

Interview with Janet Burroway

Janet Burroway is the author of *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*. This classic textbook is used in more than three hundred universities and colleges within the United States and is also considered a valuable tool by thousands of writers not enrolled in college programs. Some popular books on the craft of writing fiction have been written by people who have never published any fiction. That's not the case with Janet Burroway. Her 1977 novel, *Raw Silk*, was nominated for the National Book Award, and her novel, *The Buzzards*, was a Pulitzer Prize nominee. Her fiction, poetry and essays have been widely published.

She has served on the English faculty at Florida State University for thirty years, and in 1995 was named a Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor. The award, FSU's highest faculty honor, is a tribute to Burroway's eclectic prowess as a teacher, scholar, author. She is at work on her eighth novel, *Time Lapse*—a story that ranges from Belgium to England to New York to Missouri to Florida over half a century—and she has recently published a new book on the craft of writing, *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft*.

As with all things literary, opinions of a book on craft can be subjective, a matter of taste and inclination. *Orchid's* editors believe Burroway's *Writing Fiction* is one of the best books to be found on the subject of writing fiction. Burroway covers all of the basic elements of craft but she does so with precise reasoning and uses classic stories to illustrate the points being discussed.



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Please tell us about your new book.

The new book is called *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft* (“imaginative” seems to me more exact than “creative”) and covers the four genres: essay, fiction, poetry, drama. It’s intended for the beginning course that is offered to freshmen, or as a university workshop prerequisite, or in community or liberal arts colleges—many of these last without the staff for a full writing program, but offering creative writing courses nonetheless. As I taught in different genres, it was evident to me that much if not most of the advice given to students is relevant to any sort of writing: the need for significant detail applies equally to narrative scene, poetic line, and theatrical dialogue; voice is a concept that applies to a character, a narrator, a memoir, or a lyric persona, and so forth. So the first five chapters discuss, across the genres, Image, Voice, Character, Setting, and Story. Then it goes on to talk about development and revision, and finally has a chapter each on the four genres covered.

My expectation is that by discussing techniques and offering exercises that allow students to experiment with them before they lock themselves into a formal project, such instruction will prove less threatening and encourage a sense of adventure. There’s inevitably a lot of “do this” in a writing book, but I’ve included a good deal more of “try

this.” The emphasis is on serious, dedicated, strenuous, enthusiastic play.

Writing Fiction does a wonderful job of explaining the elements of craft. What sources did you draw upon to codify the elements of craft in such a clear fashion? How did the book come about?

When I first came to teach at Florida State, I inherited a course from Michael Shaara (the author of *Killer Angels*) in “Narrative Techniques.” This was a prerequisite to the fiction workshop, supposed to be full of literary examples and solid information, and Shaara had been very successful at

it, but hadn’t left many clues about how to go about teaching it. My first year was a mess; I started them out on Aeschylus and poked about in Yeats because I loved those authors, never mind that they didn’t write fiction. I digressed, made this observation and that

comment and the other suggestion; I knew I didn’t know what I was doing. So the next year, I thought: Right, here are some things I know from studying literature. Why don’t I assume that the things readers need to get out of a story are roughly equivalent to what authors need to put in. So I started asking what a story is, and what a character is, and so forth, and then gradually we all began to talk about how you might move words around so that they would create those things. Gradually, I began to gather

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examples of how this or that author had accomplished this or that, and ideas about how to set tasks for beginning writers that would pose them provocative problems.

In the late seventies, when I had been doing this for a few years and become comfortable with it, a textbook editor from Little, Brown came to town. Little, Brown was publishing my novels then, and my editor had suggested his colleague take me to lunch. Over coffee, I told him that I'd have been very happy to have a textbook in Narrative Technique when I began, and I wondered if other teachers would feel the same. You can't now imagine how odd a suggestion this seemed. Stephen Minot's *Three Genres* existed, but almost nothing else shaped for the classroom. He said, "I don't know. Do you think other writers would use a text?" And I said, "I don't know, do you?" And he said, "I don't know. Let's try it."

Can fiction writing be taught is an old question. In the preface to Writing Fiction, you tell a story of initial ambivalence about that question and of how, over time, you became an enthusiastic supporter of teaching creative writing and of writing workshops. Has that enthusiasm lessened any?

Not a whit. In fact, it seems increasingly incredible to me that the resistance to creative writing as a college subject persists. No one wants to deny musicians, artists, actors, dancers an apprenticeship with skilled practitioner teachers, nor has such apprenticeship been questioned since the time of

Michelangelo. Yet "writing can't be taught." The truth is that writing can only be, must be taught. Speech will be learned by any child with the capacity, but writing will not occur of its own accord. Like any art, literature is intricate, full of rules, devices, techniques, shortcuts, dead ends, traditions, pitfalls, promises, possibilities. It takes a village to raise a writer. I may get in trouble for saying this, but it seems to me that, at this still-new millennium, literary writing in the English language is in very good shape—flexible, adventurous, and skilled—by contrast, say, with painting or pop music. And in large measure that is because of the enthusiastic embrace of writing workshops.

This is not to say that the process itself isn't full of dangers. It is. On the teaching side: criticism too harsh, praise too misleading, a fostering of false promises, a desire for protégés; on the students' side: a temptation to write for the workshop, to write like the teacher, to focus on rewards and prizes and so forth. Much must be guarded against, monitored, adjusted, honestly discussed—in all which the workshop is a lot like life.

In Chapter 2 of Writing Fiction, you speak of editors rejecting a writer while saying, "This piece is sensitive (perceptive, vivid, original, brilliant, funny, moving) but it is not a story." Orchid's editors have read many submissions and said just that. Why do you think so many aspiring writers lack an understanding of what makes a story?

I think that people who are attracted

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to writing are not necessarily attracted first to structure. While you're caught in the page-turning forward movement of the story, what you're gripped by is emotion, not an analysis of conflict and its complications. So when you start to write, you head straight for that emotion, not necessarily understanding how it was produced.

And then, I think that the best of fiction (increasingly in postmodern times) conceals or skews the story structure, so the better the story is, the harder its bones are to see, though they're still there. I remember that in

the fifties we all went around saying of Samuel Beckett, "Wonderful! He's got rid of the plot! Isn't it time we got rid of the plot?!" Well, no. Take *Waiting for Godot*. The conflict: Didi and Estragon want to leave.

But they can't; they must wait. The complications: They want to die. They are not allowed. Will Godot come? They don't know. They are bored! They must pass the time. The crisis: Does Godot come? No, the Boy comes. Godot will come tomorrow. The resolution: They must wait. It's a classic story pattern, neatly concealed in brilliant banalities and funny despair.

Writing Fiction *contains well over twenty stories and many of them are short-shorts. The short-short stories you've chosen fit the story model of conflict, crisis, and resolution quite well. I think of*

The Crane Child by David Levitt, Girl by Jamaica Kincaid, Yours by Mary Robison, and even the seemingly simple Hips by Sandra Cisneros. But not all short-short stories fit the model so well. Are they not stories? What about the so-called "microfiction?"

There may be a distinction between "short short" and "microfiction" but if there is I'm ignorant of it, and I use the words interchangeably. I do see a distinction between a short-short story, which has the shape you describe, and a prose poem, which tends to reflection and an emphasis on

if a one-paragraph or one-page piece is effective in whatever it does, bravo. The reader is recompensed; there's no law that it must follow narrative shape.

language, the impulse of the lyric. The borderline is fine, and you could probably argue (not very fruitfully) about many short-short pieces. In any case, if a one-paragraph or one-page piece is effective in whatever it does,

bravo. The reader is recompensed; there's no law that it must follow narrative shape. But it's much harder to write twenty or thirty pages of fiction that aren't a story and make the reader feel her time has been well spent. So for the writing apprentice, it's good practice to try to write a short-short story that *is* a story.

You also say in the just mentioned chapter that "the necessary features of the story form are...conflict, crisis, and resolution." Some teachers and critics equate a story's resolution to the main character experiencing an epiphany at stories end. In his essay, "Against

Epiphanies,” Charles Baxter argues that epiphanous endings in short stories have become “...a tic, a habit among writers (and editors) of literary fiction.” Baxter also says, “The insight-ending as a result has become something of a weird norm in contemporary writing.” (*Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction* by Charles Baxter, Graywolf Press, 1997). How do you feel about Baxter’s arguments against epiphanies?

Two things, for a start: *Burning Down the House* is one of the best books written about the current state of writing; everyone who wants to write should read it. And: teachers and critics who equate “resolution” with “epiphany” are in error. Here are a few other resolutions: *he dies; she says yes; he decides to live; she says no; the stranger leaves; the child returns; nobody has changed at all and it’s clear that they never will.*

Baxter’s argument “Against Epiphanies” is erudite and provocative and says a number of importantly true things about the relation of Puritanism to capitalism to the American obsession with a quick fix. I also think it betrays a peevisness born of reading too many bad stories.

It is certainly true that the unearned “I suddenly realized” ending is as tired as “and then I woke up.” It’s also true that the sudden-insight phenomenon can be marketed and falsified like any other. But when Baxter approvingly quotes Raymond Carver, “What good are insights? They only make things worse,” he is reifying what is at best an original minor...well, insight. And

threatens to throw out the baby with the bath.

In fact, insight as a literary resolution predates not only the workshop, capitalism, James Joyce, and Puritanism, but Christianity itself. *Oedipus Rex* comes not very surprisingly to mind. Ancient epic and drama are full of recognition scenes, in which the identity of a twin or long-lost brother is revealed, or the enemy turns out to be the faithful retainer in disguise, or the criminal I seek turns out to be me. These traditions of not-very-likely mistaken identity arose as needed metaphors for moments of crucial insight—which are now, internalized and reduced in scale, often subtly, askew, without falsification, caught in contemporary fiction.

When Baxter says that, “To line up with the anti-epiphanic is to withdraw from officialdom...One is free to be sick of that mode of discourse,” he is talking about false insight and the epiphany as a popped Prozac. But I have to say that one may be modestly subversive and still free to believe that people do really struggle, suffer, learn, and change; and that this is a legitimate subject for literature, especially while officialdom is strutting and waving its flag and loading its kalishnikov without a ghost of an insight in its lock-boxed brain.

What books or kind of books did you read as a child?

In our house we had a *Lincoln Library of Information*, *The Real Mother Goose*, Grimms fairy tales, *Hurlbutt’s Stories of the Bible*, a complete set of the poems

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of Edgar Guest, one slim poetry anthology bound in watered silk, and for some reason a copy of the popular novel *Leave Her to Heaven*. That's it. Yet there was a certain respect, maybe even reverence, toward writing and storytelling—my grandmother claimed to be a second cousin to Louisa May Alcott—and it occurs to me that buying books would have been a genuine extravagance for my parents. My mother was an “elocution” teacher, so we had scrapbooks of little poems and prose “pieces” of various sorts, typed on onion skin in carbon copies. She also took me to the library from about five or six, where I'm afraid I had a Sunday-school-prize mentality toward the checkout. I liked to count how many books I could read and how fast—with the consequence that I have no memory of *what* they were. I fell in love with reading in about the fourth grade with a series of girls' mystery books called *The Sylvia Seaman Mysteries*, and I would hide under the covers with a flashlight to read them after hours. Almost at once I began to believe that I could write whole books, too.

This may be a strange question for a journal devoted to “literary” fiction. In 1975 (twenty-seven years ago), you wrote a children's picture book, The Giant Jam Sandwich. My son and daughter are twenty-five and twenty-three years old. As children, they demanded, time and again, that I read them The Giant Jam Sandwich and they read it to themselves over and over again. They remember the story to this day. How did

*this story come into being and how does its structure measure up to the story model mentioned in Writing Fiction? Does it seem strange that your Pulitzer Prize- and National Book Award-nominated novels are out of print but your children's book, The Giant Jam Sandwich, has not gone out of print and lives on and on? When my elder son was about five, he was obsessed with his toy trucks and trains, and would go around mumbling “trucks and tracks, trucks and tracks,” so I wrote a children's book called *The Truck on the Track* and spent about two years looking for an illustrator for it. We were living in England then, and I luckily chanced on John Vernon Lord at a party at another artist's house in Brighton. Jonathan Cape published the book (Bobbs-Merrill in America), and then some time later John made up the story of *The Giant Jam Sandwich* for a couple of children of friends. At first the editor advised him to write it himself and so avoid having to split the royalties. Later this same editor called me and said that the pictures were glorious, the story divine, but the words just awful, awful. It seemed, and seems, to me especially peculiar that a publisher doesn't know the words matter, in a children's book as much as any other. But I loved the story, decided it should be in verse, and was immensely happy writing it. John and I have been fast friends for all these years but have never done another book together. Now we are doing so. This one has a working title of *The Pig of Many Parts*. We like to say that *The Truck on the Track* was a primer in labor relations,*

and *The Giant Jam Sandwich* a first book of ecology. *The Pig of Many Parts* is a toddler's guide to self-esteem.

Of course *The Giant Jam Sandwich* is a bare-bones conflict-crisis-resolution story. It's Itching Down against a plague of wasps; you see in the pictures that sprays, nets, and swatters don't work. The town bands together with a plan while the wasps continue to swarm. The folk make their jam trap, enlisting (weapons escalating) the help of buses, horses, helicopters. "Then the other slice came down, kersplat!" *There's* a crisis moment for you. Resolution: The villagers dance and the birds feast. The end. Embarrassing, almost, how it fits the pattern. But then John is a prime storyteller.

No doubt about it, it is bizarre that the books I have in print at the moment are a children's picture book, a book of poems, a book of essays, and two writing texts. No novel in print anywhere in the world. Partly this is because of the bizarre structure of the law, which makes it ferociously tax-expensive for trade publishers (who do the novels) to keep things in print, whereas nonprofit university presses (poems and essays) do not have to trash, remainder, or shred books. Partly it is because with children and writers, there is always a new crop coming, and if the book hits, news of it will be passed along. I mind, of course, and always hope that the novels will come back into print. But this is the kind of anomaly that, if you dwell on it, would drive you mad. There are wonderful writers, wonder-

ful books, out of print, unpublished, unrecognized. Take that as a given and get on with it.

When and how did you develop an appreciation for serious fiction?

It certainly happened "in school," and certainly very gradually. I was subject to inspiration and romance, and I think I was first aware of a kind of awed emotion that some books and poems produced in me—Willa Cather, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Dickens, the Brontës, the Brownings, first Elizabeth and then Robert. And gradually as I read I began to have less of a taste for romance and melodrama, and more for irony and anomaly. In high school, Shakespeare hit me very hard. I would say that poetry and drama took hold of me first, and fiction after—which I see simply means that it was language that opened me to what you mean by "serious."

Has teaching affected your writing?

This is much too big a question for the time we have! So here is some shorthand: a) Teaching has made it possible to write, by offering me a twelve-month living for an eight-month job. b) Teaching has prevented me from writing because it takes the same kind of mental concentration and energy as writing. c) My students have kept me surprised, young, energetic, alive. d) My students have worn me down and consumed me. e) I've learned more about structure, character, pace, and detail from trying to articulate my vague perceptions of these things for students, than I could ever have learned by writing.

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f) Insisting on structure, for beginning writers who need that insistence, has sabotaged me into a tendency to bring my own narrative to too hard a closure, so that I have to “teach” myself the opposite: crack it open, send it sideways, end it earlier, end with a question. And gee) The continuing colloquy with students who have become my friends, editors, colleagues, supplicants, and co-conspirators is so much a part of my writing life that it’s hard to imagine any life without them.

What do you see as common weaknesses in student work?

A rejection at some deep level of the truth that writing is *language*. Not confession, not plot tricks, not “what really happened,” not even feeling, but a choice of words. A rich vocabulary, a flexible syntax, an obsession with the exact, and a willingness for verbal risk—these are to writing what paint is to the painter, sound to the musician.

As editors, one of the most common problems we see is writers with a fondness for surprise endings. Do you see a lot of that from students?

Yes. I suppose it has always been thus, and TV makes it worse. A couple of things I find useful: to ask, *what do you really care about?*, and mean the question; and ask the writer to mean the answer; and then suggest that the real subject matter lies in that pond. Or else I send them off to Jerome Stern’s *Making Shapely Fiction*, to the section called “Don’t Do This,” where he asks, “who wants to read a whole story just

for a punch line...?” and makes his point with a bunch of old and awful surprise endings.

What do you suggest for people without access to college-level writing programs?

Start your own workshop. Canvas other writers you know, ask your friends, put an ad in the local paper, or post a bill at the local bookshop. Meet often. Read a writing text together and discuss it. Share your writing problems. Read each other’s work and critique it. It’s harder to do this without the backing of an institution, but it’s no harder than setting up a bowling league. And writers do need leagues. Writing can be a lonely job, and the sense that you are alone can become debilitating. If you can afford it, go alone or with your group to a summer conference for fresh ideas and energizing. But the steady support of an ongoing at-home group is important for all but the most solitary souls. I spend a lot of time in university workshops, but they don’t have time for my stuff, so I belong to a group of four women writers (we call ourselves The Coven) who workshop each other. These sessions and these people are invaluable to me.

When did you know that you wanted to be a writer? What was the first thing you remember writing? Do you still have it?

I wrote my first poem when I was five, and my mother kept it in one of those scrapbooks, typed on onion skin, and told everyone that I had decided at five to be a writer. I remember the

fierce pride of the moment, but I don't know how much of the myth was mine and how much hers. You want it? Here is it:

There once was a man on the street.
He was fifty years old at that time,
And before he was ninety-nine
He prayed to God,
"God, do not let me die,
For I am the pastor of your sheep."
Then he went outside,
And a rope hanging from the sky.
Up and up he went
Until he was in heaven.
Then he knew who he was.
He was Jesus, God's shepherd.

If you looked in my current box of rough drafts, you'd probably find worse.

Do you have scheduled writing sessions?

Okay, but don't anybody take me for a model! I seem to have three different modes. There's a period when I'm working, but also working hard at concealing from myself that I'm at work—possibly in order to build up a useful fund of guilt. I spend a lot of time arranging flowers, E-mailing old friends, cleaning out drawers, and picking balls of lint off the elbows of my sweater. When I am dying of boredom and self-loathing, then I sit down every day and, though I diddle around at the desk for longer than you'd think possible, I do accomplish a given number of pages, usually not more than two. Then if I'm very lucky, the passion takes me, and I write in my sleep. I'll wake at four with paragraphs in mind, go back and back to the desk throughout the day, feel as if the piece

is all written and all I'm doing is racing after the pages clean in my mind. Then the flowers wilt, the friends lose track of me, the house goes to pot, and I would eat only peanut butter if I wasn't blessed with a husband who has the opposite style: steady, solid, easy-going, a *maintainer*. And a cook! He is the kind of person who keeps the world from rocking.

What is difficult about writing? What is easy about writing?

This question is a kind of corrective to the last one, because it's also true that as I get older I find it easier to spend long hours at the desk. The distractions matter less. I'm not awfully interested in "fun." I want to be *here*. I remember that a freshman English teacher at the University of Arizona, when I asked him if writing would get easier, said, "It doesn't get easier. It gets better." That has seemed to me profoundly true, and yet you acquire a kind of patience and trust that make you suffer less, enjoy more. Or I have. What I find hardest is muddle—when I don't know where I'm going, or have pages of stuff and can't decide what to leave in, what to chop. What's easiest is that magical (and rare) aforementioned moment when it doesn't feel like writing at all, but rather taking down what is already scrolling out in the brain.

How has your writing process changed over time?

The wonderful playwright Maria Irene Fornes once told me: "You must always change your process. There are

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two of you, one who wants to write and one who doesn't, and the one who wants to write must always be fooling the one who doesn't."

My process has changed many times, and I'm always after new ways of changing it. Most profound was the discovery of freewriting, the notion that if I muzzled the critic and let the words flow, something useable would result. Most recent is Robert Olen Butler's method of sinking deep into

the sensuous imagining of a scene before writing a word of it (one of his students called it "dreamstorming"), and then organizing such imaginings so that you are, in his words "rewriting on the level of structure." I'm experimenting with this method now and find it very promising—so promising that I'm thinking of editing his lectures on it (because, he claims, he is literally incapable of writing nonfiction).



Regular

Janet Burroway



Roy's Lovelock Shell, Lovelock, Nevada, July 1960—I was just about to start a ring job on a Chevy when I seen 'em, coughing over the alkali flats from Winnemucca like TB in their pistons. They was coaxing a 56 Dodge Custom Royale, two-tone green with the full fins and a ton of chrome, bad case of vapor lock.

It was Saturday. We'd been promised rain all week but there wasn't a scrap of cloud. I was down in the mouthy from wrangling with Myrtle and Sue Lynn, the usual, and Sue Lynn was hiked up at the counter inside like she was hung by her pony tail. She'd ought to have mopped the restrooms by now, but instead she was going over the account book looking for mistakes in my adding up. She's got those saddle shoes hooked on the stool rungs and about six foot of leg between that and her shorts that I told her not to wear in front of the customers. Twelve years old, that was fine. Seventeen you don't want her sashaying around the truckers.

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Interview with Alyce Miller

Alyce Miller has published two books of fiction, *The Nature of Longing* (W. W. Norton) and *Stopping for Green Lights* (Doubleday), as well as more than 100 short stories, essays, articles, and poems. Miller's work has won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Fiction, the Kenyon Review Award for Literary Excellence in Fiction, the Lawrence Prize, and numerous honorable mentions and distinguished short story citations in Best American Short Stories, O. Henry Prize Stories, Best American Essays, and the Pushcart Prize Anthology. Her stories have appeared in magazines including *The Sun*, *Glimmer Train*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Harvard Review*, *New England Review*, *Story*, *Kenyon Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Northwest Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, and *Witness*. Her creative nonfiction has been published in numerous magazines including *Iowa Review*, *Witness*, *Fourth Genre*, *Southwest Review*, and *Cream City Review*. Her poetry has appeared in such magazines as *New Letters*, *River Styx*, and *Seneca Review*.

She is an associate professor of English at Indiana University, in the M.F.A. program, where she teaches creative writing and courses in contemporary literature, American literature, and screenwriting. In addition to teaching, she is currently finishing her second year in law school.

In her pre-writer life, she worked as a clerk-typist, a secretary, and a loan claims examiner for the federal government in San Francisco, a high school English teacher in the East Bay, a governess in Spain, a self-employed consultant and instructor of technical and business writing (government and private industry), art critic and wacky human interest story writer for the long-defunct *Berkeley Gazette*, a song lyricist for Bay Area R&B musicians, an occasional waitress and odd-jobber, and an admitting representative for a hospital in Oakland. She divides her time between Bloomington, Indiana, and Sonoma County, California.



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You've had a variety of jobs, but one that really piques my interest is your being a lyricist for Bay Area R&B musicians.

Back in the eighties, I knew some very talented musicians, a few with national reputations, who have done very well. You probably never heard the songs I collaborated on, I assume they only got local airplay, but I loved writing lyrics. I always secretly wanted to be an R&B singer, and used to fantasize when I was a kid that I was one of Aretha Franklin's backup singers.

How did that experience affect your writing? Did it result in any stories?

I can't say a definitive yes, but I do believe that making connections to other art forms is always useful to writers. Both visual arts, like film and painting, as well as music, have always provided that for me. Music seems to show up a lot in my work without my even thinking about it, perhaps because music has always defined my life. As you already know, I'm a big R&B fan, along with opera, classical, old-school jazz, straight blues, salsa, funk, some early rap, some gospel, etc.

Your story "African Queen" is one of my favorites. There is something about the final paragraphs that remind me of an R & B song. Maybe it's that strong love that friends don't understand. I'm reminded of Jeffrey Osborne singing, "What we have is much more than they can see," in the LTD song "Love Ballad."

I never considered an R&B connection with those final paragraphs in "African Queen" before, but if you want to crank up the Jeffrey Osborne

soundtrack there I wouldn't complain. I've long been fascinated by women who get caught up with the "all-wrong man" because the "all-wrong man" often has a lot that's really right about him, too, at least superficially, which only complicates matters. I remember how as early as junior high there would be some beautiful, more advanced girl in love with the school thug, and he'd do her wrong and then "baby, baby" his way right back into her heart, and it was all so tortured and mysterious I almost warped my brain trying to imagine the mysterious force connecting them. Naturally, all relationships are very complex and emotionally layered, but the destructive ones carry additional weight. I never had a tortured love. That was the province of the more sophisticated girls who actually attracted boys. After several friends of mine met, fell in love with and, in two cases, even married men in prison (with life sentences, no chance of parole), I decided to write "African Queen". I think people get a lot from those relationships, actually. Both parties get to dream, to imagine—physical passion gets delayed unless they have conjugal rights—there's lots of mutual yearning and angst, lots of common emotional territory. (Maybe "Someday We'll Be Together" should be on that soundtrack.) Since the relationship is mostly epistolary, a very intimate form of communication, both people have the chance to transform themselves through writing, relying on the erotic charge of words. Maybe there's the combined hope of offering redemption

and receiving salvation, the idea you really can be transformed and transform others through love. It's all about passion delayed and gratification deferred, the dream of a "better time" when "someday we'll together."

Just where have you lived and traveled, let's say from birth up to the present?

Oh, quite a few places, though California will always be "home" to me.

Let's see ... I was conceived in Rome, and produced in Switzerland. (My parents are Americans.) When we came from Europe when I was four, we lived briefly outside D.C. with relatives, then we lived six months in Southern Illinois, then Ann Arbor, Michigan, then Berea, Ohio, then Oberlin, Ohio, where my parents still live. My parents lived in England for a year, so I went to London for six weeks when I was eighteen and had a fabulous time roaming around on my own. I also lived on the east side of Cleveland for two years where I attended an all-girls' school (not one of the fancy ones, trust me—a lot of the girls were there because they'd been "bad" or because there were family problems—that was not my case).

In terms of travel: I traveled solo in my twenties all over Europe on practically nothing for a year (went all over the place, lived for several months in Spain and France), then returned later for another visit, and spent time mostly in Italy and France (Italy's my favorite European country), and then to Eastern Europe briefly drove down the coast of the former Yugoslavia,

then to Prague. I've also traveled alone to Northern Mexico and Baja, Guam, Philippines, Japan, Indonesia, and Thailand. Arriving in Bangkok at midnight as a woman alone is a very interesting experience. I don't recommend it for the faint-of-heart.

Bangkok is such an amazing stew of sounds, smells, noises, etc. It was total sensory overload. I'd just come from Bali where things had been so peaceful, and there I was at one in the morning in this crazy city trying to figure out where to spend the night. But I liked living unplanned like that for periods of time, and the uncertainty of what each day brings. And because I never had any money to speak of when I traveled, I had to do things on the cheap, and that meant being pretty inventive at times and sleeping in some very strange places.

Has living in any of these places had a profound effect on your writing?

I can't speak to one place in particular, except that certain places haunt and compel me to return to them in my imagination, and they aren't always the obvious places or the most exciting ones I've been. I need time away from a place before using it as a setting. For example, though I've certainly set work in California, I am just now starting to work on a group of stories set in the Bay Area and on the North Coast. I've written more about California in poetry and nonfiction than I have in fiction. I have set several stories in foreign countries, but I am always conscious of the implications of that. You have to be careful not to

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allow physical setting to serve as psychological backdrop for your American characters. There's also what I call the "tour guide" problem. It's often easy to tell when a writer has only briefly visited a place you know well, because the kinds of details that emerge are those that would interest only a visitor. For example, when I read fiction about the Bay Area, I cringe a little if the so-called "natives" head to Fisherman's Wharf for dinner. It's sort of like having your French characters meet at the Eiffel Tower. Natives don't go there. Those kinds of details can be very telling.

When did you know that you wanted to be a writer? What was the first thing you remember writing? Do you still have it?
It was years before I understood that being a writer was a profession, like a musician, or a lawyer, or a veterinarian. We were raised without television, long before this was a popular idea (believe me, it was an anomaly, downright un-American). My mother read to us kids as many as two or three hours a night, and I assumed, well into my teens, that everyone who read just naturally wrote.

My mother has hung on to a ton of stuff I wrote as a kid, but I think the first was a story called "Hiawatha," written in pencil on that wide-ruled paper, with the little broken line running between lines. The opening sentences were "Come, come, sounded the drum. Hiawatha ran along the warpath." And there was someone named Big Chief Blackfish who is an enemy, but he and Hiawatha make

peace. Don't ask where that came from.

Tell me a little bit about your family background. I believe that your father was an opera singer. Is that correct?
Yes, my father was an opera singer. For several years, he was the lead tenor with the Zurich Opera House. He sang all over, including several months with the San Francisco Opera where he met singers like Leontyne Price and the Swedish tenor Jussi Bjerling. Occasionally, I'd get to see him perform, and he'd have on makeup and wigs, and he was always falling in love with tragic, doomed women, and usually either he or the woman had to die. I remember crying sometimes at night because the opera stories were often so very sad, and my father's beautiful voice would break my heart. My father came from a working-class, blue-collar family. He started singing on the radio when he was a little boy during the Depression and people would pay him off in sacks of potatoes. People think if you grow up in a musical family (one of my brothers is a concert violinist) that you really "know" music. But I really know bits and pieces of things, and I'm sure there's a reason I'm biased toward tenors.

Did your mother pursue a career?
My mother was unusual for her generation because she has a graduate degree in Spanish, and she taught foreign languages at several colleges before she married my dad. She didn't start having kids until she was thirty,

certainly not unusual now. She didn't work while we were growing up, because she was busy taking care of us and giving my father tremendous support in his career. After my youngest brother went into high school, she taught Italian at Oberlin where my father still teaches in the conservatory there. She also has been my father's right hand, so to speak. She helps him edit his books on singing, etc. She's a very powerful person.

How do your parents feel about your being a writer?

Oh, they must know they are to blame for the whole business.

When and how did you develop an appreciation for serious fiction?

Growing up, I didn't make distinctions between serious or non-serious fiction. Reading was uncensored in my household, and I just read all the time, which is, I think, how you start to make discriminations on your own between good writing and bad. I would easily spend a whole Saturday inside just lounging around, eating apples, and reading. There was nothing I wouldn't read. I'm always amazed by people who want to censor books for children. Why? They have to be at a certain cognitive level to process and appreciate material, so mostly they'll make good choices. I've never understood the phrase "age-appropriate fiction." What on earth does that mean? At age eleven, I remember snagging

Lady Chatterley's Lover off my parents' shelf, because I'd heard it was full of wicked stuff, but what a letdown! Ten pages into it I was so bored, I put it down, and couldn't figure out what all the fuss was about. I think kids have good judgment about what they

Not having books is sort of like not owning a refrigerator or a bathtub, or not having a front door

should be reading. I was always getting in trouble in school for

"reading for pleasure." Doesn't that sound quaint now? A lot of my friends, from all walks of life, were the same way—bookworms. We'd hide reading books inside our math books, which is probably why I'm innumerate today. Kids passed books around at school. Sure, there was the occasional trash novel that made the rounds, but I was honestly so bored by books like *Candy* or *Valley of the Dolls*. I thought it was horrible writing. I did like Iceberg Slim, though, and I went through a period at age fourteen of loving those awful Rod McKuen poems. You can't get much worse than that. It was only when I went to the girls' school for two years my junior and senior years that I discovered just how many people don't read. To this day if I go to someone's house, the first thing I notice is the presence or absence of books. I have literally prowled through people's homes in search of bookshelves, if any aren't readily apparent. Not having books is sort of like not owning a refrigerator or a bathtub, or not having a front door.

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Many of your narrators are black and much of your fiction deals with issues of race. I believe that cultural appropriation as applied to fiction is a garbage term that needs to be buried deep in a landfill instead of being recycled over and over again. Do any of your students (or others) have problems with the fact that you so often write from a black point of view?

No, not my students, they probably don't even read what I write. No, seriously, I've been asked questions about this in interviews and occasionally by some audience member when I give a reading, but mostly I've had really good responses to my work, and I've had a lot of readers tell me that they relate to the characters, which is always nice. When I first gave readings, I was completely unprepared for such questions—and, I might add, annoyed. Now I have a practiced and polite response that any questions about “cultural appropriation” rest on some rather major assumptions on the part of the asker about who I am, what my experiences have been, and what goes on in my writerly imagination, as well as what the asker expects from fiction. I think the real question behind such questions about “who has the right to represent” is “Gee, you don't look like someone who would know these characters; how do you personally come by your knowledge?” I frankly think it's just people being nosy. Such a presumption also ignores the fact that one can appropriate one's own culture, like Dee in Alice Walker's story “Everyday Use.” Mostly those who've had “problems” with some of my work have been white

readers concerned that I've transgressed some line, or curious because they can't imagine under what circumstances the lives of whites and blacks could intersect in intimate and familial ways. They will sometimes ask me “What do black readers think?” as if black readership is something monovocal that I could characterize. I have had only one black reader ever bring this up, a young woman who liked the story but told me privately she was pissed that the story hadn't been written by a black writer. Then she told me one of my characters had a “country name” and she stalked off. Not much to say to that. Mostly, I've had really great responses from readers of all stripes who tell me they recognize the characters I write about, etc., that their experience has been reflected in some way. I think there is a real dearth of American literature about the ways in which blacks and whites interact (look at our shared histories!) that doesn't locate those intersections in violence, sex, and “otherness.” We either seem to have “slave stories,” or contemporary stories of jungle fever, often which end in violence, or tales of “doomed” interracial relationships, etc. A lot of contemporary fictions about race seem way overdetermined to me.

Coincidentally, I'm actually teaching a graduate literature class this semester called “Assumed Identities” and it addresses some of the complex issues around identity, representation, appropriation, and “authenticity.” We're reading works like *The Education of Little Tree*, *Fragments* by Benjamin Wilkomirski, I, Rigoberta Menchu,

Araki Yasusada, etc. It's been a lot of fun so far. We're just about to discuss Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and Danzy Senna's novel *Caucasia*. There is a great deal to talk about in that book regarding structures of race, interracial relations, and representations of mixed-race characters.

What is your take on experiential as opposed to imaginative writing? How much do you draw on your own experience in telling stories?

I believe your subject matter chooses you, you don't choose it. And probably subject matter has some origin in real-life experience. For me, writing always starts with curiosity and questions I can't answer. I never write about things that don't interest me, that don't affect me in some very specific way. Our world-views and perceptions are certainly based on experience, but experience alone doesn't a writer make. For example, my life has been very much inflected by race, just as it's also been very much inflected by being a woman. But imagination is absolutely necessary to transform those experiences into fiction. That, and of course language. You have to render the raw materials of life to make fiction. Everyone's life is interesting, I think. Everyone has stories to tell. But fiction is a particular form we use for telling stories, for getting at alternative truths. And I do believe the imagination is often more truthful than verifiable experience.

How do you define story? What is a story? What is not a story?

I suppose I follow the standard line that a story involves a calculated ordering of events, as opposed to just a straight listing of this happened, then that happened, and there's some sort of conflict or disruption, some reason for entering the lives of these characters at this moment. Also, story involves a lot of shaping (like a sculpture) so that some things get foregrounded, and others can operate as texture or background, or drop out altogether. It's like writing music—there are different chords, different rhythms, different tempi, repetitions, themes, etc. These sorts of deliberate choices are what make story different from, say, anecdote. I've known some great storytellers (my father is one, and his mother, who had an eighth-grade education, was a fabulous one!), and good storytelling really is all about knowing how to build tension, and what details to include, and when to reveal what. All story is artifice, whether it's written or oral. My students don't like to hear me say this, because they think I mean "artificial," which for them connotes insincerity. But all stories are "made things." That doesn't make it any less real or less truthful or less authentic. For me, fiction is a great starting point for learning about how the world works. And form offers a container to give shape and meaning to ideas.

Where do stories start for you? Is it an image, a character, a phrase?

All of the above. I have a rather "filmic" view of literature. Reading

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has always been like watching a movie for me.

I love how well crafted your stories are, particularly your beginnings. You do an excellent job of presenting the story's central conflict, usually within the first few paragraphs. Are these wonderful openings the result of a lot of revision?

I couldn't possibly answer no to that question, could I? Seriously, I'd agree that openings are so critical it's worth taking time with them. Again, my interest in film plays a large role in how I "see" openings.

"A Cold Winter Light" has one of my favorite beginnings. You open with: "The winter Olivia turned sixteen she discovered her father had taken up with a black woman, someone unknown to her, but someone possibly connected with her father's old high school counseling job in Elyria, eight miles north by the edge of Lake Erie." The reader soon finds out that Olivia is a mixed-race child, her father is black and her mother is white. Of course, the story is all about questions of identity but you set it all up in the opening paragraphs. How easy or difficult was that to do?

I've always preferred grounded openings in my stories. I need to feel located, to start right away from particulars or I get lost in abstraction and then the story evaporates. I need to be able to picture clearly some small element of the situation, or location, or mindset of the characters. Some people call it a "hook" or an "angle." I don't like those terms, because they sound like "sales talk," but maybe

those words do convey some of what I'm getting at. If I can't picture the opening in my head, the story has no center from which to spring.

The first person narrator of your story "What Would Jasmine Think" becomes the third person central character of your novel, Stopping for Green Lights. Why did you see this particular story being expanded into a novel over your other stories? Why did you decide to change the point of view from first person to third person?

That book actually isn't easy for me to talk about. The brief history is that there was a change of editors during the writing process. This is not uncommon now at all (a friend of mine had six editors for her book). At any rate, let's just say the acquiring editor who was tremendously enthusiastic left the publisher and the new editor, who came through and inherited the project, was preoccupied with other things. She pretty much told me the book needed to be in third. She said that readers would have a hard time hanging out in the head of a fifteen-year-old girl. (I guess this isn't a problem with teen boy narrators.. At any rate, I came to agree with her on a certain level, because I could get at things with third that I couldn't with first, and I'm also not sure the voice in "What Jasmine Would Think" could really have been sustained through a whole novel. So it's hard to know whether I made the right choice or not. I had intended for the book to be in first, with third-person forays into the heads of the adults (which I have

now anyway). I changed the point of view because I wanted to trust the editor's judgment that it would make for a better book. She might have been right. I still am not sure. Regarding short stories that turn into novels: I think there is always a novel lurking in every short story. It's not something you can force, but some stories just want to keep on going, or be expanded. But I find novel-writing to be a completely different task from short-story-writing. They have almost nothing in common.

The main character of your novel, Tish (Letitia) Espy, is a young white girl growing up in the late sixties. Tish sees racism as most black people of the time see it. Tish's mother, Mrs. Espy, refuses to acknowledge the power of subtle racism in their supposedly enlightened community.

Study after study has shown a major divide in how blacks and whites perceive racism and civil rights progress. Mrs. Espy seems emblematic of modern white attitudes. If, as many studies show, the racial divide is such a major problem in America, why do so few fiction writers address these issues in their fiction? Are many writers, in a sense, literary versions of Mrs. Espy?

You mean well-meaning, but kind of blind to the realities? It would be impolitic of me to criticize other writers or guess why they choose not to write about issues of race, because as I said above, presumably people write about what matters to them, what presses on them, what they are interested in, what keeps them awake at night. I will say I think it's true that

many white people (and this would include white writers, naturally) in general haven't been personally touched directly by the very particular effects of race in any sustained way, and so can "afford" to ignore it, or be oblivious to it, or see racism as anomalous, an occasional glitch in things. Many whites I know, even very educated, thoughtful people, don't view themselves as racialized, or racially marked, nor do they feel themselves particularly affected by racial issues, except in some distant way. And I think a lot of whites are just extremely uncomfortable with the subject, and resort to polite platitudes like "I just don't notice color," or "People are all the same underneath." Even if whites want to do the right thing, they don't always recognize the particular issues. (Blacks alone with other blacks and whites alone with other whites talk so differently about race, it really is as if we spoke separate languages on the subject.) I also think there are currently no strong galvanizing social events, like the Civil Rights movement in the sixties, say, where many liberal whites joined forces with blacks in a bid for the noble goal of "racial equality," and might have felt more "involved" and therefore more compelled to write about it. And I think there's a strong sense among many whites now that "those problems have all been solved," etc., so they probably feel they have less of a stake. There's also been a strong backlash not only in fiction, but in a lot of movies. It's as if there is a kind of imaginative blindness there. It may have to do with the current polit-

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ical climate, too, the larger moves against affirmative action, the sense among many, even liberal, whites that blacks are being “given” too much. I think a lot of whites don’t realize how much they themselves get just by being white, even if it’s not a privilege they actively seek. It’s always interesting to me to read those studies you mention. I just yesterday read a statistic in the paper that said that only 10 percent of white Americans think that racism is a problem in the workplace, as opposed to 50 percent of black Americans. I would think that reasonable people would want to ask themselves: Now why might that be? Why such a discrepancy that divides on racial lines? And who might be best situated to determine if s/he’s being treated differently from others? This is a big topic. I’m trying to write an essay about some of this, but it overwhelms me.

Do you have scheduled writing sessions?

No, I don’t have a set schedule. My life has never allowed that. I am currently living a double life, because I’m in law school, while teaching and writing, and though I have a lot of wonderful stimulus in my life, it means my schedule changes daily, and I have to be adaptable. I also need to schedule in physical activity to keep myself sane, so I pretty much make up each day as it comes, in order to fit things in. But I do pretty much write a little each day, even if it’s just going in and tinkering with work in progress, or what I call “jazzing around.”

What do you find either easy or difficult about writing?

Everything is difficult and nothing is easy with writing. One of the most difficult things is getting enough momentum going to see the story all the way through to the bitter end.

How has your writing process changed over time?

It’s impossible to judge one’s own writing process, but I can tell you that I have made some conscious efforts to try new things, to jolt myself out of ruts I can get into, to try to work against what feels familiar. I started writing more poetry the last couple years, and I have also been writing a fair amount of nonfiction because it allows me to get at subjects I can’t make sense of in fiction. I also give myself little assignments, like “write a three-page story,” because normally my stories are thirty plus pages, and I want to see what I can do with compression and distillation. My study of law has also influenced the way I think about ideas and language, and even notions of narrative. For example, I just finished writing about a dozen “microfictions.” They’re really hard to do well, and every word matters.

You’ve published enough stories for several collections. Is another collection in the works? What are you working on now?

I’m currently working off and on a novel about a biracial woman attorney in Oakland, California, whose activist past rises up to change her nice upper-middle-class life. Her troubled cousin shows up, and things get dicey. It’s still

in very rough-draft stage, so if I say too much more about it, fate will punish me and it will never see the light of day. I'm also finishing up a collection of creative nonfiction that deals with lots of different subjects, including women's bodies and violence against women. But it's not as grim as it sounds. And I'm always working on short stories, etc. I like working on several things at the same time because it keeps me from running into dead ends.

What do you see as common weaknesses in student work?

The unerring attachment to real life events "as they happened," so that imagination can't be fully engaged. That means the writing becomes an act of transcription, versus transformation, and the story lies flat on the page. There's also the tendency to rely on formula plots or formulaic approaches to the writing itself (again, television looms large and sitcom dialogue is rampant); or there's the overwriting of highly emotional moments, replete with waterfall gushes of tears and gut-wrenching sobs and so on. Oh, and what I call the "empty middle problem." There's a decent opening and a good idea for an ending, but the middle sags. It's undeveloped, doesn't seem to connect up or really go anywhere, nothing happens, the tension of the opening is not sustained, and so on. Oh, and then there are those troubled endings, which seem to pop up from nowhere, and you wonder: Now how did we get here?

That last comment is interesting. As editors, one of the most common flaws we see is a fondness for surprise endings.

Yes, the surprise ending. I now put on the syllabus for my undergrads certain things they can't do (even though I'm truly anticensorship and they know it). But I do want to save them from easy impulses and free them of the chains of cliché, and give them a chance to learn that writing is about discovering, not just putting down what you think you already know. Some of the options I ban relate directly to surprise endings: "no last-minute encounters with space aliens to explain away character's strange behavior," and "no alarm clocks going off at the end with the last line that says 'and then he woke up. It had all been a dream.'" They actually laugh when they see the list, because they get it. Their instincts are often exactly right, but they don't trust themselves not to rely on formula. It's easier—you don't have to really look at the world. I have also had to ban psychokillers, particularly those prone to showing up at drunken frat parties and conveniently bumping everyone off in a final moment of blood and gore. There was also a period of time I was getting what I call the "women chained in the basement" stories. But even with the better writing, I think some young writers may be inclined to push too hard for that epiphanic moment at the end, when all becomes revealed, and the main character, like Saul on the road to Damascus (before he became Paul), is totally changed.

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In his essay, "Against Epiphanies," Charles Baxter argues that epiphanous endings in short stories have become "...a tic, a habit among writers (and editors) of literary fiction." Baxter also says, "The insight-ending as a result has become something of a weird norm in contemporary writing." (Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction by Charles Baxter, Graywolf Press, 1997). How do you feel about Baxter's arguments against epiphanies?

I like that essay a lot and Baxter makes a good point. It's essential for writers to question narrative conventions as they evolve, and ask themselves: Am I doing this because it's expected, it's what everyone else is doing, it's what seems to sell, it's what stories are doing now—or am I doing it because it's best for the story, and this is where the story is taking me?

I personally like anti-epiphanies, those final moments in which the character has an opportunity to change or understand something new, but turns away from it instead. A lot of epiphanic endings rely heavily on very lyrical and emotionally driven language, which makes them really attractive to write, but which can have the effect of ham-handedness. It's a little like relying on one of those overwrought John Williams movie scores, the kind that now plague the film industry, with the sweeping crescendos full of lots of sappy strings dictating to us what emotions we should feel at crucial points. Feel sad, feel happy, okay cry now—on cue.

What are your teaching methods?

Everything I can employ, short of abuse, defenestration, or murder. Not everyone learns the same way. Not everything I do works. Depending on whether I'm working with graduate or undergraduate students, or teaching literature or creative writing, I explore various tactics to get students thinking critically. No matter what the class is, I think learning to read closely is essential. Also, a lot of students are resistant to the notion that writing is always "political." Some are very resistant to considering the larger implications of what they've actually said. I try to expose students to a lot of different kinds of writing, and help them learn to develop good readerly instincts, to question their own aesthetics and expectations, to be curious about why a writer has made certain choices, and to examine the effects of those choices. Since I learned to write primarily by reading, I figure it's worth a shot with my own students. I really like to push them. In my experience, if challenged and encouraged, students rise to the occasion. They can always do more than we think they can.

Nowadays with grade inflation, it's hard to honestly assess students without their invoking their GPAs. We're supposed to be careful of their fragile self-esteem, I guess, to reward them nowadays just for making the effort—it's terribly condescending. Everyone wants praise, sure, but I don't think most people want undeserved praise. I prefer to use the word "encouragement." I also think students really want to know what they can do to improve. For example, I do not give

automatic As in creative writing classes. Far as I'm concerned, As are reserved for gods and goddesses. It says so right on my syllabi. I always say I won't punish students for not having talent, but neither do I reward them for it. I take every student seriously and try to talk about their work with care and honesty. Mostly, I want them to discover what kinds of readers and writers they are and to leave my classes understanding that writing involves discipline and commitment, and attention to craft, as well as an idea and the desire to write. In all fairness, I should add that I have some pretty fantastic students.

How do you like teaching? Do you think teaching helps your writing?

I like teaching a lot. I could do a hundred different things, but I teach by choice. I actually was trained to teach high school. Writers don't have to be

in academia. Our work has value outside the academy, so the only reason to be a writer in academia is if you like to teach. Teaching can be a thankless task sometimes, and a bit discouraging, especially in writing classes when students believe you can single-handedly make or break their future (you can't), and who imbue you with tremendous power you don't have. Also, you can put a lot of energy into teaching that seems to evaporate in thin air. It's so consumable. You do it and it's gone. Hard to know how to measure what's succeeded. I can't say that teaching helps my writing directly, but I do know that when all the planets are aligned, and fortune is smiling down, and I have a terrific batch of engaged students excitedly sharing insights and astute observations, the neurons in my brain fire away with joy. And when that happens, I'm more likely to write.



Off-Season Travel, African Queen, & Swimming

Alyce Miller



A few weeks after Ellen won the contest that had something to do with peanut butter, the supermarket arranged to fly her and Glenn to the small resort town of Puerto Cobre, on the west coast of Mexico across from La Paz. Even as they bounced along in the dilapidated taxi on the dirt road from the airport into town, Ellen thought how impossible it seemed that they'd actually disentangled themselves from the multiple complications that shaped their collective life in San Francisco: the children, the fixer-upper house, the asthmatic dog, the stack of bills, the unfolded laundry, the unfrosted refrigerator, Glenn's job, her job, the firecracker-like gunshots at night from

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the projects over the hill, the surreptitious drug-dealing of hooded silhouettes on their corner, and their own mutual complaints swirling together and lost in the fog of what could never be fixed. Long ago, specifics were forgotten. All the two of them could remember was that at one time there had been something good, and that what was left was very, very wrong.

—Excerpt from “Off-Season Travel,” from *The Nature of Longing* by Alyce Miller (W. W. Norton & Company, 1995) Copyright © 1994 Alyce Miller.

Your mother was weary for years, long before you understood. Diabetes. High blood pressure. The words were as innocent as the alphabet magnets on her refrigerator door. She uttered them with the same ease she said “plate” and “milk.” Your childhood was her slow death.

You inherited her awkward bulk and thick waist, her dark, round pancake face, shortness of breath, and disproportionately tiny hands and feet. Sometimes you catch your reflection in the mirror and mistakenly think “Mother.”

—Excerpt from *African Queen* by Alyce Miller (*The Kenyon Review*, Spring 1997) Copyright © 1997 Alyce Miller.

Water was a way of forgetting. The very blueness of it, no matter how artificially produced, cast a spell and drew her away from remembering. Helen never questioned it or hesitated getting in. True, she wasn’t much of a swimmer, but that didn’t matter because swimming wasn’t the point. And once she began down the irresistible length of pool, the water, warmed by the summer heat and just a few degrees cooler than her own body temperature, took on the quality of her own skin.

—Excerpt from *Swimming* by Alyce Miller (*Glimmer Train*, Summer 1998) Copyright © 1998 Alyce Miller.

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