

## Annual Conference, 8000 Writers Expected

by Rebecca McClanahan

And all over America we wave goodbye to our planets of origin and climb into buzzing spaceships, each with its own pulsating light, and land on the roof of the Very Large Planet Hotel, where we disembark, unfolding ourselves from individual largeness (for the planets we have come from are so small) and descend to the Bars, to the Book Fair, to the Important Room where one Large Poet reads largely, and the pale lights of our astronaut hearts beep their applause, a little sadly, remembering our Home Planet, how different we felt there, the air clearer, our footprints grander. (Once years ago at the Large Planet Bar an Important Writer kept calling me Roberta and after I corrected him four times I knew it was time to go to bed and not with him.)

Now sated with words—who knew there could be so many—we retreat heavily to our rooms, for cable. A prison flick, a Western itchy with sagebrush and cactus, a silent—ah, silent—Charlie Chaplin, his eyes rimmed with sad gaiety. Below us and above, platters rattling, bass lines thumping, meteoric laughter. My roommate sleeps soundly, she is a sound person, a sound writer, and kind. I pound the pillow and worry the lines I've been wrestling into verse: Did Billie Holiday's white habit kill her or keep her alive past the pain? Is it wrong to make music from someone's suffering? Caw, caw, the insistent crow, language scraping for a song. So many songs, so many faces, names. The conference program thicker than my Home Planet's phone directory. In my suitcase a shawl, fringed in black, and a red dress for dancing, should words fail. My roommate has packed only a bright heart that blinks for everyone, and for everyone's books, even the slimmest volume now autographed and sliding through the crack of our hotel door just before dawn.

For dawn must come, and the Book Fair's last day, last hour: prices slashed, the violent slap and zip of packing tape. And all the minor lights flickering faintly? Send us back where we belong—to husbands and sunlight and dogs, to the News of our Home Planet, which we grasp like a shield lest we encounter on the return spaceship another weary astronaut, but wait, who is this on the Daily

News cover: a Famous Poet and beautiful, too, who lost herself, hurled herself into that Vast Space where our filament lines cannot hold us aloft. Are we all hopeless, then, even the Important Writer at the bar whose singular loneliness beeps so brightly on the page? Who cares what he calls me, I'll be Roberta, I'll buy him a drink, whatever it takes to keep us all alive on this Planet where we can all be (ragged line breaks, almost rhymes) hopeless together, each light stuttering, the Lost One too—look, her words are still floating—there's one now, catch it—and there's another, sailing past our eyes.