

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Brenda L. White for the Master of Arts
in English presented on May 3, 1996

Title: Psalms of Strange Angels

Abstract approved: Margaret Ryals

This thesis is a collection of poems introduced by statements of the author's writing style, influencing factors, and future writing direction. Primarily, the focus in the introduction and the poems is an investigation into the imagination or unconscious through metaphors, language, images, dreams and dream imagery, and so forth. Special care is given in addressing audience accessibility, use of emotion, and the use of interesting vocabulary and strange phrasing or syntax, all grounded in the role of imagination.

The poems are divided into four sections: "Cousin of My Heart," "Pumps With One Heel Missing," "Dream Warp," and "Fandangos of the Heart." The sections progress from a more literal, serious vein to a more interesting, imaginative and/or whimsical style.

Foremost in this volume, including the collection's title, is the role of the unconscious/imagination and the nature of its communication to others. Imagination overrides all other factors, including the use of narrative in the poems.

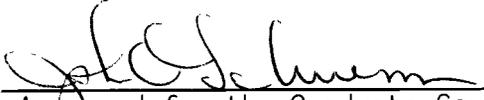
PSALMS OF STRANGE ANGELS

A Thesis
Presented to
The Division of English
EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Brenda L. White
May 1996


Approved for the Major Division


Approved for the Graduate Council

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank Chris Howell for training my ears and eyes to recognize and produce literary poems or poems worth saving. His instruction has been invaluable. Also, thanks goes to Mary Jane Ryals for her patience, constructive advice, and insight during the compilation of this collection. I must thank Dev Hathaway and Martha Wickelhaus as well for their instruction in the use of imagination and revision.

Thanks also goes to Gail Cohee, Rachelle Smith, and John Somer for the generous gift of their time in reviewing drafts of this volume.

Finally, I must thank my parents, my sister, and Hannah and Riley for their love, patience, support, and input concerning all of my poetry writing.

Acknowledgement is also made to the following publications for poems that originally appeared in them: Quivira and Flint Hills Review.

I dedicate this collection to my grandmother,
Annie Laurie Edwards Sill,
who passed away on February 24, 1996 at the age of ninety.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Works Cited	9
I. COUSIN OF MY HEART	
About that Unabomber	11
Runaways	12
The Wanderer	13
To Nickie, Beloved of the Vampire Lestat	14
Serial Killer	15
Ottawa Fence Line	16
October 1991	17
To the Rape Victims in Bosnia	18
Cornered	19
Altar Sacrifices	20
II. PUMPS WITH ONE HEEL MISSING	
February 14, 1991	22
February 14, 1991: The Twilight Zone	23
Possessed Braids	25
Your Loving Sister, Alma	26
Laid-off	28
Tenuous Holdings	29
Hannah Eats Invisible Popcorn	30
Scarlet	31
III. DREAM WARP	
Journeys	33
Dream Warp	34
Sleeping With Angels	35
Gift of Gab	36
Ophelia Under Water	37
Lost and Found	39
Dreaming of the Farm	40
Disenchantment	41
Angel of Forgetfulness	42
The Amazing Kundalini	43
IV. FANDANGOS OF THE HEART	
Invitation	45
This Side of the Rainbow	46
Blanche in Karisan	47
Amitriptyline	48
And God Says, "There was This Guy..."	49
Springing Forward	50
Swimming at Nancy's	51
Outside Lavina's Pet Store	53
Late Night at the Laundromat	54
Dear God	55

Introduction

"Imagination is more important than knowledge." Albert Einstein

Introspections

Before I began my creative thesis work, I had a dream about flying. I felt the movement of my legs as I pushed my body away from the earth, and I flew high above the trees into a summer sky. The most amazing parts of this dream were that I *could* fly, provided I released all fear and doubt, and flying did not take as much effort as I had believed it would. My dream seemed to be telling me I would be free to venture forward in my unconscious or imagination.

Making note of this dream is appropriate here as much of the focus of my current poetry writing is an investigation into the imagination or unconscious. Like Einstein, I too feel imagination is more important than knowledge. This belief also seems to be the key to deep imagery--using archetypal and/or imaginative metaphors to convey meaning at the reader's subconscious level. However, I cannot exactly say I am following the deep image per se. I can say I am pursuing my own dream imagery, including daydreams, and that I understand the importance of communicating through pictures and sound versus a purely verbal communication. If I am lucky, I can sometimes find or build an archetypal image into a poem. However, I give my imagination/unconscious and ear full priority in each piece I write. My goal is to listen to the "still, small voice within." Perhaps that is what Joseph Campbell meant when he said one must train him/herself "to *hear* metaphorically instead of concretely" (58 my emphasis). If this

metaphorical thinking is what deep imagery is all about, then I suppose I am a fledgling deep imagist.

Another point that must be voiced concerning my poetry is my need to write it. I do not have a choice here. I must write. Poetry writing is as important to me as breathing air or drinking water. In the past, poetry was a necessary coping skill which helped me through several bouts of depression. Now, poetry writing has become something much more: a need for communication, for investigation, and for artistic expression. Poetry has become my avenue toward spirituality, meaning the unconscious or that greater part of myself I am slowly discovering. This discovery is crucial in my development as a person and as a poet.

Much of what I do in the composition of my poems is intuitive. Usually some idea, image, or lines crop up that set the composition process going. From beginning to end, my poetry writing is much like meditation. Yes, I do have poetry "skills" which aid the writing process--understanding form, meter, alliteration, the necessity of paring out needless words, and so on, and I consciously make some choices about language, line breaks, and so on. However, a great deal of my poetry writing choices are intuitive. My ear makes choices concerning meter and sound; it tells me when passages "clunk" or "flow." My eyes tell me what kind of pictures to construct or where I need to add images if the work is too "talky" and does not "show" enough. Primarily, my role as poet is to become quiet and let the ear, imagination, heart, and eyes discover what the poem is all about. Most of this intuitive writing occurs during a first draft.

In the last six months, I have noticed I do make more conscious

choices in subsequent drafts of poems than I used to. There are elements I do not want in my "polishing up" of drafts as well as elements I do want in them.

First, I do not want my poems to appear as an intelligence test one has failed if he or she does not understand the piece. The goal is to make my work accessible to non-literary audiences and literary audiences alike. Many non-literary persons are intimidated by "good" or "serious" poetry. Consequently, poetry seems to lose audience, which is sad as I agree with Joseph Campbell:

Since the inspiration comes from the unconscious, and since the unconscious minds of the people of any single small society have much in common, what the shaman or seer brings forth is something that is waiting to be brought forth in everyone. So when one hears the seer's story, one responds, "Aha! This is my story. This is something that I had always wanted to say but wasn't able to say." (58-9)

Poets (shamans/seers) are the voices of many, but accessibility does not necessarily mean simplification. Though I want general accessibility in my poetry, I also want something there for literary readers, a sense of layers in meaning. To some degree, I feel several pieces in the collection do give something to all readers. However, though accessibility is important, it is not the only thing I want my poetry to have.

A second quality I do want in my work is emotion. This does not mean my poems should drip with drama or gooey sentimentality. At the same time, I do not want my work to be sterile, intellectual self-

gratification. Audre Lorde defined well what I want for my poetry when she wrote:

I speak . . . of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean--in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight.

(37)

Emotions, used wisely, are as important as pictures and metaphors. The message goes to the heart as well as the ears, eyes, and mind. The trick is to find words that convey emotion and imagery effectively, which leads me to the third element I want present in my poems.

I find I am now choosing language composed of interesting vocabularies and syntax that is only a bit off. Images are paramount in the poems, as is emotion, but the vocabulary of strong verbs, of strange nouns, and of syntax a touch off-center gives the poems something extra that I would equate with "punch," "bite," or "tartness." All of the prior, conscious choices I make combined with my unconscious choices (subject, images, line breaks, and form) bring the poems closer to "shimmering," which is the quality I find in works of poets I admire. "Shimmering," for me, is a quality of something extra or superior in a poem, a sense of precision in crafting the poem and in conveying its meaning. I have difficulty explaining my definition to others, but I can recognize this quality in well crafted works. Those works are pieces to which I aspire and sometimes attempt to emulate.

Before commenting on writers who have influenced me, I wish to note something about the role of narrative in my poems. There are many

poems in this group that tell mini-stories. That does not displease me, but quite frankly, narrative is not central to me in my writing. The unconscious beginning and other factors I have previously mentioned are primary. I do not avoid writing narratives; they are simply secondary among the conscious choices I make when writing poetry.

Influences

As for writers who have influenced me, I have a list of several poets and two fiction writers: Audre Lorde, Sylvia Plath, Joan Colby, Edison Dupree, Max Apple, and Eudora Welty. Perhaps it is odd that a poet would cite fiction writers as persons whose work has affected my own, but there are elements in Apple's and Welty's writing that I would like to incorporate into my work along with elements from the poets, whether any of these writers are widely known or not.

The first, and most influential, poet I have to cite is Audre Lorde. Her essay "Poetry is not a luxury" provided me with my own "Aha!" experience. She gave voice to one problem I have found true in poetry: the issue of emotion and its presence or lack of presence in works by persons held up as leaders or "the best" in literature. Too often, I found so-called "better" works unsatisfying when I read them. What could be the reason? I was afraid I was a literature cretin. After reading Lorde's essay, my eyes were opened. We live in an hierarchal world in which feminine elements/aspects/intuitions are deemed inferior, emotion being one (Warren 6). Lorde's essay explains that the exploration of our emotions leads us to new thought and ideas. Therefore, poetry as a sharing of these emotions/ideas can help us face

the unknown (future) and can be a point from which to implement change (37-8). Her statements are things I always felt, but had never formulated in words. Emotions *are* integral in feminine experience and poetry, so I have not been wrong to miss emotional presence in poems lacking emotion.

A second major influence in my work is the poetry of Sylvia Plath. From her writing, I feel the same necessity of poetry writing that I have felt with my own pieces. This necessity or "lack of choice" is evident in tone (narrator's voice), imagery, subject matter, and what I call "pace" for want of better language. There is an almost frenetic energy in her work that floats beneath the surface, yet this energy is contained and controlled with images, vibrant vocabulary, and phrasing. "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" come to mind as examples. There is always the sense, for me, of something large and wild lurking behind her lines and word choices. This wild thing is tightly controlled to some degree, but there is the sense that it might escape. I also get from Plath an interesting, expansive vocabulary and strange syntax, which is a main feature in the works of other writers who have affected my poetry.

Joan Colby and Edison Dupree share with Plath the traits of wonderful, unusual vocabulary, as do the fiction writers, Max Apple and Eudora Welty. The difference in the two poets is that Joan Colby's writing has a similar nervous energy behind them as Plath's, while Dupree's poems are meditative and quirky in tone. However, despite the difference in tone, both compose their poems with the precision of jewelers. Colby looks at everyday objects in a strange light so that those objects appear new or foreign, and Dupree manages to craft sonnets

that read as free verse, something I had never seen a poet do before. I would call both of these poets "unusual" if forced to describe them in one word, and elements of their strangeness creep into my poems quite often.

From Max Apple, I have received one of the most interesting gifts. His short story collection Free Agents is an adventure into whimsy and imagination. Whether in plot or language, his imaginative writing gives me the sense of being free and of courting gentle, rib-poking laughter into literary writing. Examples are his tale of Walt Disney in which Apple creates a fictional older brother, Will. In this story, Will is financing his brother's budding artistic career. When Walt wants to draw "Mickey" as a realistic looking mouse, however, Will tells Walt the mouse needs to stand up like a man, and if Walt will not represent Mickey this way, then Will cuts off Walt's money. In another story titled "Bridging," a widower and his daughter are dealing with their grief, and as part of the healing process, the widower attempts to open up their private circle. He takes his daughter to a girl scout troop meeting, and before the meeting is through, he volunteers to be the assistant troop leader. He goes to meetings and troop activities alone even though his daughter is adamant about not joining herself. Certainly, Apple has set my feet on the path to imagination.

As my final influencing factor, Eudora Welty is no less significant than the others. Welty has taught me several things: 1) the importance of voice in a character or in narration, 2) the role that sound makes in phrases or in individual words, and most importantly, 3) the strength of dream-like images. Her story titled "A

Still Moment," is a prime example.

I have learned so much from this group of poets and fiction writers. As I revise my first drafts into more polished pieces, I often find myself consciously thinking about various techniques used by these writers. Does this line need an image like Welty's? Does it need unusual or rich wording? Is there emotion and has it been used wisely? I know these traits will stay with me long into my future writing.

Investigation/Imagination

I suppose now I am back to the beginning. For the future of my poetry writing, I plan to continue my investigation into the imagination/unconscious and see where it leads me. In other words, as my dream told me, I am ready for flight. The important things to remember are that I can do it, no matter how much effort it takes.

Works Cited

- Apple, Max. Free Agents. New York: Harper & Row, 1985.
- Campbell, Joseph and Bill Moyers. The Power of Myth. ed. Betty Sue Flowers. New York: Doubleday, 1988.
- Colby, Joan. The Atrocity Book. Amherst: Lynx House, 1986.
- Dupree, Edison. Prothesis. Emporia: Bluestem, 1994.
- Lorde, Audre. Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. Freedom: Crossing Press, 1984.
- Plath, Sylvia. The Collected Poems. ed. Ted Hughes. HarperPerennial, 1992.
- Warren, Karen J. "Feminism and Ecology: Making Connections." Environmental Ethics 9 (1987): 2-20.
- Welty, Eudora. Introduction. Thirteen Stories. By Ruth Vande Kieft. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1993. 3-14.

I. COUSIN OF MY HEART

About that Unabomber

How could he do it?
We're all ticking on the inside,
hearts regular as atomic clocks,
neurons firing across uncharted
landscapes of the brain
like lightning splitting trees.
We have fuses, long or short,
leading from the heart and lit by
that particular word or face.
Yet few of us sweep away
pieces of shattered self-portraits
and futures to place nails and metal filings
inside pipes strung with wires,
packed with powder and firing pins.
Few plant parcels in doorways,
on desk tops, or under automobiles,
demur in brown paper twine
as Venus Fly Traps.

Some switch has fired wrong
inside the human computer who
deems all computers, technology, and
bureaucracy poisonous as snakes.
So he strikes first,
targets clear,
reasoning short-circuited.
He will kill the mechanical
three headed beast one
tiny cog at a time,
though never on the same gear.

And what can be said to a man
who removes his fingerprints
but leaves DNA in saliva
underneath a stamp?
Who rides a factory-made
bicycle to the Post Office
or rides buses and planes
to hand deliver
death to people he doesn't know,
has never met?

His bang out of life must be audible.

Runaways

Runaway horses pulling up ahead
make it easy as breath to
curl into a fetal ball and
bounce against carriage walls,
seats, floor.

Prayer is one request:
that the carriage, when it
careens down embankments,
ends the journey quicker than a
snapped neck.

But mystery is a road unfinished,
wheel ruts and detours,
bruised on any account.
So, a crawl to the driver's seat,
out onto riggings and harness,
seems sane.
It is dust-dragging reins
and the horses' blind indifference
that make no sense.

The Wanderer

He slid down the sand dune
on his side, face pressed
to a dun-colored breast, his body still
sick with the scorpion sting
from the day before.

His footprints swallowed by the sand's
indifference, shadow leaking away,
even the scorpion had vanished, and
there was not moisture enough
in his body for tears.

So when a silhouette appeared
black against an orange disc,
sticks tied together like a child's
drawing of a man,
he mistook it for God
burned crisp and stepping
from an orange eye.
His laugh was grit
and soundless.

To Nickie, Beloved of the Vampire Lestat

They cut off your hands when you went mad,
still lilies in a velvet box, the key in Armand's pocket.
And what a sight you must have been once released
--raving, starved--
a fiend embracing prey with
leaking stumps.

And when Armand returned those precious flowers,
did he hand you the key first?

Ah, the mystery of Dark Gifts
and insatiable appetites,
yet no mystery you chose fire when the hands attached.
To Hell with light,
and for the love of Hell
the Witches' Place
and your dance in flaming frock coat,
a strange phoenix
finally at rest.

Now the violin you sobbed upon
with petals sharp as claws .
waits in your dressing room and needs only
to be placed in a velvet box.
They will send it to Lestat then
who, for love's sake,
once incised his name across your throat.

Serial Killer

Perhaps in the beginning
there are resemblances,
the just-right distance
between the eyes,
a grin that lifts to the left,
hair her color.

He can define
infidelity for this
one as he traces her jaw line
with an index finger,
have the last word
though he speaks to
the dead.
He can leave.

Later,
any woman is The Woman.
Bitches who lie through red lips.
Perfumed, he knows, for
another man.

He tosses them
in leaves and weeds
like favorite, love-worn dolls,
their eyes reflecting
songbirds and
bare branches.

Ottawa Fence Line

The brown lace honeysuckle vine
Brittle and clothing fence wire
Is beaded with moving jewels

Drab brown, jet eyes
The filigree of dead foliage
Sparkles with sparrows

Late afternoon light
Draws them reluctant to their settings
And the bobbing gems

Transform the tangled fence line
Into a living necklace

October 1991

In the west wood
crossing two bends
of six mile creek,

I caused three coons
to scramble up a
sycamore.

Clawing their way
up the mottled tree,
they squabbled on

a dead end limb,
chattering and biting
in panic

'til one found the
almost too small hollow
and stuffed himself

inside.
His siblings soon
followed, like

smoke, and I stood
in dried leaves
branches bare above me

and blue sky,
wondering on my
frightfulness.

To the Rape Victims in Bosnia

What can Muslim women do with
Serb children whose
conceptions were more
painful than their births?

Do they leave these babies
with their fathers
in doorways of bombed houses
or propped against tanks,
beside missile launchers--
say, "You are your child's keeper."

Or do they call their babies Ali,
Hassim, Mohammed,
Fatima, or Jasmine,
crooning the Koran as their infants suck?
Because that's what I would do,
bow tiny soft spots toward
Mecca before those babies could
toddle and let the wail
the children hear be the call to
worship Allah and not the
sound of my heart.

CORNERED

Hungry coyotes
Have stripped mice from their
Homes, pawed the roots naked,
Hollows of dark dirt
Around nearly every bush and
Tree.
Their howls betray them
Closer night after night,
Brave,
As starvation makes one brave.

Last night,
They finally killed a neighbor's
Calf.
I walked the pond dam this morning
For a sacred glimpse of deer,
The cow's grief and cold wind
Through the timber.

No deer.

But a tawny blur paler than brush
Stole toward the cedar.
Baleful eyes
And a lean defiant face
Turned my direction,
Cut me with protracted stillness.
I know so little of
Desperation.

Altar Sacrifices

The bride sits in the Reception Hall
amid the ruin of satin,
wrinkles and sweat stains,
and says,
 "I can't believe this is happening."

What does one believe of an absent groom?

And what could I say
'Good Riddance?' 'It's cheaper than divorce?'
'Let's give shotgun wedding it's real meaning?'
Or worst of all, 'I know how you feel'
Instead I hold her hand.
 "I only came for the cake."

 "He's left me." Rejection brims her eyes,
drips from the rims like candle wax.
And I say, "Oh cousin of my heart,
 to Hell with him."

The hollow cork pop
and foamy splatter of champagne
christens tile.

 "I don't know what to do?" she gasps.
 "I do," I say and hand her a glass.
"Cremation is the only pure thing."

Later we warm our hands
in the rose gold of a bridal finery bonfire.
Tulle melts more briefly than a kiss.
Numb with a champagne buzz,
we add napkins, two names,
and a date no one wants to remember.
Then standing in her crinoline and lace,
she tosses the bouquet.

II. PUMPS WITH ONE HEEL MISSING

February 14, 1991

We leave my father
sleeping at the heart institute
amid monitor beeps and nurses
revolving like wind-up toys.

Everyone is so polite.
The security driver who drops
us at the Best Western,
the desk clerk who reads
our ragdoll slumps,
and Cupid who leaves us
cellophaned candy hearts
with "I love you" scrawled
in red ink on a note
white as death.
I'm so glad He remembered,
I think as we float
up the elevator to
clean beds.

In the morning we can hear
a toilet flush across the building,
and a shower sprays next door.
Do they hear me comb my hair
and pack my suitcase I wonder?

Outside,
the sky twins pavement,
monochrome grey, marred
by a single squirrel
five feet from our window.

The squirrel is red, of course,
and we look down on him
like God as he sleeps in
his nest amid a mess
of electric cables converging
on his single pole.

"Look at the size of his balls,"
my sister says in half voice,
'they're huge."

"They would have to be," I quip,
"to live in such a place."
And we laugh as if all of it
were funny.

February 14, 1991: The Twilight Zone

In the emergency room of the Heart Institute,
wires and green monitor bleeps
out of my father,
he smiles
--I.V.s, electrodes, and monitors--
he looks like a bomb we must handle with care.
So we smile too, my mother, sister, and I,
but we're careful not to breathe.

Transferred from our small town hospital,
we wait in the emergency room because
they're not ready for my father upstairs.
Those white-clad angels of mercy have
yet to clean his room.

And while we're waiting, a gurney flies by
and parks in the next cubicle.
Through the opaque veil
thin and quivering as skin
We hear the doctors
 "...her friends called the ambulance
 but they found her alone.
 No one knows what she's taken..."

So the doctors call out questions.
We hear their voices reverberate
in empty rooms she's left open,
 "What's your name?
 Can you tell us your name?"
but it's like calling down a well
or dropping pebbles without splash.

My sister and I shake our heads.
My father holds up his I.V. arm
like he's voting.

But the doctors persist.
They ask down again,
 "What's your name?"

And I sing half voice to my sister
 "Is it Mary or Sue
 What's your name?"

We laugh.
My father laughs.

 "Can you tell us your name?"
And she shouts from Saturn on speed 78,

"Yoouu waannt tooo know whaat myy naamme iiss?"
and repeats it like a mantra.

She can't tell them her name, her age,
or the kind of powder she took
as if it were Comet or Ajax
scrubbing her consciousness clean.

"Do you know where you are?"
asks an intern.

"--The twiiliight zzone,"
giggles stumble from her mouth.
We hear the slackness of her lips
and feel him shake his head.

"Do you know what day it is?" he queries.
Her voice pops back like a reflex
tapped precisely right,

"Thursday, St. Valentine's Day."

Possessed Braids

Grandma gave three sisters
two braids of hair,
brown from her youth
and grey from a garage sale.
They placed them on a dresser
in a brown paper bag.

But no one peered in
or stroked the silken snakes
coiled at the bottom.
No one pinned braids to her head,
spun in streaks of grey and brown.

The eldest sensed them brooding
and couldn't sleep
for the whispered writhing
of twist across twist.

Together with her sisters
she gripped the package shut,
carried it to a place beneath
stars--the Pleides, Andromeda, Perseus--
and sickle of a waning moon.

There they named the braids in secret,
pulled the plaits apart with sticks,
and twisted rings for their fingers,
bracelets for their wrists.

The rest they cut in pieces,
left for birds and rodents.
Fingertips meeting at the center,
they circled the ruins thrice,
tossed fine dust over shoulders,
and, in silence, ran away.

Your Loving Sister, Alma

Dear Vernon

Mama came visiting in Grandma's
bridal gown and French lace
gleaming like dew on a spider web
I told her the alfalfa
on this floor is ready to
cut and hot as it's been
we can bale it by day after
tomorrow

She didn't want to talk
about haying and hot weather

She said I must be a lady
wear my corsets and not throw
food at the help but
I don't want anymore of their damn soup
No more of that damn soup

She's been busy carding clouds
in Glory knitting lap robes
for Angels and lost souls
Needles like diamonds
clasped in her starry fingertips
I said it's a wonder she could
tell them apart but wonder's more
common than calico in Heaven

She's seen the shadow of God's face
and told me I could see it too
if I squinted sideways through
sunlight melting in
from the west

I can't see a damn thing

But I still hear her voice like
glass chimes at the back step
said she'd be waiting
and for a moment the air
smelled of her lilac bushes
after rain
I could hear the whump of warm
dough on the table as she
worked the bread

Such a sorrow took hold of me
and shook me like a rug

She didn't say if she'd
seen you which didn't
surprise me none

You broke my china doll on purpose
no matter how much you said different

But I'm ready to go now
tired of looking for the pieces
and can't find any glue

Thirty years dead, Vernon
and you're still a criminal
so I probably won't be
seeing you either

Laid-Off

The skillet behind her is on fire.
Thick smoke she doesn't smell
climbs a cabinet and poof!
the dishtowel is gone.
I should say something.
Flame spreads to the ceiling,
and the three of us for a moment
float in motion so slow
we seem still.

Then he opens the fridge,
bangs a can against the orange juice
as he removes it.
"I don't know what's wrong with him.
I just don't know," she says.
He sucks at the beer and
scratches himself back to the t.v.'s flicker.
"It's like this day after day.
His father and I think he should
move out, get a job--"
I look at him and see it's worse than that.
The flag is up, and
he's left no return address.

"There's other jobs out there.
They won't come here," she says
and drops a spoon, thunk,
into the dishpan.

Every place in town is laying-off,
I'm thinking,
...except McDonald's.
"Things will get better," I say.
The fire cackles and my eyes drip.
It's getting hard to breathe.

Her mouth opens again,
and all I hear is smoke.
We should be leaving, she and I.
We can't worry about him
in Beverly Hills with Jethro and Ellie Mae now
cavorting around the cement pond
as he takes another belt.

I run past the living room doorway
on my way out and hear a voice,
"THIS IS YOUR BRAIN..."
laid-off without options.
Just say no to the babyboom
and the twenty in front of you
who still have their jobs.
He doesn't say anything.

As I close the door,
the knob singes my hand.

Tenuous Holdings

I grip the edge of words for a better purchase.
See, I keep thinking that
if I reach some kind of summit or safe ledge,
I can look over and suddenly
the meaning of all this climbing is conveyed.

"I love you---love you---you--"

It's hollow, radiates across the eons
between us.

You mouth, "It's so unclear."

But it's just your mouth, only lips that
pucker, straighten, open, close,
and the pale arc of your words
takes a lifetime to reach me.

"Unclear--lear--ear--"

I would call out again, the gravel grates out
from underneath my feet,
but you've already turned
your descent a thousand foot climb away.

"Wait--wait---ait--"

The echo pulses against my ribs,
clumps in my throat,
precarious, meaningless,
and I must find my own way
down.

Hannah Eats Invisible Popcorn

She's ten months old and thinks
that because she can feel individual
kernels through the plastic bag,
they must still be in her fingers
as she raises them to her mouth.

She parts her lips and lets go of air,
lets it drop on her tongue,
chews nothing,
and satisfied that popcorn
tastes like nothing,
she repeats the process with
gravest concentration.

At ten months, the world is
stripped to things she can hold or taste,
and Nothing is a flavor
good as any.

Scarlet

In this picture, you are doe-eyed.
White dress against white background
framed in grape leaves or ivy,
face a quiet oval, dark hair pinned at the nape,
you seem a girl grown pensive
or an angel paused mid-prayer.

No one would guess the child
in that matching photo belongs to you--
his hair white blonde and Shirley Temple smile--
but his eyes are dark as yours,
his shirt white as your dress.

What do you wish for in this photo?
A dove bearing evidence of land?
Some clue to form futures from life found wanting?

Marriage is a maze of give and take, you say,
though the message yellows and smells of old paper.
Motherhood is a waltz in pumps with one heel missing
and the man you married doesn't even dance.
No one wants to lead.

So what is true in black and white?
Between all hues and none
your likeness is less than ghost.

No sign of desire shaded sunset,
nor lavender in a room that made you blue.
And what color is frustration?
Loneliness?
Or joy?

The future is more technicolor,
and your life beyond this photo
you will paint in streaks of
scarlet.

III. DREAM WARP

JOURNEYS

I've traveled so far
that my car finds its own way

and accelerates toward shelter
I don't have to steer

In the garage, tires folded underneath
the car hunches in sleep

I drift to the door like smoke
once inside start a fire

though my fingers are toes
and two matches ruined

The flame is warm as a lover's
breath or a child's

Mail I set on my table is from another time
The bed is a cloud I slip into

home from one journey
I am already leaving for the next

close to Heaven as I can be
for now

Dream Warp or A New Skein of Time

On the back porch of the stone house
sun filters in through hanging plants
and fern fronds.
My grandmother is there, speaking of spirits.

So--I'm dreaming

which explains sunlight the color of finches
and foliage almost neon,
everything outlined in incandescence so thick
I can feel it with my fingertips.

Her voice conjures a presence
I must feel more than see,
the shimmer of a woman in bustled ruffles,
and before her outline fades,
a man appears in gartered shirtwaist, dark vest.
The energy between us ripples with their movement.

Grandma is not surprised.
She sees them often, she says, at
high noon in certain places of the house
--old parlor, the stairs,
or cellar.
She hopes to catch them on film.

Something new for the photo album, I suppose.

Then I recall to her my own photo,
as if waking life substantiates a dream,
the moustached stranger peering out
from the tiny stone carved church
that leans against lilacs.
Was he ghost or blemish?

All things seem possible,
especially at high noon.

Grandma nods and smiles in sunlight
that surrounds her like an aura.
I shake my head as one gently stunned
and drift abruptly into now.

Sleeping with Angels

She never speaks their names
Is it Gabriel?
Abigrael?

They are simply Shandron?
brushing her body Beloved
with wing tips
and heart vibrations

Blindly she undresses
in a room brilliant with haloes
incandescent residues
and always she is puzzled

She is no saint, only
a woman
perhaps a finger's breadth
from fallen

but she pauses in turning
down the bedclothes
only to extend her arms
for blessings she can touch
and taste like rain
or melon

Craving her tears,
her body, or the laugh that
startles from her like a doe
they slip beneath
her skin and through
meridians
She does not ask
for reasons

It is enough
that her soul quakes
in its boundaries
that mercy is easy
as sighing
and grace is nothing
but these brief
visitations

Gift of Gab

"People say lizards are talkative; they will stop anywhere to talk."
Don Juan

Don't tell your secrets to a lizard,
they have the gift of gab
and will make for the first crossroad,
sell you for a stone.

They can't help their nature,
tiny tongues flapping like
laundry on a line.
They see what you ask of them
and speak all they see.

Don't share your magic,
your darkest divination,
with any lizard whose lips aren't
soldered in seraphic smiles
or stitched with flax
once you've kissed
the needle
thrice.

To give your introspections,
your witchings unguarded,
to loose-lipped reptiles
is a sign of dreaming dreams,
the body a mirage
one world to
the next.

Lizards could tell you this themselves.
They'll let fly all,
even what you would not
voice to yourself.

Ophelia Under Water

Ophelia's song
bubbles from her throat like
iridescent orbs of Lawrence Welk
It's not about valentines or
flowers for remembrance or regret

and when it breaks the surface
it is a sound no one can recognize
the sound a woman makes
before she is strangled and
dropped in dense brush
fifty feet from an
Interstate

Of course Ophelia has been
singing for some time
She pulls moss from her locks
adjusts her floral wreath
debating whether or not to water
her pansies
the fennel and rue
She has no snapshots in her head of
Interstates and barely recalls
strangulation

Under water her song sounds a
bit like "Oh Promise Me-"
She has shed her husk of satins
velvet and ermine for a
kirtle of lilies and kelp
She weighs less than a
rose petal and feels
flight is possible
were the water not so deep

Within the hole of her heart
are twists of memory
something said to her once
of nunn'ries and women's wantonness
of obedience and
babyhood

She shakes her head slow motion
as minnows ricochet from
her adagio of hair
Whatever it was
rolls off her like honey
and reverberates in water rings
away away away

Her ballads effervesce
nightmare to the surface
sparkling in her dance amid the drink
There are no tears
only time for them as
she intertwines her fingers
with a weed

She's wearing her rue with a
difference

Lost and Found

One day I left my head somewhere. I removed it to make adjustments, probing gears through eye sockets and ear canals. Then I set aside this object of faulty wiring, of jangling noises from misaligned parts and left my head to pursue heart's dreaming inclinations.

Weeks later when I meant to slap myself awake or kick start the apparatus, my fingers discovered it was gone. Imagine my despair. The whoosh of my hand against air was more than disconcerting, my head lost like a glove or set of keys.

Somewhere two eyes were staring at fluorescent lights from some bin of assorted misplacements, pens and spare glasses entangled in the stringy mesh of hair I had not combed since I lost my head. Would someone else claim this baggage? Use it for a planter, a conversation piece?

Perish the thought.

So I let my body bungle toward that bin, knocking funny bone and ankles on what my fingers could not feel. Yes, eventually I found my head and stuck it on with crazy glue. Not quite, but nearly, good as used.

Dreaming of the Farm

No more fish dreams
great ones trying to pull me in
getting free of my line
It is the farm these nights
and I slip off its edges by morning
with only the cloying sense
of field or fence or wood
maybe house
where the second story always
twists unreal with extra rooms
a hidden attic
walls that meet in prayer or merely
holes in the middle of the floor
I try not to walk toward the edge
wave to Grandma below
 Should this piano be up here in a
 room so nearly without floor?

I am traveling there or
regretting my departure
pulled every night on a
strand strong as barb wire
finer than filament of a spider's web

What can it mean?
--the deer that vanish
in the wood found
antlers entwined like tree roots
in the murky creek?
The changing house?
The traveling?
Pastures so familiar
twisting foreign?
All more vivid and more real
than waking memory

Staked there by my heart
I hover between worlds
the farm my only bridge
The eery comfort of house
and grounds transforming
seems a spiritual inheritance
and I bequeath it to myself

Disenchantment

Beauty pricked
herself by accident,
dropped to her knees
and swooned in a
silken puddle.

A Princess fresh
as swallows in Spring,
spindle and a speck of blood,
all that's needed for enchanted sleep.

But Truth is Beauty
woke up with the sting
and saw her life spun forward
in yards of flax and wool
knitting, weaving, stitching
endless stacks of
capes, crests, and christening gowns
tablecloths and tapestries.

But waiting
she saw would be
the worst.

Lady in waiting for a King
who blew in and out
the castle like wind
from this war to that
patting his children
and off to the
next campaign.

She tried to rub this
from her eyes,
turret walls shrinking to embrace
the spell.

It was death all right,
her future pristine as new
snow in January against a blue,
blue sky.

Beauty was tired beyond repair,
leaden unto the very tips
of her gold hair,
she slumped to stone
and sleep.

THE ANGEL OF FORGETFULNESS

I had a name I loved
Before I came here
A perfect fit
In every shade of me
I knew it more than any other thing

When he set himself beside me
the rose petal tips of his
wings brushed my cheek
like snow

And since his was not a thief's face
I let him place his fingertip in the
Soft dent that would be
Above my lip

Now in this flesh overjacket
Bulky lips, torso, limbs
I touch this empty place of
Memory like an amputee missing
What
I don't exactly know
But it's gone
And I am so much less

The Amazing Kundalini

appearing twice nightly
--"And now I will escape from a snuff box"--
rises toward the rafters
in rainbow colored tights,
sparkling, arcing blue,
white, neon orange,
lavender
clear as a column
of God
and spinning like a planet
gone awry

At ceiling, he fragments
in spangles and drops
of variegated light,
pelts the floor with
incandescence
which pools and amalgamates
into a magician
whose skin irradiates
and glows amid
gasps, fainting bodies,
and blistering
applause

IV. FANDANGOS OF THE HEART

Invitation

An open window at the Writing Workshop
invites me to heft myself to its lip,
free fall into the black outside
away from public shame of my poem
and Bly Bly Bly Bly.

when suddenly a vampire fits his face
in that space of my temptation,
sends his laugh into the room
and is gone in a flash of lace,
gold hair, and moldy velvet,
fallen like the moon.

Quickly,
The Dead are resurrected by the un.
Reason startles 'round the room,
takes a few deep breaths
to settle in the chairs, and lively,
we return to Bly.

My heart fandangos in my chest.

I can't feel for the rest but fear
sparks stars beneath my skin.
Imaginary fiends exist.
We can be mortally kissed aside from
images, pictures, objective correlatives
and other such intellectual myth
whether we invite spirit in or no.

This Side of the Rainbow

Dorothy is back at the farm
and already she's tired
of stepping in chicken manure
and gathering eggs.

She dreams in monochrome each night.
In the morning
everything tints green,
her oatmeal,
the peelings she tosses to the pigs,
Miss Gulch's bicycle.

By afternoon, the farm blends shades of brown,
dust, straw, machinery,
endless miles of plowed ground.
The hired men are weathered as barn boards.
And she's looking toward the prairie
for rain clouds, wind storms,
and bluebirds.

There's no place like home,
she mourns.
Yet something of an old twister
turns inside her.
She leans across the fence,
no longer afraid of the ribboned road
while Toto whines and circles
her slipperless feet.

Blanche in Kansan

I'm Blanche DuBois translated in Kansan
which means I've never married
though my best friend is gay.
It means I have no sex life,
I rarely drink, and
my body is delicate as an ox
though my spirit could poof! in a slight breeze.

My resume is so much chicken wire
porous, bent askew, stretched thin.
I have been fired, but not
for embracing pubescent boys.
Why, I'm even an English teacher.

My sister is younger and married
to a blue collar man who drinks
few beers and doesn't bowl.
There are no poker games as he
prefers the company of his blown Chevy.
I do not suck down his liquor
though I sometimes find him brutish.
My sister is not Stella, the star,
but she craves her husband like bad medicine.

We could lose the farm that is not Belle Reve
though I dream of it all the time,
stone house and collapsing barns,
the twisting Diamond Creek.

I throw no scarves, diaphanous gels, over lamp shades,
but shield my eyes from the glare.
There is no tiara dress-up,
an ox in silk and ribbons is still an ox.
This is Kansas, sweltering without
wisteria, magnolias, or Spanish moss.

I stopped waiting for Shep Huntley
or other miracles long ago.
I live with my parents,
the spinster depending on kindness of others
like ivy twisting up trees,
and I have often found my kin are
strangers.

Amitriptyline

sounds like something one would jump on
or an antidote given Superman
for kryptonite poisoning.

Maybe a newly discovered mineral
that improves the eyesight
when taken twice a day

or the Princess Amitriptyline shot by
Bolsheviks in a basement, then lost
as the stone of a ring.

Perhaps cheap fuel for compact cars
or a mountain on Atlantis
poking through the sea.

The sea nymph, Amitriptyline, doomed
by prophecy to marry one
her son will best.

Or the newest thing in washers
guaranteed for life or 30,000
spins, whichever's first.

Amitriptyline, a line of eye paint,
hair dyes, and lip gloss because
you're not worth it.

And God Says, "There Was This Guy..."

I can't see Him very well; the spot is so bright.
I'm sitting in the back of this club.

Everyone else is laughing,
but I'm missing all the punchlines.

"I don't get it," I say.

I'm rubbing my forehead, and I've
spilled the bitter stuff I was drinking.
And God says, (He doesn't need a mike..)

"And I says to this guy--

if you truly believe in me

LET GO OF THE BRANCH..."

He's slapping the mass of atoms
that would be his knee.

My spill spreads like a spider
across the tablecloth,

and I get up to look for a bathroom.

I have to dodge bodies convulsed
in rapture.

The roar makes my head ring,

and I think

even some nameless limbo

would be better than this.

SPRINGING FORWARD

Always at this hour and from far away
some Snidely Whiplash determines
I must rise an hour early
though the clocks remain the same
and always at this hour and from close up
I forget

Hell is Sunday morning with
twenty minutes to dress
stretch across a town and be at work
My dash out the door is a jog under water
my car slogging at the speed of dream pursuit
is almost in reverse

Yet I arrive with two minutes sparing
to curse that Time Magician who has
snatched an hour of life into nothing
deftly as a tablecloth whisked from
under place settings and silver

The clocks alone are fixed
poles between Now and this younger Now
those missing minutes coagulating in space
while the Angel of Lost Hours
sculpts stars from that mass of
misplaced sleep

SWIMMING AT NANCY'S

Grandpa is dead.
I watch his field machinery
and possessions sell at auction,
and I feel blank
as the computer disk a salesman
erased for me yesterday.
I just wanted little stars
on a page yet every file
faded like signatures in
vanishing ink,
like Grandpa
into the beyond
or his belongings
into four horizons
as strangers took them away.

By phone
I tell this to my friend
Nancy.
"I'm a car with no brakes,
driver, or map. "I say,
"I want to seep into
soft ground somewhere
like Spring snow."
And Nancy says,
"Come over here.
my basement's flooded
-a sort of indoor pool.
You'll fit right in."
I picture furniture
bobbing like apples,
knocking against concrete,
legs and bases suspended
over blue or green
carpet.
"I'll get my suit,"
I say.

Lying on pool rafts,
we sun ourselves beneath
the overhead lamp,
scoot the lotion across
and back on floating
coasters.
The tape player on
the steps spews ocean
surf and dolphin squeals.
I can hear it over the
water that laps against

the washing machine.
Nancy removes her
shades and dives face first.
She surfaces, and wiping
her bangs back, sputters,
"Come on in.
Grandpa's gone, but
the water's fine."

Outside Lavina's Pet Store

Grandma pulls a semi-automatic
from her bag
randomly assails patrons
at the Mall's courtyard Eatery
who were looking for
grey vacuums and car mufflers



"Lavina took my little baby!"
she screams
and as one man dives to
take his brother's bullets
the baby, a grey dog,
runs away dragging orange
neon behind him like a
comet's tail



Meanwhile someone subdues
Grandma with a Vulcan pinch
Tied up in a Sears & co.
plastic bag she's left
at the return counter
No receipt
No return address
nothing happy about it
Just the buzz of a kazoo
as she exhales inside the bag



At the Eatery tables the saved
man cradles his brother pleading
"We'll never eat at this Mall again
All of our old baseball cards are yours"
The dog has returned and laps
from the puddle of spilled coke
his leash a lifeless snake



"I can see up that girl's dress"
murmurs the wounded man
"She's wearing boxer shorts with
little blue stars on them--
looks just like Heaven"



Late Night at the Laundromat

3 a.m. at the 24 hour Easy Wash. I'm feeding quarters into a washer's tight but empty mouth, its belly full with my laundry and I envision the thousands of brassieres, shorts, blue jeans, and cotton socks this tub has agitated. How high that stack? K? Everest? The Space station? I wind up the washer to jostle my apparel and sort the stacks in my head by color and content; whites here, towels there, cottons, darks in another, rayons, hand washables--when the front door opens and in walks the "King" dressed like a truck driver in red plaid western shirt, blue jeans, and green-billed cap advertizing herbicide. But I'd know him anywhere, that funny lip, "Is there a phone?" it quivers, and I nod toward the back. "Thank you, thank you very much." He's older, but weed free.

He's crooning "Are you lonesome tonight" into the receiver when a bag lady enters, bums quarters from the King--"Here you go darlin'"--and feeds a washer of her own. She peels herself like a Russian nest doll. Blue nubby yarn hat, beige sweater without elbows, green sweater buttonless, pale pink shell, a blazing yellow cardigan, black turtleneck, cotton dress, three wool skirts, and a pair of sweatpants. Three sizes smaller, she crams the washer, seasons it with Oxydol, and sets the thing in motion as she bumps it with her hip. Then she smooths her hair in the reflection of a dryer's single eye. In long underwear and red and white Hawaiian house dress, the true doll sashays and jigs across aqua tiles until Elvis joins her and they two-step to his breathless rendition of "Blue Christmas." I hum along, forgetting to put softener in my load. "You'll be doing alright with your Christmas of white, but I'll have a blue, blue Christmas."

Dear God,

As You know, I entered this venture with total confidence in You. You accepted my application, and I signed on for the long haul. However, due to circumstances neither of us can control, the position is no longer viable or productive.

I have learned many things here, most of which involved revelation of my inadequacy. I cannot stop wars, cure diabetes, or pay my rent. Also, I did not know when I accepted this position that I would have to scrape my cats off the road and watch my grandparents die agonizing deaths. That was a total surprise,--as were tornadoes and poverty. I also did not realize that accepting this position would involve spiritual amnesia. I simply cannot recall what I agreed to do on this plane when You employed me.

Also, I have tried various means of contact, and since You will not speak with me, return my calls, or communicate in any noticeable fashion, I am writing You this letter of resignation. Yes, God, I do believe in You and as bosses go, I suppose You are no worse than the rest. Still, I cannot change my sense of alienation, and therefore, as of this date, I can no longer work in Your employ. I will seek some other position or live on the spiritual streets until I am allowed some kind of eternal rest.

Sincerely, though no longer yours,

Me

I, Brenda L. White, hereby submit this thesis/report to Emporia State University as partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree. I agree that the Library of the University may make it available to use in accordance with its regulations governing materials of this type. I further agree that quoting, photocopying, or other reproduction of this document is allowed for private study, scholarship (including teaching), and research purposes of a nonprofit nature. No copying which involves potential financial gain will be allowed without written permission of the author.

Brenda L. White
Signature of Author

May 3, 1996
Date

Psalms of Strange Angels
Title of Thesis/Research Project

Doug Cooper
Signature of Graduate Office Staff

May 14, 1996
Date Received