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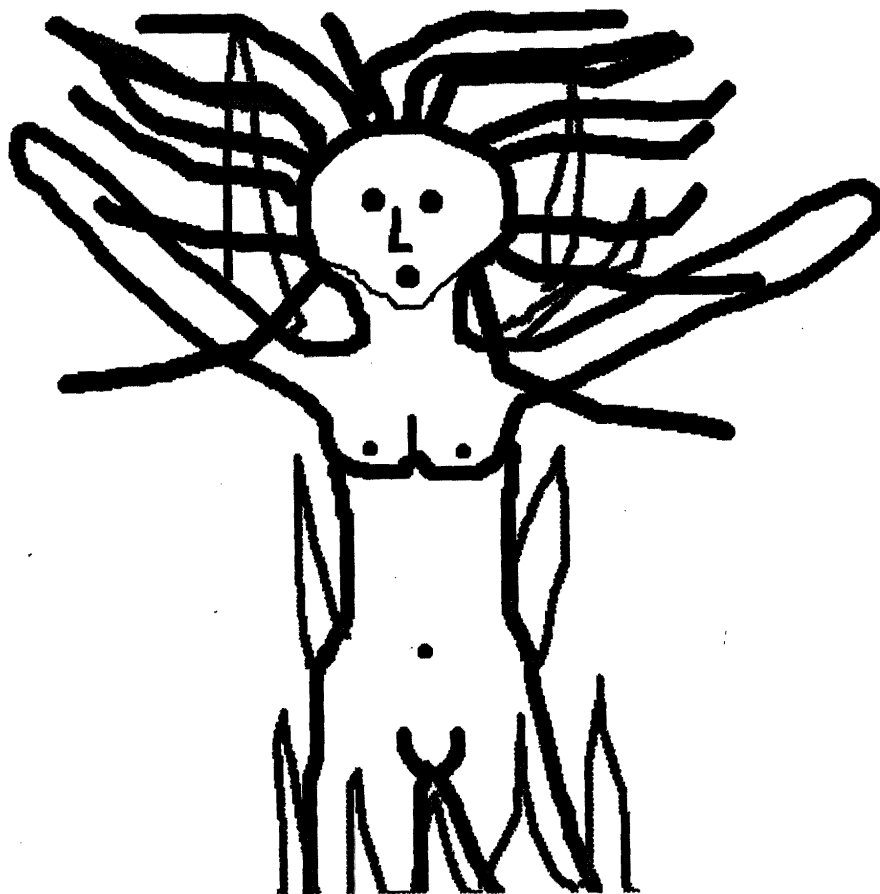
Cheryl Alfrey

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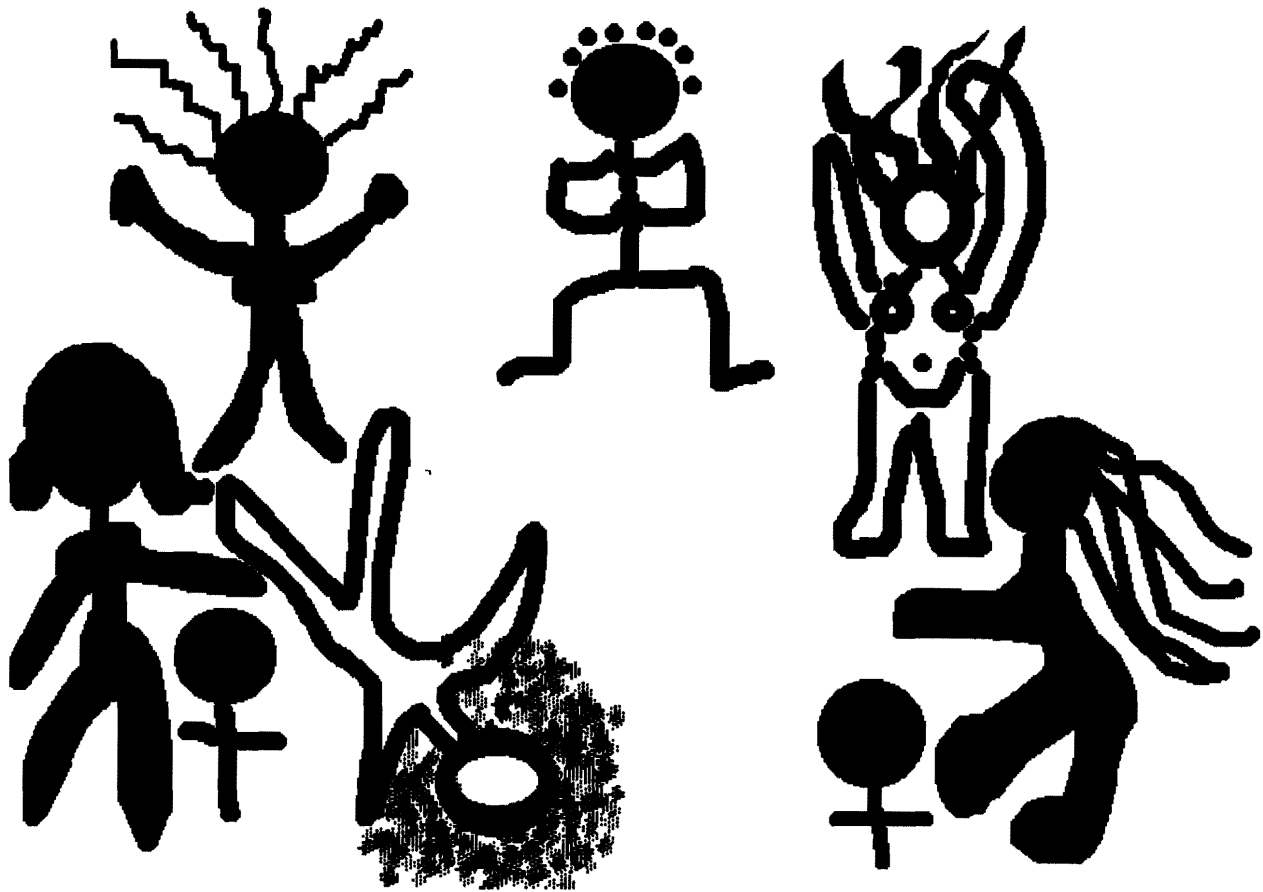


Keeper of Fire

an original manuscript of poetry

by

Cheryl S. Alfrey



**In The Circle
of
Madness**

Walk to Krutch Park

seventy four degree March
fish schools swirl the pond
in the shallows
whirl in slimy kaleidoscopes
stretching for the deep

the carp keep them cornered
and they dance never-ending
patterns of survival

Krutch Park shade away
we watch a man on a bench
struggle with himself
rock with shaking hands
reaching, reaching

"what do you think he's reaching for"

"something that isn't there"

Leslie

I dreamed about my church organist last night,
the one we had until I was eight.
I was so little then, but now I know
she was the age I am now.

*Hollowed out eyes and stringy brown hair against pale skin,
she comes to me, doling out waffle cone sundaes;
but she is one short, and I am the one left.*

*She wears a bright red boa with a rose sticking up
from her shoulder, growing beside her head.*

*Gives it to me with apologetic eyes, draping me
in a tickly shroud I'm not sure I deserve.*

I wake crying,
call Daddy collect at work;
"tell me everything you know
about Leslie Rawles."
He is surprised,
hadn't thought of her in years,
says she was a little, mousy girl,
lived with her mom in a trailer
because her father was an alcoholic.

I tell him I know it sounds strange
but I have to know: was there a flood?
I seem to remember rising water.
He gasps, awed
at my eight year old mind's
uncanny ability to know secrets
then whispered out of earshot;
"well, come to think of it,
her trailer flooded
and everything was ruined."

There's one more thought
heavy in my throat
but I have to know why I know,
why she gave me that boa.
"Was there some kind of controversy?
Did the church fire her?"
Daddy's not even breathing now
and I force the rock out of my throat:
"Daddy, was she mentally ill, too?"

His sigh is heavy as the weight of my dream
and I cry into the phone, knowing.

Angelology

bald, naked men
chase me through corridors --
if only
they had wings,
I could be
divinely blessed
rather than
mentally ill --
but my men are just
men -- staring, reaching
to touch me
to take me --
I doubt it's to
heaven

Attempt

explosion...

blood-brain heat-ache
imprisonment, loss...
the taste in the mouth, of
capsules, plastic, maybe
yellow, maybe black, filled with
white powder, so bitter, oh
so bitter against the blandness of
pain

Depression

this used to be hunger,
nauseating tickle
now a symptom,
something deeper
than need
controls me

face falls heavy,
diaphragm thuds
I'm aware of things
I can't understand
or control, only
experience, feel

as physical,
the twinge
in my side,
the hum
in my head,
the yearning

for release

Dirty

here I go,
pissing in the bathtub again;
cleanliness is so elusive -- I am
constantly bathed in the stench of myself --
I find pubic hairs in the stubble on my legs,
toe jam in my ears --

I am not clean,
just rearranged.

Manic

head pulsing pounding racing

scorched eyes color-blurred, I
stumble savage toward release with
flinging, shrieking, beating, tearing

hair
 and skin
 and poetry

howling madman severing

sticky tentacles of pain, of
howling hell inside the brain, the
chant resounds "You are insane;
you think you God, yet are inane" I
wither, cower, melting shame, I
fall to puddles, snorting Earth
slammed from a far too lofty perch
look on my destruction, havoc wreaked
maniacal laughter crescendos to screech,

"Shackle me,

I am free!"

mental ward

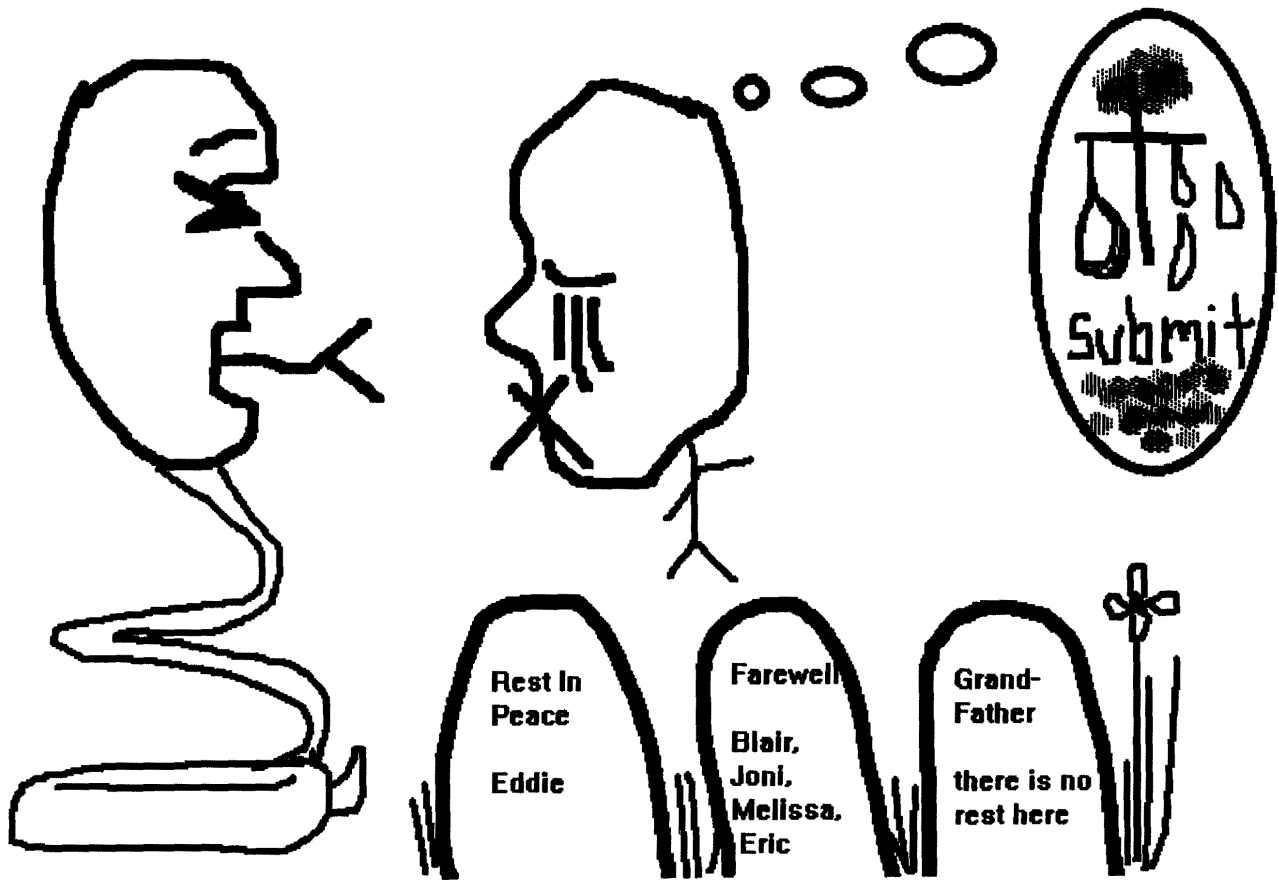
everyone's got a story here that sterilized linoleum can't make
pretty
cheezed out christian-heads check vitals a ritual three times a
day
got to keep these corpses up and running they chuckle through
xanax smiles
raiding the candy factory medicine room after doling out the
valium
sing rise and shine and give god your glory and your blood at 5
a.m.
then it's march to the grub room, can't have suicidal people
starving, now can we?
dead bugs splatter head-pounded windows and it's hard not to hate
them, lucky bastards
when it's nothing but swallow and purge and drain and crash for
the rest of us
rotting on blue carpet too clean to be real, too bright to be
natural, too short to be lethal
there's a pill for everything, and the faster our heads fry
the sooner we can get home to the safety of guns

Outgrabing

I've watched Alice in Wonderland ten times this week.
I should be writing, but everything in me hurts.

I see my wasted face in the mirror, fourteen pounds deader
than two weeks ago, and I want to go through that looking glass
to another side, outgrabing all this pain with the mome raths.
They know about pain, point to paths that get swept away.

I watch the film like it's scripture, wondering
what it takes to get to Wonderland.



The torture

I know

as love

In the Endtimes

I thought this was the time of solitude,
of rest for tomorrows, but they came
with the news; Doggie is down in the road

I run barefoot, crusty-eyed to the place,
Doggie a blur against deep crimson asphalt,
eight huge pupils pleading for an answer

the young men stand huddled, waiting for God
but I've been here before, know there will be
no answers but our own, and stoop to grapple

eighty three pounds of elastic flesh, tan fur
blood-matted, swelling red head lolling; for
a moment I am Atlas, holding a world in my arms

in the back of the pick-up, I watch the man
watching Doggie; wild blonde curls whipping
a face twisted and bewildered; I can't stop

staring at the face that is seeing God, glowing
with longing, and terror; the rest
is a blur. I hold the oxygen mask, but can

barely meet the luminous wet black eyes, begging
me to be a Messiah; I see no God here, only pain.
My head lalts and my bowels heave as I give the word.

Why can't I be strong when it matters? I crumble
toward the waiting room as other gods take over.
I can't be with you in the end, in this hour of need.

Back at home it seems like a dream until my friend says,
"You have blood on your mouth. Go wash." I am stained
from temple to waist, deep red drying brown and then

black on the first white shirt I've worn in years,
my reminder of my weakness, of God's weakness, of
ominous black eyes wet with the weight of worlds.

the day he told me the affair had not ended

I can mark the day to the hour,
to the minute, the glass shattered,
crusty flower petals falling to
dirty linoleum. The pressure
had been building for a year,
since the day my skin touched
his skin touched your skin
in sparks of friction, growing
bloody as months lolled on
full of rubbing and biting
and lies. I thought I could
preserve the flower, pressed
between paper and glass, but
flowers are weak, friendship
is weak when roots are smothered
in dirt and dirty sheets. It's
seed-spreading time; not his in you,
or his in me, but ours, my sister,
we are scattered like sand in the
hurricane, doves to the wolves. I
bite my lip and smile at the thought
of it, the carnage we have lured
ourselves into, the blood on my tongue
from my lip, from your thighs, from
our hearts. I shatter, like glass.
I'll be picking pieces out of the
cat food for days, slivers festering
in my feet where I have danced on
the explosion of our love. Now
we are splintered, like the ice
in my voice on the telephone across
distances that cannot be bridged,
like the walls in our home he has
splintered with fists intended for me,
like the dingy boxes in your heart
where you hold amputated bits of people,
trying to make wholeness from their pain.
I have broken into a thousand pieces
for you, each too small to be held
any longer, each too sharp to be
touched by your needy fingers. We
are this to each other, and nothing more:
the sting of skin against skin, the scream
of glass against membrane, the shrapnel
of love we carry deep inside, like
a memory of pain.

Sister-lover

Sister-lover, our
blood runs too thick.

It chokes me when I swallow you,
sopping up our past with a rubber tongue

full of holes, stained green-purple
from slapping with sharp words.

I'm too prickly to be touched that way,
the way you touch the skin that touches me.

I should have been the oldest child
not the clingy, dependant one

hungry for a playmate. I swear these
dolls were mine before you came,

and I treated them like babies. I watch
you run over their soft, fleshy bodies

with the wheels of your chaotic
tricycle, doll hair in your hands.

I fear for the bloody day
the training wheels come off.

Early Blossoms

planting marigolds with Mother in early spring,
we openly delighted at the sight of the first bloom.

"Cheryl, look, we have an early blossom"
we danced barefoot on the walkway

cheerfully denying that the early blooms
were always the first to die

it was the same when I turned ten,
started my period as breasts began budding

"you are an early bloomer, Cheryl" she told me
as we picked out My First Bra at Tots 'n' Teens

it was not until I faced my peers
that I first learned of early death,

rejected by all the girls in my class
because every boy wanted to be my boyfriend,

to touch the blatantly curvaceous body
that still held the mind of a child

who wanted to be invited to sleepovers
and liked for the blooms in her heart

not for a blossom budding between thighs,
plucked too early for survival

now my peers have risen to spring,
grown flowers of their own to destroy

but as I watch frail heads bend toward pain,
I hear roots ripping from soil

Second Grade Playground

second grade playground
recess gets seedy
whirlybirds poking the back
pressed flat by five little boys
playing wishbone
touching where panties go

even then, there were heroes:
Charlie, all black eyes and tan
rebel fist splattered with blood

he would never tell
why he hit those boys
none of us would ever tell
the reason

how could we explain
why it happened
every day?

From the Nest

Stranglehold distance,
I stretch too far to touch
without choking you,
grabbing with sharp
fingers and words

I saw a nature video:

mother cat wooling
her babies to death,
licking,
rubbing with
vigor,
dragging perfect
bundles of ecstasy
to safety, unaware
her love was
danger

sparrow smothering
her babies when they
hatched too soon,
her need
to give warmth
unequivocal to
their need for
freedom,
instinct gone mad
with compassion

chimpanzee carrying
the corpse of her child
for weeks, rocking it
in her arms, suckling it
at her engorged, neglected
nipple, unable to accept
the limpness of its form,
the stillness of its breath,
that the child was gone
and she couldn't save it

I wonder if that is how I will be,
clutching your heart until it bursts,
dragging your body through years
of denial,
propping you up at the breakfast table,
cradling your coldness to my skin
at night,
trying crazily to give you
the warmth I think you need,
the warmth that has killed you,

the torture I know as love

Dialogue

glass hurricane gleaming on warm cherry --

you send your spirals around the room and
words fall,
shatter, on
dirty linoleum;
go to bed so I can
sweep up the pieces.

Weeping Willow

when daddy died, the willows wept, but
deeply rooted as they were, where
years ago he'd spread their seeds, could
not attend the funeral.

for the woman whose love could save me

I see your flesh
and I sweat.
Doesn't matter if it's
an elbow,
knuckle,
nape of neck
dripping salt.

You read poetry,
hushed whispers of your soul.
The world falls in love with you,
and God is a smoky bar.

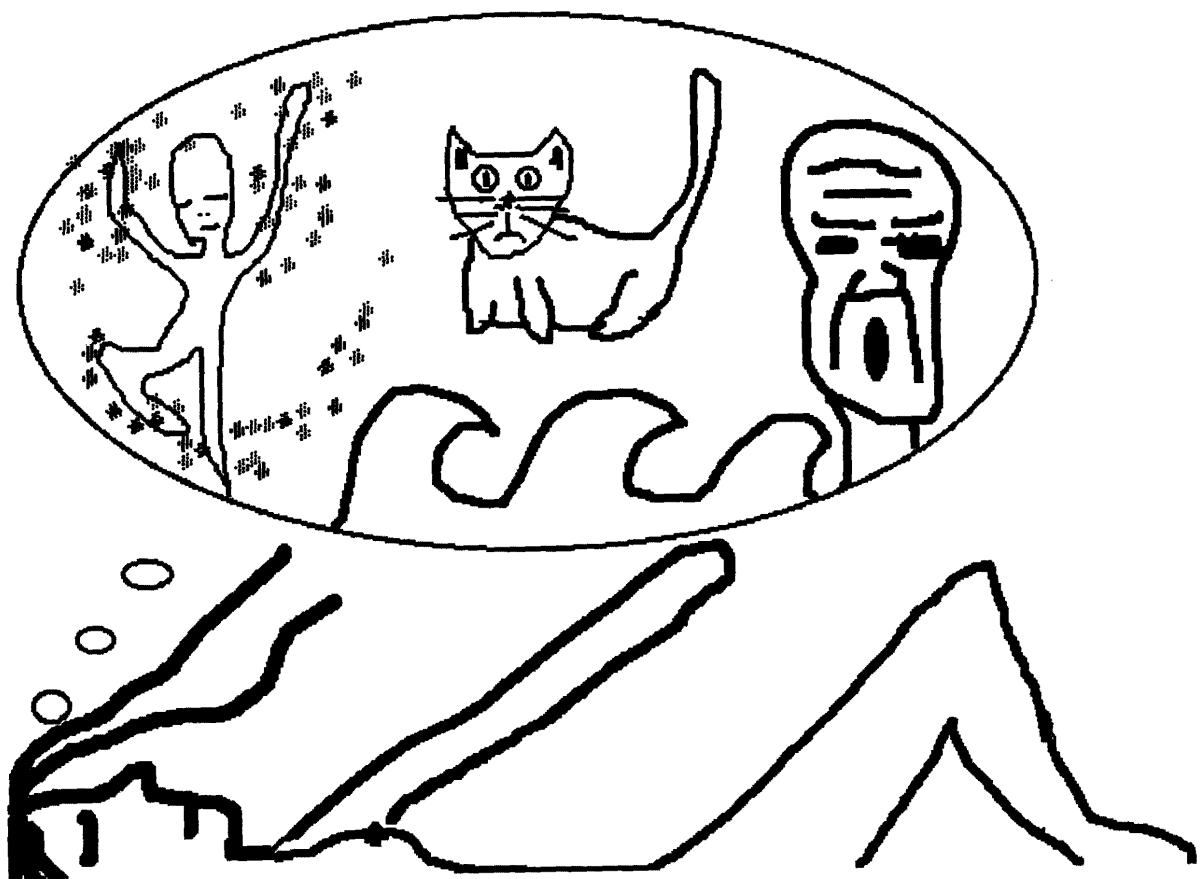
At night I strip naked
cool, pressed sheets,
contemplate skin
the sting of your heat
against my incurable coldness.

Why can't I get warm,
close, without cringing?

My ex-lover tells me he wants you
and my coldness grows
pressed flat on my stomach
uncaring weight on my back.

This isn't love.

Tension exploding into my pain,
I lie closer than death to him
skin inside my skin,
and feel empty.



Dreams and Visions

Falling Asleep

face flat pressed
mattress grids
sheets can wait
I'm leaving
night flight seizes
body sighs me out
backward arc through
rooftops, rushing
to newness, spine-
suspended in starlight

I remember childhood
slept on my back
star patterns
in my eyelids
I only had to blink
to see them waiting
to take me

now sleep is my phantom

I chase its shadow
in search of vision

Drives Me

Anger drives me
careening
down a one-way street.

I try to steer,
remember
which pedals to push,

but I can't drive
stick shift for shit
so I let Anger drive me.

She manipulates that lever
like it's autoerotica
and smiles,

eyeliner cracking at the corners
of maniacal, crusty slits
of euphoric blindness.

I love her.

In the Circle of Women

There are women in my dreams:
bare-breasted and laughing,
they want me to teach the songs
and dances. We touch as I
form their movements
and smile, sun-scorched
and alive.

Cheyenne approaches, childlike,
our nakedness melting
together, fronts of bodies
pressed softly, identical
brown hair trailing behind.
Her small hands trace the
curve of my woman-hips,

flat chest pressing
my motherly bosom.
I am not ashamed
caressing perfection,
wanting her tiny form
in unmotherly ways,
topless women whirling by

in endless circles.

Keeper of Fire: for Jennifer Vasil

school of streets
I am grounded in stone
cobble roads and castle ruins

festival faces
cartwheel by
none of them familiar

I love it here
lights strung shimmering from sky
dripping paper lanterns

a rush of blond surrounds me
comfort, you lead me
a seat high in the castle wall

you remind me
of Stacy in London
freedom-friend in unfamiliar paradise

fireballs roll from your hands
through slats of iron
"there, that should keep us warm"

this is your home
where you swing the gate
and tend fire

Thoughts In New Orleans

sitting in a cafe in
New Orleans,
having lunch with some
musical child genius
high school hero
soulmate of my
lover
slips me through the
crowded room
eases me against his
shoulder
we sit down to
have a few beers, you
reminisce about
life in the small town
Bible belt
horse shit, turns out
the hero's repulsive,
opposed to my
Feminist agenda
so I just
smile at my lover
growl at the man
grapple
the options...

seated in a beanbag chair
floor of someone's
jazz bar, I
touch my lover's arm,
feel it
tingling with excitement
over me,
over that god-like hero,
over physical friction and
groupy-groped embraces, we
revel in talk of
sex,
domination,
the mysteries of
manhood,
elegant-idiotic
tone and diction,
and I melt in the love for
my lover's adoration for
another

Voice

Let me scream with the voice
of a mad bitch, a wolf yelping,
unafraid of the power of the moon.

Let me slide naked in water, outside
in front of pale, shocked boys
who die, wanting me.

Let me walk the rocky underground
of ex-lovers, grinning, "it reminds me
of hell, but I like it," as I trample them.

Let me grasp the terror of vision
and barely survive, lick total
surrender and make it home.

Night Music

I wake to find
Bob Dylan
cross-legged on my comforter,
corroded acoustic propped on end
like a cello, gnarled fingers
plucking crusty scabs,
warm breath tinged with pomegranate
spilling across my bosom.

he winces, warbling
incoherent poetry,
and I struggle to rise up,
to grasp his nonsensical genius,
but he says,

"Lay back, baby,
I'll sing for you and all that,
But just you don't go pushing me,
Y'hear?"

I've heard this before,
and the words crawl across me
a live tarantula.

I wake,
for real this time,
spider bite throbbing
over my heart.

Cheryl S. Alfrey

*Quote from Dylan's "A Blast of Loser Takes Nothing" in
Tarantula.

Anger Dance

dream dogs eat each other in twilight
my slit eyes defining shapes
where one ends and the other begins
which teeth match which fur

I want to dive into that stranglehold
until nothing else remains

lose myself in fury

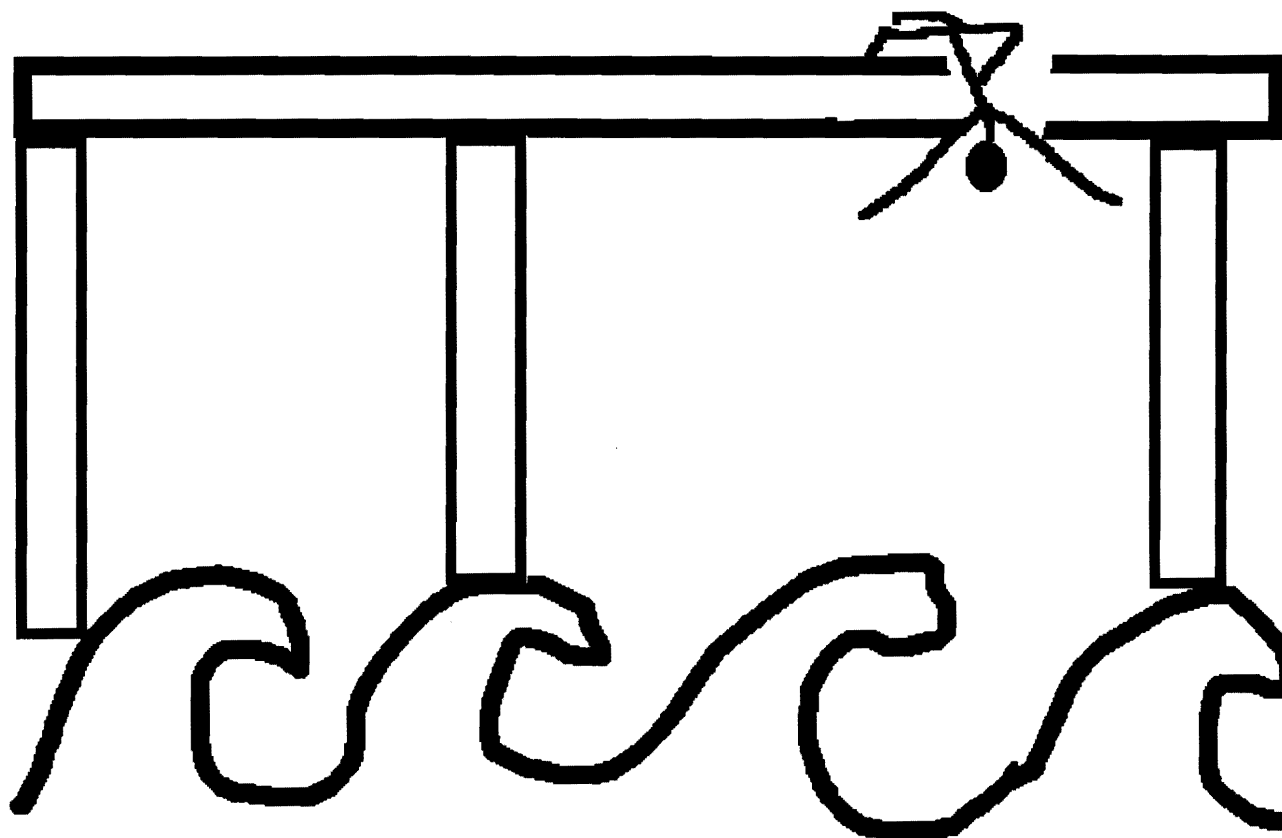
Naked

naked feet on linoleum,
bathwater running,
pours an unstoppable stream,
splashes from green ceramic into
blue-grey puddles, it
overflows,
wasted

you sit on the toilet
reading comics
as I wriggle from my jeans
exposing thighs
and breasts
and skin, skin, skin
smooth,
like porcelain

why won't you look at me?

outside the window
glowing faces of the nativity scene
which haunted me through Christmas
have turned away from the road
to file silently back into the barn
from which they emerged in early November,
green and red and blue plastic
shining like the spotlights of
unwanted voyeurs
now grown bored with their
Virgin prey,
returning to darkness.



Flood:

Chronicles of Family

Flood

bathwater spirals
sucks buttocks
I'm a child on the drain
there are no bubbles here

like the flood in Leslie's trailer
all alcohol and tears
"we had to let her go
she missed so many days"

like Eddie's body beating
dam the Ohio River
car on the bridge
engine running, door open wide

wide gape of a mouth
at the center of oceans
Jody drowns, leaving children
and names no longer hold her

I am a hand reaching
above the tide

Eddie

Black eyes, black hair
lashes long, curled
lanky frame, swanky walk
I think I loved you before
I knew the meaning,
followed in adoration,
searched for hidden smiles
that seldom came and faded fast,
washed like your face in waves.

The next to last day of second grade
I decided to die, tired of piano lessons,
afraid of dreams flying through air
in waking hours, and voices of darkness.

I ripped a page from my Trapper Keeper,
wrote out a will giving everything to you
if only you'd come home, missing six months,
your face imprinted in my pillow
where I'd tried to smother myself.

That night, the phone rang
as I shoved away a full plate:
chicken continental, peas, bread,
carrots, heart bursting out my throat,
"don't answer it, we're eating"
but no one listens to little girls
so no one ate that night.

They found your car bridging the Ohio,
your emaciated body sloshing the dam,
face rubbed off by rough water, pillow covers
where I rested that night, my head in the cleft
of your chin, thin shoulders shining at the foot
of my four-poster bed, whispering
"goodbye, goodbye, goodbye."

I missed the last day of school,
sat in Mamaw's house while they
buried you, because Mama said,
"people who commit suicide
don't go to heaven, Cheryl."

I saw that echo in her eyes last year,
crouched by my side in the hospital when
I swallowed pills to find my way back to you,
Eddie, back to someone who understands,
whose face-print lingers in my pillow,
shoulders hovering at my feet
whispering, always whispering,
begging me to find a way
to live without drowning.

Ghosthouse

Three a.m. ghosthouse,
deaf grandmother's breathing
chokes the clock's ticking.

I saw the skeleton of the farm today,
grandfather's bones that have no headstone,
and a suicide cousin who has whispered my name

from the ground for fourteen years. I never
could sleep in this town, with that train
wailing through my window, and bullets

stacked in the closet in shoeboxes. I used to
fumble through them with shaky fingers,
hoping I wouldn't get caught

so close to death. Now the ammo is gone, camped
with Uncle Homer in a schoolbus by the river
where Eddie jumped the bridge to freedom,

head full of drugs and dreams. Mamaw thinks
insanity comes from "doing dope," not from God;
I wonder what she'd think if she knew me.

Grandfather's Ground

this place whispers stories

a red pick-up that eats thumbs
red clay tilled by hand-tamed horses
sprouts of green turning brown and tall
to be hung
like the effigy in the tree garden
that called to the crows but frightened children

I remember my first taste of persimmons on your mountain
Wayne smiling, "try them, they're delicious"
and the burning bitter rush of sour seed
that lingered for days
filled my mouth by your casket

now the world is unravelling

the arsonist neighbor burned down your father's house
uprooted your fence to dig a well on all that is left of you

I know you are Cherokee,
but I am generations removed
from words that make sense
my mouth bleeds to defend
what cannot be owned

the sweet rush of your ripe fruit fades
leaves a mouth full of bitterness

for Valerie Olsen

Christened Virgilla Jo Alfrey
in a too-small house in Kentucky,
you had to run from the sticks that beat you
in the night, the madness that chased you
through streets and husbands.

You were only sixteen when you ran away,
left an attic full of Nancy Drew books
I pawed for years, searching for bits of you
hidden in mysteries you dog-eared and loved, but
not even Caroline Keene could make sense of your story.

You never even knew Mom was pregnant when you left,
would never know the gold-haired, tortured child
who asked each night, "Dad, tell me about Jody;"
never know there's a name for the illness you bear
and a name for the niece you never met

and a name for you that still ends with All Free.
You tried to shed your heritage, Virgilla,
the name that echoed the name of your father,
but the "V" chased you like clubs against your skin,
madness tangled deep between your roots and mine.

Valerie, I want to know you as more than just Jody,
want to show you the path that leads home.

Endless Spring

Balmy autumn on the porch swing
overlooking the garden, leaves tumble down,
down as I cup my hand around flame.

Mom tells me not to smoke, it's stupid,
will end up killing me after lingering,
black-lunged, cancerous suffering.

I squint and smile. Both sides of my family
live well into their nineties, and I'm not sure
I want to be around that long, I say.

Autumn is a hard time for mothers. It's hard
to watch leaves jump from trees like cousin Eddie
leaping the bridge over the Ohio at twenty two.

Mother dreams of endless spring, thinks I am
a dogwood, all pink petals and neon green buds.
Never mind the twisted branches and the roots

strangling my own trunk. I flip my filter far.
Smacked by a middle finger, it soars
over the flowerbed to red, cool earth.

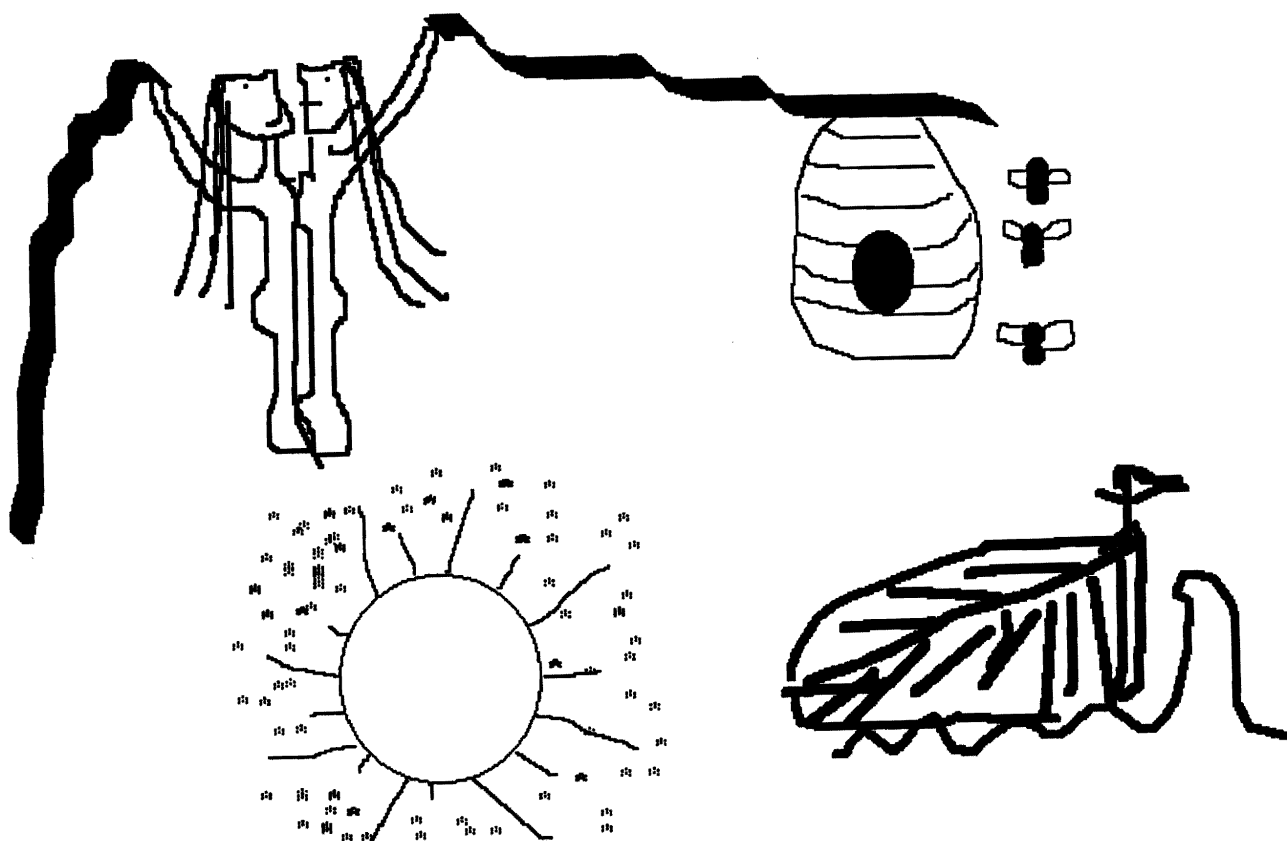
Childhood

fields of cotton sway in the green shag
carpets of childhood nurseries,
Daddy's voice floating skyward
carrying milkweed blossoms and wishes,
and our heartbeats merge in a drowsy
embrace reminiscent of ticking clocks and
musty attics, and a pale Siamese cat
slinking through shadows to wail with the
voice of a child

Mother

Birth is an act of separation:
Light from darkness,
Earth from heaven,
Land from water --
I lost the largest part of myself
And clung blindly to it
For years --
The warmth of Mother,
The scent of Mother:
I returned to that womb
So many times
Only to be delivered again
And again
Through the pain of
Separation,
Creation,
Alienation --
It's all the same

Now my loneliness is
Liberation:
I discover the warmth of myself,
The scent of myself --
The placental moisture that
Anointed my head now
Pours down my thighs,
Calls the world to my womb --
She clings to me
And I hold her aged beauty,
This childless mother, this
Motherless child --
It's all the same



sweet, honeyed embraces and
Healing

Healing

Boy of beauty, with
Painted eyes and scarlet
Lips, let me lick the wounds that
Made you you, let me touch the
Scars of erotic fervor, the
Jagged gape of wounded flesh that
First aroused your blood, let me
Hang myself on your cords of nourishment,
Caress the mischievous smile, the
Flashing eyes of youth, the country
Meadows hidden in your voice past
Gravel lanes, weeping willows, and
The sweet smell of juniper on your
Breath, let me kiss the shattered
Bones of your soul, ease out the
Glassy shrapnel of cold collision, suck
Away the placental moisture still
Clinging to your naked skin, and
Deliver you cruelly to a new world
Of cool mud between the toes, liquid grass
Against the spine, sweet honeyed
Embraces and
Healing.

learning to live with explosion

It seems simple enough;
he met her at a party.
I was home vomiting,
trying to remember
why people like food,
remembering the tomatoes
I ate from my garden
until I was ten, unable
to digest anything else.

I struggled with my bowels,
he struggled with his testicles
both of us trying to keep inside
what the world has taught us to hold.

He will see her again
when my bowels bleed.

Sometimes we have to explode.

From the rave bar to Trafalgar Square

huffing poppers
sucking a nitris cigarette
shapes saunter by
and I am beautiful
a hit on the tongue
a hit on the tongue
babes slip tongues into my ears
mushrooms in my fingers

she is in the stalls
hash drool dripping
down her face
the dress she pissed on

we are out of here
up the road with strangers
safe benches in Trafalgar Square
she passes out
I smoke some dope
at the foot of a statue of a lion

I know the guards will come
I just don't care

when running back became running forward

funny how our ending begins
back in the same bed
dreaming of fractures

I say I shouldn't be here
waking up in grey matter
while you scribble scorpions

but nothing makes distance
so tangible as two heads
on one pillow

you dress for work, I put
my clothes back on and
check my messages

our letting go a series
of discrete indiscretions
and bipolar communion

after dark you say you don't know
who you are, and I bite my tongue
to keep from biting yours

ease you gently to your pillow
and slip away before
my leaving becomes a circle

power we could have owned

so, it comes to this

beginning with words once scrawled
to begin endings, suicide note
still tucked inside the panty drawer

the silk g-strings are mine, yours
the irony of cotton-poly blend
in the shack I shared with the lover we shared

our panties knotted in the drawer of a boy
who doesn't wear underwear, tell me why
is he always at the center of our embrace

makes me want to wish my fingers to daggers
want to be beyond this, but your eyes
only meet mine in the revolving door of his bordello

so, it comes to this

us marching on, leaving him clutching our undies
won't need them where we're headed
safe marriages and dark street corners

sisterhood getting soggy under spike heels of oldest professions
and we both want to be writers, but what's left to say
that isn't blatantly exposed by your photos, his hands

Art always told us real poetry ends with insight, but
what can we possibly have learned from spreading our legs
closing our minds to power we could have owned

I count my losses, but don't care anymore
who comes out ahead, we already know
he's holding our hearts in our panties
but I've learned I can live without both

so, it comes to this

Whirlwind

I walked the dark, cold alley tonight,
searched for bits of dust left rising
from the momentum of your last movement
away from me.

My house is cold.

I crank the thermostat until my biceps
are as taut as my nipples,
listen to the laughter outside,
grind my cigarette to cinders,

grind my teeth until I taste blood.

I want you to teach me
your fine art of subtraction,
explain how a boy afraid of heights
learns to let go and leap so easily.

My psychiatrist tells me

I don't know my own needs,
but when I look for them
I hate what I've become,
huge, sucking lips

hungry for something invisible.

My healing comes as a whirlwind,
lifts me from the flood, but
leaves me dizzy. I stagger
from the strangeness of familiars

to the familiarity of strangers.

Iktomi

sticky black spider
hairy web weaver

I avoid pearly threads
shining red eyes in night forests
I know a phallus from

a weed, an old woman from
a rapist, I am schooled
in trickster ways

but Iktomi creeps
formless form becomes
all we are afraid to fear

the sister in bed with your lover
the rapist in bed with your daughter
the wrinkle in the center of your mind

we are all tangled in
the unbroken webs of
black spiders

what can we do
but laugh

Song for Blue

my heart is full

so warm, it tickles
thudding in spirals
color of your name

where have you been my whole life?

perfect brother, I was
waiting for you, begging
my parents to have a son

early bloomer like me,
seeker of symbols, wild
with the lunacy of the moon

screeching through darkness

skin crawls with realness
of memory, warm baths
in the evening

running cloudy-eyed
through night-grass
tormenting fireflies

little brother sneaking

to my bed after hours
to hear my stories,
my dreams claim your flesh

and I am not alone

I Know How to Get What I Want

wrapped in army green
you teach me to scream
82nd Airborne doesn't impress me
you have a parachute
and a big gun

strong, silent, meaningless
knife in my crotch
gets me nowhere
anywhere but here
would be better

rob my local convenience store
bombs you taught me to build
you can keep your sexist t-shirt
I'll take whatever fills my hunger
you can keep the change

bitch and whore aren't unfamiliar
just strange in your mouth
but my throat is wide open
I remember what you taught me
I'm still screaming

. they all say they love you
when they're inside you
-Oprah

I crave honesty like dark, bitter chocolate and coffee
taut, prickly man to bear his soul and skin without
apology or promises of stranglehold emotion,

"relax, let go, this means nothing, I want nothing
but the moment" as he eases me from clothing,
shackles, brutality of sex that promises

the impossible: simultaneous orgasm,
perfect fit, love that lasts
past morning.

In the driveway, mom questions my opinions
of fidelity, chastity. Fidelity's great, I say,
but chastity is the stupidest thing I ever heard.

She's unimpressed with my answer, married at eighteen
for the permissable sex she swears she hates. Would
have believed her if I hadn't looked for pantyhose

Sunday morning without knocking, seen closeness
so involved it made me vomit, and we all
skipped church, feeling unholy and awkward.

Now even fidelity slips away, choked
by embraces that crave variety. I ask
Dad, because he seems more human,

have you ever cheated? He answers a wistful no.
Why not? "Because your mother would kill me."
Why do you say that? "Because she told me,

and she meant it." Morality isn't on my side.
Jason says he cheated because I'm too good.
Loving you is like loving Jesus, he complains.

Sorry, but I'm not flattered. Just lonely,
searching for clear blue eyes that lock into mine,
tell me with a smile, I'm just going to get off.

Basket Song

I found a basket in the dumpster,
beautiful woven rim with no bottom,
two weeks ago, when my own life bottomed out,
and rescued it
exchanging my sack of dirty cat litter
with the hungry trash heap,
a promise of mending on my lips.

But my own threads began to unravel
as I stretched to hold everything:
became guardian to a homeless crack addict and brought
him into my home,
befriended a schizophrenic neighbor whose husband
beats her nightly,
offered to help friends who had betrayed me, turning my
heart into a fountain of forgiveness,
stared at the stains growing in my lover's bed until I broke
and burned the mattress,
forgot how to digest food and collapsed as i.v. tubes grew
from the tops of my hands.

The basket lay forgotten by my doorstep
until it decided to enter my dreams:

*I am weaving
a bottom for the basket, then
a cover made of colored threads.
I braid my way to the side of the circle
and see the basket has sprouted a spout,
become a watering can.*

*Undaunted, I weave a cover for the spout
as the voice of the basket rises,
flows through weaving fingers:*

*"It is not enough to heal me --
you must make me useful
and adorn me, as well."*

I wake on the couch,
medicine man pouch swinging around my neck,
cats who have adopted me sitting at my feet;
they file silently into my lap
one by one
as a blessing.

There is work to do.

I rush to my back yard,
past the basket,
and grab a hoe,
digging an earthen circle
for planting:
sweet pea, alyssum, cantaloupe,
catnip, parsley, peppermint,
summer savor.

It is healing time.