

NEWSREAL: 2003



a selection of prose-poems
by Rochelle Ratner

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Biography & Acknowledgements

Rochelle Ratner's first volume of poetry, *A Birthday of Waters*, was published in 1971, shortly after her 21st birthday. To date she has published seventeen books and chapbooks of poetry, most recently *House & Home* (Marsh Hawk Press, 2003). Other books include a translation of the Belgian Surrealist poet Paul Colinet, two novels (*Bobby's Girl* and *The Lion's Share*, both from Coffee House Press), one book of criticism, and the anthology *Bearing Life: Womens' Writings on Childlessness* (The Feminist Press, 2000). The internet magazine, *Sugar Mule* (<http://www.sugarmule.com>) recently devoted a full issue to her writing. *Leah*, a sequence of found poems culled from old postcards, will appear online soon from xPress(ed) (<http://www.xpressed.org>).



She's currently on the editorial board of Marsh Hawk Press, Executive Editor of *The American Book Review*, and reviews regularly for *Library Journal* and other publications. From 1995-2001 she served on the National Book Critic Circle's board of directors.

Although she collaborated with printmaker Bernard Solomon throughout the 1980s, it wasn't until the digital revolution that she began to incorporate photography into her artistic vision – first street photos to aid work on a novel, then old family photos she "manipulated" to reflect her mood. Verbal skills numbed by 9-11, she roamed the city with a camera, trying to capture what she couldn't put into words. It's a process she's repeated several times since, attempting at crucial, speechless moments to bring the world back into focus.

As she writes this, the built-in desk and cabinetry in the bedroom of her small New York City apartment is in the process of being rebuilt. Even the architect who designed it insists she now has no excuse not to produce great literature. This photo, where she's seated at her old desk, is destined to become a classic.

More information, and links to her other writings and photos on the Internet, can be found at her website: <http://www.rochelleratner.com>.

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SHE TAKES HER CAR

The New England Journal of Medicine reports today that operating room teams leave sponges, clamps and other tools inside about 1,500 patients every year.

— Peter Jennings
January 16, 2003

She takes her car into the repair shop, drives off, finds the radio no longer works, drives back, they fix the radio, she drives off again, the car makes it out of the shop then a quarter mile down the road doesn't want to budge. Stalls every thirty seconds. She manages, somehow, to get it back (across traffic), find the same repairman. It turns out he left his rag under the hood, and it was being sucked up by the engine. A simple thing to remove, now that they caught it early. Mechanics, like doctors, make mistakes. Her uncle was operated on for gall bladder, then a year later had his gall bladder removed for a second time. Sometimes surgeons, even the best of them, miss the spot. And sometimes they leave things: a sponge, a clamp, a bullet.

A COALITION OF THE WILLING

In the name of peace, if he does not disarm, I will lead a coalition of the willing to disarm Saddam Hussein.

— President Bush
January 17, 2003

For the past week, the 11 o'clock news has been presenting local interest stories on people from the New York area getting ready for war. Reservists, clean-faced boys who washed behind their ears, have big smiles for the camera. Young women with their hair tied back. Close-ups of people preparing at Fort Dix or some terrorism school in the South, talking about how they don't want this war, but are more than ready to go. In Israel a robot simulates the victim of a terror attack. I had a doll that drank water then wet herself. In preparation. And I recall reaching all the way up to hold Mother's hand, running to keep up with her. Today it's simpler, pre-schoolers tied to a rope, two by two, the teacher's aide stringing them along to the park, so they can whiz down slides, fall off swings, climb on monkey bars, and throw sand in each others' faces.

PROM NIGHT

Serious stomach problems such as bleeding can occur without warning.

—Celebrex ad

January 18, 2004

First, they said she'd never dance again. Then she had trouble walking. Besides, they told her, this little pill caused cancer. So she stopped taking it and he promised. He promised. And he wanted so much to dance and she was feeling fine until they got in the car and they were halfway there and it was wet and she fainted at the sight of blood and intended to just flush the toilet but it was too big. All because of that one little pill. She wasn't expecting.

A BAD MOVIE

As I said, this looks like a rerun of a bad movie and I'm not interested in watching it.

—President George W. Bush
January 21, 2003

They were together less than two months when they bought a VCR. It was 1985, before the Gulf War. Ronald Reagan was president, and he, especially, liked to watch old movies. He awakened her passion for *Casablanca*, *White Heat*, and *Now, Voyager*. She taught him about Bergman. They'd curl up together on the sofa with bulging springs, her head in his lap. The creaking TV had its own problems. Soon enough the trouble set in, with him addicted to WWII films and she, six years younger, still intrigued by Vietnam. She'd seen *Apocalypse Now* three times, and he hated it.

ART

He branded the initials of his alma mater, University of Kentucky, into the uterus of Stephanie Means, and Means is suing for emotional distress.

—January 25, 2003

Once upon a time there was a woman (I think of Mona Lisa) placed in front of an artist. Placed there to be used by an artist, one artist only, his plaything (I think of Madame Cezanne, and don't recall her first name, or her maiden name). A woman who already was an artist, perhaps, one whose whole life was a spectacle (I think of Warhol's Marilyn). But not just the smile and hair, think further down on the body (Modigliani's Woman with Velvet Neckband). No, no, the entire body, and give her more form, give her substance (Picasso's Gertrude Stein), make her alluring (Renoir's nudes, perhaps). Better. Yes, that plumpness is a dead giveaway, all she needs now is meaning, maybe symbology, maybe worship. A better artist turns her into the Virgin. Ah, yes, but we're talking great art here, we're talking a man who is driven to leave his mark and the woman who lies down before him (I think of Frida Kahlo). But there must be others. There will always be others.

THE TATTOED WOMAN

She had an appendectomy at fifteen, right at the age where girls become self-conscious about their bodies. So when the doctor suggested a tattoo over the scar her parents, who would never otherwise have permitted a tattoo, agreed: a sweet little daisy chain her mother helped select. Then, at twenty, there was the scar from her carpal tunnel surgery, a scar she covered with the picture of a diploma, all nicely rolled up. It was the only proof she'd been to college. She fell and scarred her leg something awful: that was the third tattoo, a fire-breathing dragon, its smoke running up her calf. Then breast cancer, first one breast, then the other. She chose a little mandala of hearts and flowers for the right breast, then a more meditative abstract for the left. It was around that time, when she was thirty-two, that she heard on the news about an obstetrician who carved his initials into a woman's stomach during a Cesarean. Maybe she was cut out for motherhood, after all.

ON THE MORNING THE SPACE SHUTTLE CRASHES

—February 1, 2003

Hunch-backed, bracing on a cane, one foot wrapped in plastic, two or three blankets around him, a plastic milk crate with all his belongings trailing behind on a leash like a square, brown, reluctant Scottie. It has a sign on it that I can't read from this cab with its radio turned down low, but I know it ends with God Bless You. A few people hand him money as he lumbers up Fifth Ave., momentarily blocking my view of Bergdorf's windows.

DOWN THERE

Nice girls don't touch their own genitals.

—February 12, 2003

Don't you ever let me catch you touching yourself *down there*, Mother said. And Daddy slapped her hand if he saw it edge anywhere near there. She got used to wearing skirts or jeans with no pockets. Luckily, this was America and she was white and solidly middle-class. This was the 21st Century. She could wear what she wished, date who she wished, sleep with whomever. But even in sleep, she never touched herself. And she slept soundly. She was a good girl. This was America. She could rest assured no soldier would point his rifle *down there*.

FEBRUARY 14, 2003

In New York they say code orange, threat of terror, but she sees red. There's no red in her closet, not even the scarf she almost bought last week, then didn't. Finally she settles on wine slacks and ruby earrings, leaves for work a half hour early, worried about traffic, worried about inspections, worried she'll be stopped. She decides to take the Eastside highway to the Triboro, less chance of trucks entering from that route. Backing out of the garage, she brushes against the fender of a red car.

THE TOILET SEAT

Oh yes, and I have to say, stash away the duct tape – don't use it – stash it away, and that pre-measured plastic sheeting for future – and I emphasize future – use.

—Tom Ridge, Secretary of Homeland Security
February 19, 2003

When Mr. Ridge – very nice man – suggested they stock up on duct tape and plastic sheeting, she ran out and bought ten rolls of duct tape. That would have to be enough, since she was adverse to plastics, anything plastic, ever since she was six years old and was supposed to wear plastic jewelry and play with plastic dolls while her brother played with plastic soldiers. And then, when the threat of attack was called off, she didn't know what to do with the duct tape, nice, multi-colored duct tape, orange and green and neon blue, she thought she'd liven things up a bit. That's when she remembered the toilet seat. Funny, it had been the one problem of their marriage, how in the middle of the night she'd get up to go to the bathroom, not wanting to turn on the light, and that first time she almost fell in. Now she could tape the seat down. Let Ed have to deal with the way women do things for a change. And if Mr. Ridge – such a helpful man – ever put them on the alert again, as she suspected he would, not that he'd want to, well, she could always buy more. At least she knew where to get it now.

FALSE SECURITY

If only it were *duck* tape, like she used to think it was. Now, duck tape she could understand. She'd had five ducks over two years after her pond was built – Wing and Wang, Quick and Quack, and James. All of them killed, their heads ripped off, probably by foxes. She spent long, hot, sad afternoons digging through slate-rich soil to bury them, one by one, only to find each skeleton dug up the next morning. Wang could fly over the fence, even, but obviously not quickly enough to get away. *In Dixie land I'll take my stand to live and die in Dixie. Away, away ...* She never found a way to tape even the bones down.

PASSIVELY MUTE

We stand passively mute in the United States Senate today.

—Senator Robert Byrd ... NBC Nightly News

March 4, 2003

What the hell is passive about silence? She thinks of Helen Keller, biting, clawing, kicking, all because she couldn't see or hear. No one wants a senate full of monkeys, you know, *hear no evil* and so on. As a matter of fact, her uncle sent a soapstone carving of those monkeys home to his mother from Italy during WWII. Now that was a war to be proud of. And March 4th commemorates the day Lincoln took office. In the shadow of his monument, you bow your heads. So quiet one can hear the pin of a grenade drop. But she's thousands of miles from there. At home, alone, she presses mute on the remote control, then switches to a *Law and Order* rerun she's seen a dozen times, the one about identical twins from Terre Haute, Indiana. God's country. It's always a comfort when she knows the outcome.

HOW TO START A WAR

Imagine Mr. Bush nude, addressing the State of the Union. Oh, and imagine also Saddam Hussein, nude, addressing his people. Now what? You know.

—Nadine Gary, Naked Raelian Protester, CNN
March 8, 2003

Imagine Mr. Bush how? Our president? Addressing whom? Come on, you've got to be kidding. Give the guy a white shirt, at least, and a tie. I didn't mean a bow tie, something long and flowing, easy to grab hold of. And put him behind a podium. There now, that's better.

Take a White House intern and put her under that podium. No, I mean crouching under there, hidden behind it. Not possible, you say? Okay then, his wife. Or Cheney's wife. Or his niece, the one always asking for trouble. Or Cheney, the man himself. Yes, that's best. Do you see him anywhere in the audience? Now you know why. And he's perfect. Well, not as perfect as Dan Quayle was, not that young, not that handsome, and with a bad heart, but you know, junior does the best he can. Have to give him credit.

Make sure he grips the podium with both hands. Tightly. That's right. Watch out for splinters. Now, bear with me, but let's watch as he begins to speak. Look at that grimace. Watch those wrinkles in his forehead. See how hard he's trying. Just for diversion, try to count the wrinkles. Four, six, eight, ten—

This is taking longer than expected. Come on, boys, let's give the guy a hand, show him the whole country's out here rooting for him. Won't even break for a commercial. Fifteen minutes, a full fifteen minutes, an hour if it takes that long. Eighteen wrinkles, nineteen ... Ah, finally, finally, he makes the threat one more time, clearly says the word war, then force, then Sodom, and it releases him.

WAR HALTED IN ITS TRACKS

The moon is at its fullest on March 18, one day after a proposed deadline for Iraq to comply with UN demands. The moon won't go totally dark until April 1. But it's not likely the war would wait until then.

—NBC Nightly News
March 10, 2003

The great leader will wise up, and wait just two more weeks, until April Fool's Day. Because the moon's nothing but light to him, he will have his men attack under cover of darkness. And they, on the ground, looking up, will see nothing but missiles flying over, unblinding them. The thin crescent is hidden, hidden. Their spirits have been drained. There is no reason to look into the eyes of any human. The month cannot begin.

SMOKE

A huge mushroom cloud billowed over the city. (Referring to Iraq.)

—March 27, 2003

There's a cloud of smoke over New York City, burning for days now. She couldn't see the Trade Center from her window, but this smoke is taller, easier. Holding her breath when the wind shifts north. Giving in to migraine. That was then, this is now. There's a no smoking ban even in bars and clubs. No more walking through the haze every night just to get to a table. No more excuse for the headaches. This is now. The cloud of smoke's far off, over Baghdad, burning bright red. There are other headaches. And to think, he used to blow two packs a day directly at her. That was then. This is now. Breathe. Don't breathe.

ALARMS

The super goes to visit the elevator, because they've worked together nearly thirty years, and he knows its shrill voice, calling in alarm just half a flight up from his low-floor apartment. Or, well, not always worked. There have been other cold, rainy nights like this, the end of March, snowing in White Plains, bombing in Iraq.

VANISHING ACTS

For the people of Baghdad, it would be as if the Iraqi regime simply vanished.

—American newscaster
April 1, 2003

Vanishing's sort of a family history. First the Egyptians drowning in the Red Sea, then the Marranos, then the Pogroms, then the Holocaust. Do you know there are people who still say the Holocaust never happened? And how many people vanished in Argentina? Having lost one parent and several friends, he knows all about vanishing. Finally it's his turn to perform the vanishing act. Statues of Saddam, draped with American flags, shatter in a thousand million pieces. But in the public square the military murals remain. Men walk with their heads down, women walk with their heads covered. They know it's April 1st, April Fool, and no moon tonight. They've seen this trick before.

THE CLEANEST WAR

They are calling this the cleanest war in all of military history.

—April 2, 2003

If he hadn't been seeing this with his own eyes, he never would have believed it. The progress made since Vietnam, where his father served, or the Gulf War, where his older brother was for a time before they discovered a slight heart murmur and sent him home, was remarkable. And we're not talking only technology, but the little, everyday things. The Army, for example, has passed out literally thousands of latex gloves. No more disease spread by touching dead bodies, infected wounds, or even the earth itself. And there are surgical masks they don whenever going into battle, no, not for the fear of chemical warfare but because, after all, this is the desert, and you don't want that stirred-up sand getting in your lungs. Before and after even the slightest skirmish they wash their hands, usually with water and a cleanser-like soap that scratches even the toughest skin, but when water isn't available there are plenty of dry-wipes, like those given to people after eating lobster. He ate lobster once, on his twelfth birthday, insistent upon ordering an entire lobster just for himself, and for once his parents agreed to it. He recalls that tough shell, the noise it made when he was cracking it, and how proud he was when he extracted large chunks, whole.

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

To some extent I feel fortunate that I'm here because this is something I never would have seen before and now that I see it I kinda understand some of the history behind it.

— An American soldier in front of the Imam Ali Mosque
April 3, 2003

Be all you can be, the slogan used to read. And in a Brooklyn high school, the recruiter tells kids from low-income families that this is the only way they'll escape their neighborhood. Then, when they pay no attention, or maybe one or two insist they're going to college right now, after high school, he tells them the Army doesn't want them, they'd never pass the intelligence tests. Except these particular students are articulate. They tell their teacher, tell their parents, tell the world. What's Uncle Sam to do now? Too late to take their free breakfasts back, too late to reopen the schools that didn't teach them well enough.

VAMPIRETTE

I can't tell you if all ten fingers are off the throat, but finger by finger it's coming off.

—President George W. Bush
April 8, 2003

Thumb pressure, in the right spot on the throat, she's told can kill. But little fingers give the best blood. Funny how she's come to rely on the finger that represents affectation, femininity, pretension. Everything she's always run away from. Or maybe that's why her moron-sized sword aims at them, because she could never run fast. Morning, noon, and night, the unlethal jabs. Baby. They used to be called the baby fingers. Unconsciously hating them, even as a child, can't wait to grow up, and the pricks always made her cry, aiming for the index finger, never suspecting it was bloodless, lost in cold thought, strident, holding onto its last drop at any cost. Even grown, she bites her nails. And the fourth finger, ring finger, the one they used to believe led direct to the heart, that one's really bloodless. Nails bitten down past flesh, she gnaws on the sides of her fingers.

ARCHEOLOGY

from my cold, dead hands

—Charlton Heston, stepping down as NRA president
April 26, 2003

Somewhere in Indiana, 2020, perfect vision, a man in a pale gray suit who used to be an executive works with the minimum-wage construction crew. On a day in late April, after the school term ends early for lack of funds, he places his jacket on the back of a chair, rolls up his sleeves, and takes a jackhammer to the floor of a high school cafeteria. Maybe he's been told there's oil down there. Maybe there's a leak in the century-old heating system. Maybe he's just bored and has to find something to get paid for. For whatever reason, he's drilling. And he hits something strange. Carefully, he turns off the drill, gets on his knees, reaches a hand in. Comes out with a rat? A chicken carcass? No, it seems to be human. Yes, the bones of a small human hand, still stuck together, almost intact. He holds up his prize for all to see. His co-worker, thirty years old, remembers long-ago days when his parents were afraid to send him to school for fear of some madman shooting up the place. An image from an old movie plays in his mind, the white-haired actor holding a rifle over his head like George there holds those bones, proclaiming victory.

SLEEPING WITH A MAN WHO HAS BIG FEET

You knew Bigfoot intimately?

Oh yes, I slept with him for 60 years.

—May 16, 2003

Sleeping with a man who has big feet and a hairy chest, she lets herself climb down his body, clinging, as a forbidden lover roped in Rapunzel's hair. Slowly. Slowly. Hand over hand, in tiny fists, the thumbs hidden, she grips whatever she can hold. Every bone excites her. No way she can fall from here. She knows, when she reaches bottom, she'll be held there. And it gives her comfort. Finally, discovering that spot in the bed where the sheets are tucked tightly in and the quilt all but suffocates, she curls up in the foot's crotch, pillows her head on the ankle bone. This is how she was coiled sixty years ago at her mother's hard, unyielding breast. All her life she's been searching for a man like this.

NOSTALGIA

This is amazing to me. Age, you know, 15 year olds, 56% of them said yes to that, 36% with oral sex, and 37% at that age group had intercourse....

—May 20, 2003

At fifteen, her body in its maroon plaid pleated skirt rubs against his jeans. They cuddle on the living room's high-piled rug while her parents sleep two rooms away, their door always open. She wakes the next morning, frightened, touching her crotch and new-formed breasts, not knowing what she did or what to do. It will be twenty years before she's afraid again.

THE MOSQUITO COP

You're driving around, got the lights going — you ever feel like a mosquito cop?

—May 26, 2003

The mosquito cop slaps her arm, and back, and cheek. Stop it, Daddy. But she's been a bad girl, eating sweets again. Mosquitoes love the chocolate around her lips, the sticky peppermint on her fingers. Hasn't he told her that a godzillion times? Daddy ought to know, he traps ants and mice and roaches. He drives around in a great big truck, spraying stuff that makes her eyes cry. She no longer rides around with him in the evenings. Daddy slaps the back of her calf. He slaps the chest that will need a bra soon. Daddy loves her. But it hurts when Daddy loves her. She'd rather have the sting of the mosquitoes. She'd rather have the itch, and the bright red scabs she can pick at with her fingers.

NEW YORK HARBOR

Because of high refurbishing costs, the city has rejected a plan to place homeless families on refitted cruise ships anchored in New York Harbor.

—NY Times
June 2003

Hate to say this, folks, but the free ride's been cancelled. There's too much ice in Alaska. The Bahamas are too hot. This ship's been leaking water, drop by drop, for nearly fifteen years. You wouldn't want to sleep here, anyway. Sort of has that musty smell. Not good for those tossing and turning, either. Please now, be good boys and girls, and leave, don't make us chase you off. What do you think this is, Disney World? To be honest, you're the ones who smell. Go sleep in the park, but don't forget to leave by the midnight curfew. Or find a dirty blanket and curl up on some church steps. I recommend Presbyterian. Better yet, take the kids and go sleep in the public assistance office, you know, the building two blocks down on lower Broadway, right next to Liberty Travel.

PORTRAIT OF THE SOUL

Before I started doing this, I was losing my soul, drip by drip by drip.

— Julie Powell of the Julia/Julie Project, where one woman
tackles Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*

June 11, 2003

The French don't *drip*, they *press* coffee. And doesn't she know that Julia Child's been arrested – No, that's Martha Stewart. Sometimes she gets confused about all those women. It's like food so finely chopped only a fool would taste it. She rubs garlic back and forth between her fingers. The fools she thought to marry. The son and two daughters, if she had them, would just leave home. Even the cat turns his back on her, looming large, head cocked, pink ears twitching. This time it's a solid white cat.

THE BEST TRAINING IN THE WORLD

On Mr. Bush's first attempt at riding the scooter, the machine went down, although he managed to stay on his feet.

—June 13, 2003

It was my first two wheeler, and my father helped me learn to balance, taking the training wheels off and running beside me as I pedaled around the block. One time I fell and almost knocked him over, and he said if I knew I was falling next time try to fall in the other direction, since he might have really been hurt. It was a green and white Schwinn that I got for Christmas, and I vividly recall that first morning, seeing it out in the living room with other presents under a nonexistent tree (we were Jewish), and climbing on it and pedaling in place with the kickstand on. When my parents got up they asked how I could be doing this by myself, when in the stores I had been too scared to even climb on and try the bikes for size. But the difference was this bike was mine. No one, big or small, was going to take it away from me.

THE 39¢ HAMBURGER

I think the 39¢ hamburger is the real weapon of mass destruction.

—Dr. Bill Releford, Diabetic Amputation Prevention Fund

June 14, 2003

Daddy drove the car right up to the window on that April Sunday. She was eight years old, and Daddy was excited. There was a new franchise where he'd eaten lunch that week, mother and daughter simply had to see this. He ordered three hamburgers, and three large Cokes. But this particular little girl wouldn't touch that glop. Her eating habits were, to be polite, unfriendly. She only ate hamburgers without the roll, picking up the meat with her bitten fingers. She didn't want any part of pizza or hot dogs. Daddy shook his head. Once again she'd disappointed him. On the way home they stopped to get her half a pint of chocolate ice cream.

LUCKY DUCKY

It's a strawberry blond, beautiful girl, passed out on my bed and basically there for me to do whatever I choose.

—Convicted date rapist Andrew Luster
June 18, 2003

Because she's in her thirties, weighs 160 pounds, has dull brown eyes and long dark hair that's dirty, wild and frizzy, she insists she's safe. Every so often she makes friends with a man and considers herself lucky. Lucky ducky. One friend agrees she could probably hold her own under threat of attack. *Feisty* was the word he used. Lucky plucky ducky. And another friend, this was years ago when she weighed less, stood at a cocktail party discussing Descartes with her. The only woman in the room telling dirty jokes. She's proud of all these friends who weren't there in childhood. And because her apartment's large, by city standards, she invites friends over, talks till God knows when, and lets them crash on the sofa. Friend after friend after friend. Man after man after man. It's a way of life for her.

LESS IS MORE

Fifteen to twenty percent of marriages – is that what I'm reading here? – are sexless?

—CNN "Bedroom Blues Report"
June 22, 2003

Then she said the sex was great, but really that was all they had in common. Don't be shocked, Mother. Great Gram had to marry at fifteen. Hasids only sleep with their wives on the Sabbath, in imitation of the Almighty. Priests are celibate. Ha Ha. There are other things she wants of life. A warm hand on a pounding forehead. Someone to kiss a scraped knee. A man (or a woman) she can even talk nonsense to. And, she confesses, sometimes it's good just to cuddle. Sometimes they're in the same bed, pressed against each other, and his breath on her neck is worth a thousand kisses.

THE VIRUS

I read a quote from a media professor who said he's never seen an idea virus spread so quickly. I mean, there's got to be twenty shows like this now.

—Alex, TV's original Bachelor

June 28, 2003

Used to be, when she had a virus, she'd lie on the pink brocade sofa with its high arms that, when she was feeling better, she liked to jump off. The dachshund would stretch out smellily on her lap while she watched *This is Your Life* and *Queen for a Day*. The Millionaire told tall tales of people given an anonymous million and how they reacted to the sudden wealth. Sort of got you hopeful. A million was a lot of money then. And there was no such thing as the Lottery. Today she watches over 200 channels on her computer screen, in a separate window, while scanning news of the latest celebrity murders or entering expenses in Quicken. There's a table that can be placed in front of a sofa the very same color as that childhood sofa, itself in front of the window, so she can enjoy the breeze, but there's no dog. Maybe there was never any dog. Just the smell of one.

FROM A CORNER WINDOW

An Arizona man took his own life after firing at parked cars from his retirement home today.

—Court TV news story
July 5, 2003

Daddy always said no nursing home. He's seen his mother, his brother, and too many others languish there. Hire private nurses if need be. He can afford it. This was in the 90s. He was in his 70s. His wife died at home. Daddy still drove to Florida every winter. Then the drive got too much for him. Someone rammed into his new car. It was 2003. He made some bad investments. No private nurses, he told them. He'd rather give money to the children whose names he still remembers. Let him go! Let him at that car! He wants out of here. Please.

BURNING ALL NIGHT LONG

It's likely the oil will burn all night long.

—July 9, 2003

It was Judah Maccabee, not Joshua. And all this time she'd thought it was Joshua. This might have been long ago and far away, but it was oil then, just as now. God spoke to Moses through the bush that burned but was not consumed. Moses remained silent, his tongue singed by hot coals he'd thought were solid gold. His brother spoke for him. American leaders, on the other hand ... How many Jews live in Delaware County, Ohio? Her close friend lived there once. The kindly old neighbor invited him to the Wednesday night bible-study group, but he declined to go. Call this one more act of a jealous, vengeful God – brimstone, fire, and lightning. Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho, which she remembers singing next to their Chanukah bush. They had no Menorah.

SOMETHING VERY SICK

John Poindexter: It was his idea, now scrapped, to create a futures market in which traders would bet on the possibility of a terror attack.

—July 31, 2003

There's something very sick, he says, about people gambling. It's a disease, it can't be stopped, his brother at the race track, his wife at Bingo every night, his son gambling on farmland, to be lost to fire. Something very sick about his very family. His mother always on the defensive. His disgust at what Atlantic City's turning into. There's something very sick about these new people, you'll see them soon lining the Boardwalk begging for change, mark his words. And sure, he's made money in stocks, but he doesn't take chances. There's something very sick about all those in power, he says, when suddenly terrorist threats become a high-stake option. But it can't be stopped. It's familial. And he's come to love that.

IN THE NAME OF PROTECTING OUR COUNTRY

National retailer KB Toys plans to market a George W. Bush action figure. The 12-inch likeness of the commander-in-chief is called Elite Force Aviator George W. Bush, US President and Naval Aviator.

—August 8, 2003

It's a throwback to his own childhood, the left-wing Sixties when his parents wouldn't let him play with soldiers or cowboys or violent action figures. But then one version of G.I. Joe came out that was so brilliant in the way he could move and turn that his parents made a concession. They bought him the doll, and found clothes meant for Ken dolls that were just a little too snug, so it was no longer a soldier. He was six years old. And he was content with that. Boys today would not be. A rifle in the back every pickup. A gun in every school locker. A President all dolled up for Halloween, just to scare people.

TO WAKEN POWER

In the wake of the blackout of 2003, a new study funded by the electric utilities puts the price tag for upgrading the nation's power grid at \$100 billion, money that will come from your pocket.

—August 25, 2003

He stands before the flag. He describes again how it was in the middle of the summer, a day as hot as sixteen years ago. Gas prices are two dollars a gallon now. He stands before an American flag. Or hides behind it. Or uses it to wipe off his sweat during commercials. The day's not crisp, or clear. It's no longer September. And he's only a messenger. A missing link. Everyone's missing who wants to be, and for the rest there are candles and notebook computers. This is before fires will wipe out southern California. This is terror posing as America. They tell us now that the outage is our fault. They say we'll have to pay for power, when they mean for war.

STARS AND STRIPES

—November 2003

Stars and Stripes are set free. Smiling before a nation of viewers, the President ceremoniously releases one plump, bleached turkey from its cage. The other bird huddles in the wings. Stars and Stripes (mail from the nation's children named them) have been given new life. Tomorrow, or the next day, the President will fly off to Afghanistan or Iraq to have Thanksgiving with our troops there, while we lounge before our flat screen high definition 30-inch TVs, captivated.