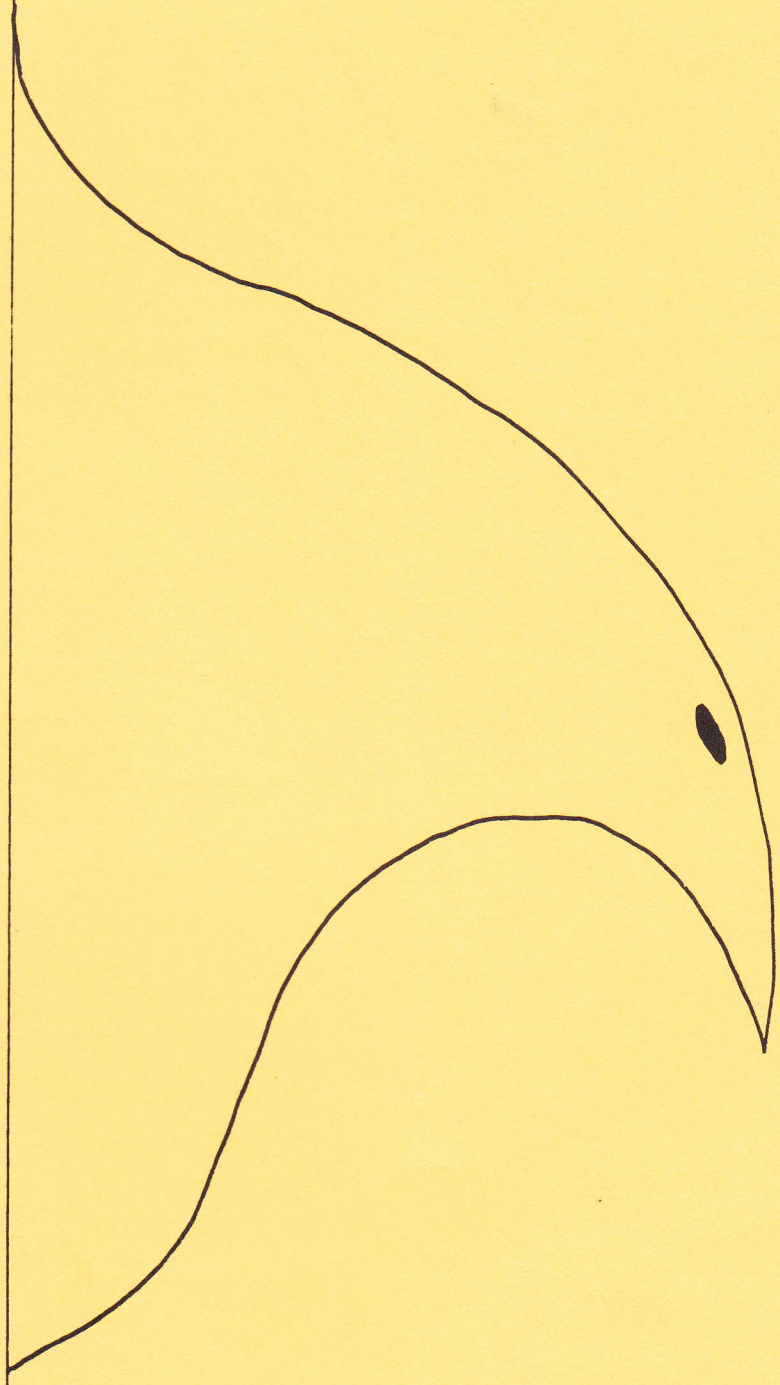


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# ALBATROSS

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ALBATROSS

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STARVING

I

There are men who leave home  
to find some of death, some who live  
in the darkness of snow.

II

There are fields across winter and death,  
sadness and days; men holding walnut shells,  
things fallen from the sky;  
homes in fields of corn falling away like lanterns.

III

Someone is saying your name  
from the middle of roads  
into the light behind your home.  
There are trees fallen there,  
men with arms extended.

IV

The oak fills an immense field with roots.

OLD COUPLE

She tells him  
his skin grates  
like coarse sandpaper.  
She watches his eyes  
reduce her face  
to lines and pores.  
Mirror-reminders of age,  
they push the  
mountain between them.  
As if caught  
by surprise,  
informed  
of some terrible secret.  
As if a bottle of ink  
full of that  
message  
had spilled upon the table.

BURDEN

They leave. They pass on. They die.  
But their residue stays with him.

He will not let anything go. He hauls  
their trinkets to the attic. Drags  
their tools to the barn. Conceals  
their letters in a closet.

The necessary items of lost people's lives  
fill his rooms.

This is his place. These are his things.  
It is essential that everything belong to him.

His house hangs heavy upon the land.

TWO POEMS AFTER PISSARRO

I - LORDSHIP LANE STATION

Aimed at the vague migrations of clouds  
the tall chimneys keep their secrets now  
and the wounded houses sleep like exhausted guards  
dreaming of captive birds, their restless bones.

Now the train coughs like a primitive message,  
its smoke thick and white as feathers or foam  
flying or flooding and thinning and joining the sky  
in a frenzy of loss and energy beyond all words.

The train must be taking you somewhere  
nearer your goal, my daughter, dark-eyed dove,  
leaving behind the holly, the pitched roof,  
the black crucifix of the telegraph pole.

Wherever you go this town will always be here  
except for that patch you carry away in your blood  
circling around and around in repetitive darkness  
touching the underground stations, your personal cross.

II - FESTIVAL AT L'HERMITAGE

Always it seemed the greenest day of all:  
the shadows of our voices green and cool  
as grassblades shaken by our boots. We'd stroll  
between the painted scenes--infantile,  
spooky, compelling in their sexual  
clangor--and your black top hat loomed more tall  
and permanent than the poplars of Chaponval.  
You smiled, you held my hand; and all the while  
I wanted to walk alone--alone!--until  
at last you let me and my heart bowled  
over and over like the wooden ball  
you threw--black, red, black, red--to win me a doll  
that cried real tears.

Now since you fell  
through the green scenery, since you rang the bell,  
old winner, old show-off, dare devil,  
I dream perversely backwards, wanting to call  
Father! Father! Take me to the Festival!



MACHINE. GUN. NEST.

The blood goes through your neck veins with a noise they call  
singing.

Time shatters like bad glass; you are this pinpoint of it.

Your feet rotting inside your boots, the skin of your chest  
festering under the zippers, the waterproof armour,

you sit here, on the hill, a vantage point, at this X or scuffling  
in the earth, which they call a nest. Who chose that word?

Whatever you are you are not an egg, or a bird either.  
Vipers perhaps is what was meant. Who cares now?

That is the main question: who cares? Not these pieces of paper  
from somewhere known as home you fold, unread, in your  
pocket.

Each landscape is a state of mind, he once told me:  
mountains for awe and remoteness, meadows for calm and the  
steam

of the lulled senses. But some views are slippery.  
This place is both beautiful as the sun and full of menace:

dark green, with now and then a red splotch, like a punctured  
vein, white like a flare; stench of the half-eaten.  
Look at it carefully, see what it hides, or it will burst in your  
head.

If you lose your nerve you may die, if you don't lose it  
you may die anyway, the joke goes. What is your nerve?

It is turning the world flat, the moon to a disc you could aim at,  
popping the birds off the fence wire. Delight in accuracy,

no attention paid to results, dead singing, the smear of feathers.  
You know you were more than that, but best to forget it.

There's no slack time for memory here; when you can, you  
plunge  
into some inert woman as into a warm bath; for a moment  
comforting, and of no consequence, like sucking your thumb.

No woman can imagine this. What you do to them  
is therefore incidental, and also your just reward,

though sometimes, in a gap in the action, there's a space  
for the concepts of sister, mother. Like folded laundry. They  
come and go.

But stick your hand up a woman, alive or freshly-  
dead, it is much like a gutted chicken:  
giblets, a body cavity. Killing can be

merely a kind of impatience, at the refusal  
of this to mean anything to you. He told me that.

You wanted to go in sharp and clean like a sword,  
do what they once called battle. Now you just want your life.

There's not much limit to what you would do to get it.  
Justice and mercy are words that happen in cool rooms,  
elsewhere.

Are you your brother's keeper? Yes or no, depending  
what clothes he has on, what hair. There is more than one  
brother.

What you need to contend with now is the hard Easter-  
eggshell blue of the sky, that shows you too clearly

the mass of deep green trees leaning slowly towards you  
as if on the verge of speech, or annunciation.

More likely some break in the fabric of sight, or a sad mistake  
you will hear about in the moment you make it. Some glint of  
reflected light.

That whir in the space where your left hand was is not singing.  
Death is the bird that hatches, is fed, comes flying.

IN HARRISONVILLE MISSOURI

The pastor said  
everytime you breathe  
in and breathe out  
eight people  
go  
to hell.

IN TAMPA

He collects  
soda cans  
in big bags fastened to a  
grocery cart  
he bathes  
every Tuesday  
at the free  
public pool  
he sleeps  
every evening  
on a bench that  
says support  
the Jaycees  
mumbling to himself  
or God  
cursing  
his manhood  
his retirement  
his weeping  
blue eyes.

THE DANCERS

We learn the circles too quickly, too soon  
the ends begin. The music goes by unbroken:  
new partners take hold of our tired hands.  
Around and around the motion leads us;  
with dumb intent the cycle finds a home.  
A gyre cannot wind too far from a bow  
dipped in divinity, swaddled in song,  
each dancer responds. A tune is called in  
three-quarter time: we waltz, we hum, mindless  
to the turns that bring us to our return.

GUESTS

These are the large moments,  
the ones in which you realize that nothing  
can ever be the same again.  
You thought they would not come,  
though you knew their names before,  
and you always left an empty place  
at your table in case they came hungry.  
You could never have imagined their faces,  
their white foreheads bending  
over you, their fine fingers parting  
your chest. Lie back, they say.  
And lie back.

MOTHER OF GOD

It gets too big for you to love it anymore.  
Only you made it that way, slowly.  
Now it has to live alone.  
You use the third person.

It's sad to be left out.  
You talk as though a thousand miles  
were not far enough away.  
When it was scrawny and anonymous  
you thought nurture.  
Then hurricane sized success.

You were not even there  
to own whatever glory or rejection.  
It is already bigger than you will ever be.  
None of that matters.  
You let it go.  
You let it go at that.

ON THE NENANA RIVER

No path led from the cabin  
to a clearing  
or to an abandoned garden.

Inside a sour smell,  
slivers of bone, a shrew's skull,  
bits of fur.

On the sill of the single window  
placed to catch the light  
a mason jar of water from the glacial river,

above the silt  
a bud of light as epitaph:  
*I made this water pure and then departed.*





SEAGULL

Did she hear these broken  
waves striking yellow sea grass  
cold foam flying  
like a dog on uncertain legs leaps  
before the rush of silvered fishes

And did she see  
water darken before  
the storm, tangled nylon  
lines of lesser hunters  
thin mouthed crabs  
panting in blue light

And now feel  
centuries of animals hidden  
beneath mud flats wide and  
brown and unforgiving, swept  
by the magic circling tide of wings  
with a song that said  
this day never ended

SIT THAT STILL

sit that still  
the frog begins to speak again  
puffing his small throat  
his red eyes bulging  
sit that still  
the brown bird comes with twigs  
in and out she weaves them  
making her dark nest  
sit that still  
each tree speaks its own voice  
to the passing wind  
a high thin singing  
sit that still  
enemies pass by blind  
friends come to  
sit with you  
sit that still.

SEEDS

How brief the budding, we know,  
instinctively, inside the seed  
tortured by spring's wet warmth  
to root in April's earth, break  
out in bud, bloom, grow green  
in summer's sun, grow green,  
straight and tall, strong and always up,  
bearing fruit pregnant with purpose,  
bending beneath its ripe rich weight.  
Now, left naked, numb in November, stung  
by frost and snow, we know, we know  
our winter's end, our bleak brown death,  
the seed and the seed inside the seed.

ONCE A SUNFLOWER

Taller than the rose, it has no thorns  
and needs no bed. It climbs an invisible  
trellis and shapes itself in the image  
of its desire. Field after field, higher  
and higher it grows indomitably.  
Its seed is valued, crushed into oil  
to cook French fries and potato chips.  
Can the rose pampered into perfume  
give as much? Seedy, the sunflower droops  
its head. Birds and insects clamor after  
its frowzy disarray. Indistinguishable among  
the once proud pillars that held up  
the sky, it can no longer support itself  
and bows in shame unable to reach its lover.

SPRING FEVER

Your lips say my name  
and doubt about my priesthood  
vanishes.

Because your lips  
make my poems,  
I don't have to prove  
anything.

You simply say,  
Lee is this,  
and I see songs no different,  
and songs say beautiful things,  
and I know this is good,  
and I'll live like a monk,  
in awe.

You make my name  
with your lips,  
sweeping leaves,  
spewing from water spouts  
where, yesterday,  
pigeons sang arias  
in their guttural throats:  
songs I learned,  
which they'd always known.

GROUNDBREAKING

I want to know everything.  
Soil in my hands feels moist  
like mosses and ferns.  
Living beneath guarded looks  
guarantees nothing.  
Absolutely.  
I don't know why  
the sky is light, but...  
I am beginning to see.  
Paper under this pen moves closer.  
The sense of words is more clearly defined  
among the amalgamated waste.  
They've proven  
something can work though it's broken,  
like soil.

ESCUTCHEON

I move in grass and the tall stalks move  
before me so tight that things running  
and sliding unseen between the stems below  
make a map on top.

Like gusts in a wheat field lay down drawings  
of their passing, so too mice and snakes underneath  
send up their symbols.

Adders, Coachwhips, whose mark is the sinuous Kris,  
rise on the stems and grass monkeys, hoppers and chinch-bugs  
make their parabolas. Static and snaps fan out as I move  
and the rocking hypnotic mantis reveals where it lurks.

From me and my kind also is a fitting sign,  
and I lay down the Icon of the Trampler.

We, who cannot seem to pass anything without damage,  
our mark follows us.

Less skillful than the skink making no disturbance  
passing through grasses marrowed with air, behind me  
are seedheads broken, the bent reeds will not close up again,  
condos take root in the turtle burrows, smothered  
are the intricate ants.

From the vole we should borrow its earth-mark, the turd,  
and add to it our crest, the sign of the nest-fouler,  
from which all animals run.



ABANDONED FARMHOUSE

The curtains hand embroidered with crude roses  
are threads,  
the abandoned farmhouse now  
curtained with roses that grow wild.

One night the old porch that surrounded the house  
had a stroke,  
a blood vessel in its brain burst,  
collapsed  
to the clay earth.  
Orange fungi now colonize  
its bones.

The walls have opened their fists  
and let the birds fly in.

AN OLD MAN IN AN OLIVE GROVE  
NEAR SAN DAMIANO ASSISI

The man who wears a black cap  
has rested for a long time.  
He leans on an olive tree.

He was resting in the morning  
when the black dog  
galloped up the dusty road.

He was resting at noon  
when the swallow brought straw  
to build a nest on rafters.

He was resting in the afternoon  
when the monk in sandals  
walked awkwardly down the road.

He was resting when  
the stars came out  
and stroked the backs of lizards.

THE GREAT BLUE HERON

A great blue heron would wait on the sand  
at the place the sandspurs were beginning to climb  
towards light from the shadows of Australian pines.  
The heron would watch a fisherman, his shirt flapping,  
flip a rod to throw a line far out into the surf.  
The heron knew this fisherman was different from him,  
for the fisherman killed for pleasure, not necessity.  
The fisherman would throw away the catch,  
toss on the sand to flop and suffocate.  
When the fisherman left, the heron would eat.  
On this May evening, the sky was grey, a slight  
drizzle, no fish bit the hook. The fisherman,  
frustrated, left grumbling.  
The heron found an old dry fish, sunned for a week,  
the fish too stiff to swallow. The heron  
carried the fish down to the gulf to soften  
by soaking in water. After the first soaking,  
the fish was still too stiff to swallow.  
The heron tried again and again until the fish  
went down his throat, a bulge appeared  
in the feathers of his neck. Another heron,  
a tricolor, that had not learned how to have  
an easier life by living off the waste  
from the pleasures of mankind, struggled  
down the shoreline, flapping his wings, jumping,  
spearing, failing many times.

THE OYSTER CATCHER

I watch the oyster catcher,  
I sit between mangroves,  
I sit where the fiddler crabs  
flash their white claws,  
guarding their entrances  
into the earth's damp mysteries,  
I sit where the grackle  
flashes a glossy, dark blue.

The oyster catcher  
brings red  
to the brown and grey  
oyster shoreline,  
a hibiscus red,  
a magnolia seed red,  
the red of the ibis  
wading in the  
seed covered river,  
the red  
of my unseen blood,  
the pale coral  
of your lips.

NERVES

The nerves screeched and an owl answered.

When the nerves were silent  
bulldozers used the nerves for gasoline.

When the nerves spoke gently,  
hunters used the gentle words  
as bullets to shoot bobcats.

STARFISH

Starfish,  
covered with rainbow hued water,  
crawling,  
wrinkling white sand,  
starfish,  
when severed  
from the knowledge  
stored in the brain,  
you become a holy presence  
and unwrite  
mankind's words.

My eyes turned towards  
the dark behind the stars  
turn away  
from the darkness  
to turn towards you  
and the coral colors  
of many arms.

I kneel,  
my knees sink  
into the oozing white mud.  
I kneel  
in reverence,  
I kneel  
without being deceived  
by the church  
and its false gods.

I attack the words  
that conceal the body  
beneath the body.  
I tear from my flesh  
the words that blind,  
put another existence  
behind my eyes.

I want only  
the first word,  
the word that will keep  
your existence in my nerves.

GULF

Certainly, I am disturbed  
by being so prolific  
with poems about your absence,  
Clizia, Laura, or Beatrice.  
Is it a necessity  
to be deprived  
in order to be inspired  
and receive the gift of lines,  
lines not requiring  
the tedious work  
that lesser poets give  
to their prize winning mediocrities.  
I do not even have to calculate  
a paucity of information  
to make what was commonplace mysterious.

I merely breathed the salt of the gulf  
and you came into existence,  
born a full grown girl,  
suspending all the laws  
that are said to be our guide and burden.  
The gulf created you,  
as when you were actual and present,  
you created the gulf  
and created the fins of the porpoises  
that emerged from beneath the surface.  
You and the gulf  
have a reciprocal relationship.  
I am only an outsider, waiting  
for the benefits of your combined forces.

AFTERNOON OF A FAUN

I know I lived it.  
I know I lived it.  
It was not a dream,  
or a fantasy  
of an alcoholic  
or drugged mind.  
I know I lived it,  
I am not in the least bit,  
crepuscular or symbolist.

It was an asphalt path  
by a railway in Switzerland.  
Out of the bushes  
crawled slugs.  
The slugs left rainbow trails.  
We kneeled  
to touch their backs.  
I touched as if holy water  
in a cathedral fount,  
but the slime  
over which my fingers slid  
had a true holiness  
and did not depend  
on authority, illusion, or legend.

We walked to our farmhouse,  
its white rooster on a woodpile.  
We went by wild swans,  
their fuzzy grey children.  
We took a shower together  
in a stall of raw wood.  
From our bed, we looked  
through geraniums  
at an asparagus garden.

Yvonne Sapia was born in New York City in 1946. She currently makes her home in Florida, where she is Resident Poet at Lake City Community College and editor of Woodrider. Her second collection of poetry, Valentino's Hair, was chosen as the recipient of the Samuel French Morse Poetry Prize by Donald Hall and will be published by Northeastern University Press in Boston in the fall of 1987. In 1983, her first collection of poetry, The Fertile Crescent, was chosen by Peter Meinke as the recipient of the Anhinga Press Florida Chapbook Award. She was a 1986-1987 NEA Fellow in Poetry Writing and has been granted a fellowship from the Florida Fine Arts Council.

We see a move from concerns about the environment in Fertile Crescent to concerns about your family in Valentino's Hair. Could you explain this transformation?

I did engage in writing poems about my family in the early seventies. But they were not working. I even tried to write a novel about my family which was not successful. I'm having greater success now, about fifteen years later. So I did start doing this, but it wasn't working, I wasn't ready. There may be many reasons for this. I may have been too close to the topic; I may not have had anything to say. I know that I hadn't discovered my voice and what I wanted to focus on. The big change came in 1974 when I moved from South to North Florida. I had published some poems while living in South Florida, but when I moved to N. Florida, that's when I really became intrigued with the Florida landscape, the people, the primitive nature of farm life. I began to see first hand some of the symbols that one sees in literature. Rituals that you see in the lives of rural people, for example, the planting of crops and celebrating of the harvest. I got interested in this symbolic landscape and began to write poems about it. These poems also incorporated stories told to me. For example, "Gator Boy" was told to me by a woman who claims this actually occurred in a little town right off the Florida-Georgia line. There are references in some of



the poems which I acquired from people also, like in "Godiva at Olustee," the phrase "deer-tongue" is used.

How has moving to Florida changed your sensibilities?

A lot. It's like two different worlds. I grew up in the Bronx--it's a grey world, it's a dark world. By dark I don't mean evil (so many people associate New York City with crime and violence), but it was a world where you had to seek out light if you wanted it--sky, stars. So I feel like I had come from one type of world into another. I'll never forget when I first came to Florida. When we crossed the Florida border, the first thing that struck me was the light--how bright and white and clean everything looked. So there was a tremendous contrast to me, especially moving down to Miami--when it was very different, 30 years ago. Every once in a while that great difference is striking to me, but it's the kind of thing that's hard to put into words. All this has to do with my own conscious and unconscious battling. To me, New York to some extent represents my unconscious. Miami represents my conscious, because I have more of it readily available. I am trying now to dredge up from the unconscious that past which is so far away.

In one poem you write, "If I return now to his grave/with this poem,/will something fantastic happen?" To what extent do your poems work as miracle-workers?

Writing has been the best therapy for me. That's why I've always been very interested in writing as therapy. And I don't like using the word therapy--exorcism, perhaps? I don't know that it solves anything; I do know it gives me a chance to re-analyze, to respond, to re-trace steps. It makes me feel very cleansed when I write a poem that works and at least conveys an emotional impact--even if it was a small degree of what was initially felt by the original experience.

Can you talk about your "works in progress?"

I'm working on three major projects. The first one is the novel Valentino's Hair, in which I am writing about an experience my father had as a barber in New York City. One day he got a call from a hotel which needed a barber immediately for one of its guests. When he went to the room, he discovered that his customer was to be Rudolph Valentino. My father cut his hair and that was it! The man left. But when my father told me this, it always stuck with me, because I knew who Valentino was, even at the age of six or seven. In the past five years I've tried to write a poem about it, and from the imagination flesh out the whole experience. The poem, however, wasn't working. I abandoned that idea until last year--January 1986--when I took a novel-writing class at FSU. Before the course started, I knew that this was the only idea I had. I am not what I consider a novel-writer, but that's the one novel I think I have in me. Dr. Jerry Stern liked one particular chapter very much, which I had buried in the manuscript. He and the entire class felt it should be chapter one. This chapter haunted me--I was very stubborn; I wanted to keep it as chapter seven. Last summer, I re-worked it into a poem--and that's the ten page narrative poem in my new book. The whole poem is meant to build up to that point where he makes this confession to his daughter:

We all take something from each other./It was then I  
got down on my knees,/began gathering with these hands  
his hair,/hurrying like a mad man,/afraid someone would  
open the door, catch me,/afraid someone would see my un-  
controllable frenzy./One month later he died and I dis-  
covered the magical power of the hair./It was then when  
I used that power./I used it to seduce a woman I loved./  
The woman who didn't love me.

I'm also working on two books of poetry--the poems I am writing

are breaking into these two groups. One is more of a collection of poems about family life, which is more centered on the woman. This is to be called The Female Hotel. The other collection I hope will be a collection about art and abstract notions. This is to be called The Door In the Wall.

What do you feel is the role of the poet?

It really depends on the poet. For me, I would like to be a poet who tells a good story--I wanted to say "who will entertain," but doesn't that sound trite? I am experimenting with narrative and dramatic techniques, because I want a reader to be introduced to another world. I don't think my role is to change society--I have very modest desires. As my role, I want to tell a good, interesting story, something that will touch the reader--and I even hate to say that, because we immediately give it a "soap-opera environment." But I want to leave some kind of impression; I wish I could say that I want the reader to feel changed, but I don't know that that will happen. I do think that a reader who reads my poetry will enter another world.

\* \* \*

#### CONTRIBUTORS

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