

A playful expression came on their mother's face. She lifted her shoulders, curled her arms over head and clapped her hands, then stamped her feet fast, fast, fast on the floor as if she were putting out a fire. "Flamenco dancing! ¡Olé! Remember the dancers?" Sandi nodded. They had all been enthralled by the folk dancers from Madrid at the Dominican World's Fair last year. As Mami began to explain that this restaurant had shows of Spanish dancers as well as yummy Spanish food, a series of thumps sounded on the floor from below.

The girls glanced at each other and looked towards their mother, who rolled her eyes. "La Bruja," she explained. "I forgot." The old woman in the apartment below, who had a helmet of beauty parlor blue hair, had been complaining to the super since the day the family moved in a few months ago. The Garcias should be evicted. Their food smelled. They spoke too loudly and not in English. The kids sounded like a herd of wild burros. The Puerto Rican super, Alfredo, came to their door almost daily. Could Mrs. Garcia turn the radio down? Could Mrs. Garcia maybe keep the girls more in line? The neighbor downstairs had been awakened by the clatter of their shoes on the floor.

"If I keep them any more in line," their mother began—and then Sandi heard her mother's voice breaking. "We have to walk around. We have to breathe."

Alfredo surveyed the fourth floor lobby behind his back, then murmured under his breath. "I understand, I understand." He shrugged his shoulders, helpless. "It is a difficult place, this country, before you get used to it. You have to not take things personal." He brightened his voice at the end, but Sandi's mother merely nodded quietly.

"And how are my little señoritas?" Alfredo called over Mrs. Garcia's shoulders. The girls forced smiles as they had been taught, but Sandi, in revenge, also crossed her eyes. She did not like Alfredo, something about the man's overfriendliness and his speaking to them in English even though they all knew Spanish made her feel uneasy. La Bruja downstairs she thought of as the devil—her being below them made sense. When Sandi played Toro, bullfighting Yoyo with a towel, she would shout after each successful scrape with death, ¡OLE! and stamp her feet in triumph, lifting her right hand to the crowd. She always had a bad conscience afterwards, but she couldn't help herself. One day soon after they had moved in, La Bruja had stopped her mother and the girls in the lobby and spat out that ugly word the kids at school sometimes used: "Spics! Go back to where you came from!"

As soon as Papi came home from his shift at the hospital, he showered, singing a favorite Island song that made the girls giggle as they slipped on their party dresses. They were already in a giddy mood from an inspired discovery that the Fannings' name sure sounded like the word for a person's bottom they had recently learned in the playground at school. "We're going to eat with the fannies," one sister would say to make the others laugh. Papi emerged from the bathroom combing his dark wet curls flat. He looked at the girls and winked. "Your Papi is a dashing man, eh?" He posed in front of the hall mirror, turning this way and that. "A handsome man, your Papi."

The girls indulged him with cries of "Ay, Papi." This was the first time in New York that they had seen their father in a lighthearted mood. Mostly he worried about *la situación*

back home. Some uncles were in trouble. Tío Mundo had been jailed, and Tío Fidelio was maybe dead. Papi had not been able to get an American doctor's license—some hitch about his foreign education—and the money was running out. Dr. Fanning was trying to help out by lining up jobs, but first Papi needed to pass his licensing exam. It had been Dr. Fanning who had arranged the fellowship that had allowed them all to get out of the old country. And now, the good doctor and his wife had invited the whole family out to an expensive restaurant in the city as a treat. The Fannings knew the Garcías could not afford such a luxury these days. They were such nice people, that was the truth, Mami said, they gave you hope that maybe at the bottom Americans were kind souls.

"But you must behave," Mami said, going back to the same old Epistle. "You must show them what a nice family you come from."

As Mami and Papi finished dressing, the girls watched, fussing at their tights, an uncomfortable new article of clothing. These things bunched at the ankles and sagged at the crotch so you always felt as if your pants might be falling down. They made you feel like those bandaged mummies in the museum. If you unwrapped them, Sandi had pondered, misting the glass case with her breath, would they still be dark Egyptians or would their skin have turned pale after such long bondage—like American skin under all these heavy clothes for the winter that was just starting?

Sandi leaned her elbows on the vanity and watched her mother comb her dark hair in the mirror. Tonight Mami was turning back into the beauty she had been back home. Her

face was pale and tragic in the lamplight; her bright eyes shone like amber held up to the light. She wore a black dress with a scoop back and wide shoulders so her long neck had the appearance of a swan gliding on a lake. Around her neck sparkled her good necklace that had real diamonds. "If things get really bad," Mami sometimes joked grimly, "I'll sell the necklace and earrings Papito gave me." Papi always scowled and told her not to speak such nonsense.

If things ever get that bad, Sandi thought, she would sell her charm bracelet with the windmill that always got caught on her clothing. She would even cut her hair and sell it—a maid back home had told her that girls with good hair could always do that. She had no idea who would buy it. She had not seen hair for sale in the big department stores Mami sometimes took them through on outings "to see this new country." But Sandi would make the needed sacrifices. Tonight, she thought, with the rich Fannings, she would present herself as the daughter willing to make these sacrifices. Maybe they would adopt her, and give her an allowance like other American girls got, which Sandi would then pass on to her real family. Provided she could see them periodically, that would not be a bad life, being an only child in a fine, rich, childless American family.

Downstairs, the doorman, Ralph, who had himself come from a country called Ireland as a boy, stood by the opened door and gave each young lady a sweeping bow as she passed by. He always flirted with the girls, calling them the Misses Garcías as if they were rich people's children. Mami often quipped that Ralph probably made more money than Papi on his fellowship. Thank God their grandfather was helping them out. "Without

Papito," Mami confided in her girls, swearing them never to repeat this to their father, "without Papito, we would have to go on welfare." Welfare, they knew, was what people in this country got so they wouldn't turn into beggars like those out side La Catedral back home. It was Papito who paid the rent and bought them their winter clothes and spoiled them once with an outing to Lincoln Center to see the doll-like ballerinas dancing on their toes.

"Will you be needing a taxi tonight, Doc?" Ralph asked their father as he did every time the family came out all dressed up. Usually, Papi said, "No, thank you, Ralph," and the family turned the corner and took a bus. Tonight, though, to Sandi's surprise, her father splurged. "Yes, please, Ralph, a Checker for all my girls." Sandi could not get over how happy her father seemed. She slipped her hand into his, and he gave it a squeeze before he released it. He was not a man to show public affection on foreign soil.

As the taxi sped along, Mami had to repeat the address for the driver because the man could not understand Papi's accent. Sandi realized with a pang one of the things that had been missing in the last few months. It was precisely this kind of special attention paid to them. At home there had always been a chauffeur opening a car door or a gardener tipping his hat and a half dozen maids and nusemaids acting as if the health and well-being of the de la Torre-García children were of wide public concern. Of course, it was usually the de la Torre boys, not the girls, who came in for special consideration. Still, as bearers of the de la Torre name, the girls were made to feel important.

The restaurant had a white awning with its name EL FLAMENCO in brilliant red letters. A doorman, dressed up as a dignitary with a flaming red band across his white ruffled shirt, opened the car door for them. A carpet on the sidewalk led into the reception foyer, from which they could see into a large room of tables dressed up with white tablecloths and napkins folded to look like bishops' hats. Silverware and glasses gleamed like ornaments. Around the occupied tables handsome waiters gathered, their black hair slicked back into bullfighters' little ponytails. They wore cummerbunds and white shirts with ruffles on the chest—beautiful men like the one Sandi would someday marry. Best of all were the rich, familiar smells of garlic and onion and the lilting cadence of Spanish spoken by the dark-eyed waiters, who reminded Sandi of her uncles.

At the entrance to the dining room, the maître d' explained that Mrs. Fanning had called to say she and her husband were on their way, to go ahead and sit down and order some drinks. He led them, a procession of six, to a table right next to a platform. He pulled out all their chairs, handed them each an opened menu, then bowed and backed away. Three waiters descended on the table, filling water glasses, adjusting silverware and plates. Sandi sat very still and watched their beautiful long fingers fast at work.

"Something to drink, señor?" one of them said, addressing Papi.

"Can I have a Coke?" Fifa piped up, but then backed down when her mother and her sisters eyed her. "I'll have chocolate milk."

Their father laughed good-naturedly, aware of the waiting waiter. "I don't think they have chocolate milk. Cokes is fine for tonight. Right, Mami?"

Mami rolled her eyes in mock exasperation. She was too beautiful tonight to be their mother and to impose the old rules. "Have you noticed," she whispered to Papi when the waiter had left with the drink orders. The girls drew in to hear. Mami was the leader now that they lived in the States. She had gone to school in the States. She spoke English without a heavy accent. "Look at the menu. Notice how there aren't any prices? I bet a Coke here is a couple of dollars."

Sandi's mouth dropped open. "A couple of dollars!"

Her mother hushed her with an angry look. "Don't embarrass us, please, Sandi!" she said, and then laughed when Papi reminded her that Spanish was not a secret language in this place.

"Ay, Mami." He covered her hand briefly with his. "This is a special night. I want us to have a good time. We need a celebration."

"I suppose," Mami said, sighing. "And the Fannings are paying."

Papi's face tightened.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of," Mami reminded him.

"When they were our guests back home, we treated them like royalty."

That was true. Sandi remembered when the famous Doctor Fanning and his wife had come down to instruct the country's leading doctors on new procedures for heart surgery. The tall, slender man and his goofy wife had been guests in the family

compound. There had been many barbecues with the driveway lined with cars and a troop of chauffeurs under the palm trees exchanging news and gossip.

When the drinks arrived, Papi made a funny toast, in Spanish and loud enough for the waiters' benefit, but they were all too professional, and if they did overhear, no one chuckled. Just as they all lifted their glasses, Mami leaned into the table. "They're here." Sandi turned to see the maitre d' heading in their direction with a tall, dressed-up woman, and behind her, a towering, preoccupied-looking man. It took a moment to register that these were the same human beings who had loitered around the pool back on the Island, looking silly in sunglasses and sunhats, noses smeared with suntan cream, and speaking a grossly inadequate Spanish to the maids.

A flutter of hellos and apologies ensued. Papi stood up, and Sandi, not knowing what manners were called for, stood up too, and was eyed by her mother to sit back down. The doctor and his wife lingered over each girl, "trying to get them straight," and remembering how each one had been only this tall when last they had seen them. "What little beauties!" Dr. Fanning teased. "Carlos, you've got quite a harem here!" The four girls watched their father's naughty smile tilt on his face.

For the first few minutes the adults exchanged news. Dr. Fanning told how he had spoken with a friend who was the manager of an important hotel that needed a house doctor. The job was a piece of cake, Dr. Fanning explained, mostly keeping rich widows in Valium, but heck, the pay was good. Sandi's father looked down at his plate, grateful, but also embarrassed to be in such straits and to be so beholden.

The Fannings' drinks arrived. Mrs. Fanning drank hers down in several greedy swallows, then ordered another. She had been quiet during the flurry of arrival, but now she gushed questions, raising her eyebrows and pulling long faces when Mrs. García explained that they had not been able to get any news from the family ever since the news blackout two weeks back. Sandi studied the woman carefully. Why had Dr. Fanning, who was tall and somewhat handsome, married this plain, bucktoothed woman? Maybe she came from a good family, which back home was the reason men married plain, bucktoothed women. Maybe Mrs. Fanning came with all the jewelry she had on, and Dr. Fanning had been attracted by its glittering the way little fishes are if you wrap tinfoil on a string and dangle it in the shallows.

Dr. Fanning opened his menu. "What would everyone like? Girls?" This was the moment they had been so carefully prepared for. Mami would order for them—they were not to be so rude or forward as to volunteer a special like or dislike. Besides, as Sandi tried reading the menu, with the help of her index finger, sounding out syllables, she did not recognize the names of dishes listed.

Her mother explained to Dr. Fanning that she would order two *pastelones* for the girls to share.

"Oh, but the seafood here is so good," the doctor pleaded, looking at her from above his glasses, which had slipped down on his nose like a schoolteacher's. "How about some paella, girls, or *camarones a la vinagreta*?"

"They don't eat shrimp," their mother said, and Sandi was grateful to her for defending them from this dreaded, wormy

food. On the other hand, Sandi would have been glad to order something different and all to herself. But she remembered her mother's warnings.

"Mami," Fifí whispered, "what's *pastelone*?"

"*Pastelón*, Cuca." Mami explained it was a casserole like Chucha used to make back home with rice and ground beef. "It's very good. I know you girls will like it." Then she gave them a pointed look they understood to mean, they must like it.

"Yes," they said nicely when Dr. Fanning asked if *pastelón* was indeed what they wanted.

"Yes, what?" Mami coached.

"Yes, thank you," they chorused. The doctor laughed, then winked knowingly at them.

Their orders in and fresh drinks on the table, the grown-ups fell into the steady drone of adult conversation. Now and again the changed cadence of a story coming through made Sandi lean forward and listen. Otherwise, she sat quietly, playing with sugar packets until her mother made her stop. She watched the different tables around theirs. All the other guests were white and spoke in low, unexcited voices. Americans, for sure. They could have eaten anywhere, Sandi thought, and yet they had come to a *Spanish* place for dinner. La Bruja was wrong. Spanish was something other people paid to be around.

Her eye fell on a young waiter whose job seemed to be to pour water into the goblets at each table when they ran low. Every time she caught his eye, she would glance away embarrassed, but with boredom she grew bolder. She commenced a little flirtation; he smiled, and each time she smiled back, he

approached with his silver pitcher to refill her water glass. Her mother noticed and said in coded scolding, "Their well is going to run dry."

In fact, Sandi had drunk so much water that, she explained quietly to Mami, she was going to have to go to the toilet. Her mother cast her another of her angry looks. They had been cautioned against making any demands tonight during dinner. Sandi squirmed at her seat, unwilling to go, unless she could be granted a smiling permission.

Papi offered to accompany her. "I could use the men's room myself." Mrs. Fanning also stood up and said she could stand to leave behind a little something. Dr. Fanning gave her a warning look, not too different from the one Sandi's mother had given her.

The three of them trooped to the back of the restaurant where the maître d' had directed, and down a narrow flight of stairs, lit gloomily by little lamps hung in archways. In the poorly lit basement Mrs. Fanning squinted at the writing on the two doors. "*Damas? Caballeros?*" Sandi checked an impulse to correct the American lady's pronunciation. "Hey there, Carlos, you're going to have to translate for me so I don't end up in the wrong room with you!" Mrs. Fanning rolled her hips in a droll way like someone trying to keep up a Hula-Hoop.

Papi looked down at his feet. Sandi had noticed before that around American women he was not himself. He rounded his shoulders and was stiffly well-mannered, like a servant. "Sandi will show you," he said, putting his daughter between himself and Mrs. Fanning, who laughed at his discomfort. "Go ahead then, sugar pie." Sandi held open the door marked DAMAS

for the American lady. As Mrs. Fanning turned to follow, she leaned towards Sandi's father and brushed her lips on his.

Sandi didn't know whether to stand there foolishly or dash in and let the door fall on this uncomfortable moment. Like her father, she looked down at her feet, and waited for the giggling lady to sweep by her. Even in the dimly lit room, Sandi could see her father's face darken with color.

Sandi and Mrs. Fanning found themselves in a pretty little parlor with a couch and lamps and a stack of perfumed towels. Sandi spied the stalls in an adjoining room and hurried into one, releasing her bladder. Relieved, she now felt the full and shocking weight of what she had just witnessed. A married American woman kissing her father!

As she let herself out of her stall, she heard Mrs. Fanning still active in hers. Quickly, she finished hitching up her silly tights, then swished her hands under the faucet, beginning to dry them on her dress, but remembering after an initial swipe, the towels. She took one from the stack, wiped her hands and tapped at her face as she had seen Mami do with the powder puff. Looking at herself in the mirror, she was surprised to find a pretty girl looking back at her. It was a girl who could pass as American, with soft blue eyes and fair skin, looks that were traced back to a great-great grandmother from Sweden at every family gathering. She lifted her bangs—her face was delicate like a ballerina's. It struck her impersonally as if it were a judgment someone else was delivering, someone American and important, like Dr. Fanning: she was pretty. She had heard it said before, of course, but the compliment was always a group compliment to all the sisters, so Sandi thought this was a politeness

friends of her parents said about daughters just as they tended to say "They're so big" or "They're so smart" about sons. Being pretty, she would not have to go back to where she came from. Pretty spoke both languages. Pretty belonged in this country to spite La Bruja. As she studied herself, the stall door behind her opened in the mirror. Sandi let her bangs fall and rushed out of the room.

Her father was waiting in the anteroom, pacing nervously, his hands worrying the change in his pocket. "Where is she?" he whispered.

Sandi pointed back in the room with her chin.

"That woman is drunk," he whispered, crouching down beside Sandi. "But I can't insult her, imagine, our one chance in this country." He spoke in the serious, hushed voice he had used with Mami those last few days in the old country. "Por favor, Sandi, you're a big girl now. Not a word of this to your mother. You know how she is these days."

Sandi eyed him. This was the first time her father had ever asked her to do something sneaky. Before she had time to respond, the bathroom door swung open. Her father stood up. Mrs. Fanning called out, "Why, here you are, sugar!"

"Yes, here we are!" her father said in a too cheerful voice. "And we must better get back to the table before they send the marines!" He smiled archly, as if he had just thought up this quip he had been making for weeks.

Mrs. Fanning threw her head back and laughed. "Oh, Carlos!" Her father joined the American lady's phony laughter, then stopped abruptly when he noticed Sandi's eyes on him. "What are you waiting for?" He spoke in a stern voice, nodding to-

wards the stairs. Sandi glanced away, hurt. Mrs. Fanning laughed again and led the way up the narrow winding stairs. It was like coming up out of a dungeon, Sandi decided. She would tell her sisters this and make them wish they had gone to the bathroom as well, though truly, Sandi wished she had herself never strayed from the table. She wouldn't have seen what she could not now hope to forget.

At the table, the young waiter tucked the chair in for her. He was still lovely, his skin so smooth and of a rich olive color, his hands long and slender like those of angels in illustrations, holding their choir books. But this man could very well lean forward just as Mrs. Fanning had done downstairs. He could try to kiss her, Sandi, on the lips. She did not let her glance fall in his direction again.

Instead, she studied the Fannings intently for clues as to their mysterious behavior. One thing she noticed was that Mrs. Fanning drank a lot of wine, and each time she nodded to the waiter to fill her glass, Dr. Fanning said something to her out of the corner of his mouth. At one point when the waiter leaned toward her empty glass, Dr. Fanning covered it with his hand. "That's enough," he snapped, and quickly the waiter leaned away again.

"What a party fart," Mrs. Fanning observed, loud enough for the table to hear, though "fart" was not a word the girls recognized. Mami instantly began to fuss at Sandi and her sisters, pretending that the exchange of angry whispering between the Fannings was not taking place. But little Fifi could not be distracted from the scene at the end of the table: she stared wide-eyed at the bickering Fannings, and then over at Mami with

a serious look of oncoming tears. Mami winked at her, and smiled a high-watt smile to reassure the little girl that these Americans need not be taken seriously.

Blessedly, their platters of food appeared, borne by a corps of waiters, directed by the busybody maître d'. The tension dissipated as the two couples took small, pensive bites of their different servings. Compliments and evaluations erupted all around the table. Sandi found most of the things on her plate inedible. But there was a generous decorative lettuce leaf under which much of the goopy meat and greasy rice could be tucked away.

Tonight she felt beyond either of her parents: she could tell that they were small people compared to these Fannings. She had herself witnessed a scene whose disclosure could cause trouble. What did she care if her parents demanded that she eat all of her *pastelón*. She would say, just as an American girl might, "I don't wanna. You can't make me. This is a free country."

"Sandi, look!" It was her father, trying to befriend her. He was pointing towards the stage where the lights were dimming. Six señoritas in long, fitted dresses with flaring skirts and castanets in their hands flounced onto the stage. The guitarist came on and strummed a summoning tune. Beautiful men in torador outfits joined their ladies. They stamped their feet for hello, and the ladies stamped back, Hello! Six and six, *damas* and *caballeros*, they went through a complicated series of steps, the women's maracas clacking a teasing beat, the men echoing their partners' moves with sultry struts, and foot stomps. These were not the dainty and chaste twirls and curt-

seys of the ballerinas at Lincoln Center. These women looked, well—Sandi knew no other way to put it—they looked as if they wanted to take their clothes off in front of the men.

Yoyo and Fifi were closest to the stage, but Mami let Carla and Sandi pull their chairs around in a cluster and join their sisters. The dancers clapped and strutted, tossing their heads boldly like horses. Sandi's heart soared. This wild and beautiful dance came from people like her, Spanish people, who danced the strange, disquieting joy that sometimes made Sandi squeeze Fifi's hand hard until she cried or bullfight Yoyo with a towel until both girls fell in a giggling, exhausted heap on the floor that made La Bruja beat her ceiling with a broom handle. "The girls are having such fun," she heard her mother confide to Mrs. Fanning.

"Me too," the American lady observed. "These guys are something else. Hey, Lori, watch that one's tight tights."

"Very nice," Sandi's mother said a little stiffly.

Dr. Fanning hissed at his wife. "That's enough, Sylvia."

As the show progressed, Sandi could see that the dancers' faces were becoming beaded with sweat. Wet patches spread under their arms, and their smiles were strained. Still they were beautiful as first one couple then another came forward in solo dances. Then the men withdrew, and from somewhere they acquired roses, which they presented to their partners. The women began a dance in which the roses were held in their mouths, and their castanets clacked a merciless thank you to the men.

Behind Sandi, a chair scraped the floor, another fell over, and two figures hurried by. It was Mrs. Fanning with Dr. Fanning

giving chase! She scrambled up onto the platform, clapping her hands over her head, Dr. Fanning lunging at but missing her as she escaped onto center stage. The dancers good-naturedly made way. Dr. Fanning did not follow, but with an angry shrug of his shoulders, headed back to their table.

"Let her enjoy herself," Sandi's mother said. Her voice was full of phony good cheer. "She is just having a good time."

"She's had too much to drink is what she's had," the doctor snapped.

The restaurant came alive with the American lady's clowning. She was a good ham, bumping her hips up against the male dancers and rolling her eyes. The diners laughed and clapped. The management, sensing a good moment, gave her a spotlight, and the guitarist came forward, strumming a popular American tune with a Spanish flair. One of the male dancers partnered Mrs. Fanning—who advanced as the dancer withdrew in a pantomime of a cartoon chase. The diners roared their approval.

All but Sandi. Mrs. Fanning had broken the spell of the wild and beautiful dancers. Sandi could not bear to watch her. She turned her chair around to face the table and occupied herself with her water glass, twisting the stem around, making damp links on the white cloth.

To a round of applause, Mrs. Fanning was escorted back to the table by her partner. Sandi's father stood up and pulled her chair out for her.

"Let's go." Dr. Fanning turned, looking for the waiter to ask for the check.

"Ah, come on, sugar, loosen up, will ya?" his wife coaxed

him. One of the dancers had given the American lady her rose, and Mrs. Fanning now tried to stick it in her husband's lapel. Dr. Fanning narrowed his eyes at her, but before he could speak, the table was presented with a complimentary bottle of champagne from the management. As the cork popped, a few of the customers in adjoining tables applauded and lifted their glasses up in a toast to Mrs. Fanning.

"A toast to all of us!" Mrs. Fanning held up her glass. "Come on, girls," she urged them. Sandi's sisters lifted their water glasses and clinked the American lady's.

"Sandi!" her mother said. "You too."

Reluctantly, Sandi lifted her glass.

Dr. Fanning held up his glass and tried to inject a pointed seriousness into the moment: "To you, the Garcías. Welcome to this country." Now her parents lifted their glasses, and in her father's eyes, Sandi noted gratitude and in her mother's eyes a moistness that meant barely checked tears.

As Dr. Fanning spoke to one of the waiters, a dancer approached the table, carrying a large straw basket with a strap that went around her neck. She tipped the basket towards the girls and smiled a wide, warm smile at the two men. Inside the basket were a dozen dark-haired Barbie dolls dressed like Spanish señoritas. The dancer held up a doll and puffed out the skirt of its dress so that it opened prettily like a fully blown flower.

"Would you like one?" she asked little Fifi. The woman spoke in English, but her voice was heavily accented like Dr. García's.

Fifi nodded eagerly, then looked over at her mother, who was

eyeing the little girl. Slowly Fifi shook her head. "No?" the dancer said in a surprised voice, lifting up her eyebrows. She looked at the other girls, her eye falling on Sandi. "You would like one?"

Sandi, of course, remembered the much-repeated caution to the girls that they should not ask for any special dishes or treats of any sort. The Garcías could not afford extras, and they did not want to put their hosts in the embarrassing position of having to spend money out of largesse. Sandi stared at the small doll. She was a perfect replica of the beautiful dancers, dressed in a long, glittery gown with a pretty tortoise shell comb in her hair, from which cascaded a tiny, lacy mantilla. On her feet were strapped tiny black heels such as the dancers had worn. Sandi ignored her mother's fierce look and reached out for the doll.

With the tip of her painted fingernail, the dancer salesgirl showed the miniature castanets the doll was holding. Sandi felt such tenderness as when a new mother uncurls the tiny fists of a newborn. She turned to her father, ignoring her mother's glare. "Papi, can I have her?" Her father looked up at the pretty salesgirl and smiled. Sandi could tell he wanted to make an impression. "Sure," he nodded, adding, "Anything for my girl." The salesgirl smiled.

Instantly the cry from the other three: "Me too, Papi! Me too!"

Her mother reached over and took the doll from Sandi's hands. "Absolutely not, girls." She shook her head at the dancer, who had since reached in her basket and extracted three more dolls.

Meanwhile the check had been brought, and Dr. Fanning was reviewing the items, stacking bills on a little tray. As he did so, Papi gazed down at the tablecloth. Back in the old country, everyone fought for the honor of paying. But what could he do in this new country where he did not even know if he had enough cash in his pocket to make good on buying the four dolls that he was now committed to provide for his girls.

"You know the rules!" Mami hissed at them.

"Please, Mami, please," Fifi begged, not understanding that the woman's offer of a doll did not mean they were free.

"No!" Mami said sharply. "And no more discussion, girls." The edge on her voice made Mrs. Fanning, who had been absently collecting her things, look up. "What's going on?" she asked the girls' mother. "Nothing," Mami said, and smiled tensely.

Sandi was not going to miss her chance. This woman had kissed her father. This woman had ruined the act of the beautiful dancers. The way Sandi saw it, this woman owed her something. "We want one of those dolls." Sandi pointed to the basket in which the dancer was rearranging the rejected dolls.

"Sandi!" her mother cried.

"Why, I think that's a swell idea! A souvenir!" Mrs. Fanning motioned the dancer back, who approached the table with her full cargo. "Give each of these girls a doll and put it on the bill. Sugar"—she turned to her husband, who had finished clapping the small folder closed—"hold your horses."

"I will not permit—" Papi sat forward, reaching in his back pocket for his wallet.

"Nonsense!" Mrs. Fanning hushed him. She touched his

hand to prevent him from opening his wallet.

Papi flinched and then tried to disguise his reaction by pretending to shake her hand away. "I pay this."

"Don't take his money," Mrs. Fanning ordered the dancer, who smiled noncommittedly.

"Hey," Dr. Fanning said, agreeing with his wife. "We wanted to get the girls something, but heck, we didn't know what. This is perfect." He peeled four more tens from his wad. Papi exchanged a helpless look with Mami.

While her sisters fussed over which of the dolls to choose, Sandi grabbed the one dressed exactly like the dancers in the floor show. She stood the Barbie on the table and raised one of the doll's arms and pulled the other out so that the doll was frozen in the pose of the Spanish dancers.

"You are much too kind," her mother said to Mrs. Fanning, and then in a hard voice with the promise of later punishment, she addressed the four girls, "What do you say?"

"Thank you," Sandi's sisters chorused.

"Sandi?" her mother said.

Sandi looked up. Her mother's eyes were dark and beautiful like those of the little dancer before her. "Yes, Mami?" she asked politely, as if she hadn't heard the order.

"What do you say to Mrs. Fanning?"

Sandi turned to the woman whose blurry, alcoholic eyes and ironic smile intimated the things Sandi was just beginning to learn, things that the dancers knew all about, which was why they danced with such vehemence, such passion. She hopped her dancer right up to the American lady and gave her a bow. Mrs. Fanning giggled and returned an answering nod.

Sandi did not stop. She pushed her doll closer, so that Mrs. Fanning aped a surprised, cross-eyed look. Holding her new doll right up to the American woman's face and tipping it so that its little head touched the woman's flushed cheek, Sandi made a smacking sound.

"Gracias," Sandi said, as if the Barbie doll had to be true to her Spanish costume.

Pow Wow : Charting the Fault Lines in the
American Experience - Short Fiction from
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Da capo Press, 2009. 6-11. Print.

IMAGINE MY LIFE

Jimmy Santiago Baca

One afternoon, as I was editing video footage shot in the village where I spent part of my childhood, my grandmother's face appeared on the monitor, and shock waves of hurt erupted in me. Her image revived the unbearable pain of leaving her when I was a child. I always thought my childhood was savage, beautiful in parts, but mostly full of hurt. Seeing her face, ravaged leather cracked and burned by the sun, her silver, squash-blossom eyes, it came back to me how much she had loved me and how warm and nurturing my childhood had been because of her love.

On the film, her mouth pursed into wrinkles as she said in Spanish, "You ran every day to the railroad, and no matter how we spanked and scolded you, you would run to play on the tracks. You spent so many afternoons there. You loved waving to the caboose engineers, and throwing rocks at the cattle cars to see if you could hit them between the slats. You had a fascination for things that went away, that traveled and came by in a whoosh and then were gone. You wanted to go with them, and it was hard to bring you back, to bring you home, especially after you had seen a train. You wanted to go after those trains, and I was scared when you ran alongside them. Once you threw your rosary on top of one of those flatcars and waved it good-bye. Yes, how you loved things that ran and went on and on."

I didn't remember any of that. It hurt to have forgotten so much, and I wondered why I had imagined my life so destitute and deprived.

My grandmother had an old-world decency. She would offer food first to the guest, offer the best chair, offer whatever the guest lacked: comfort, a bed, change from her penny purse. She would share anything she had, listen in consoling silence for hours, give of herself unstintingly, and pray every night for those less fortunate than she. I would fall asleep to that mumbling drone of prayers, like a Buddhist monastery chant. They calmed me and I fell into tranquil dreams.

My grandmother's face has a powerful dignity, like that of an old female eagle on a craggy peak, whose world is eternal. Her gestures are restrained, tentative and soft, as if the world around her, the innocent earth and flowers, were a child easily bruised. Her silence is sunlight sparkling in a freshwater snowmelt stream.

The memories of her suffering, evoked by those film images, were too much for me. I stopped the monitor, pulled on my oilskin jacket, and left the house. As I walked, a dark remorse brimmed in me. If I had not left our village, if I had stayed all these years with her, I could have learned from her; I could have been a better man than I am today. My life seemed to me a fool's jig of drunken jesters dancing for the deaf and blind. I fled from her face because it was too strong a telling of undeserved suffering. As I thought these things, my rage burst out in savage sounds of grief.

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Those who cannot see might take my grandmother's kindness and caring for weakness. She has lived with hunger—beans, tortillas, and chile her daily bread; worn frayed and faded clothes, mended a thousand times over. Yet never has she extended her hands for help, those hands always reaching to help others. For more than eighty-five years she has risen before daybreak to prepare the breakfast for her family. Her meals are offerings of the highest graces from her heart—food like spring flowers, to those who know how to savor the fragrant scents of fermenting earth and the magic of dew and sunlight. Her aged body is bent as if in perpetual homage to the earth. Those aspects of goodness that she embodies—truth, kindness, giving, and compassion—are virtues of high wisdom that the hurrying world derides.

I wish I had sat with her longer to listen to the stories of the history of our people that she carried inside her frail rib cage as a morning dove carries the song that awakens dreamers to the dawn. On rare visits after I left home, we would sit in her kitchen, happy to be together, and I would make her laugh, so hard she would cry, at my *vato loco* jokes, pulling her handkerchief from her sleeve and dabbing her wrinkled cheeks. She loved my wordplay. To her I was still the little boy who obeyed no one, who after getting spanked would rush to a grown-up's knees and hug them, who needed to be loved and was afraid to love. I was still the angel who tripped over his wings and loved running more than being still—and good, who loved laughter and men's conversations in bars more than prayers in church.

When I would tell her how difficult it was to pay my bills, she would smile gently and say, "Poverty in the pockets brims riches in the imagination, that's why you are a poet."

Those images of my grandmother's anguished face impacted the deepest reserves of my feelings and made me understand the misery of her life as something criminal. How distant she is from my world, how much truer and more sustained is her world in grounded work of the spirit. As I mourned the distance, it seemed as if my life, a boat halfway across the lake, was capsizing.

Yet as a child I had lived in her world and drawn from her spirit, the mirror that gave me my face. When I was near her, I too was gentle and caring, and raucous with joy as a yearling colt cavorting on canyon slab rocks, outrunning the wind. With gusto and reverence, I lapped up hot chile and bean soup, slurped the goat's milk that fed my young strength. Leaping up from the table, I would roll on the ground, intoxicated with laughter.

In those early days, I used to watch the men of our barrio build adobe and clapboard houses for neighbors, how their hands worked the earth with love, with such dignified attention to their tasks. The rigors of life were themselves occasions of praise for the sustaining life force that allowed us to breathe and wake and work. Work became a celebration of hands, of fingers that could move and bend, grip and push. Intelligence, wood, mud, voice, eye, were all precious, all gifts, but laughter was the highest gift, and courage and endurance. When the men worked there was much laughter, but long spells of silence, too, before the talk would start up again, so quietly. They did with words what Bach could do with musical notes: they composed the most beautiful improvised poems from everyday talk. And, as I listened, the red seed of my young heart took root and blossomed under the prairie moon.

These men always followed careful pathways through their days, following ways where they would not be obstructed, avoiding foreigners who might question them or block their passage. They refused promotions that would compromise their cultural values, preferring to work with friends and earn less than to work with strangers at a higher status and wage. Work of the hands, with the earth, was to them holy work, good for the spirit, that allowed a man to feel his life lived on earth was shared with others. And there is much good to say about leaving your house at dawn, in your trusty jacket, and breathing in the cold air, walking down a familiar path to meet friends who wait for you, noticing the changes in the fields around you, and feeling the rising sun on your cheeks and brow.

It was a mythic life they lived. Yet these gentle heroes were regarded as ignorant and vicious by those who did not know their hearts. Outsiders provoked them to fight to enhance their own machismo. They treated these kind men as if they were knife-carrying savages, every one, against whom you had to strike the first blow. When they came around looking for trouble, or arrogant tourists snooped around our yard, my uncles would ask them politely to leave. But then, if they still hung around, treating the place as if it was their own, my uncles would get angry. Without a word they would lift these intruders off the ground and toss them into the pickup bed, or drag them out of the yard by the collar and throw them in the dirt road.

The time came for me to leave the pueblo and go to school. There I learned hard lessons not to be found in books. The Anglo boys mocked me and hurled insults at me. I felt ashamed and lowered my head, trying to hide my face. When they beat me up they were heroes; but when I struck back, defending myself and knocking them down, I got the name of troublemaker. Their blows boosted their self-esteem, while, for a time, my defenseless silence assured my survival.

Looking at the monitor, hearing my grandmother talk and seeing her gestures, brought back to me what I had lost. Because I was too fragile and sensitive to endure the abuse, eventually I struck back. And, in so doing, I lost the inner balance of my elders, rejecting their wisdom and becoming lost to their ways.

At first I withdrew into silence, searching out others like me, brown children from rural towns whose confidence had been crushed; outsiders, unwanted, scorned, and condemned to lives of servitude. But later I rebelled, refusing to do anything I was told to do. Yet fighting was against my deepest instincts. When I raised a fist, my other hand stretched out, pleading for peace. I was caught in a conflict not of my making that squeezed from me every drop of my childhood's sweetness.

I soon realized that, to many, I was just a *mestizo* boy destined for a life of hard work in the fields or mines, and nothing more. But that was a judgment I couldn't accept. Knowing no other way to refuse, I found myself falling into the dark worlds where the winos and ex-cons live, a gypsy child in the urban wasteland, hanging under neon lights and on hopeless street corners. I began to drink and take drugs.

I was becoming what society told me I was—prone to drugs and alcohol, unable to control my own life, needing a master to order my affairs, unworthy of opportunity and justice—a senseless beast of labor. I drugged my pain and drowned my self-hatred in drink, seeking oblivion. I had no future, no plans, no

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destiny, no regard for my life; I was free-falling into bottomless despair. Death seemed the only way out.

Finally, I found myself hoping for death in a fight with the police or the Anglos; or that a security guard would shoot me when I tried to rob his building. Or that one night while driving my car I'd be so high I would sail off a cliff and explode in a rage, of bursting petroleum and gnarled iron, my misery ending in a smoldering, lifeless mound of pulverized bone and burning flesh at the bottom of a canyon.

Now I had become the coauthor, with society, of my own oppression. The system that wanted to destroy me had taught me self-destruction. I had become my own jailer and racist judge, my own brutal policeman. I was ruthless to myself and murdered all my hopes and dreams. I was in hell.

They told me I was violent and I became violent, they told me I was ignorant and I feigned ignorance. It was taken for granted I would work for slave rations at the most foul and filthy jobs, and I did. It was taken for granted I could not resolve my own problems, and I relinquished control of my life to society's masters.

I was still young, a teenager, tormented because none of what I did was who I was. I was screaming for release, I was afraid. My dreams for a good life, a life I would make for myself, had been strangled at birth or were stillborn.

They sent me to prison for drug possession. And there, out of suffering, I found a reprieve from my chaos, found language, and it led me back to the teachings and conduct of my elders. I discovered a reason for living, for breathing, and I could love myself again, trust again what my heart dreamed and find the strength to pursue those dreams.

Language has the power to transform, to strip you of what is not truly yourself. In language I have burned my old selves and improvised myself into a new being. Language has fertilized the womb of my soul with embryos of new being.

When I left prison, I went to see my sister, who showed me photographs of a teenager leaning against a Studebaker, his foot on the bumper, a bottle of wine in his hand. In the background a park, mildly subdued in afternoon sunlight. It was me, my sister said, at Highland Park. I remember my amazement and pain that I had no recollection of ever being this person I was looking at.

The minstrel singer I am, whose hand-clapping, heel-kicking love dances celebrate every living moment, has always found it hard to go back home. The place of humble origins exposes the illusions of my life. My loss thunders with fountains of memories, and I want to reach out to the paths, the alleys, the leaning fences, the adobe bricks, the ground, and kiss them all, rub my face in the grass and inhale the sweet earth and mesquite fragrance of my innocence.

Going back, there is so much hurt to overcome.

Recently, I visited our village again. My grandmother's house there is a very lonely house, filled with spirit shadows, spiritual presences, lingering echoes of ancient drumbeats. In the yard, the golden yield of spring in all its millions of shoots is evocations of the returning dead, breaking dirt to smell and taste and bathe again in the warm sunlight.

My grandmother is hunchbacked and disfigured now with age, a bronzed anchor, her hooked fingers refusing to loosen their grip on the *llano*. Her wrinkles

are encrusted watermarks on canyon walls, telling of almost a century of living. So many years after her birth, she still stands in her back doorway to welcome friends.

Pools of silence float in the rooms where her children, my uncles and aunts, once lived. People were born and grew up there and went away, leaving their spirit prints on the air. There is something in quiet rooms where old grandfathers and grandmothers have lived and died that vibrates with sanctity. Some of these presences do not want something to be touched or revealed. Others want something to be remembered. These spirits mourn lives filled with struggle, pain, solitude, and love, mourn the moments when they felt truly one with all earth and all people. And now there is empty space, the great vertigo of nothingness, of chairs and beds, rugs and old photos, and curtains and wood and windows falling into a meaningless abyss of motionless silence.

So few things make sense to me. I have lived on the dark side of life so long, nosing my way into patches of rotting life to find my answers; the side of life where I wear my coat without sleeves, where sometimes I wake up in the morning and shave only one side of my face, where I wear a hat with a brim and no crown. I furnish my life with what I can find on the road or in trash cans—books, chairs, and shoes that have known other lives, picked up by the waysides on my journey. I am fool and king, genius and imbecile, for this is what it is to be a poet. In my poems, whatever has been crippled in me, my hope and love and trust and endurance, rises again in spume of fire, unleashing bird wings and jungle howls. My poems beckon those who are dry into the rain, those without love into lovers' beds, call those who are silent to cry out and moan in revery.

Who can say why one day I take my shotgun and shoot the newspaper, bits of paper floating on the air as the little dog whines and scampers for cover? The poor telephone rings, and it, too, goes up in an explosion of black plastic pieces, and I am howling and laughing. The next thing I know, I am sitting cross-legged in a tepee under a pine tree in the forest off South 14, fasting and meditating. This to me is normal.

How can I contain this violent bursting of canoes that white-water in my blood and vault into the world laden with songs and flowers? Such joy will not be confined in prisons of nine-to-five. There is too much life and too much flint in my blood, and the crazy and wild light in a boy's eyes, the innocence in a small girl's whisper need all my life to tell and to praise.

And so my grandmother. How her image hit me with a jolt of lightning, and how her way of living, so different from mine, makes so much sense to me now, and I understand her gift to me. In her presence I can be anyone. I am a scuttling lizard scurrying from tin can to tin can, under boards, into weeds; then I jerk my praying mantis head and my right eyeball stares in one direction while my left eyeball swivels askance. My heart is a cow's tongue slowly licking a block of ice. My legs want to catch the train the way a cat catches a mouse in the cupboards. I flick on the light in the midnight of my life, and cockroaches skitter everywhere on these pages, on the fingers of the reader, along the woman's dress, up the man's arm and neck and into his nose, to nest in his heart that touches the life around him with cockroach antennae, testing the floors in filthy housing projects. In the French Quarter, I am that woman at the table by a window drinking her cappuccino, her suffering

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concentrated in her ankles like cold iron anvils pounded with sledgehammers, her life a red-hot iron sizzling in a bucket of black water.

And on the Lower East Side, down a dingy street, in crack dealer alleys, I howl and mutter in unknown sacred tongues. In a small mountain town in Arkansas, I am the woman screaming because her parakeet got stuck under the refrigerator and died, green shit smearing his once-sleek feathers. I am the field-worker in south Texas whose showered-off dirt forms the image of Christ's face on the floor of the stall. Thousands of people arrive to pay homage to the miracle, kneeling with candles and rosaries, cripples crowding the bathroom with their crutches and braces and bottles of pills, it's a sanctuary; while the president's son in the Rose Garden snares a butterfly into his net and rips off its wings. Some day he will command great armies.

A poet in the forests of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains stares at a placid pond frozen over with crust ice, where a bluebird flits across the steamy, cold fog simmering off the surface. And I walk out and take off my clothes and start to sing and flowers appear on the air, blue and red and green and yellow flowers, and the ice cracks and fish spin in glittering swirls and catch the flowers. And in other places millions of things are happening, equally absurd, equally heartbreaking and marvelous. How incredible our life is! How much there is that we do not understand. How honorable and full of heart has been my grandmother's life.

My grandmother does not understand what a Chicano is. She does not read newspapers, listen to radios, watch TV. Her life is lived elsewhere: thirty years meditating on the pebbles in her yard, fifty years smelling the dawn, eighty years listening to the silence at dusk, ninety years waiting for the two hummingbirds that come each spring to her unpainted picket fence—if they arrive she will live another year to await their arrival again. Forgiveness rises in her heart as she watches them whirr around the yard and hum at her screen door. She understands how they are truly flowers given wings and a beak, and how she is truly an old female turtle lumbering on wide, wrinkled footpads, raising her head with the millennial slowness of a diamond forming in the coal mines of dark years, ocean moaning in her blood vessels, returning home. While the image of a young boy chasing a train visits her, a boy as new as a just-hatched baby turtle, stumbling toward the ocean for the very first time.

Childlessness

For many years I wanted a child
though I knew it would only illuminate life
for a time, like a star on a tree; I believed
that happiness would at last assert itself,
like a bird in a dirty cage, calling me,
ambassador of flesh, out of the rough
locked ward of sex.

Outstretched on my spool-bed,⁴
I am like a groom, alternately seeking fusion
with another and resisting engulfment by it.
A son's love for his mother is like a river
dividing the continent to reach the sea:
I believed that once. When you died, Mother,
I was alone at last. And then you came back,
dismal and greedy like the sea, to reclaim me.

1998

4. Style of bed with ribbed bedposts.

LI-YOUNG LEE

b. 1957

Born on August 19, 1957, to Chinese parents in Jakarta, Indonesia, Li-Young Lee is one of the preeminent poets of the East Asian diaspora in the United States. His father had been a personal physician to Communist leader Mao Tse-tung in China, before moving with his family to Indonesia, Hong Kong, Macao, and Japan, finally settling, in 1964, in a small town in western Pennsylvania, where he became a Presbyterian minister. Li-Young Lee said in an interview published in 1995 that his family's migrant experience, though "an outward manifestation of a homelessness that people in general feel," is responsible for his intense "feeling of disconnection and dislocation." As a child, Lee learned from his father Chinese poetry of the Tang Dynasty, as well as psalms and proverbs in the King James Bible. Having grown up between Mandarin Chinese and English, Lee explores through his poetry the tensions and ambiguities of his biculturalism: "You live / a while in two worlds / at once" ("My Indigo").

The painful experience of being in between languages as an immigrant child is the subject of one of Lee's best-known poems. "Persimmons" tells the story of a young Chinese immigrant slapped by a schoolteacher for being unable to differentiate the sounds of "persimmon" and "precision." Imperfectly grounded in English as a child, the adult speaker, likewise unable to remember some Chinese words, is completely at home in neither language. Lee's early sense of linguistic estrangement can be seen, paradoxically, in his powerful attachment to the sounds and textures of English words. His poetic language is richly sensuous. Lee savors the phonemic resources of English, almost eroticizing words and their relationships. In an exemplary line, Lee revels in assonance and alliteration: a hornet in a rotten pear "spun crazily, glazed in slow, glis-

1998

tening juice" ("Eating Alone"). Studding his poems with pellucid visual images (a splinter is "a silver tear, a tiny flame" in "The Gift"), Lee evokes the smell, the feel, and the taste of an often ethnically specific experience (the steamed trout with ginger in "Eating Together").

Although Lee's work bears the imprint of his Chinese background, it should not be exoticized. It descends from the American confessional poetry of Theodore Roethke and Sylvia Plath, and from the Deep Image poetry of James Wright and Philip Levine. It is written in free—if strongly cadenced—verse, sometimes cleverly enjambed ("How to choose//persimmons. This is precision"). Emotionally charged, rooted in childhood experience, the poems narrate simple stories. Lee's father plays the dominant role as figure of ambivalence, associated in "The Gift" and other poems with tenderness and love, and yet with discipline and pain. Squarely in the Romantic tradition, many of the poems drink at the well of early memory, relying on images and dreams to recover feelings from the past. John Keats, Walt Whitman, and Rainer Maria Rilke are among Lee's formative influences.

Lee was educated at the Universities of Pittsburgh (B.A., 1979) and Arizona (1979–80) and the State University of New York College at Brockport (1980–81). He has taught at various universities, including Northwestern University and the University of Iowa. He lives with his family in Chicago.

The Gift

To pull the metal splinter from my palm
my father recited a story in a low voice.
I watched his lovely face and not the blade.
Before the story ended, he'd removed
the iron sliver I thought I'd die from.

I can't remember the tale,
but hear his voice still, a well
of dark water, a prayer.
And I recall his hands,
two measures of tenderness
he laid against my face,
the flames of discipline
he raised above my head.

Had you entered that afternoon
you would have thought you saw a man
planting something in a boy's palm,
a silver tear, a tiny flame.
Had you followed that boy
you would have arrived here,
where I bend over my wife's right hand.

Look how I shave her thumbnail down
so carefully she feels no pain.
Watch as I lift the splinter out.
I was seven when my father
took my hand like this,

and I did not hold that shard
between my fingers and think,
Metal that will bury me,
christen it Little Assassin,
Ore Going Deep for My Heart.
And I did not lift up my wound and cry,
Death visited here!
I did what a child does
when he's given something to keep.
I kissed my father.

Persimmons

In sixth grade Mrs. Walker
slapped the back of my head
and made me stand in the corner
for not knowing the difference
between *persimmon* and *precision*.
How to choose

persimmons. This is precision.
Ripe ones are soft and brown-spotted.
Sniff the bottoms. The sweet one
will be fragrant. How to eat:
put the knife away, lay down newspaper.
Peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat.

Chew the skin, suck it,
and swallow. Now, eat
the meat of the fruit,
so sweet,
all of it, to the heart.

Donna undresses, her stomach is white.
In the yard, dewy and shivering
with crickets, we lie naked,
face-up, face-down.

I teach her Chinese.
Crickets: *chiu chiu*. Dew: I've forgotten.
Naked: I've forgotten.
Ni, wo: you and me.
I part her legs,
remember to tell her
she is beautiful as the moon.

Other words
that got me into trouble were
fight and *fright*, *wren* and *yarn*.
Fight was what I did when I was frightened,
fright was what I felt when I was fighting.

Wrens are small, plain birds,
yarn is what one knits with.
Wrens are soft as yarn.
My mother made birds out of yarn.
I loved to watch her tie the stuff;
a bird, a rabbit, a wee man.

Mrs. Walker brought a persimmon to class
and cut it up
so everyone could taste
a *Chinese apple*. Knowing
it wasn't ripe or sweet, I didn't eat
but watched the other faces.

My mother said every persimmon has a sun
inside, something golden, glowing,
warm as my face.

Once, in the cellar, I found two wrapped in newspaper,
forgotten and not yet ripe.
I took them and set both on my bedroom windowsill,
where each morning a cardinal
sang, *The sun, the sun*.

Finally understanding
he was going blind,
my father sat up all one night
waiting for a song, a ghost.
I gave him the persimmons,
swelled, heavy as sadness,
and sweet as love.

This year, in the muddy lighting
of my parents' cellar, I rummage, looking
for something I lost.
My father sits on the tired, wooden stairs,
black cane between his knees,
hand over hand, gripping the handle.

He's so happy that I've come home.
I ask how his eyes are, a stupid question.
All gone, he answers.

Under some blankets, I find a box.
Inside the box I find three scrolls.
I sit beside him and untie
three paintings by my father:
Hibiscus leaf and a white flower.
Two cats preening.

Two persimmons, so full they want to drop from the cloth.

He raises both hands to touch the cloth,
asks, *Which is this?*

This is persimmons, Father.

*Oh, the feel of the wolf-tail on the silk,¹
the strength, the tense
precision in the wrist.
I painted them hundreds of times
eyes closed. These I painted blind.
Some things never leave a person:
scent of the hair of one you love,
the texture of persimmons,
in your palm, the ripe weight.*

Eating Alone

I've pulled the last of the year's young onions.
The garden is bare now. The ground is cold,
brown and old. What is left of the day flames
in the maples at the corner of my
eye. I turn, a cardinal vanishes.
By the cellar door, I wash the onions,
then drink from the icy metal spigot.

Once, years back, I walked beside my father
among the windfall pears. I can't recall
our words. We may have strolled in silence. But
I still see him bend that way—left hand braced
on knee, creaky—to lift and hold to my
eye a rotten pear. In it, a hornet
spun crazily, glazed in slow, glistening juice.

It was my father I saw this morning
waving to me from the trees. I almost
called to him, until I came close enough
to see the shovel, leaning where I had
left it, in the flickering, deep green shade.

White rice steaming, almost done. Sweet green peas
fried in onions. Shrimp braised in sesame
oil and garlic. And my own loneliness.
What more could I, a young man, want.

1. Materials used in Chinese calligraphy.

Where are the happy integers of inventory?

Call the one sandal, abstract and nostalgic:
Glove of the first baseman, it folds like night

Or night's daring bird feeding on amber insects.

The circulations of blood in the snow tree
Remind me of the woman we lost.
The sea rises behind us, at our backs.
Mr. Enos Slaughter¹ didn't die

In Nebraska, of drink. In the snow tree a sick,
Whiter angel picks its teeth.
Errors of snow in water, our names . . .
You were wrong, Rafael. The stars,
Violent at their tea,

Were the last children to learn the arithmetic
Of memory.

1. Baseball player (b. 1916).

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA b. 1947

Yusef Komunyakaa wrote the most acclaimed book of American poetry about the Vietnam War, *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), the title meaning "crazy" in Vietnamese. Having served in Vietnam in 1969–70 as a reporter for and editor of the military newspaper *The Southern Cross*, Komunyakaa, decorated with the Bronze Star, allowed the war to settle in memory for fourteen years. At this distance, he could distill the complexities of America's most controversial war—American indifference and empathy for the Vietnamese, cross-racial tension and camaraderie between whites and African Americans. Like Wilfred Owen and other modern war poets, Komunyakaa is attentive to inner experience and to shared political history. "My belief is that you have to have both," he remarked in an interview, "the odyssey outward as well as inward" (*Callaloo*, 1990).

Like the speaker who peers through a nightscope at eerily ghostlike figures in "Starlight Scope Myopia," Komunyakaa sees the war as distant and yet insistently present in the minds of the war's participants and observers. Touching a name carved on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial triggers a sudden memory in "Facing It": "I see the booby trap's white flash." On the wall's mirrorlike surface, memory bumps up against sight, the dead invade the present, and the self is interpenetrated by the surrounding world. The poem, like the wall, crosses and blurs lines of historical, racial, and political division. Time and space are similarly layered in Komunyakaa's poems inspired by jazz, such as "February in Sydney," in which the past erupts from beneath the protective sheen of the present.

Komunyakaa's poetry also cuts across different levels of diction, from biblical idiom to journalistic reportage, African American vernacular to high-art lyricism. Komunyakaa's remark in *Callaloo* about Melvin Tolson applies with equal force to his own work: "he brings together the street as well as the highly literary into a single poetic context in ways where the two don't even seem to exhibit division—it's all one and the same." Syncopating short, jagged lines, enjambling and coiling syntax, building musical resonances through assonance and alliteration, Komunyakaa crafts poems that have surprisingly quick turns of sound and sense. He mimics the sudden riffs, twists, and mannered elaborations of jazz improvisation, in the long tradition of African American poets who have mined jazz and the blues for poetry, from Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown to Gwendolyn Brooks and Robert Hayden, Amiri Baraka and Michael S. Harper.

Komunyakaa was born James Willie Brown Jr., on April 29, 1947, in Bogalusa, Louisiana, not far from New Orleans. He changed his name for religious reasons, adopting Komunyakaa from a grandfather smuggled, according to family legend, on a banana boat from Trinidad. His father was an illiterate carpenter, remembered with anger and affection in "My Father's Love Letters." After returning from Vietnam, Komunyakaa received his B.A. from the University of Colorado in 1975, his M.A. from Colorado State University in 1979, and his M.F.A. from the University of California, Irvine, in 1980. He has coedited anthologies of "jazz poetry" (1991, 1996) and published a volume of essays and interviews. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1994 for *Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems* and, in 2001, published *Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems*. He teaches at Princeton University.

Starlight Scope Myopia¹

Gray-blue shadows lift
shadows onto an oxcart.

Making night work for us,
the starlight scope brings
men into killing range.

The river under Vi Bridge
takes the heart away

like the Water God
riding his dragon.
Smoke-colored

Viet Cong²
move under our eyelids,

lords over loneliness
winding like coral vine through
sandalwood & lotus,

1. Nearsightedness. *Starlight scope*: electrical instrument that uses light from the night sky to improve nocturnal vision.

Communist military forces supported by North Vietnam against South Vietnam and the United States in the Vietnam War (1955–75).

2. Shortened name of the Viet Nam Cong San, the

my own in letters like smoke.
 I touch the name Andrew Johnson;
 I see the booby trap's white flash.
 Names shimmer on a woman's blouse
 but when she walks away
 the names stay on the wall.
 Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's
 wings cutting across my stare.
 The sky. A plane in the sky.
 A white vet's image floats
 closer to me, then his pale eyes
 look through mine. I'm a window.
 He's lost his right arm
 inside the stone. In the black mirror
 a woman's trying to erase names:
 No, she's brushing a boy's hair.

1988

February in Sydney

Dexter Gordon's tenor sax
 plays "April in Paris"
 inside my head all the way back
 on the bus from Double Bay.
Round Midnight,⁹ the '50s,
 cool cobblestone streets
 resound footsteps of Bebop:¹
 musicians with whiskey-laced voices
 from a boundless dream in French.
 Bud, Prez, Webster, & The Hawk,²
 their names run together riffs.
 Painful gods jive talk through
 bloodstained reeds & shiny brass
 where music is an anesthetic.
 Unreadable faces from the human void
 float like torn pages across the bus
 windows. An old anger drips into my throat,
 & I try thinking something good,
 letting the precious bad
 settle to the salty bottom.
 Another scene keeps repeating itself:
 I emerge from the dark theatre,

9. Bertrand Tavernier's 1986 movie about expatriate jazz musicians in 1950s Paris, starring jazz saxophonist Dexter Gordon (1923-1990) and named after a composition by jazz pianist Thelonious Monk (1917-1982). "April in Paris": jazz standard. *Double Bay*: neighborhood in Sydney, Australia.
 1. Style of modern jazz developed in the 1940s and 1950s, characterized by harmonic exploration and fast-paced flurries of notes drawn from the chromatic scale.
 2. *Round Midnight* was loosely based on the tragic lives of pianist Bird Powell (1924-1966) and saxophonist Lester "Prez" Young (1909-1959), who worked in Europe late in their careers, like influential saxophonists Ben Webster (1909-1973) and Coleman "The Hawk" Hawkins (1904-1969).

passing a woman who grabs her red purse
 & hugs it to her like a heart attack.
 Tremolo.³ Dexter comes back to rest
 behind my eyelids. A loneliness
 lingers like a silver needle
 under my black skin,
 as I try to feel how it is
 to scream for help through a horn.

1989

My Father's Love Letters

On Fridays he'd open a can of Jax⁴
 After coming home from the mill,
 & ask me to write a letter to my mother
 Who sent postcards of desert flowers
 Taller than men. He would beg,
 Promising to never beat her
 Again. Somehow I was happy
 She had gone, & sometimes wanted
 To slip in a reminder, how Mary Lou
 Williams' "Polka Dots & Moonbeams"⁵
 Never made the swelling go down.
 His carpenter's apron always bulged
 With old nails, a claw hammer
 Looped at his side & extension cords
 Coiled around his feet.
 Words rolled from under the pressure
 Of my ballpoint: Love,
 Baby, Honey, Please.
 We sat in the quiet brutality
 Of voltage meters & pipe threaders,
 Lost between sentences . . .
 The gleam of a five-pound wedge
 On the concrete floor
 Pulled a sunset
 Through the doorway of his toolshed.
 I wondered if she laughed
 & held them over a gas burner.
 My father could only sign
 His name, but he'd look at blueprints
 & say how many bricks
 Formed each wall. This man,
 Who stole roses & hyacinth
 For his yard, would stand there
 With eyes closed & fists balled,
 Laboring over a simple word, almost

3. Rapid alternation between two or more notes.
 4. Beer brewed by the Jackson Brewing Company, in New Orleans.
 5. Recording by jazz pianist and composer Mary Lou Williams (1910-1981).
 Redeemed by what he tried to say.