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HOMES

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My first home was a tenement apartment in Brooklyn. The landlord hated Jews and my mother and I took possession of it after midnight. The previous tenants, my mother's co-worker and her husband, bought a home in Levittown and gifted us with the apartment. It was 1950 and the formality of leases, security deposits, first and last months rent in advance, lay in the future. Further, it was accepted that this inner city, rent-controlled apartment could be passed from hand to hand independent of actual owner.

Where had we lived previously? I don't remember, but I imagine my mother watching the clock anxiously, then waking me. We walked to the subway. I slept on her lap, oblivious to the bone-rattling rumble and jerky halts at each stop, until we arrived at North Seventh Street and she shook me awake to walk eight city blocks.

It was spring. I wore a sweater and all I remember of that walk is a meowing cat that knocked a lid loudly from a trashcan and the echo of my mother's high heels against pavement. Because I walked that route for sixteen years, I know that we passed six-story, spray-painted tenements fronted by rows of garbage cans, dilapidated cars that provided their owners a fantasy of middle-class life, stores and restaurants whose cloudy windows sported advertisements of daily specials.

When we reached the dark, sleeping building my mother whispered "Just the steps to walk now." She was less than five feet tall, under a hundred pounds, and slight though I was, it would have been impossible for her to carry me for any length of time. I rubbed my stuffed Bambi, always with me, against my cheek, breathed in the familiar mildewed smell, and was comforted. My mother carried her purse, a slim black envelope tucked tightly between elbow and rib, and a shopping bag that contained a carved wooden bowl, the only possession her own mother had carried across the border from Russia, also in the dark of night. Each day, for a month or more, my mother had given her co-worker two large brown paper bags filled with our clothes, books, dishes, bedding. The woman promised to leave her furniture.

My mother swung open the heavy door topped with a glass transom. We walked through a dim hall that smelled of urine and beer and up a wide flight of stairs to the first floor where my mother knocked at number five. Her friend, a stocky woman with tight brown curls, opened the door, finger to her lips, and ushered us in. She hugged my mother and knelt to kiss me on either cheek, spitting three times, "to protect us from the evil eye," while her husband paced behind her. The three exchanged a few sentences in Yiddish, their excitement obvious despite their low voices. I sat on a chair and cradled my head in my arms on the Formica kitchen table. They blew a kiss, waved, closed the door softly behind them. It was now our apartment. My mother led me into a small bedroom, pulled our nightgowns from a paper bag and smiled wearily. "Home," she said as she made the bed, but I was too tired to look around. We changed clothes in pale light shining from the windows of the firehouse across the alley and lay down to sleep at last. As my eyes closed I heard, for the first time, the howling siren and scramble of fire engines that would become

my nightly lullaby.

That first weekend my mother, wearing pink rubber gloves and an old housedress, scrubbed furniture, walls, and, on hands and knees, the floor. The apartment seemed forever after to be inundated with the antiseptic scent of Lysol. There were three doorless rooms that she separated with muslin curtains. The radiators were intermittently cold during the day and promptly dead by seven P.M., no matter what the temperature, but each morning the sun streamed through large, south-facing windows and provided an illusion of warmth.

The narrow bathroom had a toilet with a rusty water tank overhead and a long chain used to flush. I scrunched beneath it when I used the bathroom, certain it would come down on me, soak my clothes, knock me unconscious. As an adult I think of it as the Sword of Damocles threatening to descend. My mother bought a cheerful green striped plastic curtain for the shower, but we mostly took baths, reading until the stingily supplied hot water grew too cold for lingering. Because there was no bathroom sink, we washed our faces and hands and brushed our teeth in the kitchen. I combed my hair facing the small mirror beside the sink, climbing on a kitchen chair to peer at my cloudy reflection until I was tall enough to see while standing on tiptoe.

Those first few weekends my mother harmonized with Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Patti Page on the small radio while she painted the kitchen white, laid yellow oilcloth on the floor, sanded the rusted chrome kitchen chairs, removed their worn plastic seats and covered them with flowered fabric. A languid breeze, redolent of exotic food, drifted in through the open window while she sewed a pale yellow tablecloth, placed it on the table, filled her mother's wooden bowl with plums, bananas, pears and centered it on the table. She purchased a jade plant and placed it on the windowsill where it could capture morning sunlight. It managed not only to survive but to thrive.

My small bedroom had a battered pine bureau and lumpy bed, which was immediately invaded by bedbugs. I woke screaming, covered with rapidly swelling bites. My mother rushed in the room, grabbed me, shrieked "*Mein Gott*," threw me under the freezing shower, toweled me dry, and laid me beside her to sleep. It required four nights of fumigation before I could sleep there again. No amount of fumigation, however, could rid anyone's apartment, of cockroaches. My mother sprayed endlessly, and we kept an old shoe by the sink to slaughter any that appeared, but it was a losing battle.

I selected wallpaper for my room, cowboys lassoing smiling cows. My mother laid brown, wood-patterned linoleum on the floor and sewed a bedspread of cowboy fabric. The room was whimsical and clean. My window overlooked the alley. It opened onto a fire-escape that functioned as a porch from mid-April through late October.

Most tenants slept outside during those stifling summer nights. Clotheslines strung from apartment to poles sported clothes of various sizes and colors that were taken in before mattress and pillows were brought out. A wordless agreement prevailed in the neighborhood. Eyes focused only on ones own fire-escape; conversations or arguments not your own were ignored. My mother crowded our fire-escape with blossoms each spring and I was warned to be careful of them. They contributed to both a restless half-sleep and an illusion of privacy. During those steamy summer months, the firemen set up card tables on their driveway and their carousing voices, slap of cards, tinkle of beer bottles bled into other night sounds.

My mother's small bedroom smelled of Shalimar perfume, her only "splurge." The spicy rose and sweet vanilla reminded me of the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, a place we often visited. The bottle was a frilled glass crown topped with a tiny black cap. It sat beside a chipped crystal bowl filled with tubes of scarlet lipstick, on a maple bureau that shone from frequent oiling. In the evening, my mother and other working women retrieved their children from a woman a few blocks away who was so impersonal I don't remember her. Once home, I'd sit on my mother's bed while she carefully hung up her shirtwaist dress, changed into a housedress, exchanged her high heels for slippers, and went to the kitchen to prepare dinner. I'd rummage through her purse and remove her wallet, the paperback she always carried, lipstick, her comb, pen and paper, and spread them out, handling each as though it might give me a head start into adulthood.

My mother had columns of books-to-be-read beside her bed, a habit I now share. In one

corner of her room sat her indispensable sewing machine, in the other stacks of *The New Yorker*, *Readers Digest* and *Family Circle* magazines. More books were housed on wall-to-ceiling shelves that my mother installed in the long foyer. Her collection was vast, a paean to literature: Shalom Aleichem, Lillian Hellman, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Steinbeck, Singer, Schopenhauer, Malamud. She had been forced to leave school after sixth grade to get a job, but loved reading and had an enormous vocabulary that conquered the *New York Times* crossword puzzle each Sunday. She frequented libraries, which even in this ghetto offered an extensive selection.

On the first of the month after we moved in, the landlord knocked. My mother dried her hands nervously on her housedress and swung open the door to face him. His eyes narrowed in surprise as he looked past her down the book-narrowed foyer at me. He was silent a moment, then held out his hand and said only, "Rent." She counted twenty-six dollars, a fortune for her, into his hand. He nodded brusquely and knocked at the next apartment. My mother closed our door and leaned against it. A blush of triumph crept up her face. Her eyes lit with relief. She led me to the kitchen, where she baked banana bread in celebration, while I sat at the table reading a picture book.

The apartment slowly acquired a worn elegance as my mother replaced the existing furniture. She combed thrift shops on Second Avenue for objects of utilitarian beauty, acquiring an old lace tablecloth, oak magazine stand, and charmed a store owner into delivering two maple bookcases and four maple chairs with curved backs and a maple kitchen table she later refinished. She sewed curtains of fine polished cotton for the kitchen and her bedroom.

Neither my mother nor I, the only Jews in the neighborhood, had friends. We spent our spare time together steeped in New York: film festivals, the Yiddish theatre, Bronx Zoo, libraries, Central Park, museums, the rare ticket to a Broadway show, art galleries and street singers in Greenwich Village, the outdoor Market on the Lower East Side. Each weekend we slid easily into the rhythm of the city, mingling with the crowds on Second Avenue, gazing wide-eyed into store windows, listening to speakers in Union Square. Every free moment was filled with hurried excitement, moving with surging groups of others from activity to activity. We rarely needed money to be entertained.

A year after we moved in, my mother remarried, beginning an eight-year turbulent relationship. I had no prior knowledge of him, where they met, when they courted. I knew nothing about my biological father, and immediately adopted my stepfather as my own. He, in turn, treated me as his natural child. I was thrilled when my brother was born the first year of their marriage.

My stepfather was an ex-featherweight boxer with a wary look and unimaginable grace. He was also a gambler who couldn't stay away from cards or a crap game. I don't know if my mother knew this before they married, but even if she did, his sense of humor, soft voice and handsome face would have been very seductive, especially to a single mother. He had an easy laugh, brought home gifts of chocolate or books, but pocketed rent and food money every week to pay gambling debts. Late afternoons, after he picked up the cab he drove nightly to earn a living, he would take us for a ride before beginning work. Cab drivers in New York frequently suggested restaurants to tourists and it inspired gratitude; in Chinatown, restaurant owners gave us spare ribs and fried rice, in Little Italy pastry, in Spanish Harlem empanadas. He knew every out-of-the-way place in New York and took us to tiny bookstores, cheap, delicious diners, beautiful gardens, and little galleries. I dreamed of the city, the way other girls dreamed of boyfriends.

My father told me improbable stories and bet M & M's about what color car would turn the corner, which raindrop would hit the bottom of the window first, whether or not we'd see a dog on the next block. He taught me to play poker and spoke of Las Vegas, which he called The City of Churches and Schools, as a pilgrimage we would all make some day. I adored him and pulled pillows over my head when he and my mother fought, pretending it was a radio show turned up too loud.

My mother's clever blending of paint, furniture and fabric had imbued the apartment with a thoughtful, non-fussy femininity, rooms clearly inhabited by women, but soon the apartment hummed with a new kind of restless energy. The refrigerator held beer, steaks, ice cream. The radio was tuned to baseball all summer, an extension cord stretched over my windowsill as my father sat on the fire escape and smoked cigarettes. I read a book

beside him while my brother, a quiet baby and later a quiet child slept, and my mother worked. Piles of loose change, worn brown leather wallet, and deck of cards now rested beside the bowl of lipstick. The apartment had assumed a new masculine importance.

In our neighborhood, children of single mothers were fair game, defenseless against those few who had fathers. Boys strutted through the streets as if having a father, no matter how unreliable and subject to disappearance, bestowed a right to steal lunch money and assault others. Men might drunkenly stumble, beat their wives and children or worse, but their importance was unquestionable. Before my father, gangs of boys would attack me, yelling "Orphan, dirty Jew." I rarely went outside to play, although by the age of seven I braved the streets to snuggle into the library's worn couches with piles of books. Although my stepfather was slight and physically smaller than some of the oldest bullies, he had a casual air of confidence, his melodic whistle a warning not to mess with him. His presence granted me, and later my brother, immunity from physical harm, freedom to walk anywhere with impunity. I felt a new ownership of the city.

We woke one morning and discovered him missing.

"Your father's gone," my mother told us casually over scrambled eggs.

We'd never been warned he was leaving. This secrecy was a way of life. It was possible to wake up one morning in your own bed with everything different, as though you'd woken in an alternative universe. In the one we now inhabited, his wallet, decks of cards, piles of coins, had vanished.

"He'll give us a little money every week," my mother said.

My brother and I looked at each other in astonished grief and fear. We'd both heard the endless fights, seen my mother chase him around the bed once with a high-heeled shoe, but we'd never imagined his loss.

He left his toothbrush resting beside ours in the little cracked glass on the shelf above the kitchen sink. I claimed it for my own, putting it in my drawer like a magical talisman. He visited occasionally, took us to the movies or to the Lower East Side for a chopped egg sandwich, but his role now seemed that of an uncle or friend of the family. His only consistent presence was a small brown envelope containing twenty dollars slipped beneath the door on Friday nights. I'd lie awake waiting for the whisper of that envelope, then tiptoe to the door and pick it up, rumpled and soiled, and hold it in my hand for a few moments imagining that I felt a remaining warmth from his hands.

We again fell prey to the neighborhood boys. I began to study, with a concentration greater than in school, which streets to avoid and when. I often got my brother and myself to the library or school without incident and chalked up the times we were found and beaten up to what my father called "the luck of the draw."

An air of sloppiness soon crept into the apartment. The days seemed tarnished. New York became a melancholy torch song, gray and autumnal, every street infused with the memory of what was gone. We inhabited the geography of loss. The refrigerator was frequently empty and my brother and I went hungry. My mother departed for work in the morning so dispiritedly I sometimes worried that she wouldn't make it. She could explode with an anger that flooded the house with menace, or be generous and loving, bringing home bakery treats and taking us to the movies.

I developed new skills in shoplifting, pilfering a couple of bagels, a can of tuna, a package of Twinkies and acquired a particular ferocity while walking that discouraged attackers. I claimed the streets with a wild kind of vengeance. I skipped school and rode the subways, frequented museums, Greenwich Village, Central or Prospect Park. Seasons seemed to shift under cover of night, the unexpected slashes of autumn's gold and scarlet or spring's lush green startling and poignant. I felt larger than myself, immersed in New York culture, a citizen of every neighborhood. At home, I felt overcome by my mother's intransigent exhaustion. A coat of gray settled onto the once shiny bureau in her room, and there was an indefinable griminess to our bedding, curtains, and the once-proud lace tablecloth. She continued to take us to the movies, the Yiddish Theatre, to Second Avenue, but something in her had shut down.

In high school, I developed friends for the first time, others who loved reading and museums and Manhattan. I spent more and more time away from home, sometimes sleeping at a friend's house. After graduation, I got a job, but didn't earn enough to get my own apartment. My mother and I settled into a routine of living side by side, sometimes having dinner together and going on walks. My brother moved into his father's apartment in Manhattan.

When I turned twenty-three, I married a Cuban man my mother hated. She found him too silent, too narrow in vision, and worst of all, not Jewish. There were long periods of silence between us. My husband and I moved into a basement apartment in a lively, Hispanic section of Queens. Slivers of light trickled in through the narrow half-windows, there was noise from the streets, and the refrigerator was always on the fritz, but I loved the neighborhood. There were theatres that showed third-run films for ninety-nine cents, bodegas that were open all night, cheap little bakeries, and a subway stop nearby. The air was rich with the smell of arepas fritas de queso chicarron, pabellon criollo, and sanocho and I developed a taste for spicy Latin food.

In the spring, neighborhood men brought out little card tables and folding chairs, then played dominos all evening. Women sat on the steps and gossiped while their children played hopscotch or rode their bikes. I loved to bring out a book and read on the stoop or speak with my neighbors.

I became pregnant with my first child. My brother, seeking money for an education, enlisted in the Marines and was killed after serving four months in Vietnam. He never saw my son. My mother, steeped in the overwhelming sorrow only the loss of a child imparts, moved to Florida in an effort to begin a new life. I had my second son soon after. The streets blazed with anti-war activists. I became politically active and started college - moves that precipitated my divorce. My mother missed New York and returned a year later, able to afford only an apartment in New Jersey that she rarely spent time in. She worked as a file clerk in Manhattan, commuting each day and on weekends, confining entertainment and even shopping to the City. My sons and I would frequently meet her on Second Avenue and wander the city. I can't picture the New Jersey apartment my mother eventually died in. Her home remained, to me, our three rooms in Brooklyn.

Soon after my mother's death, my sons and I moved to Maine. They went off to college and I eventually remarried. My husband and I, in southern Maine's crazy housing market moved from one rented house to another. One March, after still another house was sold out from under us, we decided to forestall future evictions by buying a home of our own. A real estate agent drove us down an out-of-the-way, tree-lined road rimmed with four feet of snow deposited by a couple of Maine blizzards. The few houses we passed were partially concealed by tall pines and set back from the road as though hiding. A city-dweller my whole life, I experienced a strange discomfort at this unpeopled stretch of land, its silence and dark thickets of trees. I thought ruefully how a particular urban frenzy is so integral to my sense of the world that I am aware of it only in its absence. As we drove along however, old rock walls and animal tracks that hinted at nocturnal visitors slowly aroused a sense of pleasure at the thought of traveling this inconvenient, lovely road each day.

We pulled into the driveway of a brown cape with a shingled barn that could comfortably shelter two cars. White smoke coiled from the chimney and dissipated into the frigid air. When we got out of the car, a fire-piney scent suggested a warm homey coziness inside. We stepped up onto a rough-hewn porch whose doors and windows, we learned, were stored for the winter. Drifts of gauzy white covered the wooden floor like a primitive patchwork. The deep snow left the front yard open to speculation, but the back five acres were a flood of pine, hemlock, maple and oak, interrupted by an enormous circle of granite boulders that knifed into the cold, clear air.

They seemed magical as they rose from the landscape laden with heavy snow, pristine in a way impossible in the city with its smudgy fumes and crowded sidewalks. At that moment a trio of crows landed on a flattened edge of rock and cawed loudly into the quiet day. The contrast of their ebony wings and thin legs against the blunt power of the granite and clean white of the snow seemed emblematic of the possibilities offered by the location. I wanted to live there. I saw the same desire in my husband's eyes. The real estate agent noted our enchantment and said, "It's an old granite quarry." We nodded.

We stepped into the house and were engulfed by chaos. The military family who owned it

had decorated in overpowering patterns of red, white and blue. The first floor had a small, single-windowed bedroom, a living room with a glass-faced woodstove, a dining room and kitchen. Knick-knacks were piled everywhere. A huddle of china dogs dominated the bureaus in the two bedrooms upstairs. Big stuffed dogs claimed the ruffled beds. The air was dense and stale. A faint forties smell of gardenia escaped from an open perfume bottle on the crowded dresser. The tiny bathrooms were papered with a dizzying parade of blue ducks and red tulips. Heavy drapes and dark carpets had reduced the house to a stifling cave of dim light. We followed the agent down narrow steps to the basement; two blue-carpeted rooms with red and blue plaid wallpaper, a utility room with shelves and a washer and dryer. The owners kept their three big dogs there and we knew it would take months to eradicate the putrid scent of fur and urine.

"Impossible," my husband whispered. He is a botanist who enjoys nature's disarray, but his lab itself is one of sterilized glass tubes and beakers, well organized space. I thought of that wondrous granite quarry and said, "The house needs smaller furniture, white paint, no carpets or drapes. You'll see. It'll be great."

"We can't," whispered my husband.

"Sure we can," I whispered back.

In the end, money made the decision for us. The wife, tired of snow and wanting to move south near their children, shushed her husband and offered a reasonable price.

Friends helped us move in early May. They stayed for pizza, salad and red wine, offered final congratulations, said good-by. Exhausted, my husband and I turned out the lights, climbed into bed, drew the down comforter over us and slept.

We woke freezing at five-thirty, the house ominously silent. We looked at each other in dread, pulled on heavy socks and sweaters and padded downstairs to the basement to see what was wrong. The vast spring melt over the previous few days had flooded the basement, and killed the furnace. The carpets were underwater. Once-embedded debris floated as though from a shipwreck. The stench of dog urine made us gag. We slammed shut the basement door and brewed coffee while we decided what to do.

Sunlight shone into the kitchen. The smell of strong coffee and cinnamon-raisin toast filled the room. Despite the crisis I felt cheerful. We would finish breakfast, make phone calls, go downstairs, buckets in hand, and start bailing. My husband paced in a wedge of golden light, steaming mug in hand. His pursed lips and hunched shoulders made it clear that he was angry.

"This can't be the first time," he fumed. "I can't believe they didn't tell us."

I agreed this couldn't be the first time, but wasn't surprised we hadn't been informed. My husband was part of a vibrant, often argumentative scientific community where sharing information was as natural as breathing. I was a psychotherapist accustomed to secrets. His trust in people often surprised me, but I loved what I regarded as his naiveté and felt it a good balance to what he regarded as my cynicism. His belief sometimes made me hopeful about the world, but that same belief made him prone to anger when people betrayed him.

My husband left a message for the real estate agent to call back then searched the yellow pages under furnace repair.

"I'll find the buckets as soon as I finish my breakfast," I told him.

"Buying this house was a mistake," he said as he poured himself another cup of coffee. He didn't look at me.

I heard the unspoken accusation that my insistence had gotten us into this mess, but with the sun streaming in through the wide window, I couldn't feel regret. I held my tongue and stood looking out the window over the kitchen sink, drinking coffee and nibbling toast.

Most of the quarry was exposed, a play in shadow and light, the wall of rocks surrounding

a deeply hollowed, flooded center. Trails of wild blueberry bushes and a suggestion of lady slippers threaded the yard. Sprays of slender stems and daffodil buds provided a hopeful green hedge against the brooding granite. The sun touched the boulders with gentleness, its brilliance exposing richly grained surfaces. Their chiseled edges and careless sprawl filled a previously unknown space inside me with a tentative joy. The house was small, on an out-of-the-way road, basement and yard flooded, but the dense evergreens and the swollen red buds on the maples convinced me we'd made the right decision. This solitude, the gradual unraveling of one season into the next that allowed nature's cycles to be readily appreciated, would impart a calmness to me unobtainable in the city. My mind would slow down, find the precise phrase, metaphor, theme for my writing as each day leisurely unfolded. I understood that my husband's frustration had to do with feeling betrayed.

I called to him, "Come look."

He joined me at the window, resting his arms beside mine on the edge of the sink. A moment later the botanist in him said excitedly, "The first lady slippers are coming up!" He turned to me, face glowing, and said exuberantly, "I can't wait to see what else is here."

We've now lived in our home in seven years; waterproofed the basement, painted walls white, purchased comfortable second-hand furniture. My husband built floor to ceiling bookcases, though books still rise in impromptu sculptures beside our bed. We purchased an oak dining room table at a yard sale. I crowned it with my grandmother's wooden bowl. We ripped out the carpets and laid cheap pine boards that remind me of my first bedroom.

A bay window in my office frames a curved precipice of rock ledge and swirling oak roots. The light on even the grayest days bestows a coruscate brilliance over my wooden Buddha, Native American painting of Changing Woman, woven silk textile from Tibet. It offers a palliative against winter cold. When words refuse to materialize, I sit on the window seat and read or stare out at a landscape ornamented by nature's own design. Some days, lost in the mysterious territory of an author's imagination, I look up and am startled by green trees that stretch to the horizon rather than clotheslines and a concrete firehouse. I fled New York to escape a bad marriage, unaffordable housing, crowded schools. Here I found friends, a job, a loving husband.

It would seem that my life should be one of contentment, and yet...

I long for New York the way one longs for a long-lost lover, even the most difficult moments of life there drenched with bittersweet longing. I'm lonely for the streets themselves, the long rows of skyscrapers, the rush of people, the humming of a thousand conversations voiced with no concern for privacy. I'm lonely for the theatrics and cheap treasures of Second Avenue, for public transportation, Greek coffee shops, delis, used bookstores.

My husband and I recently visited. Exiting the subway on Broadway, I was hit by a rush of love so intense I had to lean against a wall and just breathe. The contours of this city had shaped me and now folded around me like welcoming arms. I thought, I know you - I know that geometric intersection of buildings and sky, that howling cadence of cars and trucks and people, that multi-layered smell of food, flower stalls, exhaust fumes, that flat fall of afternoon sunlight and peculiar hazy orange sunset as night advances. These are the streets I dream about, the streets I write about, the streets familiar to me as the tempo of my own breath. Home is not just a location - it's a compilation of remembered experiences so profound that nowhere else can have the same power. My past exists on the streets, in the museums, the parks, and stirs in me every time I turn a corner. The city's rhythms are hot-wired into my own circuits. Just as an animal is imprinted with the first animate object it sees as mother, I'm imprinted with the first place I knew, New York, as home.

Michelle Cacho-Negrete's essay *Heat* was selected as one of the 100 most notable essays of 2004. She has been published in a number of magazines, including *The Sun Magazine*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Bottomfish*, *Mystery Time*, *Gulf Stream*, *The Sierra Club*, *The Bridge*, *Web Del Sol*, *Portland Monthly*, *Weird Tales*, and *Psychotherapy Networker* as well as a number of other magazines. She won the Hope Award, second prize in the Women in the Arts Literature Contest, and has been nominated four times for a Pushcart Prize. She attended one semester of Vermont College's MFA program, worked privately with Dianne Benedict, winner of the Iowa Award, Michael Steinberg, editor of *The Fourth Genre*, and Maxine Rodburg, head of the writing program at Harvard University.