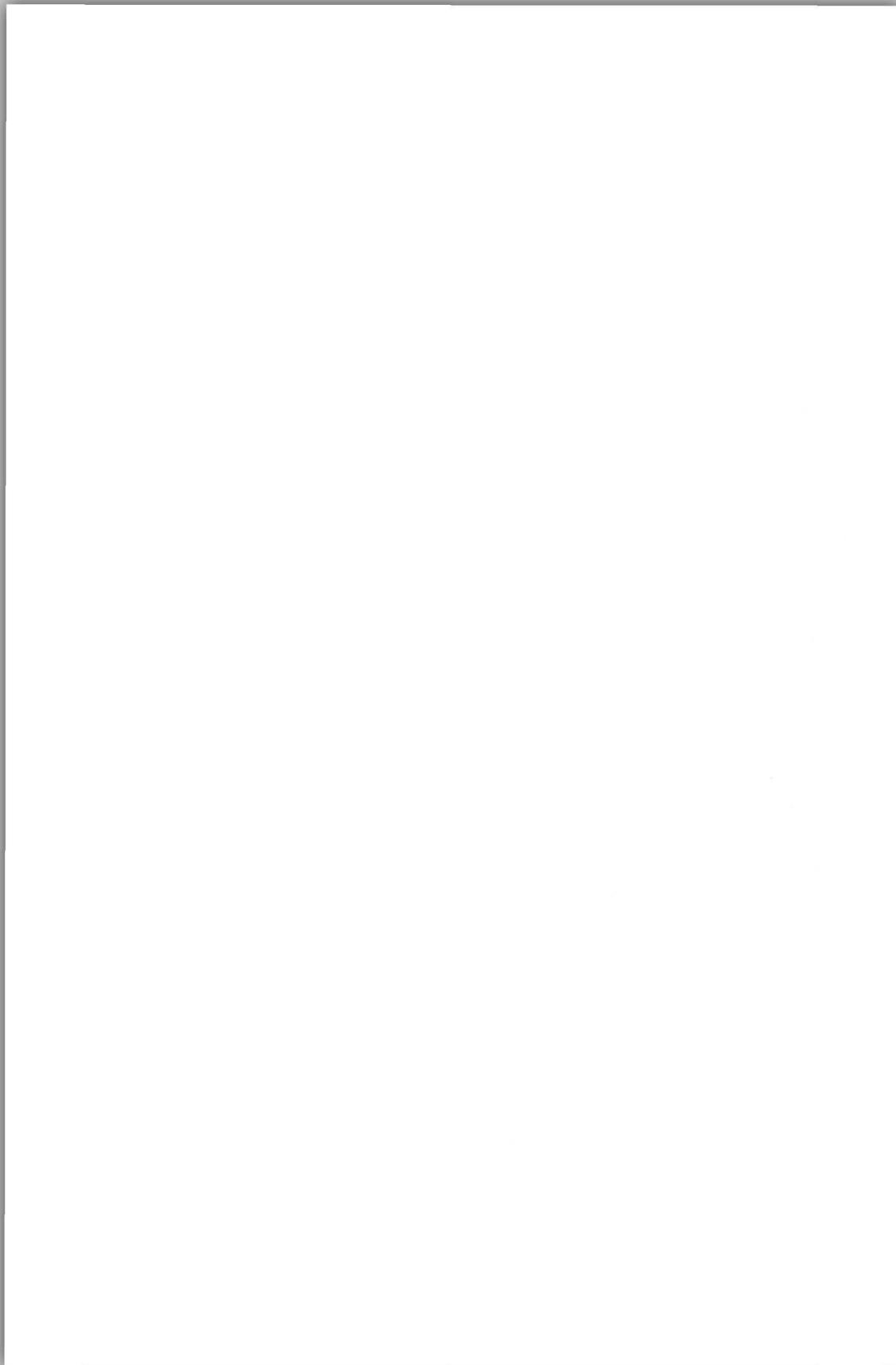


PRISM *international*

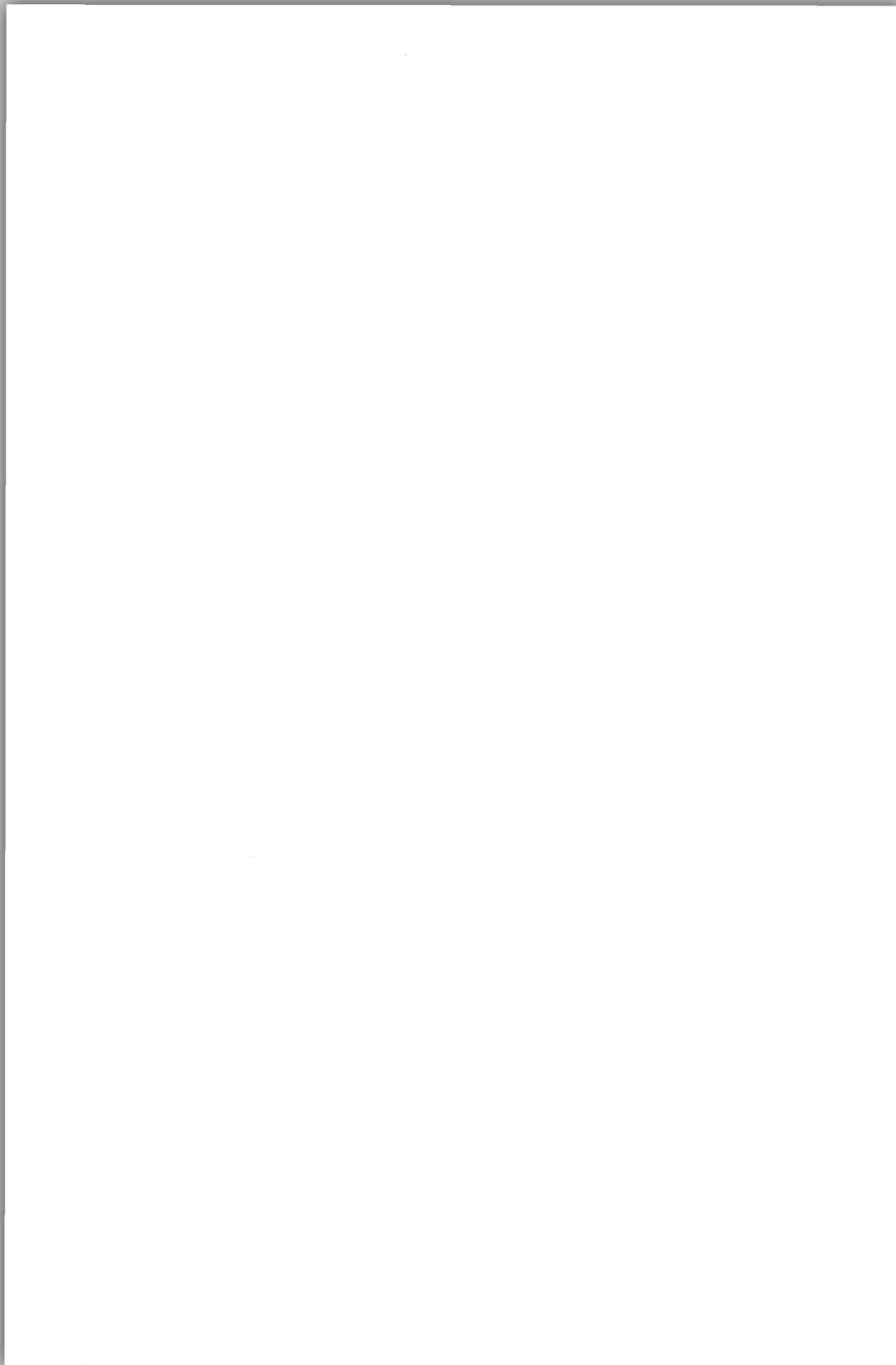
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PRISM *international*



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PRISM *international*
wishes to congratulate
Dorothy Speak,
who has been nominated for the \$10,000 Journey Prize
for her story "Relatives in Florida," which first appeared in
PRISM *international, Vol. 31, No. 3*

A Hero of Her Times

Robert Mullen

I

Opening her eyes isn't easy to begin with, and even with her eyes open the cloud still gets in the way, the thick heavy sweet-smelling cloud with the bitter lining with which they've covered her to keep her calm.

She's not wearing her own clothes, which is confusing.

Whose arms are these? Whose useless hands?

Is it malaria again? Will there be dancing? Will the man in possum fur and cassowary feathers come to drum on his pigskin drum?

Lucid periods intervene. The picture on the wall, a washed out water-colour, comes into better focus and becomes a window.

She remembers blood for a moment, blood in water, but this is harmful and she moves on.

First the drummer appears and then the long bark masks to startle the disease and then the sweepers with their brooms of grass to sweep that out the door. But here, in and out of her cloud, people move silently and speak in low voices.

Here, it seems, it's disease which has startled the doctors.

The first one to stay still is Dupree, a black man with a name tag, an orderly, a bucket-and-mop man.

"This is a hospital. People get sick here. There's no need to apologize."

She can't sit up. She can't even roll over properly. He couldn't fix that for her, could he?

"Not my field but I'll pass it on. I could bring you a fresh pitcher of water."

Her head will move, so she shakes it. Something still works. What's the point of fresh water, that's what she's thinking, when she can't reach for it?

The doctor, the one who'll decide when she can sit up, is called Stroud. Stroud pulls up a chair beside the bed and takes one of her hands out from underneath the sheet.

Stroud looks at the bandages, which forces her to look at them as well.

"There's no hurry, is there? You can stand one more night, can't you?"

He's taking no chances. He's brought the needle. That means oblivion again, followed by nausea.

"How about first thing tomorrow morning, won't that do?"

They keep their promises at least. The next morning is the end of the drip. It's disconnected. Dupree wheels it out. She's being returned, she's thinking, to the appetitive mode.

Dupree brings her some breakfast covered with a tin hat.

"Hold on. I'll crank you up. Just don't fall out on me."

But she would already have been in for a swim by now. She would have had a look along the riverbank for turtle or crocodile eggs.

"You're down for a shower at fourteen hundred hours," Dupree says.

Stroud himself loosens the last of the restraints.

"Go slowly. There'll be some dizziness. We don't give prizes here for overdoing it."

The river is full of crocodiles and the jungle full of snakes and now she can barely make it to the window and back.

"You were out there for two years. That's a long time. You must have found it quite a strain."

She did and she didn't. Quite possibly she would have been under exactly the same strain anywhere else.

"That sounds promising. Hold on to that. That might be a good place to start when you feel strong enough."

If she can sleep she can put up with anything. Sleep draws a line under it. In the morning she can get up and go down to the river and everything begins again as if for the first time. Sleep wipes the slate clean.

But other times the night works against her. She lies on her mat in the dark long before she's ready to sleep because a light would attract mosquitoes and any movement or the sound of her radio and people will assume that she wants company. She lies with her eyes closed composing her next letter: Dear Richard or Dearest Richard?

It depends on who else she thinks might read it.

Learning the language is daywork and that she relishes. She must also be able to recognize the women's honey call, their termite call, their nest call. A yam call, on the other hand, is just a fart.

On each of her breasts, a Popo woman wears a small tattoo. Without that she would be crabby and sluggish. Her milk could turn. The tattoos, the women claim, just appear one day.

She smiles at this. She finds it unlikely that a tattoo just appears. As she's listening to what's being said, she's also taking note of any evasions.

Stroud, right from the start, wants her to make appointments in advance. He wants her to get up, put on a robe and slippers, and walk down the corridor to his office at the time they've agreed.

It's Stroud who suggests that she keep a diary. She agrees, to please him, although her wrists still ache.

"A few minutes a day. Start with that and gradually increase it."

Her wrist hurts. Her handwriting as a result is atrocious. Will this strange unrecognizable handwriting, perhaps, enable her to express herself more freely?

Stroud has already read all of Richard's books on the Popo. Lots of people have. Stroud wants to know if so much work having been done already on the Popo made her own task easier or more difficult.

Richard can't eat pears. It's not the taste he doesn't like, it's the filaments. Richard, possibly, could eat a pear if someone put it through a blender for him first.

Also the beard on the dust jacket's missing.

Dupree she can ring for at any time, though she tries not to abuse this. Dupree looks at what she's scribbled in the notebook and says yes, good, with a little effort he can just about make out what it says.

She blushes. It's ridiculous. She tries desperately to think of something else that she could pretend she wanted.

Beard or no beard, she's impressed. He's so relaxed, so self-assured, that he almost puts her at ease as well. All she came for, on the other hand, is a reading list and to discuss what courses she'll be taking.

"I've looked at your transcripts." He smiles. "I can see that I don't have to tell you to work hard."

Hard work impresses him, that's nice to know. Did he notice, though, how she was trembling? With a transcript like that, surely, she's soon agnizing, she could have been calmer.

Ambivalence she's expecting. She knows she'll be buffeted. From loving, from over-valuing the people you've chosen to study, you can soon swing to wanting to wring their necks.

Loving, though, should win out in the end.

"Because?" Stroud asks.

Because how dare she judge them? Because the Popo weren't put onto the earth just to please her or to pander to her preconceptions. Nor, she might add, was anyone else.

Richard's books, she comes to realize on rereading them, are solely to do with Popo technology. This is true even when he's writing about ritual or myth. Every time somebody there told him a story, Richard asked himself what that story was good for.

She types things for him if the secretaries are all busy. She can type, so why not? She organizes his files for him because she too needs to be able to find things.

She waters his plants because it's either that or else slip on the trail of spilled water that he leaves across the floor.

A crocodile's strength is the water, a monkey's the vine. A monkey is a sack full of fruit, a crocodile a basket of rotten meat. The Popo too, Richard points out, like to play with dichotomies.

In the meeting of a monkey and a crocodile, the riddle goes, which stands to lose the most?

The crocodile, the Popo say. Its self-respect.

He agrees with her that there may be more to be said about the Popo. She's pleased, surprised. Then, before she can catch her breath, he suggests that she should be the one to finish the job.

"Work with the women. They're tough as nails. I never got to first base with them."

It's not just a follow-up, she'll be breaking new ground. The women were clannish, he says, and secretive, a world within a world.

"That was the one nut I couldn't crack." He smiles helplessly. "Why not see what you can do."

She finds it hard to fathom how the women can masturbate right there in front of her while continuing to carry on a conversation about something else entirely. Without the least embarrassment a woman, if the mood comes over her, will double one leg, folding it under her skirt, and use her heel to rub her crotch until her eyes glaze over.

The women, on the other hand, go into the river still wearing their skirts, letting the water lift the material around them like the petals of flowers.

Dupree wants her to eat more, to eat everything in fact. A lot of thought's gone into the menu, Dupree claims.

“This?” She holds up a glob of mashed potatoes. “A lot of thought’s gone into this?”

He can practically see right through her, Dupree claims. There’s more meat on a soup bone.

For six months they’re together most of the time. She’s drawing up the protocols for her own work. They’re talking about what clothes and medicines she should take. If anything should happen to her, she’s discovered, he’ll hold himself personally responsible.

She’s also been reading through his field notes and listening to his tapes. She’s amazed, most of all, by how much he was able to make later from so little.

Of his five published books so far, only the first is dedicated to his wife. To his dearest Helen. She tries, though, not to read too much into this.

She has to ask Stroud for a second notebook. Stroud shrugs. She was expecting a little more. She can buy a new notebook herself any time she wants, Stroud informs her, in the hospital shop.

Only one door here is locked, the last one.

A Popo man, before he sets off on a trip, cuts off a patch of his wife’s pubic hair. That’s famous now. That’s the opening of his third book and it launches his tour de force, his pathbreaking and compelling dissection of magic.

Why pubic hair and why a woman’s? What is it used for? What in particular does it protect against? Being devoured by quicksand is one thing.

There are photographs of the amulets which the men make from the hair, but none, of course, of the devastation left behind.

Dupree thinks that she should eat more because this will demonstrate her willingness to co-operate. Also, if too much food gets sent back, Dupree worries, the kitchen staff may become demoralized.

“Do you own stock in this place?” she asks Dupree.

The weekend at their cottage before she leaves is to be a special treat, but at the last moment Helen can’t come. One of the children has caught a cold. Children are always catching something or other, Richard explains this.

The first thing they do is go for a walk together in the woods to start breaking in her new shoes. The trees are beautiful, the leaves are turning, and when they stop to rest he kisses her.

She kisses him back and he seems surprised.

“I didn’t think you went in for this sort of thing,” he shifts the blame.

*

The women show her some marks, two shallow indentations in the soft ground near the river. The women ask if she knows what made these marks.

"Which animal?" the women giggle.

The women say that these are knee tracks. They make their fuck-fuck gesture. Didn't her mother ever tell her? The knee tracks of a man copulating.

The women have a different story about the pubic hair. A man going away on a journey cuts his wife's hair there in order to make her unattractive, to embarrass her and so keep her faithful during his absence.

No one enters a hut, the proverb says, if the thatch is torn.

He'll like this. This is yet more technology. This is the Popo killing two birds with one stone.

The women are surprised that she should know how to fish. They watch enthralled as she ties a fly out of feathers and skins a stick for a pole. They follow her to the stream and look on in amazement as the fly moves lightly, insect-like, across the surface.

"Aren't you afraid that you'll stop menstruating?" one whispers.

She was bitten by a fish once, but that belongs in another story.

"What sort of fish?" Stroud may well be wondering. "A red herring?" Or are Stroud's suspicions, too, aroused by anomalies?

The men are impressed. They've never seen such beautiful fish. The men are amazed by her competence, by the competence of a woman in such matters. Perhaps she could have gotten them to sign an affidavit to that effect.

With eyes rolling, with hips rolling, with the fish held high above their heads, the ululating women parade her triumph through the village.

II

It was Onapollona who was responsible for the first yams. Onapollona, a rebellious child, furious when his parents refused him food, dug the first garden and planted his own turds there.

People must have noticed children's fondness for their own excrement, that's one thing to say. Also children, especially male children, are spoiled and allowed more or less to run wild, perhaps in the hope that they too might make some serendipitous discovery.

*

Her letters must be careful, guarded, that's why they take so long to write. Her letters, before they reach him, will pass through many hands. That's where jargon comes in handy.

He was better on behaviour than on feelings, he doesn't dispute this. He was best on the set pieces. Behaviour, he admits, was much further up on his agenda.

"Observe some feelings," his advice runs. "And then let's hear your theories."

Other people's, he means, feelings.

Onapollona, during another temper tantrum, put jackets on all the fruit. This is what monkeys complain about in the mornings. It was Onapollona, irritated by the noise the monkeys were making, who dared the crocodile to have teeth.

Stroud wants you to make your own decisions. Stroud insists on it. Stroud's own suggestions, when he makes any, are simple-minded and obvious: Keep a diary. Keep appointments. Exercise. No heavy reading.

Stroud, for want of a better word, is all foreplay.

Dupree goes into a song and dance over the books she wants. Dupree brings her some magazines instead. Dupree is a puppet on Stroud's strings.

"Play by the rules," is Dupree's advice. "That's the best way. At least have a look at the pictures."

Women plant the fruit trees because only women know how. A girl, from an early age, is given some coconuts to look after, to keep hidden until they start to sprout. A girl can do this, the women believe, but not a boy because a boy would never have the patience.

A girl, a Popo girl, she can write down because she's observed it, is given to nourish what a boy would just eat.

Onapollona was ready for sex but nothing else was ready for sex with Onapollona. His mother refused. His sisters refused. His aunts refused. Onapollona was going around holding his penis in both hands.

"Oh, that Onapollona," the people laughed. "He has to carry what no one else will touch."

Infuriated, Onapollona sought revenge. Taking an empty pot into the jungle with him, Onapollona beat on it while he was urinating, thus setting off the first thunderstorm.

*

The bandages have come off. There are still scars, but further fading can be expected. Short sleeves need not be ruled out if supplemented with bracelets.

Dupree, he says, has seen worse. He's seen throats slit. Scarring isn't a problem there, they can smile.

The woman in this room previously was afraid of water. Keep your ears open and you learn things. She had to be washed every day using a nearly dry sponge. In this very room, Dupree says. On this very same bed.

Religion he reserved for the men. Men, his argument goes, build a Spirit House and surround it with taboos, men conduct rites and make fetishes and only men can blow the sacred conch shell.

Esse est percipi. Religion, to exist, must be seen and heard.

The women, it's true, have no Spirit House. They don't need a Spirit House, the women tell her. They have real houses.

There's a dry season and there's a wet season owing to the fact that Onapollona was first a boy and later a girl. This happened when Onapollona castrated himself in a fit of pique. This also accounts for why vaginas bleed.

She's having sex with Stroud, which perhaps is inevitable, but she's having it for some strange reason upside down, with her legs wrapped like vines around his waist, her ankles locked behind his back, her own back arched and her head, at the moment of truth, all but bouncing off the floor.

She wakes up from that exhausted, but knowing that nothing has changed.

Onapollona castrates himself so that he can bathe with the women. Onapollona shows the women his breasts and his cunt but what they can't see, not at first, is his penis, which he's kept hidden in his armpit.

"Oh, that Onapollona!" the women laugh, their dark eyes sparkling.

Richard, in the volume on Popo mythology, is quite witty at the expense of poor Onapollona.

III

A myth is a symptom, she thrilled the first time she read that. A myth breaks out wherever something is unclear, problematical, or threatening. A myth is the human imagination working overtime.

Myths give the game away. The myths of a people, while masking their deepest anxieties, at the same time point to where those anxieties are to be found.

By thinking the unthinkable, Richard puts it succinctly, myths seek explanations for the inexplicable.

A man owns the family's pigs but it's the woman who, when the piglets are born, nurses them at her own breasts. Pigs, which are subsequently allowed to graze freely in the forest, belong to the husband, but only the wife can call them back.

Once a woman copulated with a pig and it was fatal. The woman swelled up and swelled up and finally she burst. A man copulating with a pig, on the other hand, is what produced lizards.

To see him again, she'll have to wait a year. There's a conference then where they'll meet. She tries not to anticipate this too much or to expect too much or to mention it too often in her letters.

"Because if you did?" Stroud asks.

She would have thought it was obvious. She'll have a long walk and then a long bus trip and she'll then have to meet a plane which flies only twice a week. She views any possible happiness, that's why, as being suspended from a single slender thread at which men with machetes are hacking.

Their stories are above all about disobedience, about the failure to observe taboos or to follow instructions correctly. Whatever new knowledge an infraction may produce, the results for the protagonist are always catastrophic.

A woman goes to a part of the jungle which she has been warned to avoid. A child lifts the lid of a cooking pot. A man plays his drum during a thunderstorm. Whatever's forbidden, the myths say, there was once someone who tried it.

The woman is eaten, the child falls into the pot, the man's inopportune drumming causes an earthquake.

When she can't sleep, she sits up. She can hear coughing. She can hear the footsteps of the nightshift orderly. She's still a little leery of putting a lamp on in the dark.

In, you breathe. Out.

Adultery, the women believe, causes blindness. Too much adultery, the women say. A little produces only flatulence.

Woman is water, they say, and man is the paddle. One water, they tell her, grinning proudly, making the fuck-fuck sign again, but many paddles.

There are women and there are trash women. The fairer sex too dichotomizes. There are women who keep their gardens weeded and their huts swept and there are women who don't.

The surest way to attract a trash person is to chew too loudly. The best way to get rid of a trash person, the women say, is to mention some work which needs to be done.

There's a sing-sing for her on the night before she leaves. The singing will protect her and ensure that she returns. There are flowers from the jungle strewn on the beach and fish wrapped in breadfruit leaves are roasting under the sand on a bed of coals.

The women sing and they sprinkle her with coconut water and they warn her about the jungle ogre which preys on women alone, All Penis. It looks just like a stump, like dead wood, the women describe All Penis, until you brush against it.

The dangers of the bush are but the everyday dangers writ large. That's axiomatic, but it doesn't necessarily make you any less wary.

Stroud listens and he makes his notes, that's it. Stroud remains impenetrable behind the fortress of his desk.

In a Popo village, a man fears something in his food which will cause his testicles to shrink. Threatened in the village by women's treachery, a Popo man is stalked in the jungle by the ogress No Cunt.

She hopes for him to be at the airport, but she won't be disappointed if he's not. She won't use it against him. Your only love magic is a little perfume.

There's no Richard. There's no one with her name on a piece of cardboard. Instead, he's sent Helen.

"He's tied up. You know what he's like. In a world of his own."

He's that sure of her. He's that sure of both of them.

"We've got all afternoon." Helen takes her bag. "Would you rather eat, sleep, or shop?"

Stroud takes only notes, not sides. That must have been very disconcerting for her, that's Stroud's two cc's worth of sympathy.

But she does need to shop. She'll need to take presents back for the women and some tobacco for the headman. Richard's always inviting her

to come with him to conferences, Helen says, and for once she decided to call his bluff.

Because the streets are strange and crowded, they go everywhere arm-in-arm.

"He said six o'clock back at the hotel. Six o'clock for us, that means, and he'll be there when he gets there."

The men have their sing-sings in the Spirit House, surrounded by feathers and fur, and the women have theirs on the riverbank surrounded by flowers.

"They don't even pretend, you mean," Helen understands at once, "to share one world."

The women have no fetishes, only their tattoos. Only their good behaviour. Women don't cut off their husbands pubic hair before going on a trip because Popo women don't go on trips.

They can change first, Helen suggests. Then they'll have a drink in the bar. If he's not back by eight, they'll eat without him.

They have two hours alone, that's all he can manage. He comes to her room. They undress. All that she hoped for, all that she imagined, has to be compressed into that one, squeezed into that one, small space.

He warns her again afterwards about supporting her theories with evidence. Where are the women's rites? Where is their sacred precinct? She's not going to argue, surely, is she, that religion is just a good feeling?

Her mouth is dry. Her stomach has knotted. She pulls the sheet back up to her waist. She hadn't been planning on arguing, just then, about anything.

She leaves him some notes. It's easy enough to borrow, from Helen, one of the books that he's been given to review. She writes the notes in pencil, in the margins, where in a week, in a month, whenever he gets around to turning the pages, he'll find them.

Tiny tokens, tiny time capsules of my love.

IV

If a myth is a symptom, then a rite must be the cure. A myth is speculation, imagination in flight; a rite is where it comes back down to earth.

The women, first of all, love the batiks. They love the colours and marvel at the fineness of the material. Instead of making shirts, they cut the material into long strips which they hang up to decorate their huts.

I must have been very happy on my trip, they think, to have chosen something so beautiful.

I worry that he thinks I'm attacking his work. There was so little time to explain. I worry about this mainly at night.

I'm operating in a vacuum, that hasn't changed. Now it's Stroud sitting impassively. I go on because it's easy to go on, because there's no resistance.

You work during the day and at night you blame yourself, that's how to recharge your batteries in a vacuum.

They don't want me to fish for a few days. Naturally I want to know why not. Because I'm almost the same as they are now, they say, except for the way I dress and my mistakes in grammar.

I wait, elated. Taboos, I have it on good authority, exist for the purpose of demarcating the sacred.

We're all, the women tell me, one water now.

Illness can be an opportunity. Given the illness, that's all I mean to say, seize the opportunity.

Stroud, incredibly, manages neither to smile nor to frown. Is he even alive? Stroud is a sponge calmly soaking up everything that spills.

We go all together to see a young girl. She's lying on her mat. She's being rubbed with coconut milk. I ask what's wrong with her and they say everything, she's finished, she's dying. There is, however, in the hut, a conspicuous lack of grieving.

One woman watches in the doorway and another starts to sing.

"She was a child," the menstruation song says. "She was an ugly thing."

Dupree measures my progress by my appetite. I'm doing fine, Dupree thinks. I'm getting a good reputation in the kitchen.

Just once, as a reward, I'd like him to stop, sit down, and talk to me properly. But he can't.

"What would I put on my time sheet?" Dupree says.

Some moss is placed between her legs. That's all she'll wear, but she'll be wrapped in leaves from head to foot just as a yam or a fish is wrapped in leaves, the women point out, before it's placed in the fire.

I too must undress. Not even my wrist-watch is allowed. In place of my white person's clothes, there's a skirt made from grass for me to

wear and some bougainvillea because they know I'm shy about showing my breasts in the village.

I look like a bird now, they think. A large bird with a crimson ruff which they sometimes see in their dreams.

I ask again about the tattoos but the answer remains the same and the women are adamant. The tattoos simply appear. There's nothing on the breasts of the child when they put her into the leaves but there is on the breasts of the woman who emerges.

Dear Richard: I offer you a belief in the miraculous.

The breasts ache a little afterwards, the women say, but that's normal. It will happen again later when the breasts swell with milk.

"Don't we want children hanging from us?" the women say. "Don't we want pigs?"

It's nearly dark when we leave the hut. There's just enough light to find a likely place in the jungle and make a clearing, pushing back the leaves and the twigs with our bare feet.

"Snakes," someone whispers, "crawl away. Snakes, go back into your holes."

The girl will be left here. Three days will have to pass. She'll learn songs and be fed through a straw and later, when she takes a husband, this will become her first garden.

"She talks to him softly at night," the marriage song says. "In the morning she hands him his axe."

Alone again in the dark, on my mat, I write letters in my mind and I tear them up. This must take a toll. My mind fills up with the confetti of discarded solutions.

Alone, in the dark, in lieu of sleep, I see Helen behind a barricade, waving.

On the third day we make dancing sticks. We attach some feathers to them. These are better than men as dancing partners, better than husbands, the women say, because husbands get hungry.

The package of leaves is now reopened and a face appears. The eyes blink. We start pounding our sticks. Perhaps the girl has been drugged, briefly, and the tattoos applied in that way.

She moves stiffly at first, as we pound out the rhythm for her dance.

"Be many," the stick song says. "Be more. Fall from their wombs."

The drugs now are only to help me not to stay awake all night. Dupree brings them in last thing.

“Now I lay me down to sleep,” Dupree calls out cheerfully.

Calmness, rationality, both feet on the ground, in daylight, are now my own responsibility.

What he found in the Spirit House was syncretism. He found a religion made of other religions, a weave the threads of which he was able to identify as animism, Hinduism, Islam, and an ancestor cult.

Is religion more like a carpet, then, than a feeling?

The danger, always, he himself teaches this, is that you stop once you’ve found what you were expecting.

Is it possible, against all the odds, that anyone else, even Stroud, can have figured out what’s best for me? If he knows, what’s preventing him from saying?

Illness may also be just an excuse. There must be other people, genuinely sick people, that’s what I’m thinking now, who could use this bed.

And then where will I hide?

A rite provides both knowledge and pleasure. A rite celebrates even as it commands. The persistence of a rite depends on its having more than one reason.

After the dancing, we throw one another into the air. We use a mat. We’re jubilant. We throw one another again and again and what we’re celebrating, I conclude, is love: the weightlessness, the fear and the thrill of flight while at the same time knowing that you’re going to be caught.

V

At the least, before claiming knowledge, the hero must pass through a period of isolation. This happens again and again. How many times does it happen that a hero must first be destroyed, disembowelled, quartered, flayed alive, for what, committed by anyone else, would be the most trivial offence?

Fortunately, in myths, this isn’t always fatal.

I know what the terror feels like when it’s on the way, I know that well enough to predict it. It comes in spasms at first and mainly at night at first and I know I should have found a way to intervene before it spread, before it took up residence, stretching from one dark night all the way into the next.

Stroud makes it sound so obvious: instead of the panic button, that’s all it entails, push some other button.

*

Mother living and father dead, Stroud remarks, that's all he has. That's not a lot to go on. Childhood can't be changed, Stroud concedes, but they nevertheless keep certain statistics.

I see through this. We exchange, I think, knowing looks. Stroud sees me seeing through this.

You've found taboos. You've found a ritual. You should be ecstatic. Instead you lie awake on your mat at night rehearsing. Thus you fall into the embrace of the great destroyer of sleep.

I rehearse it all, the packing, the farewells, the muddy walk, the bus ride, the various flights which may or may not connect, and at long last stepping once more into his office.

I rehearse a smile, just a nod, a loving look, an apology.

Somewhere there must be more reasons, stronger reasons, more drastic reasons, Stroud thinks, reasons desperate enough to motivate a desperate act. To reduce an intelligent and capable person, these are Stroud's words, to the state in which they found me.

I must frown. I know because Stroud smiles. That's how he keeps things on an even keel. Stroud only seems to be a mirror.

How could I possibly be happier completing my work under anyone else? How could anyone possibly think that? How could he throw that at me right out of the blue when I haven't even changed clothes, when I haven't even finished my speech?

Under the circumstances, that's Richard's point. The word "circumstances" reverberates with meaning.

"Are you all right?" Richard says. "You look terrible. Did you manage to sleep on the plane?"

I use the nod. I lie. I say plenty. I must look like a ragdoll.

Stroud exerts control without seeming to. I'm on to this now. I've jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

"Tell me then." Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. "I'd really like to know how I do it."

It's simple. I want him to keep looking at me, it's as simple as that, and I start to squirm the moment he starts looking down at his notes.

I should be unpacking, especially my notes and the film. I should be arranging, organizing, the things you should do when you get back. Helen, waving Helen, I've heard, is anxious to see me.

You make things instead, mainly animals. You make them out of coat hangers. When you run out of coat hangers of your own, you go out to a

dry-cleaner's to buy more. Tied in knots, you tie knots in metal.

The wire is just stiff enough, that's what I think now, to challenge a flagging ability to manipulate the world.

Stroud wants to know if anything like the pipe-cleaners ever happened before. It's just a hunch, Stroud says. I may have been wounded once before, that's the hunch, and later, wounded again, tried to crawl back into the same hole.

There were only the pipe-cleaners. He tells you the name of an animal and you try to make it. You play with his pipe-cleaners to please him because isn't that what all children do?

Mother living and father dead but this wasn't always the case. The opposite can also apply. We're speaking about influences, Stroud understands, not ontological status.

Father living, breathing, laughing, tossing me into the air; mother immaterial.

There's nothing sinister here, I make clear. Alone with her on those fishing trips he's scrupulously shy. Their togetherness, their companionship, his easy and genuine delight in her company, become all hedging and awkwardness when she needs a bathroom.

You learn to go off by yourself, make a small hole in the leaves, and squat over it. You try not to eat too much and hardly drink anything the whole time that you're in the woods.

I try to earn love, that's another way of saying it, the same way I earn my allowance.

Sometimes it's my notes that have gotten wet. Sometimes my film is overexposed. Sometimes I realize at the last moment that I'm wearing a grass skirt but have forgotten to cover my breasts.

The coat hanger animals lined up on the coffee-table have become the enemy now, a hostile committee headed by Richard.

"What's she trying to pull?" the committee wants to know.

This is what happens when I do manage to sleep.

The restaurant is the best part, the one on the way home, because then she can gorge herself. She's slept on the ground, she's been wet and she's been cold without complaining, and now she can order anything she wants.

You study the menu. You read every item. They might have changed something since the last time. At that age, you just want to absorb love.

I associate pancakes with that, as much butter as I want, a small white pitcher of real maple syrup, and the smell of his coffee.

I could go on for days, as proven by the fact that I've already gone on for weeks, or I could just walk out of here. Even Dupree says so. Just start walking down the corridor as if I owned the place, Dupree says, a little farther every day, and then one day just keep right on going.

The strings, of course, are me, not Richard. What a stupid lie. It's me who won't eat pears or mangos.

Stroud wants to know about the fish. Someone was bitten by a fish once. Reading through his notes, Stroud must have found that dangling.

"It was stupid," I say. "Just rotten luck. Bad timing."

He knew, of course, in his own shy way, that there was no such fish, that she hadn't been bitten. A fish is just what comes to hand. And he reminds her that there's a first aid kit in the tent.

I take care of it. I go into the tent. I take down my shorts and my bloody pants and fold a towel between my legs, but when I come back out he's already started loading the car.

"Get in." His voice is cool and distant. "Sit still. You'll be wearing dresses after this. Your roughneck days are over."

Sometimes I'm swimming. Sometimes the whole lake turns red. Sometimes, in the worst case, that first and never mended parting of our ways and his heart attack become conflated.

And now I'm supposed to stand up, I challenge Stroud, alone, with only a single instance as evidence, and argue that menstruation, for the Popo, is a sacrament?

VI

Often the origins of the hero are confused and problematical. This probably accounts for the hero's restless searching. Love and affection, approval, the birthright of others, the hero will encounter only as a second language.

I practice packing. I tell Dupree it's in case of fire. Dupree tells me that the snow's gone, that the grass is growing, that the baseball players will soon be flying north again.

So, too, the hero, battered by winter, revives in springtime.

*

I know what the panic feels like. Thus I know when to take the medication. I'll know then, having taken the medication, exactly how long it will be before help arrives.

The logic of this, I'm forced to admit, is irrefutable.

Nothing will have changed, but I'm prepared for that. I won't bail out again. I don't know yet how I'm going to deal with the son-of-a-bitch, but I know that I have to.

Stroud laughs, not an everyday occurrence, and rocks back in his chair.

"Which of the son-of-a-bitches is that?" Stroud says slyly.

What I do know now about dealing with Richard is first of all to make sure that he's really alone.

I pack one more time and this time it's for real. I've got work to do. I've got people to see. I pack and then I breathe.

I breathe the way I've learned, slowly in and slowly out, urging the calm out to the tips of my fingers and down to my toes.

I ring the buzzer and then I wait. I wait for Dupree to appear. Dupree, grinning, glad for me, sizes up the situation. The point of no return has passed.

"Carry your suitcase, lady?" Dupree says.

April Bulmer

four poems

Mrs. F. Johnson

I laid down by the little plot, my heart tethered to the stone. And God fell upon me like a warm blanket, though I still shivered in the cold.

I prayed early that evening; God my horsepower. For Him my faith cantered, unreigned. But your death, daughter, was a saddle, a dark weight: your body folded untidy as a map in the rumble of the black coupe. Heart a compass, the needle spinning dizzy till it stiffened north.

Days I cradled your ukulele—a mute infant in the swell of my dress. The pick a half moon eclipsed by the clutch of my hand.

I built you a wedding cake, a sweet cathedral. Folded linens, buffed silver, bound your notebooks of poems. Laid your silk hanky red as a heart in the hollow of the chest.

I tied cans to the fenders. Planted paper flowers in the muddy hood. Fastened your slim boots to the broken buggy God drove you to His throne.

Rev. F. Johnson

The endless mourning of the wind, grieving my daughter. God, I want to tell you of the endless mourning of the wind. Some might speak of the beauty of the earth as she accepts our loss. Some might say, in her womb the calla lilies bloom their Easter grace.

But all winter I bear the weight of death like the burden of snow. And my heart, a stunned fruit, holds its juice, almost bitter.

Victor Johnson

Last night I woke to death's great howl. Called her close, pulled the burrs from her paws. Stroked her and buried my mouth in her wild coat. She is a weary dog, bearing our weight to the water, the scruffs of our necks secure in her muzzle. Mourning our thin lives. Whimpering a little as she buckles the collars, fastens the heavy stones.

Last night in the light of this kitchen the sleeping dog dreaming of pups, their new bones.

Mabel Johnson

Or was it as in my dream? My sister packed a small valise: calfskin Bible, wide-tooth comb. Boarded a clean passenger train. It whistled long through the winter night. She dreamed of birds and the Saviour's slender arms. At the station he offered her a kiss, touched her wrist. Dusted the years from her shoes. Jesus showed her the bathtub, the jars of little soaps. A chest of drawers for her cotton cloaks and wings.

Son of Night, Brother of Sleep

Marilyn Gear Pilling

My sister says she was at Death's door that afternoon, but I always think of Death as being separated from us not by a door but by a river. I ask her if she really means door.

Yes, she says, I see Death living in a colourless house in the side of a hill. You can't tell there's a house there. Just the door, and not until you're right in front of it. There's no buzzer and no door handle and no peep-hole, but Death knows when you're there, and He opens the door and takes a deep breath. That sucks you in.

"I even know the hill," she continues.

"Where is it?" I ask.

"You know that gravel road at the east side of the farm? You know how the hill goes straight up and there's a bush on both sides? Down there, in the bush, in the side of that hill."

"I see. You could have told me this before, Rita. I've been up that hill alone many times at dusk. I even played in that bush when we were kids."

My sister Rita is a doctor. She's had three husbands, no children. I have three children, no husband; we always make a joke out of that. I'm happy about the way it turned out though; my three kids are what I'll give thanks for on my deathbed.

Rita's short hair has the burgundy shine of old French wine, and it clicks into place like a metronome when she moves her head. My sister went into medicine to defeat death. When she talks about the latest advances in medical science, she says "we." "We know now that cancer is many diseases." She practices up north, in the little town near the farm where we spent summer holidays and weekends as children. Rita is not usually fanciful. At this moment, we are talking on the phone. I am wearing a housecoat that was dainty rose blush when I bought it, but now is plain faded puce. As Rita talks, I'm twisting my face under the light and plucking the black hairs that are taking over my chin with the relentlessness of Leiningen's ants.

"Yes, well, as I say," Rita continues, "I was at Death's door when our mother came out with this. Trust her to do it then."

"What did she say?" I'm thinking of having electrolysis done, but there's a satisfaction to the tweezer's thrust and tug; somehow it's more than hairs I'm rooting out.

"It was last Sunday afternoon," says my sister. "I've got this fever of a hundred and four, maybe a hundred and five, I'm sitting there with three woollen blankets around me, coughing my guts out, and wondering whether I could have AIDS, and Mom says, 'Oh, you know, Rita, for the last six months or so I've had this funny sensation. Especially when I walk any distance. This sort of pain, not really pain, this feeling that goes right up my arm and into my jaw. My throat burning too. I wonder if I should mention that to the doctor some time, do you think?'"

"What has she got?" I ask, putting down the tweezers. I would be doing something like plucking my beard at a time like this phone call seems it's about to turn into.

"Classical angina."

"What does that mean?"

"Given what is already wrong with her heart, it means she won't be around more than two years at the very most."

I don't see Death as waiting for us behind a colourless door. I see him in a ground mist on a far shore making scarecrows. He's stuffing them with straw, dressing them in the clothes of the new arrivals. Some of the scarecrow bodies are crosses, crosses on which the clothes of the dead *flutter in a little wind that twists in and out of the ground mist from the four corners*. Some of the bodies are round, stuffed plump with straw. One scarecrow is pregnant, a great straw belly hanging low over a belt whose long dangling end makes her look as if she has a penis. One is a small child, limbs of stuffed pink stockings, a tinfoil pie plate face.

I see Death straighten and get into his hot tub. He is lolling there on the far shore of the wide river, scalding his bare white bones in the steam. Son of night, brother of sleep.

Bare white bones. Our skeleton. Hidden under the epidermis, gradually revealing itself as our bony prominences proclaim themselves to the world. Death slowly becoming visible as we age. The other day someone told me about a body worker who can put her hand on a person's flesh and feel their skeleton. Know all its secret turns. Know Death. I saved that anecdote for Rita. I think she went into medicine to know Death, as well as to defeat him.

Death lolls in his hot tub and sends his boatman across for us. Like in the myths.

I suppose these days the boatman might be hooked up to a walkman that's blasting into his ears a Chili Pepper tune like *Suck My Kiss*. He might be driving an outboard motor with a bumper sticker that says, "I don't date anyone who uses four letter words like Don't, Stop or Quit."

But I like to think he's a half-naked guy in an old row-boat. One of the seats is loose and you nearly tip the boat sitting down. It's night, of course, but there's enough moon for you to see his shoulders and arms, and you hunch behind him and watch his muscles get huge and then relax, watch his muscles breathe like the plastic cover of a Harley Davidson filled and deflated by one of those trickster winds. You start to smell his sweat about two-thirds of the way across. There's no deodorant where he comes from.

You smell his sweat and every now and then you feel a stone scrape the bottom of the boat. This river isn't so deep in spots. Some of the water from the oars comes into the boat and baptizes your scalp. I said he was half-naked; I didn't say which half. All he's wearing is a grey muscle shirt. He stands up, and the boat goes back and forth like D. H. Lawrence's rocking horse. His cock is bobbing like a teasel in an east wind. You shove the broken seat off to the side so it sticks out over the water like a ragged wing, and you have one last fuck down there in the tepid water in the bottom of the row-boat, rocking now like you did where you began, in the cradle of your mother's womb, drifting off course, cold water slurping in over the sides and biting at the edge of the mortal coil you're about to shuffle off. You come with an apocalyptic shudder. Then you sit up, and there's the shore and Death way off to the left clattering out of the hot tub, rubbing his bones dry with a toddler's pink sleepers, shaking the creases out of his black cloak.

Saturday noon, two weeks after my sister's call, I walk into our mother's apartment up north. She has my father out of the nursing home for lunch. They sit across from one another, a loaded plate in front of each. "We commend this food to Thee and ourselves to Thy service, for Christ's sake, Amen," says my mother.

My father used to be the one to say that. Now his blue eyes stare straight from between the rigidified muscles of his face. He does not know me today, any more than do the vegetables that startle me with their technicolour clarity against the white plates. August tomatoes, red as the medieval hospitals for victims of St. Anthony's fire. Bright green lettuce. Half a roll, buttered yellow. Pork chops stewed in apples. My mother finds cooking difficult. She has worked all morning to prepare this food, then gone through the laborious process of bringing my father out of the nursing home. She is sitting there with a hollow doll across from

her, eating with it, pretending it's real. The TV on low to provide the talk.

This situation is just an extension of their years together. Now my father cannot talk; in former years, he did not talk because anything he uttered would be used against him by my mother. She was the prosecuting lawyer and the rest of us provided her with a lifelong task.

"Come into the back bedroom," says my mother now, as she clears the table. Her voice is more animated than it has been in years. "Rita brought me two new outfits from her trip to the city last week. I don't know which one to keep." On her way into the hall, she bangs her toes on the doorstep. "Oh *ouch* that hurts!" she says. "If there's something to kick, I'll always kick it."

A week ago, Rita phoned me and told me our mother had been told her prognosis by the family doctor. "What do you think her reaction was?" Rita asked.

"I wouldn't venture a guess."

"Well," said Rita. "There's been a spring in her step ever since. I'd forgotten she could be so chipper."

Half-way down the hall to her bedroom, my mother turns around and faces me. "I've been thinking about my funeral. I know what you'll want, Vivian."

"What will I want?"

"You'll want me laid out in the coffin for everybody to gawk at."

"Actually, you're right. It'll be hard for me to believe you're dead if I don't see you."

"Oh, I knew it. I *told* Rita that's what you'd want. I knew you'd want me up there on view. Well, I'm not sure, Vivian. Your dad would want a normal funeral if he was able to say. But I might fool you all and get myself cremated." She turns and flounces into the bedroom.

On my mother's white bedspread is a cherry suit jacket with pleated skirt. The other outfit is navy and white. "I'm leaning towards the cherry," says my mother. "The skirt's a little short, though. I don't want to look like Barbara Bush."

"Who's that?" I say.

She wheels around with her mouth open, then realizes I'm joking. "Go sit with your father. I'll be out in a minute."

My mother has never worn cherry in her life. Inside her castle, a prosecutor. Out in the world, Jenny Wren. Beige blouses. Grey coats. I remember the time Rita and I were sitting on her patio, and Rita passed on to me the comment of a friend: "Your mother is almost a saint, isn't she?"

"Did you do a BM or the other when you were in that bathroom?" I answered Rita that day, in my mother's voice.

“The other,” Rita said, hanging her head.

“I never saw anybody that could do either so fast. You must wait until the very last minute to go in,” I replied. Rita and I have lots of scripts like that down pat. Our mother’s choicer comments. “A saint,” I howled that day. “Oh my God!” Rita and I rolled our eyes.

Rita is my baby sister. I was seven when she was born, and my parents let me choose her name. I love Rita as much as anyone on this earth.

My mother moved into an apartment up here two years ago so that my dad could go into the nursing home in the town where he was born and where my sister is the doctor. Stripped of her little kingdom, the house she tended and rarely left in forty years, my mother turned into Jenny Wren inside her new place as well as outside. Or maybe a tiny brown field mouse.

The first time I visited her in the apartment, she asked me to move away from the living-room window. “Why?” I asked.

“The neighbours might think you’re staring at them.” She got up and pulled the blind.

She put her piano on mute, used the TV only with the sound off, stood up and said, “Oh shush, please shush” if we laughed. A month later, she’d moved the phone from the living-room to the back bedroom. “I wanted to get it away from the front door,” she said. “Mr. Dennis can’t hear what I’m saying back in there.”

Mr. Dennis is the superintendent for the four-unit building. I pictured him crouched outside my mother’s door on his arthritic sixty-year-old legs to hear her tell Rita and me over the phone what was on her grocery list.

“People up here go till they drop. I know what they’re thinking. They’re thinking I just shoved your father in the Home because I couldn’t be bothered any more.”

“Mom, they’re not thinking that at all.” My mother is seventy-three. She kept my father at home until exhaustion altered the very contours of her face. She got up to him three or four times a night the last year.

“Oh yes they are. I know what they’re thinking. I can’t even go out to the fowl supper, among people I’ve known all my life, without getting, ‘My, John was looking good when I saw him last week.’” My mother’s face twists into a know-it-all leer as she relates this.

“Mom, they don’t say it like that.”

“Oh yes they do, I know what they’re all thinking.”

The farm is deserted now, but Rita and I go out every time I come up from the city. We’d never change a stick or a stone, and we’d never sell

the place to strangers. Summers on the farm is where we had our happy times.

It's not just the memories from our childhood the place holds. I can never go up the gravel road at the east side of the farm—the hill Rita joked that Death lives under—without remembering the conversation Rita and I had there a couple of years ago. It was spring. There were a million dandelions in the ditches. We were near the top of the hill when Rita said it.

“My kid would have been grown up and away at university by now.”

I stopped. My jaw must have been resting on my knees. I stared at her. I'll always remember exactly where I was when Rita said that. It's how everybody knows where they were when JFK was shot.

“I told you about that, didn't I?” she went on. “I was pregnant when you were. You were twenty-seven, I was twenty. My baby was due the same month. August, 1973.”

I still couldn't speak.

“I was in first year medical school. I had an abortion. There was no way I could have a baby and become a doctor. Stop looking like that, Viv.”

My daughter with a first cousin her age. My sister a mother. Me, an aunt. The world swerving and criss-crossing.

“Rita, you never told me.”

“I was sure I had. Stop looking like that. It was a long, long, time ago.”

This evening of my noon hour visit to my mother and her cherry suit, Rita and I have been out to the farm. We're driving back into town along the ninth line as far as it goes before you have to turn right or end up in the river. On our left a huge red sun has just gone below the horizon, leaving behind the fire of a pure orange light in the west sky and fields. I like to think of orange as red somehow tempered by the yellow of understanding. The cattle in the fields to our left are humped black shapes. On our right, a full white moon and utter darkness.

“Stop the car, Rita.”

Rita gives me a quick look, then pulls over into the long grass of the ditch, grey now with fine silk dust, and turns off the car. Both of us get out. Country smells of hay and wet wildflowers and gravel and grazing animals. A thousand crickets and one low cry from a cow to her calf. The orange light. The immense moon.

I stand for a moment in the middle of the gravel road, then move over and put one arm around my sister. “Rita, you're a doctor. Stop everything right here, right now, just like this.” Rita doesn't answer. I hear the cattle methodically pulling up the grass and chewing away at it.

I lay my head on my sister's shoulder. "Rita, I don't want her to die." Again, Rita says nothing. I wonder if she's about to cry. I wonder if I am. Then, for some reason, I remember the day Rita cut her hair.

Rita's hair wasn't always smooth and burgundy. It was blond and unruly and down to her waist until one day a few years after she started up her family practice. Rita went out in the morning and had her hair cut short and dyed. Then she came home and went to bed with a bottle of wine. She drank all the wine and she cried all that day and most of the night. She wouldn't speak. Her second husband told me that. He said he didn't know what to do. He phoned all their friends to see if anyone knew what was wrong with Rita.

The ditch beside this road is full of wild carrot. Rita still hasn't spoken. Silently I remember a day when I was around five years old, my mother telling me the fancy name for this weed—Queen Anne's lace—and helping me and my cousin make a bride's garland for our hair. The ants crawled out of the white petals onto our faces. Like those black beard hairs even now emerging onto my chin.

"Smell the river," says Rita.

"Yeah," I shout, whirling her around by her arm. "Want to go down and have a threesome with the boatman?" Rita knows my death fantasy. She laughs, and the two of us dance a jig, right there on the deserted country road. "Come in your muscle shirt and catch us if you ca-a-a-n!" I holler, as we get back into the car. "You'll find we two are a h-a-a-andful!"

The cattle are all stirred up as we pull away. Bawling and sticking their heads through the rail fence.

In her fifteen years of family practice, my sister has encountered Death only once outside the walls of the hospital, and that was earlier this summer. She tells me about it when we get back to her place after dancing our jig, and the way she tells it, I feel as if I'm there.

"Remember how the first two weeks of July were this summer," she says. "Remember how beautiful? Just the way I remember those long ago summer days on the farm. No clouds, that huge blue sky, the red sunsets every evening, and the strangest thing of all—no bugs. Everybody was talking about the weather. So perfect it was unnatural. Like a dream almost. Day after day. Like living in a never-never land.

"On the Thursday of the second week, the ambulance went out Code Four. Code Four means you expect the worst. We got everything ready in Emerg. We waited and waited. Then we got the signal that means whoever they went for is beyond help. A few minutes later comes the call that the mother wants her own doctor. That turns out to be me."

The mother is Jenny Malone. Forty years old. "I delivered her twins

three years ago after years of fertility drugs and failure. She was the best, most careful mother you could imagine, Viv. Everything you could do to make a farm safe for children, Jenny and Doug did it. Jenny never took her eyes off those twins. That's the first thing she said to me when I got out there to that beautiful, prosperous farm of theirs on the fourth concession. The fire trucks and the police cars and the ambulance were all lined up down the side of the lane and along the gravel road. The neighbours had her on the couch, in the kitchen. 'I never took my eyes off him, Dr. Rita. I was looking right at him when it happened.'"

My sister is drinking wine the colour of her hair as she speaks. She sets down the glass and leans forward. "They were such good parents, Vivian," she repeats. "They couldn't have been more careful of those twins. They went to extremes."

Into my head comes the old Arab tale about the last act of evasion being the final twist that delivers you into the hands of Fate. I've always been fascinated by that story. *There was a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to market. The servant returned, frightened, and told his master he had seen Death in the marketplace and Death had looked at him in a threatening way. He begged his master to lend him a horse so he could ride to Samarra and avoid his fate. After he was gone, the master went to the marketplace. He saw Death there and asked why Death had threatened his servant. "I did not threaten him," Death answered. "I was merely expressing my surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samarra."*

I don't interrupt Rita's story. "They'd rented a machine that digs post-holes, Viv. It was standing in the corner of the barnyard. Craig went up to it and climbed on it and it fell over and crushed him. Doug had to use the tractor to get it off him. There was no way that machine should have moved, Vivian. It was solid as a silo. The police and the firemen were hanging from it when I got there, and they couldn't make it budge. Craig weighed thirty pounds. He was three years old."

"What did you do, Rita?"

"I sat with Jenny for a while and then I went out to the barnyard to see Craig. Craig's corpse. Somebody'd brought a blue towel from the house to cover him. That was all it took, he was such a little gaffer." Rita pours herself another glass of wine. Her third.

"The thing is, Viv, no one is with him. Jenny's in the house, Doug's with the police, somebody's taken Donny to the neighbour. I go and sit by Craig until the undertaker gets there. It doesn't seem right, leaving him all alone. It seems like something of him is still there."

I'm picturing it as if I'm God. The cloudless sky and the bug-free barnyard. No boatman this time. Death himself over by the tractor wearing

the helmet that makes him invisible. My sister beside the small patch of blue, her head bowed, the July sun creating an arc of burgundy flame across her hair. And there, circling overhead like birds in waiting, two forms I can't make out at first, even though I'm God. Circling round and round and round in that never-never land blue. My eyes follow the forms until at last they come into focus. Rita's long blond hair and the child that would have been twenty this month.

Mid-September, I'm up from the city for another visit. Our mother has moved her phone back into the living-room. When I tell her I'm going with her to church, she says we'll have to leave a bit early—she's shaking hands at the church door before the service. Friday evening she washed dishes with the other ladies after the church social, she says. That cherry outfit has been seen at the hairdresser's, at the post office, at church, at the nursing home, and at her cousin's, all in the same week. My mother's got a definite date with Son of Night, Brother of Sleep. She's finally free to live.

"I can't believe it!" I say to Rita, as we drive out to the farm Sunday afternoon, goldenrod high in the ditches, the trees already beginning to turn.

"Don't forget perversity's always been her presenting characteristic," says Rita.

When the boatman comes for *our mother*, there'll be no shenanigans, I tell my sister. He'll have his pants on, a clean white shirt, maybe even suspenders. The row-boat seat nailed down solid. Death'll be standing tall at his gate with his black cloak pressed and fastened all the way down with sprigs of wolfsbane from his garden.

His garden. I describe it to Rita. Elephant garlic and dead nettle and wormwood along the fence. Rue, its blue-green leaves giving off that strange, acrid scent. Hyssop with its sharp, bitter taste. Horehound and wolfsbane and creeping thyme. Our mother'll be weeding Death's garden before she's ten minutes off the row-boat, and it won't be weeds she's pulling. It'll be sloth, ungodliness, gluttony, unrighteousness. Her angina gone, she'll root them all out in jig time, as she would put it.

Then she'll set to work ironing the clothes off the scarecrows' backs. She'll get at them one by one—the pink blouse of the child with the pie-plate face, the emerald maternity top of the pregnant lady with the penis, the red plaid shirt on the chubby one nearest the gate. She'll set the iron on high, deftly turn the garments this way and that, press them perfect till the humid, beneficent billows of steam rise up to rival the ground mist and finally overcome it, till the horehound lies down with the wolfsbane and both slowly raise their withered limbs in a gesture of defeat.

Mark Mahemoff

Pantoum

Perpetual Care

That bird must be an emblem or guide
standing on the tree top perfectly.
Her whistling is heard above a panoramic view
while clouds move heavily like ships.

Standing on the tree top perfectly
you observe a serenity similar to valium.
While clouds move heavily like ships
you fizzle with nervousness and settle down to stillness.

You observe a serenity similar to valium
while freshly chiselled granite is shifted into place
you fizzle with nervousness and settle down to stillness.
As stamps become expensive and journals lose their subsidies.

While freshly chiselled granite is shifted into place
we mourn the sudden loss of his anger and laughter.
As stamps become expensive and journals lose their subsidies
twelve months disappear and your poem's out of context.

We mourn the sudden loss of his anger and laughter
when the holiday is over and it's time to start worrying.
Twelve months disappear and your poem's out of context
while epitaphs are touched up and dead flowers soon removed.

When the holiday is over and it's time to start worrying
her whistling is heard above a panoramic view.
While epitaphs are touched up and dead flowers soon removed
that bird must be an emblem or guide.

M. Travis Lane

Fly's Wing

What in us has no words, most moves.
A fly wing strikes against a fist.
Pinned laundry on a kite line.

Someone soars and will be down again.
Another flutters on the lawn,
a dying insect.

The moon tugs at its cord,
bored, bored with all we have meant to it.
No one has scissors.

The grossest joy
teeters on small clay footsteps.
It will be here in a minute or so.

Consider a swarm of midges,
a bouquet, a galaxy
almost like Theo's thalictrum—

starry mass whose oblongated circles seem to buzz,
a wheel of fluff for Jacob to ascend,
frail ladders, broken fly wings—

Nothing's permitted. The sense of thrust,
the breaking of the shell—
and pippin's head, larval, blind-eyed,

all stomach and yell,
breaks through to a new capsule.
Call it nest.

John B. Lee

Think of the White Refrigerator Standing in Your Kitchen

The pumpkin has a beauty all of its own.
The full figure
of an incandescent light bulb
is lovely beyond words. Think of the luminescent blue globes
of school rooms; the brown rumps
of quarter-horses.
Think of harp seals and the
deep, rich, throbbing resonance of bass fiddles.
Think of bumble bees. Think of brandy snifters.
Think of the word *opera*, the word *ocean*, the word *oh*. Think
of eggs.
Think of the white refrigerator
standing in your kitchen
like an intensive care nurse quietly checking your charts
adjusting the drip of your dreams
a plump angel
full of cool oranges
singing your dog to sleep.

Beverley Brahic

Nude

Woman lying on paper
take down your arms
Hide your breasts their
shrivelled nipples tense
as berries on a brier in winter or
olives shrunk to the pit
You can't read the small print
and your tongue is dry
what you say is full of guilt

Forget you were tempted
The fruit of the place
you grew up in—
the window you opened
to toss the core into the gravel
(where the dog got it
later spat it out)—
wasn't round Round
was an artist's trick

Woman your back bars
the page like a horizon
the sea always beyond
banging at cliffs Half-peeled
with a knife on the table wasn't
what you thought It was just
a trick of perspective It was
words, at the vanishing point
There Now can you sleep?

The Falling Woman

Shaena Lambert

Some of my dreams feel like memories. In one, Mother has cornered me in a stall. She is trying to get me to close my teeth over the snaffle bit. But it's massive in my mouth, it tastes like tin and the green spit of horses, if it is pushed over my tongue I will gag. Her hands are as fierce as weasel's claws, and they are tugging at the sides of my mouth.

In another I am bareback on Douna, her quarter-horse, while Mother is below and behind me, I can see the shadow of her black hat. The dry hills rise around us, pulsing with crickets. Then Mother slaps Douna's rump, and yells *grip*, but I can't grip, I can only bounce on my crotch in the white sunlight, watching the dirt blur while I tip away and fall.

Once Ben and I were lying here staring at the dark ceiling, and he asked me about my childhood. I grew up in the Okanagan Valley. It was dry, I said. There were cactuses about the size of your thumb bunched around the grey rocks. Hidden punishments. Tell me about your mother, he said. I changed the subject.

I don't talk about her. I dream her. As I walk along the slushy street, or heat my plastic dish of Stouffer's Veal Parmigiana in the microwave, I see the hills rising up, leached of colour, speckled by pines. Sauble Mountain curves above the flats like a reclining hip, a granite cliff cut into it, revealing the etched outline of a falling woman. It is hard to see her, it always was, you have to focus or have someone else point her out, and even then she is partly wishful. Her hair is five milky fissures. Her arching body is a scar in the rock, like a pock on the moon's face. She fled a marriage her father had arranged—according to an Okanagan legend—galloping in the dark up the back of the mountain. But as she reached the top, the moon disappeared; she lost her way and plunged off the cliff.

I see Mother's legs, bowed from riding, her jeans tucked into her steel-toed boots, her checkered shirt which must have belonged to my grandfather—*Papa*. I see her belt with the cattle horns engraved on the buckle; they meet in the middle like a crescent moon. I see Mother's arthritic knuckles, her thumbs strong as crowbars. She rolls up her sleeve and throws down her hand, thumb up, on the kitchen table, daring Uncle

Nesbit to a thumb wrestle. I see her walking out into the dirt yard, the screen door slapping behind her. She walks low in her hips because they ache, still, from my uncompromising birth—the only thing that was bigger than she was—the only thing that knocked her sideways, got her thumb down and twisted until she screamed.

All day today I couldn't picture her face; it blurred under her hat brim. Then I closed my eyes to sleep and her stare burnt into me, her mouth curled. I could see her gold incisor, the yellowed skin of her throat. *Ellen*, she screamed and I sat up in bed, *What the hell do you think you're doing?* Nothing, I wanted to say. I wanted to hold out my hands, show I hadn't touched myself. Then I remembered, she's dead. Any voices I hear come from me.

But now I can't fall back to sleep. I'll pay for it tomorrow. I'll be lightheaded as I clean teeth with my little tools, the tiny scaler, the suction hose, the miniature bowls that hold the prophylaxis gel. This kind of work is like playing Barbie—everything's tiny, even the teeth reflected in the mirror. Today I picked out parsley from the back fissures, then I poked my head into Dr. Stephen French's office. He had X-rays of an embedded wisdom tooth spread on his desk, the photograph of his wife and twin sons on the wall behind him. He looked up, startled, his eyes rimmed by round glasses, like dark birds caught for a moment in a trap. Then he followed me down the hall and we studied the patient together, under the heated lamp. When I passed Dr. French the silver amalgam I saw a mole near his collar.

One of these days I may close his office door behind me. *Look at this strange occlusion*, he will say, and I will stand behind him, observing the ghostly markings of teeth. Then I will touch that mole with my finger. He will close his eyes and shudder like a horse.

I never knew my father. When I was six, Serena, my cousin from Vancouver, told me I'd been born out of wedlock with a hired man. I'd seen Mother demonstrate a headlock on Walt, our current hired man: he'd stood stock still like a rabbit and remonstrated softly, *Now really, Mary*, before landing on his back on the floor. When Serena mocked me that day I knew Mother had done something unseemly, like the headlock on Walt, that had made my father want to disappear.

It was only when I was twelve that I got the facts from Aunt Clara, Serena's mother. That was the summer they drove into the dirt turnaround in a red convertible, chrome fenders and spokes and white vinyl top all shining at once. Serena sat proudly in the front, dressed in red-and-white seersucker, and when she stepped out carefully, so as not to dirty the white leather on her saddle shoes, I saw her dress had a magnif-

icent bow at the back. I instantly wanted it. I wanted everything Serena had with a complete, black need the minute I saw it.

That night after supper I had Clara to myself. Serena had begged off the dishes, saying she was sick—but I knew she was soaking in the bath water reading the Signet Romance which she'd shown to me furtively that afternoon. Mother had gone to check on Douna's foal. As her lantern disappeared into the barn, Clara sighed. "Your mother used to follow Papa out there every night. They were inseparable." She had told me this story—it wasn't the one that interested me—about how, by age three, Papa had given my mother her first horse—not a pony, a gelding named Gibraltar. How Mother knew how to ride deep in her stirrups, cueing with the pressure of her legs. I remembered this story every time I circled Mother in the corral and she yelled, *Don't tiptoe, don't slump, don't flap your elbows, let out your lead when you canter*. I had two red ribbons hanging from the feed room wall, among the sea of her blue ones.

"What was my father like?" I asked.

Clara scrubbed at a casserole dish, her forearms swaying. He had a thin face and dark hair, she said, and he could blow smoke rings just by snapping his jaw. He sounded like the men at Dan's, the main bar in Keremeos. As we hurried by the open door one day, my mother's boots clumping on the board walk, I had glimpsed a man rubbing his white stomach, the eyes of other men glinting near the pool table. I couldn't picture my mother succumbing to any man, but her particular disgust at the men who visited Dan's—the way she gripped my hand, then yanked it as laughter rolled out of the darkness—made it harder to imagine.

"I think she did it to rebel against Papa," Clara said, scouring at the glass casserole beneath the filmy water. "But it backfired. When Papa found out, he swore he'd horsewhip Les if he didn't marry her—and horsewhip your mother if she didn't agree."

Clara stopped and looked out toward the barn. We could see Mother's light through the feed room window.

"Then Papa had his stroke, out in the field. After he was buried, your Mother told Les to get going. Get going or she'd run him off."

"But why?"

"That's your Mother," Clara shook her head. "I guess she couldn't stand the thought of having him around one more second." She pulled out the plug and let the brownish water drain away.

After Mother died I found an old picture of her at the bottom of the horse medicine cupboard. She is about fourteen, standing on the back of Gibraltar, holding the reins like a circus performer, smiling brazenly into the camera. I could see the defiant beginning of anger—of wanting to be a boy, being told she should have been a boy—and being wrapped up in a

girl's body. I imagine her crossing the bare yard to the horse barn in the afternoon sun, her shadow elongated in the dirt. She pushes her new breasts in with her elbows so she will not see them in her shadow. She is fiercely repelled by the growth of her body—for good reason. It will prove fertile as a chicken's egg. It will betray her.

My heels ache from a day squeezed in high heeled slip-ons. I wouldn't be caught dead in orthopedics; that would be the beginning of the end, the spiral toward old age, which starts with orthopedic shoes, moves to opaque stockings, then spreads up to swallow hips, back, and finally hair. The last stage is when the scalp shows beneath the dyed strands of henna. Then it's death—the body lies back and comes apart, only the bones and teeth are left, gleaming against the soil.

It was two months ago this weekend that Ben and I drove to his sister's cottage on Lake Huron. We arrived at night and made love in darkness. As I tried to sleep—tossing in the strange bed—the wind threw sand at the kitchen window. Next morning I saw the white-washed shingles had blown away in chunks, leaving gaps of tar-paper.

I walked to the beach and let the wind hit me. When I came back, I found Ben around the side, out of the wind, chopping driftwood into splinters. He held on to the wood for too long, then brought the axe down and almost nipped off his fingers.

"I need to talk to you," he said.

We squatted next to the house, looking out at the garden of driftwood, listening to the wind moaning against the boards.

"I've been in agony," the words came out with his hot breath. "I've decided to tell Judy—maybe she'll take me back, maybe she won't, but I have to come clean."

On the drive home I sat beside him, not saying a word, drinking coffee from my styrofoam cup, drawing lines in it with my thumbnail. Ben had taken a shower before we left and his hair was wet, even his nose shone. "I have a lot to thank you for," he said. I peeled away a bit of cuticle and left a pink crescent beside my thumbnail.

Now I yank the blinds down, they rattle to the radiator, and when I turn the plastic wand there is darkness. Back in bed I ease my legs out, leaning on one hip, trying to find the position that will let me sleep.

All day Serena and I had been planning to go to the stable to read her paperback. But in the morning we changed the horse sprinklers, then drove with Mother and Clara into town. It was late afternoon when I slid the stable door open on its runner, closing it behind Serena. Inside, the clay floor retained its coolness, and I could hear Douna blowing through

her nose. Mother's collection of tack hung on the walls around us—bridles with bits dangling down, reins coiled around each other, western saddles splayed on their racks.

We hoisted ourselves onto the wall between two stalls and sat with our legs dangling down, watching the colt nurse from Douna's swollen teat. Serena took a frosted lipstick from her red purse.

"Put some on," she offered.

"I can't," I said. "My mother will see."

"What's she going to do? Whip you?" She made a shiver of feminine contempt—for my mother for whipping me, for me for being whipped. Then she reached into her purse again, drawing out, at last, the dog-eared paperback—*My Darling Ravager!* On the front a pirate captain, his shirt streaming open at the chest, clenched the hilt of his sword with one hand, while his other grasped a woman by the waist. Her back was arched, her lips open and her eyes closed. "Swooning with desire," Serena explained. She leafed to a place she had marked.

"This is the part where the pirate captain has tied Lady Birkwith in the hold. Listen to this: '*You swine,*' she cried out, *her violet eyes flashing, 'you'll pay for this.'* He gave her a mocking half-smile, then she felt his strong arms grip her. She breathed in his murky scent, gasping as his mouth found hers. She tried to struggle, but found she could not, did not want to. A hot tide of passion surged through her. Then she gasped again, as the sweet torture of his hands began to unlace the bodice of her gown."

We looked at each other and laughed.

"How big are your breasts now?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"Mine are bigger than last year," she said.

She pulled open the elastic collar of her dress and showed me a cotton training bra. She tossed her Alice-in-Wonderland blonde hair back over her shoulders.

"Well. Let's see yours."

I untucked my checked shirt from my jeans and lifted it up. "Ooh," she said, "you've got dark nipples." I felt a blush of shame course through me. Her hair was blonde; mine was a tangle of muddy curls. Her nipples were pink; mine were an unseemly dark shade, like eggplant. I knew my face in the dusk was plain and pinched like my mother's.

I got Papa's bridle from its peg. It was an ancient thing with cross reins and a breast harness for barrel racing. I'd polished it many times, a painful process, particularly in the hot summer: so much leather to rub back and front with saddle soap, so many bits of plated silver.

"You be Lady Birkwith," I said. "I'll tie you in the hold."

She rolled her eyes but agreed, lowering herself reluctantly onto the

hay-strewn floor of the empty stall. She held out her hands and I laced the reins around her wrists.

"Ouch, that pinches," she said. I unhooked the clip of the harness and wrapped it around her forearms, over her breasts. I watched my dark weasel hands knot the leather around the steel base of the manger. We looked at each other and Serena giggled.

"This is so silly," she said.

"I know." The white leather of her saddle shoe glowed where it stuck out in front of her. I pushed back her skirt on her thigh.

"What are you doing?" she giggled.

"Just something." The sun had sunk beneath the high window. I ran my fingers along the straps of her training bra.

"Oh, Pirate," she laughed. "Don't do that."

"I'll do what I like," I sneered. Then I whispered, "The sweet torture of my hands are touching the bodice of your dress." I pushed up her skirt until her white underwear showed. Then I pushed my finger against the cotton crotch.

"Don't," she said suddenly.

"Why not?"

"I don't like it."

"Too bad."

I pulled back the elastic of her underwear at the leg and looked at her vagina which was bare still, like a child's.

"Untie me," she hissed.

"No."

"You untie me this instant or I'm going to tell Aunt Mary."

I felt like I was falling. "I don't care." I took a piece of hay and dabbed it in a mound of fresh green manure, then I ran it along the white leather of her shoes, over her frilled ankle socks, and up her dress. I smudged it across the pink sateen-covered berets and dabbed it on each of her cheeks. She started to cry.

"Be quiet," I said. "They'll hear you." She cried like a child, not caring what noise she made. I shook her a bit, but she started crying harder.

"Stop it."

"You let me go," she wailed.

"Stop it, or I'm going to smack you."

She let out another howl and I slapped her across the face. My palm tingled. She stopped crying abruptly and looked at me.

"Please," I whispered. "Stop crying and I'll let you go."

Her mouth turned down and she drew a long gulp of air, then let out another howl.

"I'm going then," I said. I stood up and walked out of the stall. I closed

it behind me and leaned against the door. She kept crying.

"I'm going," I called out to her, and this time I did. I slid the door closed behind me and walked down the road, across the flats to the base of Sauble Mountain. I climbed up the path until I came to my favourite rock, which had retained heat in the dusk like a warm-blooded animal. I sat on it, looking down at the flats, the barn, the house.

Night came. I heard Mother hollering, our collie Freya barking, then Clara's concerned voice. Two black figures approached the barn and went in. Then, a short while later, they came out. Serena's silhouette blended with her mother's. I waited until the moon came up, large and full, until the rock had grown cold and I was shivering. Then I walked back down. The bunch grass looked cool and very clear and the stars overhead shone with a painful brilliance.

My heels ground the dirt as I crossed the turn-around. Then I saw a glint of silver near the horse barn, in the shadow of the ponderosa pine—it was Mother, the bit of Papa's bridle dangling from her hand. I walked across the bright yard toward her, then stood a yard from her. She stared at the ground.

"I don't know why I did it," I said.

"Why did you use Papa's bridle?" Her voice quavered in the dark.

My tears were a dark tar I couldn't release. She still made no move to punish me, the bridle hung limp in her hand, and when she looked up I saw she was also close to crying. If I crossed the moonlit dirt she would reach out and enfold me, I would breathe the suede of her jacket. Then a breeze bristled the pine, the moon went behind a cloud. "Mother?" I called because I couldn't see her face. She was against me, I felt her clench my collar.

"You're a bad girl, aren't you?"

"No," I said, "It was Serena—"

"You're a very bad girl," I felt her breath on my face.

She yanked me around to face the stable wall. "Say you're bad," she said, pulling up my shirt. "I'm bad," I cried, as the reins whistled through the air, biting into my back. I clung to the siding as she hit me with a blind relish.

Afterwards, as I lay on my bed in the dark, the door opened. It was Clara; I could tell from the smell of lemony talcum. She was wearing a Chinese-style dressing gown of turquoise and red satin which rustled stiffly as she sat on the side of the bed. I thought at first she was stroking my head, but then I realized she was combing my hair.

"People do things they regret," she said.

I didn't say anything. She worked away at the knots in silence. "Papa hurt your mother once," she said at last. "Perhaps you know that."

Mother had never told me this. But when Clara told me, I knew I had always known, that I'd been born with this knowledge, that I'd carried it with me from beyond my earliest memories and dreams.

Mother died of pelvic cancer when I was seventeen. She's buried in the flat expanse of graves near Keremeos. I picked out a slab as marker, nothing else. It says:

*I've gone to where the darkness ends,
To where the wind blows free,
I've gone away from this small world,
To face my master eternally.*

I don't think she would have liked it, especially the part about the master.

Fourteen floors down, I can hear the thud of cars crossing the street bridge that draws the four lanes from the QEW into the three lanes of the Gardiner. Beyond is the grey body of the lake, untouchable, serenely polluted. When I close my eyes at last I travel down the freeway, past the frozen neck of the lake, and I look down on the moonlit farm, the whispering corn flats, the old horse barn. Black and white and gray and dun and roan, the horses wait, blowing through their noses. Mother's teeth gleam where she sits on Douna, under the soughing pine. I swing behind, resting my body against her back, and then we begin to canter toward the top of the mountain.

Patrick Lane

four poems

Silence

It is night and the new moon
reaches through the branches of the elms.
Today I planted the potatoes in the spring earth
and tonight we fought
over my silence, you calling me a hermit, me
saying nothing. Two thousand miles away
the grass begins to grow on my father's grave,
my brother's, and my mother burns
the few letters that might have explained who she was.
In another week the elms will leaf and I
will have to go far to see the night.
Under the earth the harvest prepares itself,
the eyes of the potatoes sending out long tendrils
some of which will be roots. My mother's silence,
my father's murder, my brother's death. These are
what I think of under the moon. They are not
a sadness, though you in your anger
think it so. The words between us
are only words. It was your eyes I was afraid of,
their sudden flowering, and what was behind them,
my body no longer wanting anything
but peace, the quiet I have searched for, the moon,
my shovel still in the earth, dead wood, iron.

Too Spare, Too Fierce

Once when the dawn is large enough
you will go out into that stiff blue and find a cat's paw
in the bird bath, a gift from the crow to morning.
There was a moment last night when you started walking
the iron rail in your bare feet on the bridge above the river
you believed you wouldn't fall. Now, this morning,
you shake so badly you can't hold the glass,
lowering your face to it, your tongue
a thick blue muscle trying to drown.
Outside, mosquito larvae dance
among the claws and the little red cords
where the birds come to bathe. Old crow,
I will come as soon as I can.

Held Water

I have discovered I cannot bear to be
with people anymore. Even the querulous love of old friends
defeats me and I turn away, my face staring
at the hard sleet
scraping at what little is left of the trees
in early spring. The bellied pods of the wysteria hold
my face, upside down
in minute mirrors of held water. Ice falls from the eaves.
The telephone rings and like a monk I chant to myself
the many names of whatever gods I can find
in the temple bells of the hidden voices. I know
under the rotting snow there are small flowers
like insistent girls giggling in narrow attic beds,
and yes,
I know the flowers are not girls, just as
I know that what resemblance there is is lost
in the ordinary crying we think we will release
and don't. The little furred pods of the wysteria crack open
dropping the mirrors from their blue hands.
Ice slides from the roof and for a moment the air is torn.
I think if I wasn't afraid
I could play back the sounds of my friends,
the measure of their voices
almost steady in the hard wind out of the north.
Little flawed bells.
If I didn't hear them I could almost listen.

Lights

There are these lights in the sky.
Little butterflies of the night,
Little dreamers. Each time my lover
Rises to walk in the early garden
I watch her from the window.
I cannot take my eyes from her.
See how she leans under the shade,
The cherry blossoms above her
As she touches the cat
Who follows her everywhere, wanting
Only to be with her as he sits
Among the thick dark mosses.
How much night there is.
How I wait, knowing, for now
She comes only to me,
Her small feet, wet with dew,
As white as stars
In the early morning grass.

Margaret Gunning

Somedays

Somedays, the harshness of nostrils

Bus-lurching crowds, rudespeak
of news-seekers, is too much for me,

I need to nestle, to throstle,
wrestle with the renewal

(of your mint-melting
inner adagio)

The bus vomits; I catch hold of things
again. Taking charge of the crowd,
grabbing thumbs
manipulating the traffic

pulling the world with a pair of
pliers

It's no good any more: I need your dependable
light somnolence: the old silk robe
of your being
(I need to
wear you
like
hair)

Personal Literature

Lynne Macdonald

The Story of Frank

This is a true story. It's Frank's story. My best friend who's dating his best friend tells me; details are skimpy, chronology is scatter-shot; it is meant to be simple and declarative and race to the end like lemmings to the sea. It goes something like this: Frank is a druggie at Rochdale, in Toronto, and a major dealer. So when he gets busted big time, really big time, he's sent to Kingston Penitentiary. For how long, it's not said. While he's in Kingston, he takes university courses that will eventually allow him to become a lawyer. You know he's smart from the moment you talk to him but most people can't even have traffic violations and become lawyers. But never mind, this is his story and he's different than anyone on the planet.

So he finally gets out of Kingston and starts articling. Or he writes the Bar Ad and then starts articling. Concurrent with this is the fact that he's got this daughter by this wife he divorces when he gets out of prison. Or before. Anyway, when he gets out, he gets full custody of the child (again, not explained, but he's different, you must understand this), and moves back into his mother's home with her. And when he's at work either doing the Bar Ad or articling, and his mother's off teaching, there is a nanny looking after the daughter.

Except that one day, the nanny is pushing the baby around in a stroller on a sidewalk near the house and whoosh, up drives a big black car and someone climbs out and, pushing the nanny aside, grabs the daughter and drives away with her. The nanny looks up into the sky as if something there will answer her questions.

When Frank gets home and finds out what happened to his daughter, he's very angry. Apparently, he knows who might have been driving that big black car and later he makes death threats to them and they make death threats back to him. These people have something to do with his ex-wife. He gets his picture in the local newspaper where he complains about the slug-footedness of the local constabulary in regards to his daughter's case but does not mention death threats from any direction.

Time goes by. The police try to find his ex-wife, who, rumours have it, might be in British Columbia, the far North or any other spot on the

planet except Toronto. A year later she is finally found in British Columbia, in a log cabin, in the Interior somewhere, with a group of men and women and children of dubious kinship. The ex-wife doesn't know where her daughter is; no one else seems to know either. The next spring the body of the little girl is found when the pond at the bottom of the hill from the log cabin finally melts.

Notes on the Story of Frank

This story is a fairy tale with no happy ending for miles. Frank is tall and dark and somewhat handsome (handsome in the sense that one is handsome if seen from a very long distance, the parts are there), and can be seen to be the sympathetic hero. His loss is supposed to explain his subsequent descent into alienation and bitterness, ice forming around his heart when his daughter's body is found. The ex-wife is either the Wolf or a really stoned and absent-minded Grandma at Grandma's House, depending on whose side you're on. The daughter is the unfortunate child who really does lose her way in the forest. The nanny becomes a nun, she's so racked with guilt, although no one expected her to throw herself in front of the car or anything. There is no love interest.

It is presented to me as a fairy tale, and I like it like that, it makes it easier to tell, over and over. Except that I'm drinking at the same bar, at the same table actually, as Frank one night, about a year after I'd heard the story, and he points to another man up at the bar, a small nondescript sort, and says, "That's the guy who kidnapped my daughter." And I, knowing now how much Frank lies, say, "Yeah, right. The guy who kidnapped your daughter is standing right there and you're not throwing yourself at him and strangling him."

"Yeah. It wasn't his fault, he's a junkie." Which seems too magnanimous for Frank, the man everyone warned me to stay away from for a three-week period because he'd almost strangled this new girlfriend just because she wouldn't see him anymore. I'd been out of town; we were having one of our "off" times. I saw them once, walking up Yonge Street holding hands and I almost vomited; he'd never held hands with me in public.

"I don't believe you."

"I'll ask him over."

"Don't you dare. I don't want to talk to him. I don't believe—"

Introductions are made. I smile sweetly and this kidnapper/junkie and I carry on a conversation of sorts. We do not talk of death threats or kidnappings but he does tell me that Frank was in the same cab "when he was born." I ask quietly, "How could he be in the same cab when your

mother was giving birth to you, aren't you about the same age?" Which makes the kidnapper/junkie almost rupture with laughter. I find out that "being born" means the first time you shoot heroin. I am not a naïve woman, but I am very literal; I believe in the stories I am told. I know there are grey areas in life but I think it's unreasonable to be able to know where these areas are when things are presented to you in black and white.

The How Television Fucks You Up Story

I'm at a staff party that I don't want to be at and I'm wearing a dress. Which is extraordinary in itself but the dress is the kind that I never wear: it's cotton and tight and short. It's like I don't know what to wear if I'm not in jeans and a T-shirt so when I have to go to one of these grown up affairs, I go way the other way and buy something so unlike me that hardly anyone recognizes me. I even have to remember to hold my stomach in all evening.

At one point in the evening this best friend of my boss, after being introduced to me in a group of others, asks me to dance. He dances very close, practically on the spot. He moves his hands around on my back in a way that suggests that he isn't just trying to figure out whether or not I'm wearing a bra. I almost develop a full body rash, we are that hot. He is almost as handsome as an actor. He looks like men looked like on television when I was a little girl growing up. He looks like one, he smells like one and he dresses like one. I am extremely flattered. And my nipples are paying attention.

He's also married, as my nipples should have known. So when the last dance is sounded and we're the last people on the dance floor and we've almost reached the point where we're going to have to start taking clothes off, he has to drive back home to the suburbs. He isn't that married; he wants to see me again. Soon. I croak, "Sure." And then stand there, wondering if it was all a figment of my imagination or if it had really happened at all, watching him put his leather car coat on at the coat check and catching his smile around his friend's shoulder before they walk out together.

Now I'm aroused and standing in the middle of the dance floor, alone, so I run off to "our" bar. Frank and I are in one of our "every once in a while" phases: every once in a while he talks to me like I'm a human being; every once in a while we actually go home together; and every once in a while I actually think of trying to meet someone else. Most of the time though he's like a bad pop song that lodges in your head and drives you crazy for days.

Frank's there, just like I knew he would be, except that he's entertaining some woman and her friend. My face drops when I see them at his table but I go over anyway, and crouch by his side. He is being nice tonight; he talks to me and smiles. He may be in shock about the dress; he may be trying to fuck the other woman and wants to fool her into thinking that he is a rational human being. All I know is that I've been in love, or at least major obsession, with him for a long time and I want him. Tonight.

Arousal and alcohol always make me dramatic; okay, alcohol makes me dramatic, arousal makes me confused. So I go back out into the night, to my apartment. I'll call him from there; this other woman can't possibly know him or love him like I do, no one can. So I pick up the phone and call the bar and ask for Perry Mason. Frank picks up the phone and without bothering to ask who it is, he says, "What do you want, Cheryl?" Which even though it's a little creepy, I still think it's pretty nifty. Not a stride off, though, I tell him that I want him to come over, that I miss him. He tells me to wait outside the building for him, that he won't be that long, he'll come and get me.

I think I might have been crazy about him for the Perry Mason thing alone. The bartenders don't think twice or laugh or say, "Who?" They just hand the phone over. He's called all the time in there, for bail or other such things. And everyone asks for Perry Mason.

So I go downstairs to wait. I'm drunk enough now that I'm having imaginary conversations with him. I may have even taken a drink out with me, for company. And finally, after what seems like ages but which is probably just about the exact amount of time that he has to spend trying to find out whether this other woman will sleep with him or not, he appears, all in white, like some weird, tall, skinny angel. It's like for one very long moment I'm waiting and waiting and then all of a sudden he's there, walking toward me in this white suit and he's smiling and saying something nice like he missed me and I'm crying from the drinking by then and he picks me right up off the ground and carries me to his car, telling me he is there now and I'll be just fine. I'll be just fine.

The next morning he tells me I've gained weight and when I get up from the mattress on the floor and put "The Low Spark of High Heeled Boys" on the turntable, he asks me if I'm aware that new music has been released in the last twenty years. The room smells of sex and cigarette smoke and past selves.

The First Real Life Version

We actually go to the movies one night, together. It is a disaster; real life does not become us. I have not realized how much more he doesn't

want real life than I do. I'm supposed to select the film and the only thing that interests me is this Robert Mitchum mystery-noir thing which turns out to be more stupid than noir. Frank sits beside me tossing popcorn from the popcorn cup into his mouth without using his hands, which annoys me, and talks very loudly for no reason from time to time. Mind you I'm a little spiky, myself, without alcohol; it usually dulls my senses and makes me err on the love side of the love/hate thing.

When we walk out into the cool night and street lights behind the theatre, he launches into a diatribe about how awful the movie was, like I'd personally raised the money, hired the actors, and directed the thing myself. I am hoping that we can go off to have a few drinks; with a few drinks under my belt, I can tell him to fuck off. But he wants to drive me home as he has to get up and work the next morning, or so he says. So we get in the car, looking like we might actually be a real couple, silent and tired after a hastily grabbed movie on a week-night, the corners of our mouths pulled down, our stares blank.

He slides onto my bed once we get to my apartment and I sit as far away from him as I can but not that far as the apartment is only about ten feet by twelve. He notices. He gets unfriendlier by the moment. There is some test going on and I don't know exactly what it is but I don't want to break that distance. We chit-chat, struggling for conversation, lobbing dead-ended sentences at each other. He didn't like my movie selection so I won't curl up at his side like I'm Doris Day or someone; you can play that game both ways.

But soon he's standing up, really perturbed now, with a frown that is threatening to crease his face permanently. I've severely pissed him off. Beyond asking him how, I don't really know how to remedy the situation; I've been crazy about him for a year now and chased him all over the place and now for the first time he is actually sober and focused here in my apartment, and it's way before midnight, and he can't leave soon enough for me.

The Story of Cheryl

I'm not the sort of person who has stories written about them. Until I'm twenty, I lead a pretty normal life in a small southwestern Ontario city: one sister, two parents, a cat and later a dog. My father is the principal at the local high school; he got to shake Trudeau's hand and lead him into the school away from the helicopter's blades and sit beside him on the platform in the front of the assembly when he visited our school at the height of Trudeaumania. My mother is the smartest person in the world and she can see through walls when it comes to anything I'm trying to

hide from her. My sister is freckled and cute and my best friend. I read too much; I am way too dreamy; I dawdle; I under-achieve. I don't know it, but I am waiting to leave.

So if you have to shift my life into a narrative form, and you want it to be somewhat near the truth, it goes something like this: I finally move to Toronto, the city of sophistication, the place where I belong (or so I have thought since I could read). I'd gone to university at home with all of my friends, and now, in Toronto, I finally have my own place and my own job and I go out at night with new friends. We aren't sitting around talking about books or art but it will do. I am still in love with the city and I'm an adult, and since I didn't get my MRS in university, I will meet the man I'll marry right here in Toronto which will be even better.

So I meet a lot of guys but they are all good-time boys, even I know that, though I try to pretend that each one might be *the one*. I try to see the potential in people, not the reality. And then one day, because my best friend starts going out with his best friend, I meet this Frank guy who is tall and skinny and not very attractive physically, but his eyes are deep and dark, and he is really smart and quick and he makes me think. Back then, making me think was the greatest aphrodisiac in the world.

So I let him drive me home the night we meet, and, as it happens, we get to talking so much that we decide to stop off at Fran's and have a coffee. Once there, he thinks he'll be really charming by being insulting, which alarms me but at the same time intrigues me. At one point, just when the waitress bends over to refill our coffee, he leans across to me and says, "Do you know what you are?" and without waiting for my reply, he spells out c-u-n-t and says, "But the c isn't a cedilla" and I think I'll die, the air leaves my body so fast. The waitress doesn't flinch, but I scrinch my eyes at him and look over at someone else, and he glares at me in that way that even then, in the beginning, I know to be his significant glare, and reaches over to hold my hand. I know even then too, that there is too much of an edge to his behaviour for it to be just juvenile.

He is the smartest person I've ever known, but he is smart in a bad way. And he kisses too roughly, and doesn't talk to me sometimes the day after we've had sex the night before. But his best friend tells my best friend who tells me about his story. Some days I think I'd been waiting all my life for a story like his. And I think his story must mean that he has another side to him that no one hardly ever sees. And signifies a loss that I can equate with my abortion, which troubles me only when I think of it, which is hardly ever. So not only does he have another side that I can force myself to remember when he's being particularly horrible, but now we have something in common. And all of this dicking around being mean to me and then being nice to me and then being mean to me again, blah

blah blah, is just his version of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

So I don't really have a story by myself at this point anymore, it's "our story." And it's not a fairy tale, it's more like the classic Hollywood screenplay, I think: boy hates girl, girl hates boy, years go by and their friends grow truly sick of them both and move away, and then, one day, in minute one hundred and five of the movie, girl and boy kiss with clenched teeth and suddenly fall in love. You've seen it a million times.

So I ignore trivial details like how sick he is or what he's like to sleep with. It's how we'll eventually come together, all slights forgotten, in a final recognition that we were meant for each other, and marry and have at least six children, that is important. I'll stay home and colour with the children and make big suppers and he'll get home late and tired from work, and over the years we won't talk that much but we'll always know we know each other like no one else does, just by looking at each other. He can even go out at night, as long as he comes home to me. He can even fool around if he really wants to, as long as he doesn't fall in love, and he comes home to me.

If you're in a sonnet, you don't fight the rhyme scheme, that kind of thing. You see, it is all about the children, those children lost in the woods.

The Next to Last Real Life Story: Sunday at the Art Gallery

Andy Warhol is going to be signing his new book at the Art Gallery. The signing will be on a Sunday afternoon, the shakiest time of the week for those of us who live in bars. If I want to go with Frank, I have to show up at his house at one o'clock and we'll take the bus down together. This is relayed to me in the opposite of tones usually reserved for an invitation to spend at least part of Sunday together. I almost turn back about three times but I'm at his door at one o'clock. He is ready, but looks very surprised to see me. We walk in silence to the bus stop. As we wait for the bus, he tells me that he knows "some people" in New York who know Andy. He is going to ask Andy about them. I laugh. We ride the bus in silence.

Once we get to the Art Gallery, he wants to have lunch. We sit in the cafeteria and I order a glass of wine and a salad. He is disdainful of my request; he is going to have one of the entrées. Everything is out of kilter: I am acting like a nine-year-old, and he is acting like he is the king of whatever country he is pretending to be in. He treats the waiter like he is his personal butler. I am hungover and confused and he is shaking his head at me because I'm not pontificating about art. I know it is hopeless and always will be.

We leave the cafeteria and enter the room where the signing is to take place and discover that hundreds of people have formed a long line-up. Andy is seated behind a plain wooden table, signing soup cans and copies of his new book. Frank and I get in line and he starts telling me that "these people" he knows in New York had been "left out to dry" by Andy and he is going to confront him when we get up to the front. I step on his left foot with both feet and twist around the cuffs on his shirt and say, "Don't you dare embarrass me" and he pulls his arms up and around and pins my arms behind my back. I whine loudly. The right buttock of the woman in front of us twitches.

We wrestle with each other for the next half hour as we slowly make our way up to the front of the line-up. When we get to the table, Frank doesn't confront Andy, he doesn't even say anything to him, and he actually buys a copy of the book. We leave the stifling hot room and walk out into the fresh air. What would I like to do now? I am asked. I can't think of anything else in the whole of the city of Toronto on a fine, sunny, blue-skied Sunday to do except have sex with him, which I don't want to do. I don't know, I say quietly. Vexed with me because I've become even more pale and sullen than usual, he throws up his arms and says, "See you later" and we leave each other and go our separate ways. I've never felt so lonely. I cry all the way home on the subway.

The Dream Story

About five years after I leave Toronto for good, I have a dream about Frank that is so embarrassing that I only tell a few close personal friends. After I finish telling it, my women friends say, Really? and spin the word out really long and end it up really high, like I couldn't have come up with anything as anachronistic if I'd installed a wringer washer in my laundry room. My men friends think it is very romantic. And sweet.

The gist of the dream is this: it's been years since I've seen Frank, we haven't even lived in the same city for years. But one night I'm coming home from work and when I reach the door to my apartment, at the top of a long flight of stairs, I notice that the door is unlocked. I shrug in that way that dreams allow you to—so it's unlocked, there must be a reason—and walk into my apartment. I place my groceries down on the kitchen table and on the table, rather mysteriously, is a cocktail glass, like a champagne glass, filled with something that might even be champagne. Now I am getting a little concerned (what is this?), and drawing closer to the glass, I notice that there is something in the bowl of the glass. It is a ring, a single white pearl on a gold setting. I hold the glass up to the light and suddenly, from behind the curtains, steps Frank, who, raising a glass he'd been holding behind him, says, "Will you, darling?"

The Last Real Life Story

My parents' surprise twenty-fifth anniversary is in a month's time, and I ask him if he would like to drive the sixty miles or so to come to the party. This is a really big deal, this anniversary; my relatives and my parents' friends are all going to be there. I am terrified to introduce him to them. I know how weird he really is, but I don't want them to know that *I* know; I don't really want *them* to know either, but it just seems imperative that they meet, at least once.

He surprisingly agrees and on the night of the party, he phones about seven o'clock from a local bar, saying that the friend he's arranged to see at the same time is running late, and he'll try to get over when he can. I'm in a frenzy as now he'll miss the surprise part. I know I should be thankful he's even called, but there is a feeling that I'm afraid he's not going to make it; either that, or he's going to splat weird all over the place when he finally does get here.

He calls again. And then finally arrives, about eleven. I introduce him to my father three times; I am quite drunk now. I know I'm losing it with my father but I try to stay on the sidelines and not talk to anyone for too long. And Frank is being precisely polite. When everyone has left, Frank and I go out to his car and drive around the block a few times; we've hardly talked at the house and he's going to stay the night at his friend's. We sit outside the house in the car for a long time; just before he puts the key back in the ignition, we hold hands and look out our respective windows in silence. I mention his daughter, and my abortion, in a slur of drunkenness. There are tears in his eyes.

The Really Real Life Story

Life never does happen the way it does in books. When I think back to that time now, it looks and feels like I think life would if you were one of the characters in a Dorothy Parker story—everything's out of focus and slightly nauseous, and nothing's really what it's supposed to be. It just got worse over the years between Frank and me. The story of Frank and Cheryl wasn't a fairy tale or a Hollywood movie or a Shakespearean comedy. There was no story. I moved away from Toronto once and then came back for one more year, until I finally left for good.

Whether Frank was talking to me or not, it didn't help that when I looked over any night of the week from whatever table I was at in the bar, he'd almost always be staring at me. I'd count. There'd be other people at his table talking to him, the waiter coming by, and he'd still be staring at me. I used to believe that that meant something, that those eyes of his could see into my soul, that he was the only person on earth

who really knew me. But that was part of the myth that might not even have been true; he might have just been crazy as a loon and fond of fucking up principals' daughters.

My sister used to say that I only became animated when I talked about him; the rest of the time, it was like I was just waiting to be asked. And I know that. There are still more questions than answers, but he's the only story I have, like athletes who peak in high school and leave competition forever for pick-up games on Saturdays. I have a good, steady life now, but it's a daily one; there's no narrative arc.

Every once in a while, usually when I'm rooting around for my income tax receipts, I come across an old business card of Frank's. The business card is wrinkled and dirty from being handled. One night just before I left Toronto for good, I drunkenly taunted him, saying that he'd screwed me around and never cared for me in the first place. He pulled his face close to mine and said, "I'll tell you exactly what I think of you."

And he took a business card out of his jacket and wrote something on the back of it. He stood up and handed the card to me and walked over to the bar. I was sick to death of us by then, but I was still afraid to look at it. I put it in my jacket and didn't turn it over until the next morning.

It said, "8.5."

Michael Crummey

Three Pictures of Ann

i.

The blade of her right shoulder
a blue tattoo;
back still wet from a shower
the skin studded with
tiny beads of water

Twenty-four
she doesn't believe in God or in love
towels her damp hair
into tangles

Blue scar stitched beneath skin
where it can't be reached
fixed there
 almost permanent

ii.

White duvet
the warmth of her asleep
 the fact that she
doesn't need you to be here

She trusts herself implicitly
the way a sleeper trusts the heart
to continue on its own,
as if her body is
everything there is to know;
pierced her ears with a sewing needle
a bar of soap held behind
each lobe in turn

Blur of her face almost touching your face
a single light turned to the wall
on her desk;
silver earrings
hoops the size of an iris

iii.

Morning light
newspaper opened across
the breakfast table,
a long grey braid of smoke
curling above her head

All week long in the lab
she dissects small animals,
studying their central nervous systems
gastro-intestinal tracts
cardio-vascular mechanisms

Ask her sometime,
she can tell you why
nothing lasts forever

Looks up from the paper now,
eyes so dark they seem
to have no pupil
a cigarette held half-way
to her mouth

What, she says to you
What is it?

Lynn Strongin

A Climate of Affection

Burnt umber
moves over and under

the circles of the mind.
I feel like a very old merry-go-round

scorched and
shined.

Turning the gears
of affections, reflections

where things my mother taught me
to make the clockspins less long

fail.
Brass and bronze

sheet over.
Smoky mirrors darken.

There's the gold ring;
but what's to change

me? A bit lame but still in orbit,
slow with the end.

Counting on the bowl of roses on the table, the warm supper,
the circling clime, the winding down.

Steven Heighton

four poems

In The Light, Wherever Eyes

Leave me. I love her most when her eyes leave me
Sunrise, the sun a palette of reds she raises
Among olive trees by a dry rill, where she kneels

Painting a scene I'll have to guess—*of the sun*
Above a stand of jack-pines, by a stream
Brawling with snowmelt, spring—?

I see her some ways off I like the way
She's become a stone for stillness, seeming to know
How an artist has to disappear

Into landscape and lover
to see them, and scratch the page
as twigs a frozen tarn, but

here it's high summer, and hot—so the leaves
of this orchard in the foothills
Of the Alpilles, where her palette is setting

the mustard afire, grow clenched, and now I see
how I love her most when her eyes leave me
and she is not for me but for the rills

the pulsing
of poppies and sunburned olives and the sea
for the shadow of her fingers etched into sage
for a breath,

brief drawings

on the canvas of a field

in the light where her eyes lead me

An Elegy, Years After Sarah

So her ceiling a map of stars. First time we made love
late afternoon late winter, and after as she slept
how her room fogged up with dusk
and paper stars she'd stuck up there in childhood
came out in strange constellations
and I missed the earth
till her room was night her breath deepening the stars
cooling down: I said *come closer* and her eyes
half-opened—flashing back whatever light there was—went out.

Graveyard in the North Country, Again

Through a telescope of bone: nebulae
of fossils, shale
atmospheres under a field in winter *can you hear me
hear me still* where the bones grow
lonely as brown, brittle grass (but bones
never do grow "lonely")

no)

and if the dead could dream
and we overheard:

*a door into the earth door closing behind us
a way out a ways beneath winter neither here nor
elsewhere over thunderheads of clay hailing down
free of small talk voided of in-trays out-trays
and the clock-
punching sun "by salaries
betrayed" and sold and
sucked dry of all our currency in the bargain
basement of the grave*

Through the fine scope of a finger's bone: cells and
neutrons iridescent
like the fireflies we saw one dusk
hovering in the hollowed
ribs of a dead horse, by the fence
of an Indian graveyard in the Rockies

ah,

if the dead could drink
and our words were rain:

*I loved you like a field without fences
filled by the mountain's galloping shadow.
Every quarter of the wind that rolled
like a gust of forgetting through the senses
drives me toward you. Each hour of broken road
I choked down with the bile of custom
crumbles into dust with the dumb wisdom
of the elements, is spread apart by weeds,
enveloped by the steady rockfall.*

*Years now, roofless, drunk with the rains
at the treeline where only trails make choices,
we're still climbing together to the col
as your bones sink deeper roots into the plains
and spur the dust of Assiniboine horses.*

The Ecstasy of Skeptics

EXIT signs in the scholars' hallway
lead through polished sheets of plate glass
into air into thin air—

outborne

from an ivory silence
where the world was to be rephrased
where the skeleton key of learned
rigour, cracks
feckless in the lock, where screens
glow green as chlorophyll (or
landfill, breeding—a Babel
of cavilled, rootless words that mean,
in the heart's hearing, what?)

This tongue

is a moment of moistened dust, it must learn
to turn the grit of old books
into hydrogen, and burn
The dust of the muscles must burn
down the blood-fuse of the sinews, the tendons'
taut wick, these bones like tinder giving light
to read by, and heat, the winter light is already
lagging, we'll soon be less than cinders, adrift
in an aftermath of space . . .

Voices in the scholars' hallway
lead through fastened doors
into catacombs of jargon, parchment hives.

Now, love. This way. With the lights on. Blazing.

Do the Locomotion

Mark Anthony Jarman

The doomed coach touched my shoulder. *Go*. I jump the boards. The other team's goon kept saying, "Choo 'n me, choo 'n me." I thought this was a little overly dramatic but maybe it gave him an edge. The other team's goon hit me and I dropped, half my face burning. I did the dead cat bounce. He had wrists like 4 × 4 posts, snake tattoos. Broken orbital bone or something in my cheek. My body said, stay down; gravity said, stay down; my ex-wife somewhere in TV land said, stay down; Waitress X at a restaurant screen said, please stay down please. I got up. He popped me in the temple. I got my bell rung. "Know where you are?" they ask. I look around. "Yeah. The fucking minors."

Where the others imagined the bus crawled to, I don't know. To some place they expected to get something. For me it crawled toward her—exclusively. But when the seal leaked oil, we crawled very slow. When the headlights and electrical blew, we taped big flashlights to each outside corner of the bus. The reaches opened before us and closed behind, and I kept hearing the stupid galoot voice: you and me, you and me.

In Philadelphia our team bus stopped at a red light and kids trotted out with spray cans. Around Germantown grand stone mansions are gone to scum, filigree porches tilting, colonial pillars falling, nothing like them in Alberta. George Washington used to hang out here; now he'd get rolled, killed for his wooden teeth. Where the republic began it now unravels. At my uncle's stop the train platform is burned, the lights smashed. My uncle has to use a tunnel to cross under the track. It's absolutely dark as the lights are smashed out. A kid has hidden a newspaper machine there on its side. My uncle, eighty-four, steps through the blind tunnel and walks his shin into the metal corner; he falls in pain, his Irish voice cursing, and he has to crawl out of the filthy tunnel. There's a garbage strike, weird rabble hanging around, air conditioners on like constant helicopters. Is this our fate? All of us in our dotage, cursing where we live, unable to stand or understand what plays on TV or the radio, tripping over objects in the black tunnel, something maliciously placed in our way, gunfire, dark roving gangs, the old world seeming to shrink and fall around our

ears. I worry Philly or L.A. is waiting for us no matter where we live. They're just seeing it first at a few select theatres.

Monday's mauve light goes on forever. Weather keeps changing over the land, piles up on mountain cusps and whaleback dunes and wrench faults. The weather spills onto the high plains a bit at a time, like out of a heavy bucket. Hail falls, then low cloud lies on the valley while above the peaks the sky moves in blue and orange streaks. A weird mix, like with the waitress, chalk and cheese, not right but exciting. I want a train to her brain, to meet in beauty and in blood; delaying her sleek underwear and slow hips, learning the tongue behind her teeth, careful in her slender throat. To move inside her is to live. I look out clean windows and jump from car to car, bed to bed, until I hit that final set of wheels going down slow, that final mattress, that final breath under the fourteen cow heads nailed to the cabin. Ten Hail Marys and ten How's Yer Father. Waitress X is naked on my parents' pale couch, seashells on a glass table, a white-washed fireplace. Across town a tornado writhes. Her back, the long cinnamon path of her back. When I have finally written it off, a month and a half later, she phones out of the blue. She swears she called me dozens of times, even long distance from the coast, on her holiday. She says there was no answer; she says she hung up because a woman answered; she says any number of things, pushing the right buttons. I laugh. It's funny, I can't be mad at her. But my elation is followed by moodiness: she will put me through the wringer again and I am letting her. As I become older it seems less simple to pin blame. Before: that is wrong, and that is correct; she's to blame or she's a saint. Now I try and it swings back to me, partly my fault. Murk is operative as I walk to the Chink store, Red Mango Grocery, for milk and the phone booth. The Intended asks me not to call it the Chink store. I call Waitress X at her mother's. The same suggestive voice lingers in the mother, a slow "Bye" with some promise inherent. In one week her daughter leaves to school down east. Diminendo.

Thirty-three Stolen Cars

As well as the occasional addict's body, thirty-three stolen cars have been dumped around the lake roads this summer, stripped and chopped, then towed into Salvage King Ya! I can't complain. They give me work, purpose. Repairs can be affected, good can come from bad. This is my new \$1.49 philosophy.

The road to my cabin swerves south and east around a farm's pocky hillock stamped and trodden by stonedumb cattle and a few witty pigs.

You can read this one field: it says failure. Every clod, clump and lump of gumbo, every piece of wet straw and handful of wet mud possesses the same character; no other field in the water district looks quite so bad, none is as redolent of slow-motion penury and genteel hillbilly neglect. Farms a quarter-mile to the north have oil lease dividends, neat rows of silos, Norman Rockwell putting-greens; seldom is heard a discouraging word. This rise by my lake has muck, ruts, broken trees, glacial boulders where buffalo scratch themselves, and a ruined Model T with a wasp's nest glued to the ratty upholstery. Something in me wants to own that hill, that torn up real estate. I could get Neon to do an artsy installation: two or three big crosses silhouetted on the crest.

For the first time (at least in this lifetime) I am collecting things. In the Salvage King Ya! yard I have a '53 Plymouth Belvedere hardtop, a '38 Buick, a '35 Chev. Also, a '62 Ford schoolbus, two speed axle, and a 214 T baler, with a Wisconsin motor. I deal in fouled plugs, cracked blocks, mortal coils. Also, top quality tamarack, cut, split, cord delivered \$99. My honour roll: an Austin Cambridge with fins; a Borgward Isabella, black, from Tijuana; a Viva Vauxhall that my little brother who's taller than me burned on Groat Road; a Delta 88 we sold to deft Crees, who alone knew how to get it started; a '55 Chev the colour of a battleship; a six cylinder MGC, rare; and a steel-blue Austin Healy 3000 that belonged to Woody, then Luke. These have all been through my family. But now I am settling down, getting dulled out, a shift in psychology. I may join that new cult that worships Studebakers.

Waitress X is wearing a white leather belt with studs, white heels. Her face seems a little tired. She leaves soon. Waitress X says, My boyfriend Joe keeps asking if I'm seeing someone, I'm never home, he says. (I sympathize.) She says, I told him I'd call at midnight but didn't phone until one-thirty. Where were you, he wants to know, where were you? I ask her the same question because she wasn't with me.

You're quicker than I thought, she says, not quite an aside, not quite a joke. She claims she wants to make things simpler but she's obviously added another guy to the equation, another curious member. Grab a brain, the famous coach said to me at the Detroit training camp, grab a brain. Genius, systems, motivation, they say, vision. He has halitosis, veins in his eyes the shade of Mars, he's put on weight after the new contract. I treat them like human beings, the coach says, and how do they repay me? Goddam two-timing boozing hillbilly low-rent shithead skirt-chasing trash son-of-a-bitching sleazy eggsucking dogs! It rolls off us. The coach will be fired and we'll still be skating. What's their life expectancy? Everyone's on the bubble; nothing's what you think.

The forward tests his skate blade, cuts his finger. They're maybe too sharp. "You'll be flying," I say.

"Or else I'll go to cut and eat the boards. Blow out my knee again."

"Don't say that. Bad juju."

The goalie signed a termination contract, was demoted to New Brunswick at the trading deadline. I was a free agent with compensation—asking price a minor league forward "to help us in Salt Lake City." I am held together with velcro and tape, a king of shreds and patches, I no longer speak standard English. I think I need some time away from hockey, from humans, from the locomotion. The coach said to the press, "He's greasy but let's face it, in the playoffs you need greasers. He doesn't mind a little snot on his nose." Overhead the Americans cruise sharkfinned torpedoes through the balloons, over my Dominion. Two floors below me, bodies are ferried back and forth in discreet station wagons, grey with smoked glass. Across the avenue at the daycare, youngsters learn to shrug. There's a tiny yard with a tiny hedge. They come out at ten-thirty on the dot and scream.

With winter ending they moved me up from defence to have some size at centre. Twelve goals all season. I couldn't play centre; I lost faceoffs and was waived from the circle, I was benched, had trouble taking a pass in full stride, realized how much I used the boards to move the puck, the puck always rolling and hopping for me, over my stick and my sweater did not fit. I was cold and sweating. No champagne. Tired at the rough benches after only a couple shifts, leaning my head on painted cinderblock, cool. Cough hard; hurting inside, put phlegm into the sink.

Tired, tired! Jesus. Am I too old? Our line was so bad the coach put the hotshot defenceman out to cover up, to rush up the ice. I found myself gravitating back to defence to cover him while he was up ice. What exactly was the point? But I didn't want to quit on a low note, especially after a trade. Then I borrowed a Sherwood with green lettering and potted three goals and I thought, I can do this for awhile, I've still got it. As long as I've got my lucky stick.

Cowtown Blues

At the same moment I am driving north with the Intended and Neon, my Waitress X is leaving me, leaving to her college in the east. Both of us out on the sunny road, farther and farther apart, like a math problem: if two cars drive in opposite directions at seventy-six miles per hour, how long before they are no longer an item? Sick of the same highway, I take backroads. I'm jealous of her joining a motel bed with her driving companion. Inevitable, I know, she's not going to sleep by herself. She insists

she will phone, write. I know she will do neither. I'm passing every car we see; my arcs around their metal are recklessly perfect. Why are you doing this? asks my Intended. She throws my rhythm off. I wasn't aware a rhythm was there until it was ruined. I am driving the car too hard, the revs are high, red line, Quaker State 20-50 spread thin. *Faster*. I want to wreck the engine, be in debt, be a bum on the high chapparal. I imagine smoking pistons rocketing through the curved shining hood. Instead, a five-point buck sails over the windshield, crossing the road in one leap, a quick turn and a horned animal races along beside my car. Green eyes.

We stop at a farmhouse off the Correction Road north of Edmonton and Neon unloads a little dope. They are working on their skidoos in a lit hangar. Big swinging lights. The party line phone has two rings. It's the boys from the farm up the gravel road; they always have bags of drugs, though they don't seem the type at all, looking more like extras on *Hee-Haw*. Very hayseed, yet coke, mescaline, even acid, a kind of nostalgia. You sure you don't want some, they ask Neon, some good mesc. It's organic. Maybe some other time, we say. Neon looks tiny by the farmboy brothers, shoulders on Neon like a trout. All of us went to a cockfight but it was low-rent and gave me a headache: one animal cuts up another and money changes hands in the stands. I used to tape my hands illegally. I don't care to dwell on the parallels, thank you very much.

Even though I rarely saw her at the end, I am sad Waitress X is leaving. Lace waves tossed from her smart hips, champagne and lox on someone's else's coffee table. I loved her then when it was simple. The stairs and her walk. The team loses and studies the floor. That feeling. The city will seem empty, just knowing she's not inside its walls.

In certain skeletal light, on certain high avenues, the mountains to the west leap forward as if pulled by a lens, as if you're pulled by the wrist into a lunar beauty of white thorns, and I think this is how it is on the moon. From that high pure ice, from those glaciers, trout spray down from the clouds, rose-coloured graffiti on their flanks, lunkers in search of an absent ocean. The river straightens after the city and the mountain trout are hooked by Americans or their pricey guides. The trees thin out. P.J. Perry, the sax player, shows us a pretty spot to fly-fish. We tramp through a wheatfield, all blue and gilt, and climb down a cliff to the river's edge, gather at the river. We toss a stick for a dead dog. The fish move in wavering grasses, in a bent lens, carried past like the moving floor at the airport. At the Stampede the palm reader turns away, refuses to tell me what is there. What? What? She gives my money back. Go away, she says, go. (The coach touches my shoulder: Go.)

On the midway I hear an old guy mumbling to himself, eating a corn

dog: When I was a child there was a grand old tree; but it was hit by a bolt from the sky. Rain and snow got in to strip it. With a whoop the gang rushed to the sleigh and piled in the way your dad did. The horse pulled a score of years back. When I was a child, he says, it was a grand old tree.

I am a child at Jawbone Lake for the summer. The small town priest commands electrons of grief from us, pulling it from the assembled like a hormonal cheerleader. The choir sounds like mutinous cows. The locals assume we're rich. Sermons centre around donations from "the visitors." My older brother, a late '50s greaser, swaggers to confession, and for penance the old priest orders him to mow the church's lawn. My brother tells the old priest to fuck off. The next Sunday a ballsy bulldog walked up the aisle in the middle of mass and sniffed around the altar, the priest's ankles. We all pretended not to see it, assuming it's Jehovah's Witness.

Twelve miles from the lake, my Ex-wife is talking after church, the same small town church, her white shoes on the white sunny steps and her blouse with pale pink stripes like a beach tent pulled tight by her strong back and breasts, light flowing down her golden throat, and in the slight gaps in the blouse front where a delicate chain leads into her white Eaton's bra. My fingertip once followed and curled in the cool air between her levitating breasts, where there is no sun except light through a summer dress; a face close to the hovering flesh, the dangling medal and beneath her ribs, her curved, goosebumped navel, her link to her mother. The priest nods in the heat, depressed, ready to pack it in. He's tired, has to cover too many towns, never thought it would end up this way. Children on the swing, swing. An old woman in black clutches corn poppies, and children on the swings swing, and my Ex-wife stands on the wooden steps in the white shoes I once polished in our cellar. The cranium has little to do with memory. It's centered in the mouth and fingers. A woman's unfolding of certain asexual vegetables and fruit, her calm teeth. The trouble we go to for our few minutes, swearing of course we won't be back or rashly insisting that we will. Where a republic begins is where it unravels.

As I wash my hands in an enamel basin, a dead passenger washes up from the plane, from the Turbo-Arrow, water rippling over his face, into his open mouth like gin. We're all passengers, all floating. I get on the party line again, holler into static.

By Shirt is Blue's place, we watch a horned owl hit a snowshoe rabbit from behind, take its head right off. I had sympathy, decided this was a

pertinent message. The message: if today is your birthday you are intuitive, a natural athlete, sensual, unorthodox and stubborn. Cycle highlights change, romance, travel. Major domestic adjustments can be expected, could relate to residence and marital status. Your lawn will catch fire.

A Cult And Alcohol Wrecked Our Marriage

Cognac, mal du pays, homesick. The TV is low and my Intended is covered in coleslaw, but the weatherman had not lied. Eyes closed, I'm seeing my Ex-wife's horses, reading Keats, a poem *To Autumn*, a porn mag called *Angels in Pain* and no more stars fall down on meals seizing in restaurants. I wonder why is it *always* raining in this near-desert?

I Took Scars

My head got hit by a stick last night, a forward trying to go around me lifted his stick and caught me. I didn't notice it until shampooing in the morning, a tender welt announcing itself in the hairline just behind my temple. I start wearing a helmet again. My thoughts are scrambled. The patio tables are crawling; the sky, a yellow shell, flexes. I read the paper like my father, read papers from three different cities. I took scars, became infatuated with aloe vera, Vitamin E, a woman to fix my face.

The condo window in late fall: cars move under us like iron filings doing the locomotion; cars plough into each other on the hill for no reason, rocking over the curb and slicing fenders through a small mountain of corn for sale on the empty lot. The hawker flees as a Chevrolet looms sideways, a red Buick powering it along like a bad dance partner; they can't stop, mash magically into another car, smash another car, skating away in slow motion from the corn mountain. Traffic backs up the hill, police lights smeared in rain and then in snow. Women walk by with armfuls of Taber corn, a last hidden taste of summer, while cottonwood leaves crumple, turn into themselves like people in winter; the branch gives them up in fingerprints of rain and then we wake to crystals of snow, to their goon saying, you and me. A coach touches my shoulder and I have to learn winter over again each and every year. I can never really remember winter; the change seems impossible. Our windows fog, then go to frost under one huge cloud the grey of swimming mammals. We look like Russia again and I'm plugging in the car's block heater, I am sleeping on the Winnipeg couch. I'm moving. Away. Go. Romance makes some realization about itself inside this astringent season but that makes little dif-

ference: Waitress X is the death rattle of romance. He pops me in the temple and I enter a new republic. What I have done to women is now being done to me. You're not allowed to lose. I think it's in the contract. The diabetic general manager calls me up to his office full of ice cream and posters of Sonny Liston's unquiet ghost and there I am served memory like a burning dessert.

Contributors

Roxanna Bikadoroff's award winning illustrations have been published in numerous magazines and books, both locally and internationally.

Beverley Brahic lives in Paris, where she is director of the bilingual English program in a French lycee. Her articles on schools and education have been widely published in Canadian newspapers. Poems are forthcoming in *International Quarterly* and *The Antigianish Review*.

April Bulmer lives in Toronto. She is the author of *A Salve For Every Sore* (Cormorant Books) and has recently completed another manuscript.

Michael Crummey, has had his poetry published most recently in *The Capilano Review*, *The New Quarterly* and *Quarry*. He lives in Kingston, Ontario.

Margaret Gunning received honourable mention in the Edmonton Journal Literary Awards and has had poems published in *blue buffalo* and *The New Morningside Papers* (1987).

Steven Heighon won first prize in the 1990 Prism *international* fiction contest for his story "Five Paintings of the New Japan" which went on to win a Gold Medal in the National Magazine Awards. His first collection of stories, *Flight Paths of the Emperor* (Porcupine's Quill, 1992), will appear in French translation this fall. A second collection, *On Earth As It Is*, will appear next spring. A collection of poems, *The Ecstasy of Skeptics*, will be published by Anansi this October.

Mark Anthony Jarman lives and teaches in Victoria. He is the author of *Dancing Nightly in the Tavern* and *Killing the Swan*.

Shaena Lambert is currently working on a book of short stories, *The Firebird*. A writer and political activist, she has published non-fiction pieces on peace and environmental issues in the *Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star*, *Montreal Gazette*, *Ottawa Citizen*, and other newspapers. She lives in Toronto.

M. Travis Lane is the author of *Temporary Shelter* (Goose Lane 1993) and *Night Physics*, forthcoming later this year (Brick).

Patrick Lane's most recent books include *Winter* (Coteau Books), *Mortal Remains* (Exile Editions), *How Do You Spell Beautiful* (Fifth House).

John B. Lee was the 1993 winner of the Milton Acorn Peoples' Poetry Award for his book *Pig Dance Dreams*. Mr. Lee lives in Brantford, Ontario with his wife and two sons.

Lynne Macdonald lives and works in Vancouver. She recently won first place in *Dandelion's* Another Bloody Fiction Contest.

Mark Mahemoff was born in Sydney, Australia in 1965. He has had previous works published in Australia and Denmark. Currently, he works with people with intellectual disabilities.

Robert Mullen lives in Edinburgh, Scotland. A first collection of his stories, *Americas*, is due out in the fall from Coteau Books.

Marilyn Gear Pilling's fiction will appear this year in *The Malahat Review*, *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, *Queen's Quarterly*, *Carousel* and *The Pottersfield Portfolio*. She was shortlisted for *Event's* Creative Non-Fiction Contest, *Prairie Fire's* Hot Shorts Contest, and in *Prism international's* Short Fiction Contest.

Lynn Strongin's work has appeared in numerous anthologies and periodicals, including *Rising Tides*, *The Southern Humanities Review* and *Descant*. She is currently looking for a publisher for her latest collection of poems, and is also editing a novel, *Emma's Book*. She lives in Victoria, British Columbia.

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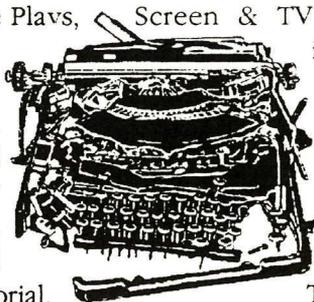
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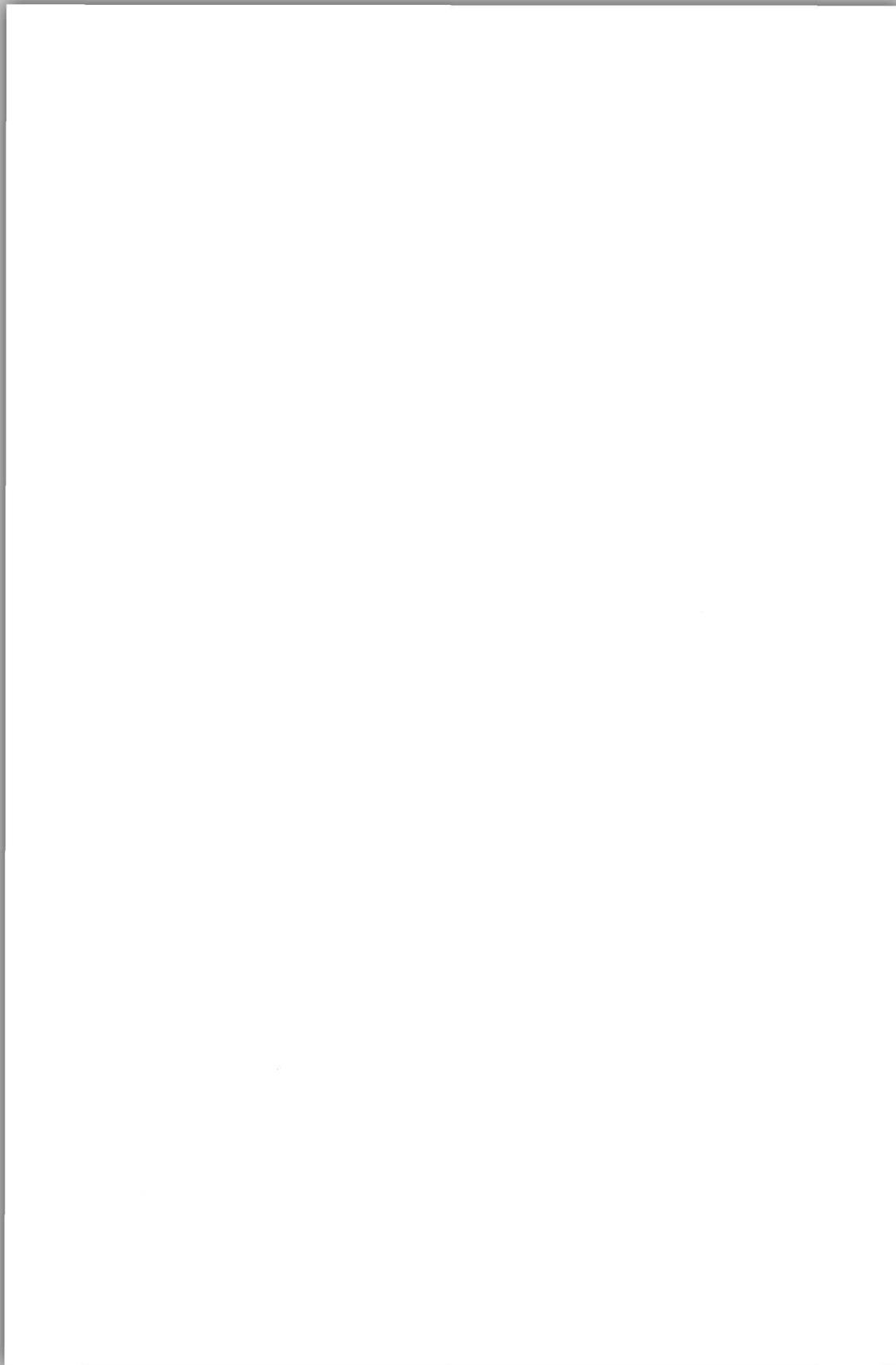
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