...Perhaps we should wait. Perhaps someone will come to our aid."

"Like who?...Besides, the rent is due next Monday, isn't it?"

Silence.

"Well, isn't it?"

Minnie stood up. She brushed the crumbs from her blouse and straightened the waist of her Mexican skirt.

"You're right, Anna. As usual, you're right. I can see it now. There's no other way for us to hold on to our own power. No other way at all."

With the help of her sister and her walking stick she climbed onto the chair. Then she managed to squeeze through the window and displace the confused pigeons on a rather substantial ledge outside. She sat there massaging her sore legs while Anna, frail as a bird, struggled to join her.

For a few minutes they looked over brown trees, over heavy, shining water, over distant New Jersey.

"I think we could just about look over the sky," said Minnie.

Anna said, "Now stand up."

Carefully, they stood up. They clasped hands and together they stepped away from the ledge into the enormous silence of a free fall.

Laurie Taylor

CICADA

Not for this one the usual
long sun-chatter of summer,
afternoons when all else
drowns. Late in the night,
after even the moths
had abandoned my lamp,
he found the screen's one hole
and buzzed in to look at me,
a blurred shape looming
as he spread cellophane wings
across my words, distorting them
as if by heat.

Laurie Taylor

REMEMBERED

She is a difficult child,
this twin who preserves
the anthills ground to nirvana,
the twinned petals of dayflower
severed in the window well,
the razorstrap fingered as it hung
on the bathroom door.

She is a difficult child:
she comes with ifonlies
and thinkifs, she steals up and says
boo! when I am at my most dignified,
she is a mental teratoma,
mockeries of tooth and hair
hiding her taunts.

Mark Sanders

NORTH WINDOW

In the morning, sparrows
cling to the screens
of the kitchen's north window,
seeking warmth. Over
another cup of coffee,
I tell them a secret
the wind taught me.
If you can't let the wind through,
get out of it. The windmill,
knowing the story better
than I do, whines a similar
conceit.

Mark Sanders

AFTER SUPPER

The most positive of confessions
come after supper. The night,
lowing silently like cows
in the yard, is glad the day's
been milked out, and settles
into its sleeping. The tabby
is a new design in the rug
on the livingroom floor.
Stretched out before the heater,
it digs its claws deep into
that fathomless sleep.
In the kitchen, above the mute mouths
of our dishes, unsinging
the sung silver tongues
of knife and fork and spoon,
fingertips kiss, and we marry
our hands from across the table.
Then we take them to bed,
undressing them finger by finger.

Mark Sanders

THE NEIGHBOR

The neighbor is digging irises,
his hands among the clods
a rusting spade.

His wife has been dead years,
his kids are buried in lives
of their own.

Left alone, he has more time
to himself,
preparing his piece of ground.

Gregoire Turgeon

EARLY SPRING, DRACUT, MASSACHUSETTS

The farmer in his cap leans
with a wrench
deep in a tractor, framed white and old red
in the barn's dark doorway.

And here the sodden pasture waits,
dotted with rocks
the size of calves, stone now the cold bulk
of winter still manifest.

And everywhere, the half-color of March.

Peter Wild

ALBONDIGAS

Storming over the hills those linemen
the cowboys all raise their right gloves
at the same time and stop. Though
they've been riding for days in a froth,
the sky has remained as blue as truth
all the way. Now they've forgotten
what set them off, they can't remember who
will sign their checks at the end of the month.
Shamefaced they look at one another--perhaps
they should establish a village, right here,
with schools and churches, merchants looking out
from their stores and girls ordered from a catalog,
all taking their first steps, set in motion
the moment they want--then down
at their last refuge, the horses
between their legs, the nourishment
that has carried them this far,
flesh of their flesh afloat in the soup
of the plains, and spiced with
just one idea, to get going.

William Ferguson

GROWING UP IN THE COUNTRY

When I was twelve and my brother was eight we used to pretend I was some kind of strange vehicle that obeyed spoken commands; he'd grab the back of my belt and I'd go tearing off through the neighborhood dragging him along behind me, little Johnny scrambling to keep up and shouting MEDIUM! MEDIUM!-- the only speed we recognized between STOP and GO. But I never slowed down. Once I sold him a cottage in the woods for fifty cents, and when we got to the site it was only a pile of sticks; "O," I said, "the wind must have blown it away." "Do I get my money back?" he asked. "No," I said.

Later my gang and I built a hut up on the hill. The frame was four living trees. We put a padlock on the door to keep the little kids out; then we began to patrol the area. Next to the hut was an old quarry. We took white paint and painted NEWTS, FROGS & BULL-FROGS on a big rock next to the water. My brother came to get some frogs' eggs for school. "Go home," I told him, but he wouldn't. "Respect your elders," I told him. He went home. Then we had a rockfight across the quarry, Phil on one side and Mark and I on the other. Mark got hit by a rock. He was bleeding. We pricked our fingers and took an oath: *We will never have a rockfight again in this quarry.*

Summer was almost over. I was a target at the Rotary carnival; if you hit a bullseye with a tennis ball I fell into the tank of water. So far I was dry. Then I saw my brother. He began to laugh. "Go away," I told him. "No," he said. He bought three chances. "If I dunk you will you hit me?" "Yes," I said. He threw the ball and dunked me. I climbed out and hit him. Then my scoutmaster came over. "Why did you hit your brother?" "Because he dunked me," I told him. "That's no reason," he said. He put me on probation.

William Ferguson/GROWING UP IN THE COUNTRY

When school started I took shop and made a cobbler's bench. We put it in the kitchen; it wobbled. My brother went down in the cellar and started to make a table. "You don't know how," I told him. "Neither do you," he said. "Come upstairs," I told him. "No," he said. Three months later the table was finished. It was perfect, no wobbles or anything, and he was still only eight years old.

Sandra Case

SAGINAW SCENE 2

Her kitchen swells baked rye
& sun, Lithuanian songs
she hums to the dog.
Her husband will be home soon
with iced fish and sausage
from Chovsky's market.
He will sing Russian
to the melancholy birds
in the forest.
He will wear his face
like a lost continent
as he opens the door.
With her clear blue gaze
she will conquer
each hollow, each plane.

Sandra Case

EARLY 1900'S PHOTOGRAPH SURVIVED SAGINAW FIRE

In the picture
the men are playing croquet
the women sit on yard rugs
dainty umbrellas balance
above exact hair.
One woman is holding a child
to her breast, their flesh seems to
melt together.
She is younger than the others
wind floats her loose hair
off the edge of the photograph.
She is looking fondly at someone
to the left where the picture
is blurred out
as if someone were trying to
warn them.

Margaret Bridwell Simson

THE LEARNING

Aggie Mae Atkinson, twenty-three, was standing in the sultry night air--humming and grinning--on the pearl shaped driveway in front of the Jefferson Country Club. She was swaying her hips slowly, to her own music, and watching the conglomeration of diamonds on her left hand swagger and wink as they caught the orange headlights of an incoming Citroen.

The child, with her matted cotton hair, her faded skin, and her dingy yellow dress, seemed to rise with the late morning heat out of the cracked city sidewalk where she stood. A large blue fly circled first around an oozing scab on the girl's left knee, then swooped across a dirt lot to hover behind a corner grocery store over a garbage can steaming with coffee grounds and smelling strongly of stale beer. Visible through the back screen door of the store and stacked high in cases, bottle after bottle of a strawberry drink cast a flowing red glow in the sunlight. The girl was staring at the drinks.

Suddenly, Aggie Mae Atkinson laughed aloud, hugged her arms to herself, whirled about, and started forward. Her laughter was sirupy, like the scent of a magnolia tree, and sounded heavily throughout the country club parking lot--bouncing from Jaguar to Continental to Mercedes and back again to a pink, or blue, or black Cadillac. Women in long pale dresses and men in tuxedos paused to wonder.

"Hey!"

The child started and pulled her gaze from the lucid red liquid to see a man seated on the passenger side of a dusty black car at the street edge. The car door was open, the man's feet upon the curb, a smudged newspaper spread wide before him.

"Hey," he said again. This time his voice quivered in a soft whine.

The girl stood quietly, her small head to one side, watching him. The man had a bushy head with

Margaret Bridwell Simson/THE LEARNING

a flat raw bald spot at the crown. His eyes were feverish and pleading. A purple flowered tie was pulled slack and hung loose over a wilted gray suit. His shoes, shiny, patent leather, black, seemed to suck up the sun.

Arriving now at the bottom of the curved marble steps that led gradually upward to the country club ballroom, Aggie Mae Atkinson stopped, again laughed aloud, arranged her face in a practiced smile, and moving like a theatrical heroine up one shining step after another, made her entrance through the stately white doors.

"You want one of them drinks. Don't you?" The man was grinning at the girl--a sweet, teasing grin, his teeth showing yellow in the hot sun.

The girl lowered her eyes and shifted uneasily from one dirty barefoot to the other. Sweat trickled down the sides of the man's flushed face and splattered softly on the out-spread newspaper. Only a humming charged the stillness as the fly returned to circle the girl.

"Well? It's the truth, ain't it?" The man spoke gently, coaxing--like a teacher, or an anxious father.

Bronzed and warped as they were by time, the great roundel mirrors that lined the ballroom entryway reflected--for an unguarded moment--a curious gold grimace upon the faces of the couples gathered there, as Aggie Mae Atkinson, silver heels clicking and snapping like the dropping of coins on the hard polished floor, wove her way toward a smiling old man.

"You sure would like one. Wouldn't you?" The man, still coaxing, was reaching carefully over the car seat with his right hand, and clutching the newspaper to his lap with the other.

The girl was twisting at the hem of her thin yellow dress.

"Well, look here! See what I found." Chuckling tonelessly, eyes fastened upon the child's

Margaret Bridwell Simson/THE LEARNING

white head, he brought his hand from behind the seat to hold up a bottle of a sparkling red drink.

A wary smile tugged at the sides of the girl's small mouth as she looked up to glance first at the drink, and then at the man.

"Well, come on. Don't you want it?" He was swinging the red drink, splashing it back and forth, making it dazzle and dance in the hot sun. His grin spread wider and his eyes watered. The fly pestered and droned. The child hesitated, then moved haltingly forward.

The old man was short, his shoulders wide. His hair, the color of milk, was thin and straight. His face was square. A great sagging mustache complimented eyebrows that fell over bright yellow eyes. He was clearing his throat and examining the faces around him, as Aggie Mae Atkinson, giggling shrilly and waving her ringed left hand, came to stand by his side.

"Hold it!" Bending quickly, the man dropped the bottle on the car floor beside him and caught the girl's arm as she reached for the drink.

Surprised, the girl pulled back. The man held fast.

"Oh, it's alright. I ain't gonna hurt you." His free hand shaking, he reached out to smooth the girl's cotton hair. Sweat dripped from the bald spot on his head and fell on her outstretched arm.

The girl, confused, looked at the drink and back at the man.

"Sure, sure. You can have it. In just a little while. Just a little while." He was crooning and drawing her in closer. The fly landed on the girl's sore knee.

"But you ain't got no money. So you got to give me a kiss for it. Ain't that fair?" His mouth was trembling and he was pushing her hand up under the newspaper on his lap.

Eyes wide, the girl looked once more at the drink, and slowly nodded her head.

Margaret Bridwell Simson/THE LEARNING

For a startled second the ballroom was hushed--leaving the giggling of Aggie Mae Atkinson and the tinkling of the giant chandeliers to collide and echo like the gonging of bells. Then, smiling broadly, a red haired man advanced to shake the old man's hand. Other men followed. Women smiled stiffly, then quickly averted their eyes. Someone ordered red wine.

Ken Poyner

47

A MAN WHO HAS SURVIVED ON BARK

He could not let the wood go.
Deep in his stomach like pearl
It waited. Always as if by a back door
His wife prepared, burdening his plate with potatoes,
Chopping his meat into easily ordered pieces.
His food entered him as a man his last love.
Wine, cordials were nothing against his cellulose.
Slowly his wrists, growing stiff and unacceptable,
Began to thicken, his chest to barrel,
The edge of his toes to knot.
His fingers beat familiarity into the arm of his chair.
His wife would weep at lightening.
Mornings she would come upon him
Standing straight in the garden,
Naked toes searching the soil,
Rain on his upturned face,
Arms spread, fingers adequate for the sun.

He has collected a thousand axes
And made her hands to fit every one.

Ken Poyner

CHILDLESS WOMAN

You have the lids on tight,
The seals pieced into place.
In the back room, as well arranged as a church,
They await the laying on of hands,
The signal that it is they who are now in season.
The yellow curtain to the pantry is kept open a crack
So you may watch them in their vestibule.
Sun reflected from the kitchen gathers on their
cold glass.

A whorehouse of jars, the shelves strain.
Your husband has put up another support,
Told you the next garden must be less.

You are counting the days until
The first jar of corn will be opened.
Yesterday, you found the tomatoes
Crossed over, in the lap of the peas.
Though once a week you move them to the front
The beans have been fond of the far corners.

You have the lids on tight
But capture your breath before entering the pantry.
A bit of zucchini has made it to the floor
And is vainly rolling after your feet.
You place it back on the shelf. Next year
The garden will be two more yards in breadth,
Another five in length. The spike of your hoe
Will be the strength that is growth,
The horror that is harvest.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Laurie Taylor's new book, *Changing the Past*, has been published by New Rivers Press. Other work appears in *The Northeast Journal* and *Eureka Review*.

Gregoire Turgeon's work has appeared in many magazines. He teaches at the University of Lowell.

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