

LEAVING APPALOOSA

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WANDA KAYE McNABB



Leaving Appaloosa

A Thesis

Presented for the

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Degree

Austin Peay State University

Wanda Kaye McNabb

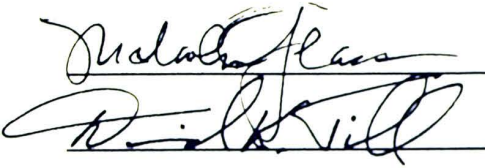
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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents

Mr. Leland Scott McNabb

and

Mrs. Dorothy Futrell McNabb

and my friend

Carol A. Eckert

who have given me invaluable education opportunities,  
support, and guidance through the years.

## ABSTRACT

This work intertwines a collection of short fiction and poetry, centered around a main character, Candy, while focusing on the connection between this main character and those people who touch her life. The poems are written to enhance the storytelling of the short fiction and touch on the lives of the characters presented in the stories. The poems and stories could stand alone as separate creative works but they are intended to go together as complements to each other. This work is an exploration of Candy and of her adventures as she leaves her home town of Appaloosa on a quest to locate her mother. It is also the story of a young girl on the brink of discovering who she really is, in a world that is fraught with loneliness and yearning.



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## INTRODUCTION

“Leaving Appaloosa,” a series of poems and short stories, was written with a sense of storytelling in mind. This collection of stories and poems tells a story of a young girl’s life and the people and characters who are a vital part of that life. The poems are meant to be an examination of certain aspects of the characters and events in the stories. This further examination leads to more full-bodied characterization as presented through two different genres. Each poem is intended to “roll into” the next, like a wave cascading on a beach.

The events and people which shape a life are not always pleasant but often reverberate with a brutal honesty and pathos. Above all, there is an underlying passion which flows through the poems and stories like an underground river; a passion not always obvious, but one which is reflected by the surface of the writing.

This collection is a fictionalized account of a young girl’s life; a life touched by madness, loneliness, abuse and loss. The atmosphere surrounding this life is sometimes filled with fire, humor and great beauty. Often there is an emptiness which lingers over the page and enters the reader’s soul.

## Appaloosa Before The Fall

Winter nights before the fall  
were quiet as a lone car  
speeding past thousands  
of stars. A twig snapped by  
a raccoon the only sound  
for an hour, the wind's howl  
the only voice. Before the fall  
the town of Appaloosa covered  
itself in blind faith . Appaloosa sat  
for weeks surrounded by lazy  
angels. At every gate and door  
an angel waited like a gargoyle.  
No angel announced the fires that  
would engulf the town. Stony-eyed,  
the angels watched the townsfolk  
fight the blaze. Icy lips offered no salvation.  
Angel's wings uplifted no souls.



## Appaloosa

The Baptist church tower  
leans to one side from the  
storm two years ago.

The clock on the Courthouse  
has stopped at 2.

Yesterday's fire has scorched  
a city block; the bank, the Dollar  
Store and Mott's grocery.

Hay market town singed  
with fire, I see your secrets  
piled high outside your doorways,  
like dead leaves waiting to decay.

Despicable town that sought  
to hide my father's name behind  
brick walls, know my hands have  
marred your once lovely surface.

## The Butcher

Day after day the butcher  
opens his shop, touches  
the meat, slices along the  
grain. Day after day he  
cleans the counter, polishes  
the knives, adjusts the ham  
hanging in the window.

Blood and guts, brains and  
heart, knuckles and joints  
displayed on the table.

Day after day the girl  
watches the carnage, waits  
for a sign to enter, counts  
the customers, smokes  
a cigarette.

The butcher opens his door  
unaware that maybe this time  
he will hack his last side  
of beef, discover he's a father,  
make his final sale.



## Preacher

This preacher is drawn by  
shiny things - gold and light,  
the ethereal, all things bright  
and pure, a young girl's  
blonde tresses.

Day after day he says his  
"Our Fathers" and closes  
with an "Amen."

His power over the meek  
is great and his promises  
of a better life are uttered  
throughout the day. "Trust  
in the Lord and ye shall be  
saved. Build your faith upon  
His word. Offer up your heart  
to God with the innocence  
of a child. " He lures the young  
girl to him with his divine talk  
and promises. Making love to  
the innocent brings him one step  
closer to omnipotence.

## The Barn

Brown scarred walls hold voices captive  
like a sponge that soaks up water. Bits  
of wood are gnawed off by termites and  
bore beetles. There are strong smells of  
straw mixed with animal dung; sunlight  
filters through the spaces between the planks.  
A salt block sits in the corner, leaning  
to one side, falling into the pile of discarded  
corncobs. It is here that my grandfather  
blackened my grandmother's eyes, shod  
the horse, and whipped me with his belt.  
This is the house of memory and blood,  
of water and grain and cold mornings  
with visible breath.

## Appaloosa County

The fires would be raging still in Appaloosa County. The wind was picking up now. Candy knew the distance from the barn to the town of Appaloosa. She had measured it often. The butcher had lived there and the preacher too. She had secretly hoped the butcher was not her father. There was something so disgusting about hacking up raw meat, scraping away the hair and preparing the carcass. She hoped she did not have that profession lingering in her gene pool, hoped she would never have the desire to set up a butcher shop and make her living off of death

Candy's head had these funny tingling sensations, like electrodes were shooting volts into her brain. They didn't hurt, just felt weird. All day long she had these tingling sensations and this feeling of not being alive, somehow stiff and charred, outside of the empty barn, waiting. Candy didn't know who her father was. Was she the preacher's daughter, or the daughter of Bill Mundy, the butcher? Either way, they were both insignificant now and out of her life. Candy felt dead inside and empty. Thinking about her father couldn't hurt her any longer if she removed herself from the pain; if she chose not to feel.

Her mother had said Candy had a father, a man named Edsel. She later found out that was the name of a very old car. How could her mother have lied to her like that? Candy felt of her hair, running her fingers through the long strands, like she was straightening the head of a mop before bleaching it. She liked to bleach her mop heads because they lasted longer when she did. Her hair was a



natural color though, the color of gold. Not many people had gold hair. The preacher had said her hair was the color of an angel's, but then preachers were always seeing something significant in the ordinary. Maybe the preacher had seen something special in her mother, too. Candy's mother didn't have gold hair, but she did have a gold tooth. Shiny things attracted preachers. From the beginning of time preachers had been attracted to golden images, light, coins.

She had been here all day, in front of this barn, an old building built at the turn of the century. She'd been waiting for him to come and knew he would. It was a matter of time. She felt charred, but there was no reason to. Her clothes were not disheveled and her jumper had hardly a wrinkle. Her skin did have a dry quality though, like the layers could be peeled off in thin strips, like shavings that land in a pile the color of white ash. Her mouth was dry and its inside had a metal tinge to it, a taste her mother had complained of when she had ovarian cancer and went for treatment. Candy's mother should have waited and not wasted her money since she went crazy anyway. Death would have been better than insanity.

Was her father the preacher or the butcher? Did her mother know for sure? Was the ovarian cancer the result of the nasty penis, some dirty disease-ridden penis that planted the cancer so that it would grow and overcome her mother? These were idle thoughts, because now it didn't matter. The two men were part of a past that should be forgotten, part of a quest that failed. The penis

was insignificant now, nothing more than deteriorating flesh against a peach-colored sky. The sky was particularly beautiful at mid-afternoon.

This barn had been her hide-out. It had belonged to her grandparents and now it belonged to her, the one place where she could find solitude, where she could search her soul and drive out the truth. She could stand inside its misshapen walls and rail at the world, could spill her heart and leave it lying on the straw to mix with the animal dung. No one would know her sadness. At least sadness was a feeling, not like now. The emptiness clung to Candy's fingertips, eyelashes, and rested on her eardrums. She couldn't hear the beat of her own heart when she placed her hand over her ear. But, it was beautiful, the sky.

She hadn't thought about her future, hadn't made plans. She'd been busy sorting, processing, grieving over the past. Now, her past, present and future were meeting for the first time inside of her. Candy felt stupid. She'd been unable to discover which man had impregnated her mother. She'd spent all that time talking on the phone, trying to get blood types to match them to hers. It was just stupid.

She could smell the smoke as the wind whipped at the bottom of her jumper, making it flap like a frantic bird. She hadn't been with a man yet, hadn't wanted to end up like her mother. When she thought about her life, it felt like she was looking at a painting. In the painting, one lone figure stood in the middle of a large field of wheat. The figure blended in with the wheat, gold against gold, side by side. Eventually Candy thought the figure would be swallowed up by the

wheat, harvested and then used to make bread. If she was a loaf of bread she might mean something to somebody.

This sort of thinking had never gotten her anywhere. She wasn't ugly, and had been a runner up at the Appaloosa Fairest of the Fair Contest last year. The preacher had said she was beautiful. But, not beautiful enough to admit she was his. Candy crumpled to the ground and drew her knees up to her chin. She held her legs close to her body, as tightly as she could. She wasn't cold, just needed human contact, needed to feel skin against skin.

Candy's watch showed 4:00 in the afternoon. The cheerleaders would have begun practice at 4:00, except they would be snug in their homes trying to escape the violence that had just occurred. Candy couldn't see how anyone could deny the brilliance of Deke's plan to rob the bank, that is, if he actually carried it out. Candy had done her part and set the fires to draw the police and everyone out of town. She wore white gloves to drive Deke's car so that she wouldn't be identified. Even though Deke was Candy's boyfriend, he still was not to be trusted. Deke had a hollow center where there should be a soul. He was driven to perform mean things, like a dog driven to beg for food.

Candy remembered the day Deke first told her about his plans to wipe out the bank and burn the city block it stood on. Candy had been frightened at first, that she was hearing such plans come from her own boyfriend. Then, the more angry she became about her father's true identity, the more exciting Deke's plans became. She and Deke truly bonded when he agreed to kill the preacher and the



butcher for her. Candy insisted that those two were not worth killing and persuaded him not to slash their throats with a butcher knife. Knowing that Deke would risk his own life for her happiness gave Candy a security which she had not known. Even with Deke by her side she had felt empty though, not filled with love like other girls who had boyfriends. Neither one of the men would own up to being her father. Candy wondered if her real father was still out there, alive and free.

Deke would surely be caught for the robbery. That much Candy knew. He had promised not to reveal her identity or role in the plan. He said if he was anything, he was loyal. Candy believed him. Deke was brave and would take the rap alone, as he did most everything. Candy didn't know why Deke had let her in on his scheme to rob the bank. Of course he wanted her help in diverting the police and the fire department. But, other than that, she didn't understand why he had trusted her with the rest of the plans. Deke had told her about his plans, down to the last detail of his escape route and everything. Deke, with his perfectly straight teeth and silken black curls.

"I'll wait at the barn for you," said Candy.

"They won't have any reason to suspect you," said Deke.

"Won't they want me for questioning?" asked Candy.

"They'll probably think I murdered you or tied you up somewhere," said Deke.

"What if somebody sees me driving your car?" asked Candy.



"This plan isn't without risk," said Deke.

"That's what I like about it, " said Candy. "Anyway, what have I got to lose?"

"Nothing, baby. You're not going to lose because you're on the winning team. Besides, I've got a long black wig for you to wear. Everybody will think its me driving the car, not you," said Deke.

According to Deke's plan, Candy was supposed to set enough fires to draw the fire department and most of the police force out of town. Then, while everyone was out battling the fires, Deke would rob the bank and set fire to it and the granary and clothing store that stood nearby. Candy would leave Deke's car five miles away from the barn at the abandoned mine where her grandfather used to work. Of course, Candy didn't know everything that actually happened, but she had done her part and set the fires as Deke had requested. She hadn't stayed around to find out how Deke's part of the plan played out.

Candy thought it was regrettable that Deke hadn't killed the preacher and the butcher. He got real pleasure out of the act of killing. Candy could have stood idly by as Deke committed the deed. She had felt nothing inside for the two men as he told her of his plan to murder them for her, no remorse, no compassion. Candy feared being caught for murder. She'd never murdered anyone and she never intended to see the inside of a jail. Maybe her real father had been Stanley Roberts. He had eluded the police for ten years before finally being caught and sent to the penitentiary. He was an arsonist. He set the fire that burned down

Hopson's Hotel on Cherry Street. That fire killed fifteen people. She'd seen him once at the show, lurking outside, trying to pick up twelve year old girls. He'd given her a look like he recognized her, then he licked his big lips with his tongue, like she'd fall for that kind of thing.

Maybe that was what made her so hollow inside. She was just like him. Maybe his penis had done the deed, without feeling or caring about the consequence. Just like she had set the fires outside of town to draw the police and fire department away from Deke, away from the bank. Candy wasn't supposed to set so many fires. She set those fires because she wanted to destroy Appaloosa and everything in it. She hadn't told Deke there might not be any escape route; that she set fires along the road that he had planned to use to make his getaway. She hadn't lied to him, just never told.

If Deke didn't get out, there would be another boy, another man, trying to escape Appaloosa County, escape the fire. Maybe Stanley Roberts would instinctively find her and she would surrender to his swollen lips and extended tongue; surrender to his cold touch and eyes of ice. If she could kill Stanley Roberts then she could find her way out of Appaloosa County, could leave the barn to the fire, and Stanley Roberts, too.

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Candy spent the night at the barn watching the fires encroach upon her. The night sky had an apocalyptic glow. No cars had gone past since noon. No man had come to seduce her or be killed; no Stanley Roberts and no Deke. She

marveled at her good fortune much as she had marveled at the birth of a calf one fall afternoon, eleven years ago. The birth had happened at this very barn. Her Grandpa had said for her to go inside the house and she had pretended to, but when she got outside of the barn she peeked through the slats. She had been six. There had been no birthday party that year. Her mother had not been able to come. Not able, what a joke.

Candy thought then that the birth of the calf had been God's gift for her birthday. She peered through the opening between the slats trying to see the calf's face. The light was dim inside the barn and her grandpa was angry at the calf. He swung his arms hard, like he was fighting an imaginary person, and then he went for his shovel that he'd used earlier to clean the stall. He swung down hard on the calf's head, over and over again, as the calf bellowed and bellowed, until it couldn't stand the pain of the final silencing blow. Candy stood mesmerized by the violence, in shock. Her birthday present was dead. She felt nothing except a great trembling growing inside her. She'd had a birthday present but God wouldn't allow it to live.

"I killed the damned thing because it didn't have no eyes, mother," said grandpa Clifford at the kitchen table as he shoveled in his beans and cornbread. "Ain't nothing ought to live like that and you know it," he said.

Candy and her Grandma had just looked at him like he was from Mars or somewhere not fit for human beings. It was a hard thing to endure, Grandpa's callous nature. Grandpa had said he was helping Mr. Charles Darwin by killing



the calf, before it was killed by its own kind. Mr. Charles Darwin came up a lot in Grandpa's conversations. Grandpa fancied himself a naturalist, although the only experiments he did were on cross-breeding of species and he never had any successes that Candy knew of.

Her grandpa Clifford was a lot like a mad scientist. Candy tried not to think much about her life then, away from her mother. Her mother was always off having one of her nervous breakdowns anyway. That's where she was now, at Bedford's Sanitarium in Phoenix.

Her mother was beautiful and mad, a schizophrenic. Her name was Ava Thompson. In her youth, Ava had wanted to be an opera singer, or so Candy's Grandma had said. But, when she became pregnant, Grandpa kicked her out of the house. He said he never meant to kick her out for long, just long enough for her to learn her lesson. He figured she'd come groveling back, but mother wasn't the groveling kind. Mother wasn't any kind at all, except the schizophrenic kind. Candy thought her mother was one of Grandpa's experiments gone haywire, just another mad scientist's attempt at cross-breeding.

Candy sat down once and made a list of symptoms her mother had for the doctors. She revised the list over and over in her mind. The older she became, the more the list began to look like a movie plot. She had gone over the list so many times, that it was quite easy to recite. It began like this:

Ava pretends she hears voices. She can be talking to you and all of a sudden she turns her head and starts talking to someone who isn't there.



Ava thinks she is a member of the FBI.

Ava believes people know she is a member of the FBI and they are out to get her for her knowledge about the government.

Ava has two telephones. One is the family phone, located in the kitchen which is bugged. The other phone, which is poisonous to the touch, is located in Ava's bedroom and is a direct hot line to the President. The only reason she hasn't died from touching this phone is that she has built up an immunity to it.

She believes Candy to be her dead sister's child, Rosemary. She cannot love Rosemary since she did not bear her; her sister did. Also, how can she love something that has kept her from a successful career.

It was almost dawn now. A lot had been accomplished, and more would be. But nothing could get done as long as Candy dwelled in the past. Grandma always said the past prevented a lot of people from living the present.

"Your mother could have been that opera singer, if she'd just gotten on with her life," Grandma said. "If she'd just picked herself up and gone on."

The sun was up and shone full force on Candy's face. It felt good to be warm again, to see the trees and the grass were not burned, and the barn still standing. Everything did look slanted though, especially the barn, and the sky toward the town of Appaloosa was still billowing with smoke. The fires would be extinguished soon, now that the wind wasn't blowing. Candy would pick herself

up and go on, whether any man came for her or not; with or without a father, mother or love.

She'd go to work until she could get enough money together to get to Phoenix. She walked behind the barn to the creek to wash up. The water was cold, but the spring was clean. Her body ached for a lover. It was her time to be with someone. Deke would have been too rough. It was in his nature to be violent.

Candy stripped her clothes away and waded into the creek, not where the spring was bubbling, because a person could sink down in the sand there and die. The body would not be recovered because it would go to a bubbling underground place. She'd heard of that happening to folks, just disappearing without a trace.

She'd been warned by her Grandma not to touch herself, but she was certain everyone her age was doing it. It was so wonderful to feel the water lapping against her body, like a larger-than-life womb, reminding her of her sex, of being a woman. As she went under the water completely, she imagined herself receiving nourishment; being filled with everything she needed. It almost worked. But she had to come up for air. She couldn't stay under for long, couldn't receive the cold nourishment of an unloving womb. She had to feel the warmth of human flesh against her own, had to feel the rhythm of take and give, take and give. She was desperate to receive this thing others called love. Had her mother felt this way when she gave up her career to lie with a man?

Candy walked out of the water and lay down in the grass, completely nude. She had never experienced this freedom before, being outside and nude. She could fantasize a dream lover. She didn't know if it would work or not, didn't know if it would replace the emptiness. She couldn't seem to see a face in her fantasy. There was no face, only a body, inhuman and cold. And then darkness.

The long sleep had engulfed her and she awoke to a mid-day sun. She hadn't meant to delay the adventure with this sort of fantasizing. She didn't remember if she had enjoyed the faceless stranger. It all seemed far away. She quickly dressed and walked around to the front of the barn. Deke hadn't made it, or he'd been arrested. Either way, he wouldn't turn her in to the police. He was everything but a squeal. Candy had a choice to make. She could either stay at the barn and wait for Deke or she could walk away from everything she had experienced so far and start a new life.

As she walked down the dirt lane, away from the barn, to the main road, Candy knew she would mold her new life carefully. The old life would become a bad dream. She felt extreme hunger in her belly. It was a stabbing pain which would not subside. She walked for an hour before a black Ford pickup truck pulled up beside her. Candy looked at the man behind the wheel, studied his face as he offered her a ride. He was middle aged, tan and blonde. His blue eyes reminded her of Deke's, only kinder.

"Where you going mister?" Candy asked.



"To Deedville," he said.

"Can I ride a while?" asked Candy.

"You're too pretty to walk," he said.

Candy climbed into his truck. The interior was worn, and much of the vinyl was cracked. He was on his way to Deedville to sell some hogs. They were fat and unaware of their collective fate as they rooted around in the pickup bed for stray kernels of corn. The man, named Tray, was impressed that Candy admired his smelly hogs. All she could think about as she rode in the truck was crisp bacon, freshly fried, on a plate filled with eggs and toast. She talked to Tray about the hogs, how some people thought that hogs were as smart as humans, but that she didn't find it repulsive to eat hog meat, like some folks did. Candy would not be repulsed by human flesh, prepared the right way.

Candy wanted something to jump out at her to signal her that this was the spot where she got off, but no signal came. This was a monotonous beginning to her new life, but at least it was a beginning. Candy would try to put her past behind her, a past that now seemed as cracked as the vinyl of Tray's upholstery. Round and round went the wheels of Tray's truck, past farmhouses, past creeks, past open pastures. This was the trail to Candy's future. Instead of riding in a chariot Candy rode in a rattle trap truck down a hogshead trail. Candy hoped she wouldn't always be waiting for the crumbs that others tossed her way. She prayed she wouldn't miss her destiny and take the wrong trail, wouldn't lose her mind like her mother.

## On Being Born

Birthed head first into

a room full of farmers.

No champagne to drink

or kiss for the mother.

No sighs of relief for a life.

One more meal to be found.

More cloth to be bought.

Just another bastard laid

next to a cold forty five.



## Candy's Birthday

On the afternoon of her sixth birthday

Candy watched her grandfather through

the slats in the old barn as he bashed in

the head of her blind calf: blood splattered

walls, metal against skull bone, eyes wide open.

Time could not undo the memory; smell of

the salt block and sawdust, screams of the young,

smoke-filled sky from tobacco barns stinging her nose.

He said nothing at the dinner table that night except

"Mother you know nothing ought to live like that."

## Purgatory

In this glass town, I move silently  
on the edge of a stranger, propelled  
by the wind, eyes straight ahead.  
Shadows stick to the trees,  
bleed out the light, linger  
over the bark like hungry termites.  
I watch a plastic cup dance and tap  
down its path; the dance an empty  
triumph, the tap an emptier percussion.  
A musk-scented dirty man wants to  
know if I have the time, the time, do  
I know it? I say it is winter.

## Old Man Around Midnight

I still hear that old man  
laugh as I walk past  
a closet door - he  
waits inside ready to  
spring forward - fourteen  
years of not forgetting  
his buried-in-his-belly laugh.  
I still hear him growl and  
whistle for my dog - threaten  
to kill the dog - if I don't  
accept his touch. I still feel  
him pin me down under the  
sheets - still feel the pain  
of his hands, like gnarled  
pieces of wood, let loose on me  
around midnight.

## Convertible Hair Sky

On the night great-grandmother died  
Hollywood celebrated the life of  
Cecil B. DeMille. I watched with  
the men in our brown TV room;  
tried not to think of her suffering,  
no more tea cakes or carefully  
sewn doll clothes. Her daughter  
clung to her, watched, waited for  
her release, prayed for it.  
My great grandfather had already  
lost her, had given her up to Him.  
Her son's eyes were dull with her pain.  
The house was filled with the cancer  
that consumed her, the guilt I felt at  
loving her too little, the anger of the  
abandoned, left to muddle through.  
Only the Convertible Hair Sky was  
excited to hear she was leaving us.  
It churned and raced, black clouds  
forming a chariot to carry her soul up  
to heaven.

## The Hogshead Trail

Tray began to get on Candy's nerves the longer she had to ride in his smelly truck. She wanted a diversion from the smell, the twang in Tray's voice, the endless miles of farm land.

"That farm land over there was deeded to Ellen Minor on the day of her wedding but she and her fiancée were killed on the way to the church, " said Tray, "along with her father who deeded the land to her.

"Is there a point to this?" asked Candy.

"Well, when they all died, they didn't have a will so everything went to the state," said Tray.

"Did you think you should have gotten it?" asked Candy.

"No ma'am," said Tray, " I'm just saying its a shame. That's prime farmland."

Candy thought it was just her luck to be placing her quest for a new life in the hands of a country bumpkin. All this talk of land and farming and who deeded what property to whom was starting to get to her. She tried to concentrate on the hum of the tires or find a rock and roll station but Tray's radio was full of static. The only station that came in clearly was WKBL Country 99.9. Candy felt that the only station worse than no station was WKBL. Tray's voice was beginning to get louder and tinnier, and it began to sound a little bit like a country alien. Even the hogs were starting to grunt and squeal in a restless manner, and had been steadily getting louder and louder.



"Say, Tray, do you think we could stop a minute?" asked Candy.

"Well, I've got an appointment with a man in Deedville," said Tray.

"I don't want to stop for long," said Candy.

"These hogs are liable to get restless," said Tray.

"Come on, Tray, I've got to go to the bathroom," said Candy.

"Oh, well, sure thing, ma'am," said Tray.

Tray stopped the truck by a thickly wooded area. Candy had to take her time rubbing and unwinding her legs which had fallen asleep as she was riding.

"I sure wish you'd go with me," said Candy.

"I don't need to go, ma'am," said Tray.

"I wish you'd stop calling me ma'am, it makes me feel like I'm a hundred years old," said Candy.

"Well, you're not," said Tray.

"Call me Blanche," said Candy.

"That's a pretty name," said Tray.

"Blanche DuBois," said Candy.

"Sounds foreign," said Tray.

"Please come with me, Tray," said Candy. "I'm afraid."

"Nothin to be afraid of," said Tray.

"I'm afraid of snakes," said Candy.

"Don't have to go Miss Blanche," said Tray. "I guess I could come with you though."

"Don't bother," said Candy. "Got a cigarette?"

Candy lit her cigarette, left Tray sitting in the truck and walked across the ditch to the edge of the woods. At first she thought she would take Tray with her and make out with him. She would kiss him and allow him to make a few advances, like she had allowed Deke. Then, he would be hers. Men liked foreplay better than regular sex, that's what Deke had said. They don't have to do anything but enjoy themselves. There's no performance anxiety. She hadn't let Deke make love to her. She wanted control over him, wanted him to desire her past human endurance. As Candy turned back to look at Tray she heard the hogs grunt gratefully. They were glad for the rest since they had been on the road for over an hour. They looked at Candy with hopeful eyes. She could soon have the power to save them, should she choose. She didn't feel anything for the hogs though, and she didn't feel anything for Tray. She couldn't make out with Tray just because she was bored.

Candy imagined what it would have been like if Tray had come with her into the woods. He would have walked with her through the brush to an area secluded from view of the road. Candy would have pressed herself against him and unzipped his pants. The grass wouldn't be wet, because it had been a dry summer. The wind would have blown her hair, which glimmered in the light like a golden fleece. The grass would have hugged her shoes, like ancestors hug a grave. In Candy's fantasy everything would have been in slow motion like it

appears to be in a hair commercial. In the fantasy, Candy would talk to break the ice.

"So, Tray, how much per pound do you get for those hogs?" she would ask.

"Don't talk about them now...not now," he'd say.

Candy could hear the call of a Mockingbird nearby. She revered Mockingbirds and thought they were the instruments of angels. She had forbidden Deke to kill a Mockingbird by telling him they were a part of her religious beliefs. Deke didn't respect much, but he did respect religion. How strange for the angels to be watching her fantasy with Tray, watching her and judging.

When it was all over, Tray would have looked at her with grateful eyes, just as the hogs had looked at her when she had gotten the truck to stop.

Candy knew she had to go back to the truck but she wanted to spend more time by the creek. She could lose her thoughts skipping rocks when she was near water. One time she fantasized for two hours and completely lost touch with reality just by standing by the water, skipping rocks. Candy made her way back to Tray's truck. She left the Mockingbird angels singing on a branch down by the creek. There was a nest there with four baby Mockingbirds in it. Candy hoped both parents would take care of the baby birds. They wouldn't survive without at least one parent. Candy thought Tray would be ready to leave by now.

She hadn't meant to spend so long out in the woods, hadn't meant to delay Tray or take advantage of his kindness.

"I hope this doesn't make you late for your appointment," said Candy, as she got back into Tray's truck.

"Miss Blanche, I'm the happiest man alive," said Tray. "I've got the best hogs in Caldwell county."

"I hope this drought doesn't last much longer," said Candy.

"Appaloosa County's pretty near burned up," said Tray.

"I heard about that," said Candy.

"The news said the police caught the fellow responsible."

"Was there just one guy that did it?"

"That's what they say," said Tray. "They hadn't quite figured it out but they believe he acted alone."

Candy and Tray rode the rest of the way in silence to Bingham City. Even the hogs' squeals and grunts were more subdued, as if they too rode submissively toward their fate.

"Do you need any money, or can I buy your dinner?" Tray asked when he let her out of the truck at the Bingham City Diner.

She and her grandpa had stopped here on one of their many rides. Grandpa was a coal miner, before he turned naturalist, and had taken Candy through the surrounding counties in his old blue pickup truck. They'd stopped at this diner before. He used to bribe her for sexual favors by promising her food.



When a girl is young and hungry, Charles Darwin's survival of the fittest just takes over.

Tray had hardly said a word after Candy returned from the brush. He'd opened the truck door for her and acted like he somehow knew what he had missed by not accompanying her. Now he was wanting to buy her dinner. She wanted that plate of bacon and eggs bad enough to take the twenty dollars he handed her. If she'd had her own money, she wouldn't have taken his. She wasn't a whore, just a desperate girl.

He wasn't able to stay and eat dinner with her since he had that pressing appointment with the hog buyer. Still, the bacon and eggs were mighty good, and there were no hogs eyes staring back at her accusingly. As she finished the biscuits and gravy she thought about a plan that might gain her employment. She needed a job and the diner would be a good place. She'd had to wait thirty minutes for her dinner, good as it was.

"I had to wait thirty minutes for my dinner, mister," Candy said to the cashier.

"I'm real sorry miss, but I'm short around here," he said. "Not enough money in and out to hire anybody either."

"I really need a place to stay," said Candy. "I saw the for rent sign in your window. I could work for you and build up your business if you'll let me."

"I don't know how you plan to do that. This place's been dead for ten years. Ain't hardly anything living that comes in here anymore. Not anything with teeth anyways."

He thought this last line was real amusing and roared with laughter. Candy wasn't familiar with people who laughed out loud and thought he sounded like a hyena she'd heard on one of those nature shows on television. He was a repulsive little man with a big beer belly. He obviously hadn't seen a pretty girl in a while either, because he kept looking at Candy's breasts, much like a pirate would look at an expensive necklace. She'd known about this part of man's nature ever since she was a little girl. It was as natural for a man to look at her breasts as it was for him to adjust his balls. No thought was necessary.

"Will you hire me or not, mister?" she asked.

"How old are you?"

"I'm old enough to know better than to work for you," she said, hoping she hadn't pissed him off.

"You can start today, but it's against my better judgment," he said. "And my name is Big L, just so you know."

Big L showed Candy to a room at the top of the stairs.

"This is the room," said Big L.

"Well, maybe I could stay until I get on my feet," said Candy.

The room had its own private entrance in the back. She'd never had a room with its own private entrance. The curtains had tiny brown teapots on them.

It was a fashion statement only Big L could appreciate. The whole room reeked of cheap, but it would be warm in winter here on the second floor.

"I'm only here until I get you back on your feet Big L," Candy said, "so don't get used to it."

Big L plodded down the steps after instructing Candy on her duties. She'd be responsible for all of the cleaning, dishwashing and some of the cooking until she could get an idea of how the business was run. Then he'd try her on waitressing. Bingham City was a small place. There wasn't much money to be made here. But, it was a start. Those who were successful weren't that way because of excessive talent anyway. Talent had nothing to do with it. Besides she knew she was talented. Deke had said she was the most talented girl in Appaloosa County. In a world where men held the power, romantic talent alone made her a voice to be reckoned with.

The past two days had been a lifetime. At the end of the day, Candy ate her dinner in the kitchen by herself. Big L didn't live there with her, since he had his own place. This was hers. She could raid the refrigerator whenever she wanted to and no one would say anything. Big L had said to make herself at home. At times like these she wanted a friend to share a meal with her. She'd never had a female friend, except for the class fool, Becky Johnson. Becky not only ate paste and crayolas, she was also slightly retarded. Anyway, the relationship was short-lived. No girls had wanted to get to know Candy, or maybe they were just jealous of the attention she got from boys. Whenever she tried to



hang out with girls, they left her. They were always leaving her places. If they went to Suzie's Café for lunch, she'd be left to walk back to Appaloosa High by herself. She would make it one of her goals while she was here at Bingham City to acquire a girl friend.

Candy climbed the stairs to her new bedroom. Each step creaked under her weight, like the steps out of a horror movie. Her life would be different soon. She'd make herself a future, like her Grandma had told her she could. When she reached the top of the steps, she turned and looked down into the empty diner. For a second she longed for Tray or Deke or Grandpa, or any man who was lonely, to need her. She wanted someone to hold her. She removed her clothes and thought of Tray, and how kind he had been. As she pulled back the covers on her new bed, the emptiness returned. She would love to have a friend to cuddle up next to in bed, someone to read to her and rub her back so she could sleep.

Sometimes at night, in the half-light the curtains would take on the appearance of a hundred watching faces. She looked out her window and saw a star shoot across the sky. She wondered if it was significant, like an omen, or just a part of Mr. Darwin's nature. Either way, there was no one here to share it with. There was no human being beside her. There was only the darkness of Bingham City; population of two thousand.



## Death

I met death in a dream  
as I crawled under a canopy  
of dried white bones; crawled  
like the snake in the desert.

The rib bones clinked in the wind  
while I crawled across the sand,  
sand in my mouth, stuck in the  
corners of my eyes.

I was stopped by death who was  
disguised as a scorpion. He left  
me writhing on the floor of the desert,  
my hand swollen from his bite. He  
left me to become one with the air,  
the sand, the bones.

## Spirit

She saw his ghost run  
into her kitchen, like he  
just came in from the barn,  
where he saw a snake or  
the devil.

He was in her kitchen,  
stopped dead; he stared  
hard, breathed his cold  
presence all over her kitchen,  
all over her.

She stood frozen, in his  
world, out of hers; she  
didn't want to see the one  
who pursued his spirit,  
didn't want to see the one  
who longed to capture his  
brown skin and tattered  
overalls in a knapsack.

## Riding the Flatboat

I dreamed about a flatboat;  
no sides, just flat with a single  
pole dead center, surrounded  
by murky green water.

I saw no fish jump.

I thought I saw you in the water,  
black hair glistening, blue eyes  
staring, pleading with me to  
save you - I thought I saw your  
face, but it was only my reflection,  
green and solemn, silently watching.

I longed to touch you, take your  
long fingers and memorize the  
shape of the fingertips, touch  
my eyelashes to your cheek.

## This Old Blue Truck

This old blue truck now lies  
deserted with one fender stuck  
firmly in the ground.

The paint has faded, the body  
corroded and the leather seats  
rest in tatters; shreds of an ill-  
sewn past.

Grandfather took me on summer days  
down to the mines, coal dust between  
my thighs, past all endurance on endless  
rides in this old blue truck.

This old blue truck with its rusted out  
bed now lingers discarded. This enemy  
still stinks long after death.



## Without Tarp

Aunt Euple was big-mouthed when I first met her. She had plenty to say about the minister of the Little Hope Baptist church, plenty about his views on dancing, drinking and ministering. She didn't like the way he was available for a closed-door meeting with the younger women, but needed to preach a funeral whenever she needed him. She didn't like his liberal views on politics, when Lord knows he was supposed to be a Baptist. She didn't care for the fact that he was related to the man who did the voice-over for Barney the dinosaur, and she especially hated the Preacher because he brought that Barney dinosaur man to the church and wasted her good money on a reception.

Aunt Euple was not impressed  
by the purple dinosaur man  
who ate sausage balls like  
there was no tomorrow,  
autographed church bulletins  
and wee wee'd behind the well  
house next to the graveyard.  
Everyone knew he did it and if  
they didn't, Euple told them.  
The Preacher acted like  
bringing a voice-over would  
raise his status, make the  
good Baptists shell out some  
more cash to front the missionary  
work in Zaire. Euple and some of  
her hard-shell friends said it  
wouldn't work, said the Preacher  
was a fake, said it ran in the family,  
but the do-gooders wouldn't listen,  
felt the Lord calling, gave Him their  
all and the Preacher their bank account.  
The Preacher left Little Hope in the dead

of night, in his blue Mercedes with the wind at his back. Barney the dinosaur man was later seen driving a dump truck without tarp.

## Ava

Ava sleeps in her bed surrounded  
by white sheets, white walls, white  
sounds - an innocent woman  
trapped by her mind.

She could have been an opera singer  
if only the FBI hadn't stalked her,  
made her pregnant, stolen her  
thoughts.

She had a daughter, named Candy,  
or someone had her, maybe a  
stranger, an Ava that lived in  
another time, who occupied another  
body, thought different thoughts.

Now, Ava sits on the front porch  
of a too white building, dressed  
in a white hospital gown, singing  
nursery rhymes, practicing for  
her big audition.

The sky before her is too bright -  
it hurts her eyes to watch the birds,



the trees, her life stretch before her  
in endless moments of white.

## Doing the Chicken Bone Walk Across the State Line

Candy loved Bingham City, and up until yesterday thought that she might like to stay. But, two things happened that changed her mind. By the end of the day Candy decided that Bingham City, Kentucky, population of two thousand, was not so appealing after all. The people who lived there acted like they were recovering from nuclear fallout. They walked around in slow motion, like they were drugged. There was nothing there to spark anybody's interest, except the occasional game of Rook, and sometimes playing a game of Rook could be erratic with all of the changing rules, depending on who you played with. Yesterday's events, which no one in his right mind could think were exciting, were beginning to appear brilliant like stars compared to the mundane atmosphere typical of Bingham City. Candy realized that even she was starting to fall into a routine. She was too young to let life capture her and imprison her inside this tiny town.

Today she would do something different. She would linger in bed all day. Living here was hard, working in the diner, with no friends or prospects. Her brain was beginning to feel dingy, plastic and off-white. Yesterday, after her shift was over, Candy tuned into WKBL out of Lexington, Kentucky, and heard that Deke had broken out of the Appaloosa County jail. WKBL alerted the listeners to be on the lookout for Deke as armed and dangerous..

Deke had said no jail could hold him, not if he had Candy on his mind. Just a little longer and he would be in Bingham City. She knew he'd be looking for her

until he died. She'd once put a curse on Red Smith so that he would neither sleep nor rest until he had her in his arms. She burned his picture in effigy and stuck straight pins in the candle. Two years later he died in a car wreck. Whenever she wanted to keep Deke in line, she dredged up that Red Smith story.

Candy remembered the first time she ever saw Deke. He was standing outside her porch in the middle of August, holding a skinned, dead squirrel by its tail, smiling like he'd killed it just for her.

"I know we're from Kentucky and all," said Candy, "but we don't eat nothing wild here."

"Well, I do eat wild meat all the time," said Deke, "I make a steady diet of it."

Candy knew then that Deke was a dangerous boy, from the way his lips formed the word wild, sensuous, like he was whispering something dirty in her ear.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I brought you this squirrel," said Deke.

"Well, I don't know anything about cooking it, so thanks anyway," she said as she turned to go back inside.

"Don't you want to know who I am?" Deke asked, as he shifted his head to one side to avoid the sun.

"You're the devil, aren't you?" said Candy, without turning back toward him.

"I've been called worse," he said.

Candy opened the screen door, and held it open, waiting for Deke to say more. Even though the sun was shining, the interior of the house was dim and smelled like decaying old people. There was a faint odor of pipe tobacco from her grandfather's pipe and the smell of bacon that she had cooked earlier in the day. The blinds had huge gaps in them from where the cat had poked its head through to look at the birds. Her grandfather's chair stood empty with great pieces of the vinyl hanging like hunks of sagging skin. Ever since he'd been bedridden she'd been the one to take care of him. It had been a long time since he'd sat in that old chair.

"Like what?" she asked.

"Dirty little bastard," said Deke.

"I think I catch your meaning," said Candy.

She didn't think much of this scrappy ten-year-old boy at their first meeting, except that he was a real smart ass. He was like everyone else she came into contact with who knew anything about her calling her a dirty little bastard. She didn't want to turn around and face him, face the fact that he knew about her past. She didn't want him to see into her present and find her weakness, or know about her pain.

"Who's that calling you?" asked Deke.



Candy's grandfather called her name in that same old pleading way that he'd done for the past five years, sickly and weak, pulling on both syllables of her name with his voice.

"Just some old man I've lived with for too long," said Candy.

"Don't you want to know my name?" asked Deke.

"Dirty little bastard, isn't it?" she said.

Deke took the dead squirrel and flung it into the woods at the side of the house. It made a sickening thud against the walnut tree.

"It's Deke Rollins. I live up the road from you. If you was friendly and all, I'd be your neighbor. I heard my old man call you the dirty little bastard, but I don't believe him."

"Well, Deke Rollins, bring me something I can eat next time and then we'll talk friendship," said Candy.

Candy watched as Deke hung his head and walked out of her yard past the old tractor that was covered in honeysuckle vines, past the chicken coop, and past her grandfather's old blue pickup truck that had been sitting there waiting for Candy to take a ride in it for an entire year. Candy's long rides in the blue truck with her grandfather were over now and she no longer had to worry about whether he would touch her anymore. Knowing that her grandfather couldn't help himself to her anymore was the one good thing about having to wait on him. This would be one of the few times that Candy would see Deke hang his head. Deke had been the older man in Candy's life since she was eight years old.

He was only two years older, but sometimes he seemed to be forty. Later that same year, Candy's grandfather died and Candy was left to live with her Aunt Euple. Aunt Euple didn't like Deke Rollins. She was jealous of his overwhelming personality.

There was so much charisma in Deke Rollins that thinking about him made the hair on Candy's body stand on end, touching the sheets like a thousand tiny feelers, sensing his smell, listening for his footsteps. Candy felt like Miss Kitty waiting for Matt Dillon to step into the saloon. A few more minutes and he'd be riding up on his horse, gripping his saddle horn to dismount, checking his gun, and tying the bay to the water trough. She'd see his wild black hair in the mirror behind the bar as she polished up the shot glasses. Candy would heave a sigh of relief to see him again, and then watch as the saloon was shot up.

No, seeing Deke again would not be a good thing. He was self-centered, beautiful and dangerous. She remembered the poem he dedicated to her last year on her sixteenth birthday. It was nothing romantic, only a poem that didn't make sense, a poem about him. She'd memorized it, trying to drum it into her head and make some sense of it.

The mighty hunter draws his bow to fell  
a squirrel or beating heart - trembling,  
preoccupied with the emotion of conquest,  
the blade is held too close too tight, as  
flesh is removed with fur, too close too

tight as flesh falls at his lovers feet

The single event that made Candy want to move on happened yesterday at the Diner. It was the most exciting thing to happen in Bingham City since she'd arrived there. It was the disgusting fight between the Baptist preacher, Eugene Sinks, and Edna Cox, the town slut.

It happened in booth number four, Edna's regular booth, a place where she could come in and be herself and seduce any man who had a penis. Candy was scrambling eggs in the kitchen, frying bacon and putting together a BELT and T for the preacher. BELT and T was a bacon, egg, lettuce, tomato and toast. It was listed in the menu simply as a BELTT, spelled with a double T. Candy heard Edna wail and stuck her head out the door of the kitchen to get a better look. Edna had thrown up her breakfast on the lime green Formica table top in booth 4.

Everyone in the diner had gathered around, with some folks rushing out the door to throw up themselves. The preacher, sitting in booth 5, jumped to his feet and started to rail on about God's judgment on whores and fornicators, striking Edna on the shoulders with his newspaper for emphasis. Edna, kept pointing at the vile concoction she had created.

"Roach, roach," she yelled.

"My lord in heaven Edna, get on out of here," said the preacher.

"The lord ain't got anything to do with this one," said Edna.

"Big L, can't you help me throw this thing out of here?" asked the preacher.



"I'm human, preacher," said Edna.

"Edna, ain't any of that that's on the table top my food," said Big L. "We don't have any roaches here."

"You're driving Big L's customers away Edna," said the preacher. "Don't you want to be a good girl and go on home?"

Try as he might, the preacher could not remove Edna from the booth, and by this time everyone else in the diner, except for Big L and Candy, had removed themselves. The preacher finally had to grab Edna and push her out the front door of the diner, screaming "and don't try to get another free breakfast out of here again Edna." Candy thought Edna had a problem with bulimia. Normally Edna would just eat her breakfast and run to the bathroom to vomit up her stuffings. But, she was obviously losing control. If it could happen to Karen Carpenter it could happen to Edna. Edna believed herself to be fat and talked of nothing else except men and weight loss. She was obsessed with it. She talked about "when I was thin," or "before I gained my weight" with regularity.

Candy burned the preacher's BELTT during all the commotion with Edna.

"I'm sorry preacher, with all the yelling and Miss Edna and all, I've let your BELTT burn," said Candy.

"Miss Dubois, don't you worry yourself none about that sandwich. In fact, I'm not the least bit hungry now, so why don't you have it?" said the preacher.



Candy told everybody when she first arrived in Bingham City that her name was Blanche DuBois. She figured there wouldn't be anybody who would give it a second thought. Candy knew no one would connect that name with a movie.

In fact, Candy felt she had a lot in common with Blanche DuBois. Her life was certainly as tragic as Blanche's. Maybe Candy's life didn't have the dramatic leaps from wealth that Blanche's had, but that didn't mean that she wouldn't be wealthy one day. Both she and Blanche had tragic character flaws. Candy's flaws stemmed from bad blood on her mother's side, unidentifiable blood on her father's.

Yesterday was a complete day in that it started out exciting, with Edna's hysterical spell, and ended up exciting, when Candy overheard on the radio that Deke had escaped. This sort of excitement was all that Bingham City had to offer.

Candy's body hair lay flat against the sheets. A great panic washed over her like a sickness. Deke wasn't going to be her white knight. He would be more like a messenger of death, always wanted by the law. She was clean right now, living as Blanche DuBois.

Candy didn't want any trouble with the law. She knew that trouble would be her shadow if she chose to let Deke be a part of her life. She knew her life didn't have to be complete chaos just because she was a bastard. She didn't have anyone close in her life now. Candy knew that Deke would not be the right man to fill the void. It had been such a long time since any normal person had been intimately involved in Candy's life. Candy thought there had been no one

stable enough to be a parent since her grandmother died. Candy still remembered her birthday party that year. It was her seventh birthday.

That was the last time she'd seen her mother. Her mother arrived late to the party. It wasn't much of a party since only two of her cousins had come to celebrate. Her mother had stumbled into the room like a drunk cow. She was singing Happy Birthday in Italian or some other language that Candy couldn't understand, and singing everything else like a recitative, as she called it. Candy's grandmother had the cancer then and her grandfather didn't come to the party since he couldn't stand to be in the same room with Candy's mother, Ava. Candy still remembered the way the kitchen looked, big and empty except for her grandmother, her two cousins, her mother and a giant white cake. That was the last time she saw her mother before her big breakdown, when she tried to slash her wrists at the Loveless Motel. They patched her up at the hospital and her mother left town, on a bus bound for Phoenix, Arizona.

Candy glanced at the clock, which flashed 4:00 p.m. She washed her face and quickly put on her clothes. The first customer would be wanting dinner by 5:00 p.m. As she walked down the stairs to the diner, Candy could hear Big L mumbling in the kitchen.

"Somebody better get rid of these damn chicken bones," Big L said.

Big L was cleaning out the refrigerator, making room for all of the pies that Candy had baked the day before.

"I've been saving those for Ben Hicks," said Candy.

"Are you sweet on Ben Hicks?" asked Big L.

"No, but he asked me to save all of the bones for his hunting dogs, so I did," said Candy.

Big L. was grouchy, like he'd been since yesterday, ever since Candy told him she would be moving on soon, on her way to find her mother. She didn't tell him about Deke's escape.

"You ought to enter these pies in the fair. They'd win I bet," said Big L.

"They'd just be up against Emma and old lady Pike. Emma's would be disqualified because they carried a sexually transmitted disease, and old lady Pike wouldn't remember what kind they were, once she got the top on them," said Candy. "What's your point?"

"Just trying to think of some way to make you stay," said Big L.

"This is important to me because I need to find out if she's dead or not, if she did herself in," said Candy.

"Sure, sure," said Big L.

"Being Blanche DuBois isn't easy, Big L. There's a whole lot of sorrow I just can't shake - memories that won't leave me alone. I thought you'd understand."

"I know about women. I watch TV you know," said Big L.

"I know you do," said Candy.

"I thought you liked it here and wanted to stay," said Big L.



"I've never had a real home and I don't know how to act once I light somewhere for long. Do whatever you want with those chicken bones. I can't wait forever for that old drunk to pick them up," said Candy.

"The phone's ringing," said Big L, "do you want to get it?"

Candy picked up the phone and old lady Pike was on the other end, in a panic about a dangerous looking man who had peered into her bedroom window.

"That young man was a hoodlum if I ever saw one Blanche, a hoodlum. He had a earring and long black hair," said Mrs. Pike, "looked just like a Indian."

"Don't worry Mrs. Pike, cause I bet he was just looking for somebody. I bet he didn't mean anything by it," said Candy. "You just lock your doors for now."

Candy slammed the phone down and jerked her apron off. She knew who that man was, and knowing it sent a chill down her back and into her arms. It was Deke.

"Who was that?" asked Big L.

"Just old lady Pike having a hallucination again. Guess she's off her medication, " said Candy.

"I hate throwing these bones out," said Big L. "My daddy used to eat every part of the chicken, including the bones."

"Are you trying to make me sick,?" asked Candy.

"No, but that's what's wrong with America today," said Big L, "no family values."



Candy knew she had to leave Bingham City and leave it quickly. Deke had arrived and it would only be a matter of time before he found her, kidnapped her or killed her. Besides, it was time for the bastard child to find that poor excuse of a mother in Phoenix.

"Big L, I've got to ask you a big favor. Now, please don't ask me anymore questions and trust everything I say to you," said Candy.

"All right Blanche," said Big L.

Get your pickup truck and pull it around back. I'll meet you out there and you'll drive me to Tennessee. Can you do it?" asked Candy.

"I don't know who is going to close," said Big L.

"Don't worry about that. This is life and death, OK?" said Candy.

"I'm getting the truck right now, Miss Blanche," said Big L. "I'm going."

Candy locked the front door, pulled down the blinds and went upstairs to get her pocketbook. She wasn't about to leave Bingham City without her money. She looked around her room slowly, taking it all in. It wasn't much, but she had made it hers. She would miss the stars from her window and the warm bed. She would Miss Big L. She ran down the stairs, through the kitchen and out the back door to Big L's black pickup. She curled up in the floorboard, hoping Deke wouldn't see her. The floorboard was like a womb, protecting her from the evil forces that fought inside her, wanting to have Deke and get away from him too.

"Big L, don't give anybody a ride," said Candy," and if you see a stranger, just keep going."

"Miss Blanch, I could help you if you'd just tell me what's wrong," said Big

L.

"Just forget you ever knew me," said Candy.

"I can't do that," said Big L.

Candy stayed in the floorboard, in the fetal position until she was sure they had cleared Bald Eagle Ridge. Then she sat in the passenger seat peering into the darkening sky. It would be storming soon. The sky was so dark Candy expected stars to appear at any moment. There were no stars.

## Big L

Big L said his daddy ate every  
part of the chicken even down  
to the bone, said he saved  
every dime he had and ate  
out of the garbage can  
behind the Piggly Wiggly store.

Big L's daddy was afraid  
of not having enough, of  
the Great Depression - -  
the tendency of life to  
repeat itself, of losing  
his house.

Big L said it was an  
American tradition to  
save - - to regurgitate  
only when forced to - -  
to give up the bones  
only when they had  
begun to splinter.

## Deke

Deke taps his foot on the  
floor of the jail, the rhythm  
of the tap out of sync with  
the drip of the faucet.

Men's voices, barely above  
a mumble, form the bass  
line, while a man's ring rakes  
a scream across the bars.

Time does not go forward  
here in this jail - - no memories  
of hunting or lovers- - no  
escaping the drone of  
the men.

Energy builds to a crescendo  
inside this body as Deke paces  
across the floor of his cell.

His black hair hangs limp with  
oil and dirt; the stench of the  
cell lingers on his skin.

No hunting knife to clean  
the dirt from underneath his

fingernails. Nothing but the  
constant scrutiny of his cell mate.



## Edna

Edna entered the diner  
with a sway in her hips,  
brown eyes flashing  
red hot looks, lips  
protruding in a pout,  
fingernails professionally  
buffed.

All eyes were on her  
as she swished by  
the preacher and  
sat down in booth  
number four - - the  
one with the lime  
green formica  
table top.

Edna smelled the food  
cooking in the kitchen,  
thought about the berries,  
watermelon, and cantaloupe  
- - all eaten earlier. She  
ordered her usual white meal.

The food smelled strong  
as it cooked, like a man  
at night, under the stars  
in Robert Lewis' cow pasture.

She thought about when  
she was thin, her sinewy  
arms holding on tightly  
to a man's back - - the  
dampness of his touch.

Edna lost control of her  
breakfast, after the third  
bite of white, when the  
roach ran out from under  
her plate.

She thought about when  
she was thin and how men  
would like her more when  
she became thin again.

## Leoda

I talked to the woman aunt  
Leoda on the phone, her ass  
indenting the couch, as she  
said she kicked my mother's  
belly with me inside.

I listened to her brag about  
her youth, the fights, and  
the other woman aunt who  
was crazy, the drunken one.  
My dogs barked in the pen  
at some old possum passing  
by, maybe the one I named  
Jimmy Durante, as Leoda said  
my baby bed was the kitchen floor.  
When she told me I had rickets  
as a baby, Jimmy Durante was  
moving the cat biscuits about on  
the front porch, looking for the  
good ones.

Leoda said she used to place me in

a cardboard box to take me out in the  
yard, and she said she loved me.



## The Jagged Hills of Dexter

"Blanche, where do you want to go?" asked Big L.

"To Tennessee," said Candy.

"I know somebody you could stay with in Dexter, just southeast of Sunnybrooke. Where did you say your mother was?" asked Big L.

"Phoenix," said Candy.

No stars. No stars in my crown was a line from a song Candy had heard as a little girl. She and her mother went to the Piney Lake Amphitheater and saw a musical called "Stars In My Crown." There had been this weird little guy called Mr. Rivers in the show. One day, a couple of weeks later, she and her mother were eating barnyards in Suzy's diner when Candy thought she saw Mr. Rivers pass by the window. She jumped up and followed him to get his autograph. She followed him into the barber shop and asked for it. He laughed real hard and told her he wasn't Mr. Rivers and had never heard of him. Her mother later told her that the man was Johnny Sikes, some old guy from World War II who'd had shell shock. That's what she felt like now, like somebody with shell shock, with part of her brain missing, on the run, trying to get away from the firing gun. Candy wondered if her mother felt like this after her shock treatments.

"Ever heard of shell shock?" asked Candy.

"My daddy had it from World War I," said Big L.

"Makes you go crazy," she said.

"You're just a little girl, Miss Blanche," said Big L. "What are you going to do out here by yourself?"

"I'm going to be famous some day," said Candy.

"For your pies?" asked Big L.

"I hope not," she said.

"My younger brother lives in Dexter with his new wife, Loretta," said Big L. "His first wife died."

"What am I going to be, the adopted daughter?" asked Candy.

"He's twenty years younger than me, because he was the final mistake," said Big L.

"So was I," said Candy.

"He got everything he ever wanted and still does," said Big L.

"That's fortunate," said Candy.

"Yes, he's never had to work for a living because all his wives support him. His first wife died under a mysterious circumstance, but they found out that Bill didn't have anything to do with that, no sir," said Big L.

"Sounds like an opportunist," said Candy.

"You better believe he is," said Big L. "A college graduate, too."

Big L droned on and on about his little brother, and his voice began to sound like the hum of a refrigerator or the gentle slap of a dryer as the clothes hit against its sides, monotonous. She wondered if Bill was monotonous, monogamous or both.

"That first wife of his was a slut," said Big L.

Some words will just jog a person out of a daydream, words like slut and bitch, any of those would work. Candy was sick of being a virgin, of not knowing what it felt like to be a woman.

"They said she was down at the Dixie Dew Drop on the night that she died," said Big L.

"What does Bill say?" asked Candy.

"He can't remember," said Big L.

"That's convenient".

"You damned right it is. Just think what he would feel like knowing she'd been down there whoring around on him. Its better he don't remember it," said Big L.

"Why can't he remember it?"

"That bitch had him so drunk before she left that he passed out on the couch. Next thing he knew the police were banging on his door, saying she'd been killed."

Candy was beginning to know more about Big L's family than she cared to know. Big L was dependable, but not very interesting.

"Big L, I've got to sleep some," said Candy.

"Oh, sure you do. You go ahead. I'll wake you up before we get there," he said.

"How far away are we?"

"I'll be pulling into the rest stop to sleep in a while," said Big L, "so it shouldn't be much further after that."

Since it was Sunday, they hadn't planned to open the restaurant until 5:00 p.m. for the dinner crowd. Candy had spent most of the day in bed writing in her journal and reading, and had been surprised to find Big L downstairs mumbling. Sunday was usually his day off. She thought about how lucky she was that Big L had been there, as the thump and whirl of the tires gently lulled her to sleep. Deke was far away now and not likely to find her. It was a relief to be heading for Tennessee, for Big L's murdering little brother, Bill, and his new wife Loretta.

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Candy had a terrible dream about Bill as she rode in Big L's truck. In the dream, Bill was trying to seduce Candy while his wife, Loretta, lay in a coma. He dressed in bright orange and green leisure suits and smoked big Cuban cigars. When Candy awoke from the dream, she knew she had to decline Big L's offer to live with Bill, even though he had been acquitted for murder.

Big L let Candy out at the side of the road, just outside of Dexter Tennessee. Before she left Big L's pickup truck, she quickly kissed him on the cheek.

"Thanks for everything, Big L," said Candy.

"Oh, it was nothing, Miss Blanche," said Big L, "I was going to see my brother soon anyway, and now I can see how him and the new wife are doing."



"Remember, you never saw me and you don't know what happened to me," said Candy.

"Nothing, ma'am," said Big L. "I'm even forgetting what you look like," he said.

"And Big L, don't believe anything you might hear about me, because ain't none of it true, good or bad," said Candy.

Candy slammed the pickup door shut and watched Big L drive down highway 46 towards Dexter. She wouldn't stay in Dexter, not if that's where Big L's brother lived. She didn't want to live with another murdering man. Her grandpa was one murdering man too many.

Candy walked down the side of the road, virtually alone except for the occasional car. The stars were fading and dawn was rising over the top of Dexter, like a hawk spreading its wings. Candy was walking towards Dexter, but she didn't want to stop there. Dexter's outline appeared like an omen out of an old western, where the jagged rocks meet the sun for the first time, casting a shadow over the desert. Then, the camera focuses on the lone silver spur of the bad guy about to enter town. The other spur is missing, because the bad guy kicked a wild dog in the head. Candy knew she was that bad guy that everyone in Dexter would dread to see. She'd been bad all her life. Every town she had touched had crumbled. Every man who touched her had died, except Deke. Still, she walked without remorse into the town of Dexter, Tennessee, population of 2100. She'd



made good tips in Bingham City and had \$300 in her pocket. Candy stopped at the Dippity Doo Hair Salon on the edge of town. She wanted to change her look.

"Good morning lady," said a young girl whose name tag read Bev.

"Morning," said Candy.

"What can we do you for?"

"Well, Bev, you can give me a new look for starters," said Candy.

"Do you like Dolly Dixon's hairstyle, you know, the singer?" asked Bev.

"No, I don't Bev. I'm only eighteen. I don't think I need that big of a hairstyle," said Candy.

"Well, then one of those french frizzy looking styles might be it," said Bev.

"It might be," said Candy.

"What's your name?" asked Bev.

"Blanche Dubois," said Candy.

"Well, I haven't even had my coffee yet, Blanche, so come back in an hour when I'm officially open, and I'll fix you up," said Bev.

"Where's some place I can get breakfast?" asked Candy.

"Moore's Café, about two blocks down from here," said Bev.

Candy stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of the Dippity Doo. The sun was shining directly over the church steeple. Dexter could have been used as the model for a postcard addressed to Beaver Cleaver's mom. The card would read "hi mom, I'm in Dexter - wish you were here. There's a man following me around...wish you were here."

Candy didn't know why she thought about men so much. She hoped she wasn't going crazy like her mother, having intrusive thoughts placed inside her head. There were lots of things she didn't understand about men. She used to stand in the kitchen washing dishes when she lived with her grandmother and remember all the times her grandfather had touched her; in his truck, on the way to the mines, stopped over a bridge, in the bathroom. She'd given in to him without a struggle, like a lamb gives in to a bobcat. He'd buy her breakfast or give her his leftovers from his lunch box. He'd take her down into the basement and touch her. Once he locked her in the basement because she had started to cry. It is strange how the memories go to a dark place and hide until a smell or a phrase or an innocent touch brings them all back. It was after her grandfather died that Candy began to remember her life with him, piece by piece. Grandfather was a hard, mean man with a square jaw and a head that was long and shaped like a horse head. Candy thought about that night when he took her into the closet and she shuddered. The next morning, when it was all over, she had been struck with a paralysis which lasted three weeks. She had only been five years old. Her grandfather died when she was eight.

"And all the people said shout, sing, say baby...the mean old stick is dead," said Candy in a voice that belonged to a child.

Candy stood on a deserted street in Dexter, Tennessee, and had no idea how she had gotten there. Her watch read 7:30. She had left the Dippity Do over an hour ago. Had she eaten breakfast? Her stomach felt empty, but she couldn't

tell. Candy couldn't see the steeple anymore. She suddenly felt exhausted. She had been walking through Dexter for the past hour and had no recollection of the town or any of the streets. This had happened to her before, this preoccupation with her own private world. Her grandma used to say she'd better watch it or she'd end up like her mama. No one wanted to be like her mama, especially Candy.

She saw a dark-haired man exit the Lolly Pop Lounge. He was wobbling over to his truck, obviously drunk. His feet kept stopping as he tried to grip the sidewalk with them.

"It's kind of hard walking this early in the morning, isn't it?" asked Candy.

"Huh?" replied the man.

"Mighty early for a Bloody Mary," said Candy.

"God damn, baby, you're pretty," said the man.

"And dangerous," said Candy.

"My horoscope said beware of beautiful blondes at dawn," said the man.

"It's past dawn mister," said Candy.

"You ain't from around here. I'd know. I know everybody from around here and I don't know you," said the man.

Candy had slowly been inching toward the dark-haired man with each passing remark. He had stood motionless like some sort of blue-eyed god by his black pick up truck. Even though he was drunk he was still handsome. Candy

was being pulled toward him like metal to a magnet. The closer she got to him the more exhilarated she became. She unconsciously blurted out her name.

"Blanche DuBois," she said, as she extended her hand to him.

"Laurel," said the man.

"Like Laurel and Hardy?" asked Candy.

"Something like that," said the man.

"That's a girl's name," said Candy.

"It is too early to take this kind of crap from an upstart," Laurel said.

Candy jerked her hand back and put it in the right pocket of her jeans. She didn't know why, but she wanted to be friends with this man. If love at first sight was real, Candy was feeling it right now. Candy had no concept of love at first sight. But, here it was.

"Are you married?" asked Candy.

"I have a room mate," said Laurel.

"Are you two married?" asked Candy.

"We have an open relationship."

"Could you take me to breakfast?" asked Candy.

"I'm starving, baby," said Laurel.

"I mean a real breakfast," said Candy, "not McDonalds."

"The Iron Hearth on the other side of Dexter is the best place," said Laurel.

"So take me there," said Candy.



Candy sat inside the king cab of Laurel's black Ford hardly able to keep her mind on anything but his bone structure. Her attraction for him was a natural instinct that was as powerful as gravity. She knew it was reckless to think of having this man for a friend, but these thoughts were in her head like her favorite song, "Climbing the Stairway to Heaven."

"Where you headed?" Laurel asked, as he put the black truck in drive.

"Phoenix," said Candy.

"Some of my people live near there on a reservation," said Laurel.

"I don't have any people," said Candy.

"How old are you?" asked Laurel.

"I'm legal," said Candy.

"You don't look it," said Laurel.

"Hold my hand and shut up," said Candy.

Here was someone to lie in bed with; someone to talk to and someone to love.

There was no threat from this man. He was too beautiful to be anything but gay.

Candy knew she had found her friend. Maybe now she wouldn't feel so hollow inside. Maybe now she wouldn't have to give her body to Deke. Maybe she could remain a virgin forever in this man's world, under the protection of a man named Laurel. Candy rode in silence to the restaurant with Laurel. She already felt more comfortable around him than she had ever felt with any man. There was no need for words.



## Water

The air is thick with water;  
so thick the trees bend  
under the weight of it.

I feel the imprint of water  
inside my breast bone,  
which bows toward the  
earth like a withered limb.

The sun does not shine.

Water pools in the front yard  
and hovers above the grass,  
waits for the earth to hoard  
the excess.

I stand weeping in the water  
unable to stop the tears.

## A Valentine for Jesus

I wrote a Valentine for Jesus.

I thought He needed one.

The writing left me empty

like a preacher's sermon.

I sang my Valentine for Jesus,

used an old mountain tune

buried in my marrow since birth,

and raised the consciousness of my

wooden house - - my small voice

singing to Jesus like I was somebody.

I made a Valentine for Jesus and

I made the words to rhyme. I said

"I love you Christ man, would you

be my Valentine?"

Its lonely on this flat land

even for a powerful god.

Its lonelier for a woman

without a Valentine.

Jesus, would you be mine?

## All Saints Day

When I'm dead

make my body

into a rattle;

hollow me like

a gourd.

When I'm dead

light an incense,

chant a prayer and

rattle my soul.

When I'm dead

don't ask

a preacher to say

kind words or

rush my resurrection.