

To the Absent Wife of the Beautiful Poet at the Writers' Conference

by Rebecca McClanahan

from Readings for Writers (Kenyon Review anthology)

I want you to know that nothing happened,
and everything that might have is now sewn
into the hoop of Arizona sky
that stretched above our heads that shy
evening of talk when we left our books
and went out to read the papery news
of bougainvillea. Here was vegetation
more animal than plant, the dangerous spine
of cactus, its fleshy stem and thistle,
and those rubbery tongues lolling speechless
in the desert air where even domestic
herbs turn wild, parsley and dill spilling
over their planned containers. When your husband
broke off a piece of rosemary and held it
out to me, I smelled the sharp clean scent
of marriage, the scent that fills my loved world
three time zones away. My garden, the spotted
cat and aged brandy, the bed pillow minted
with the imprint of my husband's head.
Yet I confess that part of me wanted
to take in that moment the man you more
than half-made, knowing that what I love
most in married men is what is given
by wives. The elbow he leans upon
is your elbow, his listening quiet,
your quiet, practiced in twenty years
of bedtime conversation. If he loved,
in that instant, anything in me, it was
the shape and smell of one whole woman
made from the better halves of two--
your hard earned past and my present, briefly
flaming. Not long ago I watched a girl
I might have been twenty years ago, sit
literally at my husband's feet and adore him.
There are gifts we can give our husbands,

but adoration is not one. If I could,
I would be one woman diverging, walk
one road toward those things that matter
always, the trail long love requires.
The other, for what burned in the eyes
of your husband as he asked, *What is the secret
to a long marriage?* I gave my grandfather's
bald reply: *You don't leave and you don't die.*
There are no secrets. Together, the four of us--
your husband, mine, you and I,
have lasted. I started to say forty
married years, but no, it is eighty,
each of us living those years sometimes,
by necessity, singly, the whole of love
greater than the sum of its combined hearts.
That's what I mean about the sky. Its blueness
and the way it goes on forever. An old
teacher told me if you break a line in half
again and again, you will never reach an end.
Infinity is measured by the broken spaces
within as well as by the line spooling out
as far as we can see. I love my husband.
Still, there were spaces in that evening
that will go on dividing our lives. And if
the sky had not begun in that moment
to blink messages of light from stars I thought
had died out long ago, I might have answered
your husband's eyes another way.
And there would have been heaven to pay.