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W. P. Kinsella

Indian Joe

I never forget the Christmas my sister Illianna got Indian Joe as a present. Pa had left us the year before and Delores was just a baby. I remember Delores peering over Ma's shoulder as we walk down the hill from our cabin to Blue Quills Hall, where the Christmas party was.

There was a big, tall Christmas tree inside Blue Quills Hall. The place smell smokey because the stove backed up. Each of us kids was gived a candy cane and a glass of lemonade. Everyone sat around with their coats on acting shy.

Finally Santa Claus showed up. All but the littlest kids could tell it was Sven Sonnegard, a mechanic at the Husky Service Station on the highway. He still got his greasy, steel-toed work boots on below his Santa Claus suit.

There were galvanized garbage cans on the stage, each covered in green and red paper, each got a sheet of black construction paper taped to it, with BOY or GIRL and different age groups written on in chalk.

We got in a long line and when a kid got to the top of the stairs to the stage, he would sneak across toward Santa Claus, head down. If Sven Sonnegard could get the kid to tell its age, he'd reach in the right barrel for a present. If the kid wouldn't tell, Sven would guess; sometimes he'd even have to guess if it was a boy or girl. One garbage can say BABY, others 1-3, 4-6, 7-9, and so on.

My friend Frank Fence-post notice the presents get bigger as the kids get older. When it's our turn, Frank he walk right up to Santa Claus and say, "Hi Sven, I'd like to buy a quart of home-brew."

"Shut up, Kid," Sven say out of the side of his mouth, but he also have a hard time keep from laughing. We all know Sven make his living bootlegging, mainly to Indians.

"How old are you?" Sven say to Frank.

We are supposed to be in the 7-9 group.

"Fifteen," say Frank, push out his skinny chest, look Sven right in the eye.

"You ain't a day over eight," say Sven-Santa Claus.

"He's small for his age," I say.

"That's right, he's small for eight."

"I seen Constable Green down by the door," said Frank. "How many cases of home-brew you think he'd find in your truck if he looked?"

Sven reach in the BOY 13-15 barrel, pull out a big package.

"My twin brother is at home sick," say Frank.

Santa Claus reach out another package, a basketball, and he nearly knock Frank over he push it into his arms so hard.

"My brother's brother couldn't be here neither."

Sven load another present into Frank's arms.

The line-up behind us getting restless.

"And my cousin . . . "

"Move along," said Santa. "What a good boy you've been," and push Frank so he skid clear across the stage.

"How old are you, Sport?" he said to me.

"Thirteen," I said, swallowing hard.

"Sure you are." He reach in the BOY 7-9 barrel and give me a package turn out to be a peg-board game got half the wooden nubbins missing.

It was at this party Illianna was gived Indian Joe. Joe was a mechanical Indian, run by batteries. He was six or eight inches tall, sit on his haunches in front of a drum, with little drumsticks raised up ready to play. In Joe's lower back was a switch, and when it pressed down he play. H-H-H-Rap—Tap-Tap, go the drum. The toys we was given was all used, but Indian Joe was good as new and Illianna was real proud of him.

"He look something like Pa," Illianna say on the walk home. Her being older she remember Pa better than the rest of us. I never knew him to play the drum, or have black braids, or even a red shirt with green suspenders like Indian Joe.

After Illianna got her toy home she is kind of like a miser with her money when it come to sharing. She like him so much she take him to bed with her that first night.

All that happened about three years before Illianna go off to work in the city. By that time everybody but Illianna forgot about Indian Joe. No one even notice he is one of the things Illianna take to Calgary with her.

After she been in the city for a year or so my sister married herself to a white man name of Robert McGregor McVey. He is a big wheel in some company that loan out money. Me and my friends have caused McVey a certain amount of grief over the years. The first time I ever seen their new house, I discover that in their bedroom Illianna and Brother Bob have what's called a walk-in closet. On one of the shelves sat Indian Joe. He look smaller than I remember him, but except that one of the plastic feathers is gone from his war-bonnet, he is good as new. I remember thinking it is strange for Illianna to keep a toy like that, 'cause

she been married for years and have her own little boy named Bobby.

Last week me and Frank went to Calgary for a day. We park the truck and start walking around.

"What should we do?" I ask Frank.

"Let's go in the lobby of a bank and watch people withdraw money from the machines," says Frank.

We watch the machines for a while.

Later, I seen a sign take me by surprise. In gold letters in the form of an arch, just like McDonald's, it say INTERCONTINENTAL LOAN CO. LTD., Robert M. McVey, Division Manager.

"Look at that, you figure that's Brother Bob?"

"Where?" says Frank.

I forgot Frank can't read and can only write part of his name. I read the sign to Frank.

"Let's go in and see," he says.

We walk inside, and boy, the place is just like a bank. There is secretaries everywhere, dressed fancy as models. Quiet music is playing and typewriters tick. Everywhere there is machines look like a cross between typewriters and televisions.

"Good afternoon, may I help you?" a lady say. She is tall, with long blond hair, dressed in a brown, scratchy-looking suit, remind me of a doormat.

"I'd like to borrow twenty dollars," says Frank, give her a big smile. "I pay you back tomorrow for sure. I even leave my friend here. You can sell him if I don't come back."

The girl try hard to be polite.

"I'm afraid we only make industrial loans," she say.

"How about if you loan me twenty dollars personally?" say Frank, and he look at her real sad, lift up one finger point to his cheek. As he does a tear squeeze out of his eye, roll onto his cheek and stop there. Frank seen an Indian on TV do that, that Indian was sad about white men cutting down trees or something.

"How do you do that?" the girl says.

"Come real close and I show you."

The girl does, then turn to another girl and say, "Hey, Francine, come look at this."

"Maybe you've seen me on TV?" Frank saying.

Frank wipe the tears off his cheek, start the water flowing again.

"Excuse me," I say to a gray-haired lady, "is Mr. McVey in?"

"Whom should I say is calling?" she say, look right at me as if what she's asking ain't funny.

"Tell him his brother, Silas, is here."

She scowl, and I bet she going to say something nasty to me when she remember that Brother Bob have an Indian wife. She push her face into a tiny smile and pick up a white telephone.

A few minutes later, Brother Bob, his cheeks all shiny, wearing a striped suit and vest, smell like he just bathed in shaving lotion, come out of a door labelled EXECUTIVE OFFICES.

He try to be friendly, but he is embarrassed to see me there. Bet he wishes he could dress me up in a suit like him and cut my hair.

"Why Silas," he say, "what a surprise!"

"I seen your name on the window."

Brother Bob stare around kind of nervous. Then his eyes light on Frank's back. Frank got five or six secretaries watching him cry. I notice he is also putting a stapler in his pocket.

"You *didn't,"* Brother Bob yell.

"He's keepin' himself busy," I say. "You never even know he's here."

"Well, Silas, how would you like a tour of our business facilities?" he ask. "We've got straight state-of-the-art technology here. Everything is done by computer. I expect you'll be buying, or how is it you put it, creatively borrowing, a word processor to facilitate your writing procedures," and he give a little chuckle.

"I facilitate my writing procedures with a felt pen and a Royal typewriter," I say. "I'm scared of these here computers."

"It's inevitable, Silas. People in the horse-and-buggy era were afraid of the horseless carriage. Now, even *you* drive a car . . ."

It get pretty noisy across the room where Frank and the secretaries gathered around a big copier. Brother Bob and me work our way over to them.

I guess Frank ain't ever seen a copying machine up close before. One of the secretaries show him how it work, and Frank put his hand down flat, push the button, and out come a piece of paper with a big, blue-black hand on it.

"Hey, I bet this here machine could copy food," cries Frank. "Silas," he yell, "run down to a restaurant and get a sandwich. I'll copy it enough times to feed the whole reserve." The secretaries all laugh. I notice a couple of them already touching Frank.

"He doesn't really believe that, does he?" Brother Bob ask.

"Well . . ." I say. "Mad Etta teach him pretty strong medicine. If he was to copy a sandwich it might just come out real."

Brother Bob stare me up and down, but he don't have the nerve to call me a liar. He shoo all the secretaries back to their desks. Then he take both of us through a couple of metal doors, thick as the kind they have in warehouses, and into a room with no windows.

"This is our computer center," he say, wave one of his small, pink hands at the rows and rows of blinking machines. The sounds in the room is quite a bit like an arcade, except all the humans is quiet.

"You keep the money inside those machines?" ask Frank.

"Oh, no," say Brother Bob," no money, but all our records are in there. We can establish the status of any loan account in the nation in

less than ten seconds. Here, let me show you . . ." and he actually smile at us, looking kind of purplish under the artificial light.

As I look at Brother Bob I wonder how Illianna feel about being married to a white man, and living in a white world. She seem to be happy, and she says her and Bob have lots of friends. And she has her little boy Bobby. Still, no matter how I try, I can't "Walk in her moccasins," as Mad Etta our medicine lady would say. I can't imagine not being with other Indians. It seem to me I'd get awful tired of always being on display, of answering dumb questions, of always being afraid I'd make a mistake.

Brother Bob poke away at the keys of a computer and a whole page of figures appear. "See," he says. I can tell by looking at Frank that he is just dying to touch these machines.

"Watch this," says Brother Bob. "This machine can speak too."

He push a button and the machine talk, sound like somebody under a foot of water with his nose plugged. But once I tune my ears to it, I can understand.

"Can you teach it to cuss?" ask Frank.

"I suppose I could, if I was so inclined," Brother Bob reply, but pretty coldly.

The steel door open and that gray-haired lady stick her head in. "Excuse me, Mr. McVey, but Zurich is on the line."

"I'll be right back," Brother Bob say to us, and trot away.

"Boy, this is just like a video arcade," yells Frank, move up to the word processor and poke a button or two. "Which one do I push to shoot down all those squiggley things?"

"I don't know if we should be touching these here machines," I say.

"Where's the coin slot?"

"Brother Bob own these machines. You don't have to pay to use them."

"Wow! Brother Bob is in heaven and I bet he don't even know it." Frank go from machine to machine, poke a button here and there. "Silas, come here and read the instructions for me, the way you do at the arcade."

"These ain't games . . ."

"But I bet they could be," and Frank whack a few more buttons.

"We better go," I say.

About that time a red light, look like an ambulance flasher, high above the door, start blinking, and a bell, like a fire alarm, begin ringing.

"I think I got this one working," yells Frank.

It does look as if it's turning into a game. The red light flashes, the siren bongs, it is just like our favorite arcade in Wetaskiwin.

Just as Frank really starting to enjoy himself, Brother Bob come crashing through the door.

"Don't touch that machine anymore," he yells. "Our entire loan records are in there. If it goes down . . ."

"I'm gonna blow these little green suckers away," yells Frank, pound the buttons the way a Russian pianist I seen on TV pound his piano.

"That's enough, Frank," I'm surprised to hear myself saying. I move toward him, intending to pull him away from the machine. Sometimes it seem to me Frank don't think enough before he act.

"Don't hit that button . . ." scream Brother Bob. We both dive for Frank. The machine look like it making fireworks and is about to explode.

I hit Frank like he was carrying a football and we both roll under a table, scatter a couple of wastebaskets across the room. Brother Bob shut off the machine, wipe his forehead, stare at us with his eyes bugging out.

I'm not sure if what I've done is good or bad.

"Another five seconds and our entire financial records would have been destroyed. Some of it could never be replaced."

I don't think Brother Bob realize that I was helping him. Maybe that's just as well. He march us both out of the building as if we was under arrest.

"We sure is sorry, Brother Bob," we say, but he don't even tell us goodbye.

Outside, Frank he decide to wait the hour until closing time. He arranged to meet two or more of them secretaries. I decide to visit Illianna.

"We stopped in to see Brother Bob," I tell her. "He sure is busy, might be real late getting home tonight." By the way Illianna look at me I know she don't want to hear any details.

We have coffee at her kitchen table and I play with Bobby for a while, then say I'd better get going. I bet Brother Bob still ain't in a mood to be apologized to.

"I've got a present for Ma's birthday," Illianna say, "you can take it back with you." She get up and walk to her bedroom and I follow. She walk into the big closet take a package wrapped in flowered paper off a shelf. The package was sitting right beside Indian Joe.

"You still got old Indian Joe," I say, act kind of surprised.

"I got my doll too," Illianna says, move aside a blanket and sure enough there is her one-eyed, bald doll, what at one time had platinum-colored hair. Illianna touch Indian Joe on the top of the head. "We been through a lot," she says, smile sad at me.

Indian Joe still sit behind his drum, wear green felt suspenders down the front of his red shirt. His black braids hang straight as sticks. His arms hold up in awkward half-circles, the little wood drumsticks forever poised.

"He sure does bring back a lot of memories," I say. I flip the switch in Indian Joe's back. "H-H-H-Rap, Tap, Tap . . ." go Indian Joe, which

surprise me a lot. I didn't think batteries lasted for so many years.

"H-H-H-Rap, Tap, Tap," he go again, and, as I switch him off, I look up at Illianna 'cause I hear her make a funny sound. My eyes catch her face just in time to see it falling in on itself. The tears flood out of her big, brown eyes.

I hold out my arms to her. She takes one step forward and clasp onto me real hard.

"Is there anything I can do?" I ask.

"No, everything's alright, Silas. Really, everything's alright."

"I know," I tell her, though I'm not sure I do. I think I can guess what she's feeling. For Illianna I bet it's one of those times when the past seems so far away and so permanently lost. I've had the feeling myself, a terrible sense of loss, like someone Important has died. But then there's the worse feeling of not being able to name the person who'd died. It's a little like looking at your own grave.

I just hold her for a while as she cries into my shoulder. I believe her when she says everything's alright.

Then I hear Bobby come pounding in the back door. "Mom! Mom!" he calls.

Illianna pulls back, take a deep breath, wipes her eyes with her hands, wipes her hands on her jeans.

"Coming, Honey," she says, and squeezes my hand as she turns away and walks out of the room, leaving me and Indian Joe staring at each other.

Funny Indian

One day, he was just there, a big Indian, wearing buckskins, carrying a big bow and a pack of arrows. He looked at me, real solemn, put an arrow in the bow and let fly. Oh, my God! Right into an office I had to visit. But, when I walked in, everyone was o.k. No one had an arrow through his head, and something else: they liked me. I made a big sale, big money. When I came out, the Indian was staring again. I get it, I said, I get it.

So, he'd fire an arrow into a restaurant (I saw it go through a waiter), a store, a bank, and when I followed up, something good happened. A great meal, a special sale, free money, you name it. I got what I could and ran. One afternoon, he shot me a girl (in one ear and out the other), and I found this gorgeous creature asking if she could pick me up for dinner in her Alfa Romeo. Sometimes, he'd set the bow, aim it and wait for me to get excited. Then, he'd give me one of those Choctaw looks, curl up in the street and go to sleep. Indian humor, I figured.

At night, we'd watch television and drink beer. He'd sit, the bow between his legs, his feet up, and, after a while, start flipping arrows through the tv. Every time, the program changed. Can't you let me watch anything, I yelled. But, he'd ignore me and start banging his empty glass on the table. Funny Indian.

Welcome, Walker

I missed Clint. Missed his humor, his cigars, his crazy driving. I wandered around, stopping to look at his pictures, play his records. My buddy, dead at thirty-seven.

One morning, he came through the wall of the den. But, it wasn't him. The guy was tall, like Clint, and had a great smile, but it wasn't him.

"Who the hell are you?" I said.

The guy looked shocked and faded away.

But he kept coming back, and I kept saying, "You're not Clint, so get out."

One Sunday, it was raining. I was sipping coffee and reading when he came through the floor and sat down in Clint's chair. I noticed his fine hair, that winning smile.

"O.K." I said, closing my book, "tell me about yourself."

Of course, he couldn't. So, I did all the talking: I told him about Clint, his girls, his cars, his spending—how much I loved him. The guy—I got a feeling his name was Walker—didn't move a muscle. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

I reached out to him, as though we could touch.

"Welcome, Walker," I said gently.

The Way It Always Is

I put the coffee on and looked out the window. The sky was clear with some puffy clouds. The cypress tree was in place on the corner, the apartment building across the street set for another day. Everything was just like yesterday.

"Is this the way it always is?" I said.

I took a shower. I shaved. First, the right side, then the left. Why didn't I ever start with the left side? I found shoes, shirts, a tie. Never found anything else, did I?

I went to the fruit store. I always went to the fruit store when the sky had puffy clouds. The fruit store had apples, oranges and bananas. I asked the lady for a Bodrick.

She smiled.

"You know, fuzzy, like a peach, but tasting more like an aardvark egg."

Her smile got broader.

"Hell, they have them down the street."

She laughed.

I smiled, took my package and left. Why didn't I ever frown? When I get home, I thought, I'll look in the mirror, call myself an Elk turd, and see if I frown.

I stopped. A man was looking at me. He wore a red jacket with gold braid around the buttons, blue pants, and white shoes with bolts of lightning on them. He wore a rimless hat, like a fez, with a blue tassel. He pointed at me and laughed. I tapped my chest. Me? You're laughing at me? Yes, he was.

But, I didn't keep his attention for long. Still laughing, he walked off, pointing to a tree, a car, a boy on a bicycle. Slowly, he raised his arms and looked towards the heavens.

At the piano the man known only as Ray-X played aggressively angular, unmelodic jazz in rhythms so insultingly subtle that only a high-powered computer could find pattern in them. Ray-X, with his close-cropped bullet head and opaque ice-blue circular spectacles, sneered as he swayed his body out of sync with the sounds he made and at complete variance with anyone's possible expectations. He was the perfect expression of the hard, but glittering surfaces of chrome and lucite that surrounded both patrons and performer. No one here ever smiled; all took their cues from Ray-X himself and the relentless, stabbing mirrored lights. But, through the haze and at the far end of the room came a rush of air and the discordant tones of a woman's voice.

"Here he is, Clem! Here's Raymond! This is where he plays.—It's all right, I'm his mother. I guess that makes me Florence-X, Har, har, ha, ha. And this is his Dad, Clem-X, I suppose. Hoo, hoo, har, har, ha. Here's a place over here, Clem. Oh my God, how that boy always could tickle the ivories. Would you believe it took us three weeks to find out where to come hear him?

The day had been marred by several impromptu snow squalls, but the weather was not sufficiently bad to cancel. Anton was now waiting in the wings with his violin in one hand and his bow in the other—a scene which was as boringly familiar to him as the taste of his own spit. All day his stomach had been as uncertain and changeable as the weather, and he had had to go to the bathroom twice in the last twenty minutes, dismantling his formal gear and redressing painstakingly each time. He was half-seriously afraid that his rumbling stomach would be heard by the audience during the quiet passages. Suddenly from the house side of the curtain four deafening pistol shots rang out, followed by the shrill screeches of hysterical women. "Thank God," thought Anton, "I won't have to go on tonight for sure."

The limousine roared at reckless speed along the narrow, two-lane highway in the darkness, its headlights cutting a swath through the lashing rain. With little warning, a faintly-lit, yellow and black diagonal-striped barrier impeded the way, and the chauffeur required his utmost skill to halt the vehicle inches from the unlighted obstruction. For several moments the car sat angled across the road, its motor throbbing and its beams penetrating but a few feet into the tangled vegetation at the roadside. The rain pelted down without pause. Presently, the door on the driver's side opened, and the chauffeur emerged, clad in a rubberized poncho and a helmet with a short bill. He carried three objects carefully to the barrier and placed them on top of it: a bowl of steaming rice, a small lacquered box, and a slender vase with a single blue cornflower in it. Almost immediately the storm upset the rice bowl and the vase, sending both crashing to the pavement.

"Bungler!" cried a harsh voice from within the limousine.

The chauffeur placed his hands on his hips exasperatedly and called back, "But, Sir, I can't help it. It's windy out here."

Japan was the last place I would have expected to meet Carl Sandburg, but there he was sitting on a round stone thingamy outside a temple. "Hi, Carl," I said, knowing that he wouldn't give me two minutes at home, but just might here, since he could chat in English.

"You're enchanted with Japan, aren't you?" he growled, flicking back his gray forelock, only to have it slide back to where it was before. "It won't last; take my word for it. My craw is stuffed with politeness, for one thing. Enough is enough."

I was surprised to hear Carl say that, but he went on: "You like all that subtlety and nuance in the art, and I was charmed too, but after a while piled up nuance is like a cartload of pig dung. It smells to high heaven."

"Hey!" I cried, "I just remembered. You died some time ago."

"I'm on a mission from the next world, so go away. Take a hike. Your two minutes are up."

BLUEGRASS IN JAPAN

i.

A Canuck who's never seen Kentucky
  plays fiddle fast in Nagasaki.
Stooped like a heavy sunflower:
Abagail, the bassist.
They fly through "Fuji Mountain Breakdown."

  Spin the globe. Come back
to my kitchen, smell candle wax, hear
Schubert's quintet direct our forks
to the mushrooms and steamed salmon.
(I love your faded secondhand skirt
more than ruffled Viennese sleeves.)

After supper, let's look up Thoreau
telling of a time echoes
rang, shouting townsmen axing ice
to be shipped to Bombay and Madras.

ii.

Once the post office brought the seven seas
to my door. Avuncular tourist bureaus
  filled my puny arms
with rivers and castles and islands,
strange-scented paper born in distant woods.

  In a dream, I was there again
on my tiptoes by the door;
envelopes of all sizes
stacked up to my chin, overflowed

onto the rug, and still there were more—

infinite answers in a bottomless mailbox.

iii.

How does a lost fox differ from a lost man?

Curiosity never killed the fox
  slipping through gardens, fleeing lights.
In his journey, the hills of Chile
glued to grape crates broken in an alley
are nothing but a blue threat.

  At twilight the shivering fisherman
forgets hunger for now,
                kneels in moss to watch
a nimble bird climb trees
upside down—
                tricks new to his eyes.

iv.

Morning buoyed by a mandolin.
Satoko and Toshiko cheer,
cheek to cheek in the grass.

All the rednecks in the rhythms
tug up their britches and
disappear;
                the banjo no longer
ties a black man to a tree.
                At last, at last,
the music soars, winged.

v.

Walden's ice melts, Schubert's quintet
brings on dessert. Day ends
with everything finding a new home—
you in my arms, play in a lyric, bluegrass in Japan.

CYCLIST IN A TUNNEL

i.

A foolish turn, then hurtling
through monotonous darkness.
Sound is one massive moan.

Far ahead, indifferent tail-lights
fade—short-lived stars.
Home of no drifted seed, a breath-

less, gutted space, a naked cave.
No stick men. No scratch. No word.
The inarticulate concrete moans.

ii.

Deafened, he keeps moving—a mole
lost and wild in a drainpipe.
He's never asked for beads of rain

suspended from every weed, light forever
sparkling on his spokes, beauty
glimpsed with every heartbeat;

yet sweating in this sudden cold,
in this trapped howl,
he speeds with loathing through

a skull scraped clean of all thought.

iii.

Bent forward, he begins to fill

this emptiness with his eyes.
Where has the sky gone? His mind

turns a stiff page of history:
When the great basilica was finished
Ivan smiled at blue and golden walls

and blinded his architect.
As a peaceful man, a sweet-tongued lord,
he would've been "Ivan the Miserly"

for that single act, that heresy:
"Gold multiplied its gold subtracted.
A splendid bird steals its twin's splendour."

iv.

A spot of blue ahead. His heart's in
the pedals, his bike parts the darkness.
Dead space, awakened, stirs his hair,

his damp t-shirt. In a tunnel of nothing
he cannot imagine a glut of beauty.
That spot of blue swells, a word

forming on the lips of a distant friend.
Broken sunlight ripples on handlebars.
The mole falls out of the drainpipe

and rubs his snout in the familiar dirt.

MUSEUM PIECE

This boneyard of the dinosaurs
finds me footsore and tired
of all fleamarket history
that sets such store on paper clips
the toilet bric-a-brac of queens
their bowel movements chronicled
by scared astrologers
But ah the dinosaurs they soar
to fifteen twenty thirty meters
(or Biblical cubits if you prefer):
their body sounds of gurglings
rumblings of ancient indigestion
monstrous mooing love complaints
sunk to soft earthworm murmurs

Stand under these bone shadows
of tons of onetime flesh
and the mind harks back
to their heyday in the late
Cretaceous when the Great Death
came and saith: —'All life is mine'
—the red sun stopped its seeming flight
the planet's moon returned to night
when the shapeless shape no man hath seen
walked abroad in its shroud
and Eden gates went clang
shut with no sound

But ah they soared they Soar
this walled space makes no mock
of those with such enormous
appetites they ate the world
When museum cleaners come here
and leave aside their mops and brooms

to climb up teetery stepladders
with rags to wipe the weeklong dust
from fossil craniums they must
tremble a little no matter what
accident insurance rates are
The mind shuffles its feet to think
of that time: — when diplodocus tyrannosaurus
and the like trumpeted at the sky
65 million years ago
and it occurs to me that our human ancestors
then were small shrew-like creatures
hiding in holes probably nocturnal
— in that instant notice the cleaners
atop their stepladders have all changed
back into small shrew-like creatures
with tragic eyes

"The elephant is slow to mate—"?
D. H. Lawrence

Not so at "Lion Safari" near Palm Beach
several tons of grey-mud-colored jumbo
with six-foot dong rear to glum sky
rejoicing thereat greatly and—
The same basic instinct
impelled Paris & Helen and Hero & Leander
not to mention classical romance
Still and all hard to imagine
Leander Jumbo dog-paddling the Hellespont
threshing between Europe and Asia nightly
fish nibbling his luminous dong
Hero Jumbo waving her trunk for guidance
Aphrodite's temple in elephant uproar

Two ostriches
also in amatory mood
Tristram Ostrich with "the whole science
of venerie at his fingertips" (read wingtips?)
tho neither lover dies from feathery encounter
Iseult Ostrich is undeniably perturbed
Beauty resides no doubt in beholder's optics
and it's instructive for us higher orders
of creation to witness barnyard basics
realize anew romance ends with copulation
the excretory orifice (as Yeats would have it)
a site of enemas and noisome exhalations

My dear my sweet my purest love
lest eye or ear offend thee with supersonic
anal music: our affection keep platonic
read Marvell with loathing and virtue
thus safeguarded by menopause and plumbing

chant we two in unison our slogan for the future
fucking briefly is for animals
and talking about it forever only human
et cetera.

John B. Lee

NOTHING

my old dog's prostate
swells up
fairly crippling him
when he smells the estrus bitch
wagging the stink
of her puffed vulva
like a three day old corsage
into the wind.

and the knacking vet
dreams a cut
along his scrotum
  his balls dropping
like two faithful nuns
before the miracle of a rising Christ.
where can his dogness
persevere
when the severed vesicles dangle
like useless laces
and his man sac heals
on emptiness?

when the taint of urine
against tree bark
stirs nothing
and in the brothelized wind
caustic with the pitch of heat
there is no redolence,
his nose
is as dull as a clay plugged stone
then he's cured
of a need
that gave life and pain with it
then he sleeps easy
stupid in the bland barren air.

CONCISE HISTORY OF A ROOM

The room hangs in the air above empty seas. Gradually it fills with drifting ash and steam from underwater volcanoes. Land appears beneath it. Giant pineapples rise swarming with monkeys grinning like pike, frogs and Persian cats.

Slowly the air becomes cooler. The room freezes to a solid block of ice. The ice melts to seas of tentacles drifting as silently as smoke past the Cadillac grills of humpbacked whales.

The land returns. Swamps simmer like vats of hospital laundry. The climate becomes cool and dry. Forest fires sweep through the room. Regiments of pine and hemlock rise and fall in a ten thousand year history of weather.

Carpenters come and erect studs, joists and rafters. A woman enters the room for the first time. She folds her sweaters and places them in a dresser drawer. She makes her bed. She hangs her favorite pictures on the walls.

THE FLORIDA ORANGE

In the palm of my daughter's hand, a Renaissance sun splattered with old blood from the quills of conquistadors. A lone starfish, dry and green as cactus, clings to a northern pole.

She parts the cool wedge lips and a skunk spray mists the room.

The droplets burn so sour with sunlight, a dagger plunges deep to the roots of my tongue.

CIDER APPLES

The soul's at her window of flesh
lightly leaning on a green paint frame.

The core:
she doesn't exist anymore.

Only her dark wit
bronze

which lets her go on the inside of her hound.
She's in his skin.

She walks around the country.
A gull-rain & sun have bleached an old spruce stand:

she sees witching:
the core of New England.

CHRISTINA'S WORLD (Andrew Wyeth)

The light bulb's a high-intensity thinker
hung.

For Christina
partly paralyzed,

even the colors of light
shrink like a worm.

Flowered dresses match the rising sea.
Her hair is strong reddish, her eyes deep brown.

Years of confinement
smell of burning oil, charred wood.

Fat cats clot her room
and old cloth.

She gazes seaward.
Locks her look back to land.

In her mind there's a lake
bulb-sized

where energy's pent
in an unmoving green.

Shirley Cox

Terrible Liberties

It was clear to Louisa, as she leaned on the sill, that yet another hairline fracture had opened up across the deceptive idyll of their days here. The deserted Berkshire lane, the scarlet poppies in hot trembling stands between the cart ruts, a drowsy cuckoo calling hypnotically through the haze—everything threatened to dissolve in the August afternoon; but the image of Anne was there, as starkly clear as if she had photographed her in an unkind light. Her own child, and yet this morning she had been suddenly an alien creature. She still could hardly believe it: the white-faced dramatic pose, the spread palms shedding brilliant drops of blood in the dust.

It had happened on their way back from the village church. As they came out under the lych-gate, she took her camera from the large handbag in which she concealed it during the service—she felt that country people might disapprove of her taking it into a house of worship, and she was very sensitive about causing offence.

It was a perfect morning, and there was still so much untouched by the war here. Mossy oaks and cobbled alleys cried out to be stored in their last brightness before the storm should break. On the other hand, her carefully hoarded film was running low and Len had written that his contact at the War Office had been called up for active duty and he had no idea when he could lay hands on a further supply. So she concentrated on Anne.

She smiled as the child appeared in the viewfinder. Every embroidered petal glowed on her white dress and the auburn curly head turned demurely from side to side creating a tantalizing series of frames: a delicate mural against a stone-cropped wall, a startling silhouette held for a nonchalant moment in a dazzle of sunlight at the corner of Church Street.

As Louisa stood there in indecision—there were only three shots left on this film—Anne suddenly turned away from the camera and walked through an open gate, into the garden of a total stranger. It was done with a bold innocence that took Louisa's breath away, and by the time she recovered Anne was already halfway across the lawn.

A woman looked up from weeding a flower-bed and smiled. She was really very gracious about the intrusion, but Louisa felt humiliated. She ought to have more control over her own daughter.

Anne's dimpled hand went out to a dark rose. "This red one 'specially I like," Louisa heard her say.

"Anne, come here. Come here this minute." Yet even as she spoke, she felt an urge to raise the camera again. There was something very lovely about the way the woman rose ponderously and brushed grass clippings from her lisle stockings, then bent again, slow and rounded, to retrieve the garden shears. Through the aperture she watched the tiny scene, the faraway silent snip of the shears. She recorded the liver-spotted hand pointing out thorns and folding the small fingers around a smooth part of the stalk.

"You really shouldn't," she said, but the woman only smiled again. "I'm so sorry—she's being very naughty today."

"Listen to me, Anne," she'd said, as they went on down the lane. She didn't know how to put what she wanted to say. She wanted both to preserve Anne's innocence and to arm her against imminent disasters, but for lack of any clear idea as to how this might be accomplished she found herself dealing with the issue of manners. "Never, never walk into other people's gardens," she said.

Anne was gently rubbing the petals of the rose against her cheek. "Pay attention!" Louisa cried. The monotonous call of the cuckoo began at that moment in the dense still air, and it struck her with terrifying clarity that this sweet still Berkshire morning was nothing but a sad mockery of the safe mornings of her own childhood—a façade that might be ripped at any moment from end to end.

It was so important to maintain the small island of security she had made for them here. She had achieved this partly by keeping her distance from the local people, whose only topic of conversation was the war. In her necessary dealings with them, she was scrupulously polite but remote. She never allowed her eye to light on the newspaper headlines in the village shop, and had hidden the radio in the attic on their first day at the cottage. Each day at six she changed her own dress and Anne's, as if Len could be expected at any moment, and arranged the cutlery with great care around their scanty dinner.

Anne was still smoothing the rose against her face and breathing its scent with a rapt look. "You must never intrude on people," Louisa continued. "'Intrude' means go in when the gate is open—do you understand?" She felt pleased with her simple explanation: perfectly intelligible to a child without using baby-talk. She and Len didn't believe in baby-talk. Anne nodded vaguely.

"If you intrude—go in just because the gate is open—you never know what it will lead to. They may be entirely the wrong kind of people, the sort who think they can come into *your* garden whenever they please.

They may take terrible liberties."

The little face was still unresponsive, but Anne was holding the rose away from her with stiff arms. Perhaps she was listening.

"There will be dirty common children everywhere with their noses running. *Ugly* children—not with pretty white dresses, clean every day." She could picture this invasion quite clearly. She had already seen the start of it in London, where the war had thrown people together in a totally new way and made it difficult to preserve the social distinctions of an ordered world. "They'll pull up all the flowers and break your toys. And their mothers will force their way into the house and expect to be given tea, and who knows where it will end?"

It was then that it had happened, that ghastly scene. When she stopped, breathless and a little shocked at her own outburst, she saw that Anne's hands were clenched around the stem of the rose. One thorn was deeply embedded beneath the tiny pink nail of her right forefinger. "Let go," she cried. "You'll hurt yourself." She forced the hands open and jerked the thorn out from under the nail.

Later, when Plessie, the eldest girl from the vicarage, had knocked at the door and asked if she might take Anne to the Sunday School, Louisa had somewhat surprised herself by saying yes. The vicarage children tended to run wild since their father was a widower and whatever disciplining they received came from an erratic old housekeeper whom Louisa suspected of dipping into the communion sherry. But Plessie was very responsible and she adored Anne. After this morning's scene, Louisa felt she needed to be alone for a while.

She had intended to spend the time in her improvised darkroom developing the film she'd taken, but instead she was here, inert, leaning on the window sill, contemplating the memory of that distraught little face and the bright drops of blood falling in the dust. Beyond the lane, the dimming poppies shimmered away across the cornfield to the corrugated iron Nissen hut. A munitions hut: a fine piece of irony.

Six weeks ago, in London, she had endured in white-lipped silence a particularly heavy raid that had left half their street in ruins. Len was home on leave at the time. "I will not sit here," she had said to him, "waiting for the roof to fall on me and my child."

He had been as concerned for their safety as she was, although she felt he did not share most of her other concerns these days. This war had changed him. She thought that he even found it exciting in a macabre kind of way. She had lost the gentle soft-spoken man who spent his days writing book reviews and articles for the little magazines and his evenings daydreaming about his future novel. A khaki greatcoat had replaced his worn old Harris tweed jacket with the soft leather elbows, and with it he seemed to have taken on a new and coarser personality and way of talking. She had been amazed at his easy familiarity with the motley assortment of people in the air-raid shelter. He had played darts and told jokes with some quite vulgar men.

It was through one of these men that he had arranged for them to stay in this cottage. It belonged to someone she didn't even know and was not nearly far enough from London in her opinion. "Safe as houses," Len had said cheerfully on the day they'd moved in. Then he grabbed his kit-bag and overcoat and rushed off in the summer twilight to catch the train and rejoin his regiment. It was quite evident to her that houses were not safe at all any more.

That first evening she had stood at the gate watching the bats weave and swoop among the elm trees in the churchyard. Briefly it seemed to her possible that something might endure of all this, that destruction might stop somewhere short of being total. Anne was already asleep upstairs. The pure smooth curve of the railway that rimmed the valley reminded her of her own childhood when trains meant day trips to the sea, lap-rugs and picnics and fighting for the back-to-the-engine seat.

But in the first few sleepless nights she'd understood that the sealed cars that crept and clanked around the dark horizon concealed troops or hid hollow-eyed hopeless refugees on their way to the West country. The lumbering shadows she had taken for cows on that first blue evening turned out to be Ack-Ack guns, snouts raised in the corn, flanks rippled with khaki and Nile green camouflage, their deadly feed housed in the ugly Nissen hut.

She put a sunbonnet on Anne's head and walked with her into the corn. She set up her tripod. Shrouded in the black cloth, she looked out on a world of golden silky stalks that framed the serious little face: Anne on the left, the corrugated roof of the munitions hut curving over her white bonnet. To the right, a long waving line of hawthorn bushes that marked the edge of the field straggled boldly up to the lens, piercing the picture with black thorns wide-spaced on dry twigs. But the child would not stand still. Suddenly she ran across the rows of grain, ripping cornflowers out by the roots, stuffing the blue flowers into her mouth, rolling down the dusty furrow towards the camera.

"Look at me, Mummy. Look at *me.*"

Louisa shuddered at the ugly memory. She roused herself and began to wander about. The room had huddled into shadow while she'd been at the window. She touched things absently—a bonnet of Anne's that lay in the old armchair, the firescreen, the face of the dim clock in the corner of the mantelshelf. She looked closely at an old sepia photo of herself in its cameo frame. She was about six years old there, wearing a white dress and buttoned boots, her hair in a page-boy cut and a serene smile on her face.

The fierce whispering of young voices broke in on her thoughts. She went back to the window. Anne was standing in the gateway, her bandaged hands behind her back, tucked into the belt of her blue pinafore. Out in the lane stood Plessie. Her hair was awkwardly plaited and hung heavily over her shoulders.

"Go away," Anne whispered. "You can't come in." Behind her the wild

roses straggled in a half arch and the late sun glowed green on a ring of clover. "My Mummy says your nose runs."

Louisa was dreadfully shocked and ashamed. All her careful teaching of good manners had been lost on the child. Almost the first words Anne had learned were please and thank you, and she never left doors open like some children. She sat politely with her knees together and knew not to blow her nose in public. Yet now it was suddenly clear to Louisa that these were formalities performed for her benefit and that, when Anne thought she was unobserved, she behaved with all the abandon of a young animal. She felt for a moment that her child was as lost to her as her husband. She saw her life as an eternal thankless task: against all odds in a world of warfare and demolition of values, she would provide them with a decent home, and they would enter this sheltered place from time to time, thank her politely for their food, and rush away leaving their crumpled napkins on the table.

She pushed the window higher and Anne jumped guiltily. Plessie smiled nervously and said, "Hello, Mrs. Wright. I brought your Annie home."

Louisa was not pleased by the common nickname, but she felt she must set Anne an example in courtesy. "Thank you, Plessie," she said. "Do come into the kitchen."

Anne backed across the clover into the shadow of the wild roses and stood there staring at her. Louisa reached for her camera and then remembered that she hadn't reloaded it. Anne had this way of assuming theatrical poses in perfect settings. She never had to be arranged: it was almost as if she knew what was expected of her. Frequently Louisa would become aware of an absence of movement around her and, looking up, would discover the child in a startling and careless position, which was held until she put her eye to the viewfinder. Then Anne would suddenly leap to life, crying, "Look at me, Mummy."

"Come in and show Plessie your toys," she said sharply.

Anne came very slowly into the kitchen, dragging her feet, her hands still behind her back. Louisa had to pull the toy box out herself. Plessie knelt down and took out Anne's favourite doll. It was a Victorian doll that Louisa had kept in perfect condition since her own childhood. The head was made of fine china, with a wig of real hair, soft and curling.

Plessie smiled into the sweet round blue eyes of the doll. "What's her name?" she asked.

"Anne," said Anne.

"Play nicely with your guest," said Louisa. "I'm going to do some work in the darkroom. And remember what will happen if you open the door while I'm developing?"

"I'll disappear," said Anne.

"Right. The pictures won't come out."

As she shut herself in the little room and switched on the red light, she

thought that the afternoon hadn't worked out so badly after all. She didn't especially want Anne playing with Plessie, but at least it left her free to get some work done. Carefully she arranged the trays and chemicals. She couldn't afford to make any mistakes with stocks of everything getting low. To say nothing of time running out. She stacked the paper neatly and checked that her tweezers and bulldog clips were in the right place. She liked working in the dark.

After a while she heard Plessie's voice. It sounded strident and quarrelsome. I knew it, she thought. As soon as you let these people in they cause trouble. Give them any sort of encouragement and they're all over you. She gave her attention firmly to unrolling the film from the spool.

Suddenly the door flew open and the late low sun flooded the room.

"Shut the door," she screamed, but Anne stood there stiffly as if she hadn't heard.

"She broke my doll," she said, barely moving her lips.

And then Plessie was in the doorway too. "I didn't, Mrs. Wright," she sobbed. "She did it herself."

Louisa threw the film down on the bench and marched towards the door. Plessie fell back before her in terror, gulping and wiping her face on her sleeve, but Anne didn't flinch. She just flattened herself against the doorpost and turned her head rigidly as Louisa surveyed the scene in the kitchen.

On the floor lay the severed parts of the doll. The head was turned to one side, the pretty face slashed with the marks of scissors. One arm was flung halfway across the room and a foot dangled loosely in its satin slipper. The cloth body had been stabbed over and over with the scissors and sawdust was running out in a slow pool on the linoleum.

"Did you do this?" cried Louisa, grabbing Plessie by the shoulders and shaking her furiously.

"Cross my heart and hope to die!" wailed the girl, and her teeth chattered in her head. "She did it herself. I seen her. She broke it all up with the scissors."

"It was that ugly one," said Anne.

She was posed exquisitely in the darkroom doorway so the angled sun shone copper in her hair and left half her face in shadow. Perfect, thought Louisa: if only I could catch her just like that.

Robert Gibbs

LIKE A BRIGHT RAIN IN A CLOUD

i

The cenotaph's a white shaft behind old
willow leaves still hanging on
A drum thuds and brasses faint on

O Valiant Hearts You can see dark
coats and tams even from here the foot
of my street where gun platoons from the

base downriver get ready to offer their
thunder after two minutes' silence
Three trucks bring in two cannon twenty-one

crated shells and crews six to each Corporals
and lance corporals ready their guns check
elevation then blast alternately

Number-one gun FIRE Number-two gun FIRE
until the count's full the salute all saluted
Gray paper like what's inside a firecracker

rags up as echoes echo Shell cases release
and brimstone taints the air with a fine
taste gunmetal gray this cold forenoon

ii

Something about war something about the way
war calls out of the dark behind me the
Great War something in it gleams

still firepower brightens pitted fields
Not my war Not the one I ranked my lead
soldiers for later learned to sling

a rifle for fire at a target But the
Great War Charlie Beesley's war Charlie
gassed in it his stomach taken out

Allan MacInnes's Allan whose Daisy made a
floorlamp out of his rifle and flanked his
soldier's face with burntout shells

Peter's war Peter Dubeau I visited more than once
In the DVA hospital with its single and double
amputees and rows of sour beds

The Great War not mine with its strutting
punies but the Kaiser's spike-helmeted
the war Armistice Day was made for

Cloth poppies on dark greatcoats cheeks
nipped red tipped round to the hooded mourner
taking the salute feet faltering into the

left-right-left once they knew too well
And eyes? Faded and bloodshot But full of it
Lit with its bugle bray its bright rain

iii

My own war came on Sunday afternoon Paperboys
hollered it uptown as Dad Don Raymond and I
walked home from Sunday School We'd seen

it coming of course In a man's open mouth
that pushed his brush into his nose the mouth
my mother called that old German devil's

We'd seen the Zeppelin fly over our backyard

and blurred bombflowers under headlines
Spain China Abyssinia

This was my war The one I played spitfires to
The one I saluted with stiff-arm salutes
Hitler Mussolini Salvation Army

The one my brother saluted to when he stood
in the kitchen and announced I'm going
to Fredericton tomorrow I joined up

The one my mother saluted with pressed-in lips
as she flung the supper dishes on and said
Donald you foolish boy you foolish boy

iv

The newyear's sun gleams on crust The cat
sleeps on the highbacked chair like a lion
on a shield My fist shadows this page

moving across it The news has been on
all night all morning My clock squawks
the hour all but run down There's

someone behind me darkcoated I must
wind the clock hours and half-hours to be
struck into one spring the house heartbeat

of seconds into the other all held in with
whatever shadows will shadow them forecast
like a bright rain in a cloud

INHERITANCE

Although there are nettles here, and thorns,
you will not be stung. Trust me. I've something
to show you made from twigs, bird-spittle, down
and journeyings in all weathers.
See how easily your hand covers
the nest and its eggs. How weightless they are.
Your fingernail, so very much smaller than mine,
can trace the delicate shell's blue veins
until they crack apart, letting silence
spill into your hand. There is a sense
of separation almost too great to bear
—and suddenly you long to crush all colour
from these pale blue eggs, for in their brief
fragility you recognize the grief
and the overwhelming tenderness you feel.
This is your inheritance:
your fist clenched on yolk and broken shell,
on fragments of an unfamiliar tense.

ARGENTINA 1978

A ship lies gasping in the cupboard:
its crew disturbs my sleep night after night
with their demands to put to sea.

—But no sooner do I close my eyes
and start imagining to myself the long ball
from Bruce Rioch that I take past one man, side-
flick past a second and am lining up for a Peter Lorimer-
rocket-postage-stamp in the top right hand corner
while the crowd goes wild, wild, wild
—when from behind the terraces I hear the opening strains
of the first of that evening's many sea-shanties.

I try to ignore it, and tell myself that back home
all Scotland's sitting boozed and bunnetted in front of the TV,
watching me with only the goalie to beat
and the World Cup as good as on the mantelpiece.

—But already the crowd's been infiltrated;
already some of them
(I suspect the ones with eye-patches,
and anchors over their shoulders)
have started singing "Hearts of Oak"
in counterpoint to the crowd's roar
—and I see the goal-posts and netting sway gently
in an easterly breeze.

I try to ignore it for the ball's still at my feet
and I tell myself that back home
all Scotland's standing on the sofas and the sideboards
cheering themselves tartan.

—But already the Easterly has freshened up,
the goal-posts are listing slightly

and, as the netting billows, are pulling away from the terraces
where *everyone's* now wearing an eye-patch
and has an anchor over his shoulder
—some of them are even watching the game through telescopes!

I try to ignore them and line up the ball for the big one,
the one that's going to be the one and only,
the most beautiful thing to come out of Scotland
since McEwan's Export,
the one they'll action-replay till the film falls apart.

The crowd gives out with "Steady boys, steady!"
I try to ignore it
—the ball turns into a pink bobbing marker-buoy!
I try to ignore it
—the goals are towing the terraces of shantying sailors
out to sea!
I try to ignore it:
Scotland's not going to be robbed, not this time!

Then suddenly I am alone in Argentina.
No crowd, no ball, no goals, no cup.
The grass is turning to sea-water
—and it's a long swim home!

Bert Almon

POEMS FOR A RUSSIAN PRINCESS

1

Where I come from,
lint picked off someone's garment
can be surrendered for a kiss.
You've worn your blue dress today,
you're full of static,
and I came, my pockets full of lint,
ready to plant it on you,
when all I have to do
is pick you threadbare, threadbare.

2

What words did you hear
out of my confusion?
Ruthless, relentless.
I meant ruthless
like March sun on a snowbank,
relentless, like the part you took
in an old play: Strength.
Is there a role for me,
Folly, perhaps, or Carelessness,
or Apology in his shabby costume?

3

And here's one of my braver speeches:

I'm a few grains of sleep in your eyes
the residue of a night of strange dreams
There, you've wiped them away

4

The inflections of Greek verbs and nouns
are posted on notecards over the sink
so that you can drill yourself on grammar
while handling wet dishes. The blue ink
has blurred in places where the water splashed.
I'm only a scholar of the modern tongues:
what have I been learning by heart? Lessons
of your bed upstairs: the conjugation of sighs,
the sweet declensions of the pronouns *you* and *I*.

5

I want to find the spots
where you dab your perfume
I seek them out like a bee
drifting over morning roses
Here, and here, yes
but if there are others
I'll never find them
with the whole world
turning to fragrance
as I skim your white horizons

THE COUNTRY I WAS BORN IN WAS RULED BY KINGS

The country I was born in was ruled by Kings.
They stood in back, in front and on either side of me,
as I bent over my schoolbooks; one was fat and wore
    a beard,
another was thin and wore a beard, yet another
    was thin and beardless.
All three wore red coats with blue sashes and
    a Milky Way of medals—
I saw the faces of the same men on the coins
    with which I bought Cracker Jack.

This was long ago, you must remember, before
    pictures lost their magic,
before television, before I had ever seen a
    movie,
in a time and place where comic books were so
    rare
that they seemed like a continuation of the
    Bible,
which also contained pictures; I thought of
    Captain Marvel
in the same breath with David and Goliath.
    Every picture was a vision
sent by God; my mother's Kodak, with its black
    snout,
was a thing of mystery: once I unwound a film,
in search of the pictures inside it, and found
    nothing.
It was not merely the pictures; every morning
we sang, "God Save the King", and another hymn,
such as "Jesus Loves Me", Nobody ever said
we belonged to God and the King; and there was no
    need to say it;

they were there, as our grandparents were there:
    nobody had to say,
this is your grandmother, this is your grandfather;
    we had always known it.
To put it another way, we no more believed in
    Kings
than we believed in Uncles; there was a blood
    relationship
involved, and like any other blood relationship,
it was nothing to make a fuss about, yet something
that nothing could alter. My King is long since dead.
Still, as a child of the 1940s,
I think I know exactly what my ancestors
meant when they inscribed upon those monuments,
the words, "For King and Country."

HE ATTEMPTS TO LOVE HIS NEIGHBOURS

My neighbours do not wish to be loved.
They have made it clear that they prefer to
go peacefully
about their business and want me to do the same.
This ought not to surprise me as it does;
I ought to know by now that most people have a
hundred things
they would rather do than have me love them.

There is television, for instance; the truth
is that almost everybody,
given the choice between being loved and
watching TV,
would choose the latter. Love interrupts
dinner,
interferes with mowing the lawn, washing
the car,
or walking the dog. Love is a telephone
ringing or a doorbell
waking you moments after you've finally
succeeded in getting to sleep.

So we must be careful, those of us who were
born with
the wrong number of fingers or the gift
of loving; we must do our best to behave
like normal members of society and not make
nuisances
of ourselves; otherwise it could go hard
with us.
It is better to bite back your tears,
swallow your laughter,
and learn to fake the mildly self-depreciating
titter

favoured by the bourgeoisie
than to be left entirely alone, as you will be,
if your disconformity embarrasses

your neighbours; I wish I didn't keep forgetting
that.

WIVES SEE

In the room where I live, a clarity I can't know.
My husband comes over & slumps in my chair, his face cut,
glass in his eye,
holding the divorce paper blindly, trying to give it back to me.
I broke a glass, he says.
What can you see in my eye?
& I look & see nothing, but shine the lamp helpfully
into his red & swollen eye;
thru the white I can see its muscle pulling,
small fibres enclosing the cone of vision,
colour & darkness,
fibres roped back to the sighted brain,
filaments of sense, watery,
an eye causing
this much pain to its body
Small man in whose eye there is nothing of our marriage,
nothing husband,
nothing safe
The man who has drunk everything
& breaks the glass, & a small bit flies up into his eye

The next day he is at the house of his wife to whom he is not
  married,
asking her, stooped in the chair.
& what is it
that makes this necessary,
his solemnity that even now is no charade?
Go to Emergency, I tell him, wondering
why does he come to me with this hurting?
What is it exactly
that wives see?

GROCERIES

Women in their clothes with their hard
hurting sunburnt backs
bent over the groceries
Small figures on the lawn breathing inwardly
The wall sunlit, moss dying off now
Wife in the room waiting for the breakthrough,
the dinner stew
to cook itself better

The woman in the street last night, head beaten with a pipe,
her arms held without direction
The anguish of her mouth's wet noise
inside her brain,
windows empty with her cry
her bare feet corroded
Caught up at last by neighbours, the white ambulant glow
The physical disobedience of the head
jarred by metal
Reaction of the eye & retina to light, to speech
the breakthrough
You aren't wearing shoes, the cop said to her
I got away, she said

As if anyone knows anyone else
As if we can cook anything more
As if we can eat again
without concussion, the thump the pipe makes
in the wall at night,
its groan & shudder
Our bodies bent among the groceries, the room lit up
Deafening

John Barton

TWO SKETCHES OF SAN FRANCISCO

I Light And Dark

After Father's death I found myself
pursuing art for the first time
as an artist, the School jammed
into a low room over Pine Street Market.
Pure vegetable, the air breathing
through the floorboards enveloped me
in leaves of green and tender being.

From above came warmth. A window
in the ceiling embraced the sun,
its brush sweeping across the room,
brightness changing with the season.
Underneath I worked, sketching fruit
bought below and reaping growth.
Not wanting love, my heart ripened.

Such an unusual scent freedom has;
one day I found mine wholly rotted.
My sisters came to visit for a year,
bringing rain. Brother Richard followed,
dying, needing warmth. Life stilled,
its half-guessed-at fruits rearranged.
The rooms of my young body darkened.

II Dark And Light

Twenty-five years later I took rooms
across the Bay, worked in Chinatown
painting lanterns for a hotel ballroom.
Money earned chalked up with money saved,
I managed an eight month stay, my life

rearranged, Hill-House boarded up,
some tenants wintering with my sisters.

The change in climate I rejoiced in,
sketched a little, shopped, my basket
laden with strange Chinese pastries,
dried black mushrooms, passion fruit.
For days an orchid flamed in my window,
the petals soon loosened by the wind,
privates defrocked, stamens missing.

One day, walking near Union Square,
I chanced on an old beau, Mayo Paddon.
I spotted his name engraved on a brass
plate mounted at his office entrance.
A youth who shared with me a love
for God, he followed me to England
twenty years before, pleading marriage.

The man I met across his desk dropped
moist eyes, his dessicated fingers spread
on the blotter like stilled fan blades.
His voice cut my flesh. I felt godless,
a grape parched on the vine. He said
his wife had left him. I requested car
fare, my cash dissipated at the Market.

His love letters I burned years before.
Writing London, he hoped life without him
wasn't barren. The man would have wizened
me till my spirit hardened. Each Christmas
I received his greetings, the card unsigned.
I put down my brush, turn off the light,
smell the everlasting pressed inside.

Susan Yarrow

ABOUT THE WOMAN

She is not hairy: white and hairless as an egg. And her flesh is thin: eggshell, no meat.

She eats her vegetables with a stainless
steel fork.

Flies buzz near her plate; honeybees buzz near her
heart.

She is attracted to flowers too. If she stands on a flower
in a certain way, it may become fossilized, if conditions are
right for it.

Women are light-boned as robins.

They have the shapes of sapling trees and apples and rivers and
cherries concealed on their persons.

Many think they have these things as possessions and are
unwilling; this is not true.

A woman has these things as gifts and if it is fruit, she is ready.

Katherine Soniat

HARP/DESIRE

Reach and you set this whole harp
to music,
even its carved gilt grapes
let summer's vineyard spill through them.

Feel the harp strings, tight,
then your own pale, cool hands
rising and falling: silvered fish
bridging the gaps, float like underwater hair
till it's all sea rocks and clear-voiced women
drawing you closer, nearer than Odysseus
ever dreamed of coming.

Stroke each chord like wind
running through rigging, falling away,
only to rise again with more
damp sea smells and deep song.

Heather Spears

THE BLIND GIRL

Coming into this strange house
she suddenly sings, and her voice
is like a sheet shaken out, a length of cloth
to touch off walls, then fall in folds with
the almost weightless texture of cloth
immersed in movement.

And I remember
after country summers
returning to red rowan berries
on the 34th Avenue trees, and pushing
inside to be first to shout in the hall—
and then listen
to its shuddery, ripe containment.

Now she walks forward, confident
in the shimmering space, to greet me,
we are the same after all—
both of us sang in the blind light
before we were born.

Anne Chamberlain

The Judge and Me

I'm gonna put on my grey dress, that Mom made over for me, and my pearls that look like real with the matching earrings, and the blue velvet hat from Missus Warrington, and I can take my umbrella. It's raining. I'll bring Junior with me, cause he knowed Judge Owens too. Junior won't remember much about him, memory isn't where Junior's strong, but he oughta be along. He'd never been to a Baptist funeral, and he'll like the music. We'll sneak into the back, where no one much will see us. But Judge Owens, he's dead, he'll know we're there. He always knowed everything about us, that sonofabitch. He knowed us better than most people in Maranon.

Mean in every bone in his body, Judge Owens was. Looked down at me that first time, twenty-eight and one half years ago (I gotta good memory, I count in my head), and knowed me then, knowed me right off.

"Mae," he says, "Mae Greenow," and his little eyes, sharp and pointed like a ferret's, is laughing while his mouth scowls.

"That's me, Judge," I answers sharp, and standing tall. I always stand up straight afore the bench, even if my head is splitting and maybe one eye black from John's bad temper, and a tooth loose maybe, I stand up and face the man.

"Drunk and disorderly," says the Judge, rustling papers; he plays with papers like he don't know what's on them, "how do you plead, Mae?"

"I don't plead nothing," I tell him loud and clear, "I was on my own front porch with my own folks, John and Junior and Helen Mae and Mom, she come over with the Greek and this wine and we was having a quiet party on my own front porch—"

"How do you plead, Mae?" Judge Owen interrupts, "guilty or not guilty?"

"It was nobody's business but our own, John losing his temper, he's my man, I won't badmouth him to you or in this court, and if that gawdamn Reeny Delacort haddena called the law, there wouldena been no trouble and—"

"State your plea!" He pounds the gavel. Crack! He does love that

hammer. Well, I know where I am. The two cops, Bub Johnson and Lee Reckard, are right here behind me, ready to open their big mouths and blab. Lee growed up in the house next to me on River Street and he got me down behind the garage one time when we was little and tried to, but that don't cut no ice with him now. He'll tell. How Reeny Delacort called about the noise we was making, which wasn't so much as a mouse squeak compared with what she does on a Sattiday night, the men and all, but Lee will tell and Bub will back him up.

John hadden done nothing but hit me, cause of the frog-hunting, for which you coulden blame him, I hadden oughta gone with Jimmy Mack, not frog-hunting or anything, and nobody could blame my John. And I was about through my yelling and we woulda patched things up, with Mom and the Greek laughing and teasing us along. Then come the cop car like a big black cockroach, crawling up to the curb. It just made John see red, that car; he has a bad temper, my John. Outta the car and up our steps they stomped, Lee and Bub, swinging them clubs, and the shit hit the fan.

I know the law and I know Judge Owens, so mean he'd eat his own baby for Thanksgiving dinner, stuffed and all. Say "not guilty" and ask for it, they'll give me a lawyer and a trial, twelve good men and true, but Lee and Bub will blab away, Reeny Delacort too, and Captain Davis, for when they hauled us in, and Gawd knows how many more. Thirty days I might get, *and* the fine. The food's been awful in the jail since Missus Denworth died.

"Guilty," I says, loud and plain.

He don't pronounce sentence right away. He'd torture a gar on the line, without no plan of bringing it in and eating it. He'd cut off frog legs just to watch them squirming, and then throw them away. He rustles the papers and scowls big, but all the time grinning in those little pointed eyes.

"This is not your first offense, Mae Greenow."

"You're telling me!" That gets a laugh. People come into the courtroom just to watch and entertain themselves. I'm a star in that courtroom.

"Order!" The Judge cracks the gavel. "I fail to see the humor in this." He looks hard and threatening at the audience.

"Me too," I says, "I ain't breaking no ribs laughing."

"Fifty dollars fine," he draws a deep breath, leans over the bench, and bores his eyes into mine, "and don't let me see you or your husband in here again."

"Thank you," I'm always polite. Mean as a blacksnake, Judge Owens, but I respect him. He knows his law.

That was twenty-eight and one half years ago, right after he took the bench. Judge Owens and me, our paths have crossed maybe a hundred times. My memory counts good, but I lost track a while back. I never

held nothing against him. A man can't help the way he's made, and the Judge's meanness was like my John's bad temper. It was born and growed in him, and was natural as a catfish's spikes. He coulden no more help it than I could help going out with Jimmy Mack, when he come sneaking around, laughing and singing and sweet-talking, rat that he was, my Jimmy. The Judge wasn't just mean on the bench. When other people, Mom and Helen Mae and John cussed him out, I'd go right along with them, call him a sonofabitch too. But I always made plain that he didden just pick on folks in trouble with the law, he was as bad in his own home. I know. I worked there.

My job at his house starts after John has the willies. He drinks too much of the Greek's wine, which is the Greek's fault, he's always bringing it over. He takes it from his own restaurant, where he and Mom work and live together in an apartment up over it; they're not exactly married but about the same. They like to sit on our front porch and pour down this red stuff, night and day, for breakfast too.

This one afternoon they turn up early, we hadden ate our supper yet. It's John's day off, he's on the sanitation truck then, earning good money and fulla beans. We settle down to celebrate, laughing and sipping away, that wine goes down sneaky smooth. 'Round about six o'clock I fix beans and franks for Junior and Helen Mae; resta us don't eat, a mistake. John and the Greek, they get into a contest, how much they can drink. Old Greek's been in training all these years, growed up on wine, that man, and he goes back to his restaurant and brings us two more fifths, five in all, maybe six. Four in the morning, John can't go to work. Mom and the Greek haul off, grinning all over their faces. John stumbles into the house and falls on the parlor floor and lies there with his bottle, like a baby nursing away.

"John," I says later, "you'll lose your job, and that gawdamn Reeny Delacort'll be calling the cops."

But he calls me names he don't really mean, and laughs. By this time he's stopped sipping, probably just can't hold no more, this is also bad.

Next I see his eyes get that stare and his hands begin to wave and clutch like a drowning man's. He starts crawling around the floor, grabbing at the walls. So I know willies are nearly with him, and we don't have much time. I call Helen Mae, she's fourteen then, and put on her clothes and I get Junior outta bed and dress him too and tell them to go straight to their Grammaw's and stay there till I come for them. It serves Mom right.

I try to get some more wine down John. He knocks it away and breaks the bottle all over my floor. "They're after me!" He screams and bats the air. He's six foot and weighs 210 and was a rassler; once he beat Bull Jones at the carnival. "Help me, Mae!" he yells, "migawd, get'em out!" He jumps up sudden and heists the table and throws it through the window. It's the oak table Missus Warrington give me. It makes a big noise.

Then he thinks *I'm* onea them, whatever they are, and he grabs up a chair and starts for me, like a lion tamer, and I run out and slam the door and push the hatrack against it. It's a black hatrack with a long mirror, what Missus Evans give me. I hear him stomping and ranting and howling "They'll get me!", and my heart goes out to my poor John, seeing things what isn't there, much worse than things what is. It's the Greek's fault. Pretty soon I hear a great crash and the whole house shivers and lo and behold, he's gone out the window and is tearing down McCready Street. He's big but can run, my John, like a polar bear.

That time, I gotta admit, I'm glad Reeny Delacort phones the cops. Couldna done it myself, not even if we had a phone, but my John needs help.

While John is getting dried out in the jail, they haul me up in court and say I been drinking too. I haven't done a thing to no one, but the wine is in me and on my breath and Judge Owens, he leans forward and *sniffs* and says: "Mae Greenow."

"I had some, yes, Judge," I answers honestly, "but not a drop since four o'clock this morning."

"Guilty or not guilty?" He's chuckling behind his eyes, but his mouth is set grim, like a toad's.

"I wasn't drunk when they brought me in and I'm not now."

"You plead not guilty then?"

"I do, your honor." I stand straight as a telephone pole and I face him with no trouble. Because, whatever was in me the night afore, it'd been sweated out when John got the willies, and I was sober as a tombstone when they picked me up. Then the two cops, Lee Reckard being one of them, they testify how they found me, racing down McCready Street after John.

"He'da jumped in the river," I says, "and he's a good swimmer but The Shawnee's high, he coulda drowned hisself dead, and I was chasing to save my husband's life for I won't deny it, Judge, to you nor nobody in this courtroom, my man he'd had a drop too much."

This gets a laugh. People pay a lotta attention to me in that courtroom.

"Mae," says the Judge, "I'm going to find you not guilty. But will you do me a favor, Mae? Will you and your husband do all of us a favor? Will you do the city of Maranon a favor?"

"Be happy to, Judge, anything you ask." I smile at him, nicely, not sassy, "if it ain't too much."

"Stay away from that cheap wine, Mae. For your sake. For your children's sake and," he almost grins, "for the sake of our over-worked police department."

"Judge," I mean every word of this, "I hate the smella the stuff!"

"Good!" He raps the gavel, "case dismissed."

John and I don't touch it for four months and a half, and during that

time I clean house twice a week for Judge and Missus Owens. It's pure accident I go there, the employment agency sends me, and that first day I do have some queazy feelings about even setting foot in his honor's home. But Missus Owens don't know nothing, she isn't the kind to keep up with her husband's doings, in court or elsewhere, she hires me right off. And the Judge don't bat an eye when he comes home and finds me mopping the kitchen floor. He just takes off his hat and politely says, "Good afternoon, Mrs. Greenow," and "Good afternoon, Judge," I answers, as if we'd never faced each other in that courtroom, but maybe had met in nicer ways.

Missus Owens is a boney, high-faluting lady, who trails around in fancy pajamas, talking slow. She don't give orders outright.

"Mae," she whines, "you might just do the bathroom now, if you don't mind."

Or: "Mae, could you manage to polish the silver before you leave, it's in such bad shape."

I like snappy women, like Missus Warrington, what keep you busy and won't take any backtalk. Missus Owens, she's just too easy; lotsa times she don't seem to know she has a cleaning woman, and she isn't about to care about getting her money's worth. Maybe she's tired, from being married to that blacksnake. He's always trying to fight with her and the poor thing, she don't have the gumption to fight back.

"Olivia!" He barks, right after he gets home, "what's on the agenda for tonight?"

Maybe she's deaf. He has to ask her everything twice.

"Olivia. I said—what are our plans for tonight?"

"Plans, Hansford?" She drawls, like half asleep, "I haven't any plans."

"Didn't you tell me the McHaneys were coming over?"

"Did I?" She yawns, "when? I don't remember saying anything about the McHaneys."

"Olivia. I saw Don McHaney downtown today, and he said—"

"But why did you ask me, if you knew?"

There's no getting a good fight outta that woman. The Judge tries every way he can. He yells about the food and the housekeeping and the grass not being cut and the way she hardly ever dresses, just slinks around in them fancy pajamas and how she never reads the paper or even watches TV and takes too many of them pills. But fight? She only yawns and whines: "Don't let's talk about it now." Mean! He sometimes acts like he wants to slap her. And he never laughs at home, inside his eyes or healthy loud. I'd feel sorry for him, if he wasn't such a sonofabitch hisself.

Missus Owens never pitches right in and works alongside me, and sometimes she's plain too lazy to tell me what to do. I can't stand laying around, so I go ahead and find a job, and this is like as not to be the silver. She has scads of it, pitchers and candlesticks, bread plates and

fruit baskets, salt and pepper shakers and water coasters and bowls you don't know what they're for. Some of it setting out on the sideboard in the dining room, and some on shelves behind glass doors. There's lots she just keeps hidden in the drawers, all done up in their felt bags with the strings drawn, her or nobody not ever seeing them or caring about them either; just going to waste, that silver. I do fancy it, and that is my undoing.

But afore this, my undoing, I mean, I'm polishing it all one day when Junior has one of his spells. Mom calls me on the phone in the Greek's restaurant, she's been keeping Junior in her apartment while I work. Junior never goes to school, his memory is a weakness.

"Yuh come git him," Mom says, "he's in the closet and he won't come out." Mom gets scared by his spells. Once he stayed in for almost two days, but it was partly her fault. She pestered him.

The Judge is home right then. When I explain why I have to quit early, he says he'll drive me. Missus Owens, she just yawns and mumbles something like "what a shame."

We take off in the big caddy, me in the seat beside the Judge, riding like a lady, and he asks:

"How many children do you have, Mrs. Greenow?"

I tell him nine and give their names and ages.

"How come I didn't know that?" says the Judge, and then real quick, like an apology, "well, no reason why I should."

I tell him only Junior and Helen Mae are at home. Mickey is with the traveling carnival and Sandra got married when she was fourteen and is in Kentucky with her man and two babies, I'm a grammaw, only thirty-nine.

"That's four," the Judge smiles, social-like. We're going straight down Birchwood Avenue, for all the town to see, me and Judge Owens in the caddy.

I tell him the others, Danny, Lena, Carl, Major, and Baby Sue, they are in the cemetery. Danny's oldest, will be eighteen next month, and Baby Sue, she'll have her third birthday in October. She has curly hair. They all went natural and didden suffer much, except for Major, he drowned in The Shawnee. His daddy whopped him but he would run there, afore he could swim. He's eleven.

"Mae," the Judge uses my first name, but not his courtroom voice, just chatty, "you've had a lot of trouble."

"Yes," I says, "but them nine children never give me a bitta real heartache, from anything they done or didden do, not a onea them."

Then he asks me about Junior, and can the doctor help him. I mention the weakness, what keeps him outta school. Except for when he goes to closets or wakes up sudden and don't know where he is, he's peaceful as a kitten. He likes music and sometimes dances, gets up by hisself and goes on like a show star without no audience but what he may be seeing.

"There might be a place, a school away, where Junior could get some education." The Judge sounds a little bit like he's on the bench and me in fronta him; I straighten up and sit tall. Somma them ladies, social workers, had come around and said the same thing to us; nosey parkers.

"There ain't no place like home," I answers loud and clear. The Judge nods.

We're sailing down River Street now and on the corner, outside the Brass Bell, there's Jimmy Mack hanging around, probably he's had his first beer for the day and is counting money for the next. He sees the caddy and me in it, and I can't help waving, and his head jerks up and his big eyes stare; he won't forget his Mae beside the Judge.

Then we're in front of the restaurant and the Judge says: "Now Mae, will you be needing anyone?" and I say "No thank you" and quick get out, for he can be mean as a bobcat when the law gets into the picture; he'd like as not wanta take charge of Junior, and that's my job, I'm his mother. The Judge can't know much about these things; he and Missus Owens got nonea their own. She was maybe too lazy, or him too mean.

Now it's four months and a half at Judge Owens' house afore I do it. You know I like things. The other ladies, Missus Warrington and Missus Evans and the others, more even than I can remember, sometimes give me what they have no use for. Like the big table that went out the window, we patched it up, and the black hatrack with the mirror in it. Dresses, summa them almost new, and hats and purses, one with a compact fitted in it, and they give me things for my kitchen like the old percolator when Missus Orne got a new one and once a whole set of dishes, Missus Evans said she just didden have no more room for them. That little house on McCready Street is the best furnished in the block; we got more than we can use, and we pile somea it for safekeeping in the basement; we sell some too to the secondhand dealer, the ladies say this is all right. Whatever we want to do, it's our business. What they give me is mine. Missus Owens, she plain never hands over nothing; she don't hear when I kinda hint. "What are we gonna do with this old frying pan?" I say, "ain't no room for it, now you got the new set, and two others besides." She yawns and murmurs, "Oh put it somewhere. Just put it." Once I'm washing cheese glasses, the little kind you can use after the cheese is all ate up, and I can't help thinking how handy they would be for us, Junior breaking so much, and I says: "Missus Owens, you got morea these cheap old glasses than you got a place for, see," and I points to the top shelf in the kitchen fulla cabinets. But she only says, "so I have," and smiles. Not a mean smile, not enough spunk to it. But nasty nice, anyhow.

One afternoon she's upstairs, snoozing away, with that little bottlea white pills beside her, and I'm doing the silver like usual. I'm good at this; I use paste polish and a toothbrush for the curlicues and I rub hard; it shines like sunlight when I'm done. The pitcher and the tea set, the big

fruit bowl and the bread plate, the candlesticks and the serving tray, all the pieces that set out on the sideboard are finished and bright in that dark old dining room. The ones behind the glass doors I do next, another shape pitcher and a cake platter and a little cup, it coulda been the Judge's when he was a baby, hard to picture, that, and water coasters, glass bottoms with silver sides. Then I start diving into the drawers, pulling out the felt sacks and untying them, the little plates and the six round spoons and that pretty basket, the things she never uses, never sees, outta them old sacks I take them, I won't neglect these things. They're not very dirty, the sacks are supposed to keep them bright, but some air has sneaked in, and anyway, I like to polish silver. I'm working away in this dark room in this big house, with all its space and no children to fill it and none in the cemetery neither, and suddenly I don't think, I *know* what I'm gonna do. These poor little pieces don't even have no lettering on them. She won't miss them. She don't even know they're there.

I don't take much. Only the little plate, what has flowers around the edge, and isn't good for nothing really but setting out for show. Once I ask Missus Owens what it's for and she looks surprised-like and says, "Oh, I don't know, it must have been a wedding present. Oh, I suppose for calling cards." Calling cards! Never hearda the things, and I don't think she ever used them. The little plate and the six round spoons, too small for soup, but kinda cute, and the big spoon and fork for salads, she has two other sets she likes better, and the basket, yes, the basket. It's not big, about a saucer size, and it has a handle and lacey sides, like wicker, and it coulda held candy or plastic posies like you buy in the dime store, but she never set it out. Last I take the fruit spoon, it's so tiny and has curlicues on its handle and looks so left alone in its felt sack without the salad set, which I'd already decided on. I put them in the shopping bag that I always bring along when I go cleaning. I walk right out the door with them. It's so easy I could cry.

The trouble comes when I get home and don't know what to do with them. First I hide them in the victrola cabinet, my usual place for things I'd rather people don't notice. It's a old wind-up machine, what Missus Jackson give me when she broke up her home and it don't work, but is the finest piece of furniture we have. Mahogany. It's in our front hall, across from the hatrack, so people see when they come to visit, or when they pass on the street, summers, and can look through our screen door. They see our mahogany victrola, which I keep nicely polished, but nobody thinks to look inside it. I put the silver in the shelves where Missus Jackson kept her records and I stuff old pillow slips around it. But it don't do me or anyone no good that way, and after all, it is for show. It is for admiration. I keep thinking about it, hiding, just the way it was at Missus Owens; it don't seem right. And now I can't go back to Missus Owens, I can't bring myself to show my face in that house. So I phone

from the Greek's and tell her I have the flu, and that flu will have to go on and on.

I lose eight dollars every day I don't work there. You see, that silver costs me plenty. In a way, I'm paying for it.

Two days they lie wrapped in them dirty pillow slips. The plate and the six spoons, the salad set and the little fruit spoon and the basket, yes, the basket. Then I can't stand it no longer and I take them out and set them where they should be, on top of the victrola. Room for alla them, lined up and shining on that black mahogany. It's like a hallway on Birchwood Avenue; our house is the finest furnished on McCready Street.

John, like a man, don't notice much. But he sees this, when he comes in from his shift on the sanitation truck, and he whistles: "Gawdamn," he says, "gawdamn, Mae, where'd you come by it?" I tell him quick that Missus Evans give it to me. He picks up somea the pieces, the plate and the basket, and then he gives me the hard look he sometimes gives about Jimmy Mack.

"Yuh sure," he asks, "yuh sure she *give* them to yuh?"

"They ain't sterling," I lies clear, staring him in the eye, "they're just imitation." That's the way to lie to John.

Helen Mae, she's fourteen then, and don't pay no heed to anything but boys. She only says, "Jeez, Mom, they're purty," and waltzes by. Boys is all for her. I worry more about Mom and the Greek. He'll know, being in the restaurant business. But it happens they don't come by that night or the next. Junior don't ask questions. He plain and simple loves the silver. Like me. He stands in fronta it, smiling big, and wants to touch. I have to take his hands away, he might break the basket without meaning to. He's strong.

That night I sit in the parlor, thinking about it, doing nothing else. John's mad at the TV, trying to get a ball game, he kicks it and stomps out, I don't care. Helen Mae is gallivanting somewheres she shoulden be, she's on probation and I can't keep no controla her right now, the age she is, it's natural. Rent's two months overdue, I keep track what we owe, and Mister Ames'll come cussing around like he always does and I don't have much money now, I miss Missus Owens' pay. I got a pain in my insides, the doctor says has to be taken out someday, but I won't go to no hospital, they kill you in them places. I sit here, the parlor door is open, and I'm seeing that silver on the victrola, the little plate with the flowers, the round spoons, the salad set, the tiny fruit spoon with its curlicues, the basket. It's like being drunk, but better.

All night I see the silver in my sleep. I wake up once and think it's a dream and walk downstairs and turn on the light and there it is. Next morning I go out and buy myself some paste polish and take a rag and a old toothbrush and shine it up. It don't need it yet, but I like the work.

That day I'm just too happy. I sing and jabber to myself like a crazy

*person or someone in love. Now John, it's his day off, he sees I'm differ-*ent. He can't know why, he can't understand it's only the silver, he thinks something else. He starts following me around, that look in his eye, and he says:

"Yuh been out with Jimmy Mack."

It don't matter what I tell him. When he gets Jimmy on his mind, he thinks the worst. He may be right or wrong, he don't listen to a word I say, and you can't blame the man. Not about Jimmy Mack.

"I know when you done it," he snarls, prowling after me around the house, "it was last night after I went out. You saw Jimmy Mack."

"I never laid eyes on that little rat in six months," I tell him, which is practically true.

"Yuh was mad at me cause I kicked the TV and run out on yuh," he comes close, balling up his fist, and I know I'm in for one unless I do something fast. So I can't tell him the truth about the silver, and I can't thinka nothing but wine. Sometimes wine puts him in a good mood, sometimes not. I reach under the kitchen sink for my purse and have enough and give him two dollars and say, "It's your day off, let's have some," and he don't need no urging. It was always me was strong about our resolution.

He brings two fifths, which wouldna been too much in our drinking days. But we hadden touched it for four months and a half, not since he'd had the willies. Then Mom and the Greek don't come over, downright unusuala them, two nights in a row, and there's no one but the twoa us to drink it. We get through the first fifth in fine shape, and John is saying, "let's go to bed," and I am wanting to wait 'till Junior dozes off, he listens outside the door and once come in when we forgot about him, and John says, "the hell with Junior, let's go upstairs," and he's reaching for the second fifth when Reeny Delacort walks in.

Walks in, mind you, without so much as knocking and I know, the moment I lays eyes on her, she's spotted the silver. She's seen it through the screen door while she was passing by. Nosey parker.

"Hello Mae," she says, sweet as syrup, "hello John, I was setting over there not doing nothing and it come to me you two was setting here and I thought to myself," she has a bottle with her, hard stuff, and she brings it out from behind her back, "we'll have us a nip together."

She's no friend of ours. We know for a fact she's phoned the police more than a few times, just to raise hell, and many's the day we've wished she'd pack up and move outta our nice neighborhood, nice except for her, that is. But John and me, we're polite people, and when she offers us that drink we take it, we pass the pint around and sip a little outta it. Then we tell some jokes and have some laughs and I'm beginning to think it's a good party after all when Reeny smiles sneaky and says: "That's mighty pretty silver, Mae, out there in that hall."

I tell her Missus Evans give it to me. She bats her eyes and purrs:

"Now weren't that nicea Missus Evans. I worked for her, and I never seen no silver like that in her house."

"Just whaddayuh mean by that?" Whiskey and wine don't mix well, not in my John. Me neither, for that matter. "Just what are you trying to say?" He sits on the edge of his chair and his fists is balling.

"Nothing at all," coos Reeny, "'cept I know real stuff when I see it and that silver's for real and what I have to mention is, however you come by it, Mae, you better take it off that there victrola. It's just too plain for anyone to see, likes cops if they come hunting."

Now John gives me a long hard look, but it isn't me he goes for. He's so mad he just can't hold hisself and he jumps up and shouts at Reeny, he calls her names and yells: "Who do yuh think y'are, barging in here and telling us what to do, spying and sneaking and telling us what we done and next thing yuh'll be calling in the law, yuh done it afore, we know yuh done it, and just who are yuh, walking into a person's private home without so much as knocking on the door—"

"Well," she answers pert, "I ain't Jimmy Mack."

It's the worst thing she can say. She don't know my John. He picks her up like she's madea cotton, he throws her over his shoulder, and while she's squealing and kicking her little pointed heels, he swings her outta the parlor and through the hall, right past the silver he swings her and onto the porch and then. If only he'd set her down! But my John throws Reeny Delacort over the railing, like a potato sack fulla cats he throws her and she lands, plop, on the brick sidewalk. She's hurt pretty bad, we guess that then and learn more later. Hip. I don't blame John.

Lee Reckard and Bub Johnson take in the silver, along with me and John. It's not been reported stolen, they got no right to touch it, they don't think it belongs on my victrola. On pure mean suspicion they take it in. Then Judge Owens recollects that I haven't been to work and he checks up, Missus Owens never woulda, and he knows. He knows most everything about us, that snake.

"Mae Greenow," he looks down doleful, from the bench, "you've been in this court many times, but never for stealing. I wouldn't have thought you were dishonest, Mae."

No use telling him I don't feel dishonest. A little sneaky, maybe, which was why I hadden showed my face in his house again. But dishonest? I didden take what anyone wanted, or had any use for, or ever put out for show. I don't feel like a thief, but I am, that's the law.

"Learn something new every day, don't you, your honor," I says, sharp-like. That gets a laugh. They wait for my funny remarks in that courtroom.

"Mae," the Judge's eyes don't smile, "your family's in plenty of trouble."

He's already given John ninety days and two hundred dollars, John'll have to serve out the fine too, we got no money.

"You're telling me!" I face him, I don't hang my head in that courtroom.

"About the silver," the Judge goes on, "I wouldn't be presiding in this case, since I am one of the parties concerned. But it happens, Mae," and he lowers his voice, downright gentle, "the parties concerned don't wish to press charges."

I like to swoon. Here I took it all, the little plate and the six round spoons, the salad set and the fruit spoon with the curlicues and the basket, alla it in my shopping bag. They caught me good and clean and now they don't do nothing about it. Why?

"You're a lucky woman, Mae. The injured parties have taken pity on you and refuse to—"

Taken pity! Missus Owens with her white pills and her pajamas and her dark old house, empty, no children there nor in the cemetery, Missus Owens what can't get up the gumption for a good fight with her man. The worst thing I ever done, the most I ever stole from anyone, and they won't let me do it. They pretend I didden take that silver.

"I stole them things, Judge," I says, "and I want to pay for my crime. Yes, I stole them," and I begin to shout, "I took the plate and the salad set and the six spoons and the fruit spoon and the basket, took'em right outta your house, Judge, and if you let me go I'll find a way to take'em again.

"I'll steal the big bowl too," I'm maybe screaming now and the two cops are closing in with their hands on my arms, "and the water pitcher and the tea set, yes I will, I'll get into that housea yours and make off with all that silver, Judge, I won't leave a single piece, I won't leave the basket."

He's pounding his gavel and the people are talking, not laughing this time, I'm a sensation. But I calm down sudden, and the Judge says, thoughtful-like:

"In that case, Mae, the injured parties will press charges."

He knows his law. He turns me over to Mister Orne, who sits in as acting judge sometimes. Mister Orne is a little pinched-face man, who don't look half so important on the bench, and the next Monday he gives me sixty days. I'd rather be sentenced by Judge Owens.

Missus Rhine, the new cook at the jail, turns out not so bad. I give her some recipes, while I'm doing my two months, and she thanks me nicely. Mom and the Greek bring Junior at visiting hours and sometimes Helen Mae. They keep me up on how my John is doing, which is all right, he's made a trustee. They don't have much trouble with Junior, the closet only a couplea times. When we get out, we have a big party. Only beer.

Judge Owens is a sober man, he disapproves of alcohol. So I can't believe he's drunk that night he comes over, two weeks after we are outta jail. I only think, when I open the door and see him there, standing on our front porch, that there has to be trouble somewheres, maybe Helen Mae. He takes off his hat and blinks his ferret eyes.

"Good evening, Mrs. Greenow."

"Good evening, Judge Owens," I answers right and proper.

"Mrs. Greenow," he hems and haws, first time I ever see him at a loss for words, "I was sorting out some old things at the house the other day and I came across this. Mrs. Owens and I thought you might like to have it."

He holds out a felt bag and I know, before I look, what's in it. The basket.

"We usually give people who work for us a little present now and then," the Judge goes on, "and Mrs. Owens and I thought, well, you left before we had a chance to give you anything."

I just hang onto it a minute. It's not mine now and can't never be. I did steal that basket once and then it was mine, for two days and two nights, all and wholly mine.

"Now that's right nicea you, Judge," I say, not nasty but polite as can be, "and nicea Missus Owens too, and you give her my regards, but no thank you for the basket. I got no place for it now."

If he's surprised he don't show it. He nods and says: "I see."

"It's right thoughtfula you, Judge, and thank you anyways."

"You're very welcome, Mae."

He puts on his hat and gives it a little tip, like the gentleman he is, and goes away.

My grey dress is the best I have, and the pearls the prettiest of all my jewelry, Missus Jackson give them to me. I never wore the blue velvet hat afore, just got it two months ago from Missus Warrington and was saving it for something special. That heart attack took Judge Owens from us, but he's not too far way to know I'm there. Me and Junior too. He always knowed everything about us, the sonofabitch.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

BERT ALMON teaches English at the University of Alberta. His fifth collection of poems, *Deep North* will be published shortly by Thistledown Press.

BRIAN BARTLETT, originally from Fredericton, has lived in Montreal for several years. Recent publications include anthologies of both Quebec poetry (*Cross/Cut*—Vehicule) and Maritime poetry (*Stubborn Strength* and *Easterly*—both Academic Press). The Fiddlehead is doing a special feature on Bartlett this year, printing a long chapter from his novel-in-progress, *Fearful Children.*

JOHN BARTON's first book of poems *A Poor Photographer,* was published by Sono Nis Press in 1981. Other poems by John Barton about Emily Carr have appeared in numerous magazines across Canada and have been gathered together in a recently completed manuscript, *West of Darkness.*

BILL BAUER has published four books of poems, the latest of which is *Unsnarling String* (Fiddlehead, 1984). In 1979, Oberon published *A Family Album,* a collection of short stories. He teaches English at the University of New Brunswick.

BRUNO BOBAK—One of Canada's most renowned artists, lives in Fredericton where he is resident-artist at UNB. Last year, a retrospective exhibition of his work travelled across Canada coast to coast.

RON BUTLIN was born in Scotland in 1949 and is currently writer-in-residence at the University of Edinburgh. He is presently completing a novel, *Conversations with Magellan.* A new book of poems, *Ragtime in Unfamiliar Bars,* will appear from Secker & Warburg in 1985.

ANNE CHAMBERLAIN is the author of three novels, published by Bobbs-Merrill and by Hart-Davis in England. The best-known of these, *The Tall Dark Man,* was also brought out in France, Norway, Sweden, The Netherlands, and in three U.S. paperbacks, the most recent being an Avon Classic. She lives in Marietta, Ohio.

SHIRLEY COX is a musician and fiction writer living in White Rock, B.C. This is her second story to be published by *Prism;* "Out of Thin Air" (22:2) marked her Canadian debut.

ROBERT EADY was born in Arnprior, Ontario in 1949 and now lives in Kanata, Ontario. His second book of poems, *The Mirror at the Auction,* was published by Golden Dog Press in the summer of 1984.

ROBERT GIBBS has published five collections of poems, one of short stories, and a kind of novel, *A Mouthorgan for Angels,* out this year from Oberon Press. A new collection of poems is due in 1985. A native of Saint John, he nmw teaches at UNB, where he has long been associated with The Fiddlehead.

W. P. KINSELLA lives in White Rock, B.C. He is the author of nine books, the most recent of which is *The Thrill of the Grass* (Penguin, 1984).

JOHN B. LEE lives in Simcoe, Ontario with his wife and two sons. He has four books in print, the most recent of which is *Fossils of the Twentieth Century* (Vesta).

JOHN LOWRY lives in New York, where he used to teach writing at several colleges. He's now trying the business world.

ERIN MOURÉ lives in Vancouver. Her most recent book was *Wanted Alive* (Anansi, 1983). She is presently working on another poetry manuscript entitled *Domestic Fuel.*

ALDEN NOWLAN, one of Canada's most distinguished poets and authors, died on June 27th, 1983. He produced over a dozen collections of poetry, a novel and several non-fiction books. Last year, Fiddlehead Press issued a collection of his *Early Poems.*

AL PURDY, one of Canada's most popular poets, lives in Ameliasburgh, Ontario. These poems are from his latest and just-released collection, *Piling Blood* (McClelland & Stewart).

KATHERINE SONIAT lives in New Orleans. She has had poems appear recently in the Malahat Review, Poetry (Chicago) and The American Scholar. She has written a chapbook entitled *The Giant Side of Seasons* (Chowder Chapbook Series, Milton, Massachusetts).

HEATHER SPEARS, a native of British Columbia, now lives in Svaneke, Denmark.

LYNN STRONGIN was born and raised in New York City. She has published five poetry chapbooks, two books of poems (*Nightmare of a Mouse* and *Countrywoman/Surgeon* (Epervier Press) and a novel, *Bones & Kim* (Spinster's Ink).

SUSAN YARROW lives in Victoria, B.C. "About the Woman" is taken from a bestiary-in-progress. Other prose pieces, as well as pieces from another series, presently called *The Book of Everything* recently appeared in The Malahat Review. She is Editor-in-Chief of *The Raddle Moon:* An international review.

PRISM *international* is holding a short-fiction writing contest open to anyone except students currently enrolled in the Department of Creative Writing at UBC. Manuscripts must be between 1,000 and 5,000 words in length, and all entries must be original, unpublished material available for publication in a future issue of PRISM. PRISM *international* will purchase First North American Serial Rights for all work it accepts for publication. All entries must be typed, double-spaced on 8½ × 11 white paper. Entrants' full name and address must appear on the first page of the manuscript and all entries must include a stamped self addressed envelope with sufficient return postage. Entries from countries other than Canada should include *international* Reply Coupons.

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