

Word For/Word

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Special Feature: Lynn Strongin

The Crack in the World Thru Which Light Shines

The days shall come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days. – Gospel of St Mark

When I was traveling with the circus in the 70s I loved the South. So different than my background growing up in Alberta's Rocky Mountains and northern prairies. It felt like a different planet, not just another country. Even the insects looked and sounded different (remembering my one and only - and painful - encounter with fire ants and bright scarlet colored wasps in Mississippi). I remember some of the show folks we traveled the country with, had their origins in the South and were extremely uncomfortable in the Pacific Northwest - even though it was still part of their own country - it felt foreign and strange to them. Until I had traveled the southern US I had never heard a Canadian accent. After a year in Dixie, I finally traveled north again and crossed the border in southern Saskatchewan and for the first time I heard the accent everyone had been teasing me about. But to this day I still tend to develop a bit of southern drawl whenever I drink bourbon. – Melody Poirier

I.

Alabama was what I named bisque doll. I was nine. She was one hundred years old and had thus survived the Civil War. Maybe she belonged to some little girl in the north who rocked her back and forth while her daddy was gone fighting the south. Maybe she belonged to some leggy little girl in the south who rocked back on her heels, hugging her doll while her daddy fought the north. “You were born to be torn in half,” Mama shouted as I ran to catch Alabama.

“It behooves you to behave yourself,” my mother raised her voice. I had learned to bite the dust and twisted my toes in it while mother was grieving the dead-long-ago-doll. “All she survived, and now she’s gone.”

I mimicked one of mama’s favorite phrases at junctures of crisis: “We’ve come to a fork in the road,” and turned on my barefoot heel and left the room. I had given Alabama her name because we were living outside Birmingham for the time being. It was during some difference of opinion, some dragon fight between Mama and me that Alabama shattered. I covered my mouth with my hands not cry out loud. When I picked her up her beautiful and elegant miniature face was cloven in two: one half held one eye, one the other. When I took her to the bathroom with what I called the crystal window, I shut the door to be private. I knelt on the toilet with the lid down so I could hold Alabama up in the shrewdest light possible. Thus, tried to piece the two halves together like a puzzle of burnt clay, she assumed an odd expression.

When I came forth, I said to Mama “I spoze something marvelous is going to happen.” “Humph” she said. “It isn’t the first time you’re supposing that.

A greenback was on the telephone table. I looked down at the grave, bearded face of Abraham Lincoln telling me things were going to work out right. But they never were okay again. Not between the south and the north. Nor between mother and me and not on your life on Alabama who right in that very moment I married to Abraham. Abe with honesty, the green running thru his face on the five-dollar bill. It was 1947.

My next determination was to see how I could mend Alabama, if ever. I went for the gluepot.

This surgical procedure of my trying to glue together the two halves of a cracked visage was but the first preview of that film I was to observe a million times: her tragedy was the crack in the globe thru which light shone. It was a stairwell light dusty, illuming splintered gold wooden rulers. One walked the numerals, breath drawn in as if to blow a balloon. Ringing up a curtain on a drama, at times opaque, at times translucent. In her hands was the chalice. She was one-hundred-years old and we called the thimble she held (waterless, crazed porcelain also) the chalice of Bedlam. Why? When Mama felt she was going crazy in the Alabama light, she'd say she was going to Bedlam. "What's that?" I asked. "A place. A Hospital in England for the insane." "An asylum?" I asked, she nodded. Then I asked, "*what's that?*" pointing to the thimble with rosebuds which the bisque doll held. "That's the chalice of Bedlam." "A sparrow couldn't drink from it," I said. We had a fight and the doll went whirling thru the air. She struck the wooden bedpost shaped like a ball of bread dough One half her head was blown off like heads of children I'd seen in newsreels in the war. "We must send her to doll hospital," Mama said. I choked and gulped, I shook my head fiercely till blind sighted with tears, and at last I nodded. Sent to the doll hospital, she came home with a different face. Her visage was cracked and crazed with tiny fracture veins: she looked both horrified and horrific like a doll who had been in a house that was bombed. It was like when I lost my legs to polio at age twelve. I went into the hospital with legs and came out without them: they were unable to move. The doll whose name I don't remember has altered with her bashed biscuit-colored head and has lit up my life.

Mama pulled up the window in Alabama. We looked down on a dusty little

Street below. Look at it as if it's a motion picture," she said to me. And ever since. Even the night I contracted polio, was a crack in the globe thru which light shone. I have looked at this life as though it were on the silver screen.

I think of mother as the enchanted princess who bore her child in her sleep. The past dusted with a film of pearl. In early childhood I became a city planner of dreams in which nurses bound up civil war fatalities a moment too late they were on the battlefield. They had no option.

The bird who nearly garroted himself in my wheelchair, gave himself no karate chop but flew is brother to the doll who broke.

Mysticism, illness and the South went interlocked. I was torn between mother and father, the north and the south: it was then that I realized in the south strife continues, bandages are being tied (in the forties) in the Civil War of the Heart. A Red Cross nurse leans in the dust but it is too late. It was then that I realized we are all players in the transparent, translucent circus of life. The one who is the clown cries thru smiles, smiles thru tears. Clowns always made me mourn. I was

detached cruelly from and very young to traditional ideas of family hence ironically made safe: divorce split the nuclear family of two parents, two children into the odd number three. Polio left me in a ward of children whose unit became the new measure of my existence. An old military installation turned into a rehabilitation tank for stricken children: victims of contagious diseases were lodged here; overflow spinabidifda and the freak case of Hydrocephalism, the girl whose head was too large to be contained in anything but a cart in which she lay for the bed and the one child, a child-Amelia Earhart on whom I secretly fastened my gaze (the passion as clandestine) all were soldiers, victims of a battlefield strewn so thickly one could hardly see the ground. Like my one-hundred-year old porcelain doll that shattered in the spring of my childhood, they all held the invisible chalice to their lips, the chalice of Bedlam.

We rested in a shoebox, which cushioned the nurses' footfalls: stubborn, fragile, our silhouettes were visible at a certain hour between the wolf and the dog at sunrise and sundown. The Celtic Twilight of the fairies shrouded us as though we were enacting a prefiguring the coffin.

The earth was pink and the sky white. The South was cradle deaths. Eucharist and evidence. The South is a red pepper grinder alongside a battered cookie tin, which has been raided by three generations. Both are on a kitchen sill. The paint is blistered, the panes have cataracts. One looked for the sky to crack and the yolk to run. We needed one another desperately, yet we reached out with fear and trembling. One could die of blood that ran from the prick at the spindle. One hungered for something beyond doorknob biscuits done in gravy. We were girls without insurance. While still young we ate fried chicken and drank gravy. We were both underground voices and lamination colony. We tried one last time to fix the doll's face: one eye was moved up higher than the other, though, and her mouth had lost its sweet expression. "What do you think?" Mama said. (We had circled the day she went into and came out of the doll hospital in Birmingham. "Not much," I said, "She has the wrong expression." "What's wrong with it?" "She looks mean. She looks as if she has it in for someone. She doesn't have the sweet expression she had borne before." "Maybe she got fed up with looking sweet." "She wouldn't." I was haunted by the grotesque; I pressed her bisque brokenness to my washboard flat chest. I liked bad weather. Crews working feverishly to clear snow paths. His southern picture-window weather was without interest to me. I was a drifter, a lover, an outsider. In a way this is an Alabama Ghost Story.

The whole South was invalid, convalescent: a translucent ghost borne on a gurney. It was photographs behind windows, the milk of memory drunk by a thin cast. When girls got on the rag, some rolled up their sanitary napkins under rugs. Joni did and when moving day came her mother rolled back the rug to her horror to find twenty stinking pads, the blood still visible. If you told someone you'd seen a ghost, they would simply nod unblinking.

This was the land of King Biscuit sky. The land where women sat on back porches, even the great southern actress who said "I like taking tea with my chickens. They don't talk back. I'm a bit of a theatre bird."

That cold chalice. It was with me when I made music for the children in the asylum. it was with me that horrific two-hour slot in time when I was dragged into and out of the asylum. Like the

cold, an adventures in the world's frozen place, an immigration and back which alerted the blood in my heart, the rhythms of its muscle.

It was with our daddy while he took our mother to dances at the asylum. This was for diversion. "We've gradually become so diverted," she'd say to me while she was ironing, burning triangular cigarette colored skeletons into whatever white thing she was ironing, "So diverted that by now I probably am a disturbed person."

Troubled, I thought keeping calm. We're a performing family. We thirst for curtain call. Keeping cool in the clutch is one this we admire to the hilt.

"You give me the buzz, you must be my honey," I said to the tall long legged girl in plate-glass who looked back to me, fastening her green eyes upon mine. It was the Deep South. Here Eucharist was broken, epiphany occur but right beside the Alabama Light & Power company. It stood near the river with its reddish dust. It as poor. Ironically this great power stood there. Generators. They were generational passed on from the Mason Grandfathers to the fathers to the sons. It was a male world.

Except for the sweetness. That was from the women. We had the moxie and sipped on our cokes, got high on our first aspirin and coke while they ate their fries and grew obese on pulled pork.

Everyone was a bit of a theatre bird. The painful feeling that nothing happens in the south was relieved by the brilliance of peacocks, those swanked up chickens.

You saw the generators lit up at night with tiny dots of illumination. We called them the fairy lights. The same kind of lights blew and burned in a southern storm over the concrete plant across the river. You could hear the ubiquitous thrum of motors. The night air heavy as a lady of the night redolent with honeysuckle, lilac. Wood dust, too, scented the air. The people who moved were largely circus people, down for the winter to the south: in the surreal filmic air of the south they appeared to be enacting a transparent circus.

The loading dock held crates of shrimp. It was where we kids hung. Watching the hauling in and the iridescent light kept us stoked, and amazed. We never roved far from this feeling. We saw it as the amazing light and it lofted us. Buckets of ice stood nearby. Like those granite quarries I had left behind in New England. In the quarries the ledges filled with snow and ice. These wooden slat boards glistened with beads of salt water. Fish traps had a bayonet glimmer they flashed back like grapeshot.

"Vanilla Log" was the second hand store near the dock. Grandma Faye had unearthed treasure from her attic to fill this store, which stood in a wood fish shack. It held children's pillow with stripes and with animals, odd egg cups but not her Ancient looking Doll Miss Hickory. Miss Hickory had a face made of hickory nut, with roses painted on her cheeks. She was a one-hundred-tear-old doll, hands clenched in fists before her as if she wanted to picked up and hugged but instead had to put steel into her backbone harness all the power and light in her kingdom. A boy doll, Sampson, stood nearby as if Sampson kept guard over Miss Hickory. His arm broke off at the elbow. The children called him Stump. Grandma Faye's became an ice

cream parlor in summer where old and young alike came, stirring up clouds of dust in their Tin Lizzies eating all flavors ice cream. The kids liked blue ice cream best of all, which wasn't blueberry but was bubble gum. Sundays people came after church, the little girls in their Mary Janes polished like mirrors, their frills dragged in the dust by now. The grandmothers came smelling of elderberry wine in all their finery. Much of it looked like borrowed finery. (All my rivers flowed on paper: I elaborated so that by age nine put a bar code on paper and I could make a lyric out of it.)

The wallpaper flowers and sugar bowls were there but the figures in the paintings got a wiggle on, began moving. They threw electric shadows and magnetic zeroes. I was filled with amazement. Lofted, stoked by the miracle I said to my mother "I am so filled with exultation." More often I was mortified. Peacocks dragged about in the dust, those swanked up chickens.

A silky knot of ash blond drawn into a chignon at the beck of my neck I gaped. A glossy purple clot of blackberry ripened in August sun. They baked in August. I wanted everybody's story. Class storyteller I was too shy to become town narrator but even then I knew that the name of the story was *now*. It was a very large story. Because now never remains. As soon as you say the word it become then. Becomes gone as you watch fields of cotton boll flash by from the Southern Pacific cabooses they become in the past.

Quickern' you can say Jack Robinson. But just as Bob's your uncle, sure as the lord made little green apples the fruit over ripens and rot set in. The child wants some sugar with her bedtime kiss but looks up with apprehension.

We kids lived in dirt plots of whitish rose earth. Adults sat fanning themselves behind a flimsy screen door, which rattled like grandpa's teeth in a glass at night. They rattled like Petunia the pig scuttling their hooves like castanets. Sunday School where girls were taught legs are best friends, always together. Sunday school was over. We'd listened politely to the Hammond B but wanted privately music that got you up out of the pews and dancing. A little emerald-eyed lizard scooted across the church parking lot. I caught him with the corner of my eye. I was called in from the yard by nightfall but it took me a basset moment to respond. Basset hounds are proverbially slow, slow as molasses in January.

I did anagrams. Seventeenth century astronomers transposed findings into Latin anagrams: rearranged letters of a word or phrase to produce a new word or phrase using all of the original letters. Anagrams exist in our language as links. *Silent* becomes *listen*; *Astronomer* becomes *Moon Starer*, *Narcissism* becomes *Man's Crisis*.

Down the road from the doc was Jackson Hole where we weren't allowed to go in the dark. At sunset I'd see the butcher's wife exchange her rubber apron spattered with blood the color of holy ruby for her baking apron. Confectioner's sugar and jam and rolled clumps of dough clung to that apron.

We girls know about our bodies. We referred to our pocket books, which like our diaries we must keep to ourselves. Our vaginas were these pock books, purses; parachutes hat opened at the right touch our orgasms floating down. I mulled this over as I sat playing cat's cradle on the candlewick bedspread or watched mother make cherry pies rolling out the dough with a scarred old wooden rolling pin then putting a lattice of pastry in slim strips over the cherries.

The docks were the terminus of town. A mile off freight trains making their southern run from Georgia all the way down into Florida punctuate night with lonesome whistles which pierced the soul and the ear as a fall cam puncture a spinal cord resulting in paralysis. Like a Dutch door, the bottom half stayed closed and the upper part swung open upon a Southern night after a day of unbeatable dust that clogged the lung. In day, one wanted only shelter. My night one longed for touch. Nubile girls with rounding pear breasts, who wore training bras and had perfect cupid bow moths, and peaches and cream complexion lured me with that language ton in their musical voices up and down the scale. I young, still green and wet behind the ears but I was learning how fiction works. "Yours till I'm asking for your autograph at some stage door," a girl whose name has long since sunk into oblivion wrote in my nine-year-old's autograph book. One observer of the south who worked a while in the circus wrote me

It felt like a different planet, not just another country. Even the insects looked and sounded different (remembering my one and only - and painful - encounter with fire ants and bright scarlet colored wasps in Mississippi). I remember some of the show folks we traveled the country with, had their origins in the South and were extremely uncomfortable in the Pacific Northwest - even though it was still part of their own country - it felt foreign and strange to them After a year in Dixie, I finally traveled north. To this day I still tend to develop a bit of southern drawl whenever I drink bourbon.

II.

In the incendiary Deep South, the little ice age of hatred had returned. Alabama's state bird is the wild turkey, her nickname The Heart of Dixie or Yellowhammer State. I had a passion for putting out fires: for cooling down the wrath and sorrow, the repression and rage in our divorced family struck by polio. I loved to watch billowing fire smolder in a small ashes. The state motto is an extinct whale and state nut a pecan. It is a rich land but the home of poor people. It is freshly opened ground but hardly new ground which I return to in my seventies.

I say to that state epitomizing the state of mind which is the new south, you give me a lot of buzz but you're still my honey. Something heroic like the hillbillies of the Ozarks, a forecast of heroines coming in the south in the women occurred in my time. Something exotic we ate, pork & pickled vegetable soup, sweet potatoes growing on the honey suckle line occurred to, flash-flooded me with vision, ignited my visions like a firestorm.

Like the Enooswetook drawings of Fox land, Baffin islands, Canada, the polar north ignited my imagination. Here was desperate Canadian tundra. Here were a people composed in a forlorn situation. From northern Scandinavia, across taiga of Siberia to ice bound East Greenland humans have proven themselves capable of enduring. Earth never thaws.

In the sinkhole that is the south, which sure could stand some cheering, in a prison of heat and racism, poetry flourished and transcended the bars of that prison. The garb of Iclander is fur, the garb of the southern stripped pale down into pastel clothing. But this is the powerhouse heavy into cut. The iron claw in the velvet glove.

The northerners had first pointed to the ships asking what great creatures those were. But they were an animal of another ilk. They came from where there was nothing but ice.

The little ice age returned of the Deep South, insupportable wrath. This land never cooled down. There are tortures where people are frozen then broken apart with a manner. These are war crimes, war games. There are torture where people melt with the heat of ignorance and who are ignited by a taper dipped in accelerant. The first I saw in books of the Vikings, the second in day-by-day life, albeit during heightened occasions such as war, illness divorce, the second I saw in the corrugated rooves and water melon juice of the deep south.

Whether where Breer Rabbit exists, or where the ptarmigan sings to the long-tailed duck, the aim of writing is to tell a good story. Homer knew and so did Plato. Herodotus knew. Flannery O'Connor knew how to spin a tale about a one armed bible salesman from the terrors of the worth, just as Nathaniel Hawthorne knew how to spin the yarns of the distaff side, like Hester Prynne, in what amounted to the witchcraft trial a woman was put to with that scarlet letter embroidered, emblazoned on her breast: Adultery. When the sea of heat is smooth as glass, or when the fire burns, to survive there must still be passage: whether in skidoos, or fanning oneself down.

Anagrams. A lifelong passion. It was in Alabama I began doing them. So were fire and power. It went deep into the inchoate form of my feminism to picture a woman fire fighter.

I realized at last that, divided, born to be torn in half, I stood upon that crack in the earth where the world's light shines. I realized that glass shearing and jack hammering were the human condition: reparation where there could be none to our lot. Here in Hades, the stage was being set albeit with minimal props: here two years beyond the age of reason, and two before puberty, in those Spanish moss and transcending universal darkness, this girl, this child was parting the curtains.

When I was growing up, there were two types girl: Shirley Temple, and Scout Finch. I was definitely Scout Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

I realized that all those new vests, and sweaters, scarves and stockings did not a new body make. Olympics are held where snow parks have to be created. Bales of hay, scaffolds, providing steps and landings. What one gets is el Niño; weather that changes in a moment, what one wants is a real mind-bending season. That I would get up north again. For now, I bided my time.

We are always saving wildlife photographers from starving to death, brought redemption in the nick of time when they failed to pack enough provisions. We are, at the same time, always driven, tempted to push our brother off the face of the earth. There is always a *Hotel Dieu Grace* hospital in which some woman surgeon is performing a mistaken mastectomy.

Anagrams: Alabama spelled Baa-Lamb with only one “b” inserted for the beatitudes, the bestiality of this world, the human condition. I realize that I was beginning to speak in the voice of an old woman my seventieth winter, leaving the capes of childhood behind.

We are always doing two-barrel rolls in an airplane, always knocking at heaven’s door. It behooves us to always live as though we were on the brink of dying. Little children little problems. big children big problems. You need moxie in the South.

I perceived that although construction began early, with dump trucks gouging the earth, their huge shovels outlined in fairy lights, the earth could never be cleansed, rethought: construction was perpetual. Cry eternal.

Far too late workers find a black box from a train collision in Belgium.

I saw indignities against human pride in the way blacks were treated, as I was later to see indignities in the world’s treatment of the disabled. Stump they called the boy with one arm. Now is the name of the story. Here comes Stump. He lost the arm as a daredevil, jumping off a moving freight train. We blamed history. We could not ask for blessing for this blame. There was no way when we were that young to measure the thickness of a spine. It was generational like shycat.

So these tales deal with addiction, forgiveness, prejudice, incest hinted at and anti-Semitism. Turning back a sheet to rest at night, one finds the blank white reveals a bed redolent of ancestral malaise.

The union won but the Confederate still dominates to an extent in the south. Just as in New England, watches were exonerated but republicanism and superstition still rule with a closed fist. Using hyperbole, one could say that the extreme north and the extreme south are, as a lover of mine once said in her first experience of Massachusetts, “Your country is a beautiful grave.” In the belles of the South, the schizophrenic behavior of the region with its schisms, one was up against the challenges of chaos and bedlam. In the straight-laced north one was up against the fusion of the backbone, the ossification that is Puritanism.

Extremity, the polarity that marks a strong country. One saw it in straight laced women in New England, one saw it in righteous women in the South, breasts quivering like a partridge in full courtship dress, woman as round as plump as Ms Couch in Fannie Flagg’s masterpiece *Fried Green Tomatoes*.

These stories move from “Child Revealed” through “Hawkeye View of a Buxom English Teacher weaving back and forth while childhood unrolls its highest drama in three traumas: war, divorce polio. I move on from the Alabama Light & Power Company but its light continues to be shed. The North symbolized by the Boundary Waters with Canada is where I learned to burn the midnight oil living on into my youthful seventies. People joke that I am Peter Pan. Perhaps I

exchanged paralysis for perpetual youth. Illness, Mysticism and the south can be one trinity, holy and unholy.

Love between women occurs, most clearly in Sarne & Lee. Middle-aged Lee is a closet case who finds that loving women is too hard work. The smaller feisty Sarne is a marathon word sprinter and would go for broke. She had heard stories from reliable sources that her heroine, Mother Theresa was famous for feeling up nuns in elevators. If it was true, she was sorry to know about it. Sarne didn't want this bitch to know she'd gotten to Sarne, so she gave her a big smile and said: "Really? How do I get on the list?"

It is bitterroot being Jewish. Having polio. Loving a woman in a world where heterosexual love is still the norm. It is being born in 1939 surviving the first decade of the twenty-first century. Bitterroot all the murals which history paints upon the walls and bones of our body.

The last stories in the book deal with a difficult contemporary theme: self-injury. Cutting, or inflicting small-cigarette burns upon the body to beat up on oneself, to feel a pain less than the emotional pain and rejection, which trigger it, self-mutilation is an addiction, which reaches epidemic proportions among adolescent girls in particular.

Alabama broke when I was nine. My biological clock was ticking. We didn't stay long there, on the outskirts of Birmingham, where life was cheap and cheerful if one was poor and happy. Life was austere and sad if one were a person with means. Always, that gaze, mildly admonishing face of Abraham Lincoln looked out at one from the five-dollar bill. Now in my early seventies, I realize that we *were indeed* at a fork in the road, my tough mama and me the day when Alabama shattered and gave up the ghost. I realize as well that this small, intense doll head itself burned with energy. *She* was the Alabama Light & Power Company. Our mother dreamed of being an actress when young. A dead ringer for Merle Oberon, smoking her Camels and wearing her fur collar, I do not doubt that mother wanted a place on what was then the silver screen. While still married, once she ran away from our father. He searched all over and found her at the movies. She was both at a film, and I imagine in her mind, being filmed. In the milky, dreamy space of the big screen, she acted out her astonishing scenes only before those she loved: no doubt, our father (though I never saw these scenes) and for the audience of her two children who were dumfounded. "Too much is going on," she'd cool a bit "and I can't get my foot into these sneakers. I have hammertoes. You kids have driven me so hard that I've swollen and need to cut a slit in my left sneaker."

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I close the stories with one called "Jewed Out" to explicitly indict the term, which is anathema. At the end I work with the poems of Nelly Sachs "The last Jewish; poet to write in German. The writer makes her own peace with a past: once a novitiate of thirteen she has achieved her three score and ten. We form a chorus. None of us makes music alone. We bring two hands together to praise: we bring two hands together to pray. The chalice can never be restored to the one-hundred-year-old doll again. Because she is with hands: they have been amputated. Players in a circus, more often than smiling we are weeping. These tears are a crack thru which the light of the world shines. They are heart armoring breaking up like ice floes. The curtain on the

transparent circus at last rings down on the eerie drama with its honey with a buzz, southern living: Dixie Paramour, and *Annabel Jenhomme*. The author has made a pilgrimage under various names from morning glory blue jeans and Alabama Light & Power Co to the clear, at times cruel, light of the north where with her Canadian lover she comes out of hiding into an air, cutting, mystically radiant. Here we were: Christless in Silentville again.

Hold Mercy

Raptor Asylum

I look forward to laying out suffering in a new light: oak bed

Quilt patches

a window over the Dutch door latches

to pour in jam bright stars.

To ripple over the old, the ancient scars

put out like man o war"

Blue eyes everywhere in Griffin Creek. In every garden. Every tree. They grow like blue fruit. Just hold our your hand. Nora's eyes, Olivia's eyes, hidden among blue fruits. (p. 113) Anne Hebert *In the Shadow of the Wind*

Soap-colored Cloths, gowns with numerals

put thru the industrial spin, a cycle call kill for the institutional
but I shall go unchastened to my grave one of fifty children of unlove:
going into the last judgment
find a colt tied
whereon the children side:
saddled, they bright the colt to Christ,
cast their garments upon him
he sat
many spread their garments
others cut branches down off tress, strewed them in the way
they that preceded, those that followed cried
it is the coming
blessed be the kingdom
in the name of the highest
the children led Christ from Calapais, it was early, they themselves were scarcely away
but they cast Mercy
down
to cross the river
Mercy, they flung off like a gown
and only the wind tried to pry it loose
Only little people could doff that shawl.

I danced with the Dolly with the hole in her stocking
my own had ladders. At dawn, haunted, we took *Philco* radios on top of iceboxes, ironing boards
with triangle burns, even the children's ward we dubbed Crowchild, yes we grabbed mercy by the seat
of its pants
and took it on all.

When I fell between two parked cars in New York

I did not cry but put one hand on one metal trunk, the other on the other & pulled myself up.
From early days, was the botanical chart of paralysis in me
like heartbeat?

I was a member of that company so private we did not know last names

The past dusted with a film of pearl

the bird who nearly garroted himself in my wheelchair, gave himself no karate chop but flew.

I will have to give away many things the glassed map of the asylum

the marbles in an old apothecary jar:

Mercy garbed in pale colors:

The first time I told them a bird had got in, the manageress might have thought me loosed from an asylum.

He was caught in my wheelchair spokes. I cannot bear any trapped things. Bending over Christmas red stockings

lacing hiking boots, blood was the color of wine back then.

Lo, Kin. List the women: Augustine Beadle, Amanda Flamer, Ernestine & Myrtle Shakespeare

last, crossing the road to the Rexall, got hit

Fay Hexall

living down her name.

The violinist from our childhood holds the Mercy chair.

As for Razel one leg a stump she fell

for nothing collecting wooden buttons

The bank got cranky

Listen, Firefox I *am* reading all of your e-mails.

My purse did spill coins & other glasses a couple of time.

Is this saying I am old & failing?

The trout is out.

Holding Mercy to its word. Thank you. *Merci*

Ok, Tiger Lily

If a bird ever gets into a room again, they won't think me crazy.

Chartwell booksellers is around the corner of my mind.

selling encyclopedias to hell & every

thing between. Sister played from the depths of anger:

Every since hospital days, a gift shop in a cube of glass

shone like a diamond.

My sister played in a real concert hall, not an aircraft hangar.

Faye Hexall

The woman who runs the tearoom each late afternoon & evening
was the one
who flashed the news.

Your glasses, which went missing when earth was, flushed infant green, over the hoar frost the time
when mole was messing about with boats & other animals living on the banks were whitewashing walls.
Embers of sunset remained on sky: a smudge, fogging
perception.

Altered prescriptions but same perception:
land tax deferral # remains the same from year to year.

In the rarefied world of ballet, where dancers are expected to speak with their bodies, sometimes it
seems that aloofness is something to aspire to. Lately, though, the ribbons are loosening. dancers are
starting to make themselves heard. Ballet has long been elite, ethereal, as fragile as under glass
It demystifies the ballet to give that behind the scenes report.

We let our dancers use twitter.

Not just shimmer under the arc lights.

Edomame beans. I read your every punctuation mark
recreating Eden
someone pounding

not that u had a good time but I renew

We set the smoke alarm off:

but the root of the fire burns, poorly sends out signals.
We kill the thing we love again & again.

Augustine Beadle

Born in Bermuda

Miss Augustine Beadle

Nighttime was her time to feel good.

By day she banked:

rubber-stamped hundreds of checks.

Once, when a borderline schizophrenic young woman tried to forge a check from me

I queried and queried.

As I queried that Welshwoman who sold me the shirt on approval so not quite sold.

Neither young nor old

she answered "Is the cloth strong? How many squares per inch?"

By hold it in both stout hands and demonstrating stretching it.

Nothing broke. Neither of us spoke.

In the child asylum, I learned to zip up my lips. I acquired two stepsisters:

I forgot the stairs

& Ms. Beadle, unaware, nearly stamped the forged check but saw the number to the left
scrawled at an angle. She phoned me:

uncaring what people would say, the borderline woman

went on a shopping spree: she bought a golden heart shaped lock & some French perfume on me.

In the mood for a heart-to-heart, I phoned Lucinda:

"Lucinda Grace, now tell the truth, you must: did you change my check?"

I listened to silence peel like church bells. Stolen church bells.

"Yes," she piped out in a high voice."

My own voice box in disrepair, I answered "Good. I am so proud of you.

Now you must go in & see Miss Beadle."

Lucinda did, this girl who bore a child unaware the next year, in a group home, still smiling.

But she didn't put a wax product in the oven.

She taught me the lesson: if you aren't standing on the rim, you're taking up too much room.

Old Chatterbox

ancient love,

bed sitting rooms available

Call to arrange a tour of our heritage residence

Glenshiel. It's not the building that's special: It's the people in it.

Glenshiel non-profit society.

Yesterday, when the finch got caught in my wheelchair spokes I felt a thrill of fear.

That was me, the twelve-year-old child trapped there out in the icy ocean air.

Slashes of love Fire-genes.

you can't smother the power of prophecy:

Glazebrooks: you moved the old glaze brooks

ancient love

but by the powers of earth & sea

Palm Sunday. Passion Sunday.

Glacial songs from Iceland.

Going back and forth in metal boxes on rubber wheels: City busses:

Feel the balloon shaped sheep in the picture on the wall:

shove the altar take the free

fall

Ancient love, you most move me.

Clear Map & Deer fall

I left behind the squall
beyond the power, the ministerial reprieve, the South France mistral
the neighborhood rose that proud porter up
& kicked brass.
My fiancé from half a century ago phone the other night
All I could do was whisper "Terrible, terrible," repeating the word till we both rang off.
Cementing the time of terror. The fright of the first man I ever held
left behind
the clear map of young woman
dusted over dust with a film of pearl:
the bliss & the dreadful boredom a weekend in Boston
touring Harvard
the unfaded but potential
death
a clear map & outline
of what would have been our downfall.

Raptor Asylum

ages pass me like one scene on a carousel I reach out to touch each time.
One wheelchair pedal in my lap,
getting ready to celebrate both our mothers' death anniversary,
(metal elbowed like a wishbone)
I try one-wing flight I try taking leather hood off
going tethered, jessed I try
everything but fly away.
Thing slide & slip and then a general griev-
ing goes up as the heavens yawn
& things mourn:
& then the fall one cannot save oneself one
as objects adumbrate rooms
feelings shadow occasions
the glass memory reflects and twins
everything:
One the raptor, though blinkered, could fly:
though hooded could partially see
then came the darkest age of all—
still young the sky was so tall
most rapturous flight could not scrape its pale
grey: not supple,
the hallway clocked ticked on & on: brass behind glass, beyond all time:
then Bight's disease
mirrors giving up reflections
the number One for Enduring:
Next, came oblivion.

Childhood sexual abuse in the Catholic Church is sweeping across Europe a storm.

Entering in like the bare, the cold fronts legion.

Raised in relief the letters. Even in extreme when there are mini blowouts of the brain
in Huckleberry fire

the news catching the cruelty returns:

nailed in like studs to a coffin. The rabbis were unbending about punctuality.

On Sabbath of the world

Lessons in less. The sparseness of stardom. Going underground in Paris

the Sabbath is a bride greeted by an impatient bridal party.

Flash back to thirty; living alone in the dessert

my pack of cigarettes for the weekend, my veil-

ed pan. A rush of magical thinking used to make miracles: magical realism.

The rainbow that came later glows. The rabbis who mixed their prescriptions. Called twilight before
Sabbath

the rainbow assured us God wouldn't destroy the world again.

The only counter to abuse is innocence. Purity of mind, does it exist?

My heart pounds anxiously at the approach of religious ritual.

I know no lights on the space where the candles will be burning

last golden moments. The modern rabbi woos apostates back into the fold.

I am too old:

Close the headlines. Cover my mouth with my hands

as we do when astonishing news numbs.

Razel & her button collection

sat up in bed, boxes spread on her lap after her one leg was amputated
why is Tuesday the most hated day of the week?

A stretcher-bearer at the door in the sun?

Thirty years ago parting with possession was not difficult.

Anon.

Hope light shadowed branches.

After seeing patients all afternoon, driving back along Haze River

swans reflected, metallic, in late winter sun

Back home I delve into my past with little silver shovels:

the great Russian dancer I took rehab with in nineteen fifty-one.

Notice what muscles are laid out

a birdcage for a spine.

Winnow & win

Irma worked the war & polio wards

when I came to know her

there was no answer.

Spastic. Speechless. Heat

If they loved one another

Willard Parker. War. Dr Deaver. The arch dragon

unfurled

the pain of the button collection on Razel's lap

the amputated leg

the leap from the roof that Tuesday

backrolled

healed tri-lingual, influenced much by the Dutch, brusht: Yield, flash card

boyed globe, maiden headed, girled:

the most hated day in the world.

A little night-music with Fay

An incision in an operating theatre down the hall
love, the mother of us all: the armoire in the hall mirrors fox & quail:
Blown glass holds it in Edwardian script, or is it Georgian? The two mix & marry.
The vinyl keeps turning & turning as needle presses in.
The city is wax combs. The kiss
I'm afraid of off ramps, a new love
the lappet of hair in the locket
but a note from the manageress of the tearoom comes "If you find your glasses, please notify us. We've
not yet found ones with wire frame but will keep searching.
Love slashes burning on the abdomen of the woman
jetting, reading, smoking who
flies back & forth to Berlin.
WE play to lose, we play to win:
Razel, & Fay & Augustine Beasley
fly, each holding to her side, her alibi
on onionskin so frail a pebble can weigh it down, a grain of sand:
yet the least breeze, unanchored in hand, it can lift like petticoats
concealing
scripted, illuminating, lofted, stoked, blown in forever & aye.

On Crow child road,

remembering her seventy-five year old sweetheart
now answering the phone with dry throat like an old woman
now listening to two radio stations at once

one blurred in the bedroom, one interrupted by static in the kitchen
like an old woman

but she was not an old woman.

Only one ear bud in,
chill distance in marriage afflicted her
Thread thin.

Stay thin

shadow tagging

dazzlingly charismatic

Rebel in big bad city wearing exuberant jeans & Aididas

Presentation is not presence:

exacting & exciting language.

Satin color ballet flats:

My dream espresso-machine went up in flames

Dutch geomoetrists, we struggle to build our log cabin, Patience & Sarah,
tongue in groove

one-by-one

red hewn light igniting it

and a front porch. You cry by speaking in a low voice.

I look forward to laying out suffering in a new light: oak bed
quilt patches

a window over the Dutch door latches

to pour in jam bright stars.

To ripple over the old, the ancient scars

put out like man o war

after the war is over. I need amnesty, Lover.

We're skating on thin ice, it's Friday night

no mini blowout of the brain
we have to get this done, that done, the red umbrella opened
the yellow one closed. down
me with my Apple, you your P.C. typing away: the soul of wit is brevity
Is everything we write looking in the mirror
a plea for mercy
nursing a bit of a broken heart spring can really hang you
so keep pumped
those with whom you hang loose and glide easy don't come every day.
O lost
the ice is taking the engravings of our names our country
mine is the deep dark one down under
yours is high above:
the wind is a pulley
the wind pulls up skirts revealing knees.
But you never wear skirts
tweed lady.
in bomber jacket, and hoodie
I've already stood half an hour in the doorway:
If you had higher self-respect, you'd come up from behind & circle me:
but haven't you felt good since last July?
Mining grief is opposed to being deaf & mute:
at ten, we gave each other the Kilroy. Now we push resentment down the chute, but somebody ruffles
thru it at the other end. You were bought a home by my family. Yours gave us a precious toy:
but I held it to my heart against destroy.
Today you forgot a meeting I dropped a greeting:
Now we have no time to waste, time is taking us
I bend over an urgent violet face in dream: trace lace
This is no elder moment it was mine from the first day:
You shrug off the latest accomplishment, I turn back the covers
I seek amnesty, lover.

Lemon slices in Tea

Only you would put slices of lemon in my morning tea
cup. Isn't that why we married?

Must I finish this on my knees, by moonlight in a rocking boat?

Any pain but this pain.

The thing itself in a pile of sawdust, bend down, Mama see where the sneak was hiding
now ca I go and play?

Not now but next time you show me you slow me down
it glistened I walked over it a hundred times the silver piece

pared

from borrowing. Lending, you lose a friend. Keep your sliver of silver by your heart-rib then.

DEATH OF A CHECKOUT CLERK
Lou Gehrig's Disease

In this little Britain, Bulbar ALS took you in a slam,

in a matter of few months you shrank from being six foot

to six feet under: In the fireplace a stump, roots & all is burning.

Vests warmed your swimmer's Mae West breasts, folk flooding to express,

ringing of till like ticking ancient piping in winter.

Vegas was your savior, winning grace & cash in winter. You did the strip (it rose erect, glowing neon in your mind):

one hand palming coin the other bagging perishables, shoving into riff raff from the floor. "Which type lottery, ma'am? Cigarettes "I smoke'em too, what's your brand? Broad shouldered, flirting with women.

Lived with Mum but a woman's woman. (Sweet Pea & I both twigged to you.

The heart is a story.

For a few short months you felt yourself dissolving like something burning: gasp turned to water. You went to turn a doorknob, it became butter.

Now pipes knock, cold spring

Good Friday is always bad: December in rain city, but it's spring.. They say when God leaves thru a door she enters by a window.

I knew death was a liar but not bad as all this: not telling double lies.

Shirl, you were some girl. You smoked Viceroy, a pack on the side of your walker clearly. You hit a home run scraping all four bases dragging them behind you.

Staring at an ironing board a sink darkened around the drain. Domestic swept the plain that grand bed you slept in, sumptuous sweetheart: honey. Toward the end, total attrition.

Boxing gloves on shelf, all sky is wet & wounded with last shine.

Handholds

No one saw the handholds nailed to walls by your bed at the end: no amazing save now could break the deal. The spike was driven.

Earth Burns with memory

reach for a petal get a scorch mark
magnolias small cigarette burns like the ones on the white piano keys.
The blacks always look more or less ok.
Did you take a grocery cart piled with Players cigarettes to heaven?
Druggists could do nothing.
It is 1941. I am two years old. Convex glass reflects my face like a fish or balloon.
Stab push pins into kitchen map for war ships new positions.
I am back in a schoolroom holding a #2 yellow pencil whose point is sharpening scarring
and staining paper with poems. I am seven.
It is April Fools. War grinds on like a meat mincer.
If the color of eyes could be taken to paint an ocean
mother, n front of her easel, would have dipped a brush in my eyes.
In stead, she crushed chamois cloth in a ball like butter:
down the hall was one sick kid. In mothers mouth the metallic taste of anger.
In the book of life only a blurred letter: ptarmigan & being shot:
coffee is sweet liquor is sweeter:
Earth burns. Incinerating viruses the illness gets even into fire. Earth is sick to the core & It won't get
any better.

Suffering was her new garb

wide shoulders when the phone rang now it made her shudder.

Lights coming on were a noise, gave her the jitters.

The jimjams were permanently hers his calm woman with a voice like furs.

Some sidekicks saw her months after diagnosis on the Avenue:

was she wearing red or gray?

From far away it was a shadow, a ghost cashier.

Death brought up the rear

Reds, oranges, all the Mediterranean colors removed from the shelf above her bed

like mascara, eye shadow, rouge, painter's soils.

Using a walker did folk know how to greet her?

They could write pity in their diaries:

but ink ran on cheap papers The elation ringing up sales

enormous dexterity turning & piling Joiner's brand jams:

getting people in wheelchairs to have their groceries put in the back by the shopper behind.

Her new rebozo had embroidery, crimped where her old had huge black & red squares: a mackinaw for a truck stop gal at all night diners.

She wore it as she must over a shrunken body.

Arnold beau sent her *Bloomex* flowers: dust swam in late light:

her hoodie was so loose it was no longer hers. Now could she shun
desire:

The last sale violently run in. Invoice put down face.

The extra cost of chasing the sun.

Still stunned by your being gone

I find Glasgow Bartender's
where is the clerk's who gladdened the mob down under:
Like a blindfolded child, I revolve looking for traces in ether, the racy pear tree
racking my brains. Boxy object contains a stash of cash for Las Vegas. You can pride yourself
on giving us grief.

Thief! Jazzy Juniper, mattress hay is mown grown raggedy.
Before me on a dark Easter day on the desk lie ink colored pieces of financial pie: Moody weather. It
rains over the screen.

I put on the ring from a late husband. You wore a woman's
ring. Above your obit, "glasses for \$38"
"Infant shoes, unworn."

I would freshen my lipstick before meeting my girl at the bus stop each evening.

Before that I sat in the glass box lobby on Cook

her bus came late, her hands were worn from industrial cycles wash, bleached by Clorox from home
making for old incontinent women from Britain:

My eyes those days were highlighted by knocking back gin.

I'd stroll Memory Lane. Once, mother went missing. Father found her rapt before
the silver screen. She wanted to be an actress. Our checkout clerk was bigger than life. Mother petite,
sat, huddled at the movies in a milk haze,

I swing, at seventy, between poles of pain in the hammock, Breathing.

Breathless Mozart's Requiem plays beyond the French door to eternity.

Good Friday has always been a sad time. I lay out a brash polo with a tiger with razzmatazz, pure
pizzazz, Shirl, in your name.

Sugarbush, have mercy on me

you are not glass & light

not harbored darked over:

I do not compare Jacqueline du Pre's sorrow with my own cover

for grief:

she was the thing itself.

the glass & light

the thing itself

The majority of the darkened homes and businesses occurred on the southern part of Vancouver Island.

The wind snapped bolts on the ferries.

While the PBX operator was plugging in lines she was really in Florence

seeing it light up

have mercy on her.

When she rises to feel her cat Gigliolo from a bowl in truth, she feeds her soul.

If she could know there is a replica of Florence in heaven, she would have a stronger handhold on death.

this little island chock full of colorful characters

you go out to shoot in a high heat haze. Against fish fraud,

build a relationship with the person who sells you fish.

boats darkening over

a feeling for people on the lower end of the game

Over du Pres, I bang my heart up against a wall as though it were my head.

If you aren't exuberant when young what are you going to pare off as the years go by?

I creep into the bedroom to listen to the trailer alone

head bent like in church yearning to play the cello piece or

One wants to write a poem that changes the world.

Let me forget

the night you came for me:
Mother riffling thru tissue paper round hats:
the broken bunting of her first baby:
the boy
her climbing high on steep ladders winter nights again
to touch the ecstasy.
sister, an old child, mother subduing the discovery of genius in the family:
both of us still tawny.
Talents swirl: form mixtures, admixtures in a home like oil
I take on others' illnesses, within me, beckoning welcoming host
motioning, a priest
Did polio as destiny lie in me early?
the practice with braces, crutches, a skinny child
in a long hallway: a girl climbing backwards a steep stairway
at the music academy.
Did the child cellist attempt to saw the cello in half like a tree?
To possess it like a lover?
whenever the clock reads later I am in ecstasy:
Scattered like fairy dust
sexual energy was everywhere in our home:
the stronger for being denied:
sable-haired sable-eyed:
I can't remember writing my first poems but it must have been in the children's ward
hospital upstate under sky so slate you could write on them: everything furred.
Never playing God but using every muscle I had
left over-the-top in my chalk gown
everywhere there: the energy vibrating
denied or fulfilled
electric, magnetic getting the deep feeling.
The night you took me: Have mercy, or die.

**"The Turmoil and Chaos from Which All Life is Born:"
An Overview of Lynn Strongin's Work**

Shine / O my Soul

Single-themed, detailed poems can become tedious, like someone on a Boston area subway giving you the run-down on their life. Strongin avoids that. She voices a series of related (at the same time unrelated) events all flowing continuously through one poem. Take "New Rochelle (5 whistle stops beyond Manhattan)," in *The Medici Girls* (2009) for example. It begins rather humbly with Strongin talking about her father taking the New Rochelle commuter train every evening: "Father took it every evening, newspaper before him, cigarette in long graceful hand...." But suddenly the father's hand takes on new dimensions "spinning slowly as a mill waterwheel / Millstone old," and before you know it she's meditating on the history of the town itself, imagining it made of black-green construction paper: "Funny to think that you saw that small town of black-green construction paper/elms where I grew up was stricken long ago back in the last century...." She tosses in a little parenthetical bit "(I'll work out my problems in privacy / & meet you at the fair:/the air will be spare.") which might be her talking, her father talking, someone else on the train talking. And then back a sketch-description of the city itself: "The underlit swamp stands apart from the turn-of-century Presbyterian Church/In the town square. / At the rail station, nearby/The obliquely-lighted mortuary/ like gas men in man-holes at work there/Glares with a flare."

All of this is within the confines of the first part of a three-part poem. The train, her father, the town, a little parenthetical whisper, more town-history, the irony being that the vivid little powerfully-imagined fragments really get to you, and it's not work on a page at all, but a little magical drop into the fragmentary quality of reality.

Part II of the poem is a description of Strongin's drunk black nanny getting a call from her son in prison and sticking Lynn and her kid sister in a taxi, going down to the jail near the train station. Not quite as fragmented, but N.B. how she underlines the nanny's blackness: "our black Nanny from down South doth bring /k id sister & me, bundled in a taxi...." taking a "long black drive / Down to the jail near the New Rochelle train station. / The Iron Horse belched snow-white steam..../New Rochelle a year or two after the close of the Second World War." (pp.14-15).

The black Nanny doesn't just bring them down to the jail, but doth bring them down. Why doth? Just a subtle little touch that spells out historicity.

Part III leaps totally into Outer / Inner Space as New Rochelle becomes an almost hallucinatory backdrop for Strongin's description of the polio attack that has affected her life. Throw back-sequences out the window and move directly into a tortured childhood consciousness that turn

everything into chaos. So masterfully drawn that we really end up seeing it all through her eyes / feelings: "Seeing New Rochelle by train was one thing / Seeing it flat on my back from an ambulance window another pair of sleeves/Blown, sewn of liquid oxygen/Not to be cut on a girl's clothes dummy, some mannequin with beige plastic skin/July 1, 1951/When the world spun on its axis like a copper penny / Black snake of woodland lake writhing / Gold transfused by an intravenous into coal / Transformed, Cinderella at ball/Music of the globe organum: out of the year in hell/Dust & grime like hurt hawks, raptors near ruin, shine/O my soul." (iii, p.15).

What an unexpected, captivating series of associations: spinning copper pennies, black snakes, coal transformed into coal, the earth transformed into music (organum), feeling surrounded by hawks/birds of prey (raptors)...and then a final uplift into hope: "...shine/O my soul."

So we get her personal (father-centered) past, a mini-history of New Rochelle, and then move into the hellish center of Strongin's first battle with polio. Even the use of slightly exotic words like "organum" and "raptors" adds another dimension of seriousness to the vision. The message here is to *avoid the commonplace, the ordinary, the little plot-tale, turn all into a vivid melange of memory that invites the reader into the poet's mind.*

The superficial, the obvious is the adversary: imagery draws you into the reality of the work as imagery can alone. Even the last line here....for the innocent/un-knowing, they may think that the "shine / O my soul" is simply something spontaneous, clear-flowing. But the fact is that it is an echo of the Hebrew song ("*L'Cha Dodi*") to the Sabbath as some sort of female incarnation, not a goddess, of course, but an attempt to turn the sacred day into a someone: "*Hitor'ri, hitor'ri, ki va oreich, kumi ori / Awake, awake your light has come.*"

In a recent e-mail to me, after reading what I'm writing about her, Strongin let loose a very revealing fact *vis a vis* her whole psycho-techno approach to writing: "You make me aware of what I am doing where I only do it instinctively." (April 11, 2010).

The fact is that Strongin is almost full-time totally immersed, immersed, immersed in the arts. Books, films, religious services, all the arts enter into herpsyche and become part of her. Hence, when she writes, true enough it is "instinctive," but instincts emerging from the art-world that exists inside her.

Take a poem like "Summer Streets Were Arterial" in *Canzoni, The Fiery & The Ethereal* (2009) : "Venus was dawn/Bled bare/Watch the boy overturn the El Train/Disturbed / The film unsurpassed in its day./Grandfather trim as an oyster/Dying in the Cossack country never but Hollywood/Death after Brooklyn/Flatbush might have well been Athens/Limping away from burnt plantations/ Armageddons of fears, sleepless nights, compensations/Which weren't compensations/But tin/ A blanket stretcher bears him away from copious shadows,/ O Clementine, you were a miner's daughter, a forty-niner/But never mine/Tape the vein / Get blood redder than river-run." (p.35).

Who, for example, is the miner's daughter, a forty-niner? Clementine who?

It's not enough to just go back to the song "My Darling Clementine," although that's where you'll find the forty-niner miner: "In a cavern, in a canyon, / Excavating for a mind, dwelt a miner forty-niner/ And his daughter -- Clementine. The door opens, not just into the song, but John Ford's film of the same name, My Darling Clementine. But still there are all sorts of ambiguities and question marks here. Who is the grandfather dying in Hollywood, Old Man Clayton in My Daring Clementine? A part played by Walter Brennan, originally from Massachusetts, who died, not in Hollywood, but Oxnard. A bit of poetic license here, but, after all, the whole poem isn't emerging from filmography or biography, but the film and song entering Strongin's poetic soul and then being transformed into an entirely new vision.

Strongin transforms all things into her own art. That being said, there are times when she's almost purely reportorial autobiographical, nearly Bukowskian, telling it the way it is. Two poles exist in her world: a dream-like transformations of data, and a succinct, reportorial re-creation of the everyday: "The old room in Manhattan was not ours/It belongs to Emotion: Cobalts, sepias, mysteries as deep as /the Middle Ages swirling about our three heads in a painting: Mother, /sister, and me:/ violin against violence of maternal depression. /Unison applause at Yiddish cultural society/Sister stood back to the wall at first blood. /Singing on the way out to Brooklyn/we were silent on the way home. The voice hardly carried thru fog / Mother kept her nose out of gossip going round/Mother unleashed her sorrow in anger/"If only you'd never been born"/ I used a midnight telescope wrong end/to miniaturize it/diamond/cutting bone/shone." ("The Old Room in Manhattan Was Not Ours," *Wyves of the Fire Dye*, p.73) Interesting, *n'est pas* that although we are playing reportorial here, that we begin with a painting and end with a telescope turned around, not to see distance, but closeness. The arts and the everyday mixed together again, and a confession that she was always in a fashion reminiscent of Freud, studying things in their minute closeness. And it tells you a lot about the why's behind Strongin's total immersion in the arts. Polio, yes, but more than that, her mother's personal rejection, "If only you'd never been born."

The poet's mind is like a giant quarry filled with endless jewels, and the further down you dig, the more gems you find, the "real" turned into symbolic infinities: "When my mother had me, fright took her breath away:/I broke from her body, /In my third year, it darkened, my nursery// Big as a sheep/or tugboat's smoke-cloud/Upon sky. //Then it began slowly happening to me:/That my mind had a great ability/To remember everything//Down to the tiny, camera rooms/Developing/All things: //The language of the jewel began to gleam. /When I came in contact with other children/I felt the immense loneliness of creation./Small at first/It had grown larger, larger like a whale/Swallowing me, eyes & all./My nighttime terrors/Gulped the whole room/Down./Up I came/Into the ordinary/Grey life, I could not impress on them, the other children/The dazzle of being: / My loss/Shone round: I could touch it with both hands." ("The Fright of Having a Child," pp.56-57, *Barn Falling Down, A Winter Lens*, 2010).

We begin here with the everydayness of a frightening childbirth.

Strongin herself is aware of her own creative dimensions, an ability of "remembering everything//Down to the tiny, camera rooms / Developing All things." Interesting, *n'est pas*, the linking up with "camera rooms," the sense of not merely abstractly remembering, but remembering with photographic vividness. And she slowly becomes aware of her special gifts,

the fact that she cannot impress on the other children the magic that she full-time sees in the world around her. She's very aware of being a creatrix tuned in on "the dazzle of being" that no one else around her can tune in. Then, frighteningly, her vision disappears, bursts like a bubble and disappears...only like a full moon that vanishes for a while creates a period of darkness, but then begins again. So she goes through revelatory cycles, on, off, and then full moon on again. We're talking about Realism versus Surrealism here, aren't we, reportorial frankness versus the visionary, the two polar opposites in the Strongin psyche.

There's never just a simple here-it-is now, but always a multi-dimensionalized *Weltanschauung* / world-view that turns the everyday into all-time, all-culture: "I see things/Power over death & loss/Unfathomable bodies of art, writing, lives of others/Structured:/ How can we live out of our skin where dragons let down their scales/& are bathing/In waters fine as skin? / How can you go for me to the wedding?/The surf line of the 21st /Century had come/I knew to live out of my bunkers, out of bonds/ With dignity, passion/To reassemble lives/Though the marriage didn't take / Though paralysis (how defined?) is fate. Greer Garson in old, flat film visits children with Infantile paralysis/ With seventy-two new cases of infantile paralysis reported yesterday and/twenty-three deaths in the forty-eight hours ended at noon yesterday, / Health Commissioner Emerson yesterday afternoon definitely and/drastically extended his efforts to prevent the spread of the disease. / I like the color of avocado, it's such a muted green, like the color of some delicious pond scum, or lake with too many ducks and geese turned green/with algae-bloom, *pentimento*, old dream." ("With Intoxicating Clarity," p.54, *Cobalt Horse*, 2009).

The core here is really Strongin's life-long battle with polio, (and its opposite ecstasy, a hard won joy rising above the fact) and the minute she begins to meditate on this battle, here come the films, Greer Garson in *Strange Lady in Town*, and then the evening news about infantile paralysis statistics, all within Strongin's visionary ability to universalize the individual and particular. As she notes at the beginning of "With Intoxicating Clarity," she sees things contextualized in demanding, unfathomable "bodies of art, writing, lives of others." Her own visionary powers, yes, but always enriched in a larger cultural context, which adds immensely to the power and universality of her work. No just confessional/personal, but a ride through cultural history.

There is a sudden break at the end, as we're moved away from polio in its socio-political (Health Commission) context and suddenly we're internalized again, back to interior aesthetics, a fascinating tying together of avocado green with pond scum green, and then ducks and geese turned green with algae-bloom which, she points out isn't photographic/realistic, but a *pentimento*, first draft, original sketch, "old dream." With perhaps a sideglance reference to playwright Lilian Hellman's graphic autobiography, *Pentimento*.

Whole hidden graveyards exist but imaginatio leads one into long halls of bibliographic-cultural referencing.

The scaleless dragon reference? Beowulf, King Arthur's Life of Eufamm, Fafner....? You tell me!

I'm not saying that Strongin is an Internet Search labyrinth of What's Going On, but, on the contrary, she's a guide that takes you through historicized personal emotions that you can not only relate to but see in larger cultural contexts: "Crutches/swung me along/over Montreal cobbles, bread-stones, egg-stone walls/sidewalks/into concert halls rarely moving/ up the stairs, backwards, of the music academy: blond wood which drove splinters into girlskin:/then aluminum rubber handholds/pads under the arms so they wouldn't rub holes window/in my blouses/still they wore all fabrics thin/including my torso:/my arms which had held trees/knobs of wood/with rapture/now developes wings as wide as an oarsman." ("Crutches," p.43, *Cape Seventy*, 2008).

What we have here is perhaps the single most personal poem that Strongin has ever written, a description of polio attacking her as a child, her still being able to use crutches which caused an unexpected muscularization of her arms which she then compares to an oarsman's wing-like arms. But don't be fooled into thinking we're into the surface, the obvious, because there is a whole implied message here that the polio itself, although it hampered her body, in a sense freed her spirit / mind. If she hadn't gotten paralyzed would she ever have so totally gotten involved with such a thorough immersion in the arts?

This realistic bent comes out most strongly in her novel *Nikko's Child* (2008), which in many respects is a fictional retelling of her own family life which is most vividly portrayed as poetry in *Wyves of the Fire Dye*. Strongin herself coping with paralysis, is very vividly portrayed (as Anthea) in the novel, but she's a little sneaky and round-about here in giving the final message that suffering (polio) creates vision (her life as a writer): "magic sucked up, seemed lost to the eyes of men, it was simply the pitch-black pitch-blind that came before the burst of light. It proved an endurance test, a call to rise like the Cliffs of Moher, which also drop drastically, plunging into the turmoil and chaos from which all life is born." (p.48).

So Strongin here, unlike her *modus operandi* in her poetry, isn't autobiographical. She steps out of author-centrism and lets the other characters in the novel express their vision that personal disaster (Strongin's own paralysis), instead of being a totally negative experience, is the trigger for a burst of creative life / light. Turmoil and chaos give birth to all life, which is Strongin's way of saying that her own creativity emerged from all the agonies she had to go through before her vision was finally born and developed her into perhaps the most aesthetically rewarding and enriching poet on the scene today.