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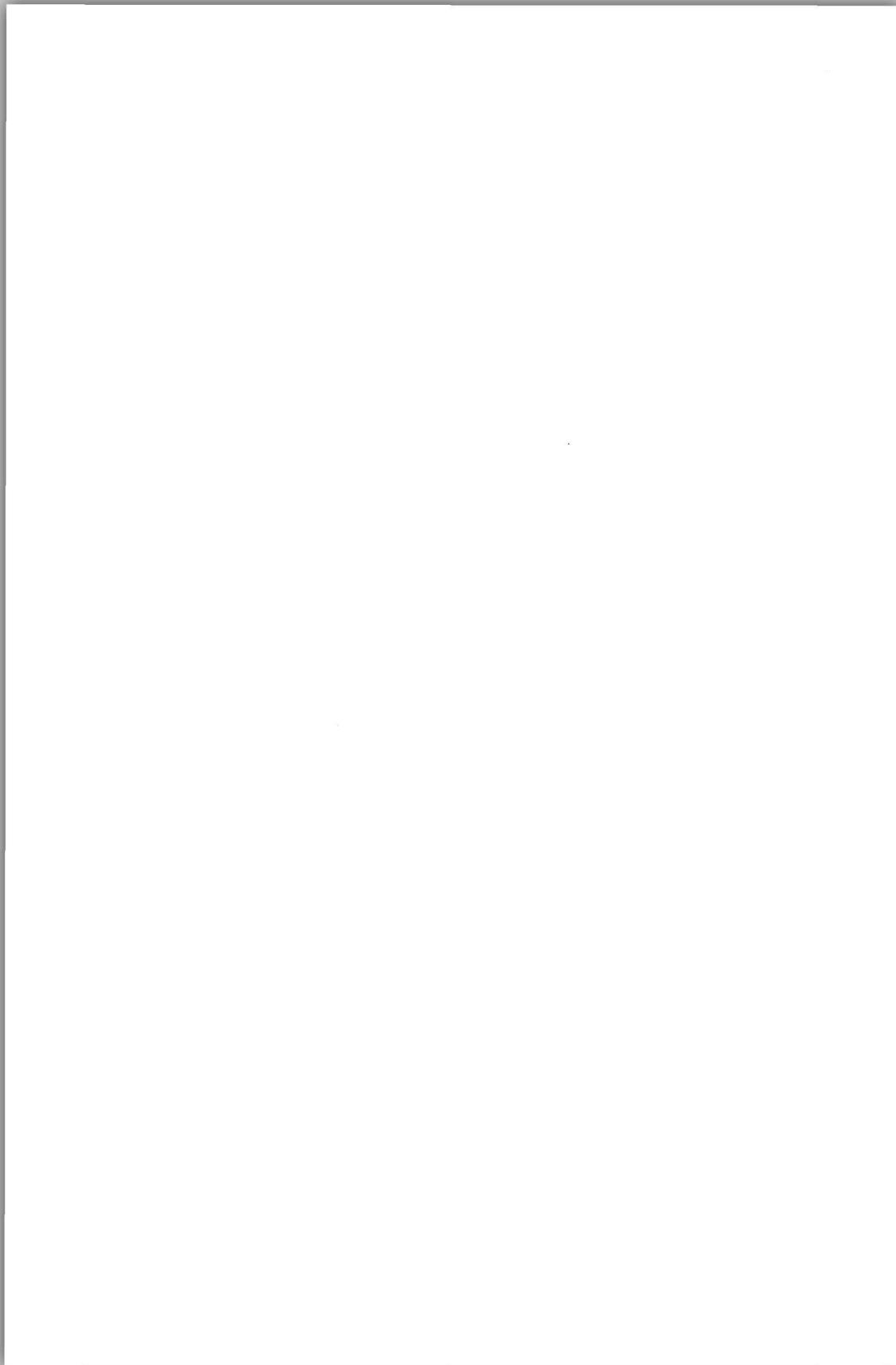
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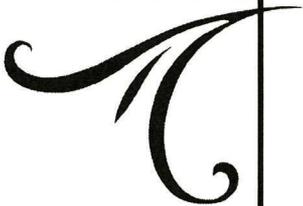


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Maximum length per story is 25 double-spaced pages. Your name, address and the title of each story must appear on a separate cover page—the title ONLY on the manuscript(s).

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Please make cheques payable to PRISM international. Entries must be original, unpublished material, not under consideration elsewhere.

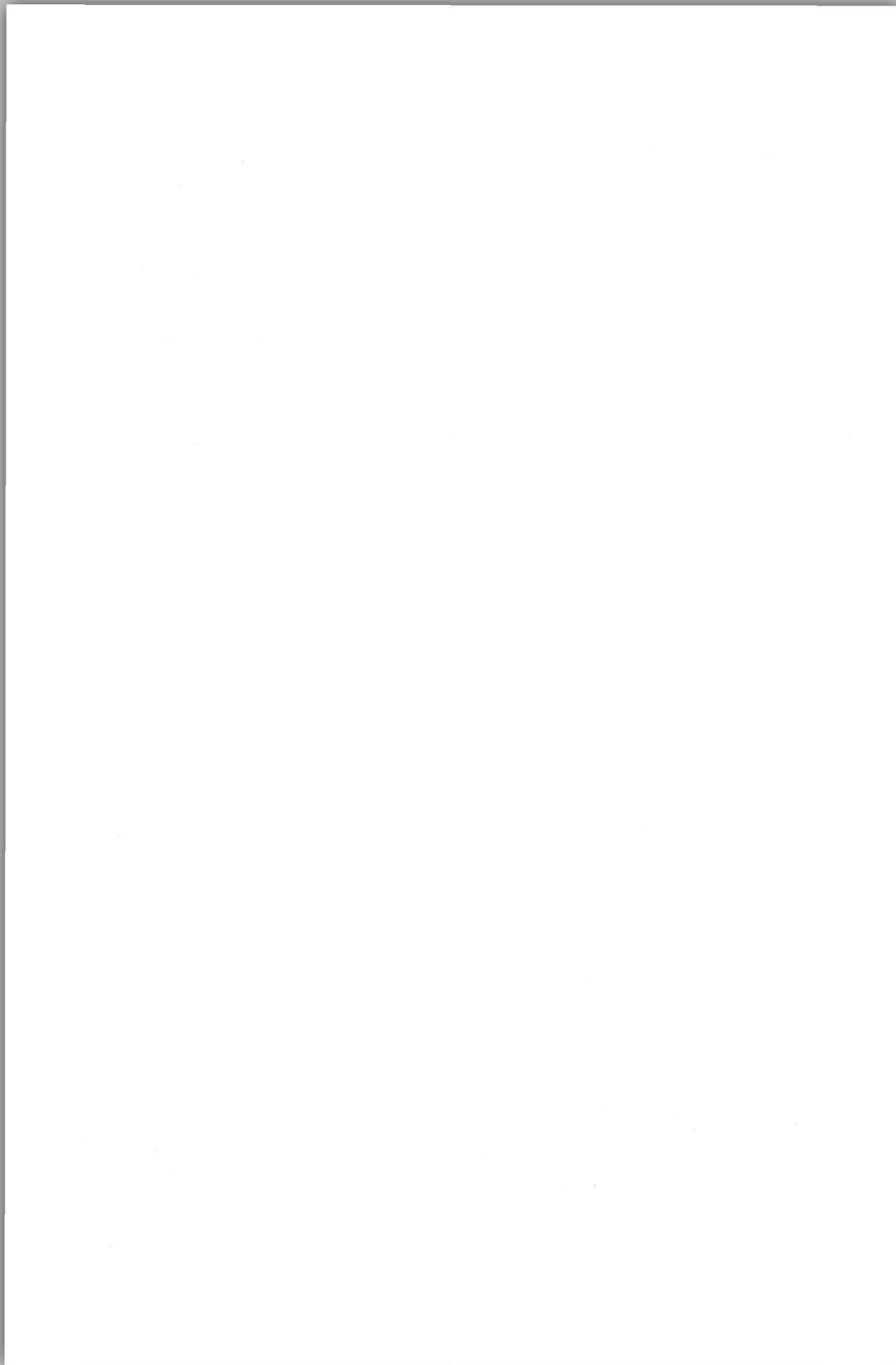
The contest is open to anyone except students or instructors in the Creative Writing Department at the University of British Columbia. Entries will not be returned. Winners will be notified by or before March, 1997. SASE for list of winners only.

Preliminary judging by the PRISM international editorial board.
Final Judge — to be announced

Entries must be postmarked no later than December 1, 1996.



Send entry fees and manuscript(s) to:
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Creative Writing Dept., University of B.C.
E462 - 1866 Main Mall, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z1



PRISM

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Melanie Boyle

K.F.C. - F.L.G. (Fries)
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Institutional

Tamas Dobozy

The authorities on the subjects will designate him Tom the Teacher, Tom the Photographer, Tom the Pensioner or Tom the Corpse. But splashing into the doctor's latex gloves at 2:36 a.m., he's none other than Tom the Newborn. Two orderlies sit on his mother's stomach for added push—doctor's orders. Her eyes swim in blood. Nurses take the baby off her chest and hand over orange juice. She looks like somebody playing on a swing.

Tom's father flaked-out on a hospital cot and prayed to Jesus for late-night courage. Now he gets to his feet, stares out of streaked windows at the tilted city. No type of vending-machine coffee pleases him, the kind of man he is. The kind of man he is: behind his back the farmhands never say it simply: "A Christian"; they call him "A Christian nutcase."

Tom's father collars the nurse coming off shift. He takes her smile for an invitation to indulge in monologue: "I thought, when my wife inherited land from her parents, great, now it's that much harder for me to get into Heaven." (His tone leaves no doubt that Heaven begins with a capital.) "You understand what I mean? You don't? Well, God is perfectly fair. Everyone gets perfect justice. You do something good? You get rewarded in equal measure. You do bad, He punishes you according to the crime, not a jot more. Now there's two ways He goes about it. Either He rewards you after you die for the good you did by sending you to Heaven, or He rewards you here and now—with cash bonuses, or good luck, or happiness, or whatever—so after you die, He's free to damn you straight to Hell, no questions asked, for your evil. My wife inherits property. Great, I think, another damn reward in this life. One step closer to Hell. I get a promotion. Great! I might as well be in Hell already. Now my wife's pregnant. I won't mind if my kid's retarded. I'm not like most people. If my kid's retarded it'll be so painful to me that I've basically got a free ride to do anything I want with the rest of my life because no reward God gives me on this earth could ever make up for that suffering."

The nurse makes a negative sound with her tongue that Tom's father catches. "I'm sorry. I don't know what I'm saying. Look, I'm sorry." He sits on the floor. "But she's been in labour for like..." —he checks his watch— "Shit! At least twelve hours! At least!"

The doctor comes through towelling his hands, not slowing as he tells the brand-new dad about his baby boy. His back is already to Tom's father as he enunciates the last words. "What's your goddamn rush?" Tom's father yells after him. "You can't play golf at night anyhow!"

His mother cradles the baby and whispers, "Tom," while the incubator turns over and hums.

Two weeks later Father Dominic—stubby hair, square jaw—does his weekly browse through the maternity ward. He stops beside Tom's incubator because the baby stares at Father Dominic with what he would refer to in a sermon as, "an affinity." The priest bends over the glass, taps it with his fingernails. "You remember," he says. "I know you remember. I remember too." The priest whispers that he too has forgotten his nativity—going from embryo to ten-fingered boy, spinning in the uterus like an astronaut, the difficult birth (not wanting out but not getting his way). All he knows about birth is what the scientists and mothers of the world have revealed. "But," Father Dominic continues, "before conception is another thing." The priest recalls the 'beforeworld': a time when he didn't have a ME on his hands, a nice stupid time, floating, gathering blackness, not needing information. "Oblivion is paradise," the priest says, getting ready to run from nurses. "You remember."

At Tom's baptism Father Sinclair—the pastor, Father Dominic's senior and Tom's father's favorite priest (light with the penance, short with the sermons, a good guest with a scotch)—nearly dunks Tom's head fully under the holy water and, like most babies, Tom couldn't care less. When Father pronounces, "I baptize you Thomas . . ." the baby howls long and hard. His mother rushes to dry Tom's forehead. Father Dominic understands the true source of the trauma.

"It's not the water," he says. "It's getting taken off the nothing list."

"What?" Tom's father asks.

"He's crying because getting a name splits you from yourself. First you get a name, then you learn to speak and read. It's like simultaneously having a self given to and taken away from you."

"Dominic, you're contradicting yourself again," says Father Sinclair tentatively (Father Dominic's known for freak-out episodes when disagreed with), handing the baby to the godparents. "Humour Father Dominic," Father Sinclair advises, back turned to the younger priest, rubbing his temple with an index finger and winking.

"If it contradicts it must be true," answers Father Dominic and everyone very carefully watches how he never blinks two eyelids together.

Winter 1969, Tom lives on a Fraser Valley farm—his father attempt-

ing tobacco cultivation. There's also livestock like chickens, cows, horses, pigs. They live in an old frame house built in Queen Victoria's day—gables and eaves and a widow's walk worn down by boxy heels. His father praises God morning, noon and night.

He also yells: "You stupid woman! You're eating me out of house and home!" He ties the pantry key to a string running around his neck. "From now on, you want the key, you ask for it!"

"Bastard, bastard, bastard." His wife kneads tears into a mound of dough that she leaves looking like a brain to answer the doorbell.

Tom rolls out of his baby-chair and his mouth sucks air—turning kisses inside-out. He finds a felt marker rolled off the table and begins to scribble with it on the linoleum. When Father Dominic and his mother come into the kitchen, Tom has already covered half the floor with squiggles and lines. "Tom!" his mother screeches, but the priest bends down, not interfering with the series of zigzags.

"Look," the priest says to Tom's mother, pointing out a section of the artwork. "That's a picture of his father!" The priest twists his head and then really opens up his eyes. "Incredible! It's your husband, under the wheels of a truck." He doesn't add that Tom's father's neck is broken and his face distorted into death's big blank smile. "And here," he points. "It's his father again! Drowning in a toilet!" The priest describes a certain section as a floor mural of Tom senior pecked to death by geese. Tom's mother takes the Jiffy marker out of her baby's hands.

"I don't know where you get all that from, Father. It's just cat-scratch."

The priest helps her wipe up before the ink dries and her husband re-enters the scene.

When Tom crawls outside of the house he still sees and hears too much diversity—green juice on the lips of cattle, birds singing a new song every time, puma prints in the soft ground by the new fence. The francophone woman next door addresses her dog in the formal tense: "Artur, ou êtes-vous?" His mother scoops him up when she's not laying in the hayloft with Emeric—farmhand for hire and number one follower and favorite of Father Dominic. Emeric and Tom's mother have discussed the utter impossibility of ever falling in love with each other, but lust is easier to cover. Nobody must know.

Emeric heads home and puts on his only necktie, then goes down to the local Christian casino, held on the odd Wednesday in the rectory basement—fundraising to cover parish upkeep and overhead. Emeric ignores the blackjack and bingo, walks between the tables to the improvised roulette game mounted on the wall. Father Dominic mans the big wheel. The two men make the least amount of eye contact needed to communicate. Emeric drops his chips anywhere, almost scattering them

without a care. Father Dominic takes note, adjusts the muscles in his arm, and sends a message from brain to hand that says, "Spin and release just so." The wheel lands on Emeric's bet like it will the next time.

Father Dominic and Emeric trade off after the floor has closed. Emeric exchanges the money for a blessing. "This will go to a good cause," the priest says. Emeric nods like he knows.

"You have such an incredible arm, Father."

"It's just practice, Emeric. I use no devices."

Tom's father padlocks the chicken coop and saws a hole in the door so only chickens can enter and leave, as opposed to his wife. Out of sympathy for Tom's mother, Emeric calls Tom's father an asshole for treating her this way. Before anyone can breathe, Tom's father tells him: "You're fired."

Emeric punches Tom's father in the face and kicks him in the ribs. Tom's father cups his cracked beak, sitting in the sagging chicken-wire fence like a hammock. "You can't fire me; I quit," Emeric says. "I feel sorry for your woman."

The next morning in confession Emeric tells Father Dominic about his little foray into physical violence. Father Dominic wants all the particulars.

That same morning, Tom's mother walks around the chicken coop, fingers clenching at the chicken wire, trying to pull the door open, rip out the fence stakes, tear a hole, fly over and in, anything. The Francophone neighbour squeezes through the gap in the hedge: "I see what your old man's doing. But it's easily solved so don't work yourself into a fit." The two women grab the chickens as they come through the hole, insert a finger into the asshole of each to check for eggs.

Tom climbs the chesterfield to watch them anally violate the chickens.

"No sweat," the neighbour woman says to his mother. The ones reading positive receive a sprinkling of salt on the bunghole, which makes them immediately want to lay their eggs. The women have blocked the entrance to the coop with a board, leaving the chickens no alternative but to lay their eggs in a nearby coal bin. Tom's mother collects the eggs afterwards. At night they let the chickens back into the pen.

"I don't understand why the yield of eggs has dropped so drastically," Tom's father will say in the upcoming months. By then, Tom has learned enough language (though not yet uttered the infamous 'first word') to have lost the art of abstract thinking. He constructs his first mental sentence: "You're such a dumb asshole."

His mother keeps the eggs among her linen, using the money from their sale to buy needle and thread, a winter coat for herself, clothes for

Tom, a new frying pan, sugar and flour.

"Come on, say 'Mommy' you little bastard," his father shouts, shaking Tom's tiny shoulders in a room full of aunts, uncles and grandparents trying to restrain him.

Father Sinclair and Dominic are over for dinner too, the former telling Tom's father to go easy on the kid and the other trying to shake his tears, talking just low enough to not be heard: "I've been here before. I've gone through this." Tom's father plows ahead through the interference.

"Don't tell me you can't speak; I can see it in your eyes goddammit. Don't you hold out on me!"

"Mommy," Tom falters, but Father Dominic sees the intention in Tom's eyes like a script: *I'm gonna get you for this*. "This was my biggest trauma too," Father Dominic whispers. *I tried not to become rational, but everyone teamed up against me*. Maybe it's only the recently experienced taste of butter, strawberry, and butterscotch pudding—like it was for Father Dominic at that age—that keeps Tom from taking a rope, crawling up the stairs, throwing a noose over the shower rod, fixing it around his neck and stepping off the toilet bowl to become the world's youngest suicide.

"Did you hear that? 'Mommy'! That's my boy!" A grandmother rushes in and takes Tom from his father.

"I hope you're happy, you big brute!" she shouts.

"What?" Tom's father asks, totally baffled. "What did I do wrong?"

His dad goes to St. Luke the Evangelist's every morning of the week except Saturday, when he sleeps in. He goes to confession once a week. While his mother goes to milk the cows, Tom wiggles through the wet grass, up onto the spare tire his father's taking into town to patch, and through the open door into the cab of the Fargo. He falls asleep on the passenger side. His father throws a woolen jacket through the open door without looking and bends down to heave the tire into the bed of the truck. The jacket covers Tom who doesn't wake to the slamming door, engine rumble or squeak of brakes.

His father goes into the church.

Father Dominic slides the window open in the confessional. "Yes?" he asks.

"Isn't this Father Sinclair's day for confession?"

"He's busy. Asked me to fill in," Father Dominic answers. "What difference does it make?" Tom's father rattles behind his buttons, but there's no way out of the pine-board box. He's committed.

"I lost my temper, Father. I swore. I wasn't wise with my money."

"Never mind all that," the priest responds. "How come I see you in

church every day from six until one?"

"I'm praying, Father."

"But you have a family, don't you?"

"Yeah? So?"

"Right. And who does all the work in the morning, while you're sitting here?"

"My wife cooks breakfast. I tell her what to tell the farmhands. She looks after things until I get back."

Father Dominic yawns contagiously. "Yeah, I know she tells the farmhands what to do. They come to confession as well. They tell me she does all the work. I hear you tried to keep your wife from the chicken eggs!"

"Tried? I succeeded! You don't know her like I do, Father. She'd just sell them and blow the money on dresses or high-heeled shoes or something."

Father Dominic sighs the only fresh air of the confessional. "For your penance I want you to stop sitting around on a pew all day and go do your duty. People have been seeing your wife around, selling eggs so she can put clothes on Tom."

Tom's father steps out of the confessional before the priest finishes. The priest rips open the door and yells: "Nobody leaves the confessional before I'm finished!"

"Screw you," Tom's father shouts back. "I want a second opinion. Father Sinclair never talks to me that way! I won't stand for it!" He swings at the priest, who ducks and knocks him down with a flamboyant uppercut. Tom's father falls down and rolls slightly under a pew, where all the dust, pennies and broken shoelaces collect.

Tom wakes and crawls out from under the jacket, goes up to the window, strains against it with all his baby fat. Tom rolls off the seat, under the steering wheel, grabs the safety brake release with both hands, the brake peddle disengages and kicks up. While the truck starts to roll, Tom climbs up on the seat and, standing, grabs the steering wheel.

The truck rolls down the hill, gathering energy. Tom's father exits the church at a gallop, blood dribbling from one eyebrow. He stares back at the priest—who's raising his fist, not in anger anymore but in warning, and isn't yelling, "Get back here and finish your confession!" but "Watch out for the truck, you fool!" The truck smashes Tom's father right in the chest and flings him into the nearby ditch; his head blacks-out against a rock, and he experiences exactly that dumb darkness Father Dominic's so pissed off about losing, where you don't know anything, especially yourself. The truck plows into the dirt a few feet to his left. Tom's soft skull, not fully grown together yet, connects with the windshield. He

tumbles onto the floor, howling.

The doctors stick Tom and his father in the same hospital room—his father in a full body cast, legs jacked up and swinging from various heights, Tom with a bandage wrapped around his head. “Don’t suck your goddamn thumb,” his immobile father shouts from his bed to Tom’s. The boy sucks harder.

Father Dominic visits the hospital, his face like a ladder towards the best vacuum outer space can offer. He speaks directly to Tom: “I don’t think it’s a good idea to kill your father, no matter how bad you want it. You’ve got no choice but to accept that you were unlucky enough to get plucked out of a good place and forced into birth. Now you have to make some kind of individual out of yourself.”

Tom’s father yells for the nurse, furiously ringing the bell they’ve given him. “Help! Nurse! This freak’s talking to my son about killing me.” He tries to move his legs, the pulleys and wires pop and stretch; his plaster-coated legs drop to the sheets and he shouts with pain.

“You must stop being such an asshole,” shouts Father Dominic at Tom’s father. Tom sucks his thumb and watches the priest rush to the other bed. Tom’s father struggles among tangles of wire and thread, flailing his casts around. Father Dominic grabs his heavy white arm and yells into his face: “You have to reform yourself, or your son’s going to murder you!” The nurses and orderlies rush in, grab hold of the priest who keeps raging: “Your son’s already tried to kill you once! Reform yourself! Mend your ways!” While they’re dragging him from the room he turns back to Tom: “The place before conception is a beautiful place. I know that. You know that. You have to earn your way back there. Stop yourself from becoming. Be good!” And with a last kick, the orderlies bash his fingers from the doorframe and drag him out.

Father Dominic gets certified crazy, crazy from way back. His file shows how he talked to birds. “To budgies,” he protests. “I was trying to get my budgies to speak.” How he wouldn’t bet on a coin toss because, “I have perfect timing and I can catch it out of the air so heads always comes up.” Searching his room in the rectory, they discover secret files, bank accounts, investments. Emeric’s name comes up. They put the farmhand on the stand and make him swear on the Bible. All the gambling money went towards Father Dominic’s plans for an institution serving the mal-adjusted needs of those who remember the ‘beforeworld’—“a time,” Father Dominic’s draft for a pamphlet describes, “before the uniting of sperm and egg, when the self was one and whole, in a unity destroyed by contingencies of place, perception, conditioning and, most importantly, language.” He has a list of correspondents all over North America.

They give him years of electricity. When finished he is an upgraded, next-generation Frankenstein. He sits in a chair and stares at the wall, deactivated, waiting for commands. When the pastor tells him to set the table, he does it, no problem. He even starts chatting pleasantly when told to entertain the guests: "Nice weather we're having. Pretty nice cardigan you got there."

Tom's father fails at tobacco, discovers Emeric and his wife in the hay, fires Emeric again, sells the farm, moves into Vancouver and begins pushing a pencil around for a living.

Tom probably takes Father Dominic's advice, because he talks more and more over the years, even going through a phase where he's impossible to shut up. He starts avoiding his father's rages the way his mother does. He never again tries to off the old man, either with a truck or by exciting a gaggle of geese into murder. Best of all, he begins to forget what it was like in that safe dark ignorant place that pre-dates the womb, where he was happy before hitting the world.

Edward C. Lynskey

Armageddon at the Lions' Cage

based on a news item in The Washington Post

Tuesday afternoon when Crazy Annie quit
dusting off mailboxes, ripped down a Red Cross
flag for a new shawl, she rode all night,
far north of Memphis. Bible in her purse,
she dreamt how curlicues of kudzu stole
like smoke through transoms, devil smothering
folk before Last Things. A camp preacher told
her where to go, where to wait amongst
the chosen few. His silken whispers held
her burlap soul in awe. Greyhound ticket
punched, doors flew open to a strumpet's
painted city, she thought she'd almost done
her penance, almost touched the hem of His
garment. A bumblebee taxi whooshed up,
driver speaking in tongues—urgent that she
scale pikestaff gates at the Bronx Zoo.
Discarding her heels and green garters, raised
on verses of Daniel, she was sure to cross
the moat, bend the bars—a cakewalk to Heaven.
Sniffing a salty spore, mad lions discovered her
locked in their cage, singing out thorny psalms.

Yannis Goumas

A Touch of Cynicism

A single high-rise building
enforces an early sunset upon
row after row of semi-detached houses
whose chimneys dress right with smoke.
All sound is in lowercase.
And this satchel-saddled child mooching
along the curb is probably his parents'
cock-and-bull story about love.

Sophia Lecker

Fish-Eye Marble

Chalk-words,
maps from 1948—
this pre-history of our wisdom.
Teacher's voice
feeds on itself in dull fury
like a man swallowing clay.

We yawn, fondle
vaguely our own bodies
that grow and flourish
like onions in a basement.
Yes, yes. Our heads nod.
We know we don't know
 anything.

Teacher is standing in front of my desk.
Empty your pockets, he hollers.
I take out

chewed gum
like the pink innards of a squirrel;
a knife; a blue-green marble
that turns into a fish when I spit on it;
a small frog that can imitate Teacher's bellow;

and a soft-skinned newt
 that makes us long for love.

They curl and slither up the linoleum aisles.
Some of the boys cheer;
the girls smile and whisper. Now
Teacher grows silent and
listens closely
to the chirrups and sand-paper rustlings.

The Mercy Seat

Norman Ravvin

illustrations by Melanie Boyle

When I was a child the rain kept us dry. Everyone, women and men, wore their lapels wide. And hair was for combing. Wherever you looked you saw girls braiding the wind and boys with a smile on their face running smack into spring.



You see! There I am with the boys from my street, the whole breathless club. Short pants. Cowlicks. Scuffed shoes. The girls aren't with us and we tell each other we don't want them to be, though we do. We do. Everything that happens is coloured by the thought that they might have been, could have been. But no! If we changed the rules of our games anything could happen. The rain might fall down, wet as the river. Shirts with no collars. Hair all down your neck.



Our town grew in a circle. Everyone agreed that this was its best feature. It had no middle, or, if you prefer, it had, instead of more town in its middle, a forest. A forest in its green belly. In its one leafy eye.

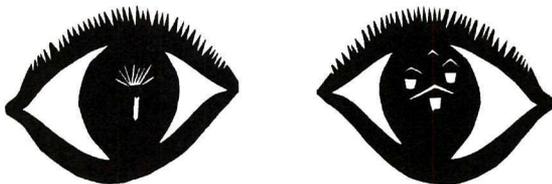


I remember how it was for us, our gruff group, as we scuffed up and back in the neighbourhood. First the confectionery store. There you could get marshmallow hearts, cinnamon moons, the licorice smile off your best friend's face.



Next, to the Turkish Baths, the windows blowing steam the way a locomotive does, bald fathers groaning on marble pedestals, exhausted emperors, housebroken councilmen. That was what my father called them, shaking in his nightsweats, my mother covering her ears by the open window. “Exhausted emperors,” I heard him shout, so loud I couldn’t understand why he didn’t wake himself. “Housebroken councilmen and little old presidents in seersucker knee-pants.” Relatives, I remember thinking. Father was dreaming of relatives who had forgotten to visit.

From the Turkish Baths we wandered out to the edge of our circle-city and stuck our toes in the sand. Huge birds wheeled in the haze and one of us always swore we had seen a camel, a lion, a water buffalo that no one else had noticed. Far, far off, orange rooftops danced in the sun. Little forms moved about under hats, as we never did in our town, and a strange sort of tree waved and waved at us out of the calm afternoon. We had no waving trees in our yards, no orange roofs, no people with hats, and the common wisdom—the civic creed, my father called it—was that this was for the best.

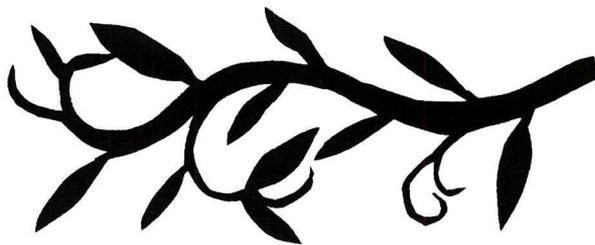




When I was a child we almost always went about happy. Children rarely ask themselves, Am I happy? Am I sad? They just are one or the other, the way a cat is a cat and a dog a dog. We were almost always happy (though at times we wished we were cats or wished we were dogs) and this was because we knew the secret of the Mercy Seat. We never spoke about our secret as we marched to the confectionery, and we never mentioned it as we dipped our toes in the sand, and we made certain we weren't even *thinking* about it in the neighbourhood of the steam baths. Our secret had to be kept separate from the world of fathers, of our little beds at home. It came from a place where no one slept, where no one shouted aloud at night.



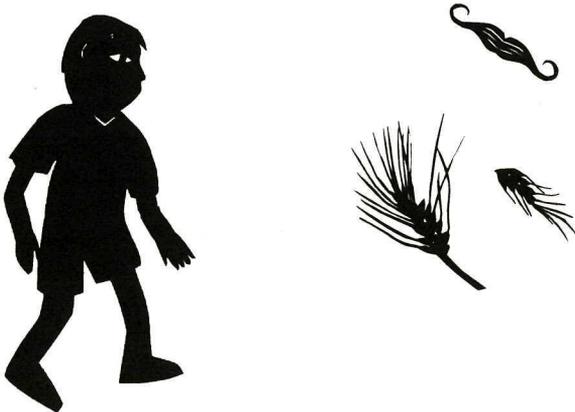
I will tell you the secret of the Mercy Seat because we've been friends a long time, shadow friends, like plants wound round each other. And I feel certain that when you were a child you had a secret too, not the same as mine, but as well-kept and fine, which you will tell me someday, in your own time. But make way now for mine. Clear a path, steal an afternoon so I can show you the way to the Mercy Seat.





When we went we always went by way of the highway—cars roaring by like animals chasing their dinner, the stiff sandy wind of traffic, men and women walking home from work all askew and out of shape. By traveling that way we went unnoticed, like spies, like lost folk. We followed streets where no one we knew lived, where the children may well have been unhappy, because they were nowhere to be heard. The shutters were always closed. Cats and dogs slept off some huge ill meal their masters had fed them. And the sun barely reached down the thin streetways to the walk where we shifted in our scuffed shoes around the panhandlers, the pipe smokers, the moppers and sweepers.

Block after block the houses sank deeper into themselves. The trees grew stunted and the yards were piled high with useless things. The moustache of a painter. A bull's horn. A bale of hay. A hoop and the stained bust of some long forgotten composer. "The spoils of empire," was what the smartest boy among us called all of this. "The spoils of empire and the forgotten end of someone's dream."



Then suddenly, there were no more spoils, no more dream-ends, and no more houses, however stunted and sad. Just a tangle. Green webs of light. And cool. We knew we were in the centre of the town—or in its not-centre if you prefer—as soon as we reached the cool. In the pockets of green we went like lions, pouncing on a piece of earth when we saw a place to put our feet, swinging over nets of fern when the low golden light pointed its finger the way we meant to go. So we went, cooler and cooler into the green, until the brighter world of cats and dogs, of lapels and rain, steam and sleepless fathers, was far away and forgotten. In very little time we were there. At the Mercy Seat.



It stood inside a building we called The Roxy because it looked, with its two neat doors and its tiny windows, like the cinema in our town where we went to holler and smoke cigarettes we'd stolen. But no one ever thought of smoking in the building that housed the Mercy Seat. No one thought of shouting or of laughing or of slapping their friend on the back as he breathed sharply in, which we all did as we marched up the wooden steps and into the nutmeg coloured vestibule with its honey glass portals and its shoe rack and coat rack, empty now and silent, but for the brittle symphony of old plastic on coat hangers.

The Mercy Seat sat at the far end of the hall, on its own platform, very pleased it seemed with itself, and empty as air. It had been made for big people—possibly people who wore hats in the sun. We sat in it singly, hands on its carved arms, though two of us could have fit in it easily.



And this was the secret of the Mercy Seat: each time we came only one of us could sit in it, and that one was chosen because he had forgotten something. Whatever was forgotten always returned as you sat there, though sometime it would take an hour or two, even a whole afternoon. A story you forgot to tell. A friend's real name that had been lost. The truth about yourself you'd been hiding and hiding until it almost wasn't true anymore. That was what mercy meant to us—something you'd lost coming back.

Now I've said we were happy, and we were, almost all the time, our scuffed club, dry in the rain with our father's sleeplessness nearly forgotten. But of the things I've told you, among all I've described, there was one thing that we wondered about and wished we could forget.



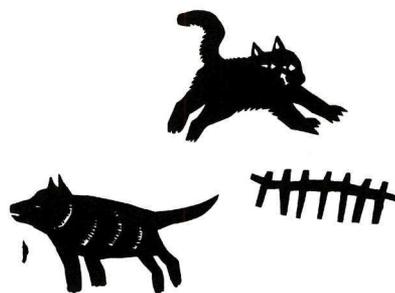


The girls had told us—always the girls—that once people had lived in the centre of our town, before there was tangled quiet and nets of fern. They wore hats in the sun, slept under orange roofs, and their trees waved like open hands against the sky.

Why had they left?

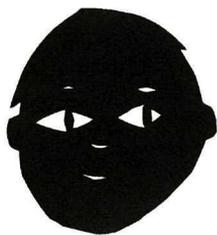
The girls didn't know.

Who had taken their houses and fences and cats and dogs away?



The smartest girl—who I liked, though I never called her by her name—said the people from our town had done it, had taken boards, nails, teaspoons, ribbons, candles and thread. Had taken and gathered, until there was next to nothing left to take. And at the same time the jungle grew up where the houses had been, so that one day they lost the way back to the centre—now the not-centre—of our town.

A smart girl's words will stay with a boy forever, as these did with me. Oh, when I was a child I could forget almost anything: people's names, the way home, my mother's favorite flower. But these words never left me. They sailed like ships in my sleep, trailed behind me on the street like the gaze of a cat.



See! There I am, scuffed and combed and dry in the rain, but with these words flying about my ears, the ghosts set free by a wise girl's words.

So the secret of the Mercy Seat hides *another* secret behind it, one that even I can't tell you because it's too old, too strange, too foreign to the life of boys and even to the life of girls. Some time in my youth I decided never to return to the building hidden in the cool green tangle that swallowed the centre of our town, so I would never again sit on the Mercy Seat, and slowly, surely, I would begin to forget.



Arved Viirlaid

*two poems translated from the Estonian by Taimi Ene Moks
and R.W. Stedingh*

Pet

Do you want me, my pet, to make you
a house out of a globe flower?
I'll cover the window with
the echo of the sky's bell.

In the yard I'll put an apple tree,
since poetry is for apples
forever and ever to appease
your hungry mouth.

You are the padlock on home,
my mirthful toy.
You are devout joy,
a life-long keeper.

The columbines tinkle
in our front yard, but
the cat's paws
walk behind the house.

Evening, the ladybug comes
to keep house for us;
the glow-worm himself with his lantern
will close the doors.

A mythical boat waits
on the evening tide for us:
I am a small boy and you
are nearly invisible.

Outcast

Singing on the road, thistles
thrust into your hands,
you saw from my eyes, from my mouth
you heard passion vanish.

I staggered among the unmapped,
crooked roads, an endless way,
and never noticed when it started:
a snake was hissing on my zither.

Lightning divides the dark
but does not clear my vision;
only the flash of a knife
brings a senseless glow to my eyes.

The Duel

translated from the German by Luise von Flotow

Thomas Brasch

When they saw the way Marsyas was toiling up the hill, they knew that Apollo would be named winner of the duel. Marsyas walked like a man who has lost before he even begins. Half-way up the hill he threw himself into the grass as though he wanted to sleep, rolled from side to side, leapt up again and continued his way to the top. When he reached the last outcrop of rock beneath the plateau, they saw his dull gaze and the shepherd's flute in his belt, and were certain that this was the man they were expecting. They whispered together and didn't come out of their hiding place even when Marsyas stepped into the meadow designated as the site for the duel.

Apollo stepped out from behind a tree when Marsyas arrived in the meadow.

You are Marsyas, said Apollo. The shepherd did not reply.

You challenged me to a competition. This is my instrument. Apollo held his lyre up over his head.

It's warm up here, said Marsyas, and from their hiding place they could see the grin on his scarred face.

I hear you play flute every day while you're herding your sheep, Apollo said.

They're not my sheep, said Marsyas.

But you play every day, Apollo asked.

In the mornings, Marsyas replied.

So you're not bored, said Apollo.

Maybe, Marsyas answered.

People say nobody can play that instrument better than you. Have a lot of people heard you?

A lot of sheep, said Marsyas.

Today the Muses will hear you, Apollo called, and made the prearranged signal toward the bushes.

They came out of their hiding place, formed a semi-circle around the two men, raised their arms and said, The competition will begin with a comparison of the instruments. Your instrument, Apollo.

Apollo sat down in the grass and set the lyre on his knee. He plucked out a few notes, turned the instrument over and plucked a few more notes.

My instrument can be played from both sides, he said.

Can you play your instrument from both sides too? they asked Marsyas.

No, said Marsyas.

First point to Apollo, they said and strode around the two men in a circle. Second part: purpose and means.

Apollo pushed a leg forward, threw his head back and began singing in a high voice: Of Atreus' sons and of Kadmos would I sing/ but only of love would sound my strings./ They would sing but of love/ so I change my strings/ to sing Hercules' life and my struggle above./ Yet even the new ones/ bring only love's sound / goodbye, sweet heroes/ till my strings come unbound.

Marsyas burst into laughter. He clutched his belly, he threw himself onto the ground. He doubled up. Yet even the new ones bring only love's sound, he moaned through his laughter. Then he got up abruptly and said, Onward. What's next?

This part's not finished, they said. Can you present a text with your instrument? Or are you only able to produce tones without a content for the listener?

This is a flute, said Marsyas.

Second point to Apollo. Third part: instrumental music.

Apollo played for almost an hour. Marsyas seemed to have fallen asleep on his feet. His eyes were open and his gaze directed toward Apollo, but it was dead.

I'm not going to play, he said, when Apollo set the lyre onto the grass.

Should we take a break? asked Apollo.

I don't care, said Marsyas.

What do you mean, you don't care? they said. You came here in order to compete with Apollo. How are we supposed to decide which of the two artists is the more important if we don't hear anything from you except talk?

Get rid of those women, said Marsyas.

They're supposed to come to a decision about us, said Apollo.

Oh, tell them to go back to where they came from and hang their dried-up tits in cold water, said Marsyas.

That guy claims to be an artist, they yelled. All he does is talk, and such gutter language. He's not worthy of competing with you, Apollo.

Marsyas jerked around toward them. His face was so distorted with hatred that red patches marked his skin.

One more word, he shrieked, and I'll knock your stinking teeth out.

Peasant, they said, and turned their backs on him.

Take a look at those fat asses, yelled Marsyas. You really want something like that to decide?

Maybe you're right, said Apollo, but who else is there?

We have come to the conclusion that Marsyas cannot be a master of the flute. Maybe he does actually play when he's with his sheep, but when he's called upon to have his art evaluated by specialists, he is a failure. We knew that when we saw him coming up the mountain.

Prove them wrong, said Apollo.

Don't feel like it.

But you're the one who told everybody you'd cause my downfall. Now's your chance, said Apollo.

I'm not interested anymore.

So what do you want to do? asked Apollo.

Nothing, said Marsyas. He pulled the flute out of his belt, threw it down in front of Apollo, turned and walked across the meadow to the cliff.

Only then did they see the tears in Apollo's eyes. He rested his head in his hands and rubbed his eyes. His body trembled. Bring him back, he moaned. Bring him back, he screamed.

Marsyas was just beginning the descent when they caught up with him.

Come back. He's in tears, they said.

I'll come if each one of you kisses my ass, he said and dropped his drawers.

One after the other they ran their tongues over his pimply flesh. Then they returned to the meadow with Marsyas. Apollo was still lying on the ground, his face in the grass. The shepherd went over to him and gave him a powerful kick in the ribs.

Now you're crying, he shrieked. You thought I didn't see through you. You thought Marsyas is even dumber than an animal.

With each word he said he kicked Apollo even harder. He danced around the weeping man, jumped from leg to leg. He thrust his arms up high and danced. His yells grew louder with every jump, till suddenly they stopped and Marsyas fell onto the grass, exhausted. His hands dug into the wet ground. Apollo crept over to him.

Play, he coughed and pushed the flute into his hands.

Leave me alone, said Marsyas.

Give me a reason.

What reason?

If you don't play they'll kill you, said Apollo. Marsyas put the wood in his mouth and bit into it with full force, till his teeth broke.

Is that why you came? asked Apollo. Marsyas didn't answer. He stared into the grass. Apollo jumped up.

The decision, the decision, he shouted. Who's the winner?

You're the winner, Apollo, the Muses answered in unison.

Punish the loser, called Apollo. Quick.

They pulled their knives out of their robes and fell upon the man lying on the ground. Two held his arms, two his legs, two ripped his clothes off him. When he lay naked in front of them, they turned him over on his back. Marsyas stared at them. He spit out a tooth.

What are you waiting for? said Apollo. Do him the favour.

They positioned their knives, sliced along his wrists and his throat, and skinned him. Marsyas stared at them. Only his face and hands were still covered with skin. He looked as though he were wearing a mask and gloves. Blood poured out of his veins. A wind sprang up and they saw his nerve fibres moving in the breeze. Only then did he begin to scream. Once they thought he'd stopped although his mouth was still wide open; then they thought perhaps the tone had risen to a frequency they couldn't hear.

He can't have been as good on the flute as he is now, said Apollo.

Marsyas reached into the air with his arms and they understood that he wanted to get up. Apollo pulled him up. The screaming man walked across the meadow to the cliff. His cries rang out across the valley, and his blood streamed ceaselessly out of his body.

Apollo went over and handed him his flute. Marsyas hurled it down the cliff and collapsed. They thought he was dead, but he suddenly raised his head and opened his mouth.

What's he saying? asked Apollo. They couldn't understand what Marsyas was saying. He began screaming again. Again the scream stopped, his mouth stayed open, his eyes stared at them.

Now he's dead, they said.

Take the skin. We'll attach it at the spring and direct the water through it, said Apollo. The river will be called the Marsyas. You will let it be known that he lost the competition and was skinned as punishment.

As you command, they said and folded up the hose that was once Marsyas' skin.

Wait, Apollo, they called when they saw the son of the gods going away, we're coming with you.

Apollo looked around. He quickened his pace.

Wait, they called again.

Apollo stopped and turned toward them.

Keep away from me.

Bad Hand

Mallory Tarses

According to the AP Wire Service, a man murdered his wife last Sunday and left her corpse stiffening on the rec room carpet while he watched the second half of the football game on his big screen TV. Then he called the police. They asked him what the hell he was thinking and he said, "I was thinking that the Steelers were gonna turn it around."

"He was probably using her as a footstool," Christopher said, shuffling cards at the kitchen table while I read him the item. "I had an uncle who told dirty jokes to women at funerals. I thought *that* was tacky."

"Maybe he just needed to clear his head," I said. I got up to get us a beer. "It's not like he didn't call at all. I mean, she wasn't any less dead at halftime. Corona or Rolling Rock?"

"I'd just find it hard to enjoy a game with, you know, a corpse in the room," he said. "Especially during the commercials. Especially if I wanted a beer. What if it'd gone into overtime?"

In my hands I gathered a Rolling Rock, a Corona, a bottle of San Pellegrino, an open can of black olives, a jar of capers, a garlic clove, a bag of Roma Tomatoes, a fistful of parsley, and an onion. I pictured the guy, maybe bald, a little chubby, two-day stubble, sitting in a soft chair, drumming his nail-bitten fingers on the armrest and eating Fritos, rooting for his boys, listening to John Madden. I held the beers out to Chris and he took the Rolling Rock. "What if it were a really close game," I said, "with your favorite team a game out of first playing its arch-rival with two days left in the season?" He shook his head. "What if it were the Superbowl?" Again, no. "The Stanley Cup? Seventh game?" Canadian, he was caught this time.

"If the Leafs were playing," he conceded. "Maybe. Probably not."

"The Canada-Soviet Series," I said, knowing I didn't have to ask.

"Well, that's just no fair, Samantha. That was like your Kennedy Assassination," he said, "but happy. 1972, Tom Noble's house. His mom made coleslaw. We wore our skates. Paul Henderson scored the winning goal with thirty-four seconds to go in the final period. They closed down the banks and schools. It was poetry, fireworks, ticker tape, Sam, and a *pile* of corpses couldn't have spoiled that day. I can't believe you're gloat-

ing." He looked up at me. He took my good hand in his hands and he kissed it. "Here," he said. "Pick a card."

A real fan knows that you always stay until the game is over. If I had a big screen TV, and the Lakers were playing the Celtics, and Bird and Johnson and Jabbar were still tangling it up out in Inglewood, hell, I'd have killed Chick Hearn just to see that second half.

Our apartment isn't pretty, but there's a palm tree in the middle of the yard. Its skinny trunk swings like a stem when the wind picks up and I sit out on our little balcony and stare past it to watch the cars speed by on the 405. I'm not pro-pollution or anything, but if you live in L.A., it's best to be right in the middle of it, or at least where you can see the middle of it and choke down the rush hour fumes beneath the blinding sun.

Christopher and I have lived in this place for a year now, since we met, and he's a professional magician. He dresses up in funny costumes and works at children's birthday parties, or else wears a tuxedo, which he owns, and works at weddings and bar mitzvahs. He says that magic is "in" these days, so there is a lot of work to be had if you've got skill and style. Chris has both, especially when he's doing what are called "envelope tricks." These involve sealing a signature or a hundred dollar bill inside an envelope and then putting the envelope in a Cuisinart, or tearing it up into five hundred irretrievable pieces, or eating it and, then, after the inevitable light-hearted suspense begins to take on a dark and doubting tinge, he reproduces both envelope and object, intact, from his sock or somebody's cummerbund. He can do all the standards as well—rabbits in hats, ring tricks, flowers from the sleeve, cards—but he doesn't thrive on them the way he does the envelope tricks.

Christopher loves his work. He says, "Samantha, it's a sight to see. When a lawful of faces shifts from disbelief to delight, it's just a glorious moment."

This I can understand. But then he says, "And it's so easy for them, too, to let themselves be surprised. I mean, really surprised, like they've forgotten that I got paid to come to the party. It's priceless."

I do not believe that Chris has ever seen real surprise, not the kind I have. I do not believe he knows what priceless really is. Because he's never sunk a twenty-footer at the buzzer on a visiting court. He's never looked up and out at the betrayed crowd and been filled all the way up with that huge boom of silence. You didn't sink it to hurt them; it just had to be. Sometimes fans just can't understand.

On the other side of this coin, I, myself, do not enjoy surprises, and I don't believe in light-hearted suspense. For this reason, I like blow-outs and clean fouls and baskets that hit nothing but net. And I like referees and their black and white stripes because I've had enough surprises.

Chris is tall and thin and has a small mole on the piece of skin that divides his nostrils. His eyes, one green and one hazel, move very quickly, this way and that, and his red hair tends to fight gravity, which lends him a certain impish quality. He has notably thin calves, of which he is ashamed. He moved from Toronto to Los Angeles before I knew him. His mother was American and died of Hodgkin's disease two years ago. His great-grandmother on his mother's side was on the Titanic when it hit that iceberg. Chris and I met a year ago in a way that I don't mind calling unusual, and that is why I have a metal hand.

I used to play pick-up basketball at Olympic Park, Tuesdays at five, and we had some serious players and some serious battles with a lot of foreign guys who were all good, had all heard about the games from different sources, and who all convened in the park's grass parking lot at 4:45 like clockwork, many still in suits and uniforms, many still in street shoes, all older and taller than me, but most of them not much stronger. Everyone called each other by the colour of his shirt because it didn't matter to any of us what the others did with the rest their time. Of course they just called me "Girl." It was electric out there, wide awake, and wet with sweat and the high percentage potential for violence, everyone cursing in his own language and people lingering on the other side of the fence, watching good sports and appreciating it, pointing at the big girl with the flawless hook shot and the dazzling free throw percentage and wishing they, too, could hold their own with those who appear, for various reasons, to be above them.

Five of us formed a team for a parks department tournament, and the Saturday morning of our semi-final round the guys and I were stretching out on the grass that butted up against the parking lot. I'd been taking yoga classes to oil up my ball joints and stimulate circulation and I was doing this stretch where you lay flat on your stomach and stretch your arms and legs out as long as you can make them. Then, like an airborne diver, you lift your limbs into the air, pose, and release. It feels great. It feels tall.

I was in the release position when a truck parked squarely on my free throw hand. The pain was huge but distant, like a voice from the bottom of a canyon. I didn't yell because I was just too stunned, so Chris didn't even see me until he passed around the front of his truck to help his stupid date slip down from the cab.

We forfeited the game and the medics came. They immobilized me for insurance purposes (theirs not mine) before transporting me to the hospital where I lay, for three hours, stiff as hairspray with clamps on my head while Chris, responsible, floated in and out of my vision, a one-man circus before me. He is definitely the right person to have above you if you can't move your head and, when it was all over, he took me home.

Because of the painkillers, I'm a little blurry on all of the details, but I lost my hand and I gained a magician, just like that.

Losing a hand is probably not such a big deal if you haven't played some sport every day of your life. Basketball was the sport I was best at, but sports, in general, had kept me happy for twenty-nine years. It goes without saying that after my accident I couldn't hit a foul shot, couldn't shoot a lay-up, couldn't pass with my left hand or dribble. I also couldn't do a handstand, catch a football, slide headfirst into third (or even bat myself into that conundrum), or finesse a backhand dropshot.

A metal hand does have its advantages. There are all sorts of prosthetics that are made available to economically-challenged people involved in limb-severing accidents, but none of them are bionic or magic. None shoot out poisoned darts or webs, and none function as powerful magnets. And none make you you again; there's no way around that. The public assistance agent at post-op sent us to a warehouse way out in Barstow where a man named Phillip showed us catalogues and working models. Phillip had no legs and refused to divulge the details of his waterwheel accident.

I chose a model called the Presto 650 because it has rods instead of a solid metal plate that make up the palm part of the prosthetic, and they can move apart and together like fingers, giving, in effect, ten fingers on one hand. I am a very strong female, and this model allowed me to pick up more things, almost twice as much as I could with my old hand, and twice as much as I can with my good hand. A metal hand is not a pretty hand, but I felt, at the time, that I'd made the right choice.

With the help of my physical therapist, I was able to begin a job at a printing shop a few months after the accident. I am rarely made to feel like a freak by my customers, but when I pass something to them with that hand, like a pen, sometimes they snatch it away, like my whole body's a trip wire or something. And children don't know any better so they stare until I want to smack the wonder off their little, snot-stained faces. I like working in the stockroom, where it's quiet and empty and all lit up, where your footsteps echo on the cold tile floors and there's nobody around to stare at you. Someday it'd be nice to get a better job, something bigger because I know I'm not stupid, but the fact is I'm not sure I can do anything that doesn't involve some sort of ball.

I don't want to blame Christopher for all the things I can't do anymore. I don't know if he understands how much time I used to spend playing games. I haven't played since the day I met him, but he does try to interest me in inactive activities, like reading and collage and wine-tasting. He brings me books, glue, wine lists. If I'd been a mediocre athlete, it wouldn't have mattered so much because I could have played

gimball and still enjoyed it. If I'd parked on his hand, he couldn't be a magician. He knows this, and he bites his fingernails with a certain protective glee.

This is not an example of jealousy. Christopher came home from a job awhile back and I told him that somebody named Carla had called. He said, "Oh," and asked me if I wanted a beer.

"No, I don't want a beer," I said. "But I would like to know who the hell Carla is."

He said, "She's the dispatcher. She finds me my jobs."

I said, "I thought Keith was the dispatcher."

He said, "He was. He got fired. Now there's Carla. She's good."

"What'd he get fired for?"

"He tried to poison our boss. It's a long st—"

"What's she good at?" I said.

"Sam. C'mon. I want to show you a new trick. Where's the fishbowl?"

With my good hand I smacked him, but not too hard. Like I said, I'm strong, and he fell, got up, went into the bathroom. I followed him. He was rubbing his jaw and looking into the mirror, no longer surprised, no longer priceless. "Boy, you've still got it, kid. That's a hell of a right hook."

"What's she good at?" I repeated.

He turned to face me, pink around the mandible. "She's good at dispatching. She worked at another entertainment agency before this, and she brought over a lot of customers. That's all. She's got a pleasant phone voice. People like her."

"I bet they do," I said, and tagged him with an uppercut.

His skull narrowly missed the toilet bowl as he went down. He raised himself on an elbow. "Sam, you're hurting me. I love you."

"No you don't," I said. "Get up, you skinny-calved bastard."

"I do," he said, and pulled a bouquet of flowers out of his tuxedo sleeve. I immediately felt awful. It hit me like a wave of nausea. The world twirled and then, shakily, swayed back to stillness.

"Oh Jesus, Chris, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," I said. "Please get up. I won't do it again, not ever. I'm sorry. I had this really bad day." I did. Three machines down, collation fiasco, averted eyes.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" He was regrouping, sitting now, putting the flowers back up in the sleeve compartment.

"No," I said, sinking to the tiles beside him. "No. You hungry?"

"Starved. Let's order a pizza, and a bag of ice. I think this one's gonna show, and I've got a birthday party tomorrow. Jackson Polish, eleven years old."

"Unfortunate name."

"On so many levels."

"Will you switch agencies?" I said.

"Aw, Sam, c'mon. There are women everywhere." He took a pair of glasses out of his coat pocket, the kind that have pop eyes on springs that jiggle and make children laugh, and he put them on. "But I only have eyes for you," he said, affecting a Groucho Marx cigar wiggle.

"Is she pretty?"

"She's a wartpig. She lives with her mother. She's got a nose the size of the Finger Lakes. Same shape too."

He took off the silly glasses, held them and his arms stiff at his sides, head down, like a penitent school boy. "Okay."

"Thanks. Are you really gonna stop hitting me?"

"Do you want me to?" Our relationship is kind of strange in this way.

"Yes."

We ordered pizza and made love until it came. All night we sat close together on the couch watching NCAA ball until we ran out of games, then switched to figure skating, Davis Cup, roller derby. I glanced uneasily every once in a while at Chris's bruises flickering in the radiant TV light and I kissed his bruised eye and his puffy jaw over and over, but they just got bluer and more swollen. He had to wear his eight foot orange bear costume, with the huge bottom, to the party.

"Are my calves that bad?" he asked in the morning.

"Yes."

I have this dream sometimes where I'm playing tetherball at night on the playground of my old school. It's dark, but I can see, and I'm little and the playground is full of children but none of them are playing with me. I'm hitting the tetherball really hard and its string wraps tight around the pole before it snaps back and swings the other way. I can hear the kids laughing and chanting, "Red Rover, Red Rover," but they never say who to send right over, and then the ball wraps around the pole and stops, totally, defying gravity. There's a noise like sound being sucked out of a place and then the voices and the laughter stream back in and I'm hitting the tetherball like a sparring bag, harder and harder, and my knuckles start to bleed but I keep hitting, and then the ball starts to bleed, it starts to gush, and my fists cracking against it sound like bones getting shattered and the blood's not just leaking, it's spurting, it's spewing and I'm covered in it. And the children are laughing and playing their game. And I'm killing this tetherball, and I have two good hands, but I'm ruining them.

Christopher's face got better, like it always did, and in a few days he stopped flinching when I reached out for him and, slowly, he started to wrap his arms around me again and kiss my throat and run his fingers

softly, back and forth, over my hip bones while we talked in bed. Eventually we'd get quiet and I'd lie back and watch him, his eyes so intent, so focused, on one little piece of my big body and his fingers reading it like a map, or a code. Then he'd look up and see me watching him and slide me the slightest smile, just a quiver at one edge, a heartbeat.

We took a lot of baths. We were so clean. Long evenings with hot winds rustling through the eucalyptus leaves and stirring up the crickets while we drank red wine and washed each other's backs and made big messes at strange hours in our big tub.

It was March and the Lakers had just annihilated Golden State in an away game for the second night in a row. We lounged, end to end, in the steamy water, legs intertwined, wine glasses set on the tub lip, sparkling. I was feeling kind of giddy. The Bucks, Chris's team, were in the basement, already out of playoff range, so he was a little reticent when I brought up basketball. I think his being Canadian diminishes his interest in the sport in the same way that I could never really love hockey the way he does, though I've known a lot of Americans who claim to have bridged that gap. I was rhapsodizing over James Worthy's finesse, as I often did when he scored over twenty-five points. "Quiet as a lion," I said. "Comes in on cat pads and claws 'em to shreds with a shrug. Thirty-six points. A school of swishes."

"So I guess they're gonna hang onto him for a while." Chris was obviously fatigued, having worked a wedding that evening, but he knew better than to joke about my lingering fear that some team with rude sportsfans and an inadequate coaching staff would woo Worthy away from Los Angeles with transparent promises and the money he deserved to be making.

"Ask me his field-goal percentage his rookie year," I said.

"But I know his field-goal percentage his rookie year. You've told me it a hundred times, Sammy."

"Then you tell me," I urged.

He sighed. At me. "I don't remember," he said.

"Then ask me."

"Sam, just let me soak, all right. Please? I'm tired and I know I'll just forget your statistic. Again."

I splashed a little water in his face, something that is also harder to do when you can only use one hand to do it. "Don't be a rainstorm, baby. Ask me."

He didn't splash back, just sank into the dying soapscum so that his ears were covered. He did look tired; there were shadows under his eyes. "Ask me," I said again.

He moved his mouth soundlessly to indicate that he hadn't heard me. I was losing my patience. He sank just beneath the surface of the water

and said, "Blub, blub, bubble, bubble."

I looked past him at the tiny white tiles on the bathroom wall, a giant one-sided checkerboard, a clean slate. Then I reached into the water and came up with a chunk of his pretty red hair. I thought I could hear the follicles opening up to release their inhabitants. I looked at my handful, there where it wasn't supposed to be, then set it to float on the grey water. It split into little rafts and drifted towards the tub's sides. Chris stayed submerged, holding one hand to his scalp.

"Damn," I said to his murk. He was blurry and closed off, probably afraid, not sure what to do. "That's not what I meant. Please come up."

He didn't, so my apology floated away, and I laid my good hand across his throat. His hand was on my foot, his thumb running rhythmically across the tip of my toe, like he was humming under there, far away from me.

A little flick of my thick wrist over his throat sent his skull into the porcelain bottom of the tub. It sounded like a handful of fallen pebbles, a clean sound, and his fingers slipped softly from my toes. Then he floated, and the water began to stain. I lifted his head and it sagged sideways from his neck. Drops of water fell from his lips. The tub was losing all its heat. I jumped up naked, knocking one of the wine glasses from the tub's lip to the water, grape purple and blood red mixing crimson and eerie. I lifted his body out of the water, gently, like he was a princess, and I carried him wet and bleeding to the bed and set him on the sheets. He coughed and I kissed him from stomach to throat and I cried and put my mouth over his mouth and he turned his head away. I didn't mean it, not this way. He glistened and I ran my hand all over his body, smoothing everything back into place. I said the stats over and over to myself like a chant until he lifted his head and set it on my chest and went, I think, to sleep.

In the morning he was gone and I was cold. A note beside the bed said: I'm tired and I need to think. I'm afraid. Love.

I sat on the balcony and listened to the freeway, morning traffic and horns and the faint echo of news radio. Below me, the Utterson's were cursing because their automatic sprinkler system had sprung a leak and was wasting its water on the hot children laughing in their underpants and trying not to stub their toes. It was too cold to play with water. A little girl had her wet dress pulled up over her head and she was spinning around and around in the mist while her mom smoked a cigarette and talked to another lady. I watched them play and could not understand why they were laughing. I cannot explain why I did the next thing I did.

I went down to the basement and pulled out two cans of Sinclair paint, one black and one white, and I laid out all of Chris's shirts on the floor

and I painted beautiful one and a half inch stripes up and down all of them, each and every one, front and back. I guess I wanted everything to be fair again. Because if a man goes about town in referee stripes, people are bound to ask him questions and believe what he says. If I were standing at a bus stop and I were lost, I would ask him for directions. Even if the President were beside him, or a policeman, or George "The Iceman" Gervin, who saw everything as if from a low-flying plane.

I went for a walk and I guess I was gone for a long time because when I came back the sheets had been changed, the pants and socks and shoes taken away. The shirts lay in the line I'd left them in, like confused prisoners awaiting orders.

Then I remembered that it was my birthday, so I went to the supermarket. Chris and I used to go to the supermarket and spend the whole evening there. It was an event, and it began with the consolidation of the contents of the refrigerator. Chris liked the compactness of the things around him, and he'd say the speech about the carrots as many times as I wanted him to. "You've got to survey your field," he'd begin. "Amalgamate the good, weed out the old, make room for the new. You get what I'm saying here? Take this carrot, for instance," waving the floppy offender over his head like an insult. "You see, it just doesn't have it anymore. Just look at this unsightly wilt. Oh, this carrot has seen the best days of its career. It's washed up; it's soggy toast. It's a smudge on its kind, an embarrassment to the entire carrot race, and it knows it. So it isn't resentful when we send it down to the minors, no, it knew this day would come, it knows it's got to make way for the stars and the rookies, for the new blood, for the stronger, tastier breed of carrots they're biogenetically engineering out there in the fields of Northern California. You see, Sam? You can't wear your high-tops forever, and any self-respecting carrot knows when it's time to pack it in." He'd whiz the carrot across the kitchen and into the wide-mouthed wastebasket. Swish. "There's a couple," he'd say. "Write down carrots."

But he wasn't there to say the speech, so I listened to it in my head and went to the market by myself on my birthday. Roaming the superlight aisles, I felt safe, and I was looking at cake mix when the Spanish Franciscan invaded my aisle. "I am Padre Mario," he said. He was at least a head shorter than me.

"Sam," I said. "Padre. It's my birthday." He was wearing sandals and a sparse brown habit with a thrice knotted chord. "What are you doing here?" I said. "What do monks shop for?"

"Same thing real people shop for," he answered, in surprisingly good English.

"We're just sinners to you, I guess."

"Call a spade a spade," he said. "I am learning idioms. Do not have a

spaz." His face was wide open. It was a beautiful, forgiving face. It was a face that had no idea what I'd done.

"Have you ever had a Twinkie?" I asked.

"Have you ever made a technicolor yawn?" he said. "Did you ever drive that enamel bus?"

"Porcelain," I said. "The porcelain bus. So you're some kind of macrobiotic monk." His cart contained tofu, lettuce, radishes, orange juice.

He wagged his finger at me. "I have simply not yet visited the meat man. I love no thing more than a juicy T-bone steak dinner with shoe-string potatoes. That is heaven on a skateboard for you. And I am not a monk, by your by. I am a friar, a carnivorous friar."

I walked the aisles with Padre Mario. I told him that I couldn't find my magician. He told me that Saint Antonio, another Franciscan, was the patron saint of lost items and that I didn't have to go to the Church to get down on my knees. He told me he could tell I'd lost a lot of things and he was not looking at my hand when he said it. He bought me a Zero bar and we set down our sacks to shake hands at the automatic doors. Cashiers eyed us. He said, "Now I must go to see a man about a dog. But I will see you later, Alligator."

I said, "After a while, Crocodile," and his smile outshone the market lights.

I turned to go and, as the automatic doors parted for me, he said, "Hey, lady," and I turned back. His bangs, I noticed, were cut crooked, like a fellow friar had cut them for him. "Whatever happens, don't freak out," he said.

I said okay and I felt better for a while, but Christopher was still gone when I got home.

He called at four in the afternoon. "Hey," he said. Hey.

"Fuck you." I wasn't feeling very eloquent.

"Samantha..."

"I spent my thirtieth birthday with a monk," I said.

"Franciscan?"

"Of course. I think."

"That's why I called," he said. "Your birthday."

"Will you come over, Houdini? Please, please. I bought wine."

"I can't. I'm not allowed to drive until the dizzy spells go away."

"I'll pick you up."

"I don't have any shirts."

"Oh. Well, when did we ever need shirts?"

"Don't tempt me, Sam. I'm pissed off."

"Nothing but our socks," I said. "Naked as bucks."

"I'm serious. This is serious."

"It's my birthday."

"I got you a present."

"I don't want a present. I want envelope tricks and disappearing acts. I want you to put me in a box and cut me into pieces, then put me back together to the wonder and amazement of screaming, cloying fans. The crowd will go wild."

"Good, 'cause I didn't really get you a present. D'ya see? The Lakers won today. Worthy at the buzzer."

"He's a symphony."

"He's a criminal." A forgotten spot of trouble in a motel room with a hooker who turned out to be a cop. Nobody remembers this but Chris.

"He's air and grace and beauty," I reminded him.

"I'll have to cut you up some other time, Sam. I just wanted you to know I remembered."

"Please, Chris. Cut me up now."

"No, Sam. Not now. Goodbye."

So I wrecked the apartment and nailed all his shirts to the walls. I broke everything we owned that was breakable, including a mantelpiece full of old trophies. I pureed all my ribbons and certificates in the Cuisinart and stuffed my high-tops down the garbage disposal. When I threw my basketball through the beautiful television screen, glass spattered everywhere and I felt suddenly exhausted, fruitless, purposeless. All my love and use effortlessly mangled around me.

The neighbors called the police and I apologized to everybody, even people who weren't there. I slept and the tetherball dream came. This time all the laughing children were wearing Christopher's striped shirts and they were laughing at me, and saying, "You're out of here!" and laughing some more. Then Chris appeared in a puff of smoke with a big pair of scissors. He cut up the strips and put them in an envelope and he cut that up too, and swallowed it, and then he reached into the big gash in his head, the one I'd put there, and he said, "Detlef Schrempf," and pulled out two enormous shirts, one black and one white, and raised an eyebrow. Then he snapped his fingers on both hands and he disappeared.

I got out of bed and I sat in a chair by the window. The light from the just-lit street lamp slipped in through the curtains. One of those amazing L.A. sunsets was creeping in over the freeway and the cars were racing South to hit the 10 and catch that light before it slipped orange and pink and sore throat red into the sun-speckled Pacific. I studied my hand and watched the dying light glint off the metal, like the sun off our sea. It seemed to me that all this strength just didn't amount to much once the sun went down and the fans packed up and returned to their real lives.

I thought, Maybe sometime I'll find a real life for myself. And maybe

then I can get a new hand, one that's not so scary, and a better job. I'll get a doctor. I'll get Christopher back and learn to treat him like he treats me. And someday, some day far away but not impossible if I'm patient, maybe I'll make this bad hand good.

Anna Margolin

translated from the Yiddish by Shirley Kumove

You

I pass through you in barbarous splendour, as through a conquered city. Four little Negroes carry my train, gold-embroidered with peacocks and poppies. Behind me march the warriors flashing their short swords, arms and knees bare. Priests in white linen, an entire troop of poets in black and purple silk; and broad, stomping elephants carrying on their backs the joyous gods of my native land, the holy monkeys and the colourful birds that shrill sweet and wild under alien skies.

I pass through you as through a conquered city.

Jubilant voices hurl my name heavenward like a raging flame, only to fall back and crack into dancing sparks. Your jewels lie in heaps, the emeralds and rubies you dug out of your depths, your own earth, your blood and your sorrow still clinging to them.

But, oh, those gloomy, crooked streets on which I fear to tread. That watchful stillness in you, in which my name never sang. . .and shadows which do not bend toward me.

For you are my conquered city. In your sad and empty temples I placed my gods. And that song you tried to sing to them in uncertain voice is like sunshine and love.

But in those silent, lonely corners I saw mocking eyes through the darkness. I saw the glint of a knife. When you embraced me as with a thousand hands in the night, in all those thousand hands was destruction.

D. Nurkse

The Impending Famine in Xaia

In the great hall an expert
is demonstrating the projected shortfall.

He has unfurled a graph
and a map of the coastal plain.

He holds up a picture
of a marketplace at noon.
In a year none of these people will be living.

But from the audience, you can hardly distinguish
the huddled bodies from the pyramids of fruit.

Perhaps the photo was taken long ago.

*

And there are others waiting to testify.

One has a metal briefcase
and drums on it with his fingers
until angry glances shush him.
Another has a laptop keyboard
and is lost in the tiny columns
like a man staring into a fire.
Another has documents
wadded into all his pockets,
sheaves of figures
folded into tiny clumps,
and as he waits he pats himself.
Another carries a mailing tube
—perhaps charts?—another
has a projector perched on his knees.
They sit on folding chairs
on the podium and flanking the steps
into the press lounge
and out the fire-door.

And the audience?

The delegates are reading the paper,
trying to find out the weather
in their own countries,
or baseball scores,
or the faces of their rulers.

One drinks from a flask.
Another takes notes
—a cloud of tiny zeroes—
his face gray with fatigue.

*

She says: "Some nights all I want
is to see the world without me—
to disappear without hurting anyone."
The walls here are paper thin.
All night, the clink of keys in other locks.
And laughter, so that sometimes
you yearn to hear the punchline.
I answer only with a kiss
but she seems comforted.
Before dawn, all we hear
is the rattle of the ice machine
and the faint hum of the monitors.

*

On the way to the hearings
we pass the first hunger strikers.
A man and a woman in the costume
of the villages of the interior.
He wears a black bowler,
a suit with white piping
and rusted epaulettes.
She is cinched in a hooped skirt.
He holds a small hand-lettered sign
explaining the demands.
A blank petition waits in a clipboard
with a pen tied to a string.
Propped at their feet is a calendar
where the days will be marked off
beginning with this one.

*

Was it her voice I heard and could no longer comfort,
raised above the murmur in the corridor,
singing the bitterness of *kwashiorkor*?
It was a single marcher
—then an army of voices,
shouting No and a counter-voice
shouting either a word or a name:
not Xaia or a hill village:
repeated, it frayed at the edges,
a heart beating faster and faster.
But when I peeked out the washroom window
I saw only a handful of peasant women
huddled in shawls or felt blankets
surrounded by riot police.

All their faces were slack with sleeplessness
even at that distance.

*

In the great hall, a microphone explains:
A hundred ships loaded hull-down with wheat
are moored on sea-anchor outside Ko.
But the draught is too shallow.

*

Sometimes an usher taps my shoulder.
I thread my way out of the conference room.
Her voice on the red phone says she's changed her life.
Or she leaves a message on my machine:
she's saved, she's leaving.

She'll be a potter or a weaver.
She'll grow melons,
one for herself, one for her neighbor,
in a hot country where land is cheap.

She no longer believes that love is hunting her
through the mirror-maze of cities.

It is only a voice that proclaims this
endlessly, in her sleep, and like the other
echoes it will fall silent and she'll hear

a mother chanting to her child,
the maize pulverized under the pestle,
the bees returning to the shattered hive.

Pia Tafdrup

two poems translated from the Danish by Roger Greenwald

Seen

I have been seen in the morning cold
by a hare
before it took flight across the ice
of a forest lake frozen to the bottom
and vanished among dry swaying rushes,
touching me with a stillness
—your glance meeting mine—
incomprehensible as the earth in its orbit
the seasons' prayer for continuance.

The Stairs

I stagger when you vanish
between the words you whisper
into my neck,
when you disappear
in the middle of a sentence
I never caught the meaning of,
step into the air as if
the night had one more
step.

What Are You Thinking?

Jay Ruzesky

What are you thinking? That's what she says. We are driving along the number three highway through hills of sage and pine, sweet beige rangeland all around us and clusters of cattle scattered around like cliques at a cocktail party. We have been on the road since three o'clock this afternoon. I am slightly pissed off meaning not that I am angry or anything; not that I even feel a particular need for her to know that I am harboring these ill spirits. I am perfectly content to allow my evil humors to stew like day-old spaghetti sauce. Feeling that probably if I let it cook I will come out fine with no ill will I need to direct anywhere, particularly not at her because it is not her fault.

Why is it that when someone asks you what you are thinking your shoulders leap into defensive position like a soldier at boot camp? What are you thinking?

We were packing, getting ready to leave, me saying things like: "Should we take the pillows? It's always nicer to have your own pillow to rest on don't you think, Love? What about the cooler? We could make some kind of something good to take along, with tomatoes from the garden. It would save us a lot of indigestion from the kind of eating places along the road." I was slipping into comments like, "You know, we could take the new highway. I know it's not as scenic but it'll get us there a whole lot faster." And I was trying to be gentle about expressing how we had planned to leave at six a.m. and now it was three p.m. and we had not yet left the house because she was compelled suddenly to do a major overhaul of the strawberry patch today of all days, how because of that we were absolutely not going to have any time to stop and take in any of that scenery she had been talking about. I was gentle about this, tried not to say anything too forceful because the last thing I needed, and I knew it, was for her to start out the trip in a foul mood because I know what travelling does to her and it would only get worse as we went along.

In fact, that we got a late start has very little to do with the anxiety I am feeling. The real problem has more to do with Annie's mother who is the reason for this trip in the first place. Just one time I would like it if we could plan an actual holiday. Did you know that the word comes from the

fact that there used to be whole days and weeks reserved for holy feasts and celebrations? That's what I would like. To take Annie to some sunny place, Bermuda maybe, where we could lie on the beach and drink sweet coconut-rum drinks and talk about being together forever and perhaps about having a family (which is a subject we tend to avoid because of the messed-up nature of the crew that she grew up with). And in Bermuda—with the sun shining on us and a breeze blowing lightly across our faces, away from all the busy-ness that usually makes me not behave in the way that I would like to when I'm with her—I could worship her properly and make a holy day out of a couple of weeks. But instead we are here again on the way to visit her ailing mother who has been complaining for most of her life about being in a state of near death and how no one cares a hoot about her despite the fact that every time she say she's ready to give up the poltergeist for good, all of her children—who have been treated none too kindly by her since time immemorial, I might add—come running and make her feel that indeed she is a valued member of this planet.

What are you thinking?

I think, given the circumstances, how I wanted to take this leisurely southern route so we could stop here and there, get out of the car in the heat of the day maybe and find a secluded spot on a lake or up some stream, somewhere we could take off our clothes and refresh ourselves in some of that clear, cold water coming down from the mountains that we are currently travelling through. And who knows what might have happened, what kind of semi-religious experience we might have had out on the bank of a river with squirrels and raccoons and so forth watching us? Considering that I was hoping that some sort of thing like that might happen that would take us from our current state of common happiness and propel us to a new plateau in our relationship where I would feel that we didn't hardly have to talk to each other because we are so bloody tuned-in to the same thought frequency. Considering the difference between what I hoped might happen and what seems to be going on here I think I am being an absolute peach.

And she snuck this one on me. A little way out of the city after we'd got going a bit and neither of us saying anything I was thinking that maybe I should start up a conversation. Ask her some provocative question that would start us rolling on something really good. Medicine. That's always something she likes to talk about because she's so fed up with the "drugs or scalpels" approach of doctors these days. She's into prevention and takes a whole variety of herbs and tinctures to keep her fit, about which I say nothing because I think that your mind controls your body and if taking a few teaspoons of dandelion root et cetera is what gets your mind taking care of your body then so be it, that's fine with me. So I leaned

over (I should say that she was the one driving, gripping the wheel like it was a bent trapeze bar which she tends to do either for fear or for fatigue), gave her a little kiss on her bare shoulder and asked her very quietly, "Are you feeling all right Annie? You a little tired maybe? Want me to drive?"

Now you can see that by asking a series of quick questions like that, each slightly different from the other, what you are really doing is giving the other person a choice and are not cornering her or him and forcing a confrontation. I could have turned her answer onto the medical profession or something quite easily and got us rolling but I was allowing her her individual freedom, as enshrined in the constitution, to come shining through. She could have said almost anything. It would have been all right.

"I'm just so happy to be away from home and work," she said, "and I was loving how comfortable it is being with you and not having to say anything."

Which answer I accepted absolutely. I whisked back her hair which was flapping in her eyes because of the open window and I brushed her cheek with the back of my hand before sitting back with a big, contented sigh.

So what am I supposed to say? Do I tell her the truth about how I think it is unreasonable of her mother to control our lives like this and that I can see that most of her insecurities come from that fact of being brought up by someone for whom nothing was ever good enough? To the point that when Annie once saved the lives of most of the family who were sleeping their way down the number one highway outside of Winnipeg—including her mother who was supposed to be awake and driving—by grabbing the wheel and steering the car just in time out of the way of a cattle truck, to the point that even then all her mother could say after they'd come to a halt on the shoulder was, "Did you have to put your elbow through my ear in the process?"

That's why she caught me off guard with her "What are you thinking?" I have told her before more than one time that that is a question that destroys marriages. That is a question you should not just pop on someone when they are not expecting it because what you might get if you're not careful is the absolute truth and that may well be something that you are not at all prepared to hear, or at least some point that you have argued to death on several occasions and which does not need to come up again.

Now I know that the real reason that anyone would pose that particular problem is that he or she is not feeling entirely secure or confident about what is going on. So what that person is really asking is, 'Is everything all right? This silence is slightly uncomfortable and I'd just like to

check on where we are standing with each other at this time.’ So why don’t people just say that? Not that I am superhuman or anything. I am not always the most forthright person that I can be either.

Sometimes, if things are not completely satisfactory between us, I am not prepared to have *the* fight or to start *the* conversation that is going to inevitably come back to my *negative attitude*. (I do not think, by the way, that I have a negative attitude at all. Not one bit. In fact, I consider myself to be an optimist.) I do admit to the occasional broody silent period which never, I mean never, lasts for more than half a day or so which I think I am entitled to now and then. But I was not brooding a few moments ago when she asked me *that* question. I was, as I believe I have mentioned, a bit frustrated that we were having to spend twelve hours non-stop in the car, driving the poor vehicle at speeds that are probably unsafe, or at least inadvisable for a car that has seen its own odometer spin around two and a half times, so far putting its accumulated mileage up to almost half the distance between here and the planet Venus. And what I usually do when I’m just a little on edge like this—as a way of preparing myself, as a way of just allowing my mind to drift and wander wherever it might want to go without worrying about what it will have to say if someone very suddenly asks for a damn progress report on its voyage—is I think of an answer in advance. So I come up with something like, “I was just thinking about what this country must have looked like before the ranchers moved in and put up all these fences.”

Or maybe, “I was wondering about whether animal communities have class boundaries and hierarchies—beavers, for instance.”

“Do you think that birds pee?”

And that usually does it. We have a philosophical discussion for a short while and then I am allowed to slip back into blissful contemplation (to come up with another profound response for when it might be necessary again) and the whole time she has no idea that I am actually cheesed-off but have decided to work it out for myself, which I would think is an advantage for us and the ongoing nature of our relationship. Don’t you agree? And it is not as though I am not genuinely interested in the answers to those questions. I would never say anything that I did not mean as a means of avoiding the truth. It’s just that sometimes I don’t want to say exactly what is on my mind at the moment so I feel that it’s OK to say what was on my mind at some other time.

So. I want to know why and how she has managed to trap me this time in such a way that she is now looking at me expectantly waiting for an answer and I know I’m going to have to say something soon or she will start to wonder if I am telling the truth (which I likely will not be doing by that time so not only do I have to think of something to say and quick, but I also have to think of a back-up comment that might be more con-

vincing than the first one).

The first thing that springs to mind is the story that I heard recently about a police dog. In which a thirty-year old computer technician goes out to his backyard at midnight because it is so hot in his house and he can't afford air-conditioning. He decides to sleep out there on a chaise lounge, wearing nothing but a beach towel. He drops off in the cool of the night air looking like a primitive Celt waiting for aliens, or getting a moon-tan or something. This is the first good night's sleep the poor guy has had in weeks. He is dreaming about the birthday cake he had when he turned three years old. His parents let him eat most of it by himself. Meanwhile the cops are patrolling the neighbourhood looking for a burglar. They have a German Shepherd named Attila, which could have been quite a different animal had they not put him through the training that they did which has made him mean but which would have done exactly the same thing to anyone else including, perhaps, some of the guys on patrol with this dog. Attila thinks he hears something stirring in the dark so he leaps effortlessly over the six-foot cedar fence into the computer technician's backyard and starts to devour him just like the birthday cake the guy is dreaming about at the time. The man survives but is scarred for life and sues the police who arrange a handsome settlement. Attila is supposed to be put down but someone has the good sense to rescue him, change his name and ship him off to a farm where he gradually forgets the harshness of his previous life, becomes portly, and sleeps curled up with a cat. And the burglar gets away.

What are you thinking?

The other thing I could do is tell her truly that I am thinking that I wish that the old lady we are going to see would shrivel up and die once and for all because it is actually her that I blame for the nature of my semi-foul state at the moment and it is simply because she is the woman who gave birth to my dear beloved next to me here that I cannot articulate the curse I would like to put on the old witch because that would send Annie off in several directions despite the fact she doesn't care too much for her dear mother either. The last time the woman got sick, which should have been the very last time since she is approaching about her one-hundred and thirtieth miserable birthday, we made this same trip in the same rushed and not so pleasant way thinking that if we didn't get there on time we would not have a chance to see the old bat while she's still breathing—everyone in the family spending a fortune on long distance calls just to say that the old crone was finally about to kick-off and we'd better get there as fast as we could or we would be sorry (which I would not have been at all because I think it is just about time that the old snake finally relieves us from the burden of thinking about her pained and unfortunate existence, and I am sorry to say that she could not go

fast enough as far as I am concerned). So we drove like maniacs to get there, thinking about what we would say to the rest of the family and even Annie admitting that it was better if she could go out with some dignity. Well, we get there and she's sitting up in her damned bed eating oatmeal, of all things, and looking like she's got a good ten years life left in her and she claims it is a miracle from God because her work here on earth is not quite finished yet. Even as she's sitting up in that hospital bed with tubes and so on up her nose I'm wondering what kind of miracle she's going to think this is when she realizes that some of her offspring have gone and given up her apartment, sold off all of her worldly possessions, and divided what was left in her bank account into equal shares which will be released as soon as they get a lawyer's signature (though as you can guess none of that transaction was completed since the woman is alive and kicking today and we are on our way there at this very moment, though in my case that process is taking place under duress).

What are you thinking?

I look right at Annie and imagine us stopping somewhere, like I had planned, to cool off from all this heat. I think about how my body would react to having a dip in some fresh flowing water and how my back would like to unbend itself under the pines and my legs could use a good stretch. And I imagine us both swimming like fish or like those two young actors in the movie *Blue Lagoon* who looked so innocent floating naked in a tropical pool, and I say, "I'm thinking about how wonderful you are."

She smiles a big smile which is what she tends to do when I say things like that. And I do have the penchant for sending phrases like that her way because that is often, in fact, what is on my mind. So I move a little closer to her and squeeze her hand, not for long because I know that she likes to use both hands when she's driving. And I have this feeling that I have somehow managed to set a little part of the world right or at least maybe some part of myself that was previously off kilter.

There are all kinds of communication that go on between people, I'm thinking. Take for example the shine in her eyes right now that I've seen before that means, "I like what you just said very much you sweet man, but I don't believe a single word of it."

Howard Wright

Without Mercy

If we work backwards from your pain
we arrive at the charmer's house.

I roll the car up on the curb, and wait
one or two hours until the rekindled witch
has done her worst for no money. You think it fate
that nothing changes hands except a touch

and a vagary of gestures: a prayer,
a pebble moved, a stub of chalk hurting slate;
she wants your "faith to alleviate the fear."
And that piece of paper burnt in the grate

is a cantrip handed down mother to daughter
without mercy, something everybody
wants to know, a gorgonesque shimmer
to drive us all out of our collective tree.

But that's charm; which means you come out again,
doubting your sanity and ill-prepared to face
that terrible road, wondering how in God's name
we found the house in the first place—

the directions weren't very precise.
We have to make our way back, just the same.

K.V. Skene

two poems

Madeira

Prazeres

Finally the sun
flowing down damp
currents of air, warming
wide-hipped women
in kerchiefs and boots
hunchbacked over their plots

and hard-hatted men
grinding flatulent trucks up
evergreen cliffs
and down and hello-ing
children dawdling to school
and back. Follow

the *levada* as it unwinds
its sweet water down
the mountainside. Branches web
overhead and underfoot. Cow pats,
goat dung (blue-buzzing

with flies) compete with sweet-toned
eucalyptus, sibilant pine—here
a golden oak whose leaves
cry as they fall (no autumn, no
winter, no reason at all). Spring's

at home here, so fat
and full of herself
it hurts to look.

Ribeiro Frio

Yesterday,
sodden in spidery mist
we risked the bent yellow taxi,
tunnelled eiderdown fog
right to the top of the mountain.

Today,
church bells coax cold rain
over the mountain. Sucked down,
our bootsoles bruise bracken, break
trails of redbrick mud.

Tonight,
you twist close in bed, whisper
you pissed blood. Again. Rain
hammers the window,
a billion finishing nails.

At last
all our tears are returning.

T is for Texas

Derek McCormack

The intern brought me pyjamas, a cheesecloth handkerchief. A plastic bottle. I hawked into it. Nothing came up. Saliva.

(As a teen Jimmie Rodgers repaired tracks in a railroad gang. Later he worked as a brakeman on the New Orleans and Northeastern line.)

I sat on the veranda, breathed the zero draught. An oldtimer in the next chair. Ninety pounds. Chest scarred from scalenotomies, thoracoplasties, pneumothoraxes, phrenic nerve crushes.

From doctors jimmying apart his ribs and spilling slime from his lungs.

(After contracting TB, Jimmie quit railroading. He toured Dixie as a minstrel in a medicine show.)

The doctor bronchoscoped me. Bombarded me with infra-red and ultraviolet rays. Cooked my *tubercle bacilli*.

"I'm going to die aren't I?" I said.

"It depends on your immune system," he said. "How you take care of yourself."

He injected me with two solutions. Sanocrysin, a gold preparation. Camphor, the stuff mothballs are made of.

"Everyone comes in contact with the bacteria," he said. "They're spores. They travel in the air."

"So I could have Jimmie Rodgers' spores?" I said.

(Jimmie's first gold record was "Blue Yodel No. 4." Most folks know it as "T Is For Texas.")

After three weeks my lungs hadn't caseated or calcified. No sign of sputum. The ultraviolet treatments tanned me.

The sanatorium discharged me. Dad drove me home.

"You look like you've been south," he said.

(Saville Row suits, boaters, spats, silk ties, gold watches, diamond rings—

Jimmie dressed to a T. Unless he wore his railroad uniform, denim overalls and a brakeman's cap.)

Mom took me downtown. At the Salvation Army I picked out denim overalls grimed with oil. A blue pinstripe suit, lining ripped, cuffs frayed.

"What about moths?" Mom said.

"Moths won't come near me," I said.

(Against doctors' orders Jimmie continued to sing, smoke and drink alcohol. He travelled by train to a recording session in New York City. Graveyard weed ear-ing out along the tracks.)

We took the clothes to City Cleaners. In the window: CLINIC FOR CLOTHES—WE STERILIZE!

"How?" I asked the clerk. "How do you do it?" The clerk toured me through the back room. Coffin-shaped presses. Torso-shaped moulds. Tanks of chemicals—amyl acetate, benzine, chloroform, camphor.

(Victor Recording Studio, New York City. Jimmie rises from his cot, musters air, wheezes into the mike. A needle etches his voice onto acetate discs. His last masters. "Whipping That Old TB" and "TB Blues.")

My clothes came back in paper body bags. I put on my suit and a straw boater and strolled downtown. I had a coffee at the train station. I bought Black Cats, smoked under the water tower.

I coughed. Yellowish slime on my sleeve.

(After his recording session Jimmie visited Coney Island. Freak shows, wax museums. He rode a roller coaster. On the tracks he had a fit of spasms, slipped into a coma. Days later he died.)

I ran home, cigarettes squirrelled in my jacket lining. My family doctor visited. He stethoscoped my chest. He whispered to Mom and Dad in the hall.

(Midnight, Mississippi. Jimmie lay in a baggage car draped with black crepe. The conductor blew the whistle for ten minutes as the train rolled into the Meridian terminal.)

Before dawn I dressed in my overalls. In a pillowcase I packed my shaving kit, my piggy bank. My suit.

I snuck out. The sky like an x-ray of the moon. I bought a ticket on the

ten o'clock train to Toronto. From Toronto I'd hobo to Buffalo. Then New York City.

When City Cleaners opened I dropped off my suit. I waited at a diner across the street. Window seat, coffee.

Smoke clouded the cleaner's.

My matches.

Cigarettes, matches, a dryer, benzine—

The cleaner's roof blew. Walls caved, flames shot sky-high. I ran outside. I saw a tumbler drum spin like a Ferris wheel. Extractor bins carousel. Coat racks twisted like roller coaster track.

Peter Bakowski

12 Miles Short of Mexico

I dry-skated 'round the room,
musta smoked about a hectare,
put down
all my thoughts onto paper
but they just flew off to become mosquitoes
sawing 'round my head.
The case remained
an iron egg.

I went down to where
all the bathing suits cause heart attacks,
showin' I had some green and a large ear.
The dwarf newsboy told me that he'd never seen
so much lightning in a dress.

A hawk's beak between piano keys,
a weathervane in the collection box
and a pair of wide-awake shoes
were the only clues she left
'cept for a blubbering shrimp-boat captain
who still strokes her name on his bicep,
you'll find him harpooned at Kelly's,
saying that whisky is just the devil's tears
and it's always been that way.

The state troopers got her
just 12 miles short of Mexico;
she looked like just so much pigmeat in a dish.
The townsfolk had never seen
such a pepper rain.

Edward C. Lynskey

Bride of Dick Tracy

My Burma Shaved G-man never engages
our dead bolt unless all the rapists,
all the alley rogues are inside cages.
He totes a heater; bares brass fists;

bloody phase of a case telephones me.
"The stakeout's a goner. Mumbley-Peg
and his molls gave us the yank, gee-
whiz snookums, I sure do hate to beg

off again." This city jogs on sirens
after finks. Call it Capone's Chicago.
Or Gangsterdom. No good guy ever wins.
As vicious night snakes to sunup, I go

to the doorbell, let him in, sparkless
tomcat staggering to our king-sized bed.
He smells like spent cordite and Tess
Trueheart's rendezvous for love is dead.

Contributors

Peter Bakowski has survived two heart operations and early rejections from girls and publishers, but has a good accountant. He continues to compose his poems on a Brother AX-250 typewriter using one finger. As his poems continue to appear in literary magazines in 13 countries, he is reluctant to change this method. He lives in Australia.

Melanie Boyle is an artist and a writer. She currently lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Thomas Brasch emigrated from East to West Germany in 1976. He is a writer, dramatist, filmmaker and translator.

Tamas Dobozy has lived in Powell River, mainly, but also in Montreal, Victoria and Budapest. He is currently a unclassified graduate student at UBC's Department of English, but if someone offers more money he may go elsewhere. His writing skills have been known to desert him at moments of autobiography.

Luise von Flotow is a Canadian/German translator, writer, and academic at the University of Ottawa's School of Translation.

Roger Greenwald won the CBC Radio/Saturday Night Literary Award in 1994. He has published one book of poems, *Connecting Flight* (1993), several award-winning volumes of poetry in translation from Norwegian and Swedish, and a novel translated from Swedish.

Yannis Goumas lives in Greece where he writes, translates, acts, composes, broadcasts and is vice-president of the family shipping concern. His work has appeared world-wide, including *The Malahat Review*, *PRISM international*, *London Magazine*, *Poetry Review*, *Dandelion*, and many others. He is also the author of seven books of poetry and has translated widely among Greek writers.

Sophia Lecker is a poet and short story writer who lives in Ottawa. She has work appearing soon in *Event* and *Necessary Fiction*.

Shirley Kumove lectures frequently on Yiddish language, literature and the art of translation. She is the author and translator of *Words Like Arrows, A Collection of Yiddish Folk Sayings* (University of Toronto Press, 1985) and contributed to *Found Treasures* (Second Story Press, 1994), a collection of short stories by Yiddish women writers. She is presently working on a translation of the collected poetry of Anna Margolin. She was born and educated in Toronto; Yiddish is her mother tongue.

Edward C. Lynskey's poems have appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *American Poetry Review*, *Dalhousie Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *The Antigonish Review*, *New Letters*, and *Blue Unicorn*. Reviews have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*. He works as a technical writer in the aerospace industry.

Derek McCormack has recently had stories published in *Writ, sub-TERRAIN* and *The Malahat Review*. His novel, *Dark Rides*, was published by Gutter Press in Spring, 1996. He lives in Toronto.

Anna Margolin was born Rosa Lebensboym in Brisk, White Russia in 1894. She emigrated to New York at age 18 where she became a journalist at *der tog*

(The Day), a Yiddish Daily. She published a single volume of poems in Yiddish, *lider* (Poems), in 1929. Her work received critical acclaim but not the recognition she desired. She died in 1952.

Taime Ene Moks's translations from the Estonian have appeared in *The Tamarack Review*, *The Malahat Review* and *Waves*. She lives in Bellevue, Washington.

D. Nurkse is a recipient of 1984 and 1995 US National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships. His most recent book, *Voices Over Water*, will be re-issued by Four Way Books; poems are forthcoming in *The New Yorker*.

Norman Ravvin's short stories have appeared in *PRISM international*, *Western Living*, *Parchment: Contemporary Canadian Jewish Writing* and *West Coast Review*. His novel, *Café des Westens*, won the Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism New Fiction Award.

Jay Ruzesky's poetry has appeared in dozens of Canadian and American journals. His most recent book is *Painting the Yellow House Blue* (Anansi, 1994). A long essay, "The Writing on the Wall" is forthcoming in *Brick* magazine. This is his first published story.

K.V. Skene's work has appeared in Canadian, US and UK publications—most recently in *The New Quarterly*, *Ennoi*, *Bogg* and *The Frogmore Papers*. She has published two chapbooks: *PackRat* (Reference West, 1992) and *The Uncertainty Factor/As A Rock* (Tears on the Fence, 1995 UK); and a book, *fire water* (1994), published by Ekstasis Editions. She lives in Dorset, England.

R.W. Stedingh is a Vancouver poet, translator and editor. His work has appeared in *The Tamarack Review*, *The Malahat Review*, *The Northwest Review* (US), *The Capilano Review*, and most recently in *The Antigoniish Review* and *Event*. He is now working on *The Golden Thistle: Selected Poems by Arven Viirlaid*.

Mallory Tarses is twenty-nine and teaches high school English in Los Angeles. Johns Hopkins gave her a MA in Writing. John High, the editor of the *Five Finers Review*, nominated one of her stories for a Pushcart Prize this year.

Pia Tafdrup's eight volumes of poetry have earned her wide recognition in Denmark, as well as translation into English, Swedish, French, and German. English versions of her poems have appeared in numerous journals in the UK, the US, and Canada, including *PRISM international*, *WRIT*, *Pequod*, *The Spirit That Moves Us*, *Colorado Review*, *Asylum*, and *Frank*.

Arved Viirlaid was born in Estonia on April 11, 1922. He is the author of eight novels as well as seven books of poetry: *A Vagabond's Gospel* (1948), *A Summer Evening Smile* (1949), *Frosted Mirror* (1962), *Songs of Longing* (1967), *Hand in Hand* (1978), *A Blink of Eternity* (1982) and *Light Under the Reefs* (1990). He now lives in Toronto.

Chris Woods was born in New Brunswick in 1970 and lives and works in Chilliwack, BC. He examines the subtle effects of consumerism, infusing his depictions of suburban locales and their inhabitants with both parody and realism. Two years ago, Woods was commissioned to paint the Stations of the Cross for St. David's Anglican Church in Vancouver. His work can be found in numerous private and corporate collections.

Howard Wright is a lecturer in Art and Design History at the University of Ulster, Belfast. Redbeck Press (bradford) is to publish his collection, *Usquebaugh*, in Spring 1996. He was a runner-up in the 1995 Arvon/Observer Poetry Competition.

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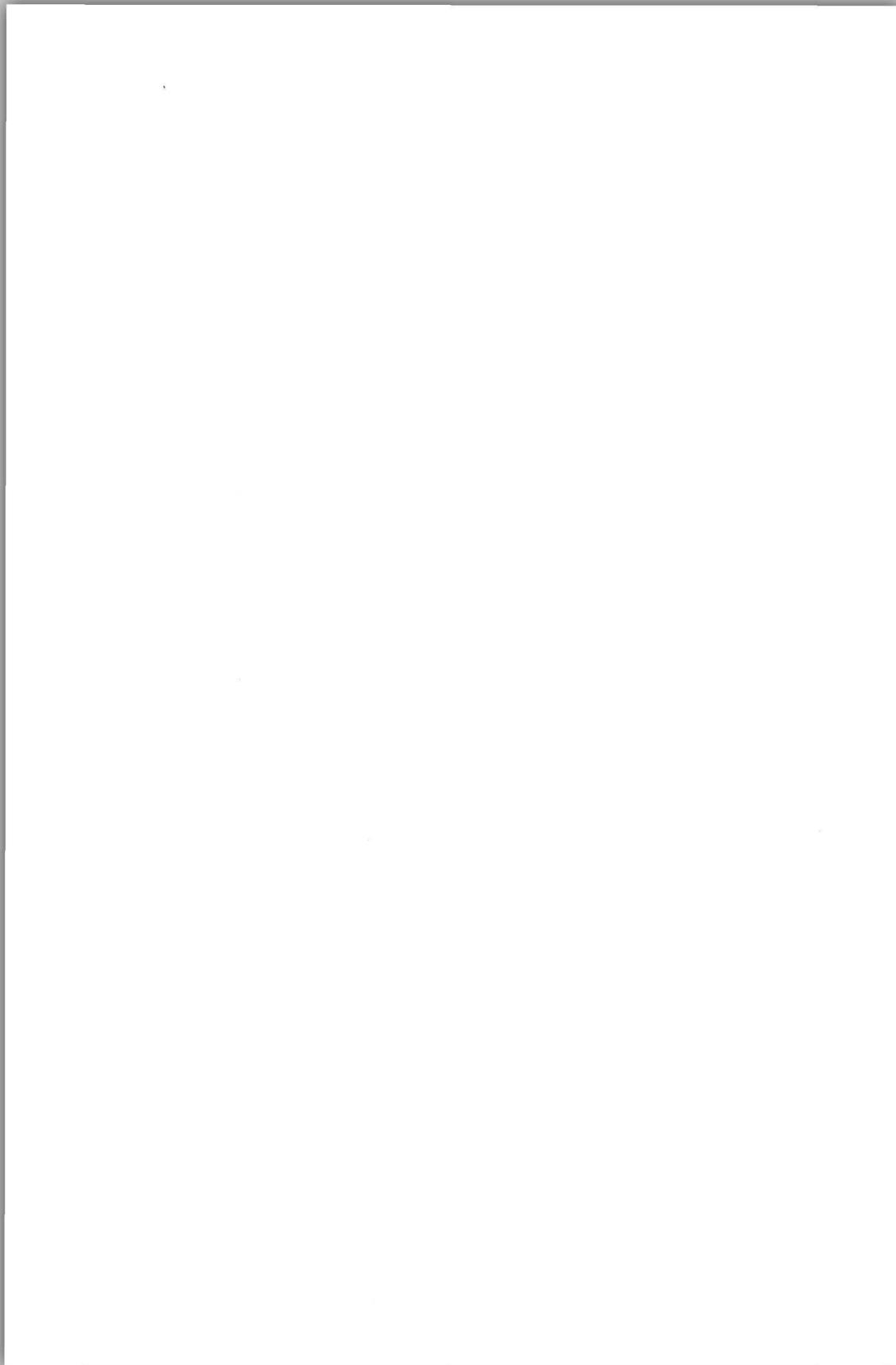
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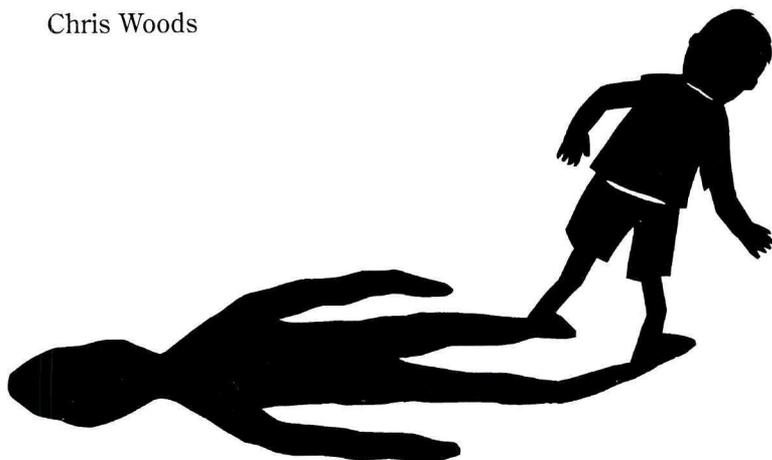
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