

# Despite Appearances

*an editor's note*

"What *was* in my face when I looked at her?" says the mother in Tillie Olsen's famous story "I Stand Here Ironing," when the woman thinks about her daughter Emily. A neighbor man had told the mother to smile at the child more. The mother was working. There were four smaller ones at home, and not much time; yet reflection tells the mother, despite outward appearances, "I loved her. They were all acts of love."

We had not planned to look at families in this edition of *New Letters*; yet we found families everywhere in the writing—someone admiring a family, or running from a family, or recovering from the loss of family, and someone trying to save her family. How does it all work? It works on the level of individuals, which is where literature thrives. In literature, the generic term family gives way to someone's brother Pat, 12 years old; and husband Manny in Iraq; and a stranger, wife and mother, on vacation in Spain.

Sentiment can expand the definition of family to include a mutt curled up on the couch, or a group of souls protesting mountain-top removal in West Virginia. That's fine, also. Literature eschews definitions in the generic sense. Leave that to sociologists. Writers of the kind we like to publish in *New Letters* want us to look into the face of the daughter whose dad runs a duck farm; and a mother-in-law, Ada, who claims to be an old friend of Normal Mailer's; we must even include "Old Dude's" nemesis Alphonse, the analyst who hangs around the house far too much.

We won't use the word "compassion," either, when talking about families. We take a clue from Flannery O'Connor, who once pointed out, "Compassion is a word that sounds good in anybody's mouth and which no book jacket can do without. It is a quality which no one can put his finger on in any exact critical sense, so it is

always safe for anybody to use." We will avoid the safe language of conventional pieties.

What I find compelling, in the end, is the pull the writers here seem to have felt—despite experiences of frustration, emptiness, even desperation—for a family connection. Each story, poem, and memoir retains its moments of humor and joy, and becomes, in its own course of reflection, an act of love.

—Robert Stewart

## UPCOMING IN *NEW LETTERS*



Carolyn Wright's translations of Eugenia Toledo.

Norman Lock's "Alphabets of Desire & Sorrow."

### DAZZLING FICTIONS:

Mariko Nagai's "Confessions," Robert Day's  
"Where Am I Now?" Brian Doyle's "King of the Losers,"  
& More.

### FIERCE POEMS:

Chad McCracken's "Cooking with Medicine,"  
Faisal Siddiqui's "Car bomb installation art," & more  
from David Clewell, Albert Goldbarth, Alice Friman,  
Gary Soto, & others. . . .