Author's Note: The following is an excerpt from a novel- (novella?) in-progress, tentatively titled Shame. *Since I never expect to actually finish said novel, I won't be posting sections of it as I complete them. I include the first chapter here, because I thought it stands well on its own.*

The Ballad of '79

by Jonathan Penton

It is impossible to relate my story without first telling you hers. She was born in Oughtsville, a town just bigger than a village on the Texan side of the Rio Grande, on the fourth of May, in the year 1932. Her father's name was Fernando Juan Guarjiro; her mother was Maria, whose maiden name was Azana. The Guarjiros were already old, for parents in the nineteen-thirties; they had three sons already, all of whom knew the sting of poverty and hardship that their sister would never learn to understand. The name on her birth certificate --which I am fortunate enough to have in my possession-- was Largueza Barbara.

Her three brothers were Fernando Jr. (the smallest of the three, he was called Junior by his peers), Jose (who is said to have been an amateur composer of promise, although all his works are now lost), and Aristides, who hardly had time to develop a personality at all before he and his two brothers were killed in the Pacific, all three in the first half of 1945. When Maria received the first sad letter from the U. S. Department of Defense, she could read almost no English. Largueza had to read and translate that letter, the one pronouncing the death of Aristides, for her. The other two letters were never read aloud.

Maria's husband could have read the letters to her, but he had died almost eighteen months earlier. Fernando Sr., according to the reports of witnesses, died a slightly drunken American patriot. Apparently a quite drunken citizen of Mexico had decided to loudly condemn the U. S., along with gringos in general, for fighting needless, stupid wars and getting perfectly good Mexicans killed. Fernando took this as a personal insult, and felt that he needed to defend the honor of Junior and Jose, who were already overseas. In so doing, he left his children and the drunken Mexican's children fatherless, as so many other Mexican and gringo children were now fatherless.

After the war, Maria packed up her daughter and moved east. She associated Mexico with her own cruel parents, she associated anything to the west with the Pacific, and she didn't move north because she hated cold weather. So she took Largueza as far east as they could conveniently go, to Atlanta. With reasonably substantial checks from the government, and Maria's ability to stretch money, they settled into a quite nice neighborhood east of downtown. Their neighbors were middle-class Reform Jews that were just beginning to understand how truly lucky they were.

Isolated from the small Atlantan Hispanic community, Maria improved her spoken English, and began to study written English with the great energy and intelligence for which she would become known. Her daughter, marred by grief but untouched by the hardships that help us keep busy in the face of tragedy, bonded to her mother in a way that she could not bond with other children. First, Largueza read 'Dick and Jane' primers to Maria, but soon they were buying pulp romance novels at the drug store, sometimes a selection of Maria's, sometimes a selection of Largueza's, and sometimes they would go into the drug store and pick out a novel together, to the

curiosity of the other customers. They would also read other things: Richard Louis Stevenson, Grimm's Fairy Tales, and Emily Dickinson. The summer before Largueza entered her junior year of high school, they read *The Naked and the Dead* together. Largueza was fond of saying that her troubles began then.

Halfway into that school year, in the January of 1949, the younger Guarjiro was suspended from school, and Maria was called to her principal's office. The principal began by stating that, although Largueza had good marks and was well behaved in class, he believed that the girl had taken to vandalism. There were several Spanish political slogans, along with some strange symbols, that were found spray-painted not only on school property but on nearby buildings. He believed it to be Largueza's work. He asked Maria a number of questions: Did Largueza have access to spray paints? Did she have money to buy them? Had Maria ever seen spray paints around their home? Maria politely listened and answered questions for a little while, then said,

"Excuse, me, Professor," (she had not yet mastered titles, and the principal did not correct her), "You say that you suspect Largueza of painting these things?" The man affirmed the statement. "But she has been suspended, is that correct? You must have caught her at something, or she would not have been sent home. Is that true?"

The principal, with a slightly melodramatic sigh, gave Maria a sheet of paper, on which was a poem in Largueza's hand:

> There's a bloated Cookie Monkey
> At the bottom of this well
> of all the things I have forgotten.
> There's a Sick Face Truman down there
> that could almost be a man
> with it's body eaten away.
> Fuck you, Truman, for what you lack.
> Fuck you, Monkey, for all the things I want.
> Fuck you, Father, for all the things I was.
> --Lemon

After a long moment, Maria said, "I thought that it was spelled F-U-G."

The principal did not understand, so he assumed that Maria was stupid. He launched into a long lecture on appropriate behavior, appropriate language, the cost and consequence if Largueza was found to be the vandal, and in general --and in very veiled terms-- the possible fates of a girl that goes astray at such a young age.

"I listened to the man for a long time," Maria would be quoted as saying. "I understood why it bothered him, to be sure. I did not like the idea of Largueza spray-painting buildings! I didn't particularly want her saying that word all the time, either, although you can see that I have recovered nicely. But eventually, after my attention started to wane, he began to question my patriotism. This little man, who spent the war behind a desk writing letters, was accusing me of being un-American because my daughter didn't like Truman.

"With a man like this in charge of the school, I began to understand why Largueza was angry. But I had seen too much to be angry at the petty insults of a fool." But as Maria stood up to leave

the man's office, she said, simply, calmly, and truthfully, "My husband would have killed you for saying such things."

Maria did not return home for several hours after that. She sat in a quiet section of the park close to the school, watching the passers-by and re-reading her daughter's poem. Try as she might, she couldn't convince herself to like it. She thought she understood all that Largueza was trying to say, but she felt that the girl was putting it in a crude and ugly manner. She felt that the child could have written in Spanish, and saved herself the trouble of being discovered by stupid people like the principal. She did like the pseudonym, Lemon, though. A beautiful fruit, capable of making so many good things, but it would hurt you and make you wince if you bit into it. It was an angry name, but Maria felt its charm and simplicity could outweigh that anger.

When Maria came home to her now-frightened daughter, she said nothing, but brought the gift of three cans of spray paint and a lemon.

Largueza's high school career did not improve. To spare her mother any more trouble, she now conducted her acts of petty vandalism far away from the school (it seems that she didn't want to be caught by teachers but was too young and foolish to be afraid of the police) but she began to harass and mock her instructors, refuse to complete assignments, and began to attempt to organize a Communist movement within the student body. She probably felt that she was being quiet about it, but Lemon never really learned subtlety. The fact that the Communist slogans and logos were no longer being painted on school walls, and that a introverted girl like Largueza Guarjiro was suddenly trying to network with as many students as possible were big tip-offs. That, and students would periodically tell school officials, "Miss Guarjiro tried to convince me to join the Communist Party today."

By the beginning of 1950 Lemon (who of course had no real ties to the tiny U. S. Communist Party) had given up on converting her schoolmates and contented herself with reading Das Kapital, in the original language, to her mother. Maria did not put faith in politics, but did feel that it was good for the two of them to learn German. By now, Lemon had met my mother, and the two of them comprised the Communist student body at their high school.

My mother's name was Beverly Herbert, and she was the perfect teenage Aryan: long, blond hair, cat-like eyes, and the tiny facial features that would be considered All-American beauty until mainstream America discovered blacks. She was two years younger than Lemon, but her breasts were almost scandalous in their development; she had just enough meat on her hips to make them sway. She was the standard of beauty at her Jewish high school, and the desire of every male classmate. She was just wise enough to find that appalling, but not wise enough to understand it.

Lemon was short and already beginning to show cellulite in all the wrong places. Although she dressed sensibly and stylishly, high school boys rarely recognize a natty dresser as such. Besides, my mother, too, wore sharp clothes, and people would inaccurately assume that Lemon learned her clothing skill from Beverly.

At any rate, the two girls had very little use for the male population at their school. The spent their time in each other's company, and soon, "invert" was added to the long list of things whispered about Lemon. As this rumor grew, the female student body avoided Lemon and

Beverly more and more. The detachment was mutual: it very soon became Lemon and Beverly against the world.

I won't insult your intelligence by pretending I don't wonder: did my mother and Lemon have sex? But this has been the subject of too much speculation and rumor already. They both consistently denied sexual involvement with one another throughout their lives; my mother always claimed to have never had a lesbian relationship. If the two had knowledge of each other's bodies, they took that knowledge to their graves.

We do know that they committed many petty crimes together, mostly vandalism and shoplifting, even though neither was hurting for spending money. They were being constantly sent home from school for a wide variety of reasons. Marilyn Monroe had hit the scene, and Lemon was constantly in trouble for painting beauty marks onto herself. They would extract vengeances on the girls that eschewed them; rolling houses in toilet paper, placing stinkbombs in lockers. On days that both of them were sent home, they would meet at Maria's house. Sometimes they would read poetry to each other, sometimes they would leave the house for more mischief.

Just before the summer of 1950, my mother's parents approached Maria in her home. "We're worried about Beverly and Largueza," said my grandmother, after they had been served. "They've -- well, Beverly's been into a lot of trouble over the school year. We're very concerned."

"Yes, as am I," said Maria, truthfully, in English that was better than theirs. "These times are not like the times in which I raised my sons. One can ill afford to be so undisciplined in one's studies."

"Exactly," said the Herbert matriarch, relieved. "We very much want Beverly to get into a good college, and although she still has a B average, this trouble won't look good on her applications."

"I hope the same for Lemon," said Maria, who now rarely thought of her daughter as Largueza. "I don't think she can be satisfied with a working-class life."

"Which is why," Mrs. Herbert continued, "We thought that the girls should perhaps begin to spend less time outside."

Maria hardly thought idleness was a solution, but she asked, "You wish to keep Beverly inside more?"

"What she means, is," said my grandfather, "We don't think that Beverly and Largueza should continue to be friends."

Maria just looked at the man for a moment, then began to laugh.

But after they were gone, Maria succumbed to a rare fit of depression. Less than ten years ago, she lived with four strong, brave men, three of whom she had the pleasure of raising, and now she was beset by tiny, irritable men afraid of a couple of teenage girls. Her daughter was a fool -- she thought that she could take on the tiny men of the world with no one but a rich white girl to back her up. But Maria had long ago learned that tiny men were stronger than great ones, and far stronger than two angry high school students.

When Lemon came home late that evening, Maria sat her down, insisting that they had to talk. "It's very important to me that you graduate from high school," she said.

"I know, mama."

"We're a long way from Oughtsville, you understand? I don't mean miles. There won't be much place in the world for a woman like you, but there will be none if you have no education."

"A woman like me, mama?" Lemon asked, sharply.

"I'm not talking about Beverly. You can talk about that, or not talk about that, as you choose. But you're not like other women, English or Spanish, married or maid. You're not what this world wants."

Lemon was visibly chilled. Maria had not meant to take such a hard tack. She backed up. "So, when you graduate from high school, I'm going to buy you a car."

"A car, mama?" Lemon was incredulous. Granted, the other students at school could mostly expect cars upon graduation, but even though Maria's house was as nice as any other in the neighborhood, the woman had a great deal less money. "Mama, you can't afford to give me a car."

"I can so. You don't realize how much I have saved. And not only saved, but invested. I could buy two cars, if I wanted. One for each of us."

"You driving, mama? You hate automobiles. This is silly. You don't have to bribe me to get me to graduate."

"It's not a bribe. I want to give you a car. I know how much you hate the place. I'd be very proud of you if you could get through it. I'm very proud of you now."

"You don't have to buy me a car to tell me that you're proud of me. I know that already. Besides, when I graduate, you'll need that money for other things."

"Oh?"

"Of course, mama. Tuition. And books and things. For college." They were the childish words of a girl that did not understand the possibility that no college would want her, but they lifted Maria's depression instantly.

"Well, Lemon, we'll look at the situation when the time comes. Let's eat. Food has been waiting."

"I'm not hungry, mama."

"Foolish girl. Are you eating out, or starving yourself out of shame? No matter. Bring our book."

The poems Lemon wrote in high school have been, by and large, destroyed. The maxim, "Never throw out anything you write," is the saying of educators and amateurs. Lemon thought of herself, quite appropriately, as an artist. As an artist, she did not want to keep anything that was not art. A few of these early works (all of which were in English) Maria kept, but since Lemon did not feel the need to publish them, I will not print them here. I will mention that, as the

Cookie Monkey piece illustrates, she never had any use for rhyming or meter, and would soon dispense with traditions such as "logic" or even "coherency." Her poems were written to evoke an emotion, not always an intelligent thought. At the beginning, they did not evoke anything very well. Still, anyone looking at this early poetry, in retrospect, would have to rate it a cut above the typical "Ode to that pretty boy who stepped on my heart" shit that most teenage poets write. No one gave it much credit at the time.

My mother kept all of her high school poetry. She was torn between the urge to emulate Lemon, and a desire to write poetry that the adults of her era would recognize as quality. She, too, had read the terrible Higginson edition of Emily Dickinson's poetry --the only edition available at the time-- and had the vague understanding that Dickinson's poetry had been chopped all to hell, and that any poetry that stepped too far outside the line would be subject to the same fate. Besides, she worshipped Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis, Jr. (She hid Sammy's records from her parents at Maria's house.) She was enthralled by poppified folk music: the deep, sensitive rhymes that could make young women swoon and young men cry in secret. So she sat balanced, with no real artistic vision, and not a great deal of talent, anyway. Still, she had an idea that poetry was supposed to be more than whining, and that clichés were tantamount to plagiarism. Here is one of her better pieces from the time:

> You said, "It is time to accept our decisions
> Leave the blood on our hands and deal with our division
> We've both made mistakes, we've reached resignation
> And it seems that enmity is the next situation."
>
> You've told me some lies, but you're telling the truth now
> I confess I don't like it but it is beyond doubt
> Behind it you'd like to blame me for your cruelty
> But in this arena who can define dignity?
>
> It can be hard to deal with such rapid change
> In retrospect our relationship seems much less strange
> We both have priorities, good and bad recollections
> I can be as strong going this way as the previous direction.
>
> You share more of this wisdom, "We've reached the last station
> And now it is time to yield to this temptation
> So if you are bleeding," but I'm not paying attention
> I can be as strong going this way as the previous direction.

Her Literature teacher considered it a bit radical, but not so radical that it did not receive high marks. This next poem, however, got her sent home with a note. I find it mediocre, but I include it because it is one of the poems frequently quoted to "prove" my mother's alleged bisexuality, or, by those rare arch-feminists that deny the existence of bisexuality, to claim my mother for lesbian history.

> I want to kiss the lips of a girl that can make me well
> I want to part the waters of the eternally drowning sea.

I want to pull myself out of my personal hell
Using methods that I know will never make me free.

I want to kiss a boy and never know his name
I search for healing electricity.

There are better ways to cover up my pain
And other ways to search for sanity

But this is who I am. This is what I'm living for.
I shall not seek another path until I cross death's door.

"It's a tribute to the Father of American Poetry," the well-read sophomore told her teacher. "I'm sure he wouldn't appreciate it," the instructor responded. Again, I shall not speculate on the accuracy of that statement.

Lemon did graduate from high school, but as much due to luck as anything. In her senior year of high school she was caught in an elaborate attempt to spray paint a burning American flag on the side of the school building. According to school policy, she deserved expulsion, but the new, basically tolerant principal didn't want to expel a woman in her final quarter of high school, especially a student as obviously intelligent as Lemon. She took a long vacation, in which she was expected to write reports for each of her teachers and her principal, and she was expected to pay the cleaning bill, but managed to escape with her diploma. Somehow, she was admitted to Georgia State College, in downtown Atlanta, to which she drove her car (Maria had insisted) every day from home.

Mother continued to be a discipline problem after Lemon was gone, but not to the same degree. She was bellicose, but no longer the chief hellion. She still saw Lemon almost nightly, however, and although the elder woman had more time on her hands, she now had access to my mother's downfall: alcohol. The two would drink heavily, often in public places, Lemon taking Beverly to her college campus where they chased after grown men.

Despite such distractions, my mother's grades improved during this period, but she would occasionally slip into fits of depression, during which she would fail to do any classwork. Thus, her GPA was a 3.1 when she graduated. By virtue of her participation in extracurricular activities (namely, theater and the school's literary magazine) and her parents' willingness to spend a fortune, she was accepted into a private co-ed college in an Atlanta suburb. Her parents moved her into a dorm to further reduce Lemon's influence. Here, their stories part ways for several years.

Lemon realized almost immediately that she was not cut out for the college's literature program. Her professors, unlike her high school teachers, were at least well read, but she found no one that supported her experimental views of art. She found a home in the psychology program, where she took pleasure authors like Freud and Erikson that, while they were second-rate writers, at least tackled the really big issues that fascinated her. The fact that she could read so many European psychologists in their native language proved to be an enormous boon; her papers were insightful, stylized, and unlike anything else coming from the students. She could have had a notable career within the halls of academia, if she so desired.

One of her professors, a Jules Lederman, realized that she desired no such thing, and worried about her. He believed she had neither the patience or compassion for a psychology practice. (This wasn't quite true. Compassion radiated from her every pore. But the type of compassion she possessed doesn't comfort patients.) Besides, Lederman was a practical man, and quite frankly didn't think that the world was going to make a female Hispanic psychologist wealthy. He recommended that she once again change her major, this time to sociology, but she dropped that idea after taking two sociology courses: sociologists were terrible writers. When she explained her reasons to Lederman, he wasn't sure if he should be relieved or terrified; she was beginning to strike him as either a future homemaker or a future lunatic.

Lemon got her bachelor degree in 13 consecutive quarters. Bored with Atlanta, she decided that a northern state might offer her a more cosmopolitan view of the world. Her application was declined at NYU, but she succeeded in getting into the graduate psychology program at Boston College. Wishing Maria and Beverly adieu, and assuring them she would see them both soon, she drove her Roadmaster to Boston in the summer of '53. Some hand (you'll forgive me if I blame the Tragic Muse) placed her in a co-op program in the psychiatric ward at Massachusetts General Hospital by the end of October.

In the January of 1954 she quit school. She simply didn't show up one day, and never showed up again. She called her mother and informed her of this development, and that she was getting a job in Boston, and was planning on staying a couple of years. "I'm surviving the winter so far." Maria wasn't thrilled, but, all in all, Lemon's educational experience could have been worse. Lemon then wrote a letter to my mother:

> My darling, my *hermana*,
>
> Forgive me for not telephoning, but I have just been on the phone with mother for an eternity, and I must watch myself.
> Headshrinking school has been glorious, I've enjoyed it immensely, as I've told you from time to time, but in our hearts, in that secret heart we share, we both know I'm not a headshrinker, don't we?
> It's time I got more serious, my love. I have been looking into things, both in me and in the Yellow Pages, and have found that it is time for me to establish a literary journal. I think Boston is the place for it. There are some women up here that are just incredibly daring and brilliant, that are truly taking the conformist, trite little form of Cold Farce American poetry and just re-undoing it, just nihilistically, without all that beat-Keroac-white boy bullshit, just completely making it what Emily might have thought it should be. But there's no business being conducted here, darling, and these poets run the risk of running a revolution that no one hears. It's time there was a journal here, a good one, that cared more about journaling than awards.
> And now --the shame I feel in my moments of glee!-- for I have to ask for some money. 'Tis a terrible thing, to ask for a grant from a sister. But I cannot call Maria and say, "Mama, I've quit school to start a literary journal, can you wire me some cash?" not because she'd refuse, but because she'd wire the funds and break her own heart in the process. I work, of course, I have a job as a secretary, I want to get one at a psychiatrist's office but none are hiring right now, but my wages are just a little too tight to allow me to publish. You needn't send much, I'll just base circulation for the first issue based on the

money I have. If you cannot, or will not fund my foolishness --but I know you don't believe it that!-- you know I will not be the least offended.

Send me your love, and soon,
Lemon

We don't know what happened to make Lemon quit school. That is, we don't know precisely what happened. Lemon steadfastly refused to talk about it, even to her grave. Sylvia (and I feel like I am taking quite a liberty, calling someone I've never met by her first name, but really! Am I to call her "Plath?" "Miss Plath?" "the young maiden Plath??") was a meticulous journalist, but there are no journals for the six months that she was in the psychiatric ward at Massachusetts General Hospital. And Sylvia was too discreet to publicly discuss what Lemon wanted to keep private. It is possible that they did not meet until a few months later, when Lemon began soliciting work for her literary journal, but I doubt it. It is possible, also, that they fucked like weasels in the hospital, but I doubt that, too, as there is no record of Sylvia ever indulging a homosexual urge. The facts are: Sylvia tried to commit suicide in August, 1953; Sylvia was in Massachusetts General from August to December; Lemon was in the co-op program at Massachusetts General from October to January, 1954; Lemon published a literary journal in March and filled it with Sylvia's poems.

My mother did send the money, along with a sheaf of her own poems, with the strict order that Lemon was not to publish any of them if they were not up to the standards of the others. Lemon ignored this order, naturally. She might have turned down some faceless benefactor, but she could not turn down Beverly Herbert. The first issue of *Hembra Bravado* (meaning Female Bravery; Lemon had considered, and rejected, the title *Hembra Cajones*) contained 10 poems by Sylvia, 7 poems each by Lemon and my mother, and 14 poems by other people, not all of them women, that have no great significance in this story. The journal was published four times that year, and four times every year until the end of 1979. Lemon's will stated that the journal should be turned over to her eldest daughter, Apollo, and that if Apollo did not want to run it, the journal should be terminated. It was terminated.

Lemon attended that fateful class in 1958, taught by John Cheever, in which Sylvia met Anne Sexton. Witnesses have claimed that the spirit of competition between Sylvia and Anne developed in such a way that they seemed to be fueled by an undercurrent of sexual tension. Whether or not that is true, the sex between Anne and Lemon was not an undercurrent. They fucked. They fucked in Lemon's loft, they fucked in Anne's home while her children were cowering downstairs, they fucked in the park at night, Lemon's brown skin half-covered to keep out the chill, wondering if a cop would be walking around the corner before they were through. They, in what might have been a first for Lemon, both fucked John Cheever. According to Anne, they both fucked John Cheever at the same time. They fucked, talked, drank gin martinis, and wrote odes to each other's clitorises.

In 1959, Lemon returned to Atlanta, unmarried and pregnant. The child, she told Maria, would be named Apollo, "regardless of her sex." Maria called her doctor, set up Lemon's old bedroom, and never asked who the father was.

My mother, of course, was thrilled. Studying for a Ph.D., Beverly had more time on her hands than she'd care to admit, and spent all her free time hanging on Lemon's every word and deed. In

1956, mother was diagnosed with manic-depressive illness. The medicines of the day did little to control her moods, and that summer, as Lemon grew in girth, mother grew in enthusiasm. She would buy baby clothes that were too big (new baby clothes, to Maria's horror) and stylish maternity clothes that were invariably too small. She bought a crib, which Maria made her return -- the crib which held Junior, Jose, Aristides and Lemon was still in fine shape. She bought an ice cream maker so that she could make ice cream for Lemon. She tried once, and botched it terribly, so Maria made ice cream for her to appease her feelings.

She pushed it too far, however, when she wanted to be there when Apollo was born. "What is your relation to the patient?" asked the nurse, when she tried to barrel into the delivery room. "I'm the father," my mother snapped back. The nurse was unamused.

Apollo Anne was born, a rather large baby girl, without further silliness, at 2:30pm April 30, 1960. She was one of those infants that was very dark during the first six months of her life, then lightened a little, but even so it was obvious from the start that her father was a black man. My mother was secretly thrilled at her adopted sister's progressiveness. Maria, who grew to love the child more than anyone, secretly prayed, desperately, for her welfare.

A liberal Anglican priest was found that was willing to make Beverly the godmother. Mother then went back to school, and Maria slowly replaced Lemon as the child's primary caretaker, as Lemon's fascination with her daughter waned. Lemon returned to work, this time in a gynecologist's office, as a medical secretary. The publishing of *Hembra Bravado* was moved down to Atlanta; Anne had been taking care of it during Lemon's pregnancy. My mother was hospitalized in 1962 and diagnosed with manic-depressive illness. She would be hospitalized four more times before her death, but her story does not interest me today.

Lemon's first book of poems found a literary agent before the end of 1962. It found a publisher during the summer of 1963. Anne had published two books by this time, and her desire to write an introduction to Lemon's book was a great boon. The book was entitled *Dark Mother*, and was scheduled to be released in September of 1963; Sylvia Plath killed herself that August. Lemon's publisher called her to request that Lemon quickly write a eulogy for inclusion in the upcoming book, and Lemon did not refuse:

> Everyone gets what they want.
> He wants you to be one thing, and now you won't dispute it.
> I want you to be something else, now you can be.
> Your children... well, it will be a little while
> before you can fulfill their desires, but perhaps you can fulfill their
> fantasies more easily now.
>
> In the end, everyone always gets what they want.
> Good people go to heaven and
> suicides go to hell
> and everyone's happy, or why be good?
> Why commit suicide?
> Poets die young and actors live forever
> People under the dirt
> slowly dissolve into their heroes

which are never caught by scandal
never lose a battle
and never miss a show.

Rumplestiltskin gets the maiden's first born;
George Washington gets his slave girls;
Romeo has Juliet and Tybalt
Maub has Shakespeare and Merlin.
Below us, no desire goes unsated,
everyone gets what they want.

Lovely, hopeless woman;
Maiden, mother, corpse:
Why did you seek fame?
If no one loved you, you would have died in peace, but as it stands
Parts of you live on in a million lovely, hopeless women.
I thought you wanted to die, but you now conform to the desires
of everyone you know and so many that you don't.
How can you die before you are forgotten?
Do you think we will forget more quickly now?

By now, fans of Plath, Sexton and their ilk gave *Hembra Bravado* a huge readership; almost all of those readers invested in *Dark Mother*. In poetry terms, the book was a smash. It was the heyday of American poetry, and although no book of poems will ever become a true bestseller, Lemon's book was widely and greatly loved, with simultaneous publication in the U.S., Canada, and U.K., with editions appearing in France, Spain, Mexico, Portugal, and throughout the British Commonwealth by the end of the 1960's.

Maria translated the Spanish editions of *Dark Mother*, and all of Lemon's books. Lemon wanted no part of this process, and never wrote a poem in Spanish. We aren't sure why, although it's easy enough to guess that Lemon did not want to be reminded of the tragedies of her early life as a Texan Hispanic girl.

The neighborhood that now housed three generations of Guarjiros was relatively forgiving, at least, by 1960's Atlanta standards. They avoided Lemon and her family like the plague, but there were no burning crosses, no death threats, nothing like that. On the one hand, they didn't go in for lawbreaking and displays of power, on the other hand, many of them went to the Temple, where Rabbi Rothschild was passionately preaching racial equality, and on the third hand, they feared the poetess. Professional poets were generally thought to be mad, or at the very least capable of raising really big stinks.

But if they ignored Lemon's childbearing tactics, they neither forgot nor forgave her political opinions. And in 1963, when America stood on the brink of war, Lemon and Maria decided to move the child to a more secure area. Getting a house loan, secured by Lemon's publisher, they considered the Prado, an isolated, circular neighborhood next to Atlanta's biggest park. They attended a Neighborhood Association meeting there, and when no one threw any rocks at them, they decided that the Prado would be safe enough.

Their new, wealthier neighbors thought that they were safe enough, too. Lemon contributed to the NAACP, but was relatively quiet politically, and an unlikely draw for an assassin's bullet. Besides, even though the neighborhood's inhabitants never read trashy poetry like hers, the nation's papers were all hailing her genius. If the Prado must integrate -- and they realized that it *must* -- Lemon Guarjiro seemed a good place to start. Their risk did not go unrewarded. In 1964, after the publication of Lemon's second book, *Alien*, she was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.

In 1965, the most unlikely thing possible happened. Lemon met a man, fell in love, and got married. His name was Immanuel d'Estaing, he was a white political activist from Bangor, Maine, he had five years' worth of back issues of *Hembra Bravado*, and he had no idea what he was getting into. He came to the South in 1954 to drive black workers during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and had subsequently moved to Atlanta, working as a volunteer assistant to Andrew Young. He was bilingual, but the wrong language entirely; he spoke fluent French, with a Parisian accent. (He had spent five years in Paris to study art history.) He was 29 years old, making her four years his senior.

They met at an NAACP fund-raiser. On this occasion, a babysitter had been hired and Maria had gone with Lemon. Maria had stayed at home for previous functions, but was now feeling like she was letting history pass her by. Lemon was flirtatious and half-drunk, as she always was. The other members had grown used to her, and no longer found her discomfiting. The word 'genius' went a long way towards smoothing over social relations, after all. That night, she was horny, and proceeded to seek out a lay.

"I knew who she was, of course," Immanuel reported, later. "Everyone there knew who she was, and she never realized it, as if a drunken, overweight Mexican woman in a red, low-cut dress could blend in. She approached me and introduced herself as Juanita. I knew what she wanted. She wanted to fuck me, go home, and throw away my phone number. Which was fine, in a way. I mean, a one-night stand with Lemon Guarjiro would be one to tell the grandchildren. But she was my idol, for Christ's sake. I didn't want her to throw away my phone number, if I could do anything about it.

"All I can say is, thank God that my old room in the Prado was still vacated. When I first came to Atlanta, I roomed with three college students in a nice house there. It was a bachelor pad, and a good one. The immaculate kitchen, the full bar, the library, the exquisitely furnished rooms -- we all had money, and we spent it on getting laid as often as possible. When I moved out, my roommates never bothered to fill my old room, deciding that it was advantageous to have a nice guest bedroom.

"I called them that night, saying that I was with a girl that I didn't want to take home, and could I use my old room? They agreed readily. I had done this before, and always paid them generously by completely restocking the bar. I still had a key.

"At about 11:30, Maria approached, to remind Lemon that the babysitter would be expecting them at midnight. Lemon cut her off, not wanting me to know that she was a mother, and told her to go ahead and take the car home. Maria left, after brief, polite, and inaccurate introductions. Lemon and I left the party about an hour later, in my car. When I turned into the Prado, Lemon grew visibly nervous. We passed her house, with her car parked in the driveway, and Lemon sat, refusing to look, her lips wrenched together.

"The rules at my old house were strictly orchestrated to make sure that no one's date ever felt threatened or used. Our foyer led into the bar on the right. No two men ever occupied this bar at the same time. Two rooms back from the bar area, a television was audible, not so loud to be obnoxious, but loud enough that the house didn't feel deserted. My friend Billy was watching that television, I shouted a greeting, he shouted one back. There was a bookshelf, filled with poetry, over the bar. I had already let Billy know who my guest was, and he had pulled Lemon's books from this shelf and taken them to the library, so that it was not quite so obvious that she had been set up. But when she asked to use the powder room -- actually, I think she called it a piss-hole -- I directed her to the one next to the library, knowing that she would take a peek inside. In addition to her books, she would find an extensive collection of poetry magazines, all in neat little binders, including a number of hers.

"'I feel a little embarrassed,' she said when she returned.

"'Don't,' I replied. 'Juanita's just fine with me, if you like it.'

"She chuckled. 'It's not necessary.' She didn't want to say, 'I'm not in the mood to have sex anymore,' although it clearly registered on her face. She did say, 'I'm afraid you have the advantage over me, though.'

"'Hardly,' said I. 'My name really is Immanuel d'Estaing. And beyond that, there is very little to distinguish me. Certainly nothing to give me an advantage over a name like yours.'

"She snorted, but tolerated the flattery. She downed her martini, and I poured her another, from the decanter I had mixed a few moments ago. After a moment's fidgeting, she asked, 'What exactly do you do, Immanuel?"'

They were married on a Sunday afternoon, Halloween 1965. Backed by the considerable d'Estaing fortune and a rapidly growing social status, they purchased the estate right next door to the Georgia Governor's Mansion. The house was designed to look like a Spanish villa (and was in fact named *Villa Juanita*), and although Maria grumbled that it looked like the house of no Hispanic or Spaniard she had ever met, the Guarjiros and d'Estaings were quite happy there, for a while. Like her friend Sylvia, Lemon changed her last name legally, although not professionally. She and her husband joined the jet set, contrasting darkly against the lily-white upper class, jarring their peers, sometimes explosively. They both got off on making waves, and as long as no one was shooting at them, life was good.

Apollo didn't hate Immanuel, exactly. He was too suave to incite a five-year-old to hatred. But she was just as happy when he wasn't around, and made it absolutely clear that he had no power over her. Rather than become an evil stepfather, Immanuel (who wasn't much of a disciplinarian anyway) left Apollo to Lemon; Lemon left the girl to Maria and her own devices. Immanuel avoided a bad relationship with Apollo by having no relationship with Apollo.

Their first child, a daughter, was born Nouveau d'Estaing on November 11, 1966. The child had no middle name, although everyone joked that the child's real name was Nouveau Riche. Less than five weeks later, Lemon was diagnosed with post-partum depression and hospitalized. Her depression has been discussed by her biographers even more than her strange sexuality. Unlike Sylvia and Anne, Lemon had no family history of depression; Maria, her husband, and three sons had all been stable and solid. Mexican-American essayist Raphael Joseph has speculated that the

depression, while not faked, in the strictest since of the word, was at least affected; that Lemon decided that a bout with depression was necessary for her public and literary image. Biographer Glorianna Parker has suggested that Lemon woke up one morning, realized that she had married Immanuel d'Estaing, and became instantly depressed. As tacky as I find Parker, she probably has scored pretty close to the truth. It's not that Immanuel was both unethical and amoral; it's that his lack of character reminded Lemon of her own shortcomings.

Lemon seemed to recover from her depression fairly well. She certainly had a great deal of encouragement, people like Joseph notwithstanding. d'Estaing is a bit of a bastard, but he's always been psychologically astute, and perhaps understood Lemon's despair better than the average husband. Besides, he was in good spirits; Anne had flown down to Atlanta to stay with Lemon, and was kind enough to take care of his physical needs, as well. Letters poured in from over the globe. Fans that had never met Lemon scraped together money for air fare to visit her. Sometimes, Lemon wanted to see everyone that came (provided they had the grace not to ask for an autograph), other times, she would only see family members. Either way, Maria and Immanuel made sure none of her fans were sleeping on the streets during their visit.

Apollo was privately tutored, and was able to spend visiting hours with Lemon almost every day. She accepted her mother's illness with a grave, calm intelligence that was positively abnormal in a child that had not turned seven.

Lemon was released in February 1967, and, other than her new passion for nude sunbathing (Immanuel had a stone wall built around the property, so that she could bathe in peace) seemed unaffected by her illness. She was writing less often, but her publisher felt that that was to be expected; a writer that suddenly becomes rich and famous must regain perspective gradually. She was drinking more heavily than ever, but switched from gin martinis to champagne, an expensive habit but one that made her a good deal less erratic in her behavior. Marriage had in no way stopped her sexual exploits, any more than it did Immanuel's, and she was back into the swing of things quickly.

On August 9, 1969, a girl named Calliope Melpomene d'Estaing was born, and Immanuel and Lemon both thought it genteel to just assume that the child was legitimate. By now, their relationship had been through the major phases of a love affair: they had moved from passion, to comfortable coolness, to tolerance, and were now bordering on mutual irritation. And that was fine by everyone, almost; only Maria noticed that Nouveau was suspiciously suicidal for a toddler.

In 1970, Lemon's third book of poetry, *The Jests of God*, was released. Almost every poem in it was about parenthood and heredity. Anne had won her Pulizer a few years earlier, Lemon now finally won hers. In September of that year, Lemon and Immanuel went down to City Hall and filed for divorce together. Lemon filed to have her name changed back to Guarjiro the same day. Nouveau managed to jump from one of the walls of *Villa Juanita* and broke an arm. Apollo, who now understood what her half-sister was going through, wasn't sure whether to give Immanuel a kiss goodbye or try to have him killed.

On the heels of this nightmare came my mother's marriage. She met my father, Jeremiah Smith, while on vacation in San Francisco in 1968. She moved to California to join him in the December of 1970, and married him in June. A month before the marriage, Lemon decided that

she and her three daughters needed a vacation, so she left *Hembra Bravado* in Immanuel's hands, and Lemon, Maria, Apollo, Nouveau and Calliope flew to San Francisco to see the couple. They stayed there a year, during which time Lemon and Beverly managed to party in ways that would have made them blush 15 years ago.

My father was a bartender (and amateur poet, of course) that shared drinks with Charles Bukowski, a.k.a. "Hank," every Thursday night, and the Guarjiro/Bukowski love affair was the kind of thing that made even tabloid reporters nervous. Lemon was going for broke, and by the end of that year she could no longer count her sexual partners. She came back to Atlanta a quiet professional, no longer interested in the extravagances she had built her life around so far. After a discussion with Immanuel, *Villa Juanita* was put up for sale (it has yet to actually find a buyer), and the Guarjiros moved into a simpler house in a simpler neighborhood ten blocks away.

Lemon's fourth daughter, Fernando Juan Guarjiro III, was born November 29, 1972. I was born on the opposite coast, Jacob Smith (A boy, with a boy's name. What a lucky shit I am.), exactly one month later. This time, my parents flew to Atlanta, where they stayed for one year. Lemon became my godmother, as my mother was the godparent of all four of Lemon's children.

On October 4, 1974, Anne committed suicide. Like Sylvia, she chose poison gas; her weapon was a car engine and a closed garage. Mimicking the half-rhyming, pseudo-meter style of her friend, Lemon once again picked up her pen:

> I'm desperate. You're a sinner.
> We make the perfect pair.
> I can see where we're going but only you remember where we've been
> And the traps that still lie in wait behind us.
>
> While I wax philosophical
> You observe the urge beneath the veneer of intellectualism
> Yet do not damn me for what you see.
>
> I need to know, my precious, what it is to sin
> I need to understand my evil nature.
> Oh, my guidepost, leopard-spotted soothsayer,
> Show me my heart
> And tell me it's all right
> To want to watch it beat.
> Oh, smelly, bloody woman,
> Teller of lies and provoker of demons,
> Tell me a truth that I can't understand while we still have the time to speak.
>
> Have you taken salvation with you?
> Or have you finally shown me the way?
> The maze is closing in on me and I haven't got time to spare.

Lemon's next book, *Gabriel Waits*, was published in March, 1975. Lemon was hospitalized for depression in June. This time, the response was much less encouraging. The world had changed, and America was growing tired of heroes that were consistently killing themselves off. My

parents and I came back to Atlanta for the duration of her depression, but were of little assistance. Nouveau, who had been relatively stable for the past few years, was now an absolute danger to herself. Were it not for the constant attentions of Maria, and that ancient 15-year-old matriarch Apollo, she would have certainly killed herself before her tenth birthday. Lemon was not released until the next April; it has been said that she only got well then because she was so desperate for a drink.

Lemon's second long-term lover moved in with her in the fall of 1976. Although they thought of themselves as married, there wasn't a priest in the world that would officiate it; Jacquline Chilson wasn't the type of person most people saw as a husband. She saw Lemon as a father-type and herself as a mother, and Fernando, almost four, was ready to accept her as such. The other children were not so anxious to love her. Apollo, particularly, had no use for a mother. She was now 16, took care of her schoolwork, material needs, and social life without any assistance, and had played a crucial role in the raising of her three half-sisters so far. Jacquline disapproved heartily of a woman so young having so much freedom and power, and intended to correct it. In her opinion, Lemon was too vacuous to take care of the children alone, and Maria was too old. She felt that grandparents were by their nature too lenient, and that stricter measures had to be applied.

Apollo had no intention of permitting this, and made her thoughts clearly and loudly known throughout the household. She and Jacquline lived in a constant state of struggle, like two male wolves competing for alpha position in the pack. It was during this time that Apollo's explosive temperament manifested; during arguments with Jacquline, she would punctuate her points by throwing breakable antiques across the room.

Eventually, Apollo asked Lemon for a separate apartment, so that she and Jacquline could simply avoid each other. But Nouveau's mental health would not permit the separation of Apollo and Maria, and Lemon's pride could not accept that the three would be happier without her. So the seven women all lived together, a three-generation, multiracial, explosive melting pot.

The relationship between Lemon and Jacquline became physically violent in 1978. As Jacquline slowly lost the battle with Apollo, she became more and more frustrated, and took to chastising Lemon with her palms, then with her fists. She did it privately at first (or at least, out of eyesight, although everyone heard the exchanges), but as time wore on and Lemon became more cowering, Jacquline decided to make the thrashings a public affair. Apollo and Maria were not at home the first time she beat Lemon in front of the children (although Nouveau told them everything). The second time, Apollo was. Jacquline, Lemon and the four daughters were sitting around the dining table when an argument escalated into a screaming match, and Jacquline threw Lemon across the room.

"Jacquline?" Apollo asked gently.

The woman ignored her, backed Lemon into a corner, and let her fists fly.

"Jacquline." Apollo stood up, slowly. No one took notice. "I'm going to kill you, Jacquline."

Apollo had intended to plunge the bread knife into the small of Jacquline's back, but the older woman realized she was being attacked, and spun halfway round, so that the eight-inch knife plunged into her shoulder. She came around with her other, massive fist, knocking Apollo back

against the table. Lemon, furious with her daughter, advanced; Nouveau leapt out of her seat to block her mother before Lemon could do anything to interfere with Apollo's fight. Jacquline pulled the knife out of her own shoulder, intending to kill Apollo with it; but one look at what the blood flowing freely from her arm and she promptly fainted.

When she recovered, Jacquline left the Guarjiros, leaving a frightened, hollow household behind her. On December 30th, 1979, when everyone was out of the house, Lemon hung herself in her bathroom. The doctor told the family that she was on the verge of orgasm as she died. She left no note.

Eulogies were written by all the great men of twentieth-century literature. Cheever, of course, along with Octavio Paz, Ted Hughes, Bukowski, even Norman Mailer. My mother wrote one too, but burned it, overcome with inadequacy. They were all inadequate. Lemon was the last confessional poet; with her death twentieth-century literature came to its end.

There are parts of the funeral that I remember with perfect clarity, and parts of it that I don't remember at all. I remember sitting in the hall while all the introductions were taking place. By then, I knew America's most famous writers by face, name, and reputation; I greeted Paz in unaccented Spanish, he shook my hand with a graceful gravity that the Americans could not match. The novelists had flasks of alcohol with them, the journalists stammered and looked around nervously. They had started showing up more than four hours before the funeral was scheduled.

Right before services began, I went in alone to see the body. I asked my parents not to accompany me. The room where the services were to be held was elaborately decorated in red, trimmed with gold, in such a way that the bright colors managed to seem solemn in their joyousness. It was a long walk, for a seven-year-old, from the double doorway to the casket. I remember the gold candlesticks on either side of the box; I remember the picture of the Virgin (*How do they know that's what the Virgin looked like?* my young mind asked) staring down at Lemon, with an expression of perfect, maternal love. The silk padding in the casket was a bright, vibrant yellow; not the sickly pastel shit that the crayon companies call lemon-yellow, but a yellow the color of lemons, of the sun.

When I finally reached her, I stared at her for what felt for a long time, although it couldn't have been. She was dressed in a way that I thought was very sexy, although it must have been quite conservative. She looked like she was only sleeping, and I didn't like that at all.

I stared at her neck. It was covered by a beautiful, Mexican lace collar. That seemed wrong to me. She had hung herself. I wanted to see the bruises. I reached over and tore the collar, dimly aware of a presence behind me.

"Get out of here," snarled the funeral attendant, grabbing my elbow to pull me back into the hall. I had no intention of going. I held on to the casket for dear life, threatening to pull it over. He let go of me and grabbed my hands, squeezing viciously. Weeping, I tried to punch him. Someone else was approaching, with masculine, angry footfalls.

"Leave him alone," said an angry voice behind us. At 5'11", Apollo had to look down to glower at the funeral attendant. She absolutely towered over me. He stared up at her, uncertain but very angry.

"I will not," said he. "The child is assaulting the deceased. That is absolutely no way to pay respects."

Apollo shuffled a little bit from foot to foot, looked down, then looked at the attendant again. She scratched her nose absentmindedly, a Freudian gesture that I would come to strongly identify with her.

"When you imagine your death," she said eventually, and I felt sure that she was talking to me, "Do you imagine yourself being ripped to pieces by an angry nigger in your funeral home?"

The attendant paused, realized she was serious, and then let go of me, more frightened than angry.

"Go ahead," Apollo said to me, and I reapproached the body. I finished tearing off Lemon's collar.

Thirteen-year-old Nouveau walked up, realized what was happening, and leaned against Apollo, shocked. By now, we had attracted a good bit of attention; several people watched me as I argued with Lemon's death costume.

Even though the dress completely covered her throat, the undertakers had applied makeup to the bruises. Forgetting the handkerchief in my breast pocket, I carefully began to remove that makeup with my jacket sleeve. Nouveau began to sob violently, and she reawakened my tears. They hit Lemon in the face, in the mouth.

When I was done, I wiped my eyes to get a look at the body. My tears had ruined her facial makeup. The bruises around her neck were livid and bloodless. The uppermost parts of her dress were in shambles. She looked very dead.

I don't remember anything after that.