ENGLISH

AT CORNELL

A NEWSLETTER FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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In This Issue

SPECIAL TOPIC: THE FEMALE LITERARY IMAGINATION

This edition of *English at Cornell* looks at the work of recent women writers from two angles. The first article, an interview with Helena María Viramontes, concerns the position of a woman writing about and for marginalized and disenfranchised members of American society. The second concerns a poem from the most celebrated recent collection of poems in English: Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* (1963). In his close analysis, Professor Roger Gilbert shows why the neglected poem "The Night Dances" is, in his opinion, Plath's masterpiece.

Helena María Viramontes: Into the Wild

Helena María Viramontes, one of the most vital and influential new voices in U.S. Latino literature, has been a member of the Cornell English Department since January, 1995, teaching courses in creative writing and American ethnic literature. Viramontes grew up in California, the daughter of Mexican immigrants. She graduated from Immaculate Heart College in 1975, and in 1994, she received her MFA from the University of California at Irvine. Viramontes's first book, *The Moths and Other Stories* (Arte Publico Press, 1985), now in its second edition, treats the lives of Chicanos in the barrios of Los Angeles; its stories have been reprinted in many anthologies, including a standard college textbook (*Introduction to Literature*, HarperCollins 1996). Her second book, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995; rept. Penguin 1996), draws on her experience of migrant labor in northern California. In 1996, Viramontes received the John Dos Passos Prize for Literature. She has also co-edited two anthologies of Chicana writing and has just completed a new novel, her most ambitious work. In the following interview, conducted by staff writer Emberly Nesbitt, Viramontes reflects on the urgencies that drove her work as a Chicana writer and on the place of ethnic American studies in the academy.

Emberly Nesbitt: What are you working on now?

The novel that is almost done is called *Their Dogs Came With Them*. It was an idea that I had gotten about my own reflections and experiences, feeling what Lorna Dee Cervantes calls my "excuse me" tongue. As a Latina, as a woman Chicana, my language is something that I have always had to fight with, because I'm not a Spanish speaker, nor am I an English speaker. Although English is the primary language that I write in, I do not feel comfortable in it at all.

The novel began with a question that I posed to myself. What is happening in East Los Angeles regarding the gang violence? Why is it that we're getting to a point where we are so vicious with each other that it's not enough to fight one on one, but one has to kill a two-year-old brother, one has to kill a son, one has to kill a mother, in order to get back? The repayment is more costly now. What happened to us?

There are four main characters in this novel, whose stories I try to tell as completely as possible. One is a young female gang member who wants to be a boy; her name is Turtle. She wants to get out of the gang. I have another character, Ben, a twenty-two-year-old USC student, who's incredibly brilliant, but very mentally ill. I have a woman, Tranquilina, whose mother crossed the border when she was pregnant with her so that she could be in the land of freedom. Tranquilina is a minister; she ministers to the very poor and marginalized, but she has no faith. And Ermila is just a fifteen-year-old Chicana who is trying to get through school, find a job and get the hell out of the barrio. These four main characters intersect with one another constantly, until at the very end they all meet together and then something horrendous happens.

It has taken four years to write this novel. It's taken so long because I didn't like it at first. Perhaps that's because I had to be honest in the way I was looking at things, our own racism and sexism within our culture, the marginalization that people experience within our society. All these characters were so marginal, they were even marginalized from the margin! I had to trust where the characters were going to take me and I just didn't like where they were going. I didn't like the fact that Ermila was a cliché, a woman who is sexually active. I didn't like Tranquilina, who was submissive to her mother, the real minister of the family. Ben! Ben, who was so pained! Writing about him was a tremendous difficulty for me because I felt his pain. I modeled him after my brother who's now in rehab and who's been mentally ill. Since I can remember as a young kid, he's always had pain in his face. But it's so hard for me to begin to conjure the mental anguish that becomes a physical pain.

For me the challenge was trying to find the hope and the light in these very dismal lives. *Under the Feet of Jesus* in a way was so easy because it was a spiritual experience. You have this young woman coming of age in the fields, very archetypal. Plus, she's a great character! She's vibrant and strong and confident in her ability to take care of things, though their world is very shaky. The novel just rolled along and I thought that was the experience of writing a novel.

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Then I did this one and it was very painful. It still is. And I don't know quite what makes it so other than the example of Ben and the challenge of trying to find hope.

During the time that I was excavating these characters I began looking at the real world that they lived in and all of a sudden the image of the freeway, of the coming of the freeway, of the dismantling and the amputation of communities because of the freeway became very symbolic to me. And so for the greater part of the novel a huge overpass looms. The shadow of the arc that these characters are under is a freeway. This is stuff that I really didn't plan, but this is what's happening.

This novel is the biggest thing I've ever written. For a long time I thought it was incredibly unruly. It was like this crazy adolescent that was just wild on the streets. What I began with was a question about gang violence. What I ended up with was a community of people who have been dissected from their own selves and their own community.

What are you going to do next?

I think what I would like to do is to write a screenplay, just get back to writing something that's totally different, something that will challenge me in a totally different way, that will be fun. And it's going to be a Western! This is something that I had started back at the Sundance Institute on Modesta Avila. She was the first convicted felon of Orange County and was imprisoned in San Quentin in 1883 for the obstruction of the railroad. Modesta Avila was a Mexican woman who had a little piece of land where they built the railroad. She put a laundry line across the railroad and I thought, man, that's a great symbol of resistance! A laundry line across the railroad! That's the way I start the treatment: the flapping of the sheets and her bloomers as the train stops.

Several years ago, after I came out of Sundance, I did a thirty-minute teleplay, which was produced and shot by the AFI. It's still, as they say, "in the cans." Writing that screenplay trained me to write better and look at imagery—setting, lighting. What one can do with light! You can set a whole mood of a person's world by where you put the light bulb in their room. If you really can't think of what a character is all about, think of what that character surrounds herself with. It tells you so much more sometimes.

Your book, The Moths and Other Stories, is narrated by Latinas and Chicanas of all ages. What does your book say about these women's lives?

The majority of those stories were women that I knew. Now, "The Moths" was not about my real grandmother, it was not autobiographical. And the voice, that was more like Estrella's sort of voice, not mine. I was a good kid, very submissive. I always felt bad for my mom, because she had eleven people to take care of and she was always working so hard. As a very young kid, I'd go to school and she'd be washing, I'd come back and she'd be washing—six hours, seven hours she'd be washing.

During my college years I met all types of women. Arlene, for example, in "Miss Clairol," the story that I wrote that's in the *Oxford Anthology of Women Writers*, I knew her well. She had four kids at the time. She was a teenage mother. She didn't know how to parent. The one thing that amazed me about this woman, and that I respected her for, was that she was trying hard to take care of her kids with no resources, no back-up plan. And I thought, someone has to pay tribute to that trying.

"The Broken Web" was an interesting story. I knew that woman; she went to prison for involuntary manslaughter for eighteen months because they proved that her husband was so mentally torturous. She got a shotgun and pointed it at his chest across the kitchen table, shot him while her kids were screaming, put it down, re-loaded the gun and shot him again. That's why they caught her. It wasn't insanity. It wasn't anything, man, she had just had enough!

What was so amazing about that story to me was that when I went to the court records, I saw she had written in very broken English how much she loved her husband, and I thought, this is a trip! I was too young and too much of an amateur to get it from her point of view. I thought I was going to write it in broken English, but it didn't work and that's why I started it out with the child who witnesses the murder. Again, I was just trying out my heels with this idea of storytelling.

How did you get the details for the migrant farm workers in Under the Feet of Jesus?

Well, we used to do grape picking in the summers. My father only had a third grade education. He was a hod carrier, someone who carries cement. They mix the cement in big buckets with a stick and then he'd carry it up to the scaffolds and dump it so that the plasterers didn't have to get down. It's mule work. He did it for years. A family of eleven, that's a lot of people. So in the summers we'd get in the back of the pickup truck and drive to Fresno, where we had some aunts, and pick grapes for the summer. Those kind of experiences never leave you. I remember the heat and the dirt penetrating through our clothes—even through our boots, that's how hot it was. The beating of the sun, finishing the work and then just having your whole body feel . . . it's just an unimaginable ache, to be covered from head to toe, saturated with sand. Things you don't forget.

When I started the story, all I had was a question. I had a young girl and I had a barn and the young girl wanted to go into the barn, so I had to excavate why she wanted to go there. Then I had to see the obstacles that were keeping her from going there. And that's what motivated me to start writing the story.

Unconsciously as you're writing for months and months, you have to keep all of your senses open, you have to keep your eyes focused on the scene in your head, the smells, the tastes, what you're hearing, in order to get a more real picture of what's in your head. As you're doing that all your senses do begin to open, so that after you wake up from this hallucination and you're walking the streets, the grass smells greener, there's more of an intensity in conversation that you pick up, there's more fascination with your world because you're seeing the world in that urgency, that space. I call it a "hypersensitivity." That's what I experienced when writing *Under the Feet of Jesus*. I was feeling alive. I'd be driving and I'd see a bird flying and I'd see the stick in its beak, and immediately that meant so much to me, and I'd make sure that I didn't forget that image and the way that the salt smelled, the dirt.

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Background: Map of Eastern Los Angeles.

What can you tell me about the process of writing?

What I've learned from working on this novel is that perseverance is absolutely essential, and that one really must have faith in the imagination to deliver—even in terms of looking at the stuff you've written and realizing that it's not that good. Three months later if you go back and read what you wrote, reread that stuff that you thought was shit, there's some pretty good stuff in there. Your imagination delivers a lot more than you think. You as the writer are the filter, the controller, you sort of give it a pattern, a form. It's like a footprint in the sand. You can't control the beach, you can't control the ocean, you can only put your footprint in the sand and stand there and take everything in at that moment.

I always go back to this passage that I have my students read from *Into the Wild*. It's about that young super tramp who decided he wanted to be a wilderness guy and graduated from some East Coast college, then traveled for fourteen months, ended up in the wilderness somewhere near Alaska, and basically starved to death. There was something that captured people's imagination about the spirit of this young man who wanted to go and be self-sufficient, who gave up everything, turned his back on everything, to become sort of a transcendental walker of the universe. In one chapter, the author tells why he was so interested in the young man. One day while climbing a rock the author slipped and fell and there, alone on this glacier-like mountain, he came to the realization that he couldn't really climb to the top, but he couldn't really go to the bottom. What to do? It's in that instance, he said, in that survival mode when all the trivia falls apart and it is only the next step, that next grip, the breathing, the calmness, the frustration, the terror all come into one; and for me, that's the perfect space for a writer. That amount of survival. When you're writing, you write to survive. When you write you have to write with authority, to let people know that this character is incredibly important because they have an important story to tell and you're going to learn something from it. It'll help you in your survival with the real world.

What do you think the place of politics is in writing?

When I talk about politics, when I introduce the word into any creative writing course, there's always that initial "Oh my god, is this going to be dogma, rhetoric, pedagogy, didactic?" The first thing I tell my students is that you have to define what politics really mean: "frameworks of understanding." If you are aware of your environment, you can understand your reality. This is probably the only country whose writers don't feel that urgency to engage in the political as in other countries.

A writer like Amos Oz has to worry about Israeli state politics; for the longest time the white South African writers were writing about apartheid. When you have those kinds of expedient realities, of course you're going to write about them and you're going to write about them with a certain conviction, a certain urgency, and also a certain vision. You've got to have some insight! Even having no insight is an insight! Do we have it here? I think we have forgotten. We have forgotten that urgency, and you can't, because when you sit down to write, it's a political act. It's about time that we begin to look at our lives with a certain aliveness. Politics really helps me understand reality better, not in a didactic way, but in an intellectual, informed way. We writers really have to do that more, because people are dying. If writing or storytelling is our weapon, we should begin using it as effectively as we can.

What authors have been major influences on your work?

Toni Cade Bambara was somebody I read and read and read and constantly re-read. As a Chicana writer, the women that influenced me the most in my own development, or at least gave me permission to write the stories I wanted to write, were black women writers of the late 1970s: Alice Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Cade Bambara. In those days, we Chicana writers were still sending mimeographed copies to each other. We were still developing as writers. My generation—Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Denise Chavez, Lorna Dee Cervantes, Terri de la Peña—we were all in our twenties and all very desperate, too isolated to come together as a community of writers, but we knew we were out there! Having things in print was something that just wasn't available to us, but black women writers were in print, and that gave me a lot of excitement and permission to work with politics and to work with being a female.

What can you tell me about the Latino Studies program at Cornell?

We have a lot to offer. From the Chicano Studies departments in the southwest grew a small cauldron of Chicana feminist scholars who began teaching our work, collecting the mimeographs, and fighting to have Chicana writers as required reading. They weren't saying, "Look, these writers are for us, Chicanas." They were saying, "These are important American writers. Check it out! If you don't acknowledge it now, you're gonna miss out." And that's the way Latino Studies has to be. It has to say, "You know what? Damn, we're good. Listen, wanna get in on this or you're gonna be left out." Not, "Please, oh please, just consider this faculty member."

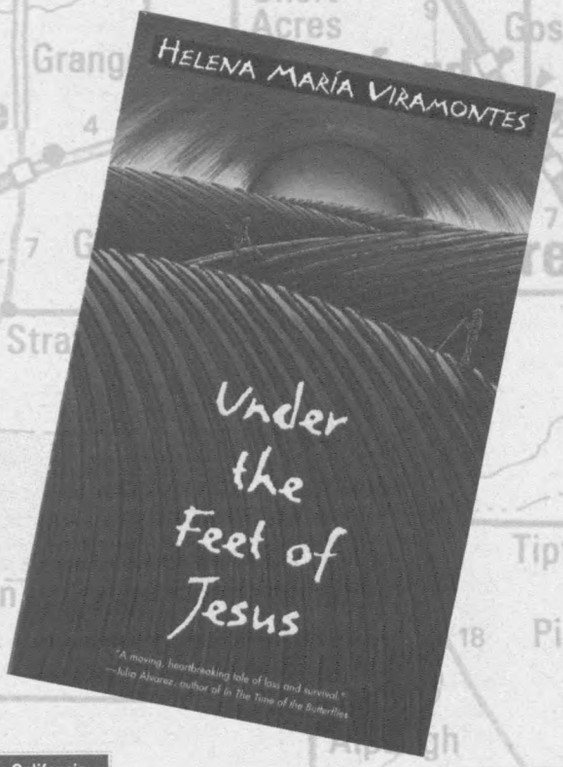
I think Cornell has a very progressive, very exciting opportunity to establish a hard-core Latino Studies program, has the opportunity to do one of the best programs.

What has your experience been teaching at Cornell?

Cornell is one of the best in the nation in terms of English literature, of reading and writing, and one aspect of it is the creative writing faculty. We have such a big creative writing program and we're all involved in teaching and we're all involved as part of the department and are respected for it.

I get such wonderful little gifts. One student wrote me a poem about my office. Another student actually made this little handmade card. They're just so kind to me and so sweet. They give me a lot of love, and I give them a lot of love, too. I allow them the security to be themselves and engage with their own emotions in a place that is safe, a place that is therapeutic, and a place where you're ready for anything.

We get a lot of emotional work done in the writing courses. I tell them, "This is probably the one opportunity that you have at Cornell to engage with yourself, to explore yourself, to see what you can do, to see how many times you can fail, to see how many mistakes you can use. Take advantage of it, don't be a fool, and don't think this is going to be an easy class." I am rarely disappointed. I ask them not only to learn about themselves, but to learn about each other. And they do. They come together, they always come together.



Background: Map of San Joaquin Valley, California.

"The Night Dances": Sylvia Plath's Private Masterpiece

BY ROGER GILBERT

While I don't have statistics to prove it, I would guess that the most popular poetry book of the last fifty years is Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*. I base this hunch largely on the book's appearance at virtually every yard sale I've ever browsed through. I've read and taught Plath's book many times over the years, and though I continue to marvel at its dramatic power and imaginative energy, I do have certain misgivings about it. For instance, while I admire the brilliance of that ferociously theatrical poem "Daddy," having been one myself now for some years I can't help wondering whether Plath is entirely fair to her subject, a lowly professor of entomology whose gravest crimes seem to have been dying when she was eight and being German. Then there's that other theatrical tour-de-force "Lady Lazarus," whose speaker describes her repeated suicide attempts as a strip tease and then excoriates us for watching. These and other poems in the book have helped to solidify its reputation as a work of pathological self-display, anticipating in the violence of its language and emotion the biographical fate of its author, who took her own life at the age of thirty-one.

Yet there is another side of *Ariel*, a tenderness and warmth that some critics have insisted is as central to the book as the darker passions it voices. Most of the poems were written while Plath was living alone with her two young children, following the painful breakup of her marriage to Ted Hughes. Difficult as it must have been for Plath to cope with her own emotional and domestic instability along with the demands of her muse in the wake of such a disastrous episode in her life, she evidently was able to find a fragile solace in the company of her children—especially her infant son Nicholas, about whom several of *Ariel*'s poems were written. One poem in particular seems to me to escape both bathos and bluster while attaining a delicate balance between grief and joy.

"The Night Dances" is a poem I've read many times over the years with a mixture of perplexity and fascination, but it's only recently that I've come to regard it as a true masterpiece. There's a reason it took me so long to appreciate the poem—the same reason, I suspect, that there's been virtually no critical commentary on it. "The Night Dances" is a willfully *private* poem. Where Plath's most famous poems stage their own conflicts and confrontations with Kabuki-like intensity, "The Night Dances" deliberately withholds its subject from the reader, almost as if protecting it from our intrusive gaze. As a result the poem can seem obscure, even opaque, as it did to me for years. Yet in fact it has a very specific subject, albeit one that remains unspecified in the poem itself. Help comes in the form of a one-sentence note in the 1981 *Collected Poems*, edited by Ted Hughes: "'The Night Dances.' A revolving dance which her baby son performed at night in his crib."

How does this information affect our reading of the poem? Based on my own experience I would have to say that "The Night Dances" is a much better poem with the note than without it, though not necessarily an easier one. Once we're able to recognize the human occasion at the poem's source, its cryptic particulars begin to coalesce, and we can hear both the sadness and the sweetness of its music with a new clarity. At bottom this is a poem about the most common source of parental grief: the awareness that the child one loves today will be a different child tomorrow, that one can't hold on to the ephemeral impressions he or she throws off in every passing moment.

The question remains: why did Plath choose to leave the poem so enigmatic? In the end, it's difficult to separate this poem's aesthetic and emotional power from what I want to call its privacy. Plath's refusal to *describe* her son dancing in his crib draws a veil between the poem and its readers that facilitates its atmosphere of quiet intimacy. If Plath's best-known poems are works of confessional theater performed in full view of an audience, "The Night Dances" approaches the ideal condition of lyric poetry as defined by John Stuart Mill and Northrop Frye: we do not hear it, we overhear it.

A few words must first be said about the poem's form. "The Night Dances" is arranged in fourteen two-line strophes; it thus contains exactly twice as many lines as a sonnet. The lengths of these lines vary dramatically, from two syllables to twelve. This combination of stanzaic regularity and prosodic freedom allows the poem to evoke both the symmetry and spontaneity of the baby's dance. Line breaks are also variable; of the poem's twenty-eight lines, ten end in periods or other end punctuation, five in commas or dashes, and the remaining thirteen are enjambed, often sharply. The high incidence of enjambment gives the poem an unusually strong gravitational pull; syntax and meaning are constantly being tugged downward, a vector that takes on great metaphorical prominence in the course of the poem. This effect is enhanced by the almost total absence of end-rhyme, which tends to stop the eye and ear, however briefly. Only two occur in the poem: "heaven" and "given" in lines 22 and 23, and "hair" and "Nowhere" in lines 26 and 28, which ends the poem. The latter instance strengthens the poem's closure, like the rhyming couplets that conclude Shakespeare's sonnets; in effect it tells us we've arrived at the ground floor.

Rhythm too emerges as a vital constituent of the poem. Though it lacks a regular meter, the poem does establish a kind of rhythmic signature that recurs throughout: a strong syllable followed by two weak syllables, then one strong and one weak, or in technical terms, a dactyl followed by a trochee. In several instances the pattern is

The Night Dances

SYLVIA PLATH

A smile fell in the grass.
Irretrievable!

And how will your night dances
Lose themselves. In mathematics?

Such pure leaps and spirals—
Surely they travel

The world forever, I shall not entirely
Sit emptied of beauties, the gift

Of your small breath, the drenched grass
Smell of your sleeps, lilies, lilies.

Their flesh bears no relation.
Cold folds of ego, the calla,

And the tiger, embellishing itself—
Spots, and a spread of hot petals.

The comets
Have such a space to cross,

Such coldness, forgetfulness.
So your gestures flake off—

Warm and human, then their pink light
Bleeding and peeling

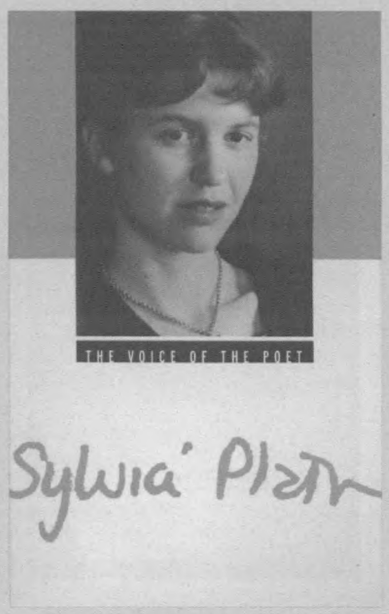
Through the black amnesias of heaven.
Why am I given

These lamps, these planets
Falling like blessings, like flakes

Six-sided, white
On my eyes, my lips, my hair

Touching and melting.
Nowhere.

created through the conjunction of present participles or gerunds: "Bleeding and peeling," "Falling like blessings," "Touching and melting." In the context of "The Night Dances" this falling cadence takes on a mournful plangency that deepens the poem's pathos.



The poem begins with a series of quick, short sentences that establish the speaker's sardonic attitude toward loss. "A smile fell in the grass": this opening metaphor is made strangely indeterminate by the lack of a possessive pronoun and the absence of any narrative context. All we know is that the smile and the warmth it betokened are hopelessly lost, like a dropped key or contact lens. The exclamation that follows mixes fury, resignation, and amusement: "Irretrievable!" Plath's usage is ironic, as though mocking the very notion that one might retrieve such things as fallen smiles. But in the next line loss comes nearer, as signalled by the appearance of the second-person possessive: "And how will your night dances / Lose themselves. In mathematics?" In effect, we move from a generic instance to an idiosyncratic particular whose meaning is essentially personal. Even with Hughes's gloss, the phrase "your night dances" retains a certain opacity, as though it belonged to a private language we could only translate with the aid of a dictionary. Having established the axiomatic nature of loss, Plath now introduces us to a special case whose emotional import clearly exceeds any smile's. Yet even here her tone remains faintly sardonic. There's an almost scientific sang-froid in Plath's choice of interrogative pronoun—not "whether," "why," or "when," but "how"—that suggests she takes the loss of these cherished dances as a foregone conclusion, speculating only on the manner of their departure. "In mathematics" may seem a curious answer, but it introduces a key dichotomy, between the warmth and immediacy of physical presence and the cold abstraction of pure form.

In the next lines Plath moves from the brisk syntax and detached stance of the opening stanzas to an extraordinarily fluid, lyrical sentence that seems to imitate the spiraling dance that inspires it, while fully disclosing the speaker's emotional investment in her subject. "Pure" is a nearly obsessive term for Plath, connoting both innocence and sterility; here it describes the geometrical perfection of the baby's dance, at once a cause for praise and a foreboding of its eventual loss "in mathematics." Dropping the mask of scientific inquiry, she now enters a visionary space in which the baby's motions take on a life of their own, traveling like meteors or radio waves through the cosmos. The speaker's tortured hopes are mirrored in the tortured syntax of her assertion: "I shall not entirely / Sit emptied of beauties." The "beauties" she imagines herself possessing modulate in the course of the sentence from the nearly abstract "leaps and spirals" of the dance to more intimate, olfactory sensations: "the gift // Of your small breath, the drenched grass / Smell of your sleeps." These least tangible, most ephemeral of impressions join the baby's movements as gifts to be kept, if only in memory. Grass, which had previously swallowed up the fallen smile, now signifies the rich fecundity of sleep and the sheer sensual availability of the child's body. The sentence ends with the word "lilies," lovingly repeated in a kind of soothing incantation. Through the agile leaps and spirals of this sentence we've moved from the cold purity of mathematics to the warm intimacy of touch and smell, an antinomy the poem as a whole continually works to bridge.

Yet as if recognizing that "lilies, lilies" represents a false or forced cadence, not a genuine resolution, Plath immediately turns against it: "Their flesh bears no relation." This is perhaps the most problematic line in the poem, but clearly its basic gesture is to reject the implied equation between the baby's flesh and that of lilies. "Bears no relation" would then mean "has nothing in common"—presumably with the child in the crib. By eliding the expected prepositional clause, however, Plath allows the phrase to take on other resonances as well. Thus "Bears no relation" can suggest the bearing of children and all the human relations they entail, a process in which the lilies do not participate. "Relation" can also mean verbalization (as in "relating a story"), implying that the lilies don't warrant the kind of poetic attention Plath lavishes on her son and his dances.

In any case it's clear that these lilies, which a moment earlier had provided the lyrical conclusion to Plath's catalogue of beauties, have now become positively menacing in their otherness: "Cold folds of ego, the calla, // And the tiger, embellishing itself— / Spots, and a spread of hot petals." In these lines the lilies have polarized into opposite, equally dangerous extremes that embody contrasting aspects of adulthood—the egoism of the calla lily and the predatory sexuality of the tiger lily—both of which threaten the purity and innocence of the child in his crib. The lilies thus represent the divided realm of adult experience, with its segregation of mind and body, its war of reason and desire, its oscillation between self-concealment and self-display. All these divisions are encoded in the basic opposition between heat and cold which governs much of the poem's metaphorical movement. Both extremes are anathema to the baby's dance, which Plath later describes as "warm and human," and the poem's imaginative labor can therefore be understood in part as a struggle to preserve a temperate zone free from the incursions of both calla and tiger, fire and ice.

The thematic antinomies noted above continue to inform the next lines, which transport us from the realm of flowers to outer space: "The comets // Have such a space to cross, / Such coldness, forgetfulness." "Comets" picks up the short "o" and "t" sounds that dominated the previous line, "Spots, and a spread of hot petals," while translating the sexual heat of the tiger lily into a more celestial form. But the image also returns us to Plath's hopeful supposition that her son's movements "travel the world forever." As she now recognizes, this perpetual journey comes at an enormous cost, thanks to the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Simply put, a warm object passing through cold space will eventually cool off, a process Plath associates with forgetfulness, since a loss of heat also entails a loss of light and thus of visibility. In the next lines she explicitly applies this principle to the baby's dance: "So your gestures flake off— // Warm and human, then their pink light / Bleeding and peeling // Through the black amnesias of heaven." The mother's grief at the transience of her child's movements now returns to the center of the poem, but a new and disturbing physicality has entered Plath's language; words like "flake," "bleeding," and "peeling" suggest that the child's dance involves mutilation as well as beauty. It's as if each gesture tears off a piece of the baby, leaving him slightly wounded and diminished. Plath's desire to rescue these ephemeral movements thus represents something more than aesthetic greed. In a real sense she is trying to keep her son whole, to guard him against the inevitable abrasions of time and space.

The second phrase—"Why am I given"—introduces the poem's final, plaintive plea, whose unspoken corollary is "only to have them taken away." Yet something extraordinary happens in the course of the ensuing lines, which offer a final oblique portrait of the baby's dance: "These lamps, these planets / Falling like blessings, like flakes // Six-sided, white / On my eyes, my lips, my hair // Touching and melting. / Nowhere." In these concluding lines Plath's remarkable gift for metaphorical transformation shows itself in full force. The demonstrative pronoun "these" brings the gestures closer to us, locating them in the same linguistic space as speaker and reader, yet their form remains radically unstable, as they metamorphose from lamps to planets, then by way of simile ("falling like") to blessings and finally to flakes. A family resemblance connects "lamps" and "planets"; both are sources of light and heat albeit on very different scales,

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Continued from previous page

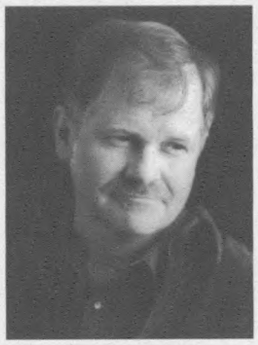
variations on the comets and the pink-lighted gestures. "Blessings" is a more abstract term, looking back to "beauties" and "gift," while also carrying overtones of its Romance meaning, wound, as in the French "blessure."

But "flakes" is the stroke of genius, the image on which the whole poem turns. Six lines earlier "flake" was a verb hinting at decay or erosion: "so your gestures flake off." Now "flakes" is a noun that evokes the geometrical beauty and purity of the baby's "six-sided, white" movements. By turning the gestures from meteors to snowflakes, Plath decisively alters both their temperature and their trajectory; they are no longer glowing objects hurtling into the outer reaches of the galaxy, but frozen crystals gently descending to earth. This transformation may at first seem cruel, given Plath's earlier associations of falling with loss and coldness with forgetfulness. But the Second Law of Thermodynamics works both ways: if it causes warm objects to grow cold, it can also make cold objects warmer, depending on their environment. And these flakes are landing not on the frozen ground, but on a warm body: "On my eyes, my lips, my hair." We've returned from the abstractions of space to the realm of the body, but now it's the mother's body receiving and cherishing her baby's gestures. The trope of snowflakes melting on skin allows Plath to bridge all the linked antinomies that had previously seemed unbreachable: between mathematics and biology, form and substance, cold and warmth, presence and memory.

The last two lines of the poem are curiously reminiscent of its first two. Both stanzas describe things falling and disappearing, and both have as their second line a one-word sentence that seems to confirm the absence or inaccessibility of the fallen object. Yet they differ profoundly in their tone and metaphorical implications. "Touching and melting" balances dissolution with contact and warmth, and when we recall that the surface into which the flakes melt is the mother's skin and hair rather than the grass, we realize that in fact they are not lost at all; instead they've been absorbed into the flesh of memory, where they will continue to nourish her as she has nourished her child. Even the poem's final sentence, line, and word, "Nowhere," which sounds like a pure negation of the dance, can actually be taken as a veiled affirmation. Snowflakes, after all, do not cease to exist when they melt, though they can no longer be located spatially. Indeed I would suggest that the "Nowhere" of the last line is precisely the no-place of memory, of imagination, of language and of poetry—more specifically the place of this poem. If the night dances have disappeared at the end of the poem, it's because they've disappeared into the poem itself; and while we can't see them there—Plath tells us almost nothing about them in a literal sense—we can still feel their power, warmth, and radiance.

A final point about "Nowhere": hidden within this word is a kind of graphic pun that Plath surely intended, given her subtle grasp of the molecular structures of language. Split the word in two and this is what you get: "Now / here." These two words are especially pure instances of deixis, the power of language to point to something without naming it. What they point to is simply the present, both spatial and temporal. There are two ways to interpret this hidden act of pointing. On the one hand the here and now being evoked is the moment of the dance itself, the moment when its gestures are still fresh and warm, before they've disappeared. Ultimately it is this moment the poem seeks to hold and prolong, even while recognizing its essential transience. In that sense Plath's "now here" is a variation on the classic theme of "Carpe diem" or "seize the day": since these dances are destined to vanish forever, we must savor every nuance of them as fully as we can, now, here. But of course those words point to a different here and now as well: the time and place of the poem, the "now" of reading, the "here" of the lines. That is the locus in which the night dances go on, each time a reader turns to page 18 of *Ariel*.

Oprah!



"What phone call would a writer most like to get? The King of Sweden? The Pulitzer Prize committee? Spielberg saying he'd like to make a movie of your book? The Oprah show is one of the phone calls," says Robert Morgan, Kappa Alpha Professor of English and author of *Gap Creek*, one of this year's Oprah Book Club selections. *Gap Creek* and its author were featured on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" on February 17, 2000, the second time in twelve months that a Cornell-affiliated work had been selected. (Last fall the show featured *Vinegar Hill*, by Cornell MFA Manette Ansay '91.)

"What I find astounding about the Oprah phenomenon is that she tends to pick books of literary quality and sophistication and gets a mass audience to read them," says Morgan. "The secret is in the way she connects with the audience. She says, 'I love this book' and they think, 'If she was moved by this book, I will be also.'"

Oprah's Book Club debuted in 1996 and has already helped launch more than thirty best sellers. No one but the publisher and the author know the next Oprah book until the day it is announced on the show. Publishers inform booksellers, "We have the next Oprah book," and send boxes stamped "Oprah Book Club" with instructions not to open them until the date of the announcement.

Algonquin Press printed about a half-million copies of *Gap Creek* to be available in bookstores the day Oprah announced Morgan's novel as the book of the month. *Gap Creek* spent thirteen weeks on the *New York Times* best seller list, fourteen weeks on *Publisher's Weekly*, and nine weeks on *USA Today* (which includes paperback and hardback as well as children's books). It was a number one best seller in Canada for several weeks and for 36 hours was number one on Amazon.com.

The talk show host often chooses books about women overcoming hardships. *Gap Creek*, set in turn-of-the-century Appalachia, features Julie Harmon, whose story made the *New York Times* book reviewer confess, "I wanted to cry 'Uncle!' and go bury this novel in my backyard, someplace where it wouldn't slip into my dreams. I couldn't take it anymore, and I mean that as a compliment."

The taping of the show, Morgan says, "turned out to be one of the easiest gigs I've ever done. When they bring you into the studio, the biggest job is signing all the copies. Then I got to sit around and listen to nice things about my book." The show featured a short profile on Morgan edited from footage shot on location at Gap Creek in North Carolina. Guests included Rory Kennedy, whose recent film documents the life of a family from eastern Kentucky.

"Oprah is doing what publishers have always wanted to do," says Morgan. "She has millions of people reading good fiction, people who would normally be reading Danielle Steele. She's upped the quality of the books people are reading . . . and she's changing the readership in the country."

The paperback of *Gap Creek* is due out in October from Simon and Schuster.

The Head of the Class

"Certainly at Cornell we see that important researchers and writers can still be dedicated and gifted teachers," says Daniel R. Schwarz, recipient of Cornell University's 1999 Stephen H. Weiss Presidential Fellow for effective, inspiring, and distinguished teaching of undergraduates. Last October, the three 1999 Weiss Fellows were announced at a dinner for 600 trustees and council members. The lifetime designation carries a $25,000 award, distributed over five years, and follows Schwarz's 1998 Stephen and Margery Russell Distinguished Teaching Award. He has also been selected nine times by the National Endowment for the Humanities to direct summer seminars.

In his thirty-two-year teaching career at Cornell, Schwarz has published books on such subjects as Joyce, Conrad, and Wallace Stevens. His most recent book, *Imagining the Holocaust*, discusses how Holocaust narra-

FACULTY NOTES

Barry Adams's *Coming to Know: Recognition and the Complex Plot in Shakespeare* (Peter Lang, 2000) uses Aristotle's conception of anagnorisis (recognition) to study recurrent features in the plays, particularly the comedies. **Frederic Bogel**'s *The Difference Satire Makes: Rhetoric and Reading from Jonson to Byron*, forthcoming from Cornell Press, attempts a major revision of the theory of satire by arguing that satire emerges not simply out of a difference between the satirist and the object of satire but from a complex play of identification and distance, intimacy and repudiation. **Laura Brown**'s *Fables of a New World: Culture and Modernity in Eighteenth Century England* (Cornell Press 2000) studies images in English material culture and literature—figures such as sewers, talking apes, and the noble savage—in order to define modernity as it emerged in the 18th century [see *English at Cornell*, Fall 1999]. **Ellis Hanson**'s *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, forthcoming from Duke University Press, collects essays on gay and lesbian cinema. **Carol Kaske**'s *Spenser and Biblical Poetics* (Cornell Press 2000) shows that contradictions and inconsistencies in imagery, religious doctrine, and secular ideas in Spenser's work train the reader to discern the complexity—and, in some cases, the unknowability—of truth. **Joel Porte** has co-edited, with Saundra Morris, a new Norton Critical Edition of *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*.

Last year, three events at Cornell honored and recognized the work of English department faculty. In the fall **M. H. Abrams** delivered the Harder lecture on the relations between literature and the natural world. This event is sponsored each year by Cornell Plantations and endowed by Torrey Harder. On the occasion of **Alison Lurie**'s retirement, the English Department sponsored an afternoon of readings and reminiscences in her honor by four former students, all of whom are now established writers of fiction. (Lurie's most recent book is a fairy tale from Russia, *The Black Geese*.) Fred Parkin, a Cornell alumnus, has endowed an annual lecture series in honor of **James McConkey**. The inaugural McConkey reading, which featured the writer Tim O'Brien, was preceded by eloquent testimonies to Jim's enduring influence as a teacher and mentor.

In 2001 **Ken McClane** will appear on a WKET Educational Broadcast on James Baldwin. This year **Scott McMillin** was co-winner of the Sohmer-Hall Prize for best work on early theater history for *The Queen's Men and Their Plays*. **Tim Murray** was guest editor of two special issues, covering film, video, and new media, of the journals *Wide Angle* and *Sites*. In the fall **Mark Seltzer** will be Distinguished Chair in American Studies at Humboldt-University in Berlin. A symposium honoring the work of **Hortense Spillers** was held in January 2000 at the University of Pennsylvania. **Helena María Viramontes** received an honorary Doctorate of Humanities from St. Mary's College, where she also delivered the commencement address.

NEW FACULTY

Mary Pat Brady, who comes to Cornell from a position at Indiana University, received her Ph.D. from UCLA in 1996. This year she won the Forester Prize, given for the best essay to appear in the journal *American Literature* in 1999, for "The Contrapuntal Geographies of *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*." Her teaching and research interests include Chicana/o studies, American literature, and the study of race and gender. Her book *Extinct Lands, Scarred Bodies: Chicana Literature and the Production of Space* is under contract with Duke University Press. Her next book project will concern the relations between the US-Mexican border and narcotics laws.

Reginald Shepherd received his MFA degrees from Brown University and the University of Iowa and taught at Northern Illinois University before coming to Cornell. His books of poetry, all from the University of Pittsburgh Press, are *Some Are Drowning* (winner of the Associated Writing Programs' Award in Poetry); *Angel, Interrupted*; and *Wrong*, which appeared this year. He has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts as well as many other awards. His interests are poetry writing, modern and contemporary poetry, poetics, and gay and lesbian studies.

Elizabeth Deloughrey received her Ph.D. in English in 1999 from the University of Maryland. Her dissertation, "Antipodean Archipelagoes: Post-Colonial Cartographies in Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures," investigates the intersections between regionalism, nationalism and diaspora in contemporary Pacific and Caribbean literature. She is currently researching the historiography of these two regions for a book. Her other teaching and research interests include post-Colonial theory and literature and ethnic/feminist theory.

tives evolve to include fantasy and parable as we move farther away from the original event. *Imagining the Holocaust* traces the connection between narrative and memory in twenty-five major literary works and films, ranging from memoirs and diaries to historical and documentary novels and, finally, to fables and cartoons. It includes such crucial works as Lanzmann's *Shoah*, Weisel's *Night*, Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Kineally's book and Speilberg's movie of *Schindler's List*, and Spiegelman's *Maus*.

In thinking about the audience for his books, Schwarz says, "I always write as a teacher, posing and answering the questions readers raise about the books I discuss." He likes to think of each of his classes as a "community of inquiry" where students are committed not only to the teacher, but to the subject and to each other. Quick to point out that his success as a teacher depends on the remarkable pool of undergraduate talent at Cornell, Schwarz believes that good teaching depends on building the bridge between the classroom and the student's private space, and that email helps to make that possible. Each week of the semester he sends an email outlining topics for discussion and requires participation in on-line discussions. He meets classes informally for dinner and discussion and plans annual reunions. Students are strongly encouraged to share news of their extra-curricular activities, such as articles they might have written for the *Cornell Daily Sun*, participation in dramatic and music groups, and athletics.

Introducing students to what he calls the "Cornell Optics"—the art museum, the cinema, and the architecture of the campus—Schwarz encourages them to explore the relationship between modern art, modern architecture, and modern literature. According to Melissa Maerz '00, "he puts a Picasso-like face on modernism, always encouraging everyone to see the text from as many viewpoints as possible." Peter Stahl '99 points out, "His passion for teaching engaged me, his intellect and ideas inspired my own, and his friendship helped to guide me through some of the most difficult decisions of my life."

"I want to teach students how to write clearly, read perceptively, to speak lucidly, to develop confidence, to grow, and to think creatively," says Schwarz. "The Weiss caps off a life that has been lived at one university. I care passionately about teaching and the life of the Cornell community. This award is perhaps the accomplishment of which I'm proudest."

Letter from the Chair

HARRY E. SHAW

Twenty years ago, half the Department of English moved to new offices in Rockefeller Hall. For some of us, this meant having an office of one's own for the first time. The space we entered was beautiful, with freshly sand-blasted brick walls in the corridors and new shelves lining the office walls. The windows were large, and they opened. The floors were of varnished fir. The change seemed most satisfactory, and I suppose that many graduates of the program will recall attending office hours in those pleasant surroundings.

As I write, twenty-odd members of the department have moved out of Rockefeller, but are not yet into their new offices in Goldwin Smith Hall. (Occupancy is slated for the beginning of August.) Hammering, painting, and the laying of carpet are occuring on the first and second floors of Goldwin Smith Hall. Our move back to Goldwin Smith is part of a larger migration resulting from the seemingly simple decision to dissolve the Department of Modern Languages and house the lecturers who teach foreign languages in the college (whose offices were all in Morrill Hall) with the foreign literature departments. This meant finding space—a good deal of space, in some key instances—adjacent to such literature departments as Asian Studies, Romance Studies, and German. In some cases, the literature departments are the ones who are moving, in others, the departments housed next to the literature departments. We are moving from Rockefeller to make way for teachers of Asian languages. Romance Studies is moving to join their language teachers in Morrill Hall, and in the process they are making room for us in Goldwin Smith. One result of this game of musical chairs should be strengthened teaching of both foreign languages and foreign literatures.

Academics do not relish changing their offices. It's not simply that moving is disruptive, though the work of placing one's books on unfamiliar shelves should not be underestimated. Half a scholar's professional life is spent alone, thinking and writing. Most of us grow attached to the locales in which our solitary work occurs. New places can be distracting, and it can be frustrating to leave a spot where we know (or think we know) where everything is to be found. When the move was first announced, a certain amount of gloom surfaced. This has subsided. Despite the major inconvenience of having their professional libraries packed away in cardboard boxes for a sizable chunk of the summer, my colleagues have been generous and forbearing. But that is the way with our department.

In the end, the advantages of our move to Goldwin Smith should be substantial. One bonus will accrue two years hence, after another series of moves not otherwise involving us. At that time we will take possession of the Binenkorb Center, which currently houses the admissions office for the College of Arts and Sciences. The space will prove an ideal venue for department meetings and a superb lounge, and it will

give us an excellent, much-needed place in which to hold lectures, readings, and receptions.

The most substantial benefit of having the Department of English united in Goldwin Smith Hall will be less tangible. Finding ourselves under one roof should increase the energy that comes from interaction. In the inaugural issue of this newsletter three years ago, Jonathan Culler wrote of what he called, with suitable irony, "the vision thing"—the desirability of supplementing the openness and tolerance that have been a hallmark of the department with a greater sense of shared purpose. Finding ourselves together in a single building should help here. It should also help with what we might call "the synergy thing," as new dialogues and collaborations emerge.

The past year has brought changes of other kinds. Among them are the departures of three valued colleagues. Mary Jacobus is leaving us for the University of Cambridge, and Shirley Samuels for Delaware. As is usual with senior members of the department, Professors Jacobus and Samuels are taking leaves of absence, to test new waters. It is therefore allowable for us to harbor the hope that they may both return. A junior member of our department, Jackie Goldsby, will also be leaving us to join the Department of English at the University of Chicago. During her time here, she added much to the strength of our offerings in African-American literature. We're very sorry to lose her, and we wish her our best.

The loss of three valued colleagues in a single year comes as something of a shock. Demographic considerations suggest, however, that it is a harbinger of the future. In the next fifteen years, the department will remake itself. Looking quite a distance into the past, it is possible to recall a period in the mid-1960s when the department hired two lecturers in creative writing named A. R. Ammons and Alison Lurie. We must hope that some of the magic that brings such things to pass still lingers in Goldwin Smith Hall.

Certain things remain the same in the department. Our teaching continues to garner prizes. Rick Bogel won a Russell Distinguished Teaching Award this year, and Dorothy Mermin's work in heading the Mellon Minority Undergraduate Fellowship Program was recognized by a Paul Advising Award. Graduate students in the department won five different teaching awards for their work as instructors of First-Year Writing Seminars.

Something else that has not changed is the strong support we receive from our alumni and friends. A substantial anonymous gift this year solidified our summer support for MFA candidates. Donations made through the Friends of English underwrote end-of-semester parties for undergraduate classes and the visit of a Shakespearean actor. They also enriched another event. This spring, Jonathan Wordsworth, a descendent of the poet, delivered a lecture to celebrate a remarkable Kroch Library exhibition of texts and artifacts associated with the British Romantic poets. This exhibition was drawn from the distinguished collection of our former graduate student Paul Betz, who also gave a talk. To add to this already rich brew, Mary Jacobus invited four more recent graduates of our Ph.D. program for a mini-conference on Romantic literature held on the day following the Jonathan Wordsworth lecture. Our former graduate students gave sparkling papers and elicited spirited discussion—as well they might, since they now teach at Georgetown, Michigan, Williams, Texas at Arlington, and Brandeis. Support from the Friends of English helped bring them here. We look forward to hosting similar events in the future. It was good for our current graduate students to see how far two generations of their predecessors had come, and where they had arrived. It was gratifying, too, for their former teachers to be reminded of the continued existence of a tradition of teaching and scholarship of which we can all be proud.

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