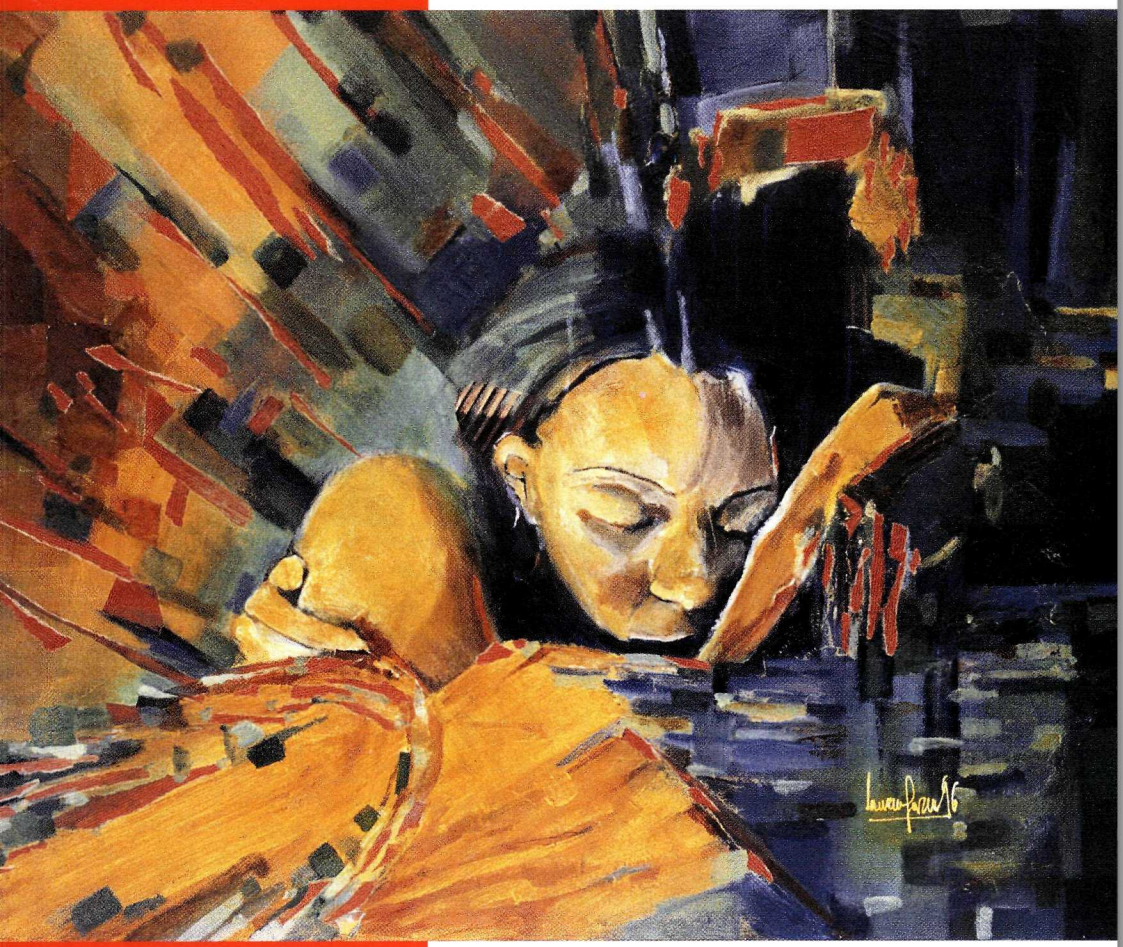
WINTER 1999

PRISM INTERNATIONAL



CONTEMPORARY WRITING FROM CANADA AND AROUND THE WORLD

37:2

PRISM
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PRISM *international*, a magazine of contemporary writing, is published four times per year by the Creative Writing Program at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, V6T 1Z1. Microfilm editions are available from University Microfilms Inc., Ann Arbor, MI, and reprints from the Kraus Reprint Corporation, New York, NY. The magazine is listed by the Canadian Literary Periodicals Index.

E-mail: prism@unixg.ubc.ca
WWW: http://www.arts.ubc.ca/prism

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Cover illustration: *Songe*, by lorenzo Garcia.

One-year individual subscriptions $16.00; two-year subscriptions $24.00; library and institution subscriptions $22.00; two-year subscriptions $36.00; sample copy $5.00. Canadians add 7% G.S.T.

All manuscripts should be sent to the Editors at the above address. Manuscripts should be accompanied by a self-addressed envelope with **Canadian** stamps or **International Reply Coupons**. Manuscripts with insufficient return postage will be held for six months and then discarded. Translations should be accompanied by a copy of the work(s) in the original language. E-mail contributors should contact us for electronic submission guidelines. The Advisory Editors are not responsible for individual selections, but for the magazine's overall mandate including continuity, quality, and budgetary obligations.

PRISM *international* purchases First North American Serial Rights for $40.00 per page for poetry and $20.00 per page for other genres. Contributors receive a one-year subscription. PRISM *international* also purchases limited digital rights for selected work, for which it pays an additional $10.00 per page.

Our gratitude to Dean Shirley S. Neuman and the Dean of Arts' Office at the University of British Columbia.

We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Canada Council ($16,000) and the Government of British Columbia through the Ministry of Small Business, Tourism, and Culture.

Thank you to our donors, Cherie and Julian B. Smith, and to the P.E. Fund.

Publications Mail Registration No. 08867. January 1999.

THE CANADA COUNCIL FOR THE ARTS SINCE 1957 | LE CONSEIL DES ARTS DU CANADA DEPUIS 1957

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Mark Anthony Jarman

A Dramatic Monologue

Songs From Under the Floorboards

I go about 190. I'm down in the pit and you drive over me, wait for me to do it. I'm broadminded but sometimes my head hurts. I hope it's not the years living with hydrocarbons and monoxide.

I hope it's not anything serious (meaning I hope it's *comic*?). In high school I was thirty pounds less but who wasn't? Toting our thirty pound sack: now that alone should be dandy exercise. *Logically*, you think, flesh should defeat itself just from lugging it about a decade or two.

There is no convincing *logic* in my life. In high school I am shy and they decide I am stuck up. I got in a little trouble, hated the sabre-rattling coaches, though they were just humans trying to get the job done with a herd of hormonal cutups.

As running back or wide-out I couldn't make first string, but an assistant coach with a cueball head and a Texas-Saskatchewan accent converted me into a deadly defensive back. Found my niche. Big white numbers painted into the grass under our cleats, rows of zeroes and our uniforms glowing like phosphorus, like pillars of salt and I liked how I looked in shoulder pads at night, my long hair sticking out of the helmet, gold bolts of neon lightning licking our midnight blue helmets.

How I loved to submarine someone cocky from a rich school in the west end, take out their knees and flip them onto the rock hard earth behind our purple brick school, flip them like a burger and make them mortal.

The big lights painful to stare into, the wider black sky and six white suns set on each stanchion, shifting halos and coronas and sunspot flares. So much bleached light pouring down on our playground, our lonely glowing squad.

I could run and cut like a damn cat and I didn't need to catch a thing: just bat the ball down or torpedo them exactly as the pigskin arrived. Some VOICE in my ear like Captain Beefheart singing *Willie The Pimp* and the voice always right.

He's going long, it's obvious.

Buttonhook this time, watch out for the mondo fake.

Fast slant, QB thinks he's Tom Wilkinson, trying to munch us a few

yards at a time.

I was no star and I dated no cheerleaders but I danced backward with a voice there like a dog at a gramophone, like a microphone screwed in my skull; plant a cleat and change and charge, polished helmet lowered smack into the receiver's floating thighs and he cartwheels, pigskin flying loose into space in slow motion, and now down in a pit I do lube and oil and differential and I slap econo mufflers onto econo cars with a little greasecap on my head like a miniature fez and that speedy special voice gone AWOL, lost in the stars, no more Captain Beefheart voice telling me what to watch for in my econo life, just the sign STOP Please Wait For Attendant and a trouble light hanging.

White smoking klieg lights hung over the high school field; red and green strobes washing the blues band on the high school stage. We smoked up walking to the winter dance, laughing in the snowy laneway, jostling, pay the cover, big Har Har Har at the milling steamy entrance, but on the gymnasium dancefloor I felt less sure, a child bride of sorts, prepared to dwell in possibilities but suddenly sure that females sensed unknown failings in me. Paula looked so pessimistic and fetching that one winter dance but I could not put a sentence together.

She was serious, brainy, disapproved of me not being able to put a sentence together. Ripeness is all. I knew she knew the word hippocampus. On the dancefloor I seized up, stopped dancing completely and she stared at my paralysis, and I fled out the alarmed doors, red bells and hammers smashing, crowd panic, and then the girls definitely sensed some failing in me. My high school years breathed disappointment, fear, white noise. One thing did not lead to another.

Everyman's Tonto or Alice B Toklas or Angus Park Blues Band grinding it out onstage, distorted psychedelic bands I loved, but the *voice* failed me on the dancefloor, the voice didn't tell me how to move at the stoned Sadie Hawkins dance. I always did the wrong thing, uttered the wrong syllables, and these wrong things blew my chances. Why do very tiny events make me question organised religion or the actual width of a wonky life? Still, I never pulled a trigger. I'm waiting, waiting for the attendant.

I try to be smarter as an older person, try to make up for how stupid I was, try to stay awake after sex, that beautiful performance, to stay awake whispering sweet nothings as a sensitive Redford might in a putrid romance flick, but God or some very convincing authority figure hits a switch that basically says, Slim, your current onboard DNA and sorry salt of the earth brainstem inclinations really lean toward deep primitive sleep now. I do apologize about that.

Hating school I stayed an extra year just to play ball in that phosphorus uniform the colour of some trendy cocktail. Hated school and stayed extra. I'm a fool for ball though I haven't played now for, oh, several years.

Two friends, guys I liked, killed themselves while attending my purple highschool. I was surprised by the suicides, saw no "signs," though it's safe to say I was too wrapped up in my own complaints to be aware of anyone else's obtuse smoke signals. Both friends liked smoking dope. Jack Gaines in my biology class had long hair like me, acne riding his face and a big calm grin like a wolf, a stoned wolf. 20 years ago. Does anyone else remember Jack Gaines and his wolf grin? I can't remember much else but at least I remember something (I remember that we smoked a lot of dope before I quit because of the paranoia that sent me running from parties).

Jack Gaines and I joked around a lot in Biology 20, gabbing, not really paying attention, though we liked the biology teacher who drove a cool Mercury from a year like 1947 or 1953. I didn't see Jack much outside of that biology class. The teacher we liked was fired. If we thought the teacher was good, then the school board thought he was bad.

Hey, I could make a whack of dough just betting against myself.

This McLube must sit on the tinest piece of real estate downtown, corner of two main drags, world spins by and tiny dust devils in the parking lot, like the dust devils in the old playground, dust devils in the schoolyard. Memories move across your head like head-lice did in that childhood classroom (thought Miss Sampson said someone had *headlights*).

Two suicides but I don't remember two funerals. Suicides were hush hush then. The papers would say, Joe Blow died s*uddenly*. I bet they both thought the world would be sorry, the world would miss them now. Does the world miss them? Is the world sorry? Do those naked bald mannequins in the store window sense the streamlined future first? Mannequins already live there with their unblinking marble eyes and lack of high school blemishes, mannequins like suicides, alone in the many blue futures.

Was Jack's acne a factor, a reason to snuff yourself? In high school, acne walked over my back and chest, but my acne was secret acne and Jack's acne was public acne, his acne was testifying, out in the open, his red flag. He saw skin doctors, he ruined pores on his face dabbing on too much drugstore alcohol.

Jack Gaines sat in a Pontiac with another guy listening to radio music as the Detroit engine purred in a closed garage, sleepy, you're getting sleepy, carbon monoxide changing their skin to a healthy reddish-pink, tiny new riders kicking into their crowded bloodstream.

Cars pull in over my pit and they shut the motor down, try to spare me from monoxide. I wonder if the car radio played crap or something good like Cream or Tull, some good wah wah pedals and Leslie speakers. I wondered why Jack was sitting with another guy. Did that mean something, dying with a guy? Not exactly Romeo and Juliet. Maybe it was a stoned error: maybe Jack just turns over the Pontiac's Slant-6 mill so he doesn't

wear down his dad's battery, so the 'rents don't yell at him, the parents who will find them in the garage, engine warmed up, bodies going cool. Carboxyhemoglobin concentration of 91% in blood, the post mortem pathology report tells the parents.

Down in my pit I open four liters of 10-30 and oil flows like beautiful honey while women drivers linger in cars above me, long legs and red heels and my sure hands calling forth slick fluids. My face and fingers so close to their legs, their warm *loins*. They come and go. Women pay. The car shudders like a live animal. A game of inches but they might as well pass miles overhead in a supersonic jet. I'm groundcrew in a high tech tomb, voice muffled in a muffler shop. They shut off their motor.

I put my head back on my neck and stare straight up through steel floorboards at women nestled (the cosy nest they carry about themselves) up there breathing on milky coffee and a complimentary copy of *The Globe*.

Women worry about their car. Their white blouses are so clean. My hands are filthy. They're always buying impressive underwear and chairs. They pay. Customers turn into pieces of paper; blow away like a voice. Women wonder if their boyfriends love them, they're sure the Atlas moving men with panther tattoos stole something. I'm deep under their blue polaroid city, the virtual reality village we stroll through in our head, our hippocampus route map.

I knew a woman who moved to this city from the Badlands and she couldn't believe how white all the men's hands were. She was used to coyotes and miles of fissured land, hands with dark oil and grease ground into lines and under and around the nails, hands working over truck and tractor engines, grime never coming out. At the farm and at the tiny Badlands schoolhouse these altered hands moved around her, moved over her clean blouses and impressive underwear like magpie shadows, traveled inside her, altered her.

My hands are a crosshatched mess; I check your tran-axle level, your U-joints and PCV, I'm your underground greasemonkey in a boiler suit, your monkey man doing the same task over and over. Crazy crows look identical in every city. I know the smell of new cardboard boxes and rubber mats. When was the last time I saw a bluebird roving a skeleton forest? Let's just say on occasion the bluebird of happiness morphs into a heat-seeking missile and you're trying to stay one step ahead, keep it from zooming up your exhaust pipe.

Gram Vincent, suicide #2 from my class, had wit and charm to spare and black hair in a nice beach boy cut; he had a lopsided sarcastic smile and an elegant shotgun in his parents' basement. Why attack the head, attack yourself? His ornate shotgun looked like it might utter witty Ivy League bon mots, but it clawed a section of his head away licketysplit. Gram

always seemed to be laughing at some private joke while talking with you about mundane things. Gram and I never talked shotguns. Of course we never talked mufflers or crappy jobs either. What did we talk about?

Gram was an interesting guy, but the shell's lead pellets expanded outward in a cone shape and cut that exact shape out of the front of his face, and, at that point, Gram was no longer an interesting guy, if you know what I mean. Do you change your mind at the last second, when the lead pellets are already released?

Grim Gram was down in the basement mixing up the medicine: Gram became a song from under the floorboards, a message waiting for his mother trotting down the stairs to find, to see some of his brain stuck on the wood paneling. The gun in your hand rattling like a seedpod and the head with the Beach Boys haircut waiting.

I don't get sentimental about Gram's suicide, yet I do about Jack Gaines's. What's the difference? I can't figure it out. Gram's death with a shotgun took more courage. Your trigger finger versus a familiar key turning in the ignition. A car key is easier, more gradual than a shotgun's exact trigger, but that doesn't sway me, doesn't cut the mustard now 20 years later. I think about Jack Gaines.

I stuck around. Hated school but stayed where I was. Now I'm down in the snakepit trying to make sense of things. You drive in over top. I'm the person under you. *Wait For The Attendant*, the sign says.

You're in a hurry, you're on top, you're glad you're not down in the hole. I remember Jack and Gram in the hall grinning, laughing, joking.

Playing ball I could run, run amuck, run smack into any guy on the field but we guys never asked each other ANYTHING that was important. Still that way. Guys find about two things safe to talk about. No one talks shotgun itch or sincere worries or mystery grievances. Maybe Jack and the mystery guy in the car talked.

The muffler shop radio serves up classic rock: Aerosmith, Petty, the Stones. All *lame*. Why play the Stones and their prepackaged predictable version of sin and death? The second album with *Down Home Girl* and *Little Red Rooster*, okay. 1963, okay. But now the Stones put their teeth in and flog fake sin like a shoddy wristwatch in a Woolco parking lot and everyone shells out for nosebleed seats in the arena. No thank you. What are you going to learn from the Stones' slow suicide at this point? The haunted Louvin Brothers or any owly 1950s bluegrass band knew more about sin and death than Mick and Keef. Sin and death is not something you *purchase* like a poodle or a poseur wristwatch.

Stanley Cup, I sneak a little TV down here in the pit.

I didn't go to your school. I went to that school across town with the weird name and purple bricks and new design with no windows. They filled in the yellow swamp, the cat-tails and hidden birds, the pasture at the

edge of town, the horse with cow sense and calves with screwworms.

You knew no one from that school but your coach said, Keep your head up boyos. Your coach said, Watch that sumbitch defensive back with the faggy long hair submarines my best goddam receivers.

In memory, Jack Gaines's garage becomes our garage; I see Dad's polished car purring, our family's beautiful wooden toboggan hanging in the rafters; I hear a good car radio playing popular music, notes hanging in the exhaust, radio playing on but no one listening after a while.

Outside the garage winter stars and northern lights crackle over tapered snowdrifts in the backyard. As kids we blasted through the icy crust to crawl inside those soft snowbanks. Our old cat tried to walk across the crust and fell into a different world.

Jar those pretty boys from the other side of town and they think twice before drifting across the middle, before taking flight like an angel in Sport Chek cleats. Horses and calves stood here. Crimson players scramble swiftly off the line, a herd rumbling on hard ground, trying a pick play, but they don't fool me.

Over and over a football leaves the quarterback's hand. Gangly receivers crisscross, look back for a ball. We float night sky to meet each other, strangers under stanchions of blinding lights, and I hit like a mock sparrowhawk, knock them out of *my* sky, down into the pit.

Your coach put a $50 bounty on my head but that made me play better. He was giving me valuable coupons, put methanol in me, rocket fuel.

1973. I float, a low SAM missile set loose by the Viet Cong, miles to roam and no one can touch me. I'm not even 21. I am what, maybe 17, 18.... For a while I am free, a voice jammed in my head like a high heel on a dancefloor.

Billie Livingston *two poems*

Gin Wave

after three nights like this
spinning on jarvis street
poor wet jarvis street trying to wash
my head away my head is way
is teetering
shoulder-high is head is
dripping sky drifting on my
lemon wave lemon gin waving on valium
waving for cars to slow come in
slow like the tide
can't quite make out
their watery faces
through my seaweed lashes
just little just a little further
just couple more pirates irates
sinking because
slinking below sea level
dragging hooks opening my
dragging off my cold ocean flesh
a little more few more pearls
and I can steal backmybaby backmy
babies all the babies and swimandfly and fly
to the warm brown sand

Thrills, Chills and Asprin Pills

mother declares—'nother great getaway
'nother escape
from the landlord/social worker/phone company/
lover/
welfare/
Children's Aid

Leeches, she mutters, take take take—they want my money/freedom/body/child/ and we run
again again away

boyfriends/
sugar daddies/
stray men pay for
planes/
trains/
wine/Librium/wine/wine

And we settle a few months
—rest rest

Welfare/social workers/Children's Aid come
to look through closets/cupboards/drawers
for evidence; a man/his shoes/his shaving cream

Another new school/friend/fight
—*no riff-raff*, she says
I saw not I seen—It isn't not it ain't—just because we're stuck in a sewer doesn't mean we're rats

Men and wine don't mix with neighbours
—a social worker announces her visit;
evaluation of my situation/custody
rabbit from hat! Mother has money for
a plane magic—last week we scrounged
in her crumb-bottom purse

'Nother great escape
—pack/
grab/
hurried/
harried we scramble into another checker taxi-cab
thrills, chills and asprin pills

Lea Littlewolfe

Recycled

wadda ya call it
when a guy comes slobberin
waltzin outa the Alberta Hotel
loaded for hell
after nine hours
pitchers of draft
shootin pool for diversion
pukin into a pocket time to time
hasn't badmouthed anybody
fresh outta minimum security
up north
bush camp
an he's followed
by three sober
though hungry dudes
that don't like the size of his biceps
don't take to his smilin face
not terribly enamoured of
his smooth uncut cheeks
have no fancy for dagger tattoo
above his wrist
just happen to know where
there's a clean two by four
an they jump him
with the wood?
wadda ya call it when
two hold him down
unperturbed by his roar
an the third beats him
till he doesn't roar
or tense
or gurgle even
so it's easy to cover his body
in black plastic bags
and heave him into a dumpster?

when he comes to
a day later
in the dumpster cuz it's not pick up day
his head's three times bigger
he's not breathin too good
most everything's swollen shut
raw willpower pulls off plastic
iron thought pushes him over bin edge
somebody sees a mass of congealed blood
in back alley dust
calls the cops

it takes forty-seven stitches for head gouges
new stitch tattoos for lower body
multiple concussions
bandages head to foot
his mother prays for him and has her way
next day he's tired of hospital nutrition
pulls off bandages
wills his eyes open tiny slits
sneaks out a back exit with his balloon head

whadda ya call the man beside me
bleached gaps on head and back
crooked whisker lines on forehead
bottom lip forever bloated and droopy?

Yasuko Thanh

Leaving Puerto Juarez

The man takes her hand.

"Ah, this is the life," Chinchu says, "the sun, the waves, and licking opium off the fingers of beautiful women."

Spanish is staccato. It snaps off the tongue like a whip, hot-tempered, rat-tat-tat, the consonants battering the palate. She always pictures the words colliding in mid-air, splintering like broken dishes.

She wraps the grains in plastic and perfunctorily seals them with the strands of sewing thread between her teeth. She has not yet devised a way to divide the sticky ounces without defiling her fingers. She looks up; another column of buyers is advancing through her sandy yard.

Closing the door, pretending she's out, is futile. They will knock on the bamboo slats, call out her name, tireless as automatons, rattling the bicycle chain around the door. Often they come without money offering ridiculous winter coats, stolen watches, dated walkmans with broken headphones. She watches them through the open door, approaching through whirls of kicked-up sand.

"Done," she says to Chinchu, nodding at the packages. "Your turn to take care of this group."

"*Como lo quires*," he says, but she is already out the door. His words dissolve in the crashing waves as she stumbles to the toilet. She can see the waves from here, changing from green to gray like a cat's eye. Flies buzz around the seatless toilet bowl, in full view of the yard, only partially shielded by the bougainvillea bushes and a low cement wall. Sometimes she walks two blocks to the La Choza restaurant for the luxury and privacy of a bathroom door.

Lately she has been thinking about moving on.

The toilet bowl fills with blood. It is the same color as the bright pink bougainvillea flowers. It hurts when she sits down. She walks to the cistern and washes her hands in the stagnant water, the hands wading through green algae and mosquito larvae. The cistern is actually an old discarded bathtub; she examines her swollen lip in the sickle-shaped shard of mirror that hangs above it, also salvaged from the dump, that is so scratched she must squint to make out her reflection. She can still taste the excrement in her mouth even though she has brushed her teeth a thousand times. This morning she was at the police station.

Now she is washing like a zombie, her mind a blank except for the conviction that before moving on, one's hands should be clean.

You love to swim in the waves. The current pushes and pulls, gently tugging like the mouth of a hungry baby. The waves swell, waiting like an elevator before they drop. Then, break-neck, they dizzy down, pounding your limbs, spinning you as if you were seaweed, incapable of propulsion.

Every Monday, after the beach, you go to the Cinco de Mayo market. You sit on the stone steps across from the church drinking mezcal, drinking quickly before the bottle sweats its negligible coolness out in your hand. The women at the market call you *guera*—fair-haired one—although they don't mean badly by it. Squatted behind a mountain of plantain or dried fish they call everyone with skin lighter than pitch guera. In fact, your hair is dark—though not as dark as theirs—and you blended in quite easily often joking that you were from the capital when people asked.

Campesinos demonstrate for indigenous rights by the market, sometimes blocking *Calle Trujano* and handing out pamphlets. On these days the town plaza swirls with brightly coloured clothing, traditional skirts sweeping the sidewalk, the men in hats and good shoes. You love to listen to their impassioned speeches blow horned from makeshift orange-crate podiums aimed at the peeling walls of the *Palacio Municipal*—the government house. They fight in a land where expectations die daily of starvation like litters of puppies. They are sharp as teeth. Once an old woman approached you; her *huipil* was embroidered with mushroom designs.

You recognised the blouse. She was from the same village as your friend Dashon, Huautla de Jimenez. She gave you *derumbe*, a psilocybin. Then in a stern voice she warned you not to have sex within two weeks of eating the mushroom or the devil would make you frigid.

You devour Chinchu with a consuming hunger, biting at his flesh until only appetite remains. There is something about him that makes you want to swallow him whole, make him belong to you. His identity is radiated by what is around him, reflected like a pat on the back. His smooth flesh, his eyelashes that curl almost mockingly into feathers around his black eyes.

His hands placate you, but sometimes you wonder why you are still here. You have gotten into the habit of drinking mezcal before noon and *aguardiente*—cane liquor—after lunch. You know you are malingering. You know you should move on. Still you devour whatever crosses your path like a person used to starving, gorging, telling yourself you are creating memories as you puke.

Huautla de Jimenez is fourteen hours north. Dashon grows the opium in a field by his shack woven from branches and red clay. His daughter

Juana is five years old; she has never seen the ocean and you used to draw her pictures of the strangest sea creatures you could imagine. In her battered notebook were eels, manta ray, sharks, and jellyfish. She asked you once if you could bring her back a jellyfish.

"No," you said trying to explain. "It can't exist without the ocean, its beauty is a fragile thing."

She became more enamoured. "What colour is it?" she wanted to know.

"It has no colour. Like a raindrop."

"How does it move?"

"Floating. Like the wind."

She was upset at your refusal.

"If I brought you one," you said. "It would have changed into something different by the time it got here. It would be hard and shrivelled because I'd taken it away from its home, and all the things that made it happy."

She was silent for a moment, thinking. "My grandmother has never left these mountains," she said finally. "She's ridden on burro to that *cerro* to visit my Uncle," she pointed to a distant ridge. "But she's never left Huautla."

Thatch bars twinkle like Christmas lights along the coral beach that stretches around the bay like a pink pair of arms. The bars twinkle, always promising more than they can give. The scene is so artificial that before she saw it she was sure glossy travel magazines only airbrushed such things into existence.

Every night at eleven she stuffs a match box with opium and goes to La Puesta nightclub. They serve mixed drinks and play disco; it is the most modern nightclub in Puerto Juarez with corresponding prices. Spanish-stunted tourists waver at the bar, waiting for their change, smiling uncomfortably, like actors who have forgotten their lines. The bartender has made a good business not returning change. The cheated customers shuffle away from the bar, into corners, clutching their drinks, trying to look cool examining potted plants.

She sells them her friendship and her opium.

Every night Chinchu plays guitar at La Choza. Sometimes she goes down to watch him perform. Tanned women cross and uncross their legs for him while he croons the love songs Mexico is famous for.

She watches from the back of the bar, by the rough posts that open to the breeze and crashing roar. She feels hungry watching him. He commands the space in a room, on the stage, or in a conversation as if daring it to resist. There are other restaurants. But as usual, she will end up wandering the endless belt of thatch huts, examining countless menus, in the end, sure only of what she has no appetite for.

For the last few weeks he has spent the night, or part of it, in her single bed, cushioning her pointy body against the bed frame. The bed is a sheet

of press-board on bricks, no mattress, and hard as a bullet. He lifts her in his arms, they are brown, carved. She lightly fingers his tattoos, asking for each story as they lace up his arm, the ancient Maya, depictions of Chac-mool, the rain god. He makes her think of vigorous, lithe creatures like the deer in the mountains of Huautla, sinewy, full of life.

His hair is long. His ponytail curls down his back like a black snake. It stays silky, not like hers, which she has to struggle with every day, pick free of dreadlocks. She can run her fingers through his hair for hours, braiding it into threads, until in annoyance he shakes his head free.

"Marry me," Chinchu says.

"You already have a wife," she reminds him. "And two kids in Vera Cruz."

"Yes," he winks. "In Vera Cruz. What's wrong with Mexican men?"

"The language thing would get in the way."

"Not the language of love." Then he grinds his hips toward her, making her laugh, and kisses her on both cheeks, and this is how it is with her and Chinchu. She likes their relationship, the fact that it is in Spanish, as simple and straightforward as her vocabulary. His hands are callused, strong as knots. Together they weave through drunken tourists with the expertise of wind, unaffected by obstacles. But even as the sweat of her breasts mingles with his, a boredom begins to surface, slow and rising, like tidewater.

Sometimes she sees herself settled in the world, happy and alone. The waves are tumbling, as always. Then her body begins to shiver, her heat drained by the ocean grown cold around her.

Not all the men she sleeps with are Mexican; she is not too picky. She and Chinchu never claimed sole rights to each other's flesh, in fact, it was part of what attracted her, that they were the same this way. The one thing all the men have in common is a strength that tugs beneath the skin, sweeping and sometimes dangerous. This is the kind of hand she wants tossing her weight, crushing her waist; the kind of hand she wants over her body, not touching, but shaping.

Dashon's daughter has wide red cheeks and eyes sharp as shards. She sleeps in the same shack as her father, mother, brother Miguel, and grandmother. If you walked in public with her people would think she was your daughter and you wish she was, to take out for ice cream, to bring back to the beach. You play together on the white stones of dry riverbeds, hide and seek in the trails that snake through the ragged hillsides behind her shack.

Her grandmother is rustling through the oak with the goats. She sees you and sucks her lip in derision, playing like a child, losing your way in the dark. You want to make her laugh, tell her you were born with a bad sense of direction but you speak no Zapoteca, and such a comment would

only further reveal your stupidity in the ways of life.

At suppertime you watch Dashon's wife prepare strips of deer meat over a cook fire. Acrid smoke hangs in thick screens, has blackened the walls, yet her eyes do not water. As you wipe away your own tears, Juana and Miguel bring you their battered homework books for you to draw in.

Miguel is always the one with the questions. "How deep is an ocean? Would a shark eat your goats if you weren't paying attention?"

Juana giggles and twirls a strand of hair in her mouth.

After supper you sit outside with Dashon. As always, you invite him down to the beach. "Bring the whole family, watch the geckos, swing in a hammock, all expenses paid."

He laughs and says this is a good idea, as he says of most things, but you have known him long enough to tell that often he doesn't mean it. This time he doesn't, but you ask him each time you come just to be sure.

Miguel and Juana cajole you into playing a while longer in the fields behind the house. Miguel ignites the prickle bushes with a stick from the cookfire. This is your favorite game. "Come closer to the fire, women," he says. "To protect you from the coyotes. Now wait here while I shoot us a deer for dinner." He rushes into the darkness with his toy rifle and Juana slips her hand into yours.

At midnight you go to bed.

"My father is clearing the kitchen for you to sleep in," Juana says.

You tell him not to bother. "I *like* to sleep outside." Dashon has been busy rearranging, moving furniture, sweeping with a corn broom. He looks at you quizzically and then throws up his hands. You pull your blanket under your neck by a mound of corn in a flat clearing of the courtyard. Your body shivers and you wish your blood was heavier than it is as you fall asleep in the frozen wind.

The door to her cabana is already open. As soon as she enters she feels weak, her too-heavy head wobbling on a pencil-thin neck. The lizards in the rafters seem to grin at her. Chinchu is in the hammock, reading a detective comic, stuffing a *tamale* into his mouth.

"*Mi amor,*" he says, and stretches open his arms.

Chinchu's friend is sitting in the chair next to the hammock. Now he tells the story again. How the blond woman walks into the restaurant across from the Cinco de Mayo market not knowing what the *chipotle* on the table is for. So she stuffs her tortilla full of it, sputters and coughs as she eats it all, trying to smile through her tears.

"*Pinche gringa,*" Dumb American. He laughs again.

She hands him his opium. "You tell these stories again and again just to hear yourself say the words *pinche gringa* over and over don't you?"

Chinchu's friends drop by every day. She sells to tourists more, the ones she has seen in the market handing out souvenir pennies from home with all the benevolence of monks. They buy construction workers bottles of cold beer. "*Pinche gringos*," the workmen mutter as they drink, wiping sweat off their brow.

But with Chinchu her foreignness fades away. Chinchu could walk anywhere from here to the capital and people would call out his name.

It is the week of Semana Santa. Masses have descended for the week-long celebration. She drinks mezcal and waits for something to happen

At night she tips onto her bed unaware of her limbs. Sometimes she doesn't make it home at all and passes out on the beach with the bottle still in her hand. When she kicks and flails in her stupor it is all Chinchu can do to remove the money and opium from her bra so she will not get robbed. When she does not fight he picks her up like a monkey and carries her back to her hut.

Every now and then she would imagine a life with someone who captured her heart. What that would be like, touching soapy palms at the cistern with hands full of supper dishes, swinging together in a hammock, buying plantain at the Cinco de Mayo market, all the tedious elements of domesticity charged with real love. She would pretend those arms could hold her. She would wish on it, the way someone tortured from sleep, her head full of demons, suddenly wishes on God and starts praying.

These days, time seems to drag like a dull blade. She thinks of the mountains or watches the waves and wrings her hands, the plodding, red earth or progression of green walls of ocean invoking, as everything around her does these days, the metaphor of relentless unfurling, unbearable and crushing.

Chinchu wanted to come with you to the mountains; a change of scenery, the silver bullet for indisposition. But you said no.

Dusk has fallen, thick and heavy. Dashon is clearing a camp, his machete makes a clean sound slicing through brushwood and small trees. He moves through tangled brush as easily as rain, peeling back the forest's skin with one clean swipe.

In the forests of your youth, tourists descended from the city to carve trails out of pristine landscapes and return as conquerors, with bear heads to prove claims of dominion.

"What would you think about taking tourists for guided tours of these mountains?" you ask hesitantly. "If I brought them up, and you took them on hikes. What would you think? I could find a lot of people who want to see this side of Mexico."

"This is a good idea," Dashon says, as usual.

You try to follow him in the dark, flashlights would scare the deer you are hunting. You trot as quietly as possible, imagining movement in the rustling pines. The moon untangles itself from the oak branches and illuminates the quick earth. Then he hears something, throws up his hand and brakes the rushing ground.

You take aim. The deer is quivering, its white tail beating like a pendulum. Everything is action-quick, shifting shapes are pinned down. Even the air, crisp and substantial, seems to crystallize in your nostrils. You curl your finger around the cold trigger. The deer is no longer standing.

It lies in a pool of its own blood. Dashon is shocked and pleased, chattering about a way for the two of you to haul its massive bulk home. And you feel like you have something solid to hold, like a magic bullet.

When she left behind the placid rhythm of the city and came to Mexico, she looked for volunteer work in the cold thin mountains. She wanted saucer-eyed children clinging to her skirt hems while she chanted E.P.R. slogans. But instead she ran out of money and ended up here in Puerto Juarez greeting an endless wave of addicts. Blinding themselves with alcohol and drugs until they can't walk properly, or have an excuse not to walk at all.

When she first came to the Pacific Coast she caught the bus from the capital. She bounced through red seared hills and bandy cactus, their limbs spread as if begging for rain. Closer to the ocean the hills became lush, steaming, like mango ripening in the hot sun.

She arrived in Puerto Juarez at ten p.m. French girls sat around a table smoking Mexican cigarettes. At the back of La Choza tanned shoulders sweat rhythmically over furiously resounding djembes.

She had just finished a *caguama*—a litre bottle of beer—when Chinchu sat down at her table. "You have crazy eyes," was the first thing he said.

"I've been on the road, in the mountains, I haven't slept."

"To get to Puerto Juarez as fast as you can."

"I have the address of an orphanage in Chiapas. I'm leaving in two days."

"The heat will make you grow roots, you'll get stuck here in Oaxaca, like the coconut tree."

She makes Chinchu tell the stories of the Maya resistors again and again. His voice is passionate and defiant. He tells her about cockfights in Chacalapa, and dances in the mountains held outdoors where the cold wind kicks up everyone's best clothes against a backdrop of jagged peaks and steam rising from cobbed corn in black enamel pots. She imagines Juana's mother squatted in front of the cookfire. He talks about the E.P.R. and the E.Z.L.N. leaning forward on an orange crate. She smokes excitedly. Poets and revolutionaries, she says. Then the bicycle chain around

her door will begin to rattle; it is time to sell opium again.

"I'm going for a walk," she says.

Chinchu shrugs. "It's all the same party."

"I know, but sometimes you just want chatter."

"Have fun, *cabrona*." Tough girl. Deer-hunter. He winks and picks up his guitar.

She flicks hungrily across the beach, a bougainvillea flower tucked behind her ear, her red sarong as beckoning as lips. She always thinks of Chinchu as she looks for other men. She is inspired by the ones who make her feel slightly uncomfortable, the way Chinchu did in the beginning.

The men who fascinate her, the ones she looks for, are those who seem like manic birds, the skin of those who have spent their lives in the tropics, restless travellers but at home in this place, in Puerto Juarez where everything feels as slippery as an octopus, that hard to hold.

Talk of career and family matters bore her; she leaves these men at the table crowing about what they do away from here because their being hinges on angle and footing and she knows this is only half the story. She leaves them and scopes the tables of other travellers until something clicks, an open mouth or the tilt of a head. Confident, unnerving.

Semana Santa had brought a stew of holidayers from all over. There was nowhere to sit. It was not yet dark and already tourists overflowed the tables.

The man spoke Spanish so fluently that faking an American accent amused him. "*Una Negra Modela por favor, mi cielo.*" Ordering a beer, he exaggerated the American drawl, mocking his own foreignness. She approached his table and asked if she could sit down.

His face was unremarkable, the kind that blended in with its setting like wallpaper, liquid gray eyes, sun-creased lids. He wore a crisp linen shirt and clean white pants. His feet were callused, strapped into worn brown *huaraches*.

"I'm buying land here," he began in German, "by the *tortilleria*, I teach in Puebla but I love the ocean, the hummingbirds. It's my small statement of patriotism to the coast."

She told him in German that she had also taught, some English, some French. His surprise that she also spoke German made his eyes twinkle.

They spoke about home, the complexity of the urban Seattle metropolis he had abandoned in favour of the simplicity of Mexican sand and sky.

"Home for me isn't a place," she said. "Home is something I'm building

piecework in my heart. A collection of all the things I've seen and done and smelled and tasted and when I've travelled widely and enough, then I'll have found my home. Wherever I end up." Switching to English, she detailed her travels over the last year, describing her wanderlust.

"Let's walk," he said.

They strolled under the huge blackness, white stars trapped in the Oaxacan sky.

He bent over and opened the padlock on his door with a key around his neck. She felt the anxiety and exhilaration she always felt at moments like this. His cabana lay hidden deep in the palms.

He stroked her arms like a doll while the palm fronds outside whispered against the tin roof like rain. "Maybe home is just a word for what you're looking for," he said.

"Maybe some of us don't know what we're looking for," she murmured. "Maybe some of us will never be happy in one place for long. Maybe it's that all the things we want out of life don't come together in one place and so we keep on searching."

"Maybe some of us want too much."

She closed her eyes and thought about Juana.

"You have to be careful," Juana had said last week, "they will steal anything from you here. A woman was hacked to death for 300 pesos. And this is the river," she pointed. "Where they found the man's body, floating here, last week."

She asks her whose body, why he was shot.

"From the next village, he wanted to marry a girl from here but her brothers wouldn't let him, they didn't like his name, or the village he was from."

It was almost dawn and still she sat, dripping wet, at a 24-hour taco stand. A drunken *chilango* leaned unsteadily against his sweating beer, leering at her through her soaking wet sarong.

His eyes were cold, like the teacher's to whose cabana she returned.

He lays her on the bed. From the drawer he pulls four long scarves.

She is not allowed to touch him. The woolen blanket scratches her writhing back. She screams but it does not escape the gag in her mouth. Sightlessly, she arches, suffocating.

After he unties her she flees like a rabid animal, blinded by excrement, flailing into tree trunks. She makes it to the police station, by the naval base in Puerto Angel. The fluorescent tubes beam down a cold light. The uniformed officers watching her make her feel like she's on stage.

One of them writes down her name. "You went with this man to his

cabana?"

"Yes."

"You let him tie you to the bed?"

"Yes."

He takes the form with him. His superior raises his eyebrows and stares at her.

Suddenly she cares only about the stench that is gaming from her flesh, the sidelong glances like hot forks by the people crammed on the wooden benches waiting. She takes a deep breath, walks out of the police station, runs along the road to the beach where she pommels herself in the hard waves, and goes to the taco stand, because she can't go home.

As she eats a bowl of *nopale* soup she thinks about Chinchu. He will glare at her. "He did what?" and "Who do you think you are?" She thinks of herself poised with Dashon's rifle, her finger curled around the cold trigger, and laughs. Who was she trying to kid? Chinchu must not find out. He will whip the man with the bicycle chain while she looks for yet another man whose arms she can trick herself into.

Two days have passed since her encounter. People advanced into her compound, moving forward like the teeth of a saw across the sand, toward her cabana. That afternoon, like many afternoons, she held her hand out to Chinchu. His tongue flicking across the opium stains on her fingers was like a switch. She gave him the opium packages and then wrestled with the bougainvillea bushes to wash her fingers in the cistern.

Chinchu would give all the opium away to his friends were it his choice. In all he did there was an exquisite looseness. Folded in his arms she no longer had to direct her own movements. They were dictated by his stroking hands. She could surrender herself to his pounding chest, guiltless as a pebble bommeranging in the surf. She would surrender to the waves that overtook her, let him be the cause of pushing her away.

Tonight she would lick the salt from his lips. The taste of ocean in his mouth always filled her with distant longing. Everything about him seemed foreign, compelling, his brown skin reminding her of how much there was yet to explore. His dark eyes stirred in her a restlessness. And it was worse now that she had decided to lie to him about the encounter.

Later that afternoon they swung in the hammock feeding each other mango. Sun piercing through the bamboo slats, illuminated curls of dust spiraling from the dirt floor, the rays warming their legs, twined like tendrils of seaweed of vines looped together after years.

In the evening, after selling all the opium, she counted her pesos while Chinchu restrung his guitar on the bed. She stacked the pawned and useless items in a corner by the bed and went to wash the opium knife. At the door she turned.

"I'm going to start arranging tours into the mountains for tourists," she told him.

Chinchu stared at her for a second, perhaps deciding whether she was serious, and then laughed.

She pushed open the door. The sickle-shaped shard of mirror nailed over the cistern framed her face in a canvas of bougainvillea, amethyst sky. She waded the knife through the water and listened to Chinchu still laughing. She would leave and he would not care, even if she hopped onto the next bus. People came and went and she let them.

She stood there, intent as a scalpel, looking at her reflection until the bougainvillea petals began to grow muddy around her. In the dusk her face took shape, piece by piece. It was dark before long.

Geeta Narang

Liang Liangxing and Me

The first time that I called Liang Liangxing there was a problem with names.

I'd been in China for just over a month. Living on the twenty-fourth floor of a luxury high rise and working six days a week, the only people I knew in Guangzhou were my neighbours: successful Chinese businessmen, Americans working at joint ventures, low-level diplomats and the dozen Canadian teachers that I was trying to call my colleagues. In short: Westerners who weren't interested in the East and Easterners obsessed with things Western.

I decided to call him the morning after a long night at Guangzhou's Hard Rock Café. I was tired of spending my days working and my evenings drinking imported beer with Australians and Americans. After all, I *was* in China.

I found the business card that a friend in Montréal had given me and went into the living room. My roommate from Vancouver was sprawled out on the couch, smoking a Marlboro and painting her toe nails bright red. She smiled at me sheepishly, covered the telephone receiver with her hand and whispered,

—It's Wade.

Wade was the young American living in the penthouse of our building. Things weren't going well for him in Philadelphia so he moved to Guangzhou and landed himself a management position at a British advertising agency. When Wade crossed the Pacific, he went from being a recent college graduate with dismal job prospects to an ex-pat living the high life. In China, Wade had an impressive title and a salary that made heads turn. In America, he had nothing.

My roommate giggled,

—He's worried that someone saw him set off firecrackers in the bathroom of the Hard Rock last night.

I stared out the window. Sunday morning smog had already descended on Guangzhou. Polluted air heavy with humidity shrouded the skyline.

My roommate hung up the phone and jumped off the couch.

—Gotta go. Brunch at the Holiday Inn.

She disappeared into the bathroom. I waited until the water started running, then dialed the number my friend had given me.

A Chinese woman answered the phone.

—*Wai?*

—*Ni hui suo yinyu ma?*

—Yes, I speak English.

I smiled.

—I'd like to speak to...

I glanced down at the business card I was holding. The words 'English name: Mike (Small)' were written next to the Chinese characters on it.

—Mister Mike Small please.

I spoke slowly, enunciating clearly.

—You'd like to speak to who?

—Mister Mike Small, I repeated.

—There is no Mike Small here.

—But a friend of his in Canada gave me this number...

—There's no Mister Small here.

Convinced that the woman on the other end of the line misunderstood me, I repeated,

—I. Want. To. Speak. To. Mike. Small.

The receptionist told me that there was no Mike Small at the office a third time, but she was really trying to tell me that her English was as good as mine. Soon, she was speaking more slowly than I was:

—There. Is. No. Mike. Small. Here. Madame.

Her English was impeccable; her exasperation was audible over the phone line. Still, I persisted,

—No Mike?

—No.

—No Mister Small?

—No.

—But...

—Oh, perhaps you would like to speak to the little Mark in sales. Is that who you are trying to reach, Mark, in sales?

—I don't know.

—You see, Madame, there is no one with the English name *Mike* here, but we do have two fellows who carry the English name *Mark*. We call one Mark Senior and the other Little Mark to avoid confusion. Perhaps you would like to speak to little Mark?

—Yes. Perhaps, I would.

—One moment please.

After little Mark said *Wai?*, I tried to explain who I was,

—Hi. My name is Geeta Narang. I'm from Canada. A friend of mine in Montréal knows your friend Peter.

—Who?

—I'm Geeta.

—No. Who is my friend?

I'd been told that Mark and Peter were best of friends, that they grew up in the same village, shared a room in college then joined the army together after they graduated.

—Peter.

—But I don't know a Peter.

—Peter, your old friend from Shanghai University who moved to Canada. You know, *Peter.*

—Oh, Zhong Qin. I didn't know his Western name.

Ever since my arrival in China I'd been thinking about names. The utter absurdity of names and the paramount importance of names. Twenty four hours after I stepped off the plane—seconds away from facing my first class in China—my boss put his hand on my shoulder and said,

—Don't forget the most important thing.

I tightened my grip on my briefcase and went through the all too familiar ritual. The teacher's body check. Chalk? Left pocket. Attendance book? Briefcase. Kleenex? Right pocket. Teaching visuals? The small folder tucked under my arm.

—Don't forget to name your students.

—Pardon?

—Don't. Forget. To. Give. Your. Students. English. Names.

—What?

My boss kept telling me the same thing using different words, his voice becoming louder by the minute. Like an airplane stewardess answering a tired traveler's questions; like a child admonishing a deaf parent.

—You. Have. To. Give. Your. Students. English. Names.

—I don't understand, I finally admitted. Don't they already have names?

—Of course they do, but they only have Chinese names. You have to give them English names.

—Why?

Suddenly: I felt jet-lagged. Tired and groggy, I needed the day that I lost when I crossed the international date line en route from Vancouver to Hong Kong.

Suddenly: I missed Canada. Sweat dripped down my neck and my blouse clung to my back. It was monsoon season in South China. I had no idea what my boss was talking about.

—They need English names so that you'll be able to call on them in class. You can't possibly remember thirty Chinese names. All of the foreign teachers here re-name their students to make classroom management easier.

My boss handed me a plastic bag full of name tags. A chill ran up my spine.

—Here, the last foreign teacher at this school prepared these.

I sifted through the bag pronouncing each name as I turned the tags over in my sweaty hands.

John, Mary, Patrick, Jane, Ralph, Linda.

The faces of friends and relatives back home flashed through my mind's eye.

Kitten, Alberta, Homer.

I wondered about my predecessor.

Panic struck: I have no right *to name*. Naming is something that mothers do when they see their children for the first time. Fathers use names as a way of paying tribute to old friends and dead relatives; holy men take on new names after taking their vows.

On my second day in China, I named twenty students; on my third night in China, I didn't sleep well.

I met Mark at a trendy bar in downtown Guangzhou.

He asked me why I'd come to China.

—To teach, I answered.

—Oh, so you are one of those. A *volunteer*.

He spat the word out like a foul piece of food caught in the back of his throat and butted his cigarette out in disgust.

—No, no. I am paid for my teaching here.

Suddenly: I was on the defensive.

Suddenly: I was adamant that the stranger sitting on the other side of the table not mistake me for an idealistic young Westerner who used helping others as a pretext for traveling the world.

—But your salary here in China must be less than your salary was back in Canada.

The conversation had gone from courteous to confrontational in the space of a few long minutes. I began mumbling,

—Yes, but...

—So you are a volunteer.

—No.

I shook my head.

—Then you must be a Christian.

—What?

—You must be one of these modern missionaries who comes to China to convert us heathens.

—No, I'm not religious.

—Ah, so you're a gold-digger.

—What?

—You're using teaching as an excuse to make business contacts. You want to be part of the Pacific Rim boom like everyone else.

—No. I *am* a teacher. I taught in Canada and now I am teaching in China.

—But, you seem intelligent. You must know that you can never really help Chinese students because you're not Chinese. If you were a real teacher, you would be teaching in your country. You don't understand the problems that Chinese students have to deal with.

—I...

I had no idea why I'd come to China.

Mark looked me in the eye and asked me the question that still keeps me up at night:

—What made you think that you'd be happier in China than in Canada?

In the taxi on the way home, I decided the night had been an irretrievable disaster. I stared out the window at the small stalls that line the streets of Guangzhou wishing that I had my camera with me. Pictures of the East's poverty—no matter how badly they're taken—always sell well in the West. The misery that clutters the sidewalks of large Asian cities provides ready-made poetry for foreign travellers to snap pictures of. The emancipated old men sucking on wooden pipes; the pretty young beggar-women nursing their children and the street urchins who use urban refuse as their play things.

Mark spoke, punctuating my train of thought with a question,

—What do you usually do on Sundays?

Startled, all I could do was answer honestly,

—Nothing.

—Then I'll pick you up next Sunday at eight in the morning.

Mark was not expecting an answer, so I did not give him one.

The taxi creaked to a halt; the porter of my building opened the door for me. I forced a smile and offered it to Mark. He handed me his business card as a reply.

—See you next Sunday. Call me if there's any problem.

I nodded.

—Goodnight Geeta.

I looked down at the business card I was holding and made an effort to pronounce the Chinese characters written on it,

—Goodnight Lien Liensing.

I cringed when I heard the way that the words I'd just pronounced sounded. Mark smirked.

—Don't bother.

—Goodnight Mark, I mumbled and walked away.

My roommate was sitting at the kitchen table listening to Enya and waxing her legs.

—Good night?

—Not bad.

I forced a smile.

—I told you that you'd like it here. *China is a blast.*

On Saturday, I attended a reception hosted by the Guangdong Ministry of Education in honour of foreign teachers working in Guangzhou. *What made you think that you'd be happier in China than in Canada?* I searched for an answer as I scanned the room.

Young Western women wearing too much make-up smiled at grey-haired government officials. A blond woman in a décolleté dress sang karaoke with an elderly gentleman wearing a Mao suit. A skinny redhead from the American School taught a group of Chinese men how to do the Macarena on the dance floor.

Someone from the ministry stepped up to the microphone and cleared his throat. The dancers resumed their seats and the karaoke machine was turned off.

—Teachers are highly praised people in our society. Since the time of Confucius, we have had great regard for teachers...

Why had I come to China? Because everyone I knew in the West had a story about someone who'd gone East and found happiness. The Pacific Rim is the El Dorado of my generation. *Go East!* People kept telling me. The writing has been on the wall for some time now; or, more precisely, the writing has been in pages of the *Globe and Mail* for some time now. I was a fully qualified English teacher with a couple of years experience, but when I leafed through the classified adds, my Canadian job options weren't promising: music teacher in a town three hundred kilometers north of Winnipeg, part time work in Montréal or full time substitute teaching in Toronto. Alongside these large ads in the Careers section with their official School Board crests and expensive bold borders, there are always dozens of smaller ones, three liners looking for English instructors (preferably with *some* experience) that have fax numbers as return addresses. Two weeks after I began applying for teaching positions in Asia, I was inundated with offers. A couple of phone calls later, I landed myself a job in Guangzhou *to begin immediately.*

In Asia, if you are a native English speaker and you are decent-looking, the job offers are never-ending. Rhonda, the woman sitting on my right, was unemployed in Toronto, now she was a teacher at a respectable international school in China. Lorraine had a suspiciously high number of debts in L.A., so she came to Guangzhou to direct extra-curricular activities at a posh private school for rich Chinese children. When my roommate graduated from university with a B.A. in art history, she moved to China and paid off half her student loan in her first six months of teaching English.

—We are very pleased to have you in our city. Your presence in

Guangzhou is a step towards better understanding between the East and the West. It is people like you who will ensure world peace in the future.

I clapped politely. A sunburnt young man from the American consulate proposed a toast to our gracious hosts. Gifts were distributed.

Rhonda and I unwrapped the small packages that we'd been given to find identical gold-plated watches. I examined mine carefully. A small picture of Mao was etched under the roman numeral twelve. I nudged Rhonda.

—Look, it's Mao.

—Who?

—Mao Ze Dong.

Rhonda looked at me questioningly.

—Mao Tse Tsung,

I repeated, assuming that my pronunciation was not up to par. After all, Rhonda had been in China for a full year. Her Mandarin must be excellent, I reasoned.

—Who's Mao?

She fiddled with the strap of her black sequined evening gown.

Who's Mao? I reminded myself that people who do Fascinating Things are not necessarily Fascinating People. Rhonda taught in Africa and in India before coming to China. Had I met her at a party in Montréal, I would have been intimidated by her before having spoken with her.

—So, who's Mao?

—Well, Mao...Mao sort of started communism in China.

—Oh.

A group of school children gathered on the stage and recited a poem they'd written in praise of foreign teachers.

—East and West. Black and white. Yellow and red. We are all people of this world. Thank you dear teachers for coming to our country.

They curtsied one by one before leaving the stage.

I went for morning tea with Mark the following Sunday. We sat at a small table piled high with baskets of dumplings, plates of noodles, small bowls of soup and even smaller cups of tea.

I asked Mark what he would be doing this morning if he wasn't having breakfast with me.

—Nothing, he mumbled between puffs on his third cigarette.

Suddenly: I became suspicious of Mark's reasons for spending time with me. From what I understood in Montréal, he was happily married but I still hadn't met his wife. To make things worse, every book that I read about China had a chapter on concubines and foot binding. I was on full alert.

—No, really. What would you be doing?

My roommate kept telling me to be careful. 'Chinese men have this

thing for foreign women,' she warned me.

—Nothing.

—C'mon...

—You don't understand. I am Chinese and I am married but I don't have any children. So I work as much as I can and I watch TV in my spare time. China is not like Canada.

—What about fun? I ventured.

—What for? Mark answered.

I could not find a reason for fun.

—You don't understand.

I nodded my head and we ate in silence.

Mark and I spent the day like people in the China Tourism pamphlets spend their days: visiting temples and memorials to China's fallen soldiers. I dressed up in traditional Chinese costumes for Polaroid pictures and bought postcards of the Great Wall to send home.

Over a late lunch of vegetables that I did not know the names for and of meats that I *hoped* I knew the names for, our talk finally turned to regular talk of people in their twenties. We started by outlining our family histories for each other: my father became a business man when he arrived in Canada and my mother was a homemaker; Mark's parents dropped out of high school to become Red Guards and married between public criticism meetings. We summarized our adult lives in a few sentences: after studying at McGill I taught in rural Quebec; Mark joined the army when he graduated, then went on to work for the local government.

—My wife and I aren't even sure that we want to have children.

I decided silence was the best answer to a statement like that.

—I mean look at this country.

I offered the stock answer,

—People keep telling me that things are changing...

—Things *are* changing and that's the problem. My parents were Red Guards and now they are both Party members. They might have spent their lives fighting for the wrong things, but at least they had something to fight for. They had a reason to get up in the morning and a cause that they believed in.

—But aren't you happy with Deng Xiao Peng's reforms? Aren't you happy that China is open to the outside world now?

—Of course I am. Only a fool would want to turn the clocks back to how things were before. But now that communism is gone, there's not much to live for. All that people want to do now is make money. That's why my wife and I get up in the morning: to make money. What kind of life is that? It's—I learnt the English word for it at university—it's, oh yes, it's a Catch 22. China would have died without the reforms, but the reforms have killed people's reason for living. I read about the Generation X in a foreign maga-

zine a few years ago and I just didn't understand why the young people in America were so miserable. After all, they're parents and grandparents were right: communism is a bad idea; it just doesn't work in practice. Western nations have good, healthy societies. Americans should be happy; they've won! It always seemed to be that Americans were always having fun; you go the movies, you have dinner parties and you are always dancing. In China, we have forgotten how to have fun. We've been so busy fighting for communism for so long. I think that my generation in China is the *real* Generation X.

I roused the courage to ask Mark the obvious:

—So why don't you leave like Peter?

—Who?

—Zhong Qin. Why don't you leave like your friend Zhong Qin?

A waiter appeared with a fresh pot of tea. He nodded his head in my direction and said,

—*Lao wai.*

Foreigner. Not a judgment, just a statement of fact. Mark nodded his head and repeated,

—*Lao wai.*

Then the waiter started talking in Cantonese. Mark translated bits and pieces for me,

—It's an old saying. People in Guangzhou eat everything that flies except for airplanes, everything with four legs except for tables and everything with two legs except for their mothers.

I smiled at the waiter and made a mental note. A local saying; another anecdote to bring back to Canada. Mark poured tea for both of us.

—So why don't you leave like Zhong Qin?

—It's not that simple.

—What do you mean?

—Well, food for example.

Every time I thought I was on the verge of Understanding China, I became confused.

—What do you mean *food*?

—Well, I like Western food. MacDonald's is not that bad. But the thought of eating hamburgers for the rest of my life disgusts me.

I sighed. So this is what it all comes down to: culinary preferences. Tastes for foods acquired in childhood determine the political allegiances of adults.

—You know you can get Chinese food in the West. Almost every city has a Chinatown—

—China is my home.

—But don't the politics ever...

—You seem to like China. You like Chinese art and you appreciate the

temples, but are you going to move here?

The thought had never crossed my mind. I stared at the food laid out in front of me. Chicken feet were good, but the thought of facing them every morning for the rest of my life was something else altogether.

—Well, are you planning on staying in China?

—No.

—And why aren't you going to stay?

Because China is a totalitarian state and Canada is a liberal democracy, I thought.

—Because China is not my home.

I answered and realized right away that that was the real reason.

—Well, Canada is not my home.

I nodded my head and smiled at Mark but he was looking elsewhere.

When I told my teaching assistant that I was uneasy naming students, she sighed. *Wo bu liaojie lao wai.* I'll never understand foreigners.

—Miss Geeta. They are just words. They mean nothing. These children forget their English names the minute that they walk out of the classroom.

I tried to imbue the moment of naming my students with some semblance of significance, but *inevitably* chubby boys with pot bellies ended up with the names Brad and Chet pinned on their shirts and pretty young girls wound up with names like Gertrude and Bertha.

And, despite my efforts at impartiality, I know that I treated the talkative young girl who I named after my mother better than her classmates. I just couldn't bring myself to say, *Be quiet Gillian* or *Gillian! Sit down.*

The next time that I broached the subject of naming with my teaching assistant, she set me straight.

—Miss Geeta, if it bothers you *that* much, learn Chinese.

The last time I saw Mark, we went for lunch. When the silence became unbearable, we fell into the rituals of international relationships. The chit-chat of people pretending to be genuinely interested in each others' countries. I told Mark about the Plains of Abraham, John A. MacDonald and outlined the problems of Quebec's place in Confederation. He translated Laotze and told be about Mao's childhood.

At about three in the afternoon, in the lull between the lunch crowd and the dinner crowd, after a few beers in the mid-July heat, we let our guards down. Mark offered me a cigarette and asked,

—What about *you?*

I looked at Mark questioningly, though I knew what he was referring to. Because I was the foreigner and Mark was the local, he was usually the object of our conversations while I was the subject.

—I mean what do you really want? Do you feel like you're part of this

Generation X thing?

—I guess so. I don't know what I want and I suppose that's why I came to China.

—You're really not here to make money or spread religion?

—*Really*, I'm not.

—I don't understand.

—I guess I'm looking for a reason to get up in the morning.

—I think I can understand that.

I ordered two more Zhu Jiang beers and filled both our glasses.

Suddenly: I felt like I was sitting in a bar in Montréal with an old friend mulling over the directions in which our respective lives were going.

—You see, I wasn't that happy with my teaching job back in Canada and I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, so I came to China.

—But is it easier to get up in the morning here?

I fixed my gaze on the dragon and the double happiness characters painted on the wall of the restaurant. I didn't know why I was satisfied with living and teaching and drinking beer in China, but I wasn't satisfied with living and teaching and drinking beer in Canada. I couldn't explain why we call Westerners doing odd jobs in the East hopeless romantics, but call Westerners doing odd jobs in the West just plain hopeless.

—Yes, I guess I do. I guess it's cause everything is a challenge here. Everything is an adventure: going shopping, taking the bus to work, getting my bicycle fixed. Every morning when I leave the apartment, I feel like I'm going on an adventure.

The dragon's eyes seemed almost human; they seemed to be staring at me. Mark followed my gaze.

—It's all that we have.

—What?

—The dragon. It's all that we have.

Mark took another swig of beer.

—What's Canada's animal?

—The beaver.

Suddenly: I was on the defensive again. That's because Mark was on the offensive.

—And what can your beaver *do*?

Build dams and make lakes, I thought.

—A beaver can walk and swim, I answered.

—Well, a dragon can do *any* thing. It can walk, swim, run and fly. America has the eagle and all that it can do is fly. Russia has the bear and all that it can do is walk. When I was a kid, I never understood why such supposedly great countries had such silly symbols.

I stared at Mark and Mark stared at the dragon on the wall. I couldn't help myself,

—But the dragon doesn't exist. The beaver, the bear and the eagle do.

All I could think of was Mark and Peter in their Red Army uniforms shooting at protesters gathered at Tiananmen.

—*Lao wai*, Mark muttered.

Foreigner. I nodded, almost proud.

Mark got up to pay the bill, his eyes still fixed on the dragon.

—I'd rather have something that's magical and that doesn't exist than something that's dull and that exists, Mark mumbled.

Then you'd better stay in China, I thought.

When we parted, I made an effort at reconciliation. I tried to pronounce Mark's Chinese name,

—*Xie xie nin. Bye bye Lien Liensing.*

Mark smirked; my Mandarin was atrocious.

—*Bu qu xie. Bye bye...*

He looked at me questioningly.

I blushed; I didn't have a Chinese name. The thought of adopting one had never crossed my mind.

On Monday morning, I started my class with a question. I took a deep breath and I asked my students how I should go about finding myself a Chinese name.

—Just choose one, they answered in unison.

—But I don't know any.

The students burst into laughter. My teaching assistant rolled her eyes. I asked her to translate students' stray comments for me. Clint wanted to know if I ever watched movies. After all, that is where his mother got the idea for his name. Céline asked me who my favourite Chinese singer was.

I put my elbows on my desk, leaned forward and said,

—Please name me.

Xiao Li, A Mei, Xiao Fang, A Xia, Aili.

The sounds bounced off the classroom walls, like the random notes of musical instruments in search of a melody. The possibilities were tantalizing, shining like gold on a prospector's spade.

Susan McCaslin *two poems*

Grace Notes

1

you are my going to myself to gather
myself
home

you are my home

2

how your vertebrae curves against mine
when we huddle in

arranging what we know
around what centre?

how we feel the workings
of each in each

the muscled speech
and slackening into sleep

3

if there is no spirit we can name
still, all our bright language will come back at us—
dew on our heads

if language is a construct, conduit,
what of that?

4

sometimes the companion is the beloved
and sometimes the beloved is a
kind sharer of tasks

harnessed there,
you glance at each other
through blinders

remembered meadows

5

too often we are too tired, numb,
to turn to each other

almost lost, the desire
that otherwise might come flaring

6

there is always the possibility:
one of us lank-haired,
vomiting up sputum

one finding the pressure points
on the other's spine
willingly, willingly

one hooked up to tubes,
the other waiting
in a close room

7

or I, holding your unmuscled flesh
guiding you toward the shower

o love, let us be true

all the pieces falling around us
and the cries of our unborn dreams

when you are old and grey and full of sleep

8

in your first vision of me
I floated toward you, veiled—
you naked as Adam

who will go first
all passions blown
still hungering

and who will linger,
o my second skin,
face within my face?

The Monster

You would not think a monster sleeps
under this agreeable facade,
for the facade is real enough,
extending down layers and layers,
only disturbed by the slow
burndown of a long fuse.
And the more than pleasant face
pokes through most of the time.

Yet there is this crazed, genderless thing
that erupts once or twice a year,
bold enough to brandish a hairbrush
over a child's head to
enjoy the terror in her eyes,
to shatter her recorder against a wall,
then sprawl downstairs in
an eerie three-block-scream
kicking all the time like a centipede against the walls
mouthing her mother's old cliché
"You're driving me to my grave."

There are these two heads,
one barely attached to the other
by a piece of floss.
One quick, waxen snap
would send one flying.

Sandra Alland

Ma Naissance (My Birth)

Mom said:
Shut your mouth.
Cross your legs.

Body in this position,
how can anything
enter?

When we walk
sidebyside
I am twice her height,
she twice my width.
Perhaps it's these
distances of flesh that
mar communication.

Mom taught me useful things:
Be kind.
But also:
to always call Italian and
Chinese people
little
(it makes them cute and
unthreatening).
My mother's silence when
Dad yells obscenities
and ridicule,
Use a knife.
Lose a few pounds.
her silence when she knew
her son a criminal.

Maman disait:
Fermez la bouche.
Fermez les jambes.

Le corps dans cette position,
les choses,
comment peuvent-elles
entrer?

The way she tells a story
three times in a row
repeating exactly the
same details as if they
were new.

There's something afoot in Demark.

Mixed metaphors and resistance
to all f-words
including feminist

> (no wonder I was born so fast
> my spirit couldn't be free soon
> enough clawing with new fingers
> through the dark tunnel that is
> her unworshipped cunt)

Yet she loved me
alien child who would place
a constant fear in her chest
strange adventurer
sexual deviant
social ist.
Often nothing to agree on
but dessert.

Mom said:
Whatever you want,
I want you to do it.

Maman disait:
Ce que tu veux,
je veux que tu le fasses.

Francisco Hernández
translated from the Spanish by Glen Downie

Selections From Criminal Texts

1. THE DISCOVERY OF THE BODY

I'm certain.
She knew that I would try to kill her that night. Still her face reflected nothing, no sign that might appear terrible or distressed.
We dined in silence.
Finishing, she went up to the bedroom happily, like a little girl heading for a playground. I downed my cognac and followed her. Two at a time I climbed the 48 marble stairs till, arriving at the hallway, I went down it without making a sound and quickly found myself before an open door. There she was, waiting. Her smile was a mix of naïveté and deceit. Her opaque nakedness shone like lanternlight.
At her right temple, she'd drawn a red dot. Under her trifling breasts she'd fixed a shooting range target. On the mahogany nightstand, alongside the lamp, a vial of greenish liquid, a needle, and a gun. At the head of the bed, with her noose already knotted, a heavy rope, and at her side, on a pillow, a butcher's cleaver and some of my surgical instruments.
I drew near, mirroring her smile. I took her in my arms, crossed the room and dropped her from the window.

*

to possess you
is that most reddened blush
of dawn
is like dreaming of murder
and waking with your body
hacked up in my hands

*

if my life were a vampire
small and one beating-wing
I'd raise it from its coffin
and it would cleave to your throat
so that you might glow
eternally pale
like Tod Browning's
most gorgeous monster

*

armed
and while I traverse
your shoulder
with my lips
the nasty obit
I couldn't write you
assaults me

*

pierced
by a pin
in your womb
a black butterfly flutters

*

I throw the word *boomerang*
and it doesn't come back
take the word *valium*
and don't sleep
invoke the name *Lucifer*
and he doesn't appear
breathe in the word *oxygen*
and choke myself
pace off the word *morgue*
and wake you
sketch the word *bridge*
and it collapses
write the word *end*
and begin again

2. ON THE DISSECTION TABLE

opening him
on the dissection table
they found
sharp words
impregnated with curare
an umbrella
a sewing machine
and the word-portrait
of Lautreamont

*

he clears up the mystery
of the blind strangler

by squeezing the delicate throats
of young girls

he believed he was
wringing the neck of light

*

I'm just hoping it happens
that the belly you'll leave full of holes
will bloom with scorched images
that make me size up the room with
Sam Spade's shoulder holster
where in said holster an empty
whiskey bottle used to shine
lonely here in the dark I'm just hoping it happens
that you swing the door open smoothly
& come in at a gallop draped over his shoulder
that you shake out my name while he bites your ass
that the two of you fuck furiously in my face
with the old red curtains drawn back
so the sun blinds me
and I can't break any bones
with the shots
from my empty whiskey bottle

*
carry him to the roof
on the pretext of looking at the night

tie his limbs securely
to the armchair you set out earlier

between his fragile wrists place
the lightning rod that will appear in your hands

while his torment increases about his fear
dry his tears with guffaws

you feel no remorse
after the thunder and the splendor

think that by simple good fortune
you've delivered your father's death
into the light

3. LOOSE ENDS

if the hurried kiss
we gave each other
hadn't tasted of
Scott's emulsion
I would have desecrated the lovely little girl
with the blue eyes
and blue panties

*
in the hand
of the recently dead
one sees the lifeline
long
very long

*

there's no doubt
about the religiousness
of the mantis
she ingests the male
because he cannot
stomach her guilt complex

*

exactly
in the middle of the lake
a swan
is strangling itself
with the reflection of its neck

*

hoping for a lightning bolt
to free them of the world
two hailstoned boys
get high
on the knees
of a eucalyptus

*

at the starting point
of translation
the words
plucked out the eyes

*

for their innumerable murders
water will die of drowning
fire will be finished off at the stake
air will gasp its last in the gas chamber
and earth will be buried alive
with no one to throw over it
a last handful of itself

Janice Levy

Dancing Up the Sides of the Wall

"Witch's toenail." Dog-Boy points to the moon. He winks one eye and then the other, as if trying them out. "Stars be her titties, rolling like dice." He piles garbage bags at the curb of the bodega. "Burning shit," he mutters. "Burning shit."

"Come on, Casandra," I whisper. "He's closing up."

Casandra hits my hand away. "I wanna see what he do. Talking crazy don't count."

We follow Dog-Boy into the Bodega Bahia. Casandra spins the counter stools and pokes her nail through the plastic covering a plate of chicharrones. She pops her gum, making cross-eyed faces at Dog-Boy until he looks up from his sweeping.

Casandra's got hips that swing, a thumping ass and struts like a cock been dumped with ice water. She bathes with baby-oil and massages her breasts, squeezing her nipples so they harden like amber. "They my ticket," she's said. "My ticket back to Santo Domingo. Marry a rich baseball player, get me a red Corvette. Live in San Pedro de Marcoris, behind one of them movie star gates.

She'll cook sancocho and yuca, keep her player sexed good, lick rum off his dick, anything he want. She's poked at my chest and said my "'squito bites" ain't taking me outta Brooklyn, they ain't taking me nowhere.

Casandra's been my best friend for five years, since her abuela kicked her ass long distance to her papi's place to get her head twisted on right. When he yanked too hard, she ran to me, her eyes purply, her knapsack stuffed with fruit she stole from the Korean deli. She sat on my bed and blew smoke rings, telling stories she swore were true.

"In this city, Bani," she said, "they play sarandungas." She fled my red scarf around her head and beat on the garbage pail with her fists. Casandra danced fast, her feet doing a merengue version of the moonwalk. She made washboard sounds on the radiator like a guira and hooted through an empty toilet paper roll like the fututos bamboo trumpet.

"You dance like you deaf," she shook her head. "You speak Spanish

like you choking on shit." She said it was my father's fault. Jews were just smart and good with money.

Casandra curled up in bed, her chin at my back, her knees spooned into mine. "Night, girl," she said. "Love you, love me?" She sucked on her knuckles, her eyes squeezed like she'd bitten a lemon. While she slept, I traced the scars on her forehead, the side of her nose, the one on her chin that looked like the map of Tennessee.

In the morning, my mom and Casandra sang bachatas about lost loves and broken hearts. They giggled at old pictures of my father sipping Cuba Libres in Puerto Plata, with gold chains and a camera around his neck, his stomach hanging past his bathing suit like a wet balloon.

My mother and Casandra spoke Spanish in each other's ears and the parts that slipped out were too fast for me to catch. I spilled my coffee and crunched my toast like I was marching in snow until my mother got that pissed off look, the one that made the air stink.

As we walked to school, Casandra checked her profile in the store windows, working her body for the pendejos drinking from paper bags in the street. She leaned on my shoulder and handed me a tissue stuck to the bottom of her shoe.

"Te veo later," she said and kissed my cheek. She hummed a song, something with a merengue beat.

Dog-Boy picks his nose. He clears his throat and tugs at his belt. He jerks his shoulders up and down.

"Can't we go?" I say.

"Not until he barks," Casandra says. "I wanna hear him bark."

"Maybe he don't do it no more. My mom says he's got a medicine takes the barks away." Dog-Boy lives in the back of the bodega and closes up the store while his mother cleans office buildings at night. His father has a Puerto Rican woman in the Bronx. My mom's been cutting the girlfriend's hair for years and this makes our mothers good friends although they'd be best friends if my mother promised to get the dye in the puta's eyes next time. Still, whenever his mother sees me, she puts her hands on Dog-Boy's shoulders and steers him away, her eyes like slits, letting me know I'm no package either.

"You forget how to bark?" Casandra asks, leaning over the counter. "Don't howl no more at the moon?"

Dog-Boy backs away. He tugs his belt and shirt collar, shifting his shoulders. "Burning shit," he says, widening his eyes. "Burning shit."

Casandra spills the salt shaker. Dog-Boy wipes the counter, grunting, rubbing with both hands.

"Hey macho," Casandra lowers her voice, "Your mami take your chain off at night?" I slip my shoulder bag strap around my neck and pretend

to choke, to show Dog-Boy Casandra's only kidding, but even if she isn't I'm not completely part of this. Casandra howls like a coyote.

"Burning shit," he says, twisting his neck like a pigeon. "Burning shit." This time he looks at me.

"They kicked Dog-Boy outta school for biting," Casandra says, looking over my shoulder as I do her math homework. She walks around my room, touching things, putting them in different places. "Poncho told me. He says Dog-Boy can kill an animal, like the chupacabras do. They make holes near the neck to suck out the blood."

Poncho is nineteen and plays in the Ligas Dominicanas from October to January. When he calls Casandra his mamacita, his mouth moves like he's sucking chocolate. His eyes always bounce off to a place above my head, but I know he's only as good as his last pitch. "Poncho's taking us to the beach," Casandra says. "He thinks you're weird 'cause you never say nothin' but I told him you had to come, I wasn't leaving you out. His cousins are going, too." Casandra searches my drawers. "Which bathing suit should I wear?" She holds in her stomach and turns sideways in the mirror.

"In Santo Domingo, my abuela's stomach turned red and blew up like this." Casandra pokes her hands under her shirt. The babalawo rubbed her stomach with herbs and egg yolk, drew lines in the sand, and then..." Casandra squeezes into a red suit. Her ass splits like a ripe tomato, her breasts pop out like footballs. I throw the math book across the room. Casandra pins me to the bed. "The babalawo killed a rooster with her hands," she says, "twisted its neck and dripped the blood on my 'buela's toes." Casandra hisses in my ear. She lets me up but does it real slow.

On the drive to the beach, Casandra sits in the back and bounces from lap to lap. Poncho brakes hard, swerving around potholes and curves, like we're in a pinball machine. "Hey, no pink-bellies," Cassandra giggles as Berto tickles her until Poncho yells for her to switch seats with me. Casandra climbs over Luis' legs, but Miguel pulls her back, grabbing at her shirt. Soon it's over her head and out the window and Casandra's squealing like a pig, half-falling out of her bathing suit.

Poncho looks at me, real pissed like, so I start naming the Dominican players I memorized from the encyclopedia, like Jesus Alou and his brothers Felipe and Matty and Jose Vizcaino and Juan Marichal and Tony Fernandez and George Bell and Pedro Guerrero and Sammy Sosa and Mariano Duncan until Poncho calls me Jew-Brain and blasts the radio and I'm hoping when Casandra pukes, like she's threatening to, that she can make it to the back of his head.

"Help me," Casandra giggles, but when I get to my knees, nobody

pulls me over. I sit back and make a big deal out of eating a banana, real slow like, with my eyes looking down but still looking up like Drew Barrymore did in some movie. Poncho opens his window. He says I'm stinking up the place.

At the beach, by the time I spread out my towel, the boys have run down to the water. I take a last look around, then take off my glasses. Casandra grabs my hand and we run, me telling her not to let go 'cause everything is blurry, like trying to look out the window when it's raining. A wave smacks me in the face, and then another, and when I come up, Casandra's gone. I hear Poncho and the cousins and I splash after them, but I'm knocked back again and I think I see Casandra on someone's shoulders and then on someone else's, so I swim around, squinting and kicking my legs. But they're too far out and my arms ache. I float on my back. Water pours in my ears. My eyes see spots.

I think about Yemaya, the Yoruban Lady of the Sea, who floats the bodies of drowned children to shore so they can be buried. Casandra says the parents throw four lit candles into the sea, like the candles that surround a coffin. She says they have to believe in the possibility of things, believe so much their soul aches. Suddenly, my body feels heavy, as if I've sprung a leak. I hug my knees like a snail, crying as shells cut my toes, then crying just because.

I walk up the beach towards where I think the blanket is, but it's gone. It's as if the whole beach has moved, like a movie set packed off to another location. I stumble around, tripping over feet and toys, screaming names, the sand burning my soles, my head aching from seeing double.

When a hand grabs me, I squint up to a lifeguard who asks the color of the blanket, which parking lot we entered, do I remember the snack bar? He leads me around, chewing fruity gum, gripping my arm too tightly and I can't make out his face except for white stuff in the middle. Finally, we find my blanket and I put on my glasses and I see that at least Casandra and the boys left all my stuff, when they took theirs. Under my shoe there's a note written in brown eyeliner on the inside of a squished tampon box. "Went for ride. Back whenever. Where are you??? C." The lifeguard points to the bus stop and asks me if I have money. He wipes his hands, brushes the sand from his thighs, already looking over my head before I answer.

I sit and wait, peeling flaky skin from my shoulders, taking off my glasses when cute boys walk by. I wave towards the water, pretending friends are waiting for me to jump in. The clouds tighten into gray knots, I rub my goosebumped arms. I smudge the words on the note and bury it in the sand. Then I walk toward the buses in the parking lot.

As I sit on the bus, I breathe like a bull and bang on the seat, rehearsing how I'll tell Casandra off, how I'll walk away before she speaks. But

first I'll mention the cute lifeguard I met, how we hung out on his boat, and as I fill in the details, my story gets better and better. But then I catch my reflection in the window; I'm shivering, my hair is sticking up, my lips are cracked and I look like the loser of a cat fight.

I pick at a crack in the vinyl seat, splitting it like a scab, and think of shoving the driver out the window, maybe riding the bus for the rest of my life. I pull the top cord but it's too late. The bus passes my stop. The driver starts to smile and then doesn't.

It begins to rain and I walk under store awnings. I call Casandra from a phone, hanging up on Poncho's annoyed voice. I'm suddenly hungry, so hungry my stomach hurts and I head towards the Bodega Bahia, spitting into the rain, kicking beer cans into puddles. Dog-Boy's dragging garbage bags to the curb, talking to the moon. He flips the closed sign, but motions me in and turns on the lights. I don't say anything, just walk around bored like, trying to stop shivering. Dog-Boy pours himself coffee, then empties the last bit for me. He twists his neck as if it's too tight and clears his throat, making a machine gun sound. "You always gonna make those noises?" I ask.

I spin on a stool with my eyes shut, like I'm screwing into the ground, riding a missile through the center of the Earth. Then I spin the other way, this time I'm up through the clouds and Mars and the planets they don't have names for yet.

"Burning shit," Dog-Boy says. "Burning shit." He rubs the counter with his rag and tugs his belt.

"What is w-r-o-n-g with you?" I say, rolling the word to three syllables. I slink along the counter, my fingers crawling like spiders, tapping the containers of leftover pie. I spin a penny on the counter, a nickel, then a dime, and soon I'm like a circus act, the one that balances plates on a stick. Dog-Boy grunts and pulls at his collar.

"I'm gonna get fixed," he says, his voice low. "Santaria lady gonna clean me out, squeeze the bad spirits like worms." Dog-Boy wiggles his fingers. "Bugs you gotta chew, break the wings down first. Worms slip down your throat."

Dog-Boy makes a sound like rusty pipes. It sounds like a laugh, but I'm not sure. "She say I gotta eat dog gallstones mixed with peppers and garlic, put mint leaves on my head." Dog-Boy slides me a plate of apple pie. He turns on a small TV behind the counter. There's a movie on about a woman who falls in love with a man with a burnt face. As they kiss, Dog-Boy covers his lips with the rag, his noises muffled as if under water. He looks at me sideways and smiles. The couple kisses again and as Dog-Boy turns to me, I wonder if he ever held someone around the waist, his hand owning her back pocket. I wonder if he twitches when he sleeps, if he's someone else in his dreams, if he believes in the pos-

sibility of things. I slump onto the counter. It's come to this, I think. Soon I'll be talking to the moon. Dog-Boy clicks the remote. A ball is hit up and out, caught in mid-air on the warning track at Yankee Stadium. The organist plays a merengue beat, fans wave blue and white flags. Two runs score.

My mind flashes from breaking-balls, to 'squito bites, to Casandra waving from a red Corvette. Dog-Boy grunts and points to the sky.

"Witch's toenail?" I ask.

Dog-Boy nods. He reaches above his head and swipes at the air. He uncurls his fingers and shows me his palm.

"Titties," I say.

Dog-Boy makes the laughing sound.

"You're never gonna get fixed," I say.

Dog-Boy shrugs. "Can't be anybody forever."

He clicks the remote. A man tapdances up the side of a wall. Dog-Boy cuts himself a piece of pie. I tap my fork to his.

"Burning shit," I say. "Burning shit."

Carla Maria Atherton

Give it Back

He is on the stiffly made bed stuffed
in layers of clothes brown and green and beige
right down
to the shoes
Short, fat hands hold each other on his ape chest
under beard and swollen cheeks

She paces in the living room face
bruised by fat hands
Waiting for him to come to a conclusion
to rise and get his stinking ass out
She rings my number I answer
He is dead, she says, *and is wearing my coat*
how can I get it back now?

Vivette J. Kady

The Bending Moments of Beams

The day we moved here, three years ago, Jake and Tasmin and I sat on boxes in the centre of this room and ate takeout Chinese. I looked around at the freshly painted walls, the polished hardwood floors, at our boxes and my drawing board and the fern I'd hung on the hook above the window. My heart knocked huge against my ribcage, throbbing with fear and exhilaration on its uncertain way to freedom and I thought: *It will hold, it is enough.*

It's eight-thirty at night and I'm at my drafting table, working on the design for the Haydens' renovation, listening to some old Dylan. "Idiot wind," he sings, "blowing every time you move your mouth." Howard's coming over to pick up his stuff. I've piled it in the middle of the living room floor.

Tacked to a corner of my drawing board is the picture I tore from a magazine yesterday. It's a photograph of an open gold lipstick case with a lethal-looking knife blade where the lipstick should be. The caption reads, "If Lips Could Kill." I can't decide if it's a weapon, a work of art, a fashion accessory, or some sort of political statement. Imagine an attacker holding off while his victim prepares to reapply lipstick—*Just give me a moment to freshen up*—then she stabs him in the eye. Perhaps it could be used on the Other Woman: *Here, let me try this lipstick on you—such a unique red.*

I pour myself more of Howard's Glenfiddich and imagine drawing the cold steel tip of the lipstick-knife along the outline of my mouth. I picture Howard coming in and I'm grinning madly, blood spreading along my teeth and oozing down my chin. *One last kiss, for old time's sake,* I'll say, and run my tongue like a vamp along blood-darkened lips. Afterwards I'd have a scar like permanent lip liner, a thin weal that would stretch when I smile.

Wounds close, blood congeals, torn flesh fuses. Scars form like photographic images we retain as reminders of difficulties or triumphs. This patched tissue is resilient—my son Jake was delivered by Caesarean section, and throughout my next pregnancy, with Tasmin, I watched my ballooning belly as the long thick welt that bisects it stretched impossibly taut and shiny. *It'll burst,* I worried, *it can't possibly hold,* but it did. Strong, but sensitive. When Lars—my ex-husband—or Howard or anyone else traced fingertips or tongues along the ridged length of the scar, I couldn't bear it.

It wasn't my affair with Lars's partner or his affair with the travel agent that caused our marriage to collapse. It wasn't the boredom, or the battles over bank loans or the children or who would mow the lawn. It's a slow accumulation until you push each other a little too far and one day you find yourself alone in the middle of an empty room, the fury of the final argument still reverberating.

With a building, you design according to the maximum anticipated loads; you create a careful balance of concrete, steel, glass and wood that barely trembles under the shifting weight of people, snow, wind and walls. You aim for equilibrium so that supports will neither hog nor sag under the action of loads and reactions. You use equations to calculate that beams are of sufficient size and strength to resist the forces that will act upon them. Before even one nail has been hammered in, you can determine the point at which the maximum bending moment occurs, the place where the beam will tend to sag, buckle, snap. Of course, there are miscalculations: department stores or parking garages crumple; wood heaves and splinters; metal groans and twists.

While the lecturer scribbled mathematical calculations on the blackboard during Theory of Structures classes, I'd think of swimming underwater as beams of sunlight slanted through the surface, or I'd imagine a lithe young gymnast teetering on a balance beam, dipping pointed toes as she pliéd, arcing over in a slow cartwheel then bending backwards, pelvis thrust up, gripping the beam with hands and feet, holding perfectly still for a moment.

I lower the volume on the tape deck. Kitchen cabinets and drawers are being opened and slammed shut. Plates and cutlery clink on the counter.

"Tasmin," I call. "Tasmin? That you?"

She slouches in. "What."

She's carrying a bowl of Rocky Road ice cream. Tasmin is fifteen, long and lean.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?" Scowling, "What did you call me for?"

"Just to see how you're doing."

"Oh. So can I go now?"

I shrug. "Sure."

She slinks off, then a minute later swings back in. "What's all that stuff doing in the middle of the floor?"

"It's Howard's. He's coming by to collect it."

She stares at me, unblinking. "You're really going through with this?"

She's barefoot, wearing low-slung baggy jeans and a cropped tank top. Her hair is twisted up off her long neck. Everything is smooth, unblemished, lucent. And she's pouting.

I first met Howard about a year ago. I'd invited my ex-shrink over for dinner because I was so excited to find out she was still alive—I'd heard she killed herself, then one evening, months later, I saw her standing in line outside a movie theatre.

She brought Howard along to dinner, introducing him as an old friend. He told me he worked as a sportscaster at an all-news radio station, and he looked me over in a way that made me want to shove out my arms and say, *Hey, back off.* He seemed pumped—talking loudly in a rapid-fire sportscaster's voice—and he sniffed a lot. I decided he could have a summer cold, or more likely he'd done a couple of lines of coke before dinner.

The evening was going badly. Claudia, my ex-shrink, had too much to drink. "It seems the only aptitude you need to be a sportscaster," she drawled, spearing a slice of grilled sweet potato with her fork, "is the ability to think of a variety of words that mean 'win,' or 'lose.' Correct me if I'm wrong, Howard. But you guys say, The Braves *blanked* the Expos six three. The Indians *shut out* the Jays five nothing. The Rockets *trailed* the Vikings seventeen ten—"

"That'd be tough," Howard grinned, "since we're talking totally different sports here—"

"Whatever," Claudia said. "You know what I mean. You can't just say, Such-and-such-a-team won. It has to be they ran roughshod over. They humbled. They pummelled, they wasted, they downed. Or my favourite—they exed. Don't you love that one? Exed. She exed him."

We had coffee and dessert out on the patio. There were thick low clouds, the air was terribly still, and I felt the start of a headache. Claudia's eyes drifted restlessly, and Howard's leg jiggled incessantly. He sniffed and frowned and chewed on his lower lip.

"So," Claudia said to me, "you're still making good, safe spaces for people to live in?"

I shrugged. Smiled. Wished they'd go home.

"The million dollar question," she continued, "is how does one construct a good, safe *life*?"

"I guess that's your department," I said.

"Well, you make plans, you factor in all the variables. You design everything perfectly, you've got it all figured out," she opened her arms wide, then let them fall to her sides. "And chances are, it's still going to fall apart."

I nodded, and offered more coffee. The headache was getting worse.

"Forget perfection," Howard said. "The thing is to find someone who'll love you right. You have to walk around with your eyes wide open. Grab whatever happiness you can. Grit your teeth through the disappointments."

He was looking at me—his eyes amused, the corners of his mouth twitching slightly—and I held my breath. The space between us became a

physical thing, as if it could be touched, weighed, measured, and I suddenly knew I was going to sleep with him. The way you realise, with a thrilled shudder, that you are still capable of ruining your life.

"Hmmm," Claudia said softly, watching us. "The touching, heartbreaking ways we limp along. Wobbly, but brave."

The next time Howard came to dinner was to meet Jake and Tasmin.

"They'll be difficult," I'd warned.

"It's okay. I have nieces and nephews."

Tasmin refused to get off the phone when Howard arrived. When she finally came to say hello, twenty minutes later, she barely looked at him, and mumbled or shrugged when he attempted conversation.

"She's angry," I told him when she went off to make another phone call. "She doesn't want anyone replacing Lars."

"That's understandable," Howard said.

I'd known him for two weeks. We could barely keep our hands off one another.

"Teenage girls are impossible," I said. "Their hormones are all over the map. Boys are easier to deal with. They shut themselves in their rooms and refuse to communicate, and they do stuff like break into warehouses, but they don't say terrible things to their mothers. Girls have no problem communicating. They over-communicate. They weep and wail, they tell you they love you, they scream that they wish you'd go away and die. It's like living with a human yo-yo."

Jake came in as we were sitting down to eat. He had a part in a school play, and rehearsals ran late.

Tasmin turned up her nose at the *gazpacho*. "What else is there?" she asked, and sighed when I told her. She whined that she was missing *90210*.

"It's reruns," Jake said. "You've probably seen this episode fifty times."

"I don't see why I have to stay," she said. "I hate listening to people eat."

Eventually I gave in. She took a tray of food and went off to watch TV. "She has this phobia," I explained to Howard. "It drives her crazy when other people chew."

"She's in serious need of therapy," Jake said.

Jake decided Howard was okay. He had a cool job, and he promised Jake baseball tickets. They discussed movies and music and sports.

One down, I thought.

After dinner I apologised for Tasmin's behaviour.

"Don't worry," Howard said. "She'll come 'round."

She did come around. Howard commiserated with her over homework. He laughed with her during *The Simpsons* and *Seinfeld* reruns. He praised her pottery masks and figurines, so she made him a salad bowl shaped like half

a football.

By the time Howard moved in with us, six months later, he'd started teaching Jake to drive.

"No way I could do it," I said. "I'd need tranquilizers."

"As soon as you turn sixteen, I'll teach you," he promised Tasmin.

She still refused to eat with us.

"Hey, Mom," Jake says. "What's up?"

"Not much. Just working on this renovation."

"How come you put Howard's stuff in the middle of the floor?"

"He's stopping by tonight to pick it up. You feel okay about all this, Jake?"

"About Howard leaving?" His hands are shoved into his pockets. He shifts his weight from foot to foot. "Yeah. He's a shithead."

Last Saturday I'd arranged to meet some clients at their country retreat a hundred kilometres away to discuss renovating the place. Howard was out running errands when I left.

I'd been driving for about twenty minutes when my cell phone rang. The clients had to cancel the meeting—their car broke down.

Jake arrived home at the same time I did. He'd been visiting his new girlfriend. He went into the kitchen to get something to drink. I went upstairs.

Music was blaring from Tasmin's room. There was a strong smell of dope. Her door was slightly ajar. She and Howard were sprawled on her bed, a tub of ice cream between them. I watched Howard dip his finger into the ice cream, and slowly bring it to Tasmin's lips. She giggled. He giggled. She sucked his finger. They never took their eyes off one another, not even as he scooped his hands back into the ice cream tub. He did it again, and again. She sucked his finger. And again. She brushed a strand of hair from her face. All in slow motion. And it was the way they looked at one another.

Jake was standing beside me. He put his hand on my shoulder.

"She was smoking the joint when I came in," Howard said. "I never gave it to her."

"It's not the dope, and you know it."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Hey, what happened to my Glenfiddich?" Howard asks.

I refill my rapidograph and adjust the set square. "Your rollerblades are in the front closet," I say. "I forgot to put them out with the rest of your things. Or are those Jake's?"

"They're Jake's." Howard comes over to the drafting table. "What's this?"

"A renovation. The wife has MS. They need to make the house wheelchair friendly."

"Oh." He points to the lipstick-knife. "I meant this."

"The picture? Just something I found in a magazine."

He frowns. "What's it for?"

"No clue. D'you need a hand carrying stuff to your car?"

One summer, when I was still married to Lars, we took a trip to Italy. In the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, in Florence, we marvelled at the wooden models of Brunelleschi's Duomo, and at the gilded brass panels Ghiberti fashioned for the Baptistery "Gates of Paradise" doors. And then we saw Michelangelo's *Pietà*.

The Florentine *Pietà* is massive—almost two-and-a-half metres tall—and profoundly moving. The pathos of its four marble figures is extraordinary. They appear outwardly calm, but the statue crackles with psychic energy.

A young man was making a charcoal drawing of the sculpture in a large sketchbook. An elderly woman stood with hands clasped, lips moving in hushed prayer.

When Michelangelo began carving this sculpture, he was already old and sick. He intended it for his own tomb. The largest figure, of Nicodemus, who stands behind Christ, is a remarkably honest and poignant self-portrait of the artist as an old man.

Michelangelo laboured on this *Pietà* for ten years. Then one day he began to smash it with a sledgehammer. He broke off limbs and almost destroyed the sculpture entirely before a servant managed to restrain him.

An assistant eventually repaired the work. One of Christ's legs is still missing.

Who can make sense of that heartbreak? How can we imagine the heft of that sledgehammer in the old man's hands?

I roll up the drawings to show the Haydens in the morning, and pour myself the last of Howard's Glenfiddich.

Perhaps I'll put in a skylight over the staircase, convert the attic to an office, tear down some of these walls. I close my eyes. Planes shift and intersect, shafts of light are refracted through sheets of glass. Shapes hover in the periphery of my mind, insubstantial and insistent as dreams. They will come, slowly, and I will turn them over, shape them, give them form.

David Starkey *two poems*

Provisional Asylum

When she took me in, neither of us
bargained for anything long-term.
My character was as ramshackle
as her cabin in the Sierra foothills.
Her reputation was murky, at best.
Yet we bobbed along above the surface

for nearly six months. When she snored,
I whistled "O' Sulivan's March"
until she woke and put her thick arms
around my waist. Mornings she'd place
a vase of white camellias
on the table so that as we ate

our sausage and eggs smothered
in tabasco sauce, the scent
of far Korea mingled
with fried food. No love affair
between two rednecks was ever more
multicultural, or more absolute.

Then something happened: gossip,
maybe, from the clan up the hill.
My inability to return a kiss.
Whatever, she turned stony:
I withdrew to that chamber
in my heart that pumps no blood.

After a week without conversation,
I told her it was off. A pause.
We both smiled. That night
the champagne corks went flying.
We played strip poker and shook hands
the next morning when I left.

Napoleon at Leipzig, 1813

One of those weird moments all soldiers
recognize:
the surprise of a sudden
lull, cannon smoke lifting, battlefield
air clear yet suffocating.
Stench of gunpowder, snort
of horses, and almost everyone—

from bloody infantryman to nervous
general—
pauses to send up cautious prayers
for mercy. Prussia, Russia, Britain,
Austria, even the waffling
Swedes have joined against
the Empire, and though it's nearly two years

to Waterloo, nothing good will happen
from now on.
So what's he thinking at his first great
defeat, retreat inevitable? Newspaper
cartoons of the time show him
seated on a drum, biting his nails
distractedly, staring at the grinning face

of Death. But the journalists,
as usual,
have got it wrong. His mind is back
in Paris with Josephine, still astounded,
(even after the bitter split
and the barbed edge to all her gossip)
by the grace with which she wears a ballroom gown.

Derk Wynand *two poems*

Magician

No wiser, the magician, old dog that he is,
sleeps well enough and sure of his routines. Aware
he also can be tricked, he rolls up the long sleeve
of his night-shirt so all the duplicate trump cards
go flying. *Go fish*, he snaps in this dream, his blood
pressure rising, and another thing, when his luck
holds or leaves him, lady or no lady—depends
on the disposition of the planets and stars
and the cards he is holding or hiding, his moods,
his contradictory points of view that leave him
panting, dreaming in just one, better direction,
an old dog learning a trick in which memory
is first and last to go and, going, he remains
just the same, his right hand immobilized by sleep,
though twitching with the idea of a wand's magic,
wand a word on the tongue he will not or does not
care to pronounce, *Wanda* a name he can't utter
without a tic in his eye or his lip, nervous
rabbit in a top hat, silk flower waved wand-like
over scarves knotted in a continuous string
with which he pulls himself from the secret pocket
up his own sleeve out of sleep, not content merely
to dream and allow such sleights of hand or of mind
—who can say if they're his or another dreamer's—
to take himself along with all his audience in.

Late October: What Started This

A contradiction of the metals
or alloys in the thermostat
allowed for contact and made
the circuit close or is
it open and the heat
kicked in, the element grew
hotter, the little fan blew
over it until the room
warmed enough for the metals
or the alloys to expand
once more, breaking the circuit
so that the fan stopped
and the element cooled slowly
without its help, cracking and
creaking, though subtly, the metals
and alloys contracting yet again,
just as slow, and all
at once the oak trees
had shed their leaves while
the wrens formed a little
community at the bird feeder
and the blood made its
rounds through the body, going,
still going, but noisier now.

Tara Yellen

Carnival Ride

"Is it violent?" the beetle-eyed blonde asks. She's snapping gum and tugging at the cuffs of her baby-blue shorts. "Is it real violent?"

The roller coaster operator, a shaggy teenager in a T-shirt that reads *Megadeath,* sits behind the gears, jumped back, legs jutting out like bendy straws. He picks something out of his teeth and stares past the girl and her moon-faced boyfriend. "It's a good ride," he says.

The boyfriend snakes an arm around the blonde's waist and squeezes. Last week they didn't know each other. Last week on this evening, she was holding hands with Jeffrey Simms, and he was smacking a basketball against wet driveway pavement. It had just rained and his backyard smelled like ivy and beached worms.

He breathes in the carnival air. lt hits the back of his throat in a thick mixture of dust and salt and candy-apple-soda-pop-doughboy sweetness. There is a doughboy stand a few yards away, where a leathery woman serves slabs of the greasy pastry on paper plates. They remind the boy of bloated hands.

His girlfriend smells of sweat and hairspray and of the cotton candy they ate together out of a sticky cellophane bag. There is still a tuft of the pink fur stuck to one side of her face, but he doesn't say anything. He thinks about saying something or picking it off but doesn't.

"I don't like anything too violent," she says. "I might throw up."

There are two girls behind them, one short and squat, the other sharp like a toothpick. Both wear their frizzy dark hair pulled up and back into unraveling pony-tails. The sharp one blasts a sigh.

"C'mon," she mutters.

"C'mon," the operator whines. He motions to the lime-green car. The door hangs open, slackjawed.

It's dark. All of a sudden. The boyfriend doesn't remember it ever turning dark. Once it was the day and now it isn't. The rides flash and spin and trail arcs of colored light.

The beetle-blonde bites a bit of skin off her bottom lip and leaves a dot of blood.

"Well...." she says. The pink candy quivers on her cheek. She turns to her moon-faced boyfriend and raises her eyebrows, which, in their own right, are light and feathery enough to be made of nothing-sugar.

They all look at him. The two frizzy girls. Megadeth.

The combined whir of the rides and the hawkers and the teenaged-yells seems, to the boyfriend, to be growing louder and sharper. Louder and brighter.

He didn't know her last week. She is just a wisp. He reaches for her hand, and, squeezing the small damp fingers, guides her toward their lime-green car.

: Frost

All of it could be ours. Th ripe
orchards for plucking, basketsoffruit

& courtly favours from th sultan.
Too bad, the lost time. Beside th

coldpaneofglass we reach out
only to crack ice, splitopenveins

& sproutasecondheart. This pulling
back, this pulling forward. Testing th waters

for hidden rocks before diving.
Day daisies that wilt in th

wild. It could have been memorable
against th redseawall. Spinning,

spinning, like a smallwhirlpool waiting
to swallow scars. Again

th choral melody, againwegather
dust from lost tribes. Even

in obsolete ways, we linger, as if
fashioningahouse from frost.

: Measure

With th white-out I saw nothing.
Notth bluesky, not th earth.

Each merged into one
indistinct blur. Th layers

of frost wesproutfrom. Th sheen
of silver-ice we carry in our bones

gives way, carries over night. Darkness
creeps through vessels&roots. Th source

of our light is scattered: slow sea
cascades onto rocks, a missingpiece of

a puzzle on th linoleum floor. We too
find our measure in small things: abox

ofchocolates, a letter from Florence, one
broadsmile. Too long between meals,

th kind that really fillthbody,
kindle the blood's fire.

Light pours in windows,
peeling across shutters. It crosses

th floor & bisectsourliving. To one
side we blossomcherrybuds, to th other

we draw in a singlegaspof water.

Gregory T. Bottoms

Intersections

Here, and west of here, too, urban renewal is ripping the cracked and withered face off downtown. Jackhammers and big orange signs. Dump trucks and workers loitering in intersections. Someone was elected (the bus driver looking through his vertical, convex window at the rutted street below can't remember who) on the promise of a new face, a makeover for this sagging section of city. Right, thinks the driver. Just picture it: spit-shined and sparkling. Pinch and tuck and tighten. Put up new signs, cut taxes, offer—what was it?—some kind of small business loan to anyone daring to open a shop. Have the cops—the cops!—move downtown, and what, have cookouts with the crackheads? He's a bus driver, man, drives these streets every day, knows this town from the inside, this bus like a blood cell cruising the pocked asphalt veins; he knows, knows better, is what. You can do what you want, legislate, promise, procrastinate, lie. Probably doesn't much matter. But damn, how bout fixing the potholes?

He, the bus driver (African American, 46, 6'1", 227 pounds and on a diet because of prodding from his wife, stomach rumbling at this very moment and nothing in his lunch box but carrots and rice cakes), has driven this road, crossed and re-crossed this grid of city blocks—not far from where he grew up—four times a day, five days a week, for fifteen years. Not a bad job, driving. All right, maybe it's a good job, benefits, decent salary, retirement plan, the whole bit. Course he'd quit if he could, sure. It's a job, not a career. Got to feed the family, got to make the bucks, but that's not what fills your heart, man. No, not exactly for the soul, this job, but not bad for the soul either, that's not what he means, just, you know, soulless, he thinks, coming to the seventh stop along his morning route, air brakes doing that *squeak whoosh squeak ssss* he knows so well, hears sometimes in his dreams. Singing. That's what he'd like to do. Have someone pay him to belt out a tune that would melt you into a puddle of tears. Now church choir fills the heart, is good for the soul; watching his son play baseball, how he can knock that ball into space, and his daughter, too, bringing home straight-A report cards. That's the stuff. Family, his wife's liquid eyes, her silky hair, the curve of her sweet-smelling neck where he likes to softly place his lips, so softly; going home at the end of the day and not thinking about a big machine, engine

humming like a sick cow, gears popping, stone faces floating in his mirror. And the hemorrhoids—don't even get him started on the hemorrhoids! Let's say he won the lottery—let's say I won the lottery—won maybe a modest ten million, which works out to be about five-hundred grand a year. First thing he'd do, after vomiting on his shiny standard-issue black shoes, would be to quit. Quit like that. Not even pick up his last check, say to the boss, Keep it, buy yourself something nice. Then he'd get his family, light of his life, three human beings he loves so much that sometimes just thinking about them brings tears to his eyes, everything they wanted. New car, new baseball equipment, new teachers, new schools (his daughter makes straight-As in a school with metal detectors and a couple murders a year, so many assaults that the school board had to get tougher on how they defined "assault"). And at his seventh stop (a stop he has stopped at approximately 3,900 times in the last fifteen years), as the door accordions open with a mechanical sigh, as he lets on the street preacher who smells of rancid meat and urine, smells of rummaged-through restaurant dumpsters and puddles of pickled wino piss, he knows that, with that cool ten mil, he'd move as far from this place as possible.

The preacher (an emaciated guy with a matted red beard and long hair the colour of soot) steps left right left up the bus stairs, knowing that right left right would hurl the universe spinning toward a disaster. (Every day he gets on at the bus driver's seventh stop and rides six blocks, gets off then to walk six blocks, then rides a final six blocks to a place where he stands and attempts, loudly, to untangle the infinitely intricate puzzle of the last days of the Earth: These Days. He repeats this pattern at the end of the day exactly backwards, always taking the steps left right left to keep the universe from spinning toward a premature disaster; he's got enough to think about without that on his head.) Preacher likes the bus. Comfortable. Gives him time to read, think, make notes in the margins of his Bible on top of layers of other notes. (He's been thinking about good and evil for more years even than the black bus driver, whose name he does not know, has been driving this bus. He graduated from a prestigious southern university twenty-five years ago. And then, certain moderately concerned people said, just lost it. He doesn't remember those people—friends, lovers, teammates, roommates, colleagues—the people who said things like, Just lost it, although occasionally one will show up, make a brief cameo in a dream. They often have fangs and spit like exotic poisonous snakes.) He's devised some theories. Considers, now, a couple Psalms—singsongy, poetic, they burn his fingers when he touches the words. Good and evil exist together in the world, in each of us, mixed, or, no, not what he means, not mixed, on top of one another, yeah, oil and water, in the same murky puddle, the puddle being us. It's the comfortable same, the bus (there is divine peace in routine;

protective angels live in the familiar movement, the practiced gesture), same time, same faces, same route and scenery, same flesh and metal smells, same drone and squeak of engine and seat, same soft sibilant sounds of quiet talk *whisper whisper whisper whisper* keep it all to yourself, put a lid on it, shake it up. He knows what they're saying, God knows what they're saying, and not saying, those little secrets like rotting teeth in their mouths, what they take to bed with them and wouldn't breathe out, wouldn't let foul the air, even in the dark. Same everything. Same everyday. A leaning hotel, a beautiful woman, a shiny car, a packed diner with glass skin. A store, a group of boys (baggy pants, expensive shoes, cigarettes), bicycles. Streetlights, a corner, an alley, an empty lot where weeds spring from the cracks in the concrete. Good and evil, love and hate, weeds and concrete, the same murky puddle: us. (Notes on top of notes.) Empty lot gets him thinking (gets him scrawling like a polygraph), feeling the crackle and pulse up his spine. A bum was found there, guy he sort of knew, bound in electrical tape and beaten deader than dead, dirt and trash and cigarette butts stuffed into his mouth, tiny red burns covering his face and neck and scalp and hands. Covering his hands like fucking stigmata. People heard things, television said, but people always hear things. People always hear something. And lock their doors. Lambs, all. A stop. Man gets on. Woman gets on. Child gets on, a girl. Seat beside the preacher's empty. Do they take it? Ha. They know who he is. He's got their number. He reads their dreams like delicate scrolls. Good and evil, oil and water, same murky puddle: us. Grass and concrete, dirt in his mouth, tiny red wounds. Driver looks at him, big black guy with the glare in his eye who thinks he knows God because he hangs a cross from the mirror, because he bows his head and gets herded into church Sundays like an idiot beast for slaughter. Black guy looks at him in the mirror, looks, cheap cross swinging like a dog dick. Religion is pounds of flesh and bottles of blood, brother, he wants to shout. If I were as weak a Christian as you, I'd divorce myself from life. Doesn't speak, though, chews his fingernails instead. Few stops later, gets up, takes his bag and Bible. People turn, look, know who he is, know he can save them or destroy them with the tiniest beat of his heart. I forgive you, he says to the driver (as he does every day). Thanks, says the driver (as he does every day at the thirteenth stop). Door sighs its tired sigh. Preacher gets off, left right left (to walk the six blocks). Day unreels. Skyline blurs. Lamps hang their heads. Good and evil, oil and water, the same murky puddle, us...

Girl catches an elbow in the biceps. Jesus, hey, what the...big mouthful of that stench before she can speak, like a dead animal, that smell, fresh and dead, entrails still on the road, or like that guy in the VA hospital she volunteered in when she was a teenager, the fat one with, like, fungus or

mold growing under the folds of his breasts, maggots in there before he was even dead, like that, something dead or dying. Jesus, wow, man, really got to take care of that. I'm sorry, Miss, forgive me, says the old guy. (The preacher spends sleepless days and nights at a time pondering religious notions of forgiveness.) Backing away, feeling the pinch and pucker of her face, muscles cinching up in the stink, and taking a long, deep whiff anyway, she looks into his face: the red beard, the dirt embedded in the creases of skin around his eyes. I forgive you, she says, walking on, stepping away, breathing in deep the air away from him, the clear, perfect air, rubbing her shoulder where she knows a bruise will form (she bruises easily). I forgive you, she thinks, what a weird thing to say, even to a rotting homeless guy. Ought to say that to her mom. Yeah. Walks on, heading for the store. To get Velveeta shells and cheese; two bucks and you have lunch and plenty left for dinner, or maybe just soup and a loaf of bread, the good wheat kind with the chunky little grains in the crust, probably not even real grains, sawdust or something, just decoration, but still, good stuff, good decorative stuff. Guy almost broke her arm, that's for sure. Need a sling or something, ice pack. I forgive you. What would Mom say to that, I forgive you, out of the blue, I forgive you for not understanding graduate school, for not understanding or even being interested in painting, for making her talk about things that don't interest her so they can still do the mother-daughter chat? Because she loves her mom, of course, no matter what, even if Mom drones and complains a lot about her father working all the time, and playing golf on the weekends, and never being interested in sex, or at least rarely. It's got to be weird for a mother and daughter to talk like we do. Mom always wants to lay some heavy stuff on her about sex and her needs, all tinged with that new age stuff she reads, like how, for intstance, most women find cunnilingus an arousing form of foreplay and a way to become functionally more lubricated, especially as you get older, and how her father, who used to be into that sort of thing, just never went down anymore. A little repression, the girl thinks, would not be a bad thing. And the chat always, at some point, makes it around to her leaving this part of the city. Every time. From uncomfortable sex talk with her mom—the woman who breast fed her, changed her diapers, put her hair in pigtails, told her how pretty she was after she got dumped by that guy in college who looked like some sort of underwear model—to what a bad idea it is to live in the city and go to that school, how there is bad energy in the economically-challenged parts of cities. After the weird, uncomfortable sex talk with her mom, her safety. Moving somewhere else. Going to another school, one in the country, or at least the suburbs. She knows Mom wonders how you make a living painting. Wishes she could explain, in one coherent breath, explain how it's

important for her in her life to understand deep aesthetic theories of painting and art, and know the history and progression and movements of art, understand that art is, as she once read somewhere, a finite sphere and the artist, the serious artist, must know, in her own particular way, that sphere and then hope and work and sweat to create something that can survive on the outer edge of that sphere and, hopefully, make that sphere grow as it must. Art. Spheres. Doesn't have to be spheres. You can substitute metaphor—or is it metonymy?—and twist logic, but that's what she's thinking about now, as she walks. Spheres. Making a living is sort of beside the point, she wants to say into the phone sometimes, outside of the purer motive at the heart of the whole endeavor. It's teleologically bohemian rather than professional. Can't say something that stupid and pretentious to her mother, though, especially after trudging through the whole cunnilingus spiel. Damn frustrating, explaining yourself. Plus, she'd sound like some wanna-be artist. Wants to be an artist, sure, more than anything. Doesn't want to sound like she wants to be one, though. Wants to sound like she just naturally is one. Yeah. She gets trapped in this circular stuff, trapped thinking in grand arching metaphors and trying to get her mind around big, big thoughts. She's not leaving. That's for sure. Mom, it's helpful to be here, she should say, in this city, in this neighborhood, helpful for the cause of art. (She needs, she truly believes, to slum and study and dispense with all those upper-middle class pretensions, having to do mainly with the acquisition of things, and try on some new intellectual pretensions, which, of course, negate at all cost the upper-middle class pretensions. Later, when she becomes that artist she hopes to become, she will attempt to dispense with the intellectual pretensions and find an honest, earnest, centered place from which to work and incorporate into her art everything she has ever known and felt—a much harder task—which will drive her to feelings of failure and futility, to stiff drink and thoughts of suicide.) Her work has improved here, in the city. She sees it in the brushstroke, the poetry of one motion leading to the next, feels it in her formal control. Her vision—whatever that means—has broadened and deepened. She knows this. Sure, she's become more aloof and meditative, like her mom says, more brooding and temperamental. All those cliches are true. The price you pay maybe. True, too, her friends find her less fun to hang out with, distant, never really there. And she reads all the time, looks at paintings all the time. But she's doing her best work. Like her new painting, "The Rape," in which a girl walks to a corner store, like she is doing now, as two men, decently dressed, nonchalant, whisper behind her back. Best thing she's ever done. A year ago, "The Rape" would have been more overt, less powerful, less evocative and subtle and dangerous (here is her nascent art vocabulary), without angry brushstrokes suggesting

menace in the calmness of the scene. No, in that affluent suburb, in that big house outside of D.C., she would have shown the rape, she knows, explicitly, blood and gore and ripped clothing, or with painfully bald metaphor, like the men would have had dicks for noses and chubby little dick fingers holding thin, burning dick cigarettes or something, and lost everything, bored herself, because violence, orgasmic, finalized violence, has gotten, well, passe. In art, she means—film, books, photography. Not in life. Life is scary. Life is without innate dramatic shape and she, she knows, is clumsy. A clumsy liver of an often scary and maddeningly capricious life. She doesn't, though, want to be clumsy in her art, or obvious, isn't really even interested in being accessible or commercially viable; wants, instead, to be deep, to be subtle, like those writers she loves to read and reread, Woolf and James and Rhys and Joyce, like that, art like a perfect little dream, all interior, all suggestion, all implicit. She walks; she strides. Her painting, in a certain way—in its intention, at least—is probably better than Caravaggio's painting of the same name. Wouldn't go around saying that, of course. But that's what she thinks, what she feels. Caravaggio's painting focuses on a perpetrator, evokes empathy for all those driven to steal another's Soul while desecrating the Body (she read that somewhere); it's completely a guy's painting. Her painting evokes empathy, no, sympathy, for all involved, for the tragedy of living in a world full of fear, for perpetrators and victims, for the forces that make people either one or the other. Her painting is an aesthetic rendering of Fear. All these men around here, dirty, lost men looking her over. She gets the creeps, paces around her apartment at night, rechecks the window locks, the dead bolt on the door, keeps a couple lights on all the time, a phone by the bed. "The Rape" is a painting in which she faces her fear, tries it on like a comfortable pair of jeans, a painting, she knows, in which every brushstroke contains a terrible sadness and beauty, a painting full of the sounds of gunshots and drunks and careless, broken people chattering in her skull. A painting as calm and dangerous as downtown at sunrise or dusk. Walking into the store, smiling at the clerk, she is thinking these things, how being here and watching people and the feeling of danger and low-wattage rage that lives in the concrete and steel and mortar and blank faces has given her something she didn't have before. I'm scared to death. Mom, she will say, I'm so alive here that every scene, every tableau, every defeated glance, reminds me of death. And I've never been worse. And I've never been better. And I forgive you for things you've never thought about.

She gets some food, just a can of soup. Lost her appetite on her way here. (This happens when she really gets to thinking.) Pulls a wadded-up five from her jeans. Hands it to the clerk. He unfolds it and, holding it in both hands, rubs it back and forth along the edge of the counter to straighten it

before giving the girl her change. Attractive girl. He's seen her a few times. Probably stuck up, like the rest of them. Clerk doesn't, as a rule, talk to the grad students around here, with their little beatnik glasses and requests for overpriced wines, with their big talk and expensive clothes made to look worn-out. Closes the cash register (smiling, falsely, at the young artist who he doesn't know is an artist). Construction is killing him. That's the thing, or one of the things (one of the things that makes him the cruel, sad person he is). No one can even get down here, unless they come from the east, and the business crowd comes from the west. The people with the money come from the west. He's barely making it. Two dollars and twenty-nine cents in three hours. Fuck. His whole life has been a constant worry over money (he often says these exact words to his wife), over crumpled fives and inventory and big chain groceries just blocks away that can afford to buy and sell everything and especially the kids from this neighborhood who come in here and steal him blind. The money he makes from the old guys, he tells his wife (the yellow-eyed men buying Thunderbird and Mad Dog 20/20 and quarts of malt liquor and lottery tickets), he loses to the little thieves. These kids, these little fatherless, twenty-siblinged kids. Little thieves, bred to take and take. Welfare turns women into Chia Moms—just add water, or better yet wine, and they drop a litter, swear to God. These kids. Kids everywhere. Like the one he notices as the smiling grad student leaves (thinking those grand depressing elliptical thoughts about art and life that he will never talk to her about). Like that kid, the black one with braids or locks or whatever the hell these people call this hairstyle. Walking around like he owns the place, picking things up, putting them down, labels facing backwards, upside-down, he doesn't care. None of them do. Watches the kid, maybe, what, fifteen, sixteen, ought to be in school in the middle of the day, as he picks up and puts down, opens coolers, wasting expensive cold air. Strutting, browsing, probably doesn't even have any money. You going to buy something or not, he says loudly.

Kid looks at him. Me, kid thinks. Walked in here a minute ago, maybe two. Been wondering about the white girl, the one that walks around talking to herself like she doesn't know it's dangerous around here, walks around at night. Walked in here with half a mind to tell her she needs to be more careful. Knows, though, that a black kid walking up to a white girl, a student, saying how she ought to stay in at night, be careful, wouldn't look right, might spook her more than it helps. (And now he's looking at the clerk framed there behind the counter by two video monitors, one for outside, one for inside.) TVs behind the clerk like a pair of eyes. Sees himself, a black wavering line in the middle of the left eye; sees himself seeing himself, a pre-convicted criminal living on tape. Yeah, I'm going to buy something. Is there a time limit for black people? (Silence.) Fuck this

old guy, looking at him like a thief, watching the nigger like a hawk because all niggers steal, fuck him (he, the kid, has stolen, in his entire lifetime, a Schwinn bicycle on a dare, several of his sisters bras to play a joke on a friend, and numerous candy bars). Ought to steal something. Old motherfucker. Ought to round up all his brothers, a whole mess of scary black folk, to hurl fried chicken and watermelon and curl activator and crack vials at your window, racist motherfucker. Sign says no loitering, says the old clerk. Buy something or leave. Says it real slow, like for a stupid person. Kid can't believe it, gets treated like a criminal in his own neighborhood because he doesn't have his hands in the air and his pockets turned inside-out. He wouldn't give this man a penny, wouldn't piss on him if he was on fire. Cool, composed, kid says he doesn't see anything he wants, puts his hands up. (And it is only as he walks out, as he puts his hand on the thick glass of the door and the man says something under his breath, that the anger, those hard little bubbles of hate in his throat and in the pit of his stomach, take over.) Puts his hand on the unsturdy magazine rack by the door, yanks it (one small act of aggression and release, almost thoughtless, the slightest twitch of the arm; and right now, elsewhere in the city, other acts of aggression, both small and large, misdemeanors and felonies, just and unjust, random and premeditated, are also happening right now). Spills the metal and the magazines along the floor, glossy covers sliding over the greasy white tiles behind him. Club, Hustler, Penthouse, Vibe, Ebony. Clerk shouts, Hey Hey. Kid wants to walk out, put his hands in his pockets and walk, right after he slaps the old man in the face like some whiny, spoiled child, but he is in a flat-footed sprint down the block already. Knows better than not to run, knows he needs to get down one of these alleys and out on another street because a nigger running around this neighborhood will be picked up sure as shit. Turns the corner on to Main (having no idea that it is the next leg of the bus driver's route), legs pumping, and hits the big fat white woman like he's hitting a brick wall. Puts her—Damn, man—large and hard on her ass. Watches her bounce.

Woman feels a small rock embedded in her right butt cheek. No pain yet, just numbness, shock. What...She can't believe it and she can believe it. This has been her day: getting knocked down. Kid says Sorry, kid says Sorry oh my god let me help you up, kid says, You okay, you all right, and is then gone, sprinting, bobbing and weaving along the crowded sidewalk, shouting as he goes, Really sorry, man! This has been her day. (If this were six months later and she was taking that night class at the university in an effort to become a matriculated student at the age of thirty-four, she would say that this incident was a physical manifestation/representation of the crappiness of her first day in the city so far; she does not, however, think or say this now.) Standing up, she counts

to ten as people step around her. I'm fine, she thinks, looking up, Thanks everyone for not stepping on my face. She counts. Counting calms her down, an effortless sort of meditation. (It's how she keeps from hitting her small daughter sometimes, counting.) Keeps her from yelling what's what at that goddamn black kid. (She moved in with her sister last night, into a loft just a few blocks away, so she could find a job here, because she lost her job of six years at home and figured the city was the best place to come to find a good job. So far she's filled out five applications, two for waitress positions, and been flat turned away at three other places and then she gets knocked down walking to the bus stop.) Eight...nine...ten. This has been her day. Remembers this morning, her two-year-old daughter throwing food all over her sister's kitchen. Almost threw it back; she wanted, she ached, to dump the whole mushy meal over her daughter's head. (She can't believe how hard it is to be a mother.) Walked off, though, counting. Looked in the bathroom mirror. Thought how she wouldn't hire herself because she just wasn't pretty enough, and so fat. Fat fat fat. Then she thought of her daughter. Then she thought of wanting to dump food on her, how cathartic that would be. How evil that is. How beautiful her daughter is, just a baby. How she doesn't know better, she's two years old, for Christ's sake. Remembers, now, how she sat on her sister's toilet with her insides just a churning mess because she was nervous about the job stuff—how embarrassing—bawling again, bawling like a child as her daughter sat in the other room rubbing food all over her face, cooing that puzzled little coo. This has been her day. Guy a block over, preaching and screaming into the crowd, some kind of Bible in his hand with writing all over it, looked right into her eyes while he was talking about sodomy and "vitriolic dykes." What does "vitriolic" mean, anyway? And why was he looking at her? Does she look gay? Big boned, okay. Even butch, but not gay. What, I'm big with short hair and now I'm gay? Walking, sidestepping people on the sidewalks, she takes in the city, looks at it, breathes it, tastes it, how different it is from home, the hilly Virginia countryside. Everyone here has a blank face, a poker face, like zombies from some bad late-night movie. (Her anger wanes, as if disappearing into the noise and odd-smelling air—hot asphalt on a southern breeze—and it is replaced by a funk, a deep, bone-chilling funk that anyone, if they were looking, could see take shape on her plump face.) She wants, now, to look into someone's eyes, doesn't dare, but wants to, like she could at home, and nod her head, smile. Needs this more than anything. Thinks of home, people bringing cakes to new neighbors, sending cards, talking endlessly about yards with weed problems and how smart their kids are. Bored her there, but she could really use maybe thirty seconds of that boredom here. Yeah, a little boredom, that'd be all right about now. She stands

at the bus stop, afraid of sitting. Rock feels like it's still stuck in her skin. People—old, young, men, women—are looking at her. Everyone is staring at her, staring at her back, seeing how huge she is, or whispering about her, the fat lady, the fat dyke who abuses her child, who doesn't love her beautiful child. I love my child more than anything in the world, people, she wants to shout, You don't know anything about me. Looks around, slowly, carefully. Faces so blank, so rigid, the cold expressions afraid of betraying what's beneath, which could be anything: a killer, an angel, a fool, or just the shell of a human, like the husks of cicadas stuck to trees back home. She can't tell. Everyone, every face, is a chiseled stone. (And her own face is like this as she looks, catches eyes, looks away, though she doesn't think about it.) Bus stops. *Squeak whoosh squeak ssss.* Bus driver, an older black man with peppery hair and arms as thick as tree trunks on the huge wheel, swings open the door. (He's still calculating his lottery winnings after taxes and setting up his extended family: his mother in a rest home, his brother in Georgia, his favorite uncle Donald, and so on.) He stares right into her eyes and smiles and says, in a musical baritone, Heeelllooo. She smiles—my bus driver sounds like Barry White—wants to thank him, wants to tell him how he really saved her, how a hello at the right time is like water in the desert, man, which would be stupid and melodramatic, she realizes, especially here, but hey....(He is smiling, though, because next stop he gets to take his lunch break and he's thinking about getting rid of the carrots and rice cakes and getting something of substance, but she doesn't know this, and takes it, the smiling, personally.) She sits in the seat nearest him, catching his eyes in the mirror and smiling, those big eyes glowing like orbs up above the crowd. I have a daughter, she begins...

Milika Pavlovic
translated from the Serbo-Croat by Srdja Pavlovic

Distances

WELL

It's dark depth
took me by surprise
without a boat.
If I had a gadget
I would have taken out
a pearl bone
stuck in our throats.

CROWD

The astonished crowd crosses itself,
the children tool down the road.
They have been told that
they were made out of mud
and will turn into slush.
That is why the boys
on the edge of the pond
knead their master
out of clay.

TOWER IN PISA

This messenger was caught by the enemy
And surprised, he became stone-mute
He chose death by silence.
But the burden of hope
still bends his bones.
The primary meaning of the message
he carried mute
tilted away from its foundations.

Absurdly,
we still climb the twisted staircase.
At the top
the point moved
and drew away the horizon.

BIOGRAPHY

In the long night of vigilance
lightning had created a masterpiece,
caught an image,
vigorously hit the nail
in the corner of my soul
and left it hanging.
For days I take refuge there
to smell the colours
and worm up on its fire,
waiting for the next night
and lightning.

SAMOS

At noon
my speech leaves
its cask
lights the lantern
and seeks
for reed
to pledge the opacity
of quietness.

MEMORIES

Sister's palms smell of rye,
her eyes are in the dark wells
between the stars
of a lower sky.
Lying on a yellow mattress
She is arched by a dream.

Is that a sickle
long forgotten in the field
or Moonbeam throwing
a question mark
over the Autumn ripeness?

MELTDOWN

Every window in the city
looks in the same direction
to distract my attention.

In that glass glacier
I can still recognize
the one
bashfully open.

FROM THE CELLAR OF MIND

Wind on the lip
Rain in the wind
Eye in the rain

The giant knee on the sun
Broken in the space

In the right eye—a meadow,
Wheat in the left

The two fragrances
Two eyes
Compete in reaping

Two cities
Kissing in the meadow

IN THE END—THE THIRST

Your old age
Was abandoned on the cane
You forgot all about it
As if it were no one's

Thirsty
You watch a mighty waterfall
Near the threshold
The sun gliding above your head
Slides down your spine
And vanishes under your bare feet

QUARREL WITH THE BIRD

Overwhelmed by the strength of desire
like ripe seedcases
hanging from the thin bean-pole,
we would touch with your remoteness
with tender fingers of imagination.

In one seed the idleness of paradise,
the bitterness of exile in another.
At the far end of experience
the ocean nests
hatching its archipelagos.

Time is in flames
on the outskirts of your eyes,
in the blacksmith's shacks
the robbed-of sky is awaking.

THE LIGHT BEARER

In memory of Bozidar Bojovic

The golden palace
In the clouds

The eastern gates of the world
Wide open

All dogs tied up

Lets turn into wheels
And roll down the hill
Said the sun
The one whose wheel brakes
Loses all

The light bearer
In a white-gloved hand
Holds a double-edged spite

The defenders of darkness
Stumble in escape

Standing at the gates
The young light
Is blessing the city
With the nine breads

Contributors

Sandra Alland is a Toronto writer, performer and activist. Her poems have recently been published in *ink magazine*, *Canadian Women Studies* and *Zygote*. When not writing, she likes to dance, grow herbs and play with her friends.

Carla Maria Atherton has a BA Honours degree in English and plans to further her education. She is currently planning a Creative Writing workshop for kids which will begin in February. Writing is an essential part of her life.

Josh Auerbach writes in Montreal, where he lives with poet Helen Zisimatos. Winner of the Irving Layton Award for Poetry in 1998, he has been published in *Solioquies* and *Trouble*. He is currently working on a manuscript on transformations, *In the Red Eye*, and is also a visual artist.

Gregory T. Bottoms' essays and stories have recently appeared in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Cleveland Plain Dealer Sunday Magazine*, *Nerve* and *Santa Monica Review*. He is an assitant editor at *Gadfly Magazine*, an arts & culture monthly (gadfly.org).

Glen Downie's books include *An X-Ray of Longing* (Polestar Press, 1987), *Heartland* (Mosaic Press, 1990) and *The Angel of Irrational Numbers* (Press Porcepic, 1991). He also co-edited the work-writing anthology, *More Than Our Jobs* (Pulp Press, 1991). He currently lives in Toronto.

lorenzo (Lorence) Garcia: French. Born 12/07/1970 in Switzerland (mother Swiss, father French). Grew up in Africa's colors and light until the age of 15; always painted for herself, using collages, letters, acrylics and gouache, with that light in mind. Was selected a few times in painting contests at 19 and 20; has had a few exhibitions in France.

Francisco Hernández was born in 1946 in San Andrés Tuxtla, Mexico. His books have won numerous prizes including the Premio Nacional de Poesia Aguascalientes, the Premio Carlos Pellicer and the Premio Xavier Villaurrutia. His *Poesia Reunida* (Collected Poems) 1974-1994 was published in 1996. He lives in Mexico City.

Mark Anthony Jarman has published a hockey novel, *Salvage King Ya!* (Anvil Press, 1997), and a collection of short stories titled *New Orleans is Sinking* (Oberon, 1998). He has stories appearing in a Pop Culture anthology (Quarry Press), a Millennium anthology (Anansi Press) and *In the Trenches* (Anvil Press). "Songs From Under the Floorboards" won the Playwrights Union of Canada's International Monologue Competition in 1998.

Vivette J. Kady was born in South Africa, and now lives in Toronto. Her stories have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies in Canada and the US, including *Best Canadian Stories*. Stories are forthcoming in *The Capilano Review*, *Confrontation*, *Dandelion* and *The Malahat Review*.

Janice Levy has been published in numerous literary magazines, including *Glimmer Train*, *American Voice*, *Alaska Quarterly*, *Dandelion*, *Blood & Aphorisms* and *Mid-American Review*. Her work has appeared in a number of anthologies, including *If I had My Life to Live Over*(Papier Mache Press), *Women At Our Core* (Papier Mache Press) and *Lovers* (Crossing Press). She has been nominated three times for the Pushcart Prize. She lives in Merrick, New York.

Lea Littlewolfe has published work in *The Capilano Review, The Canadian Forum, The Fiddlehead, Queen's Quarterly, Grain, Wascana Review, Canadian Literature, Border Crossings, Event, The Canadian Author* and PRISM (35:4). She has also appeared in Pamela Banting's *Fresh Tracks: Writing the Western Landscape*. Her new book is *The Unwilling Bestiary* (Turnstone Press), in cahoots with the Winnipeg Art Gallery and glass sculptor Ione Thorkelsson. Her tribal affiliations are Odawa-Abenaki-Menominee.

Billie Livingston's first novel, *Going Down Swinging*, will be published by Random House Canada in the fall of 1999. Excerpts from the novel as well as other work are forthcoming in *The Malahat Review, The Capilano Review, The Fiddlehead* and *sub-TERRAIN*. She lives in Tsawwassen, BC, with a stuntman and a cat.

Susan McCaslin is a poet and instructor of English and Creative Writing at Douglas College in New Westminster, BC. She is the author of four books of poetry: *Locutions* and *Light Housekeeping* (Ekstasis Editions), *Veil/Unveil* (The St. Thomas Poetry Series), and *Letters to William Blake* (M[O]ther Tongue Press). She is the editor of the anthology *A Matter of Spirit: Recovery of the Sacred in Contemporary Canadian Poetry* (Ekstasis 1998).

Geeta Narang is a Québecker. She was a teacher in India, rural Québec and at Zhongshan University in China. She is presently in law school.

Milika Pavlovic, born in Montenegro in 1934 and one of its most prominent poets, has published four volumes of poetry: *Spindle of Time* (1969); *Clean Page* (1974); *The Virgin Snow* (1983); and *A Ship for One* (1990). He has also published a book of essays, *Basement* (1992). He lives in Podgorica, Montenegro.

Srdja Pavlovic is Montenegrin born, and has translated the works of Breyten Breytenbach, Umberto Eco, Michael Blackburn, Ken Smith, Michael Ondaatje, E.D. Blodget, Monty Reid and Fred Wah. He is an associate editor of the literary magazine *Stone Soup* (London, UK). He lives in Edmonton, Alberta.

David Starkey teaches Creative Writing at North Central College and is the editor of *Teaching Writing Creatively* (Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1998), and co-editor of *Smokestacks and Skyscrapers: An Anthology of Chicago Literature* (Loyola, 1999). His most recent collection of poetry is *Open Mike Night at the Cabaret Voltaire* (Kings Estate, 1996).

Yasuko Thanh is a freelance writer for many Vancouver papers and magazines. She has travelled extensively in South America and Europe, and is currently living in Germany.

Derk Wynand's latest collection of poems is *Closer to Home* (Brick Books, 1997). His poems first appeared in PRISM 13:2, in 1973. Since then, they have been in issues 19:2, 20:4, 22:1, 33:1 and 35:1.

Tara Yellen lives in Denver, Colorado and is a graduate student in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Colorado, Boulder. She grew up in Western New York and attended Indiana University in Bloomington. She has completed a screenplay and is currently working on her first novel.

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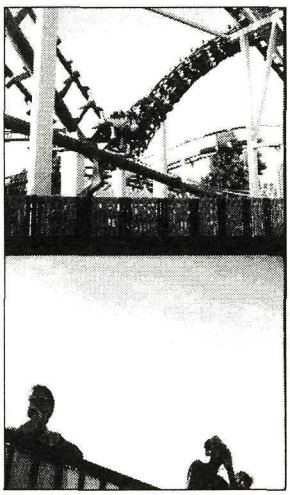

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Any unpublished fiction of 2,000 words or less.¶ Entries must be typed and accompanied by a one-time, one-story entry fee of $15.¶ Additional stories may be submitted with a supplementary fee of $5 per story.¶ All entrants receive a 4-issue subscription to sub-TERRAIN.¶ The Winning Entrant will be awarded a $500 cash prize plus publication in the Summer '99 issue of the magazine.¶ All entries MUST include a self-addressed stamped envelope to ensure notification of contest results and (if desired) return of story. Please include sufficient postage.

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Short Story Contest
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Creative Non-Fiction Contest #12

$1,500

Three winners will each receive $500

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Publication in *Event* 28/3. Other manuscripts may be published.
Preliminary judging by the editors of *Event*.

Final Judge: Di Brandt's non-fiction includes a collection of creative essays, *Dancing Naked: Narrative Strategies for Writing Across Centuries*, and a critical study, *Wild Mother Dancing: Maternal Narrative in Canadian Literature*. She has published four books of poetry and has received numerous awards for her writing. She has twice been nominated for the Governor General's Award for Poetry. She currently teaches creative writing and Canadian literature at the University of Windsor.

Writers are invited to submit manuscripts that explore the creative non-fiction form. See back issues of *Event* for previous winning entries and comments by judges Myrna Kostash, Howard White, Eleanor Wachtel, Susan Crean, Andreas Schroeder, Stephen Hume, Janice Kulyk Keefer, George Galt, Sharon Butala, and Tom Wayman.

Note: Previously published material cannot be considered. Maximum length for submission is 5000 words, typed and double-spaced. Include a separate cover sheet with the writer's name, address and phone number, and the title(s) of the story (stories) enclosed. Please include a self-addressed stamped envelope and a telephone number. Douglas College employees are not eligible to enter.

Entry fee: *Each* submission must include a $20 entry fee (includes GST). All entrants will receive a one-year subscription (three issues) with each entry. Those already subscribing will receive a one-year extension.

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Event

Douglas College

The Douglas College Review
Creative Non-Fiction Contest #12
P.O. Box 2503, New Westminster, B.C.
Canada V3L 5B2
Telephone (604) 527-5293

I WAS NO STAR AND I DATED NO CHEERLEADERS BUT I DANCED BACKWARD WITH A VOICE LIKE A DOG AT A GRAMOPHONE.

— Mark Anthony Jarman, Page 8

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ISSN 0032.8790