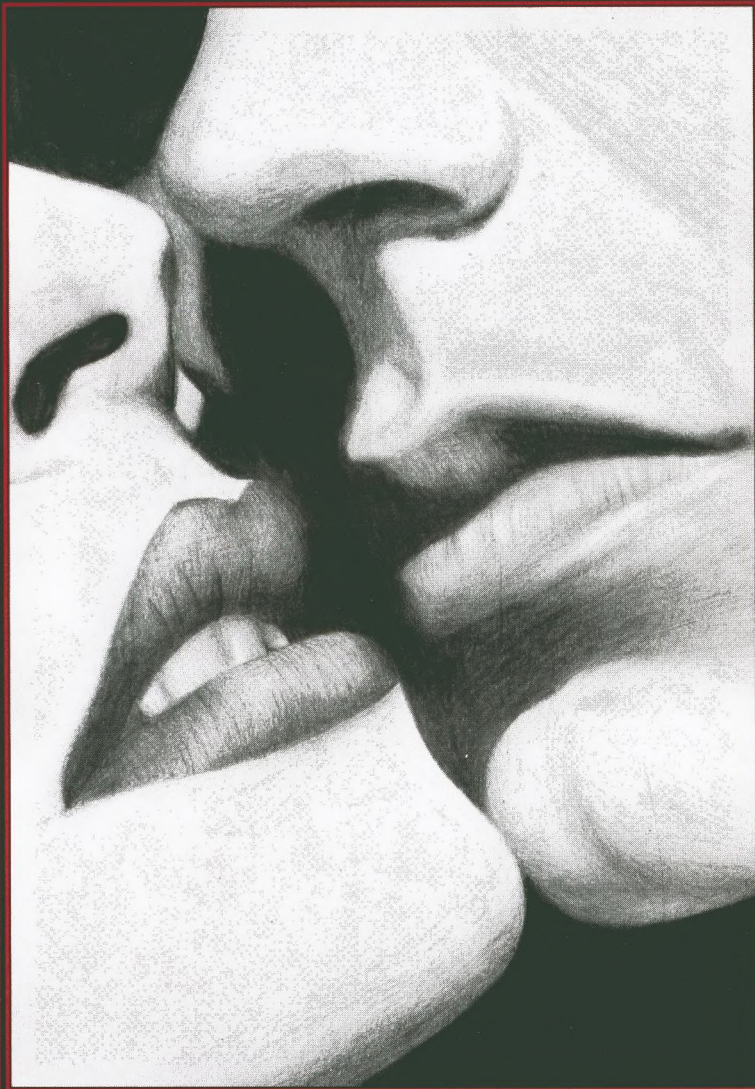


2003



HARBINGER

Stephens College

*a person or
thing*

that comes before

*to announce or
give an indication*

of what follows

Harbinger
2003

Published by the students of Stephens College

Harbinger 2003

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Harbinger is a student-edited and designed magazine published each spring since 1980.

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Acknowledgements

English and Creative Writing Faculty:

Margaret Campbell
Judith Clark
Tina Parke-Sutherland
Terry Song

for editing advice and suggestions:

Amber Pijor

for graphic arts assistance:

Roger Desmond

We also extend special thanks to:

Sharon Van Deren
Mary Cruise and
General Printing Services

*whose time and talents were immeasurably
important to the completion
of this issue.*

From the Editor

Welcome to the 2003 edition of *Harbinger*, a student publication of Stephens College. We invite readers to enjoy the work of the talented emerging writers, photographers, and artists here at Stephens.

A harbinger is a person or thing that comes before to announce or give an indication of what is to follow. Like harbingers, the selected pieces in this edition speak of worlds unfolding, of girls becoming women, of the future.

The magazine opens with Erica Parker's *Woman Spirit Speak*, a poem that asks what would happen if women were to speak freely. In answer to this poem the selections loosely mirror the stages in a woman's life, beginning with reflections on childhood in pieces like *Patella*, *Ten* and *grandpa colors*. Young adulthood is ushered in with Amber Pijor's *Fertility*. This section covers many aspects of a woman's life—sexuality, loss of innocence, acceptance of death and the harsh reality of broken families. The last few pieces represent a mature woman, developed emotionally, politically and spiritually.

We close the magazine with *Salaam*, by Renée Reed-Miller, a closing prayer, a blessing for all.

“May this tea fill you with warmth.
May it soothe the tip of your tongue—
not scorch your senses—reminding you
this kiss of sweetened liquid
flows from the depths of
my spirit
to yours.”

Renée Reed-Miller

Enjoy *Harbinger* 2003.
Holly Herlinger

Woman Spirit Speak

*If one woman told the truth about
her life
the world would*

split open¹ legs spread

to accept beloved masculine flame dancing within her fire thighs:
exhaling gray essence to drift among
birth, uncertainty, experience, death
smoke to give shape to patterns of air

a woman's compassion pours in drops of milk
weeping from her breasts for those who sleep
within her womb of
memory possibility

she has laughed amidst the mountain rain
painted with shadows of trees
she has howled at the moon that charts her body blood
swam naked to feel the current inside her being
she is the mother to whom we pray:
we are lost, wombweeper,
speak to us of oneness
guide us back to you

If a woman spoke her truth
the world would split open
and
bleed in birth

¹ Rukeyser, Muriel. "Käthe Kollwitz." A Muriel Rukeyser Reader. Ed. Jan Heller Levi. New York: Norton, 1994.



"fashionably late"

Belly

You have gained a belly
on your trim body.
Like a Buddha, you sit,
cross-legged on rumpled, burgundy
bed sheets, your arms to my back,
smoothing lotion over my
shower-fresh skin.

You have gained a Buddha belly
to rival my Venus de Milo
hips, my extra pounds you call
curves, the bends in the road you glide over.

You have gained a belly
from cooking together, generous helpings of rich food,
from quiet nights cuddling, tracing stars with fingers,
from extra hours lying in bed thinking.
Never mind your nakedness.
Let your belly spill over your pelvis. You are unfolding.
You are blooming.

Two hands pressed
against my back,
my legs, my arms,
my breasts.

Two hands pressed to my belly.
Nothing else exists.

Ten

Through the thin crack
between French doors,
mesmerized by soft curves,
shadows,
I watch Mother as she towels
her glistening skin.

Warm
soap-scented steam
slips through
to my bony
pink face.

Testament to the trials of motherhood,
a pink scar stretches
across her abdomen.

Her brown triangle is so alien,
though she showered with me
a few years ago,
teaching tiny hands
to smooth
shampoo
through my blond hair.

I stand here watching,
ashamed, in awe,
straight and curveless,
wanting
to be able to say,
I am
a woman.

Patella

They were studying bones that Thursday afternoon. "The top of the vertebrae starts at the neck," Lily said, holding the bone chart in her left hand and reaching with her right over her shoulder to feel the first ridge, a warm, round bone at her nape. The air was crisp, and in the last week, the leaves on the trees had begun to wither away into curled brown fists that littered the yard. Seventh grade had started a month-and-a-half ago.

Jacob leaned closer. "Can I see your neck?" Lily noticed his glasses sat crooked on his nose. The thick lenses magnified his eyes, and she could see every blond eyelash. She looked down at the bone chart: *ethmoid bone—makes up the upper portion of the nasal cavity and eye sockets.*

"No," she said. "You can't see."

"Why not?"

"Cause I don't want you touching my neck."

Jacob breathed heavily through his mouth. His allergies acted up even in winter. His breath rose in puffs in the cool air. "I don't want to touch you, stupid. I just want to see."

"Fine." Lily pulled her ponytail out of the way. The list read: *scapula, sternum, vertebral column.* She could hear Jacob's breaths. He'd been acting strangely around her since school started. Last night, he'd called her house around nine o'clock. Even though he hadn't said anything, she knew it was him because of the way he wheezed lightly into the receiver. She could also hear his older sister's rock music playing down the hall. Jennifer was in high school and listened to David Bowie. She had a pink telephone of her own on her bedstand. Lily knew because she had peeked in Jennifer's room two years ago when she spent the night at Jacob's house. Jacob thought his sister was stupid and girly; he had told Lily so many times. Lily didn't tell him she secretly wished Jennifer was her older sister.

Lily felt a tickle on the back of her neck. "I told you not to touch me."

"I didn't." Jacob shoved a grass stem in her face and smiled. "Hey, do you want to go inside and get some Kool-Aid? It's grape."

Lily made a face and continued studying her sheet. "I don't like Kool-Aid."

"Since when?" Jacob moved to the swing set and stood on the

base of a swing, his fingers wrapped around the chains. *Radius, ulna, metacarpals, phalanges.*

"What do you mean, since when? I don't know, I just don't like it any more." She looked up at Jacob, who was pushing against the ground with his right foot to gain speed in the swing. Truthfully, she didn't want Kool-Aid because she was worried about staining her teeth and upper lip purple. "Anyway, I gotta go soon. I told Betsy I was going to her house to watch soaps." Lily didn't think Betsy would approve of a Kool-Aid mustache. If Betsy branded her as an outsider, she'd be locked out of the popular crowd forever...or at least for the rest of junior high. Lily wasn't even sure she wanted to hang out with Betsy, but she didn't want to be permanently excluded, either.

Jacob jumped out of the moving swing, nearly losing his balance on the landing. "Since when do you watch soaps?"

"Since Betsy invited me to her house to watch them."

"Oh." Jacob scratched his arm. "I don't like Betsy. She's stuck-up. And I thought we were studying today."

"Until I leave to go watch soaps."

"Oh." He paused. "Can I come?"

Lily pretended to be busy studying the skeleton diagram again. *False rib, floating rib.* She didn't want to tell Jacob he wasn't the type of guy Betsy hung around. None of the boys Betsy talked to wore glasses or wheezed from allergies. They slouched against lockers to chat with girls. They all played sports and had muscles. Jacob never played sports, unless Lily counted the time in fourth grade when he had tried out for Little League and broken his wrist. It was the first time he'd refused to cry in front of her. She remembered how his wrist had jutted at a strange angle and how he clenched his eyes shut.

Jacob leaned over Lily's shoulder and glanced at the bone chart in her hand. "Puh-tell-uh. Which one's that?" he asked.

"Your kneecap."

"I didn't know there was another word. I thought you just called it a kneecap."

"Nope. It's patella."

Jacob blinked his eyes seriously behind his glasses. "I had a dream one time that aliens stole my kneecaps. It was really weird. I couldn't walk."

"Kneecaps are kind of important, you know. You've always had strange dreams."

"Yeah." Jacob kicked at Lily's shoe and grinned. "You're my pa-tella. So do you want some Kool-Aid?"

Lily noticed he was wearing a shirt she hadn't seen before. It was yellow and didn't have any grass stains or juice spills on it. "Fine, I'll drink some Kool-Aid." She felt like her heart was being smashed into her ribs, but she didn't know why.

"Ok. I'll be right back—ok?"

Lily nodded. She put down the skeleton diagram and crunched dried leaves between her fingers, feeling the leaf veins bend and break.

Jacob came back outside with two glasses of purple Kool-Aid. "Here. I'm gonna ask you something," he said, handing her a glass.

"All right."

"Why did you ignore me last week?"

Lily took a sip out of the cup. The Kool-Aid was warm. Her insides were swishing. "When? I didn't ignore you."

"Yeah," he said, "in the lunch line last week. At school. I was right behind you, and you ignored me."

"Oh, I must not have seen you," Lily lied, looking at the bones of the swing set, how the top bar sloped gently, how the side pieces were upside-down V's resting in autumn mud.

Jacob didn't say anything. He put down his glass and walked to the swing set. He stood in a swing, grasping the chains in his hands. He looked at the wooden dog fence that lined the backyard. "How far away do you think that is from here?"

"I don't know. Maybe ten feet."

"Do you think I can clear it jumping out of this swing? If I get a good start."

Lily thought about his broken wrist from Little League. "I think that's kind of a stupid thing to try."

"Better than studying and waiting for you to leave," Jacob mumbled, barely audible.

Lily didn't know what to say. The dry powder left on her hands from crunching leaves felt like chalk dust. The inside of her mouth felt the same way. "Do you want me to leave?"

Jacob fixed his gaze on the fence. "If *you* want to."

Lily looked down at her hands and tried to act as if she didn't care what he did. "Fine, go ahead and try to jump over the dumb fence. But then I'm leaving."

Jacob kept staring at the fence. "Never mind," he said finally. "I'm

tired of this. I don't really want to hang out anymore. Why don't you go?"

"Fine." Lily stuffed her papers into her notebook. She caught a flash of *calcaneus*, *fibula* on the bone chart before she folded the paper and slid it into the notebook. "I guess I'll see you later."

Jacob didn't say anything, and Lily went into the house to get her backpack. She heard the swing pump as she entered the kitchen. She heard the metal bar squeak. She heard the solid thwack of something hitting the fence. And she heard the loosened chains slack and the empty swing recoil.

Jacob was crumpled in a heap outside the dog fence. When Lily got outside, she saw him clutching his leg and smashing his eyes shut. She could see his teeth bite his bottom lip. One of his black and red high-tops was on the other side of the fence, in the mud by the swing set, and the exposed white sock on his left foot gleamed from repeated bleachings.

The last word on the list was *femur*, and he had cracked it in two places.

grandpa colors

1.

It begins with fishing.
Blind movement
then the rumble-humming motor,
soft tug at the hands,
snap! Flicking through the air,
flopping on the bottom of your boat,
a sunlit fish, with scales
like stained glass tiles.

I can paint our summers
on the canvas of a milo field
rusted brownyellow
like everything else in Kansas.
Brown railroad ties groan on the hour
as trains haul west to Santa Fe.
Pressed on the tracks,
tiny copper pennies
from your pockets.

I remember trips from Oklahoma to you
and back again.
The change in landscape.
Tulsa's deeper greens fading
to the grays and browns of Wichita.

You brought color to Kansas
and I followed you, laughing
on translucent blue afternoons,
as you dropped orange candy
into my hands.

In the sweet aching smell of fish
strung on a line on the back porch,
I ate purple berry ice cream,
watched you run your fingers
over the smooth
ruby skin of tomatoes.

In the distance,
two hawks
circled.

Whitney Beers

2.

I played in the backyard
in a grounded boat,
climbed pine trees sticky with sap,
sneaked into the shed.

You taught me
the magic of changing
scraps into treasures.
We collected pennies and fallen branches,
made tiny swords
from double-headed nails.

You must have spent hours
gathering old railroad stakes,
polishing rusted metal,
making wind chimes for grandchildren,
in your workroom
painting them white, green, blue.

3.

It has been years
since Grandma moved
back to Oklahoma
alone.

I find a box
filled with twigs,
flat pennies and nails,
railroad stakes,
fishing line.
Pieces of us.

I hang two of our wind chimes
from a tree with some fishing line.
The thick paint softens
the metal's music
to a tinted hum.
I shuffle the colors
with my fingers,
put us
together again.

Satellite

Ladybugs crept into all six rooms of the farmhouse at dawn. They littered the ceilings, clung with delicate legs to the curtains, made the rooms smell bitter like camphor. By mid-June they had become a nuisance. They fell on Madison's face and pillow when she was trying to sleep. She had to remove the tiny broken shells, one by one, from her tangled hair every morning.

Ladybugs or none, she was glad to be at the farm for more than a weekend visit. She had graduated from college two weeks before with a B.S. in Secondary Education and planned to enjoy her summer with Grandpa before starting her first teaching job in the fall. Her twelve-year-old cousin, Judy, was staying at the farm as well, but only on weekends. Judy's parents said they wanted their daughter to get some "good country air," but Madison knew they just liked to travel on weekends and didn't want to drag Judy along.

Madison made breakfast for Grandpa Friday morning. She boiled some oats and added brown sugar and apricot jelly. The jelly was some Momma Mae had made several years before. The canning date was in her handwriting on a masking tape label. Madison couldn't believe it had been two years since Momma Mae had died. A broken hip had led to other complications: pneumonia, an inability to swallow. She hadn't wanted to go to the hospital. After days of Grandpa spooning ice past her chapped lips, she died in her own home.

It had been Momma Mae's job to make Grandpa go to bed at a decent hour. "Art!" she'd say. "Go to bed, Art. I don't want you falling asleep in that old recliner again." Now there was no one to tell him to go to bed. Often, Madison would find him stretched out in his recliner, fast asleep after the late news broadcast, his bare feet hanging over the edge of the built-in footstool. The white soles of his feet reminded her of a child's.

"What's that I smell cookin'?" Grandpa shuffled into the kitchen.

"Oatmeal." Madison stirred the oatmeal to blend the brown sugar and jelly.

Grandpa slowly sat down in a chair. "Don't sound like much of a dinner to me."

"That's because it's breakfast."

"Breakfast at half past ten in the mornin'? Sounds kinda late in the

day. My first breakfast's already been digestin' for a couple hours or so."

Madison scooped oatmeal into two bowls. "Well, I guess you can eat again, can't you? Never knew you to turn down a cooked meal."

"Can't argue there, I s'pose."

They ate in silence for a few minutes. "Judy's parents are dropping her off here tonight," Madison said. "Around five. I've got to get your computer running this afternoon. Joy called from Iowa last night and wanted to know if you were putting her birthday gift to good use."

Grandpa frowned. "I've got to watch my TV show."

"Well, I'll get the computer ready, and then when your program's over, maybe I can show you how to send an e-mail."

"Don't know why I can't just write letters to people, like I always done."

"Joy thought it might be nice if you learned to use the computer. She thought you might enjoy having something different to do."

"Writin' letters worked just fine before." Grandpa scraped the bottom bits of oatmeal from his bowl and examined the spoonful critically. "What all did you put in these oats?"

"Brown sugar and some jelly from the fridge. Apricot, I think."

"Don't look like brown sugar to me," Grandpa said, dropping his spoon back into the dish.

Madison looked closer and saw the black underside of a ladybug cradled in the spoon, its six legs pulled in, tip to tip, and its shell mostly buried in oatmeal. "It must have fallen from the ceiling," she said. "It wasn't in there when I was cooking. I would have seen it."

Grandpa grinned. "Maybe I should have protested a bit more about home cookin'. Kept meal-makin' to myself." He hauled himself up from his chair and padded out of the kitchen.

By late afternoon, Madison was frustrated. Grandpa had watched TV all day—a soap opera in the morning, game shows in the early afternoon, then cartoons. Chores had taken up most of her afternoon: feeding and watering the few scraggly Bantam hens, mixing the compost pile, weedeating by the grapevines and road. She had hooked up the computer and tried to get Grandpa interested in learning how to type, but he just stared at the keyboard with a horrified look on his face, like a kid forced to practice piano for an hour. Finally, she gave up and let Grandpa go back to watching TV on the rickety old color set. Back when Momma Mae was alive, she used to make Grandpa

turn the TV off so she could put on a record. "Rhapsody in Blue" had been her favorite, and she would play it over and over, listening with closed eyes. She would sigh when it was finished, like she couldn't bear the music ending.

The record player still sat on the trunk beside the old rabbit-eared television, but Grandpa never listened to records anymore. He said Momma Mae was the one who played records, not him. He was the one who had taken care of the garden and barn and the tools in the shed. He was the one who had eaten the supper she cooked and kept her company while she watched her soap opera on TV, the same soap he now watched religiously.

Madison was heating tomato soup on the stove for dinner when Judy knocked on the door. Madison hurried into the living room. The TV was blaring, and Grandpa had maneuvered his recliner so it was inches from the flickering screen.

"Judy's here," Grandpa said, his eyes glued to the news. Through the window, Madison saw Judy's parents wave goodbye from their blue sedan as they crunched down the gravel driveway.

"Boy, this place smells!" Judy said as she bounced inside, kicking her red high-tops into the corner.

"It's the ladybugs," Madison said. "I vacuumed a bunch of them up. If you want, you can let them loose later, when it starts getting dark. And I want to show you a website I found."

Judy's eyes lit up. "Cool, Grandpa got a computer?" She gave him an approving thumbs-up.

Grandpa pointed a finger at Madison. "It's all her doin'. And your Aunt Joy's."

"Oh," Judy said. "Well, that's still cool. So, what's for dinner? I'm hungry, hungry, hungry. Mom and Dad dragged me to some fancy tea-place for lunch—one of those places with little lettuce sandwiches—and I am starved."

"Looks like we're havin' critter stew, judgin' by my oatmeal this morning," Grandpa said. "Come gimme a hug, Judy gal."

Before dinner, Madison showed Judy the website, which displayed aerial pictures taken from a satellite in space. There were thousands of grainy map shots from around the world, all in shades of gray. When Madison typed in the right coordinates, the computer pulled up a picture captured two years earlier of the farmhouse and the surrounding land.

"That's the farm?" Judy said. "That's it? That tiny black square? What's all that stuff around it?"

"Just more land," Madison said. "That impression to the left is the pond, and the ones to the right are the barn, tool shed, chicken house, and old wash building."

"I was ten two years ago," Judy said.

"Momma Mae was still alive, too. It seems farther away than two years."

"I remember Momma Mae," Judy said. "She wore pearls a lot. And perfume."

Madison thought about the aerial photograph, how objective it was, how little it told. *Momma Mae was moving around in that little gray square two years ago. And now everything's changed so much. She's gone, and everything's different. Grandpa's hair is so gray.* She remembered the way Grandpa had been before: always teasing, laughing, joking around. Once, when she was little, he took all the grandkids out in the front yard and taught them how to do headstands.

The dining room was quiet. Judy shoved her food down, and Grandpa didn't talk much while he ate. He hooked his left arm around his plate and ate with his right hand. Now and then, he belched loudly, wiped his whiskered mouth with one fist, and exhaled, " 'Scuse me!"

"Soup's pretty good," he told Madison after Judy retreated to the back porch to play on the computer. Madison heard Judy typing on the keyboard, singing the same four lines over and over:

*Ladybug, ladybug,
fly away home.
Your house is on fire
and your children will burn.*

Madison watched a cluster of ladybugs clinging to the dining room curtains, sheer white curtains Momma Mae had chosen. With Judy out of the room, the table seemed vast. *When did things change? When did this place start breaking apart?* But Madison knew she wasn't really wondering *when*. She meant *why*.

"Yep, soup's pretty good," Grandpa repeated, scraping his bowl with his spoon. "Mae used to make the best vegetable soup. Lands,

that woman could cook." He slurped down the last spoonful. "Still feels like she's here sometimes. Still think she's gonna walk right in the front door and start doin' things like she used to. It seems odd, me bein' here when she's not. Don't really know how to fill my days anymore."

Madison noticed again how gray Grandpa's hair had become, how thin his wrists were. Grandpa carried his dirty dishes into the kitchen and went into the living room. Madison heard the electric click of the TV being switched on and the blare of a post news show.

Judy let the ladybugs go several hours later. Madison turned out the kitchen light and watched from the window. The moon was out, a slip of silver against the cool night sky. Judy gently held the bag in front of her. At first, the ladybugs crept out slowly, a few at a time, testing their wings, lifting off. Then they grew more brave and began rising in groups—tiny dots searching for new light. Madison could hear Judy talking softly to the air. "Where do you all go, hmmm? The moon? I guess it's better than getting burned up at the sun."

There was still one ladybug in the house, Madison noticed when she turned to leave the kitchen. Even though the light was off, the lone ladybug kept beating itself against the dark fixture. It circled the turned-out ceiling light, ricocheting off the painted porcelain flowers like it couldn't grasp that there was no light left. It continued along in the same groove, the same pattern, for lack of purpose.

Madison stood on a chair and caught the ladybug in her cupped hand. She opened the window and let it outside, but it wouldn't fly away. It clung to the outer screen, crawling back and forth across the black grid. *That's what we look like from the sky. Bugs creeping back and forth. From a satellite, it's all barely a trace on a map.* She stood at the window for what felt like hours, watching Judy, the ladybugs, the land, the moon reflected in the pond. She thought of Momma Mae and Grandpa.

"Time to go to bed, Grandpa!" she finally yelled into the living room. Grandpa lay asleep in his chair, his television channel reduced to gray static.

Stroke

As her knife glinted
against chopped carrots,
Mama
told me
"Never go barefoot
in the kitchen.
You might
lose a toe."

Today
the kitchen is empty,
save sunlight streaming
gurgling
over the windowsill
onto gray tiles.

I stand here
silent,
sun-warmth pooling
around my bare feet,
aware of the scent
of yesterday's loaf.

My toenails
are purple pebbles
shimmering.
I would give them all
to see Mama
kneading bread,
slicing carrots.

But today
her hands don't work,
arms can't move,
facial muscles have
forgotten how to smile.

Thick sunshine
may drown me.
I can't make myself swim.

Fertility

I.

One scoop per gallon,
I measure aqua Miracle-Gro plant food
into a jug of water, pour the mixture
into a small watering can, and visit
my potted plants: lemon thyme, Japanese fern,
spider plant multiplying itself in little green and white clusters—
its children. My lower back aches.

I know by the calendar I will bleed
in five days, on Tuesday morning.
Already, cramps
squeeze and wring my uterus. Suddenly,
eight hours of sleep is not enough.
I momentarily curse Eve. The pain of childbirth,
side effects of menstruation,
are not worth the softest strawberry or juiciest pear.

I remember the first morning
of blood—the only
time I ever felt excited about
a stain. Judy Blume books
made me believe my mother
would embrace me with delight,
carry me to the store for bras,
new underwear, Midol, Always,
and Tampax. Instead, I was directed
to her stash of StayFree Maxis.
Left alone, to become a woman.

I am taught to be careful with my body,
take birth control pills, separate myself from
my lover at the most intimate of times,
guard my precious soil, my own seeds of life,
prevent weeds—
fields of children I cannot afford to feed or love.
Monthly bleeding—wet red to dry brown. Wasted
potential. Spider plant clusters
falling to a linoleum floor, green leaves crumbling
to brown dust.

II.

Today, I tend to my potted garden.
The spider plant, excessively prolific, hangs heavy with new life.
I pull one child cluster from its mother and plant it firmly
in the soil of an oversized pot, taking care to help it grow.
I want to teach myself to be a spider plant,
a honeysuckle, or a red grape vine celebrating
fertility, the connection to the earth that nurtures
like water and good soil.

The Fish Dish

"My fish are missing. Two of em." Jerra woke up with a start. She had been dreaming of the fishpond in her backyard, as though she had been underwater. She knew the fish in her pond, and she could see every one of them in her dream. All but two. When she had a dream like this, it meant something she owned was missing. Once, she dreamt of her jewelry box, an empty spot where her mother's pearl earrings should have been. She found out later her daughter had been sneaking around with them on. Another time, she dreamt six carrots were missing from her vegetable patch, and she made rabbit nuggets out of the culprit when she caught it coming back for more. Such a vivid dream of her algae-covered fishpond and whiskery catfish in it—minus two—meant those catfish had disappeared. "Since sometime yesterday, I spose," she said to herself, "or I woulda had that dream sooner. Looks to be two I added as stock last year. Whoever took em must not be very good at fishing, if they couldn't catch the big boys."

Jerra hauled herself up from her quilted covers. It was nearly 7:00 a.m., and she liked to wake up early. At the age of sixty, she was sturdy as a silver dinner fork, but she had one arthritic hip that gave her trouble, especially in the morning. As she headed toward the kitchen, she pulled a yellow wool cardigan over the blue and violet ivy-print housedress she slept in and arranged her long gray hair into a messy bun. The automatic setting on her coffeemaker had already heated water for her morning tea. She grabbed a homemade teabag—honey and chamomile—and dropped it into her favorite mug. She'd made the mug several years ago: an orange goldfish with a cylindrical body and head, its mouth opening wide to form the mouth of the mug, its tail flattening and curving up to form the handle. Jerra poured in some hot water and let it steep while she put on her garden clogs. She took a spoon from the drawer, grabbed the mug, and went outdoors.

She followed a slim stone path that bent around her patches of plants, mossy and curved like a green snake. She stopped at the wooden box covering her compost pile, opened the lid, and tossed in her teabag. She stirred her tea and took a small sip. The scent of purple basil drifted from the herb garden at her left. She moved along the path, passing the large vegetable patch that fanned on her right. As the path curved around a flower garden, she arrived at her fishpond. The man-made pond, a large irregular oblong, resembled a painter's pallet.

A small island sat near the far edge of the water and a bridge connected the two pieces of land. Jerra had designed it herself to incorporate art and nature.

At the fishpond, Jerra stared into the water. She walked around the perimeter, over the bridge, and onto the island, where shallow footprints marked the soft earth. From a distance, the mess of tread and retread footprints resembled a pair of abstract catfish, or maybe angels. Up close, Jerra determined that they must have been made by small feet—a woman’s probably, because a boy would have likely gone barefoot. She talked into the water. “Looks like I’m gonna have to catch me a fish thief. You boys see the perpetrator?” She laughed, imagining for a moment what it might be like if she could talk to fish. “Crazy. Too crazy,” she said and walked back over the stone path, pulling stray weeds as she went. It was September, and getting colder. The garden required less of her every day. Just a few squash and other late vegetables left to harvest.

She went indoors, finished her tea, showered, and dressed for going into town. She put on wide-legged black cotton pants and a honey-mustard colored shirt that laced at the top. She wished she had a tan trench coat to wear on her unofficial investigation. It might be fun to feel like a detective. She grabbed a small notebook and pencil for her purse.

She climbed up into her old Chevy S-10 pickup, so covered with pollen and mud that it looked brown instead of red. Her mutt, Buber, climbed over her lap and onto a dirty afghan in the seat beside her. Buber always came along for a ride into town. “Bube, we gonna catch us a fish thief today,” she said, and smiled. Buber barked back. Jerra drove down her long dirt driveway onto a short gravel road. When she got to the main road, she turned on the radio, found a classical music station from a distant town, and listened to fuzzy Mozart as she drove. Buber howled and Jerra made up words to the music—bits about poppies and peas, catfish, butternut squash, and Oreo cookies. Food was one of her favorite topics, and she was hungry for breakfast.

In town, she stopped at Chip’s Diner. The faded yellow sign with its peeling green paint and layers of dirt was almost impossible to read, but the locals knew what it was called. Chip served coffee and fresh, greasy butter rolls to a table of out-of-towners and waved to Jerra as she entered. Jerra walked over to another table, where Cora Mayfield and her daughter, June, sat gossiping and eating bacon and eggs. They

were exactly the kind of folk Jerra was looking for.

Jerra joined them without asking, plopped her round bottom into an empty chair beside June, and laughed with them about whatever they were saying a minute before. "See, Ms. Jerra knows its funny," laughed Cora. When they calmed down, they filled Jerra in on the joke.

"And then, Mama says, ain't she a sight, with her stocking runned right up to her coochie—"

"I didn't say 'coochie,' dear," Cora interrupted.

June frowned at her mother, but continued, "and her skirt up over her head like that. That's the last time she'll try to ride her son's skateboard, I'm sure." She looked at Jerra for approval, and Jerra chuckled as though the gossip were as funny to her as it was to the Mayfields.

"And just what brings you here, Ms. Jerra Hankins? I wonder. You don't usually come in to Chip's on Thursdays. Big business in town? Meetin someone?"

Jerra had a feeling Cora was doing her own kind of gossip investigating. She looked Cora straight in the eye. "Why Cora, I just ran out of eggs sooner than usual. I thought I'd come to town for more and have my breakfast here at Chip's."

"Everybody knows you shop every two weeks for exactly what you need. You never run out of anything." Cora smiled an interested, venomous smile.

"Everybody knows I also have an arthritic hip. It gave me trouble; I lost my balance and dropped a carton of eggs. Nine broke."

Jerra smiled sweetly and called Chip away from the other table. "Now, Chip, you been talking to them long enough. You're about to make old Jerra feel like she's not special anymore. Get over here, give me a hug and take my order so I can eat, boy."

"Now, Ms. Jerra Leanne, you hold your horses and let a man be hospitable. I'm trying to welcome these people. These here are Curtis's folks from Ohio. You remember his son John, don't you?" Chip talked to the other group a little while longer and then visited Jerra. "Never did like that boy, and his wife and son sure are queer. Now what can I do for you, Jerra, dear? It's a treat to have you in here on one of your off days."

Jerra ordered a western omelet with extra cheese. "You know how I feel about cheese, Chip. Colby and Monterey Jack. None of that Velveeta crap."

"And you know how I feel about cookin, Ms. Jerra, I don't use crap for nothin." Chip went back to the kitchen. He emerged half an hour later with everybody's dishes. He sat at the table with Jerra and the Mayfields, and the four of them talked about Mrs. Harrison's new tractor, Bobby Fuller's new girlfriend, Terrence Cole's pumpkin patch, and forty-five minutes later, dinners and parties they'd all recently been to. Jerra took this opportunity to ask if anyone had eaten any good catfish recently. "And I don't mean at Bob's Catfish House, I mean home-cooked."

Cora and June shook their heads, but Chip mentioned that Kyle Tucker had gotten to eat his favorite fried fish at his birthday yesterday. "He stopped in before school for a muffin, and he told me he had fresh fried fish yesterday. He must not have been expectin it."

Jerra looked at her watch and exclaimed, "Mercy, how time does fly." She paid Chip for her breakfast and left the table, to the tune of Cora, June, and Chip mumbling about when Cheryl Hanson's horse might die.

Jerra climbed into her pickup, and Buber moved from the driver's seat, where he'd been barking out the window. He re-seated himself on the afghan, as Jerra started the motor. She drove half a mile down the road to Callahan's Auto Shop. Tramp Callahan was a reliable auto mechanic, even if his shop was getting a bit run down. He was training his son, Matt, to take over the business, and she knew she'd find Matt there, hard at work on his lunch break from school.

As she pulled up to the shop, Tramp looked up from a car he was working on. He wiped some grease off his hand and reached out to help Jerra step out of her pickup. "Well, this is a real treat, Ms. Jerra," he said. "What can I possibly do for you?" Tramp had grown up working on cars with Henry, Jerra's late husband. Henry had taught Jerra a thing or two, and she seldom needed help with her truck. She knew more about motors than most men in town.

"Well, Tramp, it seems to be makin a funny noise. And I don't know what it could be. It isn't the engine or ball bearings, I know that much."

"What does it sound like?"

"I never heard anything like it. Sounds like a bit of knocking, only hollow, maybe, and metallic."

"Would you let me start it up and listen for it?"

"Well, of course, Tramp, that's why I brought it here. For you to listen to it."

Tramp climbed into the truck and started it. "Sounds beautiful so far. Can't hear anything wrong with it. You keep this old pickup in fantastic condition."

"Well, I do try. But it's not a noise you hear right away. Gotta drive it for a minute; kick it up to about forty or forty-five miles per hour. Maybe you should take a spin. Mind if I take a look at what you're workin on while you're gone?"

"Look at what you like. Maybe you can help Matt on that carburetor, over there. I'll just take Old Red out for a few minutes and see if I can't get her to talk to me one-on-one." Tramp shut the door to the truck and took off.

Jerra found Matt in the garage, sitting on a low stool, eating egg salad and staring at pieces of a carburetor in very bad shape. "Dad tells me I gotta make it work, and for cheap, because Mr. Wheeler can't afford anything but cheap. But I'd say it's shot."

"Well, son, I'd say when something looks shot, you gotta take your mind off it and look at it fresh later. See if you can't fix it then. Talk to me for a bit. Tell me how you been." Jerra sat on an old wood table near Matt and started asking him the familiar old questions. How much he had grown, if he was interested in any girls, and other nonsense. Then she asked him a personal question.

"So you and Kyle Tucker still been hangin out much?"

"Yesm. I didn't know you knew Kyle."

"Well, he does live down my street a ways. Doesn't seem strange for me to know him."

"No, ma'am. I guess it don't. Sure, Kyle and I still hang around together. Sometimes he even helps me work here. Learns about cars for free that way. Gets an education he can use. Just yesterday, I was at his house celebratin his birthday. Now he's fifteen like me."

"Was it a good party?"

"Yesm, it was. I know they don't have a whole lot and don't need to be doin anything too fancy, but it sure was a treat to have some fresh catfish. It certainly wasn't frozen. I can taste frozen catfish a mile away."

"Why did it surprise you that it wasn't frozen?"

"You know how much cheaper frozen catfish is, Ms. Jerra. Cause

it don't go bad as long as you keep it frozen. I guess it just surprised me they paid for the fresh stuff stead of havin frozen is all. But it's Kyle's favorite food, so I spose they wanted to treat him."

Tramp arrived while Matt was finishing his sentence. He stopped the truck and called to Jerra, "Old Red purred the whole drive. I couldn't hear nothin like what you described."

"That's strange. Maybe it's just me. Maybe I had something in the back before that was makin that noise. Or Old Red's makin me out to look like a fool. I'll bring her in again if I keep hearing it. And what do I owe you for this?"

Tramp laughed. "You sure ain't been here for a while, Ms. Jerra. You know nobody owes me anything until I need to work on their vehicle. You can bring it back and try to pay me, if I can find something wrong with it next time. Until then, you just keep her happy, change her oil, and she won't give you no trouble, I'm sure."

Jerra thanked him. Nothing left to do now but visit Kyle's house and investigate there. This detective work was taking a while, but at least it was working.

She went to the store to pick up an extra carton of eggs, in case the Mayfields tried to validate her story with a cashier. She'd find a use for them somehow—maybe make French toast. Jerra drove home, took some candy out of her cupboard and wrapped it up with a few ribbons. Then she left again for the Tucker place. She drove back onto the gravel road, but turned away from town and took the second driveway down from hers. She'd been to the Tucker's a few times in the past, but she and Miranda had never really become friends, and Jerra hadn't been by in a couple of years.

Miranda was in front of the humble Tucker house, sweeping the steps, awkwardly maneuvering the broom and dustpan around her pregnant body. She looked up as Jerra stepped out of her truck. "Good day, Mrs. Tucker. How's things?"

"Fine, Ms. Jerra," Miranda said. Jerra thought she looked nervous. "What brings you here today?"

"Well, I was in town this morning and heard your boy had a birthday yesterday. I thought I'd bring him some candy. He likes Tootsie Roll Pops, don't he?"

"I don't know. We don't often buy the kids candy. We think it's bad for their teeth. But as a treat, I'm—I'm sure he'll love to eat them." By this time, Jerra had stepped close to Miranda. The women were

face-to-face, and Miranda's nervousness showed plainly. Jerra supposed it could be because the women knew so little of each other, but she suspected otherwise and waited to catch Miranda's eye. She thought she could smell the fish on her.

When Miranda looked up into Jerra's face, Jerra held her gaze, stared into her eyes and saw what she wanted to know. She could see Miranda at her fishpond with her husband's old fishing pole, clumsily catching two fish, tangling the line, having to clasp a rag in her hand to remove their slippery bodies from the hook, unable to hold them with bare hands. Jerra asked Miranda, "Why didn't you ask? If you'dve asked, I wouldn'tve minded."

Miranda was embarrassed but not sorry. "How did you know? I—you weren't around. You been spying out that kitchen window of yours?"

"I would like you to get me two new fish for my pond, then. I gotta keep that thing stocked, so I can catch the big old ones and eat em, and the younger ones can get big and fat and have babies. I want your word, Miranda. Two new stock fish."

"Ms. Jerra, if I could afford such a thing as two stock fish, I wouldn't need to steal any outa your pond, would I?"

Jerra calmly replied, "When you do something wrong, there's consequences. Wouldn't have been wrong if you'd asked, but you stole instead. You need to pay the debt you owe. Two catfish. If not stock, then at least some I can eat."

"You never said how you seen me fishin for those. You sure are queer as people says. But I can't give you two stock fish. Or two fish of any kind. Only fish I got is what's in my stomach. And if you want that, I'll give it to you when it comes out."

"I'm tellin you, Miranda, I want my fish. I'm honest and hard-workin, and it don't make sense for you to take something of mine I worked for without even asking."

"You old cow. Like you couldn't spare two fish."

Jerra looked away from Miranda's eyes and stepped closer to her. She believed people should pay what they owed, but she felt bad pushing Miranda. Changing the subject, and hopefully, the mood, she put her hand on Miranda's large pregnant belly. The mound of flesh felt empty inside, like it was full of air, instead of life.

She spoke softer to Miranda, now. "Don't feel it kickin much, do you?"

Miranda backed away. "I don't want your filthy hands on me, Jerra! Knowin you, you're cursin my baby. Just cause it don't kick don't mean it ain't there. Why else would I have this stomach? I don't eat enough to get fat."

Jerra stood in silence, surprised Miranda might believe she could put a curse on her. Finally she said, "Listen Miranda, when people do something wrong, they feel guilty about it sooner or later. One day, you'll deliver two fish to my door, and things will be right between us." Jerra turned around, got back into her pickup, and drove home.

She made herself dinner—a fried hamburger, potato salad, and some butternut squash from her garden. She waited patiently.

That weekend when Jerra went in to town to do her routine grocery shopping, she overheard Pearl and Gordon Hess talking about Miranda Tucker. Pearl was telling her husband, "Woman's likely to pop soon. Come in to buy a couple yards of fabric yesterday. Said she ain't due for two more weeks, but I don't think she'll last that long."

Monday afternoon, loud knocking at her front door brought Jerra away from her needlework. Miranda stood at the door holding two catfish on a plate. "Take them. Take them." She thrust the dish at Jerra. "Always heard she was crazy. Old bat. Never believed it. Witchcraft." She screamed, "Don't want to see you again, Ms. Jerra. Jerra Leanne. No. No! Take them. Take it all! Don't want to see you!" She quieted down, hugging herself. "Fish ate my baby," she mumbled, turned around and walked away. Jerra closed the door and leaned against it.

Jerra took the dish into her kitchen. The fish were lovely, nearly as fresh as the day they were caught. Jerra cleaned them, froze one, and ate the other for dinner. She didn't want to let good fish go to waste.

The dish was beautiful, and Jerra wondered if Miranda realized she'd given it to her. She washed the plate with care. It looked hand-made, with an underwater design, featuring a lavender octopus, several fish and a seahorse. Green seaweed floated against a background of blue that faded from light at the top, to darker blue under the waves, to deep indigo at the bottom of the plate. Jerra added it to her display in her curio cabinet just as her phone began to ring.

Jerra's best friend Carol Lockheart called to share the most recent gossip. She lived in the middle of town and knew more about the people who lived there than anyone else. She told Jerra that Miranda had gone into labor at home sometime during the past weekend, but

instead of giving birth to a boy or girl, Miranda says two dead fish emerged from her womb. "The doctor suspects she miscarried long ago without realizin it but held onto her weight, or developed it as some sorta 'psychosis'. You know she don't see no doctor when she's pregnant. Never had no ultrasounds or nothin. Took some convincin before she'd let her husband call the doctor even after the birth.

"Doctor Anderson wants to do tests on her, send her to a doctor friend of his in Little Rock and write an article about how she managed to give birth to fish. He wants to tinker with her diet and stuff, see if she can give birth to birds, or lizards, or sheep or something, too.

"Course nobody believes she gave birth to no fish, but everyone's talkin about it. Has anyone told you she's gone crazy since it happened? Keeps saying a fish ate her baby, no matter what the doctor says about miscarriage and stuff. Outa her head screamin about how she didn't even eat all of the fish herself. They were for her son. Whatever that means. She calls you an old witch. You, Jerra. Says folks is right sayin you do strange things, but they don't know how evil you really are. And then she says you cursed her, made the fish eat her baby. The doctor's advised her husband to bring her over in a couple of days if she don't calm down."

Jerra listened to her friend, shocked. The fish she'd eaten for dinner that night—the stolen fish she thought Miranda had replaced—a woman had given birth to them? She didn't know what to think, except that she was sorry she'd ever touched Miranda's belly. As though she could cause such a thing.

But the fish had come back to Jerra, like she said.

Carol went on and on. "Cora Mayfield says everyone knows Miranda's been cheatin on her husband, Tom, with about seven different men. Of course, I have trouble imaginin seven, but one or two, I don't know. And Cora says she thinks the fish birth is probably caused by some new STD the public hasn't even been told about yet. Or some form of biological warfare. Although I think that last theory's a little silly. If some foreigners were trying to stir something up, why would they hit a little town like Honey Comb, Arkansas? We ain't got political influence here. Unless you count who wins at the County Fair. But I wonder about that STD idea. Wouldn't surprise me if she had one. And how do we know they were real fish? Could have been fish-like mutated babies."

As Carol chatted about the talk in town, Jerra thought about the

fish she'd had for dinner and felt nauseous. She opened her refrigerator and freezer and took out the pieces of fish she hadn't already eaten. Stiffly, she said goodbye to Carol and hung up the phone.

Jerra couldn't imagine what had happened or how. Surely she could not have caused such a thing. She had only wanted Miranda to repay her. Now she couldn't imagine eating another bite. She walked to her flower garden and tossed the fish pieces underneath some roses, hoping to at least get fertilizer out of the fish flesh. The roses died two months later.

Blood Poem

My head throbs.
I lie back on the carpet,
knit my fingers over my eyes,
stare at interwoven
pink and yellow lights.
I want to kill somebody.
The pink fingers turn red and melt
onto my face.

If I sit up,
I will *need* to kill.
I will fashion a weapon:
 Break a glass bottle.
 Drive it into your neck.
 Twist.

Blood.
Pink is thin blood.
Maroon is the heart
barely beating.
My favorite color is red.

Blood poem. Blood words.
Blood thoughts no one is supposed to have.
I wish you would die.
I wish I could kill you.

I am your blood.
Half of me came from you.
I dream of emptying my blood in a bucket
and separating
my mother's blood
from yours.

Amber Pijor

I dream of painting with your blood
and calling the finished canvas

Shallow

Wife Beater

Religious Fanatic

Empty Soul

My Curse

Pig's Blood

Coward Blood

Fake Blood

Dead Blood

Your

Worthless

Blood

I dream of drinking my mother's blood,
pouring it back inside myself,
becoming her child, only.
Her child, alone.
Her child. Blood Child.

The Three Brothers

*See no evil, pretend it wasn't heard.
Hear no evil, forget it was seen.
Speak no evil, and realize its presence.*

I.

Seenoevil ignores the world,
squatting easily on his haunches,
flashing his clever tail to one side.
His hands rest over his eyes,
no white knuckles, no straining veins,
an animal with no knowledge
of fear, hurt, or mistrust.
His lips curl into a smile.
Ignorance is everything.

II.

Hearnoevil draws
spidery legs to his chest
in a mimic of his brother.
Hands claw at ears desperately,
and a small tune buzzes from his lips,
a carnival-monkey hum of music.
Bliss is being deaf.

III.

Speaknoevil has been
loosed from the sibling chain.
Black eyes speak what lips cannot.
He is lonely,
scared,
and wonders how much longer he can be silent.
Secrets are diseased mosquitos
that swarm his figure and
seep into eyes and ears.
The fingers on his mouth are human.

The Orange Tree

I sit
skirt off
on the edge
of his bed.
He kneels
between my legs.
I have
no choice.

He says he loves me,
runs his thick
fingers
over my smooth calves.
I shaved this morning
because he told me.

His fingertips
flit
across my thigh.
My body
remains
tense.
I bathed with
antibacterial soap,
citrus-scented,
because he told me.

You're tasty.
He nibbles
my inner thigh.
I watch the wall,
dancing shadows
of leaved and fruited limbs.
I pretend
to be a tree
unable to feel
wounds,
strong enough
to heal them.

I feel his tongue
pressing
sucking
teeth gnawing
just high enough
so the gouge,
he says,
won't show.
*You smell like
oranges.*
I think he'd like to peel me.

He uses
my skirt
crumpled
on his floor
as a napkin,
stains red
the bottom hem.
He hands me
Neosporin
gauze
a Q-Tip.
Heads to the bathroom
to finish up.

I sit
skirt off,
heavy and
planted,
medicine in hand,
knowing
it can't heal me.

Black and Blues

I'm in a dark room today,
moody blues in my head,
smoke consuming my ill intentions.
An old black man sings on stage.
Another lover is gone.

I swirl my green Midouri Sour,
slosh it over the edge of a glass
more clear than he or I could ever be.
I wait, catch his wrinkled gaze
before licking moisture off my hand—
salty sweet communication.
Now he sings for me alone.

I think
of warm bath water
and cool porcelain touching my resolve
to stay aloof.

I want to submerge my head
until my hair becomes soft and pretty again.
Let the water flow into my ears.
I refuse to open my mouth or my eyes.

I am like Houdini,
trapped inside a box or burlap bag.
Not enough air
flows through the spaces for survival.
Rip open the bag with scissors.
Stab my heart.
The scars make it
tougher than it should be.
Like all fanatic deceivers
I keep coming back for more.

I order another drink though
I do not taste it,
I tip the bartender
who doesn't know my name,
lean my elbows into the jagged
counter top and bleed.

I listen to the black and blues.
I can't stand to hear the sound
of my own sobbing,
I smother my doubts
in gutter-al passivity.

I would rather pour rusty nails down my throat
than show the world any humanity.
I crack my knuckles with a frosty demeanor,
and though I let you lean against me,
I may become the tree you're nailed to in the end.

Irresistible red door

like perfume by Giorgio Beverly Hills.
We sense the attraction and
paint our front door in Hanley Hills
on Bloom
red, no need for a welcome mat.

Now I dust for telepathic company,
someone to surprise me when I sweep.
At six years old,
I think movie stars move as carefree as stars fall
in the adjacent backyard.

From Grimm fairy tales
happy endings
bad news and habitual wishful thinking,
I wish on the first star I see
when the day's had enough
breakouts to push the sun over the edge.
Mom makes us hurry indoors.
The sky has the pox.

I dress warmly for bed,
socks and a scarf to ward off vampire and spider bites
(in the dark there are more of them—stars, spiders, vampires—than us).
I sleep with my sister.
She says it's too hot.
She wants to sleep alone,
but I'm older, smaller.
I remind her to face me and squeeze
disprove what I can't see can't see me
my defenses matured into obvious mistakes.

Even in private, I'm not alone:
ghosts slide under doors.
We make room in bed for fear that won't sleep
but works the house into a wrapper.
We close the curtains, move all tall furniture in front of windows.
I steal all the covers.

Mom promises to sleep with us but breaks down
on the sofa with the phone.
She fears the uninvited company from a red door,
not the kind we clean for,
chops her last ghost in the ceiling fan,
waits for Paula to answer her call for cigarettes.

I wake up too early for school and imagine
the red door on the floor, a red carpet for police.
No.

Mom opened the door
expecting Paula
who beats the door like a drum.
The cops bring back our dog, Rock 'n' Roll, and say
if it wasn't for her they never would have caught him.
Four years in jail, he mails videos of his band playing "All Along the Watch
Tower."

She accepts collect calls.
We pretend to move and put the phone in Uncle Jeff's name.

I never get enough sleep.
I miss Mass, the first fifteen minutes of class
every morning.
My heart keeps time on a gong to overcompensate for
slow self-loathing thoughts,
speeding, self-absorbed pulse.
The drive to school is a funeral procession, mourning
as birds fly in a cage of rain.
I stare straight ahead into walls
return the same false confession.
Sister Rosella says I need a wake-up call, an earlier bedtime.
I agree, we need a reliable car.

I tell Mom to paint
the front door
blue.



"Lighthouse"

A Little Calm in the Eye of the Storm

I remember
the way love tasted
like a first kiss,
how it smelled wrapped
in fresh sheets and how
my bottom lip tingled
when your fingers brushed it
during a quiet moment
between soul mates.

Between us.

Once in awhile
I still listen to your voice,
the recorded message
I saved
when you called at 3 a.m.
Waking up to "I love you"
spoken three times
in a soft whisper
made it true.

It's funny how my true poetry
doesn't know you're gone.
It writes itself
while the rest of my body goes numb.
My pores print everything
my heart refuses to accept.

It's 3 a.m. again and
I'm breathing a little
but soft enough to
hear your voice one more time
before I cry.
It's the eye of the storm and
just so you know,
I'm sorry you left.
When it comes right down to it,
I only hate you
when I miss you the most.

what i wanted to say

I can't paint this landscape
alone. Two seconds before sunrise
the sky holds its breath
at the edge of light
waiting for a line of orange to break in the east.
I could pull that light draw the line
across Missouri to you
ending somewhere in the west.

I know the basic pattern.
Rules of form. Shading grays. Perspective.
You wander downtown Kansas City
make a sketch of empty cafe tables
call me to say your knees are stained
and there is charcoal
pressed into your palms.
Because of you I notice the blank
spaces in my poetry.

We always happen this way:
I love you for three weeks at a time.
The calls stop. I feel like a traitor
when I tell someone else the things
I'd rather tell you. I save the good stories
ration my words
pencil a thin outline
in the rain clouds
inking shadows in the west.

Absent

She thought he was out sick,
saw his empty chair in 4th period algebra, struggled
through equations and passed notes.

She didn't see it happen or
know he cried before, pressed his lips to the walls.

She didn't know he opened his yearbook
to look at the ones who shunned him,
called him a weirdo for spinning in circles
to ease the pressure in his brain.

She didn't know he took his glasses off,
looked in the mirror to see if he was handsome.

Then he put them back on.

She didn't see his methodical process:
upside-down laundry basket to the closet door,
rumpled clothes in a pile on his bed
for someone to find.

She didn't hear his sister scream
when she found him.

Did he think of those afternoons
pouring Kool-Aid on anthills,
Olympians soaring on rings,
world heroes with no need of capes?

She would take back ignoring him in the hallway after last bell,
forget the time he asked her out and she laughed, how she said
his glasses made him look like an old man.

She would remind him his muscles
were still growing.

She would let him ask her out again.

This time she would hold his hand.

on the front porch with cats

Every night you stop on your walk home
to sit on the porch of an abandoned house,
drinking gas-station coffee, talking to stray cats.

Some nights it rains
so you slow down,
turn your face up, let the rain
drop down your cheeks.
You call my answering machine to tell me
it might rain in Columbia in a few hours.

Every day I watch the sky.
When the west darkens with clouds,
I call you to ask
if it's raining in Kansas City.

But you don't answer.
You're on the front porch with cats.

We talk in recorded messages
brief hellos and questions
half-finished conversations.
I memorize your phone number.
You lose mine.
We both know it.

You're the only person
who calls just to hear what I think
about the space people don't use in their houses.
Quantum theory. Films from the 1970s.
Cops who won't let you take pictures
of statues in front of federal buildings.
Cat food.

But you're never home
to hear my answer.

I haven't heard from you in days.
I call. Leave a message:

*My phone number is
on the inside cover of your sketch book.
The leaves are turning.
On windy days, they crackle and fall.*

Rebound Sex

9/17 You're sick of sulking in between the walls of your apartment. Tell yourself it is time to get out and meet a rebound man. Desire a quick screw to get your mind off yet another bad relationship. Go to a bar you've never been to. You're attracted by the promise of '80s music and can ignore the fact that there is a girl shooting up in the corner. If no men are decent at least Billy Idol and the Go-Go's will soothe your soul. Spot a blond cutie, smooth on the dance floor, melting and swaying under the colored lights.

He yells to you, "You're an incredible dancer!"

Smile coyly. "You too." Notice he has a cleft chin, your favorite male attribute, and secretly think he's a perfect guy to have a short-term fling with. Find out his name is Ethan.

You go to his place for an after-bars party, drink a beer, meet his friends. Watch him talk to these strangers. Think he's hot. Too short? Can't decide yet. Find out he owns a few buildings downtown. Think this is great. No more actors for you. They are never honest. Plan to see him again.

9/24 Ethan and you play mini golf. He says you can go first. This is sweet. You get a hole in one first off. Woo-hoo!

He hits his ball into the river by mistake on the second hole. "Aw, hell."

You laugh, call him a dork.

He wrinkles his nose at you. "Well, then you're an even bigger dork, cuz you're with me!"

He climbs over the little rope fence around "the green" and leans over the river to reach his ball. Falls in. Wet up to his knees, his pants are stained blue by the dye in the water. You both laugh. Yeah, he's sweet. It's okay that he's short. He'll be the shortest man you've ever had sex with.

10/1 Watch a sad movie at Ethan's house about a woman who is dying of cancer. Afterward he says he doesn't want to get old and die. Notice his eyes are a little red and glassy. This is just sentimental enough for you to sleep with him tonight.

Unfortunately, he takes you home in his white Nissan Sentra. Walks you to your door. Runs his fingers through your chestnut hair and

kisses you goodnight. Soft and slow, but no real spit exchanged. Figure he's playing "the good boy."

He says, "Sorry I can't stay, Beautiful. Have to take my dog, Muffin, to the vet bright and early." Next weekend then.

10/8 Get a haircut adding luscious layers. Spend nearly fifty-five dollars. You're forced to charge it, because it's been two months since your last acting job. Ethan notices no change. You ask, "Don't I look nice today?"

"Are you kidding? You're always gorgeous!" Whatever.

In retaliation you go to the mall alone, wearing a short black skirt and a tiny green top. Other men notice. This is good. Buy lingerie in cherry red—a bra, thong, and garter belt with fishnet stockings.

To yourself say: "He'll never be able to resist me!"

10/12 You buy two small deranged pumpkins. Invite him over to carve them. You cut out a devil face with quick, jerking motions. He slowly carves a smiley face with amazing precision. This can be no good.

At the door he says, "You're so much fun." Lightly kisses you goodnight without even a hint of tongue. Once again he leaves you unfulfilled.

10/17 Meet Ethan for lunch at a local sandwich shop downtown advertising a special on Reubens. Remember they are his favorite.

Put your sandwich down mid-bite and speak with your mouth partially full of cabbage and rye. "At Thanksgiving we can drive up to Dallas to see your family. I'd like to meet them." You assume he really is a good boy at this point and needs promises of a future before going to bed.

"We can't look that far ahead. Two months is a lot of time when you're talking about a new relationship."

Is that what this is? A relationship? Wait—he's crazy to consider two months a long time. And hey, Thanksgiving is *less* than two months away! You don't eat anymore, oddly hurt.

He drones on, "My mother makes great stuffing. I can't wait to go home, haven't been there for Thanksgiving in three years. Damn, I can't wait for that *stuffing!*"

Don't want to hear about good stuffing, you just want to be stuffed. Stare at the yellow wall behind his head and mentally return to the

problem at hand—your intense craving for sex. Imagine fucking him. Decide this is not a good time. The restaurant is, after all, busy.

10/20 You and Ethan see *Noises Off* at the local high school then return to his place. Inspect his bookcase when he excuses himself to the bathroom. *Les Miserables*, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Civil Disobedience*, numerous books of poetry, and a Shel Silverstein collection.

Aloud to yourself: “Shit. Can’t believe I met you in a bar.” You are astonished at how similar your tastes are.

Pull out Shel Silverstein’s, *The Giving Tree*, a favorite from childhood. Open it. See that a girl named Sara—never heard of *her* before—wrote some cute message on the inside cover. Want to barf. Slam book.

10/27 Adopt a fish from the neighbor. This guy Ed hates it, thinks it’s sick because it swims upside down. He got it from his sister but doesn’t have the heart to flush it into oblivion. It is dark brown with whiskers and funny protruding eyes. Odd little creature, but it grows on you.

Go to Wal-Mart with Ethan to see what kind of fish it is. Pass prophylactics on the way to the pet department. Decide to test him. “You know, I’m highly allergic to latex.” He looks disappointed. Woo-hoo! Throw in, “Just kidding! I’m being stupid.”

Ethan pisses you off with his next remark. “My ex-girlfriend Sara was allergic to the lubricant on those things. That was a real problem for us. A terrible one actually.”

What? He slept with *her*, but makes no move with *you*?

At the fish section, you see that your fish is supposed to swim that way. He is an upside-down catfish. It all makes more sense. “My fish is a freak. I love him!” Ethan laughs at you.

You secretly want to ask him what his problem is right then next to the fish supplies and dog food. Decide to wait on that. Maybe you’ll do it tonight.

11/1 Ethan comes over. You both nestle down on your couch under blankets to watch a trashy adventure and sex movie you picked out on purpose. They’re doing it in the pool. The whole water thing compels Ethan to make a fishy suck face and this icky “pomph, pomph” noise. Gives you a hickey on your arm and even lifts your shirt and puts a hickey on your stomach! You start to unzip his khaki pants to make him stop.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?” He sounds playful. You think he might do it with you. Instead he starts tickling you and poking your sides. He laughs at your suffering and forces a snort. It sounds painful. Is he *trying* to be unsexy?

Try another tactic.

“Spank me! I’m a bad girl!” He does indeed spank you. This is good. Then he’s up, seems anxious. Asks if you’d like another beer. You want to scream—why the anxiety? But you just say yes. Flick a beer lid toward the trash can in anger. Miss. What? You never miss!

11/6 Your fish is cute. Every time you walk by, he pops his head out from behind the rocks. You feed him. It’s funny.

Ethan calls. “I have a surprise for you! Dress casually.”

Your boot-cut jeans cleverly conceal a black lace thong. He shows up at your door with tickets to the World Wrestling Federation show downtown.

When you get to the arena, excuse yourself to the ladies’ room and take off your thong in annoyance. Throw it in the trash. Think you’re spending too much time and emotion on what was supposed to be a rebound fling. Get a brilliant idea on your way back to your seat.

Sit down. Whisper, “I’m going commando.”

“What’s that? ‘Going commando?’”

The man in front of you obviously knows. He turns around and winks at you. You flick your tongue up and down quickly at him like a snake, and then give him the finger. Wrestling sucks. Leave to get a beer.

11/9 You are now feeling very frustrated and desperate. Deliberately leave a condom wrapper on the floor by the couch thinking he’ll get jealous and take you right there in defiance.

Ethan spots the plastic blue wrapper and looks ticked. “I’ll see you sometime this week. I have to go. I just remembered I’m supposed to have dinner with the manager from my north side property.” Slams the front door. Leaves without even a hug. You know he was really upset because his temples were pulsing.

This is the opposite of how you thought he’d react. Damn. You’re lonely and pissed at yourself. Admit to the empty room that you really enjoy Ethan’s company. Decide to entertain yourself by watching your weird fish swim, but he’s hiding in the rocks.

Begin crying profusely and leave a message on Ethan’s machine.

Try to explain your motivations. "I'm so sorry I tried to play a stupid game to get you to sleep with me. I just thought...never mind. Whatever."

He calls later and says he accepts your apology. Even says he was jealous but provides no explanation for his lack of sexuality with you. Curl up in your flowered comforter and watch *Casablanca*. There's no job in the morning anyway. Seems nobody thinks you are good enough for any parts, not even for those ads selling herpes medication. Thank God, Mom has been sending checks.

11/11 Buy a few bottles of cheap champagne. Set up red taper candles around the living room for ambiance and burn the "pussy" incense you purchased as a joke at a stand in the mall. Invite Ethan to your apartment.

You both get very drunk. He tells you a story about this girl in college that used to purposely get him drunk in hopes that he'd get crazy and sleep with her.

Shit! Your plan is not new or ingenious! Get dejected. Decide to make him worry unnecessarily. Pretend to pass out in the bathroom with the door locked. Really you carve an angry face into a bar of Dove soap with a bobby pin.

11/20 Tonight you've got God-awful, knockdown, horrible cramps. Can't move, feel pissy, look like hell, need chocolate.

Ethan visits. He brushes your hair for you.

"You're absolutely beautiful." You think he has to be lying. Who can think greasy hair, super prickly legs, and a bloated belly are pretty?

If you'd like, he'll paint your toenails your favorite shade of green but can't promise good results. Kindly say no. Instead he massages your feet for half an hour. You fall asleep in his arms.

11/22 Get up the nerve to show Ethan a tape of the first play you got paid to do. Settle down on the floor between his legs. He wraps his strong arms around you and leaves a warm hand relatively far up on your inner thigh. Think you feel a little something in his pants. Hooray...maybe. He shifts a little so he's not pressing into your lower back. Apparently this is it for the night.

Blush when you see yourself walk out on stage in an old woman's housedress and slippers.

Watch his features twitch with laughter at your character. You're so close, you can see every whisker and angle. Slowly realize you're

enraptured by his face, blue in the television glow, smiling. He is really enjoying himself.

You think he's beautiful.

Feel strange. "I have to pee. Be back in a sec."

He squeezes your hand quickly. "Okay." Go to the bathroom. Cry. Hard. You're not sure why. Don't know what you feel. Growl at your reflection, swollen and red. "Hey there, bitch! You're an actress. Fake togetherness." You daub your face with a Kleenex and apply some shimmery lip-gloss.

11/24 Have an audition for an Imodium commercial. You need the job. Ethan drives you, gives you a chocolate bar with a green ribbon wrapped around it for luck. He knows you're still ragging and could use the pick-me-up.

"Give me your best 'I've got diarrhea' look, sweetheart!" After you close the car door, you crinkle your face, stick out your tongue, cross your eyes, and grasp your abdomen. He laughs. You think he has a great sense of humor.

Sitting outside the audition room, you try to stay calm, think good thoughts. Fantasize about doing it with him in your shower.

12/3 Receive word the new face of diarrhea is NOT you. Bitch to your freaky fish since Ethan is busy at the leasing office. Call your mom to complain but she doesn't seem to care. She keeps asking if you and Ethan are getting married. "I want grandchildren before I die, honey." You choose to ignore her. You're still pissed about the job. Oh wait, you mean lack thereof.

12/7 It's raining. You are tired of watching the steely sky. Close the blinds on your sliding door to escape the gloom. Turn on all the lights and pull out your old diaries. Flip through locked journals from childhood to the ragged spirals you used in college.

Read about your first time. Get nauseous. Read about Greg from that fraternity and how he screwed your best friend. Remember how Jordan repeatedly cheated on you last summer. Bastard.

Find an empty page in the last journal you wrote in. Add an entry: "12/7. Thank God Ethan is not like them."

12/10 Go rowing at the nearby state park with Ethan, wrapped up in sweaters and wearing matching green mittens your mother sent. The metal oars are cold, and the wind over the lake seems way too brisk for

Texas. Take turns rowing the little boat because the paddles are heavier than they look. The slap of the oars on the water is repetitious and calming somehow. You stop in the middle of the lake to watch the sun disappear behind the trees. Ethan is gazing at you.

It is barely audible, his first "I love you." He chokes up. You can't believe it!

"I love you too."

You quickly scoot to his end of the boat for a hug. The boat wobbles, nearly pitching you both into the chilly water. Your scream echoes across the lake and he can't stop laughing. Then he kisses you, and there is definite passion! All sorts of spit and funny suction noises. He even sucks lightly on your bottom lip. Shivers race through your whole body. This is a good day!

12/13 You're excited. You may actually make love instead of just screwing. This is real. You're horny and you're in love.

You feel motivated and start cleaning your apartment. Put fresh sheets on the bed and hum while you scrub your toilet. Next you'll do the bathtub, sink, and you might even mop the bathroom floor! Love gets you energized.

12/17 Horny. A little hurt. Ethan's been out of town for three days on business. He's only called you twice. It's just you, your fish, and his bulldog, Muffin, drooling all over your apartment.

Doubt wrenches you from your productive cleaning frenzy. Your imagination can be a bitch. You think Ethan may not love you, that he's never coming back for you or Muffin. You think something's wrong with you. There has to be something. He slept with *her*, that bitch Sara! You feel sick and maybe you're going to vomit. Hover over the sparkling potty, enthralled by the quilting in your toilet paper. Yep, up it comes.

12/21 Still no play. You're upset. He invites you over for dinner. At the dining table you can't keep the hurt in anymore.

"Why won't you make love to me?" He says nothing, chews spaghetti in silence. He's thinking. You decide to put it all out there. "You loved her more, didn't you?" Start crying. Wipe your nose on a napkin.

He swallows and looks you directly in the eye. "I do love you very much. You mean more to me than she ever did. It's just, there was...stuff...that happened."

"What? What the hell did she do to you?" You're yelling. Shit. So much for romance. Notice he is tearing up. He must be moved by your tears. Good.

He looks down to poke at his steamed broccoli. He puts his fork down. Looks up. "Sara cheated on me. I got gonorrhea from her."

You can't believe it. "That's it?"

"What do you mean 'that's it?' It burned like hell to pee!"

You laugh hard. That's nothing. One time you had three UTI's in a month's time.

"Why don't we just get tested? Gaw, can't believe you put me through all this for that."

He reveals a small smile. "Well, gonorrhea kind of put a damper on my sex drive. Plus, I was scared of being cheated on. I wanted to make sure we were *real*."

You get up and hug him, feel soft inside. "Ethan, we *are* real." You kiss his forehead. Make plans to get tested.

12/28 Spent Christmas together, opened presents, drank spiked cider and rubbed each other's feet. Today, though, is even better because...

You're clean!

Decide to take a road trip to the Smoky Mountains. Anticipate wearing that red lingerie from when you first met Ethan. Is something burning? Oh no. That's just you baby!

1/1 A little hung over from last night's New Year's bash with Ethan's coworkers, but the sales are too good to pass up. Decide to go shopping, invite Ethan. Pass a sex shop downtown and think it's time to rev up Ethan's sex drive. Drag Ethan inside laughing and embarrassed. You buy a pink vibrator he picks out for you. Three varying speeds! You also pick up some condoms. He playfully pinches your left butt cheek on your way out of the store.

At your door he kisses you goodnight and does the fishy suck on your neck for a quick moment. Invite him in for "coffee."

He winks at you. "Who drinks coffee at 11 p.m.?"

You lick his earlobe. "Nobody really."

Ethan throws you over his shoulder so your face bounces into his hot ass. Happy New Year!



"54th and Broadway" (1st Place Photo Contest Winner)

Feminine Waves

She is nicknamed
 Baby,
the lipstick whore
plastered across plastic cases,
searing through sound waves,
holding her breath,
just so
ranting for the *bitches*
independence.

Under parental advisories,
2002 watts of
screaming lullabies.
 Plucked.
 Laid diagonally.
 Skin stretched over ribs.

Breathe.

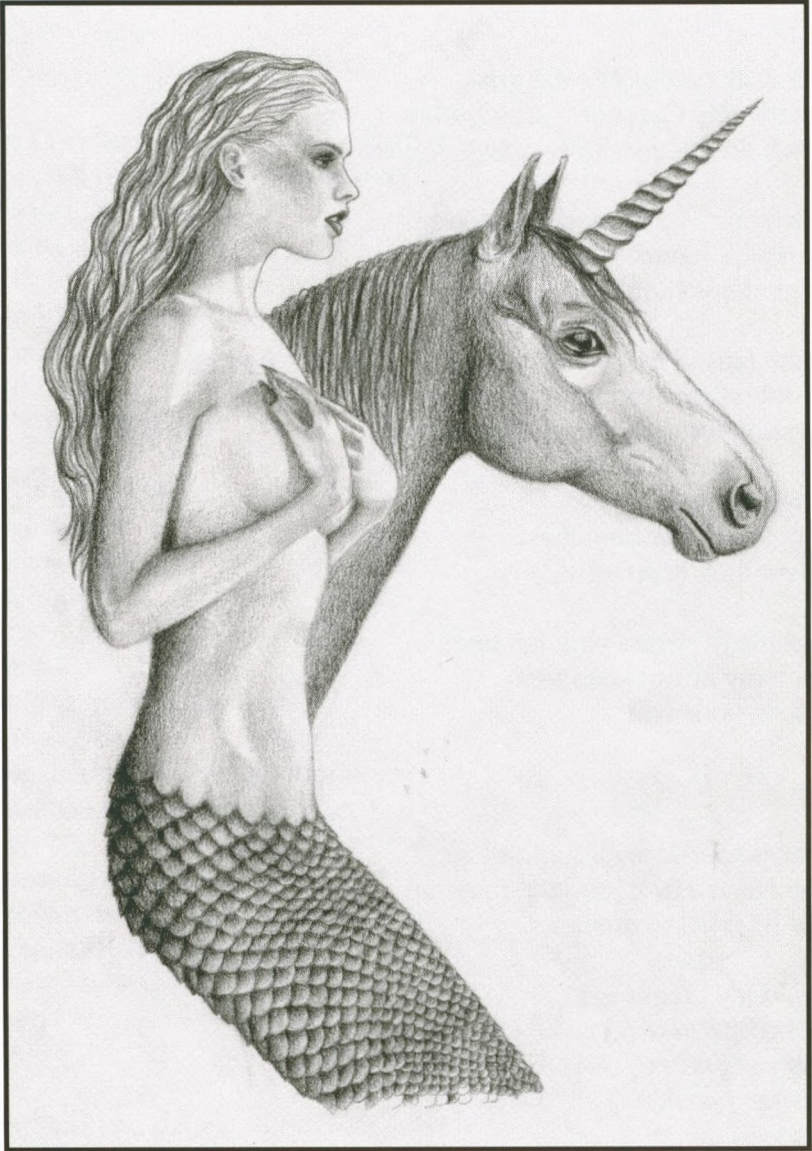
Measure
her modelesque tiny manuscript
translating
the spun dialect
of Asian tattoos

stamped
not
branded.

She has a message.
Standing on 5" boots
with tongue tied down,
she is the promenading prized princess poodle
gone from bra-burning to
J'Lo's "I'm Real" and
 "My love don't cost a thang."
Yet she still has a message.

Do you hear me?
This heifer still has a message
from the innate part
to the learned part.
It's orchestral
and singing
to you
and you
and you.
Stop tearing me apart,
breaking me down,
making me over,
defining what can't be defined.

Let me
be
a woman.
No description needed.



"Fantasy"

the reach

1.

We walk barefoot in the grass
in latenight October Our bodies
cast a doubled shadow two women

between the trees and the moon
Darkness looms hangs close
around our shoulders

Night falls in fuzzy edges earth trees bodies
lit only by the moon woman
pressing through blueshadowed sky

Dried leaves
clinging to oak branches
shiver their crisp music

Moonlight silvers your left temple
I bite my lips to keep from
kissing your skin

2.

Leaves sparkle with starlit dew
You catch a drop on your fingertip
and let it fall to mine

I hold my breath
as the brown owl calls
and wing-wind
brushes my skin

I ache for moon's pale skin
your temple

3.

The underground goddess reaches
her oak fingers
for our silver sister's eye

You say you wish
we could reach too like the tree
You turn and catch me
looking at you

Trembling
I touch
your face
with my fingertips

and come back
shining with
phosphorescent
moon glow

Reach
hold me in bare skin arms
let me open stretch
from shadow leaves into moonlight
Speak the moon language

We could be no different
from the dark ruffling of owl's wings
or the hushed groaning
of river stones
round
shining

luminous and dark
the wide-eyed circle of moon
complete

if only the long reach
was enough

Near a hill

that could have been
in Missouri,
Paris,
Egypt,
a place where the earth pushed to the sky
not asking for death, but mercy,
we lay in the valley and did nothing.

On a hill that could have been
in Taiwan,
Antarctica,
the moon,
we speared the burnt and
beaten side of our love,
the dear one.
We pierced the side of God
until the world spilled out
bright and bad.

We can't contain the world.

And we can never forget. We draw
death on our chests and press
its rosy emblem between our palms.
We draw the sign for protection
or humility
or remorse.

Look up! Look up!

We are children of the Judas flower
who breathe its blood like air.
We are all in a valley and
think we are angels.

West of the Jordan
(April 2, 2001)

It's got me thinking again,
your voice quivering
on the phone.
I wonder what you pray
with your forehead to the ground
hands shielding your intellect.

I don't know how your tears taste,
mixed with the knowledge
they may be the last liquid
on your tongue.
What do you see,
when you lift your eyes to that holy roof?

I visualize 100 shells
falling on your souvenir store today,
 (that was the count at 10:50 a.m. my time)
shells falling from the sky,
tearing apart
your home
your wife
three sons
and olive grove.

I cover my head with my hands,
bend my neck and kneel.
Pressing my forehead to the ground,
I weep with you, knowing
these species are not native
to your territory.
No, they are not doves
gliding to rest on your beams.
No, they are not doves,
but hawks, targeting your nest,
forcing an exodus.
And you have nowhere to migrate.

Salaam

Peace be on the jeweler
in the heart of the *balad*,
whose charms hang from hooks
like stems of golden wheat.

Peace be on this saffron-scented street
where dust and diesel
perfume camel hair rugs, and the aroma of
Marlboro mixed with *zatr*
infuses my hair.

Peace be on the mint leaves
floating in my cola.
Thanks be to God for
the ruins of Jerash
where Roman doorways shelter
wild, spreading stalks of mint,
where wind whispers
fresh blessings daily.

Peace be on Rania
who collects our cans of
Pepsi,
Miranda,
Teem for recycling,
to pay for the new rug
in her father's tent.

Peace be on this bread
as the sun sets in Amman,
and we break fast.
I'm sorry for chewing gum
during *Ramadan*.
Peace be on this bread
I break in Jerusalem's
Upper Room.
Forgive me for flipping
your switches
during *Shabat*.

"Peace be on your hands,
as I accept this glass.
Peace be on your house, always," I say.
You answer without speaking,
May this tea fill you with warmth.
May it soothe the tip of your tongue—
not scorch your senses—reminding you
this kiss of sweetened liquid
flows from the depths of
my spirit
to yours.

Whitney Beers is a senior graduating in May with a BFA in Creative Writing. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta International English Honor Society. Her poetry manuscript, *Naked in the Light*, was published as part of the 2003 Stephens College *Harbinger* Chapbook Series.

Angela Burke is a senior working toward a BFA in Creative Writing. A Dallas, Texas, native, she is president of the Stephens Sigma Tau Delta chapter; membership selection chair for the senior honor society, Mortar Board; president of Christian Outreach Fellowship; and a fourth-year member of the academic honor society, Alpha Lambda Delta. This is her third year of publication in *Harbinger*.

Emily Davis-Fletcher is a sophomore at Stephens College. Her short-term goal is to act as her own four-leaf clover, rather than black cat. Her long-term goal is to enjoy the success of her short-term goal and its effects, particularly a BFA in Creative Writing.

Roger Desmond is a senior graduating in May with a BFA in Theatre. He is from Houston, Texas.

Syeria Haynes is a senior Fashion Marketing and Management major who has had an interest in creative writing since the age of ten. She regrets that she doesn't have more time to dedicate to writing. For Syeria, writing brings peace and is a venue for self-expression. She hopes someday to publish a book of poetry.

Holly Herlinger is a junior earning her BFA in Creative Writing. She is a member of Sigma Tau Delta and was chosen to present her poetry at their national convention in Cincinnati, Ohio, this spring.

She is from Katy, Texas, is lots of fun, and recently single!

Erica Parker is majoring in Theatre and English and is minoring in Women's Studies. She was born and raised at the base of the Rockies in Arvada, Colorado. Erica is pleased to join the *Harbinger* tradition. She wishes to thank her family, whose love and support are the core of her life.

Amber Pijor is a senior from Batesville, Arkansas. She is working on a BFA in Creative Writing, and she has six tropical fish who serve as inspiration.

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Renée Reed-Miller is a senior pursuing a BA in English with a minor in Visual Arts. She has presented her work at Sigma Tau Delta conferences, where she received a regional award and national recognition for her poetry. In 2002, *The Comstock Review* published one of Renée's poems. This year, she produced and designed her first chapbook, *Thrown*, which was published by Stephens College.

Emily Sharp is a freshman majoring in English and Art.

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