

# Claribel's Pen

W. Nick Hill

*Claribel Alegría, Neustadt Prize 2006*

Claribel told us this story on Peachtree St., close to  
Realityland.

Her father, the doctor, cured often for little in return,  
save a chicken or a mess of fish,  
and suffered from what no doctor could cure in El  
Salvador.

He sided with the poor and the *oprimidos*  
*ante la mueca de los caudillos*

whose politics created magic realism in the lives of  
campesinos  
novelists copied later. Soldiers raped all the women in  
the house,  
then sat down like Sunday guests expecting fresh  
*nacatamales*.

But this is supposed to be her family story.  
Claribel's sister was always singing and humming.

When she graduated, her father gave her a grand piano  
with a deep, resonant sound.

Always dreaming over blank paper, Claribel got a pen.  
A handsome tortoise-shell cylinder with a gold clip and  
nib.

How unfair, we thought, with our gringo penchant for  
bottom lines.

Claribel's pen has disgorged worlds of truthful stew,  
tears in volcanic ash, semiprecious fugues, *saudades*.  
Her pen strokes the mythic keys of all the family stories  
and makes as much sound as any grand piano.  
She knew it all along and so does everyone else  
now that she composes with the silver plume of an eagle.

*Port Townsend, Washington*