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Contemporary writing from Canada and around the world
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1988 Fiction Contest Winners

Pacific Rim Issue
call for submissions

PRISM international

invites submissions of fiction, poetry, drama, translations, and creative non–fiction for a special Pacific Rim issue to be published in January '90.

Writing from and/or about any place bordering the Pacific Rim will be considered.

Send mss. and SASE before **September 1, 1989** to:

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PRISM international
1988 SHORT FICTION CONTEST WINNERS

1st Place: $1000. **Michael C. Kenyon,** Victoria, B.C., Can.
The Angels in Cities (p. 88)
2nd Place: $ 500. **Emily Hammond,** Fort Collins, Colorado, USA.
Why Would a Man (p. 36)
3rd Place: $ 250. **Dayv James-French,** Ottawa, Ont., Can.
Glass (p. 19)

Michael C. Kenyon won second prize in *Prism international*'s 1987 Short Fiction Contest. Recent work is forthcoming in *Event, Canadian Fiction Magazine* and *Grain.*

Emily Hammond has won the Katharine Anne Porter Prize for Fiction as well as the Henfield Foundation's Transatlantic Review Award. Her publications include *Nimrod, Crazyhorse* and *The Alaska Quarterly Review.* She lives with her husband and infant son.

Dayv James-French's stories have appeared in several periodicals in Canada and the U.S., as well as being reprinted in *Coming Attractions 4* and *88: Best Canadian Stories.* Stories are forthcoming in *Canadian Fiction Magazine,* the third *MacMillan Anthology* and *Valley of Fire* (Talonbooks).

1988 FINALISTS

Patricia Robertson, Canada	*Small Explosions*
David Teagle, United States	*The West* (p. 72)
Rick Hillis, Canada	*Limbo River* (p. 53)
Roberta Rees-Whalley, Canada	*Eleven* (p. 8)
Steve Heighton, Canada	*Sounds of Water*
Anne Montagnes, Canada	*Bolt*

We would like to extend a very special thank you to Leon Rooke, this year's final judge. Thanks also to Allan Cram for his organizational genius.

Trecie Melnick

Midday heat

My window opened
onto their house nestled
too close to mine.
The heat ran down
her neck, dryed her lips
as she sat with the dead
chicken in her lap. She half
smiled at me then looked
at her daughter, said, "pluck it."
I couldn't understand the rest.
The words sped up, crackled
till the quick-stripped
vine shook in the young face.
The girl took it like duty,
took it across the knees,
across the face, the knees
and she stood absolutely still,
except the eyes,
The dark eyes raced like bats in the open.

Eleven

Roberta Rees-Whalley

Poppa may have
Momma may have
But God bless the child
Who's got her own
Who's got her own
Behind the couch. He sits on the couch, skunk drunk. You little bitch he says you wanna smoke smoke this. Shoves a cigar in my mouth. First he licks it up one side down the other. His tongue is fat. His spit on the cigar. His spit in my mouth. I gag on the cigar shoved against my tongue. Son-of-a-bitchin' bastard. What kinda father are you anyway? Can't talk with the cigar plugging my mouth. Draw he shouts goddamned draw. His fat fingers pinch my shoulders. Jesus Christ you skinny little bitch, suck on the bastard, suck. The way you did the cigarette. I'll teach you to smoke I'll teach you all right.
Bastard
Bastard
Bastard
His eyes watery won't leave me be. Where you come from old man old father old bastard down by the tracks eh down by the river eh drinkin' canned heat with your friends eh. The cigar plugs my mouth. He slaps my cheek. I suck in real cool. My cheek burns. C'mon you can do better than that you wanna smoke. His stinkin' breath plugs my nose. I suck on the cigar shoved against the back of my tongue. Swallow swallow swallow stinkin' smoke. Puke in my throat, on my tongue, into the basin. Shit he laughs shit. You better get used to it cause you're gonna smoke the whole friggin' thing.
Bitch he says
Bitch bitch
bitch
to my mother. His fat fist slams her cheek. She lifts from her chair, dances across the kitchen, hits the wall, slides. Fuckin' bitch he roars how can you just sit there dyin' not breathin' what about the kids what about me when you're dead what about me. His hands hang against his

green pants. Water runs around his nose red running drunk nose. I put her to bed because I am the only one home, half lift, half drag. She is lighter than me and I am eleven friggin' years old.
No
No Verla
Don't
cry
she grunts from her pillow eyes closed dark brown
underneath all around. Bones bones under her thin skin
wearing out. Purple bleeds into her cheek.
He
he
doesn't mean
fine man
when
sober
Her eyes closed when they carry her out on the stretcher, closed. What about me what about the kids what about me. I stand on the porch as they shove her into the ambulance. Her eyes flicker at him beside the stretcher. My voice screams
I hate
hate

I hate you

Down
Down by the yards
by the tracks
trucks and box cars all over stinkin' metal. Glass all over broke in the dirt hurts my eyes. Skippin' skippin' down the hill there where he works by the tracks. Sleeves rolled up, suspenders, looks sober at me.
Hey
want a pop
come sit
with
your old dad
The bottle warm in my hands. Warm grape in my throat, up my nose. His hand fat fingers on my arm. Looks soft green at me. This here's my little girl. Pats my arm real skinny.
Skippin' skippin'
down the hill
by the tracks hot oily

where he is. Sits in the glass by the box car piss drunk the whole lot. Looks hard green at me in the sun. Points a fat finger. There's a girl who killed her mother. Pitches his bottle smash into my elbow. Runnin' runnin' up the hill holding my dead arm.

R-a-g-g-M-o-p-p
Raggmopp
doodleeeaaahhhtatata
Raggmopp
around the kitchen with the mop her hair flying. My sister Elona. Jitter bug jitter bug Raggmopp. Grabs my hands holds me tight. Angora bounce bounce against my cheek. Her plaid skirt under my fingers. Move your feet. Like this
R-a-g-g-M-o-p-p
Raggmopp
doodleeeaaaahhhhtatata
Raggmopp
sings into my hair my sister Elona. Mom died, Verla, you didn't. You're only eleven. You gotta have some fun kiddo. Around the kitchen her glasses round wire glinty.
You had
What you said had
nothing to do with
her dying
breathless around the kitchen. Doodleeeaaaahhhhtatata. Smells like lemon. I hold her tight.
Shush Verla she says
in the night
hand on my cheek
shush.
My mother's bones click in the black all around. You know Mariel's doing it with her nails. Here, crawl in with me. Pulls me cold across the dark room click click dancing dead. Stop that this minute Mariel. Her whisper sharp. Pulls me in after her. Quilt up to my ear, my mother's bones loud in the dark. Elona's hand up and down my back. Remember, two more months and I'll be twenty-one. Larry and I'll get married and you can come and live with us. I'll be just like
mom
mom
MUMMY
Elona cries in the night curled on the couch. Fills the sheet Mariel and I diaper her in. Crying eyes wide open she doesn't see us. Mummy

mummy mummy baby voice. Spit on her chin. Shush I say, hand on her head burning up three nights in a row. Shush.
Can hardly
lift
my head
she says first night. Goes upstairs to bed. In the morning moaning head rocking. All day all day cold rags on her temples beating blue under white. He sits on the couch. Jesus Jesus Jesus. Shakes his head. What about me what about the kids? His fingers in his hair. From upstairs moaning. Christ he says and goes out the door.
Mimi
Mimi
help me
in the second dark. Shuffle shuffle then Mariel's voice across the room. I'm here Elona. I'm here. In the lamplight Mariel bent over pulling on Elona hunched in her bed. Gotta peepee gotta peepee. R-a-g-g-M-o-p-p, I close my eyes. Mariel's voice in the double dark. Come help, Verla. Doodleeeaaaahhhhtatata. Elona's hand curled stiff against her chest. We drag her down thump thump against the steps. My hands clutch her body wringing wet stiff. R-a-g-g-M-o-p-p. Her panties bloody on the floor by the toilet. On the can she leans against the wall. Christ Mariel says what a time to get her period. Go call a doctor Verla. Go call a doctor.
Flyin' flyin'
down the hill
I love
love I love
her
to the stars head back screaming. Please I beg the operator in the phone booth under stars. Please I beg the doctor. How old did you say you are? Where did you say you live? Please I beg. Sorry. Too late too far too dirty. Give her an aspirin and put her to bed.
Piss-face Piss-face Prick
Up the hill. My turn in the fat chair beside the couch. Mummy. She cries slobbers in the dark. I stare and stare. R-a-g-g-M-o-p-p Raggmopp. Around the kitchen Elona with my dead mother's bones her hair flying her glasses round wires glinty. All night.
No
don't
don't
he whispers in the morning his hands soft on her face scrunched up eyes rolled white to the ceiling.

I am eleven
eleven
friggin' years
old
I have a dead mother. And a dead sister. I live in a shack on a hill outside Calgary. My father lives with me. My brother Jordie lives with me. The others moved away. Every day I make Jordie lard on bread then walk down the coulee across the field to school. In the morning I wear a sweater. In the afternoon I walk with arms folded over my new tits. Tits and more tits they call me at school. Your sneakers stink the home-ec teacher tells me, but they don't. My mother washed them.
Hang up your washing on the Ziegfried line
And smile smile smile
I sing to my shadow long in front of me. Jordie sits at home eating beans and toast I made him. The grass scratches my ankles. Downtown is a long way along the river along the tracks. Come and get me at six he said through the blanket I put up to make a wall for Jordie and me. You look like your mother you should've died instead. His fist cracked my skull. That was before the blanket.
It's a long way to Tipperary
It's a long way to go

One potato
Two potato
Three potato
Four
my finger up the bumps on Loretta Johnson's spine.
Five potato
Six potato
Seven Potato
More
all the way up to the big one on her neck warm sleepy do it
again.
One potato
Two potato
down her backbone backbone, ribs ribs.
Five potato
Six potato
Counting Loretta Johnson growing tits smaller than mine. My mom said come sleep at my house. What about Jordie? Bring him. He can play with Sam. At home I tell Jordie go get water for the floor. Get it yourself. Jordie, go get water. I said get it yourself. You little bugger you little bugger

I make your lunch wash your clothes now you go get water. Pull his hair my fingers hurt. He dumps water the whole bucket on the floor. There. My fist hits his face hard stubborn. You little bugger.

Don't say shit
Don't burp
Don't fart
Jordie's hand sticky in mine across the field. Their house a shack but warm smells like bread. Here have some more peas. Mrs. Johnson slides the bowl full green under my nose.
Peas peas peas peas
Eating goober peas
Goodness how delicious
Eating goober peas
Stuck to the roof of my mouth my tongue. Won't say nothing. Jordie across the table his crewcut hair. She says thank you. His voice just like the old man's gravelly and only eight.
Ain't no Mr. Johnson. Run off a long time ago before Bobbie was born. Loretta whispers under the cover, Jackie and Liz younger across the room. My hands up her pyjamas up and down her back. What killed your mom?
One potato
Two potato
Asthma asthma
How'd your sister die?
Five potato
Six potato
Meningitis on the brain.
Up and down her skinny ribs. Tell me who you love. No, you tell me who you love. Never mind tell me tomorrow. Her skin hot sleepy I tingle. Promise you'll tell she murmers.
Cross my heart
And hope to die
If ever I should
Tell a lie
Take this with you. Mrs. Johnson tucks a loaf still steaming into my arm. I always make too much you come every morning now for bread. At home eat the whole thing lard on. Seven o'clock in the morning skippin' skippin' across the field my belly hungry. My mother across the field puts bread in my arm sometimes tea lots of milk two sugar. Come back again before lunch she says a special treat crusty buns.
C'mon a hear

C'mon a hear
Alexander's ragtime band
I skip out early before lunch run up the coulee across the field.
C'mon a hear
C'mon a hear
It's the best band in the land
Push open the door hear Bobbie crying. Gotta pee gotta pee. No I shout at her on the couch blue around her lips fingers stiff around Bobbie's wrist. No I shout and rock Bobbie pants pissy on my knee.
What happened what happened. Loretta runnin' up the hill face scared at the ambulance. Nothin' I say fingers crossed behind my back hard. Soon I will be
twelve
twelve friggin' years
old.

Chris Kennedy

The Strange God Who Makes Us

Something in the mother's shrunken,
sea-urchin face as she guides the wheelchair
along rush-hour traffic says their lives
are worth living, a steadiness in the gaze,
as if a distant sea roared from beyond
the dull, uneven pavement, an ocean
where they could simply merge with whatever
world could maintain them better
than this one with its dirty laundromats
and Arab groceries. The satisfied look

on the boy's ash-coloured face as he rides
his father's narrow lap is as hopeful
as the way he tips his extended arms
first right, then left, in imitation
of the plane that moves slowly across
the low, impenetrable sky. Sun gleams

off the diamond patterns of the silver
footrests, and one stray wheel, the left
front, keeps circling inward, pulling
the chair toward the sidewalk—the clacking
of the wheel like the snapping of small bones.

And the stricken father has hands, limp
as two dead gulls, that threaten to catch
in the rusty spokes, but never do, his face
honed down to a neo-classical expression:
angular, extreme, polished, and hardened
like red marble, mythical, as the Greeks
might have looked when they imagined tragedy.

Winona Baker

Still Life with Children

I didn't know what to do
children kept slipping out
by twos and threes

I stood them against the wall
like gingerbread men
they crawled into my lap
snuffled through my hair
searching for nipples

after the first half-dozen
I called them my virgin births
I'd told my husband
to keep it pointed
the other way

anyway
there was no time
in whites he heated
hour-stamped bottles
buzz saws shaved mountains
for padded diapers

like balloons on water
children tumbled
over the floors
and grew

they strode
away from the house on long legs

we looked at each other
and at photographs
couldn't agree on
the names of children
with faces like those
on missing posters

we put them in boxes
and wait

Jill Jones

Nosferatu in the Suburbs

Not the guns again,
not the rain continuing,
not the knives,
not in front of the children.
No wonder they're all escaping,
the youngest ones left for the border
yesterday with all they have:
plastic back packs, bare feet and blank prescriptions,
drained by *adults only* pale night shadows.
And you, seeking beer and oblivion
and the family's deep veins for red life.

Not the fists again,
not the blind thunder,
not the axe,
blunted on the daytime coffins,
but sharp in your private midnight.
Although your mouth moves
I can no longer speak,
every cavity, every room now empty,
sucked dry but you still starve;
all dry now except the walls,
still moist, the papers will say,
when the bystanders arrive.

Glass

Dayv James-French

Across the street, in the park, a man in very small lavender satin shorts and rubber flip-flops is pushing a child in a stroller along the sidewalk. A dog lopes into view from behind some trees to the right, and bounds towards the man and child. Its front and back paws are not in a straight line but almost perpendicular to its spine, like the hounds in a Colville painting.

"Something's about to happen," Dave says. He's twenty years old, anticipation is a natural state for him; most things have yet to happen.

"Where?" Gail lifts her head from the blanket she's spread over the grass on her front lawn, and pulls off her sunglasses. These are bright green plastic, with almost black lenses. The shoulder straps of her white one-piece bathing suit are pushed down, trapping her upper arms against her body. From a distance, she'd look like she was naked, evening up the tan of her arms and legs, her back. She's taking a week off work, her kids are still in school, her husband Richard is at his office.

"There." Dave angles his head instead of pointing.

"The guy in the shorts?" She squints, puts her glasses back on. "And the kid?"

"Man sees daughter eaten by dog. I can't look," he says, turning back to face the park. The man is standing beside the stroller, holding one of the child's hands in his own, and patting the dog in long, even strokes. The child's body looks like it's been peeled away from the white canvas of the stroller, pliant and boneless. The canvas sags behind her. The dog acts pleased, wagging its tail so its whole body jiggles, while staying rooted in place. It's a thin, spotted animal.

"He's introducing them. I don't believe it."

"He's a dad," Gail says. "That's his job."

"Really, a dad?" Dave laughs. He likes Gail's categories for people, her easy reductions. He's noticed, especially, how she talks about marriage as a thing *apart* that has its own internal logic, seemingly arbitrary rules affecting married people and which they ignore at their peril. "It's not two people with a single heart beating," she says. "It's more like a corporate

entity. You have to work for it. There's nothing you can take for granted." When she uses the word *divorce* she gives it the same pronunciation Dave has heard some people give *cancer,* suggesting distance from an inevitable occurance in the lives of others.

Gail has been married since college, when she quit after first year to work putting Richard through graduate school, then the early, low-rung-on-the-career-ladder jobs, fitting the two kids into sick leave and vacation days. Dave's never met Richard, but imagines someone like a pilot in an airline commercial, efficient and stable.

"And do we like dads?" he asks.

"Nice ones, we do."

She turns to lie on her back and reaches for the plastic jar of water she uses to splash her skin when it gets too hot from the sun. He lifts it from the ground and passes it over. Supine, she snaps the jar in his direction, squeezing the soft sides. Cold water slops over his t-shirt; the skin on his arms ripples up into duck flesh. He makes a sound like *whumph.*

"Look at this." He holds out one forearm. "A systemic wimp. Betrayed by my own skin."

"Skin's an organ," she says. "Not a system."

"My shirt's soaked." He pulls a tent of the light blue cotton away from his chest.

"It'll dry."

Dave brings his knees up to his chest, crosses his arms over them and supports his head on the X of his wrists. He should get home, pick up something to eat on the way. He has two term papers to finish, before his exams.

Spring is early this year. Downtown, in the shadows of the tallest buildings, there are still patches of snow, rough and pebbly from melting and re-freezing. Under him, the grass is warm and dry. Not so long ago, there had been a rumble through the land, when a nuclear power plant in Harrisburg came close to melting down. How close is anyone's guess; with the potential to be international incidents or not, accidents on that scale are handled as government secrets, any information released now is suspect, just politics.

Dave worked for a minor politician, his first summer job, two years ago. His day consisted almost entirely of personalizing form letters to immigrants.

Dear Quann Family, *Welcome to Canada. I sincerely hope you are enjoying your new home at* 5002 Cumberland. *Remember to vote. . . .*

He worked quietly, pacing himself, and thought he was unnoticed. When the research assistant told him he was wanted in the minister's of-

fice, her expression unreadable, he flashed back, viscerally, as if being summoned to the principal's office. Room 101.

"Sir?" Dave stood on the carpet just inside the office door. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes. It's, uhm, Dave?" The man stood up and walked around the five or six yards of polished desk that separated them. "I was hoping you could give me a hand."

"A hand."

"You see, Dave?" The minister sounded like there were more than two people in the room, his voice projected to the far corners, to the rafters. "My wife hasn't been well lately."

"I'm sorry to hear it." Dave, with some effort, kept his hands out of the pockets of his grey flannel trousers.

"Oh, that's not the problem." The man made a wide, dismissive gesture with his left arm. "The problem is that she hasn't been able to get out to buy me some new shirts. And the one I have on now seems to have come back from the laundry a little small."

"Yes?" Dave's own shirt, from a distance, would appear to be lightly dotted. Closer up, the dots were tiny printed chickens. An exchange would be incongruous. The man was also twice his size.

"If you could give me a hand with this?" The minister pulled the knot of his tie down to mid-chest, stepped towards Dave and lifted his chin to expose a smoothly-shaved neck with a gap of at least an inch between the collar's button and buttonhole. "To do it up."

Dave moved forward, into an enveloping cloud of bar soap and baby powder, damp wool, taking hold of the two sides of the collar.

"I can try," he said, without conviction. The man turned his head, tipped back so the whites of his eyes showed. Dave brought his hands together.

"Ark."

"Sorry." Dave released his hold. "I'm not sure I can do it this way. Maybe if I stood behind you, it'd be like doing up my own."

They shuffled around each other until Dave was in a position to reach over the man's shoulders. He put his knee between the man's legs for leverage and, eyes closed, tried to imagine he was doing up his own collar, what that felt like.

"Ark."

"Don't *fidget,*" Dave snapped, forgetting himself in his concentration. "Just keep still." He dropped his head to the heavily-padded shoulder of the man's suit and tried again. The minister pulled away and turned to face Dave.

"Look, I think it'll be okay. I can run out at lunch and pick up some new shirts. Maybe I've put on weight."

"Well, if you're sure," Dave said, trying not to stare at the man's neck. There were two thumb-sized marks, changing from white to dull heliotrope that would become bruises on the neck of an elected representative. The one with the wife who wasn't well.

It was a little after eleven when the research assistant stood in front of Dave's typewriter and said, "Get your jacket and come with me." Dave turned off his machine, folded his blazer over his arm, and followed her to the elevators.

"You realize you gave that man a hickey?" she said. "Or, more important, that's what people will think."

Dave stared for a moment at the Down button. He took a breath and thought of the phrase, 'playing in the major leagues.' Looking slightly past her, to a distant future, he asked, "Does this mean I'm fired?"

"Fired?" She laughed, way too loud for the marbled corridor they were in. "Christ, no. I'm taking you to lunch. Oh," she added, "I'm Gail."

Dave's apartment is on the third floor of a house six blocks from where Gail and Richard live, but it might as well be in another city, that's how different the neighbourhoods are. His bedroom looks out at a twenty-four hour blue video shop. He hardly needs the room's overhead fixture; car headlights sweep the ceiling almost all night long. The hardwood floors are worn smooth in the centres of the two rooms, to the colour of beaten egg. Where previous tenants had furniture pushed to the wall, there are rough borders, dark with oily stains that have resisted turpentine, steel wool, even a butter knife. The kitchen and bathroom floors are tiled in hexagons not much larger than fifty-cent pieces, and about as secure as would be a scattering of coins. After drying off from a shower, Dave sits on the edge of the tub and pulls loose tiles from the soles of his feet, fits them back into their spaces. He hardly uses the kitchen; morning coffee, mostly, reheating take-out pizza.

He is deeply *at home* here. It's his first place on his own, and he's acquiring the accouterments of the newly-independent: a red, touchtone Contempra phone, a goose-neck lamp with an enameled goose-head shade, subscriptions to *Psychology Today, Esquire, Newsweek.*

"What was that noise?" he asks the closed bathroom door. "Are you looking in my medicine cabinet?"

"For sure," through the door. "A classic case."

"What? What's classic?"

Gail opens the door, leaves the bathroom. One step takes her into the

living room. "Nothing," she says. "I was just getting you going. But you really do use a lot of stuff for your hair and face. After shave skin renewal?"

"I try to take care of myself," Dave says. "It's not like make-up or anything. I suppose Richard slaps on some cold water and shaves with a steak knife?"

"He has an electric. When you're married, with kids, those things aren't really a priority." She runs her palm over the parsons-style table holding Dave's typewriter, library books with torn strips of paper marking the places he needs for his essay, a ceramic mug. She hasn't been in the apartment before; they usually meet at the restaurant. Dave opens the single closet door, then decides against wearing a jacket. He pats his pockets, checking for wallet and keys.

"This isn't a bad place, for what you're paying. Our first apartment was over a mortuary. Real depressing. But we managed to save enough for the down payment on the house."

"I like it."

She crosses to where Dave has a framed mirror on the wall, narrows her eyes, steps back from her image. "You know about these things," she says. "Do you think my hair is scuzzy? Should I try to do something with it?"

"Wouldn't hurt," Dave says. "Nobody rolls out of bed in the morning looking like the people in magazines."

"Wrong answer," she says. "You pay for lunch."

The Modern Cafe has been in operation practically since the city's founding, one of those businesses that survives by making no concessions at all to its customers, establishing itself as a habit sheerly by being familiar, without surprises.

After Gail first took Dave there, they started having lunch together on paydays, taking turns treating. That first day, he's been apologetic, talking too quickly about his plans for the fall, to establish himself as competent, forward-thinking.

"I'm not a stupid person," he said. "Sometimes I make mistakes."

"I wouldn't want to work with anyone who'd take pride in that job. You'd have to be brain-dead to keep your mind on anything so inane."

"But I felt stupid," Dave said. "I've never tried to dress anyone before. I really don't like being made to feel foolish."

"It was funny." Gail laughed. "The look on his face. Anyway, I had a good time, so lunch is on me."

"This is my reward?" Dave looked around, calculating.

The restaurant is divided in two by a series of arches, with a bright

mural that looks crayoned on the surrounding stucco wall. A jovial shepherdess, red-cheeked and thick lipped, dominates the foreground, with a bust that shelves out in a restatement of the terraced hills behind her. Goats gambol over the hills. By a trick of perspective they range in comparative sizes, from that of a small dog to an eighteen-wheel diesel truck.

On the one side there are tables and chairs with a remarkable similarity to the chrome dinette sets in a department store catalogue. The population of this side, apparently, feels comfortable with the furnishings. Dave, feeling crass, assumes they go home to much the same decor. If they go home at all; he's seen through the window, when he was walking home from work, the same people from lunchtime, sitting around a table surfaced with empty draught glasses, cigarette packs, overflowing ashtrays, crumpled paper napkins.

The other side, where Dave and Gail sit, is more formal, with cloth table linens, water glasses, and the draught is served in pub-style mugs. But the food is the same, on either side, what Dave thinks of as Canadian cuisine.

"I'm having the barbequed chicken burger," he says. It's what he always has. On the menu, this is *Bar-B-Q*. "Why don't you have a toasted cheese sandwich?"

"Because you're paying? No way." Gail passes her menu to the waitress. "I'll have the deep-fried shrimp."

"Shrimp inna basket," the waitress says. "Anything to drink?" She's an older woman, wearing white Wallabees with her uniform, a shapeless burgundy shift of glassy-looking fabric. Dave has a weakness, nostalgic rather than patronizing, for matronly waitresses, the type who might at any moment call him 'Hon' or 'Dear.'

"Draught for me," Dave says. He looks across the table. "And a glass of white wine?" Gail nods. The waitress walks away, looking down at her shoes. The backs of her legs appear grey through the thick stockings she's wearing. Dave resists an urge to call after her, "Oh, be careful. Please be careful."

"Richard's going to Amsterdam." This is delivered like a sentence from the middle of a paragraph, and Dave turns the side of his head, his ear, to Gail, meaning for her to repeat this. "There's a conference," she says. "And Richard is taking off in ten days. I spent all of yesterday on the phone, changing plans we'd already made."

"Well, his job, after all," Dave says. He thinks ten days is a lot of time, and he's been told that Richard is a world-class economist; reasonably, there is no crisis, nothing has happened that couldn't be expected. "You couldn't go with him?"

"With two kids? Forget it. It's just so inconsiderate of him, to leave now." She shakes her head. "I don't even want to talk about it. So, how're you doing?"

"I'm up to my hips in dead Jews," Dave says. The good and drinks arrive at this moment, and he hurries to explain in case the comment, overheard, was insensitive, "My history paper on the Warsaw ghetto. It's the most depressing research I've ever done." While they eat, he tells her what he's learning, about the creation of the Judenrat, ostensibly a democratic Jewish organization, like the Council of Elders, headed by Adam Czerniakow.

"In fact, the first meeting was held in the presence of a Gestapo officer named Mende. This was in 1939. Can you imagine what that must have felt like? That kind of absolute powerlessness." Dave puts his knife and fork down over his plate, handles to the right. "Then I have this psychology course where I'm supposed to believe that taking responsibility for my own life is the path to mental health. I know I'm at school to be broadened, but I think I'm being stretched awfully thin."

"You've certainly given me something to think about," Gail says. "I guess there's an inevitable alienation between military organizations and political leadership. It's probably more about male egos than anything else."

"Good point. Maybe it was all personal. I wonder if I can use it?"

She crumples her napkin and puts it in the wicker basket now emptied of shrimp, then rests her chin in one palm. "If I buy whatever you put on your hair, would you come back to my place and show me how to use it?"

"Thank you a lot." Dave takes the drink and holds it in his lap. The jeans he has on are worn thin and soft; he can feel the cold glass through the fabric over his crotch. He crosses his legs to create a more secure pocket. If he stood up, he would come maybe to Richard's eyebrows. The man is well over six feet tall, dark-haired, with spaniel-brown eyes that have only a narrow edge of white. He's taken off his suit jacket, and stands in front of Dave in a shirt and tie, belted trousers.

"So how long is she going to take?" Richard asks. He looks up at the ceiling, through which can be heard the sound of the running shower.

"She just has to rinse her hair," Dave says. Gail's kids had come home from school after she'd changed into a white terrycloth robe and was sitting on one of the kitchen chairs pulled into the middle of the room while Dave worked a deep-treatment conditioner through her hair. He had a dishtowel, printed with a giant panda, tucked into his shirt collar. The kids, Mark and Jenny, had stood watching, rolling their shoulders over the lower cabinets. Their eyes were milky blue, as if they had cataracts,

the eyes of old people. Dave, inspired, had shaped Gail's hair into a single, thick horn rising from the top of her head.

"What's your mother look like now?" he asked. He was thinking of a unicorn.

"An ice cream cone," Jenny said, thrusting three fingers into her mouth, to contain herself.

"Pebbles Flintstone," Mark shrieked.

Dave laughed and bent over to look at Gail face-on, then straightened and was looking at Richard. He tugged down the dishtowel, held it limp at his side. He had a sense of inappropriateness, the way he might feel if he turned off a radio that was playing a John Lennon song; it's not done.

"What's this?" Richard swung his attache case onto the counter. Its black plastic handle clicked against the metal reinforcement band between the locks. "Kids, up to your rooms." He clapped his hands.

Gail stood up, pulling tight the belt of her bathrobe, and made the introductions. "Am I about done?" she asked Dave. He nodded, and she went upstairs, with the kids.

Richard offered Dave a drink, scraped the chair back under the table, and led the way through the dining room.

"Well?" Richard looks down. Dave follows his gaze, says, "Oh, yes," and lifts his glass, sips the drink.

"It's single malt." Richard holds the rim of his glass with the tips of his fingers, his elbow held away from his body, so he brings his mouth to the drink, rather than the reverse, and takes a deep swallow.

"It's very nice." Dave moves his hand up from the base of his own glass, which he's been clutching like a weight for arm-curls, drinks again. He tips his head to the side, thoughtful. After a moment, he says, "No burn."

"A civilized drink for a man."

"You're being civilized? That's good." Gail comes into the living room. She's put on a red sweater and white slacks, and has a towel wrapped like a turban around her head. Her feet are bare.

"You were expecting us to be duking it out?" Richard asks. He brings his drink hand into his chest, raises his other hand, fisted. "Put 'em up, boy."

"Some men might be a little upset to come home and find their wives in their nightclothes with a strange man," Gail says. She stands beside Richard and puts her arm around his waist. "I don't give you enough credit for not being like that. Anyway, you know about Dave. He's an old friend, from work."

"Just that summer. I'm at school, now," Dave explains. "We were having lunch." This passes without remark. Gail and Richard seem to have

forgotten he's here. He looks past them, out the window. There's a child on a tricycle in the middle of the street, pedalling in narrowing circles. Beyond that, the park grass is darkening in patches as the sun dips below the level of the trees, although it's hours before nightfall. Dave considers gulping the rest of his drink, or leaving it on the table beside him, but he's not sure what single malt means. It could be something really expensive, or very sophisticated; he doesn't want to be unappreciative or boorish.

He checks the level of his glass, glances up, and sees Richard looking at him, over the top of Gail's towelled head.

"Will she have beautiful hair for Wednesday night?" he asks.

"I guess." Dave shrugs. "You could do it again, before that. Why?"

"Her big night," Richard says. "Isn't that what this is about?"

"Richard," Gail says. "Never mind, Dave."

"No, I should apologize. I'm sorry, Dave, that you had to move heaven and earth with your social calendar to accommodate my job. It was inconsiderate of me."

Dave puts his glass down. He rubs his hands on his jeans before he stands. "I should be going." Nobody moves or speaks, so he adds, "I'm confused. Did I say something?"

"It's our anniversary party," Gail says. "It was supposed to be the week Richard's going to be away. I've had to move it up."

"Amsterdam. I remember."

"Wait," Richard says. "You weren't invited? Have I put my foot in it?" They've started, the three of them, moving towards the house's front door, the way people move towards the box office of a theatre when they've arrived in plenty of time, momentarily relieved of purpose.

"It's all older people. I'm sure you understand." Gail unwraps the towel from her hair as Dave pushes open the door to the porch. "I didn't think you'd be comfortable."

"Older people?" Richard repeats. "We're already older people? I hope that's not true."

"Well, couples, then," Gail says.

"Oh, couples. Yes."

"Hey," Dave says. "That's okay. I'll be about in the middle of exams then. Really busy. But call me for lunch, after."

He stands on the porch, in the cooling air, and pushes the screen door closed. Richard has one arm up to the top of the frame, on the inside. Gail holds the towel in front of her. They become silhouettes through the fine mesh, lit from behind by the kitchen light at the end of the hall. Dave squints at the disappearance of details, nodding vaguely at the created dark shape. "Gail," he says. "Richard."

Dave holds up his hands, with his fingers spread, and looks closely at his cuticles. He makes a fist, and scrapes his thumbnail against a front tooth. He pushes back his chair from the table and stretches, then tucks his shirt back into his jeans. Yawning, he stands and goes into the kitchen, to check the clock on the stove panel. This is labelled **Time Control Centre.** He's never noticed that before. He rubs his eyes with the heels of his hands. Maybe, if he set back the clock, he'd be able to finish his term paper before the exam Thursday. Later today, actually; it's one-fifteen. Time control, there's a concept.

He goes back to his place in front of the typewriter. The top third of the sheet of white bond is dense with statistics: the number of tons of sugar and flour delivered to the Warsaw Ghetto, the death toll from typhoid and cholera. The Jews have decided on a policy of non-resistance, convinced the Nazis will deport only sixty thousand of their number, not hundreds of thousands.

Dave rolls in a new sheet of paper, types *Rumours of the reality of the resettlement actions reached Czerniakow and he had First, a member of the Jewish Council, check the stories with Security Police officers.*

He laces his fingers together, cracks his knuckles. There is no conclusion to this essay, no moral he can draw, no final statement on the corrosive effect of victimization. His door buzzer sounds, from the ground floor, and he nods absently. He scratches the top of his thigh, then realizes *door buzzer,* what that means, and he gets up to open the door.

A man, carrying a paper bag, is coming up the stairwell. Dave can only see the top of his head, wondering who it might be, until the man turns on the landing.

"Richard?" He steps back into his apartment, leaving the door open so the short hall has better light.

"Dave. I can come in?" Richard moves past him and pushes the door closed. His breathing is audible. The suit he's wearing is rumpled. There's a rust-coloured spot where the outside trouser seam meets the pocket. "I brought a gift for the host." He pulls a bottle out of the bag. "Or am I the host? I didn't think you should miss all of Gail's little party."

"Well," Dave says. "That's nice. I'm—" He points at the typewriter, the books stacked on the table around it.

"Don't be so serious. It's not healthy." Richard is in the kitchen; it's not much more than an open closet off this room. He tugs at the cupboards and takes down two water tumblers. "Ice?" He disappears behind the refrigerator door. There's a sound like loose change emptied from pockets at bedtime, dropping on the surface of a dresser. "Did you know glass is traditional for a fifteenth anniversary? So you can't not have a

glass of scotch with me. Can't argue with tradition. Fifteen, maybe, we should have."

"Okay." Dave accepts the glass. "I'll have a drink with you." He looks around the room, then turns the chair away from the typewriter, sits on the edge. Richard carries the bottle of scotch with him, puts it on the floor beside the couch, then leans back against the cushions. His drink is cupped in both hands between his legs. He's tall enough that his knees are pushed up, higher than his waist. He lolls his head back, over the top of the couch.

Dave gulps half his scotch, quickly, before Richard looks up. Single malt. No burn.

"How's Gail?"

"Gail? She's fine." He leans forward, as if he's falling, then puts one hand down to the floor, grasps the bottle and re-fills his glass. "Her hair looked just wonderful." Richard laughs, suddenly, his face flushing. "Stunning," he says. "Divine." He puts the bottle down, hard, and Dave wonders if this could be heard underneath the floor. The woman downstairs is a nurse and works shifts.

"Good." Dave takes another swallow of scotch, puts the almost-empty glass on the table at his side. The edge of his hand leaves a mark on the wood, a damp crescent quickly shrinking into its centre. "Thanks for the drink," he says. "I really should get back to work." He starts to stand. Richard waves him down.

"Don't spoil the party. God, you're a sober young man. These are supposed to be the best years of your life. Learn to enjoy." Richard narrows his eyes; one squints down more than the other. "Just how old are you, anyway?"

"Me? Twenty." Dave slumps back in the chair. "Listen, are you sure you should be here?"

"Twenty," Richard says. He cocks his head and looks reflective. "I was never twenty. I *turned* twenty, maybe, but I never got to *be* twenty. I don't know, she might have been right. Start early, make a commitment." He glances up, to a point past Dave. His eyes are too bright to be focused. "Are they still saving it?" he asks. "Or are they just making you pay for it?" He purses his lips and makes a sound, the way someone might try to coax an un-named kitten to come out from under the sofa: *tch, tch, tch.*

"This is not a conversation I want to have." Dave carries his glass into the kitchen, leans against the counter there.

"Come on, you're a student. We can keep it academic."

"I don't think so," Dave starts. He falls silent as Richard's head drops

down to his chest. The hand holding his drink tips forward on the arm of the couch, but nothing spills.

"Richard?" he whispers. "Richard?" There's no answer. He sighs, then moves to take a blanket from the closet. The glass is easily pulled from Richard's limp hand. He puts it on the floor, beside the bottle of scotch, then flips the blanket over Richard's chest, so he looks like he's in a barber's chair. He's about to kneel and pull off the man's shoes, when Richard shifts his weight, sliding down.

"I could have gone," he mumbles. "I could have been at Woodstock."

"Yeah," Dave says, standing. "I guess you could have."

He turns off the overhead, on the way out of the room, uses the toilet, then pulls off his own clothes, down to his briefs, and climbs into bed. A car's headlights whiten the ceiling in a broad arc, then vanish. He closes his eyes.

He's trying out for his high school's track team. His shoes are soled with tiny rubber suction cups, like the tentacles of an octopus. These are arranged in fingerprint whorls. The starter pistol explodes in the fresh spring air. Dave pushes off from the block, his weight coming down neatly on the left foot, heel and toe. When he tries to lift off, he's trapped. His sole is gripping the track. In the grassy oval the track surrounds, there's a man wearing a dark, narrow suit, a tall hat. The air lifts the sidecurls from his cheeks. "Run," he shouts. "Run with the others. This is not a practice. If you don't run, you die." Reserves of strength return to him. He takes a deep breath and twists his upper body. He opens his eyes.

Richard is kneeling on the bed beside him. He has the sheet thrown back, and he's dragging Dave across the mattress, towards him. His hands are warm on Dave's legs, as he works his fingers between the thighs.

"What?" Dave kicks out, a reflex, and pushes himself up, into a sitting position. "Stop," he says. "Just stop."

Richard crawls off the bed, his weight on his hands, stands up. He's in stocking feet. His shirt is unbuttoned, although his tie is still knotted in a pinched width of striped fabric. The light from the window is pale blue, like the light from a television seen through a window from the street. The curtains that came with the apartment have a ragged and water-stained lining. Dave is afraid to tug them closed, they might come apart in his hands.

"Relax." Richard says. "I just wanted to see if it would have been worth it."

"Go." Dave points to the door of the room. The skin of his arm is the

same colour as the veins inside his elbow. He stretches his lips back from his teeth. "Now."

He waits, hearing bumpings from the next room, short whispers, the clink of glass, and, finally, heavy footsteps on the stairs down to the door of the building. He listens, but doesn't hear a car start up. All the digits on the clock radio flip over. It's five o'clock.

He gets out of bed, wrapping the sheet around his body, slams closed the door, and walks into the living room. It looks shabby in this light, as if no one has lived here for some time.

The last page of his essay is still in the typewriter. He glances over what he's written, then turns the chair around and sits down. He types *The rumours were true. Treblinka was in operation. On July 22, 1942, the resettlement began. On this day, Adam Czerniakow committed suicide.*

Dave reads this out loud, shaking his head. He pushes the return bar, twice, then adds his name and student number. There's nothing else he can do.

It was in the newspaper: The Modern Cafe, a fixture since 1946, is going to be torn down to make way for a 14-storey office building. City planning committees have approved the demolition, and construction should start early next spring.

"It's the end of an era, for sure," Dave says. "Did you see that the chicken burger used to be less than fifty cents?" He cuts into his, forks up chicken, roll, and sauce together.

"I read that, yes," Gail says. "The article didn't make adjustments for the cost of living since, however. That fifty cents probably had a lot of buying power."

"I never know what to make of those comparisons, when they're made," Dave says. "I don't think you can tote up individual prices and come up with the cost of your life. Or its value."

"No? Richard does. That's his job." Gail takes a sip of her wine. "Did I tell you what he got me for our anniversary?" She opens her suede shoulderbag, propping it against the corner of the table. She fishes inside, for a moment, then hands the slim plastic machine to Dave.

"A solar calculator?" Dave tips the calculator so the four collector cells dully reflect the room's light. He laughs. "I guess it is a little more romantic than a new hose for the vacuum cleaner."

"No, it's what I wanted. He's not insensitive," Gail says. "You know what he said? He said he thinks we're having an affair. Not a real one, sort of intellectual."

"Platonic." Dave swallows. The barbeque sauce has a metallic, artifi-

cial taste. It's very red on the plate. "And I guess he doesn't want you getting involved in my life. I understand. I mean, he's your husband, after all. Wouldn't want to mess with that. He's a big man. Besides, he knows where I live."

There's a sound, first, and then a spreading dampness. Dave looks down at his lap, where the broken glass is spilling wine over the napkin spread there. His shirt is spotted. He looks up, and Gail is out of her chair, leaning over the table. He puts his hand over the shank of his fork. Then she turns, and leaves. The shoulderbag she has clutched in one fist swings furiously.

Dave folds the corners of the napkin over the shards and fragments of glass, then puts it on the table beside his plate. It makes a fragile, tinkling sound. The waitress comes over to the table.

"You've had a little accident? Should I get you another glass?" she asks.

"I don't think my friend will be back."

The woman bends closer to him, confidingly, "Would you like a little more sauce for your chicken? I could run your plate back into the kitchen."

"I don't think so." Dave looks at the table. Over the white bun, chunks of chicken are stained with sauce. The coleslaw, on the side of the plate, looks like shredded newsprint. "But I'll have another draught. No, a scotch. Single malt. Wait. A draught and a scotch."

"See them?" The waitress points through the arches, to a group of people at a large table with no plates or cutlery in place, only glasses. The men are large, coarse-looking, with the high colour of essential hypertension; the women are drab, bleached like old photographs too long tucked into the frame around a mirror.

"I've seen them before," Dave says.

"That's okay for them, but I can tell you're not like that. You don't want another drink."

"What? I'm not? No, no, I guess I'm not like that." He looks up at the woman. She has a lace-edged handkerchief neatly folded and pinned over her uniform, where a man's shirt would have a pocket. Embroidered in the centre of this, a spidery lettering spells out a name. Audrey. It's not a common name, not anymore.

"My friend?" he says. "The one who left? It was her turn to pay."

Sándor Csoóri

Two Poems Translated from the Hungarian by Len Roberts and László Vertes

I Believed Then

I've never desired anything else,
just that green evening again on the village's fringe:
I lay, face down, in the May grass with you,
the skirt drawn slightly up your thigh,
and the unsuspecting maybeetles flitted over us,
doomed guests of the universe,
and I believed then the world
would take me back again,
the earth, the trees, the delusions that survived the winter,
the world—having had enough of its losses—would yet take me back.

My Mother is a Black Rose

My mother has a headache,
she drinks no espresso—
my mother has a headache,
she takes no powders;
with growing silent paleness
she milks her cow,
with growing silent paleness
she washes dishes, she sweeps about.

My mother is rudely taunted
by upstart strangers?
My mother, panicked,
stammers and gets hoarse;
pulling on her black shawl,
she would draw her loneliness together:
let no one harm her any more
or add to her fear.

My mother gets nowhere
although she keeps treading paths—
from the star of poverty
her forehead is cracked;
upon her shoulders even the lilac
blossoms course so heavily
they seem to be a burden only,
sweet-scented damnation.

It is summer on the earth and in the sky
music plays, strains
in my mother's silent desert
which have to fade.
Machines, commodities sing,
stunned by society's wonders,
but not one would run to her and say:
I'll help you, that's why I've come.

My mother has a headache,
nothingness pains her,
my mother is a black rose,
she cannot put on new colours.
One night she will crumple to the ground,
she'll be small, shattered—
A bird will come to snap its beak
and soar away with her.

John Pass

Rugosa

Here's how I'm reminded
nothing can placate
your loveliness. I turn

on the path to the sea to see you
coming down in dappled light
and ache immediately, the watershed

of instance evident in a sip, slip
of the tongue to sweet
nothings, sigh

of the ruffled ocean, wave
of your body at rest on its side.
Smooth thigh. Milk-pink

rugosas overwhelm
a cedar shrub. Our son

drops his handful of strawberries
on the page. I'll go along

with you to buy the bouganvillaea
but it will prove useless.

Why Would a Man

Emily Hammond

The week his divorce from Gail became final, Alex witnessed a fight between two Korean women; one bit off the tip of the other's little finger and swallowed it. Aside from the timing, there was no connection between the two events. He didn't even know the Koreans, had never met them before that night, that dinner party. But there he'd been with Maureen, an old friend from college. She knew the Koreans.

That day he'd been in Santa Cruz on business, and had brought along Maureen's number in case he decided to look her up. Actually there were two numbers, which he'd copied from the address book at home, written in Gail's hand; she'd been the one to keep up with Maureen in the eight years since college.

Alex called the first number from a pay phone. No answer. He dialed the second and got an acupuncture clinic. This time he asked for Maureen and heard, "Just a minute, please."

"Hello?" she said. "Alex!" While they talked he pictured her as he'd last seen her two years ago, the same as in college, the same flyaway hair and mismatched clothes—stripes with plaids, dots with stripes—clothes bought at rummage sales that somehow looked great on Maureen.

Her only really big news, she said, was that she had shortened her name to Maura and was studying to be an acupuncturist. Alex wondered if she knew about his big news, the divorce. Since she didn't mention Gail, he assumed she did, probably through Gail herself. In any case, he wasn't about to bring it up. Instead he told Maureen—Maura—about the business, his business, this business trip: he was down from Marin to drum up more customers, more restaurants. "I wholesale vegetables to restaurants... remember?"

"Oh, the weird vegetables, bok choy, baby this, baby that. Baby crookneck squash?"

"Right," he said, and when the conversation slowed, he asked her out to dinner.

"I'm supposed to have dinner at Dr. Kim's," she said. "Wait a second—"

Alex was put on hold. Who was Dr. Kim? He deposited another quarter, wishing he had phrased the invitation differently. It wasn't meant as a date; he just wanted to have dinner with an old friend. Ever since the divorce he'd been feeling nostalgic, lonesome, cut off. Divorced. The word was like cold steel, and he envisioned himself with a bad shave, ill-fitting clothes, frayed collars. But there was nothing wrong with his shave or his clothes. They weren't falling apart, certainly not his shirts, and Gail had never been the type to see after his clothes anyway. *He* felt frayed, that was it, as though his neck, his skin, could unravel like fabric.

"Alex?" He pressed the receiver to his ear more tightly. "You're invited too. Dinner at Dr. Kim's, how does that sound? I can give you directions here."

"Who is Dr. Kim?"

"What? Oh. This is her clinic." As though he ought to know. "Didn't I tell you? I'm studying here, under her supervision." Maura then gave him directions to the clinic, which he jotted down on the back of his motel receipt.

Following an afternoon at restaurants—two French, one seafood, one health food place—Alex headed over to the clinic. Maura's directions were needlessly complicated; he finally threw them aside and consulted a map.

The clinic was in a medical building. He gave his name to the receptionist and almost didn't recognize Maura when she passed by: white coat, rubber gloves, her flyaway hair cut short, smooth, parted on the side. She was carrying a tray of needles which, she explained, had just come out of the sterilizer. "Be right back," she said, and when she returned, minus the gloves and needles, they hugged each other. She offered to show him around the clinic.

"I can even give you a treatment," she said.

"For what?"

"Anything. Allergies, headaches, back trouble, nerves. Anything."

He passed on the treatment—he didn't like needles—but accepted the tour. While explaining the basics of acupuncture Maura showed him the sterilizer, the needles sorted by size. They peered into several examination rooms which didn't seem much different from any doctor's. Then she opened another door. Inside was a fat man lying on a table, needles sticking out of him like a pin cushion. The needles were attached to wires, hooked up to a machine.

"What's he being treated for?" Alex whispered.

"Various things, obesity mostly." She closed the door.

"What about the machine? What's that do?"

She was about to answer when a tall Oriental woman approached them in the hallway. "Dr. Kim," Maura said, touching her sleeve. "This is Alex."

Dr. Kim held out her hand and shook it. "You're having dinner at my house," she said, and let his hand drop. Deliberately. Her eyes were dark and unreceptive. "Excuse me," she said and went into the fat man's room, closing the door.

Alex stared after her, insulted. Why had she acted that way? He turned to Maura—hadn't she noticed? She was describing how the machine warmed the needles, sent gentle waves of electricity throughout the body. "In the old days," she said, "they vibrated the needles by hand." Alex barely listened. The last thing he wanted was to have dinner at Dr. Kim's. But when he tried to figure a way out, some last minute excuse, he felt exhausted, physically weak. In the past year he'd come to associate this feeling with Gail, to blame her for it. Before their separation he'd been cheerful and energetic enough, despite Gail's continual depressions, or maybe because of them. Then she'd moved out, leaving him with nothing but the furniture and a damp spirit. He couldn't help hating her for it even though he still, unfortunately, loved her.

Alex trailed after Maura without really seeing her, down the hallway, following only the heels of her shoes, the sound of her voice. She talked about Dr. Kim, how she was not only an acupuncturist but a medical doctor as well, how her parents had emigrated from Korea shortly after Dr. Kim was born.

"She was a genius as a child," Maura said, "a prodigy." Alex imagined Dr. Kim emerging from the womb, a fully developed adult, complete with medical degrees.

Exchanging her white coat for a sweater, Maura said that Dr. Kim had taught her so much, *so much* about the workings of the body, the workings of the mind. "She's given me a sense of direction," she said, leading Alex out to the parking lot. He felt momentarily comforted by her baggy green sweater with its design of footballs across the back; this was the Maura, the Maureen he knew. She turned to face him. "Do you know what I mean?"

"Sort of."

Maura wanted to stop by her place to change, so Alex followed her there in his car. They parked in an alley and walked through a small courtyard littered with potted plants in various stages of decay.

"Those are my herbs, and that—" Maura pointed to a tiny, weed infested plot. "That's my vegetable garden."

Alex glanced at the sliding glass doors of her apartment. A huge, hairy animal stood on its hind legs, licking the glass. "Is that a dog?"

"Dog? Oh, the dog. That's Rex. Do you grow vegetables?"

People always asked him that, assuming that since he sold vegetables, he grew them too. "No," he said, "no time or interest." He was working ten, twelve hours a day and besides, why grow vegetables when he could have his pick from the warehouse? He wished Maura would hurry up and unlock the door. Her bug-eyed dog made him nervous; barking and howling, it pounded its paws on the glass as though any minute it might come crashing through. When finally she did open the door, the dog jumped up on Alex, paws on his shoulders, wagging, drooling, licking.

"Down!" Maura pulled the dog off. "He's been cooped up all day, I'd better walk him. You go on in."

Except for the futon mat on the floor, there was no place to sit, so Alex wandered around noticing the clothes in the bookcase and the books in the boxes. Typical Maureen. In college she had owned so many second-hand clothes she'd kept them in plastic bags under her bed, and she would be forever digging out some choice item to give you—a gold lame scarf, black clumpy shoes from the fifties, a man's shirt with five species of birds all over it. "Here, take it," she'd say. Once, when she heard that he and Gail were thinking of getting married, she rummaged around and pulled out a gaudy satin wedding gown with a six-foot-long train. Both of them winced. As it turned out, they didn't get married for another six years. They lived together all that time, and when they did finally marry, it was only to separate a year later. In fact, the wedding dress incident had marked the beginning of Gail's indecision about their marriage, about him. She was the most indecisive person he had ever known. Deciding what to do on any given day was almost ore than she could handle, and he sometimes thought the first and only decision of her life had been to leave him.

Alex opened the refrigerator, hoping for a beer or soda or juice, and was confronted by a multitude of small paper bags. Looking inside one, he saw a white hunk of something. Old cheese? He wasn't about to smell it. The only drinkable item in the refrigerator was a yellow viscous liquid in an unmarked jar. He drank water instead, rinsing out the glass first.

Maura was still a lousy housekeeper, that much hadn't changed. There were dog hairs in the futon, dustballs in the corners. In that way, she and Gail were alike, although Gail wasn't filthy, just disorganized. Wherever she went, clutter followed. She would announce she was going to clean out a closet, and hours later he'd find her lost in a pile of clothes, books, papers, and boxes, vaguely reading letters, on the verge of tears. "I feel so overwhelmed," she'd say, her small white face tense and frightened, the face of a misplaced child; he'd always loved that face. It was true that once Gail left, there was a lot less clutter—Alex had been the superior

housekeeper—but now the house was falling apart in ways he'd never anticipated. The roof leaked, the floors had warped, and recently there'd been an invasion of mice. He could find the droppings but not the mice. Although he'd set traps everywhere, he had yet to catch a single mouse.

On Maura's wall were two posters: the human body, front and back, speckled with red dots. Examining the dots more closely, Alex saw they were connected by lines, like a map of a subway system.

"Pressure points," said Maura when she returned. That's where the body stored toxins, she explained. If not released through acupuncture or massage, they would build to unhealthy levels. "Toxins contaminate the body," she said, "and that's what makes us sick." To Alex the theory seemed absurd, as though the body were a kind of toxic waste dump.

Then, without warning, Maura said, "I'm sorry to hear about your divorce."

So she did know. Alex braced himself for yet another discussion of his personal life. What happened? How's Gail taking it? Do you still see each other? Any chance you'll get back together? Are you seeing anybody else? All the stupid, useless questions people asked. Relatives, friends, people he hardly knew. Sometimes they even said, "Don't feel you have to talk about it." But that was exactly what they wanted, for him to talk about it.

Before Maura could ask any questions, he asked her a few. Impersonal questions. How did she like living in Santa Cruz? Had she met a lot of people? How did she like her apartment? Would she stay here or move?

"Move," she said. "It's the dog, he needs more room. He's not a puppy anymore."

While Maura changed in the bathroom, Alex watched the dog as it roamed the courtyard, knocking over pots left and right, urinating on the vegetables. When she came out, he barely recognized her. Again. Except for the sweater with the footballs, she must have thrown away her wild, rummage sale clothes. What she had on now was disappointing, almost depressing: some drab green outfit, matching blouse and pants, and those black, rubber-soled Chinese shoes that everyone wore these days.

Maura locked the dog inside and they left. She drove too fast—up, down, around hills, along cracked paved roads with soft shoulders and muddy potholes. Although it hadn't rained, everything was dripping, green, soggy, wet. "They don't get a lot of sun back here," Maura said at the base of the steepest hill yet. She floored it, wheels spinning, mud flying: up a dirt road not much wider than a path, barely enough room for a car, so overgrown with trees it was like driving through a beaver's nest, the branches so low they scraped the roof of the car.

"Wait'll you see Dr. Kim's house," she said as they passed an apple or-

chard, then a clearing. "There's a view of the ocean, the hills, the valleys. . . . "

Alex didn't see the house at first. It was sunk into the side of a hill, and they had to walk down some stairs to get there. Maura went in without knocking and Alex followed, into the kitchen, where Dr. Kim stood between two other Orientals, a man and a woman. The woman was much shorter than Dr. Kim, with shiny clipped hair, and the man was somewhere between their heights. He had on a dark suit, white socks and sandals. Introductions were made by Dr. Kim, who then led them into the living room. Alex didn't quite catch the names of the man and woman, and when he asked Maura to repeat the names she whispered instead, "He's Dr. Kim's ex-husband and that's his wife. They're all good friends."

In the living room were two couches at a right angle, a coffee table, a large picture window, bare walls. On the table were five glasses of white wine and another bottle, newly opened. Alex sat next to Maura on one couch, while Dr. Kim and her ex-husband and his wife—whatever their names were—sat on the other. Alex considered asking Maura for their names again, but she seemed so engrossed in the conversation, some of which was in a foreign language, that he decided not to bother. Since nobody included him in the conversation and he didn't speak Korean, assuming the language *was* Korean, Alex gazed out the window. The view was spectacular: dark hills rolling out to the distant ocean, a pink sky, the sunset. It almost hurt to look at the horizon, it was so red, like something inflamed.

Already the wine had gone to his head. He was tired, hungry, and he couldn't get situated on the couch. It was the type with a low back and too many pillows—you either slumped back among them or sat up like a board. Straightening up, Alex turned his attention back to the conversation, the English part at least, only to find himself staring at the little woman. Compared to Dr. Kim she was tiny, a toy woman, yet not delicate or sweet. She was perched on the edge of the couch like a brittle doll, her wine glass poised on a kneecap the size of a silver dollar. From what Alex could gather, she was some kind of teacher, while *Mr.* Kim—he couldn't help thinking of him as Mr. Kim—was apparently a lawyer. The two of them, along with Dr. Kim, seemed to be discussing their respective students, clients, and patients, though clearly Dr. Kim dominated the conversation. For some reason Alex was surprised to hear Dr. Kim talk in Korean, and surprised whenever the little woman or Mr. Kim spoke in English. Maura didn't say a word, only listened with a rapt expression. As if *she* could understand Korean. Alex was annoyed: since they could all speak English, why didn't they?

And the invitation had been for dinner, hadn't it? Or were they going to sit here all night drinking wine? He poured himself another glass, finishing off the bottle. Instantly Mr. Kim hopped up and went into the kitchen, returning with a new bottle which, strangely, he placed next to Alex. What was this, some kind of hint? Alex put his glass down and looked at Mr. Kim, who smiled back politely and stationed himself by the other couch.

All conversation had stopped, all faces turned to Dr. Kim. What were they waiting for? Alex noticed her charcoal gray suit, her long yet coarse fingers. At last she spoke to him, her dark eyes somehow deliberate, as deliberate as when she had dropped his hand earlier that day. "What is it that you do, Alex?"

"I'm a wholesaler," he said. "I sell vegetables to restaurants."

"Exotic vegetables," Maura added, as if that detail would make a difference. Surprisingly, it did. Everyone smiled, even Dr. Kim.

"Tell them," said Maura.

He started by listing the vegetables he sold. Bok choy, baby okra and artichokes, baby crookneck squash, Italian tomatoes, certain varieties of mushrooms: oyster, shiitake, chantrells. . . . He had always liked talking about his vegetables. He felt an affection for their names, their odd shapes and sizes, their tastes. And, he considered them superior to what most people thought of as vegetables—green beans, corn, carrots, iceberg lettuce, dull and ordinary. Next he described the mechanics of wholesaling: the delivery trucks, the early morning phone calls, the farmers, the chefs. Before he knew it, he was explaining how he'd gotten into wholesaling vegetables in the first place. The summers in his father's markets, the double major in business and botany, the MBA, the stint at the L.A. Produce Market, the start-up funds and business loans. A distinct wave of drunkenness passed through him. Though he didn't slur his words, he felt dizzy, boozy, as if his organs had come unmoored. *Floating kidney.* The phrase dipped and swayed in his mind. *Floating kidney.* Wasn't that a disease? He paused, more than ready for someone to interrupt, ask a question, change the subject. But they all looked at him, waiting, expectant. He realized he was in the middle of a sentence, only he couldn't remember which sentence.

"Go on," Dr. Kim said.

"I forgot what I was—"

"You were talking about a loan."

"Oh." Reluctantly he picked up where he had left off: once he'd secured a loan, he moved the business out of his garage and into a dilapidated warehouse. He brought the subject back around to the present, his current warehouse, the long hours, the risks involved, his plans to expand into supermarkets. Never had he talked so much about this

one subject, his business. He wondered why he kept *on* talking, why couldn't he stop? He tried to read the faces of the others; weren't they bored yet? But their faces were blank. He noticed the hair of all three women, cut in exactly the same style—parted on the left, the hair no longer than their chins. The effect made him stop talking. He simply stopped.

"In short," said Dr. Kim, "you're a middleman. That's all you're really trying to say."

Alex leaned back against the pillows. Everything the woman said came out like an insult. "If you want to be simplistic about it, yes. I'm a middleman."

There was a long silence.

"Why?" Dr. Kim said.

"Why what?"

"Why do you do what you do?"

"I like it," he said. "I like to think of people—" He shifted on the couch. "I like to think of people sitting in restaurants, eating my vegetables."

"How humble," she said.

Alex glanced around at the others for a clue. What was going on here? Maura was absolutely no help. There she sat, head in hand, elbow on knee, gazing into space. And over by the couch stood Mr. Kim; in all this time he hadn't moved. As for his wife, the little woman, she merely tapped her tiny high-heeled shoe and sipped at her wine.

"Why would a man sell vegetables he doesn't grow?" said Dr. Kim. "You don't grow them, do you?"

"No. Am I supposed to?"

"Why would a man sell vegetables he doesn't grow?"

"I don't want to *grow* the vegetables, I want to sell them—"

"Exactly," she said.

"Exactly?" Alex looked again at the others. No one defended him, certainly not Maura, who acted as if Dr. Kim's question were wise indeed, one they would all do well to consider. "How do you think restaurants get their vegetables? Do you think the chefs go out and pick them by hand? I sell vegetables to restaurants, I provide a service. Do you have a problem with that?"

"I'm only asking a question," Dr. Kim said. "Why would a man sell vegetables he doesn't grow?"

"Why would a doctor, a woman, stick needles into people?"

Dr. Kim laughed, a laugh that indicated she thought it a clever, if irrelevant, question, one that needed no reply. "Really, you take my questions too seriously." And with that, Dr. Kim stood up.

Maura whispered to Alex, "She like to invent questions."

"I don't think she likes to hear the answers," he said, as Dr. Kim left the room, followed by Mr. Kim, who in turn was followed by the little woman.

"That means it's time to eat," Maura explained.

"What is this, a religious cult?"

He apologized immediately; Maura looked so hurt. And as they went into the kitchen, Alex thought about the way Dr. Kim's ex-husband had followed her out of the room. Soundless in his hushpuppy sandals, like a goddamn houseboy. He pitied the man for ever having been married to Dr. Kim. He could just imagine it, being put on trial for various minor offenses, day in, day out. "Yes," she would say, "but why would a man leave wet towels on a door when he could hang them on a towel rack?"

"Vegetables," Dr. Kim announced, pulling the lid from the steaming pot on the stove.

"She grows them herself," Maura told Alex.

"I figured." He could just picture the vegetables from her garden, like most homegrown vegetables: small, pale, bug-eaten, pathetic.

Serving up plates of brown rice and vegetables smothered in sauce, Dr. Kim passed them around as though to recipients in a soup line. Then they all marched out to the dining room. Dr. Kim presided over the meal while the others, aside from nipping at their wine now and then, huddled down into their plates, eating quickly, furtively. Not Alex. He sat across from Dr. Kim and deliberately picked at his food. The vegetables were ordinary, overcooked, and overwhelmed by Dr. Kim's phlegm-like cheese sauce. Then he tasted something delicious, unexpected: an oyster mushroom. He found another and held it up on his fork. "I suppose you grow these too?" he asked Dr. Kim.

"Here in this house, as a matter of fact," she said. "Most people think they're grown only outside, under trees. But you, of course, know better."

As she described in detail how she had converted one bathroom into a small mushroom farm, Alex wondered about the others. Surely they had heard all this before, though you'd never guess from the way Maura leaned forward in her chair, as if receiving divine knowledge. Mr. Kim was as passive as always. But when he caught Alex's eye, he smiled. It was like a reflex; whenever he looked at Alex, he smiled. Only the little woman appeared bored, dinging the side of her wine glass with her tiny, sharp, manicured nails. Then she shifted her eyes without moving her head, back and forth, between Dr. Kim and Alex, back and forth, like a cat.

"You claim to sell mushrooms," Dr. Kim was saying now. "But the mushroom is not a vegetable, it's a fungus of the class Basidiomycetes."

"I'm well aware of that," said Alex, though he hadn't known the exact name of the class. Did the woman have to be an expert on everything? Fortunately, she didn't make an issue of it. Instead she rose from the table and invited Alex to see her mushrooms.

Leaving the others to clean up, Dr. Kim led him into another part of the house, past bedrooms and studies lined with books, to a dimly lit bathroom. In the tub and along the walls were shelves of mushrooms, growing in trays of dirt or blocks of compressed sawdust. Alex waited for the lecture to begin, for Dr. Kim to tell him that mushrooms were a source of protein or prevented cancer, something along that line. But she hardly said a word, other than to point out the two types she grew: the common mushroom found in any market and the oyster.

While she busied herself in the room, Alex examined her oyster mushrooms, admiring their curved stalks and creamy pearl gray caps, soft as eyelids. Of all the mushrooms he sold, the oyster was his favourite. It wasn't tough and meaty like the shiitake but tender, almost helplessly delicate. Alex was enjoying himself for the first time that night. He even felt a certain affinity with Dr. Kim, a feeling that she too liked this room with its moist, clammy odor, the smell that only mushrooms have, of things growing fast, faster than nature intended. He watched as she went from shelf to shelf, misting the mushrooms with water. Then she examined them individually, touching a cap or stalk here and there, as though checking cribs in a nursery.

"Look." She held out a block of tiny oyster mushrooms, their heads like pins. They had just begun to fruit but were shriveling up around the edges. "Look," she said.

Alex saw the dark rot forming on the crust of the block and all at once felt an ache, pity for these mushrooms that couldn't take care of themselves but depended on Dr. Kim for survival. Sensing her eyes on him, he felt compelled to ask, "How long have you been growing mushrooms?"

"A long time," she said, "a very long time."

The answer had a strange effect on him. It was all that an answer should be: sad and human, elegant and true. Also, the answer made him feel that Dr. Kim understood him and that up until now, he had misunderstood her. And in still another sense, the answer made him want to seek protection, though he couldn't say why.

In any case, when Dr. Kim suggested they join the others in the living room, Alex followed, docile and trusting. But when he actually saw the others—Mr. Kim and the little woman on one couch, Maura on the floor in front of them—he didn't know whether to trust Dr. Kim or not. Why should he? After the way she had acted all night?"

Alex sat down beside her. Exactly where she *told* him to sit, he noticed. She poured him a glass of wine and he drank it. She poured him another glass and he drank that too. He began to think he was in love with her. What was the matter with him anyway? He thought of the Wizard of Oz: "Are you a good witch or a bad witch?" That's what he wanted to know, was she good or bad?

He could certainly understand why Maura had fallen under her spell. The woman was charismatic, larger than life. He looked at her now, the way she monopolized the conversation with her voice, her hands, and how the others appeared to sway beneath the movements of her long, ringless fingers. He too was swaying. You're drunk, he told himself. There was something he wanted to tell Dr. Kim; he didn't know what. As if able to sense this, she turned to him, the pillows molding themselves around her like obedient pets. "Tell me about your wife," she said.

"Ex-wife." Not this, he didn't want to talk about this.

"Maura told me," she said.

"Told you what?"

"About your divorce."

He couldn't believe the woman's audacity, but what he really couldn't believe was that he was going to tell her all about it. And that in the end, he would be grateful to her for getting this information out of him. He told her about the two incidents that bothered him most. The first had occurred the night before the wedding, at the rehearsal dinner. Getting to the dinner was bad enough. He'd come home from work to find Gail standing at the door naked, a mascara wand in her hand. "All afternoon I've been trying to put on makeup," she said. She was beautiful like that, naked, but a wreck. "I have to wear makeup, how can I not wear makeup? How can we get married? I don't even know how to put on makeup." Once he supervised the putting on of makeup and got her into her dress—she almost left the house without her slip, and her dress was see-through—they'd driven to the rehearsal dinner, fighting all the way.

"About nothing," he told Dr. Kim. At the dinner Gail had been so nervous that she went around telling everyone she might not show up the next day. They thought she was kidding but no, she insisted she was perfectly serious. He would never forget the faces of his family, his friends. Confused, embarrassed. He felt they would never forgive him for being such a fool.

Here Alex paused, though Dr. Kim didn't ask questions. She listened. He mentioned, because he thought he should, that the wedding had gone fine, although both he and Gail looked like ghosts in the pictures. The other incident had happened six months ago, around the time the divorce papers were being drawn up. Gail had come over to discuss *something,* as

she put it. Secretly he hoped for a reconciliation but no, she had a list of things she wanted from the house, a couch in particular. He refused to give her the couch. She could have everything else, but not that. He loved that couch; it was covered in a peach-rose fabric. She threw a tantrum until finally he gave in. And when she got her way, instead of being pleased, she broke a bottle of wine on the floor—

Dr. Kim interrupted. "Did you tell her you loved her?"

"That night?"

"Any night."

"Of course," he said and went on with his story. What bothered him most, he told Dr. Kim, was the look of hatred on her face, especially when she broke the bottle. He had tried to give her everything before and during their marriage, and when she wanted a divorce, he gave her that too. The more he did for her, the more he tried to make her happy, the more she hated him. "People like me," he said, "can't make people like Gail happy."

"Did you tell her you loved her?"

"Why do you keep asking me that? Of course I told her I loved her; I did everything I knew how to do—"

"But did you tell her?"

"*Yes,* I told her. I told her and told her."

"Why would a man—"

"Don't ask me that—"

"Why would a man divorce a woman he loves?"

"Because she wanted it that way, all right?"

"But why would a—"

"Stop asking me questions! What are you, my analyst? First you want to know why I sell vegetables instead of grow them, or some stupid thing, *now* you want to know—" He stood up. The others watched him, interested. "What *I* want to know is why do you want to know?"

Dr. Kim got up and started to leave the room. "Wait a minute," he said, "I want to ask you a question."

"Yes?"

"When I met you at the clinic today, why did you let go of my hand like that?"

"Because it was cold and white."

Alex sat down on the couch, his body heavy, sinking into the pillows. "Maura," said Dr. Kim, "why not give your friend a back rub?"

Maura hopped to her feet as if glad to be of service. To Dr. Kim, not Alex. Still, he allowed her to lead him over to a rug not far from the couches. She asked him to remove his shirt and lie down on his stomach, and he complied, thinking of all the things he could say to her about Dr.

Kim. The woman was a tyrant who enjoyed dissecting people's brains, it was as simple as that. And you're just her dumb little handmaiden, he wanted to tell Maura. But he was too worn out to say anything. Never had a back rub felt so soothing.

Then he heard tense, angry, foreign voices, the voices of Dr. Kim and the little woman. From where he lay, Alex could see them arguing on the couch with Mr. Kim between them. They leaned across him, almost growling, while Mr. Kim sat placidly as though listening to nothing more taxing than a difficult passage of music. And judging from the feel of Maura's hands on his back, she too was undisturbed. The voices settled into a low rumble for a while, then rose to a screeching.

"What are they fighting about?" said Alex, trying to get up despite Maura's sitting on his back.

"We're discussing vegetables," said Dr. Kim, to which the little woman added, "None of your business!"

"Shouldn't we leave?" Alex asked Maura.

"Dr. Kim likes me to stay."

"What's that supposed to mean? Is it always like this around here?"

She eased his shoulders back down onto the rug, saying only, "I have the greatest faith in Dr. Kim." She started the back rub all over again, going from his neck to his tailbone, concentrating on his shoulder blades. "Please try to relax," she said. That was the crazy thing. Despite the racket, he did relax—his muscles simply gave up fighting. In time he even got used to the voices, the volume rising and falling; there was a certain music to it all. He began to doze, only to be awakened by Maura jabbing her fingers into his backbone, as if she were trying to disconnect the vertebrae.

"What are you doing?"

"Pressure point massage," she said. "It hurts because of the toxins."

It hurt like hell. What was in there that could cause so much pain? What were toxins anyway? He imagined the line of pressure points up and down his back, little bulbs filled to bursting, pus and words and bitterness. He heard a voice inside his head, a singsong voice he dreaded. Why would a man divorce a woman he loves? Because he doesn't really love her. No, no, too simple. It was more complicated than that. Too complicated. He listened to Dr. Kim and the little woman, their unintelligible words rising, falling, rising, the perfect background for his thoughts. Sometimes shrill, sometimes plaintive, their voices became figures in his mind, nasty Oriental nymphs, bleached white, bodies naked, yelping, screeching, howling, keening, all the sounds of love.

Dazed, he opened his eyes. The little woman was hurling a vase; it hit the wall and shattered. She screamed in the face of Dr. Kim who yowled

back in Korean, while the odd Mr. Kim remained on the couch, peering about like a bird. The little woman picked up something else to throw, a dish. Mr. Kim rose to his feet and gently removed it from her hands. He spoke soothing words to both women, then returned to the couch. The women embraced, and the little woman brought Dr. Kim's hand to her cheek, kissing the fingers.

The next thing Alex knew he was on his knees, searching for the tip of Dr. Kim's little finger. Everyone had rushed at the little woman, but she held fast with her teeth. And nobody knew that the little woman had actually swallowed the tip of Dr. Kim's little finger, until she made a point of telling Alex, who continued to grope around on the floor, thinking perhaps she'd been mistaken.

Then Alex was speeding to the hospital in a car, holding on to Dr. Kim in the back seat while Maura drove. Dr. Kim's face was chalk white, and she had a kitchen towel wrapped around her finger, but she was talking, conjugating verbs in German, French and Spanish. She said it felt better to talk. Actually she was in better shape than Alex. He couldn't stop thinking about the tip of Dr. Kim's little finger. You'd think if was *his* finger. Dr. Kim herself said it would be fine, all she needed were a few stitches. Alex had to keep reminding himself—it wasn't the whole finger, it wasn't half, or even a third, one-fourth, or one-eighth of Dr. Kim's little finger. It was probably less than one-sixteenth: a tiny bit of the nail, no bone loss, only the very, very tip. Still, he could not stop thinking about the tip of Dr. Kim's little finger. He felt attached to it somehow, even now as it lay in the pit of the little woman's stomach. He considered: if I'm attached to the tip of Dr. Kim's little finger and the tip of Dr. Kim's finger is inside the little woman's stomach, then I'm attached to the lining of that stomach. Circular logic, but he felt better, more connected to all living things.

Jorge Teillier

Three Poems Translated from the Spanish by Carolyne Wright

When Everyone Goes Away

When everyone goes away to other planets
I'll stay in the abandoned city
drinking a final glass of beer,
then I'll go back to the town I always return to
like the drunk to the tavern
and the boy to ride horseback
on the broken seesaw.
In town I'll have nothing to do
but put fireflies in my pockets
or walk along beside the rusted rails
or sit on the battered counter of a store
to talk with old pals from school.

Like a spider that goes back and forth
on the same strands of its web
I'll walk slowly through
the weed-infested streets
looking at the collapsing dovecotes
until I get to my house
where I'll shut myself in to listen
to records of a singer from the Thirties
not caring ever again to look
at the innumerable paths
traced by rockets in outer space.

To a Child in a Tree

You're the sole inhabitant
of an island only you know about,
surrounded by successive waves of wind
and silence barely grazed
by the barn owl's wings.

You see a broken plough
and a thresher whose skeleton
lets through a final gleam of sun.
You see summer turned into a scarecrow
whose nightmares torment the cropland.
You see the irrigation ditch in whose depths
your vanished friend
takes hold of the paper ship you set afloat.
You see the town and the fields spread out
like the pages of the primer
where one day you'll know you read
the history of joy.

The storekeeper comes out to close the shutters.
The farmer's daughters shoo in the chickens.
Eyes of strange fish
look down menacingly from the sky.
It's time to come back to earth.
Your dog bounds up to meet you.
Your island sinks into the sea of night.

Image

You recognize yourself
in that child who goes out to buy bread
this hoarfrost morning
and greets the milkman
whose whistle wakes up the streets.

You are that child
and the child who cuts across the field
to the neighbours' house
with a goose under his arm
under a moon monitored by rockets
in which no one will ever see again
the Virgin, Saint Joseph and the Child.

Limbo River

Rick Hillis

The bus trip took so long we felt like bugs trapped in a jar. It didn't seem like we were getting anywhere. The windows always framed the same rigid wall of mountains, and the same highway unscrolled blackly before us like a river. I slept a lot. My mother awoke me as we passed Frank Slide, the horizon ruined by chunks of rock the size of houses.

"In the middle of the night," she whispered to me, "a mountain collapsed and buried the town that was here. There was only one survivor, a baby girl. Nobody knew anything about her, so they called her Frankie."

I pictured a mountain splintering like a rotten molar. Rain was slanting into my window, making the same tinny sound as it had on the roof of our trailer back in Chilliwack. I pictured saucepans in the aisle catching the *plink plink* of falling rain.

"Nobody knew anything about her," my mother said. "Think about that. Total freedom!"

The first thing we set eyes on when the taxi dropped us off in front of the Alamo apartments was Marcel. He was sitting on one of three kitchen chairs set out on the lawn. The chair legs had been pounded into the ground like tent pegs so they wouldn't move, and the grass beneath them sprang up nearly to the seats. Even though it was about seventy-five degrees out, he had on a stained canvas parka with pockets huge enough to hide his beer bottle in.

My mother pretended to survey the area. There was a park across the street with a metal sculpture in it that looked like an axel of an overturned tricycle, the wheel on top poking the sky like a halo. On the far shore of the park was a river that glistened like foil. The heads of some kids bobbed offshore and waterskiers slalomed around them, peeling off strips of brightness.

When it became clear Marcel wasn't going to help her with the two boxes of belongings she was carrying, my mother put them down on the sidewalk and lit a cigarette. She usually hated drinkers, but she chain-smoked.

Marcel said, "I don't blame them kids for playing hookey from school." He was looking out at the river. "School's just another prison."

Mom said flatly, "Kids belong in school."

"Why isn't he then?" Marcel was pointing at me.

"Good Lord, we just got off the bus." My mother looked down at Marcel. "You're one to talk, why aren't you at work anyway? You sick? Is that why you got that big heavy coat on?"

"I'm on welfare. This coat isn't as warm as it looks."

My mother raised her chin as if about to sneeze, then patted down her skirt. "Unfortunately we are on welfare ourselves, but not for long. I think it damages the human spirit."

"It does, but it beats working."

"Work is what makes the world go around!"

"Work is prison," Marcel said. "Give me welfare or give me death."

My mother's lips got hard as two bones: "Is that alcohol you're drinking out here in public?"

She knew darn well it was; she'd served enough beer in her day. But she was fed up, I could see it. This man sitting on a kitchen chair on a lawn drinking beer in the middle of the afternoon was my original Dad all over again. He had my numerous "uncles" written all over him too. My mother had earned an aesthetician's diploma from Beauty School, and wanted to make a fresh start away from these people. Problem was the only type of person who lived in the places we could afford were the Marcels of the world, and until Mom got a job—or until I got old enough to quit school and get one—we were stuck here.

"Is it?" she said again.

"Why do you ask?" Marcel peered into the neck of his beer bottle like it was a microscope. "You want a sip?"

"*Oh!*" Mom staggered inside with her boxes and Marcel said to me, "Who was that masked man?"

"My mother."

"Thank goodness, for a minute there I thought she was mine."

Marcel swore he'd never done anything wrong in his lifetime. The reason he wound up in jail in the first place was only for drunk driving.

"When a fist gets twined around your heart," he said, "you drink for to get free. Someday you'll know what I'm talking about. Anyway when I drank, I just drove for to get free faster."

Crimped over street signs, squealed around corners up onto two wheels, got into fenderbenders. Got his licence taken away four times in six months.

"Then I went and nosed my car into a creek and couldn't get free of it

because of the weight of the water. When the cops winched me out the next morning and made me blow—even though I hadn't had a drink for about ten hours—I *still* buried the needle."

The pen was located out by where the blue vein of river wound through scrub prairie land. During exercise period, Marcel would hook his fingers through the chain link, look out over the river. It wasn't fair he was in here for just burning tiremarks into lawns, et cetera, was it? Gusts of wind blew in off the river, pasted the hair to his head. It blew like guilt through the bones of his body and the Guards could tell he was shaking it rough, so they told an old con named Pope to go talk to him.

"Now Pope," Marcel told me a few days after we'd moved into the Alamo, "was a recitavist criminal. B&Es, paperhanger, shanked a guard once... he'll die inside, but he's a smart cookie. What he told me was to buck up and be a man.

"I said, 'I didn't do nothing wrong though. I don't even belong here!'

"'You and me both, pal," he said. 'You been reading my mail.'"

We were sitting on the chairs pounded into the lawn, watching the river. Marcel said he liked to watch it because every day was a different river. The current worked like a knife. Ghostly sandbars rose out of the water, and each night the current would rearrange them, carve them away or sometimes build on long spines of silt. One of my uncles said the same about the ocean once. Every day was brand new, always a new corpse washed up on shore.

"Here's what the Pope really told me," Marcel said, "and I pass it on to you, Sean, for your wisdom bank: 'Deny it if you want to, but society don't like you no more and has kicked you out. That's why you're here. And you might as well roll with the punches because this place is going to chew you up before it spits you back onto the street. Take my advice and look around. These ain't the first walls you've been inside, pal, and if you listen close you'll hear chains every day of your life. Get smart, roll with the flow.' I'll never forget him telling me that."

My Mom didn't like me hanging around with Marcel, but what else was there to do? Most of the other tenants were at the bar by the time I got home from school, and we didn't have a tv. For a while I swam in the river with the other kids, but then Mom found out they were Métis and forbade it.

"Why?" I asked.

"Ringworm, rickets, head lice, scabies is why."

So it was me and Marcel. He told me "Limbo is good for the body and what's good for the body is good for the soul." Same went for smokie sausages, Player's sailor cut cigarettes, whiskey, beer, and wine. He

said, "In the old days when limbo was big and competitions were held all across the country, and the prizes were booze, nobody bought liquor when Marcel Gebege was in town." And he limboed for me once. Put a yardstick across the mouths of two forty ounce whiskey bottles and crab-walked under it, spread his feet wide and hopped through on the bolts of his ankles. I was only eight at the time, and could bend like a pipecleaner, but I couldn't get low as Marcel. He got snakebelly low.

He told me how a cell is a bowl about the size of an empty head. That's how teeny his thinking got in jail. He said, In jail I learned time is slow and quiet as a bowl of water. If you look, you can see things.

"For instance, I sense your Mom doesn't really like me, does she?" he asked.

"Not really."

"That's okay. Most people don't. Do you like me, Sean?"

"Yes."

"I thought you would. You remind me of myself at your age. A bit of a loner."

The real reason Marcel drank at home was because he was having an affair with the woman who lived across the hall from him, Rhonda Bighead. I already knew plenty about affairs and hanky panky, so it didn't take long to figure it out. When Rhonda's old man would go to the bar, Marcel would peel his rear end off his kitchen chair and go inside.

"Excuse me, I think I'll repair to my place for a nap."

Rhonda's old man was known as FBI for Fricking Big Indian. He had arm muscles like baloney rolls and all his teeth were punched out from bar fights.

Mom was furious when she learned about Marcel and Rhonda. She was having a lot of trouble finding a job as an aesthetician and was smoking more than ever, which costs money.

"That bitch is using him!" she cried at me one night. Mom had gone down to the laundry room and saw Marcel's phone cord snaking out from under his door, across the hall carpet, disappearing under Rhonda's.

"She's just after him for his phone!" Mom insisted. I think she was jealous for not getting the idea first. Plus Marcel wasn't a bad catch. He was about fifty-five but he looked forty. He seemed quite healthy for drinking all the time.

We didn't have a phone ourselves because we couldn't afford the deposit yet, and this made it hard for Mom to fill out applications for work. Another thing was, we didn't know anybody, and sometimes we felt stranded in a city of silence without a phone. It made Mom's blood boil to think of that slut Rhonda Bighead having a heart to heart with

somebody on Marcel's nickle when we didn't have a soul to call up; no phone to call on even if we did.

The river started to drop. In some places it looked more like a highway than a river. Marcel told me when the ice goes off a river, it breaks like somebody standing behind a hill with a handgun.

"One of the weirdest times of my life was when I crossed a river with the ice breaking. I was about your age or a little older, leaping flow to flow, ice all around me like dirty chips of glass. I could have gone under at any time, the ice would have closed over me and I would have drowned. But I'm lucky that way. I just keep pulling up aces. What's the worst thing that happened to you so far?"

I had taken money from my Mom's purse and had shoplifted. Or what did he mean? I thought of the time I got pushed out of a big cotton tree—me laying on the ground like an upside-down kite, breath locked inside my chest like my heart was trying to break out, and cotton blowing down the street like snow.

"Too many to pick from, huh?" Marcel said. "Well, let me tell you about the lowest I ever got. You got a minute?"

"Yes."

"Okay, listen and you might learn something. This was 1982 up in Fort Steel where I was working at the time—last job I ever had. Anyway one night I get this phone call. Come to Regina right away. Your daughter's been scalded. She was about two or three years old at the time. She'd be about your age now, I guess. Anyway, her mother'd put her in the tub to sleep and somehow my girl turned on a tap and scalded herself and drowned—"

He looked at me and wiped his mouth.

"—What was I supposed to do? I took all my hard earned money and went to the airport to fly back for the funeral. But the bitch in the ticket cage says there ain't no seats left. I said, Lookit, my daughter just got scalded to death and I need to get back for the funeral *tomorrow!* Don't raise your voice to me, she said. Anyways, so I go into the little lounge they got there at the airport, and I'm telling the bartender about the fix I'm in when this lady at the bar—real good-looking too, kind of looked like your Mom—says I can have *her* ticket.

"About two minutes later an announcement comes over the loud speaker: SEATS AVAILABLE ON FLIGHT TO REGINA, SEATS AVAILABLE. So I thank the woman and go get a ticket. Well I'll be damned if when I get on the plane we aren't on the same flight together, me and this woman. So, I buy her a few drinks and when we land in Regina we go to a bar. We're not there half an hour when two cops come

in looking for me. It turns I got a warrant out on me for not paying alimony, so they take me downtown and lock me up. 'My daughter died,' I kept telling them. 'I came all the way from Fort Steel for the funeral!' Next morning I'm up before the judge. Hungover, tongue thick as a steak, I say, 'Your Honour, Sir, I am a few months behind in alimony—true—but I have come for my daughter's funeral and I have money to cover the alimony. . . ' The judge looks at me for a minute. Then he says, 'RELEASE THIS MAN. He should NEVER have spent the night in jail. Take him out this instant, and when he hits the front doors: IMMEDIATE RELEASE!"

"Immediate release," I repeated dumbly. I kept wondering about the baby girl. Did she turn on the taps with her toes, or what?

"That's the kind of guy I am," Marcel said, "Lucky. You never know what's going to happen to you down the road, but if you have faith in the deck you'll pull up aces. That's what I know. Like that woman and me ending up on the same flight or that judge giving those cops hell in front of me. . . "

One night after school, I was in the laundry room folding shirts when I heard Rhonda Bighead's old man booming through the wall.

"What do you care?" I heard Rhonda yell. "Marcel is both our friend!"

I pressed my ear against the wall. Furniture slid across the floor, dishes were shattering. I thought I recognized the sound of somebody being thrown around the way I'd witnessed Mom thrown around and slapped, and the way she had thrown around and slapped me for doing things that bugged her. Nobody really wants to hurt anybody, but sometimes talk doesn't say anything.

There was a scream, then nothing.

I ran upstairs to get my Mom, but I knew she wouldn't be home. I sat for a minute in the apartment, then went downstairs and knocked on Rhonda's door.

"What do you want?" FBI barked through the door.

"This is Sean from upstairs?"

"You better come in here, man."

Rhonda's arm had been opened up with a butcher knife. Also her back from when she must have tried to get out the door. I'd seen my Mom open the utensils drawer and rattle her hand around in there to back my uncle off once, but I doubt she would have used a knife or fork on him. Rhonda was laying on her side on the floor, her eyes trying to stay shut like someone woken up who wants to get back to sleep. I started to back out the door, but Rhonda's old man said, "Close the door and come in here."

He was sitting on the couch staring off into space.

"Call Yellow cab." He pointed at Marcel's phone sitting on the carpet just inside the door.

They were piling into the cab to take Rhonda to the hospital when two police cruisers closed in front of the Alamo apartments, sirens screaming. The cops cuffed FBI, pushed him by the head into the backseat.

An ambulance blinked up and one of the attendants got out and snapped down the legs on a guerney. "Where's the victim at?"

I looked at Rhonda's old man in the rear of the cruiser, a black shape swimming back and forth across the dark blue cage, slamming his fists into the windows and wire mesh.

One of the cops said, "Which one? The victim of circumstance and history or the one he shanked?"

Rhonda wheeled around. "Don't talk about my baby like that, you *pig*!"

Marcel immersed himself in booze. He drank like a man taking off his clothes and getting into a pool of water. Floating the way a heart floats in a chest. That's how depressed he was.

"I draw the line at raping a woman," he said to me, "I wouldn't stoop low enough to be a skinner, but nothing's worse than not having a honey. Rhonda's cut me off, but I still let her use my phone. What the hell. Know what I mean, Sean?"

"Kind of I guess."

"Well if you don't, you will soon enough. You know what I just noticed about you?" Marcel said. "You're kind of quiet the way I was when I was a kid."

I never *felt* quiet. I just thought nobody ever listened to me.

"I'll tell you something you probably won't believe, but when I was your age—and this is just between you and me, okay?—I had a club foot that since has been repaired by surgery. Would you believe I spent every recess of my school life over by the playground fence, looking out at the street so I wouldn't get a soccer ball bounced off my face?"

"Really?"

"Absolutely." He patted his chest with the palms of his hands. "And look at me now. The sky's the limit. You'll see."

A few nights later I was entertaining myself by tightrope walking the rim of the fence that separated the Alamo from the chrome and glass condominium next door when Mom clicked up the sidewalk in her high-heeled shoes. She brushed off the seat of the kitchen chair next to Marcel and sat down on it.

"You'll be pleased to know, Sean, that I begin work tomorrow at Beauty City."

"Congratulations, Anita," Marcel said. "That calls for a toast." He

hoisted his beer bottle into the air.

"Thank you, Mister Gebege." Mom took out a cigarette and Marcel held his lighter under it. "I see you are still supporting the breweries."

"Listen, I drink, but I control it, it don't control me."

"You don't have to explain. I know," Mom said. "I spent too many years working in the bar industry not to. They might start out in control but in the end they live their life in the bottle."

"I drink for to get free," Marcel said.

"I'm teasing you," Mom said, smiling, blowing smoke out of her nostrils.

Somehow at that moment I knew I was in for another uncle. Which meant I would be losing both my mother and only friend in one fell swoop, but at least we'd have a phone to use now. I watched Marcel take a beer from his pocket and Mom fall off the wagon.

"Don't look at me like that, Sean, I'm just celebrating," she said to me. "Can't I do that?"

I looked away, up at the flat purple streak above the river, and underneath it to the Métis kids yelling at each other, slapping around in the water. Then I looked down at the huge denim patches on the knees of my pants and the oversized Sally Ann runners on my feet. That's the sorriest I ever felt for myself in my life.

Every day a different river. The water level kept dropping until the white foam that used to gush and splash over the dam downriver shrunk to a thin trickle like an overflowing sink. The skiiers and Métis kids moved upriver where the current still gouged the channel deep. In front of the Alamo apartments, sandbars started to sprout grass. Between them, tucked like blue stones, were tear-shaped pools.

A couple of days after Mom started making me call Marcel "Uncle Marcel," he presented me with a bike, an expensive BMX. It wasn't new, but it was the best present I ever got. He'd found it in the river and used a solution to clean off the rust.

He said he was crossing the bridge on his way to the Shamrock bar when he caught something glittering in one of the pools. He couldn't believe it was a bicycle, the chrome rims glinting like a pair of eye glasses.

Maybe somebody stole it and threw it off the bridge when the water was high. Or it happened during winter and had spent months on the ice covered in snow. Maybe even some poor lost soul rode onto the ice and fell through. That kind of thing really happened though you wouldn't believe it would. People just were swept away sometimes by the current. They just disappeared. In winter the Mounties didn't even bother to look until spring when they could drag the river. By then the victims were

misshapen balloons hung up in debris, after spending all winter locked in their frozen bodies under the skin of ice.

Anyway, that night after he spotted the bike, on his way home from the bar Marcel went down to the river, stumbled across the sandbars to the pool, through the shallow trickles of water. He stripped off his shirt and shoes, hopped for what felt like an eternity on one foot (ankle hooked in pant cuff), got down to his gochees and slipped into the pool.

He said he was floating on the surface, looking down at the round lenses of the wheels when he saw something invisible from the bridge—blue shapes darting, flashing in the blackness.

"Fish. Maybe half a dozen of them," he told Mom and me. "Big bottom feeders—carp or suckers. Maybe even sturgeon—"

I pictured shadowy blade shapes hovering above the bicycle, facing into the current.

"The river's drying up," Mom said as Marcel oiled the chain of my BMX. "The flow between those pools is so shallow now—how are they supposed to get out?"

"They *aren't,*" Marcel said. "That's the whole idea. It's just nature's way. It's too late and now they're locked in. You can't even put them out of their misery because it's illegal to fish by the dam."

The Métis kids came up out of the river to ride the bike. They couldn't do it any better than me even though they were older, maybe even eleven or twelve. I guess they never ridden a bike before either. They wobbled up and down the street in front of the Alamo, weaving in and out of traffic until my Mom put her foot down.

I was alone when Rhonda's old man came to the door, slapping the fat end of a baseball bat into the palm of his hand. Rhonda wouldn't press charges, so he was on the street, free.

"Where's Marcel, and no bullshit, okay? I got nothing against you, man, but I know your old lady's got a key to his place, and if you don't let me into it I'm going to have to club you." Even though I was only eight, he waved the bat in my face. I doubt he would have done anything to me, but I let him into Marcel's anyway. For a lot of reasons it seemed like the right thing to do.

Marcel wasn't in his apartment so FBI commenced to smash things up. Caved in the aquarium so water gushed onto the carpet, then ground his heels on the little fish who flipped around on the floor. Punched a few holes in the gyprock. Brought the bat down over the top of the tv so the tube exploded in a galaxi of glass across the carpet. He placed a few long distance calls on the telephone, then hung up and splintered it with the bat. Then he tucked Marcel's toaster oven under his arm and left.

Marcel was sitting on our couch shaking when I got back upstairs.

"Did he at least leave me one beer?"

"He wanted to break your legs."

"I know. Fortunately some queers moved in down the hall and I was over there bouncing them off the walls. It was just dumb luck he didn't find me. You ever throttle a queer before?"

"No."

"Don't worry. Your day will come."

One of the Métis kids drowned in the river. The paper said they were swimming single file out to a sandbar where the waterskiiers partied (they would do anything for a chance to ski or even ride in the boat), and one of them went down as if a weight was attached to his ankles.

One of the older boys cut fast strokes to the spot where he went under. He dove and dove, surfacing to fill his lungs, shaking his head. A grainy photo had the spray from his hair making a white flower of froth of the water.

I ran out onto the bridge when I saw the flashing Rescue van. Uniformed men lined the black bridge, heads hooked over the edge. The Mounties launched a small boat, dragged a grappling hook back and forth across the river. The waterskiiers spiraled the little sandbar in their boat and a boy not much older than me sat on the prow, stabbing a paddle into the water.

The boy who dove was collapsed on the bar, hands clutching the sand, legs in the water.

The morning after the drowning I went downstairs to go to school and found my BMX missing. I couldn't believe it. I thought I must have left it somewhere else, but I knew I hadn't, and my next thought was, those fucking Métis had stolen it. All day in school I steamed. I almost totally forgot about the drowning. How could those ringworm-headed, hookey-playing sonofabitches steal my bike after I let them use it?

I got home to find Uncle Marcel sitting on one of the chairs. By now the grass was so long underneath it, it draped over his lap like a Luau skirt. He was drunk out of his mind.

"I have to show you something," he said, pulling a black vinyl box the size of a pencil case out of the big pocket of his parka. "I bought it for your Mom." He snapped open the lid. A heavy gold chain with a locket at the bottom lay on a velvet pad. "Second hand," Uncle Marcel said. "but it still cost forty bucks." He took the chain out and tried to hand it to me. "Just feel the weight of it."

"You stole my bike," I said. The idea just flashed in my mind. "Didn't you?"

"Hey you hold on!" He put the chain back in his pocket. "I didn't *steal anything.*"

I glared at him.

"I didn't steal *anything.* It was my bike," Uncle Marcel said. "I found it and I let you use it and then I took it back. Actually I found the original owner and gave it back to him."

"*Indian giver,*" I cried. I couldn't help it. I was wracked with huge gulping sobs. I thought I was going to drown from lack of air.

When Mom came home, she stormed into my room, wearing the chain.

"I told you to keep that damn bike locked!" I smelled booze on her breath. "If you don't look after your things you don't deserve them!"

"*I did lock it!* Marcel stole it!"

"Shut you're dirty lying mouth!" my Mom screamed at me. "He got that money from a Scratch & Win!"

Though it wasn't mentioned in so many words, I'm sure it was due to the bike episode, to smooth things over, that we went to the Fair. I'd never seen a circus, zoo, marine world, or wax museum, much less a Fair, and though I hated the idea of being bribed into being nice and civil again, I really wanted to go. Mom and Marcel had bought an old clunker of a car and this was our first trip in it, about a hundred and fifty miles to where the Fair was set up in Regina.

As we were pulling away, Rhonda Bighead and her old man were reeling through the park on the way home from the bar. Rhonda's gashes healed nicely and she was holding a bouquet of white flowers her old man had ripped out of a bed in the park. When they got to the red scab of flowers at the base of the buried axel sculpture (supposedly a tree, I learned), he bent like a hero at the waist, tore out a handful and presented them to her.

Rhonda hugged the flowers, roots dripping dirt. She staggered a few steps backwards and fell over. Her old man tried to pick her up, but pitched on top of her, at which point she started swearing and slapping him on the head. Marcel spewed some beer out of his mouth and nostrils, and my Mom eyed him.

"I don't mind you drinking, but drinking and driving don't mix, Marcel Gebege!"

Marcel honked the horn as we passed and both Rhonda and her old man turned, cursing us, throwing flowers.

The clunker had a shot transmission, so we had to stop about every thirty miles for Marcel to add fluid. This was syncronized perfectly with his need to stop and water the ditch. We'd been on the road about an hour when the motor started to rattle. Then the car started shaking and the motor really roared under the hood.

Nobody said anything as Marcel slowed to fifteen miles an hour and squeezed over to the shoulder. Vehicles shot past, clots of mud dropping off, exploding against the blacktop, peppering our windshield.

"I should have guessed," Marcel said finally without looking at anyone, "the motor's going to blow. Story of my life. One step forward, two back. On the bright side," he said a few miles and about half an hour later, "we aren't burning much gas at this speed." He tapped the gas gauge which read Full.

The needle bounced back to Empty and then fell off, a red toothpick behind the glass.

Mom groaned. "What next?" she said.

"Who could have predicted something like this would happen?" Marcel said half to himself.

"Me," said Mom. "*I* could have, but you talked me into believing you. When am I going to learn, Sean?"

"Don't worry, Sean," Uncle Marcel said, "we'll get you there even if we have to walk."

"I'm not walking anywhere," Mom muttered.

We pulled into a service station outside a town called Stalwart. It was nearly dusk already. We'd been on the road since lunch. Everywhere looked like the moon to me. That's how far away the Fair seemed too.

A German Shepherd dog ran out of the garage and dove at the front of the car, whining and jumping back. The grease monkey, a kid of about fifteen, came out wiping his hands on a red rag spotched with grease. He stopped, crossed his arms and shook his head back and forth.

"You got problems," he said. "King! Go lay down." The dog reared up and barked at him, then dropped back out of sight, whining. The kid walked over to the dog and said, "Oh, hell." He pulled a bird we must have hit out of the grill, the feathers of one wing were bent back like teeth on a pink comb. He threw it into some weeds and the dog chased after it, barking.

Marcel was resting his forehead on the steering wheel.

"When you say blow," Mom said to him, "what exactly do you mean?"

I was glad she asked. I had a picture in my mind of the three of us, legless, draped over the open doors, everything on fire.

Marcel lifted his head and looked at her. Then he looked at me in the backseat and grinned like nothing was wrong. "It just quits running," he

said. "Nothing to worry about. Hey," he said to the grease monkey who was stretching over the gas hose, "how far do you think we'll make it before she goes?" The dog was playing with the bird, flinging it into the air, catching it.

"You never know with these old beaters." The kid adjusted his brimless cloth cap. "Sometimes they last forever. Sometimes they don't make it off the lot."

We gassed up and clattered back onto the highway. It was already quite dark and the pavement glistened ahead of us like ice on a frozen river. For hours, it seemed, I could see the yellow ferris wheel lights shining in the sky, and despite everything I got so excited I thought I could smell foot longs, corn dogs, candy apples, cotton candy over the burnt stench of the oil and cigarette smoke in the car.

It was a bottom-of-the-barrel fair. Workers all tatooed up like a bad face; rides greasy, probably suffering from metal fatigue. The foot longs were about the size of your thumb and cost two bucks a throw. But so what? It was a fair! And the night was swept along in a blur of light and colour, odor, sound.

Mom and Marcel riding The Death Trap, a bench chained to a giant arm that whirled around in the air like a propeller. Me, flopping a rubber frog onto a lilypad with a huge tongue depresser, winning a fly in a cube of clear plastic. Marcel limboing under a wooden rod set upon bowling pins—passing through like he was kneeling on air—winning a stuffed snake he gave to Mom. Mom winning a plaster seagull for stumping The Guesser on what exactly she did at Beauty City.

At about midnight Marcel took me onto the Zipper.

It was a mesh cage that spun and orbited around a greasy hub like a planet around a star. There were broken bolts and nuts in the popcorn and cigarette butts scattered around the base, but we didn't care. "We're here for a good time, not a long time," Marcel laughed. And as he said this our cage jerked, lifted us into the night sky and we spun upside-down and Marcel's change flew out of his pockets, whizzed past our ears like shrapnel. My heart tore free of my chest and I felt it in my mouth. We dove towards the ground, but at the last minute were scooped up, swirling through the blackness, me and Marcel, screaming at the stars between our shoes.

Jay Ruzesky
Two Poems

I've been seen over on Moss Street

sitting in the boughs of Oak trees,
talking to them
and asking them questions.

I've climbed up to where I think
their ears must be,
and when there's a breeze
we get a bit of a dialogue going.

We talk politics,
they tell me about Meares Island
and the Stein Valley.

I've overheard men in suits commenting
on the way I caress the peeling skin
of arbutus in the park,
kiss the limbs of birch and maple,
and flirt openly
with hemlock and Douglas fir.
That public affection
makes some people nervous.

When I read about the park the government
finally agreed to create
on Llyle Island in the Queen Charlottes
I was so happy that I drove out past Sooke
and climbed up in the arms of a cedar.

I guess the trees out there have been hardened though,
by all that clear-cutting
and slash burning going on around them.
I had a notebook with me,
unrecycled paper.
The tree whispered 'hypocrite'
and dropped me
twenty feet to the ground.

For a while all I could do
was lie there
with my arm broken,
my head buzzing like a chain saw.

Encounter #2: The Figaro Barbershop

I.

Three weeks before she left we went downtown together to look for a place to get my hair cut. She wasn't much of a barber but she said she wanted me to look clean and presentable. She said, "It's summer and you can't have long hair." We found a place between two theatres, the Figaro Barbershop, and I didn't like it because it had a barber pole out front and I don't need any more cliches I said but she took me in anyway. The barber turned the chair to face the wall and said he knew just what I wanted. He shaved the sides completely and cropped the back. "Have you seen that guy around with the question mark shaved on his head?" he asked as I paid him, "I did that."

II.

When I was six years old, in Thunder Bay, my father took me to my first real barber. There were mirrors on all four walls and I sat on a board the barber put across the arms of the chair. Everywhere I looked, there I was, like a dandelion anticipating the mower. Then the barber started cutting. I got just what my father wanted, a crewcut, and he sat across from me reading *Playboy*. I sat very still the whole time, looking past him, and blonde curls fell in my lap while images of impalpable breasts bounced in infinite regress behind him.

III.

Today I went to a new barber, alone. I read *National Geographic* while waiting my turn in the chair. I began to wonder about her new life in Washington because there was an article about the Giant Pandas at the zoo there: Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing. Zoo Officials were hoping for a successful fertilization from the couple and though the pandas had failed to mate at all last year they had mated a record seven times that week. Seven. I wondered if it was only a zoologist or if the general public had been counting orgasms too. I wondered if she had been one of the voyeurs, then I wondered why I wondered that. I wondered why I wanted a haircut anyway and I was so full of wonder that the barber had to tap me and say "next" when it was my turn. He smiled at my reluctance to get up. I followed him to the chair and sat facing myself while echoes of several unanswered questions reverberated endlessly in my mind.

Peter Lord

Superbowl XXIII Poem

I didn't buy
the 3-D glasses
necessary to participate
in the
half-time hoopla

It was a dimension
I felt
better left
unexplored; flash & sizzle
pouring out the set,
stars & bars of
incandescent Americana,
the grotesque at its best
swirling through my living room
without a hint
of the rage
black in the hearts
only blocks away
in an alternate Miami

Suspension of disbelief
is one thing,
reality
on an indefinite
leave of absence
is something else

Quarterbacks are
not the only ones
firing bullets
in this town

Even without
the glasses
this is
scary

The West

David Teagle

At daybreak, Mignon saw an apparition—a man, dressed in a long gray coat, like the ghost of a western outlaw, at the edge of the thin line of bushes that separated her yard from the Morrisey's wheatfields. His hands were clasped in front of him, pouring a thick spray that produced a cloud of steam as it landed on the ground, as if he were dousing a campfire that was invisible to her. He finished and walked away through the brush, fading into the early morning. She stared at the place he had been standing, convinced that he was an important omen, a sign.

She had been sitting for most of the night, nested in among the embroidered pillows on the wooden ledge by her upstairs window, a "reading nook" her mother had called it when they were planning the house. She was writing a long, serious poem, untitled as yet, that began:

I exist
and what of that;
it does not seem to matter.
The clouds are torn
by moonlight,
shredded by desire.

After the man disappeared, she set down her pen and put her face against the window. The glass was cold on her cheek, damp from condensation, and her breath made patterns of fog that vanished as quickly as they appeared. She got down from the ledge and stepped back, continuing to stare out the window with her arms crossed tight across her chest.

Each pane of glass was edged by a ring of frost, making the backyard seem like a cheap Christmas card—the barn, the trees, and the split-rail fence, all coated in fresh snow. The parquet floor chilled her bare feet, and tiny goosebumps formed on her skin under the thin cotton nightgown. She enjoyed the feeling, half cold and half fear, and stood there for a moment before getting into bed. She pulled her grandmother's quilt up over her knees and closed her eyes, going over the vision in her mind until it solidified into certainty.

With her eyes shut, she could hear every sound in the sleeping house.

The far-off thump of the central heating unit turning on, followed by the faint puff of the warm air blowing through the vent in the ceiling. The quiet hum of the refrigerator and the ice-maker emptying downstairs in the kitchen. The clock on the mantle in the living room, a metronome for the rhythm of her life.

At 6:45, the automatic coffee maker on the kitchen counter began to bubble, and ten minutes later, she heard her mother's alarm clock go off. It rang for a long time before someone stopped it.

She dressed and went out into the upstairs hall. The water was running in the bathroom, and as she passed the open door, she saw Bill, her mother's friend, standing in front of the mirror with his back to her, brushing his teeth and admiring himself. He was wearing only a pair of jockey shorts, a bright white stripe that made the tan seem darker across his body. He spit into the sink and saw her in the mirror.

"What's up, kid?" he said.

Mignon frowned at him and went downstairs. In the kitchen, she took a bamboo tray out of the cabinet and began preparing breakfast for her mother—grapefruit, toast, and black coffee. She arranged the plates neatly and folded a linen napkin into the shape of a swan, an art she had practiced from her book of Origami. Lifting the tray, she carried it upstairs and stood in front of her mother's closed bedroom door.

"Room service," she said, knocking at the door.

She set the tray down on the carpet outside the door and walked down the hall to her room, where she sat at the foot of her bed, kicking her feet against the frame, until she heard her ride pull into the driveway and honk the horn.

Her mother picked her up after school in Bill's Mercedes, and they rode home, surrounded by the smell of hand-treated leather and the muzak her mother enjoyed. They drove through town, past the shopping centers and the clusters of brick houses that encircled the city, until the highway merged to two lanes and began to curve more often, winding out into the country where the houses were spaced farther apart—square farmhouses surrounded by empty fields of gray-brown dirt. The land seemed to roll on forever, broken only by the feeble windbreaks, lines of stubby trees that fought to keep the soil in place when the winds turned hot and dry in the summer.

Mignon watched the ground off to the side of the highway. She imagined that she was riding her horse alongside the car, dipping and rising through the gullies and small hills, laughing into the cold wind with her hair flying behind her. For a moment, she could almost feel the bite of the air and the jarring gallop, but she lost it, drawn back into the car. She felt

cut off from the outside, secure in a comfortable shell of plush seats and warm air blowing onto her feet. Her mother hummed along with the radio, tapping her manicured fingernails on the steering wheel.

As they turned off the main highway onto the road that led to their house, Mignon saw him again. He was sitting on the big flat rock near the mailbox. The same rock that she used to sit on everyday, perched like a waif, waiting for her father's letters that never came. She turned around in her seat, staring at him as they passed. It was the same man, the same coat, stained and faded by weather and age. It had been at least two years since she had sat there on the rock, but she could still feel every imperfection in the stone, as if her fingers were tracing them in tandem with his.

"Did you see that man?" she asked her mother after they had passed him.

"What man?"

"That man sitting on the rock back there—by the mailbox."

"What rock by the mailbox?"

"Mother, what is wrong with you?"

Her mother eased the car over to the shoulder and stopped near the one tree on the road. Besides the Morrisey's farm, there were only six houses on the road—six houses, one tree, and thousands of acres of bare wheat fields. The tree was sad even in summer, but now its bony, leafless branches and stunted trunk, twisted by the wind and sagging against the wire fence for support, seemed unbearably depressing. Mignon noticed how the thin wire cut into the trunk, leaving deep gashes. It seemed strange to think of a wounded tree, and she suddenly felt a great empathy for it. Time never healed, she thought; it only dug in deeper.

"Mignon, honey." Her mother's hands fluttered between the steering wheel and her lap, "Bill asked me to marry him. Isn't that great?"

Mignon continued to stare at the tree, thinking of the sap, frozen inside the black branches.

Mignon watched the sunset from her spot at the window. Somewhere over there, not too far away, the real west began in the purple and orange streaks that crossed the sky. The farms dried up, replaced by gnarled bushes and thick-leafed, thorny plants, and the dirt turned loose, crumbling to sand. The ground ruptured with sharp rock formations, jutting upwards like the teeth of strange animals. Winter became different over there—cruel and mighty, a force rather than a nuisance.

She went to her closet and brought down her grandmother's photo album, bound in dry, cracked leather, clumsily tooled in simple patterns and closed with a rawhide strap. She carried the thick book over to her

shelf by the window and set it down, then opened the drawer on her nightstand, removing a short candle and a tarnished brass holder. She placed the candle in the holder and lit it with matches from the drawer, sheltering the flame with her hand before setting the candle next to the album. Her face was framed by the candlelight and reflected back from the blackness of the window.

"Mignon, honey," she said, "I'm giving you this book now. Your mother isn't interested in it, so it falls to you. I want you to take good care of it and remember the lives it holds."

She opened the book in her lap and began turning the pages, touching each picture as if her hands could see better than her eyes. The pictures were faded into dull tones of sepia, but she didn't need to see them clearly. Each photo carried a story with it, one that she had memorized long ago.

"Now this was your great-grandfather Caleb," Mignon said to her reflection in the window, "a wild one, he was, filled with poison. He left us when I was a baby and went off to the Dakotas, up to the Badlands. Wanted to be a train robber like Butch Cassidy. Nobody heard from him for years. Everyone thought that he froze his fool self to death."

She turned the page. This was her favourite picture—a thin man, his gaunt face staring out through the time-bleached photo, standing with a stern woman next to him. In the background, there was a sagging cabin dug halfway underground and patched with scrap boards and earth. The man wore a common slicker, like any other range rider, a thick leather coat, worn soft and comfortable. A young girl stood between the man and his wife, looking away from the camera, stiff and formal in her high-necked dress.

"But he came back. One night he just showed up at the door. Mother let him in like he'd just been down to town or something, like he'd only been gone a couple of hours. She never asked him once about where he'd been, and she never said a word when he left again. I used to hear her crying at night sometimes, but she kept on working, raising us kids and running that farm until the day she died.

"Oh, he'd come back every now and then, just appear out of nowhere. He'd hang around for a while, mend a fence here and there or fix the roof up some, but then he'd just be gone again one morning. I wanted to hate him, but I couldn't; he was such a sad man. It was like he couldn't help it, couldn't stop the things inside that made him do what he did. Sometimes at night, I'd wake up, and he'd just be sitting there, looking into the fire with those eyes, like he looks in this picture here."

Mignon paused and held the book to her chest for a moment.

"And that little girl there," she said, "that was me, your old grand-

mother. That picture was taken in 1908. I was 14 years old, scared to death of my own shadow. That dress I'm wearing—he brought that to me one Christmas—he brought Mother one, too. I remember him coming in that night, tracking the wet snow through the door and smelling like the great wild outdoors. Mother fixed us a big dinner, and we sat around the table with the wind howling outside, eating Christmas dinner almost like a real family. That was the last time he came around. We never heard another word from him. I guess he died somewhere out there, wandering around."

Mignon fell asleep, leaning against the window, and dreamed of faceless people who walked in the distance, masked by the shadows of a barren landscape. The people turned towards her, exposing the dark, blurry regions where their faces should be, and waved at her to come and join them. One figure stood out larger than the others, a face that she could almost make out.

In the middle of the night she sat upright, wide awake. The air vibrated as if someone had just spoken, but the house was still and silent. She looked out into the yard, but it was empty, a white expanse of untouched snow. She put the book down and closed the strap, leaning forward to see better.

He was there at the side of the barn, looking up at her. She rose up on her knees, pressing against the window, drawn to the cold glass as if magnetized. He came around to the front of the barn and opened the door. She watched as he stepped inside, and then she jumped off of the ledge, rushing over to the closet.

Her nightgown lay discarded in a heap on the floor, and she had one leg halfway into her jeans when she stopped. She reached behind the rest of her clothes and removed a dress, wrapped in dry cleaner's plastic. Laying it flat on the bed, she removed the plastic carefully and smoothed it out.

Mignon felt the fragile lace collar, browned with age, and unbuttoned the line of buttons down the front. She stepped into the dress, smiling as she fastened the front, and then put on her snow boots. Gathering her hair in a loose bun, she secured it with the antique pin from her dresser and stood looking at herself in the window.

Outside, the moonlight had risen, draining the colour from everything, leaving sharp black and white outlines of snow and shadows. The horses were restless in their stalls, and Mignon hesitated at the entrance to the barn, letting her eyes adjust to the dark interior before stepping into the blackness.

"I'm not afraid," she said.

"Don't be."

He struck a match, sending misshapen shadows across the walls, and

raised it to light a cigarette. His face was like the coat he wore, gray and beaten, scarred into lines that she wanted to touch. A tiny flame reflected back from each of his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" she said.

"Nothing. Looking for a place to sleep. If it's a problem, I'll be glad to leave."

"No, I didn't mean it like that. I mean what brought you here?"

"I don't understand."

"Never mind. Of course you can stay—I've been waiting for you. I was just wondering what made you decide to come. That's all."

"What do you mean 'waiting for' me?"

"It's okay. Don't be afraid. I'm just glad you came."

"I'm not afraid. Can we just back up a minute here?"

"My grandmother died in June," she said, "She wasn't afraid of anything—not even dying."

The match went out and he lit another, holding it out to see her face.

"I brought a candle," she said, "What's your name?"

He passed the burning match to her and watched her light the candle. She turned it sideways, letting the hot wax drip onto a slat in the empty horse stall next to them. She held the candle in the melted wax until it dried, staying in place.

"My name's not all that important. Why don't I just go? There's a place just down the road."

"No," she said, stepping forward, "Please tell me. It's important to me."

"I don't ever use the name I was given."

"You don't like your name?"

"No, not really."

"Why not?"

"Look. . . "

"You're trying to separate yourself from the past?"

"Yeah, I guess you could say that."

"And your name ties you to it, weighs you down."

"Yeah."

"My name's Mignon. My grandmother named me, and I don't mind the weight at all."

"Somehow I believe you. You're a very strange little girl—do you know that?"

"I am not a little girl. I'll be fifteen in two weeks."

"Sorry, no offense intended." He leaned forward to feel the collar of her dress. "That's a nice dress."

Mignon could think of nothing to say. She stepped up and placed two of

her fingers on the wrinkled lapel of his coat, a pantomine of his gesture. The two of them stood still, each holding on to the collar of the other, without talking, only their shadows dancing in the candlelight behind them.

She felt as if her body had divided, half soaring upwards, looking down at the two of them as the scene grew smaller and smaller, and the other half falling inward, being absorbed into the blank eyes of the stranger in front of her. She kept moving out until the house and the barn were specks on the ground and the sky drew back into points of light, and at the same time, she moved deeper into his eyes, shrinking down through the skin, into the smallest of particles. The two directions fused into nothing—a dance of light, and then she was in front of him, releasing his collar and stepping back.

"Who are you, really?" she said.

"Nobody. I'm just moving through here."

"You're just a man?"

"Sure. What else would I be? I ran out of money a couple of days ago. I've just been hanging around, trying to pick up a job here and there. Sleeping in barns to stay out of the cold."

"An outlaw?"

"No. I'm just a guy, trying to survive. Look, can we talk about something else?"

"Do you like to ride horses?" she said.

"I don't know. I've never ridden one."

The night was clear, almost brittle, but the stars were muted by the bright moon. They rode across the empty wheat field, Mignon in front, holding the reins, and the man behind her, stretching his coat around her to keep out the wind. She smiled into the cold as she let the horse run, feeling the man tighten his grip around her waist. The air froze her cheeks, a sharp pain that almost burned, and she laughed out loud as the horse began to gallop.

"I dreamed this once," she said, shouting above the wind.

"It's a good dream."

She led the horse around the perimeter of the Morrisey's nearest wheat field, following the thin tracks of the dirt roads that the farm machines used, a path that was clearly visible in the moonlight. Near the back of the field there was a small depression in the ground, a shallow ditch that stayed dry for most of the year, and a thin stand of trees. Alongside of the ditch, an abandoned thresher lay half on its side, broken and rusting into the ground.

Mignon slowed the horse and circled the machine.

"It's like a giant insect," said Mignon, "It's been there since before we moved here."

"It's beautiful. The moonlight makes it look alive."

"What keeps you alive? I mean, how do you eat?"

"I work when I can. Sometimes I steal things, things that people don't really need. Usually people like your parents."

"That's just my mom. And Bill. My father's gone."

"Yeah, but people like that, people who can afford to lose things."

"You are an outlaw."

"Look, I'm not Robin Hood or Jesse James. It's not like that. I'm just trying to stay alive."

When they returned to the fence between her yard and the Morrisey's, she got down from the horse, leading it through the gate and back into the barn. The man dismounted and watched as she put the horse back in its stall.

"My face is frozen," she said.

"Here." He put his hands on her cheeks, flushed red by the air, and held them against her skin.

"Your hands are colder than my face."

"Wait." He struck a match and lit the candle, holding his hands cupped around the flame.

"Why do you have to wander around? Did you do something bad somewhere?"

"No, not really. I used to think that home was a terrible place, so I left a long time ago, looking for this place that I imagined, a place I built in my mind. Only it didn't really exist, or, at least, I've never found it."

He came over to her and put his hands back on her face. They were warm now and smelled like wax.

"I'm in a terrible place now," she said.

"Oh, are they still cold?"

"I don't mean right here and right now. Your hands are wonderful. I mean my life."

"Your life seems pretty good from where I'm at."

"It's not very good. I hate it."

"I'd stay around here if I were you." He tilted her head back and kissed her, then walked across to the door and looked outside. "You better go inside now. It's almost sunrise."

"You're leaving, aren't you?" she said.

"Yeah, pretty soon."

"I'll stay if you'll come back and see me. I'll stay here and you'll always have a place you can come to when you need one."

"Yeah, maybe I will. That'd be nice."

At the door to the barn she turned around. He was standing in front of the candle, so all she could see was his silhouette.

"Give me a name that I can call you," she said.

"Why don't you find one for me. Whatever name you like."

Back in her room, Mignon took her bible out of the small bookcase by the dresser and turned to the back, where there was a long list of Hebrew names. She read through the names until one made her stop and laugh.

"Your name is Sarid," she said, "It means 'the survivor.'"

The next night, Mignon watched at her window, but he didn't come back. In the morning, she came downstairs as usual and prepared her mother's breakfast. As she finished and walked towards the base of the stairs with the tray, her mother's bedroom door opened, and her mother rushed out into the upstairs hall. Bill shouted from inside the room.

"I didn't leave the god-damned thing anywhere. I put it right there in the dresser."

"Okay Bill, okay," her mother said as she came down the stairs, "but I didn't move your precious Rolex. I haven't seen it. Maybe you wore it to work by mistake."

"I don't wear that watch by mistake. I put it in its case right after we came back from the dinner party at the Barton's. I haven't touched it since."

Her mother passed her on the landing, said "good morning," and headed for the liquor cabinet.

"Jesus, that son of a bitch drives me crazy. Mignon honey, what are you doing?"

"Your breakfast."

"Oh, I'm too pissed off to eat. Leave it here on the table for now."

Mignon put down the tray and started up the stairs just as Bill came out of the bedroom, dressed for work.

"Fuck," he said, "My overcoat is gone."

"Bill, said her mother at the foot of the stairs, "It can't be gone. Just look around; you'd lose your head if it wasn't attached."

"Don't you fucking tell me to 'look around.' That coat cost me fifteen hundred bucks. It was Italian—wool and leather, for Christ's sake."

"Don't you talk to me like that. I won't have that language in front of Mignon."

"Listen, my watch and my coat are fucking gone. Somebody has stolen them, and I don't give a shit about the language I use."

Mignon closed the door to her room and leaned against it. The words couldn't penetrate through the door, only the muffled tones of the argu-

ment. She held her breath to calm herself and curled up in her window with her knees pressed tight against her jaw. The empty candle holder lay next to her foot, rocking where she had brushed it as she got onto the shelf.

She picked up the holder and thrust it through a pane of glass in the window. A cold breeze pushed through the hole, blowing a small fragment of glass back into the room. It landed on her leg, just below the knee, and as she brushed it away, it made a tiny cut on her shin.

One by one, she broke all of the panes, watching the glass as it burst out of the window in shards, falling to the roof and sliding down, some reaching as far as the edge and dropping to the ground below. Looking out the broken window, she took in a deep breath of the freezing air, leaning back and closing her eyes.

As she moved off of the shelf, she saw something on the door of the barn, a piece of cloth, moving in the wind. She ran from her room and down the stairs, past Bill and her mother as they stood facing each other across the den.

"Mignon, where are you going?" said her mother.

Mignon was already out the back door, running across the yard to the barn, where a long coat hung from a nail on the half-open door. It was Sarid's old coat. She jerked it down from the nail and hugged it tightly.

"You are an outlaw," she said, "You really are an outlaw."

She twirled around in the snow, hopping through the cold in her bare feet.

"People like that," she shouted as she made her way back to the house, "People who can afford to lose things."

She rushed back up to her room and unfolded the coat, holding it in front of her and waltzing around her room. She stopped in the center of the room and buried her face in the coat. It smelled of wild things—highway underpasses, bus station benches at midnight, cigarettes and tequila, rocks, sand, and cold cement—and the countless possibilities of the past and the future.

She fell forward onto the bed, hiding her laughter in the folds of leather. Bill would go now—she knew it. Her mother would go to the city to recover, sharing her misery with her old friends back there, just like when Mignon's father left. Time would pass, and Mignon would stay. It would become her home. She felt strong, afraid of nothing.

William B. Robertson

Contexts

When the temperature goes south
with the sun
the children go back
to the motherlode of ways
to wish for new things
and talk of Hallowe'en pumpkins
white sheets, black cats, brooms
and other ordinary objects
that grow magic through
October.

What put this bit of night
this half-bird half-mammal
reminder of vampire movies
onto a morning city sidewalk
where I, watching it shake,
must decide whether to squash it
or let it freeze slowly back
to night?

I turn the stroller at this creature
to show my son
then nudge it over
with my shoe

it rears at us that
smile of little fangs
in a pinched blind face
and I step back unable
to set this thing in a context
of harvest or seasons changing
of construction paper bats
in jack-o-lantern windows
or in a long line of mercy killings

think instead of fangs
rabies and dark lofts
remember playing kick the can
in late evening
till these squeaking black
symbols of trick or treat
brushed us in the gloom.

Moving down the street I repeat
its name for my son though
we didn't look as long as we did
at the doggie, the birdie, or the cat,
stop on the bridge to point
at two ducks with their tails
in the air
tell him about south
and the letter V
then we push home to fire-
wood, storm windows
and rolling up the hose before
it becomes a stiff green snake
in the snow.

Sharon McCartney

Three Poems

Under the Junipers

Pale lilac leaves drift,
the Sutter's Gold clings
to bushes and withers.
I sweat and shiver
on the wrought-iron bench
while black ants churn the mud
with red-tipped shovels.
In darkness, fountains
begin their arc and swish.
I wrap challis
into a turban and tuck
my hands into prayer.
My father will never
return from Yugoslavia.
My shrill children will never
gallop through sand-boxes.
But a late wind
blesses me with pink and brown
discarded petals.
I'm going to kill something
and watch how nothing
changes.

Low Returns

Cold nights under cotton.
My father's belongings gone
in the Chevy. Mornings
like carcasses emptied
of blood and jewels.

Wind empties my chest
in the dying orchard.
Manuel the stone-picker
tells me long stories
I understand like gravel
sneaking into stockings,

nipples in tee-shirts,
tendons stitched
to emptiness when I roll
in blankets and hug the bones
I share with no one.

I don't care that my sister
turns furniture against me
or that horses float
three feet over my bed

because when I sing in the canyon
the trap-door spider smiles
and the coyote lowers
his grimy muzzle.

Flowers Into the Arroyo

Bones itching with rheumatism,
Annette Polizzi raises her plastic stallion
arm-high, ready to battle
whatever I have brought to the fight.

She swings down strands of iceplant,
lobbing purple and yellow blossoms
over the edge of the canyon
to light on the gully's neck
and brighten the black widow's path.

I have tasted the warmth of salt
in brick and buried the jawbone
of a lizard in my father's
garden. But there's nothing
as rare as what explodes
in my sister's brain when she argues
"kill me, kill me" and my mother,
father, sister, brother hold her
until the nurse down the street
arrives with syringes and foil.

I understand that I am not included.
I am cagey as a willow ptarmigan,
dull hair and polka-dots painting
a precise image of pressboard
cupboards, linoleum, Kool-Aid
bleeding a blue eye and tomato soup
heaving over the saucepan's lip.

I know they don't want me to see.
I retreat to the sliding
sanctuary of stunted junipers,
snap-dragons and golden poppies
where Annette Polizzi teases
kittens with a weed. Some nights,
we sleep together and I have seen
how her eyelids refuse to close
over eyes swollen by a bad thyroid,
how well she sleeps in the only
darkness her eyes allow.

The Angels in Cities

Michael C. Kenyon

Nobody has intentions, said Les.

The van fought through gusts of wind as the little family put the pass behind them and confronted open plain beyond the foothills. Les and Anne had been talking about one of their single friends, was her recent love the real thing, when Anne wondered half-joking whether the man's intentions were honourable, he being in his forties and she in her twenties.

I mean, said Les, no one knows what the hell they're doing.

Anne said, Well sure.

How can you talk about the upper hand, when no one knows what they're doing? said Les.

Anne said, That is true. But intentions are kind of plans, and a person could have a bad plan.

Nobody has intentions, said Les. Jesus.

Isn't it beautiful? said Anne. The way it opens up?

Sure can feel the wind.

Look at that sky.

Every fall for the past eight years Les and Anne had made the trip from the coast to Lethbridge to see Anne's Uncle Hugh. They admired the colours of the changing leaves, the lakes and mountains. They slept in the van and cooked meals on an old Coleman in Provincial picnic sites. Always when they got through the Crow's Nest Pass and saw the prairie spread before them, they were enchanted. They'd grin at each other, saying how beautiful, how lovely. This year was different, partly because of Tony dozing in the back. Everything was more intense.

Ten month Tony, Les said.

Look, his eyes are open, Anne said, he's looking around, he's taking it all in.

Every year the sun shone for them, Indian summer, the yellow birch leaves crunched giving off a dusty warm smell, Anne tied up her hair, Les put on his oldest clothes, and they prepared Uncle Hugh's house for winter. They installed storm windows, cleaned out closets, tidied cup-

boards, rearranged the freezer. Spent hours in the basement trying to make sense of three decades of trash and treasure. They slept on the floor of the spare bedroom—the room Anne had shared with her cousin most summers of her childhood—because the bed was shot. And they slept deep. The altitude, the air, always some excuse over breakfast. Uncle Hugh trundling his walker, taking minutes to cross from the sink to the fridge to find freezer jam, and Anne sitting on her hands, Les counting to ten, both fighting the urge to help, letting him serve them. Sometimes he coughed and coughed and couldn't stop, and couldn't stop, then did stop. Anne cut his nails while Les serviced his old Pontiac.

Jesus, Hugh, when you gonna trade the dinosaur? Thirty-seven thousand miles and eighteen years old.

Never, said Hugh. No way. No sir. Bury me in that car, understand?

This time last year I was big as a quarter section, said Anne.

All the fields were stubble, a warm brown. Tony was singing in the back.

Gonna take you to Uncle Hugh, said Les.

Butter wouldn't melt in that pretty mouth, said Anne.

Past Pincher Creek they read a sign saying *Head-Smashed-in-Buffalo-Jump.*

As they dipped into a coulee where a farm surrounded by trees sat above the river, Les said, Gee, I could live there.

And winter? said Anne.

It's never winter here, said Les, only Indian Summer.

Let's stop at Fort Macleod, said Anne. I'd like to feed Tony before we arrive, I'll bet he needs changing.

On the coast, Anne worked at home doing the books of several small companies. Les was unemployed at the moment. His job was to cook and clean, to change Tony. I'll change the tone, he'd say. Anne would snort from her computer keyboard. They liked where they lived. Who's worried? Les would snap when Anne said, Don't worry. When they got back he'd begin looking for work in earnest.

Over coffee at A&W in Fort Macleod, Les told Anne he loved her. Two men at the next table discussed the outrageous price of antifreeze. Les and Anne held hands. Tony slept in the crook of Les's free arm.

I suppose we're gonna try talk your uncle into a wheelchair again? he said.

I'm not going to ask him, I'm going to just get one, said Anne. Tell him we'll wheel it around empty if he won't sit in it.

That's one way, said Les. He's stubborn. He's so scared of his friends

seeing him crippled. We could go someplace no one will know him. We could go to the buffalo jump, or that Writing-On-Stone place.

Anne was smiling.

Les said, What you so pleased about?

You, she said, You've forgotten to be depressed and miserable.

Les said, I'm on holiday. You wait till we get home, I'll be twice as blue. Or maybe I'll let you support me for the rest of my days. God, I feel relaxed.

Les said, So you think Molly's just an ego trip, just hormone-bait for this new guy?

Anne looked thoughtful. I don't trust any older man/younger woman relationship. Too much against it being equal.

Let's go, said Les.

Outside a mild wind blew, and heaven was thick with small clouds. They fueled the van, found the Graceland tape, and headed east. It was after dark when they first saw Lethbridge, a string of fairy lights fifteen miles away, purple sky in the rearview.

Folks getting together should be like us, Les said, as they entered the city. Should be same age, same weight, same colour hair and eyes. We have minor differences. I'm a bit taller, you're six months older. Lord, we're nearly the same sex—except for Tony, except for last night.

Slow down, Les. It's fifty clicks here.

I can smell the brewery, said Les.

Maybe the feed lots, said Anne.

Tell me when to turn, said Les. I still don't know my way.

Paul Simon sang, Losing love is like a window in your heart.

And as they pulled into the driveway and parked behind the rusty Parisienne, they saw Uncle Hugh peeping from the front room curtain, and Tony started to harmonize.

Perfect, said Les.

Three days passed quickly and the visit was half over. Les managed to keep his temper, he and Hugh stopped shaving, Tony was a wonderboy, good as gold. Anne sang loud and tunelessly to her numb fingers as she tossed out of the freezer anything older than ten years. The men laughed together, self-conscious when she unbuttoned her shirt to feed the child. Everyone was talking baby-talk. The coffee was instant, the bread light as down, soft as the tone. The adults ate fish from the deep freeze, fish caught by Hugh's boys when Aunt Rose was alive, when the boys still visited. Evenings they played rummy and looked at Uncle Hugh's old slides till all were yawning. Mornings they helped Uncle Hugh down to the basement and settled him in a chair beside Tony in his highchair, then

dug into the mountain of black plastic bags, holding things up for judgement. Keep or discard. Tony had the last word on everything.

One warm evening, warmer still because Anne had baked apple pie, they sat in the living-room after supper with the screen door open. Les wanted to see the gas fire lit, so directed by Uncle Hugh he killed all the lights, and held a match to the jets between the iron logs. Uncle Hugh sat back and told them he'd dreamed the night before of the royal family—Princess Margaret had given him a map showing all the itchy places in the world. He told them he'd read in the paper that peasant girls in China were committing suicide in groups because they wanted to come back as the angels they'd seen in cities. He told them that the average length of a marriage in British Columbia was twelve years. It got so hot in the room that Uncle Hugh turned beet red and Les and Anne were pouring sweat before they thought to turn off the gas and go to bed.

On the morning of the fourth day they rented the wheelchair.

No way, said Uncle Hugh.

I knew it, said Les. I told Anne you'd never go.

You're going, said Anne. We're all going, Tony in his stroller and you in your wheelchair. We're going to Head-Smashed-In-Buffalo-Jump.

Perfect, said Les.

That's final, said Anne.

I couldn't climb into your van, I'd need a crane, said Hugh.

We'll use your car, said Anne.

I'll take my camera, said Hugh.

The Pontiac sounded like it had a hole in the muffler. Uncle Hugh sat beside Les in the front seat, Anne and Tony in the back. First Les took a tour through town, past the new hospital, the new mall, along Scenic Drive past the cemetery.

It's sure changed, said Hugh. Very nice, very nice.

That's where Mrs Olbrynski lives, said Hugh. Her husband shot himself in the garage, now she's all alone.

There's the building where Rose worked. Her boss just won some kind of citizen award.

Then they roared west toward the Rockies, pushing wind. It was a grey blustery day. Coming out of the river valley they saw four coyotes.

An hour later the prairie wrinkled to make the Porcupine Hills. Dust billowed from dump trucks where work crews were widening the road to the Head-Smashed-In interpretation centre.

More like a bunker in the war, said Hugh.

Inside they looked up and saw three real buffalo on a cliff about to leap down on them, tongues lolling, eyes crazy. Indians ran the place, the gift

shop, cafeteria, projection room. Indians conducted guided tours. A shy smiling woman gave them a key to the special elevator, told them to start at the top, work their way down.

What are they all giggling about? Hugh whispered.

Happy, I guess, said Les.

Makes me nervous, said Hugh.

Anne and Les left Uncle Hugh and baby Tony by a window on the top floor and ran the outside trail to the lookout. The wind blew fiercely. They couldn't hear their voices. They could hardly breathe. They stared at each other and saw teeth. Around them stretched land, trees in the river valley, water spraying off a lake by a farm. They kissed beside the telescope and sprinted back to the building, flapping their arms.

Side by side in their chairs, Uncle Hugh was telling Tony how the herds of buffalo grazed this area. Tony was examining Uncle Hugh's big rough thumb, turning it this way and that in his hands.

On the lower floors were legends, artifacts, a simulated dig showing bones, and a movie. The film showed how the Indians fooled the buffalo and made them stampede by wearing calf skins and coyote skins. Once a brave hid under the cliff and watched the buffalo like a waterfall falling. He was killed, buried because there were so many that autumn.

Let's take a picture, said Hugh. The three of you, over there by the tipi. Get rid of the stroller. Kneel down, the little guy between you. Les, you need a shave. Don't fold your arms, Anne, don't look so serious.

The day before they left, Les and Anne carried all the garbage bags they'd filled with junk and old frozen food to the alley. Les took the Pontiac in to get the muffler fixed. That afternoon Anne and Les had a big fight about money. Hugh had given Les two hundred dollars to pay for their trip, and Les had accepted it. Les said to Anne that it made Hugh happy to give them money, that sometimes accepting money as a gift was the right thing to do. Anne wanted him to give the money back. He said it was too late now.

That night he walked into town and got drunk. He stayed till the bars closed and the streets were empty, the sky huge and black all round. He followed alleys to where the lights ended and looked west and saw nothing. Stars above. Ahead nothing. On the edge here, everything seemed very confusing, very fragile, but precious, precious. He thought how one day Hugh would die. He thought of the buffalo and the Indians. Out there in the middle of China families were nailing daughters' bodies to their coffins to keep the souls from escaping. He thought of his son, and of the average length of a marriage in B.C. He thought of the three of them by the tipi in Hugh's photo. The Prospector, the Businesswoman, and the

Dwarf, Hugh had dubbed them, they looked so peculiar. Wind caught the prairie grass at his feet, blew him round till he faced east and was headed into town. He felt tall and strange, and didn't want to return to the coast.

He was on his way back to Hugh's, feeling sorry for himself, ashamed of not phoning Anne, wondering how to get into the house without waking everyone, when he saw the man break the window.

This small new Japanese car pulled up to the curb, a young guy jumped out with a two-by-four and smashed the window of a wedding dress shop. He poked at the jagged bits remaining, then stepped into the display and grabbed a mannequin. In a matter of seconds he was in his car again with the figure beside him.

Les couldn't believe it. This was simple, a simple act, it cut through. He wanted to laugh, it was very funny, all of a sudden felt good. The stiff bride in the passenger seat of a Japanese car, her veil still in place, the man speeding away looking so professional.

Les took a deep breath and continued. He decided to sleep in the van.

Tomorrow he'd tell Uncle Hugh and Anne the story. It would be his return ticket. He and Anne always needed something to laugh about the day they left, something to ease the goodbyes. Once in the highway he'd tell her he planned to send Uncle Hugh's money back. They'd stop at Ainsworth, at the hotsprings. The year before they'd stayed there and they'd made love twice.

G. Ébinyō Ogbowei

October 1

the courage of youth
and the confederacy of corruption
deadlier than Sango's anger
torch the land
and we are the fuel of this fire in which foul spirits dance

the moan and groan
echo from kukuruku to udi
from adamawa to idanre
a harvest of grief
and rushing whirlwinds of greed

as in a nightmare i am trapped in ojukwu's bunker
watchman watching out of a hole in history
counting diligently the rolling assassins of democracy
the roaring dragons of dodandocracy
tanks armoured carriers machine-gun-mounted jeeps

pompey's guns are trained on Rome
the sharp edge of the axe falls on the foot of the hewer
the cutlass has grown too large for the hand of the cutter
naked and barefoot our pregnant widows with uncovered bottoms
sing the fire song of crawling bowels

the strength is gone out of the land
like salt her glory is trampled under foot
the beauty is gone out of the land
her virgins ravished in strongrooms
forgotten harlots sound the gong across the land

babangida is fastened as a nail in a secure place
and we hang upon him
even as clothes and cups and pots
are hung on nails on a wall
the burden and shame of our land

Contributors

Winona Baker was born in Saskatchewan and moved at an early age to a farm in the Fraser Valley. She now lives in Nanaimo and has a grown family of four. She has published widely with about 200 appearances in various publications in North America, New Zealand and Japan. She has two books and seven anthologies.

Robert Blake is a Vancouver photographer.

Sándor Csoóri was born in 1930 in Zámoly, in western Hungary. He studied at the now-defunct Lenin Institute and is one of the leading figures in the Hungarian Democratic Forum. *Breviárium,* his volume of selected poems, was published in 1988 by Eötvös Kiadó, Budapest.

Rick Hillis is currently a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. His book of poems *Blue Machines at Night* was a Lampert Award Finalist.

Jill Jones was born in Sydney in 1951 and still lives there. She is a poet and short story writer whose work has appeared in a number of Australian and overseas publications. She is a public servant but also finds time to be involved in small press publishing.

Chris Kennedy lives in Syracuse, New York, with his wife and two daughters. His poems have appeared in *Ploughshares* and will soon be included in *The Quarterly* and *The Threepenny Review.* He teaches at Syracuse University.

Peter Lord is a 41 year old Metis artist and poet. His work has been published in *Quarry, Dual, Anthos* and a number of small magazines across North America. He has also published two books, *Front Porch Poems* and *Yes,* co-published with Michael Harris, the winner of this year's CBC Poetry Contest. At present he is preparing for an art show in Ottawa.

Trecie Melnick is an MFA student of Creative Writing at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. She spent two years in the Peace Corps in the Central African Republic as an English teacher. She is currently working on her thesis which will include both non-fiction and poetry about people of The Central African Republic. She is originally from Dallas, Texas.

Sharon McCartney received her MFA from the University of Iowa. Her work has appeared in *Poets 88, Prism international 25:3, Event, Waves, The Fiddlehead* and *The New Quarterly.*

G. Ébinyō Ogbowei was born on July 19, 1955, in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. He received his Honours BA from the University of Lagos and his Masters of Philosophy in African Literature from the University of Port Harcourt. *October 1* is from his as yet unpublished collection, *The Town Crier's Song.* He is married and has three children.

John Pass won the CIVA Canadian Poetry Prize in 1988. He is presently at work on *At Large,* a five book extended sequence of poems doing everything it can.

Roberta Rees-Whalley has just finished her first novel, *Afterdamp,* set in the Crow's Nest Pass. She is one of six editors of the literary magazine, *Secrets from the Orange Couch,* which is one year old. She instructs Creative Writing at Mount Royal College in Calgary.

Len Roberts received a Fullbright Scholar Award to the University of Pécs, September 1988 to June 1989. His latest manuscript of poems was selected for the U.S. National Poetry Series, 1988. He has also won a National Endowment Writing Award for 1989. While in Hungary, he has translated a manuscript volume of contemporary Hungarian women poets, as well as Sándor Csoóri's Selected Poems.

William B. Robertson has published his poems in magazines and journals across Canada. He has published one collection of poems, *Standing On Our Own Two Feet,* with Coteau Books. He lives in Saskatoon.

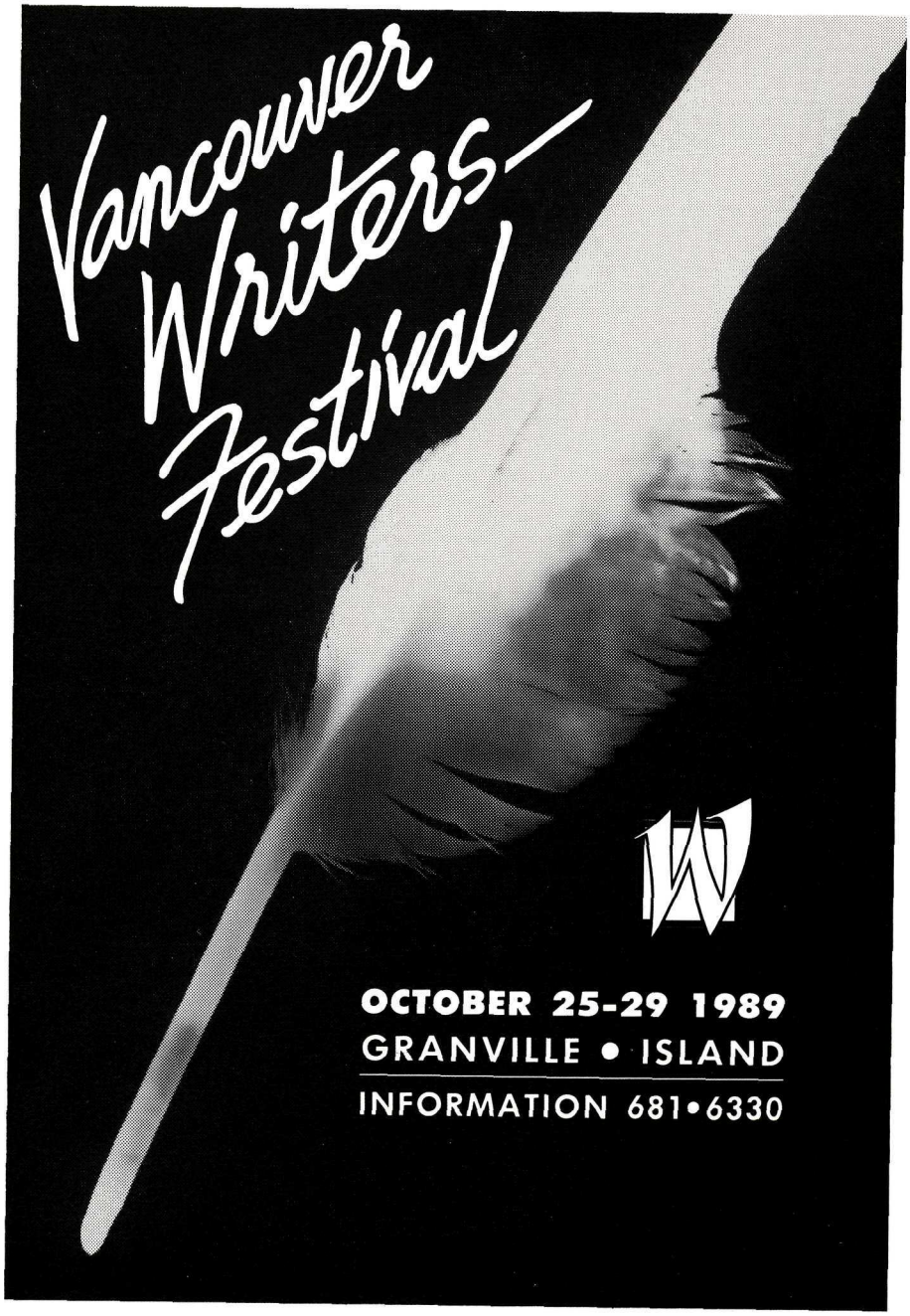
Jay Ruzesky has studied at the University of Victoria, B.C., and currently is in the graduate program in English/Creative Writing at the University of Windsor, Ontario. His poetry has appeared most recently in *Event.*

David Teagle is currently pursuing an MFA degree at the University of New Mexico. He is a native of New Orleans, Louisiana, and holds a BA in Creative Writing from Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio.

Jorge Tellier was born in 1935 in Victoria, in the South of Chile. He attended schools in Victoria and later the University of Chile where he received his degree in literature and basic education. He has spent much of his adult life in Santiago and Victoria, working as a reviewer and journalist for many of Chile's magazines and newspapers. He has published several volumes of poems, the latest of which, *Para un pueblo fantasma,* was published in 1978.

Laszló Vertes graduated from Janus Pannonius University, Pécs, Hungary. He teaches English in Budapest and is chiefly interested in American prose and poetry. He is married and has a two year old son, Péter.

Carolyne Wright was born in Seattle. She attended Seattle University and Syracuse University, from which she received her Masters and Doctorate in English and Creative Writing. Her translations have appeared in *American Poetry, The Malahat Review, Missouri, Black Warrior, Latin American Literary Reviews, Translation, Denver Quarterly, Mundus Artium* and *American Voice.*



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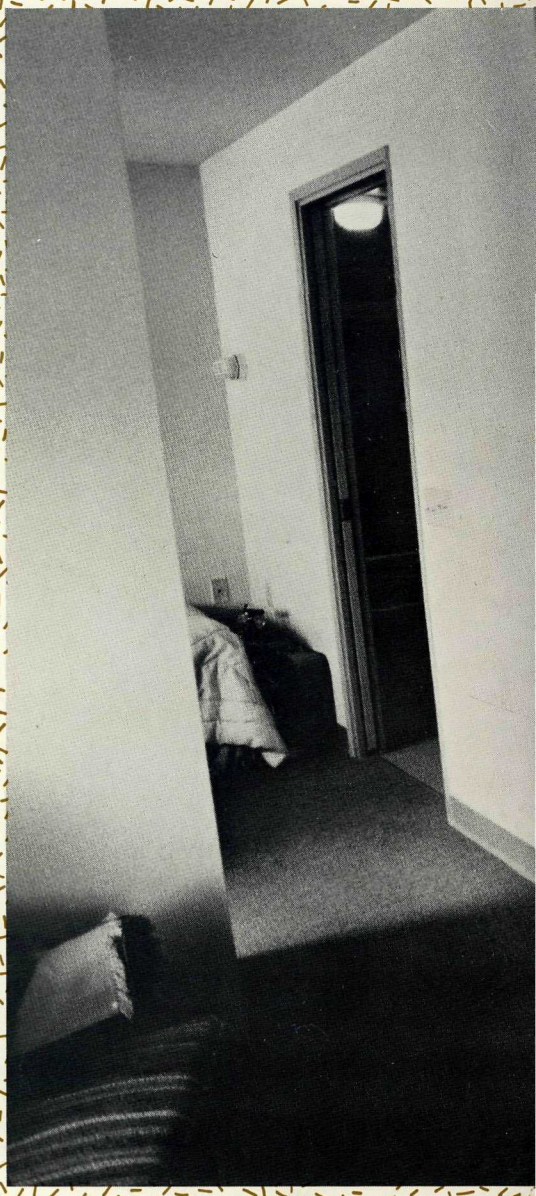
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