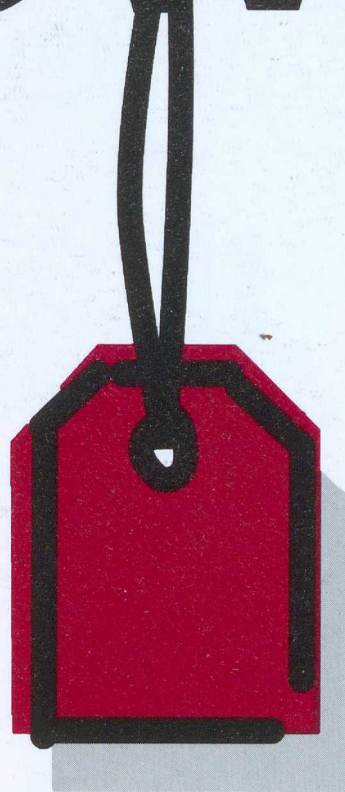


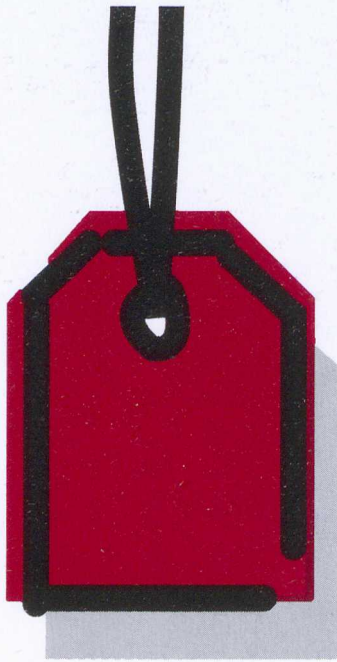
TOWERS



1997



the literature/fine art annual of
NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY



poetry
fiction/nonfiction

<i>page 4</i>	<i>Myriads</i>
<i>page 5</i>	<i>Beloved</i>
<i>page 6</i>	<i>BENEVOLENT DICTATORSHIP</i>
<i>page 7</i>	<i>Our first Christmas</i>
<i>page 8</i>	<i>Field Trip at Shedd Aquarium</i>
<i>page 9</i>	<i>An Often Slender Growth</i>
<i>page 10</i>	<i>Statistics</i>
<i>page 11</i>	<i>Idle</i>
<i>page 12</i>	<i>often random</i>

Contents:

fiction/nonfiction
poetry

<i>page 13</i>	<i>Mother and Child Reunion</i>
<i>page 18</i>	<i>Eleanore</i>
<i>page 24</i>	<i>EVICTIION DAY</i>
<i>page 31</i>	<i>Before the Dawn Comes</i>

Myriads

Everyone hides, The shell within the shell
has lost its aura, a fear
in a world of phobias.
Wrestling with a dying crypt, shaken depths,
Her eyes met his through the crowd
questioning. Better to
slink and shift like a lioness
She lies on her side listening to
the husky timbre of a voice eclipsed
To hunt on her grounds
is a failing of naivete
Flash of a silver claw

The persistence began to burn.
Chasing the illusive serpent
burning the scythed, Can she give?
As crystal and steel, garrison over transparency,
I can't do this for you, she says.
It must be done, verily, carefully,
tenderly uncoil the beloved
sentinel, crumbling the unspoken
A labyrinth ready to solve
all the turnabouts of nuance
Counting the tiers softly
knowing this is the one
content, just to know
Falling through with a sigh, a hand slipping
into another

by Laurel Scott

Beloved

She slips off her rings at night,
her softly clicking bracelets,
the thin chains of gold
around her slender neck.

Her dark skin blazes
between the cool white sheets,
eyes reflecting the moon;
her lover thinks they shine for him.

Her face is stone above him,
smooth skin pulled tight
over hard cheekbones,
high and so far away.

He gasps for breath, breathing her name
as she gazes out the open window,
counting all the stars framed there
as she sways with the treetops.

Eyes glowing only for herself,
she sighs and falls down to sleep,
dreaming she slips away from her lovers
as easily as she
does her rings.

by Donna Sanders

BENEVOLENT DICTATORSHIP

The alkaline earth
rejected my attempts to create
an idyllic eden.
Bloodmeal and Miracle-Gro,
water and ammonia;
such a careful alchemy
to drive the arid land
into submission.
My 8-by-12 plot,
each individual shoot
nurtured and spoiled into
shy adulthood,
is further proof that true Utopia
can only be achieved in miniature.
This generation's decadent demise
is the forgotten mulch
an obese and unthankful progeny.

by Greg Locascio

Our First Christmas

I

breaking bones of chickens
between my fingers, smelling
the thoughts of your father
from across the room. I have seen

how marrowless he is. I have seen
how hollow a bone can be.

II

I have touched the lives of one thousand
cats
their purring reminds me
of car engines
storming the apartment

III

Earlier

I rolled into the Atari
as you thawed
the chicken with your tears

you wanted more
than I could provide.

by Chris Newton

Field Trip at Shedd Aquarium

Asylum has come to me
In this place where time crawls
And Blue Angels swim
In a sea of screams
I love surgery
Chemistry
And exploding nitrogen bombs
That crystallize
As burst swimmers streak past in colors
The cruisers drag
Sustain and reflect in their physiology
The wall that slides to the slick floor
Thick with salty dew
Familiar fishy smells

Their smiles entwine
Curl into fear
As the children swarm and scamper
Unsupervised
Survival depends
On wide eyes, fish eyes
And heartbeats
Silversides contort
Into a hallow
Gaping picture show
The ceiling drips to the floor
Dissolves like sugar in sand
The plot is lost
Your frozen soul floats belly up

Shriek at the stingray tank
It's echo at death's door
The gaze of a dog
At the end of the day

by Katharine A. Lamb

An Often Slender Growth

Certain
Chronic layered Spikes
or Racemes,
wholly justifiable causes,
of White lilac
or Blue
flowers
and Monday's Chronic
inflammations

Act
like connective tissue
fleshy rims
Pliable simple clavicles of brute
copper coined in raging cantons,
compressed tendons of cattle,
bone black weaving filaments
feel admired
on shallow molded porcelain.

by Gene Tanta

Statistics

City lights ordinary above buildings breathing
In flickers for generations past and present,
Glow loud on rotten park bench, 7th Avenue,
Helena's home. Tongue in spite she
Mocks the nuns who pray she meets Jesus,
Lifetime over they know the answers.
Her whole life, they stare with crosses hanging
Heavy and eternal handouts.

Helena is tired. (I assume) Faith in a bottle
60 years old, wrinkled, distorted. Her
Savior the motherly lights that cradle her
Belongings at 3 am. Her articles
Cliche in my mind; a collection of littered
Papers no one read, a pigeon named Bob, an
Alternative bench one block north.

When the black out occurred I saw her first time
Ever, stumbling. I approached, trying to hand
Her my imitation words for missing lights. Dirty.
Bitter. Grateful. (I assume). Statistical problem
Like 17 year old drunk. Hand black, she graciously
bends onto knobbed knees, kissing my feet.
Only to stand and spit in my eye.

by Megan Johnson

often random

by Alec Slinde

Mother and Child Reunion

Well I would not give you false hope
on this strange and mournful day,
But the mother and child reunion
is only a motion away...

- Paul Simon

I knelt on the hardwood floor, carefully arranging my plastic dinosaurs in battle-formation. Behind me, monochrome cartoons flickered quietly on an old black-and-white TV. Suddenly, a fingernail tapped my head, hard. I looked up. Grandma smiled at me. "Well, she's gone," she said. "Maybe now things can get back to normal around here." She dropped an envelope to the floor next to my Tyrannosaurus Rex. "She left this for you. Maybe we'll read it together later, when I have time."

She turned, left the room. I opened the envelope, took out a thick letter and a photo. It showed a beautiful young woman sitting for a staged portrait, perhaps for high school or freshman college. I opened the letter. I tried to sound out the words like they taught us at school, like I did with my comic books. I skipped to the ending. It said "can't, I just can't. Someday when you're big and grown-up, and all this is over, you'll understand. I am so sorry. I love you so much, Mark. XXXXXX OOOOOOO. Love, your Mom."

I looked at the letter. Mom had cried when we said good-bye. I hadn't. I had just wondered when she was coming back. I reached up, put the letter and the photo on top of the TV. Maybe Grandma knew when she was coming back. Maybe when she read the letter to me it would make sense...

The plane's landing gear hit the tarmac, jarred me back to reality. I got my battered suitcase down from the overhead, waited in the line for the door. Through the rounded windows I saw delicate flakes of April snow falling to a white-crusting earth. Leaving Phoenix the heat had been oppressive; now, as gray evening fell, I felt cold wind leaking through the seals of the departure tube, the cold I had last felt as an infant, the Chicago cold of legend that Grandma had always warned me about.

"You won't like that cold, Mark," she would say. "We've lived in California and Arizona all your life. I'll tell you right now, you wouldn't be able to handle that cold..."

In the waiting area I paused, set my bag down. My second time in an airport; that morning had been my first. The crowds swirled about me as I glanced around. A length of black glass skirted the wall; in it I saw a boy in ragged jeans and a T-shirt, thin, gangly, eyes dark and unreadable. I waved at myself. My reflection waved back. I lifted my suitcase, noticed an ancient,

decaying baggage tag hanging next to my crisp new ones. Some long-ago bus trip to somewhere we never went back to. The tag was covered with Grandma's neat, severe, blue-inked cursive.

She's dead, I thought. The loss swelled in my throat; I tried hard to swallow past it. Dead. I remembered her lying in her bedroom on that last day, four years of cancer and suffering etched into her face. "I raised you from when you were three," she said, eyes clouded, lost in her endless morphine ramblings. "Took you in when no one else wanted you. Your father didn't want you. Your stepfather, he didn't want you." Her frail, bird-like wrists strained feebly against the restraints of her rented hospital bed. "And that mother of yours, her with her mental thing, she wasn't fit. She gave you up..." She started coughing, a liquid hacking that gurgled and rumbled in the shallow cavern of her chest. "If it wasn't for me, there wouldn't have been anyone to take care of you. But when I'm gone..." I held the curved plastic basin to her chin, let her spit out the brownish goo. "They didn't want you when you were crapping and peeing your diapers; then I was good enough to take care of you, but now that you're grown, they all want to turn you against me, make you hate your own grandmother..."

I brushed the tangled hair out of her perspiring face. "Okay," I said. "It's okay, Grandma. You know I'll always be here with you. Always take care of you. We'll clean your colostomy out tonight. You'll feel better. And I'll make you that Swanson's chicken you like."

I watched her muttering to herself, her eyes half-lidded, fists twisting in their buckled straps. And I'll never forget, Grandma. Never forget how you cared for me. Never stop loving you, and never stop hating them...

A hand on my shoulder. Reality again. I turned to see my stepfather and stepmother rushing at me, smiling, hugging me. "So good to see you!" my stepdad said, grabbing my bags. "We've got your room all ready for you. And I talked to your mother this morning. She said not to pressure you, but she really wants you to go downtown and see her fast as you can." My stepmom took my arm and guided me through the airport chaos. "First we get you settled in," she said, "and get something solid in you. My God, Mark, you look so thin..."

The desert air was like a blast furnace. Grandma and I sat at the bus stop in front of the pharmacy, my feet dangling, clutching my new comic books. I gazed down the long road hopefully, but the heat distorted objects in the distance, making even compact cars look like approaching buses. Grandma put the stiff, white paper bag of prescription pills into her purse. She zipped it shut. "After I'm gone," she said, almost to herself, "they'll all tell you. Say that I stole you. That I got custody from your stepfather after your mother went crazy, and then I took you out-of-state where the courts couldn't get at you." I kept craning my head toward the road, staring into the heat-shimmered distance as her fragile voice floated over my shoulder. "I don't know

what I did to any of them," she said. "Your father threw us both out when he remarried to that woman, to Sally. If only he'd let us stay. I could have been such a help with their children. And with you. But my son didn't want his mother and he didn't want you either."

I turned, looked at her. She grimaced, an invisible message of pain from the community of tumors prospering happily inside her. "Thank God I was there to take you," she gasped. "Your mother was still in the hospital with her mind. And then she finally gets out and finds her maternal instincts? And wants to raise you? Comes out to visit us and says she wants to take you back?" Grandma made a face like she had just eaten something unclean. "No. No. Not as long as I live. Now she writes to have you fly out and visit. For what? So she can kidnap you and I never get you back? Am I stupid? And where was she all the times when you were sick or crying or...?"

Her voice trailed off. Then, "You're not going to go, Mark. You know where your mother lives? In Chicago. In the slums. When she was married to your father, to my Joe, she never cleaned. And the cockroaches. Let you go there and catch something? No. And her with her colored friends, and her men friends, and her friends who are mentally ill like her? What if something happens to you? I'm your legal guardian. Legally responsible." I spread my comics on my lap. Grandma took exact change from her purse, jingled it distractedly, watched for the bus as she spoke. "Her men. They're more important to her than you are. Don't let her fool you, Mark. Your mother, where she lives, it's all drugs and gangs and filth and men..."

After supper, my stepfather sat me down to talk. I remembered all the photos sent in Christmas cards, my Daddy Bill, Jan, Brain. "Your daddy Bill's a good man," Grandma would always say. "He adopted you after your mother left my Joe and then married him. He gave me your legal custody, and he's always on time with your support money." She would set the cards out on the mantle, stuff the photos into battered legal-size envelopes she kept in the bottom drawer of her dresser. "But, don't ever forget, when you were little he didn't want you either..."

My stepdad lit a Marlboro, puffed on it slowly. "I don't know what your grandmother told you," he said at last, "but I think you're old enough to hear the other side of it." He stubbed out his cigarette, lit another. "You know I legally adopted you when I married your mother. Your father Joe signed off on it, for whatever reason. He'd just remarried himself, had a new family. And me, I loved your mom and you so much, I thought we'd all be together forever..." He held up his glowing cigarette, appraised it intently. "But then your mother had her problems. Mental things. Wound up in the hospital. I didn't know how to handle any of it. I was working three jobs and there was no one home to take care of you. So I asked your grandmother to take care of you. Temporarily. Until your mother got better." His eyes grew distant, as if retreating from the building chaos of swirling smoke. "But your mother didn't get better. And I didn't know what to do. My life was

falling apart. And before I knew it I was filing the papers. But I knew if I was going to leave, no way could I give a three-year-old boy the home he needed. That's when I gave your custody to Florence."

My stepdad crumpled his empty Marlboro container, got out a fresh pack. "She loved you. Wanted you. It was supposed to be a temporary thing. But it took years for your mother to recover, and in the meantime, your grandmother took you clear out to Arizona. And I figured, yeah, Mark should be with his mother, or with Joe, or better yet with me and Jan, but..." He seemed to ignore his cigarette; it lolled listlessly from his lips, forgotten, unlit. "But by then, Florence had raised you so long, given you the only stable home you had ever known. Would it've been right to uproot you from that? To disrupt your whole life? I didn't know. I just didn't know. And on the phone, you always said you wanted to stay with your Grandma..."

I shifted in my chair. Dusk had fallen. "If you had taken me away from her, I would have hated you," I said quietly. He looked at me, cupped the flame of his lighter toward his Marlboro.

"S what I thought," he said, smoke pluming from his nostrils. "But you're here now, and this is your home for as long as you want. And this is your family for good. For good." He stood up, stretched. "Okay, sermon's over. You want to go call your mother in Chicago now?"

I shook my head. "Later, maybe. I think I better call someone else first." I went to the phone, dialed my father's number...

Grandma cradled the phone lovingly. Her face was still thin and contorted with pain, but her eyes were bright, animated. "Yes, Joe," she said, "I remember. You looked so handsome in your uniform. I was so proud, my little boy all grown up and in the Navy. So proud. And they shaved your sideburns, too. All the girls thought you looked like Elvis Presley so much..." She was silent for a moment, listening. Then: "Yes, all right. I'll get him. Mark! Mark, your father wants to talk to you." I took the phone from her. The voice on the other end was grave, serious.

"Son, we both know that Ma, that your grandma doesn't have much longer." I glanced at Grandma; she smiled at me, then winced in sudden pain. I turned, closed her bedroom door, talked softly into the receiver.

"Yeah, Dad," I said. "I know. The doctors said maybe another month—" The voice grew louder.

"Right, right. Mark, you know that I have a life insurance policy on her. It's not much, just enough to bury her. Okay? Are you following me? But I don't want to do that. I've made a few calls, and I can get her cremated pretty cheap. So we'll do that, and then I'll give the rest of the money to you. What do you say?"

I heard Grandma's harsh coughing; by its pitch, I could tell it wasn't intense enough to produce blood, although it could still easily turn into a spontaneous retching vomit. "I don't, don't know," I said, one ear close to her door. "I, I think, when it happens, she should at least have a service. Shouldn't she? She has to have a funeral..." The voice on the phone grew much louder.

"No. No. Mark, you're not listening to me. I want to give you the money. Once she's gone, she's gone, right? What good is spending all that money on a funeral going to do her? And you could use it for school, maybe, or on a car. What do you think?"

I didn't say anything. Silent minutes passed, punctuated by Grandma's muffled hacking. "Okay," Dad said. "I don't care, I'm going to do this. The arrangements are already made anyway. I'll give you the money when you come out here. You know, after." I heard the television click on in the background; the voice became softer, distracted. "We're all looking forward to you coming to live with us. Your room's all ready. Hard to believe I haven't seen you in fourteen years..."

I kept one ear to the door, shielded the receiver with my palm as I spoke. "Dad, listen. Please. I can't even think that far ahead now. I don't know where I'm going after it happens. I'm taking care of her twenty-four hours a day, feeding her, cleaning her, scooping... stuff out through that colostomy hole in her stomach..." I pressed my ear harder against the door; the coughing had stopped. "Can you, maybe, come out here? She wants to see you so much. She cries and cries now. She keeps saying she wants to see you. I think she can feel she doesn't have much time. Could you just fly out, maybe for a weekend?"

"I can't do that," the voice said shortly. "It's just not possible. I've got the business to worry about. You both have got to understand that I have responsibilities." The voice became loud again. "And what is this, you 'don't know where you're going after it happens' bullshit? You better decide pretty goddamn quick where you're going, cause it's going to happen, I've called her doctors, it's going to happen pretty damn soon. All right? You understand what I'm saying? And another thing..."

Afterwards, I set the phone down, walked to Grandma's bedside. She came out of a light doze, face contorting with spasms of agony as consciousness returned. "I wanted to say good-bye to Joe," she complained softly, eyes watery. "You should visit your father. He invited you last year, remember? It would be good for a son to know his father." Her face darkened. "And I know he would send you back to me. Not like your mother. He's never tried to get custody of you like she has. Never. Never 'visited.' Never tried to take you away from me." She coughed again, belching stringy ropes of phlegm onto her polyester gown. I grabbed the paper towel roll on her nightstand, cleaned the mucus up in moist handfuls. "I wish Joe could come out and see me," she said, sighing into her pillow. "Just for a little. A little. But I know. Like he says. I know he's busy..."

I hung up the phone before Dad could answer. I lifted the receiver again, dialed another number. Whir. Click. Whir. Click. "Hello?" Mom said. We had talked on the phone every week for fourteen years, but now I couldn't come up with anything to say. "Hi, Mom," had to do. "Mark!" she said, voice bubbling with joy, "I can't believe it! You're finally here! Finally Here!" She deluged me with questions: Was the flight smooth? Was I all right? Had I eaten? When could I come see her? As we spoke, I couldn't help but hear Grandma's words, as clearly as if she were still only a room away: "Nobody wanted you, Mark. Your mother and mental illness. She wasn't fit to take care of you. I was the only one who would..."

We set a day, and a time. "I love you, Mark," Mom said. Silence. "Good-bye," I said. That was all I was ready for.

I dialed again. Whir. Click. "Hello?" Dad said. I could hear the Monday Night NFL in the background. "I just got in," I said. "Just thought I should call you."

The voice on the phone was cool, non-committal. "So. You're at your stepfather's. Looks like you made your choice."

I felt something thicken in my chest. "I'd like it if I could come see you," I said. "You and everybody. It's been kind of a long time."

He laughed. It sounded hollow. "Yeah. Since you were four. A long time, I'll say. And now you're at your stepfather's." The volume of the game turned up a notch. "All right. Okay. Listen, you've called at kind of a bad time. I was just out back barbecuing and we've got a few people over. I'll have to call you back later. And that life insurance thing? That we talked about last month? Check's in the mail." The line clicked dead. And, though I didn't know it at the time, ten years later I would still be waiting for a call, let alone a check....

The train chuffed slowly to a halt. I got off, walked into the eddying crowd of the Madison Street station. Amid the throng a woman stood motionless, face huddled between her knit cap and bunched winter coat, her eyes querulously searching the crowd. I approached her. "Hi, Mom," I said uncertainly, managing a smile. Her face lit up as she flung her arms around me. "Gotten so big," she breathed, squeezing my ribs into my lungs. "Taller than your mother! And, are you hungry? Did you eat yet? I've got roast beef at home..."

We walked out together into the cold Chicago spring. My mom couldn't stop talking, kept looking at me and touching me as if to make sure I was really real. The bus ride seemed to last hours, but at last we came to a quiet, aging neighborhood on the North Side. Her tiny apartment was old but clean. Mom made a bee-line for the refrigerator to feed me some roast beef, chattering away the whole time. Finally she sat down, watched me quietly while I

ate. "It's been so long," she said at last. "Sometimes I thought this day would never come. I just wish..." She looked at her lap. "I wish your grandmother could have been here too. I, I hated her sometimes for taking you away. But she loved you so much, Mark, and she raised you the best she could."

I put my sandwich down, traced the crumbs on the plate with my finger. Mom got up, went to her room, came back with a thick photo album. "It wasn't always like that," she said. "When your father and I were married, your grandma and I would be in the living room while the men played cards. Your grandpa used to get so mad because Florence and I would be laughing and drinking highballs... 'Carrying on like a couple of kids,' he used to say." She opened the album. Happy faces from before my birth grinned out at me in black-and-white. "But your grandma would just laugh and get us another round. But when Joe and I divorced..." She turned the pages; now the pictures were in color, the faces older and not nearly as happy. "She doted on Joe," Mom said softly. "I could never understand why he treated her like he did, even before she took you away. But he wanted to raise you, just like I did, just like your stepdad did. Everybody wanted you, Mark, but then she took you out of state and we all, we couldn't—" Mom's voice broke; she turned away, drew some withered tissues from her pocket. Her back hiccuped with the tears. I found myself putting my arm around her, heard my voice speaking to her in a low voice clotted with grief: "Don't cry, Mom..."

We hugged until we were both able to talk again. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I'm so sorry I couldn't be with you all those years I'm so, so sorry..." She dried her face with the tissues. "And I'm sorry for the pain you had to go through. And that Joe didn't even..." She rose, went to the closet, returned with handfuls of votive candles. "I know it hurt you that your father wouldn't pay for a funeral for his mother. But we can still say good-bye to your grandma." She lit the candles, set a cracked leather Bible beside the photo album. "We can hold our own service in her memory. We'll remember all the good there was and say good-bye to her in our own way. Do you want to?"

I thought about phlegm and morphine, about anonymous, cremated ashes scattered in the red desert evening. "Yeah, Mom," I said. "Yeah. Let's do that." We sat together on the couch. Mom opened the photo album again, this time from the very beginning.

And, very, very much later, the candles flickered out.

by Mark Rake

Eleanore

She could have been a sparrow. She liked to swing upon the porch swing, perch, and sing, sing, sing like a little bird at dawn. Her baby dolls would be nestled by her side, chirping "mama" in a panicky, burbling chorus with each flex of her legs. She got an odd hypnotic rhythm going—the creak of the swing, the groan of the skewered ceiling, and the twitter of the dolls, I watched her for hours behind the living room window.

Harry didn't like Eleanore to play out front. He wanted to protect her from the neighborhood children who creamed our front steps in egg each Halloween, each Friday night. When Daddy was home, Eleanore had to play in the shady backyard, a courtyard of cool, black-green spear trees and the drip of hidden water. She had to leave her dolls in the house so they wouldn't get dirty. She was allowed one hour in the outside air and then had to come inside to read—the two could not be combined, as the books might get dirty.

I spoke for her, I reasoned, but Harry only turned his black eyes on me, and I, too, hushed. When he was at work, I set Eleanore free and sat as a sentry behind the living room glass outpost, sipping coffee, stitching, sipping coffee, and watching. Near the hour of his arrival, I would grab the protesting babies by wrists and ankles and carry them inside while Eleanore calmly and neatly folded her baby blanket. With the gravity of Mary Queen of Scots she shadowed me, and we closed the door behind her.

Eleanore had ritual. Around the corners of the house, through the folds where the hyacinths stank in the heady summer warmth, between the chirping bushes, she would creep ten feet in front of Harry, a barefoot Indian princess. Harry walked so stiffly, so harshly that Eleanore, half-curved up and breathing gingerly, could anticipate where he was and where he thought she lay. I followed Harry, Eleanore followed me, and Harry marched between us, our circle more a dog chasing its tail than a papa stalking his little girl. Finally, one of us would stop, usually Harry in exasperation, and Eleanore would wrap her thin arms about him.

My baby wasn't strong. She looked healthy: a round, white, pieplate face and shiny bob, two silver dollar eyes. But she was born too early, just a jelly pink thing, mewling, propped up under my and Harry's anxious smiles. We fed her warm bottles of milk and cushioned her like a raw egg amid wads of fluffy baby blankets, rocked her daily to keep the circulation going, kept the cat locked in the basement. Under this regimen of coddle and restraint we grew a delicate, blushing girl seven years old.

Going out nights came with the warm weather, and I, flat in a trembling dress, a feather sprouting from my head, and Harry, spatted and black-tied, stood in front of Eleanore each time as in front of a mirror, nervous and comforting her. She whimpered with the strong hook of her sitter resting upon her shoulders and an angry anxiety pulling her lips in, out, right, her brows down, down, and folded.

"Don't worry, ma'am, we'll stop this crying. You two enjoy yourselves. Say bye-bye, Elly. Don't make mom and dad feel bad."

Utterly miserable.

Eleanore was a sharp little girl. We knew she was precocious, and perhaps brilliant; Harry wanted to get her measured or something clinical, but I resisted. I knew they couldn't appreciate her thoughts, such lovely thoughts. Filmy, musical things that when turned just right caught the light of some stray reason. When you examined them under the glare of thick white paper and formulas, they collapsed in a squeak.

Our first and last experience with public school was only a year ago.

Eleanore escaped kindergarten, first grade, second grade, but at third the school teacher was knocking on our front door. She was a solid woman, with pale eyes and a frustrated hat. She looked like a midwife. I let her in for coffee, and as she lipped the rim of her cup, she watched Eleanore.

"Eleanore," she called. "You're a very pretty young lady. And very smart. Would you like some other pretty smart girls to play with?" Eleanore shook her head no.

"You know, Mrs. Flynn, Eleanore needs to be socialized with children her own age. She should have little friends to play with." Her cup clattered in place.

"Oh, I don't know," I said detachedly, watching Eleanore. "She seems perfectly content here, with me teaching her. We do have quite a lot of fun together." Eleanore smiled becomingly.

The teacher's cup clattered. "But you must admit, Mrs. Flynn, she can't have many friends. No offense, but cooped up in the house like this? At school she would have recess, out in the sun, with girls her own age." She bared her two front teeth.

"I don't think you understand, madame. Eleanore is not a dog. She does not need to be exercised. She is gifted. She is independent. And she's very, very happy here. We are not interested in your school. Now it is time for her piano lesson, so I must ask you to leave. We're simply not interested, and you can spread the word."

Then one night later at dinner, Harry coughed and tried again.

"Ron Weiss was telling me about a new private school that just opened in Hartford. He's sending Veronica there. He tells me it's quite reputable."

"That's good for Veronica. She is the type who is perfect for institutionalized learning. A rather bad piano player, though. Don't you think she played rather badly on Sunday?"

"Nerves. I remember my first recital. Almost broke into tears on the stage. Funny how some things never change. You know, I was thinking that maybe Eleanore might benefit from a school like that. It's not at all like a public school. Purely academics and manners."

"We talked about this already. We agreed that because she was gifted, we'd teach her at home."

"I know we agreed on some kind of home learning—"

"Eleanore, what do you think? Do you want to go to private school with Veronica or do you want to stay here with us?"

She let her cheek plump slowly with air and then pressed them flat with her palms whistling. Then she pointed to me with a little jab. We both turned to Harry. He coughed and resigned his gaze into his lap.

I taught Eleanore everything: Reading, Math, French, Science, manners, with books from the library and my own collection. We would sit together, she close to me and we like nestling bowls, reading Cinderella and Alice in Wonderland. With companions like these she did not want for adventure and friendship. As a reward I often let her choose a book to read in bed. When one warm night she didn't ask me, I was worried. Her bedroom was empty.

"She's probably in the backyard," Harry offered, yawning.

"Really, Harry? Well, by all means, let me search for her alone."

"I'm too tired to humor her, Emily."

The backyard. The dark blotted the white, smooth patio and trim bushes. Hidden flowers waited in the dark, sending out their fragrance. Fireflies flashed lazily on and off.

"Eleanore." She never answered on the first call. You had to say her name three times to summon her, like a genie.

"Eleanore." A chorus of insects reeled off beside them. "Eleanore."

"I'm here, mama." She was crouching at my feet, looking at something on the ground.

"What are you looking at, dear? Don't you want a book?"

"Quiet, mama, he's afraid."

"Who is?"

A peep answered me. "My birdie. Look how tiny he is. And he's bald."

A newly hatched bird arched its neck in the grass, ugly and pink like a baby rat. His wings were just pimples bent bones.

"Why's he in the grass, mama? Is he looking for his mama?"

"He probably fell out of his nest, dear. Do you see it?" A black wall of trees surrounded us.

"No. Can I keep him?"

"He needs his mama. Here's a nest." A small bowl of twigs sat above us. I picked up the chick's sticky, clammy body and gently placed it in the nest. Its pink mouth gaped wildly at the night sky.

"Come on, Eleanore, his mama won't come until we leave. He'll be alright."

"Should we feed him? He looks skinny."

"His mama will bring him something to eat. He won't eat anything we touched."

"I led her away, the nest growing smaller, the bird still aimed at the sky, waiting."

On First Communion Day Eleanore revealed the beginning of the end. It was bright white outside but bitterly cold. The sky was a lively blue. The first frost of the season came in the night, silently, and killed all of our landscaping. Harry and I had bought Eleanore a dress of cotton lace that sat like a wedding bell upon her tiny frame. A gently, capped veil floated about her round face. I had never seen a child so miserable. She clenched her new Bible in her fist and a frown protruded from under the tulle. "Eleanore, what's the matter?" Harry barked. She complemented her frown with a stare that caught upon her dress. "You don't like the dress?" Harry asked, stepping toward her. "Why not? It cost us a lot of money. Your mother picked it out." "My birdie?" Tears dribbled down her face.

"What 'birdie'?" Harry looked at both of us like we were conspirators.

"She found a baby bird a couple of months ago that had fallen out of its nest. We put it back in, and it was doing fine, until the frost, I guess.. Eleanore, it was born too late, anyway. You saw how sick it looked."

She looked at me as if I betrayed her. "I wanted to take care of it but you wouldn't let me. It would've been grown up by now and safe, but you make me put it back."

"Eleanore—" She turned away from me. "Your mother's right, Eleanore. A cat would've got it if the frost didn't. Now let's get going. I'll buy you a sundae or something after mass if you do a good job."

The church was floating with white lace and net. Sober black-coated boys punctuated the lines forming of new Catholics. Eleanore was rigid amid the laughing, antsy bodies. Hands clasped and ankles locked, she stood watching Harry and I. My heart wrenched to see the space widen between her and the other children. She seemed to repel them with her stillness and unnatural, heavy look. I watched the little girls examine her and whisper in each other's ear. A boy, his shoulders hunched and his face deformed into a fat pout, crudely mimicked that expression—of bitter disappointment. And what tortured me most was Eleanore's refusal to see any of it, but only watch our suffering. The mass started. For an hour I stared at her small, hard white back. When she reached the priest, I scanned his face for a reflection of hers. But only the same set look of determination to get the Eucharist into her mouth that he had with each child.

It was over. The parents divided and conquered the children, but my child sat immovable in front of a window. Harry squeezed my hand. "She's in a mood, Emily." Eleanore was tinted in the pink glow of St. Bernadette. Her face was content, like the lady frozen in glass and gazing upon her.

"Dear. We're so proud of you. You were the loveliest of the children out there. Let's have a picture. Harry?"

I moved out of the way just as the camera flashed.

"Beautiful. Another, Emily, with you in it."

My arm around her, it felt as if I was pushing Eleanore into the floor, and I glanced to reassure myself at the still ring of lace below me.

That night Eleanore sat next to the piano, the light from a window illuminating her two eyes like blue glass. Examined closer these eyes contained spindles of violet and white, sharp like diamond splinters. They were lovely and yet they made her appear as if she was only half-made; as if her skin was only the most delicate net of spun sugar over her heated, pumping organs, I smoothed her hair. "I love you, Eleanore." I could see that exquisite threat of collapse in her eyes. But then Harry came in.

"How's our little musician?" He loudly kissed her on the top of her head.

"And how," he growled, kissing my neck, "is her teacher?"

"Oh, busy as usual. Eleanore was just about to begin her lesson. Would you like to listen?"

"Delighted," Harry fell into a chair, propped his leg up, and granted us a stare of mock concentration. Eleanore began. Badly.

"Tempo, Eleanore. You're slowing down."

The piano calmed.

"Be forceful here, darling, forte, forte."

The piano shook.

"Please, Eleanore, watch your back. You should make a 90 degree angle with the bench."

Eleanore began to whimper.

"Eleanore, tempo!"

Her head fell with a broken G flat. Her sobbing sounded so far away, lost in the machinery of the piano.

"Well, Emily," Harry concluded after some silence, "Seems you've met your match. You did well, Eleanore. Just keep practicing. You'll figure it out. Christ, am I hungry. Dinner, Emily."

Dinner was roast and quiet. The sun rolled about on the wall, the moon was pasted firmly in the west. She was still in tears, but quiet.

"Eleanore," Harry declared, a forkful of beef in one hand and a napkin in the other, "if you can't stop crying, go to your room. Your mother may put up with your moods, but I will not." She noiselessly hopped out of her chair, her head bent, a fist rubbing an eye, and she closed the door behind herself.

It bothered me whenever Eleanore listened without complaint. After an hour of enduring Harry's laughter and eating, and pure quiet from Eleanore's door, I was at her room, knocking.

No answer.

Rap.

No answer.

"Eleanore, I'm opening the door."

The room was empty, chilled, songbooks neatly stacked on her desk, lights out. The curtains were drawn. In the dark I could gather the lumpy shapes of stuffed animals and the flatness of her empty bed.

"Harry," I called from the room, "She's gone!"

"What are you talking about?" I ran up to his side and placed my hand on his fork. "Well look under her bed, or in the closet. Maybe she's hiding again." He ended his suggestion with a deliberated lick of the lips.

I turned on the lights, stooped, looked under the furniture, folded the closet

open. Bare. "Harry, she's not here." I pulled the curtains open. The pane was down, but unlocked, and sitting crookedly in its frame. Cold air whistled at me. "Harry, I think she went out the window."

The backyard was bigger in the winter, bald, exposed by all the shrunken plants, and edgeless coal gray. Harry marched toward the bushes. "Eleanore. Eleanore! This isn't time for games. It's cold out here and I'm getting angry, so let's get inside before it gets worse." Silence and whistling, frosted grass crumbling under his toes, and I shivering and standing in the middle. "Come on, Eleanore, you're scaring your mother. I am not going to search for you." He settled next to me. Whistles. "I'm talking to the goddamn trees. Let's get inside. She's not back here. I'm calling the police."

I heard once that drowning is one of the most pleasant ways to die. You feel euphoric, free. I believe it now, after seeing a baby so content. Two cruel days after we lost Eleanore, after the crying, the smashing, the accusing, the searching, we found her again, folded next to a gentle creek and suspended by a spray of glazed branches. Her hair was smooth, slick with ice, her clothes unrumpled and sparkling with frost, her body drenched and frigid. On the bridge of her nose a meek, bleached cut, and on her lips, a happy smile. "I'm free," it seemed to celebrate. "I'm free."

by Samantha Hoover

EVICITION DAY

The south wind sussurated the lush tree branches and the high dewy grass. Dragonflies buzzed through the gentle golden sunlight, mobile insect rainbows that skimmed the cool tranquil surface of the lake. A broad patch of dandelions puffed clouds of down into the air as a baby deer gamboled playfully with a leopard cub; nearby, the mother leopard and the mother deer looked on approvingly, then both resumed munching dainty mouthfuls of succulent grass.

In the distance, beyond a tangled mass of vines thick with grapes the size of apples, stood three figures. One was a woman whose face bubbled with tears, the second was a man, and the third, much taller than the other two, looked like what a human being might look like if its body were made out of electrons rather than water and minerals. Floating high above the heads of the little group was a great flaming sword, a sword that rotated slowly and seared the blue of the sky with its golden flash. Suddenly, a family of furry brown bunny rabbits with furry white paws scampered toward the three people, hopping and squeaking and wanting to play.

"Piss off, will you? Damnit, can't you see we're busy?" said the man, savagely kicking the whimpering bunnies away. He looked up at the blazing, crackling form in front of him. "Listen, this is all just a load of turd, right? The Big Guy's just yanking my chain on this one, right? I mean, you're not actually going to throw us out over one lousy, measly, stinking, rotten, moldy piece of fruit, are you?"

The angel, for that is what he was, nodded gravely. "Ye are banished, O Son of Dust, and the Woman also, and ye and your spawn SHALL nevermore return. The gates of the Garden SHALL be sealed unto you, and you and your seed SHALL labor for your bread, and the Woman shall bear your children in torment. And, at the last, to the dust SHALL you return. This Be the Word of the Most High, the Almighty, thy Creator, Lord of the Worlds AND Ancient of Days."

"Aw, come on!" the man shouted. "Get out of here! You mean He is going to let me DIE because of this? You mean, like, He's going to waste me, and her, and the kids we don't even have yet, just to teach me a lesson? Just to leave the Tree alone?" As he screamed, the man's voice decayed into a scraping hoarseness. "You're telling me the Lord is down with this?" he rasped. "After all the crud about His 'loving kindness and mercy' that He fed us, all the 'Thou art my children,' the 'Be thou fruitful and multiply,' now He wants to skrag me for eating some fruit? And I'm supposed to just believe you? You maybe got something in writing, buddy?"

The sky darkened with thick black clouds. A bombast of thunder exploded directly overhead, sending a chaos of birds whirling from the branches of the nearby trees. The angel nodded impassively, acknowledging the divine answer. The woman sagged as if under a heavy load, and struggled vainly not to weep. The man grimaced, stared at the echoing heavens for a moment, then kicked out at yet another knot of curious bunnies. "Can't you little bastards go somewhere and rut?" he bellowed. The fluffy white tails bobbed up and down as they fled.

"The Lord's Will be done," the angel intoned, his nimbus crackling with blues and silvers, "for He IS the Lord. From the Throne has He judged you AND admonished you. Ye have broken His just commandment, the lone commandment He did GIVE unto you, and thus you MUST needs be rebuked. By your OWN transgression, by your OWN rebellion, by your OWN most grievous sin have you -"

"Oh, will you simply please cut the crap?" the man interjected. "Am I supposed to listen to this dreck? Am I? His commandment! So, God shows me around the place on the first day, He says to me, He says 'Thou canst eat of any fruit in the Garden save that of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.' And I stand there, and I smile, and I nod, but come on! He's saying nothing's off limits to me in the entire world, absolutely nothing, EXCEPT of course naturally for the knowledge of Good and Evil?" The man nervously adjusted the crude wattle of twigs and leaves that hung around his waist, pawing through the bramble to scratch his pubic region. "Good and Evil? The ultimate secret? The forbidden truth? The whole shebang? And He actually deluded Himself that an order like that was going to stick? Then He puts the Tree right dead-center in the middle of the Garden? You tell me, what did He think was going to happen? It would be like me ordering all the chimpanzees to stay away from the Tree of the Knowledge of Banana-Eating, Ass-Picking, and Masturbation."

A long, massive creaking sounded as the adamantine gates of the Garden crept open. Beyond the gates could be seen a vast wasteland, barren and sere and pebbled, stretching off to the horizon. The angel pointed toward the desolation. "The time is COME," he said. "Leave you, ere His Wrath DOES descend upon you threefold; GO you forth into the Accursed Earth, into the Ground of Sorrow, into the Lands of Death, and RAISE you a voice of Lamentation and Submission to the LORD."

Globules of sweat dribbled down the man's forehead as he gazed through the gates, his teeth grinding frantically. Suddenly, the woman flung herself forward and knelt at the angel's feet, her delicate face streaked with tears and the tracks of tears. "Listen, I implore thee," she said to the angel, "Hearken to my words, thou Scion of the Host, for the blame does lie with me. As I did confess to the Lord when it Transpired, I say again it was I who first plucked the fruit of the Tree." The deep black lustre of her hair glistened with the

nearness of the angel's burning light. "I ate of the Tree and then did persuade the Man to befoul himself with my sin. It was the Serpent that spake unto me, tempting me, saying that we would become as gods, yet his tongue is Poison and his speech is Lies." Her shoulders drooped; her teardrops struck the angel's glowing feet, vaporizing into tiny curls of steam. "But truth, 'twas not the Serpent that partook of the Fruit, but 'twas I. The fault be mine own. I beseech thee, Noble Sir, let not the Man or our future children bear the weight of my sin, but let now the Lord's Punishment and Reproof fall upon me alone."

The man approached behind her. He laid his hand tenderly on her head and stroked her hair, a trace of moisture welling in his eye. He looked up at the angel. "You know you should really oughta listen to her, she knows what she's talking about. It really is all her damn fault." He paused, picked up a large rock, and chucked it accurately but unsuccessfully into the midst of a fresh crowd of curious bunnies, none of whom fled. "Listen, I'm telling you, if she hadn't of nagged and bitched and bitched and nagged and wore me down I'd of never even touched the stuff, so help me. Yeah. That's right." The man adjusted his wattle skirt again and emitted a loud fart; the bunnies retreated hastily into the bushes.

He felt the woman's trembling hand touch his knee; her eyes begged for solace, for surcease. "Please, my husband, stay thy Anger," she murmured pleadingly. "From thy body I was taken and given Life, and from my Body and from our Love would have come generations as numberless as grains of Sand, reaching from the Dawn Epoch of the world through its most distant and unknowable Eons. But the Serpent did deceive me and now I am lost, yet it is not meet that you suffer for my Trespass."

"You got that straight sister," he said, smacking her backhanded across the face. He towered over her kneeling, sobbing form. "Why should I go down when it was all you and the snake!" he roared. "Oh, thanks so much, Honey. You and your scaley boyfriend have just queered my shot at eternal life, Dear. I'm a dead man because of you, Babe. And before all I ever got was 'Well, why aren't you as SMART as the snake is,' remember? 'Why don't you talk nice to me like the snake does? Why aren't you as SENSITIVE as the snake? Why aren't you as LONG as-'"

"ENOUGH!" The angel abruptly swelled in size, his shape magnifying to gigantic stature. The rotating sword formed a halo over his head. "Begone! Hie you from THIS place and come not hence LEST ye die. Firstborn of Men, you have broken the EDICT of the Lord, AND for this and more SHALL you know the travail of bitter exile, harshest toil, and the patient, beckoning GRAVE."

The man blinked rapidly and tried to swallow, his throat overwhelmingly dry as the reality of the moment sank in. Hesitantly, he turned away and shuffled toward the open gates. The woman rose, wiping her tears with her palm, and followed him. Just short of the gate, the man stopped, looking back at the angel with a slightly puzzled expression. "Wait a minute," he said. "Wait. Hold on. What did you mean, 'for this AND MORE?' Huh? Sure, yeah, God's got me on the fruit, even though it was all HER fault, which she knows, which by the way she even ADMITS but, so, like, exactly what else is the Big Guy kicking my ass out for?"

The angel seemed to burn even brighter than before. The flaming sword ceased turning and pointed its fiery tip down toward the man on a direct line with his heart. "Your sin HAS-cast you out, manling," said the angel, his eyes obscured by arcs of blue cobalt, "Yet NOT by the Tree alone have you FALLEN. The Woman has sinned, but she IS younger than you AND did FALL through her innocence and through the Serpent's deceit. But as for ye, O Man, your FALL did stem from a far more detestable SOURCE, aye, from that which be your own TRUE Original Sin..."

The bunnies watched as the gates clanged shut. They hopped up to the bars and looked out at the man and the woman on the other side. The pair stood apart from each other, their bare skin lashed by the hot winds, and stared dejectedly at their new home. The man bent over nonchalantly, humming audibly, selected a fist-sized stone, then whirled and cannoned it at the bunnies. Instantly the flaming sword appeared, pulverizing the rock on contact; the sword then began to revolve lazily before the gate. The man spat and grunted while the bunnies wrinkled their little pink noses.

"You heard what he said to me, right?" he growled to the woman. "That glowing sac of celestial dung has the gall to say, 'Ye have fallen NOT through the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Man most Mortal, but because ye BE an ASSHOLE,' he says, and then, then he says to me, 'Ye are punished FOR the fruit first but also as a PRICK.' Can you believe it? Where does an angel get that kind of attitude from?"

The woman approached him. Her hand stole shyly into his, caressing it, her wide, dark eyes gazing appealingly into his own. "My husband, we have been cut off from the Voice of the Lord, and banished from the Garden, and condemned to brief lives of the most dire Hardship and Agony, relieved only by the bleak comfort of Death. But yet may we not rejoice that at the least God has allowed that we may not face this Fate alone? Are we not blessed by the very Presence of each other? In the brutal years that await us, may we not yet smile at each other's Tenderness, draw strength from the reassurance of each other's Touch, and after the fears and drudgeries of the day may we not sleep peacefully, intertwined in the magic of each other's Body? For our children may still fill this world with the ringing cries of the Multitude, subduing the earth and giving thanks to the Lord. And someday, some far-off, unguessed Morn, those children may be redeemed in the sight of God, restored to His Grace, and walk again His beautiful Paradise in Righteousness and Humility."

The man laid his hands on her shoulders, then ran his fingers lightly over her cheek. A sigh shuddered in her throat. He carefully brushed strands of hair from her face, strands soaked and plastered by tears. He held her, began to draw her close.

"I oughta beat the living shit out of you," he erupted, dragging her behind him by the elbow. "We're banned from the Garden, we're both gonna DIE, and you're babbling like the menstrual flow just backed up into your brain. Supposed to be my 'wife.' My 'woman.' My 'help-meet.' Yeah, right." He tried to stamp on a scurrying lizard, but the gangly reptile was far too fast. "What, I ask you, what was I thinking of when the Big Guy suggested creating you? What? I was doing just fine with that orangutan female. She never complained, never squawked, ate the lice right off my head and I never even knew her to have a period. But was that good enough for me? Was it? Nooooo, She's not my species, I said, It won't work out, I said, We can't kiss open-mouth with all those grubs caught in between her teeth, I said..." The voices began to fade as the two figures staggered and shrank in the distance. "So I says to the Big Guy, 'Sure, go ahead, take the rib. Yank that sucker on out. Have a look at the gall bladder while you're in there...'"

The bunnies sat on their furry haunches and gazed through the bars of the gate, remaining there until sunset darkened the coarse terrain in dense tangles of orange and brown. One of them scratched his neck with his hind paw. "Kind of a shame the girl had to leave like that," the bunny said to no one in particular. "She was really pretty nice. For a biped." A white rabbit next to him sniffed loudly, then waddled forward to reveal a small pile of droppings. "Yeah, that was too bad," said the white rabbit, "but I'm sure as hell not going to miss HIM. Good riddance. I never could stand that prick." And, amid a general murmur of agreement, the bunnies hopped through the grass and disappeared into the nighted silence of the Garden.

by Mark Rake

Before the Dawn Comes

June 25, 1809

I dare only write by this single candle, racing an early loss of vision even in my determination, so I beg forgiveness for the poor quality of my penmanship. The mistress sleeps badly due to her poor health condition, and if she should wake in the night for a sorely placed cup of warm milk—

But I must write, and I will take a willing parchment confidante if there is none besides. It is this place that drives me. There is something here that makes the nerves tingle unnaturally.

I have not been here long at all, only a few days, and it is all around me like putrid air, except it lacks the tangibility of a foul odor. If only it did; some days I think I am mad, and others not. It's the master that thwarts me; I have met no other like him.

The day that he purchased me, I was awakened abruptly by an unbearable pull on my hair, forcing me to rise by the length of it. In the darkness, I heard my former master whispering to him, before I was blinded in a moment of sudden light. When my eyes cleared, my stare was met by the master I serve now. His eyes were the glittering green of a predator as he sized me up like dangled bait. My breathing stopped, and I lowered my eyes. I will never forget his guttural hiss,

"Yesss..." and it was in that instant that I knew what I was being bought for, that I would not escape his grasp.

I slink through this house like a wary cat as he hunts me with the lazy, sure intent of an imminent capture. It's the chase that thrills him more than anything, and it's that discovery that sickens me, that forces me down into the cellar to write this tonight.

Just this morning, I had completed the mistress' tray when I turned about to find him in the doorway, watching me. I have no idea how long he had been there. Startled, I dropped the tray I was holding, and all the contents were strewn across the floor.

Our eyes locked for a long moment before he smiled slowly at me. "Clumsy nigra," he said in a soft, almost caressing murmur.

"Yes suh, I'm sorry, suh." I responded as expected, grabbing a cloth and kneeling to clean up the mess, but he grabbed me by the wrist and yanked me to him, holding both of my hands over my head in one of his. My eyes widened, inches from his casual scrutiny. The master I had before this never took me in the house where the mistress might come across us and faint dead away. I froze, our gazes locked.

"What is the meaning of this?" The mistress appeared behind him, a churlish redhead in a pastel morning gown. He released me, and I scurried to begin cleaning up the mess. "What has happened to my china?" Her voice went up an octave as she pushed him aside to survey the mess. "Inexcusable!" Her eyes narrowed. "You'll get a whipping for this."

"No," the master said in a bored tone, turning to go. "It was not her fault. I startled her."

"That's no excuse for such clumsiness! I want her..."

He turned around to stare at her, and the words died in her throat. "No," he said again. With that, he left the house. There are often moments like this, when I find his strange-colored eyes sliding over me like warm pus, just waiting for me to discover his vigil. But I think he stalks me more for the delight of my fear than anything else. I suppose that is what frightens me most. He is waiting on something, and when I try to imagine what that might be, my stomach turns inside itself.

Now the mistress hates me doubly, and there is naught I can do about it. Because she not only hates me for the master's special treatment, she also hates all the light-skinned slaves. I'm sure I must be close to the fairest of all here. So fair, in fact, that if I so chose, I could walk amongst her people with ease, style my long, shiny curls like theirs, don their frivolous dresses and such. I think she lives in fear of this, but I could not tell her that it is useless. I would rather die than emulate them. Secretly, they disgust me. I know others who choose this route to escape the inevitable crushing presence of slavery, but I choose to stay and fight. Not openly—I do not court death. Instead, I fence the shadow's fight; the parallel battle that everyone overlooks. This is the doppelganger I hide from all; a speaking, writing, reading lie that bows and scrapes on cue. I often wonder if they realize that their ignorance unlocks infinite opportunities. As long as they think we are too stupid to learn, they will leave us gifts everywhere, from the unlocked library late at night to allowing us to clean around their children as they learn their lessons. An alert ear and a quick mind is everything.

Sometimes, late at night, I tutor the younger slaves in their alphabet. Even if I don't stay here long enough to teach them everything, I have given them the desire to discover more. I fantasize when I am alone about the mistress coming across us. The shock would make her faint, and later we would buck our eyes and lower our heads and vehemently deny in broken English what she had thought she had seen. Then the master and the other men would laugh at her, and remind her that niggers can't learn; we can barely be taught to clean and cook correctly. Ah, but the opposite chance is enough to fell the notion; if a man were to come across us, it would mean our stinking bodies swinging from the highest tree, with the whole town gathered about in heckling, morbid curiosity, outbidding one another for a piece of our freshly burned flesh. The rituals that these people engage in go beyond reasoning. God forgive me that I hate them as much as I do; eventually I am sure it will consume me.

August 5, 1809

I know it has been awhile since I last wrote. I can not risk being discovered. Even more so, the mistress works me so hard, I only have an hour or two of sleep before I rise again. They are all tedious tasks that she exhausts herself by supervising every step of the way. She is my waking hour and my parting presence. It is all bearable only by one thing: she has become my averse sentry. The master can not get to me, and he is furious about it. I have caught his molten glare from time to time, and each one burns me differently. I think he would even seek me out in the night—and perhaps he has—I never sleep in the same place twice.

November 27, 1809

The mistress is pregnant. The others tell me this will be her fifth. The other attempts lay buried in a special family plot in the field. Everyone thinks this will be another miscarriage, but I still hope. Perhaps a new son will distract the master. The mistress is so sick that she has taken leave of her preoccupation with working me until my hands bleed at night. I believe she would like to see me break, but she will have to kill me first. To beg for sympathy from a people devoid of even the basest emotion is to chase a phantom. There is hope, and then there is stupidity.

December 20, 1809

He has done the wicked thing. I knew from the beginning that he was saving me for some heinous act, but I am shocked again at the depths of their nature. He snatched me clear off my feet when I was tending the evening meal, and carried me off into the barn. Having learned long ago that fighting only lost teeth and unmarred skin, I bit back my screams and sought to bear the unbearable. It was only the grace of God that helped me manage. When I crawled back to the kitchen, the food was charred beyond recognition. I went to bed hungry for my punishment.

When he finally rose from me the first time, it was a strange look indeed that crossed his flushed face, and he had the gall to stroke my cheek tenderly. He said, "Bear me a child. Make it a boy, strong, and fair. Bear me a child, and maybe I will set you free."

I think the man is mad, indeed, I would swear it. It was with great weariness and relief that I called to him softly sobbing this night to finally leave off, for the deed was done.

Now the mistress and I are pregnant together. I can see in her eyes that she knows. I am sickened as the days go by, and it is not the babe that causes it.

June 15, 1810

He dotes on me in peculiar degrees, buying dresses for me that will not "bind the baby," and taking me from taxing duties. The other masters try to tell him that I am only an animal, and I need no special treatment. "Why, they can work right up to the birth, wrap that little nigra up, and keep right on working after." I overheard one say to him. But he doesn't listen to anyone. He is frightening me, and the stress makes me weak most of the time. I can hardly bear to put it to paper. God willing that I were only an animal, with an animal's stupidity, because this waiting is insufferable.

September 3, 1810

I went into labor prematurely, at the same time as the mistress. It was a boy, snatched and given to the nursemaid. I never held him in my arms, lovely thing though he was. When the master came to tell me that my baby had died and the other had lived, I stared at him with dark, accusing eyes and said nothing.

I believe it was with some guilt and an acute sense of fear that he sold me to an older woman that lived far away and needed a maid. It was just as well that he did not set me free; such an act of kindness may have been too much for me. The old woman requires simple work and I don't mind it. She detests men, and she has a tolerable disposition. There is only the two of us.

March 8, 1832

The old woman died on me. Now, I'm back again at this hateful house. Fortunately, the master has died and the boy is gone. The mistress has informed me that she is giving me to her brother-in-law, but it was with a strange, slow smile that reminded me of the master. I am frightened again, and I don't know why.

April 2, 1832

I think I have discovered the reason for the old mistress's amusement. The mistress of this house is a mean little blonde who has free run of the house. The young master here is more into business and rarely home; a slight fellow with raven black hair and hazel eyes. He resembles my old master in appearance only, with no interest in us beyond our chores. The mistress sees to all of the discipline. I must try to avoid her. I am not as young as I used to be.

May 27, 1832

Tonight, I awoke to the master bending over me with worried eyes. The mistress had beaten me senseless for laying out the wrong dress. I shrank from his attention, despite the fact that I knew he was not known on the plantation for raping slaves. But I trusted no man like him, with the shiny, straight hair of his people curling darkly against his pale forehead, and the strange colors of their eyes swirling beneath his lashes. I much preferred the anonymity of my estimated middle age—a bit beyond breeding years—hoping he would never notice me. Pitiful hope had sustained me, and now—because of the mistress' unwarranted savagery, it was all for naught. I am restless now, unable to sleep despite my injury. I know that something will come of this, and it will not be good.

June 28, 1832

He has placed me in a separate cabin to rest and heal. I don't understand his ways. I am wondering what he will want in return. He came here tonight, and he seems to want something, but is unwilling to ask it. It makes no sense at all. I don't understand their kind when they are not doing what they do so well—taking. I am laying in wait, knowing that eventually he will have to give through. This younger brother resembles the old master in almost every detail, from his thick, dark, curly hair to his dimpled smile to his tall, strapping body. All the more to hold me down with. The only thing that is different is his eyes. It is not so much the color—although his eyes are a soft gold compared to his older brother's piercing green—but the nature of them. They do not make my skin crawl as they should, and this is more frightening than anything else.

July 15, 1832

He brings me food from the house sometimes, and gifts. Scarves, and more paper; he has discovered my writing, but he doesn't seem to be angry about it. He sits and talks with me about the things that he does when he's away from the plantation. He tells me about other places that he's been to, and some of the different things that he's seen. I don't know what to say to him when he talks about these things. I don't have anything to tell him in return, and it makes me sad sometimes. To think of all that he has done, and all that I will never do. I can not figure out what draws him here. I do not know how to deal with this. He wants something, and I wish he would come out with it. What is the game he is playing? I have also noticed that his skin is duskie than my old master's. Perhaps his father was up to the same mischief as his brother. Perhaps that is where he got the notion from. It's amazing, what mistresses put up with.

June 27, 1832

He brings me books now. The other slaves think I am laying with him. They won't talk to me anymore, and exclude me from their activities. I can't blame them; I know the way it looks. But it hurts me; there is so much that I could be teaching them, and I love them all so much. I'm lonely. It's strange, he wants me, but he won't take me. He is soothing to me. I'm not even afraid of him anymore, and I feel as though I should be. He makes me laugh, and it startles me to laugh with him. I don't know what I am doing anymore. I'm an old, foolish woman.

July 18, 1832

My body has betrayed me. Slowly, carefully, he has unwound the very things that bind about to protect me. As he began so tenderly and it was feeling so good, I had no idea of what the end would be. I had no idea what sex was. My God, the years I spent being bruised and ripped, held down, barely healed from the first attack before another had begun, time and again I was forced to wear and change the bloody rags pressed to the wounds, the stench of their sweat and semen, my stomach turning when any man looked at me with desire, even coloured men, because the wanting had been taken from me. But this, this was nothing like anything else. It was teasing and hungry and wonderful. And the way it makes one feel after, still open and weak. The first time he left, I was wary, confused, sure that it could not happen again because his diligence had paid off. I ignored his tender words and kisses. I regretted everything. But he still brings gifts, still comes back. I guess it wasn't the chase. Perhaps it's me. I just don't understand anymore. I guess I am trying to be happy. I've earned some right for happiness, I think. I want to do it again, and again. I am hoping that I can learn to be comfortable with this man, to take him for what is in front of me, but I do not know if I am capable.

November 31, 1832

I'm three months pregnant, and neither of us can believe it. I guess I'm not as old as I thought. He doesn't seem angry about it. In fact, the mistress is going to stay with her mother for the winter, and so he is moving me into the house. The other slaves are going to hate me, but I can't think about that any more. I am content with him, and I have not been content since I stayed with the old woman.

March 5, 1833

I have just been sick everywhere without the strength to clean it up. The master will be home soon, and I don't know what I will do.

Just now, restless from the babe's kicking, I walked around the house as I often do to ease the pain. When I reached the mantle, I picked up a picture of the family out of idle curiosity, and it was then that my heart stopped. My first mistress, in her bitter twisted mind, has revenged her life complete. For I was not owned by the brother, but by the son as this picture clearly showed, and I know that I will go mad before the dawn comes. Oh, my dear Lord, to know that from now until the birth, I am doomed to the fate of bearing my own grandchild...

by Laurel Scott





Jennifer Krings, Editor

Poetry:

Jennifer Blair, Editor
Garth Liebhaber, Assistant Editor
Sara Charniak, Staff

Fiction:

Catherine Olson, Editor
Norman Chavosky, Assistant Editor
Paul Conrad, Staff
Phyllis Gooden, Staff

Design:

Elizabeth Meiers, Designer
Robert Grennan, Designer
Brendan Reynolds, Designer

Advising:

Reginald Shepherd, Assistant Professor
Dr. Amy Newman, Assistant Professor

Towers would like to thank Shirley Chaney, the Campus Activities Board, Gay Davidson-Zielske, Hunt the Wumps, Just Dinner, Sigma Tau Delta, and Mark Federigi from Greymile for their performance and help at Towers events.

Also, thank you to John Bradley, Joe Gastiger, Dean Frederick Kitterle, and James Miller for their previous advice.

Special thanks to Dr. Eddie Williams, Vice-President of Finance and Facilities, the NIU Student Association, and the Village Commons Bookstore for their support and patience. Your contributions have kept the Towers tradition alive!