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Alexis Bernier

Give & Take

Act Three

CHARACTERS

LIBBY: A thirty-year-old woman.
SIMON: Her investment broker husband.
JANE: Her thrice married, older sister.
BILL: Her bachelor friend.

SUMMARY

ACT ONE: LIBBY AND SIMON'S BEDROOM.

While a party is going on downstairs, upstairs BILL meets JANE, who has unexpectedly arrived for a visit. SIMON gets BILL's permission to invest a large sum of his holdings in a sure thing stock. LIBBY reveals her pregnancy, which is ill-advised due to a history of miscarriages. This angers and frightens SIMON and so she turns to BILL for unconditional support. They are playfully tender together, pet-naming the baby Robert Frost. He gives her a gift which she puts, unopened, into the bed table drawer to keep. And at the end of the evening, and of the act, she secretly has BILL take her to the hospital.

ACT TWO: LIBBY AND SIMON'S LIVING ROOM, TWO WEEKS LATER.

The stock has crashed, taking BILL's house and savings. And LIBBY has lost the baby. JANE has stayed to take care of SIMON until LIBBY is let go from the hospital. During her stay, she has not allowed her husband to see her, de-

pending instead on BILL. When LIBBY does come home, after several attempts, SIMON and she reconcile and they invite BILL and persuade JANE to live with them.

ACT THREE

THE BEDROOM, TWO YEARS LATER.

(LIBBY, SIMON, JANE *and* BILL *are onstage.*)

JANE: Today is Saturday. Is it not?
LIBBY: Yes. It is.
JANE: Which means, tonight then, must be Saturday night.
SIMON: Right again.
JANE: In less than half an hour, technically, it will be Saturday night.
BILL: At seven?
JANE: Seven is the beginning of the night.
BILL: I thought that six was.
JANE: It was nine, and then I let it slip to eight, but I will not go further down than seven. I will not.
SIMON: That's okay with me.
LIBBY: Me too.
BILL: Is it okay if I stick with six?
JANE: By you, then, it is now and has been for almost an hour, Saturday night. And this is what you're doing with it.
SIMON: . . . What?
JANE: Exactly.
LIBBY: Jane is bored with us.
SIMON: I don't see why.
JANE: Did I say I was?
BILL: No.
LIBBY: Take it from me. I know she is. She is.
JANE: . . . Fifty-two weeks a year. Two years, one hundred and four. How many Saturdays in two years?
BILL: (*Pause.*) We can always go to the movies.
JANE: I have seen every movie playing in this town. Two of them twice.
BILL: Two of them twice? Who did you go with to see them the second time?
JANE: Nobody.
BILL: Oh.

JANE: I didn't know that was against the rules.
LIBBY: What if it was, what if you had broken the rules?
JANE: What if it was.
LIBBY: We'd have to come up with a punishment to fit the crime. We couldn't let you get away with it. We'd have to . . . I don't know . . .
SIMON: Take away your cake.
LIBBY: Yes, she is getting a little round . . .
BILL: That isn't fair, no cake. Just make her run around the block a couple of times or wash the dishes alone for a week or . . .
LIBBY: Make her do the dusting.
SIMON: Make her make the beds.
BILL: Make her cheer up.
JANE: It's fine for all of you. Simon, you go off to work and Bill hides in the basement painting all day or whatever he does down there and Libby . . .
LIBBY: I don't do anything.
JANE: No, but your mind is full. Your mind is too full and so you're more than happy to do nothing but think of how to sort it all out. My mind doesn't work like that. Mine is empty and I have to struggle to fill it up all the time or at least keep it half full all the time . . . some of the time . . . one day a month would be nice.
SIMON: Do something.
JANE: What do you suggest, Simon?
BILL: . . . Plant a garden.
JANE: Wrong season and I'd ruin my fingernails.
BILL: Take up a musical instrument. The violin.
JANE: Too hard.
BILL: The guitar.
JANE: I'd have to cut my fingernails.
LIBBY: Would not, guitar players let their nails grow to pick the strings.
JANE: Only one hand. The other they cut short.
SIMON: That is asking a lot, giving up one hand.
JANE: Yes, it is.
SIMON: Even for one's art?
JANE: Yes, even for.
BILL: (*Pause.*) You could become a nurse. You'd be a good one.
JANE: No, I wouldn't.
LIBBY: No, she wouldn't.
JANE: And even if I did, I couldn't become one tonight. We still are stuck here with tonight.
SIMON: No, you are stuck with tonight.
JANE: Why, what are you doing with it?

SIMON: Nothing.
JANE: Libby?
LIBBY: Nothing.
BILL: I'll do anything you want to.
JANE: Which is worse than nothing. Really, this is really getting ludicrous.
LIBBY: You don't like us anymore.
JANE: I sure as hell am not liking this.
LIBBY: You're a free person. You're not crippled. You're not stupid. You have a VISA card and a MASTER card and American Express. Do something.
JANE: Why should I?
SIMON: Oh Christ.
JANE: Oh Christ yourself, Simon.
BILL: Okay, okay, okay.
JANE: And in steps the peacemaker.
LIBBY: Don't pick on him.
JANE: He's always picking on me. Is he so perfect?
LIBBY: Yes. He is.
JANE: Oh, is he?
LIBBY: Yes.
JANE: And how do you know? How do you know what he's doing down in the basement every day, all day. He could be doing anything. Building a bomb. Planning to blow us all to bits.
LIBBY: He is painting.
JANE: Planning to blow up city hall.
LIBBY: I have seen his work, his paintings.
JANE: Well, I haven't. And Simon hasn't. We only have your word for it.
LIBBY: Go and see for yourself, then.
BILL: Um . . .
JANE: I might just do that.
BILL: Libby . . .
LIBBY: Fine. Go.
JANE: Okay. All right.
BILL: Jane . . .
JANE: I think I just will do that.
(*She exits.*)
BILL: Jane. Jane. (*He exits.*) Jane . . .
(*A silence.*)
LIBBY: What about you? Don't you want to see them too?
SIMON: No.
LIBBY: This could be your only chance.
SIMON: I can see them any time.
LIBBY: . . . You want to. Just go down.

SIMON: Maybe later.
LIBBY: Tonight.
SIMON: Maybe.
LIBBY: They'd make you change your mind about Bill.
SIMON: I like Bill.
LIBBY: You like him. I know you like him. But, you don't . . . you don't have any idea of what he is capable of.
SIMON: What, you want me to admire him or what?
LIBBY: He admires you. His paintings you should admire or at least take a look.
SIMON: He doesn't want me to.
LIBBY: Oh hogwash, he does so. You can't wait for an engraved invitation, you just have to go down on your own. I did.
SIMON: Okay, yeah, I'll go down.
LIBBY: Now . . . Jane's there now.
SIMON: So.
LIBBY: So, a little added incentive. Isn't she?
SIMON: No.
LIBBY: Whatever you say, dear . . . Whatever you say. (*Pause.*) Why don't you just give him however much you've got saved now and I'm sure he'll call it even . . . His money.
SIMON: How did you know?
LIBBY: How could I not, God, it's all you think about. And I am a mind reader. I can read yours anyway . . . It is stupid, Simon. He won't accept a penny of it.
SIMON: Yes he will.
LIBBY: You have it figured out down to the last penny, too, haven't you. Counting what was lost and the house and everything.
SIMON: He'll take it.
LIBBY: And then what?
SIMON: He doesn't know, does he? You didn't tell him.
LIBBY: No.
SIMON: Did you?
LIBBY: No.
SIMON: . . . When I have it all, then, I'll give it to him, all at once.
LIBBY: And that will make you feel better.
SIMON: Another year. Maybe sooner. And I should have it all together.
LIBBY: If the market holds.
SIMON: One more year.

(BILL *enters.*)

BILL: God, she's down there. She's looking at them. Hell. God. Damn.
LIBBY: She will love them, Bill.
BILL: She knows me. It wouldn't be so bad, but she knows me.

LIBBY: I've seen them.
BILL: Yeah, but you know me.
LIBBY: Irrational artists.
BILL: God, what's she going to think. She's going to hate them.
LIBBY: I don't.
BILL: No, I know, you like them. Oh my God.
LIBBY: You're hyperventilating. Calm down.
BILL: Sure, calm down. She's down there. She's looking at them.
LIBBY: Bill. Sit down. Simon. He's hyperventilating.
SIMON: He is not.
LIBBY: Sit down.
BILL: Oh God.
LIBBY: All right, now. Breathe.
BILL: I . . . am . . . breath . . . ing.
LIBBY: Slowly. Breathe slowly . . .
(SIMON *exits*.)
LIBBY: . . . Okay . . . and deeply . . . there. Good.
BILL: . . . I have to get out of here.
LIBBY: You have to keep still. Just sit there and shut up and breathe. Good.
BILL: God.
LIBBY: Shut up. Don't speak. Don't move. All right . . . Stay there, Bill. But keep breathing.
(*She exits. He moves his foot . . . moves it back . . . He stands, sits back down . . . He stands again and takes a few steps, turns and sits down again . . . He stands again*. JANE *enters*.)
JANE: . . . Bill.
BILL: Oh.
JANE: (*Pause.*) They are . . . Bill . . . wonderful.
(*After a silence, she moves to him and gives him a kiss.*)
BILL: Thank you.
JANE: They really are.
BILL: (*Pause.*) You didn't stay with them for very long.
JANE: Simon came in on us. I want to go down again by myself or with you . . . by myself first.
BILL: Okay.
JANE: People should see them.
BILL: They will.
JANE: You should show them.
BILL: I will.
JANE: They should be shown.
BILL: . . . That's what you can do. You can organize a showing.
JANE: Me? I don't know anything about how to do that. I don't know the first thing.
BILL: Ask somebody.

JANE: No, I'm not the right person, but what I can probably do is find the right person.

BILL: Don't worry about it.

JANE: No, I know a lot of people, in a lot of places. And they know a lot of people and I'm sure I could find somebody who could find somebody who could set up a wonderful showing for you . . . maybe even New York . . . Paris maybe even . . . or London . . .

BILL: You're going to have a baby.

JANE: Or Rome.

(*A silence.*)

BILL: Are you going to have a baby?

JANE: . . . Yes.

BILL: . . . Have you seen a doctor?

JANE: Yes.

BILL: . . . Mine?

JANE: Your doctor?

BILL: No.

JANE: . . . No, Bill, it isn't yours. (*Pause.*) What is it, just a talent you have for knowing about pregnant women?

BILL: I guess so.

JANE: It's understandable, I guess, anybody who can paint like that can, somehow, probably, see through people. (*Pause.*) Is it a boy or a girl?

BILL: You don't want me to tell you that.

JANE: Can you? Do you know?

(LIBBY *enters.*)

LIBBY: Simon is stunned. He is actually stunned. He is standing in the middle of your paintings, Bill, and he can't move. He can't speak. He's in a state of, I don't know what, he is just . . . in a daze. He looks . . . somewhat like the two of you.

JANE: . . . Tell her.

BILL: You tell her.

JANE: I want you to.

BILL: I think I should leave you alone.

JANE: No.

BILL: I think I should.

JANE: Bill, please.

LIBBY: Yes Bill, please.

BILL: You'd rather hear it from her.

LIBBY: I'd rather hear it from I don't care who, just, what is it?

JANE: (*Pause.*) Guess.

LIBBY: You're getting married.

JANE: No.

BILL: Close.

LIBBY: You are . . . converting.
JANE: To what?
LIBBY: I don't know. I give up . . . Well?
BILL: Jane.
JANE: . . . Oh well, shit, I'm pregnant.
LIBBY: . . . You are?
BILL: Yes.
LIBBY: Is she?
JANE: Yes.
LIBBY: . . . Wow . . . Congratulations. I mean, terrific. That's terrific, Janie . . . And, way to go Bill.
JANE: Yes, who would have believed it.
LIBBY: Way to go. This is great. So, you've seen a doctor.
JANE: Hudson.
LIBBY: Oh, good. He's good. You'll like him . . . Well . . . What do we do now?
JANE: Nothing.
LIBBY: We have to get ready. What have we got, six, seven months?
JANE: Five.
LIBBY: Five. Oh. This does call for a celebration.
JANE: Libby, no.
LIBBY: We have to do something. Champagne. Cigars. Caviar. Something.
JANE: We don't want a big fuss, do we Bill?
BILL: . . . We don't?
JANE: No.
LIBBY: You are getting married then . . . or . . .
BILL: Yes.
JANE: We don't know.
BILL: That's what we're doing.
JANE: We don't know yet.
BILL: We're getting married.
LIBBY: Well, anyway, whatever, terrific. And you said you didn't know what to do tonight, Jane, you big teaser.
(SIMON *enters*.)
SIMON: I want to buy them.
LIBBY: Simon.
SIMON: How much? I want to buy them, Bill.
LIBBY: The paintings?
SIMON: How much?
LIBBY: You can't buy them. And besides, there's something more important.
SIMON: I have your money, Bill. I've been investing for you and I have most of it and I'll buy your paintings and then you'll have it all back.

LIBBY: Simon . . .
SIMON: So, how much?
JANE: They aren't for sale.
SIMON: Here. I've got a cheque for the investments. Take it.
(BILL *takes it.*)
SIMON: And I'll write you another one for the paintings. Thirty thousand. Is that enough?
JANE: No.
SIMON: Thirty-five?
JANE: No.
SIMON: Okay. Okay, then I don't need all of them. The balance is about thirty, so I'll write it out for thirty and you can give me as many paintings as that's worth.
JANE: No, Simon.
SIMON: They're not yours. They're his. It's his money. You've got nothing to say about it.
LIBBY: Yes she does.
SIMON: This is between Bill and me.
LIBBY: And Jane. Wives do have a say. And so do mothers. Smile, Simon.
BILL: Jane and I are getting married.
JANE: That hasn't been decided.
LIBBY: Terrific eh, Simon? We're having a marriage in the house and a baby . . . Congratulate them.
SIMON: . . . Congratulations.
BILL: Thanks. Thanks, Simon.
LIBBY: . . . Well, let's not just stand around looking at each other's noses, let's do what we are supposed to do. C'mon Bill, let's get the champagne or wine or whatever we can find.
(LIBBY *and* BILL *exit. A silence.*)
JANE: Anything good on television tonight?
SIMON: How pregnant are you?
JANE: As pregnant as the next man, I suppose . . . The baby is due in March . . . And I know that you possess the basic mathematical skills required to calculate that you are on the list of possible daddies.
SIMON: . . . Is it mine?
JANE: What do you think? Don't men have an instinct for that?
SIMON: Jane, for Christ's sake.
JANE: It's a long list . . . there's you, there's the doctor, there's your pal Bob, there's a couple of others whose names I can't quite match up to faces. I went a little crazy in July. It was hot.
SIMON: Bill.
JANE: No.
SIMON: But, he thinks . . .

JANE: No, he does not think. He knows. But he is, unlike others who shall remain nameless, a gentleman.

SIMON: Bill is just a guy who only wants to be married.

JANE: Nothing wrong with that.

SIMON: ... Libby, but Libby thinks...

JANE: I don't know what she thinks. What do you think she thinks?

(*A silence.*)

JANE: Interesting paintings. I can't get over them... That's what Bill is, he's an artist... You'll be deep in debt to him forever now, if we go through with the wedding. You'll never be able to pay him back. (*Pause.*) Don't worry, Simon, I know what I'm going to do. Well, I know what I'm not going to do at least. (*Pause.*) Did you see his painting of Libby? The purple one. If I were you I'd take that one, if he lets you take any.

(LIBBY *enters.*)

LIBBY: Bill has taken over the honours.

JANE: Nice of him.

LIBBY: He knows I'm useless with a corkscrew.

JANE: So do I. So does Simon. But you didn't ask for our help.

SIMON: I thought it was champagne. Champagne corks pop.

LIBBY: What room can we give the baby?

JANE: My room.

LIBBY: Right. You'll be moving in with Bill.

JANE: Maybe.

LIBBY: Well, we can work it out... Simon and I could move into your room and you and the baby could have this one. Or, we could change the den into a bedroom and Bill could move into it and the baby could have his room. Or, I could move into your room and Simon could move in with Bill and the baby could have this one all to herself.

JANE: Or the baby could move in with you and Simon.

LIBBY: Or something... Janie, can I listen? To the baby.

JANE: I don't care.

(LIBBY *puts her head against* JANE.)

JANE: If you hear anything it's only my dinner.

LIBBY: Shh...

(*A silence.* BILL *enters with the glasses and wine... puts them down.*)

BILL: May I?

JANE: The more the merrier.

LIBBY: Shh.

(BILL *puts his ear to* JANE *too.*)

LIBBY: Amazing.

BILL: Shh.

JANE: ... Simon? How about you?

SIMON: There's no room for me.
LIBBY: Here. Take my place.
SIMON: No, stay there.
LIBBY: Sure?
SIMON: Yeah.
(*A silence.*)
JANE: That's it. Time. Visiting hours are over.
LIBBY: You really should listen, Simon, it's . . . you don't know what you're missing.
(BILL *pours and hands out the wine glasses.*)
LIBBY: It's like listening to the ocean by putting your ear to a seashell. "She sells, sea shells down by the sea shore." I did it. You can hear the baby . . . you really can.
BILL: You really can.
SIMON: I believe you.
LIBBY: Well, what are you afraid of?
SIMON: Nothing.
LIBBY: Then?
JANE: He's too late anyway. Tomorrow, I'll let him, maybe, if he's good.
BILL: (*Raises his glass.*) To the reality of the impossible.
LIBBY: To babies.
JANE: To the impossibility of reality.
LIBBY: . . . Simon.
JANE: Your turn.
SIMON: . . . To Jane . . . and to Libby and to Bill.
LIBBY: And to you.
JANE: Yes, to Simon.
BILL: To Jane.
JANE: . . . Now what?
LIBBY: Now the fun begins. I can't wait. This is perfect. Think about it. What goes around comes around. To perfection.
JANE: No such thing.
LIBBY: There is so.
SIMON: Precision.
LIBBY: No. You can't work for it, you can't practice for it, but we are the proof of it. Here. This. Us. Like this.
BILL: To us.
LIBBY: The quintessential quartet, soon to be the quintessential quintet.
JANE: Playing at a theatre near you.
BILL: To the movies.
JANE: To Lillian Gish, God bless her.
LIBBY: But where is the baby going to sleep? I think that's the first thing we have to settle. I really think so.
JANE: We'll leave it up to you, Libby.

LIBBY: Okay. I'll think it over very carefully.
JANE: I know you will.
LIBBY: But to myself. I won't say anything until I decide for sure.
JANE: Fine with me.
LIBBY: Okay with you Bill?
BILL: Perfectly, A okay.
JANE: ... Simon?
LIBBY: Yes, Simon.
SIMON: What?
JANE: Any objections?
SIMON: No. I don't care.
LIBBY: One down. One billion to go.
JANE: Okay. To Bill, whose artistry is exceeded only by his good sportsmanship.
LIBBY: Here here.
JANE: Drink up, Simon. We're all drunk and you're still on your feet.
LIBBY: I want it to be a traditional wedding ceremony. None of this making up your own vows crapola. I always find that just very embarrassing. Just the simple, down to it, get it over with vows are the best.
JANE: I want to be surrounded by the paintings.
LIBBY: You can't get married in the basement.
JANE: We'll bring them upstairs then. Can we bring them upstairs, Bill?
BILL: Sure.
SIMON: I always thought painters were supposed to paint in lofts or in places with a lot of windows, a lot of natural light.
BILL: They are.
SIMON: What if they don't look so good in better light.
LIBBY: They will look as good.
JANE: Better.
SIMON: Okay. Just wondering.
BILL: (*Pause.*) Which one did you like the best, Simon?
SIMON: All of them. I liked them all.
BILL: Wasn't there one you liked especially, one you were drawn to. I want to give it to you, whichever one it is.
SIMON: No, I'll buy them.
BILL: If you let me give you your favourite one, I'll let you buy as many of the others as you want. Thirty thousand dollars worth. But you have to tell me now, without looking at them again, which one it is.
SIMON: ... The one of Libby.
BILL: ... Which one of Libby?
SIMON: ... The purple one.
BILL: ... Which purple one?
SIMON: The one in the corner.

JANE: Which corner? . . . Pick a corner, Simon, any corner.
SIMON: I got turned around down there, I don't know.
JANE: Describe it.
SIMON: It was purple.
JANE: And it was of Libby.
SIMON: Yes.
LIBBY: What was I doing?
SIMON: You weren't doing anything.
LIBBY: Which part of me was it?
SIMON: It was all of you.
LIBBY: From what angle?
SIMON: You all know which one it was. The purple one. How many purple ones are there?
JANE: Three or four.
LIBBY: Six . . . The one where I'm sitting and it's the back of me but my head is turned so you can see just the side of my face, just my ear actually. That one?
SIMON: . . . Yes.
BILL: . . . Okay. It's yours.
SIMON: Good. Now, I'll just write you out the cheque.
JANE: . . . To money, the great equalizer.
LIBBY: To marriage.
JANE: The great tranquilizer.
LIBBY: And what about the great day. When will it be?
BILL: As soon as can be.
JANE: Before I come to my senses.
LIBBY: As soon as can be is a few days . . . so Tuesday or Wednesday or Thursday.
JANE: Go ahead Libby.
LIBBY: You want me to choose.
JANE: You do it so well.
LIBBY: . . . Saturday. Next Saturday. Here. In the living room. And I think only Simon and I should be the guests. Unless you want to invite somebody else.
BILL: Not me.
JANE: Not me too.
LIBBY: Good. Saturday then.
SIMON: Here you are, Bill.
(BILL *takes the cheque.*)
LIBBY: Two cheques in one day. Not bad. What are you going to do with them?
JANE: Frame them . . . So, now we're all even. Right? And all happy. (*Raises her glass.*) To being . . . no, to getting even.
LIBBY: A girl. I think she's going to be a girl. She sounds like a girl to me.
JANE: No doubt about it then. If Libby says she's a girl, then a girl she is. And she will have a good head for business.

LIBBY: She won't marry. She'll just break a lot of hearts.

BILL: I hope she likes me.

SIMON: So do I.

JANE: Is anyone else getting the feeling that it has already happened already. That she's born and has lived and she knows and she's somewhere laughing at us for going on like this, going over and over and over and over things that she knows aren't true and never are going to be. She is. She's laughing at us.

BILL: Can you feel her?

JANE: Yes.

LIBBY: That's just because right now you are the closest one to her.

JANE: Right now?

SIMON: I hope she likes me.

JANE: Uncles are the easiest things to be, Simon, of course she'll like you. You'll get to play with her and spoil her and give her what she wants all the time and when she's had enough of you, you can give her back.

LIBBY: That's right. You won't have to change her dirty pants twenty times a day. You won't have to stay awake all night worried about her. You won't have to feed her or give anything up for her or teach her anything or pick her up or hold her head when she's sick and throwing up. All you'll have to do is play with her. And she will love you so easily. And she will hate me for making her do things she doesn't want to. You won't have to be the one to hurt her. I will. You won't even ever have to listen to her crying in her room. Or braid her hair . . . or bathe her . . .

JANE: Libby . . .

LIBBY: Or have to have patience when you have no more.

JANE: I never said . . .

LIBBY: Or feel like hitting her . . .

JANE: Neither will you.

LIBBY: . . . and have to live with yourself.

JANE: Shut up . . . I never said you could have her. I never said I would give her to you. I never said that, Libby.

LIBBY: Well, not in so many words . . . but, who would be better for her?

JANE: You aren't getting her.

BILL: Take it easy.

JANE: I am giving birth to her. I am. Not you, Libby. Not you. (*Exits.*)

(BILL *moves to exit.*)

LIBBY: Hold it Bill.

BILL: What if she leaves the house?

LIBBY: Stay here. Simon will go after her.

BILL: No, I should.

LIBBY: He will.

SIMON: Libby . . .

LIBBY: You don't have to say anything to her. She'll be all right. Just don't let her do anything crazy. Go on. Go.

(SIMON *exits.*)

LIBBY: (*Pause.*) Predictable, they are. All you have to do is leave them alone a few times together and . . . They will be good parents. Better than we would be, Bill. (*Pause.*) I'm sorry about all of this, about the wedding. You had your heart set. Well, maybe I can make it up to you somehow. Maybe . . . I know.

(*She moves to the table by the bed, takes the small gift from the drawer.*)

LIBBY: I'm pretty sure it's safe to open this now.

BILL: What is it?

LIBBY: You know, the night of . . . the party. You gave it to me.

BILL: You still have it. God, Libby.

LIBBY: Of course I still have it. You didn't think I'd thrown it away?

BILL: I'd forgotten about it.

LIBBY: . . . May I?

BILL: . . . Yes. You open it and I'll tear these up.

LIBBY: Okay. Ready. Set.

BILL: One. Two.

LIBBY: Three.

BILL: Go.

(*She tears the wrapping paper as he tears the cheques . . . she stops before she opens the box.*)

BILL: Well?

LIBBY: (*Pause.*) As long as there is going to be a child . . . Remember Robert Frost? Born in 1875 . . .

BILL: 74.

LIBBY: And died . . . when?

BILL: 1963.

LIBBY: What month?

BILL: January. No, December. No . . .

LIBBY: January.

(*She looks inside the box.*)

CURTAIN

David Manicom

Looking Across

The house hollow now behind him,
chair drawn up, his silent white head.
Poplar leaves cool to pale green in autumn.
Between his morning gaze and vision
they hang, framed by aching stillness
among the blood and fire of maples.
Water.
As motionless as memories
of oval faces in worn photographs.

Growing translucent, exposing skeletons.
And the sun through them.

Accumulation of air, the diluted sky.
Paling. The space between,
intervals of the heart muscle.
Breakfast, lunch, dinner at evening.

Then the slow lisps of the wind
moving his eyes. He can no longer
interrupt the light, his lids thin scales
etched with veins. The pebbled drive,
the lawn, its clipped hedges,
do not betray him, do not change
into any other world.
They merely begin to whisper.

Winter is white.

Through the last summer they had to tape
her splitting skin, her bones were wrapped
in crackling tissue paper
like the hour's gift.

When he looks out
the leaves hang very still.
Then they are on the ground.

The window is suddenly full
of the other side of the street.

Alison Reed

Arcane Ground

Two doubled newspapers lay
Where a boy had once begun his route
Every early hour ecstatically
Before the light.
He had laid them side
By side, exactly parallel beyond the stump.
It was Philip, the sheriff's son,
Who kept his word
And shouted a greeting to us all
In the weekday papers lying in our yards
From the break of day to late afternoon.
We would find, after six months or so,
Small depressions in the lawns
That moved from month to month,
Shifting with the earth
As we experienced it in quakes,
Sudden blasts of weather
Or winter spells.
We lived our working days
And counted time
By the boy's natural acts.
Until he became as granted
As our breakfasts,
Our evening talks and anxieties.
We never caught the act itself,
But imagined it a dark and secret love,
The way he must have touched
The papers to the ground
As a child first feels
A body not his own
And begins to see that every thing
Except himself
Has edges.

We believed he danced upon the lawns
Waltzed down the streets,
Sent his words,
Like notes of music, down
Down to us.
He had us in his arms
But he danced on earth
Only when we were gone.

Seeds

We will bury ourselves in the darkness of night
And we will become seeds, we will become
Two long ovals embodied
In the shape of a kiss. We'll be disrobed
Of the light of day, like wheat
We'll swaddle ourselves only with silence
Under the spell of the sick moon.
My mouth will complete your lips,
Your shoulders will be lost, and your breasts
Will be engraved in my chest,
Two hollowed impressions, two sighs,
And a cosmic rhythm will wipe away all memory
Of me and you. We'll be clear
As waters, unknown and pure
As new plants, and we will long marvel
That every night, mysteriously,
We become star seeds.

Enigma of the Orchid

I'll be shipwrecked alone in the chambers of the evening,
Where our bodies have looked for each other
With a primitive hunger for the sun.
Nobody comes back from the past any more
And my bridges towards tomorrow will rot
Much sooner than I would have supposed.
Women brutal in their youth will venture
Near the shore, to learn the mystery, but how many
Will stay among my terrors, shrieking
With their wings clipped? Or in the geranium garden
Where verb cemeteries are in bloom? I'll send
A boat for the huge-eyed orchid and bow to
Her enigmas and her small hands of an icy paleness.
They'll say that I live with a bird
In the castle of evening, that I drink flower seeds,
That strange ghosts inhabit my days—
And they will plunder my boats and prey upon me all too
soon.

translated from the Romanian by Adam J. Sorkin
and Irina Grigorescu

Michael C. Kenyon

Shoelaces

ONE

I'm concerned about my underwear which, though clean, lies in the hallway outside the door of the apartment. My blood soaks weakly into the warm facecloth in the bathroom. The man who hands me a brandy still breathes heavily as he sits opposite me in the living room. He says he's curious about himself. I laugh and he says, "You're happy, Penny."

"You say that with such emphasis."

"But you *are* happy. Lately you've seemed distant, ill at ease. Now you are content. Isn't passion strange?"

"I'm amazed I swam the length of the pool. I'd never have dreamed of swimming that far underwater. What a shock to crash into the side! I'm not curious about being happy or depressed, but maybe I'm curious about you. Yes, a bit. I expect you to say, 'You're beautiful,' and instead you say, 'You're happy.'"

"But one has to wonder about one's motives, why one reacts a certain way in a certain situation. What we did just now in the hall shows me how little I know about myself. Don't you wonder why, as a woman, you enjoy, sometimes, being invaded?"

We both turn to watch a moth tap against the living room window. The insect flutters very gently, seems to crawl between the branches of the tree, over the lurid sky, to trespass on the dark mountains across the strait.

"You think I enjoy being invaded?"

He's relaxing now. The deep flush has ebbed to his neck and ears, always the first and last area of his face to register emotion. Leaning against the wall that separates the little kitchen window from the living room, he stares through the French windows opposite. These take up more than half of the wall. The moth has gone. The lights of the city shimmer just beyond the bottom section of the sundeck railings. The black region is the ocean, and the minute distant lights of the American town at the foot of the mountains across the strait seem very bright. The sky's pink is fading rapidly.

We hear the sound of voices in the hall. "My underwear!" I remember.

"I'll get it."

When he's gone, I look around his room. Always so tidy. A picture of me above the desk that dominates the dining room. He has me pose my hands very carefully. Hands and bare arms take the foreground in most of his snapshots of people. He considers fingers more expressive than faces. In this shot my face is in shadow—luckily: I'm wearing a pretty silly grin. My hands look like Pierrot and Pierrette puppets; I stare above them, into the deeper greys, trying to see the strings. You're happy. I never like that assured tone in his voice. Don't you wonder why you enjoy being invaded? I suppose that's what it is. Invasion. On the wall above the stereo hangs an expensively framed poster. The picture of a little girl, perhaps six, reading graffiti on the chipped plaster face of a public building. *Lesbians wear short hair and laces in their shoes.* I always imagine the next moment of the scene, in which the girl will look down at her own pink ballet slippers.

I'd left on the television at home to discourage burglars. Before I close the door behind me, I'm greeted by Johnny Carson, who's stroking the shoulder of a woman I suppose he's interviewing. I try to close the drapes, but the hooks stick. I yank at the material, which pulls the rod loose from under the valance. Chunks of dust float down. If he came here to live with me, I'd have to clean up my act. I turn off the TV, pick up the abstract rabbit from the window sill. The plastic stapled to the outside window frame appears to breathe, inflating and deflating with the wind. Through the pulsing reflection of a dark-haired woman with white hands cradling a piece of blond wood, stark branches scribble out the empty street. Maybe we would paint the kitchen and the boot room. My hair, which I didn't put up after the accident, feels heavy.

The next day I wake just before dawn with a terrific headache.

At the supermarket, I clock in and say good morning to the other cashiers.

"Hey! Who's got first break today?"

I stand just outside the circle of women, keeping the Special Offer counter between us. The newest girl comes in, late as usual, looking spry and defiant. She stands next to me and begins to chat about the man she lives with—they went to a lecture last night on public access to computer networks. This social period before the store opens is the part of my job I hate most. Out of the corner of my eye I watch the assistant manager arguing with the meat section manager. Behind the glass showcases of red meat they circle each other, waving their arms frantically. I tell the girl I may soon be living with a man—he wants to move in with me.

"Oh great! Go for it, I'd say. I think it's terribly boring to live alone.

If I'm not living with a guy, I always find a roommate."

Some crows are shrieking out on the vacant parking lot, fighting over a large moist object that leaves a trail, a series of imprints, as it's half-dragged, lifted and dropped. The cashiers laugh loudly. I'm just about to say that I like living alone, that I don't like company all the time, when the girl leaves my side to join the others. She's several years younger than I, slender and quite lovely. Her face has that fresh-scrubbed look that I know is make-up skillfully applied. She always greets male customers with a kind of petulant disdain. As the assistant manager strides out onto the floor, the group of cashiers breaks up, each woman glancing at the clock.

"I like your hair up like that," the pretty girl whispers to me.

"Thank you."

The assistant manager raises both hands, rocks on the balls of his feet. The pretty girl rearranges the cigarettes above her checkout. A seagull plunders the crows' prize and the crows flap away, cawing indignantly.

The end of the day is filled with sun and I refuse my usual ride home. The pretty girl yells, "See you!" from the open door of her lover's car. I see a severe, bearded face leaning forward from the driver's seat. I touch my bandaged head more than once as I walk home. Last night after the accident I insisted that he make love to me in the hall outside his apartment. And I had an orgasm, my face down, cheek pressed to the carpet, my fingers under my belly and he, lunging away, somewhere behind, invisible. The carpet smelled funny, kind of fermented, and I focussed on a deep cigarette burn, attributing to it an incredible significance for an instant. Then the muscle spasms, fading; the touch of hands stroking my sides, my back; his rasping breath at my neck; his whispered We should get inside before someone comes. All so familiar. The trees along the boulevards look stern, their bark green in the bright cold sun. I see in the neighbour's garden, in the dark soil under an azalea bush, three groups of snowdrops. I must plan what I should say to him. Yes, I want to live with you. But let's not rush into anything, let's have coffee and talk about it. I have to get certain things clear in my mind. Someone walks behind me as I'm putting the key to my front door. I turn, but it's only two women pushing baby carriages along the sidewalk across the street.

"Hello! You've got snowdrops already!"

The woman next next door looks up, startled, but does not return my greeting. She's burning garden refuse in a forty-five gallon drum. She struts awkwardly from the wheelbarrow to the fire and throws in a handful of twigs.

"The smoke smells nice!"

This elicits the briefest tight-lipped smile, and she turns her broad back to scurry once again to the wheelbarrow.

It's cold in the house. Soon it will be spring. I see the quick shadow of the black mouse cross the kitchen floor. As always, I'm shocked. I gasp. And still, as I walk from room to room, turning up each thermostat, I question the creature's existence. He's simply too fast, too fleeting to be real; the hint of an actual being.

TWO

We sit on the cedar chairs still damp with dew, under the patio roof at the front of the house (he bought the chairs as a moving-in present), and eat sourdough rye toast and eggs scrambled with a pinch of dill, a pinch of curry powder. This foggy morning we both wear heavy sweaters. We've just finished gulping down brimful glasses of buttermilk (his idea—it's a drink I'm not fond of). I watch the cigarette smoke leave his mouth.

"What about *your* friends?" he says.

"Oh, I haven't any friends left—they've all moved away."

"But you never telephone, or write to them."

"There's a girl at work I'm getting to know, but I'm not really sure I like her yet."

"Well, why not invite her? That's the way to find out. Is she married, or living with someone?"

"She's living with someone."

"Listen. Why don't you tell her we're having potluck next Friday. I'll invite Mal and Cheryl. We'll have a quiet party. I'd feel more comfortable if some of our guests were people you'd invited."

He's settled in fast. The house has already begun to seem more his than mine. He keeps saying he wants me to carry on my own life as much as possible, he doesn't want me to see myself through his eyes only. This issue of my lack of friends disturbs him. He's set up his metalworking tools in the second bedroom and tells me it's important to have extra-relationship interests. In a few weeks he plans to begin work in the garden. But I can't remember what I did with myself before he moved in. Now, I read cookbooks. I mend clothes and check off the items on my CLOTHES NEEDING REPAIR list. He hasn't noticed the new elbow patches on his casual sports jacket yet.

"Look!" he says. "She's putting out washing! Surely nothing will dry in this?"

We have to strain to see into the next yard, the fog is so thick. And while we watch the woman next door's hands spread the laundry, smooth the edges of each article snug into the deep fog, some children begin to sing.

"What are they singing? I can't make out the words."

We sit longer than usual this morning, staring in silence at the muted colours hanging still, while the woman's hands whisk here and there,

leaving pegs like punctuation marks where they linger. The children's voices play round and round in my head and I feel quite strange, as if I'm receding into the scene, somehow falling away.

"Mmm. Isn't it peaceful? Couldn't you stay like this forever?"

"I should be going. I'll be late at the office. I'll stop in at the hardware store on my way home tonight and buy some mousetraps."

The man he introduces to me as his oldest friend wears a large moustache; his shoulders are massive—he lifts weights at a fitness centre twice a week, plays squash whenever he finds the time. His wife, a bony woman in clumsy glasses, spends much of her time finding the exact word. She speaks very slowly, wrinkling her brow, and her mouth looks as if it seldom smiles. She works at the fitness centre giving massage therapy. I show her to the bathroom and she carefully places the swaddled baby in the tub.

"I've found it's the most secure place," she says. She watches anxiously as I hang a bucket on the faucets to catch the dripping water. "You should change the washers. It's a relatively simple job. Just make sure you buy the correct size. I understand you've lived in this house for some years?"

"Yes. For five years, nearly."

"By yourself?"

Throughout the evening, each time I pee—in the dark and as quietly as possible—I check the level in the bucket. The baby, smothered in blankets, looks cosy, and sleeps. She has a lovely dreamy expression, not her mother's owlish looks. At first I'm excited at the different dishes our guests have brought. Each couple has placed on the table in the kitchen alcove a dessert and a main dish. His friends have set out rum cake and rum mousse and a deep bowl of tabouleh. My friend from work and her lover have produced nanaimo bars and a pressure cooker full of beef stew. I've made whole wheat pasta and mizithra sauce and a creme de menthe cheesecake. But when it comes to eating, I taste nothing. We load our plates in the kitchen, carry them into the living room where the stereo plays jazz too loud. Everyone chats amicably, ooh-ing and ah-ing over the food. The glasses empty and are refilled. My friend from work talks only to the men, as does Cheryl, and somehow they manage not to talk to each other. I'm too quiet, though. I try to smile a lot. I visit the bathroom a great deal. Maybe no one notices.

"Your friend's very attractive," he tells me as we make espresso in the kitchen.

"D'you think so?" I glance through the doorway, through the hall, into the bright living room. The girl wears a jumpsuit cut open at the back: her shoulders are freckled. She's talking easily; with the room door ajar and her voice raised, I can hear snatches of her story of the

Indian woman she learned spinning from. Her lover's bearded face looks bored and rather sheeplike; he's watching Cheryl who's finished with the books and is now sorting through the records.

We listen to Mozart over coffee.

"You have mice?" The wooly beard has found a little hole in the wall under the lowest bookshelf. We all crouch low to stare.

"Well, I put down traps, but Penelope seemed to think they were cruel—"

"Did you catch one?" The front of the pantsuit is high-necked.

"No. My helpmeet rather empathizes with the mice. She painted a vivid picture of pain and anguish, mice kittens left fatherless . . . "

Helpmeet. *Helpmeet*. I know he's talking tongue in cheek.

"But is kitten the accurate term for young mouse?"

"You could try poison," says the wooly beard. "There's stuff you can get that makes them very thirsty. You leave out a bucket of water, deep, and they—well, if your setup is correct, they drown. A fairly painless death."

"Sounds horrible. Surely the only fair way is to get a cat. A natural predator."

The way she leans back from her cross-legged position on the carpet, hands behind supporting the twist of her upper torso, throws her breasts into relief tight against the thin green material. A gap appears, a shadowy cleft, as the fabric creases at the small of her back. The three men are looking.

I should say something. I'm sure they find me boring. I can't explain my feelings about the mouse, that sleek, vital presence. But I don't have to: the conversation has turned. The therapist is scanning through a dictionary. The spinner lists the various materials one can spin from. The men are glad to look at her.

"Sheep's wool, goat's wool, dog fur, rabbit fur, human hair," she counts them off on her long fingers, "silk and cotton fibre . . . "

I imagine the tiniest scrap of knitted fabric—a little sweater made from spun mouse fur, knitted tight with number fourteen needles. A Christmas present for a microscopic baby.

"God! You're quiet."

"She is, isn't she? She's often this quiet. But she emanates peace."

"Yes. Tranquility. Calm."

"She's thinking of lying naked on a soft sand beach."

"Or of us all leaving so she can go to bed."

"She's a fancy goldfish alone at the bottom of a well."

"She'd have a wonderful effect on some of my patients. Honestly, you'd make a good therapist. Have you checked the baby lately, hon?"

"It *is* getting late."

"You know, I used to be able to stay up till the wee hours, then sleep a little, get up, work out—I was always ready for anything—"

"It's the Mozart. It does have a soporific effect, a somniferous, lulling effect—"

"Stop. You're putting me to sleep. I guess we should be going."

"Lovely evening!"

"We must do it again."

"We'll have you next time."

"Good night!"

We wave good-bye to our guests, then I close the new drapes. They run smoothly along the new rail. He goes into the kitchen to wash the dishes I carry from the living room. When the room's cleared I reposition the furniture and let my eyes travel the walls, concentrate on breathing deeply. Above the record shelves hangs the transplanted snapshot of Pierrot and Pierrette. A lot of the stuff is his. I close the glass door, shut out the clatter of pots and dishes, watch through the upper frame his stooped back, muscles working under his grey viyella shirt as he dries plate after plate. I notice the seam under his left arm is coming apart, and I know he'll want to make love tonight. I must get rid of the people from this room, forget the repeating words . . .

I've eaten too much. I feel like I've shovelled down my throat the nude back, salty freckles and all, the weight lifter's biceps, the woolly head, the therapist's glasses, and the thick dreaming baby.

"I'm so thirsty!"

"The garlic," he says. "Cheryl's baby was well behaved."

"Yes."

"Did you enjoy tonight?"

"Yes."

"It's better when there's more people. About a dozen's just right. Then you get parallel conversations going and people can slip from conversation to conversation. It's more lively, more stimulating. You might find it easier to relax. I'm not criticizing, but you'd probably have more fun if you opened up a bit."

"When you make love like that—hard, and looking into my eyes—I take it very personally—"

He can't stop laughing.

"I know it sounds funny, but I'm serious. How can I respond? And how can I possibly initiate this kind of love-making. You're the one who mentioned invasion."

"Let your subconscious take over. Don't be so tense. You used to enjoy it. I haven't changed, you know."

"I know. It's me."

"Hey!"

"What's the matter?"

"Come here a minute. Shh! Be careful."

I pad barefoot to the corner of the house where he's digging. Smiling up at me, he pushes aside the long grass and there, wedged in the angle where the chimney bricks abut the soft wood siding, in a slight indentation in the soil, is a tiny cluster of naked, pink-white bodies in a straw-and-shredded-paper nest.

We kneel by the house, smelling the dank earth. As he meticulously rearranges the grass to cover the spot, a red-winged blackbird trills and is answered by another in the next yard.

"I almost hit them with the spade," he says. "We won't disturb them again."

"Remember when you cracked your head open and we had to go to the emergency. Christ, you really wanted me, didn't you? Blood all over the place. You couldn't even wait to get into the apartment. We did it right outside the door; you left your panties in the hall."

He seems to want to make love now all the time, I hardly ever. Tonight he's into reminiscing.

"I think it was probably the violence followed by the hospital atmosphere. Waiting for you in the waiting room was a real turn on." Three tiny wrinkles appear, one after another, in his forehead. I feel confused. I don't want to please him by taking up his reminiscences, by helping him to dramatize them.

In reaching for the TV remote control, he knocks over the wooden rabbit. I remember the night of the accident, holding the rabbit, feeling excited, on the verge of something, but I stop myself from voicing the memory.

"I never want children."

"But you may change your mind," he says. "I know you're thirty, but what happens if you change your mind in five years' time? Other women have."

I shake my head. "It's got nothing to do with you. *I've* decided. Let's not go into it again."

"All right. Sure. You brought it up."

I glance at the clock and it's five past twelve and I'm looking through the window into the garden where he works so diligently turning the soil, digging in peat while I sip wine from my favourite glass, the last surviving piece of a set of elegant stemware my parents gave me years ago. Alone with my smuggled bottle, I'm hiding because he thinks I went out at eleven to go swimming. The curtains are partly drawn so it's cool in the room, but airless, the windows all closed and the glass-panelled door into the hall shut tight. I've dragged his leather chair to the gap in the blue drapes so I can watch him working and drink my wine, and I feel good. A woman in white walks down the sidewalk with a man beside her and I'm aware of how the sun cuts down across the

roof and lays a hard black line between me and everything outside the dim clutter of gardening tools in the patio in front of me. He's digging hard, must be hot, he's down to shorts and his tattered running shoes and he frequently mops his brow. Last night he asked me if I found other women attractive. Sometimes, yes. And what about the girl I work with, the cashier with the freckled back. I should have told him I'd swallowed her that night at the potluck, such a strange uncomfortable night. Funny, that was here in this room. So-and-so sat over there, and so-and-so here. I was here. I'm drunk and warm. The next door neighbour works in her own yard. She has on a pretty headscarf, an old blouse of faded pink, and her thighs bulge from plaid shorts—she's much too fat and too squat. She must be stifling! She's breaking up a section of her lawn, using the axe in a brutal double-handed over-the-head stroke. Chop, ease, lift, poise. Chop. He's worked his way along the bed under the rosebush and crouches now just a few feet from the woman. Too close, except that the fence separates them. Perhaps I do find women attractive—certainly more attractive than other men—but I'm just not interested in any kind of physical relationship right now. I love him? Yes. Here in the room I can say in a drowsy way I love him. Yes. But why not with him if I love him. The window needs cleaning and the whole room could use a good dusting, and a row of red circles shows where I've set down the glass during the last two hours. He's come into the house twice since I've been watching, but he's not caught me. Once to use the bathroom, the second time to open a beer that now sits half-full on the arm of the cedar chair in full sun where he left it more than half an hour ago. The garden is starting to come along. Yes. The woman has laid down her axe and is calling to him. He's stopped work and now the two of them are chatting across the fence. He's gesticulating, telling a story while she waits, hands on hips, her face in the shade. He's holding his cupped hands toward her. I bet he's telling her about the mice. I'll pour another glass. But the bottle's empty. He's given up digging and he's sitting down in the sun to finish his warm beer, stretching his legs out. The woman's chopping again, she's making a circle under her apple tree, and he's leaning back, his body a more or less straight line propped up by the chair, facing the sun's rays, how can he stand it? And he's smiling, yes, and as the woman chops, she's smiling. Divided by the fence they both smile away to themselves, and I smile at them, yes, and I feel suddenly released, marvellous, and don't want to drink anymore, don't want to spoil the moment by greeting them, by rushing outside to hug him as I half feel like doing. So I just sit quietly, as I've been sitting quietly these last few hours, during which time I feel a great deal has happened, and I'm honestly exhausted—

THREE

When I wake up, I hold my breath until I hear his long hushed exhalation. Tomorrow—today—the surgeon will insert a probe into my navel, make an incision lower down, just above the pubic hair. I try to imagine the angle of the cut, its length and depth, what type of scar will be left. Then I'm swimming in a blue lake; my hair glistens like anthracite on the water. At the end of each filament clings a minute baby.

At the hospital, before anaesthetic, I feel very clear. I can see my life. He does not love me. I do not love him. Now I will never have children. When he comes to pick me up after the operation, however, I'm bemused and slow. I feel like giggling, but can't make the effort to laugh.

"I dreamed of you. You were a vampire and had a silver grin—something you could take off and put on at will, a piece of jewellery. You stank of garlic. Your body and head were shrouded."

I know that if he kisses me now, my face will collapse and I'll be helpless with laughter, probably for hours. He plays a more serious role, though, conscientious, concerned.

"You're talking very slowly."

"They kept offering me cookies. I'd like to eat a huge omelette. And cottage cheese. And toast with lots of butter."

Tonight, we curl up in bed, his breath warm on my shoulder.

"I can't sleep on my belly."

"I'll sleep on your belly, then," he mumbles.

I giggle. "You know I wasn't serious about you being a vampire. I just made it up. I didn't really dream at all."

"In that case, let's both just sleep on our own private backs."

"I'm going to cut my hair," I tell him. "Will you like me with short hair?"

"How short?"

"Quite short. A couple of inches long. Nothing stylish. Well?"

"I like your hair long. But let me think about it."

I'm scrubbing the boot room floor. The back door is open and a gentle breeze fills the house before escaping through the screen door at the front. The pattern in the linoleum brightens as I work. He's been standing on the back step, framed by the doorjamb, for a few minutes.

"I've thought about it," he says. "About your hair. I think you must approach this decision in the right way, be aware of the implications. Whereas long hair is a symbol of promiscuity, cutting it diminishes your stature, powerwise. Cutting it could also be seen as a kind of self-inflicted punishment. Perhaps you want to punish yourself for not feeling sexually motivated?"

"But will you still like me with short hair?"

His mouth turns down at the corners. "And laces in your shoes? Sure. I think I could cut it for you if you like? I can borrow all the gear. I'm sure I could cut it."

A kind of indigo, the sky this evening. Such a hot day, and he has brought home the barber equipment. I wear a simple orange shift and my hair hangs down to my waist. I'm enjoying the just-washed weight and earnest bounce of it.

All afternoon I sat in the sun, eyes closed, my hair drying over the back of the cedar chair. When I stood, it warmed the length of my spine, slid like a soft friend about my shoulders, frivolous. When he came home from work, he brandished the scissors.

"The barbarian cometh!" he boomed. "Where's my pretty butterfly?"

Close up he smells like garlic. Snip, snip.

Afterward, he pats my cropped head. He says, "The human foetus has a kind of unpigmented fur until it's about eight months old, then it sheds this and grows the soft baby hair that it's born with. When the child loses this, he grows what's called terminal hair—what we have."

"What I used to have."

We sip our drinks and watch the sun go down, watch the lank curve of hair in the grass lift slightly in the breeze from the sea. The woman next door shouts across in her harsh accent: "You cut your hair off! They do that to me after the war. In France. They rape you, they cut you hair off and everybody know. Welcome home! Now you are pure! But you only give you self to live! Ha! I got long hair this day! Let them come near it!"

I feel sweat trickle from my armpit down my left side.

The woman is fat and her hair hangs with less life than my hair on the lawn. She trembles. She's standing at the fence that separates my house from hers. I'm looking at her, astonished. My head feels light and my body naked beneath the shift. Her eyes are agonized as she stares at me, head on one side, hands clasped around a wood trowel handle. She will not move. My mind races as the sun sets. I'll make fabric, I'll spin my hair, I'll splice a long rope. He has stood up; the screen door bangs and I'm left to continue this mad communication with this stout woman, to lose sight of her gradually, not through her withdrawal, but through the onset of night.

Lloyd Abbey

Squid

At night the dolphins come awake
and talk to one another
I can see eyes gleam around me
as I hang here in the dark
They've chewed my arms off
When it seems they are asleep
I use my funnel to propel
my bleeding body for the black

Always a dolphin hauls me back

They have consumed my
staring tentacles and, one
by one, the rowed eyes of my arms
so what remain are only
two holes, round as theirs,
and the mind behind which,
in its blankness, interests them
They think they see the glow of
knowing in my eyes: one
white as bone, one lunar white

They do not know that night is night

At last they grow distracted I descend
Long before bottom shark or manta
will bring peace I praise
the quick jaws, sound and blind:
I go down slow, glad of
the cold that are my kind

The warm ones pry, certain
appearances deceive them—even now
they track my comet-trail of ink
as if in wonder
that a ball should sink

I know what they will find

Stone Circle

The wind is trying to utter something.
Swerving soft whistles, tongue strokes through the grass.
The whole bay works with the guillotine

Tide of glinting wave crests. Each block of stone
Is the standing shadow of my frame.
The stars touch the temples like electrodes.

The wind claims the genitals and the self
Behind the eyes for the full circuit flow.
This is how the moon lives in the skull.

The haul of the female thrust and the ice
White blast. Then numbness. Then light that hisses
In the head as if it drained alcohol.

On a Pier

The starlight is like sand in an hourglass.
Each wave thrusts until its brambled metal

Slinks backwards reassembling its cry.
The onlooker wants a wave not to stop

Or he wants a scythe through each rising arc.
He wants to strangle each shrieking gull,

He wants to shoot each star where it shines
Because the fire will not spread wide or die.

He wants to shout the sky out of silence,
Shout down the voices of the sea and the gulls.

He wants to throw away his own ears and eyes
And the whole phenomenon of the world,

Be rid of it as of armour or of the stone
On which something is sharpening its claws.

Robert Bringhurst

Han Shan

Friends, the mind, or at any rate
my mind at this moment, is much
like the moon. It is swollen
with light, it is dry and in motion.

Its taste and its smell, its feel
in the skull, are as those of the moon
over the steep hills and the bottomless
pools of deep autumn.

Friends, what is is much like the pool.
What is not is not unlike the air,
and what neither is nor is not neither is
nor is not like or unlike the hills.

This being so, there is no
comparison, is no description, assertion,
negation. I tell you conclusively,
there can be no conclusions.

I am leaving now. Please,
no applause. Those who know how to live
will leave with me
in different directions.

Douglas Delaney

The Buses of Summer

The tattoo on the driver's arm says FRANK in a new colour falling somewhere between purple and orange, the colour of lips in sub-zero cold. The tattoo is not homemade and Frank seems proud of that, especially on the bus, where scratched-in scars of moms and lovers are as common as the paper bags and cigarette smoke, the waiting.

Kilfoyle sits near the aisle and watches the sewage of passengers, the ebb and flow of that dank liquid native to buses—coffee, Coke, beer, juice left half-finished beneath the seats, later toppling into the aisle. He sits near the back and picks up his feet on each uphill run. Somewhere between Sedan and Coffeyville he throws down his newspaper, damming the flood. It proves a mistake, leaving him with nothing to look at except the woman beside him, the woman who sings, the woman he has deemed insane. She is a white woman but rough and weathered like the dirt farmers on the Kansas-Oklahoma line. Her hair is indiscreet, a black Raggedy Ann moptop that shrouds her shoulders, her eyes. She reminds Kilfoyle of Chief Joseph after the flight. When she sings the image is stronger. Kilfoyle strives to recognize the sound—*what?*—some cacophonous wail of Indian mourning? Could be. Either that or a Gregorian nursery rhyme.

"Oyaumda babysay, oyaumda babysay . . . "

She sings to six packages of Top-Ramen noodles wrapped in layers of newspaper representing cities from San Diego to Wichita. She guards them like gold bricks, pushing them to her chest, every so often unwrapping them, caressing them with a dirty hand. Chicken flavour, all six. After an hour and a half, outside Cedar Vale, she tries to make conversation. She tries to tell Kilfoyle of her life. He listens for a moment then stares at her with his killing face and she is quiet. Her life is this—she has a daughter in Buffalo.

Despite his appearance, Kilfoyle is not a dangerous man. He has a tight, medium build and is under six feet. But his shoulders are wide, and beneath his loose denim jacket he looks bigger than he is. On buses size is important, but it is the killing face that gives him the edge, the face he had learned to wear on the DM to Gravesend and the FM to Brighton Beach—the creosote-reeking subways of his youth. The face

had become second nature, kicking in without thought when tickled with annoyance, the slightest annoyance, annoyance of the kind you get on buses. In a way it was a comfort to Kilfoyle, knowing he could scare the shit out of anybody with a single glance. The trouble was it was totally indiscriminate—he could turn it on anybody. Earlier that day he stood with his wife at the Trailways station in Winfield, Kansas, holding her four designer bags and waiting, without talking. He put her on the 113 to Houston. When she pulled away he knew if he looked any harder at that southbound bus it would explode into a million shiny aluminum pieces and rain like a brilliant cloud of silver fish over Main Street.

"Go Big Red," he said. "You go that way. I'll go this way. Let's both go home."

JOPLIN

Kilfoyle shuffles down into the dirt parking lot, kicking up dust devils as he goes. His legs doubt his every move. He needs to walk them straight again and when he reaches the asphalt the heat envelopes him in cellophane waves. He feels the rush and closes his eyes and can still see the sun burning red through his eyelids. It works on him like some slow drug.

"Ten minutes," says Frank, popping a sucker in his mouth and walking briskly through the employee's door to the terminal. He must like his job, Kilfoyle thinks, and watches Joplin, which reminds him of someplace in Kansas. He realizes that no matter where they stop it will look like someplace in Kansas, until they get to Pennsylvania, which will look like someplace in upstate New York or Vermont. The interstate has that way of making even the most unusual of American landscapes somehow very regular. He watches the rest of the passengers stretch and squint their way into the terminal snack bar. Chief Joseph is the last one off the bus and Kilfoyle feels bad for a moment, noticing one of her legs is at least three inches shorter than the other, her gait not unlike that of the hunchback of Notre Dame. She stops to tuck her noodles under her arm. She cocks her head over her shoulder at Kilfoyle, as if to say *so this is Joplin*.

Yes, Kilfoyle mutters, *this is Joplin, built by the Visigoths in 900 B.C. as a model for their elaborate empire of industrial parks. This is Joplin, where the sun stays out till 2 a.m., where the men are men and the women are men and who gives a shit either way*—

"Ain't no way to talk, boy." A large hand drops onto Kilfoyle's shoulder. For some reason he is not surprised and faces the man calmly, his shoulders loose where the hand lies.

"Yeah?" he says.

"You gotta give about some things." He is old, about as old as Kilfoyle figures people can get without falling down dead. His full white

beard is nicotine-scorched from his nostrils to his chin, and up top a tangled bush of dirty white hair falls close to his head, heavy with sweat. A red jogging suit hangs loosely about his tiny frame, as if he were stuffed in a soft, bright bag. But what stands out the most are his sneakers, black high-top Keds, at least size thirteen, with no laces. Kilfoyle laughs aloud, without meaning to. This old man reminds him of a Biafran Santa Claus.

"Some things need caring for," he says. "Like the children, like the time. You got the time, boy?"

"It's 12:20," Kilfoyle says, and when he moves his arm to check his watch he realizes the man is using him as a crutch.

"Well, good. Looks like I'm in the right place at the right time. Can't expect more than that now, can I? The Lord follow you, boy," he says, and goes into the terminal. Kilfoyle follows him in, in need of the air conditioning. The room is walled in light panelling, bottomed in red indoor/outdoor carpet and stuffed with video games, vending machines and a small lunch counter—generic, as Kilfoyle expected. Santa sits near the door and rolls one of his own very large, very sloppy cigarettes, sprinkling more tobacco in his lap than in the paper. Two marines watch, one with what seems a genuine amount of interest, the other making dope jokes.

"Can you put a dove-tail on that?" he says.

"God be with you," Santa says.

Kilfoyle slides two quarters into the Pepsi machine, his choices being PEPSI, PEPSI, PEPSI and PEPSI. A white and brown can clunks out—KOALA KOLA. It has the old-style flip-top and tastes like flat TAB. Kilfoyle stares at the machine, PEPSI, PEPSI, PEPSI . . . until he is certain *he* has not made the mistake. He tries again—KOALA KOLA—and leaves it in the rack. The woman at the coffee machine is less tolerant. She is angry and lets it know so, speaking low but firmly. Kilfoyle sits in a hard plastic chair and waits, thirsty, tired, dirty with bus dust, the fine gritty ash that dances about the cabin in the blue sunlight that glares through the tinted windows. He needs to brush his teeth but instead falls asleep to the restless murmur of marines and women and old men and the dull blip and patter and tink of the pinball machine, and *oyaumda babysay, oyaumda babysay*, which now seems almost soothing. Slipping away he tries not to think about his wife but what the hell else is there to think about. So he does, and wonders just what it takes for people to *find* themselves.

"I don't understand," he says.

"It's not you, it's me," she says.

"I just don't understand."

He is jolted awake by a scream, a howl of sorts, not a cry of anger but more of despair. *It's not you, it's me*, he remembers, wondering if his life is that much of a cliché. Again the scream and he is up from his chair.

The coffee machine is split down the centre: a copper, cylindrical standing ashtray lies at its base. Hot water steams from the wreckage. Frank has the woman in a full nelson, the marines each have a leg.

"I want my fucking coffee," she manages to say, her chin pinned against her chest and the words muffled, but understandable, *"I wan ma fugn cawfee."* When she stiffens, the men spread out to accommodate her. She bucks like a mule and one marine hits the machine with a dull thud.

"Fuck her," he says, and sits.

"Get her the fucking coffee," Frank yells. "She's breaking my arm."

When the coffee arrives she is calm. Frank sits her down on the floor by the machine. "Here you go, darlin'," he says. She sits quietly now, cupping the styrofoam container in both hands. She weeps like a little girl.

"Could I have some milk, please?" she says.

"Milk!" Frank says and is off like a shot to the snack bar, bringing back a whole quart. She thanks him and drinks, her head bowed over the cup. Chief Joseph huddles over her noodles while Santa rocks slowly back and forth in his chair, his big hands clasped in his lap, and to Kilfoyle it looks like the whole damn room is praying.

ST. LOUIS

Built by Julius Caesar in 44 B.C., the Gateway Arch serves as a fitting tribute to Roman engineering and to the art of wasting metal. On your left, resembling a large, armour-plated snapping turtle stands the Cardinals' Coliseum, built by Noah on a slow day.

Kilfoyle stands on the dark corner in downtown St. Louis, and lets the rain run through his hair, over his face, deep into his jeans and jacket. A small puddle forms at his feet and he squishes his toes inside his sneakers. Across the street the quiet marine hails a cab and is gone. Kilfoyle thinks now he might have been a good person to talk to, had he felt like talking. He realizes then he hasn't said a single word since Joplin, remembering his last words to be "12:20."

"Hey."

Kilfoyle ignores.

"Waiting for the bus?" a black man says, having just turned the corner. He wears a wool cap pulled down just above the eyes.

"No," Kilfoyle says, "the ferry."

"Where you headed?" There is a raspy urgency in the man's voice, coupled with an odd concern.

"East."

"Where east?"

"Eastern United States," Kilfoyle says, and crosses the street back to the terminal, knowing it's hard to hold a corner in a strange city, knowing not to look back. Inside he jingles change in his pockets, paces

before the wall of machines, then puts two quarters and a nickel in the PEPSI slot. He gets DIET PEPSI and drinks it anyway, all the way down in three gulps. Knowing he has more change he eyes the cigarette machine. Twelve days earlier he had quit smoking, a last minute effort to save a marriage. He buys a pack of Marlboro Lights and smokes three in a row before he gets on.

"Hey," the black man with the wool cap says, pointing at the new pack in Kilfoyle's hand. "You spare a smoke?"

"No," Kilfoyle says.

"Hey," the man says, poking a bony finger into Kilfoyle's shoulder. "I asked you where you were headed."

No words this time, no need for words. Kilfoyle just stares, two tired eyes burning into the man's face. Not anger, not the lack of anger. Just eyes, glazed with apathy.

"Hey," the man says, pulling up his collar and heading back into the street, "no problem."

"No problem," says Kilfoyle, and lights another cigarette while the P.A. thumps and crackles on, spurring an anticipatory hush and whisper from those waiting.

"Yah-*EAST*St. Louis, *HIGH*lund, Van*DALE*ya . . . "

It is a black voice and despite the heavy dialect and the rasping quality of the PA, the words carry a poetic, almost musical quality through the air. It seems almost hypnotic to Kilfoyle, who listens not to the words but the sound.

"Yah-*EFF*ingham, *WOOD*bury, *MART*insville . . . "

He does not notice it is his bus boarding, does not notice the woman who had molested the coffee machine in Joplin rush by juggling three styrofoam cups in her hand. He drops his head with the downbeat, feeling the ONEtwothree, ONEtwothree, ONEtwothree waltz of words, and he is dancing with his wife at their wedding a year and a half earlier. She is nervous and tiny and looks almost panicked, knowing that *everyone* watches this dance.

"What are you afraid of?" he says. "I'm the one who can't dance."

"I'm happy," she says.

"I'm glad to hear it," he says, stepping on her foot, causing her to dip. "Sorry."

"It's not you," she says, "it's me."

"*TER*re Haute, *BELLE UN*ion, *IND*yan*AP*olis . . . "

"That's us, thrill-seekers," Frank says, tapping Kilfoyle on the shoulder as he passes. A dozen or so people fall in behind him, like chickens before the feed, snatching up things from the floor, bobbing and weaving, hustling out to the bus where another small crowd waits before the closed doors. Frank snaps them open and leaps aside, checking tickets by the seat of his pants. Kilfoyle waits, and watches, finishing his

cigarette. The passengers stand four across and still seem surprised when they reach the two-and-a-half-foot opening to the bus, surprised no one has had the decency or the foresight to move out of their way. The knowing, the ones who are good bus riders, use their armloads of paper bags, or their children, to probe and push to the front. One heavy-set Mexican man has a small rocking horse, and is pressing the plastic front hooves into the small of Santa's back. They look like refugees, only so much more eager. Kilfoyle is the last one on and there is one seat left, on the aisle, near the back. The woman who sits pressed against the window reluctantly moves her pile of full coffee cups so Kilfoyle can sit.

"Don't touch me," she says, as the bus lurches and dips out of the terminal parking lot. "Don't talk to me, don't look at me, don't touch me." It is dark and Kilfoyle can't even see her face, but to be sure she pulls her coat collar far up past her temples and seems to melt down into her clothes, reminding Kilfoyle of one of the more gruesome episodes from the *Wizard of Oz*—the melting witch.

Leaving the city lights, on the bridge that spans the dark Missouri River, the cabin is black, and reading lights click on about the ceiling, shining down into the reader's laps like alien search lights. Across the aisle a young girl with wildly long blonde hair bounces a small child, no more than four or five years old, on her thighs. She is thin and pimply, but on the bus seems attractive. She is telling the marine beside her that over the past two years she has amassed enough experience in fast food that she can work just about anywhere she likes.

"McDonald's?" the marine says, patting the child's head. The kid in turn looks to his mother with a heartwrenching yet recognizably practiced expression of *Mom, who is this guy?*

"Hardee's?" the marine says.

"Oh, yes—*and* Burger King."

"*Oh*," the marine says, sounding impressed, and Kilfoyle thinks about how his wife couldn't make steam. But she tried to cook, and if nothing else you have to love a woman who tries. Her most memorable attempt at cooking was an omelette the size of a small dog.

"How many eggs did you use?"

"All of them."

"Are we having company?"

"Don't be silly. Eat. It's got onions and peppers and ham and salami and mushrooms and those little fish your mother sent, the ones you like so much."

"Anchovies?"

Kilfoyle ate most of it, however, and even asked her to make it again the following morning, with fewer eggs. "That's one of the reasons I married you," he said. "You have no preconceptions."

Yah-EFFingham
"I usually wouldn't be caught dead on the bus but I'm between jobs as it were," says the coffee lady. "I'm in aviation. I'm a hostess for United. I'm going to Pittsburgh because it's safer there. I'm from San Diego, but it's not safe there. They got foreign ships all over the harbour, you know."

Kilfoyle listens but doesn't realize he is the focus of her conversation. She clicks on her light and he sees she is rather unattractive—ugly, to be precise. Her teeth are rotted and black, like rabbit pellets, *smart pills*, as the old joke goes. Her nose and jaw jut outward and her forehead builds a definite ledge above her eyes, which are deep-set and wandering. But, coming from San Diego, she has one hell of a tan.

"That's nice," Kilfoyle says.

"I used to stay at the Hyatt but the businessmen there'll knock you right over the head. It isn't safe. So now I stay at the Y, as it were."

"As *what* were?"

"Now far be it from me to pass judgement. I don't care from Jews or Baptists or Hindus or . . . "

WOODbury
" . . . Democrats or Methodists or *whatever* but I don't like to attract a lot of attention which is why I'm going to Pittsburgh . . . "

MARTinsville
" . . . in fact things are much safer inland and I won't sleep until I get there to the Y which is just a short walk from the bus station and I do so hope it's light out by then, as it—"

TERra Haute
" . . . you see, there's an international task force sitting in San Diego harbour just waiting . . . "

She is not talking to me, Kilfoyle thinks, because I have either been sleeping or off to the bathroom or just not listening or making any indication that I am listening. She is talking *at* me, like a mirror, like the coffee machine, and in a moment she's going to pound on my face with her fists and demand her money back.

"I'm *not* the coffee machine," he tells her, for the first time since Effingham looking directly into her eyes. "I'm Pac-Man. Bee-oop."

A hint of shock tightens her face, and she is quiet. She rips the lid off a container of coffee which must surely be cold, and drinks half the cup.

"You're no different than the others," she says, and pushes past him to the bathroom. Kilfoyle looks about the cabin, meeting the glances of "what *did* you say to her?" without emotion, and thinks my God—what if she's right? and begins to feel guilty. He sits with his guilt during the

entire twenty minute rest stop in Terra Haute (which looks like Joplin) and waits for her to come out of the bathroom so he can say, Look, I'm sorry, but I've had a rough day. But she stays in there, probably flushing 1500 miles of coffee from her system. As they roll out onto I-70 East Kilfoyle's guilt locks hands with his imagination and he begins to receive mental images of the coffee lady, having had one more put-down than she could stand, stuffing her head into the stainless steel toilet and drowning in her own piss and blue disinfectant. He makes up his mind to go see if she is all right but realizes he can't move. The marines have landed across the aisle, and while Miss Fast Food is explaining the good and bad points of the ultra-violet maintenance of french fries, the marine's hand works its way from between her small breasts to between her legs. She talks as if she doesn't notice while the boy sleeps against the window, a whole marine away. She is getting breathy, and Kilfoyle squeezes his eyes shut, and wishes he could do the same with his ears. She comes with a noise that sickens Kilfoyle, a long, high-pitched wheeze that only he is close enough to hear. Figuring it is the marine's turn now, Kilfoyle pulls his jacket up over his head and slinks down into his seat.

INDIANAPOLIS

During the summer months America peels off its roadways like dead skin, stripping off layer upon layer of tar and asphalt, calling the process *construction.* Indianapolis is no exception, where four lanes of midtown interstate funnel into one. Kilfoyle awakens and watches the slow stop and go procession of vehicles past the bus, and wonders why they aren't moving, wonders why the whole bus is leaning to the right. He finds the reason for all this out the opposite window, on the median. There, scattered about the small shrubs that separate the I-70 West and East, stands at least eight people, men, casually peeing. No sooner does one zip up his pants and walk back to the bus than another takes his place. Standing four deep in the back of the bus are women, Chief Joseph among them, their legs pressed together at the thighs.

"I think I'm going to pop," one woman says.

"Please, miss," says Frank, standing by the bathroom door. "There are other passengers to consider."

Almost fully awake now Kilfoyle notices they are on the shoulder of the road, and also that the seat beside him is empty.

"Dammit," says Frank, watching the men on the median. "This isn't a scheduled stop."

"You can't *schedule* my bladder," says the woman who threatened to pop.

"What?" Frank says, his ear flat against the bathroom door. The entire bus hushes. "Pac-Man?" He is no longer cool about things, but is visibly flustered, his hat tipped back on his head, almost falling, and

sweat pouring down his face. "Christ—she wants to talk to Pac-Man," he announces to the bus, more to show things are basically out of his hands than to pass on information. "Hang on thrill-seekers, this will have to wait till the terminal."

"I can't take these bumps!"

"It'll be an hour in this traffic!"

"Oyaumda babysay, oya—"

"Wait," says Kilfoyle, stopping Frank in the aisle. "I'll talk to her."

"Don't tell me—*you're* Pac-Man?"

"It couldn't hurt," Kilfoyle says, and pushes, gingerly, past the women waiting for the toilet. "Hi," he says, to the door, "it's me."

"Pac-Man?" comes a small voice.

"That's not my name."

"I *know* that."

"What do you want?"

"I want to talk."

"Well, come out of there and we'll talk all the way to Pittsburgh."

"No."

"I'll even walk you to the Y."

"Don't humour me. What's your name?"

"Kilfoyle. What's yours?"

"What's your first name?"

"What's yours?"

No answer. The men have finished peeing except for one, Santa Claus, who is sitting on the grass. A good time to pray, thinks Kilfoyle, but Santa doesn't pray. He massages his feet.

"Why are you here?" comes the small voice from the bathroom.

"You asked for me. Look, I'm sorry if—"

"*On the bus*."

"Oh—well, I'm going home, to New York."

"The city?"

"Long Island."

"You're Jewish, aren't you?"

"No. Listen, people are waiting to . . . "

"You live there?"

"I used to."

"Are you going to live at home, with your parents?"

"No. They're dead."

"Sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

"Then *why*?"

"Why *what*?"

The passengers wedge themselves into the back of the bus, watching with expectant eyes, a whole beast of a sort. Kilfoyle shrugs his shoulders.

"*Why* are you here?"

He is stuck now, caught between the bathroom door and the writhing mound of passengers like the subject of some freak theatre of the absurd, the forgotten, the road. And it just comes out, the truth, for no better reason than it doesn't seem to matter.

"I am here," Kilfoyle says, having to clear his throat, "because my wife left me and because I really don't have anyplace else to be."

There is an hiatus as the crowd seems to blush with sympathy, with recognition. Kilfoyle feels he is one of them now, a disaster of a life thundering through the night and day on an eight-wheeled poverty missile of possible hopes and almost unanimous discontent.

"Do you love her?"

Outside, Santa has laced his shoes and is taking practice steps about the median while Frank tries to point him toward the bus. The marine sleeps, while Miss Fast Food stands at the front of the crowd, the boy strapped to her upper leg with tiny arms, and she smiles a small, closed-lip smile.

"Yes," Kilfoyle says. "I do. Very much." And the door clicks open.

SOUTH STREET, INDIANAPOLIS

Kilfoyle sits on the corner of South Street and sweats in the midday sun, and still does not want to be bothered.

"You getting on?" Frank says.

Kilfoyle looks up and shakes his head, the killing face a memory, his eyes nothing but tired. End of conversation, end of civilization. The world could end here, he thinks, end with a parade of ghosts—blacks, cripples, old men in big sneakers and old women who just want to go to sleep, Mexicans with hobby horses, soldiers and mothers—just end, or keep on passing through.

On the corner of South Street the buses of summer roll in and out, groaning with weight and sloth, diesel engines belching puffs of blue-grey smoke. Kilfoyle watches one pass. In the back sits a woman with six packages of Top-Ramen noodles in her lap. The woman believes she has a daughter in Buffalo, and for a moment, Kilfoyle believes it, too.

Peter Trower

Boondocks 1947

Backwoods Saturday dance—
traumas of girl-refusal after walking
the wide watching hall to ask
Outside for rotgut whiskey
bought from sly bootleggers
stashed in the woodpile
Soon, fortified beyond shyness, whirling girls
over the whistleslick floor
perfume and sweat
sweet legs flashing white in the hubbub
poppy lips smiling you on
Along sideline benches old grannies nodding
in sootblack dresses remembering
sometimes essaying a waltz with shaky elegance
Smalltown characters famous as heroes
in this thousandpeople place somehow more
themselves than usual gliding though the barny dark
Jack Tram on the bandstand singing *Stardust*
in a strong voice true as a Welshman's
etching the words on your mind forever
Schottische and Swedish Waltz
round and rollicking round with Jenny the Teaser
hoteyed Lillian Mott
anyone else who'll caper with you
Now the room reels the rafters creak
Lanky Paul Gaunt, hair slicked back
gaptoothed on his ichabodcrane face
gangles about with Angela Moffat, half his size
Ageless Ephram Carlisle and his graceful lady
perennial prizewinners
demonstrate their impeccable skill

More cheap rye in the chilly dark
none of the girls will come only boys
wince by the woodpile watching out for the cop
playing at being men till the bottles are killed
Freddie and Lloyd have it out over Margie Smart
roll and grapple flail and curse
on the dewdamp grass till Lloyd cries uncle
Back in the hall the crowd still spins
around the bright axis of Saturday
like music-box marionettes the dancers move
seen now through a whiskey blur
but it's all losing momentum
like a top slowly toppling on its side
Good-night Ladies sings gentleman Jack Tram
in a trombone chant curfew is called
people start searching for coats
smalltown heroes, become only themselves again
drift sleepily homeward flashlights bob like fireflies
along the trails in the night.

Diana Reed

October 1984

for Paolo Lionni

The turnpike a music in descending curves:
andante, and a hollow timbre.
So the hours go down in Pennsylvania
and the year slides crimson down the trembling hills,
blue-black glint of grackle in the linden's nimbus,
drizzle sinks through the air.
All is glisten and fall,
a time to invent a home, a last place,
a stone farm or form folded in the hill's inner elbow,
a finger of smoke against the blaze of hills,
the fragrance of Romes aglow in a wooden bowl,
and to hold it, whatever that is, too frail for words—
knowing it is your last October,
as the light pours out of the room
and the dark strokes the hairs on the back of your hand,
while the shedding and clicking of oaks
predict the badges of silence:
curled leaves caught in clear ice—
or just let it go, let it all go
when the grackle skreeks
as the light drifts out of your hand
overturned on the sheet.

Fly

Beaten by the glassy
image of
out there

it drops
to the sill

Flat on its back
feet
wriggling in the air

it simply
will not tire

It begins instead
a second
frantic dance

a beating of wings
that spins it

this way
that
way round

some imagined
axis of desire

Rite of Spring

You can tell it's spring when
there before your very
end of April

eyes shut tight and
face upturned
the morning shower

beats a million
lightdrops on
your eyelids

and turning round
to wake your back
and neck in the hot

rain your retinae
go on dancing
to a music of their own

making
a strange new
flower all

daffodil hollow
and daylily
aureole

Sticks and Stones

complaint is often the result of insufficient
ability
to live within
the obvious restrictions of this
goddamned cage.
complaint is a common deficiency
more prevalent than
hemorrhoids
and as these whores throw their spiked shoes
at me
wailing that
their memoirs will never be
promulgated
all that I can say to them
is
show me more leg
show me more ass—
that's all you have
while
it lasts

and for this common and obvious truth
they screech at me:
MOTHERFUCKER SEXIST PIG!

as if that would stop the way the fruit trees
drop their fruit
or the ocean brings in the coni and
the dead spores of the Grecian
Empire

but I feel no grief for being called something
which
I am not;
in fact, it's enthralling, somehow, like a good
back rub
on a frozen night
outside the ski lift at
Aspen.

The Luck of the Blessed

I am in correspondence with this
artist who illustrates some of
my short stories
and this time
I mention something
that happened to me
is about comparable to the
disaster of getting
bad
head.

and he writes back, "I
never knew there was such a
thing as
bad head."

what a truly charmed
existence
this fellow has
had.

Edward Lewis

INVESTMENT

I wanted to have some plants
So I bought a dozen and put them
Behind my favourite chair.
Now I swear the room
Breathes better, and I am
Happier knowing green is with me.
If I doze I dream better
In half-sleep close to their growing.
I like some life in my room,
Don't I? Yes I do.

Plants are like dogs. Once
You have them you have them.
But these take only water
And air. They are stranger
Than humans. I feel I've
Bought into a tropical forest.
In one of them lives a spider
Big as a silver dollar. Once
He ran down the arm of my
Favourite chair—

Like a priest on a mission.
That's what I told myself
Once I collected my wits.
Once I had nothing.
Now I have a menagerie
Growing out of my vision
Shocking the roots of my hair.
Behind me sentinels are set
On the tips of invisible stems.
They feel my contrition.

That's why I sleep more
Often but lighter. I sense
A green wind. I guess
It waves the fern but I
Do not need to look at it,
Nor will I seek the arachnid.
So long as the room breathes better
Behind my head it goes on.
It will engulf my prayer.
This is how it will end.

Shirley Cox

Crazy Paving

Liz dunked her paper-nylon petticoat in a pail of sugar-water in the back yard and held it up dripping. "Hopeless," she said.

It is a moment that is still suspended like a crystal in my memory of that long hot English summer. In that split second before the bright drops of water splashed on the crazy paving around my sister's feet, I perceived the eccentric quadrilateral of our family with the clear eyes of a stranger. At one corner of this figure stood Liz, her pale face blotched with Pan-stik make-up to hide the pimples. Sunshine was not her element. Her real life was lived in the dim cafés where she and her schoolfriends went to meet boys, and daylight was a long waiting for the dark. This was 1960 and she was in a constant state of despair: her nail polish smudged, her hairspray ran out when she'd only sprayed half her bee-hive, her heels were all too low and our mother would never let her have enough sugar to starch her petticoats to the proper stiffness. "I wouldn't be seen dead like this," she would say, turning in a limp circle before the hall mirror.

Our mother sincerely hoped Liz would *not* be seen dead like that. She had visions of her elder daughter lying in the middle of the High Street, her long pale legs sticking out from under the front wheels of a car and her skirts raised in a bouffant circle so that every gaping onlooker could see the crooked seams in her stockings and the safety pin in her grubby underwear. My sister's only fear was that she would be discovered wearing the navy-blue school regulation knickers our mother still insisted on. "You never cared," she said now, glaring in the direction of the back door. "You want me to look ridiculous."

My memory of that sunny Saturday afternoon puts my mother at some impossibly great distance. I am reminded for some reason of those cold geometric infinities in which parallel lines never meet. In fact, she was in the kitchen crumbling suet into a yellow mixing bowl to make a jam roly-poly pudding. It was characteristic for her to be preparing this kind of food in August with the temperature in the eighties, just as it was not unusual for us to come home in mid-winter and find the tea-table spread with watercress sandwiches and cold beets in vinegar. This suet pudding was to explode in the pressure cooker some

half an hour later, splattering the kitchen with strawberry jam and steaming clots of dough, but at the moment when Liz raised her arms to hang her petticoats on the line, my mother was still bent over the bowl, absent-mindedly running the mixture through her fingers. Propped against the teapot and the dresser were a cookery book and Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*. "Break, break, break,/On thy cold grey stones, O sea!" recited my mother. "And I would that my tongue could utter/The thoughts that arise in me."

Father was not in the house on that day, but the kitchen armchair in which he had sat all the previous winter still held the greasy impression of his head, and on the mantel-piece within easy reach was a stack of Zane Greys with lurid covers. This was *his* corner of the household, right in front of the television, with a handy shelf for his tea-cup, tobacco tin and cigarette papers. Even now, in August, with the windows wide open and a row of bright geraniums filling the room with their pungent odour, the stale smell of smoke still hung around his chair.

All winter, my mother had worried at this corner with her vacuum-cleaner and duster, having my father raise his feet and move his elbows. She contrived to come between him and the screen at the very moment when the Cisco Kid faced the bad guy across a tense and silent saloon. She would lean over him to empty the ashtray and knock his lighted cigarette into the armchair, where it would immediately disappear through the hole in the lining and send forth clouds of greasy smoke. "I do believe it's almost spring," she would say brightly when he was immersed in a book. "Any day now we'll be hearing the cuckoo."

Father was a compulsive reader and not usually sidetracked by trivial conversation. He read and watched television at the same time and this was his routine: he ran his broad middle finger at an even pace down the centre of the page while his eyes darted back and forth across the lines. When he reached the bottom, he would fold the page-corner and catch up with what was happening on the screen. Then he'd wet his finger and turn to the next page. My mother's mention of the cuckoo brought him up short in mid-page, however, for this was a signal she was about to quote from *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring*. Poetry in the kitchen was an embarrassment to Father. "Spring, dear?" he said to forestall her. Having got his attention, she went on to the real issue. "Of course, what *is* spring without a garden? If I could just look out of that window and see a few crocuses . . . " The window was covered with steam and darkened by the matted tangle of briars and brambles that surrounded the house. As long as I could remember it had been my mother's dream to see this waste-land transformed into a cottage garden with flower beds and little paths. "And I thought, since you're not busy this year . . . " But Father had gone back to Zane Grey, and a few days later he confounded all her plans by cashing in his war bonds and

buying a small café, which kept him far too busy to allow time for gardening.

The Station Café was a dilapidated old place that stared glumly out from the sooty arch of the railway bridge. It had been closed for some time and vandals had worked it over pretty thoroughly, but my father charged in there with his tool-box and was soon doing a brisk trade in fish and chips and strong tea. Now my mother complained that he was never home, though it should hardly have come as a surprise to her, since it was the same thing every year.

He'd always hibernated during the short days of winter, and somewhere in his half-sleep a dream would begin to take shape—he would picture himself a chimney-sweep, a mushroom farmer, a cleaner of windows—until the perfect clarity of a spring morning would rouse him at last from his chair. For months afterwards we hardly saw him, though occasionally he'd erupt into our domestic scene trailing plaster or soot. The gutted parts of motors and small electric appliances would appear, laid out on newspapers on the sideboard, and once in a while we'd catch glimpses of him tearing through town in the old Morris, his sweep's black brushes or a ladder sticking up through the sunshine roof. But these projects of his always ran out of steam. Inevitably the day would come— usually a grey day with the smell of first snow in the air and darkness closing in before tea—when he would creep in dejectedly by the kitchen door, scattering all the paraphernalia of that year's trade in the yard and scullery on the way back to his old chair and the television.

"I can't do everything," our mother had said this year, when it finally became apparent to her that he was never going to tackle the garden. With the same dogged persistence with which she created unappetizing and disastrous meals, she set to work to conquer the garden problem once and for all. "Crazy paving won't need any upkeep," she said. "It's not the same as flower beds, but it's all I've got time for and at least it will keep the weeds at bay."

It was May then, I think, and already bright and hot. She put on her Wellington boots and borrowed a wheelbarrow. Liz was horrified. "Mother's stealing rocks!" she announced, bursting into my room. From the window we watched her trundle down the street.

"Let her," I said. What the members of my family did had nothing to do with me.

She dwindled steadily in the direction of the building site beyond the public house. Her seersucker dress hung down below her old raincoat and her grey hair waved wildly in the breeze she was raising. A group of men outside the pub turned to watch her in silence.

"Disgusting," said Liz. She picked up my comb from the dressing-table and began to tease her hair.

Our mother ploughed her way on to the building site, setting small

tornadoes of white dust in motion around her. She manoeuvred the wheelbarrow between an antiquated cement mixer and a mountain of rusty pipes and began to collect her first load of large flat stones.

By the time I am thinking of, that afternoon in August, the crazy paving had spread over an area approximately the shape of North America. There were Great Lakes in various odd places, because Mother had been unable to find the stones that belonged there. That they existed somewhere was not in doubt. It was just a matter of finding them. She offered small prizes for their discovery: to Liz, the chance of staying out till eleven on a Saturday night; to me, a piano lesson with Mrs. Drechsler. Spring slipped into summer as we dickered over the stakes—Liz was holding out for *every* Saturday night and I was not excited about Mrs. Drechsler—until one day we noticed that the problem had more or less solved itself. Every dustbowl and desert had sprouted a specially virulent kind of chickweed and the whole continent was surrounded by a rolling ocean of giant cow-parsley that completely hid the neat gardens on either side of us.

Now, Liz upended the bucket and sprinkled this dusty jungle with water. "Don't water those blessed weeds," said our mother, appearing in the kitchen doorway with the lid of the pressure cooker in her hand. "They'll get a hold on the garden." From next door came the brittle laughter of Mrs. Morgan. Standing on tiptoe in the French doors, I could see her perfectly curled bronze head shining through the topmost tendrils of the cow-parsley. "Did you hear that, Edgar?" This was for our benefit: I'd seen Mr. Morgan leave with a shopping bag ten minutes before. Liz dragged the clothesline prop out from the weeds and shoved its prongs savagely under the line so her petticoat was hoisted like a brave flag.

I let the lace curtain fall across the French doors and the quivering diamonds of light re-established their pattern on the brown linoleum. Debussy's *La cathédrale engloutie* was open at the first page on the piano. I gazed into the dim sea of notes, some clustered in strange growths around a single stalk, others turning in their own private eddies. The original owner of this mouse-eaten old manuscript had made a fine drawing of the sunken cathedral on the fly-leaf with a scratchy pen and ink that had faded to sepia. Mermaids and sea-horses frolicked across the pages, occasionally rebuked by the stern hand of a music teacher of the Mrs. Drechsler school. *Tempo!* she admonished, and *Count!* Numbers marched in neat ranks through this stormy ocean, apparently to no avail, for on the last page she had written in defeated letters: *Please try and count!*

I had faith that contemplation would eventually reveal to me the mysteries of music notation, and from time to time I was rewarded with brief insights. This was one of those moments. It suddenly occurred to me that the density and darkness of those fat chords meant that I was

to play on the black keys. I spread my hands to include as many of these as possible and produced a truly awesome sound. The columns of notes resolved themselves into the pillars of a cathedral, and I moved trancelike through this structure with the loud pedal held firmly down so that the notes of one chord flowed into those of the next, jangling, and the drowned bells rang out their eerie Angelus.

I was startled to find my mother in the room behind me. "Perhaps if I sent you for another piano lesson . . . " she sighed. Mrs. Morgan's caustic laughter had drawn her attention to the state of the garden, and now, reminded afresh of the general disorder of our lives, she prowled the bare sitting-room looking for trouble. "If only you could learn something with a tune," she said. She inspected the top of the piano with a jaundiced eye and her sighs ruffled a pathway through the dust. I let the last chord die away and the hum of a well-oiled lawn mower entered the room, discreetly. My mother lifted the curtain at the front window. Mr. Drechsler was cutting a smooth bright swath around his lilac bush and from the open window behind him poured a relentless stream of perfectly matched notes.

This little scene appeared to work some alchemy on my mother's thoughts. Her expression changed from one of longing, through inspiration to cunning. "Mrs. Drechsler could teach you to play Chopin," she said. It was clear that bribery was on her mind again. The elements of her dissatisfaction were to be combined. I was to weed the garden and in return I would get piano lessons to cure me of my solemn chords: the result would be pure gold.

"Here's what I have in mind," she said. Mother rarely gave us direct orders. She attempted to herd us, rather—away from chaos and disaster toward an orderly and weed-free future—by sharing with us her visions, both for good and for ill. With a bright faraway look on her face, she strode down the room, arms waving. "First we'll get rid of that cow-parsley . . . " Yank, all gone. "Then we'll need some big tubs . . . " Plonk, plonk, plonk— oleanders, myrtle and jasmine. This was her new dream, one she felt was in keeping with the paving stones. Hanging baskets (fuschia, gypsophila and Spanish moss) were involved in this scenario, although the utterly flat surface of the back of the house presented a problem. I had seen her outside the kitchen door with her arms in the air, trying out various positions for these imaginary baskets as if hooks might conveniently descend from heaven. This new plan of hers strangely resembled the yard of our neighbours, the Morgans—a smoothly-cemented extension of their house, haven for large gnomes and small flamingoes. *Their* tubs (half beer-barrels, painted pink) contained violas, pansies and those variegated purple and white flowers that civic improvement associations plant along the grass verges. They didn't run to anything as grand as oleanders, which may have been why my mother was raising them in her dreamscape. Somewhere between

the garden furniture and the birdbath, I tuned out.

I had had one piano lesson from Mrs. Drechsler and it had not been a success. She made it clear right from the start that she had a preconceived notion of how each piece should sound. "Play me something, dear," she said. She settled herself in a big soft armchair beside the piano and took some crochet work out from under the cushion. At that time I was entranced with Chopin, with the way he sprinkled his pages with notes of large and small sizes and allowed them to ramble about across the bar lines. I opened my book to the Eb major Nocturne. The notes soared and plummeted in careless profusion like the song of the lark. I pictured Mr. Chopin lying on his back among kingcups and marsh marigolds, arranging the sounds in random groups as they fell. Here was a group of thirteen, there one of seventeen, and over each group he had written the number in tiny italic figures—always prime numbers with some obscure magic to them. I found this whimsical and alluring.

"Plunge right in, dear," said Mrs. Drechsler, so I did. Her piano was a disappointment: the notes at the very end of the keyboard lacked the birdlike reediness that ours had, so I tried some of the ones lower down. It wasn't my best interpretation of that page, but I was quite offended when she leapt out of the chair with an expression of horror on her face. "What *is* that?" she cried. Her crochet thread rolled away across the carpet and she raised her glasses to peer closely at the music. "Chopin?" She repeated it—"CHOPIN?!"—in a tone so aghast and disbelieving that I knew we were never going to get along.

"Mrs. Drechsler expects you to always play the notes in the same order," I said now.

"I'm sure she's quite right about that," said my mother. "At least until you get the hang of it. If you had a little more respect for order—if *anyone* in this family had—we might have a decent home, instead of this . . . this madhouse." Her voice trembled on the last word. She sat down beside me on the piano stool and fished a cigarette out of her apron pocket.

My mother rarely disturbed me while I was playing. As long as I was hunched in Byronic melancholy over the keys producing chords of great resonance and obscurity, she regarded me vaguely as a talented, if disorderly, distant relative who occupied the dim reaches of the sitting-room, and she left me to my own devices. But today she was evidently settling in for a long harangue.

"That woman has a nerve," she said. "Making sarcastic remarks about our garden. She doesn't have to contend with the things I do. Can you imagine your father going shopping for *me*?" She pointed out of the window. Mr. Morgan had just arrived home with a string bag full of potatoes. He paused at their gate to take a look at his prize hollyhocks. "Or growing flowers?"

"Daddy did grow mushrooms," I said.

"What mushrooms?" she cried, blowing smoke fiercely through her nostrils. The mushroom farm had been the previous year and it had failed dreadfully. One April morning—my mother was raptly clutching a dishcloth at the back door, having just heard the cuckoo—he had started up the Morris and disappeared for several hours. When he returned and began to unload gardening tools and sacks of mulch, she thought he had finally responded to all her hints. "You're going to make a garden!" she'd cried, running out of the house in great delight. Then she saw the pile of sweep's brushes and window-cleaning ladders that had been thrown out of the shed. "The ideal place for mushrooms, that shed," said my father. He took two kitchen chairs outside to use as a saw horse and began to construct wooden growing-trays. From time to time he interrupted his work with a burst of song. "Roses are blooming in Picardy," he warbled. Doors and windows were meaningfully slammed next door and my mother came into the sitting-room, as now, to let off steam. "Dirt!" she had said on that occasion. "Now he's playing with dirt."

"It wasn't his fault they didn't come up," I said. He had worked very hard at the mushrooms, carting mould from one place to another, constantly changing the position of the trays. Every day he checked the price of mushrooms—I remember him coming back exuberant from a trip to the greengrocer's. "Still going up," he announced, patting my mother on the bottom. "Don't touch me with your dirty hands," she said, and she went quite pink in the face. "You'll see," he said. "By autumn we'll be rich." He had already made plans for several smart new mushroom buildings that would fill the whole garden. That night I heard my mother calling from the window. "Evan, it's three o'clock." He was in the shed checking the temperature of the soil.

"If he would just stick to one thing," said my mother, "there wouldn't always be so much mess to clean up." The remains of this last undertaking were still mouldering in the shed, and somewhere under the cow-parsley the ladders and brushes rotted away. "God knows I try to keep things in order," she went on, "but it's just impossible. Take mealtimes. What *is* the point of putting good food on the table at regular hours if there's never anyone there to eat it?" This was unfair of her because these regular hours were always changing. My mother was in constant pursuit of the perfect plan for living but, as with the crazy paving, some part of the design forever eluded her. On a Monday night it might be revealed to her that the sole cause of all her frustration and woe was the weekly wash. "You'll have to make your things last longer," she would say. "I've only got one pair of hands." But when we stood before her in our grubby pyjamas, ready to kiss her good night, she'd be overcome with remorse and we would be reprieved.

"Perhaps your father will make money with this café," she said. "And

we'll get furniture for this room." She looked around vaguely for an ashtray and settled on the brass candle-holder that was attached to the front of the piano. Mrs. Morgan, I felt sure, would have ashtrays perfectly deployed about the house, *nests* of ashtrays probably. "What I *envision*," my mother went on, "is a sofa—just there." She gestured with her cigarette. "With end tables." (No one in our family had ever owned end tables, or even mentioned them in passing as far as I was aware.) "And one of those electric fires with the light that goes round and round like flames."

The Morgans' sitting-room could be seen quite clearly from the street at night: the wallpaper that went three-quarters of the way up the walls and ended in a stick-on frieze, the china ducks in flight, the ballerina lampshades and the tatted doilies on the piano no one ever played. And the electric fire with the painted logs.

With considerable dismay, I understood my mother's scheme: she wanted us to *be* the Morgans and sit in that pink and white room reading magazines. The prospect of this transportation to next door, as it were, caused some confusion in my sense of perspective. The planes of the walls went through some subtle realignment and the piano stool seemed to tilt slightly. For a moment I looked into a grim future where music would amount to nothing more than a series of grimy fingerprints on a piece of furniture. "And in the evenings," she went on, "we could invite people in." "In *here*?" The sitting-room was my domain, since all it contained was the piano. The family lived in the kitchen—it had always been that way. And what kind of people did she have in mind? The vicar? Or perhaps Miss Pringle, who had once come to measure her for the corset she never wore? "What would we *do* with these people?" I asked.

It was while she was considering this question that the pudding made its spectacular explosion in the kitchen. "Oh, my God!" she cried. "I forgot the pudding!"

"You could've killed us all," said Liz coldly, appearing in the kitchen doorway. "Look, I'm bleeding." She held her trembling arms out for our inspection. "I'll probably bleed to death and then you'll be sorry."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Mother, heading straight for the sink after one brief glance at the scene of carnage. "It's strawberry jam."

Father could hardly have chosen a worse time to drive up and park the old Morris in what Mother fondly called her flower bed. She ran out brandishing a wet mop as if he were responsible for the failure of the pudding. "Oh, Evan!" she cried in despair. "Just look at my flowers." He leapt out of the car, crushing a few dispirited zinnias with his foot. "You've got to come and cook for me," he said. "I'm swamped down there." His weekend helper was having a tantrum in the kitchen and the place was full of hooligans clamouring for fish and chips. "I have cooking to do here," said Mother with cool dignity. Liz, gal-

vanized into life by the mention of hooligans, shimmied into her still-damp petticoat and began a feverish application of eye-liner and mascara. "You can wash that off *right* away," said father, but a moment later he had forgotten all about it and was revving the engine madly and shouting at them both to hurry.

From the sitting-room window I watched my father back across the zinnias, spinning the rear wheels and raising a shower of dust and small stones. "Mind the flowers, Evan!" Mother rushed out of the house like a banshee, Liz went clicking down the path on her stilettoes and the car doors were all slammed several times. Mr. Morgan's smooth face appeared over the curve of his privet hedge, the net curtain twitched discreetly at the Drechslers', and then the Morris roared off down the street—Mother holding on to the dashboard with both hands and Liz perched fastidiously in the middle of the back seat, her compact mirror open and powder puff poised. The car backfired briefly before turning the corner and Mr. Morgan shook his head in distaste.

In the sudden silence that followed, I heard Mrs. Drechsler's canary. Normality descended on Clare Road. The Bordens' newest baby, in white rompers, gummed the teething rings on its playpen and cooed absent-mindedly. From next door came the desultory snip-snip of the hedge-clippers, and a tabby cat strolled across the street and stretched himself indolently under the lilacs where the canary cage hung in the shade. I turned to go back to Debussy, but I discovered that fat bands of late sunshine had invaded the corner where the piano stood. The air was as heavy as treacle and the keys felt sticky under my fingers. Behind a screen of lazily swirling dust motes the unknown music teacher's numbers still plodded in mute accusation across the page, and I was suddenly inconsolable and full of despair. Years of undone homework arose before me: all the theorems I could not prove, all the Latin verbs unconjugated—nouns undeclined, sentences not parsed, Ovid, Catullus and Martial, all innocent of scansion, their spondees and dactyls locked in that world of order and reason that was as beyond my grasp as the sheet music on the piano stand. My bed was unmade, my shoes were scuffed and I had missed Mass three weeks in a row because no one had remembered to wind the alarm clock on Saturday nights. If I lived to be a hundred, I did not see how I could ever put all these things right.

I wandered out into the yard. The crazy paving was a patchwork of dark and light stones and I hopscotched half-heartedly across the central plains. Along the northern edge of the Great Lakes stood the impenetrable forests of cow-parsley. This was Canada. I sat down on a hot stone with my feet in Lake Michigan.

Beyond the wild geography of our garden, the early evening was neat and calm. Ice clinked in a pitcher next door. "Put that in the shade, would you, Edgar?" I pictured Mrs. Morgan lying in her red

and yellow striped deck chair—the one that figured in my mother's plans for the Florida coastline area. Maybe she was wearing the paper nose that kept her from getting sunburned. At Mrs. Drechsler's a tractable child was being put through its paces, and scales alternated with Beethoven's *Für Elise* with a perfect regularity. I pondered on how it was that in our house puddings exploded and how my mother, in the middle of clean-up operations, could drop everything and run off to cook fish and chips for strangers.

The gleam of my long-lost penknife, only a little rusty among the weeds, reminded me of the fine flutes that could be whittled from the hollow stems of cow-parsley. I cut a nicely tapered length of stalk and began to carve a mouthpiece.

"I think I'll have these chairs re-covered," said Mrs. Morgan. No answer from him.

I cut a hole for the first note on my pipe and tried it. Peep, peep.

"That's a funny bird," said Mrs. Morgan. "Edgar, hark at that. What *is* that bird?"

"Hm?" His newspaper rustled. "I expect it's a sparrow, dear."

"Any fool can tell it's not a bird from around here," she said. I gave her a couple more peeps. "I do believe it's one of those things we saw at the zoo—those birds that talk, you know?" She started thrashing around in the bushes along the fence. "It must have escaped from somewhere." I cut a second hole in my pipe and tried out a tantalizing little trill. "Quick, Edgar! Let's catch it. Run and fetch the budgie cage from the lumber room."

That's right, I thought. Put it in a cage. I was beginning to feel sorry for this bird. I could already see him hunched in his tiny prison, hanging between a portrait of the Queen and a snapshot of Mr. and Mrs. M. on the pier at Brighton.

"Oh, no!" she wailed. "It's through the fence in that dreadful place next door." He was back with the cage—I could hear it squeaking as he swung it to and fro. "Never get it out of there," he said. She was getting quite frantic, poking a big stick through the fence and stirring up the Canadian hinterland.

As the sun went down into the polar night beyond the railway embankment and the council garages, I sat in the shadow of the weed forest letting out occasional forlorn peeps on my flute—just enough to keep her interested. Mr. Morgan retired to the house to watch the nine o'clock news and the blue oblong of their French doors shone through the leaves. From time to time the ice clinked and I heard her go in for a refill. "We're out of gin," she said. She stumbled on the step and there was a splash as she spilled the pitcher. "Oh, damn."

"Don't you think you've had enough, dear?" said Mr. Morgan mildly.

"Why don't you go down the Off-Licence and get another bottle," she said.

Did my mother envisage a future for herself in which she staggered

drunkenly about a patio dotted with gnomes, listening for imaginary birds in the night? I was so seized with terror at this prospect that I forgot she was at the café, reciting poetry over the bubbling oil of the deep fryer, her grey hair in damp curls on her hot forehead. She seemed somehow to have transformed herself into this permed and manicured creature who was too drunk to recognize the sound of a child playing a reed whistle. "Here, birdie," cooed the strange thick voice of this changeling mother, almost at my ear. "Know what I'm going to do?" she said. "Those people are still out—it's all dark over there. I'm going round there and get it." Staring through the black trunks of my forest, I saw the white moon of her face rise against the ghostly blue flickering window.

Terrified, I jumped over the back fence and fled. As I ran down the alley, I heard this apparition rattling the cage. "Here I come, birdie," she cried.

"I wouldn't do that, dear, if I were you," said he.

I ran all the way to the station. On the railway bridge I stopped to get my breath back, and stood looking down at the row of bright windows. The red sign flashed on and off: *Station Café*, and the sound of the juke-box spilled out into the warm street. I saw Liz pirouetting under a pale streetlight and a young man leaning against the wall with his hands in the pockets of his drainpipe trousers. My father dashed across the lighted window with four plates balanced on his arm. "Who ordered this goddamn rock cod?" he bellowed. At the side doorway, my mother appeared in smoky silhouette, her hair all over the place and her stockings wrinkled around the ankle. "I only have one pair of hands," she cried despairingly out into the night. "I can't do everything." A heavenly smell of frying drifted up to me on the bridge, and Liz danced on oblivious in her circle of light.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

LLOYD ABBEY has published four collections of poetry, the most recent of which is *The Antlered Boy* (Oberon, 1984). He lives in Vancouver.

ALEXIS BERNIER's play, *Centenarian Rhyme*, won the Theatre Ontario Playwright Showcase Award in 1980. She is currently at work on a novel in Sudbury.

ROBERT BRINGHURST's selected poems, *The Beauty of the Weapons*, are published in Canada by McClelland and Stewart, and in the U.S.A. by Copper Canyon Press. "Han Shan" is from a forthcoming collection entitled *The Book of Silences.*

CHARLES BUKOWSKI's latest book of poems is *War All the Time* (Black Sparrow Press, 1984). He lives in San Pedro, California.

SHIRLEY COX lives in East Lansing, Michigan, where she's working on a novel about eccentrics in a Vancouver Island fishing community. Two of her stories, *Out of Thin Air* and *Terrible Liberties,* have previously appeared in PRISM.

DOUGLAS DELANEY's stories have appeared in *Western Humanities Review* and *Kansas Quarterly.* His play, *Lafitte,* is now running "off-off-Broadway."

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IRINA GRIGORESCU is a poet, novelist and essayist. She teaches at the University of Bucharest.

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MICHAEL C. KENYON's story "Train" was selected for PRISM's *25 Years in Retrospect* issue. His work has appeared in recent issues of *The Malahat Review*, *Quarry,* and *Grain*. He lives in Victoria.

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